Summary

It’s been a while since Joohyun had seen Sooyoung blooming with happiness and love since her soulmate died. So when Joohyun met Wendy for the first time and during their handshake, a little dandelion blossomed on her wrist—she decided not to say a word and step back on the sidelines.

Even if Wendy was her soulmate.
“You’ll get along really well,” Sooyoung said, a smile plastered on her face as she pulled Joohyun with her. The clammy grip on her wrist was a tell-tale sign of how nervous was Sooyoung, but Joohyun didn’t say anything. She lets herself get dragged along. “She’s really nervous, y’know. She’s been worrying over this meeting for—what? —the last three days. I’ve shown your picture to her but I think she’s got just even more intimidated. Maybe my choice of picture wasn’t a good one. Do people tell you that you’re scary?”

“All the time,” Joohyun mumbled through a smile. She didn’t think Sooyoung was paying too much attention to her or even waiting an answer from her but she glanced back sharply at her. A quick once-over and a bright smile, and it stuck Joohyun—Sooyoung had really changed.

“Hm… But you’re as soft as a bunny,” Sooyoung stopped for a moment on the sidewalk to pet Joohyun’s hair. There must have been something in Joohyun’s eyes that made her quickly retreat her hand. “I can’t imagine why anyone would think you’re scary.”

“You tend to forget that I’m older than you. Show me some respect,” Joohyun said, half-joking, half-serious. She was too old to be treated like a baby—and that was what Sooyoung did all the time.

“Sorry. I’m just… I’m just really—” she trailed off, watching and waiting cars to pass before they could cross the road. It was weird. Sooyoung was not the type who doesn’t know what to say or who’s afraid to speak her mind. But now she looked smaller, more vulnerable—like what she was about to say would disappear if she said it aloud. So, Joohyun patted her hand lightly, hoping the message was transmitted through the touch.

Don’t be afraid.

“Happy. Giddy. In love.” And afraid, Joohyun thought but she wasn’t about to share her noticing with the other. Sooyoung nodded, her grip opened and slid down to hold Joohyun’s hand. “I get the impression.”

“I just feel so content with her,” Sooyoung said, her voice turning from giddy to serious. She tightened the grip on Joohyun’s hand. “It feels—so safe loving her. She feels safe—and I know that I shouldn’t put too much trust into someone at the beginning of a relationship but she really feels like a safe place. Like she wouldn’t hurt me. She feels like a good person to trust me on with moving on from her.”
There was a mutual understanding between them that they don’t talk about Seulgi. It was off-topic. Afraid, that the mere mention of her would make Sooyoung’s healing period longer and would send her back to square one, they didn’t talk about her. Even if she was their friends too. Even if it felt like losing a family member, tearing them apart with sorrow and bitterness. Even if it had made everything easier, reminiscing about the happy past, filled with nostalgia and laughter that would heal wounds sooner—but for Sooyoung, it wasn’t the solution.

Seulgi went away with a smile on her face. Sooyoung couldn’t smile for a year after.

Losing a soulmate is tough. Losing a soulmate when you barely had time with her is heart-breaking. Time was precious for them, yet merciless. Each moment was beautiful and dreadful at the same time—the lingering feeling of doom was in their head. But no preparation could make her ready for the end—it was quick and everything felt unreal. Joohyun still winced at the thought of the numb and silent Sooyoung just sitting in her room and watching the birds chirp in her window. Not crying, not demanding answers why they had such a short time together. She was in denial for a long time; when she woke up in the middle of the night calling for Seulgi, or just pointing things out to no one until she noticed Seulgi was no longer by her side.

(Sometimes, Joohyun thought a bit ashamed, that she was glad she hasn’t met her own soulmate yet. Not knowing who her soulmate was a better kind of loneliness than losing them. And Sooyoung’s example just made Joohyun steadier with her beliefs.)

“It also feels wrong. It feels like I’m cheating on her,” Sooyoung said with a hitch in her voice. It’d been a while since she last talked about Seulgi and Joohyun felt like they were walking on thin ice. Like in every moment, the ice would break and they would splash into the ice cold water, numb and suffocating. Sooyoung would break down and all those times and effort they put into placing her pieces back together with Yeri, all their time and effort would mean nothing.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said with scorn in her voice. Joohyun’s eyes widened as Sooyoung, letting go off her hand, cupped her cheeks and pushed them together—making her look like a stupid fish.

“Like what?” Joohyun managed to say through the push.

“Like I could break down in any moment,” Sooyoung said, pushing her cheeks together even more. She didn’t seem shaken but Sooyoung was especially good at hiding her emotions. “I visited her yesterday. I’m okay.”

Joohyun shook herself out the push, surprise washing over her.
“You did what?” Joohyun asked. It was utterly unimaginable. Sooyoung, often pretending she was okay for the sake of them, crying only when she thought no one couldn’t hear it; who could never visit Seulgi’s grave after the burial—she went alone to see Seulgi.

“You seem worried,” Sooyoung laughed, her smile bright and true, and made Joohyun gulp down a lump in her throat. It’d been so long since she’d a chance seeing her being so happy. Sooyoung patted the Joohyun’s cheeks lightly, playfulness in her eyes. “I visited her grave. I brought lilies, white ones. She liked those the best.”

Unconsciously, her eyes flickered down on her wrist, where white lilies bloomed—the sign of her soulmate.

“Why?” Joohyun could only squeeze out this word but there were endless questions behind it. Why now? Why not with us? Why didn’t you tell us? What made you change your mind?

“It was high time I did,” she said, pushing a stray lock behind her ears. There was a soft smile lingering on her lips as she talked, and Joohyun thought that she was not aware of it. “And I thought I can’t bear the thought of dating someone else without, you know, consulting with her. It’s stupid, I know, but I wanted to talk to her about it. And while it still feels like cheating, and I still feel hollow from time to time, I think I’m ready to finally start again. Hey, don’t cry!”

“I’m not crying,” Joohyun rasped and quickly wiped her eyes with her sleeves. After so many nights spent with hugging Sooyoung closely, hearing and seeing her cry her heart’s content out, holding her head up before she could drown, Sooyoung was finally moving on.

“You’re such a sap! But it’s okay, I guess. Thanks for caring about me,” Sooyoung bumped her shoulder to Joohyun’s in the sign of solidarity. There was an increasing fondness growing in Joohyun’s heart for the younger, and she felt like, for the first time in years, finally, she could breathe easily. The hardships seemed to be behind them as Sooyoung said the words ‘I’m okay’.

“Hey, Sooyoung!” Joohyun called when she found her voice again. Sooyoung peeked back at her. “I’m proud of you.”

“Well, it was damn time you are!” Sooyoung exclaimed and winked at her.

“So tell me about this girl I’m about to meet. I don’t really know a lot about her, you just sorta
dragged me out to meet her,” Joohyun scolded her lightly. Yesterday, while getting trashed in the bar, celebrating that Sooyoung and Yeri had finished her midterms, she started to tell them about a girl she had started seeing, when Yeri’s eyes flashed at her dangerously and the question hung in the room like a dead weight ‘Does she have a soulmate?’ and Sooyoung quickly averted the topic by calling another round. “You know, Yeri’s gonna be jealous of me for meeting your new boo first.”

They slowed down, Sooyoung was no longer walking ahead of Joohyun. Her eyes quickly flashed over her wristwatch and contently sighed. Looked like they would arrive early. When she looked back at Joohyun again, her eyes were filled with zest.

“Oh, yes, she’s going to be in a rage. But I can’t help it, I feel like she’d just try to scare Wendy away before she’d get to know her, just to protect me. You’re less a mother tiger type of friend and I’ve ulterior motives. I want you to like Wendy and tell Yeri how lovely she is, and how, thank you very much, I can decide what’s good for me,” Sooyoung said and draped a long arm around Joohyun’s shoulders.

“She loves you, that’s why she’s worried.”

“I’m aware but I’m an adult. And Wendy—she’s really safe. Also, we’ve talked about soulmates before—see, I’m cautious and a responsible adult—and I told her about… about her,” Sooyoung’s voice thinned to the end of the sentence, like while moving forward, saying Seulgi’s name out loud was still as scary as ever. “She understands that I’m wary about soulmates. She also doesn’t really believe this all ‘falling into love because the universe said so’ thingy but I’m sceptical about that. I just hope when her soulmate appears, she’ll take me into consideration.”

“Why doesn’t she believe in soulmates?” Joohyun’s interest was piqued.

“Similar reason as yours,” Sooyoung said, pulling Joohyun even closer to her, into a warm half-hug. Her voice turned bitter, “Not knowing what you could have is better than losing everything.”

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Wendy was a small, fragile-looking woman with a bright smile and brighter eyes looking up at Sooyoung. Joohyun didn’t know how to imagine Wendy based on the small information fed to her during the walk there. Soft, yes indeed. Even by the way she looked at people, Joohyun could see the softness in her. Safe, well she’d see it later. Somehow, Wendy reminded her to Seulgi—all soft edges and roundness to their face; friendliness oozing of them; looking at Sooyoung with endless
Joohyun let out a breath of relief. She didn’t know what to expect but Wendy, for the first sight, seemed like someone who could be trusted with Sooyoung’s delicate soul. She seemed all right.

Sooyoung suddenly pushed Joohyun next to Wendy with a cheeky expression written over her face. She looked them from head to toes, face distorted into a smile which was enough for Joohyun to dread whatever shit would come out her mouth.

“Minions,” Sooyoung said absentmindedly.

Joohyun took a step forward, eyes narrowing, “I dare you to say it again.”

“Well, I’m telling the truth, you can’t punish me for that,” Sooyoung said but simultaneously, she took a cautious step back.

“Oh-oh, you’re so wrong.”

Joohyun halted her steps before she could reach Sooyoung and suffocate her, their friendship dead in the ditch when Wendy’s laughter resonated in her ears. Little stuck why it had such a calming effect on her, she turned back to glance over the woman. Wendy playfully winked at her and nodded in Sooyoung’s direction.

“She might be taller but we are two. We make up one big person,” Wendy joked and stood next to Joohyun, looking ready to fight.

“Hey, you’re my girlfriend! You’re supposed to be on my side!” Sooyoung cried and looked horrified.

“That’s sadly the truth,” Wendy smiled and for a long moment, she just gazed at Sooyoung lovingly. Joohyun felt delighted, feeling grateful for Wendy to showing her love for Sooyoung so readily. She turned to Joohyun and seemingly a new wave of shyness washed over her. She reached out her hand, ducked her head and said, “I’m Wendy Shon. This big oaf’s girlfriend. Nice to meet you.”
Joohyun took her hand, which was surprisingly cool and fitted hers perfectly. “Bae Joohyun. This asshole’s best friend. Likewise.”

“You’re beautiful. I mean, Sooyoung told me you are but I thought she was kinda exaggerating but oh girl, she was right, oh fuck I’m rambling again, right? Sooyoung, I’m rambling—?” With a troubled expression, that Joohyun found weird and adorable at the same time, she looked at Sooyoung for help.

“That’s Joohyun’s power.” She nodded, understanding. “Making lesbians panic since 1991.”

Joohyun remembered the first time they’d met with Sooyoung and the other was offended by Joohyun’s looks. She wouldn’t speak to her for a while, pride too high, until Yeri persuaded her into accepting Joohyun into their apartment (where they urgently needed a roommate).

“Can you stop saying that?” Joohyun asked desperately. She turned to Wendy. “I’m not making her saying this, it’s not my brand or anything. She’s just a weirdo.”

“Figured. She’s having the time of her life when she’s teasing someone else,” Wendy said, rolling her eyes dramatically. Still, there was something behind her eyes that held so much more than she let on. “Ditch her and let’s get closer.”

“Can you two stop ganging up on me? It hurts my feelings.”

“You were the one who started this!” Wendy moaned.

Joohyun laughed with pity as Sooyoung watched them, sticking out like a sore thumb. She was about to reach up and pat her head, when she saw something black blooming on the inside of her wrist, under her sleeves. It was a small thing but it struck her like a lightning bolt and panic rises in her stomach like acid. The others noticed her late response too, as the friendly banter was cut by Joohyun’s shaken expression.

No, no, no, no.

It couldn’t be.
“Everything’s alright?” Wendy noticed first. Joohyun quickly pulled back her hand and hid it behind her back.

“Of course. I just have to use the bathroom,” she said and plastered a fake smile on her lips. As quickly as she could, she left for the bathroom, her heart hammering through her ribcage, mind filled with panic.

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Joohyun often wondered if it was her fault that her friends’ lives led to a tragedy. She often blamed herself for introducing Sooyoung to Seulgi, for starting the fire that burned everything down so abruptly. Sooyoung, after some time along the way, realized how Joohyun felt without making her admit anything and held her for a long moment before whispering, “Don’t blame yourself. I’m happy it happened.” But then nightmares would come again for Sooyoung and the endless agony of losing her other half would dismiss every comfort her words had given.

Joohyun leaned her back on the door of the toilet where she could be alone. She held her hand out, her other palm tightly wrapped around her wrist. She was afraid to look at it. She was afraid of the possibilities that could come with something as uncomplicated as a soulmate mark. It was meant to be easy, to find your other half—but right now, it seemed like the scariest thing in the world for Joohyun.

It was going to be okay, she thought and let out a ragged breath. Maybe her eyes had deceived her, tricked her into thinking she’d seen a soul mark. She silently prayed that this was the situation. She just misjudged something, she tried to settle down her maddening pulse.

She took a deep breath, to clear her thoughts.

And quickly, like she was tearing down a bandage, she pulled up her sleeve.

There was a small dandelion.

It was tiny, really but it was there. It was there for her soulmate to see, to check their compatibility. Everyone who has ever touched their soulmate had a mark. For Sooyoung and Seulgi, it was white lilies. For Chanyeol and Kyungsoo—Joohyun’s friends—, it was daffodils. Her parents had roses. For Joohyun it was dandelion. Small, fragile dandelion.
And out there, Wendy wore the same mark.

“Fuck,” Joohyun sighed and laid her head on her wrist so she didn’t have to see it. “Fuck you, universe.”

This was the only sensible explanation. Wendy. She was the one she’d last touched. No brushed shoulders during their way here, no strangers patting her shoulder or grabbing her hand. She touched two people until now—Sooyoung and Wendy. Sooyoung had already had a soulmate. Wendy hadn’t had one until now.

This was to be complicated.

The tremble in her hands made it hard for her to open the door of the stall. She could still see the phantom of the dandelion despite her sleeve was hiding it. She walked to the sinks and splashed some cold water on her burning skin. She looked at herself in the mirror.

She had two choices: a) uncover everything from moment one. This was something that she would rather not do. She had seen how Sooyoung looked at Wendy, how she was finally blooming with love and happiness again, her cheeky, playful self was coming back again. She had also seen how Sooyoung gravitated towards Wendy, especially when she was smiling because she had a kind smile—the sort of Joohyun had associated it with Seulgi.

Or b) hide everything as long as she could.

Sooyoung desperately needed to relationship to work—to pick her up, to make her alive again. So Joohyun was there to sacrifice her soulmate for her. It was to be a bit sketchy, lying to her friends for so long and however she wanted it to not happen, the time would come when she had to admit everything—she just hoped Sooyoung and Wendy’s relationship would last then.

She looked at herself again in the mirror. Her reflection was alien, eyes too dark, cheeks too red, she as a whole was too hollow. She never wanted a soulmate—as far as her knowledge went, all had a tragic end. From Sooyoung and Seulgi to her own parents. It was the right thing to do, she told herself, choosing to let your soulmate love others. She pulled down her sleeve even more, conscious about them seeing the mark.

She had to hide hers because they would see Wendy’s.
She smiled at herself in the mirror. It was almost believable.

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After Joohyun trotted back to them, pretending everything was fine and dandy, they talked.

Wendy was truly a nice kid. She talked a lot, rambling on and on until she lost confidence by the other two silently listening to her. On those times, Joohyun was fighting down the urge to pat her hands on the table and say ‘Go on’ and she was glad she did because Sooyoung beat her to do so. In those times, Joohyun could see the gratitude that radiated from Wendy and her heart clenched. She’d made the right decision.

(Also, somewhere deep in her, she was sure could love Wendy if the circumstances were not like this. This was quite early to judge but she naturally felt like that.)

“Joohyun doesn’t have a soulmate yet, too,” Sooyoung said and tore Joohyun out of her daydream. She was about to say something, to change the topic, when Wendy looked at her long and quizzical and words stayed on the tip of her tongue. “She believes in having a choice. You think the same, don’t you?”

“It is a choice—” Wendy started but by seeing Sooyoung’s face she stopped. This must have been something that burdened her and now, with Joohyun here to calm her down—Joohyun often felt like Sooyoung gave her too much credit—she felt comfortable to share. Or maybe it wasn’t Joohyun’s presence that made her open up—maybe it was Wendy’s.

