Violet Crow on Silver Trails

by Despacit_oof

Summary

Stephen's been on the run his whole life, but it's been a blast! As a rogue, he's gotten away with all kinds of shenanigans in the past - setting fires, making loud stunts and distractions, going on mad dashes away from guards in wild chases, stealing from peasants and lackeys under various crowns, etc. Daunting and daring, Stephen's crimes were always laced with fun and ambition.

On his latest and greatest one-man heist, all kinds of things could happen.

Especially with a mysterious, infamous punishment - whose rumors and hushed
speculations cause the hearts of even the craftiest of criminals to quiver - being known around this kingdom...

What could possibly go wrong?

Notes
See the end of the work for notes
Fall of a Young Icarus

The sun beat down over the cobbled roads as shadows drifted down from the buildings that lined the streets. Homes, inns and shops were lined close together, seemingly forming one unified mass like a great stone. Only roads and thin alleyways acted as a means of traversing the place like ravines that cut through the mass.

Above the plateau of the commonplace buildings rested a mighty hill, upon which rested the abode of kings and queens. The stone castle was decorated with gargoyles and ornate carvings in the walls. Over the main body of the castle reigned twin watchtowers that blocked out some of the sun. The long shadows phased over the town, moving much like a sundial as days passed in the quaint little society rooted in the hills.

Society ran like clockwork in this place - harvest and trading seasons came and went, people traveled to and fro, and the streets always bustled with the pattering feet of people and slamming hooves of animals alike. Coming and going performance artisans were commonplace here, so music often danced in the air and mingled with the other sounds of travel and voices in the air. Travel-weathered caravans, simpleton farmers, craft artisans, blacksmiths, seamstresses - they all pranced along the main streets as the great barred shadows were cast down from the castle on the hills. The peoples’ appearance varied as much as their pastimes. A blue-haired and white-haired duo of noblewomen toured the town streets, gazing upon the influx of riches that came with the rising tide of the trading season with eyes that always looked moonlit. Another duo performed with instruments and dances on a small public stage, their pink and red bundles of hair glistening in the sun and complimenting plant-green dresses. In a blacksmith’s in, a master taught his apprentices - his distant infernal heritage showing itself with small horns that poked out from his forehead. The town bustled with all kinds of life, attending to businesses that yielded joy and riches alike.

Where lies riches is where thieves and criminals will rush by - this remains true from arenas of war to gardens of peace like the small kingdom. Away from the light, quick feet skittered from one alleyway to another. The roguish faces that traveled these dark paths were rarely seen in the flesh - more often, the faces decorated building walls in in parchment signs that always branded a classic phrase in reddened ink - “WANTED - DEAD OR ALIVE”, followed by varying piles of wealth. One of these signs featured a so-called scoundrel’s face, over which draped a vibrant hue of violet. With a flick of a cloaked arm and a sound which was drowned out in the crowd of other noises, the sign was gone - taken by the same purple-locked man as the sign depicted.

A little known fact was this man’s name - Stephen. The same rang true for many other criminals - that’s why the wanted signs always rely on colors and faces rather than names. The demand does draw in artisans commissioned by the crown, and with the artisans follow traders and customers. Most criminals withheld all identifiers, simply moving as shadows in the night. A few, however, chose little nicknames and titles from themselves, or were given said words from other alleywalkers. Stephen was sometimes known as the Violet Crow - his telltale locks and tendency for causing noisy distractions for getaways laying the foundations for the nickname. Stephen would often chuckle at the antics of his past heists in distant towns and kingdoms to his comrades. Although capricious and never staying long, he found a kick in making friendly jokes with kindred souls. Sometimes Stephen told the story of how he lit a large chicken coup on fire and, after that city’s guards failed to catch him, he stuck around in the shadows to see some townspeople hosting a feast of the roasted birds the day afterwards. Other times, he told a tale of breaking and entering, a close-call chase through home after home as he left a painful trail of glass from the windows that he shattered in his rush. He always enjoyed showing off his tattered cloak as evidence of the tale, pointing out the places which the shards undid the weave of the fabric.
Stephen reflected on those memories as he prepared himself for his latest one-man show, softly chuckling as he walked along the castle rooftops. After hours of sneaking around the castle’s perimeter and slowly scaling the future, forest-facing watchtower using a stolen rope and chisel, he was near the heart of his most recent scheme. The treasure he coveted this time was the Coronation Stars - a regional name for the set of jewel-encrusted items that adorned new kings upon their crowning day. A scepter whose nature-inspired vines sparkled with gold leaf. A ceremonial orb topped with a holy symbol and rumored to be made of solid silver. A necklace that framed the kings collarbones with rubies, sapphires, emeralds all laced with gold. A heavy cape lined with light grey fur and held on monarch’s shoulders by a small gold chain. And, of course, the crown studded with crystal clear diamonds. The task was risky and ambitious, even in his own opinion. It was definitely Stephen’s biggest heist to date, both in terms of risk and reward. He had stolen from monarchs in the past, sure - but never something so famous and prized by the royals. Normally he’d steal bags of coins from tax-collecting carts, the gold-plated crests pinned to guardsmen’s sleeves, or small delicacies being brought in from culinary artisans. At most he’d find himself in backrooms, kitchens, or seldom-used courtyards. Never before had he tried to infiltrate somewhere like a royal hall or throne room. But, just like his residency, the Violet Crow changed what he did as he traveled through his life and his adventures - his ambitions carrying him like blackened wings to greater and greater heights.

The story of Icarus was never told - at least, never to Stephen. Fly too close to the sun and one shall face the maw of its flames. At the back of his mind, the notion of maybe, one day, the illustrious Stephen might just fail a heist and face his deeds - he always pushed that notion aside, typically repeating little narcissistic mantras in his head. The same chants were running through his mind as he tied the rope he had previously used to help him scale the castle tower to an uneven brick jutting out from the castle roof. It looked sturdy enough, holding in place when Stephen gave the rope a strong test tug. He fed the other end of the rope into an opening in the roof - an opening made to give the ceremonial hall natural lighting that complimented the ornate stained glass windows at the end of the hall. He steadied himself, sitting down with his legs poking in from the ceiling. He gripped the rope, took a deep breath, and started his adventure down.

Things went wrong very quickly from there. Not even a minute passed before the rope, dealing with Stephen’s full weight, the rope stuttered, dropping Stephen down several inches with it. Stephen’s heart dropped in sync, but he did not have much time to linger as a frightened bird in the air. Only a few moments passed, but the tension and fear made it feel like hours as violet eyes looked skywards, watching as the rope slid down ever so slightly, then whipped down. The loop Stephen had tied had quickly come undone, leaving Stephen to the mercy of gravity alone as he and the length of rope fell downwards. He crashed down onto a decorated wooden table, splinters crunching as the force of the impact tore the furniture apart. Stephen hissed as wooden spikes drilled into his sides and back. He quickly swallowed his pain and ceased his noise as realization hit him - the crash was loud and who knows who could’ve heard it. It’d been years since the last king was crowned, the hall he was in was only used on occasions - yet the prized Coronation Stars were kept here, guards were likely inbound after the alerting sound. A second later, he could’ve sworn he heard a distant, feminine yell - he had to move, he had to go now!

Stephen struggled to find a proper grip for a moment, then he used the halves of the broken table to help himself up. He had not a moment to lose. Yanking reddened splinters out of his sides, he dashed over to the cabinet which held the treasures. Normally Stephen would’ve picked the small lock on the cabinet - but, due to sand in his hourglass running near-empty, Stephen instead chose to yank the lock clean off of the thin handles of the cabinet doors. He threw open the doors and looked at the treasures inside - the scepter stood upright, the cape hung down off of a hook, and the necklace, crown and orb sat on displays on a higher shelf. That’s when Stephen heard boots clamoring. If he could hear footsteps in such a big hall, the guards must’ve been very close to the
door. With nowhere else to run, Stephen threw himself into the cabinet - scrunching himself down to fit under the shelf and reaching out to close the doors. Stephen cursed internally as the doors would not click into place- they remained cracked to an infuriating degree. He heard the handles of the massive hall’s doors being shaken. In a moment of sheer panic, Stephen threw the cape over his face and front. As the doors swung open, the swishing sound made Stephen shiver - what was he thinking, was he trying to hide from children in a game of hide and seek? The thick fur of the inner cape absorbed the heat of his breaths and the beads of sweat that had begun to form on Stephen’s forehead. He kept himself as quiet as he could, although he couldn’t help but softly hyperventilate in the fur.

Two female guards stood in astonishment as they discovered the messy scene in front of them. One of them- a golden-eyed, mystic-looking sword wielder with long locks dyed with the hue of the sky- seemed especially exasperated.

“What the hell!? How- What happened?”

The mystic’s partner - an orange-clad woman whose ivy eyes were framed by orange-brown bangs and a short bob hairdo - was much less focused on the ‘why’ of the situation at hand. This was a time for action, not for pondering!

“Questions later! C’mon, he couldn’t have gotten far!”

“Where? We came in the only entrance? Where could the perp have even gone?!”

“That doesn’t matter right now. Let’s shut up and search, dammit!”

The guards bickered and mumbled to each other and themselves, joining the sounds of shuffling boots. From their feminine voices, it seemed like only two guards had arrived - which provided a moment of relief to Stephen. That spark of joy quickly died as he heard the boots getting closer. They kept getting closer, shifting like the beads of sweat on his forehead. Closer still, boots thumping to match a pounding heartbeat. Closer—

“How the hell—” The gold-dotted asked.

The fruit-colored guard was the one to sputter this time. “HOW THE FUCK DID HE BREAK THE TABLE AND GET AWAY SO QUICKLY? SERIOUSLY—”

“Hey, hey!”

The short-haired woman was clearly exasperated at being interrupted in that moment, but her star-dusted partner was persistent in saying something to her.

“What happened here? The lock, the handles… wait, why is the door… cracked?”

The boots scuttled closer and Stephen’s heart stopped. They were practically standing face to face, with only wood and cloth standing to separate the two parties. Stephen held his breath as he heard one of the cabinet doors open.

“Odd, everything’s in place…”

Stephen’s thoughts raced in his mind in tempo with his heartbeat. “OH DEAR GOD DON’T TOUCH A THING LEAVE ME ALONE THE TREASURE’S FINE I’M NOT HERE I’M—“

His muscles froze along with his blood as he felt his cloth covering shift in the guards grasp. The guard had paused ever so slightly- had she heard something, perhaps? In a moment, Stephen’s final
shield was gone as the guard took the cape out of the closet. The three people stood in statuesque 
fashion, sharing much resemblance to a fine painting or sculpture created to describe feelings of 
surprise and fear. All faces were so expressive, so shocked, so mortified.

Whoever made the noise was irrelevant as a small noise of shock rose out of one of the men’s 
throats. That small sound broke through the invisible bonds of shock that held them in place and 
cued them all into motion. Stephen rushed forward, seeming to have bounced off the back of the 
cabinet. He immediately felt how the guards hands had wrapped around his upper arms. Yet 
momentum kept dragging the rogue forward, causing him to lose all his footing and the whole trio 
to stumble into one another. In a moment, Stephen found himself somewhat laying on the floor and 
halfway pinned by one of the guards, as the forces of the swift movements had knocked the 
emerald-eyed guard across his chest. Both guards had fallen to their knees, but they still maintained 
at least one hand’s grip on his arms.

The toppled guard had been using one of his arms to reach across the rogue and support himself 
with the floor below. The sky-haired guard let go of the rogue for just a moment to help out her 
comrade. Stephen tried to shift away from them when the weight was off of him, but their arms 
quickly made links that looped around his shoulders.

Stephen refused to go down without a fight- if he was going to be taken, it would have to be while 
he was kicking and screaming, so to speak. Just after the trio gathered their footing, Stephen tried 
to kick the brunette guard on his left side into the spiny mass that used to be called a table. Because 
Stephen could not rotate himself enough to get in a good kick to the gut, he only managed to give a 
forceful shove to the guard’s hip, which came at the cost of Stephen’s footing yet again. He threw 
his leg forward in an attempt to regain balance. This proved to be a very vulnerable position as the 
golden-eyed guard grabbed Stephen’s back leg. The other guard followed in her thinking and 
grabbed the leg that was tossed forward. The thief tried to shift away, but he had already been 
taken off his feet as the women lifted his legs into the air. Stephen’s upper body was tipped back as 
his center of gravity was shifted. Stephen shouted as he tried to bend his legs and get out of their 
 grasp- but the guards grips held steady, shifting back and forth with his legs and shoulders. With 
them taking an arm and a leg each, Stephen was effectively restrained- even when his wild 
thrashing would release one limb for a mere moment. He wasn’t about to allow the royal workers 
to get away easy, or at least without a significant hassle.

Stephen kept his behavior going, shouting and moving in resistance all the way to the king’s throne 
room. Upon hearing the commotion, the half dozen guards that stood watch in the room opened up 
the large doors to let in the captured criminal and his restrainers. A regal looking, blue-haired man 
rushed to the scene, trying to gather information. The royal adviser observed the clamoring and 
listened to a quick report of the situation from one of the guards. His lips curved upwards beneath a 
mop of deep-dyed hair that hid the rest of his face. With a faint chuckle, he darted into a side hall 
to go fetch the king. Stephen, upon seeing how he was trapped in a circle of swords, stifled most of 
his efforts to escape - he knew he was agile, but had poor odds against the swarm of guards that 
could easily increase in size with a beckoning of voice or bell’s ringing. He still wasn’t about to be 
completely cooperative, however. The two guards that had carried the rogue set down his legs and 
needed to use force to get him into a bowing position on his knees. The adviser had swiftly 
returned, his quick tapping footsteps being followed by the heavy slam of the king’s tread. Taking 
the arrival like a cue, one of the guards gripped his purple mohawk and yanked his head 
downwards to gaze at the floor, causing Stephen to yelp in a mix of surprise and minor pain. Even 
without being able to see the king, Stephen could feel his piercing glare and felt a shiver run down 
his spine, the harsh atmosphere that managed to follow the king into the room flowing through 
Stephen’s cloak into his bones. The king’s voice seemed to boom in his ears as he spoke to the 
adviser.
“Why did you summon me, brother Elias? Why’s the peasant here?”

The adviser’s voice quivered and rose as he spoke. “Th-The man’s a thief.”

“So? The vermin exist everywhere. Rats steal from rats, why should I care? This is not my realm of affairs - I spend quite a sum in paying the guards to handle these things.”

“But, Your Highness, this...he dared to steal from you.”

“Pardon?”

“Tried to take from under your crown, Sir D-Daniel..”

“What gall the bastard has. Show me his face, I want to see the fool.”

With that command, the guard that was holding Stephen’s head down yanked him back upwards, maintaining the grip in his hair. Stephen tried to put on a facade of bravery and determination, a mask dented by his paling skin as he watched the king drape himself across the throne. From his catlike perch, the king’s electric green irises bored into violet ones. All bodies in the room stayed locked for a moment until the adviser spoke once again.

“The scoundrel came for the Coronation Stars, the blessing of kings. Charged in like a bull, I heard - without grace and leaving the hall a mess.”

The king, appalled, paused for a moment. “Are the treasures still intact? Where are they?”

“Oddly enough, it was only replaceables that were damaged. See those wooden spines? That’s the extent of the damage. Though, there’s bound to be some deep sludge-stains on the royal cloak…”

“Explain?”

“The guards reported finding him hiding himself ever so poorly. He was pretending to be a coat stand, I believe. Draped the garment over his head and left himself blind. Didn’t clean a thing, the scene was obvious.”

He was cut off by the king laughing, followed by chuckling from the guards. Stephen remained silent as shame ghosted his brow. After a few moments, the atmosphere shifted back to its previous seriousness. The king took the initiative to speak.

“The blessed gems have been in our lineage for centuries - illustrious father, grandfather, and many kings before them. What nerve… the Lim kingdom need that as much as it needs plague or bile-drenched vermin. Away with him!”

Before Elias could speak again and before Stephen could even try to defend himself, another guard came in the room with the discarded rope, the broken door handles, the lightly bloodied cape and a few large shards of wood. The timid guard walked forward to wordlessly present the evidence to the monarch. Like it was needed, though - Dan’s judgement had already been set. A small whimper brushed over Stephen’s lips as he watched the adviser pluck the coil of rope from the pile. He felt a hand ghost across his side, followed by the rumpling of paper. Flicking his eyes, he saw a guardsman unfold the WANTED sign of himself that he’d torn down earlier in the day. He then heard another chuckle, although more distant this time. He returned his eyes forwards, and they widened slightly as the blue-haired’s deft fingers filed along the rope until they reached the scuffed loop Stephen had previously tied at the end. Elias turned on regal soles to face his green-haired brother, a slight mischievousness lacing the undertones of his voice.
“Perhaps we should use this, my Lord? ‘Specially since the purple muskrat’s already known, it’d make a good show.”

“Mm… but it seems overdone, no?”

“Fair point, your Majesty. The gallows are well-used and used well. Besides, it’s not every day we find scum that reeks this badly of sins…”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop while the king pondered, eyeing the criminal and stroking his chin. Every urge in the convict’s mind and body was yelling at him, urging him to run, to shout innocence, to fight, to do something. Yet he may as well have been encased in ice, for he remained equally cold and motionless.

“Say… how long has it been since we’ve thrown in a rat?”

“Over a fortnight.. I’d say most of a moon’s passing, sire.”

“That …yes, that sounds long enough. This matter is settled and I’ll say anew, there’s no need for ambition in the peasants, and especially in the damned. Erase his name! We have neither need nor want for his kind of spearhead. Snuff out this spark like we did for the other audacious insects. This glorious kingdom needs not to be tainted by treson-makers.” The king paused for a moment, before commanding with a wicked grin, “Take his possessions - the rat won’t need those any longer. And you two, take him to the pit!”

A choked sound escaped Stephen’s throat as the guards who had carried him to the throne room moved him to his feet and a swarm of hands took away everything from his belt, his pockets and his cloak.

This couldn’t be real, Stephen thought. He’d heard tales about the kingdom, mainly in spiraling words about the riches hidden behind locked doors from fellow criminals a few nights prior. But all the luster had died from the conversations when anyone had dared mentioned the pit, replaced by a chill that flicked across the spines of the long-time residents. When asked to explain, the few who replied spoke in hushed tones as their eyes and limbs jittered around due to fear. No one knew all too much about that place - but all who spoke of it told of how effective being sent there was as a grim punishment. Whatever happened there, it never left remnants to bury. No remains, not even bones were ever found from victims of the pit. At most, a bit of blood or a scrap of fabric was all that was ever left. All who were sent to the pit were gone without a trace, disappeared as if into thin air. The only evidence came in parchment signs that crossed out the faces once marked with both “DEAD” and “ALIVE” and left only the first reddened word to speak of their fates.

Once ushered to move with a tug to his shoulders, Stephen tried to sprint away, screaming out to the king as he was being pulled towards the door from whence he came.

“Wait, hear me out! This is all overblown, let me explain! This is all misheard! I swear, I’ve never tried to rally against you! Have grace and hear my call!”

Stephen’s pleas grew more and more desperate as he was in the archway of the door. He continued struggling against the guards, slowing the trio’s departure.

“No, please! Not like this! At least not like this!”

The three were just outside of the gateway.

“I’ll take the rope! I’ll take the gallows!”
Two guards rushed to the door’s handles. The doors rumbled as they started to close.

“How about the blade? Take it! Take my head off my shoulders!”

The doors did not slow in the slightest.

“Please, be swift with me!”

The doors were nearly closed.

“Just spare me of this, your Majesty! Send me off any other way! DEAR GOD, I BEG OF YOU! HAVE MERCY!”

The doors ceased their movements and sealed away the throne room with a loud, low boom that seemed to shake Stephen to the core of his being. His body stilled and was dragged as the guards hurried him away…
What's Only Spoken on Terrified Tongues

Chapter Summary

Well, you heard the king's sentencing - Stephen's been given that ever-so mysterious punishment that sparked so many horrified rumors around the kingdom. So what's going to happen to him, now that he's been sent to the pit? Does the place live up to its infamy?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Although it took quite a bit of time for the trio to arrive at their destination, it was a blur to Stephen. He had fallen into a daze induced by utmost horror, giving little mind to his surroundings. Ever since he fell limp just outside the king’s hall, he put no effort into escape - even in his dazed state, he noticed many faces of passing guards. He didn’t pay much attention to their features due to the thick fog over his mind - but he did recall how many of their lips twisted into smiles after his restrainers spoke unintelligible things to each curious passerby.

God, what was about to happen to him, he wondered as he was moved along. What happens in the pit that left nothing of past prisoners? The punishment seemed reserved for the worst - how painful was this going to be? What agony was about to come to the violet man?

Am I going to be torn apart? Will they slit my throat? Will they drain my blood? Throw salt upon me after they’ve torn my flesh? Will they cut out my tongue? Gore and gut me like a trout or hunter’s game? Nail me to a post and leave me to die? I’ve once heard of a statue used in another kingdom, an iron hull of agony called a ‘Brazen Bull’...Will they throw me in one of those and set off a roaring pyre below? Oh God, What will become of me? What will happen? Will I be...Quartered, beaten, bludgeoned, poisoned, tortured, mutilated, gashed, torn, eviscerated, dissected, trampled, flogged, flayed, burned, drowned, boiled....oh god oh god OH GOD

The shivering young man felt a shake to one of his shoulders and one of the guard duo’s faces in front of his own. As the emerald-eyed spoke, she seemed somewhat sympathetic.

“Hello? Still alive in there?”

She snapped his fingers in front of purple eyes, which only seemed to be coming back down to reality in that moment. The other guard piped in, lacking any semblance of warmth.

“He’d better be.”

“But...I mean, it wouldn’t be awful if he was...”

“You know the king wants to hear… ‘entertaining’ reports.” Her voice shuddered a bit when she thought about Dan’s sadistic streak towards rebels.

“Yes, though... We could always make up a fib.”

“But what if somebody else overhears this place and tells another story?” Her cold-wall facade
cracked, letting a flash of nervousness show.

“Well..” The brunette guardswoman decided to stop speaking. She’d rather avoid pointless debates and the needless pain and commotion. Besides, her partner had a point - although the room was detached from the castle, it would be possible for a passerby in the groves to overhear if the screams were loud enough. King Daniel was strict and demeaning in his definitions of concepts such as rebellion and loyalty - even well-intended lies could spark his wrath. She was never fond of the trait, nor the crimson splatters it had left across the town square’s stones over the passing years.

The guards looked at their capture, then to one another. Golden-yellow eyes met deep plantlike hues, each sharing their stifled somberness to the other in their gaze. They then nodded a guilty, hesitant nod and dragged the criminal forward a bit more, lifting him up to his feet.

With his senses returned, Stephen planted his soles on the rocky ground. He took in his environment - something he had foolishly failed to during the trio’s trip. Twisting his head around, he saw wooden doors on opposite walls of the room. The room was small, and it lacked the weathering the outside of the castle seemed to hold. He looked up and saw the back of the castle rise above the roofless room, showing just how far the guards managed to take him. The towers of the castle framed the sun as it lowered, painting the sky in deep reds and vibrant orange and pink hues as it set. He looked down at the unfinished floor. It was made of sand-toned rock dotted with small plants crawling out of thin cracks. Before him was an opening in the ground covered by a hefty steel grate that divided the gap into many square pockets, summing up to be as wide as a common man lying on his spine. Quickly, the guards shifted their grasp on him - now, both of Stephen’s shoulders were being held from behind, while the empty handed guardswoman shifted towards the grate. Finding the handles, she took a moment to heave the tall panel upwards and over by its hinge, the solid weight proving to be difficult for even a trained guard. When it was leaned over enough, the guard let go of the steel, causing a voluminous BANG from the steel-stone impact that stung all of the ears in the room and twisted everyone’s faces.

The sky-haired lady looked into the ground as she walked back to her fellow worker. She only saw more of the same warm-colored stone below, devoid of life or particular features outside of a few long-dry, blackish dots. Stephen flailed once more against the single guardswoman, grabbing the arms that looped around his shoulders and attempting to flip her over his back and and drop her into the ground. With his body having gained some rest while he was dragged like a limp corpse, he had the strength to bend his torso forward and pluck the guardswoman off of her feet. A surprised yelp snatched the starry-eyed’s attention away from the rocks. She reached down to her hip and drew her sword to the man again, the point tapping the thief’s nose when he rose a few inches in a trial to stand. He stilled, then shrunk to the ground again while shaking. On her feet again, the previous takee moved in tandem with the sword-wielder to secure a better hold on the doomed prisoner. They gave him a small tug, a gesture to try to get him off of his knees, but he stayed as before.

He released a soft, high pitched cry and a half-muttered phrase. “Why like this..?”

Both women fell silent, the sounds piercing their hearts and forcing them to still their features in order not to grow too attached. They were under orders, they had no say of their own in the sentencing or the execution. They simply happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, and now they had to be the ones to stain their hands.

They dragged their hearts and well as the rogue’s knees across the floor. Amber tones glowed at sunlight bounced off of the brown-headed lady’s hair as she lifted herself and Stephen to stand. She moved her head and the prisoner’s shoulders in order to meet mortified, contracted pupils. With a sorrowed tone, she spoke.
"I’m so sorry…"

The next thing Stephen knew was wind rushing by his sides and turning upwards to see the sunlight growing smaller and smaller, followed by a sudden blunt stop to his entire frame.

Stephen winced as his nerves caught up to the damage taken by his body. The force of the impact knocked the wind out of his lungs, leaving him to lie as an empty husk for a moment. He swiftly sat upright and propped himself to his feet- this was no time to linger or be still. He was on the killing floor now, and any moment he knew he’d have to dance with the devil.

Stephen analyzed his surroundings, trying to find the infamous danger of this damned place. He saw rough rock walls made of the same sandy tones as he saw on the surface. The walls curved up and inwards, forming a solid egg-shaped dome only broken by the beams of light that filtered down through the grate. He looked down the walls and found himself to be in a sort of spotlight- his range of vision quickly lost to a dark void. He shifted around on his feet and saw the same phenomenon all around him. The void loomed around the cavern and he felt like the darkness could creep in towards him at any moment.

The darkness made the dust he brushed up look like specks of gold in the air that slowly drifted back to the ground. His eyes were drawn to the contrast and the peacefulness of the dust- a peacefulness that made this place feel even more jarring. How could something be so calm in a place of horrid death? And why did something that tracked his movements have to linger for so long?

In a moment of frightened pondering is when Stephen saw the dust shift at the edge of the blackness- a small plume of the stuff moved upwards in the air. His eyes and body locked in place at that sign of movement. The plumes kept arising from varying spots around him, the motions kept stabbing his nerves and soul. Something was alive here, something was moving around him. Stephen kept all but his eyes rigid as he watched the dust shift in a wide circle around him.

BANG! Stephen shrunk inwards at the shrill sound and pointed his eyes skywards, seeing the warm light above him divided by beams of cruel, cold steel. In the corner of his eye, he saw a mass of color. A flash of blue, or perhaps it was grey, he had no time to tell. In an especially large kick of powder and as his eyes began to adjust to the dark, Stephen’s heart skipped at the sight before him - a mound of scales shifting in the pitch before retreating out of sight. Stephen reflexively jumped back, only to curse at himself internally when he heard the sounds of something shifting a second later in what seemed like a response. He quietly swore at the sound of footsteps above him, even though it didn’t take long for the quick thumps to disappear.

He let out a high-pitched yelp as he felt something tap the back of one of his shoes. He scuffled forward while twisting his torso to face the source, and managed to catch a glimpse of a small scaled shape as it rushed back into the shadows. A tendril? A tail, perhaps?

Stephen barley registered the small whine that escaped his mouth, quickly overruled by another noise. Srchhhhhhh... It was the sound of...scratching? One long and continuous noise, originating behind the doomed boy. Sweeping his feet, he looked back to where he’d previously seen the mass of...something a few moments before. His heart dropped through the floor at the sight before him.

There was not just a single mass present this time. Rather, there was a series of scaled links - all of which rose to at least knee-level- that phased in and out of the edges of Stephen’s gradually growing range of vision. In front of the serpentlike body and at the edge of the glow, a clawed, scale-covered hand dragged slowly across the ground towards the rest of the void. Some indescribable force quickly commanded Stephen to point his eyes slightly upwards to meet it. In
the shifting light and dust, a pair of yellow eyes cut through the golden dust to look slightly upwards at the man. The wide-open eyes were pointed directly at the rogue, with pupils so slivered that they were barely visible in the gleaming, vibrant tone. The eyes were framed by a few strokes of long silver strands, as well a hue that seemed to match that of a pale skinned human. The shining grey burst forth from the creature’s head, flowing down to the cave floor and slithering down its sides and up its back. The whole form before him was pulled in on itself, seeming to be as contracted and balled-up as Stephen’s fear-strained heart as it coiled up like a spring.

A small flickering of something red and a small shifting of the kicked up sand was Stephen’s final warning - but even with that sign, Stephen had no time left to react.

In an instant, the figure rushed towards the purple-haired man. For a split second, the humanoid part of the form lingered in the air in a way that much resembled a tackle. The creature’s mouth was open wide, displaying a pair of shining fangs and an array of sharp teeth as it let out a loud hissing sound. Its scale-adorned arms wrapped around Stephen’s shoulders, its clawed hands grabbing the flesh of his upper arms tightly. The two humanoids began falling backwards, both victims to the slamming force.

They quickly hit a stop, but it was not on the dusty floor of the cavern - Stephen’s back met a thick section of the monster’s tail. The impact, while forceful, did nothing to stop the movements of the assailant. A pair of long, thin fangs found their target as they tore and sank their way into the side of Stephen’s throat. While the human began to shout from the bloody pain, the lengthy mass attached to the biter quickly shifted, circling around the noise-maker’s body. The end of the tail leading the movement, the plated weight first looped around the human’s legs twice over, then around the divot above his hips.

The monster suddenly let go of Stephen’s neck to prop itself above him with its arms. The creature’s jaws remained open, the red coating on its fangs showing at the edge its outline as light poured in from above. Continuing further upwards, Stephen’s stomach and lower arms were next to be covered. Scales glided over cloth without a hitch, making the whole process take only a matter of seconds.

Despite his reactions having been stalled by overwhelming shock and force, Stephen did try to fight back. Feeling how his lower body was trapped, he tried to lift himself up with his spine and with a hold mirroring the creature’s grasp on his own shoulders - a plan that would hopefully allow him to slip backwards and out of the building bind. In response to the motion, the clawed hands swiftly switched locations, a blue-silver hand landing on purple hair and the other on the ground. Using the strands as a tool, the hand threaded its grip in the weave of hair and shoved Stephen’s head down, the back of it landing on the ground. The force on his head remained constant as the tail stretched further, causing all the wrappings below to grow even thicker. Next to be bound were Stephen’s upper arms and chest, then one more encircling around his exposed throat. Stephen gasped in instinctual fear as the thin ending brushed across alert skin.

Like this, Stephen was completely immobilized - and it did not take him long to realize that fact. Stephen attempted to wriggle against the beast, but that proved to be fruitless as the weight did not budge. Both he and the monster above him paused for a moment, observing one another in view of partial light. Stephen saw above him the same haunting yellow eyes, although there now seemed to be blue flecks present among the vibrant irises. He saw a volume of silver hair draping down from its head - long enough to reach its humanoid hips if the creature was propped upright - and noticed how it enveloped the space around his head like a thick veil. Through the frayed layers, Stephen noticed how human-like the limb next to his head appeared to be. The arm looked as if it were wearing a perfectly tailored snakeskin glove, except for where the effect faded directly into what appeared to be skin just after the elbows.
Stephen, with those observations, put together the components of the monstrosity - the beast was some kind of serpent-human hybrid. The creature before him was unlike any other mixed-blood or beast he’d ever seen before. He’d seen some devil-born, who have a knack with fire and have brilliant horns and tails. He’d seen humanoids who always look bathed in moonlight and fly under the crescent orb on magic-made wings. He’d seen folk with the horns, ears and fur of sheep and deer, he’d seen a past partner in crime turn canine lycanthrope under a full moon from an old-afflicted curse. He’d never seen anything like this, never heard of anything so dangerous and powerful.

Flicking his eyes back to the face, he noticed how the snake-man’s jaw remained partially opened, fangs resting in front of his mouth and coated in blood that formed crimson streaks down the beast’s jaw. Stephen shuddered from that part of the picture above him, as well as from the burn of the fresh wound those fangs caused.

His eyes caught the edges of a forked tongue slither out from behind the fangs and swipe at bloody teeth before retreating. Round pupils watched as the mouth closed and shifted slightly, contracting when he heard a gulping sound. The blood in his veins froze when the snake’s lips curved upwards into a grin he found ever so evil-looking, especially when paired with solidly saffron eyes.

The serpent was also gazing at his new capture in that moment. This one had a tuft of vibrant purple hair that sat upon a layer of deeper-dyed fuzz. Sure, he’s seen a couple heads painted with reds, greens and blues, but he’d never seen anything quite as bright-toned. The strands felt soft beneath his hand, he noticed. The eyes beneath him shared the same hue - he wondered, just for a split second, if what he had bound beneath him was even a normal human. Did he catch something rare, perhaps? Something especially tasty?

He decided to test a curiosity out. Normally he didn’t focus too much on the blood of his kills, for he just found the metallic taste as just ‘okay’ at best. Since he already got a reflexive bite in on his catch that dipped his maw in the stuff, he licked his teeth to get a flavor. There was still that human trace of metal and that telltale savory-saltine kick, but he also noticed a slight... something. A sweetness? A meatiness? He wiggled his tongue around to try to get a better idea of what was enticing him so much. Although he couldn’t pinpoint what exactly was peaking his senses, he did experience more of its delectability. Saliva had built up from the sampling, so the reptilian swallowed back to clear out his mouth. He couldn’t help but grin. Even from just that little taste test, he was already anticipating what other flavors he’d find out about.

He was so excited to make a delicious meal out of the prey in his grasp.

The serpent began to squeeze his lengthy lower body tighter around the helpless human. Coiling his tail slightly further in its looping path, he started to turn up the pressure of the vice.

Stephen let out a deep-rooted cry of terror before taking a quick breath of air when he felt the muscles tense around him. The long trail of scales had been little more than resting on him before, the heavy weights all over acting as an effective pin on his beaten and scathed body. Now they were drawing even closer inwards than simple touch. With eyes like those of a cornered rabbit, purple met untainted, roaring yellow.

The reptilian felt a pang of annoyance when he heard the airy sound from his prey. Why was he holding back his strength, he was accomplishing nothing more than an act of teasing towards himself! No more of that, he resolved with a flick of his tongue.

Within a matter of seconds, the pressure had become more intense than any human grip could
become. Stephen’s form started to waver, all looseness lost as the scales bound him tight. Further, the walls closed inwards.

He tried to wriggle against the intensifying crush, but it proved useless as he could no longer even do that. As the effort made use of oxygen, Stephen tried to breathe once again, but now it was a difficulty and a challenge. Yet he managed to steal a bit of air from the atmosphere around him. Further, the walls closed inwards.

The snake felt the struggle against his inner tail. For a split second, he found the action pitiful. The tiny glimmers of forming tears beneath him would normally be something to spark the empathetic side of his heart and dance in sky-blue hues across his eyes. But animalistic hunger and desire for a feast muffled out that thought in a flash. Why delay his hunt, especially with such a wonderful prize so close - he was salivating at his imaginations of the tastes and flavors to come. He flicked his tongue out, getting into a fast-paced tempo as he detected the air with it. Further, the walls closed inwards.

It was a competition of force and raw strength - Stephen’s lungs versus the tremendous crushing pressure of the gigantic serpentine. With deep-set, high-heated horror, he tried and tried to gasp for air, but the trials grew more and more useless. Water accumulated on his eyes, blurring his vision. Further, the walls closed inwards.

A few more seconds and his attempts became completely fruitless. He was hopelessly outmatched and outclassed, the force was far too powerful! Desperation set in and grew faster and faster as veins all over his body became strained. Oxygen stopped flowing within him - now it was all replaced with pain and dread. His fear, now boiling wildly, caused him to further struggle against the monstrosity, even when he could manage nothing more than a shiver-like shaking. Further, the walls closed inwards.

He could no longer shake, so he tried to scream, to shout, to yell, to call out to any force or being that may be willing to help him. A specter, a person, an angel, he really meant anything. Even a devilish epitome of evil, he’d sign any contract and make any deal in order to escape this despair. It all accomplished nothing.

As the edges of Stephen’s vision and consciousness faded, he felt rivers flowing down his face. The ocean over his eyes made any forms above him indistinguishable and meaningless. Yet, he still managed to lock his gaze with the eyes above him. That fierce yellow consumed more and more of his watery view.

Was this going to be the last thing he would ever know? An all-consuming despair painted in the bright yellow tones of the newly rising sun, paired with the pain of the deepest-slashing, red-hot sear of death’s blade?

Chapter End Notes
I said Hosuh was going to be in the fic, didn't I? I had intentionally left things about him vague until now - I figured it'd make for a better surprise.

Also, y'know how I'd mentioned a pal's AU as serving for the a lot of the inspiration behind this story? Yeah - Snake!Hosuh is a cool concept made by the lovable and absolute m a s t e r of art, Juno! Their Instagram is @juno_tohru, they post fantastic and adorable drawings! Go check em out!
What a Curious Thing

Chapter Summary

When a hunter's caught something rare or tasty-looking, isn't it natural for them to want to take a closer look at their game?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Was this going to be the last thing Stephen would ever know?

The beast watched at the human below him shook and tried to shift out of his vice. As the silver snake cranked up the tension, the sights and sounds of his prey gasping below him made his instincts release shocks of joyous electricity through his mind and vessels. He was famished and so damn eager to devour his appetizing game, his tongue jumping out of his jaws and wavering nearly nonstop in the air.

But, as his gaze met his victim’s face, he saw salty streams form and flow from his eyes. Even in the tight grip of his primal impulses, the blue feeling managed to bubble up into his own heart and prick at his own eyes. As he focused on watching how the human’s expressions faded and the eyes gradually closed and opened less and less, he stilled his tail and tongue. He loosened his grip ever so slightly and relocated the hand on Stephen’s head to the ground beside his head. He then bent his arms and leaned down close to the salted face, fluttering the tips of his forked tongue over the clear lines that had taken shape there.

The serpentine tongue was a fine-tuned instrument, able to pick up on even tiny odors and particles on surfaces or in the air. As he retracted the sensor, he detected something in the tears. It was something else he couldn’t name, but it was not pleasant - this time, echoes of the shrill screams the incapacitated human couldn’t make phased into the hybrid’s imagination as the stressed agent lied in the water on his tongue. As empathy came to his mind, he loosened his grip. The loosening effect escalated the more he thought about the human’s predicament and lapped up a little more of the saline solution leaking down his face.

While Stephen strained to maintain consciousness, time became as warped and blurry as his soaked vision. Violet eyes stinging and the call of the void whispering in his ears, he kept his eyes open less and less, taking longer and longer to reopen each time. Somewhere in the swaying and faded mess, he thought he felt a light tickling brush by his face for a moment. As he opened his eyes, the hue dyeing the seas on his vision became chartreuse, then a bit more of a leaf-like green before his eyelids fell back on him and he slipped under a blanket of oblivion.

The silver creature pushed himself up, lifting his head back so he could better see the face below him. Violet bundles were lying and puffing out in all directions - a contrast to the still, relaxed expression the strands framed. He flicked his tongue out, gently touching the face again. Before, the face below had tensed up ever so slightly when touched like that. Now it was completely
stilled. He tried the motion again with a bit more pressure- still nothing.

With the salt on his tongue still transmitting the human’s silent screams to his mind, the serpent grew worrisome. Had he managed to kill the man so quickly? He tried holding his palm up to the side of the human’s face, feeling a plane of warmth upon contact. Shifting slightly, he added a small amount of pressure as scale-covered fingers drifted across the smooth surface. His hand started slightly shaking as he picked up on just how soft the face was.

He then felt an… unusual feeling. He felt his own cheeks buzzing, and they felt warm upon giving them a thought. Sure, he may have been able to keep some heat in his system, but the mechanisms in place were all based on efficiency. Why was energy being tossed at a seemingly random place? He nestled down on the mound of his own tail for a moment and took his now freed hand to touch his own cheek. It felt warm to the touch. He stayed like that for a moment before thinking about how the human still needed to breathe. With the thought, he quickly resumed his previous position with his torso propped over his relaxed, but still coiled tail.

A couple seconds later, the snake-man’s focus was drawn elsewhere as he realized that his clawed fingers were somewhat tapping the soft cheek below them. How long had he been doing that? Wouldn’t the human have noticed by now? He decided to tap with active intent and a bit more force. Nothing. Out of curiosity, he decided to tap elsewhere. On the nose, the tips of both ears, across the forehead, as well as on the chin and the little lump in the neck.

The snake felt a bit of hesitation before pressing a finger to the lost man’s lips. Why he paused was answered with the softness he felt beneath the pad of his fingertip. He drew his finger back and felt the buzzing in his cheeks increase. What was going on? And why did he… kind of like this odd feeling? He poked at the soft mouth for a moment more, sparks seeming to fly into the clawed finger as he did. Then, the lips stirred on their own, the human’s mouth opening ever so slightly. The snake felt a small chill from the air flowing inwards. The finger felt frozen in place, the reason for which unknown to the serpentine. He also realized that he’d leaned down closer to the human’s face, and felt unable to prop himself back up due to some invisible force. At the very least, he was able to move his hand back to the ground before the human started speaking - although what he mumbled didn’t help the vibrating feeling in his face in the slightest.

Stephen’s body realized the crushing vice had loosened before his weary mind could. Upon taking a few shallow reflexive breaths, Stephen opened his wet eyes to a tone resembling the daylight sky - he couldn’t help but think the color was beautiful, at least for a few moments. Then a nerve panged in his head - how was he seeing the sky? He supposed that this was the aftermath of death, his soul rising to the skies and whatever resided above. He closed his eyes and took several more breaths, each taking in a bit more air than the last. As breath flowed back into his system, he regained some of his senses. Odd, he had never heard of a specter, ghost or soul being able to feel the touch of the mortal world- why did he feel something smooth and sectioned around him? Why did he feel such a hefty weight on top of him? And why did it feel like something was poking his lower lip?

As he continued breathing, he realized his vision was blurred not by some heavenly force, but by tears. He tried to move a hand to wipe his eyes, but he was immediately blocked. Confused, he tried the motion again a few more times - again, nothing happened. He tried to blink the tears away instead. When his vision cleared enough, he registered sky-blue eyes above him. He flinched at the registration and groggily spoke.

“Hey, who are…? What’re you doing here?” Stephen viewed the man above him for several
seconds, still under a daze, before speaking again.

“Your eyes are so pretty.”

Stephen felt relaxed looking up at the pretty blue hue. The silver draping around the sides of his vision was also nice. Hey, was that a slight pink he saw? No, it wasn’t just a slight pink - it resembled more of a peaches tone. How cute, Stephen implicitly thought. He was content to just breathe for several moments. The cool tones soothed his senses, even through a full-body pain - which puzzled him in his current state. Are spirits supposed to be able to feel pain? And why does this other spirit here look so...

“...but why are your….Why’re your pupils so weird-looking?” Even dazed and delirious, he knew that ovoids with pointed tips was an unusual shape for an eye to have.

He pondered the question for a minute. Then the cogs in his recovering brain clicked, yielding a realization that hit him like a crash - he was in danger, he needed to get out! He reflexively jerked his head upwards to try to better see the situation, only to be met with a blunt, pain-inducing force.

Both men reeled from the impact, and Stephen shrunk internally at the louder hissing above him. He inhaled quickly as he saw a rack of sharp teeth and smudges of blood, and screamed as the sight caused the full set of memories and feelings from the attack to flood back to the front of his awareness. He tried again to wriggle out of the restraining hold- he couldn’t escape, but he could actually shift around now. He flailed for a moment before the fact that he was no longer being crushed to death sunk into his brain. Focused on his confusion, Stephen stopped his thrashing around. He tried to come up with some reason as to why he was still alive. There was no sign of a saint or savior, no evidence of any outside force ever having been present or partaking at the scene, which must mean...

“W-why?” The captured man’s voice quivered in lingering fear.

“Hm?” A simple noise of confusion. The thought that, maybe, this creature couldn’t speak or understand him crossed Stephen’s mind for a moment- but before he could act on it, his lips were already moving.

“W-w...Why’d you let up? Why am I—” His voice broke, so he paused and spoke again. “Why am I still alive?”

The half-response took a few moments to arrive. ”I... I saw how.. how you...and-d..”

“How I...” Tried to scream, to fight, to beg for mercy? How I couldn’t breathe? How I cried as the reaper loomed so close over me?

The silver-haired, reading the violet gaze as if it were a book, gave a slow, sorrowed nod.

Stephen’s features sank and the reptilian went quiet for a bit of time. Although his response was true - he really did feel a great deal of empathy for the trapped man as he struggled in despair- something else still lingered. Despite that truth he felt and gestured to, he still wasn’t entirely sure why he changed courses.

He was so excited to consume the wonderful prey in his grasp, after all.

A spark danced on his eyes and tongue at that recollection. Flicking out his tongue, he recaptured the wind that drove the primal part of his mind into overdrive. His pupils thinned as he repeated the motion rapidly. The scale-dotted torso heaved a bit as he took in scent-filled air, then let out a hungry, drawn out hum.
He wanted to take a closer look, to really inspect his catch.

Stephen shuffled the little bit he could backwards, attempting to retreat from the devourer above him.

“Wait a second,” Stephen thought as the snake blinked again… “Yeah, his eyes are definitely changing color” , he noted.

“Those eyes were blue a second ago - where did all those yellow specs come from?” Since he realized he had enough room to not just breathe, but to speak - Stephen took the opportunity to do so.

“W-What’re-e you doing? Why a-are you—??”

Stephen cut himself off as he felt a hand take the bitten side of his neck and saw as his vision was quickly occupied by long strands of neutral tones. A forked tongue started to trace along the clean side of his throat in a downward path, drawing a squeak and low shudders from his vocal chords.

Stephen was interrupted before he could even begin speaking by a low, guttural mutter.

“Mmm, good…so good…”

The words and the vibrations on Stephen’s neck sent shivers down his spine- but not entirely out of fear this time, there was something else he couldn’t identify. More chills came as the weighty serpentine tail shifted and started to drift backwards along its initial route, moving downwards like the flickering tongue.

When his shoulders were exposed, Stephen was pushed down from those points by a pair of clawed grasps. With his upper arms also exposed, the hands slid over cloth and settled at their destination. Only small pressures managed to wrangle a noise from Stephen’s throat as the serpent squeezed the muscles in his hands and pressed a section of his tongue to the captured’s collar, even with black cloth in the way.

“W--what the hell-ll? Why-y…”

The snake poked his head back up at the question. Stephen adjusted his neck upwards to better see his response. When the duo’s eyes met, the violet man saw a thick plume of neon yellow particles floating in the irises, drifting much in the same way the dust that had been kicked up earlier.

A red tongue poked out from the silver-haired’s lips, darting forward and waggling just in front of the tip of Stephen’s nose before retreating again. Stephen couldn’t help but scrunch up his features due to the ticklish sensation. Stephen’s eyes followed the tongue's path and watched the jaw in front of him open and let out a mumble.

“Y...smell good…”

“W-what!!?”

“You...mmm...s’good, so good!”

“Wha--!”

In an instant, the hands that had been gripping his arms reached up to his neck and swiped at the edge of Stephen’s hooded cloak, tugging it down his shoulders best he could. The hands then darted back downwards, resting on Stephen’s chest and seemingly sending shocks directly to his
heart. Little shocks became discharges as the the snake buried his face in the scoundrel’s neck, lips vibrating while he muttered again.

“Y’smell good, and..y’so warm..”

The scaled fingertips drifted slowly over the cloth, seemingly exploring the muscle below. As they moved, the fingers left tingling trails that went straight to Stephen’s mind. Meanwhile, the tail uncoiled, stopping only when the majority of his torso was released. As the tail moved, the snake-man gradually let his chest fall down to rest flush against the one beneath him, the cloth feeling soft against his bare skin.

When his arms were released enough, Stephen gradually waved them out - but with little force, as his focus was occupied elsewhere. Suddenly, Stephen sprung his arms out to his sides as he felt himself get wrapped up again. This time, however, lacked lethal force as the serpentine wrapped his arms around the rogue’s back in an almost cuddly fashion. The fingers proceeded to poke and trace the lines of Stephen’s shoulders and upper back muscles before starting to drift downwards.

Stephen had been letting out little confused noises as the snake started to explore him. Little muffled noises turned out outright sputtering as he felt light, sharp pricks to his neck and lower back. The blood in his veins was picking up speed as his heart rattled and shook. Nibbling pricks of teeth and pressured lines of touch started to make his body shake.

Stephen gawked in surprise as the hands slid up his back and planted themselves by the sides of his head. As the serpent propped himself up to look at him, Stephen used his now freed arms to grab at the scaly wrists, his hands noticing how the scaled ones flinched slightly at his presence.

The snake looked down at Stephen, his expression filled with...curiosity? Yes, curiosity was definitely there, but so were a couple other things that the thief couldn’t quite pinpoint. The multicolored eyes were opened, spacious on his face. The eyes seemed to be taking Stephen in, causing him to shudder. A thick veil of bright powder danced upon a blue backdrop, only divided by dilated, ovoid pupils. Those eyes were framed by.. Wait, a pink tone?

Is he... blushing?

The serpentine tail uncoiled again, gliding over his hips. ...Shit. Stephen cursed at himself internally as the movement made that region of his body jolt. The hunter’s face flinched back in sync.

“Fuck.” Well, Stephen now figured that the snake-man wasn’t the only one to be a bit red in the face.

The tail kept moving, releasing the prisoner’s hips and slinking down his thighs. The reptilian bent down again, shifting backwards and resting his chin on Stephen’s chest. Stephen’s grip on the snake’s wrists had faltered while his mind was preoccupied, allowing the hands to shuffle away and plant themselves at his sides. They meandered lower and lower, thumb rubbing circles into the muscles and bones along the way. Stephen shivered at the fiery touches, and gasped when the hands buried themselves underneath him.

“Ohhh!” The serpent let out a loud hum as he felt the ample muscles in his palms. He continued to hum for a moment as he pressed upward, feeling the supple mass that covered Stephen’s hip bones as it weighed down on his hands.

“H-Hey!” The human squaked. Whatever was going on, Stephen wasn’t sure how to take it. His body was tingling from the touches and he grew worried- had the snake poisoned him? Was there
venom in his claws? Were there toxins laced in the sunken wound on his neck? Stephen’s heart and mind were racing with confusion and uneasiness. The monster didn’t seem to be attacking him anymore, but a strong aura of pressure still remained. There was something the serpent was going after, but what was it?

Why’d he stop? Why would he, for what reason? He had me completely under his whim - I would’ve screamed for mercy if I was able.... Why didn’t he kill me? What… What does he want from me?

He planted his hands on the ground and tried to pull his legs out from their trap. The effort accomplished little, as the heaviest parts of the reptile were resting on and around his lower body. In response to the jerking, the tail wrapped a bit tighter, and the grey-headed yanked his hands out from underneath his capture. The snake placed his hands over Stephen’s collarbones and pushed against him to prop himself up and simultaneously pin the human down.

Regret slashed Stephen like a knife as he felt the scaly weight move up his own again. Why’d I think that was a good idea? With what mobility he had, he tried to halt the rising tail by pushing his arms against it.

The saffron-filled eyes shot him a puzzled look. Why was he trying to fight when he knew how outdone he was in terms of strength? The snake gave his attention to the thought for a moment, let out an entertained huff, then motioned his tail up and around the struggling human.

This time, however, his goal was not suffocation. As the tail brushed past conflicting limbs and around the human’s belly and chest, blue-silver hands moved from pushing against cloth to exerting force against sandy stone. With a firm push, the serpent was able to get his torso high enough into the air to bring himself the rest of the way upright with his spine and core. He continued to move, wrapping over the human’s collar and tensing up his tail. With a suitable grip established, the beast began to lift up his catch.

The grappled human yelped and shouted as his body was being encased again. His vocalizations grew louder as the source of danger rose up his body, ending in a high whine when the lengthy mass squeezed him. He fully expected the vice to close once again - and this time, without stopping until it would snap him like a twig. Subverting that preemption, Stephen instead felt his frame being increasingly propped up until he was looking the snake-man directly in the eyes. The voice attached to those eyes came out low and rumbly.

“You’re quite odd. The ones that usually fall down here… they’re so bony, so thin…”

The humanoid quieted, seemingly waiting for a response.

“Wh-what does that have to do with...?” Stephen’s voice faltered as he spoke, his guts tightening up.

“Oh? Did you not figure it out?”

Stephen, knowing his voice would fail him, gave a squeaky exhale and shook his head. The serpent quirked up an eyebrow, then chuckled. He opened yellow eyes dotted with blue powder and tipped his head to a side, an inquisitive gesture.

“Hmm… I suppose that makes sense. S’hard to think during a hunt, after all. It’s all instincts, thought gets left behind.”

The captured human started shaking all over as the reptile decided to raise him completely off of
the floor, a red tongue flickering in and out with the action.

“Mm, you’re special. The rest were just… okay. Not you, I wouldn’t believe the same for you. Your smell, I’ve never caught something so damn enticing…”

‘The rest’… Stephen could only assume that meant everyone else that got sent here. He tried to speak, his voice crackling before becoming coherent. “Wh-- What h-happened to the rest? W- Why’d they never find anything left of ‘em?”

The beast chuckled, entertained by the human’s cluelessness. He understood why the trouble was there, but still found some amusement. He reached out to play with the other’s purple locks and spoke again.

“Every creature’s got its needs, right? The circle of life and all that - ever heard of it?”

*Circle of life?* Why was the hybrid asking him to think, especially when he just explained that thinking’s so difficult at times like this?

“Hm.. I’ll put it another way. I like what I see here, I like the looks of you.”

The two paused, hearts pulled by all sorts of instincts and feelings.

“I’ve heard words like ‘criminal’, ‘scum’, ‘rats’…stuff like that, that’s what the shiny-plated people use to describe the ones they throw down here. I wonder, what do they usually do to ‘em beforehand? Keep them in a cage for an eternity, or something?”

Another pause, more sinking feelings - but not for very long.

“Something’s bound to be happening… Or maybe it’s all coincidence? Eh, it matters not….I did say that the others were quite scrawny, didn’t I?”

“Y-yeah?”

“Heh, You…You’re not like that. There’s more to ya. You’re no skeleton. I felt it, felt you. You’re built up all over. ‘Specially by those legs of yours.”

“W-why would that matter…?”

“It’s simple, really…” The monster paused with a grin, sliding his tongue across his lower lip.

“*It means there’s more meat.*”

**Chapter End Notes**

Even though Hosuh relented for a minute, he is still hungry. So what’s Stephen's fate set to be? The jury's out on that one - or, at least, I'm not gonna say what happens next.

Hehe - Hosuh really got to inspect Stephen. He especially liked a certain feature of his ;)

Until next time! <3
The Things That Lie Within a Monster

Chapter Summary

The mind sure has its way of wandering and tearing back the veil over things, revealing more than what seemed to be present at first...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It means there’s more meat.”

The scales against the prisoner turned to ice - at least, that’s what he could’ve sworn in that instant. *So that’s why they never find remains. That’s why they mark out their faces in such a bold way around this kingdom. That’s why this punishment's so bad, that’s why he tried to kill me like that, that’s why he’s going to kill me, that’s why that why THATSWHY-

His heart felt like it stopped while, in contrast, the snake’s tongue kicked up pace.

“So supple, so tender…”

*All the past prisoners, they were all devoured…*

“*Oh, I wonder what you’d taste like, all of you…so good, so good…”*

*...And I’m next.*

Stephen’s mind and body froze while the reptilian continued speaking.

“A delicious feast, I’d say. Wouldn’t need to eat again for quite a while after something like that…”

The beast chuckled for a moment while brushing a hand over one of Stephen’s shoulders, his voice seeming to purr.

“You’re pretty broad, pretty wide… It’d be a bit of a stretch, even for me. But, hey… It’d be something new, something fun.”

The snake moved his frosted silver hand to play with his own neck, rubbing the structure.

“I wonder, what would it be like to have you down my throat? I wonder what you’d feel like… *How you’d feel sliding the whole way down...”*

Stephen’s frame rattled in the scaled vice, skin tingling as if he’d been drenched in a mild acid.

“Mm, so much, so much...so nice.”

The human felt pressure moving on his sides, a squeeze to his form.

“...wish you could stick around, wish this whole ordeal would last longer. *I want to savor every last moment of this. ”*
Time moved slowly, every loud heartbeat from the pair feeling like markers of new minutes passing by.

“My precious prey...”

Blood rushed and roared in fiery streams, mapping out all around like a series of red rivers that spread throughout the rising and falling planes of hell.

“...It’s been lonely down here, y’know? I’ve...I’ve been wanting company for quite some time now...”

The reptilian leaned in, tongue flicking out and batting at the air just in front of Stephen’s lips. Stephen’s eyes, already wide, flinched at the action with several feelings coursing through his veins - terror, anxiety, skittishness, jitters...but also a building confusion and... anticipation? Yes, an anticipation of a fearful kind was easy to identify...but there was another anticipation bubbling up, something else that he couldn’t quite pin down as the monstrosity moved. Seeing how he gave no sign of stopping, Stephen pressed his eyes shut, so unsure of what was going to happen next.

Gently, messy bangs touched his skull, the serpent pressing his forehead against Stephen’s with a hum. Oddly, he remained still, the only motions between the two coming from their own breathing.

_Huh?_ Stephen had been expecting much more, much worse than that. He thought the creature would...well, do something! He expected the monster to snap his neck. Or bash his skull against the ground to crack it like an egg. To bite his face or open that maw inhumanly wide and encase his head before biting down and severing it from his neck...Yet there was only a simple, gentle touch. _What?_

Another subversion of his expectations followed - he heard the beast’s breath hitch, followed by another hum filled with... sadness? Violet eyes opened and met a sky hue that was lined with white - but not from clouds, rather, the eyes were glimmering with water. The black pupils were no longer slits, either - they had become much wider, much rounder. Stephen remained still, blinking slowly as the reptilian’s voice, once so dead-set and powerful, now came out as a low huff of wind.

“It’s been so lonely… Been so alone here...”

Scale-gloved hands moved to rest on Stephen’s shoulders.

“...for so long, so long down here...”

The tail’s grip relaxed as the hands gently moved up and hovered by the sides of Stephen’s head, the whisper starting to quiver.

“...All this time...”

Only smooth fingertips touched the short threads behind Stephen’s ears as the humanoid’s expression bunched in on itself.

“...Like a void...So empty...”

Those watery eyes closed tight, droplets resting on dark lashes as a coo made its way from his vocal chords. The hefty tail began to slowly fall, a sharp contrast to the fingertips that quickly shifted through deep burgundy fuzz and down to the divot between Stephen’s shoulder blades, arms wrapped around him in a loose hug. The reptilian’s hands tightened up into fists as he started to snivel and let out little, high pitched whines.
As the pained notes tapped at Stephen’s mind, he started experiencing new feeling towards the beast - a sense of sympathy, empathy for the creature. Sadness blossomed out like a drop of ink or dye on the surface of still water, a cloud that burst out in a sea of fear.

The lengthy mass unraveled the more and more as the reptilian cried with his head hung low and pointed downwards. The cloud in Stephen’s mind grew in unison with the falling of the tears and tail. When the weight of the vice fell past his arms, Stephen hesitantly began to move. Still afraid to stir, still afraid of the hybrid, his arms slowly encircled the crier - but they still did not dare to make contact.

