

I tapped Su Ah's sleeping shoulder. "Hey."

There was no reaction.

I waited a minute and then decided that she really was dead to the world, in one way or another.

Gently, I shifted her to the pillow and rolled off her bed.

Avoiding her obstacles, I slipped back into the hallway.

Another bathroom break later, I made my way over to the red beacon still emanating from Mia Noona's bedroom door. The red light trickling from under Mia's door—that familiar wound against the dark—hooked something in my gut that had lodged there years ago.

God, that door.

It had been the central prop in my earliest dreams about her. I'd always wake up confused and in a cold sweat. No nightmare or lurid fantasy could've frightened me the way that door did. The significance I ascribed to it was pure Freudian,

A sealed rectangle glowing like fresh arterial blood under a dying bulb.

And Mia would urge me to open it, persuading me that it wasn't the end of the world I feared.

'Open me, Jae-il.'

'Nothing bad will happen. The world doesn't end when brothers and sisters cross that line.'

And Jesus, if she'd only said I'd actually break it wide open someday. Walk right in like I'm strutting onto the pitch and slam it shut behind me. I always thought I'd have been against that kind of terrible decision, and my only reason would've been because her happiness mattered more than my selfish needs. But then she kept making the issue so fucking irresistible, my knees would give, and my instincts would take control and ignore the logic screaming at me.

Now, heading towards that beacon again?

Well, the situation is different now. Obviously. It felt less like revisiting nightmare fuel and more like strolling onto the field where I was expected.

Which was to say: less nightmarish, a tad less stomach-dropping, less creepy door-related trepidation—actually, none whatsoever—but the fucking stress. Jesus Christ. Opening one door led down another one, involuntarily. Somehow.

Now I had to stand between both sisters, one to the left, and the other to the right, waiting for the fucking executioner.

Any last words before he swung that axe?

Should I write a will, sign a post-coital NDA, and have a witness ready?

Is being eaten alive by a tiger better?

I shook my head, chuckling as I lifted my hand.

My knuckles didn't have time to question my command to knock—they just did it.

Three polite taps against polished wood.

For a heart-stopping count of seven seconds, nothing happened.

"Jae-il?"

Mia's voice carried just fine through the solid core construction.

She knew it was me coming. Who else but me?

"Yes, it's me, Noona."

"Come in."

I quietly pushed the door open, revealing first just a sliver of crimson before it opened enough for me to see her figure silhouetted against its glow. She'd changed after our hallway conversation.

The red light that had been leaking under her door wasn't from a bedside lamp. A string of LED lights—those programmable kinds the kids plastered across their walls—draped around her room, bathing everything in that same blood-red hue, including her.

She wasn't naked. Close to it, though. Delicate black lace that technically constituted lingerie clung to her curves. Tiny bra, almost non-existent panties, the fabric doing absolutely nothing to conceal skin beneath the passionate coloring. One leg drawn upward, creating lazy shadows against the soft bedding; her arms crossed beneath her breasts as she watched me approach with a look so unblinking, I could feel it before I stepped fully into the room.

For a moment. Just a passing second with that devilish lighting enhancing her features. The thought flitted: she-demon would suit her. Eyes darker than usual, skin somehow paler against the crimson atmosphere. Too damn beautiful, and too damn intimidating. Any sane man would see danger here.

And, wow. It's a funny thing, knowing the path ahead ends in my undoing. What the hell would that look like? An orgy, a slow, painful murder by dismemberment, my naked, drugged body used as a human dildo?

How does one mentally prepare for that?

You don't. You just go with the flow with the biggest grin.

"Took you long enough."

So she really was expecting me, after all. I did well to make this detour.

"You've redecorated with an ominous theme." I said, looking around.

"Ha... yeah. I felt like red today."

I made an indistinct noise. "Does the color reflect your mood or something?"

"If red reflects my mood right now, we might both be fucked."

I laughed. "Glad I showed up then."

"Hmm... same here, little brother." She tilted her head back, just a little.

And for some inexplicable reason, all that I found unsettling now struck me as truly fascinating. It was almost an instinct for me now to walk on a minefield with a boner; the combination made sense, though. I mean, who could stay scared in such an aesthetic situation?

