

chasing the winter moon

wedspawn

This is a work of pure fiction.

This is not real. In any way shape or form.

fic·tion (n.)

1. a. *An imaginative creation or a pretense that does not represent actuality but has been invented.*

b. *The act of inventing such a creation or pretense.*

2. a. *A literary work whose content is produced by the imagination and is not necessarily based on fact.*

b. *The category of literature comprising works of this kind, including novels and short stories.*

Just so we're all clear :::grins:::

This is a not-for-profit publication.. None of the events depicted here are real and are meant for personal entertainment purposes only.

Readers are advised materials contain Adult Sexual Content and Mature Situations.

Dedication

*To the incredible Hoshiko
for taking me out of my universe*

*And once again... still...as always,
to everyone who has ever read along
and to those who found these words later.*

Thank you for being there. So so much.

*Snookies.
Saranghae*

one

"He makes me doubt myself, Yi Mae-chang," Goo Yong Ha complained to the gisaeng pouring him a cup of soju bitters. "There are times when he looks at me and I forget that I am a man. Tell me! Is that right? Shouldn't I argue to him that he should take himself off someplace so I can never see him again? It reasons that without him near, I would retain my manhood and not quiver like a young girl when I see him."

As if to spite him, Hanseong's twilight skies were clear and bright although a storm lurked on the horizon. The tea house's windows were open to let a rare warm winter breeze clear the often smoky rooms and a brave cricket chirruped in a cluster of river rushes. A faint wind carried in the scent of the river, a fresh clean fragrance perfumed with the tang of the nearby lemon grass and Yong Ha sighed, hating that the fragrance reminded him of his wild obsession.

Beyond the tea house, a group of children were playing in the street, dodging a little girl screwing her eyes shut while they shouted out where their other playmates were standing. A splash of red fabric winked from the young girl's clothes, her dress tie bright against the duller grey of her outer robes. She shrieked when one of her companions touched her, a slightly older little boy intent on distracting her. Her shrill yelp turned to hiccups and then laughter as the boy tried to cure her of them.

Frowning deeply, Yong Ha turned his attention to the woman serving him, her extraordinary beauty leaving him as unmoved as the warm alcohol simmering on the brazier. By all accounts, Yong Ha reasoned he should be happy — at least mildly content but the ennui he carried in his heart continued to plague him despite the world's attempts to cheer him up.

"What is it, Mae-chang?" He prodded the fire with a long metal poke. "Tell me, why do I allow myself such nonsense when there is so much more to life than to worry after him?"

"I am but a gisaeng, my lord," She said, bowing her head. Her elaborate hair weave jangled as she moved, strings of metal butterflies engaged in aerial battles with the jade cherry blossoms on her hair pins. "I could not imagine having the wisdom to counsel you."

"You damn me to my ignorance then," Yong Ha quipped, a wide vulpine smile transforming his cold features. "And don't tell me tales about gisaeng and their lack of wisdom. My grandmother was a gisaeng. I've never met a more formidable and fierce woman. I am certain my grandfather passed away just to escape her. If he'd known how the world could tremble at her touch, he wouldn't have paid out her contract and married her."

"Your grandfather sounds like a wise man, my lord," Mae-chang murmured, folding down onto her shins to sit besides the reclining scholar. Her dress rustled as she moved, the yards of iridescent fabric shimmering in the soft lantern light.

She studied the young man sitting next to her. Long-limbed and pretty faced, Yong Ha was a favoured patron for many of the women at Jade Carp but none held his attention for very long. With his brightly coloured clothes and generous nature, Yong Ha was easy on the eye although at times, hard on the heart. He sampled and flitted, a teasing rogue whose smile never reached his eyes that left each of them a little heartbroken when he carried his affections to another.

Yi Mae-chung knew she would be one of those women she'd heard whispering longingly about Yong Ha. She forestalled sleeping with the scholar for as long as she could; sipping cold water to calm her arousal when

he whispered naughty things in her ear as they watched an opera performance or biting the inside of her cheek when his sensual mouth skimmed over the soft skin of her neck.

Catching Yong Ha's sidelong glance at her face made Mae-chung's heart stutter and she methodically recounted the number of spices she used in making the delicate tea one of her older patrons preferred. She'd reached the fifth ingredient when one of Yong Ha's skillful hands touched the small of her back, his fingertips working wide massaging circles over her spine. A dip into the cleft of her back and she was undone, tightening the cross of her legs to stave off the tingling sensations running down her belly and burying into the curl of her womanhood.

"You never press me for... more company, do you?" Yong Ha inched forward until his breath warmed her hands. "Why is that? Don't I please you?"

Mae-chung knitted her fingers together and slowly inclined her head to stare haughtily down at her patron, steeling her voice lest her trembling gave her away. "You please me greatly, my lord. I was under the impression I was someone you spoke to as well as someone you thought desirable."

"You are, Yi Mae-chung," Yong Ha asserted. "You are indeed."

He rolled over onto his back, nearly knocking over the soju cup. Mae-chung made a grab for it but the dainty porcelain rolled away, leaving a trail of pungent alcohol in its wake. Exclaiming softly, she patted at the puddle before it could soak into the mat, focusing more on her task than the lean-bodied young man who now found her ankle worthy of attention.

"You are a distraction, my lord," She tsked. "As well as being distracted yourself."

"He distracts me," Yong Ha sat up quickly, folding his legs under himself. Mae-chung folded the cloth, despairing her patron's moods. "I am telling you, I need to change my thoughts... change how I feel! If only I knew how."

"Who is this *he* that you speak of? The last time we spoke I believe you mentioned someone named Lee Sun Joon. Or do I have him confused with the other... what was his name? Kim Yoon Shik?"

"Mae-chung." The look Yong Ha gave her would have withered if for not the twinkle of mischief in his eyes. "The Great Secret is done for. Everyone knows Kim Yoon Shik is really Kim Yoon Hee and a woman!"

"I am certain I did not know," She said with a teasing smile. "Although I did hear something about a woman scholar at Sungkyunkwan but I did not believe it."

"Ah, now you sound like our beloved and austere Lee Sun Joon." He retrieved the cup from her lap and refilled it, weaving off her grasping hand. "No...no, I can serve myself. Sit there and look pretty as you lie to me about not knowing Kim Yoon Shik — now or perhaps always has been Yoon Hee — is really a woman."

The butterflies jingled again as she nodded. "I swear I did not know."

"I can smell a lie," He said, tapping the side of his nose. "Everyone knew. It was the worst kept secret since... well... my affection for a certain crazy person. Only Lee Sun Joon was ignorant of it. Even the blind man who peels off the dead cabbage leaves in the kitchen knew. I'm surprised it took him — Lee Sun Joon, not the blind man — so long to find out. I knew almost immediately on seeing her."

Mae-chung allowed herself a small smile at his boasting. The mimicry and arrogance were masks he wore and they often slipped in her presence, revealing the tender-hearted romantic Yong Ha hid from the rest of the world. When he peeked up at her from under his drawn lashes, she couldn't help but laugh. The comical look on his beautiful face reminded her of her misbehaving little brother.

Tapping his nose with her fingertip, she said, "So why didn't you say something?"

"Because not saying something promised to be *much* more entertaining than saying something," He replied airily, sipping at the soju. "Oh, this is cold. Can you heat this up for me again?"

"Of course, my lord." Adjusting the stoneware pot over the brazier, Mae-chung measured out a draught of soju and poured it into the heating bowl. Twisting a sprig of lemongrass into the alcohol, she stirred it carefully, allowing the leaves' sweetness to permeate the liquid. Turning to grab the soju bottle, she nearly jumped when she discovered Yong Ha pressed up against her, nearly a hairsbreadth away. "My lord!"

"Can I count on you to be discreet, Mae-chung? From one gisaeng to... well... a descendent of a particularly frightening former gisaeng?"

"I am certain she is not that frightening, my lord. Not if she is your grandmother."

"No, trust me on this. She is most frightening. But regardless, I need to hear you say that you can keep my secrets, Mae-chung." Claspng her hand to his chest, Yong Ha said, "For all that we talk and banter, I feel as if I can share with you my deepest secrets."

"You can trust me, my lord but I must ask; why not tell those you already trust?" Mae-chung struggled not to close her hand into a fist, wishing she could grab the heart she could feel frantically beating in the man's chest. She longed to soothe it, to stroke at his face until he sighed in contentment but the furious tempo had nothing to do with her and everything to do with the secrets Yong Ha kept to himself.

"Because the one I trust the most is the one who would undo me," Yong Ha whispered. "Promise me, Mae-chung. Promise me that I can tell you this one thing and it won't be spoken of beyond us."

Yong Ha's eyes were damp, nearly frantic as they searched her face, looking for any shred of sincerity or loyalty that she might give him. Unable to speak around the lump in her throat, Mae-chung nodded, murmuring a low sound she hoped sounded like assent.

"I am in love with him, my dearest almost-cousin gisaeng Mae-chung." Yong Ha licked at his lips, rubbing at his forehead as he tested for the fever he knew in his bones consumed him. "I have tried to forget him. I have tried to stop speaking to him but I find reasons to seek him out. I have done everything in my power to push him towards a woman — the infamous Kim Yoon Hee — because I knew he was — is — fond of her but then at the last minute, my treacherous nature dissembles and I sabotage any efforts I have made."

"You speak in riddles, my lord. You say you love a man when I know — know in my heart and through my body as you touch me — that you love women. You live for them. You excite them with a glance and when your fingers glide over our bare skin, we cannot help but wish for more. Yet you would have me believe that you love a man?"

"A man — a singular, exasperating man — who tolerates me at best even when he professes that he loves me as a brother," Yong Ha corrected.

"Yes, that one then," Mae-chung replied, dismissing Yong Ha's interjection with a wave of her hand. "You would have me believe that you are in love with him? Is this one of your teasings, my lord? Because I have not lain with you? I can tell you, you do not have to say such things to justify my interests or lack of. I have merely been waiting... the anticipation of being with you has... excited me during the longest and darkest of days."

"Ah see, *that* is the jest that the heart plays on us," Yong Ha said, a mournful note in his plaintive voice. "You wait because it excites you. I am with you because you do not try to seduce me like the others and at this time, I find myself longing more and more for my Exasperation than for a woman."

"My lord!" Mae-chung struggled to find something to say, unable to turn away from Yong Ha yet longing to flee the room to repair her shattering heart. "I..."

"It is not that I do not want you," Yong Ha pleaded, taking up her hands. "You are a glorious woman and any man — even my grandfather who longed never to see another gisaeng in his entire life time — would die a happy man just to have the taste of you on his mouth. I want you. My body wants you. I ache when you touch me and there are parts of my body that sing funeral songs when you take your leave of me."

"Then what is the matter, my lord?" Mae-chung cried. "What is it that turns you from me? From women? Why then? Why?"

"Don't cry, little cousin." Yong Ha wiped at her tears as they fell from her eyes, dabbing at her cheeks so as not to ruin the makeup she'd put on before seeing him. "The why of it is that no matter how much my body longs for you and to be fair, any and all women, my soul and heart belong to Moon Jae Shin and he does not want them; even if he could."



"Get out of that, Geol Oh," Yoon Hee slapped at her friend's back. "You will ruin the ink."

"Ink?" Jae Shin bent back over the burbling pot. "I thought it was stew."

"How could you think that was stew?" She frowned, picking up a stir to test the liquid's viscosity.

"I've eaten what you've cooked," He said, making a face. "It smells exactly like your stew. Probably tastes like it too."

Jae Shin easily sidestepped the slap aimed for his shoulder, ducking out of Yoon Hee's reach with a twist of his hips. Nearly knocking over a small table, he danced around its edge, keeping away from her as she chased him through the small work room.

Tiring of the game, she huffed and drew her robes in, squaring her shoulder to fix him with a glare. "I will have my revenge later."

"I think you had your revenge when I took the first bite of your bibimbap." Jae Shin laughed and held up his hands in surrender when she turned on him again. "Okay, I surrender. No more."

"Good," She sniffed, content with her temporary victory. "Now tell me why you've come by. I can't imagine it was to pick food from my table considering how poorly I cook."

"No. You have apples. It's safe to eat those." He plucked up one of the yellow-red fruit from a bowl and hefted himself up onto one of the work tables near her bubbling pots.

"Are you bored?" She eyed him.

While he'd cleaned up some since their rise to high-term scholars, Moon Jae Shin still retained his rebellious scruff, barely acquiescing to convention by wearing clean clothes and brushing his hair. On the surface, he appeared more of a brawler than a scholar but the others in their quartet knew better. Jae Shin could argue rings around them in philosophy and law and despite earning his teachers' grudging respect, refused to participate when called upon. Instead he spent most of his time listening to her argue with Lee Sun Joon and Goo Yong Ha about the complex simplicities of Confucius' teachings.

She thought of him as her older brother, as much as she loved her true brother, Yoon Shik and where others found Jae Shin's anti-social nature boorish, Yoon Hee thought of it as armour he wore to keep others from hurting his heart. The loss of his brother weighed heavily on Moon Jae Shin and despite the King's affection, the toss-and-tumble of clan politics plagued his thoughts. Only Goo Yong Ha seemed able to break a smile from Jae Shin's stern countenance but lately even the rake appeared to have lost his magical touch.

"No, I am not bored," He replied, rubbing the apple on his chest before inspecting it for bug bites. Satisfied with its health, he took a small bite, chewing at the sweet flesh. A runnel of juice rode the web of his hand and he brought it — and the apple — up to his mouth, sucking the liquid before it went any further. "Why?"

"Because you look..." Yoon Hee contemplated what to say before deciding. "You look like your skin is on too tight."

Jae Shin frowned, turning the words over in his mind, testing them out to see if they fit. He nodded once and murmured. "I... think that's a good way of seeing it. I would agree."

"Is it anything you would like to talk about?"

"How is talking about it going to make it go away?" Jae Shin asked, bristling slightly.

"Because I might be able to see a way out of your problems," She replied, sighing at his contrary nature.

"You couldn't get out of your own problems," He muttered, reminding her of the mess she'd made at Sungkyunkwan and the scandals she'd caused for their four. "How are you going to help with mine?"

"Because who else is going to listen to a grumpy badger like you?" They'd come a long way in their friendship, from grumpy dominance to a reluctant sharing and finally to an open camaraderie that allowed Yoon Hee to take liberties most people would fear to even suggest to Moon Jae Shin. "Sometimes you have to depend on friends, sunbae."

"It's my friends that have me here," He grumbled, taking another bite of apple. "Especially Goo Yong Ha."

"What has Yeorim done now?"

"Nothing," He complained, bruising the apple in his clenched fist. The meat gave under his fingers,

cracking the skin. "He's done nothing. After all of these years, he's no longer shadowing me... torturing me with his silly looks. I hate it. I keep expecting him to pop out of doorways or maybe assault me in the halls but there is nothing. It's like seeing a ghost out of the corner of my eye only to find out it is the wind pulling at a mist. It's unsettling."

"Isn't that what you wanted?" Yoon Hee frowned at him, blowing the small fire out to let the ink cool. "Haven't you always wanted Goo Yong Ha to give you more... space? Be less emotional?"

"Less emotional, yes," Jae Shin argued. "Around less, no."

"He's abandoned you? For whom?" She stopped fretting over the ink, straightening up to meet her senior's eyes. "Your Goo Yong Ha? Your Yeorim?"

"My Yeorim has abandoned me. I don't like it." A whisper escaped him and Yoon Hee almost didn't believe what she heard. "I miss him. I hate missing him."

"It sounds as if you love him," She teased. "Like when you thought you loved me."

"You were easy to almost love." Jae Shin picked at the apple's flesh, pinching off tidbits and popping them in his mouth. "You're a woman. I *knew* you were a woman, even if I couldn't have you. Even if you were — are — Sun Joon's..."

"I am not his," She declared, wagging a finger under the rumpled scholar's nose. "He is mine."

"Yours then. Pfah," Jae Shin hissed. "It's the same. You are a woman. Goo Yong Ha is definitely not a woman so I cannot love him. Not that way."

For all of her innocence in love, Yoon Hee heard the heartbreak and longing in Jae Shin's voice. Yeorim's absence unsettled him and he missed the flamboyant, outrageous flirt as if he were missing a part of his own body. "And why not? If I am proclaimed a scholar — me! A woman! Why can't you love Yong Ha? Is it so wrong for you to say that maybe — perhaps you could love someone like Yong Ha? Like your Yeorim?"

"Yes, it is wrong. For all of his flirting, he is — and always will be — a lover of women, *dongsaeng*," Jae Shin growled. "And I'm not certain if he is worth risking my life for."

Putting her hand on Jae Shin's chest, Yoon Hee cocked her head and asked, "If love isn't worth risking your life for, what is?"

"I have already been broken once," Jae Shin whispered, turning away before Yoon Hee could see the emotions spilling out of his heart and onto his face. "I can't... I won't risk myself again. Not like that. Not even for Yong Ha. I'd rather not know I could be loved by him than know that I'd never be loved by him at all."

two

A deep purple wash consumed most of the night sky. Dark clouds drenched the hillsides in an unrelenting pitch black with a promise of a cold rain lingering in the air. The young Sungkyunkwan pages scurried about the grounds, securing lanterns and tying up the long banners that flew from the school's posts.

Jae Shin looked up into the coming storm, his mouth sullen and full with regrets. Nearly an hour wasted in sitting on the cold stone steps in front of his room and despite nearly draining the full bottle of rough milk-soju he'd purchased earlier, he was coldly sober. Another glance at the rice paper screens lining the dormitory's outer walls does not settle his troubled mind. The one room his eyes kept returning to remained dark, despite the passing time and growing storm and Jae Shin found himself worrying more at the absence of its occupant than consuming the contents of his bottle.

"He is not back yet?" Professor Jung asked, approaching the younger scholar with a steady stride. "Why don't you go inside and wait for him? It will be storming soon. You will freeze the rain to your face with such a cold look."

The younger man glanced at his teacher before taking another sip of his drink. Swishing the soju through his teeth, he swallowed and said, "*Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.*"

"Impudent boy," Jung tsked. His delicate fondness for the problematic scholar shone in his eyes despite the stern frown he affected. "Quoting Confucius at me to mask your stubbornness. I should deduct a point from you purely for abuse of your learning."

"*Better a diamond with a flaw than a pebble without.*" Jae Shin returned, lifting his bottle in salute.

"More impudence." Jung took the vessel from his student's hand, wiping at the mouth before taking a sip and handing it back.

Jae Shin scowled at the gesture, sniffing impolitely. "I am not sick."

"No but I do not want to swallow any of your stupidity," The professor replied, making a face at the taste in his mouth. "Why not drink fire for all the good that bottle will do you?"

"Because I cannot get fire to pour into my mouth." He shrugged, his attention helplessly drawn back to staring at the screens. "I am fine, sunbae. The storm will be nothing compared to the cold inside of me."

"There are those of us who are worried for you, Moon Jae Shin. Despite your ignorant ways and rebellious attitude, you show great promise." Jung followed Jae Shin's gaze and his frown grew. "Of Goo Yong Ha, I cannot make that same claim."

"There is nothing wrong with Goo Yong Ha!" Jae Shin slid from his seat, firming his stance to stand against his professor. "The Joseon should beggar themselves to bring him to their side."

"While it is good to stand for friends, standing against a mentor who merely speaks his mind is not," The professor said, clasping his hands behind his back to regard the young man in front of him.

"If you are asking for an apology, I will not give it," The young man warned. "Not for speaking of my...friend."

"Then I wish for less people to speak their minds of Goo Yong Ha in your presence, lest your life become a battlefield." Professor Jung inclined his head, subtly offering an apology for offending the hot-tempered scholar. "Regardless of the fire that keeps you warm inside, stay out of the winter storm. I do not want the pages to spend the morning picking your lifeless body out of the ice."

Jae Shin grumbled under his breath as the man walked away, drinking once more from the ceramic bottle. Despite his repeated urgings, there was no sign of Goo Yong Ha and from the hurried scrambling of the university staff, if the young scholar did not pass through the gates soon, he'd find himself as locked out of Sungkyunkwan as the storm.

"What is it, Yeorim?" Jae Shin murmured, reaching inside of his jacket to finger the length of beads he'd once taken from Yong Ha's head cover. "Why do you stay away? What have I done to make you hate me?"

The string of amber were flecked with mahogany strands and despite his unwillingness to acknowledge his affection for the man, Jae Shin couldn't help himself from cutting the bead strand off with discreet slices of his palm knife. A twist of his wrist and the beads were secured in his hand before Yong Ha knew they were missing. He'd cried out over their loss a few minutes later, scouring the dirt street where they'd come but eventually agreed with Jae Shin they were lost and irretrievable.

Much like Yong Ha appeared to be to Jae Shin's heart.

The amber warmed under his touch, something that startled Jae Shin the first time he'd ran them through his hand but a few bits of research reassured him the stones' response was normal. What wasn't normal, the scholar surmised, was *his* response to them. When held up to the light, he found them to be the colour of Yong Ha's eyes and when he daringly licked at one with the flat of his tongue, he imagined the sweetness of the man's pale skin lingered in the taste of the bead.

He'd jerked the strand away from his mouth then, as if the bead had burned his tongue and refused to allow himself to repeat the action although a part of him longed to do so. Consigned to his pocket, the bead strand was one of his most treasured, and private, possessions.

If he could not have Yong Ha, he would at least carry a piece of the man with him to ward off the strange thoughts lingering in his mind.

"You drive me insane, Yeorim," Jae Shin said to the lightless screen wall over his shoulder. "You make me think of things.. things that I want to do to you...with you and I am shamed for having those thoughts. I don't even know what to do with them. It's all so unfamiliar. It's nothing I can shove aside or learn about because no one — no one dares speak of such things out loud."

"Do you not know what you do to me, Goo Yong Ha?" He sat down, turning his back to the man's empty room. "Why is it my body aches for you? What is there that two men can do? How do these thoughts conspire to steal my sleep? And why aren't you here where I can see you... so I know you are safe in this storm? I know how you hate to be cold. Why do you tempt my anger in staying out?"

"And why do you tear my heart by staying away?" Jae Shin hated to admit the truth spreading through his soul. He missed the man's teasing touch and worse, need to feel Yeorim's body pressing against his in a casual hug that lingered a moment too long for propriety.

The university grounds shimmered like dyed silk dipped into clear water and Jae Shin blinked away the hot tears threatening his vision. Banging his head against the column behind him, he tried to shake the loneliness growing in him, a desperate emptiness that seemed to swallow his senses, drowning him with the want of a man he couldn't have.

"They... kill men who want... who are depraved enough to want another man's touch," Jae Shin reminded himself. "Do not forget Crown Prince Sado, Yeorim's Geol Oh. *Geum-dong-ji-sa* be damned. It is one thing to die for one's country but another to die merely for the loving of men? If a King would order his own son — his only prince — to death for that perversion, what chance do I have to survive this? They lie to us and tell us of a madness that never was and of murders with no victims when there remain whispers of his needs. Foul needs that led to ... the only honour he had left to him."

Taking a deep breath, Jae Shin let the cold winter air shock his lungs, hoping it would soothe the heat of his heart. His tears fell, running down his smooth cheeks and into the sleeve he'd tucked the beads into to keep them warm.

The moon slid from the clouds, determined to take back the night stolen from it but the storm fought back,

swallowing the silver light. It argued still, a gloaming touching on the crystals hidden in the winter clouds until the sky above Sungkyunkwan shimmered with a liquid glow.

Allowing himself one final glance at Yong Ha's rooms, Jae Shin drained the last of the soju and heaved the bottle at a nearby plaster wall, reveling in the crack of the stoneware as it shattered. Wiping at his face with his sleeve, he retrieved the beads from their hiding place and cast his arm back, willing himself to throw his forbidden treasure away.

His arm staggered back then forward twice, each time his hand refusing to release its grip on the long beaded string. The amber burned in his palm, nearly as much as the kiss Yong Ha once placed there when Jae Shin blistered his hand in archery.

Burying his knuckles into his mouth, Jae Shin choked by his cry and rocked in place, wishing for the storm to descend and take his breath from him, willing the winter to steal his life from him if only to stop the pain he felt. The cold descended and bit into his face, streaking it red where the wind cut close to his skin.

Swallowing his injured pride, Jae Shin climbed the steps, toeing off his shoes before opening the door to his own room. The beads cut into his skin but he refused to let them go, letting the pain remind him of his unwanted love.

"For you, Goo Yong Ha, I would climb into a thousand rice chests," Jae Shin sobbed, cutting his voice down to a husky whisper. "Even knowing that you prefer women. Even knowing that you could not want someone as poor in spirit as me. Even knowing that I could never give you the satisfaction of a man's pleasure. If that is what you would ask of me, I would do it. All you have to do is ask."

"I can only live for the day when you ask me to die for you... for loving you," He murmured as the sky opened up and the winter began its furious assault. "But I know... you *never* will."



The sleet struck Yong Ha, severing the warmth from his skin as quickly and ruthlessly as a butcher cut a lamb's throat. He'd remained at the yard's entrance, affixed in place by the presence of Moon Jae Shin at his doorway.

He watched as the scholar finished off a bottle of soju then winced when Jae Shin violently threw the bottle at the wall. The shards flew wide and even from the great distance between the portal and the dormitory, Yong Ha could see one of the sharp pieces bounce back and slice at Jae Shin's face. The splash of blood on the man's tanned cheek startled Yong Ha and he stopped himself from crossing over the winter-dry grass to touch at the wound.

"He does not want you to touch him, Yeorim," He scolded himself, wrapping his robes tight about his willowy body to fend of a chill that had nothing to do with the winter storm trying to devour him. "Remember that! Be firm in that!"

There was a beaten down quality in Jae Shin's shoulders as he climbed the steps to his now private room. A quick shush of the door screens and Jae Shin was gone from his sight, hidden behind white thick paper and wooden frames. Yong Ha waited a moment, hoping the man would fire up a lantern to give himself light but the room remained dark and silent.

"If I know you," Yong Ha muttered as he picked his way across the dying lawn now being buried by small slushes of frozen water. "You are lying on the cold wooden floor and not in the warmth of bedding. Why? Because you are stubborn and refuse to accept any of the comforts we — the civilized — have worked so hard to develop. Instead, you will root about on the floor as if you are a pig looking for a treat in the emptiness of your soul. Which you will not find! Because it is empty!"

He reached his room before another burst of cold could be released from the storm, barely getting his shoes off and out from the elements as the half-frozen rain began in earnest. Shivering, Yong Ha hurried into his space, his fingers trembling as he lit a small brazier for warmth. The kindling caught slowly and he blew on them, trying to ignite surrounding coals. When the edges of the packed logs turned red, he hunkered down and watched the fire long enough to reassure him that it was steady enough to be left before standing to

disrobe.

Shedding the expensive silk he'd worn into the city, Yong Ha hung the discarded robes on a T-pole to shake out the wrinkles he'd gotten into the fabric. The silk smelled faintly of Mae-chung's perfume and a smear of her pale face paint marred one shoulder. Quirking his mouth in regret, he made a mental note to have the robe cleaned, not wanting the stain to set into the fabric. Settling down the front of the robe, he pursed his mouth when a long twist of lemongrass fell from a sleeve pocket.

"Ah, from the tea house," He chuckled, picking up the leaves. Setting it aside for the moment, he tugged down his bedding, spreading out the thick mattress and linens. Grabbing the grasses, he snuggled down into the blankets, pulling off his stockings with a deft twist of his long toes. Wriggling his feet, he pulled his arms out from under the coverlets and held the lemongrass up, staring at it thoughtfully.

"You look a little bit like my Geol Oh with that rough tuft at the top," Yong Ha said to the bundle, turning it around in his hands. A quick rearrangement of the thin string holding the bundle together and Yong Ha smiled with his craftiness. "There, now you look like a little man. Much better."

"Do you think he has enough sense to be under a blanket at least?" Yong Ha asked his simulacrum. "Or wash the blood from his face? Using soap so he will not get an infection? Do you think he will have enough sense for that?"

"What? No?" Yong Ha cocked his head as if to listen to the lemongrass man he'd made. Sighing, he patted the twist to his chest. "Sadly, I have to agree with you. It was all I could hope for that he got out of the storm. Sometimes, I wonder if I shouldn't have named him Stupid Dog instead."

The crackle of coals in the brazier startled Yong Ha and he fretted, worried now about Jae Shin and the coldness of his room floor. Nestled in a cocoon of warmth, he was reluctant to go back out but the line of blood on the man's face reappeared in his mind when he closed his eyes as did the dejected curl of his spine before Jae Shin closed the doors behind him.

"He was probably like that because he still longs for Yoon Hee," Yong Ha whispered, clenching the lemongrass golem in his hand. "Because he will always long for Yoon Hee even though Lee Sun Joon loves her."

"But he breaks the rules! All the time!" He reminded himself, turning over onto his belly. "He mocks them!"

The movement pressed his sex into the blankets, trapping his desire against the warm soft fabrics. He moved slightly, imagining first his own hand on his arousal then with a delicious fleeting forbidden longing, replaced his hand with Jae Shin's stronger one. The thought of the man's tanned fingers on his pale skin nearly brought Yong Ha to completion and he cursed himself for being as quick to excite as a first year student.

Lemongrass perfume struck his nose and he smiled, opening his hand to stare down at the crushed twist in his palm. Kissing the battered doll, he inhaled deeply, holding the scent of his enticement to him.

"Ah, little man, if anyone would dare something like this — it would be my Geol Oh." Yong Ha sighed, his longing making him weepy with desire. "If only he dared. If only he truly were *my* Geol Oh."

three

The cold crept into Jae Shin's bones and the sound of hail striking the roof in a steady pinging waves worried at his nerves. Turning over onto his shoulder, he shifted his legs up, curling into a ball to conserve his body heat. The sound of the storm rolled over Jae Shin and when a branch struck the side of the building, carried by the fierce wind, he sprang up to his feet, pacing to the door. The insulated paper felt cold on his hand and his fingers caught tightly on the panel separators, his nails cutting grooves into the hard wood.

"He's a man, Moon Jae Shin," He growled to himself. "He's been taking care of himself for years. Even before he knew you existed, Yong Ha landed on his feet like the cat he is. Rushing about to check on him like he is... some old grandmother... won't do you any good."

His mind echoed with the memories he had of Yeorim. If there was one thing the scholar hated more than being disheveled, it was being cold. He complained endlessly about the ache in his fingers and the bite of wind on his cheeks when they'd been out walking in a light snow. Jae Shin shuddered to think of the man's discomfort if actually caught in a winter storm.

He was out the door and across the walkway before the memory of Yong Ha's shivering faded. His heavy footsteps shook the wooden planks, the trembling echoing onto the frost gathering along the walkway's overhead beams. His breath misted the air on his face and after a few short strikes, Jae Shin realized he'd left his room without shoes. Looking around, he grabbed at the nearest pair of boots that looked to fit him, shoving them onto his feet.

A quick stepping run took him across the pavement and in front of Yong Ha's door. A soft glow lit up the panels of his room, turning the antique white panels to gold. Slightly relieved, Jae Shin almost turned back to his dormitory when he heard laughter come from inside Yong Ha's room.

"I'm standing in the cold worrying about him and he's in there, laughing?" Jae Shin snarled. "Knowing him, he's smuggled a woman in there too. Bastard."

Another guffaw, this one more muffled than the last, warmed the air and Jae Shin straightened, his spine stiff with outrage. Stomping up the short steps, unmindful of the muddy sleet he tracked over the upper walk, the young man grabbed Yong Ha's door panel and wrenched it aside, nearly tearing the slider off its rails.

"Geol Oh!" The flirt sat up, his covers pooling around his waist. "What's wrong? Did something happen to Yoon Hee?"

"Yoon Hee?" Jae Shin gaped. "No! Something happened to you! Did you not see the winter coming in? Did you stop and think that perhaps some people might have been worried when you did not return in time?"

"Some people?" Yong Ha slid free of his covers, standing artlessly before the other man.

And Jae Shin lost not only his breath but his mind.

Always of a more slender build than Jae Shin, the man's pale ivory underclothes accentuated his long, lean body. Raised mainly by his former gisaeng grandmother, Yong Ha moved gracefully, as if a dancer whose entire stage was the world and the disparities of their natures was never more evident than when Jae Shin was confronted by the young man in dishabille.

Normally fastidious to a fault, he often chose to be more relaxed in his own private space, undoing the knot of his hair and loosening the bindings of his underclothes before sleeping. With his shoulder-length hair down around his pretty face, Yong Ha's masculinity shone through with the strength of his features and the

glimpses of his pale, sculpted form visible through his gaping robes. The shadows on his abdomen were firm, scalloped lines of muscle Jae Shin itched to explore... to lick or ... in the faintest recesses of his mind, to stroke with fingers intent on doing other wicked things as well.

Yong Ha lifted his hands to his hair, carding his long fingers through the clove-hued strands and twisting them up, looking for one of his many topknot pins. "I am fine. Can't you see I am fine?"

"Don't." Jae Shin took a step forward, his hand trembling uncontrollably as he reached for Yong Ha's hand.

He wanted to tell Yong Ha not to draw his hair up or tighten the upper robes of his clothing. The words stuck as he tried to talk, dusty pale barbs digging into his chest and neck and Jae Shin wondered if he would die from choking on them, or worse, speak them out loud and condemn himself to Yong Ha's ridicule.

"Don't? Don't what?" The man scowled playfully at his friend, pursing his lips to one side. "The cold has driven you insane."

"I was... never mind," Jae Shin shook his head, raking his hair back from his temples in frustration. He was surprised to pull his hands away to find shards of ice clinging to his fingers and even more shocked when a steady cold drip began to course down his spine, following the line of his back until a drop hit the cleft of his buttocks. Clenching his jaw muscles tightly, he glowered at the slender man. "If you want to be found dead out in the cold, that's your business. Just let some of us know that way we can send someone to find your body in the morning when it's more convenient."

Yong Ha let his hair drop back to his shoulders, crossing over to where Jae Shin stood. His hand was warm, nearly touching Jae Shin's chilled face when the rebel jerked his head back slightly. Their eyes met, each man warring with the need to maintain control over the desires raging through them.

And each hoping they would lose.

"Did you worry about me, my Geol Oh?" Yong Ha's fingers hovered, nearly skating over the other man's cheek.

The wafting chill from Jae Shin's face bothered him as did the puffs of mist from the man's parted lips. Yong Ha longed to feel the scruff of Jae Shin's chin in his palms and taste the bitter-hard undertone of soju he knew lay on the man's tongue. His mind struggled with the realization of his longing — especially at the fearful, sour look Jae Shin gave him before he moved his face away from Yong Ha's touch.

"No." Curt and succinct, Jae Shin stepped back, taking himself out of Yong Ha's reach. He looked about for a moment before his gaze settled on the pair of ill-fitting boots he wore. "I need to return Kim Dong Ha's shoes. I took them by mistake."

Turning, he stomped out of the room before Yong Ha could respond, leaving the man standing open-mouthed and confused. Jae Shin was halfway to his dormitory when Yong Ha huffed, disgusted by the other's rejection.

"He comes here," Yong Ha muttered. "To scold me and he's half-frozen to death himself. And wearing someone else's boots."

Jae Shin's retreating back stung Yong Ha more than his cutting words and a simmering anger rose in the scholar's belly. He'd spent the evening waxing on to Mae-chung on Jae Shin's virtues while the bestial wretch wished him dead of cold. Gritting his teeth in frustration, Yong Ha crossed over to the edge of the walkway and sat down, wincing at the feel of the icy stone through his clothes. Reaching under the platform for his heavier boots, he pulled one on then the other as he recanted all of the nice things he might have said earlier that evening.

Fully armed with a high temper, Yong Ha strode across the lawn, the soft linens of his white garments dusted with a fall of light snow. His long legs carried him quickly and with none of the strolling elegance he was known for. Each purposeful step on the cold hard ground brought him closer to Jae Shin as he walked, he thought of what to say to the quick-witted young man.

"I could say; if I had half a mind, I'd gut him but then he'd respond with something snippy like *Oh, Yeorim*

— no, he'd call me Goo Yong Ha to annoy me. *Aish, Yong Ha, you don't have much mind to begin with, are you sure you can spare half of it?*"

He nearly slipped stepping on the platform stone, an ice forming in the rough cracks and Yong Ha caught himself quickly with a grab at a porch post. Shaking some feeling into his legs, he mounted the walkway, and stopped short, finding himself nearly face to face with another of Sungkyunkwan's seniors.

Kim Dae Min.

They'd passed one another for more than a year, two mongoose scraping out their territories. Coming in from a prestigious Suwon university, Kim Dae Min quickly proved to be a formidable student, climbing through Sungkyunkwan's ranks. While not as vividly attired as Yong Ha, Dae Min cut a stylist figure wearing a *jungchimak* made of a silk Yong Ha recognized as one he'd dismissed as being too muddy for his colouring. The stark burnt cherry dye against Dae Min's light gold skin complimented his striking features and brought out the deep brown of his eyes. Nearly Yong Ha's height, his thicker shoulders filled the garment out more than Yong Ha would have although its hem was soaked through from the icy slurry on the ground.

Yoon Hee openly debated — mostly with herself — on which of the two senior scholars were more of a peacock, eventually always deciding on Goo Yong Ha because it thrilled him but Yeorim secretly guessed it was closer than he'd like.

"Sunbae." Dae Min inclining his head in greeting. He glanced down at Yong Ha's apparel, his sloe eyes taking note of the man's tousled hair.

"Hardly sunbae," Yong Ha laughed off, keeping his smile tight so the other man couldn't hear his teeth chattering.

"Hyung then," He corrected, stepping back to give Yong Ha room to pass. "Are you well, hyung? You look... ravished. Would that be the right word? Please excuse my language skills. Coming from the country, I know my choice of words is sometimes... ill-placed."

"If you are comparing me to a manju, perhaps ravished would be a good word." Yong Ha frowned. He refused to look down at what he was wearing — or not wearing. Clothed only in his under-ropes, he'd effectively chased after a madman half-dressed and unkempt; not the Goo Yong Ha that Sungkyunkwan was known for. "Now if you excuse me..."

"I take it you are heading to see Moon Jae Shin," Dae Min said as Yong Ha's shoulder passed his.

Yong Ha stopped, his back towards the younger man's, facing in opposite directions. Turning his head slightly, Yong Ha glanced over his shoulder at the other scholar. "I am. Why do you ask?"

"I wondered... being relatively new to the school... if such behaviour was normal. That perhaps men of the city often chased one another across the school's inner courtyards; one half-dressed and the other in high temper?" Dae Min's smile was faint and Yong Ha tightened his fist, wanting to punch the smugness from the other man's face.

"Not always, no," Yong Ha admitted slowly. The wind was cutting into his skin and he shivered despite himself, feeling the itch of cold working up from his fingertips. "These are trying times."

"I would imagine so," Dae Min agreed. "Where I am from, such behaviour would be considered... deviant or perhaps just outrageous. But then you are known for being outrageous, aren't you hyung?"

"Say what it is you want to say," Yong Ha spat, too used to the machinations of the merchant class to have much desire to debate another scholar in the brittle cold.

"I am merely asking for guidance from one who is older and more worldly than I am. I did not mean to give offense." He turned, bowing slightly. Taking a step forward, he stopped, his shoulders firmly squared against Yong Ha. "I... am fond of Moon Jae Shin. While he is... complicated, his road is a rough one."

"I know all about Moon Jae Shin's road." The shivering began anew and Yong Ha wondered if he'd lose the use of his nose if he continued to stand in the cold any longer. "While I thank you for your concern, I don't need a country squire to tell me about someone I've known for years."

"Perhaps that is the problem, hyung," Dae Min offered. "Perhaps it is because you know Moon Jae Shin

that you no longer see — how should I put it — how familiar you are with him. Some... not myself, of course... would take your familiarity with Jae Shin hyung as something more than what it is.”

“And what do *you* think it is?” The cold in Yong Ha’s belly was no longer from the winter storm but from the cutting malevolence in Dae Min’s words. “Tell me, *dongsaeng*. Answer me that.”

“Friendship, hyung.” Dae Min’s look of innocence rivaled any that Yong Ha ever attempted and for a split second, the man believed him... until a sly smirk appeared at the corner of his wide mouth. “As I said, I would never take your familiarity any further than what it is... a close friendship grown over many years.”

“Good,” Yong Ha sniffed, his dignified response ruined by the burning red of his nose. He took two steps down the walkway when Dae Min’s voice cut through his resolve as easily as a sharp knife through a pear.

“Others might — however — view your relationship as one of... my apologies for the word, but deviance.” Smoothly, Dae Min turned, showing an outraged Yong Ha his back as he began to head to his room. “It would be a pity if someone of that nature spotted you here... like this, looking the way you do... and heading to Jae Shin’s room. That one would think you were a... *gisaeng* looking for another dalliance with her lover and not the truth of a close friendship.”

“Moon Jae Shin is above...” Yong Ha spat, crossing the walkway to grab at the other man’s arm. “He is above reproach. As am I. We have the King’s favour.”

“You misunderstand, hyung,” Dae Min didn’t look down at Yong Ha’s hand, choosing instead to meet the man’s glare with a reproachful glance that hinted at a gloating arrogance. “And yes, you might have the King’s favour but are you above reproach?”

Yong Ha recoiled, releasing Dae Min as quickly as if the man’s coat burned him. His Geol Oh’s treatment of him derailed him, Yong Ha thought, it was the only reason he’d failed so quickly at the game Dae Min played. The skillful cunning of word play edged with a sharp threat wasn’t unknown to Yong Ha but coming from Dae Min, unexpected. The young scholar in the past preferred to keep to simpler, safer games; excelling at lessons or winning at the city’s gambling houses. It appeared to Yong Ha, Dae Min was dangerously treading the line of becoming a political rival — and using his friendship with Jae Shin to force Yong Ha to give up ground.

