



SANANG
BOOK THREE

SOUIS
WHISPERING

ARIAN WILLIAMS



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Souls Whispering
Sanang Book Three

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Souls Whispering: Sanang Book Three

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WARNING. This book is intended for an adult audience. It contains language and sexually explicit material that is only suitable for mature readers.

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Chapter 1. Bin

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Cheonsin, cheonsin...

Sky spirit, sky spirit. Aid me in helping my friend.

Sky spirit, sky spirit. Give me enough strength.

Sky spirit, sky spirit. Help me drive out the evil that's making my friend suffer.

I chanted softly under my breath as I shook the bell gripped tightly in one hand and opened the fan in the other. As the clanging sounds spread through the air and the fan wafted its soft breath, my spirit eyes only saw the translucent space that connected me with my sky spirit.

Child... All you have to do is ask.

My body trembled as the spirit came down and merged with me. Although I'd melded many times with my beloved spirit, it was never something I could take for granted. The energy that infused me vibrated through every organ. My heart beat faster. My chest opened wide. Every sense heightened. The tips of my fingers and toes tingled as my body moved effortlessly through the ritual dances to keep the spirit in harmony within me.

“Evil spirit, I call on you to answer me now. I, the direct descendant of the first great shaman king, Dangun, call on you.”

With my sky spirit’s power, I observed *aggwi*, the dark spirit that had insinuated itself into Wyn’s soul. It was sucking on Wyn’s spirit, growing stronger on the fear it generated. I projected the sizzling power toward and around it. The evil spirit flinched where the energy touched it but didn’t show any sign of backing down.

“Why would I answer you when I have such a feast before me? You have no power over me, *mudang*. Why would I go anywhere?”

Although it spoke no words aloud, I clearly heard the evil spirit’s message. We were on a metaphysical plane of existence. There was no physical body. No sound. There was only an ebb and flow of different spirit energies. Yet I felt *aggwi* and Wyn as though I were seeing them right in front of me. Wyn was in pain. His fear was palpable.

“Wyn.” I gently wrapped my aura around him. “Are you there?”

“Yes... Yes... I’m Wyn.” Amidst sobs, he grabbed on to me, clinging tightly.

I embraced him. “I’m here to get rid of the evil spirit that’s hurting you. Follow my voice, okay?”

“Yes.”

Wyn’s spirit flashed briefly, coming alive with hope, then retreated as *aggwi* dug into him. Wyn was strong, but he was unused to battle on the spiritual plane. No doubt he was also

tired from being drained by the evil spirit, but I needed him to fight. I could forcefully remove the darkness invading his soul, but without Wyn's cooperation, the spirit might inflict extensive damage as I dragged it out. Wyn needed something to fight for.

Saem!

Why hadn't I thought of him before? Wyn and Saem were mates. Wyn would fight for him.

"Wyn. Wyn. Reach out to Saem. Can you feel your bond?"

"Saem? He isn't dead?" Wyn asked, sobbing.

"The evil spirit is lying to you. Saem is fine. You just need to reach out."

"I don't know." Wyn's voice was faint, like he had very little hope left. But I was sure the bond between Saem and Wyn was strong enough for him to draw strength from it.

"You need to try. Reach out to Saem. He's waiting for you."

Wyn's spirit pulsed to life.

"Saem. Wyn needs you."

I gently maneuvered Wyn's spirit energy and directed it toward Saem's vibrant one. Saem's spirit energy was easy to recognize. Saem had twin flames—the dark yellow flame of his tiger and the forest green of his own. Saem and the tiger responded quickly to Wyn, and as the mates connected, Wyn's purple aura revived, flaring brightly. Using that opportunity, I grabbed the dark spirit and pulled.

Aggwi laughed. "You think you'll get rid of me so easily? Even if I go, I will take a piece of him with me."

Wyn screamed.

I froze. “Wyn? What’s going on?”

“It won’t let me go.” His voice trembled.

“Fight it. Hold on to Saem. Be strong.”

I pulled on the sticky darkness, but it clung tightly. The tug of war between me and the evil spirit felt endless.

“My host gave me such power. You know I’m too much for you.”

Instead of responding to the taunt, I focused all my energy on the fight. The spirit was clever and tried to manipulate others with crafty words. It was trying to confuse me now. I knew once I expelled it from Wyn, I could call on the spirit lord to take it away. To avoid such a fate, *aggwi* wanted me to think I wasn’t strong enough to remove it on my own.

Gwi, the spirit or ghost of one who died, usually passed from the plane of the living to the other side with the guidance of a reaper called *jeoseungsaja* or *chasa*. However, if *gwi* has too much *wonhan*, resentment after death because they were mistreated in life or had a wrongful death, they lingered. These *gwi* wronged in life often haunted the ones who killed or tormented them.

I usually took pity on them and listened to their stories. And if I could, I helped them move on. But *aggwi* were the extreme cases. The longer *gwi* stayed in this world not meant for them, the more they lost who they had been as human beings. *Gwi* became *aggwi* when they lost all their humanity and crossed the line from resentful spirit to evil. There was nothing I could do for them except call on the spirit lord.

Sweat beaded on my forehead, gathered, and dripped down, but I maintained my even breathing. My focus had to be absolute, as this *aggwi* was formidably strong. Even with the aid of the sky spirit's power, I was having difficulty pushing the darkness from Wyn's soul. But thankfully, with Saem and his tiger aiding him, Wyn was rallying and fighting the darkness.

All throughout our fight, *aggwi* sneered at me, trying to weaken me with his denigrating comments.

“You're losing control. I'm too strong for you. But maybe I'll leave if you ask nicely. This one is getting weaker, anyway. I can find another victim who's stronger to sustain me.”

Ignoring him, I continued.

“Oh! How about the one sitting next to you? He's not a believer, is he? But he's got such power inside him. His spirit is ripe for the taking. He's got no defenses.”

Jee...

My heart gave a lurch. I knew the evil spirit was talking about Jee. But how had it known Jee was vulnerable? He'd been under my protection for many years. I first met Jee when we were young, and I'd immediately known he needed my help. With his innate power, his spirit stood out from the average people around him. Someone with his level of soul energy was usually born to a family like mine, who trained them early in life about the intricacies of the spirit world. On the rare occasions when someone not a member of a shaman family awoke to their power and started seeing the spirits, they either ended up in a mental hospital or, if they were lucky, a shaman discovered and trained them.

Strangely, although Jee's soul had the power of a shaman, he seemed completely unaware of the spirit world. Having power without being awakened was dangerous since one can't fight off an enemy one can't see. Unfortunately, awakening to the spirit world is not something that can be taught. One must be born with power and also open one's eyes to it naturally.

Having seen my first spirit at four, which was, even for a powerful shaman, a tad early, I'd been baffled by Jee. He had so much potential, but he was forever likely to become a victim of spirits who gathered near him to leach his power. Unfortunately, the spirit realm was not something I could lightly discuss with anyone outside the family, especially with those who did not know of its existence. That's why after consulting my father, I'd given Jee a gift of *bujeok*, an amulet, disguised as a necklace to protect him. Since then, he'd ceased being a buffet for the spirits who needed every bit of energy they could absorb to remain in this world.

Jee always carried my *bujeok*. The evil spirit shouldn't have been able to target him. I rapidly scanned my friend. His spirit energy was easy to recognize among the glowing ones of those around him. Warm, thick, dark brown, like liquid chocolate. His energy burned brighter than others. I gasped as I felt the weakened amulet. Its power needed to be renewed periodically. So much had happened in the last months—Jin's kidnapping, our battle with *Imugi*, time traveling, another battle. I had completely forgotten to strengthen the amulet.

The evil spirit hastily retreated from Wyn, too fast for me to grab hold of it, and advanced toward Jee.

No, no, no!

I could not let it take Jee. Unlike Wyn, Jee had no mate bond. He'd have no one to help him fight *aggwi* while I pulled it off. But I couldn't call on the spirit lord to take *aggwi* away unless it was unattached to a living being.

"Come to me now! I command you to come and take me." I pushed all my power into the words.

Sky spirit. Give me strength. Please, I pleaded.

The sky spirit heeded my call. He poured his power through our connection, then into me. Until now, I'd only been a conduit of his energy, but now he was with me. My body shook as his strength burned through it. My metaphysical energy expanded rapidly. I was like a black hole, except I was only there to suck in the darkness. One with my spirit, I didn't need to call on the lord of spirits to take away *aggwi*. The evil spirit screeched as my light burned through it, protecting all the other souls around me.

I lost myself in the bliss of being one with the sky spirit, the only being I'd ever felt this close to. And my focus on the darkness vanished as I forgot why I'd called on the spirit to begin with. I sighed softly as the perpetual loneliness and anxiety that lived inside me washed away with a surge of pure happiness.

Cheonsin. Be with me. Be with me always.

Binmi, my child, you are loved. We will always be a part of one another.

Yes! Yes, naui modeungeot, my everything.

I was where I belonged. My spirit was with me, closer than ever before. My arms wrapped tightly around my body. I

wanted to remain exactly as I was. But my spirit's energy ebbed, leaving me with his tender touch caressing every part of me.

No, no, I whined.

Please stay.

Nau sarangseuleon geot, my lovely one, your human body cannot contain me.

I don't care.

My spirit only responded with a flood of blissful energy through our connection.

Take me with you.

Is it what you truly wish? You will no longer exist on this plane.

I...

I hesitated. Even five years ago, I might have agreed. I'd never fit in this world. To be with my spirit meant to belong, and I wanted that. The world of my spirit was exhilarating. There was no need for pretense. He loved me for all that I was. Even though I loved my parents a great deal, I would have said yes to him if I had not become part of Sanang. If I hadn't felt responsible for the world. And if I hadn't grown close to Jee.

Live. Your mortal life is but the blink of an eye for me. I will be here for you when you are ready to be part of me.

A gentle warmth grazed my cheeks.

I shuddered and let out a long breath.

Chapter 2. Jee

“He’s not waking up.” I paced back and forth between the window and the bed where Bin lay, still and pale.

“It’s only been an hour. Sit. You’re making me nervous.” Jav let out a long sigh and looked up from his phone screen.

Hab, not Jav, I told myself. That was how a *j* was pronounced in Spanish. It had taken me a little while to correctly pronounce his name Jav, short for Javier.

His over six-foot tall frame was perched on the small wooden stool Bin and I had been using as a little table for the occasional flower vase or teacup. I paused and eyed him. It was a marvel that he seemed so comfortable sitting on it, especially with the stool tilted halfway back and precariously balanced on only two of four wooden legs.

“Why are you still here?”

Jav glanced at Bin, then settled his gaze on me. “I’m worried.”

“He’ll be fine,” I murmured, but even to my own ears, I sounded worried.

“Then why are you pacing like a madman?” Jav asked with a smirk.

Ugh!

I gave him a side glare and shuffled over to sit next to Bin. I gently ran my hand across his forehead, then across his cheek. His skin was naturally soft and light-toned, but he rarely looked like a ghost.

“Bin doesn’t look like a ghost. He’s not much paler than he usually is. He just has a light complexion that most people would die for.”

I scowled at him. “Who gave you permission to read my thoughts?”

Jav grimaced. “I wasn’t reading your thoughts. I just can’t help but listen when you’re practically shouting them at me. Remember what Sett told you about strong telepaths and empaths? Even if we shield well, some things still bleed through, especially if those thoughts and feelings are very strong.”

I *did* remember Sett telling us that when Mr. Nam decided to combine our forces. Sett and Jav were very strong telepaths, so they wanted us to know in advance what to expect.

A bit deflated, I muttered, “Doesn’t mean you have to listen to it.”

Jav let out a sigh. “I was trying hard not to listen.”

He rubbed his chin. “I know you normally act like a mother hen with Bin, but this is extreme, even for you. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Something’s bugging me.” Frustrated, I huffed and turned away from Jav. I wasn’t even sure why I was talking to him. When I’d brought Bin here after *goot*, Jav had tagged along and had come into our room as though he’d

been invited. Come to think of it, Jav had been hovering way too much around Bin.

“Is it something specific? Doesn’t he usually pass out after these ceremonies? He doesn’t seem much different than he was after the first one.”

Jav was right, of course. Objectively speaking, my worry was based on nothing, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t annoyed with him. I blatantly ignored his comment, instead focusing my gaze on Bin, hoping he’d open his eyes any minute now. After the first *goot*, Bin had woken up about an hour later. I’d hoped that would be the case today too, but the hour was almost up, and he was showing no sign of wakefulness. Why was I so nervous? I clenched my fists and breathed out slowly. Anything to keep my mind off his still form.

“I know you’re distressed, but please calm down. I want to read his aura, and it’s hard with yours fluctuating all around him.” Jav’s eyes were unfocused, his gaze on something only he could see.

I glared at him. “What did I say about invading someone’s privacy?”

Jav grinned. “You didn’t actually say.”

I cleared my throat with a tiny grimace. “Then let me say it clearly. Do. Not. Even think about reading any of us. Remember, we could squash you underground, burn you to a crisp, throw you into the atmosphere, drown you on dry land, or choke you with friendly plants.”

Jav raised his hands in capitulation, but his face was lit with a smile. “I hear you loud and clear, but I wasn’t invading his

privacy. His aura is on the surface, visible to anyone with my ability. Something I can't *not* see."

Ugh. I furrowed my brow. I couldn't even get mad.

Jav's eyes went out of focus once more. Then, as he blinked, his face sobered. "So tell me something. Is it normal for Bin's energy to change and go crazy during these ceremonies?"

"What do you mean?" I frowned.

Jav righted the stool, tapping a slow, steady beat on his thigh with his right hand. "It's hard to explain. You know what I mean by aura, right?" He tilted his head and paused.

I rolled my eyes.

The rhythm of his tapping became more erratic. "An aura is like a colorful veil that I can see, but those with powers like you have stronger ones. I'm used to seeing all your energies like that, and I usually ignore them, but what I saw today was different."

I raised an eyebrow in question.

"There was something else inside Bin today."

"You already know *mudang* acts as a conduit for the spirits. I assume that's what..."

"No." At Jav's firm word, I closed my mouth and narrowed my eyes.

"This was different."

"How?"

“I have already seen Bin perform *goot*. His energy did not change last time. But this time, it was like something entirely different was in his aura, like it was going to take over. You know what I mean?”

The tempo of his tapping increased.

I glowered at his moving hand and huffed out a sigh. “I don’t know what you’re trying to say.”

Jav jumped up and paced a few steps back and forth. “Something else was messing with his aura.”

Within a moment, he was standing next to me, peering at Bin. “Hmm. Now it’s almost like nothing happened, but something still changed. His energy has changed, just slightly, but I can see it,” Jav muttered.

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you sure you’re not reading him? I told you not to do that without permission.”

“I told you. This is not something I do on purpose.” Jav shrugged, holding his hands out with palms up. I shot him a look of disbelief and warning, and he smiled. “I admit, you all have impressive abilities, but I’m not completely powerless. I don’t invade others’ privacy by virtue of my own principles, not because I’m afraid of you.”

I let out a long breath and frowned. My insides were contorted with anxiety, and it was not just because I was worried about Bin. Jav was annoying, but he was not the source of my unease.

My chest tightened. It was Bin. The reason for my agitation was Bin.

After revealing to everyone that he was *mudang*, I'd thought Bin would tell me more about this big secret he'd been hiding. But he'd said nothing, and I couldn't help but wonder why he'd kept it to himself. For many years, we'd been as close as two people could be. That's why, when we first moved into the Sanang House, we'd even volunteered to share a room. But for some reason, Jin, who'd met Bin only five years ago, had been the only one Bin had confided his secret identity to. And now, Jav knew something about Bin I'd not known.

I was not okay with others knowing more about Bin than me. What had happened to us? I thought I knew him the best. Bin had been ten when his parents had finally brought him to the hunter families' biannual get-together. I'd been eleven and had been going to them for several years by then. By the time Bin joined us, Saem had already been part of the adult group, and Jin had already left to live abroad with his mom. Hwa, Bin, and I had spent time together since we'd been the only ones too young to join the adult discussion.

Bin had been an adorable child, although odd. Even at that age, he'd talked and acted like a mini adult. And he had a myriad of little things that bothered or hurt him. When his parents dropped him off to play with Hwa and me for the first time, he'd stayed far away, except to occasionally gaze at us with wary eyes. I learned later that Bin had been picked on at school by other kids and was afraid of other boys his age.

After a few attempts at drawing him out, Hwa had given up, but I'd been much more patient. I knew what it felt like to be alone. My uncle and his wife had adopted me after my mother passed away. They'd done it so they could hobnob with the main hunter families since I had been my mom's sole child

and head of the family because of that. But they already had two children of their own. There was certainly no love between me and my adopted family. Although they pretended otherwise outside the house, they never had a kind word or a gesture for me. And the way they'd treated my mother, I could never forgive them for that.

I'd never been happier than when they sent me abroad to study. Knowing how Bin suffered at school in Korea, Bin's parents had sent him to a boarding school in the US. Korea is a collectivistic society where everyone is expected to conform. As a child, it had been a tough place for someone like Bin, who didn't quite fit in with the status quo. My uncle was not keen on sending me abroad since paying for an expensive school meant he'd have less of my mother's money at his disposal, but he had eventually relented to keep up appearances.

Bin and I spent close to five years abroad, sharing a room and spending almost all our free time together. That is, until Bin got sick and had to return home while I stayed behind to finish the final half-year of my schooling. About a week after Bin left, left alone in the room we'd shared, I'd realized that I cared about Bin as more than just a friend. The pangs in my chest and my lack of desire to do anything except think about him finally sank in. I was in love with Bin.

With a sigh, I took Bin's right hand in both of mine and rubbed his cold fingertips softly, remembering how many nights I couldn't sleep, half elated because I was in love but also half in complete dread because I didn't know if or how I could tell Bin what I felt. Of course, in the end, I'd said nothing. When I got home six months later, Bin had changed.

He'd been the same person in terms of how he acted and appeared. He'd recovered from his illness and had been happy to see me. And we'd resumed our friendship, but a layer of something had come between us.

"You *do* have it bad." Jav whistled quietly.

I spun my head toward him.

Jav's expression was solemn. "I wasn't invading your thoughts. I promise. But I'm very good at reading people without using my powers. And with the way you act around him, especially now, it's obvious you're in love with him."

I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding. "Why are you still here? Of course, I love him. He's my best friend. And I have no desire to discuss how I feel about Bin with you or anyone else."

I watched his hand inch toward me and press gently on my shoulder. When I flinched but didn't move away, he gave a little squeeze. "I said you're *in* love with him, not just that you love him. And why should we talk? Hmm. I thought it might be nice for you to talk to someone who could understand a little of what you're going through."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"How much do you know about people in Tasier?"

I shrugged. "Not much. Other than the fact that you, Sett, and Menes belong to it, and the people in it have special abilities, like us."

I couldn't understand why he was asking me about Tasier out of the blue. What did that have to do with my relationship with Bin?

Jav crouched down and ran his hand through his short, dark, wavy hair. He was looking up at me with an expression I couldn't comprehend. For the first time since I'd met him, he was below my eye level. I wasn't short for a Korean, but with me at five-foot-ten, I always had to look up at Jav, who was six-foot-two. Now that I could see him without straining my neck, I could study his face closer than before. He was an attractive man, a beautiful blend of the east and the west. High cheekbones. Large, dark hazel eyes framed by thick eyelashes. Straight nose and strong jawline. And he had a beautifully toned body, not bulky, but well-muscled.

Jav let out a quick breath and raised his hand to brush away a few strands of hair that I wasn't aware had been covering my eyebrow.

“Our special abilities are fueled by an inner energy we call *atar*.”

Our eyes met. Jav's gaze intensified as though he was searching for something within me, but I didn't know what it was. A part of me wondered why he thought *atar* was at all relevant to what we were talking about, but another part of me was curious. A tiny spark flared to life deep inside me, something I'd never even known existed. It wanted to grow and spread, but this unknown thing scared me. I quickly smothered it until it was once more just a little ember.

“Don't.” Jav abruptly cupped my face.

My eyes widened. His touch lit something inside me, like smoldering ash flaring to life and igniting. From deep within, hot and scalding heat rose and spread. I gasped for breath. Whatever was inside me wanted out, and I was afraid to let it.

I didn't want it to burn through me. My eyes watered as I heaved.

“Atarav-ne. Look at me. Breathe!”

I blinked rapidly as I focused on his deep hazel eyes. Soothing coolness seeped in through his hands and, almost immediately, my breathing calmed.

“That’s it. Breathe with me.”

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

In.

Out.

I followed Jav's calm voice, whispering inside my head.

Whatever had erupted inside me spread throughout my body, but instead of burning me as I'd feared, its warmth was soothing. It felt right as it wrapped around me and inside me, gravitating toward Jav's hands still holding my face. I knew when it finally touched Jav. This meeting of our essences was not physical, yet it felt physical. It was like a metaphysical dance. Our energies touched, twined, and wrapped all around us.

And with that, my whole body buzzed, and I shuddered in response. Jav's eyes widened as he took in a sharp breath. He gently pulled me into his arms. Then he stood and touched his forehead to mine.

His breath blew hot against my lips. *“Atar is integral to us, to fuel our power. But it also determines who our fated mate is to be.”*

And before I could utter a single word, his lips covered mine.

Chapter 3. Jav

I swallowed Jee's soft gasp of surprise. The rational part of me berated myself for how I was acting, but it couldn't suppress my instinct to be closer to the missing piece of my soul. His *atar* had flared and recognized mine, and mine had responded in kind. The two energies had twined around each other and around us. A heady feeling of connection, of sublime oneness, filled me. Jee was a gift that I hadn't thought I'd find, as meeting one's soulmate, *atarav*, was difficult and sometimes impossible.

I had not known Jee was my soulmate when we first met. Even though Jee had accused me of doing so, I did not misuse my ability by delving into people's minds or reading their energies unless it was out of necessity. Having the ability to mess up another person's mind was frightening. I knew what a monster I could be. I knew what I was capable of, so I always erred on the side of caution, even at the expense of my own safety. And without using my ability, I'd only seen the very basic energy signature that was visible to me.

On the surface, the Sanang boys gave off only their elemental power signatures. I often equated seeing others' power or aura with colors. Jin had all shades of watery blue that matched his ability to control all things water, and his dragon spirit had aqua hues. Saem had the forest green colors of his nature and wood power and the gold and black of his

tiger spirit. Hwa was a fiery blend of red, orange, and yellow with an occasional spark of purplish blue. Bin had an ethereal, almost translucent white and iridescent tone. And Jee was all earthy and dark, many shades of brown with sparks of gold and silver.

I'd glimpsed Jee's *atar* for the first time when we'd fought the evil *Imugi* together. Since I couldn't sense it again afterward, I thought I'd imagined it at the time. The fight had been chaotic, and I'd been too busy shielding Wyn while he cast a spell to get rid of the evil snake. But I still kept watching Jee. And because I was looking, I saw it flash and disappear as we fought the dark creatures together. I'd never heard of *atar* that came and went, but from what I'd seen, his *atar* seemed to be visible only when he was using a great deal of energy.

I licked his lower lip and delved my tongue inside his warm mouth. Jee trembled in my arms, his body semi-frozen by my intimate touch. Every time I glimpsed his *atar*, mine responded, pulling me closer to him, turning me into a man obsessed. I was consumed by the need to be close to him.

Get ahold of yourself. Let him go! You're scaring him.

Kissing him had been unintended. I'd only meant to explain what *atar* was and what he meant to me. Then his *atar* flared, and not used to the experience, he'd tried to lock it back inside. But I couldn't let him smother it. *Atar* was an integral part of our lives. It was a beautiful and precious thing deep inside of us. Why had he suppressed it all these years? For what purpose?

With a great deal of effort, I dragged my lips away and pushed him several inches away from me. We were both

breathing hard. Jee looked stunned, but his eyes had darkened. And he was already hard enough for me to see the outline of his cock through his pants. What if I pulled him into another kiss? He hadn't resisted the first one. I'd been almost out of my mind, but I'd have known if he'd tried to push me away. I'd never be able to do anything against his will.

But...

I grimaced. His lack of resistance didn't excuse my behavior. I should have explained myself and asked for his permission instead of mauling him.

Jee looked at me with his lips parted. They were bright red from my kiss. He ran his tongue over his lower lip. At such an innocent, sensual gesture, I groaned and dug my fingers into his shoulders to stop myself from kissing him again. He winced, and I let him go, afraid I'd caused him pain with the strength of my grip.

"I'm sorry."

But saying sorry was not enough. I should have listed all the things I wanted his forgiveness for. For not explaining myself. For not letting him hide his *atar* away. For kissing him. For causing him discomfort.

Jee opened his mouth but closed it again. His breathing slowed, and confusion replaced the desire I'd glimpsed in his eyes.

"You kissed me. Why?" he asked in a halting tone.

A sigh escaped my lips. "I'm sorry. I hadn't meant to."

"Then it was a mistake, right? It must have been a mistake. You're into Bin," he muttered with a deep crease in his brow.

“Bin?” I raised both my eyebrows.

“Yes. You like Bin. I know you’ve been looking at him and hovering around him since the beginning.” Jee’s lips pressed together into a thin line.

My head tilted with confusion. I couldn’t follow. I was into Bin? Since when?

His expression soured as I stood motionless.

“That’s absurd.”

He narrowed his eyes. “But you’re always around him. Looking at him. Talking to him. Why else would you do that?”

My mouth dropped open, and I was helpless against the burst of laughter. I couldn’t fault him for being clueless. To Jee, it might have seemed like I was paying attention to Bin. He and Bin were ridiculously close and spent an inordinate amount of time with each other. Spending time with one meant spending time with the other. And of course Jee would never believe that he, not Bin, was the one worth paying attention to. Even as a K-pop idol with over a million fans, Jee didn’t seem to believe he was worth pursuing.

After schooling my expression, I asked, “How many hours a day do you think you spend joined at the hip with Bin?”

Jee shrugged. “A few?”

“Consider that always, even when you’re sleeping, you’re in the same room.” I let out a sigh and met his gaze. “I like Bin but not more than anyone else in Sanang. *You are* the focus of my attention. It has always been you. It’s just that you two are always together. So when I’m around you, I also end up being around Bin. And when I’m talking to you, it looks like I’m

talking to you both. But my eyes have always been on you. And I've always talked to you, not Bin."

Jee blinked several times in rapid succession as confusion flooded his face. "You've been interested in me all this time?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

"Yes!" I leaned into Jee's space, careful not to overstep without permission again.

"Why?"

"You're my soulmate."

His eyes widened as he took a step back, almost tumbling onto the bed on top of Bin. I grabbed his hands, and he rebounded into my arms. But before I could hug him, he pushed me away and slid to the floor.

"This is crazy." He avoided my gaze.

I lowered myself to a kneeling position in front of him so we could be at eye level.

"Why is it so hard to believe? Didn't you feel it just a moment ago? Your *atar* sensed mine and came out of its hiding spot deep inside you to greet me. Didn't you feel our energies connect?"

He didn't look at me, staring at the floor in front of him.

"I don't understand," he whispered.

"I was trying to explain when things went a bit...crazy. I'm sorry about that. *Atar* is our source of power, but it is much more than that. I just haven't told you the rest."

I held his hands in mine, peering at him to make sure he was okay with the contact. He didn't pull back but looked up when

our fingers touched. His eyes were asking me so many questions, but none emerged from his lips. They were parted, as though he was about to say something but had frozen in place.

Rapid words rose out of me to fill the tension-filled space between us. My disarrayed mind made a mess of explaining what it meant to live with *atar*. I told Jee how *atar* prevented me from being intimate with anyone who did not also have *atar*. That meant any kind of close physical touch or intimate connection with normal, non-*atar* people felt anywhere from unsatisfying to repulsive. And although those of us in Tasier could form close relationships with each other and even spend our lives together, no such connection could compare to the one that I'd have with my soulmate. *Atar* helped us recognize our *atarav*, although many never found them. And once we bonded, there was nothing else like it in this world.

“Do you see how precious it is that we have found each other?”

Jee had been right about one thing. Bin, with his delicate looks and interesting energy signatures, had turned my head at first, but not as someone I'd pursue. I'd later learned that the energy signatures that had attracted my attention were spirits that often surrounded him.

“It has always been you...”

At my whisper, Jee lowered his eyes, took a quick breath in, and sharply shook his head.

“I don't have this thing called *atar*.” He spoke without hesitation, his voice quivering.

“Then what was that between us? I know you felt the connection. You only think you don’t have *atar* because it’s been hiding deep inside you. I don’t know how that’s possible, but I felt it, so I know it is there.”

I grasped his hands tighter, willing him to look at me, but he refused to meet my gaze or talk. Why was it so hard to believe what I was saying? How could he not find our connection precious?

Then reality sank in.

I’d grown up experiencing the profound love my parents had for each other. Even though they’d told me over and over how difficult it was to find one, and I might find happiness with a partner who was not my soulmate, I’d never given up hope of finding my own *atarav* one day. Serendipity had brought my parents together from two worlds that were thousands of miles apart, so why couldn’t it happen for me too?

My family had a history that was like so many Korean dramas people all over the world liked to watch. My great-grandparents had been in charge of the Tasier house in Seoul when the war broke out. Unable to leave, they’d entrusted my five-year-old grandmother to their neighbor escaping south. But instead of reuniting with their daughter, my great-grandparents had disappeared.

No one knew what happened to them, and with so much chaos and destruction during the war, finding answers was impossible. By the time someone from Tasier was able to visit the Seoul house, it had been half destroyed by a bomb. Most of the structure had at least partially burned, and all the

furniture and valuables had long disappeared. Piles of half-burned books and historical documents were found hidden in the underground vault, safe from thieves but not the ravages of war. Of course, there were no physical remains of my great-grandparents either.

Orphaned at a young age, my grandmother became a dutiful daughter to those she'd escaped with. When her adopted parents arranged for her to be married to a much older, wealthy man, she accepted with no protest, as expected of her. The marriage had been unhappy from the beginning. Her husband had many affairs even after their wedding, and his two children from a previous marriage were disrespectful to her. It was likely that he'd also abused her.

I thought it very romantic that she met my grandfather by chance at a company event she attended with her husband. It was love at first sight. Of course, my grandfather, being part of Tasier, knew she was his *atarav*, but she hadn't known who he was at first. They became close friends. She wouldn't have dared to have an affair, and he would never have pressed her for more, against her wishes. Even though she'd done nothing wrong, her husband used her friendship with my grandfather to divorce her and kick her out of the house.

Her divorce marked a happy beginning for my grandparents. My father was born a year later, and my grandparents doted on him, their only child. While at university, my father had studied abroad in Spain for a semester. He had met my mother at a party hosted by one of his professors and immediately recognized his *atarav*. So my family history was rich with romance, and I grew up believing I'd have a love story of my

own. And, as though belief in something made it possible, I'd found my soulmate in an unexpected place.

But Jee had not grown up steeped in such romantic stories. To anyone outside Tasier, or maybe to anyone outside of my family, my belief in romance might seem unrealistic and foolish. And to make matters worse, he was in love with Bin. In my excitement at having connected with him, I'd forgotten about Bin. I didn't know what to do. I knew in my heart Jee was my *atarav*. How was it possible that my soulmate was in love with someone else? Had I done something awful in my past life?

I was not jealous, though, nor was I hurt. The thought of Jee loving Bin made sense deep inside, and I was okay with it. I was just uncertain how to handle that realization.

"I understand this is a lot to process. You didn't grow up with any of this knowledge, and I dumped too much on you all at once. I'm sorry. That was never my intention. I thought we'd slowly get to know each other, and I'd have plenty of time to tell you all about the whole soulmate thing." I let go of his hands after a gentle squeeze.

When Jee didn't respond, I continued. "Just think about it? And maybe we can talk after you've had a chance to consider all that I've told you?"

I leaned forward and kissed him softly on his forehead. He flinched for a second, but his body immediately relaxed. Although he didn't look at me, he gave a small nod.

I breathed out a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

His reaction hadn't been what I'd wanted, but he hadn't dismissed me. That was something, at least.

Bin moaned, and Jee and I both jumped to our feet. Jee's attention shifted completely, and I knew the conversation between us was over for now. I could only hope there would be more.

Chapter 4. Bin

I ached from the inside out. Even my fingertips hurt. What had happened? My chest burned. I breathed in carefully, my exhale punctuated with a groan. I'd never felt this bad after any of the numerous rituals I'd performed before. *Goot* drained my energy, but I usually recovered within an hour. Tired? Yes. But hurt? Never.

But the last one had been different. Instead of being my spirit's conduit, I'd felt him enter me. I'd held him inside me. We'd been one. And we could have stayed together if my body had not been so weak. The pain I was feeling was the consequence of holding something so powerful in my mortal body.

How I'd wanted him to stay with me!

But I had hesitated. I couldn't let go of this life, not yet.

I used to think I'd never fit in this world. Life had been cruel to me, despite my parents' efforts to keep me shielded.

My parents were abnormal by Korean standards. They had married for love. My mom had met my dad while hiking the historical trails of Gyeongju Namsan with a couple of her college friends. My dad had never been outside the region near Gyeongju. His family was renowned for their shamanic powers, but other than old *hanok*, a traditional Korean house, and a sizable piece of land near Namsan, he'd had nothing. No

employment other than being *mudang*—a male one at that— and education that didn't go beyond high school.

It had been love at first sight, and they'd married despite my maternal grandparents' heavy opposition. They had threatened to disown my mom, but they couldn't, as she was the only heir and conduit to pass on the family power. My mother was the only female child of one of the seven families that had protected the lands within and around Korea for thousands of years. In every generation, one male child from each family was born with an elemental power, banding together to hunt the dark creatures. However, the power itself was passed down only through the maternal line.

As unusual as my parents' marriage had been, my childhood had been equally so. Before I started elementary school, I hadn't known how different I was from the other kids. Despite my effortlessly eloquent discussions with my parents about many esoteric topics, I was terrible at reading and writing. But they never made me feel dumb. They always listened when I voiced my opinions on all manner of subjects. I learned later that most Korean parents believed children should never speak up. My parents also never treated me like there was something wrong with me when I had highly sensitive reactions to everything—touch, sound, smell, light, taste. Sometimes even the smallest things would make me retreat to the safety of my home.

Until my first-grade teacher called my parents to ask whether I had a developmental disability, I hadn't been aware that I didn't fit in. My world crumbled, then. Despite my parents' efforts to support me, my life turned upside down. Teachers looked at me funny. Children laughed at me or

bullied me. So I concealed my true self and retreated inward. The outside world was cruel and exhausting.

But then I'd met my best friend, Jee. And became part of Sanang.

Things didn't feel so bad anymore.

"Bin, are you okay?" Jee's voice was tense with worry.

I slid one of my eyes open, just a little. His anxious face hovered close to mine, and surrounding him were faint outlines of the spirits who clamored for his bright energy.

Hmm. It was time to renew his *bujeok*. His strange inner energy always seemed to attract spirits he could not protect himself from. At least he never took off the amulet I'd gifted him many years ago. I'd been refreshing it twice a year without his knowledge, but now I could do so openly. Now that he knew I was *mudang*, I could tell him about a lot of things I'd withheld from him.

In retrospect, it seemed silly that I'd hesitated to tell my teammates I was *mudang*. I knew they wouldn't have a problem with it, but I'd still been hesitant. Having seen spirits since I could barely speak and later being bullied for my strange behaviors, my go-to mindset had been to hide my strange nature. I'd even been afraid to tell Jee, especially since he was the most skeptical one among Sanang when it came to superstition. I also didn't know how he'd react if he found out I'd been hiding his natural spirit energy, protecting him from the wandering spirits with the amulet I'd gifted him. What if he hated me for that?

"Bin?" Jee took my hand and squeezed. "You okay?"

Why couldn't one of our powers be healing? We recovered fast from physical damage, but we were still human. Based on how I felt now, I predicted I'd feel weak for a day or two. But I didn't want to worry him any more than he already was.

I returned his light squeeze with my aching hand.

"I'm okay." My voice rasped like I'd been screaming all night.

"Water?" Jav's face appeared near Jee's.

He held a water bottle with a straw near my lips.

I took a sip, coughing a little as the water hit my throat, and let go of the straw. "Thank you."

I raised my eyebrow as Jav came into focus. Well, not him, but his energy.

Hmm. Strange. Jav has the same energy pattern surrounding him as...

I frowned, blinking. I must have imagined the energy I'd glimpsed around Jav because it was gone as quickly as it had appeared. Maybe he'd been so close to Jee that I had confused Jee's energy for Jav's.

"You don't sound okay." Jee's lips pressed together in disapproval.

"I'm fine." I rose slowly to a sitting position, trying hard not to wince.

"You should rest more. You look about as fine as you sound."

Jee gently pressed me back toward the bed, but I shook my head and situated myself upright against the pillows. He

humphed his annoyance but let me do as I wished. He knew I could be stubborn.

“It took a bit more out of me than I thought to get rid of that evil spirit, but I’ll recover. How’s Wyn?”

“He woke up right after the ceremony. He seemed okay,” Jav said.

Jee scanned me from head to toe. “I wish I could send you some of my energy, like Jin and Sen or Saem and Wyn can to each other. You look too pale. You need to replenish your energy.”

I rolled my eyes. He was the over-the-top mother hen.

“I’m fine. It’s no worse than after one of the many hunts we’ve gone on.”

“But this time, you performed *goot* right after we battled *Imugi*.”

“It wasn’t just me fighting. Everyone got a bit bruised and battered. You lost a chunk of your chin. And *goot* is not like hunting. I’m not saying it requires no energy, but I mostly act as a conduit for my spirit to do the work.”

“But you did more than just channel the spirit today.”

At Jav’s words, I twitched slightly but otherwise managed to not visibly react.

How does he know?

