In The Eye of the Beholder

by wozifii

Summary

Vernon is a half-demon, and a lifetime of prejudice and watching people avoid him for his frightening appearance has made him alone and friendless for most of his life. Seungkwan is a breath of fresh air, willing to approach him when no one else will—maybe because he’s just that nice of a person, probably because he is completely, totally blind.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

People often like to joke that parents always believe that their newborn children are the most beautiful babies of all. Not cut from steel the way people grow up to be, not harsh and unyielding and always forcing themselves against a world that keeps pushing back. No, it’s all soft skin that hasn’t felt eviction notices or layoffs or funeral bills, hasn’t felt failure and indecision. Just gentle flesh all wrapped tight around weak muscles and fragile bones to protect a frantically beating heart, to protect the miracle of life when the baby takes its very first breath, its very first heartbeat, hummingbird cartilage and raspberry juice blood and stardust sinew shifting and changing and making slight rearrangements to turn this newborn into a genuine human.

This is, of course, something your teacher would probably call a “hyperbolic statement” and you would call “a big fat lie”, because everyone knows that babies fresh out of the oven womb are pink, wrinkly little mole rats screaming at the top of their lungs and they are on an objective level not beautiful at all. But in that single moment, after months of hardship and pain and sacrifice (and
very likely the occasional “Well, we got this far, might as well just have the damn thing”), parents are so in love with their innocent infant parasites that they’ll swallow the moon for them if they want them to. And that, subjectively, is a little beautiful.

Vernon thinks his parents had to try a little harder to think of him that way.

“Good god,” he can imagine the doctors saying, horrified, “he’s a monster.”

“Nah,” his mother probably said, probably fondly, probably exasperated, “he just takes after his father.”

Usually, the ugly wrinkly mole rat babies get a bit cuter once they hit their toddling phase, but from the pictures in their family album Vernon knew he had always been a hideous thing, no matter how old he was. He supposes that maybe he was cute when he was a toddler, too—subjectively, of course—with his big red eyes that looked too big for his face and a mouth full of baby fangs, lisping heavily on anything even remotely close to sounding like an “s”. Even horns are cute at that age, the miniature nubs that both resemble and feel like tree bark on some ancient, wise tree that has seen eons come and go. But that, of course, is still completely subjective, because plenty of people had told him, both to his mother and to his face, that he was a beastly little creature and hardly what anyone would call cute.

“Well, look at him,” the other mothers used to nervously say at PTA meetings and bake sales and field trips. “He’s growing so … tall. Has his skin always, um, always been like that?”

And his mother would hide her annoyance and say, “It’s a skin condition. It happens sometimes with half-demon children. It’s perfectly harmless, just an aesthetic thing, really.”

And they’d say, “Have you tried using moisturizing lotion?”

Or maybe they’d bend down a little and look at him without actually looking at him, eyes wavering and pupils dilating in the fear of facing the uncertainty of the unnatural until they stop and focus near his forehead or his ears or something, and say, “Well, look at you, Vernon. Your, uh, your eyes sure are looking redder today, aren’t they, dear?”

And he would hide his embarrassment and say, “I can’t really stop it from happening.”

And they’d say, “Have you tried wearing contacts, darling?”

At eighteen, Vernon hasn’t improved at all. If anything, he’s gotten worse. Monster-under-the-bed, demons-in-your-sleep, villain-in-the-movies worse. It’s fine, whatever, so long as he wears beanies to hide his horns and sunglasses to hide his eyes and face masks to hide, well, his face. Then it’s okay. Then he feels kind of normal.

Sofia kicks at the bathroom door. “Vern! Hurry up and leave, I need to get ready for school.”

Vernon ignores her in favour of musing about his self identity some more. Sofia yells at him and shakes the house with the sound of dainty size six feet bashing away until somewhere below them, in the kitchen, their mom yells at her to stop for god’s sakes, Sof, are you trying to wake up the entire neighbourhood?

Eventually he opens the door and grins toothily at Sofia, who just glares at him and huffily pushes past to gain access to the bathroom. She’s at that age where she loves her brother but kind of hates him, likes experimenting with makeup, is never respected by adults as much as she should be, and thinks she’s entitled to the entire world because nothing is fair. And she’s right, of course. Nothing is fair. The fact that Sofia was born looking fully human, a honey-sweet haze of almond curls and big melting-chocolate brown eyes and a nice, human-looking mouth and everything, and Vernon
rocketed out into the human world a fucking hybrid is not fair at all, but you don’t see him taking it out on inanimate objects.

“Do you want anything to eat before you go?” his mom asks once he treads downstairs. She looks like an older, tired, prematurely aging clone of Sofia, and even a bit of Vernon in some places. Long shifts at hospitals that understaff their nurses tend to prematurely age a person.

Vernon shakes his head and steals an apple from the bowl of carefully assorted fruits on the counter. “I’ll just take this, I can buy something there.”

That is very much a lie, and both he and his mother know it. The campus plazas are constantly packed to the brim, a writhing sea of people pushing and jostling this way and that to line up for food, or taking a shortcut to another building, or meeting up with friends, or trying to find an empty seat to do homework. Too many people. Too many disapproving eyes and barely-contained looks of horror, of rejection, of I can’t believe demon hybrids even exist anymore these days, so unnatural.

But what can his mom say? If she tells him to ignore what people think and that he can damn well do whatever he wants to, including buying food in a crowded place, he’ll only get upset and retaliate by asking why she even thought it was a good idea to have children with a demon of all otherworldly creatures, like she was asking for him to be treated like shit for the rest of his life or something, and then he’ll just hurt both of their feelings by mentioning a dad he hasn’t seen in over twelve years. So she stays silent, and he stays silent, and he kisses her cheek with a clumsy mashing of awkwardly protruding fangs and thin, dry human lips, and he’s out the door to catch the next bus to campus before she can get another word in.

The sky is a pale, dusty purple of morning light; it casts an almost magenta hue on everything, like it’s raining neon grape juice. Vernon jumps over puddles left over from last night’s storm that still stain the sidewalk with a tinge of bubblegum and pulls on headphones, distracting himself with music until the bus arrives. The cracks in his skin, resembling the thin spider web hairlines on the side of shattering teacups or old porcelain dolls, starts to itch in response to the humidity. He hates rainy days like this.

The shitty thing is, if Vernon was, say, half-fae, he’d probably be forgiven for being a hybrid. All the kids with fae blood in their veins have mesmerizing gold eyes and skin as fresh as newly-blooming spring flowers and annoying, blindingly white smiles. Even if they have acid-green sclera, and a weird habit of making flowers grow in unlikely places, and sometimes even leaf-shaped wings tucked behind their backs, they can get away with it.

It’s hard to hate someone so beautiful.

But Vernon is half-demon, and he’s not pretty enough for people to look the other away and pretend he’s ordinary. A human mouth just isn’t meant to be filled with demon teeth. Human eyes aren’t meant to have black sclera and bloody red irises. Human skin isn’t meant to crack like it’s a flimsy papier-mâché mask. Human skulls aren’t meant to have horns, human fingers aren’t supposed to end in twisted, spindly claws, and humans in general are just not supposed to look anything like him.

And he doesn’t want to whine all the time, not really, but after what feels like a lifetime of seeing the way people treat him for being a hybrid that’s not lovely enough to be adored, he can’t help but feel a little jaded. Can you blame him?

A little girl stares at him curiously on the bus, smelling like sunshine ripening plastic cups of sticky juice left out on the porch and brightly coloured band-aids and skinned knees smeared with dirt. He fiddles with his mask to make sure it covers all the worst parts of him. He doesn’t want to be
the monster in the closet in her dreams tonight, not today.

“Hey, mister,” she says. Her voice is too loud, too innocent. She hasn’t learned to inhibit her thoughts and emotions, to lower her voice in public places, to think about others before thinking about herself until she becomes the demure, quiet, unforgivable woman the world expects her to grow up to be. “Are your hands okay?”

He looks down at his clawed fingers and splintered skin. “Just dandy.”

“That looks like it hurts.”

“No, no, it doesn’t hurt at all.”

“Emily!” the little girl’s mother snaps, pulling the girl closer to her side. Her voice lowers into a hissing whisper, but the sound of her poison still carries in the emptiness of the bus. “That’s the Chwe’s boy, what did I say about talking to …”

Vernon ups the volume on his phone and buries himself in music.

College is simple. Easy. It’s not like grade school or high school, where he was forced to talk to people, to interact with them, to sit with them and work with his fellow peers, and if he ever told the teacher the kids were saying nasty things to him or ignoring him or not letting him participate the teacher would do nothing because secretly the teachers all hated him too. In college, he can hide in his beanies and masks and nobody will make him take it off. He can walk into class and sit in the very back row where nobody can see him, listen to Professor Hong talk about the ethics behind humans regulating the elven rune trade, quietly take his notes, and run back home without anyone even knowing he was there. A lecture hall ghost flitting between buildings underneath electric purple skies or slime green clouds or lollipop-swirls snow. Nobody talking to him, nobody looking at him. Heaven on fuckin’ earth.

Or at least, that’s what it’s supposed to be.

He’s finishing his last class of the day and walking back towards the bus stop when something reaches out and grabs his jacket sleeve. Well, it’s more accurate to say someone, but the idea of a person voluntarily touching him to get his attention for any reason is a practically incomprehensible notion.

But there he is, a boy Vernon’s age, a little shorter than him, with round chubby cheeks and a baby blue fleece jacket and hair as rosy and red and warm as the setting autumn sun.

“Sorry,” the boy says. He talks like he has places to go and things to do and he doesn’t like waiting around for them. Clear, concise, enunciated words, all tangled into a pleasant voice with decent volume, which indicates that, while confident, he’s at least not a know-it-all idiot who thinks he can talk loudly because his opinion (and therefore his existence) is more important than anyone else’s. “I don’t mean to trouble you, but I need to get to the Student Registrar office and I, ahem, can’t really find it myself.”

Vernon can’t make out his eyes. They’re hidden behind dark sunglasses similar to his own. But he definitely notices the cane in the boy’s left hand, a thin pole of red and white and black, and the way the boy faces Vernon’s general facial direction without a hint of fear or disgust only confirms his suspicions.

The boy is blind. He can’t see.
“Uh, sure,” he says, painfully aware of how the difficult position of all his fangs makes his words sound a little muffled and distorted, like he’s talking with a mouth full of rocks. “I can take you there if you, um, if you—”

“Thank you,” the boy says, and without another word he hooks his hand more firmly around Vernon’s arm and waits, patiently and with no shame, for them to start moving. Vernon stares at the hand on his arm: smooth, human skin; clean and trimmed square-ish fingernails. He looks back at the boy’s face, knowing he’s staring a bit too intensely, raking over the features of the boy’s face almost hungrily, relishing in the fact that now he can directly look at someone without having to always see that faltering, tentatively revolted look in the backs of their eyes. The boy stares more or less back at him, a calm smile on his face, and it feels so nice to be looked at like he’s just a normal human being.

He starts walking, carefully. He thinks one jarring motion, one movement that’s too quick or too rough, will send this boy crashing to the ground. It’s not that he looks fragile, but next to Vernon and his claws and fangs and horns he feels like he’s some kind of breakable. “Uh, am I walking too fast, or …?”

“Nope, I’m good.” His words are kept to the barest minimum of sarcasm and exasperation. Vernon kind of likes it. “You can move a little faster, you know, I’m not gonna trip.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. My name is Seungkwan. What’s yours?”

“Vernon.”

“Are you a first year?”

“Y-yeah. You?”

Seungkwan laughs and adjusts his grip on his cane. It makes a faint tap, tap noise against the pavement as they walk, just in case Vernon fucks up and Seungkwan has to save himself from running headfirst into a tree or something. “Just starting, actually. Tomorrow’s my first day.”

“You’re transferring pretty far into the semester.”

“Yeah, I had to switch colleges. Mom’s working a new job in this city and I can’t aff—” he blushes for a moment, cheeks turning as ruddy as russet sun-grown apples before draining away so fast Vernon thinks he might have just dreamt it. “I mean, it’s a lot of trouble to live away from home. Plus the blindness thing, I guess.”

“I live at home, too,” Vernon replies shyly. “Uh, not … for … a blindness thing.”

Seungkwan laughs, an amused and unashamedly bright sound that makes Vernon smile and feel ridiculously proud of himself. “Yeah. It’s just annoying, you know? I was finally getting used to where everything is on my old college campus and now I have to learn it all over again.”

“How do you, uh, you know, move around? I mean, how do you find your classes?”

He’s worried he sounds rude or prying, but Seungkwan doesn’t seem to mind. “Habits and senses, mostly. You know, how many steps from A to B, if the floor inside the building has carpet or vinyl, feeling the raised letters on the signs, stuff like that. Sometimes, even smells can help remind me where I am. Back in my old college one of my classes was in a building next to a hot dog vendor. I just had to smell sizzling sausages to know I was in the right direction.”
“That sounds difficult. But incredible.”

“Yeah, those are words for it. I just need to learn my way around campus, and I’ll be good in no time. That’s why I’m going to the Registrar office, actually. I’m hoping they have volunteers or a support group or something to help show me around until I get my bearings.” He huffs, cane stuttering across the ground. “It took me almost a whole month in my last school before someone agreed to help me out. Not many people would agree to do something as time-consuming as this.”

“I would,” Vernon says, almost immediately. His brain halts and fizzes like dying carbon in a can of open soda. “I mean, I could be.”

Seungkwan looks just as surprised as Vernon feels about the words coming out of his mouth, but he smiles a little—kind of a mirthful twist of his lips more than anything, maybe he thinks Vernon is making a joke in bad taste. “You could be what?”

“A volunteer.”

“And why would you do that?”

“Because—” he hasn’t had nearly enough practice talking to other people besides his family to know how to lie effectively, so he gives up and mumbles the truth, “—I like talking to you.”

“Oh.” Seungkwan’s blush is back, his ears turning as red as his hair, eyebrows arched high above the frame of his sunglasses in genuine astonishment and possibly flattery. “Oh. Okay.”

“I don’t mean that in a weird way. Sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

“N-no, you didn’t. It’s fine. I.” Seungkwan tries out words like they’re old clothing, something to be discarded once they’re deemed unfit. He appears surprisingly flustered beyond any coherent train of thought, before he collects himself and finally says in his normal confident tone, “If you’re serious about your offer, then there’s really no point going to the Registrar office. Do you mind showing me to the Agatha Southeil Building? I have Archaic Runology there on Mondays and Wednesdays.”

“You came home late today,” Mrs. Chwe says with some trepidation when Vernon walks into the kitchen. Out of habit, her eyes roam over the exposed parts of his body to look for any telltale signs of purpling bruises. “Did something happen?”

“I made a friend today,” he replies. The words feel strange in his mouth, like fruit that he can’t decide has soured or not. “I think.”

Mrs. Chwe stares at her son for a few long minutes before breaking out into a smile. The crows’ feet around her eyes look less like tired scars and a little more like the frail, delicate lines crossing over butterfly wings, something soft and beautiful and alive.

“I,” she says, “am making your favourite dinner tonight.”

“Okay,” Seungkwan says as they stop after approximately a hundred and seventy-six steps, his cane tapping against the bottom of the stone stairs leading up to the doors of a building. “Is this A. E. Waite Hall?”

“That’s right!” Vernon says. He sounds excited. He thinks he’s even smiling, which is a rare sight
outside of his house and away from the comfort of his mother and sister. Not that anyone can see it, not underneath his black mask. But the fabric stretches against the shifting of his fangs and the faint roughness against the sensitive patches of his cracking skin reminds him that it’s happening. “And if we were to go to the building right across from this one, which one is it?”

“It’s Moll Dyer Hall. I can tell because the sign is right next to its main doors, which are to the left. My English lecture is in the main hall, and its directly across from the doors.” Seungkwan beams at him, all drizzled honey and sugar gummy bears, and for a moment Vernon feels all the nerve endings in his body alight with something he can’t really explain, but then that moment is gone when Seungkwan says, “I think I really got it! Thank you, Vernon, I can’t believe you actually helped me for this long. You’re a lifesaver.”

“No problem,” Vernon mumbles, but it’s a little bit of a problem because he’s suddenly feeling weird and gross and it’s not from the fact that he’s managed to both hold a conversation with and accompany a boy to and from his classes for two and a half weeks without any mishaps. Rather, he feels like it’s all coming to some sort of an end. Like he’s reached the last page of a book, or the final episode of a TV show. Because Seungkwan is not only cheerful and doggedly persistent, but he’s smart as all hell and he’s managed to learn where every single building is and how he gets to all his classes within only these short few weeks, and now he won’t need Vernon anymore.

“Do you know any good place to eat?”

His head shoots up. “What?”

Seungkwan’s eyes are hidden, as usual, behind the stormy panes of his sunglasses, but Vernon’s at least halfway sure he’s rolling them with gusto. “Eat, dummy, I’m starving. We should celebrate my official integration into Medea College. There’s gotta be some nice coffee shop or something near campus, right?”

“You …” Vernon says slowly, confused. “You want to …?”

He means to say do you really want to still hang out with me, someone so awkward and boring, but Seungkwan clearly gets the wrong idea. His smile dims, the dying flare of an old light bulb filament, as he says a little hesitantly, “Do you want to … not … be friends? I-I thought—”

“No!” he bursts out. “No, I, I want to—I thought you wouldn’t—you, I’d like to be—yeah, I don’t actually know any of the places around campus.”

And it’s worth it, he thinks, to sound like a stuttering fool, because Seungkwan does that thing again where his cheeks and ears bloom a deeper colour than any of the flowers that brave the chilly air to dot the candy popsicle-blue grass on the quad, and his whole face lights up in a way that feels almost heartbreaking. “Well, that’s not a problem,” he says, and like he always does, he hooks one hand into the crook of Vernon’s arm and playfully taps his ankles with his cane. “We can just walk around and see what’s out there. I can trust you to make a good decision.”

It’s also worth it, Vernon thinks, to brave the curious glances and side-eyeing of the other patrons in the coffee shop he brings Seungkwan to, to watch with admiration as Seungkwan confidently asks the person behind the counter for a medium hot chocolate and a blueberry muffin (“It’s a coffee shop, Vern,” Seungkwan will later say with a scoff when Vernon asks how he knew what they served, “you don’t need to be able to read a menu to know that they sell hot chocolate and muffins”) and pays for it with cash and exact change, just by feeling the surface of the bills and coins. Vernon orders a small coffee because Seungkwan keeps waiting for him expectantly, even though there’s no way he’s taking off his mask in such a public place like this. He pretends to drink it and lets the full cup of coffee go cold in his hand as he and Seungkwan talk, about everything and nothing and all that’s in-between.
The thing with Seungkwan is that he feels deeply about everything. There is no such thing as an apathetic answer, a mild sentiment about a subject, no half-assed feelings about anything worth talking about. Everything has to be life or death or nothing at all. It has to be entire afternoons spent in a sprawling Indigo bookstore with its royal purple curtains and pillars wreathed in golden ivy, Vernon hiding snickers behind his books as Seungkwan sweet-talks and guilt trips employees into letting him try out audiobooks for free. It has to be burgers and fries at some blue-and-pink 50’s diner Vernon describes to Seungkwan as looking like how bubblegum tastes, sharing ice cream sundaes with all the maraschino cherries and vanilla ice cream and every single type of sprinkles thrown on top into one sugar-coated cavity. It has to be The Princess Bride and Rocky Horror Picture Show and Mary Poppins and Grease until Vernon’s eyes are drying in his sockets and Seungkwan fell asleep an hour ago, slumped against a small mountain of pillows.

Vernon likes it. He likes someone who is so unashamedly passionate about being alive, about having emotions so overwhelming and powerful that he doesn’t even care if people think he’s overreacting. He likes being with a person like that, but it also means that Seungkwan can get moody. Unpredictable. Wearing his heart on his sleeve for the whole world to pick apart like vultures. When he gets upset, it becomes an ordeal equivalent to volcano eruptions and tornado storms.

They’re supposed to be hanging out at a nearby park today. Vernon guides Seungkwan down a small dirt path, towards the direction of the algae pond. The sky is a calm, dill-pickle green, lettuce leaf clouds rolling gracefully in a slow, swirling vortex. He wants to tell Seungkwan what it looks like, but the prose accurate enough to describe such beauty fades in his mouth until he can’t think of anything to say at all. Seungkwan, too, is weirdly quiet today. He seems lost in thought, face almost sullen, and his hand clenches tighter and tighter around Vernon’s bicep as they walk.