“You may think that. You may want to think that,” she smiled but it was without any emotions. She shuffled her lemonade with her straw and didn’t look at either of them. “But between us, I was the only one who has ever experienced that. And let me tell you if I had a choice, do you think I would’ve fallen in love with an untreated stage 3 lung cancer patient?”

Joohyun bit the insides of her cheeks.
Seulgi was Joohyun’s old school friend. They went to kindergarten and elementary school together and even though Seulgi moved a lot, they did their best to stay in contact with each other. When Seulgi came to town again, so many years later, when Joohyun made the fatal decision on making her and her other friends meet—she had no clue Seulgi was battling with cancer. She looked pale, she was thinner than before but Joohyun blamed the stressful life of a college student for it. Seulgi didn’t say anything about it, she smiled and laughed like everything was perfect.

She felt the metallic taste of blood on her tongue. She bit her cheeks to hard.

“But I still think that it was the best part of my miserable life. I’d do it again, without thinking.”

“That’s not fair,” Wendy said, eyes drinking in the sight of Sooyoung like she held the key of the universe. “I want to love you and I chose to love you. Isn’t it enough?”

Sooyoung’s eyes flitted over Wendy’s wrist, the one where the mark supposed to be but now was hidden by layers of clothes. Wendy followed her gaze, then took Sooyoung’s hand in hers to provide support, to show her love.

Joohyun, on the other hand, burned with shame.

“We’ll see,” Sooyoung said but neither of them listened anymore.

“It was—depressing,” Yeri said, throwing up her stress ball to the sky and catching it with ease. She had occupied Joohyun’s bed all for herself and she showed no sympathy for Joohyun. On her stomach laid a trashed notebook full of unfinished lyrics about idealized love and youth. “Sucks being Sooyoung’s bestest friend, I see.”

“She just thought you’d be overprotective with her and Wendy is—” Joohyun trailed off, fingers unconsciously playing with the sleeve of her shirt where the mark laid. She bit her lips before she continued, “Wendy is kind of a tender soul. It takes practise to put up with you. Also, don’t be so dramatic and stop laying around in my bed.”
Yeri abruptly sat up, sending the notebook flying from her stomach to the floor. She threw her hands up, making everything even more dramatic than before. “Of course I should be a little overprotective! You’re too soft and Sooyoung’s in love. What if this Wendy girl is just a really good actress and she’ll just use our sexy dynamite and throw her away? Doesn’t this girl have a soulmate, anyway?”

“First of all, please stop saying sexy dynamite. It’s weird. Secondly, she won’t use her, trust me. They get along really well and you’ll be under her spell also once you meet her,” Joohyun said, clicking her pen, again and again, the sound annoying and calming her down at the same time. She thought about Wendy’s smile as she looked at Sooyoung and the churn in her stomach told her that this was a wrong idea. She clicked the pen more vehemently. “And she doesn’t have one. She doesn’t believe in falling in love with someone you just got to know.”

And Wendy was right about it, after all. So they were soulmates—but what happened? Nothing. Wendy adored Sooyoung the same, as far as Joohyun could tell, and she might found Wendy attractive (but she believed everyone did who had taste), she was not in love with her. They might be platonic soulmates.

“Oh, so she’s like you. Great,” Yeri groaned.

“She’s not like me. She doesn’t like the idea of assigned partners, a match made in heaven, with no choice or whatsoever. She wants to break the conventional rules and date and fall in love with others. I am, on the other hand, simply saying, afraid of soulmates,” Joohyun said, pulling the hood of her pullover on her head. Not knowing is better, she thought as her mantra. “And please, can’t you just, I don’t know, laze around your own room?”

“So both of you are weird about soulmates. Nice,” Yeri said with irony lacing her voice. She gathered herself up, taking her loved notebook with her—in which, Joohyun was pretty sure, were endless love songs written for a very special lady. Before Yeri left the room, she stopped and leaned on the doorframe, wearing a shit-eating grin on her angelic face. “Are you sure you two are not soulmates?”

“Yeah,” Joohyun said, the lie felt acidic on her tongue. “Pretty sure.”
Joohyun thought it would be easy like adding two and two because--how many times would she meet with Wendy after all? How many times would she be alone with Wendy? Not being alone with her meant less chance on getting to know her, less chance on falling in love, less chance on clicking with her so well that would make Wendy realize that they were soulmates. Maybe she was a little bit smug with her ideas.

Because right now, she was sweating in her jumper, picking at the skin close to her nails and nothing to say to Wendy; who just patiently sat in front of her, hands around a steaming cup of coffee.

She was careless, you see because when Sooyoung asked whether she wanted to grab a coffee, she eagerly said yes. She was longing to finally leave the house, get some Vitamin D and drink a cup of well-deserved cup of hot cocoa. To break her out of the trance of working from home. But then Sooyoung said, “Wendy is tagging along, I hope you don't mind.” And while she did mind it, she couldn't backpedal and say no.

“Being on time is not really Sooyoung's forte, is it?” Wendy asked with that small smile that seemed permanent on her face.

“Yeah, she's always late. I swear to God, she'll be late even from her own funeral too,” Joohyun grumped because if Sooyoung wasn't about to appear here in the next five minutes she will be the one who kills her. Wendy let out an amused huff of a laugh. Joohyun pulled out her phone from the pocket of her hoodie and checked Sooyoung's schedule. “I think she might be consulting with her thesis supervisor right now. It'll take a while for her to get here then. Her supervisor will talk off her ears because she's been neglecting her thesis.”

“You've her schedule?” Wendy asked and peered at the screen for a moment.

“Oh yeah, two years ago it became a habit of us to make this monster of a schedule of the three of us--” to see who can stay with Seulgi in her last moment and then to watch over Sooyoung after her death. “And it stuck. It's kinda nice, I can kick their asses if they're skipping class.”

“So are you like, the mom friend of the group?” Wendy asked just to spark up a conversation. Joohyun noticed that without Sooyoung beside her, she chirped less and was more concerned about what she said.
“Yeah, I'm the single parent of two evil kids who cause me many, many sleepless nights and no joy at all,” Joohyun pointed at the bags under her eyes and drank some of the hot cocoa. Unaware, she glanced at her wrist for a fleeting moment. She was sweating like a pig but she wasn’t about to take off her hoodie. “But aren't you in the same boat? I peg you to be a mom friend, too.”

“Oh no, I don't have friends,” she said with such a straight face that Joohyun almost believed her. “Okay, I have Sejeong but she's more like a racoon I own. Like we don't even talk that much because she doesn't have a phone. We have to exchange emails.”

Joohyun laughed and tried not to find Wendy incredibly charming with her small smiles—but she had dimples!—and said, “Jesus, this feels like a mom friends’ support group first meeting.”

“Though being a single parent,” Wendy nodded. The silence between them was no longer that awkward than it was before. Joohyun stirred her cocoa and her eyes flew over Wendy's hands on the table, fingers calloused on only one hand.

“Are you a musician?” Joohyun heard herself ask. Wendy perked up at the question.

“Yes. How did you know?”

“You're playing the guitar, aren't you? That's why only one of your hands is calloused,” she said and without thinking, she reached out to run a finger on Wendy's rough hand. Wendy let her and laughed.

“You're really observant! Is this because you're a writer?”

“I'm hardly a writer, I'm just a loser who hates herself enough to consider writing her profession,” Joohyun groaned. She pitched her tight because she was way too salty now; maybe the effect of being shut away from the world for a week or just her nerves making her act up. Wait, no it was fine, Wendy wouldn't find a sore loser like her charming, right? Way to go, then. Deconstruct that fine first impression. “But let's not talk about me because I'm boring. Is there a place to hear you play?”

“What makes you think I'm not boring too?” Wendy asked the playful glint back in her eyes from the other day. “Writing is a really cool job, you should be proud!

“And nowadays, I play at a club close to the university. It's a small place but really atmospheric. You
should drop by sometimes,” Wendy said, her voice telling enough for Joohyun to notice how she loved doing that job. Joohyun wondered whether she sang too. A dreamy expression took over Wendy’s soft features. “I met Sooyoung for the first time there.”

“Really?” Joohyun didn’t know anything about how the two had met. This relationship came as a surprise for her. Wendy bashfully smiled.

“Yeah, she came for the first time and asked for my number. No one has ever asked for my number.”

_I would’ve asked for your number, too_, Joohyun found herself thinking. She pinched herself harder.

This soulmate thing really messed up her brain. Wendy, on the other hand, looked in ease. Joohyun had to give her credit, she was quite right about this all ‘falling for people just because the universe says so’ thing. Joohyun was aware of their connection so she became this hot mess. Wendy was blissfully unaware and perfectly okay being in close proximity with her.

“I—” Joohyun started but then there was an arm around her shoulders, stopping her before she could blurt out something that she would regret later.

“Oh, my two favourite girls! Nice to see you all bundled up and busy chatting.” Sooyoung cried with delight, managing to hug both of them over the table. She looked up, the panic was written on her face clearly. “The third is on the way as I forgot to invite her and let me tell you, she’s mad.”

“Oh fuck,” Joohyun said unconsciously.

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After Yeri had barged into the café, her eyes on fire and her mouth in a thin line, and went to strangle both Sooyoung and Joohyun in the same time—she had two hands for a reason, after all—things had settled down enough so Wendy could charm Yeri into liking her. Very much. They’d clicked in the very first moment in a way that neither Sooyoung nor Joohyun could with her, talking about music and lyrics and closing out the whole word.

Joohyun watched as Wendy’s face lightened up brightly, so brightly that it messed up her heart beat,
as Yeri trusted one earbud to Wendy to listen to a piece she’d composed. Joohyun knew that Yeri was a good composer and even a better lyricist as her pieces had a kind of lyrics that just eased the mind. She was curious when the sacred notebook, that neither Sooyoung nor Joohyun could peek into, would come out of Yeri’s backpack. Joohyun now understood why Sooyoung referred to Wendy as _safe_ before anything.

Wendy felt safe like home.

“I don’t understand anything,” Sooyoung smiled and shook her head. There was relief on her face as she watched how all of her closest friends accepted Wendy in a whim. She pulled together her eyebrows and sighed dramatically. “I think we’ve lost them.”

Joohyun hummed, entertained as she watched a friendship forming between the two. She watched as Yeri’s face blossomed into a smile when Wendy drummed the rhythm of the song that was playing through the earbud. It was nice to see as Wendy opened up for Yeri, the natural social butterfly, so easily and got accepted for it and vice versa. People came to like Yeri rather quickly, there was something in her that pulled people to like her and stay by her side.

Joohyun looked over Sooyoung who watched the scene with a fond expression. But there was a flick in her eyes whenever her eyes accidentally slid down on Wendy’s arms and Joohyun knew the reason. Suddenly the whole room was hot, and cold sweat started forming on her nape. She hoped the others wouldn’t notice.

“Can I ask a question?” Sooyoung asked, her head cocked to the side. She talked in a low voice that the other two’s chitter-chatter wouldn’t be disturbed. There was something distant in her voice. Her eyes stayed on Wendy’s arms.

“Go ahead,” Joohyun said. She willed herself not to glance at her own wrist. The feeling of looming doom was taking over her.

“You’d tell me if you found your soulmate, right?” Sooyoung mused.

“Yeah.” Joohyun felt her throat closing. It was hard to talk. “Yeah, of course.”

Sooyoung considered the answer for a second, then knowingly nodded.
Lying to Sooyoung was harder than she’d thought.

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Joohyun tasted the bitter taste of coffee on her tongue and her stomach churned uncomfortably. She hated coffee but deadlines were in her neck and she really needed to get this part out of her system. Sleep was not a priority right now—big amount of caffeine intake was. Her hands furiously moved on the keyboard, typing away letters and words that would get deleted later on, as she was extremely picky what she signs her name on. She took another sip from the coffee and fought it down.

“Why do you drink it if you don’t like it?” Sooyoung asked from Joohyun’s bed. Everyone loved hogging her bed. She was reading one of Joohyun’s manuscripts, making small notes on the margins, correcting the typos. Joohyun trusted Sooyoung on first readings before sending it to her agency because she’d a good eye for ungrammatical sentences and screaming plot holes.

“Sleep is for the weak,” Joohyun said, deleting a good chunk of text. She hated writing articles, especially of trivial matters that she didn’t care about. They usually turned out to be way too sarcastic. But these articles funded her lifestyle until she finally finished her debut novel—if she ever stopped frigging rewriting everything—and until that moment, she had no choice, whatsoever.

Sooyoung let out an amused hum, “You’d spelt ‘first’ wrong.”

“Nice to know. A good motivating boost.” Joohyun held up her mug. The sleeve of her T-shirt slid down, revealing her mark. She quickly pulled it back but she realized too late that the mug was still considerably full with scorching hot coffee. The beverage landed on her chest and a good amount on her laptop. She was on her feet in no time. “Fuck!”

She was swearing too much nowadays.

(Life sucked big time nowadays, too.)

She was standing there, eyes glued on the keyboard as the coffee seeped into it, her chest and arms burning but it was manageable considered to the pain that came with the thought that she forgot to save the article on her cloud.
“Okay, calm down. No need for tears,” Sooyoung patted her shoulders. She was wiping down the laptop with some tissues she’d found on the bedside table. Joohyun hadn’t realized she was crying until Sooyoung had pointed it out. She quickly wiped down the tears like they were never there. She watched as Sooyoung tried to save the laptop but bitter, black coffee was dripping from the keyboard. “Hm. I think we can save it—tomorrow, bring it to the tech shop to Chanyeol. He’ll know what to do.”

“I don’t have time. I have to present the article tomorrow morning. It’s not even half-done,” Joohyun powered through the sentences but her voice became broken for the last bit. She felt like a cry baby but she was providing articles left and right for the last few weeks.

Sooyoung considered for a second, observing Joohyun gulping back tears, her gaze flickering back at the ruined laptop.

“You know what? You won’t finish this tonight. I’ll call your editor and tell you’re sick and beg for a deadline extension. You need to, I don’t know, live your life a little,” Sooyoung said. She pointed a finger at Joohyun. “You never leave the house nowadays. I thought okay, busy week but then the week turned into a month and now it seems like a never-ending vicious circle. Stop being a hermit, forget work for a second and come with me tonight. Wendy’s playing at the bar and I’ve got a feeling that Yeri might be too.”

“She will?” Joohyun looked at Sooyoung with wide eyes. Yeri loved music but never had the confidence to actually pursue it—but maybe Wendy persuaded her to try herself out.

“Yes. She said it during lunch you didn’t care to come.” Sooyoung sounded bitter and Joohyun wondered how much she’d missed out. They made a habit of having lunch together at least three times a week, eating home-cooked meals and spilling their souls during the time. Joohyun didn’t remember the last time she went, even if it was in their kitchen. Her job was all-consuming right now and she wanted to be spotless. And the sacrifice was her friends.

Also, Wendy was starting to be a member of the bunch and began to come to the lunches. Joohyun wanted to minimize the time spent with her.

“Sorry.” That was all she could say.

“It’s okay. You can make it up by coming to the bar. Relax a bit, listen to Yeri’s songs, maybe stay for Wendy’s. You don’t have to drink, I can get you some hot chocolate. You don’t even have to
dress up,” Sooyoung said, intently boring holes into Joohyun’s eyes. She wanted her to come. Joohyun thought, asking for extension sounded so tempting; spending a night with her friends was even more so. Getting out of this hell, forgetting her job and articles for a little time—she wanted that.

She took a deep breath. Inhale. Exhale.

“I’d use some relaxing,” Joohyun finally said. She closed her eyes and leaned against her chair. She flashed her eyes open. “But promise me I can come home when I feel tired.”

“Promise!”

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Joohyun felt underdressed the moment she walked into the bar. She had changed out of her sweater that was dripping with coffee into something more elegant—but she wanted comfort and she wasn’t planning on impressing anyone, so she opted only for a nice-looking shirt.

The bar was a pretty place with red velvet curtains and soft armchairs and barstool scattered on the hardboard floor, around small tables. It was warm and calm, the tension in Joohyun’s muscles was slowly easing as she was carried away by the soft music playing in the speakers. Piano music always helped to ease her mind but she couldn’t write while listening to music, thus she never really listened to it during her work. She closed her eyes for a moment, just adapting to the atmosphere of the place.

There weren’t many people there and most of them looked like business people who wanted a free night or college students who chose fancy places over the good ol’ pubs. People talked in low hums that blended into the piano—and Joohyun felt so peaceful. That was a first in so long. Sooyoung dragged her through a bunch of people until she flopped down in one of the armchairs closest to the stage. Joohyun lowered herself down next to her, eyes wandering around the odd place.