I was not planning to tell anyone about the sky spirit entering me. Mr. Nam and my father would only worry, and the others wouldn’t understand what it meant, anyway. Some might call what happened to me a possession, but it hadn’t

been like that. To remove *aggwi* from Wyn, I'd needed more energy than I normally got from channeling my spirit. It had felt entirely natural to accept the spirit energy inside me. It wasn't as though my spirit forced himself on me. I had called him.

It had been so tempting to have my spirit be a permanent part of me and to remain in a space without the troubles of the physical body. But in the end, I couldn't say yes. I had my parents and my life with Sanang and Jee. Who'd protect him from the random spirits he seemed to attract everywhere he went? Not that all the spirits that hung around him were bad or would leach his energy, but even a few would be harmful.

Jee's face had creased with concern after Jav's words.

I glared at Jav for needlessly worrying Jee. Then, turning to Jee, I smiled. "I needed stronger energy today, so I asked the spirit to help me. That's all."

"And..." I raised my index finger at Jee when he opened his lips. "It was perfectly fine. Other than feeling sore, probably because of our fight with *Imugi*, I'm just a bit tired."

Jee opened his mouth again, but when I glared at him, he promptly closed it. We knew each other well. He knew once I decided not to listen, I wouldn't. So instead of talking, he tightened his hand around mine and eyed me with frustration and worry. And as I regarded his intense gaze, a warm wave of energy flowed in from where we touched. It traveled throughout my body, soothing away every bit of ache and fatigue. I breathed out a long sigh of pleasure. I was floating in a warm pool of water with my body being massaged by thousands of hands.

Was Jee doing this? How?

His energy had brightened, attracting a few passing spirits like moths to a flame. My mouth opened in wonder as my gaze was riveted on Jee. I couldn't turn away. His face had softened with an expression of...love? *Love?* I blinked rapidly, unable to comprehend. Then I took a shallow breath. Of course, he loved me. We loved each other. We knew each other better than our own selves sometimes. How could we not love each other? That must be it.

But as his energy merged with mine, my mind became crystal clear, connecting the social dots I often had difficulty recognizing. There was something between us. Something I wasn't familiar with. My heart sped up. My breathing quickened. I had butterflies in my stomach. What were these feelings? Were they even mine? I reeled from the onslaught of unfamiliar thoughts in my head and the warmth flowing into me. Heat pooled deep in my stomach and spread throughout my body.

I gasped as I gazed at his face.

And the realization struck me like lightning.

Jee loved me.

Our energy pulsed in sync, getting brighter each moment.

Then, like a flash, everything dimmed.

Pain slammed into my chest.

In slow motion, I saw Jee's eyes slide closed as he slumped onto the bed.

“Fuck.” Jav swore under his breath and pulled Jee into his arms.

Confused and concerned, I looked up at Jav. What had happened? A tear slid from my eye at the loss of something precious. But even as I took a choked breath, my head tilted in wonder as Jav’s energy sparked to life, mesmerizing me and the passing spirits that had been hovering around Jee.

“You’re like Jee,” I whispered.

“What?” His voice was sharp in the stillness of the room.

I flinched and shied away from him.

He grimaced. “Don’t do that. I’m sorry. I’m just worried about him.” Jav spoke softly, but his face was creased with a frown. “What did you just say?”

I raised my eyes and blinked a few times. He didn’t seem scary anymore, just worried and sad.

“I...I thought I’d imagined it, but I just saw your energy. You’re like Jee. He’s got this inner glow that attracts spirits. Most spirits aren’t bad, but there are some that try to remain in this world by stealing living energy. When I first met him, the bad ones were leaching his energy, so I asked my father to help me make *bujeok* to protect him. I gave it to him and made him promise that he’d wear it as a symbol of our friendship. But he doesn’t know that it’s an amulet to protect him. I should’ve told him about the spirits around him, but he doesn’t believe in them. I once told him his mom’s spirit comes to watch over him sometimes, and he got really upset. So I don’t talk about spirits with him anymore. But you seem to be able to shield your energy. I didn’t even see it until now. Maybe

you can teach Jee how to protect himself so he doesn't attract evil spirits. Do you know..."

Jav put his finger against my lips, and I took a quick breath.

I'm sorry, I mouthed.

I had a tendency to either become a silent robot or yammer like a fool when I felt unsettled. I watched mutely as Jav held Jee close and kissed him softly on his forehead. Then my mouth dropped open as I stared, completely fascinated by the bright energy seeping into Jee from Jav.

"You're sharing your energy with him. I didn't know you could do that. How are you doing that? You're not *mudang*. How are you able to..."

Jav stared at me, and I shut my lips. I'd been babbling again. I was still shocked by whatever had happened between Jee and me. And now Jee and Jav.

Silently, he shook his head, then shifted his hold on Jee to position Jee's head comfortably on his shoulder.

"You can sense *atar*?" Jav had a strange expression on his face as he regarded me. He was more relaxed now that Jee was in his arms.

"*Atar*?" I echoed.

I didn't know what *atar* was, but from the way he asked, I suspected it might be related to the spirit energy that I'd seen flowing between Jee and him.

When Jav briefly explained, I finally remembered Sett and Mr. Nam mentioning something about *atar*. I'd just forgotten the name. It's not that I didn't believe such things existed, but

Jee having *atar* seemed unlikely. Jav was serious, though. He suspected Jee was a healer and had inadvertently used his power to heal me. Jee hadn't known what he was doing, of course. And because he was unaware, he'd overused it.

I watched Jav's energy slowly seeping into Jee, brightening Jee's own energy. Was it possible that *atar* had properties similar to what I called spirit energy? Since I could see and connect with the spirits and knew how to handle spirit energy, perhaps I could also do so with *atar*.

"Jee doesn't believe he has *atar*." Jav gave me a pained look.

"I told you he doesn't believe in spirits."

"*Atar* is not a spirit." His sharp tone made me shrink back again.

"But..."

Jav's jaw clenched, so I closed my mouth.

"You said you gave him an amulet. What is it? What does it do?"

I hesitantly pointed to the necklace visible around Jee's neck, disappearing beneath his shirt. "It's that necklace he's wearing. It's supposed to shield his energy so the spirits can't see it."

Jav sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "If your *bujeok* has been hiding his *atar*, no wonder it took mine so long to recognize it."

Jav peered down at Jee with eyes full of...yearning? I wasn't sure if I had another word for the way he was gazing at

Jee. I'd never been good at reading people, but even I could tell there was something between them. There was a connection that I hadn't seen before. It was thin and almost transparent but still there. What had happened while I'd been unconscious?

“You...and Jee?”

Jav looked up and smiled softly. “He is my soulmate.”

But as he finished speaking, his face shadowed.

“Your soulmate? Then it's a wonderful thing? Why do you act like you're not happy about that?”

Jav's lips twisted, and his face crumpled with anguish. I furrowed my brow. Why was he so unhappy? Shouldn't he celebrate finding his soulmate?

“Why am I not happy?” He barked out a short, dry laugh. “My *atar* has chosen Jee as my soulmate, but he's in love with someone else.”

I drew in a sharp breath.

“I...”

Ah... What did one say in situations like this?

Even an emotionally stunted person like me could tell that Jav was very aware of what I'd just figured out a few minutes ago. He was talking about me. I was the one Jee was in love with.

Chapter 5. Jee

My body felt light as a feather. I drew in a deep breath, sighing with contentment. Something warm and soft yet firm cushioned my head and chest. A rhythmic, low thumping pulsed beneath my ear, which brought a strange sense of comfort and peace.

If I could just stay in this moment...

A soft breath of air blew across my forehead.

My eyes popped open.

Shit!

My cheek was resting on a hairless, well-muscled chest. The sound I'd heard had been a heartbeat. I was cocooned in warmth, a soft blanket and solid arms wrapped firmly around me. I raised my eyes, up and up, past the peaks of collarbones, the prominent Adam's apple on a sleek neck, and finally settled them on...Jav's face. His soft lips and straight nose.

His eyes were closed, his breathing even. He appeared to be sleeping. Maybe I could extricate myself without having to face Jav. I had no idea why I was sleeping on top of him. *In my bed!* But I didn't want him to find us like this when he woke up.

Holding my breath, I raised my head and slowly inched Jav's arm off my back.

Please try to get some sleep. It's not even seven yet.

I froze at Jav's voice in my head.

You need to rest more. He tightened his arm around me.

"Stop talking inside my head," I hissed.

"What are you doing in my bed?" I pushed at his arm and squirmed myself out of his hold.

Jav sighed and slid one eye open. "I fell asleep while I was replenishing your lost energy. Can we just get some more rest? I was only trying to save you from death by energy loss."

"What are you talking about?" Glancing at Bin's empty bed, I raised my voice.

"You might deny it, but you have *atar*, and you overused it."

I growled under my breath. That again? I thought we had ended that conversation with me promising I'd think about what he'd said. That had only been last night. I'd hardly had time to consider what he'd told me. And what did *atar* have to do with him landing in my bed? I was fuzzy on the details about last night, but I didn't think I'd invited him. Thankfully Bin wasn't here, or I'd have died from the embarrassment of waking up on top of Jav. I'd never been more grateful that Bin usually got up early.

Turning away from Jav, I lowered my right leg so I could get out of the bed. I wasn't in the mood to have another conversation about *atar* and soulmates at the moment.

A strong arm wrapped around me, and an involuntary squawk escaped my lips. Before I could blink, I was lying

back on top of him, chest to chest.

“What the heck?” I glared at him.

“You really need more rest, and we need to talk. I told you I’d give you time to think about us, but this isn’t about that. We need to talk about *atar* because you accidentally activated your power last night and used your ability without knowing how. That was very dangerous.” Jav’s lips pressed tightly together.

“What are you talking about?” I sighed as I shifted to rise again. “And do we really have to talk like this?”

I gestured at the two of us. Naked chests. Tangled legs. Disheveled hair. None of it made me want to talk about serious topics. Irritation flooded my mind, pushing out any semblance of nicety. I struggled in his arm, pushing hard enough at his chest to leave marks.

Jav tightened his hold on me for a second but let me go with a sigh. “Okay. I was hoping you’d rest a bit more after losing so much energy last night, but I’ll not hold you against your wish. But we *do* have to talk about what happened last night.”

Feeling a strange sense of loss when he removed his arm, I got up stiffly. I frowned. A part of me wanted to stay in bed and snuggle with Jav, and I didn’t like that one bit. He’d been so warm and comfortable. Harrumphing, I paced to the closet in my sleep pants, grumbling and cursing at the man occupying my bed. He had no boundaries! He not only invited himself to sleep with me but also thought it was okay to remove my clothes and get me changed, all while I was unconscious.

“Bin said you sleep in your lounge pants. I didn’t know how long I’d need to stay with you to replenish your energy. I was just trying to make you comfortable. Not make moves on you.”

Ugh!

I turned to glare at him. “Stop reading my thoughts.”

Jav narrowed his eyes. “I wasn’t reading your thoughts. I had to share my *atar* with you last night. Because we are *atarav* and shared our *atar*, we have a much closer connection now, which also means whatever thoughts you aim at me, I hear as though you’re actually speaking. For your information, you were practically shouting your thoughts at me. And not for the first time, I might add.”

I shook my head. “That’s absurd. My thoughts are in my head. How do they end up in yours unless you take them from my mind?”

“That’s part of being *atarav*. Soulmates are connected at a deeper level. And for someone with abilities like mine, I can’t read your thoughts if you want to hide them from me, but whatever random things that you’re not hiding come through, especially if they’re aimed at me.”

“Whatever,” I muttered as I grabbed the first pair of pants and sweater I found in the closet and stomped to the bathroom.

After starting the shower, I turned back around and let out a squeal as I practically smacked into Jav, who was standing inches from me.

“What the heck! It’s not enough that you invaded my bed. But now you’re following me into the bathroom too? Have

you ever heard of privacy? Just leave me alone,” I spat out.

I turned away again, frowning. What the heck was wrong with me? Ever since I woke up, I’d been acting unlike myself around Jav. I’d been behaving like a petulant child. Or had I been like an overly testy teenager? That was Hwa’s role, not mine.

The five of us in Sanang each behaved a bit like the elemental power we wielded. Like water, Jin usually went with the flow of the group, except if he got riled up and then he became a typhoon. Saem’s calmness was deep, like the trees and all the living plants he communed with, but he could be fierce when his protective instincts rose. Hwa was fire in every aspect. He was reactive, funny, prone to action, but like some fires that burn forever, he could also be steadfast. Bin was... He was special. Like the air, he was everywhere, taking care of everyone, but he was also untouched by everything and sometimes seemed to live outside the earthly realm.

And there was me. I was of the earth and gravity. No rash words. No abrupt reactions. Grounded was the word everyone used to describe my behavior.

Or so I thought...

Feeling a soft touch on my cheek, I looked up and flinched at the naked emotion visible in Jav’s eyes. I’d hurt him, but I hadn’t wanted that. Other than being in the same bed, he’d done nothing to deserve the way I’d treated him. I didn’t understand my emotional rollercoaster. What was wrong with me?

“I’m sorry,” I murmured as I lowered my eyes.

Something zinged to life between us through the touch of his hand, connecting us beyond this physical world we stood in. Warm energy flooded me and surrounded me, and something deep inside me responded to it. My lips slid open in a silent gasp as a swirl of conflicting emotions seeped in.

Disappointment. Love. Sadness. Hope.

The feelings... They weren't mine, yet I felt them. I was so confused.

With a soft sigh, Jav slowly lowered his hand, breaking the invisible link between us. My heart skipped a beat and spasmed in pain. *No!* I snatched his hand midair and clutched it, raising my face toward him, questioning him with my eyes. What was this? Why did it hurt to let him go?

It hurts because you are my atarav, and I am yours. He spoke the words silently.

I gave a nod and squeezed his hand tightly. Somehow, his answer made sense deep inside, although my mind couldn't process it.

"I don't know what's going on, but I can feel there's something between us. And part of me recognizes what it is, but I don't understand it."

My mind was in complete disarray. My heart was full of longing. All my life, I'd only ever loved Bin, but I couldn't ignore that there was also a connection between me and Jav. I didn't think I loved him, but every ounce of me recognized him as someone I must cherish. I just didn't know how to describe what I felt, even after Jav explained to me what was between us.

Jav pulled me into his arms. “I don’t fully understand this miracle myself, and I know this is sudden, but we’ll navigate it together. I know you love Bin, but there’s also us. No matter what happens, I will always be here for you as your *atarav*. This connection between us is not something we can ignore or cut off.”

I sighed. Comforting warmth that was already so familiar flowed into me from Jav. I let go of the uncertainty and the anger that followed it. All the negative emotions subsided with the unfamiliar sense of belonging with someone, and I realized something. I’d been so reactive because I’d been resisting this incredible sense of peace and happiness that came with belonging. I’d been scared. Could I trust whatever this was?

Jav simply held me as a myriad of emotions flashed through me. I breathed in and out quietly. Being held so tenderly by another person was an experience I hadn’t had since my mother passed away when I was young. Bin often hugged me affectionately, but his touch was different. His touch made me want to protect him. He was under my care. In Jav’s embrace, I was the one being protected and cherished.

He pressed a soft kiss into my hair, and I raised my head.

Want blossomed inside me.

And he responded to it by bending closer, his face a breath away from mine.

Our eyes met, and I fell into his dark hazel orbs. I bit into my lower lip. Anything to pull me out of this madness. But instead, I fell deeper when his eyes darkened. My lips slid open, questing for his touch. Jav swore under his breath as he swooped down to press his mouth against mine. It was only

our second kiss, but he was already familiar to me. His tongue brushed my lower lip, licking it, and I hesitantly touched mine to his.

His arms tightened around me.

What do you do to me? Jav's thoughts flitted into my mind as our tongues tangled together.

All thoughts disappeared. Desire flared as the tingling sensation ran through my body, stimulating every nerve. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him closer. Tighter. But it wasn't enough.

Want... Want... Closer... I chanted in my head as I pushed down his boxer briefs.

Anything you wish.

Jav pressed one hand into my back and pushed down my sleep pants with the other. As the fabric pooled around my feet, he lifted me into his arms, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, moaning as his groin pressed against mine. Our hard cocks rubbed against each other as our lips continued their dance.

“Hey Jee! Where the heck are you?” Hwa's loud voice came from the bedroom.

“Shit!” I hissed.

As I scrambled to set my feet down on the floor, Jav clasped me. “Shh. Stay still,” he whispered against my lips.

The bathroom door slid closed behind him as if by magic.

My eyes opened wide as he smiled.

Sometimes I forgot he could move objects with his mind.

“Jee?” Hwa’s voice was now behind the door.

“I’ll be right there. I just want to take a quick shower.” My calm voice surprised me.

“Fine! You better come fast and join us for breakfast. If you’re late, there might not be any food left. And you’ll miss Mr. Nam helping Sett cook. It’s out of this world!”

“Yes. I’m coming soon.”

I stood frozen in Jav’s embrace until he cupped my face and bent his head close to my ear. “He’s gone.”

I shivered as his warm breath caressed my cheek, but my momentary insanity was gone.

“I...” I croaked.

Unable to continue, my face burned as I pulled myself away from him.

He let me go with a soft smile and a quick caress of my hair. “I’ll go take a shower in Jin’s room and meet you in the kitchen.”

After a long, lingering look, Jav left. And as I stood under the cascade of warm water, I had to bite my lips to stop myself from calling him back to share the shower with me.

Chapter 6. Jav

From behind my dark sunglasses, my eyes followed Jee's every movement. At the photographer's direction, he leaned back against the white, velvety baroque chaise and slid open his suit jacket. Menes and I were standing near the back of the studio, scanning the crowd and acting like the bodyguards we were posing as. Several hours into the photoshoot, no one was paying attention to us anymore.

Jee was the last to be photographed, and of the Sanang members, only Hwa and Bin remained here with Menes, Hosin, and me. Sen had already left with Jin as soon as Jin's photoshoot was finished. Jin's dragon was showing some signs of life, and Jin had been pouring all his energy into helping him recover. As a result, he was often exhausted. And, of course, Sen was overprotective, fussing over him every step of the way, much to Jin's irritation. Wyn and Saem had left earlier because Wyn had his heart set on finding a home for the two of them, and they were meeting with a real estate agent to tour a few places close to Sanang House.

Watching the two couples was both heartwarming and miserable. While the connection between them was wonderful, I ached with the distance that remained between my *atarav* and me.

“Good. Now look slightly to the left. Yes! Ms. Kim, can you loosen his tie and unbutton the top three buttons? Mr. Baek,

his hair is too stiff. We want aloof and sexy, not frozen...”

The hair and wardrobe stylists ran to carry out the photographer’s instructions. I drew in a sharp breath as Jee transformed in front of me. No longer stoic and disinterested but alluring and decadent. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from him, not that I’d ever been able to.

My soulmate was perfect.

The rapid click of shutters beat in sync with camera flashes as the photographer crooned his approval at Jee. And with each word, something hot and dark inside me threatened to come out. I swallowed and pushed down the urge to lay the photographer flat on the floor. How dare he talk to Jee that way? I wanted to snatch Jee out of the bright spotlight and hide him away where only I could see him.

“Easy.” Menes’s whisper pulled me out of my dark thoughts.

“What?” I hissed back at him.

“You can’t kill everyone you think is flirting with Jee.”

“I wasn’t going to kill him. I was just...”

I stopped protesting because Menes had been partially correct. Dark thoughts of hurting the photographer, who was even now flirting with Jee, were running wild in my head. I knew some amount of flirtation often happened between photographers and their subjects to set the right mood, but this man went beyond the acceptable limit. The previous photographer who’d taken photos of Jin, Saem, and Hwa had not acted like this.

When this photographer arrived and started flirting with Bin, I'd been okay. I liked Bin, but he wasn't my *atarav*. I didn't feel any jealousy. Then Jee's shoot started, and I was ready to commit murder. I was certain the photographer's level of flirting had skyrocketed with Jee, despite Jee's typical indifferent, monosyllabic answers.

"Just what?" Menes peered at me over the rim of his shades, but his lips curled up at the corners. A rare show of emotion from him. My behavior was so foolish that it even amused Menes.

"I only envisioned sending him some mental whammy and making him pass out. Nothing big."

I trained my eyes on Jee again. He continued to follow the photographer's requests for poses, each one becoming more and more revealing. His expression was aloof, but his fatigue seeped in through our weak connection.

When was this thing going to end?

"Becoming a tad possessive, aren't we?" His voice shook with laughter.

I sighed. "You'll understand when you meet your own."

"Unfortunately, I know well what you're feeling. And more. At least your *atarav* doesn't flirt with everything that has two legs." Sarcasm dripped from Menes as he spoke.

"What?" Startled, I cast him a sidelong glance.

"You heard me," he snapped.

A sudden flare of anger emanated from him, and I blinked at the strange phenomenon. In all the time I'd known him, I'd

never seen Menes get upset. Unfortunately, there wasn't much I could do to help him. And as rapidly as it had come, the anger disappeared from Menes's face.

“You have an *atarav*?” My voice was barely above a whisper. As he nodded, my mouth dropped open. Menes had an *atarav*!

“Wh...” I snapped my mouth closed mid-word.

His expressionless face already told me he wouldn't tell me anything. But standing next to him, it was suddenly all too easy to figure out who it was. His stoic expression didn't shift as his shaded eyes remained trained on the dressing room door, where the other two remaining Sanang members had gone to change back into their street clothes. I should have seen it. It was Hwa. Menes had been overly protective of him lately. I'd thought it was because he was acting as Hwa's bodyguard, but now everything clicked into place. Menes, who rarely took any crap from anyone, let Hwa run circles around him. He even occasionally smiled at Hwa's many outrageous antics, and he wasn't prone to smiles of any kind.

“Hwa is your *atarav*?” I murmured.

“Yes.”

After the curt reply, Menes sealed his lips. I fell silent. There were so many questions I wanted to ask, but I was certain he wouldn't talk.

Jee continued to pose as requested, beautiful even as his weariness pulsed weakly through our bond. I snarled under my breath at the photographer, who was turning into my public

enemy number one. With every passing second, I was devising more and more creative ways to do him some damage.

“They should finish up shortly. That’s the last ensemble for the shoot.” Hosin appeared by my side, with Hwa and Bin in tow.

I gave him a curt nod of acknowledgment but kept my eyes on Jee and the photographer. At least he was not touching Jee since he had to stand far enough away to take the photos.

Don’t kill the photographer, Hosin sent silently.

I glanced at him with a lift of an eyebrow. Had Hosin just made a joke? His face held no amusement, but what he’d said showed a glimpse of dry wit. Ever since he got together with Sett, he’d become more relaxed. He even displayed his feelings now and then.

But no one would know if I killed him. I smirked.

I was mostly joking, of course, but Hosin frowned. *I was joking. But you don’t look like you were.*

I shrugged. *It was a joke.*

Maybe.

“Is Jee done yet?” Bin asked as he buttoned his jacket.

He’d already removed most of the thick makeup they’d layered on him for the photoshoot, but the faint signs of lipstick and eyeliner were still visible. Even with minimal makeup, he was ethereally beautiful. The faint liner around his eyes gave them a smoky look. My heart sank a little as I watched him brush back a lock of the soft dark hair that framed his face. Of course Jee was in love with him. How

could he not be? Bin was a perfect angel of a person. And he brought out a strange protective instinct in everyone, even if he could lay any monster flat without lifting a finger.

Hosin shook his head in response to Bin's question.

“Any idea when we might get to eat?”

Hwa wedged himself between Hosin and Menes and flashed a mesmerizing smile at Menes. The corners of Menes's mouth twitched upward.

I watched open-mouthed as Hwa turned and winked at the hairstylist who'd been standing near us. She'd been gazing at him with admiration. After that, he waved at a wardrobe manager who was walking by with a rolling hanger full of clothes and then smiled at yet another staff member. Hwa seemed to know everyone, and he had a little smile or wave for each of them. At each friendly, playful gesture, Menes's face and shoulders tensed further.

Poor Menes. Hwa definitely flirted with him, but he seemed equally flirtatious with everyone around him. From the way he acted, I didn't think Hwa had any idea what it was doing to Menes. Of course, it was strange that Menes thought Hwa was his soulmate. I didn't sense any *atar* in him. Unless Hwa was hiding it like Jee had been. How could someone without *atar* be Menes's *atarav*? And why was Menes keeping silent about his feelings for Hwa?

Atar and *atarav* were something I'd learned about growing up, and I'd expected my soulmate to have the same understanding about them. I'd never considered the possibility I'd meet someone who knew nothing about them. I had always imagined that my *atarav* and I would recognize each other at

first sight and run madly toward each other, hug, kiss... Well, none of that had happened, but at least I'd told Jee he was my soulmate. I hadn't been able to stop myself.

Why hadn't Menes? Didn't he want to be with his soulmate? It had hurt me to be near Jee without telling him, and it was hurting Menes.

Why didn't you tell him?

When I sent him the question, Menes glanced at me, but he was silent as he returned his gaze to Hwa. I shook my head. I had no clue what he was thinking, but it wasn't my business.

"Bin, let's go get *suta jajang*. It's on the way back home." Hwa poked Bin on his shoulder.

Bin gave him a sidelong glance. "Did you forget Saem scheduled us to broadcast 'Wake Up with Sanang' tomorrow? If we eat greasy noodle dishes tonight, we're going to look bloated on camera tomorrow."

Hwa rolled his eyes. "You have the least to worry about. You eat like an elephant, but you never gain weight, and I've never ever seen you bloated."

"You should all get back and rest after Jee is done. Full schedule tomorrow," Hosin said, lips flattened as he studied the photographer.

I narrowed my eyes. Had Hosin noticed the photographer being unprofessional and blatantly hitting on Jee? Was he going to do something about it? I held my breath, waiting, but Hosin just continued to observe the man closely without acting.

“But we have to eat. We’ve had nothing since brunch. We’ve been stuck here almost all day,” Hwa whined.

Hosin said nothing.

“What about takeout? We can begin resting as we eat.” Hwa grinned and batted his eyes at Hosin, then at Bin.

Bin puffed out a small sigh, and Hosin nodded.

“Whoo! I’ll text everyone asking what they want,” Hwa said.

He turned to Menes, beaming. “You’ll help me pick up the food, right?”

As Hwa blinked prettily at him, Menes huffed, nodding his head resignedly. Of course, what Hwa meant by helping him was that Menes would be the one to pick up the food since Hwa was a celebrity and couldn’t just pop into the restaurant.

The photographer announced the end of the photoshoot with a loud voice that echoed through the studio space. “Fabulous! That’s a wrap. Jee, my lovely darling, why don’t you come have dinner with us? We’re all going out to celebrate. Bin and Hwa should come along, too.”

Jee’s irritation flared, but he displayed none of his feelings outwardly.

“We have another meeting.” Jee bowed and walked toward the dressing room.

“What the...” I swallowed the swear words that were about to escape my lips as the photographer blocked Jee’s path.

His hand wrapped around Jee’s arm.

I saw red.

Hosin put a hand on my shoulder as I was about to bound over.

I know what you're feeling, but you can't react like that here. I'll take care of it.

Shaking, I breathed in and out, shifting my weight between my feet to stay in place instead of jumping on the man as I wanted to. My eyes were glued to Jee as Hosin swooped in and firmly told the photographer about our prior commitment, at the same time removing his hand from Jee. With an irritated huff, the photographer finally moved on to flirting with another staff member. I let out a slow breath and glared at him until he disappeared from the room. I should have been the one to protect my *atarav*. Yet I'd stood helplessly as someone else saved him from that vulture.

It would have been so simple to just...

"Don't finish that thought. I can almost hear what you're thinking," Menes murmured.

"What?" Hwa raised both his eyebrows.

"Jee will be here soon, and we can go. You must be tired." Bin's eyes softened.

He must have noticed me acting strangely. Of course, he probably thought I was fidgeting because it had been a long day and I wanted to leave. I sighed and nodded, although he was off the mark. As much as I wanted to hate Bin for being the object of Jee's affection, it was impossible. Bin was a kind soul, even though sometimes he seemed to not belong in this world—as if he were only a spirit that came down to briefly rest here.

Chapter 7. Bin

When we got back, Saem and Wyn were already sipping hot tea in the living room. Jee waved at them before going to take off his makeup, which he hadn't done at the studio in his haste to get away, and Jav followed him after him. As I watched them disappear into the room, images from last night popped into my head. Jee was in love with me. And Jav had pretty much confirmed it.

I didn't know what to do with that information. I just knew that I couldn't imagine my life without Jee in it. It had been like that since I'd first met him. He was the first person other than my parents who'd accepted me for who I was. And I cared for him like no one else in the world. But Jav was talking about the kind of love I'd seen in movies and dramas. Dating. Falling in love. Kissing. Sex. Marriage. I wasn't sure I could do that with anyone.

I'd always thought Jee loved me like I loved him. He couldn't really be in love with me, could he? My head spun as my thoughts ran in all directions, incoherent and distressing. And I knew only one way to deal with such a situation. I pushed my runaway thoughts into the deepest corner of my mind and smiled at Saem and Wyn. It was so much easier to focus my thoughts on other people's problems. Wyn, who was usually in good spirits, was grumpy today, and Saem was scowling.

“What happened?” I sat down on a couch near them.

Wyn sniffled. “Some stupid politician swooped in and snatched away our perfect apartment. We fell in love with it at first sight and were ready to sign the final papers, but it fell through at the last moment.”

“We’ll find another one soon. A better one. Maybe this one wasn’t meant to be.” Saem wrapped his arm around Wyn.

Wyn shook his head. “No, we won’t. It was perfect. We can’t find another perfection. It had everything. Just ten minutes from here. Top floor with a view. All the modern amenities. Brand-new building...”

As Wyn whined, Saem patted his hair and peppered kisses on his temple with an expression of helplessness on his face.

“Hey, how did the house-hunting go?” Hwa called from the entryway.

He and Menes appeared, each carrying two giant cardboard boxes filled to the brim with large plastic food dishes. I breathed in the mingling aromas of the different items we’d ordered. The food smelled delicious even through the tight plastic wrapping that covered the take-out containers.

Wyn’s face shifted from morose to cheerful in an instant. “Oh! The food is here! It’s from that Korean Chinese restaurant, right? I asked Saem to order me some of those tasty handmade noodles with black bean sauce, *ja...jang...myeon*?”

“Yes. That’s the place. We got an extra large *jajangmyeon* for everyone to share and also got two large *tangsuyuk*. And for Sett, we got *giseumyeon* as he requested. When is he

coming, anyway? Where are Jin and Sen?” Hwa looked around as though they might be hiding in some corner.

“Mr. Nam was picking Sett up on his way back, but they’re not here yet,” I said as Hwa and Menes unloaded the take-out boxes onto the dining table.

“I think I might move back to Sanang House.” Jin strode in, looking piqued, with Sen following close behind him. As Jin marched toward us without a glance in Sen’s direction, Sen reached out several times to touch him, but Jin moved out of his grasp every time.

Jin sat down, huffing.

Clearly miserable, Sen settled next to him.

“If you do, you’ll have to share a room with Hwa. Wyn and I are using your old room,” Saem said, and Jin wrinkled his nose.

“*Merwati*,” Sen whispered, taking Jin’s hand in his, anguish written across his face. Jin narrowed his eyes and turned away.

“You can totally come back and share a room with me. We’ll have so much fun together. Having a room to myself is great, but I sort of miss having a roommate.”

Hwa gave Saem a sad face, but I knew it was fake. He’d been having the time of his life without Saem cleaning up after him and nagging him to keep their room tidy.

Sen glared at Hwa, but his shoulders sagged with relief when Jin didn’t respond to Hwa’s offer. He leaned forward, peering into Jin’s face, but Jin ignored him. No words were spoken aloud, and the tension stretched for minutes as they argued silently. Slowly, Jin’s body relaxed, and he finally let

out a sigh and laid his head on his mate's shoulder. Sen beamed.

“Thanks, Hwa. I'll think about it. Having to sneak in and out of Sanang House is getting old, but I sort of like having my own place.” Jin shrugged.

Mr. Nam came in with Sett just as we finished unloading the take-out boxes, and Jee returned from our room with Jav, his face now clean of the thick makeup. Everyone grabbed their food, and silence fell as we ate. Eating a proper meal was an anticipated event for everyone. We had to eat several times the average person's caloric intake each day thanks to our supernatural bodies. But we didn't always have time to sit for a meal, so we often ended up making do with energy bars, snacks, and easily portable foods, like sandwiches. Being able to sit and enjoy good food brought smiles to everyone's face.

While we ate, my gaze frequently strayed toward Jee and Jav. Jee seemed nervous and distracted. Occasionally, he'd glance up at Jav and, finding Jav's eyes on him, he'd quickly look away. I wrinkled my nose. Something must have happened between them when Jee went to remove his makeup and Jav followed.

“So? The house?” Hwa broke the silence and lifted an eyebrow at Saem.

Saem sighed, and Wyn scowled and muttered, “Nothing. Absolutely nothing!”

Hwa opened his mouth, but Saem cut him off with a shake of his head. “Don't ask.”

Hwa frowned questioningly, but when Saem gave him a long look, he shrugged and said nothing more.

“I’m sorry,” Sett said.

Wyn’s face fell, and Saem wrapped an arm around him and rubbed his shoulder.

“Sett.” Jav abruptly raised his head from his food.

“Hmm?” Sett turned toward him.

Jee grabbed Jav’s arm. “We can talk about that later.” It was a plea more than a statement.

Jav shook his head. “We agreed to talk about it at dinner. You can’t make this go away. You could have been in serious trouble last night. Besides, Sett and Hosin can probably already sense it.”

Jee breathed out a sigh, and I laid a hand on his arm. “What is it?” I asked quietly.

“Nothing.” He turned and gave me a flash of a smile, but there was definitely something.

“It’s not...” Jav started, and I turned to Jav, hoping he’d tell me what was going on.

Jav was frowning, although not at anyone in particular. He seemed more worried than annoyed. Jav gave Jee a meaningful look, and Jee sighed again. Their eyes met, and their expressions shifted as they spoke silently to one another.

My hand dropped from Jee’s arm. The connection between them was palpable, and I was not part of it. I was no longer the center of Jee’s world. An ache spread through my chest as part of me mourned the loss of that place in his life. From the first

time I'd met him, Jee had always put me before others, no matter how busy he was or how many people were around him. Now that had to change. Jav had said they were soulmates. I could no longer be Jee's number one because that spot belonged to Jav.

"Why don't you just tell him?" Jee snapped.

He was clearly not happy. I'd never seen him react so brusquely to anyone. My hand shot out to rest on his, and I squeezed lightly. Jee turned to face me, and my lips opened to ask, but at his conflicted expression, no words came out of my mouth. I didn't know how to make things better. Throughout my life, I'd never known the proper words to offer comfort.

"Jav, why don't you tell me? Or perhaps you'd like to talk privately?" Sett's voice was gentle.

Jee glanced up at Sett but quickly looked down after meeting his eyes. "It's fine to talk here. Everyone should know, anyway," he mumbled.

"I have a new ability." Jee looked up slowly, hesitantly.

He gulped.

"To be specific, he's got a new ability because he has *atar*." Jav wrapped his hand around Jee's where it rested on the table, and Jee's shoulders relaxed.

Sett, Menes, and Mr. Nam didn't seem surprised by Jav's statement, but the rest of us glanced back and forth between Sett and Jav, asking without saying.

Sett drew in a deep breath. "That is not surprising since I sense his *atar* now, but I had not sensed it before. Has his

ability manifested recently? Strange that it has only just shown itself. *Atar* usually appears at a much earlier age.”

Jav gave me a frustrated look, and I cringed. It was my fault that Jee’s *atar* had remained hidden.

“Bin gave Jee *bujeok* to keep his *atar* hidden,” Jav said.

Jee’s eyes settled on me, questioning. I lowered my gaze. I should have told him about *bujeok*, but I’d been afraid.

I’d learned to fear confiding in people that I was born with spirit power and saw supernatural things. Although *mudang* had been revered for their powers in ancient times, a huge stigma was associated with being one now. That’s why, as far back as I could remember, my father had told me never to reveal my ability to anyone outside the belief circle. But having lived isolated with my parents throughout my younger years, I hadn’t understood why he’d given me that advice until later.

By the time I started elementary school, spirits had been an integral part of my life. Good. Bad. Transient. Powerful. I grew up surrounded by them rather than people. Then in school, for the first time, I was surrounded by kids my age. The trouble started on the very first day. Forgetting my father’s advice, I made a mistake and told someone that I could see spirits and would become *mudang* like my father one day. I quickly learned how cruel my peers could be. One little slip, and bullying and isolation had followed me for years. And school became misery itself.

Of course, I knew Jee was different. He’d been there for me from the very first moment we met. I knew I behaved oddly even without the spirits involved, but he’d accepted me despite

my strange hangups. Even so, I'd still been afraid he wouldn't accept yet another strange part of me. Jee had often spoken out against his superstitious adopted parents, his expression full of contempt whenever he talked about rituals they took part in. I didn't want that directed at me.

How could I tell him I was *mudang*, the center of all superstition, when he despised them? But the truth was out now.

"I..." I plucked at my pants with my nonexistent nails. "I thought I was helping. The evil spirits were always hanging around Jee, attracted by his energy. I didn't want them leaching energy from him and making him sick. I didn't know I was blocking his *atar*."

My heart fluttered with anxiety. What if I'd inadvertently done something to harm Jee? Jav had implied that Jee could have been in serious trouble. Had I caused it?

"You've done nothing wrong," Sett said.

I looked up to find Sett smiling gently. I returned it with a tiny smile of my own and directed my wary gaze to Jee and Jav. Jee was lost in thought, and Jav was studying him. Neither of them seemed to hate me, at least from what I could tell. But I was notoriously bad at reading people, so they could be upset with me and I might not realize it.