“You okay?” Vernon asks, and then, when Seungkwan doesn’t answer him immediately, he nervously says, “Do you want to sit down somewhere, or …?”

“No, it’s fine.” Seungkwan lets out a sigh, eyebrows pressing together as if he’s suddenly thinking about something unpleasant, or at the very least, deeply troubling. “I’ve been having a bad day. Bad week, really.”

“Oh.” The issue with Vernon being insecure and lacking the social learning necessary to know what to do with friendships is that he’s never had anyone besides his sister to argue with, and as such, he’s forever too passive and awkward to know when and how to press matters if he sees his friend is having a hard time. “I’m sorry. Do you want to, um, talk about it?”

“Whatever, it’s nothing. It’s just me being stupid, and having to deal with stupid people, and—and—no. No, you know what? I’m fucking done right now.” He stops walking, Vernon jerking to a halt half a beat late, and he slides his hand away. The wind dies down, like it’s trying to listen in.

“Um, Seungkwan?”

“Why are you here?”

“Yesterday you said you wanted to go outside somewhere, like to a park or something, this is the closest one to Medea—”

“No!” his voice raises for a moment like a crack of lightning before he struggles to reign it back in. Vernon can see his hands flexing uncertainly around the handle of his cane, clinging to it like it’s a lifeline but also like it’s the head of a snake. “No. I just—why are you here, with me? Why are you even here with me?”
He doesn’t know what it is exactly about it, but the way Seungkwan’s words are curdling into something bitter as they fall halfway out of his mouth makes Vernon feel nauseous and horrible. “Look, is this because of someone else, or is this because of something I did?”

“It’s everything, Vernon, okay?” Seungkwan crosses his arms, shoulders hunching closer into his torso as if he’s trying to make himself smaller. “It’s everything, and I’m getting tired of everything, and it’s just one of those days I’m having so you don’t need to go around pretending to be sympathetic just because I’m having a temper tantrum—”

“Then why are you talking to me like I am the problem?” Something in Vernon is slick and hot, like melting molten knives over a kitchen stove and sticking his hand into them. He’s not used to fighting with someone. He’s not used to losing his temper. He’s not used to being stubborn. But something in the way Seungkwan’s mouth is twisted, trying to be hard and cold and instead looking desperate and vulnerable, makes him feel a blinding, irrational need to bite back. “Can’t you see that I just want to—”

“Can’t I see? Vern, are you fucking kidding me?”

He grits his teeth. One of his top fangs presses hard into his bottom lip, enough for it to be a little painful. “You know what the fuck I was trying to say. What, do you want me to skirt around my words like that? Would that make you feel better, for me to tiptoe around you like you’re breakable or something? If you want me to hold your hand every time we cross a damn street, then—”

His face turns an angry cherry red. “Shut up!”

“You shut up!”

Both of their voices are raising, the argument dissolving into something that feels almost childish but is at its heart something much bigger, much sadder, much older than either of them can handle. Some small part of Vernon is calm enough to feel glad that there aren’t that many people at the park at this time of day. Nobody is around to see a hybrid and a blind boy yell at each other on the lime-green grass. That small part of his mind is almost immediately drowned by how upset he’s getting, the drive he’s feeling to not stay silent, not this time.

“Why did you even want to be my friend, Vernon?” Seungkwan practically shouts. And then, almost in a fit of passion, he rips off his sunglasses and Vernon sees his whole face for the first time. His eyes are fogged over, glossy and blank and the colour of grey mist, framed by fine lashes. Tears are welling up in his cloudy eyes, even as his eyebrows furrow together in what might be fury, and Vernon stares in horror at the disaster he’s unwittingly created. “Is this, is this all just a game to you? Am I just the blind friend you want to parade around, to, t-to, to show off to people like you’re some kind of big shot, some kind of fucking hero for being so nice to someone who’s disabled? Tell me the truth!”

“No,” Vernon says, and even though he thought he wasn’t that angry he suddenly realizes that he’s already halfway close to furious, hands clenching into shaking talons and voice changing into what might be a defensive snarl. If anyone could see him now, boy, would they have the time of their lives. A true demon, they’d say. He can’t help it, being a monster’s in his blood. “No! I don’t know why you’re putting words into my mouth, but—”

“Because there has to be a reason, Vernon!”

“What other reason could there be besides just wanting to be your friend?!”

“No,” Seungkwan hisses, voice wobbling, and he stumbles just close enough to jab his finger
No,” Seungkwan hisses, voice wobbling, and he stumbles just close enough to jab his finger jerkily against Vernon’s chest. It feels like a stab wound. “No, no, no, you don’t get it, there’s always a reason why people are nice to me. They always want to look so sweet, walking around with some fuckin’ disabled blind kid to show how kind and inclusive they are, acting like I’m a glass doll that needs to be helped at every point in my life or I’ll shatter without some considerate, healthy, normal person protecting me. Acting like I can’t walk down a goddamn sidewalk on my own, acting like I can’t find an empty seat on my own, acting like I need help knowing where the fucking exits out of a building are. I was never a real person to them, I was just some helpless little —thing. None of them have ever, ever—” he fights back a sob and it sounds almost feral, like a wounded animal, “—ever actually given a shit about me. So why should you, Vernon? Why should you be any different—”

“I’m a half-demon!” Vernon yells.

Seungkwan stops dead in his tracks. “What?”

“I,” he says, voice shaking in what might be anger, what might be terror, what might be a whole lot of pain, “am half-demon, Seungkwan. I’m a goddamn hybrid. Don’t you fucking talk to me as though I’m anything normal.”

Seungkwan’s so shocked it feels like all the anger had drained out of him. He halts, finger still pressing into Vernon’s sternum, before it falls away, his arms hanging limply by his sides. “You— you—”

And just like that, everything Vernon’s had to suffer, alone, all throughout his life, everything he’s hidden from his mother so she wouldn’t blame herself any more than she already does, everything he’s kept secret from Sofia because he’s so scared to one day discover that she too thinks of her brother as a freak, everything he’s kept secret from Seungkwan because he’s so scared to one day discover that she too thinks of him as a monster, everything breaks through his walls and floods out in torrents. “I’m a goddamn monster, Seungkwan. Okay? I have to spend every day pretending I don’t see the looks on people’s faces when I pass them by, I have to suffer that, myself, and I—you were the first person to ever talk to me like I was normal, like I was just another person, and you’re fucking blind!” He gulps to try and swallow the burning sensation building in the back of his eye sockets, hands clenching and unclenching as he struggles to gain some semblance of control over himself again. “Only you. You’re the only one to ever want to be friends with me. How could you think that I could ever … would ever …?”

Seungkwan doesn’t seem to have heard him. His vacant, bewildered, unseeing eyes are looking up at Vernon as though he’s suddenly trying, urgently, to make out shapes and colours in the empty darkness that was his entire life. As if he’s trying to see Vernon.

“Half-demon,” he whispers, like saying it out loud will make the truth feel more real. “You never … you never said.”

Even when he’s blind, Vernon sees it: the faint flicker of uncertainty, the starting line of horror, the recovery of memories of stories about demon hybrids and how they’re ugly, so, so ugly, so monstrous, just like their parents, and they’ll surely grow up to be monsters in turn. Vernon sees all of it passing faster than a second, just a trick of the light in Seungkwan’s eyes until he’s almost starting to look at him the way everyone else does, and he loses it.

He pushes Seungkwan away and turns and runs, even when Seungkwan frantically calls back for him. He runs until his legs are squealing and his breathing is labored and constricted against the tightness of his mask. With a growl of frustration, he rips it off, shoves it into his back pocket, falls to the ground under the nearest patch of shade. Who gives a shit. If anybody’s around, walking their dog, playing with the squid monsters in the nearby pond, then let them look at him. Let the whole world look. He’s too tired to care right now.
He doesn’t know how long he stays there, collapsed beneath some tree by the pond, watching as the tendrils of willow-like leaves from the tree hang close enough to brush against the surface and leave delicate ripples in its wake. The squids snap at the disturbance with their bird-like beaks and try to grab at the branches, but the twigs pull away before any tentacles can tighten their grip. Above him, the chartreuse-hued foliage rustle in a way that sounds like mocking laughter. Vernon stays there until his chest stops heaving and his hands are relaxed and loose, and he apathetically examines one of his palms. There are four deep, stark-red marks against the calloused surface, indentations left from digging his claws too hard into his skin. He stays there until those marks fade and the ripples on the pond and the occasional splashing of the squids lulls him into a sort of peace—not the love-and-harmony kind, more like the kind that comes after a war, the kind that comes after a painful tragedy. The exhausted, dead, hollow sort of peace that makes his mind go blank and his whole body sag with exhaustion.

Seungkwan.

And then, suddenly, he realizes what kind of dick move he just pulled and he jumps to his feet, tiredness forgotten; now he’s nothing but an overheating star, a ball of adrenaline and restless energy and despair. He just left Seungkwan alone in the middle of a fucking park. What kind of jackass is he? Seungkwan doesn’t know the area, he can’t make it home by himself. He could be lost here for hours, scared and alone, and it’ll be all his fault.

Without another thought, he pushes his aching muscles and runs back the way he came, keeping an eye out for Seungkwan’s noticeable hair. When he realizes his sunglasses are needlessly obscuring his vision, he clumsily shoves them into his back pocket as well. Let people see his eyes, let them see his fangs, let them see every inch of his fissured, inhuman face. None of that matters right now. How could he just leave him like that, how could he leave Seungkwan alone?

Finally, just when he was starting to lose hope and panic that he had lost him forever, he hears someone calling his name in the distance. He follows the noise until he reaches Seungkwan stumbling alone across the uneven grass, both his cane and his free hand reaching out blindly. His shoulders are shaking. Who knows how long he’s been aimlessly wandering, searching for Vernon, no idea where he is or where he’s going? He wails out Vernon’s name again, glassy eyes searching through an endless void. Vernon’s heart breaks.

“Seungkwan!” he yells out, skidding down a particularly steep slope and nearly twisting his ankle on the way down. “Seungkwan, I’m here, I’m sorry, I’m here and——”

“Vern,” Seungkwan chokes out, hands shooting forwards towards the sound of his voice. He’s been crying for what looks like a good, long while, all swollen puffy eyes and red, tear-stained cheeks. “Vern!”

He sweeps him into his arms like they were made to fit together, tucking Seungkwan’s head firmly into the crook between his shoulder and neck. “I’m here,” he whispers. If he speaks any louder he thinks he’ll start crying. “I’m here, I’m so sorry, I’m sorry I left you.”

“Vern,” Seungkwan sobs. His hands are everywhere and nowhere at once—flitting around his back, wrapping around his neck, clawing at his shoulders, smoothing at the front of his shirt, brushing almost pleadingly against his collarbones. “Vern, Vernon, I’m sorry, please forgive me, please—I didn’t mean what I said, I was scared and upset and I took it out on you and—it doesn’t matter if you’re a half-demon, I don’t care if you’re a half-anything, none of that matters, I’m sorry, please don’t—don’t hate me.” He makes a sound almost like a broken whimper, a fresh bout of tears dripping down to stain the collar of his sweater. “Don’t hate me don’t hate me don’t hate me please.”

“I don’t,” he says, voice catching on the last syllable, tightening his hold further. He turns his
head, and he’s not sure if he meant to do it so he can speak more clearly into Seungkwan’s ear or so his lips can press fleeting, butterfly-light kisses against the side of his head, half-knowing that Seungkwan’s so upset he wouldn’t be able to feel it. He’s not sure about anything anymore, but he does it anyway. “I don’t hate you, I don’t.”

It’s hard to hate someone so beautiful.

They’re in Seungkwan’s house, talking in his room. Seungkwan’s bedroom is almost ridiculously clean compared to Vernon’s pigsty, all carefully folded blankets and pastel curtains covering the windows and that nice Febreze clean-laundry smell. Everywhere, there’s a permeating sensation of a loving mother, from the absolutely spotless kitchen to the fresh towels in every bathroom to the cultivating garden of herbs and vegetables in the tiny backyard. Somewhere outside, a bird faintly sings an aria from Bellini’s Norma, slightly off-tune. Seungkwan is collapsed onto his bed, looking up at the ceiling as he talks, and Vernon listens from the chair by his desk. Neither of them are wearing their sunglasses; Vernon has his folded carefully right next to Seungkwan’s on the desk, beside his mask and beanie. He feels light and free without them.

“Vern,” Seungkwan suddenly says, after a few minutes of comfortable silence. “What do you look like?”


Seungkwan kicks in his general direction, and then laughs when he actually manages to connect with Vernon’s kneecap. “Right, because I’m supposed to know what a half-demon looks like.”

“Okay, okay. How should I, um? Should I describe myself to you, or …”

“I don’t trust you to give yourself a fair, objective description.” Seungkwan pats the space next to him. “C’mere.”

He’s blushing up a storm, fingers and ears freezing—demons get really cold when they blush—as he sidles down onto the bed. They turn to their sides, facing each other, and stare at one another for a few moments in silence. Seungkwan’s lashes are so frail, his cheeks so full. Vernon watches him breathe and think and smile and breathe again and something in him aches, like witnessing the sun stretch over the horizon of a new day. Something precious.

Seungkwan gives him a nervous grin and says, “Sorry if this is a little weird,” before he reaches up and lightly touches his forehead.

Vernon stiffens up in surprise. Seungkwan feels him twitch beneath his fingertips and draws back immediately. “Sorry, I—”

“No,” Vernon says, extremely embarrassed at his reaction. Seungkwan doesn’t get cold when he blushes. Instead, he lights on fire, his skin boiling like red tomato-soup oceans, his touch leaving a trail of gumdrop flames, sugar-icing blue and pink and yellow, dancing along Vernon’s popsicle skin. “No, I just didn’t expect it. It’s fine. Continue.”

He does. His fingertips move downwards until he smooths over Vernon’s eyebrows, carefully following their shape, before inching down to his eyelids. His eyes stare straight ahead, as usual, but they seem oddly alert, like he really is trying to envision and recreate Vernon’s face in his mind by tracing his facial features. He huffs out a soft laugh and mutters, “You have such nice eyelashes, what the hell,” before moving his hand down to his cheekbones.

“Oh,” he exclaims, ghosting over the spindly cracks in his skin, “what’s this?”
“It’s a demon thing,” Vernon explains. He’s trying very hard not to move, just in case Seungkwan interprets that as a signal to end whatever … this is. It makes him feel almost queasy, like he’s at the very top of a rollercoaster and is waiting at the split second his heart stops before it soars down, but he wants it to go on forever. “I think. Mom says that it’s just a thing that happens and it won’t hurt me or anything like that.”

He brushes the pads of his fingers more firmly against the spider web rifts. “Do they hurt you?”

“Nah, but I still hate them. They get kind of itchy and ache when the weather is wet. It’s like I have arthritis or something.”

Seungkwan laughs, hand shifting until his entire palm is pressed against Vernon’s cheek, burning hot and a little sweaty and a little clammy. Vernon can’t hide the quiet intake of air he takes. The action feels sweet, affectionate, and he thinks he’s about to spontaneously combust or throw up or cry or maybe all of the above.

“You’re, like, getting really cold.”

“That’s also just a demon thing.”

Every action is slow but purposeful, almost methodical in a way. Seungkwan removes his hand and returns to just using the tips of his fingers, moving slowly down the bridge of Vernon’s nose, testing out its shape. Both of them start and hold their breath when he slides down his philtrum and makes contact with the tip of the first fang.

Vernon fidgets. “It’s fine if you don’t want to—”

“Shut up, Vern,” Seungkwan says breathlessly. Time slows down to a sluggish crawl, Matrix slow motion, jumping on the moon, dancing underwater. Vernon stares intently at Seungkwan’s eyes, steeling himself for the moment when he sees hesitation or distress, in which case he’ll bow out as soon as possible and laugh it off and pretend this whole thing never happened. But Seungkwan’s expression doesn’t change. He remains focused, almost awed, as he traces over every protruding fang, testing its sharpness, and Vernon has to squeeze his eyes shut tight and struggle to breathe when careful, soft fingers pass over the outline of his lips.

“I do this with my mom, sometimes,” Seungkwan explains in a whisper. The atmosphere has become one that requires a hushed voice, as if they’re in the presence of a grand church bleeding stained glass or an ethereal, echoing temple. “So I can try and imagine what she looks like.”

It’s incredibly, horribly difficult for him to find his voice. He sounds croaky and grating, his words sounding like rusty gears grinding against each other in the center of his voice box. “Does it work?”

“I don’t know,” Seungkwan says with a little smile. “I get … not really images, more like an idea. A half-formed one, really. Thoughts of what people might look like. But I can’t ever … I mean … it’s like when you wake up in the middle of a dream. And like, in the first few seconds you can still remember it so clearly, you know? But then you start to forget, and no matter how hard you try, you’re left with just a vague concept of the dream, like—like smoke.”

“That sounds hard.”

“It is. Sometimes.” His fingers hesitate, trembling slightly, against the swell of Vernon’s lips, before he pulls away and turns so his face is buried into his pillow.

“Seungkwan?” He gulps, Adam’s apple bobbing, as he frantically tries to reign in the sudden
hurricane raging in his chest and sending his heart spinning like a toppling boat. He’s feeling almost lightheaded, streaks of acid-electric sparks corroding the inside of his veins and making him numb and fizzy, like the glass of champagne his mom gave him for his sixteenth birthday. “Kwannie?”

“I hate it, sometimes,” Seungkwan mumbles, voice muffled. “I don’t know what I look like. I don’t know what my own mother looks like. And I’ll never know, because I don’t even know what people are supposed to look like. I just …”

“Oh, Kwannie.”

“I wish I knew what you looked like, Vern.” He turns his head just enough that Vernon can see him blinking back tears. What he’s saying right now isn’t just some mindless, flighty thought running on the steam generated by his overindulgent emotions. This is something that’s been bothering him for a long, long time, maybe long enough for it to be ingrained permanently into the stitches that make up his very being. “I wish I could see things. I want to know what colours are, I want to see the sky when it rains. Mom always told me it was like the weather holds a carnival, all the lights and fireworks shows at night and pretty rides and everything. I don’t want to just be told that, I want to be able to see it with my own eyes. I just …” he hiccups, “… wish I knew what the world looked like. It’s just not fair.”

What can he say to something like that? Can he even say anything to make it better, make it right? Vernon’s heart thuds dully in his chest as he realizes he would do literally anything right now, anything at all, to make Seungkwan smile again. It’s a very terrifying feeling. “Why is your hair red?” he blurts out.

“What?”

“Your hair. You dyed it, right? Why did you decide on this colour, if you can’t, well, see it?”

Seungkwan looks surprised, but to Vernon’s great relief a weak little smile creeps up on his face. “My mom said it was the colour of strawberry jam. I like strawberry jam, I like how sweet it tastes. So I thought, you know, why not.” He hesitates, before crossly adding, “She said it looked good.”

“I like it,” Vernon confirms. He reaches out to brush at Seungkwan’s bangs. “You look good in this colour. It’s warm. Like you.”

Seungkwan flushes right up to his roots and Vernon smiles, giddy and almost ridiculously proud of himself. He isn’t receiving any backlash for the hand currently running through strawberry jam and cherry rosebush locks so he keeps on doing it, keeps sliding his fingers through the strands until Seungkwan’s eyelids are fluttering shut with a quiet sigh of contentment and he’s ignoring the slight ache in his wrists and the awkward angle their position forces him to use.

“We could find a spell for you,” he whispers, more to himself than to anyone else. “A spell to give your eyesight back.”

Seungkwan’s eyes are still closed, appreciating the feeling of a careful hand stroking his hair, but he snorts. “Get real, do you realize how hard it is to find a spell? Or afford one?” He shakes his head and smiles. “It’ll sure be nice if we could get it, though. I was thinking something along the lines of a billion-dollar robotic eye implant, but I like your idea better.”

Vernon smiles too, but the thought never quite leaves his mind.
He makes up his mind a week later. One day after classes, he takes a bus downtown and enters the first potions and runes store he sees. It’s a small little shop of sangria-purple bricks, the kind that looks like it could either be a hidden treasure trove of delight or a potential drug den, almost buried between the shadow of a skyscraping bank on one side and an extremely pretentious used furniture showcase room on the other, glass vials of all shapes and sizes full of oddly coloured liquids on display at the dusty window.

