

# 01



## Bell

*(t h e y / s h e)*

Bell looked up at the moon, low in the sky, and couldn't help but feel a sense of dread. Something bad was about to happen.

Carrie never seemed to fancy walks on the beach, and yet she'd insisted on taking one tonight. Halfway down the sandy shoreline, she stopped, turning to Bell and releasing their hand. Bell met her gaze, already hearing the words before they were even spoken. "Bell... I think we owe it to ourselves to admit this isn't working out, and let each other go," Carrie said, her tone even and collected, as if she'd practiced this. "It's for the best."

The words stung every time, but still Bell smiled, because it was all they could do to keep the tears from welling in their eyes. "Maybe it is," they murmured softly, their tone also carefully controlled. They couldn't let it waver, couldn't let the pain show. "But... before we do, one last kiss?"

Carrie shifted her weight from one foot to the other, frowning gently at the request. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

"Please?" Bell asked, taking a small step closer and offering their hand. "It would bring me closure." It wouldn't.

Carrie sighed, but nodded. "Okay. I guess."

Bell lifted her own hand to her face, pretending to hide her expression as she slipped a glassy marble into her mouth. Their hand fell back to their side as they stepped forward to meet

their soon-to-be ex-girlfriend halfway and bring their lips together. Daring to part her lips with their tongue, they let the glass-like bead slip from their mouth to hers, then snapped their fingers behind Carrie's back. As they leaned back, they looked into Carrie's unfocused gaze and held up their hand, palm to the sky. Without needing to be asked, she reached into her mouth and pulled out the marble, setting it in their palm delicately. It was slick with her saliva, but they paid no mind to that. It never bothered them.

Holding it delicately in their fingers, Bell brought the pearl to their lips and slipped it between them, swallowing it. She looked back to the woman in time to see her eyes clear up, and they stared at each other for a long moment. Finally, Carrie blinked and glanced around. "Oh, um. Sorry. I didn't mean to stare. I just... you seem familiar."

Bell smiled again and did her best to keep the hurt from her eyes. "No worries, I get that a lot. Just have one of those faces, you know?"

Their ex, now a stranger, hesitated. Briefly, Bell wondered if she'd managed to somehow retain some fragment of memory. However, a second later, she offered a sheepish smile of her own. "Must be. So sorry to bother you." Then she turned and began to walk away, leaving Bell alone on the shoreline.

"Have a good night!" Bell called after her, waving even though she wasn't looking. She didn't answer, likely too embarrassed by the events that didn't actually happen. They watched her go, sighing once she was out of earshot, and let their gaze drift to the sea beside them. The moon was so big and bright, it was almost like twilight. It would've been romantic, had they had any other conversation. "Second one this year," she muttered to the sea. "And it's only May." Its only response was one wave lapping at her sandaled feet.

Bell nodded like that was a proper answer, then turned and began walking in the opposite direction down the beach, intent on finding the only thing that could alleviate the sting of rejection: a good drink.

They stepped onto the sidewalk and made their way down to the end of the beach, where sand gave way to concrete, and started down that street. Buildings passed but none were afforded her attention. Bell had made this walk plenty of times before, she knew exactly where she needed to go for what she wanted. So one block gave way to another before she turned down another street and walked into the establishment on that corner. Neon signs filled the windows, advertising different brands they carried, and the fact that they were open, of course. Bell's personal favorite was the rainbow flag right by the front door that flickered occasionally. It probably needed to have the neon checked, but the defective nature of the light added to its charm.

Inside, Bell's eyes immediately went to the mural on the back wall, covered in a few places by some posters to hide where paint was flecking off. In big, old-timey script was the name of the bar, the Sinking Ship, along with some rather stylized waves, and the titular ship doing as the

name described, sinking into the murky depths below. Tables dotted the room and stools lined the bar, many occupied by patrons.

This was Bell's favorite bar. Well, human bar, anyway. It wasn't as impressive as the Smiling Shojo down on Convoy, but it held its own well enough here in PB. Besides, Bell wasn't feeling sake and soju right now. The sharp bite of cheap spirits would do just fine.

Making a beeline for the bar following the side of the entire room, Bell pulled back a stool and flopped onto it with a sigh. "I recognize that look," Kennedy said from behind the counter as she took a glass from underneath. "Let me guess, vodka cranberry?"

