The Songbird and the Sea

by MissterMaia

Summary

In a world where dominance of the sea is an endless battle between pirates and mariners, Park Jimin is content living in his little village on a small, uninteresting island by the eastern mainland. He wants nothing to do with the bloodshed of good and evil, the heartless killing of both innocents and condemned, the constant establishment and disruption of order. What he wants is peace, to live his life in the same town he was born in, to spend his days in the beautiful forest, and to use the powers of his Blessed Rune to nurture the home he loves so dearly.

But when his island is attacked by pirates, Jimin will have no other choice than to do as they command and leave all thoughts of peace behind in favor of boarding the Agust, a pirate ship captained by the infamous Min Yoongi, Black Fox of the East.

Notes
Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the introductory chapter of "The Songbird and the Sea" (tStS for short)! I won’t say much here, all info will come at the end of the chapter, but I hope you can enjoy this first chapter and then get as hyped as me because holy shet this story is gonna be long and so goddamn gud!!!!!

/throws modesty out the window

HAPPY READING.
The forest was alight with the sounds of nature, a choir made out of the humming of cicadas and bright chirping of birds flying in and out of their nests, their plumages a beautiful mix of the colors of early spring. It was that time of the year when mothers taught their offspring to walk, run, and fly, no matter what species they were. Tiny birds would flap their wings in effort, little rabbits would hop tentatively after their brothers and sisters, and even the forest lynx cubs were learning how to stalk and hunt, their little growls hardly intimidating to even a squirrel just yet.

There was only a light breeze in the air and not a cloud in the sky; in other words, a perfect spring day for all animals to break out of their nesting.

But up high on a tree branch sat an apparent intruder, a young man, a boy, really, his hair the softest hue of peach pink, with kind eyes and round cheeks, and plush lips pulled into a bright smile. He was observing a family of bulbuls in the middle of a flight lesson, the mother bird hovering next to six chicks, all of whom were flapping their little wings in heavy enthusiasm, their talons still firmly gripping the branch.

“Go on,” the boy whispered, so quietly not even the birds caught his voice. “Trust in your wings and let go. You can do it.” He leaned closer against the tree stem, barely blinking for fear he’d miss the magical moment. His bare feet moved soundlessly against the bark, his calloused soles long since accustomed to the rough exterior of the tree; he’d spent more hours on this particular branch than he could remember. Every year, he’d climb and perch precisely here, eager to watch the first flight of his beloved birds.

He held his breath in waiting, his heart humming in his chest, and when the first of the little birds finally stepped off the branch and into the air, he almost gave voice to his delight. He had to press his hand down over his lips to muffle himself, too happy to trust himself to be able to contain it. Internally, he cheered as he watched the other chicks follow their brother’s example, and soon, all six of them had taken flight, chirping excitedly at their mother.

With a soundless giggle, the boy reached for the small bag tied loosely to his waist, shifting around the grip of his bow to pull out a book and a pencil, eager to make note of this miracle of nature. He riffled through the used pages, turning until he found an untouched one and quickly scribbled down the time and location, as well as a sketch of the bulbul family. He wasn’t particularly skilled as an artist, but he’d always believed it to be a shame not even try to capture the beauty of what he was allowed to witness.

Suddenly, a twinge of dread rose in the boy’s chest, the skin of his arms contracting into goosebumps. His smile faded in an instant and he looked around, narrowing his eyes as he searched
for the source of the ominous sensation. He couldn’t see anything on the ground that’d cause him such worry, so he tilted his head back and looked up, and his eyes widened when they landed on a massive shape soaring above the treetops, a large red eagle out hunting for prey, for smaller birds to feed on.

Quick as a cat, he shoved his notebook back into his bag and rose into a crouch, throwing a glance over his shoulder and at the family of bulbuls. They were still blissfully unaware of the looming threat above them, too caught up in their joyous first flights to be able to sense the sky’s predator. They were the eagle’s obvious target, so oblivious and unsuspecting, and the thought of them dying made the boy’s heart ache.

Not today, he decided and turned his eyes back up to the sky. When he spotted the eagle, he stood up straight and pulled the bow from around his shoulders, reaching to take an arrow from the quiver at his waist, and as soon as he’d nocked the arrow, he parted his lips to beckon the attention of the bird of prey.

The sound that left his lips wasn’t human, but a high-pitched trill, a sound identical to that of a singing bird, bright and beautiful, and most certainly innocent enough to draw the eagle’s attention away from the flock of bulbuls. The large bird of prey broke out of its circle to chase after the boy’s call, hungry for an easier target, and what could possibly be easier than a lone, defenseless little canary?

The boy repeated the sound once, twice, nimbly moving out along the branch as he sang, drawing back the arrow until the string of his bow grew taut enough to snap. He waited, his eyes following the eagle’s movements through the curtain of leaves, and when the large bird was right above him, he emitted one final trill before releasing his arrow.

The projectile caught the eagle square in the chest and drew a blood-curdling cry from its throat, its giant wings thrashing in sudden panic. Quickly, the boy scurried out of the way, pressing himself flat against the tree stem just as the large bird came crashing down onto the branch where he’d just stood, causing a hellish cacophony in the previously quiet forest. The crackle of wood and rustling of leaves mixed with the eagle’s screams, and the boy had to tightly hold onto the tree to not lose his balance when the branch snapped and tumbled to the ground along with the bird.

He didn’t move until the eagle’s cries had faded, holding his breath as he waited for its inevitable death to arrive. He kept his eyes trained on the tree stem, knowing there would be nothing else to look at now; the ruckus he’d caused had most certainly scared off any nearby animals, bird or not. “It was necessary,” he mumbled to himself, his short fingers clenching around the grip of his bow. “Necessary to save an entire family.”

He thought of the bulbuls, the little chicks barely old enough to learn how to fly, and his guilt eased somewhat. Carefully, the boy made his way down the tree, descending expertly until his feet touched the soft moss of the ground. He donned the straw shoes he’d left waiting by the roots, and without tying his bow back around his chest, he walked over to where the eagle had fallen.

It really was a monster of a thing, with a wingspan that could’ve easily fit two of him. Granted, he wasn’t the tallest man around, but even so, it was a frightening sight. The bird had gone still, a large stain of dark red dirtying the white feathers of its chest, still seeping from the wound dug by the boy’s arrow.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly and sank to his knees, finally setting down his weapon in favor of touching the eagle’s head, tracing his fingers through the rough feathers. “I know you were simply hungry, but I couldn’t let you kill those babies.” He pulled the arrow from its chest and hesitated for a moment before parting his lips to sing once more, the sorrowful trilling echoing through the silent
It was in moments like these when Park Jimin felt uncertainty about his blessing.

He’d been seven years old when he had happened upon the Rune of the Canary, finding it out of nothing but pure luck. Much like on this day, he’d been running around in the forest, childish laughter bubbling past his lips as he chased rabbits and collected pretty flowers, too excited to pay proper attention to where he was going. He’d strayed deeper into the woods than his mother would’ve liked, but, too caught up in his own little world, he hadn’t noticed.

He’d ended up at a nearby creek, and at its bank, he’d found a deceased pink canary, the sight of which had brought tears to his eyes. He’d approached it with the thought of giving it a proper burial, but before he could touch it, the canary’s feathers had fallen and its body had turned to dust, leaving only a little pebble behind, a stone barely the size of a songbird’s heart.

Little Jimin had been loath to touch it, recalling his mother’s stern words about leaving unknown things be, but the stone had been so pretty, with a faint glow and some weird letter engraved into its surface. It had definitely been too special to leave behind, and so the boy had taken it in his hand with the intent to show it to his mother.

As soon as the stone had made contact with his skin, he’d felt a rush of warmth flooding up his arm and into the rest of his body, as if something had entered his bloodstream to be carried to every last cell of him. The warmth had been soothing, and for a moment, the stone’s glow had intensified, flashing brightly before it had disappeared completely, the shine gone along with the strange letter.

The whole ordeal had left Jimin with an odd feeling, and only when he’d found his way back home had he learned what had happened. “A Blessed Rune,” his mother had called the stone he’d found, smiling down at him as he sat by the edge of her sickbed. She had pulled out a little mirror and shown Jimin his reflection, and his eyes had widened in surprise when he saw his hair had taken on the same color as the little canary from the creek, a soft pink replacing his natural black. The stone he’d found had been the Rune of the Canary, and ever since that day, Jimin had been blessed with the same qualities as the little songbird. He had never grown very tall, he had learned to love high places, and he’d found himself much swifter and sure-footed than before, with an irresistible call to the beautiful forest.

Naturally, his voice had changed as well, and it was with the canary’s voice that he sang for the eagle, a sad melody of farewell for the bird he’d killed.

When the last tone of his song had faded, Jimin rose to his feet and pulled a coil of sturdy rope from his bag. He would’ve preferred to bury the eagle in the woods somewhere, but he knew it would only be dug up by a fox or lynx not hours after, so instead, he set to work, folding the bird’s impressive wings to its chest and working the rope around its body.

The eagle was certainly heavy, but however soft-hearted Jimin was, he was no weakling; years of running around in the forest and swimming in the creek had awarded him with a strong body, his slender form corded with muscle. Thus he hoisted the bird’s body up on his back with a huff, securely gripping the ropes, and steered his steps towards the edge of the forest and his village.

Jeju was a small village and slightly after its time, lacking the resources to keep up with the development of the outside world. It was a quaint place, it’s most extravagant building being the white stone church near the harbor, its tall peak reaching as high as the lighthouse. The town was located on the coast of a small island some miles off the mainland, inhabited by some five hundred citizens. They were farmers, mostly, with a few hunters to work the forests, and so nearly everything apart from food and linen cloth had to be imported by sea, which was expensive.
The cargo ship only passed their island every two weeks, and whenever it did, the villagers would hear about the latest ideas and inventions of the mainland’s government. First it had been mundane things, such as lanterns to replace oil lamps, and the boilers that heated water for your bath without needing a fire. Jimin had been a bit envious of the latter, but he had survived this long with heating his own water, so surely he could make do with what he had.

Then, a few years ago, the inventions had taken on a more dangerous tone. With the drastic rise of crime on the sea, weapons were being shipped out from the mainland, automated cannons and stronger handheld pistols finding their way onto every vessel. Protection, they called it, safety in the form of firearms that could kill a man with one pull of the trigger.

That time, Jimin was as far from envious as one could be. On the contrary, he was more content with his uneventful life than he’d ever been, wanting no part in the ongoing war between pirates and mariners, and he’d rolled his eyes at those from his village who eyed the cargo ships cannons with obvious enthusiasm.

No, peace was what he wanted, and he had plenty of that in the little village of Jeju.

As soon as he reached the outskirts of the town, he was greeted by a small group of people, four boys the same age as he, although they were more fit to be called young men; whereas he was small and appeared almost delicate, they were tall, broad, and bursting with the pride of youth. And obnoxious, as young hunters tended to be. “Look at this,” one of them called out over his shoulder, grinning toothily as he sauntered over to Jimin. “The little bird brought home a friend.”

Jemin’s smile was tight-lipped, but he smiled all the same; he knew better than to pay any heed to the teasing undertone of the youngsters in this village. “I wouldn’t call her my friend, Minjoon,” he said as casually as he could. “Or at least not a very good one, since I ended up shooting an arrow into her chest.” He tightened his grip on the ropes and moved to walk past the man, but found himself trapped by two of the others, who were seemingly too interested in the bird of prey to let him go just yet.

“Look at the size of this freak,” one of them marveled, and if Jimin had been in a worse mood, he would’ve wondered if the man was talking about the eagle or about him; he’d heard it both ways before. “Those talons could tear open the roof of your house, canary.”

The nickname could’ve been an affectionate thing - it was what his mother had called him - but from these boys’ lips, he knew it meant to do nothing but spite him. “Then I suppose it’s good I killed it before it could kill me,” Jimin said stiffly and took a step away from the group, suppressing the urge to flat out ask them to leave. He didn’t want to provoke an argument with these men, seeing as he was hopelessly outnumbered. “If you’ll excuse me, I still have to pluck its feathers before dinner, so…”

“You know we can help with that, canary,” the oldest, Minjoon told him, speaking in that voice Jimin despised to his very core. An undertone of desire was the last thing he wanted to hear from a muscle-headed dullard such as Hong Minjoon, but it seemed no matter how many times he tried to make that clear, the young hunter just wouldn’t accept it.

“No, thank you,” Jimin said flatly, having half a mind use his bow to knock the lecherous smirk off the man’s lips. “I’ve done it several times before, Minjoon, I don’t need your help.” He knew the hunter wouldn’t let him go so easily, but Minjoon and his friends had already managed to completely dampen his joy of seeing the bulbuls chicks’ first flight, and Jimin had no interest in letting them affect him further; this group seemed to have a particular talent for burning through his patience quicker than anyone else. “I’ll see you around.”
“Oh, come on, little bird, don’t be like-”

“There you are, Jimin!”

The voice sounded from some paces behind them, effectively startling the four hunters, and not for the first time, Jimin thanked the heavens for Choi Jihyun. “Here I am indeed, ma’am,” he called in relief, quickly pushing his way past Minjoon to scurry towards the old lady, mouthing the words, thank you, with an expression of exaggerated relief. “What brings you to the outskirts of town?”

“Someone told me he would be back before four o’clock,” the woman scoffed and greeted him with a smack up the head. “But here you are, at quarter past, making nice with your little,” she eyed the four with a skeptical glare before scoffing, “friends,” in a voice that indicated the word had a sour taste on her tongue.

“We were just offering to help the little bird with his catch,” Minjoon said sullenly, his voice uncharacteristically meek. “We weren’t going to keep him long.”

Jihyun scrunched her nose and made a tutting sound, far from impressed by the lame excuse. “That’s good, then,” she said snappishly before turning on the heel and grabbing Jimin’s arm. “Come on now, Jimin, you can play with your friends after you’ve escorted me back home. I came all the way out here to look for you, so the least you can do is help me return.”

Jimin was more than happy to comply, flicking his wrist in a brisk farewell to the young men before turning his back on them and correcting the old lady’s grip on his arm so she could walk easier. “Thank you, ma’am,” he sighed, the smile returning to his lips only once they were out of sight from the hunters. “They really won’t quit their teasing, and Minjoon never misses a chance to try and court me.” He gave a theatrical little shudder. “I’ve seen birds in the forest be more classy than him.”

“That’s because he thinks with his cock, not his brain,” Jihyun said matter-of-factly, not even bothering to lower her voice as they walked onto Jeju Village’s main street, her words awarding her with several disgruntled looks. “I swear, it’ll be a sad day when he takes over after his father as mayor of this town.” She pulled her face into a grimace and mimicked Jimin’s shudder. “Hopefully, I’ll already be dead by then.”

Choi Jihyun was the oldest woman in the village and straightforward to a fault, with a temper that was feared by near everyone. She walked with a cane, a heavy stick that could easily be turned into a weapon, one the wrinkly old lady would wield with the strength of a fully trained warrior when she saw fit. Even the four young hunters, the pride of the village, were wary of her, and in all honesty, Jimin couldn’t fault them.

Luckily, he himself stood on Jihyun’s good side, having earned that privilege early in his childhood, when she’d found him nursing an injured raven, singing in the voice of the canary to soothe the black bird. She’d asked him why he would help a bird of such a dark name, and he’d blinked owlishly up at her and told her she shouldn’t condemn the animal based on the colors of its plumage; the raven could’ve been the kindest bird in existence and she would never know, because she was so quick to judge.

It had hardly been the best thing to say to a woman rumored for lack of control on her anger, but Choi Jihyun had thrown her head back and laughed, and told him he was absolutely right before settling down next to him so they could take care of the bird together.

She’d been right about the raven, of course; as soon as it was healthy enough to fly, it had almost clawed Jimin’s eye out, and that in turn had Jihyun laughing all over again, none too gently patting his back while he cried.
They’d shared a strange bond ever since, one that had intensified after his mother had passed away in sickness.

“You say that, but I’m pretty sure you’ll outlive us all, ma’am,” Jimin hummed and emitted a little giggle when she smacked his shoulder. “Hopefully, Minjoon will get married before he’s put in command. Someone like Song Eunha or Lee Jihee could probably subdue him and his arrogant ass, though I can’t see why either of them would ever look his way.”

“Listen to you, so cheeky,” Jihyun said with a snort, her lips stretched into a toothy grin. “You should talk to those fools like this and maybe they’d learn some respect.” She emitted a short cackle, shaking her head at his own antics before sobering up and heaving a soft sigh. “It’s that pretty face of yours, Jimin,” she mused and peered at him. “All it does is bring you trouble.”

He quirked a brow at that, amused. “Last time you said it was because I’m too sassy for my own good,” he said innocently, smiling when that prompted another wave of laughter from the old woman.

“Ain’t that the truth, birdie!” she chortled, and this time, Jimin didn’t mind the nickname; only when spoken by Jihyun did it lack any trace of mockery or spite.

“Will you come over for dinner?” he asked her and adjusted his grip on the eagle. “I’m making stew. And I thought I’d give you something special as thanks for saving me from those idiots. This bird’s feathers are really beautiful, so I could make you a new set of quills.”

That earned him a pinch of his cheek. “You really are a kind boy, Jimin,” the old woman said fondly. “But I’m afraid I can’t come over today. My son is bringing his children over, and lord knows I need all the energy I can get for those little beasts. I’ll be taking a nap as soon as I get home and wake up only when the demons come knocking on my door.”

“Okay,” Jimin hummed. “Then I’ll bring you your quills tomorrow.”

They strayed onto the topic of his visit to the forest as they walked. Both Jimin and Jihyun lived at the eastern edge of Jeju Village, and while it wasn’t that long of a trek, the old woman was slow to walk, her joints aching from age. Jimin was in no rush to get home, so he moved to her pace, happily letting her lean on him, and he let her go every now and then only to animatedly describe what he’d seen in the woods.

Jihyun kissed his cheek when they arrived at her house and gave his hands a firm squeeze. “You tell your mother I said hi,” she told him with a toothy smile. “And tell her I’m going to knock Minjoon’s teeth out next time I catch him leering at my favorite birdie.”

He laughed at that, the sour feeling from his encounter with the hunters as good as gone. “I’ll do that,” he said, nodding. “Now get some sleep. I don’t wanna hear about you collapsing halfway through dinner due to overplaying with your grandkids.” He giggled at her dry scoff and raised a hand to wave her off, waiting for her to make her way into her house before taking off, humming a soft tune under his breath as he strolled towards his house.

Much like the rest of the village, his home was small. It was a wooden building with only two rooms, a kitchen with a pantry, and a chamber, barely big enough to fit his bed. It was certainly not much, but Jimin had always been content in small spaces, so he liked it well enough.

He left the eagle’s body outside while he stripped off his bow and quiver, leaving everything unnecessary inside. He changed out of his leather vest and donned his favorite white shirt, the smooth, billowing fabric feeling like heaven against his warm skin. He kicked off his shoes as well.
before grabbing a knife from the kitchen and heading back outside, hoisting the eagle into his arms before walking around to the back of the house, where he settled in the grass before his mother’s grave.

“I’m back, mom,” Jimin said cheerfully and started fiddling with the ropes he’d tied around the bird’s body. “I’ve been in the forest since morning, and you won’t believe it, but I got to see the bulbul chicks’ first flight! I told you it was gonna happen soon. It was such a beautiful moment, and I could really tell how proud the mother was.”

This had been a habit of his ever since he’d learned to talk, to relay every detail of his day to his mother, starting long before she’d even fallen ill. He would go on his adventures in the forest or to the meadow, or even only as far as the farms, and every time he returned home, the first thing he’d do was to tell his mom about the things he’d seen, what he’d learned, everything. The habit hadn’t stopped even after her death, and so here he sat, in front of a grave surrounded by flowers, speaking animatedly as if his mother could still hear and see him.

“I heard some of the villagers talk about pirates again,” he told her as he plucked the eagle’s plumage, carefully pulling out the most pristine feathers and setting them aside. “It seems they’ve started attacking cities to rile up the government. Apparently, they struck a big harbor town somewhere on the mainland’s coast and burned almost half the city to the ground.” He frowned at the thought. “Jihyun’s son seems to think the man responsible uses the powers of a Blessed Rune. The Rune of Fire or something similar.”

He considered the possibility for a moment; he didn’t know much about Blessed Runes to begin with, only what his own had taught him and what his mother had told him. According to her, there could only be one of each blessing alive at the same time, which meant that there was only one human being in the entire world that could harness the Rune of Fire. “If it’s true, then we’re bound to see a bounty on his head any day now,” Jimin said and nodded thoughtfully to himself. “I mean, whether or not the pirate possesses the blessing, he’ll probably get a price on his head either way. He still burned half a city.”

He’d seen the bounty posters decorating the walls of Jeju Village’s inn, nailed into the wall to constantly remind visitors of the dangers lurking out on the sea. Jimin knew their faces by heart by now, and their bounties as well; some of them were worth more than the entirety of his village, and he sometimes wondered how terrible a person could be for someone to want to pay so much to see them dead. He knew the names the mariners had given them; Sabertooth, One-Eye, the Black Fox of the East, the Reaper, and plenty more, all titles given to somehow describe the horrors of their actions. Burning cities, razing villages, stealing, kidnapping, raping, slaughtering, just about everything that went against the law of the government.

With a shake of his head, Jimin pushed all such thoughts of out his head and smiled at the tombstone. “I’m making some quills for Jihyun,” he said and held up a few of the feathers, a beautiful mix of white and red. “I know she likes to write a lot, and those old owl feathers she’s using right now are losing their touch. I think she’d be happy with a few of these.”

He fell silent after that, only humming a little song his mother had taught him when he was young. It was her favorite, and when he sang it now, it was with his own voice, not the voice of the canary.

Jimin didn’t move from his spot until he’d removed every last feather from the eagle’s body, saving the softest of them to use in his bedding, the down a welcome addition to the unyielding straw. The rest he would use to make arrows. He fetched a sack to store them in for now, making sure to not rumple them too much, and he grabbed the five feathers he’d use to Jihyun’s quills before rising to his feet and heading back inside.
Preparing the meat was easy enough; he’d dealt with chickens before, and really, an eagle was only a bigger version of poultry. He did have some trouble fitting the thing into his small kitchen, so he ended up having to butcher it outside, which, in hindsight, was probably a better idea either way, what with the mess.

Several hours later, when the sun had already set and Jimin had eaten and stored away the rest of the food in the pantry, he curled up in his armchair in the kitchen and set to work on the quills, using his knife to clean the feathers and sharpen the tips. He knew he could’ve gone out to the tavern to spend time with the other villagers, perhaps make an effort to socialize with the ones he would live among for the rest of his life, but he willingly chose the loneliness of his cabin. He knew some of the inhabitants of Jeju Village could be kind enough, but most of them viewed him with the same eyes as Minjoon and his friends; weak and odd, with an abnormal ability that set him aside from the rest. They would never simply let him be, always demanding him to sing and scoffing when he refused, always wanting him to *show off* somehow, even though he had no idea what it was they were after.

*Jealousy*, Jihyun called it, that and the fear of what they can’t understand. She truly was his saving grace in the village, somehow always showing up when he needed her to get out of a tough situation, and he could never thank her enough for it. Sure, he could make her quills and invite her to dinner, but her reputation had suffered from taking care of him; she used to be known only as the oldest lady in town, but after she’d used her cane to beat the literal shit out of a tourist who wouldn’t leave Jimin alone, some of the more nervous inhabitants started avoiding her on the street as if she bore the plague.

Jimin set down the knife and closed his eyes, burying his teeth into his lower lip when he felt it begin to quiver. *No*, he told himself firmly, fighting against his sadness before it could rise to his eyes and take form in his tears. *You will not cry, Park Jimin. You’re stronger than this.* He inhaled deeply, over and over, keeping his eyes screwed shut to ensure not a single tear would fall, and after some minutes, he felt the burn dissipate and he found his peace.

He didn’t stay up for much longer after that, suddenly feeling too tired to even work on the quills. He’d have time in the morning, always being the first one awake, so he put away his knife and dragged his feet to his chambers, huffing as he slumped down onto the bed and buried his face in his pillow. “If I could live in the forest,” Jimin muttered, leaving the rest of the sentence unspoken; he knew he was only sulking, that things weren’t truly as terrible as he made them out to be, and so it was a ridiculous thought.

His life was as good as it could be; he had Jihyun, he had his precious time in the forest that he loved, he had the voice of the canary. He had all he needed right here, and he was content with that. Or so he told himself, over and over, as he slowly drifted off to sleep.

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Jimin had no idea for how long he’d been sleeping when he jolted awake, so suddenly it was as if someone had screamed right into his ear. His heart was beating furiously in his chest as he sat up straight in his bed, eyes wide as he searched for the source of his fright, but he found nothing in the almost compact blackness of his room. It was now the middle of the night, dead silent and dark, with no trace of anything that could’ve caused the boy to wake with such a start.

He remained unmoving in his bed for well over a minute, hardly soothed by the lack of noise. On the contrary, it seemed almost *too* quiet, an eerie silence that had the fine hairs of his arms stand on edge.
He slid out of bed, raising his arms to blindly feel his way around the darkness of his room, hissing when he stubbed his little toe against the narrow door frame. He limped into the kitchen and tried to find his oil lamp, hands groping at the surfaces of his counters and cupboard, and after several seconds of unsuccessful shuffling, he emitted a frustrated sound and gave up.

He turned to stare at the front door, holding his breath as he listened intently, waiting for a sign of life from whatever it was that had woken him, but when seconds ticked by without him hearing or seeing or sensing anything out of the ordinary, he decided he’d probably had a terrible dream. He heaved a soft sigh and shook his head at his own jitteriness before steering his steps back to the chamber, hoping he could catch at least a few more hours of sleep before the sun began to rise.

He was almost back in bed when he heard it, and his blood went cold in his veins.

It was the sound of cannon fire, the loud boom tearing through the night’s silence, instantly followed by a deafening crash at it hit its mark, the very ground shaking with the impact of the explosion. Screams followed shortly, panicked and terrified, but even the cries of the villagers were drowned out by the building roar of their aggressors, a choir of menacingly delighted cheers drawing closer for every passing second.

Pirates, Jimin realized with an almost paralyzing ripple of dread. His village was under attack by pirates.

Chapter End Notes

And so it begins...

WOO!!

So this was the intro! It was a bit on the shorter side, since, well, since it's an intro, you know, the calm before the storm. We're introduced to Jimin and his home, and then BOOM, we drop a pirate invasion on him! Yay! I'm so nice to my favorite mochi! Fret not, we get to see more, ah, familiar faces next time~ (I mean it's in the bloody summary, we all know who we're meeting!)

Right. So there are probably several things you noticed in this first chapter, and I'm sure you have questions about one of them in particular, namely the Blessed Runes. A brief explanation on them; they are the source of "magic" in this universe, born from natural occurrences - such as the canary dying - and infused with the attributes and abilities of whatever occurrence it comes from. For example, Jimin talks about a pirate who's most likely blessed by the Rune of Fire; this means that that a rune stone has come in contact with fire and absorbed its attributes, and that he pirate, like Jimin did, has picked up the rune stone and thus acquired it's abilities.

These attributes are referred to as blessings, abilities, powers, and/or skills. We will learn more about these Blessed Runes as we go.

You may have noticed that my writing and formatting is slightly different than usual,
and it's completely intentional; I want to try writing this story as if it was a book, an actual book, so I'm busting out my good vocabulary for this one! I'll try keeping these chapters between 5k and 8k words (which is a decent amount of wiggle room, but heck, you know me, I'll need it. /sigh. No self control here.) This’ll allow the story to be more episodic, make it easier to follow, as well as leave more room for cliffhangers.

AND BELIEVE YOU ME, I KNOW HOW TO CLIFFHANG. THIS IS THE FIRST LONG CHAPTERED FIC I’M POSTING HERE, BUT I HAVE PLENTY OF EXPERIENCE IN LEAVING PEOPLE HANGING FROM CLIFFS STEEPER THAN MOUNT EVEREST. SO PREPARE YOURSELF.

/evil cackle

I'm very open to constructive criticism, by the way! If you have any thoughts on my writing, storytelling, something you think I could do better, or include/exclude, please let me know! I'd be very happy to hear! (though if you troll me, boiiiii, I'll whoop your ass through this screen! <3)

Also! I have a playlist of roughly 800 soundtrack-type songs that I listen to whenever I write these kind of open-world fantasy/adventure stories, so if you’d like, I could recommend a few at the beginning of every chapter. Basically I’d give you links to the songs I listened to while writing every chapter in case you wanna do the same, get the same kind of feel that I do. Let me know if you’d be interested!

For example, when writing this chapter, I mainly focused on these three songs;  
Two Steps From Hell - After the Fall  
Two Steps From Hell - Nero  
Future World Music - Emerald Skies

That's it for now! Subscribe to the story to keep track of it if you wanna know what happens next! With the pace I'm going, I'm probably uploading chapter two already tomorrow, or the day after!
Fear Like Fire, Burning

Chapter Summary

The entire harbor had been destroyed. The church tower was gone and the lighthouse had been levelled with the ground, dust and flames rising from the ruins to illuminate the darkness of the night. Several houses had been bombarded to pieces, cracked wood and debris lying scattered all across the street, and the air was thick with the scent of gunpowder, of burning timber, and, undoubtedly, death.

Chapter Notes

Poor Jimin. That's all I'm gonna say.

ALSO MUSIC. These three tracks, man, listen to 'em, they really set the atmosphere for this chapter! Listen to 'em if you can;

Brand X Music - Last Chance
Brand X Music - Altered States
Two Steps From Hell - Freedom Fighters

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jimin remembered the first time he'd ever heard about pirates. It had been years ago, before his mother had passed, even before he’d found the Rune of the Canary in the forest. He’d been a mere five years old, too young to listen to such terrible stories, but the other boys in the village had made him stay, refusing to let him leave halfway through the frightening tale of a pirate crew that had stepped ashore on an island somewhere in the south and proceeded onto wiping out every single town there, simply for the fun of it.

It had been one of the older boys, Jihong, who’d told them all about it; being eleven years old himself, he was already allowed to read the newspaper articles and listen to the heated, gruesome discussions of the older men. He would always relay the stories to the younger children, and while Jimin had been fortunate enough to avoid those gatherings by silently slipping away from the village whenever Jihong had that look in his eye, his luck had ran out when Minjoon caught him before he could sneak away to the forest.

The pirate captain’s real name had been something foreign Jihong couldn’t pronounce, but he’d been known on the sea as the Red Plague, so called because it seemed as if wherever he went, death was sure to follow, leaving nothing behind but a trail of red, the blood of his victims marking his path. He had slain more than a thousand innocents, laughing all the while, never quite quenching his thirst for blood, for the rush of the kill. And he’d been quick about it too; when the mariners finally arrived at the island, it was as if a natural disaster had struck, leaving nothing behind but death and destruction.

Apparently, a woman had survived one of his onslaughts, and upon her rescue, they had interviewed her to compile a report to help the mariners on their hunt for the Red Plague, a file that would later
find its way to the mainland’s papers, from where it had made available for all the world to read. The injuries she’d sustained in the bloodshed cost her her left arm and leg, scarring her for life both physically and psychologically, and according to Jihong, she had been so traumatized she hadn’t been able to complete the interview without having to be sedated due to a fit of panic.

Before she’d passed out, however, she’d told the interviewers of the horrors she’d witnessed. The Red Plague’s crew had flooded the streets of her town like a tidal wave, unstoppable and vicious, killing everything in their path and leaving everything burning in their wake. She’d watched her children die by sword, had seen her husband’s head cut clean off with an axe, and yet, the worst thing she could remember, she’d said, was the pirate captain’s smile as he dragged her out of hiding and cut open her arm.

She had lost everything that day, everything short of her own life, and it was this thought that rang through Jimin’s head when he heard the sound of the cannons go off for a second time.

Without wasting even a second on grabbing anything to defend himself with, Jimin threw open his door and ran outside, his eyes widening when he saw smoke and fire rising from somewhere in the harbor. “Oh my god,” he breathed out, his voice trembling, high-pitched with panic. “Oh my god, oh my god..!”

He wanted to turn around and make for the meadows behind the village, to cross them until he reached the northern entrance to the forest, where he could hide for days, until every single trace of the invasion was gone, but he couldn’t. He knew he couldn’t, but even so, it took all the willpower he possessed to move his legs closer towards the chaos, stumbling over his own feet as he made for Jihyun’s house.

He slammed his fists against her door as soon as he reached it, frantically beating on the wooden surface. “Jihyun!” he screamed, choking on his own breath when his ears caught the sound of gunfire. “Jihyun, please, open the door, we have to go!”

He pulled the door open as soon as he heard her unlock it, almost throwing it off its hinges and startling her, and he almost broke down in tears when he saw her carrying her youngest grandchild in her arms, a wee girl of three, her older brother clutching Jihyun’s leg. “Jimin,” the old woman rasped, her voice thick from sleep. “Jimin, what’s going on, why-”

“Pirates,” was all he could say, foregoing any and all formalities and reaching out to take her grandson’s hand and pulling him out the door. “We have to go, now! We have to find the others and get to safety!” He reached out to take Jihyun’s hand, forcing himself to be patient and careful with her. “Where’s your son?”

“He left the children with me and went home for the night,” she told him, her eyes widening in dread as she took in the sight of the distant fires. “What on earth are pirates doing here? There’s nothing of value on this island, no reason for them-”

“It doesn’t matter!” Jimin cut her off, desperately wishing he could sprout wings or heal the old woman’s legs. “It doesn’t matter why, they’re here and we- shit!” A third cannon went off, and the heavy projectile crashed into the church tower, the white stones blasting out of order and shattering under the weight of the cannon ball, causing the entire structure to crumble and break. “Oh god,” Jimin whispered, his throat constricting in sheer terror. “Oh god, Jihyun, what do we do, w-what do I do, ho-how do I get us out of here?”

“Jimin.” She clamped a hand down on his shoulder and leveled him with a firm look, the trust in her eyes greater than her own fear. “You will lead the way, birdie,” she told him, unflinching even when a strained scream erupted from some six houses away. “The others will be gathered up north, as far
away from the harbor as possible. You’ll get us there safely, Jimin, I know you will.”

All he could do was nod and force himself to breathe through his terror, swallowing thickly against the wave of nausea that bubbled in his throat. “O-okay,” he said, his voice quivering like a leaf in a storm, but he tightened his grip on both Jihyun and her grandson’s hands and coaxed the two to follow him. “Okay, this way, as quickly as you can!”

They took off, delving into the rows of houses, making sure to stay on the smallest streets, the alleyways in between the tallest buildings to stay out of sight as best they could. Their pace was agonizingly slow, and while Jimin had always thought Jeju Village was small, almost too small, now it felt enormous, as if the streets would never end, stretching out their journey to make it as insufferably long as possible. They were never given even a second of peace, with consistent screaming rising from every direction, their voices terrifyingly familiar, drowned out only by the sounds of gunfire and the distant, maniacal laughter of the invading pirates.

They had already passed four houses when the sense of terror in the pit of Jimin’s stomach intensified as he realized they hadn’t crossed paths with anyone else yet. All around them, they could hear shouts of panic, cries of pain, yet they all seemed to come from closer to the main street. “Why,” he hissed through gritted teeth, twisting his head to look back in the direction whence they came and finding nothing to explain the strangeness. “Why are everyone staying in plain sight on the main street? Why aren’t they trying to hide?”