A haunting, eerie chime plays when he opens the door, setting the tone of what kind of place this is probably going to be. The inside is just as purple as the outside, with terrifyingly dim lighting from strings of naked bulbs lining the ceiling and swaths of mauve and violet and plum fabric billowing around the darkened interior. Almost immediately it’s like stepping into a mausoleum or a soundproof booth, the traffic outside muting to white noise. Even his footsteps sound muffled and silent against the plush dark wine-spill carpet, all in a way that can’t possibly be natural. He peers through the gloom towards the back of the store and lets out a tremulous little, “Hello?”

There’s a moment of silence, thick and heavy the way humidity soaks into and weighs down air. Then someone says, “Who is—Jesus Christ!” as they pull back a thick curtain directly in front of Vernon, scaring the shit out of both of them.

“Wow, okay, thanks for taking off years of my life,” the person says, clutching his hand to his chest. He’s a young man that looks a little bit older than Vernon, with a long nose and tremendously goofy smile. Something about him is playful and fun, the physical embodiment of throwing Frisbees under dappled sunlight and digging toes into wet sand, even while the raw-red burns on his hands and old acid scars of accidental potion splashes along his arms indicate that he has a very serious job, and he’s very dedicated at what he does. Vernon shuffles backwards a little to let the darkness of the shop hide his features and nervously readjusts his mask. “Anyways, are you looking for something in particular or just browsing?”

“For a moment, he wonders if there’s any other enchantment shops nearby. Any that’s preferably not this one. “Uh, what kind of more bad rep are we talking here?”

The man waves his hand dismissively. “Oh my god, nothing crazy. It’s just, I sometimes like to experiment when I’m making potions and it sometimes doesn’t turn out great, and my boyfriend who runs this place with me knocks over everything because he only cares about carving rune marks all day long and he can’t see where he’s going. So, you know, if you get a bottle of instantaneous hair growth or boils or something knocked onto your ass by some klutz, you’re probably gonna leave an angry review on Yelp too.” He playfully places his hands on his hips, and as he leans back slightly into the light of one of the nearest strings of bulbs that stain his face and hair a temporary dull yellow-orange, Vernon catches a small brass nametag pinned to the side of the man’s button-up shirt. Lee Seokmin. “But if a kid like you is out here hunting for spells, I’d say you’re already set on having a bad rep yourself.”

“I’m not a kid,” Vernon mutters mulishly, hands placed firmly into the baggy pockets of his hoodie where his claws are safe and hidden. “I’m eighteen, and—”

“You’re a fucking kid.”
“Well, how old are you?”

“Twenty-two,” Seokmin says proudly, before thinking it over inside his head and adding with a self-deprecating laugh, “And I have zero impulse control and can barely control my finances enough to keep this place running, so I guess I’m still a bit of a kid, too. Alright, so you’re some eighteen-year-old wandering into a shop like this all by yourself and looking for spells. I kinda wanna ask, and I kinda wanna don’t.”

“It’s not a spell to assassinate the president or poison a school, alright? Chill.” Vernon looks around at the aisles upon aisles of jars and bottles and fancy crystal tubes. Thick, greenish jelly in one; wispy almost smoke-like pink trails in another. Fiery red liquid with carbonating little bubbles that travel from the top down to the base of its jar, the bubbles caking into a thin black film at the very bottom. “Look, do you have one or not?”

Seokmin clucks his tongue. “No, we don’t.” He sees Vernon’s shoulders sag and says, almost like a teasing little afterthought, “But we might know where you can find one.”

“Where?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he turns his head and hollers out, “Soonyoung!” like he’s trying to catch the attention of someone across a football field. After a few minutes, another man slides out from behind a different curtain from the other side of the shop, black hair messy with bedhead and wire-frame glasses skewed heavily to one side of his face, like he had accidentally fallen asleep with them on. He’s wearing the heavy-duty apron required for a professional rune carver to do their job without injury, but no thick gloves, which strikes Vernon as odd. Do none of them care about the safety of their limbs? He looks down at the two of them and the scars and old marks that blossom and fade like flowers along their skin and he thinks of his own ugly hands, calloused and clawed, and he feels almost … connected to them.

“Fuckin’ what?” Soonyoung mutters, words drowning themselves behind a humongous yawn. He stumbles off balance when he stretches and crashes into an aisle and makes all the jars shiver and rattle. Vernon can see why they get bad Yelp reviews.

“This kid here’s looking for spells.”

“Well, tell him to fuck off downriver to some other store, we don’t have any.”

Vernon raises an eyebrow at Seokmin (one of the few sarcastic expressions he can make with his eyes hidden), who just gives him a sheepish grin and a give-me-a-second gesture before he sidles closer to Soonyoung, wrapping an arm around his waist and letting him rest his weight against his shoulder. It’s such a casually sweet, romantic gesture that Vernon feels frost form on the tips of his ears and suddenly finds himself very interested in the jars on the other side of the aisle. “Hey, c’mon, babe.” Seokmin receives a sleepy half-coherent grunt in reply. “You gotta feel sorry for him. I mean, look, how often do you see some half-demon college kid come into our store asking for—”

“What?” Vernon screeches out, head spinning around so fast he almost gets whiplash. “You know I’m a—”

Seokmin wiggles a set of slender, almost inhumanly perfect fingers (minus the burns and slight potion discolourations). “Psychic, my dude,” he cackles. “Really gets the customers wild. You know, telling them that I already know the rune they’re coming in for, or giving them a potion for something they didn’t even know they wanted until it’s in the palm of their hand. Really sets the mood for this place.”
“Sets the mood for you to be a creep,” Soonyoung responds with a snort, flicking Seokmin’s chin with loving precision as he shuffles towards a coffee machine balanced on a small round side table in a shadowy corner. Vernon hadn’t even noticed it was there until Soonyoung was pouring himself coffee into a *World’s Best Boss* mug. “Look, kid—”

“Vernon.”

“—Vernon. Spells are kind of super rare. You don’t get that many people dabbling in them these days.” He takes a long sip of coffee with all the ecstasy of a smoker getting their first drag of the day, then promptly chokes on it. “Far too risky. Old tech almost extinct, hard to find any of the golden age Spellmakers still willing to take on new students. It’s not like how it used to be back in the 1920’s, all those speakeasies and shit and people practically throwing spells at customers like they couldn’t wait to give them away.”

“Yeah, I know—” he took History 101 like everybody else, Jesus, “—but you guys just said you knew where one could be—”

Soonyoung chokes again on his coffee, spluttering a bit and sending a few droplets soaking into the carpet, then turns to give Seokmin a half-hearted glare. He gives him an *oopsey-daisy* grin as he fiddles with the potions on the shelves. “You *said* that? Seokmin, c’mon, man. Next thing you know, you’re gonna send him off to find Seungcheol.”

“Seungcheol?” Vernon perks up, desperate for *any* sort of hint. He slides his mask down so it hangs around his neck; there’s no point hiding himself around these guys, it seems. He’s still in a state of semi-shock that these two are acting like seeing a half-demon right in front of them is perfectly okay. “Who? Who is that?”

“Some stupid nomad-like guy that travels across the country doing whatever the fuck he does,” Soonyoung says dismissively, waving his hand. It’s heavily marked with the vibrant blue lines of rune scars, running uniformly over his fingers and knuckles down to almost his elbow before fading away into smooth skin. They appear to glow faintly in the dullness of the shop, ozone-blue and electric shocks and the hazy streaks of traffic lights on dark, rainy nights. “If anyone knew where a spell was, that bizarre hobo would know.”

“Well, where is he?”

“Who knows? I told you, he travels across the country on his weird homeless mission—Seokmin, I see you eyeing my coffee pot, don’t you dare mess with it for your next batch—look, Vernon, the last time he stopped by to see us was well over a year ago. He could be literally anywhere right now.”

“Give us your number,” Seokmin offers, stealing Soonyoung’s mug and taking a sip out of it before promptly making a face. “Oh god, Soonyoung, this tastes like old paint—Seungcheol passes by our place to trade in special potion ingredients and new rune tools every time he comes around, if he shows up we’ll let you know.”

“Well, that’s better than nothing, I guess.” Vernon fidgets and stands there awkwardly, unsure of what to say or do next. These series of events are confusing: he had essentially just barged in here, demanded a spell, and was then promptly told he had to wait for an indefinite period of time for his next lead, all in the presence of two very weird, very unordinary shop owners who don’t even seem to care that he’s a hybrid. This is a social interaction he is not familiar with, and it’s both highly uncomfortable and highly gratifying.

“Uh, do you want anything?” Seokmin asks in a distinctly paternal tone, as if he notices Vernon’s discomfort. “Coffee? Juice? Do you want us to make you something?”
“For god’s sakes, Seok, he’s not a street urchin. He’s eighteen, the kid can fend for himself. There’s a McDonalds four blocks from here.”

“I’m just saying, I’ll feel bad just letting him go out like this without even something to eat. He looks like a suburban mama’s boy. He’s probably never gone this deep into the shitty parts of downtown, what if he gets mugged?”

“Alright,” Vernon interrupts, glaring at both of them in pleased embarrassment. They’re treating him like a normal eighteen-year-old, any ordinary college kid who could get lost or hurt all by himself, like his fangs are nothing. It’s both comforting and belittling. “Alright, you guys are kinda super condescending and it’s annoying me, but I really need that spell. Just—let me give you my number and let me get outta here. You will let me know, won’t you?”

“We’ll keep in touch, Vernon,” Seokmin says with a friendly smile that makes him feel a little bit better about all this. He even reaches out and shakes his hand after they exchange numbers, claws and all, without even a wince or a fidget of discomfort at the feeling of stubby talons scratching across his skin. Vernon looks down afterwards, nonplussed, and reeling slightly at such casual intimacy.

“Come back again,” Soonyoung yells after him as he leaves the store.

Either those two idiots forgot to contact him or this illusive hobo really is gone off the face of this earth, but either way, Vernon doesn’t get an answer for weeks. He gets antsiier as time goes on, as school continues into a new semester, as he and Seungkwan celebrate their birthdays and he lets Seungkwan make a big deal about being a month older than him, and he continues to notice the way Seungkwan’s smile dims when he hears people talk about what the weather looks like, or what colour the flowers on the quad are today, or how cute someone’s dog is. Or when people talk to him all slow and careful like being blind means he’s also hard of hearing or stupid.

This is what’s keeping him from giving up on what seems like an impossible task akin to a Mission Impossible movie or something, keep him dreaming his foolish orange citrus and 7-11 slushie fantasies. To be able to witness Seungkwan open his eyes and see everything he’s always wanted to see would be worth all the trouble right now, Vernon thinks. It’ll be worth all of this. So it kinda sucks that after such an adventurous trip downtown all by himself, his search has dwindled down to just googling up places that could sell spells and then groaning when his results turn up either negative or extremely sketchy.

Eventually, he does something he has never done before. He decides to text Seokmin first, sending him the link to a spells website that seems promising, and then demand that if Seungcheol isn’t going to show up anytime soon then they can at least tell him if any of these Spellmakers are legit. Instead, in his heady rush and mashing of clumsy hooks against a slick iPhone screen, he accidentally sends it to Seungkwan instead.

Fuck. Less than a minute later his phone starts buzzing right out of his hand, and the caller ID shows a very familiar name. Double fuck.

He winces as he answers the call. “Hey, Kwannie, can you do me a favour and pretend your screen reader totally didn’t just tell you about that link? I sent it to the wrong person.”

“Vern, what the hell is this? ‘Spellmakers near Greater Medea Area’? That thing you said, like, decades ago, about finding spells to—are you still hung up over that?”

Still hung up over it. Like learning that his only friend in the world was deeply unhappy with his
sightlessness wasn’t meant to be a big deal. He flushes as cold as marble statues, as brain freeze, and looks down at his knees, wishing he could curl up into a ball and never see the light of day. For some reason, the idea of Seungkwan thinking he’s trying too hard, thinking he cares too much, makes him feel goosebumps-itching terrified. “Um, no? It’s for a project?”

“You’re a fucking terrible liar. How long have you been doing this?”

“I don’t know, like, maybe a few weeks? Like four, or five.” He turns away from the receiver so his shameful muttering is hopefully less audible. “Maybe seven.”

“Vernon!”

He sits up straight on his bed, pressing his phone tighter to his ear. Why doesn’t he get it, why can’t he understand that …? “Seungkwan, if I can find a spell for you, you’d be able to see! Nobody will disrespect you, nobody will treat you like a glass doll, you’ll be able to see colours and the weather and cute pets and—”

“Vernon, I—Jesus.” He hears muffled chaos coming from the other line. Seungkwan is either slapping his face with his palm or just sat down and nearly knocked over something. “Look, I’ll admit it, it would be amazing if we could find a spell for me to gain my eyesight. But the odds are just not in our favour, okay? The number of people who get spells these days are, like, about as rare as lottery wins.” His voice softens until it feels like spring, sweet and warm and blossoming butterfly wings—yellow. “It’s really sweet of you, and I’m really, really grateful that you’ve been doing that for me all this time, but … come on. I mean, I can live without my eyesight. Plenty of people do, and they are just fine.”

“I just—I just—” Why does he want this so badly? Is it all really just to see the look of amazement on Seungkwan’s face when he learns the difference between red and blue? Did he want something else out of it? Did he want Seungkwan to know that it was him that did it, that he was the one who looked high and low to find him a spell, did he want Seungkwan to be grateful to him, to think of him as someone special? He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know why he’s so desperate. His heart continues to pound frantically somewhere in his throat as he tries to swallow its ashes down and mumbles, “—I just wanted to do this for you.”

There’s a moment of very tense, painful silence, just Seungkwan sighing heavily. Eventually, he says, “Okay, fine. My college life needed a couple more horrible decisions to make the experience feel complete, anyway. But I’m helping you find my own damn spell, thank you very much. I want in.”

A strange sense of relief surges through him, melting his insides like sugar ice. “Of course! I mean, I wasn’t considering this some exclusive hybrids-only quest or anything from the start, so —”

At that moment, Sofia bursts into his room without even bothering to knock. Vernon fumbles his cell and glares at her, blushing as though he was doing something wrong even though he’s at least partly sure he wasn’t. “Sof, what did I say about barging in like that?”

“Mom’s telling you to pick up the phone,” Sofia says, rolling her eyes at him. One eye looks much darker than the other—she must’ve been testing out mom’s mascara, thank god she isn’t using him as her guinea pig again. She was twelve, glitter pens in her jean pockets and sparkly barrettes in her hair, and very persuasive, and Vernon learned the hard way that an accidental mascara stick jab into demon eyes hurts just as much as it does in human ones.

“I am on the phone.”
“Not your cell, idiot, the home phone! Someone’s calling and asking for you specifically, he says his name is Seokmin. Who’s that?"

“Long time no see, Vernon,” Seokmin says cheerfully. He’s still the same friendly smile that’s all teeth and gums, crinkly eye-smile full of interstellar dust clouds, weathered and ragged hands, new stains swallowing the pretty oval of his fingernails, dying his perfect cuticles with imperfect black and green and blue. He’s wearing the exact same shirt Vernon saw him in last; he dearly hopes that it had been washed within the past seven-week period. “Hey, who’s this?”

Seungkwan stands next to Vernon, hand hooked around his arm, looking stubborn and tenacious and wonderful in a puffy red vest and a baseball cap over his matching hair. Today is one of those early twilight days, the sky a dull periwinkle blue sprinkled with baby stars and Tylenol-pink clouds from a candlelight-white sun despite it being only around four-thirty in the afternoon. “I’m his sidekick,” he says.

“Partner in crime,” Vernon corrects.

“Okay, well, whatever you are, just make sure you don’t break anything when we’re inside. We have one guy in here already who causes enough accidents with both of his eyes working.”

Seungkwan gives him a truly magnificent patronizing smile. “I’ll do my best.”

“Yeah, that was a shitty thing to say on my part, I realize that now. Sorry, kid. Look, just come inside. Your man is waiting in the back.”

They follow him into the store, just as dark and mysterious and creepily ambient as he last remembered. Waiting behind yet another set of velvety curtains is Soonyoung, hunched over a rune carving station, and an older man Vernon has never seen before watching him work with great interest. He’s not as tall as Vernon but is broad-shouldered and has the steady, confident air of a man who’s seen and knows more than you do, so it feels like he’s big and imposing, taking up too much space in the tiny back room. He has a confusing mixture of features that make it hard to tell if he looks handsome or deranged: carefully slicked-back dark hair and dirt clogged almost permanently underneath his short-trimmed nails; gentle eyes with long lashes countered by blue bruise-like shadows underneath his eye circles; toned arms and a strong jawline marred by the faint imperfections of old, fading scratches and scars crisscrossing on every available surface of skin. When he turns to greet them with a dimpled smile, Vernon sees he’s wearing a leather biker jacket that has way too many pockets and zippers than is necessary, as well as a loose, baggy trench coat over the jacket. Vernon wonders if he’s dying from heat.

“Vernon, is it? I’m Seungcheol.” They shake hands—again, he doesn’t so much as look twice at Vernon’s irregularities. “Seokmin said you wanted to know about spells. You’ve got some luck on you; I’m probably the only person this side of the globe who has tabs on these kinds of things anymore, and sometimes it’s years before I pass by this city.”

Years? This guy can’t be older than twenty-five, surely. “Yes, that’s right,” Vernon says, quickly analyzing the situation. When he comes to the conclusion that Seungcheol also won’t be making a big deal about his demonic features, he pulls down his mask so he can talk easier, eager to take a breath of air that isn’t through a swath of fabric. Seungkwan immediately picks up the difference in how his voice comes out and looks at him, curious, fingers twitching cautiously around his cane. “I’m looking for a spell. Are there any out there that you know of, or at least any Spellmakers that can make me one?”

Seungcheol looks him over carefully, almost sizing him up. Off in the corner of the room,
Seokmin has his hands on Soonyoung’s shoulders, leaning over him to watch as he hacks and saws and digs away at the smooth, circular rune charms. The two of them may be unusual, but they look perfectly at peace being unusual together in their own little world. Vernon can clearly see the future they are pulling together through the seams of nostalgic old sweaters and shared scarves, can suddenly see years past and years to come of arguing over the same shitty coffee, holding each other’s hands and forgetting they are spoiled, scarred and blemished, only feeling a lazy heartbeat pulsing in delicate wrists and the warmth of a lover’s flesh. Something inside of Vernon picks away at the plastic organs and candy sinew in-between his ribs, a sort of gnawing, crushing, desperate longing. The hand around his arm is suddenly so much more prominent than before, his senses narrowing down to that single point of pressure Seungkwan holds against his body.

“So listen,” Seungcheol finally says. He’s not bending down to talk to him—that would be ridiculous, since Vernon is taller—but somehow he still gives off the feeling that he’s a father going down on one knee to talk face-to-face with a troublesome child. “I cannot, in good conscience, suggest you resort to breaking-and-entering or thievery or general mischief of any kind. However, if I were to list possible ways for you to get a spell and you might have to resort to criminal methods, I want it put on record that I did not endorse it in any way and I heavily discouraged you to do so.” His eyes twinkle like they’re the home base for interstellar galaxies. “What I’m about to tell you is purely a hypothetical situation only.”

Seungkwan bites back a faint giggle, as Vernon grins and says, “Yeah, man. You’re the boss.”

“Damn right I am. Okay, so first things first: there’s only one Spellmaker around this area, and she’s Old Mother Hayes, back from the golden generation of Makers. She doesn’t give away her spells anymore, but there’s a very good chance she’s got one or two still lying around her shop somewhere. I’ll get Seokmin to text you the address, so there’s an option. If that doesn’t work out, I suggest going to another realm to get one. There are plenty of Makers still up and running in the demon and fae worlds. Of course, to do so you’re gonna need your passport and a transrealm gate pass, and getting those will take time and money. If you don’t have a passport ready or you don’t have enough cash and you’re in need of a gate, though, then find a man called Jihoon at the check-in counters at the airport and tell him I sent you. He’ll let you kids through for free so long as you have a pass, I can guarantee it.”

“Holy shit,” Seungkwan says in amazement, “how do you know all this?”

Seungcheol laughs. “You pick up on stuff once you’ve lived as long as I have.”

“But you’re like twenty-five,” Vernon protests, but nobody seems to have heard him.

“Anyway, it’s pretty odd for you two to be searching for a spell.” Seungcheol fixes his gaze curiously over Vernon’s features. “Is this a good time to make a ‘beauty comes from within’ speech or something?”

Immediately, Vernon feels ice creep up the back of his neck and behind his ears. “It’s not for me,” he mutters, embarrassment washing over him in a wave of dirty rain puddle nausea. He takes a quick side glance at Seungkwan, suddenly humiliated.