"No need to fret. You probably helped him more than hurt him. You shielded him from his *atar* until he met people who could help him control and wield it. It's interesting, though. I didn't know *atar* could be hidden like that. The only way I know *atar* can be hidden is to bind it, but that can be a terrible experience and not something we do lightly."

Even with Sett's reassuring words, my worry didn't go away. I was still terrified I might have put Jee in danger. Sett thought kindly of everyone, and he'd likely try to make me feel better even if I'd done something wrong.

"Bin can somehow see or sense *atar* without having it." Jav glanced at me, and I flinched.

Fear crept deeper into my heart. I now had another strange ability, thanks to my spirit powers. I cautiously looked around the table. The other members of Sanang were like my family, and the people from Tasier were quickly becoming vital to us. Not one of them had ever offered me anything other than support. While their faces shone with curiosity and intrigue, there was none of the disgust or fear I'd come to dread. I let out a slow breath, and the tension eased out of my body. I should have known they wouldn't treat me as a monster for having powers. But the fear ingrained from the trauma I'd experienced at a young age was hard to overcome.

"Hmm." Sett rubbed his chin.

"I think..." I began, and Sett's eyes settled on me. "I think *atar* might be related to spirit energy." My voice was small and hesitant, but I managed to get the words out.

I bit my lower lip as my anxiety rose. Even surrounded by those I considered close to me, I still felt like a fish out of water when I was the focus. I turned my gaze to Jee out of habit. He was my rock in every social situation. If he was there, everything would be okay. Our eyes met, and I let go of the breath I hadn't realized I was holding when his face softened into a smile.

“I hadn’t considered that, but if it’s true, I can understand why you’re able to see and interact with *atar* like you do with spirits.” Sett tapped his finger on his chin as he directed his gaze at me. “I’d like to consult a friend about this. Would you be willing to talk about this with us later?”

I nodded. I’d never thought to analyze my spirit powers, but if there was something tangible that could be studied, I wanted to know more about it.

Sett turned to Jav. “You said Jee had an incident with his *atar*. Can you tell us what happened?”

Jav looked at Jee, brow creased with worry. “Jee’s ability manifested for the first time last night. Bin was hurt, and I think Jee’s desperation to heal him brought it out. But Jee didn’t know what he was doing, so he overdrew on his power. He could have depleted or damaged his *atar* if I hadn’t been there. And maybe his *atar* had become unstable after being hidden for so long and couldn’t be contained anymore.”

I gasped as last night’s event replayed in my head. I’d thought Jav had been angry because he’d realized his soulmate was in love with me. Scared by his reaction, I’d run away and ended up spending the night in Hwa’s room. But now I could see that he’d been worried sick and frantic when Jee had passed out.

Chapter 8. Jee

“Um... I don't think there's anything wrong with Jee's *atar*. It's my *bujeok*. It has to be renewed periodically, or its protection wanes. Our lives got crazier than ever when *Imugi* appeared, and I forgot to renew the *bujeok*. That's why his *atar* is visible now.”

As he spoke, Bin alternated between staring at me and avoiding me. I ping-ponged between needing to wrap him in a tight hug and wanting to push him away to hide the hurt inside. I'd thought I knew him better than anyone else, but perhaps I didn't. It stung that he'd hidden so much about himself from me. But of course, it was stupid of me to think he'd share everything.

Bin said nothing unless prodded. His way of dealing with situations that involved fear and anxiety was to not deal with them at all. He was an expert at brushing problems aside and pretending they didn't exist. Then his pretense magically became reality, and he forgot the problems. I knew he'd been too scared to tell me about *bujeok* and becoming *mudang*; he'd pushed them into that magical place until he needed to deal with them, and then promptly forgot them again.

So how could I resent him or be angry at him for being himself?

As was my habit, I absently fingered the small necklace Bin had given me when we were just children. He'd shyly offered me a crudely carved wooden token about a centimeter in diameter with woven thread to go around my neck. The vulnerable way he'd looked at me, asking for acceptance, as he told me he'd carved it himself, had made me want to cherish it forever. I'd only ever taken it off once as a teen, when I'd replaced the worn thread with a leather cord. It had been the first gift anyone had given to me from the heart. I often imagined there was a piece of Bin's heart in it, spreading warmth through my body when unhappy memories threatened to take over.

The necklace had even been a lasting point of discussion on our fan chat site. Since I always wore it, no matter what other jewelry I might have on, people noticed it. There were lots of rumors about what it was, from it being some secret cult symbol to a ploy for attention. The chats about it still flared up now and again, but as I was the 'enigmatic Jee' to fans of Sanang, no one knew the backstory. And no one would ever know I considered the necklace a piece of Bin's heart I carried around me at all times.

"That's my *bujeok*."

At Bin's words, I surfaced from my thoughts.

"May I examine it?" Sett asked me.

My hand froze on the necklace, my initial response to his question being a vehement *no*. I didn't want anyone to touch it. But I also knew Sett was asking to see it for a good reason. Reluctantly, I nodded and handed it over to him. As soon as it left my neck, I felt its loss.

I warily watched Sett as he studied it from every angle. “Fascinating. I don’t know how this works. I sense nothing from it.”

“You sense nothing from it because it no longer has any protective power. That’s also why Jee’s energy is now visible. I should have renewed it over a month ago. Let me...”

Bin held out his hand and, after studying it for a few more seconds, Sett offered the necklace to him. “Perhaps it would be better for Jee’s *atar* to not be hidden any longer. It’s time for him to learn to control his powers, don’t you think? I will ask one of our healers to help him.”

Before Bin could take the necklace, I grabbed it first. “If there’s no reason to renew its spell, I’ll just take it.”

Sett looked thoughtful, but Bin’s stunned expression made my breath stutter as I quickly put *bujeok* back around my neck. Its familiar weight comforted me, soothing the nervous energy that had risen while it was gone. Bin might never return my feelings, but I loved him and I wanted to have a piece of him with me.

Bin’s hand grabbed mine as I fingered the wooden token. Our eyes met, and he wrinkled his nose at his hand as though it were a foreign object. When he looked up, there was regret and sadness in his eyes. My chest tightened. What had made him sad? I could never bear to see him unhappy.

I put my other hand on top of his and slowly raised it to place a soft kiss on the back. The corners of his mouth lifted into a tiny smile. I wished I could communicate with Bin the way I could now with Jav. Then we could talk right this minute with no one else listening in. Something was bugging

him, but I knew if I didn't get him to talk now, he'd just brush it aside. I wanted to reassure him that whatever was bothering him would be okay.

I let out a sigh.

There was no time for anything. The last few months had been a blur. So much had happened. Discovering the existence of evil *Imugi*. Jin's kidnapping. Saem losing his tiger. Traveling back in time to fix the timeline. Driving the evil spirit out of Wyn. All of that had been on top of our regularly scheduled performances, photoshoots, and appearances to maintain our cover as a K-pop group. And, of course, there was also our work as hunters.

Jav put his hand on my thigh. *What is it, atarav-ne?*

Nothing. I guess I'm just tired.

Should we excuse ourselves and go rest?

"Who are you planning to call to help Jee?" Menes asked Sett, and I pulled myself out of my head.

"I have someone in mind." Sett flashed Menes a secretive smile, then turned to me. "It might be prudent for you to be careful while you hunt until we know how your new ability may affect your other powers."

I furrowed my brow. "But..."

Before I could finish, Mr. Nam nodded. "That seems wise."

Something rose inside me. I shivered as it spread through my body, filling it with turbulent emotions that threatened to spill out. I didn't want to be left behind while the others were

fighting dark creatures and putting themselves in danger. I opened my mouth to protest.

Mr. Nam raised a hand to stop me. “You’ll still be part of the hunt. Sett said you have to be careful, not that you can’t be part of it.”

I snapped my mouth shut and took a long breath. These emotional ups and downs were unfamiliar territory. I wasn’t the type to be swept up by feelings, so I didn’t know how to deal with these runaway reactions.

Jav shifted his hand to my back and gave me a gentle rub. The unruly emotions settled with the warmth pouring through his touch. Something inside me that had wanted to pour out calmed, and my body relaxed. I hadn’t realized I’d been clenching every muscle.

What the heck is wrong with me?

There’s nothing wrong. It’s your atar. Atar sometimes feels like it has a personality of its own, and that’s what’s affecting your emotions. Don’t worry. Once you become familiar with it, things will be much better.

I shivered as Jav’s silent words flowed into me. Hearing someone’s thoughts in my head had been strange at first, but it already felt so natural. The intimacy of being so connected to another person was addictive.

I feel the same, atarav-ne.

Jav’s words seeped into me like the sweet, fluffy whipped cream in the cream puffs I loved so much. The problem was, they didn’t always sit well in my stomach afterward since I had some trouble digesting dairy. But even knowing the

outcome, I still ate them. I wondered what consequences I'd have to face if I were to be with Jav. Surely more than eating cream puffs. And was it bad that I already wanted that, no matter what price I might have to pay?

That thought started out so well. I'd have been happy to be your cream puff. And maybe a bit of me would linger on your lower lip, or a tiny dollop of me could run down your lovely chest.

I drew in a sharp breath. My body responded immediately to the image he'd evoked. Heat crept up my neck. The memory of this morning flooded my mind. I'd shamelessly rubbed myself against him, and if Hwa hadn't interrupted us, I didn't know how far we'd have gone. I'd been too busy all day to dwell on it, but now the memory came back in full force.

And with it, utter embarrassment at how I'd behaved.

And that led to irritation.

Stop reading my thoughts. And what the heck is atarav-ne, anyway? I shot back, avoiding his gaze. If I looked at him now, I knew I'd find him smiling, and I'd have a hard time not smacking him in the face. I had to focus. Mr. Nam was talking about our schedule, but whatever he was saying sounded like gibberish.

It translates to my soulmate, but it is a term of endearment for the one you're destined to be with.

His voice inside my head was deep and husky. I didn't know how that was possible, as he hadn't spoken out loud. I clenched my hands into fists to stop myself from reacting again, and Bin gently tapped on my arm. When I glanced at

him, he was looking at me questioningly. I shook my head. I didn't know what was happening to me, either.

Bin glanced toward our room with his eyes, asking if I wanted to leave. Mr. Nam had moved on and was now busy discussing the logistics of our schedule for the next few days with Wyn and Saem. Jin was leaning against Sen with his eyes closed, asleep. Menes and Hwa were stacking the used dishes at the far corner of the table.

Sett stood and piled the empty take-out containers into a tall stack. When Bin reached out to grab the plates Sett had not gathered, Sett stopped him.

“No need. You must all be tired after the photoshoot.” He collected the rest and paused before heading to the kitchen. “Go rest. I'm sure you also have some other things to talk about.”

Bin rose and tugged on my hand. I followed him as he led me to our room, Jav close behind us. As soon as we entered, Bin settled himself down on his bed and breathed out a sigh. I sat across from him on mine, and Jav went to the chair by the window, once more leaning back to balance precariously on only two chair legs.

I raised an eyebrow. “Aren't you supposed to go to the guest house?”

“I was hoping to stay with you, with us being soulmates and all,” Jav said, grinning widely.

“Are you crazy?” Irritation dripped from my voice, but I couldn't help my face from flushing.

Ugh. I hated my reactions to him.

“Um. I can sleep in Hwa’s room.”

I looked up at the uncertainty in Bin’s voice. He was trying so hard to put a smile on his face, but after so many years together, I knew what he was feeling even before he knew it himself. Insecurity and sadness radiated from his posture as he curled in on himself. Jav had not exaggerated when he’d implied we were joined at the hip. We’d been the one constant in each other’s lives since we were young. Bin needed someone he could trust. Someone who could accept his oddities. His parents were wonderful, but they couldn’t be part of every aspect of his life, especially now that he was an adult.

And I’d been there for him.

Until I got distracted by Jav.

I crossed the short distance between us and sat down next to him on his bed. When I wrapped my arm around him, he stiffened but quickly relaxed and leaned against my shoulder. I sighed and rested my chin on his head as I tucked him closer. He fit perfectly in my arms.

We sat silently until Jav got up from his chair. I followed his movement with my eyes as he sauntered over and sat down next to me and slung his arm around my shoulder. He squeezed it reassuringly, his finger briefly caressing Bin’s hair. Sandwiched between these two people, I felt complete as a sense of calm energy surrounded us and anchored us together.

I understand how important Bin is to you. I’d never ask you to change that.

Warmth seeped in from where Jav touched me. It was becoming familiar, this strange energy we both had that craved

constant connection. And part of me knew what we had between us was inevitable, but I couldn't accept it if it meant I had to choose only him. I needed Bin, and I couldn't stop loving him. I didn't want to stop loving him.

Jav's understanding and acceptance of what I needed flowed through our bond. His love, too. He would accept Bin as part of our lives because that was what I needed.

But before I could react, I was tugged into a web of mind links.

Chapter 9. Jav

Jav, can you link our minds together and shield them? Jee had just begun to relax in my arms when Hosin's urgent mental message came through.

I drew from my power, tapping a brief warning in everyone's minds before forming connections between us. The web of minds linked with me as a central node, and I extended my protective mental shield around it.

Done, I replied to Hosin.

We'd practiced linking our minds after the emergency connection we'd had to create during the battle with *Imugi*. After a few practice sessions, everyone knew what to expect. Having linked minds was a powerful tool during battles. We could communicate silently, and those of us with a shielding ability could protect everyone's minds from intrusion. But the link was also disorienting since stray thoughts projected to the group could be confusing. The practice had helped everyone learn to conceal those stray thoughts in case a link was necessary again.

As I waited for Hosin to say more, the lights abruptly blinked out, and an eerie darkness fell around us. Jee went stiff in my arm, and Bin froze beneath my hand. No outside light seeped in through the window, not a hint of moonlight shining through the overcast night sky. Tall walls and shutters

protected Sanang House from prying eyes outside. Without the lights in the gardens and inside the house, there was nothing else to illuminate it.

On high alert, I sent tentacles of my senses out wide, searching for any sign of a threat. It could be a simple power outage, and I might be overreacting, but a sudden cut in electricity usually posed a threat. My shoulders tensed when I sensed the presence of several outsiders nearby.

There are intruders. What's going on? I asked Hosin through our group mind link.

My mind went blank as a surge of potent energy poured into the web from Sett to strengthen my mental shield. I drew in a sharp breath, awed by his power. I had not known how formidable his *atar* was until that moment.

Please do not be alarmed. I'm just strengthening our mental defense. One of the five attackers has mental abilities. We lost touch with our man at the gate, and he just tried to tap into Wyn's mind, Sett said.

Are you all right? I asked Wyn.

Yes. Sett and Hosin wouldn't let anything happen to me. I'm sorry. I should have put the ward back around the house as soon as we got back. It completely escaped my mind that my ward wore away while we traveled back in time. I'm erecting a shield by the front door for now. I'll have to remember to re-ward this house after we take care of the emergency.

Wyn sounded distracted toward the end.

The three of you can sit tight for a moment, Hosin commanded.

I turned my head to place a soft kiss on Jee's temple.

Are you all right? I asked privately.

Jee laid his head on my shoulder but said nothing.

Soulmates have their own private mental link. No one should be able to hear if you send your thoughts to me.

Was I supposed to hear that? Bin's thought flowed into what I'd thought was a channel just between Jee and me.

You can hear us? How is that possible?

Um. I don't know? Bin replied hesitantly.

I frowned in the dark, unable to fathom how Bin had somehow linked to Jee and me. We weren't completely bonded yet, but the connection between *atarav* shouldn't allow anyone else to interfere. Was Bin's link with us because Jee loved him? I accepted Bin in Jee's life, but I didn't know what that meant. Did it mean Jee and I could never fully bond? Unreasonable fear of something I didn't understand punched me in the gut. I'd never imagined my soulmate would be in love with someone else.

Jee grabbed my hand in the darkness as if he'd sensed my distress. The metaphysical bond that had been simmering in the background hummed to life. He shivered, and on instinct, I sent a gentle wave of warmth through our connection. Moments later, I felt him return it. My insides warmed all over with love, my confusion and anxiety forgotten. My soulmate was certainly a fast learner.

I can feel all of that between you two. Bin's soft voice interrupted my delight.

What the heck was going on?

Jav, Jee, and Bin. Meet us downstairs. We are all here. Wyn will send a light to guide you.

At Hosin's silent message, I stood and pulled Jee up with me. A glowing orb the size of a golf ball appeared in the doorway, floating ahead of us as it dimly illuminated our passage. We followed the light guiding us, me in front with Jee and Bin trailing behind. Before we could reach the others, the muffled report of guns erupted in the near darkness, and I dropped to the floor, pulling the other two with me. Wyn's translucent shield was protecting us, but the instinct was hard to ignore.

There you are! Hwa beckoned us forward. Sett and Hosin were standing in the open kitchen, and the others were congregated in the open room by the front door we used as both a living and dining room. The scene in front of me was surreal, as though I were watching an action movie in slow motion. The rapid, suppressed sounds of guns filled the air as smoke shielded the five assailants standing near the front door. I winced as I helped Jee and Bin stand, cautiously making our way to the others.

Do we know who they are? I asked Sett.

Not precisely, but the one with telepathy has atar.

I wondered if that was the case.

He's powerful, although not as strong as you or me.

But he's not Tasier, which means Kahar? Here? Why?

Kahar was an anti-Tasier group—a group of *atar* purists that aimed to assassinate some of the higher circle members of

Tasier. They targeted those with *atar* who were not of pure blood, meaning almost everyone in Tasier. But there was no reason for Kahar to go after Sanang, except...

Dread filled my stomach. Could they have found out about Jee? It wasn't possible. We'd only just learned about his *atar* last night. That meant these assailants were probably after those of us in Tasier. Since Sett and Menes were pure bloods, the only ones they might be looking for were Hosin and me. And the only reason Kahar would have focused their attention here was because Netru came to help Sanang.

"They must be here for Hosin and me, then," I muttered aloud.

"I don't think this is Kahar's doing. The man with *atar* is at least half human," Sett said.

So the assailant with mental powers was a mixed blood? Kahar employed human mercenaries since they were expendable, but they would never hire someone of mixed blood. That meant these assassins were not after me and Hosin, after all.

The muffled sounds of gunfire ceased abruptly, but the smoky shield remained in place.

Did they run out of bullets? Wyn asked as he yawned.

Probably not. More likely, they realized bullets aren't doing anything, Menes said.

*You should get some rest. You only recovered from *aggwi* yesterday and just spent a lot of energy casting the shield.* Saem's worried thought came through.

Not until the bad guys go away, Wyn said.

It's too smoky to see what they're doing.

At Hwa's complaint, a slight wind rose from nowhere, probably Bin's doing. As the air moved, the smoke shifted to the side, revealing the first attacker, crouched down and dressed from head to toe in black tactical gear, including a gas mask.

How useful! I didn't know your shield also blocked the gas, I said.

It's an all-purpose shield. Wyn smiled.

This is too easy. Tiny flames rose in Hwa's hands.

There is no need to hurt them. Menes's severe voice rang through our link as he pulled Hwa flush against his chest.

I wasn't going to hurt them. Just scare them. Hwa pouted but settled into Menes' arms with a grin.

I don't believe scaring them is necessary, Sett said with a twitch of amusement on his lips. *We can just put them to sleep. Although the one with the mental ability will pose a minor challenge, as he seems to know how to shield his mind. The rest will be too easy, as Hwa said.*

I can help, I said.

No. Hosin's quick response stopped me. *You must continue to maintain the shielding of the others, just in case that one tries to attack someone's mind. Sett and I can handle this.*

Sett and Hosin disconnected from our linked minds, and I scanned the shield surrounding our mind web for any sign of intrusion. Finding none, I stood watching as the smoke cleared, feeling rather useless. My primary ability was

manipulating and controlling minds, but I often found mental battles to be tedious. It was preferable to shooting or hitting someone, but sometimes I liked the thrill of physical fighting. That's partly why I spent so many years training in martial arts. It disciplined the mind and also the body.

Three more assailants became visible. One of them stood out as a leader as he was directing the others with hand signals. And I knew he was also the one with mental powers. As I studied the figure, crouched like the others, with the same dark, tight uniform and gas mask, gun in his hand, I couldn't help but be curious about who he was. As an organization, Tasier was expert at using its vast network to bring those with *atar* into its fold. Its main purpose was to provide for and protect people like me. I wondered where this guy was from, that he'd flown completely under Tasier's radar.

Shit!

Bin swore loudly through our link. I winced as his thoughts rang through our minds. Then, my eyes widened as the wind, which had been carefully blowing the smoke in one direction, was now swirling and forming a mini tornado.

Um. Bin? What are you doing? Jee asked in a cautious but concerned tone.

It's not me. I'm not doing anything. I lost control of the wind. Bin was maintaining an outward calm, but turmoil was brewing inside. I could feel his panic through our connection.

What? How's that possible? several voices asked simultaneously.

If I knew, there wouldn't be a tiny tornado inside this house!
Bin hissed, his face strained as he tried to hold on to his runaway wind.

Is someone else controlling it, then? I asked, sending reassuring warmth toward Jee.

Jee was agitated as well, probably because of Bin. I wondered if my comforting energy would transfer to Bin as well. He looked like he needed it.

I don't know. Maybe? And if someone is controlling it, then they're not really doing a great job of it, as you can see. Bin tightened his lips. Sweat dotted his brow as he focused on the whirlwind.

Fuck!

We swiveled our heads to Hwa. He'd been intermittently playing with the tiny flame in his hand, but now there was a fire blazing several feet high in the middle of the air. Panic spread across his face as he raised his hands toward the flames that should be under his complete control. What was going on? Neither the tornado nor the fire seemed like they were likely to settle down.

The gunshots resumed.

Quickly, Hosin. Let's put the last one to sleep, Sett said.

They had already put the other four to sleep. When his team members went down, the leader had resumed firing his weapon.

Abruptly, everything stopped.

No tornado.

No flame.

No popping noise of silenced guns.

With everything so quiet, I'd have thought I'd imagined the attack. Well, except for the shell casings and the five men in black sprawled around the front entrance. Automatic weapons with silencers. Smoke.

“What the heck happened?” Jin's eyes were wide as saucers, and he was staring at the entryway with his mouth open.

Sen rubbed his shoulder. “No need to wake up, *Merwati*.”

“We were attacked,” Hosin said as he approached the leader's body.

“That much is obvious.” Jin rubbed his face, blinked a few times, then pointed at the five men.

“It wasn't much of a fight. One of them has mental powers, but the other four are typical mercenaries or assassins. I don't think they had any idea what they were walking into,” Menes said.

He held Hwa close, his hand absently running up and down Hwa's back. Hwa looked a bit dazed. With an equally stunned expression, Bin was clutching Jee's hand. Bin's shock radiated through the connection I had with Jee. He'd never lost control of his power like that. Had someone messed with his ability?

“What are we going to do with them?” Wyn asked as he waved his hand toward the men. Then he yawned loudly and shook his head. “If you don't need me, I think I'm going to retire.”

“I don’t feel anyone else in the vicinity.” Hosin glanced at Sett for confirmation.

At Sett’s nod, he turned back to Wyn and Saem. “You should get some rest. We’ll take care of these guys.”

Saem pulled Wyn into his arms and stood up. The shield that had been protecting us from the bullets and the assassins faded into nothing. With another yawn, Wyn waved and disappeared as Saem carried him toward their room.

“We can drive them far away from here and leave them. I assume when they wake up, they’ll make their escape.”

Hosin nodded at Menes. “I can go with you.”

“Jin and I should return home.” Sen pulled Jin closer.

“Hmm.” At Jin’s hesitant tone, Sen scowled, but the expression vanished when Jin stood up. “Need help?”

“You should go. Sanang has an early start tomorrow,” Hosin said.

Jin yawned. “Okay. See you tomorrow, Mr. Nam.”

I glimpsed the relief on Sen’s face as Jin slipped into his arms and they headed toward the secret exit located downstairs.

“Bin and Jee, you should also go rest. And you too, Jav.” Sett motioned us toward the back of the house.

“We can help.” Bin hesitated as he glanced at the bullets and shell casings.

“No need. It should be simple enough to sweep that area while I wait for Hosin and Menes to return.” Sett waved us away once more.

With a slight bow of thanks, I guided the other two up to bed.

Chapter 10. Jee

I turned on the shower and quickly shed my clothes. I was so ready to wash off the day's worth of grime and sweat. When we got back from the photoshoot, I'd only removed my makeup. I hadn't wanted the others to wait any longer for dinner, although they could have started without me. Bin had taken a shower moments before, so warm water rained down the moment I turned it on.

"Crap!" I bent down to grab my clothes from the floor and crashed into Jav as I stood up.

Still half bent over to hide some of my nakedness, I raised my eyes to glare at him. "The heck? What are you doing here?"

Jav grinned. "I also need a shower, so I thought I'd help you wash at the same time."

He'd already taken his shirt off, and in this position my eyes were level with his well-developed chest and abs. For just a second...or maybe a minute, I admired his toned muscles.

Ugh. What the heck was I thinking?

"I was here first. I don't need your help."

Jav's expression sank with disappointment, then sadness, and something tugged inside me. His tone had been light, but a certain desperation seethed inside him. His potent need was

completely directed at me, and I suddenly lost the desire to fight.

As Jav's eyes roamed over my body, heat crept up my neck and onto my face. I'd think nothing of being mostly naked in front of my teammates. We often had to share bathrooms and dressing rooms, and never once had I been self-conscious about removing clothes. Bin was the one who rarely liked to show any part of his body.

My shoulders sank as I exhaled a sigh. It was time I accepted that my emotions were all over the place where Jav was concerned.

"Fine." I straightened and walked into the shower stall, lamenting that it was roomy enough to accommodate two people. I couldn't even kick him out with the excuse of it being too small for us to share. Of course, the question I didn't want to ask myself was, why couldn't I just tell him no?

Moments later, Jav joined me in the shower. Naked. My heart beat wildly. His body was a work of art. His arms and legs were long and well-toned but not thick. I'd already drooled over his chest and abs when I'd woken up on top of it. I felt my cock harden from that single glance.

I averted my eyes, turning away as I got under the water, hoping he hadn't noticed my flushed face and semi-hard organ. Why was I reacting to him this way? I didn't live under a rock, so I'd met plenty of beautiful people, Bin being one of them. But I had never felt this carnal desire toward anyone, not even Bin. It's not that I never felt physical desire. I occasionally masturbated, but that hadn't been with any person

in mind. Drooling over a real person was a phenomenon that was completely unfamiliar to me.

“Let me.”

Jav pulled my head out of the stream of water and leaned it against his chest. My butt was precariously close to his cock, but I could thankfully arch forward enough to avoid contact. His soapy hands slid through my hair, massaging my scalp as he washed.

I closed my eyes.

Oh... that *did* feel great.

I'm glad, Jav sent through our mental link, his tone soft as a whisper.

Immersed in the pleasure of the moment, I didn't even chasten him for reading my thoughts. His fingers felt too good as he washed the shampoo away and gently carded his fingers through my hair as he smoothed in the hair rinse. My body slumped toward him, and the distance between us lessened. I was nearer his warmth, and my body was instinctively drawn to closeness with him.

“Relax. You can let go,” Jav whispered into my ear.

My body draped over him and on his...

“Shit!”

I jumped away and almost smacked my face against the wall. His hard cock had touched my butt crack. Before I could bang my forehead on the tile, Jav pulled me close again and tightened his arms around me. With my back flush against his

chest and abs, his hard length pressed up against me. Something inside me snapped. Desire flooded my body.

A moan escaped my lips, and I shivered.

“Jee...” Jav breathed into my neck and landed soft kisses on my nape.

I melted into his arms as his hands roamed my chest, caressing, kneading, and I gasped when he tugged gently on my nipples.

So responsive. He sent a silent thought as his mouth was busy tugging on my earlobe and peppering kisses up and down my neck.

My eyes slid closed. Filled with exquisite sensation, I turned and wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him into a kiss. The experience was overwhelming. The buzzing inside me vibrated outward, and I could tell the moment when it passed through our connection and into Jav. He responded with a groan, and his body rocked with mine. Jav grabbed both our cocks and slowly pumped up and down. He swallowed my moans and gasping breaths. The pleasure rose steadily, speeding to a crescendo as Jav pumped faster. I grabbed on to his neck as though it were my lifeline, a whine escaping my lips.

I... I want... What's happening?

Broken thoughts projected from my mind as our energies twined and melded in the metaphysical space, and our bodies did the same.

Let go. Be with me.

Jav whispered words of love.

My mind went blank, and I let go as I pulled tightly on the twin threads that connected me to the two people I cherished.

I opened my eyes again when the water shut off. I regarded Jav as he grabbed a large towel and dried my hair and body, taking another towel and wrapping it around me. All the while, his glorious naked body was on display in front of me. My mind was blank.

What had just happened?

Jav had grabbed our cocks and... I flushed bright red. My penis once more twitched in response as the memory of the pleasure and absolute connection overwhelmed me. What the... *Stop that!* I chastised my unruly organ.

“If you keep staring at me like that, we might end up taking another shower.” He gently booped my nose and flashed me a smile. “But I think you need to rest.”

“Wha...? I... Okay.”

I wrapped my arms around my torso. Stupid. I couldn't form a coherent sentence.

Jav grinned. “You're adorable.”

He bent to brush a gentle kiss across my lips. And as if awakened by his touch, my mouth opened, seeking more. My body seemed to know what it wanted, even though my brain was having a hard time catching up. A soft whimper escaped my lips.

His face was only an inch from mine.

His eyes darkened.

He froze in place, but only for a second. He pulled me into his arms and covered my mouth with his.

You are going to be the sole reason for my insanity. Or maybe you're the only sane thing in my life.

His silent words breezed into my brain as he carried me away.

With his lips, his touch.

I felt a flare of the now familiar surge deep inside me, one that overflowed and filled me with tingly energy. It wrapped around me and Jav. His mouth pressed, pulled, and his tongue licked my lower lip, asking for entry. A cross between a howl and a moan bubbled up from my throat as his tongue swooped in with the next intake of breath.

It was a kiss to forget everything.

I resisted when Jav pushed us apart. I whined as I tugged at him, begging for more, just a little more. Jav pulled me into a tight hug and sighed into my ear.

“Atarav-ne. I'd love to continue this forever, but you need rest, and you might catch a cold if we don't dry your hair properly.”

“But you're still wet.” I let my glazed eyes roam over his still dripping body.

“Well, who got me distracted?” Jav asked playfully.

I blushed again as he ran a towel over himself and motioned me toward the sink and the mirror.

“Stand still.”

He turned on the hairdryer, and I closed my eyes to enjoy the warm air blowing over my scalp. His fingers combed carefully through my locks, and I hummed silently. My eyes remained closed even after he'd turned off the dryer. If I didn't open them, I could extend this moment, and he'd stay with me.

Jav sighed. "No rest for the wicked."

I slid my eyes open.

A small crease puckered the space between Jav's eyebrows.

"Hmmm?" I tilted my head, already mourning the loss of his touch.

"I am being summoned."

"Who? What?"

"Sett. Menes and Hosin are back. They want to talk. Probably about what happened tonight."

As if still in total sync, we let out simultaneous breaths of frustration. Reality intruded. I had an early morning, and Jav had work to do.

I slid into my sleep pants and a thin T-shirt and peeked into the room. Other than a soft night light and the glowing numbers on the clock that told us over an hour had passed since we'd gone to take a shower, the room was dark. Bin was already in bed, and from his slow, steady breathing, I knew he was already asleep. We'd shared a room for long enough to also know he was a light sleeper, so I crept carefully toward my bed.

Jav lifted the covers, and when I slid under them, he tucked the blanket securely around me. My eyes had adjusted to the

semi-darkness so I could see the outline of his body. He was still wearing just the towel wrapped around his lower body. I eyed him, hoping he'd get in bed with me and spend the night here like he'd proposed.

Ugh! What was I thinking? From the way we'd behaved in the bathroom, I was certain we wouldn't be able to keep our hands to ourselves if we slept in the same bed. Bin would certainly wake up, and even if he didn't, I probably wouldn't get any sleep. As grumpy as it made me, it was better that he had been summoned by Sett.

He bent down to place soft kisses on my lips and cheek.

“Good night,” he whispered into my ear, his warm breath sending shivers through me.

As he straightened, I had to clench my fists to not reach out and wrap my arms around his neck to pull him back.

Chapter 11. Bin

My eyes popped open when the door closed softly behind Jav. He was finally gone. Jee shifted in his bed, and I kept my breathing slow and even so he wouldn't suspect I was awake. Soon, Jee's breathing pattern slowed to match my own, and I carefully turned my head, lifting it slightly from the bed. He was still under the covers, just the slight rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. I let my head flop back down onto my pillow. My body was tingling all over. It was similar to how my body felt after I performed *goot*, but not exactly. I never got physically aroused after *goot*.

Shuddering, I let go of my cock. It had been hard, leaking. *Ugh*. But it was now flaccid. I'd come all over my hand. I grimaced. Why did people wax poetic about such a yucky physical act? But of course, when my body had come alive just half an hour ago, I'd been perfectly fine grabbing my hard penis and yanking on it blindly to achieve satisfaction.

Maybe my body wasn't so different from others, after all. It's not that there was anything wrong with it. It had no problem serving daily functions. I had to eat and go to the bathroom. I needed regular exercise and sleep. My body was quite adept at performing and hunting. Everything had been fine except for one little thing. I'd never once felt the sexual desire that others spoke of. If anything came close to the sexual pleasure people wrote entire novels about, it was when

I danced with my spirit, who showered me with his energy.
Then I would writhe and spin from the rush of sensation.

I'd thought my inability to feel physical desire was because I'd given my body to my spirit when I came of age. The winter of the year I turned sixteen, my sky spirit had come down to me, and I'd become his conduit. It was not by force. I'd known what would happen, and I'd been waiting for it all my life. It had been inevitable since I couldn't remember a time when I didn't see spirits around me. My father had tried his best to give me a choice. Even as he'd dedicated his life to his spirit, he'd waited to perform the spirit ceremony that would join me with my spirit until it became inevitable.

My father's life as *mudang* had been complete, especially after he'd found my mother. But he hadn't wanted to choose that life for me unless I wanted it. Of course, he'd been aware that I might not have a choice, but he'd been worried I'd end up alone. He knew some spirits were selfish and would not allow life companions for their spirit conduits. My father's spirit had been generous and blessed the union between my mom and him. From the stories I'd been told as a child, I thought it likely that his spirit had arranged for them to meet. My father's spirit was of the large mountain range that formed the backbone of the Korean peninsula. My mother had gotten lost somehow while hiking the well-known trails of Namsan with her friends, and the spirit had led him to her.

My parents were happy and still in love. Of course, as my father was a conduit to a mountain spirit, we'd needed to reside close by, and he was most comfortable at home. But we'd traveled, especially since my mom loved to, and many important people visited from all around Korea to consult with

him. I'd watched him prepare countless ceremonies and take hundreds of ritual steps. But he'd never let me take part until the winter my spirit had called for me.

My ability had been strong from birth, and I'd seen spirits even before I could speak, but it was my elemental power that came to me first when I was nine. Because of that, I also met my maternal grandparents for the first time. My mother had married my father against her parents' wishes, so the relationship between them had been stilted. But once they realized I'd be carrying on my family's legacy, my grandparents had reached out to my mom. And I thought they had also been hoping that my mother would have another child, a female child, so the matrilineal legacy could remain in our family.

I wiped my sticky hand inside my boxer briefs and turned my head again to Jee's bed. Still nothing. Jee was a deep sleeper, so I wasn't too worried, but I couldn't be too careful. I wanted to change out of my messy underwear and take another shower. I raised my head and paused then, hearing nothing from Jee's direction, slowly got out of bed.

Ugh.

The briefs clung to me in odd places. It was so wet and sticky. I hoped I'd never succumb to another of these weird impulses. When my penis sprang to life, waking me from a shallow sleep, it had felt like my body had been taken over by someone else.

I carefully slid open a drawer and extracted clean boxer briefs and another pair of pajamas. Jee liked to just wear his sleep pants, but I preferred the full ensemble, so I had an

assortment of pajamas at my disposal. I made a face at the first set I pulled out, then broke into a smile. The dim night light illuminated the cartoon print of fluffy sheep in various poses. Some sleeping, some exercising, some eating. Since I was born in the year of ram, which was often labeled as the year of sheep, Jee liked to buy cute fluffy sheep things for me.

He thought I was cute, although I disagreed. From the time I was small, I'd always felt ancient, and his description of me did not jibe with my odd sense of having lived a thousand years. Some of my fans have used similar words to describe me, but more of them used words like beautiful or ethereal. One thing was certain, though. No one would ever use words like masculine or strong to talk about me.

I crept into the bathroom with a fresh change of clothes and quietly closed the door. My pajamas went right into the hamper, even before I turned on the shower. When the water warmed, I stepped in with my briefs on, wanting to remove the evidence of my sticky mess before putting them with the rest of the dirty clothes.

Water cascaded down my body as I took off my now soaked underwear. I scrubbed the cum from my briefs with a frown on my face. I'd heard teenagers often had nocturnal emissions. *How awful!* I was glad I'd never had to deal with that when I was younger—not that I wanted to deal with it now. Shuddering, I wrung them out and tossed them in the hamper.

As I soaped my body, I pondered why people found sex to be this glorious thing. So far, what little I'd experienced was unpleasant. A quick burst of pleasure followed by lingering stickiness and smell. I looked at my soft penis. What had

prompted my bodily desire to spring to life? I poked at the organ. Then I grabbed it and pumped it a few times like I'd done to get myself off.

But nothing happened.

My stroking action didn't feel bad, but neither was it super pleasurable. It certainly didn't make my penis hard. I wrinkled my nose at it, then rinsed away the soap and turned off the shower. Now that I was clean, exhaustion hit me hard. It had been a long day. Actually, ever since *Imugi* had appeared, things had become more difficult. Was waking up with an erection some sort of stress response? I shook my head.