The vapors in Stephen’s head...was just pity that he felt? He’s seen criers before, he’s heard plenty of sobs. He’s felt the little tugs at his heart that rang of others’ distress. Yet those arguments almost never stirred his hands. Even in times of safety, even when providing help or solace would not be a difficulty, Stephen seldom acted on feelings of pity - so why would pity be driving him in this dangerous situation? Why would it override his gut and make him move towards a killer?

So was this emotion pity? No, definitely not - it was something else that he was feeling.

Shaking fingertips and quivering hands moved like those of a watch, drawing inwards until they barely touched the grey strands draped over the humanoid’s back. Upon sensing the faint contact on the strands, the sorrowed snake squeezed his arms around Stephen as the last sections of his tail dropped to the ground in a pile around the human’s legs. Although the squeeze was not forceful, it still drew a squeak out of the thief. Waiting out a moment of chills, Stephen saw that the creature wasn’t making any moves to hurt him - so he pressed against the silver cords on his back in a comforting embrace.

Insight…yeah, that was a much better word to describe the swirling thing in Stephen’s skull. He was no stranger to being alone, he remembers the long, straining days spent traveling across fields of sand, stones and grasses all barren of company. There was something else, too. To have insight is to read and to understand - the feelings that come with that understanding can take many forms.

So what shape did his emotions take? What did his insight bring to his heart?

It was something that rarely struck his heart - a heart that’s been chilled by an unkind world. His insight yielded a sensation of compassion - compassion for just how miserable loneliness can be. He was no stranger to wanting more than the hollowness and emptiness of being alone. He’s recalled time and time again the memories of the way raindrops mixed with his tears and he treaded onwards in life alone. Time and time again, he’s recalled the stormy, restless nights spent on streets and in alleyways as a sole and endangered sleeper.

The serpent’s hands unfurled for a moment, shaking but lying flat of the thief’s shoulder blades, moving slightly up and down to feel the soft texture of his cloak. Then the hands clenched again, folds of the cloth sprouting out from tinted grey fingers. Mimicking part of that movement, Stephen started motioning his hands up and down over waves of long hair. The snake’s crying quieted for a moment when he did that, replaced by a questioning whimper. Stephen ended up letting out his own whisper, his soft voice only registering in his brain after the fact.

“It’s okay...You’re not alone, I’m here now…”

Just as the vocalization clicked in his head, the serpent hugged him tighter, burying his head into the rogue’s shoulder and letting out more muffled sobs. Stephen froze for a second, then started rubbing up and down the creature’s back in soothing strokes. He gently parted the long strands of hair to the sides, trying to deliver more comfort through direct touch. The rogue’s hands tingled as they made contact with a surprisingly smooth back.
His mind wandered as the two remained in standstill. He couldn’t help but think of loneliness, to sympathize with the humanoid in his arms. One little thing often caught his mind, that one little thing that hung on a fine thread of gold... In the past and present alike, Stephen thought about the tiny weight around his neck that the guards managed to miss when they took his belongings - a small ornament of sentiment from someone he loved and whom loved him back...

For a moment, he wondered if the vice had crushed it, but then recalled that it wasn’t exactly easy to break. The same unbreaking quality held true for the bittersweetness that came from the object - he hadn’t seen the person who gave it to him in a very long time. Sometime soon, sometime soon... He has repeated that phrase in his head like a mantra time and time again. That’s what he had always hoped to become true - and had always been denied.

*God, how Stephen wished he could see that person again.*

Saline beads formed on violet eyes, rolling off as he blinked. *Maybe it was just the weeping in the room. Maybe it was just dust in the air... Oh, screw it.*

Stephen could very well lie to others, but he had trouble deceiving himself.

It was hard to not get emotional when thinking about the little thing around his neck... There weren’t many people out there who loved him, after all. The world’s been a cold place for him as long as he could remember. It’s always been that way, he’s always been like a ragged blackbird beating its wings and trying to fly through a wretched thunderstorm.

Clear streams painted both of their faces now, both of their breaths skipping and both sniffling as their faces grew clogged with materials of misery. The scaled hands shifted, mirroring Stephen’s movements and running down his cloaked spine. After a few minutes, the serpent also shifted his head to rest his chin on the rogue’s soaked shoulder. He spoke in a crackling voice.

“A-are you...serious? W-would you st-stay by me?” *Even if you were free? I’m a monster...A truly hideous thing all the way through, inside and out...*

Stephen remained quiet for a moment, his emotion-loaded brain chewing on the question and making a decision of how best to choose his words. His voice came out tear-battered as well.

“I-I mean, you aren’t trying to kill me anym-more, right-t? S-so... this much, I d-don’t mind this.....”

That much was actually true. Even if the being in his arms wasn’t really human, the contact still brought warmth, still stimulated that urge for touch and affection that all humans have. The hug really did feel nice, the rubs felt good, both to give and receive.

The two humanoids continued their standstill embrace a little longer. While doing so, the snake was muttering something Stephen couldn’t quite decipher, only picking up a few words from the quiet stream.

“...sosorry.......longtime....wishididnt....haveto...hadto...wish.....ididnt...wantthis......”

Stephen could feel the hybrid’s anxiety as clear as his touch. Compelled by compassion, he traced up the grey-haired’s spine and, with a pause, ruffled through the strands to rest his hand atop his head. The serpent froze for a split-second, his murmuring stopping before he leaned into the warmth of his hand. Even through his surprise, Stephen continued his gesture of gently moving his hand in long waves.

As the criminal continued the soft petting motion, claw-tipped hands drifted upwards until they met
deep mauve fuzz. The thief stilled when the hands rested there and the serpent shifted his body. The whole frame rose as he propped himself upright on a different spot on his tail. Violet eyes went wide and a droplet of inky fear dashed on the surface of the thief’s mind, only stopping after the humanoid pulled his head to his neck and embraced around Stephen’s back again. Stephen was draped in the creature like this, a silver head rested atop his own as long locks and arms placed him in his own little pocket of space. Stephen squeaked into the skin that was suddenly pressed against his face. Even given the particular being that was holding him, even given the entirety of the circumstances, the position felt...oddly protective? Like he was being watched after, as if he were being shielded by a loving, guardian-like figure. Stephen considered talking, but the serpent beat him to the call with a quiet sigh and another murmur.

“..didn’t want...again...”

Stephen let out a confused hum against the reptillian’s neck, which quivered at the vibrations. Stephen had the same reaction when the snake started speaking, the vibrations feeling ticklish to the human.

“Oh! Uh, I-... I guess I was just thinking...”

“...What about?”

“Ehm...It’s just something I wasn’t looking forward to doing... didn’t want to have’ta do that again...”

Stephen let out another hum, then waited for the reptilian to gather his words. Sensing how the human was waiting for a response, the long-haired started speaking.

“I mean… things are…”

The thief was rather confused - both from the vagueness of the statement, but also when he felt the serpent move again, the weight on his head disappearing and the feeling of scaled hands on his cheeks that tipped his head upward. The hybrid drew back, taking a hand off of Stephen’s face for a moment to sweep away the lengthy strands of drooping locks to get a better view.

Looking slightly downwards at the teary face in his hands, he saw a lot of things. Fear still lingered, but it was buried under a more prevalent confusion and...sadness?

This human’s odd... I’m not holding him anymore... Barley even touching him- he could’ve easily backed away minutes ago, yet he hasn’t made a move. Why? Why! I’m a monster, we both know! I’m a killer, wasn’t that clear?... Animals made prey, if they had any sense, would run away at first sight of a predator... Damn my eager tongue- I made it more than obvious that I’m a vicious devourer! So why...

Those wide, vibrant eyes drew the serpent’s attention, reeling him away from his perplexed thoughts. As he peered at the rich violet hue, he sensed something mysterious and powerful, something swimming deep in those spheres - but what was it?

...does he...does he understand? Does he get the true meaning of isolation? Does he actually know a hell like this hollow place? Is the world above... Was it lonely up there, too? Shouldn’t he know otherwise, know myths like reality? Those things impossible here - Warmth, tenderness, comfort, solace...

The eyes below him hinted at another story, a different truth.

Or... Maybe he doesn’t?... Maybe life is cold, maybe the whole world is as empty as this cavern...Or
is it just to him?...maybe he’s been cast down, just like I’ve been...Could that be the truth? Is he just as starved as I’ve been?

As he peered into the dark, growing voids amongst the violet, a thought took form in his mind that shook him to the core.

*Is it possible?...Does he see my shattered heart?*

Stephen was puzzled as the serpent silently scanned him. His thoughts couldn’t help but wander, filing through his anxieties and his questions for the unique situation. He then noticed the gazer’s face shift a bit. Was he about to cry again?

No, if anything, the reddish face had softened, not stiffened. Was the snake also roaming around in his thoughts? What could he be thinking? As he watched the last of the gold powder fall away like snowflakes, Stephen felt he could read an inkling of the other’s thoughts.

*He’s...he’s really hurt. Has he..? Yeah, it seems like he’s been acting against his will. So why was he so eager about-- ...no wait, that’s just the animal in everyone. Everything does need to eat at some point, survival and all... That blue, it feels....human? ....yeah, I can’t put it as anything else.*

The more he looked into those eyes, the more he felt and the more he discovered in those opening windows.

*He looks beastlike, and he’s most definitely terrifying, sure...but there’s more than that. There’s something...hurting deep inside him. Something whimpering and shivering, something that’s gone brittle over the years, hidden under armor, a facade of great power...*

*...There’s a bleeding heart in there - A heart just like his own.*

Pivotal thoughts struck the duo like warhammers, yet they kept their ground, motionless and magnetized by the other’s eyes. They remained like that for several moments more, until the serpentine broke the silence, grabbing the floating, untied end of his previous mumblings. He spoke with a softness that matched his features.

*“Things are different now...”*

In their shared trance, one of the scaled thumbs waved over the human’s cheek, a mirroring to the gentle strokes the snake felt on his head earlier. He didn’t even register the motion as he continued speaking.

*“I have you here now...”*

Still dazed by their magnetism, the two were content just to watch each other. After a few moments of this, the snake noticed how peachy hue had spread across the human’s face. It had been red before, when he first shifted out of the human’s hold and saw tear lines running down his cheeks again. But... *Hadn’t that died down as they were standing there? Yeah, the face was paler a minute ago...* Suddenly, he noticed a buzzing feeling in his claw-tipped hands. *How long had that been there?* With that little pop of awareness, he noticed the same feeling in his cheeks as well.

*Huh? When did that come back?...Is it because...* he pondered for a second, drawing the connection that every time he felt that unnecessary energy, it was while he was touching the human’s face.
Upon making that conclusion, the feeling only seemed to intensify. What the hell?!

Stephen, still in a trance, felt bewildered as he watched a rosy tone blossom across the silver-haired’s face. The way the coral color popped against the cool undertones of his hair and framed sky-dyed eyes... it looked beautiful. He saw the tone grow redder and redder as his brain was slow to process the way the other flinched. He then felt the hands on his cheeks shaking. Huh? WHA-

Unknowing of how to process the odd sensation he had been feeling, the serpent threw his hands aside and darted back - reacting in the same way as someone who had just burnt their hands on hot metal or iron. In the sudden action, neither of the two had realized how the encircling mass of the serpentine tail would follow the humanoid frame as it jumped back in the air. The silver haired stayed upright just fine, strong bones and muscles curving over the sections of tail on the ground behind him.

The human was less fortunate - the thick section of scales that had been lying behind his feet and lightly touching his calves rushed into the criminal’s space. As his legs were knocked out from under him, Stephen yelped and started falling backwards. Fine-tuned reactivity caused the serpent to bolt forward, the motion being a familiar one. He wrapped his arms around the human’s form again - this time looping around his waist instead of his shoulders - and pulled the form towards his own. His own instincts firing as gravity yanked him down, Stephen reached up and wrapped around the reptillian’s neck, warm hands landing on his back as he was lifted upward.

Locked together, the two figures kept their hold on one another as they rushed to a halt, gravity causing each to tug at the other where their hands had shifted to. When they stopped, the human’s hands pressed flat against hair-covered shoulder blades while the snake’s rested along his spine, one at his middle and the other over his belt and tailbone in order to better prop him up. The snake let out a small grunt as some of his long hair was unintentionally yanked at when the duo stopped.

Yet neither surprise nor pain broke their mutual trance. If anything, that magnetism the pair had been feeling only seemed to get stronger. They had been embracing before, but not like this, not quite so close. Their torsos were pressed against one another - the position almost being a mirror to when the serpent was exploring and inspecting Stephen’s form before. The resemblance appeared as an imprint on the serpent’s mind, a veil of half-thought that he didn’t consciously recognize.

His hands, however, seemed to pick up on the thought. One hand was already on the small of the thief's back, already on the sloping surface. The pull felt like gravity as the serpent let his hand slide lower. His other hand rose up the human’s spine to better support his frame. But this time, the actions were not derived from hunger. Starvation had pushed to the back of his mind - he was instead consumed by... whatever that buzzing feeling was. Scaly fingers felt the soft surface of the thief's pants, gently pressing against the squishy muscles. His other hand couldn’t help but mimic the pressure, giving a gentle push and pressing the rogue closer to him, all the touch making his heart twist.

Stephen, without even knowing it, quietly gasped as the hand drifted downwards. The static-like feeling grew like wildfire as his body felt a gentle pressure against it, pushing it against the silver man’s chest and hips. The scales that adorned the hybrid's hands may have well been rocks floating on a stream of lava with the heat Stephen felt from them. Yet, even if he weren’t in a stunned state, he wouldn’t equate the feeling to a painful sear. He felt a kind of burning, something else he couldn’t identify. Unconsciously, he pressed his own hands against the silver-haired’s back and let them sink down, as consumed by roaring fire as much the serpent was.

Through the wisps of flame, the snake managed to feel a feather-light pang of annoyance - a little irk at the minor pulling sensation he felt on his hair. He tipped his head forward to ease the
tension, accidentally bumping his forehead against the thief’s in the process. Since the motion was not very forceful, the two only flinched.

However, the light impact did knock a sense of awareness into the dazy duo. Both of them felt electricity buzzing from where each contacted the other’s form. The air around them was charged as they realized the position they were in. With their chests held flush together, the quick-tempo of their hearts danced on both their ears, much like the tune of a drumline.

Rattled by their bumping hearts and the shivers that they both began to feel, both pairs of hands sputtered and jittered as they bounced off the other’s body. However, this left Stephen without any support in the air. The air was knocked out of his lungs as he was dropped onto the serpentine tail, his legs bending into the little gap where he had been previously standing. Shaking with a sense of embarrassment, the snake jolted again, adjusting the humanoid part of his spine to hold himself upright. His whole body feeling as if it were doused in fire, he quickly stammered out an apology

“I’m sorry! I-I don’t know what that was- I-I was j-just -- I noticed y-you falling and I- Are you okay?”

With just as much magma in his veins and reddened tone on his face, Stephen’s tone mimicked the frantic snake’s. His mind gave out an autopilot response as he propped himself up, his spine curving.

“It- it’s okay, I’m okay- fine! Not hurt, not badly. P-prob’ly just some bruises from earlier. R-really, I’m fine!”

Stephen froze as his head caught up to reality, notified by the mounds of scales he was lying upon. The plates beneath him felt somewhat cool to the touch, and much bigger than the fine scales he had felt on the humanoid wrists. He wanted to scramble off the long tail, yet his body remained stationary. Maybe it was because the creature had already demonstrated his complete physical power over him? He dared not bring out any of the silver-haired wrath by disturbing him any further, so his instincts locked him in place. As if under a hypnotic spell, Stephen had completely forgotten his surroundings and situation. He had forgotten how avid, monstrous hunger had gleamed in golden-yellow eyes.

**He had forgotten that he was the helpless prey, trapped in the apex predator’s grasp and all but bound and acid-boiled within the belly of the beast.**

The serpent watched as the way purple eyes darted around in an awkward flusteredness as the human propped himself partially upright, his hands behind his back and legs draped over the scales and into the little open pocket. His heart dropped to his stomach when he saw those eyes widen and lock in on him, mortal terror constricting his pupils and petrifying his form. He tried slowly shifting his arms forward, attempting to make a calming gesture. His fingers curled inwards when he saw Stephen flinch.

Pausing for a moment, his determination to change the situation drove his hands to reach out again. He held open palms out to the shivering human, who yelped at the movement.

*Not again! Things are going to be different this time...I swear they will!*

Chapter End Notes
Hello again!
Somehow fucking -G O D h i m s e l f- has noticed this work and really enjoys it (I'm still so shook about that AAAAAA) -- so I decided to upload this chapter a day early... (breaking my previous schedule of uploading once every 3 days, for reference...)

Hope you enjoy the little gift y'all - especially you, Eli~

As for the chapter itself...
Mm, the heart sure has its ways of showing itself, even in the most wild of situations... Isn't it interesting, the way Hosuh's heart is poking through? How his warmer side is overstepping past the animal within him?

MMM FEELINGS ARE F U N -- I wonder how these ones will go, how they'll affect things - especially with the duo's instincts being present and all... Well, that's a proposition for the future to explore. So, until next time, I'm gonna leave y'all to ponder that thought, think about the possibilities of what could happen next....
Chapter Notes

Sorry this one came out a smidge late - real life stuff had me busy...I hope y'all weren't too bothered by the wait!

...I also started a little something else that's ties back this project - hopefully I'll get that done and will be able to show y'all soon~

But for now, hope you enjoy the update!

*Things are going to be different this time...*

The serpentine’s will wasn’t going to waver now - he was determined to get through to this human, to diverge from the usual series of events that occurred when criminals were cast down here. Well, to deviate even further than he already had - normally animal impulses would’ve dyed the victim’s tongue and lips blue, hunger would’ve already cemented the end for the fallen prisoner.

Long locks shifting as he slighted forward, he spoke in the softest voice he could muster.

“It’s okay, I’m...I’m not going to hurt you....”

The human’s voice came out crackled and quiet.

“How do... H-how can I know that? Y-you already...”

The snake winced, knowing full well he was guilty of the human’s claim. The hunger, the hunt, the attempt to kill for a meal- all those things were real...but none desirable in the slightest to his conscience.

“I... I’m so sorry...so sorry.... I wasn’t myself...But I’m back, I’m here now...”

“...w-what does that mean?”

“I can... can get lost in my urges...those damned, powerful urges...but it’s okay, they’re under control. I’m in control of myself... n-not going to hurt you anymore..”

*He really did hate how his actions were torn between his true will and impulses.* A duality between a raw, unhinged beast and something much deeper and complex, something -no, *someone* - who only wishes to give, feel and spread warm-hearted love.

Stephen tensed up as the serpent tried leaning forward a little more. Seeing how that wasn’t making any progress, the hybrid stilled and retreated to his thoughts. ...

*I guess humans are similar to animals, too. They all have survival instincts, those primal forces running through ‘em. He’s...yeah, he’s acting just as such - a scared animal, a little critter backed into a corner, lying still in hopes that the predator will scurry away from its last-resort trick... Hmm, trying to talk things out isn’t going to go anywhere while he’s like this.*

... Should I...try holding him? I mean - I don’t know why, but - he *did* do the same to me earlier. It
felt. Really nice... really warm... I mean, he didn’t try to shake me off or anything. If anything, he was holding on to me too. Also... his face was changing color? And not by turning lighter, either - I’ve seen some humans’ skin turn pale, and I mean... they all do kind of turn reddish-purple under a strong vice...

But no, I wasn’t crushing him, not at that point. I was essentially just holding him... I mean... this just could be an odd trait of some other kind of creature. I mean... is he even human? I mean, nothing’s ever quite smelled like him before, never piqued my senses so much... But he looks pretty human, and his blood had that signature taste to it...

...I was doing little more than holding him earlier, and his face turned really... pinkish? Reddish? So, I guess humans can turn those colors too... But what does it mean? When they change color, it always means something...

...Could it mean... that he liked it too? Was that why he didn’t let go right away? Maybe, maybe... Perhaps I should try that later...

But for right now - considering how he’s so jumpy - even with how slowly I’m moving, while I’m just trying to calm him down... he’d probably start running if I get any closer. Yeah, trying to touch him at all’s a bad idea right now... What to do, what to do...

In the midst of his pondering, another idea floated to his head. Maybe that might work... Worth a shot, right?

“Here, uhh... Let me show you something.”

The snake pulled its lower body towards itself in order to move, the whole length following in tandem. The circular, uncoiling motion caused the human to move as well, rotating with the shifting supports beneath him. Unexpecting of the motion, the thief's limbs and voice responded with a sputter - ultimately leaving him sprawled out on the tail even more so than before.

“Oh yeah, it might be a good idea to hop off my tail there…”

Upon the request, Stephen finally hurried off of the mass, limbs flailing as his hands and feet scrambled to get to the stone floor.

“O-oh! I-ah-- I’m so sorry! I-I-” His voice cracked and his breath hitched before he could speak again, his tone matching his plastered-open eyes. “Please don’t hurt me for that!”

“Wha- No. I’m not gonna-- it wasn’t- It was okay, I didn’t mind... N-now, uh, come along.”

The silver-haired slithered over to one of the edges of the cavern, gesturing to part of the wall.

“It, uh... making stuff like this... it shows control over myself, no? ‘Least, I think it should count for that…”

Stephen stayed still for several moments, chest heaving and his gaze locked on the snake. The blue-silver beast made no moves towards him, and what little he did move was slow. He rubbed up and down one of his dyed forearms with his opposite hand while his tail gilded towards his humanoid torso. His whole form was self-contained, closed in on itself. His head was somewhat downcast, his sky-colored eyes shifted between the thief, the walls and the floor.

The hybrid was still massive and powerful. Stephen’s instincts reminding him about the full capability the silver haired possessed, how he could easily strike and kill in a moment’s notice. His gut screamed about the monster, fear shooting through his system when his subconscious replayed
the way the beast grew excited watching him struggle, the way he eagerly spoke about wanting to swallow him whole.

But his conscious perception of the creature before him didn’t align with the blaring sirens. The more he scanned the serpent in the shadows, the less he saw the appearance of a monster. If anything, he appeared... nervous? Shy? His tail curling into a ball around his lowering, scrunching torso - the rogue felt a timid atmosphere radiating from the hybrid.

As Stephen sat propped up with his hands, his breathing gradually calmed and his muscles started to relax. He drew his own legs inwards, shifting his hands to his sides. His eyes widened a fraction and he froze for a split-second when the blue orbs caught on to the movement. Seeing no other reaction, Stephen continued shifting - he slowly rose to his knees, then to stand fully upright. His form somewhat mirrored the snake’s - his shoulders curved inwards, limbs pulled close to himself. Still not seeing any hostility from the frosted pile of silver, he gradually extended his empty palms and curled fingers out, arms bent towards the form in a gesture - halfway surrendering himself, halfway trying to disarm the serpent. He paused for several seconds before taking a small step. Still no big reaction, so the thief kept inching forwards.

*He doesn’t seem quite as scared anymore... That’s something, that’s good.* The serpent watched as the human got up and approached him. The movements were all so small, so slow. He had sunken down his form, resting his arms and torso on a thick coil of his own tail - lowering himself to about half the height of the standing rogue. The silver-haired tried to accomplish a couple things at once with his own movements - his own comfort was one, sure, but he also knew from gut feeling that shrinking down, looking smaller would help him look more approachable - or at the very least, less intimidating. He has also settled a fair bit away from the drawing, trying to give the frightened human plenty of space to observe the wall and - hopefully - to calm down.

The strategy seemed to be taken well, as the scared scoundrel’s form seemed to loosen slightly as he tiptoed closer.

Even in the dimming light of a fading sunset, Stephen’s eyes had already had plenty of time to adjust to the darkness. There were markings of some sort, thin and thick black lines. It definitely wasn’t natural - even with the bumpy, jagged texture of the stone, the lines still curved and weaved together in deliberate clusters that couldn’t be formed by the cracking, stiff lines naturally found in rock. It was clearly intentional.

It was definitely some kind of drawing. *What the...?* Raw curiosity started to creep in and take place of some of his fears, driving his movements and stowing some of his apprehensions away to the back of his mind.

As Stephen slowly walked closer, he got a much better view of what the particular picture was supposed to be. It had a smooth, curved head, a small beak, little circular eyes - it was like a portrait of some species of common bird. One of those tiny, cute birds that dotted the air and trees, such as a bluebird, a cardinal or a canary.

Curiosity settled in his even more, his questions overtaking even more of the fear that had wracked his frame. He was deeply intrigued by the details, scrunching down with his knees to get an even closer look. The way the lines grew bolder and finer - it reminded him of a calligrapher’s penmanship, those high-prized artists. He was perplexed by the way they all flowed in unison without branching or bumping into one another... *and the fact that it was done on the tricky texture of the wall.* Stephen’s eyes locked in on the piece, and the rest of his frame mirrored that focus. He kept tracing and retracing the lines in his head and with his finger in the air, trying to figure out the
cool-colored hands produced the image. Within the matter of a minute, he had gone from being lost in fear to becoming lost in wonder and speculation as he remained perched in front of the piece.

The scale-gloved chuckled to himself internally, the violet’s dumbfoundedness being amusing to him. He craned his head a bit to get a better look at the rogue’s expression - who didn’t seem to even register the movement. Stephen’s eyes were open and moving in jittering motions. Despite the shakiness, the serpent couldn’t help but stare at the violet irises. As he stayed there, a thought drifted to his mind. *That bright purple...it’s really pretty....*

*Wait! Where did that come from?!*

The silver haired pressed his lips in a thin line, accidently getting some of his long bangs caught in them. Carefully, he moved the stroke of hair out of the way - he didn’t want to break the rogue’s concentration, despite already having made enough movement to cross his normal threshold of awareness. Thankfully for the serpent, he was blissfully unaware of his surroundings at the given moment.

Stephen’s lips then parted, another signal of his awe. They moved only to murmur the word “How?” on occasion. Taking in as many details as Stephen was, blue eyes shot over to the source of the motion immediately. Although the outermost layer of skin was slightly cracked and dry, the area behind the line where his mouth would usually close had a slight glimmer to it - looking slick and smooth. Even the drier parts looked rounded and somewhat plump, all parts dyed with a salmon hue. *That color’s so pretty, too...* He watched every minute movement when Stephen muttered again - his mouth opened and closed slowly, teeth barely touching his bottom lip before retreating backwards. Maybe Stephen noticed the dryness in his lips at that point - that’s when his tongue poked out of his mouth for a second before slipping back behind closed doors. The serpent, already zeroed in on the region, didn’t miss a thing - seeing the pink muscle tense slightly to tap his upper lip and observing just how smooth the movement of the saliva-slicked tendril was.

*He really wondered how that tongue would taste if it were pressed against his own.*

A thin plume of yellow burst from his irises, the saffron glimmering as it fell like glitter in water. Liquid started pooling in his mouth as he got lost in his imagination for a moment. He was snapped back to reality by the feeling of molten fire running through his cheeks.

*Dammit, this again!? What the hell’s this strange feeling? Why am I thinking like this? What’s going on, what’s causing it?*

The snake had no time to further explore the thought as Stephen leaned back and spoke with enthusiasm

*“Holy shit. How the hell did you even do this-- It looks amazing!”*

Stephen turned to the artist beside him, his fears forgotten for a split second. However, upon gazing at the scaly masses of the serpent, his anxieties returned to the front of his mind. Never having gotten off of his feet when he observed the drawing, he hopped slightly back from the snake.

He was returned with a flinch of the hybrid’s features - Stephen kept his eyes on them several moments. He noticed that the expression was slowly...shifting? He set his focus on examining details again - this time on the artist’s face instead of his work.

The expression had clearly started from a clear startle, a widening made from a surprise. Stephen had jumped back, and he presumed that the movement was unexpected. It now looked...saddened?
No, that wasn’t quite right. The features were... tightening up, actually. Failing to align with the droopiness that was telltale of blue mood, Stephen wrote off sadness. He noticed the way the slightly sparkling blue eyes were still open fairly wide, even after several seconds since he had moved. He also noticed the way his mouth was pressed shut, forming a thin line that seemed to be a sign of nervousness.

Wait a second... he noticed that the hybrid’s lips looked different - how the color had changed at some point in the last few minutes. They now were much closer to a salmon hue than a skin tone. He glanced back up towards the serpentine eyes and realized that the skin around them had changed as well, the color only accentuated by the coolness of the grey hair. Jumbled by anxiety and absorbed in detail, Stephen’s voice quietly relayed his thoughts.

“Are...you okay? Your face, it’s…red, bright re-”

Stephen tried to stop himself, only then realizing that he was talking - and that he was asking about an embarrassing and possibly provoking subject. But the damage had already been done, the blue eyes widening with his violet ones following suit. The serpentine face was already quite dyed, and the color only seemed to be getting richer.

Stephen’s mind raced with nerves, unaware that the snake was doing the same.

Huh?! The hybrid had never heard of his face doing that before....Was that caused by the fire in his veins? Was the heat and tingling feeling in his cheeks visible?

He knew that those were questions he would have to save for later - he was in the spotlight to speak now, so he uttered the first thing he could think of.

“Wha- Oh, I’m fine, I’m good. I-I was just uh.. Surprised! I’m surprised you like the drawing there that much - that was just me playing with style for a bit there…”

Fuck- Why did I say that? I mean, it’s not wrong or anything...But still, where did that come from?

“A-Ah, uhm-- gotcha….” The thief’s shaky voice trailed off. Unsure of what else to do and afraid of accidentally spurring the snake’s wrath, he decided to take another look back at the piece. His eyes followed the slope of the lines one more time, trailing off out of his own nervousness. With the movement, he noticed something that he had previously missed.

“Hey, what’s this right here? These little marks…”

He squinted in the low light, trying to read the small sigils. They were thin, straight lines with curved sections that especially stuck out from the rock. The whole sequence looked a bit warped from the jagged section of rock, but it was still plenty legible.

“Hosuh? What does that mean?”

“Hm? Oh, that- That's just my name there. It doesn’t mean anything in particular - at least, I don’t think it does.”

“Oh!” Stephen was surprised at the word. Hosuh... So he actually has a name... I mean - he seems to be part human, so I’m not exactly surprised, per say. Yet it’s still.. interesting to hear what it is...

The scoundrel repeated the name a few times in his head, letting it roll off his metaphorical tongue. ...It sounds...soft. Easy to say, the name doesn’t have any sharp or rough edges. He glanced between the writing and the serpent for a moment. He didn’t really know why, but the name seemed to fit the silver-haired pretty well. Maybe because he became much more docile?
Trying to figure out what that unknown reason was, he replayed the name a couple more times.

*Hosuh...Hosuh...*

*...It’s a pretty cute name, actually.*

*Wait, what the fuck was that?* The rogue’s eyes widened as the thought floated by his mind. He had no idea where the notion came from, or why it showed up in his pondering.

He felt the serpent’s gaze on him - he knew he had to make up something to cover his wide-eyed look, and to avoid boring or upsetting the serpent. So he thought fast and bullshitted something, as he had with guards and patrols so many times before.

“So is this a signature or something?”

“Signature...” Hosuh’s eyes seemed to lose focus for a moment as he paused.

“I recognize the word, but don’t quite remember what it means... I think you’re right, though - from what I can recall.” Another pause, accompanied with

“Ah, well, a signature - that’s just when someone writes their name on something - either to claim it as their own, or to show approval for something. It’s pretty normal for artists to sign their pieces, proving that it’s their work and all.”

“Mmm. Yeah, then that’s what that is. I mean, I’ve been doing that ‘signature’-thing by my drawings for a while...It’s nothing special.”

“Hm...I still think it’s pretty neat, actually. It’s a good habitat. Claim what’s rightfully yours.”

*What’s rightfully mine?* For some reason unbeknownst to Hosuh, that particular phrase stuck around in his head. He never really had much of anything he truly thought of his own - the notion of a change was intriguing and strange, transfixed his mind...

“How? I-is there something else you want to show me?”

*Wha- Oh!* The hybrid hadn’t realized his eyes were pointed towards the human before him. *Wait, weren’t we both just looking at the old bird drawing? And when did he get up?* Sure enough, Stephen was noticeably closer - he probably got up and shuffled a bit closer before scrunching down on his feet again. Still nervous for no apparent reason, Hosuh quickly came up with something to spit out.

“Uhm- Oh yeah! I-I’ve got more stuff, if you wanna take a look..”

“Of course! If they’re even half as good as this one, they’ll be amazing!”

“Wha-? I-I mean, that little experiment there did end up turning out alright...But I don’t think--”

“Er! S-sorry if I said anything off!”

Stephen was reeling at himself. Sheer curiosity had gotten the best of him, motioned him to move closer to the snake and try to figure out what exactly was going on with him. But now his thoughts were rapidly bouncing around his skull, worrisome about his endeavor and how it could end poorly for him. He tried to keep things as calm as possible, even with his words flying like bullets out of his mouth.

“Uhm-m-- I-I just meant.. You’ve clearly got skill, - far more than I could ever live up to. I’m j-just
excited to see what else you can do!”

The pink-faced perked up, his head rising off from where it had been resting on crossed arms, letting out a short, surprised hum in the process. The human also let out a small sound - but his was a bit lower pitched and indicative of fear. The long-haired continued to raise his upper body - however, it was a slow movement as he had picked up the prisoner’s scared cue. Once he was upright, he mustered as much of a calming tone as he could.

“It’s okay, you didn’t say anything wrong. And even if you did... I’m not going to hurt you, if that’s what you were thinking.”

Hosuh held his palms open, pointing them down towards the thief, who had frozen in place and was still crunched down in front of his coiled tail. Seeming to read the gesture, the human shifted a bit and placed a hand on the rocky ground in front of him to better support himself. However, he froze up again when he realized that his fingers were nudged against part of the giant tail.

Seeing how his eyes widened again, Hosuh knew the thief would need further affirmation.

“It’s okay...Not gonna hurt you…”

The mohawked form loosened a bit, but still maintained its pose. Hosuh gazed down at him, eyes roaming his frame a bit. His loose tan cloak made a nice contrast to his bright purple hair and pale purple cord around his waist. The black shirt underneath looked comfortable, as well as the pants that seemed to be made of the same material - although they had a deep brown tone instead. He saw how black boots rose up to his knees- then he took particular notice of the way his feet were positioned. They were bent and placed close together as Stephen had perched himself on his toes.

How is he supporting his whole body like that? With all that weight pressing down on such a small spot... Wouldn’t that be uncomfortable?

Hosuh looked closer at the thief, sticking out his tongue slightly to detect the air. He noticed that he was wobbling and shaking slightly. The silver-haired tried to imagine what having legs would be like, and how bending them in the manner before him would feel like. It took him a couple seconds, but he got what he deemed to be a decent image in his mind.

Oh wow- that’d be really painful!

He cringed at the imagination and the awkward bending of bones. Why was the human doing that to himself?

No more of that , he resolved with a flick of his tongue.

The giant tail shifted a bit as Hosuh leaned forward - the movement causing Stephen to pull his hand back towards himself as if it had been burned. He paused for a second, his open arms a bit further away from himself than before. One of the rogue’s eyebrows quirked up a fraction in confusion before darting up in shock.

The silver-haired rushed forward, leaning down and wrapping his arms around Stephen - one behind his calves and the other around his waist. He let out a yelp as the frosted blue arms tightened and his feet were swept out from underneath him. Hosuh lifted the the thief off the ground and carried the both of them into the air, supporting their combined weight with his arms and a thick section of his tail. With the quick bending of his back and uncoiling motion of his tail, the duo was suspended several feet in the air for a second as the thief stuttered.

Continuing to move the rest of his tail, he layered the sections with one on top of another, on top of
another - stacking the rings of the coil as best he could in a short timeframe. He then set the human down on top of the pile, the arm under him tightening to pull his legs forward before relaxing. Hosuh leaned back a fraction, keeping his arm pressed on Stephen’s back for an extra second before letting up - but not letting go, just loosely resting.

With everything having happened in a matter of seconds, Stephen’s shocked system was rendered near-useless, unable to react outside of making a few noises. As soon as they started shifting upwards, the rogue immediately assumed the worst. He thought he was going to be thrown or swung around - he thought the serpent was going to slam him into a wall or try to bash his skull in.

Yet, in defiance of all expectations and before Stephen really knew it, he was seated on top of the serpent, his legs draping down the tail to a small pocket of ground in the middle of the coil - with long silver hair slithering around his body and scaly arms surrounding his form as the blue-eyed snake loomed closely above him.
Well-Meaning Motions

Chapter Summary

It's easy to miscommunication when you're only talking in touch.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Sorry this one took longer than usual to get out there - I had some stuff to do irl. Well, that, and...
I MADE A DRAW THIS IN YOUR STYLE CHALLENGE BASED ON THE FIC HERE.
It's Snake!Hosuh, except I made multiple versions of the piece- one with lighting and environment similar to that found in the story, and the other in X-RAY that shows his anatomy!
(I mean I'm gonna gradually explore/reveal things about his anatomy throughout the story, but... I don't know, it just paints different pictures and feelings upon viewing versus describing things with words.)
It's over on my Instagram - despacit_oof!
https://www.instagram.com/despacit_oof/?hl=en

Check it out! I hope you like the artwork, and I hope you enjoy the update!

They both froze for several seconds for their own reasons- Stephen’s brain was trying to catch up on the fact that he wasn’t hurt, and the aforementioned was trying to avoid scaring the thief any further. Their wide eyes locked, blue meeting purple and both being frozen and having no clue as to what next to do. Aside from their breathing and a few questioning, confused noises from Stephen, the duo was quiet - neither knew what words to say at the moment. Without words to fill the space, the pair’s eyes began to wander.

Stephen analyzed Hosuh’s features as he held himself above him. With the fog of fear having thinned, he could gather his focus and process what he saw. Long strands flowed from his head, glistening as if they were threads made of fine silver. The hair, even as messy as it was - with dust laced throughout the whole length of the mass and strands flying out in all directions- was a luscious thing. Stephen chuckled internally, entertained by how easily he could imagine how people, especially nobles, would pine over the weave.

His eyes wandered up and down the veil as it shrouded him again. This time, though, it didn’t feel trapping - just containing, like he was in his own little bubble. He was still confused as to why he was plucked off of his feet all of a sudden - but, for some odd reason he couldn’t quite pick out, he only felt a faint trace of the fear he had felt minutes ago. Maybe it was because the serpent had been moving so slowly? Maybe it was because he hadn’t made any hostile moves towards him, not trying to hurt him anymore?

With those thoughts, his eyes snapped back up to the figure in question and let out a near-inaudible
Stephen couldn’t help but notice how thick strokes of hair framed Hosuh’s face and accentuated the features. Vibrant eyes that danced with tiny flakes of gold paired nicely with the icy undertones of silver strands. As his eyes meandered, the serpent’s mouth popped out against everything else.

His lips had a warm tone, a light tint of redishness that rested upon a slim jawline. They were definitely dry, the skin a tad cracked - yet, somehow, it didn’t look off-putting in the slightest. If anything, there seemed to be quite a smoothness and softness present.

_Gah! Stop it, brain!
_

Stephen felt a warmth on his cheeks. For a moment, he tried to fool himself into thinking it was simply due to the hybrid’s warm breaths ghosting over his face. The plan backfired, as the thought only intensified the tingling feeling.

Then he realized something...he hadn’t been feeling the serpent’s breath before. He blinked again and drew his focus from fantasizing to reality, and saw how things had shifted while he was lost in his head.

_Wait a second - when did he get so close?!
_

Sure enough, Hosuh had leaned down and was noticeably closer to his face than before. Stephen immediately tried to figure out when he had moved, but had no time left to question any further as he felt scale-dressed arms tighten around him and a warmth pressed to his chest as Hosuh leaned his head over to a side and rested his chin on one of his shoulders.

_W-what the- How did this happen!?_ He tried to rewind to a minute prior in his head for a moment...

With the rogue beneath him again, Hosuh couldn't help but stare - but his motivations in doing so were different this time. He was no longer lost in a frenzy of instinct, his eyes had been cleared of dust. Instinct was a thing he could identify in with his conscious knowledge - he could always pinpoint his instincts as the culprit that had driven his actions after they had been enacted. But this time he felt both focused and unaware at the same time, not knowing what force was calling for his attention and guiding his eyes but still feeling a need to jot down every detail of the picture before him in his mind.

Violet eyes were blown open, giving an expansiveness a shifting sea of the royal hue that hosted the dialating voids of his pupils. Playing off of the warmer undertones of his eyes, Hosuh noticed how a redness dusted the thief’s cheeks.

He recognized the same thing had happened last time the human was under him - but only now was he really aware and acknowledging the detail. It was just a simple color change, so Hosuh was unsure as to why it caught his attention. Something, there was something about the tone that was catching his eyes. The tone looked warm, it looked soft. It looked... _pretty_?

_Why does that color look so entrancing?...I’m pretty sure I saw it before - why didn’t I really recognize it then?...
_

Hosuh was growing confused in his own thoughts. Maybe if he recalled where he first noticed the tone, maybe it would help explain why it’s only so eye-catching now... He started replaying the thoughts and events from the past minutes, metaphorically flipping through the pages of short-term memory.
Shortly, he had zeroed in on when he and the rogue were tied together in an embrace as tears were drying on both of their faces. That’s when he really saw this phenomenon before, the first time he really noted the coral color in any conscious capacity. In that instant, a thought replayed in his head.

*When humans change color, it always means something…*

Hosuh recalled how nice the hug felt. It felt so warm, so comfortable. *Did he like it as well? Did he feel the same? I mean, he didn’t back away… nor did he let go for quite some time…* He did consider an idea about trying to hold the human again, to try to calm him down from his frightened state. With the recollection, his mind snapped its focus to the weight on his hands and tail. *Oh…* He had nearly forgotten he was loosely cradling the thief’s frame in his arms already. *Well, things have already gotten this far… He doesn’t seem scared - might as well give it a shot?*

Hosuh leaned closer to the thief, intending to pull him into another, gentle hold. Yet, he found himself hesitant, seemingly unable to make any further movement. *Wha…. He didn’t know why he was pausing- what was with this human and making him behave that way? What was making him act so different than usual?*

Suddenly, the violet eyes snapped back to his own, seeming to be more focused than before. With a sudden burst of nerves and motivation, with an anxious ‘now or never’ kind of mindset, he simultaneously leaned down and pulled the rogue’s body closer to his own. He made sure there wasn’t much pressure against the thief’s front and back as he drew him in, a light-hearted attempt to mimic the way the human wrapped his arms around him when he was crying earlier. Even though he had no idea why he behaved in that way, the human had comforted him then - and Hosuh wanted to return the favor.

*Besides, he would’ve had to have been in pain and discomfort in that scrunched up form on the ground… this should be a lot more comfortable, right?* That was the idea Hosuh pinned as his motivation for why he was acting this way at the moment - and definitely not because of the way his heart was starting to race in his chest.

The thief’s heart was in a similar predicament. Stephen’s heart had already been rushing a bit without him even realizing it - his focus had been elsewhere. Now it was outright pounding as he felt the serpentine’s torso pressed against his chest and his tail against his legs and back, his whole body almost cocooned by the silver-haired. Overwhelmed and flustered, his mind kicked into overdrive and words started spilling from his mouth.

“What the- the hell are you doing?! .. why- What is-- Ah !”

Pins pricked at Hosuh’s cheeks at the sputtering scoundrel’s speech. In his surprise, his body tensed and he flicked out his tongue - an instinctual response, a means by which to detect the scents of things and scout out potential dangers in the area. However, with his chin rested on the thief’s shoulder and his face turned somewhat inwards, the thin tendril ended up swiping against the back of his neck.

Stephen shivered at the ticklish feeling, his arms darting from where they had been hanging by his sides to grab at the first thing they could - which happened to be the middle of Hosuh’s back, which felt fiery to the touch. Along with that, his shoulders tensed and rose up at the feather-like brushing, knocking against Hosuh’s chin and causing him to let out a small hiss from nearly biting his tongue. In his own flinching, Hosuh drew his head back, as well as redacted the arm that was behind the thief’s knees.
Fuck! With his brain detecting the pain in the noise, it started jumping to frightened conclusions. Oh god, did that accidentally upset him? Would that break this...this trance or whatever that’s going on here? Is he gonna... go back to before? Oh no, not that, not that!

Stephen’s train of thought halted for a moment when the snake had leaned back enough. Although Hosuh only meant to get away from the little knock and look at him, Stephen’s instincts set the presumption that the one little screw-up sealed his fate, breaking the serpent’s veil of tameness and knocking sense back into him.

No! --Please let this be fine- please stay calm please stay calm --

Stephen’s body jolted in an attempt to wriggle away, which caused his both the human and animalistic parts of his mind to wince - he had already gotten in this mess by mistakes of movement, why was he trying the same ineffective things? Even though the hold on him was very light and could be shaken out of easily, he knew how things could quickly change. The massive tail was already at his back and all around him - it’d only take seconds for it to bind tight against his frame, to crush inwards, to drain his lungs and snap his bones like thin branches all in a matter of minutes.

His unconscious deemed that he had gone back to being a starving beast - and that he was salivating at his prey, the bountiful meal in his grasp - when he saw that forked tongue dart out again and again in quick succession, much like he had before.

Oh shit oh fuck oh- AH!

His nerves were rising by the second as the creature stared at him. Knowing that movement was a terrible idea, Stephen stilled and stared back, eyes drawn to his jaw by fear and the blurring motion from the scanning tongue. This quickly accelerated to a near-boiling point as he scanned lower and noticed something - bright red lines of his own now-dried blood ran down the hunter’s throat, ending in faded, broken dots creeping up by his chin. His brain had been somewhat in a trancelike state and too focused elsewhere to really pay any mind to the detail before - now the crimson was all he could keep his eyes on as his skin grew cold.

His high-wired nerves fired again when the silver-haired leaned down towards him. Looking to now gold-speckled eyes as he moved, the thief noticed that they were fixed on his throat. For a split second, there was fear that he was going to be bitten in that spot again. Once again in defiance of his expectations, he felt surprisingly soft skin gently press against the region, the silver-haired having turned and buried his face in the crook of his neck. He tried to catch his breath for a moment, tried to calm a heart that was racing for a variety of reasons - but was cut off as his brain short-circuited at the feeling of the split-ended tongue running against his skin. It wasn’t a faint brushing either - there was some definite pressure behind the movement.

Stephen didn’t register the high-pitched, breathless whine he made until after the fact, when the serpent seemed to respond to the noise. At the sound, the serpent made one more quick swipe at his throat before drawing his head back. Stephen’s mind resembled a television coated in static, sparks and electricity running through his mind and veins like wires.

He barely even registered when Hosuh moved again - saw a bluish blur passing by the hybrid’s face and, a half-second later, another press around his neck. This perplexed Stephen. Hosuh was touching him again in that same spot… yet he was still in front of him? He felt...whatever was on his neck move in repeating strokes.

Wha-?.... With the system being so overloaded, he failed to react to the motion as his brain
struggled to burst through the feelings and confusion - and to catch up on what was going on or how this ended up happening.

Hosuh had drawn the thief’s body to his own in an attempt to bring him comfort - the way he was putting all that weight on such small areas seemed quite painful to Hosuh. That, and the notion that *embraces just feel nice*, as Hosuh had discovered earlier. He didn’t expect the thief’s surprise, a shiver racing up his spine when he felt human hands dart to his sides and pulling his tongue out of his mouth. For a split second, it brushed across the human’s skin and captured an enticing scent. Then he felt a reeling feeling pulling his body backwards as jerking shoulders knocked into his jaw. It didn’t hurt much, but he still let out a small hissing groan at the pain.

For a moment, his focus was overcome by the sensation on his tongue. As little yellow particles formed in his eyes, he picked out the components of the aroma. There were warm components, something akin to slight eartheness or smokiness paired with another trace that could be compared to a whiff cooked meat. There were also sweetnesses in the mix, faint traces of herbs or spices, as well as even a couple floral scents. There were also other indescribable elements - although this presence wasn’t surprising. He had encountered humans many times before and knew that they all had those *somethings* that were unique to each one of their scents, and assumed it could only be this specific human’s trace he was detecting. Whatever it was, for some reason he couldn’t figure out, that unique lacing that this human had was particularly attention-grabbing, particularly transfixing.

All the components swirled together in harmony- Hosuh found it all so enticing, so wonderfully intoxicating.

That buzzing feeling was running through his cheeks again, that bug that had been ever-so perplexing him ever since the prisoner fell down here. Despite its intriguing nature, though, the tingling was ignored for the moment.

There was something...off about the scent. A faint air of something was present, and for some reason it caused a small pang to tug at his heart. Laced in the mix, at the edges of his senses, there was a trace of… *something metallic*?

His eyes refocused on the human in his grasp. He had gotten the trace from around his neck, so that was the first place he looked - and the only place he needed to in order to answer his question. Orange-brown smudges crept around the outline of the affected region, surrounding the field of crimson that filled in the oval-shaped area. Tracing up the streams of red that ran down his front, in the middle of all the mess lied two dark dots, two holes dyed nearly black with clumps of dried blood.

He had been so focused on calming the human to pay it mind before. That, and the fact that the mess had been turned away from his point of view for the past several minutes had taken his attention away from the occurrence. Remorse tugged at his heart, and the imaginations of the pain from the wounds twisted his facial features into a wince. He had inflicted the gashes out of habitat, out of instinct when that monstrous, ravenous side of him bid him to strike and capture a hunt. But he didn’t let instinct serve as justification for the act - *he* was still the one to have caused the wounds, so he felt the responsibility to amend for the deed.

Things had already been going so differently than before, things had already formed such a special predicament - he wasn’t going to revert to his old ways now. His determination to try to connect with the human wasn’t going to falter now.
He leaned down close to the wound, feeling a strange, strong magnetism that tugged at him more and more the closer he got. Odd, he hadn’t felt that before when so close to a human. Maybe it was originating from the particular, addicting scent of this purple-haired person? Wherever it was coming from, he had no way to really resist it- much in the same way he hadn’t been able to draw off the little bursts of electricity that kept coming and going from his face and heart. Drawn in by the gravity-esque force, he gently pressed his face into the rogue’s skin, surprised at the smoothness and utter fire that seemed to dance behind the surface.

Hosuh didn’t let all the pulling forces distract him - he was still set in his self-made mission to help the human. Buried in the thief’s neck, he stuck out his tongue to start lapping at the wounds and the mess of red.

He had disdained the sight of blood for a long time, it was always indicative of so much suffering. Besides, cleaning wounds always seemed to help with the healing process anyways. He had always done the same to himself whenever he’d end up with bloody scrapes and scratches - he was just trying to pitch in to patch up the gashes, his desire to help far outweighing his lack of fondness for the iron-laced taste of blood.

To Hosuh’s surprise, he heard a drawn-out squeak from the scoundrel. Oh no, did that hurt?! He had been halfway through a second lick at the tainted skin, so he finished it with a quick brushing before leaning back. He drew one of his hands to his face in a nervous gesture, his jaw quivering slightly from said anxiety and the taste of metal - but also from the flavor of skin he had found so damn delicious when he was consumed by the wild and so curious to inspect what he then saw as prey. Plumes of dandelion dust burst in his eyes and the electricity in his cheeks turned to lightning upon recalling how his hands mapped out the rogue’s body and the way his mouth watered when he nibbled at the other side of his neck, eager for a little taste test. Yellowish eyes glanced at the spot and noted how the flesh had turned slightly pink from the way his teeth had brushed by the region.

Snapping himself out of his momentary monstrous trance, he realized that saliva had started to accumulate in maw again. Wanting to distract himself from a sudden feeling of embarrassment and to continue his initiative, he used the pool and licked his fingers he had been holding near his mouth anyways. He hovered his hand over the thief’s neck before that gravity pulled him in again. Gently holding his neck, Hosuh moved his slightly shaky thumb in repeating strokes over the outer regions of the bloodstain, watching as the orange and red tones were smeared slightly and swept away in dry flecks.

When the section was mostly cleared, he shifted his hand downward to try to clear more of the coating. After a few swipes, he realized he was just batting away the driest parts and wasn’t being as effective as he could be. He took his hand off of the warm neck, bringing it back to his face to lick his fingertips again.

The movement - more specifically, the fleeing of the warmth that had built from the scaled appendage - tugged Stephen out of his trance and returned to him some of his senses. Still overwhelmed and overloaded from the serpent’s actions and the way he was still being held, Stephen couldn’t voice the questions on his mind. Couldn’t ask what was going on or why, couldn’t form the words to speak or to even form coherent thoughts. He just stayed quiet, eyes looking up to yellow dust that swirled in a blue backdrop and a bluish hand moving to Hosuh’s face. He was confused until he felt the hand against his neck again, unable to stop himself from leaning slightly into the touch. As the fingers rubbed against the side of his throat, he felt a soothing warmth that caused him to close his eyes and let out a near-inaudible hum.

When Hosuh had to draw back his hand again in order to better clean the wounds, Stephen’s face
scrunched up slightly, reflecting his annoyance at the fleeing of the warmth. The long-haired was too focused to pick up on this cue. Another minute passed, more of the blood was cleared, and the hand retreated again. Stephen let out a louder, slightly irritated hum at the air floating over his neck and the way it chilled the dampened regions of his skin.

Hosuh picked up on the quiet noise, pausing for a moment while his tongue was pressed to his fingers. He hadn’t heard that kind of noise in such a long time that it caught him off-guard for a brief moment. He still didn’t pick up on the thief’s irritation, though, with his focus being on patching up the gouge marks as best he could.

He rubbed his hand again, cringing at the shallow dips he felt at the epicenters of the scene. The holes, even as filled as they were with dried and drying blood, were still deep enough to form slight valleys - which served as evidence of just how bad the bite was, how far his fangs had sunken into his victim’s flesh. He winced at the pangs of guilt he felt at his heart, but also felt pushed on by them to keep gazing at the chilling crime scene and keep trying to make up for his actions.

He had cleared about two thirds of the affected area before he started drawing his hand back again. He paused - his hand just barely off his skin- when he heard an annoyed hum, louder yet again than the last. Hosuh was growing more and more worried. Was all of this hurting him? Despite knowing that rogue was only making the sounds when he moved his hand away, he still couldn’t help but think his presence, not his absence, was the thing that was troubling. Hesitantly hovering for a moment, the snake pulled his hand back and continued to his effort with quicker motions than before, noticing how the human seemed to wiggle in his grasp in the moment his hand was missing.

Having got the worst of mess cleaned up, Hosuh tried to move his hand back in order to get the last lingering orange-brown smears and crackled red lines running down the violet-haired’s front. Yet as soon as he started moving, he heard a groan as loud as conversational speech from the thief and felt him shift even further against his arm and tail. Suddenly, there was a warm weight on his hand that pushed it back from whence it tried to move. Blue eyes dotted with sunflower spots widened at the sight - the human had his hand on top of Hosuh’s scaly one, actively holding it against his own neck. The serpent’s cheeks vibrated in sync with his hand as the thief let out a pleased hum at the warm contact, lips curving slightly upwards and cheeks pushing up against still-closed eyes.

At that moment, there was only one thought on Hosuh’s worried mind amidst all the buzzing, all the fire and all the feelings going through his body and head.

*Did I break him?!*
Did I break him?!

Hosuh’s worries spun around in his skull. *Humans didn’t normally behave like this around me... Well, then again, I’ve been acting different too... Ah, why does that even matter - he’s acting weird regardless! Shit... How much blood did he lose? There was quite a lot to clean up... Is the loss affecting his brain? Could I give him- no, I don’t think that’d work. Dammit, how do I fix thi-

Hosuh’s racing thoughts were interrupted by the purple-haired letting out another hum. This time, instead of sounding annoyed or irritated, it sounded very relaxed and somewhat cuddly. His hand quivered at the thief’s next move - he mirrored the motion he been doing before, the beige thumb rubbing across the fine scales on the back of his hand.

He could swear the human’s skin grew even hotter to the touch as he stared down in awe. The rogue looked so calm, so soothed, his face loose and features relaxed. The sight made Hosuh’s chest flutter - and this time he had at least a partial guess as to why.

He’d seen many faces all relaxed like this before, but it had never brought him anything other than satisfaction to his inner beast - after all, it was the easiest evidence of death he could see. It was a marker that his prey had faltered, that his hunt was secured as their life fizzled out, as their body stilled beneath him and turned to a cooling corpse. Even though he had been through the routine many times, even though he had long since gotten into the pattern of putting his head and heart aside during his hunts, even though he long since stopped trying to foster attachments to the damned and doomed and even though he slept through the passing harrows of tearful days and weeks... Every face of the departed left new paintings upon his memory, each kill always left a new laceration upon his tender soul.

Just like the rest of the evening, just like the rest of the events under twilight, this was all so different from the happenings of the past. This time, the human wasn’t slack due to asphyxiation and a draining of vitality, but instead by something else. *What, though?* Again, Hosuh suspected blood loss, expecting the loopiness that comes with the light-headed fog to be the culprit of the oddity before him.

The electricity and pins that had been pushed to the back of the silver-veiled head had been
gradually crawling in his head - and were finally pulled back into full force when the sleeper mumbled something.

“Mmm, warm…”

*Ohhhh*… Hosuh let out the breath he didn’t even know he was holding within both his body and mind. Alright, it wasn’t an indicator of blasted suffering. No more of that, no more, no more, he needed nor wanted it again…. Hosuh had long since seen enough horror, enough agony, enough pain and blood dashed across the floors and walls of this awful place.

With his mind able to drift away from tragedy, there was nothing to throw a veil over the pins pricking his face. Those relaxed features… They looked soft, round… *sweet*, even. He knew he didn’t have the best collection of sights in his memory, having been in the same damned, harrowed place for so long - but nonetheless he knew this human’s sleepy face was among his favorites out of all the pictures in his head due to the way his features seemed to indicate a mellow happiness.

“Mm?”

Hosuh snapped out of his minor hypnosis at the violet’s noise. It was another soothed sound, but it also had a questioning tone. For a moment, the long-locked was confused as to what the person was wondering about - until he realized his hand was moving without his realization, repeating the same stroking movements as before. Pins seemed to arise from the human’s skin and gave the snake a small urge to draw away - however, in an unusual twist, *he* was the one being trapped in that moment. Hosuh figured that the thief, as sleepy as he looked, would likely tighten his grasp if he tried to pull away - much the same way he’d hold tighter onto fleeing forms in his own grasps.

Yet…regardless of whether it was out of sheer curiosity or something else entirely, Hosuh felt the urge to test the theory regardless. Ever-so gingerly, he tried to tug his hand out of the prickly trap, and was met with something that both matched and defied his expectations. He figured the rogue would hold on tight or react with annoyance, but no - the push on top of his clawed hand was evident, but not awfully forceful. There enough to keep his hand where it was, absent enough as to provide the opening for escape if he chose so.

Although, that choice to escape would be a difficult one to execute as violet eyes locked upon him. This time, they were not a wide mimicry of the thief's previous expressions - rather, he still maintained his relaxed form, purple eyes half-draped by his eyelids and seated comfortably over small bumps of… wait - *gray*? Eyeing the detail for a half-second more, the tone was evident, streaks of ashy imitations of the surrounding tone of his cheeks. *Odd - he hadn’t picked up on that feature on a living body before. He’d have to ask about what that color signifies in humans at some point.* But that would be a deal saved for later - in the present, this human was leaning into his touch, fingers waving over his knuckles and his eyes pointed in the direction of their hands.

Gold-dusted eyes caught the pink tone of his lips as they moved, mumbling out something Hosuh couldn’t decipher.

