

Today was a slow day.

Some would have abhorred such days. Stirred by impatience to stir the slowing passage of time into something, *anything* more active. Jumping at whatever interrupted what they saw as a dull occasion: turning what would otherwise be viewed with equal dislike into something to revel in. A touch of spice to a dull day, a little stir to a slowing moment.

Shin wouldn't have called it slow.

The air was as crisp as the fallen leaves, and the aftertaste of coffee still lingered. The sound of the odd jogger or cyclist didn't even break the calm: they passed in and out of the chill (in more than one way) bubble, blending into the rustling of leaves and the notes the wind hit in its absent adventure through the trees.

It was relaxing. His eyes were half-closed, and every blink seemed to jolt him forward in time. It hadn't turned disconcerting. Yet. Thinking it over later in the warmth of his home would be just as nice, but he was quite caught up in this moment. Just watching the world go by, an observer in it all for once.

Anticipation.

He was just as pliant to it, under however many thinning, transparent layers of denial.

Or not so much denial as tension, for what he knew waited at the end of every road. However dark or meandering.

Shin wouldn't call himself the sort to always long for adventure, but the kind of life he led was...less one fraught now and then with excitement, and more so one where the peace was a break from the peril. It was hard to explain to anyone who wasn't a close friend, familiar just as much with how quick things were to turn over on him. And just as hard to take a moment to relax, given how much thought he'd lent to why this break was being granted him.

His breaths were deep, seemingly mulling over the taste of the air. Would be starting to see it condensing, soon, as the winter fully took hold. Would that feel as comforting? Here and now, he sat in silence. There was something about autumn.

Something brushed his face.

Shin tossed his head, scrunching his nose up. Nothing was there. Stretching his legs, he let out a lazy breath, keeping his movements slow as if wary about pressing the boundaries he'd built in his cosy little space.

A leaf was blown along not too far off, and he followed it with his slightly hazy gaze, watching the reddish-brown shape dancing in front of the dew-jewelled grass, under the cloudy sky. He let out a sigh as it twirled about, the breath one he hadn't realised he'd been holding. His neck brushed the back of the bench, the cold pressuring the 'reverie' more.

At a sudden pressure over his eyes, the writer grunted, moving up a hand. For a spot relatively far from any trees or leaf litter, the wind tying the leaves in midair wreaths as opposed to anywhere near, he hadn't been banking on his pseudo-trance being tested this often.

'This often' meaning 'about twice', but it stuck more in his mind, happenstance aside.

The expected fallen leaf was heavy. Very heavy for a leaf. Very much not budging.

Warm, too, and curling in a way that a leaf likely wouldn't before the wind stole it away. A solid presence in the near-winter wonderland--ironic, given how Shin couldn't see it at all. And arresting to the man of the hour as his tracing over it became slower--held in that not-quite-still manner, their slight movements making his face twitch again, they were inviting his touch, but there was something ominous about what waited to enter on its arms.

They were big. Their joints flexed against his skin. Shin could figure that one, maybe two were almost enough to cover his face completely.

But they were unmistakable.

He could practically hear the question hanging over them--*guess who?*

About to come out with some deliberately wrong answer, to poke some fun at his own willingness to play along with the figure's shenanigans, there was something in the air that sucked away his words. The writer's flush couldn't be owed to the cold; he licked his lips, his breathing so loud all of a sudden.

Of all his friends, and all the ways he'd seen them, all the situations they'd been in--never a dull moment in his life, to be honest--in terms of who had him playing this game, Shin could narrow it down to two people in particular. Two *gods*. And he could narrow it down even further. He wasn't sure he dared to, given how Chris could jump on the slightest chance to bully him even more...or likely still would regardless...

Or maybe he wouldn't. This was one of his fabled 'off days'. He just wanted to hang out. While...invisible. And silent. Or quiet enough to let the slightest sounds or mere implications rock thunderous.

The footsteps. A strolling figure on the far side of the path. So unhurried, and so taunting. Such an unaware catalyst; every contact of shoes on soil echoed through the very soul of the writer. Even once they were out of sight, the steps heightened to stomps in his mind: faraway footsteps, always loaded with promise to certain beings--those used to the smaller side of things, thinking in terms of such even when not experiencing it yet--carried it on behalf on another this time.

Internally, he cursed the way he'd cut himself off from everyone, daring to seek some alone time. It was like he'd dared the higher-ups of existence to mess with him. The target that had not so much been painted but reapplied on his back felt so vivid. Like the cold had drawn away from their little stage, the localised heat of the god's body more than just a ward

against it. It seeped into Shin's muscles, twining its sickly coils through his paradoxically shivering form.

In starting to haul up some words from his tightening throat, the writer only managed a gasp at the atmosphere that was resting over not his body but the air, the bench that now felt so hard and cold, the whole damned world. He straightened up. Cleared his throat. Stole a breath.

Only to have it juddered right out of him.

Thoom went something behind him, then *thoom* again, further to the right: the vibrations were near equal in teeth-shaking strength, likewise with the time between each of them, and drew a slow arc around the bench. Shin's gaze snapped in the direction of each, watching the furrows of earth form, the marks of treads parting the grass. Just one of the prints could fit two of his own, the frozen figure realised, letting out a breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding.

Every shake quickened his heartbeat. The sitting man and soon-to-be sitting duck yelped as he was tossed about. He clenched his fists around the edge of the bench, wincing as the vibrations continued. His arms hurt--seemed like he'd traded one little torment for another. The heat was radiating from the area right in front of him. Two patches of grass, right next to each other, were crushed into...familiar shapes.

Just as this caught his attention, so did the fact that his fingers hurt. He blew on them, rubbing them together, and then wondered why he'd done it. Force of habit? Running some program, trying to ease regular manners of behaviour back into himself? This train of thought took a minute to make tracks, and it took a second for him to realise that the convoy of quakes had halted.

The twin depressions in the ground hadn't moved. The tips of half-flattened blades of grass waved in the wind, the lower halves of them crushed under an idly shifting weight.

Apart from the leaves rustling in the trees, there was a near unbroken silence lingering. Trying to shift back where he sat, Shin felt the solid brace of wood behind him and bit back a quiet whine. Craning his neck, he tried to look the looming force in the face.