“Neither one of us have done anything that we would need to be ashamed of,” Yong Ha said, smiling winningly at the younger man. “I don’t think you’ll find anyone who says otherwise.”

“Done? No, not done,” Dae Min agreed but the telltale shake of his head warned Yong Ha that the agreement was a conditional one at best. “But your Geol Oh — that is what he is called, no? — he doesn’t have the luxury of riches and protection that you do. Even the King’s favour wouldn’t be able to protect him if there is... evidence that he...”

“He what?” Yong Ha’s stomach left him, crawling away alongside his courage and temper.

As if reluctant to speak it out loud, he leaned forward until his mouth almost touched Yong Ha’s ear. Gesturing to Yong Ha’s undone garments and the obviously finger-combed and loose mane around his face, he whispered, barely loud enough for the man to hear. “That he is a lover of men. Because even to my unsophisticated country eyes, that is what it looks like. That you are running to your lover after a fight... a fight perhaps that began while you were — engaged in other things.”

“You dare?” Yong Ha drew himself up, casting a disparaging glance.

“I dare only because I am concerned.” Another man would have wheedled but Dae Min stood firm as if discussing the weather or the price of tea at a shop. “As I’ve said, I’m fond of Moon Jae Shin. I know some of the others are... threatened by him but I know of his intelligence. I admire him... and his fealty to you as a friend. Your manner to him is overly familiar... and could be misconstrued but he makes no effort to push you aside, instead he remains loyal. I wish I had a friend as he. It seems a steadying influence, despite his unorthodox ways.”

“Then all of this concern?” He eyed the man, careful not to let his suspicion of Dae Min show on his amiable face. “It is for Jae Shin?”

"Of course." Dae Min made a small show of straightening his over-jacket's sleeve. "You, hyung, have the merchants' association's — your family's — protection but what does Moon Jae Shin have left to him? The clan factions are still as pronounced as they always have been, despite the best efforts of the King. It will take time for those to ease up and what would happen to the brittle, fragile partnership the four of you — the Jal-geum — should someone start whispering of dark things to hurt Jae Shin, solely because you are seen like this... running towards him?"

"You dare?" Yong Ha snarled, taking a menacing step towards the other scholar and stopped as a door panel slid open behind Kim Dae Min.

A bleary eyed student looked out, rubbing at his moon-shaped face. "Dae Min hyung? Is that you?"

"Yes, Yong Ha — sunbae — has taken care to see me safe to our room. I'll be inside in a moment. Close the door. You will let all the heat out and then what shall we do?" He waited until the panel slid shut before turning to Yong Ha to say, "I am merely saying, hyung, that Jae Shin does not have the luxury of society's forgiveness that you do. That any of the other Jal-geum do. Kim Yoon Hee is sacrosanct now that she has been discovered and the King has made her a personal... pet, if you would. Lee Sun Joon is also untouchable, look at his bloodline. The courts and the King both protect him. You have the deep pockets of the merchants at your disposal, the caretakers of the court and our land's coffers. No one would move against you."

"We would stand by anything thrown at Moon Jae Shin." Yong Ha asserted, leaning in close until he was nose to nose with the other man. "I would stop at nothing to protect him."

"That is why I say, people talk. People whisper." Dae Min pointed out, turning to open the door panel. "If someone wanted to hurt the King — to hurt the imagery the four of you represent — then the one they would strike out at would be Moon Jae Shin. And you — his affectionate, flamboyant, loving friend — would be the knife they would use to geld him."



Kim Dae Min left the panel open barely wide enough to give him a view of the courtyard... and Goo Yong Ha. The senior scholar appeared to be flustered, tugging on his lower lip as he paced the walkway, stopping momentarily at Jae Shin's door before stalking off again.

"Hyung, can you move your arms?" His roommate, Kim Bon Hwa, tugged at Dae Min's jacket to help him undress. "I can't get your ties undone."

The first-year student often served as his servant, a poor second cousin now poised to become a government official through his relative's more powerful connections. Dae Min was fond of the younger man, although often frustrated at his lower intelligence but certain things could not be helped, especially considering Bon Hwa's common-born mother brought nothing to the family line but a field of cabbage and a few goats. Still, Dae Min was grateful for the younger man's companionship, especially when he needed something done and he couldn't be seen doing it.

"Leave it for now, dongsaeng," Dae Min peered out of the of the screen, watching Yong Ha pace away. "I'm busy."

"Are you watching Moon Jae Shin again?" The younger man's round face gave him a look of innocence that he didn't possess. "You've been after him for nearly a year now. Perhaps he isn't one for... your tastes."

Born in Hanseong's lower districts, he'd grown up in the gaming halls and black markets, well versed at lightening a pocket or snipping a hair pin if desired. Discovering his cousin was more worldly than he imagined was a benefit to Dae Min. Discovering his cousin had little to no morals had been a delight.

"No, he is," Dae Min corrected him, cursing under his breath at Yong Ha's hesitant manner. "I watch him with Yeorim. *That's* the problem. Yeorim."

"They've been together for over a decade, hyung," Bon Hwa said, craning around his cousin's shoulder to see out the door. "And, Yong Ha is... pretty."

"Pretty but not... accessible. That's the problem with being old friends. It's hard to change a relationship from what is to what one wants." He murmured happily when Yong Ha succumbed to the cold and his nerves

and sprinted back across the courtyard. "Yes!"

"He's gone, then?" Bon Hwa asked, unable to see past Dae Min's arm. "What will you do now?"

"Now, my dearest cousin," Dae Min purred as he removed a bottle of *munbaeju* from the cupboard. A small packet of dried apricots were tucked into his sleeve and he turned, smiling at Bon Hwa. "Now, I go to tame a wild horse."

four

"Hyung?" Dae Min scratched lightly at the scholar's panel, listening for movement inside. "Are you awake?"

Sliding the door enough to look into the room, he sighed when he spotted Jae Shin lying on his back in the middle of the floor. Still dressed in his winter damp clothes, the scholar visibly shivered when the night wind swept through the open door but his eyes remained shut.

Even by a lowly scholar's standards, the Geol Oh's room was barren of most comforts. With the help of the silvery moonlight fighting through the winter storm outside, Dae Min could make out an assortment of weapons hanging from hooks set into the overhead beams and a few spare clothes creating shadow puppets against the wall. Unruly stacks of books took up most of the surface of a low table, the piles precariously leaning against one another for support. Unable to make out much more, Dae Min stepped in and looked over the man he'd come to pursue.

With his robe slightly open to expose a wide swath of tanned chest and stomach and the slightly unkempt tousle of his hair, Jae Shin could have almost passed for a laborer, muscles honed tight from work and dusted gold from the sun. His long legs were slightly akimbo, seemingly inviting a lover to kneel between them and roam lips and hands over his body and the strong, slender fingers that Dae Min watched play with calligraphy brushes were stained with ink speckled and callused from Jae Shin's love of archery.

His handsome face and graceful, long hands saved him from appearing brutish but a feral tang lurked just beneath the surface. Dae Min dreamed of tasting Jae Shin's lips, sucking on the lower one until it plumped up against his teeth so he could bite into it. The man's thick lashes begged to be kissed and Dae Min wanted to feel them flutter open against his skin as he explored the other man's exquisite body.

Taking it all in, Dae Min's mouth watered at the sight of the other man stretched out in front of him.

"Get out," Jae Shin grumbled, not bothering to open his eyes.

His manners, however, remained guarded and sullen, Dae Min noted.

Crossing into the room, Dae Min's soft footsteps on the polished wood alerted Jae Shin to his presence and the man opened his eyes to peer up into the darkness to see who violated his privacy. They stared at one another for a moment, bereft of the moonlight's assistance and for a fleeting second, Dae Min wondered if Jae Shin would be inclined to spring up and stab him dead, thinking the scholar was an intruder intent on harm.

"Who are you?" Jae Shin sat up, resting his weight on his elbow and scowled. "Never mind. I don't care who you are. Just leave."

Smiling broadly, Dae Min offered up the *munbaeju* he brought with him, leaving the bottle on the floor by Jae Shin's legs as he hunted for something to bring light to the room. Discovering a battered brazier against the wall, he quickly located a starter and ignited kindling for the coal. Turning back around, the young man yelped in surprise to find Jae Shin standing right behind him, staring him down.

He'd never been as close to Jae Shin as he was now and despite the intense longing he'd developed for the other man, Dae Min was struck mute by the intensity of the man's dark eyes and the beauty of his face.

Rumours of Sungkyunkwan's rebellious scholar reached even the relative quiet of Suwon and Dae Min had been intrigued by the stories of the forceful young man. Contradictory tales were told and he'd longed to dig into the mystery of the school's lone wolf, only to discover the man's incredible magnetism drew him in

nearly as deeply as the whispers of his wildness.

Dae Min swallowed, twice, when he realized how close his lips were to the other man's delectable mouth.

"Hyung!" He forced himself not to step back. "You'll catch your death from the winter if you're not careful. I brought some *munbaeju* to help."

Giving way to Jae Shin would be a sign of weakness, something he learned while handling his father's birds of prey but it was a hard-won battle with instinct. Backing down from a wild animal was as good as showing it his throat and Dae Min's plans for seducing the other man would go nowhere if he didn't prove himself to be Jae Shin's equal.

At least equal, Dae Min corrected himself. Showing him that I'm his better will make it easier to have him on his stomach at the end of this little game.

"Why are you here?" Jae Shin stepped closer, his mouth partially open as if ready to take a bit of Dae Min's face. Canting his head to the side, he studied the other man in the sparse light, taking measure of Dae Min's demeanor. "And why are you remaining here?"

"I've told you, I'm here to offer you something to warm up." Dae Min chanced taking a step into the man, slightly brushing his chest against the other scholar. "You passed me outside and looked upset...and cold. I thought perhaps I could offer at least something to help keep your belly warm."

The grunt from Jae Shin's pretty mouth was low and dismissive. "Why? I don't know you."

"We have classes together," Dae Min replied, sliding the packet of dried apricots from his sleeve. "Philosophy of Law for one. I am the one sitting in front of you, blocking the teacher's view as you nap."

"Hah, you're the one with the red stitching on his shoes." Jae Shin didn't move as the man pushed past him but didn't bother to keep Dae Min pressed against the cabinet. "They look silly."

"My mother gave them to me," He said with a shrug, mentally noting never to wear those shoes again. "Red is one of her favourite colours."

"It's a good colour." He grunted again as he pulled the bottle's stopper. Sniffing at the alcohol, Jae Shin wrinkled his nose and coughed. "What is this? It smells as if you've boiled the dead in it."

"I admit, the fragrance leads a bit to be desired." Dae Min tried not to smile at the man's appraisal of his father's brewer. "But it's very good once you get past the initial taste."

"I like apricots," Jae Shin plucked the packet out of Dae Min's fingers, inhaling the dried fruit's sweet scent.

I know, Dae Min thought. I've watched you suck on the damned things until they're moist from your mouth and then nibble on the flesh. You could teach a gisaeng how to give a man pleasure with that mouth of yours, Geol Oh.

He dug through Jae Shin's linen cupboard and pulled out the rolled up bedding haphazardly shoved onto a shelf. Unfurling the mattress pad, he arranged the linens with a crisp snap of his wrists, billowing out the blankets to settle on the bed.

"I... do you listen to anything anyone says?" Jae Shin shoved Dae Min's shoulder, nearly knocking the man over. "What are... why are you doing this? I didn't tell you..."

"I think too many people listen to what you say..." Dae Min straightened his clothes, smoothing out the wrinkles across his chest. "And not enough people see what you need."

"What does that mean?" If it were possible, Jae Shin's suspicious glare intensified and Dae Min deflected the man with a casual shrug of his shoulders.

"It means that I saw you and thought, there is a man who needs a friend," He said, taking the bottle from Jae Shin. "And one that is willing to merely sit and drink with you if that's what you want."

"I don't." Jae Shin scowl. "I don't want."

"Then if you don't mind, I will sit down, drink a bit to get warm before I head back outside." Dae Min settled onto the floor, resting his behind on the mattress pad. "You can keep the apricots although I wouldn't say no to one if you wanted to share."

The heat from the brazier had yet to reach the floor and despite the thick foot coverings he wore, Dae Min

could feel the chill creep up into his toes. He heard Jae Shin shuffle behind him then a burst of heat as the other man poked at the coals to bring them fully to life. Emboldened by Jae Shin's seeming disinterest, Dae Min took a tentative taste of the *munbaeju*, forcing the potent mouthful down his throat. It burned but he swallowed a second sip, coughing slightly as he held it out for Jae Shin.

"Really, try it," He covered his mouth with his sleeve. "It's better than soju."

"Nothing is better than soju," Jae Shin murmured but he took the bottle from Dae Min and filled his cheeks with the fiery liquid.

Dae Min felt a small tinge of pride when Jae Shin slowly swallowed the drink without coughing it back up. It had taken him years to master drinking the brew without losing face and to have the other man savour the potent liquor with ease showed promise.

If he can easily take that burn, Dae Min thought. He'll be able to take other... irritations in his throat as well.

"Here," Jae Shin shoved the bottle back at Dae Min.

"It's good, then?"

"Yeah," He mumbled, sitting down on the bed pad, almost out of reach of Dae Min's touch. "It's good enough."

"It's from my family's brewery," Dae Min said, surreptitiously moving the bottle around until he saw the damp mark left by Jae Shin's lips. While the other man picked at the apricot package's tie, he placed his mouth on the spot and had his first taste of Sungkyunkwan's wild horse.

Then died a little inside when Heaven filled him for a fleeting moment before dissipating on his tongue.

He'd tasted others and had found most unremarkable with a few that lingered in his memory until someone more intriguing came along. In that single touch of Jae Shin's mouth against his, however removed, Dae Min knew he'd found the man he wanted to keep. Slightly sweet and subtly layered with a sensual hint of masculinity, the taste of Jae Shin on his tongue, in the back of his throat and through Dae Min's sense were headier than the alcohol brewed strong enough to blind.

"So you are just going to sit here and drink?" Jae Shin asked, not looking up from the apricots. A final skillful twist of his fingers and the packet opened, revealing the delicacy inside of the thin cotton pouch. He took one then after a second, held the packet out for Dae Min, taking it back after the other man selected one.

Jae Shin did not disappoint him. After an initial nibble on the fruit's red tipped edge, he sucked on it, dangling the round between his teeth and down his lip while holding it between his fingers. The wrinkled blush-golden fruit curled around the man's tongue as he toyed with it, looking so much like the helm of another's glans that Dae Min forced himself to look away before he pushed Jae Shin down on the bed pad and took the apricot's place.

"Just long enough to get warm." Dae Min made not to let the glee he felt show as he listened to the wind howl outside. In the short amount of time since he'd sat down, the storm kicked up and swallowed the moonlight whole, tossing the room into a darkness only warded off by the small brazier's fire. "Although it sounds like I'd be taking my own life if I go outside right now. Is Hanseong always like this in the winter?"

"You're not from here?" Jae Shin looked up at the man through his hair. "You look like you're one of the spoiled brats from the hills."

"No," Dae Min laughed. "I'm from Suwon. Far enough away to be considered provincial by some of the others around here."

"Others?" His scowl told Dae Min how little Jae Shin thought of others' opinions.

"Yes," He said, innocently nodding as he sipped the brew before handing the bottle back over. "Sunbae — Goo Yong Ha — I think he feels I'm some poor country rat who was caught on a ship heading up the river only to jump off at the docks instead of waiting to go back home."

A fiery gleam in Jae Shin's eye warmed Dae Min's heart. The ember burst into a tiny flame when the man said, "Goo Yong Ha spends too much of his time minding other people's business and too little on his own."

"Ah, but he..." Dae Min cast his eyes down, prolonging the stretch of time between his words. "He is well

liked ... and he has you, a good friend. I came here with my cousin, Bon Hwa... who is nice enough but ah, I worry that he'll barely pass the courses much less excel at any testing."

"Is he stupid? How did he get in then?" His cheeks flushed pink from the *munbaeju*, Jae Shin braced himself with a palm down on the mat. "They were supposed to stop the cheating."

Leaning towards the other man, he let his fingers linger on Jae Shin's as he took the bottle back, stroking at the man's hand before drawing away. He barely brought the bottle up to his mouth, closing his lips tightly as he had the other three times he'd taken the *munbaeju* back and mimed a deep gulp, pulling the bottle away and shivering as if he were working to get the brew down.

"He is smart enough," Dae Min said softly. "Just...not wise enough. I've noticed, hyung, that so many students are quick to memorize what they need to know but can do so little to apply it. Bon Hwa is one of these. I... miss some of my fellow students in Suwon. We could sit for hours and debate the simplest of things. Here, I find I'm... lonely for that kind of company."

Jae Shin's grunt was a soft assent of agreement that spurred Dae Min on.

"To tell the truth," He whispered, low enough to make Jae Shin lean in to hear him. Shifting over until his knee touched Jae Shin's thigh, he kept his face down, a shy seductive purr to his voice. "I came here to... hope perhaps that you'd..."

Dae Min trailed off, picking up again only when he saw the curious purse of Jae Shin's mouth. "I've been through the library and I've noticed... that you've read so many of the texts there. So in turn, truthfully, that I'd be able to... find that kind of friendship here at Sungkyunkwan...with you."



The storm tore at the school for three days, keeping many of the scholars locked up tight in their own rooms. During that time, Yong Ha briefly ventured out of his door, stopped short by the frozen white landscape stretching out to cover most of the buildings. A thin stretch of the walkway had been cleared that morning by one of the pages, the swept area on wooden planks barely wide enough for a man to walk. On the third day of his confinement, Yong Ha felt he was about to go out of his skin and vowed to venture outside no matter how dreary the weather. Bundled up against the cold with his thickest jacket, Yong Ha debated sprinting across the now covered lawn to see what Jae Shin was doing when he spotted Kim Dae Min coming out of his friend's room.

Jae Shin emerged the room as well, standing in the threshold with an uncharacteristic look of contentment on his face. The men appeared to exchange a few words, an obviously friendly banter evident even from across the yard. Nodding at Dae Min, Jae Shin turned as if sensing Yong Ha's eyes on him. The man's gaze met the other's and lingered for a brief moment then he returned to his room and shut the door behind him. Dae Min glanced in Yong Ha's direction and offered the older student the briefest of nods before continuing down the walk towards his own room.

"What the...?" Yong Ha growled and took a step off of the walkway to demand an explanation from either Dae Min or Jae Shin.

And immediately went feet first down into a snow drift that nearly buried him up to his chest.

"Yong Ha!" He heard someone shout and then the world tilted back and grew solid again as he was tugged on from above.

Warm hands reached under his armpits, yanking him free of his frozen prison. Blinking, Yong Ha tried to focus on the face of the man carrying him into his room but only got a brief glimpse of a scholar's robes and *gat* before he was thrust inside the dim quarters. Strong hands stripped him of his outer jackets and pushed him down into the relatively comfortable warmth of the bedding he'd left on the floor. Shivering, he wrapped his arms around himself and curled up, heartily wishing the cold out of his bones.

Bringing the blankets off of his face, Yong Ha swallowed his disappointment on seeing Lee Sun Joon holding a cup of steaming soju a few inches from his face.

"Sit up, hyung. If we can get some of this in you, you'll feel better."

The honorific seemed out of place considering the young scholar had just saved him from a certain chilly death but Yong Ha nodded willingly as Sun Joon helped him raise his head to take a sip. The first taste burned more than it should have and Yong Ha felt his tongue go numb from the scald. Not about to refuse another sip, he drank again, deeper this time to get the warmth further into his body. Satisfied, Sun Joon lay him back into the bedding and crouched down next to him.

"If you crawl in here with me," Yong Ha chattered. "I wouldn't toss you out. Your girlfriend might have something nasty to say to me but she'd hardly be one to talk about sleeping with strange men."

"I am going to pretend that you did not say that so I don't have to repeat it to Yoon Hee." The scholar's serious face held a hint of mischief, making Yong Ha smile. "I would have hated to save you only to have her kill you. It would be a waste of my efforts."

"Your efforts are never a waste, Garang." Yong Ha felt at his face, making sure his lips were still attached to his face. He sheepishly met the other man's thoughtful gaze and asked, "Did Geol Oh see me fall?"

"Perhaps," Sun Joon cocked his head, thinking back on his memory of the scene. "No, I don't think so. I don't think anyone but myself was around."

"Thank Chungryong for its small gifts." Yong Ha laid back, relieved at the thought. "And for you as well. I would have frozen to death otherwise."

"The snow wasn't that deep, hyung," Sun Joon remonstrated. "You could have pulled yourself out."

"No, no." Yong Ha waved off the objections. "Frozen solid. I was too shocked with the winter trying to consume me alive to fight back. You are definitely my saviour. A much better friend in time of need than a certain horse we both know."

"Ah, that is why I am here actually." Sun Joon sat down, crossing his legs.

"What?" Yong Ha sat up, keeping the blankets close to his body to keep the warmth in. "What about Geol Oh?"

"I came to ask you..." Sun Joon glanced at the door as if suspecting someone lurking nearby. "How well do you know this Kim Dae Min that hyung is spending so much time with? And is it true that you are avoiding Moon Jae Shin because you think he is... a deviant?"

five

Jae Shin fingered the scrap of paper slipped to him during his midday meal. Like many of the other scholars, the break in the middle of the day meant a hastily eaten bowl of leftovers from the night before and rice, with the barest minimum of panchan. He'd barely dipped his chopsticks into a dish of heavily spiced cabbage when a blue liveried page appeared at his elbow.

Meet me at the funerary. Before fifth session. — Kim Yoon Hee

After a few blustery storms, winter settled in to stay, paralyzing most of the city with an icy grip. Sungkyunkwan was not spared, sharing the city's misery behind its frozen walls. Outside of the funerary building, icicles fought wars along a tall pine tree as the wind picked up, slashing the ice shards against one another to fill the air with a tinkling discord.

He'd already decided to duck out of the fifth session before Yoon Hee sent her note and the missive only sealed his determination to skip out on Civil Responsibilities towards the Lower Class.

The ink smeared under his touch, the paper damp from the moisture in the air. Fidgeting, he paced off in the small open space in the middle of the structure, keenly remembering the first time he'd found himself outside of the building's wooden doors and discovered the young man he'd grown fond of was actually a woman.

He couldn't have been more shocked than if he found out Yong Ha lusted after him.

The door opened behind him and Jae Shin slid back into the shadows, unsure if it was Yoon Hee or one of the university's scholars coming to check on the deads' belongings. The person coming through the door wore a gat and Jae Shin frowned, soaking into the darkness.

"Geol Oh?" Yong Ha called out, peering into the shadows. "Are you here?"

The young man was as brilliantly dressed as usual, this time in a bright violet and golden ensemble that seemed nearly sacrilegious in a place where the dead were prepared but the solemn look in his sad eyes seemed mournful enough for any funeral. Always delicately handsome, Yong Ha's expressions seemed to border on childish until an observer got to his eyes. There was no child-like innocence behind that wicked, amber flecked gaze and his sharp tongue and keen wit often skewered many an unsuspecting scholar intent on undermining the society-savvy young man.

It hurt to look at him, Jae Shin realized. Even as the days stretched between them, kept apart by time and circumstance, Jae Shin knew every inch of skin on the man's face and could almost feel the weight of him against his arm. So much of their lives were spent knitted together, sometimes loosely and in times of strife, tighter but Yong Ha was a constant, as much of a part of him as the moon was to the night sky.

He'd spent hours with Dae Min, listening more than talking as the young man chattered about their studies and different interpretations of philosophies. In all of the time he'd spent with the other scholar, Jae Shin often thought of Yong Ha and wondered if he would share some of Dae Min's views or merely laugh them off as naïve prattle. The flirtatious scholar was known for his cutting wit and suffered fools only long enough to lead them into a false sense of security; more likely to prick at Dae Min's wandering thoughts than encourage them.

Jae Shin now wondered if he'd been one of those fools.

"Yong Ha?" He took a hard look at the piece of paper with Yoon Hee's message. Flicking the paper up for

him to see it, Jae Shin asked, "Did you make him — her — write this?"

"I asked her, yes," Yong Ha admitted. "I wasn't sure if... I sent you a note that you would come."

"Why?" The man narrowed his eyes and stalked around the low shelves piled with incense cones and scrolls.

"I wasn't sure if... you'd be here for me. Especially if I asked."

"When have I ever not been there... here for you? You have to lie to me now? We've come to lies between us?" Jae Shin's rage took over him, turning his vision nearly red with a misplaced anger. Yong Ha was back to his old games; games he played before Sun Joon and Yoon Hee entered their lives.

For all the playful teasing between them, Jae Shin knew he was an embarrassment to the other man. Yong Ha never seemed to understand his unease at the fripperies Yong Ha embraced and as Jae Shin turned away from the more elaborate clothing the others wore in a display of wealth, the scholar seemed more resigned to Jae Shin's wearing of darker cottons than supporting his desires. The differences of their outward philosophies hadn't mattered at the time. Jae Shin knew Yong Ha was sympathetic to many of his causes but now Jae Shin pondered if the other man hadn't just been humouring him, stringing him along while Yong Ha manipulated the others around them.

They would rarely meet in the open, something Jae Shin hadn't minded at the time considering his dislike of crowds and Yong Ha hadn't seemed to mind, fueling the wild reputation Jae Shin encouraged to shield himself from others. Being Yeorim's Geol Oh served him for many years, affording him a respite from the demands of an aristocrat born to serve a land's court rather than its people.

But was he just another weapon in Yong Ha's social armory? Jae Shin asked himself. Or did Yong Ha actually have affection for him...however slight...however undeserved?

"I haven't seen *you* lately," Yong Ha snapped back. "You've been distant. I haven't seen you in nearly two weeks and every time I get near you, you find some excuse to get away."

"Do you expect me to be at your beck and call whenever you snap your fingers at me?" The simmering anger in Jae Shin's voice erupted, growing louder with each step he took towards Yong Ha. "I have always been there for you. Can you speak the same for me?"

"What are you saying? Are you meaning that I'm not by your side when you need me?"

"I'm saying that you're not by my side *until* I need you." He retorted. "Hardly ever because you want to. Hardly never when I *might* want you there."

"That's unfair, Jae Shin." Yong Ha winced, hearing a truth biting through the anger. "I have always been your friend."

The pain in Jae Shin's eyes couldn't be masked by his gruffness and the growling scholar stalked away, turning on his heel when he nearly reached the wall. Biting at his lip, he tried to shove his temper down but it rose, a phoenix born on a bitterness he didn't know he had. His heart burned, turning to ash the fabled bird fed upon to rise.

"You are my friend when no one is looking, Yong Ha." His whisper cut deeper than any blade he could have sharpened and Yong Ha gasped, touching his own chest in shock. "Or when you are bored and want me to instigate something to entertain you."

Yong Ha reeled, struck hard by Jae Shin's harsh words. "It is that Dae Min? Is he the one feeding you these words?"

"Do you think I need someone to think for me? Do you believe that because you are not around I need Kim Dae Min to think for me? To chew my food? To pour me some tea as if I'm a simple-minded thing?" Jae Shin poked at Yong Ha's shoulder, pushing the man back a step. "How do you think I took care of myself while you were playing around in Han In Soo? Where were you then for me?"

Yong Ha reached for Jae Shin, needing to get his hands on the other man — needing to stop the sourness flowing from Jae Shin's pretty mouth. "Don't say these things. Don't."

"If I don't say them now, will you listen to them later? After you've walked away and told yourself that

I'm merely in temper?" His eyes glittered, more from tears than anger. The anguish in his chest bloomed, cutting into his heart until he felt he would bleed out from the pain. "Isn't that always how we end? With your chin up high and your back to me as I chew over what I said that offended you?"

"Are we really arguing about this? You and I?" Yong Han's fingers ghosted over Jae Shin's face, touching at the light scruff on his chin. "Are we really having these words?"

"We should have had some words a long time ago," He admitted softly. "I just didn't know what to say."

Jae Shin's tears came, driven by hurt and anger he'd kept inside. Unsure of what hurt more, the pain of his breaking friendship or the fact that he wanted to cross over to Yong Ha and cup his face to kiss the sardonic twist of his mouth and say he'd never leave him.

"We've been friends for... more than ten years." Yong Ha's robes rustled as he moved. "We've...we have always had each other."

"You have had me," Jae Shin whispered. "But have I had you?"

"He said that to you?" Yoon Hee whistled under her breath, cupping her hands around a steaming tumbler. "Aish, what are we going to do with the two of you, sunbae?"

Propriety and society long tossed aside for the sake of comfort and her unconventional nature, she still wore men's clothing while out in public although she'd gladly shed her itchy gat for an elaborate hairpin gifted to her by a shy Sun Joon. Yong Ha studied the young woman as he sipped at his own tea. They sat together comfortably, friends sharing their troubles over a steeping tea pot but his mind drifted, caught in the guileless beauty of the man who walked out on him.

"He doubts me. Me!" Yong Ha growled, leaning forward to pick at a piece of honeyed ginger. Nearly lifting it to his mouth, he instead waved it to emphasize his point. "Have I not always been his greatest champion? Who else would keep track of his points to tell him when he was about to be expelled for lack of studying? Me!"

"I have to ask, *hyung*," Yoon Hee's eyes glinted gleefully at the misuse of her honorific, knowing it delighted Yong Ha. "If Geol Oh doesn't like studying, why is he here? At Sungkyunkwan?"

"You know him," He replied with a sigh, balancing his chin on his fist, leaning on his knee with his elbow. "He is brilliant, Daemul. He looks wild, acts uncontrollably and belligerent but he has a kind heart and an even hungrier mind than you. Until Professor Jung arrived, there was no need for Jae Shin to attend classes and there was no one who could challenge his thoughts. All of our time here, he's been sliding back further and further into a hermetic life and I worried for him. His place is... his natural place is to lead."

"He is too rough to be a leader." Yoon Hee made a face. "I love him. He is a brother in my heart but he would be a horrible leader. He is too grumpy."

"He is grumpy because he is shy," Yong Ha admitted, picking up his cup. "Don't tell him I told you. For all that he loves me — and I know that somewhere in that tiny brain of his that he loves me — he will not hesitate to skin me and make a hanbok from my hide if he found out I told you that."

"That he is shy?" She cocked her head, contemplating the possibility. "I can see that. Now that I know him better. Before... long time before... I was too scared of him to believe that but now, I can see that."

"He hides, like a wounded badger lurking in his lair and when someone comes near, he strikes out and draws blood." The man sighed. The years of his friendship with Jae Shin were marked with sporadic tempers and misunderstandings, all eventually swept to the side by Yong Ha's willful ignoring of any bad behaviour until Jae Shin gave in.

Did I make you like this, Geol Oh? He thought suddenly. By not demanding you be with others... by being selfish and wanting you to be only mine, have I condemned you to a life of loneliness and regrets? Have I cut short your happiness only to preserve mine?

"You should have named him *osori*." Yoon Hee's voice startled Yong Ha from his thoughts. He blinked at her twice and she said slowly, "Badger. You should have named him badger instead of Geol Oh."

“Ah but see, Daemul, a badger — however fierce — is not beautiful. A horse — especially a wild one — is.” Yong Ha smirked, remembering the day he’d bestowed his best friend’s nickname. “And if Moon Jae Shin is one thing... it is beautiful.”

“So what are you going to do then?” She pressed. “This person — Kim Dae Min — is he the one who has started the rumours that you and Jae Shin are lovers? Or at least one of you wants the other? It’s very complicated. Too many half-whispers and not enough evidence to follow back to the source.”

“Those are the best rumours,” He admitted. “Should I be worried for Jae Shin in this? Do I have to shore up his reputation?”

“It does not help that he slept in the same room as me and never knew I was female,” Yoon Hee pointed out.

“He knew before any of the rest of us,” Yong Ha said then tapped his cheek with his index finger. “Well, I suspected but he *knew*.”

“How?” She glared at the man suspiciously. “You never told me that.”

“He hiccups when he’s around women,” Yong Ha said smoothly, skillfully omitting the revelations Jae Shin experienced while peeking through the funerary building’s doors. “It’s a horrible affliction. One he’s had since we were children. Even his mother — rest the spirit of her in peace — made him lurch and gasp. I thought it would go away as he got older but sadly, no. It’s why I’ve never been able to get him to one of the tea houses and into a gisaeng’s arms. It’s why he’s...”

Yong Ha shut his mouth, pressing his lips together tightly. Curious, Yoon Hee moved forward, narrowing her eyes to peer into the man’s face. He refused to meet her gaze, only gaping at her in surprise after she pinched his arm.

“Aish, see what habits you learn when you share space with Geol Oh? That hurt!”

“After everything that we four have been through, you would not share that secret with me?” She asked, pinching at him again. “Tell me. Or I will pluck out the embroidery on your jacket like a spider needing silk for its web.”

“You are a vicious, wicked thing.” Yong Ha whined, leaning back to take himself out of her attack range. “You must swear that no one else will find out.”

“Who would I tell?”

“Lee Sun Joon,” Yong Ha pointed out.

“Alright, so I would tell him but shouldn’t he have the right to know as well? Everything we are is laid open to each other. It is something we all should know.”

“If I tell you and you tell him, then I will have company when Jae Shin burns my body to ash,” He murmured. “Because he will kill us all.”

“I promise. We will die next to you,” She swore, rising to her knees and inching closer to the man. “Now tell me.”

“For all of his wildness — our Geol Oh,” Yong Ha whispered, careful to keep his voice as low as he could lest someone passing hear him. “Our wild horse is still untouched. He has never known... the touch of a woman and probably... never will.”



The gambling hall Jae Shin fled to was a far cry from the elegant tea houses Yong Ha preferred. Here there were no beautiful gisaeng to fill his cup with warmed soju and the gentle whispering banter of cultured young women was absent, replaced with the hoarse mutterings of low-breasted women calling out to passing men in the hopes of a quick dally and coin.

Pushing past the rough cotton curtain strung across the entrance, Jae Shin tossed up a coin to the man behind a low counter, demanding a bottle of whatever his money could buy. He carried a ceramic jug to a darkened corner table and sat down hard, the chair rattling beneath his weight. Pulling out the cork stopper, he stared at the nothingness in front of him, blinking when the world turned to a watery shimmer and wiping

at his face when his lashes grew too wet to hold back his tears.

He didn't look up when someone else came through the curtain. Too far away from the door for the escaping heat to be much of a problem, he ignored the shouts of displeasure coming from the bartender at the man standing in the threshold. Jae Shin was on his third mouthful of gut-stabbing soju when the shadows surrounding him deepened. Growling, the scholar tossed his head back, ready to tear into the person hovering over him when he recognized Kim Dae Min.

"Hyung." Dae Min crouched next to Jae Shin, pulling up his long sleeves and coat to avoid ruining his clothes on the dirty floor.

"Get out," Jae Shin muttered, jerking his head towards the door.

"Are we back to that then?" He asked softly. "Have I done something to earn this anger?"

While showing a calm and placid demeanor towards the man, Dae Min's inner voice screamed in frustration. He'd caught wind of Jae Shin's meeting with Yong Ha and the rumours began to seep through the university before he could even make it out of the front gate to find Sungkyunkwan's rebel. He'd heard everything from a reconciliation between the two scandal-weary friends to a raging battle where one had struck the other dead; the victim varying from person to person.

Once outside of Sungkyunkwan's walls, Jae Shin's trail was even harder to find. The man seemed to be liquid shadow, disappearing from notice between a blink of an eye. After three false starts, he'd finally found someone who saw the shaggy-haired aristocrat duck into a gaming house, coins jingling in the pockets of his loose jacket.

One would think it would be easy to find someone that pretty walking through a crowd of peasant, Dae Min muttered to himself as he browbeat a stall owner for information. Just because he dresses like cheonmin, doesn't mean he can pass for one.

His relief at finding Jae Shin increased when he spotted the man's stormy countenance. No reconciliation bred anger and a furrowed brow, not even for the infamous Geol Oh. Forcing himself to calm his nerves before entering the main room, Dae Min gave the bar attendant a withering glare before going to Jae Shin's side.

"I don't want company," Jae Shin muttered. "Not even yours."

"This..." He waved his hand, encompassing the gaming hall in his derisive gesture. "This is not the place for someone like you."

The man's explosive snort was bitter and heavy. "How do you know where someone like me belongs? How do you even know what *makes* me that someone?"

"Because I have spent time with you, no?" Dae Min nearly recoiled as something chitinous and scary skittered past the table, its weaving body chittering on legs too many for him to count. "Please, hyung. Let me take you someplace where we can talk."

"I told you," Jae Shin slurred, drawing out another mouthful of raw soju. "I don't want to talk."

"Then we don't have to," He murmured, tentatively reaching out to rub at the small of the man's back. Unlike other times, Jae Shin didn't flinch and Dae Min nearly laughed with the sheer satisfaction of it. The feel of Jae Shin's warmth under his palm excited him, sending tingling reverberations through his body and down to his shaft. "Please, hyung. Being here, in this place with you, makes me fear that you will stumble out into the cold if I leave you. And if you are too drunk, you will die out there. It is that cold and I fear for my hyung in this."

"He hurts me, you know," Jae Shin murmured, turning the bottle around on the table. The stoneware guttered the wood, leaving behind circular scrapes and exposing the grain through years of grime.

"Who? Me?" Dae Min asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

"Yong Ha. Goo Yong Ha." He banged his fist on the table, proclaiming the man's name loudly. The people around him barely raised their heads to look towards the disturbance, long used to drunken screams and shouts. "He does his best to hurt me sometimes... or rather, does very little at all and hurts me the deepest...without even trying."

“Your Yong Ha?”

“Mine? He is a whore, flitting about to anyone with coin or a smile.” Jae Shin turned his head, missing Dae Min’s grin. “A centipede whore. He attacks because it is in his nature, taking out chunks of my flesh and heart with each bite...injecting me with a poison that blinds me... makes me want to go back to him because I am numb and insane. That is what Yong Ha is. A centipede.”

“I’d rather have this comparison of Yong Ha to a centipede when there isn’t one nearby to take offense.” Dae Min shuffled closer to Jae Shin, watching the ground for any further movement. “Please, hyung. Some place safe. Some place warm. And preferably with better things to drink.”

“I like it here,” He mumbled, hooking his arm around the crockery. “It’s comfortable.”

“A strong wind will come by and we will be buried under its roof,” Dae Min replied, sliding his arm under Jae Shin’s. The heat of the man’s body struck him and the sweet lemony scent of his hair filled the young scholar with a longing he couldn’t shove aside. Determined to heft the man up, he was momentarily stymied with the complication of moving a reluctant Jae Shin while hardened by his touch when the older man leaned on him.

He’d never come this close to fully touching Jae Shin’s body and he was tempted to go further, sliding his hand between the gap of the man’s jacket and explore the warm skin and muscles beneath the cotton. A bump of their hips and Jae Shin shifted, sliding his rear along Dae Min’s thigh as he struggled to get up. Keeping a tortured whimper of desire from whisking through his pressed lips, Dae Min forced himself to concentrate on getting Jae Shin to his feet, releasing the man only when he was certain the scholar had his balance.

“I don’t want to go back to Sungkyunkwan. *He* is there. Probably lurking in the shadows of my room to chew on my feet.” Jae Shin pursed his mouth and looked around for the soju bottle he’d purchased. “And I need to take this with me.”

“I wouldn’t mind lurking in your room to chew on parts of you,” Dae Min muttered to himself, blinking innocently when Jae Shin shot him a curious, slightly inebriated glance. “Leave that, hyung. Where we’re going, there will be better things to drink.”

“Where?” He eyed the man suspiciously, refusing to let go of his bottle.

“To a tea house I know.”

“He goes to those. Invasive creature. Wicked thing,” Jae Shin grumbled. “Centipede. I should have been in charge of the names. The ones he comes up with? They make no sense.”

“No, this is not one that Yong Ha would go to. Not many men know about this one. Only men who need...time away from life — *from their carefully constructed and false lives* — and from their women...they go here.” Dae Min shook off Jae Shin’s mumbling objections. “Let me take you, my Geol Oh — let me take you some place where we can be... together. Where we can be free. Just the two of us alone.”

Six

Crystalline flakes etched cold lines on Jae Shin's face as he half walked, half stumbled besides Dae Min. Much of the city was deserted, the only sign of life appearing to be a dog sprinting across the street to burrow into a stable's warmth and a young guard marking off the rounds for the district, a look of sullen misery clouding his cold-reddened face. The incoming weather thickened and the wind howled and raged at the men as they made their way through the falling snow.

The buildings grew further apart, richer in appearance and Jae Shin glanced around him, unsure of where he was. Predominantly middle class dwellings gave way to more elaborate structures and as they approached the river, walled compounds nearly hidden behind copses of pine and evergreen trees.

After a few minutes of hard walking, the drunken numbness of Jae Shin's limbs leached away, only to be replaced by the more alarming paralysis of cold seeping in. Turning about, Dae Min tugged him along and pointed towards the end of a road where a sloped up roof emerged from the white flurry, its tall posts rising up above the high wall surrounding the compound.

"There, hyung," Dae Min said, pointing towards the heavy wooden gates nested into the walls. "We'll get warm inside."

A guard stood by the gate, nearly hidden inside a wide set-in alcove near the entrance, a large and menacing hulk of a man whose frown didn't lighten even as he appeared to recognize Kim Dae Min. The gate's clasp disappeared under his huge fist and its hinges creaked loudly as he pulled the door open, seemingly unhindered by the large amounts of snow blocking the gate's progress.