He realized a second too late that it was definitely not a question he wanted answered, for when they reached the next intersection in their path, a crossing amidst a cluster of houses, a masked man with hair the color of the sun appeared before them as if he’d materialized out of thin air, a long, bloodied sword in his hand.

As if time had slowed down, Jimin watched the man raise his sword to point at them, and the sight triggered something other than fear in him, a thrill of something instinctive racing up his spine and settling in the base of his skull. The feeling shook his body with more force than he’d ever experienced and the sound that made its way past his lips was one he could only connect to anger. The sensation was a need to protect, the urge so overwhelmingly strong it clouded his senses to the point he wasn’t even fully aware of what he was doing when his body moved.

Without hesitating for even a second, Jimin shoved Jihyun’s grandson out of the way and lashed out, the back of his hand smacking against the blade and forcing it away from him and his group. He ignored the flare of pain in his arm when the edge caught on his skin, and while he heard the pirate’s grunt of surprise, he didn’t pause for long enough to see the shock manifest on the man’s face. With a sound almost like an animal, Jimin took a step forward, widened his stance, and drove his fist directly against the pirate’s eye.

His exclaim mingled with that of the invader, feeling like his knuckles had shattered upon impact, and the momentum of his swing almost knocked him off balance, sending him staggering into the wall of the nearest house. “Jimin!” Jihyun shouted shrilly, and he felt a hand on his arm before he could even turn around, pulling him back and away from where the pirate had dropped to his knees, the thin sword falling from his hand as he clutched the side of his face, groaning. “You’re absolutely mad, boy!”

It was probably true, but Jimin didn’t waste any second on lingering to discuss the fact. Instead, he reattached his hold on both Jihyun and her grandson and tugged them along with him, this time not bothering to keep a reasonable pace. Adrenaline was rushing through his veins and he could hear his heart thudding in his ears, and all he could think of was safety, safety for the old woman he loved so dearly, safety for her grandchildren, safety for them and for no one else.
“They’re flanking the main street from the alleys,” he said breathlessly, unsure of whom he was talking to. “I’ve seen animals do it, they herd the prey into a tight spot and attack from the sides to catch them off guard.”

“Wha-what does that mean?” Jihyun asked, her voice strained as she struggled to keep up.

“That everyone else will be gathered near the town center.” He wasn’t quite sure what to do with that piece of information, seeing as there was absolutely nothing he could do about it; he couldn’t fight off the pirates on his own, he couldn’t warn the rest of the villagers without giving away his and Jihyun’s family’s position. There was nothing he could do apart from continuing north, praying to whatever gods were listening that they’d make it out alive.

He shut his ears on the deafening sound of crackling timber and shattering glass, fighting against the image of his village’s destruction with every fiber of his being. We’ll make it, we will, he chanted inwardly, filling his own head with the words and rejecting everything else, every scream, every gunshot, every explosion, every bloodcurdling ring of a sword. We’ll make it out alive, all of us, we’ll survive and wait out the attack and-

“Granny, look!”

Jimin’s heart nearly leaped out of his chest and the sound of Jihyun’s grandson’s voice. He looked down and found the boy pointing towards an alley they just passed, and while Jimin would’ve rather died right on the spot than turn back and find out whatever it was the child had seen, a voice erupted from the alley, the familiarity of it making him want to sing. “Jimin?”

Never in all his life did he think he’d ever be so relieved to hear Minjoon’s voice. “Oh, thank god,” he croaked and skid to a halt, standing upright only for long enough to see the young hunter come rushing out of the narrow street; as soon as Jimin saw him, the adrenaline in his veins burned out and he dropped onto the ground, his hands and knees taking the impact. “We’re safe..!”

“Jimin, what- father!” Minjoon turned around and beckoned someone from the alley he’d emerged from, and Jimin’s relief intensified tenfold at the sight of Jeju Village’s mayor rushing out onto the street, flanked by several of other familiar faces. He almost wanted to cry; surely they were safe now, safe in the hands of the town’s sworn protector. “Father, it’s Choi Kwang’s old lady and his children,” the young hunter said and sent Jimin an odd glance. “And the canary.”

In any other situation, Jimin might’ve taken offense from his apprehension, but not now, not today, not when he had crossed half a village under siege by pirates and lived. “Ta-take the children,” he wheezed, his voice thin with delirious exhaustion. “And Jihyun, he-her legs, I… I had to make her run, we, there was a pirate…” His voice trailed off and he shook his head, his thoughts too clustered to form a single, coherent one. “They’re flanking the main street,” he managed after drawing several lungfuls of air. “The others, they… they’re still…”

He couldn’t bring himself to say it; it was too awful to even imagine, to imagine everyone he knew being rounded up like a herd of livestock, ready for slaughter.

“We’ll take Jihyun and the children to safety,” the mayor said and motioned for the others to help the old woman. “But we can’t move in this big of a group, or we’ll risk giving up our position. Minjoon…” There was a brief pause, a silent exchange of looks between father and son, and when Jimin raised his head, he saw the young hunter nod resolutely. “Take care of the bird.”

“Yes, father.” Before Jimin could do more than knit his brow in confusion, Minjoon walked over to him and pulled him upright, and without allowing him to catch his breath or regain his balance, let alone spare him a single glance, the hunter broke off into a run, dragging Jimin along with him onto a
street leading west.

“W-wait, Minjoon,” Jimin stuttered, feeling that uninvited hint of dread in the depths of his chest. He craned his head to look back and saw Jihyun be held up by the mayor and a man he recognized as the shopkeeper, and the sight would’ve given him comfort if not for the look the old woman sent back at him, mirroring his confused worry. “W-what about everyone else?” Jimin asked, the distant shouts everpresent. “We can’t just leave everyone else, we have to-”

“It’ll be fine,” the hunter clipped him off, not a shred of conviction in his voice. “I know what I’m doing, just focus on running, canary.”

Jumin parted his lips, not to protest, but to ask what on earth it was Minjoon was doing, but the grip on his arm tightened almost as if in warning, and a completely new kind of dread rose in his chest and made him hold his tongue. Suddenly, he felt just as afraid as he had upon the first cannon’s release, and no matter how hard he tried to convince himself that the hunter was probably scared out of his wits, just like he was, he couldn’t rid himself of the building ominousness. He contemplated raising his voice again, more carefully this time, but before he could even reach a decision, a sound like a small bomb going off somewhere close had them both recoiling out of fright.

“Fuck!” Minjoon spat when he recovered and instantly took off again, slipping into a side-street and dragging a still shocked Jimin behind him. Every single cell in Jimin’s body was screaming in terror as he watched another pillar of smoke rise towards the heavens, it’s base red with flames. “Can’t you move any fucking faster, we have to get there as quickly as we can!”

“G-get where?” Jimin squeaked, and if he’d paid attention to anything but the rising fires, he might’ve noticed the direction in which they were running, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t tear his eyes off the sight of bright flames reaching for the night sky, roaring as they chased away the stars. “W-where are we going, Minjoon?”

For the second time that night, Jimin realized too late that it was not a question he wanted answered. All of a sudden, the two of them emerged from the safety of the narrow alleys and out onto the main street, and Jimin felt his heart stop dead in his chest at the sight presented to him.

The entire harbor had been destroyed. The church tower was gone and the lighthouse had been levelled with the ground, dust and flames rising from the ruins to illuminate the darkness of the night. Several houses had been bombarded to pieces, cracked wood and debris lying scattered all across the street, and the air was thick with the scent of gunpowder, of burning timber, and, undoubtedly, death.

Jumin had never felt as weak as he did when his eyes found the first body. It was the man who owned the tavern, lying face down in the dirt, a pool of blood forming underneath his abdomen. He didn’t move, not an inch, but his eyes were open, staring unblinking into the ground. “Oh god,” Jimin breathed, his voice cracking pitifully, and he tried to look away, he turned his face away from the corpse, but all that served was to show him another, then a third, until all he could see was death.

In his terror, he turned his eyes to the sea for salvation, but all he saw was the silhouette of the vessel that had brought the tidal wave of death to their shores, the dreadful pirate ship.

He felt his knees fold under his weight, but Minjoon held him up, cursing under his breath as he dragged Jimin towards the devastated harbor, and Jimin was too caught up in his horror to realize, staring into the ground and wishing it could save him, that it could make it all go away. He couldn’t bear to watch what transpired around him, it was too terrible, he did not want to look, but then the young hunter raised his voice and called out, “Pirates!” and Jimin’s blood froze in his veins.

Slowly, very slowly, he raised his head, and somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered how
afraid a human being could be before it consumed their life and left them dead.

Surely, as he found himself standing before the invading pirates, he was on the cusp of that thin line, balancing on the verge of certain death.

They looked like monsters, every single one of them. Their bodies were rougher than any Jimin had ever seen in the village, tall and heavy with raw strength, their limbs covered in paint and ink and scars. Their hands carried weapons of all sorts, swords, daggers, cutlasses, axes, chains, pistols, and every single one of the blades were caked with blood, not a single clean surface remaining. Their faces were dreadful, portraying not a shred of mercy or empathy, only hunger, ravenous and insatiable, as if the destruction in their wake had done nothing to slake their need for death.

They were monsters, and they were all looking at him.

“Pirates!” Minjoon shouted again, jarring Jimin out of the prison of his crippling dread. “We have nothing of value to offer you here! This is a poor village on a poor island, with no treasure to speak of!”

“What are you **doing**, Minjoon?!” Jimin hissed, his voice like a whistle, and he tried to retreat, to stagger backwards and away from the crew of pirates, but the young hunter’s grip on his arm was iron. “We’re going to **die**, Minjoon, what have you done, you-”

“All we have are our lives,” Minjoon carried on, and his voice was cold as ice as he jerked his arm forward, tugging Jimin along with it and causing him to lose his balance and fall onto the ground, “so if what you seek is something precious, take the canary!”

Jimin crashed onto his side on the ground, hard, his shoulder and waist taking a painful impact against the rough surface, but he hardly even realized he’d fallen. His ears were ringing with the hunter’s words, blood rushing to his brain in an attempt to process them, to comprehend the words that couldn’t be true, that couldn’t have been real. Surely, he’d misheard. Surely, Minjoon hadn’t said what he thought he’d heard.

“The boy carries the powers of a Blessed Rune!” His words were like a gunshot in Jimin’s ears, a knife through his heart, a sword through his abdomen. “He’s more valuable than anything you’ll find in this village!” the hunter shouted, his voice trembling with his own fear. “T-take him and leave the rest of us be!”

Jimin couldn’t move. He couldn’t feel, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t even see, his vision blurring either from tears or an impending loss of sense. All he could do was lie there, his blood racing in his ears and rendering him deaf to Minjoon’s words, the words that discarded him as if he was nothing more than a piece of cargo to be used for negotiation. He felt like the ground beneath him was crumbling, splitting open to rob him of even the security of the earth.

“A Blessed Rune, you say?” The voice jerked him back to reality and his head snapped up, a quivering exhale finding its way past his lips as he found one of the pirates standing above him, leaning forward with his head inclined in a curious manner. The man was smiling, but there was little warmth to it, an almost sardonic curl of his lips. “Didn’t expect to find one of them out here,” he mused, his voice a deep rumble that seemed to reverberate through Jimin’s very bones, and the pirate offered him a sharp grin before straightening up and turning to the rest of the crew. “You reckon the captain could use a scrawny kid like this?”

“Look at the boy, Joon, he’s damn near pissin’ himself,” another one of them answered with a dry scoff, his voice thick with a foreign accent. “He’d shit himself the second he saw the cap’n.”
“Speaking from personal experience, are you, Xiao?” the first pirate quipped, earning himself a buzz of snickering from the others, and he was still smiling when he turned back to look at Jimin, who recoiled, bracing his hands against the ground to push himself up onto his knees so he could back away. “What’s your blessing, kid?”

Jimin parted his lips but nothing came out, not even his breath, his airways clogged with dread, his vocal cords rendered useless. His eyes darted from the pirate’s face to the bloodied twin swords at his waist, the red liquid still fresh and dripping from the steel surface, and the sight triggered a fresh wave of nausea in Jimin’s throat. When his eyes returned to the man’s face, his heart sank when he found a hint of impatience there, and he tried, he really tried to speak, but his voice was lost, his lips moving around nothing but air.

“You leave that boy be!”

Jimin turned his head so fast it hurt his neck, and the fear for his own life was promptly replaced with an almost painful sense of dread as he watched Jihyun limp her way towards them, holding a piece of debris, a stick of wood in her hands like a weapon. Dimly, Jimin noticed the mayor and another few villagers behind her, but they all froze the second their eyes landed on the pirates. “Jihyun,” he croaked, his voice barely above a whisper, “no, Jihyun, go away, please...!”

“You leave him be!” the old woman repeated shrilly and waved the stick in the direction of the pirate who was standing over Jimin, as if she couldn’t see the swords at his waist, the blades that could’ve easily cut through both her and her makeshift weapon. “You pirate scum have no business here! There is nothing for you here, least of all that boy, so back away and fuck off where you came from!”

“Jihyun, stop!” Jimin pleaded, gesturing wildly for her to not come any closer, to stay away, to run. Behind him, the pirates were laughing, and he realized the only reason they hadn’t killed the woman yet was because of the amusement they found in her behavior. “Please, Jihyun, go, d-don’t come any closer, I-”

“No no, let the hag say what’s on her mind,” one of the pirates barked, breaking out of the crowd and walking up to meet Jihyun halfway, an almost maniacal grin twisting his face. “Let’s hear it then, lady, tell us why we shouldn’t take your precious little boy.”

Even in the face of death, Choi Jihyun didn’t hesitate. “I just told you, boy,” she spat, her voice laced with venom, “or are you as deaf as you are foolish? There’s nothing for you here, scum, nothing your filthy hands are worth touching!” She jutted the end of her stick against the pirate’s chest, forcing him to take a step back. “You return to your ship and sail it away from here, and never return to these shores unless it’s in a casket, where your sorry arse belongs!”

Jimin wanted to cry.

While the laughter of the invaders escalated, the pirate’s grin twitched and curdled, and Jimin had never moved as fast in all his life as he did just then. He saw the man reach for his sword, and before he knew it, he had staggered to his feet and broken off into a run, his paralyzing fear all but forgotten. “Don’t!” he screamed as he watched the pirate raise his blade, and he threw himself in between the two with his arms raised, screwing his eyes shut and bracing himself for the pain to come, for his death.

It never came. There was no pain, no trace of steel on his skin, only the near deafening sound of metal meeting metal, the clash emitting a shrill ring that caused Jimin to recoil so violently he almost backed right into Jihyun and knocked her to the ground, his eyes flying open in alarm. “Wha-”
All air left his lungs at the sight of the newcomer, a tall, masked man with hair the color of the sun. He had parried the pirate’s sword with his own, stopping the blade barely three inches shy of Jimin’s face as easily as if the weight of the pirate’s strike was as light as paper, and in the shock that followed, the blonde man took his time to turn his face to send a brief glance at Jimin, whose heart sank upon the sight of his bruised cheek, the mark courtesy of Jimin’s instinctive strike back in the narrow alley.

The pirate who’d taken a swing at Jihyun was quick to retreat, his eyes wide as he stared at the man who’d interfered, nearly dropping his own sword in his hurry to lower it. “Fuck,” he hissed and backed away, bowing his head in apology, “I-I’m sorry, sir, I-”

“I’ve told you to stop waving that thing around so carelessly, my man,” the newcomer sing-songed, his voice unbelievably deep, every single syllable laced with amusement, and when he turned to fully face Jimin, he looked like he was smiling underneath the plain, black mask. “You’re the one who punched me, aren’t you? Back there.”

He gestured towards the eastern houses, quirking a curious brow when Jimin only gaped at him in response, utterly stunned. He didn’t seem to mind the silence he was met with and took his time to take in Jimin’s appearance, his gaze trailing down his front before returning to his face, and when Jimin still couldn’t produce a single sound, he turned to look at Minjoon, who’d been standing perfectly still ever since he’d shoved Jimin onto the ground before the pirates. “Who are you?” the blonde man asked of him. “His friend?”

“He’s scum, that’s what he is!” Jihyun barked shrilly, and the newcomer emitted an amused snort. Jimin was dimly aware of the fact that the rest of the pirates had gone very quiet. “I-I’m the son of this village’s mayor,” Minjoon declared, the stutter in his voice betraying his fear. “I, we, we offer you that boy as tribute for you to take a-as payment for leaving this village and its people unharmed.” He swallowed thickly, squirming under the man’s unblinking gaze. “H-he’s infused with the Rune of the Canary, he… there’s nothing of value in this town. He, he’s more precious than anything you could find here.”

The blonde man hummed at that, an outdrawn, oh, and he nodded to himself before turning back to Jimin, who instinctively positioned himself to better shield Jihyun. “That’d explain your reflexes from earlier,” he said and reached up to tap a finger against the bruise that had blossomed across his cheek. “Is that true, what that guy says? Are you,” he gestured vaguely at Jimin, “their, uh, tribute?”

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Jimin had no idea what to say, what he should say. The blonde man was asking him to confirm whether or not he’d just been offered up as sacrifice without warning, to agree with the fact that made him feel so empty, so alone in his terror, so betrayed and so utterly devastated he couldn’t even remember what happiness meant. He wanted to scream, the howling in his chest so overwhelming he felt like he could die.

“He is not!” He startled when Jihyun shoved him out of the way, curling her fingers around his arm to pull him in behind her. “You will not lay a finger on him,” she hissed and pointed a quivering digit at the blonde man, who only inclined his head in response. “He’s not some piece of meat to be thrown to the pack of wolves when they come barking! If you want someone, take him!” She sent a scathing glare at Minjoon, who flinched as if the words had struck him. “Like he said, he’s the mayor’s son! Aren’t those the ones you pirates capture, children of royal blood to demand ransom for?”

“Well, sure,” the man said, and there was that amused undertone to his voice again, “when there’s actually a ransom to be demanded. Didn’t you just say there’s nothing of value on this entire island?”
“That’s—”

“Yes, that’s right!” The prospect of being taken instead of Jimin had seemingly frightened Minjoon within an inch of his life; he looked positively maniacal as he bulled over Jihyun’s words. “All we have are farms, and spring has only just arrived,” he said loudly and threw a hand out to the side, gesturing in the general direction of the tilled lands beyond the village’s northern border. “We’ve almost nothing left of our winter stock, and the new crops haven’t sprouted yet! This island is poor! All we have is the canary!”

Jimin had never felt a pain like this. Not when he’d broken his arm, not when he’d cut his foot on a rock in the creek, not even when he’d accidentally eaten a poisonous berry and spent three weeks in his bed, teetering on the verge of death. No, this pain came from the depths of his heart, all-consuming and inescapable, and all he could do to hold onto his sanity was to cling to Jihyun, his Jihyun, the old lady who was waving a wooden stick in the face of a pirate and his crew.

“This is taking too long, Tae.” It was the pirate who’d first addressed Jimin who spoke, impatience now clear in his voice. “The captain will be wondering where we are,” he said and flicked his head towards the shore, where the grand ship was waiting. “We have our orders, but it’s up to you. Either take the boy, or kill him and raze the village.”

The blonde man nodded before turning his eyes on Jimin, and he knew, he knew what his decision was, he could see it on his face as if someone had carved the answer into his skin.

He had to go.

“Don’t you dare,” Jihyun started, but Jimin reached around her and took hold of her wrist before she could raise the stick on the pirate. “Jimin, what-”

“It’s okay, Jihyun,” he said, and whereas his entire body felt numb, every movement costing more than what he felt he could give, his voice was steady, albeit monotonous and void of emotions. “It’s okay, it’s alright, I’ll… I’ll go with them.”

He had to go. For her sake, he had to go.

Jimin stepped around her and put his hands on her delicate shoulders, giving his all to keep his arms from trembling. “It’ll be okay,” he told her. “I’ll go, and you… you and your son and your grandchildren will be alright. You’ll live.”

“Birdie, no,” she breathed, her eyes wide in fear, and when she reached up to cup his cheek, he couldn’t help it, he couldn’t keep it in. He choked on a sob and squeezed his eyes shut, biting his lip hard enough to draw blood. It hurt, he was in so much pain, but there was nothing else he could do. “Birdie, you can’t do this, you can’t go with them, you-”

“I will,” he interrupted, shaking his head to ward off her words. “I’ll go with them, and you, you’ll live and you’ll be fine, and you’ll look after my mom, right? You’ll watch over her grave a-nd make sure it’s okay, and…” He forced himself to lean away from her touch. “You’ll live,” he whispered and smiled, and it must’ve looked as heartbroken as he felt, for Jihyun was crying now, tears trailing heavy down her aged cheeks. “As long as I know you’ll live, I’ll go wherever they want me to.”

It took all the strength he possessed to take his hands off her shoulders and turn around, swallowing his devastated sorrow as he faced the blonde pirate. “I’ll come with you,” he said, pushing through the crack in his voice. “I’ll come as this village’s tribute, as long as you leave the rest of it unharmed.”
The man nodded promptly at that, his eyes crinkling in the corners as if he was smiling underneath the mask. “Perfect,” he crooned and turned to his fellow pirates. “You heard him, we’re done here! Back to the ship! Joonie, we’re missing five of ours, go find them and drag their ass back to the Agust.”

He glanced back at Jimin and looked like he was about to say something, but the sound of a relieved chuckle pulled his attention to Minjoon. The young hunter was smiling where he stood, looking so immensely satisfied he could barely stand, and Jimin felt hatred rear its head inside his chest. Before he could do more than glare at the man, however, the blonde pirate took three swift steps towards Minjoon, and without a word, he drove the tip of his sword right into the hunter’s foot.

The scream that rose from Minjoon’s throat was deafening, terrible and anguished, but all Jimin did was look, unflinching, at the man who had thrown him away in favor of his own life. He watched the young hunter’s spine curl in pain, he watched the muscles of his arms and neck strain prominently against his skin as he heaved, he watched blood seep from his foot onto the ground, and he felt nothing.

“You know,” the blonde pirate said almost casually as he twisted the sword slowly, as if he couldn’t hear the pained howl Minjoon emitted, “you seem like a real fuckin’ pain in the ass, mister.” He emitted a theatrical little sigh and leaned more of his weight onto the hilt of his sword, his eyes studying the hunter’s form as the blade sank deeper. “I think I’m doing everyone here a favor by taking you down a peg or two.” He lowered his head until he could speak directly into Minjoon’s ear. “If your tribute hadn’t already accepted, I’d tear your guts out your ass and choke you with ‘em.”

A moment of absolute silence followed his words, and then, with an almost childlike chuckle, the pirate straightened up and yanked the sword out of Minjoon’s foot, sweeping it in a sharp arch to the side to send the hunter’s blood splattering against the ground. “Alright, then,” he chimed and grabbed Jimin’s arm, his grip much gentler than expected as he coaxed him into walking. “Time to go, friend! We gotta go see the captain and ask what to do with you.”

“Birdie, Jimin, don’t, don’t do this,” Jihyun pleaded, tears streaming down her face as she tried to grab ahold of his hand, her fingers slipping on the sleeve of his shirt. “You don’t know what they’ll do with you, you can’t!”

“No,” Jimin said and gently pried her fingers away from his arm, “but I know what they’ll do with you if I don’t go.” He squeezed her hands tightly, taking a moment to memorize how they felt in his, the aged limbs, wrinkly and bony, the hands he’d never get to hold again. “Live,” he whispered when he finally had to let her go. “Live, Jihyun, and be happy.”

With that, he dropped her hands and turned around, shutting his ears to the sobs of his friend as he walked away, swallowing the cries his own heart wanted to give voice to. He let himself be led towards the harbor by the blonde pirate, keeping his eyes trained on the ship so that he wouldn’t have to see the bodies that littered the edges of the main street, faces he would recognize if he looked.

“I’ll tell you right now that the captain’s got a really foul temper,” the blonde pirate said almost cheerfully as he tugged Jimin towards the shore, where three large dinghies were floating peacefully on the water. “He’s not bad, really, but he tends to act before he thinks when he’s angry, so try your best to, well, to not make him angry.”

Jimin gave a numb nod, not quite sure what it was he was agreeing to; the pirate’s words were oddly distant in his ears, as if he was speaking through a veil of water. As he was sat down in one of the dinghies and instantly surrounded by half of the group who’d attacked his village, all he could think
about were the stories he’d heard during his life, about the ruthlessness of pirates, their complete lack of empathy, how they wouldn’t hesitate to do just about anything that came to their minds. If they wanted to burn Jimin alive, they would do it. If they wanted to peel the skin off his flesh, they would do it.

*I’m going to die,* Jimin realized as the rowboat left the shore and started its trek towards the grand ship. *There will be nothing but pain for me here, and eventually, death.*

“If you’re gonna throw up, do it over the edge.” The blonde pirate’s voice startled him out of his horrible thoughts, and when he looked up, he saw the man had removed his mask. He was young, probably not much older than Jimin, with sun-kissed skin and sharp features, and his lips were stretched in amusement, a rectangular grin that displayed every last one of his white teeth. “No one’s going to wanna clean your vomit from their clothes,” he crooned, chuckling as if there was something inherently funny about the thought. “I think Xiao would throw you into the sea if he had to wash his shirt again.”

While the other pirates chortled at the joke, Jimin silently thought he’d be better off at the bottom of the sea than sitting squeezed in between seven heartless murderers.

By the time they reached the ship, Jimin’s terror was back in full force, clawing at his chest as if it were alive inside of him. The vessel was enormous, the dark wood of its hull glistening from the ocean spray, and open gunports flanked the sides of the sturdy ladder leading up to the deck, displaying the iron mouths of the cannons that had fired and destroyed most of the village’s harbor.

“After me,” the blonde pirate said and flicked his hand in a beckoning motion before making his way up the ladder, climbing expertly as if he’d done it a hundred times. Which he probably had, and then some. Jimin followed as quickly as he could, his fingers trembling as he gripped the slick rungs of the ladder, concentrating on not falling, and much too soon, he reached the deck and climbed up onto the rail.

The ship was full of life, with loud voices sounding left and right, with pirates moving back and forth across the deck to prepare for their departure. There was laughter, singing, irked shouts for someone to get out of the way. Orders were being called out from somewhere around the mizzen mast, where the sails were being released by two deckhands balancing on the topgallant.

“Aafter me,” the blonde pirate said and flicked his hand in a beckoning motion before making his way up the ladder, climbing expertly as if he’d done it a hundred times. Which he probably had, and then some. Jimin followed as quickly as he could, his fingers trembling as he gripped the slick rungs of the ladder, concentrating on not falling, and much too soon, he reached the deck and climbed up onto the rail.

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“Yoongi,” the blonde pirate called and took Jimin’s arm, effectively tearing his attention away from a slender man who was hanging upside down from the shrouds some ten meters up in the air, holding a lantern above his head as he studied the underside of the crow’s nest. Jimin followed the pirate’s gaze, his eyes landing on two men standing by the quarterdeck rail, one of them familiar from the village, the other a stranger, his back to Jimin as he conversed with his crewman. “I brought you something real special!”

The captain turned to look at them, and Jimin’s heart sank like a stone.

Even in the black of night, he recognized the man with ease, having seen his face countless of times over the past year and a half, those hauntingly dark eyes that had stared back at him from the detailed sketch of the bounty poster nailed to the wall of Jeju Village’s inn. He was dressed all in black, befitting of his name, a sturdy vest over a loose poet’s shirt, with a long and heavy coat hanging off his shoulders, its hood pulled up over his jet-black hair to shield his face, as if even the faint moonlight was too strong for his eyes.

“This is the part where I’d introduce you to my captain,” the blonde pirate said with a cheerful lilt to his voice as he studied Jimin’s expression. “But I’m gonna venture a guess and say you already know who he is.”
Of course Jimin knew who he was. How could he not? There wasn’t a single human being in the east who hadn’t heard his name, who hadn’t seen the face of the man who had single handedly taken on half a fleet of mariner warships and left it sinking in the sea, the man who’d destroyed an entire naval base to free one of his captured crewmen. The man who had killed the eastern emperor’s eldest son when he had been foolish enough to try his luck in hunting down the infamous captain.

“Min Yoongi,” Jimin breathed, his voice barely audible even to his own ears, but the pirate captain seemed to have heard him just fine, his dark eyes falling to meet Jimin’s. “The Black Fox of the East.”

Chapter End Notes

everybody say HELL YASSS IT’S YOONGI TIME. WOOOOO!! Also, poor Jimin. /cries

This story is like my drug, holy hell. 7.5k in a day, man alive, I’m FLYING.

Also.

OUTTA MY WAY TAEHYUNG I’LL BEAT THAT FUCKER MINJOON UP LIKE YOU WON’T BELIEVE I’LL BREAK HIS BLOODY FOOT UP HIS ASS YOU JUST WATCH ME.

/clears throat. Right. Where were we?

Oh! Right! Ahh, I wanna say thanks for the incredible feedback on chapter 1! The intro is always the scariest, since you gotta be able to pull people in for the long run, so I’m really happy to hear you guys enjoyed it! (*˘'*˘*) ˘.:.:*
Min Yoongi’s laughter was as cold as the night, utterly devoid of glee. “Tough words for a helpless boy such as yourself,” he said dryly, and he inclined his head as his eyes fell to Jimin’s cheeks. “Look at you, you’re crying.” He scoffed at the fact, his grip never wavering. “Does your face hurt? Or are you so afraid you-”

“I’m not,” Jimin protested even as he felt the wetness spill from his eyes. “I’m not crying.” It was an obvious lie; his face ached with so much pain he felt he might faint, he was scared out of his wits, and he had been torn away from his home, a home he would never see again, a home that had turned its back on him. He was justified in his tears, but he would never tell the captain that, never for as long as he lived. “It’s the sea,” he said instead, fighting against the quiver of his voice, and his gaze never strayed from Yoongi’s. “The sea is overflowing.”

Chapter Notes

Poor Jimin pt. 2

Also, um, before this chapter starts, I feel like I need to give you an extra heads up; please remember that Yoongi is a pirate captain, okay? A PIRATE. He, uh, he’s not gonna be the nicest of pies in the beginning, alright? Like, I kinda got the feeling a lot of you are expecting him to be more tsundere than anything else, which he will be, trust me, eventually he’ll mellow out and be cute, you know, the Yoongi we all know and love! But not from the start, nope, uh, that’s what the Slow Burn tag is there for, so, uh… just… be prepared, okay? Okay.

Right. Okay! Music!
The Man From U.N.C.L.E. - The Red Mist (basically this one on repeat. All day every day.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Never in his life had Jimin felt as small as he did under the pirate captain’s gaze. The intensity of it made his airways close and his heart stop beating in his chest; it was as if the man’s hand had closed around his throat and squeezed, hard, slowly forcing the life out of him until it was all he could do to pray, to beg to be spared.

When the pirate finally looked away, it was as if Jimin had emerged from the sea after nearly drowning. He quickly cast his eyes down to the deck and drew a quivering breath, his blood rushing in his ears and making him feel faint. He tried to get ahold of himself, tried to calm down, but all the dread, the terror, the fear that he’d felt during the night was accumulating inside of him now, and when the captain spoke, Jimin flinched, his right hand fisting the side of the blonde pirate’s shirt next
“Who’s this?” Min Yoongi asked, his voice a low and hoarse drawl, laced with bored disdain.

“Chim, I think his name is,” the blonde man said cheerfully, and Jimin numbly wondered how he could sound so utterly content with the situation when it was all Jimin could do to simply breathe. “He’s the newest addition to our family.”

Jimin’s head snapped up at the same time as the captain emitted a dubious scoff. “I thought I told you you can’t adopt every single fucking rat you find in the gutter, Taehyung,” he said with a cool glare in Jimin’s direction. “This one will be dead within a week.” Had Jimin been any less frightened, he might’ve taken offense from the captain’s words, but when Min Yoongi’s eyes narrowed in something akin to anger, he shrank into himself, the sensation of drowning rising fast within him once more. “Is this the reason why you’re coming back empty-handed? You took him instead of what I actually asked you to bring?”

“I did,” the blonde man, Taehyung, said, not a shred of worry in his voice.

“Unbelievable,” the captain spat and turned to face the pirate he’d been conversing with before Jimin’s arrival. “Namjoon, why the fuck didn’t you stop him?”

The man shrugged and spread his arms in an expunging gesture. “I’m not in a position to stop Tae from doing what he pleases, captain,” he said almost casually.

“As first mate, you outrank him.”

Namjoon actually laughed at that, something Jimin perceived as teetering on insanity; the captain’s mood seemed to be descending towards rage with alarming speed, and the others were willingly provoking him to help him along the way. “Last time I tried to pull rank on your brother, you told me you’d shove a cannon up my arse, Yoongi,” the first mate chortled, though he sobered up rather quickly, his eyes momentarily shifting to Jimin. “Whatever the case is, captain, the boy was sacrificed by his village. They threw him before my feet and begged us to take him in exchange for their village’s safety.”

If Jimin hadn’t been looking at the captain so intently, he would’ve missed the flash of tension on his face, a mere ghost of apprehension, but when Yoongi blinked, his gaze was as dark as before. “That’s none of my business,” he said harshly. “What the fuck am I supposed to do with this boy? You plan on substituting him for the supplies you were supposed to get?” He flicked his head at Taehyung, the corners of his lips twitching into a wry smirk. “Never took you for the cannibal type, Taehyung.”

It was a jest, Jimin knew, but he’d heard of people who feasted on human flesh, and the thought alone prompted him to quickly let go of Taehyung’s shirt, eyes widening in alarm. The blonde man only laughed and dismissively shook his head. “He’s too cute to be eaten, but that’s not the point. Look, he’s infused with a Blessed Rune,” he explained and lightly patted Jimin’s shoulder. “He can be useful.”

That seemed to pique the captain’s interest, his brows arching in surprise as he turned to look at Jimin once again, and if Jimin had found his attention frightening, it was nothing compared to when Yoongi addressed him directly. “You have a blessing?” the captain asked, a subtle hint of curiosity hiding behind the roughness of his voice. “Which one?”

He parted his lips, but all that left them was a trembling exhale. He knew he had to answer, and it had been such a simple question, but under Min Yoongi’s gaze, he felt like he was drowning, with
no air to fill his lungs, nothing to help him find his voice and explain. The Canary, he cried inwardly, but the words wouldn’t leave his head. All he could do was look, his eyes trailing over every inch of the captain’s face, registering his narrow, fox-like eyes, his straight nose and smooth, pale skin.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered if this was the last face he’d ever see in this world.

Upon his lack of response, the pirate’s expression quickly morphed into one of frustrated impatience and he pushed away from the quarterdeck rail to stride over to Jimin, who instinctively tried to take a step back, but Taehyung’s hand on his back held him in place. “I asked you a question,” Yoongi barked, his voice hard. He came to a halt barely a meter away from Jimin, who was too busy clinging to his sanity to notice they were of almost equal height. “Can’t you even fucking talk?”

The results were the same, with Jimin managing nothing more than to stare at him with wide eyes, and he clicked his teeth in contempt before turning to Taehyung. “So instead of food and water, you brought us a mute coward,” he stated coldly, sounding utterly discontented, as if he’d never been so disappointed. “Fuck’s sake, Tae, of all the useless—”

“I’m not mute.”