God. Right there. That unbroken gaze. He could *feel* Chris' grin, all his expectant, barely-braced excitement just waiting to come crashing down on him. Waiting for...

What? What mood was the giant in at this point? Did he want a pliant little plaything, or a defiant little preything?

It was one thing to accept that whatever you did was meaningless despite or maybe even *because* of its clear-cut position in the game of the gods that was life. While stopping yourself from continuing to act on instinct, daring to take said life back for yourself...that was another matter. Any course of action Shin took would be allowed to pan out by Chris for as long as his enjoyment lasted--which the current object of interest knew firsthand could be damn long. Hell, *lifelong*.

He pushed his glasses up. They hadn't slipped to begin with. The idea that he deserved some kind of punishment for his so-called alone time was hard to shake. Granted, the border between that and enjoyment was as difficult to define as the rest of Chris' divine intentions. And if this was the place--

Shin fought not to cover his ears at the practical explosion of sound, pounding mercilessly on the path in this casual action. Displaced air drove out in a *whoosh*; it met a passing cyclist and nearly sent them spinning into the grass. They managed to stay upright, if not off course, and Shin was distracted for a moment watching their wobbly departure along the path.

In the next second, the temperature spike registered, and his attention was back where it was demanded. The spacious-seeming area around the bench to anyone passing by? One step too close and the sudden heat of it would take hold, the sight of how tightly the man sitting there was holding himself. Under him, the bench slats were starting to protest against the unseen force. The creaking of the tortured handle as the pressure on it increased--

And now the rhythmic warmth of the giant's breath was rolling over him, wetly blowing back his hair, further fogging up his glasses and bringing the heat to his face.

This blurring of his vision only worsened things. His imagination danced on ahead of him, painting a hot, wet portrait before him as he sat helplessly. The source of those breaths, so intense. Searing through slightly bared teeth. Saliva in a glistening web across his jaws and tongue, snapping and sloshing as he smacked his lips.

How...far was Chris planning on going?

What did he have in mind for this public performance, to which invites were so selective? This show under people's noses, with them all barely out of touch: fellow park-goers only sensing an odd heat and heaviness in the air, warranting little more than a confused glance or brief halt before they carried on their merry way.

Would the loudest groan in minutes from that bench have made them wonder any more, had they heard it?

In one sense, it was helpful that the sound forced out of Shin was muffled by its cause. But under *this* kind of pressure, he couldn't keep that small virtue at the front of his mind.

It was still covered in denim, but it was still so undeniable what was being ground all over his flushed face and chest. And real difficult not to gasp for air, only taking in the tiniest slivers of it soaked in harsh fabric and musk. All verged on painful, and Shin found himself only trying to keep his glasses on with one hand, the other pinned, more from habit than anything else, because what good would it do against this playful phantom?

Any second, he figured that the bench would give up the ghost in giving up to a ghost, and he wished he could even prepare for the impact that would make. Knowing how much of a challenge that would be, he focused instead on snatching precious oxygen up between the

thrusts and grinds, matched to the distant deepening of Chris' breaths. Slowing, but not stopping.

Less easing off on the excitement, and more ramping up a different stage of it. He felt trapped in time, the tiniest movement pitted against the pressure of an outside force. He took a deep breath, and promptly regretted it, another swirl of that mental morass now mixing in the scent of his tormentor. The rub of *it* over his reddening self ground him back against the bench. Those not-leaves were back, digging into the jeans. They weren't fitting so tight around *it*. Amplified as it was, scratching like sandpaper, the feel of it sliding was...

It was sliding down. The material was moving, while its contents weren't as much. As flush as it all was against him, the grooved pads brushed along him as they did the denim; Shin would have been white in the face if it still weren't so pink, flinching at the ghostly pinpricks of pressure. The jeans. They were...Chris was about to...

Shin's heart was about to beat out past his ribs.

Please...

The word was hanging there, building and bracing behind his lips...and what did he plan to attain with it?

His phone going off in his pocket was what nearly made him cry out. The overall feeling of being trapped, the aerial assault that had ceased, to let it sink in...and this comparatively little thing made his heart miss a beat. Wasn't so little given how it rang out against him, the vibrations felt through his legs, with the implications hanging just as eerily over it as their creator himself did. With the hand that had served slightly more of a role in...not preventing much from Chris at all, he took out his phone, fingers fighting not to drop it as he squinted at the screen.

*Always nice *hanging out* with you--*

Shin shoved it back into his pocket; he was starting to feel taut, as if these jerky movements were being denied him too and any one of them could step over some barely visible boundary. He gripped the bench again, his breaths coming choked: if he moved, what would he invite?

If he looked up, the image in his head would be strong enough before the reality of it bore down afterwards. The weight behind it all was waiting, ready to come crashing down over him and the second he felt the muscle and flesh, no, not even that, once Chris moved down *one more inch* and the temperature ticked up a degree too high and his last nerve was going to fry--

"Hey, are you okay?"

The pressure vanished in an instant, because *why the hell wouldn't it*, and Shin scrambled for an answer that wouldn't grant him any funnier looks. "Oh! Y-yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Don't...don't worry about me! Just guess I drifted off there for a second!" He hoped his

laughter could be passed off as embarrassment, as opposed to teetering on the brink. "You know...you know the heat and all..."

Leaning back, the writer felt his attention drift again, the pounding of footsteps blending with the beat of his pulse. For what he always went through, that hadn't been too bad. He'd remembered just as fast that Chris' games were as fathomable as the ocean. Whatever the surface was like, there was no predicting what their depths were like. One could only glean so much from bringing their close-minded perspectives into these grounds. Their close-minded...mortal perspectives.

Yep. They were already gone. That was to be expected. No room for any explanation. There was no heat that *they* could sense. No heat had been ensnaring them, clinging and musky and heedless of the weather. No heated mist, heavy rain...

But what was the alternative? *Hey, it's nothing too big, except actually it is, just my friend who's also a god and a giant about to yank his frank while my abject terror is both an incentive and an afterthought in one, see, nothing you need to worry about, because if he doesn't want you to then it's fundamentally impossible for you to even hazard at entertaining the thought--*

Which may have opened the floodgates, this measure of mental mileage.

