Lost And Lonely But Never Alone
by SinisterSound

Summary

Vampires are very social creatures. The only issue with that being their alarmingly small number and large distances between clusters of them.

Companionship is a physical necessity for vampires to retain their mental stability after decades or centuries of existence and the burden of immortality begin to weigh against them.

The first years of vampirism are most crucial to the healthy formation of their minds- many Makers remaining with their Changelings for decades until another can provide for them.

When a vampire is robbed of that company, when their minds are denied that comfort and support, they are twisted and misshapen. They are tortured souls and slowly succumb to a hopeless insanity.

They are called Rogues.
It’s my new work!!! setLabel
This is very self indulgent, but in the sense that I’ve always wanted to write something like this!! (The first time my brain suggested pirate vampires, I almost cried)
It’s a little more delicate and slow-going than I anticipated, but I’m not gonna rush to put it out since I’m trying to keep quality up!
I make up some stuff and take certain liberties with traditional vampire lore so bear with me on that one.
This first chapter isn’t Wooyoung/Yeosang But it is important for set up! (And just expect copious amounts of Seonghwa/Hongjoong throughout this fic).
I hope you enjoy and please let me know what you think!!
Thanks for everyone who kept supporting me!
-SS

See the end of the work for more notes
Prologue: The Beginning

Seonghwa lived a very simple life, with a very simple conviction: Seonghwa would die for his captain.

Many thought his loyalty amusing.

“Why risk your life for someone indestructible?” the crew jeered, jostling each other cheerily as their captain returned below deck after yet another sea battle. “Think about it, First Mate, have you ever seen the captain hurt in battle?”

No. No one ever had. In all the time he had been captain.

Did that stop Seonghwa was attempting to keep it that way?

No.

Because the captain was reckless. Laughing at danger and battles as if they were amusing fish he had seen swimming alongside the ship. He fought weaponless, and one against many. He threw himself in head first, without a care for the consequences. He mowed through Navy officers like hacking away branches to create a path. And he did it all with a smirk on his lips, and a shrug, saying the invincible didn’t need to be careful.

He appeared for battle on the top deck, and then disappeared back into his quarters, emerging only as long as it took to take care of whatever business arose, and then he was back below deck. Like a breeze- floating here and there without a care for anything- and it made Seonghwa’s heart leap every time he jumped in front of sword and firearm alike because he was going to get himself killed one day. One day, his impossible luck was going to run out, and then Seonghwa would… he would…

He was just going to have to try and cut down on the captain’s recklessness. If the captain would not watch his own back, than Seonghwa would do it for him. He never planned it. It simply became natural, seeing his captain in danger and moving without thinking. Leaping at Navy officers who went for his vulnerable back or tried to shoot across the deck at his fighting form.

And sometimes… those actions wound him up with deep cuts along his side or bullets scratching deep in his arms.

Despite the captain’s chiding reassurances that Seonghwa didn’t have to be quite so eager to lay his life on the line for him, Seonghwa stood his ground, feet planted and eyes stoic even as Hongjoong laughed at his blind loyalty to duty. Back when Seonghwa first began stepping between his captain and bullets.

“It is not only my duty to die for you where I am able,” he said, making Hongjoong’s smile fade slightly. “It is my desire.”

And his captain… for the first time in many years that Seonghwa had known him, had fought beside him… looked unsure. His tongue darted out to wet his lips, and he looked as if words were trying to force their way out of his tongue, but he was desperate to keep them back.

“So Seonghwa,” he said firmly. “Do not die for me. I am invincible, remember?”

“No one is invincible,” Seonghwa said flatly, wanting to roll his eyes. “It is a good lie to scare off
imposing threats, but the reality is a bullet can kill you as easily as any member of the crew.”

Hongjoong’s lips became thin. He looked like he wanted to say something. Needed to say something. He didn’t.

“And it is my duty… and desire… to ensure that does not happen.”

And sometimes, Seonghwa fought off the cowardly attackers… and others, he simply took the attack meant for his captain. Blades piercing skin, fists blooding his mouth.

Of course, Hongjoong continued to snap, to order, to demand that Seonghwa stop throwing himself into danger’s path, but it fell on deaf ears, despite how the captain may grab and shake him, shouting that he didn’t need Seonghwa to die for him.

“I do not need to die for you,” Seonghwa had responded calmly. “And I do not wish to die. But there is more fear in my imagination of your death than my own.”

Hongjoong had been stunned for several moments, staring at Seonghwa in shock.

Seonghwa had followed this man for years.

He would follow him further. That was a bond of trust between them. Between every member of the crew, but Seonghwa was first mate, and Hongjoong was his captain.

He couldn’t recall the exact moment it became absolute that he would follow Hongjoong anywhere. When he looked back, it seemed like there was no other option ever presented. He didn’t know when Hongjoong began calling him in to aid in planning attacks, or when those business meetings began to drift into just speaking quietly about their lives. Hongjoong was secretive about his past, but Seonghwa was fine with filling their silences with stories of the small village he was born too big for.

Hongjoong always seemed at peace when these moments came. As if just Seonghwa’s presence was a balm against his soul. It was a good feeling. One that covered their connecting string in iced iron.

There could be no hesitation or questioning when it came to each other. Their trust had to be instinctive, reactionary, unquestionable. And it was.

But it soon ran deeper than trust.

~~~~~~

“Seonghwa!”

He whipped around in time to catch the dagger tossed to him, stabbing deep into the ribs of the Navy officer whose sword played a game of tug of war with his own.

There was the gurgling sound of blood as he dropped, Seonghwa turning, scanning through the carnage of battle- swords clashing and the echo of gunshots clouding the main deck, his heart pounding.

Hongjoong. Where was Hongjoong?
He leapt down from the main deck, shoving a uniformed soldier away and slashing with the dagger, his other hand holding his sword aloft as he searched-

*Where?*

He slashed his way through the battle, aiding the men where needed, shoving limp bodies to the floor, grabbing the shirt of one of the crew. “Where is the captain?” he demanded.

“I’ve not seen ‘im since this hell started,” he gruffed, shoving Seonghwa’s hands off and raising his pistol. “Burn in ‘ell, Navy scum!”

Seonghwa tried to search as he fought, turning in circles, chest tightening because no soldier had gotten below deck- the fight contained to the main deck- and everyone should be up here fighting.

He shoved one body overboard, whipping around-

*There.*

Through the smoke and carnage, he caught the familiar flash of burgundy coat, trying to follow its movement, but a dagger was suddenly thrust at him, and his attention was diverted, back to staying alive now that he at least new the surprise attack hadn’t caught his captain off guard.

Not that he thought it was likely to, but Seonghwa was terrible at logic such as that in times such as these.

He was backed onto the upper deck at the bow of the ship, struggling with clashing swords to keep the soldier from reaching his gun, sweat dripping even in the cool evening air.

He shoved the man back, who smiled triumphantly, sword dropping and his hand flying to the gun at his waist-

Seonghwa lunged forward, sword piercing the skin of his chest and pushing deeper until it stopped meeting resistance. Foot planted on his stomach, Seonghwa kicked him off, flicking the blood from his sword, eyes immediately returning to scanning for the cap-

*There.*

Seonghwa’s eyes finally fell upon his captain, his back pressed against the rail of the ship, his sword and a soldier’s shoved against each other’s, turning into a battle of strength and will as Hongjoong was slowly bent backwards over the rail, the soldier laughing as he taunting whether or not he should throw him overboard.

Hongjoong was strong enough that he could have thrown that man over the railing himself, but the ground was slick with blood, and his boots slid against the wood as he struggled to keep his purchase and fight off the blade closing in on his face.

Seonghwa raced to the stairs, leaping down them and narrowly avoiding landing on a corpse that littered his path, his own boots sliding in the gore that had accumulated. He raced for Hongjoong, dagger raised and ready, but Hongjoong suddenly moved.

And it never failed to stun Seonghwa, just how quick his captain could be.

One of his hands released from holding the hilt of his sword, but before the soldier could even lunge forward at the lesser resistance to his push, Hongjoong’s hand wrapped fingers in the man’s coat, expression hard as he pulled, twisting, one of his legs shooting out to catch the soldier’s
ankle, dragging him until he slammed his back against the railing.

Seonghwa drew up short, indecisive as to whether or not he was needed. Hongjoong could handle this now-

Seonghwa saw something move from the corner of his eye, other than the shifts of fighting. His head snapped to the right, several meters away, eyes falling on a soldier on the ground, blood streaked across his face and back, but he shifted, lifting his pistol with a shaking grip and hate filled eyes.

Aiming at Hongjoong.

And Seonghwa made a split second decision: run to the farther-away man to stop him or run to Hongjoong. He made no conscious decision, but his legs carried him forward.

His hand flew to the dagger at his side as he ran towards Hongjoong.

“Captain !”

Hongjoong dropped his sword, grabbing the soldier’s leg and flipping him over the edge of the ship, hearing his cries as he fell to the water.

He turned quickly, weaponless, as a gunshot sounded through the battle sounds even as Seonghwa’s hand drew back to throw his knife-

The knife clattered to the deck as a hot ball of metal buried itself in Seonghwa’s side.

He fell forward, a cry ripped from his throat.

“ Seonghwa !”

And for a moment, in his pain-addled mind, he wondered why he had screamed his own name, a shaking hand pressed to his side, a quick flow of warmth cascading over his fingers as his ears rang.

He heard a death cry from the direction of the soldier, but he-

The world flipped slightly, and then he was staring up at the sky, teeth threatening to crack with how they ground against each other, fire racing through his side.

Even through the pain… he knew.

A bullet wound like this… Maybe their ship’s medic could fix it. But Seonghwa already knew that most abdomen wounds were fatal- if not immediately, within the next fortnight. He gasped out a choked cry, pressing harder against the wound which only spread more venomous pain through his blood.

“ You fool !”

Hongjoong’s face appeared, blocking the sky, his expression furious.

“What have I told you ? Why on this wretched earth did you-”

He heard Hongjoong yelling for someone- the medic, maybe- turning back to Seonghwa, eyes dark. “Stay awake,” he snapped, eyes furious in a way Seonghwa wasn’t sure he had seen before. “That’s an order.”
Seonghwa blew out a short breath, wishing he could take air back into his body, but it was hard to operate around the pain. “Hong-” He couldn’t make a sound, air leaving his lungs but not returning, no matter how he tried.

And even though Hongjoong continued to yell at him, hand slapping across Seonghwa’s face in stinging cracks of sounds, his eyes closed, body begging for reprieve from the pain.

Seonghwa wondered if he would regain consciousness before he died, or if he would wake for a few days, only to succumb to fever and festering disease.

“\textit{Open your eyes, you bastard!}”

And then floated in darkness.

~~~~~

Seonghwa awoke, staring at the semi-familiar ceiling of the medic’s hideout.

And if he were honest... he was surprised by the lack of pain accompanying his consciousness. There was a dull ache in his side, and when a wandering hand touched where the wound was, he felt a thick bandage and a thick ache that made him hiss, but nothing compared to the burning agony from before.

“Oh, you’re up.”

He tilted his head, seeing their medic sitting at his desk, a scattering of rough equipment across it. He looked at Seonghwa and his lips twisted into a scolding grimace.

“You are a crazy bastard, first mate,” he said. “Luck wasted itself on you.”

Seonghwa shifted, trying to roll over, but the medic stopped him with a sharp snap of his fingers, glaring.

“Don’t go messin’ up everything Lady Luck gave you,” he demanded. “And thank whatever deity you count your blessings from that you’re alive because every man medicine said you shouldn’t be.” He stood, pouring water from a jug into a cup, splashing some over the edges. “Gettin’ the bullet out was a right pain, but with the amount of blood you left on tha’ deck and how torn up the rest of your pretty little insides were-” He shook his head. “I was ready to just throw you overboard so you weren’t taking up space in my beds.”

He drained the cup of water himself. Seonghwa’s jaw tightened, but he was silent.

The medic scoffed. “But you must have made some god happy because I didn’t expect you to last three days. But your body knit itself back together nice and neat- a better healin’ than I’ve ever seen. You were still out the better part of eight days, but by all the heavens, it’s a miracle if I ever saw it.” He chuckled. “I never did believe all those myths about nice gods, but maybe I should accuse you of being one of those \textit{myth beings} that they say walk around this earth.” He snorted, walking to the door of his quarters. “The poorest thing about it, is that you survived that miracle only to be killed by your own captain.”

Seonghwa frowned, but the medic only cackled to himself. “I’ll let him know you’re awake,” he
gave an amused salute. “It was nice knowin’ you, first mate.”

Seonghwa opened his mouth about to demand that he come back. But he was gone before he got his tongue to work. Sighing, he stared back up at the ceiling, fists clenching and unclenching.

He was alive.

By some absolute miracle of the heavens he was alive.

He laughed shortly, cut off by himself.

Hongjoong was going to kill him. Seonghwa blew out a hard breath, bracing his hand against the stiff bed and pushing himself over. He winced and grimaced, but the pain was nothing at the moment. Barely even a hindrance as he sat up, his bare feet hitting the floor as he leaned on his knees, still slightly hunched around his wound, but a hundred times farther along than he should be for the wound he had been inflicted.

He touched his side gingerly.

He had never been one to believe in miracles.

The door slammed open, but Seonghwa didn’t jump, simply lifted his eyes to see Hongjoong standing in the doorway, eyes blazing and jaw tight enough to snap, the medic nowhere in sight.

“Captain,” Seonghwa greeted, nodding to him, waiting to see what Hongjoong would do.

He still remembered the yells that had been spawned from a simple cut along his arm that he had gotten aiding Hongjoong. He didn’t want to imagine what sort of reaction almost dying would bring.

Hongjoong was slimmer. He was shorter than Seonghwa, shorter than most of the crew, and slimmer along the width of his shoulders-

But as a Captain he was never small. It didn’t matter if he had to look up to you, he was never the smaller one. And he had ways of making you feel as if you were the one who stood only inches tall.

Seonghwa had, over time, become immune to this anger and bolstering puffing of feathers, only bred from time seeing Hongjoong in various situations the crew was not privy to.

(Namely, the indecision behind routes and actions, the nerves before a raid, the frustration as storm after storm would throw them off-course. Seonghwa was usually there to witness and attempt to quell those bursts.)

So when Hongjoong took a step into the medic’s quarters, any other man would have cowered under his barely-contained rage, but Seonghwa merely met his gaze passively. Hongjoong stopped a couple of steps from the bed Seonghwa sat on.

“I told you to stop throwing yourself in front of me like that.”

His voice was low, stiff, and shaking. Seonghwa couldn’t see his hands hidden within his coat, but he suspected they were curled into fists.

“And I told you it was duty and desire to continue to do so.”

“Seonghwa-”
“Your back was turned, Hongjoong,” he said, voice sharp but quiet. “Your weapon was dropped. What was your plan, had I done as you asked and stood by?”

“I would have been fine.”

“How?” Seonghwa demanded, brows pulling down in confusion. “There was legitimately no way for you to defend yourself! You had not even seen the soldier!”

“You almost died, Seonghwa!” Hongjoong snapped, the yelling bursting forth as usual. He closed the last of their distance, legs hitting Seonghwa’s, forcing Seonghwa to tilt his head to meet his gaze from his seat on the bed. He still did not feel intimidated. “This was not a simple scratch- you would have died had I n-” He cut himself off, lips pressed together until they were white. “Can you put aside your duty for one moment and think about what you are doing?”

“I am protecting my captain and my friend,” Seonghwa said, voice level, eyes hard. “And no amount of scolding or orders from you could ever change that.”

“You-”

Seonghwa straightened as much as he could, deciding to stand with a small wince, the space between them shrinking even further as Hongjoong refused to take a step back. “I regret nothing of what I did,” he snapped. “And I would do it again- I would die- to keep you safe.”

Because Seonghwa… he had fought alongside Hongjoong for years. Some members of the crew had come and gone, died or been arrested, but they remained unchanged. That was the beauty that Seonghwa found in them: they were as steady and strong as a heartbeat, pounding on regardless of what happened outside.

Seonghwa trusted Hongjoong. He would call him his friend before his captain, and duty had long since been left behind, to be replaced by a simple desire to keep Hongjoong safe. Because he did not want the other hurt. Did not want him to die. Regardless of Hongjoong’s own opinion on that.

Hongjoong’s frame shook, icy eyes staring into Seonghwa’s, jaw working as if he were trying to speak but nothing was coming out.

And when Hongjoong’s hand shot out, Seonghwa felt a flicker of surprise that perhaps Hongjoong had had enough and was going to hit him or some other violent act.

But then he jerked Seonghwa forward (there was no pain in his side) and the only thing that crashed against him was Hongjoong’s lips against his.

And Seonghwa had to take several seconds to process what was happening because his captain- Hongjoong. Hongjoong was kissing him, lips pressed to Seonghwa’s in a seal, fist twisted in his shirt, eyes squeezed shut tightly, and Seonghwa almost wondered if he was supposed to pull away. But he simply remained very still, ice floating in his blood as Hongjoong separated from him with a short breath, but didn’t release him, still pressed into Seonghwa’s space.

Eyes still angry.

“Has it never occurred to you,” he hissed, “that perhaps I do not wish to see you die either?” His fist tightened on Seonghwa’s shirt as his eyes widened slightly. “Have you ever spared a thought for what I would do if you were to die?” His fist shook, anger not failing to hide the shimmer in his eyes. “Do not leave me, Seonghwa,” he ordered, voice hoarse as it dropped low, jaw tightening as the anger died in his eyes slightly. “Do not subject me to this life alone.”
And it was an odd phrasing, but the last thing on Seonghwa’s mind.

His hand lifted, laying against Hongjoong’s that was twisted in his shirt. Hongjoong’s skin felt chilled, and he wondered if his captain were truly afraid in this moment.

This was many discoveries all at once. Of course, Seonghwa did not want to die. Did not want to leave Hongjoong behind and rob Hongjoong of himself, but it was a necessary risk. However, he would admit… he did feel a prickle of guilt. Because were it Hongjoong speaking of casually dying for Seonghwa’s sake, Seonghwa would never allow him to leave his quarters, locking him in and demanding that it was for his own good.

He had never spared much thought to the real consequences of his protection.

“What did you kiss me?”

And Seonghwa was… he was thrown, disoriented and stunned. Because he would die for Hongjoong. The things he felt for him were strong and unquestionable, but Seonghwa had never considered this to be one of them. Had never thought that this would be something on Hongjoong’s mind.

Hongjoong swallowed, expression stony. “Because you are precious to me,” he said, voice rough. And Seonghwa waited for more, but that was apparently all he had to say.

He wet his lips, trying to conjure a response.

He felt a burning in his chest.

“You are precious to me as well,” Seonghwa responded. If that had not been evident in his proclamations of dying for his captain….

Hongjoong swallowed. “Then stop throwing yourself into Death’s hands,” he murmured, voice edging towards a foreign desperation. “I understand that you feel fear for my life, but you must trust me.” The hand on his shirt loosened. “I am able to care for myself. I do not want to worry for myself as well as you.”

Seonghwa pulled the hand from his shirt completely. “And what would you have done for that soldier shooting at you, Hongjoong?” he questioned quiet, but fearless and unabashed. “I do not doubt your ability to defend yourself, but you cannot deny that I act in situations that are necessary for it.”

Hongjoong’s hand twisted, grabbing Seonghwa’s in a firm grip, almost too strong for the thin fingers and wrist it belonged to. His skin was still chilled.

“Seonghwa, I would have been fine, you cannot keep risking yourself—”

“Hongjoong—”

“Please,” Hongjoong begged, other hand coming to clasp Seonghwa’s, startling him.

Hongjoong was not a prideful man, but he had his dignity that he brandished like a blade. He was never one to beg.

“Please, Seonghwa,” he whispered harshly. “Do not risk yourself for me. Trust me,” he stressed, eyes more open than Seonghwa had seen in a long time. “For my own sake… please. Do not uselessly be harmed for me.”
It was not useless. It was not, it was protecting and trying to keep safe-

But Seonghwa was brought up short by Hongjoong’s desperation. “I cannot promise I will not attempt to aid you,” he said firmly. He could not lie to Hongjoong and give in completely. “But I will try to reduce the amount I am exposed to danger for you.”

And Hongjoong didn’t look content. He looked frustrated, as if Seonghwa were not understanding, but the buzzing expression was shoved away. Hongjoong simply sighed heavily, dropping his head.

“Very well,” he said quietly. “I suppose that is the best I can get out of your misguided loyalty.”

“It is only misguided if there is no evidence to support it,” Seonghwa replied without missing a beat. “And you have provided that in spades.”

Hongjoong chuckled, the sound sticking to his chest, lifting his eyes to stare at Seonghwa. “You seem very unbothered by my kissing you,” he noted.

Seonghwa could only hum. “I am still attempting to sift through that. It was a rather sudden thing to set upon my shoulders.”

Hongjoong seemed vaguely apologetic. “Understand, though, that it was not done in passion.”

Seonghwa wet his lips. “Than why did you only do it now? Why not before?”

“You hadn’t almost died for me before,” Hongjoong said plainly, as if it were obvious. “Almost losing something precious is a jarring experience.”

“And, yet, you seem to be unable to comprehend why I try to protect you so desperately?” Seonghwa said, not accusing, but simply stating.

Hongjoong smiled, and it was a little sad, a little amused. “I comprehend it,” he assured him. “I simply wish for you to not rob of me of you while you try to preserve my life.”

Seonghwa did not understand it. Not all of it. But he nodded.

“Would you do it again?” he questioned.

Hongjoong’s expression was firm. “Only if you asked it of me.”

Seonghwa’s throat was dry. He wished the medic had given him that water. “Then you will wait for the day I ask if of you?”

Hongjoong chuckled, some of the seriousness breaking down into a cocked smile. “Until the end of time, I would wait for you.”

Seonghwa blinked, taken aback by the strong words that fell from his tongue easily. Hongjoong simply watched him contently. Seonghwa’s heart raced in his chest because he had seen many sides to Hongjoong over years, but… none quite like this. But truly…. What was a kiss compared to dying for him?

His side twinged, as if a reminder of what he had done.

“I doubt I would make you wait that long.”
Seonghwa response was given some days later, a knock on the captain’s quarters in the middle of the night. He stood there, Hongjoong answering with his day clothes still on, a candle lit at his desk and maps spread across it.

He lifted an eyebrow at Seonghwa who swallowed. “I’ve made a decision,” he said quietly.

Hongjoong straightened, mouth opening to respond, but Seonghwa pushed into his space, hands grasping at cold skin and kissing him deeply. Hongjoong’s hands curled into the back of his nightshirt, stumbling backwards into his quarters as Seonghwa kicked the door closed.

Hongjoong was precious to him.

Hongjoong gasped against his mouth, pulling Seonghwa closer, and Seonghwa had expected to simply kiss him and withdraw but with Hongjoong’s fingers digging into his waist, he decided to remain.

It was not a hard decision to make. Just a thoughtful one, of what it might change, what it might affect. And Seonghwa… Seonghwa could not see many reasons to stop him from taking a risk like this.

There was trust. They were unchanging.

And Seonghwa found his lips curling into a smile as Hongjoong kissed him back almost desperately, Seonghwa pulling him closer.

His friend.

His captain.

~~~~~~

His days remained the same.

Even if his nights were filled with sneaking from his quarters, across the deck, and slipping into Hongjoong’s.

Seonghwa spent much of his time during the day within Hongjoong’s quarters, regardless, aiding him in planning ship routes and places to stop and restock. Those meetings were punctuated with deep kisses and trailing touches. Seonghwa didn’t mind at all.

And soon, this became his norm. Seonghwa’s chest grew warm with each kiss from Hongjoong, his mind alighting like a candle lit inside a dark room at his quiet whispers during the nights.

“You are my precious, Seonghwa.”

And Seonghwa found his face heating at the words that seemed to carry more weight than he could interpret. Like Hongjoong meant something more by them. But Seonghwa could not figure it.
And all was well between them.

Until the ship went through a rare time without any sort of battles. It had been nearly a full month without running into a Navy ship or another patch of ruffians looking to take what was theirs. There was no bloodshed among the decks, no firing of cannons or clashing of swords. Just the wind carrying them on, and the crew growing bored as they lazied around.

*You’re one of Them.*

And truly, this time of peace was just in time, because Hongjoong grew ill.

It began slowly, with Hongjoong seeming more tired as they poured over maps. But then, with each passing day, he seemed to weaken, movements turning sluggish, holding his head as an ache persisted through it, eyes often squeezing shut as he clutched at his abdomen as if he had just been struck.

It was startling. Terrifying, because he had never seen his captain in this kind of pain. Seonghwa would watch in helpless concern as he tried to support his crumbling form, but Hongjoong always waved him away, as if his touch caused more pain.

*You’re one of Them.*

The medic was at a loss.

“There doesn’t seem to be anythin’ wrong with ‘im!” he said after he exited, brow pulled down. “He hasn’t vomited, his skin’s cold, but he says that’s normal. He wouldn’t let me get very close to him, but usually somethin’ this serious, you can see from a distance. I’ve got nothin’, though. I just told him to try and sleep more, and see if his body can fight whatever this is.”

Hongjoong made to stand one day, claiming to need a drink, and no sooner than he straightened did he crumple, legs giving way and a cry in his throat as he narrowed missed hitting his head against his desk.

Seonghwa carried him to his bed despite his protests that he was too weak to implement, staring across his pale skin. He was always lighter in color, but he seemed almost ashen. Hongjoong’s fists clenched the blankets between his fingers as Seonghwa laid him down gently, standing beside his bed and watching his teeth grit as one hand hand clutched at his abdomen.

“Howleveland,” Seonghwa whispered, chest aching as Hongjoong gasped around a sudden pain. “We have to stop at a port. There has to be some doctor there that can fix this.” He touched Hongjoong gently on his wrist, the warmth of his hand seeping into the chill of his skin.

Hongjoong flinched away from the touch, something flickering in his eyes as Seonghwa withdrew his hand quickly.

“I don’t-” He closed his eyes, adam’s apple bobbing tightly. “I don’t need a doctor, I’ll get through this, I swear. I just need time.”

“You’re lying through your teeth,” Seonghwa sad simply, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Hongjoong- *nothing* is working. Not the medicines the medic left for you, not resting, not drinking- You are practically withering away before my eyes.” His chest clenched painfully.

He had prepared himself to die taking a bullet or dagger for Hongjoong. To keep him safe.

He never prepared himself for losing Hongjoong to himself. Losing a fight against some illness
Seonghwa was powerless to even slow.

“I will be fine,” Hongjoong said, trying to be firm, but his eyes clenched shut tighter.

Seonghwa pressed his lips together, eyes raw and open. “Hongjoong, please,” He whispered, hand twitching to touch him. “You once asked me not to leave you alone to this world. Provide me the same courtesy. Please- do not allow this to take you from me. Go to port-

“This will not kill me,” he fought, and Seonghwa was growing tired of him believing his own invincibility.

“Hongjoong, look at me,” he requested. He wanted to see his eyes as he begged. Because Seonghwa may have his pride, but not so much to watch Hongjoong die to his own hubris.

Hongjoong did not open his eyes. Simply shook his head.

Seonghwa sighed. “Hongjoong, please,” he whispered, hand reaching to caress his cheek. “Please, just look at-” His fingers brushed against the cool skin of his cheek.

With a sudden strength that Hongjoong had not had moments ago, his fist unclenched from the blankets, snatching Seonghwa’s wrist and dragging it from his cheek.

Seonghwa gasped sharply, surprised by the sudden movement, but it turned into a sharp cry as the grip turned too tight. Hongjoong sat up, head ducked as he threw Seonghwa’s hand away as if his skin had been burned, practically shoving Seonghwa from the bed. The first mate stumbled to his feet, clutching at his wrist with wide, confused eyes.

“Hong-”

“Get out,” he snapped, voice rough and angry, turning away from Seonghwa, hands gripping his own arms, as if he were suddenly cold.

And Seonghwa refused to show the flicker of hurt in his heart.

“Hongjoong, what-”

“I said get out!” he yelled, voice raising to a volume Seonghwa had never heard.

Seonghwa took a hesitant step backwards, confused and concerned for the anger he heard directed at himself. “Hongjoong, I will not-

Something flew dangerously close to him, and Seonghwa stood shock still, hearing the familiar sound of a knife imbedding itself in wood. He stared at Hongjoong’s outstretched arm, the empty knife belt at his waist.

“Leave!”

Seonghwa took a step backwards.

Hongjoong did not look at him, body curled around himself, and every part of Seonghwa said not to leave him, but he didn’t know this man.

This was not his captain. Not as Seonghwa knew him.

Seonghwa turned and ran from the room, heart pounding and aching, mind as stormy as the seas, turbulent and troubled and terrifying.
Hongjoong was-

His eyes stung.

He wasn’t sure what that was. Didn’t know what brought it on or what it was doing with his captain, but-

Hongjoong had never spoken to him like that. Never- Never attempted to harm Seonghwa like that. And Hongjoong’s aim was too good for that knife to be anything but a warning, but it was something that had never happened before-

Seonghwa locked himself within his quarters and did not emerge.

~~~~~~

One day.

Seonghwa remained away from Hongjoong for one complete day.

The crew said that the captain was allowing no one to enter his quarters, not answering anyone’s calls, and some of them were beginning to question the loud crashing sounds that came from the room occasionally.

“Maybe he got cursed,” one of the crew whispered. “Maybe it’s a curse eating away at him- I’ve seen it happen before.”

“You ‘ave not, ya liar. I say it’s sea sickness. Those sailors who get too attached to the sea and lose their minds to it.”

Theories and rumors spread rapidly in the peaceful days that had nothing better to occupy their attentions.

Seonghwa spent the next night in his quarters, not sleeping at all, wrist still aching from his captain’s grip. He tried not to think of the man across the ship, but his name acted like a buzz beneath his skin, making him toss and turn, restless, until he finally stood, running hands through his hair.

Something was wrong.

Something was wrong with Hongjoong, whether he admitted it or not, and they were going to be stopping at the next port, regardless of what Hongjoong wanted.

Seonghwa felt his resolve solidify. Captain or not, friend or not, lover or not, Seonghwa would not stand idly by and lose him.

He did not even slip his boots on, pushing open the door of his quarters and walked across the deck, guided by the half-visible moon through the clouds. The ship rocked gently, like a lullaby, but Seonghwa felt none of it, rushing towards Hongjoong’s quarters, fists tight at his side.

He would not lose him.

He stopped outside the familiar doors. There was no actual lock on the doors of the ship. However,
no one was stupid enough to try and attempt to enter the captain’s quarters without permission. Respect was enough of a lock. Seonghwa didn’t enter without knocking first, either, something Hongjoong had said he appreciated. He stood outside it, and for the first time, he hesitated, fist raised to knock, but drawing back slightly.

What was waiting for him on the other side of this door?

His wrist ached in memory.

He bit his lip hard. Hongjoong. Hongjoong was waiting for him.

He knocked three times. And was met with no response. Again. No response.

He swallowed. “Hongjoong,” he called, careful not to allow his voice to carry in the night. “Hongjoong, I need to speak with you.”

Silence.

And then what sounded like books crashing to the ground floating through the door. Seonghwa jumped at the sound, heart leaping to his throat, pulse jumping as images of Hongjoong falling, crashing to the ground and knocking the objects from his desk-

He grabbed the doorknob, twisting it and shoving the door open, rushing inside-

“Hongjoong!”

Seonghwa caught a glimpse of the candle-lit room, throw in disarray with papers and books and clothing scattered as if a wind had swept through it-

And then suddenly, a hand was around his throat, body slamming back against the door that swung closed, his head smacking against the wood painfully as he tried to gasp around the fingers around his throat.

Seonghwa’s hands leapt up, trying to pry the hand off, but it was like cooled steel, holding him in place, only allowing the barest, necessary amount of air to pass through.

Fear rose in his blood but no sooner than he moved was there a face pressed into the crook of his neck, a chest rising and falling rapidly against his own-

And even here, Seonghwa could recognize Hongjoong’s outline.

He choked, clawing at the hands choking him, trying to keep calm enough to get breath-

*Hongjoong, Hongjoong, what-

Lips and breaths brushed his skin roughly, teeth scraping against the crook of his neck, panting breaths beating against it like a warning. Something sharp sliced at the skin on his neck, and for a terrifying moment, Seonghwa thought it was a knife, something like a purr, a growl rumbling through Hongjoong’s body that shuddered against him, mouth open against Seonghwa’s neck. Seonghwa’s eyes began to water as he tried to force his head away, but Hongjoong’s hand did not allow him to shift even an inch, heart pounding dangerously fast.

He felt something stab his neck, making him force out a pained gasp that barely escaped his constricted throat, his vision growing fuzzy as fear pumped blood quickly through his body, making it seem like all of him was throbbing, not enough air-
“H-Hon-”

A tongue ran across his skin. Another purr.

Seonghwa’s eyes closed tightly, tears slipping out.

“Hong-joong-”

Like a lightning strike, every touch was gone.

Seonghwa crumpled to the floor, hands touching his throat gingerly as he heaved in choking breaths, air catching and making him cough harshly, his throat burning and his neck aching as he rubbed at it-

One of his hands came away bloody.

Seonghwa wanted to look, wanted to see where Hongjoong was, what he was doing-

But all he could do was choke out breaths, chasing air into his lungs, shakings so badly, he wasn’t sure he could even support his own weight. He stared at the ground, trembling-

Hongjoong.

Carefully, slowly, terrified eyes lifted from the floor as he continued to breathe heavily, a shaking hand pressed over the puncture on his neck.

Hongjoong was halfway across the room, curled up on the floor, fingers twisting in his hair as he hunched over his legs, his back rising and falling in short, rapid breaths, shoulders shaking violently. Seonghwa could hear his ragged breathing from here.

Hongjoong.

Seonghwa lifted the hand from his neck, trying to see how much it was bleeding-

Hongjoong’s head snapped up, a hissing sound filling the quarters, and Seonghwa’s heart stopped in his chest.

Blood red eyes stared at him, deep and swallowing the iris completely, fingers curled into claws, and teeth bared like a wild animal-


Seonghwa covered the wound on his neck again, chest cold.

“You-” The words caught in his throat. Hongjoong didn’t move, just continued to glare at Seonghwa with blood irises.

Seonghwa forced himself to sit up slowly, leaning against the wall, hands trembling.

“You’re one of Them.”

Everyone heard the stories. The bloodsuckers. The immortals. The undead. Whatever legend, whatever tavern, everyone had a story about them. And they weren’t concrete enough to be fact and no one had ever had enough proof to be real, but they were too widely known, in too many variations, for people not to think there was something to the stories.
And Seonghwa was staring one in the eyes.

Hongjoong.

Hongjoong suddenly coughed- an ugly, hacking sound- flinching away, fingers twisting in his hair, turning away from Seonghwa, breathing heavily again, like he was in some horrendous pain.

And Seonghwa didn’t really care what sort of mythical being he was, it still looked like Hongjoong- it still was Hongjoong, and he almost reached out instinctively for him, chest aching as he whined in pain.

“How’s Hongjoong,” he breathed, wanting to hit himself for calling attention back to himself. But what else was he doing? Sitting here, Hongjoong only feet away… He couldn’t leave.

Hongjoong made a whining noise, deep in his throat, shaking his head sharply, pulling at his hair in what looked like a very painful manner. “No,” he muttered, voice almost lost in how he shifted and moved, like he couldn’t sit still. “No, no, no- don’t- No--” He flinched again. “No- Don’t- Don’t wanna hurt you-” He shook his head sharply.

He breathed heavily, and Seonghwa wondered if something had made him lose his mind.

He was one of Them.

His Hongjoong. His captain.

It was still him.

Right?

But Seonghwa shifted forward slightly. Only an inch. His hand twitching forward like he wanted to reach out to Hongjoong.

He was insane. Seonghwa, not Hongjoong. Seonghwa was the one currently reaching towards a monst-

Hongjoong.

It was Hongjoong.

“Don’t wanna hurt you,” he repeated, like he had forgotten Seonghwa was even there and was talking to himself.

He didn’t want to hurt him.

“Hongjoong,” he whispered, tongue numb, voice not able to go any louder. “Hongjoong, what-” Hongjoong withdrew further away from Seonghwa who paused, but swallowed. “Hongjoong, what’s wrong?”

He shook his head, whining deep in his throat. “Leave,” he stressed, voice weakening. “Seonghwa, you- Go . I don’t-”

“What’s hurt you?” he asked, not moving any closer, but sitting up slightly. “Hongjoong, what’s-” “No ,” Hongjoong slurred, twitching claws digging into his hair. “No, Seong- No .”

Seonghwa took in his sluggish movements, the red eyes that fluttered open and closed, sharp teeth
baring and retreating, the blood drying on the cut on his neck-
His stomach dropped.
Bloodsuckers.
He was one of Them. The stories-
Seonghwa almost backed back up against the wall. But he was frozen in place.
It was Hongjoong.
He didn’t want to hurt him.
“Hongjoong,” he managed weakly. His heart was bruising his ribcage. “Are you…”
What the hell did he even call it?
“Are you… hungry?”
A jarring mixture of a growl and a whine tore from his throat, hands falling from his hair to catch
him as he fell forward, catching him so he supported himself on his hands and knees, staring with
wide eyes that were scared.
“Seonghwa, go-”
He gasped as if he had just been struck in his gut, curling around himself like a man- a man dying
of hunger pains.
Seonghwa never could bear to see Hongjoong in pain.
He’s a monster.
It was Hongjoong.
“Hongjoong,” he rasped, voice threatening to break. “What do you need?”
Hongjoong shook his head, but stopped halfway, as if it hurt to move. “Seong-”
“What do you need?” he repeated, moving closer only a few inches.
Hongjoong ducked his head, breathing out hard, coughing roughly. His arms trembled, as if he
couldn’t keep himself up. “Blood,” he choked, fingers digging into the wood. “Why are you still
here?” he hissed, tearing up bits of wood from the floor.
Seonghwa swallowed, stomach churning. “Are you dying?”
Hongjoong forced out what sounded like a bitter laugh. “I can’t die.”
Indestructible. Invincible.
“But you are in pain.”
Hongjoong tried to laugh again, but it cut off with a pained whine, one hand coming to clutch at his
abdomen. Yes, he was in pain.
Seonghwa’s fingers curled against the wound on his neck.
“You’ll drink mine?” he asked.

“No,” Hongjoong snapped, head shaking, body swaying. “No, Seonghwa- Don’t- I can’t hurt you- ” Hongjoong almost sounded near tears, but his eyes were dry, teeth gritting.

“Will it kill me?”

“If I take too much,” Hongjoong grit, and Seonghwa wondered if it was pain or desperation loosening his tongue.

“Then don’t take too much.”

He was insane. He had lost his mind. He had taken everything that was logic and reason and thrown it into the sea.

But he had always been bad at having logic such as that in times such as these.

Hongjoong was hurting.

“Seong-”

Seonghwa shifted forward slowly. “Hongjoong, I want to stop your pain-”

“I could kill you.”

“I trust you.” A whisper. One that made Hongjoong pause, glancing up at Seonghwa as if he had figured out that Seonghwa had lost his mind. Seonghwa didn’t retract the statement.

It was still Hongjoong. His captain. His friend. His Hongjoong.

“I trust you.”

Hongjoong’s jerked forward, and Seonghwa flinched on instinct even though he immediately stopped, as if physically restraining himself. “Desk,” he bit out, sharp and dark enough that Seonghwa turned to the desk only a few inches away. “Bottom- ah- drawer.”

Seonghwa casted him a wary glance, but shifted, opening the drawer and finding only a sheathed dagger there. He took it out slowly, turning back to Hongjoong who blinked, and unless Seonghwa was losing his vision as well, the edges of his eyes tinged gold.

“Blessed blade,” he choked, arm twitching as he struggled to push himself up. “Use it if I-” He rose up and sat back on his feet, doubling over. “If I start going- too far.”

And listen ‘ere, ya little runt. The only thing that’s got the stuff to kill those beasts is steel that’s been taken to a holy man. Otherwise, you’d bes’ start prayin’ that God’s feelin’ generous to have that monster make it quick.

Seonghwa wanted to throw it away. “Hongjoong, I can’t-”

“Promise ,” he demanded weakly, lifting icy eyes to Seonghwa. “Seonghwa- Please , promise me- I can’t hurt you-”

Seonghwa stared at the blade, pulling it from the sheath and staring at the symbols etched into it. His stomach felt like this knife was currently buried in it. He couldn’t kill Hongjoong. He would die before he killed him. But maybe he could wound enough to get away if things-
No. Hongjoong… He trusted him. He would not need this knife.

He wet his lips. “I...I promise.”

And there was one more moment of Hongjoong staring, gold beginning to swallow the red in his eyes, his entire body seeming to shake-

Seonghwa didn’t even see him move.

Suddenly, he was against the wall, Hongjoong filling his lap-

He cried out as it felt like a knife being stabbed into his neck. It hurt-

Hongjoong held Seonghwa in place by his shoulders (thankfully, not his neck this time-), fingers digging in but not very painfully (compared to the ache in his neck), and Hongjoong-

Seonghwa could feel his lips close around whatever wound he had made, sucking hard enough to hurt, Seonghwa’s head tilted away to allow him to latch onto his neck. He could feel the blood rushing out. Could feel the moisture of it on Hongjoong’s lips, Hongjoong moaning against his skin, pulling Seonghwa away from the wall and close to him, desperate mouth drinking, drinking-

It was the strangest sensation Seonghwa had ever experienced. Foreign and strange and it made him feel slightly sick in his stomach-

It hurt, but the pain faded as Hongjoong licked at the crook of his neck, breathing heavily, desperately, and then he began sucking deep mouthfuls, hands shaking, throat rumbling with another purr-

What was Seonghwa doing?

Hongjoong kept sucking, kept swallowing, not even pulling away for breath, and Seonghwa’s mouth fell open slightly as the sting turned to something…. Warmer. His hands twitched by his side, one coming to rest at Hongjoong’s hip-

Seonghwa closed his eyes.

It didn’t hurt anymore. But, perhaps, that was due to the numbness spreading to his fingertips as his blood left him-

Hongjoong was drinking his blood.

He never slowed. Never stopped pulling Seonghwa closer, closer, practically growling against his neck, biting into it again, and Seonghwa winced, but there wasn’t even a sting-

It was terrifying. This… this was Hongjoong. But this was something dangerous. Something animalistic.

When Seonghwa opened his eyes, he had to blink to clear his vision, and his stomach dropped.

They probably needed to stop soon before Seonghwa passed out.

But Hongjoong wasn’t slowing down.

The hand on his hip squeezed lightly. “H-Hongjoong,” He gasped, the sensation of speaking while he was latched onto his neck a strange one.
A growled sounded deep in his throat, one of Hongjoong’s hands squeezing his shoulder, and maybe it would have hurt a little if he wasn’t slightly numb.

“Hon-Hongjoong,” he managed, “you- You need to stop now.”

A desperate sound left his throat, tongue dragging roughly over Seonghwa’s skin, another deep suck-

Seonghwa didn’t quite feel fear as his pulse picked up. He curled his fingers in his shirt, tugging twice, vision getting a little blurry. “Ho-ngjoong,” he said firmly, as stern as he could with his tongue feeling heavy. “Hong- You need to s-stop-”

The dagger felt heavy in his palm. Hongjoong rose up onto his knees, whining, fingers grasping-

“Hongjoong,” he whispered. “Stop.”

Once again, there was a lightning strike, all of Hongjoong gone, and Seonghwa fell back against the wall, head spinning slightly, wanting to touch his neck, but his arms felt heavy.

Hongjoong didn’t curl around himself, but he leaned against the opposite wall, staring at Seonghwa-

His eyes weren’t gold. They were a red tinge, but they were brown once more.

A hand was clasped over his mouth, and even around his fingers, Seonghwa could see the red staining there. He breathed heavily, looking scared.

Seonghwa let the dagger fall out of his hand.

“Seong-” Hongjoong’s voice was thick, dying before he could get out the name.

Seonghwa was tired.

“Seonghwa,” he managed, pushing away from the wall, looking horrified. “Seonghwa-” he crawled across the floor, “Seonghwa, Seonghwa-”

Seonghwa didn’t fear that he was coming to drink more. That’s not what his expression was.

Hongjoong stopped beside him, eyes pinched painfully, eyes trailing over Seonghwa, eyes shining. “Seonghwa, I’m-” Gentle hands grasped Seonghwa shoulder, pulling him forward gingerly, and when Hongjoong dipped his head into Seonghwa’s neck again, his pulse jumped.

“I’m just healing it,” Hongjoong whispered, voice uneven as he ran his tongue across Seonghwa’s neck. Once, twice, thrice- He pulled away, and Seonghwa skin tingled. He lifted a sluggish hand, and when he touched his neck, there was nothing but smooth skin.

“I’m sorry,” Hongjoong whispered, hands pulling Seonghwa further. “I’m sorry, I didn’t- It wasn’t- I never wanted to hurt you-”

“M not,” he whispered, eyes feeling heavy. “You stopped in time.” He blinked slowly. “M just… tired.”

Hongjoong moved towards Seonghwa, but hesitated, pulling back for a moment, before shifting closer, pressing his lips to his hair. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I tried to keep you away, this isn’t-” He sucked in a sharp breath.
“Rest,” Hongjoong whispered, pulling Seonghwa until he rested against his chest. “I- You can rest. I’m so sorry, Seonghwa.”

Seonghwa closed his eyes, not really having the option to keep them open at this point. He didn’t feel bad. Just tired. Sluggish. As if he had been awake for several nights.

Hongjoong’s hand pet his hair gently, voice shaking. “Just rest,” he repeated. “I’m sorry, just rest for now.”

And maybe Seonghwa should have been worried to sleep around him. Should have been wary, but it was…

It was still Hongjoong.

He trusted him.

With evidence to support it.

Seonghwa fell asleep, Hongjoong still whispering apologies and regrets. Seonghwa felt a tear hit his cheek, and wanted to wake back up, to stop it, but he was dragged under, eyes closing and mind numbing as he finally fell asleep.

~~~~~~

Seonghwa sat on Hongjoong’s bed, a cup of water cradled in his hands and a piece of bread with only one bite taken out of it sitting on the nightstand.

Hongjoong sat in his desk, staring at the ground, hands clasped together.

He looked as he was supposed to: brown eyes and kempt hair and small teeth that he kept licking at.

“You’re one of Them?” Seonghwa voice was a little hoarse after everything, but he no longer felt so weak. He did not feel fear as he looked at his captain. Only nerves and confusion.

Hongjoong nodded slowly, not looking at Seonghwa, staring at his feet.

“You’re…” He wet his lips, trying to take it all in stride, trying not to let the buzz in his blood take over. “What do… you call what you are?”

Hongjoong shrugged. “Whatever anyone else calls us. I think bloodsucker is the most common.”

“But what do you call yourself?”

His jaw tightened, but he looked up, eyes meeting Seonghwa’s. “Hongjoong.”

It felt like a punch to his gut. Seonghwa winced, staring at him, trying to reconcile this person that he had known, trusted, loved- for years. With that…

With the Hongjoong from last night.

The one who hadn’t wanted to hurt him, who wanted him to run away, who gave him the one thing
that could kill him, told him to use it if Hongjoong hurt him-

Were they… were they truly so different?

“You’re… indestructible.”

Hongjoong’s lips twitched, but nothing grew from it. “You could say.”

“You need blood. To live.” He nodded. Seonghwa stared into murky brown. “Your eyes were red. And gold.”

Hongjoong jaw flexed. “It… It’s a… hunting thing, I suppose you could call it. When a prey is found, when the prey is caught… Our senses our heightened with it.” Hongjoong was going to chew through his cheek if he didn’t stop.

“Where… How did you- Why last night-” Seonghwa sighed, rubbing at his face and taking a long sip of water. There was so much.

“What if I just… start from the beginning?” Hongjoong offered quietly.

Vaguely, Seonghwa could hear the men yelling and going about their afternoon duties.

“The beginning would be a good place, I think.”

Hongjoong was one of those myth beings. Bloodsucker, undead, bloodless- whatever you chose to call him.

A hundred years.

Hongjoong had been laying in a forest, a dagger through his chest after men grabbed everything of value he had and ran. He had been dying, crying weakly for someone, anyone, anything-

One of Them appeared. Eden, he called himself. And he turned Hongjoong into… this.

He lived off of blood of humans.

“Since becoming a captain here,” he murmured, not meeting Seonghwa’s eyes, “It’s a little harder to come by the blood. I can’t just start feeding off of the crew.” He swallowed. “But we see enough battles… enough death and fights, that I just sneak what I need from the corpses. It doesn’t work after the body is dead too long, but that’s never been a true issue.”

His hands wrung each other.

But lately… there had been no fights. No blood. No corpses. And Hongjoong, with the amount he was usually able to sneak, was able to make it a couple of weeks before needing to feed again.

A month had passed, though.

“It felt like… the worst kind of death,” Hongjoong said, shaking his head, hands clenched tight around each other. “But I can’t actually die from starvation. You just… weaken and wither… but you stay alive.”

That sounded terrifying.

“And you kept coming around, and you-” He voice caught, making him pause before beginning again. “You’re so warm, Seonghwa. And I can hear- I can hear every member of this crew’s pulse,
can feel their blood rushing in their veins- It was so tempting. They kept their distance, but you kept coming back.”

Hongjoong twitched. “And two days ago… when I threw you out, told you to leave-” He pressed his lips together. “I didn’t want to hurt you,” Hongjoong whispered. “I could feel that hunting instinct- I didn’t trust myself not to hurt you, if I didn’t push you away. I didn’t want you to come back, to risk losing control and just… taking what I needed.”

Hongjoong’s eyes shone as he stared at Seonghwa. “I’m sorry,” he choked out. “I hurt you in a different way.”

Seonghwa wet his lips. “It was to protect me.” Because it had been.

He chuckled bitterly. “I should have had better control. There never should have been a danger of it-”

“You controlled yourself last night.” Because he had.

Seonghwa was not making excuses. He was looking at facts.

Hongjoong gave him a look that questioned his sanity. “You had to tell me to stop three times before-”

“But you didn’t start until I told you to,” Seonghwa reminded him gently. “And when I first entered, you attacked, but you stopped yourself.”

Hongjoong lowered his head, shame clinging to his frame. “I almost didn’t-” He shook his head sharply. “You said my name, and I- It was like tearing off a limb, and I- I’m sorry, Seonghwa, I never- I can’t undo it, but it kills me to think I-” He cut off, covering his mouth as if he were going to be sick.

“But you’re…” Seonghwa hesitated. “You’re… okay now?”

Hongjoong nodded slowly. “For a while. I took enough last night-” He winced at the thought. “I should be able to hold out until we have another fight or take on another ship.”

“How long?”

He shrugged. “A week, probably.”

“And if we don’t have a fight within that time?”

Hongjoong blinked, and then narrowed his eyes slightly at Seonghwa. “Then I’ll wait until we do have a fight.”

Seonghwa stomach twisted. “And return to how you were yesterday?”

“That was after a month,” Hongjoong said, and it sounded like a warning. A message for Seonghwa to stop implying-”

“But you would be weakened and in pain as you were?” Seonghwa pressed, remembering Hongjoong clutching at his head and pained gasps slipping passed his lips like blades against Seonghwa’s skin.

Hongjoong’s eyes were hard. “Seonghwa, I will not feed from you again.” Stony. Final.
Seonghwa set his jaw.

He was terrified. It was jarring, and he felt as if he wasn’t quite touching the ground, free to float away like a leaf in the wind, but one thing he knew, one thing that had been his whole reasoning the night before-

“And I will not sit by as you suffer.”

“This is not a game, Seonghwa!”

“Does it look as if I am playing?” Seonghwa snapped, standing, and his head spun slightly, but he ignored it. His shoulders were tensed. “The entire reason I offered last night was because regardless of what you are, regardless of what you claim to be- you are precious to me, Hongjoong, and I cannot stand by and let you be harmed when I could cease it.”

And Seonghwa could not tell whether the storm in Hongjoong’s eyes was pain or anger. He stared at Seonghwa, and looked away. “You do not know what you offer-”

“I offered my life for yours,” Seonghwa said sharply. “Why should there be a difference if I offered my blood?”

“Because I will not be the thing that kills you!” Hongjoong yelled, getting to his own feet, expression shaken. “I did not want you to offer your life in the first place- but you did so without regard for what I desired. You continued to throw your fragile human body before an indestructible being, Seonghwa. But you cannot throw yourself here. I will not feed from you again. I will not have your death on my hands.”

“I trust you-”

“You should not!” Hongjoong snapped loudly, his voice echoing around the room. “You should not have even remained this long! You should have taken that dagger I gave you and used it without even letting me touch you!”

Seonghwa’s nails dug into his palm. “Why would I kill that whom I pledged my life to?”

“You pledged your life to something lifeless,” Hongjoong said darkly. “You risk your beautifully short life for something living on borrowed blood and life. You are a fool, Seonghwa,” He spat. “Had you any sense, you would have ensured your life by ending mine.”

Seonghwa stormed towards him, and Hongjoong’s expression twitched but he did nothing to stop it as Seonghwa grabbed him by the front of his shirt-

And kissed him.

Hongjoong made a thick noise against his lips, tugging back, but Seonghwa pulled him closer, knowing that Hongjoong could force him off if he desired. He licked at the seam of his mouth, Hongjoong’s hand clasping at Seonghwa’s hips as Seonghwa worked his mouth open, exploring the cool heat, tongue dragging against Hongjoong’s-

Hongjoong moaned slightly, fingers tightening on Seonghwa as he held pressed Hongjoong’s body to his, bending him backwards with the force of his lips, swallowing every sound as Hongjoong pushed back, forgetting for a moment, that they had been fighting. The weight of weeks without a single touch of each other bleeding into desperate sounds that sent lightning traveling through them. The warmth of Seonghwa’s body bled into his.
Seonghwa broke the kiss, but whispered against Hongjoong’s lips, breaths a little heavy. “Is this lifeless?” he breathed, hands trailing Hongjoong’s body, making him shiver. “Is this borrowed? Is it something you would have me end?”

Hongjoong closed his eyes tightly, as if he could no longer bear to look at Seonghwa, swallowing thickly. Seonghwa brought one hand up to Hongjoong’s cheek, brushing warm skin there.

“You beg me not to leave you alone in this life,” he whispered, searching Hongjoong’s tight expression. “I beg that you show me the same courtesy. Do not act as if I could ever have the strength to take you from myself, Hongjoong. Do not act as if we were shallow as to destroy what we had built because of this.”

Hongjoong’s fingers shook at his waist.

“Please, Hongjoong,” Seonghwa whispered. “Consider me in all of this. Would you ever kill me, were our situations reversed?”

Hongjoong glared at him, and it was all the answer he needed.

He was frightened. Because he had seen last night- Hongjoong’s hand against his throat and his teeth about to tear out what he needed- that Hongjoong was dangerous. And were he to lose control, Seonghwa was absolutely powerless to stop him. Utterly and absolutely dependent on Hongjoong’s own will.

But had that not been how it always was? Seonghwa trusting Hongjoong, blindly, at moments, but knowing that ultimately, he would not let him down.

Had Hongjoong not always been this... Had he not always, for as long as Seonghwa had known him, been hiding this part of himself? If he had not even let Seonghwa suspect in years, why should he suddenly lose control, simply because Seonghwa was now privy to his… condition?

“Do not hurt me,” Seonghwa murmured. “Do not push me away, Hongjoong. Allow me to continue aiding you, as I have. If it is necessary, let me ease that burden.”

Hongjoong stared at him, and Seonghwa had wondered if what he saw last night would color Hongjoong’s appearance, how he thought of him-

But the hard glint in his eye, the subtle hidden fear there, the darkness that spoke of apprehension-
It was all so viciously Hongjoong- *his* Hongjoong- that Seonghwa felt his heart settle a bit in his chest.

“I make you no promises,” Hongjoong muttered, lowering his eyes. “But I will not give you a refusal.”

Seonghwa couldn’t say he was relieved at the news- terrifying in what it implied- but if he looked at it as Hongjoong trusting himself, trusting Seonghwa, his lungs tightened.

“I will gladly wait for the time. And we will see where we stand.”

~~~~~~

Their peace continued. There was a couple distant scuffles with passing ships, but no deaths or excessive bloodshed to pass their decks.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong had been…. Not distant. But their nights were no longer occupied with each other. Their days were spent planning, and Seonghwa coaxing small kisses from Hongjoong who seized up as if he expected some being to grab control of his body and force his limbs.

(The same hands that had once bruised his neck and wrist, now, caressed his cheeks in feather-light touches, hardly even there, as if he were prepared to pull away at any moment.)

Until one night, nearly a full seven days after…. That Night. Seonghwa knocked on Hongjoong’s door, glancing around the darkness. There was no moon tonight.

The door opened, and Hongjoong looked confused for who could be knocking at this hour, but his eyes fell on Seonghwa, and they hardened. “Do not-”

Seonghwa stepped inside, Hongjoong moving back instinctively.

“Seonghwa-”

“I am merely here to ask a question,” he said firmly, leaning against the edge of Hongjoong’s desk. Hongjoong clearly didn’t believe him, standing in the center of the room, arms crossing. “What?” he asked darkly.

Seonghwa stared at him impassively. “How are you?” he questioned lightly. Hongjoong’s brow pulled down. “Are you in pain?”

He scoffed, shaking his head. “Seonghwa, we are not-”

“Set aside your sudden self-loathing and answer me, Hongjoong,” Seonghwa said sharply. “I am not here to fight, I am here to ensure your well-being, as I always have.”

And maybe there was a flicker of guilt in Hongjoong’s eyes, his jaw working as he didn’t meet Seonghwa’s eyes. “Hunger pains have… begun lightly. But it is not even something I notice yet.”

“Yet,” Seonghwa repeated, quietly, stomach twisting.

“Seonghwa,” Hongjoong warned, and Seonghwa pushed off the desk to stand fully.
“Would you sit by and allow me to suffer, were it in your hands to stop it?” he demanded. “If your hunger is barely noticeable, is now not the safest time to attempt it, when you are not half-dead with starvation?”

“I will not let you-”

“Trust me,” Seonghwa begged, stepping forward until only a small space separated them. “Please, Hongjoong… If you will not trust yourself, trust me.”

And Hongjoong’s jaw tightened, eyes tormented as he scanned over Seonghwa, as if imagining him bloodied and still, his fists clenching tightly, fearful and frightened-

But there could be no question: he trusted Seonghwa.

In the same way Seonghwa was trusting him, allowing him this opportunity.

It was the same string connecting them, binding them together and twisting around them-unbreakable. Even in the face of… all of this.

Neither of them moved, staring at each other with marble-set apprehensions and determination.

Hongjoong turned away, and for a moment, Seonghwa’s stomach dipped, but he marched to the desk in the corner of the room, tearing open the bottom drawer and grabbing the sole object within it.

He turned back, eyes set in obsidian as he grabbed Seonghwa hand, pressing the hilt into his hand firmly, the cold metal biting. His jaw flexed. “Use it,” he demanded, voice low and sharp as ice. “Set aside whatever fantasy you have of trusting me, and promise me you will use it, Seonghwa.”

He closed Seonghwa’s fingers around it firmly, holding them in place. “Protect yourself for once.”

Seonghwa glanced down at the dagger, and he felt a dark twisting in his stomach at the sight of it. There was an instinctual reaction to throw it away-

He trusted Hongjoong.

But he took the dagger, Hongjoong’s hands falling away. “I will use it if I have to,” he said quietly, Hongjoong’s shoulder losing a barely-noticeable tension. “But I won’t have to.”

He tensed again. “Seonghwa-”

“I won’t have to use it,” he repeated firmly, closing the final step between Hongjoong and him, his free hand grasping Hongjoong’s hand. “You’ll stop in time.”

They had held each other’s lives in their hands so many times before but this was different. Uncharted. Dangerous and stormy around their boat.

Hongjoong stared at him and he couldn’t decide if it was pain or anger in his eyes.

Seonghwa swallowed slightly, his throat sticking as his hand trailed up Hongjoong’s arm, touching his cheek gently.

Truly… He must have lost his mind. Regardless of whether he assigned the title of “monster” to Hongjoong or not (he did not), he should have more self preservation than to stand so close, to act without thinking as he leaned in to brush his lips against Hongjoong’s for the first time in days.

And as always, Hongjoong seized, hand bracing against Seonghwa to push him away, that fear in
his muscles that tensed—

But he didn’t push away this time. The hand on Seonghwa’s chest curled into his shirt as Seonghwa kissed him, and he hadn’t realized how awful it was to be distant from him until Hongjoong pulled him closer, arm sliding around his waist, mouth opening invitingly.

Why should Seonghwa fear to be close to Hongjoong now?

Had he not been this the entire time Seonghwa had been intimate with him before? Had he not been completely controlled? He would not simply snap now that Seonghwa knew. Seonghwa was in no more danger now than he had been before, and that was: none.

They parted, Seonghwa’s breath coming shorter as he stared at Hongjoong who still kept his eyes closed. His arm tightened around Seonghwa’s waist as his eyes closed tighter, as if trying to block out something.

Seonghwa kissed the corner of his lips gently.

Hongjoong swallowed. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he whispered into the centimeters between them, fingers clenching in his shirt.

Seonghwa ran a hand over his cheek. “You will not.”

Crazy or not, Seonghwa truly believed this. Poor decisions or not, it did not matter. This, Seonghwa would always believe.

“You trust me too much,” Hongjoong said, eyes opening and staring at him with an open fear.

“I trust the exact amount you have given me reason to,” Seonghwa whispered. “With everything I am.”

Hongjoong swallowed, scanning Seonghwa’s face once more. “Sit down on the bed,” he breathed, hand shaking slightly where it uncurled from his shirt drawing back to his sides.

Seonghwa obeyed, turning his back to Hongjoong as he walked over, sitting on the edge lightly, watching as Hongjoong walked half the distance before stopping. “You will use it,” he said firmly.

Seonghwa glanced at the dagger in his hand. He tightened his grip on it. “If I have to,” he said, the unsaid part hanging between them.

Hongjoong wet his lips, taking another step forward, and another, another— until he reached the edge of the bed, sitting a too-far distance from Seonghwa, but Seonghwa didn’t move closer.

Hongjoong needed to convince himself that he could be trusted.

His eyes trailed over Hongjoong’s arms, the dagger cold in his hands. “Do you… bleed?”

Hongjoong nodded slowly, the question seeming the shatter the ice between them slightly as he wet his lips. “My blood… Well, our blood… can actually heal people.”

Seonghwa blinked, taken aback. “It can?”

Hongjoong looked guilty. “I used it to heal you, once.” At Seonghwa’s wide eyed stare, he looked away. “That… That battle that you almost died… the one I visited you after… You were going to die, Seonghwa. So I snuck in during the night and fed you my blood.”
Seonghwa’s stomach dropped. Hongjoong had…

“I didn’t want to,” Hongjoong said quickly. “And I would not have, if I hadn’t known so surely that you would die otherwise- I could not let you die.”

Seonghwa’s hand on his wrist stopped his quick words, Hongjoong’s mouth clicking shut as they stared at each other. Seonghwa tried to smile. “You act as if I will hate you for saving my life.”

“Seonghwa, it-”

“You saved my life,” he repeated firmly. The how or why did not matter. It was the same act as Seonghwa stepping before a bullet for him. The silence between them was long, Hongjoong appearing to try and gather to say something. Seonghwa withdrew his hand. “Shall we?” he asked, trying to be casual and not show the slight sick feeling in his stomach.

Hongjoong swallowed.

His eyes trailed Seonghwa. “I- I don’t want to feed from your neck,” he said firmly. “It’s… I don’t want to trap you like that.”

Seonghwa simply nodded once.

“I can… I can take it from anywhere,” Hongjoong said, hands clasped in each other. “If I take it from your wrist… it’ll hurt less. And you’ll have easier movement with your other hand.”

With the dagger.

Seonghwa swapped the dagger to the other hand, half-holding out the hand closest to Hongjoong, wrist turned up.

It seemed… frightening. The neck, the wrist, they were vulnerable spots. And Hongjoong chose the wrist to allow Seonghwa movement with the dagger. But Seonghwa could not care less. He would not need to use it.

Hongjoong stared at the offered limb, lips fluttering as if he wanted to speak.

Cool fingers wrapped around his wrist, cradling it gently in both his hands, running a gentle thumb over the soft skin there.

“I would be touched by your faith in me, were it not so easy to get you killed.”

Seonghwa kept very still. “It is easy for me to be killed regardless. You are not alone in that power.”

Hongjoong stared up at him, eyes shining, and he chewed the inside of his cheek for several seconds. “You will stop me.”

“If I have to.”

Hongjoong held his wrist gently, moving forward slightly so Seonghwa’s arm was not so stretched, head bowing as he lowered his lips to the skin. He kissed it gently, lips resting there, and Seonghwa could feel them shaking.

And it was different this time.

Because there was no cloud of fear to see through, and it was not done in a lightning flash, and it
was not with Seonghwa unable to even see Hongjoong’s body-

Seonghwa watched, with an almost scientific fascination, as Hongjoong mouth opened, sharp canines appearing, and he watched them sink into the soft skin of his wrist.

It still hurt, Seonghwa wincing at the thick, sharp pain that swallowed his wrist, but he did not tense. It was nothing, this time, compared to the discomfort from before. Not even as bad as a knife wound.

And like before, the moment the puncture allowed blood to hit his tongue, Hongjoong tensed, hands tightening on Seonghwa’s wrist, but not even nearing painful. He sucked, quick and desperate, but nothing compared to before. Nothing like the animalistic abandon that had him pinning Seonghwa down.

It still felt a little sickening, that sensation of blood flowing out, knowing that Hongjoong-

His captain. His Hongjoong was feeding from that. Needed that to live.

There was that rumbling in Hongjoong’s chest, but it sounded closer to a purr than a growl this time as he pulled away, licking at the blood that had escaped and began to trickle down his arm. Then his lips were back around wound, drinking more, grip tightening a little more.

Seonghwa kept half an eye on his own body, waiting for the lightness in his head or the numbness in his fingers.

But Hongjoong suddenly pulled away, jerking off of his wrist, one hand dropping it and covering his mouth and he breathed quickly, staring at Seonghwa, searching his face, over the rest of him, as if looking for a sign of pain or near-death.

Seonghwa frowned. “You… That was enough?”

