

Chapter Seven – Part 2

“I think I must have changed several times since then.”



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THE sound of a slamming door down the third-floor hallway alerted Jimin and V that someone had come upstairs. It had to be Jin or JungKook. Maybe now was the time to pay the sisters a morning visit.

The plan in motion, they crept quietly down the empty hall, stopping at the top of the back staircase, straining to hear the conversation drifting up from below. Figuring they would scope out possible escape routes first, they made their way down into the vast kitchen, noticing it was empty.

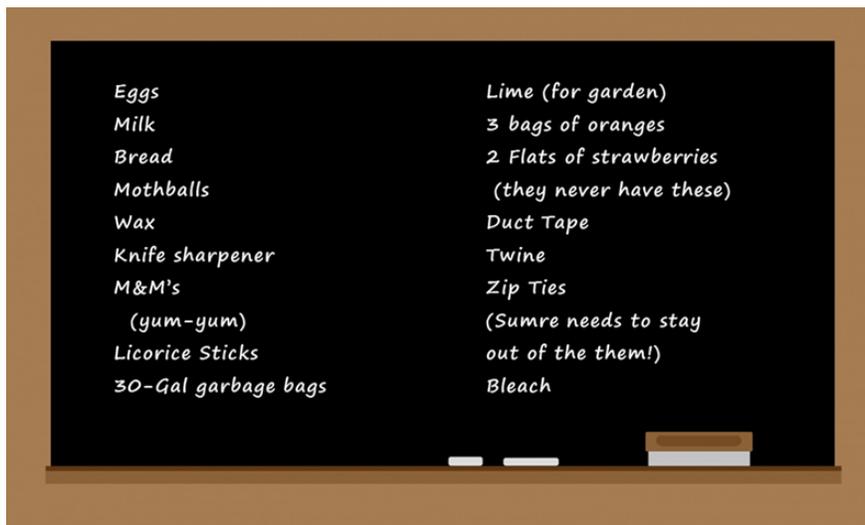
Halting an anxious V from making any unnecessary noise and alerting the girls to their whereabouts, Jimin threw his arm out in front of him, hushing him (much like Jin had done the day before in the upstairs bedroom). It wasn't too late to sneak around and see if they could find an open window or basement door unlocked. Seemed Sumre and Sundae were arguing heatedly over the inability to trust one another, and too much discipline.

V leaned against the cool refrigerator door, scanning the surroundings. It reeked of breakfast food, his stomach rumbling hungrily as he spotted the pan of potatoes still simmering on the old

gas stove in the corner. But what immediately caught his eye was the massive black board, covering nearly the entire wall above the long butcher counter top.

Nudging Jimin he pointed at it silently, his eyes widening in horror. It was a neatly printed out list of ‘Alice’ characters, starting with the ‘King of Hearts’ and ending with the ‘Door Mouse.’

Each name dotted with stars and smiley faces . . . the ‘King’ had many, the ‘Mouse’ only a few. On top of that, the ‘White Rabbit’ had been moved, from last on the list, to second, (a large white arrow pointing to his new and improved status). But . . . it wasn’t the order of their ‘characters’ that concerned V and Jimin, it was what followed underneath.



“HOLY SHIT!” Jimin’s hand flew to his chest, hoping what he was seeing wasn’t true. It read like a grocery list, but not your ‘ordinary’ list.

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“**WE’RE** gonna die!” he squealed into V’s ear, clutching his arm tightly. “What are they saying? Can you hear them?” Tugging V closer toward the open dining room entry they stuck their heads out peering at the sisters and a blankly compliant JungKook seated around the large table as they argued.



“I TOLD you it was too long,” Sumre shouted, her arms flung out toward the back hallway. “He was pale, and thirsty. I hate you! I’m not doing this again.”



“Well, stop letting them wander and disobey then!” Sundae screamed back, her face puffed out in anger, attempting not to include JungKook in their argument. “My husband’s listen to me. Yours are just silly,” she finally snorted, throwing both palms down on the table in front of her. “This one even played the piano for us didn’t you sweetie?” Crooning at JungKook, she reached down patting his skirted leg under the table lovingly.