“Hey, hey now, kid.” A heavy, strong hand pats his shoulder. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it. I see the way people treat half-demons like you, the way they look at you when you’re walking down the street. It just felt like one of the more obvious reasons why you’d be looking for a spell. You won’t believe how many people want one just to change their appearance.”

Seungkwan’s head is glancing back and forth between them, trying to keep track of the conversation as his fingers worry over the handle of his cane. “Is it really that bad?” he blurts out,
then blushing when he feels everyone’s attention turn to him. He raps his knuckles anxiously over the head of the cane like it’s a baton. “Vernon, I mean. Does he—really look that bad? For people to act like that to him?”

“I can’t really say, kid,” Seungcheol says, and he gives Vernon a warm smile and ruffles his hair, even scratching at his horns a little like his mom always does when she’s trying to comfort him. “He looks fine to me.”

Vernon thinks he’s going to cry.

Old Mother Hayes lives in the next city over. One day after school (and after getting permission from parents for a “trip downtown”), Vernon and Seungkwan take the train together. Seungkwan had to leave behind his cane on the off chance that they might have to—as Seungcheol put it—resort to criminal methods, so his only option is to keep hold onto Vernon’s arm closer than usual as he navigates the streets with Google Maps. Neither of them have complained about this outcome so far.

“I feel weird without my cane,” Seungkwan mumbles next to him. The sky is a dull mandarin orange, the sun nothing but an egg yolk far off above them dripping jellyfish-smooth yellow sunlight down on the crowns of their heads and the back of their necks. “It’s like I’m missing a hand.”

“I mean,” Vernon says, squinting at his phone, “taking a blind guy to a sneak-and-steal robbery already sounds like a disaster.”

“It really does.” He beams up at him. “Thanks for taking me anyway.”

Vernon obviously knows that Seungkwan can’t actually see him, but he still ducks his head to hide the fact that a goofy little grin is spreading across his face and his cheeks are turning a hypothermia-blue. He hides his brief moment of pitiful little heart-flutters by adjusting Seungkwan’s grip around him, noticing the hesitance lacing his usually sure steps. “Here, hold on to me tighter. I’ll make sure you don’t fall or hit anything. I promise.”

Seungkwan ducks his head to hide a goofy little grin and reddening cheeks. Vernon sees this and suddenly, frantically, wishes that he had the courage to put his arm around Seungkwan’s shoulders instead, or around his waist, or maybe even hold his hand.

But he doesn’t, and the two of them just keep on walking.

“This place should be it,” he eventually says. Old Mother Hayes’ “shop” is a cramped, two-story home that looks like it was made back in the 60’s when people didn’t need big suburban French-windows, professional-gardens, fountain-in-front-of-the-circular-driveway nuclear family of two and a half kind of houses to feel accomplished. Despite the sky being vibrant and casting a tangerine glow over everything until the world is like the inside of a jack-o’-lantern, the house still manages to look like a depressing, ramshackle forty-dollars-an-hour scamming psychic’s cove. A cheap sign out front on the overgrown lawn reads: HAYES POTIONS, RUNES, AND SPELLS, with the “spells” crossed off and a tiny handwritten PSYCHIC READINGS scrawled underneath.

“What does it look like?” Seungkwan asks.

“Like we could potentially get murdered by a crazy old Spellmaker in a sketchy run-down neighbourhood. Alright, let’s—”

“Sneak around back and break into her house.”
—ring the doorbell and ask her if she’s willing to sell any spells to us, Jesus, Kwannie, come on.”

“Sorry, I’m just super excited to be doing something horrible. You’re right, we should, uh, ask first.”

The doorbell is loud, shrill, and obnoxious, much like a shrieking cat. The two of them wait for over five minutes before the sound of thundering footsteps clattering down a stairway can be heard. Vernon puts on his best *hi do you have a spell and can I buy it from you at a price befitting a first year college student appearance and hopes for the best, but the door doesn’t even open for them when he hears an old woman’s cantankerous voice yell out, “We’re closed! Did you see that sign? It says we aren’t open on weekends! Get lost and come back some other time.”

Seungkwan and Vernon exchange a raised-eyebrow glance, before Vernon shouts back, “We aren’t here to shop—well, not really, I mean—we just want to know if you have any spells.”

There’s a brief pause, before Old Mother Hayes’s figure rises like creeping shadows through the opaque milky glass on the front door. “I don’t sell spells anymore,” she snaps, her quavering voice suddenly as sharp and crackling as radio static and thunder. For a brief moment, the air around them feels heavy and dripping with ozone. “And even if I still had any lying around my shop, I wouldn’t give them to you! Not for anything you can afford! Now get lost!”

“Wait—please, wait!” Vernon hammers on the door, but her figure disappears and he hears the faint sound of her climbing back up her staircase again with heavy feet, like a lumbering rhino.

“Well, that went wonderfully,” Seungkwan says. “Shall we go around back?”

He can’t help smiling. “You are enjoying this whole robbery thing way too much,” he mutters, as he takes him around the house to a tiny square backyard full of unhealthy soil and the shriveled stalks of dead flowers. The grass is yellow, hazed like a buzzcut right down to the dirt. There’s a rickety back door that leads to what might be a kitchen, and when Vernon pulls on the handle experimentally it flies right open. Clearly, Old Mother Hayes either forgot to lock it or wasn’t expecting a burglary.

“Come on,” he whispers, and grabs hold of Seungkwan’s hand. It might just be the adrenaline starting to kick in, the knowledge that they are two rather well-behaved boys about to do something that wasn’t very well-behaved at all, but when his fingers wrap around Seungkwan’s, cold hard talons weaving around warm soft flesh, his heart rate picks up and Seungkwan looks strangely *enticing*, red hair and dark sunglasses and all, with his half-nervous and half-excited grin and the way he clings to Vernon as tight as he can as the two of them navigate the kitchen and out into the hallway.

The house is cramped and tiny, and it doesn’t take them too long to find Old Mother Hayes’ “store”, which is really just her living room modified into a miniature gift shop, plastic folding tables full of weird gadgets and strange books and mirrors that didn’t always show his reflection piled haphazardly in Tupperware boxes and jars. Except for the knick-knacks, there was a faded loveseat couch shoved into a corner and a heavy cedar closet pressed against a wall, and that was about it. Vernon heard the creaks of floorboards up on the second floor above him, but none of them sounded close enough to the stairs for him to need to get worried.

“Stay here,” he whispers to Seungkwan, maneuvering him so his back is pressed against the closet, just so he knows there’s something solid behind him. “I’ll take a look around.”

Seungkwan smirks and says, “I’ll shout if I see anything.”
“Ha ha, shut up.” He looks around, poring over all the magical artifacts on the tables. It’s dusty and dim and quiet in the house, everything old and creaky, pipes huffing like asthmatic old men in the walls. He grins in satisfaction when he sees that Old Mother Hayes’ runes look cheap and shoddily made compared to Soonyoung’s lovingly crafted ones, then shakes out of it when he reminds himself that it’s silly to be proud of someone he’s not even friends with.

He’s not exactly sure what a spell is supposed to look like, but after a thorough search through the items on every table, he’s positive that none of them are one. His shoulders slump and he barely fights back a whine of disappointment. Of course it wouldn’t be that easy. Maybe Old Mother Hayes’ really didn’t have any spells left, or maybe she had them hidden in a secret location, in which case there really was no point trying to get any from her unless he wanted to risk getting both him and Seungkwan arrested.

He turns to Seungkwan with the intention of getting them both out of there, when his foot knocks into a table leg. The two of them freeze in horror as a single round marble-like object rolls to the edge of the table and, almost in slow motion, drops to the side and clatters against the hard wooden floors. It bounces mockingly once, twice, three times before smacking into the baseboard, then settling into sardonic silence.

There’s only a few seconds to register the gravity of their new situation, before Vernon hears a cacophony of sounds above him and a sharp, needle-piercing, “Who’s there?”

Seungkwan lets out a tiny squeak of fright that Vernon doesn’t want to ever hear from him ever and he practically vaults over the tables to get to him. “It’ll be okay,” he hisses, voice so low he’s not sure if Seungkwan will even be able to hear it. “Go, we have to go—”

“Where? Where?”

“Just—uh, just—” They won’t have time to make it back to the kitchen and through the back door by the sound of it. He can already hear her running down the hall, towards the stairs. Everything feels like it’s going too fast and too slow all at once, and when he notices that the cedar closet looks just big enough to fit the two of them, he wrenches it open and practically drags Seungkwan inside. He manages to close the door just as the sound of footsteps trample down the stairs, the hoarse voice of Old Mother Hayes shrieking out “Thieves! Thieves!” like the angry howl of hurricane winds and the gunshot explosions of hailstorms.

Seungkwan stands frozen right in front of him. The closet is slightly too small; they’re pressed uncomfortably close together, Vernon’s horns are scraping against the top, and their stuttering breathing sounds way too loud in the darkness. They both struggle to hold their breath or at least slow the panicky jittering of their exhales, as if the rapid-fire engine spluttering of their hearts and lungs will alert the Spellmaker to their location.

Seungkwan fidgets, making the base of the closet creak, and Vernon presses his hand to his lips to indicate for him to be quiet. At first, it seems to do its job; Seungkwan doesn’t move, or breathe for that matter, and Vernon listens intently as Old Mother Hayes’ pointed boots echo dangerously up and down the first floor. But then he hears a small, sharp intake of air, and he looks back at Seungkwan and realizes exactly how close the two of them are.

Let’s put it this way: if Seungkwan were to lean forwards just a little bit more and if Vernon were to lower his head just slightly, their lips would be touching. Seungkwan seems to have realized this, because his inhales are getting ragged and nervous, little hitches here and there like he’s trying to regulate it and failing, and when Vernon feels slight movement against the finger he has pressed against his lips he realizes that Seungkwan is actually shaking.

This is a tragedy. A disastrously unfortunate circumstance. Seungkwan’s eyes stare, round and
unseeing and helpless, the two of them shoved right up against each other in the cramped interior, so close that they can both feel each other’s breathing, the shaky rise and swell of each other’s chest, the feeling of each other’s hot puffs of air against their skin. It’s horribly, frighteningly intimate in here. Seungkwan’s fragile human body radiates heat like a miniature white-hot core of the sun, making Vernon feel summer-beach-hot, stifled and light-headed, almost feverish. He’s so close, so close, one clawed hand pressed against the inviting softness of Seungkwan’s lips while the other is wrapped around his waist to keep him from losing balance and knocking against the walls of the closet, and it’s just them in here, just them and the darkness, nobody would see if Vernon leaned forwards and kissed him, no one would know, it would be just their little secret …

Old Mother Hayes’ boots stomp into the living room, too close for comfort to the closet they’re mashed inside, and it shakes Vernon out of his reverie. The two of them stiffen up, barely daring to take a breath, as they hear her grumble and prowl around the room and occasionally let out a jungle cat snarl that makes the foundations of the house tremble and a mysterious groan echo against the walls. Finally, after what feels like hours, she mutters something to herself and makes her way back upstairs, the house falling silent with her.

After a tense, painful moment, Vernon opens the closet door, making sure it doesn’t squeak at its hinges, and helps Seungkwan out. Neither of them make a sound as Vernon guides him down the hallway and out through the back door again, not relaxing until they’re far, far away from Old Mother Hayes’ house and they both let out a sigh of relief, muscles weak and rubbery with stress.

“That was close,” Vernon pants, but Seungkwan doesn’t make a clever little quip in exchange. He turns to see why. Seungkwan’s face is as red as fire, as red as oversweet ripe fruit, and without his cane for comfort his fingers are clenching and unclenching around the fabric of his sweater instead. Vernon sees all of this and his cheeks flush an ice water and glassy blue in turn, and something in the way Seungkwan looks so horribly anxious and conflicted makes his stomach flip and tie into storm-soaked sailor’s knots.

“V-Vernon,” Seungkwan says unsteadily; he licks his lips (such pretty lips, such nice and soft lips, he can’t stop looking at them, can’t stop thinking about them) and tries again, “Vernon, I—”

“We should get going,” he interrupts, suddenly terrified of what Seungkwan might say and not willing to hear it. “C’mom, we gotta catch the next train home or our moms will kill us.”

The walk back to the train station is deathly silent and almost painfully awkward. Seungkwan’s hands around his arm keep fidgeting, sometimes going robotically stiff and at other times flexing and smoothing along his sweater sleeve as though they’re thinking of holding something else. Vernon isn’t sure if he regrets that moment in the closet or if he relishes it; right now there seems to be a mix of both running through his mind right now. He should have just let Seungkwan say what he wanted to say back then.

What if it was something horrible? He keeps thinking to himself, in a weak attempt to justify his cowardice. Another part of him keeps hissing back, what if it was something great?

The ride back is almost an hour. Vernon is so overwhelmed by both the botched attempted robbery and his own confusing emotions that he falls asleep almost immediately, head lolling between his shoulders. He wakes up thirty minutes later with a very stiff neck and the feeling of Seungkwan’s fingers ghosting over his eyebrows.

Just about every single muscle in his body contracts in surprise before he relaxes and tries to pretend he’s still asleep, but Seungkwan knows better. “Sorry,” he mumbles, pink as strawberry whipped cream and looking thoroughly mortified beneath the bitter coffee-black panes of his sunglasses. “I thought you were asleep—I mean, I didn’t think you were going to wake up—I
mean—sorry, I was being creepy.”

His hand drops down to his lap. Vernon stares down at it for a moment before wrapping his own fingers around Seungkwan’s palm and guiding it back to his face. He’s equally as embarrassed now, blushing all the way past his neck, as he presses Seungkwan’s fingers against the ridge of his eyebrows again. The two of them don’t move, both looking confused and clumsy and very much like awkward middle school children who barely understand what the concept of attraction even entails, but when Vernon lets go Seungkwan’s hand moves on its own anyway. Eyebrows to eyelids, brushing against his long eyelashes, cheekbones and jaw and nose and lips. The same pattern as before. Vernon lets him slide his mask down to his chin once he’s sure no one else is in the same compartment as them and goes slightly cross-eyed in his attempts to monitor Seungkwan’s fingers as they slide over his fangs and dip into the corners of his mouth.

Seungkwan stays there for a while, expression hidden and almost unreadable behind his sunglasses, but after a few moments he snatches his hand away like he had been burned and huddles into himself, looking at nothing in particular as he gnaws his way through his bottom lip. For a single pathetic minute, Vernon is glad that Seungkwan’s blind and can’t see the way he stares, shamelessly, at the visionless boy. Every part of his face feels tingly and numb, a head rush like looking down from great heights and listening to a favourite movie soundtrack and clumsy slow-dancing after one too many drinks and holy shit he’s in love with Seungkwan.

It’s almost laughable how hard the realization hits him, how shocked he is by this revelation because of course, of course. The way Seungkwan’s face scrunches up when he’s trying not to cry, the way he laughs, the way his eyebrows raise when someone says something stupid, his strawberry jam hair, his button nose, his lips, his soft hands, his dorky jackets, Jesus fucking Christ, his everything. Vernon’s been in love with him since the moment he first met him, and it’s only been farther down the rabbit hole since then until now, this very moment, when he grasps exactly just how deep he’s gone until he’s stuck.

“Vernon?” Seungkwan says, shaking him out of his love-struck thoughts. “I think this is our stop.”

“Oh—shit, it is, come on.” He rushes them out of the train and onto the platform before the doors can slide shut. He can’t think straight. His hands tremble where they’re placed around Seungkwan’s shoulders. He’s in love, he’s in love, after nineteen years he’s fallen in love—

And once they get this spell, Seungkwan’s eyes will be fixed. He’ll be able to see.

He looks at his hands, the flaking, spider webbing cracks and the stubby claws he has to manage daily to keep them from getting sharp enough to hurt someone. They look dead and horrid next to the plush, vivid beauty that was Seungkwan’s entire existence. The thought of something so ugly touching the boy he loves repulses him, and he lets go immediately, arms flopping down to his side like dying fish.

“Um, Vernon?” Seungkwan looks worried when he loses contact and reaches out, fumbling a bit before he makes contact with Vernon’s chest and then patting his way towards his arm. He laughs a little as he slides into place at his side. “Jesus, thought I lost you.”

“Sorry,” Vernon mumbles, and they start to walk home. Seungkwan is his usual chatty self, and normally he’s content with staying quiet and just listening (because he loves him, all he wants to do is watch him talk and smile at the way he gets so animated and passionate, because he’s in love and it took him this long to notice, come on, Vernon, get it the fuck together), but even Seungkwan can tell that something is distracting him. Eventually, all talk fades away and the two
of them are quiet and contemplative.

Seungkwan can be okay with Vernon being a half-demon now because he doesn’t actually know what Vernon looks like. Once they get that spell and his eyesight is restored, he’ll be able to see what humans should be, that beauty is a clear conscience wrapped up in perfect marble skin. And then he’ll see Vernon, and he’ll understand why people think he’s a monster, and—Vernon’s stomach lurches. All he’s been thinking about for the past three months has just been the thought of being the first person Seungkwan looks at when he wakes up after the spell-infusing operation, the thought of Seungkwan smiling and reaching out to him and saying, with clarity and wonder, “It’s you. You look like this.” He hadn’t even considered the idea that he might instead face disgust and horror and the sight of Seungkwan’s back as he walks out of his life forever.

But if they didn’t find a spell? If they couldn’t find one in the end, and Seungkwan was still blind, and the only way he could “see” Vernon was through tracing his features, would it all stay the same? Would everything be exactly as it was and he’d never have to know the ugliness of a half-demon, would he still be able to keep him?

“So the Spellmaker was a no-go,” Seungkwan finally pipes up. He doesn’t sound disappointed by their lack of results, merely hopeful. “But Seungcheol said a lot of the other realms still have active Spellmakers. Have you ever been to the demon realm before, Vern?”

Disgusting.

Vernon’s disgusting. He can’t believe he’s even considering abandoning their quest, cheating his way out of finding a spell, just because he’s scared Seungkwan will leave him afterwards. Christ, fuck, he’s so selfish. This isn’t supposed to be about him, it’s supposed to be about Seungkwan, but in the end, he only started doing this for himself, didn’t he? Egotistical intentions hidden behind a layer of lemon-soured empty promises and bitter sweet nothings. Now he’s awful both inside and out.

“Never,” he answers, choking back all the love and fear and heartbreak bubbling its way up his esophagus, burning his tongue and flaying the roof of his mouth. His words feel charred and cancerous-black, dripping with poison, taking root in the enamel of his fangs. “Mom’s always said she’d take us to Hell one day, but it never worked out.”

Professor Hong, who teaches Vernon’s favourite class (Philosophy on Otherworldly Creatures and Human Dynamics), didn’t even have to spend time talking about it in their very first lecture: everyone with a decent education knows the names of all the different realms belonging to the otherworldlies: New Sheol for demons, The Grand Aeval for faeries, Alfheim for elves, Melusine for the merfolk, and so on and so on. As their interactions with humans increased, so did passage of both humans and otherworldly creatures alike to and from their different realms. It takes a hell of a lot of passport work, a transrealm gate pass to let you through, and it’s never that easy for humans to feel comfortable in such drastically different worlds anyway, but you sure get some great tourist photos.

Unless you were trying to get into New Sheol. Then it was just damn well impossible.

The thing with New Sheol was that it was, well, full of demons. And while goblins still get a pretty bad rep and werewolves get stereotyped to hell and back and some otherworldlies are considered no better than hyperintelligent animals, demons still get shit on quite a lot.

It probably has something to do with the fact that, compared to fae and elves and their other counterparts of the most humanoid and intelligent otherworldlies, they are the ones that look the
most monstrous. All of them stand at an average of six to seven feet tall, with horns far bigger and more menacing than Vernon’s, and much bigger fangs and way longer claws. And if the demon realm is commonly called “Hell” by just about everyone else, then you know they aren’t doing too well trying to make themselves likeable by the rest of the worlds.

It’s very likely that Vernon likes Professor Hong so much because he doesn’t treat demons like second-class citizens or terrorists in disguise. And if he does, at least he has the decency to not show it in front of a lecture hall of impressionable college students. He acknowledges that, yes, hundreds of years ago demons had a bit of the conquering fever and were nobody’s best friend, but he also makes a point to always say that the behaviour of creatures in history does not necessarily dig their grave in the present. Vernon remembers one time when Professor Hong calmly and patiently out-argued a demonphobic first-year Psychology student by pointing out everything demons have done for humans within the past fifty years alone: cutting down the construction of buildings and roads down by several months with their superior strength and skill, freely sharing their cultivated knowledge of medicine and research with scientists all around the world, even forming small military peacekeeping groups for the Universal United Nations despite not even having a seat in it.