Jemin wasn’t quite sure what it was that suddenly made his fright retreat to make way for his anger; perhaps it was the look in the captain’s eyes or the tone of his voice, the same one he’d heard so many times from the lips of those who had discarded him without hesitation not ten minutes prior. Whatever it was, it surprised even himself, even more so when he parted his lips and found his voice flat with contempt. “But like you said,” he hissed, lips curling down into a scowl when the captain turned his eyes back to him, “it’s none of your business, bastard.”

He never even saw the strike coming. Barely a fraction of a second had time to pass after the curse left his lips before the back of the captain’s left hand connected with his cheek with a devastating crack, the impact knocking the air out of his lungs and filling his vision with black spots. It felt like he’d been hit with a bludgeon, as if his head had been split open, and the burst of pain elicited a sharp exclaim from his throat.

Jemin probably would’ve crashed into the ship’s rail if the captain hadn’t grabbed hold of his chin before he could stagger off balance, roughly pulling him back upright until their faces were merely inches apart. From the rigid coldness of his fingers, Jimin numbly realized the captain’s left hand was made out of hard metal, an artificial limb.

“You forget your place, boy,” Yoongi growled, his fingers digging into Jimin’s jaw until he feared it might break under the unyielding pressure. “Right now, your life is dancing in the palm of my hand, so unless you’re eager to have me end it, you’d better fucking behave.”

Jemin’s face was throbbing, his heart thundering loudly in his left ear, but even though he could hear Taehyung’s agitated sigh, even though he knew the wise thing to do would be to cast down his eyes in submission, he didn’t. Instead, he reached up and tried to pry the captain’s metallic hand away from his face, his short fingers hardly a challenge for the ones made out of steel and tin. “Go right ahead,” he gritted out, his voice cracking pitifully. “Maybe I’d rather die than have you be in control of my life!”

Min Yoongi’s laughter was as cold as the night, utterly devoid of glee. “Tough words for a helpless boy such as yourself,” he said dryly, and he inclined his head as his eyes fell to Jimin’s cheeks. “Look at you, you’re crying.” He scoffed at the fact, his grip never wavering. “Does your face hurt? Or are you so afraid you—”

“I’m not,” Jimin protested even as he felt the wetness spill from his eyes. “I’m not crying.” It was an
obvious lie; his face ached with so much pain he felt he might faint, he was scared out of his wits, and he had been torn away from his home, a home he would never see again, a home that had turned its back on him. He was justified in his tears, but he would never tell the captain that, never for as long as he lived. “It’s the sea,” he said instead, fighting against the quiver of his voice, and his gaze never strayed from Yoongi’s. “The sea is overflowing.”

What followed was a series of muffled snickering that alerted Jimin to the presence of probably the entire rest of the crew. Their argument had escalated, and when one side of the clash was the captain of the ship, his men had gathered to observe. Apparently, they found something amusing in Jimin’s words, or perhaps it was his denial of the obvious fact that he was crying, but for the moment, he didn’t care. He didn’t care if they were laughing at him, if they found him pathetic. He paid them no heed, instead clinging tightly to the anger that held his fear at bay, conveying as much of it as he could as he glared at the pirate captain.

Whereas his crew laughed, however, Yoongi remained silent, his eyes narrowed as they trailed over Jimin’s face, his aggravated scowl having smoothened out into a pensive frown. For several seconds, he only observed him, and while Jimin could see the gears working behind the captain’s calculating gaze, the meaning behind his expression was unreadable.

Finally, he turned away, his hand falling from Jimin’s face and leaving his jaw numb. “Tell me at least one of you idiots knows what he is,” Yoongi said snappishly, looking between Namjoon and Taehyung.

It was the former who answered, a note of hesitation to his voice. “The, uh, the mayor’s son said it was the Rune of the Canary,” he said slowly, keeping his eyes firmly on a point right above his captain’s head.

For a moment, Yoongi just stared at him, lips parted in skeptical disbelief, and then he raised his hand to his face and pinched the bridge of his nose, hissing in poorly restrained irritation. “The Canary,” he repeated slowly, as if he couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. “You brought me a songbird.”

“I did,” Taehyung said instantly, lacking the first mate’s apprehension. “You’ve been complaining about our lack of a proper musician aboard the Agust, so this is a perfect turn of events!” He all but beamed at Jimin. “He’ll fit right in!”

The last statement was so ridiculous it almost elicited a dubious snort from Jimin, and one look at Yoongi was more than enough to realize the captain shared his sentiment on this matter. He fixated Jimin with a cool glare, and it took more effort than Jimin wanted to admit to not recoil under the harshness of it. “And what do you say to that?” he asked, his voice equally cold. “Will you sing?”

“Never.” The word fell from Jimin’s lips before he could think twice, and half of him cursed his own recklessness as he watched anger seep back into the captain’s expression. The other half, however, the half that consisted of the throbbing pain in his cheek, reared its head in challenge, refusing to cower. “I won’t sing,” he bit out scathingly. “Never for you.”

Yoongi’s brow twitched and he shifted as if to strike Jimin again, this time with his right hand, but Taehyung stepped in between them before he could do more than tense his muscles, placing one hand on the captain’s shoulder. “He’ll come around,” the blonde man said, his voice almost alarmingly convincing. “Just give him some time. He’s just been thrown out of his home, you gotta go easy on him.” When Yoongi didn’t budge, not even to avert his outraged glare from Jimin’s face, Taehyung sighed softly and leaned forward, his voice taking on an almost childlike lilt as he put himself beneath the captain’s height. “Come on, brother,” he whined, and Yoongi’s brow twitched again. “Let me keep him, pretty, pretty please.”
From the corner of his eye, Jimin could see Namjoon’s smug grin, displaying a set of deep dimples in his cheeks as he shook his head, and for a moment, he wondered what on earth was so amusing.

Then his attention was jerked back to the two pirates in front of him when the captain emitted a frustrated sound and took a step back, looking so utterly agitated as he reached up to run a hand through his hair, pushing off the hood of his coat in the process. “Fuck,” he spat, his voice austere from fury. “For fuck’s sake, fine! Keep him if you bloody have to, but he’ll sleep in the brig!” He glared at Jimin, and there was something so utterly accusatory in his eyes, as if he was the cause of all evil in this world, he and no one else. “A songbird belongs in a cage.”

His venomous words sent a thrill of anger up Jimin’s spine, but before he could do more than curl his lips down into a scowl, the captain rounded on Taehyung. “He’ll be your responsibility,” he snapped and jabbed a finger into his chest. “Not mine, not Namjoon’s, not Jeongguk’s or anyone else’s. You’ll teach him how to survive on this ship, you’ll put him to work, and if he doesn’t pull his weight or gets in the way, I’ll personally throw him into the sea!”

Taehyung emitted a cheery sound at that, as if he hadn’t heard the threat on Jimin’s life. “Roger that, sir!” he chirped, smacking his right hand to his forehead in a gesture of salute before turning to beam at Jimin, the rectangular grin out in full force. “You hear that, Chim? You get to stay.”

“The rest of you, raise the anchor!” Yoongi shouted as he stalked away from the two, his crew quick to get out of his way as he stormed towards the aft of the ship. “We’re not spending another fucking second on these forsaken shores! Get us out to open sea!”

A resounding, “Aye, captain!” rose from his crew before they all set in motion again, moving left and right, some climbing up the shrouds while others steered their steps towards the fore to deal with the anchor. Namjoon heaved a sigh and sent a pointed look at Taehyung before following after Yoongi, calling out orders as he went.

“Come on,” the blonde pirate said and took Jimin by the arm to lead him away from the bustle up on deck. He led him away from the quarterdeck and to the main mast, where he kicked open the companionway and motioned for Jimin to climb down first. “The brig’s this way. Sorry you have to sleep there. I didn’t expect Yoongi to be in such a bad mood today, although I did kinda go against his orders by bringing you here. Still, it might be for the best, you know? It’s sort of like a prison, yeah, but it’ll keep you safe as well! Since you’re my responsibility, I’ll be holding the key, so no one will be able to disturb you. Not that they would, everyone’s so nice on this ship, but they get drunk a lot, so… well, you never know.”

Jimin listened to him ramble all the way to his cell, finding himself incapable of responding or even interrupting Taehyung’s flow of sentences. They passed a long row of bunks and climbed down another set of ladders, walked past what looked like a storage space, and by the time they reached the brig, Jimin’s head was throbbing painfully, both from the dark bruise that’d had time to blossom across his cheek, but also from what he could only identify as a migraine, the toll of the night’s events finally catching up with his body.

“Here we go.” Taehyung plucked a chain of heavy keys from the wall outside the door before pushing it open, and Jimin swallowed thickly at the sight of the cells, sturdy bars of iron rising from the floor and all the way to the ceiling, leaving no room for escape. “I have to go help with casting off,” Taehyung said as he unlocked the cell door and held it open for Jimin, still smiling, “but I’ll come back as soon as I can. I’ll bring something for you to sleep on, and I’ll try to get Hoseok to come look at your cheek. And your hand.”

Jimin had almost forgotten about the cut on the back of his hand, the one he’d sustained when deflecting Taehyung’s sword back in the village, but now that the blonde pirate brought it up, the
wound added its voice to the already dull symphony of pain in his body. “Okay,” was all he said as he took a seat on the floor inside his cell, his jaw aching.

“Hoseok’s the ship doctor,” Taehyung explained softly, taking care to close the cell door quietly, as if to spare Jimin’s headache any further disturbances. “He’s got herbs and salves that’ll make you feel better in a heartbeat, so just hang in there for a little bit longer, alright, Chim?”

Despite the fact that his face hurt every time he moved his jaw even a fraction, Jimin looked up and mumbled, “Jimin. My name’s not Chim, it’s Jimin.”

Taehyung blinked and made a noise of understanding. “Oh, okay, that’s what that old lady called you,” he mused, nodding to himself before offering Jimin another blinding smile. “I think I’m gonna keep calling you Chim, though, if I can. It’s such a cute name, so it suits you.”

With that, he sauntered off, shoving the cell keys into the pocket of his trousers on the way out. The very second the door closed behind him, Jimin closed his eyes, curled into himself, and broke, tears bursting from his eyes as every single ounce of anguish he’d felt over the course of the night came crashing over him.

Everything hurt. His head, his face, his hand, but worst was the pain in his chest. In the mere spawn of an hour, he’d lost everything, his home, his friend, his freedom, even the control of his own life. He’d been thrown away like a rag, only to be picked up and treated worse, and now he felt like the earth had been stolen from underneath his feet, as if he was on the verge of an endless fall.

*I’m going to die*, a voice in his head screamed, and he felt his sanity cracking.

His airways constricted and he couldn’t breathe, panic flooding his veins and dulling his senses to everything that wasn’t inside of him. All he could do was feel, feel the horror in his chest, the sorrow in his heart, the pain in his head. His muscles were going taut, tightening to the point it almost hurt, until he was certain he’d rupture a vein. His body heaved and he choked on his breath, and when he fell onto his side on the rough floor, he didn’t even notice.

Jimin had no idea how much time had passed when he suddenly felt a hand on his back, rubbing firm, soothing circles into his spine. “Breathe,” a voice told him calmly, “take a deep breath for me, I know you can do it.”

A part of him wanted to reject it and pull away, to refuse the offered help, because he knew the only people on this ship were pirates, the same pirates who had caused his state to begin with. However, more than that, he wanted the pain to go away, he wanted the ache to stop, and so he clung to that voice with all his might, gasping breathlessly as he attempted to fill his lungs with air.

“What’s wrong with him?”

Jimin vaguely recognized the voice, but the first one spoke up again before he could place it. “The hell do you think, dumbass?” it said, just as calm as before. “He’s having a panic attack.” He felt someone’s body shift closer to his to provide him with warmth, with a sense of security. “Breathe for me, Jimin, just like that, in and out. You’re doing so well, you hear me? Really well, just follow my lead.”

He found himself nodding frantically, a whimper spilling past his lips when he finally succeeded, drawing a trembling inhale. Instantaneously, the chaos in his mind eased up, and while it was by just a fraction, the clarity of it spurred him on to do it again, focusing all of his effort on breathing.
“That’s it, you’re coming back now.” The voice never stopped encouraging him and the hand kept rubbing circles into his back, and slowly, he found himself beginning to calm down. The tautness of his muscles eased and he stopped shaking, the distorted roaring sound in his ears fading until he finally regained his awareness of his surroundings.

“How do you think you can sit up?”

Jimin blinked away the blur from his eyes, only now realizing how wet with tears his face was. He felt faint and groggy even as he lay on the floor, but he made himself follow the sound of the voice and found a man kneeling next to him, tall and gangly, and below a fringe of cocoa-colored hair, his brows were arched in expectation as he smiled almost kindly down at Jimin. “Come on, you’ll feel better once you sit up,” he said, and when Jimin offered him a slow nod, the man helped him sit up, his hands on Jimin’s shoulders to guide him to lean his back against the iron bars of his cell.

Jimin exhaled slowly and allowed himself to relax, his eyes momentarily sliding shut as he attempted to regain his thoughts and make sense out of the situation. In his panic, he had blacked out completely, losing track of both time and of his surroundings; he hadn’t even realized the ship had departed, but now he felt the steady rise and fall of the vessel as it rode the ocean waves, and his nostrils caught the strong scent of salt and spray.

“How are you okay, Chims?”

He cracked his eyes open and instantly recoiled, a yelp leaving his lips before he could stop himself. Tae-hyung’s face was mere inches away from his own, his eyes wide with concern, but he smiled upon seeing Jimin’s reaction, as if he was pleased he had managed to startle him. “I think he’s fine now,” the pirate chirped and scooted away, plopping down onto the floor not far from Jimin. “But his cheek’s really swollen.”

“Of course it’s swollen,” the stranger said with a huff, pursing his lips as he studied the left side of Jimin’s face. “Yoongi really didn’t hold back at all, did he?” He shook his head in discontent before straightening up and placing a hand to his chest. “My name’s Hoseok,” he told Jimin, the smile returning to his lips. “I’m Agust’s surgeon, or doctor, or whatever you want to call it.” He moved his hand towards Jimin’s face, but left it hovering a few inches away. “Can I?”

Jimin’s eyes went from the man’s hand to his face, searching for a sign of hostility, but no matter how hard he stared, he found no reason to refuse. Slowly, he nodded, though he didn’t quite manage to stop himself from tensing when the doctor gently grabbed his chin and tilted his head to the side.

“You’re gonna be purple for at least ten days,” Hoseok said instantly, his eyes narrowing as he studied the sizable bruise, “and yellow for another ten. There’s no immediate sign of a fracture, but it can be hard to tell when it comes to the cheekbone. How’s your eyesight, can you see properly out of your left eye?” Jimin nodded and the man seemed content. “Can you move your jaw?”

“Yes,” Jimin said, wincing as he spoke. “But it hurts.”

The doctor snorted at that, but not unkindly. “I should think so,” he said and released his chin to lean back on his heels and reach for a satchel he’d placed next to the cell door. “Yoongi doesn’t look like it, but he carries a shitload of strength in his punches.”

The mention of the captain made Jimin’s lips curl down into a scowl, his brows knitting in anger, and Hoseok must’ve noticed, for his voice was much gentler when he took his seat in front of him again, holding a glass phial in his hands. “I know it’s hard to believe and definitely not what you want to hear right now,” he said slowly, “but Yoongi isn’t a bad man.”
Whatever Jimin had expected the doctor to say, it certainly wasn’t *that*. His eyes widened and he fixated Hoseok with an incredulous stare, so utterly caught off guard he barely even felt it when the doctor began applying a cool ointment to his cheek, his touches featherlight and meticulous. “Not a bad man,” Jimin repeated dubiously, his voice a sharp hiss. “He ordered an attack on my village. He backhanded me, with an *artificial hand*, mind you. I can’t even feel the left side of my face. And he put me in the brig, saying this is where I belong.”

“Considering the apparent state of your face, I think you should be thankful for a lack of sensation,” Hoseok countered, grinning at his own jest even as Jimin continued to stare at him as if he were mad. “Anyway. Yes, he did strike you, but I hear you also called him a bastard, so you had it coming.”

“Wha-” Jimin couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Are you trying to tell me you believe his actions were *justified*?” he asked shrilly, speaking through gritted teeth.

Hoseok sighed at that and shook his head, as calm as ever even under Jimin’s near accusatory glare. “No,” he said, “of course they weren’t. He shouldn’t have hit you, *but,*” he raised his voice on the word as if he could sense Jimin had been about to say something, “you shouldn’t have said what you did. You don’t seem to realize the position you’re in. This is a pirate ship. Yoongi is a pirate captain. Now, I don’t know how much experience you have in dealing with pirates, but if it was any other man, they would’ve reached for their sword or gun rather than their fist.” He leaned back and tapped the mouth of the phial against Jimin’s nose in an almost playful manner. “You’re alive only because of the captain’s kindness.”

“Kindness,” Jimin repeated stiffly and turned to Taehyung in hopes of getting a more sensible explanation from him, but the blonde pirate merely nodded enthusiastically, smiling his rectangular smile. “Is that supposed to make me feel at ease?”

The doctor snorted, the sound just shy of gleeful. “Yes, actually, it is,” he mused and produced a wad of cotton and a linen bandage from his satchel. “Your cheek may be hurting and you may be sleeping in the brig, but you get to live another day in this world.” He quirked a neat brow. “Not to mention you punched Taehyung in the eye earlier. The captain’s younger brother.”

His words prompted a sting of guilt in the back of Jimin’s head and he sent a quick glance at the blonde pirate, who only laughed, as if he couldn’t feel the dark bruise surrounding his eye. “I’m sure it was in self-defence,” Hoseok continued, “but you still did it, so… consider the three of you even.”

“Even. Right,” Jimin said, not convinced in the slightest, and it was at Taehyung he directed his frustration. “Apart from the fact that you and your crew killed my friends.”

The pirate looked absolutely unperturbed. “Did we?” he hummed with a thoughtful smile, as if he couldn’t remember ever doing such a thing. “If you’re talking about those villagers, they weren’t really your friends, were they? I mean, they willingly offered you in return for their own arses.” He pursed his lips, the first hint of annoyance seeping into his face. “Honestly, I would’ve wanted to open that one guy from collar to balls, but you’d already agreed to come, so…” He rolled his shoulders in a shrug, taking a second of two to think, and then he grinned again. “That old lady was the only one who stood up for you,” he said and sat up straight, teetering on exhilaration. “She was really amazing, wasn’t she? She didn’t seem scared at all, she even poked Hisashi in the chest with a stick.”

Hoseok paused his ministrations with Jimin’s hand to emit a cheery cackle. “Shit, and he’s still seething about that, by the way,” he chortled with a bright grin. “Especially since you stopped him and made him *apologize* in front of that woman.”

“I didn’t *make* him do anything,” Taehyung protested, although he didn’t seem too agitated about the
possibility. “He did that all on his own. It’s not my fault he thinks I’m frightening.”

“Right, because who in their right mind would ever think the quartermaster is frightening?” the doctor asked rhetorically and shook his head before returning to his task. “On a ship, the quartermaster is in charge of discipline, amongst other things,” he told Jimin by way of explanation. “We’re all closer than family aboard Agust, but if someone steps out of line, and they do, Taehyung’s the one who cracks the whip.”

Jimin wondered briefly if the doctor meant the words literally, but decided against asking; he’d already asked too many questions to which he did not want to know the answer. Instead, he sullenly cast his eyes down, making the mistake of looking at his hand halfway through Hoseok’s ministrations; the cut was shallow enough, but the sight of dirt-mixed, clotted blood and pus made him feel nauseous. Or perhaps it was the steady rocking of the sea that made his stomach churn.

“Taehyung, take the medicine from my satchel,” the doctor said, needing only a brief glance at Jimin’s face to recognize his queasiness. “The blue phial for his nausea and the clear bottle for his pain. And water.”

The blonde pirate was quick to comply, digging out the requested items, and when he crouched down next to Hoseok to pass him the glass jars, Jimin took a moment to study his face. He wondered what depth of ruthlessness was hidden beneath his cheerful smile; the man looked almost like a child now, youthfully expressive as he struggled to uncork the leather cask of water. He was kind, Jimin thought, kind in the way he’d protected Jimin from Yoongi, kind in the way he smiled and in how his touches were so gentle.

But even so, Jimin couldn’t simply forget the image of him in his mask, pointing a bloodied sword at Jimin and Jihyun’s grandson. “Y-you still killed them,” he blurted before he could stop himself. “You still murdered innocent people.”

Taehyung didn’t even blink. “That’s true,” he said without pause before emitting a sound of triumph when he finally managed to pry open the water canteen. “And I’m not gonna justify or excuse myself. I did what I did, and I won’t lose sleep over it, even if you will.” His tone was light as day, as was his smile when he passed the bottle over to Jimin, who took it with slight hesitation. “I am sorry we had to meet like that, though,” the pirate said, rocking back and forth in his seat. “It wasn’t the best first impression, but I really want us to be friends, Chim.”

Jimin almost choked on the sip of water he’d just taken, tears springing to his eyes as he coughed. “Friends,” he repeated dubiously when he recovered, but while the mere thought sounded absolutely ridiculous to his ears, there was something almost contagious about Taehyung’s grin when he gave an enthusiastic nod. He almost giggled, catching himself in time to swallow the sound.

“Aye, friends,” the blonde pirate all but beamed. “I like you. You’re cute, but you have more attitude than half the crew. Plus, you’re incredibly brave to come here just to save your friend.” He leaned forward, and this time, Jimin didn’t recoil. “I want you to be friends with everyone else, too. Just like Hoseok, they’re all good people.” His smile faltered into something much softer, as did his voice. “Even Yoongi.”

His words triggered a flare of pain through Jimin’s cheek, a dull reminder of what that good man had done to him. He pressed his lips into a thin line and said nothing, choosing not to bicker endlessly with these two pirates who seemed to all but worship their captain, and while Taehyung seemed to barely notice his silence, launching into a retelling of their clash against the Busan mariner base, Hoseok offered him a sympathetic little smile, as if he understood what Jimin was going through.

They stayed for another fifteen minutes, until the doctor had cleaned and bound his hand and made
him ingest a few drops of thick, opaque liquid from each of the glass phials Taehyung had picked from his satchel, with a promise of eased pain and a few hours of sleep. Taehyung carefully slipped a frayed blanket over his shoulders and patted him on the hair in an almost loving manner before standing up and moving to walk out of the cell.

“The sun will rise in three hours,” he told Jimin, spinning the brig key around on his index finger as he waited for Hoseok to gather his things. “You think you’ll be okay to start working if I come get you then?”

Jimin’s head felt heavy when he nodded, as if his strength was being drained from his veins. “I’ll be fine,” he mumbled and pulled the blanket tighter around himself, but before he closed his eyes, he raised his head and looked at the two, hesitating only for a moment. “Thank you. For…”

He didn’t say anything else, but they seemed to understand well enough. “Sleep,” Hoseok told him while Taehyung smiled sweetly. “You’ll feel better in the morning.”

With that, they left the brig, and Jimin heaved a deep sigh, letting his eyes flutter close as he leaned his weight back against the iron bars. He was calmer now, the ache in his cheek and hand slowly ebbing away to make room for his exhaustion. He was also thankful for whatever it was Hoseok had given him to drink; even though his mind was peaceful now, he was fairly certain he wouldn’t be able to sleep without it, the tension of his location still lingering.

Slowly, he scooted down and curled up against the floor, folding his arms under his head to cradle it. I won’t yield, Jimin promised to himself as he closed his eyes, expelling the memory of the captain’s words and his actions from his thoughts. Even if they attempt to break me, I won’t kneel.

The last thing he heard before he was claimed by sleep was the gentle whisper of the sea, and the distant, seething song of a piano.

Chapter End Notes

who plays the piano hmm i wonder i have no idea hmm.

THINGS WILL GET BETTER FOR JIMIN, I PROMISE.

But still, YoonGI, HOW DARE YOU HIT MY SUNSHINE CANARY YOU ABSOLUTE DICK.

yay for Hoseok, though! Yay!

Also! While this is a fantasy story, I’m still trying to keep it somewhat (keyword: SOMEWHAT) geographically accurate, and you can notice that a bit in Yoongi’s crew; there are people there from all over Asia. A man named Xiao was mentioned in the previous chapter, he’s Chinese, and in this one, you saw the name Hisashi, who’s from Japan. Yoongi’s known as the Black Fox of the East, aka the east side of the world, which includes Asia. We’ll be meeting more of his crew in the following chapters!
Life of Agust

Chapter Summary

With a huff, he heaved himself up onto the topgallant and crouched on top of it, one hand gripping the very top of the foremast while the other brushed his hair out of his eyes.

Nothing in the world could’ve prepared him for the overwhelming beauty of his scenery.

The ocean spread out around him as far as his eyes could see, blue and shimmering in the light of the sun, a deeper hue than that of the sky, the horizon a stunning clash of contrasts. It was so vast, so apparently endless, as if Jimin stood at the very center of the world. There was not a cloud in the sky, not a bird in sight, only the sun, warm and comforting on his skin, and for a moment, Jimin forgot where he was, his heart humming with a familiar urge in his chest.

He parted his lips and drew a breath, the song’s words already on the tip of his tongue.

Chapter Notes

Brace yourselves for several new names to remember; it’s OC time!

ALSO! If you haven't seen it already on Twitter, I'll be following an update schedule for tStS! I'll upload a chapter every Monday and Thursday, and any random AUs/one-shots I conjure in between~

Music;
The Man From U.N.C.L.E - Circular Story
Rocha Productions Music - In All Its Glory
League of Legends Music - Kindred, the Eternal Hunters

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Jimin opened his eyes next time, it was to someone excitedly jostling him awake, the playful touch accompanied by the strong scent of the sea and something sour he couldn’t quite identify. “It’s morning, Chim,” a chipper voice told him, and reluctantly, he cracked his eyes open, squinting even against the dim light of the brig.

Taehyung was sitting next to him on the floor of his cell, two plates perched in his lap as he poked at Jimin, his smile blindingly bright. “Sun’s up,” the pirate informed him cheerfully, and Jimin dimly thought that he was quite correct. “I brought you breakfast. Thought you’d rather eat here than with everyone else, so Jin gave me two portions. Jin’s the cook,” he added as an afterthought. “I’ll take you to meet him later.”
Clumsily, Jimin pushed himself up from the floor, blinking hard against the heavy sensation in his head. He knew it was an effect of the medicine Hoseok had given him during the night, but he felt like one might after an evening of excessive drinking, so even the simple act of sitting up took more energy than it should’ve. He reached up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes before peering at Taehyung, and he was about to greet him when he froze, his eyes widening at the sight of the collar of dark bruises framing the pirate’s neck.

“We don’t have that much aboard the ship right now,” Taehyung hummed and moved one of the plates to Jimin’s lap, completely unaware of the alarmed look he was receiving. “That’s why we were at your village, to get food, but it’s fine, really, Jin’s got plenty of herring and pickled cabbage in storage, and hard bread and dried meat, and…” His voice slowly trailed off when he finally noticed the look on Jimin’s face. “What’s wrong, Chim?” he asked, leaning forward. “Is your cheek hurting again? Should I go get Hoseok?”

“No, I…” Jimin’s concern surprised even himself, but he couldn’t fight it; the bruises looked quite painful, and he was hit by a rush of guilt at the thought of Taehyung receiving them as punishment on his behalf. “Are you alright?” he asked carefully and gestured towards the pirate’s throat. “I… those aren’t… they’re not because of me, are they?”

For a moment, Taehyung looked utterly bewildered, as if he didn’t have a single clue as to what Jimin is speaking of. “What…” he started and reached up to touch his neck, and then his eyes widened comically and he burst out laughing, so hysterically Jimin had to snatch his plate out of his lap for fear he’d spill it.

“What’s so funny?” Jimin demanded, beyond alarmed by the pirate’s reaction. “Did they do that to you? Did that bast- did Min Yoongi do that to you?”

That prompted Taehyung to instantly sober up, a pinched expression screwing up his face. “What, no,” he managed breathlessly, looking like the mere thought was repulsive. “God, no, it wasn’t Yoongi. Shit, what would ever make you think it was…” Again, he trailed off mid-sentence, but this time, his lips spread slowly into a grin, rectangular as always, but with an unfamiliarly smug undertone. “Chim,” he asked, sounding as if he teetered on the verge of laughter, “do you know what these are?”

Jimin frowned at that. Of course he knew what a bruise was, and he told the pirate as much. “They’re bruises,” he said, a hint of irritation prickling the back of his mind when Taehyung descended into another fit of cackling. “What?”

“You really are cute, Chim,” the pirate chortled, clutching his stomach with one hand while the other dabbed tears from the corners of his eyes. “There aren’t punishments, if that’s what you’re thinking. Actually, they’re the complete opposite.” There was something almost salacious in his grin when he finally sat up straight, and Jimin promptly decided he didn’t want to know the truth behind his words. “You’ll meet the man who gave them to me in a bit.”

“I’d rather not,” Jimin thought half-heartedly, but he chose not to say anything. Instead, he turned his attention to the plate he’d been given and found a big piece of hard bread topped with two slices of herring and pickled cabbage, and half a lime. The fish smelled strongly of the sea, but Jimin’s stomach rumbled all the same, and he carefully lifted the bread to his mouth and took a bite.

His eyes widened in surprise at the taste; the flavor of the fish mingled with the sour cabbage in perfect balance, and he found his mouth watering. Eagerly, he squeezed the lime’s juices over his breakfast before devouring it with gusto, making a conscious effort to not groan contentedly at the taste. Even the pain in his jaw and cheek seemed less prominent.
“Jin’s a really good cook,” Taehyung said amusedly around his own mouthful of food. “Us pirates sometimes spend weeks at sea without a sight of land, so there’s not much of a supply of fresh ingredients, but Jin always manages to make us something delicious.” He scarfed down his breakfast just as eagerly as Jimin and produced a flagon of water from behind his back, uncorking it before handing it to Jimin. “Drink up,” he said, grinning as he rocked to his feet. “Then it’s up to the deck. You gotta meet the crew, and then you’ll be put to work.”

Jimin took deliberately slow sips of water in a feeble attempt to stall what was to come. Meeting the crew was the last thing he wanted to do; the thought of walking out amongst a group of malicious, bloodthirsty murderers aboard an inescapable ship made his chest tighten in alarm. Deplorable as it was, he’d rather remain in the brig, safe from the grasp of pirates, and safe from the wrath of Min Yoongi.

As if Taehyung could’ve read his thoughts, he reached down and put a calloused but gentle hand on Jimin’s shoulder. “They’re really nice,” he said reassuringly, something Jimin was hardly inclined to believe. “They won’t do anything weird.”

Jimin nodded slowly, although he was far from convinced. With a trembling hand, he passed the flagon back to the blonde pirate before rising to his feet, gripping onto the iron bars of his cell to steady himself. “Alright,” he mumbled after taking a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

“Let’s,” Taehyung agreed brightly, a skip in his step as he threw open the cell door and led Jimin out of the brig. “They’re all really excited to meet you, you know. Joon said you have really pretty hair, and Jin wants to see it - he likes pretty things - and Jeongguk wasn’t on deck yesterday when you boarded Agust, so he hasn’t seen you either. Xiao also said you’re pretty, but I think that old bear meant it to be teasing. He’s really nice, though it can be hard to see when you first meet him.”

Just like during the night, Jimin let him prattle on as they made their way to the deck, too busy chewing the inside of his bottom lip absolutely raw in his fretting. They passed the bunks, where he vaguely registered some of the bunks were occupied, a muffled chorus of snores rising from around him. The sounds were drowned out by the ruckus that flowed in through the open companionway, however, a lively bustle of voices, both loud and regular, and there was laughter, lots of it, and in Jimin’s ears, it sounded like the cackle of the devil.

“We’ve got full sunshine today,” Taehyung announced as he made his way up the ladder, turning to send Jimin a wink from over his shoulder. “You’ll fit right in.”

He didn’t know what to say to that, so he kept his lips pressed firmly together as he followed the pirate up the steps, squinting hard against the strong sunlight that flowed in through the companionway. I can do this, he told himself as he climbed, his heart beating in his throat and making him nauseous. I won’t let them see my fear.

He broke that promise the very second he stepped up on deck.

The Agust was filled with life even though the sun had barely risen fully from the horizon. People were moving back and forth over the deck, shouting and bickering amongst each other as they worked, carrying crates and barrels from the quarterdeck to the forecastle, testing the secureness of the shrouds and the fores. Several younger boys were on their knees on deck, diligently scrubbing the wooden surface, and they seemed perfectly in tune with the bustle of the ship, somehow managing to effortlessly stay out of everyone’s way.

The ship was impressive, Jimin realized; he hadn’t had time to drink in its appearance during the night, but now he took in as much as he could, his eyes wide in amazement. The main body of the ship was made of painted wood, so dark it seemed almost black even in the light of the morning sun.
The rails matched the color, as did the three masts, each rising over ten meters high and hanging sea-stained black sails from their gallants. The deck was spacious enough to allow free movement, if not for a few stacks of wooden crates and folded cloth.

Some meters behind the companionway were two doors, one closed and one open, both beautifully carved with winding engravings. Pirates were coming and going through the open door, carrying either empty plates or ones with food, and Jimin realized it had to be the galley. Both doors were flanked by the set of stairs that led to the quarterdeck, a rail separating the two stories, and behind it stood the helm, positioned right in front of the base of the main mast. A familiar man was leaning against the wheel, a smile on his lips as he looked down at Jimin, who instantly stiffened as their eyes met.

“Joon!” Taehyung’s voice startled him to the point he almost staggered back, but the pirate grabbed his arm and dragged him towards the quarterdeck, waving enthusiastically at the first mate. “This is Chim, or Jimin,” Taehyung chirped happily when they reached the helm, his smile as bright as the sun as he gestured at a pale Jimin. “Chim, this is Namjoon, Yoongi’s right hand man and first mate aboard the Agust.”

“Nice to, ah, properly meet you, Jimin,” Namjoon said, a hint of something apologetic in his voice as he nodded in greeting. His eyes strayed to Jimin’s cheek. “How are you feeling?”

All Jimin could do was nod in return, his neck suddenly unbearably stiff. “I-I’m fine,” he managed, but his voice was so quiet it wouldn’t have surprised him if the pirate hadn’t heard. He couldn’t bring himself to reciprocate Namjoon’s politeness, however, but the first mate either didn’t notice, or then he didn’t mind.

“So it’s your first day on a pirate ship,” he mused, glancing out over the deck. “Do you have any ideas about what you’d like your role to be? I’ll be making the final decision on your tasks, but if you have something you’re particularly good at, let me know.” His smile widened, digging dimples into his cheeks. “Might save you the role as a swabbie.”

“We’ll have time to do that later,” Taehyung stated before Jimin could even begin to conjure an answer. “I’m showing him around first, introducing him to the crew.” He looked around. “Where’s Yoongi?”

The tension in Jimin grew tenfold and he hoped it didn’t show, but judging by the way Namjoon looked at him, he couldn’t have been very successful in his attempt to hide his thoughts. “He’s in the captain’s cabin with Jeongguk,” the first mate said. “They’re going over close harbors where we could restock our supplies. There won’t be much food to get in Shanghai, at least not anything that fresh.” There was amusement in his voice now, along with something Jimin couldn’t quite identify. “The crew doesn’t mind it much,” he crooned lightly, “but you know Jin loses his mind every time he has to go too long without fresh ingredients or other vegetables than cabbage and potatoes.”