“How did you end up here, in the first place?” Joohyun asked, her hands running on the soft plush of the armchair. She couldn’t imagine her choosing this place randomly; that didn’t seem to be that place people just find out of the blue, it had to be through someone who had already come here.

“I happened to stumble in,” Sooyoung answered, meaning staying cryptid.
“That’s not a real answer, y’know.”

Sooyoung winked. She checked her wristwatch—carefully arranged to hide her soul mark, little things like this helped her ease the pain that came with losing Seulgi—and sighed with content.

“We still have time. I’ll bring you some hot chocolate,” she said and patted Joohyun’s shoulders. She watched her leave; Sooyoung was beautiful. Joohyun had to bite her lips to hide her smile. Sooyoung was always beautiful per se, but nowadays she was glowing. Under her eyes were no longer dark shadows, no crease on her forehead that seemed permanent, nor was she making herself look smaller than she was like someone who wanted to disappear. She looked content, her eyes shone with a light that Joohyun thought was lost forever. She pulled her shoulders back and held her head high like before, showing the world that yes, she was here and she was a force to reckon with.

And it all happened thanks to Wendy.

Joohyun didn’t want to feel like a self-absorbed asshole but she sort of felt disappointed. She was there for Sooyoung alongside with Yeri; they were holding her up, making her feel alive again. They were there but they weren’t enough for Sooyoung. She needed someone else.

Wendy.

She needed Wendy.

Sometimes Joohyun thought, as she stared at the soft material where the small, tender dandelion laid on her wrist, what could’ve happened if she had met Wendy sooner. But she quickly dismissed the idea because this was right. Sooyoung needed Wendy. Joohyun didn’t. Yes, she was extremely fond of Wendy, even if they’d just met for a few times but she could live. She had her friends and maybe Wendy would turn into one—platonic soulmates didn’t sound that bad.

“Joohyun?” a voice asked behind her. Joohyun winced, caught off guard. She turned back and Yeri fell into her arms. “Oh my gosh, you came! I thought you wouldn’t, you were so busy!”

The warmth was spreading through her as she hugged Yeri back and laughed. This was happiness in the purest form, Yeri holding her in a bone-cracking hug and nuzzling her nose into the crook of her neck. She felt the slight tremble in her body, her grip tight around Joohyun’s shirt.
“I thought you wouldn’t come,” Yeri repeated. Joohyun felt her stomach drop. She really neglected her friends these days. She caressed Yeri’s long hair.

“I’m sorry I don’t spend nearly enough time with you guys nowadays,” Joohyun croaked out. “But I’m here now.”

“It’s okay. The only thing that matters is that you are here now.” Yeri pulled Joohyun impossibly close until she could feel the other's heart beating like a small bird's. She took a trembling breath. This was a weird behaviour from the always happy, confident Yeri; seeing her so self-conscious with the things she loved to do. Joohyun understood. Bearing out your soul, showing the world what you’d made, something so precious to your soul—it was scary. It was not like when Yeri and Seulgi fooled around, strumming lazily on the guitar, singing tunes and words randomly, making up songs on the go. Yeri loved composing with passion, she loved singing and doing music but she was never brave enough to show it to the world. She chose biology over pursuing music at the university to play safe.

But it was her time to shine now.

“I’m sure you’ll do great. Don’t be nervous.” Joohyun wanted to say more but words stuck in her throat and couldn’t get them out. She wanted to tell Yeri that for one, she was there. Her number one fan; even if things didn’t go as planned, she would still cheer for her. She wanted to reassure her how great her songs are, how her voice matches the mellow tunes so well, complimenting each other so well. “Just do as you always and everyone will love it.”

“Yeri!” Joohyun watched as Wendy strutted to them and stopped for a moment as she realized Joohyun was here, too. “Oh, Joohyun! Did you manage to come?”

“I kinda killed my laptop for this but yeah,” Joohyun said and earned a quizzical look from the other two. She didn’t want to elaborate her misfortune with the coffee so she just shrugged.

“I’m glad.” Her voice was warm and the familiar churn in Joohyun stomach had appeared again. Wendy turned to Yeri and said, “Please go to the backstage. Mic check is on.”

Yeri was still holding Joohyun’s hand and she tightened her grip for a moment before she let go. Her eyes were still shaking from nervousness, her cheeks and ears burning with excitement. Joohyun opened her mouth and closed it, unable to say anything that would make her less anxious about her performance. She trusted her unconditionally—and that was all she could do.
Yeri murmured a quick ‘Thanks!’ to Wendy and started to the backstage.

“Good luck!” Joohyun yelled after her after a moment of hesitation. Yeri turned back with her signature cheeky smile and a thumbs up, then left, leaving Joohyun alone with Wendy.

Joohyun wondered how long would it take to Sooyoung to bring her that hot cocoa.

“She appreciates it,” Wendy said suddenly, breaking the awkward atmosphere between them. The last time they’d met when they were waiting for Sooyoung in the café. Joohyun looked at her, looked at the small curve of her mouth, full cheeks and sparkling eyes. Then she looked away. “She was really nervous, even though not many people have come today. She kept asking, ‘Do you think Joohyun will come?’ and I reassured here you’d be here. So thanks, I guess, for not making a fool out of me.”

“Thanks for having faith in me.” Joohyun laughed. “It’s all thanks to Sooyoung, though. I-I didn’t even know about it.”

Wendy hummed. Her eyes were on the velvet curtains, the look in her eyes making her look like she could see through the curtains, see how Yeri was relieved, how her hands didn’t tremble as much as before. Joohyun found her expression and that permanent smile charming and offsetting at the same time.

“She leans on you. Sooyoung, too. They feel safe with you, they feel they can rely on you. You’re a great friend,” Wendy said finally, at the very same moment Joohyun thought about escaping to the toilet. Joohyun snapped her head to look at her. Wendy laughed at her wide-eyed stare, a light dust of pink on her cheeks.

“I don’t think I understand—” Joohyun mumbled. She felt her heart picking up to a beat that she thought was impossible. No one ever had said anything like this to her, no one ever had seen through her. No one saw the need for validation, the need to be needed. She was bad at expressing her thoughts that, for once, she was aware. And often, she found herself wishing that saying things aloud, not just feeling them would not fill her with dread, that she could convey her emotions into words.

“Your silent ways—they understand.” Wendy bumped her shoulder to Joohyun’s. She giggled again, awkwardness thick in the air, her eyes raving on the drawn velvet curtains. “They never shut up about you. I thought you would like to know. You seemed like you needed to know this.”
Joohyun clenched her teeth to hold herself back from hugging Wendy. She probably could, no one would question it. But she didn’t let herself. She couldn’t let herself. She had set the boundaries, she was not about to step over them so easily.

Wendy was warm. Wendy was safe. Wendy saw through her like she was transparent. Joohyun’s hands were shaking at the thought of being an open book for her; for laying bare before Wendy’s eyes. It was scary. She hated the feeling.

Wendy hugged her. Tightly. She wasn’t held back by some imaginary boundaries. Her slender arms wrapped around Joohyun’s tense body and hold her there with surprising strength. She laid her head on Joohyun’s shoulders, her breathing was soft on Joohyun’s skin. It was comfortable as they were around the same height but Joohyun just wanted to get out of the hold. Get out before she got into it too deep. The hug tightened even more like Wendy sensed her desire to escape and she couldn’t help but loosen up and slowly, cautiously embraced Wendy back.

“You looked like you needed a hug,” Wendy whispered, her warm breath tickling Joohyun’s skin.

“Oh my God!” Sooyoung screeched, not so far from them. In one hand, she held Joohyun’s hot cocoa with extra marshmallows, in the other a glass of wine but in her excitement, she splashed some out. She didn’t seem to mind as she beamed on the other two. “This is the content I like to see!”

“Don’t you dare come any closer with those beverages in your hand,” Joohyun threatened, holding up a finger. Sooyoung stopped dead in her track but the threat didn’t make the wide, toothy grin falter. She looked proud, her eyes shining as her gaze flicked between Joohyun and Wendy. She moved slowly and set the glasses down on the table.

“I like seeing you close,” Sooyoung said. She snaked her arm around Wendy’s waist and peppered kisses on her face. Wendy giggled and whined but, in the end, it was easy to tell that she liked the overt exhibition of love. She blushed prettily on her cheek; a faint pink dusting over them.

Joohyun watched the scene and her stomach, once again, churned uncomfortably. This was the first time she’d seen them intimate. Until now, she didn’t really realize that they were truly in a relationship. She hushed the green monster in her. She’d thought that it would be easy. Pretending that there was nothing between them. She thought it’d be easy as she was the only one knowing about the link between them and all she had to pretend there wasn’t one. But she felt a pull towards the other—which made her hands sweat and her heartbeat to quicken. It’d also made her knees wobbly and her breath short but not in a good way.

Sooyoung pushed her mug of cocoa into her hands.
“Turns out they don’t serve hot cocoa. I had to go and buy one from the store nearby,” Sooyoung said, clearly proud of herself and fishing for compliments. Joohyun wouldn’t have minded sacrificing her hot cocoa to avoid the hug. Despite it, she smiled.

“Thanks. You’re the best!” She hoped she sounded grateful enough. Sooyoung seemed to be satisfied with her answer and flopped down on one of the armchairs, her long limbs spreading and taking up a lot of space. She was similar to a feline, Joohyun thought, sweet but dangerous. Sooyoung flashed her eyes on Joohyun. “Take a seat.”

She was aware that she was awkward. She slowly set herself down on another comfy armchair, big and fluffy that slightly reminded her to the embrace given by Wendy. She slowly sank into the plush material, unable to let loose. There was still tension in her back, in her muscles. She tried to calm down but she was walking on eggshells all the time she was around Wendy and the comfort she’d given her was setting her off. Her hands wrapped around the warmth of her mug, suddenly feeling cold. Really cold.

She heard chattering from her side. She turned her head to see Wendy and Sooyoung whispering to each other’s ears, smiling and laughing—and just being happy. There was something awfully lonely about watching the two. Joohyun had never thought she was lonely. She liked being alone, liked the silence that came with it. She’d never thought she would want a chatterbox like Wendy in her life just to talk, talk the silence away.

But Wendy was not hers.

Wendy was Sooyoung’s source of happiness now. And the stretch of her lips signalled that Joohyun had made the right decision when she hid her mark. The mark burned right now; the skin sensitive under the rough material of her blouse. It burned and throbbed, and Joohyun hoped it was just some kind of projection of her feelings. She rubbed her mark with warm fingers.

Joohyun peeked at the couple once more and her eyes met with Wendy’s dark ones. She was also rubbing her own wrist. Panic was rising in Joohyun’s throat. Wendy was a smart woman; Joohyun was sure she could put two and two together. Joohyun’s eyes flickered away from the other but she could still feel her boring holes into the side of her head. She tried to play it off and drink some of her cocoa as nothing had happened.

As naturally as she could, she asked, “When is Yeri starting?”
There was a slight tremor in her voice. Wendy looked at her wristwatch, alarmed.

“In 5 minutes. I gotta go!” Wendy quickly pecked Sooyoung on the lips and ran off.

“She supposed to introduce Yeri but I think she forgot,” Sooyoung explained and she watched her girlfriend’s retreating form. Joohyun hummed and hid her little smile with the rim of her mug. “Her mind is always—elsewhere.”

“What do you mean?” It was the odd undertone of Sooyoung’s words that stuck Joohyun. Sooyoung’s eyes were on her glass of wine, swirling it around and watching the colour of blood wash on the clear glass.

“Wendy’s got a soulmate. Her soul mark had appeared long ago on her wrist. A little dandelion. She pretends like she doesn’t care and says that it’s good she doesn’t know who her soulmate is. But I know she’s curious. I—kind of think she knows who they are but doesn’t want to share it with me. I suppose, she’s trying to save me from the trouble and the pain but it also feels like I’m being excluded in a big part of her life.” Her hand tightened around the thin neck of the glass and Joohyun was afraid that she’d crack it. “However she wants to believe, being soulmates with someone is not a choice. It’s like a gravitational pull. You can’t escape it.

“And I know I’m being selfish but I want more time with her. I’m not ready to lose her yet.” She confessed. Joohyun reached out to hold Sooyoung’s hand in her own trembling ones. She just wanted to cry. She was making the both of them sad by just existing and oh, how she wished soulmates were not a thing. Then Sooyoung might have never gone through the pain that came with Seulgi, no matter how precious their time together was, nor would she go through this mess. Sooyoung was always the one who made them happy, brought and kept them together—and Joohyun will forever be grateful for her.

Sooyoung was a priceless friend and Joohyun just wanted her to finally find her happy ending.

Joohyun suddenly remembered the time she was so overwhelmed with everything—with college, with her parents, with her current relationship—that she just wanted to quit. Sooyoung noticed the small details of her fatigue, of her losing sleep because of her anxiety, of her crying the quietest way possible—and she stepped up and said, “No, you won’t do this to yourself or I’ll kick your ass. Come, I’m taking you somewhere. I love you.” And took her to the beach, a long drive from the city, and just—let her breath, let her cry on her shoulders and let her forget. She also contacted a therapist for her anxiety issues, and while things were still not ideal, Joohyun knew that she had Sooyoung by her side, checking on her and having her back.
It was something Joohyun felt like she could never pay back. So, she gritted her teeth and willed the loneliness away with sheer force. Sooyoung needed her.

“She loves you,” Joohyun said, the truth making her throat close. “I see the look in her eyes and those are not the ones that say she’ll leave you anytime soon.”

“Really?” Sooyoung finally looked up from the wine, her eyes glinting with hope.

“Yeah,” Joohyun smiled but her cheeks hurt. “Also, ask her about it. Talk to her. I’m sure, she’ll understand your fears.”

Joohyun didn’t know Wendy. She didn’t know her well enough, but she wasn’t blind. Wendy was a perceptive woman who picks on signs you don’t even remember throwing. She was sensitive to these signs and reacted to them readily. Joohyun was sure that Wendy was already aware of Sooyoung’s feelings—but somehow, they didn’t get to confront about it. Joohyun wondered why.

Sooyoung leaned over the desk that was between them and held Joohyun’s hand, her black eyes reflecting with gratitude.

“Thanks, Joohyun.”

“Anytime,” Joohyun smiled at her, pulling Sooyoung’s hand closer to her and draped her arm around her shoulders. Noises came from behind the weighty curtains which signalled that they will soon see what Yeri had prepared. Yeri, who always loved to jam out with Seulgi, who was loud about her music, who had a clear sight of what she wanted to achieve—after Seulgi died never showed any of her compositions to either of her friends.

Seulgi was with them for such a short time, yet the impact she’d left is enormous.

Joohyun thought, would Seulgi think that she was being replaced? That Wendy came out of nowhere to fill all the creaks left by her passing? Would she mind that Wendy is healing all of them, providing comfort to lean on? Would she be jealous?

She thought, no, Seulgi would be happy to see all this unfolding. She would love Wendy—they had similar characters. It might be just Joohyun who felt like they were moving on too fast; Seulgi became the centre of their own little galaxy passed fast and was replaced fast.
Joohyun took a sip from her hot cocoa. It was nice and sweet on her tongue, rich in taste and warm. She hummed, delighted. She didn’t notice Sooyoung looking at her, the tender pull of her full lips. Joohyun swept away the foam from her upper lip with the back of her hand.

“So do you like it?” Sooyoung asked and Joohyun gave an enthusiastic nod. Sooyoung tasted her own red wine, classy in a way Joohyun felt like she could never reach. “I’m glad. I’m also glad that I left Wendy and you alone for a few minutes. I was afraid you two won’t get along. You seemed distant with her since you’d met her, so seeing you hug makes my heart swell looking at you.”

“She’s a sweet girl,” Joohyun said absentmindedly. “There’s literally nothing that people would not like about her.”

“That’s right” Sooyoung nodded, seemingly content with the answer. “That’s my girl.”

Joohyun chuckled, good-natured at that, ignoring how fake it felt. Sooyoung deserved Wendy. Wendy deserved Sooyoung. They were good together, looked after one another, had each other’s back. It was okay, everything would be okay. She just needed to push down her unwanted and possessive thoughts.

Sooyoung turned to her, a small flush dusted on her cheeks, probably from the wine. Joohyun noticed when the other’s eyes flickered on her, thankfully, covered wrist.

Oh boy, here it comes, Joohyun thought.

“So, is there any developments on your soulmate?”

Okay, she had practice in this. Every goddamn family event brought the same kind of questions. She was practised to face with these questions but now she felt off. The sweetness of the cocoa turned sour on her tongue as she opened her mouth to spur out a lie.