“Hm?” Hosuh let out a questioning hum, trying to get the human to clarify whatever he had just said.

His plum eyes shifted over to a face slightly obstructed by silver strands, widening slightly in a way that seemed to indicate surprise. After pausing for a second, he spoke again, clearer and louder this time - all while the plumes of peach grew deeper in his cheeks.

“The wounds, you… you were cleaning things up, right?”
“Yeah?” Hosuh grew more nervous as he spoke. *Have I done something wrong?* “I’d figured that it’d be an okay thing to do, so...I mean, I’ve always done the same when I’ve ended up bleeding, it should help...or, unless-- Oh no, I didn’t make anything worse, d-did I? I-.. I know it can sting quite a bit...”

The rogue’s tone matched the surprise in his eyes - despite being directly talked to with no one else around, he still seemed a bit caught of guard. “Wh-? Oh, I-I’m not really in pain or anything at this point. No, nothing like that. I guess it’s....”

The thief's words and eyes trailed off. He looked… rather somber. Stephen was so unadjusted to the notion of kindness towards him that it was an oddity to him. No, oddity was not strong enough of a word. Sympathy was alien and unheard of, an outright blasphemy to his point of view in regards to himself and the way the world would paint him. There can be no love for a criminal or a devil, as they’d say. There’s no beauty in a scraggly, screeching crow pecking among the scraps of a wasteyard, as they would put the image. But he also knew that the world never cared much for the words of the ostracized. He knew how quickly most would snuff out any fire he’d try to build, they’d interrupt and override any case of redemption he would try to make for himself. The lesson of staying silent, and the way it prevented the stirring of rage and blood, had been cemented in his head long ago - and thus he tried to guide the dialogue to silence once again.

“I... I guess it’s nothing...”

Hosuh’s brows lowered at the dismal tone of his voice and the way the rogue kept gazing off into nothingness. He let out a low hum of his own that was laced with suspicion.

The kleptic hand had stilled while the thief was speaking - now it rubbed over silver-blue knuckles before slowly sliding down, dragging against his clawed one on the way before dropping. Hosuh held his stance despite the gesture lined with mild force.

“No.. this seems like something. Something off. What’s going on?”

Violet eyes shot up to oceanic ones with a furrow of brows and a flurry of emotion - fluster, annoyance, defensiveness, surprise, and vulnerability, along the disdain that came with it.

“It’s fine, it’s really nothing!”

The thief tossed his fallen arm upwards, grabbing at the scaly forearm and pulling lightly - a clear request for Hosuh to let him go. Yet, despite having an easy understanding of the gesture, he barely budged. Despite having little knowledge of how to handle such situations stored in his recollection, he still had the intuition to hold his ground and to press forth.

But he also had the sense that too much pushing would be a bad idea - so he would only press the issue a little longer. He had little time and room for only a few words - *but which ones?! Argh....* Never having the best or most ample dictionary of words in his head, he hummed a faint noise of his associated annoyance. *What to say, what to say?*

“Ah.... Uhmm...” Hosuh tried to buy himself a little more time to sift through his head. *Dammit, where are my words?!*

The thief barley mumbled as the snake quieted. “What? Got something to say?....”

After a couple seconds, his humming and hawing stopped with a small perk of his voice, a half-excited hum before he started speaking with a lacing of shyness.
“Hey - er if I may ask… What is your name? You know mine because of those signature -things... But you never really mentioned your own name...”

The rogue was quiet, his eyes losing focus yet again. Normally he never spoke his name - even though many WANTED posters he’s seen don’t use names, he’s always preferred avoiding the risk of being cast in ugly spotlights because of the misdeeds that would’ve ended up tying to his name. Names, hearing one’s own draws their attention and paints them as the holder. Names, they can snag like vines on the ground, sending a person to tumble downwards and fall prone long enough to be taken by the hands of ostracists and of a dark world.

“Erm..I mean, only if that’s an alright thing for me to say, to ask of ya…”

Yet, despite all that… the scoundrel didn’t feel as much defiance to that common question as he normally would - he merely felt what he deemed to be apprehension. ... It’s not like he would start screaming my name to the hilltops or anything - and even if he did.. it wouldn’t mean all too much. ‘Stephen’ would just be another name, I haven’t said it nor seen it around here...

That, and it’s not like it even matters - he’s not going anywhere. I probably would’ve heard of something like... all this otherwise. This place... The lack of details known the place was a significant factor in its terror.

It’s not like we’re getting out or anything. We’re trapped here regardless...

Its mystery and the lack of evidence was a maker of the horror threaded in all the rumors of what this infamous punishment truly entails. But one thing was always a guarantee, as given by those sent and disappeared without a trace...

It’s not like it matters... So what difference does it make if I say my name?

A chill ran down his spine and a tensity wracked his frame as all the thoughts crossed his mind.

What does it matter if I say it again!? I’m going to die here anyways!

The forming and somewhat nihilistic dread swayed Stephen to let go of the serpent’s arm. He still had a will to live, he knew better than to try to jump out of the snake’s grasp. He had nowhere to go, nowhere to run nor to hide. He’d still be hunted down ever-so easily when the time came to be - he’d still be held down mercilessly under the might of the monster, his lungs and bones straining under force until they were snapped and shredded. The reason as to why he wasn’t already dead still baffled him - it was a thorn wedged in with lingering sting, it was an awful stew simmering in the back of his mind.

Lost in shadowy fears of the reaper and infinite void, Stephen failed to recognize that he began to speak with a quiet and harrowed voice.

“W-what does it matter… Y-you’re just going to kill me anyways...”

Oh no... That dismal tone, those awful words... Not again, not again! Hosuh was still determined to get through to the human in his arms.

...Since apparently I haven’t yet done so.....I need to get that idea out of his head!

By an act of pure impulse and gut-based intuition, he swiveled the hand on the scoundrel’s cheek around to the back of his head, the tips of his claws just barely brushing at vibrant strands longer than the rest of the fuzz. Simultaneously, he slid the arm that had been propping up his neck back down his spine and stopping at his middle. In a brief moment, he pulled up the nearly-limp thief
yet again into another embrace.

*Things are different now... So please, just listen to me!*

Ignoring the way the criminal flinched and gently rubbing the back of his skull, Hosuh nudged his head against the rogue’s before resting his chin on his shoulder. He spoke nervously and quietly.

“I-I….I was telling the truth, when I said that I’m not going to hurt you...I still am, I still mean that…”

The rogue didn’t seem to fully register what he was saying, continuing to mutter.

“...For how long? You’re going to starve eventually…need to eat sooner or later…”

Hosuh’s face crumpled slightly. “I…. Although that’s true, that’s-”

Stephen’s tone focused and coalesced itself, the swaying gone and left with a somewhat angered boldness.

“ Yeah, I know I’m right.”

His hands darted from his sides onto Hosuh’s shoulders. His voice shook with emotions, both somber and forceful, both icy and fiery - yet he didn’t speak too loudly, as he was propped up and held close to one of the reptilian's pointed ears.

“So just do it already!”

His grip on Hosuh’s shoulders tighten as he continued speaking with a rising volume.

“Just kill me! Enough of this- the running and hiding, the danger, the hate, the worry and terror-enough of it all! To hell with all this pain here!”

Stephen’s breath hitched and his tone lost much of its fire as tears welled up on his eyes.

“So...At the very least...soothe your own pain. You said you were starving, so just…”

His breath skipped, preventing him from speaking for a moment as the drops painted streaks across his face. His voice started out weak and dejected, then built back boldness in a crescendo fashion.

“Just eat me...Strangle me, crush my lungs and snuff out my life... bite me, sink your fangs in and devour...You said it yourself - I’m your prey. So take me! Make use of me! At least then I’ll be worth something!”

Sobs wracked Stephen’s form, tugging at his ribcage and cutting off his speech. Before another wave of tears flooded in, he muttered one last thing as he loosened his grip and shifted his arms in order to bury his face in Hosuh’s shoulder.

“At least then... I can finally make something good of myself...”

Hosuh pulled his head back to attempt to look at the criminal, and was only met with him crumpled into his own form, his tears and the emotion in his cheeks feeling like lava on the bare skin of his collar.

The silver-haired was horrified at the things he was hearing, his fear and empathy far outweighing the way his instincts had perked up at the notion of *finally consuming the bountiful feast in front of him*. His more humanlike judgement well-overtook his inner primal beast. Thus, with a strong will
from his heart - and a little extra assistance from the less-than-pleasant flavor coming from trace of blood still in his mouth - he could contain his hunger and gather his thoughts.

He knew he had to say or do something to wrangle the harrowing monster out of that purple-crowned head. And yet he paused, not knowing what to say and keeping his thoughts in his head.

Stephen, on the other hand, just kept rattling off the things on his mind in dismal mutters. Much of it was too muffled in Hosuh’s flesh to understand, but one thing was pretty easy to understand when he pulled back to take straining, shaking breaths.

“...Not like the world ever cared much about me anyways…”

“Stop it.”

Forget trying to find the most proper or elegant wording - his last statement was the nail in the coffin for Hosuh. He knew it was time to speak, and so he did with a piercing glare. He looked so sturdy on the outside, yet internally he was so disheveled. He was purley relying on improvisation to weave words together and chance to work itself in his favor.

“snff.. ..what?”

“That nonsense you’re talking about - stop that.”

Stephen went quiet for several seconds, fighting through rising and falling tides of teariness. Still half-choking on his tears, he spoke again with quiet tones.

“I-it’s right, th-though...”

“No...”

“Hmm ?” Stephen had to fight another bout of sobs before taking a deep breath, leveling his voice. “Snffff... i-it really is...”

“No!” Hosuh shifted himself and the human in his hold in order to directly meet his tear-reddened eyes. Draping his arms over the thief’s shoulders, he hoped that his gaze might do something to crack the ice that had flowed and froze over Stephen’s mind, his hunger haven taken a toll on his focus and his cognitive ability to string a good chain of words together.

As he was moved, Stephen kept his arms loosely wrapped around the point of Hosuh’s back that had sunk to a minute prior - even in his state of self-deprecation, a wanting of comfort still guided his subconscious and that little action. With the dusk air and his own sorrows turning him cold, the warmth of the hybrid’s shoulder blades felt soothing under his hands.

Meeting the serpent’s eyes, Stephen saw a gaze as solid and sturdy as a sapphire, a strength of will that incited an emotional response of his own. That force, that pressure he saw in those eyes - it was intimidating to his vulnerable mindset. This provoking of his exposed heart, it prompted him to act in a rather hypocritical way - a move for defending his own destruction.

Not wanting to draw out his agonies any longer, Stephen spoke with his own firmness in hopes of ending the argument - even with what it ultimately entailed for himself.

“It is, Hosuh. It’s just fact.”

Hosuh grimaced for a moment, trying to think of an effective comeback. His brain stumbled across a notion... He had been thinking about the definition of certain words here and there - perhaps that
could be used for something?

“Facts need some kind of backing, right? So where’s the proof to all this?”

“Oh, evidence? There’s more than enough of that, trust me.”

“Where? I see nothing like it on you.”

“It wouldn’t be on me, Hosuh. The guards took everything from me, I’ve got nothing to show.”

“Guards? Guards of what? And why, why did they take your things?”

“Wha- You’re joking, right? You....”

“Wh... Why would I? Is there any reason for me to do so?”

Stephen shut his eyes tight for a moment, clearing out the last of the droplets and salty stings. Opening them back up, he picked apart Hosuh’s expression.

*He can’t be serious...* He saw a firmness in his features, and the sweep of long strands that had fallen across his face did nothing to block out the strength in the roaring blue seas. But he also saw the way his features were worked apart - his grey brows were only half-furrowed, his eyes wider than they had been moments prior.

His mouth was slightly ajar - but that alone wasn’t odd. His lips had parted many times a second before his tongue would dart out, just like any common snake. What made the detail astonishing was how it was staying present- as he stared, the thin tips of the forked tongue barely met the air before retreating, yet his jaw didn’t close afterwards.

Perhaps he focused on that section of his face for a bit too long - it didn’t matter, Stephen drew his conclusion nonetheless. *Damn... he really doesn’t get it...*

“Do... Do you not know what this place is?”

“Hm-“ Hosuh’s features loosened as he looked up for a brief moment, observing the way the shadows closed in on the walls as they had done a thousand times before. His voice came out a bit quieter than before.

“I know this place is probably some sort of hell, given how barren and lonely it is...”

He met the thief’s gaze once again, and was perplexed at the growing confusion taking hold. “Is...there something else you’re referring to?”

Stephen was silent again, stunned at just how his confusion was mirrored in the creature before him. “You... you don’t even know that this place is a punishment?”

Hosuh paused, a trace of stress flashing behind his eyes. “...Well, it’d make sense to trap *me* here... I mean, I honestly wouldn’t be very surprised if I had done something awful on the surface long ago, knowing how...” He trailed off, whatever that trace was coming back to his features again. He lingered on it for a moment before seeming to snap back to the present.

“But, are you... you’re thinking about something else, aren’t you?”

Already weighed down enough by the antics and strife of the last several hours, Stephen let his head sink down in a sort of nod. “I didn’t... didn’t have a choice in coming here.”
“Mm? Why not?”

Stephen reeled back in surprise - *is he as unknowing as everyone else?* His pitch rose in ever-rising confusion. “They...dragged me here? Against my will and pleas? I mean, they were under orders, everything was said and done...

“...I suppose they didn’t have much of a choice either?”

“Huh?”

“Oh- I could’ve sworn I heard someone say a faint ‘sorry’ just before you fell down here....”

“Fell? No - I was *thrown* down here ....By any chance, did you hear anything else?”

“...The usual coming and going of feet, but also a lot of...shuffling around? And a.. I guess, *half-scream* from that same other voice, along with a bit of talking, I suppose...” The reptilian paused, wondering why the question was brought up. “Were you...fighting them or something?”

“Yeah, trying to break free…”

“...Why did they stop you? Why did they capture you in the first place?”

“Again, orders. They were told to do so.”

“...Why couldn’t they choose to not listen?”

“They’d probably get their asses handed to them if they tried…”

Hosuh looked confused, as if he was trying to decipher a different language.

“Er - I meant that they’d get in a lot of trouble--”Stephen shifted backwards, his hands sliding up to Hosuh’s shoulders to keep him locked in place. “Look, none of that even matters - Why are you even asking?”

“Is it-” Hosuh tried to give an answer, but Stephen was swept up by that deathly illusion in his head and just kept talking.

“Why the hell do you even care anyways??”

“Wh-”

“Are you just trying to toy with my emotions? Were you making up those tears, are you pretending to see the pain in my heart??”

*I knew from the get-go that this punishment was awful...But this as well? Certainly didn’t expect it...* As his thoughts kept racing, his grip on Hosuh’s shoulders continued to tense and tighten.

“No-”

“Did you have fun messing with me? Are you like a cat satisfied after playing with a mouse? Heh, what a pointless charade! “

“That’s not-!”

“What, it wasn’t pointless… I suppose so - I mean, hey, you got me to say something with all those seemingly innocent asks.”
“I didn’t mean-”

“Hah! As I said, this place is a punishment. And not just any punishment, either.. No no- this is an outright death sentence!”

“Please-”

With a white-knuckled grip that was painful for both parties involved, Stephen shook Hosuh’s shoulders more and more for greater and greater emphasis as he spoke. “Please what? Face it - It’s just proof that they’d be happier without me! They cast me down, they don’t need me - they just want me dead!”

“Hold on-!”

“Hold on to what? What’s the damn point - I’m just going to die here sooner or later, so why are we delaying things?!”

“Please-!” Tears budded out from serpentine eyes, matching the beads already formed on the rogue’s.

“No! Enough of this, just-- Augh! Why did you let me go? Are you just trying to screw with me? Why am I still alive - you brought me to the brink already, so why did you stop? You’re hungry, you’re starving - you said you wanted to eat me, so why haven’t you? Dammit, damn it all!”

Stephen shook Hosuh’s shoulders one more time, the drops on his eyes and his own emotions becoming too much to hold up. He pulled the scale-dotted shoulders towards him, rushing forwards and ducking his head - in nearly an instant, his frame was wracked with sobs as he wrapped his hands around the snake’s spine and leaned his forehead against his collar.

As soft hair brushed against the serpent’s neck, the thief let out one last shout from his soul, the scream bouncing from the little nook in the spiral of his tail to all around the cavern. The walls may have already been cold from nightfall, but they became much more chilled from the agony in Stephen’s scream.

“Why haven’t you killed me already, Hosuh!?”
“Why haven’t you killed me already, Hosuh!?”

The questioned couldn’t say a word even if he did have an answer - he was far too concerned with the purple-haired man in his arms.

Stephen was curled into Hosuh’s form, hands gradually sinking down the hybrid’s back as his own frame was overtaken with sobbing. Misery had broken the last of the flood barriers with that final scream, leaving saline to flow out unblocked and unchecked. Streams tore down his face like roaring rivers, beads growing heavy before descending downwards like rainfall. His form was rattling as if electricity were coursing through his veins, causing him to gradually crumple inwards into a smaller and smaller ball. With his head placed at Hosuh’s throat, his shakiness caused him to headbutt the hybrid and his hands’ grip to writhe as if they were trying to strangle the bitter lashings at his heart, all without his awareness.

The forces exhumed by the quivering man were minor, so Hosuh didn’t say a word. He dared not to, his own heart aching at the sounds of agonized inhales and high-pitched, harrowed keens. He knew the pain he felt as the human’s nails scraped at his spine was nothing compared to the winds raging in that violet-crowned skull pressed to the underside of his jaw.

Even as desolate as he’d been for a length of time he’d long stopped keeping track of, he was no stranger to these gestures and bellows. He’d been through these motions many times himself, albeit for different reasons. The horror of isolation drawing in like the shadows of the cavern, the craving for connection gnawing at his soul, the coil of cold reality crushing him in as real of a way as his own vice - those were things he hated to know ever-so well. So many nights and days passed over shut, sleeping eyes in order to prevent the tears flowing like the rain that fell through the cruel iron grate above lied in the torment-ruined wreckage of his memory.

And so Hosuh held the crier in his arms. Even under the shell of the cavern for so long, he had ample knowledge on this kind of storm. Oh how he knew how much worse streams of clear could be in compared to drops and streaks of red, how much more pain the former could signify.

Hosuh’s arms had been hanging in the air for a few moments after Stephen had unexpectedly clung tight - it didn’t take many tearful seconds in order to change that. One hand made its way in between the human’s shoulders, and the other wrapped around the back of his head. Shuffling his fingers through the fuzz yet again, he tried to mirror the soothing pace he had used when cleaning up the messy marrings left by his fangs. He didn’t really know what best to say, or if speaking at all was a good idea - so he kept his communications to be delivered through his touch and a mantra-esque muttering of the phrase “It’s okay, it’s okay….”

It seemed to at least partially get through, as Stephen gradually did unwind - however, whether this was due to the tiredness onset by violent crying alone, or if it was helped along by his gestures was a conundrum Hosuh didn’t have an answer to. Little by little, the waves of sorrow and saline waned.
more and more, the tides rising less and less. Regardless of his factor in the process, the stings of empathetic pain soothed with the fading of the waves - a thing that Hosuh was glad for.

It was a sign of soothing and the lessening of suffering, so evident that even the air told him of it. Like any other serpent, Hosuh was hard-set to keep a metaphorical eye on his surroundings, flicking out his tongue to gather the information of the atmosphere. As sobs quieted, so did the echoes of screams and traces of stress detected with the instrument.

As Stephen cried and calmed, he had gradually curled more and more inwards on himself, lasting until his forehead had slid to the serpent’s collar and his hands to the small of the humanoid back. Hosuh just held Stephen as he sank, moving his hands into his mohawk and towards his shoulder blades as he mimicked Stephen’s slow motion. Almost climbing onto his slumping form, Hosuh continued his ministrations between the plate-like bones and in the longer strands of near-neon hair.

After a few minutes of being hunched over that way and fighting the last of receded waves, Hosuh felt the human beneath him shift in a seeming attempt to get up. Reading the signal, the silver haired receded, moving all but his hands off his frame. Sliding scaled hands to the small of the human’s back, he watched as he sniffled and retracted his own hands to wipe away the last of the tears still coming. Hosuh’s hands twitched up in a movement to help, but Stephen made a quick gesture with one of his hands as he tidied his face, a quick and silent way of saying ‘I’ve got this covered.’

Another minute and Stephen finally met the blue eyes of the snake, his own reddened and puffy from prickleings of salt.

A light horror wisped on the air in breathy words from the serpentine. “Your eyes… oh no…”

Hosuh had seen discolored eyes a number of times before - as the beast watched the life drain from the eyes of his prey, he recalls seeing red lines creep out from the edges of each victim’s eyelids, staining the snow-like white surface of the spheres. His own eyes widened at the thought. The thief may have been alive then- but to Hosuh, given that awful sign, he might as well have been dying again.

In an act of impulse, his hands glided up the human’s spine and drew him to his own frame. Now being the one to be jostled and ever so slightly shaken, Stephen let out a yelp as Hosuh used his arms to wrap him in a squeezing embrace. Having grown tired from crying, he could let out nothing more than a confused sort of hum before Hosuh started muttering in quick, anxious breaths.

“No, no! Don’t be- please don’t be- Dammit, not again, not again!”

“What?” Stephen tried to spring free from Hosuh’s hold - with the way he was pulled down before he was to drop his arms to his sides, said arms were now bunched between the duo and curled into his own chest. Swiveling his hands around, he placed them on the reptillian’s collar and gave a slight push. Reading the gesture, he was let go, only for Stephen to maintain his hold on both his bones and his anxiety-widened eyes.

“Hosuh, what’s going on?!?”

“Wha- Your eyes, they’re so red!!”

“Yeah? That’s-”
“Yeah!? Why are you being so calm?!”

Stephen was about to add his own rebuttal, but was cut off by Hosuh’s low, swift mutter.

“Fuck, how do you heal a dying human?!”

*He thinks I’m dying? What the hell?* Especially given the fact that he had already tried to kill him and has more than enough ability and strength to do so at any given moment - Stephen was utterly baffled as to Hosuh’s squabbling.

“What the hell are you talking about?!”

“What- Your eyes! When you humans change your colors - it always means something, right?”

“I-I suppose? But I don’t understand what you’re trying to say…”

“Red eyes? Doesn’t that mean you’re dying?”

“Wh- No! Why would y-?”

“Or, if that isn’t the case... What does it mean? Why are you making your eyes look this way?”

Stephen made a confused gawk before speaking with words. “I-I’m not making this happen.. *Wait,* do you seriously think people do things like this - er, ‘change colors’, as you put it- do you think we do it intentionally?”

Hosuh nodded, genuinely believing the misconception born from a lack of human contact. Even with all his shaken emotions, his fears and his common sense, he couldn’t help but let out a half-second lasting chuckle.

“H-Hosuh, turning red - or, I guess, changing skin color, that’s completely normal, natural.”

“...Can’t you control it, though?”

“No, not really. It’s quite annoying, actually.”

“Ah… but that still doesn’t explain your eyes..?”

“Oh, the redness there? Yeah….that just happens when you bawl your eyes out.”

Hosuh let in a small gasp upon hearing the last of those words. Concern spiked in his skull. “*What*?!”

He grew panicked, darting his hands to grip at Stephen’s shoulders. The thief yelped again as Hosuh suddenly rushed towards him. The rogue was immensely puzzled as wide blue eyes kept focusing and refocusing on his own, the hybrid so close that he could feel his breath as he mumbled.

*His eyes are going to fall out of his skull!?* “Ah- how do I fix this? Dammit, dammit…”

Hosuh was observing every detail of Stephen’s eyes. Every movement caused his eyes to relocate, reading the irises as if they were the pages of a book. The snake was looking for any faults, loose gaps, lacerations - any spot where things could slip out. *I’m not seeing anything like that…*

Stephen paused for a moment as Hosuh scanned him, too baffled to resist anything. Almost by instinct, he felt a mirror of the panic laced in the other set of eyes. The hairs on his arms and back
of his neck stood up as he felt warm air rush past his lips, causing a shiver down his spine with each puff of hot air. Only after a few solid seconds of this passing - only then Stephen gained the ability to actually process what Hosuh had said. It took a moment more for the rogue to gather himself to talk, the closeness jolting him like electricity in a wire - and when he spoke, his voice sounded as shocked as the rest of his weary system.

“Hosuh, w-what are you doing!?”

With confusion written on his face and voice, Hosuh responded. “You said your eyes were going to fall out!”

“**The fuck?!**” Stephen pushed against the reptilian's collarbones with shaky hands - he’d never moved from Hosuh snatching him up in his arms, so they were already in place. The silver arms had greatly loosened as their owner’s focus was taken by his confusion and concerns, making Stephen’s task an easy one. Not missing a beat from his movement, he continued his quandaries.

“Wh-? When did I say anything like that?”

“Just a moment ago... You said this redness thing happens ‘when you bawl your eyes out’ - how can I stop that?”

“It… already happened?” **The hell is he trying to say??**

Hosuh made another perplexed noise. “But.. your eyes, they’re still there...”

*What does he mean- Oh.* Stephen, even as sore and tired as he was, found amusement in his realization. His grip loosened and his frame relaxed, half-laughing as he talked to a companion that only grew more and more clueless as he moved.

“**Hah-** Hosuh, I didn’t- *pft,* I didn’t mean that literally!”

“Wh..” The serpentine paused, processing his words. “So, wait - you’re not losing your eyes?”

“No, of course not!” The violet continued to chuckle. “Did you seriously think my eyeballs were going to pop out of my skull or something?”

Hosuh had believed a literal nature to his words - he didn’t know if humans had any weird abilities like that - he simply didn’t know any better. Thus, with that information and no reason to pull tricks, he gave an according response.

“Yes!”

*Oh.* The scoundrel immediately stopped his vocalizations.

“Huh? Why’d you stop that - and why were you laughing anyways?”

*Well fuck.* Stephen felt a pit in his stomach, a rush of guilt. He didn’t mean to take advantage of Hosuh’s unknowingness or anything of the sort - the only kind of person he’d enjoy doing such a thing to would be a noble or an enemy to make them look like fools. Hosuh was neither of those things - clearly having nothing by means of wealth in obviousness, and more subtly proving he wasn’t exactly an enemy either.

“I...uh...”

Even though Stephen still feared a hunt he deemed inevitable, it had been a fair bit of time since
he’d tried at the current point - that, and the serpent’s actions have been so contradictory to that of a hunter. He’d been trying to heal, not to harm. Regardless of how much it baffled the rouge, he did still recognize that the silver-haired hadn’t hurt him again - not yet, at least.

It still didn’t kill his suspicion of how, at any moment, the serpent could become a doombringer with a deathly strike, though.

With that tail-end of his thoughts, dread intermingled with his shame and chilled his skin. As he had many times before, he feared the way a single misstep could bring out the claws of an enraged monster -and in this case, in this place, the notion held more weight than just a metaphor.

Quickly, he had to fix this quickly! Danger was often a swift thing for him- so, by fearful instinct and years of persecution having long-since conditioned him, he was already shooting words like arrows before his brain even recognized the command to do as such.

“Fuck- I’m sorry! So sorry, I-I didn’t mean any of that! I-I lost track of myself- really, i-it was nothing! I-I-”

The criminal cut himself off when the reptilian started to move - clawed hands shifting up his back and dark grey brows furrowing slightly. Taking this as a signal of jeopardy, his already fast string of words flew out with an even greater pace while simultaneously unraveling from his terror.

“Sorry! - I r-really didn’t- I wasn't trying to make fun of you- I fucked up I didn’t mean anything bad please don’t hurt m-”

A high pitched whimper escaped the thief's throat as he felt the sudden press of scales against his face. Holding his cheeks in his palms, Hosuh gave a stern gaze and an equally stern tone.

“Enough!”

His unvocalized screams roared in his shaking skull. “Aa-aah Hosuh wait really I can explain--!”

Stephen squeaked as he felt the pads of scaled thumbs press against his lips and the claws tap the bump of his nose - a move that effectively shut him up, to say the least.

“Stop it. Whatever’s going on, whatever’s causing you to say all of this nonsense - enough of it!...” Hosuh paused, never breaking eye contact for even a moment.

“Wherever all this fear is coming from..I don’t understand it. I haven’t hurt you since I’ve gotten the better of myself, right?”

Hosuh paused, waiting for a response - yet he never moved his hands. Was he looking for a nonverbal response, perhaps?

Regardless of whether or not that was the case, that’s all Stephen could give, his brain so high-strung both from the perils of the day as well as the points from where the serpent was touching him. Despite having a solid recognition and agreement with Hosuh’s notion, he still couldn’t help himself from being afraid.

Much like a rabbit, his instincts had just kept firing - bidding him to run or do something to evade the jaws of the hunter. Something primal within him had propped open an awful floodgate

His head already being a shaky thing, his nod came out quivering

Hosuh kept his gaze unfaltering, even as his expression grew softened and somber. He let out a
small sigh before talking again.

“Whatever this lingering…. thing is - you need to get it out of your mind… Gh, how do I fix this…?”

The floodgate of fear and adrenaline may have still been open, but one fact remained true despite that - no flood can roar forever. No river can run endlessly, not without someplace to draw from and a place to roam. Both were things Hosuh had done a number on stopping. For one, Stephen’s weary system would have to strain itself further to stay on absolute alertness and edge. Along with that, Hosuh had blocked the fields by which the rogue and his fears could run amok by showing his softer, calmer side of his being, as well as by holding him in place in a rather literal sense.

Hosuh’s gestures, his show of fine craftsmanship and control, and his embracing touches all had worked in tandem to wring a great deal of terror out of Stephen’s wildly rampant skull - yet it was the unplesantries that still remained that was dismaying to the silver-crowned.

“However.... in whatever way I can.... I want to help you …”

The raw emotion and warmth in his voice, the genuine intent shining through - Stephen’s body froze in sync with his mind at the statement.

Of all things he could ever guess, Stephen seldom dared imagine something like that to be said to him. He could never quite picture it - he thought his mask of pride and the rough chaos his alleywalking lifestyle entailed would turn people away. He’s said so many words of glory towards himself over the years - ‘No one’s better than Stephen!’ ‘I can get away with anything!’ ‘I’m already better than a King, so where’s my crown?’ ‘Just try and catch me, peasants!’... Whatever way the words came out - in voice and by thought alike - they were all equally figments of his construction. Even then, they were all makings of power and pride- they were not notions of deeper, warmer love. Hah, what a myth!

Through it all, he never really expected for even the shallowest of his mantras to be thrown back at him by someone else. At best, he could take appreciations of his abilities - he knew he had skill, he knew the products of his tricks were worthwhile - but never did he expect the compliments. He had plenty ability to acknowledge and even to accept surface-level kindnesses - but to delve deeper was so strange, so unheard of to his head, his heart, his memory and his core. Yet despite it all, there he was, face to face with a defiant reality.

The truth was radiant like the sun, even under the shadows of stones and the rising moon.

_He couldn’t help but hate it._

His brow lowered slightly as he moved his hands off of Hosuh’s collar. He let one arm go lax by his side as he tugged at the silver-blue thumbs on his mouth. Hosuh, only wanting to help the thief, offered no resistance and moved as he was untold. He implicitly hoped that quieting the thief in the moments passed and complying in the current one would be of help to the scoundrel - the bitterness in Stephen’s mutter told another tale.

“Don’t lie to me…”

“What?”

“Don’t lie to me, Hosuh!”

He knew the power of liars and the way they could twist the world to their image - to an extent, he’d used the power before. A number of times, a number of ways, he’d long since lost track of
each ploy of his - if he were asked, he could be persuaded that he himself was a bit of a bastard in that regard. He never worked to be too personal, though - he had no wishes of lashing at people’s hearts, just at their pockets. He knew all too well the mayhem that could be unleashed by way of the hands or words of someone truly cruel.

Hosuh was no such thing in reality - but as Stephen was enthralled by misdemeanor and anger, he couldn’t help but think otherwise. *He has a serpent’s body - it’s really no surprise that there’s a serpent’s heart in there, too. Why did I try to think there was anything else?*

The grey-haired voiced his confusion - he wasn’t sure how the violet’s anger had reawoken, of what he did wrong.

“But...I’m not lying?”

“Yes, you are!”

“But... I’m not trying to-”

“That’s the same thing a liar would say!”

“Wh-”

“Heh, y’know, I already thought this place was hellish - I know many of the tales. But to toy with your victims like this? Now that’s something else.”

“That’s not-”

“What, not true ? Then explain what you’re doing!”

“I’m... trying to help?”

“Liar! Why are you messing with me?!”

“I’m - I’m really not trying to do anything wrong-! I meant what I said before--”

Stephen broke the argument with a laugh born from wrath - but even all the anger couldn’t hide the undertones of pain. The tone stayed the same as he took on the baton for speaking once again.

“Oh, I’m sure you did - You sure were going on about it!”

“Huh?”

“You know what I’m talking about - seriously, the way you fucking smiled…”

Hosuh stayed silent, Stephen’s tensity imbuing a charge into the cooling air.

“Your mouth was drenched in blood... when you licked your lips and swallowed… You were drooling at the thought, weren’t you?”

Hosuh opened his mouth to give protest, but slowly shut it - Stephen was completely accurate, he had no factual rebuttal for the ways he behaved under the influence of his inner beast and only adding to his own dismay.

“You said it yourself - ‘I wonder what you’d taste like’…‘I didn’t mean that-- I wasn’t referring to-- ’
“Then do tell me - what did you mean!?”

“I-I--I-”

“You wanted to figure that question out, right? That would explain why you gnawed at my neck - more than once, might I add!”

Hosuh broke eye contact in dejection and shame, pressing his lips in a thin line as Stephen just kept going.

“Was that you trying to get a taste test or something? I mean, you referred to me as a feast… You said you wouldn’t need to eat for a while afterwards - so would I be really filling? Is that why you were feeling me up?”

“I wasn’t trying to- I just was trying to do a light look-over--” “You grabbed my ass!”

“Uh--”

“And you followed it up with literally referring to me as a piece of meat!”

“I- I wasn’t in control, I was just--” His hands quivered on skin grown fiery from rage.

“Face it - you still want to eat me, and we both know it! Speaking of, you never answered my damn question - why the fuck haven’t you done that yet? What’s stopping you - ’cause clearly I can’t!”

“I--...”

“Well!? Speak, or do something, dammit!”

“Or do I have to do this shit too? Fuck - can’t you just kill me already!? Why are you cruel enough to make me do this too...”

Stephen let out an angered huff before moving quickly, wanting to get things over - Hosuh was too taken aback to properly react. Stephen’s hands - primed by years of sleighting pockets for picking - darted like blurs. First, he tugged Hosuh’s hands off of his face, never really having fully recognized their presence, yet still being aware enough to grow annoyed. Then he returned the favor - but not quite in the same fashion as Hosuh had done. A few fingers of one hand went for the side of his jaw while the other darted directly to the middle of his jaw. Not acknowledging the way his fingertips slipped inwards, he tugged down with a little force, just enough to prop his mouth open and to prove a point.

He was successful in that endeavor - what was problematic was that he was a bit too successful.

He had expected to open up a row of monstrously sharp teeth, yes, but in a very human-looking mouth. A lot of the traits were the same - teeth came out of the same places, a thin tongue still down the center… but it ran over something raised in his jaw - it almost looked like a pipe, the exit at the front of his jaw.

But Stephen was much more jarred by something else - in the middle of his jaw, there was an outright gap in his teeth and he felt no bone where Hosuh’s chin should’ve been. - at best, a small plate of cartilage. Instead of being stopped by a hard mass of teeth and bones, said teeth seemed to shift slightly out of the way as his fingers sunk into the muscle. The feeling was much similar to the inside of one’s cheeks. And Hosuh’s cheeks…
They were stretched too much as his jaw was held open - the sight was terrifying, as the gaping maw was being held in such a way that made it inhumanly wide.

Chapter End Notes

Snake-human anatomy sure is something, huh?
Intriguing Forms

Chapter Summary

Anatomy sure is something - especially when you're face to face with a creature with a form much different than your own.

Chapter Notes

Here we go again! Hope y'all enjoy the way things go and how the story continues to unfold this time~

Let's also see if I can upload more frequently- I mean, I have more down time now due to.. things..
So.. I hope my motivation stays true - I love writing for y'all, I love seeing your reactions and support, I love to hear about the questions and ideas you wonder about based on the shenanigans-- I just A A AA

But enough of me screaming - at least until next time. For now, here we go!

Stephen was immediately petrified and locked in place at the creepy sight in his hands. One was holding the side of his jaw, the other having had somewhat slipped inwards by mistake, and the whole scene was marked with a series of faint, orange-red smudges from where Hosuh had swept at blood with a wetted hand or tongue.

His fingers did not meet any of the sharp, slightly curved teeth inside - there was a gap in the middle of his bottom row of teeth. Not only that, but the gap expanded at the intrusion, as if it were tied to flexible strings of muscle. Everything melded together naturally - there was no tearing or straining anywhere, not even where the seemingly twin pair of lower jawbones split into stretchy muscle nor in the cheeks that were being held a bit too open.

This freeze-frame didn’t stay long - even as frayed and off-taken as Hosuh was due to Stephen’s anger a second prior, there was no missing a stunt like the one he’d just pulled. His body and instincts taking command, a gold film-like splash of color flashed over his eyes as his discarded arms reached up to the ones on his face. He snapped his mouth shut, facing little resistance from the human as the horror chilling his bones had made his hands go nearly limp where they were. Since his fingers still sunk into the middle of his mouth, they were only minorly scratched by the points of his upper teeth with the movement.

Stephen let out a yelp at the surprising pain, his own fear at the sight, and the movements of Hosuh’s jaw and hands. Scaled hands grabbing at his wrists, his arms were yanked back with - wait, was that a puff of air he felt? It rushed over his bitten fingers, an exhale of sorts. It wouldn’t be a significant phenomenon - except for the fact that it didn't come from the back of his throat, as one would expect. Instead, it felt like it came from just in front of his fingertips in the split-second before they were yanked away.
With his own reaction, Stephen tried to shuffle away as he started to scream- however, he was immediately thwarted. His grip tightening on lightly tanned skin and letting out a hissing sound, Hosuh pulled the rogue’s arms down and towards his own sides as his whole body shifted.

Stephen had tried to plant his hands on the masses beneath him, to push off of the ground with his legs and spring out of the coil - but with his arms taken away, he just ended up sliding down the mound and onto his back. His spine dipped into a pocket of air - with the tail having contracted, curling up tighter with Hosuh’s startled movements, Stephen was now being held up just above the ground. He’d tried to jump out of the rings - that endeavor well and truly backfired as taking his feet off of the ground led to him being swung forward. To try to avoid a blunt impact and the pain that would come from scrunching up his body, he instinctively moved his legs to the first open spots he could. This, however, happened to be by either side of Hosuh’s hips - or, at least, where a human’s hips should be in proportion to his torso. Propelled by a defensive response, his body bid him to hold on to whatever might support his prone form - thus, without thinking, he wrapped his legs around his scaly sides in a locking loop.

He had no time to think about their position or question the oddness of the bumps of bones he felt under his legs- especially where they seemed to just curve off, like two separate shell-like shapes that floated at his sides and didn’t wrap all the way around, very much inhuman.

But he couldn’t pay any mind to that, for there was something else taking precedence. That thing was a pair of saffron-coated eyes staring down at him because Hosuh, with his own reactionary movement, had stretched up into the air on intimidation-born instincts. In an effort to appear larger, he had hiked his torso upwards before quickly bending over, looming over the rogue once again.

A couple seconds into the hiss and just as the prisoner had accidentally fallen against Hosuh, a loud growling-like quality entered the sound. Stephen’s initial scream was cut off by this unintentional aggression, turning into a series of quiet shouts as he started hyperventilating. Fear washing over his consciousness and motions, he tried to curl into a defensive ball. As his whole form tightened, he constricted his own hold around Hosuh’s hips - unintentionally pressing himself completely against serpentine as his feet hooked over a curved mass of raw, boneless muscle. He flailed against the silver-crowned, using his hold as a means of supporting his frame as he tried to lean back in order to pull his arms away - despite his trial, he still failed to break the grips that held his wrists. His wrath well overtaken by dread, his body and bones froze to the core as he lied prone, tears growing on his eyes as they locked on Hosuh’s semi-bared teeth.

They both remained still and watched out for any movements from each counterpart. Each of their states lingered for several seconds - Hosuh keeping Stephen in place as his mortal panic strained at his heartbeat, pumping its already quickened pace to something audible and drum-like in sound. During the chaos, a slight rumbling sound seemed to mingle with Stephen’s voice.

As the dragged-out moments went by, the only movements made were the racing of breaths and several quick flickerings of a forked tongue before the slightly stained jaws slowly closed.

After several seconds had passed, Hosuh started to move towards him, the tail beneath the captured man shifting as he did so. His chest had been heaving wildly enough before, but that last shift seemed to be the push over the cliff’s edge. His lungs seemed to give out on him as the spastic movements devoured the remnants of his energy and strength, the shallow breaths providing little by way of oxygen. That last jolt of terror caused a swift decapitation of his awareness, an abrupt failure of his consciousness.

In the span of a mere moment, Stephen completely blacked out.
Hosuh was just as startled as Stephen had been—what exactly was he trying to do?!! Whatever the specifics were didn’t matter - his body was already moving, a natural fight-or-flight response. He closed his mouth and got rid of the hands, the intrusion having been sudden, strange and uncomfortable. His more animalistic inclinations took complete control from there, stirring him to hiss and to take on an intimidating stance. His intuition predicted that the thief would try to flee - the inner beast was not going to let his capture get away. The brace on his wrists holding firm, the human slipped and fell on his coiling tail, completely vulnerable beneath him. He stared down at the helpless one, teeth showing from his growling. He caught the slight taste of the human’s hands on his tongue and, with the apex hunter in command, he couldn’t help but flit it in the air to catch more of the sensation.

The cloaked-adorned game peered up at Hosuh, his breath coming out with a lacing of shout-like sounds - and when the tears formed again, that’s when Hosuh’s warm heart started to kick back in.

He had to fight his primal senses, he had to fight the urges onset by the hollowness that raged inside. It had been a while since he had last eaten anything - that wasn’t really surprising, though. Spans of dozens of days and nights passing before the next hunt would plummet into his cage - it had happened time and time again, forming a pattern Hosuh had eventually picked up on.

Stephen’s case was no different, keeping right in line with that trend - if anything, it was a bit on the early side of his predictions.

Just about any person would’ve died with how long the sequences of waiting tended to be, the body breaking itself into oblivion in a matter of weeks. Hosuh had outlasted that bar a number of times before - though, that made sense for him. His body was much larger than a human’s- even though his torso matched normal proportion, the gargantuan tail attached was what defined his mass. Although his body took much more food than a human to run, there was also more room by which to store energy as well as the ability to consume much more at a time.

His stomach growled, the noise incited by thoughts of time already passed and especially spurred on by the salty savor on his palette. Hosuh closed his mouth to stop tracing the enticement - although it happened slowly, toiling against the desire to do more than just keep it open.

His focus snapping back to the present, he looked down and felt a stab at his heart at the sight of the teary, terrified rogue. Dammit, not this again - it was a near-mirror of what happened before! This time, however, Hosuh’s system was set to a different gear. He was hunting for something, but not for sustenance, not for meat or for prey - he was on prowl for the incorporeal, to get on the better side the human’s emotions and getting him to open up at least a marginal trust to him. But how best to do that? He recalled how slow movements and embraces seemed to be soothing, so he tried that. Leaning slightly downwards, he carefully tried to adjust himself so he could gently pick up the human once more.

However, something unexpected happened as soon as he budged - the thief beneath him took one longer, cut-off breath before his rushing movements ceased. His whole body went lax, his arms no longer struggling against his hold, his muscles loosening. His eyelids drooped to be half-closed, the telltale glint of light indicative of life and vigor covered and sealing a somewhat dead look when paired with the way his skin had paled where teary-made blotches of red didn’t cover.

Without missing a beat, Hosuh sea-colored eyes widened and he started to panic - even with being ever-so familiar with death in his grasp, the repetition did little to dull its impact in the end. He was off his guard, with all armors down and his human heart exposed since he shoved the hunter aside. Confusion swiftly interwove itself with his anxiety this time - why did he suddenly collapse, what did I do?!
He couldn’t manage more than a ghostly wisp of word in his horror. “Wha…”

Hosuh, without thought or second-guessing, bent down and buried his arms under the rogue’s tan cloak. Leaning back, he splayed his hands over his back as his frame flopped against him, nothing inside to fight the pull of gravity. As he adjusted the unconscious body, the snake felt his limp legs slide by his sides, falling off what little support his hip-like bones provided and cloth easily sliding against scales. Hosuh hadn’t even paid attention to their presence and was surprised by the movement against his front. Shivers ran up and down his lengthy spine, shooting all the way to his fingers and to the tip of his tail, making the points quiver. The feeling was only amplified as it was paired with the human’s head, with the way it fell over his shoulder and tipped slightly with the curve of his neck.

He couldn’t focus on the way the buzzing feeling started to crawl in his skin, he needed to focus on the current situation. Or, at least, focus as much as he could with his thoughts cranked to a rushing overdrive. Did he just die on me?! No, What did I do-- I wasn’t doing anything, was I? Please no, I-!

He felt something shift again, this time it was against his chest. Hosuh stilled, monitoring the motion - it was a gentle push, the gentle rising and falling of the human’s chest against his own. Paired with the sound of breath, Hosuh let out a shaky, worded sigh.

“ Oh thank the stars…”

He was utterly relieved that the thief was definitely alive, and very much so given that he was showing signs immediately instead of appearing flatlined.

Despite his relief, he didn’t stop shaking. Hosuh was unsure as to why for a split-second, but was promptly clarified as he felt a little wisp of air flow over the back of his neck and generated another wave of shivers.

Okay, okay, okay - this is all okay! He’s fine, I’m fine - dammit what do I do now?!

He tried to still his shaking fingers and tail, but alas it came to no avail. Failing that, he tried to think of ways to wake the sleep-taken scoundrel. How best to stir him ...perhaps a literal approach might be a good one? Mm, probably not that... Hosuh didn’t find the way Stephen had shaken his shoulders to be quite jarring, uncomfortable. How else to stir? Hosuh’s mind went blank for a moment as he felt slow motions of vitality against him, more breaths like feathers over his neck. Oddly enough, that wind was the thing that gave him an idea. That’s when he woke up last time... maybe that might work? The breath felt like it was coming from his mouth, after all. It’s worth a try...

Still taking a priority of carefulness, he adjusted the body in his arms so that he was somewhat upright, leaned back against his arms. He tried taking one arm off of his back to enact his thinking, but the dead weight was a bit much for just a single arm to prop up. Hosuh let out a short shout and caught Stephen before he could fall backwards all too much.

He stilled for a moment, pondering, before shifting both of their forms around. In a motion somewhat similar to a person schooching backwards from a seated position, Hosuh drew some of his tail with him and created a surface without a great slope. As he moved, Stephen started to slip backwards and off the side of the makeshift ledge. Hosuh quickly reached towards the region and dragged him forward with one arm, re-centering him. It took a moment after Stephen was steadied for a realization to sink in. To put it simply with a borrowed phrase from the snarky crow, Hosuh had grabbed his ass again - only somewhat, but still enough to count.
Hosuh tensed and froze - he hadn’t even been thinking about what he was doing. He had no ill intentions, he just didn’t want him to fall! The hand still on his back started shaking even more as he tried to move the other off of the warm, squishy muscle. Just like before, the movement was slow - he had to fight his urges, the saffron sparks that burst in his irises.

Making a compromise with his inner devil, he re-established the lock Stephen had placed over his hips by nudging up his legs, one thigh at a time to keep a supporting hand on his back so that his half-slumped form from shifting off his sides.

As he oriented the limbs, another realization dawned upon him. This realization needed no words, just the gravity that was pulling the thief down onto him and little bits of motion he was enacting.

The tingling feeling grew tenfold as his subconscious processed the warm weight on top of him. Equal parts of him guided his next move - it was a flustered attempt to avoid outright thinking, an impulse driven by the same feelings he was trying to choke down, and an enactment of the idea in his head.

Wrapping one arm around his waist for support, he leaned the frame so it was properly upright. He took his other, now freed hand and reached towards Stephen’s jaw. It was a hesitant movement, an anxiety washing over him despite the other’s eyelids having closed and his lack of vigor indicating that he was still passed out.

With shaking fingertips, he touched the rogue’s lips, his open palm curving with the bones of his face and claws just missing his nose. He held it there for a moment with featherlike pressure, both too ensnared in his own nerves to move and curious to see if he’d wake. Nothing except for more steady warm air drifting over his hand was to be found. He next tried adding a little more of a push - still nothing, except for a small squishing of the human’s face.

He couldn’t even smother the thought that came across his head, couldn’t deflect just one quirky word - *Cute...* He couldn’t even help but stare for a moment.

Then, still half-entranced, he tried lifting and re-applying the pressure repeatedly, playing with the soft features. It was still an attempt to stir the human anyways, so he didn’t even try to fight the urge to tap both fast and fluttery nor slow and more forcefully.

Several seconds of this passed before Hosuh tried jostling the mounds from side to side. As he tried to do so, one of his fingers slipped on a slight slickness on Stephen’s bottom lip and caused him to touch a tooth.

*Huh?* He was surprised at the flatness he felt - all of his own teeth curved slightly inwards, so this was new to him. Out of curiosity, he pressed down on his bony chin and opened his mouth a bit more. He knew that humans had more rigid jaws than he did, he knew that humans had blunt-edged teeth - he could see it when they talked or felt it when touched. What he didn’t know - or, rather, didn’t pay close enough attention to know - was the variety of shapes he saw. He first noticed two little pointed teeth on each row - they looked like miniature versions of his fangs, with even placement matching his own. He chuckled a bit at the resemblance. He looked at the teeth a bit further back and was surprised again - *why are they so thick and bumpy?* It was odd to him, given that his own teeth only came to singular points.

He then became quite fascinated with his lower jaw - more specifically, whatever was going on with his tongue. He’s seen that humans have thicker tongues than he does, but he didn’t know they were *this* wide. The lax muscle laid flat - which was also odd to Hosuh. *Where’s his windpipe?* It seemed to be absent, or at least pushed back to his throat. He could breathe like that too - he just happened to have an alternate method towards the front of his jaw as well. The structure wasn’t
anything special or supernatural - he just had a trait that matched any other snake.

So strange... Human anatomy was just as odd to him as his own form was jarring and new to a human viewer.

It took him a handful of seconds to realize he had been tracing his own jaw with his tongue, comparing the structures he knew versus the ones he saw as he explored the other male’s mouth. He also had the realization that Stephen still hadn’t awoken yet. That much was a tad concerning - he was taking his time to wake up, similar to as if he had been strangled a second time. Yet he had done nothing to hurt him… perhaps I need to try something else?

The answer was a negative - just as he began drifting into thought once again, he saw the wide tongue twitch in Stephen’s mouth and heard him take a sharp inhale through his nose. A brief, questioning hum immediately followed, alongside a light attempt to close his mouth - a movement that was blocked by the way Hosuh was holding his lower jaw. Hosuh flinched, his tongue flicking out instinctively and barely missing Stephen as he let go of his chin, backing up slightly.

Stephen reeled back and, with his jaw freed he took the opportunity to voice his confusion with a shout-like voice.

“What the hell was that?!”

Hosuh sputtered, a feeling of embarrassment washing over him - which was strange, given that he was never usually so scattered around humans, as well as the fact that they were alone in the cavern.

Although, he did have some clue this time. He was feeling another bout of those shivers, so he pinned it on that. Stephen had shifted slightly on top of him as he woke up, after all.

“Sorry! I-I--” He took a breath for a moment. “I didn’t mean anything wrong - I just…saw something, and became curious. I was only looking.”

Stephen gave him a puzzled expression and a pause before speaking. “..Okay, sure…”

Hosuh’s lips unwittingly curved into an awkward smile as his mind darted around. That tone..Can he tell that I..kind of lied?

“What did you see? What caught your attention?”

Wha- ah shit! Hosuh started speaking frantically to help cover his tracks, reeling internally at himself for saying too much.

“Really, it was nothing! I-I just--” He cut himself off with a realization. “You had done the same thing not long ago, hadn’t you?”

“Hmm?” What exactly is he referring to?

“Or- whatever that was supposed to be.”

“Huh? What are-”

“Oh, and uh.. sorry for the way I responded. I didn’t… I didn’t mean anything like that- it was just ..a bad reaction to something weird…..Actually, why did you do that?”

“Do..what exactly?”
“Why did you grab and open my mouth? I really don’t know what you were trying to do, with doing that...”

“Oh, that…” Stephen’s tone dropped, his form slumping and shifting slightly. He didn’t even register the way Hosuh’s facial features had jostled a bit as he moved, too lost in his own thoughts. “Well, sometimes it’s best to cut to the chase, right?”

“Hm? What were you- I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.. There’s no chase? So how would it be cut--”

Stephen’s previous existential-based anger started to return. “No, I didn’t mean- Argh! How about I say it another way - Getting things done? Getting this shit over with? Ever heard of those things, Hosuh?”

“I-....” Hosuh’s response died on his tongue.

Stephen stared at Hosuh with a scowl as he waited for a response - that’s when he noticed something. “Hey- why’s your face so red?”

“Wha-?” His breath caught and cut off his words. *This again? Why does that have to be here right now - and why can’t I control it? Things are already bad enough as is!*

Stephen grew confused as he saw Hosuh’s eyes dart around and the way his face tensed up. He seemed..flustered? *But why would he...*

Stephen’s own eyes had wandered slightly as he thought, and finally picked up on how his surroundings had changed a bit. He saw the sandstone walls of the cave instead of the ceiling. *When did I?... He wasn’t on his back anymore, he noted - wait, why’s his arm there- and why does it feel so...tense? Actually... Where’d his tail go? And why do I feel-*

Stephen’s body and mind froze as he thought about his own position. His arms were at his sides, that was normal. But his legs..he felt something between them? Something thick, too..

He leaned back slightly, the arm on his back moving as well - Hosuh was too lost in his own head to stop him. Violet eyes drifted down to see what the hell was going on.

His legs wrapped around Hosuh, as if they had fallen off his hips. Looking down to where his torso tapered off to his serpentine form, Stephen saw where his skin transitioned to scales. The scales started out very small and fine- they got bigger and more blueish the further he looked, until the size and color matched the rest of his tail. He also noticed the way the scales quickly changed towards his center - wide, smooth, and slightly overlapping with a central line down the middle.

But he couldn’t focus on any of that for more than a second - he was far more occupied with another observation, one that stuck him like lightning. The way he was seated, the way Hosuh’s body continued down and the placement of where things would logically be present...

*Stephen realized that not only was he sitting on top of him, he was sitting on the serpentine equivalent of his lap - and paired with the way his own hips were pressed flush to the spot, Stephen realized that he was well and truly straddling Hosuh.*
Chapter Summary

The mind can sure come up with some odd, wild thoughts sometimes...

Chapter Notes

Hello! First off.. I'M SO SORRY THIS TOOK SO LONG!

Seriously- this fic has been on my mind nearly every day since I last uploaded a few weeks back, and I've been meaning to update so much during that time! It's been a mix of things that delayed this - as we all know, it's plague (COVID-19) season! And I'm sure everybody knows what that entails- quarantine. During quarantine so far, I've been doing a number of things - the first of which I'll mention is trying to write this chapter! Ah, isn't just great when you have all the time in the world to and a heck of a lot of wanting write - then, boom! Writer's block! a h h o w F U N!

I mean, I've also been doing other things - drawing, running a D&D campaign over on Discord (yes, the same Stephen cult I've mentioned before), schoolwork as it comes and goes... But yeah, writer's block has been the biggest killer. Hopefully I've broken it by now and I can write more / get back on the 'one chapter per 5-7 days' schedule' at this point (based on the fact that I wrote quite a chunk of this today)... but unfortunately I can't guarantee anything. I know I tend to get motivation and inspiration in spurric waves and spikes - so it may be longer than 5-7 days for the next chapter- but know I'm still working on it, this fic isn't going to die any time soon!

Oh, and seeing likings of the fic, things like hits and comments.. yeah, things had (understandably) slowed down quite a bit, which felt kinda draining... But seeing growth again- I know that'll bring forth new sparks that can hopefully turn into a fire that fuels me to write more and continue this story!

Well, that's all I can think of... so with that out of the way, Hope you enjoy!

Stephen’s eyes widened as he realized the predicament he was in. His head felt locked in place, unable to look away from the point where their bodies converged. He pressed his lips to a thin line as his thoughts bounced like echoes on the walls of his skull. Why am I--- I--- Straddling him?!

When the hell did this happen? How, why, what the fuck!? This isn’t-- What is this even supposed to mean? Is he trying to... No, no, I don’t think he would...why would he, I’m not worth that kind of-- Gah! I really need to stop thinking about this!

He tore his eyes away from the spot, trying to think about anything else. Though, with his head still feeling immobile for some blasted reason, he couldn’t really see much besides Hosuh. Besides, it was not like he would be able to see much else anyways. Near the center of the cavern and under the steel grate, the two were cast in a split-up spotlight of forming twilight - his eyes
would have to re-adjust to see any significant details on the cave walls.

Okay, this is fine… Stephen thought it would be an alright idea for his eyes to wander around Hosuh - he quickly found himself regretting that decision as a warm redness splayed itself across his face.

He looked again at the way his body transitioned from serpentine to human like - he was surprised at the fineness and tone-match of the scales, but more curious about just how smooth and clear his skin was after the scales faded off. Hosuh’s belly was flat and smooth, broken by the small divot of a humanlike belly button and muscle lines. Although the lines were somewhat faint, they still held a masculine edge - still had that characteristic way of drawing a viewer’s focus downwards, much in the same way a painter or illust would use the flow of linework to guide the beholder’s eye through a piece of art. Stephen, in that moment, was a captivated audience to the form before him, and much like a viewer of a pristinely-crafted sculpture, his eyes were lured by the cues put in place.

Is it possible that…. no, I couldn’t have- right?

He was utterly entranced by what he saw - he felt a pull rather akin to the force that drove many of his past theivings. He could tell by sight alone if something was valuable, illuring, finely-crafted - he knew treasure when he saw it, and only grew more enticed the closer he could get to it. The same urges were nipping at his mind again in the moment - he tried to smother them, but in doing so he let a nagging thought loose from the back of his mind.

Did I do this?

Stephen felt as though wisps of flame were running by his face, flowing on a wind of embarrassment that caused his lips to curl inwards and press together. He pressed his eyes shut, his head moving to a path of deceit once again, a reaction quite woven into him through years as a trickster.

No, no way - no way I would... try to… right?

Stephen pressed his eyes shut, trying to avoid watching the way the whole swath rose and fell. As he had been staring, Hosuh’s movements were in an unnatural fashion- evidence of how he was actively trying to tame his breathing. Stephen didn’t really take note of this - it didn’t seem exceptional, given that he was trying to do the same thing.