Hongjoong nodded, swallowing, eyes falling to Seonghwa’s wrist that was still dripping red, a slight throb around the two wounds puncturing there. Hongjoong dropped his head back down, running his tongue over them gently.

And Seonghwa watched with wide eyes as the skin seemed to knit itself back together, the wound closing until all that was left was excess blood clinging to his skin.

Hongjoong wiped his mouth with a shaking hand. “Are you dizzy?” he asked, voice rough.

Seonghwa shook his head, flexing his hand. “Not even a little. Did you truly take enough?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

Hongjoong nodded. “It has only been a week. I told you the pains were not that bad, the hardest part-” He swallowed. “The hardest part is having it from someone still living. It tastes different. You’re-“ He wet his lips. “Warm.”

That was… a morbid thought. But not quite something Seonghwa was going to focus on. Getting used to it would come later.

“I did not even have to tell you to stop.”

Hongjoong stared at him, almost defensively. “I could have still killed you.”

“And I could have killed you.” He lifted the dagger in his hand before tossing it further away on
the bed, turning back to Hongjoong. “But I would not. The same as you.”

And Seonghwa could still see turbulent waters in Hongjoong’s eyes, unsteady and dangerous. But he did not refute the statement. But there was still pain there. Apprehension and fear causing a physical ache within the other. And Seonghwa felt the familiar urge to protect, to ease, to comfort.

He took Hongjoong’s hand in gentle hands, the other jumping slightly at the contact. “You will learn to trust yourself,” he promised, bringing his hand to his mouth and kissing it, eyes closing. “I will not stop until you do.”

Hongjoong stared at him, eyes slightly wide, mouth open as if to speak, but he simply stared, fingers curling in Seonghwa’s grip. “You are a fool, Seonghwa,” he breathed, voice weak.

Seonghwa glanced from his hand, eyes stern. “If I am a fool, it is only for you.”

This was his Hongjoong. Despite his physiology, despite his bloodthirst, despite his fear, he was Hongjoong. Who did not want to hurt him, who did not trust himself for fear of a miniscule doubt of whether he could protect Seonghwa, who placed a cool hand against Seonghwa’s cheek, lifting his head gently and pressing his lips to his-

Seonghwa expected to taste blood, but there was only the cool warmth of Hongjoong mouth breathing against him as he pulled him closer, breath coming quicker as Hongjoong’s hand threaded through his hair. Seonghwa closed his eyes, leaning into the touches, hand curling into Hongjoong’s waist, chest tightening- kissing harder, Hongjoong sending a hundred messages Seonghwa could not yet read

Hongjoong would learn to trust himself.

Seonghwa gripped tighter at his waist, leaning back and dragging Hongjoong closer and laying him against the bed as Seonghwa’s braced himself on top of him, the other making a surprised noise against his mouth as Seonghwa’s hands braced against his chest as his weight pressed against his lips, a light moan on his lips as he pulled Seonghwa closer, gasping against his mouth-

~~~~

And Hongjoong hands grabbed his waist, flipping them with a strength that had once startled Seonghwa, but that he only found amusing now as Hongjoong climbed atop him, straddling his waist as his hands found Seonghwa’s wrists, his lips never leaving Seonghwa’s.

He pinned Seonghwa’s wrists to the bed, a position they had found a thousand times, claiming his mouth rapidly, Seonghwa simply allowing himself to lay back as Hongjoong kissed him as if that was what he needed to live.

“Hong-” He was cut off by another kiss, and he laughed against the other’s mouth. “Hongjoong, this isn’t-” Another kiss- “Isn’t what we came here-” Kiss- “To do.”

Hongjoong pulled away only enough to whisper against his lips roughly- “This is always what I plan to do,” before working Seonghwa’s mouth open, tongues tangling as Seonghwa chuckled.

You would think the captain of a ship would have a better attention span.
Seonghwa almost told Hongjoong to release his wrist, a desire to touch back claiming his muscles, but he was content where he was as Hongjoong finally pulled away, trailing lips and unnaturally sharp teeth along his skin, making Seonghwa shiver.

There was no dagger anywhere in sight.

Teeth scraped along his bare chest, never breaking skin, and Seonghwa leaned his head back, chest rising and falling quickly.

“You're so warm,” Hongjoong murmured, lips brushing along his stomach before moving back up his chest.

Seonghwa rolled his eyes. “Must you point it out every time?” he questioned.

Hongjoong chuckled. “It is a very pleasant warmth,” he said, perhaps as a defense. He trailed over his shoulder, ending at the exposed skin at Seonghwa’s inner bicep, nipping at the soft skin there.

A gentle kiss, and then a pinprick sensation of teeth puncturing-

Seonghwa had gotten used to the small pain, until it was never noticeable. Only feeling the rush of Hongjoong sucking against his skin and blood flowing-

Getting used to it was not easy, but the familiar sensation now only brought a sort of... comfort? Nostalgia? It was a warm feeling, filling his chest because he was able to give this to Hongjoong, taking away his need to hunt for corpses and wait with bated breath for another battle, just to continue on.

Seonghwa shivered, powerless in his grip, but rathering to be nowhere else. He did begin to twist his wrist inside Hongjoong’s grasp, not the arm he was feeding from, and Hongjoong released his wrist, allowing Seonghwa to thread fingers through his hand, squeezing there as his eyes fell closed, Hongjoong purring against his skin as his free hand trailed Seonghwa’s skin-

Hongjoong pulled away, tongue running over the wound, cleaning up the last of the blood until only pale skin remained, kissing his way along Seonghwa’s skin, back to his chest, something slightly more desperate in the touches as Seonghwa’s hand fell from his hair, his body simply laying still as Hongjoong attacked it with kisses and bites and tongue, his cool lips stark against the warm body beneath him.

Hongjoong’s lithe body dragged against him as he moved, covering every inch of Seonghwa, who twitched when his lips trailed down his hips. “Hongjoong,” he breathed, hands leaping to his hair again, holding on tightly, Hongjoong kissing the skin roughly, as if he would not get another opportunity to do it.

“Hongjoong-”

His hands pulled at Seonghwa’s pants, untying the little knot there and kissing each inch of skin exposed, nipping at it lightly, and making him gasp, heat rushing beneath his skin.

“Hongjoong, you can s-slow down,” he assured him, hands petting through his hair. ‘We have time, you can-”

Hongjoong was suddenly at his lips, kissing with bruising force as Seonghwa’s arms came around his neck automatically, dragging him closer, rough lips against his.

“Hongjoong,” he gasped around his mouth, legs tangling with his. “Hongjoong, you can- We have
Hongjoong suddenly pulled away, just enough to breathe, eyes wide and clear and terrified and gentle, begging, pleading, loving, desperate, pained-

Seonghwa felt paralyzed.

“Be my life partner,” he breathed, chest heaving against Seonghwa’s. “You are precious to me, be my life partner, Seonghwa-” Hands caressed his face, gentle and cool and stroking, lips pressing against his for a moment before leaving. “Please, Seonghwa, be my precious-”

Seonghwa’s throat closed up at the meaning he didn’t fully understand.

“What does that mean?” he rasped, Hongjoong’s lips kissing his shoulder, his neck.


Seonghwa clung to Hongjoong, afraid that he might float away without him, and he didn’t quite understand, didn’t quite grasp everything, didn’t have all the facts, but…

Forever with Hongjoong.

Precious.

“Never apart,” Hongjoong whispered, looking back up at Seonghwa, and he was stunned when tears fell onto his chest. “Mine and yours, forever, Seonghwa. Together.”

He didn’t understand what it meant. Couldn’t understand. But Seonghwa’s body was like a stone falling to the earth, powerless to fight the force dragging it down, stuck in the current that dragged him to Hongjoong-

“I never wish to part from you,” Seonghwa gasped as Hongjoong kissed his neck, his fingers digging into the back of Hongjoong’s shirt, clinging there. “I don’t understand, but I-I wish to be with you as long as I live, Hongjoong. For as many years as I have left on this earth, I want you-”

Hongjoong pulled away, jaw flexing, hands stilling against Seonghwa’s body, a chilling, sudden lack of sensation after the frantic pull of before. Seonghwa stared at him, almost in fear, but Hongjoong stared down at him, eyes swirling more dangerous than a hurricane.

A single hand grasped Seonghwa’s, tight enough to be unnatural, but never painful. Hongjoong’s eyes had that fear back to paint them, but it was simply a single color in a mural of emotions.

“What if I could give you forever?” Hongjoong breathed, barely audible, even in the silent night around them. His hand shook against Seonghwa’s. “What if I could give you as many years as are left to this earth?”

Seonghwa frowned for a moment- only a moment- before his eyes widened, staring at Hongjoong who stared back, both of them unmoving, as if even a shift may destroy this balance they had found of breathing and stillness.

Forever.

Years.

Like… Hongjoong?
Forever.

It was a frightening prospect, one that made his chest seize in ice.

Hongjoong didn’t move.

“Be my life partner, Seonghwa” he whispered.


“No more risking lives. No more fearing for each other.”

A gentle hand touched his cheek, water droplets hitting his chest. Hongjoong stared as if this were the last time he would get to see Seonghwa, hands shaking.

Seonghwa couldn’t breathe as Hongjoong kissed his chest.

“Neither of us will ever be subjected to this life alone.”
An Encounter

Chapter Notes

Okay truth time: I hate how this chapter came out, but let me know what you think- I can try and fix it more, but I’m just tired of rereading it.
But it’s just me, probably, so please enjoy it!! My biggest concern is that it seems rushed, so let me know about the pacing of it all!
Let me know what you think, and have a great day!
-SS

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Life was good.

“Jung Wooyoung, what the hell are those?”

Wooyoung paused as he passed Seonghwa, cocking a confused eyebrow. “Um… pants?”

Seonghwa stared from his spot in his chair, a book laying flat on his lap as his mouth fell open.
“Where is the rest of them?” he demanded in disgust.

Wooyoung felt his lips curl in a smirk as he glanced down at his exposed knees. “They’re ripped jeans, hyung, this is all of them.”

“You bought them like that?” he demanded, leaning forward. “They’re already ruined!”
Wooyoung snorted, rolling his eyes. “Get out of the dark ages, hyung, this is the style now.”

“Torn up clothes? In my time, we called that dressing in rags,” he raised his voice to follow after Wooyoung who had already continued on his way.

“I’m going out now,” Wooyoung called, on his way to the door. “San and I are going shopping!”

“For more torn up clothes?” he heard Seonghwa call.

He paused, snorting with one hand on the doorknob. “No, we’re getting crop tops.”

“Those mini-shirts?”

Sometimes, Seonghwa could be the cool parent. Like when he stopped Hongjoong for reaming them out for coming home late. Or when he listened to the weird rap that Jongho and he liked, and they could tell he didn’t like it, but he said it sounded interesting anyway.

And then sometimes, he was stuck further in his past than Hongjoong was. At least Hongjoong had found a liking to eyeliner (and Seonghwa was welcome for that because Wooyoung knew he appreciated that look on Hongjoong), but Seonghwa liked to keep to his formal shirts and nice pants.

Maybe Wooyoung could convince Hongjoong to get some ripped jeans. Let’s see how Seonghwa changed his tune about them then.
“Hurry up, Wooyoung!” San called from where he waited at the bottom of the porch steps.

“Shut up, asshole, you were still applying make up until ten seconds ago!”

The night was warm, which was good because Wooyoung didn’t feel like running back inside to get a jacket. San immediately launched into a too-intricate explanation of his newest drama-binge session that Wooyoung had never even heard of before, and he just hummed along enough that San didn’t yell at him for not listening.

The walk into town wasn’t far. If you could really call it a “town.” It was more a pit stop. That place people didn’t go to unless they were out of gas on the highway. But they liked it that way. Less humans, less problems for them.

“This one first!” San declared, dragging Wooyoung past the little thrift store he wanted to visit, and heading straight for Sunshine Clothing.

Shopping with San was always fun. He wasn’t quite so stingy with his money as Yunho (it was the Great Depression in him) and he didn’t have a horrendous sense of style that Mingi had (it was the 80’s in him). Jongho didn’t like going shopping (he liked reading and video games and not much else), and God help him if he ever went to Seonghwa or Hongjoong for fashion advice.

“What about this?” he asked, holding up a silky dark blue shirt to his chest.

San examined it for only a moment. “Those matte black pants you have would look good for it.”

That was all Wooyoung needed as he put it with the other shirts he was buying.

“Oh, I’m getting this one!” he heard San exclaim, holding up a vibrant purple leopard print shirt. Sometimes, though…. Sometimes the 70’s followed San.

“Disco is dead, San, I told you that. You have to let it-”

“Excuse me… sirs.”

They both stopped, glancing behind themselves where a young woman stood, stiff and slightly wide eyed. “Um… we close in twenty minutes.”

Wooyoung wanted to sigh. This was the worst part of night shopping. Nowhere was open for convenient vampire hours. Which was understandable, given that there were only seven vampires in or around town.

“We’re done, we can check out now.” He tore the shirt out of San’s hand and put it back on the rack. “It looks like something Mingi would wear, so you’re not getting it.”

He turned, and heard San take it off the rack anyway. Whatever, not his money.

The girl checked them out, dropping several of the articles of clothing and muttering apologies as he bagged them, not looking up. San and Wooyoung kept to themselves, discussing where to go next, and neither of them looked at her.

Wooyoung knew she was probably scared shitless, basically the only person in this store with two vamps walking around, but the only thing they could do was attempt to appear as non-threatening as possible as she handed them their bags with a quiet- “Have a good night.”

At least she wasn’t like those people who looked ready to spit on them.
They walked around, most places already closed, and Wooyoung sighed harshly. “We should try and come during the day. I’m tired of not being able to get good clothes.”

San snorted. “Sure, and when we come back with our arms turned to dust, I’m sure Seonghwa won’t kill us the rest of the way.”

“We could be fast enough!” Wooyoung fought. “The hyungs are always talking about how they walked around their ship. If they could stay out in open sun for that long, we can go shopping with burning up.”

San slung a comforting arm around his shoulders. “Climates are different, now. All that ozone and UV stuff-”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, do you?”

“I heard Seonghwa telling Hongjoong!” San said indignantly as they passed by some clubs, speaking over the booming bass. “He read it in one of those science journals about vampires. And did you know, that because there’s such a small, hidden population of vamps, it’s hard to get real data about how the earth changing affected-”

There was a loud crash to their right, and both of them jumped, stumbling away from the ally that the noise sounded from, San grabbing Wooyoung and hauling him back until they were almost falling into the street.

“What the hell was that?” San hissed, still clinging.

Wooyoung stared through the darkness, eyes doing better than a human’s, but all he saw was a knocked over pile of empty bottles from the club.

“Did a cat knock them over or something?” he whispered, taking a step closer.

San hauled him back. “Uh, we are not going over there!” he hissed, holding him tightly. “Come on, let’s go home, now I’m freaked out.”

Wooyoung, however, kept staring down the alley. “Hold on, I want to check to see if-”

“No,” San said firmly, beginning to walk away and dragging Wooyoung along. “Hongjoong is going to kill us if we get caught up in something-”

“But what if there’s someone back there?” Wooyoung demanded, even if he didn’t fight to get out of San’s grip.

“Then it’s either people having sex or about to start a fight, and we’re steering clear of both! I, for one, don’t feel like being grounded at the house for a month, like the last time you tried to go sneaking off into places you don’t belong.”

Wooyoung huffed, shaking San grip off until he just held his wrist, following without fighting. “To be fair, that dog was adorable.”

“It was running away from you, Wooyoung. You scared it.”

“I just wanted to pet it!”

“You chased it off the pier! And then jumped in after it!”

Wooyoung crossed his arms petulantly. “Like you’ve never gotten your ass handed to you by
Seonghwa and Hongjoong.”

“Not as often as you.”

“That’s because you and Mingi haven’t gone out anywhere together lately.”

Their bickering continued until they reached home, the alley almost completely forgotten until they found Hongjoong and Mingi watching some nature show on the TV, and the elder glanced at them as they wandered through.

“It’s not even 3,” he noted, glancing at the clock. “You’re back early.”

And suddenly Wooyoung remembered why they called it a night. “The shop was closing, and then San got scared because something fell over in a back alley—”

“I wasn’t scared, I was just making sure you didn’t try to go check it out!”

“Where’s Yunho?” Wooyoung asked instead of engaging in another round of yelling. “I want to play Halo.”

He heard an unhelpful sound of “uh-uh” from Mingi, and Hongjoong simply shrugged, so Wooyoung just gave San a peace sign and went in search of the other, who was expectedly laying on his bed, already deep into a game.

Wordless, Wooyoung grabbed an extra controller from the shelf, pushing against Yunho until he moved over, allowing Wooyoung to lay down beside him. He stared at him expectantly until Yunho sighed, exiting the round and starting another for both of them.

“How was shopping?” he asked without looking away from the screen.

Wooyoung gave him a quick rundown that was interrupted in the middle by Yunho being an asshole and shooting Wooyoung off a cliff. Which left all cordial conversation behind in favor of yelling and shoving as their characters fought.

And when they laid on Yunho’s bed, ally long forgotten and replaced with a surge of adrenaline as his character dodged a punch from Yunho’s, smashing buttons and throwing controllers, diving off the bed to avoid having their controls snatched—Wooyoung had yet another random thought of…

This is nice.

He didn’t have the sort of thought… often. But it was something that cropped up here and there, as natural as a small mental note that the weather was nice. Not necessarily a special occasion, but not something rare either. It was just a thought that tended to strike when his chest got warm.

It was sort of easy to forget the weight of the choice they had all made… what it really symbolized and meant for them as a species. As a family. And when Yunho flattened his huge body over Wooyoung’s to stop him from winning the next round, he frantically tried to keep his controller away from his grasping hands.

Wooyoung knew about life partners. Of course. Every vampire did. It was the first thing any maker told their changeling. It was the one thing every vampire needed to know about.

The same way they were first taught of rogues and why they existed. It was important to know. So you didn’t become one.

And he remembered working at his maker’s bookshop. No one ever came in because they knew
they were vampires. This was before the half-hearted laws and research that began to protect them, but it had all begun with a yet another brick thrown through the window, followed by some sort of burning alcohol that they managed to put out, only after it had burned so many books-

Wooyoung wanted to get away. To move somewhere else. Somewhere they weren’t so hated, somewhere they weren’t so targeted-

And his maker had stared with cold eyes. “Hate is everywhere, boy. And nothing can ever change that.”

Wooyoung stared at him, still standing among the ashy burns of their shop- their home- and the brick and the glass that blanketed it, a symbol of how they would never be safe. Could never truly be accepted.

And this… This was all it could ever be?

So Wooyoung ran. He always intended to go back, but he just needed freedom that that suffocating shop and the terrifying thought that he was doomed to a life of throwing stones and torches.

And call it fate, destiny, whatever, but he ran in the night until he reached the shore of the ocean, feet kicking up sand as he ran, making him close his eyes as he ran towards the water-

And he slammed into what felt like a tree in his path, falling backwards until his ass hit the sand, his nose throbbed as he rubbed at it-

Running into things never hurt before. Only when his maker would swat at him for dropping books.

“Oh my- I’m sorry, I wasn’t even looking-”

The hands that touched him were not warm, which was strange because everyone’s touch felt warm, save for his maker’s-

And when Wooyoung looked up into apologetic eyes, and he knew instinctively, automatically, that the man pulling him to his feet was like him.

Namely, that no human would ever consider touching a vampire. And the only thing that could harm a vampire was another vampire, and Wooyoung’s nose was still throbbing viciously.

“Are you okay? You didn’t hurt your head, did you?” He turned away. “Seonghwa, come here!”

And it wasn’t until then that Wooyoung looked around and saw a scattering of people along the beach. One of them glanced up, getting up out of the sand, and even from here, Wooyoung could see the frown on his face.

“You’re- Oh, you’re a vampire, aren’t you?” the stranger said suddenly.

Wooyoung stared at him. “Um. Yeah.”

The newcomer, Seonghwa, stood beside him. “Hongjoong, what did you do?” he asked before he even stopped moving. “Look at his nose, you might have broken it!”

Seonghwa stepped forward, and Wooyoung didn’t flinch back, gentle hands taking his face in his hands and examining his nose with soft eyes. “Does it hurt?” he asked, and Wooyoung realized he was speaking to him.
“N-No, not really-”

“Is that another vamp?” a voice yelled, and suddenly another body was beside Seonghwa’s, face lit with an excited brightness that… Wooyoung had never seen on a vamp before. His maker was cold, and any vampire who wandered into their shop had hollow eyes and heavy shoulders. None of them were happy. “Holy shit, he looks like a baby!”

Wooyoung glared at the newcomer because he just had a youthful face, he didn’t look like a kid-

“Shut up, San,” Hongjoong said, swatting at him. “You don’t look any older than him.”

Wooyoung wasn’t sure he had ever seen so many vampires in one place. There were still two more shapes wandering around near the beach’s shore.

There were so many of them. He had only ever seen two or three together that wandered in his maker’s shop, trying to give him some business to live off of as they passed through the area.

“There’s… so many of you.”

“Don’t remind me,” Hongjoong huffed, turning around. “Yunho, put Mingi down! You’re walking the rest of the way if you get him wet!”

And really… Wooyoung didn’t want to jump to conclusions, but…

“You’re all… life partners?”

Seonghwa finally released his face. “Unfortunately,” He said, but Wooyoung thought he saw a glimmer of warm fondness in his eyes. It made his skin tingle.

Of course, there term ‘partners’ may conjure imagines of only two, but Wooyoung had heard stories of groups of vampires that chose each other as life partners, forming what his maker called “covens” or “families.” Wooyoung hadn’t even believed that many vampires could exist in one place together without being run off.

But these men apparently did it.

This man- all these men- seemed nothing like Wooyoung’s maker.

“But at least it’s never boring,” San piped up, as if that might make up for the exasperated look on Seonghwa’s face.

“I think you’re fine,” Seonghwa told him. “Sorry about that, Hongjoong likes to stare at the ocean and reminisce. It takes a crew of horses to drag him out of his head.”

Hongjoong jabbed a finger into Seonghwa’s side, and he pushed his hands away, San pretending to vomit into the sand-

“Where are you guys heading?” he asked, tongue feeling a little numb.

“Seoul!” San said excitedly. “We’re going on vacation!”

Vampires going on… vacation?

“A decision we regretted as soon as we left,” Seonghwa assured him. “You live around here?” he asked, frowning. “We hadn’t heard word of any covens in the area.”
“It’s… just me and my maker.”

He made a noise of understanding, lips lifting in a smile. “It’s always nice being able to stay with your maker,” he said honestly. “And-"

A ball of wet sand suddenly exploded against San’s back, making him squawk in indignation, racing off with a cry of “Mingi!” tackling what appeared to be a very large vampire into the sand.

“Jesus, could they just kill each other already,” Hongjoong huffed, rubbing at his eyes. “Just get it over with.”

Seonghwa swatted at him, but he didn’t voice a disapproval of the idea. “Sorry,” he told Wooyoung. “They’re not quite house trained yet.”

He snorted, watching another vampire lift San off of Mingi, dangling him in the air, laughter audible even over here. Seonghwa’s eyes glanced behind him with heavy sigh even if they were bright, and Hongjoong looked like he was suddenly trying not to laugh.

And Wooyoung knew… he knew that was what he wanted. He hadn’t known that vampires could act like this. They weren’t burdened with thoughts of darkness and bricks thrown through windows.

He couldn’t imagine standing among them and being stared at with cold eyes and a bitter heart that told him things could never get any better.

“Take me with you .”

And being pinned underneath Yunho, even after Yunho had pried the controller from his hand but still refusing to get off of him, it only made such a stark comparison.

Using a bit more strength, he finally flipped Yunho off of him, making a show of heaving in breath.

“You don’t even need to breathe!”

“That’s how heavy you are, I guess.”

Yunho locked an arm around Wooyoung’s neck, forcing him immobile as he laughed, Yunho demanding he take it back.

They fell off the bed, Yunho landing on top of him as Seonghwa pushed the door open.

“For goodness sake, are you trying to break through the floor?” he asked, one hand sitting dangerously on his hip. “Can you keep it down, some of the others have already gone to bed.”

Wooyoung twisted as best he could, eyes landing on Yunho’s clock. “It’s already 6?” he demanded.

Seonghwa snorted. “Yes, and the rest of the house is very aware of how unaware you are of the time.”

Wooyoung sighed, Yunho’s arm loosening around his neck as he stood, straightening his clothes. He didn’t want to go to bed, but tomorrow night, Hongjoong promised everyone was going to head out together, and Wooyoung was excited for that.

The barest visibility of sunlight began to creep around the curtains that were drawn inside his own
room as he laid down. They had special glass and stuff that they could stay up during the day if they wanted to, but that was so much work. Wooyoung got too warm in the sun, and it made him sleepy anyway.

His eyes closed, and he heard distantly, down the hall, Seonghwa and Hongjoong’s voices speaking quietly. He knew it was nothing bad. The two of them always stayed up until everyone else fell asleep.

And if Wooyoung was honest (though, God forbid he ever say it to their faces) it was a comforting sound to fall asleep to.

~~~~~~

There was a pounding on their front door that shook it violently, entirely too loud for so late in the afternoon. No one was going to be up for another few hours.

Wooyoung groaned, jerking awake, pulling his head out from under his pillow, feeling the way it stuck at odd angles. He peered blearily around the room, blinking sleep away, and heard quick footsteps outside of his door.

More banging on the front door, and Wooyoung scrubbed at his face as he walked to his door, glancing down the hall in time to see Hongjoong and Seonghwa heading down the stairs. Intrigued, and maybe a little worried, Wooyoung stepped out, following after him.

Wooyoung paused at the mouth of the entrance hall, Seonghwa and Hongjoong exchanging glances as they walked towards the door.

When no immediate answer was given once again, the pounding returned, louder, with a loud cry of “Open up, we know you’re in there!”

“Well, I should think so,” he heard Seonghwa mutter. “It’s the middle of the day.”

Hongjoong opened the door, and immediately, a man in police uniform entered, Hongjoong closing the door behind them with a sour expression. “Can we help you, sir?” he questioned cordially. “Or did you only come to try and wake our entire household?”

The man did not seem amused, lips thin. “I’m Officer Kwang from the Police Department. I work among the homicide division.”

And Wooyoung watched irritation bleed from his hyung’s faces as concern set in. “All of the people of our household are accounted for and have been all day,” Seonghwa said, glancing at Hongjoong to confirm this. Hongjoong nodded.

“I don’t know what happened, but it was no one staying here,” Hongjoong assured him, not quite defensive.

“This isn’t about accusing anyone here of committing a murder,” Officer Kwang said, voice sharp. “We have a rogue wandering around town.”

Wooyoung’s nonexistent heart skipped a beat.
Seonghwa and Hongjoong glanced at each other, unreadable expressions on both their faces.

“We began tracking a slew of maulings and killings across town, thinking a wild animal had wandered into the city, but last night, there was a murder that didn’t leave the body completely unrecognizable, and… well, we’re not completely familiar on the nuance of vampires killing, but we know fangs when we see them.”

Seonghwa’s jaw was tight. “And you came to us because…?”

“You’re the only vamp coven in a hundred miles. And law requires that I inform you of rogue sightings and provide you the chance to attempt to corral them. You can choose to bring the rogue into your coven or not.”

“And what will you do if we don’t?” Hongjoong questioned, already knowing the answer.

“We hunt him down, then. I figured there are so little of you, you might wanna try and keep him around.”

“You’ve seen him?” Seonghwa demanded.

“We have witnesses describing a thin, bloody man wandering around the area the murder took place last night. Near the shopping district.”

Wooyoung’s stomach dropped. The alley… That really couldn’t have been a rogue, right?

“Of course, we will attempt to find and subdue them,” Hongjoong said, glancing at Seonghwa, their expression giving nothing away. “How long do we have?”

“48 hours,” Kwang said sharply. “After that, we hunt him down.”

Wooyoung saw Seonghwa’s fingers twitch. 48 hours was not a lot of time, especially if there was a rogue involved and you were trying to keep them alive.

“Of course, we’ll have him out of your hair by then,” Hongjoong said, voice dangerously cordial. “Thank you for informing us, Officer.”

Officer Kwang simply gruffed, casting an eye over both of them. “Give us a call when you either catch them or give up.” He touched his hat, a seemingly mocking gesture, before exiting quickly, slamming the door behind himself.

The concrete expression on Seonghwa and Hongjoong melted slightly as they glanced at each other, waves of concern and horror in their eyes. “A rogue,” Seonghwa said quietly. “I have not seen one in decades. Who is foolish enough nowadays to neglect their changeling-”

“There will always be fools roaming this earth, I suppose,” Hongjoong sighed, both of their speech slipping back into habit, as it did when they thought they were alone. “Bringing a rogue here… Is that wise, Seonghwa?” he questioned. “If we do not know exactly what we are dealing with, we may be unable to contain him. Should we risk the others-”

“We cannot simply allow him to be hunted,” Seonghwa said firmly. “The others are capable of defending themselves, if necessary, it will simply be tedious. We must try to save him.”

“Should we not ask them first?” Hongjoong suggested, stepping closer to the other, something askin to fear but closer to horror in his eyes. “This is their home, too. We cannot simply bring another into it, the same as we did not bring any of them without consent.”
Seonghwa pressed his lips together tightly, before nodding, looking torn. “There are other places we can bring the rogue, if they do no wish to have it here. We can house it elsewhere. But we must attempt to save him.”

Hongjoong’s expression dropped even as he nodded. “What monster created this rogue?” he whispered, Wooyoung barely able to hear. “How terribly lonely he must be… how confused and tormented-”

Seonghwa embraced the other quickly, a sight he was long familiar with, but it was different when it was simply the two of them. “We will find him,” Seonghwa promised, chin resting atop his head. “We will not let him be harmed.”

“Who would simply abandon-” Hongjoong shook his head, resting it against Seonghwa shoulder, finally facing towards the end of the hall, his eyes falling on Wooyoung.

And maybe Wooyoung hadn’t been doing anything wrong, and maybe he hadn’t heard anything he wasn’t supposed to, but he still felt like he had gotten caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Hongjoong cleared his throat, tapping Seonghwa, who turned as well, both of them watching Wooyoung with softened gazes, hiding away the concern and worry of moments ago.

“Why are you hiding?” Seonghwa asked as Hongjoong pulled away, both of them beginning to walk towards him. Part of him felt guilty for interrupting the scene.

“That rogue,” he said, swallowing, coming further into the hall. “I think San and I may have heard it when we were coming home last night. That noise I told you about,” he told Hongjoong.

“Did you see anything?” Seonghwa asked gently.

Wooyoung shook his head. “No, just heard a bunch of bottles falling over. We thought it might have been a cat.”

They exchanged a glance that no one but themselves could read.

“Head back to bed, Wooyoung,” Seonghwa told him, laying a hand atop his head and patting his hair. “We can deal with this tonight. For now, just go back to sleep.”

Wooyoung glanced between them, chest tightening. “What… What are you two going to do?”

“We aren’t leaving, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Hongjoong assured him, smiling knowingly, even if it was faint. “We’re just going to be discussing what we should do.”

And Wooyoung believed them. Seonghwa and Hongjoong did not lie to them. Never hid a truth from them. Even if it hurt.

He nodded slowly, beginning to turn away. “But for what it’s worth,” he said, stopping himself. “I think he should come here. No one-” He wet his lips. “No one deserves to have to live like that. And clearly, everyone here has no problem with a crowded house.”

Something warm flickered in Seonghwa’s eyes, and Wooyoung would almost call it pride. “Your vote is noted,” he assured him. “Now, head to bed while you can.”

Wooyoung headed back up the stairs, feeling so much like a child, but that’s what they were compared to Seonghwa and Hongjoong. Just children. Decades compared to centuries.
And it was times like this that Wooyoung was grateful for that because he didn’t want to be the one having to make decisions like this. He didn’t want to be the “grown up” when things started getting nasty.

He didn’t want to have to choose whether to keep his family safe or save another vamp from insanity. Didn’t want that on his conscience.

He didn’t return to his room, finding his way into Yunho’s again and creeping in quietly. The heavy sleeper did not wake, even when Wooyoung slid into the bed next to him, pressing in close and letting a heavy arm fall over his chest. He felt a little shaken. Like he had missed a step in the dark.

He hated thinking about rogues. They had never had any around here, but being suddenly faced with the prospect of needing to bring one here…

He didn’t sleep. At least, it didn’t feel like it. Maybe he did. But it wasn’t restful, because Wooyoung kept wondering…

What was going to happen?

~~~~~~

That evening found all of them standing on the sidewalk, just on the edge of the shopping district, a group of seven vampires on an empty street.

This was not what Wooyoung imagined their family outing to be.

After an alarming response of, yes, bring the rogue here, there had spawned a fifteen minute fight of everyone demanding to help, none of them allowing Seonghwa and Hongjoong to follow their plans for just the two of them to go in search of the creature.

It wasn’t until Jongho crossed his arms tightly with a glare, saying, “If you don’t let us come, we’ll just sneak out after you’re gone, and then you’ll have even bigger problems on your hands,” that they finally caved with a stern glare at each boy who followed them to the car.

“Alright,” Seonghwa said, voice devoid of any amount of mirth. “Wooyoung, Jongho, San- you three are coming with me. Mingi and Yunho, you’re going with Hongjoong. No one is wandering off, and no one- ” he snapped- “is going to be engaging if we find the rogue. Leave it to Hongjoong and I. The rest of you- back off if we have to start a fight, understand ?”

And every one of them wanted to protest because how could they just leave them alone to fight a rogue, but Seonghwa’s voice had taken on the rare tone that made Wooyoung remember how despite his distaste for fashion, despite Hongjoong’s nagging about being home on time-

They were older. They were more experienced. They were more dangerous than any of the rest of them could hope to be.

So they agreed.

And it was… horrendously boring.
They walked down the streets, stopping at each alley where Seonghwa would gesture for them to wait before moving down the narrow spaces, searching and sniffing. The entire night had passed, and Wooyoung knew they’d have to head back within the hour if they wanted to make it home in time. San and Jongho occupied themselves with playing rock-paper-scissors silently as they walked.

Wooyoung, however, sped up just a little so that he was a step behind Seonghwa.

“Can rogues really be rehabilitated?” he asked quietly, the question burning in the back of his mind the whole night. “I mean… can you really come back after being insane?”

Seonghwa glanced at him curiously, as if questioning why he brought it up now, but he turned away, continuing to keep a careful eye out.

And he couldn’t blame Wooyoung for not knowing- vampires were scarce. And that meant there wasn’t a whole lot of available information that he could just Google. He, of course, heard occasional stories on the news of rogues getting hunted down, and, maybe once he had seen a story of a rogue that had been adopted into a coven family and was being rehabilitated. (News outlets didn’t like showing the… nicer parts of vampires, of course.)

But seeing the handful of clips and videos that existed… made him wonder if that was truly possible.

“That depends,” Seonghwa said patiently, quietly as they passed by a supermarket that was brightly lit. “On how long they’ve been rogue and… well, what sort of person they are. Whether they accept being taken in or not. Whether they want to come back.”

Wooyoung knew stuff about rogues. Almost all of that information coming from Seonghwa and Hongjoong who had the most experience in living as a vampire, and meeting others over time. But a lot of the nuance stuff, like the likelihood of rehabilitation or the factors that affected it, was something he had never bothered to ask about.

“How do you even go about doing that?” Wooyoung asked, feeling especially childish as he trailed after Seonghwa.

The older sighed, pausing to glance inside an alley. “It’s hard to say. We don’t know what happened to him as, nor how long he’s been alone, nor what kind of person he is. I like to believe that any rogue could be saved… if people were simply willing to try hard enough.”

Wooyoung wondered, vaguely, how many rogues he and Hongjoong had met.

“How do you even go about doing that?” Wooyoung asked. “What- do you just group hug them until they stop acting insane?”

“With patience,” Seonghwa said gently. “Rogues are a creation of loneliness and despair. Some are deeper and more hopeless than others. I suppose it’s simply a guessing game of how much attention and fixing needs to be done. Perhaps, yes, one could be fixed with a simple group hug.” He glanced over his shoulder, smiling warmly at Wooyoung, almost indulgent. “I’ve seen it done before, to an extent.”

Wooyoung’s lips twitched in response. “Are you ser-”

Vampires moved at alarming speeds. Which meant their brains needed to be able to process things fast enough to compensate for that speed.
Wooyoung still didn’t see anything move.

Just a blur of something slamming into Seonghwa’s exposed back, and a snarl so violent, Wooyoung stumbled back, falling to the ground.

Vampires were scarce. They lived in small clusters. And even all his life, Wooyoung had only ever seen vampires who were cordial to each other, if a bit distant. The most alarming thing he had ever seen were those blurred clips of the aftermath of rogue attacks where there was nothing but blood and gore to see.

He had never seen vampires fight.

He and San wrestled, and he and Jongho pulled each other’s hair and slapped each other around-

But Wooyoung had never seen a vampire pin another to the ground and begin tearing into flesh as if they were digging a hole in wet sand.

It was horrifying.

Seonghwa snarled, face twisted in a furious anger Wooyoung had never seen before, hands snatching one of the rogue’s clawed hands, but the other scratched deep across Seonghwa’s chest as its fangs snapped at his face, eyes a swirling mosaic of gold and red-

The rogue was already covered in blood. It was smeared across his face and staining his clothes and skin, and more was added to the gorey sight, more blood- Seonghwa’s blood.

Seonghwa slammed a knee into the vampires side, and Wooyoung heard a terrifying crack, but it was immediately followed by the rogue hissing like pieces of sand falling over each other, nails dragging across chalkboard, and it lunged forward, snapping its mouth around Seonghwa’s neck-

“No!”

Wooyoung didn’t remember thinking he needed to move, but suddenly his body was slamming into the rogue’s tearing him off of Seonghwa with a strength he didn’t ever remember needing, slamming the other vampire onto the concrete, but no sooner than his body hit, Wooyoung was flipped, head hitting the concrete as the rogue was suddenly above him.

Wooyoung had only ever used his strength to move Jongho out of his spot. To shove Yunho off when he crushed him. To drag San down the stairs when he refused to play games with them.

He had never needed to use it to fight off sharp nails and vicious, blood teeth aiming for his most vulnerable spots.

Wooyoung’s vision was a blur of fangs and claws that tore and snapped at him, a growl he could feel in his bones vibrating through the air-

The only thing that could harm a vampire was a blessed blade. Or another vampire. Wooyoung only ever remembered stings of pain when his maker would swat at him or when Jongho would flick his forehead, but they were never…

They were never meant to hurt. Never meant to cause real pain.

And so when the rogue’s claws pierced into Wooyoung’s chest, it was unexpected. Because he had never felt that kind of pain before. Not since he was turned.
And he screamed. Because it fucking felt like hot iron being pressed against his skin, and he clawed back as desperate as he could, his teeth clamping onto Wooyoung’s shoulder, as if the rogue was going to tear out a chunk of flesh-

Wooyoung grabbed the rogue’s hair, twisting and pulling, pleading that the vamp let go and didn’t take-

Suddenly, the rogue went completely still. And it took Wooyoung several seconds to realize what had happened, his body screaming in agony, but he saw the top of the rogue’s head, its teeth still sunk deep in Wooyoung’s shoulder, its claws still stuck in his chest, but completely still. As if it had been turned to stone.

And it took his pain-weary mind several seconds to notice Seonghwa hovering above the rogue, his eyes a bright gold, a deadly anger that Wooyoung… Wooyoung had never seen before. His eyes trailed down Seonghwa’s arm, one hand clawed into the back of the rogue’s neck, and the other grasping a silver dagger with markings etched into, pressed harshly into the side of the rogue’s neck, beads of blood appearing along it.

It was a knife Wooyoung had only seen a handful of times in his life, mostly kept in or on the desk in Seonghwa and Hongjoong’s room. He had always wondered why they kept a blessed blade, seeing as they should never need to hurt another vampire, but Wooyoung felt a sudden dizzy relief for it.

“Release him,” Seonghwa snarled, low and dangerous, and even Wooyoung went still beneath the rogue.

The rogue snarled, jaw tightening, and Wooyoung cried out sharply, hand twisting in the rogue’s hair as Seonghwa pressed hard enough to cut fully into the rogue’s neck, making it hiss that turned into a pained whimper.

“Release him, now,” he snarled, “unless you wish to become what you would have been had your maker not found you.”

Wooyoung’s breath was stalled in his chest as the rogue seemed to weigh his options before his claws slowly retracted, Wooyoung whimpering, his hand falling off of the rogue as Seonghwa pulled him off. His fangs released Wooyoung with a wet, sickening sound.

Seonghwa pulled the rogue away, hand moving to the front of its neck and the knife still pressed centimeters into its neck, the rogue immobile, like a stiff, dead animal corpse. Seonghwa’s eyes flickered to his left. “Get him home,” Seonghwa ordered, knuckles white against the rogue’s neck when it twitched.

Footsteps approached quickly, San and Jongho appearing above him, worried, pale faces turning sick as they saw him up close.

“Seonghwa,” San whispered, glancing at him, hands hovering as if afraid to touch him.

“Get him home. Stay there.”

“Come on,” Jongho urged, sliding a hand under Wooyoung’s back. They helped him sit up, and Wooyoung got a better look at the rogue through tight eyes.

He looked no older than the rest of them. (Them before they were turned, of course.) His teeth were bared, growls stuck in his throat, and his eyes were half-open in pain-
His eyes… were brown.

The red was gone, only clinging to the edges of his irises, and Wooyoung thought he could see straight through them, nothing between him and the rogue’s inner workings-

A sharp pain through his shoulder drew his attention away as San apologized.

He bit down on his tongue to keep the pained noises from escaping, but they still slid through gritted teeth as they maneuvered him onto Jongho’s back, his bloodied shoulder pressed up against him.

“Seonghwa,” he heard San whisper, but whatever expression Seonghwa gave in response was enough for him to usher Jongho on.

Pain made him woozy, his shoulder slowly leaking blood onto Jongho, and he thought that maybe he should apologize for that, but he just rested his head against Jongho’s shoulder and tried not to think about the pain.

“Maybe now isn’t the time,” San said as they ran on, “but you’re a fucking idiot.”

“Maybe,” Wooyoung agreed in a pinched tone. He had no other response than that. Maybe it was absolutely stupid of him to try and interfere, especially after such a stern reminder from Seonghwa and Hongjoong, but what was he supposed to do? Sit there while the rogue snapped Seonghwa’s neck?

They all knew Wooyoung wasn’t great at just sitting by and minding his business.

San broke off halfway back to the car. And by the time they reached it, the others were already there, sans Hongjoong.

“He went to go help Seonghwa,” Mingi told them, helping get Wooyoung in the car without causing too much pain. “Yunho’s driving us back, he said they’ll be back as soon as they’re done.”

Wooyoung didn’t pass out. But he floated in and out of the stinging pain as San pressed Mingi’s jacket to the wound to try and slow the bleeding.

“We have enough blood at home, right?” Jongho called up to the driver seat. “You got more, right?” He glanced at Wooyoung. “Are you gonna have to feed?”

Wooyoung tried to snort, but it hurt his chest. “It’s not that bad. It’s just a lot of blood.”

Yunho made a small noise. “There’ll be enough blood at home. Jongho, when we get home, grab the bandages from the bathroom. He shouldn’t need to feed.”

Wooyoung could practically hear Yunho’s white knuckles on the steering wheel.

“Stop acting like I’m dying,” he mumbled, head leaned back against the seat. “It just hurts.”

“Shut up,” Jongho almost-snapped. “You threw yourself at a rogue after Seonghwa told us specifically not to interact with it, you don’t get to make smart remarks after that sort of dumbass shit.”

Wooyoung almost wanted to laugh if his shoulder didn’t hurt so fucking bad. “Seonghwa’s gonna wash your mouth out if he hears you talking like that.”

Apparently they weren’t that concerned for his health because Jongho flicked his cheek hard
enough to create a pain temporarily worse than his shoulder. “Motherfu–”

“Enough,” Yunho called from the front, probably glaring in the rear view mirror. “Can you guys please keep it together without the hyungs here for an hour?”

Jongho settled back in his seat, arms crossed childishly over his chest, and San muttered something about both of them being idiots.

The wounds were actually quite superficial, and nothing life threatening. They were just scared. None of them had ever been hurt like this before. Not since they all knew each other.

By the time they arrived home, Wooyoung was a feeling a little sick, but at least the pain was basically numb.

“No, Wooyoung, that’s bad,” Mingi scolded when he voiced that relief. “That’s bloodloss setting in.” Admittedly, he hadn’t lost a dangerous amount, but they still wanted to get it fixed up as soon as possible.

“Are you sure you don’t need to feed?” San questioned as they helped him out of the van.

“You would know if he did,” Yunho assured him. “Human blood will be enough.”

And it was weird. Because all of them had a cloud hanging over them of Seonghwa and Hongjoong being out there, potentially still fighting a rogue, potentially getting hurt, potentially losing-

But no one said anything. Simply carried Wooyoung to the kitchen and grabbed some blood bags from the fridge, skipping the cup and just puncturing a straw through it and pushing it into Wooyoung’s hand. He sipped on it, like an athlete drinking electrolytes on the sidelines, while Jongho rushed off and got bandages.

“So what the hell happened?” Mingi demanded as they all sat (or leaned) around the kitchen, no one having anything better to do but wait.

San told them, shoving the blood back up to Wooyoung’s mouth each time he lowered it to interject about calling him a ‘dumb bitch.’ Wooyoung really hated how well San picked up the modern day language.

“Seonghwa was just… gone,” San said, and Wooyoung stopped drinking because this part he had missed, ignoring Yunho carefully pressing bandages to the claw and teeth marks in his skin. “The rogue had Wooyoung, and Seonghwa suddenly wasn’t there, so Jongho and I start panicking, trying to figure out what the hell to do, and then he got back, like, five seconds later, and he had that blessed knife from his and Hongjoong’s room-”

“Christ, I always forget how fast he fucking is,” Mingi muttered, arms crossed.

“And he presses it against the rogue’s neck, and it would have been totally badass if I hadn’t been so busy trying not to throw up.”

Wooyoung stared at his third blood bag (replenishing the blood he lost). Tonight had really been… nothing any of them had ever experienced. Aside from a few pissy and bigoted humans, they were left alone in peace. They existed in their little world, and the only vampires they encountered were ones who were passing through and stopped in for a blood bag and a little chat about the good old days (which really weren’t all that good, in Wooyoung’s opinion).

The fighting, the rogues, the blood shed- that wasn’t their corner of the world. That was the big
“Do you think they’ll still bring the rogue back here?” Jongho questioned in a quiet voice, as if he didn’t really want to ask it.

“They said they would,” San replied simply.

“Even after it tried to kill Wooyoung?”

Yunho frowned. “Are you saying they shouldn’t bring it back here anymore?”

“I’m wondering whether they’ll want to bring it back here anymore,” Jongho said. “I don’t think they’ll want to risk it.”

“Well, we can’t know until they get back here,” Mingi said, as if that settled the matter.

Wooyoung wiped his mouth. He didn’t… want them to bring the rogue somewhere else. What was the point of bringing it in at all if you just stuck it in the dark somewhere else? He wasn’t scared of the rogue.

Okay, maybe he was a little nervous, but that was reasonable. It had attacked him. But Wooyoung didn’t blame it. Rogues weren’t… in their right mind.

He felt bad for him. His eyes were brown…

Wooyoung wondered if he knew what he was doing. His eyes had seemed coherent, intelligent, but that was afterwards. Not during the attack. So… did the rogue know what he had done? Did he feel remorse for it?

Time ticked on. Wooyoung had finally drank enough blood that no one shoved more in his hand, and he could feel some of the pain fading, but the wound wouldn’t heal immediately. It would take some time. The only thing strong enough to break a vampire was a vampire.

Which is why they felt such fear for Seonghwa and Hongjoong out there.

~~~~~~

Hongjoong stared at brown eyes that stared back, half-lidded and tired, as if he were sleeping with his eyes open.

“Do you have anyone around here?” he questioned slowly, clearly.

Seonghwa stood, knife still pressed to the rogue’s neck, who didn’t shift, almost limp in Seonghwa’s grasp.

He didn’t answer Hongjoong. “Do you know who your maker is?”

Again, silence, the rogue’s eyes flickering over Hongjoong, dull.

He glanced at Seonghwa behind him, his eyes trailing over the blood on his neck. And Hongjoong felt no anger towards the rogue for harming his partners. Only a tug to fix it. Because it was not the rogue’s fault.
He focused on the rogue. “Do you understand-”

The dull, blank brown eyes suddenly flashed red, and Hongjoong… Hongjoong was foolish enough to think the blade against its neck would be enough of a deterrent. The rogue lunged forward, tearing its neck against the knife without a care for the blood or pain, leaping towards Hongjoong-

Seonghwa snatched the rogue by the back of its shirt, hauling it backwards with a viciousness Hongjoong had not seen in since before they gathered the others. One they had needed since they gathered the others.

He slammed the rogue into the ground, dagger drawing back threateningly-

One of the rogue’s hands snatched at Seonghwa’s neck- one hand occupied with the dagger, the other holding the rogue down- and its other hand shot to Seonghwa’s side-

From this angle, Hongjoong couldn’t see what the rogue did. Only heard Seonghwa’s muffled cry, the rogue shoving him back, the wet sound of blood hitting pavement-

Hongjoong lunged forward, Seonghwa dropped out of the way, clutching at his side as Hongjoong grabbed the rogue who tried to sit up, slamming him back down by his wrists.

The rogue’s chest rose, trying to snap at Hongjoong, thrashing in his grip violently, and Hongjoong had to remind himself- had to stop himself- because the rogue didn’t know what it was doing. It hadn’t hurt Seonghwa on purpose, it didn’t know-

Hongjoong released the rogue’s wrist, and even as he felt its claws tear at his cheek, he grabbed its hair, slamming the rogue’s head back against the ground.

The rogue stunned for a moment, blinking almost in confusion, and Hongjoong did it again, watching a snarl die on its lips abruptly as its eyes fell closed and its limbs stopped thrashing.

Breathing heavily, Hongjoong slowly pulled away, waiting to see if it would wake back up, but it remained unconscious on the pavement. Hongjoong wanted to examine him, his face that was smeared with blood, but he turned away almost immediately, eyes landing on Seonghwa, struggling to sit up.

Hongjoong’s stomach dropped as he saw a gaping wound at his side, too much blood to really see how big it was, but Hongjoong imagined that it would match up with the rogue’s hand.

“Seonghwa,” he whispered, crawling the small distance, lifting him into a sitting position slowly, trying to ignore the pained gasps that floated by, one of Seonghwa’s hands pressed carefully over the wound. “What-”

“Ribs,” he bit out, eyes closed, focused on… something not the pain. “…I…” He opened them to glance down at his side and closed them again. “That is a lot of blood.”

Hongjoong was already pulling away the jacket on his shoulders. “I’ve got you,” he whispered gently, pulling the t-shirt away from his neck, exposing the skin there.

He drew Seonghwa closer, another muffled gasp, and Hongjoong hushed him gingerly, heart twisting and guiding his head to his neck and letting him rest there.

There was a weak press of teeth against his skin, breaking through and he felt warmth over his neck as Seonghwa drank, slow and sluggish against the pain. Hongjoong hushed him soothingly,
hand carding through the back of his hair as he held him close.

It had been… decades since either of them had needed to feed from the other.

Very little vampire blood was needed to heal humans. It took more to heal vampires, but…

It was… extremely potent. It healed vampires, too, but it was different. The wound needed to be serious. It was a bad idea to try and feed for something like a bite or scrape. Otherwise, it was… like treating a scraped knee with surgical sutures. Prescribing opioids for a common headache.

But that was… a lot of blood. Hongjoong could feel it flowing over his legs.

Seonghwa kept drinking, Hongjoong urging him on when he stopped, gritting his teeth in pain. It was an open wound, and it would take a lot to heal.

Hongjoong knew he’d need to replenish his own blood after Seonghwa took so much, but that was nothing. Hongjoong kissed the side of his head gently, and he could feel the blood flow slow.

There was a… it wasn’t normal hunger. It was like… a hollow feeling. A desire to replace and fill the hole that had appeared as Seonghwa took his blood for himself. But it was easily pushed aside as Seonghwa pulled away, breathing coming heavy as he continued to lean against Hongjoong.

“Is that enough?” he asked, afraid to check the wound himself.

“For now,” Seonghwa panted, leaning against Hongjoong heavily. “It will last me.”

Hongjoong shifted, and the wound was covered in new skin, knitted back together, though it still looked uncomfortable. But the rogue would not remain unconscious forever.

“We will finish this after everything is settled,” Hongjoong promised, running a hand down Seonghwa’s spine. “Can you stand?”

Seonghwa nodded, though it seemed like the last thing he wanted to do. He pulled away from Hongjoong, and regardless, Hongjoong helped him stand, not even a wince escaping him. Seonghwa stared at the vamp who was steadily bleeding from the wound at his neck.

“We may need to clean him up,” He said, glancing at Hongjoong.

Hongjoong wanted to prioritize Seonghwa. Wanted to just get the rogue home and make sure everyone- Wooyoung- was okay.

But guilt hit almost immediately as he stared down at the limp body. This vampire deserved help as much as any of his coven did.

“Let’s be quick,” he gave in. “I will take care of it, if you simply rest-”

“A very funny joke,” Seonghwa said, stepping up and beginning to sit the rogue up. Hongjoong wanted to make him stay off to the side, but if there was one thing more steadfast than Seonghwa’s loyalty, it was his stubbornness.

Hongjoong simply sighed. “Please do not hurt yourself,” he begged.

Seonghwa offered him a strained, tired quirk of his lips. “Aye, captain.”

If the man were not currently injured, Hongjoong would have kicked him.
When the front door opened, it was just on the cusp of being 4 AM, and everyone immediately straightened. “Don’t go anywhere,” Yunho said firmly, all of them waiting and listening.

They heard Seonghwa’s footstepes moving up the stairs, heavier than usual. Only a moment later, Hongjoong appeared in the kitchen doorway.

Wooyoung’s heart leapt to his throat at the sight of blood, but there was only a small scratch on his cheek, and a small smear along his neck that didn’t look like it came from him.

Before anyone could even burst out a question, Hongjoong lifted a quick hand.

“We’ve got the rogue,” Hongjoong told them firmly. “He’s currently unconscious, and Seonghwa is bringing him to Jongho’s room, so you need to find someone to share a bed with for now.”

“Why my room?” Jongho demanded, but not looking particularly serious about it.

“It has the least amount of stuff,” Hongjoong said off handedly. “And he’s going to be breaking all of it, so sorry about that, but we’ll fix it later.”

Jongho did look a bit upset at that, but said nothing, simply muttering about how Mingi better not snore.

“He’s okay?”

Everyone glanced at Wooyoung who stared at Hongjoong. “Seonghwa or the rogue?” he questioned evenly.

Wooyoung felt a spike of guilt before correcting himself.

“Both.”

“Seonghwa has a few scrapes and bruises, but nothing detrimental to his health. I’ll be taking care of him once he gets the rogue sorted. As for the rogue…” He seemed to consider his words very carefully. “He’s fine. Beaten up, cut up, but nothing that will kill him. We cleaned him up a bit. We knocked him unconscious, but before we did, he was… he was a bit coherent.”

“You talked to him?” San demanded, eyes wide.

“A little,” Hongjoong said. “But it was mostly asking questions that he seemed to understand, but didn’t answer. Regardless, it seems like his volatile reactions are more like episodes than a constant part of him, which is good for us. The bad part is that his episodes seem just as violent as a rogue who’s completely lost themselves.”

Seonghwa and Hongjoong knew more than the rest of them. A product of living for so long and interacting with so many more vamps, but also of just living those parts themselves. As demonstrated before, Wooyoung didn’t know a lot of the little stuff. Like what might cause a rogue to be more violent than another one. Like the stages of being a rogue and what each of those might imply about them.

And maybe Hongjoong didn’t know either, but it was pretty easy to assume that meant that
something pretty bad had happened.

“So… what’s the plan?” Mingi questioned, shoulders raised. “We just let him sleep for now? What are we doing when he wakes up?”

Wooyoung was suddenly second guessing that group hug theory.

Hongjoong sighed, glancing at the clock. “Our basic plan: we’re going to try to keep contact with him to a minimum for now. Let him wear himself out, and then it’s going to be an ugly process of attempting to gain trust and inserting ourselves into his space, and then integrating him into the rest of the coven. And he’s likely going to fight it at points, but…” Hongjoong’s eyes were pitying. And… something else. “We’re not going to give up on him, understand? No rogue wants to be one. Its nature that makes them fight, but we’re not going to let this one go, alright?”

A loud silence.

“Sounds like a plan,” San said, trying to break the thick quiet.

Wooyoung didn’t know how this was going to turn out. But he figured they would work it out. They were good at that.

Hongjoong stiffened, turning towards the hallway. “Everyone should head to bed,” he said, turning back. “The rogue is locked in Jongho’s room- he won’t be able to get to any of you.”

And Wooyoung knew they lived in a house built to accommodate vampires, which meant doors that you couldn’t just break through, but that didn’t mean he was comfortable with that. Regardless, the others nodded.

They followed Hongjoong as he lead them out of the kitchen, Wooyoung waving off Mingi’s attempt to help him stand. They climbed up the stairs, and Wooyoung could see drips of blood on the wood, but he ignored them.

Jongho’s door was locked tightly, and everyone glanced at it warily as they passed. It was last in the row of doors, the farthest from them it could possibly get.

“I’m going to go take care of Seonghwa,” Hongjoong said. “The rest of you should sleep. This… You’ll need it for tomorrow, okay?” He gave them a concerned look, perhaps searching for fear or uncertainty in their eyes. But they all nodded.

“Want company?” San asked Wooyoung as the others split off slowly and headed towards their rooms, Jongho threatening Mingi if he kept him up.

Wooyoung thought about it, but shook his head. “No, I’ll just… I’ll be fine. I’ll crawl in with you if I feel like it later.”

San watched him a moment longer before nodding. “Don’t go sticking your hand under Jongho’s door, alright?”

Wooyoung punched his shoulder with his good arm, and San bade him goodnight, pushing him towards his room.

And despite the uncertainty running through him, Wooyoung laid down and closed his eyes, shoving the entire evening from his mind, ignoring the twinging in his shoulder. Ignoring the rogue sleeping only two doors down and across the hall. Ignoring all the thoughts about his morality and intent. And to his surprise, he was able to fall asleep, the tension of the day leaving him tired and
spent.

**Boom!**

Wooyoung was a light sleeper anyway, and usually, even just someone walking down the hall was enough to wake him momentarily, so you could imagine the soul-tearing adrenaline that shot through him when he heard what sounded like someone trying to break his door down.

He bolted up, heart leaping to his throat as he almost threw himself off of the bed, scrambling away. And it was only while on the floor, peering around the edge of his bed, that he realized it wasn’t *his* door that was being slammed against.

Muscles shaking, he dragged himself to his feet, walking towards the door. He hesitated, flinching as another loud sound rattled the walls. Pulling open the door, he peered out into the hall, eyes automatically going to a couple of doors down.

Jongho’s door stood firmly and silently where it had always been.

Wetting his lips, he stepped out into the hall, creeping a couple of steps towards the other room—

**Boom!**

Wooyoung leapt back, barely keeping the shout inside his throat as the door shook in its frame as it seemed like the rogue threw himself against it. It was immediately followed by similar sounds against the walls, and Wooyoung’s stomach churned as he turned on his heel, sprinting down the hall.

He by-passed his door completely and ran straight to Seonghwa and Hongjoong’s room at the end of the hall.

He tore the door open, launching himself inside before coming to a sharp halt.

Hongjoong sat on the floor, his back up against the bed with Seonghwa sitting up against his pillows, a book open in his lap. Wooyoung could see no evidence of the injuries from before. Which, more than anything, told him of how badly the fight with the rogue had gone. The rogue was continually crashing around down the hall.

Seonghwa’s lips twisted into a sympathetic, wry smile. “He’s being quite loud, isn’t he?” he asked gently.

And Wooyoung thought his maker had the ability to make him feel like a child, but rather than a box of incompetence and rebellion, in the face of these two, he just felt… young. Even if his pride did make him want to say ‘nevermind’ and return to his room, anxiety made him stand his ground, like a child asking after a nightmare.

Wooyoung nodded jerkily, his heart still choking him. “You’re sure he’s not going to break down the door and maul us in our sleep?” Of course, they were sure, Seonghwa and Hongjoong wouldn’t have let him remain if they thought he would.

It was Hongjoong who chuckled quietly. “He won’t. But if you don’t feel safe sleeping alone—”

Hongjoong hadn’t even finished before Wooyoung was climbing over Seonghwa (careful not to hit anything hurting) and laying down in the other empty half of the bed, head hitting the pillow.

Seonghwa laughed, leaning to look down at Hongjoong. “Looks like you’ll be sleeping on the
Another loud crash sounded distantly, and Wooyoung winced. Seonghwa’s hand came automatically to his arm without even looking at him.

“Are we even going to be able to talk to him?” Wooyoung questioned, staring at the ceiling as Hongjoong stood, sitting on the other edge of the bed. “He doesn’t seem very interested in conversation.”

“I’m sure he’ll have his moods,” Hongjoong assured him. “No one ever said it would be easy.”

Wooyoung tried to imagine… being crazy like that. Being rogue. Being unconscious and then waking up in a strange place, locked in a room.

It made his stomach hurt.

“Why are you still up?” Wooyoung asked, eyeing Seonghwa’s book.

“We had to call and speak with Officer Kwang,” Hongjoong said. “He passed on his hope that we succeed in helping this rogue.” His voice was tinged bitter.

Another loud bang. Wooyoung sank down into the pillow, humming as he pulled the covers up to his neck. “I’m surprised no one else is already here,” he muttered.

Seonghwa patted his arm. “I’m sure by the time morning comes, there won’t be anymore room in the bed.”

Wooyoung closed his eyes. And apparently they continued on as they had before Wooyoung showed up, Seonghwa talking about something he was reading about, and Hongjoong humming along in a way Wooyoung knew meant he had stopped listening, but was probably still staring at Seonghwa like an idiot.

And when Wooyoung woke up, not even realizing he had fallen asleep, San’s knee was buried in his ribs and Jongho’s elbow was wedged uncomfortably under his arm. He could hear Mingi’s snores and was sure that Yunho was probably somewhere on the floor.

There was no more banging.

He sat up, glancing around. Seonghwa was curled up on one corner of the bed, but Hongjoong was not in the room.

Wooyoung carefully moved himself over San, sliding off the bed, rubbing at his shoulders with a wince. Everyone slept on, Wooyoung stepping over Mingi and Yunho on his way to the door. Hongjoong was probably down in the kitchen, waiting for the others. He slipped out, closing the door quietly, standing in the silent hall, all the doors open but two of them.

Wooyoung sucked in a breath, preparing to sprint by the door, like racing up the stairs after you turned off the lights, his heart strangling itself as he let go of a long breath.

Three... Two.. Go-

Tap... Tap... Tap ...

Slow. Quiet. And Wooyoung was sure he would never have heard it if the entire house weren’t asleep. He stared at Jongho’s door.
Tap…

Wooyoung took a hesitant step forward. Okay, maybe the others weren’t all that odd about his self preservation issues.

But that wasn’t the banging and crashing he had heard before. He crept down the hall, the slow tapping continuing on, as if someone was too tired to really try.

He stopped a few steps away, feeling sick. What did he do? Tap back?

Tap… Tap… Ta-

It stopped.

He heard something shift, as if the rogue were leaning against the door.

“Hello?”

And Wooyoung was violently startled by the soft voice that barely even reached through the wood.

He moved forward on instinct, trying to hear better.

“Is… Is someone there?”

It sounded worse than a whisper, as if his throat would not physically allow himself to go any louder than a barely-audible try at speaking.

“H-Hello?”

And Wooyoung’s chest twisted as he realized the voice was scared.

His hands shook as he took one more step towards the door. “H-Hi,” he whispered, feeling very foolish, speaking to the door.

Dead silence on the other side. Wooyoung frowned.

Crash.

Wooyoung cried out, jerking away and falling to the ground, scrambling back as the door rattled, his ears ringing with fear-

“I’m sorry-” He barely heard, the crashing cut off sharply, the voice was so quiet-

It sounded like it was crying.

“I’m sorry,” the rogue whispered, something thudding heavily against the door, as if it had hit its head on it. “I’m so sorry- I- I don’t know-”

Wooyoung felt like he was going to vomit, and Seonghwa was suddenly beside him, grabbing his arm, but Wooyoung placed a finger to his lips, which made Seonghwa glare, but he let Wooyoung sit up, staring at the door. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hongjoong standing at the stairs, arm slowly lowering to his side, eyes hard.

Wooyoung’s throat felt fuzzy.

“I-It’s okay,” he said as calmly as he could, trying not to let his voice shake. Seonghwa let go of him, allowing him to approach the door. “Are… Are you okay?”
There was a quiet, hard sigh on the other side of the door. “I… I don’t know.”

Wooyoung had to tilt his head to make out his words. “It’s okay. You’re safe here,” he promised.

It had been something hard to believe before. But it was true.

“You don’t have to be scared.”

“Safe,” the voice hissed, taking on an ugly twist that strangled out the quiet gentleness of before. There was a bitter laugh.

“You are safe,” Wooyoung pushed, kneeling outside the door. “You-” He wet his lips. “We… We’re here for you,” he swore quietly, the words feeling flat and stupid. “I’m Wooyoung….What’s your name?”

There was a long silence on the other side, and Wooyoung glanced back at Seonghwa, eyes worried, but Seonghwa just inclined his head, so Wooyoung figured he was doing something right. He turned back to the door.

The rogue was scared. Wooyoung had never had to protect someone before.

“No one…” The rogue trailed off, voice dying. “Why does it matter?” He was so quiet.

And Wooyoung’s heart hurt. Because that was… it was his name. Who didn’t think their name was important?

“You’ve gotta have a name,” he said, forcing a laugh, trying to sound calm. “We need to know what to call you if you’re going to be staying with us.”

Wooyoung was sure the rogue was just going to ignore him. The long silence that followed heavier with every moment.

Wooyoung didn’t know what the fuck he was doing.

Something shifted against the door.

“I…” The rogue tapped the door again, gentle.

Wooyoung had to lean to hear the whisper, his ear almost pressed against the door.