He sensed...friction. Contact. This wasn't the beginning--the giant's breathing and moaning hinted at him tuning in partway, in addition to what was starting to drip on him. Already so much of it, the salty hint in the air growing stronger as more of it oozed down Shin's taut shoulders. He fought the urge to wipe it off. There was no point. His glasses were so fogged up that the world seemed like one lurid blur.

And the sound of it...slightly wet, skin on skin, it wound through his feverish mind. He looked up, and fell into the trap of his own imagination. Pulsing up above, red-hot and shuddering. Slick and bubbling liquid drooling out, dripping between the clenched fingers and raging cockflesh. The shifting of fabric. Chris' panting, quickening as the rubbing did--

It all came down to some kind of tightening, extending out from the ghostly figure's tension. It drove its claws into the air and the earth and took him by his throat. The feeling of everything going not-so-blessedly still for just a second, as it bent in around this one bench: a well drawing in every drop of energy, ready to release it back out in a burst.

Don't forget your sun cream...

Shin didn't know if Chris had whispered that into his ear or if his pre-wired mind had taken the initiative and filled it in for him. In the latter case, it would have been a testament to how attuned he was to his ways. As inaccurate as it was. *It's autumn, come on*, he thought, staring up at the cloudless sky, the sickly sunlight.

He screwed his eyes shut. He felt like he was burning up inside. The smell of sweat, of pre, of sheer excitement--it was winding through his head, warping his senses to its will. Acting to

enshroud him, to push aside anything that wasn't Chris. *He changed the weather, he's just messing around with you.* It was simple enough to think it. Not so much to believe it.

Was that...the exact same passerby? It very well could have been.

Continuing on past them, their walk wasn't tripped up by any sudden 'showers'. Lucky for them--the ghostly giant only had one target with this practice right now. And despite his aim being everywhere but his trapped friend, the force of it still hit the mark. Then shot out in heavy bursts, painting the sky, flattening the grass in thick lines, staining and splattering the dirt and leaves and lacing the air with that slightly musky scent...superimposed over his vision, swimming behind the lines of heat that had also slithered their way through his head...

Shin squeezed his eyes shut and leaned back, wishing for it all to just *slow down* for a moment, knowing that diverting or even slowing the flow of these rapids was quite the fancy of nature, and thinking they would stop was even fancier.

The *creak* of wood was eerie, ringing in his ears and making his toes curl; as the bench bowed down, the opposite armrest articulated all that the sitting man couldn't in one resonant groan.

Unable to stop himself, Shin found his backwards journey a little lengthened. His heart rocked his ribs, his instinctive shout snatched away (while still very much resonating to eyes and ears above). It met firm, unyielding warmth. Chris' bicep, giving an idle flex as he froze against it. He felt the muscle, hard as granite, tense behind him. He bit his lip, so very conscious of the cage woven around him by his gigantic friend.

And, the heat and the scent and the overall aura of his excitement, never completely quashed, stirring riiiiight back up underneath.

As ever, that grin behind them was so very palpable.

The only thing that came to mind was, *but you only just finished...*

It was ridiculous, and he knew it even as it flashed through his mind. Figuring that he would let the rules of physical condition limit him, including such niceties as the resolution phase. That, and the sheer stupidity of relating the idea of EVER being done with his 'little' games to the likes of Chris.

At that, he figured he should cut himself some slack. He was only human, after all.

"Shin?"

And how, right now, could the human condition be defined? He was resigned to being snatched up and being made to help the giant out more directly with his arousal. A toy. Target practice. Whatever.

"Shin, is that you?"

Wondering when the next 'round' would start, the voice that came from further away hadn't registered yet to the writer. Frozen in the act of wiping a hand over his shirt, he was running several excuses through his mind, even as the owner of the voice was walking towards him, plain to see. For a moment everything in sight froze too, and the dark-haired, jumpsuit-wearing arrival seemed imposed over it, whatever the weather. Shin's half-formed excuses promptly evaporated from his thoughts, something else taking precedence.

A moment of slight detachment, with a core of excitement to it. Being a close friend, Jake had been privy in the past to just as much weirdness in his daily life (whatever 'weirdness' accounted for, if it happened on a regular basis). There didn't need to be any excuses here. Jake would understand what was happening. Jake could...

Shin felt the shock of relief dissipate as fast as it had arisen. What COULD Jake do that didn't entail getting roped into something for someone else's benefit, most likely not his...

The force clamped down on his shoulder, increasing oh-so-slightly before letting go, and his shout was the hardest to swallow down yet. For Chris, it was barely anything extra, and yet it spoke so much to Shin in its damning, silent strength. Such meaning, promise, purpose. All in one 'little' squeeze.

There was visible movement in the corner of his eye. Jake was closer now, concerned. "Are you okay? What's going on?"

He really could not say whether he was okay, or whether he had ever been okay. The veritable mannequin of a man, his strings stretched but not quite sliced, tried to ease the breath back into his lungs around what felt like a boot pressing on them. Glancing around--most of his attention aimed upward--Shin wondered where to begin...

And Jake was gazing up at the sky as well, still looking over at his friend now and again for an explanation. Or a confirmation. Given what so many of their moments together turned into, he may have known on some level what was happening. As well as what was *going* to go down.

Or...*who*.

"Jake," he asked, "it's cold today, isn't it?"

His friend looked confused. "Yeah." Then, softer, "y-yeah? Why?"

Shin didn't want to look up. His teeth worried at his lip. Then his hands moved to his temples.

"Wait," said Jake, before falling quiet as things seemed to click. He fixed Shin with a stare, asking in silence for an answer he already knew.

Still sitting down, Shin closed his eyes for a moment, exhaling. Then he returned the other man's look. "Jake," he began, clasping his hands together, "I feel that it's beyond our control."

"...Oh..."

With a slow rumble, two huge furrows began to draw themselves out in the dirt. Fountains of brown were thrown up around them, some of the earth nearly driving over the newcomer who jumped away, eyes widening. They carried on through the path, two parallel pieces cut out of the world.

The distinctive marks of treads were visible at the end. After a prolonged gaze at them, Jake's eyes snapped back to Shin, taking in how rigid he looked. How he was sitting, away from the sides of the bench.