But she didn’t manage to do so because the curtains were drawn. Both of them snapped their heads to the stage. There sat Yeri and Wendy, guitar in their hands. The noise around them died down lowly as heads turned to look at the girls, a few whistles were heard from the bartenders and regulars. Wendy smiled and waved to them, no sign of nervousness in her antics. She looked natural on the stage like she was born to do this. Joohyun could see, even from the distance the glinting of her eyes and the upturn of her lips. It was crystal clear that this was something she loved to do with passion.
Joohyun found this oozing confidence of hers charming and she had difficulties tearing her eyes away from her.

She turned her gaze on Yeri. She was trembling. She drummed her fingers on the body of her guitar slightly, something that gave away just how nervous she was. There were only a few times that Joohyun had seen her this nervous before—and all her instincts told her to go and comfort her friend—this is the point where Sooyoung would laugh, point a finger and call her the ‘mom-friend’. But she couldn’t just go up on the stage to hold Yeri’s hand and tell her everything will be fine. She was not that gone yet. Yeri eyes narrowed as she searched the crowd, probably looking for them for reassurance but couldn’t see well from the reflectors.

“I hope she’s alright” Sooyoung mumbled.

Joohyun nodded.

“Hello everyone,” Wendy’s voice came from the speakers, cutting into her train of thoughts. She held onto the mic, her body language showing that she was comfortable doing this. Some people whooped and yelled back at her and Wendy giggled, somehow making the atmosphere less serious than before. “I hope you’re having a great night!”

“Sing ‘Honey’!” Someone yelled.

“You’d like that, don’t you?” Wendy laughed and winked. “We’ll get there. But first, let me introduce my dear friend, Kim Yeri! She’ll accompany me for the first few songs. Even more, she’d composed some of these songs! Please, enjoy!”

People clapped around them and Joohyun joined in hesitatingly. She watched Yeri’s reactions while Wendy was speaking—she paled first but then, slowly but surely gaining back her colour. There was one moment when they exchanged gazes with Wendy—and the elder gave her an easy smile and soon it reflected on Yeri’s face too. Wendy counted back from three and they strummed the guitar lightly.

Joohyun listened, growing more and more amazed. Their voices matched, showing that they practised well. She enjoyed the music and wondered why Yeri didn’t show her such a good song. It was nice, something that Joohyun would listen to on the radio or on her own. When her nervousness eased away after seeing Yeri get comfortable on the stage, even enjoying herself singing her heart out, she closed her eyes to relish the music fully.
It was Yeri’s night. But it was hard concentrating on her solely. Wendy’s voice was honeyed, mellow or sharp in places it suited the best, sometimes soft to let Yeri shine, sometimes taking over the song when Yeri’s voice trembled. She was a born performer, seemed to grow up in the limelight and the watching eyes of the crowd. She went into high notes without thinking and hesitation—and Joohyun wanted to listen to her sing forever.

Her eyes shot open and guiltily glanced at Sooyoung. But she was watching the performance, proudness written on her features as she gleamed at Wendy. Joohyun still felt somewhat guilty about her thoughts—but she couldn’t help it. Wendy was an amazing singer and an even more amazing person.

But it was good like this. Sooyoung deserved Wendy.

Joohyun closed her eyes again to just listen and drown out her thoughts.

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The performance ended with a blast as people coerced Wendy to perform ‘Honey’ for them. Unwillingly, first making sure that Yeri was okay with it because it was her night tonight, she played the first cords and Joohyun thought that every single person in the room had fallen in love with Wendy in that very moment.

She silently thanked whatever spirit was good enough to ask for the song—but she also wanted to fight them. She was in enough trouble starting liking Wendy, she really didn’t need to see her perform this Lesbian Anthem. But, if she was playing, what could Joohyun do?

“Coloured out the line” Wendy sang and Joohyun melted. How fitting, she thought. There they were, fitting together perfectly according to the universe—and somehow, they managed to just fuck it up and colour out the line.

Wendy’s eyes flickered to hers for a moment and everything stopped like they were in a cliché movie from the eighties. Wendy was beautiful, her face flushed by the strong lights, eyes full of mirth and happiness, hair tousled in a way that it made Joohyun want to run her fingers through the soft strands to make them behave.

“Heartache would stay with you,” Wendy’s voice turning sorrow, and the spell was broken. She was looking at others with the same hazy gaze she’d looked at Joohyun—because that was Wendy for
you, someone whose look makes your knees weak and your heart tremble. And it was a bit worse for Joohyun.

She stood up abruptly.

“I have to go to the toilet,” she announced as Sooyoung sent a quizzical look to her way. Sooyoung just nodded and went back watching her girlfriend with a lovesick smile that made her adorable and fuzzy—and things were starting to be complicated.

She quickened her steps, not really paying attention to where she was heading. She bumped into people but they were drunk enough not to tell her off. Somehow she managed to get out of the pub, the cold air hitting her reddened face. It was colder than she’d initially thought—it was almost Summer for god’s sake—and her teeth tattered together after standing out there for more than a few minutes. But she didn’t care. She was sleepy and tired and she just wanted to go home and lay down or do some work. She was too tired and it weighed her down. It was messing with her mind, making her feel things that she shouldn’t.

She shouldn’t feel these weird things towards Wendy.

It was just the fatigue washing over her. These feelings were not real.

It was just that she was lonely and overworked—and knowing that her soulmate was a step away from her was messing with her mind. But that step seemed to be miles and miles long, too long for Joohyun to take it. Not like she wanted to.

The entrance door opened behind her but Joohyun wasn’t paying attention to it. But suddenly, a cardigan was laid on her shoulders, warm and soft. She quickly snapped her head to the place the stranger was supposed to be—and it was Wendy.

“I thought you’d be cold,” Wendy said, her face still flushed and her eyes were still alight with excitement. Joohyun pulled the cardigan tighter on her body, the little warmth it gave felt good. Also, it smelled like her favourite detergent. She was about to say her gratitude when she noticed that Wendy is out there in her dress only. The cardigan must belong to her then.

“It’s not necessary, you’ll catch a cold if you—” Joohyun began taking off the cardigan.
Wendy waved her off. “I lived in Canada for a long time. I don’t get cold easily.”

Joohyun hummed but she was ready to shed the clothing when she was to see the slightest trembling from Wendy.

“You left before the last song ended,” Wendy said. Her eyes widened like she didn’t mean to say that aloud. Joohyun would’ve laughed on her comic expression but something told her not to now. The silence after that was a bit too heavy, Joohyun was not very sure how to react to that. So Wendy just bumped her shoulder to her and joked, “Was I that bad?”

Joohyun good-naturedly giggled. She appreciated that Wendy tried to lighten the mood that for some reason seemed to always be too heavy for it to be considered normal. But maybe it was all in Joohyun’s mind.

“I needed some air, it was really stuffy in there,” she said. “And you were great. I—I didn’t know what to expect but this… This was something out of a dream. You’ve got some golden pipelines.”

Wendy sheepishly scratched the back of her head. She was turning red and Joohyun found it odd because she thought Wendy would be used to the compliments.

“Thanks but I’m not that good. Yeri, on the other hand, shined brightly today.”

“Yeah, she did.” Joohyun realized she sounded like a proud mother. “Thanks for helping her find her voice.”

“She always had it in here,” Wendy pointed at her heart. “All I did was to help her get out.”

Joohyun just stared for a second before she cracked a smile, “That was kinda cheesy.”

Dramatically, Wendy gasped and clasped her mouth. “Ah, Miss Bae, you’ve hurt my feelings. I can’t forgive you for that.”

There was a pause between them where Joohyun just blinked at the other and Wendy stayed in one place, afraid to move because her joke failed. Then Joohyun burst out in a loud cackle that seemed to
scare Wendy.

“Oh my goodness, you’re cheesy and not funny at all! That was so bad!” She laughed loudly. She felt sort of bad for laughing at her like this—but she couldn’t help it.

“But you’re laughing now, I am funny.” Wendy pouted which gave her a kicked puppy look and while Joohyun didn’t want to admit it, it had a serious effect on her. She hoped these thoughts didn’t reflect on her face, though.

“I’m laughing at you, not with you.” Joohyun patted Wendy’s shoulder. Suddenly a thought struck her. “Wait, wait, wait! I can’t imagine how you flirt. I mean, I don’t want you to flirt me, obviously, I’m just curious how you managed to get a girlfriend with you being this cheesy and unfunny.”

Jesus Christ, I don’t want you to flirt me, obviously, fuck, fuck, fuck. Could she be even more obvious? Wasn’t it an open offer to flirt with her? To flirt with her in the most unstable state, when she was in the brink of developing a crush on Wendy? Did she lose all her marbles already?

“Oh, I don’t really flirt.” Wendy shrugged, seemingly unaware of the inside conflict Joohyun was going through. “Sooyoung just looked at me, said ‘I want this gnome’, picked me up and the rest is history. I didn’t have much say in that.”

Joohyun snorted. “Was this another attempt of you trying to be funny?”

“Only if it worked.”

“It did not.”

“Oh.”

It struck Joohyun how easy it was to talk to Wendy. She was an introvert and terribly shy. She wasn’t easy to get to know, she was well-aware how high her mental barricades go. Her friends were mostly extrovert who somehow adopted her into their groups by filling the talking time until Joohyun melted up and was ready to add her own thoughts. But Wendy also seemed a tad bit shy—she was loud and made friends easily but seemingly she was unaware of the charms she held.
Wendy sheepishly smiled and ducked her head. Joohyun wanted to press the laughter down but seeing her like this, trying hard to attempt to be funny—it was adorable. Joohyun wanted to pinch her cheeks (and kiss them, but she was delusional right now). She burst into laughter, so loud that it surprised Wendy and choosing the safest option, she patted her head. They were sort of the same height—some fun-sized gals—so the movement felt awkward.

“Okay, it was funny—now, don’t get overconfident. I don’t really know you but I can tell this won’t happen in the close future again,” Joohyun said, laughter still bubbling up in her throat.

“You’re mean.” Wendy pouted and she tried hard to fight down the smile that was ready to bloom on her lips.

Joohyun watched her lips a moment longer than she should’ve—they looked so soft and pink like candy, and Joohyun just wanted to kiss her senseless. She wondered how those lips would taste—like honey, she guessed from the chapstick Wendy used. Joohyun thought about the way Wendy would open up for her, to kiss her deeply, to lick into her mouth, to run her tongue over the other’s. To kiss her breathless. She broke her own train of thoughts. This was improper. This was creepy. It seemed like her body had its own ways because when she resurfaced from her thoughts she stood a bit too close to Wendy.

“I should go inside,” Joohyun said, the atmosphere between them once light, was heavy and thick again. Wendy just nodded. She looked like she was just broken out of a trance of some kind, like Joohyun’s words didn’t register in her head.

She took off the cardigan Wendy had given to her. Wendy’s eyes followed the movement and dazedly, she took the clothing away from Joohyun.

She started inside, feeling like she was made of metal—feet (and heart) heavy and dragging. Wendy stopped Joohyun, her small hand on the other’s elbow.

“I know, I’m not your closest friend. And I also see that you’re not warming up to me easily but… If you need someone to talk to—just give me a call, ‘kay?”

It surprised Joohyun and she offered a smile.

She didn’t promise.
“I love your voice, by the way,” she said before she stepped into the pub. She didn’t wait for any reaction before closing the door.
Sooyoung’s hand reached the table with a loud bang. Joohyun didn’t even look up, she continued typing away on her laptop.

“No,” she said. These days, Sooyoung decided that she would persuade Joohyun into going somewhere with them, to get her out of the sweet cocoon of her room. After the night at the pub, she kind of, sort of pulled herself together to finish the article—and while on a roll, she finished another three. Working on the fourth. This was a miracle on its own, and Sooyoung was so adamant on ruining it for her.

Joohyun peeked at Sooyoung. She quickly saved her document. Turned out it was a wise thing to do because the next thing she knew was another, slightly smaller bang, as Sooyoung slapped the laptop shut.

“What if I didn’t save?” Joohyun asked, eyes unimpressed as she took in Sooyoung’s worked up expression.

“I know you, you nerd, you save after every freaking word,” she rolled her eyes, hands still pushing on the laptop to stop Joohyun from opening it again. “Now, that I’ve got your attention—we’re going to the beach.”

“It’s half a day away. I’m not going.”

“We’re gonna camp there and head back the next morning. You can afford two days of chilling. I also know that you’re ahead of your work. You can’t say no.” Her hand moved to ruffle Joohyun’s hair but midway she thought better of it and pulled back.

“Who’s coming?” Joohyun narrowed her eyes.

“Just the four of us.”

“Who’s driving?”
“Wendy.”

Joohyun thought, bitterly, of how lovey-dovey these two will be on the trip. Her mind unhelpfully provided her pictures of them as Wendy is driving and Sooyoung sits on the shotgun, their hands intervened halfway. Or them kissing in the sunset and making Joohyun take photos of them doing so, oblivious of the brewing fury in her stomach. That was—not ideal.

“I’m not going.”

“How? Is it because of Wendy?” There was something else behind the question and Joohyun felt like she needed to tiptoe around it.

“I like Wendy,” she said. She wasn’t lying at least. “I just don’t feel like stuffing into a car, travel for like 10 hours, bathing in sweat and dirt to get 2 hours of relaxation on the beach. And I hate camping.”

She was a simple woman. She liked her place air-conditioned, preferably squishy clean and uncrowded. She liked taking cold showers during the day if it was too hot outside and especially liked if she didn’t have to watch her soulmate kiss her best friend. And this trip symbolized everything she hated.

(Besides all the reasoning, the number one reason was that spending a lot of time with Wendy, crowded in a car was not good for her. She was already too deep.)

Sooyoung narrowed her eyes, “You two are awfully awkward since we watched Yeri’s performance. Did something happen?”

Joohyun hoped that the panic she felt didn’t show on her face. She waved.

“Nothing happened. We’re awkward by default, that’s all.”

That was not all, but Joohyun didn’t feel like admitting that what she thought was fatigue indulged delusion of maybe liking Wendy a bit too much than it should be allowed in these certain circumstances, was real. Too real. The next day of the performance, she woke up from a dream full
of kisses and cheesy lines shared with Wendy, and worst of all she enjoyed them. She woke up giddy and giggly until the moment it dawned upon her that she was in trouble.

Sooyoung considered for a second, then simply scoped Joohyun’s laptop up.

“Never mind. You’ll come. I’m going to hold your laptop in hostage until the end of the getaway,” she said, the smile on her lips seemed fake. Joohyun had thought about fighting with her—and probably winning her laptop back—but she was not spending nearly enough time with her friends again, so a weekend on the beach wouldn’t hurt, right?

(She didn’t want to admit how she badly wanted to see Wendy, too. They met from time to time but it wasn’t enough to ease her hunger.)

“Are you sure Wendy is safe to drive? No offence, but she looks like someone who is a disastrous driver.”

Sooyoung’s smile turned into a true, bright one—it was the toothy smile that made Joohyun’s warm and glad she could do something for his friend.

“She has a license,” that’s all she said.

“Hey, that wasn’t what I asked! You have a license and you drive like a madman!” Joohyun squeaked. Both her and Yeri held traumas from sitting beside Sooyoung while she was driving and she would not sit beside someone as a horrible driver as her. She was still too young and she swears the few grey hairs she had were all from Sooyoung’s driving.

“So, pack your things we’ll go early tomorrow.” She walked away, laptop under her armpit. She threw a flying kiss at her friend and winked.

“Park Sooyoung, answer me!”
“We… Why do we always find ourselves waiting for Sooyoung?” Wendy asked loudly, breaking the silence as she looked at her wristwatch. Joohyun grunted something inaudibly; she wondered how the hell she managed to get there earlier than Sooyoung when she knowingly left the house later than supposed.

Last night Yeri told her the details of the trip and that she and Sooyoung will pick up the rented car and later they’d pick to other two up. To avoid any awkward moment that might arise, Joohyun risked Yeri yelling at her for being late. And still. She was there, Wendy by her side in a cute little flowy dress that made her irresistibly huggable (and her ass looked great in it) and no sight of the devil duo anywhere near.

Joohyun felt like an idiot. While Wendy was dressed all cute and suited for a beach trip, the soul mark on her wrist too bare, too visible; Joohyun was sweating profusely in a long-sleeved shirt because she wouldn’t risk anyone spotting her mark. She’d already come up with an even though embarrassing but usable lie. She had a pretty bad rash, yes it was contagious and it would get only worse if it got wet. Both Sooyoung and Yeri gagged hearing it and were horrified when Joohyun wanted to show it to them. A success, she believed.

“That’s our lives. Waiting for the princess to arrive.”

Wendy nodded, looking at Joohyun’s miserable form. She was drenched in sweat; somehow they managed to choose a place with little to no shadowy space. She was sure that she’d died without realizing and this was hell because firstly, it was freaking hot and Satan could chill with this temperature and secondly because temptation was standing beside her and staring at her with doe eyes.