"Did you talk to Su Ah?"

I made my way to the edge of the bed. She tracked me the entire time until I came close enough to slide a palm across her foot and ankle before placing it on my lap, examining her toenails. A deep crimson color. I was especially intrigued by her pinky nail—it was so tiny! "Why is this nail so damn tiny? It has no business being this size!" I poked it.

Mia flinched and nearly withdrew her leg. "J-Jae-il! Are you seriously giving the poor toenail grief?" She wriggled her toes, glaring at me. "What is up with you? When did you become this judgmental about toes? Just give it a fucking massage or something already."

"Not judgemental, I'm surprised this thing hasn't come off already with how minuscule it is, really."

Mia pushed her face in her hands and groaned, though a smile was easily seen through the cracks.

I laughed as I acquiesced with her demand for a foot rub. While plucking her toes and making her squawk indignantly, I turned towards her, a little more seriously. "Yes, I did talk to Su Ah Noona. Needless to say, your reaction was a tad extreme. Not just the slap... but the argument. The fight. You two have completely lost control, and I can tell it's not the first time."

Mia sighed, either in relief from the massage or remorse. "I did snap, yeah."

"Noona, the issue is escalating out of hand. I hope you understand, and Su Ah Noona too, of course. We can't afford to have Mom walk in on you two going berserk or worse."

"I'm aware, Jae-il..."

"Su Ah Noona is aware too, and she said multiple times that she's good at keeping things 'under wraps'" I air-quoted. "So that no one notices when shit goes sideways, yet it's only going one direction. You two have lost control, and this has gotten ridiculously out of hand. And neither of you care one bit. You are both heading to disaster—what do you think is going to happen to our family if things blow up and the three of us break apart? How badly do you two think Mom will take it, how heartbroken will she feel? More importantly, how will we deal with the fallout? My career is at risk too, as is our relationship."

"....."

A moment of silence. I continued to rub her foot.

"I can't help it, Jae-il..." Mia said softly.

I stared at her.

She stared right back at me. "Su Ah shouldn't have... you two shouldn't have...."

Ah, yes.

That was true as well.

"It's my fault too, Noona. Sorry."

Apologizing wouldn't really fix anything, but appearing uncaring was worse. I was technically cheating on my sister... with my other sister.

How crazy did that sound? God.

"It is." Mia said, neutrally, lacking the typical heat you'd expect from such an accusation. "It wasn't supposed to happen, that's the simple fact of it all. It shouldn't have occurred, and a part of me isn't particularly surprised it did anyway"

because if I'm being honest, I knew Su Ah was going to be a problem from the day that mark made its home on her skin. No, even before then... perhaps we've long known what was going to happen..."

"Are you mad?"

"Can't say I'm not, can't say I am... Jae-il, I don't know. I can't hate you, obviously. I could get mad enough to do something stupid, but my love for you overrides whatever emotions Su Ah's behavior stokes within me. And well... I..." She struggled here, her toes curling in my grasp. "I know that one day you'll have to, you know, be with someone else or people will suspect. I hate it. I want you to live forever beside me, but I know that won't happen because we just so happened to be born as siblings. Ugh... I'm sorry you have to witness that part of me."

"....."

She let her head hang. "No matter how much I love you and want to make you mine forever, I can't ever give you what some girl will... we can't go out on dates, can't post cute pictures together, can't do any of the most basic things normal couples do... that makes me crazy, and so fucking mad."

"...."

My hands on her foot came to a standstill.

Mia leaned forward to take my face in her hands. That curtain that perpetually covered the right side of her face slightly parted to reveal both of her eyes—looking at me so intensely.

Ah. Was it just me or were there no endings for this? Just new, additional, tangential problems spawned out of the solution to the ones we solved in the first place?

"I tend to lose control, Jae-il... more often than I want." She said. "Please bear with my insanity and ugly temper as best you can. It makes me happy that you care so much about us despite our absurd, fucked up situation. It makes me sad, too, because... I feel like I'm holding you back from the future you should have. If someone is able to treat you and love you better than I could, you deserve every bit of happiness." Then she started trembling, eyes wide and unblinking. "Except that... I can't stand seeing someone else give you the same happiness I've worked hard to give you myself."