Inside appeared to be a wealthy residence with several large buildings wrapped around a stone courtyard. Jae Shin glimpsed a garden through an iron gate to the right, guessing the estate ran all the way up to the river and to the side. Leafless trees bore up against the snow on their branches, their roots protected by the enormous round ceramic pots they were planted in. Dae Min shuffled Jae Shin forward, aiming for the largest of the buildings, a main residence hall nearly three stories tall and stretching the length of the main stone yard. The granite steps leading up to the entrance had been swept clean although the falling snow was beginning to gather in its crevices.

"What is this place?" Jae Shin chattered, not for the first time wishing he'd grabbed a heavier coat before he'd chosen to go out and get drunk to forget the man haunting his thoughts. "Where are we?"

"This is — for lack of a better word — a tea house purely for — gentlemen," Dae Min whispered into his ear. "I wanted to bring you here before but... well, I wasn't certain how you would feel but now, I think you need the comfort and safety of a place where no one will ... see you. That's a good way to put it."

"See me? Why should I care if someone sees me?" He muttered, confused by the man's cryptic words. The wind chose at that moment to slice down at him with cold-razor spurts and he clenched his jaw, refusing to let his clatter.

A gisaeng appeared at the top of the steps, a beautiful and graceful creature dressed more for entertainment than warmth. Despite the royal decree against extravagant wiggling, she wore a complicated hair piece that defied the natural fall of a woman's hair. Braided up into an elaborate chignon and studded with bits of jewelry, the wig framed out her delicate, triangular face, artfully made up by a skillful hand. The dark liner around her eyes was smudged slightly, drawing emphasis up to her doe-like gaze. The bright red of

her mouth stood out against her pale skin, a complimentary contrast to the thick dark green jade rings on her fingers as she drew her hand up to her cheek and cried out for the men to hurry inside.

"I thought you said there were no women here?" Jae Shin hissed, grabbing at Dae Min's arm.

The young scholar glanced up the stairs and smiled, a sly knowing look on his face. "I did, hyung. I did."

Jae Shin waited for his body to wrack with nervousness and for the air in his stomach to fold him in two but the hiccups never came. Then the woman turned slightly and he could see the profile of her face and slender neck... a neck with a small ridge in its hollow.

"That's... a man!" Jae Shin muttered into Dae Min's ear.

Despite the welcome feel of Jae Shin's mouth against his cheek, Dae Min hurried the other man up the stairs, giving the gisaeng the barest of nods. The faux-woman bowed, gathering up his skirts and led them through the entrance, ordering the young page sitting at the end of the hall to close the doors behind them.

"Have you come to seek... entertainment, my lord?" Even to Jae Shin's acute hearing, the man sounded like a gisaeng, affecting the fluid vocal tones of a learned woman.

"It's like a reverse Daemul," He muttered, wondering if the drink had finally taken him over the edge into insanity. He'd seen other men pretending to be women, most notably the carnival performers acting out dramas but none with the skill and seemingly flawless of the gisaeng before him.

The warm air hit Jae Shin's chest and he staggered back, the unexpected heat drawing the alcohol back up into his blood. The main hall spun about, whirling into a dizzying array of colours and textures and Jae Shin reached out, looking for something to steady himself with.

"A room first, Sun Hee," Dae Min grabbed at Jae Shin's waist before the man stumbled. "And some soju."

"I don't think I should drink any more," Jae Shin mumbled. "I'm not even certain I should have drank anything in the first place."

"Probably not. At least, not that." Outwardly agreeable, Dae Min was secretly thrilled at the other man's lingering inebriation. He'd feared the cold would sober Jae Shin up enough for the man to throw back up his emotional walls but the resuscitation of his drunken state by the warm air gave Dae Min delightful shivers.

"Here you are, oppa," Sun Hee slid open a panel and hurried in, scrambling to light lanterns to illuminate the room.

"Heh, he called you oppa," Jae Shin slurred. For some reason his feet seemed to be on the wrong legs and he kept trying to place them in the right order, only to find himself careening into Dae Min with every step. "What did I drink?"

"I don't know but I'm thinking of buying up every bottle so only you can have it," The man murmured under his breath.

A long mattress pad was seated into a smaller nook off of the main room, a thick pile of linens and pillows arranged both for comfort and aesthetics. Near the bed, a sunken fire pit lay ready for lighting, aromatic woods and spices piled up in its white stoneware bowl. The rest of the room contained open-faced cabinets sporadically with small statuary and short lines of red-paper bound books.

Dae Min slowly walked towards the alcove, shooting Sun Hee a warning glare when the gisaeng moved in to help. Keeping Jae Shin slung over his shoulder, Dae Min reveled in the feel of the man against his side. Begrudging the thick layers of clothing separating them, he resigned himself to be content with Jae Shin's whiskered chin brushing over his cheek as they walked and the erotic feel of the man's strong back muscles through Jae Shin's jacket as they moving under his supporting hand.

"Yeorim has some of those," Jae Shin gestured towards the books. "They're...naughty."

"They are." Dae Min hid his grin. "And I'm sure if Yong Ha has copies of those, he's probably never shown them to you."

"Oh?" His foot hit the edge of the bed and he toppled into the linens, taking Dae Min down with him. "Why not? He shows me everything else. He *can't* help but show me everything else. He's like a little boy with new things to play with. Every time he gets something new, he brings it to me first."

"There's nothing wrong with a friend sharing his excitement," Dae Min counted the seconds he could safely lay against Jae Shin's warm torso and legs before he reluctantly moved, leaving the bed to beckon Sun Hee closer. Muttering under his breath, he said, "I would like to share my excitement with you. It's been a thing I've wanted the most for a long time now."

"Oppa..." He coyly ducked his head, the elaborate wig nearly obscuring his face and played to Dae Min's master status.

"Don't," He shushed the man, cutting at the air with the flat of his hand. "No games tonight. What I want is your strongest brew, preferably hot. Something sweet. Actually a few somethings, preferably with apricot or oranges. Even apples if you have it. Then after you've brought me those things, I want you to shut the door behind you and make certain that no one comes down this hall. No one is to use any of the rooms next to this one. And unless the building is about to collapse upon us from fire, no one is to even knock on that door unless I come looking for someone. Understood?"

"Yes, my lord," Sun Hee gathered up his skirts, exposing a trim, bare ankle. "I will see to it."

"Good," Dae Min grunted then reached out, grabbing Sun Hee's arm in a painful grip. Keeping his voice low, he muttered loud enough for only the gisaeng to hear. "I also want you to bring me some of the green unguent."

"My lord, those are for..." The faux-woman glanced at the man sprawled out on the bed linens behind them. His voice dropped to a whisper, the only evidence of his masculinity showing in the husky rasp. "Those are for the younger men... to calm them down enough to..."

Dae Min straightened imperiously, canting his head to the side as if daring the gisaeng to question him. "Do you have some ready or not? And if not... then why?"

"No, my lord. We do," Sun Hee stammered, bowing as he stepped back to the door. "I will... include the balms on the tray... along with everything else."

"Good," He said smugly. "Now hurry. I have a long night ahead of me and I don't want to waste a second of it."



Yoon Hee struggled to hold onto the coat she'd stolen from Sun Joon's wardrobe. The bulky jacket was lined thickly and while came to mid-calf on Sun Joon, it was long enough on her to cover her feet despite every effort she made to hold it up away from the snow.

Burrowed down in the fur around her face, Yoon Hee almost missed seeing the two men slip past an estate's broad wooden gates, only the clanging sound of iron rings striking a cross bar catching her attention as she slogged through the snow.

Ducking behind a tree line, she wove through the lower shrubs, trying to get close enough to the gate to see the resident's name placard. By the look of the stony-faced guard standing watch, she imagined the compound belonged to someone very rich or worse, secretive and paranoid. The large man seemed impervious to the cold and when the storm struck with a slapping torrent of slushy rain that soaked through her gloves and turned her lips blue, Yoon Hee wondered if he were even human.

"He has to use the bathroom," She muttered, peering out at the man as he stared out into the storm "Or breathe. Does he even breathe?"

"Too cold." Yoon Hee stamped her feet to get the feeling back into her toes and looked down the length of the wall.

The end of the estate seemed to be more than 100 paces off although she couldn't be sure with the darkness starting to fall and the snow flurries filling the air. Hugging the trees, she kept her face down, using the drab colours of the coat to mask her presence from the guard in case he looked in her direction. The heavy snow on the branches above her and causing the smaller bits of the canopy to fall, a loud crashing sound interspersed with the crackle of ice hid the sounds of her footsteps, especially when she stepped down on a sodden log and nearly fell onto her face. Cursing the dampness creeping into her boots, she pushed forward

until she reached the wall, panting heavily with the effort of working through the trees.

Peering back towards the gate, yelped in surprise when she spotted the guard coming towards her, obviously walking the perimeter of the compound to secure it from intruders. Frightened at being discovered before she could extract Jae Shin from the estate... or at least get an explanation on why he hadn't returned to the university, Yoon Hee flattened herself against the surrounding wall, looking for someplace to hide.

A dark blot of bushes offered some promise and she scuttled towards them, crab-walking with back along the wall. Time seemed to slow and her feet were nearly bloodless as she hurried, uncertain if she could reach the nearby shrubbery in time to hide herself from the approaching guard. A loud sound near the entrance drew his attention away for a long second and she dove towards the shrubs, burying herself into their prickly, waxy leaves, hoping to remain undetected.

He approached with a heavy tread, cracking through the thin ice layer spreading on the frozen ground. With his breath frosting the air, he cupped his hands over his mouth and blew, warming his fingers before reaching down and tugging hard at a small iron grate in the wall. Satisfied, he continued back to the gate, passing it and disappearing around the bend of the compound's wall.

"Oooo? Delivery grate for contraband? Or to throw out ashes maybe?" Yoon Hee clapped her hands, mostly to get the stiffness out of them and sprinted as quickly as she could in Sun Joon's coat to the iron grating. Up close, she realized it was larger than she thought and adjacent to a building beyond the enclosure's thick wall. A pile of firewood stacked nearby gave her some idea the tiny gate was used as a pass through for heavy pieces of lumber that could damage a fine stone courtyard if dropped.

The pass through gate was definitely locked, refusing to budge as she tested the locking ring with all of her strength. Puffing out her cheeks in frustration, she dug into her pockets, looking for something to reach into the lock with. A thick piece of metal from a pen wrapping poked her fingers and she exulted in the find, pulling it out to examine it.

"Geol Oh can do this." She encouraged herself. "Remember? You've watched him do this. He's taught you this. Oh why can't I feel my fingers?"

The grate was cold against her shoulder as she tried to angle her body to reach the locking mechanism on the other side. Shoving the pen guide in, Yoon Hee turned it one way, meeting a firm resistance. Sighing in frustration, she twisted and put her weight into the opposite turn. A single click rewarded her efforts and the grate rattled, loosening its grip on the bolt.

Giving one last glance over her shoulder, Yoon Hee reassured herself the guard was no where to be seen and yanked the grate open wide enough to slide her slender body through. The heavy coat she'd stolen caught on the tiny space and she growled, shedding it to slip in. Tugging it free, she landed on her back in the drifts, sheaves of snow driving down the gap between her neck and hair.

"Damn it!" She caught the tip of her tongue between her teeth, biting down to punish herself for swearing. Shaking out the snow, Yoon Hee worked Sun Joon's coat back on, scraping off the pine needles and dead leaves clinging to the front. Pulling herself straight, she looked around, spotting a likely entrance to the main building.

"Okay, now to take back our Geol Oh."



Dae Min plucked off a piece of apple from the tray, biting into it with a snap of his teeth. Sucking the juices from his fingers, he sauntered over to where Jae Shin lay sprawled out, nudging the man's leg with his bare foot.

"Hyung." Balancing the tray carefully, he sat down on the mattress, edging in closer to the other man. "Are you awake?"

Jae Shin mumbled, shuffling back down into the blankets. Sighing heavily, he turned slightly, his jacket ties unraveling as he moved. Dae Min lay the tray down, out of reach of Jae Shin's legs in case the other man kicked out. Stretching out next to the slumbering man's form, he ran a hand over Jae Shin's side, daringly

working his fingers under the jacket flap.

“Hyung?” Dae Min scooted closer, tugging at the fastening’s end. He froze, hand as still as he could make it as Jae Shin turned, his eyes hooded and unfocused.

“Dae Min?” The rough velvet purr of Jae Shin’s voice settled into the scholar’s stomach, wending down to wrap hot tendrils under his sac. “It’s warm. Too warm now.”

“Then maybe we should... help you get some of these clothes off of you?” He pulled at the ribbon slowly, undoing the tie. It slithered free of its bow, allowing Dae Min to push the folds of Jae Shin’s jacket aside, baring the man’s belly.

Dae Min’s hand was pale compared to Jae Shin’s toned stomach, a light shadow against the golden tint of his skin. Swallowing at the sight of his desire stretched out next to him, Dae Min shivered with delight, lifting his eyes to Jae Shin’s handsome face.

The rebel’s dark eyes watched Dae Min, his lashes sweeping shadows on his cheekbones. A tangle of hair fell down over his forehead obscuring part of his face but the younger man felt the heat of Jae Shin’s gaze on him.

“What are you doing, Dae Min?” Jae Shin lay still under the man’s hand, shuddering slightly when the scholar began to run his finger down the centre of his stomach, curling the tip of his finger around each muscle bunching and relaxing on his abdomen. A sparse scruff of soft hair curled down his navel, thinning out to a trail and disappearing beneath his waistband. “What are you doing to *me*?”

“What should have been done to you a long time ago, my Geol Oh,” Dae Min whispered, slowly moving over to straddle Jae Shin’s thighs.

Dae Min was hard beneath his clothes. So hard that Dae Min wondered if his sex would ever soften again. The heat of his hands warmed Jae Shin’s muscular torso and released the faint lemony scent of his soap into the air, heightening the tension between them.

Dae Min kept his eyes on Jae Shin’s shadowed face, bending over the man’s body to inhale the sweetness coming up from his skin but far enough way to give himself space in case the man came up fighting. The flick of Jae Shin’s tongue on his upper lip made Dae Min itch to bit into the lower one, suckling on the plump flesh while grinding his hips against the man’s body.

“You are...exquisite, Moon Jae Shin,” Dae Min whispered, stretching his hands out to stroke the man’s chest. The rebel’s nipples pricked at his palms, tightening to nubs as hard as the shaft burning its need through Dae Min’s pants. “So beautiful. So rare.”

A hitch of Jae Shin’s breath rippled his chest under Dae Min and he closed his eyes, turning his head slightly away from Dae Min’s perusal. The young scholar caught up the man’s chin, urging Jae Shin back, murmuring and coaxing for the man to open his gorgeous eyes so he could see them.

“Hasn’t anyone ever told you that? Has no one ever told you how beautiful you truly are?”

Jae Shin’s eyes flew open and his throat spasmed with his gulping swallow. Tightening his lips, he glanced at Dae Min, eyes shuttered and dim of light as he whispered, “No. Never.”

“Then let me be the first,” Holding Jae Shin’s face, Dae Min lowered his mouth to the man’s parted lips. “To tell you how beautiful you are.”

He took his first taste of the man he longed for, skimming his lips over Jae Shin’s unresponsive mouth. Stroking at the man’s jaw, he murmured, coaxingly as he would a wild cat. If he moved too quickly — to fast — too hot, Jae Shin would pull away and he’d never have a chance at the man again. So Dae Min sipped, taking small little tastes and licks with his tongue as he tested out how far Jae Shin would let him go.

Jae Shin was sweeter, darker than he thought... that he’d ever imagined — that he’d ever dreamed — that he’d ever fantasized. Even laying still beneath him, Jae Shin thrummed with a sensual heat Dae Min needed... wanted to delve into until he drowned. He couldn’t think past the fire burning through him and Dae Min wondered if he could ever use his tongue for anything other than dipping its tip past the press of Jae Shin’s lips.

Then moaned loudly when Jae Shin opened his mouth, and surrendered to Dae Min's kiss.

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Rough laughter echoed down the hall and Yoon Hee stopped, tucking herself against the wall as long shadows moved back and forth behind the panels ahead of her. She'd worked her way into the building without seeing anyone but once into the main hall, the scholar had little hope of remaining invisible while she sought out Jae Shin. The bright blue of Sungkyunkwan university seemed drab compared to the finery around her and no one in their right mind would believe a lowly scholar could afford to pay for the services of a high-end tea house.

"Well unless that scholar is Goo Yong Ha." She muttered to herself. "Of course they probably pay *him* to be there."

The sound of shuffling feet on the hallway's polished floor panicked Yoon Hee to look someplace more secure to hide. The door panel behind her was dark, a semi-reassuring sign that the room was unoccupied and she slowly eased its along its rails, trying to keep the noise below notice. Opening it barely wide enough to slip through, she berated herself when Sun Joon's coat caught on the frame, the thick garment too bulky to move in properly. Pushing at the door, she opened it another few inches and slid into what looked like storage room.

With the person approaching too quickly to shut the door all the way, Yoon Hee instead looked for someplace to hide, spying a standing wardrobe along one wall. The tall cabinet appeared to be filled with clothing; dainty garments reeking of rich scents and sparkling dangles. An elaborate jeonmo fell down from an upper shelf, striking Yoon Hee on the head. She caught at it before it could tumble any further, gripping the hat with its yards of veiling fabric to her chest.

"Have you seen the green unguents?" A soft voiced woman asked someone else in the room. A bit of panic edged her words, cutting through like a needle in cloth. "He wants them for... his guest."

"Why would he bring a *cheonmin* here?" A different woman this time, sounding bitter and caustic. "We are here. And he brings in someone... rough?"

"The man is pretty. His clothes are too nice for a *cheonmin*."

Yoon Hee bit her tongue to stop herself from defending who she assumed was Jae Shin. No one else would dress like a peasant in a tea house. The mention of a salve bothered her. *Was Jae Shin hurt? Was I wrong about Dae Min?*

"Those lotions are for the new ones. The ones who aren't used to having a man inside of them," The second woman muttered. "Why would you bring a man here who would need something to prepare him for... those matters?"

"I don't know." A cry of relief followed some rustling. "Here they are. I shall put a small container on the tray but only because he asked. Truthfully, I think the pretty maybe-not *cheonmin* is too drunk to do anything with... or to."

"Men don't care about that." The bitterness was back in the unseen woman's voice. "The *cheonmin* should be happy *that one* is going to use those. Normally, he'd just stick himself in and have his own pleasure — we both have suffered through that."

"This time, I think it is different." The sounds of the women closing cabinets and putting things away both eased and worried Yoon Hee's thoughts. "I think this one is different. From what I could see, Sa Ma Gwi wants him. Very badly."

“Good, then the *cheonmin* can have him.” She muttered, barely audible over the scrape of the door panel. “Let the Sa Ma Gwi fuck him... and leave the rest of us alone.”



“*Sa Ma Gwi*? Is that what they call... Kim Dae Min?” Yoon Hee grumbled as she walked primly down the hallway. The clothing she’d found in the wardrobe swam on her tiny frame, even with her robes on underneath and she’d nearly left Sun Joon’s thick coat behind when she realized the heavy garment could serve another purpose.

Her face burned as she thought on what the women said. A vivid image of Jae Shin, partially disrobed and sprawled on a bed pad flashed in her mind. “And... what did they mean Dae Min would... oh no, *not* with our Geol Oh. He’s Yong Ha’s! If anyone has... will... do *that* with our Jae Shin it should be Yong Ha. They both love each other so much... even if they are too stubborn to say so.”

With a quick raid of the wardrobe and hastily pinched cheeks to bring the colour up in her face, she’d once again found herself masquerading as a gisaeng looking for her lover.

Several men passed by her, each leering at her willowy form as she bowed with mock respect. With the coat folded over her arms, she appeared to be searching for its owner, a mission that would keep her from having to entertain any of the other tea house’s guests. Strangely, the other gisaeng were no where to be found although she heard a husky, warm laugh coming from one closed off room that sounded like one of the women from the storage room.

She ducked her head when she spotted a bored young page near the front entrance and her stomach twisted sourly at the very real possibility of being caught...while dressed as a woman in a bawdy tea house. Stopping suddenly, she looked at the boy swinging his feet back and forth as he sat waiting for someone to need the door opened. Keeping herself partially shadowed, Yoon Hee called out to him.

“Boy!” Yoon Hee affected Sun Joon’s strong tone, hoping to drive some authority into her voice. She hoped the shadows would hide her face but the familiar clothing would trick the boy into believing she belonged. “What room is *Sa Ma Gwi* in? I have to return this coat to his guest.”

“Sun Hee said he wasn’t to be bothered,” The boy called back, still swinging his feet.

“If his guest doesn’t get his cleaned coat back, I will tell them it was you that didn’t help me,” Yoon Hee barked, begging forgiveness from herself for lying to the young page.

“He’s down the hall.. on the right. At the very end,” The page stammered, straightening his shoulders in alarm. “But do not tell him that I told you or I’ll be beaten.”

Yoon Hee didn’t respond but frowned as she continued on. “Who would beat a child for that? Oh Kim Dae Min, you and I are going to have words when I find you.”

She didn’t get more than a few feet down the hall when a strong hand grabbed her, yanking her into a small room. Dropping the coat, Yoon Hee brought her fists up, squaring her stance as Geol Oh taught her and lashed out with a quick fist, aiming up towards her attacker’s head.

Her knuckles hit something solid, probably the man’s head and she was suddenly airborne, her attacker’s hands gripping her upper arms and lifting her up. With her feet dangling nearly a foot off the ground, Yoon Hee was paralyzed with shock for a moment before her senses came back to her and she reared her legs up, intending to kick her way to freedom when the man shifted and his face fell into the sparse light coming from a sconce.

“Sun Joon!” Yoon Hee breathed a sigh of relief. “I almost died from shock! What are you doing here?”

“The question is, dear *agi*, what are *you* here?” His eyes, hot and demanding, raked over her slender body and Yoon Hee felt another blush pink over her skin. “And why are you dressed as a woman? Didn’t I tell you that you should never do this? — To dress this...*way*... because this is only for me?”



Dae Min felt Jae Shin’s hands on his shoulders, moaning loudly when the man’s palms ran down his arms. His sensual murmurs turned to an outraged yelp when Jae Shin gently gripped him and pushed him away.

"No," The rebellious scholar whispered, his breathing hot and fast as he turned over onto his side. A shake of his head kept Dae Min back, even though the young man wanted nothing more than to fit himself against Jae Shin's body and hold him tightly. "Please...Dae Min-ah, I... need some air."

"This is too...quick for you, yes?" He berated himself for moving too quickly, especially while not taking the time to pour more soju down Jae Shin's pretty mouth. The glass salve container mocked Dae Min from its place on the tray, as if taunting the man with the possibilities of his pleasure if only he'd taken precautions against Jae Shin's sobriety. "If I've given offense, hyung...it's just that...I thought you wanted this."

"I do," Jae Shin murmured, unable to get his body to shake of its lethargy enough to move further than a few inches from the man he'd teased into seduction. "I... I just can't. I'm sorry. I've never... not this. Not ever."

Yong Ha, bless you for your ignorance and stupidity, Dae Min suppressed his shouts of glee at Jae Shin's innocence. Schooling his face carefully into a mask of concern, he lightly touched Jae Shin's arm, tugging at the man's broad shoulders. "Please, hyung, let's at least talk about...this. Between you and I, there should be no walls. No lies. Have we not always been open with one another? Can we not continue that now?"

For a second, Dae Min wondered if he'd plied the man too thickly but a shift of Jae Shin's body and he exhaled with relief. Lying on his back, the scholar stared up at the ceiling, his soft hair falling down around his face and obscuring most of his features. All Dae Min could see clearly was the man's beautiful, kiss-swollen mouth and he shifted painfully, pulling at his pants to relieve the pressure against his tortured sex.

"Talk to me, hyung...Jae Shin-ah. Tell me what I can do to make...this... feel better for you." Dae Min stroked at Jae Shin's sleeved arm, not trusting himself to touch actual skin. "I thought...have I made a mistake? Have I done something to make you hate me? If so, please.. that was never... I wouldn't be able to bear the thought of you hating me. Not after all we've become."

"I don't hate you, Dae Min-ah," Jae Shin held Dae Min's hand, working their fingers together in an embrace. "It is just that... if I were to do something... like this... with you, I don't know what *this* is. I don't know what I am doing here. Or what *we* doing. How do men... love this way? It's wrong. Or it should feel wrong but it doesn't. How can I do this to you... make you do this with me... knowing how dangerous it is for you to be with me...as we are now."

"Because..." Dae Min sat up, kneeling besides Jae Shin so he could lean over the man's body and look into his eyes. "Because I have done these...things with other men. I've known for a long time that I prefer men...the touch of men over women. Nothing excites me more than a man's lean body, naked and strong before me. I have known this for a long time."

"If you've..." Jae Shin bit his lips, sucking them in as he thought. "If you've done this, then why... do this... with me? You must know I'm...not used to doing this. I've never done anything like this...with man or woman. Why not find someone to pleasure yourself with who knows what they are doing? Why choose me?"

Have you seen yourself? Dae Min wanted to scream at the man, folding his hands in tightly so he didn't grab Jae Shin by the shoulders and shake him until his eyes rattled back into his skull. *Because I watch your ass beneath your clothes and I think about how tight you would be around me? How hot you would feel on my cock? How I want to fill you with my seed and bite you so hard on the back of your neck that I leave a mark than never heals? Or maybe because no one has ever had you and I want to be the first to plunder that sweet richness? Are you that blind, Moon Jae Shin, that you cannot see how much you make me lust for you? You are driving me mad enough to just take what I want and damn the consequences — I know your body will be **that** sweet...be that wicked... that I won't care if I have to murder you afterwards because you'll want to kill me for hurting you; I want you **that** much.*

"Because I've not felt this way about anyone before," Dae Min murmured, lowering his gaze to focus on the man's mouth, hoping the coy shyness of a fellow scholar would draw the man out. "Because for all the time I have spent with me, I've only felt my body respond with pleasure and with you... with you, I feel as if you make my soul and heart spill open, as my body has done with other men."

He chanced another kiss, a small delicate press of his lips on Jae Shin's to seal the sincerity of his words. The tantalizing taste on his obsession ground a soft moan from his throat and Dae Min swallowed, holding Jae

Shin's flavour on his tongue before he pulled away.

"Because I love you, my Jae Shin," Dae Min lifted his gaze, hoping the glitter of lust in his eyes could pass for the promise of tears. "Because if I spent one moment dying with a kiss from your mouth, it would worth living a long life sharing pleasures with a thousand men."

"Yong..." Jae Shin breathed, closing his eyes against the anguish Dae Min saw flicker across his face.

"He is not here, Jae Shin." He pressed his fingertips against Jae Shin's lips, stopping the man from saying his best friend's name. "He would never be here with you. Not like this. Not like I am with you. The tea houses he visits have women, many women who have already felt his touch...already felt his pleasure... women who have already wiped his pleasure from between their thighs once and will do so again. He is not for you, my Jae Shin. Not like I am. Not like I always will be."

"He is..." Jae Shin forced himself to look at the dark corners of his heart where he tucked away his affection for Yong Ha. "This... my being here with you isn't...right...it isn't fair to you."

"Being here with you," Dae Min whispered. "Is all I've ever wanted."

Dae Min worked his jacket off, then stripped the undergarments constricting his movements. Bare chested, he straddled Jae Shin's hips, slowly peeling the man's loosened jacket from his torso. Jae Shin let the other man guide him free of his sleeves, lying back into the bedding as Dae Min leaned over him and placed his hands on either side of Jae Shin's shoulders, resting his weight on his knees and palms.

They stared at one another, separated by a few inches and centuries of forbidden temptations. A wanton anticipation lurked in Dae Min's gaze as Jae Shin looked away, turning his face aside when the rawness of Dae Min's lust grew too great. Jae Shin's heart beat hard in his chest, pumping so furiously that Dae Min could feel the pressure of his pulse jump under his skin.

"I can feel you...feel your wanting under me," Dae Min whispered, lowering his mouth to the crook of Jae Shin's neck.

He opened his lips and parted his teeth, taking a gentle bite of Jae Shin's satiny flesh. The man underneath him gasped and his hips jerked up in reflex, making Dae Min smile around his mouthful of skin and meat when he felt the hard length of Jae Shin's arousal press up into him.

"Tell me you don't feel a need for me, Jae Shin." He rolled the bite between his teeth and let go, licking at the spot with his tongue. Unsatisfied with the faint marbling pink on Jae Shin's skin, he bit again, hard enough to make the man moan with the slight pain-pleasure.

Biting again, taking small clenches until Jae Shin writhed under him and the man's hands wrapped up in the linens with a furious grip, Dae Min continued, "Can you tell me that there isn't a part of you clenching when I touch you. That you don't long to feel me against that secret place that is begging for me to touch? Tell me, Jae Shin — my Jae Shin — can you tell me you don't feel the *need* for me? Don't you wonder what it would feel like... to finally be worshipped and loved as you are meant to be?"

Jae Shin's moan, a dark and slithering sound, fueled Dae Min on.

"Tell me, my beautiful Jae Shin, tell me what you want," He murmured, sinking his teeth into Jae Shin's throat again. "Tell me you need to feel me fill you. That you will let me show you how incredible it feels to have someone love you long and hard enough to bring the stars down to you. Tell me that, my Jae Shin, and I will spend every second we have of this night, rolling you in moonlight and drinking the silver from your body. Just tell me... you want this."

"Yes," Jae Shin whispered, a broken rough rasp filled with his overwhelming want to be touched and loved. "Please. I want this."

eight

"What are you doing here?" Yoon Hee hissed, wriggling in Sun Joon's grasp. "And put me down."

Sun Joon barely budged when Yoon Hee struck his chest with the flat of her hands. A ghost of a smile appeared on his face when she pushed again and he took the merest step back to appease her ego. Gently setting the slender woman down, he set a disapproving scowl on his face — a scowl seriously undermined by the smile warming his eyes.

"What am *I* doing here? What are *you* doing here?" He leaned over her.

"I asked first." Yoon Hee fought a brief battle with her borrowed skirts, pulling at them to bunch up around her waist. "If I like your answer, I might give you one in return."

"I followed you." Sun Joon shrugged. "You looked ...sneaky when I left you at your room so I waited to see what you were up to."

"I did *not* look sneaky! I just needed to... make certain Jae Shin hyung was okay." Looking up, she glared at him through narrowed eyes. "And what were you thinking? Following me? Why?"

"Because you are the centre of my world," Sun Joon replied softly, cupping his hand over her cheek. "Because where you go... no matter how ill-advised... I am there with you."

"Oh ho! You think you can soothe me... like I'm some child!"

"No, I think I can walk besides you to battle anything you take on. My heart hears yours and I am compelled to follow. It is such a thing I have resigned myself to... this loving of you." His thumb pressed on the fullness of her mouth, a slow stroke of his pad on her lower lip. Sun Joon dared himself to take a small taste of the woman who bedeviled his life, promising himself a tiny touch of his mouth on the corner of her lips and moaned when Yoon Hee turned to kiss him fully.

"You are now forbidden to be around Yong Ha!" She declared, gathering up her skirts. "You sound like Yeorim trying to coax something out of one of his gisaeng."

"Yong Ha doesn't love his gisaeng," Sun Joon said in return, fixing his dislodged gat. "Not as I love you. Not as I want to love you every day. Until the day I die of exhaustion from following you into your schemes. Now tell me what you are doing here? And I might even forgive you for stealing my coat."

"I had to take the coat. I was cold." She murmured under her breath as she picked up the discarded garment. "And I love you too."

"Then tell me what we are doing here. What are you doing here? In a tea house and dressed like... that."

"You are going to have to get over your obsession with my clothes." She poked at his chest then blushed when he pursed his lips in an attempt to control another smile from taking over his mouth. "Stop that. We need to focus on what we're doing here."

"Something I am still without any guidance on," Sun Joon said sternly. "Why did you sneak out of Sungkyunkwan to follow Moon Jae Shin?"

"Because he and Yong Ha had a fight. I went looking for him but that Dae Min found him first...then brought him here."

"Dae Min is his friend," Sun Joon said, his tone flat and steady. "I would imagine they do... many things together without your assistance or involvement."

"Don't be that way."

"What way?"

"The way when you pretend as if you are above judging someone else when I know in your little heart you are judging with each breath you take." Yoon Hee wagged her finger under his nose. "You just like pretending to be better than the rest of us but there is a little Sun Joon inside of your head gleefully dancing around and saying; *YOU I judge! Judge! Judge! Judge!*. I hear his little voice all the time. Don't think I can't."

"Why are we here?" Sun Joon sighed, the sound of a long-suffering man. "To spy on Jae Shin?"

"No, we are here to get him out of Dae Min's arms," Yoon Hee declared. "And bring him back to Yong Ha where he belongs."



Jae Shin felt his heart die, its final sputtering and gasping throes poisoning the blood in his veins. His hand shook when he lifted it off of the bed, fingers trembling when he touched Dae Min's bare shoulder. He felt strangely cold inside, although the rest of his body was on fire with the wanting of Dae Min's touch and he shoved it away, refusing to look too closely at the emotions swirling around inside of him.

The touch was wrong. For as good as it felt to have the man's hands and mouth on him, they felt.. infinitesimally wrong. And when Dae Min leaned in for a kiss, Jae Shin turned away, somehow unable to take the taste of Dae Min on his tongue.

"It's okay, hyung," Dae Min murmured, stroking at the man's face with delicate brush of his finger tips. "I know this is new to you. Let me show you how good this can be. How good I can make you feel."

He lowered himself onto Jae Shin's body, covering the man with his weight. Heavy with want, Dae Min's sex seemed to instinctively find Jae Shin's, their lengths growing stiff as he lightly rolled his hips against the other man. It was hard to go slow, Dae Min discovered, especially when taking in the sight of Jae Shin's sloe eyes shimmering with the surrender to his touch.

Mine, Dae Min thought, unable to stop his smile from spreading over his face. *You are mine, Moon Jae Shin.*

"I have something... that will make this easier for you, Jae Shin." He bit back his moan, keeping his voice as steady as he could despite the growing friction on his sex. "I'll take care of you. I promise."

"I... don't know how..."

"We will take this slow," Dae Min promised, mentally calculating how long it would take for the unguent to take effect if he had to use it. "I won't do anything you don't want...or don't like. I want this to be as much about your pleasure...as mine."

"This... this between us," Jae Shin whispered. "This is too quickly done for me. I'm not... I'm not one for these kinds of pleasures."

"That's because no one has ever touched you... not like I want to," Dae Min replied, cursing inwardly. He was losing the man's interest with each passing second. Needing to distance Jae Shin from his thoughts, Dae Min reached for the soju. "Lie back, hyung, and just...feel."

The storm outside had fallen silent while he'd coaxed Jae Shin into the bedding but as Dae Min fought with his desire to take what he wanted, it rose again bringing harsh winds down upon the exclusive tea house. Even through the thick outer walls, the screaming howls could be heard clearly, whipping around the building in a hungered frenzy.

"The winter wants us, Geol Oh." Dae Min whispered, sliding down Jae Shin's long, muscular body. "But I won't let anyone have you...you are just for me."

His fingers teased Jae Shin's nipple, plucking it hard. Jae Shin writhed, reaching for the other man. Dae Min caught his wrists, pressing them down to Jae Shin's side.

Dae Min coaxed Jae Shin's mouth open with a slow, tantalizing kiss, his fingers slowly stroking at the man's chest. Moving to trail a line of biting kisses over Jae Shin's jaw, his belly warmed at the deep purple mark forming on the man's neck, his teeth prints vivid against Jae Shin's golden skin.

"Let me do this..." Dae Min purred. "Just let go, my Jae Shin. Let go and just...feel. Don't think. Just...feel ...and breathe."



"This is not our business," Sun Joon grumbled as he followed Yoon Hee out into the hallway. "Anything that is happening between Jae Shin and Dae Min... is..."

"Not supposed to happen," She finished for her fiancé. "Dae Min is poaching. Jae Shin belongs to Yong Ha."

"No one can *belong* to another."

"You belong to me," Yoon Hee replied. "Jae Shin belongs to Yong Ha."

"Does that mean you belong to *me*?" He teased as he held up his hands to ward off her expected attack. Sobering, Sun Joon tugged on her sleeve, stalling her progress. "We're making trouble in this, Yoon Hee. By involving ourselves in this, we are *acknowledging* there is a relationship here... several of them... between *men*."

Yoon Hee's chin went up in a challenge. "Are you worried because it is against the supposed rules?"

"I am worried because while you and I do not care about the rules, there are others who would make things...difficult for Yong Ha and Jae Shin. Even here, as we are now standing in a place where men gather, they hide their...affections for one another behind a ruse." He plucked up the end of her stolen jacket to emphasis his point. "They... our friends... would be risking a lot, maybe even their lives, if they act towards those affections."

"Isn't love worth it?" She turned, the faint light catching her face. "Weren't we worth it?"

Standing in the middle of the hallway, Yoon Hee made a nearly comical figure. Her slender form was swathed in an elaborate dress nearly two sizes too large for her, despite the layers of her scholar robes beneath. The gaudy colours and brilliant sparkles were a far cry from the blue they often wore and she could barely keep her head straight from the weight of the bulky wig she'd tried to fit over her head. To the passing eye, she might resemble a gauche young woman attempting to mimic her betters...and failing to do so in a spectacular manner.

To Sun Joon, he only saw where his heart resided and where his soul longed to spend eternity in.

"You are, *agi*," He said, voice soft and warm. "And yes, love — no matter whose love it is — is worth it."

"Then let us go find our Jae Shin." Yoon Hee punched a fist into her open hand and a bloodthirsty smirk formed on her lips. "And I have a score to settle with that Dae Min."



Jae Shin lay still under Dae Min's explorations, swallowing furtively at the uncomfortable lump in his throat. His body was tight and hard, obviously responsive to Dae Min's fingers as they undid the ties to his pants. Those same fingers brushed under the band, a daring journey onto skin never touched before. His arousal was evident, Jae Shin glanced down to see the push of his sex against the seam of his clothes.

Then why do I feel... wrong?

His mind whispered answers, none of which he wanted to hear. The clench in his belly was shame and not repulsion. Shame at wanting another man's touch when it was considered a perversion. In the mist of his confusion, Jae Shin felt the stirrings of rebellion in his mind and an aching itch in his hands to tear the other man off of his body and run down the hall like a frightened virgin on her bridal night.

Isn't that what I am? Am I not that virgin? He asked himself.

Ah but this is not your bridal night, The whispers in his mind were joined by the sobbing cries in his heart. *Because this is **not** the man you would spend your life with. This is not the man you long to have touch you...to mark you... the one you want to explore you...not the one you **want** to explore.*

His soul joined in, a sibilant wending of a truth he longed to bury. *This is not the man you love.*

Dae Min's mouth touched the soft skin of his underbelly and Jae Shin jumped, startled by the brush of lips. So lost in his thoughts, he'd not felt the man tug down the front of his pants, exposing a wide swath of skin and the first inch or so of his sex. Trapped beneath the tight pull of cloth against its length, his shaft filled with desire, the soft wiry hair surrounding it prickling Dae Min's chin.

The man's tongue licked at Jae Shin's exposed base and the scholar's world spun into a hard tight point,

pushing the air out of his lungs. Unable to stop himself, he thrust up, rubbing his shaft on the press of Dae Min's body. The need for satisfaction drove each roll of his hips and when Dae Min worked his fingers into his waistband and pulled them down to his hips, he made no move to stop him.

Another lick and Jae Shin shuddered, wanting to hold back but the pounding of his blood through his veins was proving to be more than he could handle. With another thrust, he eased some of the tightness only to have it return tenfold. The slit on his sex's head dampened, the velvet curling back with the need to be touched. Dae Min fondled him through the cloth, working Jae Shin up into a frenzy he couldn't hold back from. It was too much to hold onto, especially since he'd only felt the furtive touch of his own hand before tonight and the aching loss of Yong Ha echoed in the depths of his soul.

He can never love me like this, Jae Shin sobbed, biting down on his lips to keep from crying out. The depths of bitter despair rose up from the well of his soul and he fought the riptide, trying not to drown in the misery of his loss. His anguish grew, tormenting him with every breath he took and he battled to keep it contained, refusing to give in to the whispers of his mind.

Dae Min is here, He told himself. Dae Min is the one who wants you. The only who has ever wanted you.

The only one who came after you.

The only one who willing to love a degenerate like you.

Only because it won't hurt as much when he walks away, The voices whispered, an erosive rain pounding on his resolve. *Because he **will** walk away. Just like everyone else. And you will be left alone... once again.*

The rush of his blood to his shaft stole Jae Shin's breath and he gasped, trying to find a balance for the pleasure and despair consuming him. Grabbing at Dae Min's head, he lost his fingers in the man's loose hair and tried to push him away before the first wave of satiation hit.

Wrenched from Jae Shin's body, Dae Min rolled, getting up to his knees and growled in frustration. Swearing between gritted teeth, he reached for the glass jar he'd ordered the gisaeng to bring him, intent on finding the warmth of Jae Shin's body around him no matter what the cost.

Lost in the pleasure of his body going over the edge, Jae Shin growled as he fought the rise of his orgasm. The wordless animal sounds clawing out of his throat aroused Dae Min and the man reached for the writhing scholar, wanting to ride the pleasure filling Jae Shin's body. The man fought the contact, needing distance from the temptation tormenting him. A rush of sour water hit his throat, pulled up from his stomach as the rotgut alcohol tried to leave his system and Jae Shin lurched, struggling to hold it in.

Turning over onto his stomach, Jae Shin touched himself where he lay bared and cried out, his anger growing inside of him at the wetness he found there.