Suddenly, Wendy began to rattle through her handbag, pulling out a small fan. She held it out for Joohyun.

“There. You look like you need it.” Wendy cocked her head aside, bangs falling into her eyes—and no, Joohyun couldn’t afford to lose it right now.

Yes, this was indeed hell.
She took the fan gratefully with a blunt ‘Thanks’.

“Do you have any idea who could it be?” Joohyun asked and she nodded towards the soul mark that Wendy was flaunting so freely. She knew she was walking on thin ice but it was ebbing away in her and the words stumbled out of her mouth without thinking.

Wendy looked up, surprised, and then looked away. Something had passed between them for that mere second when their eyes collided but Joohyun couldn’t put a name on it. She felt electrocuted and her limbs froze.

“No idea,” Wendy whispered. Her gaze flickered down on Joohyun’s clothed wrist and then to her eyes. “Any luck on your side?”

“No,” at least she was telling the truth. She was as unlucky as someone could get. This was how she lived her life.

Wendy hummed. She looked like she wanted to say something else but she pursed her lips into a thin line.

“You know, I’m kind of scared of soulmates,” Joohyun said—but she didn’t know why. She didn’t know why she shared this. Wendy wouldn’t care, right? She felt like she could tell her because Wendy was the safest person she’d ever had the luck to meet. Wendy furrowed her eyebrows and looked at her like she was trying to solve a puzzle but a piece was still missing.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because it’s not a promise. The universe says that yeah, you two belong together—but there’s no guarantee that you would stay together. Like Sooyoung and Seulgi. The universe put them together, made them perfect for each other—and why? Just so that they could get separated. It’s a one chance thing, if you blow it you’ll be forever doomed for loneliness. I think it’s cruel. And scary.” As Joohyun talked, she couldn’t risk looking at Wendy because she felt like she was spilling a bit too much already—and felt like Wendy could see through her if their eyes met. Shame and embarrassment filled her as the silence stretched between them. “Ah, I’m sorry I’m like this. The hot weather is messing with my mind and I’ve been cooped up in our apartment for way too long for me to even attempt a normal conversation.”

She felt a tender touch on her arm and slowly, she glanced up from under her lashes. Wendy was
studying her face.

“You don’t have to be ashamed because you feel like this. I understand,” she said. The sincerity in her voice told Joohyun that she wasn’t miming, she really understood how she felt. This was a first—there was no one yet who told her that they understood how she felt about soulmates. No one shared the sentiment or at least tried to accept that she had this fear.

And it was her soulmate, after all.

She wanted to ignore the growing fondness in her heart but it was impossible to do so.

“It’s a hard thing to understand—why the universe plays us like it does—and you know what, I don’t want to understand it. I don’t want to know why it offered us to find our soulmates if being soulmates are real after all or it’s just our mind desire to believe that the same soul mark means that we are destined to be. It’s easier to accept. People don’t want to think they’re alone.” Wendy’s grip tightened around the material of Joohyun’s sweater.

“I would prefer not knowing who my soulmate is,” she said absentmindedly. She wondered whether or not she told too much, led Wendy to discover that they were soulmates. Wendy’s eyes stayed on her face for a moment too long, something like pain reflecting in them.

“I would prefer, too.” Her voice was so raw that it surprised Joohyun.

She also pondered about what would be Wendy’s reaction to finding out Joohyun is her soulmate. Would she be glad? Would she be repulsed? Joohyun had been lying since the appearance of the mark, lying to everyone who was dear to her. Would she think that she was a bad person for this, for trying to protect Sooyoung? Would she think that she doesn’t want Wendy, that she wouldn’t want Wendy as her soulmate?

There was a dull ache in her heart. Overthinking never did anyone justice.

“Wendy, I—” she began but she stopped herself. They ended up in the same place when they were at the bar, pulling towards each other yet there was a barrier between them. Joohyun wanted this barrier to get higher so Wendy could not reach her. It was a useless wish.

She had to stop it now.
“Yes?” Wendy prompted. Joohyun took Wendy’s hand into hers and squeezed it.

“Wendy, I hope you’re not as a shitty driver as Sooyoung or I’ve to decline the invitation to join the trip and go home, hide under my covers and pray that you’d not run over me with the car. I swear to God, sitting beside Sooyoung in a car is a traumatic experience I cannot forget,” Joohyun rambled as she watched Wendy’s expression turning from bitter to surprise to mirth. It was a nice change, whenever she talked with Wendy there seemed to be a permanent furrow of her brows and only smiled when Sooyoung was around. She liked this.

“I can assure you—I’m worse,” Wendy’s smile was wide and toothy, eyes full of mischief.

“Then, thank you very much for the invitation, I have got urgent things to do. Goodbye.”

“Nah, rest assured I’m not the ‘run over everyone’ type. I’m the ‘I refuse to go faster than a snail’ type. I hope you’ve brought something that will entertain you because it’s going to be a long drive.”

Joohyun clicked her tongue in distaste, “How did you people manage to get a license?”

Wendy shrugged. “Sometimes I wonder, too.”

“That’s not making me less scared, you know.”

A car honked and both of them winced in surprise. Then Sooyoung’s head peeked out of the car with a wide smile on her face, pushing the horn again. “Beep-beep bitches!”

On the other side, Yeri pushed open the door, some 80s bubble gum pop playing in the background. “Get in losers, we’re going on a trip!”

Joohyun made a mental note not to leave these two alone again anytime soon because of trouble but make it double. Besides her, Wendy let out a long sigh and shared a glance with Joohyun. Not only the driving style would make the trip longer than necessary but the devil duo too.
Joohyun was about to strangle them. Life without friends didn’t seem that bad at that very moment. Or she just needed to ditch them and get some new friends—but she was too old to get new friends. She literally went nowhere she could get new friends—her social life was pretty much dead. Plus, that was a whole lot of awkwardness and she was not about to do that. Friendless that was it.

Yeri was screeching the lyrics of *Eye of the Tiger* beside her, while Sooyoung gave out guitar solo impressions. All the while, Wendy was going with like 50km/h on the highway, knuckles white as she held into the stirring wheel and other cars honked for a long time as they passed beside them.

Joohyun just wanted a passing moment of silence. Just a moment when someone wasn’t screaming in this tiny, closed place; when there was a break between quarrels so she could quickly recharge.

She counted back from ten to one, for like the hundredth of time but it didn’t calm her down. Her palms were prickling with a desire to fight the two and her leg to push the gas pedal until they were going with the maximal speed.

The music changed to *Barbie Girl* and Joohyun lost it.

“Okay,” she began as calmly as she could. “Please Wendy, as soon as you find an exit, let’s go there.”

“Why?” Yeri asked, puzzled by her reaction.

“I need a break from you,” Joohyun deadpanned.

“But it’s the start of my road trip playlist! The hottest tracks are still back, you can’t kill the vibe right from the start!”
Joohyun looked at her and the hell that had been raging in her must have reflected in her eyes because Yeri gulped and understandingly nodded, silently agreeing that yes, a break would be nice indeed.

“I think there’s one a few kilometres away,” she told Wendy. The driver nodded, her eyes already searching for the said exit.

“You’re such a party-pooper, Joohyun,” Sooyoung moaned but she knew that she could only get away with it if she slowly lowered the volume of the radio. She did so.

“Be grateful I warned you before I lashed out.”

Joohyun felt the momentary calmness surround her, the windows down and the wind catching into her hair. She couldn’t remember the last time she was on a road trip. They missed them—they were always fun and she was sure this would be too once she got adjusted to the others. She was a tad bit hot but she could manage. She took in deep breaths, trying to recharge as quickly as she could because she knew her friends and they could go without talking only so much. When she opened her eyes, Wendy’s dark ones caught and locked them into a merciless gaze. She looked worried as her eyes ran up and down on Joohyun’s face, back to the road for safety reasons and again on her.

She glanced at Yeri, who was sitting beside her to make sure she wasn’t paying attention—she didn’t, she was busy sulking about her ruined road trip party—and she mouthed ‘I’m okay’. Wendy looked relieved, her mouth turning into her signature smile that made her cheeks fuller.

(She wanted to pinch them.)

“What are you smiling at?” Sooyoung asked intimately from Wendy but the car was too small to be private. She intervened their fingers over the gear shift, thumb running over Wendy’s hand. Joohyun felt like she was invading into an intimate moment. Wendy’s eyes flickered at her in the rear-view mirror and then back to Sooyoung.

“Nothing. Something just came into my mind.”
Turned out, the exit that Yeri was talking about didn’t lead to a resting place but to another road and they ended up being totally lost. They were in a rather secluded area with many trees and bad reception. And worst of that, as an act of revenge, Sooyoung and Yeri started their two-person party all over again and Yeri wasn’t kidding that the best (in Joohyun’s case the worst) was still behind. As *Never Gonna Give You Up* blasted through the speakers, they yelled through the music for Wendy to turn here or there to get back to the highway, getting themselves more and more lost as time went by.

“Turn left!” Yeri screamed from behind.

“No! Turn right!” Sooyoung also yelled the map in her hands seemed as old as time probably didn’t even include the road they were driving on. No one used maps nowadays anyways. It was a mess and Joohyun wanted to get out of the car, find public transportation and go back to the city—and never ever leave it.

Suddenly, Wendy stepped on the brake so hard that their seatbelt had to hold them back.

“What the—” Yeri’s high-pitched scream was halted when she locked eyes with Wendy.

Wendy lived as a tender person in everybody’s mind. Neither of them could imagine her getting angry or hurting anyone—that would be ridiculous. Wendy looked like she couldn’t hurt a fly. But right now, her eyes promised the living hell if they didn’t shut up. So they did. Even Sooyoung, the actual girlfriend, didn’t try and talk with Wendy when she’d got this look in the eye. Mouth pressed in a thin line, making her chiselled jaw even sharper that somehow reminded Joohyun of the typical rich girls from k-dramas, she said, “This is enough.”

Yeri was about to open her mouth and risk it all for a smartass comment but Joohyun patted her knee and signalled that it was not the time for that. Seeing that the appointed ‘mature friend’ advised not to, she soon retreated.

“I’m going to tell you what we’ll do,” Wendy said, sending pointed looks to the three of them. Her gaze was sharp like a knife and all Joohyun wanted to do was to apologize right now (and hold her hand). “Since we don’t know where we are or when we will reach the beach, I say, let’s sleep here.”

Sooyoung slowly held her arm up in the air like she was about to ask a question from a teacher in the classroom. Wendy shook her head, understanding the question without hearing it, “Not on the road,
per se, but I saw a camping place a few miles back. Not the beach but it’ll do.”

(Joohyun felt bad how her body was heating up listening to Wendy having an upper hand on all of them. She willed down the blush that had been creeping up on her neck and tried to recall disgusting things.)

Wendy let out a little puff of breath like she was letting out the steam.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Joohyun said before the other two could immediately reject the idea. When Wendy heard that, the ever-present curve of smile planted on her lips beautifully. “Look, we could go and get even more lost. Now we’re kinda sure where we came from and it wouldn’t be hard to get back from where we came—but we came to get out of our lives. And okay, maybe this isn’t what you’ve imagined but it’s the closest thing to make a good trip out of this.”

Wendy nodded furiously—and Joohyun felt so validated. “I don’t think that what you said made sense but thank you for standing up for me.”

Yeri snorted.

“Okay, I don’t mind,” she agreed, shrugging her shoulders. Joohyun wondered whether her quick agreement happened because she was smitten with Wendy or she was growing up. She suspected the former. “After all, we’ve brought tents.”

She thought about the tents. Those small, confined places where you cannot move without touching the other. Then her eyes wandered to Wendy’s nape, the skin bright and smooth and so inviting to kiss and mark and lick—and she watched a sweat drop roll down under her dress. She gulped.

She was behaving like a freak.

Not cool, Joohyun. Not cool at all.

She couldn’t reason her sudden hot feelings—she blames that it’d been a while since she last dated someone and her hermit lifestyle—and God, Wendy was just really attractive, okay? With her dress on she looked like a perfect summer fling, sweet on the streets and spicy in the sheets. But she could manage.
“Joohyun?” Wendy broke Joohyun out of her trance. She could only hope she wasn’t thinking aloud.

“You’ve been staring at me for a while now. Did I hurt you with my comment on you?” she asked, amusement mixed with clear worry in her voice. Her eyes were opened wide like saucer plates and Joohyun felt every piece of her heart falling apart.

“Ah, no. You just—you just look beautiful in that dress,” she said finally because she couldn’t lie to those eyes more than she had to. It was an understatement, though. She was beautiful like goodness, bathing in the sunlight—and Joohyun felt blessed every time she’d turned her eyes on her. She thought whether she should kneel in front of her and pray.

“Oh. Thanks.” Wendy shyly tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ears.

Sooyoung cleared her throat loudly.

“Do my eyes deceive me or are you really flirting with my girlfriend in front of me?”

Joohyun choked on her spit, blood rushing to her cheeks and ears.

“I am not!” she managed to say but no one in the car was convinced. Sooyoung turned back and reached her arm out to pat her head. Joohyun pushed back the overwhelming feeling to bite her fingers off.

“I understand, though. She is quite a good catch. And I’d chosen this dress myself—I’m pretty proud of myself if I can say so.” Her gaze was painfully soft as she glared over to Wendy but it immediately changed back to one full of mischief as she turned back to Joohyun. “So, even though you’re older than me, I shall ask you for a proper duel to fight for this beautiful maiden’s heart.”
“What the fuck are you on, Park Sooyoung?” Yeri spat.

Sooyoung didn’t say anything, just considered Yeri for a moment. All the while, Wendy rested her forehead on the stirring wheel and mumbled what seemed a prayer. Joohyun thought it was unnecessary, this car was a godless place.

“I see through you, too. All this, oh Wendy teach me how to play this song or come listen to this song with me with half pair of my earphone impossibly close to each other like we were in a romantic movie. Kim Yerim, you’re as transparent as you can get.” She stuck her nose up in the air. Joohyun watched, delightedly, as for the first time in her life, Yeri couldn’t utter a word in shock.

Now, this was getting much more competitive as Joohyun had ever imagined.

Why was everyone in their vicinity besotted with Wendy?

Wendy stopped murmuring and turned to her girlfriend with a tired face. “Sooyoung, for the hundredth time, we can’t do that because both of us are AirPods owners.”

“And?”

“It’s killing the vibe.”

Joohyun took in a deep breath. This was what she deserved for lusting over her best friend’s girlfriend. Even though she was her soulmate. All these overthinking was making her head hurt. She massaged her temple. It was tempting to walk her way back home because then a) she would be alone and b) she could be alone with her thoughts of Wendy. Which were, by the way, getting out of hand.

“I know I shouldn’t have trusted you,” Sooyoung said, looking at her friends accusingly.

“Yes, Sooyoung, everyone wants to take away Wendy from you,” Joohyun said in a dead voice. “Now, can we get going and go to the camping site you were talking about?”

Sooyoung gasped dramatically. With wide eyes and mouth gaping, she turned to Wendy.
“See? I’m not seeing things!”

“She was joking.” Wendy patted her thigh and put the car in gears.

“But if she was not—who would you choose?” Sooyoung pressed, voice growing softer to the end of the sentence. Joohyun thought that it wasn’t mean to be heard by them.

“I would choose you over everyone.” Wendy’s smile told that she was sincere. She sensed that Sooyoung was still insecure of her unknown soulmate and she made sure to get it through her thick head—she loved her more than anyone else.

In her head, Joohyun was grateful for that. For giving Sooyoung solid and rich ground to plant her love into. For giving her the love she needed and deserved. It was not easy, putting up with Sooyoung, who was hot-headed and stubborn and so, so lonely—but she had the patience and the sincerity to do so.

In her heart, well, it was another story.

“What the fresh hell is this?” Yeri asked as they’d stepped into the camping site. Joohyun was afraid to turn around and see the camp but she heard the low thud of the bags falling from Yeri’s shoulder and she quickly turned.

It was—old. Joohyun guessed not many people had stayed here for a long time. The few wooden houses that were situated sporadically around the place of the campfire were blackened what seemed like fire damage. It was questionably liveable.

“It’s not that bad,” Wendy said nervous smile on her lips. “I used to come here with my sister when we came back to South Korea in the summers.”
“Isn’t it trespassing if we stay here without paying for it? Without anyone knowing of it?” Yeri pressed, legs rooted where she stood, under the gates. “Oh my God, this is like the start of a bad horror movie.”

Her eyes widened with realization. She pointed her fingers at Sooyoung and Wendy, “You two, the couple will die first trying to save each other. Then it’d be me because I can’t function over such distress of having a serial killer come for me. And Joohyun would stay alive—the lucky bastard. She has the brain to survive.”