“Yeosang… I was Yeosang.”

Wooyoung’s stomach dropped. “Was?” he whispered, voice dropped. “Aren’t you still?”

Silence.

“I don’t… know…”

Wooyoung glanced back at Seonghwa who stared on sadly.

“He may not be,” He said quietly. “Many rogues are barely recognizable from the people they were.” His eyes flickered, almost unconsciously, to Hongjoong on the stairs who made a vague gesture and disappeared down the stairs.

“And Wooyoung’s heart hurt. Because that was… it was his name. Who didn’t think their name was important?

“You’ve gotta have a name,” he said, forcing a laugh, trying to sound calm. “We need to know what to call you if you’re going to be staying with us.”

Wooyoung was sure the rogue was just going to ignore him. The long silence that followed heavier with every moment.

Wooyoung didn’t know what the fuck he was doing.

Something shifted against the door.

“I…” The rogue tapped the door again, gentle.

Wooyoung had to lean to hear the whisper, his ear almost pressed against the door.

“Yeosang… I was Yeosang.”

Wooyoung’s stomach dropped. “Was?” he whispered, voice dropped. “Aren’t you still?”

Silence.

“I don’t… know…”

Wooyoung glanced back at Seonghwa who stared on sadly.

“He may not be,” He said quietly. “Many rogues are barely recognizable from the people they were.” His eyes flickered, almost unconsciously, to Hongjoong on the stairs who made a vague gesture and disappeared down the stairs.

“Do you want to be who you were?” Wooyoung asked quickly, his heart twisting. He was different than who he had been, but not to an unrecognizable extent. The thought scared him.
The rogue-

Yeosang. Yeosang was quiet.

“You’re the one I attacked.” Jesus, could he speak any quieter?

Wooyoung nodded. “Yeah. Seonghwa, too.”

Wooyoung waited for an apology or an expression of regret, but there was only silence. “Did you
know what you were doing?” Wooyoung asked.

Yeosang gave no response.

“Yeosang,” He called through the door. “Did you know-”

Boom.

The door shook as Wooyoung leapt back again, Seonghwa’s arm coming around his waist,
dragging him away. He was going to get a fucking heart attack-

The door down the hall opened, San appearing as Yeosang hit the door again, eyes wide as he
rushed over. “Did he-”

Seonghwa stood, dragging Wooyoung up to his feet, keeping a firm hand on him. “San, will you
get the others?” he requested. “Have them all meet in the kitchen. I think we need to have a little
meeting.”

San nodded, but kept a long glance on the door as it sounded like something was thrown up against
the wall. “Let’s go,” Seonghwa said, urging Wooyoung towards the stairs. “You did very well with
that.”

Wooyoung nodded, feeling sick. The crashing was cut off abruptly, silence coming from the room.

Wooyoung wondered if he was crying again.

He finally understood what Hongjoong meant about the episodes.

I was Yeosang.

Wooyoung shuddered. What must it be like… not even recognizing yourself? He remembered
when he first woke up, after his maker bit him, staring at the mirror and feeling like he was losing
his mind because that was him, but it wasn’t him-

His maker had simply laid a hand on his shoulder, assuring him that everything would be fine.

“His name is Yeosang.”

Everyone’s expression were varying degrees of concerned and dark.

Hongjoong stared at a mug in front of him, tapping the handle. Wooyoung tried not to wonder too
much about what Yeosang was doing.

“He’s showing good signs of wanting to helped, though,” Seonghwa said, everyone sitting around
the table, save for San who sat on the counter (Seonghwa would probably yell at him as soon as he
was done speaking). “He’s much more coherent than some, but he’s also more violent than most, it
seems. It’s going to be difficult, if it begins to seem as if he is healing and then he loses himself
“We have precautions we can take,” Hongjoong said, not looking up from his mug. “But I think we should wait a couple of days… let him calm down.”

A couple days. Locked in a room with nothing. No one. Not even memories.

And Wooyoung felt sick as time passed.

No one went out. But everyone spent as much time away from upstairs as possible, even falling asleep on the couch while playing video games, Seonghwa just shaking his head as he laid blankets over them.

Wooyoung kept as much distance between him and Jongho’s room, because maybe San had a point. Maybe Wooyoung was terrible at keeping himself out of trouble. Knowing him, he’d probably open the door and try to invite Yeosang down to dinner.

At the end of the second day, he climbed the stairs with Yunho, heading to grab another disc for their game marathon that Wooyoung hadn’t really been paying attention to.

And he heard it.

_Tap… Tap… Tap…_

He froze in his tracks, just beyond the door, Yunho stopping when he realized Wooyoung wasn’t moving.

“Wooyoung?” he called, frowning deeply when Wooyoung turned to stare at the door.

Something thudded quietly against the door.

“Wooyoung?” a voice whispered hoarsely.

All three of them seemed to fall still, Wooyoung glancing at Yunho who looked slightly horrified and startled, Wooyoung swallowing as he turned back to the door.

“Wooyoung?” Yeosang asked again, sounding a little more frantic.

Wooyoung took a step forward. “Yeah, Yeosang?”

Yeosang shifted on the other side of the door, the door creaking. “Wooyoung, you- you- I don’t-”

“Hey,” Wooyoung said, dropping to his knees outside the door again, ignoring Yunho’s hiss of “Are you crazy?” “Calm down, I’m right-”

There was a slight scratching at the door, and Wooyoungrowned, dropping his eyes to the ground.

Three fingertips stuck out of the crack between the bottom of the door and the floor, just barely able to fit underneath.

They moved, as if he were trying to reach them farther out, and Wooyoung stared for several moments before he lowered his own hand, hesitating.

“Wooyoung?” Yeosang questioned, voice clipped. “Are- Are you still there?”
“Yeah,” he said quickly, his fingers brushing Yeosang’s that stuck out.

Yeosang jerked them back as if Wooyoung had burned them, Wooyoung snatching his own hand back quickly.

“I’m sorry,” Yeosang said quickly, whispering, murmuring. “I’m sorry, don’t- don’t-” He sucked in an audible breath. “Please don’t leave me alone again,” he begged in a near silent whisper.

Rogues were what happened when a vampire was not given the support they needed for their minds to cope with their reality.

Undying, blood, immortality, the concept of forever. The human mind was not meant to comprehend it. And it couldn’t. It panicked and tore itself apart at the thought of such an abomination, a crime against humanity-

They were crimes against humanity.

And that’s what life partners, covens, families were for. Providing all the comfort, support, and reassurance that a vampire would need not to lose its mind to its condition.

When it didn’t have that… when it was just a new vampire- or even an older one, though they were more stable- just floating along, alone, without a word of advice or knowledge given to them…

Loneliness was a vampire’s worst and most deadly enemy.

Wooyoung tried to imagine not having his coven.

If he had simply run away from his maker, and there was no San to joke around with, but who never laughed when Wooyoung talked about all the stupid things he was afraid of.

If there was no Jongho to act as if everything was a pain in the ass, but threatened to break Wooyoung’s legs if he called himself a monster one more time. No Mingi to flop on top of him until he stopped being sad for no reason other than… life. No Yunho to take his mind off of any worry with controllers pushed into his hands, letting him vent as he lost every round.

If there was no Seonghwa or Hongjoong who just always knew. Who it never took much to just feel… better.

Wooyoung had once been sitting on the couch, shoulders heavy, and Seonghwa had simply sat on the other end of the couch, not even looking at Wooyoung, and Wooyoung had cracked, spilling everything with the tears that fell too.

Hongjoong, who always acted like he was a pain in the ass, but who was always there when Wooyoung didn’t even know he was acting different. Just a hand on his shoulder, knowing eyes that didn’t need him to say a word-

Not having any of that. Just…

Just himself. Alone in an eternity.

“It’s okay,” he said, voice coming out a little thick. “I’m still here. I’m not going anywhere, Yeosang.”

He glanced at Yunho who looked ready to either run or hit Wooyoung. “What are you doing?” he hissed.
“Staying here,” he said calmly. “I’m not… I’m gonna keep him company. You can go ahead.”

He didn’t want him to be alone. After two days of everyone ignoring him…

Yunho still looked worried, like he wanted to drag Wooyoung away from the door. “Just be careful,” he begged quietly.

Wooyoung waved him off, facing the door again. “Yeosang?” There was quiet hum. “So… what do you do in there all day?” He coughed. Other than breaking things.

There was a long silence. “Nothing,” Yeosang whispered. “I sit here.”

Wooyoung hummed. “Well, Jongho has some books in there, if you want something to pass the time.”

“I… I broke those.”

And Wooyoung might have laughed if Yeosang didn’t sound so distraught. “That’s fine,” he said quickly. “Jongho never read them anyway. We were gonna get rid of them. Is his desk still intact?”

Silence. “Most of it.”

“He’s got pens and papers,” Wooyoung offered. “You could draw. Or… write something, I don’t know. Do you know origami?”

Yeosang coughed. “No…”

“I could teach-”

Yeosang slammed against the door so hard, it bowed, and Wooyoung couldn’t stop the instinctual reaction that threw him away from it, Yunho grabbing him, but Wooyoung shook him off quickly as a couple of minutes passed, Yeosang creating a loud cacophony of snapping wood and snarls, the walls vibrating with the destruction.

“Wooyoung,” Yunho hissed sharply. “Come on, we should go-”

“Go finish playing the game,” Wooyoung told him, on the opposite side of the hall, waiting for the sounds to die out. “Tell Seonghwa and Hongjoong that I’m here if you’re that worried.”

“You’re not worried?” Yunho demanded, glaring.

“He can’t get out,” Wooyoung said firmly, leaning against the wall. “And… you heard before, he’s not that dangerous. It’s just… episodes, like Hongjoong said. He’s just… He’s not in his right mind.”

“That doesn’t mean he can’t hurt you,” Yunho warned.

Wooyoung stared at the door, almost wishing he could see Yeosang’s expressions. “I’m gonna wait here. You can go on without me. He… he’s been alone long enough, don’t you think?”

It really didn’t seem like there was any rhyme or reason to Yeosang’s… episodes. There was no triggering discussions or words, and it didn’t even seem like Yeosang knew they were coming either.

Yunho huffed. “Fine, but I’m telling Hongjoong where you are.”
Wooyoung hummed, and Yunho went down the stairs quickly. Wooyoung simply sat, hearing what sounded like glass shattering against the wall, and then there was silence.

He really did wish he could see Yeosang. It might make navigating easier. But he also didn’t want to see that face again. The one that pinned him down and tore at his chest.

There was the thud of a body falling against the door.

Wooyoung swallowed, oddly calm, even if his hands still shook a little. “Did you hurt yourself?”

A louder thud, as if Yeosang had banged his head against the wall in surprise. “Wooyoung?”

Shifting.

“I’m still out here,” he said, shifting forward to try and hear. “Did you hurt yourself?”

A pause. “No.”

Wooyoung didn’t necessarily believe him, but he nodded. “So you’ve never made any sort of origami?”

“....No.” Yeosang almost sounded suspicious, as if he were waiting for Wooyoung to suddenly run off, or drop some bomb about what he was thinking.

Wooyoung was just going to have to go with it.

“If you pass me a paper under the door, I can show you how to. It’s gotta be pretty boring in there.”

Wooyoung held his breath. Several moments of no response.

“I’m… tired.”

It didn’t sound like an excuse. It sounded exhausted. Wooyoung didn’t trust himself to try and analyze what sort of hidden layers were buried under that simple statement.

Wooyoung sat on his heels. “You should sleep, then. It’s nearly daytime anyway, I think.”

Yeosang shifted around, his clothes brushing the wood of the door. “I… don’t… want to sleep.”

Wooyoung winced. “You get nightmares?” he asked quietly.

“Do you… get them?” It almost sounded like Yeosang were trying to speak another language. Like he had been given a stack of words and was trying to piece them together into something coherent. He was still scared, whatever it may be.

“When I was first turned,” He admitted truthfully. “But that’s normal. All changelings get them.”

“Besides, you’re a rogue. I’m sure that gives you more cause than most to have nightmares.”

A long pause. “They keep calling me that,” Yeosang whispered.

Wooyoung leaned closer to the door. “Calling you what?”
“A rogue.” He heard him shifting around. “What is that? A rogue?”

Wooyoung’s stomach dropped.

“A-A rogue? You don’t know… you don’t know what a rogue is?”

Yeosang made a negative noise, quiet and unsure.

“How do you not know what a rogue is?” Wooyoung demanded. “That’s one of the first things your maker should have told you about. Either before or after explaining what a life partner was.”

Pause. Wooyoung waited for it, but it still hit him like a brick to the stomach.

“What… What’s a life partner?” Yeosang asked, almost inaudible, like he was losing confidence. “I- I’ve never heard of that before.”

Wooyoung felt like he was free falling. “Yeosang, didn’t your maker-”

Snarling, and it sounded like claws raking through the walls, a body slamming into them. Wooyoung leapt to his feet, but he didn’t just stumble back in fear, turning and racing down the stairs so quickly, he almost went tumbling down them, but he caught himself, continuing to sprint, throat closing.

“How… How could Yeosang not… How could you not even know the words? How could he be so disconnected-

But if he didn’t even know what a life partner was…

Had he ever even had one?

There was no way he had never had one. He had to have had one. Maybe he didn’t know they were called that. Maybe-

He barreled into Hongjoong who caught him, eyes searching behind him, as if expecting to see Yeosang hunting him down, but Wooyoung just stared at him with wide eyes.

“We have a problem,” he panted, chest icy.

Vampires without life partners… did not survive.

Well, they lived on because there was no way for them to die.

But they were broken.

They were not alive .

Chapter End Notes

If I’m being truthful, I almost deleted like 30k of stuff I prewrote because I wanted to
keep writing Seonghwa/Hongjoong vampire pirates, but I swore I would give
wooyoung and Yeosang their dues.
I hope nothing was awful, and feel free to give constructive criticisms about how I
presented everything! I tried to make it as concise as possible but I apparently suck at
writing short chapters~~
Thank you for reading!
-SS
A Discussion

Chapter Notes

Hey~~ A bit of a quick update but this is the last one I had prewritten, so the next ones may take a small time longer to get out but hopefully not too long ㅠㅠ I hope this one isn’t too rushed, but let me know if it starts getting confusing! Thanks for reading and have an amazing day~~!!
-SS

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Seonghwa stood outside the door, Hongjoong’s solid presence beside him, and the weight of a knife at his hip.

Wooyoung was downstairs, being kept there by the others while Hongjoong and Seonghwa decided it was time to try a more coherent conversation than the mess of snarls and growls they had attempted before.

Hongjoong glanced at him, and sometimes Seonghwa could believe that no time had passed.

That Hongjoong was still his captain, giving orders, and Seonghwa knowing them without a word.

He raised a hand, knocking on the door gently.

There was the sound of something hitting a wall, but it sounded more like a scared flinch than something being thrown.

“Yeosang?” Seonghwa called, his throat aching in memory of teeth digging into it.

Silence met his call. Until the same timid voice of before barely made it through the door. “Did… Wooyoung leave?”

They exchanged slightly raised brows, but nothing else, Seonghwa turning back to the door.

“You didn’t scare him off,” Hongjoong assured him, voice strong. “He came to get us. We want to talk to you.”

And Seonghwa could practically see the other cowering against the door. “... Okay.”

“Face to face,” Seonghwa said gently. “We’re going to open the door. We’d appreciate it if you would stand against the opposite wall.”

“What if I-” Yeosang’s voice was slightly frantic, but Seonghwa cut him off firmly.

“We have protective measures. Remember that dagger?”

There was an audible whimper on the other side of the door, and Seonghwa was nothing if not empathetic. Blessed blades were a different kind of pain. Even if it seemed his episodes cared nothing for it, he would feel it afterwards.
“We won’t use it against you unless we absolutely must,” Seonghwa assured him. “It is only for the safety of everyone else here that we would use it.”

There was the sound of someone standing. “Okay…”

“Against the other wall, please,” Hongjoong requested, and they waited until his footsteps had retreated before exchanging one last look and sticking the key in the lock.

The room was in shambles, and Seonghwa was suddenly standing in his captain’s quarters so long ago, witnessing for the first time what a caged vampire could do.

The desk was torn apart, pages everywhere, the bed ripped open and fabric and fluff covering the ground, glass from some decorative ornaments filled one particular corner. And up against the far wall, was huddled a thin, cowering vampire.

Yeosang’s eyes were fiery, defensive, but his entire demeanor was of someone waiting for a blow to be delivered. His eyes trailed over Seonghwa’s neck, but his eyes were remorseful, not predatory.

“We aren’t going to hurt you,” Seonghwa tried to calm, neither of them taking further steps into the room. “We merely want to talk. To help you.”

Yeosang visibly swallowed, eyes flicking over them rapidly, like a caged animal.

He was young. Prior to being turned, he had been young. And the eyes that stared at Seonghwa were like a child’s- knowing and understanding nothing, lost in a supermarket and searching for someone, anyone who might help them find their way.

“Help me… what?” His voice was no louder within the room than through the door.

“Get better,” Hongjoong assured him. “Do you remember a time…before? When you didn’t destroy everything around you?”

Yeosang’s entire body stiffened, eyes downcasted, breaths coming a little quicker. “I- I don’t- I don’t know. I can’t remember, I can’t-”

“That’s normal,” Seonghwa said gently, having to physically resist the urge to over and comfort him. This was not the same situation as so long ago. “Rogues… their minds are often confused. You don’t need to be-”

“Rogues,” Yeosang repeated, glancing up towards them, his arms wrapped around himself. “Wooyoung… mentioned those.”

Hongjoong nodded slowly. “And that’s why we’re here,” he told him softly. “To explain a few things to you. Things that should have been explained long ago for you. How old are you, Yeosang?”

His teeth gritted together, lips white. “I- I don’t-” He shook his head, like he was trying to clear a ringing. “I… ten years? Twenty? I- I don’t remember, I didn’t count.”

He was young, but older still than some of the others here.

“And where is your maker?”

Seonghwa was getting a very sinking feeling in his chest.

Yeosang frowned. “I… He was… He was here when I woke up. And he told me… he saved me.”
And then he… he left.”

A piece of ice wedged itself in Seonghwa’s chest. He couldn’t help how his eyes widened the slightest bit, the only indication of his surprise. “He left you… with someone? Another vampire?”

Yeosang shook his head slowly, looking confused. “No. I was… I was camping. I woke up in my tent. And he left me there.”

“You found others, though, right?” Hongjoong asked, voice tight in a terrifying way Yeosang would not pick up on. “Other vampires?”

Yeosang looked scared, like the two of them were making no sense, but he didn’t know why. “I- No- I mean, I heard of some, but I couldn’t find them. I- I didn’t know- People talked about vampires, and they called them dangerous, I didn’t know if I could trust them-”

The ice crept into his heart.

This vampire had saved someone. Had turned them. And then simply abandoned them? Not even remaining to give him the tools for his own survival? Not even bothering to ensure they found somewhere to accept them?

He simply left him to die?

Why bother saving him in the first place?

“So you have no life partner?” Hongjoong questioned carefully, voice meticulously controlled.

“Those things Wooyoung mentioned?” Yeosang asked, and that answered that question.

“So you’re…alone? You have been since you woke up in that tent?”

Yeosang wet his lips, chewing on it vigorously. “I- yes. But I don’t-”

His eyes flashed red, and that was the only warning Seonghwa needed before the dagger was in his hand, his hand closing around Yeosang’s neck as he lunged forward, slamming him to the ground and placing the tip at the base of his throat.

His snarls sounded louder, violently, but his body didn’t move, a faint growl creeping through his throat. His eyes flared red, claws digging into the carpet, apparently a little more wary of the dagger digging directly into the soft of his neck. He snarled at Seonghwa’s face, but the older simply remained there calmly.

Hongjoong was silent behind him. “You haven’t lost your touch.”

“Is now the time to flirt?” Seonghwa tossed over his shoulder without turning his eyes away from the rogue.

“It was a simple compliment, do not be offended.”

Seonghwa wanted to roll his eyes, but Yeosang choked, blinking as his eyes faded to brown, his chest heaving and eyes wild as he went completely still.

“I- I’m sorry,” he choked, throat bobbing against the dagger that Seonghwa pulled away slowly. “I’m sorry- I can’t- I can’t stop it-”

Seonghwa couldn’t help it- he laid a hand on his arm, helping him sit up. “You are not to blame,
Yeosang,” he said firmly, the edges of the words softened. “You are a victim of cruel circumstances. You were turned by someone who gave not a single thought to your well-being or survival.” His chest twisted. “And I’m sorry for that.”

Yeosang stared at the two of them, still wondering if they would harm him at such close range, eyes on the dagger at Seonghwa’s side, eyes hollowing out, as if a candle had been blown out. “What… What’s happening to me?” he whispered, voice dropping even further.

Hongjoong crouched to the ground until he was eye level with the rogue. “We have much to tell you of, Yeosang,” he said quietly. “Things your maker should have explained to you. Things you should have had long ago. But you can have them now. You do not have to be alone anymore.”

Yeosang stared as if they were speaking another language, confused and alarmed.

Seonghwa recognized the practiced words from Hongjoong’s lips as he spoke quietly to Yeosang. Seonghwa had never had to deliver this information to any of the others, and Hongjoong had last needed to explain it centuries ago to the only person he had ever turned.

Seonghwa remembered being curled in a corner, staring at Hongjoong with terrified eyes because he felt… he was…

He was cold. And it felt like everything that had once filled space inside him was gone, leaving a cavern that echoed with something. He was so horribly cold-

Yeosang could not be afforded the luxury of proximity, both of them keeping a distance for when his episodes hit. Seonghwa resisted every instinctual urge to go over, to comfort and hold as Hongjoong had to him, because Yeosang stared at them as a new changeling did: confused and scared and distrustful.

Seonghwa had gathered too many life partners to leave another like this.

Twice during their conversation (one-sided as it was) he had attacked, but they (now that they expected the attacks) easily subdued him until he calmed again. One time took only seconds. The other took a full ten minutes.

Each time, Yeosang came back to himself, it was with pain in his eyes, and with each episode, it seemed as if he were losing strength when his eyes cleared. Seonghwa would take the risk to touch his hand, but Yeosang would jerk away, not looking at him.

Yeosang was completely silent the entire time, never once meeting their eyes. Hongjoong stopped speaking, watching Yeosang who stared at his hands, as if picturing everything they had done.

“I… Can I be alone right now?” Seonghwa had to read his lips to hear the slightly rumbling words.

Seonghwa knew that the last thing he wanted was to be alone. But he knew that after so long on his own, something like this would take time to process. He simply glanced at Hongjoong for a confirmation, the other nodding with heavy eyes on Yeosang.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong left with a quiet promise to bring him something to eat soon, and closed the door behind them, standing out in the hall in silence, both of their shoulders heavy.

Abandoning changelings… it was not unheard of. But that was back in the days before everyone understood just how few of them there were. Just how precious each and every life that was turned was. Just how important it was that they stay with each other.
And the thought that there was someone who misused that power so viciously…

“Distract me so I do not hunt down that maker and tear him apart,” Hongjoong requested, voice low and eyes dark as obsidian.

Seonghwa’s jaw flexed, chest hollow. “You are flawed in thinking I would not aid you in a heartbeat.” But regardless, he took Hongjoong’s hand, leading him away from the door. They needed to go back downstairs to the others, but they needed to calm themselves first. It was never within their plans to show the others how shaken they could be.

Seonghwa closed the door to their room, leaning against it as if to prevent something else from entering. Hongjoong ran an irritated hand through his hair.

“It is wrong, on so many levels, Seonghwa,” he breathed, scrubbing his face harshly. “How- How could you simply abandon your charge? What monster-” He paced the room, needing to dispel the energy within him. “Who could inflict such pain on an innocent they turned?”

Seonghwa simply felt cold. “If he was abandoned from the beginning, it is a wonder there is any part of him left.”

Because decades… was a very long time to be alone. Even for an older vampire, more firmly rooted in themselves. He was alone, without any sort of memory of life partners to comfort him. A brand new vampire… like Seonghwa had once been…

He tried to imagine that time. The parts of him that changed, the parts of him that fought. The part of his were unrecognizable as he tried to cope and comprehend what it was he had become.


Seonghwa had relied on the other so heavily, there was a time he thought that being without his presence would cause him to cease to exist. It was so imperative that a vampire have someone beside them. He tried to imagine if Hongjoong had simply left. Just bitten at his neck, and Seonghwa had woken up alone instead of pressed against his chest-

He couldn’t think about it. It was too terrifying a thought.

Seonghwa tossed the dagger onto the desk, staring at it with a swirl of mixed emotions, most of them dark. “I don’t think he truly believed us,” he admitted, voice unsteady. “About life partners…”

Hongjoong snorted sarcastically. “Of course not. He has been alone his whole life, how could he possibly believe that the answer to his torment is simple companionship?” The words were sharp. Biting. And Seonghwa simply stared as Hongjoong’s shoulders dropped. “I apologize,” he murmured, lowering his head in shame. “It is not you I am angry at.”

“Most definitely,” Seonghwa agreed, not taking even the slightest bit of offense at his sharp words. He stepped towards Hongjoong. “There is nothing we can do to change his past. However, we can ensure his future. It seems that he and Wooyoung have already gravitated towards each other.”

Seonghwa remembered the natural pull he felt towards Hongjoong. The one that made him almost crave his touch and presence. Embraces and holding whatever limb was available, or simply sitting in his room in silence, not even speaking. Just the knowledge that you were not alone… Just having someone there, knowing that within their presence, you were not adrift.

Seonghwa came to stop before him as Hongjoong’s lips twitched. “It is Wooyoung’s natural
tendency to stick his nose where it does not belong.”

“Which may be our greatest ally,” Seonghwa noted, lifting his hands to rest on Hongjoong’s arms. “You see how coherent Yeosang is of himself, there is hope for him. Much of it,” he stressed. “He is fighting to stay above water, and that will also be our best strength.”

And Seonghwa could see it- a small bit of light, of hope flickering around Hongjoong’s eyes, replacing the anger and frustration of minutes ago.

Hongjoong leaned forward until his head hit Seonghwa’s chest.

“He reminds me how grateful I am for you.”

Seonghwa’s chest pinched, and he managed a weak smile. It hurt. Because Seonghwa could only imagine what that sort of loneliness must feel like. He had never needed to experience it. From the moment he was turned, there was Hongjoong.

Hongjoong understood more than Seonghwa did. In those years when he joined the crew, Hongjoong had been alone…for a while.

“So… it keeps you sane? Life partners?”

Hongjoong nodded, expression serious as he traced patterns into Seonghwa’s warm skin.

“You need to have one?”

“Some can go longer without one than others, but you need to eventually find someone.”

“Then… where is yours?”

His eyes flickered to Seonghwa’s. “Right here,” he whispered.

Seonghwa still felt his heart lurch at the statement, despite knowing its truth. He sighed, shaking his head. “I meant before you met me.”

Hongjoong’s shoulders were heavy. His eyes were dull, and Seonghwa felt guilty for asking. Clearly, it couldn’t be good.

“From the moment I met you… I think I knew what you would become to me. Even had you not agreed to be my partner, I still took that comfort from you.”

And it was still strange. That concept of needing someone to rely on. But part of Seonghwa grew warm at the thought that he had been that, without even knowing. It was quickly iced over, though, as Hongjoong’s eyes darkened.

“Before you… For a good portion of my life, my maker, Eden, stayed with me. But… after time, he wanted to move on. He was always anxious to move on. I was… content where we were. I did not want to leave the familiar house or village we had resided in. I wanted to stay where we were. Eden did not want to force me on, but he would not leave me, so he remained. But I knew he was not happy to stay.”

His jaw flexed slightly, as if the memory were not painful, but unpleasant. “Another one… someone like us, wandered through town. He… He was called Maddox. He was looking for a place to settle. He stayed with me, and Eden moved on, promising he would see me again. Maddox was… a good
partner. We kept each other company for decades until…” He wet his lips, clearly trying for a nonchalance. “People found out what we were. Maddox was caught feeding in the forest, and scared villagers can be… very dangerous. He did not survive the attack.”

Seonghwa found no words in his mouth to attempt to articulate the hole slowly opening in his chest.

“I fled,” Hongjoong confessed, looking almost guilty about the statement.

Seonghwa wanted to reach out, to touch and comfort, but his limbs were frozen at his sides.

“That is why I came to the sea. I was frightened of being hunted like that again. And for years, I move from ship to ship. But as time passed I… I could feel myself beginning to… It felt like fading,” he said, touching his chest lightly as if ensuring something were still there. He almost seemed confused by the sensation. “As if my mind were losing its ability to stay coherent. Like suffocating underwater. I looked in water, and I did not recognize the person staring back at me.”

Hongjoong shuddered lightly, and Seonghwa could not help the hand that grasped at Hongjoong’s, holding it tightly.

Hongjoong lifted his eyes that swam with knowledge Seonghwa could not yet comprehend. “And then I met you. And it was like breathing again. Long before I ever considered you mine, I relied on you as if you were already going to stay with me forever.”

“It is I that should be grateful for you,” Seonghwa assured him. It truly did cause him pain to think of what Yeosang’s mind must be now. It hurt to think how Hongjoong must be remembering what it felt like.

Hongjoong often attempted to subdue how he described his years alone. But Seonghwa, without a word from him, knew that it was horrible for him. He knew it in the way Hongjoong clung back to him just as desperately when Seonghwa agreed to be his life partner and was turned by him.

Seonghwa remembered being surprised by seeing his own desperation in Hongjoong’s eyes when he sought him out. Having a real, confirmed, agreed life partner had brought out the parts of him that had been robbed during his time alone, and his time when Seonghwa had been unable to fully understand the weight he carried with him.

Hongjoong’s hand rested against his waist gently. “If we can do for him… what you did for me… we may yet call it a success,” he whispered. “I wish for him to feel whole here.”

Seonghwa wrapped his arms around him, holding him tightly, his chin resting on top of his head. “He will be,” he whispered, and he felt it with absolute conviction. Yeosang wanted help. He wanted his life to change. And that was the largest difference between him and other rogues.

Many lost themselves to hopelessness, deciding it was all they could ever feel.

Wanting to feel again… that was a powerful thing.

~~~~~~
Wooyoung was outside the door again.

After Seonghwa and Hongjoong explained everything they discussed, Wooyoung felt no better than he had before. In fact…

He felt sick.

His maker had been rough, distant, but at least he had been there. Wooyoung truly couldn’t imagine what it was like to be alone like that. He didn’t want to.

He didn’t knock on the door. Simply sat against the opposite wall, trying to figure out what he should say.

“You can go speak to him, but he may need more time alone. He’ll need to feed soon, too. He’s exhausted.”

Occasionally, there would be the sound of breaking and pounding, but he stopped jumping quite so violently at the sounds. It was only after a longer spout of carnage- probably pushing twenty minutes of crashing and hissing- that he swallowed in the long silence that followed it.

It was eerie.

“Hey... Yeosang?” he called quietly, scooting closer, knowing he’d never hear from back there.

Silence.

“W-Wooyoung?” The voice was rough and torn, but that same sort of surprised at his presence.

He felt his lips tug in a weak smile. “Yeah.” He waited for a response, but none was given. “Are you okay in there?”

Pause. “Your… Your two friends came here.” Wooyoung hummed in confirmation. He wished he could see Yeosang’s face. He didn’t even think he could remember what it looked like from that night, too hidden in blood and adrenaline. “I’m…” Yeosang breathed out harshly, voice dull.

“I’m... broken. Aren’t I?”

Wooyoung’s chest felt hollow. “No,” he said with absolute conviction. “Broken is the wrong word. You… You were never told anything. They set you down without a map and told you to find your way around. It’s not your fault.”

The door vibrated with the force of his hit, and Wooyoung only flinched, not jerking back. Three more hits, and then silence.

“Do you… Do you remember what happens?” Wooyoung whispered. “When you… get like that?”

Another long silence, and Wooyoung was sure he could understand Yeosang so much more if he could see him. But all he could do was hope that Yeosang had not decided to ignore him.

“Yeah,” Yeosang whispered.

“Oh.” Wooyoung swallowed. “Do you feel when it’s going to happen?”

“No.”

“It’s okay,” he said quickly. “It won’t last forever.”
There was a bitter laugh from Yeosang, disbelieving and almost cruel. “It already has.”

Wooyoung was sure each day passed as an eternity when you were alone. He couldn’t imagine getting through a single day, left only with his head and a broken room. “It won’t,” he stressed firmly. “You have us now. You’re not alone anymore.”

Another bitter laugh, more twisted, and Wooyoung almost imagined his eyes turning red. “What can you do?” he hissed angrily. “Nothing.”

Wooyoung’s fingers curled into the carpet, swallowing. “We won’t abandon you,” he said, trying to find some way to convince him. “You can destroy and attack all you want… when you’re done, we’ll still be here.”

A harsh scoff that made Wooyoung’s skin crawl.

“Is it lonely?” he asked quietly. “In there?”

Silence. Wooyoung waited, but got no answer. Slowly, his fingers uncurled from the carpet, sliding along the soft fibers towards the door.

“We’ll wait for you,” Wooyoung promised, picturing Hongjoong’s kind face as he stared down at Wooyoung crouched on the ground, trying to tie his shoes as everyone kept walking, stopping as each of them realized one of them had been caught up. “You don’t have to be alone.”

His fingers slid beneath the crack beneath the door until he felt the cool air of Jongho’s room. He imagined Yeosang grabbing the fingers, breaking them, scratching them, crushing them—

Nothing happened for several moments.

“There’s a lot of people here,” Wooyoung said quietly, trying to keep his voice strong. “We’ll all be here for you.”

Wooyoung thought he felt an icy touch brush his fingers. “Why?” Yeosang whispered.

“Because—” Wooyoung almost didn’t know how to say it. They just would. “Because that’s what life partners do. Hongjoong and Seonghwa would have told you. They… They keep you safe. They stick around and keep you company so you aren’t alone. They’re the best thing that could ever happen to you.”

There definitely was a gentle brush of skin against his.

“And they don’t abandon you,” Wooyoung murmured. “We won’t abandon you, Yeosang.”

Cool fingers laid gently, hesitantly against his fingertips. It didn’t hurt. They didn’t grab or tear, they just rested. Wooyoung’s throat felt stiff. He wondered when the last time Yeosang touched someone without hurting them was.

“Why do you care?” Yeosang whispered. “Why do you care about me?”

That one was easier to answer.

“Because no one deserves to be alone,” Wooyoung answered. “No one deserves to live… without having someone to stand with them. You have just as much right to be happy as the rest of. We found you, too, and that means you’re one of us now.”
The hand against his twitched, and he could almost see Yeosang staring at their fingers curiously. He knew that this must be the first time he touched someone in days, locked in the room with only himself and nothing to even take away his attention from his-

“Are you hungry?” Wooyoung questioned after a small silence, trying to fill Yeosang’s lack of response.

The hand retracted quickly, something like a whimper-groan sounding quietly, pained and low.

Wooyoung frowned. “When was the last time you ate?” The officer had spoken about people being killed, but that didn’t necessarily mean he had fed. Seonghwa and Hongjoong had mentioned wanting to get him some blood.

“I don’t…. remember.”

Wooyoung stood, withdrawing his hand from under the door. “I’ll get you some-”

“You’re leaving?” Yeosang asked quickly, voice tinging towards the franticness once more.

“I’m coming right back,” Wooyoung promised, dropping back down to the ground and sliding his fingers under the door to show he was still there. “I’m going to get you something to eat. I’m only going to be a couple of minutes, I promise.”

He stood slowly, waiting to see if another desperate question would fall, but when silence was his only response, he just repeated another- “I’ll be right back,” and headed down the stairs.

For someone who seemed to be nothing but confused and lost, Yeosang was desperate not to alone. And it only solidified Wooyoung’s resolve that life partners were a natural thing. Yeosang knew nothing, but he knew he didn’t want to be alone. The visceral reaction deep in your soul to find someone comforting.

And it hurt. But at the very least, it was something he could provide. Even if his ass was getting bruised from sitting on the ground so much.

He expected to run into Seonghwa or Hongjoong in the kitchen, but it was empty. He frowned, heading to the fridge and grabbing two bags of blood and two straws from the drawer. He stuck his head in the living room.

Yunho, Mingi, and Jongho glanced up from their movie.

“Where’s Hongjoong and Seonghwa?” Wooyoung questioned.

Yunho shrugged. “I think they were wandering around together. They said something about talking about their talk with Yeosang.”

Hongjoong and Seonghwa sometimes just wandered the house together. There wasn’t a ridiculous amount of space, but they didn’t need it. It was always a little hard to pin them down when they did, almost as if they didn’t want to be found.

“Got it,” he said, going to back away.

“You’re still talking with him?” Jongho asked from the floor, leaning to see Wooyoung.

“Yeah?” Wooyoung said obviously. “And the rest of you could come visit, too. It’s not like he can hurt you through the door. And it’s not like you’ve been ignoring him since he got here.” He gave
them a half-accusing eyebrow raise.

“We’re not ignoring him,” Mingi said firmly. “Some of us are just better at self-preservation than you. You’d probably stick your fingers through the bars in the zoo.”

Wooyoung’s fingers tingled.

Yunho frowned at him for a moment before nodding slowly. “I’ll come up after this episode is over,” He said. “If you haven’t gotten mauled yet, and if the hyungs explained everything to him, it must be fine, right?” He winced. “I feel a little guilty about not going to him before, but… it’s freaky, you know?”

Yeah, it was. But it was also heartbreaking.

Wooyoung’s chest felt lighter as he smiled. “At least one of you still has a heart,” he snorted, waving goodbye and heading back up the stairs.

“I’m back,” Wooyoung announced, and what he got in return was a snarl. He winced, sitting on the ground as it sounded like carpet being torn up.

Seonghwa wasn’t going to be happy about that part.

A couple of minutes later, there was a soft panting at the door, the crashing dying out.

“W-Wooyoung?” Yeosang whispered, sounding tired. His voice dragged like feet against concrete, just wishing for a place to sit. “I-

“It’s okay,” Wooyoung said quickly, scooting up to the door. “Are you tired?”

“I… My stomach hurts.”

“You’re hungry,” Wooyoung informed him, as if the sensation were new to him. “I’ve got some blood for you, I’ll just-

And Wooyoung looked at the crack beneath the door, barely big enough to fit his hand under, and the blood bag sitting in his hand. It would never fit under there. He looked around the outside of the door, as if he could find an opening he had previously missed.

“Uh…” Well, that was a problem.

He chewed on his lip. “I can’t fit it under the door,” he said, tasting metallic blood from his lip. “I-

He didn’t wait for a response, racing down the stairs quick enough to part the air, snatching up a key from a basket on the window sill, and appearing back at the door, the key heavy in his hand.

“-young?”

“Yeah, I’m back,” he said, feeling his chest squeezing.

This was probably a very stupid decision, but… Seonghwa and Hongjoong went inside, right? And Wooyoung didn’t even need to go inside. Just pass him the blood and then close the door.

“Okay,” he whispered. “Yeosang, I’m gonna open the door a little. I’m gonna pass you the blood bag, and then I need to lock the door again. Okay?”
Yeosang was coherent enough right now. And he usually had a little break between episodes. If he just had one, if Wooyoung was fast, they should be good.

“Wooyoung, I don’t think that’s—”

“It’s okay,” Wooyoung assured him quickly, clenching the key in his fist, resolve solidifying. “I… I trust you.”

“Why?” Yeosang demanded quickly.

Wooyoung huffed quietly. Why? Maybe it was that Yeosang seemed so in his right mind at the moment, maybe it was all the talking they did, but… “Dunno,” he admitted truthfully. “But I do.”

A solid, heavy silence.

“Yeosang, I’m gonna unlock the door now, okay?”

Quiet, timid, terrified. “... Okay.”

Wooyoung swallowed, sticking the key in the lock. “I’m just gonna open it enough to pass you the blood.”

He turned it, hearing the lock click. The door didn’t immediately burst open in a fit of rage, so Wooyoung sat on the ground, turning the handle and pulling it open only an inch.

Peering through the crack, he could make out pale skin and terrified brown eyes. He couldn’t see much of his face aside from his eyes, but he picked out a little red smudge at the corner of his eyelid that looked like a birthmark.

Wooyoung managed a nervous smile. “Hey,” he greeted, word sticking in his throat slightly. He groped for the blood bag on the ground. “Okay, I’m just gonna pass it to you.”

Yeosang nodded jerkily, eyes locked onto Wooyoung’s face, as if he didn’t intend to look away.

Wooyoung opened the door a little further, pushing the blood bag through the space in the door—Yeosang’s eyes dropped to the deep red liquid, and brown was immediately flooded with crimson.

Wooyoung received no other warning before a body slammed into his.

His head hit the ground, drawing a broken cry out of him as claws cut into his chest. Apparently, the exhaustion of before was lost. He tore at the hands that slashed at him, grabbing one of Yeosang’s wrists and tearing it away, the other going for his throat and trying to keep his fangs from his neck.

“Yeosang!” he snapped, voice strained as Yeosang fought him, his unshackled hand, finding Wooyoung’s neck and sinking claws into the skin, making him choke as fear and pain shot through his blood. “Yeosang,” he choked, voice catching as Yeosang pressed harder, arms thrashing to shake off Wooyoung’s grip that was barely holding on.

The arm holding Yeosang’s neck away suddenly gave way as his locked elbow buckled, Yeosang falling forward, teeth piercing the skin of his n—

Yeosang was suddenly gone, and Wooyoung heard the sound of a body crashing into the wall, rolling over quickly and pressing a hand to his throat, feeling blood pooling there.
Hands dragged him up, Hongjoong’s terrified eyes coming into his vision.

“Wooyoung, are you-”

He turned quickly, seeing Seonghwa pinning Yeosang’s limp body to the wall by his throat, teeth bared, as if daring him to regain consciousness.

“Stop!” Wooyoung burst, trying to jerk away from Hongjoong who held him back tightly. “Hyung, don’t hurt-”

Seonghwa turned to Wooyoung, eyes a deep red. Wooyoung’s mouth clicked shut loudly.

“Hongjoong, get him out of here,” he said, voice low.

Wooyoung didn’t fight Hongjoong hauling him up, dragging him down the stairs, Wooyoung looking back and seeing Yeosang’s limp hand twitch before they went out of sight, Hongjoong dragging him into the kitchen and forcing him to sit in a chair.

“Yunho!” he called, dropping into the other chair, dragging Wooyoung close and shifting his head to the side gently. He examined the shallow bite that had been cut off before it could go any deeper.

Wooyoung saw the older appear, Hongjoong not even looking up to his horrified eyes before he snapped for him to get the medical kit.

Yunho stared at the blood on Wooyoung’s neck and chest before sprinting away. Maybe it was shock or adrenaline, but Wooyoung didn’t even feel the pain anymore.

“What happened?” Hongjoong demanded, voice stony, looking up at Wooyoung with hard eyes.

Wooyoung suddenly felt like shrinking into dust. “I-” the words stuck in his throat. “I- I didn’t- He didn’t do anything, I- I opened the door-”

“You what?” Hongjoong snapped, eyes sharpening, and Wooyoung knew he wasn’t actually angry. He was scared. He was scared for Wooyoung, but it didn’t stop him from dropping his head in shame because, really, it had been such a stupid decision.

His tongue seemed to tie itself in knots. “I- We were talking- He was- Yeosang was hungry- You said we were going- You mentioned getting him fed- I- It was only supposed to be a little bit, but he- he saw the blood, and I think it triggered it-” He forced himself to look at Hongjoong’s dark eyes. “He didn’t do anything, I was the one who opened the door!”

“It’s not a question of who did what.”

Both of them turned to see Seonghwa standing in the doorway, eyes as hard as Hongjoong’s.

Usually one of them was the softer one when the other was pissed, but… Wooyoung had fucked up.

He supposed Yeosang was locked back in the room right now.

Yunho snuck passed Seonghwa, passing the kit to Hongjoong before backing out again, casting a worried glance. Even he could tell that this was something he shouldn’t be getting between right now.
Seonghwa’s arms were crossed over his chest tightly as Hongjoong got out bandages.

“You opened the door?”

Wooyoung’s stomach was burning, but he nodded.

“To give him food?”

He nodded slowly, fingers twisting each other.

“Did you even think about him having an episode while you opened it?”

It wasn’t harsh. It wasn’t degrading, but it was so disappointed. It had been a while since Wooyoung had needed to be scolded this seriously.

“He’s usually fine for a few minutes, and he had just had one, but the blood-”

“You didn’t think to get one of us?” Seonghwa demanded firmly. “What if he had gone for the others?”

Wooyoung’s stomach dropped. “But- He- He was fine, we were talking, I-”

I trust you.

“I trusted him.” It sounded dull on his tongue. “He- He doesn’t want to hurt anyone.”

Hongjoong and Seonghwa exchanged a look that Wooyoung could not decipher, but whatever it was, it was enough for Seonghwa’s eyes to close, his shoulders unlocking as he let out a long breath, seeming to count to himself.

Hongjoong pressed a bandage to his neck firmly, making Wooyoung wince.

“Trust has to be earned, Wooyoung,” Hongjoong said quietly, not looking up from his task, voice hard but without any sharpness to it. It was almost patient. “Regardless of intention… there has to be proof that the trust won’t be betrayed. It doesn’t matter if Yeosang doesn’t want to hurt, if he can’t stop himself from doing so.”

Wooyoung felt like an idiot. But he stood by his thought process. Maybe it was a stupid decision, but it wasn’t one made without thought. It just wasn’t enough thought.

“You can’t just assign trust, Wooyoung,” Seonghwa said, voice gentler than before, but still stern. “It has to be earned. And regardless of how much time you’ve spent speaking with Yeosang… he hasn’t earned that. If he had, Hongjoong and I would have opened that door and let him roam. He can’t have that trust until we’re able to bring him down to a level that is manageable without putting you all at risk.”

And Wooyoung’s hand were shaking slightly from the adrenaline, his mind realizing the flaw in their plan.

“How is he supposed to get there, hyung?” Wooyoung asked forcefully, chest tightening. “How is he supposed to become manageable?”

“We’re trying to help him, Wooyoung.”

“We can’t help him while he’s in there,” Wooyoung fought. “Hyung, he’s lonely. It’s just him in that room- that’s not helping him.”
“Wooyoung.”

He winced at Hongjoong stern tone, glancing at him to find the older staring at him hard enough to pin him in place. But underneath it was sympathetic.

“It’s admirable, that you want to help Yeosang so badly. And that’s what he needs. But we cannot endanger everyone here and Yeosang. If he attacks one of you, we have to attack back. We don’t want him to remain in that room,” Hongjoong said firmly. “Never think that either of us would want him there.”

“But we have to think of everyone’s safety,” Seonghwa said, leaning against the wall. “And until we take enough small steps, we cannot take large ones. It’s only been a few days, Wooyoung. Rehabilitating rogues… it can take years to get back to a proper mental state.”

Seonghwa’s eyes flickered to Hongjoong.

Wooyoung felt chastised. Embarrassed and silenced. He stared at his feet.

The part that hurt the most was that they were right. And Wooyoung would never think that Seonghwa and Hongjoong wanted to keep a vampire locked up like that. But that didn’t stop the urge inside of Wooyoung to get him out of there because Wooyoung could barely stand the thought of him in there, much less the idea of being in there himself.

“Isn’t there somewhere else we can put him?” Wooyoung asked quietly, looking up at them pleadingly. “Somewhere… less isolated? Without things for him to destroy?”

His brain suggested something he never would have considered. Something he hadn’t even thought of in years. His body straightened, perking up. “What about that side cellar?”

Their shock was palpable. Seonghwa’s eyebrows went up. “You want to put him in the cellar?”

Houses may be built to withstand vampires, but they were still built by humans. Pessimistic, misguided humans, who equipped each house with a holding cellar, intended for locking crazy vampires in, when they “inevitably snapped and became a danger to the house.”

They had theirs locked up. They had wanted to dig it up, sneering at the implications it held of vampires losing their minds, even within safe covens. But it still stood under the floor at the back the house, collecting dust. Wooyoung had only been down there once, when they first moved in.

It was like a storm cellar, but when you walked in, there was a small cell, thick bars with very small space between each, and walls lined in a variation of blessed metal.

Humans liked using it to build houses out of. It didn’t hurt vampires when they touched it, but it was what made the walls and doors able to withstand them. Some scared human even used it on their own houses, in the case of a “vampire attack.”

“You think putting him in a cell would be better than putting him in a room?” Hongjoong clarified skeptically.

And Wooyoung winced at the implications of it, but shrugged. “He won’t be locked in a little box. He’ll be able to see us, and…” He sighed before straightening, mind lighting up. “I had an uncle when I was alive. And he got a new dog one time, when my cousin was still a baby. He put the dog on one side of a gate, and the baby on the other, introducing them through the bars. They could touch, but the dog couldn’t snap at her through it.”
He paused, the silence ringing, and he touched the bandage at his neck, not even realizing Hongjoong had stopped the bleeding of the thin cuts across his chest.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong appeared to be having an entire conversation through their eyes, lips pressed together tightly.

Behind them, Wooyoung could see San and Jongho peering around the edge of the kitchen door, and he knew the others must be listening too.

Hongjoong finally sighed, dropping his shoulders. “I think…. That this is a question for Yeosang.” He stared at Wooyoung sternly. “But...it might be a reasonable idea.”

Wooyoung smiled, but their continued stoic expressions forced it down.

“You’re not out of trouble,” Seonghwa warned him, arms crossing. “You endangered everyone in this house, including yourself.”

He winced, guilt clogging his veins, making him feel antsy. “I… I’m sorry,” he murmured, dropping his head. “I didn’t mean to. I just- I thought I could-”

And hindsight was 20/20. Looking back, it seemed so fucking stupid to even attempt it. How did he not even consider that blood would put him into an episode?

He was surprised by the comforting weight of a hand against his shoulder, Hongjoong sighing quietly. “Your heart was in the right place, Wooyoung. But you need to start using your head more.”

He nodded slowly.

“Head up to your room,” Seonghwa said, nodding at the door. “Don’t stop by Yeosang for now. Just go rest.”

Wooyoung stood slowly, not able to meet either of their eyes.

Nothing felt worse than disappointing them. Because they were right. Yeosang was not in his right mind. It didn’t matter what he did or did not want to do. He had no control over himself. And he could have easily shoved Wooyoung aside and gone downstairs to the others, who wouldn’t have suspected a thing.

A shiver ran down his spine at the thought.

The others were waiting at the doorway, parting to let him pass through, sympathetic and pitying eyes following him as he dragged himself to the stairs.

“Do you need help?” Mingi asked as Wooyoung grabbed the banister and hauled himself up the first step.

“No,” he said, voice dull without even really considering the question. He made his way up the stairs slowly, his chest stinging and his neck aching. His eyes trailed over the closed door, and the two popped blood bags seeping into the carpet.

He went to his room, closing the door behind himself and laying down on the bed, curling up.

He fucked up. There was nothing around that.

He felt sick. For endangering the others. For being so stupid. For keeping Yeosang locked away
like that…

He hoped Seonghwa hadn’t hurt him too badly. He didn’t know what he was doing. He couldn’t control it, they couldn’t forget that.

Wooyoung couldn’t forget it.

He could see the beginnings of light around his curtains, his eyes dragging down.

And he had life partners. Which meant, just on the edge of sleep, his door opened quietly, and he felt San’s familiar shape press against him, hugging him tightly.

“‘You okay?’ he murmured.

Wooyoung hummed, twisting until he was more comfortable against him, ducking his head. San pet his hair gently, comfortingly, and Wooyoung refused to cry. It sat in his chest, along with the thought of disappointing Hongjoong and Seonghwa so badly and the others potentially getting hurt. But they never fell.

He fell asleep, and he tried to make it peaceful, comforted by the familiar presence of not being alone, but all he could think of was Yeosang alone in the room, ten times worse off than Wooyoung, a victim of uncontrollable circumstances, rather than a conscious choice to be idiotic.

It made him feel guilt.

Yeosang deserved someone there more than Wooyoung did.

His sleep was not restful, despite San’s warm presence.

~~~~~~

A single, quiet knock.

“Yeosang?” Hongjoong called, Seonghwa not by his side, but downstairs with the others.

He heard a scared breath, something dragging against the carpet, and the quiet murmurs creeping through the door thickly.

“Is-” The voice caught, coughing weakly. “Is Wooyoung… Is he okay?” His voice was slow, as if he didn’t want to really know, scared of the answer.

“Wooyoung is… scratched up, but his life is in no danger,” Hongjoong said firmly.

A short silence, and Yeosang’s voice came back, uneven and wobbling. “I-I didn’t mean to,” he whispered, the sound of a head resting against the door. “I-I didn’t- I saw the blood, and I- I didn’t want to hurt him, but I couldn’t-”

“I am the last person you need to explain yourself to, Yeosang,” Hongjoong assured him, feeling his chest twist despite his anger earlier.

Because while Hongjoong would protect his family, even against another vampire, Yeosang was not the blame. It was not his choice to act as he did, and Hongjoong could hear the way it tore him
apart.

Like listening to a recording of the past.

“Are… Are you going to kill me?”

Hongjoong jerked back to the matter at hand, his stomach dropping at the quiet question.

“No,” he said firmly, quickly, perhaps a little too harshly, but it was such a ridiculous notion-

Yeosang was a part of this coven now, whether he knew it or not.

“No, Yeosang, we would never kill you. And we don’t want to harm you, even to protect the others.”

“You should,” he murmured quietly, voice dark. “I’m a danger to everyone here and myself. I-

Hongjoong stared at the door, wanting to open it, to look Yeosang in the eyes as he explained
something very important to him, but he simply rested a hand against it.

“Maybe we should,” he said honestly. “But we aren’t going to. And regardless of what you do, we

Yeosang didn’t need to voice his “why?” for Hongjoong to hear it in the silence.

“Because you are already a part of this coven, Yeosang,” he said firmly. “And that means that each

“You don’t even know me.”

“We didn’t know a lot of the people who currently reside here,” Hongjoong said matter of factly.

“We had known Wooyoung a couple of hours before taking him in.” He listened to the silence.

“Life partners are not a matter of time, they are a matter of choice. And we’ve already chosen you,

More silence, and Hongjoong would almost think he had left, but he could still hear his gentle

“We have a proposition for you,” he said quietly. “It was something Wooyoung suggested.”