"More vodka than cranberry, please," Bell replied, sinking further into their seat.

The bartender scooped a few chunks of ice from the cold storage and into the empty glass, then grabbed a large bottle of vodka, pouring a generous amount before splashing in the cranberry juice to give it a reddish-pink hue. Setting it in front of Bell lightly, Kennedy said, "I take it Carrie didn't work out."

Bell shook their head and took up the glass to give it a sip. The vodka permeated the cranberry taste well, but it could've been stronger. "What gave you that idea?"

"That's the same look you had when that one guy broke up with you a week after Valentine's Day," Kennedy replied. "What was his name? Gabe?"

Bell nodded, expression grim. "Yeah." She took another sip.

"Sorry, Bell." Kennedy sounded sincere about that, at least. "Want something to eat?"

Bell shook her head again. "This'll do fine for now."

"If you need to talk, you know where to find me," Kennedy said with a nod. She turned her attention to another patron down the line, stepping over to him as she asked for his order.

Tilting the tumbler until its contents were millimeters from spilling over, Bell watched it with a deep frown, then straightened it out and lifted it to their lips to take another, deeper drink. This wasn't their first time drinking over a failed relationship, of course. In fact, if they had their count right, this was the thirtieth time they'd sat and moped over this situation. Thirty tries to find love, all crashing and burning. How... depressing.

One hundred and eight years in this world and still alone. Admittedly, that was young for a gumiho, but when she'd seen whole generations come and go before her eyes, it didn't feel like a short period of time. Humans came and went and came again, and here Bell was, watching them fall in love and have their families and be happy together. They made it seem so easy...

Not just humans, others as well. Their mind immediately drifted to their friend Momo, the baku who worked at the college bookstore. The dream-eating tapir had found love, and her girlfriend was a delight from what Bell could tell. They were so happy together that it almost made her angry. Was Momo better than them? Maybe she was just lucky. Maybe that's what it was, that Bell was cursed when it came to such things. Maybe love was about how lucky you

could get. But that didn't seem right either. There were billions of people in the world, surely there was someone for everyone—several someones, statistically speaking.

Yet here Bell was, sitting at their favorite human bar, nursing another drink and lamenting a lost love that wasn't even love at all. Truth be told, they didn't know if they loved Carrie at the end. They wanted to, though. They wanted to love her so badly. Perhaps that was the problem, they'd fallen for the idea of what they'd wanted her to be and not who she really was. But when she smiled at them the first time they'd seen each other at this very same bar, Bell couldn't help but think maybe this was finally it. They'd only made it six weeks.

Maybe that was the universe telling them it was time to stop for a while. A few months not looking, not worrying. That sounded good right now, actually. Maybe they just needed to put this all behind them for a couple weeks and just see what happened. They did say sometimes the thing you wanted or needed would show up when you weren't looking for it.

No, she couldn't think like that. Hoping for a chance meeting was still looking, wasn't it? They needed to truly let go of expectations. They needed to just... *be*. When was the last time they'd done that? When the answer didn't immediately come to her, Bell sighed and her frown deepened. How sad.

"Big sigh," a voice commented.

Bell glanced over at the person who was now occupying the seat beside them. Well, sort of. He was half sitting, half propping himself up with his other leg, elbow resting on the bar counter as he watched them. He had a pair of red-lens sunglasses propped on his head and was wearing a white tank top with a pastel blue and pink shirt over it, left open. His jeans were faded and torn at the knees in that clearly intentional way. They couldn't help but wonder if he could be mistaken for a K-pop boy with the right makeup and outfit. He was handsome, after all. Bell's eyes drifted over his features and his lightly tanned skin. His hair was blond from the tips of his ears up and dark brown on the underside, blond bangs framing his face. His gray gaze was sharp, despite the casual smile he wore so easily. He looked like the kind of guy who got attention whenever he wanted it. After all, he already had hers.

Bell smiled back at him, though that woefulness was still there, and tipped their drink towards him. "Bad day," they replied, then took another sip.

"Why's that?" he asked, shifting to sit at the bar properly now.