Rest now. Analysis later.

I opened the bathroom door and padded out, my bare feet making no sound on the floor.

"Bin, is that you?"

I froze midstep at Jee's voice. I had been silent. How was he awake?

"Yes, sorry. Go back to sleep," I whispered as I walked to my bed.

"I wanted to talk to you, but the assassins came."

"A day in the life of Sanang. The evil creatures and assassins don't seem to care that we have a busy schedule," I joked.

Jee chuckled, then he paused. "Did you have an unpleasant dream like you sometimes do?"

"Um..."

Could I tell him I'd had a wet dream, and that's what had woken me up? The answer was no. I'd say nothing. "Yeah. Unpleasant dream."

"Why don't you come and join me?"

Jee rose halfway in the shadow and scooted toward the far side of his bed to make room for me. Then he lifted his covers and patted the place in front of him. I bit my lower lip. Hadn't I promised myself I'd not rely on Jee so much? He had Jav now. I eyed the open spot next to him. It was so inviting and familiar. We'd slept in the same bed countless nights, both in our dorm room and at Sanang House. It had started because I often suffered from nightmares. It was a side effect of having strong spirit energy. For some unknown reason, Jee's presence chased the bad dreams away.

"Okay."

The temptation was too great, and I was weak. Maybe starting tomorrow, I'd be strong. Tomorrow, I'd figure out how to change the nature of our relationship. We were certainly best friends, but I was pretty sure the way we'd behaved had gone beyond that into gray territory. Jee had let me rely on him and burden him with all my troubles. That had to end. I padded over to his bed.

As I settled next to him, he pulled me closer and wrapped his blanket around me. I rested my head on his chest, thinking about other nights we'd lain together like this.

"I wanted to tell you before...about Jav and me." Jee ran his hands through my hair.

“Jav told me you’re his...soulmate.” I controlled the tone of my voice, revealing nothing of my fear and insecurity.

Jee’s hand froze, his fingers threaded through my still damp locks. Then he let out a sigh and dropped his hand. At the loss, I wrapped my arm around his torso, pulling us tighter together.

He took a deep breath, making my head on his chest wobble. “No matter what”—he paused and swallowed—“what craziness there might be between Jav and me. You’re still my one...”

He didn’t quite finish his sentence, but his words seeped through and touched my heart. Unlike the calm of his voice, his heart beat rapidly. Mine sped up in response and matched his rhythm. Our heartbeats came faster, louder. In the quiet room, I could almost hear them beating in sync.

My one... Were there words after that?

My one and only friend?

My one love?

Why was my heart beating in sync with his?

“Jav said you’re in love with me,” I blurted. I pressed my lips together to avoid saying anything else when Jee became rigid underneath me.

I raised my face from his chest. What was he thinking? It was too dark to study his expression, not that I was good at reading faces, anyway. Jee cupped the back of my head and gently pressed it back down. Silence stretched on, and our synchronous heartbeats slowed.

I was just wondering if Jee had fallen asleep when his fingers slid back into my hair.

“I’ve been in love with you for a long time.”

I swallowed. How was I supposed to respond? I loved Jee too, but were my feelings for him enough? Was I hurting him by staying close, even though I wasn’t capable of falling in love with him? I didn’t know what to do.

“I know you don’t really feel the same way about me,” he murmured, and I could hear the sadness in his words. Or perhaps I was feeling them. Too much was confusing right now, and I didn’t quite know how to trust what I was experiencing.

I opened my mouth, but my words didn’t come.

“That’s okay. I’ll always be here for you. This *atar* and soulmate thing between Jav and me...it’s intense. I’m not even sure how to feel about it. But I can’t ignore it, either. It’s there, and it won’t ever go away. I don’t think I want to push it away, either. It’s a wonderful feeling, being connected to someone that way.”

I knew the feeling he was talking about, the profound connection with another at a metaphysical level. I’d first felt it when my spirit came down to join with me. And I’d glimpsed it when I’d sat with Jee and Jav moments before the lights went out. Their energies had brightened like twin flames and merged into a stronger one.

“But I still love you. You’ll always be a part of me. Jav knows that, and he’s accepted us as a pair.”

Jee kept carding his hand through my hair, and I pressed closer.

Was that what had happened? I'd felt it, a beautiful twine of energies that connected them. And Jee had drawn me to him, to let me share and experience what they had. I'd felt my spirit energy anchor to Jee and form a tenuous connection to what he shared with Jav. In that moment, I'd thought the bond felt the same as the one I had with my spirit. When the spirit came down to be with me, a transient link formed, but it waned as my spirit went away.

Since the assassins had attacked us at that moment, I'd completely forgotten about the connection. And I'd had no time to pay attention to anything until now. But the anchor that had formed was still there, between Jee and me, and through it, my link with Jav. I still felt both Jee and Jav through the energy thread that tied us. What if this connection wasn't transient like the one I had with my spirit? *Atar* was like spirit energy. If I could form a bond with the spirits, I could form a bond with those who had *atar*. Had Jee inadvertently created a connection between the three of us? I'd been able to hear Jav's words spoken to Jee through the private mental channel. Could I still do it?

Jav? I sent a silent message to Jav through Jee.

For a moment, nothing came through.

I sighed. I must have been mistaken about our link.

Yes? Is Jee okay? A twinge of alarm pulsed through our connection.

Jee's fine. I was testing a theory.

Confusion and impatience trickled through. It was strange to feel another person's emotions like this.

This is very unusual. I don't know how you are able to talk to me through the private connection that exists between atarav.

I don't know, but I have an idea.

There was a pause, and I sensed his distraction.

We'll talk in the morning. I'm in a meeting with Sett, Hosin, and Menes.

Jee's arm had tightened around me when I'd called on Jav, but he had said nothing while we had our brief conversation. I knew he'd heard what we'd said. This thing between the three of us was not transient. My spirit eyes saw the strong threads connecting us. For the first time in my life, I experienced butterflies in my stomach. I was truly Jee's one. Maybe not the one and only, but still a *one*. And with that thought, all the doubt and anxiety I hadn't even realized filled the depths of me scattered away like butterflies in the wind.

Chapter 12. Jav

I'd quickly thrown on the first shirt and pants I could find in my room before heading back to the living room. The area near the front door was now clean, free of the bullets and shell casings that had littered the floor. If I hadn't been part of what had happened just over an hour ago, I'd never have believed a team of five mercenaries had attacked our place.

Sett, Menes, and Hosin were sitting comfortably on the living room furniture as though it were an everyday occurrence to have a dangerous assailant tied to a dining chair near the center of the space by the coffee table. The other four assailants were already gone, removed by Hosin and Menes and dropped off someplace better left unspoken. My eyes widened as I took in the man's appearance. Behind his gas mask and mercenary clothes, I'd expected him to be taller, more formidable, older. But he was young and beautiful, his expression impassive as he regarded me mutely.

He was around five-foot-ten. His body was sinewy, without an ounce of fat on him. He had the face of someone who was half east Asian, like me. His nose was straight and high, his hair light brown and wavy, but he had high cheekbones and chocolate-brown eyes. He was striking. I couldn't imagine this man leading a team of mercenaries. In proper clothes, the man would have fit in better with the Sanang boys than the mercenary crew he'd led.

I lifted an eyebrow at Sett. “What’s he doing here?”

I’d thought they’d planned on setting all five of them free. When Sett called me, I hadn’t expected to find a man tied to a chair.

Sett gave me a stilted smile. “It was not my idea to tie him to the chair. Hosin was worried about me. He was afraid he would attack again.”

His tone told me he was not pleased with Hosin’s decision. I said nothing, although the reasoning made sense to me. Sett was too nice to everyone, and Hosin’s concern for his *atarav* was well-founded.

“*Atarav-ne*, he led a team of assassins to come and kill us,” Hosin said.

The man said nothing. He didn’t even try to fight the ties that bound him. Instead, he studied each of us carefully, no doubt testing our mental shields. As soon as I thought that, he scrutinized me, and I felt his mental push.

“That won’t work,” Hosin said in an icy tone.

The man grimaced.

“Hosin. Be nice,” Sett admonished.

I rolled my eyes. “Why should we be nice to someone who was trying to kill us only a couple of hours ago?”

“I’m sure he had his reasons. And he is one of us.”

At times like this, I wondered whether Sett was born yesterday instead of thousands of years ago. If I were to live that long, would I turn into a ball of empathy like Sett? But he wasn’t always like this. Sett could be ruthless. There had to be

a reason he was behaving so kindly to this unwelcome stranger. Had Sett seen something in this man while he'd been putting him to sleep?

The man's gaze settled on Sett, who was smiling at him. He looked a bit taken aback by Sett's behavior. I probably would be too, if I were a mercenary and the man I'd tried to kill showered me with kindness.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

Sett's smile broadened. "Mm. I would have thought you knew who we were. You came to kill us."

The man opened his mouth, then closed it again. I wished I could read his mind, but it was shielded like ours. And although it wouldn't be difficult for me to get past his shield and pry into his mind, I wouldn't do so. Well, not unless it was absolutely necessary.

"I don't know who you are. Our target was the five Sanang members and their two managers. I recognize the other two as bodyguards, but you are not one of the bodyguards who always accompanies the Sanang group."

"I'm Hosin's partner, his life mate."

"Where is my team?" The man dismissed Sett and directed his question at Hosin. His speech was curt and businesslike, but I detected a hint of worry. I supposed even bad guys had a smidgeon of humanity.

"They were all let go. We dropped them off in an alley in the Itaewon area, near a popular street full of bars. We removed their weapons and outerwear, so they'll blend in with the crowd. I hope they take the hint and stay away. They

should know they're no match for us." Hosin's voice was dispassionate. I wondered how Sett, the one who was so empathetic and often wore his heart on his sleeve, ended up with Hosin. Hosin looked like he wouldn't bleed, even if someone poked him with a needle.

Sett stood up. "Perhaps you'd like some tea? It might be too late for green tea but maybe some chrysanthemum or toasted grain tea?"

The man stared at Sett as though he were looking at a creature he'd never seen before. I chuckled, and his intense eyes turned to me.

I grinned at Sett. "I'd love some toasted grain tea."

Menes leaned back in his chair. "I suppose we might as well have some tea. This might take a while."

Hosin got up and ushered Sett to the kitchen, half protective and half exasperated.

Our assailant's shoulders relaxed slightly when the two of them left. I wondered whether it was because he only had two people watching him now or if he was flabbergasted by the ridiculous display of hospitality.

"What are you planning to do with me?" he asked.

I shrugged. It hadn't been me who had detained him. If it had been up to me, I'd have just left him with the other four.

"I'm not the one who wanted to talk to you," Menes said.

The three of us sat in tense silence until Sett appeared with a tea tray and Hosin followed with a tray of *dasik*, beautifully molded grain, and seed flour cookies made with honey.

“Menes, why don’t you untie him? With four of us here, I doubt he’d be able to do any harm,” Sett asked calmly as he poured the tea.

Menes didn’t look like he wanted to let the man go, but when Sett raised an eyebrow at him, he reluctantly untied him. The would-be assailant massaged his wrists and circled them a few times, then settled his hands in his lap.

Sett put the first cup of tea on the coffee table in front of the man and pushed the tray of *dasik* closer to him. “Please, have some tea and *dasik*.”

The man stared at the steaming cup but didn’t touch it.

Once everyone else had their tea, Sett finally poured his own and then faced the man. “I wanted to ask if you knew where your powers came from.”

The man shrugged. “What powers?”

“We know you have mental powers. You tried to take over Wyn’s mind. We also know you can shield your mind from others with abilities like yours. I’m only curious how much you know about your powers.”

“Why should I answer your questions?”

Sett smiled. “Hmm. I don’t know. I suppose you don’t need to answer them, but don’t you want to know where your powers come from? If you don’t already know, that is?”

“Who cares where it comes from? I have it, and I know how to use it.” Although his response was defensive, Sett could tell by the gleam in his eyes that he was interested in what Sett had to say.

“One usually likes to know one’s origin. Your parents or guardians must have told you something.”

His face momentarily contorted with pain before all emotion drained from his face. “I had no parents or guardians. My parents abandoned me when I was a baby, so why should I care about my origin?”

Sett’s face drooped with a deep sadness. “Whoever told you that your parents abandoned you lied to you. Our children are precious to us. We’d never abandon them.”

“But they apparently did.”

Sett looked unconvinced but said nothing in response to the man’s curt reply. He might not believe it right now, but I knew everyone at Tasier cherished children. Conception was difficult among Tasier members, especially for those with purer blood. And birth was even harder, although there was advanced incubation technology that members used to reduce the chance of loss. Abandoning any child that would belong to Tasier was unthinkable to us.

After taking a tiny sip of tea, Sett set his cup down and delicately ate a piece of light-pink *dasik* made with *omija*, magnolia berries. I grabbed a light-green *dasik* made from *nokcha*, green tea. I wasn’t a big fan of *dasik* because of its powdery texture, but it went well with the tea. Both Hosin and Menes also reached for *dasik*, but our guest remained motionless.

“May I ask your name? I’d like to refer to you as something other than ‘you’ or ‘hey.’”

Sett reached out to touch the man's forearm. Such a gesture was a typical touchy-feely thing for him to do, but the man knocked Sett's hand away. Menes rose halfway from his seat, ready to spring into action. Hosin regarded the man coldly, probably readying for a mental attack if the man dared to do anything more.

Sett pulled his hand back and shook his head, admonishing Menes and Hosin to stay put. The man glanced at his hand that had touched Sett's. He said nothing, but he seemed surprised by what he'd done. I suspected his reaction had been instinctive.

"Either kill me or let me go." He dropped his gaze to the floor.

Sett sat, sipping his tea, regarding the man patiently. For what purpose, I didn't know. I didn't think Sett was speaking silently to the man. If we were only going to play teatime in the middle of the night after a long day, why had Sett called me? I was tired. I drained my cup and put it back on the table. Hosin filled my cup with more tea, and I nodded my thanks.

Why did you call me here? I don't think he's going to talk, and I'm not sure how I'm helping. What do you want, and do you really need me? I could use some sleep, I said to Sett.

"I was hoping our guest would warm up to us," Sett said aloud.

The man, who had been steadily staring at the floor, looked up but remained silent.

"How are you able to control fire and air?" Hosin asked.

The man turned his gaze to Hosin, his eyes narrowing slightly. He opened his mouth, then shut it tight again.

Hosin regarded him, then his gaze intensified. Something had piqued Hosin's interest. "You didn't know, did you?"

Hosin's question made no sense. I lifted an eyebrow at him, but he didn't notice me, his focus entirely on the man in front of him.

"Know what?" the man asked.

"That you can control the elements."

The man frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You made the flame go wild and created a small tornado."

Huh. I'd completely forgotten about the elemental powers that had gone out of control during the attack. Now that I thought about it, there had been no reason for Bin and Hwa to lose control of their powers. Unless someone else had messed with them.

"I don't know what you're talking about." The man was flustered for the first time. "This was a standard kill mission. In and out. Easy targets. According to our intel, we should have encountered no obstacles. Instead, I can't tell anyone what I saw or why we failed. You had some kind of supernatural shield and natural disaster inside the house, not to mention multiple people I couldn't sense, which tells me you all have special abilities like me."

It was like a floodgate had opened. The words spilled from his mouth, then abruptly ceased as the gate slammed shut again. I studied the man once more. He was more dangerous than I'd thought. His mind abilities did not rise to the level of

Sett's, Hosin's, or mine. But if he also had elemental abilities, could that mean...? If he could wield elemental powers like the Sanang boys, it might mean he was a distant relative. *Atar* did not manifest in power over elements, and he wasn't a wizard.

I eyed Sett, who continued to smile gently at the man. Sett might have already known this, and that's why he'd wanted to speak with him.

Did you know? I mean about him having the elemental power. He could be their relative.

I thought it was a possibility, Sett said silently while smiling at our guest.

He's aware of his mental abilities, but I don't think he knows about Sanang and their powers. Until we know more about him, we should keep that a secret, Hosin said.

Sett gave a slight nod. *I agree. I'll tell him about atar and Tasier, but we'll wait to reveal his other heritage.*

Sett leaned forward in his chair. "I understand that you have no reason to trust us right now, but there are some important things you need to know. I think you're related to us by blood because you have abilities that are fueled by a special energy we all share, called *atar*. We suspect that instead of being abandoned, you were more likely forcefully taken. Those of us with *atar* cherish our children because there are so few of us here."

At Sett's words, doubt and yearning filled the man's eyes. He bit into his bottom lip and lowered his eyes. I could see his effort not to react to Sett's words, but he was not so old and

jaded that he could just brush off the possibility of someone finding him precious. He must have yearned for a family, even if he'd been told no one wanted him.

In a gentle voice, Sett told him about Tasier and the people with *atar* who were part of it. He was one of us. He should have been with family who loved and cherished him; he should have been part of us from the very beginning. He tried to appear disinterested, but even though I couldn't look into his eyes to confirm, I sensed he was listening intently.

After his explanation, Sett took a sip of his tea and met my eyes. "Jav. Perhaps you could let him peek into your memories of growing up in Tasier."

Menes's and my memories of childhood might shock him too much since that was many thousands of years ago. And Hosin did not grow up in Tasier, Sett added silently to me.

I breathed out a sigh. I finally understood why Sett had needed me to be part of this tea party. Sharing memories could be an intimate experience, so it didn't thrill me to go through it with a stranger, but if it would convince the man to join us, I was willing to try.

"Okay, but if he attempts anything..."

Sett patted me on my arm. "I'll make sure he behaves."

The man looked up.

"Will you let Jav share some of his memories with you?" Sett asked.

The man shrugged. "Do I have a choice?"

Sett nodded. “You do. I hope you decide to stay and get to know us, but if you’d rather leave, we will not stop you.”

The man lifted an eyebrow, probably wondering if Sett was telling him the truth or setting him up for something. His eyes flitted between the four of us. When we made no move to do anything, he stood slowly. Then, as we watched, he backed up toward the front door and, with a last glance at Sett, left the house.

Chapter 13. Jee

January, 2014

Our jet glided toward the small airport near Seogwipo on Jeju Island. We were supposedly here on vacation, but there was no real vacation for us. Our nighttime hunting activities would continue, and we'd be informally broadcasting *Sanang on the Island*. It wasn't enough that we spent a combined five to six hours on social media each week, including responding to some of the fan messages that filled our chat room. We were also required to broadcast many candid moments of our personal lives, like photos and video clips of us relaxing on the beautiful, subtropical island south of Korea.

We were all exhausted after several weeks of packed schedules. Holidays might be the time most people went on vacation, but for us, they meant holiday performances, parties, and special television programs. Would it be too much to ask for the dark creatures to give us a bit of a holiday break? *Ha!* They didn't care that we had a full schedule. If anything, the long nights near the winter solstice brought them out at an even earlier hour.

With so much going on, we'd pushed aside everything not related to our parallel jobs as K-pop idols and hunters. I worked and shared a room with Bin, and Jav was constantly present as our bodyguard, so we saw each other often, but that

had been the extent of our interactions. We'd been too exhausted for anything else, and by the time we fell into bed, we were all eager just to catch a few hours of sleep. As a result, we'd had no time to talk to each other in any meaningful fashion. Jav often came to bed with me but only to hold me while we slept. While I took great comfort in that, it wasn't enough.

"The fun begins," I muttered with a heavy dose of sarcasm as the plane descended to the runway.

A soft hand squeezed mine. "It shouldn't be too bad. We are technically on vacation."

"I suppose." I gave Bin a tight smile. "But we still need to broadcast some of what we're doing. I don't consider that a true vacation."

Bin responded with a slight smile of his own. He was beautiful as always, but I glimpsed weariness lurking behind his eyes. "Yes, but compared to the last month or so, it will be utterly relaxing. I'm really looking forward to not having to deal with so many people."

With his hand still clasped in mine, I squeezed back. It was hard for Bin to be in the public eye. Even though it was just the five of us from Sanang, as well as Mr. Nam and Wyn, Sen, Menes, and Jav, there were bound to be moments when we had to deal with others. Performances themselves were relatively easy for him since he was on stage and didn't have direct interaction with fans or press. But the pre- and post-performances, fan signing events, traveling to and from places, interacting with staff, and everything that had to do with real people made him anxious. I was glad there would just be the

core group in Jeju. Since we were supposed to show more natural, candid shots of our vacation, we'd been able to give our support staff some time off.

Mr. Nam had booked out all the bungalows at a resort in the Jungmun tourist region for the next couple of weeks, including the three-day Lunar New Year holiday. We had a shared hot tub, a kitchen and dining room, and a lounging area. Our individual bungalows surrounded the shared area as well as an outdoor pool, although in winter, the water would be too cold to swim.

"We'll have one more person joining us," Mr. Nam said. He was sitting across from us, so he must have heard Bin talking about not having to deal with strangers.

"Who?" From his seat in front of us, Hwa turned sideways to look curiously at Mr. Nam.

"A healer from Tasier is arriving tomorrow. He'll help Jee learn to control his powers and also take Gedeon's place to pose as a bodyguard."

Gedeon had left in a hurry several weeks ago because of some trouble in eastern Europe, near his homeland. So we were short one bodyguard, even though we really didn't need any.

"So Gedeon is not coming back?"

Jin, sitting in front of Mr. Nam, turned his head toward us. I'd thought he was sleeping. He'd been doing that a lot lately as his dragon stirred, but he now looked remarkably awake.

"He might be back later, but we don't know when," Menes said from behind Mr. Nam.

I groaned inwardly. How was I supposed to get any rest on this vacation if I had to learn how to control my new ability on top of everything else?

Our private jet landed smoothly on the small, isolated airstrip, and we descended the mobile staircase into the sunshine. The air was chilly, but compared to the icy streets of Seoul we'd left an hour ago, anything above freezing felt warm.

Arriving this way meant there were no gauntlets of fans or cameramen to wade through. We grabbed our day bags and coats and headed to the two SUVs we'd rented for our stay. The crew would transport the rest of our luggage directly to the resort. Before settling into our lodgings for the night, we planned to visit the famous Yongmeori Coast. It was called *yongmeori*, or dragon head, because the sandstone-layered coastal cliffs had eroded into the shape of a dragon sliding into the ocean.

We weren't going there to play tourist, though. Yongmeori Coast was a sacred place for dragons, with legendary rejuvenating properties. Jin's dragon was now talking to him, but he was still too injured after his encounter with *Imugi* to emerge. Jin had been putting on a brave face, especially with Sen watching over him, but I'd seen the change in him since he'd lost his dragon form. Not having his dragon had been a terrible blow to both his power and his spirit. We were all hoping the healing energy surrounding the place might finally help Jin recover his dragon form. The area was closed to the public after sundown, so we were planning to slip in just after dusk.

We arrived right as the park was closing, the famous sea-eroded cliffs looming above us. The temperature was going down rapidly, and the wind was picking up. We waited in our vehicles until darkness had fallen. There was only a low enclosure blocking off the area, so we easily climbed over the railing and onto the stone pathway leading to the coast.

Within five minutes, the trail ended, and Wyn erected a shield behind us to hide us from prying eyes. The shimmering veil also served as a light source and illuminated the dark, rocky coast. From this close, it was difficult to imagine that these coastal formations were in the shape of a dragon's head, but as I stepped onto the shore, something inside me buzzed to life, and a tremor ran through me. Bin tightened his hand clasped in mine, and Jav squeezed my other hand, almost in response.

“Strong spirit energy here,” Bin murmured.

We paused shortly after leaving the paved pathway, the rest of us instinctively stopping as Sen and Jin walked closer and closer to the water without hesitation. With nothing to protect us, the coastal wind swirled around us. The coldness seeped in through every little gap in our clothing. Shivering, I pulled my jacket tighter around my body.

Bin waved his hand, and a wall of air formed around us, blocking the wind. It was still cold but more bearable now.

“Thanks, Bin.” Hwa was huddled under Menes's arm. “He can't possibly be planning to go in the water, can he?”

I shuddered at the thought.

“Dragon spirit!” Bin blurted out a moment later.

At Bin's exclamation, Jav's shield sprang to life in front of us. I pulled Bin closer and wrapped my arm around him. Jav did the same with me.

Bin let out a slow breath. "I don't think we need the shield. There's a strong spirit energy here, but nothing unfriendly. I was just surprised, that's all."

Jav's shield dissipated, but we remained tense as we watched Jin and Sen.

As Jin approached, the water retreated and rose upward, exposing more of the coastal sandstones and creating a column that continued to grow as he walked. He stopped a few meters into the exposed seabed. As he watched, the pillar of water in front of him morphed and twisted into the shape of a dragon.

"Wow," Hwa whispered.

Bin trembled. "Can you feel it?"

"Yes. I can feel the dragon spirit here."

Bin looked up, his eyes wide with surprise. "I never thought you'd say that," he murmured.

A realization hit me, then. This was the first time I'd acknowledged the presence of a spirit in front of Bin. He often talked about spirits this and spirits that, and I always frowned and shut him down. The time he'd told me about the spirit of my mom, the way I'd reacted was deplorable. Regret filled my heart. There was a reason Bin had never told me he was *mudang*. He'd been afraid because I'd always been so vehemently against a superstitious belief in spirits.

I'd attacked the belief because I resented my adopted parents. A childish rebellion against the way they'd treated

me. Since I'd been powerless to go against them, I'd acted in the only way I could. But I wasn't a helpless child anymore, and my adopted family no longer had any power over me.

I cupped Bin's face and lifted it gently. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. Spirits are an important part of your life, and I made it impossible for you to tell me about them. When you left school that winter, I didn't understand why you never came back. If I'd known, I'd have followed you and been there if you needed me."

Bin chewed on his lower lip. "That's okay. I know why you acted the way you did."

Warmth seeped in through my connection with Jav. He said nothing, but he'd been listening and sensed my sadness and regret. He wanted to comfort me, and through me, his energy also flowed to Bin.

I leaned closer and let my head drop to his shoulder.

Thank you. Bin let out a sigh.

We really have to talk. Jav's voice in my head was dull with fatigue.

"Look!"

At Hwa's exclamation, my eyes shifted back to catch the last bit of the water dragon coiling itself around Jin. He raised his arms high as though he were caressing the dragon, iridescent hues wrapping around him. His arms lengthened, and his fingers morphed into dragon claws. I watched with my mouth hanging open. It was always a marvel to see Saem and Jin shift into their other forms. Especially Jin, since his dragon, although not yet fully developed, was still impressive

in its size and shape, with its long, sinewy body and large head with snout. Seeing a mythical creature come alive was awe-inspiring. Saem's tiger was no less magnificent. Although tigers were not mythical creatures, Saem's tiger form was special. He was twice the size of an average tiger, and his gold fur glowed with an ethereal sheen.

The place was rich with spirit power, but it was not enough. Jin did not transform into his dragon. The liquid dragon unfurled and fell. We were far enough away but still felt a rain of cold droplets as the waterfall cascaded around Jin and Sen. Completely soaked, they slowly walked back to the group. As we watched, the water evaporated upward, and by the time they reached us, they were completely dry.

Jin's face was downcast, Sen's arm wrapped comfortingly around him. My heart ached for Jin. He'd failed to transform into his dragon. When I'd felt the vast power of the place, I'd been hopeful that he would succeed. I opened my mouth, wanting to offer some comfort, but my words caught in my throat as Jin lifted his face to look at us. At my side, Bin gasped. Jin's eyes shone with sparkling blue light. Although his body and face were human, his eyes were those of a dragon.

Chapter 14. Jav

“Do we have any snacks?”

Bin dropped his daypack by the door and headed to the small refrigerator in our bungalow. Half of his head disappeared inside as he rummaged through it.

“Didn’t we just have a huge dinner on the way over here? Where does all that food disappear to?”

I eyed Bin’s slender form. He was the shortest member of Sanang at just over five-foot-eight, though he looked taller because he had a balanced and well-toned body. And yet he ate more than any of us.

He closed the refrigerator with a huff. “We are going shopping tomorrow. For snacks and dessert!” Then his eyes widened. “Oooh!” He grabbed a box sitting neatly on the kitchen counter. “Compliments of the resort,” he read, lifting the lid. “Come look! They left a gift box full of *tteok!*”

Jee’s face brightened, and he rushed over to Bin, who was already lifting a dark-green rice cake to his mouth.

“Are they the honey-filled kind?” He peered into the box Bin held out.

Bin nodded as he chewed, and Jee grabbed a piece and popped it into his mouth. Still happily chewing, Bin carried the box over to the small dining table and set it down.

Jee, Bin, and I had taken a large bungalow together when we arrived at the resort. I could have shared a room with the healer who was arriving tomorrow, but there was no way I'd spend the night apart from my *atarav*. Each spacious bungalow had a bedroom with a king-sized bed and an attached bathroom. The living room, dining room, and kitchenette were an open design, and the sofa in the living room pulled out to a full-size bed so the whole place could handle at least four people.

"Jav, come try this." Jee beckoned me close as he ate another piece of *tteok*.

Bin pushed the box closer to me as I sat down next to Jee. I wasn't hungry, but I could always use more energy. All of us bled calories because of our special abilities. I grabbed a small, round, white piece and tossed it into my mouth.

Mmm. The flavors of sweet, liquid honey and savory, toasted sesame burst into my mouth. A hum of contentment flowed in from my connection with Jee. But I couldn't tell whether it was directly from Jee or from Bin or both.

"You said you have an idea about what's happening with the three of us." I turned to Bin, and he nodded as he grabbed another piece.

"I 'ink I 'av idea." His words were garbled through his full mouth, but I understood what he was trying to say. I motioned him to go on.

Bin raised his finger while he finished chewing. After he swallowed, he cleared his throat.

“Okay. Remember I told Sett I think *atar* is like spirit energy? Well, I was thinking, since I can be a conduit for spirit energy, I can also be one for *atar*. Jee and I were close for years, so I think even before you showed up, we already had a sort of connection. We know now that he has *atar*, and I have compatible energy. When you formed a soulmate bond with Jee and also accepted me as part of him, this three-way bond thing happened. I mean, the connection flows through Jee, of course. So he is like a central node.”

Bin spoke rapidly, as though he'd been thinking about this and practicing his speech. As he talked, Jee looked back and forth between us, his face creased with worry. The bond he'd created between the three of us was certainly unusual. My entire world view had been turned upside down, so I could only imagine how this information was impacting Jee.

“The bond between soulmates usually forms between two people because it's hard enough finding one *atarav* in a lifetime. Unless you're like Sett or Menes, who have lived many lifetimes. Then maybe you might find a few. This is very unusual,” I said.

When I'd envisioned having *atarav*, I had never considered this scenario. I had accepted Bin as part of Jee's life and therefore mine, but it had never occurred to me that it would connect the three of us. But I wasn't upset by it. If it was what Jee wanted, I would gladly get used to having a three-way bond. And Bin didn't sound like he was bothered at all by this course of events.

But as I spoke, Jee's tension increased with every word, his shoulders creeping up toward his ears and his white-knuckled

hands clenched in his lap. To allay his anxiety, I put my hand on his back and soothingly rubbed up and down. He gazed at me, his eyes wide, worry-lines creasing his forehead. I pulled him into my arms and pressed a soft kiss on his temple.

It's all right. Just because what we have is unusual doesn't mean it's bad.

Jee slumped with relief. *But I thought you were angry that I was in love with Bin.*

I sighed. *I was never angry. Maybe a little frustrated. As I said, this is unusual. I wasn't prepared for it. But between soulmates, love and acceptance is inviolate, unconditional, and limitless. Ever since I realized you were my atarav, my world shifted. I accept you with everything you have. And I know you feel the same about me. Whether you also love Bin doesn't change anything. We can love multiple people.*

Jee buried his face in my chest and slowly exhaled. I felt the rest of the tension in his body melt away as his warm breath seeped through my shirt.

I ran my hand through his hair, marveling at the softness. "Hmm. I'm wondering how the sleeping situation will work for the three of us while we're here. We have one large bed and one sofa bed."

I don't think I can keep my hands off you. I hope you feel the same. I sent the silent message to Jee, although it was possible Bin could also hear those words.

Jee lifted his head from my embrace, his face flushed.

Bin wrinkled his brow. "You can sleep with Jee in the bedroom. I'll be very comfortable with the sofa bed in the

living room. I get up way earlier than either of you, anyway.”

With that, Bin left the table to circle the sofa, removing cushions, tugging at the frame, and finally smiling with satisfaction as it sprang into a full-size bed. Then he dragged his suitcase from the front door and lifted it onto the luggage rack.

“I have first dibs on the bathroom.”

Before we could respond, he grabbed his toiletries and pajamas and disappeared into the bathroom.

Jee sighed as he shook his head. “He takes really long showers.”

“Well then, I guess we’ll have to think of something to do in the meantime.”

I pulled him back into my arms. His eyes fluttered as I lowered my lips to kiss him. Initially, I’d meant for it to be just a simple touch of lips, just to taste. When Jee’s arms wrapped around my neck, overwhelming desire flooded my body. My cock hardened instantly as I pulled him onto my lap.

Most people in Tasier had sex with other people. The probability of finding one’s soulmate was about as unlikely as winning the lottery and sex was pleasurable, so there was little reason to avoid it. I’d slept with several people in Tasier, of both genders, and I had enjoyed it. But making love to my *atarav* was beyond anything I’d experienced or imagined. The emotional connection, the sense of belonging, the euphoria of our two energies merging... These were life-changing experiences.

I sucked on Jee's lower lip. When his lips parted, I slid inside, demanding his response. From the first moment we touched, I knew physical intimacy was new to him. His reaction was always that of surprise, hesitation, but he eventually melted in my arms. After our last two encounters, Jee was now quite a demanding participant, and his tongue wrapped greedily around mine. I grabbed both his butt cheeks and pressed him even closer. Our groins collided, and a soft moan escaped his lips.

Lips still melded together, I stood with him in my arms. He wrapped his legs around me as I supported him with my hands, squeezing his ass almost forcefully. I thanked my heightened senses as I navigated my way to the bedroom with my eyes half closed. Jee clung to me as I tried to set him down. Balance lost, we both toppled onto the bed, with me pressing him into the mattress. The memory foam cushioned our fall, and I pressed my lips closer to swallow the tiny *oomph* escaping his mouth.

The kiss continued, but I wanted more. I dragged my lips away despite his protest and quickly pulled off his shirt, reveling in his well-muscled torso and his flat, soft chest with its light dusting of hair. Now I had more targets to explore. My mouth latched on to one pinkish-brown nipple. Jee's legs tightened around me, and he trembled as I laved his areola. Moans spilled from his lips as his arm hovered around my head, unable to settle.

I paid equal attention to his other nipple and kissed my way down his torso. When my face reached his lower stomach, he tried to close his legs, his face flushing red. Holding his thighs open, I pulled his briefs down. His hard penis sprang free,

already wet at the tip. I'd rarely volunteered to perform fellatio in the past, but with Jee, I wanted to do everything. Without hesitation, I opened my throat and swallowed down more than half of his cock. Jee wailed, the sound somewhere between a shout and a hiccup.

No. no. Stop. Please. It's em...barr...

He was pleading with me to stop, but his hands were clutching my hair and pressing me tighter against his groin.

His pleasure flowed into me through our connection, becoming mine, filling me with bliss. I could be content simply to make him come, over and over again. There was no need to seek my own pleasure when his ecstasy became my own. I sucked and laved his hard member while he trembled beneath me. His moaning increased, and his body tensed, his legs wrapped around me becoming as tight as a vise.

He swallowed a sob, trying to push me away with his feet as his cock swelled, but I held his legs captive and swallowed him deeper. A wail erupted from his lips as he spilled into my mouth. His whole body was flushed with heat, trembling with the aftermath of his orgasm. I watched him as his eyes slid open and his face flushed even deeper at the sight of his cock engulfed in my mouth.

After his trembling subsided, I slowly pulled his pants and boxer briefs off the rest of the way, baring his entire body. He regarded me intently, then he turned his eyes away as I pressed a light kiss on his inner thigh, his breath quickening once more.

Then his whole body froze. His eyes grew impossibly wide, fixed on a spot, his lips opening on a silent word that did not

come. I followed the path of his gaze. Bin stood in the doorway, with his hair dripping, his body wrapped carelessly in a bathrobe. I'd never seen him this disheveled in the several months I'd known him. He seemed oblivious to my presence. His eyes were glued to Jee, who lay gloriously naked on the bed.

Chapter 15. Bin

I was in the middle of shampooing my hair when my penis started thickening, a phenomenon which had not happened since the night of assassins. Heat crept into my body, with strange sensations nipping at my nerve endings. My cock became rock-hard, and I realized I was experiencing sexual pleasure, flowing in waves through the metaphysical connection I had with Jee that also linked me to Jav.

When I had woken up with these strange sensations before, they had bothered me. I'd been fast asleep, and being woken up like that was disturbing. But now that I knew they originated from Jee, I was curious. Why was this so pleasurable? I wanted to see; I wanted to understand.

As I quickly washed the shampoo from my hair, the pleasure flowing through the connection intensified, and I almost fell flat on my butt from my trembling legs. Now I was desperate to know what was happening. Rather than my usual forty to forty-five minute shower, I finished up quickly and was out in a mere twenty minutes. I didn't even bother drying my hair or putting on my pajamas.

When I appeared at the doorway to the bedroom, I was not prepared for the sight that greeted me. Jee was lying naked on the bed with Jav's head between his legs. His cock was soft, but it glistened with a sheen of moisture. Jav's hair was

disheveled, as though a bird had nested in it, his lips shiny and red.

I stood frozen as Jee looked up, and his eyes widened in shock.

Jav turned his head, his swollen lips parted as he gaped at me.

Jee's face twisted with panic as his gaze fixed on mine.

It's okay!

I sent a reassuring thought through our connection. Jee was beautiful with his skin flushed and his body languid from the aftermath of pleasure.