Taehyung chortled at that, but Jimin was too caught up in what he’d just heard to see the fun in the first mate’s words. Shanghai, he repeated to himself, his hands turning clammy. He’d heard of Shanghai before; a pirate’s port, infamous for its ever shifting population of outlaws of all kinds, a vast community even the most seasoned of mariners were hesitant to approach. An absolute hell for anyone who wasn’t already on the wrong side of the law.

“Shouldn’t be more than two days’ delay,” Namjoon went on, breaking Jimin out of his fearful thoughts. “We’ll most likely stop by some of Japan’s southern islands.”

Taehyung nodded enthusiastically at that before turning to Jimin and hooking an arm around his. “That means you’ll have plenty of time to get to know the ship, Chim,” he beamed, and without
wasting any more seconds where they stood, he took off towards the aft, dragging a stumbling Jimin along with him. “I’ll give you a thorough introduction of our precious Agust.”

They began on the poop deck, where Taehyung showed him just about every single rope supporting the spanker and mizzen sails, naming every single one of them in a rapidfire succession that Jimin would surely forget. The blonde pirate also pointed out and named every single crewman they passed, all of whom seemed too busy to stop and talk, but they did pin Jimin under either a suspicious or smug look, both of which made his skin crawl unpleasantly.

Taehyung also beckoned him to the rail at the very back of Agust, dramatically shushing Jimin before leaning out to look straight down. “You can see the windows of Yoongi’s cabin from here,” he whispered, even though the chances of anyone hearing him over the racket of the crew and the sound of the sea were nonexistent. “They’re really fancy, look.”

Reluctantly, Jimin walked up next to him and braced both hands securely against the rail before he leaned out to look. True enough, the curved windows were pristine, a series of glass lined neatly in frames of black wood with twisting decorations, as if the timber was alive and aiming to swallow the clear glass. The light of the morning was too bright to allow them to see through the windows, the sun’s rays reflected on the glass, and Jimin half-heartedly wished the sun would blind the man who occupied the captain’s cabin.

“Let’s continue,” Taehyung said cheerfully, seemingly completely immune to Jimin’s frown. He turned around and motioned for Jimin to follow him back down to the quarterdeck, but paused halfway there, his eyes rising to the fighting top halfway up the main sails. A grin split his face and he cupped a hand around his mouth to call out to the pirate who stood there, waving excitedly when the woman leaned over the rail to look at him.

Jemin’s eyes widened in surprise as he watched her make her way down the mizzen mast’s side; he hadn’t expected there to be a woman on board, especially not one who looked quite the way this one did. She was tall and voluptuous and dressed in tight leather pants and an even tighter shirt, and she’d tied some sort of fur-lined coat around her waist as a makeshift skirt, the fabric smooth and speckled. Her hair was the color of cream, pale and glistening in the sun, falling over her shoulders and down her back, not a single strand out of line.

When she walked over to them, Jimin noticed her eyes were of the most piercingly blue shade he’d ever seen in his life. “This is our current lookout,” Taehyung told him happily, making a point of gesturing to her and then to the top of the main mast, where the crow’s nest was located. “She’s from Russia, and she has a long, complicated Russian name, but we call her Lucya. It sounds almost like Russia, which is funny, but it’s actually a shortened version of her real name. She seems to like it well enough.”

While he all but beamed at her, her face remained impassive, her eyes trained on Jimin, who resisted the urge to squirm; he felt as if she was staring straight into his soul. “Oh, and she doesn’t speak any Korean,” Taehyung said almost as an afterthought. “She hasn’t had time to learn yet and Yoongi’s the only one on this ship who speaks Russian, but communicating is really not that hard if you just try.” He raised a hand at her and waved, his rectangular smile out in full force. “Good morning, Lucya!”

She spared a glance and nodded, the faintest of smiles on her lips before she turned back to Jimin and said something in a language he didn’t understand, her voice soft and deep. Very cautiously, Jimin tipped his head in greeting, and when he looked back up, she was still smiling, content.

“She’s really nice,” Taehyung hummed, observing their exchange with amusement. “Though I feel
like I should tell you she’s wanted across Russia for killing some four hundred people, including several key characters in their government.” He emitted a bark of laughter when Jimin’s eyes widened, swimming with alarm. “They named her the White Death, a name the mariners stuck to after she joined our crew and became a pirate three months ago,” the blonde pirate said with something painfully close to respect in his voice. “She’s a sniper, and she works every possible weapon in that area. Crossbow, actual bow and arrows, even the rifle. She’s got eyes of a hawk, this one.”

It was all Jimin could do to keep very still when the woman said something and reached out a hand to let her fingers ghost over the bruise on his cheek, her touch light as a feather, before she turned on the heel and strode back towards the mizzen mast to climb it effortlessly. When a gust of wind caught the coat around her waist and made it flutter, Jimin saw the crossbow she’d strapped to her right thigh, and his throat tightened uncomfortably.

“She put a bolt through Xiao’s hand on her first day on Agust,” Taehyung told him in a much too chipper tone. “He thought she was someone to have fun with, but the instant he put a hand on her arse, she drew her crossbow and buried a bolt right through the middle of it. She took her punishment without complaining, and no one’s dared lay a hand on her since.” The way he was talking, one would’ve thought he was relaying a fond memory of a pleasant family supper. “She and Xiao get along great now, don’t worry,” he assured Jimin, as if that was the part that had made him turn ashen pale. “Lucya’s closest with him out of everyone else in the crew, so it’s all good.”

It was as far from good as it possibly could be, Jimin reflected, but again, he held his tongue, quickly averting his eyes when the sniper turned to glance down at the two of them. The death of four hundred people at the hand of one woman was a terrifying thought; Jeju Village itself was home to five hundred. He wondered how devoid of mercy someone had to be to commit the worst crime of all so many times over, yet still be able to smile the way she had, almost kindly.

He watched Taehyung wave at her again before the blonde pirate steered his steps back towards the stairs leading down from the quarterdeck. He paused at the top of them and turned to look at Jimin, a sweet smile on his lips. “You wanna go see Hoseok’s infirmary?” he asked, as if he knew what was going through Jimin’s head and wanted to ease his dread by showing him a familiar face. “It’s the door next to the galley. I’m sure he wants to see how you’re feeling.”

Jimin nodded gratefully and hurried after Taehyung, offering Namjoon a quick little nod when they passed the helm. He moved close to the blonde pirate, barely resisting the urge to grab onto his shirt as he once again found himself moving through the majority of Agust’s population, dodging around the crew as best he could. He barely managed to avoid being run into by a mountain of a man in the process of hauling an iron cannon out of the companionway, and when the pirate turned an annoyed glare on him, it was all he could do not to cower.

“Ignore Sungsin,” Taehyung told him with a snort. “He works directly under the master gunner, Raji, and has to carry the heaviest stuff according to the gunner’s whims.” He grinned toothily at the tall man. “Need any help, Sung?”

“I need you to fuck outta my face, sir,” the pirate said gruffly, and Taehyung emitted a bark of laughter.

“Touchy,” the blonde man sing-soned before taking Jimin’s arm and leading him the rest of the way. “Don’t let their tough words scare you, Chim. They might sound like they’re angry, but they’re really not. They’re just used to speaking a certain way, so they’d curse even if they were telling you they love you.”

That hardly eased Jimin’s alarm, but thankfully, they reached the infirmary door before anything
worse could happen. Taehyung forewent any and all thoughts of knocking and unceremoniously threw the door open with a cheery greeting of, “Rise and shine, Hoseokkie!”

Jimin scurried in after him, eager to shut out the bustle of the deck, but he froze when he found an extremely chiselled man seated on the infirmary bed with no shirt, looking incredibly bored as he pressed a wet piece of cloth to his ribs, the rag stained with a color horrifyingly similar to that of blood. He was aging and bald, but with an impressive moustache and beard of black, and when he turned his face to look at them, Jimin recognized him from the raid on Jeju Village.

“You say that as if you don’t know I’ve been up all night, Taehyung.” Hoseok emerged from a door at the back of the sickroom with a fresh cloth and a jar of salve in his hands, the exasperation fading from his smile when his eyes found Jimin. “Good morning,” he said with a nod before taking a seat on a wheeled stool and sliding it up in front of the large man. “How are you feeling, Jimin?”

“Oi, ’m the one yer treatin’ right now,” the man on the bed complained in a heavily accented voice before Jimin could do more than part his lips. “Ya should be askin’ me that.”

“But I already know how you’re feeling, Xiao,” the doctor stated, unimpressed, “since you choose to remind me every other minute.” He rolled his eyes and batted the pirate’s hand away from his ribs, and Jimin was quick to turn away when he caught sight of the bleeding gash in his side. “Would you like to tell Jimin how you got this? I’m sure he’d be interested in hearing how ridiculously dumb our carpenter is.”

The pirate was big enough to be able to snap Hoseok in two if he chose, but rather than anger, his face contorted into a sullen frown. “Now that’s mean of ya, doc,” he muttered, to which Hoseok responded with a dry chuckle.

“Let me guess,” Taehyung said with a grin before walking over next to the big pirate and observing the wound over Hoseok’s shoulder. Jimin wondered how on earth they could be so calm about it; the big man, Xiao, didn’t even seem to feel any pain when Hoseok dabbed at the wound with the clean rag. “Don’t tell me you actually forgot to move your axe from your bed after cleaning it again.”

Jimin’s brows knitted into a disbelieving frown at the ridiculous suggestion, but then Xiao chortled sheepishly, lips stretching wide over yellow teeth. “Rolled over on the blade,” he said with a leisure shrug. “But ya should see my iron lady, she shines like new again.”

“I hope it was worth it,” Hoseok scoffed with another roll of his eyes as he smeared a white salve around the gash, sending a glance at Jimin and grinning at his dubious expression. “Jemin, this is Yong Xiao, our shipwright,” the doctor told him, and Jimin tried his best not to squirm when the big man quirked a brow at him. “We’ve been stuck with him since before we set sail for the first time. He’s got as much etiquette as a bear and he smells worse than one, but he’s harmless.”

“I don’t smell,” the carpenter protested loudly and turned to look at Jimin when Hoseok only hummed in response. “Ya tell me, pretty bird, do I smell?”

A nervous little sound was the best answer Jimin could conjure, a response that seemed to amuse Xiao, although the grin vanished off his lips when Hoseok none too gently smacked him over the shoulder. “Retract your fangs, stupid bear,” the doctor chided promptly. “Don’t scare him.”

“I’m not scared,” Jimin said instantly, clenching his hands at his sides when all three turned to look at him in curiosity. “There’s a difference between being scared and fearing for your life, and I am not scared.”

That gave the pirates pause for a good several beats, silence stretching heavy in the infirmary, and
then Xiao emitted a booming laughter, so loud and so sudden it made Jimin jump in surprise. “The pretty bird sings a pretty song,” he guffawed, his massive frame racking with his laughter. Next to him, Taehyung nodded enthusiastically, his eyes brimming with something akin to awe as he looked at Jimin. “Then ya got nothin’ to be so tense about. No one here’s gon’ lay a hand on the quartermaster’s friend.”

Except the captain, Jimin thought bitterly, but nodded all the same.

Content, Taehyung danced his way back to Jimin’s side and looped an arm around his again. “Well, we just wanted to stop by and say hello,” he chirped, going for the door. “There’s still a lot to show Chim and then I have to find work for him, so we’ll be going now.”

“Have fun,” Hoseok said while Xiao raised his hand in a leisure gesture of farewell. Jimin could see a round scar in the center of his palm and tried his best to push away the image of a crossbow’s bolt sitting buried in his hand. “And come see me if you start feeling sick again.”

Again, Jimin nodded, and as he followed Taehyung outside, he wondered briefly why he was making a conscious effort to remain as silent as possible. He was nervous, yes; as he had told Xiao, he feared for his life, no matter how reassuring anyone tried to be, but even so, his silence was strange to him.

Taehyung showed him around Agust’s fore, everything from the bowsprit to the forecastle, which, to Jimin’s immense surprise, contained shelves full of books. The blonde pirate told him it was Namjoon’s favorite place on the entire ship, that the first mate would spend hours reading about history and philosophy, as well as warfare, both on land and at sea. He was, after all, first mate, which meant he had to have a vast knowledge of strategic combat to keep the crew safe and ensure victory in battle.

After that, Taehyung showed him the figurehead. They had to balance out onto the bowsprit to be able to see it, something Jimin easily complied with; even with the rolling of the sea, he was surefooted as he stepped out after the blonde pirate, having no need to hold onto the many ropes of the jib sails to stay upright.

The figurehead was not what Jimin had expected. He’d seen plenty of ships before at the harbor of Jeju Village, and they all seemed to follow the same fashion; either a beautiful mermaid or a weeping woman, figures to represent the names of the ships to those who couldn’t read. Or that had been the original thought behind the figureheads, but at some point, Jimin had begun to wonder if it wasn’t simply customary to nail the image of a pretty lady to the front of your ship.

While Agust’s figurehead was also a woman, she was nothing like the ones Jimin had seen. She was wild, fierce, arching out of the ship’s hull to point a wooden sword up along the underside of the bowsprit. She had wings like an angel, painted black as the rest of the ship, and in her free hand she held a bird, clutching it to her chest as if to protect it from whatever it was her furious eyes saw.

“That’s the Life of Agust,” Taehyung told him in a voice full of reverence. “Yoongi designed her and had her made, saying she’s the spirit of this ship, the one that protects us all from the perils of the sea.”

“I see,” Jimin said quietly, his eyes trained on the bird wrapped safely in the woman’s embrace, and he found himself oddly at peace. “She’s beautiful.”

“She really is,” Taehyung agreed happily, looking absolutely overjoyed. “I love how she looks like she’d do anything to protect her friend, no matter who or what she faces.”
Somewhere in the back of Jimin’s mind, he remembered hearing about the time Min Yoongi had engaged in a naval battle with some ten mariner warships and triumphed, and he wondered if the Life of Agust had kept him and his crew safe from what should’ve been their deaths.

They sat on the bowsprit for a little longer before Taehyung made his way past Jimin and back towards the deck, easily sidestepping him even on the narrow jib by holding onto one of the ropes and swinging himself out over the sea. “We should start thinking about what your job on the ship should be,” he stated, lips stretched into a grin as he watched Jimin easily make his way back down. “You seem to have pretty good balance. How’s your climbing skills?”

For the first time since the night, Jimin felt a genuine smile grace his lips. “I’ve climbed trees all my life,” he said and tipped his head back to look to the top of the foremast mast. “That should be no different.”

Taehyung emitted a bark of laughter and clapped his hands together. “Then show me what you’ve got, Chim,” he mused and bowed his back in an ironic gesture of respect, as one would before someone of royal blood.

With a chuckle, Jimin rounded the mast until he found the rungs to help him climb. They weren’t very impressive and would surely only provide a fraction of stability, but for him, they were more than enough; after all, he’d grown used to climbing even the most naked of trees, the ones that barely had any branches to grab onto. Thus his smile widened and he rolled his shoulders once before reaching out and curling his fingers over the first one.

The steady rocking of the sea did little to perturb his ascent. Jimin’s movements were swift and deft, his bare feet finding easy support on the narrow rungs, and his weight seemed almost nonexistent as he climbed, rising higher and higher above the horizon. He could hear Taehyung’s excited cheering from somewhere next to him and turned around to find the blonde pirate climbing the shrouds, taking the easier way up alongside him. “The foremast is twelve meters tall,” he said, loudly to be heard over the sound of the wind and sea. “Only seven more to go, Chim!”

Jimin laughed before he could stop himself, and he took a hand off the mast to wave at the pirate before resuming his ascent. He felt like it’d been an eternity since his last climb, his senses tingling with adrenaline as he moved, pulling and pushing himself higher into the sky, closer towards the blinding sun. He passed the first and second sail yards, and by the time he reached the topgallant, he was out of breath, his heart beating strongly in his chest. With a huff, he heaved himself up onto the topgallant and crouched on top of it, one hand gripping the very top of the foremast while the other brushed his hair out of his eyes.

Nothing in the world could’ve prepared him for the overwhelming beauty of his scenery.

The ocean spread out around him as far as his eyes could see, blue and shimmering in the light of the sun, a deeper hue than that of the sky, the horizon a stunning clash of contrasts. It was so vast, so apparently endless, as if Jimin stood at the very center of the world. There was not a cloud in the sky, not a bird in sight, only the sun, warm and comforting on his skin, and for a moment, Jimin forgot where he was, his heart humming with a familiar urge in his chest.

He parted his lips and drew a breath, the song’s words already on the tip of his tongue, but then a voice tore him out of his momentary illusion.

“You’re positively insane, Chim!” Taehyung exclaimed as he pulled himself up next to Jimin, out of breath and smiling as brightly as the sun. “You climb like you were born to do it, and you don’t hesitate at all!”
“Like I said, I’ve climbed trees all my life,” he said. “And my blessing is that of a bird’s, so I think it’s an instinctive thing to not hesitate and to seek high places.” He straightened his back and closed his eyes, feeling the soft breeze ruffle his hair. “I love this feeling.”

“Good.” Jimin blinked and looked at Taehyung, who was nodding thoughtfully to himself. “You should be our new lookout,” he mused. “You don’t seem to mind the rocking of the ship, and you climb much better than Lucya.”

Jemin felt a thrill of dread at the suggestion; he didn’t want the sniper to think he’d gone after her job. “Uh, a-are you sure?” he asked meekly, suddenly feeling like he was being watched. “You, you already have one. I don’t want to, uh, replace anyone against their will.”

Taehyung shook his head at that, beaming. “You wouldn’t be,” he assured Jimin. “Lucya’s only a temporary lookout because she’s got really good eyesight. Our previous lookout, Rodel, had to step down several months ago, after the mariners caught him and cut out his tongue. You can’t really warn the crew of approaching without the ability to speak.” He said the words so casually, it took Jimin several seconds to actually process what he’d said. “Rodel’s our rigger now. He used to work for a circus when he was younger, so he moves around the sails and masts like a monkey.”

Jemin struggled with what to say for almost a full sixty seconds before he gave up and slumped down on the topgallant, heaving a deep sigh as he decided to just ignore the horrifying fact he’d just learned. He wondered briefly if being so severely injured was part of a pirate’s daily life, what with Xiao cutting himself open on his axe and the fact that the captain of the ship had a prosthetic hand, but he was quick to dismiss those thoughts, choosing instead to enjoy the pleasant warmth of the sun.

His peace was quite short lived. Not five minutes later, the ruckus of the crew below them escalated, and Jemin didn’t even have time to turn around and see what the fuss was all about before Taehyung emitted an almost deafening shout from right next to him, more delight in his voice than Jemin could’ve imagined possible. “Jeongguk!”

Without a shred of hesitation, Taehyung jumped right off the topgallant.

Horrorstruck, Jimin felt his heart leap to his throat in shock. “Oh my- Taehyung!” he exclaimed and hurried to turn around and look down, his heart hammering in his chest as he watched the blonde pirate land effortlessly on the fighting top, as if his legs couldn’t feel the effects of the three meter drop. He launched himself into the shrouds, descending faster than what should be possible, and when he reached the deck, he instantly threw himself into a run, crossing towards the quarterdeck and almost knocking one of his crewmates over on the way.

Jemin climbed down to the deck just in time to watch Taehyung all but pounce on a young man with hair the color of red wine, almost tackling him to the floor where he stood next to Namjoon at the helm. Jemin heard the man laugh even as he was all but suffocated by the blonde pirate, and then, right in the middle of the busy ship, he brought a hand up to the back of Taehyung’s head and pulled him into a fiercely passionate kiss.

Heat flooded Jemin’s cheeks and he turned his head away so fast it made his neck throb in protest, an incoherent, meek sound falling from his lips. He couldn’t believe what he’d just seen, the two acting as if they were the only two people in the world, completely ignoring the rest of the crew. The crew who didn’t seem to mind it in the slightest, Jemin realized when he chanced a peek at the others; they either ignored the two, or whistled and shouted something teasing.

They didn’t break apart until someone elbowed the young man in the ribs, hard, and Jemin felt his entire body stiffen at the sight of Min Yoongi.
The captain said something to the two, and while the red-haired man was quick to dip his head in
apology, Taehyung merely laughed, the sound carrying across the deck. Next to them, Namjoon seemed
to snort in amusement, shaking his head at whatever it was Yoongi had said. Jimin watched
the captain roll his eyes in frustration and snap something at his brother, and all of a sudden, the
blonde pirate turned around and pointed directly at him.

On cue, Jimin was pinned under three pairs of eyes, but the only gaze he returned was Yoongi’s.
His was impassive as he looked at Jimin from across the deck, holding nothing but irritated contempt,
something Jimin didn’t hesitate to respond in like with. He felt the skin of his neck contract in
tension, but he pretended not to notice, refusing to be the first one to look away, no matter how
strong the urge to turn was.

In the end, Taehyung was the one who broke them out of their murderous glare, by taking the red-
haired man by the hand and loudly declaring that he was going to introduce him to Jimin. The
captain had different plans, however, reaching out to grab his brother by the arm and pull him back
to ask something of him. They seemed to bicker for a moment or two before they fell into
conversation, and Jimin watched Namjoon heave a light sigh before making his way down from the
quarterdeck, motioning for the younger man to follow him as he walked towards Jimin.

“‘They had to discuss something,’” the first mate told him matter-of-factly when he came within
earshot, “but introductions should be made either way. Jimin, this is Jeongguk, our sailing master.
And Taehyung’s paramour, if that wasn’t painfully obvious already.”

The man looked as embarrassed as Jimin felt, but he reached out a gloved hand either way, which
surprised Jimin; none of the other pirates had greeted him so formally. “Hi, Jimin,” he said in a tone
that was almost shy. “It’s, uh, nice to meet you. Tae’s already talked about you a lot.”

Jemin nodded slowly as they shook, taking his time to study the navigator. He was taller than Jimin,
with broad shoulders and arms corded with muscle. He wore an open shirt that displayed the raw
strength of his chest and abdomen, and Jimin could see several lines of ink trace along his hipbone
and disappearing beneath the waistband on his trousers.

He wondered if this was the man who’d given Taehyung the bruises around his neck.

“What were you saying before Tae interrupted?” Namjoon asked as soon as they let go, distracting
Jemin from his thoughts. “We’re stopping by Japan?”

Jeongguk nodded in confirmation. “We’re not well enough prepared for our visit to Shanghai,” he
said. “We need fresh food and water, and Hoseok’s running low on Sleeper’s Drought as well as
fabric for bandages.” He gestured vaguely in the direction they were sailing. “There’s a small port on
Fukue Island that should have everything we need. It’s a bit of a risk; there’s an active mariner base
on the island, so we’ll have to anchor Agust somewhere out of sight and go with a small party to not
raise any alarm. We’ll pay for everything we need in gold.”

Jemin’s eyes were trained on the deck as he listened intently to their conversation, his heartbeat loud
in his ears as he processed the navigator’s words. An island with mariners, he thought, his mind
alight with the possibilities of this piece of information. If I can somehow get in contact with them, I
can-

“You look like you’re plotting your escape.”

His head snapped up in alarm, all air leaving his lungs as he found both Namjoon and Jeongguk
observing him, the former with a brow arched in question. His gaze felt heavy, as if it weighed down
on Jemin’s shoulders, and when Jemin raised his voice to deny their suspicion, his voice was of a
higher pitch than before. “N-no, I wasn’t,” he pressed out, internally cursing how meek he sounded. “I wasn’t, I swear, I... I’ve never been to Japan, so I just-”

“If the songbird wants to leave,” a voice drawled from directly behind him, and Jimin felt his blood run cold, “all he needs to do is flap his little wings and fly back home to the people who threw him away.”

He whirled around and recoiled from the captain, an unwelcome shiver ripping up his spine as their eyes met; the intensity of Yoongi’s glare was much stronger up close. Jimin swallowed thickly and clenched his hands by his sides, digging his nails into the palms of his hand to keep himself grounded. “What are you talking about?” he snapped, feeling a crack in his brave facade simply by noticing the slight twitch in the captain’s jaw. “I can’t fly.”

Yoongi arched a brow at that, disdain seeping into his expression. “Of course you can,” he stated coldly, his voice rough. “You have the canary’s blessing. Canaries are birds. Birds can fly, and so can you.”

All Jimin could do was stare at him in absolute disbelief, too trapped in his incredulity to notice Taehyung had sauntered over to them and wrapped his arms around Jeongguk’s waist, pressing his face in between the navigator’s shoulder blades. “Uh,” was the first thing that made its way past Jimin’s lips, quickly followed by, “no, I can’t. I can sing, but that’s it.”

Now it was the captain’s turn to adapt an expression of disbelief. “You’re telling me you’re not only just a songbird,” he said, his voice thick with venom, “but you’re the most useless fucking songbird there is. You refuse to sing, and you don’t even know you can fly.” He heaved an exasperated sigh and crossed his arms over his chest, and Jimin vaguely registered the metal of his prosthetic hand stretched past his wrist and in under the sleeve of his shirt, possibly reaching as far as his elbow.

“Yous is a blessing of Nature,” Yoongi told him in a tone that indicated just how ignorant he thought Jimin was, “and the nature of it is an animalistic one. That means you can take the shape of the animal your blessing represents.”

This was the first time Jimin had ever heard anything about such traits of his blessing. Granted, all he knew about his abilities was what he’d learned from his mother, and the way the captain spoke made it sound as if there were several different categories of blessings. And that there was more to his own blessing than he’d thought.

His silence didn’t seem to sit well with Yoongi, whose irritation seemed to only escalate at Jimin’s apparent lack of knowledge. “For fuck’s sake,” he hissed before turning around, his eyes scanning over the deck until he found who he was looking for. “Xiao!”

The carpenter had just stepped out of the infirmary, and he almost jumped out of his skin at the sound of his captain’s harsh voice. Had the situation been any different, it would’ve been almost comical to watch him hurry over to where they were standing, tall and broad and built with muscle and cowering under the short pirate’s gaze. “Ya called fer me, cap’n,” he said tentatively, as if worried he was facing a punishment of sorts.

“I did,” Yoongi said, a bite to his voice when he turned back to Jimin. “The songbird doesn’t believe in the skinchanging of those carrying blessings of Nature, so show the songbird what he should already know.”

A look of genuine surprise crossed Xiao’s face as he looked at Jimin before his lips stretched into a sharp grin. “Aye, cap’n,” he said and took a deep breath, his eyes falling shut.

And then his body began to change.
Jimin watched in terror as the carpenter’s already muscular frame began to grow in size, his shoulders broadening and the biceps of his arms filling out and becoming even heavier. His posture hulked and he leaned forward, and when strands of dark fur blossomed from the skin of his arms and chest and neck, Jimin staggered back and almost lost his balance, a meek sound of dread escaping his parted lips.

Rather than a man, what stood before him now was a cross between a human being and a black bear. The structures of his face were still that of a man’s, but his beard had shifted into rough fur, the same fur that sprouted from his cheeks and temples, reaching across his neck and shoulders and over his chest. His arms had grown longer and thicker, and instead of fingers, five long, sharp claws were braced against the deck, supporting the heavy increase of his weight.

“The Rune of the Black Bear,” Yoongi said curtly, his eyes trained on Jimin’s shellshocked face. “Also a blessing of Nature, which allows him to take on either a hybrid or a complete form of a bear.”

“’M not gonna do a full shift now,” Xiao rumbled, his voice almost a growl. “Don’t wanna tear through my pants again.” He grinned at Jimin, showing a row full of razor-sharp fangs. “Ya scared yet, pretty bird?”

“I-I, you, you’re a...” he squeaked, his voice quivering like a leaf in a storm. He felt faint, his hands instinctively searching for something to hold onto, something that could stabilize him. The ship’s rocking suddenly felt that much stronger. “I’ve never... I-I had no idea you...” He wasn’t even certain what it was he wanted to say, and the fact that no one else seemed even a little surprised by this phenomenon only made it worse.

It was Yoongi’s voice that broke him out of his almost paralyzed state, the sheer amount of scorn in his voice triggering that same anger in Jimin that he had felt during the night. “You know absolutely nothing of the world, do you?” he spat, and even though they were of the same height, he easily managed to look down on him. “Remind me again why the fuck you took this boy instead of razing the village, Taehyung?”

“Who do you think you are?” The words were out of Jimin’s mouth before he could stop to think twice; there was something in the way the captain spoke that he couldn’t bear, the feeling of being treated as if he was worth less than the dirt underneath Yoongi’s shoes. “You’re acting as if I asked to be here,” he said loudly, ignoring the warning hand he felt on his shoulder. “As if I should consider it some damned privilege to be allowed on this ship!”

It was almost startling how quickly the captain could don so much rage in his expression, and his voice was more feral than Xiao’s when he spoke. “You’re too mouthy for your own good,” he snarled and reached out to grab hold of Jimin’s arm when he tried to back away, the fingers of his right hand curling tight around Jimin’s wrist. “It’ll get you killed before long, if not by me, then by somebody else. You should be grateful you’re still breathing.”

“Don’t touch me, pirate!” Jimin barked and pried his fingers away, this time successful due to the lack of his artificial strength. “I’m not some plaything for you to do with as you please!” He took a step back and held his ground there, keen on maintaining a safe distance while still refusing to run away. “You’ve given me nothing to be thankful for!”

“I’ve spared your life!” Yoongi said loudly, looking just about ready to close his hands around Jimin’s throat and squeeze until all life was gone from him, but Jimin didn’t care. Not anymore.

“That is not something I should have to be grateful for!” he almost screamed, his anger now accompanied by a hollow anguish, tears burning behind his eyes. “It’s my life, I’m allowed to keep it
for myself, and just because you're not taking it away from me does not mean I owe you anything!” He turned on the heel and surged towards Taehyung, ignoring the pirate’s surprise in favor of digging the brig’s key out of his pocket, and once he found it, he sent Yoongi one final, scathing glare. “If there's anything I owe you, it’s a swollen cheek!”

Without lingering for another second, he took off, reaching up to angrily rub at his eyes as he stormed towards the companionway, eager to just lock himself up and never resurface. Whatever small amount of joy he’d felt up on the sails was gone now, leaving nothing but bitter sorrow behind.

Jimin had almost reached the companionway when he felt something shoot past his right ear, a sharp sting of pain flaring up the lobe, and as if time had slowed down, he watched a knife embed itself in the wall right in front of him, sinking in all the way to the hilt.

The shocked sound that tore up his throat was just shy of a scream, his heart stopping dead in his chest for all of two seconds before starting a wild pace. His hand flew up to his ear and he turned on the heel, and no matter how hard he fought against it, the overwhelming amount of terror that arose in him as he watched the captain walk towards him was too strong, clutching an identical knife in his left hand.

“Don’t tempt me, songbird,” he snarled almost softly as he came to a halt right in front of Jimin, the quietness of his voice causing every last cell of Jimin’s body to cry out in fear. “There’s only one reason I haven’t ripped your throat open, and every single fucking time you open your mouth, that reason starts to weigh less and less.” Yoongi leaned in close, so close Jimin could feel his breath against his cheek as the captain pulled the knife out of the wall behind him. “Next time, I’ll make sure this lands in your skull.”

It was all Jimin could do to breathe, the air traveling past his lips high-pitched and trembling. His heart thundering against his ribs, beating so hard and so fast he feared his bones might crack, yet for all the horror, all the dread, all the fear that stormed inside him and threatened to almost consume him, when he found his voice, however weak it was, the whispered words that left his lips were, “Go to hell.”

He could almost feel the ripple of anger that went through Yoongi’s body and he closed his eyes, bracing himself for the consequences of his words. He could feel the change in the captain’s breath against his skin, he could hear the sound of his prosthetic hand gripping the knife tighter, the leather handle creaking in protest.

_Forgive me, Jihyun_, Jimin thought.

An eternity seemed to pass before someone finally broke the crushing silence. “Even a songbird has talons, Yoongi,” Namjoon said solemnly.

The furious sound the captain emitted made Jimin recoil on instinct, a wet whimper spilling from his lips as Yoongi jerked away from him, the ringing of the knives sending a violent shudder down his spine. “Don’t you fucking lecture me, Namjoon!” Yoongi shouted, his voice echoing across the sea. “He brought this on himself! I don’t give a fuck who he is, he’s responsible for his own words!”

Jimin felt the captain shift in front of him, and then his world came to a crashing halt when he felt hard, cold fingers close around his throat.

He briefly wondered who, if anyone, would mourn his death.

The harsh touch was there only for a fraction of a second, however, gone before he could do more than emit a sharp, quivering exhale. Next thing he knew, he was falling backwards, and his eyes
snapped open just before he crashed painfully against the floor at the bottom of the companionway ladder, the impact shoving all air out of his lungs. He gasped, tears springing to his eyes, but even through the wet blur, he could see the captain’s silhouette towering over him at the top of the ladder, and the sight jarred his body into action before he could even catch his breath.

He rolled over and pushed himself up from the floor, running before he’d even properly regained his balance. He’d never moved as fast in his life as he did then, darting past the bunks and all but flying down the second set of ladders, not pausing for long enough to see if the captain was even coming after him.

“Please,” he wheezed as he reached the brig, his hands shaking so bad he struggled to fit the key into its hole. “Please, please, please...!”

He cried when he finally managed to open it, and the very instant he stepped inside the brig, he pulled the door shut and scrambled to lock it from the inside. Only once he heard the secure click of the lock did he finally allow himself to breathe, sinking onto his knees on the floor and heaving, the sheer amount of fear making his stomach roil.

He gagged on the burning sourness that was left in his mouth once he’d vomited, and every single breath was accompanied by pain. Jimin could still feel the cold touch on his throat. He could hear the captain’s threats, could feel the sting in his ear, which he barely registered was bleeding lightly, but throughout all of this, he forced himself to keep breathing the way Hoseok had taught him, deep and slow.

When he thought he heard something, Jimin flinched away from the door and fled to his cell, making sure to lock that as well, doing all he could to guard himself from the man who wanted his life. I have to escape, he thought as he clutched onto the bars of his cell, the only source of security left for him in this world. When we reach land, I have to escape.

Chapter End Notes

juuuuuust when you thought things were looking up for Jimin.

NOPE.

Poor Jimin part 3. I’M SORRY.

I KNOW I SAID IT LAST TIME AS WELL, BUT THINGS WILL GET BETTER I SWEAR. IT’LL JUST... IT... IT’LL TAKE TIME. BUT IT’LL GET BETTER.

Imao at TaeKook tho, like no shame at all. I LOVE PIRATE TAEKOOK. THEY CAN BE AS NASTY AS THEY WANT IN PUBLIC IT'S GREAT.

Also, and I am sorry, I know this is my own story and I’m writing it BUT OKAY WHEN I WROTE THAT PART ABOUT THE LIFE OF AGUST GODDAMN I FELT SO OVERWHELMED SOMEHOW. Like, the Life of Agust was only supposed to represent, well, you know, the everyday life aboard the ship, BUT THEN I DESCRIBED THE FIGUREHEAD AND IT JUST HAPPENED AND I’M SO HAPPY IT DID.
Historical note - the White Death, as Lucya is dubbed, was actually a Finnish sniper, Simo Häyhä, who was active during the Winter War, when Russia led an attack on Finland. He was not a woman nor Russian, but when I created Lucya’s character, I thought it’d be so cool to have her be a sniper, and, well, I just had to go with it! So it’s a historical inaccuracy, but an intentional one! Ah, and he was also credited with over 700 kills, but that seemed a bit excessive for this one. (And worry not, I’m Finnish myself, so I’m not trying to “take glory away from the Finns” x))

FORGIVE ME FOR MY SINS, JIMIN. I LOVE YOU SO MUCH.