“When demons have given so much just to make amends for the behaviour of their ancestors over eight centuries ago,” Professor Hong had said, “don’t you think it’s a little unfair for them to continue to be barred entry into the human realm and to be treated like monsters?”

That day, from his seat in the back row, he had watched as quite a few students fidgeted uncomfortably in their seats. And from that day on, he made an effort to sit a little bit closer to the front row for each lecture.

Professor Hong ends the class a few minutes early today so he can talk about their major essay. Vernon had been going over the list of topics the night before and is still uneasy about which one to choose. The easy choice would be to obviously pick out one related to demon culture, but the truth is, he’s not sure how close he is to their affairs anyways. The problem with being a hybrid—anything is that you’re in Purgatory, limbo, a weird middle ground that exists between two places. He’s the middle spot in a Venn diagram, the overlap of both circles that is its own little category and not technically part of anything else. He will never be accepted as human with his demonic features, but he also knows next to nothing about demon culture to be able to accept himself or be accepted as one of them. He’s part of both worlds and identifies with none of them, and the thought that he now has to enter New Sheol and discover that side of himself he was never able to learn terrifies him.

When the professor dismisses his students, Vernon sucks in a quick lungful of mask-filtered air before walking to the raised platform at the front of the lecture hall. Professor Hong was rather young to be a college professor, and looks even younger due to big doe eyes and full lips and slim, delicate features. What Vernon likes best about him, though, is the way he styles his hair every day—trendy, but not wild—and the uncommon piercings in his ears. He keeps it simple, a cross-shaped cartilage piercing and a forward helix, but up close it becomes much more apparent that he has numerous other piercings in various spots that he has to take out for professional reasons. Vernon thinks he sees tiny pinpricks that could hint at a past industrial bar and—good god, is that a hole in histragus—before Professor Hong turns his head and notices him hovering.

“Hello there,” he says with a calm smile. He’s always so serene, all silky satin and jazz music out of expensive stereos, faint ripples in still, mirror-surfaced water, a voice that sounds like it could read bedtime stories to children for a living. “What can I do for you?”

Vernon clams up for a split second, but he manages to stumble out a, “I had some questions about the essay, sir.”
If Professor Hong notices the weird way his mouth moves behind his mask when he talks, he doesn’t say anything about it. “Shoot.”

“I’m really conflicted about what to choose. I mean, I feel like I should pick the one about the ethics of denying demons residency, because I feel like I can say a lot on the matter, but I don’t—I mean, I’m not sure if I—”

“It’s alright,” Professor Hong says soothingly, noticing the way Vernon keeps stuttering and stopping like a new driver learning stick shift. “Why do you ‘feel’ like you need to choose one of the demon topics?”

Vernon fidgets and shuffles his feet. This is gonna really suck if the professor does turn out to be a hidden demonphobe. “My dad is a demon,” he mumbles, voice almost hidden in the echoing, emptying lecture hall, as students make their way outside. “He’s been gone for over ten years. Works in New Sheol, trying to get his citizenship to come live with us. But it’s been years, and it’s not like he has a criminal record or anything—I mean, he’s a freaking math teacher, for fuck’s sakes—sorry for swearing, sir.”

Professor Hong laughs softly at that, and his eyes are anything but disgusted as he takes in Vernon’s cracked skin, the uneven bumps disguising his horns and fangs, the faint red tinge of his eyes behind his sunglasses. He’s nothing short of compassionate when he says, “The essay topic is entirely your choice. If you feel like you really don’t feel comfortable writing about demons you can always choose another topic. However, I would like to give you my genuine, honest opinion on the subject: stick with something that matters the most to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“The best essays that are written in any college course are the ones where the students writing it genuinely feel something about their research, and not writing whatever they want so they can get a good grade. It’s even more prevalent in a philosophy course like this one. There’s no right answer in philosophy; there’s only facts, and how well you use those facts to explain your own thesis.” And he looks almost curious, really, but not in the scientist-boggles-at-Frankenstein’s-monster kind of way. More like he’s curious about what Vernon has to say, what he can do. “I have to admit, I would be rather interested in hearing your argument about certain human laws involving demons. What’s your name?”

“Chwe Vernon. I’m a first-year student in Humanities.”

“Well then, Vernon, come see me during my office hours, or give me or your TA an email if you need to talk about it some more. I’m happy to help.” He gathers up his papers and starts to step away, before pausing and adding, “Oh, one more thing. If you do choose that topic after all, I recommend looking at the Dowager v. Humanity case from 1981. You should find plenty of research to back up your future thesis.”

And Vernon can’t help the disbelieving little smile spreading across his face as he watches Professor Hong leave through a side door to get to his next class. He can’t believe he actually got not only advice, but a hint, from his college instructor. That’s wild.

Seungkwan is waiting for him outside of Marie Laveau Hall, and Vernon’s heart almost immediately tries to jump out of his throat and land with a sickening splat at Seungkwan’s feet. He looks precious in a tacky pea green coat, the apples of his cheeks and the tip of his nose slowly growing the same shade as his hair as he battles the cold. Vernon wants to hold his wind-bitten pink hands and attempt to warm them up, even though as a demon he doesn’t have much body heat to work with. He wants to pull him into a hug the way he sees couples do on campus, spinning around in circles and muffling laughter into shoulders and whispering apologies and
honey-sweet sorry-I-was-late into ears. He wants a lot of things, but instead all he does is call out to him, just to make sure he doesn’t startle him when he reaches out to touch his arm.

“Are you done?” Seungkwan asks as they link arms. It’s begun to feel almost natural.

“Yep,” he says. “Sorry for taking so long, I just needed to ask my instructor something about the essay.”

“It’s alright, I only just got here.” That’s a lie; he’s shivering underneath his coat, hands burrowing into the folds of Vernon’s jacket sleeve for some semblance of warmth. “By the way, tell Seokmin to stop texting me. He keeps sending me promotional deals for their store, it’s driving me crazy.”

“What? I was going to tell you to tell Seokmin to stop texting me! He’s been doing the same thing, I’m half-tempted to block his ass already.” Unfortunately, he can’t. Seokmin’s promotional deals also involve personal offers of nachos at some shitty Irish pub with him and Soonyoung or catching up over lunch at some new Chinese place, and Vernon likes these offers far too much to tell Seokmin to stop. It feels nice to know that there’s someone else out there besides Seungkwan who is willing to befriend him, even if that someone is a twenty-two-year-old psychic potion-making nutcase with an equally batty boyfriend. And despite all of his vocal complaints, Vernon has a feeling Seungkwan likes hanging out with the couple just as much as he does.

“Yesterday he offered me a rune that’s supposed to make my hair change colour whenever I wanted it to. I don’t even know what colours are, what the fuck am I gonna do with that?”

“You should have taken it,” Vernon snickers, the two of them walking slowly across the quad together, slow and careful and with all the time in the world. There’s still a thin sheen of crystalline pink ice on the sidewalk from the subzero temperatures the night before, making their path a little treacherous, but all that means is that Seungkwan holds onto Vernon tighter than usual and Vernon gets to wrap an arm around his waist for a few seconds if he happens to slip, so he’s not exactly upset with their circumstances. “I can help you choose a good colour.”

“No, you wouldn’t. You’d make my hair a … a … a neon beige.”

He bursts into a full-blown laugh. “That’s not a thing!”

“Well it should be! I can see it in my mind’s eye, and it’s fucking hideous.”

Vernon’s amused laughter fades into a look of what’s probably absolute disgusting fondness. He notices he does that a lot, just smiling at Seungkwan for no other reason than Seungkwan being a beautiful person worth smiling for, his insides gooey and soft and overwhelmingly warm. Loving someone and then actually realizing you’re in love with someone are two wholly different experiences, both awful in their own incredible ways. In this moment, trying not to fall on his ass on ice and underneath a milky white sky and the faint flicker of cherry blossom bright snow falling to the ground, he thinks he could pour his heart out to Seungkwan and be strong enough to face whatever reaction he gets.

But then he catches sight of someone far off in the distance, almost on the other side of the quad, and the moment is gone. “Wait, I think that’s him.”

Seungkwan’s instantly more alert, something sweet and playful that Vernon hadn’t realized was even in his expression melting off his face like putty. “The one who’s …?”

“Yes, I would recognize him anywhere. He’s our only chance.”

Seungkwan nods, lips pressing into a thin determined line, and Vernon steers him towards one of the maple trees, its leaves still stuck in transition from winter violet to a spring green. After a
moment of hesitation, he unravels his hand-knitted scarf and wraps it around Seungkwan, ignoring his squeaking and flustered protestations. “Wear that, I’ll be right back,” he promises, before running down the quad to meet the man in question.

Wen Junhui is half-fae and an older student that just so happens to share the same philosophy class as him. Of course, one of the only hybrids in Medea College and they just had to have a similar program, so Vernon can always look at handsome, charismatic, go-getter Junhui and remember that hybrids are only treated like shit if they look like him. It feels like some form of divine punishment, in a weird way, like occasionally Vernon must turn and see Junhui’s golden, ethereal head walking somewhere and surrounded by his usual crowd of admirers, just so he remembers his place in the world. But he’s desperate. This is his only chance to get that pass. If this fails, then he can kiss that spell goodbye. Remember, he tells himself as he shoves his shaking hands into his pockets and makes his way towards Junhui’s group of friends, muscles liquefying in anxiety, this is for Seungkwan.

“Um,” he says, choking on the word like it’s old dust from a forgotten box, and then repeats it a little louder when no one hears him. “Um, Wen Junhui?”

Junhui halts mid-laughter to turn to him. He’s tall and lithe, with glowing tan skin, gilded honey-coloured hair, and two rows of teeth as white and straight as military-issued tombstones. He blinks brilliant amber eyes at him, surrounded by harlequin-green sclera that remind Vernon of everything young and spry and growing from the earth. He’s just … so disgustingly handsome. The perfect inhuman hybrid.

“Hi,” he finally says, smiling a little cautiously at Vernon. He can’t exactly blame him: he’s covering as much of his face as possible and drowning in an oversized hoodie and old jeans, the epitome of a frumpy college boy nobody in their right mind would want to associate with.

“You’re, uh, Vernon, right?”

“You know me?”

“Um, yeah. We’re both in the same philosophy tutorial for Hong’s class. You only showed up a couple times but you always answer everybody’s questions on the online discussion board. Is there something you need?”

This is turning out to be a lot more different than he was expecting. Jun’s voice is annoyingly pleasant and not at all hard to listen to, a sort of lilting, musical quality to his syllables combined with an endearing Chinese accent. It’s hard to dislike someone with such a nice voice. “I, yeah, um—if I could talk to you in private, that would be—”

“Hey, Jun,” one of his friends says. He’s making an effort to sound friendly, but there’s a distinct sneer in his voice. Vernon glances down at an expensive watch he’s wearing prominently around his wrist, which is surely too bulky and gold-plated and obnoxious to be anything but real. “Who is this? Your dealer? He looks like a cocaine addict, man.”

Junhui stares at Vernon with wholehearted embarrassment, jaw tightening noticeably. Interesting.

“Hey, push off, dude,” he says to his friend. “He’s only a first-year. That’s seriously not cool.”

“Ugh, look at his face,” a girl with strawberry blond tips whispers. “It’s cracking. I think he’s some sort of freaky hybrid—” she catches sight of the look on Junhui’s face when he turns back to them and flushes a defensive pink, “—uh, sorry, Jun. You know what I meant.”

Vernon looks at the students and is suddenly so sick of them. Of all of them. Are these really the kinds of people he was so scared of before, that he went to such great pains to avoid because he was terrified of their disapproval? He wrenches off his mask and sunglasses, baring his fangs at
them and growling, “Get lost,” and they all immediately shuffle away farther down the quad, as fast as they’re able. Vernon puts his disguise back on, both vindictively pleased at their reaction and also repulsed with himself for resorting to it. He’s so glad Seungkwan isn’t here to know about this.

“You’re a half-demon,” Junhui says, staring at him and ignoring his group’s grumblings behind him. He’s not quite terrified, but he isn’t exactly as okay with it as, say, Soonyoung and Seokmin were. He looks tense, but not like he’s about to bolt. Vernon has a feeling it might be because it’s his first time actually talking to a fellow hybrid. The curiosity towards each other outweighs their initial disdain.

“And you’re half-fae,” Vernon mutters, “way to point out the obvious.” He looks back at the crowd of gaggling students whispering furiously to each other and he loses his temper a little. “Your ‘friends’ are total assholes. They even called me a hybrid, right in front of you! Don’t they know it’s not cool to say that unless you are one?”

Junhui looks back at them, too, and when he determines that they’re too far away to hear their words he looks back at Vernon with a long-suffering expression. “Yeah, you think I don’t know that they’re all dickbags?” That answer surprises Vernon. “Look, I don’t want to start a competition on which hybrids get it worse, because I think we can safely say that you probably do, but other half-blooded otherworldlies aren’t exactly welcome on the red carpet, either.”

“Why wouldn’t they be?” Vernon scoffs, gesturing loosely at Junhui’s face and entire body, and the way the gentle rosy snow collecting on his shoulders and hair frames him like spun silk, like angels in hymns, like a lover’s painting. “When you look good, you get preferential treatment. That’s how evolution works. Pretty people come out on top. Whether you’re a hybrid or not, so long as you don’t look like a mad scientist’s experiment gone wrong—” he means himself, “—you get to go out without having to hide any part of you. You get to make friends and be respected and shit.”

“Buddy.” Junhui lets out a short, humourless laugh. “You just met my so-called friends. You think I’m respected by them? I hang out with them because they’re the only people I know who will actually make an effort to talk to me, to get to know me beyond the whole mom-is-a-faerie, dad-is-a-human thing. And even then I’m pretty sure they only do it so they can get me to go to parties with them and they can pull the I have a hybrid friend so it’s cool for me to say whatever I want card.” He hesitates and looks around again, and then, like he had been wishing to say this out loud for a very long time, leans in closer and hisses, “Every time someone thinks that calling me exotic is a compliment, I want to make vines grow inside their stomach and then burst out of their throat.”

This disastrous conversation is quickly turning into one of the best things to happen to Vernon in a while. “Wow. Disturbing, but very fucking cool.” Junhui smirks. “Look, being friends with a bunch of losers who don’t even respect you feels a little worthless. There’s gotta be better people for you out there, man.” He worries the edge of his mask, feeling where it clings tighter to his fangs. Junhui doesn’t have fangs. He has nice, perfect, human-looking lips, the kind of lips other humans probably wouldn’t mind kissing. “But I have no friends, so what do I know?”

“What about that blind guy with the red hair? The one you always walk around campus with? Your boyfriend?”

Vernon blushes so hard and so fast that his mask grows a thin layer of permafrost and the snow beneath his feet hardens into carnation-pink ice. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

He receives a raised eyebrow in return. “Could’ve fooled me, the way you look at him sometimes.” Junhui sighs. In that single moment, he doesn’t look like a handsome, tall, half-fae
boy. He looks tired and broken and something in his eyes looks very much like Vernon’s. Like they really are the same, beneath everything. “You’re lucky to have someone who cares so much.”

They stare at each other for a moment, smiling awkwardly at the strange sense of camaraderie that has developed between them, when Vernon remembers what he actually came here to do. He reminds himself that Seungkwan is waiting for him in the cold. Sweet Seungkwan, his Seungkwan. “Okay, listen. I actually need a favour. Do you by any chance own a transrealm gate pass?”

“Uh, I think so, yeah. I went back to The Grand Aeval to visit family last summer. Why?”

Vernon fidgets uncomfortably. “I need one, like, on really short notice, and I can’t sit around waiting for one to come in the mail for another three months. It’s super important for me to get a pass. Is there any way you can lend it to me? Or rent it, I can pay you, whatever you want.”

“Why is it so urgent?”

“Long story, hard to explain. Please, I really need it.”

Junhui hesitates. “Alright,” he relents, “I’m going home tomorrow so I can give it to you as early as Sunday. Just make sure that whatever you’re doing, it won’t get me into trouble.”

“It won’t, I swear. Thank you.” It feels like the best time for him to leave, especially since the initial surprise is wearing off on Junhui’s posse’s faces, and they’re looking at Vernon with growing dislike. Probably because he scared them off like they were fools, or maybe because they don’t want their pretty token hybrid friend to be influenced by a half-demon like him. He looks back at the half-fae man, at his caramelized skin and glowing eyes and the youthful springtime freckles that faintly dot his skin like constellations of glitter-dusted stars, and he realizes that despite not having to deal with the same kind of drastic, visceral reaction from other people, Junhui is just as lonely and miserable as he is. He’s broken glass people keep cooing at like an ornate mirror, looking at their own reflections through each shard instead of trying to put him back together. And he doesn’t have someone like Seungkwan to make it even a little better.

“Hey,” Vernon says, slowly. “How about we exchange numbers? And, uh, when I get back to the human world and return your pass, I could tell you about it. The entire long, dumb story.”

Junhui looks at him and, after a moment, breaks out into a slow smile. The leaves of the tree closest to them rustles and then turns a few shades brighter than before. “Yeah,” he says softly, maybe even a little hopefully. “Yeah, sure.”

“Mom,” he says over dinner a week or two later. “Can I ask you something?”

Mrs. Chwe glances at him over her bowl of soup. “Of course.”

“Some—friends of mine, they’re having a road trip this weekend. They invited me and I-I really wanna go, but I didn’t want to confirm anything with them until I got your permission first.” He cringes inwardly as he fixes his poor mother his best pleading, hurt, I-am-a-loser-and-this-is-the-first-time-anyone’s-asked-me-to-do-anything-ever look. It’s totally unfair, especially since he knows his mom has had plenty of guilt trips throughout the years for getting together with a demon and exposing her hybrid child to the disapproval of the outside world, but it’s the only way he’s sure this excuse can work. “Is it okay if I can? It’s fine if you say no.”

Mrs. Chwe’s eyes soften, but Sofia is less convinced. “What friends?” she asks, not in a rude way
but in her own obstinate, blunt manner. Vernon is pretty sure she got that attitude from their missing father, because both he and their mother have the total opposite tendency of sugarcoating their words or, better yet, passively saying nothing at all.

“Sofia,” Mrs. Chwe chides, before turning back to Vernon and saying gently, “Of course, Vern, I’m so happy you got invited. Do I know them?”

“Are they really your friends?” Sofia mutters through a mouthful of stark red pork bone soup. He kicks her under the table, not enough to hurt but enough that she fumbles her spoon and gets a red stain on her shirt. She glares daggers at him.

“Junhui,” he says immediately, “from my philosophy class. We started studying together a couple weeks ago. And—” hoo boy, he has to think fast for this one, “Seungcheol. He’s the, uh, the driver. Real responsible guy, super dependable, the type that probably won’t even start the car unless we all have our seatbelts on. And there’s also Seokmin and Soonyoung, from, um. I met them where they both work and we hang out a bunch. Seungkwan knows them, too.”

“Oh, Seungkwan?” His mom perks up at the name, since rather obviously he’s the only boy she’s actually met before. “Is he going, too?”

“Oh—no, his mom’s worried about him being away from home for so long.” Which is the truth. They had initially entertained the idea of both going to New Sheol together, but after a number of phone conversations Seungkwan wasn’t able to get permission for a “road trip”. A small part of Vernon was actually relieved when he heard the news: he worried over Seungkwan constantly here on Earth, the idea of also bringing him—a blind and outspoken full-blooded human—into the demon realm with him, a place that could be frightening, could be dangerous for someone like him, made his insides curl.

_He won’t know if you don’t get a spell_, the scared, wicked side of himself would always whisper when they were making up the cover story. It always tells him the same thing. Venomous words, spider bites, bright and sick and spelling out danger like frogs dipped in artificial candy reds and blues, dishonest and vicious and defensive. _He would believe you if you said you couldn’t find one. Nothing would have to change._

He ignored that side of him as much as he could.

“I see. Well, where will you all be going?”

The lies fall out so effortlessly he feels almost ashamed. “Nowhere in particular, just a fun trip to the closest place that has beaches and mountains. I can give you a call whenever we find a place with Wi-Fi, if it’ll make you feel better.”

Mrs. Chwe gives him a little smile. She’s not completely sold on the idea, he can tell by the look in her eyes, but she also can’t bear to refuse him when (as far as she knows) this trip is the very first time he’s ever been specifically invited by anyone to go out and do anything, particularly with “friends”.