My feet moved on their own, and I was sitting on the bed beside him before I knew what was happening. My hands itched to touch his body. His nipples were hard, and a sheen of sweat covered his chest. I wanted to run my finger through the spilled cum on his stomach. I'd thought everything about sex bothered me, especially the smell and the stickiness, but this was different. Jee didn't smell bad, and the mess no longer disturbed me.

I slid my finger down his chest and through the viscous cum.

Jee covered my hand with his and pulled it away. "It's dirty."

I shook my head. "No. Not this. You're...beautiful."

Jav turned his head, and our eyes met above Jee's smooth thighs. I'd never found a physical body to be something desirable—aesthetically pleasing, yes, but not something I

wanted to possess. Apparently Jee was the exception now. I wondered whether Jav's thoughts had become mine or if they'd actually originated from me. They felt foreign, but they were also mine. Either way, it did not matter.

Not breaking eye contact with me, Jav licked Jee's inner thigh. Jee trembled like a stem quivering in the wind.

We can't have him be lopsided.

Jav's silent thoughts flittered to me as he ran his tongue over the other thigh, like he was licking a favorite ice cream.

Jee's cock stirred.

Fascinated, I ran my finger down the still soft organ. It twitched at my touch. I lived with one myself. Although, other than peeing, I had found little use for it. Still, I had some knowledge about what could give him pleasure. I wrapped my hand around Jee's soft member and slowly massaged, feeling every flinch and shiver as I stroked. I glanced up at his face and found his wide eyes flitting back and forth between Jav and me. His eyes darkened further as I firmed my touch, and his cock hardened in my hand.

After licking and brushing gentle kisses across both inner thighs, Jav bit the soft skin of Jee's right thigh, hard enough to leave a little mark but not so hard as to bruise. I felt Jav's warm breath on my skin as he moved closer to Jee's now half-hard cock with my hand encircling it. His long tongue swept over my hand and the base of Jee's cock, and his mouth moved down to caress Jee's scrotum. Then Jav pushed a hand underneath Jee's thigh to raise his hips higher, and his head sank lower.

Gasping an inhale, Jee wailed, the combined cry sounding like he was choking. Letting go of Jee's cock, I shifted lower to see Jav's tongue licking at Jee's anal hole. Jav held firm as Jee writhed his hips and flailed his arms, trying to move away from Jav. With his eyes tightly shut and his face contorted with ecstasy, it was clear this was very pleasurable. So I wasn't sure why he kept trying to wiggle out of Jav's grip. I grabbed one of his hands in mine, threading our fingers together.

Jav kissed and sucked on Jee's crease, and Jee let out a soft gasp. His whole body vibrated with tension. I'd heard the anus was an erogenous zone, but this? The typical me would have found it disgusting, but no such thoughts entered my mind. I focused on Jee's face as soft moans escaped his lips. His eyes, now slitted open, were dark with desire. He was looking at me, but I wondered if he really knew I was here.

"Bin," Jee whispered.

The energy vibrated all around us. I opened my spirit eyes and saw a thick mist of it covering Jee's body. It flowed over me and twined with Jav's.

Bin, touch him, Jav said.

I reached up and wrapped my hand around Jee's hard, leaking cock. He whimpered, and the energy around him thickened and brightened.

He's very sensitive. Jav sent another message through our mental connection.

Then Jee yelped, his eyes popping open wide.

Don't. Oh! Yes...

His sputtered words came through our connection with a whimper and a plea.

Would you open the drawer next to the bed and take out the blue tube of gel inside? Jav asked.

I let go of Jee's cock, wondering if he'd miss my touch, but he seemed oblivious to anything other than Jav's tongue for the moment. Inside the drawer of the nightstand, I found the blue tube and some boxes of condoms, amongst other things. Had Jav put them there, or had they come with the room? As I shifted to reach for the gel, my overly sensitive penis gave a twitch. I frowned at the inconvenience. My body was aroused, but my mind was curiously clear and uninvolved, as though the two were completely separate.

With the gel in hand, I scooted toward Jee, setting his right foot in my lap and lifting his leg higher to give Jav better access. Now I could see even more clearly as Jav's tongue laved and poked at him. Every time Jav pierced his hole, Jee flinched and trembled. Jav reached out to me even as he laved Jee's crease, and I handed him the gel.

Touch him, Jav told me again.

I ran my hand along Jee's soft inner thigh and settled my hand back on his cock. While I stroked Jee, Jav opened the tube and squeezed a dollop of gel onto his index finger. He rubbed it against Jee's glistening opening, and his finger sank in slowly. Jee flinched but relaxed into the invasion as I massaged his thigh and his hard member. My penis twitched again, a drop leaking from the tip and trickling down my length. I pushed the unfamiliar sensations out of my mind. I now understood it was only a spillover sensation from Jee.

I wanted to focus on Jee. Only him.

Jav's finger sank deeper, and my hand tightened on Jee's cock as his digit was swallowed by Jee's hole.

"What...?" Jee gasped, levering himself up on his elbows, his stunned eyes dark with desire. Breathless, a high-pitched keening erupted from his throat, and he collapsed back down, his slick cock leaking copiously. Jav had pressed something inside him, making him writhe with pleasure.

That's his sweet spot.

Pulling out momentarily, Jav added a second finger to Jee's shiny hole. As before, both fingers sank in with only slight resistance. Jee moaned, writhing again as Jav pumped in and out of him and I stroked his cock. We kept up a slow rhythm, although Jee's hand grabbed mine, urging me to go faster.

Engrossed in the slide of my hand over Jee's pulsing cock, I forgot about Jav until Jee screamed again. Three of Jav's fingers were fully buried in Jee now, and his hips shook, movements frantic. Jav pumped his fingers faster, in and out, deeper and rougher. Jee's hole was glistening from the gel. His thigh muscles tensed and fluttered as he rocked into Jav's hand. As Jee's climax built, my penis throbbed, ready to erupt.

Jav pulled out his fingers, and Jee whimpered.

Pump faster; Jav commanded.

As I tightened my hand and shuttled it over Jee's leaking cock, Jav added more lube to his fingers and roughly inserted them again, immediately hitting Jee's special spot. Jee screamed, and his cock pulsed as hot cum erupted onto my hand. My own release painted the inside of my robe as

pleasure ran through my body. But I didn't care about that. I smoothed my hands down Jee's thigh.

Jee was so beautiful.

I bent forward to press a kiss on his cheek.

Jav hadn't removed his fingers, and Jee's hole was still spasming around them as he continued to tremble. His orgasm dragged on, and his energy surrounded us, especially heavy around Jav, melding and twisting as Jee breathed rapidly. But Jav hadn't come yet.

I removed my robe and wiped myself and Jee with it. He lay still, his body spent, and I curled up next to him with my head on his chest. As we lay together, his breathing slowed. I studied my smaller, paler naked body next to his. It was strangely comfortable being bare in front of both of them, even though I usually loathed revealing my body to anyone. Even Jee, who I had known for more than half my life, had never seen me naked.

But here I was...

Jav shed his clothing, his hard cock glistening and his eyes dark with desire. Although Jee was breathtakingly lovely, Jav didn't fall too short with his tall frame, sinewy muscles, and defined chest. He settled between Jee's bent legs and lifted them. I grabbed Jee's right leg under his thigh, pulling it up and spreading him open even further.

Jav leaned forward so his forearms rested on either side of Jee and pressed his groin against Jee's, his cock gliding along Jee's wet crease. His arm brushed against my side as he lowered his head to kiss Jee on his cheek, down his chin,

nibbling on his neck. Jav writhed sinuously against Jee, sliding his cock against Jee's hole a few times before pushing up to trap it between their bodies and rub against Jee's soft member.

Jee wrapped his left leg behind Jav, pulling him in. "Come. Be closer. Inside me," Jee whispered.

I felt his desire to join with Jav, and I knew Jav felt it too.

But Jav didn't move. "You've never done this before. I don't want to hurt you. We can slowly learn how to be with each other," Jav murmured into Jee's chest.

No. No. Now!

Jee forcefully pushed his thought at Jav as he rubbed against him. Jav looked torn. His desire swirled around him. I knew he wanted to bury himself deep inside Jee, to be one with his soulmate. But he loved him so deeply that he couldn't bear to hurt him.

Now!

Jee pulled his other leg from my grasp and wrapped that one around Jav as well.

Jav's resistance fell. He rose to his knees and grabbed Jee's hips with both hands. Jee let his knees fall further apart, baring himself. I clasped Jee's hand as Jav slowly lowered his hips. He let out a small whimper, tensing when Jav's cock penetrated his hole, and I tightened my hold on his hand.

Relax. Breathe. And push out slowly, Jav crooned.

Jee took a deep breath, and I felt him trying to do as Jav said, but his hand clenched mine and his face was contorted in a grimace.

Jav stilled his movement, then pulled out and lowered his body to press reassuringly against Jee's.

I'm stopping now, love. No more. It's over. He cupped a hand around Jee's face, caressing his cheek and wiping away the droplets of tears that had pooled in his eyes.

Don't stop. Jee sniffed, then he locked his legs around Jav again.

Jav peered down into Jee's eyes, and his resolve crumbled. He tenderly stroked Jee's face again, brushing his lips against Jee's before shifting upward. Jee took shallow breaths as Jav lathered his cock with more gel and fingered Jee's opening, pressing in slowly when Jee nodded.

Jee's eyes glistened with tears, but he breathed slowly and made no sound as they slid down his cheeks. I lifted my hand to wipe away the moisture on his face. He was so beautiful that I couldn't help but bend forward and touch my lips against his. As I breathed with him, his muscles relaxed, Jav's lower body now pressed flush against his.

Suck on his nipple. He's very sensitive there.

At Jav's instruction, I slid down and closed my lips around one peaked nipple. As I did, Jav pulled out, and as I shifted to drag my tongue across his other nipple, Jav pushed back in.

Jee let out a loud groan as his cock plumped up once more. I continued laving and sucking on his nipple as Jav pumped in and out rhythmically, drawing a string of whimpers and moans from Jee's lips. Jee's hard length now bobbed in the air, untouched and neglected. Wondering what it would feel like in my mouth, I let go of his nipple and shifted closer. It was a

magical moment, unaffected by bothersome heightened senses. I grabbed Jee's cock with one hand and closed my lips around it. It was strange but pleasant—the skin was soft and taut, but beneath that, it was firm and unyielding.

I sucked and licked, studying Jee's reaction. His fingers slid across my scalp, and he grabbed my hair, tugging but not hurting. He was barely breathing now. Jav's respiration was fast and uneven as he pumped in and out, frantic but not quite rough. Jee's muscles tightened, and he choked on a loud scream, shoving my head away moments before his cock spurted as his entire body shuddered and spasmed. Jav shouted and fell forward onto Jee, murmuring words of love as I, too, came once more.

Chapter 16. Jee

The light shining through my closed eyelids told me it was morning and I should get up, but I didn't want to. Cocooned in warmth, I was floating in an ocean of contentment. I wanted to stay just like this forever.

But...I was thirsty. Totally parched. My throat was dry and raw, as if I'd been shouting and drinking all night at some trendy club, although I'd never done that before. I'd joined Sanang right after finishing boarding school, and my life had been too hectic to do much partying at night. Of course, going to a club would also be out of character.

Oh... Last night...

My eyes popped open.

Sunlight filtered through the thin white curtains. A gentle weight pressed on my sternum, and I glanced down to find Bin, who was sleeping with his head on my chest. My eyes traced the length of his body, naked and halfway covered by the thin sheet draped around his torso. My heart fluttered as I studied his lovely neckline, delicate collarbone, and taut stomach. Despite sharing a room for years, I'd never seen so much of his skin before.

I never wanted to look away.

At the tickle of soft breath on my neck, I shifted my gaze to the right. Jav was sleeping on his side facing me, naked. His

arm was draped across my waist, with one leg wrapped around my thigh and his knee wedged between mine. His penis was semi-hard, pressing against my bare right hip. The sheet draped across my left leg and barely covered my groin.

I took a shaky breath and swallowed.

Last night.

The three of us.

My breath caught as the memories flooded me; I couldn't believe what had occurred. It had been so out of character for me that I wondered for a brief moment if I'd been drugged. Like Bin, I'd never been much of a sexual person. Or so I'd thought. I masturbated occasionally, but that was more to scratch an itch—a stress relief. I'd never wanted to have sex with another person of any gender.

The way I'd behaved last night was...*confusing*.

I flushed as I recalled how I'd acted with Jav, mindlessly craving his touch, seeking to be closer, desperate for more of the rapture he'd elicited in me. I'd moaned, whimpered, and screamed. And it hadn't been just Jav. Bin had touched and caressed me too.

It was too embarrassing.

Too inconceivable.

And the thought of it was arousing...

My cock twitched and swelled just from the memory.

“Did you sleep well?” Jav murmured in a low, husky voice as he nuzzled my neck.

“I...” I couldn't form a coherent thought.

Stop thinking about last night, I told myself over and over, but the more I repeated it, the more I thought about it. I needed to get out of my head. Then I remembered...

I was thirsty.

Parched.

Water?

At my silent thought, Jav disentangled himself and reached over to the bedside table. He twisted the cap off a water bottle before handing it to me. “You must be thirsty. We wiped you down with a wet towel after you passed out, but we didn’t want to wake you up.”

I rose halfway, carefully dislodging Bin from my chest. He whined in protest but rolled over and went back to sleep. Desperate to push away the images of last night that were parading inside my head, I gulped down more than half the bottle. But my eyes kept drifting to Jav’s cock. He’d buried it inside me over and over last night, each stroke bringing an ecstasy and intimacy I’d never experienced before. At every glance, his cock thickened, and soon I couldn’t turn away.

If you keep staring like that, we might end up staying in bed all day.

At Jav’s silent words, heat flooded my cheeks, and I averted my eyes, making the mistake of looking at his face instead. His eyes darkened with desire, but he didn’t move. I inhaled shallowly, wondering what he’d do. Even one small touch would dissolve me into a puddle. After a scorching moment, Jav pushed himself up, and my breath hitched as he brushed his lips against my cheek.

“Unfortunately, Sett and Hosin both told me we can’t do that. But we could have a lazy morning. Maybe not show ourselves until brunch?” he whispered into my ear.

His breath tickled my earlobe. I shivered as the energy thread that connected us pulsed through me. Our bond had strengthened since last night. I could almost see the main thread I shared with Jav and also the filament that ran through Bin.

“You guys just won’t let me sleep longer, will you?” Bin grumbled as he turned to face me again.

“Don’t you usually get up at the crack of dawn?” Jav reached across me to ruffle Bin’s hair.

“Stop that.” Bin narrowed his eyes as he pulled the sheet up, tucking it under his arms and exposing my body completely.

I looked at him tenderly. Even with disheveled hair, Bin was too perfect for someone who’d just woken up.

“I had only half a shower last night, thanks to you two. So I’m going to take a proper long one. Which means either you go take a shower now, or you wait an hour until I’m done.” Bin lifted his eyebrow.

“I have a better idea.” Jav rolled out of bed and, before I could blink, I was in his arms, being carried into the bathroom. “The shower is big enough for the three of us.”

Bin huffed and padded after us, the sheet wrapped around him dragging across the floor. “What?”

“Up to you, but didn’t you say last night you wanted to wash him?” Jav set me on my feet and started the shower.

Bin stared at Jav, open-mouthed. I couldn't tell whether he was appalled or just surprised.

Grabbing my hand, Jav threaded our fingers together and stepped into the shower stall. I followed him in and pressed my body against him. *Mmm*. Warm water cascaded down my back as I blinked and watched Bin standing on the tile floor, still draped in the bedsheet, his mouth closing and opening repeatedly, like a fish out of water. I lifted my eyebrow at him, beckoning him to join us.

Jav tilted my head to wet my hair, and my eyes fell closed as he massaged shampoo into my scalp.

Oh, that feels so good.

Bin grumbled softly, but moments later, his delicate soapy hands slid across my chest, playing lightly with my nipples. Immersed in the warmth of the water and their caresses, I stood passive as Bin's hand shifted lower and dug into the tight spots on my lower back and glutes. I would have melted onto the shower floor if it hadn't been for Jav, who put an arm around me to keep me upright. As they washed me, I wondered if we'd make it in time for brunch. But the thought flitted away as I swam in the sensations surrounding me.

At half past eleven, we sailed into the shared kitchen and dining bungalow at the center of the complex. It was a tad late for brunch, but we had at least come before lunchtime. We could have been even more delayed if Bin's stomach hadn't growled loudly.

My hands flew up to my burning cheeks; they were hot to the touch as I recalled the reason we were so late. Things had gotten heated in the shower and...

“No way!” Bin huffed as he stared at the picked-over breakfast buffet.

What had once been a sumptuous display of food was now mostly empty.

Ugh! I knew we shouldn't have taken so much time in the shower. There's nothing to eat.

At Bin's lament, Jav shook his head, smiling fondly. Bin was adorable even when he was in distress.

We grabbed whatever leftover food we could scrape together and approached the central table, where Sett and Mr. Nam sat talking to a man I'd never seen before. I surreptitiously studied the newcomer. He had to be the healer Sett had called to train me. Even seated, the man was tall, his broad shoulders straining the fabric of his shirt. His dark hair was short and wavy, and he had large, light-brown eyes and generous lips that looked like they smiled often. He had one of those kind faces that put people instantly at ease.

In Korea, there was a concept of one's *sang*, a physiognomy that didn't refer to the actual lines and shapes of a face one was born with. It was said that the way a person lived became etched on their face, showing their true character. And as a person got older, more and more of their true nature showed on their face. Even if a person maintained an outwardly beautiful face, their *sang* would still reveal their true character and render them ugly.

“Is there any coffee left?” Jav asked.

“Nin only arrived ten minutes ago, so we asked for fresh tea and coffee and also more light breakfast food. Everyone promised to be back for lunch around one, so hopefully that will tide you over until then.” Sett motioned for us to join them at the table.

Bin’s grumpy face brightened at Sett’s words, and he mouthed a *thank you* before sitting across the table, in the chair nearest to the food table but furthest away from Mr. Nam and Sett. I settled next to Bin, and Jav sat down beside me, closest to the new person and across from Sett.

“You must be Jee. I’m Nin.” The man leaned forward and offered me his hand, and I automatically reached over and took it.

As his warm hand wrapped around mine, I flinched involuntarily. A snippet of his energy had zapped me like static electricity. It only lasted a moment, the touch immediately turning gentle and soothing, but Jav reacted to my initial shock by putting his arm around me and pulling me tight against him.

“What did you do?” he snapped at Nin.

Nin smiled, completely unperturbed by Jav’s aggressive behavior. “Calm down, Jav. This is very new to him. Your *atarav* is just unused to interacting with others with *atar*. I believe the initial energy recognition between us startled him.”

At Nin’s gentle words, Jav relaxed and let out a little puff of air. “Sorry. Having *atarav* is still new for me, as well. My *atar*

seems to overreact too often. I'm sure it will get better with time.”

Jav rubbed the back of his head with one hand while his other arm still clutched me.

Sett chuckled. “Jav, dear. Be prepared to live with overreacting to things from now on. It doesn't really get better. One might say it gets worse, but one *does* learn how to live with it better.”

Jav sighed but said nothing.

“I can sense you have the potential to be a powerful healer.”

Nin's eyes were intense as he regarded me. I pressed my lips together, not knowing how to respond. I felt like I was under a microscope, a helpless and mindless creature under study. I squirmed under his gaze.

“There aren't many healers in Tasier. I'm honored to welcome you into our midst and thrilled to help you develop your ability. And of course, thanks to you, I also get to enjoy a lovely vacation here,” Nin said.

He was trying to put me at ease, and I was grateful for his kind words, but all the polite pleasantries that I knew I should say never emerged. Although Nin had felt familiar to me from the start, probably because our *atar* recognized each other, talking to strangers was not my forte. When we met press or fans as Sanang, there was usually a script to follow, or else Hwa and Saem would ease the way.

“Thank you for coming,” I said, my voice fading to a whisper at the end.

“My pleasure. Perhaps we should chat about what comes next? Unlike abilities like telepathy or dreamwalking, which can be more innate, the healing ability has a learning curve and can be dangerous for someone who doesn’t know how to wield it properly. So we’ll take it slow. And you should at least get a chance to rest during your vacation. I heard you already have some live streaming to do and hunting at night. I predict I will have to remain with you for a while, even after the vacation.” Nin’s voice was quiet, even, and almost melodious.

I nodded as I wondered where Nin was from. His accent was hard to place. Other than the fact that he was part of Tasier and knew Sett, I knew nothing about him. He’d mentioned enjoying a vacation, which seemed to imply he had a job elsewhere, but he’d also said he’d stay with me for a while, so it probably wasn’t a typical office job.

If it were up to me, I’d just ignore my healing ability altogether. I didn’t need yet another ability, and I didn’t want to trouble Nin. I felt fine now, and I’d had no weird incidents with my *atar* since the night I’d passed out. But both Sett and Jav had said I was in danger until I learned to control my ability, so I had very little choice.

I still had many unanswered questions about Tasier and *atar*. We’d been so busy for the past several weeks, and we’d had no time to talk. Or maybe I’d been avoiding the conversation. I didn’t want added complications in my life. My plate was full already, just between being a K-pop idol and a hunter. Then came my soulmate Jav and the unusual connection that formed between Jav, Bin, and me. And now I had to learn to deal with a new ability that had a stiff learning curve and possibly become part of Tasier.

How was I supposed to juggle it all?

Jav rubbed my arm and pressed a light kiss on my head. *I'm here. Use my strength. You don't have to face things alone.*

My eyes watered at his words. Instead of a reply, I rested my head on his shoulder.

“So, when do you want to talk?” I asked Nin.

Chapter 17. Bin

Sensing the approaching sunrise, my eyes drifted open. Wrapped in Jav's arm, Jee didn't stir as I slid out of bed and tucked the sheet around him. With a lingering look at his sleeping form, I sighed. I didn't want to leave the warmth of his embrace, but I also wanted to talk to my spirit. Because of our busy schedule, I hadn't been able to speak to him as often. Time was meaningless to my spirit, and he didn't miss me in the same way I missed him, but I longed for him when I didn't connect with him every so often.

Our schedule had settled into a routine since coming to Jeju. We spent the bulk of the day being K-pop idols. Once or twice a day, we uploaded photos or streamed short snippets of our vacation life for our fans. Since the world tour of our last album was over, we were due for a new one. We used content created by outsiders, but we liked to have at least a third of what we released be original in both song and dance. Even though we enjoyed this part, our vacation was not truly a vacation. It was just time away to do more work.

A lot of my time went into brainstorming choreo with Saem and Jin. They were phenomenal dancers but not interested in choreography, so I ended up doing most of it while they performed as I directed. I also spent time with Hwa and Jee, trying out the new songs he was composing from Jee's lyrics.

As Jee and I were the main vocalists, we had to try out the new songs first as Hwa composed them.

Besides working on lyrics, Jee spent an hour or two each day with Nin, learning how to be a healer. Jav disappeared most of the day, doing whatever he did for Tasier. He was never forthcoming about what that was. I was curious, and I think Jee was also, but I didn't want to intrude on his private life. I had a connection with him, but only through Jee. It pained me that Jav and Jee had something only the two of them shared. But that was the reality, and I accepted it.

No matter what we did during the day or night, our sleeping ritual was always the same. We went to bed together, even if we did nothing but sleep. Jee slept between us, with Jav settling on his right and me on his left. Although it was rare that we only slept. They had a hard time keeping their hands off one another, and I was always swept away by their passion.

Without Jee and Jav, I had no interest in sex. And even when I was with them, only my body reacted. I'd spent most of my life detached from my physical form, and its reaction was interesting but not of much consequence. Curiously, my lack of interest did not apply to Jee. I loved touching him, caressing him, eliciting his response. I'd never tire of hearing him moan with pleasure and watching him flush and gasp from orgasm. Jav was equally addicted to physical intimacy and the melding of energy I sensed between them. I wasn't part of it, but I was the closest bystander.

There was one downside to our nighttime activity. Getting up at the crack of dawn was much easier when I'd been sleeping by myself. Since I'd become his conduit, I'd always

reserved sunrise hour for my spirit. And I wouldn't change that if I could help it. I could always go back to bed afterward and let the cocoon of Jee's warmth soothe me back to sleep.

I put on a cotton robe and splashed some water on my face to wipe the sleep from my eyes. The sun was rising. I went to the corner of the living room to light incense in the small, gilt bronze incense burner I carried everywhere. It was shaped like a flame but also resembled a lotus blossom, and it had a tiny phoenix on top. It had been given to me by my father, a legacy of his grandmother and many other ancestors before her. He'd kept it safe for me until I came of age.

As the smoke rose, I called my spirit.

Cheonsin, will you join me?

Binmi, my love. Always.

I shivered as my spirit wrapped around me, enfolding me with warmth and love. Although I imagined myself talking to him, we rarely used actual words. Nature spirits communicated better through shared images and feelings since human words often confused them. Of course, *mudang* also connected with other kinds of spirits. Those spirits that used to exist as humans were more likely to communicate with words.

Through images in my mind, I shared the last couple days of activities with my spirit. The spirit watched over me, but he couldn't pay attention to me at all times. And he liked when I told him about my life, feelings, and thoughts. I had wonderful parents, great friends, and Jee, my special person. But sometimes my spirit was all that and more. He could be everything to me.

Cheonsin, were you able to speak to a dragon spirit at Yongmeori Coast? I thought Jin's dragon would heal after his visit there. It is a powerful place. But he hasn't transformed into his dragon yet, and he's been very tightlipped about what happened. I hope his dragon is recovering.

My sky spirit sent me a shrug through our connection, and I shook my head. He was powerful, but he didn't go out of his way to be friendly with other spirits unless I asked him to.

Are there dragon spirits at Yongmeori Coast?

My spirit shrugged again.

Ugh.

My frustration must have communicated to him.

My spirit nudged me. *Jin will be fine. His dragon is getting stronger.*

I let out a sigh. *That's good to know. It's been hard seeing him without his dragon. Saem's got his tiger back. The evil spirit that was tormenting Wyn is gone. We might finally get back to the way things were once Jin gets his dragon back.*

At my speech, my spirit shook his figurative head at me. I wrinkled my nose. Now what? What part of my statement was wrong? I waited, but he remained silent.

What? I asked, frowning.

The past is not the way it used to be. The present is not the way it used to be.

Aargh! It's not that my spirit was trying to be difficult. If the message was a complicated one, he had a hard time expressing it in terms that I could understand.

What are you trying to tell me?

Things are still changed even after your return. Your trip to the past has not fixed the timeline.

What? My heart lurched in my chest.

Was the spirit telling me our trip to the past hadn't worked? But that couldn't be. We'd spoken to Saem's father and others, and they all seemed to have the correct memories. Sett and Mr. Nam had also read through whatever historical records they could find, and all had pointed to what we'd remembered as the correct timeline.

Imugi is no longer locked up inside Geumgang Mountain.

Dragging my white robe on the ground, I flew across the complex, past the common area, to Mr. Nam and Sett's bungalow. I'd left my spirit without saying goodbye, knowing he would understand why I had to run. I couldn't sense him now that I'd closed the connection. But he could still be watching over me. He didn't understand human feelings well, but he loved me enough to be there for me whenever I needed him.

Gasping for air, I knocked on Mr. Nam's door, forgetting it was half past seven, and the sun had only risen a few minutes ago. It didn't even occur to me they might still be sleeping. My heart pounded, not only because I'd just run, but out of fear. Every encounter with *Imugi* had hurt us, in more ways than one. But we hadn't discussed *Imugi* since our return from the past. We'd thought we had time to come up with a way to

deal with it since it was still locked away and not free to attack us.

But we'd been wrong.

Maybe my spirit was wrong, or perhaps he'd developed a sense of humor.

But of course, neither of those was possible.

The door opened slowly. Mr. Nam was wearing lounge pants and a loose, long-sleeved T-shirt. Either I'd woken him, or he'd just gotten up a short while ago. His half-scowling face immediately morphed to worry when he found me standing at his door, panting.

"Hosin, what is it?"

Footsteps drew closer, and the door opened wider to reveal Sett in his robe.

With one look at me, Sett took my hand and pulled me inside. "Your hand is ice cold. What are you doing here only wearing a thin robe? You must have frozen on your way here."

He led me to the sofa, sat me down, and wrapped a plush blanket around me. When Mr. Nam handed him another one, he bundled that around me as well.

"There. Are you any warmer?"

Dazed, I nodded.

"Now, tell us what happened." Sett put both his hands on mine, his warm ones thawing my chilled fingers. Gentle energy flowed from him, calming me. How did he do that? My mind cleared as his warmth seeped into me.

"*Imugi* is free."

Sett's eyes widened, and Mr. Nam frowned.

Silence fell.

I sat staring into space, not knowing what else to do. I wasn't even sure why I'd run over here. It's not as though there was anything anyone could do right at this moment. My mind ran in a million directions, but I was paralyzed. I couldn't focus on anything.

Sett pulled me back up to stand. "Hosin asked the others to join us in our common area. Let's go get some tea and coffee ready while we wait for them to arrive."

I don't know how long I sat comatose, but things had happened without my notice. Sett handed me a large, thick sweater so I could wear it over my much thinner robe. He was already dressed in a gray turtleneck sweater and faded jeans, and Mr. Nam was wearing a black sweater and jeans.

Once I was bundled in the heavy sweater, Sett patted me on the shoulder. "Come."

I followed Sett and Mr. Nam out the door and to the large common room, where we ate our meals and enjoyed tea or coffee. When I fidgeted by the door, Sett nudged me toward the kitchenette.

"Can you take out enough cups for everyone? I'll make some tea."

Moving like a zombie, I followed his directions while Sett put on the electric kettle and fussed with the tea. Mr. Nam turned on the espresso machine and opened a bag of coffee beans. The resort was always ready to bring us hot coffee and

tea at any time of the day, but we preferred not to have others intrude on our space.

The first ones to appear were Jee and Jav. They must have dressed in a hurry. Jav was wearing sweatpants and a shirt but had a thick bathrobe over them. Jee was wearing his sleep pants with Jav's sweatshirt. Both of them had hair sticking out all over the place, although they must have at least splashed some water on their faces since it was damp at the edges.

As soon as Jee saw me standing aimlessly near the table, he came and pulled me into a hug. After letting me go, he studied me carefully, his eyes full of concern. "Bin, what's going on?"

I buried my face back in his chest, and he wrapped his arm around me.

"Let's take a seat and wait for the others." Jav's soft voice was still husky from sleep.

I clung to Jee as he half carried me to the couch and pulled me down next to him. The seat dipped further as Jav sat on his other side.

"What's going oo...?"

I shifted my head just in time to catch Wyn yawning. Saem had an arm around him, shuffling him along. Saem looked more awake than Wyn since he was one of the early risers of our group. They both sat as Nin came in. Nin nodded at the rest of us and went to Sett, who was pouring water into the teapot.

Sen arrived next, carrying Jin in his arms. Jin's eyes were barely open. Sen, being a vampire, albeit a living one, liked to stay up late and sleep most of the day. So Jin, who had been a

night owl to begin with, was now even more of one. And since he was no longer fueled by dragon power, it was harder for him to function with little sleep. Sen was scowling, probably upset that his love was not getting enough rest. He'd been worried sick since Jin's dragon got hurt.

Hwa and Menes appeared last. Hwa was dragging Menes, his hand gripped around Menes's wrist. I wondered what was going on between them. I couldn't put my finger on it, but Menes treated Hwa differently than the others. It was just so subtle that I hadn't realized there was something between them until this trip, when they'd paired off to share a room.

After everyone had gathered around the coffee table with tea and coffee, Mr. Nam turned to me.

“Now, tell us.”

Chapter 18. Jav

“*Imugi* is free,” Bin whispered, but we heard his words loud and clear.

Gasps and startled coughs erupted in the room, but no one spoke as we waited for Bin to elaborate.

“My spirit said the timeline is not back to the way it used to be, and *Imugi* is not locked away in Geumgang Mountain as we believed. It has to be something we did when we went back in time. I...” Bin lowered his eyes. “That’s it. I didn’t know what to do, so here I am.”

His lower lip wobbled. Jee rubbed his back, hand moving up and down in a soothing motion.

“Did the spirit tell you anything else?” Hosin asked.

Bin shook his head and let out a sigh. “I guess I should have asked more questions, but I couldn’t think. I can contact the spirit again, but we have to come up with some concrete questions. Talking to spirits is not like talking to people.”

“If the timeline’s changed, shouldn’t we also have forgotten that *Imugi* used to be locked up? I mean, the last time the timeline changed, I thought we only remembered the original one because Saem’s tiger spirit intervened.” Hwa ran his hand roughly through his hair, making it stand on end.

“We were likely not in our own timeline when this happened. Something we did when we traveled back in time caused this change.” Sett rubbed his temple.

“It’s my fault.” Wyn’s face was pale.

Saem gathered him in his arms and lightly kissed his forehead. Wyn leaned his head on Saem’s shoulder, his face crumpled in misery. “I let *Imugi* get away when you almost had it in your grasp.”

Saem ran his fingers gently through Wyn’s hair. “It wasn’t your fault. An evil spirit was tormenting you.”

“I’m a wizard. I should have been stronger. Now *Imugi* is free.” Wyn wrung his hands in his lap.

Saem put his hand on top of Wyn’s, stopping him without words.

Bin gave Wyn a sympathetic look. “The evil spirit was strong and devious. You couldn’t have known what was happening.”

Wyn said nothing but nodded.

“It’s possible that we were the seven warriors who were supposed to lock *Imugi* away,” Hosin murmured under his breath. He was scrolling through his phone.

Hwa’s mouth dropped open. “No way.”

“I’m quite certain I read about the seven warriors in this document, but it is no longer there.” Hosin’s face was grim as he scanned the meager information we’d accumulated about *Imugi*.

“I also remember reading about *Imugi* being locked away inside the Geumgang Mountain. Where does it say *Imugi* is now?” I asked.

“It doesn’t say. Just that seven warriors battled it, and it escaped badly wounded.” Hosin set down his phone.

“Do we even know the origin of that document?” Menes asked.

Hosin shook his head.

“If the damn monster is free, why didn’t we know sooner? It should have made some sort of move.” Sen asked the question we were no doubt all thinking. Unfortunately, none of us had answers.

“Maybe we hurt it badly, and it was recovering?” Bin wrinkled his nose.

“For close to six hundred years?” Hwa shook his head.

“I’m waiting for some information that might help us figure out our next steps,” Sett said.

I turned to look at Sett.

“The assassin,” Hosin replied to my unvoiced question.

I scowled. “What about the assassin? We just let him walk. Did you do that on purpose? Why?” Questions shot rapid-fire from my lips until Jee squeezed my hand.

Thinking about the attack riled me up. The mercenaries had targeted my *atarav* and the people I cared for, but we’d just let them all go. Not that I knew what we would have done with them if we’d kept them. I had to admit, when I’d seen the mercenary leader tied up in the chair, for just a second, I’d

envisioned Hosin torturing him for information. Of course, that was ridiculous. None of us would ever torture another being, even if they had tried to kill us.

“We didn’t think he’d give us any information about who hired him. But since he has *atar*, we tagged him,” Sett said quietly.

The Sanang boys looked perplexed, but everyone in Tasier knew what Sett meant. Upper circle Tasier members all had a molecular tag injected into them. It was a biological substance that worked with individual *atar* and emitted a special energy signature. The tag worked with the security systems at Tasier houses around the world, and it could also be tracked using a special device. Since I wasn’t a scientist or an engineer, I didn’t know *how* it worked, but I knew it worked.

I gave Sett an incredulous look. “So, you’re tracking him now?” From the trusting way Sett had behaved toward the assassin, I would never have guessed he’d be so calculating.

“Yes. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. The best-case scenario was that we would convince him to stay, but the chances were slim. So we needed a plan to track him without his knowledge.”

“Where is he now? What is he doing? Who is he? And how is he related to *Imugi*?”

“He’s in San Francisco at the moment, but we don’t know what he’s doing. Since he was ordered to kill Sanang, we have to assume *Imugi* was probably behind it. Other than *Imugi*, I can’t think of anyone else who would want Sanang dead.”

“That sounds crazy. *Imugi* hired mercenaries to kill us? Why? Human assassins are no match for any of us. Maybe it

has gone crazy?” Hwa giggled, and it seemed to have had a contagious effect since Jee, Bin, and Saem all broke into smiles.

“What?” Jin’s eyes popped open. Hwa burst into full-blown laughter when Jin rubbed his eyes, his mouth opening on a massive yawn.

“Were you sleeping this whole time?” Saem’s smile morphed into a grin as he looked at Jin.

“No.” Jin gave him the side eye, but his face flushed with guilt. “What did I miss?”

“*Imugi* is free. We don’t know where it is. And it might have sent assassins to finish us,” Hwa said.

Jin’s eyes went wide. “Are you serious? That’s what the dragon spirit was talking about?”

Bin frowned. “What do you mean?”

“There was a real dragon spirit at Yongmeori Coast. An ancient one who is on the verge of drifting into permanent slumber. He rambled about the dark *Imugi* that had appeared. *Imugi* tried to steal the spirit dragon’s powers, but the spirit sent it packing. When I asked when that had happened, he couldn’t tell me. He has little sense of time, so it could have been yesterday or hundreds of years ago. I assumed it was some other *Imugi* since ours was locked away. Are you saying that might have been our *Imugi*?”

“There is no such thing as *our Imugi*. We don’t have *Imugi*. There’s just an evil one we have to eliminate,” Saem said in an uncharacteristically vehement voice. His eyes flashed yellow

for a moment as he spoke, and I realized it was probably his tiger showing himself.

“What else did the spirit tell you?”

At Bin’s question, Jin tilted his head to the side.