Stephen had shut his eyes as a means to avoid thinking - yet the darkness only served to eliminate any potential distractions that could drift by his eyes. The fire in his cheeks continued to burn. His head was in no shape for words - without words, what else was he to do, though? Perhaps looking elsewhere might help distract from…all this…

Stephen opened up his eyes and, unsurprisingly, was still greeted by the sight of Hosuh. This time, though, his eyes were pointed at Hosuh’s torso. Still ensnared by something that felt like awe, his eyes roamed several seconds. Hosuh’s collarbones were well defined, a fine frame to a sleek chest. Where areas of skin weren't covered in strands of hair, fine scales formed little specklings of slightly off-colored dots stuck to toned lines of humanlike form and muscle. Other than the scales and a few long-healed scratch marks, his skin was clear and smooth - and it was only complimented by those damn beautiful locks that he wanted to run his hands though-

The rogue felt his heart rate pick up even more at the thought. When did that- Where did that come from!? Augh!
He screwed his eyes shut for another prolonged moment before opening again. This time, violet irises landed on Hosuh’s face. What he saw he had grown slightly accustomed to - bundles of hair often swept over the bridge of his nose like long-overgrown bangs. Scaled hands had been sweeping out of his face every now and then, yet they’d always return sooner or later - and here they were again, obscuring... quite a lot of his face, actually. Yet, Stephen could still see plenty - purple eyes easily pierced the veil of grey. The silky strands curved gently with the soft bell of his nose - but that’s not what struck the thief. No, another part of the picture drew his gaze - it’s common for the eye to be drawn into contrast, so it only made sense that Stephen’s eyes were drawn into the way Hosuh’s lips popped out against the cool and pale tones of his hair and skin.

As soon as the scoundrel’s eyes fell upon his mouth, upon those lips that somewhat resembled the petals of cherry blossoms, that’s when his subconscious became all too aware of the way he was trapped once more, how that this was a bind he’d be unlikely to escape even with the best of fortune on his side. Seeing as how those lips were already parted to take in a series of shallow and deep breaths - it was sensical that only a matter of seconds passed before his subconscious grew active and overflowed like the froth of a boiling pot.

Stephen hadn’t noticed the slight magnetism affecting his frame before - but now the force was tenfold and he had to actively resist the force, to pull on his own reign. His breaths started to grow shaky, his body following suit shortly after. His own lips tightened in sync with the ones in front of him as quite a thought drifted by his mind.

**Dear god he’s attractive.**

Deception had long been woven into his actions - and here it was again, bursting forth in the shape of frantic denial. **Wait- Fuck! Did I just-? No, no! That can’t be right! That can’t be the case, that he’s just really alluring... right? Yeah - he must have some kind of... I don’t know, ability or something... Oh! Maybe it’s magic! The hell if I knew how any of that worked anyways - yeah, it could be that...**

Stephen’s mind contemplated what specific form of magic or spell he could be under. He’d heard of magics that could cause flames to dance like nothing nature could make, and he’d even seen fellow scoundrels set traces of their crimes alight by using gathered tinder and little magical sparks that burst from their hands- could pyromancy be the culprit, given the way he felt heat rising all around and through him? Who knows - certainly not him. He’d also heard of a few types of charms that put people into friendly trances... but this didn’t seem to quite match that case. What he knew about a charmed state was that the affected would greet the spellcaster like a friend. This was definitely different... To his flustered brain, this even seemed like it could be something else entirely... For a moment he digested the thought, then was hit with an idea that made his stomach sink.

**Oh fuck... Poison!**

In the world of criminal alleyways and streets, he knew a decent few things about toxins. Some could kill very quickly, but others could take quite a bit of time to take hold - these things often caused rather strange effects in the meantimes. Whether the victims had days, hours, or minutes left before deathly bells rang, they would exhibit rather odd behaviors - delirium and dazes like that of drunkard men, laughing and monologues that twisted like the victim’s unbalanced footsteps, spirals into a world unknown. Or, at least, those are all things he’d heard of through rumors, recollections from others and a number of stories. Throughout all the accounts, serpents and venoms were semi-frequent things to be mentioned among tale-telling that was both terrifying and thrilling to discover.
Poison - that was the suspect on Stephen’s mind. Although the wound on his neck was mostly cleaned and dried, two black dots and a lingering ache still stood as indisputable evidence to the attack. But what else could’ve been left? The rising heat seemed like it could be something - the rogue recalled how a once-partner in crime poisoned a minor baron before the duo looted his residency. The man had fallen into a low, but survivable sickness before they’d escaped - was it an oncoming fever Stephen was feeling? That sure would explain all the heat he felt in his blood, especially in his head...

Or again, could it be magic? Some kind of charm or pyromancy wouldn’t be far fetched to the thief - if anything, it seemed all too likely to his scattered mind. But how would magic even work in a venom? The toxins he’s heard about were all very nature-based, from the likes of plants, bugs and snakes. On top of that, nothing about Hosuh seemed arcane - but then again, other races of humanoid with oddities existed without magic and came from a line of inheritance. Yet none of them held as extreme or powerful of a form as the silver snake before him. Thus, ideas of mystic forces somehow being laced in Hosuh lingered in his head - although, it didn’t clear even a grain of confusion from the dunes of bewilderment that had formed in his purple-crowned skull, didn’t offer even a word to explain all the odd thoughts in his brain.

“What the hell are you?”

The question was low and mumbled, the words a bit tricky to understand - but Hosuh still comprehended the asking, even with how unexpected it was. The duo had been silent for the past minute or so, neither trying to stir the other and trying to keep their own composure - Stephen staring towards Hosuh while he himself looked downcast, away from the human who’d been the primary subject on his mind ever since… well, ever since he was cast down along beams of light of the just-then setting sun. He was trying to keep a number of things at bay - both at instincts he knew well and at that buzzing fire lacing his body he couldn’t quite figure out.

But that had passed - now the silence was broken and Hosuh was bidded to respond. But how? How should he answer the question? For as long as he could remember, he’s had this form, this body… He’d never encountered another like him, and no one ever gave a particular name for his kind of creature. Still, he quietly gave the best response his jumbled brain could conjure.

“I-I mean, I’ve heard humans call me ‘snake’ a few times before…”

The thief's body went ramrod, all the muscles Hosuh could feel going rigid as he heard him take a sharp breath. Hosuh finally met the rogue’s gaze at the reaction, and his deer-in-the-headlights expression only further egged on his intuition. He didn’t mean to say that out loud, did he... Talking when one didn’t mean to - even Hosuh knew that feeling. Many times before, he’s been caught muttering out his streams of thought - most of the time he caught it himself, but a few other times, another was the one to catch it...

And much like those catchers, Hosuh instantly felt a wave of surprise and sheepishness, acting accordingly to help tend to the misstep.

“Um-! I-I mean-! Y-you had asked, s-so I wanted to give the best answer I c-could.”

The human just let out a quiet word amidst his bafflement as he tried to keep calm, to try to act natural like all the other times he’s been caught in his acts. “Wha...”

“Er- I know i-it’s not anything big or special- ‘Hosuh’ is the only word that I know of that really refers to me. But that’s just my name, and you already knew that, so... It seems like you were trying to ask something else, like...How best to I explain this... Oh, how the word ‘bird’ describes all those little... fluffy round things that fly in the air. I think you’re asking for a describing word
as to what I am.

“I- I guess? I mean—”

“Or like how you are a human - or, at least, I think you are. And you have a name, just like I do, right?”

“What- I mean, I do, it’s- ” Stephen cut himself off, his habits of not revealing his name or any other information being ever-prevalent. “Look, I didn’t even mean to say... that out loud, so I guess it doesn’t really matter. Also - about me being human- what was that about? Do I not look like one or something?”

“No, y-you do. Just.. I don’t know- you’re... I don’t know, different .”

“...What do you mean by that?..” Stephen’s voice came out well defined at first, but his expression started to sink the more he thought about his own words - or, more to be more exact, Hosuh’s words. Those things he said earlier echoed in his skull, and the images of the events, that wild look that intermingled with the golden dust swirling in his eyes and that bloody maw filled with rows of sharp teeth...those memories rushed around inside his head -the contradicting, fresher memories of him staring at Hosuh’s drawing or the ways he gently held him only acting as a minor, unconscious damper. That unseen damper and his observation of Hosuh coiling up in response to him moving were the only things that kept him from jumping off him and skittering away to the furthest carven wall.

Although Stephen was alone in just how afraid he was, he wasn’t so in having thoughts laced with anxieties. As Hosuh processed the question, it was his turn to go wide-eyed as the tingly fire slithered through his veins. He hadn’t realized the implication of his response. It was entirely true-no human had ever piqued his senses so much - or, at least, not this quickly. As soon as he appeared is when the first domino tipped and toppled and when the first gear whirred into motion - and from thereon, things only came in rising crescendo. The rising feelings, they grew louder, louder! How could he tame the forces pulling at the strings of his mind?

Hunger was a problem he knew how to deal with well enough - starvation was something he’d encountered many times before, something he could clench his teeth and bear for weeks at a time. This new buzz was so much less familiar to him.

Well, just staying silent and avoiding the problem seemed to be going nowhere - the only progress he had made with the thief was made through action, he recalled. Thus, action was yet again needed, Hosuh reasoned to himself. But what do I do?

The serpent finally looked at the human occupying his thoughts - eye contact was something small, something that even his nervous self could do, right? He could certainly do it, and thus he did - and he quite regretted doing so. Stephen’s eyes were wide and the rest of his features were sunken.

Fear... Hosuh’s mouth parted at the sight - and it added another regret to Hosuh’s head. The violet eyes, already focused on the spot, contracted as the tips of his teeth came into view. Hosuh’s jaw shook before he took initiative and quickly closed it. He threw his arms upwards, ringed around Stephen’s back - but he dared not touch him, he was too afraid of the fear he saw in the human’s eyes.

No!.. How can I make this right? I don’t want to eat-- He cut off that thought, for he knew it was a lie. Deep down, the ravenous beast still clawed at him, he still felt that hollow pain inside his gut. I don’t want to kill you! There- that was a much more accurate thought, something he really meant.
Hosuh was about to open his mouth to relay that thought, to let the human know his intent - but his damned body, that damned inner beast beat him to the call. Both of them heard it, both of them felt it.

*Grrr*gggghhh…

Stephen felt the vibrations underneath him, from behind and... *inside* the serpent’s tail? It wasn’t an alien in sound, just in placement. But the strangeness held nothing of significance- the chills still came all the same to Stephen, for he knew what he was hearing, what he was feeling beneath him - *Hosuh’s stomach was growling.*

*grrrgghh…* It was a minor but awful shaking, a rattling of Hosuh’s body that caused a much greater quake in his mind. *Dammit, why must that happen now...Well, there goes any progress I tried to make...*

Hosuh’s shoulders dropped and his eyes went adrift around the cave again. Stephen shifted too, but in a different way - instead of a folley, his form grew tenser, more coiled up. The thoughts at his brain tugged at him like puppeteers’ strings, an infuriating sort of curiosity.

He needed to know- he needed to finally get an answer to the question of why he still lived, why Hosuh spared him, what his intentions were. And he needed to know where those usual, fiery thoughts clouding his brain came from, why they’re here now, how they came along!

His brow furrowed as the lack of answers grew infuriating, given that Hosuh seemed ever-so aware of what he was doing all those minutes earlier. So, that still had to be true - Hosuh had to know what he was doing to him at this moment, right?

The rogue’s rage came out in a roaring tone, a bursting forth of his voice. “What the hell?! What are you trying to do now!?"

Much of Hosuh’s dread turned to confusion, relayed in anxious notes as his voice wisped the air between them. “What? I’m not trying to do anything!”

Stephen’s arms shot into the air in frustrated gesturing. “Bullshit - we both clearly knew what you were doing earlier, so what kind of scheme is this?”

“Wh-”

“Is this some way of.. What, playing with your food? C’mon, even children know not to do that!”

“I- I’m not..playing? I-”

Stephen grabbed Hosuh’s shoulders with a tough grip.“Then what are you doing!”

“I-”

Stephen gave Hosuh a shove before his hands waved in gestures. “Or- y’know what, screw whatever *this* or your reasoning for it is - it doesn’t change that it’s pointless!

“No, you’ve got it wrong, it's-! Is it really so bad to try-”

“No, Hosuh, you’re the one who’s wrong. I can see what’s going on- you’re delaying things, just stalling shit!”

“Wait! I’m not trying to - to stall or keep up anything either - I-I mean no harm-”
“To hell with what you mean, it doesn’t change the truth! And the truth is that you’re going to—... to—...” Stephen’s voice started to choke up as tears welled up on his eyes and his arms fell to his sides once again.

“You’re going to kill me, going to eat me… You made that clear, so….” He paused, taking in a breath as he remembered how he was strangled. His tone picked up intensity once again, the tears rolling down his cheeks. “So why are you waiting if we both know what’s inevitable!?”

“I’m not waiting!”

“Then what are you doing, Hosuh!? What are you doing…” Both his tears and his tone lost heat, chilled in the cooling night air. Losing energy more and more, his voice quieted as his head and shoulders fell. “Just tell me, it can’t be that hard…”

Hosuh’s voice lost much of its volume at the sight. “I- I don’t know….”

A moment of quiet passed before he spoke again, this time with greater confidence. “But I do know that I’m not trying to do anything bad to you. I—... I guess I’m just—”

Stephen looked up at Hosuh through soaked eyes. “Trying to do? Hosuh - what you try to do is different from what you actually do…”

Hosuh had been keeping his own annoyance at bay until this point- but this? This inferiation wouldn’t stand with him. He let out a sigh before grabbing the rogue’s shoulders, pulling him close enough for their foreheads to touch in a motion that made the crier yelp.

Hosuh’s eyes met his reddened ones with a glare that burned like blue-hot fire, and he spoke with a tone just as strong.

“Look, if I wanted to do anything to you, it would already be done! Don’t you see that I mean nothing wrong ?!”

The statement struck it’s recipient hard. The sheer emotion of everything - the tensity communicated in Hosuh’s hold and voice, the fear, rage, confusion and fluster in his own head and the sadness and embarrassment painted across his features - Stephen wanted it dash it all aside.

He wanted to make a powerful comeback, to express the angered befuddlement he felt at the statement and clear the shameful state he knew he was in. Yet, as soon as he opened his mouth, nothing more than a small whimper came out.

Stephen could very well lie to others, but he had trouble deceiving himself.

He didn’t like the fact in Hosuh’s words - it burned, how fiercely he wanted to reject that truth. Oh how it burned within him, that painful heat just behind his eyes. He tried to speak again, and was met with the same result - a small, high pitched whine that mingled with their breaths as the streams continued to run.

“I don’t know why you were fighting me on this, but it’s true…” Hosuh paused for a moment - and as he continued speaking, he loosely wrapped his arms around the thief’s neck.

“Again, I want to get rid of... whatever’s in your head that’s opposing this. I...I really don’t mean to hurt you - I’ve actively been trying to help you, actually.”

As Stephen’s tears flowed, they seemed to have calmed him - when he spoke, his tone lacked the wrath it had moments prior. “...Help me? How... and...w-”
“I mean, I’ve been trying to calm you down all this time - the little drawing, the way I’ve been trying to make you comfortable...trying to stay calm myself…”

“W-...What exactly are you referring to? I mean, I.. Hunger’s obvious, but it seems like you’re getting at something else, too...”

“Right- well.. Do you remember when you…” As he struggled to find his words, he moved one of his hands up to the back of the scoundrel’s head. After a small, weak flinch, he started gently petting the soft plum hair there.

“...fell out, fell still on me a little bit ago?”

“You mean when I blacked out? Y-yeah, I recall...You.. Did you know how…-?” How terrifying you were?

“Yes, and I very much apologize… I didn’t mean to act like that, damn instincts…”

“Ah...Wait- so you weren’t mad at me?”

Hosuh’s hand froze as he responded. “No? Barley at all. You just..., had grabbed my mouth? It was really weird, whatever you were trying to do…”

“I... yeah…”

Stephen recalled the gesture he was trying to relay - he was trying to stick his head in the lion’s jaw, to further emphasize his point, to have Hosuh bite down and just kill him already. Looking back, he reeled a bit - not just at the feelings he was experiencing at the time, but at the foolishness of the action. He did still fear death, after all. Even if he wasn’t the fondest of it, he didn’t actually want to throw his own life aside like that.

Even at the current moment, with another wave of tears pulsing down the rivers on his cheeks, he knew he didn’t truly want to die - quite the opposite, really. It was desperate, the wanting he had to keep living- and it burned brightly as it swirled around in his heart.

Hosuh’s hand slid down, gently resting itself against the nape of his neck as he spoke. “...If you wanted to look, you could’ve just asked.”

“Wha-! Oh, right…” Stephen had been lost in his thoughts for a moment, and thus caught by surprise by the words and movement.

“Um… I mean, you asked ‘what the hell am I’... Honestly, I don’t really know myself, and… you don’t seem to either, but still… perhaps we could figure it out?”

Hosuh let out a quiet, almost nervous chuckle. The rogue seemed calmed at the moment, and he didn’t want to shatter or shake that peace in the slightest. He decided to keep talking, a worry that too much silence would break the mood lurking in the back of his mind as he looked away from the thief.

“Er, it’s not a priority or anything. It’s not really important anyways - I’ve gotten by for as long as I can recall like this without knowing, so.. Yeah. That was just a thought that came to mind.”

Stephen hummed in acknowledgement. When he spoke, he was surprised at how steady his voice came out. “I...Well, I’ve never seen - or, even heard of- anything like you. I ..I guess I’m curious, I won't deny that, but…” His voice trailed with his thoughts once again.
“But?”

His voice cracked and quivered as he spoke. “B-but it doesn’t matter - you’re still gonna k-kill me…”

Hosuh’s eyes darted back to him. “I’m-”

Stephen wasn’t listening. “Y-you have to, y-you need to eat, after all… we b-both know it’s g-going to happen, we c-can’t avoid it! S-so… why are you even caring for me?”

“Wait- just, wait, hear me for a moment. It’s…” His eyes pointed themselves away, towards the walls of the cavern as a mist of guilt and shame washed over him. “That isn’t as certain as you think it is. I’d like to think of it as unlikely of happening at all, honestly.”

Stephen’s eyes had been unfocused and wandering, much like pieces of driftwood on the waves of saline streams - that statement pulled him out of his spaciness, blowing the pinkish orbs wide and locking them on Hosuh’s face as he turned his head upwards, still maintaining the spot where their foreheads touched and shifting the strands of Hosuh’s long-overgrown bangs.

“W..what?” Is that what I think- no, that’s impossible...right? “Excuse me- What did you just say?”

Hosuh’s eyes were still faced away- now he was the one to become lost in his own head. But his thoughts seemed happier, given that he smiled and chuckled quietly.

“Heh , I… I didn’t want to add another mark to the wall…but hey, I have a guess that I probably won’t have to.”

‘The wall’!? What the hell is he referring to?!

“Wha…” Stephen wanted to jolt away, but he forced himself to stay still - he avoided his questions before, but now it seemed like he was going to give answers. He knew treasure when he saw it, he knew how to read the signs - he wasn’t about to break this opportunity! Thus, his slowly-clearing eyes continued to watch ahead.Meanwhile, the serpent just kept rambling on - almost as if he were caught in a dream...Or was it a trance? Whatever it was, it seemed happy, as reflected in the notes of his voice.

“Mm? Well, I mean… Rocks wear down over time - at least, that’s what it looks like. I don’t go over to… that place often, but recently, I... I felt the stones against my hands, just like many times before, but this time…”

As he spoke, Hosuh’s tone became laced in great awe and disbelief - and, with just a few words, he stole the air out of Stephen’s lungs without even knowing it.

“...Some of the stones, they...they crumbled before me... and behind them, I saw the golden beams of the sun just barely peeking through...”
Cheer in Old Dreams and Novel Birdsongs

Chapter Summary

Both old things and new things alike can bring such joy - a happiness as real as the happenings themselves...

Chapter Notes

GUESS WHAT EARLY UPDATE Y’ALL CAUSE I’VE BEEN REALLY PRODUCTIVE AND MOTIVATED / INSPIRED THESE PAST 2 DAYS
Also I’m releasing this early as a gift to y’all - thanks for chilling out / waiting through the hiatus!
WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!! <3
As always, I hope y’all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I saw the golden beams of the sun just barely peeking through...”

Stephen couldn’t believe what he was hearing. In every story about this dreaded pit, in spite of all the wild differences from guess to guess he’d heard of, one motif was consistent - certain annihilation. Complete destruction, horrid death, utter decimation - the variance in the phrasing never mattered, for no tale dared to dream of escape or survival.

So, to hear living proof of such myths as solid as the stones being spoken about - it was blasphemy to all he’d known.

His brain had immense difficulty in even processing the words and their greater meaning - the discrepancy was outlandish to him that it kept his jaw dropped from his initial shallow gasp. As the gears spun, sparked and sputtered in his skull, his wide and salty eyes abandoned their focus, losing their vigilance to Hosuh.

Maybe if those eyes had been more aware, he may have seen the crimson incoming.

For the past minute or two, Hosuh had kept his forehead pressed against the thief’s. When he pulled him in like that, it was for emphasis - he needed his blue fire to get through, he needed to finally kill that bug latched under the waves of purple that spun up his brain in webs of fear. And it seemed like it was an effective move - Stephen had lost his rage as well as most of the force behind his own arguments. So, Hosuh had no regrets for that.

The regretful thing that was biting at him, however, was that bug of buzziness in his own skull. It nibbled at him - and, when paired with his wishes to keep up the calm established, made him grow nervous, that pinkness unknowingly returning to his cheeks. But it wasn’t awful this time - he was
able to improvise conversation despite his nerves, which felt good. Then Stephen’s parasite spun
another, albeit weaker, argument to kill him again. Hosuh wanted to comfort Stephen first and
foremost, and his own soothed state, he felt no hesitance in talking and talking about the fantastical
event of days ago.

Stephen’s little theory about Hosuh having been in a dreamlike state was correct - despite having
whole days to process his discovery, he wasn’t leagues ahead in comprehending it than the violet.
He realized that the beams of light they meant - they were an embodiment of the hopes that
dwelled dormant alongside him for all his years trapped in the life-draining cavern. And the fact
this was no illusion, the fact that the sunbeams were as real, just as real as all his memories and
miseries - he’d half-forgotten what elation felt like, that soaring sensation in his chest. All his
hopes, his dreams, they were reciprocated at last! It was such a wondrous feeling at the time - and,
as he relayed the information, he felt a strong echo of the feeling once again, getting swept up in its
happiness.

He got so lost in his cheeriness that his conscious forgot to tend to his body.

Hosuh’s nibbling, nervous bug had kept him focused enough to stay still, to not reel away from the
closeness that was causing the fluster. He even had enough control to give comforting strokes to
the soft back of the human’s head. That control was lost the more he daydreamed, letting old,
instinctual habits come back into play. It wasn’t a major movement, just another flicker of his red
tongue that he’d done countless times before - a routine check of his surroundings. But his
surroundings held more than just air at the moment - he still had his forehead pressed up against
Stephen’s.

So this time, when he absentmindedly flickered his tongue, he ended up brushing it between
the human’s parted lips.

Both shocked by the swift, slick touch, their reactions were all but immediate - Stephen gave out a
wordless shout as he reeled backwards, Hosuh doing the same and unwrapping his arms away from
where they had been resting around the rogue’s neck. Without Hosuh’s hold to block him, Stephen
yelped as his spine fell and he started...sliding backwards?

They had both accomodated to the way they were positioned - Hosuh doing the equivalent of
sitting on loose coils on his tail while Stephen loosely straddled him. The way his legs wrapped
around Hosuh’s tail prevented him from falling off him entirely as he retreated- so, as his back fell
against the dual rows of wide scales, gravity pulled his weight down the slope. His clothes were far
too soft to let friction catch him, and the angle Hosuh had raised himself didn’t help either. So, he
slid backwards, letting out a prolonged shout in the process.

Hosuh reacted by bending forward and extending a hand towards him, and Stephen managed to
lean upwards and try to meet it - but their reaction times were too slow. But, with his form
somewhat bent, he hit the ground with his whole torso, rather than with the top of his skull. It still
didn’t prevent the impact from being quick, the force knocking the breath out of him.

“Ohhh!..Hhh- Owww…”

Stephen groaned as he half-lied on the ground. He’d been so focused on other things before to pay
too much attention to it, but now he really felt how sore his body had become. It wasn’t surprising,
given the events of the day - multiple tall falls, several dried wounds from yanked-out splinters and
a fair degree of roughhousing from the guards would definitely do that to anybody. And that’s
without mentioning the full-body vice Hosuh nearly crushed him with - all things considered,
Stephen was surprised to find that none of his bones felt broken. It still didn’t take away the pain,
though - and so he sucked in air through his teeth, hissing at the feeling.
Hosuh grew concerned from the pained noises and the scrunched up expression Stephen was wearing. “Oh-! I’m sorry, I-I didn’t mean to do th-that, I-”

He started shifting his tail and leaning over towards the criminal, but slowed when the legs resting on him flinched. Stephen let in a teary gasp as matching eyes popped open, gazing up at Hosuh once again.

The moments felt like minutes as they simply observed one another yet again. Even in the dimness of moonlight, each could still make out the pink tones splayed across the other’s cheeks. They both had the suspicion that the other felt the same in the moment - but, then again, perhaps it was only meant to be, given that they each had the other’s taste on their lips.

Both of them detected savory notes on their own tongues - though, given where the flavors came from, traces of meatiness coming from a tongue made logical sense. They both also caught a sliver-faint hint of metal - which also made sense, given how Hosuh cleaned up Stephen’s neck wounds. But there were other things each picked up on.

Stephen was greeted with a minor saltiness, paired with… some sort of freshness? Whatever it was, it distantly resembled the light, refreshing feeling that comes from eating a minor amount of mint. Something else was much like mint, actually - Stephen swore he could pick up a similar sort of sweet note somewhere in the menagerie. Or was that the kind of faint sweetness that comes from butter? Other notes of the flavor - perhaps it was the saltiness, maybe it was the savor - seemed to compliment the 'butter-esque' comparison. Whatever the flavor was... Damn, Stephen couldn’t even deny that he enjoyed it. Part of him wanted- no, craved for more...but he’d consider himself damned if he dared act on that impulse, so he simply continued to lie and gaze upwards, even with the bit of blur that came with his over-watery eyes.

Hosuh was met with quite a few of the same things he’d detected before - the meatiness and saltiness of his skin were re-iterated yet again. But that strange sweetness he’d first noticed in his blood - it was back, and it was much stronger than before. Maybe it was because he had nearly no recollection of tasting sweet things before, or perhaps it was because of something unique to Stephen - every human had similar elements in their scents in their smells and tastes, but they all had their unique somethings as well. It could be the case that Stephen’s something was the key to making all his tastes so damn delectable - it could even be that there was a lot of this something on, or perhaps in those soft lips of his. The notion made fire charge through his veins like beasts as rambunctious and wild as the thought itself. Without realizing it, he continued to lean in closer over Stephen-

“Huuhhh?.. Your eyesss….H-Hosuh?”

His words were a bit slurred by a pained groan-esque tone, but they were clear - and so was the sight he was seeing. Seconds ago, Hosuh was only partially overhead, his long hair draping over his calves - but nothing more than that. Now, his torso was a much greater canopy overhead. Soft strands brushing against his arms where his tan cloak didn’t cover, Hosuh was practically parallel to him as he loomed above him, just out of arm’s reach in terms of height.

Even obscured by shadow, Stephen’s eyes had adjusted to the dark and could perceive the many flecks of gold that were swimming in Hosuh’s eyes, as well as that quickly flickering tongue popping in and out of his slightly parted mouth. Even though all the things that were stunning him - the aches, the blushing buzz, the tears, fears, and the processing the dream of escapism - he still recognized and pointed out the behavior pattern Hosuh was falling back upon, his form tensing and his voice taking notes of anxiety.

Hosuh flinched at his words, nervous thoughts flashing by his brain as he retreated back a fair way,
back to above the thief’s now-bunching-up legs. *- I lost it again? I thought I had a better grip on myself… Wait a second-

He quickly started speaking with a shy tone and waving his scaly arms in disarming gestures. “Oh! I’m sorry, I-I didn’t mean to do that!”

Stephen pulled in his legs so that they no longer draped on the coil of Hosuh’s tail. While propping himself up with hands behind his back, he leaned up and spoke with an already clearing fear.

“You.. Y’sure?”

Hosuh nodded, his long hair waving with the motion. He looked away whilst giving a soft smile - partially to comfort Stephen, partially out of his own joy. *It seems like I’ve finally calmed him down… Thank-

Hosuh’s thoughts were cut off by a sniffle from the rogue. Pointing his eyes back to him, he saw the thief sitting before him, rubbing his eyes with the back of one of his hands. He drew in a shaky breath, then started...chuckling? That was odd, concerning.

“Why are you laughing?”

He just kept chuckling for a moment before resting his hand on his lap and looking to Hosuh with a quivering smile and mostly-cleared eyes.

“Oh, it’s nothing. It’s-”

“If it’s nothing, then why laugh?” *Nothing can come from nothing...right?* - at least, that’s what Hosuh thought. He decided to elaborate a bit further. “Why do anything, if it really is nothing? No, you’re doing something, which means that whatever you’re thinking about is something too… and you can tell me this something.”

He quieted, giving that smile again before those gold-frosted eyes popped a fraction wider. Raising his arms in gesture again, his voice picked up tempo. “Er- y-you don’t have to if you don’t want to. L-like I said before, I mean no harm, or anything wrong..I-”

Stephen chuckling grew a bit louder. “Relax, Hosuh. No need to be so nervous.”

Both of their forms relaxed a bit as his laughter faded. As he leaned back to rest on his coils, Hosuh quietly chuckled at his own foolish nervousness for a moment before the scoundrel spoke again.

“*Heh*, it makes things so damn obvious... Leaves you with your deeds written all over your face. It’s hard to get away with anything like that, it’s ass.”

“What?”

“Crying. Sobbing. Balling your eyes out-” He flinched at his words, remembering how Hosuh worried about him and scooped him up after saying that phrase. “And no, I don’t mean that literally! My eyes are fine, I.. I just meant ‘it’ as crying...”

“Mmm…” Hosuh gave a simple hum of acknowledgement, his form already backing down after giving a small jolt upon hearing the phrase again.

“Ah crying. It’s natural, but it makes you look like shit.”

“Wh- But… nothing looks… Wait- if it’s natural, then.. Isn’t it goo-?” Hosuh reeled at his own
words, knowing all too well how natural things can be unspeakably awful.

“Good? Hah! No… Think about it, Hosuh - do you think I’d want to look like this? All sore and puffy.. Like some weakling, primed and ready for a beating? No- the great Stephen shouldn’t be seen like that!”

“W-wait—....”

Hosuh’s features sank as he visualized the rogue’s words, an image of him a more beat-up state coming to his mind unnervingly easily and clearly... until he thought about just how much he was overstating his current physical condition. His eyes were a bit pink, but that had faded most of the way. The tear streams were mostly dried, and he had wiped away the little excess that had ran from his nose.

So he clearly didn’t mean it literally, which calmed the initial flash of concern. Still, as the reptilian further processed his words, one bit of information was a faulty cog messing with that mechanism.

“The… great Stephen?”

With an amused huff, the thief tried to maintain that little wall of false confidence again, just like he’d done many times in his life.

“The one and only.”

“Who’s that?”

“Hm?”

“This ‘Stephen’... Is he a friend or something?”

The violet let out a genuine chuckle. “No no, Hosuh - that ‘Stephen’ person, it’s me!”

Hosuh paused for a moment, looking away in what Stephen read as embarrassment again. That notion was all but confirmed in the silverette’s tone.

“Sorry - seems like I misread your words...”

“Hey, it’s nothing to worry about. It happens.”

Stephen continued chuckling as Hosuh bunched up, lying down fully into his coiled tail and sinking in the central gap a bit. Stephen’s form flinched when he opened his eyes and saw his body language. Too caught up in concern to second-guess the action, he schooched closer to the pile of the serpent, silver hair and shy person alike. He spoke with a softness he rarely used.

“Hey, don’t be scared. I’m nothing to be afraid of.”

Hosuh perked his head up at his words, finally meeting Stephen’s eyes and crawling up his tail to prop up his face and upper torso on the scaly mass, arms draped forward and just missing Stephen’s black-leather shoes.

Stephen’s smile grew wider, and he even let out a small hum at the sight in front of him. He didn’t even feel ashamed to think of the sight as cute, so cute - Hosuh was flicking out his cherry red tongue over a pink face and staring at him with attentive blue eyes dotted with the finest particles of gold.

Stephen’s smile broke into laughter for a couple reasons. The first he kept in his head - the horrible
depiction of a dreadful beast made from rumors and previous behaviors utterly shattered as he witnessed the polar opposite in the sweet thing before him, the surprisingly gentle and shy creature called Hosuh.

The second reason came in the form of a new question he wanted answers to - so, with his words still shaky from laughter, he asked away.

“Hell, why would you be afraid of me anyways? We both know that I’m no match for you.”

“M..Match?”

“Yeah..?” They both looked at one another’s confused expressions before Stephen continued talking.

“Oh, you didn’t understand that. Well.” He chuckled for a moment - *Heh, that’s...kinda cute, actually...* “Well, I didn’t mean ‘match’ as in...something like a pair of things. Er, not quite, anyways. A ‘match’, in this case, describes two people- er, or two things - engaging in a duel, a battle, a competition… it refers to both the event itself, as well as the.. I guess, opponent?”

Stephen’s words grew nervous, not wanting Hosuh to take his words the wrong way- or worse, act out negatively. “B-but I-I - I don’t see you as an enemy or a-anything like that. I meant ‘opponent’ in the same way you can have an opponent for a game while having no actual.. Fights or tensions with them…That makes sense, right?”

“Yes, it does...” He smiled softly at Stephen before chuckling. “Thanks- and sorry for not knowing sooner. It’s not good to misread one another...”

“I- I guess, yeah. Yet it happens all the time - it’s pretty much natural. You simply clarify yourself then move on, it’s simple.... Or, at least, that’s when things go smoothly”

Stephen paused and met Hosuh’s oceanic gaze for a moment before continuing.

“Hey- how are you supposed to know what you don’t know, anyways? It’s simple- you can’t! And the same goes for anyone- hell, it’s true for even the great Stephen! We can’t know what we don’t know. It’s a minor thing, it’s no trouble... well, not unless someone makes it to be. But I doubt you or I would try to make a big deal over little things like that - so, it’s nothing worth worrying about.”

“Mm...” Hosuh smiled and listened to Stephen chuckle some more. Both his words and that happy sound of laughter… it was like beautiful music to him, an ancient melody of joy he never even fathomed he’d experience again. For a moment, he just listened and stared - until a thought popped into his silver-draped head.

“Oh, speaking of things I don’t know - why were you asking about my eyes?”


Hosuh shook his head, a look of genuine confusion painted on his face under the pale moonlight. Stephen leaned in a fraction, examining Hosuh’s eyes - they were entirely aqua, *beautifully blu-

Stephen cut off his own thoughts to avoid becoming flustered, to avoid the feeling of his pulse picking up in his chest - *there’s other stuff to take care of right now.*

“Huh...Your eyes, they’re all blue right now - but they weren’t earlier. There were little...bits of yellow in there?”
Hosuh’s brow arched in confused doubt as he let out a questioning hum. If he had ever heard of his eyes doing that before, he’d long since forgotten...yet the claim still felt familiar, almost like it was something he’d veiled or tucked away.

“Yeah, it looked like...dust? Like- Actually…” Stephen flicked his eyes to the floor next to him illuminated in cool-white tones of moonbeams where steel beams didn’t block. Reading the gesture, Hosuh looked to the spot and saw Stephen wave his hand back and forth just above the floor, kicking up the thin layer of powder into the air and watching the particles fall like tiny snowflakes.

Patting his hand against the black fabric of his pants, he explained the quick action as he too observed the shimmering flakes.

“Imagine that kind of effect - except the dust was more of a yellow-gold-ish color, and the darkness is the blue part of your eye.”

“Ah…”

Hosuh had no trouble getting the image of such an eyeball in his mind - with all his time alone, he’d taken the ample opportunity to picture all sorts of things, as well as burn the way things looked into his mind. Whether it was for drawing or simply daydreaming, it helped him to recall the ways his environment could change from the same old, dismal and motionless things - a gentle, small and merry thing much like the chirps and visits of sweet songbirds on the steel grate overhead.

In all his years in the cavern, his imagination brought him comfort - just like the little birds, just like... this human-no, Stephen... His hands tensed slightly at the thought - he didn’t usually see humans that way, so it was a strange phenomenon to him. But then again, strange phenomena just seemed to be a given, fitting thing for the current night. Things have been very odd ever since he fell down here... but also, very nice...

Hosuh grew lost in thought as he started at the tan-garbed rogue in front of him, sinking into the gap in his coil as his mood and muscles became relaxed and fuzzy. Without even realizing it, he let out a content hum and wiggled the end of his tail - not even the hollow ache nor the quiet, shaky gurgle of his stomach beneath him pulled him out of his mesmer.

He pointed his fingers outward slowly, the tips of his claws barley missing the soles of dark shoes. He reached out a fraction, resting the tips of two nails on the hardened material. Stephen didn’t even seem to notice the touch, so Hosuh’s hand moved forward a bit more. Not even with all his fingertips resting on the rim of the sole did the vigilante appear to see him. Everything stayed still, and Hosuh was happy to simply observe Stephen in the moment.

Though, in his dreamlike trance, he failed to notice his expression - and was thus surprised when he felt the shoe start to shake. The motion did pull him back to reality, and his eyes up to Stephen’s face - and it did so with good timing, for right after that cue was when Stephen started speaking.

“Ho-Hosuh? Remember that ‘wall’ you mentioned a few minutes ago?” He pointed his head down to meet Hosuh’s face, the expression he was wearing...

“Wh...Yes?” Hosuh’s words came out with a worry and horror that mimicked the tones he’d heard in Stephen’s voice and those feelings painted on his face. The change was rather unsavory, like milk that was once so fresh but had suddenly become curdled.

Hosuh had only registered that phrase as words he had spoken earlier - he had discarded their
significance for the moment of fantasy. In his distraction, he had failed to digest the fact that pointing out the wall would bring up questioning, and that revealing it would force him to explain what the markings upon it meant.

The serpent was reeling at himself inside his heart, dread blossoming like dye in water as he heard the chain of events unfold, starting with the thief’s tongue.

“This.. This is the one you were talking about...right?”

In their low tones and harrows expressions, they both already knew the answer to that question - but Hosuh responded out of courtesy.

“Yeah…”

A melancholy face of regret framed in silver met a mortified one crowned with a tuft of vibrant purple as they gazed one another. This lasted for a few seconds, breaking when Stephen closed his eyes and moved to stand up. Knowing where he was heading, Hosuh propped himself upright and slithered over to the wall, following only a second behind the beholder.

Stephen’s haunted eyes were wide as he gazed upon the markings on the wall - once again, they were pictures of illustrious quality… but this time, that quality only served to make the drawings so much more chilling. The quality, the sheer realness of the drawings- they only caused the ice to make its way under Stephen’s skin and cause the hairs on his arms to stand as upright as his legs.

Already raising a hand to his own mouth, Stephen’s harrowed voice quivered as he gazed at the images.

“This is...this is what I think it is, right?”

Meeting Hosuh’s expression, he saw immense sorrow and regret, such horrid shame and deep, draining misery written in his eyes. That beautiful sky-blue hue - it was as if it became tainted and covered by the darkest overcast as he looked away and gave a few shallow nods.

His shaking fingertips rising to rest over his mouth, Stephen took in a few low breaths before turning his head and looking back to the horrid scene before him.

He was never too connected to any of the forms he saw, and many were completely unknown and new - nonetheless, he still recognized the ones he had seen before. He knew the things he saw, even through the way they had been obscured with red strokes when he had seen them in the world above. But those same lines he’d seen also told so much more than the words and features they blotted out, they explained the stories both to the people overhead and now, to Stephen here in this underworld.

The images were untainted, clear, and haunting to the core - but that made sense…

**After all, they were all the faces of the damned, all were the lifeless faces of people whose whole beings had been snuffed out within the bellows of this horrible place.**

Chapter End Notes

....But the deepest miseries and fears can be made just as easily as making happiness
by the same exact paths and means....
Stephen trembled as he stood before the swath of sandy stone Hosuh had briefly mentioned. Before, he had questioned why Hosuh specifically mentioned not coming over to this section of his already limited space - now, his avoidance made an awful degree of sense. It’s clear he’d spent a long time at this wall anyways - there was so much detail in each face, and the number of them he saw as he craned his neck up and down… So many hours must’ve been spent here...

Stephen saw face after face depicted - all depictions of those who had been slaughtered and whose bodies had been devoured in this hellish place. Each one looked just about perfect in scale, almost as if he could print each victim’s features against the rock. Not even the warping and curving of the surface distorted the images significantly - the dark markings were finely laid out, all the way down to single strands of hair in some places.

Each drawing had their own distinct features, their own details that made each and every person recognizable. But they also held a common trait throughout in their expressions, they were each closed-eyed and lifeless. At best, they could be considered to be asleep - if slumber eternal could be considered a good thing, that is.

One of the images Stephen saw was that of a young-looking man, one about his age, or perhaps slightly younger. His features looked soft and curved, and his jawline matched the overall slimness, yet roundness he had. His eyelashes were on the ample side - though, that was simply emphasized by his eyes being closed. Still, it seemed like they might’ve had a pointed, near-catlike
quality to them. Smooth-looking bangs swept down just past one of his eyes and thin brows, curving slightly and framing the left side of his face. The rest of his hair had a similar quality - mostly straight, but with a curve that adhered to the curves of his head...except for where they flared out in a series of points by the back of his skull, wrapping around almost like a partial collar. His neck was quite thin, the masculine ball in his throat barley even visible with a single thin line to represent it. Everything combined, he looked somewhat effeminate, at least in some ways.

Even in mortal slumber, Stephen had a guess that this person was a bubbly, kind fellow. Of course, he had no proof, given that he’d never met the man in his life - still, something about his face just gave him the impression. Maybe he was a servant-type of person, going about occupation with an almost childlike cheer. *How on Earth did he end up down here? How’d he piss off the asshole-king? Sir Daniel? Hah! ‘The Tyrant’ would be a much better title for that son of a bitch...*

Stephen pondered what kind of thing sent the young man down there. *A crime?* That seemed unlikely, given his little impression - but faces could easily be deceiving, so who was he to know. *Not the crime or whatever he did matters much now - he’s long dead at this point...* Another face he saw, however, seemed much more likely to be that of a person sentenced on the basis of a crime.

The face was that of a woman in a dark hood. She was older than him, perhaps in her early or mid-thirties - yet the purple-haired thief guessed that she lived a similar lifestyle to his own, given her clothes and the overall rugged look she had to her face. Her hair was shaved on one side, and she seemed to be wearing a tattered black cloak. Underneath, she appeared to be wearing a light-colored tunic, and one of her ears were pierced with a half-obscured ring of some sort of metal. *Am I mad..? ...No, she really does kinda look like...*

Stephen cut off that line of thinking. He didn’t want to think about that comparison, he didn’t want to bring the thought of death to places it hadn’t happened, to those he hoped it would never find.

He didn’t care if those kinds of thoughts were naive, for he knew everyone had to die eventually - he found comfort in avoidance, it helped his anxieties from jumping to unproven conclusions. He preferred to avoid unneeded miseries, and could find some soothing in seeing a line of afraid thought and disproving its false delusions.

He decided to look at something else to help distract from that specific thought. In truth, he’d rather turn and run away entirely, but he had no place to go - no place to run away from the horror before him. So, he did what best he could in the situation - look at something else.

He decided to look at the rest of the gradually-formed mural. There was a stoic and stocky-looking, bearded man in an upper corner - at a height more than double his own. *How’d he even get up there-? Oh right - the tail....That’s...impressive, actually...*

The high collection didn’t seem any less detailed than those at or below eye-level either - rugged criminals of varying marks and age, a man who probably lost his eye to whatever gave him that nasty scar, a few people with curly bobs of hair and freckles, all were still clear. Looking the assembly up and down, some of the faces had a number of qualities - some had horns protruding from their foreheads, a manifestation of infernal bloodlines. Several others had skin dyed in deep tones - some by natural pigment, a couple others by a mask of tattoos.

*Huh...* Stephen guessed that whatever ink or dye Hosuh used to paint the images must be semi transparent- or, at least, could be diluted to create the non-opaque tones of skin and other facial markings.

Scanning further down, some portraits had long, flowing hair, and others had...*pointed ears?*
Those were known to be indicative of elvish or fey origin. Even though Hosuh’s ears seemed to be tucked under his hair most of the time, he thought he saw a pointed shape to them when the silver hair flowed around him as the serpentine loomed above.

*I’ll have to ask about that later...* He knew he’d have to hold off that relatively trivial question - an impending dread was crawling further and further up his spine the more he gazed upon the wall. The assortment of people were all beautifully done, but that didn’t deter Stephen’s fears...

*Oh god, how many of them are there?*

His hand had dropped from his mouth as he stood otherwise frozen before the group memorial - he brought it back up slowly, fingers twitching and his lips just barely moving as counted the sheer number of the faces.

*One, two...five, six, seven...*

Stephen started to feel a chill - was that a nightly breeze, or a machination of his own terror?

*Ten, twelve...eighteen, twenty...*

Another shiver, this one making his spine shake ever so slightly - nothing a breeze could do, not even on a bitter winter’s night.

*Twenty-five...twenty-nine...*

The rogue noticed how much his hand was shaking. He used all his will to still it, but the effort was utterly useless.

*Thirty-three...thirty-six...thir-thir-ty-nine...*

His slightly mumbling jaw now mimicked his hand - uncontrollably quivering ever so quickly.

*Oh god, is that a fucking kid!?*

The face he paused on looked very young - perhaps fifteen years of age? Fourteen? *Thirteen?* Something like that - looks could be deceiving, after all. Yet, the round, freckle-dotted cheeks, the smooth jawline, the lack of scuffs or scars, and the lack of any sleepless grey patches under his eyes all indicated youth to Stephen. *That bastard....*

For Daniel to send someone so young to this hell... *Does his cruelty have limits?* Regardless if it was Daniel himself, or someone under his rule who carried out the sentencing, Stephen knew that the bastard was still under the king’s authority, the blood was still on Dan’s hands.

With his own shaking hands, Stephen continued to count out all the souls lost to this awful place as the morbidity of it all sank deeper in, lurching closer and closer to him like the shadows of the cove.

*Forty-six, forty-seven...*

His knees were getting weaker and weaker by the second, as if his very bones were falling to atrophy, being made brittle by the fear consuming him.

*Another one, another one, more?* The next few seemed equal in youth as the last one, *Oh no...*

*Forty-eight, forty-nine- god, oh god..*
All the horror was getting too much for Stephen... *Just how many people did Hosuh kill!?*

*Fifty, fifty-two, fifty-four*…

Hosuh had remained rather still as Stephen observed the wall, coiled in on himself and laying on the pile once again - but this time in an aura of melancholy. He knew each and every weight all too well, tears threatening to spill from his eyes once again, just like they had so many times before. The beads teetered on his eyelashes as he tried not to think too deeply about all their faces, the way they contorted before relaxing and stilling as they took on hints of grey tones… He tried not to recall all their struggles and thrashings, their screams, the way the life in their eyes faded as their lips turned more and more of a morbid blue…

He especially tried not to recall all the faintly whispered calls of ‘I’m sorry’ and ‘Forgive me’, the bittersweet mutters of ‘God’ and ‘I love you’ released from final breaths and dying tongues…

As streams broke loose down his face, Hosuh thought he saw motion in the corner of his eye. Instincts primed to alert vigilance, he jolted his head up and turned his gaze from the open cavern towards the source - which happened to be a thing he was hoping against. It was Stephen’s form, fear-crumpled and shaking once again, his eyes and body a direct parallel to that of the captured rabbit he was when locked in the beastly hunter’s death-vice.

“*..fifty-seven, fifty-eight, nine*…”

As he thoughtlessly let out those mumbles, the haunted man’s knees seemed to crumple, bending more and more until they collapsed underneath him. Hosuh darted out to try to catch him - but with his reaction time slowed by his miseries, he couldn’t stop him from falling to his knees and falling towards him. He did manage to get a grip on his cloaked shoulders, holding his back just above the ground while lying on it himself.

“*Sixty...Sixty, oh god*…”

Stephen was so lost in the morbid truth that he didn’t even seem to register that he’d fallen down, his head still locked towards the display. Propping himself up with one arm, the snake pulled the thief and himself toward his coiled tail - he hoped getting him more comfortable might bring him back from his overwhelmed trance. ...*At least he won’t fight me on this right now...Gh, I...why did my foolish mouth have to tell him about this?*

As Hosuh uncoiled and recoiled his tail to adhere to Stephen’s form, he paced around within his head alongside the fear-saturated human. *Well, wait - he probably would’ve seen this sooner or later anyways... I mean- the rocks and all, I still need to get those out of the way... It’s different from what I initially had in mind, and it’ll be harder to move the weights like this, but..*

He gazed at the sweeping violet locks in front of him. ...*I think I’m liking this outcome a lot better.*

Moving him by his shoulders, Hosuh leaned Stephen’s back against his tail and his head against his belly. Draping one arm down his front, he lifted his other scaly hand and gently placed it on the vibrant plume of hair, gently moving his fingers through the soft strands.

*Yeah, this… this is a lot better than what I expected I’d be doing right now. No more death, no more blood?...Ah, I still have a hard time believing it all*…

As he settled his tail to comfortably support Stephen in an almost ramp-like fashion, he felt his entire frame shake as he mumbled ever so quietly. His brows shifted at the feeling, another pang to his somber heart as he could hear the fear in the indistinguishable words.
...Even with him so scared. Hopefully I can calm him down again and all... and even though I’m sure I’ll have to talk about... all this, I still think I prefer it to drawing him over there right now...

He felt and heard his stomach rumble again - catching Stephen’s scent as he passively flitted his tongue in the air wasn’t exactly helping him keep his monstrous tendencies down. Quite the opposite, especially after how he’d accidentally caught the taste of his mouth minutes prior. Yet, even with that fact working against him, he wasn’t deterred from trying to comfort the thief.

*Oh, to hell with my hunger! He’s much more important to me...*

He promptly stopped stroking the purple hair with that thought, hand tensing slightly. He was surprised how it drifted by his mind - how was he growing so attached to him this quickly? The question poked like insects’ legs at his cheeks, and he couldn’t really find much of an answer. Sure, it felt nice holding a human - a *live* one- in his arms, but he knew it was more than just comfort that was spurring his actions and these odd thoughts and feelings. But what was that unknown factor, though? He didn’t know - but at the moment, he wasn’t too pressed to care.

Holding Stephen and knowing he was living and breathing - even despite his distress- felt good. It felt so good to his touch-famished heart that he wondered when the last time he had done something like this was.

But he didn’t exactly regret the way he handled humans in the past either - he knew it mimized the heartache he’d have to suffer through for the following weeks until another arrived. He let his inner beast run wild, and it caused him to act with great and deathly swiftness. Each time, he’d hide in the shadows and observe his prey-to-be for a few moments before striking out and going in for the kill, just like any other serpent or reptile. But after the deed was done, gazing down at the dead, often teary eyes before him - that’s when his soul would come back to the surface, somberly replaying the events and taking detailed notes of the victim on the wall through clawed hands finely tuned to making artistic strokes.

Hosuh looked down at the stunned thief draped across him. Bending the pointer finger through the locks, he started repeating the kinds of strokes he’d use to draw, the tip of his claw gently scratching his scalp.

Meanwhile, even though he was half-lying on the reptilian instead of standing as before, Stephen didn’t process the change - his mind and eyes alike were locked on the tapestry of horrors before him. He couldn’t help but ponder- did they feel the same fears he did? Did they scream out, or try to do so? *The faces... They look oddly peaceful now, like they’re asleep...* *How ironic...* He knew just how horrid the hunt was - his heart roared at the fresh recollection of the pain, the struggle, the desperation... *How much did they suffer? Did they all die as horribly as I nearly had?*

Oh, how he’d rather run away from all this hell - yet his mind held him hostage, unrelenting with its torment in a show of an especially cruel form of self-destructive anxiety.

*Drie, die...Oh god, I was gonna die, I was gonna die- Why, WHY!?...Ah! They knew they were going to die too, right? Yeah, they had to, how could they not!? What else could come from - aahh, from the crushing force and the fangs...*

*Oh god, oh, god, oh god,* the memories flowed in with all the grace of an enraged bull, and with equal strength as he felt himself start to drown in the flood. As his inner self felt breathless once again, his body responded accordingly - shallow breaths, in and out, in and out, in and in *and in AND IN-*

He froze when he felt a sharp pain on the top of his head. It wasn’t much, but still enough to alert
his attention. His subconscious finally registered that his position had changed, and that he was lying against something - but since he didn’t know what it was, he tried to jump away from it. Yet, he was blocked mid action - as soon as he curved his spine forward, a pair of arms wrapped around his collar, draping over his chest as they pushed him back.

When his head collided with the surface behind him, he was profoundly confused - the surface bent somewhat beneath him, and was somewhat warm and squishy and—*Oh god it’s moving—!*

“Stephen!”

He froze at the concerned voice. *Hosuh?*

He turned his head as much as he could, accidentally pressing his cheek against Hosuh’s belly in the process. Both of them flinched at the mild warmth, and Stephen felt sparks in his veins from *the feeling of skin pressed against his face*. He tried to get up again and met unyielding resistance along with movement beneath him.

“Please, calm down!”

Hosuh maneuvered his tail quickly but with intent - to gently hold Stephen, but also to keep him still. Seeing how spastic his legs were trying to push off the cavern floor, he draped the end of his body across Stephen’s thighs and curled his tail inwards on the surface of his cloak, forming the beginnings of an encircling just above his hips.

“Please…”

He adjusted his own breathing, taking slow inhales and exhales in hopes that the slow rise and fall might help soothe him, cease the hyperventilating that caused him to flinch with a stab of sadness. Paired with that, he started moving his hands - one moving across Stephen’s chest in a gentle, petting-type of motion, the other shooting upwards and applying a light pressure to his exposed cheek, both arms bending slightly in an attempt to embrace him without re-maneuvering the duo.

As he did these things, he wanted the human to feel better - but he had something to gain as well. After all, it’d be much less painful to answer the questions he’d ask if those wonderfully violet eyes weren’t painted with the awful fear that came from witnessing the wretched monstrosity he knew he was.

Stephen wriggled against his hold for a few moments as his fear faded into bafflement and the smoldering aftermath of being overwhelmed. His subconscious was the first to be charmed by Hosuh’s tactic, his heart rate and breaths slowing down and starting to sync with the other male’s. His conscious mind, however, was left behind in a cage of confusion.

“What the fuck—”

“Sssss...ssss...”

It was an odd sort of hiss he heard - hell, he’d barely even classify it as a hiss. No, it sounded much more like... *Is he trying to shush me?* Given that Hosuh was making absolutely no hostile moves towards him, and that none of the forces he was putting upon him were very hefty, he assumed his guess was correct. The forces were really not much of an adversary - enough to pin him, sure, but also enough that he could escape without much trouble if he resisted.

*That’s kinda cute…*

With that thought, he became over-aware of his positioning, he felt his face flush. He already knew
He was being pressed up against skin, but now he was realizing just how soft it was. He became transfixed by the scent coming off from the surface, unavoidable as it was all he could inhale in his current predicament, washing over his brain with each breath. He couldn’t describe much, but it was warm and seemed to have the same fresh-like-mint quality as his mouth…

His head spun as he shivered, the night air feeling different to his rising body temperature.

“When did it get so cold…”

Hosuh felt a flash of concern at the mumbled-out thought— but it was drowned out immediately by something he could only describe as a fluttering, light feeling in his chest as Stephen nuzzled into his form with a low hum. Hosuh tensed up at the feeling, every nerve tingling and his cheeks taking back their resident salmon hue. The feeling only intensified when he felt Stephen’s warm hand on top of his, stilling the petting motion it was making over the soft tan cloth. His other hand followed suit, but gently lifted his blue-greyed hand off his cheek. He kept it hovering there as he moved his head upward, trying his best to meet Hosuh’s gaze.

Hosuh felt both joy and sadness at the sight—his eyes and body language clearly showed how he’d calmed, but that didn’t destroy all of his fears, remaining worry still overlayed on the rich purple.

It wasn’t really surprising though—something as strong as death, only made more profound by the amount of it in the mass memorial before them, is something that simply does not leave the mind easily.

Hosuh’s gaze asked his unvoiced question for Stephen—“What do you want to ask?”

Stephen’s voice came out quiet and timid, not really wanting to know, but knowing that he needed to be told the answers. His voice was still low, like he knew he was going to regret asking.

“So…how long did it take ‘em?”

Hosuh spoke in a low, quiet voice. “…To…?”

“To die, I mean. How much did they end up suffering…” His voice trailed off like a lost ghost.

“…I’ve always tried to make it quick— I…Not even the worst parts of me try to linger…”

They both stayed in somber silence as they gazed at the mass tomb before them.

“I really do hate to see all the suffering…”

Stephen lightly grabbed Hosuh’s hand and lifted it off his face with just enough force to let him turn his skull forward and upwards before setting his greyed hand back on his cheek.

“…but.. You looked so…? E-excited, maybe?” Stephen’s words shook as the monster’s golden-eyed expression flashed in his mind.

Hosuh stayed silent for a moment, the quiet only broken by the faint sound of his stomach rumbling. On cue, he spoke quickly but carefully, as if treading among a net of thorny vines while being chased.

“Ah, I…I guess what I said must’ve sounded pretty ridiculous to you, right?” Hosuh added a light, yet saddened chuckle to try to lighten the mood. Seeing as the effort was fruitless, he focused on properly explaining himself.
“I...yeah, that wasn’t joy or anything like that. It didn’t actually mean anything other than hunger…”

A pause as chilled as the night air lingered between them.

“Uhm, Stephen?”

“.y-yeah?”

“Is it normal for humans to get excited about food?”

“Mhm. I- or, I guess, we- can make a pretty big deal about it. Some people especially get way too fancy and frivolous about it.”

“What do you mean? Are they… wasteful, perhaps?”

“Incredibly so. The so-called ‘nobles’ hoard and hoard with eating hardly any of it.”

“So.. do they starve?”

“Wh- No. Um.. Alright, that was a guess - I don’t actually know how much food they’ve got. But what I said, it’d make sense if you think about- how else would they be able to host their royal feasts and tea parties with their other snobbish fuckers like ‘em if they didn’t have extras?”

Hosuh hummed in acknowledgment. “It makes sense, especially if that happens a lot…”

“Yeah, it does.”

“...Is ‘tea’ another word for… having a lot, or things being plentiful?”

“Wha- pfft,” Stephen couldn’t help but chuckle. “You don’t know what tea is?”

“No?”

“Ah, right… Hmm.. Picture soup, but it’s just leaves in water.”

Hosuh made a confused sort of sound, drawing another chuckle out of the rogue. “S-soup?”

“Uhm… it’s a food that’s basically flavored water in a bowl. Tea’s like..”

Stephen thought for a moment, then laughed at the comparison he put together.

“Leaf soup! It’s fuckin- leaf soup, hah!”

As Stephen chuckled a bit more, the cute sounds made the pointed tips of Hosuh’s ears turn red in the process. The snake let out a variety of hums - one of which sounded like an ‘aww’ sort of noise- before talking again.

“Wait, how would the flavor even get in there? And the substance - water doesn’t feed you…”

“Heat. Making the water really hot and chucking stuff in there does the trick.”

“Ah…” Hosuh sounded a bit disappointed. “Then I guess I can’t actually make this ‘tea’ or ‘soup’ stuff.”

“Pardon me?”
“Erm! I-I’ve got a way to get the water, and I’ve got the bowl-thing needed, but not the other stuff…”

“Wh- When’d you get those!?”