Bell scoffed and let their gaze drift over to Kennedy as she came over to see to him. She didn't say anything at first as the bartender interjected. "What can I get you?"

"Amber ale," he replied. "Whatever you've got on the tap that's local." Glancing Bell's way one more time, he added, "And bring another vodka cranberry for them, too."

Bell raised a brow at that, but didn't protest. Not like it was the first time they'd gotten a free drink from a bold stranger. She knew what people tended to think of her; beautiful, mysterious, charming. She was all those things when she wanted to be. It was easy to score free

drinks when you could look any which way you wanted— though Bell had never quite been the type to change much from her original features. While she occasionally altered her body to suit her identity, for the last several years she'd been going all natural: fluffy ginger hair, wandering green eyes, a slim but slightly curvy figure and a pretty face with high cheekbones. Today they'd chosen to bind their modest chest, something they only slightly regretted thanks to the tightness in their heart from all the roiling emotions.

"Thanks," they said before knocking back the rest of their current drink and setting the empty glass on the counter.

Kennedy gave them the tiniest smirk as she set a new one in front of them. She took out a tall glass next, walking over to the tap to pour his beer. Once she'd set it in front of him, he lifted the glass and motioned to Bell, nodding in their direction. "Toast?"

Bell scoffed again, still half-smiling. "What are we toasting?"

"New friends," he replied.

That made Bell grin a little wider, slightly amused, and they nodded, lifting up their new glass and clinking it against his lightly. "Sure. New friends," they said, tone very noncommittal. The likelihood of *actually* making a 'new friend' tonight seemed very slim, but they weren't going to turn down an easy ticket to getting tipsy. If he wanted to think they could be friends, then sure. They sipped at the new vodka cranberry. It was definitely weaker this time. "Though, friends usually know each other's names."

"They do, don't they?" He set his beer down and offered his hand to them instead. "Name's Tae, nice to meet you."

"Are you Korean, Tae?" Bell asked, watching him. They hadn't heard that name too often since leaving Asia.

Tae chuckled softly and nodded. "Well, half Korean."

Bell set their glass down, running their pointer finger along the rim, then took his hand and gave it one shake. "I'm Bell. Also Korean."

"Really?" He gave another small, single laugh. "Small world." He took up his ale and took a deeper drink. "You are way too cute to be moping alone at this bar, Bell."

It was Bell's turn to chuckle at that. "Oh, should I be moping with you, then?"

"You shouldn't be moping at all," Tae replied.

Bell's grin relaxed into a lazy smile as they turned their attention back to their drink. "Kind of hard not to right now."

"Yeah, why's that?" Tae repeated his earlier question, watching them.

A small sigh left Bell before she could stop it and her lazy smile promptly disappeared into another frown. They didn't owe him an answer, they didn't owe him anything. But they'd never been good at keeping it all inside. "My girlfriend broke up with me tonight."

Tae watched them for a moment before looking at his own drink. "Well, she's stupid for letting a cutie like you go, then."

This time the noise that left them was a small snort and they glanced at Tae again. "Keep calling me cute and I might think you're trying to take me home."

"Uh, yeah?" Tae commented casually, meeting their gaze. "You're hot, but that's not the only reason I bought you a drink. Looked like you could use one."

His blatant reply caught Bell off guard and they stared at him for several seconds before a sheepish smile crossed their face and they looked back down into their drink, picking it up and bringing it to their lips to try and hide the expression. Bold indeed. "I didn't expect you to just admit it."

"Just being honest," Tae said with a shrug. "I spotted you from across the bar, alone, and thought you might want the company." He glanced over their head briefly, then back to them. "Plus, you *are* really cute."

Bell looked down the counter, noting a few empty seats at the end and a table nearby where one of the guys was watching them. Other friends, perhaps? Had this guy really just ditched his friends to come try and score with them? The other boys at the table didn't seem bothered, talking amongst themselves and laughing. As she watched the one guy, he finally looked back to his friends and said something that she couldn't make out above the noise of the other patrons. While she could hear everything in the bar with crystal clarity, she'd never quite managed to master the art of *separating* the different threads of conversation.