Unfulfilled and frustrated, he grabbed at the bedding, shrouding himself in the linens while he desperately fought to keep what he longed for inside of him. The want came hard and fast, looming up over him as a cobra with teeth bared to strike. Curled up in a ball, Jae Shin surrendered to his own struggles, too tired to do much more than whisper his defeat to the man who'd conquered him.

"I am sorry for hurting you — for wanting you — for loving you...when you cannot... will not love me, Yong Ha." Jae Shin choked around his breaking pride. *"My Yong Ha."*

nine

Dae Min reeled, tumbling on his back when Yoon Hee's fist connected with his face. He tasted blood and the bitter taint filled his throat, eviscerating Jae Shin's delicate lemon taste he's savoured for so long. Slamming into the wall, his weight shattered the frame around the mattress pad, fragments of rice paper and thin wood exploding into the air. She stood over him, shaking her hand out before clenching it again. With her knuckles scraped from hitting Dae Min's mouth and her stolen wig perched precariously on her head, Yoon Hee reared back her fist, prepared to hit if the man attacked.

"Who ... I don't know you," Dae Min was up on his feet before Yoon Hee could strike again, peering at her face. He dabbed at the line of blood forming at the corner of his mouth. "But when I find out who owns your contract, you little boy-bitch..."

Sun Joon would have smiled at the sight of Dae Min's face turning white when he realized who was standing behind Yoon Hee but the coldness of his temper rose at the abuse the young scholar flung at his Yoon Hee. Calm and determined, he stepped forward, intent on ripping Dae Min's head from his neck when Yoon Hee placed a hand on his chest.

"Grab Jae Shin." She cast a withering glance at Dae Min. "He doesn't look like he can walk. Who knows what this one did to him."

Hooking Jae Shin's arm over his shoulders, Sun Joon hoisted the half naked man up, his nostrils flaring at the sour smell on the man's clothes. "He smells...drunk."

"He was that way when I found him," Dae Min grabbed one of the cloths from the tray to stave off his bleeding. "I brought him here to sober up."

"Hyung," Sun Joon jostled the older man, hoping to get Jae Shin to open his eyes. Speaking louder, he frowned when he got a murmuring, broken response. "Yoon Hee, we need to get him back to the school. There is something wrong with Jae Shin."

"He is safe here." Dae Min barreled past Yoon Hee, grabbing Jae Shin's arm. "You'll be risking his health if you take him out into the cold."

"His health I'm willing to risk," Sun Joon growled, backing the other scholar off with a show of his teeth. "His heart... *that* is another matter. Let go of him, hyung. Or you will not like what happens to you next."

✦

"He is suffering from alcohol poisoning," Jung said, wiping at the bitter-smelling sweat on Jae Shin's forehead. "The distillation was...bad, possibly contaminated. He'll need to be given juices to keep him hydrated and someone should sponge him off to help with his fever. I don't think he drank enough of it to die but it's best if someone watches him."

"I'll watch him," Three voices rose in unison and the friends looked at one another with varying degrees of emotion.

"We will take turns," Sun Joon offered. "Someone will rest while the other cares for Jae Shin. No one will exhaust themselves that way."

"Call me if his fever gets worse but for now, just let him sleep. He will sweat it out eventually but if he starts to get sick and empties his stomach, make sure he is turned downwards so he won't choke. With this kind of thing, that is the greatest risk as the body tries to get rid of the poison in its system." Jung packed up

the items he brought with him and nodded towards Yoon Hee. "I would tell you that it is improper for you, a female, to be doing this but considering you spent most of the year sleeping next to him and are too stubborn to listen to reason, I will not bother."

"For someone who didn't bother," Yong Ha muttered into Yoon Hee's ear. "He sure bothered."

"Thank you, Doctor Jung," Sun Joon accompanied stood to accompany Jung to the door, bowing in respect before sliding the door panel closed. His fatigue set in, a bone-weary tiredness draining him dry. Removing his *gat*, Sun Joon set it down and looked down at the man lying unconscious in the middle of the room.

Following Yoon Hee's being exposed as a woman, the three roommates were relocated to different quarters; Yoon Hee and Sun Joon housed in smaller single rooms with Jae Shin occupying a larger senior room between them, an unlikely chaperon set between the two more stalwart and traditional scholars. Left once again to his own devices, the rebel scholar took little care with his bedding, often shoving it aside and out of the way rather than using it to sleep on. As a result, maneuvering the mattress pad and bedding took more time than getting Jae Shin under the linens and Sun Joon's now ached from the chore of Jae Shin situated and ready for Jung's examination.

Hunkering down next to Jae Shin's shoulder, he looked at the others sitting on opposite corners of the mattress pad.

Yoon Hee's colour was up; her cheeks still pink from the cold and blood lust. Despite the difficulties in getting Jae Shin out of the tea house and back to the university, she'd soldiered on, once again amazing Sun Joon with her resilience. Yong Ha, however, was another matter.

They'd had to send word to the riverside tea house, asking Yong Ha to please return to the college. Sun Joon purposely wrote out a careful note, not wanting to alarm the older scholar but at the same time, expressing an urgency for his presence. He'd arrived after Jung did, his fox-like face curled into a false smile as he entered Jae Shin's room.

A smile that melted into vapours when he saw the too-still form of his friend on the floor.

His questions had to wait and Sun Joon saw the difficulty Yong Ha was having with his patience. When Jung lowered the blankets to listen to Jae Shin's chest, he saw Yong Ha recoil at the sight of the savage bite mark purpling the crook of Jae Shin's neck. For a moment, the scholar believed Yong Ha was disgusted by the obvious sight of his friend's sexual needs but something in the man's expression said pain and hurt more than judgment and recrimination. Now with Jung gone, the time for Yong Ha's questions had arrived.

"How did he get like this?" For a first question, it was a good one. An even-toned query Yong Ha almost prided himself on but the quiver in his voice gave away the depth of his emotions.

"Daemul," Sun Joon ignored the puffing of Yoon Hee's chest at the use of her nickname. Her ego had grown large enough over the night's adventures. "She went looking for Jae Shin after..." He was loathe to lay blame on Yong Ha, especially when the man's complexion was ice white with fear.

"After we fought," Yong Ha finished. "You can say it. He and I fought."

"You did not bring him to this," Yoon Hee defended. "You could not have known Dae Min was lurking about."

"Of course I should have known. He's been lurking about for weeks now," The older man said, his eyes flat and dull. "That doesn't explain how he — my... our Jae Shin — ended up here. Like this."

"Yoon Hee," Sun Joon prompted. "Please, tell him."

"When I went looking for Geol Oh...Dae Min got to him before me." She wrung her hands into the folds of her robe. Guilt pressed in, a hot tight knife to her guts. "I should have... been quicker. I should have found him sooner. This is on me."

"I should never have left him. This is on me." Yong Ha cut her off and the room grew silent and heavy. After taking a few breaths, he motioned for Yoon Hee to continue.

"I found out where Jae Shin had gone but Dae Min had already taken him from there. It took me a while

to find someone who saw which direction they went — too long, hyung — but I finally caught up with them.” The man in question moaned and Yoon Hee reached for one of the damp cloths Jung left behind and wiped the sweat from Jae Shin’s face. “I should have been faster.”

“He never should have gone there at all,” Sun Joon’s condemnation was light but the censure was enough to make Yong Ha’s back prickle with resentment. “He shouldn’t have, hyung. He should have come to one of us if he needed to speak his mind out about something. We have always been here for him. When is Moon Jae Shin going to trust us?”

You mean when is he going to trust again? Yong Ha thought bitterly. *He trusted more before this... before I let him down.*

“When I got to the tea house, I...” Yoon Hee shot Sun Joon a hard look. “I had to sneak in. I didn’t think they would just let me walk in but apparently they do.”

Sun Joon shrugged. “If one knows the tea house is there, then it stands to reason that one knows what its clientele...”

“*One* is not familiar with tea houses but *one* would like to know how you are,” Yoon Hee sniffed. “That is not the point. I should have tried it. At least asked.” She rinsed the cloth out, wringing it before wiping at Jae Shin’s throat. Yong Hee was tentative around the mottling, unsure if she should touch the area if it would cause Jae Shin pain. “It made for a delay. I could have helped before...”

“No one is blaming you for this, Yoon Hee.” Sun Joon touched her shoulder lightly. “No one is really to blame for this...except for the persons who made the alcohol that poisoned Jae Shin.”

“For all we know, it was something Dae Min gave him,” She responded, her voice rising. “Look at his throat! How did that happen? We don’t know what Dae Min did and when hyung wakes up, do you think he will tell us?”

“Where is Kim Dae Min now?” Yong Ha asked. His demeanor was quiet, nearly subdued compared to the forceful expressions he was known for. It was as if having Jae Shin lying nearly dead-still on the mattress sucked the life from him as well.

“I don’t know,” Yoon Hee replied. Holding up her fist for the man to see, she brandished the damage to her knuckles. “But I got a good punch in. Made him bleed.”

“Yes, she was quite fierce,” Sun Joon winced when his belly rumbled. Ducking his head in embarrassment, he pressed his stomach in. “My apologies, I didn’t eat before I followed Yoon Hee.”

“If hadn’t been there, Daemul, who would have carried Jae Shin? With two of you there, Dae Min was less likely to cause trouble.” Yong Ha staved off Yoon Hee’s adamant protests of not needing the man’s help. “The both of you should eat. I’ll stay here with Geol Oh. One of you can come by later if you’d like but for now, I think I need to... sit here with him.”

They left with a minimum of complaint, mostly Yoon Hee insisting on arranging items around Yong Ha so he would have everything within his reach. Promising to call for them if he needed someone, he sat quietly as they bickered their way out of the room, shutting the warmth in behind them.

The wind battered the building, tearing at the landscape around them. Despite its howling, the room was too silent for Yong Ha’s liking.

Jae Shin was too silent for Yong Ha’s liking.

He leaned over Jae Shin, turning his head so the man’s breath ghosted over his cheek. The soft shushing exhale warmed the cold chunk of ice encasing Yong Ha’s heart... the frosted over hardness that formed when he opened the door to Jae Shin’s room ready to fling hot, angry words in his friend’s face.

Yong Ha’s heart stopped beating in that horrifying moment and he wasn’t certain it had started up again. Or if it would once Jae Shin opened up his eyes and saw him there.

“What have I done to you, my Geol Oh?” He ran his fingers through Jae Shin’s hair, loosening the topknot at the back of his head. The silken black-brown mane fell, covering the man’s cheeks and softening his features. “You could have died tonight. That...alcohol you drank tonight could have killed you and it is my fault. I

drove you to it. I drove you away as if I'd beaten you with a stick."

The mottling on the man's neck terrified him nearly as much as the unconscious state he'd found Jae Shin in. Yong Ha had left little bites on others, tiny scallops of tingling pleasure meant to excite even after a lover has parted but the mauling of Jae Shin's neck made him sick down to his soul.

And the tiny teeth marks near Jae Shin's belly broke his heart.

Shedding his head covering and outer jacket, Yong Ha stretched out besides Jae Shin, wrapping an arm around the man's torso. He caught his breath every time he heard the man's heart skip and his tears fell to be absorbed into the bedding tucked around his friend's body. Tentatively, he undid the pin and hook holding his hair up and tucked himself closer, needing to feel the warmth of Jae Shin on him.

"Did you do anything with him?" Yong Ha pressed his eyes shut, unwilling to take the pain lashing out from his thoughts. "If Yoon Hee hadn't stopped him, would you have given yourself to him? Have I been wanting you all of this time only to find out now — that you prefer men — but still you do not want me?"

With his soul scraped raw and bare, Yong Ha buried his face into Jae Shin's chest, letting go the anguish he felt inside of him. Guttural sobs rocked his body and he gasped for air, wishing he could somehow absorb the damage done to Jae Shin. Every fibre of his being ached to hear the man laugh; even if it was at him. Anything would be preferable to the nothingness that lay beneath him.

"I'd even take you shoving me away, Geol Oh," Yong Ha whispered. "I did this to you. I should have stayed and made you listen to me. I should have told you to stay away from Dae Min... *no*, I should have made you stay away from him. Because look what he has done to you, my Geol Oh. Look how much you are lost inside of yourself because I did not hold you tight against me."

A cry he couldn't catch escaped, the heartfelt whimpering pain oozing from his throat and Yong Ha bit down on his lip, wishing for the first time in his life to have the control he mocked Sun Joon for having. Letting his eyes overflow, he lay against the man he loved more than his own life.

"I am sorry, Geol Oh," He whispered. "I am sorry for not...loving you like you needed me to. I shouldn't have assumed you would always be there, waiting for me as if no one else would want you. Who could not want you? Who could look at you and not want to have you be there with them? I know better now. I'll do better now."

"You're leaking on me, *Yeon Kkoc*."

It was a hateful nickname, one Yong Ha wished he could bury beneath miles of dirt and rock. Growing up with it made him choke down every bit of lotus root he found in his meals; a long standing vengeance exacted through meticulous consumption. He'd cast it off when he'd entered school, swearing the one person who knew of its existence to a secrecy never to be violated for any reason, yet hearing it in Jae Shin's rough, scraped-up voice was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever experienced.

As was the man's hand lifting up to caress his hair.

"Don't cry, Yong Ha," Jae Shin slurred, barely conscious but awake enough to try to comfort the broken man laying against him. Born of habit and bred from true affection, he cuddled Yong Ha close, rocking the man gently even in his sickened state. "Sleep now and don't worry. Whatever it is, I'll take care of you. I will always take care of you. I am your Geol Oh. Yes?"

Relieved, Yong Ha patted Jae Shin's chest, closing his eyes as the man's heart beat lulled him to sleep. "Yes, you are — *my* Geol Oh."



The flames could be seen from several streets away, a pillar of fire reaching up into the winter sky. After dodging several merchants scrambling to get their stalls packed up and out of the way in case it spread, Sun Joon finally came upon the immense pyre burning bright despite the wintery sleet falling over the city. Several city men stood nearby, water buckets readied for action but they held back, their nervous eyes flitting from the fire then back to the impassive face of the brilliantly clothed man standing in front of his handiwork.

"This is the bar, I take it?" Sun Joon asked, clasping his hands behind his back. Something popped inside

of the falling structure, followed closely by a small boom as a jug of alcohol surrendered to the flames. The fireball it created rolled up into the smoky canopy, crackling like a demon from a fairy tale as it rose to the sky.

"Yep." Yong Ha fanned himself, wafting away the ash specks clotting the air.

"It makes a nice fire." He looked around, noting the number of men ready to battle the blaze. "Does the owner know you are burning his place down?"

"I *am* the owner," Yong Ha said smoothly. "I was the first one I told. The new owner is very considerate in that way. Yong Ha, I said to myself, I am going to be burning down that wretched bar that sold the poisonous swill that almost took Geol Oh from you... me... whichever me that was. I was quite reasonable about it, accepting the demise of my newly purchased business with a fatalism that would have made my long-dead and gisaeng harassed grandfather proud."

"Is the tea house next?" By Sun Joon's reckoning, it was a valid question, especially considering the maniacal gleam in his friend's eye.

"No, that is a business intent on pleasure," He corrected. "It does not make its living selling toxins to my... my friends. I have no intention of razing it. It will, however, cull its membership rolls. They have a few *undesirable* clients — one in particular comes to mind. That will be seen too as well."

"Ah." He didn't know what else to say except to stand next to Yong Ha and watch the flames. After a moment, he cocked his head and turned towards the other man. "Does Dae Min know you've declared war on him? And does Geol Oh know he is the prize?"

"If he — Dae Min — doesn't know this by now, then he is stupider than I've thought and I'm ashamed that I even considered him even the slightest bit of competition," Yong Ha replied, chasing away a particular large ember swirling too close to his robes for comfort. "And as for Geol Oh being the prize, he isn't. What he is — is someone whose heart I have to win."

"Is destroying Dae Min that necessary to you," Sun Joon glanced up at the inferno threatening to overtake the square. The city men dashed water around the perimeter, trying to keep the flames contained. "Are you doing this for yourself? Or for Jae Shin."

"Destroying Dae Min is something I am doing for pleasure, Garang," He said, clasping Sun Joon on the shoulder. "Winning Geol Oh's heart is so I can live as I've found that I am dead without him. And Death, my beloved Sun Joon, is the ultimate boredom. I can think of much better things to do with my time... and my newly-won Geol Oh... than be bored."

ten

"Jae Shin looks well." The voice was familiar to Yong Ha, a deep throated sensual voice that should have been pleasant to his ears but instead, drove knives into his guts and ripped at the underbelly of his heart.

"Kim Dae Min."

Nearly at Jae Shin's door, Yong Ha stopped and turned, frustrated and angry at the young man sliding free of the shadows behind him. Stinking of ash and a sour mood, he tilted his chin up and looked down his nose at his competition.

The man was handsome enough, Yong Ha admitted to himself. Even wearing a thick long coat to keep out the cold, he cut a dashing figure; long legged and firm shoulders narrowing down to a slender waist. He wasn't as handsome as Jae Shin, Yong Ha thought dispassionately; or even Sun Joon but some might find him attractive.

So long as that someone wasn't *his* Geol Oh.

"You've been in to see him then?" Yong Ha wanted to run down the walkway and throw open Jae Shin's door, needing to run his hands over the man's shoulders and face...anywhere he could touch to see if Jae Shin was alright... if Jae Shin hadn't suffered again from Dae Min's whim but he steadied himself, remaining outwardly stoic in Dae Min's face. "I hope Yoon Hee or Sun Joon didn't let you stay long, he needs his rest."

"*Dongsaeng*...Sun Joon was there," Dae Min purred, walking a slow circle around Yong Ha. The mark on his swollen lip gave Yong Ha a tiny sense of satisfaction and he reminded himself to buy Yoon Hee something nice to thank her. "Jae Shin seemed fine to me, although a bit tired. He asked Sun Joon to leave us alone to talk."

"And did he?" Yong Ha forced himself to stay in place, not giving the other man the satisfaction of making him turn to watch his saunter across the walkway.

"Leave us alone?"

"No. Talk." Yong Ha replied, deciding while Yoon Hee would get a present, Sun Joon would be made to copy over his lessons as punishment for leaving Jae Shin with his tormentor.

"We did." He stopped, a few feet away from Yong Ha and stepped back when a gust of wind picked up a swirl of loose ash from Yong Ha's clothing. "I was sorry to hear of his condition. I did my best to help him but ah, the other two dragged him out into the cold before I could get a doctor to him. Sadly, he cannot remember anything other than me helping him from the bar. The poisons in the brew rattled his brain. I think there were hallucinogens in the alcohol. He doesn't remember much. Just my warmth and... how tender I was in caring for him."

"And the bite?" He lifted one eyebrow, skewering the other man with a telling look. "How did you explain that away? A wild dog attack? He fell into a barrel of hungry eels? Or did you just tell him the truth and admit you tried to force yourself on him?"

"Force?" Dae Min's smile mocked him. "I didn't force him at all, hyung. Every mark on Jae Shin's body was made willingly and to the willing. He was begging me to touch him... wanting me to delve into him. He pleaded for my fingers inside of him..."

Yong Ha had a fistful of Dae Min's robes before he even realized he'd moved towards the man. His shoulder muscles strained with the effort of keeping the man pinned against the wall and somewhere down

the walkway, a door panel rattled open and someone called out; asking if there was trouble.

"No," Yong Ha responded loudly, not-so-gently dropping Dae Min onto his feet. "Dongsaeng slipped on the ice. I grabbed him before he could fall. He's okay."

A shout of be careful came back and the door slid back into place, leaving Yong Ha and Dae Min alone in the light wintery squall. Dae Min stood, pulling himself up against the wall and grimaced as he took a step, glaring at Yong Ha as he delicately balanced most of his weight on one ankle.

"Is that what you think will win you Jae Shin's heart?" He sneered at Yong Ha. "Violence?"

"There's a good chance of it, yes." Yong Ha grinned back, a wide gleeful expression on his face. "And if you don't think that, then you don't know our Geol Oh."

"Then the bite to his neck definitely turned him on," Dae Min shot back. "I thought perhaps he was that responsive because he hadn't been touched by anyone before. I can't wait to see how he writhes under me when I get to use more than my teeth."

"Hyung!" Sun Joon's deep voice cut through the wind, stopping Yong Ha from wrapping his hands around Dae Min's slender neck. Stepping out of the scholar's sick room, he strode down the walk, stopping halfway between the room and the men. "Jae Shin probably would like to see you before he falls asleep again and I'm certain you've not had anything warm to eat. Perhaps you'd like some time to clean up before your visit? You wouldn't want to come to Jae Shin smelling of burnt refuse. He already has had that experience this evening."

"Of course, you are right." Yong Ha stepped back, bowing his head at the younger scholar. "I will go repair my clothes and be right in."

"I'll see that Kim Dae Min gets back to his room without further incident." Sun Joon gave Yong Ha a small smile. "Please, hyung, hurry. Jae Shin is tired and won't sleep until he sees you."

"No, no, you are right," Yong Ha stepped towards his room, halted by a touch of Sun Joon's fingers on his arm.

"He's asked for you since I've been back to relieve Yoon Hee," Sun Joon murmured. "He'll be glad to see you. He misses you, Yong Ha."

"I'll be right there. Tell him that for me."

"I will." Sun Joon nodded towards Yong Ha's room. "I will wait for you in his room."

Yong Ha stalked down the walk and Dae Min brushed off the snow stuck to his coat. "You can't stand guard over him forever, Lee Sun Joon. Eventually, he will seek me out. We are... close."

"You are close only because he does not know who you are but I am sure we will find a way to expose that side of you to him, Dae Min." Sun Joon inclined his head in a slight farewell. "You can depend upon that."

✦

"We've been banned from the tea house!" Dae Min waved the piece of paper he'd been given by a page under his cousin's nose. "Banned! Both of us!"

"They can't ban you, hyung. Your fathers set up our accounts there. Where else are we going to drink for free?" Bon Hwa plucked the message out of Dae Min's hand, scanning the writing. "*We regretfully find our establishment can no longer offer you courtesies.* What does that mean? Can no longer offer us courtesies? We've paid for those courtesies."

"It means we are forbidden to go there," He snapped at his cousin. "Someone doesn't like losing so he's pulled strings to punish me."

"Someone? Someone who?" Bon Hwa turned the paper over, looking as if he looked at it the right direction, it would provide him with a way out of their banishment.

"Goo Yong Ha. Who else do you know that has a grudge against me?"

Bon Hwa thought of several names but kept his thoughts to himself. "What do we do? And why include me?"

"The membership is under my father's name. Anyone included under him would be banned as well." Dae

Min flicked his fingers at his cousin's head, snapping his nails on the man's temple. "This is because he is afraid of me so he's using what power he has to lash out."

"Why should he be afraid?" Bon Hwa asked. "He's the one with Jae Shin right now, not you."

If Dae Min could, he would have skinned his cousin alive at that moment. "Why do I keep you with me?"

"Because no one else wants to be your friend," The younger man shot back before he thought to keep his mouth shut. Visibly wincing when he heard himself, he quickly said, "That was a jest, hyung. I wasn't serious."

"When I find someone I like better, I am going to have them kill you, Bon Hwa," Dae Min threatened. "And I will watch as they do it. Possibly even laugh."

"What are you going to do now, hyung?" Bon Hwa crumpled the paper, shoving it into the pocket of his sleeve. "We can't stand for this. It's one thing to fight over... something to fuck but to have someone's privileges..."

Bon Hwa's head snapped back hard and he twisted around, the momentum of Dae Min's punch turning his body. He hit the floor with a hard thump, coughing out a mouthful of blood-tinged saliva onto the polished wood. Standing over the man's prone body, Dae Min grabbed at his robes, hauling him up off the floor until they were eye to eye.

"Jae Shin is *not* just something to fuck," He hissed, lightly slapping his cousin's face to keep his attention. "If I'd gotten Jae Shin into bed, then his family's political power can be mine to leverage. What family wouldn't want to keep their son's dirty secrets? Especially if that dirty secret is that he likes men."

"What's to stop them from just having you killed?" Bon Hwa gurgled, shoving his fingers against his cousin's hands to give him enough slack to breathe.

"Because Jae Shin believes it is true love," Dae Min sneered. "He'll protect me from his family's wrath as long as he believes I love him but now that damned Yong Ha is going to ruin it. He's going to take Jae Shin out from under my nose and I'm going to be powerless to stop him."

"What can you do? Should we pack?"

"Pack?" He laughed, a hollow echo sound in the close confines of their room. "We're not going anywhere. Yong Ha is. Because if I can't have Moon Jae Shin, then I'm going to make damned certain no one else does... or wants to."



Yong Ha strolled into Jae Min's room, impeccably attired in a bright peacock blue hanbok he knew Jae Shin liked. Sun Joon was up off of the floor and out the door before Yong Ha could say a word, the rattle of the door panel echoing against the sound of the wind.

"He's been needing to go to the bathroom for an hour now," Jae Shin murmured sleepily. "For some reason, he believes I can't be left alone for a minute."

"Knowing you, he's right," Yong Ha teased.

The room was as familiar to him as his own. Pieces of their shared adolescence lay tucked into nearly hidden corners, small treasures that would only mean something to the two people involved in their gathering. A smooth white rock, its edged rounded off by the river, sat on top of birds' next woven with tiny pale yellow feathers. Resting against the next was a woven ball made of reeds, the play thing trapped against a stack of fairytales.

He'd given Jae Shin the rock one night when they'd snuck away to share a purloined bottle of soju, whispering into his friend's ear that he'd stolen the moon as well and needed somewhere to hide it.

I think you stole my heart that night as well, Jae Shin, Yong Ha realized as he was flooded with memories of their times together.

The bird's nest was one Jae Shin discovered on a rooftop they'd climbed up onto one winter's afternoon. Abandoned months ago by migrating birds it sat discarded until he'd picked it up. Yong Ha teased him about giving up his restless, nomadic ways now that he'd found a home. It wasn't until much later that Yong Ha found out Jae Shin had taken it with him, carrying with him a piece of a home they'd briefly shared.

The other bits and bobbles were tiny little moments, found or shared things they'd laughed or cried over. If he dug through the carefully arranged pile, Yong Ha was certain he could map out his life based on what he found. Although, he frowned slightly, he couldn't quite remember where Jae Shin got the string of amber beads curled up against his favourite book.

The scent of food caught his attention and Yong Ha looked about, finding a small iron kettle set on the side of the brazier. Its contents bubbled but the odor was faint, the merest hint of meat and possibly vegetables. "Have you eaten?"

"Yoon Hee tried to get me to eat some soup." The face Jae Shin made ground a chuckle out of Yong Ha. "Don't laugh. You know she can't cook."

"Sit up a little bit. I'm sure what you have here is fine." Yong Ha grabbed bolsters to slide under Jae Shin's shoulders, helping his friend sit up slightly. Lifting up the lid to the pot warming over the brazier, he sniffed at the stew. "Or at least edible. We'll get you something better in the morning. This smells flavourless."

"Sun Joon thought it would be a good idea if I had something *calming*." Jae Shin's lip curled in disgust. "It smells like someone dropped a piece of onion into boiled water." "It might even taste like that as well but it's all we have for now." Yong Ha dished out a portion into a small bowl and brought it to Jae Shin's side. Settling down, he spooned a bit of the broth up, blowing on it cool it off. Holding the spoon up to Jae Shin's lips, he said, "Here."

"You're not really going to feed me." Jae Shin eyed him. "Really?"

"Yes, really," Yong Ha insisted. "Now open your mouth so I can get you another spoonful. No arguments for a change, Geol Oh. I'd feel better knowing I was getting this in you. Please. For me."

"I'm not sick."

Despite his grumbling, Jae Shin allowed himself to be fed, opening his mouth slowly to sip at the broth. Although awake, he appeared drawn and grey as if staying upright was nearly more effort than he could bear. After a few spoonfuls, Yong Ha sat back on his haunches and picked up a warm damp cloth from a nearby bowl.

"I don't need you to give me a bath." Jae Shin gulped, alarmed when Yong Ha reached for the blankets to tug them down.

"You're covered in sweat. Jung said to keep you clean and cooled off." Yong Ha gripped at the bed linens, trying to wrest them down from Jae Shin's chest. "You have three choices on who you want to do this. Me, Sun Joon or Yoon Hee. Who would you prefer?"

Blowing at the hair in his face, Jae Shin scowled up at his friend. The sullen pout of his mouth sparked a desire in Yong Ha to kiss the disgruntled expression away from the man's lips and Yong Ha decided it would be better for them both if he busied himself by wringing out the cloths.

An idea struck him, puncturing his heart as if it were an arrow shot by Jae Shin's bow and he choked, unable to hold in the sound of his fear as he asked, "Unless you want Dae Min..."

"Why would I want Dae Min?" Jae Shin pursed his mouth and stared at his friend as if Yong Ha grew a turnip from his forehead. "Why would I want Dae Min here when I have you?"

If relief were a wine, Yong Ha would have been drunk on the sheer amount of comfort drowning him. Exhaling his caught up breath, he nodded and tugged at the blankets. "Then let me do it. I promise, I'll be gentle."

"You're never gentle," Jae Shin muttered. "You like to pretend you are but you are sadistic and cruel, especially when you think it will make someone laugh."

"Are you still upset about when I put that glue on your chin?" Yong Ha asked, trying not to look at the purple mark marring Jae Shin's neck. "I thought it would work better than shaving. It was a good idea! And that was ten years ago!"

"I had to walk around for a week with your hand stuck to my face." He snorted at the memory. "It was a horror."

“At least you had use of your hands,” The scholar grumbled back. “I had to get you to help me do...everything! I was ready to cut my hand off by the third day... a horror for you was a humiliation for me.”

“You shouldn’t have glued yourself to my face then,” Jae Shin replied.

“You shouldn’t have moved so your glued chin filled my hand.”

It was an old argument and one they’d had a few thousand times before but the teasing beneath their words felt different to Yong Ha’s ears. There was something darkly erotic in them and he blushed, remembering how the other man had to help him do everything while they were bound together, including going to the bathroom.

The incident had been one that cemented their relationship. Dependent on one another for even the smallest things, the wild feral genius and the urban sophisticated flirt found themselves sharing the most intimate of thoughts and dreams, often staying up into the wee hours of the morning listening to the one another talk.

When the fixative finally was able to be dissolved, their closeness remained and Yong Ha’s palm sometimes itched from the nothingness it now held. Yong Ha couldn’t stand for his hands to be empty any more and he filled them with small things, an apple or a fan but it wasn’t the same. The texture was wrong... the silken smoothness of Jae Shin’s jaw was what he needed to feel complete and his hand still drifted up to the man’s face, unbidden and sometimes unwanted but always seeking out the comfort of Jae Shin’s touch.

He also knew Jae Shin well enough to know the man couldn’t sleep properly unless he had his hand tucked under his chin and against his neck, reliving the pressure of Yong Ha against his skin but it was never something he mentioned. Jae Shin’s pride remaining intact was as important to him as Jae Shin’s smile.

That and he wasn’t quite confident enough to tease Jae Shin about it and not get punched in the face for it. The glue *had* been his idea, however ill-advised.

There wasn’t a strong enough word to describe the shock coursing through Yong Ha’s thoughts when Jae Shin suddenly cleared his throat and said, “I sometimes miss having you there... touching me like that. It feels strange not to have you there when... I’m feeling...”

Blinking away the tears in his eyes, Yong Ha let the cloth drop and he reached for his friend, mindful of the tenderness of Jae Shin’s stomach and throat. His arms tightened around Jae Shin and Yong Ha thought his shoulders were snap from the pressure of holding the man tightly but he knew he couldn’t let go. The enormity of the previous evening’s event finally hit him as he realized how close he’d come to losing the feel of Jae Shin in his arms...in his life... and in his heart.

Unable to hold back his emotions, Yong Ha whispered into Jae Shin’s hair, “I love you, my Geol Oh. I can’t.. I don’t want to live without you. Not again. Not ever again.”

eleven

Jae Shin forgot how to breathe.

Perhaps he'd died and somehow, the spirits he'd angered were mocking him until he was reborn.

It was the only thing he could think of.

Well, he reconsidered, that and he could be insane.

Yong Ha's hand trembled near his face, reaching up to touch him — stroke him — his long, delicate fingers so near his mouth Jae Shin's breath warmed their tips. He could turn away and distance himself from the young man's hand. Jae Shin could break away so easily, put enough space between them with the twist of his head so they wouldn't connect if Yong Ha dared to come any closer.

A simple twist of his head and his life would be safe. Be normal. Be... the same.

He pursed his lips and kissed the fingertips trembling in front of his face.

✦

"Did you leave Jae Shin with Yong Ha?" Yoon Hee settled down next to her fiancé, rubbing her hands together in delight.

The pages filed into the small dining area, placing trays in front of the few scholars who'd remained at the school in the storm. Many with family in the city fled to their homes, preferring to wait the winter out in the comfort of familiar surroundings but a few stalwart students remained, notably Yoon Hee and her voracious appetite. One of the boys barely had time to put the tray in front of her when she began to pick at the panchan, pinching nibbles of pickled vegetables into her mouth.

"No, I left him with Dae Min and told them I wouldn't be back until morning." Sun Joon grabbed at Yoon Hee before she could fully get up out of her seat. Although alone at the end of the long hall, he still kept his voice down, mostly to encourage Yoon Hee to keep hers to a whisper. "That was a jest. Why would I do that? I do not trust Dae Min and I certainly do not like him."

"It's hard to tell with you," Yoon Hee said around a bite of octopus tentacle. "You could be trying to keep an open mind and all of that nonsense when deep inside you *know* he's guilty of something."

"Is he?" Sun Joon returned Yoon Hee's frown with a placid, measured stare. "Can we prove he is guilty of something?"

"Did you see Jae Shin's throat?"

"Yes." She was about to snort at his expressionless face when she caught the fire in his dark eyes. "And I've also seen yours sometimes after we've been... down to the river."

"That is *not* fair." Hissing at him, Yoon Hee ducked her face, sure that the burn in her cheeks were the same vibrant red as the horseradish kimchi she'd been eating. "You're distracting me."

"I'm asking you to keep an open mind," He countered. "We don't know what went on between them."

"Geol Oh is..." Smiling at the older scholar who'd looked up from his meal at her outburst, Yoon Hee lowered her voice. "He is Yong Ha's."

"Another something that we don't know," Sun Joon pointed out, moving his bean sprouts from his food to her dish. "You might want them to be together but keep in mind, that is a very dangerous love to have. It is something either one of them could be banished for ... or even worse, killed. It might sound romantic but the truth is; encouraging that ... connection could lead to their deaths. Are you willing to risk that? Do you think

Geol Oh or Yong Ha is willing to risk the other for it?"

"The Nipponese men love one another." She grinned at the shocked expression she was able to pull out from Sun Joon's somber face. "What? It is true! Maybe they could run away there?"

"And give up everyone they love? Everyone they know for a land where they'll have nothing? Where they will be nothing?" Sun Joon prodded at his bibimbap, wondering where his appetite had gone. "I love you too much to ask that of you. I can't see either hyung asking that of one another."

"Because they love each other too much," Yoon Hee grumbled. "It's just not...fair."

"That is why we dedicate ourselves to changing the world we live in," Sun Joon reached over and took her hand, hiding the caress beneath the low tables. "So everyone can live...and love... as best they can."

✦

Yong Ha's body thrummed with the need for the man laying under him. Jae Shin's tongue flicked out, touching his skin. His lips were soft and there was a slight tickle of whisker on his nails. If Yong Ha hadn't been holding in his breath, he would have laughed.

If he hadn't been holding in his breath, Yong Ha thought, he'd burst into tears at the gentleness of the other man's affection.

Tired and worn, Jae Shin leaned his head back, his expression unreadable as he broke off the caress. Only the painful glitter of tears in his deep brown eyes warned Yong Ha of the emotions running deep inside of his wild-spirited friend. There was fear mingled with hope but Yong Ha also saw a veil of resignation, as if Jae Shin expected...*knew*... he'd be rejected.

It would take time to coax trust but time was something Yong Ha was more than willing to take. If he died with only the feel of the man's lips on his fingertips, it would be enough. But hopefully, he'd get more. He needed more. Wanted more. But only as much as Jae Shin was willing to give.

The fierce Geol Oh he loved hid the most beautiful and tender heart, Yong Ha thought. *His Geol Oh. Forever his Geol Oh.*

He brought his shaking, wet fingers to his face, his lips parting slightly instinctively as he slid Geol Oh's kiss into his mouth.

twelve

There were too many emotions for Jae Shin to absorb, fleeting star-like bursts illuminating his heart and soul. Watching Yong Ha lick the kiss he'd placed on the man's fingers was too much for him to handle and he scrunched his eyes closed.

And tried to forget that he wanted to follow his kiss into the man's mouth.

"Jae Shin, look at me," Yong Ha whispered. Moving his body closer, he raised himself up over Jae Shin's torso, carefully avoiding putting any weight on the man's stomach. "Geol Oh, please. If you can't look at me...now... I couldn't bear it."

"I... I don't know how to feel." Jae Shin's eyes remained closed and he flinched as Yong Ha's fingers ghosted over his cheek but he didn't move away. "This is too... much for me. I can't..."

Never overly emotional, the rebel scholar was now drowning in too many sensations. Unable to sort out even the basest of his feelings, he found himself short of breath, caught up in a roaring tide he didn't have the strength to swim in.

"Do you love me, Geol Oh?" Yong Ha begged. "Or are you just playing with me? Or is it Dae Min that you want and I'm just here?"

"What?" Jae Shin's eyes flew open. "No! I..." Lightly touching the throbbing spot on his neck, he said, "I don't know. I don't think so. I... just don't know. There's too much in my head. I can't think straight."

"Okay." Yong Ha sat back on his haunches, crossing his legs under him. "I know you're not feeling well but I don't... I don't want this to grow a distance between us. We need to talk about this."

"Why?" Jae Shin gulped and he struggled to sit up only to find himself too weak and tired to flee Yong Ha's soul-stripping gaze. "I...can't. I don't know... I keep saying that but you're not listening to me..."

"You keep saying that because you feel trapped." Patting Jae Shin's shoulder, Yong Ha nodded. "I know you. I know how you think. You want to run away right now because you have too many unfamiliar thoughts in your head. You don't want to push me away but you can't think right now. You're hoping I will go away and in a minute or two you'll start flinging insults at me, trying to drive me away from you to give you room to think but I'm not going to go anywhere. Not this time, my Geol Oh. Not for this."

Yong Ha waited for the explosion of tempter Jae Shin was known for but it never came. Instead, he found himself staring into the face of a Jae Shin he rarely got to see; a vulnerable and scared young man seemingly out of his depth in so many ways.

A Jae Shin that Yong Ha knew in his heart existed beneath the man's rough exterior.

A Jae Shin that made Yong Ha love him even more.

"We can take this slowly," Yong Ha promised. "Talk about one thing first. Keep to that one thing, yes?"

"I don't want to," He refused with a shake of his head. "I...don't think I can."

"You scramble over rooftops in the pouring rain, fully armed to deliver messages of rebellion to the masses while being chased by guards who want you dead," Yong Ha scoffed. "And you're afraid of *talking* to me?"

"The rooftops I know. Being shot at and beaten, I can survive," Jae Shin muttered. "And I want to do more than talking with you. I just don't know how. And if I should."

Yong Ha's sternness softened. He'd been prepared to do battle with Jae Shin but the young man didn't

want to fight. He just didn't know how to love, he discovered. Truly didn't know how to go about loving someone, even a clandestine love they'd have to keep hidden.

Jae Shin really didn't know what to do with what his heart was telling him, Yong Ha realized. One of the bravest, craziest and driven men he'd ever known now lay trembling at Yong Ha's fingertips, felled by the touch of a man's hand to his lips.

"Let me help you," Yong Ha laughed at the frightened, fierce look Jae Shin gave him. "Let me make talking about this...less scary."

"How can you make this less frightening?" The tinge of temper in Jae Shin's rough voice strangely calmed Yong Ha. "We're talking about *this*."

"Us," Yong Ha replied softly. "We are going to talk about us."

"There should be no us!" Jae Shin's words stung Yong Ha but he kept going. "What we... what I want is wrong. This... I don't know what to call it. Affection? Attraction? Other people..."

"Other people don't have to know," He cut the other man off. "For now, let's worry about you and me. We can bring other people into it later."

"What do you mean bring them in? What *in*? What does that mean? How many people are supposed to have sex with each other?" Jae Shin's eyes widened at the thought. "I can't even have sex with *one* person! I'm supposed to have more?"

"If you don't breathe, you're going to pass out."

"Good! Then we can't talk about this!"

"It's not going to go away — this thing between us. We need to discuss it. If we don't, we're just going to do more damage to one another," Yong Ha said as he reached out to touch the bite on Jae Shin's neck. "And you're going to do more stupid things to get yourself hurt."

"I don't know how..." He scowled. "Sun Joon told me Dae Min did that but I don't remember. Why would he chew on my neck? Was I attacking him? Was that the only way he could get free? How drunk and sick did that bad soju make me?"

"He... told me you let him." The bedding suddenly became fascinating and Yong Ha picked at a loose thread a wave of embroidery. "That you liked it."

Jae Shin didn't know how to respond to what Yong Ha said. He tried, opening and closing his mouth several times but no sound came out, not even a whimper of protest and Yong Ha sighed in heavy resignation.

"So you *do* have feelings for him?" He asked, prodding Jae Shin.

The silence hurt — probably more than if Jae Shin admitted his affection for Dae Min out loud. In the deep silence between them, too many things lived; unspoken, dangerous things that whispered wicked thoughts into Yong Ha's ear.

"I... don't know." Jae Shin struggled to sit up, breathing heavily as he worked the blankets from his chest.