"Can I...I mean, do you want me to..." He fell silent again, looking as anxious as Shin now. It was unsettling to be reminded of his lot in life--all the questions he was turning over in his mind could be answered before he could even start wording them. He couldn't do anything, couldn't say anything to change it. He could only strap in for whatever the invisible instigator had planned, and what he'd signed himself in for regardless of whether he'd kept walking or not...

There really was so much out of their control. Shin and Jake were far from alone in this...and yet among only a select few that knew it.

His movement towards the bench was a stop-and-start struggle, Jake lengthening a two seconds or so journey by at least three measures. No-one could blame him, though. With each moment his eyes dragged back to the skies, the weight of this apparent gallows walk slowed him even further. Chris was subjecting them both to quite the performance with his presence alone. And Jake was just as much an observer, his body stirred to those invisible strings.

The deal with toys being that they stood to a little wear-and-tear. Both stars of the show had to gird themselves for that. They had no idea if those hands would play with care, and whether said care, if it came, was for the sake of letting them run a little longer before winding down. And whether this entailed a break or not. And what a 'break' entailed.

Jake couldn't say whether or not his status was encouraging. His head snapped first to the side, with his mouth opening in surprise, and then not so gently back against the bench along with the rest of him: if the flaring of his nostrils and the deepening of his breaths didn't indicate what had befallen him (in more than one sense), then the smell certainly gave Shin a taste.

The shorter man's jumpsuit was becoming darker. Some liquid soaking into it, worked in by slow motions. First in isolated spots, then in growing patches, until Jake looked like he'd waded out of the world's saltiest sea. His expression said all that his smothered self couldn't. With his arms pinned down and his face scrunched up, both his unease and enjoyment were

blurred, and the fact that the fun would continue regardless of his feelings on it didn't seem any consolation--if it would have registered to his enthralled mind.

A moment ago, Shin was clinging to this seat like the sinking ship in a summer storm he saw it to be. Inevitably going down, and taking one step off of it would be like jumping in at the deep end. Chris' intentions in all their incomprehensibility were daunting enough just to mull over in the rare moments he wasn't involved in them. This was his safe, or rather safest haven, even amongst the unsettling creaking and rocking.

Those noises now? Frozen against his seat, watching his friend twitching and moaning under the sweltering, sweaty assault, the protesting of muscle and wood hard to distinguish between, the flexing of huge, spectral leg muscles blocking his way away, should the thought of trying to escape ever cross his mind regardless...

At least that's not his shoe, Shin thought, before the image of treads that could sweat flashed through his mind for one disconcerting second too long, and another wave of nausea washed over him. The garnish to that vibe of *oh god why* that practically radiated from him. Said god attentive enough to it, and not in the sense of answering the question. Not blatantly, anyway.

What made up his M.O. right now was tenderising his catch. And given the heat starting to ensnare them both, in a spell cast by the giant's panting breaths, he wouldn't be eating with his eyes alone soon.

"Okay, this is getting ridiculous!"

Both of them jumped, jolting around to the new voice that wasn't Chris, but in this situation still served as much of a shock to their overcharged systems. Jake, having less room for it, still said plenty with the look on his face.

It was very much still disorienting once their secluded stage admitted the next player--a feline demi, with brown hair framing her frustrated face in unkempt fervour. Her tri-coloured tail was frizzed up, lashing slightly as she came to a stop. "I've walked past this tree about *five times* already! If this is a dream, I don't care what it's saying about me--its worn out its damn welcome! It's not subtle, what--"

Then she turned, going stock-still at the sight of Shin and Jake, and all bore witness to the exact same cycle of confusion that they had undergone...except far faster.

Trying to focus on his breathing--more for it being the closest thing he could possibly control over any actual necessity for air--Shin's gaze soon wandered past the woman, unfocused again. Any words he had the capacity to speak were more along the lines of *Gen, you're as boned as the rest of us*. If Jake had anything to say, it wasn't getting past the pungent phantom barrier. Or his own nerves.

Words weren't necessary. In seconds, the catgirl had it clocked. Gen's tail reverted from its former fox-brush form to relaxed in a blink, still looking like it would fluff back up any second.

Her friends were familiar with how their layers of calm were faster and faster to fray and to feign. No effort from the leaves or grass to fill in the gap, either.

The weather was a forbidden subject.

Shin held his next breath for a while before letting it out.

Jake slumped down, the weight of this constructed world leaving him for a moment. The feeling of harsh wood on his back didn't seem to register. His own breathing was rapid, shaking his limp, mostly moist frame as he continued drinking in whatever still lingered around him.

Between them all, there was something they couldn't shake off. It would be simple enough to have it down to denial, from the eye of any passerby that had served more than a, well, passing role in the games of gods. The simple conclusion that nothing was happening, until it happened--it was just human, wasn't it? Calling their overseer by name, even without any pleas in any sense to attach to it--or, just as likely, the time to express them--was an action inciting some new stage of reaction, and it scared them more sometimes to entice him that way to carry on with his play.

Which would, most likely, carry on anyway. But sometimes the mortals may have wanted to believe in some sort of control over the speed of this whole procedure. It didn't progress past some underlying impulse: one that ticked away in time with their heartbeat of the moment, as easy to toy with as the rest of their bodies. But it was something that had been allowed them. A barrier they could put up at the edge...while not daring to look over it.

Chris may have seen it as the kind of toy he wanted to take apart. To see how it worked. And to see how it carried on while laid out like that. With varying amounts of care.

All deliberately, of course, was the room for 'denial' left them. That may have been the one truly superficial aspect of a god--the idea that even their tiniest, most (relatively) insignificant action wasn't a part of some plan. They knew it, deep down. Everyone was shifting uncomfortably as it had built back up all this time. The truth. It was bubbling back up to the surface.

Gen was the one to breach it.

"Chri--"

It was silent, and that may have been the most disarming part. The speed of it made their hearts race in tandem, it being a step up from the languid manner of the onslaught that had surrounded them so far. Gen was across the path from them all. And then she wasn't.