“The bowl? It’s just a curved piece of rock, really. Crumbled off the walls a long time ago. And water falls from the sky sometimes - some of it falls in here.”

“...You mean when it rains?”

“Rai- Right, that was the word.”

Stephen hummed calmly in response, before letting out a more startled hum at Hosuh’s suddenly anxious tone.

“A-ah, sorry for not recalling it, Stephen. And s-sorry for getting topic- I didn’t mean to start talking about food - er, human foods.”

Stephen quietly talked as soon as Hosuh first apologized. “You’re fine? No big deal-”

“No really, sorry! I didn't mean- well, I don’t want to make you anxious either way… I don’t want to make you afraid or talk about….” Hosuh pointed to the wall with the hand on Stephen’s chest. “...All this, I don’t want to talk about it longer than we need to. And your face, you don’t seem to like talking about this either…”

Stephen let out a low hum. “Yeah, but… I don’t know, I feel like I have to know…”

Hosuh responded with an equally quiet, hesitant hum. “Yeah so...let’s keep talking, I guess.

Both remained silent for a few seconds, neither itching to continue the conversation.

“So I meant to ask - what about when you’re starving? How excited do humans get about food then?”

“Oh, it’s.. Yeah, it’s not pretty when we get like that, it’s like a.. Hunger-angry? Hangry? Whatever you wanna call it. People get real short-fused.”

At the confused noise Hosuh made, Stephen rolled his head back to look up at him. Not really noticing the way his belly slightly shook as he moved, he thought about how to explain his words. Wow, he really doesn’t know quite a few things, doesn’t he...

“Well… A fuse is a rope you burn attached to something explosive. It takes time to burn - a short fuse doesn’t have much time left before reaching the gunpowder. Once it’s there,” Stephen took his hand off the grey-scaled one resting on his face, making a gesture as he continued speaking.

“Boom! With gunpowder, it’s a burst of fire - with people, it’s a burst of anger.”

“Ah… I-I think I understand?”

Stephen gave an acknowledging hum, a nod for Hosuh to continue. “Well, that makes explaining things a bit easier, at least. Yeah, what you saw… whatever you saw that looked like I was enjoying.. that.. that was...Well, it wasn’t quite that hangry feeling you described…”

Hosuh chewed on the concept he was trying to explain for a moment.

“Um, how about this- instead of hunger and anger, what about hunger and anticipation? Does
that...I guess, *hanticipation*? Does that make sense?”

Stephen’s brows furrowed a small degree as he thought about it. “Actually, yeah. Makes a lot of sense, really.”

“Yeah.. Well, that’s what you saw. Even… Even the worst of me doesn’t mean to be mean or evil…”

Again, silence floated in the air - this time, it was tinged by a hint of anger mixed in the somber tones as the smaller male tipped his head back down, purple fuzz rubbing against Hosuh’s belly again. Stephen’s voice dropped in pitch as his tone gained more of a grim seriousness gazing at the wall.

“...Was that the way you felt about the rest of them?”

“Yeah…”

“...Nothing else? Did you really feel nothing else?”

“...Not.. Not during the hunts, no…”

Stephen paused for several seconds, the atmosphere changing around them.

“Then…Then tell me...” Stephen let out a low, near-growling noise before he spoke again - this time, he snapped his head to look up at the reptilian again, his voice coming out in a sudden roar of saddened rage.

“Then tell me Hosuh! Is that all you see people as, then? Are people - *Are we nothing more than food to you?!*”
“Are we nothing more than food to you?!?”

Hosuh let out a small hiss as his pointed ears twitched at the sudden loudness that shot up to him. The question’s echo bounced on the cavern’s ceiling and walls, looping Stephen’s wrathful words over and over. His winced expression quickly contorted, a remorseful edge engraving itself upon his features once again.

Stephen tried to bend forward, wanting to know whatever the fuck he has to say for himself. He wanted answers, and he wanted to look him dead in the eyes while he spun whatever tale he was about to tell to defend himself. With Hosuh frozen by guilt, his arms provided no force to stop Stephen. Surprised momentarily, he refocused and took advantage of the opening. He bent his spine forward and pulled his legs inwards underneath the weight of the tail on his legs - a weight similar to that of a smaller, yet heftier breed of dog sitting upon its owner’s lap- in order to sit upright. Twisting his torso and resting his arm on a thick frosted-grey coil as Hosuh’s arms slipped off his shoulders, his brows furrowed as he glared at Hosuh with rage and scrutiny.

Hosuh visibly recoiled at Stephen’s gaze, self-directed disgrace gnawing at his heart at the sight. But he still knew he had to speak, so he spoke with a voice drowned in timidity.

“N-no…”

Stephen’s nerves only tensed at the lacking answer. Well that sure tells me a lot.

His yelling continued. “Then what the hell are we!?”

“I-.... I’m not sure how to explain it, but r-really - I truly do see more than what you’re suggesting!”

Stephen’s voice came out in a grumble. “Bullshit....”

“What?”
“Bullshit! Or maybe I should put it another way- Rubbish! Garbage! Trash! Crap! Lies! Understand any of those??”

Hosuh’s face sunk more as he nodded and Stephen continued.

“Look what you’ve already done- do you really think I’m going to buy that excuse!?”

“N-no, I d-don’t…But Stephen, I’m not trying to-”

“What does it matter what you’re trying to do? What’s done is done!”

“Y-yes, but…”

“But what?!”

“...I’m really not making excuses, and I haven’t been telling lies- not once have I done either of those things tonight…."

“Tonight-!?" Stephen whipped around and looked up to the grate, seeing the pale moonlight filter down and seemingly paint the few dust particles in the air from gold to white. After a moment, he began to mumble.

“Damn, how long have we been down here?”

Hosuh sat in remorse as Stephen stared at the moonbeams. He really did mean no wrong, and his soul had never truly wanted nor reveled in all of the tragedies he’s caused over all his time trapped in his little piece of hell.

“...I’ve long since lost count...”

Stephen flinched, unaware that he had said anything. Nevertheless, he heard Hosuh’s mutter in an obvious response. The rogue still had his need for knowledge, so he was sure as hell going to get answers.

But his subconscious was still unsatisfied - far deeper down than his conscious could ever know, Stephen was gaining a growing sense of equilibrium, given that he finally recognized that he was safe enough to be able to act on his own will. In the same way a small morsel can’t quell a ferocious appetite, Stephen’s unknown craving for vengeance was only starting to be fed. ‘An eye for an eye’, they say - something deep within him needed to retaliate against Hosuh, to make him feel pain as payment for how he hurt him before.

All’s fair in a fight for justice, right?

Thus, the hidden desires in his heart drove the aggressors' words. “The fuck did you say? If you’re gonna speak, do ya mind doing it clearly?!”

“Wha-! I- I’m sorry, I didn’t - that slipped out.” Hosuh paused, but promptly continued nervously at Stephen’s infuriated expression.

“I mean- I know you haven’t been down here all too long - a couple hours, given that the sun was setting when you were thrown down… But you asked about both of us, so… I told my truth - that I don’t recall how long I’ve been down here.”

Stephen’s brows lost some of their tensity at the response. He pondered the weight of the words, his eyes drifting away and his mouth letting out a bitter mutter.
“Time’s not that hard to tell…”

Hosuh fully knew that he was a monster deserving of harshness- it was a notion he’d accepted as fact a long time ago. He was willing to take a lot of demeaning and hazing, he’d consider himself deserving of such treatment. But this specific kind of belittlement - he couldn't put his finger on it exactly, but something about the sheer snarkiness about it got under his skin. He wanted to respond in a calm way that still spoke his mind - however, just like outbursts of his beastly instincts, a tone equally bitter to Stephen’s was what came out of his mouth instead.

“Well excuse me, Stephen, but not everyone can be as fortunate as you!”

“How the fuck am I fortunate!?"

Stephen started fighting against Hosuh’s hold on him. At this point, he was already sitting upright, so only his tail was draped across his lap. He gave a forceful shove to the scaly tendril - since his motion was quick, Hosuh didn’t have time to prepare, and thus the tail flopped to his side. Before Hosuh could fight back, Stephen sprung up to his feet and stepped away.

Hosuh only grew more aggravated because of this, snapping back with rebuttal.

“You know I’m not the one who’s been happily living on the surface all these years!”

Turning on one heel, a plumage of snow-like dust surrounded the human’s calves as he yelled back.

“Happily? Hah! Look what that place has done to me- I was damned up there, I was sentenced to die! And there’s no way you can’t know this-” He pointed an accusatory finger at the serpent, “You’re the one who’s supposed to kill me! Just as you had the rest of ‘em!”

With a quiet hiss, Hosuh adjusted his body so he could become upright and in a position comparable to Stephen’s height. In all but a second, he held a stature that resembled a human slightly shorter than the rogue. With flailing arms and the sting of emotion in his blood, he continued his argument against the other male.

“At least death would be quick! At least it wouldn’t last, at least it wouldn’t throw you in the same awful situations over and over again!”

Stephen froze in place, not having a good rebuke on hand for that point.

He knew the simultaneous dull monotony and intense frustration of doing the same things over and over. New places, new trinkets, the same persecution and the same lonely, raining nights. New faces with the same cold eyes, with glares like knives upon a mangy crow pecking among scraps.

As memories flashed behind his eyes, Hosuh continued elaborating his point while swaying on his long tail.

“These same walls, the same swallowing shadows... And this same damned grief that only keeps growing as more and more of you- you people show up!”

Stephen flinched at the word. “Grief?” His tone had faltered, but quickly regained its biting edge. “What could you have to grieve about, there’s nothing to lose here!”

“Stephen, no! You- Don’t you get what this is!?” He threw his scale-adorned arm to the side,
gesturing to the wall of faces.

“Your past victims?”

“Yes!”

“So?”

“So!?” Hosuh let out a sound, a mix of a growl and a hiss as he held his palm to his forehead. He pulled in his tail, rising to barely exceed the thief’s height before he faced him and yelled again.

“Damn it, did you ever consider why I would do something like this!?”

Stephen gazed at the wall up and down once again. The initial shock factor gone and his anger overpowering his fear, he pondered the serpent’s question. In a flash, his enraged brain jumped to a bull-headed conclusion that spilled out from an impulsive tongue.

“Is it like a collection of hunting trophies?”

That really struck a nerve in the silver-haired snake. One of his eyes began to twitch, and he flicked his tongue in the air out of sheer habitat. Once again, he caught some of Stephen’s alluring scent, but this time it came with an awful thought arising from the beast within.

Maybe it’d be better to cut my losses and enjoy a delicious meal.

Saffron speckles shot across his eyes, but they could not be seen - at the thought, Hosuh’s brows furrowed and his eyes snapped shut. Putting his hands at the sides of his head, he gripped the locks that swayed past his hips as he curled in on himself.

“No! No, no, no, no-”

Stephen’s voice came across the air, but it seemed noticeably less bitter-toned.

“No? Then... what is it?”

Hosuh froze, his tongue darting out in instinctual response and making everything worse. He threw his head back, releasing a shout-like scream to the ceiling above.

“Hosuh? Wh- Ah!” His voice still had a trace of anger, but concern was the clear precedence - at least, that was the case until he shouted in shock.

Before Hosuh could even think, he’d darted forward towards Stephen with a hiss. However, his reaction timing allowed him to stop himself from doing anything drastic - nothing more than grabbing his shoulders. Squeezing the bones in his hands, he stared down at Stephen with a gold-dotted glare. Stephen tried to mirror his expression, but there were clear cracks in his mask - a twitching brow and nose, pupils a fraction too contracted, the tightness in the line of his succulent lips-

Dammit, why’s that back now? I don’t- don’t want- Or maybe I- Gah!

He held his gaze for a few seconds longer, then he started settling down on his tail, his rage and grip beginning loosening. His eye level lowered to match Stephen’s, he took in all the details of Stephen’s face again. Damn this fool, why doesn’t he understand that I’m not so cruel...Does he have that little sense? Stephen, why do you have to be such a beautiful idi-
head again, craning his neck forward into the space just in front of the rogue’s chest. He let out a low, frustrated and melancholic sigh as the tips of his hair swayed just above the ground.

He grumbled incoherently as he tried to find the proper words for what he knew the wall was. As he rummaged his thoughts, he could find a small relief in the fact that Stephen didn’t look nearly as scared as before.

Still, there was much misery to deal with, and Hosuh wasn’t going to let Stephen’s demeaning guess stand.

Gripping his shoulders again, he had to look a bit upward to meet Stephen’s eyes - his height settling a bit shorter than the rogue’s as his temper cooled. Vibrant violet intermingled with fading wrath as they met Hosuh’s anguished azure tones, both in hue and in voice.

“You.. You really don’t get it… It’s not meant to be some cruel decoration, it’s…”

Hosuh’s voice trailed with a quiver, his head dropping again as he continued to speak out his heart’s burden.

“It’s… what little I can do to apologize for…”

Stephen’s voice came out as quiet as Hosuh, albeit with more traces of rage remaining.

“For all the slaughter? For killing them?”

Hosuh nodded, raising his head once again but keeping his eyes on the wall of relics. “I made this to remember them - not like I could ever forget, though.”

Tears bubbled on sea-blue eyes as both the voluminous and silent screams of those dying faces echoed in his mind.

“I was once told about a word you hu-no, you people use... It’s something, like an object used to remember those who are dead…”

The tears absorbing back among the whites of his eyes, Hosuh mumbled as he tried to find the word he was looking for.

“What was it.. ‘Greeve?’ ‘Grove?’”

An arched brow framed one of the rogue’s weighed-down eyes.

“I-.. I think you mean-”

His face perked up somewhat, finding the word on his own.

“G rave, that was it…”

Hosuh finally met Stephen’s eyes again. A ghostly aura wisped around them, both haunted by a truth they both knew well - their lives had made them both into killers and mourners alike.

Hosuh was only barely aware that his hands had been resting on the thief’s shoulders when he let go, his arms gliding along bunched, tan sleeves. Both of their gazes ended up wandering, the grim subject matter a thief to their linguistics as they lingered in front of one another.

Seconds transitioned into minutes as neither knew what to say, both retreated into their heads and dealing with the unwanted visitors of their deathly memories.
Hosuh’s deeds were written on the wall, and it pained his heart whenever he’d draw near - thus, he only visits to mourn on occasion, just like any other human visiting a grave. Claws, tears and wails fell upon the wall, the snake’s form shaking as his remorse snuck around him, its presence harrowing and terrifying. Oftentimes these bouts of grief came at night, strong forces of emotion pushing him down upon his coils. These nights were especially agonous when the reaper was a recent visitor, when he could feel the bumps and divots of dissolving forms as he lay upon his stomach. Those were the nights fate and his heart turned the tables on him, his guilt strangling and swallowing him whole. That’s when an acid-rain of anxiety would coat his being, boring into him as he dreaded the thought of death’s next arrival until the sweet void of sleep took him.

Even though his means were much different, Stephen’s hands were tainted as well. Although he didn’t resort to it often, the purple-crowned could remember fights with knives, swords, and terrible gashes he was in. Of such battles, many were events where he aggressively defended himself against royal guards from whatever resident kingdom he had ended up in. ‘The best defense is a good offense’, they say - this was a philosophy Stephen exhumed as he bobbed and weaved his body during a fight, slashing and piercing motions making his knives strike true. Stephen would flee the scene as not to be seen, hiding the stains on his skin and blades in sheaths and cloaks - at least until he could find water to wash away the remnants of the crime. Even though he would run before the end came, Stephen still knew that sometimes the wounds he left surmounted what a doctor could heal. Perhaps magic may have saved some, but Stephen never knew - he never saw confirmation, but he knew about the blood on his hands, blood that his heart would hold against him on terrible nights.

He also remembered all the times he’d walk down city and town streets, vigilant eyes scanning for wealth and hiding places when he’d pass by WANTED signs - oftentimes he didn’t know the people, but sometimes he saw criminals he’d acquainted with through minor heists. Sometimes he saw evidence scribbled on the sign that signaled their capture - things that made the parchments look like tombstones to him. It was for this reason he often tried to limit his closeness with partners in crime - yet no matter how much he tried to bury it at times, his empathy would still ring and cling true. And when he’d see the paper graves, his empathy would flare with the most intensity, his mind dragging him into a state of hellish worry. As he would try to deny the notion that a certain person he loved had already been taken by a ghostly specter or solid hand, his heart would pound with such force that it shook an ornamental symbol of that love, rattling the pendant he wore beneath his dark shirt.

A few minutes had passed in the pause, and at the tail end of it, Hosuh noticed something he’d failed to pick up on before - a small lump on the center of the rogue’s chest, the very same sentimental treasure he kept by his heart.

Hosuh may not have known human anatomy very well, but he knew enough to tell that the bump was abnormal. His eyelids perked out of curiosity, but it was a question that would have to remain unsaid for the moment as Stephen broke the silence, but still kept quiet.

“You said you were told about the word ‘grave’…”

Hosuh’s eyes darted up to Stephen’s. “That is true.”

“What do you think it means again?”

Hosuh’s brow arched, puzzled. “Any object a living human uses to remember other dead humans with...Did I misunderstand again?”

Stephen reached up to his chest, lightly cupping his palm over the pendant. “Somewhat. A grave describes a place where a body is buried and is marked by a tombstone- er, a rock with the person’s
name on it.”

“Buried?”

“Er- put underground.”

“So… does that mean we’re buried too?”

Stephen chuckled, a smile flashing across his face for a second as they both found the other. *rather cute* in that moment- Hosuh for his pure lack of knowledge and Stephen for his smiling giggle.

“No, no. Burial is… when something’s completely covered in dirt- or anything else like it I guess. And a lot of it - dead bodies are typically put six feet below the surface…”

“Ah…”

“Yeah- put a headstone on it and there you go, that’s a grave.”

Hosuh hummed in acknowledgment, his eyes drifting off and bottom lip moving as he processed the definition. He turned his head to the wall momentarily, then turned back and spoke again.

“Well… The stone’s to remember dead people, right?”

“And to identify them, yes.”

“Mhm.. Well, the wall’s not too different, actually…”

“Pardon?”

“It’s markings on stone, used to remember the dead...we’re already underground, and…” Hosuh’s voice started off sound enough, but dropped off at the end.

Stephen grew a note of concern at the tone change. “And?"

“Well...people bury bodies to get rid of them, right?”

“...yeah?”

Hosuh spoke quickly at first, not wanting to bring back more of their fears.

“The bodies are gone, so… isn’t this actually pretty close to a grave?”

“I..I guess so…”

Hosuh gave him an awkward smile for a moment, and Stephen couldn’t help but mimic it. This time, Hosuh started chuckling before he spoke.

“Ah, well, on a different note,” He chuckled again, a faint blush arising on both of their cheeks at the cute sound. “Sorry - I was just thinking about how wrong I was, how s… sss… sil... What was the word?”

“...Silly?”

“Yeah, that was it- silly. Silly that I was going to say ‘There’s a bunch of graves over there, too’- How silly!”
Stephen’s smiled at Hosuh *cute* latching onto the word, but it quickly twitched in concern before faltering.

“W-wait, there’s.. There’s more? Where?”

Hosuh’s own bubbliness faded. “I suppose - but I mean, they aren’t really graves at all. Not even my misunderstood version of the word, really…”

“So like.. Are they things you took from them?”

“Yes, but nothing more than simple things I can make use of. Never much, just things like-actually….” Hosuh trailed off, getting the idea that just showing him would be more effective. He slithered in a semicircle towards the opposite end of the cave. He looked over his shoulder to the rogue, pointing to something in that direction. “You said you were cold, right?”

“Uh.. Yeah? Hosuh?”

Hosuh hummed in acknowledgement. “The same thing happens to me a lot. I feel like I’m nearly always cold, yet.. You humans are so warm- how does that happen?”

“Uhh...Maybe we’re just built differently or something?” Stephen half-retracted into his own form with a shrug.

“Well, however it happens doesn’t really matter. It’s still nice.” Hosuh let out a small chuckle before talking again. “Actually, it’s part of why I really like holding yo-”

Each of the duo flinched at Hosuh’s words, blood rushing through their veins again at the comment. The serpentine spoke quickly, as if trying to cover up a mistake in the same way he was covering the reddened tips of his pointed ears by tucking long strands of dusty silver over them.

“One moment.” Hosuh slithered to the corner of the cave, towards a lump of *something* in the shadows. Whatever it was, it didn’t look like a rock to Stephen - especially as Hosuh plucked a layer off of it. He grabbed another layer before slithering back over to the scoundrel, the objects becoming clear in the moonlight.

Two long cloaks, both as black as midnight - just like things Stephen and his partners in crime would wear.

Before he could even speak a word, one of them was wrapped around his shoulders like a bunched up towel. His gaze snapped back to Hosuh’s face, looming above him even at his standing height.

He was standing in the middle of the cavern and Hosuh wasn’t touching him - so why did he still feel rather pinned? And why did it make him feel not afraid, but *flustered*?

And why does the moonlight make him look so damn pretty?

At the very least - *thank god*, in Stephen’s mind- he was slowly settling on his tail, getting shorter in the process. Still, it didn’t stop somewhat nervous noise from escaping his throat and a blush that continued to deepen on his cheeks.

“Uhhmmm…” The rogue’s wide eyes darted around, focusing on the enshadowed pile instead of the man before him - he had to for the sake of his own racing heart.

His eyes adjusted to the dark, he tried to discern how many things were actually in the pile as he, slowly and passively, held the cloth before wrapping it around his shoulders in a blanket-like
fashion. He could only barely see color in the dimness, but there seemed to be a mix of dark blues and greens, some tan tones, various shades of brown and grey, and of course more black. They varied in size but stayed similar in fashion - it looked like the pile was entirely made up of cloaks...perhaps about thirty or so in number, based on the size and shape of the mound.

Stephen shivered both from the cold night air and the grim ramifications of the cloak he had draped over his shoulders. “So.. You said you just took things you could ‘make use of’, right?”

Hosuh nodded.

“Mm, that would make sense for the whole ‘being cold all the time thing.’ But still… do you feel anything about these? Or are they just like tools?”

“I... I don’t know what this tool thing is, but I get the sense that it might be right.”

“Well, a tool’s simply an object you use to help.. do tasks, things, whatever. Technically, just about anything can be used as a tool.”

“And...do people typically feel things towards the tools?”

“Not really - they’re just objects. No feelings, just business.”

“Business- nevermind. Yeah, then my guess was right - these are tools.” Hosuh waved his hand, pointing at the cloaks draped over their shoulders.

Stephen went silent for a moment, the quiet horror of wearing a deadman’s clothes seeping into his bones. “A-ah…”

“Erm…” Hosuh seemed to pick up on his subtle shivering, and perhaps even his mortification. “I know it sounds bad - and I-I mean, you wouldn’t be wrong to say that, saying I’m awful and all…”

Stephen reached out to Hosuh with a shy, shaky hand, about to make a rebuttal - but he was cut off by Hosuh continuing.

“Don’t - I know it’s true. But the reason I.. I don’t feel too much about these - these tools, it’s because of heartache...I’ve already cried so much, so…”

Slowly, Stephen placed his hand over Hosuh’s cloaked shoulder. Hosuh flinched slightly at the touch, but then he leaned into it. He passively mumbles, his aqua eyes wandering.

“Are more tears needed?”

Stephen spoke quietly. “I-I...don’t know…”

The thief’s hand gently quivered on Hosuh for a few seconds, both caught by the somber, horrid silence and locked in their own heads.

Oh, how Stephen would rather run, run far away from the haunting horror - yet the thought was futile, he had no place to flee too... Or was he really that hopeless?

Stephen turned his head over his shoulder, violet eyes wandering among the swirling shadows. The dark encroached nearer and nearer to his mind - that’s he swore he saw something. At the side of his vision, he saw a pile of rocks pour out from the memorial wall, some pieces protruding out onto the cavern floor. *That must be the thing Hosuh saw earlier... Moonlight was far too dim to shine through the pile, but from the structure of the heap, it seemed like it could be possible for sun
rays to shine through, just like the serpent had described.

He started at the fallen stones, pondering. *Is there a tunnel there or something? Did it happen naturally, or did someone dig it out? I wonder... Well, wait - if someone was digging it out, wouldn't they want to continue forth? Why would they stop, why would the pile still be here? I mean, unless they saw the rocks falling down, then decided to turn and dig in another direction - or maybe another place entirely?*

*Hold on...* The cavern walls, they were quite high - at the entrance grate, the distance to the ground was about... five times his height? Six? Something like that. Looking up, the ceiling sloped down on all sides, reaching between three and four times his height before dropping dramatically to form the wall - the shape was somewhat like an egg on its side. Regardless, Stephen knew they were deep underground - *why dig down so deep, only to abandon all the effort? It seems like Hosuh's guess about rocks breaking down over time was probably right...*

*Time, time... Wait a second!*

Stephen flinched when the realizations came to his head. He turned his head to face Hosuh again... and saw silent streams cascading down from unfocused eyes. Quietly, tenderly, he asked the question on his mind.

“How long have you been down here... you said years, right?”

Hosuh nodded before speaking with a tear-marred voice. “A ‘year’ is some big amount of time, right?”

“Yeah - a little more than three hundred and sixty days, if I remember correctly.”

“Then I used the word right. It’s been... some number of those ‘years’... How many times has the sun passed over? A thousand? More than that, probably... Hundreds more, maybe...”

Stephen’s eyes widened in shock, the sheer length of time sinking into his skull.

That long ago... his thoughts drifted down to the gold string around his neck. He’d had the relic for a long time - a pretty similar to Hosuh’s imprisonment, actually. It was a fond memory he’d replay from time to time, when he bought the pendant... He bought a pair of them actually - both an echo of the other. Even during those years ago, they were symbols he and his counterpart held over their hearts, both when they were together and when they were apart.

Snapping himself out of the subject before he spiraled into misery once again, he gently pulled the bony curve of Hosuh’s shoulder towards him in a gesture. Hosuh’s eyes flicked to him, wide in surprise as he scooted closer to the rogue. Letting go of the serpent, Stephen held both his arms out, his hands slowly closing and opening.

Hosuh seemed to pick up on the gesture, slithering up to Stephen and holding his own arms near his waist - yet he didn’t actually touch him. Stephen let out a small amused huff before wrapping his arms around silver-veiled shoulders. Yet Hosuh just froze in response - so, in impulse laced in shyness, Stephen whispered before he even realized it.

“You said you like holding me, right? Go ahead, I don’t mind...”

Immediately, the duo’s skin began to tingle - so much that air itself seemed to become charged as Hosuh embraced him, wrapping his arms around his waist and gently resting his forehead on his chest. That alone made Stephen’s heart tense - what made it skip beats was when Hosuh nuzzled his head, lightly schooching the rock-sized bump of the pendant out of the way.
The two stood in near-silence for a minute, just focusing on one another with only small sniffles from Hosuh in the air. Quietly, carefully, Stephen then asked a quick question.

“I assume you’ve cried for a lot of that long-ass time, right?”

Hosuh nodded, the movement stirring his heart yet again. Still, he didn’t move - Stephen found this embrace comforting as well. Inside both of them lied something more famished than Hosuh’s hunger - a wanting of soft affection, connection, and touch.

Deep down, they were both starved souls craving love - both to give and to receive alike.

They stayed still for several minutes, just holding one another. They both eventually broke off, Stephen giving a small gesture to sit and rest on one of the cavern walls. Hosuh, in response, pointed to the mound of cloaks, slithering over to the pile and half leaning on it after he adjusted most of his tail. Stephen walked over, and moments after he seated himself, the end of Hosuh’s tail gliding over his lap, then rising before resting over his shoulders. Stephen looked at the finger-thin tip of the tail just below his collar - wait, is it wagging? That’s adorable…

Their lips curled into smiles at the sight of one another - Stephen even getting the bravery to gently pet the tail on his lap, even when it shifted further into the touch. The two sat for minutes more, just content with the company. The darkness pulled at their eyelids, their states of comfort beckoning sleep to come to them.

As his eyes wandered, though, Stephen eventually caught a glimpse of the portrait wall again. His heart dropped at the sight, finally recalling something they had ended up getting sidetracked from.

With a hesitant mumble, he tried to ease that conversation back into being.

“Sorry…”

“Hm? For what?”

“Earlier - for a couple reasons, actually. Sorry I was so brash…”

“Brash?”

“Bull-headed. Stupid. ‘Hunting trophies’ - what the hell was I thinking? How idiotic, am I right?”

Hosuh just hummed in acknowledgement. He didn’t want to call him a fool out loud, but he couldn’t find the heart to outright agree with him, either.

Stephen chuckled for a moment, the sounds coming out like soft music notes to Hosuh’s ears. Then Stephen jumped back to his more solemn, serious tone.

“But the other thing was this- I got us off subject. Remember how you said you were told about the word ‘grave’?”

“...Yes?”

“How?”

Chapter End Notes
Mmm, sounds like there's quite a story to tell. I wonder how that'll go.

Also, an idea had floated in my head the other day... What would happen if the VCST characters met their normal counterparts? I ended up thinking of little scenarios of what would happen, how things would even be possible, etc...

..Would y'all be interested to read an off-shoot, non-canon story of those shenanigans? Please, let me know~

(Idk if it would be multiple chapters of one new fic or like - one-shots for each character duo (like the two Stephens, for example)... Either way it'd be all for fun)

Anyways... see y'all next time!
(Or before, given I stop by here fairly often to be like OOO THINGS (comments, kudos, hits, etc))
Chapter Summary

Hosuh tells the story of a unique and tragic encounter...

Chapter Notes

Hey, sorry I uploaded a day late again - BUT HEY THIS TIME THE CHAPTER'S FUCKING-- 6.7 THOUSAND WORDS WOOO (ok it took me a lot of words to tell and get to where I wanted, thus why this is like- literally a normal chapter + half of another chapter in length oop)

ALSO- Bit of a violence warning! Hopefully I didn't get too graphic, I left out the worst of it.. but yeah. Also uh.. tragedy warning? I don't know- it's a sad story, be ready.

Well, uh... I'll see your thoughts and tears in the comments, and I'll see you next time for the next progression of the adventure!

“ How? ”

The word came out cold from Stephen’s tongue - calm, but slightly accusatory.

That edge to his tone made Hosuh a tad nervous, the end of his tail ceasing its motion over Stephen’s shoulder as he spoke.

“How? I- I didn’t do anything…”

Stephen simply turned his head and gave a questioning, disbelieving glare to the serpentine, who tried to further his own defense.

“T-to make her say that word, ‘grave’- I didn’t force her to say it, she told me willingly…”

“She? Who’s-? But how-” Stephen cut himself off, turning his head away and letting out a minor sigh. Facing Hosuh again, he clarified his intent.

“Let me rephrase that. What did you do differently?”

“I...I’m sorry, but I don’t understand what you’re trying to ask. I didn’t do anything...Or, at least, nothing...not-normal...”

Stephen grimaced. “If normal is what you did to me, then how did- whoever this is, how’d she manage to talk to you? How did that happen?”

“I...” Each of their faces sank as they beheld the horrid truth in Stephen’s words - it’s a fruitless effort to speak when the bony hand of death is wrapped tight around one’s throat, it’s an active
detriment as the useless deed consumes an air supply as faded as oxygen-starved tunnel vision.

Quietly, hesitantly, Hosuh spoke after several cold seconds passed. “Should...I think it might be easier to understand if I just told the whole story…”

As Hosuh’s head dipped and melancholic blue eyes drifted away, Stephen paused before speaking quietly. “Yeah, these half-baked bits aren’t really going anywhere… I take that it’s quite an awful story, right?”

Hosuh simply nodded, head turning towards the wall of murals once again. Slowly, he lifted one of his scale-adorned hands, the black claw pointing to a particular face among the crowd, one near the floor of the cavern. Stephen squinted, trying to see the details better, but he couldn’t get a great scan from the opposite side of the cavern. Slowly, Stephen placed his fingertips on the thin tail draped over his shoulder. The tendril flinched at the contact before stilling once again.

Stephen’s fingers slowly wrapped around the ending, lifting ever so slightly. “May I?”

“Ah, right.” Even though not much of his weight was on the rogue at the moment, Hosuh still saw the courtesy of the hesitant question. He retracted his tail swiftly, the scales running back over cloth and removing the weights off of Stephen’s shoulders and legs.

Stephen gave a small nod to Hosuh before getting up, letting out a faint groan as his muscles ached at the movement. Most of the pain had been at bay when he was still - now the forming bruises across his body were becoming more apparent, both in appearance and in feeling. He took a few steps forwards and-

“A-ah!”

Stephen stumbled a bit at a sudden pain, but didn’t lose his footing. Hosuh jolted towards him, his instincts throwing his torso off his coils and left him leaning on his hands before Stephen waved one of his arms, a gesture to stop in place. He turned his head over his shoulder as he regained his balance.

“I-I’m fine, don’t worry - relax...”

He took another step and winced a bit. The pain was originating from his left leg, just below his hip- it seemed like one of his bones got thrown out of place, somewhat… turning or twisting in an awkward way with each movement. As he continued walking, his movements faintly resembled a limp as he mumbled just over his breath.

“Shit, My leg…”

In the seconds it took to cross the cavern, he took a quick glance to one of his forearms and saw a wide stripe of a bruise forming… but as he turned the appendage, he noticed the bruise was only forming on the outward side.

Ah right, the vice… That would explain why his body hurt all over - he had a feeling that he had more darkening stripes all over his body.

But that was a deal for later - the moment he looked past his arm, he saw the portrait in question, as well as what differentiated it from the rest. The rest of the faces could be deemed asleep under an optimistic lens - not this one, though, for the eyes were open. They were semi-lidded and faced away, but still definitely open and awake.

The person in question seemed to be a devil-born, given the horns that jutted past waves of curling
locks. The face was feminine, rounded yet mature. Perhaps she was in her young twenties? Or perhaps a bit older - Stephen pondered if the woman was his age when she was sent here. She had notable scars - slash-like lines that ran over her eyelids and lips, near the corners of her closed mouth. Pointed ears poked out from plumes of ringlets that spilled over her shoulders and over simple garbs. From the looks of the drawing, she seemed to have worn a collared cotton shirt, simple and dark-colored. It had quite the resemblance to what Stephen wore under his tattered cloak - and so did another piece of the drawing.

Hanging out in the open, the woman was wearing a pendant, an artisan piece of carved something - wood, stone, he couldn’t tell for certain. It had the shape of a bear in front view, jaws closed and face enveloped in an orb of fur. Under both of its eyes, there were regions of lighter tone amongst the rest of the dark details.

Perhaps it could’ve been colored sections showing through the rest of the stone - a guess made Stephen think of his own hidden jewelry. The two pieces of artwork had quite the similarities if that was the case - beautifully carved animals made of stone, streaks of color showing through the illustrious dark, a thin wreath of precious metal to hold the treasure…

Gently cupping the lump over his chest, Stephen wondered if the woman’s pendant had special meaning as well. Was it a fragment of a lost love? A symbol of an old friend? Of family? Was it a keeper of heartfelt things - of grief and worries, of hope and happy memories?

Stephen pondered the questions in his mind, even as he recognized that he couldn’t know anything for sure. The dark dye on the walls didn’t show a variety of colors all too well, and the sentimental significance of an object isn’t an easy concept to communicate, even in emotionally expressive styles of drawing.

Stephen was about to turn back from the mural, but something ended up catching his glossy gaze - were those small sigils near the floor? Looking closely, it had an echo of Hosuh’s signatures - but neither the name nor the handwriting matched the others. Where Hosuh’s name was made with thin, straight lines, the letters of this name were made with wide, curving and somewhat messy strokes - and little quivers in the lines seemed to suggest that it was made with a shaking hand.

The simple word, the name, that inscription … Did she write it herself? How?

Stephen leaned back up to full height and walked back over to Hosuh, taking a new seat in front of the serpent and hunching his spine, all without a word. The two held a melancholic gaze with one another for several seconds before the rogue broke the silence.

“So… What’s the story of this ‘Destiny’ person?”

Hosuh let out a low sigh, organizing the series of events and readying his nerves to tell the tale in question…

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It was about a year before the current cold nightfall when the strange run-in happened. The sun was freshly risen in the sky, the warm beams of morning having fallen upon the sleeping serpent’s face and stirring him to wakefulness about an hour prior. Though, there was no reason for Hosuh to be all too active - it was just any other day, the same old shadows, the same old harrows… and the same old hunger that had built up yet again.

A part of him was considering going back to sleep - why spend the energy of being awake for another dull, uneventful and lonely day - especially when there’s not much spare energy to spare in
the system? But he had already slept so much, just a handful of hours were spent awake out of the past several days. All the same, all the same...

Perhaps drawing would’ve been a good thing to do at the time - it’d be something to distract from hollow boredom and worse grievances, after all. Hosuh tossed the idea around in his head, imagining subject manner and where the drawing would even be placed on the cavern walls. Even back then, the walls held many markings - both artistic expressions and ledgers of the dead - but they were still noticeably cleaner than those of the present.

Hosuh laid flat against his coils, simply pacing around in his own skull with a sort of slothfulness induced by oversleeping and dismal dispositions. As famine gnawed at his empty insides, he thought he heard something in the distance - footsteps. Lifting his torso up slightly, he intently listened to the sound - and a burst of excitement came when he was certain that the footsteps were getting closer and closer. Rising to his full height, golden dust swirled in the air and inside his irises. He’d heard the same sounds time and time again, he recognized the pattern built up over the past couple years and even the most animalistic parts of him knew what was about to happen.

It was time for another hunt.

He shuffles himself into the shadows at the edge of the cavern, coiling up like a spring and readying his offense. He heard the dragging and creaking of the wooden doors above him and smiled. He continued staying vigilant, ready to bound forth when the moment was to come - as he waited, he was surprised that he didn’t hear the usual skirmish of feet and voices. But it was a minor thing quickly set aside as he lifted his hands to his ears, just in time for the signature BANG of the steel grate falling open against stone. Having avoided the sting on his ears, he set his hands on the ground and readied himself to strike, yellow eyes pointed ahead to see... something else a bit odd.

Instead of landing on her back, this humanoid seemed to take a seat on the edge on the opening before jumping down and landing on her feet, her hands hitting the ground a second later. Hosuh quickly studied the form before him - two pale horns that rose above thick hair, locks that started out brown, then faded to dark and slightly faded purples and blues, a simple indigo shirt with dark pants and boots...

But none of those things caught his attention as much as her frame - even when facing away from him, he could see a notable width and bulkiness throughout her body. She rose to her feet and twisted her head around, frantically observing her new environment.

Hosuh decided to experiment on something - carefully, he darted the end of his tail and poked the side of one foot before retreating. She turned to face the stimulus, and from the new angle, Hosuh could see that a noteworthy muscle mass adorned much of her tall form. He flicked his tongue out of excitement and instinct alike, and the quick-moving instrument caught a savory, somewhat salty scent. It wasn’t anything astounding or exceptional, but it was a bit more enticing than usual.

The appeal of the scent, however, was merely a minor bonus - the ravenous beast within Hosuh was never a picky eater, after all. And this beast was excited - this was going to be a bountiful catch and a filling feast.

Crimson red eyes had just barely fallen upon the hunter’s form when he sprung out to strike at her. The echoes of his hiss bounced with a pained yelp as Hosuh tackled the prey-to-be and sank his fangs into her collar. Hosuh had swung his tail around, preparing to catch the duo as they fell - and it was that moment when the encounter started becoming unusual.

Instead of falling down completely, the sudden force only knocked the demoness to her knees. That
was an odd surprise to Hosuh - but he didn’t take it as anything awful. He simply improvised, starting to wrap his tail around her legs as he kept his hold of fangs and hands alike. Both parties moved quickly in a flurry of survival instincts, the demon shoving the beast off her with shocking strength and a voluminous shout as his fangs left deep ravines in her flesh, the rushing blood staining indigo into a nearly black hue.

She then fell to her side as a thickening section of Hosuh’s tail wrapped around her thighs and more of the tail quickly traced around her hips. Planting her free hands on the ground, she tried to pull her lower half out of the building bind - cloth easily gliding past scales, she was able to get everything above her knees out before Hosuh could catch her. Hosuh quickly tackled her again, forcing the back of her skull against the stone floor with a loud knock as one hand grabbed a horn, the other her clean shoulder.

But before he could move his tail much, he felt sharp nails on his shoulder blades and she sprung up from the ground, grabbing him and forcing his spine to the ground with a quick rolling motion.

Hosuh’s surprise worked against him in that moment, his grip loosening enough for the devil-born to yank his hands off of her and pin them at his sides, pressing down with force as she continued to move. She bent her arms and tried again to yank her legs out of the bulky bind, but the serpent’s grip held true and the mass had only barely budged. Hosuh tried reaching up with his neck, hissing as he tried to bite her again. The effort was futile as she swiftly leaned up, propping herself up with a strong grip on his arms - yet, oddly enough, it wasn’t a painful hold.

At that observation, Hosuh wondered for a brief moment if that was intentional, if she was trying to avoid hurting him.

The thought was quickly drowned out as his tongue flicked and caught the prey’s scent once again - but the way it caused sapphire flecks to pop up in Hosuh’s eyes was not missed.

“What- Ah!”

Guided by famine once again, the reptilian tried to wrap his tail around the woman once again. The two went back and forth a few short times, making Hosuh’s conundrum evident - in order to move, he had to loosen his grip slightly, which gave the prey an opportunity to yank herself out a bit and negate his progress. Hosuh was confident that his raw strength could overpower her, especially if he could get her arms bound - but to get to that point, it’d be a war of attrition and stamina, something his starvation made him ill-equipped for.

As he lay pinned, his mind pondered again - the demoness definitely had an opportunity to strike at him at the moment. She could slash at his skin or try to pierce between his scales with sharp nails, she could bite back with the strangely sharp teeth Hosuh saw when she yelled. She could also scrape his back against the rough stone floor, or use her now-greyed horns to try to stab him. She had opportunity and ability, yet she wasn’t acting.

Why?

Azure dots began to form in his eyes as he stilled himself, trying to quench a growing curiosity. She again tried to escape his strong grip on her lower legs, and looked down to Hosuh’s face when the attempt proved itself fruitless. Her own form relaxed slightly when she noticed that he was no longer hissing and trying to bite at her, that the scaly forearms in her grasp were no longer writhing against her.

She let out a breath neither realized she was holding, and her body started shaking for several reasons - her adrenaline was beginning to dispel, the blood lost from the gashes was making her
grow dizzy, and her conscious mind was fully registering her surroundings.

Hosuh simply watched as her red eyes scanned over his form, both of their chests heaving a bit from the effort of the fight. Several things appeared in the red pools—fear, shock, dizziness, processed thinking, curiosity, realization.

With a rattled voice, the demon-woman spoke. “S-so… You’re the thing that lives down here… That answers a lot of questions…”

Hosuh quirked a brow over multicolored eyes, speaking his thoughts without realizing it.

“...Questions? What questions?”

She flinched, surprised that the serpent was suddenly speaking instead of hissing. She let out a confused hum, then her foggy mind clicked into gear.

“You don’t- Ah, well.. No one up there really knows what happens here. This place, the pit... It’s a well-feared punishment...”

“A punishment... For humans?”

Crimson eyes grew wider in further surprise. “You really don’t know?”

Hosuh’s expression told his answer. As the shining dust in both the air and his eyes settled, the demoness’s voice dragged in places as dizziness pulled at her head.

“Yeah- getting sent down here, it’s a punishment for... well, anyone, potentially... whoever breaks the law...”

She paused, experimentally lifting a fraction of her weight off of Hosuh’s right arm. The blue-eyed flinched in surprise, but stayed still - the woman responded by lifting her arm off him and pointing to her horns.

“Devil-born... or elves, halflings, humans - doesn’t matter...”

Hosuh hummed in acknowledgement. “But what- laws ?”

“Rules of the land...Rulebreakers and troublemakers...they get punished, that’s the way things are...”

Before Hosuh could respond, she mumbled beneath her somewhat labored breaths.

“Unfortunately, that’s the way this shit world is...”

Hosuh silenced himself at those words, a dismal feeling mixing with the hollow pain in his stomach - the feeling pulled at his sympathetic side, further smothering the ravenous beast towards the back of his mind.

Hesitantly, he loosened his grip on her legs. the woman swayed as the effects of blood loss were getting to her, but she let out a sound in what seemed to be a response. With a questioning expression, she carefully pulled herself out of the bind before another wave of lightheadedness hit her and she wobbled over, half-sprawled out on her hands and side. She quickly adjusted her balance and lifted one hand towards her wound, bracing herself before pressing her hand to the wet, bloodsoaked cloth. She bit back a scream, the stinging sear immense as she felt the divots of the deep wounds.
Hosuh winced at the sight, human parts of his mind mirroring some of the pain he knew she must feel. Even though Hosuh never recalled suffering that caliber wounds himself, he could fill in the blanks with reasonable guesses. And even though he had no injuries, he was hurting as well - not only from hollow famine, but from his heart’s distress. He disdained the sight of copious blood, he had felt that way for a long time - he knew just how much suffering the stains could entail.

Slowly, Hosuh rose to a position that resembled a human sitting on the mass of his coils as the demoness tried to staunch the gashes, quiet hisses escaping her mouth. When she opened her eyes, she mimicked his action while keeping her hand in place. Blue met red, and the gaze held for several moments before Hosuh cautiously spoke.

“Why... Why do you think things are so awful?”

The demon let out a dark, pained chuckle before responding.

“Why does what I think matter? It’s not going to change anything, things’ll be whatever they’ll be regardless…”

The snake went quiet at her words, saddened and pondering. He never understood why the world was the way it was, why his own situation had to be reality - but he didn’t question it much either, for he knew almost nothing else and this means of living, although horrid and painful, was still successful for his survival. The fact that he was still alive was satisfactory to his inner animal, a fulfillment that helped lessen the effects of the gaps in his human needs.

Hosuh was pulled out of his head at the sound of another chuckle - looking at the sound’s source, he saw thick curls hanging towards her chest as her head loomed forward, letting out further mumbles.

“Yeah, not like it matters at all...not then, especially not now…”

The desolate tone unnerved Hosuh, the boldness and strength of it only serving to be more unsettling.

“Wh- Wait, what are you talking about now? What doesn’t matter?”

The devil-born flinched, then let out another, albeit smaller and quick-fading chuckle before speaking again, keeping her head downcast.

“Oh? I was still talking about my thoughts, myself…” She let out a small laugh with a hitch in breath.

“Hah!” She shook her head side to side. “So meaningless…”

“W-Wait, You- That’s not-!”

“Not true? No, no, it is…That’s just the way things are…”

Hosuh heard a sharp inhale, a clear indication of teariness. His voice grew more pained and concerned by the second.

“But they don’t have to be!”

“...It’s a nice thought, and I’m sure-” A sniffling sound echoed around them. “I’m sure that’d be
great advice to follow... Many things can change, especially with time and will…”

“Right! So—”

“But even willpower’s pointless now. Whatever reason to make changes and to fight the tides of life…” She took a breath before looking up, shiny streaks painted across skin and the scars of her smiling jaw.

“Well, at least it’s a relief…I know I won’t have to fight much longer….”

Her sorrowed voice transitioned into another set of chuckles as she pressed her eyes closed - low, somber, yet with an oddly joyful energy behind the sounds.

Hosuh was rendered horrified and speechless.

When she calmed her tears and voice, she looked up to Hosuh - her eyes now held multiple shades of red as she tried to give a comforting smile to the worrier.

“Hey now - I know it’s horrid, but..” She shifted her position and slowly rose to stand, her bloody hand still glued to its spot and making her hiss with small shakings.

“Hey, at least we can both benefit from this, right?” She widened her grin, awkwardly showing her teeth and fruitlessly trying to dampen the severity of her mannerisms.

Hosuh was too frozen to respond, so the devil decided to continue her efforts after several seconds. She moved a couple steps to get right in front of Hosuh, bent down with her knees and held her clean hand towards him. She bent her fingers, leaving one extended to point just above his belly. She traced what she saw with her finger just above his skin, waving around the region marked with the ends of silver strands curving inwards from his back.

“You’re starving...Don’t deny it, I can see your ribs...”

It was as if she could read his mind - Hosuh was going to dismay the notion out of courtesy, but the truth was obvious to them both. Hosuh wasn’t sure what to say or do, so he simply scanned the details of her face - he knew he’d end up drawing it soon enough. She didn’t seem to notice - or perhaps she just didn’t mind as her head was turned away, eyes flickering around the cave for several seconds. She squinted, trying to see the details of the markings better, but simply couldn’t discern things all too well, even in the glow of daylight.

Swaying her weight from foot to foot, she spoke gently and quietly as she looked down at Hosuh.

“Are.. Are those drawings?”

Hosuh simply nodded, still not feeling ready to speak.

“Is it alright if I take a closer look?”

Another nod, and the demon gave a small smile. A moment after she walked to one wall, Hosuh shuffled himself off his coils and rose to his default upright height before following. The devil-born’s pointed ears - or, at least, what was visible among the dark fluff - twitched at the sounds as her head spun to his direction. It was an old habit of over-vigilance, her eyes pointed wide before calming an instant later, turning back to the pieces.

Hosuh tilted his head and leaned around her side, trying to see what specific things she was looking at in the given moments. Her eyes looked intense and interested - and surprisingly clear, the
pinkness at the edges already fading significantly. She flinched slightly when she noticed Hosuh at her side a few seconds later, but kept her focus primarily on the drawings.

After a minute or two had passed, she leaned back slightly and gave the reptilian a gentile grin.

“These really are astounding! Seriously - getting all that detail on such a tricky surface… That’s impressive. And the lines, I’m surprised at how clean they are…Heh, I can never keep my hands that steady. You’ve made quite the talent for yourself - my applause goes out to ya, from one self-taught artist to another.”

She smiled, happily impressed by his works - Hosuh, however, just gave her a look of confusion. She gave a small hum before talking again.

“At least, I assume that’s the case, right? I mean…” She turned her head around the empty cavern. Hosuh gave her a nod, and she gave a calm response. “I figured as such. Mind if I look elsewhere?”

Hosuh gave an approving hum, slowly gaining the courage to speak. She walked around to the other walls of the cave, eyes entranced by scattered drawings before her foot landed on something… soft? She looked down and saw a pile of cloth, flinching in surprise. She looked over to Hosuh, looked up at the grate, then nodded before carrying on, walking a couple steps away from the pile.

Her eyes fell upon a handful of drawings that she seemed to especially catch her attention. The drawings were relatively simple, a collection of little rabbits - a few were sitting, a couple were standing, one was running and there were drawings of just the faces in the mix. Despite the perkiness of the bunnies, Hosuh noticed that she seemed to freeze at these particular drawings.

By the time he carefully slithered over to her, she was reaching towards her collar… but she was doing so with her bloodied hand. She glanced over to him for a split second, then pulled out a string of silver previously hidden in a fluffy mass. Tugging the string and leaving small dried chips in the process, she pulled out a little object connected to the end of the fine chain. It was an animal Hosuh had never seen before, the black stone textured to look like mounds of fur and little streaks of deep violet formed accentuating accents around the nose, mouth, eyes and ears of the carved bear.

Hosuh was so entranced by the fine details of the pendant that he flinched when he saw a droplet of water fall upon the shiny surface. Darting his eyes back up to the demon’s eyes, he saw that she had started crying again - but it was strangely calm, lacking a scrunched up face or loud snivelings. Looking into her eyes, Hosuh saw a mix of fondness and sadness, a bittersweet sentimentality. Then he saw those eyes close, saline beads rolling past her scarred eyelids and falling towards a closed grip where the liquid picked up a wisp of red.

The serpentine looked away for a few seconds, then hesitantly reached out to the devil-born. Her eyes landed on his hand a moment before it tapped her shoulder.

“What are you…”

Hosuh looked towards the memorial wall nervously, pointing towards it with curled-in shoulders and a timid hand. Taking one more look at the rabbit drawings, she then turned and walked to the wall with Hosuh close behind.

Her red eyes grew wide at the sight, haunted by what she knew was true. After all, she recognized several of the faces for what they were - the previous victims of the infamous punishment.

Although she didn’t recognize everyone, she could discern some of the faces from being present at
the sentencings. She knew a couple others by hearing word from fellow guards with the prisoner in tow - but the ones that chilled her most were the faces of prisoners she had personally carried off.

Looking at their dead faces, she couldn’t help but recall the way they looked in life. She remembered the pleading, teary eyes of the prisoners in her grasp, she remembered the way they would scream and whisper for mercy..

“Oh no…”

But out of everything, the looks on their faces stuck her the deepest. She had often lingered over the closed grate, gazing back at the people she had just doomed. The terror in their blown-open eyes, the quivering of their hands and knees, the guttural whines of horror rising from their throats…

“Oh god, oh god, oh god…”

Hosuh looked at the crier’s form - clear streams ran like waterfalls, her own limbs were shaking, her grip on her pendant so tight that the pale white of her knuckles contrasted starkly from the crimson in between her fingers. For several moments, she just seemed to let herself sob - yet it felt all too quick when she started wiping her eyes with her clean arm’s sleeve.

Hosuh nervously reached out to touch her shoulder again, but she had removed her arm long enough to give a ‘stop’ gesture to him.

“Just- ah, give me just a moment…”

And after several more seconds of sad sounds, she gave a small nod to Hosuh. Still a bit scared to unnerve her, he reached up and placed his hand gently on her shoulder. After giving one more squeeze to the stone in her hands, she let go and placed her reddened palm atop the scaly hand. After a moment, she looked the serpent in the eyes, both eyes multicolored messes with a shiny layer of gloss. Under her breath, so faint Hosuh difficulty discerning it, the demoness whispered.

“Sorry - I’m almost ready…”

With that, she started to take a kneeling position, keeping her hand on his in a gesture for him to sit as well. Taking the cue, Hosuh lightly squeezed her shoulder before taking back his hand, backing up and swinging his tail around to form coils to rest his torso flat upon. Lowering her hand to the ground, the woman took a seat directly in front of the serpent. At first she turned her head towards the ground, then she looked the snake’s body up and down before letting out a small chuckle, wiping the last of her tears from her eyes with her sleeve.

Hosuh could only give her a heartbroken look and concern through timid words. “Why...are you laughing?”

The woman only chuckled a bit more before responding with a saddened tone. “Ah, I’m just…feeling some things - fear, worry, bits of melancholy…” She reached a hand up to her head, swaying slightly.

“...Dizziness, though that’s just the blood loss…”

“But..isn’t laughter supposed to be a happy thing?”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t be wrong in thinking that. It ain’t wrong, either..Heh, can’t help but feel a bit of..peace? Joy? I don’t know, it’s all bittersweet....”
They both sat in silence, knowing the grim truth of the situation. “But hey-!” She flashed a grin at him, although it faltered at its edge. “ ‘Least my death can actually do some good now, right?”

Hosuh’s face sank, unsettled by the disturbed sort of happiness he was seeing before him. At least it wasn’t particularly energetic, there was saving grace there - still, he knew this kill was going to be especially taxing on his heart.

“So... Are you gonna chew me up? Your teeth, they look real sharp...Could tear meat off the bones pretty easily...” She looked up for response, and Hosuh simply shook his head.

The woman let out a questioning hum. “Then are you…” She flinched as the cogs clicked in her head. She scanned the serpentine’s form, scared but morbidly fascinated.

“So…. you swallow people whole? I mean, no one’s ever seen remains, so...” She closely looked at his jaw, wondering how the mechanism would even work.

Hosuh gave a fraction of a nod, proceeding to shift around until his form resembled a human standing and leaning forward from the hips. The woman gave a low, hesitant hum, eyes darting around as she rose to her own feet.

“Um… is there anything I can do to make things easier for ya? Like uh…” Her voice became hesitant, quivering. “...I mean, that crush-thing’s gotta be taxing, right?”

Hosuh rose to his full form, but kept his head downcast. *Why is she so...willing?* The thought was horrid and dismal. He heard another low hum from the demon before she spoke with a resolute tone.

“Allright, I think I have an idea. Plus, it works for us both - I’ve... I’d rather go out quickly, if possible. I don’t think that’s a ridiculous thing to want…”

Her voice trailed off, but she didn’t seem quite finished talking. After a few moments of tense silence, she pointed her thumb over her shoulder to the wall behind. “So, I take it you’re gonna end up adding me there afterwards?”

Hosuh flinched in surprise before giving a hesitant nod, eyes pointed away. *How’d she figure it out?*

Her red eyes followed the movement. “Mhm. Hey...Mind if I throw in a little something? It’s not much, I’m not gonna touch any of the pieces.”

“Um..alright?” Hosuh was more curious than anything.

She turned on a heel, knelt down and reached towards the ground, tapping her shoulder and moving her arms a bit... Then, her form rose, her hands shaking as she buried her hands in the hair over her neck. After a moment of shuffling, she raised them above her pale horns and turned around, another layer of tears shining on her eyes as she held the carved stone bear in her hands. She gave it one last stare, then looked up to Hosuh with a strong gaze.

“Hey - hold out your hands, like this.”

She formed her other hand into a cup shape, and Hosuh nervously followed her instructions. The demon opened her palm slightly, giving one last stare at the pendant before closing it and placing it in Hosuh’s scaly hands, her own resting on top.

Quietly, Hosuh spoke. “What is this? Why are you...giving this to me?”
Red eyes tensed before the face gave him a soft smile. “Well… There’s going to be nothing left of me - and that’s okay. Good riddance, I say.” She let out another one of those low, sad chuckles.

“But also I figure… if nothing else, this can be my grave....”

They stared at one another with teary eyes, then the woman gently squeezed his hands. “I hope you can find some happiness out of it - or make some, if happiness doesn’t come on its own....”

She let go, lifting her hands before holding them outwards by her sides in an embracing gesture. Holding the necklace in hand, Hosuh hesitantly took her offer as beads formed on his eyes. She seemed to hear his near-silent sniffle, and gently stroked his back. In a quiet, comforting voice, she spoke towards one of his pointed ears.

“..Take care of yourself - at least, as best as you can...”

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Violet eyes were blown wide, staring at the storyteller’s reflective blue pools and watching as they dripped down his face. A heavy atmosphere wisped around them, the very air around them growing weighty to their lungs. After several seconds of somber silence, Hosuh wiped his eyes with the back of his arm and Stephen hesitantly asked a question on his mind.

“So… What happened next?”

Hosuh took an inhale through his stuffy nose before talking, his voice still fairly steady.

“She wrapped the thing around my neck, then told me that idea she had in mind...Well, not directly at first. She had walked past me, picked up some of my tail, then put it on her shoulders before nearly falling over…”

Stephen had a ghastly look in his eyes. “Was she…” He choked on his words for a moment before spitting them out in a haunted voice. “Was she asking you to break her neck?”

Hosuh nodded. “She explained that it’d be quicker for both of us. She kept trying to comfort me, saying how ‘this would all be over shortly’ and things like that…”

“...I’m guessing it didn’t work so well?”

Hosuh lifted a shaky hand to his mouth before shaking his head. “I-I-- I would’ve...hunted that way to help cause less pain… if only it hadn’t gone so wrong…”

After a pause, the rogue spoke. “....So...how did things happen?”

Hosuh talked quickly, trying through the painful images quickly. “Wrapped around her throat - about.. this much, this bit…”

Hosuh shuffled around on his tail, getting up from his belly-down position and laying out his tail in a large loop towards the center of the cavern. With one hand, he gestured to a section towards the middle of the length- it was much thinner than his waist, but still had a thickness comparable to a bulky person’s thigh.

Stephen’s eyes tracked the section as Hosuh shuffled into a seated-like position, imagining the way things must’ve looked.