“Hmm.” He fell silent, his eyes losing focus, his body frozen. Then, moments later, he stirred and blinked. “My dragon remembers the spirit saying *Imugi* tried to steal his power but fled after it failed. I guess the dragon spirit kicked its butt and told it never to show itself around these waters. Before it angered the spirit, *Imugi* had spent some time along this coast, fairly close to here. I think somewhere between here and Yongmeori Coast? *Imugi* left in a hurry after being banished, so it might have left something behind in its lair.”

“Like what?” Hwa’s eyes sparkled with interest.

“I don’t know.” Jin shrugged.

“How did the spirit know *Imugi* left something?” Bin asked.

“Maybe he doesn’t know. I’m not sure. But if *Imugi* did leave something, maybe it will give us a clue to help us find it.”

“My tiger might be able to figure out where its lair is since he can sense *Imugi*. Maybe the lair has the same energy.”

“Seriously? It’ll be like searching for a needle in a haystack. Remember, someone had this brilliant idea to bump into *Imugi* at the palace? How long did we roam around that enormous place with absolutely no lead, only to discover that *Imugi* wasn’t there at all?” Wyn poked Saem, who grinned sheepishly.

“We know it’s somewhere along the coast between here and the Yongmeori area. That’s about forty-five or fifty kilometers for us to cover. We can even incorporate some fun and hike the Olle Trail while streaming parts of it. It’ll take a couple of days, maybe three?” There was an excited gleam in Saem’s eyes. Given that he was a tiger shifter with a nature elemental power, he was the most nature-friendly of the Sanang boys.

Bin shook his head at Saem. “There’s no way I’m going backpacking. I’m not here to camp. I love my bungalow, soft bed, hot shower, flushing toilet...”

“I’m not saying we go backpacking or camping. We can have a car drop us off at the start of the Olle Trail and pick us up at the end of each branch. Each section should take six or seven hours, and there should be tons of places to stop for food and rest since it’s a well-traveled path.”

“Okay. That’s fine then.” Bin sagged with relief, slumping against Jee.

“When do we want to start?” Saem’s tone was neutral, but I could tell from the glint in his eyes that he couldn’t wait.

“Today? As soon as possible?” Jin looked eager as well.

Bin grimaced but nodded. The Sanang boys started chatting about plans. Development of the Jeju Olle trails that covered the entire circumference of the island had started over six years ago. One by one, sections of the old coastal trail used by the people who’d lived there for centuries had been connected, and now the trails were popular for hiking and exploring. The Sanang boys were now talking about how to promote some of the special charms of Jeju in their live broadcast.

With a concrete plan to follow, Bin looked a lot calmer than he had half an hour ago when Jee and I had first arrived. He'd been deathly pale then. When he saw Bin, Jee had clutched on to my arm, his heart skipping a beat with worry. With the five of them and Wyn talking animatedly about the trail, I stood to get a second cup of coffee.

Just as I'd finished pouring a cup, Hosin came over. Sett and Menes appeared next to us a moment later.

"We heard from our source late last night," Hosin murmured.

"We should talk." Sett motioned to the door.

I glanced at Jee and Bin. They were still busy chatting, oblivious to anything else. I followed Menes, Sett, and Hosin outside, shivering in the morning air. The temperature had warmed up since sunrise, but it was still quite chilly. I'd been deeply asleep, with Jee in my arms, when Hosin had called an emergency meeting. In my hurry to get here, I hadn't taken the time to dress properly.

"It's too cold to talk here. We can go to our room." Sett motioned forward.

Sett and Hosin's bungalow was a mirror image of the one I shared with Jee and Bin. Once we'd settled in the living room, Menes began.

"The group that attacked us works for a corporation called Serpentine. The company is not well known to the public, but they have a reputation among those who deal with weapons and security."

“So he works for a legit company?” I shook my head in disbelief.

“It appears so, although no one knows who owns the company or how it came to be. While they seem legitimate, there are some unsubstantiated claims about where they recruit their mercenaries for hire. Usually, these types of companies employ people who are ex-military or ex-intelligence, but that doesn’t seem to be the case for Serpentine. There’s a rumor that the company has its hands in multiple orphanages around the world and that they secretly screen and groom these children to take jobs in their security forces. Unfortunately, their computer systems are locked down pretty tight. Trying to hack into their system has been unsuccessful so far.”

I glowered. “That’s it? We still don’t know who’s trying to kill Sanang. The name of the company, Serpentine, seems to point to it being associated with *Imugi*, but we don’t know for sure it is involved. And we just let those assassins go.”

“It was still the right decision to let them go, unless you think killing them would have achieved something. The mercenaries wouldn’t have known anything useful, anyway. And it wasn’t a complete loss. We can track the man who is of interest to us.”

Sett was right, of course. We were not killers, and the people who came to kill Sanang would know nothing about who hired them.

“So?”

I looked at each of them. They’d wanted to talk to me about something, and I didn’t think it was just to share this useless information.

“We’d like you to go talk to our assassin,” Sett said.

I frowned. “What?”

“We have him under surveillance in San Francisco, and it doesn’t seem like he’s contacted his company. Something’s changed for him. If we contact him now, he may be willing to talk.”

I shook my head. “You want me to go now? *Now?* When we just found out *Imugi* is free? What about protecting Sanang?”

And what about Jee? My atarav... I added silently to myself.

The last few days we’d been together had been perfect. I wanted this idyllic time to continue, even if it was just for a few more days.

“I know it’ll be difficult for you to be apart from your *atarav*, but if he knows anything or can help us find out more about Serpentine, that would...” Sett let out a small sigh. “Even if he knows nothing except the mission was given, you know how important it is for us to bring him into Tasier. He’s been living out in the world all alone.”

Sett reached out and took my hand, his eyes pleading. I understood his reason for asking, but I couldn’t say yes.

“Also, we need to know how he’s able to control multiple elements,” Hosin said.

“We know nothing about him. He might be some kind of Trojan horse planted to entice us. Who knows why he’s not contacting his employer? Maybe he’s on vacation. Or maybe he got fired for utterly failing his last mission. I don’t see how

talking to him now would change anything. If he were even remotely interested, he wouldn't have just walked out.”

Even as I gave all kinds of excuses for why this was a bad idea, I knew how important it was to connect with this man. Whoever had sent the assassins was likely to try again, no matter how easily the first attempt had failed. Sighing, I rubbed the back of my neck. It was unlikely, but if he knew anything at all that could help, it would be worth trying. Plus, not only did the man belong with Tasier, it was possible he was somehow related to Sanang as well.

A smile bloomed on Sett's face as he observed my wavering. “I would go if I didn't think you were better suited for this task,” he said.

I nodded. He was right. Of the four of us, I was the only one who could pull this off. The others might have been superb at hiding their true nature and their powers, but they still put power-sensitive people on the defense.

I drew in a deep breath. “When should I leave?”

Chapter 19. Jee

Leaning back in my chair, I stared with disbelief at the list of documents that Nin had loaded onto my tablet. “You want me to do what?”

“Read and study these at your leisure,” he said, his voice far too cheerful for the task he just gave me. He tapped his fingers lightly on the small dining table in his bungalow.

“These are texts for practicing doctors. Eastern and western medicine... Anatomy texts...” I scrolled through the dizzying array of titles. “I didn’t go to medical school. How am I supposed to read and understand all this?” I looked up, shaking my head.

Nin smiled. “You’d be surprised how much you’ll be able to understand.”

I grimaced. Bin and I had been attending an online university for the last five years. Since we’d joined Sanang right after high school, we hadn’t been able to go to college in person. While I enjoyed taking classes and learning new things, unfortunately, we often ended up being negligent students because of our busy lives.

In high school, I’d been a passably good student in most subjects, although that was partly thanks to Bin. Even though I’d passed my science classes with good marks, my strength was in literature and maybe history. That was why I was

majoring in linguistics and poetry instead of something like biology. Bin was studying anthropology.

Within Sanang, Saem, Jin, and Hwa were science- and tech-oriented. Saem had studied biology at Goryeo University. *Doh*. Of course, it was easy for him since he was so in tune with nature. Jin had an engineering degree from a university in L.A. Hwa had completed two years of a computer science degree in England and was slowly finishing it online.

I blinked at the sound of Nin's melodious laughter. "I didn't mean to scare you. I don't expect you to study all this."

Then why the heck did you give me all this? I thought the words but didn't speak them aloud.

"I wanted to show you that by the end of our time together, you will know everything in these books and more."

Putting the tablet down on the table, I looked at him, frowning with confusion. If he didn't expect me to study the texts, how was I supposed to gain this knowledge?

"We've spent the last several days gauging your strengths and weaknesses as a healer, and now we're ready to begin your training."

With one elbow on the table, he leaned forward and rested his chin in his hand.

"Being a healer is hard to describe. We're not medical professionals. We—I mean Tasier—already have doctors and nurses who work in medical schools and hospitals around the world. But they're not healers."

I raised an eyebrow, and Nin nodded as if he had understood my silent question.

“Healers are... Well, healers don’t need any medical intervention to heal. Hmm. Okay, that’s not quite right. I said there aren’t many healers in Tasier, but what I meant was that we don’t have many powerful healers. We can divide healers into two categories: Those who are powerful—about a half dozen of us, including you, who can heal using only their *atar*. And others with much weaker power. The weaker healers often become doctors or nurses, and they use their healing power to amplify the effect of existing medical interventions. The powerful healers can heal almost anything by simply using their power.”

“Then why haven’t I heard of healers curing terminal illnesses? Wouldn’t you want to help as many people as you can?”

Nin shook his head. “Just because something can be done doesn’t mean it should. We can heal almost any illness or injury, but the more grave one’s condition, the more energy it requires. It is in a healer’s nature to help, but we can only do so much. We can’t heal everyone. And we also need to understand that human beings are not meant to live forever. That is something I had to learn early in my long life. I hope I can teach you many of the lessons I had to learn the hard way.”

I wrinkled my brows. “You can’t be that much older than me. You look like you’re in your early thirties.”

Nin grinned. “I’ve lived many thousands of years. Now that you’re likely to be part of Tasier, you get to know some secrets about us.”

I stared at Nin's cheerful face, which was completely free of wrinkles.

Thousands of years? *Surely not.*

Nin must have guessed what I was thinking since his smile deepened.

"There will be more opportunities for us to speak about Tasier once your vacation is over. It will take some time for us to introduce you to the organization."

"Maybe I will never know all the secrets Tasier has. I don't know if I want to join Tasier."

I put my hands flat on the table and rested my forehead on them. I liked Nin and the sessions we had together, but I was not in a good mood today. That was why I'd been acting like a grumpy butt. I was just tired. I was already busy enough with Sanang and hunting. Now I had the additional burden of having to learn to be a healer. It was ironic. I was both a hunter—a bringer of death—and a healer—a bringer of life.

"Well, we'll see, won't we? No one will force you to join Tasier."

I jumped at Nin's soft touch on my shoulder. *Wow!* Although he'd only touched me for a couple of seconds, I'd felt the invigorating energy zing through my body.

"Whoa. That was better than gulping down an energy drink."

Nin nodded. "A little something to help you."

"Thanks." My smile of gratitude froze halfway.

I swallowed a sigh. My body now felt more awake, but my head was in the toilet. Grumpiness was mushrooming inside of me. And I knew why. There was no point in trying not to think about it. Jav had left early yesterday, almost immediately after Bin had told us *Imugi* was not locked up in the mountain like we'd thought. Jav had just said he had urgent business to take care of in the US, and before I could protest or ask what it was, he'd disappeared with a small daypack.

It had only been a day, but I missed him terribly.

I'd been fine most of yesterday. Although it hurt that he'd left without a backward glance, I hadn't broken down or anything. The day had been fun. We'd started with a visit to the *haenyeo* coast. It was an area where water ladies dove and collected shellfish to sell. There were only a small number *haenyeo* left, but in the past, there had been many. As large numbers of men were lost at sea, Jeju ladies had earned their living this way. One could say *haenyeo* grew up in the water and became half fish as they matured. They could dive for over four minutes, collecting snails, abalones, and octopuses.

We were quite a hit among the handful of *haenyeo*, most of them in their fifties. Even in Jeju, they'd heard of us. They fawned over us and gave us more food than we could eat. That is...more food than we could have eaten if we'd been normal people. After eating *hoe*, raw fish, and shellfish prepared for us by the ladies, we took a bunch of pictures and went on our way.

We spent the next several hours walking the Olle Trail in search of *Imugi*'s lair. Saem's tiger was on high alert, but we found no sign of *Imugi*. The day hadn't been a total waste,

though. We took many photos and videos to stream for our fans, and the response had been phenomenal. Mr. Nam and Sett came to pick us up at the end of the trail, and we had a giant pot of *saengseon jjigae*, a spicy fish stew.

All up to that point, I'd been fine. More than fine. But after Bin and I got back to our room, the loneliness had hit me. Bin was there, but Jav wasn't. And without Jav, nothing was the same. I felt the thread that linked us, but it was stretched thin across the Pacific Ocean. I could tell Bin also felt his absence. Even as we snuggled into bed together, Bin in his flannel pajamas with dozing sheep and me in my sleep pants, we knew our relationship had irrevocably changed.

A gentle touch on my shoulder pulled me out of my morose thoughts. I lifted my eyes to gaze at Nin, who was sitting in front of me with a serious expression. He offered me both of his hands, palms up, and without a thought, I rested my hands on top of his.

“Learning what’s needed to be a proper healer takes a while, and most healers build their skills slowly. Acquiring knowledge at a slow pace helps hone one’s skill and is highly beneficial. But you have too much power and very little time. If you don’t learn quickly, you might be in danger, like when you accidentally tried to heal your friend.”

As I stared blankly at him, the smile returned to his face. “I’d hoped to tell you a bit more about Tasier and being a healer, but I can tell you’re not in the mood for it today. And maybe that will continue until Jav returns. So let’s skip the lecture for now.”

His hand closed over mine. “Because you need this so urgently, I’m going to take a shortcut. I hope I will not be doing you any disservice. From now until we leave Jeju, I’m going to impart to you all the basics you need to know as a healer, directly, through a mind link. What would otherwise take weeks can be learned in a day.”

My mouth dropped open in a silent O.

“But to share via mind link, I need your permission. And perhaps this is something you should also tell Jav. Your *atarav* might sense what I’m doing and get angry. Some consider sharing via mind link to be an intimate act. If you approve, we can start with something small so you know what it feels like and can decide if you’re okay with that.”

I nodded vigorously. Heck, yes. If he could just plant knowledge inside my head without my trying, why would I say no?

“I’m totally okay with it. I trust you.” For the first time today, I smiled.

I wasn’t lying. I’d only met Nin a few days ago, but I trusted him. Something inside me said he’d never harm me.

Nin peered into my eyes, his eyebrows creasing. “I should ask Sett to teach you how to shield your mind. You have nothing to protect it from outside influences.”

I shrugged. “I don’t have mental powers or anything.”

“I understand, but anyone with a certain level of *atar* can learn to shield their mind. Although, without mind power of your own, you won’t be able to protect yourself from those with powerful mental abilities, like Sett, Hosin, or even Jav.”

Nin gently squeezed my hands. “Now, relax.”

A tingle traveled through my hand and dissipated. Whatever Nin had done was subtle. It was so small and fast that if I hadn't been on the alert for signs, I wouldn't have noticed it.

“How do you feel?” Although his expression and tone hadn't changed, I could tell he was busy examining my body for signs of distress.

“Totally fine. I thought I felt a zing, but maybe that was my imagination.”

At my answer, Nin let out a breath. “I think it worked. I was hoping it would.”

I frowned. “Are you saying you've never tried to train healers before? Am I your guinea pig?”

Nin grinned. “Somewhat. Yes and no. I've trained many healers, but you're my first powerful healer. And I've never tried sharing my knowledge through a mind link.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Then why did you suggest doing it this way if you've never done it before?”

“Don't misunderstand. Many powerful healers have been trained this way in the past. It's just that they're rare, and you're my first student powerful enough for me to try it this way. Even though this is how I was taught, the process is new to me from the teaching side.”

His words felt strangely complimentary. I hadn't been keen on the idea of being a healer, but hearing that I was special wasn't so bad.

Except, I didn't feel any different after whatever he did to me. "Am I supposed to feel something?"

"I only sent you a small bit of knowledge about a few important herbal remedies to enhance your healing. You probably won't feel any different since the new knowledge I sent you would feel like something you already knew."

I tilted my head. "Then how do we know it worked?"

"We can probably test your knowledge by visiting the island's botanical garden. I've been meaning to go there and check out the plants, anyway. There are bound to be some herbs you can identify. I assume you don't memorize the names of herbs as a hobby?"

I shook my head. "I don't even know common herbs used in cooking since if anyone cooks, it's Bin."

"Then let's go to visit the garden now. We should be back well before lunch."

So instead of our usual session in his bungalow, we were soon wandering Yeomiji Gardens. Thankfully, the garden was indoors because of the many tropical specimens in its collection, and we were able to stroll at our leisure through a myriad of blooming plants.

After walking for a few minutes, Nin stopped in front of a small bed of plants.

"Tell me what this is."

I raised an eyebrow at him. There was no plaque explaining what it was. I wasn't a botanist, so how should I know?

“Just tell me what it is,” Nin repeated with a smile. It looked like a common shrub with elongated heart-shaped leaves. As I focused on it, the answer popped into my head. What it was, why it was important, and what it was used for. The knowledge was there even though there was no way I’d learned it.

My mouth dropped open as I pointed to *Epimedium koreanum*, also known as horny goat weed. “Seriously?”

How did I know that?

Nin grinned.

Chapter 20. Jav

San Francisco was home, a bustling city one could get lost in. It had been a good place to settle. As a half Asian person, I'd always stood out wherever I'd been. Blending in was the main reason I'd chosen to come here for my undergrad, even though I could have studied in Europe as my mother had hoped or Seoul as my father had wanted.

I loved my parents, but their compromise to spend half of the year in Spain and the other half in Korea meant my childhood had been a mess in terms of social life. Not that I hadn't enjoyed having an unconventional childhood. When I was young, I'd studied outside a normal school system, being taught by private tutors. I'd had no problems with that, but I'd wanted a more conventional life. So when I was finally old enough, I'd convinced my parents to send me to boarding school.

As I topped the escalator, exiting the BART station at the street level, I quickly spotted my friend's bright yellow Mini Cooper and ran toward it.

"How was Korea?" Kayla asked, barely waiting for me to shut the door before she zipped away from the curb.

I hurriedly put on the seatbelt. Kayla was an incredible singer and violinist as well as a talented therapist, but she was a scary driver.

“Where’s Damian? He’s usually attached to your side.” I’d hoped her *atarav* would pick me up today. At least with him driving, I wouldn’t have had to worry about having a heart attack.

“He’s gone on a dig again, obviously.” She sighed, but she didn’t sound too distressed.

Damian hated to be parted from her, which I understood all too well now, but his love for the field pulled him away once a year. Kayla was a creature of comfort, through and through, and unless he was digging somewhere close to civilization, she refused to accompany him. It wasn’t just that she didn’t enjoy the fieldwork. As a therapist, she couldn’t abandon her clients for that long.

“Since Damian’s gone, stay at our house and keep me company. The San Francisco Tasier house is too hectic, anyway. And why were you planning to go there when you have a perfectly lovely condo of your own in the city?”

“I wasn’t expecting to be back for a while, so I rented it out for the next six months.”

“Why ever for? You don’t need the rent.”

I gasped as Kayla made a lane change right in front of another car. The car we’d cut off honked loudly, but she ignored it.

“Hard to find a place in the city for cheap. Renting to a grad student couple who needed a place.” My answer was fragmented as she zigzagged through the streets.

“Stay with me then.”

I slammed my eyes shut as Kayla made a ninety-degree turn and almost ran into another car. Tires squealed and more honking ensued. I stopped breathing for a while.

“Yes?”

I slowly opened my eyes again and let out a breath of relief. We hadn't hit the car.

“Okay.”

My answer was primarily survival instinct. Kayla and Damian's house was closer than the Tasier house, and I'd have that much less time to spend in her dangerous car. It was a wonder that she maintained a spotless driving record, not to mention not having a scratch on her car. It was possible that everyone in San Francisco veered out of her way when they saw her distinctive car coming.

“Great! It will be so good to catch up.”

I had to smile. She had been heading to her house all along, which, if I'd paid attention, I would have realized immediately. She was right. It would be good to catch up. I'd only been gone for a few months, but we had a lot to talk about.

“But can we go to my place first? I want to grab my bike.”

Public transportation in San Francisco was great, but it was more convenient to ride my bike, especially if I was trying to find the man I'd come here to talk with. I opened my phone to the tracker program that would show me the assassin's location. When I'd left Korea the previous afternoon, he'd been stationary at a downtown location. Now that it was past

noon the following day, his dot had moved to a different neighborhood, blinking in place.

My eyes narrowed.

Really? That can't be.

It was too much of a coincidence. His dot was blinking near the San Francisco Tasier house.

“Here we are.”

The car came to an abrupt stop, and I clutched my phone to prevent it from flying out of my hand.

“So, the reason I came back unexpectedly...” I opened the door and ducked to avoid hitting my head as I got out, breathing a sigh of relief.

“What is it?”

I shook my head. “Actually, I’m sorry. Can’t tell you, but I have to go now because of it. I’ll call you when I’m done, but it might take a while.”

Kayla made a face at me, but I gave her a salute and hurried into my condo building.

I stopped my bike near the San Francisco Tasier house and dismounted. But instead of going in, I stood near the front, looking for any sign of the man I’d come to speak to. It couldn’t be a coincidence that his signal was hovering near the San Francisco Tasier house the day I arrived, could it? How had he known I’d be coming?

As I scanned the surrounding area, I felt a light touch on my mind. It was a gentle knock, not a push to force an entry. The man was letting me know he was here without ill intentions. I lowered my shield a bit, letting him send his thoughts to me.

I want to talk.

I scanned my surroundings. He couldn't be far, but I couldn't tell where he was.

Where?

Somewhere private.

What about the Tasier house? I suggested. *It'll be private.* I knew he wouldn't go for it, but we were right here, and I could think of no place more private.

Not there. Somewhere neutral. Let's meet at McLaren Lodge in Golden Gate Park.

When?

As soon as you can get there. With that, he went silent.

I got on my bike again. The park was close enough that I could have jogged, but I wanted to get there quickly and also have an easy egress. Although I knew he'd been close when he contacted me, he wasn't at the meeting point when I arrived. After pacing in front of the landmark for a minute, I took my phone out. I hadn't had a chance to message Jee after sending him a text that I'd landed. But I didn't get a chance now, either.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a man approaching me. He was wearing a ball cap pressed down so low that I couldn't see his face, but he had a similar build to the one I

was looking for. I followed him with my eyes until he finally stopped a couple of steps in front of me, close enough to speak but far enough that I couldn't reach out and touch him.

Huh. I did a double-take. What had happened to him? It was definitely the man I was looking for, but he looked different now. He had dark circles under his eyes. Where he'd been sinewy before, now he was thinner and sharper. His stare was intense but also bleak. As I watched, something sparked in his eyes...not pity but compassion. I'd expected anger, maybe even apathy, but not empathy.

We regarded each other silently until he nodded and turned, starting down a smaller walkway. I followed him. I'd envisioned tracking him down and confronting him in a secluded location. I was confident in my ability to interrogate him forcefully with my mental powers, if needed. There were many scenarios in my head for our encounter, but none where we strolled through the park like old friends.

"I have a younger sister...*had* a younger sister." His tone had a faraway quality, but there was a tremor in his voice.

He'd lost his sister. From his tone and his behavior, I had the feeling it was a recent event. Was that why he appeared so different now? He was shielding his thoughts and feelings as he'd done the first time we'd met, but his emotions still bled through. I sensed the devastation raging inside of him.

I stopped, my hand reaching out to comfort him, but I froze as he turned to face me.

His face was...

He was like a ghost.

As I stared at him, not knowing what to say, his mouth twisted in an expression halfway between a grimace and a smile. It was heartbreaking to see. I clenched my fist. I didn't want to feel bad for him. I didn't want to see his humanity. He was an assassin. I wasn't here to listen to his family's tragedy.

"They said she killed herself...but she wouldn't have done that. I know her. She wouldn't have left me."

His gaze dropped to the ground. Then, without lifting his head, he shuffled toward an empty bench and sat down. I unclenched my hand, let out a slow breath, and joined him. I'd lost the fight to remain aloof.

"We grew up in the orphanage together. I'm sure you did a background check and already know about that."

I actually hadn't, but I didn't tell him that. No doubt Sett and Hosin had run a check in the time since I'd left, but they hadn't sent me anything. So I didn't know as much about him as he seemed to think. But he appeared to be talking to himself more than to me. He wasn't even looking at me. I wondered if he was even aware I was sitting next to him.

"They told us my mother died giving birth to her. I was only two, so I don't know if that's the truth. All I know about my childhood is the orphanage. I didn't hate it there. They treated me well enough. At least I thought they treated me well since I always got more food and treats than other kids. Not my sister, though, just me. The other kids hated me for it, but I was okay with it since I could share my extra treats with my sister. When I turned eleven, I started hearing voices. At first, I thought I was sick, so I told no one about it. If I was ill, they'd take me away and my sister would be alone."

A hysterical giggle erupted from him, but his eyes were still unfocused and staring.

“It didn’t take me long to realize I was hearing other people’s thoughts. And I experimented with my strange power. I’d say things to elicit people’s thoughts and then eavesdrop on them. That’s when I discovered that the adults at the orphanage gave me special treatment because of an unnamed benefactor. He’d told them to watch out for changes in me. If I showed any kind of sign, they were to take me away and send me to him. I didn’t know what it was, but I hid my ability. I didn’t want to be taken away.”

“I knew this benefactor. He rarely came to the orphanage, but whenever he did, we got ice cream and he always brought a gift for me. All the kids looked forward to his visits. Except my sister. She was good-natured and hated no one. Except this man. She was terrified of him. So I tried to read him, you know, to find out why my sister hated him, but I couldn’t. His mind was the one I couldn’t read.”

“As we got older, his interest in me waned, and I didn’t get special treatment anymore. But it was fine since there was no threat of being taken away. Until my sister spoke out against the benefactor.”

He grimaced as he ran his hand through his hair several times. I wanted to say something, anything, to ease his distress, but I had no words of comfort.

“What did she say?” I asked. Listening to his story seemed to be the best course of action.

His laugh was hollow. Mirthless. “She said he’s an evil snake who should have been locked away. The way she

talked.” He shook his head. “I’d never seen her like that. She said he would have his day of reckoning after all the bad things he’d done.”

My ears perked at the word snake. Evil snake could be *Imugi*, couldn’t it? Was this story what would finally tie Serpentine Corporation, this man and the assassins, and Sanang all together? Or was I reading too much into it? It was common to associate evil deeds and people with snakes.

A flash of anguish showed on his face. He jumped up and began pacing. “They took her away. I was too young and helpless to stop them. They didn’t tell me where she was at first, but I was relentless. They finally told me the benefactor had her sent to a mental institution. For her own good, they said. But I had to see her. I knew she wasn’t crazy. She was just special. She saw things that sometimes came true.”

“I insisted on meeting with the benefactor to tell him I had special powers. I thought that was what he’d been looking for, but he only laughed at me. He didn’t care about my mind-reading ability, but if I joined the Serpentine Corporation and became of some use to him, he’d let me see her. And I did. I became very useful. So I could see her and take care of her.”

He stopped pacing. A hint of a smile appeared on his face. “My sister was always a tiny thing. She was so shy that she almost never spoke, but she was so smart. If she’d gotten a chance, she could have become anything she’d wanted. But she was also sickly. Every time she got a fever or cold, I thought she wouldn’t live through it. But she was so very brave, too.”

Letting out a sigh, he walked back to sit next to me. All this time, he hadn't looked straight at me even once. He'd lost the only family he'd ever had. As much as I didn't want to, it was impossible not to empathize with him. How devastating had his sister's death been for him that the cold-blooded, calculating assassin had become like this? He'd spent his life with the purpose of protecting his sister, and he'd lost everything. His purpose, his family, his life.

His eyes finally met mine. "When that man told me about Tasier, I didn't want to believe him. If they take care of their own, why didn't they come to take us away? Still, I wanted a place like that for my sister. So I... But it doesn't matter now. She's gone."

"I'm sorry."

Those words seemed so inadequate, but what else could I say?

"There's nothing to tie me to Serpentine anymore. I can't prove anything, but I think he killed her. The benefactor. I spoke to my sister before I left. She told me she'd had dreams about him. I told her not to tell anyone about them. She didn't seem any different from the way she'd always been. A little apprehensive about me going away, but that's always been natural. I just don't understand why he'd kill her. She was harmless."

I reached out and gently put my hand on his shoulder. He flinched but didn't push me away. I said nothing, although I thought I knew why the benefactor might have killed his sister. His sister had powers, probably the power to see what was in the past or the future. What if this benefactor was *Imugi*, and

she'd seen what it was about to do? If she could see *Imugi's* future, she was certainly not harmless.

“But maybe everything had been planned. Her death. That mission. I'm certain I was sent on a suicide mission. The abilities all of you had. There was no way we'd have survived if you'd retaliated. He wanted me gone. He wanted both of us gone.”

He shook his head and put his face in his hands.

Chapter 21. Bin

Hwa turned and started walking backward. “How long of a trail do we have today?” He lowered his sunglasses and ran a hand through his fiery hair. Since we were on vacation, he hadn’t bothered to darken his naturally flaming hair.

We slowed down to accommodate his pace but didn’t stop.

“About half of what we did yesterday. It shouldn’t take more than a few hours, and we’ve already walked almost half of that. This is the last section of the coastal trail we said we’d explore. I suppose if we find nothing, we can expand our search,” Saem replied.

Hwa scowled. “We can’t search the entire island.”

“We’ve only walked maybe thirty kilometers of trail. That’s barely ten percent of the Olle Trail that circles the entire island.” Saem smiled good-naturedly.

After throwing Saem a look of disgust, Hwa faced forward again, falling in line with us.

“The dragon spirit said *Imugi* stayed near Yongmeori Coast, so if we can’t find anything around here, there’s no point in widening the search area,” Jin said, his expression grumpy as he glanced at the very back of our group.

We were out in public, so our so-called bodyguards were following discreetly behind us. Jin was probably unhappy

because he couldn't be with Sen. I sent a casual glance in Saem's direction. He and Wyn had gotten together after our first encounter with *Imugi*. But unlike Jin, he didn't seem to be as attached to his partner. Wyn was a few steps behind us, talking to Mr. Nam, but Saem didn't look unhappy. Well, actually... he was spending an inordinate amount of time glancing back at Wyn.

And there was Jee. He looked wretched. Ever since Jav left for whatever super secret project Hosin and Sett had sent him on, Jee hadn't been himself. He'd been with us the whole time, but he hardly paid attention to a word anyone said. I wasn't sure if he even knew what we were doing here today.

"Ugh." With Jee so miserable, I wasn't doing great either. He wasn't sleeping well. He tried not to disturb me, but I was a light sleeper, and I couldn't help but wake up when he tossed and turned. Of course, lack of sleep didn't help with our moods. So we were a morose couple at the moment, without our third.

"Why don't we finish today at *Jusangjeollidae*, post some photos of the site, and go to that *Small Small Sea Story* restaurant you told me about? Didn't you say you wanted to go there?" Saem asked me with a broad smile on his face.

I blinked at him in confusion. When had I spoken to him about this? I had no idea what restaurant he was talking about.

Hwa tapped on Saem's arm. "Hey. I told you about that." Judging by his grin, the anticipation of going to the restaurant had cheered him up.

"Sorry. I thought you'd told me about it," Saem muttered, glancing down at his shoes.

I shrugged and wrinkled my nose. “That’s fine. We all look alike, you know.”

Saem’s face crumpled. *Ugh*. I’d forgotten. He never got my occasional sarcasm.

“That was a joke! Things have been crazy. It’s totally fine. Maybe for the rest of the time here, we can relax and focus on our next album.”

“Hmm.” He nodded, then slowed down to join Wyn and Mr. Nam.

I reached for Jee’s hand. He’d been walking, deep in thought.

He turned and gave me a half smile. “What’s up?”

“You okay?” I whispered.

He nodded.

But you look like someone sucked out your spirit.

At my silent comment, a small chuckle escaped him. But it didn’t last long. He fell into his own thoughts once more, his gaze settling somewhere in the middle distance.

I shook his hand to get his attention.

Yes? He turned and raised an eyebrow.

“Jav’s been gone for two days.”

Jee huffed. “Yes. I know.”

“He didn’t call you?”

“He texted when he landed in San Francisco.”

My eyes narrowed as I studied his profile. He hadn't told me Jav had texted.

"What did he say?" I tried to keep my tone nonchalant, although I was eager to find out what Jav was doing.

Jee shrugged. "He said his plane landed."

"That's it?"

"Yes," Jee muttered, his lips pressing into a thin line. "It's not like he's obligated to message me. I'm sure he's busy."

Hmm. Jav's lack of communication was bothering Jee more than I'd expected. When Jav had told us was going to San Francisco on urgent business, and he'd be back soon, Jee hadn't looked too bothered. But Jee was like that. He didn't show his emotions on his face, which many people mistook as him being aloof, but he wasn't.

I squeezed his hand. "I'm sure he's trying to finish his business as soon as possible. He might even be on his way back now."

Jee turned and gave me an uncertain smile. "I'm sure."

"Shit!"

At Hwa's exclamation, we halted and turned to see what happened. He was on his butt a few steps behind us, and Saem was darting toward the coast.

"What happened?" Jin offered his hand to Hwa.

Hwa took it and pulled himself up. "I guess Saem found something. I forgot the man is solid as a rock."

Jin grinned. "You bumped into him?"

Hwa gave him the side eye. “He stopped right in front of me, like, with no warning!”

“Are you okay?” Menes scanned Hwa from head to toe.

Nin joined us a few seconds later while Sett and Hosin went after Saem.

“I’m fine, just feeling silly for bumping into Saem and falling flat on my butt.” Hwa dusted off his pants.

“Let’s see what Saem found.” Jin was already following the others.

We speed walked in the same direction Saem had gone. This coast was famous for cliffs that resembled columns of rock. The way these honeycomb columns rose from the sea, they looked man-made, but they were the result of past volcanic eruptions. Along with these rock formations, the area was also full of lagoons.

We got to the cliff just in time to see Saem jump and land lightly on the coast below.

“Maybe he shouldn’t be doing that?” I murmured.

We weren’t in a place full of tourists, but one never knew who was watching. We’d surely draw people’s attention if we all jumped down the three- to four-meter cliffs as though they were nothing. People wouldn’t even attempt climbing down since it was slippery and dangerous. Not to mention probably illegal. Jumping was out of the question. I could just see the headlines tomorrow.

“Don’t worry about that.” Wyn waved his hand. He must have seen my expression of horror.

With whispered words, a translucent veil appeared behind us to hide our activities.

I rolled my eyes. Of course, we had Wyn. Why had I been worried?

I wasn't sturdy enough to jump like Saem or Jin, and I wasn't willing to get myself dirty by climbing down. I called on the air to help me slowly float to the bottom, all the while grinning at Hwa as he descended on foot. After sliding more than once, he finally made it all the way down. As he used a wet tissue to wipe at a large green spot on his pants, he grumbled about mean friends who wouldn't help him.

Saem walked along the uneven coast, which, in some places, was ankle-deep in water. At least it looked like we were here at low tide, or we would have been half submerged.

"This is the place." Saem halted in front of an indentation in the cliff that couldn't have been more than a meter wide. His eyes flashed gold as he stood confidently in front of it, but the rock surface looked no different from the other ones around the area.

"Here?" Jin looked at it suspiciously. "But there's nothing."

"You don't feel it?" Saem's voice was rougher. His tiger was close to the surface.

Hwa wrinkled his forehead. "What?"

"*Imugi*."

"I think you're the only one who can sense *Imugi* here," Sett said.

“Maybe it was here before, but I don’t sense or see anything now.” Menes scanned the wall and shook his head.

Saem frowned as he knocked on various parts of the surface.

“Hmm.” Wyn narrowed his eyes as Saem continued his investigation.

“Here!” Saem exclaimed.

“What?” we all asked at the same time.

“Do you hear the difference?” Saem knocked on the side, then in the middle of the indentation.

“Huh.” Hwa tilted his head.

The resonance sounded different in the middle.

“There’s something behind the rock?” Jin also knocked on various parts of the cliff, then stood, studying it with his arms crossed.

“Let me try something.” Wyn approached it cautiously. He put both hands on the surface and closed his eyes, muttering under his breath.

Nothing happened for a moment. Then, as I blinked, an opening appeared.

Hwa whistled in admiration. Wyn conjured a couple of glowing balls and sent them inward, and Saem disappeared inside after them. Wyn went in after Saem, with Jin, Hwa, Jee, and me following. The opening was only big enough for one of us to enter at a time, and everyone except Wyn had to bend over. Whoever created it had not been very tall. Wyn’s light

globes illuminated the path in front of us, but other than the passageway, I saw nothing.

Then, about fifty meters in, the tunnel widened.

“Fuck!” Hwa yelled.

Jee muttered under his breath.

“What?” I asked, but as soon as I followed Jee in, I understood Hwa’s reaction.

We were in a cave chamber, about ten meters wide and shaped like a half circle. The wall in front of us was covered from floor to ceiling with shelves cut into the rock. And on the shelves were hundreds of jars filled with glowing liquid and human body parts. I stared; they looked so surreal. I wasn’t sure what I’d expected from *Imugi*’s lair, but glowing vessels stuffed with body parts was not it.

“Seriously? Again?” Jin paced back and forth and studied the shelves. “This is getting old.”

“It must have left in a hurry if it left its energy source here.” Mr. Nam lifted a jar that held the decapitated head of a young woman. She was so well preserved that she’d have looked like she was asleep if it hadn’t been for her not having a body and floating in liquid.