Tae was hardly the first person to proposition them at a bar, but he was the first to just outright admit it instead of being coy and using honeyed words to get what he wanted. Well, he'd used a few, but still. Bell didn't really make a habit of going home with suitors on the first meeting. People like that were known to have ill intentions on occasion, and while she was hardly worried for her physical safety, that didn't mean she wasn't vulnerable to other pains. Humans were hardly a threat for a gumiho. They were faster, stronger, the all-around better predator. She was considering how to turn him down when a thought occurred to her. Why? What did they have to lose? Freshly single, in need of a good pick-me-up, and not looking for anything committal, why *not* just go home with a cute guy? If he truly meant to do them harm, he wouldn't stand a chance.

Bell let their bashful smile shift more into a smirk. "Well, be a good conversationalist and maybe you'll get what you want."

"I think you'll find I'm something of a linguist," Tae replied, leaning towards them a little.

Bell shifted in their seat to face him better and rested an arm against the back of her tall chair. "Alright then, Tae. Converse with me."

"Do you come here often?" Tae asked.

Bell laughed. "I said converse with me, not try and pick me up."

"Why not both?" Tae asked with a grin. "I come here from time to time and I don't remember ever seeing you."

"She only comes here when she's sad," Kennedy cut in as she walked by. "Hurts my feelings."

Bell rolled their eyes. "That's not true, but I... guess I *could* stand to come by more."

"Where do you hang out when you're not here then?" Tae asked, then took a sip of his beer as he waited for an answer.

"I go to the arcade a lot," Bell replied. She wasn't going to mention the Smiling Shojo. Aside from feeling like it was poor taste to advertise another bar in the middle of one, creatures didn't really care for humans in the few spaces they made just for themselves. You couldn't let your hair down around humans, so to speak.

This seemed to pique Tae's interest and he tilted his head slightly. "The arcade, huh? What games do you play?"

Bell began to relax again, the lazy smile staying on her face. Maybe he wasn't suspicious after all. "I like dancing games mostly."

"Like DDR?" he asked.

That made Bell's smile widen and they nodded. "Yeah, that's one of my favorite ones."

"Are you any good?" Tae smirked.

Bell scoffed and held a hand to her chest like she was offended. "Of *course* I'm good! I wouldn't mention it if I wasn't."

"Hmm, I might have to see it for myself to believe it," Tae commented, then finished off his beer and set his empty glass on the counter.

Another soft laugh spilled from Bell's lips and they followed suit, placing their glass beside his. "Meet me at the arcade sometime and I'll be happy to kick your ass."

Tae waved at Kennedy as he said, "It's a date."

"Well, we'll see about that," Bell commented.

"You want another?" Kennedy asked as she approached.

Bell nodded. "Another ale for my new friend, too."

That made Tae preen a little. The bartender nodded and got to work on the drinks. Tae turned his attention back to Bell and asked, “Don’t want to go out with me?”

Bell accepted the fresh vodka-cran with a nod of thanks, then met his gaze, holding the drink between them. “I have to see if you’re worth it first.”

It was Tae’s turn to scoff. “I promise I am.”

“I think that’s up to me to decide,” Bell countered, then took a drink.

“Well, whenever you want to find out...” Tae trailed off and sipped at his new ale.

Bell laughed gently again and took another sizable drink. “Patience is a virtue, Tae.”

“I never said I was virtuous,” Tae commented.

Another laugh, another drink. “I guess you didn’t.” They gestured to his glass with their own. “When we’re done with this round, how about we go for a walk?”

“Oh?” Tae raised a brow. “Where are we going? Not going to lure me down an alley and murder me, right?”

Bell couldn’t help but laugh again, louder this time. The boy had no idea how easily she could’ve done exactly that. She wondered what his liver tasted like after a few beers, but quickly shoved the thought aside. “I was thinking a walk along the beach would be nice. The moon is real bright tonight.”

Tae nodded. “Sure.”

The two made quick work of their drinks after that and slipped out of their seats as they set their empty glasses together. Bell went to retrieve their credit card, but Tae pulled his out faster and handed it to Kennedy, saying, “Both tabs are on me tonight.”

With a smile, Bell said, “Thanks.” Just as she’d expected.

Tae shrugged. “You can make it up to me next time. Once you decide I’m worth it.”

Bell rolled her eyes, but kept smiling.