Once seated, Hosuh gave Stephen a saddened look before turning his head away and continuing
the story. “With that, I squeezed hard - trying to do what she asked… I kept going until I heard a quiet sound, something like this.”

Hosuh leaned down, balling one hand into a fist and lightly swinging it against the ground. The *thunk* sound was innocent on its own, but it made Stephen wince at the context of it being the sound of snapping bones.

“…That’s when she tried to scream - not much came out, but the sound that did…” Hosuh visibly shivered at the recollection, not daring to describe it. He continued quickly, his body and voice trembling.

“She grabbed at my tail...and pushed against it. I think she wanted the pain to stop...So I did what I thought she was telling me...Those seconds that passed, though...the red eyes, the blood dripping from her jaw....It was all so horrible…”

Hosuh’s skin paled even further as the images flashed before his mind. His eyes widened when he felt something against his tail - to his surprise, Stephen had sprung up and seemed to be climbing on his coils. One arm was extended outward, the other shaking by his knees as he tried to balance himself. Hosuh quickly took the gesture, leaning forward before dragging Stephen back with him, his hands wrapped around his shoulders and legs draped over the mounds. Stephen squeaked in surprise at the movement, and squeezed him tighter as he felt his racing heartbeat against his chest. He flinched again when he felt a warm press against his neck and a sting from his wounds there - but he didn’t dare back away, instead leaning his head on top of Hosuh’s despite the pain it caused.

Buried in Stephen’s neck, Hosuh squeezed his back tightly, breath shaky as he tried to calm down. He was terrified, he was panicking...but he was also incredibly happy to have someone to comfort him, his breath hitching even more when he felt a warm hand bury itself in his silver roots and sway slowly..

After what felt like several minutes, Hosuh finally spoke over Stephen’s shoulder, letting out the last of the agnous story in a pained whisper.

“I really wonder what she was thinking, as she lay there dying…After a minute of quiet, awful sounds..I could barely hear it, but she clearly mumbled out something before she fell still…”

“…Love you...Goodbye, little rabbit…”
Chapter Summary

Levity would be a good thing after the telling of a tragic tale... Let's see how that plays out.

Chapter Notes

Why do I keep doing this- taking 6 days to write up a chapter and then uploading much more than my usual 4k-word goal? I don't know, I guess I keep writing myself into situation and need to take some extra words to get things settled in a satisfying way.. But hey, it's more for y'all to enjoy, right? Still, sorry for the smidge of lateness from my 3-5 day schedule, oop...

But hey, here's today's batch - 5.8K this time around!

So yeah -as usual, I hope ya like it, and uh... Ready your scream jars and leave 'em in the comment section once you're done reading- I have a feeling y'all will enjoy at least some of the shenanigans I stirred up this time ~

“...Love you...Goodbye, little rabbit...”

Hosuh spoke out the woman’s dying words in a murmur, so quiet that it was barely audible. After that, he had gone silent, gradually steadying his breath as he leaned over Stephen’s wounded shoulder. Stephen reacted in kind, leaning his own head on Hosuh’s and reaching one of his hands from his neck to the back of his head to pet the mess of silver. The two stayed silent and still for a few minutes, both needing to process the story and calm the emotions that sprung from it.

Even though Stephen was a bystander to the whole situation, his heart ached for both the victim and enacter alike.

For the victim, much of his empathy sprang from sheer relatability. Even though he faced a different kind of vice, came out alive and without shattered bones, he still had a good idea of the degree of agony she felt - with the immense power of the crush, he was surprised none of his bones snapped under the pressure.

Yet, despite the physical forces they faced, it was the tides of emotion that especially got to him. The lack of self-preservation in her words and actions showed a clear streak of self-hatred to him, and the way she cried at specific imagery and held her own pendant... He looked up and saw the same drawings of the rabbits over Hosuh’s shoulder, yet his astoundment was completely drowned out by remorse as he could only think about Destiny’s story.

They were different creatures with different stories, lives and loves, but the similarities between the two purple-crowned people struck Stephen’s heart.
And though he knew Hosuh was a killer even before telling the tragic tale, it was obvious he was a reluctant one. He could see the guilt in Hosuh’s eyes as he told the story, hear the pained waverings of his voice, and now he could feel the shaking of his chest and racing heart pressed against his own. He acted this way out because of his horrid situation, and felt immense remorse at his deeds - it was clear he never wanted to do such things, yet here he was.

And here Stephen was, hugging and petting that very same killer. The rogue felt a bit uncomfortable with his legs bent at an awkward angle and having virtually no ability to prop up his own weight in the position, but he didn’t pay it too much mind.

_Hosuh’s much more important than tha--wait-

Stephen flushed at the fondness of the thought in his brain - more specifically, he was surprised that he was having such a thought while he was scooped up in the very subject’s arms - toned, thin yet muscular, adorned with fine scales of a beautiful frosted grey color and strong enough to pick him up like it’s nothing…

He squirmed a bit at the tingly feeling that washed over him as his thoughts wandered around the subject of Hosuh. The squirming was also in part due to the slight feeling of pinpricks starting to develop in his legs - but none of his movements were nearly enough to indicate an attempt at escape.

His body may have been uncomfortable, but his mind was all the opposite. If anything, a little feeling of accomplishment stirred inside of him, for as he felt Hosuh’s breath and heart rate soothe, he knew he did something undeniably good. Yes, he did find a lot of joy in things classically seen as bad, and he usually didn’t mind being seen as a villain - but over time, the hatred of others seeped into his soul and his self image, rendering the boastful confidence he had into a hollow shell of an act.

But being able to comfort someone, to be able to throw out a hand and pull out a kindred soul from not just from strife, but from the very pits of hell’s suffering- if Stephen were asked to make a list of similarly virtuous deeds, he’d find trouble in recalling many things he’d deem worthy. And he’d have an even harder time recalling times where he didn’t expect some kind of pay or favoring deed in return.

In a man-eat-man world, he knew he had to milk whatever opportunities from any situation or person he could. Sometimes this entailed doing acts of good - sometimes he’d help local farmers chase down a group of loose animals, sometimes he’d catch a craftsman, carpenter, or other kind of laborer at work and convince them to take him as an extra pair of hands for a few hours, and sometimes he’d even help travelers navigate a town he’d taken residence in. But even though these were acts of good, his heart was ultimately in it for the money, not for the sheer sake of it. The words of thanks, the minor praises he received - hell, even the small degree of moral good he felt - those were a nice plus, but in the end they all felt surface-level, leaving his core unstimulated and hungry.

This embrace, this gesture of kindhearted and true warmth, though? It brought fulfillment where drought had reigned for years. Stephen didn’t dare move, simply content in the moment.

And so the two stayed in embrace, simply breathing the other in with a nuanced sort of comforting joy for who knows how many minutes.

Even behind closed eyelids, sunflower specks floated on the serpent’s irises at the rogue’s scent - all sides of his being enjoyed the warmth, the smell, the closeness, even if there were differing reasons for such. Hosuh’s grip tightened fractionally as the plumes moved in unseen dance and he
continued to keep his inner beast at bay, yet still feeling temptations drawing ever so near.

Maybe I should let him go at this point…

Stephen hadn’t particularly noticed Hosuh’s scent before, but now he decided to pay it some attention as it filled his lungs. There was some degree of dustiness to the odor, but also an airiness somewhat like that of grain. There were notes of something almost metallic in the mix, intertwined with a salted savor and an odd freshness. The more he focused on that element, the more it resembled that essence of mint-like lightness that he caught when his tongue feathered over his lips…

The thought made even more blood rush to his cheeks, especially as he couldn’t shake the nagging feeling of somewhat wanting to try the intriguing taste again.

O-okay, now might be a good time to let go…

With such similar thoughts on their minds, they seemed to read each other’s shifts in movement as good reassurance to let go. Stephen shuffled to gain balance on Hosuh’s body, legs bending to somewhat kneel on the coils as he propped himself off his collar by pushing against a loop Hosuh was essentially sitting on. Stephen’s hands were slightly shaky at Hosuh’s sides, his subconscious hoping he wouldn’t notice the quivering in the contact and his conscious scrambling to find something not so daunting to focus on. Violets spheres quickly met blue and picked up the way yellow particles seemed to sink like dirt in water.

“That’s odd... Your eyes, they’re doing it again.”

“The… dust-thing?”

“Yeah.”

They shared puzzled looks, scanning one another’s faces as they tried to guess what could be causing the strange yet alluring phenomena. They both stared at the little details of their features once again, both getting slightly lost.

As violet eyes shifted ever so slightly, they picked up an odd detail on Hosuh - the skin just below his jaw and down his neck seemed to warp a bit, somewhat resembling waves. The curving surface was lightly dotted with scales - some matching his skin tone, others contrasting with the grey-blue color of his tail and hands. The thief grew distracted from the question of the near magical appearance of his eyes, his thoughts zeroing in on this peculiar detail.

What’s with the mismatched scales - actually, what’s with the scales at all? The rest of his neck, it at least seems to be covered in skin. Too much skin, actually - like it’s all stretched out or something. Why does- wait, that - oh right, that probably has to do with-

The rogue was pulled out of his head at the sound of a quiet voice in the air, catching only the end of Hosuh’s mutter due to his distracted senses.

“... face, it’s all red again...”

Stephen’s lips pressed into a thin line as the words clicked in his skull, Hosuh’s statement becoming even more true in the process. He hadn’t realized he was blushing, he barely even recognized the reasons that could even bring about such a bodily reaction.

Yet, Hosuh seemed pretty oblivious to his predicament, for he kept talking as if he didn’t just drop a bombshell and make Stephen squirm and shake even more.
“Hmm.. all this color changing, maybe it means something? I mean, when you humans change color, it always means something, right?”

Stephen sputtered to speak, baffled at how calm Hosuh was - even with a faint blush dusting his pale cheeks, as if he wasn’t even aware of it.

“I- I guess, yeah?”

Hosuh nodded. “Then I wonder what mine means…”

His expression changed, going back into pondering before simply shrugging his shoulders. “I guess it doesn’t matter too much.”

“I s-suppose, yeah...”

“I mean, I’ve gotten by well enough without knowing - so what if that changed, it doesn’t change much of anything. At least, I don’t think it would.”

Hosuh gave a nonchalant hum, closing his eyes and shrugging yet again. Meanwhile Stephen’s demeanor was the opposite, all but combusting on the spot. How the fuck is he so calm!?

The rogue gave a shaky nod and looked down, trying to guide his body off of Hosuh’s in the least painful way he could manage - movement and pressure were starting to grow painful, a dull ache taking over his flesh.

But as his eyes drifted, they picked up an odd detail about his torso. Looking closely, the faint outline of ... something on his sides came into view. There appeared to be something akin to waves or rising and falling mounds. Just barely visible on his outline, light dips and concaves into his form became apparent. Stephen grew jarred at the picture. Are those his ribs?!

Without thinking, Stephen placed a hand on the warped surface. Both parties flinched at the touch - Hosuh from the unexpectedness of the movement, and Stephen from the accuracy of his guess. His fingers alternated from being on bones and in the gaps, the ones in the valleys sinking slightly with the small amount of pressure. On top of that, something felt strange under Stephen’s palm. Mindlessly, he shifted his hand along the lines where a hum’s ribs would extend and curve upwards. He expected to feel solid structures, he instead felt something softer. It was most likely cartilage, some tendons and ligaments, or some combination of the three.

Stephen’s eyes widened as he felt a gaze upon him - he jerked his head up to meet it, seeing equally shocked, gold-dusted orbs with sliver-thin pupils staring back at him. Under his hand, he felt the reptilian's heart rate pick up pace as he gained a reddened complexion himself.

“W-what are you-?”

Stephen cut him off with a sporadic and fast-paced yell, covering his tracks for an action he didn’t even know the reason by which he performed it for.

“‘Was just looking for a way to get off - sorry Hos!”

To further support what he knew was purely improvised bullshit, he pressed against Hosuh with moderate force - most of which was carried out by the hand on his tail- and tried to push himself backwards and off the pile of coils. Even with the minor pressure, though, Stephen’s hand sunk slightly against the center of his chest - an unexpected sensation that caused Stephen to sputter and lose his balance against smooth scales.
His body moving to lessen the brunt on his already damaged form, Stephen fell forward - one hand landing out by his side, the other just above Hosuh’s belly as his torso and legs draped over the pile and onto the stone floor. Where his head fell, though... Hosuh let out an unusual, shaky sound at the impact, halfway between a groan and a hiss at the mildly painful sensation shooting up his nerves.

Both males froze at the sound, both frozen in shock as their minds struggled to catch up with the information and the jolts in their bodies.

Stephen felt scales of various sizes pressed against his face - some about the width of his hand, others as fine as his fingertips and everywhere in between. In the center of all the scales, he felt a faint divot, a small gap which his nose and lips occupied - as well as something semi-stiff underneath.

His lagging brain took several solid seconds to realize what had happened, during which the solid structure felt increasingly tougher against his touch. But as soon as it did, Stephen’s limbs scrambled and he tumbled backwards off of Hosuh, hissing in pain as his bruised back hit the floor.

He took the additional black cloak he had draped over his shoulders and yanked at it as he curled up on the ground, pulling the hood over his face. His voice was slightly muffled by the cloth as he rushed through his words, half-yelling in panic.

“I’m so sorry Hosuh--! I-I didn’t mean for that, I-I-I-- ”

Stephen quickly lost his linguistics, all the sounds coming out of his mouth turning into embarrassed yells and squawks of half-formed words. Hosuh remained in stunned silence, once again fighting the buzzing heat rising up through his torso. A long mutter escaped his lips.

“Uhhhhhhhhhhh--”

Stephen’s form increasingly curled inwards at the sound, his form resembling a hedgehog rolled up in defense as the pressure of his grip turned his knuckles a contrasting white against the black fabric. Hosuh wasn’t sure what to do - he’d never seen a behavior like this before, yet he also felt a seemingly similar urge, wanting to curl up in his coils in a similar fashion to the prone thief. Yet much of him resisted the notion, not wanting to accidentally freak him out...and because part of him found the sight oddly endearing. Something about his vulnerable and spaztic form - why did he find it cute and feel the desire to scoop him up in his arms once again? Why did he actively want to hold him close and tight?

But he also recalled how he’d ended up passing out from raw fear, when the both of them had freaked out after a minor but inhuman stretch of his jaw. He knew both of them were high-strung at the moment, hanging by a fine thread so close to snapping and setting up the scheme for something else to go some sort of wrong. And yet he also knew the comfort he guessed was mutual among the duo, as well as the violet’s enticing scent and taste - with everything put together, fate had put him in a dilemma.

Not knowing what to do, he simply did nothing but stare at Stephen’s form - arms shielding his face and chest, legs shaking in small kicks to the air above him as he lay on his spine, his unintelligible hollering only now beginning to calm in speed and volume.

This is fine, this is fine, this is fine! Aaahh fuck why did I- how did that even happen? Damn sweaty hands, damn those pretty scales and that fucking gorgeously smooth chest--
Stephen’s grip tightened at the thought, legs stilling and drawing closer to his form. In that moment, something else dawned upon him - even though Hosuh’s scales made for a deceiving appearance, he still was completely naked. Well, he was wearing something - his own black cloak that he’d wrapped around himself while he was storytelling. - but that didn’t help Stephen’s predicament, his face heating up even more. Another unhelpful thing was his own frantic breaths, their heat being absorbed into the cloth and causing him to perspire under the hood as he couldn’t stop zeroing in on the aforementioned fact.

It wasn’t the first time he had seen another man nude- it wasn’t even the first time he had ended up in a position like the one moments ago. Memories flashed wildly in his head, squirming by his hips as he couldn’t stop himself from imagining Hosuh in a similar scenario. The ideas coming back after each time he momentarily slapped them down, much like a fly determined to stick around - so if he couldn’t smother them, why not try to focus on something else? And so his thoughts drifted back to himself...

Gah! Why can’t I stop having thoughts like this!? And why can’t I stop thinking about him!? I wasn’t- he wasn’t there that night, so why do I keep imagining that he was?!

...We’ve only been here a few hours - what the hell is happening? It’s… God, it feels like… like that all over again - except I knew him before then! Yeah, not super well but - why do I feel like-Ahhh, what’s with meeeeee...

Stephen slowly lowered his legs, extending them to lay against the floor as he recalled his earlier quandaries.

“Ughh...How long’s this poison supposed to last?”

Hosuh flinched at the sound, the fingers of a timid outstretched hand twitching. He questioned Stephen with a voice as hesitant and nervous as his reach.

“P-poison….? What are you talking about?”

Stephen froze, his body going ramrod stiff at the sound - once again, he ended up uttering something he didn’t mean to. Well, he was already screwed enough - he was metaphorically and literally under the dirt, so how far downhill could things go from here?

With that logic in mind, Stephen lifted the slightly smothering cloth, moving it just enough to expose half of his face. He pretended to hide as he gave a nervous glance up to Hosuh before looking away and providing his honest answer.

“You bit me, remember? And snakes are venomous - or, at least, a bunch of ‘em are. Poison in the bite - why else would I be feeling and acting so weird…”

“I…” Hosuh’s face looked pale in the moonlight as he leaned down towards Stephen, oval pupils darting around in worry. “I-I don’t know what’s going on or why you’re feeling it- but poison? No, that’s not the case- at least, if my definition of ‘poison’ is correct. It’s deadly stuff, usually some kind of liquid - right?”

Stephen nodded, slowly taking more of the heated cloth off his sweat-beaded forehead.

“Then I was right. Yeah, um… I couldn’t do that to you even if I wanted to, I don’t have any of that poison-stuff….”

Both of them stared at one another silently, both faces red as fresh cherries among gardens of grapes, blueberries, and a few daffodil petals in the wind.
Suddenly, Stephen rolled on his side and pushed himself upwards, swinging his legs around and shooting upright with a small hop. His face was more red than the cold or cloth would've justified - and his voice matched the rest of his flustered body language, eager to run from the thoughts and the subject.

“Well, anyways!” Stephen crouched down and picked up the cloak that had fallen off, his face contorting mildly in pain as he did so. Nervously wrapping the fabric into a ball around his hands, he tried to use acting skills to steer the conversation - an act that was pretty cracked by his face, body, and raised pitch of voice.

“So, these things, the ways I assume you use ‘em... It’s rather clever, actually. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Hosuh had his arm tucked to his chest, drawn back when Stephen suddenly sprung up. The sudden change in Stephen’s tone and mood, as well as the trace of cynicism - it all baffled Hosuh. Why is he acting like nothing happened?

But he couldn’t deny that he didn’t know how to handle the given situation - the tingling feeling coursing through his whole body, the strangeness of the sensation when Stephen fell on him, the way he had trouble taking his eyes off his middle section... On top of that, he was curious to see the way Stephen would take things. Is this kind of thing normal for humans?

So, Hosuh decided to act as well, to avoid voicing all the questions and feelings on his mind. However, without having a need to act differently than his normal self, his attempt at playing along was timid and unsure.

“I- I guess?”

“You guess? Hosuh, no no - you should be more sure of yourself. You found a good solution to the cold problem - that’s definitely something.”

Hosuh sat in stunned silence for a moment before responding. “I mean, yes, that is true... But the way I did it - I mean, I prefer to avoid thinking about it whenever I can...”

He reached behind his head, long nails scratching at the back of his skull. Stephen took a step past Hosuh’s coils and eyed the pile, tossing the given cloak back with the rest. He turned to Hosuh and casually spoke.

“Sorry - Got a bit too hot with everything on.”

Hosuh nodded, the action making sense - his mind, however, was not quite on the same page. Yeah, it’s probably a good idea to take your clothes off--

“Makes sens-”

Hosuh’s face burned as he jumped to talk again, interrupting whatever Stephen was about to say while looking away from him. I should do the same...

“I-I mean, it’s pretty clear how I got these, right?” He lowered his hand, fiddling with the cloth and wrapping it around his arms as he continued talking. “You’re... Do you not see anything wrong with it?”

The thief paused for a moment. “Well, it’d definitely be considered messed up by anyone who didn’t understand - but hey, that’s okay. You did what you had to do, nothing personal about it. You’re doing what you can for yourself, trying to make things less hellish here. Making the best of
a bad situation - no matter how it’s done, I don’t find it irredeemably terrible or anything.”

Stephen paused, noticing the way Hosuh was poking at the cloth in and around his hands. He held an open hand out to him. “Want me to take that?”

Hosuh nodded, tossing the ball of fabric to his open hand, which subsequently threw it on top of the mound. Or, at least, that was his aim - the cloth landed a bit further ahead, splaying out on the ground. Neither were too bothered, though.

Stephen took a few steps around Hosuh and took a seat next to him. Hosuh responded by shifting around to somewhat sit on the ground, getting as close to eye level with Stephen’s hunched form as he could. As Hosuh moved his body, Stephen gave a contradictedly nonchalant shrug as he continued his previous train of thought. “I mean, I find it’s best to work with the hand you’ve already got rather than spend the whole time complainin’ anyways.”

Hosuh slightly tipped his head to one side and arched one of his eyebrows. He gave a little hum of confusion.

“Oh, sorry. I guess that’s just something people say sometimes. A figure of speech, a way to get an idea across.”

When plum eyes looked back at the snake, he was surprised to see how intently Hosuh was listening. He was just gonna leave that little note there - but that expression gave him second thoughts. Besides, it acted as a good distraction from…all that - so it was a win-win scenario for him to keep talking.

“Er, the phrase… It refers to certain games we- we humans play. The games involve cards, usually the classic kind of playing cards- er, do you know what those are?”

Hosuh shook his head, flyaway hairs shifting like the dust in the air.

“Okay, well.. Y’know what paper is?” A nod. “Alright, well picture something like.. Slightly thicker-than-normal paper, about yay big…”

The rogue held up his hands, using his fingers and thumbs to form a rectangular shape. He continued his explanation when he heard an understanding hum.

“Yeah, now imagine it has little symbols on one side, and a bunch of decorations on the other.” Another hum. “Then imagine a bunch of ‘em. A stack of these cards…52, I think? Yeah, if ya use all of em…”

“All of them? Why would you not use all the cards? Is there something different about some of them?”

“Oh, yeah! Sorry, I guess I didn’t say enough - all the cards are different from each other. Those symbols on the one side? Yeah, they’re all different. Er, the combinations are all unique..

“Combinations?”

“There are four little symbols - or ‘suits’, if you want to be all fancy. Then there are the numbers, one through ten, plus jacks, queens and kings…also there’s the joker cards too, but those are the ones that aren’t always used….”

Hosuh’s face twitched in a way Stephen couldn’t really read.
“Oh? Do you recognize any of those things?”

“Uh- sort of? That ‘king’ word sounds familiar… I have no idea why.” His brows furrowed as he wracked his brain, miffed at his lack of knowledge - yet also glad to be thinking about a relatively calm topic.

“Um.. do you know what the word means?”

“...I think it’s… like a name or something? Er- not quite a name, per say. More like a label used with a name. Not sure what exactly it means...is it like another word for ‘rich’, or something? Or like- for having a lot of stuff, I mean.”

“Mm.. Well, you’re not wrong with any of that. Kings are rich, they have a lot of money and shit. Plus it is a title - that ‘label’ quality you were talking about, it’d be used with names. Like ‘King Jay’ or ‘Jo the King’, for example. There’s a bit more to it, but I’d say that ‘rich asshole’ sums up any king pretty well.”

“A bit more? I mean, I figured it was a negative term and all, but...Like I said, don’t really know the specifics.”

“Okay, well… They come in families, usually. Like - a king has a son, that son becomes the next king when the other one dies, and so on. Or somebody murders the current king and takes power that way, then puts their own kid in line - a bunch of nonsense, really. Never cared for it. Anyways, kings... They live in big ol’ castles and sometimes other fancy houses, they control kingdoms - these big collections of land and whatever lies in it - and they have a habit of buying whatever useless shiny things happen to catch their eyes. They also control a lot of people, too. Sometimes it's a loose kind of control, just a tax on the people living on the king’s lands. Give the royals some amount of coins - if they don’t got that, food or tools work too. There’s also more direct stuff, like the idiots who work in the big castles. They clean the place, feed the king’s laziness - essentially they just do whatever he says. Kings also have guards for protecting their hoards of wealth and enforcing so called ‘order’ - which really just means beating the shit out of us ‘commonfolk’. Eugh, bastards.... But yeah, kings, royalty? They’re all into flaunting off their wealth and getting into petty gossip and other ‘fair and proper’ shit - or whatever the hell else they do - while everyone else starves…. They’re all useless shitheads that just love to watch other people suffer for the sheer fun they get from it.”

Hosuh took a moment to imagine what kind of twisted pains such people would inflict upon one another, eyelids shutting tight as he reeled internally.

“…These kings sound pretty cruel…”

“Exactly. Those fuckers can all go burn in hell.”

Stephen’s whole form tensed up as he spoke, anger from thoughts and memories making his blood start to boil. He then sighed and curled in a bit where he sat. Hosuh extended a cautious hand, pausing before patting the scoundrel’s shoulder. Stephen leaned into the comforting gesture. He stayed there for a moment before scooching closer to the serpent, lifting the hand from one shoulder to the other, wrapping himself up. Hosuh was surprised, freezing for a moment, before curving his arm inwards to give Stephen a half-formed hug. The two remained quiet for a minute before Hosuh tried to lighten the conversation with a soft-voiced question.

“...Aren’t games supposed to be fun? Why have kings painted on cards, then?”

“...It’s just tradition. Whatever poor sod designed the game must’ve under their beck and call. Just
part of the game... I guess it was easier to draw those wacky drawings of kings then just going up a few more numbers? Eh, it was probably just the bastards of old showing off their egos. So yeah - that’s how kings got in there. Same goes for their wives and kids - queens and jacks, I mean.”

“Mm...So, are there any particular people on the cards? Are new cards made when each passing king dies?”

“Oh, new cards are definitely not made when that happens. Kings dying is something that happens way too often, they’re no way they could make enough for the endless amount of decks out there. Usually there’s no particular person depicted - just generic, anybody-looking figures dressed in fancy clothes paired with one of the symbols.”

“Alright, so… a little picture of a person with….what next to it? What are the symbols you talk about?”

“They’re just shapes, really. Hearts, clubs, spades, diamonds - that’s all. Or, I mean, I have seen a set use symbols like swords, weapon-style clubs, vases, circular crest-things, as well as another that used looped ropes and hunting horns. Whichever way the set goes, they’re just little images that you’d see on all the cards.”

“Okay… you explained the people-cards pretty well, but you also mentioned number-cards? Would those be just the symbol used for each given number paired with the little symbols?”

“No - my bad for not saying that bit well enough. The number cards show one particular symbol however many times over. Like.. a ‘two’ card would have two little symbols, a ‘ten’ card would have ten of them, so on.”

“Alright.. Hm, they seem like they’d be pretty colorful with all the symbols on them! Especially the higher numbers, eights, nines, tens… Lots of little pictures.”

“I mean, some sets can be really elaborate. Most of ‘em are much simpler though. Like, umm… Here, I think it’d be easier to just show what I mean.”

Stephen reached up to the arm hooked around his neck, tugging it closer around him and patting the blue-silver hand before ducking his head and swinging the arm around, undoing the hold. He scooched forwards a bit and got up to the point of resting on his knees.

Hosuh looked at the thief’s form, scanning up and down. He took particular interest in the way the end of his cloak draped over his backside. He chuckled to himself while playfully peering at the detail - the fabric really curved a fair bit over that part of his body. His ‘ass’, as he so eloquently called it. *What an odd word…*

The act should’ve made him fluster and freak out like before- and while pink still painted his cheeks, he was surprised to notice that he didn't feel embarrassed. The relative calm of the casual talk had soaked into him, easing his high-strung nerves and letting him enjoy a little laugh and not overthink things so much.

Stephen stopped getting up when he heard the serpent, confused. He turned his torso to face him, trying to figure out what was going on.

“Huh? What’s so funny? I don’t recall telling any jokes…”

Hosuh held a hand to his face as he let out a snort and calmed down.

“S-sorry, I was just.. Just thinking about something. It wasn’t anything in particular, nothing to
Stephen quirked up an eyebrow, still lacking the context for why the snake was laughing. He stayed in place, trying to figure him out for a moment before something popped into his head. He realized he forgot to ask a certain question he’d meant to ask earlier.

“Hey Hosuh, where do you keep your supplies? The stuff you made those awesome drawings with?”

The artist’s face froze, a bit startled by the dime-turn of the conversation, but still acknowledging what he knew Stephen was asking.

“What? .. Umm …”

Hosuh went quiet, the atmosphere around him turning awkward. Even with the uncertainty of his thoughts, one thing was for sure - he didn’t know how best to give the answer to the thief’s question, or how well the information would be received after revealing the truth.

Hosuh cringed slightly as he wondered what best to say. His eyes darted away from the rogue, an awkwardness and anxiety crawling in his brain like a beetle. He was quite worried about how to give out the answer to the question at hand. He knew he had to be careful with his phrasing - he couldn’t imagine that being blunt about it would be a good idea.

What to say, what to say? How do I put this?! Dammit, words are difficult…

Even though he could speak and understand language, his knowledge of words was not the absolute best. He knew the essentials just fine, and could get necessary things done with what he knows for certain. But more specific things, such as often-used sayings and new metaphors he would likely go over his head. He knew the names of many objects and things, but there were also many words that he only had a hazy definition of - such as that ‘signature’ thing the scoundrel had told him about earlier. He could never recall where or why he learned these words, or from where he based his guesses on what they mean. He’s just had this lingering phenomenon for as long as he could remember.

It never bothered him much before, nor did he often think about it - but with his current predicament, he was once again frustrated at his lack of knowledge. Dammit, if only I knew more!

He had a feeling there was a word or string of words out there that could help him out, that could relay his message in a way that would be received well - or, at least, would avoid generating any forms of dismay in the beholder.

If only I had the words…
Devil in the Details

Chapter Summary

Stephen finds out what exactly Hosuh's been drawing all over the cavern walls with...

Chapter Notes

Mmmm it's 3am of the 5th day but screw it, I'm still counting this as hitting the mark of the 'upload once every 3-5 days' thing.

Also - if you get uncomfortable at any point during this chapter, PLEASE don't push yourself to keep reading it. I'll include a little summaray of what happens at the end. Does that count as a fair warning (that doesn't reveal the twist right away)? Hopefully....

Also I started writing up that side-story thing I mentioned- it should be pretty easy to find in the Stosuh tag here, it's called 'VCST, Meet the Classics!'. Check it out, if ya like!

As usual, hope you enjoy and I'll see you again soon!

If only I had the words… Gah, I don’t know what to say! I don’t think I can get away with not saying anything - I need to say something, but what? I don’t know how to phrase it! Without the right words how else am I supposed to show him? How--

The artist cut off his own train of thought. A certain thing he had rambled in his thoughts stuck out to him. Wait a second - show! I don’t need words, I can show him - just like he did earlier! Yes....But how would I do that? Hmm...

What if…? He had an idea in his head - it’d be a small action that would do the talking for him. He had everything he needed to carry out his idea - and it wouldn’t take long, the answer would get across in one quick deed, only needing a matter of seconds.

...Yeah, maybe that might work...

Yet he still had his hesitations. Would it be okay to do that? He wasn’t planning on doing much, but still he felt worried. He metaphorically paced around in his head for a few moments, going back and forth on whether or not he should enact his small plan.

With hesitance and worry, he decided to just go for it - he didn’t know what else to do anyways, so the plan was all he had to work with.

Hhh… I don’t think he’s going to take this well, but...Hopefully this...this goes over alright, umm… Here goes nothing!
“... Give me your hand for a moment.”

Stephen paused for a second before complying, accepting the fact that he was just going to be more confused if he questioned things. Reigned along by curiosity, he shuffled on his knees to get a bit closer to Hosuh, extending an open hand out to him with a confused expression. The snake flicked his eyes away for a moment before speaking quickly.

“I, uh- sorry about this!”

“Wha-!”

Stephen had no time to let out even a full word as Hosuh took the hand extended to him and tugged it to his jaw. Flipping the hand so it laid palm up and lining it up to the right spot, he swiftly opened his mouth and pricked one of the fingers using a sharp fang.

Hosuh was already moving the hand back to Stephen when he flinched, drawing back his arm to his chest from the sudden sting.

“Ow! What the hell?”

Stephen looked at his pointer finger, a crimson bead already taking shape. Hosuh flurried his hands in apology, the bright red coating visible on the tip of one fang as he spoke.

“Sorry! You gave the impression that you wanted to draw! And you asked where my drawing materials were, so uh… yeah, that’s that….”

The silver-haired’s voice trailed off at the end as Stephen’s eyes darted between looking at his nervous expression and his own hand. He watched as the warm drop overflowed and ran down his finger, painting it with a striking red line.

At first, the scoundrel felt electric, wide-eyed confusion laced with worry and fear. Why’d he bite me again? And why now? He said he wouldn’t hurt me, and he hasn’t been...So why, when I asked for-

In that moment of silence, Stephen had connected the dots.

“Wait- Did you draw everything in here with blood!? ”

Avoiding the ghastly violet eyes upon him, the reptilian lowered his head and gave a hesitant, anxious nod. Both males lingered in fearful silence for a few seconds before Hosuh, in a quiet voice, tried to explain himself.

“I mean, I don’t really have anything else to work with in here…”

The rogue’s eyes rushed back and forth once again, speechless from the creepiness and morbidity of the action.

His eyes settled on the sight of his hand for a few moments, the sight grisly given the context. The initial streak went all the way down his pointer finger and filled in many miniscule creases at its base with a deeper tone. There were also brighter red tracings around the indents from when his hand shook. The main scarlet line continued, bending with the creases in his palm and ending just past his wrist, where a dark, heavy drop grew and fell in front of his skin, creating a circular spatter with a few tiny dots around it on the stone beneath him. He flipped his palm around and saw a smaller drop stopped at the middlemost part of the back of his hand.
His mind shook much like his palm before him. *All the drawings…*

He swiveled his head around, noticing how markings covering significant portions of the walls around him. There were even some much higher than he could reach, although they were much less frequent as the ones further down. *That’s… Must’ve taken a lot of blood. Where did he even get- wait a second.*

A dark idea flashed by his mind. *No, that- oh no, please tell me that isn’t right. Please Hosuh, prove me wrong!*

Stephen’s face sunk as the idea lingered in his head, his tone reflective of his turbulent concerns.

“I-Is this all… their blood? Or is it-? Please tell me it isn’t yours…”

“Umm…” Hosuh ducked his head even more, drawing his arms towards himself and holding a hand over his turned head, trying to block the view of his guilted face. His form shrank as he started to curl inwards, shifting his tail to sink into the pile of coils. The thoughts beneath the waves of silver hair were just as timid and lowly as his body language. *I know it’s terrible, but… Please, don’t hate me for this…*

Stephen choked out a small, half-formed word of worry from his throat. At the sound, Hosuh’s anxiety took forefront of his cowering timidity, dropping his arms from his head and crawling on his hands to the edge of his coils. Each of the two had a hand barely extended towards the other as Hosuh started speaking, his ample anxiety soaking his voice.

“I-I mean - well, not everything is because of.. *that.* Some things I’ve made with theirs, it’s not all mine-” His eyes widened as the last word slipped out, his pace increasing drastically. “I know it’s not- it isn’t great, but…”

“Wh- this… Hos-” Stephen tried to enter the conversation, but was cut off by an anxiously rambling reptilian.

“It’s- It’s not as awful as it may seem! Not something to worry about, really! I never draw too much at any given time. All this has been over a lot of time, and I haven’t… no big wounds or anything like that, all little stuff…”

Stephen remained motionless, perfectly statuesque aside from the increased shine forming over the violet eyes locked on Hosuh.

“…It’s kind of like what you said, no? I’m working with the little picture-cards and people-cards I have. Or- however you said it… Speaking of, you wanted to draw out what those little pictures would look like, right? Go ahead, wherever’s fine.”

Stephen still didn’t move, not even his eyes shifting from their gaze. Hosuh noticed his slightly shaking hand and tried to nudge the purple-haired into calming down.

“Um… All this has already been done, why think about it for too long…”

Hosuh leaned forward with his arm and extended his hand further, fingers shaking as he reached beneath Stephen’s short, fearful reach and touched blue-grey pads to beige ones. He curled his fingers to hold Stephen’s hand with his own, doing so gently as he kept aware of his claws. Stephen’s warm palm shook for a second in response, then reciprocated the gesture with a light grip of his own.

Stephen kept his gaze on Hosuh for a moment more before letting his eyes move, gazing at their
curved interlocking of hands. The scales of Hosuh’s fingers felt fine, smooth, and surprisingly warm. The poking of Hosuh’s sharp claws didn’t even bother him, only being a minor pressure against the base of his fingers.

The two stayed like that for many seconds, eyes shifting between their hands and their faces. Both forms gradually lost their tensity, sinking down to more relaxed positions - Stephen sitting on his knees and Hosuh laying with his chest atop his arm on the pile. After who knows how long, Hosuh turned to rest his cheek on his forearm and spoke with hesitance.

“Um...I think it’d be a good idea to show me the little symbols you were talking about. Er, if you want, I mean...” His voice trailed off, not knowing what else to say. He wriggled his fingers slightly in Stephen’s grasp in hopes of communicating through the gesture.

Stephen got the feeling he had something on his mind, but couldn’t quite discern what it was. He quirked his brow and looked at Hosuh, who was staring back up at him through messy, overgrown bangs. Despite the tinge of sadness in his sky-colored eyes, the image of Hosuh’s face rested on his arm, looking up at him curiously as one of his cheeks was squished against his mouth - Stephen’s heart fluttered at the cute sight.

Only half-aware of what he was doing, he gave the scaled hand a gentle squeeze. Hosuh’s eyes perked wider open before mimicking the gesture. For a second, the duo forgot the reasons for their distress and gave each other small smiles.

Then Hosuh loosened his grip, a nudge for the thief. Reading the gesture, Stephen decided to give another light squeeze to the scaly hand before letting go and - Oh.

When he pulled his right hand back, he flinched at the sight of bright crimson smudges and blots coating his pointer finger and part of his palm. He hadn’t even been thinking about what hand he had extended out to Hosuh - his mind was too full of concern for his… well, his friend.

Even though Stephen was usually slow in showing kindness and even slower in trusting others, something about Hosuh managed to persuade him to act otherwise. Although it took him time to break through his initial fear and discard his quick-formed prejudices, he came to realize that the humanoid before him was a kind, warmhearted creature. He could tell he was a caring soul, recalling the measures he took to help soothe him - even if he didn’t understand why. He didn’t get it, why Hosuh showed such tenderness to a scrappy, lowly guy like himself - especially with how stubborn and idiotic he was acting. Clearly he had more patience than him. His heart swelled in both airiness and anguish alike.

He was never much for sappy stuff - he didn’t want to feel pain born from affection, and so he steered his mind to something else beside the notion of friendship he found so bittersweet.

The first thing his mind jumped to was something immediate, his physical pains. He still felt a mild singe in the small piercing, but even that hadn’t alerted him - the rest of his body had been aching for hours, all the pains blending together and becoming less focused on where any specific injury was located.

He looked back to Hosuh, his concerns only partially satiated by his explanation. He was looking at his own palm, eyes flicking to Stephen for a brief half-second before returning. Even though it was faced away, he knew by logic that Hosuh was looking at a similar splashing of vibrant red over the muted tone of his scales. Written on his features were apology and guilt, as well as some other vein of misery that he couldn’t fully identify. The way his eyes were subtly twitching, as if reading his hand like a book... Did he recall something?
Feeling his gaze upon him, Hosuh’s eyes darted back to the thief. He lifted his clean hand with an exhale, waving it in an expressionary fashion as his voice mimicked the attempt at reassurance in his voice.

“It-.. It’s good to use things while you still got them, right?”

Hosuh gave an awkward, nervous smile to the thief as he responded. “I-I guess? Er- yes, that’s a good thing to go by, but in this case…”

“Yes, I know… But it’s already done, so.... “

The thief gave a small nod.

“And sorry again, by the way. I wasn’t sure how else to say what... this all is. Sometimes it’s easier to show something than to talk about it, right?”

“Yes.”

Hosuh gave a nod. “It’s like these little drawing - card - symbol… things, just like these things you’re talking about - easier to show, right?”

Another nod. With hesitance and a slightly shaky hand, Hosuh gestured to the ground in between them.

“You can draw right here, if you want...”

Stephen stayed still for a moment before he hesitantly shifted off his knees and into a sitting position, scooching backwards to make a bit of space between the two. Hosuh re-adjusted his body, shifting his torso a bit further forwards and lied down, resting his chin atop both of his arms on his tail.

Stephen looked at space he had to work with. The canvas was pretty even, albeit with a slight and mildly annoying curve. He looked back to the hand he had to work with - still half-splashed in bright red. A few minutes had passed since the initial prick, yet the wound was still leaking, keeping the blood running down his pointer finger wet while the swipes around his palm started to dry into flakes. Damned his teeth are sharp...

He looked up to his friend with a sunken heart. Silver locks blanketing his back and spilling over his coils, Hosuh simply looked calm and curious looking back at him... It’s like he thinks nothing is wrong with all this... Stephen wondered how much of his pleasant demeanor was an act, or perhaps an effort of him fleeing from his feelings.

Then he noticed how he was rubbing his hands together, a thumb rubbing over his palm and much of the red disappeared. He noticed the minuscule flinch in Hosuh’s brows before he licked the pads of two fingers - a sight that definitely didn’t make him jolt as well. Stephen smothered the thought by seeing what Hosuh was doing - he was using the fingertips to rub away the remnants of the stain on his other hand. As Hosuh focused on getting the last of the blotch out, the rogue’s thought zeroed in on the microexpression.

Clearly he’s still thinking about it...right? Or maybe not - I distract myself from my worries before and during heists... Plus after crying so much and so long - as well as doing this so many times.. I guess it’s only natural to get less sensitive to things when you put it that way.

But even with that conclusion and the heat of the liquid on his hand, his skin still felt cold. Everything about the whole blood-drawing thing, Stephen found it all so disturbed. Even with his
familiarity with blood, he was still new to this terrible idea. He tried his best to avoid dwelling on the horror any longer, stealing his nerves in order to actually fulfill what he had unspokenly agreed to do.

“Waste not… Waste not, want not, I supp-pose…” Stephen’s voice came out with quite a shudder.

Stephen leaned forward and reached his bloodied hand out to the canvas-like floor in front of him. Hosuh unfolded his arms and rested his chin on his hands, adjusting himself to get more comfortable. When he found a good spot, his eyes began intently watching his movements.

Stephen first tapped the pointer against the ground to make three touching dots, then tilted his finger and gave the round blob a stem with a downward and sideways sweepings of his nail. He picked up his hand, then hovered it in lifting and descending a rectangular path around the club-shape. As he fluttered the digit, the sizable droplet that had stuck to his finger spread with the movement, becoming a series of smaller raindrop shapes. He used his middle finger to spread out the raindrops and make a solid outline of the card’s shape. Pressing his middle finger to the pad of his thumb, he moved to one of the corners of the outline, turning the finger inwards before using the nail to draw the letter ‘A’ as neatly as he could - It was a bit shaky, and the thickness was all over the place from needing to re-dip his finger, but it was legible. He tried to draw a tiny copy of the central club underneath the letter - it just ended up being a deformed circle. He moved his hand to repeat the process upside down, tilting his head sideways to be able to read and properly make the lines again.

“Ace of clubs.”

“Hm!” The relaxed serpentine sounded as if he were snapped out of a trance.

“This is what one of the number cards would look like - this one’s the ace of clubs.”

Hosuh’s tongue flicked out as he looked up to Stephen. “Wait- ace? ‘Ace ’ isn’t a number!”

“True, but it’s just...just another established thing. Again, just traditions. I didn’t design these - I just play games with ‘em. Also an ace is just a stand-in for the number one.”

“Mhmm, so that explains the ‘A’....but why are there two of em, and with smaller pictures underneath? And why is one upside down?”

“That allows you to read the card from either way you look at it. The tiny clubs under the letters make holding a hand of many cards a lot easier.”

“Hm.. why is it called a ‘hand’- do you lay a bunch of cards down in a hand-like shape? Is there any limit to how many cards you can have?”

“Heh, no...I think it’s called a hand because, well, you hold all the cards in your hand . It depends on the particular game you’re playing if there are limits to how many you can have - many different games can be played with these of things. Like - screw it, I’m gonna try drawing it out. Don’t mind my terrible art skills, if that’s alright.”

Stephen chuckled as he moved his hand over to another spot on the ground. He started drawing lines to start representing someone’s wrist and hand - he quickly used the side of his hand to scribble it out, muffling an annoyed sound from behind his lips.

*Well that looked fucking awful. Here we go again, I guess...*

The same process repeated a couple more times, the violet scrawling out each attempt into an
indistinguishable blob before Hosuh could even try to stop him.

At that point, Stephen just accepted his fate of not being able to draw a good-looking hand. *Fuck it. Fuck this. *Fuck hands. *This is going to be a disaster but whatever, I’ve made enough of a mess already.

*It can only get better from here, right?*

Stephen’s drawing just kept getting worse the more he tried. He had already drawn all the lines for the poor-looking hand before even realizing he needed to actually draw in the fanning array of cards. Since there was no erasing the stuff and he hated the way the hand looked anyways, he drew most of the outline of a card over the current mess. Then, using his other hand to pick up whatever blood hadn’t dried yet from the back and base of his hand, he rubbed the area to fill it in. Adding a bit of pressure to his pointer finger, he then drew the remaining outlines of the other cards - intentionally having left the filled-in card partially incomplete at one end to better portray the stacked look of the cards.

Already having given up on making the doodle look good for some time now, he put little squiggles and dots on the blank cards in quick succession. He muttered angrily and unintelligibly to himself, visibly holding himself back from rubbing out the drawing then and there.

When the mumbling started, Hosuh had leaned a bit further forward and let go of his own face. The more it escalated, the closer Hosuh lurched towards the rogue, until after a couple minutes of the drawing session had passed, he grabbed the messy hand. Stephen let out an angry huff in surprise, head darting up to meet Hosuh’s gaze- Stephen was a bit confused at the degree of worry he saw in his features.

Even without fully understanding the empathy Hosuh was showing him, his unconscious led his body to relaxation, his muscles loosening as he adjusted himself back to a sitting position with his arm still extended. Stephen could easily pull back his hand if he wanted to, Hosuh was not holding it atop the ground with much force - but he chose not to resist, finding the contact too comforting to want to break away.

He also wanted to avoid an emotional conflict - of course, that’s when his foolish mouth opened up. “Why’d you stop me?”

Hosuh let out a small exhale as he talked in a calm tone. “You’re angry, and you’re going to end up hurting yourself at this rate.”

Stephen raised a brow at that statement. It was so contradictory to how the world usually treated him. Growing up, his agile feet and a small dagger were often the things that let him escape being dragged into alleyways and getting beaten - so even with all the kindness Hosuh showed him, even with him holding up his end of the bargain in not hurting him, the idea of someone caring for his well being failed to resonate for him.

Besides, he was drawing with *his own fucking blood* because Hosuh more than prompted him to do so - it was hypocritical to turn around and start worrying about the state of his body when he was the very thing that casued the wounds in the first place.

And so, Stephen showed a counter for Hosuh’s argument. “No I’m not. I’m totally used to scrapes and shit, and I’m pretty sure my hands got calluses a long time ago.”

“Call-us?”
“No - Cal-us. It’s basically just toughened skin.”

“Ah, but still... you were rubbing your hands against the ground pretty hard there...”

“So? That’s what the calluses are for - and also how they got there in the first place.”

“But skin’s not really strong, you’d still end up tearing something sooner or later!”

“I wasn’t rubbing that hard, Hosuh!”

“I don’t care, I still don’t want you doing that!”

Stephen went quiet for a few seconds, staring at the hand covering his own. Again, the scales should’ve felt cold or simply lukewarm to the touch, yet they felt strangely warm.

Hosuh felt the same kind of warmth beneath his palm, his hand growing tingly at the feeling. Barley even thinking, he looked at Stephen’s drawings and started talking once again.

“Hey, I think I got a good idea about what you were trying to show me anyways. A bunch of these double-design things on little bits of paper that you play games with - and you hold them like...this, right?” He bent his other arm to set himself back on his coils before holding it towards himself, mimicking the way a person would hold cards with his thumb barley hovering behind a wall of his fingers. He rotated his hand a bit to make sure Stephen could fully see his guessing gesture.

“I guess that’s what it boils down to, yeah…”

Hosuh gave him a small smile, both glad that he understood the message Stephen was trying to tell him and pleased that Stephen wasn’t fighting him much at all anymore.

He’d be damned to admit it, but the sight made the thief’s chest flutter and his lips tighten ever so slightly. He flinched when he felt Hosuh gently squeeze his hand - but before he could say a word, the snake was lifting Stephen’s hand and maneuvering his own to bend it upwards, detail-trained eyes examining the small incision.

“Looks like it’s stopped bleeding, that’s good.” About five or six minutes had passed since he’d initially pricked him.

Hosuh grew inquisitive as he scanned the wound. _Looks like humans heal about as quickly as I do. Interesting, they’re so weird to me in some ways, but so similar in others…_ But given that the sight before him was a bloody one, it didn’t take long for his thoughts to start falling down a darker route. He began feeling guilt for even this small wound, which brought up all the other pains he’d put upon him - the twin holes in his neck, perhaps a couple miscellaneous scratches...He tried to avoid thinking about the king of them all, but he couldn’t distract himself from the blaring truth - he’d nearly killed him in his vice, a power he knew full well could break his bones. He found small relief that he didn’t hear any muffled snaps, but then he recalled how Stephen hobbled upon walking around and wondered if he really messed something up in his leg.

_The red, the blood, it all means so much pain…_

He looked up to Stephen, whose eyes seemed to be elsewhere. He didn’t know if it was because he hadn’t seen something quite like it before or because of another reason, but he found the way the hairdo flopped over his skull quite pretty, especially when paired with the bright color. He still felt guilt looking upon the person he knew he hurt, but his thoughts also gained some levity as he embedded the face into his mind.
... But at least it can be used to tell the story of that pain... and, just maybe, it can even be used as an apology...

Chapter End Notes

Summary:
Hosuh drew everything in the cavern with blood. Some of it was from his victims, but it was more often from him. He never drew too much at any given time, just pricking a finger or two like he did to Stephen. Stephen's horrified at the disturbed nature of all this at first, but is calmed enough by Hosuh's reassurance to actually draw. He tries several times to draw some cards, as well as explaining what a hand of cards is with a drawing. He gets the message across, but also ends up getting frustrated at himself at his poor drawing skills, to the point where Hosuh jumps in to calm him down once again. He specifically states how he doesn't want Stephen hurting himself and his relatively fragile skin (cause his scales are much tougher, y'know?). Stephen finds the statement contradictory to both Hosuh's actions as well as his past experience, but the kindness already showed to him keeps him from fighting Hosuh yet again. Hosuh examines the wound, glad to see that it's stopped bleeding after the 5-6 minutes, before his mind brought up his guilt - he did seriously hurt Stephen, after all. But then, as he's staring at the red hand, he gets an interesting idea with inspirations from a practice he's done many times before...

Hopefully no one needed to read this, and I deeply apologize if you were brought to that point. I'm glad you stepped away and read this though - and I truly hope my warning was alright... Again, sorry...
Illustrations

Chapter Summary

Let's see what ends up getting drawn...

Chapter Notes

Heya, I know this one's late. I'm sorry, I got held up by a number of things - the tail end of my school year, an AP test (and studying for said test), shenanigans with my friends (don't worry, good shenanigans)- and with...uh...well, my girlfriend now <3 Also the classic writer's block/lack of motivation too - that's been in the mix oop.

But hey- we got the new round out, and I'll try my darndest to get the next one out within my goal of 3-5 days

See the end of the chapter for more notes

….Hopefully it can even be used as an apology.....

Hosuh’s mind drifted off as he stared at the pair of hands before him - a beautiful soul on one side, a horrid monster on the other, and yet they both held at least a somewhat human shape. At least, despite all their differences, they could connect with one another. Even though the duo hadn’t known one another for long , the connection still spurred a vein of joy to form within Hosuh at their bond. The serpent had nearly forgotten how much time had passed since he could say he had a friend beside him in the dark pit of hell.

His sky eyes flicked between his friend’s hand and face, just absorbing all the details he could observe - both for the sake of his idea and out of simple, happy awe of his presence and how he was willingly staying right where he was in front of him.

Implicitly, Stephen had the same sort of thoughts flowing deep within his mind. If it were anyone else holding his hand, he would’ve pulled away by now - but since it was Hosuh, his subconscious bid him to stay. He still wasn't completely sure of the reasons why, but he knew he had a liking for that surprisingly soft nature of Hosuh’s- it persuaded him to behave in kind, and so he loosely grabbed back as Hosuh intently stared at the digits.

He found his own eyes wandering, taking in Hosuh’s unique form once again. His hair covered much of his form with a cool-tinted grey - the contrast against the warm, deep orange tones of the cavern that caused his eyes to naturally become drawn to the feature. Even with all its messiness and stray strands flying out in random directions, he still found himself entranced by the sight before him - finding the way the long strokes of hair flowed across his back and over the ground picturesque and alluring. Where his skin poked out from the layers only added to the sight, the skin smooth and nearly unmarred with surprisingly few pale scars - especially on shoulders accented by dottings of chilled-grey scales. Pairing that with the fine, soft face brushed with a layer of pinkish salmon, Stephen felt that the beauty of his friend before him much resembled the work of a master painter. He knew he didn’t have much skill in the way of the arts - the mess on the ground before
him was definite proof - yet he still felt a spur in his head. *Dammit, he’s so pretty...*

With the same lines of thought and as if they could read one another’s minds, they let go of one another in sync. But instead of pulling his hand back, Stephen left it hovering in place - if anything, he extended it a bit closer to the serpent. For a moment, Hosuh focused on resituating himself, looking like he was going to take that somewhat-seated position he’d done before - Stephen’s expectations were defied as Hosuh lifted himself fully upright. As he did so, he mumbled something - it came out too unclear for the rogue to understand.

Stephen hesitated before talking just above a whisper. “What’d ya say?”

Hosuh’s eyes darted to Stephen in surprise, his long, pointed- *wait, did his ears just perk up? Yeah....dammit that’s cute...*

Hosuh spoke shyly with a stutter - it almost made Stephen wonder if he actually could read his thoughts.

Almost - even with magic being present in the world, he doubted the possibility of mind-reading. He’d never seen nor heard of successful enactment of the task. The closest thing he knew about was temporary telepathy between a limited number of individuals - this would usually be between just a ‘speaker’ who would send a short message to another individual, a receiver who’d hear the speaker’s voice in their head and be able to send an equally short response back.

But enough of that, Hosuh was talking - or, at least *trying* to talk.

“O-oh um, well… D-do you need - o-or want - help cleaning your hand there, or are you- are you good handling that yourself?”

Stephen responded without much thought. “I can get it myself, you’re good.” He paused for a moment, during which he picked up on Hosuh’s somewhat nervous body language.

“Are you...Are ya planning on doing something?”

“Well, yes - I was about to ask if you were comfortable just… sitting there for a few minutes? Er - it’s ah- it shouldn’t take long, and you seem to be… overall okay.” Hosuh gestured to his whole body with a wave of his arm.

“Ah - yeah, don’t worry about that Hos.”

The snake turned his head at the word. “...Hos? You know my name’s Hosuh, not Hos..”

Stephen chuckled at that. “No, no - it’s a nickname! It’s like a shorter way of saying the same thing, or just things friends call each other-”

Violet eyes grew wide as the thief caught his own words, his hands freezing in the air they had been waving in a moment prior. *Fuck, I actually said that out loud....*

Hosuh’s eyes mimicked his own, although it seemed to be more out of interest than out of anxiety. He mumbled the word ‘*friend*’ beneath his breath with a faint, nearly invisible smile. He was about to talk again when the rogue suddenly sprang up to his feet and trotted a bit closer to him.

He looked aside, rubbing the fuzz on the back of his head with one hand. “H-hey, um.. I was gonna ask… I know it’s an odd request, it’s disturbed, but uh..”

He gulped, taking in a breath before talking again. He was still uncertain about following through
with his idea, but he really wanted to make the gesture he had in mind. Pictures are worth a thousand words, right?

He spoke quickly and with a pained expression, much like he was ripping off a sticky bandage as he held his red hand out to Hosuh.

“Can you do that again?”

Hosuh looked between his friend’s hand and face, concern painting his features.

“Why?”

He gave the first excuse he could think of. “I… want to draw something that isn’t garbage.”

“Hey, your drawings aren’t-”

“They are - look, that doesn’t matter, I guess. I still want to draw more. Something else. Is that okay?”

Hosuh hesitated to answer. He didn’t really want to hurt his friend again - but then again, he knew the kind of wound was minor, so minor that he went through with it even when Stephen wasn’t directly asking and expecting it. With that in mind, Hosuh felt a bit more comfortable going through with the request.

After a few moments in his head, Hosuh responded with a nod. He gently took the palm faced to him and held it to his lips. As he was doing so, he happened to have flicked his tongue out again - it was bad timing, as it spurred his inner beast to chime in. He had been smothering his hunger astonishingly well, swallowing down both action and thought even as he caught Stephen’s enticing scent in the air again and again. But now, with the human’s skin pressed against his mouth yet again - even with the off-putting blood coating the digit - the animal could no longer be fully contained. The wild thing gave Hosuh the urge to do much more than just bite his hand - it urged him to pin him to the ground once again, to open his jaws wide and- No.

Hosuh had much more self control than that. Still, the animal and the temptations did leave their mark, and with the source of the intoxicating scent so near, his thoughts drifted. Just one bite won’t hurt - or, won’t hurt badly, right?

On the outside, Hosuh had simply paused again, nervously looking between Stephen and the crimson digits with puffs of yellow dissipating in his eyes. To Stephen, Hosuh’s stance at the given moment… it looked like he was treating him as a noble, courteously holding his hand to kiss it. Dammit, brain, why are you doing this to me!? Bad timing- Ow!

Stephen recoiled slightly as Hosuh pricked his hand, this time on his middle finger. He supposed that made sense, a single wound only seeps blood for so long. Unlike last time, he didn’t draw back his hand immediately - he waited for Hosuh to let go before intentionally trying to pull back.

He weakly gestured with his other hand, pointing to a nearby wall - only a few steps away from the memorial wall and the pile of rocks that he figured was the exit. Hosuh nodded, and Stephen took his spot on the ground in front of an empty patch of stone. He swiveled around to Hosuh, his tail feeding into his form like a rope being pulled away and - wait, his hair was shifting? Stephen raised a brow at that, getting the feeling that Hosuh had just turned his own head away from him, as if waiting for his next move. He had also slithered over to the memorial wall again, his form a bit hunched over and seemingly hiding his own hands. What is he…?

Nevermind that- focus, Stephen! He looked Hosuh’s form up and down, noting his features. When
he holds himself at what seems to be his default height, his hair reaches to just past his hips. His…

rather curvy hip- Gah!

Okay, okay, deep breaths… He recalled what his face looked like pretty well, so he turned to the
drawing board - and flinched when he noticed a decent dripping of blood on the ground in front of him. How long was I starin--

Running away from his thoughts once again, he reached out, tapping the side of his pointer finger
to the bleeding digit and beginning to trace the outline of Hosuh’s jaw on the wall. He managed an
alright thickness and shape for the line - satisfied with that, he started on his neckline with curving
strokes, rubbing his middle finger in the new space to mimic a downcast shadow. Just as he
finished drawing the lines for his shoulders and adding little blots to show the discolored scales, he
wince - probably should’ve drawn some hair hanging over his neck before drawing that….