He could almost hear Yeosang frown, straightening. “What is it?”

~~~~~~

Everyone was gathered in the living room, sitting on the couch and ground, silent and waiting.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong were going to be moving Yeosang to the cellar. The rest of them were
threatened with a litany of nonverbal messages to remain in the living area. So Wooyoung sat
between San and Mingi, staring at the ground as he heard quiet speaking upstairs.

“You’re not gonna run out there and try to hug him as they pass, are you?”
Jongho kicked Mingi’s leg, making him bark out a loud “Hey!”

Wooyoung didn’t feel quite so shitty about everything. Seonghwa had come to his room that night, sitting on his bed with a much softer expression, asking if he was okay.

And yeah, maybe Wooyoung cried as he apologized, but it was just the two of them, so no one was ever going to find out about it. Seonghwa had hugged him, and Wooyoung could almost feel a beating warmth as he buried his face in his chest.

Life partners could be a strange thing. Because sometimes, it was just a concept. A thing you knew as you looked at these people you called family, friends, and you knew they were going to stay with you.

Other times, it almost seemed like a physical… thing. A string or a pulse or a force, pulling you together and wrapping you against each other, leaving you encased in something warm that you could never explain.

There weren’t enough people interested in vampires to truly examine or research what sort of connection life partners had, but Wooyoung knew there had to be a physical bond.

So they were okay. Wooyoung had spent his time in punishment, and now they were okay. They heard people walking down the stairs, all of them tensing.

They didn’t pass the doorway, going the other way down the hall.

“I guess it’s good that we didn’t dig up the cellar, right?” San asked nervously, trying for humor.

“I don’t think they ever thought it would be used for something like this,” Yunho agreed. “I hope that this can… help, though.”

Wooyoung did, too. He hoped… He hoped Yeosang could understand what it meant that they were here for him. He just wanted him to understand that he wasn’t alone.

All of them were dealing with things they had never needed to before.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong had never needed to see any of them viciously hurt like this.

None of them had ever needed to fear for themselves like this, had never seen a vampire who would hurt its own kind.

Wooyoung had never needed to imagine what it would be like if he didn’t have his life partners. If he had been alone. If he had always been alone, slowly losing everything that once made him himself.

He had never needed to consider the possibility that someone could be so lonely… that someone could have never known what it felt like to have someone behind you, ensuring you were never alone.

Immortality was terrifying.

The concept of a long, unending forever where you watched the world move on without you. Memories collected and pressed against the inside of you mind, trying to shift around, but there was no room. Your heart became strained and stiff, wondering how long it would need to keep going, why it couldn’t rest.
And even with people surrounding you, ensuring that eternity would not be lonely, it was terrifying and hard to constantly struggle against the pressing winds of time trying to throw you back.

In the beginning, when you’re first turned, you don’t understand anything but what your maker tells you. You don’t know what you are or what to call yourself or how to cope with what you’ve been handed. You just find someone willing to stand with you and cling to them in hopes of making it through without losing yourself.

Wooyoung had only had his maker before. And while it was enough, it was nothing compared to what he had now. Nothing compared to being wanted and cherished, rather than tolerated.

“Hey,” San said, knocking his shoulder with a half-smile. “It’ll all work out.”

Wooyoung’s lips twitched half heartedly. “I know.”

But Wooyoung had always been impatient. And the thought of Yeosang having to keep living like this for months or years…

“Yeah, and you won’t have a key to cellar, so you won’t be able to-”

Jongho kicked Mingi again, and Wooyoung had to chuckle a little, chest tight. These people were all idiots. He wasn’t much better, admittedly.

But he loved them to death and more.

Seonghwa appeared in the doorway, making all of them sit up straighter. “We’ve got him situated,” he said, no one going to stand. “Hongjoong is making sure he gets enough to eat, and we’re going to give him some time to hopefully rest. Hongjoong is going to stay down there for a while to make sure everything stays in order.” He paused before putting on a gentle smile. “Is anyone hungry?”

Wooyoung sipped his blood bag quietly, knowing that everyone’s eyes were trailing over him and then flickering away.

“I’m not going to burst down there, you know,” he said, glancing up from his blood, and there was nothing hurt in his tone. It was light, because this is what Wooyoung loved about them.

Nothing stayed heavy. His stupid decision was already a joke, taking away the weight it held over him, offering a relief despite the heaviness the situation still had.

“I don’t know, you seemed pretty attached,” Jongho muttered, eyebrows quirking accusingly. “I’m surprised you didn’t try and sneak him into your room.”

Wooyoung snorted, part of him chest feeling like it was being glued back together. “You’re just mad because your room got fucked up.”

“Well, I’m not sleeping with Mingi for another night, so your room isn’t exactly safe either.”

“I don’t snore!”

“Mingi, everyone in this house knows you do,” Yunho said sympathetically, patting his arm. “It’s not anything bad, it’s just-”

“Annoying as shit,” San supplied.

“What is with all the vulgarity?” Seonghwa sighed, shaking his head as he twisting his straw. “I thought we were civilized in this house.”
“Hyung, you are the only one who ever had an illusion of civility here,” Jongho told him regretfully. “You didn’t see it, but San was throwing pens at Mingi like knives while Yunho held him down.”

“We said we weren’t gonna talk about that,” Yunho hissed.

“You said you weren’t going to talk about it.”

“Yeah, well, Jongho was trying to sing and break a glass,” San accused.

“That was science!”

“It was annoying!”

Seonghwa’s lips twitched. “Clearly, Hongjoong and I have not been spending enough time with you if you’ve gotten up to that much without us knowing.”

And there wasn’t guilt in his voice. No, never guilt. But an acknowledgement.

Because their coven was as tightly woven as a grass mat, but they were… different.

Because they had… they weren’t divisions. But there were groupings. All of them were life partners of each other. And no one claimed more than another, but it was a universally acknowledged truth that… Well, Seonghwa and Hongjoong were different.

They were special, and no one among the coven would argue or begrudge them that.

It was just them for years. Hongjoong turned Seonghwa, and neither of them needed another soul, living or otherwise, for centuries until near the 20s when they met Yunho with his life partner dying in his arms from shrapnel of blessed metal in his chest.

But before them, it was just them. And they happily allowed more into their family, eyes alight at the thought of having more people, but each and every one of them understood- and embraced- the fact that Hongjoong and Seonghwa were different.

Both for the time they knew each other… and the nature of their relationship. At first, you almost couldn’t tell whether it was romantic or not, but Wooyoung had known the moment he saw them that they were something to each other.

Sometimes, seeing them made Wooyoung’s chest hurt. Because there was history there. Things they all of them had been told, but could never truly understand because they had not been there.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong did not like each other more than the others, or pay more attention to each other than the others. It was not an unequal balance, but their relationship with each other and the rest of them were different.

Like parents with their children. They loved each other, and they loved the rest of them, but the loves were different. They couldn’t- and shouldn’t- be the same.

And there were periods of time where the rest of them- the kids- played more with each other than they wanted to hang out with their parents. And sometimes the parents needed time to themselves, asking the kids to entertain themselves for a little while.

Sometimes, he didn’t even notice he was in one of those phases until he realized it had been a while since he spoke to Seonghwa or Hongjoong. And this statement was simply Seonghwa
acknowledging that he and Hongjoong had gone through of phase of interacting with the others. And that was okay.

“Well, considering you’re dealing with a rogue that’s trying to kill things every five minutes, we figured you needed your time,” San snorted, thought his tone was a little heavy at the mention of Yeosang.

Seonghwa hummed, glancing around at them, his eyes softened in a way that always made Wooyoung’s stomach flip. “We never did get to all go out that night,” he noted, as if he had just realized.

“And we probably won’t go out anytime soon,” Yunho said, lips twitching. “What with the new baby at home.”

Everyone chuckled, trying not to let their fragile mood drop. It was like blowing a tissue into the air, trying to keep it aloft without tripping over your own feet.

“The newest episode of that drama came out,” San said, and Seonghwa nodded, leaning back as he prepared to hear all about it.

Because despite his hatred of ripped jeans… Seonghwa always listened. And despite his valiant but failed attempts to become proficient in technology… Hongjoong was always there.

San had described two episodes in great detail before Hongjoong appeared in the doorway, leaning against the doorway. “Just eat without me,” he huffed.

“We’d offer you a bag, but we drank it all,” Mingi said, holding up his own empty bag.

“If you managed to drink all the blood in that fridge, I’d only be impressed,” he assured them, walking over and sitting in his seat beside Seonghwa, stealing his bag and taking a sip, passing it back.

“How did it go?” Seonghwa asked, the entire table falling silent to listen.

Wooyoung had tried not to immediately launch into a demand to know, but Seonghwa asked first, so he looked up quickly, Hongjoong leaning back and sighing.

“Well, it seems like feeding is going to be bit difficult. He sees the blood and goes into an episode. He fed, but it took a while. The bars and everything are holding, he’s already torn up the bedding we put in there, but there’s not much we can do about that. He must not have fed in a while, though, because he had quite a bit. He fell asleep pretty quickly after, though.”

“Peaceful?” Seonghwa questioned curiously.

“From what it seems,” Hongjoong replied, stealing his blood bag again. “He was shifting a bit, but it didn’t seem like anything serious. He’ll probably wake up and destroy some more stuff, but at least for now he’s actually sleeping.”

Wooyoung wanted to ask if he could go see him, but stopped himself, knowing that if Yeosang was asleep, he didn’t want to risk waking him.

At least he was sleeping.

“I think this might actually work out well,” Hongjoong admitted, glancing at Wooyoung who was startled to suddenly be addressed. “It’s less isolating for him, and he actually let me touch his hand
through the bars.”

Wooyoung felt a little bit of weight leave his shoulders as he managed a half-smile. “Was he okay with it? Being in the cell?”

“He was actually pretty eager for it,” Hongjoong said. “And while we were down there, he said it felt less suffocating in there. I thought it might dampen his mood, but I think it’s good for him.”

Wooyoung was relieved. Beyond relieved, really, and part of him wanted to question his rather… enthusiastic attachment to Yeosang, but all he could come up with was the obvious:

They were life partners now. Which meant Wooyoung… Wooyoung just wanted to help.

It was the same as when Jongho went through those episodes of not eating, pushing blood bags away and looking sick at the thought of drinking them (a common occurrence in particularly young vampires), and Hongjoong would sit and coax small sips, rubbing his back when he gagged.

Or Yunho losing his signature smile and just wanted to lay in his bed, but you couldn’t let him stay alone with his thoughts, so Mingi crawled in with him, hugging him as much as he could, and didn’t speak (for once), just reminded him he wasn’t alone.

Or when Seonghwa would stare out the window, and Wooyoung knew he was several layers deep in memories and thoughts, and it wasn’t inherently bad, but he sat next to him anyway, laying a hand on his arm, just to ensure he didn’t let so lost in the past that he forgot what he had in the present.

It was a feeling of helplessness. Of knowing that despite being a life partner, all you could do was provide comfort while they worked through it themselves. But a deep, aching desire to do all you could, even if it was just sitting beside them. And often, that was enough.

But it hurt. Seeing them distant or cold or sick, it hurt as if someone had buried a fist in your gut because that was yours. Your family. Your partners. And their pain was your pain, always.

So Yeosang’s quiet, scared voice apologizing, rasping out weak detriments… It hurt. It made Wooyoung want to wrap himself around him until it stopped, to drag him out of the bars and just him breathe-

But he couldn’t.

Wooyoung had already made a choice: Yeosang would be a life partner. The same as the others. Time meant nothing to life partners. There was no battle of seniority, there was only a Yes or a No and everyone here was a Yes. It didn’t matter if he knew nothing of Yeosang, didn’t matter if Yeosang tried to kill him- Wooyoung had made a choice.

And that was another thing Wooyoung had never had to do: choose between life partners.

Because he wanted Yeosang to have freedom, but he couldn’t risk the others. Because he felt guilty for endangering them in the first place, but Yeosang deserved better than this.

Jongho made good of his promise to spend the night in Wooyoung’s room, pushing him over and flopping onto his pillow. Wooyoung made a show of pushing him onto his side of the bed, threatening that he had better stay over there, even though he knew they’d wind up on top of each other by morning.

Jongho kicked in his sleep, but Wooyoung kicked him back until he stopped, and they slept, and
Wooyoung could almost imagine everything was normal.

Yeosang was… small.

Well, admittedly he was probably taller than Wooyoung by a bit, but Wooyoung was not currently curled up in the corner of a cell, and he knew that Hongjoong said Yeosang was okay with it, but the violent surge of sick and guilt at the sight almost made him run back up the stairs.

Hongjoong hadn’t even acknowledged Wooyoung’s ‘hi, hyung’ before informing him that Yeosang was already awake. And then smirking and saying he should go tell him good morning. Wooyoung had to wait a moment to ensure that Hongjoong was actually being serious in encouraging Wooyoung to go see Yeosang.

Hongjoong’s smile was bittersweet. “I’m sure he’s been up for a while. He’s probably due for some company, right?”

And for the first time, Wooyoung got a good look at Yeosang, and he was… Startlingly normal.

Clear brown eyes that stared at the stone floor, flat brown hair that fell over his forehead and ears that stuck out slightly. His skin was pale and there were several half-healed marks near his neck and shoulders where the dagger had pressed.

Yeosang ducked his head into his knees, words muffled. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to- to- The blood, it was-”

Wooyoung stepped forward slowly. “It’s o-”

“Stop saying it’s okay- it’s not. I tried to k-”

He voice caught, the anger flashing to distress before rekindling. “To kill you, and I would have if your partners hadn’t shown up to stop me!” He ducked his head again. “Just go away,” he spat.

Wooyoung was startled at the sudden anger, but his feet didn’t move, his muscles oddly settled in place.
“No.”

Yeosang lifted his head to glare. “I said to leave,” he said, voice darker.

“And I said no.”

“Why won’t you just leave me alone?” he snapped, straightening, hands dropping as it to push himself up.

“Because you don’t really want to be alone.”

Yeosang came up short, the anger flickering, like a radio station picking up words from another channel. Surprise and then confusion, and then anger returned, but it was weakened, struggling to stay at the front.

“You don’t know that.” His voice shook. Like he was afraid of Wooyoung’s statement.

“I do,” Wooyoung said firmly, stepping forward slowly, Yeosang trailing eyes over him as he was the one who would attack. “Because you were already alone. And you didn’t want it… did you?” It was a genuine question.

Yeosang stared, eyes alarmingly cold and intense where they met Wooyoung’s.

“Why are you here?” he asked, voice dropping, and the anger continued to dissipate, showing apprehension clouding his eyes.

Wooyoung stopped a couple feet from the bars. “I didn’t want you to feel lonely down here.”

Yeosang shifted backwards slightly, arms coming back up to wrap around his knees, as if he were trying to make himself smaller.

“Do you want me to leave?” Wooyoung offered softly. “I just… thought you might want company.”

Yeosang swallowed, and now that Wooyoung could see his face during his silences, he could see the way his eyes flickered back and forth, as if making some sort of frantic calculation. Like he was desperate to not say the wrong answer. “You… want to stay down here?”

Wooyoung nodded slowly. “I want to keep you company.”

“Even… after yesterday?”

Wooyoung winced. “That was my fault, not yours,” he said firmly. “I opened the door, I didn’t even think about-”


He was silent for a moment, an automatic response on the tip of his tongue, but he held it back. Wooyoung dropped into a squat, sitting on the ground and crossing his legs in front of him as he made himself comfortable.

“You don’t know anything about life partners or rogues?”

His jaw flexed. “Seonghwa and Hongjoong told me some.”

“So you know that…everything you do… it’s not your fault, right?”
Yeosang sighed, turning away. “They keep saying that.”

“It’s true,” Wooyoung pressed, moving closer to the bars, making Yeosang look over sharply, eyes wide with an almost-fear. “Yeosang, it’s biology. It’s fact. You are not in control of your actions. Your mind… it wasn’t allowed to make a transition smoothly. It wasn’t able to handle what happened to you. There was nothing you could have ever done to stop that. You said yesterday-you can’t control yourself when you go into those episodes.”

“So what now?” he demanded, voice dipping back into the darkness that fear and hopelessness spawned. “You sit and talk with me and it fixes everything?”

A group hug.

Wooyoung shook his head. “No. If we had you from the beginning, maybe. But… it’s going to be a long process, according to Seonghwa. But we aren’t going to leave you alone, Yeosang.” He chewed on the inside of his cheek. “This isn’t something you can fix by yourself, Yeosang. Rogues… they need life partners. They need to trust and rely on people. There’s-“

He huffed. He had never needed to try and explain this. He had never needed to put everything into words. Most of this he hadn’t thought of since he had been told it, after he was turned.

But there was a lifetime of memories to support it, if he could just figure out how to say it.

So Wooyoung tried to articulate it. The pressure in your head, the ache in your chest, the storm that raged- all of it, a result of your body being incapable of handling the weight that was placed on it.

The need to take those burdens and lay them on another, to understand that you were not alone in your feelings, nor alone physically. But it was hard. Hard to explain it to someone who had never experienced that relief. Someone who didn’t even know there was a relief from the crushing weight of eternity that pressed against their minds.

“Vampires need their life partners,” he said, voice a little hoarse. “And it’s better, Yeosang. I swear to you, it is so much better than being alone. You’ve existed for only a couple of decades. Seonghwa and Hongjoong are centuries old, and they are… well, you’ve seen them.” He risked a small smile. “That is what a life partner can do. Seonghwa and Hongjoong are sort of the poster boys for life partners.”

Yeosang didn’t smile. But he continued to stare in the silence, eyes distant and seeming to race a million miles an hour. His finger tapped against his leg, like it had against the door, and Wooyoung simply shifted, scooting towards the wall perpendicular to the bars until he could lean against it more comfortably.

He didn’t prompt Yeosang to speak.

Yeosang shook his head slightly, like someone was whispering in his ear, and suddenly, Wooyoung saw that happened on the inside of Jongho’s room.

Yeosang threw himself at the bars of the cell, grabbing them and shaking them for a moment before throwing himself away, shoulder slamming into the rock walls.

Wooyoung jumped, not used to actually seeing the violent acts, and the snarls echoed louder within the stone cellar, making his ears ring as Yeosang’s red eyes scanned the room, fixing on Wooyoung and bleeding gold.

When Yeosang slammed against the bars again, Wooyoung stumbled back, knowing Hongjoong
had said they would hold, but it was still terrifying to see his teeth bared and his claws reach through the thin space between the bars.

He could fit his hand through, but nothing further than just below his elbow could fit. He snatched at the air, Wooyoung a completely safe distance away, but Yeosang pressed hard, teeth snapping as Wooyoung was dangled out of his reach.

Wooyoung began to fear that Yeosang would try to break his own arm to get it through the bars.

“Yeosang,” he said, getting to his feet slowly, not moving closer. “Yeosang, stop, you’re going to hurt yourself.”

If he could even hear him, he gave no indication, tearing himself away from the bars before slamming back against them harder.

“Yeosang, stop,” He urged, speaking over the echoing crashes. “You’re going to hurt yourself, just-”

He flew back, slamming against the wall, and then throwing himself into another, and Wooyoung’s stomach twisted.

It didn’t look like hunting and trying to destroy. It didn’t even look like trying to escape his little prison.

It just looked desperate. Crazed. As if he didn’t know what to do with himself, so he crashed into walls and slammed into bars.

Wooyoung swallowed down the shout for him to stop, knowing that it would be useless. So he simply sat back on the ground, trying not to look, until he heard a final weak beat against the bars, half-hearted, and he glanced over.

Yeosang breathed heavily, hands wrapped weakly around the bars, as if it was the only thing keeping him upright. His skin looked paler. His eyes were tired as they looked up at Wooyoung only to drop to the ground against he sank to the floor, still holding the bars.

Wooyoung didn’t know what to say. What to do. He’d never seen the aftermath of the episodes, only heard his strained whispers through the door.

Yeosang bowed his head, sucking in sharp, heaving breaths, his hands slowly releasing the metal as he leaned his forehead against one of the spaces, like it was the only thing keeping him up.

He looked worn.

Like a piece of cloth that was still whole, but threadbare and weakened, waiting for the slightest pressure to make it tear.

Wooyoung moved closer carefully. Yeosang didn’t move.

He stopped just at the edge of the bars, still an arm’s length away in case he needed to jerk back.

*Your heart was in the right place, Wooyoung. But you need to start using your head more.*

Well… he was probably going half and half right now.

He reached out a hesitant hand, throat dry as Yeosang continued to hang his head. Wooyoung’s fingers brushed against Yeosang’s hair as he went to touch him. There was a mixed snarl sound as
Yeosang jerked back, eyes wide and wild for a moment, a hand coming up as if expected to fight him off.

Wooyoung jerked his arm back quickly, heart leaping to his throat as he and Yeosang stared at each other, both eyes wide and scared. He did have a birthmark.

“Don’t touch me,” Yeosang rasped, rough, but not aggressive. Just quiet.

Wooyoung slowly brought his hand down until it rest in his lap. “Are you saying that because you don’t want to be touched… or because you’re scared?”

Yeosang was silent, something almost guilty in his eyes.

Wooyoung moved even slower, his hand touching the ground and shifting forward until it reached just outside the bars. He didn’t cross into them.

The other stared at his hand as if it were going to explode. Wooyoung simply watched him quietly. “You don’t have to be afraid of hurting us,” he said. “I’m safe out here.”

Well, he could break Wooyoung’s hand. Maybe rip it off. Tear it apart with his claws, digging his teeth in and breaking the bones.

But Wooyoung wouldn’t die from something like that. So, he was safe, compared to before.

Yeosang stared as if he didn’t understand what he was supposed to do.

“It took me a long time to get used to life partners,” Wooyoung said quietly, tapping his fingers against the stone casually. Yeosang finally lifted his eyes from their hands to his face. Wooyoung offered a wry smile. “My maker was… he was good. A little distant. I don’t think he really wanted to turn me, but he didn’t want to leave me to die either. It was fine, but… here was better. But I wasn’t used to it.”

Yeosang stared curiously, no longer so transfixed on his hand. “You… didn’t like it?”

Wooyoung couldn’t help but snort. “No, I liked it,” He swore. “It just… was so different. I was used to someone pretty cold and distant. Only really touched me to cuff the back of my head when I messed up the books. And suddenly… everyone wanted to hold my hand and hug me and ruffle my hair and lay on top of me…” A laugh was on the top of his tongue.

He turned his hand palm up, Yeosang’s attention drawing back to it, intense eyes staring at it as if it could be solved like a puzzle.

“It wasn’t… claustrophobic. It was just a lot. That sort of feeling lasted a couple of months, but… it was easy to start finding comfort in their touches. After I realized that this was… this was what affection was. Affection, before, was just… not getting smacked,” he chuckled.

Yeosang’s hands shook as he lifted one from the ground, never looking away from Wooyoung’s.

“You aren’t obligated to touch or be touched,” Wooyoung assured him. “Jongho doesn’t really like hugs, but we always pull his hair and stuff like that. Yunho likes laying on top of people, and San loves using him as a blanket.” His lips twitched at the thought. “I like hugs,” he confessed. “San likes holding hands.”

Yeosang’s pale hand slowly moved towards Wooyoung’s.
“It doesn’t matter what you want. Or what you don’t. That’s now what it’s about,” Wooyoung assured him. “It’s just how we’re used to showing comfort, but we don’t ever have to touch you. This… it isn’t just physical. Physical is the smallest, most insignificant part of it. I didn’t think I was going to really enjoy it… but once you open up… it just becomes part of everything.”

His fingers stopped a few inches from Wooyoung’s, eyes never looking away, wetting his lips. “Your maker... he told you about… life partners?”

Wooyoung nodded. “He was a good maker. Just not an affectionate one. He told me everything I needed to know, though.”

The barest tips of their fingers brushed, Wooyoung’s heart expanding in his chest as he focused on keeping completely still.

“How did you die?” Yeosang whispered.

Wooyoung was startled by the sudden question, and usually vampire tact told you not to broach that subject unless you were close enough to, but the surprise quickly faded. “There was a riot,” he said, not actively remembering, but giving off the rote words he had crafted to describe it without hurting. “I got caught in the middle of it.”

Yeosang winced, fingers brushing his as he reached through the bars into Wooyoung’s space. “I’m sorry.”

“I was unconscious,” Wooyoung assured him. “I woke up with my maker.”

“My maker left me,” Yeosang whispered, finally overlaying his fingers on Wooyoung’s palm, a shiver running down his scared frame at the soft contact, making him shake his head. “He wasn’t supposed to.”

“No, he wasn’t,” Wooyoung assured him, fingers curling slowly. Yeosang didn’t jerk away. “Makers have a responsibility to the humans they turn. To stay with them until another life partners can take care of them, and beyond that, a lot of times. He abandoned you, knowing the consequences you would face. And that makes him the monster.”

Yeosang forgot their hands for a moment, staring at Wooyoung with wide eyes, startled.

Wooyoung’s fingers curled loosely around Yeosang’s, a half-attempt at holding hands. “You aren’t the monster here, Yeosang,” Wooyoung told him firmly. “You’re the victim.”

His fingers twitched inside Wooyoung’s, but he didn’t withdraw the hand. He didn’t look like he quite understood or believed, but he didn’t dispute it.

He swallowed, dropping his eyes back down to their hands, as if fascinated with them. Wooyoung ran his thumb over the back of his hand, and Yeosang tensed, breath holding for a moment.

Wooyoung did it again, slowly, but Yeosang didn’t pull away, another small shudder running through him. He swallowed thickly.

“Will you…” Yeosang’s gentle voice dropped further. “Will you tell me about your life?”

Wooyoung’s lips twitched with hope, settling further against the ground, careful not to shift their hands. “Before or after I was turned?”
Yeosang squeezed his hand, eyes snapping up to Wooyoung, as if seeing if he would have a negative reaction, but Wooyoung only smiled gently, squeezing his hand back carefully. “Both,” Yeosang said, voice caught in his chest.

Wooyoung’s smile grew as he nodded. “I hope you didn’t have other plans, because I can go on for a while.”

Yeosang simply shook his head, settling on his knees, their hands staying around each other. Wooyoung was watching, though, waiting for the abrupt flash of red in his eyes as he thought back to…

Actually, it seemed like he and Yeosang might have been turned around the same time, if it had been a couple of decades. Wooyoung may have been a little longer, though.

“My parents were good people,” he said, knees drawing up. “I was their only kid, but they worked a lot, so I knew our babysitter really well. She was a little crazy, I think…”

Yeosang listened.

And when his eyes flashed red, Wooyoung snatched his hand back, moving away until the thrashing and crashing stopped, Yeosang dropping back onto the ground, spent and tired, telling him to continue on in a strained whisper, not able to lift his head.

Wooyoung went on hesitantly, watching for signs, and he placed his hand back on the ground, but Yeosang made no move to take it, keeping his head ducked as he leaned against the walls of the cell.

Wooyoung didn’t know how long he talked, and he wasn’t sure how much Yeosang was listening, his head bowed and curled around himself, but when Wooyoung paused, trying to see if he was even still awake, Yeosang’s head snapped up, eyes searching as if Wooyoung had suddenly left.

“Sorry,” he said, ducking his head down again as Wooyoung nodded, continuing to talk about where he grew up, and then bleeding into meeting the others and going away with them.

Yeosang remained curled up, small movements, like flexing or hand or running a hand through his hair, the only proof that he was still awake.

Wooyoung wished he had something to wet his throat with, but he kept talking, recalling any stupid story he could think of.

It wasn’t until Yeosang’s head dropped completely to his knees, cheek resting against his knee as his eyes were closed, mouth open slightly as he breathed.

Wooyoung cut off abruptly, but Yeosang didn’t stir, cheek squished against his knee and expression…

Peaceful.

Wooyoung hadn’t realized how much tension strained his eyes and mouth until it was lax in sleep, and it made him look a thousand years younger.

Wooyoung wanted to get up, to get blood back to his numb limbs, but he remained frozen in place, watching Yeosang closely, leaning back against the wall, ignoring the ache in his tailbone.

He didn’t want him to wake up alone.
Chapter End Notes

I’ll try to get the next chapter up before the weekend but it might take a little longer Т___Т
But I hope you liked it, and that no one is disappointed with the amount of time given to each of the relationships~~!!
Thank you for reading!!
-SS
It’s quick, I don’t really think it goes anywhere, and it’s shorter than the others, so you may draw and quarter me as needed ¯\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
But I hope it’s at least something to hold you over~~ until the next chapter!
It’s mostly a transition chapter and I’m trying not to drag things out but I’m also trying to be realistic!
(I minimally edited this so hopefully it’s coherent)
Let me know what you think! Comments are my favorite food!
-SS

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It started out with… cold.

It was… so… cold.

Yeosang opened his eyes, expecting to see the rain pouring down on his face, the rocks that had broken his limbs, the mud slicking up his hands and feet where he’d stumbled-

That man.

But he saw the familiar grey sheets of his tent, his ears ringing loudly-

It was still raining.

He shivered weakly, his skin icy where it pressed against itself.

It was cold.

He sat up, feeling… He was…

He brushed a hand at his neck, wondering if it had been a dream-

He could feel puckered skin and the rough drag of dried blood against his skin.

He felt…

He looked around quickly. There was no one. He got up, unzipping the tent, looking around for someone-

That man.

“I just saved your life, kid. So when you wake up, you won’t have to worry about a thing.” There was still the metallic taste of blood in his mouth.

He was alone.

Outside was almost flooded with the rain, the campsite almost underwater. There was no one.
He was alone.

“Hello?” he called, but it didn’t even raise above the deluge.

Something heavy settled in his chest as he felt bile rise in his throat. He was… The bite at his neck throbbed, and he threw up into the wet mud, the rain carrying it away.

He felt-

It wasn’t good. He shuddered, feeling his stomach twist as if someone were crushing it. He was… It felt like something buzzing under his skin.

He couldn’t breathe.

He stumbled out of the tent, clothing soaking immediately in the rain as he ran through the downpour, voice raising and yelling for someone… anyone… please…

There was no one. He clutched at his neck, throat closing up as panic and… something-

He threw up again, feeling like everything was standing still inside of him. As if his body had fallen silent, like a city with no lights, no electricity, no hum-

He realized there was no pulse under the hand clutching his neck.

He-

The man.

_Vampires_, he had said.

Yeosang threw up again, but nothing came up. He- Those things- Those evil… evil…

Evil. Right?

Yeosang pressed a hand to his chest, waiting to feel his heart pounding against his skin, and there was nothing, there was nothing-

There was nothing. It felt like he was crushed beneath the rocks again, suffocating- there was no heartbeat-

He kept screaming. Kept stumbling through rain and trying to find a way to go, barely able to see through the torrential sheets slamming against him-

It was so cold.

Warmth.

“Hey!”

It sounded a thousand miles away, but Yeosang turned towards it with a surety he couldn’t explain, and suddenly his feet were carrying him towards the sound.

Warmth.

A woman stood at the edge of the forest, a bright orange vest on.

“There was a rockslide not far from here!” she yelled, hands cupped around her mouth.
Warmth.

“Are you ok-”

Warmth.

Yeosang was awake.

But he didn’t move.

First, his mind became aware of the uncomfortable position he was curled in. Second, his limbs shifted to straightened out and stretch. Third, his eyes opened slowly, blinking away the darkness and taking in the dark stone he was staring at.

It was… cold.

He groaned slightly, lifting his head up and wincing at the crick in his neck.

Something in the room moved.

Sleep flew from his mind as he realized he was not alone, shooting to his feet and backing against the wall-

Outside the cell, Seonghwa watched him with a carefully controlled expression, pausing where he was laying a blanket over Wooyoung’s body that was curled up on a pillow on the floor, asleep. Seonghwa simply laid a finger over his lips, asking for quiet.

He laid the covers over Wooyoung’s shoulders.

“If he intends to make a habit about this,” Seonghwa whispered, straightening and walking towards the bars, “we may have to move some bedding for him down here.”

Yeosang glanced at him, nerves calming. “We were… talking.”

“I heard,” Seonghwa said, lips twitching in a display of amusement Yeosang was not accustomed to, considering last time they saw each other, he was pressing a knife to his throat. “I was listening at the top of the stairs.” He crossed his arms, not angrily, but curiously. “Wooyoung cares for you a great deal.”

Yeosang had to force his eyes not to glance at the sleeping vampire.

Yeosang didn’t think he would even live this long inside this coven, much less be accepted into it. He saw their scared eyes, angry gazes, threatening stares… And he waited for the other shoe to drop. For the act to end and the knife to fall at his neck, for him to get a little too close to someone, and his throat to suddenly be gone-

But small fingers wiggled at him from underneath the door.

Soft words explained what their coven was and life partners and rogues.

Patient gazes and gentle reassurances that he was… wanted here. Not accepted, not tolerated or invited… Wanted. Even those eyes that threatened him had softened to comfort him.
And Yeosang was… so confused.

A hand was extended to him, fingers curling around his and a small smile that spoke volumes, and Yeosang thought for the first time that maybe this wasn’t something unfixable.

Maybe there was… an after.

“’I think… I know that.’”

“Would you like to meet the others?” Seonghwa offered. “The others of the coven? They were… more careful than Wooyoung, but they’re no less eager to meet you.”

Yeosang never thought vampires could live together. For the longest time, he had believed they were all like him- wandering and killing and destroying…

No one here was hurting anything.

“Okay…”

Seonghwa’s lips twitched. “I really do think there’s hope—”

Kill.

Yeosang lunged at the bars, slamming against them and reaching his arms through, grasping for Seonghwa’s throat-

Seonghwa didn’t flinch, a good foot from Yeosang’s reach, and a growl of frustration tore from his throat as he felt an urge to- to-

Something.

He slammed against walls, trying to get rid of the feeling, trying to kill whatever it was clinging to his blood, anger and hatred-

He hated them. He didn’t have a name for them.

He tore at the walls that confined him, feelings like his skin was trying to burn itself off, his blood burning and raging, just move, just kill it-

All at once, it left, and Yeosang’s knees gave out as he fell to the ground, hands barely catching him, chest heaving in shaking breaths, as he swallowed the metallic burning in his mouth, limbs shaking.

Fuck.

He was so tired. But he lifted his eyes slowly, finding Seonghwa staring at him with pained sympathy-

And then there was Wooyoung sitting up on the ground and staring at Yeosang, probably startled awake during his raging. He felt something like guilt burning his blood.

A million emotions flooded his throat, but none escaped, his mouth dry and throat closing.

He was sorry.

He didn’t know how to stop it.
His lungs burned, his head dropping and hanging between his shoulders.

“I truly believe that there’s hope for you,” Seonghwa said, as if he had never been interrupted.

Yeosang felt that ugly twisting in his stomach, the one that made him laugh with a bitter anger that scared him.

He felt like he was trapped in his own mind, unable to really control what was happening.

“Believe it or not,” Seonghwa said quietly. “You’ve been taken in by a very stubborn coven.”

Yeosang was so tired. He couldn’t hold his head up anymore, sinking against the bedding beneath him, letting it take the weight off of him.

“Rest for now, Yeosang,” Seonghwa told him gently, the voice foreign to him-

It was different from Wooyoung’s softer tone. Weighted differently, as if he were speaking to someone…

Yeosang didn’t know. But it laid over him like a weighted blanket. Pinning him down, but it didn’t suffocate, it was-

Warm...

And he didn’t trust it, didn’t trust the perfection in it, but it didn’t stop his eyes from closing. He wanted to fight it, wanted to stay awake, but it was…

He was so tired.

And his sleep was never… peaceful.

Perhaps there were not nightmares and horrors, but there was… it was never restful. It felt like sleeping inside a dark cave- hard darkness and cold black pressing against him, even if he dreamed of nothing.

And he jerked awake several times, blinking in the darkness, shivering at the chill that clung-

But each time he could still make out Wooyoung’s sleeping form. And even through his desire to laugh at how foolish he was, sleeping down here, on the hard ground, for no other reason than keep Yeosang’s company…

Even through his bitter skepticism, his heart was heavy in his chest.

Yeosang had never woken up… with someone there.

He was used to waking up alone, hearing nothing but his own breathing echoing around him in a suffocating darkness.

But he heard Wooyoung breathing. Heard him shifting under the blankets. Soft sighs in his sleep and the dragging of cloth against cloth as he moved.

And it was- Yeosang didn’t know- He couldn’t describe-

It was a completely foreign feeling. Something heavy but… not uncomfortable settling in his chest. It was hot, whatever it was, burning his ribs, but not painful. It wasn’t cold . It made him shift, made him antsy, but not in the same way the… “episodes” did. It was-
He scrubbed at his eyes.

He didn’t know.

And when he woke next, it was to gentle speaking, whispered quietly as his eyes opened to see Wooyoung sitting up with someone else kneeling beside him.

Yeosang recognized him from that first night.

“-believe Seonghwa let you sleep down here.”

Wooyoung rolled his eyes, kicking the other vampire. “You needed someone to sleep with you for months when you first got here.”

“You’re sleeping in a cellar, Wooyoung,” the other said incredulously.

Wooyoung’s lips thinned. “So is he.”

And Yeosang could see the way the other shrank at the response, dropping his eyes away in a clear expression of guilt. Wooyoung’s expression softened. “San,” he sighed, shaking his head. “Sorry… I didn’t mean for it come out like that.”

San shook his head, staring at his knees. “No, you- You’re right. The same way you were yesterday. The rest of us… we’ve been avoiding him. I-” His jaw flexed slightly, shaking his head slowly. “God, I feel so shitty.”

“You shouldn’t-”

“I think we have been treating him like a monster,” San whispered, sitting fully on the ground, and Wooyoung moving closer. “Like we’re waiting for him to fuck up. Like it’s actually him that’s hurting people. Despite everything… it’s hard to separate the two, you know? The person in him that’s just like us, and… the one who hurt you and Seonghwa.”

Wooyoung put an arm around San’s shoulders, Yeosang watching with an almost clinical fascination as he pulled him against his chest, hugging him tightly. Yeosang’s hand twitched. San leaned into the embrace, sighing harshly against Wooyoung.

Life partners…

“They’re different people,” Wooyoung almost promised. “As soon as you speak to him… you can see that they’re different people.”

Yeosang’s stomach swooped sickeningly, and San hummed quietly.

He intended to act as if he were still sleeping, to roll over so he could stop seeing the scene in front of him, the two of them hugging tightly, warmly, but there was a sudden surge of sick in his throat—

Get it out.

He didn’t know what it was. Didn’t know why it was so awful to feel, but he tried to shake it off, desperately thrashing as if something were clinging to his skin, ice burning him-

It twisted inside of him, scratching and tearing and-

He fell to his knees, pressing the heels of his palms against his eyes, seeing spots from the pressure, his breath coming short and fast as he tried to shake off the last of the itch, hands shaking.
“Yeosang?”

Wooyoung was right there. Within reach, writhing his grasp, so easy to hurt, but he didn’t want to.

He wanted to flinch away from the quiet voice, to cover his ears and stop it because it hurt.

It hurt for some reason, and it caused something different to stir in his chest, but he wanted to get closer, to fall asleep listening to it again, to let it wash over the echoes in his head he couldn’t understand.

He wanted to rip it out. He wanted to bask in it.

He lowered his hands, muscles tensed, and Wooyoung was there, right at the bars, eyes soft.

Yeosang had to look away, something twisting tight in his chest and making his eyes burn. He felt sick.

“Are you okay?”

He backed away, to the farthest point away from Wooyoung and San who had also moved closer. He… It felt like a cage at a zoo.

He dropped his head, wanting to-

He didn’t know. There was so much beneath his skin, and he didn’t know how to deal with any of it. Didn’t know how to get it out-

“Yeosang?” he asked, voice dropping in concern. It bounced around his head, crashing and banging. “Do you… Hey,” he called gently, and he heard a quick noise from San’s throat.

Barely moving, he glanced over his arms, seeing Wooyoung holding onto the bars, knelt down on the ground, expression tight with almost-pain and his arm reaching as far into the cell as it would allow, hand resting on the ground with his palm up. Like coaxing an animal to approach.

Maybe that’s what he was. An animal. Something that needed to be approached with caution, lest you anger it. But Yeosang was worse than an animal. At least an animal needed provocation before it tried to kill you.

“Are you hungry?” Wooyoung asked quietly, and Yeosang saw San moving closer to the bars carefully. It hurt, his gaze burned, why did it burn-

He looked away.

“Yeo-”

“Stop it!”

Wooyoung flinched, arm drawing back, but he remained at the bars while San scurried back, grabbing at Wooyoung who shook him off.

“What?” Wooyoung prompted, eyes locking onto his with gentle conviction. He wasn’t calm, but he wasn’t afraid. “I can’t read your mind, Yeosang. You have to talk to me.”

Yeosang wanted to hit his head against the wall. Wanted to shake the feelings loose, wanted to finally be able to breathe-
“Go away,” he said, voice lowering.

“Do you actually want us to leave?” Wooyoung asked quietly. “Or are you still just scared?”

Yeosang curled up, fingers twisting in his hair and a whimper stuck in his throat, he just wanted it to stop.

He moved away from the wall, needing to move, needing to- to-

He wasn’t having an episode, he was just- he felt so-

“Wooyoung.”

It slipped out without him thinking about it, but Yeosang was kneeling in the middle of this cell, feeling like he was going to throw up, his skin crawling, and he didn’t know how to stop it.

Life partners would fix it, they said. Hadn’t they said that? Hadn’t Wooyoung said they were his life partners?

Yeosang didn’t put stock in it, but at the moment he was so desperate for something to stop, the name slipped out. He had spent years… so many years… stuck in these loops, stuck in this hell, and even if it was only a string of a lifeline, he tried to grab it.

Just make it stop.

“Get the hyungs,” He heard Wooyoung hiss, before his voice was louder. “Yeosang.” He called, voice tinging towards frantic at Yeosang’s desperate plea. “Yeosang, look at me.”

He forced his eyes up, meeting Wooyoung’s eyes that were wide and open and scared-

He was scared of-

No.

He wasn’t scared of Yeosang. He was scared for him.

“Yeosang, does something hurt?” he asked quickly, San stumbling away towards the stairs. “What are you feeling right now?”

Yeosang didn’t know, he couldn’t describe it, he could never describe it-

When he didn’t answer, Wooyoung reached back through the bars. “Come here,” he said firmly, hand opening and closing. “Yeosang, come here,” he urged when he didn’t move. San was gone.

And Yeosang wanted to pull away, wanted to wrench his hand back, wanted to just have an episode and get lost in his own mind because it was better than this.

He moved towards Wooyoung, who didn’t draw back, simply opened his palm to him. “Give me your hand,” he urged.

Yeosang held his arm close to his body, breath freezing.

Touching was…

It felt like a sensory overload. Painful. Searing. Like staring at a bright light when you had a headache. Like bounding music when your skin was already tingling. It was too much, even
without it, it was all too much.

Fighting the urge to retreat, Yeosang forced his hand into Wooyoung’s, resisting the urge to snatch it back, to shove him away.

Wooyoung’s touch almost burned.

It wasn’t cold. But it *hurt*.

Like a gentle heat against frozen limbs, amplified and painful.

Wooyoung drew him closer slowly, glancing behind himself, but not removing his attention from Yeosang. “Come here,” he urged again, drawing him closer until Yeosang sat just up against the bars, and both of Wooyoung’s hands clasped around his gently, *too gently*-

Yeosang closed his eyes, ducking his head away, shaking it as if it would help clear it-

“-to me,” Wooyoung said firmly, gentle fingers brushing against Yeosang’s hand, almost massaging it. “Talk to me, Yeosang, just tell me something.”

Tell him something? “Tell you… what?” he demanded, voice tight. It felt like sensation returning to a numb limb, pins and needles and a hundred things crawling-

“Anything,” Wooyoung said, still holding his hand, grip tightening in a way that was… not letting go. “What were your favorite foods when you were alive?”

*His favorite food?*

He wanted to laugh, an ugly sound building in his chest, but Wooyoung stared at him earnestly, and Yeosang sighed, twisting in his grip, but not trying to get away.

“I- I don’t-” He didn’t remember, there was just the tent and the man… And…his backpack. And-

“I- Snack cakes,” he said suddenly, feeling like someone had just punched him in his chest, head snapping up, startling Wooyoung. “I- I always ate- I ate snack cakes.”

Wooyoung looked shocked by the sudden revelation, but he nodded quickly. “Okay,” he said encouragingly. “Did you- Did you like sweets?” He sounded like he was grasping at straws, too.

Yeosang didn’t remember. “I- Maybe,” he confessed. “I- I had them in my pack… when I was turned…”

Wooyoung let out a nervous, shaking laugh, and it dug under Yeosang’s skin. “So you went camping… and brought sweets?” Yeosang nodded. “Aren’t you supposed to bring like… health foods? High energy and protein stuff?”

Yeosang…

“I guess… I just brought sweets,” He admitted, voice tight.

Wooyoung’s fingers curled through Yeosang’s, holding his hand tightly.

It was warm.

“Did you camp a lot, then? Or was it your first time?”
He didn’t… “I think… I don’t know,” he confessed, shaking his head as a shiver ran through him, making him twitch. Like the aftershocks of a lightning strike.

“Okay,” Wooyoung said quickly, rubbing the back of his hand, as if to calm him. “Did you travel?” Wooyoung tried instead. “After you were turned… did you move around?”

Yeosang nodded, staring at their pale skin beside each other, trying not to focus on the cavern in his chest. “I… did. I- I was chased out of a lot of places...”

Wooyoung made a noise of intrigue and sympathy, making Yeosang look up. Wooyoung stared at him, the frantic panic missing and something a little calmer there as he held Yeosang’s hand firmly, watching him with intent eyes that were...

He was listening. Touching Yeosang, despite the danger of him having an episode. Pressing as close to Yeosang as the bars and the rogue would allow.

The hand not curled around his rubbed small circles into his wrist, and it was...

It wasn’t cold.

Yeosang shifted forward without thinking, throat closing, a semi-familiar sensation rising in the back of his throat. It wasn’t sick, it was… something different. The same thing that made him slide his fingers under the door and beg Wooyoung to stay-

He felt like he was getting whiplash. As if his entire existence was a civil war inside his body.

Wooyoung tensed as he moved forward, but he relaxed almost immediately as Yeosang’s other hand leapt from the ground, grabbing Wooyoung’s tightly, but not painfully, he didn’t think. Wooyoung was still, as if waiting to see what Yeosang intended, or afraid to shift and incite Yeosang to let go.

“Yeosang?” he practically whispered, glancing at their hands.

It felt like… like having two hands on a battery, a current running from Wooyoung, through their connected hands, and Yeosang-

It was sensory overload. It was warmth after so long of shivering in the dark, it was- it was… Yeosang wanted to let go. To release the foreign sensation and retreat-

He closed his eyes, head dropping forward as he pulled Wooyoung’s hands closer, resting his head against them, trying to fight off the urge to let go because he knew-

He knew that letting go was going to hurt. Hurt infinitely more than the sparks traveling along his skin.

Wooyoung’s skin was smooth where Yeosang pressed his forehead to it, eyes clenching shut to shut out everything but the feeling of hands grabbing back at him.

_We won’t abandon you._

Yeosang took a deep breath, teeth gritting against each other, as a wave of pins and needles rushed over his skin. Wooyoung’s forefinger lifted from Yeosang’s hand, brushing against his cheek-

He jerked away, heart leaping, and Wooyoung jumped, but neither of them released their hands, staring as their fingers stayed intertwined.
Wooyoung swallowed thickly, eyes unblinking. “Are you… okay?” he asked, voice a little unstable.

Yeosang’s hands shook on his, throat closing and making it hard to breathe. “I… I don’t know.”

Wooyoung simply nodded, as if this was an acceptable answer. “Did you sleep well?”

He choked a little, hands twitching. “You were here.”

Wooyoung nodded slowly, carefully, as if afraid to give too much information. “Yeah. I fell asleep down here.”


Wooyoung had said the answer before, but Yeosang… he wanted to hear him say it, needed him to…

He didn’t believe all the life partners stuff, but hell, if it wasn’t a good lie to cling to.

“I didn’t want you to be alone,” Wooyoung answered, as easily as saying the color of the sky. “I don’t… We don’t want you to have to be alone ever again.” His hands squeezed Yeosang’s, who flinched, but didn’t let go. Couldn’t let go. Like the current running through them had locked up his muscles.

Never alone… never again…

“I-”

His eyes fell passed Wooyoung, peering through the dim lighting, and seeing half of Hongjoong’s body sticking out around the doorway to the staircase, and he realized San had gone to get him and Seonghwa. He tensed, hands jerking away from Wooyoung’s as his hair stood on end-

Wooyoung snatched his hands back almost desperately, and Yeosang momentarily forgot about their audience to stare at him in shock.

Wooyoung swallowed thickly, glancing over his shoulder at the people he surely saw before. “I-” He closed his mouth tightly before wetting his lips. “You don’t have to be afraid, Yeosang,” he said firmly. “Of anyone. No one… No one in this house is ever going to hurt you, understand?”

Yeosang wanted to jerk away again, the panic-buzzing building under his veins again-

His grip on Wooyoung turned painful, body surging forward and mouth snapping at his trapped arms that suddenly were gone-

Get rid of it.

Yeosang slammed against the bars, and he didn’t think much time had passed because Hongjoong was still holding Wooyoung by his shoulders, a few steps away from the bars, Wooyoung’s hands dripping only the smallest bit of red where his nails had dragged against the skin when Hongjoong pulled him away.

Yeosang’s stomach flipped, and he pushed away from the bars quickly, feeling his heart clench and shrink and crush until his chest was hollow, until his back hit the wall-

“Young,” Wooyoung said quickly, breaking out of Hongjoong’s hold and kneeling on the ground outside the bars. His eyes held a pain that had nothing to do with his hands. “Yeosang, it’s not your
fault, you don’t have to—"

Yeosang turned away, pressing his forehead to his knees.

The buzz beneath his skin was muted. Not even noticeable in the cold numbness that blanketed itself over him. He stared at his hands, and saw red under his fingernails.

“Yeosang,” he heard Wooyoung call gently, but he didn’t turn.

Every time he reached out to him, Yeosang was going to hurt him. There was no way around that. Yeosang wanted to press closer to the wall-

He wanted to move back to the bars, accepting the hand that he knew Wooyoung was holding out to him.

“Yeosang,” he heard Hongjoong’s soft voice call. “You aren’t at fault.”

It felt like another brick being laid on his chest. He didn’t move, focusing on his breathing and not panicking, not slipping back into that franticness that made him want to move-

“Come on, Wooyoung,” he heard Seonghwa’s voice, and Yeosang’s heart leapt to his throat.

“I can’t—"

“You’ve been down here for a while now,” Seonghwa said firmly, but his voice was soft. Coaxing. Comforting. “We’ll send San to keep him company. And we’ll have Yunho come down, too. For now, though… let’s go upstairs, alright?”

Yeosang resisted the urge to turn, to fly at the bars and grab Wooyoung to stop him from leaving-

He heard Wooyoung stand. “Okay,” he mumbled, defeated, and Yeosang listened to two sets of feet walk back up the stairs. He curled around himself further.

“That isn’t because we don’t trust you around him,” Hongjoong said, voice firm enough that Yeosang glanced back. He expected to see dark eyes and stern irises glaring back at him, but Hongjoong’s expression was…


“That’s not why Seonghwa brought him upstairs,” Hongjoong told him. “But… we’re trying to play a juggling game. Of keeping you and the others safe. Not just physically. We don’t want anyone getting overwhelmed, or blaming themselves for things outside of their control. Seonghwa is going to talk to Wooyoung, make sure he’s okay, make sure he… he understands everything important.”

“Like what?” Yeosang found himself asking.

“That it’s not his fault anymore than it is yours.” Hongjoong stepped up to the bars. “And that tonight… was not a failure. Nor a disappointment.”

“I hurt him.”

“You touched him.” Hongjoong tilted his head. “You can probably count on one hand the number of times you’ve touched someone without hurting them, can’t you?”

Yeosang almost bit back something defensive, but it died in his chest.
“I…” He stared at Hongjoong, trying to form the words, trying to understand the language that Yeosang had been hearing, but couldn’t mimic yet. “I… He- He was… “ He stared at his hand, tingling and tinted pink under his nails. “He touched me, and I… It hurt, but it… it wasn’t-”

“It was confusing, wasn’t it?” Hongjoong filled in, eyes empathetic and deep. “Like…” He chuckled to himself. “Like you were burning, but it didn’t… it didn’t hurt. Not in the same way being alone does.”

Yeosang stiffened, muscles tensing dangerously. “You…” His eyes trailed over Hongjoong, his lax posture and gentle eyes. Not bone-snapping tension and fear.

“You’re… You’re like… me?”

“Not right now,” Hongjoong told him gently, eyes trailing to the side. “And not technically. But I was… I had a life that brought me very close to losing myself.” It sounded like a confession.

Yeosang’s arms dropped from his sides. “You… Were alone?” He asked almost in awe.

Hongjoong nodded slowly, expression carefully controlled on what he allowed Yeosang to see. “I had a life partner who died… And I wandered on my own for a bit. I… I started feeling this… emptiness. At first, I thought it was hunger, but nothing ever… ever filled it. Nothing made that ache stop. It was…. cold and empty. And nothing I did could stop it.”

Yeosang felt like the buzz was returning to under his skin, staring at Hongjoong as he shifted towards him, entranced. “But you- you’re… normal.”

Hongjoong laughed. Not just a little chuckle, but a full laugh. “I guess you could say that,” he said lightly.

“Wooyoung said you got nightmares.”

Hongjoong’s smile didn’t dim, but his eyes became heavy, and Yeosang felt a spike of pity in his chest, momentarily overriding the buzz. “I do. They’re better now, but not gone forever. Barely even noticeable.”

“How did you do it?” Yeosang demanded, something desperate climbing his throat and spine, drawing him closer to the bars. “How- What did you do?”

Hongjoong’s smile was almost too soft to see, Yeosang’s chest twisting at the sight of it. It seemed almost… private. Like it wasn’t something he was meant to see.

“I met someone.”

Yeosang wet his lips. “Seonghwa.”

Hongjoong nodded. “I met him the first time at port, a man looking to take a position on a ship. I had no first mate, so I took him on, and… he was human at the time. But I…” He chuckled, gentle and soft. “I clung to him as if he were someone who had been with me my whole life.”

Yeosang had never heard Hongjoong sound so raw. Not pained- not a all- it was soft and open, and something about it made Yeosang look away, like looking at a too bright light.

“Why?” he whispered, staring at Hongjoong desperately, as if he could give him some secret. As if
he wouldn’t have already given him a cure-all if he had one.

“At first, I told myself it was just being lonely.” His brow furrowed. “But I had never felt like this for anyone else. Seonghwa was… brilliant. Like…” He laughed, and something about it felt like a physical pain. “Forgive me if I wax poetic, but he was like hot coals being shoved into my chest.”

Yeosang winced. “That doesn’t sound pleasant.”

“But infinitely better than the cold, isn’t it?” he questioned, eyebrows raising knowingly.

Yeosang’s stomach dropped. Hongjoong smiled knowingly.

“And I think… I was able to regain part of myself, leaning on Seonghwa, even if he didn’t know I was relying on him to keep myself sane. At the time, he assumed it was camaraderie. But then I asked to turn him… and when I finally knew I could have him for eternity… it was like something inside of me was unlocked. Unleashed.”

God, there was something deep in Hongjoong’s eyes. Something long and solemn but it was…

It was soft. And sweet. And Yeosang… Yeosang didn’t believe this life partner stuff, he didn’t believe that everything wrong with him could be solved by these people holding out their hands, but…

Staring at Hongjoong’s eyes… it almost seemed cruel to think it wasn’t real. Degrading and invalidating… to try and think that whatever he had… wasn’t real. It made Yeosang’s mouth close together tightly to keep the slight sick feeling behind his lips.

Hongjoong’s smile was warm.

“And I… I couldn’t let him go. I clung to him embarrassingly hard, and even a changeling’s natural attachment to their maker was paled compared to it. I think I frightened him at times… acting as if he would disappear if he left my side, but he was… he was so much after so little, and it was a war of being encased in ice in his absence but of being burned to ash in his presence.”

Yeosang’s throat felt dry. He felt like he had stopped breathing. Like he physically couldn’t move, even to pump air.

“After so long without a single kind look or word, so long of being withdrawn and alone…” His eyes became darker, but not… negative. “That touch starved sensation turns to pain when we’re given what we’ve been deprived. But it’s necessary. This-” He gestured to Yeosang, around them at the cell, back to the shredded bedding- “This is not what you are meant to be Yeosang. Caged and separated from us… You’re meant to be with us, Yeosang. That’s where you belong.”

Yeosang tried to imagine… being out there. If there were not bars and one of them had their arms wrapped around him, like he had seen Wooyoung do to San… if that burning and buzzing was spread over every point of contact, instead of his hands-

He winced, hands clenching at each other. “I don’t-”

Hongjoong shook his head slowly. “Time will dull the pain,” he promised, “and put it in its proper place. At first, it will be infinitely overwhelming. But don’t shy away, Yeosang. That’s not pain you’re feeling. It’s everything you’ve deprived of. It is everything you will ever need.”

Yeosang couldn’t breathe.
He stared at Hongjoong, and Hongjoong held his hand out slowly.

Yeosang backed away.

Hongjoong was almost amused in his smile. Yeosang felt like he was missing something, his chest hollowed out.

“You’ll get better,” he promised. “And you’ll learn to trust yourself.”

~~~~~~

Seonghwa glanced up as the door to their bedroom pushed open, expecting to see one of the others come to crawl in to talk or just sit beside him. But Yunho and San would be down with Yeosang. Wooyoung was probably still occupied with Jongho and Mingi who had dragged him into a movie to get his mind off everything.

So by process of elimination, he expected Hongjoong before seeing him step inside, closing the door softly behind himself. Seonghwa sat up slightly at the distant look in his eyes, but not enough to be truly concerning.

“Wooyoung is fine,” he said as Hongjoong came in, walking slowly towards the bed, not quite looking at Seonghwa. “The scrapes barely broke skin, and I think I finally drilled into his mind that huge steps were taken today.”

Hongjoong nodded almost absently. “I think Yeosang understands what we are saying… but I think he finds it difficult to believe. He will soon, though,” he almost-promised. “He simply needs enough evidence to support it. He will gain that with time.”

Seonghwa’s eyes dragged over his far-away eyes that stared at the bedsheets, the slight hunch to his shoulders, the curling of his fingers around themselves as he sat on the edge of the bed, one foot dangling.

He frowned gently. “Did you speak of something with him?”

Hongjoong swallowed gently, lifting his eyes slowly to Seonghwa, and Seonghwa blinked at the deep pools staring at him. “I meant what I said before,” he said quietly. “He reminds me how truly grateful I am to you.”

Seonghwa set his book aside, frowning as he turned more fully to Hongjoong, taking one hand and pulling him forward until he was completely on the bed. “What did you tell him?” he asked gently, searching Hongjoong’s face carefully. “Why are you looking as if I would disappear from your sight?”

Hongjoong simply lifted a hand, pressing it to Seonghwa’s jaw and guiding him forward smoothly until their lips pressed together in a warm seal.

Seonghwa started for a moment, surprised by the sudden movement, and it wasn’t that Hongjoong and he never kissed anymore, but it was rare to have something so vigorous as Hongjoong sliding hands into hair and pulling him closer.

It wasn’t heated, but it was pressing and bordering towards the side of more desperate, reminiscent
of the days when they were still fearful of being apart. Seonghwa looped his arm around Hongjoong’s waist comfortingly, pulling him against him, not fighting the action as Hongjoong’s other hand cradled his cheek.

Seonghwa was reminded of times when the two of them would lay in the captain’s chambers for days, both of them too afraid to wander outside, and the crew…

Well, of course, people talked. And suspected. But Hongjoong’s reign was a firm one, and even if people’s suspicions were correct, no one dared to say a thing, nor take action against them.

Days that passed like seconds to Seonghwa who pressed his face to Hongjoong’s chest, just trying to keep his lungs moving without the usually tandem beating that echoed with them. It was like he now had to consciously make them provide air.

There could have been a war on inside their very room, but he would have seen nothing but Hongjoong who held Seonghwa was tight as he could, but as gently as if he could break him with a single touch.

It felt like those days when Hongjoong stared at him for hours, and Seonghwa could only stare back, until something in Hongjoong broke and he would hold Seonghwa, just hold him, like pressing your hands to a warm flame to ward off a chilled night.

It was not concern in Seonghwa’s chest. Hongjoong was fine, but he was pressing to Seonghwa in that way of being fearful of losing him, so Seonghwa did as he always had, for centuries: he pulled Hongjoong close, wrapping himself around him until nothing could breach their little bubble.

Hongjoong climbed into his lap without breaking the kiss, pushing him back against the headboard, hands cupping his cheeks so gently.

“I love you,” he whispered against Seonghwa’s lips, Seonghwa’s eyes opening and seeing suns shining back at him. “For everything you have done for me, for everything you are to me- you are precious to me, Seonghwa-”

Seonghwa’s hand caught one of Hongjoong’s on his cheek, holding it firmly. “Did you think I could ever forget that?” he asked, chest tight as Hongjoong kissed his neck gently.

“I told you, he reminds me how grateful I am to you- to everyone,” he breathed. “I feel as if I sometimes grow indifferent to all you did. And I am disgusted with myself for it.”

It was not a heavy, self-deprecating tone, but light and almost teasing.

Seonghwa threaded his fingers through Hongjoong’s hair, chest warm. “I did nothing that you did not make easy to do,” he promised, kissing his shoulder, Hongjoong leaning his weight against Seonghwa.

Hongjoong hummed, the noise vibrating against his skin, and Seonghwa dragged a gentle hand up and down his spine, making him shiver slightly.

“You are my precious,” Hongjoong breathed, so low Seonghwa almost didn’t hear him, but he had memorized even the air vibrations of those words, wrapping his arms around Hongjoong’s waist and holding him tightly.

“Precious,” Hongjoong whispered, pressing his face to Seonghwa’s neck, just breathing against him, lips tickling the skin there. The skin that had once been pierced in a symbol of trust and comfort and eternity-
Seonghwa shifted him easily, bringing their lips together, and Hongjoong gripped his shoulder tightly, rising on his knees slightly, forcing Seonghwa’s head to tilt, and Seonghwa’s hand traveled under the hem of Hongjoong’s shirt, touching skin that was cool, but it felt so warm under his fingertips-

Seonghwa swore they had a pulse at times. As if their bodies could almost remember how. There was no other explanation for the searing heat against his lips and the branding iron at his shoulder.

Hongjoong broke away, foreheads resting, and stared at Seonghwa with a gaze that had once made him need to look away, but that he now met with equal warmth.

Gentle hands cupped Hongjoong’s jaw, and he closed his eyes, leaning into them.

“I love you so much, I can’t stand it at times,” Seonghwa whispered, searching the face he had learned every crevice and plane of. “As if I would burn in your presence.”

Hongjoong laughed, eyes remaining closed, simply leaning against Seonghwa’s palms, his hand traveling to the crook of Seonghwa’s neck by memory, brushing his thumb there. Seonghwa shuddered at the gentle touch, warmth shooting across his body from the contact point.

“I…”

Hongjoong’s eyes fluttered open halfway, his chest rising high before letting go of its breath. “It has been a while,” he noted, voice lofty and completely calm.

“It has,” Seonghwa agreed, lips twitching gently. “Months, I believe. Not quite a year.”

The last time had been a once in a blue moon occurrence when all the others had gone out together for a late night movie. Seonghwa and Hongjoong had occupied their quiet free time with each other.

Hongjoong nodded, eyes dragging over Seonghwa’s face. “I would suggest it if not for Yeosang,” he promised.

Seonghwa chuckled, hips shifting and hands catching as he flipped them slowly, laying Hongjoong gingerly against the pillows as he supported himself on his hands and knees over him. “You fear Yeosang walking in on us?” he questioned.

Hongjoong’s hands leapt to his chest almost instinctively, resting where his pulse would beat. “Is now the time?” he asked, head tilting curiously, as if asking Seonghwa’s genuine opinion in a debate. “Especially with the others with him…”

Seonghwa gave him a quick kiss, there and then gone, eyes warm enough to burn if you held them too long. “You,” he breathed, kissing him again, and then gone, “are precious- to- me” Each punctuated with a kiss that Hongjoong loosened under, fingers curling into his shirt.

He gazed up at him. “That is not an answer to my question.”

“No, but it is a reminder, since you seem keen to forget,” Seonghwa informed him. There was a beat between the two of them before Seonghwa lowered himself down. Hongjoong’s eyes followed him, watched his legs stretch out and his arms tuck in as his head hit the pillow slightly above Hongjoong.

Arms pulled him in, Hongjoong following without a word as Seonghwa tucked him beneath his chin, arms holding him completely immobile against his chest, Hongjoong waiting for a moment,
as if seeing if he would do something else. When Seonghwa simply pressed a kiss to his forehead, Hongjoong shifted until his every line was pressed into the curved of Seonghwa’s body.

He could feel his breath puff against his skin, Seonghwa pulling the smaller body somehow closer.

It had been a while since they had been like this. Despite residing in the same bed, their usual sleeping patterns had them turning over onto the other, throwing an arm over, or heads winding up on the same pillow. This sort of… magnetism had been reserved for no particular nights where one or both simply felt that pull again. It came and went, for no reason at all, a simple realigning of the forces of a magnet, pulling them together.

The weight against Seonghwa’s chest was one he would never tire of.

“They…” Hongjoong laughed against his neck, lips brushing skin. “They are startlingly like us, aren’t they?”

Seonghwa let go of a small breath. “I am not sure it’s entirely equatable.”

“You’d be lying if you said they weren’t.”

I trusted him.

“We were perhaps smarter,” Seonghwa noted.

Hongjoong huffed. “Give them credit. It is unfair to try and compare your brilliance to another’s.”

Seonghwa chuckled, tugging on the ends of his hair. “I was not the captain of a ship.”

“If you don’t think you would have run that ship better than I, you were not paying attention.”

“I paid the utmost attention to you,” Seonghwa promised, lips brushing his temple. “You knew that.”

Hongjoong settled completely against him, his full weight on Seonghwa’s chest, feet tucked beneath Seonghwa’s legs. “Only because I was already looking at you.”

Seonghwa closed his eyes, and for a moment, he forgot about rogues and cellars and wiping tears off of cheeks. For a moment, there was their bubble. There was him and Hongjoong, and the distant sound of the others yelling something at the TV.

Seonghwa couldn’t die, but if he did… it would be happy.

Hongjoong’s fingers curled into the sides of his shirt gently. “My precious Seonghwa,” he murmured against his skin, dyeing his skin with the words.

Seonghwa’s lips twitched. “My captain.”

Hongjoong’s leg kicked him hard, and it only caused him to laugh as Hongjoong huffed against his chest, tucking his head deeper, muttering something Seonghwa didn’t catch. He squeezed him gently, shifting to the side so some of his own weight pressed against Hongjoong, kissing gently at his neck.

“My precious captain.”
Seonghwa slipped out of the bed in the middle of the day, slowly extracting himself from Hongjoong’s limbs, the other jerking awake, but relaxing quickly.

“Where’re y’ going?” he mumbled, still deep in sleep.

Seonghwa smiled, brushing his hair back carefully, his eyes already closing again. “I’m just checking on the others. I’ll be right back.”

Hongjoong merely made a noise of understanding, curling into the spot Seonghwa had vacated, shoving his face into his pillow, blankets drawn up tightly.

Seonghwa exited the room carefully, not closing the door fully, and was surprised to see all the bedroom doors open. He passed them all, seeing them vacant, and headed down the stairs. The kitchen and living area were empty.

Brow furrowed, he walked down the steep stairs into the cellar, peering around the corner.

He expected to see San and Yunho curled up, but he didn’t predict the three extra bodies and blankets scattered around.

Limbs thrown across each other, the five of them crammed themselves into the small space, San practically asleep on top of Yunho. In the cell, Yeosang was curled up on half a mat (the other half was on the other side of the cell), pushed into the farthest corner from the others, but he seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

Wooyoung was asleep, not directly against the bars, but as close as he could get without endangering himself.

Seonghwa watched them for a moment, his chest warm. He supposed Yeosang may have become accustomed to the others as well. They had nothing to worry about.