It was imperative the NICE day be saved. Seeing Sumre’s eye twitch alarmingly, as usual . . . it seemed she was getting extremely distraught over nothing. Sundae decided it was time to end the conflict and get on with breakfast. (No telling what her crazy sister would do if pushed any farther).

Ducking back out of view as Sumre’s flying head of hair turned in his direction, Jimin reared up, only hearing “*Stop letting them wander and disobey.*”

Now would NOT be the best time to be discovered. Sucking in his breath he tried shoving V back toward the staircase, but it was too late. Unable to hold it in any longer, V’s loud sneeze broke the silence, carrying into the dining room, giving away their presence.

Without skipping a beat, Sundae . . . head still in her plate of eggs and potatoes, called through a bite of toast. “Come on in boys. You’re late, breakfast is getting cold.”

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SHOWERED and changed, Jin stood at the bottom of the creaky staircase spurned on only by the aroma of food, and lure of coffee (that he knew awaited him). He should have stayed upstairs, searching out an escape route, but his insides were crying to be attended to.

Wiping sweaty palms on the white pants that had been carefully laid out on his still neatly made bunk, he licked his dry lips and head high, proceeded into the dining room, eyes peeled on the small troupe of guests gathered around the large table. Everyone was there including ‘Alice’ and the ‘White Rabbit’. He was the last.

“HUSBAND. There you are . . .” Bolting from the table, Sumre nearly knocked down V in a rush to meet him. Pulling out the chair on her other side, she snatched him by the arm. “What took you so long? Hurry, sit . . . We made all your favorites.” Helping deposit him into the chair beside her she cupped one hand to his ear, smiling and whispering, “You look and smell so nice. You used the cologne I left in the room.” (Now, satisfied she had compensated for his prior punishment.



Husband? Since when had he achieved HUSBAND status? And, what about V? Wasn't he supposed to be the ONE? Frowning, Jin's eyes darting across at Jimin, who tried desperately to ignore him, focused instead on Sundae his face bright with a sudden uncanny cheerfulness.

Why was Jimin being all giddy? This was surely Hell. And, they were about to bite it! Why was he looking so smug? Did no one know HE had spent the night in a damned closet amongst creepy blue lights, and disturbing written admissions? (Obviously not.) Maybe he didn't WANT to be 'chosen', or 'King-for-a-day', or even pampered and kissed all over. He just wanted to get out. And not soon enough.

Poking V in the back as he passed, V turned and smiled brightly, his eyes sparkling as keenly as they did before he headed on stage for a performance. *Okay. Something was up.* Settling stiffly into the chair, he tried desperately to relax as watching Sundae and Jimin, hoping what he was seeing was just an act and not Jimin, giving in to the evitable, like V had ultimately done.

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THE tray of fruit and biscuits loomed temptingly at his fingertips, but unsure (for yet another meal) what was safe to consume and what was not, Jimin paused before allowing himself to indulge, ignoring his growling stomach.

Deciding if he didn't act quickly and do something to show Sundae he was all in after being chosen over hyung JungKook he would quite possibly end up back on the discipline list. Spending another horrifying day at the mercy of this attractive girl's ruler and odd punishments.

Heaving a resounding sigh, he gingerly picked a large ripe strawberry from the top of the pile and sticking it between his teeth, bent forward to Sundae's astonished face, waiting for her to bite from the other side. As she nibbled toward his lips slowly, he felt the uneasiness in his belly rise.

Kissing was NOT on the menu, and especially NOT in front of his members, (who for all practical purposes thought he was the sane one). But, it had to be done, or the plan would fail.

The air crackled with tension as all eyes around the table watched him pick up the large juicy strawberry depositing it with his teeth at Sundae's slightly parted lips.

Sumre gasped, laying one hand on each boy's thigh beside her, noticing that suddenly her sister seemed to be getting all the attention . . . yet again. Here SHE was sympathetic and understanding, and neither of her husbands seemed to be responsive to her laid-open heart.