“Hey, isn’t that...?” Hwa bent forward and narrowed his eyes.

“What is it?” Jin asked.

“It’s the young woman.” Jee nodded.

“What woman?” Jin looked back and forth between Hwa and Jee.

Hwa smiled awkwardly. “Well, remember the time we traveled back in time without you?”

“Yes. I’m still mad about that.” Jin glared.

Hwa rubbed the back of his neck. “*Imugi* had taken the form of a young woman. We didn’t know whether it had taken over her body or if it could morph into a human form. But whatever the case, I think this is her.”

“What the heck? It decapitated its own head? Or maybe it was using this body and chopped the head off when it didn’t need the body anymore. Remember when *Imugi* kidnapped me? It locked me up with jars like these under that building. What does it do with them, anyway?” Jin waved his finger at the jars and turned to look at one that appeared to be filled with human kidneys.

“My tiger told me *Imugi* uses these things to store energy. It preserves organs and body parts to trap what it doesn’t immediately consume. Then when it needs it, it has a readily available energy source.”

“Ugh,” Jin grunted in disgust. “That’s it? This is our lead? A bunch of jars of body parts and no other clue about where it went?”

“Wait.” I closed my eyes. Switching to my spirit eyes, I cast my senses all around. With so many body parts in this room, there had to be some sign of spirits hanging about the place. Those who didn’t die peacefully tended to hang around.

Hmm. I frowned. “Strange. I sense no spirit here. Nothing. With this many deaths, I thought there were bound to be some I could ask about *Imugi*.”

“My tiger says these jars are how it locks away bits of human spirits. Until they are freed, you won’t be able to sense them,” Saem said through a clenched jaw.

My chest tightened. “I...” My voice wobbled.

Imugi was permanently destroying souls whenever it opened these jars and pulled the spirits out. Once consumed, these souls would cease to exist. They’d become nothing. It was... unthinkable. People might think spirits didn’t feel pain, and that was mostly true. Most spirits moved on, and the ones that hung on because of some particular evil that had been done to them often forgot the reason. But they had souls. They were still living beings, just in a different dimension controlled by another. It was beyond my reasoning to imagine that dark *Imugi* would sink so low as to mess with souls. He had to know there were consequences to his actions.

“Bin.” Jee pulled me into his arms, and I turned to bury my face in his chest. “Breathe.”

I shook. How many thousands of spirits had ceased to exist because of this evil thing?

“Breathe, okay?” Jee repeated, patting me on my back until I let out a tiny gasp of breath.

“He’s...destroying them. Innocent spirits,” I whispered.

Jee ran his hand through my hair, his caress gentle and soothing. “We’ll stop him. And we’ll free the spirits locked in here.”

Crash!

I started at the loud noise, and Jee jumped backward with me in his arms.

“What was that?” I extricated myself and turned.

The young woman’s head was now on the floor of the cave, with large shards of glass scattered around it. Mr. Nam was holding the remnants of the broken jar in his hands. Silence filled the cave. What had once looked almost alive now looked like a prop for a cheap horror movie now. As I watched, the head lost its shape and disintegrated into an unrecognizable blob.

My spirit eyes saw a faint cloud of energy rise from it. I gasped as I realized what was happening. “Quick! Break more of the jars! I think we can free the trapped spirits.”

I grabbed the closest jar I could reach. Holding it high, I threw it, groaning as it rolled across the cave floor instead of breaking. I glared at the jar and used my power of air to lift it high.

As I was about to let go again, Jee whispered, “Let me do the last part.”

I nodded and released the air that was holding it. As I did, Jee motioned with his hand, propelling it down hard with his power of gravity. The jar plummeted to the ground and, with the added force from Jee, shattered. A wisp of spirit energy floated upward.

“Let’s take care of all of them,” I said, relief bubbling in my chest. Jee nodded.

I manipulated the air all around the shelves to float the jars as high as they would go.

“Now,” I muttered as I released them.

The sound of breaking glass rang through the chamber, and I looked at the cave floor with satisfaction. The broken shards littered the ground, and body parts disintegrated as the protective liquid dissipated.

“This gave us no lead on *Imugi*, but at least there’s some satisfaction in destroying its energy supply, even if it had abandoned the stash.” Saem sighed.

Spirit energy from the hundreds of shattered jars rose around the room, forming a rainbow fog. “I can ask if they know anything about *Imugi*’s plans. Maybe we can still uncover a lead.”

“Bin...” Mr. Nam shook his head.

I responded with a head shake of my own.

“Think before you do this,” he said. “It might be dangerous. Without the ceremony to focus your power and protection, one of them might try to possess your body.”

I knew Mr. Nam was right, but we had little time if we wanted to question them. Once freed, the spirits would soon walk the path to the other side with *chasa*, the reaper.

“I have to try.” I closed my eyes and shut out everything around me.

Bin! Jee yelled through our connection, but his words faded away. I’d already opened my metaphysical body wide to the spirits surrounding me.

Chapter 22. Jee

Bin! What are you doing? I shouted through our mind link, but it was as though I'd hit a metaphysical wall.

Bin tumbled, his face pale, eyes closed.

Fuck!

I caught him inches before he hit the stone floor. Crouching down with my arms wrapped around him, I studied his beautiful face. He was breathing evenly, as though he'd gone into a deep sleep, but his energy was all over the place. I finally understood what Jav meant by Bin's fluctuating energy. Although there were no outward signs, through our connection, I could sense the energy of spirits swirling around him as they came in contact.

Cold.

Only one word registered in my brain as wave after wave of chill pulsed through the connection and washed over me. How could Bin stand to connect with spirits if this was what he experienced? It was strange. Spirits were not corporeal, and they didn't belong in the physical realm. So how could they give off coldness here? There were so many elements of what Bin could do that were hard to wrap my mind around.

With each icy sting that touched him, Bin's energy seeped out. I knew it was impossible, but I could see the warmth draining from him. Trickling, dripping, oozing into

nothingness. My heart skipped a beat as realization struck. Bin was turning into a spirit in front of me. I was losing him, but I didn't know what to do. I had no experience with anything metaphysical. Although I'd formed the connection between the three of us, it had only been possible because of Jav. Maybe if Jav were here, he'd know what to do. He'd saved me when I had a problem with my *atar*.

But he wasn't here, and I was powerless.

"Jee. Look at me." Mr. Nam's voice shook me out of my panicked state. Images of Bin slowly dying in my arms while I watched had been spinning through my head.

I raised my eyes so I could focus on something other than Bin's pale face. Mr. Nam was gazing at me with his usual calm expression. I took great comfort in that.

"Bin should be fine on his own, but I think he could use your help. Do you think you could pull him out of this? Focus, and see if you can call him back from the spirits," Mr. Nam said evenly, as though what was happening was entirely natural. Nothing to worry about.

"Call him back?" I echoed his words.

I didn't think shaking Bin and calling his name was what Mr. Nam meant. But if he was asking me to do something else, I didn't know what it was. I'd already tried to reach Bin metaphysically and failed.

A warm hand wrapped around my shoulder. "Just close your eyes and focus on Bin. You'll be able to feel the connection you have with him. Visualize holding it and pulling on it. And

call him through your mental link at the same time.” Calmness flowed in with Sett’s gentle voice.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Focusing on Bin was not a problem since a part of my mind, my heart, every part of me, always stayed with him. Visualizing the tie was harder, but I imagined a stretchy, glowing thread between us, and with it, I also saw the connection I had with Jav. My metaphysical hands each held a thread: a long, thin one linked to Jav and another, wide and short, connected to Bin.

Jee? Are you okay?

It was Jav. He must have felt me groping my way around the bond between the three of us.

Jav? Is it really you? I...I can talk to you like this even when you're so far away?

My heart fluttered with joy.

The link between atarav is powerful, so yes, we can talk this way. And it's easier for us because of my mental abilities. But it's hard to keep this up for a long time from so far away.

If I’d known I could talk with him this way from the beginning, I would have been tempted to do it all the time. But would I have had the courage? I’d had plenty of chances to just call or text him. Jav always answered, and he never forgot to tell me how much he missed me. It was me who hesitated to contact him because I worried he’d run away if I were too clingy. I’d been grumpy all this time because we hadn’t chatted, but it had been my own fault. Every time he’d messaged me, I had only replied with monosyllabic answers or

smile emojis. Stupid me. I sniffed and blinked rapidly. I couldn't understand why there was water in my eyes.

Are you okay?

Picking up the worry in his tone, I cleared my throat and let out a long breath. What the heck was wrong with me? Sappiness was unbecoming. This was no time to be emotional. I had to help Bin.

Yes. I'm fine, but Bin might be in trouble. He opened himself to some spirits to find information about Imugi, and he's not waking up. Mr. Nam said I should help him, but I don't know what to do. Sett said I can pull him out through our connection, but what if I do something wrong?

Jav sent a mental hug through our connection, and if I hadn't known he was several thousand miles away, I'd have thought he was actually holding me close. But the blissful moment of feeling protected and cherished ended much too soon.

Listen to Sett. You can do it. I'm here because you pulled on our connection. You can do the same for Bin. Your link with him should be stronger with him physically next to you.

Jav sent a pulse of warm energy, and my mind settled. It was strange. Just a second ago, I'd been unsure of myself, but now I knew I could do this.

I think I can do this.

Yes. You can. We'll speak soon. Love you.

His presence faded away from my mind after a light metaphysical caress.

I focused on the thread that connected me to Bin and visualized myself tugging on it.

Bin, can you hear me?

I felt a faint twitch on the other side and pulled harder.

Bin?

Encouraged by the stronger response on the other end, I imagined pushing my energy through the bond to aid him, wondering if that would work. I didn't know what he needed, but I was prepared to do anything. Mr. Nam said Bin should be fine, but a part of me didn't trust his reassurance.

“Easy.” As Nin spoke, I felt a hand on my shoulder and popped my eyes open. He was smiling, but he gave me a slight shake of his head. “That’s enough. You need to stop sending him your healing energy. It wouldn’t be good for you to pass out as well. Who would help him then?”

I looked down at Bin. His eyes were still closed, but he seemed less pale. Of course, that could just be my imagination.

Bin. Wake up. Come back to me.

“Jee?” A faint whisper escaped Bin’s lips.

I gently shook him. “Bin?”

His eyes slid open, and he gave me a tired smile. “Hi.”

Bin, my beautiful love. Words failed me. Instead, all I could do was pull him closer to my chest and bury my face in his shoulder. I sighed with relief as his arms wrapped around me.

“Why?” My voice trembled with leftover fear and anguish. “I thought I was going to lose you.”

I sat on the floor of the cave with Bin’s head cradled in my lap. I couldn’t stop touching him, petting his hair.

“I had to try.” His voice was thin with exhaustion. I wanted to be furious with him for risking himself that way, but right now all I could feel was relief that he was back.

“Were you...able to learn anything?” Saem asked.

I narrowed my eyes. I might have been too relieved to give Bin hell right now, but as our leader, Saem should have reprimanded him for acting recklessly.

“You know why he did it,” Saem said.

I sighed. What would chiding Bin achieve? I’d have done the same if I were in Bin’s place.

Saem gave me a guilty look, but he turned his attention back to Bin, searching for an answer to his question. I shifted my gaze away.

“Can that wait until we get back?” Wyn scanned to his left and right, his expression full of disgust.

Glass shards and small remnants of organs littered the cave floor.

“Yes.” Hwa wrinkled his nose.

“Portal anyone?” Wyn asked.

We all murmured our assent. None of us were in the mood to walk back or wait for a car to pick us up. Wyn opened a portal to our common bungalow at the resort and, one by one, we abandoned the cave. Right before Wyn closed the portal,

Menes and Hwa sent fireballs through, burning everything inside.

“Is it me, or did the stench follow us?”

Hwa sniffed the air, and we all mimicked him. Although we’d left the foul place behind, it did seem like the odor still hung in the air.

Jin drew in a tiny breath. “Hmm. I don’t think we brought the smell, but maybe it seeped into our clothes? Skin?”

Bin scrunched his nose. “Um. I’m going to go take a shower.”

A chorus of agreement followed. No one said anything, but I suspected we were all paranoid that we might have stains from the strange liquid or small pieces of organs stuck to us.

Back in our bungalow, I let Bin shower first. With his lengthy showers, I knew I’d have to wait an hour with the odor I couldn’t seem to escape, but I thought it would be more prudent. The three of us had formed a habit of showering together, but my mind was in too much disarray to do that right now. With my nerves in tethers, I wasn’t sure I could keep my hands off Bin. I’d keep reaching out to him to make sure he was all right, and he’d be annoyed with me because he didn’t like being touched. Of course, if Jav had been with us, I’d have my hands all over him instead, and he’d do the same to me.

When we got back to the common area, freshly showered, everyone else was already there, eager to learn what Bin had discovered. He had risked his life for the remote possibility of

uncovering a clue to help us find Imugi. I shuddered, and Bin squeezed my hand.

“I think Imugi spent a long time there to hide and recover, so we must have hurt him. That’s good to know, right? If we did it once, we can do it again.”

Sett nodded at Bin, and he beamed.

“Many of the spirits I asked had passed a long time ago and remembered nothing about their lives. The longer spirits stay here, the more they lose who they were as humans. And they eventually remember nothing. It’s ironic since they hang on because they want revenge or to take care of something they regretted in life, but after a while, they lose sense of who they are and forget why they stayed.”

Bin tilted his head, staring into the middle distance. Before he could fall into his thoughts, which happened often, I gently nudged him.

He blinked. “Oh, and I also spoke with more recently killed spirits. One remembered a typewriter in her room. Two others remembered their company logo but not the name. They were foreigners who’d come to make a deal in Busan. Something to do with the military.”

Bin’s shoulders slumped as he let out a small sigh. “I guess that isn’t very useful.”

Not enough to risk yourself! I wanted to add, but Bin looked unhappy enough, so I held my silence.

“Did the spirits describe the company logo? If they were foreigners here on military business in Busan, I don’t think

they'd have met *Imugi* by chance. How did they end up in a cave in Jeju?"

"They sort of projected an image, so I can try to recreate it on paper."

Before Bin could wander off in search of writing supplies, a small hotel memo pad and pen plopped in front of him on the table. It was Sen.

Bin looked up and smiled. "Thank you."

He drew a sideways S on the page, with the two ends of the S almost, but not quite, touching near the narrow point where the lines would cross on a figure 8. "So it was sort of like this, an incomplete infinity symbol with a line across the middle."

At Sett's sharp, indrawn breath, I pulled my eyes from the drawing to look at him.

"Hosin and I know this symbol." He reached out and grabbed the notepad to inspect it.

"What is it?" Sen asked with a gleam in his eyes.

Ever since *Imugi* had kidnapped Jin, Sen had become increasingly focused on getting rid of that threat as soon as possible.

Mr. Nam took the pad from Sett. "This is very similar to the Serpentine Corporation logo."

"The Serpentine Corporation?" Sen frowned.

"The mercenaries who attacked us were working for them," Menes said.

"I knew it! I suspected *Imugi* was connected to that insane attack."

Sen looked furious, but Menes showed no emotion as he said, “Unfortunately, it looks like that is the case.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you found out about who they were working for? What are we doing about this?” Sen looked back and forth between Menes and Mr. Nam, who had been acting as leaders for Netru and Sanang.

“You had your hands full helping Jin get his dragon back. That takes priority. Jav went to talk to one of them,” Menes said mildly.

“What?” Sen’s frown deepened.

Sett calmly explained how they’d detained the assassin with *atar*. Mr. Nam added that the man might be related to both Tasier and Sanang. As they shared what they found out after the attack, all I could think of was Jav.

Jav had gone to meet with the assassin who’d tried to kill us.

The assassin was aligned with *Imugi*.

Jav was in danger. My heart fell to my stomach, and cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

“Jee?” Bin pulled on my hand.

I shakily turned to look at him, but I couldn’t get any words out.

Dread flooded my mind.

Chapter 23. Jav

“Fuck!” I swore as I jumped up from my chair and began pacing.

“Are you okay?” JS lifted his eyebrow.

I stopped and forced a smile onto my face.

Strange.

He was the man who’d once come to kill us. I’d traveled to San Francisco with, if not hostility, then apathy. But within a few hours, he’d become familiar to me. I no longer doubted his intentions. Compassion had replaced indifference and some amount of anger. All around him were brilliant shades of sunset—reddish pink with purplish hues—spotted with gray. He’d relaxed the tight hold on himself. Now I could sense his *atar*, and I saw his aura. My instinct told me he was one of us.

JS, short for Jinsang, sat calmly, gazing at me as though we were old friends who’d gathered for dinner. He’d transformed in front of my eyes after our conversation. It was as though sharing his history and the story of his sister’s death had been the last bit of grieving he’d allowed himself. Once he’d finished, icy anger and purpose had burned in his eyes.

JS had returned from Korea after the mission, intending to pull his sister out of the mental facility at any cost, but when he’d gone there, he’d been told she was no longer a resident. He hadn’t been notified of her death because he was only an

allowed visitor, not a guardian. Her official guardian was someone in the Serpentine Corporation. They told him she'd killed herself shortly after his last visit and had been cremated, per her guardian's wishes. There was nothing else they could tell him. After he left the facility, he'd packed a bag, cashed out what little money he had, and left his life behind.

He was certain Serpentine and the man he'd once known as the benefactor had a hand in her death. He wanted revenge, and it was now his new purpose in life. My heart went out to him. With all he had lived through, he looked much older, but he was only Jin's age. I hated to see someone so young filled with such a desire for vengeance.

It hadn't been a coincidence that he'd been hanging around San Francisco. He had a contact in the city who could set him up with a new identity for a price. Since this source had ties to Serpentine, he'd been reluctant to use it, but he knew eventually he'd have no choice. In the meantime, he'd done research on Tasier. If he were to bring down Serpentine and the benefactor, he'd need resources. He'd been scoping out the nearest Tasier house when I'd appeared.

We were in his room at the small, cheap inn where he'd temporarily taken up residence. He was still wary of going to the San Francisco Tasier house, and we'd needed a better place to talk. We'd just gotten our pizza delivery when I felt alarm I'd not expected or wanted to feel for the second time that day.

I pulled my hand back through my hair several times.
"Something's happened to my *atarav*."

"*atarav*?"

"My soulmate."

His face was blank with confusion, but I was too distressed to explain. My connection to Jee had flared. He was either in a great deal of panic or in danger. What had happened? When he'd talked with me maybe an hour earlier, he had been a little anxious about Bin, but he'd otherwise seemed fine after our brief chat.

Jee? I called to him as calmly as I could. Maintaining the connection was much more difficult with so much distance between us, but I clutched it, waiting. Jee didn't answer. Instead, panic and danger were all I could sense through our link.

I opened my phone and dialed Sett's number. At the first ring, the call connected, and I spoke into it without waiting for him to speak. "Tell me what's happening with Jee."

"Jav. Breathe," Sett said gently. "I'm calming him now."

Unable to follow Sett's advice, I paced back and forth with the device glued to my ear, repeatedly running my other hand through my hair.

Whatever Sett was doing seemed to help. My breathing evened as the terror that gripped me through our connection lessened.

"Would you like to talk to Jee?" Sett asked.

"Yes."

"Jav?" his shaky voice asked from the other end.

"Jee? Are you ok?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

“The Serpentine Corporation is associated with *Imugi*, and they told me you went to meet with the assassin who tried to kill us. I thought you were in danger, and I panicked. I don’t know what happened. It’s stupid, I know.” Jee sounded subdued, calmer, but not quite settled.

I wished I could instantaneously transport myself and put my arms around him. Why was I not born with a teleporting ability like Saf or the power to create portals like Wyn? If I got lucky and could fly out of here within two hours, it would still take me over twelve hours before I could see him.

“That’s not stupid. A lot has happened, and our connection is still new. It can be overwhelming. When you panicked, I did as well. You’re not alone.” I spoke in as soothing a tone as I could. I wasn’t sure whether it was to calm him or myself.

“Are you okay? You’re not in danger with the assassin?”

“I’m with him now.”

“*What?*”

His distress flooded our connection. I pushed as much comforting energy as I could in his direction.

“Don’t worry. It’s safe. It’s a long story, but I’m totally safe,” I said quickly, not wanting Jee to have another moment of panic.

It seemed we’d bonded faster than I’d expected, and Jee hadn’t adjusted yet to the turbulent emotions that *atar* can bring. He hadn’t grown up with *atar* or around people who had an *atarav*. He wasn’t used to this level of connection with another person. This panic attack was my fault. I should have taken things gradually with him so he could get used to our

bond with more ease. But I'd been so elated to find my *atarav* that I'd run headlong into a relationship with him.

The phone crackled as Jee let out a long breath. "Menes says he'd like to talk to you."

"You're okay? We can talk more or..."

"I'm fine. We can talk later."

I felt Jee retreat behind the stoic mask he often put on. If I were next to him, I'd pull him into my arms and kiss him senseless until he could no longer hide himself.

"Love you," I whispered.

Jee did not answer. Everything was still too new and raw for him. I didn't expect him to reply, but it still hurt.

"You're with him now?" Menes asked from the other end.

"Yes. He's here. We've had a long talk. There's a lot to update you on when I get back."

I didn't want to have a long conversation over the phone. My priority was going back to Jee.

"We'd like to talk to him. We're certain *Imugi* is at the head of Serpentine."

"I suspected as much from what he told me."

"Does he know about *Imugi*?" Menes asked sharply.

"No. I think his sister was a Seer. He and his sister grew up in an orphanage together, but they locked her up in a mental health facility because she said the owner of Serpentine was an evil snake, amongst other things."

“An evil snake sounds like a fairly close description of our *Imugi*. If he’s willing to come speak with us, it would be good to meet her as well.”

“That’s not possible. I’ll tell you why later.”

I glanced at JS. I hadn’t wanted to tell Menes any more stories about him. His life was his to tell. Nothing he’d told me was something I’d ever casually mention over the phone.

“Do you think he’d be willing to come talk to us? Maybe help us find out more about Serpentine? And bring it down if possible. Unfortunately, since they deal in arms and security, the Serpentine Corporation has a highly secured internal computer system. I am told their network is air-gapped and can’t be hacked from outside.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s willing. He wants to bring down Serpentine.”

“That’s fortuitous. Can you ask him if he’ll come to Seoul?”

I turned to JS, who’d been following me with his eyes. “They want to meet in Seoul. We also want to bring down Serpentine. It looks like we have a common enemy.”

JS gave a quick nod. “When?”

“He asks when,” I told Menes.

“Message me his details, and we’ll arrange for your flight out as soon as possible. We were hoping to stay in Jeju until after the Lunar New Year, but we’ll take an earlier flight out so we can all meet at the Sanang House. The Serpentine Corporation has headquarters in Seoul, Baltimore, London, and Budapest. But their main headquarters is in Seoul, and we want to retrieve information from there. Hopefully, he knows

at least a little about the Seoul headquarters since he was here on a mission.”

As I hung up the phone, I gently tugged on the thinly stretched bond between Jee and myself. Sensing a light tug back, I let out a sigh of relief.

Love you. I'll be there soon, I whispered through our connection.

I smiled when a stronger tug responded to my message.

“Where are we headed?” JS asked as we settled into the back seat of the taxi, and I gave an address to the driver.

Although the airport train system to Seoul was convenient and fast, I'd opted to take a taxi. With rush hour over, we'd arrive sooner, and I didn't want to take a second longer than was necessary. The others returned from Jeju earlier in the day and were waiting for us.

“We're headed to the Sanang House. That's where everyone is.”

JS said nothing in response, but I knew I hadn't answered his question. He'd been to the Sanang House, so it's possible he knew I wasn't being entirely truthful. I leaned back and closed my eyes. I didn't have the energy to answer his questions right now. He'd find out soon enough.

It had been a hectic two days. I'd flown to San Francisco from Jeju via Seoul, only to come right back to Seoul. I traveled often, but never tens of thousands of miles within a

few days. My life had been serene before coming to Seoul after grad school to spend some time with my sister. When Sett had asked me for help, I'd thought it would be amusing. I'd studied Taekwondo and other martial arts since I was young and had powerful shielding and mental abilities. It hadn't been a big deal to pose as some CEO's bodyguard and spy on him.

Of course, I hadn't considered everything that had followed. My prior plan to return to San Francisco and start up a consulting business while working with Tasier's infrastructure team was on permanent hold. Life had gotten significantly more complicated, especially since I'd found my *atarav*. Jee was a hunter and a K-pop star. His life had more limitations than mine, which meant I'd have to accommodate to be with him. I was prepared for that part, but maybe I wasn't quite as prepared for this thrilling life of fighting *Imugi*.

I opened my eyes again when the car stopped. JS was watching the view outside the window, deep in thought.

"We're here." I quickly paid the driver and grabbed my overnight bag. JS scanned the area as he got out, his body tense.

"This way. We're going through the back door." I motioned for him to follow me.

It was already dark, and we weren't wearing bodyguard uniforms. Going through the front gate where others could see was not a good idea.

JS followed as I approached the three-story residential complex, went down the stairs to the half-basement apartment, and entered a pin to access the area. After turning on the

hallway light, I locked the front door and continued walking toward the back of the unit. Another door with a pin pad led us to yet more steps leading downward. I turned on the lights and gestured for him to go first so I could lock the door securely behind me.

With JS in front, we descended the flight of stairs, went down a long, narrow corridor, and then up another flight of stairs. Yet another door with a pin pad greeted us.

“This is a level of security I’d expect from someplace like Serpentine, not the residence of K-pop idols,” JS muttered under his breath.

As I switched places with him to enter the pin, I flashed him a grin. “There are things about Sanang that might surprise you.”

I hurried inside. One more short hallway and a flight of stairs, and I’d be able to see Jee again.

Jav? Are you back?

My heart melted when his tentative voice came to me through our link. I’d texted him when we landed, but I’d wanted to give him a hug in person rather than sending another message when we left the airport. The traffic in Seoul could be terrible, and I didn’t want him needlessly watching out for me.

I’m just walking up the stairs.

As I spoke to him silently and glanced up, Jee peered down the staircase and smiled. I’d have turned into a puddle on the spot if it hadn’t been for JS following closely behind me. And knowing I wouldn’t be able to hold Jee if I actually turned to liquid.

I sprinted up the stairs, pulled my *atarav* into my arms, and buried my face in the crook of his neck.

I missed you. I sent warmth along with my words.

Jee startled in surprise but melted into me. *Missed you too.*

We held each other, the others forgotten.

“Can you wait until after dinner?” Hwa’s voice broke us apart.

“Aw! Stop it, Bin,” Hwa whined.

As I started toward the living room with my arm around Jee, JS caught up with me, muttering under his breath, “You’ve got it bad.”

“You’ll understand when you meet your own *atarav*,” I said with a grin.

“Not sure if I want to.” He shook his head, his shoulders tense as he scanned the group assembled in the room.

Chapter 24. Bin

We sat silently in our favorite spots around the living room, staring curiously at JS. I wasn't worried about him being a threat if Jav and the others had invited him here. He was a mercenary employed by some multinational arms and security corporation. An assassin. Was he like James Bond? I studied him. He was handsome, but he didn't seem that dangerous.

JS sat cross-legged on an ottoman with his back straight. His face was unreadable, to me at least, but his posture gave me the impression that he wasn't comfortable being here. Other than his teacup, his gaze only occasionally settled on Jav to his right and Sett to his left. Jav sat closest to JS, one arm wrapped around Jee, who was as attached to his side as close as possible.

Although I wasn't sitting as close, Jee's hand was wrapped around mine. I missed the days when I had his complete attention, but I was happy for him. I'd never been able to give Jee what he'd needed, and Jav had come in and effortlessly opened himself up to Jee. I was content to be a part of him through the metaphysical link he'd created. Our unconventional bond was still strange, though. Were the three of us in a relationship together? Was that even possible? I had no answers; I was just glad that Jav was back. Jee had been quite distressed while he'd been gone.

Mr. Nam, Sett, Menes, Hwa, Jee, and I had flown back earlier in the day. Jin and Sen were staying in Jeju for the time being. The dragon spirit they'd met at Yongmeori Coast was going to an eternal slumber soon and had consented to help Jin's dragon recover before that. Saem and Wyn also stayed behind since Sanang had to appear as though they were taking a vacation in Jeju until the Lunar New Year. Before we left, we'd spent an entire day driving around the island, taking as many videos and photos as we could of the various sites we were supposed to visit. That way, even if we weren't there, Jin or Saem could release the clips.

Nin was planning to enjoy a few more days of vacation in Jeju as well before joining us. It was a win-win since he'd get the chance to see a few more sites, and Jee would have some time to spend with Jav after his return.

"Was your flight comfortable? I heard you insisted on flying economy, even though we wanted to book you in business class. A twelve-hour flight can be tiring. Why don't you have a cookie? They were baked fresh earlier today." Sett slid the tray a few inches toward JS, but he declined with a polite raising of a hand.

Sett's baked goods were addictive. He baked often, especially since he'd found out Mr. Nam had a bit of a sweet tooth. We were heavily benefiting from that since he always made enough to feed a dozen people. Jav, Jee, and I happily helped ourselves to some cookies.

"I didn't want anyone associating me with Jav. It's much easier to hide among the larger crowd in the main cabin."

"Jav said you cut your ties with Serpentine," Menes said.

“Yes.” JS’s short monosyllabic answer was immediate and terse.

Although Menes lifted an eyebrow in question, JS seemed unwilling to say more. Instead, he turned to Jav. When Jav blinked back at him without speaking, JS sighed.

“My sister was the only reason I joined the Serpentine Corporation, but she’s gone. I don’t have any evidence, but I’m sure Serpentine was involved in her death. I’m also sure they sent me on a suicide mission to kill you. I’m planning to bring them down, especially the owner of the company.” His tone couldn’t have been more dispassionate, but even I could sense the pain behind his short speech.

Sett’s eyes softened in sympathy. He lifted a hand as if to reach out and comfort JS, but JS’s body immediately tensed. Sett’s hand hovered in the air for a few seconds before he reached out to Mr. Nam instead.

“We also want to bring down the Serpentine Corporation and its owner. If you’re willing, we can help each other,” Menes said.

“Anything.”

“Before we do, there are some things we need to talk about,” Mr. Nam said, turning to Sett.

Sett patted his hand and smiled at JS. “Remember I told you we think you’re related to us because of your ability?”

JS gave an imperceptible nod.

“We think you’re also related to Sanang.”

“What?” JS yelled, both eyebrows rising toward his hairline.

“When we first met, you saw the flames and tornadoes in the house.”

He frowned. “That was real? I thought you were making me see things. You were trying to take control of my mind.”

“I’m sorry about that. Taking control of another’s mind is not something I do unless it’s absolutely necessary. Putting you to sleep was the only way I could think of to deal with the situation without people getting hurt. But I only did what was necessary, and making you see things was not part of that. The fire and wind you saw were both very real, courtesy of Hwa and Bin.”

As Sett’s gaze settled on Hwa and then me, JS’s eyes followed. Hwa grinned at him while I just lifted the corners of my mouth.

“Each Sanang member wields a different elemental power. It is an inherited family trait through the maternal line.”

JS listened intently as Sett told him a brief history of the seven families who’d been protecting Korea and nearby lands from the dark creatures. Our elders thought only five families remained, to which each of the five current Sanang members belonged. But of course, we knew now that Mr. Nam was from the sixth family, although our elders refused to recognize him. It sounded like Sett and Mr. Nam suspected JS could be a descendant of the lost seventh family. It might not be easy to ascertain, of course. With the Japanese occupation and war, so much information had been lost.

JS shook his head. “I believe what you said about Tasier but not about this. I don’t have any powers other than my mental ability.”

“Hmm.” Sett rubbed his chin, then turned to Hwa. “Hwa, would you be kind enough to conjure a small ball of fire?”

With a shrug, Hwa lifted a finger and swirled it. A sphere of fire about two centimeters in diameter appeared in front of him. It wasn’t the hand motion that started or stopped our elemental powers, but the gestures worked to focus us. So our fingers and hands often danced in the air as we wielded our elements.

Now throw it at JS.

Hwa flicked his finger, and the small flame flew. I watched as it rapidly sailed toward JS. What was Sett trying to do? I made a small vortex of wind in my hand, ready to deflect the ball from JS before it hit him. But I didn’t have a chance to act. As the glowing ball got within a few centimeters of JS’s face, the small tornado suddenly flew out of my hand and collided with it. The air and fire tore into each other, creating pyrotechnics.

“Hwa, Bin, do whatever you can to stop what you’re doing.”

At Mr. Nam’s command, I closed my hand into a fist. Hwa must have done the same since the fireworks ceased.

“What just happened?” Hwa’s eyes were wide with shock.

“I believe that was JS.” Sett smiled.

“That was JS?” I stared at him.

He narrowed his eyes at Sett. He didn't look convinced that he'd done this.

“Hwa's and Bin's powers went out of control when you were here last time as well. They'd never lost control of their powers until you appeared,” Sett said.

“So his power is to mess ours up?” Hwa scrunched his face.

Mr. Nam shook his head. “I believe he can manipulate and combine the existing elemental powers but not create one of his own. I read a description of such power from a document Sett and I retrieved from the past.”

“Huh.” Hwa ran his hand through his hair. “How is that helpful?”

“He can act as a conduit to combine your powers.”

At Mr. Nam's words, Hwa and I exchanged looks. I still didn't get it, and I was pretty sure Hwa was just as confused as I was.

“Think of us as five separate laser guns, which now can become a single giant laser gun that someone else can wield,” Jee muttered.

Understanding bloomed on Hwa's face, and we nodded at one another.

“But he made their powers go out of control.” Menes creased his forehead.

Mr. Nam grimaced. “Sett and I talked about that. JS didn't grow up knowing he had this power, so he can't control it yet. Right now, all he's doing is instinctive.”

“So the power I have is useless now. Or worse, it messes up whatever you all are doing.” JS looked like he didn’t know whether to run or cry.

“It’s not as bad as all that. Now that you’re aware of what you’re capable of, you can be more careful around Sanang for the time being. Slowly, you can train with them in a controlled environment,” Sett said.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” JS tapped on his thigh with his index finger. “But how is all that related to Serpentine?”

“It’s related to Serpentine because we believe a dark creature called *Imugi* is at the head of it.” Mr. Nam explained what *Imugi* was and told him about our battle against it.

JS frowned. “Then it can’t be a coincidence that he was in my life as well.”

“Not likely, but until we learn more, we can’t be sure.”

JS gripped his thighs and regarded Mr. Nam, Sett, and Menes. “Then for now, we ignore everything else and go after the Serpentine Corporation.”

“I agree. We don’t know where *Imugi* is or what it’s doing, but if it owns this multinational arms and securities corporation, then bringing the corporation down will hurt it. If we can do that, we may even be able to expose *Imugi*’s intent or its whereabouts,” Menes said.

“You told me to join you in Seoul. What are you planning?”

“With *Imugi* at its head, the company must have had illegal dealings and missions. Serpentine has its main headquarters in Seoul and probably keeps sensitive information there. If we can retrieve that information, we can expose its secrets and

bring down the company. Unfortunately, hacking into its system has proven to be impossible.”

“I can confirm your suspicion. I’ve been on many shadow missions and can attest to their illegal dealings, but I have no proof other than my own words.” JS’s face darkened as his fingers dug into his thigh.

“I…” JS drew in a quick breath. “I’ve tried to kill you. How are you okay with that?” He bowed his head slightly, confusion and uncertainty written across his face.

“We understand what you’ve gone through. We wouldn’t have invited you here if we didn’t accept everything about you. You never have to question if we’re okay with who you are or what you’ve done.”

Sett reached over and pressed his hand to JS’s. This time, Sett ignored his flinch. They regarded each other. I don’t know what words were spoken silently between them, but JS’s grip on his thigh loosened as the tension bled from him. When he stopped holding himself so rigidly, he suddenly seemed much younger than he’d first appeared.

Sett smiled. “Now, let’s talk about how to break into the Serpentine Corporation, shall we?”

A mix of complex emotions I couldn’t decipher flashed across JS’s face but disappeared within a blink of an eye. “Unfortunately, I don’t know a lot about computer systems or the Seoul headquarters. I had multiple assignments in East Asia and have been in and out of the building, but it was not my base of operations.”

“We have computer experts, and we can get building schematics, but we need someone who knows more about operations inside Serpentine. We need to identify which room the servers are kept in. Also, if we can find someone who has access to the systems, we can use mind control to have them retrieve information for us without putting any of us in danger,” Menes said.

“I know where the op room is, and I’m sure the information you’re looking for is in there. But I don’t know who has access to it at all times. Probably someone in IT.” He chewed pensively on his lip. “But I know someone who works at Seoul headquarters. He’s in HR, so it’s possible he might have personnel information. We grew up in the same orphanage.”

“Won’t that expose where you are? I thought you were hiding from them.” Jav cast a worried glance at him.

JS shrugged. “They already know I’m not dead. If they want me dead, there aren’t many places I’ll be safe until we bring them down. I’m putting you all in danger by being here.”

He stood up. “I should find a different place to stay for the night. I can connect with you after I find out if my contact has any information.”

Sett put a hand out to stop him. “Stay here with Sanang. We have a guest room, and you should be safe here. You don’t have to worry about putting us in danger. We can protect our own.”

JS’s lips pressed together.

Jav stood up and put a hand on his arm. “Come. I’ll show you to your room.”

JS stood frozen, his body radiating tension. Then, letting it go, his shoulders slumped as he sighed and nodded.

Chapter 25. Jav

“Jee?” I knocked on the door to Bin and Jee’s room.