Like a snapshot, the lot of them sitting there in different kinds of silence. Shin staring upwards. Jake shakily smoothing out one of a hundred creases in his jumpsuit, more rippling and bunching along it as he did so. And the writhing, whining ball of limbs and fluffed fur that bulged between them, marking out the jailer's position by how his clothing only left her tail and shoes unswallowed.

The shifting of fabric, followed by a muffled mewl. Then only Gen's tail was lashing.

Three minds in varying states of hysteria wondered what could be packed into that one little gesture. What the rumblings of Chris' stomach right in Gen's ears said besides the obvious. Could have been a simple *don't bother*. Or, *there's only one practical purpose for that struggling of yours, so save some of it for later, pretty kitty. As good as it feels*. Or a simple revelation in his seat, a general declaration of *believe me, gents and lady, this is only the beginning*.

Jake's whine barely audible under the sudden press of sweaty sole. The crusade of creases marching over his poor, tortured suit. The rub of skin on flushed skin, the loudest sound there, building its lazy way up once more. Up went the rise on the rollercoaster tracks again.

Shin's back hurt from how much he'd tried to meld himself with the bench. With Jake about to accomplish it (and not of his own volition) and Gen tangled between two bodily heats and two rhythmic beats, he was so far beyond any form of excuse for what was happening. The fact that he hadn't had to make any yet was only a small relief. It must have been quiet, or else more questions would have arisen from outsiders...but then why did the thumping of Chris' heart and his bitten-back moans sound so loud in their ears?

Was...was he done with that part of his predatory play? Focused now on more personal pleasure, which they knew now meant him above them, in senses literal and mental? Why did the air, cloaked in musk and warmth and the panic-stale exhales of lessers, still feel so thin?

Where, thought Shin, his eyes darting wildly about, *the hell...is everyone?!*

How tasking Chris' multitasking was on all of them. Split as his attention may have been between his friends, Shin saw the chance to run, and didn't take it. The path not two steps away from him was like a whole new world, and one he was scared to try and venture into. He forced himself to focus on the mini-giant's ministrations, listening to every grunt and gasp, registering them as a maybe-reminder that the world hadn't left them behind yet. As much as it reddened his face and made his own pants feel a little too tight.

It was a thickening in the air, the temperature hitting a fever pitch for the sweating men below. It was the loudest protest yet from the poor, tortured bench. A moan that shook any errant leaves from the trees.

And it was Gen's noise of complaint muffled as she was ground one last time into Chris' stomach, a flare of finality cast out to everyone with its eager growl, before she was yanked out from under his hoodie, pulled into the light for a long second, and promptly forced from their sight again as she was shoved into something moist. Her face squishing into a wet blanket of flesh was mockingly loud. Her shout was smothered in turn, devolving into coughs and splutters, all quick to be engulfed en route to her new destination.

The rasp of fabric along wood was disconcerting, like the scales of some creeping reptile; Shin bit back a yelp as Jake was dragged up, his squirming body ground with slow precision

along phantom fabric and flesh. The gurgles against him, even if not amplified for Shin's benefit, still would have reddened his face even more given the squeaks forced out of his friend with every deliberate pause. The sound of gentle drumming on the surface next to him as the motion halted...the writer was fighting not to shift in his seat himself.

Jake wouldn't have wanted to move around too much, either. He'd been hauled onto the back of the bench, and it occurred to Shin that if he *did* need to keep up appearances for anyone who might look over, he had a tidy job to do in keeping his balance. For it hadn't taken a second or two before that heavy *gulp* resounded in his ears and made his whole body lurch, and his body reeled in an involuntary jerk. How firm the grip was and how sturdy his headrest was helped only partway. The vibrations of the clashing throat muscles rumbled down to Jake's very bones, shaking the choked breaths right out of him.

That one swallow set Chris in motion again. It was followed by a deeper *gllllrk*, pressing down over all, the flexing of his throat sounding so loud, strong and slick from where Shin sat that he couldn't imagine what Jake was being subjected to up there, much less Gen.

Playing her like an instrument, indulging in every note he could tease out of her, the ghostly god certainly seemed to be enjoying making his prey face the music. The catgirl's muffled cries were drowned out by his breathy moans, fading further by the second, an ominous, subtle rumbling rising above it. Imagining how it felt, sinking deeper and deeper into those wet, dark depths as the gurgling rose up to surround you...eyes blown wide, Jake would be rigid as the bench under them even outside of his captor's hold.

Soon there wouldn't be room just to wonder. Another creak from the bench implied some sudden movement from Chris, the mental image of him shifting in delight commanding their attention just as much as the last of Gen vanishing from sight. Her tail was slurped up like a noodle, fur matting itself down as it vanished into thin air; its dwindling thrashes etched into two minds below even above their swimming surroundings.

Still, however, came the catgirl's cries, now with an extra layer between her and the selectively unassuming surroundings. Right as someone else came, too. There was no mistaking the mark that Chris had left by now. The thickening of musk and salt in the air as the space in front of Shin, part of the seat, and Jake's lower legs were powerfully, stickily sprayed (him managing not to flinch too hard, gripping his perch) was enough to make their eyes water.

It was capped off with a rumbling of displaced air and distended stomach muscles, followed by said air being...muffled, held back somehow above them. There was the sound of taut skin and muscle being rubbed, the groans from within not muffled by his hoodie. Then another smack to his prey's new prison, bringing out a yell that was muffled by the grinding, gurgling force that was a natural process of his body.

Or this stage at least was concluded. Of course, the mini-giant would only constrain himself to mortal rules if he were able to get something out of it.

And he was filling himself up just as much on the anticipation...the terrified wonderings of his friends and food, and the self-satisfaction paving the path he was planning to set them on, to

string out their unease even more before he stopped stringing things along and started to thoroughly cut the threads...

Except not, perhaps, given how the pressure had eased in one sense. The bench creaked again, two *thooms* resounding in front of it before it straightened itself out. The heat faded slightly, still strong enough in its hold as it stayed in orbit. With that, there was a shadow cast across the bench so vividly in the minds of both men glued to it. A soft dripping could be heard still, a little spattering of fluid petering out over a patch of grass.

More eager to speed things along now, in some likelihood.

Jake fell off the bench.