The others would take good care of their newest addition.

~~~~~~~~

Wooyoung woke up to a gentle noise.

He groaned, shoving his face further into his pillow that smelled suspiciously like-

Blinking, he lifted his head to stare at Mingi’s thigh, wrinkling his nose as he flipped over, his hip uncomfortable from being pressed against the ground. Why did he wake-

His eyes fell on the bars of the cell, staring passed them at Yeosang who was sitting up on his half mat, one hand clutching at his chest and the other covering his face, his breath coming in stuttered rasps.

He sat up onto his elbows, heart tugging. “Yeosang?” he whispered, the others sleeping on around him.

The other jumped violently, pressing against the back wall, staring out at the bars with wide eyes, one hand still clawed into his chest.
Wooyoung sat up further, sleep still coating his throat. “Are you okay?” he croaked, scrubbing at his eyes.

Yeosang’s eyes flickered around, as if looking for an answer written on one of the walls. “Go back to sleep.” He tried to whisper, but it rose slightly above it.

Wooyoung shook his head, scooting closer to the bars. “Did you have a nightmare?” he questioned carefully, watching his reactions carefully.

Yeosang simply winced, turning away and staring at the ground.

Wooyoung frowned, moving forward until his knees hit the bars. “Tell me what you’re scared of.”

He looked up at him with sharp eyes that were angry for a moment, but it died like a candle blown out. “Why?”

Wooyoung shrugged. “That’s what I did when I first got here.” He wrapped his fingers around his crossed ankles, rocking back and forth slightly. “There were already so many of them… I thought I wouldn’t find a place to fit in. I was scared of making a mistake. Of getting sent back to my maker. Of finding bricks getting thrown through our window…”

“Did talking fix any of those?” Yeosang asked incredulously, scoffing and looking away.

“No,” Wooyoung said honestly. “But it’s not supposed to. Try it. You’ll see what I mean.”

Yeosang shook his head stubbornly. “It doesn’t matter. Just go back to sleep.”

“It does matter,” Wooyoung fought quietly, drawing Yeosang’s eyes back towards him. “The same way your name matters. It matters, Yeosang. It’s important. You are important.”

Yeosang’s eyes were unreadable.

“Are you happy here?”

Wooyoung blinked, taken aback by the... unexpected question. “What sort of question is that?”

“You met someone?” Yeosang asked, as if he hadn’t heard.

“What does that mean?” Wooyoung frowned gently.

“After... your maker. You found someone?”

“You mean, did I find a life partner?” Wooyoung guessed. Yeosang gave no indication whether he was correct or not. “You know I did.”

“It changed things?” Yeosang clarified, shifting forwards, talking riddles. “It made it... better? You said it was better than being alone.”

Wooyoung didn’t know what answer Yeosang was looking for. But he answered honestly. “It is.”

“How do I know if I fit?” Yeosang demanded, moving along the ground, towards Wooyoung.

“How did you know you belonged here?”

Wooyoung’s heart twisted as his mouth opened slightly. “I... I just knew,” he said, Yeosang looking disappointed by the response. “The others never let me question it.”
“How?” Yeosang demanded, stopping a couple of feet from the bars. “How do you know? How do you know you’re life partners? How do you not think they’ll just... leave you behind? How do you trust that easily?”

The words weren’t angry. Nor were they bitter or even skeptical. They were just... desperate. Eager for some sort of answer he didn’t have the tools to make himself.

Wooyoung’s hand came out. “Come here,” he beckoned gently.

Yeosang’s eyes trailed over the still-red stripes on his hands. Wooyoung shook his head. “Just come here.”

Yeosang’s jaw flexed. “Why?”

“I want to show you something.”

“What?”

“The answer to your question,” Wooyoung said, fingers outstretched. “It... I can’t answer it in words. So I’m gonna show you. And maybe you’ll get it.”

Yeosang’s expression was stony, and Wooyoung could practically see the uncertainty and war raging behind clear eyes that were scared but calculating. Slowly, jerking, like a broken animatronic, Yeosang held his hand out, shaking slightly like he was waiting for it to scratch at him.

Wooyoung simply waited until his calloused palm slid into his, curling his fingers around his gently. He reached behind himself, finding a pillow hidden in the mass of blankets and limbs. He was pretty sure he saw Yunho’s eyes open, but he turned back around.

“Here,” he said, stuffing the pillow between the bars. It took a little, but it fell onto the ground in Yeosang’s space. He stared at it in confusion for a moment, glancing back at Wooyoung whose lips twitched. “Lay down.”

“Why?”

He sighed lightly, squeezing Yeosang’s hand gently. “Stop questioning everything, and just lay down and do what I tell you, alright?”

Yeosang looked slightly annoyed, but he stared at the pillow, then back at Wooyoung, looking passed him at the room before moving... very... slowly... and putting his head against the pillow.

Wooyoung shifted Yeosang’s hand to his left one, reaching his right one through the bars. “I’m gonna touch your hair, alright?” he said, pausing just before making contact.

Yeosang flinched away. “Why-”

“Just tell me if you don’t like it,” Wooyoung said firmly. “I can’t explain to you why, you just have to see.”

Yeosang’s eyes held a deep distrust. Not for Wooyoung. Not for any of them. Just... everything. Himself. But Wooyoung ran his thumb over the back of his hand until Yeosang laid back against the pillow, staring at the ceiling, stiff as a board.

Wooyoung hummed encouragingly, hand reaching out once more, and he just barely brushed his
fingers across the top of Yeosang’s hair.

It was… soft surprisingly. A little dirty from not being washed, and he could feel small amounts of dried blood stuck to it, but he just touched it. “Close your eyes,” he said quietly.

Yeosang made a quick, negative noise in the back of his throat, and Wooyoung hushed him quietly. “Alright, you don’t have to,” He assured him, hand lifting off of his hair. “But you don’t have to be afraid to.”

Yeosang glanced at him before staring back up at the ceiling.

Wooyoung examined the tense line of his shoulders, the tension in his neck, the stiffness in his arms that stayed by his side… He placed his palm against his forehead gently, drag the back backwards and letting his fingers card through Yeosang’s hair.

Yeosang shuddered almost violently, a shiver running down his muscles as one of his arm half-leapt towards Wooyoung, as if to stop him, but he shrank away, staring at Wooyoung as if he had just struck him.

Wooyoung paused. “Does it hurt?”

A short, slow shake of his head.

“Do you want me to stop touching you?”

A pause. No blinking. And rather than a response, Yeosang simply turned back towards the ceiling, laying against the pillow, somehow, stiff enough to look like a statue.

Wooyoung waited another moment before lowering his hand again.

It was different and difficult to do it through the bars with his limited motion, but he ran his fingers through Yeosang’s hair once more. Another involuntary shudder ran through him, Yeosang closing his eyes either on instinct or by choice, but he stiffened under the touch, fingers curling into tight fists.

Wooyoung waited to see if he would pull away again, but when he didn’t, he did it again. And again. And again. He would occasionally hit a knot in his hair, but he smoothed it out carefully.

Yeosang was like concrete beneath his hand. He twitched, eyes closing tighter, fists shaking, breaths puffing out in short bursts, and Wooyoung almost stopped out of pity, but Yeosang didn’t pull away.

“Hongjoong used to do this a lot for me,” he whispered quietly. “Well… I guess they all did. It was… good.” Yeosang didn’t respond, but Wooyoung didn’t expect him to. “Especially after nightmares.”

He kept going. And when he saw Yeosang shift—only the slightest bit, only a twitch—but not away from his touch, but towards it, his chest tightened. He let his nails drag against his scalp gently, and Yeosang sucked in a sharp breath, eyes flying open, but he didn’t pull away.

“Hongjoong used to do this a lot for me,” he whispered quietly. “Well… I guess they all did. It was… good.” Yeosang didn’t respond, but Wooyoung didn’t expect him to. “Especially after nightmares.”

He kept going. And when he saw Yeosang shift—only the slightest bit, only a twitch—but not away from his touch, but towards it, his chest tightened. He let his nails drag against his scalp gently, and Yeosang sucked in a sharp breath, eyes flying open, but he didn’t pull away.

“Hongjoong used to do this a lot for me,” he whispered quietly. “Well… I guess they all did. It was… good.” Yeosang didn’t respond, but Wooyoung didn’t expect him to. “Especially after nightmares.”

He kept going. And when he saw Yeosang shift—only the slightest bit, only a twitch—but not away from his touch, but towards it, his chest tightened. He let his nails drag against his scalp gently, and Yeosang sucked in a sharp breath, eyes flying open, but he didn’t pull away.

Simply remained very still. And Wooyoung halted, watching his surprised face, waiting for a statement to stop. But Yeosang simply swallowed. And Wooyoung placed his hand back in his hair.

“They would just talk to me… and I found out some pretty weird things about them… Sometimes I
talked to them, too.”

He dragged his nails gently, and after several soft movements, Yeosang’s eyes fell closed again, head twitching to the left, and Wooyoung focused the soft touch on the offered area.

It felt like hours passed. Each drag of his hand like pulling something free. And slowly- slowly, as Wooyoung’s hand began to tire- he began to relax. First, his fists loosened. And then unformed. Then, his shoulders drew away from his neck. Then, his eyes stopped clenching and just rested closed.

“I’m scared of being left behind.”

Yeosang didn’t stiffen at the statement, but his eyes fluttered half open, as if he had been on the edge of sleep. Wooyoung stared at them. They were startlingly clear.

“It’s not a rational fear at all,” he said quietly, still dragging a slow hand through his hair, Yeosang’s eyes closing again. “And it’s not because I think the others will leave me. But… I guess it’s sort of a fear for every vampire. I came in… and I’m scared that one day, I’ll wake up and everyone will have left. It’s not rational. But it’s the thing that keeps me up at night.”

Yeosang’s tongue darted out to wet his lips, another shiver running down his spine as Wooyoung’s nails scratched gently.

And then a soft noise sounded in the back of his throat, like a sigh of relief.

He looked younger.

Wooyoung stared at him, still and relaxed against the pillow. “Tell me something you’re afraid of,” he whispered quietly.

He waited for Yeosang to tense up, and he did feel his skin jump under his palm, like a reactionary twitch, but he didn’t pull away. Didn’t tense and demand why he should.

He was just quiet. For so long, Wooyoung thought he might have actually fallen asleep, but he heard him swallow. He dragged his hand down the side of his neck, and Yeosang sucked in another sharp breath.

“I can’t fix whatever it is,” Wooyoung whispered. “But I can try to help.”

Yeosang’s eyes opened halfway, clear and still like those photoshopped pictures of beach water. He wasn’t scared. Or, he didn’t look it. He just looked like he was staring at something very far away.

“W…” It died on his lips, and Wooyoung did nothing to rush him. “I…” He almost looked like he was trying to tear the words out. Like those cartoons where the character is fighting to pull a carrot from the ground.

Yeosang swallowed, eyes pinching slightly. “I… You keep…” His fingers curled around Wooyoung’s slightly. “They keep saying… I’ll get better. But… what if… I don’t?” he questioned in a tight whisper. “What if… I just stay like this? What if this is… forever?”

Wooyoung sucked in a quiet breath, nodding as his chest ached. “It won’t, Yeosang,” he promised. “But… even if it does… we’re forever, too.”

Yeosang’s brow pinched, and his eyes fell back until he looked at Wooyoung’s, whose hand paused. “What do you mean?”
Wooyoung felt the urge to laugh mix with a pain in his chest. “We’re forever, too, Yeosang.” At his continued confusion, Wooyoung frowned. “We… We aren’t just keeping you to fix you, Yeosang. You’re not a pet project that we’ll get rid of if we find out we can’t help you. We already chose you. Which means, rogue or not, you’re ours.”

And Yeosang swallowed, as if the thought hadn’t occurred to him. As if this was surprising.

Yeosang’s jaw flexed as he stared at Wooyoung intently, and he got a very sticky feeling that he was being tested on something. He wanted to look away, but it felt like his entire body was stuck in concrete.

“I don’t want to be alone,” Yeosang whispered, a knife to Wooyoung’s chest. “I- I didn’t- I didn’t understand before. I- I was always alone, but you- you were here- I-”

Wooyoung brushed a hand through his hair again, and Yeosang choked off suddenly, swallowing thickly.

“You won’t be,” Wooyoung promised. “That is one thing, I can promise you without a doubt, Yeosang. You don’t ever have to be alone again.”

And to his utter horror, he watched Yeosang’s eyes fill with a shine that spilled over his cheeks with alarming speed, and his entire voice was caught in his chest, his mouth open, a comfort, a question, a cry on his lips, but none of it fell as silent tears streamed down Yeosang’s face.

He closed his eyes, turning away from Wooyoung, shoulders hunching as if he was going to pull away completely, and Wooyoung’s hand slid from his hand to his wrist, holding him back. Yeosang looked back quickly, shining eyes wide, and Wooyoung begged his tongue to work.

His chest felt hollow.

He just pulled at Yeosang’s wrist, until the other sat up, eyes staring at Wooyoung with a clarity that was striking. His other hand moved slowly, and Yeosang still said nothing, made no move towards or away from Wooyoung.

Wooyoung’s free hand touched his cheek that was damp, and Yeosang started at the touch, eyes widening to alarming sizes before dropping closed again, a soft breath leaving him as he leaned into Wooyoung’s palm…

Wooyoung had thought he was touch starved. Thought that the worst thing that could happen was that you weren’t given physical comfort often.

He never imagined what never… never being touched could do to someone. Never imagined that someone could be to a point where even a hand on their cheek… just running fingers through their hair… just holding their hand-

New tears hit Wooyoung’s hand, slipping against his skin, and he tried to wipe them away with his thumb, like Seonghwa had so many times.

God, he felt like he was dying all over again.

There was a different pain creeping through his chest. It- It was different from Yeosang’s claws and teeth. Different from sitting and watching him throw himself around a cell. Different from Seonghwa and Hongjoong’s scolding. Different from even the fear in Yeosang’s eyes when he stared at Wooyoung.
It was… It was…

It was a chilling pain. One that seemed to suck whatever warmth he had gathered. It made him want to rip away and run to Seonghwa and Hongjoong as Yeosang’s lips trembled with the tears, a shuttered breath falling back into his lips as he leaned against Wooyoung’s hand.

Wooyoung was not the adult. Seonghwa and Hongjoong were the ones he went to when someone was in a state that he couldn’t handle. Sometimes, you just didn’t know how to help, and that’s when you got the parents. Wooyoung was never supposed to be the one trying to fix what he didn’t know how to.

He didn’t know what to do. Yeosang was hurting and crying, and Wooyoung’s chest felt like an ice pick was being shoved between his ribs, and he didn’t know what to do-

“It’s okay,” he finally breathed, his own eyes stinging. “It’s okay, Yeosang, I promise, it’s gonna be okay-”

Yeosang made a short noise in the back of his throat, something scared and helpless, his hand searching for Wooyoung’s again and wrapping tightly around it, his hesitation lost in the face of… whatever feelings were currently raging inside of Yeosang.

“I promise, it’s gonna be okay-”

The grip on his hand was tight enough to hurt, but Wooyoung would never dare try to take this from him.

“It’ll be okay-”

He had lost enough.

“I promise-”

If nothing else… Wooyoung had to believe that he wasn’t lying. Because he was sure neither he nor Yeosang would be able to handle him being wrong

Chapter End Notes

I get bored easily so feel free to ask me any questions on any platform!!!
Hopefully, this isn’t as bad as I thought it was, but please let me know!
Next chapter will have a lot more progress, so you can wait for that~~
Have an amazing day and thank you for your support!
-SS
A Hand

Chapter Notes

Gah!!! I’m losing confidence with every chapter, but hopefully this one isn’t too rushed~~~
I tried my best but let me know if anything feels out of place or too sudden!
Thank you so much! I read every comment and all of them make my heart flutter-you’re all amazing!
Happy reading and let me know what you think!!
-SS

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time seemed to stand still.

But for the first time in his life, time seemed to pass in the blink of an eye.

The days blurred together until they were indistinguishable from each other. The events and mountains of each passing night formed into one massive vision, until Yeosang was dizzy from it. Episodes and talking and touching and sleeping and feeding all amassed until it felt like Yeosang was suffocating under a pile of stone after stone being laid atop him.

Despite it all… Yeosang felt more alive than he had in… perhaps his entire life. Even when he had been alive.

He felt. More than loneliness and disparity and anger at an invisible enemy. He felt so strongly it hurt, but it was infinitely better than the cold that covered his heart and chest.

So he took careful note of a few things he had deemed necessary to his sanity.

First: The others… were not like Wooyoung.

Wooyoung, who fearlessly and confidently stuck his hand through the bars, holding onto Yeosang even when he snapped, coaxing Yeosang closer, and smiling with warm eyes whenever Yeosang spoke.

It burned like fire, but Yeosang had come to bask in it. Welcome it. Crave it, as hesitant as he was to admit that, but Seonghwa simply smiled and told him that was natural. Wooyoung gave that freely and happily.

The others… were scared of him. Yeosang could tell that much. They glanced at each other, keeping in pairs, hands shaking when they tried to touch him, flinching back to far distances when he lost himself, and slow to approach him immediately after. But despite that… despite the fear…

They always approached again.

Despite their fear, despite their shaking limbs, they were trying. They weren’t leaving. And that… that hurt in a different way from Wooyoung. But it was the same good hurt. The burning kind, not the chilling kind.
Second: Though the others were not like Wooyoung, and though they were scared of him… he felt no more distance between them and himself than with Wooyoung.

They talked to him about stupid things, endlessly filling his usual silence with things he cared nothing for, but that he found himself listening to as if they were rungs to ladder he was trying to climb.

It was stupid, but it made him feel…. included. Like they weren’t vetting what they said to him, treating him as openly as they would the others.

San was currently comparing their hand sizes.

“We’re almost the same size,” he said, as if this were very crucial comparisons he was conducting. “But yours are a little bigger. Mingi, come here.”

Yeosang was silent as his hand was pressed to palm after palm of the others, and it was stupid and pointless and Yeosang didn’t understand why San was doing it—

But touching was touching, and Yeosang’s skin tingled with each sensation of skin pressing against his. Like the vague buzz of a limb slowly getting its blood flowing again. Not quite the lightning of before, but it grew stronger beneath his skin with every passing moment they touched.

The night where he had fallen asleep to Wooyoung stroking his hair and whispering reassurances to him… was passed, but never able to be forgotten.

It haunted Yeosang when he woke up at night, the ghost sensation of hands and whispers, and it was the farthest thing from unpleasant, though it left an ache when he realized there was no one beside him.

It’s going to be okay, Wooyoung had promised. There were moments when Yeosang could almost believe him. And there were others when he wanted to spit at Wooyoung for lying to him.

He felt like he was walking around after spinning in circles. If he concentrated hard enough, he could walk straight, could keep his head, but if he let his focus break, he would veer off course.

Hence, the hiss that tore from his throat when he stopped paying attention to San and let his mind wander to stare at the stone walls that encased him—

San jerked away, narrowly avoiding Yeosang’s claws that slashed at him, and they went through the process of waiting out his rage, a safe distance away, glancing at each other as Yeosang thrashed around the cell.

Wooyoung wasn’t there.

According to Yunho, Seonghwa and Hongjoong wanted to let him have some time away from Yeosang.

The initial revelation of this had made Yeosang almost panic, his mind whirling with thoughts of why they would stop Wooyoung from being down here, what he would do if Wooyoung did stop coming, but Yunho had been quick to quell the panic before it could build.

“We’re dependent on each other,” Yunho explained calmly, closer to the bars than the rest, drawing shapes on the ground. “But we don’t want to be… codependent on each other. Does that make sense? Like… even though you need your life partners, you can’t rely solely on them. You need to be able to get on by yourself. Wooyoung is still here. He’s still here for you. But you don’t
want to rely on his physical presence too much. He’ll come back, though.”

And it made sense. But that didn’t mean Yeosang wasn’t a little more antsy without him there. And it was true that Yeosang was more… drawn to Wooyoung than the others. And he was beginning to understand what everyone was saying: not more or less, just different.

He was never gone for long. He was usually down here with the others, but Hongjoong or Seonghwa would come down at some point and tell him to come spend time upstairs. He would be up there for a few hours or all day, but he always came back down to sleep (the floor now covered in sleeping mats for them).

Everyone was quiet when Yeosang came back to himself, leaning against the wall and trying to swallow the burning in his throat. And even if he knew that Wooyoung wasn’t there, he still scanned the line of faces.

He dropped his head, wiping at his face heavily, frustrations and hopelessness clinging to the back of his throat bitterly.

If he imagined hard enough, he could feel the sensation of hands dragging through his hair. It made his skin crawl, but not like the episodes did. He closed his eyes tightly, imagining that he was laying back on the ground, and someone was touching him, and it felt nice-

For a moment, there was no burning. Just gentle warmth swallowing his chest, making it hard to breathe, but it felt so nice-

It was a comforting thought.

Yeosang… had never had those before.

Never had a memory to go back to when things got bad.

Yeosang… liked the people in this coven. Genuinely liked them. Because he didn’t think he could ever have the patience and desire to try and fix someone like him. The others sported similar cuts and bruises from his episodes as Wooyoung did. None of them brought them up. None of them shied away because of them.

It was… different. They were different from Wooyoung. But it was still good.

It was still comforting when Yunho smiled and talked about the video games he had. When San gave him a play-by-play of a drama he had never heard of. When Jongho arm-wrestled Mingi and beat him so badly, Mingi sulked upstairs for a while.

When Wooyoung would return from upstairs with a bright smile, asking what he had missed as he sat down in front of the bars, eyes moving to Yeosang questioningly, waiting for his input.

Yeosang would give some half-spoken summation of the day, but his voice died under Wooyoung’s gaze too easily. The others would have to finish filling him in. But he always asked Yeosang first.

And it was… it began to feel less like an animal at a zoo. Less like a cage and more like… like the bars in front of him were a fence. A fence between yards, two friends passing toys between the slits and playing in their respective yards.

Yunho even offered to let Yeosang play on his little hand-held gaming console, but Yeosang refused, too afraid of breaking it. Jongho had passed him a notebook and pen between the bars, and
Yeosang spent the day covered in ink after he snapped in and tore the book apart.

He drew another line when San offered to let him play with several small plushies.

Yeosang had to wonder why they cared. He knew the answer they gave: they’re life partners. But why the hell would they bother choosing him as one? What exactly did he have to offer them? They were certainly in no need of more companionship. And that was just about all he was good for. (Not even that, though, because half the time he got too tongue tied to even speak properly.)

But it was almost as if they placed his company directly alongside each other’s. None of them left for long, and Yeosang always had the company of at least two people, talking either to him or with themselves if he was curled in his little corner, too lost in his head to even try to add to the conversation.

The only time he didn’t have various bodies on the other side was when he fed.

Warmth.

For once, the itch inside of him wouldn’t be one of being caged, but one of hunting. He saw the blood, and even if he knew that the bag had just come from the fridge, his body yearned for warmth it thought it would give.

He tried to grab the blood, to tear it away from the others. In that moment, it would feel like he hadn’t fed in months. Yeosang had similar troubles controlling himself around humans. They were so warm. When he got the blood, he didn’t even try to drink it, he just tried to destroy it.

Yeosang hated when he would start to feel hungry.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong would send the others upstairs for a while, smiling at him kindly, but that just made him twitch because he knew he couldn’t control himself. After several failed tries at just giving him the blood (that wound up with several deep scratches along Seonghwa’s hands) they began attempting different tactics to make it easier to actually drink the blood and not just tear through it.

Yeosang kept waiting for them to get frustrated, to just toss a bag in and let him fend for himself, it doesn’t matter anymore-

And immediately felt guilty for the thought. Seonghwa and Hongjoong had given no indication that they would ever leave him alone, any more than Wooyoung would. Nor had they ever been cruel like that. Yeosang wanted to hit himself for the dark thoughts. Those didn’t belong with them.

Blood bags didn’t work. He popped them and tore at them, and just made a mess.

They tried holding the bag for him, tried letting him calm down before giving it to him.

They poured the blood into cups, like they sometimes used, and that was a little better, but as soon as he looked into the cup or smelled the blood, the cup was crushed in his grip, splattering red across him.

They told him to close his eyes. And Yeosang tried to refuse that idea because he didn’t like the thought of being unable to see what they were doing, frantically shaking his head at the thought of being that vulnerable, that exposed-

But then he really looked at them. And their eyes were softer than even Wooyoung’s. More

They had walked this road before, he realized.

Yeosang looked at Hongjoong differently. Knowing that he had, at one point, been as lost as Yeosang. And then he looked at Seonghwa. Knowing that he had been the reason Hongjoong was who he was.

When they stood beside each other… Yeosang had thought it was hard to see Hongjoong’s smile when thinking of the other, but when they stood together- not in a threat against him, but trying to help him, as earnestly as they would each other…

Yeosang…

He didn’t believe in the whole life partner thing. He didn’t. But if anything could make him believe, it was them. It was almost like his mind played tricks on him, almost convincing him that they were the same body, connected in a physical sense, as if he couldn’t quite tell where one ended and the other began. The lines between them blurred. It made Yeosang… it made him…

Curious. And almost… Maybe… a little… wanting.

Seonghwa coaxed him to trust them, smile blinding and burning, Hongjoong standing at his side. And there was absolutely nothing threatening there. Not even Yeosang’s addled mind could find a single reason to distrust.

So he closed his eyes. And he managed to get the cup to his lips before his nose picked up the metallic scent.

So, at their encouraging smiles and gentle persistence, he closed his eyes, one hand coming up and pinching his nose tightly. He felt like an idiot, but held his hand out when he was told to, a cup pressed into his hand.

Yeosang moved quickly, chugging half the cup before throwing it away, crushing it and slashing his fingers through the red on the ground.

But he got more than he had in all their other attempts. And when he lifted his face, staring with guilt at the broken cup, he glanced at the others, waiting to see disappointment at another failed attempt, but they were both smiling.

Beaming.

Yeosang frowned, breathing heavily. But Seonghwa simply nodded with something that almost seemed like pride in his eyes. “That’s great progress, Yeosang,” he assured him firmly. “That’s a very good step in the right direction.”

He stared at them in dumb silence for several seconds, his limbs buzzing as if he had been touched.

And it was at that moment that Yeosang gained the piece he had been missing: progress. Steps.

It felt stupidly obvious, but it wasn’t until that moment, both of them smiling proudly… that he truly realized…

It wasn’t a switch inside of him. It wasn’t Rogue or Normal. It wasn’t Sick or Better. It wasn’t Broken or Fixed.
There were steps to be taken in either direction. It was a spectrum. He wouldn’t get better all at once, he had to progress in one direction or the other. And the thought of how long a journey that would be was disheartening and terrifying, but almost comforting. Because there wasn’t just one Victory. Just one test he needed to pass or fail.

There were a million little ones. And for each he missed, there was another that presented itself, allowing him another chance.

Holding hands. Allowing a touch. Not flinching at each brush of skin. Not going into an episode every hour. Finding the strength to continue a conversation, even when an episode took everything from him. Trusting his eyes to close.

Yeosang had been scared to look back. Scared of what he might see back there, but when he finally did turn around, he saw dozens of victories scattered across days and nights. There one day and gone the next, but they were there.

And it hit him with the force of a train: he had been making progress.

Not enough to be allowed freedom, but good progress. Not huge leaps and bounds, but progress. Not even really things that were noticeable, but progress.

He was still escorted to a shower with both Seonghwa and Hongjoong and their knife, the others tucked safely away in a corner of the house. Hongjoong sat in the bathroom with him, dagger at his hip, and Seonghwa waited outside the door.

Surprisingly, he had no episodes on this journey. Maybe he was too afraid of hurting someone to trigger one. Or maybe it was the dagger he kept eyeing.

(He wouldn’t say he had been having less episodes, but he knew that they had been occurring less frequently when he was occupied with the others. His most violent ones had been occurring as he woke up from sleep, but there had even been a few days when he was able to fall back asleep after them.)

He had time to think as he scrubbed at his hair, the glint of the dagger at Hongjoong’s hip visible through the crack in the shower curtain.

When Seonghwa and Hongjoong returned him to his little cellar (blood cleared away courtesy of the others, according to Seonghwa), Hongjoong passed the knife over to Seonghwa, muttering something about talking to the others, and he exited, offering Yeosang one last warm smile. He barely saw it, watching the way Seonghwa’s fingers curled around the hilt.

Seonghwa’s lips twitched. “We’re gonna work on getting you some new bedding, so hopefully you can sleep better.”

Yeosang, however, was staring at the knife in his hand. “Do you meet Rogues often?” he questioned almost absent-mindedly, completely ignoring the question.

Seonghwa followed his gaze, eyebrows pulling down. “....No, you’re our first.”

“Then why do you have a blessed knife?” he asked, lifting his eyes to Seonghwa’s that were gentle but reserved. “Did you have vampire attacks?”

“No,” Seonghwa said quietly, staring at the knife with a distant look in his eyes. “This… was Hongjoong’s knife. When he and I met on the same ship, he had it.”
Yeosang frowned, drawing closer to the bars. “Hongjoong said you were human when you met. Does that mean he was already a vampire?” Seonghwa nodded slowly. “Then why did he need a knife to fight vampires?”

Seonghwa hummed, as if it were an interesting question, fingers curling around the knife. “It is technically my knife now.” He said quietly. “Hongjoong gave it to me.” He was silent for a moment. “Hongjoong and I… do not really talk about this part of our lives with the others.”

Yeosang was… shocked at that. “Don’t… life partners share everything?”

“They don’t have to,” Seonghwa said, glancing up. “But most do. And we have. But there are things that Hongjoong and I… keep for ourselves. The others don’t necessarily need to know about the more… nitty gritty, shall we call it? It would add nothing but meaningless weight to their lives, and Hongjoong and I do not wish that.” His eyes softened slightly, an almost smile on the corner of his lips. “But you… you may benefit from it.”

Yeosang… was going to be told something that even the others hadn’t? Part of it felt wrong. He hadn’t been here that long- hell, he was barely even a part of the coven-

Life partners aren’t a matter of time. They’re a matter of choice.

He swallowed hard.

Seonghwa lifted the knife, staring at it like one might an old photograph. “Hongjoong was alone on the ship he was captain of. He got his blood from the corpses of battles they fought on the sea. But before he stepped foot on a ship, he got a blessed knife for the purpose of… keeping himself in check, we’ll say.”

Yeosang’s stomach dropped dangerously. “He- He was going to kill himself?”

He regretted the choice of words as Seonghwa’s face tightened slightly. “He didn’t intend such a fate,” he assured him. “But he wanted something in case he ever lost himself. He was alone at the time. He didn’t want to hurt anyone.” It sounded like he was trying to convince Yeosang. “The first night I discovered what Hongjoong was, he was starving and I told him to feed from me. He gave me this dagger and told me to use it on him if he went too far.”

“You…” Yeosang stared at the dagger too, something twisting in his stomach. Whatever history he had thought belonged to that dagger, it was not this. “You…”

“I didn’t use it,” Seonghwa assured him. “But Hongjoong gave it to me. Told me to keep it. Just in case.” His eyes were heavy, but… not sad. Nostalgic. “I didn’t want it. I thought it was a ludicrous thought, that Hongjoong would ever harm me. But Hongjoong did not have the same confidence. This knife…” The words died on his tongue before coming back with a new strength. “This knife is a symbol of trust between Hongjoong and I. Trust that I would stop him from hurting me. Trust that I wouldn’t have to.”

Yeosang felt sick. But there was a coal burning the bottom of his chest.

“You… you never had to use it?” he asked, voice catching.

“Oh, there were times I used it,” Seonghwa assured him, sadly and Yeosang’s stomach flipped. “Times when I was human, and Hongjoong would become… odd.” He frowned gently. “At the time, there was very little knowledge of rogues and such. I just knew there were times when Hongjoong seemed to… become someone else. Not violent, as you were, but… I was careful not to let him feed on those days. For both our sakes. And there were times I needed to defend myself.
with this when he…would not listen.”

He lifted the blade, and Yeosang had to look away.

He had to wonder what that felt like to them.

“So he… he betrayed your trust.” It felt like a sad ending to a story you were sure had a happy one.

“No.”

It was stated so simply and concisely, Yeosang jerked his head back up, frowning deeply.

Seonghwa almost laughed at his expression. His eyes held more emotions than Yeosang could identify in a lifetime.

“Hongjoong never betrayed my trust. Any action he performed against me… that was not him. The same as these-” He lifted a hand, showing off the red lines clawed there, “- are not from you.” His eyes were gentle. “My trust in Hongjoong was and remains absolute. My needing to use this knife does not change that. The same as your violence does not change our desire to help and accept you.”

Yeosang felt as if Seonghwa had buried the blade into his chest. His hands gripped the bars tightly, knuckles white. His throat was closed, allowing him no response.

“Even after Hongjoong turned me… I kept the knife.” He stared at it almost nostalgically. His lips twitched. “It became an almost inside joke between the two of us. We didn’t need the knife anymore… Not after Hongjoong had gained himself back. Before now, it was collecting dust in our desk. But it is still what it was: a symbol of trust for the two of us.”

“But he hurt you,” Yeosang burst suddenly. “You trusted him not to, but he still did.”

“It was not him,” Seonghwa stressed patiently. “Hongjoong knew he could not control himself at times. And it was for that reason that he gave me this. To give me a fighting chance. To trust me to protect myself, even if it meant hurting him back. To not kill him, but to do everything in my power to help us remain together.”

Yeosang didn’t like the comparisons of himself and Hongjoong. It wasn’t the same. It was… wrong. And regardless, Hongjoong had not been the same as Yeosang. Everyone acknowledged that. But he stared at the knife. Looked back at Seonghwa, whose expression was a mirror image of Hongjoong’s from before.

“You and Hongjoong…” Yeosang’s tongue felt numb, as if he had just been handed a very fragile glass ball and was told not to drop it. Seonghwa’s smile hurt to look at. “You’re… special?”

Seonghwa laughed, shaking his head in amusement. “We’re special to each other,” he agreed. “We were precious to each other before life partners ever came to our minds. We are… different things to each other than we are to the others,” he explained. “It’s not more or less… it’s just different.”

Trust. Different. Special.

Yeosang nodded slowly. Dumbly. And Seonghwa offered a gentle smile, reaching for Yeosang’s shoulder. He flinched, but didn’t jerk away as Seonghwa squeezed the limb comfortingly, pulling away and leaving a burn there.

Yeosang swallowed. “Even when he couldn’t control himself… you still trusted him?”
“Hongjoong and I trusted each other at the beginning of everything,” Seonghwa told him. “The knife was a safety net. Something we never wanted to use, but something we had in case we needed it.” His smile seemed as if he could see straight into Yeosang’s thoughts. “I stopped carrying it when I was sure it was safe to. It’s okay to have a safety net, Yeosang. It doesn’t negate the trust balancing above it.”


He couldn’t control it. Did that make it alright? Did that take away guilt?

Yeosang could only stare. Seonghwa didn’t seem to mind.

~~~~~~

“Do you trust me?”

Wooyoung jumped slightly at the sudden voice from Yeosang, who hadn’t said a word since he arrived.

He hadn’t meant to. But when Wooyoung asked how he slept, he couldn’t bring himself to answer, just shrugging. All other attempts at conversation from him and the others were ignored, his arms curled around his knees and his chin resting.

It wasn’t just Seonghwa’s words echoing in his head, but so many things he had gathered and wondered, bouncing around too loudly for him to speak.

Wooyoung had spent the day next to the bars, waiting patiently as the others talked about a new video game Yunho had purchased. Yeosang tuned out most of their conversation.

“I really can’t wait to play it!” Yunho burst, fists clenched in excitement. “It’s waiting upstairs.”

“You said I could play,” San said, frowning in disappointment.

“It’s a two payer,” Yunho assured him. His eyes flickered to Yeosang. “But Jonho and Mingi are out right now, so we can just play it when they get back.”

Wooyoung had glanced at Yeosang who tuned back in to the exchange. “You guys can go play it now,” he said easily, leaning against the wall. Yeosang felt a ball of anxiety curl in his stomach.

“Jongho and Mingi will be back in a couple of hours.”

San opened his mouth, glancing between the two of them. “Are… you sure?”

Wooyoung turned to Yeosang. “Do you mind them leaving?” he asked carefully, expression giving no indication for a desire one way or the other. It was truly a question for Yeosang’s opinion.

Yeosang didn’t even look at him. He couldn’t. It had been… weeks, at this point, since he and Wooyoung had been alone together. But he shook his head.

He didn’t want the others to feel a need to stay here. It wasn’t their fault he was here.

Yeosang figured they were having some sort of silent conversation, and Yunho finally sighed. “Alright,” he said hesitantly. “Let us know if you want us to come back down, though…”
“Will do,” Wooyoung promised. Yeosang closed his eyes. He heard San and Yunho leave, already lost in their discussion.

Just him and Wooyoung.

Neither spoke a word. And it wasn’t awkward or heavy, but Yeosang could feel Wooyoung staring at him, could feel the frown on his face boring into him. He said nothing. And Wooyoung didn’t try to force anything out of him.


Yeosang made no conscious decision to speak, but the hurricane of thoughts in his mind suddenly came to an eerie standstill as the words fluttered quietly from his lips.

“Do you trust me?”

He saw Wooyoung jump out of the corner of his eye, gazing at Yeosang as if ensuring he had spoken. Yeosang couldn’t bring himself to look at him, staring at the wall and feeling his chest tighten.

He was an idiot for asking such a question. And the answer would undoubtedly hurt, but…he had long since stopped caring for pain.

Wooyoung was quiet for a long while, and Yeosang was almost sure he was going to remain silent, but then a quiet question fell in the silence around them.

“Are you asking if I trust you? Or if I trust you not to have an episode and hurt me?” Wooyoung asked quietly. “Because those are two different answers.”

Yeosang squeezed his eyes shut tighter. “How?” he murmured, bracing himself. “How are they different?”

“Because I can’t trust you about something you have no control over,” Wooyoung said heavily, like the words were physical weights he was carrying. “If you were in complete control over yourself, the answer is yes. Since you first joined us, I trusted you.”

That answer… came a lot quicker, and with a lot less hesitation than Yeosang expected.

Yeosang had to look at him, turning his eyes to the earnest face between the bars, and he almost had to look away again. They weren’t even touching, but Yeosang could feel the electricity racing across his skin as Wooyoung’s eyes burned into him.

“Even when I attacked you?”

Wooyoung wet his lips, looking as if he were trying to remember something he had discovered, staring at the ground. “I made a mistake when I first opened that door to you.”

Yeosang’s stomach disappeared, his blood freezing, and something icy gathering in the base of his stomach as he felt darkness closing in on his heart-

Wooyoung, however, kept going. “I placed a responsibility in your hands that was impossible for you to meet. I made you and… the rogue into the same entity. When you’re not.” His eyes were guilty, and Yeosang momentarily forgot about the ice in his veins. “I said I trusted you. But it was impossible for you to meet that trust because you were not in control of the actions that would break it.” He winced. “That was unfair of me. And because of that, I hurt both of us.”
Yeosang blinked. It almost sounded as if he were apologizing.

“And part of me is guilty of still doing that,” Wooyoung continued, staring at his knees. “When I hold your hand and tell you to come closer, trusting you not to have an episode when you do… I put an expectation on you that you are physically incapable of meeting. But I keep doing it because… well…” He glanced up, lips twitching in a sad attempt at happiness. “You haven’t had an episode all night, haven’t you?”

Yeosang opened his mouth, ready to speak, but stopped as he thought back to the time he had woken up to now. It had only been a few hours, but… he hadn’t had one. Yunho and San had already been here when he woke up.

Yeosang had become accustomed to waking up with the sound of breathing around him. He had grown used to rolling over and seeing the lumps of the others sleeping.

“You’re… you’re still not better,” Wooyoung said carefully, as if trying to avoid a mindfield without a map. “But you’re… you’re better than you were, Yeosang.” He huffed, a sad amusement. “Hell, sometimes, I almost think you might smile while we’re talking.”

Smile?

Yeosang realized that he… he hadn’t. He hadn’t smiled. It had been… Had he ever smiled, since being turned? What did he have to smile about? But it seemed… strange to think that. To think that for decades, he had never smiled-

“I trust you as much as I do anyone else in this house,” Wooyoung told him firmly. “And I always have. My mistake before was trusting you with an expectation you couldn’t hope to meet at the time.”

Yeosang’s throat was slowly closing as he stared at Wooyoung, who seemed to be bracing himself for Yeosang to yell something, gripping the bars weakly. Wooyoung seemed to be waiting to say something wrong. But Yeosang only felt a…

It was warm. But it was thin. Weak. Testing and new.

It wrapped around his heart loosely, making him swallow thickly.

“And now?” he asked, despite himself. It wasn’t a fair question, it wasn’t fair to expect Wooyoung to answer. “Would you trust me now?”

Wooyoung looked surprised by the question, eyes widening as his mouth opened slightly. He stared at Yeosang as if he had just cursed, eyes trailing to the bars, the lock, the stairs behind them, and then settling back at Yeosang who held his breath.

He didn’t want to know.

Wooyoung was being too quiet. Too long. Yeosang’s chest tightened.

“Forget ab-”

“Yes.”

Yeosang felt like he had just been slapped, something hot crashing into the ice in his chest and shattering it painfully. He physically winced, fists curling tightly at his sides as he stared at Wooyoung who looked almost scared, as if he knew how close Yeosang was to assuming the
answer was ‘no’.

“Yes, I would,” he repeated, voice stronger. “If it were up to me, and I knew the others agreed, I
would open this door right now, Yeosang.”

It took him several seconds to gain the strength to speak, his ears ringing.

“Why?” he breathed.

I don’t know, Wooyoung had answered before. He hadn’t known before.

Now, though, Wooyoung swallowed, eyes trailing over Yeosang as if seeing him for the first time.

“Because…” It was quiet. Hesitant. Again, afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Wooyoung’s hand reached through the bars, offering itself to Yeosang in a pose that had become
familiar.

“I…” He chewed the inside of his lips. “I know that you’re better. I know that when you really talk
with us, you don’t have as many episodes. I know that… you don’t belong in there. And I think
you’re beginning to recognize it. I think your body is starting to adapt to life partners. It knows… it
knows you’re safe with us.”

Yeosang stared at his hand.

He always offered his hand.

No matter how many episodes, no matter what time he came into the cellar, no matter what was
going on…

Wooyoung always had his hand held out to Yeosang.

Almost unconsciously, Yeosang began to turn to him, slowly, as if his muscles were atrophied.

It wasn’t opening the door. But it was a different type of trust. One Wooyoung had been holding
out since Yeosang arrived.

He held out a hand that still shook. He no longer feared the pain of touching. He almost welcomed
it.

A trust Yeosang still betrayed, time and time again, but that Wooyoung continued to offer
because… because…

His hand twitched away before touching Wooyoung’s, their skin just barely brushing as Yeosang
hesitated, lungs burning as he stared. It was nothing they hadn’t done before, but it meant
something different this time.

Because it wasn’t him.

His eyes trailed over the scabs and scrapes covering Wooyoung’s hand and arm, put there by
Yeosang’s claws that had dug in, that had tried to hurt, had tried to kill…

Because Yeosang would never…would never hurt Wooyoung.

And at the sight of the cuts… Yeosang’s chest hurt.
It caved in. Not cold, not warm, just a hollow pain that made it seem like his heart had been torn out, leaving a gaping hole.

His eyes stung as his hands both came up and touched Wooyoung’s gingerly, fingers tracing over the scars of his episodes, as if this was his first time seeing them.

He would never hurt him. Not if he were in control.

Wooyoung didn’t try to take his hands, simply allowed Yeosang to cradle his hand in gentle fingers as he traced over the cuts over and over, the pain in his chest forcing tears out slowly.

He had hurt Wooyoung.

Not him. He would never.

But Wooyoung had been hurt. The others had been hurt.

And it wasn’t the usual guilt clogging his throat. It was something different, something-something-

He wanted to stop it. He felt hot tears stain his cheeks as he stared at the bruised wrist.

Wooyoung breathed out a pained, “Yeosang…” His other hand coming up to brush at the tears, but Yeosang dodged the hand, wrapping both hands tightly around his and pressing his forehead against it hard, eyes squeezing shut as his lungs forgot how to breathe around the pain.

“Hey,” Wooyoung whispered, voice tinging towards concern as his unoccupied hand touching Yeosang’s arm gently. “What’s wrong?”

Yeosang choked slightly, shaking his head, the skin of his face and Wooyoung’s hand slick as more tears burned their way between them-

It hurt. It hurt because Wooyoung was hurt.

The others got hurt.

He sucked in a sharp breath, squeezing his hands tightly as if that could fix it, as if that were something that could heal the scars he had put there-

And it wasn’t guilt. It wasn’t, it was- It was different, but he didn’t know how.

Wooyoung had been nothing but kind and patient and resilient to him.

Wooyoung had sat there beside him, had held his hand, had calmed his fears, had smiled at him like a lantern held aloft in a cave-

Yeosang… Yeosang didn’t believe in life partners.

He didn’t.

He was sure he didn’t.

Maybe Seonghwa and Hongjoong.

But… But Wooyoung… it hurt, it hurt because he was hurting. It didn’t matter what had caused, didn’t matter whose fault it was, he just wanted to stop the hurting-
His life partner was hurting-

A gentle hand touched his hair.

Yeosang was so lost in his own mind, he barely felt it, barely even registered the sensation. It dragged through his hair slowly, resting at his neck and squeezing there gently, massaging the muscles softly.

Yeosang swallowed, saltwater on his lips, and it felt- it was- Wooyoung was-

“It’s okay,” he whispered softly, dragging comforting strokes through his hair. “Whatever it is, it’s okay, I promise-”

It felt… It was…

It was like a hot stone being dropped into his chest. Then another. Another. With each word, with each touch, another heavy stone burning against his ribs, but it…

It filled the cavern. It weighed him down so he didn’t float off, something grounding and… and… and Wooyoung.

Yeosang hated that he couldn’t describe it. Hated the numbness in his tongue, but…

This… was this life partners?

The pain at his pain, the desire to fix…

The same way Wooyoung stared at him during his episodes, as if Yeosang’s own exhaustion were clinging to himself. The way Wooyoung desperately clung to his hands or coaxed speech from him, so assured that it would stop whatever hell Yeosang was spiraling into, as if in that moment, the only thing that mattered was fixing it.

Yeosang’s tears had stopped. But he didn’t move, still pressing to Wooyoung’s skin, as if pulling away would tear whatever fragile string had formed between them.

I think I frightened him at times… acting as if he would disappear if he left my side.

Yeosang felt as if his grip on Wooyoung was the only thing keeping him from floating away. He didn’t feel like an episode were imposing itself, but it felt as if he were only being held down by their weak grips on each other.

It was a thought that had often slipped into his mind as Wooyoung touched him.

Unafraid. Confident. As if Yeosang were simply one of the others, unburdened and free of the things that made him fear himself.

Wooyoung’s hand paused in his hair, the entire world standing still around them.

“Are you okay?” he asked, voice dipping into worry at Yeosang’s prolonged silence.

Yeosang squeezed his eyes until he saw spots, stomach twisting and churning. “I…” It came out a weak rasp, and Yeosang wondered how he always wound up here.

As if holding onto Wooyoung for dear life was the only outcome he could ever face.

“I… I don’t… want to hurt you,” he breathed weakly, hands beginning to shake where they held
Wooyoung’s. “It… it hurts… seeing you hurt. But I don’t... I don’t know how to… to fix it, Wooyoung, I don’t know how-”

Wooyoung hushed him quietly, the hand from his hair dropped to his cheek, but rather than trying to brush the tears away, he tried to tilt his head up to look at him. Yeosang fought the movement for only a moment before Wooyoung whispered a quiet, “Just look at me, Yeosang,” and he braced himself as he stared up at Wooyoung who looked prepared to cry as well, concern and a little bit of apprehension peaking through.

“You don’t have to fix it,” Wooyoung said, voice a little thick, a little hoarse. “Because it’s not your fault it happened. You have nothing to fix, Yeosang.”

“Look at these,” he burst weakly, pushing Wooyoung’s own hand back at him, displaying the cuts and bruises. “Look, and tell me there’s nothing to fix!” he snapped.

Wooyoung pushed his hand away, never looking away from Yeosang. “There’s nothing to fix,” he repeated sternly. “Because you’ve done nothing wrong.”

Yeosang wasn’t satisfied with that answer, his mouth opening again, but Wooyoung sighed quietly. “Do you truly want to do something to fix it?”

Yeosang’s mouth closed, his eyes falling to the half-healed wounds. His hands twitched. He nodded slowly, looking back up at Wooyoung who looked very much like he was indulging Yeosang.

Call it insanity, closure, delusions- whatever- but something inside Yeosang was screaming at him to just fix it, regardless of what that required. His hands shook.

“Fine,” Wooyoung said gently, settling more comfortably with his legs crossed. “Tell me about your life.”

Yeosang frowned, hands loosening on Wooyoung’s instinctively before regrasping, not letting him pull away. “My... life?” Wooyoung nodded pointedly. “That, in no way, would fix this.” Yeosang felt something buzzing in his stomach.

“That’s my decision, isn’t it?” he posed. “I’m the one who was hurt, so I decide how I want you to fix it.”

“Wooyoung, I’m serious-”

“So am I,” he assured him, voice never raising. “You can’t do anything to heal the actual cuts here, so you can make it up by telling me about your life. I told you all about mine.”

Yeosang pressed his lips together, the tip of annoyance sprouting in his chest, but it wasn’t anger, it was… almost flustered. Almost embarrassed.

“I don’t… remember anything about it.” He had spent some time thinking back, but all he could ever see was the man, the tent… his backpack… and then shapes. Voices he couldn’t hear. Shapes he couldn’t make out. It was so frustrating, he just stopped.

Wooyoung nodded encouragingly. “You remembered the snack cakes.”

Yeosang sighed harshly. “That was a fluke.”

“Well, do whatever made that fluke happen again,” Wooyoung coaxed. “Come on, Yeosang, what
can it hurt?”

So much. So much, and Yeosang looked away, shaking his head sharply, but still unable to release Wooyoung’s hands as his chest squeezed painfully.

It did hurt. It hurt because he couldn’t remember. He couldn’t remember his trip, he couldn’t remember his life, he didn’t even remember half the people he had killed. Everything blurred together, like these days passing by, just endless and continuous and it made his head ache because there was just an eternity of nothing. Nothing and darkness and cold and emptiness and pain and so alone and there was nothing, just- just-

Just the tent, the man, the rain, the pain, the loneliness, the woman, his backpack, the snack cakes, the photo torn to shreds on the ground-

Yeosang felt like something had just been buried deep and mercilessly into his chest.

He jerked away, his hands tearing away from Wooyoung’s as they jumped to his chest, a pained shout leaving him as he clutched at the searing iron pressing to his skin.

Distantly, he heard Wooyoung yelling his name, but there was a loud ringing in his ears, making it impossible to hear.

Why did it hurt so bad? He hadn’t felt this with the snack cakes, why did it burn-

He saw faces staring at from a piece of paper.

His own face. A little girl’s face. A man and a woman, arms wrapped around each other and laughing as the girl tugged at his hair-

“You’re sure you’ve packed everything?”

“Yes, Mom, can you stop worrying so much?”

“Why can’t I come?”

“Because you’re still a little kid.”

“Yeosang.”

“Sorry, Dad.”

“Just be safe while you’re out there. It’s supposed to rain later in the week.”

“I’ve camped at the mountain before, I’ll be fine. Besides, Minyoung is meeting me there in a couple of days.”

“I don’t trust Minyoung with my good China, much less my son.”

“Mom, I’m going to miss the train if you keep nagging.”

“Alright, fine! Just go, then. Call us everyday and let us know you’re safe.”

“Don’t worry so much. It’s just camping. There’ll be people around the site in case anything happens. Which it won’t.”

Yeosang gasped, his lungs heaving in air, as his limbs flew, his head whipping around, looking for
kind hands that stroked his face to wish him luck, for sticky hands that grabbed his hair just to piss
him off, for heavy touches on his shoulder to congratulate him for his grades-

Gentle but stern hands held him down, not pinning but not allowing him to move.

“-sang. Yeosang.”

He felt like he had the wind knocked out of him, frantic eyes flickering wildly, seeing faces and
people, but nothing registered-

He lunged forward at the nearest body, a loud gasp echoing in his mind, but he just slammed into
their chest, hands grasping at whatever they could find- clothing and arms- his head burying in
there chest as saltwater burned down his face.

Arms caught around him, hesitating only a moment before crushing him against them-

Yeosang felt like he was burning. Like his veins had been replaced with live wires, sparking and
thrumming with a million volts of electricity, his skin buzzing and rippling with painful warmth
that encased him more fully that he could ever recall-

The embrace was almost painful with its grip, but Yeosang tried to press closer, his lungs heaving
and a broken sob muffled by their shirt-

His parents. His sister.

He hadn’t even… in all these years, he had never thought of them. He had never thought or missed
his family specifically, as if he had forgotten he had ever had one-

He had forgotten them.

He remembered them.

Unlike before… his chest wasn’t empty. It felt full to bursting, painfully straining against his
ribcage, crushing his lungs and forcing its way into his throat-

It was so warm.

It hurt so badly.

The weight of the person against him felt like it was crushing him, but he welcomed it, welcomed
the sensation of being held, being comforted, he wasn’t alone-

He had lost his family, but he wasn’t alone, he wasn’t alone, he wasn’t-

“You’re not,” a voice whispered, strained and thin. “You’re not alone, Yeosang.”

He froze, almost forgetting that the thing he was wrapped within was a person, his breath stalling
for a moment as he gripped the fabric of their shirt hard enough to tear it. His entire body was
shaking, as if he was going to tear his very molecules apart from each other.

He shifted his head very slowly, his muscles aching as he stared at the dark purple he recognized
from Wooyoung’s shirt.

He couldn’t look up, his head tucking tightly beneath Wooyoung’s chin, his arms still crushing
him to his chest.
Wooyoung was the one holding him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Seonghwa kneeling on the ground, watching Yeosang with an open sadness that made his chest twist. Hongjoong sat just outside of his vision, making his expression unreadable, but their fingers were linked tightly, Seonghwa’s resting atop Hongjoong’s, encasing his hand completely, and rubbing his thumb across the back of his hand.

Yeosang wanted to move. He wanted to pull away, to face them, to demand what the hell had happened-

But he just fell back against Wooyoung’s chest, closing his eyes.

He was so tired. He felt like someone had attached weights to his limbs, dragging him down and down and down-

But Wooyoung’s grip was tight, rock solid and warm-

Yeosang felt like he was being burned alive, from every part of his body, flames licking at his skin, but it was… the best sensation he had ever felt. He pressed closer, arms winding around Wooyoung’s waist and clutching at the back of his shirt desperately.

“I’ve got you,” Wooyoung whispered, voice breaking slightly. “I’ve got you, I’m sorry, Yeosang, I’ve got you~”

His eyes were closed. And Yeosang… Yeosang felt no desire to open them.

It was not a conscious thought. The only thought he had was of warmth and exhaustion. But he kept his eyes closed, allowing his body to rest completely against Wooyoung-

Trusting him to keep him up. Trusting his eyes to close.

He didn’t sleep. His body was too strung out for that, too tired, even as his mind raged too violently to sleep.

A hand rubbed up and down his spine (not Wooyoung’s, he could feel both of his pressing against his back). It was too small to be Seonghwa’s.

Hongjoong’s hand was warm, trailing a flickering flame along his spine.

No one spoke. Yeosang felt like he should say something, should move, should explain himself-

He was so tired.

“You can rest,” Seonghwa’s voice assured him, gentle and coaxing. “Just rest for now, Yeosang.”

He didn’t sleep. But as time passed, his muscles began to unlock from their death grip on his bones, leaving him aching and bruised.

Wooyoung shifted as he relaxed, and Yeosang seized up, reaffirming his half-loosened grip on his shirt, pressing closer with a desperate cry rising in his throat- He didn’t want to be alone-

Wooyoung held him tight enough to hurt, hushing him quickly. “I’m not going anywhere,” he promised. “We’re just laying down.”

Yeosang didn’t loosen his grip as Wooyoung shifted until Yeosang’s back hit his little mat. He rolled them slightly, both of them on their sides, still tucked against him, and Yeosang…
Yoosang… had never been touched like this.

Wooyoung was everywhere. He could feel his chest moving, his hands stroking the fabric of his shirt, his knees bumping against Yoosang’s, his cheek resting against the top of Yoosang’s head-

It was sensory overload, making him want to twist away-

It burned, but Yoosang never wanted it to be extinguished. It felt like being wrapped in… in something, but it was all-encompassing and surrounding, as if he were breathing in Wooyoung with each rise and fall of his chest. It dug into his chest, into his blood, into his mind, and it made everything just…

Warm.

Yoosang didn’t fall asleep. And he could tell by Wooyoung’s continued touches that he wasn’t either. He didn’t know if Seonghwa and Hongjoong were still there. But it felt like years before he coughed weakly, face still buried in Wooyoung’s chest.

“I…”

Wooyoung paused, as if turning his everything to listening to Yoosang whose hand shook where it twisting in the back of his shirt. His voice stuck in his chest, and Wooyoung waited patiently.

“I… remember… my parents,” he breathed, just saying the words making his eyes sting and his throat close. He had to clear it roughly to go on as Wooyoung’s grip tightened somehow. “My sister…” His voice wavered.

Wooyoung’s breathing changed. “You… remembered them?” he asked, voice rough from not speaking.

Yoosang nodded as best he could. “I… had a picture… of them. In my tent.” Something sharp was buried in his chest. “They don’t… They don’t even know… what happened to me.” The sting in his eyes turned to a burn as he squeezed his eyes shut as if it would keep the emotions back. “I just never- never came back- They didn’t know-” He voice wavered dangerously.

He wondered if they had looked for him. If people could look at the dead bodies and the missing boy and make a connection.

He couldn’t press any closer to Wooyoung, but that didn’t stop him from trying, chasing the warmth to burn away the pain.

“I know,” he whispered, voice shaking, one hand jumping to stroke Yoosang’s hair softly enough he could mistake it for a breeze. “I know, Yoosang, I’m sorry-”

Yoosang felt something wet drop against his skin, and his head snapped up, almost slamming against Wooyoung’s jaw, but suddenly they were staring at each other, Yoosang’s eyes wide and clear even as tears slipped out. Wooyoung’s misty with pain, and his damp cheek reflecting the dim light around them.

Yoosang stared. Wooyoung didn’t move.

Almost in a trance, Yoosang’s eyes released Wooyoung’s shirt, his hand slowly moving upward until his fingertips brushed the tear streaks.

Wooyoung’s eyes closed pushing more tears down his cheeks, and Yoosang’s stomach twisted.
“Why are you crying for me?” he breathed, eyes searching Wooyoung’s tight expression.

Wooyoung opened his eyes, confusion peaking through the pain. “Wh-What the hell kind of question is that?” he demanded weakly.

Yeosang… wasn’t sure what he was supposed to say to that. His mouth opened, but nothing came out, and Wooyoung just closed his eyes, shaking his head as he cupped the back of Yeosang’s head, pulling him down against his chest once more.

Yeosang stared at the fabric of his shirt as Wooyoung held him there. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, voice wavering. “Just- Just try to sleep or something, okay?”

Yeosang didn’t want to sleep. He didn’t know what he wanted, but sleep wasn’t it. He just wished he could… could understand everything. What he was feeling, what it meant, why he remembered, why it hurt-

Instead, he just clung to Wooyoung because there was one thing he did know: Wooyoung was safe. Wooyoung was familiar. He didn’t need to understand anything else at the moment.

The mat was thick enough to protect his hip from the stone floor, and he tried to be comfortable against Wooyoung. He heard, vaguely the sound of metal bars clanking as they settled, and Yeosang was hit with a very alarming realization.

Wooyoung was inside the cell.

There were no bars separating the two of them. Nothing between Wooyoung and Yeosang if he somehow went into an episode.

The thought was startling enough to almost make him rip himself away, shove Wooyoung from the cell and lock himself back in.

But once again… the fear of hurting him was muted by the fear of being left alone. He pressed closer selfishly.

They said that life partners would keep him grounded, right? They had noted that being close with them had lessened his episodes, so as long as he was here, Yeosang should be okay.

Wooyoung should be okay.

Time ticked past. Yeosang truly had no idea how long. Wooyoung didn’t sleep, and he could make out the gentle breaths of others in the cellar. He didn’t know how many.

Yeosang didn’t want to sleep. But, he seemed to not have a choice as he closed his eyes to blink after what seemed like years of keeping them open. When he tried to open them, exhaustion kept them closed.

He didn’t even remember falling asleep.

But he suddenly woke up.

He jerked slightly, coming back to awareness all at once, and if Yeosang thought it was an experience waking up with people around him, it was something surreal to wake up pressed against someone.

He could tell Wooyoung was asleep, the consistent rise and fall of his chest giving him away. He
was still holding Yeosang tightly, but they were no longer chest to chest. Yeosang was flipped onto his other side, facing the bars of the cell, Wooyoung pressed up against his back, arms locked over Yeosang’s chest like a safety belt.

His own hands were clasped over Wooyoung’s, loose in sleep, but still holding on.

Yeosang’s chest felt like a balloon was slowly being expanded inside of it.

He opened his eyes slowly, still sluggish and lethargic, and saw the bars of the cell, but beyond them, he realized they were still not alone.

He also realized that the two sitting against the wall were what woke him up, their quiet whispers just loud enough to be understandable in the silence around them.

Hongjoong’s head rested against Seonghwa’s chest, the other’s arm wrapped tightly around his shoulders, holding him close.

Hongjoong’s eyes were closed, his breathing coming a little quicker as his hand tangled tightly with Seonghwa’s free one, their knuckles white on each other.

Seonghwa rubbed his arm without releasing his hold on him. “-yourself,” he whispered, almost inaudible. “Calm yourself, I am right here.”

Hongjoong nodded jerkily, his eyes squeezing shut tightly, as if in pain.

Hongjoong still gets them sometimes.

Seonghwa kissed the top of his head, in a startling display of affection, and simply rested his lips there, continuing to whisper things that were lost in Hongjoong’s hair.

I… I’m not really sure how he deals with them, since Seonghwa is always the one there.

Yeosang felt like he was watching something he very much was not meant to say. And he knew that both Wooyoung and the two of them had spoken of how Hongjoong and Seonghwa were different, they were special, they were their own separate thing…

But it still startled and shocked and stunned him when Hongjoong suddenly lifted his head, kissing Seonghwa desperately, hand tangling in his hair. Seonghwa met him calmly, hand dragging up and down his spine comfortingly as he pulled away, both hands coming to cup Hongjoong’s face gently.

“Look at me,” Seonghwa coaxed gently, waiting until Hongjoong had opened his eyes and lifted them to meet Seonghwa’s, shimmering pools of darkness. Yeosang waited for him to speak, to offer some sort of word of comfort or reassurance…

Seonghwa was silent.

They simply remained staring at each other quietly, Seonghwa’s thumbs brushing against the curve of Hongjoong’s cheeks, and Hongjoong’s hands grasping at Seonghwa’s shirt.

And without a word, Yeosang saw Hongjoong’s shoulder unbunch, some of the tension leaving him as Seonghwa drew him into a tight embrace, head tucked safely beneath his chin, his eyes closing as Hongjoong breathed slowly against him. As if just his presence had calmed something inside him.
“You and Yeosang are different entities,” Seonghwa whispered, again almost too quiet for Yeosang to make out. “But you both are cursed with hearts too soft.”

“I am not too soft,” Hongjoong muttered into Seonghwa’s chest. “I simply… am worried for him. He has made alarming progress, and has even begun to remember his life. I do not want them to be disappointed.”

“They understand the time they must commit to this,” Seonghwa assured him. “You need not fear for them being caught off guard by the passing of time.”

There was a long silence before Hongjoong sighed gently, turning his face to Seonghwa’s neck. “They do not deserve this,” he breathed. “None of them deserve the hand they have been dealt. Yeosang should not have to bear this burden of darkness. Wooyoung should not have the burden of a life placed in his hands.”

“You did not deserve it either.”

Yeosang’s stomach swooped, but Hongjoong chuckled, kissing Seonghwa’s neck, and when he pulled away, Yeosang was surprised to see a small curve to his lips. “We have long since passed that storm.”

Seonghwa nodded, examining his face sternly. “I am simply ensuring you remember. You often act as if you had forgotten that.”

Hongjoong’s eyes were warm as he pressed a gentle kiss to Seonghwa’s lips, pulling away shortly. “You could never allow me to forget.” The warmth in his eyes did not dim, but the upturn of his lips smoothed into a gentle frown as he lowered his eyes to stare at his hand that grasped Seonghwa’s. “They are so young, Seonghwa.”

“We were, too, once.”

Hongjoong looked up, as if prepared to dispute, but Seonghwa silenced with him a quick finger to his lips. “We are not the same as them, Hongjoong,” he said sternly. “And that is as true for our faults as well as our strengths. They do not have the luxury of the time we did, but they do have more support than we had at our disposal.”

Hongjoong sighed, lowering his head, and Yeosang thought he would continue to dispute, but he simply nodded.

Seonghwa ran a hand through the smaller’s hair, and Yeosang felt his own skin tingle in memory. Hongjoong leaned into the hand that caressed his cheek. “No one in his home would ever question that you would take every burden from them if you could.”

Hongjoong chuckled, a warm, sad sound as he lifted his eyes to Seonghwa’s. “As if it would do me any good when you simply take every burden I gain from me.”

Watching them… hurt.

Centuries, Wooyoung had said. Trust, Seonghwa said. Healing, Hongjoong said.

Yeosang could tell. They were different. They were…

They were special.
Their foreheads rested together, and Yeosang tried to imagine what it might be like to be that comfortable with another’s touch. He wondered if they felt fire when they touched.

He closed his eyes when their smiles became too warm to bear, tucking his head away.

He felt like he had seen something not meant to be seen. But he couldn’t feel guilt. It felt necessary to see. Like it was another puzzle piece being handed to him.

And it stuck it together, right next to Wooyoung holding his hands, the others smiling as they offered him their objects to play with, Seonghwa holding the knife, and Hongjoong telling him he would learn to trust himself.

He couldn’t tell what picture was being made. But it was getting bigger, whatever it was.

Yeosang stayed in the silence. Hongjoong and Seonghwa had stopped speaking, sitting in silence.

Wooyoung was warm against his back. And it was almost gentle, rather than searing.

He swallowed thickly, squeezing his eyes shut. Wooyoung was different from the others. He treated Yeosang differently, and Yeosang reacted to him differently.

He couldn’t think anymore. Rather than giving in and sleeping, he simply existed in Wooyoung’s warmth, counting the seconds and Wooyoung’s breaths.

Behind his eyelids, he saw proud, smiling faces and pink sneakers being showed off. A garden around a house. A wall of photos of which he was in each.

A torn apart tent as he stumbled off into torrential rain.

But it wasn’t… cold.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Yeosang woke up with the sound of voices tossing back and forth over his head.

He groaned lightly, trying to tuck his head into his pillow, but only hitting something hard.

There was a hand burning a brand into the small of his back as he shifted, blinking slowly and turning over carefully.

He blinked awake to Wooyoung’s eyes dangerously close to his.

For a moment, they simply stared at each other, and Yeosang lifted a hand, rubbing at his face.

“You okay?” Wooyoung asked carefully.

Yeosang swallowed, trying his hardest to keep memories of everything that happened at bay. He nodded slowly, placing a hand against Wooyoung chest and pushing against him until he could turn over and see the room at large.

Hongjoong sat outside, legs crossed and eyes gentle as he smiled at Yeosang. “Good morning,” he greeted. “You had quite a night, didn’t you?”
Yeosang sat up slowly, Wooyoung hesitantly releasing him to let him straighten, his mind feeling like it was moving through honey. It suddenly felt cold without Wooyoung pressed against him, but it felt like more of a body temperature thing than a… in his soul thing.

There was quiet as he scrubbed at his face, looking between Wooyoung sitting up beside him and Hongjoong outside the cell.

“Why are you in here with me?” he asked, too tired to feel true fear for Wooyoung’s safety.

Wooyoung managed a weak smile. “Well, it didn’t seem like you were going to let me leave even if I wanted to.” The smile flickered, threatening to fade before disappearing and leaving an empty space.

Yeosang frowned. “What… happened?”

“You scared the shit out of me, that’s what happened,” Wooyoung burst, not angry but louder than his regular speaking voice. “I thought I’d fucking killed you.”

“Wooyoung,” Hongjoong said patiently, and the younger ducked his head, sighing harshly. Yeosang’s head turned to the other who gave a small, hesitant smile. “Rogue minds are fickle. Things will set them off, and some things… they don’t know how to deal with. Similar to your reaction when Wooyoung first touched you. Usually, memories don’t start returning until… a little further along in the healing process. It speaks volumes for you that you’re able to begin remembering.”

Yeosang swallowed. “I remembered…” He was careful not to think about them. “My family.”

Hongjoong nodded in understanding. “It was an overload to your mind,” he explained patiently. “Rogues are convinced that the darkness they live in is all there is. So when they remember their past lives, it can distress them. You remembered your family, and… well, you sort of collapsed for a short while.” His lips twitched, but there was no amusement. “Wooyoung ran to get us when you didn’t respond to him. You scared him half to death.”

“I asked you to remember, and then you collapsed!” Wooyoung burst again, but fell silent after a quick look from Hongjoong.

“We stayed with you afterwards,” he explained. “You… well, you were rather attached to the first person you found, which happened to be Wooyoung. Seonghwa and I remained here while Wooyoung kept you company as you slept. Seonghwa is currently checking in with the others, after asked a few… polling questions.”

Yeosang wet his lips nervously. “I… I didn’t… do anything?”

Hongjoong’s smile was warm. “You didn’t have an episode,” Hongjoong assured him. “Not that we thought you would. We just wanted to make sure you didn’t have any issues while you slept.”

Yeosang turned to Wooyoung who was glaring at the ground, fingers picking at his fingernails. “You can go now,” he murmured, eyeing the cell door that was half-ajar. Wooyoung looked up, frowning. Yeosang nodded to the door. “You don’t have to sit with me anymore. I’m okay.”

Not that he wanted Wooyoung to leave. He was currently fighting the urge to grasp his twitching hands and use them as an anchor, but he didn’t trust his prolonged peace. After so long without an episode, another was bound to be on the horizon.

What he didn’t prepared himself for was… Wooyoung blinking, frowning as if… as if he was hurt
by the suggestion. As if Yeosang had just said something hurtful.

Yeosang’s throat closed at the sight. “I-I- My episodes-”

His words left him as Wooyoung opened his mouth, but Hongjoong spoke up behind him.

“Yeosang.” He turned, meeting Hongjoong’s eyes that were firm. “I have a question for you.”

Was now the time? With Wooyoung still in the cell with him, and a potential episode at his tail? He frowned, confused by Hongjoong relaxation despite Wooyoung’s presence so close to him with nothing between them.

Hongjoong searched his face, as if Yeosang could speak through his eyes, expression sober.

“Would you like to come out of the cellar?”

Wooyoung thought that Yeosang had been turned to stone. The way his body seized as his breathing seemed to stop as he stared at Hongjoong.

His knuckles were white where his fists clenched, shaking.

And Wooyoung almost told Hongjoong to change his mind, if only to stop Yeosang from looking so fucking terrified.

Hongjong stared on impassively for a moment. “We’ve been discussing this for a few days. We asked the others how they would feel if we began allowing you a chance to wander outside of the cell. They all agreed and welcomed the sugg-”

“Are you insane?” Yeosang snapped, making Wooyoung wince at his voice that was pitched towards fear. “You want me- I still have episodes! Do you want them to get hurt?”

Hongjoong made no reaction. “How many episodes have you had in the past days?” He posed patiently. “They’ve decreased drastically with your allowed interactions with the others, but they will never go away completely until you are able to fully place yourself among a coven. I told you before, you are not meant to be in there, Yeosang.”

“I’m still dangerous!” Yeosang snapped. “I don’t even know why you let him in here with me!” He threw a hand back towards Wooyoung, who grit his teeth to hold back an automatic response.

“You have to learn to trust yourself, Yeosang. You cannot get bet-”

“Trust myself?” he hissed, drawing away from the bars. “How am I supposed to trust myself when the last time I was near them, I tried to kill them?”

“We are not letting you out with the expectation that you won’t have an episode,” Hongjoong said firmly. “We are not letting you out with the expectation that no one will be hurt. But for your sake… for the sake of your recovery, we have measures set in place to allow you to heal while protecting the others.”

“I can’t control it, Hongjoong!” he snapped, fear making his voice rise. “If someone makes one
mistake, and I-” His voice died, the volume snuffed out like a candle. “What if I…” His eyes flickered to Wooyoung frantically as anger died to fear. “I don’t… I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Have you hurt me?”

Yeosang whipped around, and Wooyoung met wide, wild brown eyes that questioned his sanity. Wooyoung, however, had never been more sure of anything in his entire life.

“I’ve been in here with you for the better part of 24 hours, Yeosang,” he said plainly, the stone hard against his back as Yeosang continued to stare. “You haven’t done a thing to me.”

“That doesn’t mean I never will!”

“But it means that there are times when you won’t,” Wooyoung pressed, pushing away from the wall.

He always tried to respect Yeosang’s barriers. He knew that he was frightened and easily startled, so he tried to coax him into his own decision. Allowing him to take Wooyoung’s hand instead of simply grabbing Yeosang’s, even if he knew that was what he wanted.

He had to learn to trust himself.

Wooyoung stood, making Yeosang scoot backwards a little as he marched to the cell door and pushed it open the rest of the way, holding a hand out.

Yeosang looked so small, his eyes staring at Wooyoung and flickering to the open door behind him, almost begging him to close it.

Wooyoung stood his ground, wetting his lips. “You don’t trust yourself,” Wooyoung said.

He had had a lot of time to think while he held Yeosang.

“And that’s okay,” he assured him.

And he realized that he had been placing too much responsibility on Yeosang.

He put his hand farther forward. “But at least trust us,” he begged.

He realized that even though time had nothing to do with life partners, he was already too deep with Yeosang to wait on the sidelines.

“Trust us to keep you and ourselves safe. For your sake.”

He realized that no matter how scared Yeosang was, there were steps that needed to be taken. Hongjoong and Seonghwa had said it plainly: Yeosang may half-heal within the cell, but he could never completely heal until he was allowed to exist completely with them.

Wooyoung took a half-step forward.

Yeosang stared at him as if Wooyoung were speaking a language he had heard so much, but couldn’t understand more than a handful of words from.

Another half step.

He stared at him with fear. Hongjoong hadn’t said a thing, but Wooyoung wasn’t looking at him.
He held his hand out. Another step.

Yeosang dropped his eyes from Wooyoung’s face to his hand, as if it were holding a knife tip to his throat. As if taking it was grabbing the end of a branding iron.

He took one final step, his hand just within reach of Yeosang’s, if he ever took it.

He mouth was dry. “We’re not getting out of this unscathed, Yeosang,” he said plainly. “It’s time to accept that… and let yourself heal. Stop holding yourself back because you’re scared of what might happen to us.”

Yeosang shrank away from the hand slightly, but not completely.

“Be selfish for a little while,” Wooyoung said, voice dropping. Yeosang lifted bright eyes to his, staring almost in awe. “Take what you need to heal. While you can.”

Yeosang’s hand twitched. His eyes fell back to Wooyoung’s hand, chewing his lip hard enough that Wooyoung was afraid he’d break the skin.

“Everyone here signed up for this, Yeosang,” he promised as Yeosang’s hand slowly… slowly… began to reach for his, Yeosang looking prepared to snatch it back at any moment. “And we’re not going to stop until you’re happy.”

Yeosang swallowed.


Happy. Smiling. At peace, for once in his life.

Yeosang’s hand was trembling concerningly, but it slid into Wooyoung’s regardless, chilled fingers wrapping around his weakly.

Wooyoung curled his around Yeosang’s tightly, beginning to tug gently. Yeosang look practically petrified as he got to his knees. Then his feet, the weight on Wooyoung’s hand growing as Yeosang used him to keep himself up.

It was only three steps to the door that was still open. Wooyoung held Yeosang’s gaze as he guided him towards it.

Yeosang’s eyes flickered like a caged animal, from Wooyoung to the door to Hongjoong to behind him-

They reached the door, and Yeosang jerked to a stop.

He stared at Wooyoung desperately. “Promise me you won’t let me hurt anyone,” he whispered quickly, as if they were on a time limit for an answer.