Also, thank you SO MUCH FOR THE AMAZING FEEDBACK. HOLY SHIT I'M SO OVERWHELMED. I LOVE YOU GUYS SO MUCH, MAYBE EVEN MORE THAN JIMIN. //cue dramatic gasp

CHAPTER 5 - The Law - WILL BE UP ON THURSDAY.
He didn’t turn around until they’d reached the shores. While the others tied the rowboat to the closest tree on the coast, Jimin stood at the brink of the sea, waves splashing gently against his bare feet as he observed the Agust. Even from this distance, it looked as hauntingly impressive as it did up close; its sails were folded up as it was rocked by the ocean, and if not for the black flag fluttering in the wind on the highest point of the main mast, perhaps Jimin could’ve found the sight beautiful.

It only now dawned on him that this was the last time he’d ever see the vessel.

Right, so this chapter was supposed to be called “The Law”, but it got wayyyyyyy too long, so I split it in half. You’ll get to read about the law on Monday instead!

Music (listen in order!);
C21 FX - Aurora
Ramin Djawadi - You Know Nothing
Ramin Djawadi - I Am Hers, She Is Mine
Ramin Djawadi - What Is Dead May Never Die

All hail Ramin Djawadi, the mastermind behind the legendary soundtracks of Game of Thrones!

Jimin didn’t emerge from the brig until he heard the heavy sound of the anchor being dropped into the sea. He jerked upright, groaning at the stiffness of his neck and scrunching his nose at the sour stench of vomit that filled the dim room; he’d have to clean that later, lest it make him sick again.

No, he realized as he listened to the distant sound of pirates moving about up on deck. I won’t have to clean anything.

The only thing he had to do was escape.

Quickly, he unlocked the his cell and hurried out, gingerly stepping over the pile of sick he’d left next to the door, only to almost set his foot in something else as soon as he was outside the door. “Wha~” he exclaimed and barely managed to avoid it by almost losing his balance and falling to the side, and once he’d recovered, he blinked down at what he’d almost stepped in, a pang of unwelcome affection rising in his chest.

A plate loaded with potatoes and dried meat had been left outside his door at some point during the
day, and already, Jimin felt his resolve crack. It was Taehyung, he knew; the blonde pirate had likely gone against his captain’s orders to bring him a plate of food, or then he’d given Jimin his own portion. Either way, it made him hesitate. No one but Jihyun would ever have done something like this for him, such a simple gesture, yet enormous in its own way.

“No,” he told himself sternly and walked towards the ladders leading up to the bunks. “There’s no going back.”

He had to escape.

Jimin felt tense as all hell as he climbed up onto deck. He could some of the pirates’ eyes as they stared at him, as if their gazes were real, physical touches against his skin. It sent a rush of goosebumps trailing across his neck, but he ignored it, instead turning his head to look around, and his eyes went wide at the sight of the island some two hundred meters from the ship.

From what he could see, it wasn’t very large, but a lush forest stretched out across the coast, its trees tall and beautiful and home to hundreds of birds, some of which Jimin could see flying above the green tops. Behind the small island, he could see several others, a cluster of land, and behind all of them, the mainland of Japan stretched out, reaching much further than the eye could see, taking up what seemed like the entire horizon. Jimin had never seen so much land before. All he’d ever known was the island of Jeju.

“The fuck you doing back up on deck?”

Jimin startled at the harsh voice and turned on his heel to find the man who’d almost killed him and Jihyun during the raid on his village standing behind him, an empty sack slung over his shoulder and a snarl on his face. Hisashi, Jimin remembered Taehyung calling him. “You should be down in your cage,” he spat, his voice a sharp hiss.

Jimin’s lips curled down into a scowl. “There are plenty of places where I should be,” he said hotly, “and this ship is the last of them.”

The pirate emitted a sound that was half a chuckle, half a growl. “Big words for a little bird,” he snapped, his hand moving to the katana at his waist simply to rest at the hilt, the simple act speaking volumes of his intentions. “The captain should’ve done you worse.”

A thrill of cold rage went through Jimin, who took a step forward. “Easy words for a coward,” he said shrilly, “who threw a tantrum because he didn’t get to kill a defenseless old lady.”

Hisashi’s rage was near palpable, but before he could do so much as curl his fingers around the hilt of his blade, someone appeared behind Jimin and put a hand on his shoulder, and the pirate visibly balked. “Do put your needle away, Hisashi Junji,” a smooth voice said, and when Jimin turned his head, he found a tall, beautiful man standing next to him, with broad shoulders and hair the color of hazel. “No one wants to see you wave it around in such closed quarters.”

Just like when Taehyung had interrupted him, Hisashi ground his teeth and did as told, bowing his head in a stiff gesture of salute before turning on the heel and storming off, hissing under his breath as he went. “Good riddance,” the stranger said with a huff. “He draws that needle so often, one would think he’s attempting to stitch himself a dress to go with his dramatic flare.”

His lips curled into a smirk before he descended into a fit of chiming laughter, and he moved the hand from Jimin’s shoulder to none too gently smack him on the back instead, too caught up in his own glee to notice Jimin’s confused stare. He had no idea who the man was; he hadn’t been anywhere in sight when Taehyung had taken him around for introductions earlier that day. The man
also seemed to radiate some sort of grace that Jimin certainly didn’t associate with pirates.

“Ah, that was too funny,” the stranger said breathlessly when he finally sobered up, raising a hand to gently dab at the corners of his eyes. “Yet you didn’t laugh, canary. Did Yoongi manage to kill your sense of humor already?”

Jimin frowned at that, displeased to be reminded of the captain. “He didn’t,” he protested, although quite unsure why; when he thought about it, he came to the conclusion it was most likely the truth. “I’m just not in the mood for laughter.”

“And so you prove my point.” The man’s smile was almost warm. “Joon told me the canary had something akin to a death wish,” he mused, “walking around the ship and yelling at people he can’t defend himself against. First Yoongi and now Hisashi. How are you enjoying your life on the edge?” Jimin didn’t quite know what to say to that, but he didn’t have to rack his brain for an answer before the man heaved a soft sigh and shook his head. “That was insensitive of me,” he said and pursed his lips into a pout. “I’m sorry.”

“Wha- t-that’s not necessary,” Jimin said hurriedly, waving a hand as if to deflect the man’s apology. “But… who are you?”

The stranger blinked at that, quirking a perfect brow. “You don’t know me?” he asked in genuine surprise, and when Jimin shook his head, he heaved a frustrated sigh and adapted an expression of heavy disappointment. “I can’t believe these ungrateful fools who sail this ship. All day I slave for them, make sure they’re well fed with food they don’t deserve, and what do I get as thanks? Not even a single shred of—”

“Jin.” The name rose to his mind the very second the man mentioned food, slipping past his lips before he could stop himself. “You’re Jin, right?” he asked, and instantaneously, the stranger’s eyes lit up and he smiled in content, his irritation gone in the blink of an eye. “The cook.”

“The cook,” Jin echoed with a nod. “And you’re Jimin, the living, breathing thorn in Yoongi’s side. And now Hisashi’s as well.” He waggled his brow with an almost teasing smile. “You have a gift, canary.”

Vaguely, amidst Jimin rolling his eyes and pursing his lips, he realized how little he minded that his man, this pirate, called him by the same name his mother once had. The thought, however, made his gut twist, for reasons he couldn’t quite explain; there was something comforting about the cook’s mere presence, and that in itself was unsettling.

“Will you join us ashore?” Jimin snapped out of his thoughts and blinked up at Jin, who nodded towards the island. “We’re preparing to go ashore to get supplies,” he said by way of explanation. “Jeongguk, Taehyung, Hisashi - unfortunately - and Sungsin and I. We can fit one more, if you want to come.”

It took a conscious effort to not seem too eager. “I-if that’s alright,” Jimin said carefully, fighting the urge to curl his hands into fists to hide their sudden clamminess. “I wasn’t sure if I was… allowed.”

Jin observed him for a moment before sighing softly. “Well,” he said with a huff, “what Yoongi doesn’t know won’t kill him. He’s asleep at the moment, and we’ll be back before he wakes up.”

With that, he promptly walked past Jimin, curling his fingers in a beckoning motion as he headed for Agust’s starboard side. Jimin was quick to follow; it sounded like the captain had ordered for him to remain in the brig, and if that was the case, staying on the ship was the last thing Jimin wanted to do.
The rest of those going ashore were halfway through the process of lowering the dinghy to the water when Jin and Jimin walked over. “Boys,” Jin called, and the very second Taehyung turned around and his eyes fell on Jimin, he emitted a delighted shout and released his grip on the ropes steadying the rowboat, much to Jeongguk and Sungsin’s dismay.

“Chim!” the blonde pirate said cheerfully and, to Jimin’s immense surprise, pulled him into a tight, bone-crushing embrace. “Are you okay? You were down there for hours and the door was locked and you hadn’t eaten anything since sunrise, and-”

“I-I’m fine,” Jimin stuttered and reached up as best he could to pat Taehyung on the back. “Really, I’m fine, I just... I needed some time to myself. To think. And... and-”

“Why is he here?”

The tightening of Taehyung’s hold on him was so minimal, Jimin almost missed it as he turned to send a sour glare at Hisashi, who’d stepped up to the ship rail and tossed the sack he’d carried into the dinghy. “He’s supposed to be in the brig,” the pirate snapped, confirming Jimin’s earlier suspicions.

“He is here on my invitation,” Jin declared flatly, placing a hand on his hip and jutting out his jaw. “Just like the rest of you. We’re setting out to restock the pantry, my pantry, and unless you lot want to go without food until we reach Shanghai, you’d better be on your best behavior during this supply run. That means you stop glaring at each other like that.”

The last part of his scolding was aimed at Jimin as much as Hisashi, both of whom turned away from one another with an equally displeased expression. “Good,” the cook said and marched up next to Jeongguk to help him with the ropes Taehyung had abandoned. “Now let’s get moving. The sooner we’re done with this mariner-infested island, the better.”

They lowered the dinghy the rest of the way and climbed down, the six of them fitting nicely with room to spare for the supplies they would acquire. Jeongguk and Sungsin took charge of the oars while Taehyung and Jimin took a seat on the fore thwart, with Jin and Hisashi in the back. “I’ve never been to this particular island before,” the blonde pirate told Jimin in a voice filled with childlike excitement. “I’ve been to Hirado Island and Shimoshima Island, and the mainland of Japan, of course, but never here.”

Jimin listened in silence, apart from the occasional hum or sound of agreement; for every stroke of the oars, he was becoming more nervous, the knot in the pit of his stomach tightening almost painfully as they drew nearer his eventual escape. He reminded himself over and over, “I have to go, I have to go.” For the third time since he’d left the brig, Jimin had to sternly tell himself to not falter in his mission.

He didn’t turn around until they’d reached the shores. While the others tied the rowboat to the closest tree on the coast, Jimin stood at the brink of the sea, waves splashing gently against his bare feet as he observed the Agust. Even from this distance, it looked as hauntingly impressive as it did up close; its sails were folded up as it was rocked by the ocean, and if not for the black flag fluttering in the wind on the highest point of the main mast, perhaps Jimin could’ve found the sight beautiful.

It only now dawned on him that this was the last time he’d ever see the vessel.

“Let’s go, Chim.”
Taehyung’s voice brought him out of his thoughts and he turned away almost reluctantly, his steps somehow heavy as he hurried after the others. “Goto Port is only a short bit away,” Jeongguk said with a nod in the general direction they were walking. “This island is as small as Jeju, if not smaller, but Goto’s a rather popular port for merchants and travelers on their way to China, so they have a decent stock of supplies to offer.”

“Not just travelers, however,” Jin said dryly. “Mariners. The eastern troops, who sail as far north as Russia and as far south as the Philippines, they tend to rest at Japan, be it on the mainland or these smaller islands. One of their warships is somewhere in these waters, so we have to be careful and not raise suspicion when we reach Goto Port.” He turned to glance at Jimin and Taehyung from over his shoulder. “Tae.”

The blonde pirate nodded and reached up to undo the bright blue scarf he’d tied around his head to keep his hair out of his brow. “I know,” he said lightly before retying it, this time around the lower half of his face, the cloth covering his nose and jaw, long enough to reach halfway down his neck. Like this, only his eyes were visible under the heavy fringe of his hair.

“Why do you do that?” Jimin asked, remembering the leather mask Taehyung had worn during the raid on his village. “Wear a mask? You don’t do it on the ship.”

He could tell the pirate was smiling even with his face almost completely hidden. “Yoongi’s orders,” he hummed. “I hide my face every time I step ashore, or whenever we go to battle. That way, no one can ever draw a complete bounty picture of me.”

“They call him the Unknown,” Jeongguk piped up, a fierce sense of pride and affection in his voice as he observed his lover. “They know who he is, but they’ve never seen his face.”

Taehyung chuckled brightly before looking at Jimin. “While my brother is wanted dead all over the world and will never be allowed to know peace,” he said softly, “he wants me to always have the chance to live a normal life, if I one day choose to leave the ship.” He laughed again, and the fondness in his voice made tightness in Jimin’s chest intensify. “That’ll never happen,” Taehyung mused, “but Yoongi makes me wear a mask either way.”

All Jimin could do was nod, holding his silence while the others conversed. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t put together the image of Min Yoongi with the brother Taehyung described. A good man, the others kept calling their captain, kind and merciful unlike the rest of the pirating world, yet Jimin had never seen it. Not once had he seen even an ounce of kindness in him, not in his harsh, degrading words and his violent demeanor.

He is not kind, Jimin thought firmly, and the tension in him eased, steeling himself for what was to come. Not now, not ever. I will never be safe until I’m out of his reach.

True to Jeongguk’s words, it barely took them twenty minutes of walking before the outskirts of Goto Port came into view. The town was surprisingly big, which prompted Jimin to wonder if this was the only town on the entire island; they hadn’t passed any people or seen any houses during their walk, thus it was likely the island’s entire population lived here.

Suddenly, the lot of them came to a halt. “Alright, find me some rocks,” Jeongguk said and began peeling off his gloves, and Jimin was about to ask what on earth he would need rocks for, but the question died in his throat when the sailing master removed the mitt off his left hand to reveal another one underneath, however that one seemed to be made out of the purest gold, glittering in the afternoon sun.

“What…” Jimin began, but no matter how hard he struggled, he couldn’t find the words. Mutely, he
watched Jeongguk repeat the process on the other hand, tucking his regular gloves into his belt before slowly working off the gilded ones. “What are…”

The navigator’s smile was almost tight. “It’s my blessing,” he told Jimin. “The Blessing of Gold. Everything my hands touch…” He left the sentence open and waved one of the golden gloves around in answer before letting it fall to the ground. “You have a blessing of Nature, right? Right, mine’s a blessing of Abnormality. Blessings of Abnormality affect and change the body somehow.” He held his hands up much like a surgeon while he spoke, waiting for the others to bring him what he needed, and once they’d gathered a small pile of regular stones, Jeongguk reached down and took a few of them into his hands.

Jimin’s eyes widened in wonder as he watched the grey stones slowly take on the glimmer of gold, their value rising to the heavens with a single touch. They were beautiful, shining in the sun, and Jimin leaned forward for a better look, but a hand on his shoulder pulled him back.

“Careful,” Taehyung whispered and draped himself over Jimin’s shoulders as he watched his lover go about his work. “He’ll turn you into gold as well if you’re not.”

At first, all Jimin realized was that the reason why Jeongguk wore gloves, not one pair but two, was because his blessing wasn’t limited to inanimate objects; if he accidentally touched someone on the ship, they would be turned as well. They would die, by nothing more than a single touch from the navigator.

Then the gravity of the pirate’s words hit him, and it made Jimin’s heart ache. The two of them were deep in the throes of love, yet Jeongguk could never touch Taehyung, not truly. Whatever they did, he’d always have to be careful, and no matter how hard he tried, he’d never be able to feel his lover’s skin under the palm of his hands, to card his fingers through his hair. They could never hold the other’s hand without a layer of leather in between.

Jimin wasn’t sure why, but as he watched the navigator turn every stone into little chunks of gold, he felt his eyes fill with tears, his vision blurring. He bit into his lower lip and raised a hand to rub at his eyes, holding back any and every sound that wanted to escape his chest when he felt Taehyung tighten his hold on his shoulders. “The Hand of Midas,” the blonde pirate said softly and rested his chin on Jimin’s shoulder. “The mariners don’t even realize what an evil name it is for him.”

Jimin nodded silently, blinking hard against the sadness that wasn’t even his to feel. It was Taehyung and Jeongguk’s, but even the mere thought of how much it must weigh to them was more than enough to bring tears to his eyes.

By the time the sailing master was done, Taehyung had recovered, untangling himself from Jimin and skipping happily up to his lover as soon as Jeongguk had pulled his gloves back on, both pairs. “Good job, my love,” the blonde pirate chimed and kissed him, a quick and loud peck on his lips before sauntering past him, steering his steps towards Goto Port. “I’m so proud of my little goldmine.”

Jeongguk grimaced at the nickname, but the scowl melted into a grin within the second, and he was quick to pass half the gold over to Jin before hurrying after his lover. “Oh, young love,” the cook said with a sigh, a smile on his lips as he shook his head. “I remember when I was as foolishly enamored as those two.”

Jimin heard Sungsin emit a dry snort at Jin’s words. “You… you had someone special?” he asked carefully, not wanting to intrude on his privacy. “Someone you loved?”

“I did, and I still do,” Jin said firmly. “We were younger than Jeongguk when we fell in love, and
loving one another aboard a pirate ship is difficult, but just like Joon and I, those two are making it work to the best of their abilities.” Jimin barely had time to widen his eyes in surprise at the name that fell from the cook’s lips before Jin nudged his shoulder and pointed after Jeongguk and Taehyung. “You go with them,” he said. “Sungsin, Hisashi and I will buy everything I need for the kitchen, so you three make sure to get everything else.”

Albeit somewhat dazed from Jin’s confession, Jimin nodded and settled into a run to catch up to the two others, racking his brain to process what he’d learned since stepping off the dinghy back at the shores. Love, he thought, love amongst pirates, amongst the ones the whole world knew to be cruel and heartless, utterly without empathy. They were ruthless, Jimin knew; after all, he’d watched Taehyung run a sword through Minjoon’s foot, he’d heard the blonde pirate confess to killing innocents, yet here he was, admiring the bond Taehyung shared with Jeongguk, one strong enough to persist even through the navigator’s blessing, a blessing that seemed more like a curse to them.

“Alright,” Taehyung huffed when the three of them stepped past the first lines of houses of Goto Port, grinning as if he was about to embark on the greatest of quests. “What’s our first stop?”

“Jin said they’ll take care of restocking the pantry,” Jimin said and looked around. “What else do we need?”

“Medicine and cloth for bandages for Hoseok,” Jeongguk said, bringing up a hand to count on his fingers. “Ropes and nails for Xiao, and parchment and ink for me and the captain.” He pursed his lips in thought. “New quills, too.”

Jimin felt himself tense at the mention of quills, his thoughts straying to the unfinished eagle feathers still waiting on the small table in his house. It seemed like an eternity ago that he had sat there, working the feathers with his little knife after a day out in the forest, after speaking to his mother’s grave, yet less than a full day had had time to pass since then. The raid on Jeju Village had happened during the wee hours of the night, and it was barely evening yet.

“Jeongguk.”

The gravity of Taehyung’s voice snapped Jimin out of his thoughts and he looked up to find the blonde pirate had come to a halt, his eyes trained on something a bit further down the main street. When Jimin followed his gaze, he found a group of four men standing outside what must’ve been the local tavern. They were conversing loudly, glee in their voices as they laughed; if not for the ultramarine uniforms and the steel swords at their waist, Jimin wouldn’t have paid them any heed at all.

“Shit. Mariners,” Jeongguk mumbled quietly, and Jimin’s heart leapt to his throat. “They’re really here.” He gently nudged Taehyung’s ribs to get him to walk; openly staring at them could warrant their suspicion. “Should we go find Jin?”

“No,” the blonde pirate said, his voice uncharacteristically stiff. “No, a big group catches the eye quicker than a small one. Let’s just… let’s just find the infirmary and get what we need.”

Jimin’s eyes lingered on the mariners, turning the sight of them into his memory. Their uniforms were formal, of dark blue cloth and black leather, with white trousers and high boots of dark leather. The swords they carried seemed identical for all four of them; the only difference in their appearances was that one of them wore a broad hat with a large, beautiful owl feather, a clear symbol of his higher rank.

Mariners, Jimin thought with the ghost of a smile tugging at the corners of his lips, not quite daring to believe his luck. They will help me get back home.
He thought about how he would reach out to them all the way to the infirmary, too caught up in his own plans to notice just how off Taehyung seemed from his usual self. Gone was his cheeriness and his rectangular smile. Instead, he kept his lips pressed into a tight line beneath the scarf, his jaw clenched, and if not for Jeongguk’s gloved hand holding his firmly, the quartermaster would’ve probably turned right around to do lord knows what to the unsuspecting mariners.

Jimin didn’t resurface from his thoughts until they were standing at the counter inside the little infirmary, his eyes widening in surprise as he listened to Jeongguk speak near fluent Japanese as he told the lady behind the counter what they were looking for. Jimin didn’t understand what they said, and he was content with simply listening until the apothecary turned her eyes on him and frowned as she spoke.

The navigator turned to him with a sheepish smile. “She’s asking if it was me or Taehyung who did that to you,” he said awkwardly and pointed to the left side of Jimin’s face, where the bruise still stood out, deep purple against his skin.

“If it was you who- no,” Jimin exclaimed in shock, quickly raising his hands to wave them in denial, fervently shaking his head at the lady. “No, no, it wasn’t either one of them, th-they’re my friends, they would never…” His voice trailed off into silence when he realized what he’d said, what he’d called these two pirates. The word had slipped past his lips with ease, hesitation rising only now, after it had already been spoken. “Th-they wouldn’t do that,” he finished meekly, his voice thin.

The lady seemed content with that and nodded before turning back to Jeongguk and saying something that must’ve been an apology, bowing her head while she spoke. The navigator emitted a nervous chuckle and shook his head, most likely to dismiss her apology before returning to listing the things they needed, and when Jimin turned away to try and gather his thoughts, his eyes fell on Taehyung, who was smiling at him, his joy obvious in his eyes.

Jimin could almost hear the crack in his resolve.

Don’t falter, he told himself sternly even as he returned the pirate’s smile with a cautious one of his own. You can’t go back to that ship. You can’t.

He told himself that, over and over, as he waited for Jeongguk to finish with their business. When the navigator paid for their purchase, the apothecary almost fainted on the spot when he placed a small chunk of pure gold on the counter, her eyes so wide they threatened to fall out of her skull as she stared at it. Once she’d recovered, she tried to protest, but Jeongguk refused to take it back, grinning happily, and the lady came around the counter to pull him into a suffocating hug, thanking him over and over and over again.

She was crying when she let him go, and the rift in Jimin’s resolve deepened.

He was clenching his fists so hard they were shaking when they left the infirmary, clasping his hands tightly behind his back to hide his tension. Taehyung seemed to be in a vastly better mood now, cooing and praising Jeongguk as they walked, his fingers toying with a lock of the navigator’s hair, and while Jeongguk batted his hand away several times, he was smiling as well, completely content with the repeated action. He carried the supplies in a bag over his shoulder, the soft chime of glass phials bumping against each other steadily driving Jimin mad.

You have to go, he cried inwardly, you have to go now!

They’d reached halfway to the carpentry by the time he finally found his courage, meek as it was. “U-um,” was all he managed at first, barely resisting the urge to shrink into himself when the two pirates turned to look at him. “I… I have t-to…” He cursed himself internally, cursed his hesitation,
cursed the part of him that thought of Taehyung as his friend, as someone he’d be willing to return to the Agust for. “I have to, uh, to go… to go, uh…”

And when Taehyung willingly yet unknowingly gave him a way out, Jimin cursed his heart for almost breaking.

“You gotta go take a piss?” the blonde pirate asked, laughing when Jimin scrunched his nose in distaste at his crude words. “Then go find somewhere to relieve yourself, Chim. You want us to wait for you here?”

“N-no,” Jimin said and shook his head, hoping the smile he forced onto his lips was convincing. “That’s fine, I-I’ll find the carpentry after… after I’m done.”

Taehyung nodded, and just like that, the two of them turned around to resume walking, not a single ounce of doubt in Jimin’s return. The fact alone made him want to tell them, to shout at them that he was about to leave, that he would never see them again, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t do that, everything would be over if he did.

So he dug his teeth into his bottom lip and turned around, swallowing down his sorrow as he steered his steps towards the tavern where he’d seen the mariners.

They weren’t there when he arrived, and he felt a thrill of dread run down his spine at the possibility that they’d already left, that his opportunity had passed. They’re inside, he told himself and quickly made his way to the door, taking a deep breath before pushing it open.

The heavy stench of smoke and alcohol hit him full in the face and almost made him gag. The tavern was dimly lit and full of noise, raucous laughter and drunken shouts, both of which Jimin was far too accustomed to to be deterred by; he’d seen his fair share of drunken brawls back home. With a hand pressed to his nose, he moved into the tavern, his eyes searching for anything blue and white, his hope diminishing for every second that passed without him finding what he was looking for.

When he finally caught sight of a broad, feathered hat, his knees almost folded in relief. He quickly navigated his way past the multitude of customers until he reached their table, and without giving it much thought, he reached out and touched the higher ranked officer on the shoulder. “E-excuse me,” he said thinly, his breath thick in his throat when all four of them turned to look at him, their conversation interrupted. “I-I need your help.”

The man he’d touched arched an eyebrow at him, impatience obvious on his face. “We’re off duty right now,” he stated flatly before shrugging Jimin’s hand off his shoulder and taking another swig of ale. “Find someone else to help you, boy.”

Whatever Jimin had expected to hear, this certainly wasn’t it. “P-please,” he stuttered, alarm rising in his chest as his eyes darted from the commanding officer to his subordinates. “I-I really need your help. I’ve escaped from a pirate ship, I need your help to get away from them, please, I don’t know where I am or where I could go!”

He’d unintentionally raised his voice, gaining the attention of those seated closest, and that in turn caused the mariner to heave an agitated sigh, begrudgingly setting down his cup onto the table. “Fine, let’s hear it, then,” he huffed and fixated Jimin with an almost accusatory look. “Where did you escape from, boy? What ship? What crew?”

Jimin swallowed thickly. “I-I don’t know what the crew is called,” he said, the words heavy on his tongue, “but the ship is called the Agust.” The mariner stiffened visibly. “And the captain’s name is Min Yoongi, the-”
“The Black Fox of the East,” the officer finished for him, his voice barely above a whisper. His eyes had widened to the size of saucers, a mix of dread and suspension settling over his face, an expression his subordinates all shared, and Jimin was beginning to worry he’d managed to paralyze them somehow when the mariner shot to his feet, both of his hands clamping down on Jimin’s shoulders. “Are you sure?” he asked fervently, his face so close Jimin could smell the stench of ale on his breath. “Are you absolutely sure it was him? Min Yoongi?”

“Y-yes,” Jimin said and tried to untangle himself from the man’s grip, but he was much stronger. “He, he’s dressed all in black, with black hair and pale skin, a-and he’s about as tall as me, and, and he struck me across the face with his left hand, it’s prosthetic, made out of metal a-and ceramic, I think.”

“It’s him.” The mariner looked almost manic when he straightened up, his lips moving as if he was speaking to himself. “Alright,” he said at last, turning to his men and flicking his head in a commanding motion. They all scrambled to their feet at once, one of them leaving a few coins on the table to pay for their ale before they made haste for the exit. “Alright, boy, you’ll be safe now,” the mariner promised and shifted his grip to Jimin’s arm instead. “We’ll take you to our warship so you can tell us exactly what happened. Our vice admiral will want to hear what you have to say.”

Jemin’s eyes widened at that, but before he could do more than exclaim in surprise, he was being jostled out of the tavern, the mariner pulling him along by his arm. “W-wait, there’s a warship nearby?” he asked, incredulous. “And a vice admiral? Here?”

“Yes,” the man said and nodded without looking at Jimin, his eyes trained on where they were going. “Sir Jukan wanted us to drop anchor here to gather information on pirate activities across the waters surrounding Japan, but this…” He looked like he didn’t quite know what to do with himself. “This he certainly didn’t expect.”

There was something in his demeanor that prevented Jimin from feeling the sense of security he should; he was in the hands of the mariners now, the officers who fought to preserve the law across the seven seas, yet something about the man holding his arm was less than convincing. He seemed almost excited at the possibility that Min Yoongi and his crew were nearby, something Jimin felt was the last emotion one should experience under these circumstances.

He didn’t have time to ask any more questions before they reached the harbor, and Jimin’s eyes widened at the sight of the warship. It was enormous, nearly twice the size of the Agust, painted blue and black to match the colors of the mariner uniforms. The sails were pure white and pristine in the light of the evening sun, and at the tallest point of the main mast, a blue flag fluttered in the wind, proudly portraying their sigil in white; a sea eagle proudly spreading its wings, a sword in one talon.

“Come on,” the mariner urged, pulling Jimin out of his admiration and towards a gangway to board the impressive vessel. “Sir Jukan will be waiting.”

The man was greeted by every single deckhand they passed once they’d boarded, the recruits and swabbies pausing whatever it was they were doing to salute him. Jimin tried to count them all, but there were too many of them; too many mariners dressed in blue and white, and finally, he managed to grasp onto that sense of security. No pirates would be able to reach him here.

He was led to the quarterdeck, where the mariner finally released his arm and told him to wait out here while he spoke with the vice admiral. Jimin nodded, and then he was left alone, his skin prickling with the feeling of being stared at by the unfamiliar crew, a sensation he’d already experienced once in the span of one day. He kept his eyes trained on the doors to the captain’s cabin, his hands clenched tightly behind his back as he tried his best to not think about the ones he was leaving behind.
Taehyung and Jeongguk had probably began to get worried by now, wondering where he was and what was taking him so long. They would leave the carpentry to search for him and when they wouldn’t find him, they’d look for Jin and the others to help. After that, they’d be forced to return to the Agust without him, and stand before their captain and explain how Jimin had managed to slip through their fingers when he was supposed to be kept in the brig.

*Don’t think about it*, he told himself sternly. *It’s not your responsibility, it’s not your fault. You don’t belong on that ship, even they have to understand why you’d leave.*

Jimin had barely finished the thought before the doors to the captain’s cabin were opened and the mariner stepped out, for some reason feeling the need to grab him by the arm again and escort him inside. Jimin parted his lips to protest, to tell the man he was more than capable of walking on his own, but his words died in his throat when his eyes landed on the man waiting inside.

His posture alone was more intimidating than Jimin would’ve thought possible; he stood straight as a ruler, his dark uniform pristine without even a single crease. From his shoulders hung a heavy coat, reaching as far down as to his ankles, the white material lined with the same ultramarine blue as the rest of his uniform. Underneath the high collar of the coat, Jimin could see a flash of gold, a glimpse of the gilded shoulder boards he knew mariners were awarded upon reaching a certain rank, and this man, the rank he carried was one of the highest ones.

“You stand before sir Son Jukan, Vice Admiral of the Mariners,” the mariner announced. “Also known as the Son of the Sea, pride of the eastern ocean’s justice.”

Jimin’s eyes widened at that; he’d definitely heard the name before, spoken in deep reverence amongst the villagers of Jeju. *The Son of the Sea*, so named due to his incredible knowledge of naval combat, as if he was born out of the ocean to bend it to do his bidding whenever he clashed with a pirate crew. He was a highly respected officer in the ranks of the mariners, and now Jimin stood before him, asking for his help to get back to his home.

“S-sir,” he said tensely, lacking any sort of knowledge on how he should go about greeting such a highly ranked officer of the law. “Th-thank you for helping me.”

For several seconds, the vice admiral’s face was utterly impassive as he observed Jimin, doing nothing but stare at him until he felt his skin beginning to crawl in discomfort, and Jimin was on the verge of asking him what he was looking at when the vice admiral finally spoke.

“It is good to have you here,” Son Jukan said with a smile that did not reach his eyes, a coldness to them that dug a crack into whatever sense of security Jimin had managed to grasp onto. “I do hope you can provide me with sufficient information to finally bring an end to the Black Fox’s reign.”

**Chapter End Notes**

…… uh oh.

Do I sense an ominous foretelling of… poor Jimin part 4.? Or will it be part 1 of “Jimin what have you done”..?

The mariner ranking in this universe goes as follows, from lowest to highest: Recruit,
Junior Lieutenant, Lieutenant (Lt.), Lt. Commander, Commander, Captain, Rear Admiral, Vice Admiral, Admiral, Fleet Admiral.

Another historical note - Midas, whom Jeongguk’s dubbed after, was a legendary king of Greece who could turn everything he touched to gold. It was a curse as much to him as it is to our precious Golden Maknae; Midas starved to death seeing as he couldn’t eat without turning his food to gold, which, as we all know, is inedible. (lmao what kind of sentence was that holy shit I’m pretentious!) I suppose Midas was never smart enough to wear gloves… or two pairs of gloves… like our Gukkie!

ALSO. I’m lowkey hating myself for throwing such a cruel thing into the midst of Taekook. Like, seriously, why the fuck would I do that? I just, I got the idea and it was perfect, because it’s the Golden Maknae, how perfect would it be if he was ACTUALLY golden? BUT WHY THE FUCK DID I DO THIS?! THIS IS SO GODDAMN MEAN. THEY’RE SO FUCKING IN LOVE AND I HAVE TO GO AND THROW A “Nope, sorry Jeongguk, you’ll never get to feel the warmth of Taehyung’s skin, and sorry Tae, you’ll never get to feel the direct touch of Jeongguk’s hands,” LIKE WHAT THE FUCK IS MY PROBLEM. I’M SO ANGRY AT MYSELF, ISTG.

//curls up into a ball and sobs

BUT THOSE TAEGI BROTHER FEELS THO, HOLY SHIT. YOONGI MAKES HIM WEAR A MASK SO THAT HE CAN ALWAYS HAVE THE OPTION TO LEAVE AND LIVE A NORMAL LIFE, I’M SOBBING.

//crawls over to corner and cries

JEONGGUk I’M SORRY. TAEHYUNG I’M SORRY. JIMIN I’M SORRY.

… This fic is making me dish out more apologies than I have so far in all of 2017. Wow.

NEXT TIME! ON MONDAY! CHAPTER 6 - The Law - AND OH LORD THE LAW IT IS.
The Law

Chapter Summary

Vaguely, it dawned on Jimin how alike the mariner and the pirate captain were, both men of pride, both men who succumbed easily to their anger, but something about Jukan was almost worse. While Jimin had been terrified before Min Yoongi, he’d always had the possibility of clinging to his anger and retaliating, perhaps to foolish degrees, but not with Son Jukan. The man carved fear deep into Jimin’s core, and he hadn’t even began to voice the same kind of threats as the pirate captain had.