“What do you mean she has the brain? She has like 2 brain cells.” Sooyoung’s voice rises in disbelief. “Clearly I am the one with the brain. Look, I have the brain and the muscle mass to outlive you all.”

Wendy snorted. Sooyoung sent her an apologetic smile. “Sorry babe, that’s the truth.”

“I am going to be the mass murderer if you two don’t stop right now,” Joohyun said and pinched the bridge of her nose. The headache she was having was the permanent addition for having two idiots as a best friend.

Yeri considered her for a second and then turned back to Sooyoung, “If this were the case—Joohyun being the murderer—then I think it’d be Wendy who would stay alive.”

“I second that,” Sooyoung nodded vehemently.

“I’m afraid to ask but—why?” Wendy asked.

The shit-eating grins that were spreading on their faces made Joohyun leap toward them to slam choke the living daylight out of them but they were quicker. “Because she clearly has a crush on you.”

Joohyun hoped the ground would open under her so she wouldn’t have to face Wendy again in her life. It’d be convenient, really. She was already used to deal with the devil (on the top of that, with two devils) so spending time in Hell would not be half that bad as people imagine. Also, she certainly belonged there because she was having a crush on her best friend’s girlfriend.

If she thought about it again, she might be living in Hell already.
“Cut it guys, you’re making her embarrassed,” Wendy, the living angel she was, cut into the snickering of the duo. She caught Joohyun’s eyes and there was a reassuring smile on her lips. “I think, she’s just glad she finally has a normal friend.”

“Friend?” The word escaped without Joohyun realizing. It was soft enough so Sooyoung and Yeri didn’t hear it over their loud cackle but strong enough for Wendy to hear it. She turned to her with confusion swarming in her eyes.

“Oh, are we not friends?” Her light tone was obviously pretension, as her face reflected surprise and slight hurt when Joohyun dared to look at her. She was trying—Joohyun realized—to grow closer and to leave the awkwardness behind them. And Joohyun was just pulling them back. She tried to push down all those frightening thoughts of her being her soulmate and that all the while she was Sooyoung’s girlfriend—she tried to forget all these labels that came to define Wendy… and just—her as she was.

“Yes, we are,” she said finally and felt that it was true.

A smile split on Wendy’s lips, so genuine that it took her breath away. “I’m glad.”

“So,” Yeri cut in with a loud voice. “We’ve finished the discussion and the only thing we could agree on—Wendy would be the first to die, surely.”

“I feel very attacked right now.” Wendy sighed.

“No, you don’t understand how soft you are. Like, you’d listen to the murderer’s sob story then you’d bake them something sweet and after that, you’d gladly scarify yourself for us.” Sooyoung passionately explained. “Joohyun, thoughts?”

“I agree.”

Wendy gasped, “I trusted you!”

“You think we’re the evil ones here,” her girlfriend pointed her thumb at herself and then at Yeri. “But you’ve never played a somewhat competitive game with her. Also, on this note, never play
Mario Kart with her if you want to live.”

Wendy turned a questioning gaze towards her, so Joohyun plastered a smile on her face and clapped.

“Let’s get back to reality! So we’re going to stay here, no murderer is going to appear, no police is going to come to this nowhere to find us trespassing. I say let’s light the campfire!”

They’d managed to find twigs to light for a sorry excuse for a campfire and found that the houses were not usable enough to sleep in them. They’d put up the tents—Joohyun tried to settle her one not too close and not too far from Wendy to stay neutral—and bickered more on which one of them would die in a murder spree.

Weird enough, during they burned s’mores on the fire, Joohyun thought the last time they did this together was when Seulgi was still with them. And even weirder, how thing would’ve turned out if she was still there. Then maybe, Sooyoung instead of asking for Wendy’s number, she’d have talked about the cute girl she’d seen at the bar to Seulgi, who—knowing Joohyun’s type perfectly—would convince her to make them meet. And after meeting for the first time, they would hit it off immediately—and the rest would be history.

“Hey, do you remember when Yeri scared Seulgi so bad that she started laughing and crying at the same time?” Sooyoung asked, eyes dreamy over the fire. She had a smile on her lips but all in all, she looked sad.

“She never got to know it was me and not a ghost,” Yeri chuckled.

“She kept on insisting that there were ghosts in the cabin. We had to sleep outside,” Joohyun added. She complained so much through the night, that they had to sleep on the dirty ground instead of in the perfectly okay and ghost-free house—but then, they laughed so much. They had to hold each other’s hands so Seulgi wouldn’t get scared and they slept like that.

What would she do to bring it back?
This was it—their shared scar. It was the worse for Sooyoung per se. But all of them lost someone so dear to their heart, someone who brought sunshine in their lives when things seemed lost, who helped them find their passion and their love. Seulgi was the one who cemented their friendship. She was the one who scarred them for life.

She was the friend of a lifetime.

“I wish I could’ve met her,” Wendy said, her voice as always genuine. Her palm rested on Sooyoung’s, caressing it lightly.

“Sorry for bringing it up,” Sooyoung smiled wide but tears glittered in her eyes. She slipped her hand out of Wendy’s hold and stood up. Joohyun saw as she quickly dabbed at her eyes but no one said anything. She turned back, still smiling. “Now if you’d excuse me, I’m really tired. I had to put up with y’all all day. It’s demanding.”

They watched her go. For a short time, she thought Wendy would go after her. But she stayed, munching on an s’mores and watching the fire. She looked somewhat sad—but even Joohyun had an inkling that she was probably sad on Sooyoung’s behalf.

Yeri cleared her throat, “I’m gonna sleep too.”

Sooyoung loved Seulgi like her lover. Joohyun loved Seulgi like a friend. Yeri loved Seulgi like a sister. Yeri was carefree and she loved people easily. She connects with people quickly and trusts easily—and this was her downfall. She had been hurt and disappointed so many times with so many people, yet she stayed trustful toward the world.

“Are you okay?” Joohyun asked as she settled down next to Wendy. She had half a mind to go after Sooyoung and Yeri—but she knew that it was time that they needed right now. They’d been through this a lot—one of them bringing up Seulgi, accidentally because she was part of their group for some time and most of their memories were connected with her—and they would all retreat to their own rooms to fight with their own demons.

“Yes.” Wendy nodded. “Seulgi was a big part of your lives. She left a big impression. I don’t blame her bringing it up.”

“Seulgi—she was a good kid. She didn’t deserve to go.”
“They never do.”

The only noise for a while was the wind catching the branches and rustling the leaves and the cracking of the firewood. It was a warm night but the fire was nice against their skin.

Joohyun thought how easy it was to just sit beside Wendy. Not talking, not doing anything. It was so rare for her—for not feeling the pressing stress to fill the silence between them, to just accept it and enjoy it.

“The stars are so bright tonight,” Wendy laid down on the bare ground. Usually, Joohyun wouldn’t do that but now it felt almost natural to follow her.

“I wish I could see a shooting star,” Joohyun said, eyes searching the vast sky. The sky was so different from the city. Stars clear and brightly shining, the moon sitting there, full and royal on the black sky.

“What would you wish for?” Wendy looked at her and smiled brightly. Joohyun thought the stars might start being jealous of how brightly she shone.

For a moment, she thought she’d ask for having another soulmate. But it felt wrong. Wendy was perfect, they certainly fitted together well. They were just the victims of the circumstances and Joohyun had no one to blame but herself for messing things up.

She wouldn’t change Wendy for anything.

So she would just wish for Sooyoung to understand and forgive her.

“I’m not telling you. It wouldn’t come true,” Joohyun teased. The other chuckled.

“I’d wish more time with you all.” Her voice was full of earnestness as she continued looking for the shooting star.

Joohyun turned to look at Wendy with furrowed eyebrows. “What do you mean?”
“I’m leaving. I’m eliminating myself.”

Joohyun shot up into sitting position.

“I know you are my soulmate,” Wendy said, eyes never turning back from the stars. They stare ahead calmly like she didn’t just drop a bomb right here.

There was no sense in trying to deny to obvious.

“How did you get to know?” Joohyun was prepared for every answer possible. She might have seen the mark before. Or worse, Sooyoung might have seen the mark when she was stretching. They might all have just pretended to have a fun time together this night and they all hate her now.

Wendy sighed and sat up, too. Her eyes searched Joohyun’s eyes. They were tired, oh so tired. “I feel the pull towards you.”

“What?”

“You know, I’ve never believed this before. I thought people liked to imagine, liked to add to the feeling of having a soulmate, just to make it more magical than it is. I’ve never imagined in my life that this all would be true,” she said and her voice was tired. “But then I met you and it was like—I don’t know, it’ll sound cheesy and stupid—but it was like I was the moon and you were the earth. I was gravitating towards you. And it’s growing stronger the more I want to detach myself.”

Joohyun fidgeted with the hem of her sleeve. “It’s not stupid. I feel the same.”

“I was afraid of that.” She ran a hand through her short locks, messing up her bangs. “That’s why I chose to leave.”

“What—?”

“I’m going back to Canada in a few months. I haven’t told Sooyoung yet—I didn’t want to talk to
her about it without telling you first. I’m going to work with my sister.” The way she talked showed that she’d gone through these words a lot in her head. She stated everything, as a matter of fact, dislocating feelings from her sentences.

“But why?” Joohyun felt like she was not able to articulate more words. She wanted to ask: What about Sooyoung? What’s going to happen with you two? Are you going to try long-distance relationship or will you break up with her? And also she wanted to say, Please don’t go.

“I think it’s obvious, Joohyun,” she rested her chin on her palm. “I’m starting to fall in love with you. Don’t get me wrong, I tried not to. I still love Sooyoung. I spent as much time with Sooyoung as I could, taking her on dates, making myself focusing on her. But all the while, I found myself thinking back at you. And it’s weird because I don’t really know you.

“I don’t know what you like to eat, what you like to watch on Netflix, what’s your favourite colour or favourite animal. I don’t think we exchanged conversations too much—but as I watched you afar I started to fall for your antics. The way you treat people around you so warmly while the world perceives you so cold. Or how you care about everyone, silently taking in the problems and solving them for them. Or how you offer a shoulder to anyone who needs it. The list is endless and I don’t want to waste your time.”

Joohyun felt her heartbreaking. She had her fair share of breakups, some of them hurt, some of them not so much. But this thing between them—it was killed so early before it could grow into something that would hurt more people.

She listened. She didn’t say anything. There was nothing for her to add.

*Please don’t go.*

Wendy took Joohyun’s hand into hers as she did for Sooyoung. “What I want to say is that I am very lucky to have you as my soulmate. I just can’t do this to Sooyoung. So I’m leaving.”

“So you’re leaving,” Joohyun echoed.

“Yes. It’s for the better.”

Joohyun wanted to argue. She wanted to tell her that Sooyoung needed her. That she should be the
one leaving because it was her fault. That she would stay away from them, just don’t leave Soo-young in pieces. That she needed her to be here.

But she felt tired. She was too tired to argue, to fight, and to win. It was easier to give up something she’d never experienced before.

“And I won’t tell her about you. I don’t want to risk to ruin a friendship like yours. But of course, it is your own decision to tell her if you want,” Wendy added but Joohyun wasn’t listening anymore. She was too preoccupied to bury a love that had no chance to begin. She just wanted to sleep, hoping it would be just a bad dream in the morning.

Out of all options, this was the one that Joohyun dreaded the most. Never seeing Wendy again. She could’ve put up with being friends. At least then, she could see her, could talk to her, and could touch her for some extent. But even now, she felt kind of void and empty—and Wendy was beside her.

Wendy slowly stood up. Despite the warm night, Joohyun shivered. It was suddenly so cold around them, the fire not warming them up anymore.

“I hope you won’t hate me for my decision,” Wendy leant down to breath a kiss on the other’s cheek. “Goodnight, Joohyun.”

She could still call her back and beg. She could still tell her everything—how she could stay behind and continue lying to Soo-young just please, please stay here.

But she didn’t do that.

“Goodnight.”
'cause i'm a beautiful wreck

Looming dread filled the morning. They were silent when they packed their things, silent when they put out the remaining small embers of the campfire and silent when they began their journey home. Sooyoung insisted that she wanted to sit beside Yeri through the way home so she could catch some sleep. That made Joohyun sit beside the designated driver—and awkwardness reached a new peak.

She wondered what Wendy was thinking about.

The tension that built up between all of them was easy to detect and uncomfortable. Joohyun glanced back to the backseats often, to see whether Sooyoung was watching them or she was truly sleeping. Joohyun was worried she might have overheard them talking—and then all the careful planning she had done for the happiness of the two of them would mean nothing.

Not like they meant anything now that Wendy was planning to leave.

But she couldn’t stop her, right? She didn’t possess any claim over the woman, she could say ‘don’t go’ but would it have any effect? Probably not. Certainly not.

And what would happen if Wendy stayed? Joohyun would have to keep up with her act for a long time, risking of her best friends to hate her when the truth gets out. Or maybe Sooyoung and Wendy would break up—they were in love now, that was very clear but it was also clear that they were fundamentally different. And however familiar was Wendy to Seulgi, she’ll never be her. She will never replace Seulgi in Sooyoung’s heart.

And Wendy deserved that, Joohyun thought selfishly, to be someone’s first.

But the thing that was between them, unnamed and heavily hanging in the air between them was doomed from the start. This was just another sick joke from the universe and exactly what she was afraid of in her whole life. The universe could give you a soulmate—but it can take it as easily. And the universe already did that.
She watched Wendy as she was concentrating on the road, fingertips white as she held into the stirring wheel. Joohyun wanted to pry them off and soothe them with butterfly kisses on every knuckle. She thought bitterly, it was not the time to think of these things. It was the time to cry, scream and show her anger; that she was part of this clownery that was her fate and life—that why her soulmate was in love with another woman? And out of everyone, her own best friend? This was ridiculous and every sense in her was yelling that it must be only a bad dream and nothing else—life cannot pull schemes like this.

And yet, she was still there: heart wishing she could only do as much as to hold her soulmate’s hands, mind telling this would only hurt so much more if she did.

So she clenched her hands in a tight fist, nails digging small crescents into the soft skin of her palms to endure just a bit more. She took her time to count back from ten, eyes fluttering from Wendy to the road.

But Wendy was so devastatingly beautiful, she had a hard time taking her eyes off her. From her big, brown eyes that comically popped out whenever someone said something remotely surprising; from her fluffy cheeks that Joohyun wanted to pepper with kisses, that puffed up and made her even softer when she smiled; her lopsided smile that was permanent on her lips and somehow always meant something else; from her short hair that framed her face softly, highlighting her features so well, she wanted to run her fingers through the soft tips.

All in all, she just wanted to worship Wendy with everything she had.

But life worked in other ways.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Wendy asked, voice low so she could not disturb the others sleeping on the backseats. Her voice broke Joohyun’s thoughts and she realized she was no longer pretending that she wasn’t staring at Wendy—she was just plainly marvelling her like she was a masterpiece in the museum.

“Like what?” She was afraid of the answer but she braced herself.

“Like I broke your heart.”

The air felt heavy around Joohyun. It was one thing, getting your heart broken by your soulmate with nothing between you. It was another when the said soulmate know she’d broken your heart.
When the silence stretched between them a heartbeat longer than it was still in the safe zone, Wendy’s fingertips turned even paler around the steering wheel and Joohyun had a dismissive thought that she was about the break the wheels off.

“It was a joke, you know. It’s polite to laugh.” There was an awkward smile on Wendy’s lips like she was aware she fucked up. Like it was never meant to be a joke but the truth was too harsh so that she changed her mind.

Am I a joke to you, she wanted to ask. Rather, she decided, she stayed silent for a moment, not wanting to get into this conversation. She worried her lip between her teeth, searching for something to say.

“It was a really bad one,” she said, facing to the side window so she didn’t have to look at the other. She concentrated on the scenery, trying to wish her thoughts away. She concentrated on the green freshness of the woods, on the slight greyish tingle of the sky, on how she was not allowed to love the person who was made for her.

It is time to let go, huh? she thought before it even started.

She felt like a hypocrite. All these times, she was hiding her soul mark before anyone could see so she didn’t have to confront anyone. So she didn’t have to break Sooyoung’s heart. So she could keep her friends and Wendy close. She was withering away in the hiding, as her love for Wendy was growing and strengthening—but she went too far to even consider, to tell the truth. And now, Wendy offered her a solution. What she thought to be the best solution. It was a clean-cut, easy and quick. Leaving the country, meant that they might never meet again. Sooyoung would still get her heartbroken. As would Joohyun, too.

There was just no good solution to this mess. It would end, every single time, with someone’s heartbreak.

She was aware. She was aware that this was a logical decision, something Wendy had spent probably hours to decide and accept—but Joohyun, just, for now, wanted to be angry. She didn’t want to understand, didn’t want to accept this.