I’d shown JS to the guest room above the garage. I’d been sharing the room with Menes, but since I was spending most of my time with Bin and Jee, I hadn’t been there in a while. And strangely, it didn’t look like Menes had been staying there either. Had he told Hwa that they were soulmates? If so, I hoped things were working out between them since it was impossible to tell from the way they acted around each other. Menes was a tough nut to crack when it came to his emotions. He hid them like his life depended on it.

Getting no answer, I knocked again and opened the door.

“Jee? Bin?”

“Jav?” Bin looked up. He was leaning against a pile composed of stuffed animals and plush pillows, with a book on his lap. He smiled and pulled out his earbuds.

I smiled back. “Where’s Jee?”

“Taking a shower.” Bin turned to look at the closed bathroom door. “Hmm. He’s been in there too long for a shower, and I don’t hear the water, so maybe he’s taking a bath.”

Mmm. Jee in a bathtub. That was certainly enticing.

Bin tilted his head when I pulled off my sweater along with the undershirt.

“No way I’m leaving him alone if he’s taking a bath.”

I unbuttoned and pulled down my jeans and boxer briefs. Just thinking about a naked Jee half-hardened my cock.

Bin’s mouth opened into an O. He sat up but avoided looking at me.

“Can I join you?” His voice came out so softly that I wouldn’t have heard him if I hadn’t been paying attention.

I grinned. Bin could be such a timid little thing, although once he got near Jee, especially a naked Jee, he changed.

“Come. You don’t even have to ask.” I headed to the bathroom.

As Bin had suspected, Jee was in the bathtub. Steam was rising from the water as he lay with his head on the towel placed on the lip of the tub. I stood there watching him. His eyes were closed, his skin flushed. His beautiful body was visible through the water.

His eyes slid open.

“Hi.” A languid smile spread across his face. “Jav.” He raised his arms, but I was too far away for him to reach.

I bent over so he could put an arm around my neck and lifted him from the water.

“Jav...” He whispered my name like a prayer and wrapped his legs around me.

His naked, wet body clung to mine as I climbed into the tub. Not letting go, I sank into the water, and he straddled me. The

tub was wide and deep, but water still sloshed over the side. I pulled him in closer for a kiss. We'd only been apart for a few days, but it had felt like a lifetime. In the back of my mind, before reason fled in the face of desire, I marveled at the intensity of my need for him. Then our lips met, and I couldn't think anymore.

Jav, Jav, Jav...

Our tongues dueled as our bodies ground together. Our hard members rubbed against one another, and even through water, the friction was intense. Moans escaped our lips, only to be swallowed up by each other's mouths.

A soft, small hand crept between our torsos. Jee and I pulled apart slightly to study Bin, who was sitting at the edge of the tub, also naked. He peered back and forth between us as he reached over to run a hand up Jee's sinewy stomach and beyond. It settled on Jee's chest, fingertips near his nipple, just resting there, not quite touching. His index finger and thumb slowly closed around Jee's nipple, already puckering without touch. Jee let out a gasp, his breaths heavy in the steamy air, and Bin's tentative touch firmed at the encouragement. His fingers plucked at the other nipple. Then his left hand slid around to caress Jee's back as the right hand drifted down and took hold of Jee's hard cock.

Bin!

Jee's silent shout vibrated through me as his eyes slid closed. A whimper escaped his lips, and I grunted as he undulated his soft butt cheeks against my hard organ. He rose halfway onto his knees, his tight opening now rubbing against me. I wanted to sink inside his warmth.

A tube of lube appeared in my hand. Bin's lips lifted into a little smile as he met my eyes. More water sloshed out of the tub as he got in behind Jee and wrapped his wet hands around Jee's torso. His hands explored Jee's chest and lightly pumped his hard length as I lifted Jee to his knees and explored his opening with slick fingers.

Jav... I want...

Jee trembled. He pushed away my hand and sank down onto my hard cock, and hot pleasure shot through my body. His wet chest pressed against mine as his lips covered my own. The sensation of joining with him was overwhelming.

Jee. Love you.

I wrapped one arm around his shoulder and another around Bin, pressing him against Jee's back. Bin's soft tresses tickled my shoulder as he kissed Jee on his nape, and his hand continued to pump Jee's hard member as Jee rocked against me.

Bin... I ran my fingers through Bin's hair, and he leaned into my touch.

Jee shifted, reaching back and looping his arm around Bin.
Love you, Bin.

Pulling Bin closer, Jee kissed me as he continued to rock on my cock. I cupped the back of Bin's head so the three of us could move together. Our breathing became harsh. Pleasure rose as Jee's movements became more frantic, and the three of us moved in sync.

Jee's thighs gripped my waist as he screamed.

My answering shout echoed through the bathroom.

Bin breathed out a contented sigh.

The metaphysical threads that bound me to Jee and Jee to Bin wove together even more tightly.

We were meant to be together.

Never thought I'd end up cleaning toilets at night, I grumbled as I wiped off a suspicious stain on the white porcelain.

It's an important job. Sett's voice came through dead serious, but I knew he was smirking.

I grimaced and sprayed gobs of cleaner on the next toilet, which had more dubious stains on it. This was an office building. How was it possible for toilets to become so filthy within a day? This was my second week filling in for a cleaning person who was on vacation, courtesy of us.

Not that there was anything wrong with being a cleaner. I was grumpy. Other than a few stolen hours in the late afternoon here and there, I hadn't been able to see Jee. I'd been working the night shift and was staying in a tiny, rundown one-room apartment on the opposite end of the city from the Sanang House.

It's not funny. You know I'm not talking about being a cleaner.

I'm sorry you had to be the one stuck doing this. Unfortunately, some people there know JS, and Imugi saw everyone other than you, Jin, and Sen the last time we

encountered it. Sett's sympathetic voice soothed my raw nerves.

This has to be the last day. Unless the man has the plague, he can't call in sick again, JS said.

JS's Human Resources contact had come through. Well, more like he'd pulled the information out of him. JS had called his friend, saying he'd failed his last mission and wanted out of Serpentine. None of which was a lie. He'd invited him to have lunch together on the pretext of asking for the best way to quit the company. His friend had been happy to help.

The Serpentine Corporation was a legitimate company, and most of their dealings were above board. Other than the limited number of people involved in shadow ops, most employees were treated like they would be at any other company. Salaries, benefits, and at-will termination. JS's friend had been all too happy to give advice about HR procedures. While they talked, JS had manipulated their conversation, gleaning information from inside his contact's head about which IT person we could target.

Out of several people who had access to the internal servers, we'd picked one who worked in the evenings. The only way for me to gain access to the company without attracting notice was to work as a cleaner, and most of the cleaning staff worked after hours. Serpentine contracted with an outside cleaning company, so it had been easy to send one on vacation and take a temporary job. The cleaning staff was not allowed inside the sensitive areas, but that was not a problem.

For several days, we'd studied our target's work patterns. He usually started around five, about an hour before the rest of

the workers went home, then worked until about one in the morning. His office space was one floor above the highly controlled level that contained the server room and op centers. Although I wasn't allowed on that level, I had access to our target's floor.

From what I'd seen, he did very little. He ate his dinner at his workstation, made a lot of mess, and spent an inordinate amount of time in the bathroom. Whenever I'd been around him, emptying trash bins and wiping the desks, he was always playing computer games. The day we had planned on getting the information, he had called in sick. A flu of all things.

He's coming, JS said.

Sett, Hosin, and JS were on the first floor. They'd been spending several hours each evening at a small coffee shop in the lobby. The shop closed around six, but they snuck into the back using the employee and delivery entrance. It was nice to know I had some backup if anything were to go wrong.

Ugh! Finally done. I threw away the antibacterial wipe I'd used to finish cleaning the last toilet.

Congratulations, Sett said, and this time I heard the laughter in his voice.

Explain to me again why I have to do this?

No one answered, and I hadn't expected them to. It was a rhetorical question. The type of mind control we needed to make the IT person gather information couldn't be done from a distance.

He got on the elevator, JS said.

Okay. I'm going to his floor. He's over an hour late today, so I doubt there's anyone else up there. Let's get this done fast. I don't want to clean any more toilets.

I pushed my cleaning cart out of the bathroom and rode the freight elevator to his office floor. As I suspected, I saw no one else. During business hours, there were about half a dozen people in the office, but they usually all left promptly before six.

As I parked the cart near his office and grabbed the large trash bin to empty smaller ones around the people's cubicles, the elevator dinged, and our target appeared. His nose was red, and he was sniffing. He dragged himself toward his desk without his usual take-out dinner, not bothering to give me a single glance as he passed by. I grabbed a small trash bin from a nearby cubicle and emptied it into my larger one.

It was time. I slipped into the man's mind. I'd been inside his mind a few times already to gather information about his job, especially on the restricted floor. His task was simpler than I'd thought. His team downloaded the updates to the internal server, checked for issues, and then applied them to the secure server. He had access to the floor because he did the server maintenance during off hours.

I whispered into his mind that he needed to apply an urgent server update immediately. As I bent to grab another trash bin, he walked past, his eyes slightly glazed over, carrying several DVDs in his hand. I followed him inside his head as he took the elevator to the floor below. Through his eyes, I watched as he unlocked the server room with his employee card,

fingerprints, and a pin. He shivered, and I did as well. The chill of the server room was almost palpable.

I tightened my control on his mind. Instead of a whisper, I directed him to log on to the machine. His fingers flew as we found the op orders folder. Since JS had been part of several ops originating from the Seoul headquarters, he had been able to tell me what folders to look for. We burned the entire shadow op orders root folder onto the handful of DVDs the man had brought.

His task in the main server room took less than half an hour, although it felt interminable to me. Once he returned to his office desk, I had him toss the DVDs into his wastebasket, and then I let go of his mind. He blinked a few times and shook his head. Then he yawned and unlocked his computer. I shuffled around the room, continuing to empty the small trash bins. He was busy paying attention to his game as I emptied the contents of his wastebasket into mine, including the DVDs.

I carried the large trash bin back to the cart. Before loading it, I grabbed the DVDs and stuck them underneath my shirt. I'd worn a wide storage belt around my torso to carry the disks safely.

Information acquired, I sent to the group waiting for me below.

Good. We'll meet you by the loading dock in the back.

I hurried down to the custodial room and parked the cart. Since the cleaning staff were all out performing their duties, I was the only one there among the mops, rags, and other cleaning supplies. I pulled off my uniform, threw it in the laundry, and left the room.

Coming out.

I was only the length of a hallway from the loading dock. Up ahead, the door to the left of the loading area stood open. With Hosin's power over metals, there wasn't a metal lock he couldn't crack. I hurried along the empty corridor as his face appeared in the doorway, followed by JS. I smiled and patted my middle. Things had gone unexpectedly smoothly.

When I was about a hundred feet from the exit, I heard a door opening behind me. I spun and froze in place as a slender woman appeared several paces away. With her pale face and enormous eyes, she looked fragile in a long denim skirt and tunic-length turtleneck sweater. I watched, open-mouthed, as her face contorted into a grotesque smile.

She raised a skinny arm, her fingers forming a complex pattern in the air. An eerie glow lit her eyes as a greenish-blue fog swirled around her hand.

What the heck?

I got my shield in front of me just before she flicked her fingers. The fog turned into a flame, growing rapidly as it sped toward me.

“Jinhee, stop!” Jinsang shouted from behind me.

I closed my eyes and braced for the impact.

Chapter 26. Jee

“No!”

I curled into a ball.

My body was burning.

Make it stop!

“Jee!” Bin grabbed my shoulder.

Gasping in a breath as dread filled my chest, I tugged on the metaphysical bond between Jav and me. There was no answer. Tears flooded my eyes as I shook off the remnants of the agonizing sensation.

He pulled me into his arms. “It’ll be okay.” His fingers slid gently through my hair.

“Something happened to Jav.”

“I feel it too,” Bin murmured, tightening his hold. “But he’ll be okay. He’s got Sett and Mr. Nam, and JS is there too.”

I nodded, but I was paralyzed by fear.

Hwa rested a hand on my arm and squeezed. “Menes said he’ll call and find out what happened.”

I drew in a shaky breath and nodded again.

I heard Menes’s low voice from the back of the room, but my mind couldn’t process his words. My body rocked back and forth in Bin’s arms. That was all I could do for now.

“Sett and Hosin are coming with Jav.”

I lifted my face to Menes, who was crouching in front of me.

“Jav is okay?” My trembling voice sounded like it was coming from someone else.

Menes regarded me, his expression indecipherable.

I gasped. “He’s not...” My windpipe spasmed as I tried to cough. Something was caught in my throat, blocking me from speaking or even breathing.

“Jee! You have to breathe. Breathe...” Bin whispered into my ear as he rubbed his hand soothingly up and down my back.

“He’ll be here soon. There was some trouble on their way out. Jav is unconscious but safe.” Menes grasped my hand, firmly looking into my eyes.

I managed a wheezing breath. “He’s coming?”

He nodded.

I pushed Bin away and rose to my feet.

Jav is coming.

My legs trembled as I walked unsteadily downstairs.

Jav is coming.

They’d come through the back door. I needed to be there when they arrived.

Time crawled by.

Leaning against the hallway wall, I stood staring at the door. Bin and Hwa were pacing near me, but their presence barely

registered. My mind was blank. I saw nothing. My body felt nothing. Bin metaphysically brushed up against me a few times, but I couldn't respond.

The lock clicked.

My eyes focused on it as it opened. Sett came through and held the door open for Mr. Nam, who walked in with Jav in a fireman's carry across his shoulders. Jav's eyes were closed, his face pale. I bit into my fist to stop myself from making a sound.

Sett walked over and patted me on my shoulder. "It'll be alright."

He followed Mr. Nam to our practice room, and I hurried after them.

Mr. Nam laid Jav on the long ottoman flush against the wall, and I rushed over and collapsed to the floor in front of him. I lifted my hand, wanting to touch but hesitating because I was afraid of what I might sense. Jav looked fine. Other than his eyes being closed and his face pale, there was no visible sign of injury. No wounds, at least not any that I could see.

I ran my fingers through his hair.

Jav. Can you hear me?

Mr. Nam lifted Jav's long-sleeved top and the undershirt and extracted the thin pouch that wound around his middle. Then he peeled the clothes off Jav's body.

Bin gasped when Jav's torso was revealed.

When I lifted my head to look at him, his mouth was half open, his eyes turbulent.

I looked down at Jav's body, pushing his shirt up further and running my hand over his chest. His skin was cool to the touch, but he had no bruises or damage. Maybe he'd just passed out. He'd wake up, and he'd be okay. My shoulders relaxed slightly.

"Who... What happened?" Bin's voice was soft and hesitant.

"What are you seeing?" Mr. Nam frowned.

"You don't see it?" Bin covered his mouth with his hands.

I shook my head. "What...what's going on?"

Panic twisted in my stomach again.

"He..." Bin's mouth opened, but he didn't speak for several seconds. "He's been badly burned."

"What do you mean?" I grabbed his hand.

Bin squeezed back.

"What happened to him?" His voice was steady now as he asked Sett and Mr. Nam.

"Everything was fine. Jav got our target to burn all the information on DVDs and got out with no one noticing. But just as we were leaving, a woman appeared. JS recognized her. She threw a greenish-blue flame at Jav. He tried to block it with his shield, but it went right through. The flame hit him and he collapsed, but there was no fire. JS shouted something and ran after her, and then while we glanced away for a moment to check on Jav, they both disappeared. We didn't see a sign of them anywhere."

As Mr. Nam summarized what happened, Sett regarded Jav, his eyes dark with worry. Bin looked grim.

I tugged Bin's hand. "What does this mean?" I said in a tone that was halfway between a scream and a wail.

He cupped my face and looked into my eyes. "It will be okay. I'm here. I'll make it alright."

"Is he hurt? I can heal him. I'm a healer." Hot tears slid down my cheeks.

Bin rubbed the moisture away with his thumb. "His physical body is not hurt."

"Then what?"

"Someone burned his energy. His *atar*. *Atar* is close enough to spirit energy that he was burned by spirit fire. I do think his shield helped. It missed his vital parts—his heart, his mind."

I wrapped my shaky hands around Bin's. "Can you save him?"

He nodded. "I will. I need to prepare. Keep talking to him. He is still with us."

"Okay."

I grasped Jav's hand in mine.

I'm here, Jav. Stay with me. Bin's going to make you better. He's a powerful mudang. I can't even see where you're hurt, but he can. He'll heal you. I...love you. Don't leave me.

Chapter 27. Bin

Cheonsin, please help me.

Binmi, love. I'm here.

His presence wrapped around me, and my heart fluttered with joy. I stepped through the dance of the spirit, my movements precise as I kept the balance between the human and spirit realms. My spirit filled me with his energy, and I breathed with the rhythm of my heartbeat.

Help me heal my friend. An evil creature hurt him.

My spirit saw Jav through my eyes, and I saw Jav's wounds once more. He was badly burned. Although the core of him sparked strong, the darkness surrounded it, ready to smother it in ashes.

My love. I don't know if it's possible for us to help him.

Tears sprang to my eyes. Jee knelt beside Jav, his shaky fingers running through Jav's hair. Jee clung tightly to Jav's hand, his own energy fluctuating as he clutched Jav's hand tightly, and the thread that connected them shone brightly as he shared his energy. He'd pour his healing *atar* into Jav until there was nothing left.

We must. We have to save him. I can't lose them. I can't let Jav die. And if Jav dies, Jee will die inside.

Binmi. To heal him, I have to be with you.

I shivered at the memory of having him as part of me. It had burned, but the bliss of our joining had been sublime.

Be with me, then, I said.

My energy will burn through you. Your human body cannot contain me for long. Will you leave everything behind to save him? I felt his presence like a hand caressing my cheek.

Yes. He must live.

Then open your eyes, my love.

But they're...

I blinked.

Before me stood a tall figure. His eyes flashed sky blue. His face was so beautiful, ethereal, not of this world. The sky-blue robe that perfectly matched his eyes was open in the middle, exposing skin that glowed in all shades of the sky.

Cheonsin. I cupped his face. I knew he didn't have a physical form, but he'd created all this for me.

You see me now.

Yes.

We'll be together like this until we become part of each other.

His arms wrapped around me and pulled me close. In the world created by my spirit, I wore a robe just like his but in a rainbow of iridescent colors. When my skin touched his, our energies collided. He lowered his head and pressed his lips against mine, and his energy burned through me. There was such power in me now. I pulled on the energy that was flowing through me and poured it into Jav, washing away the darkness

surrounding his core with the lightness of the sky. My spirit's energy was so strong.

Cheonsin, I gasped as the ache and pleasure filled me at once.

As his energy mended and the darkness faded, Jav's eyes flew open.

Bin, stop! You're burning up!

Jee turned, and his eyes widened. *Bin? What's happening? Who's with you?*

From the way they looked at me, I knew they saw me as no one outside the spirit realm had seen me before. Our bond made my true self visible. They saw the spirit energy burning through me and my spirit, who held me close. His fingers wiped away my tears of pain and joy.

I smiled. *My beautiful Jee. Do you see my spirit now? He's always been with me. He's also my love. This is goodbye.*

No, no! Jee shook his head. His face contorted in agony.

You can't go. Jav grabbed my arm, his eyes full of worry and sadness.

My breath caught. How was he able to hold me inside this metaphysical plane?

Jee took my other arm.

The thread that bound us thickened and formed a web around us.

My spirit wrapped his arms around me. *Their love for you is strong.*

Yes. I nodded and turned to smile at Jee.

Jee, I promised to save Jav. He's okay now. He'll be with you. I'm with my spirit. My physical body can't contain him. His energy will burn through it. But it's okay. I'm okay.

Jee shook his head again. *I won't let you go. If your body can't contain him, I will help. If we do it together, you can be with your spirit and also with me.*

And I will be with you both, Jav said.

Our bond strengthened and grew around us and around my spirit.

Wetness trickled down my cheeks. I'd thought I had little to keep me on this plane, but I was wrong.

Cheonsin. I love you. I rested my head against his chest.

He dropped a kiss on my head. *Their bond with you is strong. It has protected you. You can choose to stay if that is what you want. Because you will no longer exist on this plane if you want to be with me completely.*

I love you. I want to be with you. But... But there was hesitation in my heart.

I will be with you, love. You don't have to choose. His form faded as his energy slowly slid out of me with a last caress on my lips.

I gasped and opened my eyes fully to the physical realm. My body was in agony. I whimpered and fell forward into Jee's ready arms.

"Love you," Jee whispered.

Chapter 28. Hwa

“Glad to see you’re well. And just in time for the New Year’s celebration. Take a seat. We’ll be ready to eat soon.”

Sett motioned Jee, Jav, and Bin toward the large, low table we’d laid out specially for the Lunar New Year feast. It was already more than half filled with mouthwatering dishes. The three of them looked much better now, after two rounds of Nin’s healing sessions and sleeping for almost two days straight. I wasn’t sure what had happened to them since I couldn’t see what took place in the spirit realm. But the three of them had been deathly pale when they’d all passed out.

“Do you need any help?” Bin poked his head across the counter that divided the kitchen and the dining area. After seeing the full kitchen, Jee and Jav had already retreated to where Sett had directed them.

“There are more than enough people helping in the kitchen.” Sett shooed Bin away.

“Bin, come and join the fellow lazy people waiting for food. We’ve all been kicked out of the kitchen because we’re useless.” Wyn beckoned him.

“Are you saying Hwa is supposed to be useful in the kitchen?” Bin rolled his eyes.

Wyn was sitting daintily next to Nin, who towered over him even sitting crossed-legged. Nin looked comfortable, as

though he was used to sitting on the ground. Next to him, Sen had an arm wrapped around Jin, who rested his head on Sen's shoulder. Jin looked healthier, more alive since returning from Jeju.

Menes stood, leaning against the wall next to the counter, his eyes glued to his tablet. Along with Mr. Nam, he'd been reading through more than fifty op reports that Jav had smuggled out of Serpentine. They were planning to release the information with the help of Tasier's media team. But before that could happen, any ops JS had been involved with had to be removed. With JS still missing in action, the only way to accomplish that was to read through every report and eliminate anything they didn't want released.

Bin sat down next to Jee and Jav and let out a soft sigh.

"How are you feeling? The three of you were not in good shape when Wyn portaled me here. But you were in the most critical condition." Nin scanned Bin with his eyes.

"I'm fine. Just sore. Thank you for helping us."

"My pleasure. You'd have healed on your own, but hopefully I hastened your recovery."

Bin laid his head on Jee's shoulder and eyed the table laden with food. His eyes sparkled as his hand leisurely moved toward a tray of various *yukjeon*, fritters made with mixed meat and vegetables.

"Hey!"

Bin rapidly removed his hand at my shout.

"What?" he asked, his face guilty.

I shook my index finger at him while I lowered the fire on the steamer. “No touching the food until we’re all ready to eat. I’ve been slaving over it since yesterday. Do you know how many *songpyeon* I had to make?”

As Bin pouted, Jav reached over, took a small *yukjeon* and held it in front of Bin’s mouth. He grinned and then opened wide for Jav to pop it in. Jav grabbed another one and did the same for Jee.

“Ugh!” I flung both my hands in the air.

Saem chuckled behind me. “You know there’s no use trying to stop any of us from eating when there’s food in front of us.”

He transferred the *japchae*, stir-fried sweet potato noodles he’d been cooking in a pan, into a large serving bowl and headed to the table.

“Hosin, can you take this tray of *tteokguk* to the table? I think that’s it.” Sett handed Mr. Nam a platter containing half a dozen bowls, then lifted another himself.

“Hwa, you can turn off the fire and lift the lid. I think they should be ready now. Then come and eat before the food gets cold.” Sett nodded in the direction of the table as he walked by me.

I turned off the stove and lifted the lid of the steamer full of *songpyeon*. A giant cloud of steam rose and, with it, the fragrance of pine trees. I’d grumbled for several hours while making the traditional filled rice cakes that were steamed with pine needles and eaten during the New Year. Now that I was close to reaping the rewards of my hard work, the hours of

effort didn't seem so bad. I snatched a pine needle and rolled it between my fingers as I sauntered over to Menes.

His face lifted as I got within a few feet of him, his gem-like green eyes boring into me. I froze in place as my eyes lowered in response to his gaze.

Look at me.

I slowly lifted my eyes. A zing of excitement ran through my body. My fingertips tingled; my heart quickened. I let out a shaky breath and managed not to smile.

“Hwa! The food is disappearing. You'd better come quick. What are you doing over there?” Jin's voice rang from the dining room, only a dozen steps away.

The sounds of laughter and lighthearted banter rose, but every fiber of my being was focused on Menes.

Our gazes held. His, commanding and unyielding, and mine, obedient and passive.

My stomach growled at that moment, and the corners of his lips lifted. The tense moment between us was gone. Menes lightly pressed his hand on my back.

“Let's go eat, shall we?” he whispered into my ear.

I shivered.

Characters & Abilities

BIN

Member of *Sanang* - *main vocalist, sub dancer*

Element: *Air*

Zodiac: *Ram*

HOSIN

Member of *Sanang* - *manager*

Abilities: *Telepath*

Element: *Metal*

Zodiac: *Monkey*

HWA

Member of *Sanang* - *rapper, sub voc, dancer*

Element: *Fire*

Zodiac: *Snake*

JAV

Type: *Tasier*

Abilities: *Telepath, Shield*

JEE

Member of *Sanang* - *main vocal, sub rapper*

Abilities: *Healing*

Element: *Earth*

Zodiac: *Horse*

JS

Member of *Serpentine*

Type: *Tasier*

Element: *Elements of Others'*

MENES

Member of *Netru*

Type: *Tasier*

Abilities: *Fire Ball, Shield*

MIREU (JIN)

Member of *Sanang* - *main dancer, sub voc, sub rap*

Element: *Water*

Zodiac: *Dragon*

NIN

Member of *Tasier*

Type: *Tasier*

Abilities: *Healer*

SAEM (TIG)

Member of *Sanang* - *leader, main dancer, sub rap*

Element: *Wood/Nature*

Zodiac: *Tiger*

SEN

Member of *Netru*

Type: *Ankaneh*

Abilities: *Strength, Speed, Mind Control*

SETT

Type: *Tasier*

Abilities: *Dreamwalker, Traveler, Empath, Telepath*

WYN

Member of *Netru*

Type: *Wizard*

Abilities: *Wizard*

Glossary

AGGWI (*Korean*)

evil spirit

ANKEMER (*Ankeneh*)

mating bond

ANKENEH (*Ankeneh*)

Immortal, vampire-like race

ATAR (*Tasier*)

an inner energy that powers special abilities

ATARAV (*Tasier*)

soulmate

ATARAV-NE (*Tasier*)

my soulmate

BEOMSIN (*Korean*)

tiger spirit

BORICHA (*Korean*)

roasted barley tea

BUJEOK (*Korean*)

amulet, protection against evil

BUNSIK (*Korean*)

fast, cheap food

BUNSIKJIP (*Korean*)

place that sells fast cheap food

BYEOLCHAE (*Korean*)

usually a structure within Hanok complex for guest quarters

CHAKHOGAPSA (*Korean*)

tiger hunting regiment formed in 15th century, but became official during King Sejong

CHASA (*Korean*)

grim reaper

CHEONSIN (*Korean*)

sky spirit

DACHEONG MARU (*Korean*)

central wooden floor hall

DASIK (*Korean*)

Korean cookie made by mixing honey with grain or seed flour and pressed into a decorative mould

DONGDONGJU (*Korean*)

unfiltered rice wine

DUEOGSINI (*Korean*)

large creature who supposedly can eat humans, but if they're treated well, can give fortune and baby.

EOMEONIM (*Korean*)

mother in respectful form

EOMUK (*Korean*)

fish cake

EOMUKGUK (*Korean*)

fish cake soup

GAEKKUM (*Korean*)

silly dream

GAMJATANG (*Korean*)

spicy potato soup

GEURIHAGEORA (*Korean*)

do as will but can only be said by nobility to their servants

GGUL TTEOK (*Korean*)

rice cake with honey and sesame seed filling

GIM (*Korean*)

dried seaweed

GIMBOP (*Korean*)

rice and vegetables, fish/meats that are rolled in dried sheets of seaweed

GISAENG (*Korean*)

women who were trained to be courtesans, providing artistic entertainment

GISEUMYEON (*Korean*)

Korean-Chinese dish, noodles in light chicken broth with vegetables and meat

GOOT (*Korean*)

shaman ritual

GWI (*Korean*)

spirit

HAEJANGGUK (*Korean*)

spicy stew eaten after drinking

HAENYEO (*Korean*)

ladies who forage for shellfish in Jeju island

HANBOK (*Korean*)

traditional Korean clothing

HANOK (*Korean*)

traditional Korean house

HANYANG (*Korean*)

what Seoul was called during Yi dynasty

HOE (*Korean*)

raw fish (sashimi)

HOTTEOK (*Korean*)

a melted brown sugar and nut filled pancake

HYEONG (*Korean*)

term to call one's brother (males only)

IMUGI (*Korean*)

pre-dragon in snake-like form

JAJANGMYEON (*Korean*)

Korean-Chinese noodle dish with thick black bean sauce, meat and vegetables

JAPCHAE (*Korean*)

stir fried sweet potato starch noodles with vegetables and meat

JEON (*Korean*)

savory pancake

JEOSEUNGSAJA (*Korean*)

reaper

JOOK (*Korean*)

porridge

KAHAR (*Tasier*)

organization against Tasier

KYONGCHAGWAN (*Korean*)

government position, most closely a special investigator

MAKNAE (*Korean*)

youngest and last child of a family

MANDU (*Korean*)

filled dumpling

MANIM (*Korean*)

like “ma’am” to call noble lady

MERWATI (*Ankeneh*)

Beloved

MIRI (*Korean*)

Imugi with immense power who’s turned to evil

MUDANG (*Korean*)

Korean shaman

NAE SARANG (*Korean*)

my love

NAENGYEON (*Korean*)

cold buckwheat noodle soup

NAEURI (*Korean*)

like “sir” to call noble man

NAUI MODEUNGEOT (*Korean*)

my everything

NAUI SARANGSEULEON GEOT (*Korean*)

my love

NETRU (*Korean*)

a group Sen, Menes, Wyn, and Gedeon formed to fight against darkness

NOKCHA (*Korean*)

green tea

NUNA (*Korean*)

older sister

OGSUSUCHA (*Korean*)

roasted corn tea

OJINGEO (*Korean*)

squid

OMIJA (*Korean*)

magnolia berry usually used in tea or as flavor for desserts

ONDOL (*Korean*)

radiant floor heating

RABOKKI (*Korean*)

spicy rice cake dish with added ramen

SAENGSEON JJIGAE (*Korean*)

fish stew, usually spicy

SANANG

5 member K-pop group composed of Mireu (Jin), Saem, Bin, Hwa, and Gee who also fight against dark creatures

SANG (*Korean*)

a physiognomy, not referring to the actual lines and shapes of a face, but of person's lives etched on the face

SARANGCHAE (*Korean*)

main room of the Hanok where men usually reside

SIKHYE (*Korean*)

slightly sweetened rice drink

SONGPYEON (*Korean*)

type of tteok, rice cake, filled with semi-sweet filling

SOONDAE (*Korean*)

steamed pig intestine usually filled with vermicelli noodle, meat, and vegetables

SUJEONGGWA (*Korean*)

cold cinnamon and persimon dessert drink

SUTA JAJANG (*Korean*)

Jajangmyeon made with hand made noodles

TANGSUYUK (*Korean*)

Korean-Chinese dish that's like sweet and sour pork/beef

TASIER (*Tasier*)

a secret organization composed of those with atar and special powers

TTEOK (*Korean*)

rice cake

TTEOKBOKKI (*Korean*)

spicy rice cake dish

TTEOKGUK (*Korean*)

rice cake soup usually eaten during New Year time

TWIGIM (*Korean*)

fried vegetables and sea food

UNMYEONG-UI JJAG (*Korean*)

fated mate

WONHAN (*Korean*)

resentment in the heart

YACHAE (*Korean*)

vegetable

YEOUIJU (*Korean*)

pearl of wisdom

YONGMEORI (*Korean*)

dragon head

YUKJEON (*Korean*)

pan-fried meat, usually meat with vegetables and onions
coated with little flower and egg

Thank You

Thank you to all readers who took a chance in reading this book. I hope you enjoyed the story as much as I loved writing it.

If you are able, please consider writing a short review. Every small feedback, good or bad, helps the author.

Contact me

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I would love to hear from you. If you have questions or if you'd like to just to say hello, please

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Sanang Series (Amazon/KU)

Dragon Awakening: Sanang Book One (Amazon/KU)

*A K-pop idol
with an
awakening
dragon
within
A vampire
who is not
dead
Sparks fly
when they
meet*

SEN. I saw him in semi-darkness. My prey was so beautiful. So alluring. Tousled, wavy dark hair obscuring his closed eyes. Thick, long lashes making half moons above his high cheekbones. Lips that were dark red from a touch of rouge. His body moved sensuously with the music. Unhurried, languid, and expressive.

MIREU. Had I ever gone against a vampire so ancient? The strength I sensed in him was intoxicating. Of course, it didn't help that he ticked all my boxes. Tall, toned body with the face of an angel. Long, wavy, dark hair with hints of auburn highlights that I could run my hands through. His green eyes were sinfully large with long thick eyelashes, his nose long

and straight, his skin flawless, and... he had these lips that looked infinitely kissable.

Sanang is a K-pop group composed of five idols with special abilities that fight against dark creatures. This is the first book in the *Sanang* series.

Spirits Merging: A *Sanang* Novella (FREE)

*A protector
And a
traveler
Their spirits
merge when
they meet*

SETT. Short raven-black hair, a strong, masculine face, and a well-toned body. He wore an exquisitely tailored gray suit that clung to his body but was loose enough to allow for easy movement. As he walked toward the counter, I eyed him from behind my laptop. Was it him?

HOSIN. He slowly breathed in and out. His warm energy wrapped around me, soothing away the pain I hadn't realized I was carrying around. My breathing matched his as we held on to each other. And more than ever, I wanted forever with him. Forever what? Needing him so much scared me to the core. What did I want from him?

This novella is set in the *Sanang* world. *Sanang* is a K-pop group composed of five idols with special abilities that fight against dark creatures.

Tiger Roaring: Sanang Book Two ([Amazon](#)/[KU](#))

*A K-pop idol
with a tiger
spirit within
A wizard in
need of a
familiar
Their
energies
meld when
they meet*

SAEM. Is it possible for any human being to be so beautiful? I could stare forever at his delicate cheeks, large blue eyes, and silky skin. Wyn is beautiful and confident, and so fun and sociable. Being together is all I've ever wanted. But the danger lurks in our past and the present, and we must fight together to keep our bond alive.

WYN. My purple-loving, tall, breathtakingly beautiful Saem. I've been his fan forever. Just when we discover he's my familiar and I'm his mate, the evil creature threatens both our lives. But I will risk everything to save my love and our future.

Sanang is a K-pop group composed of five idols with special abilities that fight against dark creatures. This is the second book in the Sanang series.

Souls Whispering: Sanang Book Three ([Amazon](#)/[KU](#))

*Brought
together by
destiny
Bound by
fate and
circumstances*

*Unrequited
love
One fated
love
And one who
cannot love*

*Two are
fated to be
together
One belongs
with a spirit*

*The
darkness
threatens
When the
powerful
creature
stirs
Through
eminent
danger
Will love
unite the*

*three
Or would
their lives
unravel?

Two K-pop
idols with
elemental
powers and
a telepath
The spirits
whisper
when the
three meet*

SANANG is a K-pop group composed of five idols with elemental powers that fight against dark creatures. This is the third book in the Sanang series and the story of Jee, Jav and Bin, their love and their fight against the dark creatures that threaten everyone.

Tasier Series ([Amazon/KU](#))

Dream Bound: Tasier Book 1 ([Amazon/KU](#))

JOON is mostly content with his orderly, but lonely life until a chance encounter at a cafe turns his life sideways. Before he knows it, he's caught up in a secret organization of individuals with special abilities. And he discovers his hitherto unknown biological parents and finds a man he'd been dreaming about.

TREY has been in love with Joon all his life. His life is complete; with a childhood full of adventures, a membership in a secret organization, annoying but fabulous special abilities, and the love of his life. Except there is just a small problem. His soulmate doesn't remember him.

As they meet for the first time, their love for each other grows, but they discover hidden threats against Joon that can tear their love apart. Will Joon and Trey find strength to overcome the darkness?

Souls Aligned: Tasier Book 2 ([Amazon/KU](#))

From the moment he laid his eyes on him, Eric knew Bhas was his soulmate. Beautiful, enigmatic, and timeless, Bhas became a constant presence in his heart. But as his guardian and protector, Bhas seems oblivious to his love. Heartbroken, Eric ran away, leaving his heart permanently behind.

Now Eric has to face Bhas again. And danger and darkness follow them as they embark on an adventurous journey to the past to help their friends in the Tasier organization. Will there be enough time for Eric to convince Bhas they are meant to be? Can their souls be aligned now that they are brought together again?

Remembrance Lost: Tasier Book 3 ([Amazon/KU](#))

Ryan met his soulmate when he was fifteen. And for him, it was a love at first sight. Nikki was sixteen, an orphan who came to live with his family with no memory of who he'd been. Five years later, Ryan's still unsure whether there's something more between them other than platonic love. They'd bonded in every way, except as lovers.

Then the world of Tasier intrudes, a hacker in danger in need of a rescue and a brother who needs redemption. Nikki and Ryan, along with their friends, travel across the world and are met with astonishing adventure and danger. With Nikki's lost memories haunting them, will their bond be strong enough to survive the darkness that surrounds them?

Nial & Naz: Tasier Shorts Book 1 ([join Arian's newsletter](#))

Nial fell in love with a man who did not exist, but also the only man he ever wanted in his heart. When reality merges with his dreams, can he find the way to grab onto his love and never let go? From the artists' quarter in Paris to London, this

is a glimpse into the love story between soulmates Nial and Naz.