Once his card was given back, Tae slipped it into his pocket with one hand and raised the other as he looked at a table towards the end of the bar. One guy in the group sitting there, the one who’d been watching them earlier, returned the gesture. Bell glanced over at them and noticed the guy grinning widely, then looked back at Tae. “So you did ditch your friends to come talk to me.”

“Yup,” Tae answered casually. “But they were fine with it.”

Bell looked to the group again and waved, offering them a cheeky grin before taking Tae’s hand in their own and leading him to the door. Once they were outside, she let go and he settled in at her side to follow along as she walked down the sidewalk. “You didn’t make a bet with any of them or something, did you?”



Tae gave one laugh at that. “No. I wanted to talk to you.”

“You wanted to score with me,” Bell corrected.

“*And* talk to you,” Tae countered. “Are you not having a good time talking to me?”

“No, I am,” Bell assured him. “I actually... liked that you were upfront with me.”

“Yeah I find that people tend to prefer that,” Tae said, shoving his hands into his pockets. “And it keeps us all from wasting our time.”

Bell chuckled under their breath. “If I had said I wasn’t interested, would you have left?”

Tae pouted slightly as he considered the question, then shook his head. “No, I think I would’ve kept talking to you.”

“You’re lying,” Bell accused, but their tone remained casual, even a little playful.

“I mean it,” Tae insisted. “You were sad. Seemed like you could use some nice company anyway.”

That softened Bell’s smile and they glanced away sheepishly again. “Well... thank you. I am feeling better, to be honest.”

“Happy to,” Tae replied. A moment of silence stretched between them before he asked, “So what do you do anyway, Bell?”

She looked back at him. “What do *you* do? Not everyday I have a young guy like you pay my whole tab and his own.”

“Young guy like me?” Tae repeated with a slight laugh. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-one,” Bell lied. That was roughly what their age equated to. “You?”

“Twenty-four,” Tae answered. “I’m in college, but I uh, come from money I guess you could say.”

Bell whistled. “Rich college boy huh?”

It was Tae’s turn to look a little sheepish. “I prefer not to think of myself that way.”

“Sorry,” Bell said, slipping her hands into her pockets as well. “What do you study?”

“Law,” he replied. “You?”

“History.” Bell shrugged. “With a minor in international relations.”

“Wow, don’t hear that one everyday,” Tae commented. “What are you planning to do with that degree?”

The beach was finally in sight and the two stepped off the paved sidewalk into the sand, heading towards where the water met the shore. “Well I want to work with ancient artifacts,” Bell explained. “But I’ll probably end up appraising antiques because that’s easier to get a job in.”

“So specific,” Tae commented with a slight laugh. “Was that your dream growing up?”

Bell giggled. “Sort of. I mostly just wanted to work with old stuff. Like an archaeologist.”

“Bet you were a big Indiana Jones fan as a kid,” Tae said.

With another soft giggle, Bell pulled their hands from their pockets and offered one to him. Tae hesitated a moment before pulling his hand from his own pocket and accepting theirs, stepping a little closer as he walked beside them. “I did like those movies, yeah, but I think Tomb Raider and Uncharted were my real inspiration.” And a few ancient Korean stories that she wasn't going to bother bringing up. The video games were always easier to talk about.

It was Tae's turn to laugh. “Good taste all the same. Didn't they make an Uncharted movie?”

“Yeah but I never saw it,” Bell replied. “Didn't want to ruin my rosy memories, you know?”

“That's fair,” Tae conceded.

They continued to chat in this manner as they drew closer to the water, eventually shifting their trajectory so they were following parallel to it just far enough to avoid the waves. Tae kept hold of Bell's hand. Eventually, Bell took a chance and shifted to lace their fingers together, keeping their grip loose in case he wanted to pull away. He didn't, though. She tightened her grip slightly.

As they reached the darker end of the beach, away from the main walk down the road that connected to it, Bell sighed and looked up at him. They felt... lighter now, the heaviness in their heart lifted enough for the moment that it was bearable. This guy was fun and easy to talk to. He was also clearly not looking for anything serious. Perhaps it really wouldn't be such a bad idea to follow him home.