When Jimin managed to find his voice, it was high-pitched and thin, just shy of a quiver. “W-what will you do to them if you find them?” he asked in an attempt to stall. For what, he did not know. “Th-the pirates.”

Chapter Notes

Poor Jimin part 4 + Jimin what have you done part 1.

Oh lord.

BUT ANYWAY!! ON WITH THE SHOW! And by show I mean music!

Yuta Kitamura - Firelink Shrine
Yuta Kitamura - Premonition
Brand X Music - Altered States
Arn Anderson - Dawn

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I do hope you can provide me with sufficient information to bring an end to the Black Fox’s reign.”

Jemin parted his lips and closed them again, at a complete loss for words as he stared at the vice admiral. Bring an end to his reign, he repeated inwardly, the thought making him even more bewildered than before; that was definitely not why he was here. He didn’t want to think about the pirates and their captain anymore. He simply wanted to go home.

“I-I’m sorry, sir,” he said carefully and made a brave attempt at convincing himself he imagined the twitch in the vice admiral’s jaw, “but I don’t think I could be of much, uh, much help. I don’t, I don’t know anything about warfare or, or combat or anything of the sort.”

The mariner looked at him for a moment before heaving a sigh and gesturing for Jimin to take a seat opposite of his desk, and when Son Jukan himself sat down in his high-back chair, he smiled at Jimin in a way that was probably meant to be reassuring, a sign that he was a man to be trusted. To Jimin, however, it came off as nothing but stiff and condescending, his eyes still holding that unpleasant
chill.

“Let us start from the beginning,” the vice admiral suggested and tapped a finger against his desk. “Tell me what happened to you. My subordinates have informed me you were held captive aboard the Agust.”

Jimin took his time before answering, pressing his lips into a thin line as he observed the mariner. He had a thin face and sharp eyebrows that seemed to be set in a constant glower, and hooded eyes that didn’t radiate a single shred of warmth. His hair was dark, cropped short and slicked back to leave his forehead bare, as if to ensure his vision would always remain unimpaired. His jaw was sculpted and clenched firmly, Jimin noticed, as if the vice admiral was biting his words back.

“Alright,” Jimin said at last, his voice sounding off even to his own ears; he felt incredibly uncomfortable under the man’s piercing gaze. “They, uh, the pirates, they attacked my home, Jeju Village, in the middle of the night. They were after supplies, I later learned, and… and in return for their departure, the villagers of my town, they…” His voice trailed off and he swallowed, the words thick in his throat. “They offered me as tribute,” he finished stiffly, his hands clenching in his lap.

“Why?”

Jimin blinked, momentarily breaking away from his tension at the curt question. “Why what?”

“Why did they offer you?” Son Jukan asked and tapped his finger to his desk again.

“I…” Jimin wasn’t quite sure what it was that made him hesitate to tell the mariner about his blessing, but he couldn’t bring himself to speak the words; the vice admiral radiated such untrustworthiness, it filled Jimin with an odd premonition, a feeling that the mariner would somehow use the knowledge of his blessing against him. “B-because of my appearance,” Jimin lied instead. “With the unnatural color of my hair, they believed the pirates could… could sell me for a better price than anything the village had to offer.”

It took a lot of self-restraint to not avert his eyes from the vice admiral’s, holding his cool gaze until the man nodded in motion for him to continue speaking, not an ounce of sympathy in his voice when he spoke, “Go on.”

“R-right.” Jimin took a steadying breath and clasped his hands in his lap. “Min Yoongi didn’t like that his crew had brought me instead of the supplies they needed,” he said, a twinge of pain traveling across his cheek. “He struck me across the face and had me locked up in the brig, saying that’s where I belonged. He probably would’ve killed me if not for…”

Again, he hesitated to speak the truth, and then the second lie fell from his lips before he even realized what he was saying. “If his crew hadn’t told him what the villagers of my home told them, that I could be worth something if sold into slavery.”

Son Jukan nodded slowly, and Jimin hoped he had believed him; he couldn’t quite tell, the mariner’s stone-set expression utterly undecipherable. “Someone from the crew let me up on deck after several hours, I don’t know how many,” he carried on either way, fighting against the nervous prickle of his skin as the vice admiral looked at him, unblinking. “…I had no idea where we were, but I heard some of the pirates talking about stopping by Fukue Island to get the supplies they were supposed to get at Jeju.”

“Stopping by?” The mariner leaned forward in his seat, his fingers ceasing their insistent tapping against the desk. “What was their intended course?” he asked, the first hint of curiosity subtly hidden away in his tone. “If Fukue Island was merely a supply stop, where were they sailing after?”
Shanghai, Jimin’s mind supplied instantly, but the name never even made it to his vocal cords, stuck inside his head and refusing to budge from there. “I-I don’t know,” he said meekly and hoped the vice admiral couldn’t hear the stutter in his voice. “I… I never caught that part.”

Son Jukan’s displeasure was plain to see in the way he gave up even on his mediocre attempt at a reassuring smile, his lips curling down into the makings of a scowl. “Very well,” he said curtly, the sharpness in his voice intensifying Jimin’s discomfort. “Then what?”

“Then I escaped,” Jimin stated and hoped it would suffice as an explanation; the last thing he wanted to do was to tell this man that Taehyung and Jeongguk, and Jin and the others were still somewhere in Goto Port, perhaps even searching for him. “As soon as they dropped anchor, I-I escaped and swam to shore.”

“They means the Agust is somewhere close,” the vice admiral mused to himself, and Jimin pressed his lips together. “If you, who comes from a village that focuses primarily on farming and not seafaring or fishing, were able to swim ashore, the ship can’t have been anchored very far off the coast.”

Jimin felt a cold sweat form at the base of his skull and spread a shiver down his spine as he wondered how on earth Son Jukan knew about Jeju Village’s main livelihood, or anything at all about the small village. It was as insignificant as could be, a tiny town that provided no sort of stability or income for the mainland, yet somehow, the mariner seemed to know quite a bit about it.

The Son of the Sea, Jimin thought and tightened his clenched hands further. Knows everything there is to know about the ocean and all its little islands.

He tried not to show his apprehension as he watched the vice admiral flick his wrist in a commanding gesture at the mariner officer still standing by the doors. They sat in silence until the man had left, most likely to lead a search party around the island, and the instant the doors had closed behind him, Son Jukan spoke again. “It is good that you came to us,” he stated and stood up, yet Jimin felt anything but good. “You managed to escape that dreaded ship. You should be grateful you’re still alive.”

The effect of his words was instantaneous; Jimin bristled, his discomfort easing slightly to give way for his anger, brought on by the familiarity of the vice admiral’s statement. “People keep telling me that,” he said lowly and turned his eyes to glare out the tall windows of the captain’s cabin instead, as if he could see the Agust and its captain on the waters outside. “That I should be thankful for being allowed to live.”

Two entire beats of silence passed before the mariner emitted a dry scoff, and when he raised his voice again, it was laced in venom, dripping with disdain. “Do you even know who he is?” he asked almost condescendingly. “Do you know anything about the captain of that ship?”

Caught off guard by the abrupt tone of contempt, Jimin looked up at him, suddenly very aware of the fact that he was still seated while Son Jukan stood, towering over him like predator over prey. “He’s Min Yoongi,” Jimin said tentatively, the muscles of his arm drawing themselves taut on pure instinct. “The Black Fox of the East.”

“And you don’t know what that means, do you?” When Jimin didn’t respond, the vice admiral heaved a frustrated sigh and shook his head. “The Black Fox is one of the Four Winds, the Cardinals of the Seas, whatever you want to bloody call them,” he told Jimin in a voice of ill concealed impatience. “He, as you do know, is of the East. To pirates and scum alike, Min Yoongi rules the eastern seas, governs over them like royalty. He sails his cursed ship wherever he desires and commits whatever heinous crime he pleases, and the disgraced underworld of the seas treat him like some sort of emperor for it.”
He scoffed again, although the sound trailed off into something more akin to a growl, and Jimin found himself having difficulties to swallow the thickness in his throat. He’d known all along that the pirate captain was infamous across the seas, a man wanted dead in every corner of the world, but Min Yoongi being so highly regarded amongst pirates was news to him. A good man, Taehyung had called him repeatedly. A good man regarded as a ruler by the most vicious of criminals, the most heartless of outlaws.

For the umpteenth time that day, Jimin wondered how he was still alive, but this time, the reasoning behind the thought was different.

His terrible musings were interrupted when the vice admiral resumed his rant. “What a joke,” Son Jukan spat, his posture rigid as a bowstring. “That man, a ruler. And not just him; beside him, there are three others who govern over the vicious seas. The Pirate Prince of the West, the Long-toothed Tiger of the North, and the Red Plague of the South.”

A thrill of fear ripped through Jimin’s chest, a sensation like he’d been shot with an arrow; the last name triggered a horrifying memory within him, a memory of the first time he’d ever heard about pirates. The Red Plague, the pirate’s name had been, the pirate who had eradicated entire villages and viciously mutilated every single human being that was unfortunate enough to cross his path.

The vice admiral went on without paying him any heed, seemingly too enraptured in his own hateful words to notice Jimin’s distress. “Pirate scum, every last one of them,” he hissed and closed a hand around the hilt of the sword at his waist, clutching it so firmly his knuckles began to whiten. “They make themselves out to be better than the rest, arrogant and cruel, boasting of their crimes and wearing crowns on their heads for the horrors they’ve committed. And Min Yoongi…”

His voice trailed off and he exhaled slowly, his breath quivering with his rage. “That traitorous bastard sails under a black flag,” he said, his tone and austere. “Taunting us, cajoling us, laughing in our faces as he uproots the order we struggle so hard to build.”

Jimin found himself holding his breath as he listened, genuinely frightened by the sheer, seething anger the vice admiral exuded. Even his curiosity hesitated to latch onto the fact that Son Jukan clearly had a personal past with the pirate captain, a past that fuelled the hatred he couldn’t even seem to control. Jimin pressed himself as far back in his chair as he could, half tempted to get out of it and bolt for the door, and he parted his lips to say something, anything to break the tension that was almost crushing.

“U-um-” he began, but choked on his breath when the vice admiral rounded on him, malice shining in his eyes.

“You say he struck you?” the mariner asked harshly and pointed at his cheek, disdain clear as day in his voice. “He gave you that bruise? He’s done far worse. He’s done far worse to me. I stood alongside him for years. We were brothers, closer than brothers, pride of the mariners.” Jimin’s eyes widened in shock at what he heard, but Son Jukan carried on without pause, allowing no room for questions. “We rose easily through the ranks, and the fleet admiral had already declared his intentions to make us admirals one day. The Son of the Sea and the White Fox, the unbeatable duo, the pair destined to keep the ocean’s peace, and what did he do?”

He bit out the question through gritted teeth, his grip on the hilt of his sword tightening to the point Jimin could hear the creak of his skin against the rough metal. “He turned against us,” the vice admiral spat, outraged bitterness enveloping every last syllable. “We were facing our promotion to captains, following a successful capture of a pirate crew amidst a vicious raid on a fishing village, but he turned against us, he turned against me, and for what?” His voice dropped into a hiss, a sound that made the hairs on Jimin’s arms stand up straight. “To save some pirate scum from the noose.”
He fell silent after that, breathing as if he’d been running, and Jimin found he was now every bit as afraid as he had been aboard the Agust, if not more so. The vice admiral seemed almost manic in his rage, gripping his sword as if it was all he could do to not draw it and hack his way to the vengeance he so obviously and desperately desired. And I’m a stepping stone, Jimin realized, the thought making it harder to breathe. He knows I know where they are. He knows I lied.

True enough, when Son Jukan regained his composure enough to turn his eyes on Jimin again, they were brimming with the same rage his voice held, the same contempt he’d wielded when speaking of the pirate captain. “Where are they?” he demanded and rounded the desk until he was standing directly before Jimin. “Where did they drop anchor? Tell me.”

Vaguely, it dawned on Jimin how alike the mariner and the pirate captain were, both men of pride, both men who succumbed easily to their anger, but something about Jukan was almost worse. While Jimin had been terrified before Min Yoongi, he’d always had the possibility of clinging to his anger and retaliating, perhaps to foolish degrees, but not with Son Jukan. The man carved fear deep into Jimin’s core, and he hadn’t even began to voice the same kind of threats as the pirate captain had.

When Jimin managed to find his voice, it was high-pitched and thin, just shy of a quiver. “W-what will you do to them if you find them?” he asked in an attempt to stall. For what, he did not know. “Th-the pirates.”

“I will do my duty,” the vice admiral stated without a second of hesitation. “I will rain hell on that ship and every last pirate aboard, and send them to the bottom of the sea where they belong.” He straightened his back as he loomed over Jimin, and even with the evening sun shining on his back, a touch of gold, his eyes were nothing short of demonic. “And I will personally remove Min Yoongi’s head from his shoulders. There is no place for scum like him anywhere on this earth, and so I will personally remove that traitorous bastard from it.”

It took all the effort Jimin could muster to not shrink back against the chair and cower under the mariner’s gaze; it was as if Son Jukan’s promises of death had been aimed at him, not the pirates. Instead, Jimin bit the inside of his lower lip to stop it from trembling and clenched his fists so tightly his nails dug painfully into his palms, and he waited, dreading.

When Jukan spoke again, his voice was forcibly calm, an obvious indication that only a ghost of a fraction of his patience remained still. “Now,” he breathed, the veins of his neck prominent against his skin. “Tell me. Tell me where the Agust is.”

Jemin could’ve lied. He could’ve denied knowing anything, he could even have held his tongue and it would’ve been a better decision than the one he made. “I won’t,” he told the vice admiral, his voice cracking as he watched the outrage swiftly return to the man’s features. “Y-you plan on e-executing them. They d-don’t deserve that, no one deserves that. C-can’t you just, just arrest them or something, I… I thought that’s what the mariners do, not… not—”

“Not what?” Like a snake lashing out, Son Jukan grabbed Jimin’s arm and pulled him out of his seat, his grip devastatingly harsh. “We do what is necessary to keep the peace,” he growled, his lips curling back to bare his gritted teeth and cause Jimin’s instincts to go haywire with fear. “Those pirates defile the laws of men with their mere existence! They spit in the face of kings and emperors and refuse to obey the laws that make us human, the laws that raise us above animals! They need to be eradicated, every last one of them, and I will begin from the top!” He shook Jimin roughly, his nails digging gouges into his arm. “Tell me where they are, boy!”

“N-no!” Jimin cried and tried to wrench himself free, yet he didn’t look away, refusing to let the predator’s gaze go for even a fraction of a second. “Not until you swear there won’t be any more bloodshed! That’s not what I want!” He blinked hard against his tears, his breathing shallow in his
chest. “I don’t want any of them to die, so if I tell you where they are, it’s so that you can bring them in for a fair trial!”

The vice admiral emitted a bark of disbelieving laughter and tightened his grip to the point Jimin’s hand began to feel numb. “What fair trial do you think those pirates will get?” he rumbled, his voice like the churning of a storm. “They’re murderers! Thieves, rapists, scum of the earth! Any trial they’d get would end in a hanging, so why bother with a middle man when the results are unchangeable?!”

“Because that’s the law!” Jimin shouted, desperately trying to claw his way free from Jukan’s grip. “Every living man is entitled to a fair trial, no matter their crime! If you kill them without sentencing them fairly before the judges of our laws, then, like you said, you’re no better than an animal!” He drew a quivering breath, and sealed his own fate. “Then you’re no better than a pirate!”

The silence that followed his words was crushing. The mariner froze, his eyes wide as he stared down at Jimin, wearing an expression like he’d seen a ghost. Jimin was breathing heavily, his throat aching with every sharp, high-pitched inhale, and for every passing second, the terror in his chest escalated.

Somewhere, in the back of his mind, Jimin wondered if there was still a single place on earth left where he wouldn’t have to fear for his life.

When Son Jukan recovered from the shock of his words, he looked almost crazed, more like a rabid animal than the creatures that lived in the forest where Jimin had spent his childhood. “A pirate, you say,” the vice admiral said slowly, his voice breaking on the word, as if it physically pained him to even speak it. “I’ve given my life to uphold the peace of this world, I have kept my faith in the law even when the man I considered a brother betrayed me, I have given my everything for the protection of those unfortunate enough to fall in a pirate’s path, and you-”

His voice was escalating with every sentence, and the hand that wasn’t holding onto Jimin was still clutching the hilt of his sword, ready to draw it any moment. “You come seeking my help,” Jukan continued, on the brink of insanity, “and then refuse to let me help you, and for what? Because you don’t want those pirates to die?!”

“Let me go!” Jimin cried, exclaiming when the vice admiral shook him again, so hard he staggered back a step.

“You will not keep me from my justice!” Son Jukan declared loudly, his voice ringing terror in Jimin’s ears. “So help me god, I will have you tell me where they are! Even if I have to force the words out of you myself, I will not allow you to keep me from the vengeance that is rightfully mine!”

It was all Jimin could do to struggle, putting his all into his attempts to free himself from the vice admiral. “Let me go!” he screamed, but Jukan was beyond reason now. “Let me-”

“You’ll tell me where they are!” the mariner interrupted loudly, and the scrape of metal against metal made Jimin’s heart stop as Jukan began to unsheathe his sword, the blade catching on the edge of the scabbard with a soft screech. “Or I will carve the answer out of bones, strip away piece by piece until you-”

It was too much. Too much for Jimin to bear, the mariner’s words, his grip, the fear in Jimin’s chest. All of it, it was too much, and so his body reacted purely on instinct. With every cell in his body screaming at him to get away, to run, to find safety, he did the only thing he could think of to gain his freedom.
An odd tremor went through his arm as he lashed out and struck Son Jukan directly over the eye.

The effect was instantaneous. While the open-handed slap barely contained enough strength to make the vice admiral stagger, the shock of Jimin’s actions made him loosen his grip for just a fraction of a second. That split second was all Jimin needed, however, and he pried himself out of his grip, emitting only a sharp exhale as the mariner’s nails came free from his skin before he turned and ran as fast as his legs could carry him.

Jemin threw open the doors and burst out onto deck, almost barreling directly into a pair of deckhands standing outside. He barely managed to avoid them, nearly throwing himself off balance in his hurry to keep running, his eyes frantically searching for a path of escape. He found the gangway and made a beeline for it, ignoring every confused call and question that was thrown at him, only repeating the words, *get away*, in his head, over and over and over again.

At least until the very instant his foot touched the gangway, the same instant the doors to the captain’s cabin were thrown open again and a booming voice gave a command that stirred every mariner aboard the warship.

“*Apprehend that pirate!*” Son Jukan shouted, his voice bearing across the entire harbor. “Do not let him escape!”

Jemin didn’t slow down for long enough to look back, but he felt a tremor of movement in the gangway under his feet and knew that if he was caught, he would have no other chance of escape. He wanted to part his lips and cry out, to call the names of the only ones who could save him, but he didn’t; he didn’t have the right to do so, not after what he’d done, so Jimin gritted his teeth and swallowed down his voice and the tears that came with it, and ran as fast as he could.

His resolve carried until he felt a hand clamp down over his shoulder, an exclaim tearing its way up his throat as he was roughly pulled backwards and slammed into the hard surface of the docks, the impact jarring his lungs. “No!” Jimin screamed and clawed at the hands holding him down, kicking at the mariners who flocked around to restrain him. “*Let me go! Let me go, you can’t do this, you have no right, you can’t!* I won’t tell you anything, never!”

“Bring him back aboard the ship!” Son Jukan’s voice drowned out his screams, the harshness of his tone promising nothing but pain, but Jimin kept fighting the mariners who tried to pull him upright either way, thrashing wildly to get out of their grip. “Bring him to me!” the vice admiral barked as he stormed down from the quarterdeck to meet his subordinates halfway. “And fetch the irons!”

It took three mariners to get Jimin under control, one holding each of his arms while the last pressed hard against his back to force his shoulders and spine into a painful arch. *It hurts,* Jimin cried inwardly, but he ground his teeth to keep the words inside, refusing to let these people know his pain. “Let go of me!” he shouted instead, trying and failing to wrench his arms free. “Let me go, you bastards!”

His demand fell on deaf ears, and no matter how hard he struggle, no matter how firmly he pressed the soles of his bare feet against the gangway to resist, his strength could not outdo that of three grown men. And even if it could’ve, there were two dozen more mariners waiting to take his suppressors’ place.

Jemin knew he had lost his only chance for escape, but even so, he didn’t stop struggling until he was brought before Son Jukan, his eyes widening at the sight of the man.

The vice admiral was bleeding from two parallel gashes across his left eyebrow, as if someone had gouged him across the brow. The cuts were shallow, but facial wounds had a tendency to bleed a lot,
and this case was no exception. The red liquid seeped down the side of Jukan’s face, all the way
down to his chin, where it dripped onto the white collar of his coat. He swiped a hand across the
wound to keep the blood out of his eye, yet all it did was buy him a few seconds of unimpaired
vision.

“I knew there was more to you than you let on.” Son Jukan hissed and reached out to grab the wrist
of Jimin’s right arm, wrenching it out of his subordinate’s grip and holding it up to observe it. “A
blessing of Nature, is it?”

Jimin momentarily forgot his dread when his eyes landed on his right hand, all air leaving his lungs at
the sight of the rough, grey skin that spread unevenly from the tips of his fingers and halfway to his
wrist, the sporadic blotches of an incomplete transformation scattered across the back of his hand.
His nails were longer, sharper, more akin to claws, and smeared with a dark substance Jimin could
only associate with blood.

The state of his hand was steadily reverting back to normal, the rough skin of a bird’s talon fading to
give way for its human shape, looking almost as if it was disappearing into the pores of Jimin’s skin.
The sight had his mind reeling, and if he hadn’t witnessed Xiao’s skinchanging earlier that day, Jimin
would’ve surely descended into another fit of panic.

“What else did you lie about?” The vice admiral’s voice brought him back to reality, tearing his
attention away from his hand to glare up at the mariner. “You come aboard my ship and you claim to
be in need of my help,” Jukan spat and released Jimin’s arm in favor of once again rubbing the blood
out of his face. “And you lie to my face and try to tell me how the law works, as if I haven’t
dedicated my entire life to it!” He leaned forward, towering over Jimin. “Did he send you?” he
asked, his eyes boring holes into Jimin’s skull. “Did that traitorous bastard send you here?”

It was an absolutely ridiculous thought, that Jimin would be acting on Min Yoongi’s orders, that he
was a pirate, and he would’ve told the mariner as much, even in the face of terror; he had already decided exactly what he’d tell Son Jukan, which was nothing, nothing at all. “I won’t tell you anything,” he said again, the words falling from his lips in the form of
a hiss, although his voice cracked pitifully at the end. “I won’t help you execute anyone!”

“I already know what you are,” the vice admiral snapped. “There is no use in denying it. You said
you don’t want any of them to die. Do you take me for a fool?” He emitted a sound that was half a
scoff, half a growl, and Jimin felt the by now familiar thrill of fear stir in his chest, threatening to
constrict his airways. “Only a pirate would care so much for other pirates,” Jukan stated harshly. “I
know what you are.”

All Jimin did was to grit his teeth against the unfair accusation, his anger no match for the vicious
storm of dread within him, brought on by the vice admiral’s threats, the promises of what he’d do if
Jimin held his tongue. “You don’t know anything,” he breathed out and once again made an effort to
get out of the mariners’ grip, but his struggling brought him nothing but pain. “Not anything...!”

He recoiled involuntarily when Jukan emitted a sound of frustration and shifted backwards, and for a
split second, Jimin thought the man would strike him. He squeezed his eyes shut and braced himself,
but the pain never came. Instead, he was met with something much, much worse.

Jimin heard the rattle of the chains before he felt the heavy iron bangle close around his wrist, first his
right one and then his left. He snapped his eyes open in alarm and he parted his lips to protest, but his
voice died in his throat when he was greeted by the sight of a thick, metallic collar, gaping open as
one of the mariners brought it up against his neck.

Like the jaws of a beast, the collar clamped shut around his throat, and Jimin felt like all life had been
torn away from him.

“He’s a skinchanger,” Son Jukan barked at his subordinates as they led Jimin away, taking him to the brig while the vice admiral himself pressed his sleeve against the still seeping wound on his brow. “Chain his arms and legs to the floor to make sure he doesn’t escape! And his neck as well!”

“Yes, sir!”

The mariners’ simultaneous reply sounded oddly distant in Jimin’s ears, as if they were speaking through a veil of water. All he could focus on was the heavy tightness around his throat and wrists, the weight of the iron so overwhelming, it drained him on whatever it was that had made him fight so desperately not five minutes prior. He felt trapped and subdued, and the feeling was near paralyzing.

He vaguely even registered when he was jostled inside the brig, staring blankly at the row of iron bars stretching out across the narrow hallway. The mariners took him to the cell furthest in the back, where one of them produced a key to open the door so the others could shove Jimin inside.

They forced him onto his knees and began attaching the chains of his iron collar to the hooks embedded in the floor, leaving him just enough freedom to kneel on the floor without strangling himself. However, for his arms, they tightened the chains to the point he had to keep them halfway raised to the sides to not chafe the skin of his wrists. Finally, they snapped shackles shut around his ankles as well and tightened those chains so he’d have no chance to shift positions, even to lie down on the floor.

With that, the mariners stepped out of his cell and slammed the door shut, the devastating sound barely causing Jimin to even flinch. He dimly heard them lock his cell before they disappeared from his line of sight, and with the sound of the brig door closing, he was left alone in the silent darkness.

A near half hour had time to pass before Jimin finally managed to regain some semblance of his sanity, the reality of his situation slowly but surely sinking in and manifesting in the form of a white-hot lump in the depths of his chest. He pulled weakly against his shackles, but he couldn’t barely move his hands at all, the chains straining taut to hold him in place, and a shaky exhale gusted past his lips at the sensation of complete and utter restraint.

He wanted to raise his head and sit up straight, but he couldn’t do it. Not because of his chains, but because it was too hard. It was too much and too hard to bear, the weight of his situation, the accumulation of everything that had brought him here, brought him to his knees, to the chains that bound him to the floor.

This is not the law, Jimin thought numbly, swallowing hard against the burning sensation in his throat. This can’t be the law.

He refused to cry. Jimin bit the inside of his lip until it hurt and stared into the floor as if it held the answers to every question mankind had ever had, mustering every single ounce of willpower he possessed to keep his tears at bay. It didn’t matter if no one could see or hear him down in the brig; it was for his own sake that he held back his tears, held back the crippling anguish that would’ve forced him to face the thoughts that plagued his mind.

The thoughts of the ones he’d walked away from to come here.

The Agust had probably long since departed, raising its anchor as soon as the crew realized what Jimin had done. The ship would continue its journey to Shanghai, or perhaps somewhere else; he wouldn’t blame them if they suspected he’d told the mariners where they were sailing. The crew would continue with their lives as they always had, and Jimin would await whatever consequences
he had to face for his foolish mistake.

Dimly, Jimin realized he hoped the pirates were gone from the island’s coast. He hoped they were far back out on the sea, where a man such as Son Jukan could never reach them. No one deserved what the vice admiral had in mind, least of all Taehyung, Taehyung who had been so kind to him, who had smiled at him and brought him food and asked him to be his friend. Or Jeongguk, who had paid the pharmacist with a piece of gold that could feed a family for half a year. Or Hoseok, with his patient, encouraging smile and sarcastic wit.

All of them were pirates, criminals Jimin had known for less than a day, yet as he kneeled in the darkness of the brig, he realized they were some of the most genuine people he had ever met. They hadn’t shied away from who they were or what they’d done, not like Son Jukan, who hid his acts of horror behind the name of the law. There had been no falsehood to them, not like the young hunters back in Jeju Village, not like the ones who had cast him out.

I had to leave, Jimin tried to tell himself, but in this very moment, he couldn’t remember why. Nothing what he’d experienced on the Agust had been worse than this. Not Hisashi’s scathing words, not the constant worry that one of the pirates decided to turn on him and do whatever they pleased.

Not even Min Yoongi was worse than this, and that statement alone threatened to break Jimin’s resolve to not cry.

Slowly, he drifted back into a state of complete unawareness, his senses dulling themselves as time ticked on around him, minutes in the quiet darkness turning into hours. Or perhaps only a few seconds passed; his incoherent thoughts lost track of time completely and he give up on even trying to maintain any semblance of control before long. All he did was sit there, staring into the floor as he kneeled. The only thing he was properly aware of was the pain in his knees and his neck, his muscles aching with the posture he was forced to maintain.

Jimin had no idea how much time had passed when he felt the warship shift slightly, the floorboards moving under his legs and jostling him out of his near comatose state. His eyelids felt heavy as he blinked, but he didn’t raise his head; the mariners were probably casting off to sail somewhere where Jimin would face his punishment. It was the last thing Jimin wanted to think about, so he let his head hang, breathing slow to ease back into his half-aware state.

That proved a task more difficult than expected when his ears suddenly caught the distant, muffled sound of agitated shouts coming from somewhere above him, likely up on the warship’s deck. Reluctantly, Jimin swallowed against the thickness in his throat and raised his head, unsurprised when all he saw were the other cells of the dark brig, the sight of the iron bars providing him with little comfort. Still, he waited, ignoring the dull ache at the base of his skull in favor of listening intently, waiting for any sound that could help him understand what was going on.

When the first sound of the cannons fell, every single cell in Jimin’s body cried out in something painfully akin to relief.

The sound of crackling wood was deafening, the entire warship lurching from the impact, and Jimin exclaimed as his body was jarred back by the tremor, the iron collar digging harshly into his neck. “No,” he breathed out when he straightened up again, his eyes wide as he listened to the warship’s alarm bell ring through the chaos, sharp and frantic, signaling the approach of the enemy vessel. “It can’t be…”

The second cannonball hit the warship somewhere up on deck, a chorus of screams reaching all the way down to the brig as the quarterdeck seemed to be blown wide open, the wooden planks splitting
open under the impact. The third hit the stern, the force of it painfully jostling Jimin against his restraints as the entire ship quaked. “It can’t be,” he repeated hoarsely and screwed his eyes shut, roughly shaking his head to deny himself the spark of hope that flared in his chest. “It can’t…!”

The shouts and screams carried on even after the cannons stopped firing, the large projectile replaced by gunfire and the ring of swords meeting, the choir of battle reaching all the way down to where Jimin kneeled in his cell, the task of fighting back his tears now more difficult than ever. All he could do was listen, listen and keep telling himself to not hope, to not be relieved.

Jumin jerked in shock when the door to the brig was suddenly thrown open with so much force it slammed into the wall, his recoil so strong the iron collar dug harshly into his neck, and it was all he could do to not close his eyes against the sharp pain in his throat. He braced himself as best he could, his hands latching onto the chains that restrained them; if Son Jukan had come to take him, to use him somehow to turn the tides of the battle, Jimin would fight him with every fibre of his body.

He ground his teeth as he waited, listening to the heavy, frantic steps draw closer, their owner hissing a curse for every empty cell he passed. Jimin’s muscles drew themselves taut and he took a deep breath, only to have every last part of him deflate completely when the man came to a halt in front of his cell.

It wasn’t Son Jukan. It wasn’t even a mariner.

He was breathing heavily from the exertion it had cost him to come down here amidst the battle, his black clothes stained with the blood of those who’d stood in his way, and the pirate captain’s eyes were burning with the fires of hell as they landed on Jimin.

“I’ve come for you,” Min Yoongi seethed, his rough, austere voice sending a tremor through the depths of Jimin’s chest, “songbird.”

Chapter End Notes

HHHHHHHHOLY SHIT IT’S MIN YOONGI, Y’ALL, AND HE’S PISSED AS FUCK. I’M HOLLERING.

…………………….. Poor Jimin part 5 inc.

This chapter is also known as JIMIN’S REDEMPTION BECAUSE HOLY SHIT YOU GUYS GOT SO MAD AT HIM :’D even though, let’s be real, we’d all do the same. Kidnapped by pirates who half destroyed your hometown, beaten by the captain of the ship, forced to live in constant fear for your life… of course he’d go to the mariners! I mean, that’s like you saying you wouldn’t go to the police if you were bloody kidnapped! But shit ain’t as easy as good and evil~

BUT GODDAMN, JIMIN, YOU GOTTA LEARN TO HOLD YOUR TONGUE. SERIOUSLY, HOW ARE YOU STILL SURPRISED WHEN BAD SHIT HAPPENS TO YOU? YOU CAN’T JUST SAY WHATEVER YOU WANT TO PEOPLE WHO CAN KILL YOU. LIKE YEAH, GOOD JOB ON THAT SASS, BUT DON’T TELL THE MAN WHO OVERTLY HATES PIRATES THAT HE’S JUST AS BAD AS A PIRATE. THAT WON’T GET YOU PLACES. AND
YES, SLAP HIM, EVEN BETTER.

//facepalm.

For those I yelled at on Twitter about “this one part of the chapter” that made me lose my shit completely; Jimin was never supposed to slap Son Jukan, nor try to get off the ship. Jukan was supposed to take him straight to the brig and lock him up, but instead, I made Jimin smack him across the face, ALMOST reach freedom, and I threw in a spontaneous shapeshifting. SO YEAH, NOW YOU KNOW WHY I FREAKED OUT. IT WAS JUST SO GOOD.

I’m telling you now, uh, that the next chapter is gonna be pretty heavy. Like, it’ll be the “worst” chapter so far in terms of how Jimin is treated, but I promise and swear that the chapter following the next one will be the start of something better!! It won’t be anything irreparable, I swear, but we’re heading into the center of the storm, where the seas are the most violent, the rain the heaviest, but we’ll pass it, alright? Just bear with me and we’ll pass it!

So… with that in mind, stay tuned for chapter 7 - The Black Fox of the East - on Thursday!
Chapter Summary

When Yoongi pulled him up on deck, Jimin realized this must’ve been what hell looked like.

There was fire everywhere. It clung to the sails and rose from the part of the deck that had been split open completely, the rift reaching halfway across the ship, wide and gaping like the jaws of the devil. The flames clutched to the massive chunks of debris lying spread out all over the deck, having been blasted out of the rail, out of the masts, out of the deck itself, and the black smoke that rose from the flames seemed to almost encase the entire warship, surrounding it in a curtain of thick, unbreathable darkness.

Chapter Notes

/deep breath.

You are not prepared.

Music to go with this hellish chapter;

Ramin Djawadi - What is Dead May Never Die
Brand X Music - All Or Nothing
Two Steps From Hell - Freedom Fighters
Future World Music - The Prayer
Arn Anderson - Dawn
Jonas Göbel - Empty Streets

Good luck, my friend.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Jimin saw Min Yoongi through the heavy iron bars of his cell, half of him was relieved. The other half wanted his shackles to swallow him whole so the pirate could never touch him again.

The captain looked angrier than Jimin had ever seen him, his dark eyes livid with rage and his lips curled back over his gritted teeth, his jaw clenched so hard Jimin could almost hear the dull creak of his bones. The captain towered over him and made him feel so incredibly small, like a flightless bird cornered by a mountain cat, and the thought of the pirate being his only salvation from the numbing hell he’d experienced in the warship’s brig was near devastating.