Wooyoung squeezed his hand, knowing that there was a dagger at Hongjoong’s hip. “We are going to do everything in our power to keep everyone safe, Yeosang. Including you.”

One more step backwards, and Wooyoung was out of the cell.

Yeosang looked ill, glancing around as if waiting for something to fall from the ceiling. Wooyoung stopped pulling. Just stood outside and offered a weak smile to Yeosang.

The last step was his to take.
Yeosang stared at his feet, than glanced to Hongjoong. Wooyoung didn’t see what Hongjoong did, but Yeosang held his breath, taking one more step, his foot landing outside of the cell.

It was such an anticlimactic scene.

Yeosang had even been upstairs, when Seonghwa and Hongjoong let him shower, but it was with the understanding that he was not to be trusted, that he was going right back where he had come from. They escorted him as guards, not as companions.

This was different. Wooyoung could feel it in the way Yeosang shook as if he were about to collapse.

His smile grew as he squeezed Yeosang’s hand, drawing his terrified eyes to his.

“Are you ready?” he asked quietly, not sure he could make his voice go louder.

Yeosang shook his head quickly, but still clasped at Wooyoung’s hand, warm and shaking, and Wooyoung clutched it right back.

Wooyoung chuckled, almost wanting to cry as Yeosang stared with wide eyes that had experienced so much, but nothing that he should have.

“That’s okay,” he assured him. “Because we are.”

Chapter End Notes

Wooooo progress!! I’ve been waiting for this part of the story!!! (Truthfully this whole thing was supposed to be a little fic but I can’t cut back my writing to save my life~)
But really do let me know if this was too much to shove into one chapter!
But hopefully it was good enough!
Let me know what you though, and have an amazing day, lovelies~~
-SS
A Discovery

Chapter Notes

I don’t know how I feel about this, but I proofread at top speed, so I hope you can enjoy it!
Hopefully it’s not too disjointed, I wrote it a LITTLE out of order, but let me know if I need to smooth anything out!
Thank you to everyone who commented and asked questions, you are my motivation!!
Have an amazing day!!
- SS

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yeosang kept very still.

As if moving too quickly may trigger an episode.

Everyone held their breath.

They stood in the living room, Yeosang practically crushing Wooyoung’s hand in his, but Wooyoung wouldn’t dare let go as everyone stood without purpose around the space.

Everyone stood very still. As if moving too quickly might trigger an episode.

The thing now was: what did they do?

Yeosang spent his days before just sitting in a corner, and now he was free to do whatever he pleased, but it didn’t seem like there was much he thought to do.

Or, at least, Yeosang was too terrified to attempt anything, pressing close to Wooyoung as if that would help.

It had resulted in an attempt to just sit around the kitchen and talk, mostly the seven of them conversing and Yeosang sitting there, staring at Wooyoung’s hand, stiff as a board.

He never relaxed. No matter what Wooyoung or the others would tell him, there was no way to tell that Yeosang had not been turned to stone. The fear that painted his eyes was deep and unquenchable.

Being outside the cell seemed to have turned Yeosang to stone. Fear making him still and silent.

Wooyoung was constantly on the lookout for signs of an episode, but so far, after hours of sitting around and being exposed… they were still okay. Even if he couldn’t feel his hand anymore.

He kept glancing at Yeosang, who refused to meet his eyes, but he could see the strain around his eyes and mouth, and Wooyoung almost was beginning to wonder if it was worth it to bring him out here right now. But for now, at least, everything seemed okay.

Until Mingi got too uncomfortable with the silence that had fallen and cleared his throat, announcing that he was going to start cleaning up the counters.
The counters were spotless, thanks to Seonghwa, and the only thing he had to do was putting away the dishes that were sitting to dry.

Conversation picked up slowly, until there was the sound of a glass shattering on the ground.

And this was the first time Wooyoung had seen something other than blood actually be the trigger for an episode.

He jerked his hand from Yeosang’s even as the other’s body slamming into his, shoving him from his chair and pinning him to the ground with painful claws, Wooyoung giving a cut-off cry at the pain.

There was Seonghwa behind Yeosang, grabbing him and throwing him off of Wooyoung-

Wooyoung swore he saw Yeosang’s eyes flash brown for a moment, jarring the blood sitting in his chest, but then they were red again, snarling at Seonghwa who pinned him with the knife.

Barely seconds later and Yeosang was crying softly, apologies and sobs falling like raindrops down a window. Wooyoung swallowed thickly and tried to keep himself from rushing over.

Seonghwa brushed his hair away gently, setting the dagger aside and helping him sit up.

“It isn’t your fault, Yeosang.”

Yeosang, however, looked passed Seonghwa at Wooyoung who showed off his hands as proof. “You didn’t even break skin,” he said, even if the spot where his nails had dug in still ached.

Yeosang simply stared at him, eyes shattered, and Wooyoung was quick to move closer. Yeosang almost tried to back away, arms drawing close, but Wooyoung caught his hand quickly, keeping him still.

“Hey,” he said softly, squeezing his hand. “You’re doing fine,” he assured him. “You didn’t hurt anyone.”

“I hurt you.” It was a dark tone.

“Yeah, but I’m just a baby when it comes to stuff like that,” he said quickly. “It didn’t actually hurt that much.”

Yeosang clearly didn’t believe him. Was clearly slowly retreating in the wake of the episodem but Wooyoung cupped his hand in both of his, rubbing the skin soothingly, waiting for Yeosang to stop breathing so hard.

After several minutes and calming down and quiet whispers, Yeosang started to shift into a position to stand up. They returned to the table, Yeosang keeping even more to himself, curling in his chair, but he still held Wooyoung’s hand tightly.

It was not a good feeling. But it was something. They sat, they talked, Yeosang was silent, frightened, and shaking as Wooyoung held his hand tightly, brushing his thumb over the back it here and there.

Three days passed similarly. Episodes scattered throughout them. Each without any major injury to anyone aside from a small scrape.

Night time was…
Seonghwa told him that their best option was to continue to let Yeosang sleep in the cellar, since his sleep tended to be volatile, and he simply nodded as he and Wooyoung stood, walking with Seonghwa back down the stairs as the others called for him to have a good night.

Yeosang was completely fine with and supportive of sleeping in the cell, until the moment his eyes laid on the iron bars. He stared at them, and everything in his body suddenly wanted to run. He didn’t want to go back. Didn’t want to let go. Didn’t want to be trapped. Didn’t want to be alone.

Yeosang had barely even taken a single stumbling step back before Wooyoung was tightening his hold, pulling Yeosang into a tight hug that Yeosang returned at a painful speed, burying his head in Wooyoung’s neck.

“No,” he breathed, shaking his head, fear pumping. “I don’t- I don’t want to go back in- Please-” Wooyoung had dragged him back up the stairs before Yeosang could even finish begging, and as far as Yeosang could tell, this was without consultation from Seonghwa. Wooyoung dropped until they both crouched on the ground, Yeosang shaking in his grasp.

“Hey,” he said quickly, but Yeosang didn’t want to meet his eyes. Wooyoung’s hands cupped his cheek gently, turning his face upward, and Yeosang finally gave in, meeting his eyes that burned worse than his touch. “Yeosang, you- Calm down,” he coaxed gently, thumbs rubbing over Yeosang’s cheeks. “Yeosang, you don’t have to stay down there. Listen to me- you don’t have to stay down there. Do you understand?” Yeosang nodded quickly, clutching at Wooyoung’s wrists that held his face, searching his eyes for a lie.

Seonghwa crouched down beside them, eyes heavy as Yeosang tried to keep breathing through the fading panic. “We can find other arrangements,” he promised. “If you don’t want to, you don’t have to go back down there.”

Yeosang had wanted to go back. Had wanted to make sure that even in sleep, the others could keep safe. But the thought of going back, of letting go-

He tucked his head into Wooyoung’s neck, who simply let him cling.

It had taken a while, but Yeosang finally realized that Wooyoung smelled like mint.

Wooyoung was different.

The “arrangement” was Yeosang laying beside Wooyoung in Hongjoong and Seonghwa’s bed while the two of them sat in chairs along the side of the room, speaking quietly after wishing the two boys good night.

Yeosang felt guilty, knowing that the two of them would not sleep, to ensure nothing happened, but Wooyoung was quick to squeeze his hand.
“Seonghwa and Hongjoong don’t sleep half the time anyway,” he assured him. “They’re old, they don’t need it as much as we do.” He smirked, like it was a funny joke, and Yeosang simply nodded.

He wanted to press close, but fear and distrust of himself made him simply hold onto Wooyoung’s hand, laying on his back and staring at the ceiling. He knew he would likely not fall asleep, knowing that Wooyoung was so close and that there was nothing between them. More than likely, Wooyoung wouldn’t sleep either, knowing that at any moment Yeosang could-

Wooyoung tossed and turned, jerking Yeosang’s hand, and he glanced down, frowning, his heart flipping as he stared at Wooyoung’s clearly sleeping face.

Was he insane? At the very least, his common sense should have told him to stay awake until Yeosang fell asleep.

Trust.

He stared for several seconds, taking in his gently sleeping face. The soft set of his eyes and lips and jaw.

Wooyoung’s face was always gentle, but it was often twisting in concern or laughter or frowns, but here, it was just soft relaxation and sleep, making him look… he looked…

Yeosang faced the ceiling again, sure he would get no sleep.

Wooyoung was different.

Yeosang did fall asleep, but it did not come quickly.

Yeosang fell into the pattern of having episodes, still random, but he began to respond to things, rather than simply losing himself wildly.

Hongjoong said this was a good thing. Rather than continuous, random episodes, his body was beginning to save the violence as a response to something, rather than a constant need. Yeosng, of course, looked as if he didn’t truly believe this was better. Wooyoung took Hongjoong’s word for it.

It made sense.

Someone slammed a door too loud. San yelled a little too loud when Mingi sat on him. Each time, Yeosang would look around, as if looking for something that was about to hurt him.

It was an interesting change. A concerning one. One that made Wooyoung feel a twinge of pity because it was like it had become a defense mechanism for when Yeosang got surprised or thought he might get hurt. As if he would get hurt around them.

But at least, it was something they could likely control, everyone hissing at others to shut up when they got too loud. Yeosang, however, only seemed to shrink further and further with each episode, as if he were sliding down a slope, rather than scaling it bravely.

And there were several times that Wooyoung would swear that Yeosang would blink during an episode, and his eyes would be brown.
Day 5 brought about a… terrifying and alarming episode.

It was Yunho who glanced around at their awkward evening of sitting around and trying to hold a conversation while Yeosang curled up in his seat, crushing Wooyoung’s hand. He cleared his throat, looking around, but landing on Yeosang. “Do you… want to watch a movie?” he asked carefully.

It took Yeosang several moments to hear the silence following that, and to look up and see Yunho was talking to him. He swallowed as everyone stared at him. Wooyoung squeezed his hand, sending a pulse of electricity up his arm.

Yeosang simply shrugged, staring at his feet resolutely, as if looking them in the eyes would trigger an episode.

A movie was the only thing they could think of after days of just standing around and talking. What did you do to occupy someone who hadn’t been sane enough to speak to another person in years? Yeosang clearly wasn’t in the mood to sit and color. Wooyoung had wondered if they should maybe try and give him some alone time, but Yeosang seemed to want anything but that by how Wooyoung’s fingers were beginning to ache.

“Let’s watch a movie,” San decided, smiling his best. “And if we get bored, we can just turn it off.”

Wooyoung looked to Yeosang, a question in his gaze.

Yeosang just shrugged, shoulders hunching. “Whatever is fine,” he whispered.

So, they moved to the living room.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong stood near the door, observing, as they tended to do. Still in the room, but letting the others try and stumble their way around. (It was a skill they were going to need.)

Mingi gave Wooyoung a questioning look, gesturing to the couch that was being fought over. Wooyoung chewed on the inside of his cheek. He didn’t think pressing Yeosang between a person and a cushion was best for now. “Me and Yeosang can sit on the floor,” he said, gesturing for them to fight over the seats.

As they argued over middle vs. armrest, Wooyoung turned to Yeosang who still hadn’t looked up. “Hey,” he murmured. Yeosang didn’t move. “Hey, talk to me. Are you okay?”

Yeosang swallowed, but he did give a tiny, jerking nod.

Wooyoung always wondered how truthful Yeosang was being when he said he was okay.

“We don’t have to watch a movie, if you don’t want to,” he assured him.

Yeosang gave a tiny shake, taking another breath that seemed way too difficult to get.

Wooyoung’s thumb brushed over the back of his hand. “Will you tell me if you start feeling worse?” he asked. “If you start getting antsy or claustrophobic?”

Yeosang had turned into even more of a guessing game. Whether he was lying or not, whether he was just nervous or about to send himself into another episode. And Wooyoung had taken to trying to get small things out of the way. Like Yeosang admitting that he was feeling off even if he didn’t
Another swallow, but Yeosang nodded, his hand beginning to shake in Wooyoung's.

“Are you...” He sighed, trying to get the words right. A guessing game. “Do you want to be touched right now?” he asked. “Or is this good enough?” He lifted their joined hands slightly.

Sleeping with Yeosang in the cell had changed some things.

First, it highlighted just how desperate Yeosang was for touch, not letting Wooyoung pull away even an inch without trying to drag him back against him. It was no longer a question of if Yeosang wanted a touch, but a question of which or how much.

Second, it proved just how much their presence aided in keeping episodes at bay. He had yet to have a single episode in sleep. Before, sleeping and waking up were the times when his episodes were most random and violent, when he had a nightmare or just woke up alone in a cell, and things just went downhill.

And third, it provided a new pain to Wooyoung’s chest at the thought that Yeosang had been feeling so cut off from them, locked inside a cell. He had fooled himself for a while into thinking that holding his hand and stroking his hair could make it better. But those were a water pistol against a bonfire that was wreaking havoc on Yeosang’s mind. The way Yeosang reacted to being embraced for the first time was something that was seared into Wooyoung’s mind.

The same as Yeosang telling him to leave the cell since he was no longer freaking out, as if Wooyoung had been counting down the seconds until he could leave, rather than trying to think of a way to stay without creating more harm.

And Wooyoung could tell that getting Yeosang to talk about things he wanted, rather than needed, was going to be an issue. He may only need to hold Wooyoung’s hand to keep himself from freaking out, but that didn’t mean that more than that wasn’t going to make him feel better.

Yeosang finally looked up at Wooyoung, jaw flexing and eyes bright with anxiety. “You don’t have to-"

“I’m offering, Yeosang. No one is telling me to do this,” Wooyoung broke in firmly. This was beginning to be a familiar game. “I’m asking what you want, Yeosang.”

Yeosang was silent, chewing his lip.

Wooyoung’s expression softened at the indecision. “Being out here is basically starting from Step One,” he said quietly as the others started arranging themselves. “If you don’t want to hurt anybody, you need to talk to us about what it is you think you need or want. If I need to hug you the whole movie, we can do that. It’s not like hugging you is a chore or something.” His lips twitched in what he hoped was an encouraging way.

Yeosang just looked like Wooyoung had handed him a very large bomb.

He could hear the movie menu music playing, but the others didn’t interrupt them, and Yeosang didn’t even seem to register it.

Seconds ticked by like a heartbeat.

Yeosang looked like he was trying to speak through honey. Wooyoung nodded. “Okay, how about this: Do you think if I hugged you, it would make things worse?”
He was a little surprised by how quickly Yeosang shook his head, but it was a concrete answer at least. “Then, what if I hold you, and if it starts being too much, we can just sit normally okay?”

Wooyoung honestly didn’t know if he could trust Yeosang to speak up if he did get uncomfortable, but hopefully he and the others had become good enough at reading him that they might be able to help out.

Yeosang glanced at their hands, chewed the inside of his cheek, before nodding slowly. “Okay,” he whispered. “That works.”

Wooyoung smiled brightly, Yeosang staring at him as if he had startled him with it, and tugged on his hand gently. “Come on, you can sit against me so it’s more comfortable.”

Yeosang looked confused, but followed as Wooyoung guided him to the spot of the couch where San was sitting cross legged, and Wooyoung placed his back against the couch, gesturing for Yeosang to come closer.

Yeosang looked at the row of legs hanging down in front of the rest of the sofa. “W-Where do I…”?

Wooyoung spread his legs in a V and patted the space between them. Yeosang blinked, and his grip on Wooyoung’s hand loosened minisculely before tightening again, as if afraid Wooyoung would actually let go.

And whether it was determination or desperation to not be apart, Yeosang scooted over between Wooyoung’s legs, looking unsure of where exactly his limbs should go.

Wooyoung chuckled. “Like this,” he said, turning Yeosang until his back pressed against Wooyoung’s chest. Once more he was stiff as a board as Wooyoung placed his arms loosely around him.

Sometimes it was concerning how stiff and terrified Yeosang could be within the safety of them.

“You okay?” he asked as Mingi declared he was starting the movie.

Yeosang shifted slightly, maybe to get more comfortable, maybe in discomfort, but he nodded regardless. “Yeah, this is- I’m… It’s okay.” He took a shuttered breath.

The movie was some dumb action one with too many explosions, but Wooyoung wasn’t paying that much attention to it, either way. He was focused totally on Yeosang, feeling the way he shifted against him, but never pulled away.

And the angle was too awkward for Wooyoung to stroke his hair (Which, Wooyoung was a little shocked at how much it seemed like Yeosang liked that. It had felt like the biggest victory ever when he had gotten Yeosang to actually fucking relax.), so he just waited a while into the movie, and then tightened his arms around Yeosang slightly.

While sleeping, it had seemed like Yeosang had been trying to fuse with him, wanting to be held tighter and tighter, and Wooyoung was willing to try that, to see if it would let Yeosang relax a little.

He waited, seeing if there was any tension, any shift, but Yeosang simply remained as still as he had been. Another few minutes, and Wooyoung held him a little tighter. A little more, a little more-

Yeosang stiffened up in his arms, and Wooyoung immediately loosened them, letting them almost
hang, but Yeosang suddenly pressed back against his chest fully, a half-cut-off noise in his throat, and Wooyoung’s arms jumped back around him tightly.

Yeosang gripped his hands tightly, the line of his spine pressed hard against Wooyoung’s chest, his breath coming a little faster.


Yeosang nodded quickly, as if hesitating would make Wooyoung release him.

Wooyoung simply hummed in understanding, continuing his act of keeping an eye on Yeosang, his grip around him tighter, pressing him directly to Wooyoung’s chest, his head resting near his shoulder.

He tried watching the movie a little, trying not to be so hyper-fixated on Yeosang, but every shift drew his attention back like a whip crack. Especially when about twenty minutes from the end of the movie, he felt Yeosang’s shoulders loosen slowly.

For the first time in days, it felt like he was actually holding a person, instead of a statue now.

Wooyoung’s throat closed even as his lips twitch in triumph. And over the course of the next twenty minutes, Yeosang slowly… as if making each individual muscle and focusing on that… relaxed against Wooyoung. His spine curved to match the shape of Wooyoung’s chest, his neck allowing his head to fully rest back.

And Wooyoung would lie if it didn’t make his throat close up a little because here Yeosang was, out in the open, terrified but trusting, sitting with them, and he was… he was okay.

At least for now, he was okay.

The final scene played of the protagonist kissing the female lead, and Wooyoung glanced away, towards the door-

Seonghwa was gone, probably going to vampire-proof the house further or something, but Hongjoong leaned against the door jam, a serene smile on his lips as he watched Wooyoung with eyes that shone with pride.

And yeah, maybe Wooyoung’s eyes stung a little at the thought that he was doing something right, but it was dark in the room, so it didn’t matter. But he rested his chin on Yeosang’s shoulder all the same, remembering a time when he had been practically encased in Hongjoong’s arms just like this.

When he first got here. When he first confessed that he was afraid of being sent away, and Hongjoong had looked so heartbroken for him, he hadn’t even said anything. Just looked so disappointed in himself for allowing Wooyoung to feel that way, and pitying Wooyoung for having lived a life where he could think that. Just held Wooyoung tight enough to hurt, and even if he didn’t utter a single word of reassurance, Wooyoung had cried with relief because it was an answer enough.

If Wooyoung could give that sort of relief to Yeosang, it would be a truly beautiful thing.

And the ending credits played, and he could feel the others shifting around on the couch, but he didn’t release Yeosang just yet.
“That sucked!” Jongho burst, probably voicing what everyone was thinking. “They call that the movie of the year? They had better special effects when Yunho was alive!”

Wooyoung chuckled, squeezing Yeosang who had begun to stiffen back up. “You still good?” he whispered, disappointed at the return of his tension, but knowing he had at least gotten a reprieve.

Yeosang hummed lightly, even if he no longer held that looseness. Wooyoung rubbed a hand on his side, and Yeosang shivered slightly, making Wooyoung chuckle again. Yeosang twisted in his grip to frown at him, and Wooyoung shook his head quickly.

“No, I’m not laughing at you,” he promised, lips still tugging. “I’m just happy you were able to relax, okay?”

Yeosang still stared at his face, and Wooyoung almost apologized for laughing, but Yeosang wasn’t frowning at him. Just looking. As if window shopping and seeing a shirt that had caught his interest, trying to weigh whether the price was worth it, whether it would fit-

Wooyoung felt like he was being analyzed. Observed. Documented. And he wasn’t sure what to do, so he stared back in confusion, waiting for Yeosang to get bored or blink.

Yeosang’s eyes traced over his face completely- from the roots of his hair, down to his nose, ghosting over his lips and chin and then to his eyes-

Wooyoung tried not to move.

Usually, when Yeosang did stuff like this, it was him trying to sort something out in his head, and Wooyoung wasn’t going to risk throwing him off and making it worse.

Yeosang’s hand suddenly placed itself against his upper arm, and Wooyoung jumped a little at the sudden contact, but Yeosang just lowered his eyes to stare at his fingers wrapped around Wooyoung’s bicep. He could barely feel the touch, even when Yeosang squeezed it slightly.

“You…”

His voice was so fucking quiet. Soft, as if afraid of being scolded for speaking. Wooyoung lifted an eyebrow, even if he was growing increasingly concerned for Yeosang’s intent stare.

Yeosang’s eyes lifted to his, firm and set, as if he had made a decision.

“You’re dif-”

There was a loud “Gah!” and a body was thrown off of the couch with another cry of “That tickles, asshole!”

Yeosang jumped, as if his soul had just snapped back into his body, whipping towards the sound, and even if it fucking hurt to do so, Wooyoung shoved Yeosang away hard, only to twist and grab the back of his shirt as he lunged for Jongho on the ground.

Yeosang choked, stopped by Wooyoung’s hand on his collar that was jarred violently, but all he did was whip around.

Wooyoung let go, scrambling back as a blur sudden slammed Yeosang into the ground, pinning his arms with one hand and a dagger resting against his throat as he snarled and thrashed, almost bucking Hongjoong off before the older bore down on the blade, making him fall still. growls and whimpers mixing.
Wooyoung cut off his own shout, feeling so foolish. Hongjoong wouldn’t hurt Yeosang. Not if he could absolutely help it. But Yeosang’s legs twitched as Mingi grabbed Jongho, hauling him back up onto the couch, the youngest looking a little shaken.

Wooyoung moved closer to Yeosang and Hongjoong, peering over the older’s shoulder to stare at Yeosang’s eyes that were a deep crimson, and his usually soft mouth that was pulled back in snarls and snapping teeth.

A growl caught in the back of his throat, almost as if he had choked, and the red in his eyes flickered slightly between cinnamon and blood before dying a deeper crimson once more, anger revisiting in legs that tried to kick at Hongjoong, whose eyes hardened.

Wooyoung’s eyes widened.

There was no mistaking it that time. Yeosang’s eyes were flickering.

He saw Hongjoong draw up short, looking shocked for a moment, before his eyes hardened again.

“Come on, Yeosang,” Hongjoong said firmly, voice hard as stone. Not coaxing, but almost demanding. Yeosang pulled at his hands that Hongjoong held in place easily. “If you could remember your family, you can remember yourself.”

Yeosang jerked, one knee catching Hongjoong in the side, knocking him sideways, but he righted himself, one leg sweeping back and pinning Yeosang at the knees, holding him completely immobile.

“Get out of your own head,” he snapped, dagger still keeping teeth at bay. “Yeosang, so help me, give us something to work with.”

Wooyoung didn’t think they had ever tried speaking with Yeosang during an episode. There had been once when he had told Yeosang not to hurt himself, but he had ignored Wooyoung as if he wasn’t even there.

But it almost seemed as if Yeosang was reacting to Hongjoong’s voice, his body tensing and shifting, as if he wanted to throw himself against the walls once more.

Like a toddler being told they couldn’t do something, resulting in a bigger tantrum.

Wooyoung watched in horrified silence as tears began building in Yeosang’s dark irises even as he kicked at Hongjoong, shaking him but not pushing him off.

He had never cried during an episode before.

“Yeosang.”

There was a snarl that shook Wooyoung’s bones, dark and deep, as Yeosang jerked hard, all his limbs flailing and striking, hips shoving Hongjoong up as his knees jerked and hit his side, wrist twisting painfully as Hongjoong was finally dislodged, and Yeosang flipped onto his hands and knees, shaking himself and stumbling as if he were dizzy.

An angry, pained growl made his hair stand on end, and Wooyoung shifted forward almost automatically, hand reaching out so fucking stupid-
Wooyoung knelt, paralyzed, as Yeosang’s head snapped towards him at the movement, lunging with a snarl-

He flinched back, but claws didn’t sink into him. Teeth didn’t touch him.

He stared at Yeosang, only a couple of feet from him, as he dropped his head, shaking it hard, like a dog ridding itself of water, stumbling back and forth, as if unsure where it wanted to go.

Wooyoung’s throat closed up. He should probably see what Hongjoong was doing, but he could only stare as Yeosang jerked towards him, then away, growling low in his throat.

“Yeosang?”

The whisper was enough for crimson to stare into his eyes, and Wooyoung wanted to kick himself, but Yeosang didn’t move, just stared at Wooyoung, face twisted in anger and rage and danger. Wooyoung didn’t even breathe. But Yeosang didn’t move.

A whimper left Yeosang’s throat, and Wooyoung winced as the rage flickered with his eyes, twisting and then stiffening, like a dozen voices speaking at once-

Wooyoung didn’t know what was happening.

But if he had to say a ridiculous idea, he’d almost think Yeosang was fighting it.

“Yeosang,” he repeated, wanting to look to the others for support, but not willing to take his eyes off the rogue who snapped glowing eyes back to him. Wooyoung lifted a hand slowly, hating how it shook. “Yeosang, it’s okay.”

Yeosang’s claws tore a chunk of the carpet out, throwing it away and tearing away another. But he wasn’t moving forward.

Wooyoung winced, but kept his hand extended.

“Yeosang.”

It sounded like a cough or a choke sticking in his throat as Yeosang shook his head sharply.

Hongjoong hadn’t snapped at him to shut up yet.

“Yeosang, look at me,” He said firmly, red and brown mixed eyes swirling and golden boring into him, making his skin crawl. “It’s okay,” he promised, holding his palm out. “Come here, it’s okay.”

What the fuck was he thinking? But Yeosang stared at his hand and didn’t try to snap it off. Like a dog trying to see if the hand being held out was a threat.

“It’s going to be okay,” he promised again, not daring to move forward as Yeosang shifted towards him, staring intently at his hand as if trying to decide how to break it. “I promise, Yeosang, just trust me.”

It was like watching a game of tug of war.

“It’ll be okay.”

Brown and red and anger and pain and back and forth-
Yeosang suddenly lunged forward with a cry, but it wasn’t angry or threatening.

It was broken.

His hands wrapped around Wooyoung’s, but claws didn’t pierce.

His hand was yanked to Yeosang’s face, but teeth didn’t snap at it.

Yeosang held his hand tight enough to break it, but that wasn’t the intent, as if Wooyoung were the only thing holding him above a cliff and he desperately didn’t want to fall.

It wasn’t the resmoreful, pitying movement from the cellar. This was desperate. Holding onto the part of Wooyoung he had offered and violently begging that Wooyoung not let go. As if Wooyoung were the only thing keeping him from falling back over that edge.

Wooyoung’s other hand leapt to rest against Yeosang’s head as he breathed heavily against Wooyoung, shaking violently. Wooyoung bit back a relieved curse when no growls sounded against his skin.

He pet his hair carefully.

“We’re right here,” he promised, heart expanding painfully as Yeosang clung, sobs shaking his frame that suddenly seemed so small and fragile. “I’m right here, it’s okay, you’re okay—”

Yeosang shook his head sharply, a broken sound in the back of his throat, tears smearing.

His fingers threaded through his hair, and Yeosang kept shaking his head, as if every stroke was a question.

“Just breathe,” Wooyoung said, voice weak. “It’s okay, just breathe…”

Wooyoung finally glanced around.

The population on the sofa stared at him as if he were sticking his head in a lion’s mouth, pale and shaking with concern.

Hongjoong half-knelt on the ground, the dagger clutched in his hand and eyes set in a hard concentration Wooyoung had only ever seen reserved for Yeosang. He was prepared to strike at the slightest movement, not even looking at Wooyoung, but watching Yeosang’s dangerously close mouth.

He saw Seonghwa near the doorway, tensed and ready, but his eyes were on Wooyoung, as if waiting for an expression of pain.

The world stood still as Wooyoung turned back to Yeosang, continuing to brush his hair as he continued to shake his head until he must have been dizzy. Wooyoung’s breath was catching in his throat as he kept whispering that it was okay.

“You didn’t hurt anyone,” he promised. “You didn’t hurt anyone, Yeosang.”

Yeosang fell completely still, eerily still, and Wooyoung’s words stuck in his throat as he didn’t even breathe against his skin.

“You could have,” he forced out. “You could have hurt us, Yeosang. But you didn’t. You stopped yourself. You did that.” And he had.
For the first time, it seemed as if Yeosang had stopped an episode of his own volition.

Yeosang didn’t move.

“Everyone is safe, Yeosang. You’re safe.”

Wooyoung saw Seonghwa make a vague gesture out of the corner of his eye, and the others on the couch all stood slowly, skirting around the edge of the room until they exited.

Leaving just Hongjoong, Seonghwa, and the two of them.

Yeosang’s hands shook around his.

“Yeosang,” Seonghwa said, walking closer slowly. “Everything is okay.”

He laid a gentle hand against Yeosang’s back, and the other jerked at the contact, but didn’t shove it off, breaths shaking like a leaf caught in the wind.

Seonghwa stroked up and down his back slowly. Yeosang shuddered.

“What you just did was amazing, Yeosang,” Hongjoong murmured, joining on his other side. “You brought yourself out of an episode.”

Yeosang swallowed. “I-I didn’t mean to- I jumped when-”

“It doesn’t matter what triggered it,” Seonghwa said gently. “Most people would take much longer than this to reach a point where they had potential control over their reactions.”

Yeosang pulled away from his hand slowly, staring at it before ducking his head. “I- I didn’t- Wooyoung- Hurt-” It almost sounded like a glitch. Like there were pieces of his script missing, and he didn’t know how to ad lib them.

“I know you’re upset that you could have hurt someone,” Hongjoong said softly. “But I want you to think about what it means that you were able to have that small amount of control.”

Yeosang pulled away, and he looked even more exhausted than he usually did after an episode. His eyes glanced between Seonghwa and Hongjoong before landing back on Wooyoung, staring at him with hooded eyes that were clearer than water.

He opened his mouth, as if he were going to say something, but Wooyoung just grabbed his shoulders, pulling him against his chest quickly and tucking his head beneath his chin.

Yeosang stiffened against him, hands braced as if to push him away but they fell away quickly, and Wooyoung was shocked by Yeosang leaning against him, letting Wooyoung take his weight as he relaxed against him, head resting at his collarbone.

Yeosang had yet to relax so quickly, but Wooyoung wasn’t about to complain, rubbing his back comforting.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong exchanged a glance before looking at Wooyoung, not smiling but their eyes light.

“Everything will be alright,” Hongjoong said gently.

Wooyoung didn’t think he was talking to Yeosang, so he just nodded. “I know that.”
Yeosang didn’t shift. Didn’t squirm. Wooyoung was almost tempted to say he had fallen asleep, but for his breathing. He simply remained there, and Wooyoung was always a firm believer in the side of life partners that resided in the comfort drawn just from their presence.

He didn’t know if Yeosang quite believed that, yet, but Wooyoung was desperate to assure him of it.

But Yeosang’s hand grasped weakly at his hip, as if he didn’t have the strength to hold it tighter, breathing against his neck lightly. Wooyoung could practically feel the guilt and exhaustion hanging off of him. But regardless, he was holding Wooyoung back.

Wooyoung felt his lips twitch. “You were great, Yeosang,” he assured him. Even if Yeosang probably didn’t believe him.

He didn’t need to believe him. He would see soon enough.

~~~~~~

Seonghwa and Hongjoong hovered at the doorway while the others filed back in slowly.

Yeosang sat against the wall with Wooyoung beside him, shoulder pressed together and Yeosang’s head ducked low with Wooyoung’s hand on the small of his back.

“So what was so bad about the special effects?” Wooyoung asked as the others scattered around the room. “I thought the explosions were pretty good.”

There was a pause, everyone’s eyes on Yeosang, judging and evaluating before San coughed. “I mean, the explosions were fine, but those green screens for the airplane were disgusting.”

The ice between them being to break, Hongjoong watched them slowly fall into a calm conversation, still on edge, but enjoying the sight.

He could almost imagine everything was fine. That the movie had just finished, and Yeosang was just tuckered out from running around all night with them at the shopping district. That Hongjoong and Seonghwa could retire to leave the kids on their own, giving them time to just mess around with each other without glancing to see if the parents would step in.

Almost.

Seonghwa’s hand against his waist was a comforting weight, and Hongjoong found himself leaning towards him.

“Are you alright?” Seonghwa questioned softly.

Hongjoong tilted his head to stare up at him. “Why would I not be?”

“Windows to the past often bring about issue.” Seonghwa’s thumb rubbed gently against his hip.

“I believe this particular window would bring issue with you more than I,” Hongjoong noted.

Despite time passing, both of them had such clear recollection of everything they had suffered together.
Seonghwa hummed. “I am fine,” he assured him. “But… it is a startling thing to see that they are perhaps… similar to ourselves.”

He didn’t want to hurt him.

“You see it too, do you not?” Seonghwa murmured, just for Hongjoong’s ears.

Hongjoong leaned his head onto Seonghwa’s shoulder, letting him take some of his weight as he stared at Yeosang who leaned into Wooyoung.

“What?” he questioned quietly. “Yeosang and Wooyoung?” Seonghwa hummed in confirmation, and Hongjoong sighed. “You’d have to be blind not to.”

“Or simply young enough not to notice,” Seonghwa allowed, and Hongjoong sighed, turning his head to nose at Seonghwa’s neck gently.

“Youth is the creator of all of life’s problems, is it not?”

“It certainly seems to spawn much of them,” Seonghwa agreed. A short pause where he kissed the top of Hongjoong’s head. “Do you plan to tell them?”

Hongjoong glanced back at them, and Wooyoung had his arm around Yeosang’s shoulders, Yeosang’s forehead touching his shoulder.

“If they do not already know, they will soon,” Seonghwa almost warned.

“I understand,” Hongjoong assured him. “But should it not be something they discover on their own?”

“I would agree without hesitation if not for the very fragile peace the two seem to have found. I do not want to risk something rocking that and endangering them.”

Hongjoong pressed his lips together. “We’ll speak more of it later,” Hongjoong promised. “For now… it is their time to rest.”

Hongjoong’s arm looped around Seonghwa’s waist, their sides pressed together, and Hongjoong allowed his eyes to close for a moment.

Hongjoong had spent his entire life truly believing that as long as he had Seonghwa at his side, no challenge could better him.

He continued to hold that belief as Seonghwa squeezed his hip comfortably.

“Yeosang is making almost alarming leaps,” Seonghwa noted. “To bring himself out of an episode…”

Trufully, Hongjoong had not expected Yeosang to gain such an ability until years had passed. And while he was beyond relieved at his swift progress, it was something that only made Hongjoong watch him closer. Hongjoong inclined his head. “And it is not hard to see that Wooyoung is near the center of that.”

“I do not think, though, that Wooyoung can truly understand what he has become to Yeosang,” Seonghwa said heavily. “And I am afraid that his undermining his own importance to Yeosang may prove an issue.”

It had taken Seonghwa a long time to realize just how much he truly meant to Hongjoong, even
after turning him and explaining life partners. That utter dependence and magnetism to each other, as if moving out of orbit would send you crashing to the surface. It was something that you could only gain through heartache together, surviving together, and living together. Wooyoung had not had that experience yet.

Hongjoong simply sighed shortly. “We can explain everything to them soon. Ensure that they understand what game they have decided to enter into. I do not think they are in much danger. Wooyoung cares for Yeosang just as much.”

“It is different,” Seonghwa reminded him gently.

Hongjoong wet his lips, gazing at the two sitting together. “Indeed, it is.”

Seonghwa simply pulled him flush and kissed his temple.

“Hyung!” San called, much calmer than he usually would, his eyes glancing at Yeosang who hadn’t moved. “Stop being gross over there and help us pick a second movie!”

Hongjoong’s lips twitched. “If you think this is gross, you should see us when-”

“No!” Jongho cried sharply, glaring at them. “Stop that, hyung!”

Hongjoong’s eyes glanced to Yeosang who was sitting up, watching them intently, but not angrily. More like they were a walking machine that he was trying to see inside of.

He felt Seonghwa kiss the side of his neck, and Mingi pretended to throw up over the edge of the sofa, Hongjoong having mercy on the younger ones, and dislodging himself from Seonghwa’s side.

Yeosang’s appearance had sparked much more than just the need to rehabilitate a rogue. It had brought back memories, nightmares, and stirred an unrest within the house that had never been there before. But Hongjoong could feel nothing but pity as he walked over, feeling Yeosang’s eyes trailing him like a lighter against his skin.

“None of you like my choices.”

“At least pick something with color, hyung,” San bargained.

“What’s wrong with black and white?” Yunho asked, frowning.

Hongjoong scanned their endless titles of movies, humoring them even if he probably wouldn’t watch any of it. He picked one he knew they liked watching, some comedy thing Hongjoong had never paid much attention to, and he handed it to Mingi to put on.

He took his spot next to Seonghwa once more, comfortably leaning against him.

There was general conversation as the mood began to pick back up, and Hongjoong could feel Yeosang’s eyes pinned to him and Seonghwa, their arms around each other as they watched over their coven.

~~~~~~
Yeosang’s pain outside the cell was different from inside it.

Inside, there was nothing. Maybe a hand, maybe a conversation, but there was nothing… grounding. Nothing tangible and sturdy.

Outside, there was too much. Always too much, but he kept trying to take more. Kept welcoming the painful burn, and the way his mind spun, because it felt like being alone. It felt like not being alone.

Wooyoung never released him, never let him wander far, and if Yeosang suddenly felt a burst of panic and clutched to his side in a pitiful attempt at ensuring he didn’t fall into his own head, Wooyoung never begrudged him that, almost seeming to enjoy holding Yeosang tightly.

It was a dangerous juggling game, sitting with the others, nothing between him and them but Hongjoong and Seonghwa at the doorway. They didn’t feel like guards though. Just guardians, ensuring that everyone played nicely.

Though Yeosang felt slightly guilty at how much he didn’t allow Wooyoung to move around, Wooyoung didn’t seem to mind at all, simply shifting to accommodate Yeosang at whatever part of him he threw himself at.

Since that… Episode… the strange one, Yeosang hadn’t had another yet.

And it was the strangest episode of his life because Yeosang… Yeosang could remember what happened during an episode. He was aware, but he wasn’t conscious. He had no control over what he felt until it ended and the weight of his actions hit him.

That time, though, he had seen Hongjoong above him, dagger at his throat, and Yeosang didn’t want to force him to use it. He saw Wooyoung staring at him, and even as his mind screamed for him to kill, his body jerked back.

The split of body and mind reactions was… surprisingly painful. It felt like being torn in two.

And Wooyoung held his hand out.

Wooyoung was different.

Wooyoung was special.

If he questioned his entire existence, this was what he knew.

Wooyoung was stupid because he kept having no problem with crawling into bed with Yeosang, fingers interlaced and falling asleep peacefully, rolling close to Yeosang in his sleep.

The time after that Episode made Yeosang feel as if he were watching through a screen. He couldn’t respond to the others, barely responded to Wooyoung, and he was so… tired.

Wooyoung and he were laying in Seonghwa and Hongjoong’s bed once more, the two of them sitting and speaking quietly, bidding them goodnight, as if Yeosang had not just done the impossible a few hours ago.

Yeosang felt Wooyoung settle beside him, content to just fall asleep. Yeosang’s mind buzzed with questions and flashes of Wooyoung staring at him, hand outstretched-

Yeosang lay awake. He barely slept, regardless, and he knew tonight should be no different.
Until Wooyoung’s hand squeezed his, near the middle of the day when Yeosang still had not closed his eyes. “Why don’t you sleep?” he whispered into the darkness around them, clearly not even fully awake. “Do you have nightmares?”

Yeosang hadn’t had a nightmare since exiting the cell. He shook his head.

“Do you still not trust yourself?” Yeosang didn’t answer. “I can tell you’re tired,” he murmured plainly. “You should try to sleep more.”

“I don’t want to,” he said, voice low.

Wooyoung rolled over until he was on his stomach, propped on his elbows as he stared at Yeosang, tired, bright eyes glinting in the darkness. “You don’t want to risk an episode.” Wooyoung tilted his head curiously. “You haven’t had one yet, have you? You can trust yourself this far, Yeosang. Just go to sleep.”

Yeosang opened his mouth, another excuse on his tongue, but Wooyoung was apparently still half-asleep, and simply dropped off of his elbows-

His head landing on Yeosang’s chest, one arm thrown over his waist as he settled in against him. Fearless and already back to sleep.

Yeosang stiffened under his weight, muscles seizing as Wooyoung lay across him, everything in his demanding that he shove Wooyoung away-

But he was warm. And the weight on his chest...His body and anxiety betrayed him as he relaxed almost automatically, Wooyoung’s weight against his chest like a heavy, warm blanket. Something Yeosang couldn’t bring himself to remove and risk the cold seeping back in.

Yeosang didn’t want to sleep. Didn’t want to risk Wooyoung, especially now that he was so close.

But Yeosang’s body betrayed him. Wooyoung’s warmth betrayed him.

And even as his mind screamed to stay awake and vigilant, safety and comfort (be them lies or truth) drew his eyes down alarmingly fast.

Wooyoung was different. Wooyoung was safe.

And Yeosang didn’t even really remember actually falling asleep, but there was darkness around him and he didn’t dream. Just floated in a warm darkness.

He woke up with still heavy eyes and a heavier chest.

He blinked in the dim lighting of the room, and stared at the top of Wooyoung’s head, which still rested comfortably against Yeosang’s chest. His waist was weighed down with his arm, and he could feel one leg tangled with his under the blankets.

The weight was hot and heavy.

Yeosang’s breath came a little thicker.

It was a good feeling. Wrapped around him and piercing into the center of his chest, thrumming through him almost like a heartbeat. He savored it, memorizing the exact feeling of Wooyoung’s chest rising and falling against his...
He remained awake, feeling Wooyoung shifting around, tossing and turning comfortably in his sleep, legs sometimes kicking Yeosang, but Wooyoung never rolled far, tucking himself back against Yeosang’s side, one leg thrown over his-

It was a lot. But Yeosang was sure that the weight on his chest and limbs was what allowed his eyes to close once more as if hadn’t slept in weeks.

And when he woke up again, seeing darkness outside the curtains of the room, he was on his stomach, something digging into his side. He blinked awake, staring at a soft fabric pressed against his cheek.

Fabric over Wooyoung’s stomach. The thing in his side being Wooyoung’s elbow.

He shifted, eyes still heavy and blood thick with exhaustion and sleep. The lump underneath him groaned in a high pitch whine, arms winding around him and pressing him back down, Wooyoung shifting until they laid on their sides, chest to chest, eyes still closed.

Yeosang could feel his chest rise and fall in sleep, and he could almost imagine a pulse there. Beating against him. Within him.

Yeosang felt warm.

Not burning, not searing, but a thick warmth that laid over him, pinning him down and spreading across every inch of skin as Wooyoung sighed in his sleep.

Yeosang closed his eyes again.

“-just let them sleep the night away?”

Yeosang frowned, face scrunching in discomfort at being torn from his sleep.

“Yeosang has likely not had a good night’s rest in decades, I will not begrudge him this. And if Wooyoung’s remained asleep for so long, he’s clearly in need of it as well.”

He groaned, trying to roll over, but finding his arm pinned beneath something.

“It’s actually kinda cute. Look at them cuddling.”

Yeosang rolled back, hiding his face in something warm to block out the dim light around him.

“San, understand that if you wake them, you will be spending the rest of the night confined to your room.”

The voices were gentle. Warm. And Yeosang almost could have fallen back asleep to them, but the warmth he was pressed against suddenly twitched.

“San,” he heard a sleep-rough voice rumble beneath his ear as an arm wrapped around him tightly, stealing his breath. “You’re loud and annoying.”

“I was being quiet,” San hissed. “You just wake up when a leaf fucking crunches outside.”

Wooyoung groaned in annoyance, shifting against Yeosang, and he waited to be carefully extracted from Wooyoung’s hold, but the arms around him simply tightened, a soft hand rubbing up and down his side, setting his nerves alight.
“Yeah, but you woke Yeosang, too.”

Yeosang wasn’t exactly trying to hide being awake, but at the mention, he finally lifted his head slowly, peering up through sleep-thick eyes at Wooyoung who offered him a tired smile.

“Morning,” he greeted quietly.

Yeosang was very aware of two more sets of eyes boring into them. “I’m pretty sure it’s evening,” he said dumbly, eyes tracing over the pillow streaks on Wooyoung’s cheek.

“Actually, it’s night,” Seonghwa corrected. “Around 2 AM, last I checked.”

Wooyoung’s head jerked to the side. “ Seriously, hyung?” he demanded. “You just let us sleep that long?”

“You would not have done it if you had not needed it,” Seonghwa stated simply. “And you’re free to go back to sleep, if you like. But if not, I think Yunho has set up a gaming tournament in the living room.”

Wooyoung’s eyes turned back to Yeosang. “Are you still tired?”

Yeosang lowered his eyes, staring at Wooyoung’s collarbone instead of his gentle eyes.

In truth, Yeosang felt better rested than…. Like Seonghwa said, probably decades. But that meant that his body was weighed with sleep, desiring to just burrow back into warmth and never emerge. But reality said that the right answer was to get up so that Wooyoung didn’t have to stay here, and go sit and watch them play video games.

He let out a short breath. “Not really.”

Wooyoung didn’t immediately respond, and Yeosang risked a glance up to meet his eyes and immediately regretted it because Wooyoung was staring straight past the niceties and pleasantries and burning holes into Yeosang’s useless heart as he stared almost sadly.

It was always unsettling, being able to be seen through. But rather than uncomfortable, it only made him grateful because Wooyoung could take one look at him, and answer the questions Yeosang was too afraid to answer.

“You don’t actually want to get up… do you?”

It wasn’t accusing. wasn’t petullent. wasn’t even sure of itself. It was a genuine question that Wooyoung was posing. One he was asking Yeosang to answer. Truthfully.

Yeosang wanted to drop his eyes again, but felt like he was tethered in place, just staring at Wooyoung. And he felt guilt lick at his throat.

“I-” He swallowed, mind racing for an answer. “I- It’s not- I just-”

Wooyoung’s hand squeezed his arm. Yeosang’s lips clicked shut, heart squeezing as Wooyoung’s expression changed none.

“You don’t need an excuse,” Wooyoung told him. “I just want the truth, Yeosang. Do you just want to stay here?”

Yeosang felt like he wanted to throw up. But Wooyoung watched him carefully, and Yeosang tried to respond passed the guilt, but could only manage a single, frightened nod. He should let
Wooyoung actually leave, but…

He was being selfish. Wooyoung wanted him to be selfish.

Told in Wooyoung’s lips twitched in a smile, and his eyes shone with a light Yeosang couldn’t look at. He dropped his eyes, staring at Wooyoung’s chest, and Wooyoung’s hands touched his head gently, guiding it down until it pressed right where he would be able to hear a heartbeat.

“Then we’ll just stay here.”

Yeosang wanted to fight the gentle hold keeping him down, but it was warm and sturdy and safe, and he sank into it like a mattress at the end of a long day, letting it take his weight and closing his eyes against the sensations around him.

“Holy shit, that’s adorable.”

“Language, San.”

“Hongjoong curses worse than that, hyung.”

“Hongjoong also has the privilege of other things with me that you do not. And until you have those things as well, you should watch your tongue.”

“Jesus Christ, hyung, I’m going to vomit.”

And Yeosang was shocked and slightly frightened by how quickly he fell asleep for another round of darkness, even as voices continued to whisper around him.

Only to be woken up to soft fingers in his hair.

He lay on his back, his side pressed against Wooyoung’s and his head resting on his shoulders. One of Wooyoung’s hands curled around his neck and cupped his head, tugging at his hair and making goosebumps erupt across his skin. His other hand held his phone, his face lit in a pale blue light as he scrolled through something.

Wooyoung must have felt him shift because he immediately glanced down, eyes meeting Yeosang’s half-lidded ones, a small smile on his lips that made Yeosang’s stomach twist.

“Sleep well?”

Yeosang shifted, staring up at the ceiling, and Wooyoung continuing running fingers through his hair, making it a little hard to concentrate. He shivered.

“I didn’t dream.”

“That’s good,” Wooyoung agreed quietly. “You didn’t wake up when the others came in and out, right?”

Yeosang hadn’t even known they had shown up.

“Yeah, they just came in and talked since I was awake. I was pretty sure you were out cold, but they were pretty loud when Yunho grabbed Mingi. Seonghwa kicked them out after a while.”

Yeosang glanced around the room, looking for said vampire, but his stomach swooped as he realized the two were alone in the room. “Where-”
“He and Hongjoong are right outside,” Wooyoung reassured him quickly. “They’re talking about something and didn’t want to wake you up.”

Yeosang lifted his head slightly, seeing the door slightly ajar, hearing quiet murmurs out in the hall.

“You feel better after everything?”

After the Episode.

Yeosang swallowed. “I think so.”

“That’s good.” More hands through his hair, making his eyes flutter slightly.

A silence fell, as if that was all they could say about it.

“I…” Yeosang stared at the ceiling, trying not to concentrate on the burning line of Wooyoung against his side. “I… I stopped that episode.”

Wooyoung made a vague noise of understanding. Or perhaps agreement.

Yeosang wet his lips, hand twitching on the blankets as he curled it in the covers. His stomach hurt a little. “I… I saw you… and I couldn’t… I didn’t want to hurt you.”

Another silence. “I know,” was all Wooyoung said, voice dropping into a murmur.

Yeosang felt his throat closing up, as more and more guilt built up there. “I-I didn’t want to hurt you. I tried to stop.”

“You did,” Wooyoung agreed, his own voice sounding a little thick. “Hongjoong said that was a really good sign. It means you’re in a good place for healing. I’m really proud of you, Yeosang.”

A jolt of electricity raced up his spine, and Yeosang turned suddenly, burying his face in Wooyoung’s chest and fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt as it felt like his lungs were being squeezed. Wooyoung’s arms automatically leapt around him tightly as Yeosang took a deep breath, trying to remain calm.

“Youosang?” Wooyoung murmured, a clear question of his mental status in the name.

Yeosang simply hummed, the pressure fading quickly, pressing his forehead against the softness of his shirt. “You…”

Wooyoung’s hands burned circles into his back.

“I…”

Wooyoung’s hands stroked his hair gently, making Yeosang shiver slightly at the sensation.

“I was going to say it before.”

Wooyoung held his hand out.

Wooyoung took Yeosang’s and didn’t let go.

Wooyoung looked at him as if he were no more and no less than something precious.
Precious.

It was a word Yeosang had only heard used possessively. Materialistically. Precious jewels that you hoarded. Precious people that you selfishly held close. Precious resources that were fading quickly, unreplenishable.

“We were precious to each other before life partners ever came to our minds.”

Seonghwa and Hongjoong were precious. This was something Yeosaag knew, perhaps, before he knew anything else.

Not possessive. *Valued*.

Not hoarding. *Treasured*.

Like a precious pearl. Held gently within your hands, fearful of breaking something so beautiful. Fearful of something ruining the rare item you found naturally. Fearful of losing it, after finding something so *beautiful*.

Yeosang swallowed, suffocating slowly under Wooyoung’s eyes.

“You’re different.”

Wooyoung blinked.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong were different. Different to each other than with the others. Everyone acknowledged this.

He could hear confusion in Wooyoung’s voice. “I… You mean I’m acting different? How?”

Yeosang suddenly sat up, sight flipping from the ceiling to the wall, staring intently, lungs freezing. “You’re different,” he said again. “From the others.”

He heard Wooyoung sit up behind him, and from the corner of his eye, he could see the confusion in his frown. “I- What? The other what?”

Wooyoung’s hand touched Yeosang’s side.

Wooyoung told Yeosang that everything would be okay.

And Yeosang believed him.

“The others,” he said firmly, turning to Wooyoung sharply, making him straighten in surprise, his heart leaping to this throat. “San and Yunho and the others. You’re different from them.”

Wooyoung looked shocked. And then surprised. And then, almost hesitant. “I- I don’t get it,” he said helplessly, frowning at Yeosang, searching his face as if his half-meaning weren’t making sense. “Is that… bad? Am I being too overbearing?”

Yeosang shook his head quickly, turning more fully to Wooyoung, mouth open once more, but his voice caught in his throat because Wooyoung stared at him softly, curiously, even as Yeosang sprouted nonsense, as if he were content to sit and try and parse together what he meant for hours.

Wooyoung understood him. Or tried his best to, which was more than Yeosang could even do himself.
Wooyoung looked surprised, though, at the sudden movement. Wooyoung was not afraid of him.

Yeosang stared, trying to engrain the sight into his mind because Wooyoung was not afraid of him. After time and episodes and everything, he wasn’t.

Yeosang’s hands withdrew from their fists and reached for Wooyoung’s face, touching his cheeks gently and running his thumbs across the soft skin as Wooyoung had before. As Seonghwa and Hongjoong had done.

Wooyoung was different.

Calm yourself, I am right here.

Are you ready?

Hongjoong and Seonghwa were special.

It hurt to see him hurt.

Wooyoung’s eyes were wide as he stared at Yeosang. But he was not afraid.

Wooyoung was special.

“Yeos-”

Yeosang suddenly pulled Wooyoung forward, his eyes slamming shut as he pressed their lips together firmly. It was like flicking a lighter in his chest.

Wooyoung’s hand leapt to his chest, pressing against Yeosang, and for a moment he thought he might shove him away, but fingers curled into his shirt, fisting the fabric tightly.

Wooyoung tasted like mint.

Yeosang felt as if something very large and very heavy had just been slammed into his chest. He couldn’t breathe.

The fire that had died to a gentle warmth suddenly blazed like white flames licking at his skin, making his fingers tremble against Wooyoung’s face, his chest burning in a wondrous blaze-

Suddenly, the fist against his chest pushed.

Yeosang’s lips parted from Wooyoung’s silently, and Wooyoung’s entire face appeared as Yeosang’s eyes snapped open and cold splashed over him.

Wooyoung’s hand was still curled in his shirt, but he had pushed Yeosang a full arm’s length away, holding him there, and staring at him… staring…

He looked shocked. Stunned silent. As if Yeosang had just struck him. Had just shoved him down and kicked his stomach.

Yeosang stared back, ice slowly spreading from his chest into his limbs.

For a moment, neither of them moved, Wooyoung’s chest heaving as Yeosang’s stayed perfectly still.
He was scared.

Yeosang was terrified as each second passed with Wooyoung continuing to only stare, his hand not holding Yeosang coming up to his lips and touching them, as if ensuring that had actually happened.

“What the hell was that?”

It wasn’t loud. Wasn’t angry. Just a quiet whisper of disbelief.

Yeosang’s mouth closed slowly.

Wooyoung only looked more lost.

“Yeosang, what the hell was that?” he demanded once more in a weak murmur.

“I-” Fear began to take hold of him, limbs beginning to shake. “I- You’re- You’re different-” The words died in his throat.

Wooyoung wasn’t being cruel. Wasn’t even being mean.

He was just staring at Yeosang with such utter confusion, Yeosang cursed himself for not thinking this through, for not thinking at all- What was wrong with him?

“You-”

Yeosang’s hand leapt to Wooyoung’s holding onto him and tore it away, backing away from him quickly until his feet hit the ground, ice burning his skin.

“You’re-”

His breathing came quicker

“Yeosang,” Wooyoung said firmly, crawling along the bed with pleading eyes, stopping at the end when Yeosang backed away more, hands clutched to his chest to protect his vulnerable heart.

“Yeosang, why did you do that?” he questioned gently, stern, not angry.

“I- Hong-”

Yeosang felt like such an idiot as his breathing went from nonexistent to quick.

“I-Hongjoong and Seonghwa, they’re- they’re different,” he said quickly, trying to explain, trying to make Wooyoung understand. “You said so. They’re special, you’re different,” he said, feeling his back hit the wall and his eyes burn as he shivered.

It was cold.

“You’re different-”

Wooyoung looked so lost.

“Yeosang, I don’t-” He shook his head, looking desperate to understand. “Are you trying to say that you’re-”

Wooyoung’s voice died and Yeosang looked away, face burning from the cold.
He made a mistake.

“Hey.” Yeosang shrank away from the familiar coax, and he knew that if he looked up, Wooyoung was going to be holding his hand out.

Wooyoung was different. Yeosang didn’t know how else to say it, nothing else to compare it to, no other words to use, no other way to try and communicate that Wooyoung was different, and the only other people who were different were Hongjoong and Seonghwa-

“Yeosang, calm- hey…”

Yeosang hadn’t even heard Wooyoung move but a hand suddenly touched his arm, and Yeosng cried out at the harsh heat against chilled skin, jerking away and holding his arm as if he could feel a welt there beginning to form, burning through his skin and into his veins-

Wooyoung jerked back, eyes wide and scared. “Yeosang, calm down, you didn’t- I’m not mad at you, you didn’t do anything wrong-”

Yeosang dropped to the ground, feeling ice and fire crashing against each other, his head spinning as he tried not to- He didn’t want to-

“Yeosang, I just need you to talk to me,” Wooyoung said, hands hovering, like he wanted to touch but didn’t. “Are you saying that you feel about me the same way Hongjoong and Seonghwa feel about each other?”

No. Yes. Maybe.

Yeosang didn’t know. He didn’t know, he just knew the lines he had drawn and connected, and clearly he had connected them wrong. Because now ice was creeping over him while fire burned painfully, and his ears were beginning to ring because he had made a huge mistake, he could see it in Wooyoung’s eyes.

Wooyoung was trying not to show it, but Yeosang saw something deeper in his eyes.

“Yeosang, hey, look at me,” he begged, voice so gentle and warm, and Yeosang flinched at the sound, jerking away, frozen limbs and gentle warmth-

“Don’t let lost in your head, Yeosang, look at me, come on.”

Yeosang clamped his hands over his ears, teeth gritting and he just wanted it to stop -

“Yeosang-”

Hands suddenly shoved Wooyoung back, and he traveled across half the room before slamming into the ground hard, a cry in his throat more out of shock than pain as he sat back up quickly, braced to scramble back and see crimson-

Yeosang curled around his stomach, feeling a burning there and he couldn’t tell if it was hot or cold, it just hurt-

It hurt so badly.

He felt like a buzz was under his skin.

He just wanted it to stop.
He twitched, throwing himself against the wall, but catching himself before he hit, chest beginning to draw in shorter, faster breaths as he stared at the drywall, fear taking over his veins.

“W-” He shook his head, feeling ill, an ugly energy crawling under his skin. “Wooyoung,” he choked, hands clutching at his hands, his muscles twitching with the urge to move.

“I’m right here,” Wooyoung said, and out of the corner of his eye, Yeosang saw him beginning to move closer, hand outstretched-

“Stop,” he snapped, sharp enough that Wooyoung jerked back, frozen still, and Yeosang could feel it, could feel the fog in his mind.

He had never felt it happening before.

“Go,” he choked quickly, fear clogging his throat, making his voice break. “Back away, Wooyoung, I- I can’t-”

Wooyoung wasn’t moving, still staring at Yeosang, and he was going to get hurt.

Yeosang was going to hurt him if he didn’t leave-

His life partner.

“Leave,” he whispered, voice shot as he backed against the wall. “I don’t wan-” He gasped, clutching at his head. “Wooyoung, go, ” he begged, “I can’t hurt you-”

“You won’t,” he heard Wooyoung whisper. “Yeosang, you won’t- Hyung !”

Yeosang’s head snapped up at his cry, and saw Seonghwa picking Wooyoung up by his arm gently, eyes only on Wooyoung who fought his grip. Hongjoong stood beside him, looking at Yeosang.

“Let Hongjoong take care of this,” Seonghwa said quietly, and Yeosang expected Wooyoung to comply, as he always did when Seonghwa gave a soft order-suggestion.

But Wooyoung didn’t stop pulling against him. “No! I’m not going to leave hi-”

“Wooyoung ?”

Wooyoung fell silent, looking slightly shocked at Seonghwa firm tone. And when he turned back to look at him, Yeosang could swear there was something pained in his eyes.

Like an old wound acting up again. Something deep and ancient.

“Give Yeosang this piece of mind while Hongjoong takes care of it.”

Wooyoung didn’t say anything, simply stared with an open mouth as Seonghwa guided him from the room, glancing back at Yeosang, and his gaze felt like a knife against his skin, it burned-

“Yeosang.”

His head snapped back to Hongjoong who crouched a few feet in front of him, expression soft and sad as the dagger dangled from his hip. He stared at Yeosang who felt like everything was spinning.

“Do you remember the movie night?” he asked, voice soft and gentle. Not hurried, as if Yeosang
were not a ticking time bomb. “Do you remember what was going on?”

The movie night? What movie?

It hurt.

Yeosang clutched at his chest as another wave of ice grabbed him, a cry stuck in his chest.

“Yeosang, do you remember?” Hongjoong continued, voice firmer. “It was an action movie.”

What did that matter, it hurt-

The others had spent the whole movie whispering about how stupid it was. On the couch. Hongjoong and Seonghwa hovered in the doorway, and Yeosang-


“I know, it hurts, Yeosang,” he said softly. “Do you remember where you were during the movie? What you were doing?”

Pain clouded his mind, his hands falling to catch himself as he braced against the floor, staring at the polished wood-

The movie, what was he- what was he doing, the movie-

“I- Wooyoung,” he said jerkily, shaking his head sharply.

It was…

It was warm.

“I- I was- He was hugging me. I was leaning-” He winced- “against him, he- I-”

“Do you remember what that felt like?” Hongjoong asked carefully, taking a single shuffling step forward.

It was warm.

Yeosang was so cold, it hurt-

Wooyoung’s arm tightened around him. Slowly. So slowly, Yeosang didn’t even notice until his back pressed completely against Wooyoung’s chest, and he… he was warm. It didn’t burn. Didn’t hurt. For once, it was simply… warm.

Comforting. Like being surrounded. Like even if he wanted to, he couldn’t feel alone. Couldn’t feel the cold.

“Warm.”

He heard Hongjoong hum quietly. “Do you remember last night? When you and Wooyoung went to sleep?”

Warm.

“Do you remember in the cell, when Wooyoung stayed with you?”

Always warm.
Always there. His hand held out. Smile hesitant and unsure, but never afraid. Never unkind.

Never alone.

He hadn’t even noticed Hongjoong approaching him until he saw the edge of his foot appear.

“Remember that, Yeosang,” he murmured. “Remember what that felt like.”

He wasn’t alone.

Arm suddenly pulled him forward, Yeosang pressed to Hongjoong chest, and he cried out sharply, jerking away because it-

It burned.

All along his body, covering every inch of skin as Hongjoong’s arms tightened to hold him in place, it burned.

Yeosang went completely still.

The war was back. Ice melting under fire, fire trying to grow over flame, anger and contentment, fear and safety, pain and comfort-

Hongjoong was around him. Yeosang wanted to jerk away, it hurt-

It melted the ice. It burned away the fear, leaving nothing in its wake but warmth that seemed to bury inside his pores.

“You are… doing an amazing job, Yeosang,” Hongjoong murmured, barely loud enough to be heard over the roaring of his ears. “You are trying so hard. And you have accomplished so much.”

Yeosang dropped his head, pressing it to Hongjoong’s shoulders, fire spread in thin lines over his ragged breathing-

“You are certainly further along than I would ever hope to be. It’s been only months, Yeosang, and you already are learning how to trust in your memories.”

Wooyoung held his hand for the first time. And it burned. But Yeosang would rather die than go back to the cold.

His limbs stopped twitching.

Yeosang felt something heavy settle on his chest.

“I don’t-” he rasped, as if he hadn’t wet his throat in weeks. He coughed harsly, Hongjoong’s hand burning into the base of his spine. “I don’t want… to hurt him. Any of them.”

He heard Hongjoong’s breath catch, and a deep breath as he held Yeosang tighter. “I know,” he whispered, voice shifted. “I know you don’t.”

His fingers curled into the side of Hongjoong’s shirt, his eyes burning worse than the touch around him.

“He’s different,” he breathed. “He’s special.”

This is what he knew.
“I know he is.”

That was all he knew.

“I-” Yeosang swallowed, throat constricting and hands shaking. “I kissed Wooyoung.”

He had fucked up so badly.

He could feel the way Hongjoong stiffened, a sharp intake of breath through his nose, and the way his arms shifted around Yeosang, not pushing or pulling.

“Did you?” he asked calmly. Too calm. “Why did you do that?” he asked curiously.

Yeosang tried to swallow, but couldn’t.

Hongjoong was warm, keeping the chill at bay.

“He’s different,” he whispered helplessly. “He’s special. I don’t- I didn’t know what else to do- I didn’t know how else to show him- You and Seonghwa- You- You were both different, you said-”

He sucked in a deep breath, choking on it. “You were different, and Wooyoung was different, so I- I didn’t know- I kissed him because you and Seonghwa- you-”

He heard Hongjoong swallow. “Oh, Yeosang.” It was soft, and Yeosang felt burning tears on his cheeks. Hongjoong’s arms tightened, holding Yeosang’s head gently to his chest.