She just… She just wanted Wendy.
Suddenly, there was a hand on her own, thumb caressing her knuckles. She snapped her head to look at Wendy, who was still concentrating on the road but instead having her signature little smile on her lips, instead there is a frown itching on her face. While she secretly enjoyed the warm touch, she pulled away from Wendy’s touch. That made the lines on Wendy’s face deepen.

“Hey, look. I’m sorry,” Wendy said, voice still barely above a whisper. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. You know how I feel—I would never want to deliberately hurt you.”

The way she talked made Joohyun nauseous. How freely she admitted that she was starting to fall in love with Joohyun, how she kept flaunting it even now. Wendy was never afraid to show her love—Sooyoung was the prime example.

But Joohyun was always afraid to do it. It made her feel too vulnerable.

“Can we not talk about it right now?” she asked, her voice strainer to even her ears than she intended.

Wendy straightened up in the seat, making her whole appearance artificially poised. “Of course,” she said, eyes trained on the road, knuckles white around the stirring wheel. The little quirk of her lips, the one Joohyun liked so much on her, were gone.

Joohyun took in the sight and felt her heart withering away with a love that needed to be tended, needed to be reciprocated, needed to be put out for everyone to see but was ignored instead and she sighed. Her eyes stayed a moment too long on the soul mark, that little flower, on Wendy’s skin, so demandingly dark against the pale skin. She wondered if their marks were dandelions because their love was never meant to be long-lived. To be so delicate and fragile that even a slight wind could destroy it.

But jokes on the universe, their love had no chance to bloom. It was the work of the destruction herself, Bae Joohyun.

There was a moment when Joohyun just wanted to reach out. Not to hold back Wendy, not to tell her to stay—just to tell her everything will be okay. She wanted to hold her hand as Wendy did just a moment ago, thumb caressing the soft skin just to communicate through the touch everything she was too cowardly to say aloud. Before she realized, her hand was half-way to Wendy’s—but she stopped. It wasn’t right. She was not in the position to hold her.
She looked up at the rear-view mirror and her eyes met with Sooyoung’s.

For a moment, Joohyun’s heart stopped beating.

How much could she overhear? Did she know? Was she angry? Was she sad? Did she want to leave Joohyun for being a bad friend that she knew she was? Did she think she was a liar? The gears in her mind were working as fast as they could, overthinking and overanalysing every aspect of the last few minutes and coming up with the conclusion that Sooyoung knew. She knew and Joohyun was finally, irrevocably damned.

Her face was composed in a careful mask of contentment. She had no malice in her eyes, neither did she seem sad. When she noticed that Joohyun was looking at her, she offered a sweet smile—which might have fooled someone else but she knew her better than that. It was melancholic and bittersweet and while Joohyun didn’t know the extent Sooyoung had overheard them, she wanted to apologize and explain and beg—anything just for her to stay close to Joohyun.

Losing Wendy was hard. But losing Sooyoung with her would be deadly.

“You two are boring. You’re not even talking,” she said loudly, breaking the deep silence of the car. Yeri started to stir at her booming voice but Sooyoung didn’t seem to care at all. She pushed herself between Wendy and Joohyun to start the radio, “But luckily for you, I’m here to spice things up.”

Her cheerful voice sounded a bit strained for Joohyun, yet there was still a relieved smile that spread over her lips. She seemed okay, not at her very best but—okay. If she was angry with Joohyun, then she would’ve already called her out on her bullshit. Instead, she was there to cheer them up, hands threw around them, yelling the lyrics of some bubble gum pop coming from the radio, making them click back to their old dynamics so easily, it was almost seamless. Almost.

“Yeah, luckily you’re here,” Joohyun said softly, mostly for herself but Sooyoung caught it. She turned to Joohyun with wide eyes and words frozen in her throat, and Joohyun really wasn’t about to repeat herself, it was corny enough for once, when the arm around her tightened into a hug, pushing their faces together into an uncomfortable mass.

Joohyun thought for a moment, soulmates and marks forgotten, that she was indeed lucky.

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After getting back from the trip, everything seemed easier. It was easier to pretend she had nothing to hide, easier to just lie to Sooyoung continuously while agreeing to go on dates with girls organized by Yeri. She thought that she was being miserable because she was lonely. She was not entirely wrong. Even with the bumpy conversation during the trip, she could risk saying but it seemed like she and Wendy also got along better.

Not like Joohyun had a choice, the girl was basically living with them now. Sooyoung decided that she would die if she didn’t have Wendy in a five-meter radius, therefore she was stuck in their already shared apartment.

And surprisingly, Joohyun didn’t mind.

She didn’t mind waking up early in the morning, finding Wendy in their kitchen with a cup of green tea in her hand, handing another mug for Joohyun. She didn’t mind finding her on the couch, swapping between trashy dramas in the TV while Joohyun typed away on her laptop. She didn’t mind listening to her singing in the shower or while she was doing the laundry or while she was cooking—she never grew tired of her voice. Falling into this dynamic was easy. Way too easy. Wendy suddenly felt like a constant in her life that she needed—but couldn’t have, couldn’t afford.

Them, almost living together also had its downsides.

Joohyun caught the small, nervous glances from Wendy whenever Sooyoung kissed her, looking for any sign that it made her uncomfortable or sad. Wendy cared too much for her and Joohyun was afraid that Sooyoung noticed that—that Wendy froze for a second before she melted into the kiss or that her eyes always fluttered to Joohyun.

But Joohyun didn’t mind. Of course, the jealous churn in her stomach was still ever-present – but she didn’t mind. It was already so much more than she had ever let herself imagine with Wendy. This domesticity—this was what she was longing for. She liked the warmth that Wendy radiated even when she sat an arm's length away to her on the couch. She liked how Wendy always cut her some fruits when she was too into writing that she forgot to eat. She liked how whenever Wendy came back from the bar after a long night singing her soul out, and she found Joohyun awake, staring at the laptop screen, she always offered a kind smile and asked ‘Want to talk about it?’.

It was too easy to fall into this ocean of emotions that swirled inside of her.

But Joohyun was afraid she was drowning.
Joohyun was typing on her laptop while Wendy was looking through the whole repertoire of Netflix. Seemingly nothing satisfied her needs, skipping from category to category, from animation movies to thrillers. She didn’t seem to notice Joohyun watching her. Wendy worried her lips between her teeth, eyes not perceiving what was going on on the screen. Joohyun’s gaze slid lower, where Wendy’s hand grasped the remote tightly in her fist and there was a peek of the dandelion under of her hoodie.

“You can watch Glee for the thousandth time, I won’t judge you,” Joohyun said finally. Wendy winced. “If that’s your coping mechanism, you do you.”

“I don’t watch Glee that much,” Wendy mumbled and rolled her eyes. She leaned back on the fluffy pillows Yeri got them on a sale. Joohyun heart clenched on how soft she looked, her face surrounded by the white feathery pillows, dark eyelashes shocking against the light beige. She turned back to her laptop before she did something she would regret later.

“You’re using my account, I know what you watch,” she said unimpressed.

“You’re just picking on me because I said Glee was better than High School Musical,” Wendy grunted out and wiggled closer.

Joohyun snorted. “Firstly, you are wrong. I pick on you because you’re easy to hype up. Secondly, you’re also wrong. Name a bop that hits you stronger than ‘Fabolous’."

“Now, I won’t start defending Glee because the both of us know I’m the one who’s right here, you just like the hype HSM got and——” Wendy stopped when she saw Joohyun’s smile. She sighed, scooting even closer to Joohyun, leaning her head on her shoulder. “I walked into your trap, didn’t I?”

“You did and I didn’t even have to try hard,” Joohyun snorted. The familiar weight on her shoulder was nice – Wendy, as turned out, was rather a clingy person. Once they got through the awkward phase when they sat as far of each other as was possible, Wendy no longer held any respect for anyone’s private sphere. But it was good because Joohyun was mutually clingy and Wendy was warm and soft, pushed against her arm. She smelled like the detergent they use in the apartment but mixed with something that is unquestionably Wendy.
“You – and the other two, too – are just my bullies and I willingly came here to live with you. What does that make me?”

“A fool.”

“That was a rhetoric question,” Wendy whined.

Joohyun cackled and typed in a few words. Sometimes she got too caught up by just the presence of Wendy beside her that she forgot to do her actual work – but she didn’t care. She could just stay up and write the rest of the article when Wendy went out to sing. Wendy watched silently as her fingers flew on the keyboard, then furrowed her eyebrows when she deleted the sentence.

“That thought was nice,” she said. “But I still can’t believe you’re wasting your talent on writing articles like ‘How to lose weight in 10 easy steps’.”

“Didn’t follow the logic. And I do what I have to do to earn money,” Joohyun answered. She wiggled the shoulder Wendy was laying on. “And why I’m the one who babysits you? Where’s your caretaker?”

“Don’t call her like that, that’s just gross,” Wendy sent her a dirty look. “And I’m not a baby. But Sooyoung is doing a study group – I think she likes doing that because then she has a lot of people paying attention to her while she explains things. And she can play as a leader. As for Yeri, isn’t she on a date?”

“Ah, no she calls them dates but it’s just her giving a hard time for her friends. They go to cute cafés, though,” Joohyun said and wondered just how did Yeri find a) that many cute cafés and b) that many friends. She couldn’t keep track just how many friends she had.

Wendy hummed and she buried her face into Joohyun’s hoodie.

Joohyun still felt awkward. She still felt afraid that Sooyoung or Yeri could step suddenly into the apartment and find them together like that – and however her mind tried to reason that they were doing nothing wrong, both of them clung to the other two as well – her paranoia of getting busted was all-time high. Being close to Wendy still felt like playing with fire.
Wendy didn’t seem to share the sentiment. She took Joohyun’s hand into hers, slowly pushed up the sleeve of her hoodie to reveal their shared soulmark. The careful touch of her fingertips made goosebumps run up on her spine. It was too intimate – while they were far from the awkward mess they had been – this was off-limit. Joohyun had half a mind pulling her arms away but looking at Wendy changed her mind. She looked troubled and seemingly she tried to find solace in touching Joohyun.

“I was thinking,” she began but hesitated a bit.

“How about this?” Joohyun prompted.


Please don’t say anything, Joohyun thought. She wanted to backpedal. Wanted to get up and leave because it was dangerous. She heard enough during the road trip. She didn’t need Wendy to break her heart twice in a row.

“There is no us,” Joohyun said, hoping her voice is final enough for Wendy to stop. She pulled back her hand, unrolling the sleeve of her hoodie to hide the mark.

“I know.”

“Then?”

There was a long moment of hesitation on Wendy’s side. Joohyun couldn’t see her face as she was still hidden away, leaning on her shoulder. But Wendy sat up quickly, eyes determined and burning up with a fire she’d never seen before on her. Joohyun was about to reach out to check her temperature, looking for any sign of fever when Wendy started talking.

“Can I have a date with you? So I can remember when I leave,” Wendy asked, her nervousness plain on her face. “I understand if you don’t want to, of course.”

Joohyun almost choked on her own spit. This must have been a hallucination. There was no way Wendy said those words. A date – while she was still together with Sooyoung and Joohyun still fought with her pangs of conscience whenever she was a step too close to Wendy. That was way out
of question. Not that she didn’t want to – she would die for a date. She would die for holding hands in a museum, pointing out ridiculous artworks, listening to Wendy talk about some with real appreciation and just be with her without fear. But this was the real world and here, a date sounded terrifying at best.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Joohyun choked out.

“We don’t have to call it a date. It can be a simple hanging out – just the two of us.” Wendy’s face was still hidden in Joohyun’s shoulder, so her words came out muffled. Joohyun reached with her other arm and slowly caressed Wendy’s short locks.

“I still don’t think it’s a good idea,” Joohyun repeated. Before Wendy could try to talk her into it, she added. “Aren’t you afraid?”

“Of what?”

“I don’t know. I’m afraid of a lot of things,” Joohyun said as lightly as she could. She leaned her head on the top of Wendy’s and closed her eyes. “For once, I’m afraid Sooyoung would somehow discover our secret. And then I’m afraid I would lose her. I’m also afraid of getting to know you because if we, universally proven, belong together – then getting to know you when you leave would hypothetically mean more pain. This – that is going on right now – it’s comfortable and simple. I know a few things about you, shallow things but we never really had a long, deep talk. I don’t even know what your favorite color is.”

After a long moment, Wendy says, “It’s blue. My favorite color is blue.”

“Suits you.”

“I’m also afraid of things, Joohyun. But I want to brave once.” Her voice was merely a whisper. “I want to have a date with you.”

_You’re a coward, Wendy Shon_, Joohyun wanted to say.

But she was a coward, too.
“Okay.”

Wendy sat up suddenly with a really loud “Really?”, knocking the top of her head into Joohyun’s chin, causing for the both of them to groan from the pain. But there is a wide smile stretched on Wendy’s lips when she looked over Joohyun and she thought it might have worth it.

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“Where are you going?” Sooyoung eyed them as they were putting on their shoes. She was still dishevelled from sleep, hair looking more like a nest than anything proper and she had bags under her eyes. Joohyun noted in her mind to ask Wendy whether or not Sooyoung was sleeping through the nights or if she heard weird noises coming from the bathroom.

“We’re hanging out,” Joohyun said. She wanted to be honest with Sooyoung even if it was still a half-lie. They would hang out but with the intentions of a date. But Joohyun and Wendy agreed on everything – they would not hold hands, nor kiss each other. Neither of them could stomach the idea of cheating on Sooyoung, not even for an innocent peck on the lips. It was a friendly date. It was to just have a taste of something they would never get.

“Aw,” Sooyoung cooed and looked at them like a proud mother. “It’s nice seeing you two get so chummy when a few weeks ago you couldn’t even stay in the same room. Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

“People change,” Wendy said.

The kind smile on Sooyoung’s lips died quickly. She leaned on the doorframe, watching Wendy intently before she said, “Some people don’t.”

“Sooyoung, I –” Wendy began but the other put her hand up.

“Stop it. We’ll get back to it later. Now, my sweethearts, have fun, don’t fight and be careful. Get back before it gets late.” Sooyoung yawned. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll go back to my beauty sleep.”

She stretched her arms out, looking more like a giant than she really was in this house full of minions.
“Oh, and please if you don’t get back late, bring me some milk tea. I’ve been craving for it since forever,” she added as an afterthought, waving them and disappeared to her room.

Joohyun waited until she heard Sooyoung’s bedroom’s door close before she whipped her head to look at Wendy, who was tying her shoes and she asked, “Did you two fight?”

Wendy sighed and straightened up.

“I just told her I’ll go back to Canada. She tried to talk me down of it but it’s kind of already settled.” The words fell from her mouth heavily, like she was regretting her decision. Joohyun, deep down, hoped she was – it was an option, yes, but after spending several sleepless nights thinking about it, it wasn’t their only one option. Without really thinking it through, Wendy acted as she pleased and she’d chose to run away.

Joohyun nodded and hummed, reluctant to share her thoughts on the matter. Wendy watched her for a moment and said, “Joohyun, we’ve talked about this—”

“I haven’t said anything.” Joohyun cut her quickly. She grabbed her handbag and keys before she forced a smile on her lips. “Can we get going now?”

Wendy considered her for a moment but she also decided to drop the topic. The elephant in the room was obvious but neither of them wanted to ruin this day. At least, Joohyun wasn’t about to let the thought of Wendy leaving spoil her friendly date with the other. She wanted to have fun with her, take her on the date she deserved and that Joohyun had been fantasizing about.

“So—” Wendy began as she walked beside Joohyun. “Will you tell me where are we going?”

“Nope!” Joohyun said, entirely self-satisfied. Despite the fact that Wendy asked her out, she gave the right to organize and set the details and then had the audacity to nag her for it. Joohyun wanted it to be a surprise, something that she couldn’t get neither Sooyoung or Yeri to join her and she hoped that Wendy wouldn’t say straight up no for the idea.

“I feel like I’m in danger,” she grumbled but the corner of her lips curved upward. She gave an approving look to Joohyun. “It’s good to see you in other things than hoodies. Not like you don’t look extra soft in them but hey, you look really good.”
Joohyun knew she looked good. She spent over 3 hours to choose an outfit that would go with their friendly date. Something that wouldn’t call Sooyoung’s attention on them and still something that she’d wear on a date. So she settled on an off-shoulder white dress that she immediately fell in love uring a shopping trip.

“Thanks.” Joohyun cocked an eyebrow. “You also look really good.”

Who was she joking with? Wendy always looked good. She’d seen her in dresses and hoodies and even in fuckboy outfits (she always wondered where those came from but she was also ashamed to admit that she very much liked them) but Wendy looked really, like really good in a simple shirt tucked into black slacks – and all this made her, oddly sophisticated.