“Oh of course you can go,” she says. “And if you can just give me a call or two throughout the trip so I know you’re not dying in a ditch somewhere, that would be great.”

“Thanks, mom,” he says, relieved. Sofia gives him a suspicious frown throughout the rest of dinner, and when they’re done and he’s finished cleaning up all the dishes, she follows him upstairs to his room.

“Alright, alright, what do you want?” He tosses a pillow at her when he collapses onto his bed,
aiming for her face but throwing it in a high enough arc that she could easily catch it. She does, and hugs it to her stomach as she paces the small length of his room.

“I wanna know the real story,” she says. It’s truly remarkable, really, how despite looking fully human her mouth still moves the same way Vernon’s fang-filled one does. “You could fool mom with your puppy dog eyes, but you can’t fool me, that road trip story was utter bullshit.”

“Watch out mom doesn’t catch you speaking like that.”

“I’ll just tell her you taught me.”

“Sof, what can I tell you? I’m really going on a road trip. I’m sorry if my hideousness makes it seem shifty that I can actually make friends, but—”

“Ugh, don’t give me that crap, Vern!” Sofia throws the pillow back at him and then swings herself onto his bed, elbowing him until he slides over to give her more room. “You’re the only one in this house that gives yourself such a hard time. If you stopped hiding underneath your six million hoodies and maybe talked to a few people for once, you’d realize that times are changing and not everybody and their dog thinks you’re a terrifying monster.” She snorts. “There’s guys in my school that are way uglier than you.”

This makes him laugh, but it turns a little self-deprecating and derisive halfway through. “Sof, no offense, but you kind of can’t say shit to me about it. You got lucky, you know that, right? You’re so human-passing people used to think I was trying to kidnap you when you were a kid. You don’t know what it’s like having to walk out there and everyone’s staring at you and—”

“I know, Vernon.” Something in Sofia changes. Her voice sounds soft, almost sad, even. She impatiently brushes her mess of hazelnut curls to the side when she turns her head so she can look Vernon directly in the eyes. “I know how people look at you. But you think that just because I look human I get a get-out-of-jail-free card? Once people find out dad’s a demon, boy, you should see the way they scatter. One kid even thought that I was using a potion or a glamour or something to make me look ‘normal’. Still called me a hybrid until the teacher made him stop.” She makes a face. “I hate being in ninth grade, everyone’s an immature asshole.”

“Again, Sof, shut the hell up with the curses or mom’s gonna kill you.” He hesitates. The atmosphere between the two siblings is soft and lazy, more lovingly exasperated and familial than it has been in a long time. It’s been a while, he realizes, since they’ve just sat down and had a talk like this. Their interactions were typical for siblings with an age gap of five years, mostly consisting of fighting over the bathroom and laughing at lame jokes or getting weirdly competitive for no reason at all. But this? A real conversation, a genuine heart-to-heart chat? Sof is growing up, he thinks almost wistfully, she’s already a teenager and she’s growing up and she’s old enough for them to be able to have real discussions now. “Have you ever … been ashamed? Of me, I mean. Like, have you ever wished that you didn’t have a brother who looked …?”

Sofia heaves a frustrated sigh and glares up at the ceiling with long-lashed brown eyes. In this moment, she looks wolf-girl wild and plucky-heroine-of-her-own-story stubborn and a whole lot more like her older brother than ever before. “Vern, every fourteen-year-old has thought about having a different family before. It’s, like, inevitable, it’s like a care package that comes with the whole teen angst thing. It has nothing to do with bloodlines. What a bunch of stupid freshmen say about me, behind my back, to my face … whatever. Screw them. They don’t even know you. If they did, they’d know you were the best brother in the whole world.”

Something in him crumples up dense and tight, like a paper ball, and then breaks. He feels light and airy and chokes back the overwhelming surge of liberation threatening to reach his tear ducts as he laughs and says, “Well, shit, Sof, that just about warms my heart.”
“You let me braid your hair and put makeup on you when you were sixteen, Vernon. If that’s not best-brother material, I don’t know what is.” She sits up and makes a face. “Ugh, your room smells so gross. Wash your blanket already, I think it’s so caked in B.O and stale sweat that it’s starting to seep into your mattress.”

He snorts and kicks her off. “Can’t. Going on a road trip, remember?”

“Oh, yeah, your—” she air quotes exuberantly, rolling her eyes, “*road trip.* Such a liar.”

“Hey, are you really gonna badmouth the best brother in the whole world?”

“*Uuuggghhh.*”

Seungkwan insists on walking with him to the bus stop where he’ll hitch a ride to the airport. He’s as cheery and upbeat as ever, tapping his cane to the beat of some song he’s humming in-between his words, and Vernon is bantering and laughing like he always does. But there’s a hidden tension between them, shimmering like gossamer threads. The sky doesn’t seem to get the tone and shines uncooperatively bright and joyful, a brilliant sea blue that faintly reflects the world down below like a gigantic, opulent mirror. Vernon keeps looking up at the distorted sapphire reflection of himself above him, how twisted he looks next to Seungkwan. He keeps thinking about the fact that if he *does* succeed, if he does come back triumphant and exultant and clutching a spell in his splintered, clawed fingers, he might just be hideous enough to lose Seungkwan forever.

“You ready?” Seungkwan asks. He’s trying to sound optimistic, but it fades right away into something more like worry. “Got the gate pass?”

“Yep.” God, he hopes Seungcheol’s hint about the guy called Jihoon pays off. He couldn’t afford to take his passport with him on the off chance his mom discovers it and thinks he’s fleeing the country, and there was also no way he was going to spend hundreds of dollars on a ticket. If Jihoon at check-in can’t help him, then there’s nothing he can do.

“Money?”

“As much as I had lying around.”

Seungkwan nods, then reaches up to fiddle with the collar of Vernon’s plaid sweater and smooth out wrinkles he can’t actually see. This is starting to feel a lot like the teary couples in TV shows and movies that have to say goodbye, all the sad string music wailing in the background as they desperately try to pretend they aren’t upset, speaking casually and fixing each other’s clothes because they want to hold on for as long as possible. This is … almost exactly like that. Vernon sees Seungkwan’s hands start to quiver, so he reaches up and wraps his fingers around smooth, soft knuckles, gently lowering them back down.

Seungkwan’s chin is wobbling. “Do you really have to go?” he whimpers. “I just—it’s kind of starting to hit me, you know? What we’re doing right now. Breaking into a Spellmaker’s house was crazy enough for me, but now you’re actually planning on *illegally* gate-hopping to New Sheol of all places, and I know demons aren’t as scary as everyone makes them out to be but it’s still going to be an unfamiliar world and you’ll be all alone and—Jesus, I’m so fucking terrified right now, Vern. I’m scared you’re gonna get in huge trouble, either at the airport or in the demon realm. And I’m scared that you *will* find a spell and I’ll actually get my sight back. I’m scared of everything.”

Vernon’s hands, still wrapped around his, pulls him gently into a hug. Seungkwan buries his face
into the crook of his neck like he was born to fit there, a perfect puzzle piece, and Vernon briefly closes his eyes so he can memorize the feeling of Seungkwan’s gravity against him, the smell of his watermelon shampoo, the way Seungkwan clings to him like being in his arms makes him feel so safe.

“I’m gonna be okay, Kwannie,” he says, even though he doesn’t believe it himself. “I’m going to the demon realm, and I’m going to find you a spell. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“You don’t have to do this, you know. We don’t need to change me. I’ll be okay.”

He’s so, so tempted. Just call it all off, go back home, watch musicals and eat ice cream and talk about whatever comes to mind, and nothing has to be different. Nothing has to break his heart. “Would you really be happy that way, Seungkwan? Being blind forever? Never being able to see? Would you really be okay with that?”

There’s a long pause, and then he feels more than sees Seungkwan’s head shake, almost shamefully, just a fraction of a centimeter side to side. That settles it.

“Please be safe,” Seungkwan whispers against his skin. “I’m so sorry for making you do this, I’m sorry. Please please please be safe.”

The bus is coming; Vernon sees it in the distance, heading towards them. He tilts his head so he can press one last ghostly kiss against the side of Seungkwan’s head, as faint as he can, but this time he has a feeling Seungkwan felt it. “You didn’t make me do anything, Seungkwan. I—” the bus is close enough for him to make out the orange-yellow digital letters blinking its various destinations above the windshield, “I just—” it’s rolling to a stop in front of them, the doors swooshing open, he has to act now or forever hold his peace, “I would do anything for you. Anything. Including walking into Hell itself.”

And before Seungkwan can say anything else, before he can face the repercussions of his words, he pulls away and runs into the bus, almost forgetting to pay in his haste to escape.

Seungkwan continues to stand there until the bus pulls away, his expression unrecognizable. Vernon presses his face against the cold, grimy glass of the window, heart hammering in his chest. He only moves away when Seungkwan is out of sight and the bus is thundering down the road, his breaths fogging up the glass until it’s condensed enough for him to draw a heart, if he wanted to. He doesn’t, but he thinks about it.

He has to take another bus and then a shuttle to get to the airport, and by then it’s almost two hours into his “road trip”. He’s never flown anywhere in his life, and the sight of the airport’s massive glass walls and floating sculptures and impossible cathedral-high ceilings makes him stop and gape for a moment, transfixed. There’s not too many people here at this time of day, but enough for him to duck his head into his hood as he walks up to the check-in counters, a line of at least three or four dozen with a maze of black-belted stanchions cordoning off different lines for different tickets. The majority of them are unmanned except for a select few, but near the very end of the line far away from everyone else is a single man staring at his phone, looking very much like he would snap at the first person to bother him. He will have to do.

“Excuse me,” he says, approaching the lone counter. “I’m looking for Jihoon.”

The man looks up and promptly says, “Who wants to know?” He’s small and almost deceptively cute—thick, round glasses and the faint hint of tiny dimples every time his mouth moves. Something about him (maybe the careful way he sits, or the neat trim of his short, square fingernails) gives Vernon the idea that he was cultivated with the intention to become an uptight, conservative person (the kind of pretentious guy that went to private schools and could play violin
and sneered at lower-class people over a glass of chardonnay), and had somehow failed miserably halfway to completion. His tie is crooked, his hair is a shaggy brown mess, and his uniform looks slightly too big for him; he had to roll up the sleeves of his jacket. There’s a single faded coffee spill stain on his white shirt that he has either forgotten or can’t be bothered to hide.

“Me. I want to know.”

He looks back down at his phone and then, with a sigh, puts it away. “Yeah, no shit. I’m Jihoon. I’m technically on my break right now, so if you’re checking in you should probably go to counters six to fourteen. They can help you.”

“That’s not it. I was told that you could help me get to—”

“Told? By who?” Jihoon’s eyes narrow slightly as he takes in Vernon’s fully demonic appearance. He’s not wearing his sunglasses or mask and he’s feeling very exposed, but he knew it would probably look worse if he walked in asking to illegally gate-hop while trying to hide his face. Much more suspicious. “You look pretty young to be travelling by yourself. Where’s your bags?”

“Listen, I only have a transrealm gate pass, but I was told that—”

“If you don’t have a passport or a ticket, there’s literally nothing I can do for you, kid.” His attention is already drifting back towards his phone, fingers reaching reflexively for it like he gets nervous whenever it’s not in his hands. “If you’re here for a job, hand in your resume to Mrs. White at the administration desk over there. Honestly, though, airport jobs are super not worth it. Wait until you’re older and dead inside like me before you come here. It’s way too far away, it saps all the life and soul out of you, you have to deal with crying kids all day—”

“Seungcheol sent me,” Vernon finally says, desperate by now. He can only hope that the utterance of his name will do the trick as promised. Jihoon promptly freezes up, muscles and joints visibly interlocking until he’s stiff and surprised, jaw working for a moment with no sound. He blushes a shocked red, then a hopeful red, then a happy red, then an angry red, then a furious red. Uh-oh.

“Kid,” he says in a soft, dangerously pleasant voice, beckoning him over with the crook of his finger. “C’mere. A little closer.”

He does, leaning over the counter until the sharp edge presses against his stomach and makes him wince. Jihoon promptly grabs a fistful of his jacket and drags him in even further, making Vernon let out a pitiful little oomph noise as his flesh digs into the piercing edge of the check-in countertop.

“You can tell that asshole,” Jihoon hisses through gritted teeth, “that I’m not doing any more favours for him. If he wants to go around sending some fucking demon kid to do his dirty work, then he can—he can—” for a moment, his lower lip trembles and his eyes look bright with held-back tears, he looks young and vulnerable and desperate before he shoves Vernon away. By the time Vernon straightens up and is discreetly clutching his abdomen for any signs of rupture, Jihoon is back to looking cold and collected, steel ice and scorching acid arteries and his own kind of monstrous claws, whatever he has at his disposal to keep everything that could hurt him far, far away. “—He can fuck off.”

“Jesus,” Vernon huffs, looking around to see if anybody else noticed him nearly get eviscerated at the end of the check-in counter. Everyone looks tired and stressed and aren’t looking any farther than their own passports. Lights blink runway paths of Christmas-yellow and undersea blue and cool white, forming paths and lines and curves over the surface of the ground outside for roaring
airplanes. “Okay, that wasn’t the reaction I was expecting—”

Jihoon waves his hand at him in a universal “shoo” gesture. “I told you, kid. Whatever he wants to say, he can drag his stupid, unemployed, homeless, dirty ass down here and tell me himself. Now get lost or I’m calling security.”

“He said you would help me,” Vernon says, lowering his voice, “to get to New Sheol.”

Jihoon pauses where he stands, teeth chewing into the inside of his cheek for a moment until he finally looks up, eyes sharp and wary behind his glasses. “Follow me,” he says, and disappears into a back room behind the counter. Vernon once again looks around at the spacious airport to see if anybody has his eyes on him, but everyone within range is all preoccupied with a screaming baby down at aisle six. He vaults over the countertop and through the door.

They walk down a small, brightly lit hallway. Jihoon walks fast for someone with short legs, and Vernon has genuinely no idea if he’s really going to help him or if he’s turning him in to the authorities. When Seungcheol said Jihoon would help him if he mentioned his name, he expected a lot more smiles and “what the hell, it’s a favour for a friend”, not an outburst of emotional violence.

“Are you not gonna ask?” he blurts out. “Why I’m gate-hopping?”

“Nope,” Jihoon says briskly. “Don’t wanna know.”

“So you’re just going to help me? Just like that, no explanation, no anything? I could be doing something bad.”

Jihoon turns around to eye him again. “Are you?”

“No.”

“Then I don’t care.” He turns back around, and after a few minutes of painfully tense silence, he speaks up again. “Seungcheol told you to come to me.”

“Right.”

“So you met him.”

“Uh, yeah?”

There’s a pause, and Jihoon’s voice sounds weak and soft, almost plaintive, when he says, “How is he? Like, did he look healthy?”

“Um. I guess so? I mean, he’s kind of scarred, like, all over.”

“He’s always looked like that. I meant, you know, did it look like he was eating well? Did he look tired? When he told you about me, did he, I dunno, say anything? About me? Like, did he say he was going to—forget it, I changed my mind. Don’t answer any of those questions. I don’t know, I don’t care.”

“Um, okay—” Vernon starts to say, but Jihoon just explodes instead, spewing magma-laced words like an erupting volcano.

“I mean, you would think if he was in the fucking area, he’d come see me, don’t you? It’s been three years since he last came around to this city. What, do I have to wait another ten years to see him again?”
And once more, Vernon is lost. The way Jihoon talks about a time span of ten years makes it sound as though he’s spent a very long time living on this planet, which just doesn’t make sense. “I mean, Soonyoung said he visited them last year, so—”

“Last year? He visited that rune-scarred piece of high school dropout horseshit last year and he didn’t come see me?”

“Uhh.”

“The fucking asshole! The next time I see him, I swear to god, I’m gonna give him a whole new set of marks to worry about, the absolute prick!”

And then he falls silent, the storm passing for now, and even from behind Vernon can almost see the anger and sadness steaming off of Jihoon like a boiling teapot. Jihoon, from what he can tell, is the kind of guy who can’t hide his thoughts and feelings regardless of how much he tries. Vernon is very confused, just a little bit scared, and has no idea what kind of weird, complicated relationship Jihoon shares with Seungcheol except that it’s way too emotionally charged for him to be dealing with right now. He’s already struggling with a potential heartache of his own.

“We’re here.” Jihoon announces, opening one of the numerous unmarked doors. It’s a large room that looks like it used to hold office chairs and tables, but is now empty except for one powered-down gate. Vernon was expecting something dark and gothic, maybe with spires or skulls or something, and is disappointed to find that the transrealm gate just looks like a sleek metal door frame. Modernism takes the fun out of everything. “Give me a minute to turn it on and change it to New Sheol.”

“Won’t you get into trouble if anyone finds out?” Vernon asks, watching as Jihoon flips switches and presses buttons and lights begin to flash along the edge of the gate. A low hum drones from the machine and crawls into the empty spaces of the room.

“Maybe, but I’ve done it before, which is why I’m using this old unused gate and not one of the installed ones at the terminals.” Jihoon leans back and nods in satisfaction as a dark, void-like substance blinks into existence within the gate’s frame. It looks like squid ink and black treacle, thick and viscous. “Hey, kid, you gonna be okay? Are you going in alone?”

“Yes,” Vernon says, almost hypnotized by the swirling vortex of darkness in front of him. “I should only be a day or two. Can you—can you leave it on, or do I have to call you, or what?”

“I can’t leave it on or someone will know.” He hesitates, torn, before pulling a tiny notepad out of his pocket and scribbling something on it before thrusting the sheet of paper into Vernon’s hands. “Here’s my number. Just give me a call on a payphone or something whenever you need me to switch it back on.”

“Alright.” He faces the gate, dimly aware that he’s starting to tremble from nerves. His legs are wobbly, his vision turning to TV static fuzz, the base of his horns aching with oncoming stress headache. He’s utterly terrified. He wishes Seungkwan were here.

“Hey.” Jihoon’s got a hand on his shoulder. He has to reach up quite a bit to get there, but the warmth and weight of it grounds Vernon back to reality. “Deep breaths, kid. You’re gonna be okay.”

“My name is Vernon,” he croaks out, struggling to inhale until his lungs couldn’t take it anymore. And then, piteously and like a whining child, “Will it hurt?”

Jihoon’s voice is soothing, somehow, like the cool strength of a piano’s ivory keys, slow and
“Crossing the gate? Hell no, it’s actually pretty nice. Like floating in warm water. If you ever want to leave for any reason, just call me and I’ll set everything up to bring you back home. Don’t forget to keep your gate pass on you at all times, you know the consequences when you try to cross through a gate without a pass.”

“O-okay. Yeah.” He turns to face the gate again. Seungkwan comes to mind, all the things that he loves about him. Smiling at Vernon’s jokes. Blushing when Vernon has the courage to compliment him, to be gentle to him. The sounds he made in the back of his throat when he was in Vernon’s arms, apologizing for him going to Hell alone, sounding so upset and guilty like he was somehow forcing Vernon to do it, not knowing that it was all Vernon’s own decision, that Vernon was doing this because he’s selfish and greedy and god, he wants so much. “Okay.”

He takes a few steps and walks through the gate.

The first thought he has about New Sheol, City District Seventeen, is *this looks a hell of a fucking lot like New York.*

Seriously, Hell is kind of a let down. Okay, sure, there’s literally no sky—instead there’s a rocky, cavernous ceiling, stretching what might be hundreds of feet into the air—and absolutely everyone he sees is a demon, but as he walks down the streets clutching every single pamphlet and tourist booklet he could grab from the airport, all he sees are skyscrapers and flashing neon lights and the sounds of a bustling city, and it surprisingly feels a little like home.

If he ignores the fact that he’s alone and independent for the very first time in his life, with no one except for Seungkwan and Jihoon having any idea where he is, and with only enough money for a day or two (maybe three if he stretches it tight), it feels a little bit like a vacation. He eases his tension by whistling the song Seungkwan was humming earlier, hoarse and whispery through the small spaces between his messy fangs, and ducks into the first bar he finds to peruse all of this pamphlets in peace. The bar, too, looks remarkably similar to human ones, disregarding the floating wisps of light that lazily bounce this way and that around the ceiling, and a strange twisted device that might be a jukebox playing music in Demonish, the hissing and unfamiliar language making his spine tingle. He’s about to grab the nearest empty spot when a heavy hand presses against his shoulder and he whips around with a small yelp, immediately on the defensive.