Yeosang crushed the fabric of his shirt in his hands. “I- I didn’t know what else to do, I-” He choked, tasting salt water on his lips as Hongjoong rubbed his back slowly.

“Yeosang… you didn’t do anything wrong,” he said quietly. “You did absolutely nothing wrong. You tried to make a connection using what you knew.”

“The wrong connection,” Yeosang cried softly, hiding his face.

“You weren’t given the tools to make the right one,” Hongjoong said firmly. “The same as everything else- you were never given the proper knowledge to be able to make these decisions. But you’re trying, Yeosang, you’re still trying. And that is the most important thing.”

“Wooyoung is different,” he murmured thickly. “You and Seonghwa are different. Where… Where did I mess up?”

He didn’t know. He just knew they were both different.

Hongjoong let out a low breath. “Yeosang… Seonghwa and I love each other,” he whispered. “Very much. We were on the same ship, trusting each other with our lives every single day. We risked our lives, nearly lost our lives to each other and for each other… And when I almost lost Seonghwa once… I could not longer live with him not knowing the true extent of what he meant to me.”

Yeosang swallowed. “Precious.”

Hongjoong physically started. “Yes,” he answered slowly. “Seonghwa was very precious to me. But we had time to build slowly to a place where we gave our hearts to each other. I told him my feelings, and then I waited, allowing him time to think through his own. We came to the same conclusion, but… there was every possibility that we wouldn’t.”

Yeosang winced. “I came to a different conclusion,” he surmised. “One Wooyoung didn’t
consider.”

“Well, Seonghwa had never considered loving me until I revealed that I felt it for him,” Hongjoong said patiently. “But given time, he decided it was something possible. However, you have to think about whether what you’re feeling is truly the same as that, or if you may simply be superimposing feelings because you are unsure.”

Yeosang frowned, unable to think about much outside of the immediate conversation flooding him. “You… Are you saying Wooyoung might…?”

Hongjoong was quiet for a moment. “I am not saying what you’re feeling is wrong. Or misguided. Or anything like that. But I am saying that while what you feel may be something… more… It isn’t wise for you to try and use Seonghwa and I as a template for your actions. You may simply find yourself closer to Wooyoung or more comfortable with him than the others. It does not necessarily mean that what you feel is the same as us two.”

Yeosang swallowed thickly, chewing his lip as he tried to focus on breathing. *Seonghwa and I love each other.*

For the first time, someone had used a word Yeosang knew. And it jarred him to his core.

Not necessarily the same. Seonghwa and Hongjoong were different. But it was possible that Wooyoung was a... different difference?

Yeosang’s head hurt.

“You’re on a difficult path, Yeosang,” Hongjoong said warmly. “And you’re already doing so well, don’t let something like this trouble you. I guarantee you, Wooyoung will not hold something as trivial as this against you. I believe you just startled him. We will get it all sorted, Yeosang, I promise. Don’t let it trouble you.”

Yeosang sighed gently, closing his eyes tightly.

Easier said than done. But as the silence stretched between them, and Yeosang felt himself… not relax, but his skin no longer buzzed in a panic. He let out a long breath. If nothing else… it felt good to be able to say it. To get it out. He felt… lighter.

“How are you feeling?” Hongjoong murmured quietly.

Yeosang took stock of his limbs that felt numb, but they no longer ached and hurt. The fire had died down to warming coals. He felt… more normal.

“Better,” he whispered weakly.

Hongjoong hummed, sounding pleased. “I need to speak with Seonghwa and Wooyoung,” he said calmly, rubbing Yeosang’s back gently. “Do you want one of the others to come sit with you? Or a few of them?”

Yeosang… didn’t know. Part of him wanted to be alone, to process and think, but every other part of him begged not to be alone with his thoughts.

“Sure.” It hurt to say.

Hongjoong squeezed him lightly. “I’ll send Yunho up,” He promised. “Are you okay to let go?”
It occurred to Yeosang that this was the first time since exiting the cell that he was without Wooyoung. He swallowed, nodding slowly.

Hongjoong slowly loosened his arms around Yeosang, and Yeosang pulled away carefully, waiting for any sort of jolt of panic. None came. Even as Hongjoong retracted, it was like wearing an already-worn jacket, the warmth still sticking to Yeosang’s skin.

Hongjoong’s smile was small and soft, but warm and proud as he stood. “Yunho will be up in just a second,” he promised.

Yeosang nodded numbly.

Hongjoong kept his eyes on Yeosang all the way to the door, waiting at it, before nodding to Yeosang and exiting quietly.

And for the first time in… a long time… Yeosang was alone.

But he wasn’t… *alone*.

It was a different feeling.

Yeosang was different.

And if he could tell one thing out of this whole shitstorm, it was that this different… was better.

His lips burned and tingled in tandem with the rest of him.

Chapter End Notes

Wooo!! This was the bit I’ve been waiting to write since beginning this (*rubs hands maniacally*)

Hopefully this was okay, given that I wrote 7k in like two hours lol

Comments are my favorite food, and thank you for reading!

Until next chapter!

-SS
A Problem

Chapter Notes

Okay just let me know if I messed this up completely or I rushed it but I tried my best
ㅠㅠㅠ
I had a lot of fun with this chapter though, so let me know what you think!
The plot is picking up!!!
I hope you enjoy and have an amazing day!!
-SS

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“He kissed me.”

Wooyoung felt like he had just had a tether cut. As if someone had punched him in the gut and left him breathless, only to shove him under water and told him to breathe.

Seonghwa’s expression was one of complete shock, as if he expected anything but that to come from his mouth, but he quickly quieted the expression into something softer, more curious.

“Do you… know why?” he questioned as if aware of Wooyoung’s fragile mental state.

Wooyoung shrugged, curling his knees to his chest where they sat in the hallway.

He felt… weird. Like there was something other than blood sitting in his veins.

“I tried talking to him… he just kept getting freaked out.”

You’re different.

“He kept saying I was different,” he murmured. “From the others.” He swallowed. “He talked… he kept talking about you and Hongjoong being different, too…” He looked up, confusion still dyeing his eyes. “Hyung, do you think… do you think Yeosang likes me?”

Because if Yeosang was comparing him to Seonghwa and Hongjoong, there weren’t many other options.

Seonghwa looked perturbed, but simply dropped into a crouch in front of him, laying a heavy hand on his shoulder. “I think we should wait for Hongjoong before we discuss anything.”

Wooyoung glanced at the door. It was quiet inside. Silent. Somehow, that didn’t bode well for him. He couldn’t find anything else to say, so he just rested his chin on his knees and waited.

You’re different.

He said it so… convinced. As if this was an absolute truth or something.

And yeah, Yeosang stared at him, and Yeosang clung to him over the others, but Wooyoung hadn’t ever seen any sort of indication that it was anything more than seeking comfort in the only way he
The kiss had been warm. Almost burning. Wooyoung hadn’t ever felt something like that, and he had to admit, it took him a moment to process what was happening and what that meant-

Because Yeosang was kissing him. Yeosang, who was not in his proper mind, who was confused on the best of days, who probably did not even understand what he was doing or why he was doing it-

Wooyoung felt something like guilt settle in his chest.

Had he been giving off the vibes of being interested? Had Yeosang looked at his actions and seen them as something more? Had Wooyoung been the one misleading him without even realizing it?

The door opened.

Wooyoung leapt to his feet, turning, but Hongjoong just closed the door behind him carefully, silently.

Wooyoung frowned. “Hyung, where’s-”

“Give me a minute,” Hongjoong said, walking quickly towards the stairs.

“Wha- He’s alone in there?” Wooyoung demanded, looking to Seonghwa who looked prepared to grab Wooyoung should he try to run for the door. Suddenly, a kiss seemed like the least of his problems.

“Hongjoong wouldn’t have left him if Yeosang were not safe,” Seonghwa assured him. “Wait.”

And even though Hongjoong returned only seconds later, it felt like too long, Wooyoung counting the moments that Yeosang was in there, alone-

Yunho was with him, Hongjoong opening the door and gesturing for Yunho to go in. The other entered, glancing around with concern, but Hongjoong parked the door, allowing it to be ajar but closing out most of the sound.

Wooyoung turned to him. “Is he-”

Hongjoong held up a quick hand, glancing at the door, his expression falling for a moment into something pitying. “I’m going to explain what was going through Yeosang’s head,” he said firmly. “And I want you to sit and listen until I’m done, okay?”

Wooyoung didn’t like the sound of that. Not at all. But he nodded regardless.

Wooyoung didn’t know who looked more alarmed as Hongjoong spoke: him or Seonghwa.

Hongjoong’s expression was heavy. “He tried to create a leap in logic. And under normal circumstances, he may be correct, but he can’t exactly know the depth of everything he’s feeling until he is further recovered.”

Yeosang saw that Hongjoong and Seonghwa were different from the rest of them.

He knew that he himself felt different about Wooyoung than the others, given their closeness.

He made the leap that he and Wooyoung were the same as Hongjoong and Seonghwa, despite his actual feelings not necessarily being lined up with theirs.
So maybe he liked Wooyoung. Maybe he didn’t.

He kissed him to show Wooyoung that he was different.

But he hadn’t necessarily meant it as a kiss.

Wooyoung was still being held underwater.

But more than confusion or shock, he just felt a sad weight in his chest. How lost was Yeosang feeling? Trying to make desperate connections to understand what he was to people, taking a leap and trying to guess correctly-

And Wooyoung had shoved him away.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Wooyoung,” Hongjoong said firmly, eyes on Wooyoung’s face.

“Your reaction was natural and warranted.”

That did little to help. “I freaked him out and almost sent him into an episode.”

“You may have potentially done worse damage, had you let him continue,” Seonghwa said comfortingly. “It was best that he understand quickly where lines are drawn. You would not want to placate him into situations where his feelings aren’t real. That isn’t fair to Yeosang.”

Wooyoung sighed, hanging his head and rubbing at his eyes.

“How do you feel about all this?”

He looked up, Hongjoong watching him curiously, expression reserved. “What?”

“How do you feel about it? Truthfully,” he said firmly. “About Yeosang kissing you?”

Wooyoung opened his mouth. Closed it. Again. He frowned, heart twisting. Seonghwa laid a gentle hand against his back, and he took a short breath. “Well… I mean, I was mostly shocked by it, but like… I don’t hate him for it. He just surprised me. It wasn’t like he shoved me against the wall and started making out with me, it was just… it was sudden.” He looked at the floor. “And if you’re asking if I’ve been sitting here waiting for him to do it… no. I never thought about it. But I’m not upset with him over it,” he said quickly, looking up sharply. “It’s just not something I ever considered.”

Hongjoong and Seonghwa exchanged glances.

Hongjoong’s lips twitched, even if his eyes were still heavy. “I didn’t think you would be upset.” The amusement died. “You’re going to have to have a conversation,” he said almost in warning. “I think Yeosang understands, but he needs to hear from you where you both stand. Your opinion matters to him.”

Wooyoung nodded, already expecting this, the fact sitting on his shoulders like a weight. “But he… he’s okay? Like, I didn’t… mess him up?”

Hongjoong hummed, neither a yes nor a no. “He was startled. He thought your rejection was of him, not the kiss, so it scared him. He was able to remain coherent through it all, though. I was impressed with him and how he handled it.” He nodded to himself. “He may be confused on a lot of things, but when he is sound, he’s able to stay remarkably calm.”

Wooyoung, at least, felt better knowing he wasn’t back to square one, even if the guilt at having
been so firm in his rejection hurt a little. He didn’t regret it, because it had been a correct reaction: he did not feel about Yeosang in a way that warranted a kiss. And Yeosang did not need someone to lie to him in order to spare his feelings.

“Should I… go talk to him now?” Wooyoung asked.

Hongjoong shook his head. “Give him some time. Yunho is watching him, and I’m about to send Jongho up to join them. I doubt Yeosang will be doing much but sitting there. We’ll wait until tomorrow and see how he feels. For now… you should perhaps go spend some time with the others.”

Wooyoung wanted to plant himself outside the door and stay there.

But he felt rocky. Like he was standing on a pile of small stones with nothing beneath them, shifting and swirling under his feet, forcing him to keep moving if he didn’t want to get caught in them.

Yeosang kissed him.

He shoved the thought from his head as Seonghwa laid a hand against his back, turning him towards the stairs. “Let’s go see what the others are doing,” he said gently, and Wooyoung didn’t fight him.

He hung his head low, chest heavy, and when they arrived at the living room, the others were playing video games, but clearly more subdued than they usually would be, glancing at Wooyoung knowingly before turning back to the game.

Seonghwa pushed him towards them, and Wooyoung let his feet carry him to the couch, San scooting over to make room.

No sooner than he plopped down, did San move back over, until he was squished between him and the arm rest. Wooyung didn’t complain. He welcomed the proximity. He sighed, letting some of the tension (a very little piece) leave his shoulders as he watched their characters run across the screen.

It felt weird, not having Yeosang here after so many days of constantly being attached to him.

“Wanna sleep in my bed tonight?” San offered, glancing at him.

Wooyoung didn’t look away from the screen, wondering who was going to spend the night with Yeosang. Maybe Hongjoong or Seonghwa. Or maybe Yunho would just stay there. Would Yeosang let himself sleep? Would the scare of the day keep him up?

He nodded slowly. “Yeah.” If he spent the night by himself, he’d never get his brain to shut up.

~~~~~~~~

The night was restless.

Wooyoung didn’t sleep longer than an hour without waking up, even with San already on top of him, pinning him down comfortingly. It was infinitely better than being alone, though.
He was grateful when it was time to actually get up, San opening his eyes and taking one look at Wooyoung before frowning. “You didn’t sleep at all, did you?”

“I slept,” he assured him. “Just not very well.” He sat up, rubbing at his tired eyes. “I’m just worried.”

San squeezed his hand tightly. “Everything will work out,” he said firmly. “Seonghwa and Hongjoong aren’t going to let him down.”

Wooyoung hummed absently. He needed to talk with Yeosang.

They exited the room together, San murmuring something about being hungry and wondering if he could convince Jongho to go to the store with him to get the next book in a series he was reading.

Mingi was already in the kitchen with Seonghwa.

Wooyoung managed not to immediately burst into questions, but Seonghwa simply nodded at him calmly. “Hongjoong said that Yeosang is awake upstairs, whenever you’re ready.”

Wooyoung opened his mouth. He wanted to run upstairs, but he hesitated, wondering if he should wait or-

Seonghwa gave a small, knowing smile. “Go now, if you want. I’m sure it’s better to get it over with anyway.”

Wooyoung felt his face heat slightly at being caught, but he just nodded quickly, turning and running back up the stairs.

His heart would be pounding if he could feel it.

The door to their room was shut firmly. Wooyoung stared at it for several seconds, knowing that Yeosang was on the other side of it and thought back to a time when all he knew of Yeosang was his voice through a closed door.

You’re different.

It echoed as he knocked quietly.

“Come in,” he heard Hongjoong’s voice call.

He pushed it open without hesitation, poking his head in and glancing around.

Hongjoong sat in a chair against the wall, Yeosang curled up against the headboard with Yunho sitting at the bottom of the bed, arms lowering as if he had been animatedly telling a story.

“Anyway,” Yunho said, smiling at Yeosang who was staring at Wooyoung. “The dog got away, but the peanut butter was safe.”

Yeosang looked at him, nodding. “M glad.” He sounded genuine, if a bit dull.

Yunho smiled, glancing at Wooyoung. “That means San’s up,” he said standing. “I’m gonna see if he wants a round two for yesterday.” He gave Yeosang finger guns, heading out the door and smiling at Wooyoung supportively.

“Good luck,” he whispered, snickering.
Wooyoung poked him hard in the side as he passed, but Yunho was unfazed.

“Sleep well?” Hongjoong asked, drawing his attention back.

Wooyoung glanced at Yeosang who had taken up staring at the bed. “Sort of,” he confessed. “I woke up a lot.” He stepped inside, closing the door gently. “How about you?” he asked Yeosang, knowing that Hongjoong wouldn’t have slept at all.

Yeosang took several seconds to realize the question was addressed at him. He stared at Wooyoung, looking startled, before the anxiety died into a dull brown eyes as he looked away.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured instead, barely audible at this distance. “For yesterday.”

Wooyoung’s mouth opened. He glanced at Hongjoong, who gave him a ‘go ahead’ gesture. “You have nothing to be sorry about.” He began walking closer to the bed.

Yeosang still didn’t look up. “I made a mistake,” he said, voice dull. “I thought… I thought certain things were the same, but… they’re not. And I acted without even telling you anything. So I’m sorry.”

“It’s not as if you did it on purpose,” Wooyoung said, trying to laugh a little. “It’s not like you sat there and actively thought that we weren’t on the same page, but did it anyway. It’s a learning curve, Yeosang. You’ve gotta test things and see how they work out.”

“I made you uncomfortable.”

“You surprised me,” Wooyoung corrected. “I just didn’t know what was going through your head.”

Yeosang still wouldn’t look at him. Wooyoung sighed, sitting right in front of Yeosang, one leg dangling off the edge.

“Listen, Yeosang,” he said softly, reaching out, but hesitating, still hearing his cry from the last time he touched him. He swallowed, forcing his hand down all the same and wrapping it around Yeosang’s. He flinched, but didn’t jerk away, his head snapping up to stare at Wooyoung, wide eyed. “Even if you kissed me and meant it… that’s not bad. You didn’t do anything wrong. I just don’t want you to get involved in something that you don’t actually want.”

Yeosang still stared at him, eyes a little misty and dark.

“Your intent wasn’t to make me uncomfortable, or try and… I don’t know, take something from me. It’s fine, Yeosang, it really is.”

Yeosang opened his mouth, like he wanted to say something, but he closed it, his body leaning forward slightly before drawing back again.

Wooyoung lifted his free hand slightly, opening his arms in a clear offer.

Yeosang stared, eyes tracing over Wooyoung’s face and arms, hesitating before slowly moving forward. Wooyoung didn’t even have to guide him. Just shifted his legs so Yeosang could get close enough to wrap his arms around tightly, his forehead resting at his neck.

Yeosang was very still in his arms, but Wooyoung could feel his hand clenched in the hem of his shirt. He rubbed his back gently, a small smile on his lips.

“But we need to talk seriously, Yeosang,” Wooyoung said quietly. “About what you feel and what
needs to happen to accommodate that and your recovery. Because I think it’s the best policy for someone to try and sort themselves out before trying to make something work with someone else.” He chuckled nervously.

What would he do if Yeosang said he had thought about it, and that he did feel That Way about Wooyoung?

Well, he’d be super confused for one, because Wooyoung was a fucking mess, and even more so around Yeosang, so he’d probably ask Hongjoong to examine his head.

But… well, Wooyoung would probably need to ask for time. To look at his own potential, to look at Yeosang, and make a decision only after that introspection. As well as… well, like he said, he’d want Yeosang to get to a better place with himself before even attempting to make something happen. It’d feel wrong otherwise.

If he was confused enough to kiss someone he didn’t Like, Wooyoung didn’t want to try and confuse him farther with relationships and all the issues that came with that.

(See: All of highschool.)

But… Wooyoung definitely wouldn’t go running. No, never running. Not for someone like Yeosang. Not from a life partner. It’s the same as if any of the others suddenly confessed feelings: it’d be weird because Wooyoung had never thought about it, and they had been together for so long, it would seem sudden, but… Wooyoung would never scoff and shove them away.

So he held his breath, prepared for that eventuality, as unlikely as it was.

Yeosang nodded against his chest, though, taking a deep breath.

“I… can’t tell you with one hundred percent certainty,” he warned quietly. “I’m still… thinking about everything. About some stuff Hongjoong told me, but…” The hand on his shirt clenched tighter, and Wooyoung ran his hand up and down his back slowly. “But I don’t… I don’t feel that way,” he said, in an almost forced calm, like he was trying not to freak out again.

Wooyoung appreciated that.

Yeosang pulled his head away, but didn’t try to break the embrace. His eyes were still cloudy, but they held a clear conviction, even if his mind wasn’t able to give him a definite answer.

“I can’t feel that way,” he said carefully. “Because I don’t know how to feel that way about someone. I never have before,” he confessed. “But I don’t think… right now… that it’s the same. I…” He frowned, almost frustrated, but not quite. “You’re… different,” he said firmly, with conviction. “From the others. I feel differently around you than I do them. Not… more or less,” he said, like reading a script. “But different. But I jumped to conclusions in assuming that there were only two options: the others and Hongjoong and Seonghwa. But I realized that it’s not.”

Wooyoung had to be… very impressed with Yeosang’s words. Hongjoong was right: he may be confused, but when he found the right thing to say, it made sense. He wondered if Yeosang was like… an english major or a philosophy geek when he was alive.

Wooyoung’s lips twitched, feeling something almost like pride.

“I’m glad you were able to figure that out,” he said honestly. “And you keep thinking that over… let me know if anything changes, alright?”
Yeosang held his gaze for a moment before nodding. “I will.”

And part of Wooyoung was terrified at the prospect that something could change, but the other part of him wanted to scoff. He was a fucking vampire. Dating drama was the least of his fucking problems. Besides, Yeosang seemed like a pretty easy person to date. Calm, quiet, showing vague signs of having a little fire that could spark up in him.

Definitely better than some of the humans he had dated pre-vampirism.

But for now, all that was getting set on the back burner. There were things infinitely more important than Yeosang potentially thinking of him That Way.

Like Yeosang getting to a place in his recovery that allowed him to feel That Way about someone.

Wooyoung hugged him again, tight and long, and Yeosang relaxed against him, like sighing a breath of relief. To the side, Wooyoung saw Hongjoong nodding to himself, offering a small smile.

Well… even if Wooyoung was a mess, he seemed to be keeping on the right track. For everyone’s sake, that was probably a very good thing.

~~~~~~~

Yeosang laid awake at night.

Wooyoung breathed quietly beside him, unbothered and peaceful, and Yeosang was glad for that, he really was.

He just wished his own sleep could be so quietly.

His mind churned with wordless thoughts and worries, obsessing over whether or not Wooyoung was being truthful. Which then sparked guilt for doubting him which then sparked a dark feeling for still, even now, doubting him-

He laid awake.

Wooyoung tolled in his sleep, one arm catching across Yeosang’s chest and staying there like a tethered weight.

Yeosang sighed, one hand coming up to hold onto the arm gently as he closed his eyes.

His sleep was not peaceful, but… it was infinitely better than being alone.

That seemed to be what everything boiled down to.

He didn’t want to be alone.

He was never alone. Even now.

~~~~~~~
Wooyoung could almost forget about the kiss.

It was nearly-lost in being thrown head first into Yeosang and the others.

Yeosang and he did a half- tiptoeing dance around each other for two days. And then the ice broke when Wooyoung fell asleep on the couch while they watched them playing video games, and wound up kicking Yeosang so hard in his sleep, Wooyoung woke up and everyone burst into raucous laughter. Yeosang stared at him as Wooyoung apologized through his sleep-asked head, still rubbing his eyes.

Wooyoung wasn’t sure why that was something that knocked them back on track. But he wasn’t going to complain.

Not when Yeosang’s eyes finally looked at him without expecting Wooyoung to… he didn’t know, snap at him?

It fixed something.

Yeosang was getting…. better.

His episodes were still popping up, but… Wooyoung and the others had started getting good at seeing them coming and taking appropriate measures.

And Yeosang… Yeosang was getting better at sensing them, suddenly jerking away and not even needing to say anything for them to understand.

About 3 times out of 10, they could talk him out of the episode before it even began. And, about half the time… Yeosang could end the episode early, after minutes or sometimes seconds, eyes flickering and then fading back to brown as he slid to the floor, exhausted.

It was a challenge. It was hard. It was heartbreaking.

It was an odd mixture of helplessness and influencing.

But Yeosang… Yeosang seemed to be focusing with a new vigor. Whether it was having everything out in the open, taking away some of that confusion, or if his small progresses were suddenly seeming to add up, he glared down each episode valiantly.

(“You’re getting better at this,” Wooyoung whispered one night while they climbed into bed.

“I don’t… feel quite as… lost as before,” Yeosang explained quietly. “I don’t know how to describe it, but… Even the episodes… seem less terrifying and … dark. It’s like… I’m crazy but I’m getting closer to being able to drag myself out of that? Like because I’m aware of it, I can fix it.”

“Talking helped?”

He was sure knowing what he felt was helping Yeosang a lot. He now had a solid ground to stand on in terms of … well, where he stood.

Yeosang swallowed. “Yeah. Talking helps a lot.”)

Yeosang was determined.
Even when he was shaking from exhaustion as he practically tore his mind from itself, he glared at the ground, as if this was a challenge he was determined-

No. Destined to defeat.

Sometimes it seemed like he was physically tearing himself from an episode, as if it actually caused a real pain, but Yeosang always looked so relieved when he came back to himself, glancing around in question.

Wooyoung… Wooyoung could only beam with pride.

Yeosang still flinched and withdrew and curled around himself, but he was making more attempts at reaching out. Not just to Wooyoung, but he seemed to have become more comfortable with Yunho after their night together.

He would whisper quiet questions while they played video games that Yunho was happy to answer vibrantly, even offering to let Yeosang play, but he always refused, content to watch.

Yeosang began opening up to the others more, even if it was only verbal. Touch, he still seemed to reserve for Wooyoung, in terms of gaining comfort from it, but he didn’t flinch away when San laid a hand on his shoulder, or Mingi poked his side to gain his attention.

And sometimes, Yeosang’s voice would die out mid-conversation, but he started the talks, and that was something amazing.

Wooyoung was sitting beside Yeosang as they watched Yunho kick San’s ass in a video game that took place in a cityscape.

And Yeosang whispered, so quietly they almost didn’t hear over the battle sounds-

“That building looks like an ice cream shop near my house.”

San and Yunho almost dropped their controllers, and Wooyoung looked at him quickly, almost expecting another violent reaction to something he clearly remembered, but Yeosang just blinked, looking surprised with himself before frowning. “I-”

“Did you go there a lot?” San asked, the game forgotten for a moment.

“I…” Yeosang frowned, as if angry at himself for not remembering immediately. “I- Yeah,” he said finally, staring at his knees. “For… We went on my birthday every year. I… I got a different flavor every time.”

Wooyoung’s chest was warm.

Yeosang remembered. Small things, big things, it never mattered. With each piece recovered, there seemed to be an easing of his shoulders. As if one weight after another was being removed.

They were far from healed. Yeosang still fought himself every day, but in terms of his comfort and trust in his own mind, he was gaining back that sanity.

He no longer only knew the darkness and loneliness.

There were his few memories. There was them.

Yeosang curled into Wooyoung’s side as they tried to fall asleep.
“I…” Wooyoung listened carefully in the darkness. “Thank you.”

He frowned. “For what?”

“Everything,” Yeosang whispered. “Not just you. Everyone- I- I need to tell everyone, but… I- I don’t know… I don’t know if you can understand just how much… from the beginning… you made my life better.” His voice wavered, and Wooyoung knew he was crying. “I- There was nothing, Wooyoung,” he whispered, voice dropping. “Nothing. Just… a chasm I was stuck in, falling deeper and deeper, and you all-” His voice broke, and he took a moment to collect himself.

Wooyoung rubbed his back comfortably.

Yeosang sucked in a sharp breath. “You threw down a rope. And even though I was heavy and I struggled, you… you kept holding on.” Tears made it harder to speak as his voice failed him, making him hide his wet face in Wooyoung’s shirt. “You never… never let me go…”

His voice broke again, and Wooyoung wrapped his arms around him tightly.

He didn’t have anything he could say in response. Yeosang clung to him, sobbing quietly into his chest.

“We chose you, Yeosang,” Wooyoung murmured into the darkness, feeling the wetness bleed into his skin. “That means we don’t let go. Ever.”

Yeosang nodded, and Wooyoung knew he was being truthful.

If nothing else, Yeosang finally understood that.

~~~~~~

Yeosang… felt more at peace than he had, perhaps in his entire life.

His mind was still his greatest enemy, but Yeosang was learning all its weaknesses and tricks. He was learning.

Even if he still failed. Even if he still messed up, the one thing he could rely on was knowing that if he looked in any direction, there would be someone there.

There for him.

Wooyoung watched him, no longer in search of episodes, but just because he could, examining Yeosang’s face as if he wanted to memorize it. It made Yeosang feel warm.

Wooyoung was warm.

His smile was warm. Yeosang found himself… safe. Happy.

It was nothing special. Nothing out of the ordinary.

It was a normal day.

They sat on the couch, watching video games.
Yeosang felt Wooyoung holding his hand gently, loose and relaxed. Yunho's large frame was on his other side, the others scattered around the floor.

All of them here. Around him. Just existing. Not staring or watching. Their backs were turned to him, and no one was afraid. Not anymore.

He felt something in his cheeks loosen, like a muscle unlocking and relaxing.

Wooyoung snickered as Mingi’s character ran straight off the edge. Leaning over, he whispered, “How many times do you think he can run off before he throws the controller?”

Apparently, the answer was two.

Mingi’s controller hit the carpet, Yunho yelling at him to be careful with it, and Jongho squawking about almost hitting him, San rolling around on the floor-

Wooyoung snickered.

And Yeosang felt something warm pushing its way up his chest and neck. Something bright.

Wooyoung suddenly stopped laughing. Yeosang glanced over, wondering what was wrong and he found Wooyoung staring at him…

Like…

Like…

Yeosang didn’t know. Wooyoung had never stared at him like that before.

But it made his chest squeeze as Wooyoung stared almost in a quiet awe. Like Yeosang had just performed an amazing magic trick.

“What?” He whispered.

Wooyoung swallowed, still not looking away. “Nothing,” he said quickly. “You just... You have a nice smile.”

Yeosang’s hand leapt to his face and sure enough, his lips turned upwards the slightest bit.

Yeosang wasn’t even sure you could call it a smile.

But after decades without having anything to use it for? It suddenly seemed as if Yeosang were trying to remember how. Like his lips didn’t quite remember what they were supposed to do.

Regardless Wooyoung stared at him and Yeosang had to look away, his face burning in a not-unpleasant way.

“Thanks.”

It felt like another huge step. Maybe it didn’t have much bearing on his recovery but…

He would call this one a personal victory.
Wooyoung stared in shock.

“I- Come again, hyung?”

Hongjoong’s lips quirked in amusement, and Wooyoung kept waiting for him to draw the object in his hand back, laughing with a “Gotcha!”

But the knife was still in his hands.

Still held out.

To Wooyoung.

Hongjoong didn’t move where he offered it. “This is us taking a chance,” Hongjoong said once more. “Yeosang’s episodes have come down to a manageable level, both by you and him. Seonghwa and I no longer need to breathe down your neck. But, we would rest a little easier to know that you had something more than yourselves to defend yourself with.”

This is not what Wooyoung imagined when Hongjoong asked to speak with him for a few moments.

He felt the urge to run. Because he didn’t know if he could really be trusted with anything like this. This was a stupid decision on his hyung’s part.

“I- Why me?” Wooyoung demanded, chest caving in. He was the least qualified person to hold that fucking knife.

He stuck his hand beneath a door just to comfort someone who was trying to kill him. His decision making streak was not a great one.

“You and Yeosang are rarely apart,” Hongjoong said calmly. “It makes the most sense to give it to you. If you leave, you can pass it off to one of the others, but…” His eyes took on a different air. “Seonghwa and I think that you’re the best person to hold it.”

“Hyung, that’s your knife!”

“Technically, it is Seonghwa’s,” he corrected with a gentle smile. Too at ease for the situation. “And he was the first to suggest giving it to you. We have no use for it anymore. It’s original purpose has long since been served, and Yeosang is the only reason to have it still. Given everything the two of you have undergone, there is no one else who should hold this.”

He spoke almost as if the dagger were metaphorical.

Wooyoung stared in horror at it. “I- Hyung, I can’t- Not Yeosang-”

Hongjoong’s smile faded slightly into something heavier. “That is exactly why it should be you, Wooyoung,” he said quietly. “You would rather die than harm, Yeosang, wouldn’t you?”

That was unquestionable. They were life partners.

“But it is you who has taken responsibility for Yeosang,” Hongjoong said. “The two of you chose each other in some capacity, and that is why it must be you. You and Yeosang are building a trust, Wooyoung. You must be able to give yourself a safety net to build that.”
He imagined having to be the one pinning Yeosang down, pressing a blade to his throat, trusting himself not to push too hard, trust Yeosang not to just break his hand holding it-

Trust.

In the past, trust had gone no farther than knowing the others wouldn’t laugh when he admitted something. Trust had just been that the others weren’t going to leave him behind.

Trust had never been life and death. He had never blatantly been handed something so fragile in another person and told not to drop it.

Trust Yeosang.

He did. He truly did, even within an episode, he was beginning to trust that Yeosang would fight it, and that he would be in sound enough mind not to hurt him.

But this knife…

This was different.

“Seonghwa had to use this knife,” Hongjoong said, making Wooyoung look up. “Against me.”

His stomach dropped violently. Hongjoong continued to speak casually, staring at the knife.

“I loved him too much to risk ever hurting him. That was a pain worse than anything hunger or loneliness could ever threaten me with.” His grip on the handle tightened. I gave it to him when he first learned what I was. When he was still human. I was afraid of losing control and hurting him. I told him to kill me.”

Wooyoung flinched. Hongjoong gave a sad smile.

“And even if he never did, I trusted that he would save himself in the face of me.” He nodded to himself. “There were many times when he used it against me. Some deeper wounds than others… and each time it left a scar on us. We never wanted it. But it shaped us for the better, Wooyoung. It gave us the freedom to progress without the fear of harming each other irreparably.”

He stared at the knife for a moment. “A small injury is worthless compared to the price of killing, don’t you think?”

Wooyoung stared, stomach churning in horror, his body frozen as Hongjoong looked up. He was right but it made Wooyoung sick.

“This is not a weapon, Wooyoung,” he said, pushing it forward until it was only inches from Wooyoung’s chest. “It is a safety net. It is something that will allow you and Yeosang to function. You, without fear of being hurt by him. And Yeosang, without fear of harming you.”

Wooyoung continued to stare.

Hongjoong reached forward with one hand, grasping Wooyoung’s and pulling it up, pressing the handle into his palm. “Promise me that you will use it, if you need to.”

Wooyoung didn’t want that responsibility. He was not one of the Adults, he wasn’t supposed to have-

Trust.
He curled his fingers around the handle slowly, the knife feeling heavier than he imagined. He didn’t want to have to use it against Yeosang. Maybe he wouldn’t. So far, the knife had been making appearances less and less. Maybe he wouldn’t have to use it.

He turned away from Hongjoong, glancing at the door where Seonghwa stood with Yeosang, the other gazing at him with an indescribable expression, open and closed off at the same time.

“What do you think?” he questioned, Hongjoong releasing the knife and forcing him to take it fully in his hands.

Yeosang’s eyes flickered between Wooyoung and the knife. Then back to Hongjoong where he continued to stare for several seconds. Wooyoung could practically see his mind working a thousand miles an hour, as if he were seeing every possibility at once.

His eyes moved back to Wooyoung slowly. Still unreadable. But determined.

“I trust you,” he said plainly.

It wasn’t an answer.

But it was.

Wooyoung glanced at the knife. “Even if I hurt you?” he questioned.

“I trust you.”

Even if you do. Even if you need to.

I trust you.

Wooyoung swallowed a bitter taste in the back of his throat. If only he could trust himself. What if he went too far? What if he accidentally hurt Yeosang worse than he meant to? Or worse-

I trust you.

Don’t let him down.

Wooyoung almost bit through his cheek, but he nodded slowly. “Okay,” he said, quieter than he meant to, but still strong. “Alright.”

Hongjoong smiled at him, patting his shoulder. “It’s a burden,” he said honestly. “And it’s not pleasant. But it’s necessary.”

For both of them, it was necessary.

Wooyoung nodded, glancing back at Yeosang.

Yeosang wasn’t looking at Seonghwa or Hongjoong. He stared at Wooyoung, a thousand thoughts in his mind, but his eyes continued to burn into Wooyoung’s, as if looking away were admitting defeat.

Wooyoung felt… small under the gaze.
Which was unusual for Yeosang. But in that moment, it looked like Yeosang was cataloging everything about Wooyoung.

He didn’t look at the knife even once.

Yeosang… knew that things were changing.

His place among them had turned from weary participant to… family. Friend. He finally… felt like one of them.

And he didn’t need to be as loud as San or as bright as Yunho or as outspoken as Jongho…

He was just him.

Quiet and timid, barely speaking, but when he did open his mouth they all listened.

Wooyoung smiled at him each time.

And each time he did, Yeosang felt warm.

The knife was nothing. Wooyoung was everything. Yeosang trusted him, he had come to realize as an absolute truth. Unquestionably. Almost instinctively.

Wooyoung was there, listening to anything he had to say, and just being…

There.

Bright and caring and trusting and… Perhaps now… Yeosang thought that he appreciated Wooyoung now even more than when he was lost and drowning in his own mind. He could see in high definition clarity… everything Wooyoung was to him. For him.

And one day… Wooyoung smiled, laughing at something Yunho said, something Yeosang wasn’t even paying attention to, but…

It felt like something was slamming into his chest. Like a firework being shot directly into his heart, racing through his veins and screaming the whole way.

It took him by surprise. Wooyoung didn’t seem to notice the way he stopped breathing for a couple of seconds, his entire body seizing in shock.

In his now mostly-coherent mind, Yeosang could only stare at Wooyoung.

What the fuck?

It didn’t stop.

The gentle flicker of warmth he got knowing Wooyoung was happy suddenly turned into a freight train to his chest every time Wooyoung looked at him.

Yeosang was beginning to be a bit scared by it. The intensity. Like the first time he had felt the
burn of his touch.

He almost asked Wooyojng- hell, he almost asked Hongjoong, fearful that it was something getting worse with his rogue self.

But he kept his mouth shut because while it hurt and knocked the breath out him everytime it was…

It wasn’t bad. Necessarily.

Wooyoung plopped down on the sofa beside him, after getting his ass handed to him in a wrestling match with Jongho that he started.

Boom. Freight train. Yeosang stood very still as he tried to remember how to breathe.

Wooyoung grinned at him. “You okay?” He asked breathlessly.

Yeosang stared at him, trying to figure out what the hell was-

“Yeah.”

Wooyoung’s smile grew to blinding proportions. “Good.”

Yeosang could feel it. There on the edge of his brain. A realization. An edge of a cliff. The answer to the mystery.

But part of him was scared to give find it. Terrified to go over that cliff and fall into something he… or perhaps Wooyoung… weren’t ready for. Maybe didn’t even want.

But he carefully shied away from the edge, careful not to get too close.

But realization was right there, on the edge of his mind. And when he tipped over it...

When he tipped over it…

He was sure there was going to be nothing to catch him on the way down.

~~~~~~~~

The knife was a constant weight at his hip.

Hongjoong was right: it was a burden. A constant reminder. But…

But each day that passed that he didn’t need to use it felt like a victory.

Yeosang’s episodes weren’t quite violent enough to warrant pulling the knife, and even if he did, he didn’t have to use it.

Time ticked by.

“What’s on your mind?” Yunho asked as they sprawled around Hongjoong and Seonghwa’s room, the two of them absent for the time being. They were just chilling. Wooyoung didn’t think Yeosang had ever looked so relaxed.
Yeosang stared up at the ceiling, humming quietly. “I’m wondering how much longer I’ll have the episodes.” His voice was peaceful. Still that same quiet, murmuring lilt, but it was less frightened. More peaceful.

Yunho hummed curiously, arms tucked behind his head. “Hongjoong said it could take years before they stop completely.”

“But he also said you’re progressing really quickly,” Wooyoung reminded him, sitting with his legs crossed beside Yeosang. “So I guess we’ll just have to see, right?” He leaned forward, hovering over Yeosang who focused on his face as Wooyoung grinned down at him encouragingly.

Yeosang blinked, taking in a sharp breath, staring up at Wooyoung with startled eyes.

Wooyoung frowned at the sudden expression shift. “What?” he asked, chuckling, tilting his head to see Yeosang’s properly. “Do I have something on my face?” he joked.

Yeosang frowned. Deep, and then… dark. His jaw flexed as he swallowed thickly.

Wooyoung copied the expression. “What?” he questioned in confusion, some of his humor dying in the face of his distress. Yeosang continued to stare as if Wooyoung had just asked him an impossible question. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Yeosang didn’t move. Wooyoung was getting worried. “Yeosang?”

Yunho shifted, rolling onto his stomach, but Yeosang blinked, frowning deeper before his eyes widened in a clear panic as he shot up, forcing Wooyoung to sit back to avoid getting slammed in the head.

Yeosang ducked his head, pressing the heels of his palms to his eyes tightly, breathing a little quicker.

“You okay?” Yunho asked, frowning in concern.

Yeosang nodded quickly, not looking up. “Yeah,” he said, voice a little strained, a little breathless. “Yeah, I just…. I was thinking about something.”

He slowly lifted his head, but he didn’t look at Wooyoung, looking at his feet. “What were we talking about before?” he asked, in a clear attempt to stop talking about whatever that just was.

“Uh, the shopping trip,” Yunho said, watching Yeosang carefully. “The rest of us are planning to hit up a bunch of different stores.”

Wooyoung frowned still, but nodded along as Yeosang hummed in understanding. “Which stores?”

Yeosang still did not meet his eyes, but Wooyoung tried not to be too concerned about it, still listening to Yunho go on about their plans for their trip.

It had been months since they’d been able to go out, since everyone stayed with Yeosang most of the time. They used to go out every other night, but that had been drastically cut down. Slowly, they had been venturing out in small groups now that Yeosang was better at managing himself. But Wooyoung always stayed behind with Yeosang.

Yeosang still did not look at Wooyoung.
For the next day. And the next. His gentle peace had begun to melt away slowly, leaving him frowning and stiff as they sat. And then not looking turned into not talking. Any attempt at conversation was met with silence or simple head movements, and Wooyoung was beginning to get worried.

He didn’t want Yeosang to start taking steps back. He didn’t want him to have to go back to before. But any time he brought it up, Yeosang would just shake his head and maybe mutter something about just thinking.

“Yeosang, you have to talk to me,” he said quietly as they lay in bed. The past two nights had passed in absolute silence, but Wooyoung’s concern was reaching higher peaks. “You’re getting distant. I need you to tell me if something is wrong. I just want to help.” It was a useless plea.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Yeosang whispered quietly, not budging an inch. “I’m just… tired.”

And then not talking… devolved into not touching.

Nothing so disastrous as pushing Wooyoung away, but Yeosang no longer took his hand on his own. And when Wooyoung held his hand, for the first time in weeks, Yeosang was stiff, as if Wooyoung was squeezing his hand too tightly.

When laying in bed, he no longer rolled closer to Wooyoung.

When sitting next to each other, there was always a space between them.

Subtle things that meant a world of different. Subtle things that… that made Wooyoung’s chest twist painfully as he watched Yeosang continue to try and act as if everything was normal.

What was going on?

The shopping trip was all the others could talk about. Yeosang simply nodded along to their discussions, and Wooyoung watched him. Watched him shrink further and further away the longer the conversation went.

Day 5 of his weird behavior brought about a breaking point in Wooyoung.

He reached for Yeosang’s hand, smiling as he suggested they go watch Mingi play a racing game. He took his hand, but Yeosang kept shifting, as if holding Wooyoung’s hand had become painful. And after a few minutes, Wooyoung felt too horrible about it to keep holding on. He let go of Yeosang’s hand, and the other relaxed minutely.

It… hurt. In ways Wooyoung didn’t expect it to.

And thought that maybe… maybe there was a solution.

“Can I take Yeosang outside?”

Seonghwa blinked, the quiet of the house piercing during the night. It was just the four of them. “Take Yeosang… outside?”

Wooyoung nodded. Yeosang was not clutching his hand, but rather, standing by the doorway, staring at the ground. He had not looked at Wooyoung in days. “Just around the yard,” he promised. “We’d go sit in the garden or something. But I…” He glanced behind himself before dropping his voice, worry saturating the syllables. “I think he’s upset that the others got to go out. I think he wants to be able to go somewhere.”
Wooyoung didn’t know what had caused Yeosang’s sudden change in behavior. But he knew that it lined pretty well with the talk of the shopping trip and how long it had been since they had gone out… And the only thing he could think of was that Yeosang was getting depressed, just staying inside.

They’d kept him inside, worried that an episode may force him to run off into the darkness, and they certainly didn’t think he was quite ready to be around humans in town. So, inside he remained. For months.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Wooyoung promised. “And we’d stay within the yard. And he doesn’t tend to run around during his episodes anymore. And I have the knife! And you and Hongjoong would have time to yourself—"

“Wooyoung,” Seonghwa broke in, hiding a laugh. Wooyoung silenced himself. Seonghwa just shook his head. “I don’t see any reason why you can’t bring him outside with you, as long as you keep an eye on him.” He pressed his lips together for a moment. “We’ll give you thirty minutes to start? If you don’t check back in with us by then, we’ll go check on you, okay? Just to make sure.”

That was fair. Not that Wooyoung thought it would matter. Yeosang was better now. Maybe not better, but he was better.

He smiled in excitement, eager to try and fix whatever was hurting Yeosang. “Thanks, hyung. You and Hongjoong have fun!” he tossed over his shoulder as he hurried back to the door.

“You act as if Hongjoong were teenagers,” Seonghwa called. “And yet you vomit at the thought of us—"

“Don’t say it!” Wooyoung burst, glaring as he shut the door behind him quickly, turning to Yeosang who was staring at the ground. The excitement dimmed slightly in the face of his heavy expression.

Wooyoung really didn’t know what was wrong. It wasn’t like Yeosang was regressing, but he just… seemed so sad all the time, suddenly. Not even sad. Troubled. Lost. And he wouldn’t just talk to Wooyoung.

“Seonghwa gave me the go-ahead for us to go outside,” he said, voice dimmed. “It’s not going out the mall or anything… but you wanna see the garden?” He offered hopefully.

Yeosang swallowed, his fists clenching and unclenching. Wooyoung almost wondered if he was upset with him. As if he wanted to say something, but couldn’t.

“We don’t have to,” he said assuredly. “I just… I thought it might be nice for you to be able to get outside after so long.”

His heart sank by the second.

Yeosang was still silent. But he slowly lifted his head, eyes meeting Wooyoung’s firmly, even if they were reserved, for the first time in days.

Wooyoung didn’t know what was going on. Yeosang nodded absently, like he was back to just giving into whatever the person suggested without wanting it. Wooyoung opened his mouth, but Yeosang dropped his eyes again, and he closed it slowly.

Maybe he just needed some air.
Carefully, slowly Wooyoung grabbed Yeosang’s hand.

Yeosang flinched, but didn’t jerk away. He stared at their hands, and Wooyoung suddenly had a terrifying thought of Yeosang removing his hand from his, but he just stared. As if their hands could tell him a secret he desperately wanted to know.

The walk to the front door was silent. Wooyoung didn’t know what to do.

“You’re sure you wanna go out?” he asked, before touching the door. “We can just stay inside.”

Yeosang shook his head. Said nothing.

Wooyoung could only go with it. He opened the door, the cool night air bursting through and brushing over their skin. It had been a long time since he had been able to go outside. The cool air helped clear some of the stagnant air between the two of them, giving Wooyoung courage.

He guided Yeosang out, keeping a close eye on him as he glanced up seemingly against his will. His eyes trailed around the small yard that held nothing but a fence and a sidewalk to a gate.

The wind blew through, and Wooyoung closed his eyes, letting it wash over him. It felt good to be out again. He opened his eyes, glancing at Yeosang, who he found staring at him with wide, clear, terrified eyes that darted away as soon as Wooyoung looked over. He chewed the inside of his lip.

Down the stairs, Wooyoung pointed to various corners of the yard and told stories of games of soccer and attempts at acrobatics. Most of which ended in failure or Hongjoong and Seonghwa yelling at them.

“I played soccer,” Yeosang murmured, numb and quiet.

Wooyoung look at him sharply, but he was already turned away. “You did?” he asked eagerly.

No answer. Yeosang stared into the trees.

Wooyoung’s heart sank further in his chest as he lead him around the back of the house. The garden was nothing special, just some wild flowers in clumps. Things that didn’t need to be taken care of. Seonghwa used to come out at night tend it, but he hadn’t done that in years. It still lived on, though.

“-and one time Yunho pushed Mingi into a rose bush we used to have. He was fine, but Seonghwa was pissed because the bush was basically dead.”

Yeosang continued to stare at his feet.

Wooyoung’s shoulders fell, and he sighed, watching him sadly. He waited but Yeosang did nothing for his silence. “Yeosang,” he said quietly in the darkness.

He didn’t move. Wooyoung turned more fully to him, hand squeezing his gently. “Yeosang, look at me,” he requested, not quite a plea.

Yeosang’s hand twitched in his, but he didn’t move, his jaw flexing and eyes closing tightly.

Wooyoung tried not to feel hurt. But after doing so well for so long, the silent treatment stung.

It hurt.

He sighed, turning his head upward and staring up at the stars. He grit his teeth determinedly.
“Come on,” he said quietly, leading him to a clear spot of grass and sitting down, pulling him down.

Yeosang complied without fighting, but he was stiff as Wooyoung told him to lay down, letting the cool grass tickle his neck as he laid down, staring up at the stars. Yeosang took a spot beside him.

The only thing touching was their hands.

Wooyoung’s heart twisted painfully as he tried not to act out of emotions. He took a deep breath.

“Yeosang, did I do something?” he asked quietly. “Or did one of the others?”

Silence. Yeosang’s hand shook in his, fingers releasing Wooyoung’s. The only thing keeping them together was Wooyoung’s grip. He felt something like fear settle in his chest, wondering if Yeosang was going to pull away.

Now, he was the one afraid of being left alone.

“Is something upsetting you?” He asked quickly, gently. “Are you getting lost in your head? Are you sad or angry about something?” Wooyoung felt helpless. Yeosang’s hand twitched.

Please don’t pull away.

“I said before, Yeosang,” he said, voice thick. “You have to talk to me. I can’t help if I don’t understand. I don’t know what you’re feeling, and I don’t know how to help you.” He wanted to look at Yeosang but was too afraid of what he’d see.

“I want to help, Yeosang;” he almost whispered. “I don’t want you to feel like you can’t tell us something. Or if we made you feel like we wouldn’t listen. And I’m sorry if something I did made you feel that way, but-”

Yeosang’s hand tore away from Wooyoung’s, snatched away as if he had burned him.

Wooyoung felt cold.

He jumped at the violent move, Yeosang sitting up quickly and moving away from Wooyoung, sliding along the grass, breathing coming quicker.

Wooyoung shot up, but Yeosang was already getting to his feet.

“Yeosang-”

He shook his head quickly, turning his back on Wooyoung, moving away-

He didn’t look like he was having an episode. He looked completely coherent. Just torn. As if he were being pulled in two separate directions.

Wooyoung watched helplessly as Yeosang ran a hand through his hair, shaking his head, muttering something Wooyoung couldn’t hear.

“Yeosang, you’re scaring me,” he said quietly getting to his knees. “Talk to me, what are you-”

Yeosang shook his head quickly, hard enough to crack something. “I-” He turned to Wooyoung, and for the first time that evening, their eyes met.

Yeosang looked as if Wooyoung had just buried the knife at his side in his chest. Something like
horror, like realization, like condemnation in his eyes.

“No,” he said quietly. He tore his eyes away from Wooyoung. “No, I- I need-” He started moving away, rushing towards the darkness away from the house.

“Yeosang.” Wooyoung leapt to his feet, rushing after him.

He couldn’t run away, not now. Wooyoung ran after him, desperate hand outstretched-

Yeosang jerked back around, eyes a fiery red, but they didn’t look at Wooyoung. They stared at his arm, not looking at his face. “Stop.”

Wooyoung froze.

Yeosang covered his eyes. “I need to be alone,” he whispered quickly, Wooyoung forced to read his lips to understand. His stomach disappeared.

Alone?

Wooyoung’s mouth opened. Closed. His mind a blank panic. “I- Okay,” he agreed in a panic. “Okay, that’s- Let’s go inside, Yeosang,” he tried to coax carefully. “You can be alone inside, but I can’t just leave you out-”

Wooyoung made the mistake of reaching for Yeosang again, trying to guide him back towards the house.

He was so fucking stupid.

Yeosang slashed at his hand, snarling, and his eyes flashed a brighter crimson.

Wooyoung snatched his hand back, but his claws caught the edge of his skin, and he winced at the sting that snagged deeper than usual.

He stared back at Yeosang’s brown eyes watching him in horror.

Wooyoung opened his mouth, about to try to calm him, to assure him it didn’t hurt, to explain that it wasn’t his fault, Wooyoung had tried to touch him-

Yeosang turned.

And he ran.

“Yeosang!” Wooyoung shouted, taking off after him, desperation and fear making him move without thinking. He should go get Seonghwa and Hongjoong. He should try and talk to Yeosang from a distance. He shouldn’t make the same mistake fucking twice-

Wooyoung caught up to Yeosang, snatching the sleeve of his shirt, desperate just to make sure he didn’t leave, he had to stay here-

Yeosang had episodes when he felt threatened. And Wooyoung was chasing him down, trying to hold him back when he clearly wanted to run.

He was asking for it. He was an idiot.

Yeosang whipped back around, eyes crimson and glowing as his hand flew back, slamming against Wooyoung neck and he lost his sense of direction as the world flipped, and he was slammed into
the ground.

The breath was knocked from him, but he grabbed at Yeosang’s hand on his neck, prying it off before he could get a good grip, shoving it away and knocking him off balance. Wooyoung’s hands were unpracticed, but they planted against Yeosang’s chest and shoved.

Yeosang fell off of him, snarling, and Wooyoung had barely gotten to his feet, whipping around to follow his movement, his hand flying to waist and pulling the dagger from its sheath, his heart in his throat-

Yeosang flew towards him.

Wooyoung lifted the dagger in defense as Yeosang...

Yeosang…

And Wooyoung… the stupid, ignorant, idiotic fool that he was…

He hesitated.

He looked at Yeosang’s face, so twisted in anger until he was unrecognizable… but he still saw Yeosang.

It was still Yeosang.

And he couldn’t… he wouldn’t hurt Yeosang.

What if he brought himself out of it? What if he was trying to fight it?

You have to protect yourself. You promised you would.

But the moment’s hesitation was enough. The moment where the dagger’s tip dipped towards the ground was just long enough.

Wooyoung tried to raise it back up, but Yeosang was already there.

The dagger caught his shoulder, but it only brought an angry snarl as he continued to press forward.

Wooyoung knew he had fucked up. Badly.


Wooyoung dropped the dagger, trying to cry out, but the pain was so bad, he couldn’t even breathe, much less make a sound.

He was sure his neck was broken.

They tore out, and Wooyoung fell forward. He wanted to feel shock. Feel betrayal or remorse. Something.

He was just numb, his knees giving way as he buckled forward-

His knees hit the hard ground, his body folding over until he hit the grass, and Wooyoung could feel the slick red spreading dangerously fast.
A few feet away, he could see the dagger laying in the grass.

He had fucked up. So badly.

His vision was already blurring, spots dancing. He wanted to press a hand to the wound, try to keep the blood inside, but… He couldn’t move.

And the only thing he felt aside from the pain… was fear.

He didn’t want to die.

He couldn’t even cry.

It felt like the air around him was vibrating.

Suddenly, he was staring up at the stars, and the pain exploded at his neck so badly, a choked, wet sound left his throat, but it only made a burst of blood hit the grass.

Yeosang was there.

Eyes brown and wide and terrified and dripping salt water.

His lips were moving. Wooyoung stared, fear settling in his chest, deep and foreign.

Blood roared in his ears.

He didn’t want to die. But he couldn’t even make a sound from his broken throat.

His hand twitched desperately, his eyes stinging painfully.

Yeosang was the only one here.

He took Wooyoung hand, staring at him in horror, and Wooyoung tried to bring him closer, but he barely even moved.

By some miracle- by some miracle- Yeosang moved closer, lips moving faster, hands fluttering near Wooyoung’s neck-

Wooyoung kept trying to pull on his hand, eyes closing against the pain, trying to convince himself that his vision wasn’t darkening.

“-young!”

He kept trying to pull, throat clogged and limbs weakening-

Yeosang frowned, desperate, and finally followed Wooyoung’s miniscule movements, rather than trying to decipher what he wanted.

He only got halfway to his head before his hand dropped, muscles giving out. He wanted to cry. Scream. Be back inside, just-

He was scared.

Yeosang stared from his hand, still hovering just above Wooyoung’s neck, then Wooyoung’s face, terrified, even as he lifted his hand further, until his wrist lined up with Wooyong’s mouth.

He almost cried with relief as Yeosang tried to decipher if this was the correct action.
If hurt. Fuck, it hurt-

But Wooyoung opened his mouth, biting down on Yeosang’s wrist until he broke skin and blood flowed into his mouth.

Wooyoung had never needed to feed to heal before. Had never had an injury that would ever need to be healed like that.

But he hadn’t imagined that it hurt almost as bad as the thing killing him.

It felt like fire filling his veins, a vice squeezing his muscles, hands tearing and ripping at the already broken limb-

He choked on the blood, his throat ruined, but trying to drink-

Yeosang’s hand was suddenly behind his head, sitting him up halfway, and he had to release his wrist to grit his teeth together-

It hurt so fucking bad.

He heard words rumbling in Yeosang’s chest he was leaned against, and then his wrist was pressing insistently against his mouth, one of Yeosang’s hands coaxing his mouth open, his chest continuing to vibrate with words Wooyoung couldn’t hear.

Wooyoung drank, sucking hard and desperate to just get it over with, his eyes squeezing shut-

Vampire blood tasted different than human blood. A deeper taste.

He choked again, losing an entire mouthful down his front-

Yeosang was petting his hair. His hand shook violently, but he ran his fingers through it quickly, as if desperate to ease his mind.

Wooyoung didn’t know how much he was supposed to take. Didn’t even know if it was fucking working, but it still hurt. Still burned. Still ached-

“-sorry,” he heard, as if from underwater. “-sorry, I can’- I- so- sorry- lease- jus- kay- Woo- pleas-”

He felt numb. And only when Yeosang began to tug his hand away, did Wooyoung finally dislodge, breathing heavily-

He was breathing.

Cold, shaking fingers touched his neck, and he winced, the area feeling raw and burned-

“-do, - young?” Yeosang demanded weakly, hands shaking where they held Wooyoung. “H- Wh-Wooyoung!”

Yeosang’s arms shook where they tried to support him, and finally Wooyoung was lowered quickly to the ground when he felt Yeosang’s arms give way.

How much blood had Wooyoung taken? When was the last time Yeosang had fed?

Yeosang was probably almost too weak to stand. Please don’t let him be.

He swallowed thickly, still afraid to open his eyes. They needed help. “Seon-” His voice caught
"Wait!" he said, voice shaking and breaking and trembling. "-right- back, I- mise!"

Wooyoung could tell he was alone. And it felt like seconds, not even long enough to start to rekindle fear, before he felt warm hands touching his face and arms.

"Wooyoung," he heard Seonghwa and Hongjoong’s voices overlapping, hands touching and stroking gently.

Something left him, leaving Wooyoung spent and boneless, a relief washing over him.

They were here. Everything was going to be okay, they were here-


Weakly, Wooyoung tried to tighten his grip, and he wasn’t sure if he succeeded, but it didn’t matter because a moment later, he felt himself falling backwards into darkness, relief and exhaustion and fear telling him to just let go.

Everything just burned like acid still, and Wooyoung let himself fall unconscious, not even able to worry about where Yeosang was or what was happening.

~~~~~~

Yeosang watched Seonghwa pick Wooyoung up, arms sliding behind his back and under his knees, standing quickly.

Wooyoung’s head lolled, exposing his neck that was a raw pink color, just barely covered with enough new skin to be called healed-

His mouth was covered in Yeosang’s blood. And his own.

His arms dangled, eyes closed lightly, not moving, completely still and silent-

Because of Yeosang. Yeosang was the one who did this, Yeosang was the one who hurt him, who tried to kill him-

His wrist ached where blood had begun to clot on it. Admittedly, he had panicked when Wooyoung suddenly bit him, but then he saw his neck begin to stop bleeding and heal, and Yeosang was prepared to give every drop of blood inside of him to fix it.

He stood there, shaking, his knees threatening to buckle and his hands shaking from something that felt like adrenaline but was probably blood loss.

The grass was darker in the night, stained with blood.

Yeosang felt the urge to vomit, his stomach rolling violently as Seonghwa turned back towards him, Wooyoung limp in his arms.
Their eyes locked, and Seonghwa’s were stiff and hard, even under his concern. Yeosang could tell nothing of what he felt.

He wanted to disappear.

Seonghwa turned to Hongjoong who was straightening. “Take care of Yeosang,” he said in a quiet tone, rushing passed Yeosang with Wooyoung. Yeosang turned with him, arm reaching out, but he snatched it back to his chest, feeling like he had just been dunked in ice water.

Wooyoung…

“Yeosang.”

He whipped back around, stumbling back a step, and Hongjoong just held his hands up in a placating gesture, eyes calm and lips tight in an attempt to hide his pain and stress.

“Yeosang, you need to remain calm,” he said voice warm and soft.

Yeosang stared at him in horror, the longer he sat there, the more heavily the sight weighed on him.

Hongjong had trusted him.

“What happened, Yeosang?” he asked quietly. “I need you to tell me what happened.”

Yeosang’s lungs locked up, his chest caving in.

He…. Wooyoung…

“I attacked him,” he breathed, voice spent. “I- I- He touched me, I- I panicked, I couldn’t- I couldn’t face him, I couldn’t tell him-”

Hongjoong stepped closer, hushing him to calm him, and Yeosang just shook his head.

“I screwed up again,” he cried, threading his fingers through his hair roughly, tugging at it harshly. “Hongjoong, I- I-”

All because he couldn’t bring himself to say it. To realize it.

“I attacked him, and he- he had the knife but- he hesitated and I- His neck- He drank-” he showed off his wrist, breathing coming in short bursts. “I didn’t mean to,” he said in a rush, looking at Hongjoong and begging him to understand. “Hongjoong, I- I didn’t mean to-”

“I know you didn’t,” Hongjoong assured him. He stared for another few seconds before gesturing to the side. “Let’s go inside, Yeosang. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

He frowned, glancing down at himself and seeing red dyeing his clothing and skin.

Oh.

“Come on,” Hongjoong coaxed carefully, hand outstretched.

Yeosang jerked back, and he quickly withdrew the hand.

“Okay,” he said calmly. “It’s okay, Yeosang. We’re just going to head inside. I don’t have to touch you.”
Yeosang stared, guilt and anger and horror and fear-

He swallowed, following Hongjoong. The walk into the house was silent, and Yeosang wished that Hongjoong would yell. Would scream at him for hurting Wooyoung, for betraying their trust, for not having the proper control-

For fucking up over something so simple.

Hongjoong just led him up the stairs, his legs shaking weakly, entering into his bedroom, and pulling clothes from the drawer.

Yeosang glanced around, wondering where Wooyoung was. He almost asked, but stopped himself. He didn’t have a right to know that anymore.

Hongjoong handed him the clothes, and Yeosang got dressed robotically.

Hongjoong used his discarded clothing to wipe off the stray blood on his hands and arms. Yeosang felt like his heart was gone. Removed from his chest and thrown to the floor. Destroyed.

He hurt him-

“Are you calmer now?” Hongjoong asked carefully.

Yeosang wanted to run. He nodded, staring at the ground. He just felt numb. Hollow. Like a glass china doll, empty inside with nothing to fill it and fragile skin that could so easily break to expose it.

He felt like his limbs weren’t fully attached, like they were going to fall apart at any moment-

“Yeosang.”

Hongjoong’s voice drew him back to stare at the gentle concern on his face, gentle and kind, even after Yeosang had hurt-

“Stay with me,” Hongjoong said calmly, hands still placating. “Can you tell me what happened? Slowly and calmly.”

Yeosang couldn’t even feel the urge and desperation from earlier. He just felt numb. His tone was flat as he described going outside, walking around, the garden, and then Wooyoung trying to touch him, and Yeosang…

For the first time… Yeosang had seen Wooyoung as a threat.

And he wasn’t. But he was.

Because he was everything hurting Yeosang.

“Yeosang.” He glanced up at Hongjoong’s gentle face that was pinched in concern. “Why did you think that Wooyoung was a threat? Does it have to do with how you’ve been feeling?”

Yeosang wanted to back away, to run, to escape because he hurt Wooyoung, he almost killed him-

He swallowed thickly. Hongjoong couldn’t tell, right?

“I…” The words stuck in his throat. “I- I couldn’t be around him,” he said quickly, some of that panic seeping back into his words. “I- He kept trying to touch me, and he kept talking to me, and I
couldn’t- I had to get away-”

“Calmly,” Hongjoong reminded him, voice like a butterfly’s wing beat.

Yeosang sucked in a deep breath that didn’t do much to calm him. “I didn’t want to be around him,” he blurted, and even Hongjoong couldn’t stop the flicker of surprise across his face.

“Around… Wooyoung?”

Yeosang nodded quickly, taking a small step back. “I- I couldn’t- I couldn’t say anything, but he just kept- he kept being- he-”

His eyes burned. He had hurt him. And somehow….

It hurt worse than before. Hurt differently. More piercing and direct and intentional.

Wooyoung’s eyes shimmering brightly at him, trying to lift his mood even as Yeosang ignored him. Wooyoung’s smile bright and forced for Yeosang’s sake, trying not to call attention to the fact he was ignoring him. Wooyoung’s glowing smile fading as Yeosang continued to look away-

Yeosang had been hurting him long before he attacked him.

All because he was a fucking coward.

Wooyoung’s warm hand sending continuous pulses of electric warmth up through his arm, gathering in his chest almost like a mimic of a heartbeat-

But that sensation being nothing to the absolute bursting warmth when Wooyoung smiled at him proudly, happily, laughing-

“What does that mean, Yeosang?” Hongjoong murmured. “What were you trying to tell Wooyoung? What did he do?”

“I-”

Wooyoung smiling. Holding his hand out, even if Yeosang didn’t need it anymore. Approaching again and again and again-

Hesitating… for Yeosang.

“I couldn’t tell him,” he breathed, pressing a hand against the cold rotting his chest. “He- I promised I would tell him, but I- I couldn’t, I was afraid of what…”

Wooyoung petting his hair to calm him.