Thoughts of where their ethereal painter may next venture in his Pollockian style were halted for a second. Soft as the grass was--especially in *some* areas--Shin knew that Jake couldn't have been hurt, but was concerned regardless. It was like the edge of their bubble had been stretched. It was disconcerting. Thinking of running over to his friend, the fear of what sudden movements may entail threw a wrench into the works. The bench was still the closest thing to a lifeline. He managed to prop himself up, craning his neck to look over the top of it.

After all that Chris had put him through so far...the heat of it all still flagged compared to what was radiating off of Jake's wide-eyed, rose-red face, even as he covered it in his shaking hands.

There was something else. It wasn't just the throat torture session. He knew it. As chatty as the mini-giant often was, he wasn't leaving them all privy to it. Go figure, he was being selective with it, that was how it was, and they were all screwed. Shin's fingers drummed shakily over the wood as he tried to wrangle the words. "What...what did he say?"

"He...he just...he?!" His breaths came so violently they seemed to shake him where he sat.

Shin wondered whether to edge closer to him, put an arm out to steady him.

Jake toppled over, the grass clumping in his hands. He pushed himself up, slightly, before his legs gave out and he fell back down. It didn't look like he'd registered the grass around him already being flattened down and...fragrant.

Shin decided not to say anything.

While on his friend's end, there only turned out to be room for some articulate observation. "He...he ate her!" *And then he's going to eat US*, his expression screamed.

To be fair, anything above that, in terms of words or of action, would be grounds for the beast to jump on.

Jake stared at Shin, his eyes widening. Everything was crashing down on his shaking shoulders at once.

“Ohhh...my go--”

“Oh, come on, guys. As fun as it is to see you so strung out...it’s so easy to pin you down like this, and you know it. You’re *used* to it. So what’s with the admittedly adorable theatrics?”

Both of them jolted, and stared in the direction the voice was coming from.

“Nothing that hasn’t gone down before, am I right? Or rather, no-*one* that hasn’t?”

The words were stated so casually, lingering in the crisp air after they were spoken; with that, Shin was as strung out as Jake to see in seconds. Now on his shaking legs, shifting from one foot to the other, Jake was trying to get something else out, but no words would come together.

There were big, ghostly fingers being pointed over *theatrics*, were there? The (visibly) taller man had plenty to say himself, now that there was a little more room for it. Narrowing his eyes at the last point of reference for their overseer, hands conspicuously covering his lap, he gave his head a shake. “Chris!” he shouted.

Nothing.

He was realising as he tried to articulate it that there wasn’t much he could say that actually *mattered*, however. But he still tried. “Chris, please! You don’t have room to...you won’t...” Such straws to grasp at, but... “There’s no point if we’re not even conscious, is there? Isn’t there a limit?”

Still nothing, and Shin grit his teeth. So much was running through his mind, in concrete presence with no room to move among it. The look on that big, smug face, watching them stumble over themselves in their fruitless predictions. That aura of superiority, of knowledge of how long he could dance with them on the brink without pushing them over it. The flavour of fear and frustration on his tongue, and the salivating at it that was practically palpable.

The groaning, shuddering fleshy confines that wetly smothered Gen’s protests, not a metre or so away...

It was sudden, again--Jake falling onto the grass again with a yelp, and brushing at one flushed cheek as he tried to pull himself up and together. The shorter man was shuddering, casting frenzied glances around to try and get a fix on Chris’ next attack. He was drumming his hands on his lap, with some of his attention drifting to the dance of his fingers. They wiped at each other every now and again.

There was nothing on the material that Shin could see. But it looked...differently weighed down. In several places. And smelled different, too.

His gaze locked to the sky, Jake fidgeted around. Shin watched in frazzled silence as his friend was drawn up again, puppeted on those eternal strings. Jake may have spoken. May

have mumbled. It could barely be distinguished over the play of wind on branches. Then louder. "You don't...I mean, what--"

A sudden *stomp* that shook it all. Jumping from one dire diorama to another, with no pause in between. With the air itself drawn taut as if to discourage backtalk. Or back-action.

Jake not having much room to get out any more, due to being slammed against the ground, his face scrunched up not only in discomfort but also from the tightening of something around his face--his arms flat to the dirt even as they jerked at the contact made, words reduced to whimpers. Then his legs followed in being pressed down, Jake barely able to thrash about as he pushed the boundaries of how red in the face one human could get.

Despite being the audience to what seemed like an intermission, Shin still found it hard to catch his breath. It was mocking, almost, what Chris expressed in his enjoyment: the grass blowing back, the last few leaves shaken from the shuddering branches of the trees. The deep moan that soaked the air and shook the earth. The melodrama of it all was lost on them both at present.

The growing stink of the surface smothering Jake gave away what it was. Again, nothing they hadn't smelled before, in...varying intensities. He couldn't cautiously eke his lips apart a millimeter more or else it would invade his mouth, flood it with the sweat-salt that had dominated his senses for so long. Flat on his back, he whined, jumpsuit now near completely damp, discoloured. The redness to his cheeks alone hiked the heat up another notch.

If it was actually sunny out today, as a certain someone decreed it to be, then would it have been easy to pass off as an exerting jog?

"Suh--what, *seasoning?*!"

It took a second for them both to register that Jake could speak, and another for the implication to set in. And it wasn't three or four frantic 'no's later before Jake forced himself into a staggering run.

Which he could do all of a sudden. It had been permitted. It was planned. Everything was against him. He was wading, more than running. And yet he carried on. Getting nowhere fast. The pounding of his shoes soon deafened by deliberately slow *thooms*, spaced out as they sounded where he'd run. Him jolting as if tripping over something, going rigid, and being lifted off the ground.

Shin choked. His throat clenched around the breath he'd tried to steal for himself, and he shuddered all over. He couldn't look away, caught in an anxious flush: his assailant now visible through the teasing of his next victim. The closing act here and present for him to see. The only one privy to the air thickening around Jake's body and the frankly relatable near-chattering of his teeth—which, fancy that, *wasn't* due to any chilly weather—and the heaving of his chest as he tried to meet the invisible eyes mulling him over.

The air...not just thickening now, but resolving itself into a towering form.