He looks up (and up and up) at a tall demon man. His skin is smooth but a deep shade of violet-blue, his horns long and jagged and far more impressive than Vernon’s. Red eyes stare down at him, occasionally emitting small showers of sparks when he blinks, and a jagged mouth is pressed into a firm, serious line.

“You look a little young to be wandering around Seventeenth by yourself, son,” he rumbles. His voice hisses and cracks and pops like logs in a fire, his words cut sharp with the steel of a Demonish accent that gives Vernon the same faint spine-numbing quality.

Vernon frowns and takes a firm step away from him, his brain instantly overflowing with memories of Mrs. Chwe teaching him and little Sofia when they were children about all the signs of stranger danger and what to do if they ran into a situation like that. His nerves, fraying like the edges of old ropes, make him a little ruder than he meant to be when he says, fiercely, “Where I come from, strangers don’t just go up and ask questions like that. People might get the wrong idea.”

The demon just ignores him, infuriating Vernon further. “C’mere, son,” he grunts, sliding into the booth seat Vernon was already going for and gesturing for him to do the same. “You hungry?”
Vernon glowers at him suspiciously but does as he’s told, stiff and ready to bolt at any opportunity. He doesn’t trust this man in the slightest, and feels particularly young and vulnerable and stupid right now, but the demon is at least six foot eight and could probably crush him like a soda can if he wanted to, so making him angry is probably not the best idea. “I’m fine, thanks.”

“Come on, now, you should eat something.” The demon rifles through the menu, which snarks back at him something about losing a few extra pounds until he flicks it with one clawed finger to make it shut up. “We have human food here, too, since this is one of the more international districts. Do you want burgers? Fries?”

“I said I’m fine.”

The demon looks at him, black-red eyes ambiguous and unknowable, two glowing embers settled deep inside a pit. He looks ominous and frankly a little frightening, and for a moment Vernon thinks he’s going to get beaten up in broad daylight (cavelight?) in a bar within the first thirty minutes of arriving at New Sheol, which must surely be a world record somewhere. “Alright then,” he finally says, tossing the menu aside. “Let’s just get down to business. What are you doing here, son? Where is your—did you come here all by yourself?”

“That’s none of your business,” he mutters, glaring resolutely at his own hands. He’s dimly aware that he’s clutching his stack of tourist pamphlets like they’re a sack of diamonds. With no Wi-Fi access for his phone, and no connections in the demon realm, these booklets are his only chance to find a hostel to stay in, cheap places to eat, spells to search for, everything. For a wild moment, he thinks the demon is trying to steal his free airport tourist supply, and clings to them even tighter.

The demon doesn’t say anything for a moment. Then he leans back, sparks fluttering from his eyelashes and scattering red and gold, and wearily says, “Okay, kid, I get the picture. You don’t trust me. I understand. Smart, I guess, not to be too trusting of someone you only just met.” One of the waitresses asks if he wants anything and he orders a beer, a human import, surprisingly. “But listen, I do really need to know if you’re here with some sort of guardian or supervisor or anything. It’s not safe for you to be here alone, I don’t even know how you managed to get through the gates—”

“I’m not a kid,” Vernon interrupts fiercely, every single part of his body tense. For once, he’s glad he’s got twisted fangs and claws and the same demonic eyes as the man in front of him, because it makes him feel braver. For once, he’s glad to feel monstrous. “I’m nineteen. I’m not a fucking kid. I came here well aware of what I was doing. Don’t talk to me like I am one.”

The demon stares at him for a long, long time. “You’re right,” he finally says, and something in him changes. His rumbling, accented voice sounds quiet and contemplative and … sad? Why?

“Hello, son.”

“Oh.” This … is a revelation. “You. Um. I. Guh.” What the actual fuck. “Holy shit, I guess. Sorry, I thought you were a kidnapper or something.”

His dad chuckles and receives his beer, a nice cold glass of Heineken. The foamy amber liquid is strangely welcoming, a touch of something he’s accustomed to in an otherwise outlandish new
“Now, I know it’s been over ten years and I’m practically a stranger to you and this is none of my business,” he says, sipping his drink, “but I think I’m correct in saying your mother doesn’t know you’re here.”

“Please don’t tell mom,” is his immediate response, which makes him blush cold and blue. It’s just such a grossly familial thing to say to a man he barely knows, a man he feels very, very confused about, paternally speaking. “She thinks I’m on a road trip.”

Vernon’s dad—Mr. Chwe—who fucking knows what to call him at this point—snorts. “Are you still in your rebellious stage? Running away from home to search for your estranged father?”

“No,” he grunts. He wants to snidely say, what makes you think I’m here for you, but that’s just rude. He may have some disappeared-dad syndrome going on, but even with all the quiet settling resentment he’s had for his father not being there for them, not being present to support his mom through tough times, he knows that Mr. Chwe isn’t living in New Sheol because he wants to. He’s always known—the entire family has known—that he’s been fighting for human citizenship since the moment his children were born. “I’m here looking for … something.”

“What?”

“A spell.”

“A spell?” Mr. Chwe runs his claws down his short goatee, looking a little bewildered. It strikes Vernon how funny it is to see an old, powerful demon look so utterly at a loss on how to talk to or even connect with his hybrid son. “Um, Vernon, I—I know sometimes it feels easier to go hunting for a Spellmaker and get your wish granted than achieving dreams on your own, but trust me, in the long run persevering the whole way through and granting your wish with your own power is a much more rewarding experience.”

“Yeah, dad, I know, it’s not for me, it’s for—” He chokes on the name.

“Oh.” Mr. Chwe smiles, revealing two rows of sharp, elongated, curved fangs. While chaotic and frightening, they are surprisingly rather ordered and aren’t as messy and awkward as Vernon’s. Well, Hell wouldn’t be called Hell if it also didn’t come with demon braces, he supposes. Above them, the lights swim in a slow spiral, before scattering once more. Their movements make shadows dance along the walls, eerie and fascinating. “You’re doing this for love.”

Vernon blushes blue again. Frost gathers beneath his lower lashes, against the incline of his cheekbones. “Yeah, whatever.”

“Are you in love with her?”

“Him.”

“Are you in love with him?”

“I,” he shrugs jerkily, “guess so.”

“And is he in love with you?”

“I don’t know.” He pauses, remembering a dark closet and two bodies pressed uncomfortably close to each other, the feverish atmosphere, the way Seungkwan’s whole body trembled and how it felt against his skin. That single, wild moment where he so desperately wanted to kiss him, and he thinks maybe Seungkwan wanted to do the same. He blinks hard, terrified that his father might see this scenario playing out in the backs of his eyes. “I hope so.”
“I’m going to give my child the benefit of doubt and surmise that your spell hunting isn’t for a love potion?”

“God, no, dad. I don’t want to roofie him. He’s—” he hesitates, realizing how strange it is to share so much to a man he doesn’t really remember, a man who had almost no presence in his life except for when he looked at himself and tried to pick apart the features each parent gave him. Maybe it’s precisely because his father feels so distant that he feels comfortable telling him all of this. Like how some people can feel comfortable talking to a psychiatrist. “He’s blind. I want him to be able to see the world, you know, colours and everything.”

“Do you want him to see you, too?”

“I.” Ah, but that’s the question, isn’t it? That’s the Catch-22. “I don’t know.” When he sees the way his dad is looking at him, he quickly changes the subject. “For you to run into me the second I arrive at New Sheol feels a little too coincidental. Something’s off.”

“I’ll say,” his father grunts. A light floats by close enough to their table to temporarily bathe them in soft light, making Mr. Chwe look less intimidating, less monster-under-the-bed. “I got an international call when I was getting off work. I thought it was your mother, but I didn’t recognize the number. It was some human boy, telling me that my son had just arrived at Seventeenth District’s airport terminal and that I should probably go see if he’s okay. He didn’t give me a name, but he sounded very sure of himself, like he knew exactly where you were and what my phone number was without—”

“Seokmin,” Vernon blurts out in shock. “It must’ve been Seokmin. He’s psychic.”

“Ah. Well, that makes a lot more sense. He’s from one of the old families, then. He sounded worried about you, enough so that I couldn’t think of it as some elaborate prank call. So I took a shuttle to the airport as fast as I could and just when I got off, I happened to catch sight of you walking down the street.”

“Yeah, you freaked me out majorly, sneaking up on me like that.”

“I watched my son that I haven’t seen in twelve years just walk down the streets of New Sheol out of nowhere, no news from his mother or anything about him being here. You want to talk to me about being freaked out?”

“Alright, yeah. Sorry. Also, how did you even know it was me? Not that many half-demons around?”

Mr. Chwe smiles, and suddenly Vernon has no idea how anyone could ever look at a demon and think of them as monsters. “Your mother sends me a constant stream of pictures of you and Sof. You’ve both grown up so much since I last saw you.”

“No shit, dad, I was only, like, six.” Vernon’s voice drops into a halfhearted mumble halfway through, ashamed of himself. He sounds like he’s blaming his dad for not being there, but really, how must it feel? To only be able to see your children grow up through the lens of a camera, the edges of a photograph? Alone in a home but not a home, moonless nights under starless skies, to only be able to contact your wife maybe once a month through a telephone call? His father didn’t deserve to be made guilty for not being able to be with his own family. “We’ve all been pretty good. Sofia’s not nearly as bratty as she could’ve turned out to be. Mom’s stressed over her nursing job, but what can you do.”

“She’s stressed? Is money tight? Should I send more over?”
“What? No! Dad, you already give us enough to fully pay off our mortgage and send me straight through college, you’re fine. The hospital just understaffs their nurses, so she’s been getting the short end of the stick in night shifts for the past few months.”

Mr. Chwe is frowning, a helpless gleam in his eyes. It’s almost eerily similar to the look on Vernon’s face whenever anything happens involving Seungkwan. “Maybe I should just stay here. I’ll make more money in New Sheol than I will on Earth, enough for her to quit her job if she wants.”

“Dad, that’s stupid.” Vernon says with exasperation. “What would make her happier would be, I dunno, actually having her husband live with her? Perhaps?” His dad still looks conflicted, so instead Vernon decides his best bet is to bow out before things get too awkward between them. “I should probably get going. I think one of the pamphlets said there’s a store that sells old spells somewhere around here . . .” he tries to pull out the leaflet as proof, but fumbles it and gets mixed up and can’t remember exactly which one out of dozens it was.

“First of all,” Mr. Chwe says, downing his beer. “If you think I’m going to let my son wander New Sheol all by himself, you’ve got another think coming. Second, it’s starting to get late, I highly doubt you’ll be able to reach any shops before they close for the night. How about you crash with me, and then in the morning I’ll drive you to wherever you need to go?”

“You don’t have to,” Vernon mumbles, staring at the dark granite-like tabletop. His fingers trace over the grooves of Demonish scribbles scrawled onto the surface. He can’t read it, but he has a pretty good idea what the scratches are: young couples promising foolish eternal love, jokes, hellos, encouraging messages. The same things written in the human world. The same kinds of people. All the same. “This is something I want to do myself.”

“Son, I know where they sell spells. Wandering around because you ‘want to do it yourself’ is just a waste of time. How about this: you sleep in a place where I know you’ll be safe, I’ll take you to get a spell tomorrow morning, and I won’t tell your mother where you are.”

“That’s blackmail, dad.”

“No, that’s parenting. Same difference. Now, are you sure you aren’t hungry?”

The thing with buying spells is that they aren’t always bought with money. It’s one of those delicate crafts that had slowly withered away into extinction over the years, the art of good spell-making dying with it. Nowadays, the only spells left lying around are ones that have been collecting dust for years, their owners either unwilling to give it away or too crafty to sell it cheap. When Vernon climbs into his dad’s car after a good night’s sleep on a comfortable couch (he had absolutely refused to kick Mr. Chwe out of his bed and had instead curled up in the living room, watching the sparks and glowing wisps dance lazily around the ceiling until he knocked out), he finds himself getting increasingly more nervous as his father drives him down roads paved with silver and gold mineral deposits that look like trailing human veins. By the time he parks by the side of the street, Vernon’s hands are clenching into nervous fists, talons piercing through his jeans at the knee, and he thinks he’s starting to hyperventilate.

“Shit, dad,” he croaks out, “I don’t think I can do this.”

His dad lets out a soft huff of a laugh, hand reaching out to press reassuringly against his skull. He’s obviously not warm, but the pressure in his hair still gives him the same feeling, the sense of something comforting and tender in its weight. “Take deep breaths. It’s really not a big deal, you’re going to be just fine.”
“What if they ask me something crazy in return?” he says, panicking. “What if they ask for, like, my voice?”

“What, like Ariel?”

“What if they say something like, ‘I’ll give you this spell but in return Seungkwan is gonna lose all memories of you’? Or they’ll make him hate me or something?” He lets out a small, terrified little noise, clawing at his seatbelt when he feels it press too close, razor blade-close, to his skin. “Oh my god, dad, Seungkwan’s gonna hate me. He’s gonna get his sight back and he’s gonna see my face and he’s gonna hate me, he—he—”

“Hey, hey, hey, son, alright now, ssssh, calm down.” And after a moment of clear, thoughtful hesitation, he gently pulls Vernon into a hug. It’s awkward in a car, the gear shift pressing into Vernon’s abdomen, but he lets himself be buried into the embrace, lets himself become a child again and make weak little whimpers against his father’s broad chest, lets his dad hug him tight with strong arms and feel safe and protected for the first time in years. “You’re okay, you’re okay. I’m here, I got you.”

Vernon needed this, he thinks as he slows his breathing. He doesn’t want to say he was the “man of the house”, because that’s frankly insulting to the woman who raised and protected him all these years, but even so: he was the one who found his mother crying in her room one night because she was so overwhelmed with work and felt like she was alone, hugging her until she was all cried out and promising to keep it a secret. He was the one who had to comfort his baby sister and kiss her band-aids when she fell, had to learn what the fuck was going on with the menstrual cycle and help a panicking Sofia through her first period when she was eleven because mom was out on another overtime shift. He didn’t have a dad to share his mother’s burdens in the family, didn’t have a dad to teach him how to put on a tie while looking in a mirror, or to give him advice on how to talk to someone he likes, or how to drive. And when his dad’s hold tightens briefly around him, pressing him closer, he thinks Mr. Chwe might be thinking the same thing.

“You feeling better?” his dad asks when Vernon pulls away, sniffing. “Are you having second thoughts? Want to turn back?”

“No,” he says. “I came this far. I gotta go through with it.”

“Want me to come into the store with you?”

“I’ll be fine. Can you just wait here?”

His dad nods, horns nearly scratching the roof of the slightly-too-small car, and Vernon heaves the biggest breath he can manage as he exits out of the passenger’s seat and into the store they had parked in front of. It’s small and quaint, but contains the same bright blobs of light that are absolutely everywhere. He brushes a few away from his face when they buzz too close to his nose.

“You’re in luck,” a faint, dreamy-like voice says somewhere by his ear. He whirls around and only just barely manages to fight back a small squeak of surprise, which turns out to be pointless in the long run when he just squeaks in surprise anyway at the sight of a half-demon. She looks like she’s somewhere in her late forties, a strange mixture of soft wrinkles and dragon-scale skin, ram-like horns curling gracefully around her round face. He can’t stop staring at her, because all the half-demons he’s ever seen either on the street or on TV are young, closer to his age, most of the older half-demons having lived in a generation much less forgiving to demon hybrids than now, escaping to live a life in other realms where they’re moderately free from prejudice. “We have one spell left in stock, and I don’t mind selling it to you.”
Vernon realizes he’s staring a bit too shamelessly and ducks his head. Questions, frightfully young and children’s dreams innocent, stain the tip of his tongue. He wants to know what her youth was like as a half-demon. How she made a life for herself. If she’s happy. If there’s someone who loves her, despite everything. Instead, he just asks, “How did you know? Oh—psychic, right?” Guess psychics just like going into retail, apparently.

The half-demon shopkeeper laughs. “From the old families.” She smiles at him, and even with a mess of fangs like Vernon’s her smile is gentle and very human. “Tell Seokmin I say hi. He’ll know who you’re talking about if you mention New Sheol.”

She knew Seokmin. “Holy shit.”

She tilts her head, gesturing for him to move. “Follow me.” She takes him to a corner of the store, where several display cases are set. At first they look like solid black boxes, but when he moves closer and peers at them curiously, its walls abruptly transition into glass, revealing its contents. Most of the objects appear to be fragile scrolls and ancient grimoires, little boxes of jade and opal rings that flash his inner thoughts and half-dreamt desires back at him in their reflection. The shopkeeper opens the case and selects a small vial, small enough to fit in the palm of his hand, and appears to be made of a strange metal.

“That’s a spell,” he says. He has no idea how he could know what a spell looks like, but when he stares at the vial he somehow just knows. “How—how much for it?”

“How much indeed?” she murmurs in response, more to herself than to him. “The cost must equal the reward, they always say. The price must befit the intentions. But you are so young, you barely even know what your intentions are yourself. You’ve thought of this before, haven’t you? If this is all a selfish quest disguised as something noble? Is it even worth it if, after everything you’ve gone through, he won’t love you back?”

His throat is burning. His chest is on fire. Much like being faced with condescending adults asking “what do you want to do with your life?”, this is a question he doesn’t have an answer for. He can barely understand what to do with his feelings for Seungkwan as it is. All he knows is …

The shopkeeper’s eyes turn soft. “You really do love him, don’t you?”

“I think I do,” he says.

“You do. I can see his name, his face, everywhere in your thoughts. Your heart aches with it.”

His cheeks shine with embarrassed snowflake-laced ice. “Okay, okay, you don’t need to be all poetic about it. I’ll—I’ll take any price.” He closes his eyes shut tight, briefly, before opening them again. “Even if he won’t—won’t like me afterwards. I’ll take it anyway.”

The shopkeeper thinks for a moment, looking at him and then down at the vial and back again. Finally, she says, “Fifty years. It will cost fifty years of your life.”


She gives him a motherly smile and hands him the spell. “Let’s just say that I’m feeling lenient today. Tell your father to try filling out his permanent resident documents one more time and hand them in by the end of this month.”

And just like that, Vernon leaves the store, a spell clutched tight in his hands, between his palms, more precious than anything else he owns. Time passes like the flighty flashes of a dream, giving him hints of what’s happening around him that feel like half-forgotten memories: his father shows him around the district a little bit, pointing out interesting pieces of culture that Vernon swallows
down greedily, fascinated to learn a little bit more about the world he could one day be a part of. He spends much of the day with his dad, and after a quick lunch and a hefty amount of begging until his dad promises not to tell mom about this trip, he’s driven back to the airport, borrowing dad’s cell phone to call Jihoon beforehand.

“You got a way of getting back safe and sound?” he asks.

“Yeah. Jihoon said he worked something out with a guy here. He’ll take me to an unmarked gate.” He looks down for a moment, shuffling his feet. “I guess I have to go. I … bye, dad.”

He gives his father one last hug, almost unwilling to pull away. He doesn’t know how much longer they’d have to wait for him to come home. When Sofia’s in college? When Vernon’s already moved out and busy with a job? He blinks back the pressure building up beneath his eyeballs and gives his dad a watery smile. Mr. Chwe, six foot eight and hundreds of years old and a man who misses his wife and children very much, watches his suddenly-grown-up son talk to a demon worker in an undertone before disappearing through a side door out of sight, and he stays there until there’s absolutely no trace of his son left before he leaves and heads back to his car.

“Vernon?”

He thinks his heart could burst when he’s let inside Seungkwan’s home, climbs the stairs and sees him waiting at his desk in his bedroom. It’s only been a day and a half, really, and they’ve been apart for longer than that before, but somehow this feels different. He feels older, a changed man, when he pulls him into a fierce hug and lets every sensory nerve in his body reacquaint itself with Seungkwan.

“I have so much to tell you,” Vernon says when they finally pull away. “Seokmin found and contacted my dad, and—”

“Hold up, your dad?”

“—I’ll tell you everything, but look! I have it.” He pulls the spell out of his pocket, places it carefully into Seungkwan’s hand and manually wraps his fingers around it. “This is it. It’s a spell, Kwannie.”

Seungkwan is speechless, mouth open and no words coming out. He appears to be blinking rapidly behind his sunglasses, pressing the cold metal of the spell vial against his chest and stuttering out a, “You—you really got one. Holy shit, Vern. But what did you have to pay for it? What was the price?”

“Fifty years of my life.”