“Of what if might change.”

Wooyoung pushing him away, shock and wide eyes shining through.

“I- I tried to- to fix it, to figure everything and convince myself it wasn’t- I tried to stop- To change it-”

Wooyoung frowning at him in such gentle concern, looking guilty, as if he were personally failing with Yeosang’s supposed depression. And Yeosang… Yeosang was making him feel that way, and it hurt-
It hurt to see him sad, to know that Yeosang was causing it by being so fucking stupid.

He just needed to move passed it. To forget about it and pretend nothing changed.

“But he kept…”

But then Wooyoung would smile again.

A freight train.

Would hold his hand out. Offered to take him outside since the others got to out shopping, just trying to make Yeosang happier-

“He kept…”

Wooyoung speaking with the others while they played video games, threatening to throw his controller at Yunho who just put him in a choke hold, and they were all… so happy.

“He was there.”

Wooyoung smiling, small and hidden. “I’m really proud of you.”

“He was always… there. And I couldn’t- I couldn’t ever escape him, and I didn’t…”

Wooyoung hugging him tightly as they watched Mingi and Jongho cursing at their video games, chuckling quietly whenever one would lose.

“I didn’t want to.”

Wooyoung burned.

“But I couldn’t tell him.”

Yeosang thrived.

“Because I was scared.”

Hongjoong stared.

“And I... I hurt him, Hongjoong.”

Yeosang cried.

“I never wanted to- I- I thought I wouldn’t ever-”

Hongjoong stepped forward.

“I didn’t want to hurt him, and it’s all my fault-”

Yeosang couldn’t step back, chest caving.

“It’s all my fault. All because I couldn’t tell him-”

Hongjoong touched his hand like a gust of wind.

“I couldn’t even fucking tell him how I felt.”
Hongjoong hugged him. Tight and crushing, and Yeosang wanted to pull away, but he wouldn’t dare. He crashed into Hongjoong like a wave breaking against stone. Tears fell freely, and Hongjoong was the only thing keeping him on his feet.

“He- He told me to tell him if things ch-changed,” he cried quietly into Hongjoong’s neck. “But I… I didn’t. I couldn’t.”

Hongjoong just held him silently, heart breaking quietly.

“I couldn’t tell him.”

Chapter End Notes

The plot thickens!!!
I think I have a couple more chapters for this, depending on how much I fit in each!!
Until next time then!!
-SS
Wooyoung woke up slowly after drifting in and out of noises and sensations.

He blinked awake, staring at the familiar ceiling of his room.

Which was strange because the last thing he saw before was the night sky.

“Are you awake now?” a voice murmured.

Wooyoung tilted his head, wincing at the stiffness in his neck that resisted him, but he saw Seonghwa sitting on the edge of his bed, staring at him with sad eyes but a gentle smile.

He looked tired.

And Wooyoung supposed… that was fair.

He swallowed thickly, his throat aching as if he had been coughing his lungs out. He had to look at the ceiling again, eyes stinging. “I fucked up,” he rasped thickly, guilt settling heavily on his chest.

This was worse than opening the door.

Seonghwa’s hand was gentle on his shoulder, perhaps a little unsteady. “Mistakes were made on multiple people’s parts. The blame is not only yours.” He squeezed it gently. “Hongjoong and I… perhaps made the biggest mistake of all.” His voice was heavy with something Wooyoung wasn’t accustomed to hearing on Seonghwa.

Regret.

Wooyoung turned to him slowly.

Seonghwa stared at him with a heavy weight on his shoulders. “We placed a burden you were not prepared to carry on you. We were blinded by what we assumed, and placed… too much on your shoulders alone. And perhaps expected too much of Yeosang-”


He swallowed, cutting himself off.
Yeosang staring at him in horror.

His chest burned.

Seonghwa stared gently. “Your reaction was natural. You were trying to protect him,” he comforted.

Wooyoung knew he had made so many mistakes last night. But it hurt the worse to watch Seonghwa staring at him like that.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong had never almost lost one of them before.

Wooyoung had to look away. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, shoulders heavy, and so much shoved into the simple words.

Wooyoung’s mistakes did not only affect him.

Wooyoung didn’t fight it as Seonghwa tugged him closer, hugging him tightly to his chest. He turned his face into his chest, wrapping his arms back around him loosely. It was warm, comforting in ways words could never be.

He breathed in and out slowly as Seonghwa pulled away.

It was okay. Without a single word, it was okay.

Wooyoung let go of a shaking breath, glancing out of the corner of his eye.

“Is Yeosang… okay?”

Wooyoung didn’t like how Seonghwa looked away, sighing gently, his hands folding together. He didn’t say anything for a moment too long, and Wooyoung’s heart leapt to his throat, thoughts of Yeosang running off into the night or sneaking out when their backs were turned slamming to the forefront of his mind.

“Hyung?” He asked desperately. “He didn’t- He’s here, isn’t he?”

Yeosang couldn’t leave.

Seonghwa nodded quickly, seeing Wooyoung’s panic. “He is here, he’s with Hongjoong,” he assured him quickly, Wooyoung letting go of a terrified breath, hand pressing to his chest.

“Don’t pause like that, hyung, you’ll give me a heart attack,” he breathed harshly.

“Physically, Yeosang is fine,” Seonghwa said quietly. “But mentally… the guilt he is experiencing for what he did is weighing heavily on his mind.”

“It wasn’t his fault!” Wooyoung burst, fists curling tightly in defense. “He-”

“Do you think Yeosang is thinking rationally about it?” Seonghwa questioned softly. Wooyoung winced as he watched Wooyoung carefully for a moment, eyes heavy. “Wooyoung… you were very severely injured.”

And even if his voice didn’t waver, Wooyoung could hear it- the small temor there, the fear and uncertainty, Seonghwa looking at him… after Wooyoung had been so badly hurt.

And Wooyoung felt his own brand of guilt bubble back up. Because even the wounds he had gotten
from Yeosang before were nothing compared to this.

“You were semi-coherent a few times,” Seonghwa said, like trying to change the subject. “I fed you a bit more blood to finish up the healing.”

Wooyoung touched at his neck, the ache there as if he had slept on it wrong.

“Where’s Yeosang and Hongjoong?” he asked quietly.

Seonghwa glanced at the door, sighing. “Our room. I’ve been with you.”

Wooyoung rolled his lips. “And the others?”

“Understandably troubled and startled,” Seonghwa said. “They all spent the night in Yunho’s room. I think they’re downstairs right now.”

Wooyoung swallowed, feeling like the ground was about to swallow him whole.

He tried to imagine if he had been the one to come back to one of the others half-dead. He didn’t want to.

But it wasn’t Yeosang’s fault. They shouldn’t blame him-

“What… What happens now?” he whispered, slightly nervous.

They wouldn’t… they wouldn’t send Yeosang away would they? No. No, they would never-

But what would they do? Continue on? What would Yeosang do? Would they start back over at square one?

Seonghwa was silent for several moments, not looking at Wooyoung. “Well,” he said quietly. “We are going to ensure that you are fully healed… and we are going to make sure that Yeosang feels grounded…. And then we are going to have to have a talk about what caused all this.”

And Wooyoung couldn’t help it. He couldn’t look at Seonghwa, but he asked anyway. “Is anything going to happen to Yeosang?”

The silence that followed weighed like a mountain against his skin.

“Wooyoung.” Against his will, Wooyoung lifted his head to Seonghwa’s sad eyes that bore into him gently. “The only thing that will happen to Yeosang… is a discussion about what is needed to ensure this doesn’t happen again.”

And Wooyoung knew that, he already knew that but he was-

He was so…

“I’m scared for him, hyung,” Wooyoung whispered quietly, jaw flexing nervously. “I’m scared for what he’s doing to himself, and what- what if we really can’t help him?” A wave of helplessness crashed over him, threatening to send him under waves. “What if we just keep getting set backs, and he just never… ” His heart clenched as eyes flashes red and horrified. “He just never gets better?”

And Seonghwa… Seonghwa stared at him. Pitying and gentle and sad.

“I think that Hongjoong and I would have made many less mistakes,” he said quietly, “if the two of
you did not make it so easy to see ourselves in you.”

He almost sounded amused, underneath the heaviness.

Wooyoung waited as Seonghwa tried a half-smile.

“When I was first dealing with Hongjoong…as someone with potential tendencies as a rogue… It was only me. Hongjoong and I were all we had. And there were many times when I asked myself the same question… of whether or not I could truly save him. My actions seemed useless against whatever it was consuming him. Months passed by, and I wondered if the road we were on would ever have an end.”

Yeosang had come so far. Had climbed and crawled and clawed his way to fucking far…

But he still seemed to be clinging to that past. That darkness.

He sighed gently, but not quite so heavy. But distant. Like Hongjoong’s got sometimes. Wooyoung wasn’t used to seeing it on Seonghwa.

Even if it wasn’t so heavy.

“And while it was long and arduous… there is an end, Wooyoung. It will come at its own pace… in its own way… but there is an end. Nights may seem long, but day must come eventually.”

Wooyoung winced, his chest squeezing because he knew that, but he wanted Yeosang better now. He wanted him happy and carefree and guilt free now. He had already spent so long locked inside his own head, it wasn’t fair.

Seonghwa reached out, resting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing comfortingly. “But one thing that you must understand… is that you cannot save Yeosang.”

Wooyoung’s stomach dropped. His blood chilling.

Seonghwa’s eyes were hard and determined, but not unkind. Firm. “Only Yeosang can save himself. Your duty is not to save him. It is to be what he needs while he tries to save himself.”

And Wooyoung didn’t like that. Didn’t like the thought of being unable to help, of being powerless while Yeosang did all the fighting on his own-

Just his presence beside him.

Wooyoung bit his lip tightly.

“How do I convince him it wasn’t his fault, hyung?” he asked, throat tightening. “He’s never going to accept it, is he?”

Seonghwa took a short breath, shoulders loosening. “Well… I imagine that for a time, he may not trust himself. He may withdraw from you…” He lifted his eyes to Wooyoung firmly. “Or he may not. But I believe that his reaction depends heavily on what yours is.”

“I don’t blame him,” Wooyoung said, quick and firm.

Seonghwa nodded. “Words and actions are two different proofs,” he reminded him. “Yeosang is going to need something stronger than that.”

Wooyoung felt sick. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling at all.
But it felt… necessary. Like this was where they were always supposed to inevitably end up. With Wooyoung sick with worry, but… determined. And Yeosang struggling on his own… but with someone beside him.

Wooyoung couldn’t save him. Wooyoung wasn’t strong enough to grab hold of Yeosang and pull him free. Only Yeosang had that power.

But Wooyoung was going to continue to hold onto that rope. To try his hardest to not let him slip back down.

But he would climb back down with him if he did fall, until he gathered enough strength to attempt the climb once more.

Seonghwa continued to sit with him as he became lost in his own mind, silent and pensive and scared.

~~~~~~

“Wooyoung is going to be stopping by after he finishes eating.”

Yeosang didn’t move from where he was curled with his knees pressed to his chest. Part of him wanted to feel upset. Fearful. Anxious. Something.

He just stared. Wooyoung would come whether Yeosang feared it or not.

He always came.

Always chased after him.

Always held on.

He was an idiot.

“Are you going to tell him?” Hongjoong asked quietly, seated on the edge of the bed.

If Yeosang had his way, he would have run from this house and never looked back.

If not for the fact that the thought of leaving hurt worse than anything else. Something keeping him tethered, binding him here.

“You should tell him what you told me. He deserves to know.”

Yeosang bowed his head. How he wished leaving was the more confusing thing on his mind. Part of him hated how coherent he had become. He wished he could go back to just… existing.

“What if I’m wrong?” he rasped into his knees, not lifting his head. “What if I’m still just confused?”

“Then, if you realize that you misinterpreted it, you can tell Wooyoung that and break things off,” Hongjoong said gently. “That’s the thing about life partners, Yeosang. They’re forever, regardless of the title you place on them.”
Yeosang just wanted…

He just wanted it to stop. The episodes and the frustrations, the changes and the twists wrapping their way into his life.

*They’re forever.*

His fingers twisted in the loose fabric of his pants.

“What if I hurt him again?” he whispered, fear wiggling its way into his blood.

“Then it will be no different than the dozens of other times you’ve hurt him.”

Yeosang’s head snapped up so quickly he heard something crack, something fearful and painful exploding in his chest as he stared at Hongjoong who simply looked back passively.

Yeosang stared in horror.

“What?” Hongjoong questioned, voice level and controlled. “Yeosang, these are things you have to accept. You’ve hurt the others. You *have* hurt Wooyoung. You almost killed him. He likely would have died had he not managed to convince you to give him your blood.”

Yeosang’s stomach disappeared, and he felt like he was going to vomit-

Why was he saying this?

Hongjoong’s expression didn’t change, firm but not unkind.

“These are facts, Yeosang,” he said sternly, like a teacher reprimanding their class. “You need to stop acting as if hurting Wooyoung is something new or shocking. We said it in the beginning: we expected this to happen. You seem to be the only one surprised by your reactions.”

The words were blunt. Almost cruel. But they weren’t. They were almost… caring. Enrapturing and full of warning. Like calling out to a child running towards the street.

“I understand the guilt that comes with hurting someone you care for,” Hongjoong said, and his voice softened around the edge, becoming warmer, heavier. “I know the pain and self-loathing that comes along with that, Yeosang, believe me, I am well acquainted with that agony.”

Yeosang stared, his blood cold but… not like before. It was a different cold.

He was scared.

Hongjoong’s voice hardened. Firm, like a coach yelling on the sidelines. “But you will *never* stop hurting Wooyoung until you can accept this part of yourself. Until you can learn to accept your mistakes and try to *fix* them, rather than cowering in your darkness.” He lifted a hand. “You are holding onto your darkness, Yeosang. You’re familiar with it, and you’re hesitant to let it go.”

No. No, he wasn’t, he wanted it gone, he wanted to be with them, he didn’t want to be in the dark anymore-

It was almost easier in the dark. When he didn’t have to think, when he didn’t care who he hurt, when he didn’t know what it was to be wanted-

“I know that you hurt Wooyoung. But I can guarantee you that when Wooyoung walks through that door, he is not going to give two *sh* lights about what you’ve already done to him.”
Yeosang blinked, taken aback by the sharp language, but it almost seemed as if Hongjoong had decided that hold his hand gently wasn’t going to cut anymore.

For months, they had been gently guiding Yeosang by the hand, coaxing and prompting him along his path.

Last night was too serious a mistake after too long of being coherent. A different tactic was warranted.

“Wooyoung is going to come in, he’s going to ask you how you are feeling, and he is going to try and help you in any way he can. You have to let him help you, Yeosang,” Hongjoong urged firmly. “Even if that is only telling him how you truly feel. You have to trust us. Completely.” His eyes were almost pleading. “No more holding back because you’re afraid. No more crawling back into yourself with guilt. Otherwise, you’re only going to keep falling back and hurting people.”

It… it hurt… to hear that.

Because Yeosang was doing better. He was more coherent, he felt normal again, he felt wanted and loved and at peace here-

He hurt Wooyoung-

No.

He almost killed Wooyoung.

It was time for him to start taking responsibility. He could no longer rely solely on Wooyoung and the others to support his mental state. He was coherent enough now to be responsible for his own actions.

He needed to take responsibility. No more blaming the rogue. No more blaming himself. Stop blaming and start fixing.

Yeosang felt like he couldn’t breathe.

It felt like… electricity flowing into his limbs. Like putting batteries in a half-broken toy covered in dust. Finally letting a little sunlight shine on a wilted plant.

It felt like waking up.

There wasn’t an urge to move, but there was a push in his muscles to do something.

He didn’t want to hurt Wooyoung. He had been working so hard not to hurt him. And he had done so well until last night.

But he had just been so afraid. So afraid of Wooyoung figuring it out, of him rejecting it, of Yeosang being left there on his own-

It felt like dangling something just out of his reach.

But rather than the usual frustrations, he felt the urge to leap further, to loosen his hold on his safety line and risk…

Wooyoung was never going to give up on him. Hongjoong would never give up. Seonghwa would never. Yunho and Mingi and San and Jongho - they were never going to give up on him.
Why did he keep giving up on himself?

Hongjoong offered a wan smile. “You can heal at your own pace, Yeosang. But you need to have realistic expectations for what is going to come from that. Every break is not a failure. It’s a process. Understand?”

Yeosang didn’t respond, staring at his feet. It felt like getting punched in the gut.
But it was sensation and feeling after hours of numbness. It was better than the numbness.

Wooyoung was going to come in here.
(Yeosang tried to shake the imagine of him limp in Seonghwa’s arms out of his mind.)

Yeosang was going to have to tell him what he felt… tell him something.

It seemed so fucking wrong to try and say something after he had nearly broken the other’s neck. After he had hurt him to badly, to try and claim something more-

Yeosang shrunk back against the headboard, trying to keep his breathing steady.
Don’t panic. Just stay calm, it’s just Wooyoung-
But it had never been… just Wooyoung, had it?

~~~~~~

Wooyoung stood in the doorway of Hongjoong and Seonghwa’s room.

Seonghwa waited in the hallway.

Hongjoong stood as he entered, walking towards him.

Yeosang curled around himself on the bed, and it was like... Like looking through the bars of the cellar again.

He looked small.

He didn’t lift his head.

Wooyoung felt frozen for a moment as Hongjoong passed, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Just listen to him, okay?” he whispered, squeezing his shoulder. “We’ll be right outside.”

He heard the door close most of the way, but he still stared at Yeosang, swallowing thickly as something rose in his throat.

It tasted like fear. But it wasn’t.

It tasted like a need to run, to escape, to hold, to beg-

He had planned out his whole speech. Everything he was going to list, from the reasons why Yeosang wasn’t the blame, to the things that Wooyoung wanted to try to make him feel better-
He stared at Yeosang who slowly... slowly... slowly... Lifted his head to stare at Wooyoung with heavy...sad eyes.


Yeosang looked so small.

In so much pain.

And Wooyoung’s eyes stung as his instinct took over and he was crossing the room in long strides. He saw Yeosang stiffen, as if he thought that Wooyoung was coming to hit him, eyes following Wooyoung who rushed across the floor without thinking.

The speech went out the window as he barely even sat before grabbing Yeosang and pulling him until they crashed together.

He hugged Yeosang tightly, knees and all, sure that he was probably making Yeosang uncomfortable with the position, but he just pressed his face to Yeosang’s neck, squeezing his eyes like it might stop the emotion was spilling out.

Wooyoung wasn’t sure if the hug was more for his own comfort or Yeosang’s.

He was not afraid of Yeosang. Even now.

He crushed Yeosang against his chest tightly, throat closing up until he could barely speak.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed against his skin, fingers twisting in the back of his shirt and the edges of his hair. “I’m sorry, Yeosang, I’m so sorry-”

Wooyoung wasn’t expecting Yeosang’s arms to tear away where they were pinned between them, nor did he expect them to wrap back around him just as tight, Yeosang’s legs dropping out of the way until he could fill the gap between them with himself.

It felt like waves breaking against the sand, the two of them wrapped around each other so tightly it was painful.

Like a wave tugging at sand, trying to pull grain after grain into its depth, but holding on, just holding on-

Wooyoung had expected Yeosang to pull away.

He clung tighter, like grains of sand trying to stick together as waves tried to tug them out to see.

“Why are you sorry?” Yeosang whispered brokenly, voice thick and weak against his skin. “Why are you apologizing?” His fingers curled into Wooyoung’s shirt.

Wooyoung swallowed, chest feeling like a stone had been placed in the middle of it. “I- I didn’t listen,” he murmured rapidly, guilt choking him. “Whatever you were going through, I wasn’t there for you. I-I don’t know if you thought I wouldn’t care or if you thought you couldn’t tell me, but I’m sorry, Yeosang, I-”

God, the two of them were pretty messed up, weren’t they?

Yeosang’s fingers twisted his shirt around them, to the point of almost ripping it.
Wooyoung’s chest felt like it was filled with cement.

“You didn’t,” Yeosang whispered, barely audible. “It’s not like that, Wooyoung. You—You were there, you were always there—It was me, it wasn’t you, I was scared—”

He cut himself off, as if someone had just punched him in the gut, his hands shaking slightly.

Wooyoung stroked a hand up and down his back firmly.

“Are you okay?” he asked quietly when Yeosang was quiet for a beat too long.

Yeosang pulled his head back, arms remaining as tight as they had always been, but now Wooyoung got to stare into tormented brown orbs that were crystalline and shattered.

“I…” It was barely a breath. “I was… I was scared. You told me…"

It was like each word was being torn from his throat. Yeosang didn’t look away from him, though. He stared on fearlessly. Even as he trembled.

He swallowed, jaw set.

“You told me to tell you if something changed.”

Wooyoung frowned for a moment, his mind reaching back and trying to remember—

*The kiss.*

His mouth went dry. “Oh,” he breathed.

It almost felt like he had a pulse, pounding and roaring in his ears, drowning out everything but Yeosang staring at him with wide eyes that were haunted.

The world stood still.

Yeosang’s lip was white with how hard he bit it. “I said I would tell you, but… when I realized that things might be… different… I got scared.”

Different.

Things had changed.

Things were different which meant Yeosang felt…

Wooyoung felt something like guilt and fear creeping up his neck. “Scared of what?” he whispered, feeling the way Yeosang began to shake under his fingertips.

Yeosang stared at him. His eyes pure and innocent and not hiding a single thing—

It was Yeosang.

“Everything,” he whispered, eyes shining, breaths picking up. “What might change, what you would say, what I was really feeling, what I was going to do, what you were going to do—”

Instinctively, Wooyoung hushed him, hand coming up and brushing against his cheek like they had done a million times before.

It felt different this time.
Yeosang stared at him, and Wooyoung didn’t need to guess what was going on behind his eyes. 

The world almost seemed to stand still. 

“What did it change to?” Wooyoung asked quietly. 

He was scared. Not of Yeosang. 

Yeosang swallowed, looking torn, eyes flickering away like he wanted to run. 

“Tell me, Yeosang,” he begged. “Trust me.” 

Wooyoung was pretty sure he already knew the answer. 

It terrified him. 

All that time he pushed closer and closer to Yeosang, as he drew further and further away… afraid of feelings that Wooyoung wasn’t helping him work through. 

“I…” 

Yeosang swallowed, and Wooyoung could feel his muscles move under his hand. 

“I feel…” 

Yeosang’s hand came and touched Wooyoung’s cheek, fingers trembling against his skin as Yeosang stared him dead in the eyes, still terrified. 

“Can I kiss you again?” 

Somehow, it still felt like a knife to the chest, even knowing what was going to happen. 

Wooyoung swallowed, eyes searching Yeosang’s that stared back, intent and open and waiting. 

Waiting for him. 

Wooyoung wet his lips. “Give me a second,” he breathed, dropping his head without moving away. Yeosang said nothing. 

Okay. Kissing Yeosang. 

Wooyoung had already reconciled himself with the fact that he wouldn’t hate it if Yeosang kissed him or said that he wanted something more. 

But it was a completely different situation when he was actually in that situation. 

Did the idea of kissing Yeosang want to send him running? 

…. No. 

It scared him. It sent a jolt of adrenaline that made him shake. It was something terrifying and frightening- 

Because it was Yeosang. Wooyoung didn’t want to hurt him. Didn’t want to give in and risk pulling Yeosang into something he wasn’t ready for. 

Yeosang wanted to kiss him.
Yeosang…

In hindsight… it seemed so sudden. But Wooyoung could almost believe it was a long time coming.

Because for all the fear at the future and how things would turn out…

He felt a certain… peace with the idea.

He and Yeosang had been building a relationship for a while now. They just hadn’t known what label would be placed on it.

Yeosang was better now. Maybe not Better, but he was better, and that meant… Wooyoung didn’t think that this was him being confused anymore. He had taken time, thought about it, and came to a conclusion.

He now offered the same choice to Wooyoung. A question. Soft and probing and ready to be rejected if that’s what they decided.

In all the times that Wooyoung had watched Yeosang in the cellar, walking around, with the others, holding his hand…

The thought of being any sort of intimate with him had never crossed his mind even in passing. But it felt like a situation of not knowing what you could be having. Maybe it never occurred to him, but he was looking at the option now, and…

Really… after everything the two had been through… specifically with each other… specifically for each other…

Was there ever really anywhere they could wind up but here? Was there really any other outcome for the two of them who had clung so tightly?

Wooyoung always liked to playfully roll his eyes when Hongjoong and Seonghwa talked about themselves. A forever love and the gravity around them and the inevitability of it all..

Wooyoung had thought they were just waxing poetics about life partners. It was the same thing. But it wasn’t.

Yeosang was right. It was different.

There was gravity, there was inevitability… but Wooyoung could never liken what he felt for Yeosang with what he knew he felt for the others. It was something special.

Not more.

Not less.

Just different.

He was a vampire. Was this really his largest concern?

Yes.

Because this was Yeosang on the line. This was more than just a misguided kiss and a teary apology.
Wooyoung looked up slowly.

Yeosang still watched him, eyes unpressuring and neutral, but clear in their intent.

Yeosang had never put a name to what he felt. Which was good. Because Wooyoung couldn’t either right now. All he knew was that…

Yeosang was… different. And he wanted to kiss Wooyoung right now, and Wooyoung…

Yeosang smiling.

Laughing.

Better.

Happy.

“Okay,” he breathed quietly, voice catching. “You can.”

Wooyoung couldn’t think of a reason to say no right now.

Yeosang’s expression didn’t change.

His eyes simply closed.

Wooyoung closed his too. God, he would swear he could feel a pulse. It ran through him in a beating rhythm, emanating from Yeosang’s hand across his cheek that shook against him.

It felt warm, something catching in a beautiful pain in Wooyoung’s chest.

He couldn’t breathe. It felt like he didn’t need to.

He could feel the bed dip.

When Yeosang’s trembling lips touched Wooyoung’s, he stiffened, sucking in a sharp breath that Yeosang echoed.

He closed his eyes tighter.

Both of them froze, lips touching like statues fallen against each other.

Wooyoung’s heart sped up.

Hesitantly, he guided Yeosang further forward, hand traveling from his cheek to his jaw and guiding until their lips pressed firmer together.

Yeosang’s other hand leap to clutch tightly at his hip, like it was the only thing keeping him from tumbling over a cliff.

Wooyoung felt like someone had just buried a hot coal in the center of his chest, something catching and blazing, so much like that first time-

Yeosang’s lips moved slowly, tasting, testing, terrified-

Wooyoung forced his brain to keep working, responding carefully, calculated, cautious-

Yeosang made a gentle noise in the back of his throat, like finally finding something you had been
looking for so long. He pressed forward gently, not pushing but suggesting, and Wooyoung caught him, his chest burning in a way…

A way he had never felt before. It hurt in the best way possible.

Yeosang’s hand traveled to the back of his neck, touching gently, fingers warm against his skin, tapping and feeling gingerly as his mouth moved against Wooyoung’s.

There was a clear lack of experience in Yeosang’s movement, and Wooyoung felt something warm bubble in his stomach, like laughter that didn’t break the surface. He used one hand to tilt Yeosang’s head-

Both of them so careful and slow and scared.

Yeosang puffed breaths of air against his lips, like letting out a sigh after so long-

Like relaxing after so long of bracing yourself.

Yeosang melted against Wooyoung, his shoulder falling forward, and the lines of his back and arms loosening until he leaned against Wooyoung, pliant and peaceful, as if he intended to fall asleep as such.

His mouth opened against Wooyoung’s the tiniest bit, most likely a reaction than a real request. But Wooyoung inhaled sharply at the action that made Yeosang snap his mouth shut quickly-

Wooyoung stopped him from moving away, a gentle hand on the back of his neck as he continued the quiet kiss.

God, he hadn’t kissed someone since he was alive. Meaningless little high school flings that were more for passing the time than a search for real companionship.

Yeosang quickly relaxed back against him, pressing forward with a little more confidence as he drew himself closer, until their legs bumped each other.

Yeosang’s hand stiffened on the back of his neck, as if afraid that Wooyoung was going to be the first to pull away.

Wooyoung ran a gentle hand along his side, and Yeosang shivered, stiffening back up, but not out of discomfort as he pressed forward again, rising up slightly on his knees until he was slightly higher than Wooyoung, the angle of the kiss changing, deepening-

Wooyoung’s breath caught in his throat, Yeosang’s mouth moving against his as his hands threaded through Wooyoung’s hair gently, but tinged more desperate, as if there was a clock ticking against them-

It felt like…

Like a final puzzle piece snapped into place, snug and clicking and satisfying, knowing that there was nowhere else this piece could possibly go, this was the only option, this was always the only option-

Any of Wooyoung’s hesitancies seemed to dissolve like candy floss in a rainstorm, washed away and down a gutter that he didn’t care enough to even watch flow away.

Yeosang was a solid weight against him, warm and pulsing and constant-
Yeosang suddenly pulled away, their lips parting, but only enough to allow them to breathe heavily against each other, Wooyoung’s heart feeling like it was going to beat out of his chest-

Yeosang’s eyes were still closed, his hands still buried in Wooyoung’s hair, shaking as they clutched the strands. Wooyoung felt like everything was spinning a little, but Yeosang was a grounding weight against him, their chests rising and falling together-

He swallowed thickly.

Yeosang let go of a shaking breath.

His eyes opened half-way, as if checking if a monster was still there, locking onto Wooyoung’s, shining like dark topaz, and there was only silence.

Wooyoung sucked in a breath that filled his lungs. “That…” His voice felt weak, like it might break at any moment.

His heart expanded in his chest until he couldn’t breathe.

“You…”

Yeosang continued to watch him, carefully reserved eyes, as if not willing to get his hopes up, but unwilling to have them destroyed.

Wooyoung understood Yeosang’s frustrations.

It was something impossible to articulate.

So Wooyoung simply pulled Yeosang back against him, kissing him firmly, fingers tracing along his neck as Yeosang made another small noise against him.

Wooyoung felt like his blood was singing. Rushing and warm and addicting.

It was unlike anything Wooyoung had ever felt. Different from everything he had ever experienced with a person- life partner or not.

It lasted only seconds before Wooyoung pulled away, breath frozen in his chest.

“That’s what I think of it,” he breathed quietly.

Yeosang stared in shock, swallowing and searching Wooyoung’s face with wide eyes that shimmered dangerously.

He swallowed.

And then Yeosang kissed Wooyoung again.

Both hands cupping his cheeks, he pulled Wooyoung against him, a deeper kiss, more desperate, less hesitant, like finally bursting into open fields after so long tied down. It was freedom and relief, slamming together and mingling like their breath as Wooyoung pulled Yeosang closer.

Yeosang made a noise, almost scared, maybe desperate, but Wooyoung squeezed his hip comfortably.
It felt like the most satisfying click of pieces into place, forming a complete picture. Like finally gaining that last clue to figure out the mystery, pride and relief as he made the final connection.

Like fire pouring from Yeosang into him, burning its way through his body, setting off fireworks that screamed and cheered-

It felt like finding life partners again.

Like the first time he didn’t spend a night alone.

Like the first time Yeosang smiled.

It was everything, coursing through Wooyoung in place of blood, providing everything he would need to live off of-

Yeosang’s cheeks were wet where they brushed against Wooyoung’s skin, and Wooyoung just massaged his neck gently, rubbing soothing circles in the muscles as Yeosang pulled away, their foreheads resting together.

There weren’t many tears. Just an overflow from everything, but Wooyoung still brushed them away gently, staring at Yeosang almost in awe.

It felt like seeing him for the first time again.

So startlingly ordinary and normal, now almost glowing in front of him as the light of the room shone against them.

Yeosang’s voice was thick. “Thank you,” he breathed, air brushing against Wooyoung’s cheek as Yeosang dropped his head to his neck.

Wooyoung wrapped an instinctual arm around his waist. “For what?”

Kissing him? Liking it?

“Everything,” Yeosang breathed, like a puff of air released after so long of holding his breath.

Wooyoung’s chest hurt as he curled his fingers into the hem of Yeosang’s shirt. Really, what had he given Yeosang? Some comfort, but ultimately, it had been Yeosang who made every step.

Wooyoung was the one who kept messing up. Kept stepping too far. Kept being too oblivious.

He swallowed. “I’d give you more if I could.”

*You cannot save Yeosang. Only he can save himself.*

Yeosang shook his head slowly, like he was suddenly tired. “You give enough,” he promised.

Wooyoung swallowed around the lump in his throat. Yeosang felt so light, but like an unmoving weight against his chest.

“Is this…” He hesitated, “Is this something you want to be a thing now?”

Yeosang stiffened the tiniest bit, completely still for a moment before he nodded slowly against his neck. “Do you?”

Wooyoung chewed the inside of his lip. “I think… that it isn’t something that would be a mistake,”
he whispered quietly. “It... It felt right.”

If Wooyoung had learned one thing with life partners, it was that words and facts and rationale didn’t have much place with them. It was all emotion. All feeling. You went with what you felt.

And Wooyoung felt like Yeosang was something completely different from anything the others had ever been. From the beginning, he had been different. It all culminated into an inevitable result.

They were inevitable.

It was a... nice thought.

“Is this like... dating and stuff?” Yeosang questioned, almost sounding embarrassed.

Wooyoung let go of a low breath. “Well, the only people I have to go off of are Hongjoong and Seonghwa, and they never really... called it anything. They were just life partners. Just different ones. Do some stuff that the rest of us... didn’t... with each other. I mean, I’ve never kissed any of the others, just so you know.”

Was he kinda of rambling? Probably. But he still felt like someone had heated his blood and shoved it back inside of him. It almost felt like being tipsy, a little unsteady, but warmed through to his core.


Another thing: vampires didn’t care much for labels. You were a life partner or not, and that was about it. Everything fell under two categories, and they didn’t stress too much about which was which.

Wooyoung rubbed a hand up Yeosang’s side. “But... this won’t be completely... normal, you know, right? We... we’re putting you first, understand? Your recovery and stuff. That comes before this.” His hand brushed his own shoulder and then Yeosang’s.

Yeosang pulled away from his neck, sitting back with a slight frown, more curious than confused. “Does that mean... we wait? And just... put it off?”

Ideally? Wooyoung thought the answer was yes. Yeosang was still not completely better.

Realistically?

“I guess... we just see where it goes,” he decided in an attempt to be confident. “I’m sure Hongjoong and Seonghwa can help us sort out that stuff. But I guess... we could take some baby steps? See where that takes us?”

He had never done this before. He didn’t know where was solid ground, safe to put his feet and where was dangerously loose gravel.

Yeosang didn’t seem to know either.

He just nodded. “I like that idea.”

Wooyoung snorted without thinking. “I’m sure you do.” He had been holding this in how long?
Yeosang knocked a knuckle against Wooyoung’s knee, lips twitching slightly. “I…” He rolled his lips. “I am sorry,” he said quietly. “For last night.”

Wooyoung opened his mouth, ready to burst that it wasn’t his fault, but it died on his tongue. He swallowed. “I know you are,” he said instead.

Yeosang’s eyes flickered to his neck for a moment before returning to his eyes. “I don’t want to keep hurting you.”

His eyes were like crystals glued back together. Fragile but trying to hold on.

“You won’t always do it,” Wooyoung assured him, something solid hitting his chest. Like a promise. “One day, you won’t.”

Yeosang pulled Wooyoung forward, hugging him tightly. He pressed a gentle kiss that wasn’t quite a kiss to the still-tingling skin of his neck. “I can’t wait for that day,” he whispered quietly, something about the confession punching Wooyoung in the chest.

“It’ll come one day,” Wooyoung promised.

It took his breath, and he hugged Yeosang back tightly, heart breaking in a different way.

That day would come.

Wooyoung could trust in that.

~~~~~~

Hongjoong peered through the crack in the door.

It was heartbreaking, but hope inspiring in the most raw way possible.

His lips twitched into a soft smile at the sight of the two, practically in each other’s laps as they embraced. As if they were the only thing keeping them from floating away.

“Well,” Hongjoong said quietly, pulling away from the door. “They were able to sort through it themselves.”

Seonghwa gave him an unimpressed look, though his posture was equally relieved. “I believe that there were several disasters before this moment.”

Hongjoong’s smile curled upwards as he laced his arms around Seonghwa’s neck, chests pressed together. “We were worse.”

“They are not us. We established that very clearly.”

Wooyoung clearly was not Seonghwa. And Yeosang was very much not Hongjoong.

Their gravest mistake was assuming each would react as they had to their situations. However… they were perhaps more resourceful than the two of them had been.

Hongjoong smiled almost sadly, kissing the junction of his neck gently. “And that is perhaps their
greatest blessing,” he assured him.

Seonghwa’s hands found his waist automatically, holding him gently as he pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead. “As relieved as I am, they are not quite out of the woods yet.”

Hongjoong smiled knowingly, gently, pulling back to look him fully in the face. “My precious, there is no ‘out of the woods’. You simply learn how to navigate the trees.”

Seonghwa sighed quietly, nodding as if in a sign of acceptance, and Hongjoong had to kiss him, dragging him down until their lips met in a firm seal.

Wooyoung and Yeosang were over a road bump. But this was not the end. Not even close. They would face much more after this.

Hongjoong clung to Seonghwa a little tighter, chasing away the impending worry. He looped his arms around Hongjoong’s waist, locking around him.

It felt like being back on the ocean. Rocking in stormy waves, but unbothered within the confines of his precious safety.

Hongjoong could only pray Yeosang and Wooyoung could find such comfort with each other.

~~~~~~

Wooyoung felt his face heat guiltily as Hongjoong and Seonghwa peeked back into the room several minutes later.

He and Yeosang had not kissed since that last one, but his face lit up like they had been caught in the most compromising of positions.

Yeosang didn’t look up, swallowing thickly, as if prepared to be scolded.

They stood a few feet away, and Wooyoung just glanced at his and Yeosang’s joined hands.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong could tell. Wooyoung could see it in their eyes.

Hongjoong’s smile was gentle, but reserved, like he wanted to be happy but the responsible part of him wouldn’t let him.

“You both understand what you are entering into, don’t you?” he asked quietly.

Wooyoung glanced at Yeosang who lifted his head slowly. Their eyes met, and Wooyoung felt like something electric shot down his spine, Yeosang’s eyes dark but determined.

As if he were preparing for a fight.

His eyes didn’t leave Wooyoung’s.

“I do.”

Wooyoung swallowed, feeling… unbalanced.
Like Yeosang was leaning off a cliff and telling Wooyoung not to let him fall.

Wooyoung held tighter. A solidarity.

“I think I do, too.”

This wasn’t a relationship.

It was, indeed, a fight.

Against that darkness. Against their own shortcomings. Against Yeosang’s fear and Wooyoung rashness.

For each other.

And it was something… terrifying. But exhilarating. Like standing on the edge.

Like pushing that last second of holding your breath.

Like a challenge, a cocked eyebrow, asking “Do you dare?”

Wooyoung clasped Yeosang’s hand tighter. He always was bad at keeping to himself.

“Yes,” he repeated. “Yeah, I understand.”

When he finally tore his eyes from Yeosang and glanced towards their audience...

Seonghwa looked at him with a different kind of pride. A softer, warmer, sadder kind.

A nostalgic kind.

A bittersweet kind.

A brighter kind.

Hongjoong’s eyes were distant, shining and a million miles away, but they were seeing the same thing.

“Then there isn’t anything else you need to concern yourself with,” Hongjoong told them, voice quiet. “Everything else will come in its own way.”

“What should we... do, though?” Wooyoung asked quietly. “Do we just... wait?”

Seonghwa glanced at Hongjoong. “Those decisions are yours to make,” he said quietly. “I would suggest a very slow pace, but there isn’t a very large reason why you shouldn’t be able to continue on if you both understand the risks and potential dangers you’re taking on.”

Oh, they were both very well aware of those dangers.

So intimately aware.

Everytime they were near each other, there was going to be a danger. And there likely would be for perhaps years to come, before they were able to drop all their walls and stop needing that trust.

But for now...
Yeosang was willing to wait.

For Wooyoung, he would be willing to wait for that day.

It was an… awkward event, to say the least, with the eight of them gathered around the table, Yeosang clung to Wooyoung’s hand and the others looking as if they weren’t sure what their reactions should be.

“-so it was my fault mostly,” Wooyoung said, having trouble meeting their eyes but managing to glance up. “But it’s… it’s okay. There’s nothing like… wrong now or anything.”

The others glanced at Yeosang. A mixture of wary and pity. They looked at Wooyoung, who was unconscious the last time they saw him.

Wooyoung nodded firmly.

Yunho was the first to let go of his breath. “You scared the shit out of us,” Yunho told him, lips twitching nervously.

“It wasn’t good,” Jongho agreed in a darker voice, mingled with anxiety.

“I know,” Wooyoung said quietly, swallowing.

“But we’re glad everything worked out,” Yunho assured him, a hesitant smile, but genuine.

Wooyoung breathes a sigh of relief, dropping his eyes to Yeosang’s fingers tapping against his. “Oh,” he said, lifting his and Yeosang’s hands. “And this is a thing now.”

Everyone stared, Mingi making a confused face. “You always hold hands.”

Wooyoung opened his mouth. Closed it. “No, I mean-” He could see Seonghwa snickering off to the side. “I mean like…” He lifted Yeosang’s hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it.

He felt Yeosang jump slightly at the action.

The others stared, their mouths dropping.

Wooyoung’s face lit on fire. Why the fuck didn’t he just say something?

He glanced at Yeosang who was staring at his lap, eyes slightly wide, as if he couldn’t believe Wooyoung just did that.

“Holy shit, that’s fucking adorable.”

Hongjoong actually snorted. “Thank you for that input, San.”

He heard a tiny gag from Jongho. “Tell me you aren’t going to turn into Hongjoong and
Seonghwa.”

Wooyoung glared at him, but despite the disgusted gagging, everyone was…

Smiling. Small or large, their lips were turned up.

Yeosang was staring at his lap still, mortified.

And Wooyoung… Wooyoung felt like his heart was going to burst. It swelled in his chest, pressing against his rib cage in a way that almost felt like a need to cry, but his eyes were dry.

It was the strangest sensation he’d ever felt, but it was… it was good.

It felt like home. Like trust.

“Does that mean that Yeosang is sleeping in Wooyoung’s bed now?” Yunho asked.

“How that mean we can’t sleep in Wooyoung’s bed anymore because they’re going to be nasty?” San demanded, looking prepared to fight Yeosang for a place in the bed.

“Jesus Christ, guys,” Wooyoung sighed, rubbing at his face. “We’re not fucking, we barely even kissed.”

“You kissed?” San screeched, getting to his feet, hands braced on the table. “I thought you just acknowledged feelings!”

This time, it was Yunho who gagged. “I don’t want to think about you guys fucking.”

“We’re not!”

“You kissed?”

“It was hardly a fucking kiss.”

“No, really, where is Yeosang sleeping now?”

“Jongho, they kissed!”

Wooyoung slammed his head onto the table, already regretting everything. They were never going to make it through this.

The hand inside his left and patted his arm gently, comfortingly, and when Wooyoung glanced at Yeosang, his lips were wearing the ghost of a smile, eyes dancing like fireflies above the lawn.

He was finding this all very funny.

Wooyoung huffed. “Well, I’m glad you’re having fun,” he muttered.

Yeosang shrugged quietly. “It is kinda funny,” he said quietly. “You look ready to walk out.”

Wooyoung ignored San strangling Jongho for his indifference at it all.

“Would you walk with me if I did?” Wooyoung questioned, eyebrow raised.

Yeosang glanced around the table, Mingi trying to pry San off of Jongho. Seonghwa and Hongjoong whispered to themselves in amusement.
“No,” he said quietly, eyes a little misty. “No, I’m happy here.”

A fist buried itself in his chest as Yeosang’s hand found his again, just resting in it loosely.

“Are you gonna stay?” he murmured out of the corner of his mouth, glancing at Wooyoung.

Wooyoung chewed the inside of his cheek as he swallowed thickly.

Yeosang was still smiling.

“Yeah,” he whispered, glancing at the others who were finally parted. “Yeah, I’m gonna stay.”

~~~~~~

It was weird.

Yeosang still had some episodes.

They were reduced to less than one per day, sometimes multiple days passing without a single incident.

He still had them, though, but they were shorter. And as time passed, they became less violent. And as more time passed, they almost seemed more like days when Yeosang would be snappy, rather than a real episode.

But between those times, they lived on.

They wandered the house. Yeosang picked up a controller for the first time.

He finally began drawing on those art supplies Jongho offered him, sitting and chuckling to himself as he drew a little cartoon character that he modeled after each of them. Those papers littered the house, stuffed in random drawers and hanging on walls around the house.

Yeosang was allowed to go to town with them all. Seonghwa and Hongjoong went too, but nothing happened. It was just a nice evening of shopping around.

Yeosang’s eyes fell on a bike shop, and he frowned at it for a moment before his eyes widened. “Come on,” he said in rush, dragging Wooyoung in.

Wooyoung had come in here a couple of times just because it stayed open late, but he never did anything more than look at the cool racing bikes. Yeosang, however, didn’t even glance at the bikes, walking deep into the shop, eyes flickering around as if looking for something. They passed by a wall of skates and extra wheels, and then found a back wall that was covered in skateboards of varying colors and designs.

Yeosang froze in front of them, eyes wide as he stared at them, scanning them as if they were bright lights that dazzled him.

Wooyoung frowned between the wall and Yeosang. “Do you… want one?” he asked carefully.

Yeosang swallowed. “I used to skateboard before,” he murmured, still entranced by them. “I collected them, even if I didn’t use them.” He wet his lips. “I went to the skate park with my sister
every weekend, and I... I would just skateboard all day.”

Given the brightness of his eyes, Wooyoung figured this was a good memory.

He smiled gently as Yeosang walked up to the wall, tracing his fingers over one electric blue board gingerly.

Sometimes, Wooyoung was a little startled by his own reactions to Yeosang.

Like the burst of warmth in his chest as Yeosang observed the colored boards. Like the way his chest tightened as Yeosang glanced back at him, a bittersweet smile of nostalgia on his lips.

“Let’s go find Seonghwa,” Wooyoung said, holding his hand out. “He’s got his wallet.”

Yeosang clutched the board tightly to his chest as they left, Seonghwa smiling broadly as Yeosang held it like something fragile and special.

It was black, with realistic purple lightning on the bottom, and electric purple wheels. It looked pretty badass, despite being pressed against Yeosang’s cute baby blue sweater now that the weather was getting colder.

Yeosang seemed to ride the energy of the skateboard for the rest of the evening.

When they got home, he set it down on the little sidewalk and started wobbling his way along. Everyone stayed out to watch as he refamiliarized himself with it. It only took a few minutes before he was gliding along confidently, kicking the board to turn and flipping it over to land smoothly.

His head whipped over to them, and Wooyoung’s heart lurched at the blinding smile on his face.

“I remember how!” he called, pulling another flip of the board, smiling wider than ever before-

It hurt to look at. Like Wooyoung couldn’t breathe. His own smile was wide enough to hurt.

He felt Seonghwa nudge his arm gently. “You’re being obvious,” he whispered quietly in Wooyoung’s ear.


Seonghwa just smiled knowingly and sat back.

Wooyoung felt like he had been caught doing something, but he didn’t know what.

(This spawned a long discussion about where in the house Yeosang could skateboard, and it was unanimously decided after one evening that near the stairs was not one of those places.)

Yeosang ate with the rest of them.

And at the end of it all, he and Wooyoung retired to Wooyoung’s room.

(“I guess it’s convenient,” San muttered. “He’d have to share with someone. We don’t have anymore bedrooms.”)

Yeosang curled around him like a blanket, resting his head against Wooyoung fearlessly.

Wooyoung felt himself relax every time. No matter how often they did it.
Yeosang was no longer so afraid.

They woke up wrapped around each other, blinking sleep away as they stared at each other for a moment before laughing deep in their chests as they got up. They never knew what was so funny.

Wooyoung would stare at Yeosang throughout the day, his heart playing it’s familiar dance that had long since started to hurt as Yeosang laid on the floor leisurely, at ease and half-asleep as the others played their games.

~~~~~~

“Is it supposed to hurt this much?” Wooyoung demanded, Seonghwa sitting up in bed where Wooyoung had snuck away to while the others hunted down a board game.


“Looking at him.” Wooyoung was honestly getting worried because it had gotten to the point where just looking at Yeosang made his chest squeeze so tightly, it felt like he couldn’t fucking breathe.

But Seonghwa just smiled brightly, laughing gently as he set the book aside and laid a gentle hand on Wooyoung’s shoulder, looking too amused for Wooyoung’s crisis. “I’ll let you in on a little secret that might help,” he told him quietly.

Wooyoung nodded, all ears.

Seonghwa leaned forward, still smiling widely. “It still hurts me to look at Hongjoong.”

Wooyoung frowned slightly, brow pinching.

“To this day, it feels like a dream. I don’t even know what to do with myself, at times.” Seonghwa pulled away, nodding like a period at the end of his statement.

That didn’t help much at all.

But it was the answer he was looking for: Yes, it was supposed to hurt that much.

~~~~~~

“Why does it hurt so much?” Yeosang whispered, clutching at his chest tightly, something almost like fear beating along him.

Hongjoong glanced up from the bag of blood in his hand, eyebrow raised. “What?”

“Being around him.” Yeosang was going to go insane for how much everything just kept burning. “You said that the pain would fade as I got used to it, but it never stops.”

Every touch. Burning.
Hongjoong took a leisurely sip of his blood. “Do you want it to?”

“What?”

“To stop. Do you want it to?”

Yeosang clutched at his chest tighter, throat closing. “No,” he whispered quietly. He didn’t want to lose that. “But does it never… die down?”

Hongjoong watched him for a moment before setting his blood down. “Most of the time, it’s still a near-physical pain for me to touch Seonghwa,” he admitted quietly. “Even after centuries. It’s as if he still burns me from the inside out.” He played with the straw. “But it is really pain anymore, Yeosang?”

Well, pain was the closest thing he could liken it to. Too much, all at once, all the time.

But it didn’t really… hurt. It was just so much all the time-

Yeosang didn’t flinch away from the burn. He craved it. Dragging it closer.

Every touch felt like kissing again.

Hongjoong smiled knowingly. “It’s everything you need, Yeosang. I told you that.”

Warmth.

~~~~~~~

“Does it ever feel like you have a pulse?” Wooyoung asked.

Seonghwa hummed, as if it were a complex question. “In what way?”

“Like when you…” He broke off, coughing and lowering his eyes. “Like when you… like touch and… if you kiss or something…” God, he hated talking about this stuff.

Seonghwa snickered like an asshole, but made a noise of understanding. “I guess… you could call it a pulse. I always thought it felt like a riptide,” he said, passing his book back and forth between his hands. “Like a current, pushing and pulling relentlessly.”

Wooyoung hummed. “Sometimes… I swear, hyung, it feels like I can feel my heart beating, but it’s like… it’s like-”

“It’s coming from him?”

Wooyoung looked up with wide eyes.

Seonghwa nodded slowly. “I understand.”

~~~~~~~
“Is it supposed to do that thing?”

Hongjoong tilted his head curiously.

Yeosang flexed his hands, heart heavy. “Like… like where it feels like… you’re alive again?” He pressed a hand to his chest. “Like… your chest feels empty after you’re turned, but sometimes it… it doesn’t feel empty, it’s like… my heart…” He sighed harshly.

Hongjoong chuckled. “Like a heartbeat?”

Yeosang’s head snapped up and he nodded quickly.

Hongjoong nodded absently. “I always thought it felt like sun rays,” he said quietly, voice distant. “That sort of pulsing, constant warmth. But I can see where it might feel like a heartbeat, too.”

“So that’s normal?” Yeosang asked.

Hongjoong chuckled, shrugging. “For me, it is. I think I might panic if I didn’t feel it once.”

At the very least, Yeosang felt better about that.

Between the bits and pieces of getting better and staring at each other…

Wooyoung and Yeosang grew closer. Legitimately. Like… normal people. Instead of being driven by a panicked desire not to be alone or lost. They stayed up late, wrapped in darkness and just… talking.

And sometimes doing other things.

They both discovered very quickly that they were on the same page for taking it slow. After that first real kiss, they didn’t even get near that stage for three weeks. And that was only broken because Yeosang rolled over in the bed one night and asked if he could kiss Wooyoung again.

It was just a quick press of it lips, but Wooyoung still felt the shock travel down to his toes.

And then it was another week, but Wooyoung was hugging Yeosang after he broke Yunho’s record on his racing game, and the celebration may have turned to him kissing Yeosang full on the lips with the others watching.

They pretended to gag as Yeosang’s face turned a bright red, Wooyoung about to apologize but then Yeosang shoved at his chest, turning away with a smile fighting to appear, and Wooyoung just felt warm.

And then Wooyoung started kissing him goodnight (or vice versa), and it became normal then.

And then Yeosang would kiss him good morning (or vice versa), and it became normal then, too.

And then the clock kept ticking onward, and then Yeosang would peck him, and Wooyoung would ask what it was for, and Yeosang would shrug.
And then Wooyoung would kiss him, intending to be quick, but he would linger just a little longer, and Yeosang would respond by pressing closer, and it was like neither of them could be bothered to pull away.

Each time still felt like electricity.

And Yeosang….

Wooyoung had gotten used to feelings tears against his cheeks as Yeosang continued to kiss even as he cried, clinging to Wooyoung’s shirt as if he could still lose him. It was irrational and unnecessary, but Wooyoung would never begrudge him it. Not that comfort.

Hell, even Wooyoung would feel his throat closing up as Yeosang just….

Existed.

Wooyoung would feel embarrassed by how lost the two were in each other, especially given how the others loved to take advantage of that fact, but… really, the mortification died quickly compared to the racing of warmth and just… Yeosang that sped through him like a firework screech.

That’s all that he felt: just warmth and Yeosang.

Yeosang with his tiny noises as they kissed, new and still too much. Yeosang with his loose or tight grips on Wooyoung’s shirt, scared and still trying not to be left alone. Yeosang with his eyes that sparkled, bright and still climbing higher and higher from his darkness that was almost forgotten.

Yeosang and his warmth that bled into Wooyoung like a beating pulse that pounded its way through him, like an explosion that was barely contained.

Too much, almost. But everything that was just enough.

Especially when time continued to pass on, both of them falling deeper and deeper into the other, as the days ticked by like hourglass sand, and then suddenly it was just passed a year since Yeosang entered the house.

And Wooyoung was sitting against the headboard of his bed, Yeosang in his lap holding his face between gentle hands as he kissed him, deep and searing and dizzying, Wooyoung just holding on, warmth racing from his heart to his fingertips.

It felt like a ribbon wrapped around both of them, sliding along his arms and back, binding him against Yeosang who pressed closer, tying itself in neat little bows as a finishing touch.

It always felt like a physical connection. Like a pulse or force binding the two against each other, like they would never need to part. Wooyoung could only let it happen and bask in the fireworks.

Yeosang pulled away, just enough to breathe quickly against his lips in short bursts.

“I love you,” he breathed, eyes shining and bright and unafraid.

Wooyoung stared, feeling like he had just been struck in the gut, the air knocked out of him.

It wasn’t something whispered in a scared attempt not to run out of time.

It was light, bright, like he couldn’t keep it in his chest anymore, tumbling over his tongue in a
jumbled rush. Like it was something growing in his chest that he had finally allowed to slip out. Like he had finally gotten far enough away and he could finally, finally see what the finished picture to their puzzle was.

Wooyoung stared.

He...

Yeosang...

Shit.

Was that what this feeling was?

Wooyoung swallowed.

“I think…”

Yeosang’s hands shook on his face. You’d think it’d be harder to say. That there would be more fear in his chest.

You’d think he’d need another minute, another moment to process, but it was- they both were- inevitable.

“I think I do, too.”

It was startlingly easy to realize.

Yeosang cracked a watery smile. “You love you, too?”

Wooyoung pinched his side, which made Yeosang yelp, shifting to get off, but Wooyoung kept holding on, trying to land with Yeosang under him, but Yeosang just twisted until he hovered above Wooyoung, his hands holding his wrists to the bed, smiling brightly.

It was a… dangerous position.

A heavy one.

One Yeosang had held Wooyoung in before, eyes glowing.

One Wooyoung had held Yeosang in before, waiting for him to come back.

It was vulnerable. Controlling.

But Yeosang’s eyes weren’t red. They were brown and almost disappeared as he smiled, his hands gentle around Wooyoung’s wrist, not crushing, his thumbs brushing against his wrists.

Trusting.

Wooyoung didn’t even feel a flicker of fear. Just rolled his eyes. “Always have to be on top,” he muttered, and Yeosang laughed quietly, still staring at him.

His smile didn’t fade.

“I do love you,” he repeated quietly. It felt like another punch to his gut. Why did everything always have to hurt.
Wooyoung nodded. “I know,” he whispered.

He had probably known for a while.

Yeosang’s lips quirked. “Are you going to be difficult about it?”

Wooyoung cocked an eyebrow. “About what?” His chest hurt as Yeosang shook his head, hair falling in front of his eyes, half-hiding them.

And then he kissed Wooyoung again, and Wooyoung’s fingers curled until the tips of them brushed Yeosang’s-

Yeosang let go of him, sliding up until his fingers laced through Wooyoung’s, and Wooyoung hummed into the kiss, but gasped when he felt Yeosang lick at his lips.

When Yeosang’s tongue slipped alongside his own, Wooyoung almost choked, but he could feel Yeosang smile against his mouth, and relaxed, head tilting quietly to allow an easier angle, melting against the mattress.

For someone who claimed to have never felt for someone before, he certain kissed like he had some experience.

Wooyoung didn’t mean to let out a little moan when Yeosang dragged his tongue across his soft palate, but he really wasn’t expecting it, and Yeosang had to pull away for how hard he laughed when Wooyoung choked on the sound.

It was a really nice fucking kiss.

But now Yeosang was burying his face in Wooyoung’s chest and almost crying with laughter, and Wooyoung had his pride so he had to put him in a choke hold.

“There’s not *that* funny- what, do you only want *quiet* partners?”

Yeosang didn’t stop laughing, but he twisted in Wooyoung grasp, eyes shining. “How else am I supposed to get you to say it? *Clearly*, I wasn’t doing enough-”

Wooyoung wrapped his arms around Yeosang’s head, crushing him against his chest.

“Okay, fine- *I love you*, you *asshole* .”

Yeosang broke free of Wooyoung’s arms easily, smiling as he kissed him, not wasting any time before he was kissing deep enough to draw out another moan from Wooyoung (this time without the fit of laughter), and only going deeper.

Freedom. It felt like freedom.

It felt like fire burning in the pit of his stomach, but Wooyoung wasn’t going to complain. He just threaded fingers in Yeosang’s hand, feeling the soft strands, as they laid against each other.

It was so warm. Like laying in a pile of smouldering coals. Like laying in a field during summer and just resting. Like a warm breeze, or the waves of heat from a bonfire reaching even when you stood back.

Yeosang stopped kissing, tucking his face into Wooyoung’s neck, arms wrapping around him tightly.
Wooyoung was quick to hug him back, the weight against his chest an indescribable comfort even as he felt the skin of his neck get wet. He rubbed his hand up and down Yeosang’s back, so familiar at this point, it was automatic.

Yeosang shook the tiniest bit as he took a small breath.

“I love you,” he whispered, lips brushing against Wooyoung’s skin.

Wooyoung had to close his eyes, the quiet, heavy words settling against him like a head resting on his chest. He felt tears pressing against the inside of his eyelids, something heavy but so fucking happy.

“I love you, too, Yeosang,” he breathed, fingers curling in the back of his shirt.

Yeosang swallowed. “I know,” he whispered.

They were silent. And it could have been hours that they sat there, laying against each other, the confession settling over the both of them like a blanket.

It felt so right. Like so many puzzle pieces falling into place at once, clicking into place and clinging to each other, unable to be separated.

They stayed there. Simply existing with each other. And if Wooyoung cried a little into Yeosang’s shirt, Yeosang was the only one who would know, so it didn’t matter.

And if Yeosang kept whispering “I love you” against Wooyoung’s skin, like writing down reminders on a list, Wooyoung heard all of them, so it was okay.

And if they stayed like that, not interested in ever moving away from each other, they were both content to exist against each other forever, so it all worked out in the end, didn’t it?

It all worked out in the end.

Despite all the fear and all the fighting and all the darkness… they were still here.

They had made it.

Wooyoung held Yeosang a little tighter.

They made it. Yeosang made it.

Yeosang fucking did it, and because of that, Wooyoung was able to kiss his shoulder gently and whisper back his own little “I love you.”

He loved him.

It was certainly not what Wooyoung expected from… everything.

He could have never thought this was where he would end up.

He could have never thought that Yeosang would ever become…. This to him.

Yeosang could have never been anything but this.

There was no way he would ever stare at Jongho’s locked door and think that something like this could come of it.
There was no way he could ever stare at life partners and think there was a way he could possibly have *more*.

There was no way he could ever stare at Yeosang and not think that this was something that was inevitable.

There was no way he could ever stare at Yeosang and not feel his pulse racing through him, alive and beating and…

And warm.

Always warm.

Always there.

Forever. Regardless of title.

Both of them. Together. Forever.

“I love you.”

~~~~~~~~

“I almost felt bad,” Seonghwa said quietly, Hongjoong laying with his head in his lap, Seonghwa’s fingers carding through his hair. “For how lost they seemed to their own feelings.”

Their journey of even *thinking* of they could be something more…. They had such a road before them. Even now after so much and so far.

The house was silent, everyone asleep peacefully (Given that Yeosang and Wooyoung had, indeed, gone to sleep like he told them to.).

Hongjoong hummed, eyes closed gently. “They are young,” he reminded him. “And neither have loved before. It will take them time to become accustomed to themselves. They will guide themselves down the right path.”

“We had never loved before either.”

Hongjoong cracked an eye open, smiling warmly, the smile growing as he stared at Seonghwa’s gently concerned expression. “My precious, you and I were *always* inevitable. There was no other path for us to take with what we had experienced together.”

With everything they lived, risked, and gained together, there was nothing less they could be. After *centuries* of pain, struggles, and each other, there was nowhere else to be.

Seonghwa hummed, expression fallen slightly. “Yeosang and Wooyoung have undergone much as well. From the very beginning they were each others’. Part of me thinks they were inevitable as well.”

Hongjoong chuckled, reaching up and grasping one of Seonghwa’s hands tightly, simply holding it and feeling the weight of it. “Tragedy always breeds inevitability.” He brushed his lips over the curve of Seonghwa’s knuckles absentmindedly. “But inevitability has a habit of outliving tragedy.”
Seonghwa leaned over him, smiling so gently, Hongjoong felt his chest tighten. “Give us and them some credit,” he said, pressing his lips to Hongjoong’s forehead gently. “We did some of the work ourselves.” He smiled was so warm it hurt.

Hongjoong sat up, turning onto his knees, kissing Seonghwa fully, feeling warmth wash over him like stepping out onto the wooden deck and feeling the sun for the first time in days.

Seonghwa pulled him forward, like a current guiding a ship, both of them falling into each other, heavy and floating and trusting in the waves they braved.

“You have done so much,” Hongjoong promised him, foreheads resting together, chest full and heavy as an anchor. Grounding. He traced a gentle hand down Seonghwa’s cheek, soft eyes ghosting over his features. “You have always done so much, my precious Seonghwa,” he whispered, kissing him again, warmth flowing through him like sunlight in his veins.

Seonghwa pulled away, chuckling quietly. “My precious captain,” he said, and Hongjoong couldn’t even bring himself to get annoyed. “Always so ignorant of your own struggles,” he whispered, hand cupping Hongjoong’s cheek gently. Hongjoong leaned into the touch. “You have carried your own burdens this far.”

He leaned, kissing his palm gently. “They are worthless with you by my side,” he promised, closing his eyes and feeling Seonghwa sigh gently.

“My precious.”

“Do you think… that one day we will be free?”

“We are not bound down now.”

“You cannot tell me that you do not regret everything.”

“What do I have to regret?”

“I have hurt you.”

“Those are your own regrets, Hongjoong. I have none.”

“I turned you into this thing and bound you to me, only to force you into years of fearing for yourself at my hands.”

“I fear nothing. Least of all you.”

“You are still as foolishly blind as you were.”

“And you are still as apt to put words into my mouth.”

“You would never say them otherwise.”

“I will never say them, regardless. And I’d beg you to spare me the thought that I would one day ever regret this.”
“I have hurt you.”

“You have been hurt.”

“That is not an excuse.”

“It is a reason, though.”

“I am not looking for forgiveness.”

“That is lucky, for there is nothing to forgive.”

“Seonghwa.”

“Precious.”

There was silence.

“You said that is what I was to you.”

“You are precious to me, Seonghwa.”

“Have I given you reason to doubt that you are precious to me as well?”

“Never.”

“Then cease this act. We are in a darkness right now, but there will be a light.”

“When, Seonghwa? When do we stop this game of suffering?”

“One day. I promise you, Hongjoong, one day we will find a light.”

“I wish that day were now.”

“I know, precious. But we will have each other until we reach it.”

“How can you know such a day exists? How do you know we will not just exist in this hell forever?”

“This could never be a hell, if you are beside me. Will you leave me?”

“Never. Never, Seonghwa, I would never-”

“Then this is not a hell. It is a road. And all roads have an end. All nights must come to day.”

“You… You cannot know that.”

“I can trust in that. In the same way I would trust in you.”

“You should not trust me.”

“But I do. And this trust will not fail me. Just as you have never failed me.”

“I.”

“You have never failed me, my precious Hongjoong. If you will never listen to another word I say, listen here. You have never failed me.”
There was only silence. Wet droplets on his skin.

“One day, my precious,” He promised, begging the stars. “One day... in some way... in some form... we will find a light. We will find our light, I swear to you.”

Silence.

“I trust you, Seonghwa.” Broken between his cries. “My precious.”

It echoed throughout time.

My precious.

Chapter End Notes

I’m still tossing around ideas for my next work, but like before I think I’m gonna take a break and try to write some before actually posting it. I’ll see how it all works out and hopefully I’m not gone too long!! Thank you so much, lovelies~~~

-SS

End Notes

I have a twitter and a CC! Both @_SinisterSound_
You can contact me there and I’ll always respond, but I don’t always have the confidence to respond on ao3!
Have a lovely day!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!