Naked to the waist, he rubbed at his stomach, urging the rolling muscle cramps to stop. A fine sweat clung to his skin and his throat closed up at his own smell, a rotten acrid scent he'd couldn't stand. What little strength he'd had was now gone, burned off with the mere effort of sitting up and it was all he could do not to fall back against the cushions. Yong Ha exclaimed at the grey tinge crawling over Jae Shin's face and reached again for the cloths warming near the brazier.

Yong Ha was about to sluice a damp cloth over Jae Shin's torso when the man grabbed his wrist. The shaking of his hand traveled up Yong Ha's arm and his fear grew when Jae Shin shivered uncontrollably, losing his hold on the other man's wrist.

"You're going to wear yourself out," Yong Ha scolded, quickly washing the sweat from Jae Shin's skin.

"*You* wear me out," Jae Shin muttered, shuddering when Yong Ha's bare knuckles brushed over his pert nipple.

"If I were going to wear you out, this wouldn't be how I would want to do it." He retorted then drew back when Jae Shin scowled menacingly at him.

“See? You...” He pushed at the man’s hands, unable to do more than edge Yong Ha away. “How am I supposed react when you say things like that? Do you mean them? Are you teasing me? You ask me how I feel about Dae Min? I feel more in control. He doesn’t... *taunt* me with words and feelings I don’t understand.”

“It’s an act,” Yong Ha spat, tossing the cloth back into the bowl. “And it’s a worse act than Daemul’s. Can’t you see that?”

“What part is the act?” Jae Shin gestured wildly. “The respect? Wanting to talk to me about how I think about a certain law or maybe a passage of poetry? Is that what he fakes? That he’s interested in what I feel or think? And for what? What does he gain in pretending to be interested in me?”

“He gets to *fuck* you,” Yong Ha exploded and shoved Jae Shin back into the cushions. The man fell, the linens puffing up into the air around him. “He gets to get close enough to sink his teeth into your skin and mark you deep enough that I wonder if you’re not going to have a scar. *That’s* what he gets. *That’s* what he wants.”

“Isn’t that what you want?” Helpless and weak, Jae Shin struck back with a snarling storm of words. “To *fuck* me but without any of the time Dae Min’s spent...”

“Do you want to see how much I want to spend time with you?” Yong Ha growled. “Here. Let me *fucking* show you.”

The kiss was brutal but Yong Ha didn’t care. His hands were on Jae Shin’s face and his mouth was on the other man’s lips before Jae Shin could utter another word. Their tongues met in a savage dance, teasing and touching until Yong Ha moaned into Jae Shin’s mouth. Working his fingers into the man’s long hair, Yong Ha shoved Jae Shin further into the pillows, straddling his long tanned body. Fitting his crotch into the curve of the man’s hips, Yong Ha lay down on Jae Shin’s chest, frustrated with the layers of clothing separating them.

Their anger surfaced in small bites of each other’s lips and when Yong Ha moved down Jae Shin’s throat with a hot stream of kisses, he stopped at the mark left on Jae Shin’s satiny skin and stared at the mottle for a second before clamping his teeth over the spot, biting down hard into the pain Dae Min left behind.

“You are mine, Geol Oh,” Yong Ha growled, biting harder until Jae Shin gasped and writhed under him.

Sitting back, he felt a small tingle of satisfaction at the larger ring of marks forming around the bruise Dae Min left on the man’s throat. Gripping Jae Shin’s head, he descended again, delivering a punishing kiss and stealing any breath Jae Shin might have had left.

Jae Shin’s lips a sleek silk compared to the rough velvet of his tongue and Yong Ha made certain to explore both textures, dipping his tongue past Jae Shin’s teeth and nipping at his mouth until Jae Shin was unsure of what Yong Ha would do next. Trapped beneath the leaner man’s body, Jae Shin lay open to his friend’s assault, unable to do much more than ride the tide of sensations overwhelming him.

And unsure even if he could stop Yong Ha, that he would want to.

Yong Ha’s weight on him felt... right. And the hard length of Yong Ha’s sex thickening against his belly only made his own cock ache and thrum. Inside of him, something uncurled and reached out, needing more of Yong Ha.

If only he knew what to say. Or how to ask.

“Yong Ha...” Jae Shin murmured, coming up for air when the other man pulled back. “I don’t know how to *be* like this. I just... don’t know how to...*be*.”

“You don’t have to change for me, Geol Oh,” He whispered into the cupped space of his hands made around Jae Shin’s face. “You *never* have to be anything than what you are. My grumpy genius. My quiet romantic who saves the moon when I give it to him. The protector of a little girl far in over her heads but the keeper of her secrets. My complicated, gruff, loving mess.”

“And this... thing between us?”

“This thing is love. How we love... we have to figure that out,” Yong Ha sighed. “You... have no experience with loving anyone and I...”

“Have too much,” Jae Shin grumbled. “How can you want me? You... love women.”

"Adore them," Yong Ha admitted with a sharp laugh. Rolling his hips around, he ground his sex against Jae Shin's tender shaft. "But I love you more. Want you more. I have for a long time."

"Then why do we... fight like this?" He asked, putting his hands on Yong Ha's hips to stop the man from moving against him. The pressure building up in his sex was nearly to a bursting point and if he didn't get Yong Ha to stop grinding on him, he'd have to push the man off of him and finish himself off with his hand.

"Because we need to...figure out this thing between us," Yong Ha declared. He liked the feel of Jae Shin's hands on him but the inability to move frustrated him. "I need you to talk to me. About everything. About how you feel about me...and how you feel about Dae Min."

"I don't know how I feel about Dae Min," Jae Shin admitted. "A lot of it... I like him because he reminds me of you sometimes. He's... a brat."

"You think I'm a brat?" He raised his eyebrows and sat down firmly on Jae Shin's crotch, avoiding the man's stomach. "Like a spoiled child."

"Most of the time." He shrugged off Yong Ha's glare with an elegant lift of his shoulders. "And sometimes you're quiet...or asleep, and I can get a word into the conversation."

"I *do not*..." Yong Ha trailed off, studying his friend's face. "Okay, I promised I would listen. So I'm listening. Go on. Tell me how you can't stand to be around me because I'm a pain."

"I didn't say I can't stand to be around you," Jae Shin murmured, moving his thumbs around Yong Ha's hip bones, rubbing at the juts through the thick fabric of his underrobes. "If anything, I want to be around you *more* but... sometimes it's hard... you're not..."

"Around," He whispered. "I've not been around you these past few months because I thought... you didn't want me." Yong Ha stopped Jae Shin before the man could protest in his own defense. "No, I'm not saying this is your fault. It's not. It's mine. I *knew* Dae Min was up to something but I trusted... us... that he wouldn't think about tearing us apart when that's what he was doing all along."

"Why would he want to tear us apart?"

"Because, my dear innocent Geol Oh," Yong Ha bent over to steal another taste of Jae Shin's kiss-swollen, succulent mouth. "You can only belong to one person. It's in your nature. Just like it's in Dae Min's to try to take what doesn't belong to him."

"And I what's supposed to belong to you?" Jae Shin curled his lip, pulling back to stare up into Yong Ha's pretty face.

"Yes," He grunted, fisting his fingers in Jae Shin's hair. "I just now need to convince him... and you... of that so I can get down to the business of showing you what love is."



Bon Hwa entered the small building the school set aside for bathing. With the winter storms barreling down on them, sacrifices were made to keep the reek of sweaty male flesh down. An emptied out pantry off of the kitchen became a make-shift bathing house with large tubs of hot water periodically refreshed by the pages lurking nearby.

Removing his outer clothes, he glanced at the two young men squatting around a low tub, their partially naked bodies soapy with suds. Wrinkling his nose in disgust at getting wet, Bon Hwa heaved himself over the edge of the tub next to the younger scholars, grunting when his feet hit the hot water.

"Has Moon Jae Shin been in here yet?" He looked around suspiciously.

"Why?" The younger of the two looked up. Bon Hwa recognized him from one of the basic classes, a young lordling who dogged the upperclassmen in the hopes of appearing important.

"He makes me nervous," Bon Hwa tried not to roll his eyes. If Jae Shin showed him as much interest as the man did his cousin, nervous would be what he felt in return. "He's always sneaking a peek at my..." He flicked his glance down at his crotch. "You know... my manhood."

"Moon Jae Shin?" The second youth's voice lifted, disbelieving what he was hearing. "Geol Oh? That Moon Jae Shin?"

"I didn't notice at first." Bon Hwa shrugged and began to work a piece of soap across a wash cloth. "But then I heard one of the pages say he'd... well, Jae Shin wouldn't stop touching him one day when hyung was drunk."

"Touching him?" The lord's son gasped. "Like a man does... with a woman? Did he... kiss him?"

"Worse," Bon Hwa whispered. "Or so I've heard. But then, he's Geol Oh, right? The Wild One. Who's to say what's in his nature or not. I just know... that if he's in the bathing house... I wait. The last thing I want is to fight him off if he wants something. You've seen him with people who are nice to him. You should go look at my cousin's face. Then you can see what he does to someone who wouldn't give him what he wants."

thirteen

"You left him?" Yoon Hee slapped Yong Ha's shoulder. Thinking better of it, she smacked him again for good measure. "Why did you leave him and with whom?"

"He fainted." Yong Ha winced and rubbed at his smarting arm. "I panicked and called Professor Jung. He kicked me out. Told me I was over-stimulating the patient."

"Were you?"

"Was I what?" Yong Ha's nostrils flared.

"Over-stimulating him!"

"You, little Daemul." He tapped the end of her nose. "You have a dirty little mind."

"I'm not the one with a *library* of red books," She shot back.

Leering, he replied, "And I'm not the one who made a living copying them."

"One! I did *one* and it...was about women. There was a lot of talk about flowers." Yoon Hee blushed at the memory. "And I only did the texts. Not the pictures. I never saw the pictures."

Yong Ha leaned over, whispering into her ear. "The pictures are the best part."

"I'm going to make tea. Try not to embarrass yourself in the few minutes you are left alone."

Yoon Hee's new room was smaller than the one she'd shared before but it had a tiny attached room they'd converted to a bathing area. Yong Ha pillaged his family's warehouses, bringing in slightly damaged furniture to make it more comfortable for her. A wide mattress pad sat against one wall and a luxurious silk screen blocked off the bathing area, a delicate painting of a green-gold bamboo forest filled with tiny pink birds. Ornate lanterns provided enough light for Yoon Hee to read, their edges barely scuffed but deemed unsellable by an exacting Yeorim.

Geol Oh caught the man picking out a thread from a new coverlet and Yong Ha grinned, motioning his friend to help him *damage* the rest of the room's furnishings. Jae Shin's fingers pushed imprints into the screen and left Yong Ha to his little white lies.

But not before he plucked out a button from the mattress pad and tucked it into Yong Ha's hat.

"My hat!" Yong Ha exclaimed. "That's where I've seen that before."

"What?" Yoon Hee stopped measuring out leaves for tea, nearly overflowing the kettle's basket. "Seen what?"

"The amber." His smirk was sensual and knowing. "I think, my little fierce sparrow, that our Geol Oh loves me."

"I never thought you were stupid, hyung." Carefully pouring hot water into the kettle, Yoon Hee placed the lid on it and carried the metal pot over to the table. "Of course he loves you. He just doesn't know how to say it."

"Do you — in your infinite wisdom and exacting portrayal of the male species — even know how men make love to one another?" Her face churned white then to a deep pink, nearly matching the plum blossoms Sun Joon cut from a tree for her earlier that day. Tapping his chin with his fan, he lounged back on the seat cushion and chuckled. "Do you even know how a man and a woman make love?"

"Hyung!"

"So the answer would be no, then?" Yong Ha teased. "Remind me to have a talk with our Garang. He's

had months now and you still can't look me in the eye when I talk about sex."

"It's not right for a... woman and man... to talk about such things. It's not... proper." She fretted at the teapot's lid, refusing to meet Yong Ha's inquisitive gaze.

"You pretended to be a man for more than a year and you talk now about being proper?" He burst into a hearty laughter. "Ah, maybe you're the perfect match for our uptight Sun Joon — enough rigidity to make him comfortable but enough of a bohemian to make him take risks."

"And your Geol Oh?" She quirked an eyebrow at him as she poured him a cup of tea. "How is he your match?"

"He's better than me," Yong Ha said quietly, sipping at the strongly brewed tea. "Inside and well, out. Very handsome. Thank god he doesn't go to tea houses. I'd never be served and I'd lose my women to his pretty face."

"Your women?" She looked at him over the cup. "Is that... how is.. this going to work between the two of you?"

"Ah, yes," Yong Ha shifted uncomfortably. "I haven't had a chance go talk to him about...that yet."

"Will you?" Her dark eyes flicked to his face, a probing look that noted the tightness around his mouth. "Share him with women, I mean?"

"No." The answer came sweet and quick, a short refusal to share any part of his Geol Oh with anyone. A wink broke the tension, his flirtatious nature refusing to be buried. "Well, maybe with you but definitely not with Sun Joon."

"Hyung!"

He widened his eyes in a mocking gape of her expression. "Daemul!"

"Is it... difficult?" She struggled with her curiosity, torn between wanting to know the secrets of a forbidden love and scandalized at possibly knowing. "Have you.. done it before?"

"Yes." His candor shocked Yoon Hee and she spluttered before catching herself. "It's nice. It's nicer if it's with someone you like. I imagine it's heavenly with someone you love."

"Haven't you ever been... done that ... with someone you loved?" Pressing her hands to her face did nothing but hide Yoon Hee's cheeks but it was good enough for her and she peeked out from between her fingers at the man sitting next to her.

"No," He admitted. "I've only ever loved... one person. Still love one person. And probably will always love only that *one*."

Yong Ha knew love the moment he set eyes on Moon Jae Shin. At the time, he dismissed the feeling burbling up in his belly. A bad bit of dumpling, he'd thought at the time, or perhaps too much of the plum wine he'd drunk at lunch with his uncle but now, in retrospect, he knew it was his body telling him he'd been infected a terrible illness for which there was no recovery.

His nerves were frazzled. Having Jae Shin slump over in his arms scared the life out of him and even though the young man came around a few moments later, he'd panicked and started screaming for Professor Jung. By the time the older man arrived, Jae Shin was grumpier than normal, slightly ashamed at Yong Ha's frenzied yelling.

Jung took one look at Yong Ha and ordered him out of the room.

Then ordered Yong Ha off of the walkway when he heard the scholar pacing outside of the door.

He'd knocked on Yoon Hee's door after slogging through dirt-speckled snow drifts and let himself get dragged into her room. Nearby was easier but still fraught with worry. Every tread on the walkway alarmed him and when one of the pages ran over to knock on the door, he was on his feet before the young boy could tell him that Jae Shin was alright and Jung was going to stay with the young scholar until he slept a few hours.

"It's like he doesn't trust me to let Jae Shin sleep." Yong Ha flushed when his mind flashed on Jae Shin lying half naked and tucked in his blankets. His skin itched with the want of Jae Shin against him so in hindsight, Jung probably was right. "I would let him sleep."

"If he were mine, I wouldn't," Yoon Hee murmured.

"Daemul! Does Sun Joon know you lust after our Geol Oh?"

"Stop teasing, hyung." Turning the metal kettle, she stroked at the rabbits embossed on its side. "This is a serious matter. This ... thing.. between you, it's a dangerous thing. Look at what happened when..."

"When Ha In Soo forced those accusations on you," Yong Ha interjected. "I know. Jae Shin is worried. He thinks the worst of society — that I could be shunned or killed if we're found out but understand, Yoon Hee, I'm willing to love him however I can. Perhaps I'm not brave enough to throw off conventions and live with Jae Shin as his lover. I don't think I'm strong enough for that kind of ostracization but then I don't think Jae Shin would ask that of me."

"So it is... really love then? Like I love Sun Joon? Those same feelings?"

"Well, probably stronger feelings," He teased. "I am more passionate and Geol Oh is definitely more hot blooded than the two of you combined. I'm hoping for a very responsive lover once I can show him how to love."

The red on her cheeks refused to die down and Yoon Hee fanned herself, slapping Yong Ha's knee when he laughed at her. "I'm not used to... even when I was Yoon Shik... no one spoke so openly of such things."

"That is because I suspected you were...not everything you appeared and well, Jae Shin knew," He grimaced. "Sun Joon was really the only one fooled. We didn't want to talk about how a man loves a woman in front of you and well, the others? What were they going to say to the Daemul? It would have been rude to ask for advice and possible humiliation if they offered you some in return. Thus, you were spared such talk."

"But how do... men?" She frowned, wondering how blatant she could be and not pass out from shame.

"In one of the same ways a man and a woman can embrace their passions," Yong Ha murmured, not at all astonished by the look of shock on Yoon Hee's face. "With enough...coaxing of the body and quite a lot of aromatic oils, men can pleasure one another quite easily — thoroughly even. Some men prefer that method, even if they are with a woman. Hasn't your mother told you about these things?"

"No." She bit at her upper lip, trying not to imagine Geol Oh and Yeorim locked in a sweaty, fragrant embrace. "But I've seen dogs breeding before and once, a boar mounted a sow."

"It's much like that," Yong Ha smiled, amused at her pure innocence. "Except humans have a greater variety of embraces available to them. In fact, I have a book from India that I can loan you. It's where I learned one of my more favourite things... the splitting of the bamboo..."

"Hyung!" Sun Joon scolded the older man from the doorway. "Yoon Hee... don't... listen..."

"I thought we spoke about what I would listen to and not listen to." She mocked his stern face with a quick jab of her tongue into the air.

"We did." He opened the lid of the tea pot and reeled from the strength of the brew. "I talked. You ignored me."

"As I am ignoring you now," She countered sweetly as she offered him a cup. He poured it half full with tea, diluting the rest with hot water. "How is he?"

"Jung's almost done with him. He said Yong Ha can only go back if someone stitches his mouth shut." Sun Joon sipped at his tea and made a face. "This is very... pungent."

"Much like its maker," Yong Ha saluted the female scholar with his cup. Sobering he asked Sun Joon, "Did you see him? Is his colour better?"

"Yes, his face is pinker," The man said. "Of course that could be from Professor Jung yelling at him. Geol Oh does not like being disciplined."

"No," Yong Ha smirked. "He doesn't." Putting down the cup, he rose and thanked Yoon Hee for the tea. "I'll go back to the room now. Professor Jung probably would like some time to yell at me as well before he heads back to bed."



The scolding wasn't as heated as Yong Ha expected, nor was the fury he anticipated when he opened the

door to Jae Shin's room. If anything, his friend appeared sheepish and subdued, ducking his head when Yong Ha entered. Ordering Jae Shin to remain in bed and under warm blankets, Jung gave them strict instructions on brewing a medicinal tea for Jae Shin's stomach with a firm warning to stick to juk in the morning. Moments later, Jung was fading into the swirling snow, intent on reaching his lodgings before the night grew chillier. Closing the door behind the doctor, Yong Ha turned and met his friend's doe-soft eyes.

"You look better," He said, setting his shoes down on a mat near the door. "Less...grey."

"I threw up," Jae Shin's gaze dropped for a moment then he looked up at Yong Ha through his long lashes. "A lot."

"That is probably why you feel better," Yong Ha encouraged.

"All over Jung."

"Oh." He winced. Gathering up his long robes, he sat down next to his friend, edging onto the mattress pad. Their hands touched and without thinking, their fingers intertwined in a loose embrace. "But you're better?"

"Yes, I feel... better," Jae Shin replied, rubbing at the back of his head with his free hand. "He.. um... saw what you...did to my neck."

"Aish," Yong Ha exhaled hard. "Do we have to have him killed? I know he's your favourite teacher but..."

"He's concerned for us...for me," Jae Shin replied. "You — well, he doesn't think there's much hope for you but I apparently am redeemable."

"What did he tell you?"

For the first time in the past few hours, Yong Ha was afraid. Foremost was his fear Jae Shin would come to his senses and revoke his admission of love. Now, closing in on the pinnacle of his worries, was Professor Jung's disapproval. If Jae Shin chose to follow one man's advice, it would be Jung's and Yong Ha did not have confidence that the older man would encourage a relationship between his two male students.

"He told me... to be careful," Jae Shin whispered. "And to not let you bully me into doing things that felt uncomfortable."

"Me? Bully?" Yong Ha exclaimed loudly, relief at Jung's tacit acceptance filling him. "Does he think so little of me that he believes I would force you to do something you didn't like?"

"No." Jae Shin reached up, hesitantly stroking at the down on Yong Ha's cheek. "He thinks I'd do anything you'd want to make you happy. And... he's right."

"Then," Yong Ha leaned in until his mouth nearly brushed Jae Shin's, his breath ghosting hot over the scruff on the man's chin. "I guess I will have to be the sensible one."

"You always have been," Jae Min murmured, running the pad of his thumb over the man's cheekbone. A yawn curled his nostrils up and he fought its release, refusing to give in to the fatigue plaguing him.

"Oh no, Geol Oh, it's time for you to sleep," Yong Ha ordered, pushing his friend back onto the cushions. "We can talk about this...about us in the morning."

"The morning seems so far away," He murmured, unable to stop touching Yong Ha's skin. Running his fingers over the soft skin of his friend's inner wrist, he asked. "Will you stay?"

"Yes, let me get some more blankets out. I can make a pallet to sleep on..."

"No." Jae Shin stopped Yong Ha before he could say anything else. "I mean, will you stay? Here. With me?"

Yong Ha spent most of his life hiding behind the brittle, porcelain mask he'd forged earlier in life but he felt it crack under the brilliant warmth of Jae Shin's shy smile.

Then split open to fall into powder when Jae Shin's mouth touched his, a delicate run of soft lips over his mouth followed by the gentle dab of the man's tongue against this upper lip. The quiet shush of linens being moved aside excited him but Yong Ha calmed his heart, warning his libido off with a scolding not unlike the one Jung gave him earlier.

"Anything to keep you warm," Yong Ha sighed as if it would be a great imposition but the smile on his

face told Jae Shin otherwise. "And well...anything to keep you in bed."



The morning was barely promised in the sky when the dormitory rocked with the sounds of the Kim cousins' arguing. Bon Hwa's deeper voice rose and fell, half apologetic but mostly resigned as his older cousin berated everything from his face to the air he breathed. The walls separating their room from the adjoining rooms were packed with other students, each pressing their ear to the plaster in hopes of hearing more of the fight.

Inside the room, Dae Min stood over his shorter cousin, so filled with rage he couldn't speak. He grabbed at a water urn and flung it against the wall, its loud crash somehow less satisfying than what he'd hoped it would be. Another followed then an ink well, the black splatter stark against the room's white paint.

"Jae Shin?" He screamed, not caring who heard him. His voice carried, echoing off the walls and Bon Hwa cast a nervous glance towards the door. "I *told* you; Yong Ha! The deviant is supposed to be Yong Ha! What were you thinking? Weren't you listening to anything I was saying?"

"Hyung?" A young voice called from outside of their room. "Scholar Kim Dae Min?"

"What?" Dae Min stomped over to the door and flung it open, his eyes wild with anger.

Despite the fearful visage before him, the page stood his ground, his face pale with semi-fright as the older man bent over him. "You've been called, hyung."

"Called? By whom?" Dae Min's fist clenched and he longed to beat someone senseless. His cousin had seemed a likely target but if he could somehow fix Bon Hwa's mistake, he might have need of the hapless young man. It wouldn't bode well for his plans if his only ally refused to help him. The page's arrival was serendipitous. The cheonmin boy would be a handy substitute for his cousin...and an easy target to mete out his rage.

"The student president." The boy eyed Dae Min and took a step back, placing himself out of reach. "You're wanted in the council room."

"President? There's no president!" Dae Min spat in the page's face, raising his hand up to strike at the boy's face. "We've just voted..."

"There is, hyung." He made no move to wipe the spittle from his cheek. He'd been a page long enough to know if he returned to the professors bearing a scholar's mark, there'd be recriminations and he'd be given the rest of the day off. Considering the earliness of the hour and Dae Min's angry colour and dominating stance, he had high hopes of being able to return to bed. "The votes were tallied this morning and the new president has been sworn in. They're waiting for you, hyung. You are wanted. *Now.*"



He was woken up by a kiss. Soft and warm, the man's lips — and Yong Ha *knew* it was a man — were taking their time exploring the peaked nub on his chest. Moaning, he tried moving, only to find himself pinned down by strong hands on his hips. Smiling, he tangled his fingers into Jae Shin's loosened hair, keeping his eyes closed as he floated on the pleasant sensations roiling over his body.

"You'll need to hurry." Husky voiced and lazy, he purred when the man's tongue darted out and toyed with his nipple. "I'm serious, Sun Joon. My Geol Oh will probably be back soon and he can't find out that..."

He didn't get a chance to finish his sentence, his words lost in the squeak he gave when Jae Shin's sharp teeth nearly pierced through his nipple. Hissing with the pain, he jerked up right and rubbed at the offended nub.

"That hurt!" Yong Ha scrubbed at the spot. "I was joking."

"If you knew how hard it was for me to do that, you wouldn't have joked," Jae Shin shot back.

"If you knew how hard you were making me, you wouldn't have stopped."

Yong Ha reached for the young man who'd captured his heart, sliding his hand under his chin in an oh-so-familiar way. Jae Shin smiled, despite the ember of irritation in his gullet. He leaned into the cup of Yong Ha's palm, rubbing his cheek on the soft caress.

"I know, Geol Oh. I know how hard it is for you," Yong Ha murmured. He glanced quickly at the door, satisfied its latch was on. "Let me show you... how easy it is for me."

"I keep telling you, Yeon Kkoc... I don't know what I'm doing." The shimmer in Jae Shin's voice was brittle, fragile mark of his fear. "How can you want... *that*? How can you want the nothing that is me when..."

The unknown was something easily faced if he knew the consequences. Loving Yong Ha... was beyond unknown and the act of being with the young man... of lying with him for anything other than sleeping or dreaming up schemes... terrified Jae Shin. He didn't want to imagine what he would do if he hurt Yong Ha in some way and worse, he'd want to die if he'd ever caused the man enough pain to make him turn away. And Jae Shin knew he'd rather slit his own throat than have Yong Ha turn his back on him.

Loving the experienced Yong Ha... bringing nothing to the pleasures the man already knew... seemed a futile and useless exercise that he was doomed to fail.

"And I'm telling you, my Geol Oh," Yong Ha whispered against Jae Shin's lips. "I don't care. I *like* knowing that I'm going to be the one to teach you."

"But..." Jae Shin stubbornly turned his head slightly, nearly breaking contact with Yong Ha's hand.

"No more. Please, Geol Oh," Yong Ha pleaded. "Let me show you. Let me take care of you. Let me start to get you to trust me."

"I *do* trust you," He whispered and Yong Ha fell into the depths of Jae Shin's bottomless dark gaze.

"Then let me..." The slender man lay his hands on Jae Shin's shoulders and guided him back down into the bed. Keeping his eyes on Jae Shin's face, he skimmed his fingertips over the man's body, peeling back the robe hanging loose around Jae Shin's torso. "Let me see you."

His shyness made Jae Shin turn away but he allowed Yong Ha to strip away the rest of his clothing. With his arm thrown over his eyes, he blocked out the knowledge of Yong Ha's perusal but he still could feel the burn of the man's roving gaze over his naked body.

"You are... beautiful, my Jae Shin," Yong Ha said, awed by the perfection laying before him. "*My* Jae Shin. My love. My heart."

The plum of Jae Shin's mouth always drew Yong Ha in. He couldn't watch the man eat without wanting to bite into his lips and even with the shadow of Jae Shin's arm across his face, the beauty of the man's lips were exposed to him.

As was everything else.

He explored the man's chest, taking in the familiar skin stretched over toned muscles. Thin pale scars blended into the rise of Jae Shin's ribs and pectorals, evidence of a life lived roughly and devoted to righting society's wrongs. Each slash into Jae Shin's body cut Yong Ha deeply. The man might shrug them off as mere marks of following his heart but Yong Ha knew better. Jae Shin's passion for justice was rivaled only by Yong Ha's love for Jae Shin's safety. The scars were slender reminders of each time Jae Shin returned to Yong Ha's side, bleeding and near death at times but always... the man found his way back.

The scars were Jae Shin's promises. His tokens of love even if Yong Ha didn't realize it at the time. They were evidence of Jae Shin's refusal to give up and leave Yong Ha alone to weep in the bleed of his lost love.

His stomach clenched under Yong Ha's fingertips, the thin trail of hair curving down under his belly leading to treasures Yong Ha didn't want to look at...not quite yet. The fragrance of Jae Shin's skin fascinated him. Always a deep burnished golden with a hint of lemon, Jae Shin smelled... good. Yong Ha searched for another word but good seemed to capture the essence of it. Others came to mind; delicious...luscious...delectable but good was a nice one. Heady also came to mind, especially when Yong Ha bent his head down and inhaled the sweet musk lingering on Jae Shin's most private flesh.

Succulent, Yong Ha decided. Pleasurably succulent.

His body was lean and muscular, an exquisite study of beauty Yong Ha had never found an equal for. Years of archery and sword work kept the man honed, his body tight and luxurious to the eye. Jae Shin's thighs were long, straight and strong with a whisper of hair at the base of his thick sex.

Yong Ha expected Jae Shin to flinch when he finally touched the hard length of his arousal and the man did, a startled shiver that ran up and down his body but the scholar remained prone, as if by moving, he would be breaking the trust he'd given Yong Ha. Silently thanking the young man's stoic calm, Yong Ha explored further, stroking at the crux of Jae Shin's hips. Fitting his thumb pads in the crease of Jae Shin's thighs, he stroked at the paler skin he found there, entranced by the hooded shaft slowly emerging from its cowl.

"You make me... hungry, Geol Oh," Yong Ha whispered, deeply taking in the forbidden scent of another man's skin... of a man he loved and who he'd dreamed of touching for nearly as long as he'd known of him. "You make me hunger for pleasures that I know only you can give me."

Sliding down Jae Shin's body, Yong Ha reached up and splayed his palms out onto Jae Shin's belly. Then slipped the man's hard sex deep into his warm, wet mouth.

fourteen

If talking about sex with Yeorim stymied Jae Shin's tongue, then having the man's mouth around him drove him to the brink of insanity.

He'd touched himself before, often in the middle of the night when he knew everyone was asleep, hiding in the darkness in case he made noise. Most of the time he'd imagine Yong Ha touching him, the man's nails lightly scraping at the underside of his cock or even spreading the milky seed at the slit of his head with the heel of his hand or thumb.

Jae Shin never imagined Yong Ha kissing him there. Never imagined the heat of the man's mouth on the silky skin of his shaft or even the cupping of his sac into Yong Ha's palm.

If he had, Jae Shin was sure he would never would have left his room.

Ever.

Unsure if he should touch Yong Ha, Jae Shin dug his fingers into the blankets, twisting them about his wrists. The heat of his... lover's... mouth enclosed him and the man's tongue found each dip and vein on his sex, lapping at the surface as if the taste of Jae Shin was all he needed to survive.

"Touch me, *agi*," Yong Ha whispered, pulling Jae Shin nearly all the way out of his mouth. Wrapping his tongue around the spongy tip, he pushed the tip into Jae Shin's slit, spreading the tender spot apart. A drop of seed sprang from the pout and he lapped at it, savouring the bitter-sweetness of Jae Shin's spill.

Jae Shin reached for Yong Ha, discouraged when he encountered cloth instead of sleek skin. Tugging at the man's jacket, Jae Shin growled, frustrated and needy. Yong Ha's mouth remained around him, suckling hard as the man worked to shed his clothes. Fingers touched places too intimate for Jae Shin to think about and when Yong Ha's finger brushed over the clench of his body, he gasped, startled at the shock traveling through his nerves.

Then Yong Ha was naked and kneeling between his legs and Jae Shin forgot everything else.

"Can I..." He whispered. "Can I... look at you?"

"Of course, my Geol Oh," Yong Ha murmured. "Anything you want to do, *agi*"

Jae Shin lay still as Yong Ha slid up along him. The young man briefly kissed the rebel scholar then lay back into the bed linens, stretching himself out for Jae Shin to explore. The ache in Jae Shin's sex throbbed need up his spine and down into the sac between his legs but the desire in his heart was stronger. He *needed* to see the man he loved

Over the years, he'd snuck in peeks of Yong Ha's willowy body. Entranced by the purity of Yong Ha's skin, he'd often pushed the man away with the flat of his palm across Yong Ha's cheek, carrying the softness of Yong Ha's touch in his hand as he walked away.

So Jae Shin didn't understand why his hands were trembling now.

"It's like the moon poured itself out," Jae Shin murmured, his fingers skimming over Yong Ha's slender chest. The texture of the man's skin was so different from his own, a porcelain sheen compared to the rough coarse bronze of his body. Suddenly Jae Shin was ashamed to touch something... someone ... as beautiful as Yong Ha and he drew his hand back, clenching his fingers into a fist.

"Don't." Yong Ha reached out and grabbed the man's wrist. "Don't stop touching me. I'll go crazy if you stop now, Jae Shin. I'd rather you plunge a knife into my heart than draw away right now."

"Are you sure?" He rasped. "Because if I start touching you, I'm not sure I can stop."

"Oh my world would be complete if I were to spent the rest of my life with you against me," Yong Ha said, cupping the man's face. "Please. If you need me to, I *will* beg. I'm not to proud to admit I need you. Please, Jae Shin, please."

The brightly hued linens seemed an appropriate display for the flirtatious man, his pale burnished body elegant and supple against the satins. Yong Ha's amiable face lay in repose, his eyes hooded as he watched Jae Shin inch closer. When Jae Shin's fingers touched his shoulder, he exhaled lightly, relieved at the rough feel of Jae Shin's hand.

He loved the feel of Jae Shin's palms; the rasp of calluses from sword work stimulating his skin and working a heavy desire into the heft of his sex. When Jae Shin's mouth tentatively kissed the ridge of his collar bone, Yong Ha gasped and pressed his hips up, the need for Jae Shin driving him wild. He longed to tell the man what to do; how to plunder into the depths of his body but he knew he would have to be patient. Jae Shin's shyness coupled with his inexperience was not insurmountable but the sensitive scholar would emotionally flagellate himself if he hurt Yong Ha.

Another reason Yong Ha loved his Jae Shin. For all his rough ways, the scholar *cared* about him. No one else made Yong Ha feel as treasured as Jae Shin did.

No one else frustrated Yong Ha like Jae Shin could and as the young man lay under Jae Shin's scrutiny, he realized just how frustrated he could get with the man's hot eyes drinking him in.

"I..." Jae Shin clamped his mouth shut. Yong Ha was probably tired of hearing him say he didn't know what he was doing. It wouldn't be a surprise if he was clumsy. Yong Ha more than likely expected it but Jae Shin wanted more than that for the man he needed besides him. "I like looking at you."

"I like being looked at by you," Yong Ha whispered. "I'd like being touched by you more."

"I... don't know where to start." Jae Shin's awestruck hush brought a smile to Yong Ha's wide mouth.

"How about here?" He took Jae Shin's hand and placed it over his heart. "You're already here. It should be very familiar to you by now."

The brush of Yong Ha's nipple on his palm gave Jae Shin the shivers and he moaned when the man's body responded, curling the peak into a tight nub. His mouth watered, longing for a bit of Yong Ha on his tongue and Jae Shin swallowed, unsure if he could survive the taste of the man now that...

"Everything is so... possible," Jae Shin whispered, placing a kiss on Yong Ha's nipple before sucking it into his hot mouth.

Instinct drove him and he suckled at the tip, his hands roaming over Yong Ha's ribs and stomach. Splaying his fingers over Yong Ha's hips, he stretched his palms out as much as he could over the man's soft skin, rubbing the pristine white flesh pink in spots where his work-roughened hands caught.

He let his mouth explore, finding each delectable inch of Yong Ha's body had its own unique flavour. The sweetness of the man's chest was a contrast to the salty-musk of his underarm and Jae Shin grinned wickedly when the man writhed under him, trying to squirm away as Jae Shin's touch found ticklish spots.

Reaching Yong Ha's hips, he stopped and sat back on his haunches, staring at the man's incredibly long legs and the hardened shaft laying heavy against Yong Ha's abdomen. A thin silvery trail ran along Yong Ha's stomach muscles, his sex already weeping seed. Without a second thought, Jae Shin ran his thumb through the glistening moisture and brought it up to his mouth, taking his first taste of another man's desire.

"You taste like... a bit of rice with pickled plum in it," Jae Shin murmured around his thumb, meeting Yong Ha's eyes with a lustful gaze. "So good. So...right."

He turned his attention to the long slender shaft, marveling at the cowl peeling back from the man's heart-shaped glans. The skin stretched, accommodating Yong Ha's arousal and Jae Shin pared it back from the head, fully revealing the seed-moistened head.

"May I?" Jae Shin looked up at Yong Ha's beautiful face. His features were mostly hidden in shadow but Yong Ha could see the curious lust in his newly-found lover's eyes, a roiling darkness turning the red-gold

flecks in Jae Shin's gaze nearly black with desire. "I want to... I need more..."

"Please," Yong Ha heard himself whimper and then bit his own lip nearly to blood to stop from screaming when Jae Shin's mouth closed over him.

The heat was incredible and the soft grip of Jae Shin's tongue pressing Yong Ha's sex to the roof of his mouth nearly made Yong Ha spill. Sharp tingles ran up his shaft and clenched his sac when Jae Shin's teeth scraped along his head. The man pulled back slightly at Yong Ha's hiss then returned to suckle at the man when Yong Ha grabbed him by the back of his neck to guide his sex back into Jae Shin's open mouth.

"Please, *agi*," Yong Ha mewled. "Don't... stop. Please."

"I won't," Jae Shin murmured, wrapping his lips over Yong Ha's glans and hooking the edge of his teeth along the mushroom shaped head, barely tugging at the sensitive skin. The tip of his tongue worked into the tight cowl at the base of Yong Ha's head, stretching it snug up against the man's shaft. The sensations were overpowering and Yong Ha thrust his hips up, sliding deeper into Jae Shin's mouth. He was coming to a climax too quickly and Yong Ha pulled back, trying to think non-stimulating thoughts to counteract the sight of his sex sliding in and out of Jae Shin's parted lips.

"Geol Oh!" Yong Ha puffed his cheeks out, trying to calm his breathing. "Are you sure ...you've never... done this before?"

"I only have the taste of you in my mouth," Jae Shin said quietly, licking around the man's shaft. "I don't think I've done this before."

"Then don't ever stop...doing it on me," Yong Ha gasped. "Only me. Okay? Just me."

"Just you." Another swipe of his tongue and then Jae Shin dipped Yong Ha in deeper, rubbing the man's head against the back of his throat. He choked slightly, drawing back when he discovered he'd gone too far for his liking.

"I need to touch you, *agi*," Yong Ha murmured. "Turn around."

"Eh?" The curious innocence in Jae Shin's expression made Yong Ha laugh.

"Turn around," Yong Ha repeated. "You and I are similar height. We can do this to one another. Well, for a little while anyway."

Reluctantly, he drew himself out of Jae Shin's mouth and guided the man into place, nestling back down on his side and murmured when he gripped at Jae Shin's aroused sex. Canting his leg, he lay hip to Jae Shin's face, and savoured the sight of Jae Shin's desire clearly displayed before him.

Thicker than his own sex, Yong Ha fit his hand around Jae Shin's shaft, feeling the weight of it in his palm. Putting his mouth on the head, he grinned around Jae Shin when the man's hips twitched. Licking at the head brought the same reaction and Yong Ha increased his friction on his lover's shaft.

Yong Ha began to slowly show his lover what to do, reveling in the feelings of Jae Shin's mouth surrounding him. When he pulled back and twisted his mouth around Jae Shin's head, he received the same treatment, nearly exploding into the depths of Jae Shin's heat. The tickle of his lover's scruff on his thighs excited him and the gentle brush of his lips on Yong Ha's damp cock ground his desire up from his belly and Yong Ha felt his sac tighten up.

"Yong Ha," Jae Shin's mouth slackened, holding Yong Ha on the pout of his lips. "I can't..."

"Get your fingers wet, *agi*," Yong Ha instructed. "Just the one you point with for now but put it in your mouth and get it wet."

Jae Shin complied, laving at his finger before nuzzling back into the soft powdery musk of his lover's groin. Nipping lightly at the darker line of Yong Ha's crux, he quirked his mouth at the control he had over Yong Ha's response body. "Can I go back to... licking you?"

"Oh you're going to do more than lick at me," Yong Ha promised. "But I'm not sure I want your mouth on me when I bring you over. You have very sharp teeth and I don't know if you can handle that yet. I think I just want to... feel you under me when you fill me."

"Kissing though...?" Jae Shin murmured, trailing a line of kisses over Yong Ha's sex.

"That is perfectly...fine," Yong Ha sighed. "Use your finger... on me. Below. Try to get at least the tip in."

"That's...!"

"Trust me, Geol Oh. It's how we can start... doing pleasurable things."

"I don't...want to hurt you," Jae Shin frowned. "I could..."

"I'll be fine," Yong Ha reassured him. "Just a little until I'm comfortable. Watch me. Feel me against you. If I'm too tense, give me time to relax. Get to know me, my Geol Oh."

Jae Shin reluctantly pressed at the crevice, emboldened by Yong Ha's sensual moan of approval. The other man lay still next to him, his long fingers stroking at Jae Shin's length as he opened up Yong Ha's body. The clench of Yong Ha's entrance startled him and he almost jerked free, stopping short when Yong Ha gasped.

"Did I hurt you?" He murmured, worried as he kissed down the inside of Yong Ha's thigh.

"No...Please, go on," Yong Ha urged.