Vernon hears the unmistakable trace of tears clogging up Seungkwan’s windpipe, welling in his eyes, and realizes his mistake. “Oh! Oh, no, no, Seungkwan, it’s okay, it’s—demons live for, like, five hundred years. Half-demons don’t live that long, but still a pretty decent while. Fifty years is nothing, I can promise you that.”

“Y-you sure?”

“Positive. What’s fifty years to me when I’m gonna live to like, two hundred and eighty? I’d rather have a human lifespan, anyway.” He smooths down Seungkwan’s hair, fluffing it and then petting it back into place by the nape of his neck. He does it almost semiconsciously, just so intent
on being close to Seungkwan and touching him somewhere that he barely notices what he’s doing, but Seungkwan lets out a quiet, happy little sigh anyway. “It was nothing to me. And it’s yours. You’re gonna be able to see.”

And then Seungkwan really does burst into tears.

“You’ll stay with me, won’t you?” he whispers once he’s finally calmed down, head resting against Vernon’s shoulder. One hand tiredly slides against Vernon’s features, the same comforting pattern over and over again, occasionally stopping to cradle his cheek against his palm for a few moments before going back and starting from his eyebrows and repeating the process again. Vernon hardly dares to breathe, but his hands tighten around Seungkwan’s waist, relishes in the touch, not sure if he’ll ever feel it again. “During the operation. I’m, um, a little super terrified.”

“I will stay,” he promises. “The whole time. Until they have to kick me out of the hospital.”

Seungkwan huffs out a soft laugh. It tickles Vernon’s collarbones. “Mom’ll only agree to having the operation done when she’s at work if she knows you were there watching out for me in her place. You better stay, or I’ll kick your ass once I’m all healed up. I’ll be able to see where I’m kicking this time, too.”

And Vernon is silent. Contemplative. Closes his eyes and fights back a shudder when the plushy pads of Seungkwan’s fingers brush against his eyelashes, tantalizingly gentle. He doesn’t want to count these casual, intimate touches, doesn’t want to ruin the magic of the moment, but he’s been thinking and worrying ever since he came back from New Sheol, and he’s not sure how many of these moments he has left.

He waits until the operation is over, until the doctors tell him that it was a complete success and he should recover in a few weeks with absolutely no side effects. Only then does he let out a breath he can’t remember holding, texts Seungkwan’s mother to let her know that her son will be okay, and sinks back into his chair, placed firmly by Seungkwan’s bedside.

Seungkwan looks so peaceful when he’s heavily sedated and fast asleep, monitoring devices for his brain waves and magical residue levels in his bloodstream and other strange mechanical natures blipping softly to the rhythm of his steady heartbeat. Vernon gives himself a moment of weakness, one of the many he falls victim to around the boy he loves, and by today probably the last he will ever have. He takes Seungkwan’s hand, as carefully as if he’s handling a small child, making sure that his claws don’t dig too hard into his skin. He rubs the pad of his thumb carefully against his palm, watches the rise and fall of Seungkwan’s chest, and desperately tries to remember every single detail of this moment so he can hang onto it forever.

He’s not sure if he’ll ever see Seungkwan again after this. It’ll break his heart to not be able to be with him, sure, but for Seungkwan to gain his eyesight and look at him for the first time and to have that risk—that possibility—of finding Seungkwan staring at him with the same horrified expression as everyone else, will probably kill him. And he’s too much of a coward to risk it.

He cries when he’s sure nobody is around to see it, lets hot fat tears fall and stain the bedsheets a faint iridescent blue. Sofia was right, he suddenly thinks. Life isn’t fair at all. It’s not fair for Vernon to fall in love for the very first time at the age of nineteen and to have to walk away from it all voluntarily, just to save him the extra heartbreak.

He wipes away the blue stains on his cheeks and gives Seungkwan’s hand one last squeeze before he leaves, leans down to brush his lips almost fearfully against smooth and unmarred knuckles. And that, he hopes when he walks away, is the last he’ll ever see of the boy he loves.
Summer has arrived, and with it, heat waves and scorching sunny-side-up yellow skies and royal red flowers that ooze nectar just outside his bedroom window. Vernon would probably be sweating underneath his beanie, but luckily for him, demons don’t have sweat glands, and neither does he. He thinks. Maybe that’s another question he should add to his growing list of *Things to Ask My Dad When He Can finally Come to Earth.*

It’s been several weeks since he’s last seen Seungkwan. Three, four, slowly inching towards five. He doesn’t want to lapse into bouts of melancholy, but his thoughts always seem to come back to him: musicals aren’t the same without Seungkwan singing along next to him, coffee shops and diners don’t hold the same charm they used to, the crook of his arm that Seungkwan always held onto feels empty and weightless. He hopes his vision therapy went well; it should be over by now. He hopes he’s happy. He hopes he’s able to see all the pretty things he’s always wanted to see.

“Vernon,” Professor Hong calls out to him when class is over. He doesn’t have to say his name all that loudly: Vernon had eventually migrated close enough that he was now in the front row. It’s actually not that bad being up front—harder for people to turn around and stare at him. “C’mere for a second.”

He jumps up to the platform and pads towards the podium, where Professor Hong is putting away his notes and answering a few questions some nervous students have for him about the upcoming final. They give him a curious glance but don’t spare him much else, instead just bidding the professor goodbye and hurrying away. “What’s up, professor?”

Professor Hong smiles at him and holds up a very familiar stapled document. “Your essay. Your TA was so impressed she actually forwarded it to me. It’s truly incredible for a first-year student.”

This is unexpected. Vernon’s cheeks blush little flecks of snowflakes that he hurriedly brushes off his shirt, flustered by the praise. “I-is it, sir?”

“He had migrated close enough that he was now in the front row. It’s actually not that bad being up front—harder for people to turn around and stare at him. “C’mere for a second.”

He flips through some of the pages. “As a half-demon yourself, you are in a very interesting situation, Vernon. You live in the human world and are more or less raised as a human, yet you are also able to understand the demon side of things more than any full-blooded human negotiator ever could. You will never fully be one or the other, but,” he smiles at him, “I think being a half-blood gives you more potential for change than anyone else in the world.”

He doesn’t know what to say. His throat bobs for a moment, struggling to speak, because somehow everything that Professor Hong just said to him has answered every question he’s had in his life. What exactly was he, a demon or a human. If he could ever be accepted into either community. What he could do with his life, what he could become looking like this.

“I just,” he chokes out, “kept thinking … there has to be a way for humans and demons work together. If my parents could do that, if they could get over their prejudices and fall in love, why can’t the rest of the world?” He falters. “Is what. I. Was thinking of. While writing the essay.”

Professor Hong is quiet for a moment, the open handsomeness of his face quizzical and calm as he snaps his briefcase shut. Finally, he looks back at Vernon and says, “The truth of the matter is that the world is still scared of demons. We humans have a talent of lashing out when we are frightened by things we don’t know, things we don’t like, things we think aren’t pretty. So even
“now, even after years of working together, why do you think we are still afraid?”

“Uh, I dunno.” Professor Hong’s eyes twinkle and he wonders if this is a trick question that counts for marks. “I think it’s because we don’t understand each other.”

“I think so, too. And do you remember what I said to the class when we were discussing negotiations?”

“All negotiations start with common ground?”

“Precisely. So what does that mean to you?”

“It means, um … it means …” He looks down at his hands. Human hands with splintering demon skin and claws. A horrific mashup of both sides of the same story, a story of two people meeting and coming together, regardless of differences. A monstrous skin that, despite its ugly features, is nevertheless a body made from love. He thinks he understands now. “I’m that common ground.”

“You could be, Vernon. I really think you could be.” Professor Hong looks around at the empty hall. “Listen, as a professor I really shouldn’t be showing any preferential treatment. But I would like to send this to a few journals, see if they’re interested in publishing your essay. It’s a little rough around the edges, but a few more years of writing essays will polish your skillset nicely. And if you are interested in majoring in otherworldly studies, it would be a great honour if you were to work on your thesis with me.”

Ten minutes later, Vernon leaves the building with ringing ears and a happy, disbelieving buzz tingling up and down his spine. The sky is cloudy today, dismal dull purple clouds blocking the sun like giant puffy balls of liquid vapor grapes, but with the mood he’s in right now he can still find the weather to be admirable. Something has changed. He’s no longer going to college because he enjoys a couple classes and because his mother expects him to; now he has a goal, a plan in mind. He thinks that maybe, just maybe, he’s finally starting to have a future.

“Hey, Vern.”

He freezes up and then turns his head, and there’s Seungkwan, standing a few feet away. No cane. No sunglasses. His eyes are a rich, dark brown, alive with clarity and the orbit of faraway galaxies. The eyes of someone who sees every single magical thing in the world. And he’s staring right at Vernon with a hyperaware intensity he’s never had before, and Vernon realizes he can now see everything. His splintering skin, the faint bumps of the horns underneath his ratty grey beanie, his black face mask, the sunglasses hiding his red eyes.

Seungkwan looks so beautiful, so vivid, and he still looks so … so …

He can’t breathe.

“You’re really something, aren’t you?” Seungkwan says when he doesn’t receive an answer. He takes a small step closer. “This isn’t exactly a big campus. You’re good at making yourself scarce when you want to, I’ll give you that.”

He doesn’t sound angry, but he’s definitely not happy, either. Vernon swallows down the lump growing cancerously in his throat and croaks out a weak little, “You look good, Seungkwan.”

“Yeah, thanks. I have working eyeballs now.” He laughs without really laughing. It’s just a sound coming out of his mouth. “Therapy went fine, I got back to school two weeks ago. The hard part was just getting adjusted to how … bright the world is. I finally know what I look like in the mirror now.” His mirth diminishes somewhat, as his eyes turn soft. “I know what features I share with my mom now, I know that we share the same nose, the same lips, what she looks like when
she smiles. And I have you to thank for that. All because of you.”

He takes another step forwards. Vernon feels an overpowering urge to run away, to escape while he still can and while his heart doesn’t have time to mend itself. But something in the supernovas gleaming in the core of Seungkwan’s eyes somewhere compel him to stay, make him wonder—hope—pray—that this situation will turn out differently than he had feared. God, please let him have this. Even for just this one time.

“You’re really something,” he repeats. “You went through so much trouble to get me a spell only to disappear off the face of the fucking earth. You literally changed my life, and for what? To just leave me, to make me wake up and be able to see the world and learn colours and everything only to find that you’re not there, you’re gone, you don’t answer my texts or calls or anything?”

He thinks he’s going to be ripped apart, torn to shreds from the force of the hurricane swirling inside him and setting fire to all the spaces between his organs. “I had to,” he says, repeating himself when he realizes a tearful whisper isn’t loud enough for Seungkwan to hear. “I had to, Kwannie. I’m—I know it sounds stupid, but I—”

“I know why you did it, and I’m still pissed.”

“Seungkwan—”

“Let me see your face.” His voice is soft, hushed, but strong as iron. Still as stubborn and persistent as ever.

Vernon flinches like he was punched. He wants to cry, break down into shivering, wailing sobs, the kind an impulsive child would make when they don’t have anything to swallow down or hide. “Don’t make me. Please.”

“Vern—” Seungkwan chokes out a laugh, sad and wet and desperate, eyes blazing with starlight. “Vernon. You spent six months trying to get a spell for me, broke into a terrifying old Maker’s house, worked with half-fae and eccentric humans and even your own damn estranged father, all on top of travelling illegally to New Sheol. And now, now when I’m not blind anymore and I owe everything in the world to you, you won’t even let me see you?”

He makes a noise very close to a sob. The mask feels like it’s constricting, growing tighter around his nose and mouth, making it hard to breathe. “I don’t want you to hate me. Seungkwan, please, I don’t want you to look at me and—”

“And what? Be overcome with horror? Run away screaming?”

Vernon gives him a look to indicate: Yes. Yes, that’s exactly what I’m afraid of.

“Oh, for fuck’s sa—Vernon, you have done more for me than anyone else I’ve ever known. You have literally gone to Hell and back for me. Me, Vern. How could I ever, ever be afraid of you?”

He takes a step forwards, then another one, until he’s inching closer and closer and Vernon wants to back away but he can’t, he can’t move a single step, not with Seungkwan’s eyes trained squarely on his face, looking, seeing, and then suddenly they’re standing right in front of each other, close enough that every part of Vernon’s senses is suddenly alight with the fraying electrical sparks of his nerves, unable to take in anything other than the boy in front of him.

“Please.” His hands reach up, slowly, to press gentle fingers against the edges of his sunglasses. Seungkwan’s hands are shaking, Vernon realizes, but he doesn’t know from what. He hopes it’s not fear. Fuck, please don’t let it be fear. “Please let me see you.”

He can feel tears burning the backs of his eyes, beginning to well up in his ducts, his vision
It’s a slow process, intentionally done so, and somehow it feels filthily intimate—more than kissing, more than sex, more than hushed I-love-you’s against bare skin or slow dancing in the dead of night in someone’s backyard. Seungkwan removes his sunglasses, carefully folding them and tucking them into the front of Vernon’s shirt. Then he pulls off the beanie, taking a moment to ruffle black hair as it fizzes from static electricity and run his hands gently around gnarled horns. And finally, he takes off the mask. Unhooks it from one ear first, then the other, before pulling it away and folding it into his pocket.

He stares. And stares some more. Vernon watches and waits for the moment where the disgust creeps into his expression, or the fear, or even just an apathetic, reluctant acceptance of his looks, a sort of oh, so that’s what you look like, which could possibly be even worse. Instead, Seungkwan runs his fingers carefully over Vernon’s features, the touch as light as moth wings, the way he’s always done. First over his eyebrows, then brushing against his eyelids. Across his cheekbones. Down his nose. And against his lips and fangs, the same as before, the same as all those other times he’s tried to envision Vernon’s face, like he needs to remember what it felt like when touch was the only way he could see his friend, when his world was a void.

“My Vernon,” Seungkwan declares, his voice barely above a whisper. His hands are quivering, or maybe his lips, or maybe Vernon’s the one shaking and he just doesn’t know it. It’s probably an all-of-the-above type of answer. “It’s really you. Idiot. How could I ever be scared of my Vernon?”

And finally, he knows. The realization, the relief, blossoms inside of his chest cavity like golden flowers and honeycomb kingdoms, until he thinks he really might start sobbing in the middle of the street. Seungkwan won’t look at him the way other people do. Seungkwan won’t reject him, won’t leave him. He’s staying. Even after seeing his face in its entirety, he’s staying right here. And he isn’t the only one, either; it’s Seokmin and Soonyoung, it’s Seungcheol whenever he stops by the city, it’s Jihoon at check-in and the half-fae Junhui and Professor Hong. And if they can see past his half-demon looks, then so can others. Vernon finally understands that he can make that happen. He can carve a life for himself into the surface of this cold, hard earth and make gentle things grow. He can find more people who love him for who he is and not abandon him for what he looks like, and once he surrounds himself with those people everyone else’s words won’t matter anymore. He can build a fortress to protect his fragility and he can be strong enough to protect his people and he can bare himself, bones and scars and all, for this boy, this one beautiful, precious boy, and they can be happy. He can make him happy.

He carefully, ever so cautiously, rests his hands against Seungkwan’s waist, lets his fingers curve naturally into the dips and swells of the soft body beneath his shirt, and he lets out a meek little, “I’m so sorry.”

“For what?” Seungkwan’s hand is resting against his cheek, thumb pressing softly against the cracks in his skin, rubbing little circles as though he can make them smoother and soften them out so they don’t bother Vernon as much. “For ditching me after the operation when you said you wouldn’t? For avoiding me for weeks? For not trusting me?”

“All of the above.” Seungkwan laughs, which of course makes him laugh too. Seungkwan’s eyes hungrily trace the movement of his lips, following every shift in his facial muscles like he wants to etch the shadows of it into the walls of his brain, and it’s almost funny how weird it is to be the recipient of this kind of look, a look so intense that it makes him feel like he’s wanted, and—holy shit—he only just now realizes that it’s totally the exact same look Vernon had given him the first time they met. A look that implies he’s a starving, dying, broken man, and the person standing in
front of him is an angel, his glorious salvation. “Do you hate me for ditching you?”

His glorious salvation cocks his head and gives him a playful pout. “Angry, yes. Rather furious, actually. I don’t know how long it’ll take for me to forgive you.”

*That* makes the smile fall from Vernon’s face. He’s immediately concerned, unsure whether he was being serious or not.

But then Seungkwan laughs again, and before either of them can say anything he leans in and presses his lips against Vernon’s. In a perfect moment of pathetic fallacy, the clouds in the sky part and fat beams of sunlight stretch down the street, ricocheting off windows to dazzle the whole world. The pavement beneath their feet glitters like graveyards for diamond shards. The world is wonderful. Seungkwan is wonderful. And Vernon … well, he can’t go that far, but maybe someday he can say the same for himself and he will mean it.

“But,” Seungkwan says when he ends the kiss and pulls away, grinning with wild, joyful delight at the dumbstruck look on Vernon’s face, “it’s hard to hate someone so beautiful.”

If you were to walk down the street and happen to see two boys, hand in hand, you might be a little shocked.

One of the boys is human. His hair is sweet strawberry jam, because he likes the taste, but eventually it might be a wheat-field yellow, or coffee-grains brown, or his natural colour, something dark and wholesome and carefree. He doesn’t wear sunglasses, and he doesn’t carry a cane, but the way he looks at the world sometimes in such undisguised amazement—such as when it starts to rain and the sky turns into a glorious lightshow of neon pinks and brilliant blues, or when the sun encases itself into a crystalline cocoon and the entire city shines like multi-faceted gemstones—gives you the faint impression that he used to.

The other boy is a half-demon hybrid. He’s alarming to take in at first glance, with horns like the jagged stumps of trees that know more secrets than you do and red eyes that he takes after his father. His mouth is a haphazard nuclear site of fangs and regular human lips, and his skin is cracking in places like shattering glass. One look at his clawed fingers and you might wonder how the human boy could hold the hand of someone like him without any trepidation.

But then you might see the half-demon talking as you pass them by. He talks like he’s a young boy again—excited, animated, sometimes rising in volume when he gets worked up only to fall back to normal tones with a sheepish grin of embarrassment. He talks like he has been broken by the world and is starting to repair himself again, bit by bit, each puzzle piece being carefully put back together until he’s whole and new. You might hear him talking about his dad finally moving to the human world and living with them, and that they’re starting to become a family again, making new memories to fill up the empty spaces that they missed over the years. You might hear him talking about his major, about his thesis on more concrete human-demon relationships and his research under the dedicated, affectionate tutelage of his favourite professor. You might hear him talking about his sister, or his mother, or any number of his friends. He talks quite a bit, as though he only just realized he’s a person with a lot to say, as though he only just found someone who’ll listen.

And you’ll see the human boy watching him as he speaks, fondness in his eyes and affection in his smile, and the way he looks at him is like the hybrid isn’t half-demon at all, but instead something better, something greater. A person who loves, fiercely, vibrantly, and without any fear, and is loved equally as fiercely in return.
And as the two of them talk and laugh and smile and walk, hand in hand, down the street, you might see the look of pure adoration on the half-demon’s face as he says something that makes his human boyfriend laugh, and you might find him a little less disturbing.

You might see the glass palaces and fireworks displays that, together, they create and tear down and build back up again in their eyes every time they look at each other and think that, subjectively, the two of them are rather beautiful.

End Notes

This story was inspired by an OTP prompt I saw on tumblr about half demons and blind friends, and very, VERY loosely on Beauty and the Beast. It was originally meant to be a fun little story, but as usual it quickly became much more than that for me.

Vernon's treatment as a "hybrid" and his struggle with identifying as either a human or a demon is a fairytale exaggeration of common issues I've seen and experienced being mixed: the fetishization of classically pretty mixed people, hence half-faerie Junhui and his distaste over being called "exotic"; the disdain some people have over some mixed-races, especially if they're an uncommon pair; and the trouble with trying to identify as one or the other or nothing, never quite belonging to one side and not exactly fitting in on the other. It has taken me a long time to find a cultural identity I am comfortable with, and despite everything I enjoy having a unique blend of Western and Eastern ideologies, of growing up in a family that barbecues one weekend and cooks hot pot the next, a string of Chinese New Year paper lanterns hung right next to our Christmas decorations, a karaoke machine full of old Chinese songs sitting in the basement next to the TV my dad watches hockey on. In this story, Vernon hasn’t quite reached that point yet—but maybe he will, one day, and he’ll be happy too.

*EDIT: Feel free to check out my otherworldly au tag on my tumblr for fanart, worldbuilding, and more!

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