Bell came to a stop and Tae did as well, looking at them curiously. He didn't speak, though, but seemed expectant. Bell kept facing him, but glanced away as they turned a little shy. They reached up to twirl a lock of ginger hair around their finger, then released it. It bounced and maintained the curl for a moment before going back to its usual waviness. “Um, Tae?”

“What's up?” Tae asked, still watching them.

There was one thing they needed to do before they decided if they would give in to what he wanted— what they both wanted, if they were being honest with themselves. So, still holding his hand, Bell looked at him and reached up with their other hand to slip it into the back of his hair and coax him down until their lips met. Tae wasted no time, pulling them closer by their interlocked hands before letting theirs go and resting his on their hips. He returned the kiss as softly as it was given, and as Bell leaned back, he followed to pull them into another. Bell let their free arm slip around his neck, relaxing into the second kiss. He wasn't overly eager, though he did nip playfully at their lip before leaning back enough that their eyes met again. A lazy smile slowly crossed his face.

Damn, he really was cute, and a good kisser. You can glean a lot about someone from their lips. A selfish person's kiss didn't feel the same, for instance; too focused on what they wanted out of it and not enough on both parties enjoying the experience. Selfish people only take. Tae's kiss wasn't selfish. He kept it playful, but still soft, catering to them as much as himself. He seemed like the type who cared about giving as good as he got.

Bell had long ago learned that if the first kiss didn't feel right, there was no point going further, even if they weren't serious about anything. If just a simple kiss couldn't generate even a little bit of a spark, the rest wasn't going to be good. Tae had met the criteria. He could be fun—and easy to let go of after.

Overcome by a shyness they often felt in first moments like this, Bell glanced away again and pulled their hand from his hair to twirl a lock of their own once more, other arm slipping from around his neck so that hand could rest on his chest. “So... how far away is your place?”

Tae chuckled under his breath and leaned in like he might steal another kiss, but instead said, “Not far at all once we go back for my car.”

“Do you... live alone?” Bell asked, meeting his gaze.

“Yeah,” he replied, smile shifting more into a grin and widening a fraction. “And my walls aren't thin, if you're worried about that too.”

That brought a soft blush to Bell's cheeks and they glanced away again, smile going a little lopsided. “I guess we should start the walk back then, huh?”

“Guess we should,” Tae agreed, already starting to walk backwards, taking both Bell's hands in his to make them follow him.

His efforts were rewarded with a soft giggle and Bell quickly caught up to him, taking her place by his side and lacing their fingers together again as they walked. “Do me one little favor, Tae?”

Tae looked at them, tilting his head slightly. “What is it?”

“Don't brag to your friends about this tomorrow.”

That got a laugh out of him, but he nodded. “I won't, promise.”

Bell gave his hand a squeeze. He returned it.

The walk back to the bar was quieter, the air between them charged. Bell was struggling to find something to talk about, but Tae didn't seem to mind the silence. When they got back to the parking lot, he led them to a dark blue, fairly new looking sedan, bringing them to the passenger side and opening the door for them. They flashed him a small smile as thanks before slipping inside. He jogged around to the driver's side and got in, pressing the ignition button and settling one hand on the wheel as the car came to life, the other messing with the radio. “What kind of music do you like, Bell?”

“Oh I’m fine with anything really,” Bell replied.

“Okay but what do you *like*?” Tae asked again.

Bell ran her hand through her hair before sheepishly admitting, “K-pop would be good I guess.” He had it on their mind.

Tae chuckled. “Should’ve known,” he muttered to himself. He flipped through a few things, then the car filled with the sound of 'Chk Chk Boom.'

Bell perked up instantly, recognizing the song. Looking from the radio to Tae, they couldn’t help but smile. “You like Stray Kids?”

Tae nodded, looking over his shoulder as he backed out of his parking space. “Yeah. You too, I’m guessing.”

“They’re my favorite K-pop band,” Bell said as she put on her seatbelt. Well, modern K-pop band.

“You’ve got good taste,” Tae commented. “But I knew that already.”

Bell laughed. “And how did you know that?”

Tae grinned as he glanced over at them, merging into the night traffic. “You’re coming home with me, aren’t you?”

Bell looked out the window so he couldn’t see their shy smile. They really were, huh? In the back of their mind, they couldn’t help but hope it wasn’t a mistake.