The horrible sounds of battle still bled through the ceiling, screams echoing from somewhere above them, but Jimin found himself rendered deaf in the presence of his savior. Or his doom; he couldn’t quite tell which one the captain was.
“M-Min Yoongi,” he breathed, his hoarse voice barely above a whisper, trembling on every syllable of the man’s name. He barely managed to hide the flinch that jarred his body when Yoongi straightened up and took a step closer to his cell, but only because his entire body was already quivering. “You…”

The words died on the tip of his tongue as he watched the captain reach out for the iron bars, and the very instant the fingers of his right hand touched the cold metal, the bars began to bend out of shape, creaking loudly as they shifted. They snapped off at the ceiling with a harsh crack and continued to bow under the pirate’s touch, bending until the opening they’d created was big enough to let Min Yoongi step past them and into the cell.

With a thrill of dread, Jimin realized that even in Agust’s brig, he’d never truly been safe from the captain of the ship.

He held his breath, unmoving, as Yoongi bent down and gripped the iron collar around his neck, and while Jimin managed to bite back the exclaim that rose in his throat when the rough movement painfully jostled his throat, he wasn’t quite as successful when the collar snapped open in the captain’s hand. A choked whimper fell from Jimin’s lips as the weight left his neck, the relief flooding his veins so strong he almost broke under its pressure, tears burning behind his eyes. It was like he could breathe properly for the first time in years.

He kept his head down while the pirate made quick work of the rest of his shackles, releasing his arms and legs, and he didn’t look up until he heard the final set of chains fall heavy to the floor. He raised his head and watched Yoongi briskly walk towards the opening he’d created without sparing a single glance down at Jimin, still on his knees. “U-um,” Jimin began shakily, “I-I’m-”

The pirate captain was on him in an instant, clamping his hand down over Jimin’s mouth as his poorly contained rage seeped through the cracks of his restraint. “You keep your mouth shut, songbird,” Min Yoongi snarled, his voice a terrifying hiss. “I’ll deal with you when this is all over, believe me, but until then, don’t say a single fucking word or I’ll leave you to burn along with this ship.”

Every single cell in Jimin’s body screamed in alarm at the captain’s promise, yet all he could do was press his lips into a thin line and give a shaky nod. With a sound that was half a huff, half a growl, Yoongi withdrew his hand and stood up straight again, his movements so rough he almost shoved Jimin off whatever poor semblance of balance he had left, his knees aching.

“Get moving!” the pirate barked at him and stormed out of his cell, his eyes trained on the ceiling, lips curled down into a scowl when the muffled sound of cannon fire echoed from somewhere above them, the entire ship quaking under the force of the shot. “Those bastards started their retaliation.”

His last words were spoken to himself rather than Jimin, but they worked well enough to jar him into action. Jimin pushed himself to his feet and moved to take a step forward, but his legs wouldn’t carry his weight; after spending countless hours on his knees, disrupting the blood flow to his legs and feet, they cramped and gave in, and Jimin crashed hard onto the floor, a sharp cry tearing its way past his lips as his ribs took most of the impact.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake..!”

Before Jimin could even properly recover, he felt a hand close around his arm and pull him up, allowing him only a second to reassert his balance before he was dragged out of the cell, staggering to keep up. The captain’s touch was far from gentle, the cold, metallic fingers digging harshly into the flesh of his arm, but Jimin leaned into it either way, allowing it to take some of his weight off his
unsteady legs, his calves prickling with painful numbness for every step they took towards the door.

As soon as they stepped out of the brig, all air left Jimin’s lungs at the sight that awaited him, and he latched onto Min Yoongi’s arm with his free hand without even realizing it.

The hallway leading away from the brig were littered with corpses, unmovng bodies still seeping blood onto the floor. There were at least seven of them, their weapons still in hand, whatever good it had done them; every single fatal wound seemed to have been dealt to the mariners’ necks or hearts, a quick slash or an easy stab of the daggers tied to the pirate captain’s belt.

“O-oh my god,” Jimin breathed out, horror tearing at his chest and nausea churning in his stomach when he realized his left foot was standing in a puddle of blood, the liquid still warm. He subconsciously dug his fingers into the fabric of Yoongi’s sleeve, needing something, anything to hold onto, to stabilize himself against. “Th-they’re all…”

The captain didn’t give him much time to process the terrifying reality of their surroundings; when the sound of the raging battles above them escalated, he hissed a curse and made way for the stairs leading up to the deck, tugging a horrorstruck Jimin along after him. He seemed completely unaffected by the presence of the dead, and in his state of dread, Jimin only vaguely realized it was because it was Yoongi himself who had produced every last one of the corpses in their way.

It didn’t get any better after that.

When they found the stairs leading to the deck, Jimin got his first look on what a ship under attack by pirates looked like. There was a gaping hole in one of the walls, shattered planks and debris scattered everywhere, most of it burning, the thick smell of smoke filling the hallway. Through the open companionway, the screams of battle sounded even louder, accompanied by the sharp ring of metal meeting metal and the cracks of gunfire.

Jimin had to press a hand to his mouth when he saw the body of a mariner lying on the floor opposite of the gaping hole in the wall, his body bent oddly out of shape with a large piece of wood stood sticking out of his hip, large enough to crush through his bones and shred through his entrails. Bile rose to the back of Jimin’s mouth, but he forced it back down, his eyes watering with the sour burn it caused his throat.

When Yoongi pulled him up on deck, Jimin realized this must’ve been what hell looked like.

There was fire everywhere. It clung to the sails and rose from the part of the deck that had been split open completely, the rift reaching halfway across the ship, wide and gaping like the jaws of the devil. The flames clutched to the massive chunks of debris lying spread out all over the deck, having been blasted out of the rail, out of the masts, out of the deck itself, and the black smoke that rose from the flames seemed to almost encase the entire warship, surrounding it in a curtain of thick, unbreathable darkness.

Even through the heavy smokescreen, even in the black of night, the pirate ship stood out as clearly as if the sight of it had been carved into Jimin’s eyes. The Agust was smaller than the warship, but from where he stood, the vessel looked ten times as large, towering over him, and its black sails were almost comforting, welcoming Jimin back as if he’d never left.

Amidst the chaos aboard the warship, battles were taking place left and right, men fighting each other as if their lives depended on it. Which they did, Jimin realized dimly, his eyes wide in horror as he watched someone vaguely familiar drive a katana through a mariner’s chest and twist it before forcing the blade to shred through half of the man’s upper body, drawing a terrible scream from the mariner’s throat before he deflated, his life forcibly torn from him. “Come on, you scum!” Hisashi
shouted and went for his next target, cackling near hysterically as he went.

Jimin turned his face away sharply, the sight too dreadful, but no matter where he looked, all he saw was death. He saw Xiao, in his hybrid form, crush a mariner’s ribs with the enlarged paw of a bear, digging his claws into the man’s chest and crushing him against the deck. He saw mariners falling like flies from a spray of crossbow bolts, each of Lucya’s projectiles finding a home in a mariner’s throat, heart, or jaw while the sharpshooter herself was nowhere to be seen.

All around him, people were dying, and it was all Jimin could do to breathe.

“Move, songbird!”

The captain’s voice was like the crack of a whip, startling Jimin out of his terror in time to realize a mariner had set his eyes on him, drawing closer with a sword in hand. Jimin’s heart seized in his chest, but before he could do more than take a stumbling step backwards, Yoongi lashed out, detaching himself from Jimin in favor of taking on their aggressor.

As Jimin watched Min Yoongi fight for the first time, he understood why they called him the Black Fox.

The pirate captain was vicious in his movements, and he fought in a way that most people would say lacked honor, making use of whatever dirty trick he could without a shred of hesitation. He was quick and precise and used the mariner’s long reach against him; when the man swung his sword to cleave Yoongi open from collar to waist, the captain twisted on the heel and sidestepped the blade before leaning forward and burying one of his daggers into the back of the mariner’s knee.

While the man sank into a crouch with a pained exclamation, Yoongi yanked the knife out, turned around once more, and drove the blade into the mariner’s eye, not a trace of remorse in his stone-cold expression.

He didn’t stop there; another mariner had been stumbled within his reach, driven there by a pirate Jimin didn’t recognize. The mariner had his back to Yoongi, who reached out for his collar with his right hand while he plunged his left into a pile of burning debris, his prosthetic limb drawing out a handful of white-hot charcoal. The man turned, distracted by the captain’s touch on his shoulder, and was greeted with searing coal to his cheek, swiftly followed by a knife buried deep in his neck before he could even scream.

All Jimin could do was watch and see, see what happened to those who crossed paths with the Black Fox of the East.

“Clear the fore!” Yoongi barked at his crewman, who voiced an affirmative before turning and sprinting towards the front of the ship, dodging under a mariner’s sword on the way. The captain turned back to Jimin, who instinctively recoiled, but Yoongi wasn’t even looking at him, his dark eyes searching for something behind Jimin. He found what he was looking for before Jimin could even turn, worry seeping into his scowl as he hissed, “Fuck’s sake, Tae..!”

Jimin’s eyes widened at that and he turned around, searching, only to emit a sharp exhale when he spotted Taehyung up on the quarterdeck, locked in a brutal clash with none other than Son Jukan, aggressively driving the mariner back. His blonde hair seemed to almost shine in the light of the fires, but if Jimin hadn’t heard Yoongi’s words, he wouldn’t have recognized the quartermaster.

Taehyung was absolutely livid, his movements fuelled by silent rage as he launched attack after attack at the vice admiral, the ring of their swords never letting up for even a second. His movements were swift and sharp, everything from his footwork to the way he worked the thin blade of his
sword; it was almost as if he was dancing, anger seeping into a choreography Son Jukan definitely did not know. The mariner had the disadvantage of their battle; his ship stood aflame and his subordinates were falling all around him, and the blonde pirate didn’t allow him to do anything but parry every incoming strike, every attempt at his life.

The sight made Jimin feel so utterly lost, it made his chest tighten almost painfully. Gone was the smile he’d been able to see even through Taehyung’s mask, gone was the cheerful laughter and the almost childlike innocence that had surrounded the blonde pirate even when he spoke about the horrors he’d committed. Gone was everything Jimin knew about him, leaving nothing behind but his rage, the anger of the Unknown.

“Quartermaster!”

Jimin emitted a startled yelp at the sudden outburst that rose from right beside him, his heart leaping to his throat in shock; he’d momentarily forgotten all about Min Yoongi and their hellish surroundings, the sight of Taehyung pushing all other thoughts out of his head. It all came barraging back now, however, his mind flooding with terror as the captain grabbed him by the arm once more and tugged him deeper into the chaos that was the warship’s deck.

Yoongi’s voice snapped the blonde pirate out of his rage-induced craze in an instant. He blinked as if he was surprised to find himself where he stood and quickly backed away several paces from the vice admiral, putting a safe distance between them before turning his gaze to the source of his captain’s voice.

The instant his eyes found Jimin, all anger vanished from his face, gone in the blink of an eye to be replaced by a smile, a smile Jimin recognized by the way Taehyung’s eyes crinkled in the corners. He raised a hand and waved cheerfully at Jimin, who felt a rush of panic rise in his chest, drawn out by the carefree way the pirate behaved when standing before someone like Son Jukan.

His concern seemed to be all for naught, however; much like Taehyung, the vice admiral had turned his attention to the sound of Yoongi’s voice, and he was staring down at the captain now, a bottomless rage slowly twisting his face. His breath passed his gritted teeth in the form of a hiss as he turned to fully face the pirate, gripping onto the hilt of his sword so hard his arm shook.

Remembering Jukan’s words, Jimin turned to look at Yoongi, but all he found was a sense of icy disdain, none of the vice admiral’s anger anywhere to be seen. For a second, he looked almost disinterested, sparing Son Jukan, who had claimed to once be close as brothers with the captain, only a brief glance before he turned away.

“Namjoon!” he shouted, and Jimin followed his gaze to Agust’s quarterdeck, where the first mate was handling the helm, keeping the pirate ship levelled through the chaos. “Bare her teeth!”

It was an odd command to give, but Jimin wasn’t given much time to process it. He barely had time to see Namjoon reach for a lever situated next to the helm and pull it before he heard a sharp, whistling sound, like swords being unsheathed from their scabbard, and then the entire warship gave a jarring quake, so violent Jimin would’ve fallen if the captain hadn’t reached out to grab his arm once again. The sound of crackling wood was near deafening, emitting from somewhere between Agust and the warship’s hull, and all of a sudden, the mariner ship began to tilt.

Before Jimin could even reassert his balance on the winding deck, something crashed hard into his side and he almost screamed in shock, fearing someone was making an attempt on his life, but all that ended up leaving his lips was a shaky exhale as a pair of arms closed around him and a head of blonde hair nuzzled into his jaw. “I was so worried, Chim!” Taehyung cried, unknowingly smearing blood onto the sleeves of Jimin’s shirt. “I thought they’d take you away before we had the chance to
“Now’s not the time, quartermaster!” Yoongi barked at the two of them, his eyes darting to where Son Jukan was struggling to keep his balance, a near frustrated hiss finding its way past the captain’s teeth as he watched the mariner move towards them, a hungry look in his eyes. “Fucking...!”

Yoongi sank into a crouch, drawing a startled exclaim from Jimin’s throat as he was pulled down along with him, but when the pirate pressed the palm of his free hand flat to the deck, Jimin found himself thankful for his position.

The entirety of the deck split open with a devastating crack, tearing a deep rift into the boards and separating them from the quarterdeck, cutting off every single path the vice admiral could take to reach them. The gap was almost deep enough to split the entire warship in half, and with his heart beating furiously in his throat, Jimin wondered what kind of hellish blessing the pirate captain had come to possess to be able to cause such destruction with only a touch.

He found himself being pulled upright before he could dwell on the matter for longer than a second or two. “You were supposed to remain on the ship!” Yoongi snapped at Taehyung, his voice loud to be heard over the ongoing chaos all around them. “I told you to stay as far away from that piece of shit as possible!”

The blonde pirate’s expression morphed into one of bitterness, his brows knitting together in sullen defiance. “I know,” he gritted out and threw a glance at where Son Jukan had been standing, now nowhere to be seen. “But I saw his face and I just… I couldn’t…”

He struggled to find the right words, and when he couldn’t, Yoongi emitted a frustrated sound and turned around, his eyes scanning over the devastation that was the warship. “Take the songbird back to the ship,” the captain told Taehyung and none too gently shoved Jimin against his chest. “Tell Namjoon to prepare for takeoff!” He turned on the heel and stormed deeper into the chaos without waiting for a response, his resounding voice drowning out the sound of the roaring flames. “All hands, back to the ship!”

“Come on, Chim,” Taehyung said and took Jimin’s hand, his grip so gentle Jimin felt an uninvited urge to cry stir in his chest. He shook his head roughly and looked away, only to once again be reminded of the horror surrounding them, the sight of a mariner hanging from the shrouds with a bolt buried in his neck causing his stomach to turn.

Before he could do more than emit a broken whimper, he felt hand clasp his neck to turn his head, forcing him to look away from the terrible sight. “Don’t look around you, okay?” Taehyung told him and pressed his forehead against Jimin’s, his voice calm even amidst the chaos. “Just look at me until we’re back on Agust. Can you do that, Chim?”

Numbly, Jimin nodded, clutching onto the quartermaster’s words with every last string of his sanity, and with a grin that reached all the way to his eyes, Taehyung squeezed Jimin’s hand before leaning back and pulling him along towards whatever remained of the warship’s rail, navigating smoothly through the near destroyed deck. All Jimin could do was trust him, holding onto his hand and letting the pirate guide him back to the ship he’d tried to escape not hours earlier.

When they reached the edge of the warship, Jimin’s eyes widened when he realized what it was Namjoon had accomplished by pulling the lever earlier. Five enormous cleaver-like blades had been released from Agust’s side to shred through the warship, tearing deep rifts into the bigger vessel’s hull to let water rush inside, every thrashing wave of the sea filling the warship from the inside out.

Jimin tried his best to ignore the dark liquid sprayed across two of the cleavers, no doubt the only
remains of some poor mariners who’d been stationed at the warship’s starboard gunports, which the blades had eradicated completely.

“Ready?” Taehyung’s voice pulled Jimin’s attention away from the giant blades and to the jump they had to make to cross over to the Agust. The gap between the ships weren’t that wide, but the sight of the churning sea between them made Jimin’s legs feel like they’d been made out of stone, heavy and uncooperative.

The blonde pirate must’ve noticed his apprehension and he once again brought a hand to Jimin’s face, tapping his thumb against his cheekbone. “I saw you climb a mast quicker than anyone in the crew,” he said in a tone that was almost proud. “If you’re surefooted enough to do that, then doing this is nothing more than child’s play.” He emitted a cheerful laughter, as if they weren’t surrounded by the flames of hell and the death that came with it. “On three, Chim!”

Jimin felt his stomach twist for every number Taehyung counted, and when he reached the final one and Jimin jumped, there was a moment where everything went dead silent around him. The roaring of the flames disappeared and the screams faded; it was only Jimin, weightless, surrounded by nothing but air.

Then his feet connected hard with Agust’s deck and he fell forward, a sharp exclaim tearing its way up his throat as his aching knees took the brunt of his fall. He was given very little time to recover, with Taehyung pulling him up and out of the way of the pirates rushing back and forth across the deck, moving around each other in what looked like an almost practiced dance, barely even nudging one another.

Jimin wondered how many times the crew had led an attack on another ship to be able to get through it with such expertise.

Suddenly, he felt a presence draw up next to him, and before he could even turn, someone grabbed his shoulder and shoved him up against the main mast, cold fingers digging into his skin. “Ready the guns!” The captain threw the order over his shoulder before turning his eyes on Jimin, promising nothing but pain. “You stay right here, songbird,” Yoongi hissed, his voice alight with anger. “Don’t move one fucking inch until I tell you to!”

The terror in Jimin’s chest didn’t even have time to properly escalate before the captain pushed away from him and stormed towards the quarterdeck, leaving Jimin to grab onto the main mast as if his life depended on it, needing any sort of stability to cling onto as his legs threatened to give in. He dug his nails into the rough wood as he watched Yoongi take over at the helm, leaning over to shove the lever back into place.

The cleaver blades came free from the warship with a sound that was almost a whisper, the sharp steel sliding smoothly through the air and back into Agust’s hull. The warship shook almost violently upon the release, jarring away from the smaller vessel, and Yoongi turned the helm to follow, keeping Agust lined up with the burning warship. “All guns-”

“Min Yoongi!”

The outraged voice dug terror into Jimin’s chest, his throat constricting as he turned to look at the vice admiral, who stood amidst the flames eating away at his ship, amidst the countless bodies of his subordinates. He looked almost savage, his slick hair disheveled and blood staining his pristine, white coat, and a rage the likes of which Jimin had never seen before clung to him as if it were a physical being, rendering his movements rough and jerky as he pointed at the pirate captain.

“As if treason wasn’t enough,” Jukan seethed, his voice trembling, “you come here, sailing under
your bastard black flag to take *everything* from me! Nothing was ever good enough for you, not your position, not your name, not even the law, and you turned on me for *scum* like this?!” He gestured savagely towards the group of pirates gathered at Agust’s rail, completely ignoring the half a dozen guns currently aimed at his head as he glared at Yoongi, blind to everything else.

_This is not the law_, Jimin caught himself thinking for the second time that night as he watched the vice admiral; the law wasn’t something used to terrorize others. It couldn’t be.

“I will kill you, Min Yoongi,” Jukan promised, his voice ringing across the open waters. “I don’t care how long it takes or how it’s done, I won’t rest until I tear the life out of your bones with my own hands!”

His words echoed across the sea, loud and clear for every last soul to hear. The pirates of the Agust turned to look at their captain, awaiting his response, and when Jimin turned his eyes on Yoongi, all he found was that look of icy indifference, as if he truly did not care about the vice admiral’s anger, the anger born out of his actions.

When the captain parted his lips, it wasn’t to reply to Son Jukan’s threats. “All guns,” Min Yoongi said again, his austere voice triggering an almost violent shudder down Jimin’s spine. “Fire.”

For a fraction of a second, everything went silent as a crypt. It was as if Jimin had gone deaf, every sound fading the very instant Yoongi’s words fell from his lips. Time seemed to slow down around him as the crew complied to their captain’s orders, and when that one second of absolute silence came to an end, Jimin heard his own trembling exhale before he was rendered deaf by the choir of cannonfire.

He turned and buried his face against the mast, squeezing his eyes shut tightly. He couldn’t bear to watch, not after all the horrors he’d seen; after all the destruction, all the death, Jimin couldn’t bring himself to watch the final blow, the barrage of cannonballs that surely broke whatever remained of the warship to pieces.

He refused to look up even long after the sounds of cannonfire had died down, driving a painful inner battle against himself to force back all the things he’d witnessed since he’d been freed from his chains. They plagued him, the images of dead bodies and the stench of burning flesh, every single memory so vividly engraved into his mind, it was as if he was still there, standing on the deck of the warship, surrounded by nothing but the horrors of war.

_All those people_, he thought and pressed his forehead harshly against the mast. He felt hollow, disturbingly empty. _All those people, dead. Because of me._

Jemin dimly noticed the Agust was moving, rocking gently on the sea as it sailed away from the destruction it had caused, but it wasn’t that fact that finally made him look up. It was the silence, the eerie quiet that had settled across the ship without him noticing. All the previous urgency had vanished; no one said a word, no one moved an inch, and when Jimin turned around, he realized why.

Min Yoongi was standing before him, his arms crossed over his chest as he looked at Jimin, a harsh coldness to his eyes that made Jimin instinctively back up as far as he could against the mast, pressing his back flat against it and wishing it could swallow him whole. The captain’s gaze was like a palpable pressure against his chest, crushing his lungs and making it hard to draw breath.

“You,” Yoongi said, the low drawl of his voice not quite succeeding in masking his anger. “Tell us what it was you did.”
Jimin parted his lips and closed them again, only now realizing that every single one of Agust’s crew was looking at him, twenty pairs of eyes boring holes into his skull. Without realizing it, he dug his fingers into the wood of the main mast, desperately seeking stability, security. “I…” he tried, but the words wouldn’t come. “I-I…”

Someone in the crowd raised their voice, a familiar softness to his serious tone. “Yoongi,” Jin started, but the captain interrupted him before he could say more than that.

“No. I want to hear it,” Yoongi spat, his eyes never leaving Jimin’s face. “I want you to tell everyone who just risked their lives to come save you why we had to come save you in the first place!”

Jimin didn’t want to look at him, he didn’t want to see the accusing hatred in the pirate’s eyes, but he couldn’t look away. “B-be-because I left,” he stuttered meekly, a raw sensation in his throat. He knew it wasn’t the answer Yoongi was looking for, and true enough, the captain’s eyes narrowed, his lips curling down.

“And?” he pressed, his voice a hiss.

“A-and,” Jimin said, pausing to take a deep, trembling breath, “because I went looking for the mariners.”

The pirate captain’s expression remained the same, but Jimin could see his reaction elsewhere, in the way the muscles of his crossed arms tensed, his hands gripping his arms tighter, in the way the veins in his neck became more well-defined as his jaw clenched. “You went looking,” Yoongi repeated slowly, rage coating every single syllable. “So it wasn’t what Taehyung believed, that you were mistaken for a pirate and forcibly taken aboard that warship. You sought them out by your own will.”

Guilt flooded Jimin’s veins and he buried his teeth into his lower lip, fighting to hold back his tears. Even as he held the captain’s gaze, he could feel the blonde pirate’s eyes on him, waiting, and it was like a dagger through Jimin’s heart. “Yes,” he whispered at last, his voice cracking around the lone word.

A buzzing murmur broke out amongst the crew upon his answer, their voices dull and distant in Jimin’s ears, but the tones of their mumbling was clear as day; angry, suspicious, peeved. Jimin ignored them as best he could, dedicating all of his focus to not cower under the captain’s glare, a task he managed only until the pirate spoke. “Bring it to me,” he told one of his crewmen, his voice suddenly void of any emotion.

It was Jin’s reaction that dug a crack into Jimin’s resolve. “Yoongi, please,” the cook said and took a step forward, but Namjoon held him back, placing a hand on his shoulder and silently shaking his head.

When the pirate returned to Yoongi’s side, Jimin’s heart came to a stuttering halt in his chest. He was carrying a whip, sturdy and long and made out of once sleek leather, the coil frayed here and there, with spots of faded blood scattered across it, a telltale sign of what it had done to its prior victims.

“I’d say ten lashes would pardon your betrayal,” the captain stated and grabbed the whip, but instead of unfolding it himself, he held it out towards someone of his crew. “Quartermaster.”

Jimin’s heart sank like a stone when the realization of Yoongi’s words hit him, and along with everyone else, he turned to look at Taehyung. The blonde pirate stood straight as a ruler, his face utterly blank, not a shred of an expression anywhere to be seen as he looked at the whip in Yoongi’s hand. Slowly, he raised his eyes to his captain, his voice eerily monotonous as he said, “I won’t do
A tremor seemed to pass through the entire crew as Yoongi’s expression shifted, the depths of his barely controlled rage slowly becoming more and more apparent. “Do tell me,” he said slowly, his voice quivering under his restraint, “why the fuck not?”

“Because.” Taehyung’s gaze drifted over to Jimin, still without a trace of emotion on his face. “Because he’s not a pirate,” he stated before looking back to his captain. “We’ve done nothing to make him feel at home here or make him feel like he could belong, so our rules don’t apply to him.” He spoke without a shred of hesitation. “I don’t punish strangers for running away when we haven’t given them a reason to stay.”

When Min Yoongi’s anger erupted, several of his crewmen backed off. “This bastard put everyone’s lives in danger, Taehyung!” he shouted, his voice echoing across the sea. “His actions could’ve gotten everyone here killed, not just me, but you, Jeongguk, Hoseok and everyone else as well! I don’t give a fuck whether or not he’s a pirate!” He thrust the whip against Taehyung’s chest. “You know if this was anyone else, you wouldn’t hesitate to give them what they deserve!”

Jimin couldn’t take it. The captain’s words rang like sirens in his ears and mingled with the guilt that tore at his chest, and it was too much to bear, so when the blonde pirate parted his lips, perhaps to protest, Jimin cut him off. “T-Taehyung, it’s fine,” he breathed even as his entire body trembled, wanting it all to be over, to be done with. “J-just, just get it over with, I... it’s fine.”

A brief silence followed his words before the quartermaster spoke again. “Nope,” he said and shook his head. “I don’t want to.”

“I’m not asking if you want to do it or not!” Yoongi rumbled, still holding the coil pressed hard against Taehyung’s chest. “You’re the quartermaster! I’m ordering you to do your job!”

Had the situation been any different, Jimin would’ve marveled at how utterly unimpressed the blonde pirate was by his captain while the rest of the crew seemed to be holding their breath, backing as far away from Yoongi as possible.

“No,” Taehyung said again, calmly meeting the captain’s furious glare. “I am the quartermaster, aye, but when we set sail for the first time, you told me being a pirate was about doing whatever we wanted, regardless of consequences of the law or anyone else. Well, I don’t want to lay a hand on Chim.” Something dangerously akin to challenge seeped into his voice. “If you want him whipped, brother, you do it yourself.”

The effect was instantaneous. As if a crackle of lightning had burst between the two, Yoongi stepped back, his lips curled down into a deep scowl. “You fucking-fine!” he barked and unfolded the whip, the long coil falling heavy to the floor. “Then I will!” He turned on Jimin, whose body seized up, every single cell of him screaming in alarm. “Get him out of his shirt!”

It was Hisashi who complied, breaking out of the crowd to take hold of the collar of Jimin’s shirt. Without allowing him to fight back, the pirate tore the fabric open, ripping through the seams until the shirt fell off his shoulders to leave his upper body completely bare. Without pause, Hisashi forced Jimin down onto his knees, his back to the captain, and only then did he step back, the ghost of a manic grin tugging at the corners of his lips.

Jimin’s throat constricted in horror as he heard Yoongi walk up behind him, the slow drag of the whip’s coil against the deck rendering him completely paralyzed. “Ten lashes,” the captain said slowly, his voice hoarse and tight as a bowstring, “for your betrayal.”
Jemin could barely hear him over the deafening sound of his own heartbeat thundering in his ears, over the sharp hiss of every shallow breath he drew. His arms quivered uncontrollably as he pressed his hands flat to the deck to steady himself, and he screwed his eyes shut tight, refusing to cry as he braced himself for the pain.

It took all the willpower he possessed to not jerk away when he heard the captain’s sharp intake and the rustle of his clothes as he swung the whip.

The crack of the coil was loud as a gunshot, drawing a startled exclaim from the depths of Jimin’s throat, but the pain never came. He never felt the touch of rough leather on his back, never felt the searing hurt of the coil carving into his skin, and when he dared open his eyes, he found the fall of the whip half embedded in the wood next to his knees. It lay there, unmoving and buried into the deck of the Agust, who had taken his punishment in his stead.

His muscles convulsed and he was trembling like a leaf in a storm when he slowly turned around, his breathing shallow and jerky. He felt numb and his mind was reeling, and when his eyes found Yoongi, his heart tightened painfully in his chest, worse than what any lash of the whip could’ve done.

The captain looked almost anguished. He was breathing heavily as if he’d been running, air hissing through gritted teeth. His shoulders were hunched from the force of the lash, and even though he was the one holding the whip, his face was contorted in affliction, his brows knitted tight. He was glaring at Jimin with such intensity it was near suffocating, but behind the anger in his eyes hid an ocean of torment, as if the one frightened out of his mind was Yoongi, not Jimin.

Suddenly, Jimin wished the captain had seen his punishment through. Somehow, he knew it would’ve hurt less than this.

For several seconds, no one aboard the Agust moved a muscle, not even to breathe. All they did was stare, shellshocked, either at their captain or at Jimin, and even the sea seemed to have stilled, its waves no longer splashing against the ship’s hull. All there was was silence, a silence more deafening than Jimin had ever heard.

It was Yoongi who shattered the paralyzing tension. As if breaking out of a daze, his body gave a sharp jerk and he dropped the whip like it had burned his hand, and before it had time to even clatter to the deck, he turned around and stormed off, his urgent steps echoing loud in Jimin’s ears as he made for the quarterdeck and the captain’s cabin. The air he left in his wake was so heavy, Jimin felt he might break under the pressure of it.

And he did.

He curled in on himself as the first sob tore its way up his throat and cracked as it left his lips, burning hot tears spilling down his cheeks and falling onto the deck. He couldn’t breathe properly, every inhale interrupted by another broken cry, his throat raw and aching. All Jimin could do was close his arms tightly around his chest and lean forward until his forehead touched the deck, closing his eyes to shut out everything and everyone around him.

He wasn’t allowed to remain like that for long. His breath hitched when he felt someone kneel next to him and place a hand on his shoulder, the grip firm yet gentle. “It’s okay, Chim,” Taehyung whispered soothingly, his thumb drawing circles into the skin of Jimin’s neck. “It’s okay, you’re alright.”

Jemin tried to part his lips to tell the pirate he was as far from alright as he possibly could be, but all that left his lips was another wet sob. He gritted his teeth and pushed his forehead harder against the
deck, seeking something, anything that could distract him from the hollow anguish in his chest. *Anything would be better than this,* he screamed inwardly, his fingers digging into his collar as he struggled to keep his sanity under the pressure of his emotions. *Anything.*

He had no idea how long he sat there, crying until he didn’t have a single tear left in his body, but when he finally began to calm down, he was surrounded by people. Taehyung had somehow drawn him into his arms without him realizing it, Jimin’s face buried against his chest, and Hoseok was kneeling next to them, his eyes narrowed in concern as they studied every inch of Jimin he could see. Jin was crouched down on his other side, having shed his own shirt to drape it over Jimin’s shoulders, his face marred by an expression of worry that Jimin didn’t feel like he deserved.

“Come on, Chim,” Taehyung coaxed gently when he noticed he was calming down. “Let’s get you something warm to drink, okay?”

Too exhausted to argue, all Jimin did was nod and let himself be pulled up onto his feet and led away from the deck, wishing more than anything he could just close his eyes and sleep, and forget everything that had happened ever since he’d left his home.

Chapter End Notes

Fuck.

Okay...

………… BET Y’ALL THOUGHT YOONGI WAS GONNA DO IT. I BET Y’ALL A MILLION MONOPOLY DOLLARS YOU THOUGHT HE WAS ACTUALLY GONNA WHIP JIMIN.

//wins 1,000,000 monopoly dollars.

No but seriously, my heart hurts from that scene, like holy shit does it hurt. Writing Yoongi’s emotions at their peak is always so… I can’t even explain it, but when his feelings “overload” and reach their breaking point, whatever those feelings are, they’re always so RAW, so intense, just, ahhhh!

Oh yeah, and Yoongi has a blessing. I wonder what it is, hmm, interesting~

I love Taehyung. Sweet, precious, Taehyung who’s also an absolute murder machine when he feels like it. So sweet~

And oh god, it hits me like a freight train out of nowhere when I write gore in this fic! And it’s not even gory gore, not really, I mean, it’s not entrails flying around and shit, but STILL. Blood and guts isn’t something I associate with Yoonmin fics, so this felt so FOREIGN to write!

Also, the amount of time that passes in this chapter is roughly, what, 15 minutes..? I just find that fact hilarious somehow. xD AND ALSO, I have no idea where they are when all of this happens. Like, are they still at Goto Port or have they left for open sea already? I have absolutely no idea. Uh… good job, me..?
AND IF ANYONE’S WONDERING; the briefness of Yoongi and Jukan’s interactions in this chapter are completely intentional. This was a “flash attack” on the warship, with the sole intention of taking them by surprise and getting Jimin out of there, and then leaving before the mariners could properly retaliate. There’s obviously a history between the two, and while we didn’t get an insight on it yet, fret not, we’ll learn everything there is to know about it in later chapters~

THINGS WILL GET BETTER FROM HERE ON OUT, I SWEAR. I ALREADY PROMISED IT, AND I SWEAR I’M STICKING TO THAT PROMISE.
An Easy Choice, But a Hard Decision

Chapter Summary

For a moment, Jimin only stared into his mug, his thoughts drifting while his eyes traced the pattern of the steam rising from his tea. He was tired, so very tired; apart from the three hours he’d slept after first boarding the Agust, he hadn’t gotten a second of rest. Instead, he’d been through an emotional hell, first aboard the pirate ship and then the mariner warship, yet as he sat there, in the galleys, surrounded by the pirates he’d attempted to escape, he felt almost at ease.

And that fact hurt, but not for the reason he’d imagined.

Chapter Notes

I’m several hours behind schedule, but it’s still Monday, so I made it! Woo! Big thanks to everyone who encouraged me on Twitter, I love you all <3

Music;
BrunuhVille - Black Heart (replay this throughout the entire chapter!!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jimin was only vaguely aware of what was happening around him, too numb to be able to properly pay attention as he was led to the galleys and placed on a bench, his hands coming up to clutch Jin’s shirt tighter around himself when he felt Taehyung move away from him. “Can you go get Jeongguk?” the blonde pirate asked Namjoon, his voice hushed as if he was worried he’d startle Jimin if he spoke any louder.

Only upon the first mate’s departure did Jimin notice the sailing master’s absence; while the battle between Agust and the warship had been a blur, he had still caught sight of near every familiar face he knew amongst the pirates, except Jeongguk. He parted his lips to ask, but as soon as he opened his mouth, he felt another wave of that hollow emptiness strike his chest, and he quickly ground his teeth and dug his fingers into his arms to stop himself from crying.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and snapped his head up to find Hoseok standing beside him, brows knitted in concern. “You’re bleeding from the soles of your feet,” the doctor told him and nodded down in indication. “Should I take a look at them?”