In silence except for the gradually weakening protests, from Jake starting to slowly and slickly disappear into the mouth of apparent madness—in several senses. As more of him was swallowed up, muffled by the contented savouring the mini-giant was indulging in, it became easier to see where he was going. Like *he* was shoving aside a sliver of reality itself to stand tall there, smug and self-assured. Their tormentor of however long.

The spiky brown hair, the half-lidded brown eyes, the slightly red cheeks, all of it melding into comprehension at once...and the lips closed around Jake's lashing legs, followed by the tongue that lazily dragged them into the smirking mouth.

It painted itself over the still-so-still afternoon air—and was punctuated by a powerful *gllluck*, appearing bit by bit around the slight bulge that travelled down a contracting throat. As the green of a hoodie laced itself together, a slender tongue danced over the dangling limbs, squeezing every last bit of flavour from them. One final twitch and the shoes were still, the final destination opening its sweltering gates below.

That heated, pulsing prison was so...so palpable already. Another quieter gulp consigned him to it for good. As Jake reached its insides, its outside revealed itself alongside the giant's own stock-still legs. It was imposed in high contrast, swimming in the maybe-heat. The swollen gut shivered between the thrashes of its contents and the rippling of the lacework of phantom summer.

The figure stood there, fully formed. His eyes were locked on Shin's. Holding him still under the weight of their intentions.

That tongue emerged again. Wetted his lips.

And then he was gone.

Just like that. All at once. So quickly. Shin didn't know if he'd blinked, given his hunter just the right timing to dramatically cloak himself again, but his nerves were far, *far* outpacing any form of critique he felt like making of the theatrics.

He just sat there, sweat marring his brow, hands undecided between drumming at the bench and gripping it like a perceived lifeline. For a long, nauseating second, he wondered if the last place he'd seen Chris was...where Chris still was. His footsteps had only served as an indicator because he'd felt like allowing them to do so.

Shin wanted to look behind him. At the same time, he believed it would damn him from any direction. He took a deep breath. The ache from his palms on the bench was distant, floating just beyond his senses like a dark little cloud. Even then, what was swirling around in his head was just as black. If he stayed here, he was just as much a sitting duck as he'd been for the whole time he'd been 'relaxing' here. But if he tried to run, he was essentially just leading the shot. So, why would he try to make a break for it? What would cross that flimsy line he'd drawn?

The thick, prolonged gust of moist air that ruffled his hair and rolled over the back of his neck?

That did the trick before he was aware it had happened. He bolted out into the minefield, an initial pulse of pride at not tripping over in an instant soon overrun by his nerves. Every single damn time his shoes hit the ground, he was wrestling with himself not to hold up and give up. Any second now, he'd be snatched up, following his friends right down Chris' gullet.

He was being given so long just to struggle and flounder, however. If he'd had a second to take it in, maybe the logistics would have given him half a second's pause. Sudden vibrations through the ground that sent him sprawling over, clawing his way back to his feet through disturbed earth, gasping for breath. Brief snatches of laughter between those casual plants of foot--Shin had spent so much time desperately, instinctively scanning the motionless air around him, his neck and shoulder muscles straining that he hadn't a lot to put into what lay ahead of him.

It did, at least, finish up with no breath to waste contesting. His foot slamming into something leathery, momentum sending him flying over it to fetch up in the grass. He lay there, face flushed and streaked with dirt, glasses askew. Strings cut. One *thoom* and then another, on either side of his body, were the nails in the coffin. He could feel the heat radiating from the figure above. As if this weren't already so *heated*...

Next came the marination. A recollection of Jake and the souring of his suit made Shin flinch, wrinkling his nostrils as if the scent of their predator still hung around them. He was still except for the shuddering that he'd just now realised was pervading his every movement. His heart rang out in some desperate rhythm--but what was he desperate for? The end was too easy to long for, and it was never as simple as it seemed. Thoughts in kind were all off-kilter.

Unless, in the world they lived in, the state of 'kilter' was in line with whatever their omnipresent overseer had in line for them. Some twisting, turning line, with a likely ending despite the darkness mottling it. That being the whimsy of the moment, only flimsy in how predictable it was.

Some predators loved the thrill of the hunt.

A fat drop of liquid hit the small of his back, his shoulders subject to the scattershot.

Oh, it's raining now, is it, he thought, the splashes muffled to him. While he heard them to some extent, the feel of them soon faded out. A shroud enveloping him, leaving the points of wet pressure and the weird, wild weather to carry on outside of it in their indecisiveness. Relaxing his muscles under its gentle, creeping warmth.

Which was...no, actually it was his body lifting off the ground, with something...no, *several* somethings sinuously sliding under him to grip and lightly, triumphantly squeeze before the ascent. And for just a moment, he brushed against a warm, distended, very much moving surface, and *oh god*, the thought of what lay beyond it left him warding it off with mental force that his flesh-and-blood hands long aspired towards.

Then he was held still, his mind very much carrying on into the clouds even as he halted, and glad to an extent that he couldn't dwell on the possible, given what was definitely staring him in the face, phantom gaze piercing, breaths steaming and heavy and so, so riled up...

"Love a snack with some *kick* to it...keep it up on the way down, will ya?"

And Shin was barely able to comprehend the sultry words breathed out so suddenly over him before being bathed in Chris' drooling tongue. The outside world was gone in an instant, overcome by slurping, sucking and deafening moans. The muscle curled and slithered over every inch of his body, a slippery serpent coiling the breath out of him, slathering him in slime and slamming him into the curve of one cheek after the other, savouring. All the predatory poise had vanished, the deafening moans in the ears of his hapless prey speaking only of their creator wanting him in his stomach *now*.

There was barely a moment to get a fix on it, with his 'pre-prepared' flavour, however many tangs of terror, soaking into the lashing tongue faster than the maybe-reality of it all. Still (somehow) clothed, the material was sodden and couldn't decide whether to stick to the hungry tongue-flesh or to his ever-shivering skin. The decision was made easier as he sunk further in, the tongue tilting rather than tasting: banishing the chill of the autumn air and the weird web Chris had wove to a slick, shuddering warmth his victim found himself knowing more intimately.

His thorough introduction began right away. The breach of those drool-pearled gates was a hungry, heated ***gulp***.