Forcing himself to relax, he concentrated on licking around his lover's head, sliding his hand down Jae Shin's shaft to hold him primed. He'd just covered Jae Shin's glans with his lips when the man's tip slid into him. Gasping around the head, he confined himself to creasing the velvety skin until Jae Shin felt comfortable moving more of himself into Yong Ha's body.

"You're so...warm," Jae Shin hummed, unable to resist licking up the pearl spill on Yong Ha's head. "Is this..."

"That's where I want you," Yong Ha admitted. "Not now but soon, once we... prepare, it will be like nothing you've ever felt before in your life."

"Is this... do you want this from me?" Jae Shin's nervousness thrummed through his words and Yong Ha kissed first one thigh then the other before returning his attentions back to Jae Shin's sex.

"Yes," Yong Ha whispered, moaning loudly when Jae Shin twisted his finger in deeper. Buried up until the second joint, Jae Shin's supple touch brushed nearly at the spot itching inside of Yong Ha and he cried out, softly feeling the clench of his body around Jae Shin's finger. "Gods of my father, yes."

He sucked Jae Shin in deep, drawing the man's balls up tight. Cupping Jae Shin in his hand, he rolled the man's sac as he tugged at his sex, drawing Jae Shin further into his mouth. Encouraged, the scholar delved in deeper and felt something rough under his finger tip, playing at it curiously as Yong Ha flattened his tongue across Jae Shin's sex.

The effect was astonishing as was the vortex of sensations Yong Ha set off inside of him when he swallowed Jae Shin up, fitting the man's shaft down his throat.

Yong Ha rode the lightning storming through him, his cock spilling and jumping merely at the touch of Jae Shin's finger against his core of nerves. The man was relentless, his mouth moving over Yong Ha's sex while he toyed at the edges of Yong Ha's centre, alternating the stroke of his mouth with his finger. Unable to stand much more, Yong Ha came, taking Jae Shin over the edge with him as he convulsed around Jae Shin's sex, his throat closing in on his lover's shaft.

Jae Shin caught a twist of Yong Ha's seed in his mouth, wanting more as soon as the taste hit him but his body refused to respond... refused to move other than the wild writhing of his hips as he thrust harder into Yong Ha's welcoming mouth. His skin tightened over his locked muscles, his limbs frozen with the shock of his orgasm. The heat building up inside of his sac boiled out, waves of pearled salt meant solely for his lover's tongue. Yong Ha remained fixed on his sex and he flexed his hand, driving his finger deeper into the man's hot passage. The flick of his fingertip against the sweet spot of Yong Ha's body ground out another gasping cry from the man and Jae Shin tried to return the pleasure Yong Ha was giving him, licking what he could of the man's spill from his quivering cock.

Yong Ha convulsed around him, the curve of his ass fitting into the cup of Jae Shin's palm and the larger man pushed in again, working Yong Ha's body into a pleasurable tide of sensations. Another orgasm wave hit him when Yong Ha suckled harder and Jae Shin fell into it, trusting Yong Ha to take care of him as the world around him spun into darkness and stars.

Dae Min stepped up into the main hall, trying to look as imperious as possible. Wishing he'd bribed one of the pages to whisper unkind things just within ear shot of one of the other scholars, Dae Min cursed himself for not thinking far enough ahead. Having bluffed and bullied his way out of most punishments, he prepared himself to answer for Bon Hwa's unsubtle rumour mongering.

He's my cousin from the country, Dae Min prepared his initial excuse. He does not understand friendships that men have. I am sorry I did not take the time from my studies to help him understand how men can... like... one another but I don't see how that has anything to do with me....

The small form sitting formally at the end of the room's woven mats gave Dae Min pause as did the tall looming sentinel standing behind slightly to the right of her. Lee Sun Joon's shoulders were turned a bit, casting him into slight profile as if he were more interested in the falling snow framed by the open window than expecting anyone to come through the door. Yoon Hee barely glanced up at what she was reading, turning a page as he approached.

"Where is the student president?" Dae Min cocked an eyebrow at Lee Sun Joon. "You? Not that it would be a surprise. The powerful of the state always is mimicked in this council."

"It is not me," Lee Sun Joon stated quietly, his eyes cold and cutting as they swept over Dae Min. "I am just one of the elected council members. Your president awaits you there."

"Sit down, Kim Dae Min," Yoon Hee said, her attention lifting from the book to the face of the man in front of her.

While handsome, the bloat in his cheeks and the dead-fish stare he gave her told Yoon Hee that he was not worthy of Jae Shin. There was no warmth or sacrifice in the other scholar. Not as lean as Yong Ha, there was an inherent softness about the man, a weakness of spirit hidden behind the fine clothes and arrogant manner. Definitely not a suitable match for her Geol Oh. Not one she could trust to be gentle with the wild, feral genius. Not someone who could coax him out of the shadows with the promise of pleasure and unconditional love.

And she just didn't like him.

"Kim Dae Min," She repeated, inviting him to sit on the cushion opposite of her.

He took the seat with a swirl of his robes, settling down gracefully into a formal stance. A low table separated them and Yoon Hee was thankful for the distance, especially considering the man's cold haughtiness melted away for a second and she could see the embers of rage burning behind his aristocratic mask.

"I am curious as to one such as yourself thinks she can operate as student president." Dae Min thinned his lips barely wide enough to qualify as a smile. "I understand Sungkyunkwan is... progressive in allowing you... a woman... to study among men but this? It is an... outrage seems too strong of a word. Perhaps.. shocking."

"The office of student president is one elected by the scholars attending Sungkyunkwan. It is my pleasure to serve the school," She demurred, secretly wondering if she could stab him with the sharpened end of an ink brush and claim self-defense against his stupidity. Lee Sun Joon cleared his throat and she sighed, hearing the censure in the man's murmur.

"And I was invited here because...," Dae Min trailed off. "I'm much too recent of an arrival to have secured the second seat on the council, although it appears that the senior representative is missing, yes?"

"He is..." Sun Joon suddenly discovered a uniquely formed snowflake, focusing on its descent from the skies of particular interest. "He is otherwise occupied at the moment but I am sure he would have wanted to be here if it were a formal meeting."

"True," Yoon Hee agreed. "Goo Yong Ha certainly would want to be here."

"Ah," Dae Min sighed, letting his mouth fall open in mock understanding. "You are here to admonish me for what? Being the Geol Oh's friend? Shouldering the great Yeorim aside in Moon Jae Shin's affections? He can't stand a little competition for the man's friendship so he sends his friends to bully me? The university

head will hear of this.”

“This... thing that is between us,” Yoon Hee said, cocking her head to study the man. “Senior Goo Yong Ha does not know that I’ve called you here.”

“I doubt he even knows he’s on the council again,” Sun Joon muttered. “You *know* how much he loves political maneuvering.”

“So you’ve decided to call me before you as a misguided attempt to bully me *for* Goo Yong Ha?” Dae Min’s laughter was sharp and brief. “And here I thought the Jalgeum Four were supposed to be the enlightened friendship of our new Joseon dynastic cooperation. Instead, once again...the *noron*...the old reasoning of the *seoin* look to shove aside anyone who does not agree with them. And now, they have learned to use a puppet from the...”

“Shut your mouth before I shut it for you,” Lee Sun Joon snapped, a rough displeased rumbling low in his chest. “I will not stand for someone to speak of Kim Yoon Hee in that manner.”

“Because you are the junior representative?” Dae Min cocked his head and looked between the two scholars. “Or because you are *fucking* her?”

fifteen

Yoon Hee was on her feet before Sun Joon could reach Dae Min. Catching at her fiancé with her strong hands, she pulled on the scholar's arms, trying to yank him sideways before he could get his hands on the other man.

"Let me go, *agi*," Sun Joon growled. "This filth needs to die.

"If you kill him, then we will have to get help hiding the body," She hissed. "And where can we bury him without the ground dying in protest? Don't you think the head of Sungkyunkwan won't notice when an entire area is blackened and scorched from the rot burying him would cause?"

"Do you think the two of you scare me?" Dae Min rose slowly, hiding the shaking of his hands in the folds of his robe. "Do you think you can intimidate me into giving up my friendship with Geol Oh merely because you are unhappy with it?"

"What is the point of your friendship if you use your cousin to tear the man down?" Yoon Hee turned to ask, keeping a firm grip on Sun Joon's arm.

"That was ..." Dae Min cursed his loose tongue. "I did not put Bon Hwa up to that. Like you, he is jealous of my relationship with Moon Jae Shin. I obviously need to reassure my cousin that he is still my friend and that one does not replace the other."

"Doesn't it?" Sun Joon spat. His temper high, the calm and collected scholar was washed away by the passionate fury Dae Min invoked in him. "Isn't that what you are trying to do to Yong Ha? Put yourself in his place with Jae Shin?"

"If Yong Ha were actually in Jae Shin's heart, then you would have no fear of this, no?" Dae Min said slyly. "I know of Yong Ha. Even if he were to bring Jae Shin closer, he would lose interest quickly. He is like a spoiled little boy who wants a treat and with one bite, he is done and moving on to beg for the next kind of cake. You are Jae Shin's friends. Do you think he deserves that kind of friendship?"

"What do you know of friendship?" Yoon Hee inquired. "Jae Shin was sick, poisoned by the alcohol he drank and instead of seeking help, you took him to a place where you could paw over him. How is that friendship?"

"I wasn't given a chance to help him," Dae Min lied smoothly. "How was I to know he was sick? It took you some time to realize it. It took time for the poisons in the brew to reach his innards and make him ill. He was gone before I could act. If anything, you denied me the chance to prove to Jae Shin that I love him dearly as a friend."

"A friend?" Sun Joon asked, drawing himself together. "Is that what you want from our Jae Shin?"

"Do you claim any love for him is deviance then? You who stand besides a woman who wears our robes? Robes that until she lied her way into these grounds, were forbidden to a woman? If not for the King's favour, would she be wearing them now?" Dae Min pressed. "And if you claim love... did you love her before her nature was realized. Because if you are saying that it *is* true love between you, then for a moment...perhaps even longer... you were in love with a man. In your mind and in your heart, you loved a man. Is the love deviant? Or the person?"

"That is *not* relevant," He growled back. "Yoon Shik...Yoon Hee..."

"Is one and the same. You loved the heart while accepting the body," Dae Min straightened the tie on his

robe, artfully arranging the bow to lie flat against his side. "If you have not called me here on something official, then I will take my leave. But know this, I will not give up my friendship with Moon Jae Shin merely because you ask it. The only person who has the right to turn me away from him is Moon Jae Shin himself. And considering our... closeness, I do not see that happening for quite some times; despite what Yong Ha might do to make it otherwise. Good day, Student President and her lackey. We shall talk some other time."

Yoon Hee continued to hold onto Sun Joon's arm while they watched Dae Min leave the council room. The rage in the man's heart was evident, his dark eyes burning holes through Dae Min's body until the man closed the door behind him, leaving the couple alone. Only then did Yoon Hee drop her hand and hissed out her breath with intense frustration.

"He twists everything," She muttered, upset at the turn of events. "He uses *us* to justify his taking of Geol Oh."

"Kim Dae Min is not stupid," Sun Joon pointed out. "If anything, he is more dangerous because he has nothing to lose in this. Jae Shin is his friend, no matter how he manipulated himself into the man's life. The Geol Oh will defend him because that is his nature."

"I hate that about him sometimes," Yoon Hee replied. "So what do we do? Other than kill him. Which is what I am leaning towards."

"Make it impossible for him to be alone with Moon Jae Shin," Sun Joon said, his voice once again calm and cold. "If Kim Dae Min would like to know what friendship is like, then let him see ours. Constantly."

"I can't move," Geol Oh murmured as he stretched out on the blankets next to his lover. "Well, not much. I think you broke me."

His body ached in places he'd not expected and the constant itch in his soul seemed to be gone, scratched by the touch of the man laying next to him. He knew he smelled and there was a drying, flaking film on his hips and thighs but the effort to move seemed too much for him.

He also didn't want to get too far from his Yeorim.

His. Jae Shin pondered the word. He went for something to more...connective. A word that he held in his heart. *Mine.*

"What are you muttering about, my wild scholar?" Yong Ha let the languid feel of his afterglow seep through his bones. "The air is full with your thinking which tells me that I didn't do a good enough job of loving you."

"You did..." He turned over onto his stomach, lifting himself up to rest on his forearms. Brushing his fingers over Yong Ha's bare ribs, he shyly leaned over and kissed the spot he'd tickled earlier. "I don't think I can move more than a few inches."

"Then I *definitely* did a good enough job loving you." He purred at Jae Shin's touch, luxuriating in the man's gentle stroking.

"Have you... done a lot of this?" Jae Shin pushed himself to continue. "With other men?"

Yong Ha turned his head to look at his young lover, reading the emotions he knew were brewing beneath the surface. There could be only honesty with Jae Shin. He needed to live his life openly and full-hearted; no walls to deflect truths and certainly no stone maze to traverse to reach the trust he needed. Yong Ha spent his life behind false smiles and half-baked lies, skillfully negotiating the pitfalls of their society's intrigues.

Behind the doors of their shared room, there could be no masks or hidden smiles, Yong Ha realized. Especially not in this, not as Jae Shin reached out, hoping for reassurance that he was worth loving.

"A little," Yong Ha replied solemnly. "More when I realized I was in love with you but then I came to understand that while I was open to being with a man... that I got pleasure from being with a man... I felt nothing...I felt dirty because that man was not you."

"But I..." Jae Shin stumbled over his words, unsure on phrasing his thoughts so Yong Ha would understand his meaning. "We weren't..."

"Together?" Yong Ha answered with a nod. "In my head, I knew we were not a couple. But my heart and soul, said otherwise."

Jae Shin pursed his lips, exhaling noisily. His heart skipped a beat then dove down into his belly as another thought came to him. "And...the women?"

"Ah, the women," Yong Ha grinned widely, amused at the blush on his friend's face. "I love women. I do. They are maddening and more manipulative and vicious than men. The aristocratic ministers and lords think they are skilled politicians but no one is better at social puppetry like a woman. The heavens will only weep for us when a woman rises to lead our society. There is a reason men push them down. They are frightened of what a woman can do. I am sure of it."

"So you admire them?" He looked confused and Yong Ha took pity on him, rubbing at Jae Shin's full mouth with his thumb.

"They can bring great pleasure," The flirt acknowledged. "I like pleasure. I like being pampered and cooed over. I grew up in a household of women and I learned at an early age how to use that to my advantage. They like a pretty face and someone who listens to them. The more attentive a man is to a woman, the more spoiling they give him."

"But you've been... their lover," Jae Shin said, unable to keep a timbre of jealousy from his voice.

"Jae Shin," Yong Ha broached gently. "Women are... like clothes. Beautiful things to try on and wear but nothing feels better on me than my own skin. I love women. I do. I love their taste and how they smell and how they sound. But for you, I would never touch another if you asked it of me."

"How could I ask that?" He stared down at the blankets, angry at himself for daring to think Yong Ha was only his. Jealousy ate into his belly, a blackened poison that reached his heart to turn it cold and stony.

"I've asked you to go against your nature," The man prodded. "When I asked you to stay by my side...to not risk yourself for the... for what your brother died for, you could not. Would you now? Could I ask you to turn away from who you are?"

"No," Jae Shin answered. "I feel... dark inside because of it. From your love of women. It sickens me inside in a way I can't describe."

"Probably the same way I felt when you were protecting our Yoon Hee," Yong Ha said, tapping his lover's forehead. "A little jealous but at the same time, relieved that your heart could beat for someone else besides a noble cause. It was very tiring you know, competing with an ideal. Your crusade against the wrongs of society gives me indigestion. I can't dress better or ply you with sweeter words than justice. She's a hard mistress to shove aside."

"Would you? Give them up if I asked?" Jae Shin looked up suddenly, meeting his lover's thoughtful gaze. The shimmering wet in his eyes gave Yong Ha pause and not for the first time, the young scholar was struck by the intense passions hidden in the other man's heart.

"Yes," He murmured softly. "I would give up anything for you. It would be hard because I've built up a reputation but I would. I already have, really. I've not... been with a woman in months. Every kiss from another's lips has been like ash for me lately. Only you... your mouth... your touch... has made me feel alive again."

"People would wonder if you were ill," Jae Shin fretted. "And... it's wrong of me to ask that. It is. People would suspect something if you suddenly became chaste. They would think the world was ending."

Yong Ha's laughter was a fierce, hearty sound that brought Jae Shin's scowl to full bloom. Balling up his fist, he lightly tapped Yong Ha's shoulder, barking his knuckles against the man's sinewy arm.

"Don't laugh at me."

"I am laughing at you because you are right. They would think I was sick." He wiped at his face, glad he was already on his back or he would have fallen over. "No, I don't want to give up women but if you wanted me to..."

"No, it wouldn't be right. It's not fair to ask you to change for me," Jae Shin muttered, hating himself for

seeing the fairness of the situation.

"There is also another solution," Yong Ha ventured. "I could take you with me... to the tea houses. And we could share..."

"A woman?" Jae Shin gaped then his body convulsed, a hiccup rocking his chest. Puffing up his chest, he held his breath before another escaped. The attempt was futile and he hiccupped again. "Damn you."

"You would like some of them, my shy wild horse. Some of the gisaeng are quite witty," Yong Ha offered. "I am friends with a few of them. Visiting the tea houses isn't just about sex. Mostly they are fine companions...and without the complications of an upright woman."

"I don't know if I could. Do that. With someone other than you," He muttered under his breath.

"That's the best part of being with a gisaeng," Yong Ha leaned in to whisper, letting the tip of his tongue trace the shell of Jae Shin's ear. "We can do things... very wicked naughty things with each other while she is there and she will keep our secrets. The gisaeng are wonderful at... helping someone love another."

"Yong Ha!" Another round of hiccups racked Jae Shin and he punched his friend harder, wishing away the blush colouring his cheeks.

"There are reasons I stick to gisaeng, my Geol Oh," He replied, pulling away to rub at his injured, soon-to-be-bruised arm. "They are women intent on my pleasure and have no intention of securing my heart. I can please myself and not give away what is yours. There is nothing complicated about being friends with a gisaeng; I only have to offer patronage and protection and they offer...gratitude. Love? I would rather have from you."

"What now?" Jae Shin ducked his head, burying his face behind his mane of hair. Yong Ha carded his fingers through the deep, soft silk, pulling it away from Jae Shin's beautiful features. "Between us... this."

"This," Yeorim murmured, craning his neck to kiss Jae Shin's temple. "This is all we need. If I could stay inside of this room with you forever and feed off of your love, I would."

"I would miss..." He frowned. The thought of staying within the room's four walls brought an prickle up between his shoulder blades and he squirmed, uneasy at being contained. "Everything."

"Oh no, my Geol Oh," Yong Ha laughed. "I know you. Keeping you in a cage isn't what I want for you. You're too restless inside. Too passionate. I imagine that I'm going to find myself doing some very unsavoury things in the least likely of places because of it."

"Would you mind?" Cocking his head, he regarded his long time friend with new eyes. The prettiness of Yeorim's features no longer tugged at him and Jae Shin found he could look at the man full-faced, something he had trouble with before. Where the descriptions of shared love with a gisaeng made him embarrassed, the thought of taking pleasure with Yong Ha on the rooftops or on the shore of the river made him hard.

"No, I don't mind at all." Yong Ha's smile was wicked and full of intent. "And I think that tree hollow of yours is just big enough to do what I'd like to do with you."

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Goo Yong Ha rarely went home. The travel to the family compound was easy enough, a short ride through the city to the other end of the hills but the lure to the Goo household was dim at best. Governed mostly by the women in his family, the compound offered Yong Ha little freedom; something he treasured as a necessity for his slightly wild lifestyle.

He felt his air constricting as soon as he saw the high walls of his family's compound rise over the far hills of the capital's river.

"This is what Geol Oh feels every day," He muttered, trying to loosen the robes tied too tightly around his chest. "Like he cannot breathe."

But it was for Geol Oh he made the journey.

The crisp snow laid a brilliant white sparkle on the surrounding evergreens, the bright pine scent filling the air as he was carried down the road towards the enormous estate. The compound's sloping blue tiled roofs were similarly iced and the golden carved posts jutting out from the eaves hung heavy with slender icicles. It was a beautiful, breath-taking scene. Elegant and worthy of a king, the Goo estate was well known for its splendor, hospitality and comely residents.

A gilded cage for deadly venomous peacocks, Yeorim thought, as the tall wooden gates were thrown open to welcome him in. A compound filled with beautiful, delightful creatures; all dancing in attendance to their draconian queen.

The women descended on him as a swarm, prettily attired scorpions clattering their jeweled claws even before he stepped out of the litter. There were new faces, wives of lesser cousins he'd not met and the maturing faces of female relatives entering their womanhood, each bearing the family's trademark beauty. Unable to hear himself over the chatter, he slowly moved through the throng, intent on reaching the smaller battalion of women standing at the upper steps of the compound, bowing slightly in welcome to every woman around him.

"Let the boy pass," His eldest aunt separated from the cluster, her still black hair artfully arranged around her unlined, painted face. "You nip at his heels like a pack of dogs."

Like many of the Goo women, his elder aunt preferred to dress in the style of his grandmother's youth; elaborate wigs festooned with baubles to draw the eye to their attractive features. Their family's wealth gave them access to fantastically dyed fabrics and delicate ornaments to frame their slender bodies, a luxury Yeorim took full advantage of himself.

He took the steps quickly, drawing himself up to his aunt's side. Leaning in to kiss her cheek, he caught a whiff of cloves and powder and his lips creased her makeup slightly. "Hello, auntie."

"Goo Yong Ha," She murmured, clasping his shoulder gently. "It is lovely to see you. Even better if we saw you more often."

"There is only so much poison one can sip and expect the body to withstand, Auntie," He replied smoothly. "I fear my constitution would not be able to take much more than I already drink. Even for poison as sweet tasting as you."

"Your smart mouth will be the end of you, little lotus," She teased, gathering her skirts as she shooed away the other women. "Your grandmother waits for you."

"Will my heart be able to take it?" Yong Ha murmured. Taking one last long look at the courtyard where his female relatives were systematically taking apart the piles of city-purchased delights he'd brought for them, he sighed and followed his aunt into the main house's warm darkness.



The elderly woman waiting for him wore her years well. The delicate tremors in her hands could be explained away with the excitement at seeing her favourite grandson but Yong Ha knew better. Her nerves had been going for years and despite her tremendous will and stubbornness, her body was slowly betraying her age. The ebony wig on her head was shot with a delicate touch of silver, a nod to her years and the her hanbok jacket collar was high enough to mask the slight wobble of her neck, something Yong Ha assured her only added to her allure.

What man wouldn't want to be seduced by such a delicate and experienced beauty? He'd once whispered into her ear when she drew him near for a kiss. She'd slapped at his hand for his nonsense but later that evening, one of her favourite rings was delivered to him by one of the servants, along with a note for him to have her in his heart; forever.

He wore that ring to this day.

"Goo Hee Young," He greeted his grandmother, bowing at his waist.

She remained reclined on her chaise but held her hands out to him, urging him forward. "Grandson."

"You are as beautiful as ever," Yong Ha glanced about the room. "I see that you've banished your cackle."

"I wanted time alone with you," She murmured, coyly settling back into the cushions. Tucking her legs under her voluminous skirts, Hee Young gestured towards the kettle steaming on a brazier. "Pour some out for me, lotus."

"I hate that name," Yong Ha muttered but poured a serving from the kettle. The richness of a fine soju hit his nose and he grinned. "Does Auntie know you are drinking this?"

"What she does not know will not kill you," Hee Young replied, motioning with her hand for him to serve her. "Get yourself a cup and sit down. Looking up at your great height is hurting my neck."

"Yes, Grandmother," He acquiesced, serving them both. Settling on the end of the chaise, he took a sip from the smooth liquor, astonished once more at the skill the woman had in acquiring the best of what the city had to offer. "This is good."

"I am old." She fixed him with a steely glare. "Do not waste my time with the nonsense prattle that society tells you to speak to an old woman. Tell me why you are here."

"Can't I just come to visit my beloved grandmother?"

"You could," Hee Young sniped back. "But I would think less of you if you did. Not when the capital holds greater pleasures for you than this brooding estate does. We are a place of women here. Women you cannot touch. Why would you remain here when there are others that you can coo and tickle?"

"That's... something I want to talk to you about." Yong Ha refilled his cup, draining it quickly.

"Women?" Hee Young waved her empty cup at him, hissing at his slowness.

"No, Grandmother," He replied, unable to meet her eyes. "Men."

"Ah," She drank the soju down with a practiced ease. Passing it back to her grandson, she reached over and touched the finger her ring sat on and said, "You should go talk to your uncle, Park Bae Jung. He is the one who can tell you about men."



Searching for Bae Jung proved to be a chore. The place was a bastion full of women so most of the Goo men fled to the city and what little refuge a man would have in the compound was usually overrun by the younger children looking for someplace to hide from the plethora of maternal orders given from any number of females.

He found the man he was looking for in one of the store rooms, counting up supplies for the household. A quiet and stern-faced individual, Bae Jung still was considered by Yong Ha to be one of his favourite relatives;

mostly because he seemed to be able to withstand practically anything Grandmother seemed to throw his way — an admirable trait among the Goo men.

“Hyung,” Yong Ha greeted the older, thin man, stepping carefully around containers of pickled vegetables. The redolent smell of food supplies tickled the scholar’s sense, a particular scent making his nose twitch. Unstopping a fermenting jar, he gagged slightly at the powerful smell of horseradish root and chili. “Who are they making this for? No one ever eats it.”

“Guests,” Bae Jung muttered, barely glancing up from his records. He crab-walked down the aisle, stopping at the next section of high shelves and began to verify its stores. “I did not know you were coming home, Yong Ha. A visit or did they send you back in disgrace?”

“Hardly disgrace.” Yong Ha carefully dusted off the flat top of the large horseradish kimchi urn and sat down on it, dangling his feet over its curved sides. “I’m a good student.”

“You are a great student only doing enough work to be a good student,” Bae Jung looked at the young man, peering over a pair of thin wire spectacles. Unlike other Goo men, he remained clean shaven; too smooth faced to wear the forty years he’d gained.

“The work doesn’t really matter,” He replied. “Only the civil servant test does. What you do before then is...nothing really. Just ways to show that you’re intelligent and witty. Not something I want someone to know about me. I’d rather they underestimate how smart I am and dismiss me as a threat. Life is better that way.”

“You are your Grandmother’s child,” Bae Jung intoned, returning to his book.

“Speaking of Grandmother,” Yong Ha said, smiling as he swung his legs. “She sent me to you.”

“It couldn’t have been to count rice bags,” He murmured. “The last time you helped me with our inventory, you got sick from the candied persimmons you ate while no one was looking.”

“I was six,” Yong Ha reminded him with a laugh. “What sane man expects a six year old boy *not* to eat all the persimmons?”

“The man who then had to clean up both ends of the six year old boy.” Bae Jung shook his head at the memory. “I can’t stand the smell of them any more.”

“I still love them.” The scholar laughed. “I’d probably eat them again and get sick but I’ll enjoy doing it.”

“Your Grandmother did not send you to me to talk about persimmons.”

“No,” Yong Ha sobered. “She sent me to talk to you about... men.”

“Men?” The older man quirked an eyebrow at the scholar and removed his spectacles to better see the young man’s somber expression. “You are having problems with men?”

“Just one.” He shrugged, unable to dissemble under the watchful eye of an uncle he’d always been honest with. “My Geol Oh.”

“Ah, so it is like that,” Bae Jung sighed heavily, putting the book down and rubbing at his face. “Grab a bottle from the shelf. This is a conversation men should have while drunk.”

“I just had four cups of soju with Grandmother.”

“If you can still walk, then you are not drunk enough for this talk,” Bae Jung replied, tucking his glasses into his sleeve pocket. “Get the bottle, Lotus and go sit by the fire pit.”

“I really hate that nickname,” Yong Ha muttered under his breath but he did as he was told, grabbing one of the lesser brews from the shelf and holding it up for his uncle to see so he could strike it from the books. “Should I bring cups with me?”

“Cups don’t hold enough,” He replied, stoking the fire to a healthy burn. Waving towards two thick wooden blocks, he sat down on one and waited for Yong Ha to perch on the other. “And you waste time refilling them.”

The first sip burned and Yong Ha coughed around the cheapness of the liquor compared to what his grandmother served. The milky fluid stung more going down and when it hit his belly, erupted into a ball of numb that spread out into his bones. After three mouthfuls, he passed it back to Bae Jung who drank heavily from it before leaning his hands on his knees.

"This... affection you have for the politician's son, how strong is it?" Bae Jung asked, his voice as gruff as the crackling fire.

"Very," Yong Ha replied then thought more. "Deadly so. It hurts not to be with him. And until recently, it hurt to be with him too."

"So things have... changed?" His uncle regarded him with a steady gaze. "Be truthful with me, Lotus. How much are you... entangled with this boy?"

There were few times in Yong Ha's life when honesty was his first choice. Now as Bae Jung quizzed him, his instincts whispered lies in his ear, suggesting all manner of supposition and deflection to keep his uncle from knowing the truth of his affections.

Swallowing, Yong Ha replied, "I am in love him. He is my life."

"Moon Jae Shin!" Dae Min hurried to catch up with the scholar, nearly pushing a small group of students to the ground as he passed. Unable to match the man's long-legged pace, he raised his voice nearly to a shout, disliking the brashness of the act but not willing to lose Jae Shin again that day.

Most of Dae Min's morning had been taken up by avoiding Lee Sun Joon or his shadow, Kim Yoon Hee. Every step Dae Min took was soon mimicked by one or the other as if neither had anything better to do than to follow him through his classes. He'd finally found a gap through a crowd of students and dodged through it, spotting Jae Shin walking across the far side of the yard. If he sprinted, Dae Min thought, he'd be able to be at Jae Shin's side before the other two knew he was missing.

He hadn't counted on the man being so lost in thought that he couldn't hear Dae Min shouting for him.

Jae Shin turned, his serious eyes keen and alert in his handsome face. Scanning the in-between class crowd, he spotted Dae Min and paused, waiting for the other man to catch up. Panting heavily, Dae Min drew up next to him, a wide grin plastered on his face.

"I wanted to come see how you were doing," He huffed, pressing in on his side. The ache didn't hurt as much as he pretended but the twinge he acted out brought a concerned glower to Jae Shin's gaze.

"Are you hurt?" He reached for Dae Min's robes then stopped before he could pull them up. Gripping the cloth tightly he examined the man's face for any continued sign of pain. "You can run across the yard without breathing hard. Did something happen?"

"Some bruising," Dae Min murmured, ducking his head. "From the other night when I was trying to get you home."

Jae Shin drew back, alarmed at the thought. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not a lot," Dae Min replied with a shake of his head. "It's nothing. Just some bruising where you... stumbled...when I was trying to get you indoors."

"Did Jung look at it?"

"I didn't want to bother Professor Jung," He said, shrugging off the injury as if it meant nothing. "He was busy with caring for you. This is minor. I was more concerned about how you were feeling."

"Come, let's take a look at least," Jae Shin's frown grew and he lightly pushed Dae Min towards the infirmary. "Jung is in class but I can take care of it."

The infirmary was warm and out of the cold wind but despite the welcome heat, Dae Min shivered when he crossed the threshold. Hidden from Yoon Hee and Sun Joon, he'd be able to coax Jae Shin into at least a kiss, something he'd hungered for since that night at the tea house. His ribs ached from where he'd gotten Bon Hwa to pummel them, and the purple mottling was just starting to bloom over his side as if a deep bruising was beginning to surface.

He knew they'd done a good enough job when he heard Jae Shin hiss in sympathy.

"See?" Dae Min ducked, hiding his grin from Jae Shin's watchful eyes. "It is nothing."

"You are more purple than a plum," He scolded. "Sit down on the examining table. I will go get some ice from outside. We should at least try to get the swelling down."

Dae Min stripped off his upper robes, carefully arranging himself to his best advantage. While not as muscular as Jae Shin, he knew he was trim and lithe with long muscles carved firm from exercise. By letting the folds of his jacket fall from his shoulders, the deep blue of his scholar robes picked up on the bruises' purpling tint, making them appear more vicious and painful on his pale skin. The cold air and excitement at Jae Shin's hands on him pricked his nipples and Dae Min fought back a moan, having to bite his lip to keep from salivating when Jae Shin came back into the side hall.

The man's swagger did him in, Dae Min decided. A knowing swivel of hips and the pressing forward of long legs thick with muscle made Dae Min's mouth water. Jae Shin's long hands and squared off fingers promised a deep sensuality as did the man's full and passionate mouth. He moved to the side to grab a cloth to wrap ice in and Dae Min spotted the love mark he'd left on Jae Shin's neck, its diminishing circle still vibrant and strong against the man's golden toned skin.

"I shouldn't have hurt you like this, Dae Min," Jae Shin murmured, contrite as he ducked his head to examine the area. Carefully placing the wrapped ice on the man's ribs, he soothed Dae Min when he hissed at the cold burn eating into his skin. "I am sorry. This... is my fault."

"I don't mind," Dae Min replied, leaning forward to nuzzle slightly into the crook of Jae Shin's throat, hoping the man would take the action as a friend needing support as his painful ribs were being prodded at. "I marked you as well."

"Eh?" Jae Shin glanced up, his breath hot on Dae Min's chest. Lightly touching the spot on his neck, he quirked his mouth into a grimace. "That was an accident."

"Truthfully, hyung?" Dae Min held his breath, trembling as if he were frightened to speak. Jae Shin straightened up slightly, still close enough for Dae Min to feel his exhalations on his skin but far enough away for the man to see his eyes. Keeping the timbre in his voice to a shaky innocence, Dae Min confessed in a breathless whisper. "I wanted to... do that. I needed to."

"Bite me?" Jae Shin's head canting would have been frustrating if Dae Min hadn't known of the man's inexperience. "Why?"

"Because you asked me to," Dae Min chanced a glance up through his lashes, inwardly pleased at Jae Shin's stunned look. "And then... you wanted more... you asked me for more and I thought... I would die if I didn't have the taste of you."

"I..." Jae Shin stumbled back on his heels. "I couldn't have..."

"We made..." Dae Min wondered how far he could push the other man. Jae Shin seemed on the edge of something, as if the confusion clouding his mind paralyzed him instead of merely giving him pause. "You wanted to make love to me. For us to... do things together."

"But that's impossible... I mean," Jae Shin stammered, his mouth slightly open in shock.

"We were intimate, hyung," Dae Min lied smoothly. "As intimate as a man and a woman are... as intimate as two men can be."

"I couldn't have..." His heart raced, pounding with an unfamiliar fear. "Yong Ha... I mean, Yong Ha..."

"You said Yong Ha didn't matter." Biting the inside of his lip, Dae Min forced his eyes to water as if he were on the verge of tears. "It was my name you were calling out, Jae Shin. When I kissed you...when I took you into my mouth... when you filled me with... your seed, it was my name on your lips. Not Yong Ha. Are you telling me now, that you love... him?"

"I just..." Jae Shin caught his breath into his chest, unable to comprehend what he'd done with Dae Min.

"You wanted me," He said, reaching out to touch Jae Shin's shoulder but he let his hand fall away, as if he were unfit to touch the man before him. "You told me so at the soju hall. You said you wanted to be with me...first. And that you wanted to learn how to pleasure me. And you did... pleasure me, hyung."

He lifted his rear, slowly lowering the waistband of his pants to reveal long bruises, obviously made from a man's hands, marking his hips and wrapping around to the front from the back. Bon Hwa's hands were nearly as long as the restless scholars and Dae Min nearly beat his cousin about the head in order to get the

marks right.

"I did this? To you?" Unable to breathe, Jae Shin was no longer sure of what he'd been told happened and the truth Dae Min appeared to be laying out before him. "And you let me?"

"I wanted it," Dae Min whispered. "I wanted... I still want... you."

"Dae Min...how can you want someone who does this to you? Who hurts you like this? How can you want me this way?"

"I would suffer anything to be with you," Dae Min murmured, guessing Yong Ha had kept his involvement in Dae Min's tea house ban to himself. "My father... knows about... how I feel... about men and when word reached him about you and I at the tea house, he made certain I could never go there again. I am forbidden to go to the one place where I feel safe...where I can live as a man without fear. Being here in Sungkyunkwan is the only thing that's saving me from... his anger."

"Dae Min," Jae Shin murmured through his shock. His mind reeled at the thought of taking another man other than Yong Ha to his body... but the news of his involvement with Dae Min didn't register to him as false. In anything, some part of his heart skipped a beat as if it caught on the truth and stumbled. "I don't remember..."

"Being here with you is all I have left to me, Moon Jae Shin. Without you, I have nothing. I will *be* nothing." Whispering softly, Dae Min masterfully played the card he knew would wrap Jae Shin around his heart. "If you turn me away, then everything I have done...everything I have given up... will be lost. Without you, there will be no one to protect me from my father and what he might do to a son that has disgraced him. Would you leave me to that? To that anger? To that hatred? A hatred born only from who I love? If so, then yes, I will gladly die from his beatings because if it is true, then you are not the man I fell in love with... and there is *nothing...no one* left to live for."

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"He is a *fucking* liar! Does he want to die? Because we can kill him! I will be very happy to kill him."

Goo Yong Ha watched Yoon Hee pace back and forth through Jae Shin's room, waving her arms about as she shouted furiously. Lounging on the pile of cushions he'd smuggled in when Jae Shin was ill, he kept out of the way of her path, moving his stocking foot when it looked like she was going to tread on it.

Sun Joon ducked into the room, bowing his head in an abject apology to Yong Ha after he glanced at Yoon Hee. The scholar visibly was uncomfortable with the stream of invectives pouring from his fiancé's mouth but her heavy-footed pace and wild, frantic gesticulations gave him pause. Yong Ha took pity on him and patted at the cushions, twisting his mouth into a sardonic grin when the younger man scurried over and sat down out of the way.

"How long has she been going on like this?" Sun Joon whispered.

"A few minutes," Yong Ha replied in a low voice. "She started right after I asked her if she'd seen Geol Oh. Have you seen him? Do you know what she is ranting about?"

"No..." Sun Joon glanced at the man next to him. "I mean, I wasn't..."

"You are as predictable as the stars, Lee Sun Joon," Yong Ha murmured, wishing he'd grab a soju bottle from across the room before Yoon Hee set up her warpath. "Does this have to do with Dae Min?"

Another imperceptible wince confirmed Yong Ha's suspicions. The usurper definitely had something to do with Yoon Hee's mood and Jae Shin's absence. He was tired and worn out from traveling to his home and back to the university, with an extra dose of cold from being exposed to the wintry winds when the litter flaps failed to keep the icy chill out. The last thing Yong Ha wanted to deal with was Dae Min and his clumsy machinations.

"Where is the insect now?"

Sun Joon pursed his lips in displeasure. "I suspect at the dining hall. He eats with the second group, usually."

"And I hope he chokes," Yoon Hee interjected, spitting with rage.

"Have you come down from your mountain long enough to tell me what happened?" Yong Ha asked, tugging on the edge of the woman's robe. "Or must I deduce it from your mad ravings?"

"Dae Min!" Yoon Hee gestured into the air as if the man's name was enough for Yong Ha to glean out past events. Taking a deep breath, she calmed herself long enough to mutter. "We found him...half naked and... pawing at Jae Shin in the infirmary."

"Mostly naked, really," Sun Joon murmured. "He'd pulled his pants down around his hips."

"And where was my Geol Oh?" Yong Ha's amicable smile whispered away, leaving none of his humour behind. Yoon Hee paced off, muttering to herself again so the older scholar turned to Sun Joon, piercing him with an uncompromising gaze. "Where was he?"

"A few feet away," The man replied, meeting his friend's glare. "He wasn't near enough to Dae Min to touch him."

"Tell him about the... markings!" Yoon Hee grumbled. "Tell him what we saw."

"Markings?" Yong Ha's eyebrows rose. "What markings? Where?"

"On his hips, there were... handprints. Bruises. And more on his ribs; as if someone punched him there."

Sun Joon said. "I...came in just as Dae Min claimed Jae Shin put them there."

"Tell him the rest of it. Tell him about what Dae Min said happened between them."

Staring up at his fiancé, Sun Joon wished she'd be more discreet, especially considering the murderous look on Yong Ha's face. Clearing his throat, he said, "Dae Min inferred that they were intimate. That they'd coupled. That the marks on his body were from Jae Shin's hands."

"Really?" The swoop of Yong Ha's eyebrows grew more pronounced and for the first time he could remember, Sun Joon felt a tingle of apprehension with regards to the man sitting next to him. The lazy hedonist was gone; replaced by a fierce and cunning predator. "My Geol Oh?"

"That is what he inferred." Sun Joon murmured, bowing his head slightly.

"He did more than infer," Yoon Hee growled. "He flat out said they did."

"And my Geol Oh?" Yong Ha's voice was deathly quiet and still, bringing Yoon Hee's pacing to an immediate halt and Sun Joon wondered if he'd need to protect his love from the storm that was brewing deep inside of the slender man. "What of him?"

"He left," The scholar replied, grabbing at Yoon Hee's shin before she could take a step forward. "Moon Jae Shin left the infirmary without saying another word and we've not seen him since."



Jae Shin's breath misted hot in the air and he cupped his hands over his mouth, hoping to warm his fingers. The thick robes he'd put on to keep out the daytime cold were no match for the wintery evening but the boiling buzz in his head had yet to subside. His soul burned; as hot inside of him as it was cold out and he knew he wouldn't be able to return to the university as long as his mind and heart raged.