He quickly scampered to draw a couple stokes near his throat, smudging part of the lines in the
process. The lines curved, curling over his collarbones - oh yeah, I should probably draw that...
The feature was pretty prominent on Hosuh - he hoped more of it was due to nature rather than
from starvation. Luckily the feature could be represented with a couple lines. The same went for
the chord-like muscles in his throat and the bobbing lump of his Adam’s apple.

The more details he added, the more nervous Stephen grew - he really wanted to make something
worthwhile despite his prevalent lack of skill or practice in drawing.

Next was his face - he estimated a couple points where the hybrid’s pointed ears would stick out
from his hair and drew incomplete triangles. Noting the way his overgrown bangs would often flop
over his face, he drew a couple curved strokes over the center of the incomplete face. He then took
the side of his hand and blended the area within, both in an attempt to represent the grey tone of his
hair, and to help it look better in comparison to the solid red lines that made up the bits of hair he’d
already drawn.

The textures and style of Hosuh’s drawings were pretty consistent, so he figured his drawing
should be as well - even if his work stuck out like a sore thumb near the other mastered renderings.
He swallowed his urges to claw and scream at his inadequacy as he continued, drawing waving
lines and spikes to represent the long, messy yet pretty mass of hair on his head.

Stephen gently squeezed the tip of his middle finger to set a bead of crimson on his left hand - he
knew the next details would require as much precision as he could manage with his jittering
fingers. Taking note of how Hosuh cleaned his neck wound, he licked the pointer of his right hand
before rubbing it off on his pants. He then hovered the digit just over the surface of the drop,
picking up miniature versions to help him draw thin lines for his nose and stray strands flying into
and away from his face. Reloading the dye, he used a few strokes to form a thin line, a
representation of his mouth. Stephen chuckled in his mind when he realized he had drawn a faint
smile. The same sort of curve fell upon his own lips as he continued - the giddiness even spurred
him to draw a couple lines sticking out from the jaw to represent the forked tongue he’d stick out
every so often…. Is that just a force of habit for him? A natural instinct?

He pondered the question as he added more thin lines and tufts to his hair, smudging in places to
help make things look more cohesive. He probably did it at least five or six times a minute at the
slowest, most relaxed pace, and a few times per second at fastest. After things calmed down,
Stephen started thinking about how it’s an... oddly cute behavior of his. An oddly cute behavior that
can lead to hijinks - as he was thinking about that thin tongue in both reality and in his drawing, he
couldn’t avoid recalling how Hosuh had flicked it out at just the wrong moment, causing it to run
across his lips. Well, more than that - it had slightly flown into his mouth due to their proximity,
the taste sticking to his own tongue with just a sliver.

Part of him was glad the metallic taste of his own blood had override the other flavor, but that still couldn’t stop him from turning red and overthinking once again. He tried again to bat away his thoughts, but this wave came in especially strong. Perhaps it was because he had been fleeing from his feelings before, or maybe it was due to the fact that he was in the middle of making a heartfelt gift for someone who was only a few paces away from him.

Whatever it was, he was too preoccupied by the thoughts themselves. Images and wants were bombarding his mind - he wanted to scooch back over to Hosuh, he wanted to have him hold him again. Not only that, he wanted him to do so closely, to both touch and be touched again- maybe even while telling him about the gift, perhaps... Am I feeling-? No, I can’t be, right?

He swiveled his head back and forth between his drawing and the serpent a few times, trying to control the thoughts in his head - at least long enough to keep his hands mostly still and finish the present. Luckily or unluckily, he didn’t have much left to go - just the eyes and a couple more waving lines for the hair that covered most of his ears a fair amount of the time. The latter was pretty easy, just dragging his bleeding finger on the sides of the head and blending slightly with his other hand.

The eyes, however, were much trickier - they were the feature a person looks at most often, after all. *Eyes are the window to the soul ‘n shit like that.* Repeating the strategy he used to make thin lines, he carefully made two wide, hill-like curves to represent the tops of his eyes. He winced a bit as the quivering made the lines a bit thicker than he would’ve wanted. He was glad that, while drawing lines for the bottoms of his eyes, the lines came out better. Thinking about his serpentine eyes, Stephen decided that going for pointed ovals would be a good shape to go with. But the eyes still looked a bit bland to him, so he thought about what could make a better image. *Oh!*

The way plumes of gold would dance in his irises, it seemed almost magical to Stephen. He felt no tug on his consciousness that might be associated with a hypnotic spell, and yet he still felt himself allured by the detail when it came around. Carefully tapping his fingers in the circles, he added tiny droplets and mostly-dried flakes to the surface to try to re-create the effect. *There we go* - the detail added much more life to the drawing, even giving the impression of light shining where the dotting wasn’t present.

He scooched back slightly and looked at his drawing - a masterpiece by no one’s standards, but it still looked alright to even him. For a moment he considered drawing more, but the wound on his hand was closing up. Combined with the fact his nerves were so alight from trying to make something acceptable and from the thoughts pounding at the metaphorical door to the front of his mind, he firmly decided against going any further. Besides, that would involve *directly confronting Hosuh again* - something his racing heart and cherry face wasn’t ready for at the moment.

Adding to his misfortune, he was now left without a key piece of defense against the raging waves in his mind, given that he no longer had the active process of drawing to distract him. He scanned the drawing again, comparing it to its counterpart - he got the details right, the raggedy yet fine hair, the dots adoring his collar and shoulders...his well-defined collarbones and neck, his… wow...

The drawing was nothing compared to the real thing which dominated his mind. He could no longer hide, he could no longer run - it was as if he was in a quarry where a tall wooden dam was constructed, and he could hear splinters creaking and snapping by the second.

He closed his eyes, but the act brought no sanctuary. His brain simply replayed the ways he and Hosuh held one another. It played back the unexpected warmth of his scaly touch, the surprising smoothness of his skin and hair beneath his hands. It recreated the twitching of every muscle, it
recalled all the little dips and divots he felt...The sparks that ran through his veins and the heat that roared in his cheeks were released once again at all the thoughts in his skull.

He tried to think of something else, but he couldn’t stop thinking of the serpentine. The least flustering this his brain did was bringing out notes of where his jaw and ribcage felt so odd, so intriguingly inhuman. But it didn’t help that the next thing his mind brought up were the positions he was in when he figured those things out - either sitting half-wrapped up in the coils, lying prone in the pile, or even... even...

His eyes flew open, his breath starting to shake from the overwhelming nature of the thoughts. He looked around the cave, but avoided looking in Hosuh’s vicinity at all costs - his mind was rampaging enough at the moment. The spheres darted all around the cavern, looking for something to help bring ease or resolution to his head. It didn’t take long for his eyes to point towards his own drawing.

His eyes quickly fell upon the red lines of a thin tongue again - he knew that was a mistake, the imagined breaking sounds grew so loud because of it. He couldn’t help it anymore, he wanted to try that intriguing taste again. He couldn’t shake the desire to lace his fingers in that messy, pretty hair, to grab the back of his head and pull him down and kiss the ever-loving hell out of him-

That’s when the dam broke. His heart pounded with the force of roaring waves as the tsunami swept him off his feet, taking him under with insurmountable force and without hope of resurfacing. His feelings filled his chest like water, drowning out the denial and excuses, filling his mind with the blatant truth.

Fuck.

He took in a gasp as if he were truly fighting titanic tides. He hardly believed the conclusion that dawned upon him, and yet it made so much sense. Why else was he so flustered this whole time? What else could that unknown factor he’d been feeling be? Why else did he feel a tinge of excitement and bloodrush when the golden-gazed hunter inspected him, his teeth lightly poking and nibbling at his neck? Why did he feel such sympathy and interest for Hosuh, even after he thoroughly tried to kill him?

Shit, fuck. This, it’s- Yeah, that- how? Why even-?? He- How’s he so damn...attractive? And calm? No, that isn’t the word...soothing? That’s warmer- wait-- Warm-hearted!? That’s… pretty close, but not quite it- fuck, what the fuck was that word--

He heard movement behind him, and quickly swiveled his head back to the real deal - he looked like he was getting up?

Stephen flinched at the sound of the reptilian's voice and how he turned to face his half-prone form, a worried expression on his face. Wait- why on Earth is he blushing too?

“Are you alright, Stephen? You’re face, it’s...” ...so red...What does that mean?

Oh god, this is a really bad time to ask that… But the rogue knew he had been thrust on stage to speak, and thus he did so with as much as his trembling form could manage.

“H-hey, it’s s-s’all good here. W-what-”

As Hosuh slithered on his form more to better face him, his front came into motion - and that’s when the thief stilled. His arms were held slightly outward with his hands curled inwards, but the angle still didn’t hide the tinges of red on the tips of a couple claws and half his fingertips.
Stephen’s voice came out airy and haunted, his heart now being the one most overtaken with worry.

“What were you doing…?”

Hosuh’s sky-colored eyes drifted aside, his voice and form timid as a warm shade continued to linger on his face.

“I- ...You said you wanted to draw and…Well, I had the idea for something on my mind, I wanted to give it an effort…It seemed like a good time to do it, so…I wanted to use the picture-cards in my hand, I guess?”

They both let out light chuckles - Hosuh in an attempt to lighten the mood, and Stephen from finding his attempt to use the figure of speech rather cute.

“As, so...you drew something too?”

“Well, yeah..” Hosuh seems timid, bashfully looking aside and- ..he’s blushing even more now…?

“Um..do you.. not want me to see it or something?”

“Wh- No no, I do! I-I- ..sorry, I know it isn’t my best work, but I..”

Hosuh went from nervous to trailing off, mumbling beneath his breath. Stephen waited a couple seconds before talking again, being quiet in lieu of reading the room.

“...Then...wanna take me to it? Wanna show me?”

Hosuh shyly nodded, locking gazes with Stephen for a few moments.

When...Why is that little bit of gold so pretty?

He slithered in a small circle, gesturing Stephen over with a wave of his hand. The rouge felt a small pit in his butterfly-filled stomach when he saw that he was being guided towards the memorial wall - but something burst forth when he saw what was now on the wall. It was on the sketchier side, more composed of thin lines rather than lights and shadows. It lacked the finer details of Hosuh’s other renderings, the hair and clothes being mostly made of rubbed, blended marks instead.

Sill, the picture was undeniable. Stephen was staring at a splitting image of himself.

And unlike the rest of the specters in the menagerie, this drawing wasn’t corpse-like in the slightest. The face was on the relaxed side, but the eyes were open and bright, gently curved lips pushing up against them ever so slightly. The image was soft, happy and alive - a figment of a brimming heart.

Chapter End Notes

Mmm- in this house we love our gay disasters. Any guesses as to what'll happen next - like, how they're both gonna react to each others drawings?
Worth Ten-Thousand Words

Chapter Summary

Elegant images and rolling seas of emotion - all kinds of things could happen when these things mix.

Chapter Notes

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO - FUCK HIATUS AND FORGET SCHOOL CAUSE BOTH ARE FINALLY OVER.

I'm so sorry this took so long to get out - on the flipside, y'all are in for a treat. A normal chapter is around 4 - 4.5k words, as I tend to shoot for 4,000 and often need a bit more room to get to a good cut-off point. YEAH. THIS CHAPTER IS NEARLY TEN THOUSAND WORDS LONG. Y'all are in for a ride.

In this house we love our chaotic dumbass gays.

Well, I'm not sure what else to say. I'm glad to be back, and I hope that next time I upload will be soon! (As in like- within 7 days or so, hopefully.) Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oh my god, this is... woah ..”

The rogue was baffled by the near mirror-image of himself before him.

His jaw fell as he stared at the mastery, astounded by the detail and accuracy. The way the mop of purple flowed over his forehead, the sharp, angular shape of his brows, the glint of trickster-esque fire that always seemed to be present in his eyes… Hosuh couldn’t have been working this for much longer than Stephen had drawn his piece, only adding another factor to be impressed about. How long could he have drawn - like.. Ten minutes? Or was it longer- wait, how long was I staring at-

Nevermind that. This is... Stephen’s eyes drifted back to the excellent work in front of him. Despite not being quite as laser-fine as the other portraits, the image was undeniable - it was as if Hosuh was somehow able to draw as if he had been sitting before him as a smiling model. And the smile Hosuh managed to depict, it was…

Holy fuck.

But there was something else about the expression that was...surprising, to say the least. Stephen grinned and smirked a lot, but smiles of pure joy and unblocked sunshine were rare for him. He almost always had some ulterior motive to his actions, after all - with his life as a roguish thief, that was the way things had to be, or so it seemed. Also the air of almost anxious vigilance and
seriousness it took to keep himself in one piece didn’t help his chances for making pure smiles either.

Such awareness was only amplified ever since the king uttered the order and supposedly sealed his fate, with orange and blue-haired guards ushering him to the pit. At first it was fear, shock and survival urges that spurred him - then came the awe and fire, the sparks of everything stimulating his heart to race again and again. None of those things were very calm, so how could he have been so relaxed as to make such a face?

“When did I smile like that?”

Stephen heard a bit of shifting on the ground beside him, and he barely had enough time to swivel around on his feet to face the serpent before he answered the inadvertent ask.

“Well…the closest thing was when you first- ah….woke up.”

Stephen’s brow quirked in questioning - his oxygen-starved barley even registered what had happened even when he was in the moment. Seeing his confusion, Hosuh attempted to clarify.

“You seemed...a strange sort of tired, I guess? I’m not sure. But I do recall that you were staring at me...And you said that my eyes were…”

Hosuh found a faint pricking to his cheeks as he looked back to Stephen. Maybe it was just shyness, but the way he’d said his words… It made Hosuh start to flush at just the thought - and it was only heightened by the violet orbs locked on him. They seemed curious, but his face, it also seemed like….the heat was somehow in his cheeks as well?

Even without knowledge of the intricacies of social interactions, he still knew he had to speak - and he still reeled inside as his words came out in a bit of a stumble.

“Well...y-you said they looked odd….but also p-pretty?”

Hosuh’s heart was already tense as he relayed the memory, and felt his heart jump when he heard Stephen squeak. For a couple seconds, the scoundrel let out little sounds, broken attempts to speak in words before shutting his mouth and shooting his gaze away. Hosuh’s heart continued to squeeze as he saw the scoundrel looking again at his artwork with an obvious fondness in his eyes. And paired with the cherry red tone his face was sinking into...

“You face... really cute.”

The force on his heart must’ve squeezed out his thoughts as well - Stephen’s head swiveled towards him again, forcing Hosuh to realize and acknowledge his blunder.

“I-...I said that out loud...?”

The thief tried once again to speak, but it came out much like a high-pitched whine. So instead he nodded, albeit more vigorously than he’d intended. He nipped at his inner cheek with his canine teeth, looking at the floor for a moment before steeling his nerves enough to speak.

“Is- was that your assumption of what I was thinking a-at the time?”

“No, it’s not a guess...you said it just like that, you used the word ‘pretty’."

The criminal’s ankles began to shake. What? How did I-- I didn’t realize- Have I been feeling this the whole time down here?
The two males stared at one another for several seconds, both overthinking and uncertain of how to process the feelings painted on each other’s and their own faces. And so Hosuh, in a move of both first and second-hand embarrassment and fluster, took initiative once again.

“...I mean… I’d use the same word to describe the way you looked, too…”

“That-” Stephen’s hands trembled at his sides. Internally, he swore he saw the blue hands start to do the same, one of them going up to his head and pushing a pointed ear out from the forest of silver as he scratched nervously. Reading his body language, Stephen felt spurred to keep talking - almost entirely disregarding how he’d normally try to play things off in a more cool, almost valiant way.

“I-..I don’t really blame you- er, either of us, really...I know I was really faint..but I’m not surprised I thought what I did- what I’d apparently said, I mean. Just look at ya, you’re...you’re…”

Tripping on his words, Stephen’s eyes alternated between Hosuh’s artwork and the artist himself, starting to shift his weight around on his feet. Dammit, it’s just a word. I know he’s pretty, why is it so hard to tell him!?

After some more stuttering he stopped pursuing that endeavor. “....Yeah.”

Hosuh seemed rather still before - and he might’ve a hint of somberness to his face? Whatever that tinge was, it disappeared in the blink of an eye. Now, it was Hosuh’s turn to sputter for a few moments, his hands and tongue fluttering even more than before - details which were not lost from the rogue’s perception. Wh- My words got to him? But-- how--? How’d it have this much of an effect? And- is he--? Oh my god...

He took a deep breath in through his nose in hopes to steady his racing mind and pulse.

Yeah, pretty sure he’s blushing...But why? I’m sure he knows what he looks like - yeah, he’s got to know he’s beautiful! So why, why does he seem so surprised? ...Seems like there’s something else to all this...

Once the notion was on his mind, the burglar felt determined to get to the bottom of it. Ignoring the fact that he admitted part of what he thought about the serpent, he pushed his fluster aside and spoke in as casual of a voice as he could manage.

“Say, Hos, may I ask ya somethin’?”

Oval pupils darted up from the floor. “S-sure?”

“Yeah- why’d ya draw me like this?” The rogue gestured to the other faces on the wall with a wave of his hand.

The size of each drawing was about the same, and the sketch of Stephen was already darkening to more closely match the hues of the others. Still, it contrasted from the rest - but not just from the level of detail in the rendering. The expression stood out from the rest, radiant and brimming among the still nature of everyone else.

It was like a spark in the dark, sound in silence and joy amongst bleakness - a clear distinction of a life among the dead.

Hosuh’s voice cracked slightly as he answered. “Well, there’s nothing wrong with drawing
something beautiful.”

Hosuh noticed how Stephen’s expression changed, his brows shot upwards and eyes wide. He felt a pang of nervousness at the sight, worried that the surprise he saw was that of ghastly horror. “...Right?”

“Ah-h--” Stephen tried to answer him, but he couldn’t gather himself to actually form words. One of his hands rising and fingers curling, he stood in place and spat out fragments of sound, his mind and voice much like a skipping, repeating record.

His face grew redder and redder as the seconds ticked on. Hosuh wasn’t sure how to read it- but he did feel some relief in that he didn’t see the paleness of fear taking form. Still, he felt nervous nonetheless, and so his tone began to pick up speed and even a bit of a heightened pitch as he continued.

“Erm- I mean-- I wanted to do something for you anyways, and with the way you looked before- I already said your smile looked p-pretty. Just- the idea seemed right to do...So.. would there be any reason to not do it?”

Shit, shit, shit! Stephen knew he had to respond, and he reeled inside as he heard the scattered nature of his stutterings.

“A-a-ah yeah- You’ve got a good point th-there. That’s- well- I mean-- I had similar shit on my mind too. That’s why I asked ya to, well…” Stephen raised his blood-coated, mildly injured hand and waved the fingers in the air in an attempt to mask its trembling. “Y’know?”

Hosuh nodded at the pause presented to him, after which the purple-haired continued rambling - even though he knew he was saying something he knew he’d probably regret, his mouth was moving faster than his lagging mind.

“O-oh! Speaking of, w-would ya l-like to see what I did?”

Fuck, fuck-- The pointed tips of Hosuh’s ears perked up at the question, rising from out of his hair before falling back among the strands as he nodded. As his head stilled, his eyes and expression gained a clear aspect of pure-hearted curiosity....fuck, that’s-

Stephen didn’t even realize he faintly mouthed out the tail end of his thoughts . “...that’s really cute.”

Hosuh could barely hear him, so much to the point that he wasn’t certain of the exact words spoken - but the message got through nonetheless. Without even realizing it, his now crimson-tipped ears rose once again as he pressed his lips into a thin line. He drew his forked tongue treating back into his mouth at a very slow pace, too shocked to consciously direct his actions. His lips then began to quiver, his face taking on a deeper shade of red.

His hands jittered at his sides, blue fingers waving by his sides. As if on its own, one arm partially extended, digits shaking. Only one finger was extended, the shaking index pointing forward before anxiously darting around. The claw faced several points as it flailed - Stephen’s face, the drawing behind him, the purple tuft on his head, his ears, and his chest before curling in, somewhat facing the ground and followed by his eyes. While this was happening, Hosuh looked like he was trying to say something, with even a few stray sounds barely escaping his mouth.

Stephen wasn’t holding up much better - he could tell Hosuh was flustered and searching for words. If it were another person, he’d jokingly ask them if they were getting cold feet or if they
were getting the hots for him. But he’d always do so in a teasing manner, a lack of seriousness shown through slack shoulders and entertained chuckles. He never expected a person to respond back in a serious way, he’d always brush away the notion that the person might seriously be falling for him.

This wasn’t just anyone, though - Hosuh and all his behaviors were all so foreign, so new. There may have been a handful of times in Stephen’s recollection where people had gotten a bit wobbly with their words around him, but none were ever to such an obvious and potent degree as the show before him. The sheer amount of heart and heat before him, it was astonishing. He’d never thrown someone off their game as much as now - or if he did, his subconscious would lock up his own heart and render him blind to the cues.

His mind couldn’t fully process what he was seeing before him. Deep down, though, a buried part of him knew that he was seeing signs that Hosuh felt warmth and care for him, something more than acquaintance or friendship. His subconscious could see the fire in Hosuh’s chest, it could see how it had somehow sparked and grew into a roaring blaze within a matter of hours. And this time, neither Stephen’s head nor heart resisted all the captivation and allure. This time, his subconscious wasn’t a stern gatekeeper, but instead a shepherd guiding the sparks in his heart and tending to the fire growing within his own heart.

However, this knowledge did not reach his conscious mind that clearly - and so, as far as Stephen was aware, he was left to try to put together scattered puzzle pieces with shaking hands and racing thoughts. It was an anxious, yet oddly hopeful situation for him, an odd duality of clarity and confusion.

The standstill would not last forever, however. The passing seconds felt like minutes and hours, but they all passed soon enough. At the end of it all, Hosuh spoke up, his voice cleaving the static charge in the air despite its shyness and hesitance.

“I-if you want to, then...that would be nice...”

Stephen froze up for a moment, then recalled the question that threw him into the predicament at hand. Suspecting that his voice would crack, Stephen instead nodded and took a few steps over to his work. He bent down on his knees, balancing on his toes and his unwounded hand next to the drawing. Hosuh read the gesture and slithered closer, his hair swaying over his hips. The silver endings brushed over the ground as he bent his torso to get a closer look at the work.

For the first few seconds, he seemed confused as to what he was looking at - Stephen didn’t really blame him, it was a relatively crude impression of him. Then his ears perked again, a visible signal of realization. Looking up at Hosuh from the ground, Stephen couldn’t tell whether or not his blush had deepened, but he could see his lips part even through the shadow. It was a couple more seconds before his tongue flickered out in habit once again, only confirming to Stephen that it was an expression of surprise, not instinct - not that he needed it, though. Hosuh’s mouth did not open much when he exhibited the behavior - his tongue simply popped out from between his lips before waving and waning once again. For a moment, he caught himself staring at the feature and his mind beginning to wander, beginning to want - Dammit, not now, brain!

Then he heard a little shifting of air from Hosuh’s direction. It sounded like something significant, though, it sounded a lot like...a sigh? Refocusing on Hosuh’s face, the thief had thought he was just intently looking at the drawing. Most of that was still there, but there was an evident trace of something else present. Fuck, that’s... well, I’d probably be disappointed too if I were him...

Yet disappointment was not evident in Hosuh’s next movements - he leaned back so that his torso was upright, but he was still staring at the drawing. Then his lips pursed a bit, his light blue eyes...
tightening a bit as he took in a quick breath through his nose. Stephen’s heart sank at even the momentary gesture - at the very least it didn’t last long, for Hosuh’s face relaxed about as swiftly as it tensed. However, in the process, Hosuh had pulled his bottom lip into his mouth for a moment - Stephen had a pretty good idea of what had just happened, and was spurred to act in accordance.

“Oh god, Hosuh I- Don’t cry, please!”

“Huh? I wasn’t-”

“Then what was that?”

“What?”

“Your face, it sure as hell looked like you were about to cry.”

“I…” Hosuh wasn’t much for lying, he rarely had reason for it. And he wasn’t necessarily lying, at least not entirely - he knew he wasn’t telling the full truth either. He did feel a wave of teariness come over him, he did feel the water start to prick at his eyelashes. But he didn’t want to admit it, and he sure as hell didn’t want to say the reason he was feeling as so. He knew it would hurt Stephen’s feelings if he knew that - but it wouldn’t hurt to speak about the sweetness he was feeling because of the gesture, right?

“Sorry, I hadn’t realized. I-”

“No no, I get it. I painted the wall with garbage, I stained an otherwise beautiful set of masterpieces. I- I can get rid of it if you want-”

“No!”

“No...as in don’t do that?”

“Well- yes. But also just- everything about that, just no. I’m not disappointed or anything. Not sad, either. It’s...the gesture, the effort, it’s…”

Hosuh went quiet, not sure of what word would best describe the softness he was feeling, but also avoid the sharp pang of dismay deep within him. His chest felt tugged both skywards to the heavens and downwards towards the underworld, conflicting feelings tugging at his heart. He let his eyes drift aside, perhaps looking at the thing that was causing the quarrel in his mind would be for the best and bring some levity to his head.

Without even knowing it, Hosuh was as baffled as Stephen had been - even when each of the duo considered their actions as natural and easily preceded.

Both souls held a hatred of themselves, keeping them back from even the imaginations of love that would feed their affection-starved hearts. Stephen would mask his inner torment with false pride, while Hosuh would drown in his guilt and regret until his whole body and mind fell into a sea of saline droplets and lulled into unconsciousness. But deep down, they were so similar to one another, much like a reflection in a mirror or still water. They were the same, so when love would finally rear its head, they were both left confused and with conflicting feelings - much like a great bull leaving shards of glass beneath its mighty hooves.

Just as he’d gone out of his way to act on Stephen’s behalf, the human had reciprocated in kind. It was unbelievable to him, and yet the irrefutable evidence was clear to see before him. How astounding it was to the serpent. Stephen...
In the seconds of silence, both were left to ponder - but even when one tries to put on their best poker face, tiny cracks will show through, with the effect becoming ever more prevalent as less and less focus is put into the act. Thus, both faces turned to those of contemplatives, the cogs spinning in their heads practically visible to one another.

Dust kicked up by the duo’s movements minutes prior still floated in the air, gently flowing by faint wind and gravity alive. The specks looked white in the moonlight, like tiny specks of light. Time felt frozen for ages - yet, ever so soon, Stephen’s voice cut through the silence.

“Hey, Hos…”

Hosuh promptly pointed his face towards Stephen’s, barely even recognizing that his cherry ears perked in tandem - a detail that only added to the burst of sparks suddenly ignited. He’d be so shy to admit it, but his heart would flutter a bit every time the violet called him by that… *newname? No….Nickname! Yeah, that was the word. Used when a person likes another person…*

Hosuh’s smitten train of thought was interrupted when the rogue spoke again - thankfully, he said nothing about how his pupils had gone unfocused during the momentary daydream. Although somewhat blurred at the side of his eye, he was able to tell that Stephen’s face had gone red. Yet, despite what he said, he didn’t seem tearful - he seemed more shy than anything else.

“I know you said how you said you just… wanted to draw - and f-for me, for some reason..”

“Ah, yeah…” Hosuh chuckled to help brush off the embarrassment he was feeling. The fact that he was even feeling as such was odd to him - normally he had no problem drawing, so he didn’t understand the timidity washing over him.

“But there’s something else, too... I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something more to all this…”

*Oh no...* Hosuh grew anxious, his form starting to quiver. He had a feeling of what was about to be asked of him, and he dreaded it. His hands suddenly feeling jittery, he reached up to his skull and lightly ran his claws over the back of his neck. His nails left a slight biting feeling over the hair-covered skin, a tiny tingling that helped distract his nerves. *I don’t want to tell him, I don’t want to tell him...*

The shimmering dust in the cavern slowly shifted as the two fidgeted, twitching and swaying ever so slightly. Stephen grew a bit more nervous, but his desire to answer the question on his mind outweighed his doubts. He saw Hosuh’s face during the silence, he knew *something* was on his mind - but what? He damn well wanted to know, but he still paused in hesitation before speaking.

“So why...why else did you draw this?”

Instead of trembling or quaking more, Hosuh completely froze. Stephen stayed as still as his form could manage, silently anticipating his answer.

*Wow he’s nervous. Why, though? Well, the scratching...and his face, it’s as red as mine probably is- oh, his ear is too? That’s...adorable…sweet, kinda like he is- no, not just kinda. His eyes swiftly drifted over to the masterpiece on the wall.*

*Like this, it’s... damn. It seems like he put a lot of effort in getting the details right - and holy fuck does it look good with ‘em. Why’d he do this? It’s so sweet.....But also, when’d he notice and jot down everything? Can’t draw that perfect without really knowing the reference - so when’d he….Wait, did he- Well wait, we’ve both been staring at each other a lot...But still, to remember*
...this level of fucking detail ...Wait, could-- Could all this possibly mean-?

He couldn’t finish the thought- his mind and body completely froze at the words Hosuh struggled to spit out - but deep down, the serpent believed Stephen deserved to know the whole truth, and so he swallowed his worries and spoke.

“...It’s an apology.”

Stephen’s words were aghast as he saw sorrowed guilt take over Hosuh’s reddened features.

“....What?”

“An apology...We...We both know what I did...” Overgrown silver bangs swayed as Hosuh slowly lowered his head, both of his hands falling to his front and clawed fingers interlocking with one another.

With a small delay, Stephen let out a nearly silent sigh when he realized the things the hunter was talking about. His eyes fell to the floor and he raised one arm to lightly rub at the tender flesh of his upper arm, a mild ache he’d been distracted from now making itself more apparent. He knew large bruises would form on his skin within the next few days, wide lines across his body Hosuh’s tail encircled and nearly shattered him.

Although his gaze was obscured by grey strands, Hosuh could still see Stephen’s form. His thumbs twiddled as he let out a mumble the burglar could barely discern.

“Must have been so horrible...what a monster, damned monster, I...”

“Hosuh.”

Silver locks bounced as he snapped his head up to look at the rogue, his eyes wide in surprise. He wasn’t trying to think out loud, damned mouth... Stephen spoke in a strong, yet still somehow gentle and relaxed tone.

“Hosuh, you’re not some beast...Yeah, all that hurt, but so what?”

“Wh...’so what?’’

“Yeah?...” Stephen raised a brow for a moment, then the cogs in his head clicked.

“Oh! Again, it’s just a phrase people use. It essentially just means ‘that isn’t important’...”

Hosuh nodded before continuing. “But...how is this not important? I hurt you, I scared you- I nearly killed you! We both know it...”

“Well, that may be true...” Stephen took a step towards the shy serpent.

“But that ain’t a first for me, not even close. Many people have tried to kill me before - that stuff’s an every-other-day sort of thing for me.”

Stephen chuckled for a second before seeing Hosuh’s face sunken with concern. His voice had an airiness to it as he spoke, slowly raising one of his hands towards his mouth.

“That’s...so awful.”

“...Mm, I guess? Eh, it’s just normal for me. I don’t complain about the game - not out loud, at least. No, instead I’ve just been playing life with the hand I’ve been given, y’know? Working with
what I’ve got and all that.” He made a quick gesture to the drawings of cards he had made on the floor earlier. Even with only a partial hour’s passing, the drawings had already turned noticeably more brown-toned.

Hosuh looked where he was directed, but he made no other movement or sound that acknowledged it. The air only seemed to continue to grow colder in the duo’s awkward silence - luckily it didn’t last long as Stephen clarified his intent.

“Er- Hosuh, I was trying to say that it’s not a big deal now. I’ve calmed down - and, ah…”

Stephen hardly even noticed that he mimicked the way Hosuh had interwoven his hands a minute prior as his knees began to feel weaker and his heart pounded a bit harder. He normally had quite a cockiness to his behavior, often regarding words of thanks with an entitled attitude and a narcissistic streak. But this night was nothing for nomality, a nail that kept getting hammered deeper into the metaphorical coffin with each new happening in the grim cavern.

“...well, it’s thanks to you, really. I mean- you actively put effort into caring for me? That- even now, it’s still so… wow…”

Hosuh was nothing normal, no such thing as an ordinary creature to him - and that was due to more than his unique body. To Stephen, such a kind heart was a thing of myth and legend - and he could only barely grasp the feeling like warm sunbeams beneath his skin. The wonder squeezing his heart, he could hardly believe it - and yet here was the truth he had been running from, the object of his fancy barely more than a stride away from him.

The same being, however, had a shadow of unknowing draped over him. Kindness was just part of Hosuh’s nature, a quality he’d possessed deep down for the whole expanse of his memory. Much like a field covered in fog, there was much he could not see or know - but compassion was something that just seemed to be woven into his core. Benevolence came so naturally to him, so the airy astonishment in the thief’s voice was a strange, clashing note to what he knew.

Turning his head to one side in a somewhat doglike fashion, the serpent’s voice had a vein of uncertainty to it.

“I...I mean, yes, I did really want to do that. And, ah...keeping.... things back, it’s an effort too...But I don’t understand, why are you surprised about this?”

Stephen’s black boots shuffled slightly as he flinched in surprise.

“Wha-? It’s- the nature of this world is cruel - everyone has to fend for themselves. It’s...it’s all so animal out there…”

Stephen let out a low, cynical kind of chuckle with a faint grin as a thought crossed his mind.

“ Heh, It’s kill or be killed, eat or be eaten…”

Stephen chuckled a bit more in hopes of lightening the weight in the air, but Hosuh gave no indication that he found the attempt at humor uplifting.

“Why would you joke about that...It clearly affected you, why are you suddenly so okay with it...why are you so okay with me? Why are you being nice to me after what I did?

The two fell into silence for a moment before Stephen continued, reaching the point of his words.

“With a world like that, it doesn’t make sense to go out of your way unless you got something you know you can gain from it. So kindness...haven’t seen too much of it in my life, that’s for sure...So
what ya did...wow...

“I-....” Hosuh stilled for a few seconds. “But that doesn’t change how I hurt you!”

“...I suppose, but... What you did afterwards, it sure as hell makes me say ‘fuck it’ to all that. And I mean, you haven’t tried...well, anything wrong, actually....”

The snake paused again, unable to argue with that truth. He came back with worry and strength once more.

“No matter how much I care for others...It doesn’t change what I’ve done during all this time here...It doesn’t change me from being a monster... ”

“Hosuh, no!”

Sky blue eyes widened in surprise. Stephen’s retort was strong, but not just in force- there was a great deal of warmth behind his words too. His face turned and scrunched a bit in thought, yet it stillemanated good intent. It seemed like he was trying to figure out what to say - and after a couple moments, he seemed to find what he was searching for.

“...remember what you said to me earlier? Y’know, when I was still freaking out?”

He remained silent, the rogue taking the answer as a clear negative. Thus, he started to explain himself.

“It was when I...well, being an idiot and-- fucking--When I asked you to eat me? God, I was being a dumbass!” Stephen chuckled for a moment at his own foolishness. He took a breath before steadying his tone.

“But that’s beside the point. You said that we needed to get rid of ‘the bug in my head’? Yeah, that. The ‘bug’, for me, was my fear and stupidity- for you, it’s how you see yourself.”

Hosuh made a quiet, discouraged grunt as his eyes fell to the floor and the dust settling around Stephen’s dark boots, the moonlight making the particles look like snow. Stephen’s own gaze on him took on a dissatisfied note at the change. Closing his eyes and letting out a small sigh, he took another step towards Hosuh, nearly eliminating the gap between them.

Hosuh flinched in surprise, but Stephen held himself steady. Looking slightly down to meet his eyes, Stephen wondered for a split-second why Hosuh chose to ‘stand’ at a somewhat short height - he’d already proven he can hold himself to be much taller than him already, after all.

He quickly brushed the thought aside and regained his focus, speaking with a firm voice.

“Monster? Yeah, that’s bullshit.”

A small squeak escaping his mouth alongside a flick of his tongue, Hosuh was surprised when Stephen suddenly shifted to stand by his side and threw one of his arms around his shoulders. A thin sheen of yellow powder glossed over his eyes from the startle and Stephen’s scent so close. But, without hesitance or regard for the animal impulses bubbling beneath his consciousness, Hosuh leaned into the touch and looked at Stephen intently, the buzz on his cheeks increasing.

“Here.” Stephen gently tugged his frame to face his own mastery head-on. He looked at his work again for a second in confusion before looking back to the taller - and his heart picked up pace when he saw a similarly bright smile on his face. Stephen’s eyes were wide and glimmering as he spoke about the art they were facing.
“Just look at this! God, I- I’m not even sure where to start. It’s so good, I-... I’m astounded! Could a monster make that? I certainly don’t think so.”

He paused, smiling and tuning his head back to Hosuh. The serpent wondered if his face would soon erupt into flames, given the heat he was feeling. And despite the choking nature of smoke, he instead felt elation in his chest. Such a strange sensation...yet he very much enjoyed it. This feeling, here it is again...I like it... or do I-

“Seriously! You’ve got quite an eye for art. Hell, I can’t believe you like the garbage I drew!” Stephen pointed to his small artwork with a finger covered in flakes of red.

“I don’t get it, you’ve got higher standards than that, right?”

Stephen closed his eyes and chuckled at the notion of Hosuh really liking his work, lost in his own head until the sound of mumbling right next to him alerted his attention.

“Standards? That’s not... Dammit, not this again, Stephen...”

The arm around his shoulder tightened slightly in a flinch. Normally, Hosuh would find such a thing uncomfortable and want to reel away - instead, he found himself liking the small squeeze.

“I- I was just telling the truth-?”

“No, Stephen. It’s....That’s.. Dammit, what’s that word you said earlier?”

Stephen raised a brow at Hosuh, trying to follow his train of thought. Hosuh’s mind, meanwhile, grew distracted. Even though he was self-degrading once again, Hosuh still liked the sound of his voice. Even with the minor tensity of the conversation, he still found himself enjoying the closeness Stephen had pulled him into with the arm hooked around his neck. He sure liked quite a lot...

Actually...do I just like him?

Hosuh’s eyes went wide as the thought passed his mind. It felt like the raw truth the instant it came into being and it struck him right in the chest. He felt astounded and shocked, and yet the fact fit and felt so right to him. But how would he express that to the thief? His mind was too overloaded in the seconds that ran out like sand in an hourglass.

Throughout the whole debacle, though, he had managed to let out a series of mumbles.

“B..Bash?.... Bell.shoo...? Ball-shoot?.... That’s...is?...Yeah...”

Stephen chuckled at the attempts - paired with Hosuh’s wide eyes, it appeared as if he was surprised about the word he was trying to guess. At the sound, Hosuh pressed his mouth shut, a flush of embarrassment rolling over him.

“Bullshit?”

“Y-yeah, it’s b-bullshit..”

Oh my god.... Hosuh’s ears were perked up once again as the timidity quickly formed in his voice and face - even being shy to nod in emphasis. Stephen couldn’t help but smile, he really did find the sight adorable.

He could hardly believe the cute sight was on display just for him- how the hell did I get him to do
that? How did I get him so close…Fuck. He had acted on an impulse when he wrapped his arm around Hosuh’s shoulders, and it wasn’t until that moment that he fully realized the predicament he got himself into.

The two were very close to one another, so close that they couldn’t take breaths without smelling the other. Stephen hadn’t paid much mind to Hosuh’s scent before, but now his mind was transfixed on it. It was earthy with a hint of dust, yet somehow still so light - even stranger, it caused his nerves to buzz under his skin. Why do I like this? Why do I like this...

Frozen in Stephen’s lock of arms and eyes, Hosuh’s nerves and blood swirled inside of him. He couldn’t stop taking in the intoxicating blend of scents that was ever so Stephen. He liked it, it was so alluring and addicting, he wanted to breathe him in and fill his lungs with smell.

But, even as gold specks of instinctual gold shimmered in his eyes, he didn’t want to just pounce on him. No, he dared not do anything like that to him again like before - rather, he wanted him to want it as well. But how would he communicate the idea? What was it, what was it…It’s something a human does when they really like another human person...dammit, what was the word!?

...Friend? I mean, yes, I do feel that for him. But there’s something more, much more…’Friend’ doesn’t describe it well enough, though…

What else, what else…a nickname? I mean, yes, I do like Stephen…and nicknames are used when people like each other… I don’t know the rules for making them, though. Do I have to ask him first? Er- he didn’t ask me, he just...said it, ‘Hos’- aah, why do I like it so much!?.... I wonder if he’d feel the same if I came up with something for him….

Neither of the males knew how long they stood staring at one another, lost in their own minds and one another’s features. After a time that felt so long, yet so short, Hosuh felt Stephen’s arm slip off his shoulders. The snake flinched at the loss of warmth, his body chasing the retreating appendage without command from his brain.

Stephen, in turn, was surprised by the gesture. Again, he found it to be a cute sight - this time like a duckling following its mother, in a way. He also found the way Hosuh’s shoulder bumped into his side and chest and the way he somewhat curled into his form sweet as well. Stephen couldn’t help it, he felt the urge to gently tease Hosuh since he somewhat resembled a clingy child.

“Woah- don’t want me to let ya go, huh?”

Perhaps the question would be pretty predictable to a normal person, or perhaps not. It was certainly the latter for Hosuh, who squeaked and stuttered in shock before shaking his head with a low hum. In fact, he tried to further cast aside his nerves and melded into Stephen’s even more, wrapping his arms around the thief - one scaled arm around his waist, the other around his shoulders in mirror of moments prior.

Stephen’s muscles tensed for an instant, nerves trained from a life of suspicion and a near-paranoid level of vigilance. The moment was purely instinctual, the fibers of his body relaxing as quick as they tightened. Instead of feeling worry or tensity, however, Stephen felt relaxation and a surprising warmth from the contact. In some ways, it was comparable to a dog rubbing up against its owner and asking to be petted. Wow... For a few seconds, Stephen just stared at Hosuh - noting the detail that his humanoid torso was smaller than his in practically all measurements. It just added to the list of things he found charming about the silverette, and served as a distraction from the feeling of his bare chest pressed against his forearm.

If only the violet knew how to shut his mouth when getting lost in feeling-fueled thoughts around
“...doing this again?...must be really touch-starved...”

Silence lingered for a couple moments before Hosuh quietly hummed in response.

“I....yeah...”

Stephen’s pulse picked up at the warmth and openness in his voice, a factor increased by the fact that Hosuh curled in a bit further as he spoke, one of his pointed ears near his chest. He was sure the little snake could hear his heart pounding against his ribcage and wondered how long it would take to burst from all the novel feelings of fluster and affection he was feeling. Wow...guess I’m still gonna die down here, huh? Heh, death by cuteness doesn’t sound so bad-

“Stephen...you’re warm...and nice...”

There was only one ever-so eloquent word on Stephen’s mind in that moment: 

“Your touch feels good... I like it...”

“H-hosuh..”

Fuck! Stephen’s hands trembled as Hosuh let out a low, mellow hum and leaned his head further into his chest. He took a deep breath in through his nose, letting out a small coo when he exhaled warm air. He seemed so calm, so relaxed and docile.

Stephen, at least within his mind, was all the opposite with his position at hand. Does- does he not hear it?! How - I mean, I wasn’t facing him when he drew that masterpiece... It- wait, he- yeah, that must mean he did all that from memory! Holy- for fuck’s sake! He seemed observant before, but adding to that-- how on Earth is he not noticing this!?

Contrary to Stephen’s belief, Hosuh could most certainly hear his racing pulse. Although he wouldn’t be able to explain it fully, he did know that a raised heart rate equated to heightened activity in some form or another. Physical activity would be the most obvious cause, but he knew to rule that out as the cause of the tempo - Stephen had been drawing and walking only a few steps, none of which was particularly strenuous. No, it must’ve been something else. He also knew fear could be a cause, but that too was overruled, for nothing about Stephen’s demeanor resembled all the fear he’d seen before. Perhaps it was overactivity of the mind?

Hosuh could understand that - after all, a menagerie of quandaries were bouncing around within his skull.

Humans, they make some sort of….pair bond thing, right? Yeah. I wonder what it’s like...It’s supposed to be something... a mesmer- no, amazing! Supposed to be amazing, right? ...Yeah, I think so, think that was it...

Hosuh felt the buzzing in his cheeks increase tenfold at the thoughts. Upon recognizing that, Hosuh recentered his focus on his own body for a moment, curious if his active mind was causing his own heart to race. It only took a second before he found the same effect beating in his own chest. For a second, he wondered if Stephen could hear it too - or, at the very least, feel it. After all, with the way Hosuh ended up rolling onto his form, one of his arms got tucked and pressed against the middle of his chest.

Of course, that’s exactly what was on Stephen’s mind at the moment. Hosuh’s heart, it’s racing...and he’s staring off into space again - just what exactly’s on his mind now?
Locked in time and still seconds, both were wondering about the content of the other’s mind - they each questioned if the other was having the same confusing feelings course through their minds and bodies alike. Their faces looked the same shade of deep red, their hearts were beating fast, nearing a perfect sync to beat as one. Were their minds the same as well?

Hosuh, deep down, had always had a streak of hopefulness to him - it’s the spark that pushed him to keep going on in years of torment, it was the faint hope that things would one day change that fueled his heart. When he saw the wall break days prior, his hope swelled like the sunbeams pecking through the stones. As the sun was setting on the current day, his hope had spiked again when he heard footsteps approaching - a meal was coming, and after taking it down he could finally flee his pit of hell. His plans and expectations had been pulled in many ways, things he’d never even dreamed of came to reality in his heart.

Now, holding the thief in his arms once again, Hosuh’s hope was shining bright - even with all his nerves, he knew he wouldn’t be able to recall a time more hopeful, the spark deep within being the most radiant it’s even been in the current moment. His timidity molded the way the hope manifested, but it didn’t change its inherent goodness.

_The whole pair-bonding thing...it sounds beautiful, it...I think I... no, I do! I want one of those!... But how would I say it to him? How-there’s a word for it, something to ask him...I know there’s a word, but I can’t recall what it is, dammit...._

Hosuh’s hands gently squeezed Stephen’s body, sending a wave of warmth through his body. Stephen’s knees were going weak, and not from Hosuh’s body weight. Although Hosuh was heavy enough to pin him just by draping his tail over him, at the moment the length was fully on the ground and supporting most of Hosuh’s remaining weight. Although the snake was leaning against him, he was still holding himself upright on his own. Even with all that considered, Stephen’s knees still had to support his own weight, a task he felt was soon to fail.

Slowly, he started bending down, hoping that Hosuh would follow suit. He seemed a bit confused and only half-complied - to worsen the matter, the confusion seemed to spur a certain behavior of his. His curious tongue poked out of his mouth as Stephen was leaning down to Hosuh’s face-level, accidentally causing the thin tendril to touch the underside of his jaw. As soon as it made contact, Hosuh drew his tongue back- unintentionally swiping back from his throat to his chin in the process. Stephen squeaked and flinched at the feeling, almost knocking against Hosuh’s face again. Staring eye to eye, the violet pools were wide in surprise and gazing at plumes of gold among watery blue.

“What… what’s that, Hosuh?”

“What- my tongue? I- I’m sorry! I-it’s a habit of mine - I barely realize I’m doing it half the time. And I definitely didn’t mean to do that, sorry!”

“What- oh, that- that wasn’t… awful, or anything….I’m talking about your eyes, they’re doing that gold-dust thing again.”

The eyes scrunched a bit in a questioning way. “Huh…”

“Mhm…” Stephen’s voice got lost in the mesmerizing swirls, the effect alluring and almost magical to him. As if under a spell, he spoke his train of thought once again.

“...you know, maybe… Maybe they’re both instincts of yours or something....”

Hosuh deliberated Stephen’s notion a bit in his head. They both knew his habit with his tongue was
instinct, just something every snake shared. But his eyes changing color? It was odd enough to hear about the phenomena in the first place.

“That’s….odd, but…”

Still, every time Stephen pointed it out were times when his inner animal was more active, impulsive desires coursing just beneath his skin. Putting it that way, it actually made quite a fair deal of sense.

“...Actually, I think you might be right?”

Stephen hummed in surprised acknowledgement, but he didn’t know what else to say - and so he let the air silent as Hosuh further elaborate the thought.

It also made sense in another way - the last time he had seen a reflection of himself did feature eyes entirely made of that piercing yellow. All that time, all those years ago, the saffron seemed to glow, thin beams stretching out over the surface… the surface of….pooling and flowing...

Hosuh felt a chill beneath his skin, his whole form quaking as he fought the memories incoming. His form started giving way as the thoughts bombarded his mind.

Before he closed his eyes tight, Stephen saw how his pupils had gone from wide, near-circular ovals to thin slivers. Combined with his paling skin, it was clear to see Hosuh’s sudden terror. With a small noise of worry rising from his throat, Stephen shifted his partially trapped arm and wrapped it back around Hosuh’s shoulders, the other going to his lower back. He bent his knees and gently guided the duo to the ground, leaning back to watch the floor with careful eyes. He made another small noise of worry before swallowing his nerves and leaning close to one of his long ears and spoke softly.

Quietly, he repeated a mantra in the most soothing tone his shaky voice could manage. “It’s okay, it’s okay Hosuh. I’m here....”

Hearing the warm tone of Stephen’s voice paired with an equally warm embrace around his, his quickened breath gradually soothed. By the time he had mostly settled, he realized his position had changed a decent bit. First, his own embrace must’ve been rather tight, given how he felt his arms loosening from Stephen’s torso. Second, he was seated on the ground - that much made sense, giving how his form had trembled. Third was how his head had moved to rest over his shoulder. But the fourth detail was his tail, how it loosely wrapped around Stephen’s sitting form as well as his own, an enlarged version of how he’d often coil up. How-? When?

This was surprising to Hosuh, given that he hadn’t recognized when he moved - but he was more shocked that Stephen was okay with the happening, given that he freaked out at some point or another every other time this occurred. Hosuh’s arms tensed up again at the realization, afraid of scaring the rogue by mistake once again. In response, Stephen hummed and gently asked a question.

“How-? When?

“Hm - you okay, Hos?”

Dammit, that nickname… wait, those are given when- gah! Hosuh writhed with the flustered timidity in his own head. That’s why I’ve been- ah!

Externally, Hosuh’s throat let out quiet versions of the spaztic, flustered coos in his head without him realizing it.
“Hosuh?”

“Ah- hello, hi- I’m okay, I’m okay!”

“Hosuh….”

“H-hey, when d-did I- I should probably get off.”

“No- you don’t have to. You said you like holding me earlier, right? You also said you like- uh…”

Stephen paused, chuckling for a moment. However, it wasn't a humorous sound, but instead a flustered and uncertain one. Yet, strangely enough, it seemed like he didn’t hate the thing he was thinking about - perhaps even enjoying the thought a bit?

“Ah-ha, um... touching me, as you put it. .. But hey, right now I don’t mind if you do that.”

Hosuh remained in stunned silence as he felt the warmth against his torso and tail alike. Stephen then chuckled again - this time much more casual, but with an apparent streak of the feeling from a second ago.

“Not like I have anywhere else to go.”

Stephen’s laugh faded over a couple seconds before returning to the soundlessness. It didn’t last long, however, for the air shifted to a somewhat hesitant mood and Hosuh heard a mumble from the rogue.

“Y’know... I’m also pretty sure ya said something about liking....”

Before Hosuh could fill in the blanks, he felt the human’s bare fingers shake for a moment - then the hand on his spine shifted upward before slowly sliding back down, petting his long hair in gentle strokes. Without even thinking, Hosuh let out a small coo and planted his face on the tan fabric over Stephen’s shoulder. A similar noise came out of Stephen’s mouth before it melded into a low hum, volume lowering and resetting with each long stroke.

This patterned continued for half a minute, Hosuh’s mind blank aside from the scent filling his nose. Even though smelling this way wasn’t nearly as descriptive to Hosuh, he still enjoyed even the abridged version of the musk. As he regained brainpower, he felt the urge to reciprocate Stephen’s kind gesture. For a second he pondered how best to execute it before he recalled how soft the purple locks on his head were. Sliding one of his hands up to the back of Stephen’s skull, he felt a minor flinch before swaying his greyed fingers with a gentle pressure. His other hand mimicked the motion as it was draped around the back of his collar, playing in the space between his neck and shoulder.

It was simple, but the two rather liked it. Neither was sure how many minutes they spent as such, but they didn’t care much either. Both of their bodies were calm and relaxed - however, their minds were much less so.

This was especially the case for Hosuh, the silver-haired so inexperienced with all the feelings and sensations that came to him on the current night. So many feelings, so strange yet so wonderful. Why do I like all of this? I- I know I like him, but how does he do this to me!?... Gah, I… I want to tell him, tell him how I feel...I want more of this, I...Shit, I want more of him! I..

His mind wandered to feelings of anticipation, both in the moment and all the hopeful instances brimming in the past several days.
damn my original plan - forget it, it’s been gone for a while….I don’t know what I’m going to do about tomorrow - but enough of that, I don’t care! I’ve faced worse hunger before, I should be able to keep it down….

Though with the subject of hunger, he couldn’t help but acknowledge a certain difficulty he’d been keeping back. …even if he is...something else. Damn, his smell...

His inner animal couldn’t be kept forever, he knew this - it was still in its cage, but it was still able to claw out through the gaps between iron bars and knock him down a dark path.

His skin...ah, even that mouth of his...delicious...so good...Ah-hah, it would be so good to - No! Dammit, Hosuh!

His heart found the thoughts so unsavory, a direct opposite to the flavors of delectable salt and meatiness he picked up when he first mauled Stephen, and once again when he’d grown curious about him as he was caught and helpless beneath him. His scent was so alluring, and that unknown factor among the otherwise dissuading taste of his blood spurred him to take a taste test of him, leaning down to nibble on his exposed throat as he found out what else his game had to offer him.

But that was long passed - even though in reality only mere hours had passed since the attack, it felt more akin to weeks bathed in the shadows and pale moonlight. Even though his inner beast would torment and tempt him, Hosuh didn’t view Stephen as a hunter’s game or as something to be devoured. No, he outright refused to do so - instead, he saw someone beautiful and kind, he saw a tender heart and soul deep within.

And he wanted to get closer to the wonderful being, even as he was holding Stephen in his arms. His heart yearned for more than just physical closeness, it craved both touch and talk alike. He wanted to get to know Stephen better, he wanted to find out all the ways he could best pour his love into him. Humans had a concept for this, he knew it...

There’s a word for it...Dammit, what is it!?....

“Thinking about something Hos?”

What the- Oh. Hosuh noticed that his hands were quivering again - and so was his voice when he answered on cue.

“Um… yeah, it’s…”

“It’s... what?” Stephen’s arms shifted on his back until both made a loose ring around his shoulders. He slowly leaned back, with Hosuh taking the cue to unbury his face. Stephen had a fair blush of his face and a tender smile - all the while paired with a sweet voice that pulled at his heart.

“Not even magic can read minds, Hos. Or, at least, I’ll be damned if I see somebody pull it off.”

“Magic ?” Hosuh didn’t know the concept- but that’d be a question for later. Other matters were more on his mind. He shook his head, loosening his hold to mimic the thief’s and leaning back.

“Er- let’s save that for later. There’s something else on my mind. A word…”

“Mmm - can you tell me anyth-”

Stephen hummed in curiosity, but before he could fully respond, Hosuh’s fingers were tapping on his shoulder blades in contemplation.
“Ah… What is it- what do humans call it? I know there’s some word that’s used to describe what I’m thinking…”

Hosuh slowly and hesitantly let go of Stephen before bringing a hand to his jaw. Stephen patted his back before following suit, leaning back and staring at Hosuh’s focused face. Even his eyes trailed off, he still tried to figure out the word he was looking for…

After an uncertain amount of seconds lost to gazing into nothingness, Hosuh let out an exclamatory hum. His eyes and ears perked up at the recollection- however, they fell a moment later when he realized he had to actually speak in order to communicate his thoughts.

Meanwhile, Stephen had found the sight and sound adorable- it wasn’t until Hosuh’s face grew nervous that he grew flustered. This was only intensified as his body leaned back, trying to escape the source of the emotion only to be met with a thick mound adorned with scales. He found solidarity in the feeling and position, even as it continued to make his heart race.

This ordeal lasted for what felt like tortuously slow minutes. With both of their faces already painted red and the decision that something needed to change, the thief decided to prompt things along. Among many other things, curiosity was gnawing at his head.

“You got it? Then what’s the thing you’re thinking of?”

“Erm…” Hosuh looked away from him, which struck Stephen as particularly odd. Those colorful eyes had been practically glued to him ever since he was thrown down here - why was he growing so bashful now, when he was just trying to spit out a word? He kept his gaze on the snake, a silent nudging for him to speak when ready.

They lingered like this for a few moments with nothing more than a couple mumbles in the air. Taking in a breath, silver-haired broke the silence with a slight quiver and a notable enthusiasm and excitement in his voice.

“ You, I want--...Want you as-- uh.. with me, as a....”

Hosuh paused for a moment, seeing how he was tumbling over his tongue. Taking a quick but deep breath in, he spoke with a boldness in his tone.

“ Stephen, I want you as my mate.”

Chapter End Notes

*drops mic with that intentional cut-off*

Please leave any and all screams down in the comments- I’d love to hear them~
What Do You Mean?

Chapter Summary

It can be so easy to say the wrong things, regardless of whether you mean to or not. What confusion it can cause, oh such stirring chaos...To speak or not to speak, to take action or inaction - what a situation...

Chapter Notes

Heya! My apologies for the long wait again. Darn other factors in life - college has been a big roadblock for writing lately. Same goes with a bit of...well, I've been in a bit of a rut, not sure of how to approach getting these two idiots's affection for one another. But hey - guess that just happens when you're as much of an overthinking dumbass as they are, right? ( *Sigh*, ah well... At least I have much better plans for most of the rest of the story, at least.)

Umm... I hope yall like the way I took things this time - enjoy!
Also, turns out I went waaay overboard again in word count- about 7.2K! But hey - I think I finally got things to a satisfying cut-off point... Yeah <3

Oh, by the way- I'll meet yall in the End Notes, I've got a little more I'd like to mention. Some stuff I'd had in my head during the past couple weeks o o p.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Stephen, I want you as my mate.”

Silence. That’s what lingered in the air between the two, that’s what saturated the air of the cavern. Yet, even without a sole whisper or sound to shake him, things were ever-so loud to Stephen at that moment. With just a few simple words, wires snapped and sparks flew in his mind, filling his imagination with the sights and sounds of a turbulent thunderstorm.

His brain was akin to a guillotine’s victim with a blindfold tied tight around their head- a building tension to discover something unknown, the loud crash of a great cleaving force, then the coming of an all-consuming silence. He had lost his head in the blink of an instant. Perhaps, in a way, such a fate might be better than the situation he had at hand.

Silence, such a voluminous noiselessness overtook the rogue as his mind swished and swayed like a rolling sea.

Holy fuck, holy...did- did I even hear him right? Did he- j-just say-? He...is this a joke? Is he just messing with me? He’s gotta be...

Violet pools blown wide tilted up to the serpent’s face, and were met with a show of saffron that swirled as if they were in spinning water. But with the setting of his eyes and grey brows, the
pinkness intensifying on his face and his overall expression, Stephen couldn’t pick up any intent of a trick.

Oh, who am I kidding - I’d only be fooling myself. He was speaking clearly... Oh god, a...mate...? Not a partner, not a boyfriend, not a date, but a mate, for fuck’s sake! And the way he said it, he phrased it as specifically me, not just anyone...Referring to me...as his... Holy hell - but why me, though? I... God, this is a lot to process...