Shin would have cringed at the sound, were he not already being buffeted about and down by the moist confines. Wet pulses of esophageal walls, each stronger than the last. Driving him deeper and deeper into the gurgling guts of the god, his slightest struggles and squirms powerless against the choking conduit ferrying him on. Nothing more than a whine got past his lips, and nothing could be heard, even by himself, over the din of squelching, squishy processing.

Not that Chris likely hadn't heard it anyway, and savoured it like yet another seasoning.

For all the lengthiness of the build-up, this part went down relatively fast. Shin registered bits and pieces of the ever-shifting world within as he was squeezed down through them: the excited pump of the god's heart, the heavy gusts of air through his lungs, and all of them heightening, quickening, deepening to such a maddening degree that the snack-to-be sliding down felt that the world he'd known and all its memories were like a glimpse of something unreal in comparison.

The grooves of the sphincter against his face broke the trance; they barely resisted his entrance for a moment before giving way. Shin's body was drawn through, the writer cringing as his lungs were further tortured—articulating his discomfort verbally was beyond him at this point. His glasses finally gave up at the gastric gallows, knocked off his face and plunging into the rumbling pit below, followed by giving up the ghost as another surge of stomach muscle resulted in a *crunch*.

Trying to get out a 'look out below', the continued pressure of the rippling walls wringing the already scant air from his lungs only allowed him a 'I-look--' before gravity took hold. Down he plunged, and up flew the frothing juices, further drenching his tortured clothes in the slimy slop. Gen was curled to one side, her tail stirring the stinking stew surrounding them. Jake was more...under him than next to him. Shin was unsure of what else to try saying. (Given that he had them sussed by the scent of the specific substances Chris had coated them in, he balked at bringing it up.) If it weren't already cramped and bereft of many things—space, light, hygiene—it was further complicated, being a several-person affair.

Swilling about and bubbling just below their waists, a bitter-sour soup churned about in the dark cauldron. It sloshed and it itched and their minds did plenty to fill in the blanks. All storm, no calm. The already scant oxygen was only laden with more of the digestive byproducts, balefully at their nostrils and lungs as they helplessly drank it down.

One guttural noise had opened this chapter of their venture. Another closed the curtains. This time it expressed itself in the form of a rumbling, hearty *UUUOOORRPH* that tightened the hold of moist muscle even further, and drowned out the meagre bits of air leaving the trio's lungs in comparison. Still didn't drown out the slaps that came from outside, nor the soft chuckle that rocked the fleshy prison ever more.

It was already stirring itself up, enthused by the three people-turned-prey that struggled among its acids and grooves. Growls resounded around them like an awakened animal, building in intensity as its hunger rose. Between the choking atmosphere, the swilling sludge and the scant space, said struggles were getting more and more muted. Whether regret or consolation, they wouldn't be aware of it for too much longer.

Nothing it wouldn't have done to anything else consigned to the pit. But the idea of being destined for it wasn't such an easy one for any of the three to shake. How many times had they seen—or rather, smelt and felt these whirls and walls? So much more familiar than whatever he'd dressed the outside world up as today. *Real* familiar, due to what both his friends had been basted in earlier. Another layer of Chris' unbridled dominance, it seemed.

To the last man who'd not so much stood as sat, it all rushed over him as it had any other time, leaving his chest heaving and stare wild. Head braced against folds of slick gut flesh, Gen squirming next to him, and Jake half on top of him, he found his thoughts darting on as if the overpowering energy of the moment had started driving them.

He could picture it so vividly. The confusion of passersby as they bumped up against something they couldn't see, feeling along the surface of leather and cotton...hearing wet gurgles from overhead...and the rush of movement and pressure as they were introduced firsthand to the source of those noises, disappearing to outside eyes as the conditions within grew ever more cramped, stinking, suffocating...

Hopefully they'd be out of here before it got too crowded. Er, then again, there could be another layer of embarrassment, given the different ways of departing a stomach. Would they wind up...padding him out in certain areas?

Dwelling on this was as difficult as steering any other train of thought from derailment. The steam was more than accounted for, though. Chris had that settled. Letting the pumping of his heart and lungs bear down on them alongside the machinations of his stomach, and drive into them, suffuse *through* them in a reminder of his undying dominance. Contractions in time with their own laboured breathing and squirms more responsive than planned, his own position was superimposed--reminder, proof and statement.

He certainly seemed in no hurry to get up and get down and dirtier.

...Given how, judging from the movements that his mentally-frayed prey could sense even beyond the natural squeezing and squishing of digestion, he could start it again right there.

It was still as it could have been, relative to the tightening of the sticky hold around them and the back-and-forth flow of acids. There would have been silence, had the caustic, churning chorus of Chris' gut not continued on, heedless of what its occupants were trying to carry out.

Shin wasn't too enthused on fighting it. The chase had drained him. His friends' efforts may have drawn out a little struggle before his final bow...if they weren't winding down too. He could feel the way their shoves and kicks were losing strength. As the gurgling and thumping and whooshing began to blur, they sank under it like a blanket. One tangle of spent muscle and bone.

Jake nudged up against him. Or got jostled into him by a squeeze of the stomach walls. The result was the same. He could figure out the look he had on his face, lack of light be damned. Flushed and antsy before the temperature had even hit.

"It's...uh, it's not so bad, is it?"

The experience of it all--breath-taking, mind-melting, heart-jolting--had left only room for quite the understatement. Shin reached for his friend's shoulder and squeezed it, saying nothing. He spoke enough with that one understanding gesture.

"...Gen?"

"I'm not saying anything," was what the voice sounded like next to them, in the catgirl's first and apparently last words for a while, and it was hard not to let their nerves drive them to laughter. That would feel like admitting to something, regarding how tentative their grasp on reality was becoming--whatever it was willed to be by a certain someone--and it was hard to know what that would invite in the future.

For now they remained, jostled about with increasing fervour by their captor's movements, idle and mechanical. Such was a day in the life. All focused as best they could on holding on to themselves--whatever happened, it would be a lot to deal with. However things turned out for them. Whatever they had to sit through, or digest.

Which, helplessness aside, exhaustion notwithstanding, not one of them saw fit to complain about.