As the words caught in her throat she whined sadly, "I like strawberries . . ." her voice trailing away into nothingness, leaving the declaration hanging in the balance between she and her two choices.

As the sudden fight for attention whirled round the dining table, the delighted and satisfied sisters couldn't believe their luck. Just as planned, all four of their guests had finally stopped disobeying. The day had been salvaged after all.

Opening wide to accept V's offer of a strawberry as well, Sumre met his dark eyes wondering if she had upset him by leaving upstairs alone this morning. It was so difficult to balance herself between the two. In her defense, she had tried desperately to find a way to stop his random sleep talk, and loud snoring. The extra juice had helped. But, now even in his enthusiasm he seemed tired and anxious.



Chewing the sweet fruit, she turned to Jin. "You can get me some more tea," she requested, "And, Alice too. She loves hot tea for breakfast." Lifting her cup toward the china pitcher in front of him, she nodded at the life-sized Alice perched at the head of the table (as always). "I love it when you wait on us. I think maybe that was the problem last time, don't you?"

The question caused her to think back to the last time her chosen one had been with her. Yes, he had started out treating her like a princess. And then, suddenly everything had changed. No wonder she had been hesitant to invite him again this year.

“Isn’t it time for dishes?” Sundae asked, turning to a quiet JungKook, wringing his hands unconsciously against his apron under the table. “

“Dishes?” Leaping from the chair, he and Jimin motioned for the others to join them, gathering up empty plates and silverware, now animated as they rushed toward the kitchen sink.

V snatched a full plate of strawberries out from under Alice’s stuffed, starched figure perched at the head of the long dining table, apologizing, “Sorry Alice,” patting the top of her head playfully. “Time to clean up.” Chuckling he followed JungKook’s aproned back through the doorway.

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WITH loud clattering dishes and random sporadic singing to veil their hushed conversation, the four heads bent together, discussing their plan of escape.

“What are they doing now?” Jimin asked, turning slightly hoping the girls stayed put, and weren’t about to descend on them while attempting to figure out what their next move was.

“They look bored,” JungKook announced. “We should probably hurry up. I don’t think they like just sitting around.”

“I’ll go back in there,” V suggested, blowing the soap bubbles off his fingers, watching them dangle in mid-air before disappearing down into the large porcelain sink. “Maybe I can get them back to the piano. They seem to like the singing. That way I can try the front door. Sumre won’t care where I am.”

Nodding agreeably, Jimin noticed JungKook was still extremely quiet. “Hyungs, if we don’t play along and act happy, they’re going to think we’re being disobedient and we’ll never get the hell out,” he hissed knocking Jin in the side, “Right Princess?”

“Ye.”

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“**SUNDAE**, hear that? They’re singing again.” Sumre scooted back her chair leaning toward the melodies coming from the kitchen. Clapping her hands with excitement, she began bouncing up and down, motioning for Sundae to get up. “Come on. We can sing around the piano again for our first activity!”

As V careened into the dining room, the sisters were already dashing toward the living room, as they fought one another for a prime location on the creaky old bench. Banging chords loudly, Sumre grinned up at him as he followed them into the room. “Bring the others. I love your music. Let’s play. Let’s play!”



Kicking off her slippers, Sundae dug her bare toes into the soft rug under the piano. It suddenly dawned on her that the music sounded vaguely familiar, like something she’d heard years ago in college. The ‘A Girls’ had listened to it. Unable to put a finger on what she remembered, she loved it none-the-less, but still wondered why this year’s guests were so talented. The piano had sat untouched at their last birthday party.

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THE remaining boys filtered into the living room, making a mental note of each window, hall and doorway. Sumre rose, reaching eagerly for the arms of Jin and V.

“Have you looked outside?” she urged, steering them toward the large picture window, and throwing up the blind. “I’m so excited. The snowstorm is over. I’ll be planting bulbs soon.” Then smiling over toward Sundae, (perched between a smiling JungKook and fidgety Jimin) she clapped her hands gleefully announcing . . . “OH GOODIE. IT’S ALMOST TIME FOR PROM.”

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