His eyes and brain unfocused, Stephen tried to scooch himself backwards, hoping that a little more space would help ease his mind. He forgot to consider the tall mound of scales against the base of his back, and ended up shoving himself flush against it. A wave of fiery chills shot through his body at the contact, the flush on his face deepening at the feeling of raw muscle against his spine. Neither his clothes nor Hosuh’s scales did much to shield him from the feeling.

Hours prior, his whole body had been wrapped up in the lengthy tail, and he felt the immense force it could exert. Before, he felt terrified of that deadly force - and for easily justifiable reason, as he was made the prey of a monstrous hunt. Now, however, he felt something illogical and near-nonsensical - he felt a degree of fascination, excitement, exhilaration, anticipation. But all of it still had a nervous, slightly fearful edge to it, so in the end, the best word to describe what he was experiencing would be thrill.

Despite the irrationality on the surface of the feeling, there was some sense to it deeper down. No words or actions would be needed for Stephen to know Hosuh could be dangerous if he wanted to be. It was like a fascination with the sharp, silver gleam of a blade, it was like playing with fire. Ultimately, It was the glorious tango with something dangerous that Stephen loved, it was the feeling that would satiate a curiosity and hunger within him and guide him throughout his days.

He’d been a thrill-seeker all his life. Even as a child, he would call his younger brother along and they would play together in forests at dusk. Part of it was fueled by the youthful joy of rebelliously disregarding others’ warnings, and another was just the fun of being with his brother of blood, heart and soul alike. But it was those rendezvous in the woods that were some of the first things to fan the spark of his thrill. He sought to satiate this hunger more and more as he grew, spending the later part of his childhood running through his old hometown’s markets and nabbing morsels of meat and pastry treats with his sibling and a few old friends.

Both he and his brother had rebellion in their hearts, a trait that lingered from childhood, through adolescence and further onwards. Perhaps that was one of the reasons their parents gave them up and gave them away to live like slaves on an aristocrat’s wheat fields - when the tide of royal tax came, the gold they had was not enough, and so they were the ones who had to pay the price. But even with their hearts burdened by confusion and a sense of being betrayed, even as they were first being taken away by a forgotten king’s men, the brothers both knew they wouldn’t stand for a life of servitude. Thus, it wasn’t long before the young teenagers crafted up a plan and escaped the farming complex in the dead of twilight. They ran and ran, but they always had each other’s backs as they ran together. Life on the run was tough, but they found comfort in one another as they scratched by. Even when working odd jobs for temporary amounts of time, they both held strong, finding a sense of togetherness and peace through the thrill of the thieving life. Whether they had to turn to it out of survivalist necessity or psychological need, they found joy in the eye of their stormy lives.

Stephen, the eldest of the brothers, also held the greatest sense of ambition. Intertwined with his impulsive streak, it led to the violet spearheading higher and higher-stakes heists as they traveled from town to town. For a while, this was fun for the both of them - but eventually, the sapphire sibling needed a long rest. While he had great ambition and pride himself, he was more hesitant
about risks than Stephen. The years had taken a toll on his mind and heart, eventually reaching the point where his whole demeanor had taken an anxious turn. It took time for the violet to recognize and come to terms with the pain he saw, but when he processed it, he was the one to suggest that the pair split for a while. He cared deeply for his brother, wanting the best for him then as much as he always had. Before parting ways, they swore to always remember one another, sealing the oath by buying symbols for one another with stolen gold. They were both hopeful souls, convinced and happily mentioned how they’d see each other again someday. Even if they had no plan, it didn’t bother them much - they never had any long-term plans for life anyways, pulled along by fate and their own whims alike. They had a feeling that, just as the whirlwinds of life were sending them separate ways, the turbulence would eventually change directions and reunite them, that the winds would let them to fly back to one another on wings of purple and blue.

Once on his own, his adventures in the name of thrill-seeking only increased in intensity. Since he usually traveled as a solitary unit, it was easier to take missions in a ‘hit and run’ style. Travelling solo also made it easier to convince fellow thieves to let him assist on heists. The past few years for him had been immensely fun, often teaming with other solo thieves or entire criminal guilds. Although he could be brash, loud and proud about his work, Stephen was surprisingly talented in his field - a trait which convinced other thieves to pull through in splitting the bounty accordingly. He often acted in unconventional yet clever ways, and he had a sort of scrappiness to his demeanor that had a casual sort of charm to it - he had often been told he was a great player to have in a game of bets. His skill, his traits, his unusual vibrant hair and the fact that he rarely told his name- the combination of it all is what gave him the nickname of the Violet Crow. The name followed him in rumor wherever he traveled, and he took pride and ambition with it - it only fanned the flame of his thrill-hungry heart.

Pride comes before the fall, and Icarus had to fly high in order to fall from the fiery heavens above. His ambitiousness was what formed the plan for his greatest heist, it’s what led him to target the riches of King Daniel himself. It was his craving for thrill that overruled his worries, it was the thing that shouted over the terrified whispers of the horrid punishment known to the kingdom - it's what got him thrown down into the pit of hell in the first place.

And now, his back pressed against the scaly surface of the creature he once found mortifying, the sweet rush of thrill coursed through his veins once again. But among that coveted buzz he knew ever-so well, there was also a sour edge of doubt present in the mix as he both heard and felt his heartbeat in his skull.

I...Is this- fuck...but, something doesn’t seem right...is it possible that he said something he didn’t mean to? Does- does he even know that word means?

“....Stephen?”

The softness of Hosuh’s voice did little to dampen the blow of surprise that shot out when he spoke. Stephen flinched, both arms darting out and open palms landing on blue-grey scales with a tiny yelp. Trying to swallow the heat he felt intensifying on his cheeks, Stephen’s voice came out crackled and high-pitched.

“Y-y-yeah Hos?”

“You look....” Hosuh’s brows furrowed slightly as he tried to think.

“I l-look like...what?”

“Hmm...’afraid’ isn’t quite right...surprised, yes - but there’s something else. And your face... it’s very red. Stephen, are you okay?”
No! Do I look fucking okay, Hosuh?! Stephen would normally just speak his mind in such a way, but he didn’t want to be so brash and rude to Hosuh - he just didn’t have it in him to do it.

Still, Stephen screamed in his mind as he hesitated to speak, eyes wide as he stared back up at the serpent. He hadn’t even realized that Hosuh had moved a bit - how long was I staring?

Hosuh’s torso was leaned forward, his scale-dotted shoulders sticking out from long locks that spilled over the floor. A portion of twin rows of pale scales that ran down Hosuh’s front were rolled out and closer to him, with a pair of darker-toned hands placed atop the protrusion. With his hesitant, yet kind and curious demeanor, the pose was actually quite familiar - it was as if Hosuh was bending on a pair of knees to stare down at him, somewhat like he was greeting a small child or cute animal.

Dammit, it didn’t help the rogue that Hosuh’s face looked so cute like that. Shit, it especially didn’t help that his face was also painted a deep hue of red, a color that also appeared along the tips of his long ears where they poked out of his hair.

“...Stephen?”

“GAH-HAAH!” Stephen shouted and flailed as if an electric current had been hooked up to his body. Hosuh winced slightly at the reaction, and a frown deepened as Stephen piped up in a quick, evasive tone.

“Hi- sorry! I-I’m fine, everything’s all good here, no need to look into it!”

Hosuh let out a small huff, closing his eyes and humming - a detail that caused Stephen’s volume to rise a notch.

“H-Hosuh, I-I’m serious! Things are really okay!”

“Bullshit.”

“W-what?” The curse slipping from Hosuh’s lips sounded so strange, such an unusually harsh word from the gentle soul. It didn’t seem right, none of this did in Stephen’s mind. There’s no way he- he- gah!

The rogue froze at the strength in Hosuh’s gold-dotted gaze. He wasn’t going to back down, he wasn’t going to run- well, slither- away from anything. He was determined, and his stern-faced silence sent another wave of shudders up Stephen’s spine, the rogue’s voice shaking with his frame.

“Hold on- did you even mean to say that?”

The only response Stephen got was another closed-eyed huff.

“Hosuh?...Did ya hear me? Hosu- ah-haah!..”

Stephen’s words withered and died as he felt waves of scales slide against the back of his cloak. The motion took barely more than a second as Hosuh adjusted his tail and rushed forward. He grabbed the rogue’s upper arms, squeezing lightly against the tan cloth of his sleeves as he stared intensely at the half-prone human. His voice was equally strong as he hovered closely, his breath ghosting over Stephen’s sensitive skin.

“I know what I said, and I meant it. You were the one who taught me that word, and you made its meaning clear.”
The violet wasn’t sure if the serpent could feel his frame shaking against his scales. *Probably*, he presumed. Though, oddly enough, he felt the clawed fingers tap against him repeatedly. *Wait, is he shaking too?*

His lips parted slightly, wanting to respond when he was blocked by a brain that couldn’t form words. Saffron particles swirled in Hosuh’s piercing gaze before he closed his eyes, leaning back and sighing. His voice was a bit breathy when he spoke.

“I shouldn’t have brushed it off earlier….”

“Wh….what are you talking about?”

“Your red face. I knew it meant something, and it’s clear now that it’s something important.”

Stephen squeaked in response, but couldn’t collect himself enough to form proper words. After a moment of nervous squeezing, the scaly hands let go of his tan cloak and pulled back to rest atop the serpent’s kneeling. Air rushed out of Stephen’s lungs, the breath he hadn’t even recalled taking escaping him. Hosuh waited for several seconds, but when he was returned with a lack of words, he decided to nudge Stephen along.

“Please, I want to know.”

Fuck! Stephen wasn’t sure what to say - he both loved and despised the notion of telling Hosuh how he felt. Not that he’d even know what words to say, the realization hadn’t had much time to simmer in his brain. Instead of the serpentine, it was now Stephen who was the one lost for words, simply staring at Hosuh with large eyes and parted lips that emitted shy squeaks every now and then.

Hosuh, however, wanted more than that. He wanted words, he wanted answers, and his mind zeroed in on getting them.

“Stephen, I want you to tell me…. I want… you…”

“Wha-ha-haah? Hosuh- Ah!”

Now that he was sure Stephen was no longer afraid of him, and that he was no longer afraid that he’d accidentally hurt him, he figured that using a little more force might do some good. Plus he had already had the consideration in his head for a while by this point anyways - time to finally enact it.

And so, despite the thief’s more prevalent squeaking, Hosuh maneuvered himself once again. The thick section of tail behind Stephen’s back pressed inward, scooching Stephen closer as Hosuh wrapped his arms around Stephen’s shoulders. But Hosuh didn’t stop there, sinking one arm down to the small of his tan-cloaked back and pulling him up the curve of his tail as he sunk down a bit from the kneeling-like pose. Quivering hands grabbed at scale-dotted shoulders as Hosuh rose back up, taking the thief with him.

But the snake wanted the thief to be stable, and so he had recalled a position they had already found themselves in before. Well, that wasn’t his only motivation - after all, the desire to hold the rogue again had been gnawing at the edges of his mind again for many minutes on end. On top of that, Stephen said it was okay to touch him - so why not, right? Hopefully the thought he had in mind would work out. He rather liked the way all the buzzing in his veins had increased when Stephen was atop him, and he found himself intrigued with the way the thief’s face had turned red at that point, too.
Maybe this will do something. Maybe this will make him more comfortable and help him talk to me.

Hosuh dropped his arms from his shoulders, quickly gliding down Stephen’s back before grabbing each of his legs and wrapping them around his waist once again. This time, however, the scoundrel was conscious, and so there was a lot more movement in the confusion - generating a strong shiver that shot up Hosuh’s spine.

The thief nearly shrieked as he tried to spring off Hosuh, who promptly caught him with his clawed hands behind his shoulder blades. A trace of annoyance sinking in, Hosuh’s impulses took charge and his tail slithered once again. Stephen’s back went ramrod straight when he felt the tip of his tail quickly slide over his clothes. It wrapped once around his belly and once around his waist, covering the thin, slightly violet rope he had tied there. He draped the tip of his tail over one of Stephen’s shoulders. The ending couldn’t help but wiggling a bit due to all the electricity in Hosuh’s spine.

Stephen completely froze in his grasp. Although his mind knew full well that Hosuh wouldn’t try to hurt him, his body was still hot-wired from the hunt hours ago. His arms had shot out during the quick motion, and were now slowly drifting down. Stephen barely blinked as his wide eyes stared at Hosuh. The bright red complexion of his skin complimented the warm tones within his vibrant violet hair and eyes well, all aspects of heat playing off of one another for an image Hosuh found himself allured by. He didn’t let the glaze of gold overwhelm his eyes, setting aside the distraction and trying to read into his eyes more. Hosuh could tell something was off, and it didn’t take him long to find it - Stephen’s gaze looked empty, as if he were somewhere else entirely.

In his mind, Stephen might as well have been elsewhere. He was not processing a single element of his surroundings, with all of his focus locked within his own skull.

Oh god, oh god, oh fuck! Uhh, what do I do, I- ‘mate’, mate - did he mean that? Did he? Could he-does he know what he’s doing?

After several seconds in the air, the tiredness in Stephen’s beaten arm muscles waned, causing him to rest them on the coils around his waist. As soon as he touched the grey-blue scales, he couldn’t help but acknowledge the sensations the rest of his body was picking up - which sent his already fluster-broken mind even further into overdrive.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! I- He- did he mean-? Does he actually want to do - that- with me? Ah-hah, I….Woah….

As the tail had quickly slithered around him, the mass grew thicker and thicker - in the end, the loop around his stomach was partially rested on his hip bones as the second loop rose alongside his ribs. Although the force was nothing compared to before, it was still something to consider. Thus, feeling the hefty weight around his body, his mind couldn’t help but drift along certain lines.

Would Hosuh completely wrap him up again if they were to do... things ? He was already partially doing as such anyways. However, there wasn’t really any extra force behind the scales - it seemed like it was just a light hold, not a squeeze. Still, Hosuh wouldn’t exactly need to squeeze to keep him trapped - the weight of his tail alone, at least in its thicker parts, was enough to pin him. The heft should’ve been intimidating to him - and though it was in some ways, he didn’t feel particularly scared. Rather, it was something else, something that stirred the blood in his veins.

Would he- oh god, ah- If we were to… fu-uck,...Would he wrap me up again? How much...all the way? Ah, probably… Fuck….Ah shit- would he squeeze me again? ‘Cause that would be…
None of the ideas coursing through his mind seemed impossible, or even unlikely- and oddly enough, the ideas didn’t feel off-putting to him.

He’d once heard about... that kind of bondage from an old thieving pal of his. Stephen had limited knowledge on the subject, but from the way the other criminal had described one of their experiences with it, it sounded...oddly fascinating. It would add an interesting wrench into the situation, having some or all of one’s movement be restricted - that, combined with the pressure of whatever would be used as a tie… It all had a way of hooking into Stephen’s mind and surging through his veins, in many ways it was like a drug.

On top of all that, there was another factor in the mix as well - the fueler of many other things in his life, his lust for thrill. To give up one’s control to a partner was a fascinating concept. After all, even when one is told what another person will do to them and when it will happen, it’s still impossible to predict the exact fraction of the moment when things will happen, when something would touch or break the surface of one’s own skin. To lack the ability to fight back was another concept in the mix, and it had quite exhilaration to it. A break from the norm, a fight against the ties that would bind a person and the utter thrill of being unable to escape - and the fact that escape wouldn’t even be wanted even if it were possible, oh what a feeling...

The bite of the bonds was something to consider as well, the buzzing tingle of light pain has a strange way of being pleasurable. Even the sting of another person’s teeth on one’s skin could be a delicious sensation for both involved - no wonder why people have such a habit of adorning one another in love bites and bruises, it’s both a lasting declaration of love and a reminder of passionate feeling.

Teeth… Stephen knew Hosuh’s mouth was filled with sharp spikes, sharper than even a human’s pointed canines. He’d not only seen them, but he’d felt them too….Despite his usually skeptical nature, he felt pretty sure that Hosuh wouldn’t actually hurt him, or at least not in any intentionally malicious way. Still, the idea of willingly letting him run his teeth over his flesh, the thought of the tingling lines they’d leave - and that’s without even considering his long, forked tongue. He knew the whole situation would make his blood course through his body and make his skin tingle….

Normally appearing so confident, the thief fell victim to irony and was rendered into bashful excitement and shyness alike from the ideas bouncing in his skull. Normally so vigilant, his unaware perception was completely shocked and swept up when Hosuh spoke once again.

“...phen?...Stephen?”

Fuck. Barely catching the repetition of his name, it became clear that Hosuh had been repeating his name. How long-? Nevermind, screw it.

He knew he had to get back on track with the real world - however, his brain was in shambles, his focus scattered, his mind overwhelmed, his heart racing and his body coursing his blood to-

“Stephen, what’s.. happening?”

You tell me, Hosuh! Y-you’re the one causing all this! So why the hell are you...looking...

His muscles tensed as he finally looked past his impulsive thoughts and saw where Hosuh’s eyes were pointed - downwards, towards him, towards…

...Fuck.

He had felt electricity buzz and course throughout his body, including to that region. In retrospect,
he would be surprised it hadn’t happened sooner - but for now, he could only curse himself for the evidence before them. It made everything worse in how he could feel the hefty mass that draped over his hip bones - at the very least, there was an inch left to god between him and Hosuh’s lower belly.

His entire body felt stiff at the realization, and remained as so due to something in Hosuh’s gaze. It was obvious he was curious, but was that all there was to the glint Stephen perceived in his eyes?

“Ah-hah, Hosuh, I…..” Stephen could hardly speak, his voice riddled with nervous chuckling. But even this was quick to die in a wave of sputtering as he noticed one of Hosuh’s hands drifting, fingers bending in a curious fashion. A single finger out with the rest gently curled in, as if he wanted to poke at something. Stephen silently hoped Hosuh wasn’t thinking of touching him there at the moment - like he needed to be more overwhelmed than he was at the moment.

Stephen’s hunch did have some evidence, given the tingling pricks Hosuh could feel in his cheeks - however, there wasn’t as much of an ulterior motive as he suspected, curiosity being by far the most dominant force at the moment. Hosuh was aware of what human forms looked like, and he knew the differences between masculine and feminine, even with cloth covering their frames. So, he wasn’t unfamiliar with the male body part before him - rather, it was what it was doing that was confusing. He’d never seen that happen before - those parts were usually as limp and floppy as the rest of each body he’d dealt with. So why was the one in front of him suddenly so... hard? He was genuinely curious.

And so, he failed Stephen’s silent hopes. The rogue responded in lieu of his fluster, loudly stammering at the first slow fraction of movement from the claw-tipped hand.

“W-wait, you don’t need to do that! I-I can explain!”

Stephen’s body buzzed and burned as Hosuh spoke innocently, as if he were completely oblivious to what was going on.

“Huh? I wasn’t going to do much. Just touch you. Is… is that wrong?”

“Uh… y-yeah…” Stephen sat in his own blaze, not realizing that he mumbled out his next thought.

“N-not right now at least…”

Hosuh stayed still, a near inaudible hum behind his lips as he wondered what made touching Stephen okay later, but not at the moment. An anticipation started to simmer in his mind, although he wasn’t sure why. But there was a sour edge to it - should he completely let Stephen go? He wasn’t resisting the hold on his tail… Does he not want to be touched at all? But he said it was okay to do so….

Looking slightly aside, Hosuh started uncoiling his tail from Stephen’s body - the shaky yelp that escaped the rogue’s mouth at the first fraction of movement came as a surprise to both males. Hosuh’s reaction was a quick jolt of uncoiling that didn’t move much - Stephen’s reaction was another odd sound and a wave of his arms. It didn’t sound like he was pained, not entirely at least - he’d probably be pushing against his tail if he were. And yet his hands rested after they suddenly flying there a second prior.

Why did he... Hosuh’s eyes flicked back down, and he took a note of something - as he moved around the human’s belly, he could feel something besides the warm clothes he wore. It felt as if he had rubbed up against a rod-shaped rock on the other side of his tail. Is- is that it? But why-?
“Ah-h-! Hosuh wait- S-stop!”

“What? You… didn’t you just say touching you was wrong?”

“I- that’s not what I meant!”

“Then what did you mean?”

Hosuh’s gazed pierced into Stephen for a silent moment of tensity - although, it was as fleeting as its arrival, as Hosuh continued his thoughts after a single slow-moving second.

“...And why did-”

“I j-just meant- d-don’t touch me right there!”

“Okay, I won’t... So is the rest of... this fine?” He loosely gestured to the scales wrapped around his waist.

“Ah, that! Y-yeah, totally!”

“Alright... Are you sure I shouldn’t…” His initiative beginning to die with the interruptions, he decided to communicate with a gesture. He started shifting his tail, gently squeezing the rogue in the process- the movement was so light, thought, so he didn’t understand why Stephen’s voice jumped even more.

“Nope! T-this is fine, this works, th-this is good!”

Hosuh let out a small pouting noise as he doubted Stephen’s words. Even though he knew little on the subject of lying, he could still sense that the rogue’s true intentions were not being relayed in his words.

Or rather, something along those lines anyways. In reality, he was far from certain about the specifics - he just knew something was misaligned between his words, his body language, and his intent. It was just a gut feeling - and so, having been guided by such notions for a significant amount of his life, he once again acted in a way he’d deem as ‘just feeling right to do’.

“Do you really-”

“Yes!”

“Stephen I didn’t even finish-”

“Don’t need to - cause you d-don’t need to worry about this!”

“I- Stephen, I wasn’t… wasn’t greatly worried or anything. I just-”

“Y’Sure Hos? ‘Cause your f-face is red too.”

“Wh-” When did that happen? I… damn that buzzing, why does it have to come back now?...Especially when Stephen’s acting… what was the word?

Hosuh took a breath, collecting his thoughts before talking again. “That doesn’t matter right now. What matters-”

“No, Hosuh - you’re probably nervous or s-something. Yet there’s nothing to worry about!”
I'm really not feeling any of what he’s describing....He’s acting like-

“Really!”

_Idiot_ ...like an idiot. There’s the word.

On the outside, Hosuh simply closed his eyes and sighed. But in his head, he continued pondering the mismatch Stephen was displaying.

*Why is he acting like this, though? What’s causing it? Nothing comes from nothing... Hmm...Why’s he trying to say I’m nervous, when I’m....not....*

Hosuh focused on his own body, and could feel how the buzzing tingle in his veins was causing the tips of his fingers and tail to shake ever-so slightly.

...okay, not very nervous....So where’s the idea even coming from?

“Y-you can stay as you are... you d-don’t need to do anything..”

*What-? Ah, right. Well, he can deal with my face. He won’t really let me talk, he keeps stopping me- so let me think, dammit...*

Hosuh kept inside his head, only flicking his eyes up to Stephen as he slowly and unconsciously began to raise a hand towards his chin.

*Now where are his ideas coming from? Nothing comes from nothing, so this nervousness, it had to come from somewhere.... Wait, does that mean that he’s feeling it?...That...feels oddly right....*

....But that’s another question, too- when did all this start? Nervousness comes from something, somewhere...on top of that, he was pretty calm not long ago...Oh right! All this, it started when I asked him-

“H-hosuh?”

“Sss!”

The snake’s normally ambient blood was starting to heat up with his frustration. Anger wasn’t something he felt much - so even though it wasn’t a high degree of rage, he still let out a small hiss at him. Seriously, why’d he have to interrupt right when he was onto something?

Stephen flinched at the change in mood and the gold specks in the slit eyes, his tongue swiping over his lips in an unnoticed wave of anxiety before he babbled on quickly in a flurry of his own nerves and stupidity.

“Y’know maybe you’re right, maybe you shouldn’t t-touch me right now! I m-mean, you can, but y’know- maybe it isn’t the best idea? M-maybe you just didn’t mean what you said, and you are actually nervous or stressed or something. Doesn’t that make sense Hos--AH!”

Stephen barely had time to yell as Hosuh’s bubbling irritation caused him to act. Like any other serpent, striking was just as natural as sticking out his forked tongue to detect the air before him. Strikes are often used for taking down prey, but it’s also used to protect or intimidate, usually in stressful situations.

Stress just like the frustration in Hosuh’s head.
So, with a hiss in the air, he lunged forward before he could really think. Muscles tensed around Stephen’s waist as he grabbed for the source of his annoyance - that stupidly pretty mouth the thief possessed. Hosuh’s dark claws flanked near each open eye, the base of his palms pushing up against the bone of his jaw as he yanked the purple-crowned skull forward a bit. As with every serpentine strike, Hosuh was primed to try and land a bite. His jaw open and the target so close, he easily could’ve - but he managed to stop himself, if only barley.

Although, the situation in which the duo found themselves was arguably just as bad as a bite in its own way.

Instead of biting Stephen, Hosuh had snapped his jaw closed just in front of him. Due to his momentum, though, he couldn’t have stopped himself from continuing to move forwards - and so, he found himself face-to-face with the conundrum. To make matters worse, Stephen was the second to close his jaw, doing so with subpar reaction time.

And so, the result of the microsecond mess was Stephen accidentally taking Hosuh’s lips with his own. But it was nothing like a graceful kiss - in a twist of circumstance, it looked a lot more like Stephen was the one trying to devour the other, not the reverse.

With a high squeak, the thief tried to pull his head back, but Hosuh’s hands had already taken him. His instincts were still a powerful force that he only barely managed to stop - thus, his body was determined to keep a hold on his jaw, his grip tightening without conscious command. Stephen’s own instincts came to play as well, trying to close his jaw again and only managing to press his mouth around Hosuh’s with a bit of pressure.

However, none of this lasted for long. Both of their conscious minds were quick to catch up fully. With squeaks from both flustered souls, Hosuh’s hands flew from Stephen’s face, and he sprung again from his lap - although, this only resulted in him getting further tangled up in his tail.

Before, there had been a thick loop the two had sat upon, a coil that transitioned up to the bindings that had been on Stephen’s waist. With the shocking jolt and the feeling of Stephen falling backwards against him, though, Hosuh couldn’t help but move. When his spine hit the thick ring, it moved aside just enough to loosely wrap around him and over his sprawled-out legs. Although he wasn’t applying any conscious pressure, the weight of the muscle alone was enough to get the rogue to squirm as he was pinned to the ground, locked in place from the spiral up his torso.

Stephen grabbed at the ring of tail over his hips, attempting to get it off or, at the very least, lift it up enough so it wasn’t rubbing against a certain sensitive spot. His chest heaved as he hyperventilated, panicking with little thought and a lot of confusion and flustered uncertainty. He felt flattered, he felt embarrassed. He felt unsure, he felt curious. Excited yet doubting, nervous but tempted, all originating from just a single word uttered from Hosuh’s maw.

In those moments, Hosuh was feeling much of the same feelings as his counterpart, his face painted a vibrant red like the stammering human before him. Sparks surged through his veins, both from the sight and from the feelings the thief’s squirming that spawned when he rubbed against his tail.

But once again he set those feelings aside - Stephen’s current state in trying to detangle himself from him only proved Hosuh’s hunch that he was the nervous one, not himself. To him, it was settled - for humans, a flushed face meant nervousness. He felt pretty assured in the judgement, seeing the clear evidence before him. He then wanted to help alleviate the panic before him - the sight pricked at his heart like pins, for he’d only seen Stephen that disheveled during the hunt. He really did only mean well for the other.
Stephen yelped when he felt the scales slide over his body once again, but then felt a secret, small wave of relief when he saw that it was retreating from him, not coiling hard once again. It was like a minor consultation to him, a means by which he could finally start to catch his breath - well, after he stopped moving over his sensitive body, of course. When the tail was off his body and curled on the floor before him, he let out the breath he had been holding in, closing his eyes and draping one of his arms over the mass at his back, half-hugging the mound. Despite his panic, he did mean what he said when he was okay with Hosuh touching him - in reality he rather liked it, but he’d be damned to say it out loud, at least right now.

The two sat in standstill, hearts pounding in their own ears and blood racing on their faces as fluttering feelings made it nigh-impossible to look the other in the eye. But, after long seconds that seemed to dry up too soon, Hosuh was the first to speak, wanting final assurance on his judgments.

“Did...did moving help?”

“I...Kind of, yeah…”

“...You were nervous before, right?”

“I- I mean yes but- but really, it wasn’t too bad. Nothing you should be concerned about.”

Without realizing, Stephen mumbled out his inner thoughts.

“I mean, I still am but...less so...”

Hosuh paused, only a quiet hum shaking his vocal chords before he heard Stephen again, a barley aware mumble on his soft lips.

“Ah, this is pretty comfy....”

Hosuh blushed and smiled at the sweet statement, his blue eyes examining Stephen’s face and form - he seemed to be curling in and melting upon the mound at his back, his legs extended and his boots gently poking at the spool of thinner tail before him. But despite the gentle relaxation he was seeing, there were still cracks in the image - Stephen’s tense hands, his darting eyes that refused to meet his gaze, and those perplexing things of his blush and his hardness. Why were they still here? Something about it felt off to Hosuh, and he felt comfortable enough to say something about it, silently hoping Stephen wouldn’t rile up and interrupt him again.

“...Hey, Stephen?”

“Yeah?”

“Is it okay if I ask a question about humans?”

One of Stephen’s brows rose at the question, but he still nodded as he leaned on his tail.

“Your...redness - it means you’re nervous, right?”

Stephen squeaked a bit before speaking. “I-I mean it can…”

Hosuh paused, processing his answer. “It...can? So… can it mean many things?”

Stephen nodded, flinching slightly as he recalled something. “Hey Hos - remember the last time you asked me about the whole red-faced thing?”

Hosuh nodded, and so Stephen continued. “Yeah, well...I had been crying when you asked that, so
I’m sure my face was all red then too.”

Hosuh nodded again, humming before he asked another question. “Then...why is your face still like that now?”

Stephen had been hoping he wouldn’t point that out. “Oh, that? Ah, well….”

The rogue quickly rummaged through his brain for a distractor, and he found a fitting one - but before he fully realized the potential double-edge it could pose, he was already talking.

“Hey, you don’t seem to have any word for this.” He gestured to his own face. “It’s called ‘blush’. I’m pretty sure its shorthand for ‘blood rush’? Something like that.”

“...Blood rush? Short-hand?”

“Blood moving around - and a quick, simple way to say something. Sorry about that, shouldn’t have assumed you knew what that meant. My bad.”

Stephen chuckled a bit, Hosuh nodding and smiling alongside him. Stephen’s boot tapped again at his tail, and it got Hosuh thinking - he was told that touching him was both okay and not okay at pretty much the same time. What did he actually mean? What does he actually want?

In truth, the rogue’s poking was actually an attempt to pry under the tail and get Hosuh to drape it over his ankles. He felt shy about it, but he could no longer shake the wanting to touch and be touched at this point. Thoughts and feelings had been swirling, and they were reaching a tipping point. A part of him was growing strained - enough indecision, it’d be better to just cut to the chase! Besides - both question and rejection both hurt anyways, so why not get further along in the healing process?

And so, Stephen broke the silent pause, no longer willing to be left to stew in wild confusion, no longer willing to stay in the iron pot Hosuh had unknowingly cast him into ever since he spoke that one perplexing word.

“Hey Hos, ah…” His boldness was already starting to fade, but he preserved through a well-used method - coming up with some bullshit.

“Y’know, words are quite the funny subject. How can two people talk when neither knows what the other is trying to say? It’s quite the thought, right?”

Stephen chuckled as Hosuh stared, lightly nodding with a perplexed look on his face. It looked like he was really pondering the question.

“Yeah, um….Sorry, I didn’t mean for you to think so hard about that- just wanted to make some conversation, yknow?”

“Hm?” Hosuh flinched with a genuinely questioning look. Stephen’s breath fluttered at the cute expression as he jumped in to fill the gap.

“Er, I guess you’re wondering why I even asked then, right? It’s just a little something people do, it was a rhetorical question - er, asking a question without expecting others to answer. It’s actually a bad idea to provide answers to ‘em, it just makes the mood awkward…”

Hosuh’s brow furrowed as Stephen looked at his scales, passively tracing over them with his fingers. A few seconds of silence, thought and nervousness, then the serpent spoke.
“..Then why ask them at all? It seems...like it does nothing…”

“Well...I mean, yeah, that’s a fair judgement, but...There actually is a purpose to that sort of thing - many purposes, actually. I mean, the question got us on a bit of a new topic, right?”

“Oh…” Hosuh’s ears perked, he hadn’t thought that’d be a possibility.

“Yeah, um... I just wanted to bring up the subject.... there’s something I wanted to ask along those lines, that’s what I was getting at.”

“Oh? What is it?”

With heartfelt hesitance, he spat out the question pounding in his head, the question he couldn’t take to deliberate upon any longer in search for the answer he needed to know, the answer that would clarify the boiling beneath his skin.

“Wh-when you s-said....when you asked me to be your...your mate... I uh.... Gah!”

Stephen sputtered for a moment, stirring both a sight of cuteness and distress in Hosuh’s eyes - he then took a deep breath in, blurting out his point with heightened volume and heartbeat.

“Did you mean it?”

Chapter End Notes

So I mentioned I had some ideas in my head over the past couple weeks... Two things really come to mind to say to yall here. First is a little computer pet thing- I actually made one for Hosuh! I had the project in the works for about 2 months, and I finally finished it the other day! So yeah- hop over to my instagram, it's @despacit_oof and check it out! I put a bunch of effort into getting things to look right. Who knows, I may have even snuck in an easter egg or two~

And here's the other thing.... How would y'all feel about merch based on the story? Like....what if I made some designs for things like.. stickers, sketchbooks, prints - things like that? I...funny enough, I actually made a RedBubble on that thinking....it just needs some designs - so, would yall be interested in things like that? And just VCST art in general - would y'all like to see more of that kind of thing? Please, let me know.

(Please note - I wouldn't be able to make merch of Stephen or Gavin due to thier merch policy... but Hosuh, Dan, Elias, Jay....everyone else should be fair game! (plus also s y m b o l i c representation might be possible, mabye? Idk.)

Well... until next time, everybody! I'll try my best to be faster next time...sorry I can't guarantee anything
Plan B

Chapter Summary

What has Hosuh been thinking?

Chapter Notes

Yo - sorry my ass is late, writing out this bit of the story has been real difficult. Plus some life responsibilities have slowed down stuff too. I feel like a more realistic deadline at this point would be to try for one chapter a week, but... Hey, I have been and will continue to get these chapters out as timely as I can.

Also of course my ass overwrote again, so yall get 5k instead of 4k, oop

Hope y'all enjoy the shenanigans~

“Hosuh, I, erm... Did you mean it?”

The thief’s near-yell bounced on the cavern walls in echoes.

Hosuh nodded without hesitation, his head shaking in tempo with Stephen’s quickening pulse. Even though that was the answer the rogue suspected to be true, it was difficult to let the information really sink in. Maybe he needed a bit more insight as to what Hosuh meant to help guide him out of the cesspool of chaos in his head - and so, with quivering form and a flustered, shaking head, he shot out the request for such clarity.

“W-wait- what did you mean with that word?”

Hosuh’s eyes widened a bit as flecks of gold shimmered. He turned his head to one side, questioning the man before him.

“Isn’t it clear? I thought that was the word humans use for it...”

“I-...I-!” Stephen stammered, his faded blush coming back as he retracted his legs, curling them towards his form a bit in hopes to hide himself a bit better. He took a quick breath inwards, gently hugging his knees with one arm as he spoke.

“It’s one word that can be used, I suppose... But Hosuh, please - I want you to just tell me what ‘it’ means. Say it out loud, say it clear, I just want to know!”

Hosuh let out a hum, at first calm but quickly shifting to a shy coo. He really thought he was being clear with what he meant, and he struggled to find other words to describe his intent. But, after seconds of humming and hawing, he started talking once again.

“...Sorry, I’m not really sure how to describe it... It’s something humans do with one another, something really good, I think...”
Stephen squeaked and shifted in place at the serpent’s choice of words. *Something people do? Goddammit Hosuh, just- gah! Just tell me you want to-

“It’s usually done with two, though I guess...maybe more could be involved? I’m not sure…”

*Ah-haaaah, Hosuh! Get on with it, get on with-

“I...I guess another word for it could be... ‘pair-bond’, I think?” Hosuh’s voice raised, his uncertainty obvious in his flushed face and retracted hands.

Meanwhile, the rogue’s eyes went wide. *Wait a second- does he not mean-?

“Something like that... It’s a word used when humans- no, *people*, sorry. When people *want* to spend time with one another, when they *want* to be...be together...”

Hosuh raised one of his hands and stroked the back of his own head, his fluster radiating in his form, yet somehow failing to taint the softness of his voice. Stephen gradually uncurled at the sweet tone, yet he still had a lingering pin in his head - *could his intentions really be that pure?*

“Yeah...when they want to just... draw together, work together, play together...”

Hosuh’s voice trailed for a moment, his eyes scrunching a bit before he continued his train of thought.

“... *sing* together...” He paused again. “Just.. being, surviving, *living* together! It doesn’t even really have to be very... showy, I guess. It's just... *wanting*, and wanting to be together....”

Stephen felt his chest flutter at Hosuh’s purity, even through the sting of his malignant doubt. He still questioned if all this softness was all there was to Hosuh - he used the word ‘mate’, for crying out loud. But the way he was elaborating his meaning, it didn’t match up. With that inconsistency, a thought strayed over to the rogue’s mind.

*I don’t think he knows the right word for it. I...Oh god, I think...Could he be trying to describe-?

“I-...I want to hold you, I want to touch you, I-I-”

Stephen’s growing nerves made him more short-fused than usual, so he quipped in without thought or hesitation before the snake could finish once again.

“Yes, Hosuh- we’ve already been doing that kind of thing - do you not realize that or something?”

“Well...No- yes? I-...I recognize that...I guess I mean-”

“Meant what, Hosuh? Cut to the chase, get to the point! Just say it!”

Stephen felt himself getting deeply embarrassed. To think Hosuh wanted to do... *things* with him, that was one thing - but to think that he genuinely feels for him? That was a beast of its own, a monster Stephen didn’t know how to deal with. Although he wasn’t virgin to it, most wouldn’t consider him experienced in the art of the heart. And this included himself, his inexperience only adding to his feeling of incompetence.

“God, what have we been doing this whole time...”

Stephen muttered out his thoughts, only half-aware of the movements of his mouth.

*“Why have we been doing this song and dance? Why didn’t I get it sooner...”*
Hosuh went quiet, uncertain of what to say - he just didn’t have the right words. But he had the ability to act, so he hoped his actions were acceptable as he slowly leaned forward and reached out a blue hand towards the thief, shifting his tail to move his body a bit closer. He stumbled over his words, his voice soft and his heart timid and optimistic.

“Stephen, I...I don’t know what you may or may not be getting, but...but I know...I...”

Rich violet eyes pierced into Hosuh’s form, Stephen’s form slightly bunched up from flinching. He was high-strung, he was antsy, he was an uncertain mess trying to comprehend the notion of true warmth being thrown his way.

And yet, although Hosuh sensed his apprehension, he didn’t see it as a flaw - just as a fear that he could work to soothe. With time and effort, he was able to get Stephen to be comfortable with much of his behavior and touch - and that was in the span of hours, starting upon a base of mortal fear and horrendous pain. So he could tame this demon too… right?

That was the direction his soul guided him, and that’s the reason he took to spell out tender words with a true heart.

“I know I want to be together with you. I know I want to be yours, I…”

The nervous human’s heart rate rose to a roaring crescendo….

“I want to be yours, and I want you to be mine- just...us, together.”

...and then it skipped beat after beat, awestruck by the truth before him. There was no lie in Hosuh’s tone, and only gentleness in the hand that he lightly placed on his shoulder. He was astounded, the wind taken from his lungs and the thought taken from his head. Had he been on his feet, he’d be bound to fall, knocked off by the confirmation in Hosuh’s...well, everything.

Fuck....He...Oh god, he really--

“We’d be mates, mine and yours...But there has to be another word for it...Wait- Oh, I think I know! We could be partners!”

...What?

That’s...that’s not what he expected to hear. And yet, Hosuh just kept talking, his pace getting subtly faster and more flustered with the same sentiments echoing in his grip on his shoulder.

“You’d be my partner...I mean, at least for a little while. I honestly hope things wouldn’t have to end soon, or... end at all, really... ”

Hosuh... The tail end of his words were barely muttered out, hardly audible sounds that the thief still picked up on.

The serpent shook his head a bit, stray stands flying around before his volume reappeared and a glint of hope gleamed in his eyes.

“Come with me! We’d get out of here, out of this terrible place! Let's...we’d leave the graves to rest...”

He leaned back, letting go of his counterpart and looking over to the wall of faces, the horrid menagerie on the sand-colored stone. A feeling of hollowness and guilt started to creep in, the weight of all the things he’d been forced by desperation and famine’s curse falling upon him.
“Let’s get out of this place of horrible death…”

Despite everything, there was a spark of joy amongst the unrighteously, unjustly damned souls - the smiling faces of Stephen and himself on adjacent stones, happy and somehow so alive amongst the graveyard. How paradoxical it was, how beautiful the utter duality was, the contrast emphasizing the sheer radiance and persistence of life even in the void itself.

That spark is what allowed him to shed the shadows sapping at his soul and regain boldness in his words, excitement about long-dreamt thoughts evident in his voice.

“I mean, we’ve got a way to escape now! The wall…” With his other hand, Hosuh pointed to the corner where two of the waving cave walls met. Stephen shifted where he sat and turned his head, seeing a pile of rocks where solid stone should’ve been present, a heap next to where he tried to make a kind gift for Hosuh in crimson strokes.

Odd… I mean, even mountains wither eventually, so I guess it makes sense…

The counterpart of the drawing spoke in a quiet, awed tone.

“…I don’t know why, but look - it fell apart when I touched it a few days ago..”

_Huh, must’ve been really close to crumbling then...Wait- a few _days_ ago?_ Something about that statement didn’t feel right. Although it was likely factually accurate, the implications it might’ve been implying towards were unsavory.

At the very least, before he had time to elaborate on the notion, Hosuh was already talking once again.

“We can get out of here, you and me. We’d start a new life on the surface, in that brighter world…”

Stephen huddled a bit closer to himself as his realization grew overshadowed when the serpent turned shy, scratching the back of his own skull and looking at a sketch-laden wall to the duo’s side.

“I mean, I hope it’s brighter and better out there…”

He seemed to stew in his own head for a few moments, looking up to the cold iron grate that split apart the moonbeams casting down over them. Just like still ponds, Stephen could see the stars above reflected in the blue pools of his eyes. He adjusted the collar of the black shirt he wore beneath his cloak, the turtleneck of it seeming to have turned a bit tight. Or maybe it was just his own nerves. He didn’t have time to think about it, too awed by the hopeful beauty before him, a beauty that turned his head back down to face him with an almost childlike curiosity in his eyes, barley a breath away. _God he’s close…_

“You’d know what’s up there better than I would, right?”

Stephen nervously nodded, subconsciously leaning his head back a bit. Hosuh gave a small nod of his own in response with a faint mumble on his lips, pulling away slightly without realizing it.

_“I had a feeling you would…”_

Hosuh’s voice gained a bit of volume, as if he hadn’t realized he was speaking before.

“Then we could survive pretty well out there...Er, at the very least, you could help me get my
bearings out there, right?”

Although the question seemed rhetorical due to the fact that anyone who’d be sent down to the hell-pit would know the world better than Hosuh, Stephen recalled his confusion at the point of asking things in such a manner. He assumed the hybrid would want an answer, so he nodded, albeit with less energy.

After all, his vigilant ears picked up on the way Hosuh’s tone dropped, somber notes taking hold and only growing as he continued and pulled back once again.

“Yeah, you could guide the way to a safe enough place, somewhere that’s livable for at least a little while... We’d find a suitable place, and you could help me hunt. We would get a good meal or two…”

Although there was plenty of hope in his words, he still sounded dejected - a sentiment Stephen couldn’t help but feel alongside him as he silently listened to Hosuh, curling into a bit of a ball.

“Then, I guess... if you wanted to leave me, you could…”

No! There was the punchline the rogue feared, his cocooned form unraveling a bit in concern.

Especially in the past few years of his life, Stephen had preferred to keep himself open, never keeping a partnership with another criminal for more than a few months. He kept the skies above him open so he could take wing and fly to catch new opportunities. Hosuh already hinted that he would want something more, to stay by his side for much longer than that. Normally, Stephen would view such an offer as caging, as a drag similar to a ball and chain affixed to his ankle. But neither the night nor the being before him were normal, so all his past behaviors may have well been cast aside as he felt himself reeling from the idea. This time, he wouldn’t fly away like a startled bird - he didn’t feel even a minor desire to do so.

Although many would see it as foolish to stay with him, he didn’t care - even with the realistic danger the silver serpent posed, even with the risk of being devoured, the crow knew he wanted to stay landed by the snake’s side nonetheless.

Like a crow, Stephen was about to squawk out a retort - and yet, Hosuh was already speaking, seemingly acceptant of his dismal notion too quick for Stephen to provide a counterpoint.

“But uh.. It’d be bad to leave now. Night’s already here. The dark...it’s hard to move in, even if you know the place you’re in well. So when you don’t know where to go, it’s much worse… It’d be best to wait until dawn. The light, although there won’t be much of it, will be enough to see. The world goes quiet at that time anyways. Hopefully, we could use the silence and finally get away from this place together.”

Stephen nodded slowly before replying.

“Yeah, fair call on that one. I’ve used the dark plenty of times…” Stephen went quiet for a moment, wondering how best to word one of the many questions in his mind. God I hope this doesn’t come off the wrong way.

He settled on a calm, casual tone. “Seems like you really thought things out, huh?”

“I - I mean, yeah…” Hosuh’s voice got quieter, more timid. Stephen reeled at himself, already feeling regret seating itself upon his shoulders. But he tried to prevent it from showing in his expression, instead putting on a good poker face even when he was pulling his knees towards his chest.
If it was bound to happen anyways, or if it was spurred by Stephen’s appearance of curiosity is a
factor that would be unknown - but alas, Hosuh hesitated to continue. He held a hand up to his
mouth for a few seconds before lowering it, speaking quietly.

“Ah, um...There’s a reason I haven’t left this place just yet, even though I found the thing with the
wall days ago…”

*Oh no...*

“In that time… it left me with room to think… And to think in a real way, about things that would
actually happen…”

Hosuh’s words were only feeding Stephen’s suspicions, putting everything about all of their
interactions under the unsavory doubts he felt forming when he first mentioned the light of
escapism.

_Hosuh...would he have said and done the same things to just anyone? Does he...has he been
meaning to do this, to make me feel this way? All of it, everything.. Is it some kind of big act?-

“I don’t know what it’s like on the surface, so I thought...it’d be best to be as prepared as I could
be…."

_Huh?_ Hosuh’s tone was quiet and shy - a mood only emphasized by the growing nervousness he
displayed as his tempo of speech hastened and he motioned his hands in quick, slightly shaky
gestures.

“And so I waited for one last meal before I would leave this place…”

_Just one more... delicious meal..._

The serpent’s jaw quivered momentarily with the quiet thought, still stimulated by the enticing
scents and flavors received from his tongue.

_Gah! What bullshit is that? Why, why! Dammit, no - I don’t want to, I’m not going to eat him!
...Even if he would be tasty-

“So...you had this planned out?”

“Well...y-yeah, I did…”

Stephen shifted uncomfortably where he sat, agitation obvious in his form. Hosuh’s shyness and
hesitance had been rooted in fears of Stephen taking his explanation the wrong way.

“Wait, It’s not as bad as it sounds! I- I didn’t mean it in any bad way. I had simply been thinking,
worried…”’How long would it take to find something to hunt?’ ‘How long would I be able to last
out there on nothing?’... Do those questions make sense?”

Stephen stayed still for a moment, digesting the question, but nodded with a furrowed brow.
Although he could usually steal up a good stockpile of food, he was also familiar with worries
about supplies running out, about where to find his next meal.

Hosuh’s tone soothed with the subtle slumping of Stephen’s form. “I mean...I don’t really know
where to find food up there, so...”

Stephen almost raised a brow in question, but he stopped himself. _He’s been trapped down here_
“I...I just didn’t want to take unneeded risks, really. That’s why I was thinking the way I was…”

The rogue was still sunken in thought...it’s also been intense and grisly - shit like that’ll do quite a bit to ya...And the evidence, it’s literally written on the wall - ah, what was i thinking!?

After a moment, Stephen decided to answer the questioning looking down at him. “Right. No matter how fun taking risks can be, it can also be scary… Making sure you’ve planned things out properly and have whatcha need, having that brings peace to mind.”

Risks? I mean, I didn’t really plan on taking those, but... I want to be safe on things, but I want Stephen much more... I guess... I guess I’ll take a risk on him? Ah, that doesn’t sound quite right, he’s not an unwanted weight or anything...

“Peace.. It means like.. Calmness, right?”

“Yeah. As well as a lack of anxiety. At ease, calm, resting, things like that- that’s peace...”

Peace...that’s what I feel with you, Stephen....

Stephen seemed to retract into his own head for a moment before returning with a cynical chuckle. “Peace is really rare- I wonder if it even exists sometimes, honestly. Ah, what a sham, what a lie!”

His eyes seemed to grow a bit cold as he continued to chuckle, emitting a rolling sound that unnerved Hosuh. He thought he’d loved Stephen’s chuckle, yet he found himself off-put with this one. It wasn’t happy, there was a dark stain to it - and he wanted to help clean that stain if he could.

“I... I don’t know for sure, but... It seems like peace can be made, so why don’t we make peace and feel good together?”

“I...” Stephen’s reply came out as more of a whine than a word, his voice high pitched as heat returned to his face. I-I doubt he means that but... ‘feel good together’? Hosuh, please! You... god, you don’t know what you’re saying..

“How does….how does planning to make some peace together sound... partner?” Hosuh’s voice curled at the last word, not wanting to force the title on Stephen but unable to his sheer level of want completely.

You don’t know what you’re doing to me, either, huh? Why must you phrase it as ‘making something together’.. That sounds so...so...

Stephen’s thoughts were flustered as he tried to redirect his brain away from certain subjects, hoping to sway the blood in his body to pull away from his core, his face and his hips. And yet, despite all his reeling, he couldn’t help but enjoy the feelings regardless as he curled into his own form.

“Ah, but...The plan, that first plan... ah, I’m not really sure what to do if we were to completely ignore it…”

Stephen perked his head up a bit at the pondering tone to Hosuh’s voice. He shuffled a bit in shyness, accidentally rubbing against himself a bit in the process - but even with a shaky breath, he still spoke.
“W-well H-Hosuh, plans can change...Although it’s good to stick to plans sometimes, there are also just gonna be times where you gotta say ‘fuck it’ and do what- whatever feels right, whatever’s good.”

Hosuh’s eyes widened as his mouth seemed to move a bit, almost as if he was physically tasting the thought. He leaned a fraction closer, flickering his tongue in the air between the pair and tilting his head. Dammit, he’s being cute again...Why does he-

Hosuh ended up mumbling absentmindedly. “You feel right…”

“Ahh-hahh…” Stephen cursed his own body as he could feel himself tense up even more, looking aside as he curled up tighter, damning the way even the small movement made him feel.

However, there was a complication to this matter of mutterings- both the boys thought they were speaking only within their own minds, unaware that they’d spoken until the other responded.

And so, Hosuh’s ears perked up at the sound, his blush deepening at the qualities of the sound - flustered, nervous, yet not opposing or disagreeing. Wanting to discover more about the origin of such a sound, he leaned in, returning Stephen’s space and placing a hand atop one of his knees. Stephen squeaked at the contact, whipping his head to meet the curious snake face-to-face. His face was boiling from the warm breaths he could feel blowing over his face - and, unbeknownst to him, Hosuh was feeling the same effect. The grip of shyness took hold of Hosuh and wrung out his sense of boldness, but not enough to prevent him from taking action by word of mouth.

“Ah, um… Y-you said to do what feels good, so...So I have to ask, how would I ‘do’ you?”

“I-..I-” Stephen’s voice completely broke along with all remaining semblances of having his feelings under control. His head spun more and more as he felt each breath wash over his face, his heart beating louder and louder. Ah-hahaaaaahhh....Hosuh’s gotta know what he’s saying now, right?!

He swore he could see Hosuh slowly but surely leaning in closer to his face. Or perhaps that was his wild mind starting to imagine things. But still- with as many blatant hints Hosuh had left, Stephen doubted the possibility that it was all delusion. The same thinking was true of what he was seeing before him, that annoying trace of doubt present until it was brushed away. It didn’t take much to brush it away -in just a single second, the feather-light fluttering of Hosuh’s curious tongue over his nose fried the remnants of his doubts and jump-started his reasoning and speech. As he leaned back with his neck, his words tumbled out his quivering mouth in near-shouts.

“Woah, ah-hah.. okay um..! Y-y’know m-maybe we should come up with some m-middle ground be-between our ideas! L-like an in-between, or m-maybe a m-mix of both I guess-? I dunno, p-perhaps we can think of something that works out in b-both ways?”

Hosuh’s lips pressed in a tight line as the rogue sputtered, placing his other hand on his other shaking knee. He wasn’t sure why, but the disheveled and flustered nature of Stephen behavior was contagious and had spread over to him. His wide cerulean eyes darted around the cave as he rested his head atop his hands. He tried to properly think even through the static of embarrassment as he adjusted himself on his tail, drawing a squeak and shiver out of Stephen as he moved to lean his body against his legs. What to do, what to do...

The duo sat in bashful, blushing silence as they both wondered about what to do next. Neither could tell if it was a span of seconds or minutes that passed, but it was a length of time both too long and too short that progressed before Hosuh had his thoughts in line enough to form proper words.
“I suppossssse….. I suppose this ‘middle ground’-thing puts us in a...a trap, I guess. It’s like… a choice kind of thing, I guess…”

“A...A choice? What would we be choosing between?”

Hosuh’s eyes went downcast, his voice lowered and muttering. “I don’t know how good either one is…”

Hosuh looked up to Stephen with nervousness and apprehensiveness in his eyes, a small hum of dismay rumbling in his throat. He lingered for a moment that felt just enough to be too long before he adjusted his weight and got off of Stephen, raising a hand to his mouth as he became upright. His words came out too muffled to be understood, but the look in his eyes at the latter end of his speech unnerved Stephen. Still, for better or worse, Stephen knew he was in for this deal, however it was going to end for him - he wasn’t going to back out now!

“I- I’m sorry Hos, can you repeat that? I couldn’t hear through your hand there.”

Hosuh winced a bit before nodding. “Well, there’s the better option of you… coming with me, escaping as partners, being...m-mates, if you’re okay with that…”

Hosuh’s uncertain pause made Stephen hesitant. He showed visible interest in the first option, but the brightness in his eyes faded as Hosuh’s hesitance.

“What...what’s the other option, then?”

“I’m...I mean….” Hosuh went quiet for a moment more, nibbling on his lower lip.

“I...I really don’t want to eat you - but I also don’t want to force you into this, either…”

Hosuh winced before raising his palms to his face, curling his head down in shame with a distressed groan. A couple seconds later, the clawed hands slid up his face and he nearly yelled again, his voice still just as dismayed.

“Ah, I know I need help in some way or another, but both choices are awful!”

Hosuh turned his head up, his palms still planted in the curves of his face with a quieter echo of his groan. Stephen shuffled, letting go of his legs and using his hands to help prop him to his feet. His legs bent much like a frog’s, he ended up rolling right in front of Hosuh. Even though the change in position was problematic for him, he bit down the pain and started reaching up to Hosuh just in time for him to speak again, quiet and dismal.

“...The choice is open, you can choose either... I just wanted to make things clear…”

Stephen wobbled on his feet a bit before taking a gentle hold of each scaly forearm, lightly tugging to try to persuade Hosuh to open back up. After a moment and a questioning hum, he complied and looked down to the thief with - wait, glossy eyes?

_Fuck, he was tearing up. Shit, ah…._ Stephen felt compelled to soothe Hosuh - Hosuh had chosen to take extensive efforts to soothe him, so it was only fair. But even then, Stephen’s reasoning was not of pure favors - he truly _wanted_ to act the way he was. And so he did, albeit with an unwanted anxious and unprepared edge.

“You did! Really, you did. I get what you want from me, and…”

_Fuck._ He realized he was starting to say too much. Yet the mistake had already been made.
“...And? And what?”

“Ah..um..” Stephen wanted to play his usual card of bullshitting something on the spot, but something deep within told him to avoid it. He ended up going with a middle ground, something that was true, but not the specific truth he was thinking of.

“Ah, um... I wanted to say thanks for clarifying and all. For a moment - gh, curse my suspicious ass!”

Hosuh chuckled slightly at the use of the crass word. Ass, what a funny thing. I like it.

“Whatever - you had me for a moment, I had some stupid doubts at first. Why did I even have ‘em, you’ve only been showing me kindness!”

Stephen scoffed at himself before taking a breath and continuing.

“But enough of that - why’d you even bring any of that up, anyways?”

The peach on Hosuh’s face darkened slightly in the small hesitation before he spoke. “I… I wanted to make sure you know what I’d been thinking of. Mates, they’re supposed to be open with one another, right?....Well, even besides that, I...I think you should know... I shouldn’t keep such... sachets from you.”

“....sachets? Do you mean-” Stephen chuckled for a moment. “I think the word you’re looking for is secrets.”

“See...See-creds? Secrets?....” Hosuh let the word roll off his tongue a few times. “Yeah, secrets! That sounds like the right word. Secret, secrets...”

The sudden spur of happiness evident in his form was something Stephen couldn’t help but find cute. The raw joy was contagious, spurring Stephen to laugh and take the message to heart.

“Yeah, you’re saying it right. Maybe it’s about time I stop keeping so many of ‘em.”

“Oh?” Hosuh sounded genuinely intrigued as he reached down towards the thief, loosely placing her hands beneath his shoulder blades. Stephen flinched slightly before responding in kind, using the base of Hosuh’s spine for support. The serpent slithered back a bit, leaning down and looming over Stephen once again as he spoke, calm and endeared.

“I mean… I don’t think I understand all the… raisins? No, reasons, I don’t get all the reasons you’d want to keep too many secrets...”

“Well… I think you can understand wanting to leave some things unsaid? To just not bring them up?”

“Yeah, that makes sense...”

“Yeah - sorry, that wasn’t what I was trying to say. What I was trying to say was...well..”

“Hm?”

Stephen grasped Hosuh’s form a bit tighter, leaning into the serpent and scaling his hands up the reptilian’s back. He felt both flustered and reassured at the shiver he felt beneath his skin at the gliding movement, and he thought he could hear Hosuh’s heart pounding in his chest from his position just below his ribs.
“W-well… You say the choices are bad ones, but I’d have to disagree. I choose to think differently, and I think I have the choice I want to go with in mind.”

End Notes

So a few weeks back, I had came up with an interesting story idea based around an awesome AU that a pal had made... (Juno / juno_tohru on Instagram - go check them out they're awesome!)...
So with time, a bunch of encouragement from various friends on Discord and a lot of imaginative overthinking, here we are!

Strap on those seat belts everybody, we're in for quite a ride!

Side note- There's gonna be... certain chapter(s) that will pop up as the story goes along that not everyone might wanna read - that's okay! There's plenty of story besides that, the story's perfectly read-able without those bits. They'll be clearly marked and contained within their chapters...
I'm sure this sounds a bit wacky now, but it'll make sense in the future... I also don't want to spoil things, thus why I'm being a bit vague.

Oh! Also if you want in on the Discord, just mention it to me! (via comments/messages on here or on my Instagram! (same name))

DOOT DOOT

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!