Every time he blinked, he saw the marks on Dae Min's pale flesh. The bruises he'd supposedly made were wicked-looking and painful but his hands ached at the thought of hurting a man that deeply; especially a man he said he'd loved. Curling up around his knees, Jae Shin stared out into the city, tucked under the eaves of a high rooftop and once more, tried to untangle his thoughts.

You told me you loved me. Dae Min had said. *You said my name.* *Not Yong Ha's. Mine.*

"Is this true?" Jae Shin chewed on his upper lip, cracking at the chap from the bitter cold. The sour bitter of his own torn flesh gave him comfort, a justification for the pain he'd inflicted on Dae Min's body...and possibly his heart. "Would I have told him I loved him? Do I love him? How can I when... Yong Ha..."

The shift of clay tiles jerked Jae Shin from his thoughts and he straightened, ready to defend himself against an intruder. A shambling mound of fur slithered across the flat surface of the pestle and he jerked away from it, unsure if he should draw his knife or merely kick it off of the rooftop. A familiar but hatless head rose up behind the fur and Jae Shin smiled tightly despite the intrusion, especially when the man's mocking grin bringing an embarrassed tinge to Jae Shin's cheeks.

"You thought that was a kumiho," Yong Ha teased, hooking his leg up over the tile and fitting his foot firmly on the roof to leverage himself up. Reaching out with one hand, he wiggled his fingers to his friend. "Help me up."

"Not if you're going to come up here to scare me." Jae Shin gathered up the furs before he grabbed Yong Ha's hand, letting the man dangle for a moment before pulling him into the dubious shelter he'd taken from the cold. "What are you doing here?"

"I noticed your first question was not; how did I know you were here," Yong Ha muttered, shivering as he unfolded the furs, holding up one end for Jae Shin to burrow under with him. The young man hesitated, chewing at his lip again and Yong Ha sighed irritably. "Punish yourself later. For now, get under here and help keep me warm. Unlike you, I don't have a hot enough temper to keep the ice from my blood."

Yong Ha frowned when he felt Jae Shin's chilled limbs next to his. Ice crystals clung to the mans' clothes, immediately melting when they came into contact with Yong Ha's warmer body and the melt-off dampened the underside of the furs. Shivering through clenched teeth, Jae Shin shifted his weight, lodging himself up against the roof's curved niche to leave Yong Ha the majority of the space to nestle into.

"How did you know I was here?" Jae Shin ducked his head under the fur's edge, blowing into his hands again to relieve the numbness in his fingers.

Yong Ha sighed and pulled the heavy covers up over them, hooking its ends over the eave tip to create a small fur-lined tent to capture the combined warmth of their bodies. A small collapsible lantern near their feet took a moment to unfold and Yong Ha busied himself with lighting the tiny votive inside. The light was barely enough to see in but Yong Ha decided it was enough for what he needed to do.

"Open your mouth first." Yong Ha ordered. Undoing the flat-leather bag slung over his chest, he unstopped the end of its teardrop shape and squeezed it, lightly spraying the liquid inside past Jae Shin's parted lips. The man coughed, choking slightly on the rough alcohol but finally swallowed and pointed at the bag.

Coughing harder, Jae Shin sputtered, "What is that?"

"The bag is called a *bo-tah*. One of my uncles got it from one of the Portuguese traders," Yong Ha held it up for the man to drink from again. "What is inside of it is the disgusting cheap soju you keep stashed in your room. I'm surprised your stomach doesn't have a hole in it from drinking this stuff."

"It's good enough," Jae Shin muttered, snagging the lantern up off the roof flat to shove it up behind them into a niche between the eave and roof slope. The lantern side crumpled a bit as Jae Shin fitted it into place but the light remained steady, a watery golden glow through the panels of rice paper.

"And my delightful grumpy horse..." Yong Ha gulped quickly from a stream of soju, pulling a face at its taste. "I knew you were here because this is where you always come when you're feeling...insecure about yourself."

Yong Ha knew where to look. There was no second choice, really. After he'd gathered up the thick furs and filled the bota with soju, he'd instructed the couple to go back to their studies, stealthily sliding the book he'd gotten from a South Asian merchant into Yoon Hee's hands. A quick kiss on the girl's shocked mouth and he was off, determined to find his Jae Shin and knock some sense into him.

They'd found the birds' nest on this particular rooftop, Jae Shin's little bit of comfort wrapped around feathers and sticks. Yong Ha couldn't count the number of times they'd scaled the sloped tiles, certainly more than two hundred at least in the past ten years but each time they did, he was always amazed at how the sheer wonder of the view transformed his friend's face.

It was the same look Jae Shin had on his face when he smiled at Yong Ha.

"Did you talk to..."

"Yoon Hee..." Yong Ha laughed when Jae Shin glowered at their speaking on top of one another. He handed the bota to his friend who mastered the slow squeeze of the leather much quicker than Yong Ha had. "You first, Geol Oh."

"I am guessing you spoke to Yoon Hee and Sun Joon?" Jae Shin asked around a mouthful of soju. He couldn't look at Yong Ha, not directly although the flirt could see the dark sparkle of Jae Shin's eyes through his lashes.

"I did," Yong Ha admitted. "I did not, however, seek out Dae Min to punch in his head until his brains bled out but I will have to do so before bed, I think. I will sleep better that way and it will save me time in the morning, time I could use for eating breakfast."

Jae Shin fell silent, trapped under the weight of his emotions. The soju in his mouth turned sour and ashen, not strong enough to wash away the anguish inside of him but potent enough to numb his throat.

"I... don't know what happened that night. He said... I touched him. Had sex with him..."

"What do your instincts tell you?"

"That I betrayed you...somehow," Jae Shin mumbled, picking at a spot on his boot where a dribble of wax stained the leather. "I... feel something for him. I do."

Yong Ha closed his eyes to ward off the pain of Jae Shin's words but they struck with deadly accuracy, pricking through his resolve to embed barbed prongs into his heart. "Do you... want him?"

"Like I want you?" Jae Shin sighed, wishing he could part the furs to get fresh air and a glimpse of the city sparkling under its icy blanket but Yong Ha's dislike of cold was well known and he'd never hear the end of the man's complaining. "No, not like I want you. It's different with you. Warmer. Like I'm breathing in the sun. Dae Min is just... someone I could speak to about... lessons or teachings. No, not like I want you."

"There has been... a lot of change in your life these past months, Geol Oh," Yong Ha ventured. "Our lives are not our own to live. We are a part of a larger thing... and there are these people... more people than you have had before... in your life; people you care for where there were none. All of them are big changes."

"Are you saying I can't adapt to change?" He grumbled.

"No, I am saying that you give your heart freely once it is open." Yong Ha moved closer to his lover, leeching off the man's body heat.

"So I am gullible."

Yong Ha thought on the word then nodded. "Yes. You are, especially where people are concerned."

Jae Shin was reaching for the fur to toss it off of them when Yong Ha stopped him. Glowering at his friend, he stared the young, slender man down, his pride roughened by Yong Ha's honesty.

"Listen to me, Geol Oh, before you go sliding down the roof to your death." He tugged Jae Shin, planting the man back down.

Sullen, Jae Shin hunched over and made a grab for the half-full bota, sloshing a mouthful down before he looked up at Yong Ha. "Talk fast."

"One of the things I love about you is your sincerity," Yong Ha smiled when Jae Shin eyeballed him from under his bangs. "You love deeply, Jae Shin. Wholly, fully and without reservation. Because your spirit is pure and your heart is good, you think everyone is like you."

"People are dishonest, despicable creatures."

"People you don't trust...yes. Most of them are," Yong Ha agreed, sliding his hand under Jae Shin's robe sleeve and touching the warm skin beneath. "The person Dae Min presented to you... yes, that is someone you would love. Is that his real face? No but you would not know it so I can excuse you that but think less of him for playing games with your heart. Would you think he was manipulating you? No, that would never cross your mind."

"*Why* would he manipulate me? What is there to gain?" Jae Shin shifted, unable to bring himself to break off contact with Yong Ha but his legs needed to be stretched out.

Maneuvering around, Yong Ha moved around until he found himself sitting in the crux of Jae Shin's thighs, his back resting against the man's flat, hard stomach. Inhaling the man's fresh rain and citrus scent, he sighed and smiled when Jae Shin's arms came up to wrap around his chest.

"You are to gain, my innocent Geol Oh," Yong Ha whispered, craning his head to kiss at Jae Shin's forearm. He ran his lips over the fine hair growing there, taking a quick nibble at the man's wrist bone before getting bit himself on the back of the neck by Jae Shin's sharp teeth. "You are the prize in this game. Well, in his game."

"And you? Do you have a game?"

"Once more, I ask you... what do your instincts tell you?"

His heart quickened at Yong Ha's touch and when the man's lips once more ghosted over his skin, he felt himself growing hard and hot, despite the cold air outside. With Yong Ha's rear nestled against him, his body fit into the man's crevice snugly as if he belonged there. It felt *right* to have Yong Ha lying against him... fitting into him and Jae Shin knew that if their positions were reversed, he'd feel the same comfort in his belly and heart as he did now.

"My instincts..." Jae Shin cocked his head and his cheek brushed against the softness of Yong Ha's pulled back hair. He rested his forehead against the back of the man's head, inhaling the soft scent of Yong Ha's body. He knew that smell, the taste of sweet spiciness in the air he'd always associated with his best friend. His hands itched to have the man naked underneath him, to explore the depths of Yong Ha's body and in return,

lay himself bare to Yong Ha's tongue and fingers explore him in return.

"They tell me... I am yours," He whispered, feeling the pressure drop away from his chest and for the first time since he fled Sungkyunkwan, he took an easy breath.

"Then you are," Yong Ha replied, once more kissing the back of Jae Shin's hand. "No matter what Dae Min says... or what he tries to make you believe happened, your heart is pure enough...rich enough in the truth to know what really happened. I am not saying that you were tempted — or that you didn't come close to being with him — because he is pretty, you were sad and I hurt you so deeply I will spend eternity trying to apologize. You are human, just like the rest of us but do I believe in my soul that you lay with him? No, my Geol Oh, I do not believe you had sex with him."

"How can you be so sure?" Jae Shin buried his face into Yong Ha's soft hair. "How can you be so sure when I'm not certain myself."

"Because I've seen you bloom underneath my mouth and I've watched when pleasure takes you," He laughed. "It's like seeing the sunrise over the mountains and river for the first time or when you look up to the moon and it is surrounded by a lacy ice from the clouds. I would know if the sun rose twice in a day just as I would know if you'd taken pleasure from someone else. You are *sun*. You are my *winter moon*. You exist in no one's sky but my own because that is who you are. You wouldn't betray your heart any more than I could betray mine once I discovered it really belonged to you."

"I do not... believe I lay my hands on him," Jae Shin mumbled, concerned still of the bruising on Dae Min's body. "What if I do something like that to you?"

"If you did, I can't promise I won't like it." Yong Ha's eyes twinkled. "Sometimes things get heated and well, there are always little bits and pieces of ourselves that end up bruised." He trailed his fingers up, finding the spot he'd claimed over Dae Min's bite. "Didn't you like this? When my mouth was there?"

"Yes." Jae Shin flushed. "Damn it, yes. Don't remind me."

"Ah, my shy Geol Oh," He teased, brushing his hand up until he touched Jae Shin's hair, stroking at the man's temple with light fingers. "That is also how I know you are still untouched. Your body would sing to me if you'd...been more intimate than we already have."

"I hate that you know me."

"You hate that I know you so well," Yong Ha pointed out. "You *do not* hate that I know you. Imagine what your life would be without me."

"Dull," Jae Shin grumbled. "Bleak. Like a washed out sky against the bright brittle sun."

"Exactly." He smiled, touched at the lyrical turn of Jae Shin's mind. "So we are settled on this? You are mine, yes?"

"Yes." There was a slight nod, all the movement Yong Ha felt but it was enough. "We should head back. It is too cold up here."

"Agreed," Yong Ha shivered, more for show than actual chill. Jae Shin's long warm body kept him snug and warm, something he intended to take advantage of once they reached the comfort of Jae Shin's quarters. "But first, my Geol Oh, I am going to stop and have a talk with your friend, the praying mantis. It is time he discovered there are things out in the world that eat little insects who stray into their territory."

eighteen

Amid the crackle of ice in the trees, the main courtyard surrounding the dormitories seemed hushed, as if the ground was holding its breath for another storm. Dae Min stepped out of the make-shift bathhouse and hurried across the main courtyard, his soft footsteps creating cobweb fractures on the frozen yard's thin frost. The ends of his hair were still wet and the chill chased him up the stairs of the walkway, only stopping long enough to remove his footwear before ducking into the anticipated warmth of his room.

A room that was bare to the plaster walls.

Startled, he poked his head outside to check the placard hanging above the door frame. Verifying the number, he returned to stare at the empty room, a fury slowly growing up from his belly to reach the back of his brain.

Swearing under his breath, he spun on his heel and grabbed his boots from the warming shelf near the door. "Damn Bon Hwa, if he thinks this is a good prank to play..."

"Oh this is no prank, Sa Ma Gwi." Goo Yong Ha stepped out of the shadows, emerging from behind a column like an avenging ghost. "That is what they call you at that tea house, right? Praying mantis?"

"Where are my things? And where is Bon Hwa?" Dae Min's breath was hot, froths of curling mist streaming from his snarling mouth. "Do you think because you are senior representative that you can do this sort of thing? To me?"

He pushed up against the slender man, expecting to knock Yong Ha back but the scholar held his ground easily. Dae Min bumped into Yong Ha's shoulder, trying to intimidate him with a barreling push but the older man merely laughed, disarming Dae Min with a single gutting shove to the chest. Toppled aside, he slipped on the ice, flailing to get his balance as Yong Ha stepped in closer, his hands clasped behind his back.

"You have no right..." Dae Min spat, his face ugly with hatred.

"I earned the right the moment you used Jae Shin against himself," Yong Ha replied smoothly.

Even in the scant light coming from the nearby closed up rooms, Yong Ha could see Dae Min's colour rise. "Moon Jae Shin comes from an aristocratic family. As do I. You are beneath him. You are beneath *me*. I have the blood of Kings running through my veins where you come from a family of whores."

"Jae Shin is beneath me by choice as I will be beneath him... by choice." Stepping forward, Yong Ha pressed in tight, dropping his voice to a low whisper. "And as far as coming from a family of whores, that is something I gleefully embrace."

Dae Min flailed, his arm snapping out to strike Yong Ha but his clenched fist met air and he spun about, carried around by the momentum of his swing. Yong Ha's first blow took him by surprise and he barely had time to squeak out a grunt of pain before the next one struck, catching him on the side of the face and slamming him into the walkway.

Crouching next to Dae Min's head, Yong Ha inspected the slow dribble of blood streaming from the man's nose. Pursing his lips at his handiwork, he almost half-wished the man would spring back up so he'd have the chance to strike him again, despite the throbbing in his right hand. Sadly, for Yong Ha, Dae Min remained prone, writhing on the ice cold wood as he clutched his face and mewled.

"Let me tell you something about my family of low-blood whores," Yong Ha whispered. "We control the flow of goods coming into the country and men, noble or otherwise, beg for us to do business with them. That

whore you spit upon? She was the lover of a King and if she'd not fallen in love with my poor besotted grandfather, you could quite possibly have been bowing and scraping at her feet right now. She is still very close to the Dowager and current Queen. They have tea together and talk, plotting weddings between families and where monies should go to keep the cities thriving."

Lightly kicking at the man's arm, Yong Ha continued, "The men in my family know that a partnership with a woman is the wisest and most profitable relationship one can have. We marry well and to people with connections as much as noble blood. Because while power may shift and wane, hunger never does. The demand for shelter remains the same and the need for roads and bridges, and even in times of war, there is always a want for the finer things in life. We control those too."

"So while we are a family of whores," Yong Ha said, tapping Dae Min's forehead with his bared knuckles. "You are the ones who come begging at our back door, hoping for scraps."

"I will ruin you," Dae Min struggled to get upright, wiping at the blood freezing on his face as the winter wind picked up, whistling through the walkway columns. "I will..."

"You probably will be joining your belongings...and that pathetic sycophant of a cousin who are now on their way to Suwon by now." Yong Ha smiled pleasantly. "You see, Kim Dae Min, one of the benefits of being from a prominent merchant family is that everyone does business with us... even people like your father who owes my family a lot of money for goods he's received on commission."

"My father...? Suwon? I'm not going to Suwon! I can't go to..."

"Yes, your father," He murmured, flicking a bit of ice from his fingers. The cold was beginning to numb his bare hands and Yong Ha stood, burying his hands into the heavy sleeves of his winter coat. "Who so graciously accepted an offer for his son to apprentice to one of the architects building the King's Hwaseong Fortress. A great chance to study classical structures and master the hidden intricacies of harmonic construction."

"You...can't!" Dae Min staggered to his feet, resting his hand against the dormitory outer wall. Despite the cold in the air, his face showed signs of swelling, plumping hot and red around his right eye and cheek. The jut of his lower lip tautened against the blood rushing from his nose, a trail of snot mingling in and turning the run off a bright pink. "You have no..."

"I know, I have no right," Yong Ha said, shrugging as if helpless. "But I do and I will. What I am doing is an abuse of power. It is using my family's connections, their monies and their influence to strike out at someone on a personal level, something that I swore I'd never do."

Wagging his finger under the man's nose, Yong Ha was pleased to see Dae Min flinch and shy away. "But you see, Sa Ma Gwi... little insect... you put me in a bad position. I have to choose between my morals and Jae Shin. Luckily for me, I come from a family of whores so my morals are already loose. There was never any question that I would choose Jae Shin over a promise I made to myself. Even if we weren't already lovers — even if we never became lovers and I never had a chance at his heart — I would still take these actions; because he is worth that much. And you are worth *that* little."

Stretching out to his full height, Yong Ha worked the kinks from his spine and yawned, covering his mouth with the back of his hand. "Your father's men will be here in a few minutes. I told them I wanted some time to talk to you first; share some fond parting words. If you choose to write to Jae Shin, that is between the two of you. He thinks of you as a friend. Despite everything you've done and how you've shamed him, his heart is still open to you because he is that way. My Geol Oh... believes that you were misled perhaps by something he's done or said to you... led you to believe that he loves you but we both — you and I — understand that isn't the case."

"So, little insect, I leave you with a promise that I never intend to break," He hissed, bringing himself close enough for Dae Min's face to be heated by his breath. "If you ever hurt Moon Jae Shin or try to manipulate him again, I will find the farthest point of our country and bury you there. I will then burn the ground over you and roast chestnuts in the flames so you finally have some use. Are we clear in this, little insect?"

Dae Min's nod was imperceptible but satisfied Yong Ha. The walkway rumbled with someone heavy walking towards them and Yong Ha spared the man a brief glance, nodding in a silent greeting.

"Your father's man is here." Yong Ha gathered up his robes, holding them tight against his body. "He'll escort you to anyone you wish to say goodbye to but don't take too long. Suwon awaits you, Kim Dae Min while Jae Shin — awaits *me*."



He'd lied to Dae Min when he said Jae Shin was waiting for him. Yong Ha had no expectations of the feral scholar coming anywhere near him much less anything else. They'd fought a bit about Dae Min, the headstrong Jae Shin championing his not-friend while Yong Ha was determined to go through with his plan to eviscerate any sign of Dae Min in their lives.

The last time he saw Jae Shin, the man had been stalking through the snow to get to his own room, dragging the fur coverlet behind him.

What he *did* know was that he hurt. Especially in places that should only have hurt following a very busy night and several twisting positions but sadly the pain wasn't from either of those causes. The small of his back ached from riding in the litter for several hours and his head still buzzed from the amount of soju he'd consumed over the day. The ends of his fingers were chafed and raw from climbing over the roof tiles, despite using the trap door of the inn's attic to get to the upper slope and now his knuckles screamed in pain when the cold wind hit their raw edges.

"Pain. Pain is the reason not to exert oneself too strenuously," Yong Ha muttered as he worked off his boots, hissing when the sting spread over the back of his hands and up his arm. Blowing on his knuckles only made matters worse and the chirping behind his eyes increased, forming a tic above one eyebrow. Sighing, he padded over the short distance to his door, boots in hand, and slid the panel open.

Only to have his breath taken away by the spreads of votives illuminating his room.

And the sight of the man crouching over a brazier roasting a sweet potatoe pierced through with a long metal skewer.

The scant flames from the brazier tossed fingers of light onto Jae Shin's handsome face. Jae Shin's beauty struck him senseless; the purity of his heart shining through his dark eyes and the roughness of his palms at odds with the gentleness of his touch. The tightness around his eyes was still there, a sure sign of fatigue and possibly too much fretting over things he couldn't change but the man's very kissable lips were relaxed and slightly parted, enough space for Yong Ha to slip his tongue... or other parts of his body... into.

Yong Ha's sex hardened immediately, drawn taut by the thought of Jae Shin's mouth surrounding him and Yong Ha shifted, pulling at the inner seams of his pants to relieve the pressure against his crotch. Jae Shin glanced up from his roasting and smiled, a sweet, open and unhindered shy smile Yong Ha knew he was the only one in the world who'd ever seen it.

And he hoarded that smile and its memory in his heart as if it were more precious than any gold trinket he might be given.

His bedding was laid out, spread to warm up in the room's growing heat and Yong Ha glanced at the soft pillows arranged at one end, wondering if he was expected to sleep alone or if Jae Shin would share his bed. Strolling as casually as he could to Jae Shin, he laid his hands on the man's shoulders and leaned over, sniffing at the roasting vegetable.

"It smells good," He murmured, surprised to hear his stomach growling. Thinking back on what he'd eaten that day, Yong Ha imagined the handful of dried persimmon strips and soju were by now, quite gone. He frowned when Jae Shin's eyebrows knitted together, gasping when the other man snatched at one of his hands.

"What happened?" Jae Shin growled. "Who did this to you?"

In the light, his knuckles looked worse than they felt which was something extraordinary, Yong Ha thought, considering they hurt a great deal.

"I hit Kim Dae Min," Yong Ha confessed. When Jae Shin looked up at him, alarmed and shocked, he

murmured, "A couple of times. Maybe a few. At least a few. I don't remember."

Jae Shin said nothing but wrapped his strong fingers around Yong Ha's wrist and pulled the slender man down onto the bedding nearby. The potatoe forgotten and left to cool on the side, he stretched over to grab at the kettle he'd left heating over the flames and measured out a small amount into a bowl. Wetting a cloth, he dabbed at Yong Ha's knuckles, holding the man's arm firmly when Yong Ha tried to squirm away.

"That hurts." He complained, hissing when the hot water reopened his cuts.

"Learn to punch," Jae Shin murmured. "I've shown you countless times. You should know how to do it by now. Even Yoon Hee knows how to hit someone and she's a girl."

Subdued, Yong Ha sat as the man dabbed and scraped the mess he'd made of his knuckles. Only allowing a stray whimper to escape when Jae Shin touched the more rougher areas, Yong Ha murmured in pleasure when his lover's fingers stroked at the underside of his wrist to soothe him.

"So you did it then?" Jae Shin asked. His head was dropped too far down for Yong Ha to see anything other than his hair and the tip of his nose and chin but he heard the tightness in Jae Shin's voice. "Sent him off then? Because of me?"

"Because of you, he's still alive," Yong Ha growled, meeting Jae Shin's stare with a piercing glare of his own. "I know you are fond of him. I know that somewhere inside of that creature is someone who talked with you about things you care about. I know that but what he did to you...there's no excuse for it."

"I don't need you to... protect me." Jae Shin returned to the scraping and daubing, carefully working around the injured flesh.

"You do," Yong Ha whispered as he kissed the top of Jae Shin's head. "Why can't you... just let me protect you? Shield you from harm sometimes? Or from making stupid mistakes that could cost you your life? Why can't you just let someone take care of *you* for a change? Why can't you accept that someone is me?"

Jae Shin had no answer or at least none he wanted to share with Yong Ha and the slender scholar sighed heavily when the other man put the bowl and cloth aside. When Jae Shin left his side to tend to the roasted potatoe, Yong Ha leaned over and began to untie his stocking undershoes, picking at a knot he'd somehow managed to work into the strings.

"Leave that," Jae Shin grunted. "I'll get it."

"Get what?" Yong Ha asked, slightly miffed at the man's refusal to talk. It was a position he was well versed in. Jae Shin's reticence was legendary and of all the people in Jae Shin's life, Yong Ha was the most familiar with the man's quiet nature.

"Your ties." Breaking apart the sweet potatoe, he blew on the steaming purple flesh before handing both halves to Yong Ha. "Eat this while I get you undressed."

His body was willing, Yong Ha realized. Despite the aches and length of his day, his body still thrummed and spasmed at the thought of Jae Shin's mouth and fingers and whatever else the man wanted to use roaming over him. Fully alert with the idea, his sex joined in with its throbbing opinion, practically begging for the man's touch.

The clouded inability to think however, stopped Yong Ha dead in his arousal.

"I don't know..." He murmured. "The heavens know I want to..."

"I know," Jae Shin nodded, sitting cross legged at Yong Ha's feet. "But you're tired and you need rest. We'll be here together tomorrow."

"Will you be here?" Yong Ha mumbled, laying the potatoe down on a piece of paper so he could stroke the hair away from Jae Shin's face. "Tonight?"

"If you want me to."

"Oh yes, how I want you to." He grinned at the blush running over Jae Shin's cheeks and down his throat.

The man undid one stocking then the next while Yong Ha blew on the sweet root to cool it and he was about to take a bite when Jae Shin's fingers began to massage the arch of his foot. Moaning low in his throat, he practically prostrated himself with the pleasure of his tired muscles being worked loose and groaned loudly

when Jae Shin's hands moved up to massage his calves.

"Remind me to marry you," Yong Ha moaned, lying back into the blankets, the potatoe forgotten.

"Men cannot marry," Jae Shin reminded him but his fingers continued to dig out the knots in Yong Ha's muscles, stroking outward with each turn of his thumb.

"Then we'll be reborn over and over until we can, damn it," He grunted, the pain in his legs edging away to a soft numbness. "Because there's no way I'm going into the eternity of the universe without you by my side."

"I don't need a priest to tell me who..." Jae Shin's blush forced him to look down again. "Tell me who I love."

Yong Ha's expression softened and he reached out to touch the man's shoulder, running his fingers down Jae Shin's strong arms. "Did I tell you I spoke with my uncle, Park Hee Young, today?"

"No." Jae Shin cocked his head. "Is he the tall one? With glasses? Very serious?"

"The one and the same," Yong Ha agreed. "He's also my uncle Goo Min Jae's lover."

He didn't blame Jae Shin for squeezing his leg hard enough to make him yelp but Yong Ha took exception to being dragged forward across the bedding. Yanking his leg back, he failed to dislodge Jae Shin's hold on him but made the man remember he was holding a piece of Yong Ha's body and not a chunk of wood to be broken apart for kindling.

"Goo Min Jae? The stupid one?"

"He's not stupid," Yong Ha protested, secretly agreeing with Jae Shin on his uncle's lack of wits. "He's... just sweet."

"He's an aberration in your family," Jae Shin replied caustically. "A sparrow dumb enough to fly into a lake because it reflects the sky compared to the cunning, predatory peacocks that live behind those walls."

"He is very sweet," Yong Ha asserted. "Very."

"Isn't Park Hee Young married to your... third aunt?" Jae Shin sniffed suspiciously.

"Yes."

"Who told you this?" The suspicion grew and Yong Ha wondered if Jae Shin's eyebrows were going stick together considering how deep he was frowning.

"Park Hee Young," He replied. "He told me this. My grandmother sent me to talk to him about... us."

"You told your..." Jae Shin stood suddenly, hissing with his displeasure. Raking his hands through his hair, he caught his fingers on a knot near his ear, tugging on the snarl until it came loose. "You..."

"She knew I'd fallen in love with you before I did," Yong Ha dismissed Jae Shin's concern with a wave of his hand. "Who do you think told me?"

"I..." Shaking his head, he plopped to sit down on the bedding next to Yong Ha. "Your family...it is insane."

"My family is... well, odd," Yong Ha agreed. "But they...work together nicely. Even when they're fighting with one another, they come together. Like they...did for me today."

"Today," Jae Shin murmured softly. "I don't agree with what you did today."

"I know," He said, leaning his head onto Jae Shin's firm shoulder. "But I'm glad you let me do it. I know he is ... you think he is your friend. I know that. But I can't have him here. Not after what he's done. Not after what... you've been through. Inside, I regret having to... use my family's favours and name but I'm willing to do so... to protect you."

"Don't do it again," Jae Shin growled at him. "It makes you less of a man. Inside. It makes you a bully and you're not someone who abuses people, Yeon Kkoc."

"If you keep calling me that, I won't be able to get my family to stop." Shoving Jae Shin down onto his back, Yong Ha straddled the man's thighs, placing his hands on either side of Jae Shin's head to stare down at him. Jae Shin gave him no resistance, grinning slightly at Yong Ha's peeved expression. "Let me tell you what my uncle said... about us."

"Us?" Jae Shin's brow furrowed again. "We... just..."

"We've been dancing around one another for ten years now. Most men have courted, married, had children and moved on to mistresses by the time you and I had our first kiss. I think I can say there is an us."

"Us then," He murmured, biting his lower lip as Yong Ha settled down to sit on his legs. "Don't move too far up or I'll... have ...problems."

"I like your problems," Yong Ha laughed and resisted the temptation to squirm over Jae Shin's crotch. "I'll behave. I've already promised you I'm too tired. I don't know how you go about doing all this exercise and manage not to sleep most of the day. I used to envy your ability to fall asleep anywhere but now I know it's only because you're too exhausted to find someplace soft."

"You were saying about your uncle?" Jae Shin prodded.

"And grumpy. I'm certain it makes you grumpy." Yong Ha yelped, rubbing his thigh where Jae Shin pinched it. "I was telling you that my uncle... uncles are lovers."

"The bookworm and the stupid one? I don't believe it." The scholar's hand drifted over the spot he'd twisted on Yong Ha's thigh, caressing it to make the sting go away. "Park Hee Young is married! To the sparrow's sister."

"It was an arranged marriage." He nodded when Jae Shin grunted. "My aunt did not want to leave her family and well my uncle..."

"The sparrow or the bookworm?"

"The... stop that... Park Hee Young... he was in love with my uncle. Well, they were in love ... still are in love with each other." He corrected himself. "So my grandmother arranged for their marriage."

"By moving into the Goo menagerie?" It was Jae Shin's turn to wince when Yong Ha's clever fingers found his nipple through his shirt and tweaked it. "Ouch."

"Grandmother said a few of my uncles and aunts have these kinds of arrangements. Most live... at the estate but others live in the city."

"How many is a few?"

"Eight." Yong Ha held up his hand, spreading his fingers out. "Five at the estate. Park Hee Young moved to the compound. It's why some of the men move there but the others share estates with their lovers... and their wives."

The enormity of what Yong Ha was telling him finally sunk in and Jae Shin gasped at the implications. He'd not thought further than the university walls, not daring to trust his emotions if he contemplated life outside in society... a society that would forbid his love to Yong Ha.

"You think we should... do that? Arrange things like that?" He gaped.

"Agi," Yong Ha started gently, sliding over Jae Shin's chest to capture the man's mouth in a simple, sweet kiss. "I'm not saying that we do this tomorrow. Or even the day after. What I am saying is that my family is willing to... help me...to help me find a way to love you without endangering us. That we've done this before and no one knows. No one cares. That we protect our own and that you, my Geol Oh, are considered one of our own; even by the dragon of all gisaeng, my grandmother."

"We would have to bring in women..." His hiccup frustrated him and Jae Shin growled, biting lightly at Yong Ha's lips as the man kissed him again. "I don't know..."

"You will have to," Yong Ha said, saddened by the trembling apprehension starting to grow in Jae Shin's body. "You're the only son your father has. You'll need a son to carry your line on. You know that."

"I know," Jae Shin murmured. The weight of his filial duty still weighed heavily on him, a frustration eating away at his nerves. Long estranged from his father, they never seemed to find common ground, especially in the days following his brother's death.

"I can help you," Yong Ha declared, rubbing his nose on Jae Shin's. "I can find us a pair of petal women — women who love one another and we shall hide our true loves from the world! It's the perfect solution."

"And you know these kinds of women?" Jae Shin chuckled, a deep throaty sound that made Yong Ha

seriously reconsider how tired he was.

“Of course,” Yong Ha whispered into his lover’s mouth, working his fingers into Jae Shin’s long hair to hold him still as he deepened his affection into a sensual kiss. When he broke free, it was only to give Jae Shin time to breathe, the man’s heart beat a quick staccato under Yong Ha’s body. “I know exactly where these women are... and we Goo men, we have a long standing tradition of marrying beautiful gisaeng women but this one... here... this Goo Yong Ha... is only interested in one thing... one person right now. And that is his Geol Oh.”

nineteen

Jae Shin woke to the sounds of the pages stomping up and down the walkway, their high pitched voices querulous and demanding the scholars' attention. About ready to throw off his blankets and beat the little demons to death, what they were saying finally sunk through his fuzzy, sleep-clouded head.

Classes were cancelled until further notice. Only one dining hall will remain open, serving hot soups and teas. Scholars may return home if they wish. Message will be sent to notify students when classes resume.

The singsong warbling of the pages echoed up and down the open walkways, fading in and out as they worked their way through the dormitories. Silently cursing the pages for waking him up, he shifted to turn over onto his stomach when he realized he couldn't move.

Pinned down in place by the long slender man sprawled out on top of him.

At some point in the night, they'd fallen asleep, worn out from the emotional battles they'd fought, although Yong Ha was depleted physically as well. Staring down at the top of his friend's head, Jae Shin frowned at the tight top knot of Yong Ha's hair, wondering how the man stood getting his face pulled up by his eyebrows every day.

"It's stupid," Jae Shin murmured. "How do you sleep like that? It must pinch your dreams in."

He found the end of Yong Ha's hair tie, undoing the binding carefully so as not to wake the man up. Working his fingers through Yong Ha's hair, he rubbed a few strands between his fingertips, marveling at the fine texture. One caught on a snag in his thumb's cuticle, weaving around Jae Shin's thumb.

"Even your hair is clingy," Jae Shin teased the sleeping man. "You just can't seem to help it."

Yong Ha moved, slithering around Jae Shin's body. His knees edged into Jae Shin's thighs and for a moment, the scholar wondered if he'd have to protect himself from injury but the lanky man stopped moving before he did any damage. With his cheek turned and resting on Jae Shin's chest, Yong Ha murmured in his sleep, nuzzling into his lover's warmth as a bite of chill from outside seeped in.

Straining slightly, Jae Shin barely was able to reach the fire prod and carefully jabbed at the embers he'd banked in the brazier. Using the hook edge of the prod, he knocked in the pressed together wood blocks he'd placed on the upper rail for the morning, wincing slightly when a trail of sparks swirled into the air before dissipating into an ashen dust. Watching the flames catch and thankful for the brick work protecting the brazier from catching anything on fire, Jae Shin slid the prod back into place and tugged the blankets up around Yong Ha's slender shoulders.

"It's cold," Yong Ha mumbled.

The flirtatious nature of his voice was missing, replaced by the lower pitch Jae Shin knew so well. Hiding most of his anxieties and fears behind a playful mask, Yong Ha often dropped it when alone with his best friend, especially in the dim light of a wintery, iced in morning and while cuddled up against Jae Shin's chest. Stroking his friend's hair, Jae Shin murmured comforting words, urging the man to sleep.

"Classes," Yong Ha replied though half-asleep. He made no move to get off of Jae Shin and from what Jae Shin could see, hadn't even opened his eyes but the protest was a serious warning the man would eventually rise up out of bed.

"Cancelled," Jae Shin whispered, easing his hand down Yong Ha's neck and caressing the soft skin there. His fingers tangled in the man's fine hair and he smiled when Yong Ha's arms tightened around him. "The

pages came through the walkways screaming a while ago. I'm surprised they didn't wake you."

"Hurt." Yong Ha's small yelp of pain when he moved his arm alarmed Jae Shin. "Oh heavens take me, I hurt. *Why* did I do so much? *Why* didn't I just send some of my grandmother's men to pull you off of the room? Or to beat up Dae Min? *Why* did I think I needed to do it myself?"

A man of few words, Jae Shin said nothing. Sliding out from under Yong Ha, he slowly eased the man into the bedding, gathering up the blankets to form a warm nest but leaving Yong Ha exposed. His fingers shook slightly as he touched the ties of Yong Ha's under-ropes, his eyes never leaving Yong Ha's face. The tremble in his hands echoed the uncertainty in his burnished brown gaze and he fingered the end of one tie, holding his breath as he bit his upper lip and waited for Yong Ha to answer his unspoken question.

The slow murmur on Yong Ha's lips and the gentle nod of his head released Jae Shin from the amber he'd trapped himself in.

They kissed once, a tentative touch of lips. Yong Ha lay still, wanting desperately to strip Jae Shin bare and taste every inch of his body but he knew his Geol Oh. The man needed to explore; re-learn his friend's body in ways he'd not expected he'd ever have the chance to do so before. When Jae Shin's mouth descended on his again, Yong Ha sighed and parted his lips, inviting Jae Shin in.

Their clothes whispered from their bodies, soft cotton garments joining the bedding to feather the nest around them. Sitting up, they remained tangled in on one another, arms wrapped around shoulders and hips, legs hooked into one another until they sat hard against the other's sex. Tugging at the leather thong holding Jae Shin's top knot, Yong Ha spread a line of kisses from Jae Shin's ear down to the crook of his neck, laving at the healing mark he'd placed there.

Then Jae Shin's fingers splayed over the small of his back and Yong Ha went still, breathless at the intimate touch.

Holding Yong Ha close to him, Jae Shin looked over his lover's shoulder, entranced by the long curve of his back and the milky expanse of his pale skin. Spreading out his hand, he smiled at the contrast of their tones, his darker gold on Yong Ha's porcelain. He skimmed over the man's ribs, laughing softly as Yong Ha squirmed in his lap then moaning with need when the man's finger brushed his already dampened sex.

"I need this..." Yong Ha whispered wicked and hot into Jae Shin's ear. "I need this inside of me. I need *you* inside of me."

"I..." He wanted to say he wasn't ready but his body betrayed him. Lightly kissing Yong Ha's shoulder, Jae Shin closed his eyes and searched the *why* of his hesitation, startled from his thoughts when Yong Ha's hands rubbed at his shoulder blades.

"Love me, my Jae Shin," Yong Ha murmured. "Trust me to stay with you. Trust me that I'll always be by your side. As I always have been... so I always will be."

The icy fear clenching Jae Shin's heart shattered under the weight of Yong Ha's words. Sharpened by Yong Ha's conviction, Jae Shin's emotions swept through his thoughts, slicing away at the bonds that kept his heart from beating freely.

I've lost so much... He realized. *From my brother... my dearly loved hyung... to a father who deserved more than my scorn. Thinking I loved Daemul only because she... broke through me, like Yong Ha did so long ago. I thought I loved her because it was normal to love a woman when really, all I was doing was mirroring the love I had for Yong Ha. My Yong Ha.*

Leaning back, Jae Shin cupped Yong Ha's face and stared into the man's gentle, loving gaze. A curious frown marked a slight groove between his eyebrows, more perplexed by being examined by the man who knew his face probably better than he knew his own but Yong Ha said nothing, letting Jae Shin's thumb rub over his mouth before nipping at it lightly then kissing it better.

"I love you, Goo Yong Ha," Jae Shin whispered. "I have *always* loved just you."

Yong Ha's vision shimmered, watered by the tears threatening to overwhelm him and he blinked, trying to wish them away. One fell, then another, landing on the curve of Jae Shin's hand. Leaning in, the man kissed

them off, returning to savour Yong Ha's mouth with the man's joy on his tongue.

"Love me then, my Jae Shin. Please." Oils meant to ease their loving emerged from under one of the cushions and Yong Ha's eyebrows rose with surprised pleasure. Taking the bottle from Jae Shin's fingers, he stoked another kiss to full life, taking his time with Jae Shin's beautiful mouth.

"Let me," Jae Shin murmured, holding his hand out to Yong Ha. "Help me. Show me...how."

Opened, the oil's sweet almond scent warmed the air and Yong Ha cupped the back of Jae Shin's hand, slowly coating the man's fingers with oil. Spreading the slick lubricant over his lover's hand, he leaned back into the pillows, gently guiding Jae Shin down with him.

They lay on their sides, facing one another and Yong Ha stretched, reaching down to grip their sexes in his hand. Jae Shin leaned in, excited by the man's touch and encouraged by Yong Ha's soft murmuring sounds, ran his fingers down the sleek crevice between Yong Ha's cheeks, lightly touching at his hidden, tight entrance. Their kisses grew languid, slow exploratory unhurried caresses of tongue and lips until the passion between them grew to a peak and Jae Shin was bold enough to slid the tip of his finger into his lover's core.

His mouth was on Yong Ha's lips when the man gasped and cried out his lover's name in a burst of uncontrollable pleasure.

"I want you to be everything that's you, deep at the centre of your being," Jae Shin quoted, moving his kisses down Yong Ha's throat and onto his shoulder. "And I want to be there as well... at your centre...in your being."

A brief space broke between them and he delved down, pressing further into Yong Ha's body as he wrapped his lips around a peaking nipple. Laving the nub to a tight tip, he bit at it, working it back and forth between his teeth. Yong Ha cried out, clenching his lover's head to his chest and lifted his knees up, opening himself up for Jae Shin's intruding touch.

"More," Yong Ha begged. "Another, please. Make me ready for you. Make me ready for this part of you."

He cupped Jae Shin's heavy sex, its breadth nearly too wide for Yong Ha's fingers to close over. The ridge beneath Jae Shin's shaft was thick and throbbed in Yong Ha's hand, pulsing with the need to be buried deep inside of the slender man.