“A girl must try,” Wendy chuckled but Joohyun saw that her ears turned red from the compliment. Joohyun’s heart thumped hard at the realization – she wanted to see her flustered more. She was ready to drown Wendy in compliments. “So, where are we going?”

“Not telling you,” she said stubbornly.

“At least tell me if we walk. These shoes aren’t made for long-time journies.” She pointed at her high-heels.

“Those are not that high. You just wanted to be taller than me, don’t you?” Joohyun narrowed her eyes at her. They really weren’t a feet killing height, just added a few centimetres on Wendy.

“I’m caught red-handed. But please, I beg you, I wanted to feel tall for a moment and you’re the only one I know who’s around the same height as me.”

“Okay, understandable.” Joohyun nodded, she knew the feeling. “I can tell you that yes, we are walking but not for long.”

Wendy stopped in her track. For a second, Joohyun didn’t notice her falling behind but then she turned back to her. She had a defeated look on her face.

Wendy dramatically sighed, “We’re going to the Moomin exhibition, aren’t we?”
“How did you know?” Joohyun asked, scandalized. She was doing such a good job from keeping the date location a secret and here she was, all figured out.

“You haven’t stopped talking about it since it opened. Sooyoung also talked about it, that you almost tricked her joining you. Yeri, too, complained that you want to go to the exhibition more than you want to go to her gigs. And I know that it is nearby and you’ve been just waiting for the perfectly gullible person, and that would be me, to take her,” Wendy sighed again but then looked up at her mischievously. “You’re an open book for me, darling.”

Joohyun’s heart did not stop for a second when Wendy called her darling.

“You don’t want to go?” Joohyun asked. “But I’ve already bought the tickets.”

“Okay, whatever, let’s go – just for Pete’s sake, stop pouting.” Wendy couldn’t look into her eyes. Everything was working out just fine, Joohyun thought. “You calculated this into the bigger picture, right?”

“What can I say? You’re a big softie, I work with what I have.”

Wendy grumbled inaudibly and passed beside Joohyun. As they walked their hands touched from time to time, making Joohyun’s desire to hold hands grow bigger with every touch. But this was a friendly date – and while she used to hold hands with Sooyoung, Yeri and also Seulgi – this would have felt like something entirely else. Wendy must have sensed the same thing, too because slowly she put distance between them. Joohyun, just to fortify the thought, held onto her handbag.

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“So, here we are,” Wendy said as she looked up at the huge posters advertising the exhibition. Joohyun thought that she was being overdramatic because an exhibition with cute animation characters wouldn’t hurt anyone. And the only reason Sooyoung and Yeri didn’t want to come with her because they liked to act like grownups. Nonsense, Joohyun thought. Being a grownup meant you can do almost whatever you want.

“Please show more enthusiasm,” Joohyun would have sent her a sharp look if she wasn’t so excited to go in. Moomin was her safe island when stress was overwhelming during her time as a college student. Heck, even now, in dreadful times when deadlines are close and things in real life are overwhelming, she finds peace with this animation.
“I bet we’ll be the only adults beside those sad parents with weird little kids in there.”

“Are we going to have a problem with that?” Joohyun’s voice steeped very low. Wendy chuckled at the fierce tone and grabbed Joohyun’s wrist.

“No,” Wendy laughed out freely and pulled Joohyun up on the stairs. Joohyun assumed, unintentionally but Wendy grabbed her where the soulmark laid on her skin under the material of her dress. With a mocking cheery voice, Wendy continued, “We’re going to have fun.”

“You’re just making fun of me,” Joohyun stuck out her lower lip.

“No, we’ll truly have a great time,” Wendy added, her back facing to Joohyun. “Every second is precious that I can spend with you.”

The words were stuck in Joohyun’s throat.

Wendy turned back with a sly smile and said over her shoulder, “But you can never tease me over Glee anymore.”

“Reasonable,” Joohyun agreed.

When they arrived at the ticket office, the woman behind the window looked at them with bored eyes and asked, “High schoolers?”

Joohyun clenched her jaw and was about to end someone before Wendy stepped in. She sent a glance at Joohyun that signalled to get a grip on herself and yes, that was what Joohyun gonna do. While she hated being called a high schooler – please, she looked at least 20 years old, if not older – she didn’t want to let it affect her.

“We already have tickets,” Wendy smiled and she reached her palm out for Joohyun. And Joohyun, being the idiot she is, put her own hand on Wendy’s. There was a moment of awkward silence as Wendy stared at their hands. After being shocked witless, Wendy shook off Joohyun’s hand and gritted through her teeth, “The tickets, Joohyun. The tickets.”
“Oh, yes.” She fished the tickets out of her handbag and handed them to Wendy. She gave it to the lady, who asked them to reach out their wrists for the armbands.

Unconsciously, Joohyun trusted out her right hand where the soulmark was. The lady looked at it, interest brightening up in her eyes.

“Oh, soulmates?” she asked. Both of them awkwardly nodded. It was still a territory they didn’t like to step in. This was the first time they had shared with someone that they belonged together, the first time they posed as soulmates. “You’re so lucky, to find each other so soon in your lives.”

Joohyun set her lips into a tight smile and she snaked her arm around Wendy’s waist. The other blinked at her, her body rigid in her arms but Joohyun saw the kindness and interest in the lady’s eyes – and she just wanted to brag about Wendy to the world. Even if the world now centred on the small, ticket office lady. “Yeah, we’re lucky.”

“Nowadays people are all about trying to fall in love with others outside of the soulmate link and let me tell you – it’s not the same. My poor husband, God bless his soul, has left us when we were still young. After that, even if I tried, I could never love someone as much as I loved him. But this is alright, this is natural,” she said, leaning her chin into her palm. Her eyes glistened with memories that neither of them could understand. “I just hope you’ll have the time to enjoy each other’s presence.”

“Thank you,” Joohyun choked out. Suddenly the room felt airless and she wanted to just leave and not acknowledge what was obvious already. She couldn’t run from facts for too long but having to face them hurt her way too much to independently stand against them. Her grip on Wendy’s waist tightened and when she looked at her to check on her, Joohyun deliberately avoided her gaze.

“You’re welcome. And I hope you’ll enjoy the exhibition!”

They exchanged some words more but Joohyun really wanted to get away from this sweet, old lady before she panicked and ruined her only chance for a real date with Wendy. So she tugged on Wendy’s clothes to signal that she wanted to leave and she understood immediately. They walked away with fake smiles plastered on their faces and heaved a sigh when they were away from the lady’s eyes.

“Is everything okay?” Wendy asked, stepping away from Joohyun, distancing herself from her. It didn’t hurt that much as she expected – it didn’t hurt how Wendy kept a distance from her, how she
recoiled whenever there was a sudden touch, how she looked around when their hands as much as brushed – because she was doing the same. This almost felt unethical, like they were hiding something. And they were, at last, hiding something that should be the clearest truth anyone could experience.

“Clearly not,” Joohyun pinched the bridge of her nose. “But I don’t care, right now.”

Wendy opened her mouth but before she could say something that would just make Joohyun feel worse – about their chances, their future, their friendships and relations – she cut in, “I came here to see the exhibition and cry over cute animation characters so if you don’t mind, I want to concentrate on that.”

“Then lead the way!”

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“So you’re telling me that this woman, the mastermind and artist behind Moomin, was a queer?” Wendy asked, seeing the picture of Tove Jansson and her partner. The awe in her eyes was striking, mouth hanging slightly open. She turned her gaze on Joohyun. “Suddenly I feel validated somehow.”

“See? Coming here was my best idea ever. Now, say ‘thank you Joohyun, you are the best’, ” she said, patting herself on her shoulder. Wendy snorted beside her, giving her a sceptical look. “Or you can send your gratitudes via email.”

“I’ll choose the latter,” Wendy said unimpressed. She turned back to the picture of Tove Jansson and the small summary of her life. “I would also leave the busy city behind me and move to an inhabited island with my partner and travel until I am unable to do while creating what I love.”

Joohyun hummed firstly at the idea of a small cottage with someone – she deliberately didn’t want to think of Wendy, that was too dangerous – just the two of them living there and managing their lives the way they wanted. “I don’t think that would work out for you.”

“Why?” Wendy sent her a quizzical look.
“Then you wouldn’t be able to sing for people. And that’s a loss for both sides.”

Wendy shyly rubbed her hand on the back of her neck and said, “I’m not that good to be a loss for anyone.”

Joohyun furrowed her eyebrows. She put a hand on Wendy’s shoulder and looked into her eyes, just to make sure she communicated her message properly. “You think too little of yourself. You’re not aware of how many people will miss you when you leave. You’ve made an impact on many and they’ll be sad to see you leave.”

Joohyun’s hand fell from Wendy’s shoulder when she realized what she said. How it could be reflected on her own self and she hoped that Wendy didn’t connect the dots. They’d talked about it, around the campfire and Joohyun said nothing against her leaving. Because it was not her place to give her two cents. If Wendy thought running away was the best and only option, giving up her comfortable and familiar life to leave for a new country, then she would stand on the sidelines and let her do as she pleased.

Wendy’s eyes were always so open and telling, and now they glistened with something Joohyun was too afraid to name. The locks of her bangs slightly fell onto her eyes as she turned away from Joohyun. “I think they’ll manage without me somehow.”

“Will you sing in Canada, too?”

“I’m not sure,” Wendy said, fiddling with the hem of her shirt. “But I want to.”

“Make sure you do.”

Wendy nodded. She bit her lower lip and her gaze wandered around in the room, looking unsure what she should say. Joohyun followed her gaze and she huffed a little laugh. Wendy was right. Beside them were only tired parents and energetic little children, pointing at the sculptures and playing with the interactive games. But it was nice, no one paid attention to them. Even with people in there, the date felt private like they had the whole place for themselves. Suddenly, beside her, Wendy screeched and pointed at a painting that took over a whole wall and she excitedly pulled on Joohyun’s dress like she was one of the little kids.

“Look, that’s you!”
The painting on the wall was the iconic angry-looking Moomin holding a knife. Now, Joohyun was offended.

“Excuse me?” She blinked surprisingly. She followed where Wendy was pointing once more, just to make sure she was that right. She did. “What the hell? What does that mean?”

“That means that while you’re usually cute and soft, but God save the brave person’s soul who tries to beat you in Mario Kart,” Wendy said confidently. Okay, sure Joohyun was told she could be quite scary when she was in her competitive mode but now it felt like Wendy was just looking for ways to insult her.

“I do not look like this,” Joohyun pressed on every word to maintain her stance on the question.

“Of course not. Now stand beside it and look threateningly while I take a picture.” Wendy took out her phone and snapped a few photos before she laughed out loud. She shoved the device into Joohyun’s face and while she didn’t pose or anything, the similarity was striking. “Now tell me that you don’t look like Moomin with the knife meme.”

“I do not look like it,” Joohyun repeated stubbornly.

Wendy shrugged, “Whatever you say. I have evidence of that.”

Joohyun sighed defeatedly. And an idea came to her mind and took her own phone out to take a picture of Wendy. The other looked up, alarmed at the sudden brightness of the flash Joohyun forgot to switch off.

“I want pictures of you, too.”

Wendy smiled with that half-smile that made Joohyun’s heart flip and flop and said, “Then let’s go to the forest.”

The forest part of the exhibition was just cardboard cutouts of trees and bushes but it still created the magical and calm atmosphere Joohyun loved about Moomin Valley so much. They hid behind the trees and acted out parts they had seen and taken a million pictures. Joohyun couldn’t remember when she felt so free, so calm and when she enjoyed herself so much in the presence of another person than now.
In the end, they ended up sitting at the drawing table for children, coloring out pre-printed pictures. Some of the parents sent odd glances at them but Joohyun could care less. This was their date, too and if they wanted to color some pictures they will color some pictures.

“I’ll color one for you and you’ll color one for me. Is that ok?” Joohyun asked and handed Wendy the paper. She took it with a laugh.

“You know, sometimes you’re so serious like for quite a long time I thought you’re like a capable adult. But you can also be so childish,” Wendy said as she searched for a pink pencil.

“Is that a bad thing?” Joohyun grimaced. She was aware she was childish sometimes but she didn’t give too much thought for that. But now it made her a bit self-conscious for acting like that.

“No, it’s charming.”

Joohyun looked up quickly from her coloring. Wendy was closer than she first thought, only a few centimetres away. She looked as surprised as Joohyun felt like but neither of them moved away for a safe distance. Joohyun could feel the mint on Wendy’s breathe and saw as the other’s eyes flickered from her eyes to her lips unconsciously. Alarms rang in Joohyun’s head but she wanted to lean in so bad, even if just for a peck, just a brush of their lips – to feel them against her own, to save the memory of the kiss, to cherish it when Wendy was no longer beside her. There was a small movement on Wendy’s side, her head cocking to the side and closing the distance between them and Joohyun, instinctively, closed her eyes.

A picture of Sooyoung swam into her vision and she recoiled.

“No,” she whispered against Wendy’s lips. They were too close, too dangerously close. She pulled back, giving them the awkward arm-length distance from before. “We can’t do that.”

“No, we can’t.” Wendy agreed with a sigh. She buried her face into her palms. “I was so stupid to let myself almost kiss you.”

Joohyun wanted to show empathy for Wendy, to let her know she wanted the kiss too but she couldn’t find the fitting words to do that. It felt like if she said it aloud, they would just worsen the situation. So rather, she stayed quiet and colored her drawing. Minutes passed and she found coloring oddly comforting. The presence of Wendy beside her, just in silence – even if it was still
awkward, even if it felt like they went back to stage one – also felt soothing.

“Look, we’re friends. Why we can’t be—I don’t know—platonic?” Wendy asked suddenly and her voice cut into Joohyun’s thoughts. Wendy watched her drawing. “You colored out the line.”

Joohyun put her pencil down and turned to Wendy, not minding the quality of her art right now. “You know damn well that this isn’t how it works. The moment before, that was the living evidence on that.”

“I hate that you’re right,” she said.

It wasn’t much but it was nice knowing that it felt the same for Wendy. That she wanted to stay next to Joohyun, that she tried to reason helplessly for something that would let her stay, stay with Sooyoung while she was still close to Joohyun. Joohyun thought that she could stomach that, she could continue to see Wendy being happy with Sooyoung because then at least one of them would be happy, right? But Wendy leaving meant misery for the both of them – and also for Sooyoung as well.

This all was just a big mess in which Joohyun felt trapped in.

“Here,” Wendy cut the silence once again. She pushed her drawing to Joohyun. “I hope it’s acceptable.”

On the drawing, Wendy drew bunny ears on the already printed on Moomin and colored them in with pink – Joohyun could guess that it meant to represent her. Next to Moomin’s toes stood a few dandelions. A small message was written on the paper, ‘Thank you for taking me there today. I enjoyed my time with you. – Wendy’ with curvy letters and small ornaments. Joohyun felt endeared with the drawing.

“It’s beautiful,” her voice sounded odd to even herself like she was choking back all the emotions she had been bottling up for a while. “Thank you.”

Wendy reached out her hand to hold Joohyun’s for a moment. Joohyun didn’t move away – she let herself indulge in Wendy’s presence just a moment too long. She let herself seep in her warmth and the softness of her touch, to engrave it into her memory to last her for a lifetime. It was that. It was their farewell from each other. Joohyun didn’t know how long would Wendy still stay with them, how long until she left the country. But this was their private farewell from each other, the last time
they could act like as they were. As soulmates.

Joohyun wanted to say she will miss Wendy. That even if they didn’t have a long time together, even if it was just a few weeks, she would still miss her terribly. Not just because she knew they were soulmates. But because she came to like her so much. In the beginning, she wanted to despise her, to guard her own heart but Wendy was too charming, too sweet and she fitted into Joohyun’s life so seamlessly that it was impossible to do so.

But she said neither of those things. It would just make everything harder.

In Wendy’s eyes, there were also myriads of emotions but she didn’t say anything either.

For a moment, Joohyun wondered if they were only a bit braver, this might have worked. But no. They were cowards, both of them. They rather go through their lives miserably than to confront with their loved ones or to hurt them.

“You’re welcome,” was all that Wendy said in the end.

***

That night, after they arrived home and their route led them to part and Wendy retreated to Sooyoung’s room, while Joohyun went back into her own terribly dark and empty one, Joohyun plastered the drawing on her wall. Read the small message over and over again, until the words were carved into her mind, until her eyes hurt from concentrating on the small letter in the dark for too long until she couldn’t think of anything else than Wendy’s soft eyes when she looked at her and Wendy’s different smiles and – Wendy, Wendy, Wendy.

She was still looking at the drawing when the first droplets of tears rolled down on her cheeks.

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