Yong Ha wondered if he'd ever wanted something...someone... as much as he wanted Jae Shin.

Never, His mind whispered. *From the first day you saw him until the day when you close your eyes for the last time, you will never know a desire as pure and intoxicating as your Jae Shin.*

The velvety feel of Yong Ha's heat around his finger made Jae Shin's sex ache and the remembered pleasure of the man's mouth on him only fueled his desire. Working another finger past the tight pout of Yong Ha's body, he bit his lip in worry at the slightly pained expression on Yong Ha's face. Nearly withdrawing, he was stopped when Yong Ha frantically grabbed his arm.

"No, please," He mewled, sliding his hips back to impale himself on Jae Shin's fingers. "It's good. It feels so good to have you there."

"Are you sure?" Jae Shin's instincts told him to draw back but the grip on his arm and around his sex said otherwise. Yong Ha made long stroking touches along his shaft and Jae Shin felt the burn begin in his sac, threatening to spill over into Yong Ha's grasp before he could even tempt himself with the hot touch of Yong Ha's inner heat.

Yong Ha's fevered kiss spurned him on and Jae Shin stroked and played with his lover, easing deep inside of him until he felt the brush of Yong Ha's sweet spot on his finger tip. The effect on the other man was electrifying and Jae Shin was slightly worried he'd hurt Yong Ha then the man clenched his hands on Jae Shin's shoulders and mewled for more.

The slick of oil around his hand sluiced at Yong Ha's core and Jae Shin cuddled the man closer, fascinated by the sight of his fingers working Yong Ha open. His cock responded as well, a drop of pearl liquid forming at the slit and a deep throbbing want spreading through the shaft.

"You're so close." Yong Ha worked the seed drop over Jae Shin's head before bringing the taste of his lover

up to his mouth. The salty bitter taste was pure Jae Shin, pleasant and tangy as it filled his mouth and Yong Ha suddenly needed the man to be pressed deep inside of him, a begging want for the hot thrust of Jae Shin's body against his growing with each passing stroke of the man's fingers.

The sensations along his shaft were building, nearly painful with each stroke of Yong Ha's skillful hand and he bit the inside of his cheek, hoping to stave off his release. The man's hand was glossy with almond-scented oil and he worked around Jae Shin's shaft until his sex glistened in the dim light.

"I'm... too big," Jae Shin fretted. "How..."

"It fits, *agi*," Yong Ha chuckled, sliding free of Jae Shin's fingers and reaching for the oil once more. "Let me show you."

They were clumsy, familiar with each others' bodies but without the intimacy of touch their love needed. A few bits of laughter and Yong Ha's consternation when he realized he'd gotten into a good position only to discover the oil vial poking him in the back.

Jae Shin reached under his lover to retrieve it and stopped suddenly, his arm around Yong Ha's torso and the press of his stomach trapping the man's length between them. The moisture gathering at Yong Ha's head provided enough friction for their bodies to roll sensations through the shaft. Jae Shin pulled his lover's leg to rest up on his hip and the slender man moaned loudly, writhing slightly as Jae Shin's abdomen rubbed at his turgid sex.

"Go slow," Yong Ha murmured, reaching between them to capture Jae Shin's cock in his hand. Guiding it to the edge of his entrance, he kissed the man's shoulder, urging him in.

Closing his fingers over Yong Ha's, Jae Shin pressed at the resistant ring. Resting most of his weight on his knees, he slowly eased forward, feeling the tight muscles of Yong Ha's entrance push back against him. Breathing hard, he glanced up at Yong Ha, unsure and fearful he would tear his lover apart but Yong Ha smiled and stroked Jae Shin's temple, murmuring for the man to go forward.

The first bit of Jae Shin's mushroom-shaped head made Yong Ha gasp and he inhaled sharply, riding the shockwaves of discomfort rolling over him. His startled noises still Jae Shin's movements and the scholar patted at his lover's shoulder.

"Don't stop, Geol Oh," Yong Ha whispered. "The hardest part is the first push. After that, it gets better. So much better."

"I don't want to hurt you..."

"It will only hurt me if you pull away," He replied, cupping Jae Shin's jaw, mimicking the adhesive bond they'd once shared. The touch comforted the alarm in Jae Shin's eyes and his shoulders released their tension, relaxing the rigidity of Jae Shin's hips. "Get the tip in then give me some time. I need to... feel you in me. Just for a moment and then, Heavens I want ride your body until I can't take it any more."

Jae Shin rocked his hips slowly and Yong Ha's body opened, taking in the velvet head. His breath stolen from the heat of Yong Ha's tight body, Jae Shin forced himself to remain still. Every instinct in him shouted for more, to feel the slide of Yong Ha around him until he spilled everything he had into the tight sheath but the quivering almost-pained look on Yong Ha's face stopped him. The man's hard sex trapped between them had softened a bit and Jae Shin frowned, fretful at the response.

"Give me a bit, lover," Yong Ha teased, his panting breaths making his chest heave with the effort of taking in Jae Shin's thick sex. He shifted and relaxed, opening up his body more with a push of his muscles. His body responded to his needs, seemingly sucking in more of Jae Shin's sex with each breath Yong Ha took. "Now, baby. Fill me. Now."

Their clumsiness gone, the men moved, falling into a rhythm as natural to them as breathing. Jae Shin's feral nature took over, plunging his sex deep into Yong Ha and finding the spot that drove his lover crazy with nearly each stroke. His strong will tempered the rushing need for his own pleasure and he slowed his movements, drawing out each plunging stroke until Yong Ha nearly screamed in frustration. Resting his weight on his hands, he covered Yong Ha's body, hooking the man's legs over his shoulders and leaned in to

press his lips over his lover's gasping mouth.

He wanted to feel Yong Ha release — wanted to capture the screaming cries of the man's pleasure into his mouth. Jae Shin rode the pleasure working through his body, allowing the sensation of Yong Ha around him to intoxicate his mind. The sound of their bodies meeting one another filled him as much as he filled Yong Ha and Jae Shin wished he could make the moment last forever; securing them a place in a heaven outside of prying eyes and a wintery gale.

Despite his innocence, he knew when Yong Ha was close. The man's body tightened around him, spiraling sensations closing over his shaft and then the push of Yong Ha's sac into his was a welcome touch. Riding along the man's trapped sex, Jae Shin lowered himself further, kissing Yong Ha soundly as he reached between them and rubbed at the man's leaking head.

He swallowed Yong Ha's scream of pleasure as ropey strands spilled from his sex, covering Jae Shin's fingers and coating their sweat-glistened stomachs. Jae Shin's vision erupted with flashes of white light and the brittle, sharp feeling of his orgasm hit, shattering his senses as if they were fragile glass trying to hold back a hurricane.

The deep heat of his body spilled into his lover and he thrust harder, needing to reach deep into Yong Ha's core and leave his mark as close to his lover's heart as possible. Pounding at the man's entrance, he scooped Yong Ha up, holding his shivering, spent lover against his chest as he found his passion. Too enraptured in the pleasures of Jae Shin's sex moving against his nerves, Yong Ha cried out again, biting down into the meat of the man's shoulder as another climax crested over him.

Jae Shin filled him. The release of hot liquid poured into Yong Ha's waiting core, reaching in deep until he was certain he could taste the man in his throat. They continued to rock, slowly ebbing back into the languid, boneless state of their spent bodies. When the press of Jae Shin against his centre drew away, Yong Ha mewled in a faint protest but the ache in his hips and the slightly tender push of his entrance was grateful for the release.

He struggled to catch his breath, rolling over onto his side to nuzzle into the blankets as Jae Shin shakily got to his feet. Too tired to reproach the man for leaving him, he murmured thankfully when Jae Shin returned with a warm, dampened cloth and lay still as his lover took care of him.

A few moments of emptiness surrounded him then Jae Shin was back, his hands chilled from the water but his mouth was hot with kisses, shattering Yong Ha's resolve not to move when their lips touched and the slender scholar found himself torn between sleep and wanting more.

"I am glad you decided to keep me," Jae Shin murmured. "Especially after your father told you to cast me aside."

"My father doesn't know what pleasure and love are," Yong Ha hissed and nuzzled back against Jae Shin's stomach, resting his shoulder blades against the man's strong chest. "You... are too beautiful and rare of a treasure to be tossed aside — and I am a connoisseur of such things."

Jae Shin reached behind him, undoing one of the heavy duvets from the nest he'd made and covered them. Wrapping his arms around his slender lover, he brushed his cheek against the soft dark hair falling down over Yong Ha's brow. Lulled by the release of his body and the sounds of the storm outside, Jae Shin let himself drift off, coming back around when Yong Ha kissed his arm and spoke.

"Did you mean what you said?" The scholar was tentative, as if unsure of Jae Shin's reply.

"What did I say?"

"That you..." Yong Ha was glad he couldn't see Jae Shin's face and he buried himself into the edge of the blankets, holding his heart as tightly as he could in case it shattered under the deathblow of Jae Shin's answer. "When you said you loved me."

"I do love you," Jae Shin kissed the back of his lover's neck, tickling the fine hair that grew there with a brush of his lips. "Why would I say something I don't mean?"

"I love you too," Yong Ha whispered, unable to fully believe the joy blooming inside of him. "Very much."

“Good,” Jae Shin muttered. “But one thing... one thing between us you should know...”

“What is that?” Yong Ha twisted slightly, edging his shoulder so he could see Jae Shin’s face.

“This...love between us,” Cupping his lover’s chin, Jae Shin brushed a soft kiss onto Yong Ha’s mouth but the firmness of his resolve gleamed in his dark eyes and the rough rasp of his voice offered no room for argument. Demanding and firm, he held Yong Ha’s face in his strong hand, commanding Yong Ha’s attention.

“No one else will ever touch you like this. No other man will *ever* have the pleasure of your body,” Jae Shin rumbled, his fierce love for Yong Ha shining through in full passion on his face. “I will be the only one to love you this way. The only one to touch you like this. Am I understood?”

Yong Ha nodded as best he could, captured in the predatory gaze of his lover’s need. Swallowing, he blushed and kissed the rise of Jae Shin’s palm, murmuring his assent when the man’s mouth came down to claim him.

“And I will make this promise to you, Goo Yong Ha,” Jae Shin murmured, keeping his hold on Yong Ha’s jaw as he pressed a kiss at the corner of the man’s wide mouth. “No other man will love me that way either. When you are ready. When you want me that way. Only you.”

twenty

Winter refused to give up its prey. Holding Sungkyunkwan in its icy talons, it squeezed hard, driving the remaining scholars deeper into their lairs. Meals were hastily prepared hot dishes, cooked in heavy stone or iron pots and carried back to their rooms. Buried in their own chambers, the wait staff emerged only to pick up crockery left out on the walkways, moving as a quick, shuffling fur-enrobed horde.

Ensnared behind closed doors and stockpiling food and alcohol with a few well-placed bribes to various pages and staff, the men spent their time hidden away exploring one another, alternating their laughter and low murmuring conversations with long bouts of slow love-making. Twice during the snowstorm, Jae Shin ventured out to raid Yong Ha's stores of oils, the first time returning with a single bottle only to be met with a mocking reproach by his lover.

His second raid proved to be more to Yong Ha's approval and amusement. A hearty eye-watering laughter greeted him when Jae Shin slung a clinking satchel of bottles and vials onto the bedding, the bag packed nearly to full with every manner of lotion, potion or oil Yong Ha had stashed in his room.

An early dinner of hot stone rice warmed their bellies and the men lay next to one another, their fingers trailing over long expanses of bare skin. Melted snow provided them enough water to bathe in and the stores for the inset brazier was stocked with dry wood, enough to last them a week if they hadn't found other ways to warm themselves.

"Did you... mean it when you said you'd let me..." Yong Ha turned over onto his side, his nude form fitting into the curves of Jae Shin's body. The other man lay on his back, his stomach clenching in response to Yong Ha's long fingers tracing the muscled lines on his abdomen. He nearly jerked away when Yong Ha stuck the tip of one finger into his belly button and wiggled it, making Jae Shin squirm from being tickled.

"Stop that."

"Tickling you?"

"That..." Jae Shin growled, grabbing his lover's hand. "And asking me if I mean something. You know me by now. Why do you keep asking things like that?"

"Maybe because I can't believe that... you and I are finally like this," Yong Ha whispered as he rested the point of his chin on Jae Shin's chest. "That we're together like this."

"We are." He grunted and pushed at the man's cheek with the flat of his hand. "Stop being stupid about it. We just...are."

"Such a simple life you lead," Yong Ha sighed, returning to his examination of his lover's abdomen with a quick glance at the heft of his sex shadowing the space between the man's thighs. "Everything is so easy for you. Once a decision is made, you move forward onto the next problem, never questioning your choice."

"You aren't a choice," Jae Shin muttered. "You're more like a fate...or a destiny. A very loud, annoying, twirling-about destiny."

"Geol Oh's destiny," He murmured, turning the phrase over on his tongue. "I like that."

"Good." The man ruffled Yong Ha's hair then glared the scholar when Yong Ha widened his eyes and batted his lashes at him. "What now?"

"You never answered me."

"You never asked the damned question."

"No?" Yong Ha cocked his head, thinking back. "I guess not. I wanted to know if you were... interested... in letting me...have you."

"Letting you have me?" Jae Shin rumbled. "Do you want..."

"I don't want you to feel pressured to give me something you're not ready to give me," Yong Ha said.

The slight startle in Jae Shin's widened eyes gave Yong Ha pause. Only a few days experience did not a trusting Jae Shin make and although the man was relaxing about their intimacy, Yong Ha wondered if he'd pressed his lover too soon.

"But you're willing to give it to me?" Jae Shin propped his head up with his arm, staring down into his lover's face. "That's not fair, is it?"

"Sex...love between us... doesn't have to be fair, just good," Yong Ha answered baldly, shrugging off Jae Shin's hissing condemnation. "It's true. Besides, I don't want to scare you into doing something you don't want to do just because you feel like you need to."

After staring at the ceiling for a few moments, Jae Shin asked, "Do you like it?"

He sounded so earnest and young, clearly working around to a certain point that he wasn't ready to get to. Yong Ha hid his smile with a quick duck of his head. He didn't have the eloquence Jae Shin did when the man put his mind — and heart — to it but describing the pure ecstasy of having his lover take him deserved more than what he could think up.

"Oh, yes," Yong Ha laughed. "It feels like I'm drinking from the stars. Having you inside of me is... it takes me into the heavens, my Geol Oh."

He grunted and played with Yong Ha's hair, listening to the storm wail outside. His cock began to fill, urged by the fingers trailing over his hips and tangling into the sparse hair below his belly button. Clearing his throat, he shifted a bit on the blankets. Yong Ha noticed and skimmed his fingers over the hardening shaft, ranking it gently with light furrows of his short nails.

"Does it hurt?" Jae Shin instantly flushed, ashamed he'd mentioned it. Never one to embrace pain or even physical exertion, Yong Ha seemed perfectly capable of taking him in and after hearing himself out loud, he cursed at his foolishness. "That was.. cowardly of me."

"No, my dear Jae Shin," Yong Ha murmured. "Remember when I asked you to realize you were human. Now is one of those times. Asking if it hurts is...refreshingly normal. It's very hard sometimes being your friend. Between you and Lee Sun Joon, I sometimes have to think up especially naughty things to balance out the universe. It really is quite a chore."

"There are times when I could beat you." Flattening his lips, Jae Shin grunted again. "Does it hurt?"

"It's uncomfortable at first," He admitted slowly. "But we take our time. That helps...in more ways than one."

"Do you want to?" His eyes were hooded, unreadable in the scant light but Yong Ha caught the small dab of Jae Shin's tongue on his upper lip, entranced by the dampness the man left behind. He shifted, suddenly uncomfortable at the frank appreciation on Yong Ha's face. "Take our time..."

"If that is a Yes to my question then my answer is," Yong Ha whispered, sliding up to kiss at the wet spot Jae Shin left on his own lip. "Oh yes."

Their bodies, fragrant from their evening bath, shimmered from the friction of their moving hands. Yong Ha rolled over onto Jae Shin, straddling the man's legs. Cupping his lover's face, he kissed the edges of Jae Shin's full mouth, moaning thankfully when the man parted his lips and slid his tongue into Yong Ha's mouth. They played with one another, rough velvet against the slick satin of their lips and Yong Ha growled at the press of Jae Shin's sex prodding his leg.

"Are you sure?" He murmured, stroking his thumbs over Jae Shin's jaw. "Because I can tell you, there's nowhere else I'd rather right now be than inside of you but I don't want to..."

"I'm sure," Jae Shin huffed, puffing out his cheeks for a moment. "I want to at least... try it. I enjoy the...other."

"I will do my best," Yong Ha said, solemn despite the heated, searing look he gave his lover. Jae Shin opened his mouth to skewer the other man with a barb but stopped when Yong Ha reached out and put his fingers over Jae Shin's parted lips. "I am serious, my Geol Oh. I want to do this so *you* have the pleasure of it. You've been taking care of me these past few days. It's my turn to take care of you."

"Yong Ha-ah," Jae Shin whispered into his lover's hand, kissing the gentle touch of fingers on his mouth. "You always take care of me."

"Then lie there," He teased. "And let me do my duty as your love."

The man's body was now familiar to Yong Ha but still as intoxicating as the first time he'd taken a sip of Jae Shin's flesh. The lines of scars on his lover's stomach and side still made him cringe as did the newest scar across his chest. He kissed it, reverent and thankful to whichever spirit heard his prayers the night he'd feverishly toiled to keep Jae Shin alive. The man bore the scars silently but Yong Ha only felt pride in his lover's healed over wounds. They were a testament to his passionate beliefs and even when Yong Ha feared he would lose Jae Shin to his crusade, in the depths of his soul, he knew he wouldn't have Jae Shin be anything other than true to his heart.

There were other marks on the man's body, small sun kisses dappled the round of his shoulders and Yong Ha kissed the scatter of constellations, smiling at the amber stars he could find on his lover. A birthmark lay hidden on the inside of Jae Shin's thigh, a tiny crescent moon a few shades darker than Jae Shin's golden skin. There, in the secret place, Jae Shin tasted of anise and a night wind, a delicate tea of flavours Yong Ha found himself addicted to soon after he'd discovered it.

And as he'd done that first night — that not so long ago fantastical night — Yong Ha slipped his lover's sex into his mouth and swallowed him down.

Jae Shin's hands fisted Yong Ha's hair, holding the man as an anchor to the world when the pleasure hit him. It frothed up around him, a demanding wave he couldn't control — couldn't stand against — and one he eagerly sought to drown in. Yong Ha's mouth suckled and toyed with him, the man's skilful tongue delivering curls of bliss. Jae Shin's mind wandered, unable to focus on anything longer than a moment and the delicious feel of his lover's hands on his hips.

They'd run out of almond oil two days before and Yong Ha discovered among the many lotions Jae Shin liberated from his stores, a container of lychee scented unguent. The paste grew slick in his warm hands and the delicate sweetness of sugar on his lover's skin drove Yong Ha insane. Dipping his fingers into the open container, he scooped out some of the paste, cupping his fingers in to warm the balm.

Returning his attention to Jae Shin's sex, Yong Ha laved around the head with the tip of his tongue and gripped its base tightly. Holding the man's shaft steady, he worked its heft down his throat, breathing in carefully to keep himself from choking. The murmurs from Jae Shin's parted lips soothed Yong Ha's worries that the man would be too keyed up to go further but when Jae Shin began to writhe under Yong Ha's body, he knew it was time to introduce his lover to a new kind of ecstasy.

The first touch of Yong Ha's finger tip at his entrance startled Jae Shin and he instinctively pulled back, finding himself held firmly in place by the weight of his lover on his side and hips. Coaxed by Yong Ha's soft, reassuring murmurs, he lifted his knees and splayed his legs apart, calming the flutter of nerves working a tingling line of apprehension up his stomach.

"Relax, Geol Oh," Yong Ha murmured, licking along the thick vein on Jae Shin's sex. He slid his hand up Jae Shin's torso, rubbing at the man's belly to soothe him. Jae Shin quivered under his touch, as powerful and beautiful as his namesake and Yong Ha sighed, wondering what he'd done to receive such a gift. A tint of salty bitters hit his tongue and he swallowed it, taking in the excitement of Jae Shin's body.

His lover's entrance resisted him and Yong Ha stroked and coaxed at the ring, suckling at the man's head until Jae Shin relaxed enough for him to slide the tip of his finger in. The man's mewling needy response was encouraging and Yong Ha ran the tip around the muscled ring, easing in further only when it seemed Jae Shin was ready. His lover's hands were no longer tangled in his hair, moved onto gripping the coverlets as he let

himself fall into the intensity of Yong Ha's loving.

The press of Yong Ha against his core was odd at first then something in Jae Shin broke apart and his body welcomed the intrusion. Barely aware of anything beyond the realm of his own skin, Jae Shin gave a brief fleeting thought to giving Yong Ha his own pleasure but the slender man pushed him back into the bedding when he reached out for him. Trapped in the swirling tangle of his desire, Jae Shin let go his tightly held control and handed his body over to Yong Ha, willing to ride out any storm his lover visited upon him.

The full easing of Yong Ha's finger into him went slowly, nearly maddeningly slow for Jae Shin after the first push. His hips canted up, reaching up to greet the measured thrusts. Another finger joined the first and Jae Shin gasped, panting at the widening of his entrance. The almost-pain was a whisper of something ashen on the wind, blown away before he could grasp at it. Yong Ha's long fingers delved into his recesses, stroking along the slick, velvety passage as if trying to reach the embers starting to burn in Jae Shin's insides.

Then Yong Ha touched something buried in him and Jae Shin lost what little grip he had on the world around him.

When he was very young, Jae Shin hid from a thunderstorm under an enormous tree at their family's country home. Protected from the pounding rain, he'd laughed as his brother, Young Shin, searched frantically for him, calling out for Jae Shin to come back into the house. A few seconds later, he opened his eyes to find his sobbing brother kneeling over him, shaking his shoulders to wake him up.

He remembered a ripened tingling filling his tiny body and as Jae Shin sat up, the smell of crackling fireworks in the air. The tree lay split apart, its corpse smoking as its leaves smoldered in the pouring rain and Young Shin's tears falling on his face as his brother hugged him tightly. Jae Shin had never felt so alive and secure as that moment, filled with lightening and held by someone who loved him.

Until that moment Yong Ha touched that bit of starlight inside of him and his universe unfurled to consume him.

The fleeting bursts of intense pleasure continued, erratic tremendous surges that begged for satiation that never seemed to come. He thrust harder, riding Yong Ha's fingers, lost in the feeling of his lover's mouth and hands until he crested close to the edge of a heart-pounding climax.

Only to gasp at the emptiness inside of him when Yong Ha withdrew.

"Need you," Yong Ha whispered, sliding his arm under Jae Shin's back. The man panted, rising up onto his knees only with Yong Ha's assistance. The scholar kissed his lover, sharing the taste of Jae Shin's sweetness with him and smiled, when he saw the confusion on Jae Shin's face. "Turn around. Let me make this good for you."

He guided Jae Shin into place, kissing down the length of the man's spine. There was an overwhelming urge to take the man on his back, facing his lover as he pounded into him but for their first time together, Yong Ha wanted the loving to be gentler, easing the scholar into his pleasure.

Resting on his shins, Jae Shin leaned slightly forward, his hand drifting down to stroke at his rigid sex. The lingering buzz of Yong Ha's explorations was beginning to subside when his lover pressed one hand on his shoulder and touched the tip of his long sex to the entrance of Jae Shin's body. The memory of Yong Ha's touch reignited the want inside of Jae Shin and he moaned, feeling the rush of his climax boiling in his sac. Urged to spread his legs further apart with a nudge of Yong Ha's hand, he rested his free hand onto the bedding, distributing his weight forward.

The first push was difficult and Jae Shin let his head drop, focusing only on Yong Ha's soothing words and the man's hand as he rubbed long comforting circles on the space between Jae Shin's shoulder blades. Although thinner in girth than Jae Shin, Yong Ha still knew he'd have to be careful so he eased further in, reapplying another swath of balm around his lover's entrance.

Another rock of his hips and Yong slid in, seating his head into Jae Shin's heat. The man stiffened, lifting up off the bedding until his back hit Yong Ha's chest. Alarmed, the scholar rubbed his hand over Jae Shin's stomach, coasting over his nipples as he encouraged Jae Shin to breathe slowly.

"Gods, you feel so....good," Yong Ha whispered, resting his forehead against Jae Shin's shoulders. "Give it time. Let your body know I'm there."

"No...no," Jae Shin panted. "I am fine. It feels... good. You feel good."

"Yes?" Yong Ha smiled, despite the tremours threatening to over take him. Jae Shin gripped him so tightly he wasn't sure he could take more than a single stroke without losing his hold on his body.

"Yes," The man responded, slowly moving his hips back, falling into the familiar rhythm he'd found with Yong Ha before.

Yong Ha slid in further, nearly seating himself into Jae Shin's body. The heat closed in on him, enveloping his sex with a snugness he'd never imagined feeling. Summer engulfed him, chasing away the winter battering at their door and Yong Ha sighed, hugging Jae Shin tight against him. The other man's arms lifted, wrapping over Yong Ha's. Jae Shin began to rock back and forth, sliding himself up and down Yong Ha's sex in small tugs and pushes, driving the slender man wild.

"You ready, *agi*?" Yong Ha asked, brushing the hair from Jae Shin's cheek. The man turned his head, resting back onto Yong Ha's shoulder so he could share a kiss then nodded, throbbing with the need for Yong Ha to fill him.

They began slowly, finding the new ways their bodies fit into one another. A shuddering wave took Jae Shin the first time Yong Ha's sex found the sweet core of his body and he cried out, startling Yong Ha into stopping. Panting heavily, Jae Shin slid back onto his lover's shaft, urging him in deeper as he bent his head down, biting his lower lip as he strained to reach the stars inside of him.

Their world tightened in, becoming only a few feet of sweat and passion. The low murmur of their voices were set to the symphony of the storm, a deep aria as Yong Ha thrust deeper and deeper until Jae Shin moaned with intense pleasure. Rising up, Jae Shin plunged back down onto Yong Ha's sex, arching his back until every inch of his lover rested inside of him. Yong Ha panted, trying to keep up with the larger man, driving as hard into Jae Shin as he could.

"Too much, baby," Yong Ha whispered, easing Jae Shin forward. "Lie down. Let me..."

They moved forward together, the seal between them unbroken as Jae Shin rested on his folded arms. Gripping his lover's hips, Yong Ha set into him, digging his fingers into the tanned flesh. His sac struck Jae Shin's body, setting a soft steady beat to their driving motion. The sound drove him as did the rough, feral growls of his lover reaching his climax. Angling his body, Yong Ha hit the nerves inside of Jae Shin again, taking long strokes to rub his sex over the spot until Jae Shin was forced to spread out his hands to grip the bedding.

Snarling, Jae Shin lifted his hips, driving back against Yong Ha as fiercely as the slender man could push forward. They fought to find each other, skin striking skin until the sensations unfolding inside of Jae Shin finally grew too much for him and he clenched down, biting at a pillow to stop himself from screaming into the night.

Yong Ha was aware of every inch of Jae Shin's skin beneath him. The man's muscles flowed under his, the round curves of his ass parting just enough to let Yong Ha slide in between them and the wink of Jae Shin's entrance gripping him worked Yong Ha's imagination into overload. He couldn't stop moving, thrusting in and out with each snap of his hips but never seeming to tire of the forceful hold his lover had on him. Jae Shin shifted, milking Yong Ha's tip and the slender man increased his pounding, wanting to embed himself into Jae Shin's heat until he melted.

With his hands slick from Jae Shin's sweat, Yong Ha reached around his lover's side, finding the man's dripping sex and pumped his fist down its length, rounding over to cover the head just as Jae Shin's body released. The smell of his lover's spill took Yong Ha's breath away and he lost himself to the rush of his climax, pouring his seed deep into Jae Shin's belly.

They continued, furiously stretching out the moment into one breath then another. Yong Ha found himself unable to stop, pumping his hips forward as his orgasm continued to spray into his lover, mirrored by the

silken liquid threads spilling over his hand from Jae Shin's sex.

Curling his shoulders, Jae Shin took more of Yong Ha's thrusts, grunting as he begged the man to continue, closing in on Yong Ha after every long stroke to hold him in just another moment longer. Catching himself in the stop jerk rhythm, Yong Ha dug in, gripping with punishingly hard fingers.

"More," Jae Shin murmured, hooking his hips up to meet Yong Ha's. "Now. More."

"So bossy," Yong Ha laughed, biting a trail along his lover's shoulders. He complied, forcing Jae Shin down further with his thrusts until the man could only writhe beneath him. He crested again, lifting his hips up to stroke at himself while Yong Ha held him down, covering Jae Shin with his long body. Reaching up, he worked his fingers into Jae Shin's grasp, holding the man's hands as he rode him.

"Mine," Yong Ha let his orgasm hit, feeling the tender ripple begin to swallow him up. His teeth ached with the anticipation of it and despite the warning coursing through him, he could do nothing but be carried off under its strength. The spasms of Jae Shin's fingers in his grasp told him his lover was close as well and he continued, forcing himself to bring Jae Shin over the edge with his final, hard thrusts.

They came together, both screaming one another's names. Their howling was lost beneath the growling of the winter storm, the fury of their bodies as fierce a gale as the one raging outside of their room.

Falling forward, Yong Ha felt his flaccid sex slide free of Jae Shin's body and he mourned the loss of Jae Shin's around him. Wanting nothing more than to curl up around Jae Shin's sweat-dappled body, Yong Ha forced himself to retrieve one of the washing cloths warming near the brazier and squeezed out as much water as he could. He turned back over to find Jae Shin staring up at him, tangled hair fallen about his handsome face and his eyes hooded with a lethargic pleasure.

He started with Jae Shin's stomach, stopping only long enough to kiss each of the man's nipples. He had to chase them with his tongue, laughing at the heavy plunge of Jae Shin's chest as the man recovered his breathing. Cleaning them both, he took care with Jae Shin's thighs and ass then saw to his own sex, delicately wiping away the slick balm from their bodies. Not caring where the cloth landed, he tossed it in the general direction of the ceramic warming bowl, laughing to himself when he heard it hit the water.

"You couldn't have done that if you aimed," Jae Shin teased, hooking his arm around Yong Ha's shoulders and pulling the man down on top of him.

Glad to be held, Yong Ha stretched out, working his toes over Jae Shin's feet, knowing it annoyed the other man. "That was..."

"Nice," Jae Shin muttered, stroking at Yong Ha's loose hair.

"Nice?" He scoffed, lifting his head up to stare intensely at his lover. The tug of a smile on Jae Shin's mouth made him hiss in disgust. "I hate you sometimes."

"Maybe," Jae Shin conceded. "But I love *you* always."

Yong Ha's hard disgust at being teased melted away, nearly as quickly as it formed, Resting his chin on his hand, he positioned himself on Jae Shin's chest, losing himself in the man's beauty for an indulgent moment.

"What was it? How did it go?" Yong Ha screwed his mouth up into a moue. "*Wherever you go, go with all your heart?*"

"Yes, why?" Jae Shin eyed his lover. It was rare that Yong Ha showed his wealth of knowledge and less often when he quoted from the Analects.

"I never understood that, really," He sighed, plucking at Jae Shin's mouth with a pinch of his fingers. "I always thought it meant to throw yourself into everything you do; which you know is a lot of effort. I'm not one for much effort."

"I've noticed," He drawled, quirking his mouth at his lover's playful frown. "What do you think it means then? Now?"

"I think he meant to carry your heart with you. To never leave behind any piece of it. Any part of it I might find along the way. Not just to go enthusiastically but to go... loved. To love in return." Yong Ha hummed in pleasure as Jae Shin stroked the length of his back with a soft brush of his fingers. "You, my Geol Oh, are my

heart. And I will carry you with me; wherever I may go...I will go with all of my heart."

twenty-one

The thaw came quick, moving in with a hot kiss and shattering the frozen veneer winter laid over the city. Within days, the eaves ran slick with melted ice and Sungkyunkwan's pages scurried to spread sand over the walkways' growing puddles, lugging hammocks of mounded grit between them in a frantic race to beat the scholars before they came home. The students arrived in dribbles, one or two at time. Many admonished themselves for not taking the time to keep up with their studies, especially when welcomed at the entrance by a sign announcing points-dependent tests covering their most recent materials.

A warbler scolded Yoon Hee as she made her way through the soggy yard. Burdened by heavy satchels filled with food, she nearly lost her footing when her shoe slipped on a patch of ice on the pavement. Flailing to keep her balance, she came to a jerking stop when two strong arms caught her before she fell.

"You cannot expect to be able to walk when you are carrying things as heavy and as tall as you are," Lee Sun Joon righted his fiancé, putting her back on her feet. Removing the satchels from her nerveless fingers, she glared at his imperious tone.

"I can carry that," Yoon Hee snarled. Sun Joon ignored her, continuing down the pavement towards their dormitory. His servant bowed with deep courtesy, giggling at her vexed expression.

"The young master can be... a trouble sometimes," He murmured as he passed, ducking his head to avoid a falling clump of snow. "It is good to see you again, mistress."

"Kim Yoon Hee!" Sun Joon stood on the walkway of their dormitory, ramrod straight and somber. "Are you coming?"

"No," She sniffed, climbing up onto the stone entrance slab and removing her shoes. "I'm going to see the seniors first. You can put those in my room."

"She's gotten bossy now that she's student president," His servant muttered as he fell in behind his master.

"No," Sun Joon grinned, a wide stretch of a smile that gentled his features. "She's always been that way. Let's put these away. I'd like to see Moon Jae Shin and Goo Yong Ha myself."

She found them in one of the gardens, its plum blossoms beginning to break through their snowy confines and speckling the nearly bare branches with delicate pink clouds. Jae Shin sat on a stone rise, nearly hidden by a gardening shack and lost in thought, his hooded eyes watching Yong Ha as the man struggled to reach some of the more pleasing arrangement of flowers, a set of snipping clippers in his hand. Several sprigs lay on the ground, carefully placed on a flat rock where he couldn't accidentally step on them. His gat lay abandoned on the ground, its black horsehair ridge battered slightly from being smashed up against the lower branches.

"He's picking flowers?" Yoon Hee bounced up behind her friend, resisting the urge to hug him from behind. She held back for a second then bent over, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck. "It is good to see you, sunbae."

"Aish, Daemul," Jae Shin muttered, giving her a light, gentle shove. "Get off of me."

Her robes fluttered, barely disturbed by his push and she laughed at him, settling down next to him. The cold stone seeped through her clothes and she gasped in surprise. Tapping her shoulder, Jae Shin jerked his hand up, motioning her to rise. Lifting his own hips, he unfolded a flap of the mat he'd been sitting on, spreading it out to share with the young woman.

"Oh, it's cold." Squirming, she made herself comfortable, grateful for the thick padding and Jae Shin's

heat. She snuggled up to him, ignoring his baleful glare and tucked her hands under her arms to keep them warm. "What is he doing?"

"He wants plum blossoms for his room." Jae Shin glanced at her robes then undid the heavy jacket he wore. Tossing it over her shoulders, he steadfastly ignored her murmur of gratitude. "Now he's not happy with just his room having flowers in it. The fool thinks all of our rooms should have them too."

"They're pretty," Yoon Hee remarked, taking a deep breath to catch the sweet, light fragrance permeated with the fresh wash of winter.

"They die and leave a mess," Jae Shin growled. "And then I have to listen to him about how they are fleeting reminders of our youth. He should be satisfied with the ones they make out of stone. Those are nice and they don't die."

"You are definitely not a romantic at heart, Geol Oh," Yoon Hee pronounced. "He is very sweet to get them for us."

"He's an idiot." Leaning on his hands, Jae Shin watched his lover jump around the base of the tree. "He's gotten more snow on him than the trees have on them. And he's fallen twice already."

Yoon Hee watched as Yong Ha strained to reach a branch above him, jumping up to grab at the tree. Unable to reach his target, he instead jostled the slender trunk, dislodging clumps of snow which fell on his head. Jae Shin chuckled and Yong Ha turned around to glare at him, offering out the clippers.

"Do you think you could do a better job?" He spat out a mouthful of snow-frosted bark chips.

"My father's ancient cat could do a better job than you," Jae Shin grunted, getting to his feet. Brushing off his rear, he padded over to the tree, taking the clippers from Yong Ha. "Go sit with Daemul and stay out of the way. Just tell me which ones you want when I get up there."

Yong Ha pulled a grimace at his lover then snatched up the branches he'd been lucky enough to clip off before damaging his ego any further. Calling out to a passing page, he bribed the boy to bring them hot soju to drink before settling down to direct his lover.

"So, have you and Sun Joon done anything with that book I gave you?" Yong Ha leaned over and whispered into Yoon Hee's ear.

"Sunbae!" Yoon Hee exclaimed, pressing her hands up to her blushing cheeks. "No!"

"But you looked at it right?" He grinned at her shocked expression then laughing out loud at her shy nod. "Good, at least one of you will be informed. I'm not certain if Garang wouldn't pass out from the shock of having to initiate anything."

Lee Sun Joon wandered into the garden area and studied the scholars sitting next to one another. Pursing his mouth, the scholar glanced about and his eyes lit on Jae Shin. Changing course, Sun Joon strode over to where the other man was beginning to climb one of the heavier plum trees, the clippers clenched between his teeth.

"I think he doesn't want to hear what we're talking about," Yong Ha commented, tilting his head to one side and smiling widely. "Probably because your face is darker than the blossoms. Ah look, here is the boy with our soju."

He poured Yoon Hee a cup, wrapping the bottle back up to keep it warm for Jae Shin. They sat sipping at the spiced alcohol and Yong Ha shouted out directions periodically to guide Jae Shin towards the branches he wanted.

"He has no taste or eye for balance," Yong Ha muttered, shaking his head at Jae Shin burying himself deeper into the plum tree. "Or colour. The most colourful I've seen him dressed was in the guard uniform we were made to wear. Oh! And when we compete in sports."

"I liked Geol Oh in the burgundy he wore." Yoon Hee sipped at the soju, careful of her empty stomach. "He looks good in that colour."

Licking a drop of soju from the corner of his mouth, Yong Ha casually said, "He looks best without anything on at all."

He put down his cup to pound her back, holding a startled Sun Joon off with a nonchalant wave of his fingers. She coughed, clearing her throat and sucked in a mouthful of air, glaring at her senior malevolently.

"You did that on purpose!"

"Yes," He agreed. "I did."

"So then, you two are..." She trailed off, unsure of how to phrase their unorthodox relationship.

"Lovers," Yong Ha quirked his lips, tapping at his cheek with a finger. "Probably more so than you and Garang but then ah, we are older... more worldly. Which is saying a lot because Geol Oh is quite the innocent."

Her mouth was full again when Yong Ha whispered.

"Or he used to be."

The sound of her choking once more filled the air and this time, no amount of pounding on her back helped clear it. Shoving the man away from her side, Yoon Hee caught her breath and muttered about Yong Ha and his wicked ways.

Jae Shin padded up to join them, holding the clippers out to Yong Ha. Sun Joon was close behind, his arms full of fragrant branches. Exclaiming loudly with pleasure, Yong Ha motioned for the man to place them on the ground before him, pouring out two cups of soju before picking through the selection. Draining his cup, Sun Joon was about to pour himself another when Yoon Hee grabbed at his wrist. Using his weight to pull herself up, she bowed a quick goodbye to Jae Shin and scurried off, dragging an astonished Lee Sun Joon with her.

"What bit Daemul?" Jae Shin grumbled, removing the stopper of the container and drinking directly from the bottle. "Her face is all red."

"Hopefully, Lee Sun Joon." Yong Ha yelped when Jae Shin's fist struck the middle of his back. "You are going to end up giving me bruises in places I don't want them."

It was Jae Shin's turn to blush and he turned his head away, unable to meet his lover's teasing with a sharp retort. He'd discovered how easily it was to lose himself in the passions they had for each other, often marking Yong Ha with his teeth or gripping him tightly by the hips. Unlike the marks Dae Min inflicted on himself, the lingering mottles were subtle, not at all painful to look upon.

Jae Shin had to admit to himself, he liked seeing the tiny marks he left behind on Yong Ha's body. Even better, they allowed him to lave and kiss the spots to make them feel better; which usually led to more markings.

"They're...traditional," Jae Shin replied, frowning at a branch being held up to his face.

"They're about as traditional as we are." Yong Ha shoved the sprig into Jae Shin's hand, moving the man's arm up so he could inspect it. "She passed herself off as a man. How traditional can she be?"

"Do you think... we will..." Jae Shin struggled to find the words he wanted to say. "Be able to live like... the way you said? Together?"

Lowering the branch, Yong Ha gazed into his lover's face. Jae Shin's expression was soft, unguarded and as vulnerable as when they were making love and Yong Ha sighed with pleasure, knowing the man's gentleness was something only he was allowed to see.

"Oh yes, my Geol Oh," Yong Ha glanced about, noting how hidden they were behind the walls of the service shed. Protected by the overhang and nearly fully tucked in by shadows, he risked leaning over and kissed Jae Shin on the lips, lingering long enough to slide the tip of his tongue into the heat of his lover's mouth. "The question is, do you wish to? Do you want to live that way? With me?"

"Lotus, I can't think of any other way I'd want to live." Plucking off one of the blooms, Jae Shin tucked the flower behind Yong Ha's ear, grinning when the man smiled at him, their mouths still tasting of their brief but passionate kiss. "Certainly not without you. Never *ever* without you, my love. My Yong Ha."