It took quite some effort to swallow down his emotions. “I-it’s not my blood,” Jimin said, his voice thick and hoarse from exhaustion, but he nodded all the same. “It… there were so many mariners, they were all…” The words stacked in his throat and he shook his head in a futile attempt to rid himself of all the horrors he’d witnessed, all the bloodshed, the chaos. “They were all..!”

No one said a word when he began sobbing again, burying his face in his hands and sniffling, and
on some level, he was grateful for it; he knew they weren’t affected by what had happened in the same way he was, having seen and taken part of such devastation many times before. Just as Taehyung had told him during Jimin’s first night aboard the Agust, the pirate didn’t lose sleep over his actions, thus in this very moment, any words of comfort would probably have been detrimental rather than soothing.

Or perhaps they all knew everyone had to deal with death their own way, and so they were waiting for Jimin to decide how he was going to cope.

Soon enough, his sobs subsided, his eyes stinging with dryness; he had cried more than a lifetime’s worth of tears in the span of a day, his body aching with dehydration. As if on cue, a steaming mug was placed on the table in front of him, a delicious scent rising from the sturdy cup. “Drink,” Jin told him firmly while passing everyone else in the galley a drink of their own. “It’s an Indian herbal tea. It’ll help you relax.”

Jimin nodded and spoke a silent word of gratitude before reaching out, a shiver coursing through his body as the heat of the cup hit his fingers, a promise of its soothing effects. He brought the mug to his lips and took a tentative sip, sighing softly at the pleasant taste and the warmth that spread from his chest. “It’s good,” he mumbled when he lowered the cup again, so quietly the others could barely hear him.

For a moment, Jimin only stared into his mug, his thoughts drifting while his eyes traced the pattern of the steam rising from his tea. He was tired, so very tired; apart from the three hours he’d slept after first boarding the Agust, he hadn’t gotten a second of rest. Instead, he’d been through an emotional hell, first aboard the pirate ship and then the mariner warship, yet as he sat there, in the galley, surrounded by the pirates he’d attempted to escape, he felt almost at ease.

And that fact hurt, but not for the reason he’d imagined.

“I,” he began after gathering his thoughts as best he could, not quite daring to raise his head. The words caught in his throat and he had to take a moment to swallow the lump they created, and he closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he tried again. “I’m really sorry,” he said in his best attempt to keep his voice steady. “I-I had no idea this would happen, that I was putting all of you at risk by… by doing what I did, and… and I…”

He held tightly onto his mug, clutching at the warmth as if it was the only thing in the world that kept him from losing his sanity. “I never wanted anyone of you to get hurt,” he breathed, his eyes burning with tears he could not shed. “Or to be in danger be-because of me, I…”

Unable to find the proper words, Jimin bit into his lip and lowered his head in a stiff bow, hoping it could convey his apology, bending forward until his forehead almost touched the table. “I’m sorry,” he pressed out again, near inaudible.

A brief silence followed his words, broken only by Jimin’s own trembling breath. The quiet lasted for what felt like an eternity, the inner turmoil in Jimin’s chest fighting to surpass his exhaustion for every passing second, but then a hand settled on the base of his neck, the touch warm and gentle, and when Jimin looked up, he found Taehyung smiling softly down at him, looking so happy it almost made him hurt more.

It was Jin who raised his voice first, however. “I understand why you did what you did, canary,” the cook said and slid into the seat opposite of him, taking a sip of his own tea. “You’re here against your will and you’re scared of us, scared for your life, and you thought the mariners would help you, maybe even take you back home.” He nodded thoughtfully to himself, and Jimin briefly wondered how the man could know his thoughts when they’d only ever spoken a handful of times. “I
understand.”

“As do I,” Hoseok chimed in from the end of the table, though there was a tightness to his smile. “This time, however, I hope you realize Yoongi was perfectly justified in demanding a punishment for you.” His tone was firm but not unkind; it was purely factual. “I understand what drove you to do what you did, I really do, but as you said, your actions put his entire crew at risk. Unintentionally, I know, but even so. He might’ve scared you just now, but you can’t blame him for being angry. To him, this crew is family.”

Jimin pressed his lips together and nodded jerkily, letting his head hang low afterwards. He found himself completely unable to disagree, his chest aching with the memory of all those people who had to die because of him and his naivety. He tried to recall the terror he’d felt while kneeling with his back turned on the captain, tried to find anything that he could use to justify his own actions, but all he found was guilt, as well as the bloodcurdling sensation he’d felt upon the sight of Yoongi’s almost pained expression.

“It’s a complicated situation, that’s for sure.”

Jimin jerked in surprise and almost spilled his tea, having not heard Namjoon’s return. He turned around in time to watch Jeongguk slide into the seat next to Taehyung and wrap his arms around the pirate’s waist, his cheeks pale as he buried his face in the crook of the quartermaster’s neck. Taehyung emitted a soft hum and rested his cheek against the navigator’s temple, hushing him softly, and Jimin would’ve asked what was wrong with the boy when Namjoon raised his voice again.

“While I can’t fully fault you for what you did,” the first mate said with a slight frown, “I hope this teaches you a lesson about what the world looks like. Things aren’t always as straightforward as good and evil. The mariners might represent the law, but that doesn’t automatically make them good people.” He glanced at Taehyung, who was quick to hide the rigidness of his smile in Jeongguk’s hair. “They kill just as much as we do, and as you’ve seen now, the ones they go after aren’t always pirates or criminals.”

Namjoon reached out and patted the quartermaster on the head before making his way over to Jin to stand behind him, placing his hands on the cook’s shoulders and squeezing slightly. “That’s how the world works,” he stated, his eyes trained on Jimin. “There’s good in evil, and evil in good. The mariners are supposed to represent goodness and justice, but they put you, an innocent, in a cage.” His frown morphed into a near apologetic smile. “Sorry you have to keep going from cage to cage,” he said sheepishly. “It’ll take some time, but Yoongi will come around. You won’t be stuck in there for long.”

Jimin emitted a hollow chuckle before he could stop himself, his brows knitting tightly into a frown. “Right,” he said quietly, reaching up to clutch at the front of his shirt. “After everything he’s done and after what I… after…” His voice trailed off, and suddenly, there were fresh tears in his eyes all over again.

Jimin wished the guilt would go away, he wished it with all his might. The last thing he wanted to do was to associate the pirate captain with guilt, but every time Jimin thought of him now, all he could see was the anguished look on Yoongi’s face and the way he’d let go of the whip as if it had burned his hand. As if swinging it had hurt him.

Again, Jimin curled in on himself, this time in an effort to not cry; he did not want to shed tears for Min Yoongi. He bit into his lip and blinked hard, staring into his lap until Taehyung raised his voice for the first time since they’d settled in the galley.

“Do you know why I’m the quartermaster?” he asked, shifting slightly so he wouldn’t speak directly
into Jeongguk’s ear; the sailing master hadn’t moved an inch ever since he’d settled next to Taehyung. “Why I’m the one in charge of discipline?” He waited for Jimin to shake his head before continuing, the smile on his lips almost painfully warm. “It’s because Yoongi’s too kind for that,” he murmured. “He struggles with his anger, aye, but he could never do what sometimes needs to be done to keep a pirate crew in check. He could never do that to those he cares about.”

He raised a hand before Jimin could even begin to part his lips. “I’m not trying to tell you Yoongi cares about you,” Taehyung said bluntly, “but he knows I do, and beneath all his anger, beneath his temper and his aggressiveness, he also knows you’re innocent in all of this. I mean, yeah, running to the mariners wasn’t the best decision you’ve ever made, but Yoongi knows why you did it, even if he doesn’t want to admit it to himself yet.”

He let his hand drop back down to his lap, settling it over Jeongguk’s, still holding him around his waist. “That’s why he couldn’t do it,” the quartermaster continued. “Whip you, I mean. Even when I challenged him to do it in front of his entire crew, he couldn’t. Yoongi can kill an ocean of enemies without batting an eye, but he would never hurt someone innocent. Especially not after seeing what they’d done to you.” For a moment, something rueful crept over his face, but it was gone in the blink of an eye. “That’s not the kind of man he is.”

Jimin’s heart tightened almost painfully in his chest; Taehyung all but radiated reverence for his captain, his voice so incredibly soft, it hurt. “I owe my life to my brother,” he said quietly. “I love him more than life, so I happily take on the role of quartermaster. I’ll spare him the pain it takes to keep a pirate crew under control.”

Jimin parted his lips and closed them again, hesitant to break the pirate out of his emotional state. His apprehension must’ve shown on his face, however; Taehyung quirked a brow and his smile took on an almost encouraging tone, nodding for him to go ahead. “What… what about the rest of the crew?” Jimin asked carefully, trying his best to not sound accusing. “I thought pirates valued strength over all, so… doesn’t that… I mean, if he can’t…”

“You’re wondering why the crew would respect him if he can’t do what needs to be done on his own,” Namjoon supplied, chuckling when Jimin adapted a slightly panicked expression. “Don’t be so alarmed. For someone who’s lived a fairly sheltered life, it’s an understandable misconception.”

“Even pirates aren’t so straightforward,” Hoseok chimed in and lifted his eyes from his empty mug of tea, which he’d been balancing on its edge on the table. “Most of us have never known home, really, never known what it’s like to have someone care about you and to love you, but we found that in Yoongi.” He grinned at Jimin. “He rages worse than a rabid bear,” he mused, “but he would tear through mountains for any of us. You know why?”

There was an almost teasing lilt to the question, and Jimin knew exactly what it was the surgeon wanted him to say. “Because he’s a good man,” he mumbled and pursed his lips when the lot of them nodded in unison, smiling. “Still. If… if he wants a punishment done, he should be able to do it himself.”

“Maybe,” Taehyung hummed, drumming his fingers against the back of Jeongguk’s hand. “But things aren’t so simple, Chim. Take, for example, that asshole from your village, what was his name… the mayor’s son. You remember what I did to him?”

He didn’t wait for Jimin to nod this time; the sight of his clenched jaw and frown must’ve been confirmation enough. “Right, I ran my sword through his foot, and you can deny it however much you want, but watching me do it felt like justice to you. I could see it on your face. He deserved to be punished for how he treated you, you knew it as well as I did, yet it wasn’t you who stabbed him. It was me.”
Jimin wanted to protest, but he couldn’t think of a single feasible argument. The memory was clear as day in his mind; he remembered how angry he’d been at Minjoon, how betrayed he’d felt, and how he hadn’t felt a single shred of sympathy for the young hunter when Taehyung had run his sword through his foot and twisted the blade to elicit as much pain as he possibly could.

“Justice doesn’t always come in the ways we want it to.” The smile on Taehyung’s lips was borderline cheerful, as if he was genuinely happy about the fact that Jimin had found justice in such a gruesome act. “One could say I should’ve left the task to you,” the quartermaster said, “but just like how I had the freedom to choose to do what I did to that arse, it’s Yoongi’s freedom to choose whether or not he’s capable of holding the whip.”

“It was also his freedom to choose to not hurt you,” Jin piped up. “And to come save you. Obviously, Tae asked him to do it, pleading on the verge of tears, but Yoongi had absolutely no obligation to actually do it.” He smiled, a mischievous curl of the lips as he turned his eyes on the quartermaster. “We all know Taehyung has our captain wrapped around his little finger,” he mused, chuckling when the blonde pirate flashed him his rectangular grin, “but even so. Piracy is about freedom, canary, the freedom to live our lives as we like.”

He spoke so sincerely, Jimin almost wanted to believe him, to believe all of it, but he couldn’t, not with the memory of Jeju Village’s harbor burning, dead bodies scattered around the streets he’d grown up in. He swallowed thickly and averted his gaze, struggling to find something to say, something that could take them away from the topic of the pirate captain’s nature. “He… that vice admiral,” Jimin managed at last, his voice thin. “He called Yoongi a, a traitor. He said… he said they used to serve alongside each other until… until Yoongi betrayed him.”

He regretted the words as soon as they had left his lips; a palpable tension settled heavy over the galleys, and everyone turned their eyes on Taehyung, who had stiffened visibly, his jaw set taut and his expression taking on a whisper of that same, emotionless anger it had when he’d stood face to face with Son Jukan. Even Jeongguk finally shifted, lifting his face from the blonde pirate’s shoulder to press a soft kiss into the skin of his neck.

“A traitor.” Taehyung bit out the words as if they hurt his throat, emitting a sound akin to a growl. “Oh, aye,” he hissed, his voice sharp as a whistle. “To them, that’s probably what it looked like. Treason. Those fucking…”

He cut himself off when Jeongguk’s arms tightened around his waist, pressing his lips into a tight line before closing his eyes and simply breathing for a full ten seconds. “Okay,” he said when he deemed himself calm enough, shaking his head slightly before looking at Jimin. “I was there when it happened, so if you want, I’ll tell you what I know and what I saw. But,” he inclined his head in a curious manner, “only after you do what needs to be done.”

Jimin furrowed his brow in confusion. “What needs to be done?” he repeated, his bewilderment only growing when Taehyung’s lips stretched into a lopsided smile.

“You know what I’m talking about,” he said simply. “I can see it.” He raised a hand and pointed directly in between Jimin’s eyes. “That’s guilt. You’ve apologized to us, but you still feel guilty, and you know why.” His grin was near angelic. “So go and do what needs to be done until you don’t feel guilty anymore.”

Jimin’s stomach twisted uncomfortably and he felt a sour taste in the back of his mouth; cued by the quartermaster’s words, the captain’s pained expression rose into his mind once again, uninvited and intruding, and true enough, the emotion that came with it was undeniably guilt. “Right,” he mumbled into his mug of tea, but he wasn’t allowed to sit there for long, a frown marring his brow when he felt the blonde pirate nudge him in the side with his foot. “Y-you mean now?”
Taehyung’s grin was almost mischievous, wide and childlike. “The sooner, the better,” he hummed. “The longer you let it be, the harder it’ll become. Plus, Yoongi’s bad mood will take longer to disappear if he’s given time to sulk.”

*Sulk* was the last word Jimin would ever use in association with the pirate captain, the term too innocent for a man like him. Even so, he knew the blonde pirate was right, and he knew himself well enough to realize that if he let his guilt untouched, it would fester and add to his already immense disregard for the captain. Or worse, it’d turn on itself and made him feel as if he should forgive Yoongi for his actions, something he certainly did not want to do.

Thus Jimin pushed himself up from his seat and slid his arms properly into the sleeves of the shirt Jin had given him. It was much too large for him, hanging loosely around his shoulders and low over his hands, but it was better than to display the bruises around his wrists, products of the iron shackles’ chafing. He couldn’t hide the broad purple and red line around his throat, however, and he touched the skin gingerly, scraping his nails over the bruises as if he could still feel the collar’s presence. “Alright,” he breathed, the word a mere sigh, but before he could reach further than the door, he was called back.

“You’ll have to make a decision, Jimin,” Namjoon told him, his tone solemn, serious. “You came to us as a tribute, perhaps unwillingly, but a tribute all the same. It sounds wrong to say that you belong to this ship, but that’s the best word I can use to describe your situation.” He drummed his fingers against Jin’s shoulders, suddenly looking older than only minutes earlier. “In return for us not razing your village, you owe this ship a debt,” he stated bluntly, “and I don’t think Yoongi expects much from you apart from labor. That means it’s up to you to decide what kind of life you want to lead here.”

The first mate nodded his head at Jimin, who stood stiffly by the door, a hand resting on the handle. “You can spend your days refusing to accept your fate and fear for your safety,” Namjoon went on, “or you can do your best to get accustomed to living aboard the Agust. This crew is a family, and everyone pulls their own weight somehow.” His expression softened slightly. “You have to decide where in this family you want to stand.”

Jimin took several seconds before answering, running the pirate’s words through his head over and over again. The thought of belonging to the ship made his chest burn uncomfortably, but he knew it was the truth; after all, that was what the people of Jeju Village had offered the pirate crew, his life in exchange for theirs. The entirety of his life.

The fact seemed to properly sink in only now, when laid out so flatly before him, and he felt his exhaustion begin to creep up his spine once again. His grip on the door handle tightened and took a deep breath, purposely looking away from Taehyung before voicing the question that bled like an alarm inside his head. “And what if I don’t want to stand anywhere in this family?”

Contrary to what he’d expected, Namjoon’s lips curled into a smile. Jimin had thought he’d be irritated with the stubborn question, perhaps even angry, but while his expression was hardly joyful, there was not single shred of hostility in the smile. “Then your life will be much the same as it has been for the past day,” the first mate declared with an almost leisure shrug of his shoulders. “Your life aboard this ship will depend solely on you. It’s an easy choice but a hard decision, and you’ll have to make it. Soon.”

His words were cryptic, but Jimin understood. He understood far too well. “Right,” he mumbled, and with a final nod, he pushed the galleys’ door open and stepped outside.

The deck was near empty. It was the middle of the night and Jimin assumed most of the pirates had withdrawn to the bunks, eager to rest and recover after the battle against the warship. He was
thankful; walking up the quarterdeck stairs alone would’ve taken a lot more effort if he’d been pinned under two dozen pairs of eyes. It was difficult enough like this, every step heavier than the last as he climbed the steps to what was sure to be the most difficult conversation he’d ever had, or would ever have to have.

He kept his eyes glued to the deck when he passed the helm, pretending he couldn’t feel the curious gaze of the pirate stationed there for the night. The man didn’t say a word, the night’s silence only interrupted by the distant chatter of two crewmen at the fore, as well as the soothing sound of the calm ocean hitting Agust’s hull. Jimin would’ve been thankful for that as well, but as he approached the captain’s quarters, the sound of his blood rushing in his ears became near deafening.

*Calm down,* he told himself, to no avail. *Calm down and breathe.*

He paused some three meters away from the double doors, his eyes glued to the gilded handles. There was light seeping through the cracks of the door and he could faintly make out a shadow move about the room, and that sight alone was somehow frightening; only the knowledge that the captain was pacing back and forth, probably in anger, sent a thrill of dread down Jimin’s spine.

Min Yoongi had been pushed into almost doing something he apparently couldn’t bear because of him. His mistake had singlehandedly driven the captain to the brink of desperation, and if Jimin resented himself for it, he could only begin to imagine what Yoongi must’ve felt.

He considered for a moment to go back to the galleys and ask Taehyung if he could come with him, but quickly shook the thought away, Namjoon’s words fresh in his mind. “I’ll decide what kind of life I lead,” Jimin told himself and took a deep breath to steel himself, clenching his fists by his sides before crossing the remaining space to the doors of the captain’s quarters and knocking.

“What?” came the snappish reply, the harshness audible from Yoongi’s voice already through the doors. Jimin had to fight the urge to turn around and flee to the brig, whatever small help that would do him; he still remembered the way the iron bars of his cell had bent out of shape under the captain’s touch. Thus he remained, closing his eyes for a moment before pushing the doors open.

The first thing he noticed was the captain’s quarters’ beauty. Much like the rest of Agust, it was lined from floor to ceiling with dark wood, but the walls were lined with oil lanterns that cast a warm glow on every surface. Shelves and cupboards were pushed up against every available inch of the walls, upon which strange instruments stood peacefully, everything from jewel-encrusted spyglass to a heap of frayed scrolls, tied together by a gilded thread. A sizable bed took up one of the corners, and in the middle of the room stood a large cartography table with an intricate globe in its center, rotating slowly to the movement of the ship.

What made Jimin momentarily forget his dread, however, was the sight of the organ piano built into the wall underneath the high, ornate windows. It was nearly twice as broad as the old piano that had stood in the corner of the tavern at Jeju, its countless pipes reaching all the way up to the ceiling in a seemingly haphazard pattern, leaving open spaces here and there to let moonlight shine through the windows.

It was a breathtakingly beautiful sight, and Jimin found himself taking several steps towards it, drawn in by an inexplicable urge to touch the delicate keys and make the instrument sing for him.

It wasn’t until the doors slammed shut behind him that he was jarred out of his state of awe, so abruptly he emitted a startled sound and flinched, his muscles drawing themselves taut when he turned and realized it was Min Yoongi who had closed the doors, having somehow managed to move up behind him without making as much of a sound. “What are you doing here, songbird?” the captain asked coldly, his voice laced in venomous hostility. “What do you want?”
Much like so many other times, Jimin found himself rendered mute under the sheer intensity of Yoongi’s glare, frightened only by the sight of the man’s clenched jaw and furrowed brow. “I, uh,” he began, a cold sweat breaking out across his neck when he realized his only route of escape had been cut off by the very pirate he might had to escape from. “I-I want… I came to… apologize.”

The captain didn’t move a single muscle, his stony expression and stiff posture remaining the same as he looked at him, showing no indication that he had even heard his words, so Jimin tried again, finding his voice firmer this time. “I’m sorry,” he said slowly. “I am, I did not mean to cause you or your crew any harm, and I’m sorry that I did.”

The silence that followed was near suffocating. The flames in the lanterns sparked quietly and the boards of the ship creaked, and Min Yoongi said nothing. All he did was stand there, his eyes trained heavily on Jimin, who could feel his gaze as if it was clawing its way into his skull, prying him open to leave him vulnerable and without defence. It made his skin prickle and contort, but he held his ground, determined to see his apology through until the guilt in his chest faded.

It felt like an eternity had time to pass before the captain finally heaved a sigh, the gust of air carrying a sound of frustration. “You’re sorry,” he repeated curtly and walked past Jimin, who jerked and took a quick step out of the man’s way. “Do you think it’s so easy? That everything will go away simply with an apology?” He turned around once he reached the desk and leaned against it, reaching up to cross his arms over his chest. “You take off without a single thought about where your actions might lead us, and you think apologizing will make it all-”

“You misunderstand.”

The words fell from Jimin’s lips before he could think twice, his throat constricting as he watched anger seep into the pirate’s expression, partly for the interruption, partly for the words Jimin had chosen. Even so, Jimin fought the urge to cower with all his might; he wanted Min Yoongi to know exactly what it was he meant.

“I’m not sorry for escaping,” he told the pirate, making a valiant effort to keep his voice from trembling. “That you can’t fault me for. I won’t apologize for what you drove me to do, but I am sorry for putting your crew at risk. I didn’t mean to do that. I didn’t want to put Taehyung or anyone else in danger because of me. I didn’t realize what would happen when I sought out the help of the mariners, and I am sorry.”

Jimin took a deep, steadying breath, and even though every instinct in his body screamed at him to not look away or bare himself before the predator-like man, he cast down his gaze and stiffly bowed his head, the movement almost painful. “And thank you,” he murmured quietly, barely above a whisper. “For saving me.”

He held his bow for as long as he deemed necessary, letting ten agonizingly slow second pass before he straightened up again and made himself meet Yoongi’s eyes. The captain seemed to be chewing on his words, his lips pressed tight and his jaw moving soundlessly, and it was all Jimin could do to wait, wait and pray that his words were enough.

When the pirate finally spoke, his voice was more austere than before, but for once, it was perhaps not solely because of Jimin. “What did you tell that piece of shit?” he asked, something akin to a snarl twisting his features as he spat out the vice admiral’s name. “Son Jukan?”

Treason, Jimin remembered Taehyung saying not minutes ago, hissing out the word in the same venomous tone as the captain. “I didn’t tell him anything,” he said carefully, furrowing his brow when Yoongi emitted a scoff at that, clearly unconvinced. “I swear I didn’t. Or, I mean… I told him I had escaped from you. That your crew had attacked my village and taken me away, and that I had
As he recalled the evening’s events, he felt a small drop of that same venom seep into his own tone, turning the words sour in his mouth, and he found himself averting his eyes. For some reason, the thought of relating to the captain’s anger made his stomach twist uncomfortably, so much so that he couldn’t bring himself to meet the man’s gaze any longer.

“He wanted me to tell him exactly where you were so he could, as he put it, end your reign,” Jimin managed stiffly, “but I refused, so he threw me in the brig. And because I’m apparently a skinchanger, he made sure I was thoroughly chained to the floor.”

He recalled the way his hand had shifted, the smooth skin taking on the rough, dark texture of a bird’s talon. The thought made him shudder; he remembered the tremor that had gone through his hand a fraction of a second before he had struck Son Jukan across the face, as well as the blood he’d drawn, the two cuts across his eyebrow.

When Jimin pushed the thoughts away, he realized another silence had settled between him and the pirate captain and he turned back to face him, only to instantly sink his teeth into the inside of his lower lip and clasp his hands tightly behind his back, the fine hairs in his neck suddenly standing on edge.

Yoongi’s scowl had smoothened out to leave only a slight frown marring his brow as he studied Jimin’s face, his eyes trailing over every inch of his skin and lingering at the bruise on his cheek before he met Jimin’s gaze again. He simply held it for several seconds, as if he was trying to read Jimin, to see all the way into his soul. For the first time, Jimin couldn’t find a single trace of hostility in the captain’s eyes, his expression utterly unreadable.

Suddenly, the air was alight with something he couldn’t quite identify, and when Jimin held his breath, he didn’t even realize it.

“Why didn’t you?”

Jimin almost startled, having been so entranced by the shift in atmosphere that he’d almost forgotten they were still speaking. “H-huh?” he stuttered, blinking in confusion.

The strange air was gone as quickly as it had come, disappearing when Yoongi arched an eyebrow. “Why didn’t you tell him where we were, songbird?” he asked, heaving an impatient sigh when all Jimin did was part his lips and close them again. “If you’d told him, he would’ve summoned reinforcements, surrounded us, and given us a real fucking swift burial at sea. We would’ve died and you would’ve been taken back to your little island, which is what you seem to want. So,” there was something almost challenging in his eyes, “why didn’t you tell him?”

The accusation of his intentions hurt more than Jimin would’ve thought possible. “I-I don’t want any of you to, to die,” he stuttered, his eyebrows knitting together in distress. “I… you should all be given a fair trial.”

That certainly broke the captain out of his stony expression, his lips parting in what Jimin could only interpret as disbelief. “A fair trial,” Yoongi deadpanned after he’d regained his composure, his voice dripping with dubiouness. “Do you still not realize what we are? We’re pirates. We are not fair. We purposely disobey the law, we steal, we hurt people, we burn their houses to the ground.”

He looked like he truly couldn’t believe what Jimin had said, a wry smirk curling his lips as he shook his head. “You’ve seen it firsthand, songbird,” the captain stated, his eyes once again drifting to the bruise on his cheek. “You’ve felt it firsthand, or do you mean to tell me you think I’ve been fair to
“No,” Jimin said instantly, “but—”

“There are no buts here,” Yoongi interrupted. “None of us expects fair, and none of us complain about it. We are what we are, and we are what we are by choice. No one in the entire world is going to be dumb enough to give the likes of us a fair fucking trial.” He chuckled, a wrong type of amusement hidden in the sound, and Jimin could only stare, incredulous. “All you accomplished by refusing him was to paint a big red cross over your back.”

His words tore Jimin out of his apprehension, a flicker of defiance sparking somewhere in the depths of his chest. “No,” he said again, loudly enough to make the captain sober up from his hollow glee. “I accomplished more than that. I already told you, I didn’t want any one of you to die, and none of you did.” He paused to grit his teeth when uninvited images of death and fire crept into the back of his mind, but he refused to let them affect him. Not now. “I accomplished plenty,” he told Yoongi, the steadiness of his voice surprising even himself, “some of which I have to apologize for. So here I am. Apologizing.”

His tone hardly matched his words, and the captain must’ve thought so as well; when Jimin had said his peace, the two of them simply stood there, glaring at one another, both waiting for the other to fold, both refusing to back down.

Finally, to Jimin’s immense surprise, Yoongi heaved a frustrated sigh and closed his eyes, reaching up to pinch at the bridge of his nose before shaking his head. “Have it your way, then, songbird,” he said flatly and pushed away from the cartography table, straightening to his full length as he looked at Jimin. “I can’t say I want to forgive you for what you did, but if I don’t, Taehyung will hound my arse until I agree either way, so fine. I’ll accept your apology, on the condition you don’t ever pull something so fucking stupid again.”

It hurt.

It was near painful how relieved Jimin was upon hearing those words, and he despised himself for it. “I won’t,” he pressed out, his voice oddly thick. He watched the captain nod curtly at his response and wave him off before turning to walk around the table, shifting his attention away from Jimin and to the map, but for some reason, Jimin didn’t leave. All he did was look at Yoongi, look at him while he attempted to quell the uneasiness in his chest.

The captain noticed his reluctance quickly enough, an annoyed frown settling on his brow. “What now?” he snapped impatiently, without taking his eyes off the cartography table.

Jin cleared his throat to buy himself some time to make sense of his own thoughts, and the one he managed to hold onto was tied to Namjoon’s earlier words, the question of where he stood. “What… what will happen to me?” he asked very quietly, far from comfortable with putting the decision in Yoongi’s hands, but right now, he had to know. “Do… do I stay on the Agust?”

The pirate’s answer was instantaneous. “Did I tell you to get off my ship, songbird?” he asked, and again, there was that near challenging hint to his voice.

“No, you didn’t,” Jimin said slowly.

“No, I didn’t,” Yoongi echoed, but when Jimin still didn’t move, he closed his eyes before looking up and pinning him under an aggravated glare. “Do I actually have to tell you to get the fuck out of my quarters, songbird?”
Whatever it was that made Jimin hesitate vanished in the blink of an eye, the by now familiar hostility in the captain’s voice jarring him out of his unsettled state of mind. “N-no, I, uh, I’ll go,” he stuttered and took a few stumbling steps backwards, his hand groping blindly for the door behind him. “I…”

There was another thank you resting on the tip of his tongue, but he closed his lips on it. Once was enough, he thought, and so, without another word, he left the captain to his own devices.

Outside, Jimin found Taehyung waiting for him, smiling his bright, rectangular smile from where he was leaning against the ship rail. “Still alive, I see,” the quartermaster stated, chuckling when Jimin offered him a tentative nod. “How are you feeling, Chim?”

As if on cue, Jimin’s exhaustion returned in full force, draining him both physically and mentally, and he heaved a deep sigh as he walked over to the blonde pirate. “I’m tired,” he mumbled. “I’m really, really tired.”

Taehyung nodded and straightened up, reaching out to carefully take Jimin’s hand. “Come on,” he said and pulled him towards the main deck and the companionway leading below. “You can bunk with me tonight.”

Jimin’s eyes widened at that, and he threw a quick glance over his shoulder and at the doors he’d just walked out of, half expecting the captain to come bursting out and demanding that Jimin be locked in the brig again. “Th-that’s okay, Taehyung,” he protested and made a meek attempt at squirming out of the pirate’s grasp. “I’ll be fine, just-”

“Nope.” Taehyung’s grip was firm enough to keep him in place. “You’ve spent enough time in cells for one day,” he declared with a thoughtful nod. “My bed’s big enough for the both of us, and Jeongguk’s in the infirmary for the night, so I’d be all alone.”

Even though there wasn’t a trace of sorrow in his voice, his words gave Jimin pause. He thought back to how the navigator had acted back in the galleys, how small he had seemed then, curled around Taehyung and refusing to even look at anyone else. Part of him wanted to ask, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it; if the quartermaster had made the choice to be brave in the face of whatever it was that haunted his lover, it wasn’t Jimin’s place to uproot his determination.

“Also.” Taehyung turned to face Jimin before they moved down the companionway, his blonde hair shimmering in the light of the moon. “I’ve still got a bedtime story to tell you, Chim,” the pirate whispered, almost as if he was telling a secret, and the small smile on his lips made Jimin’s heart tighten in his chest. “About two mariners and a boy who turned the better of them into a traitor.”

Chapter End Notes

Did…

Did they just… DID THEY JUST HAVE A CONVERSATION?!?!!!?!? AN ACTUAL CONVERSATION WHERE NO ONE GOT HURT?!?!!!??!

//faints
I never thought this day would come… THE SHIP SAILS ALREADY. SOUND THE WEDDING BELLS. IT’S HONEYMOON TIME.

//snorts

Imao, not even close~

But holy shit, for some reason that very last paragraph really fucked me up D: like, Taehyung’s sadness is so palpable even though he’s smiling there, holy crap, ugh, my heart...

SO. MUCH. TALKING. THOUGH. This chapter contains pretty much everything that should’ve been said and established when Jimin first boarded the Agust. This is the conversation he should’ve had with the crew, and Yoongi… well, Yoongi is Yoongi. He’s still a dick, but ayyy, we got to see him go five minutes without threatening to kill someone, so that’s a win, right? Right?... yeah, okay.

Anyway. WHAT was up with Jeongguk? Hmm. I don’t remember seeing him at all during the previous chapter. Curious. Hmm. HMM….. please don’t tell me I’m being mean to them again. Oh lord. WHY DO I DO DIS?

Okay, no. No, I won’t be mean to them anymore. I WON’T.

SEE YA ON THURSDAY WITH CHAPTER 9 - A Tale of Two Brothers - AND YOU JUST KNOW BY THAT TITLE THAT IT’S BACKSTORY TIME, FOCK YES.
A Tale of Two Brothers

Chapter Summary

When his fingers dug into the mattress so hard it threatened to tear, Jimin couldn’t bear it any longer. Without hesitating, he reached out and placed his small hand on top of Taehyung’s and squeezed gently, rubbing his thumb against the pirate’s knuckles to coax him to ease his tension. “It’s alright,” Jimin told him, soothing the quartermaster much in the same way Taehyung had done for him earlier that night. “I’m… it’s okay.”

Chapter Notes

Okay, so I cried. Like a baby. WHY IS THIS GODDAMN STORY SO GODDAMN SAD I DON’T EVEN KNOW, WHY DO I DO THIS???

:((

BRACE YOURSELVES FOR SOME SAD-AS-FECK MUSIC;
Ramin Djawadi - I Am Hers, She Is Mine
Jonas Göbel - Empty Streets
Fairy Tail (Takanashi Yasuharu) - Slow Theme (piano)
BrunuhVille - Black Heart
Arn Andersson - Dawn

now i'm gonna go back to crying.

A soft sigh gusted past Jimin’s lips as he rested his head against the mattress, his eyes automatically sliding shut as he allowed his body relax into the bunk. It felt like a warm embrace, comforting and peaceful, and Jimin was numbly awed by the sensation; he wouldn’t have guessed he’d ever appreciate a mattress as much as he did now, but after two consecutive nights in cells, chained or otherwise, the softness felt almost like home.

“Don’t fall asleep on me yet, Chim.” Jimin felt a dip in the mattress and cracked his eyes open to watch Taehyung settle on the bed, a smile on his lips as he made himself comfortable, shuffling around until he was lying face to face with Jimin. “I know it’s heaven compared to the brig, but you gotta stay awake for a bit longer,” the pirate chuckled, his voice hushed to not disturb any of the sleeping crewmen. “Is this okay?”

Jimin had to swallow the lump in his throat before speaking; the way they were curled up against each other reminded him of the times he’d seen Jihyun’s grandchildren sleep, the toddlers caught in a tangle of limbs in their crib. “Yeah,” he mumbled and surprised himself by how genuine his reply was. They were lying almost chest to chest, barely four inches between them, but rather than uncomfortable, Taehyung’s presence was somehow calming. “I’m okay.”
Somewhere in the back of his mind, he realized this was the first time since his mother had passed that he’d been so close with anyone.

“Good,” the blonde pirate said and grinned, shifting slightly so he could tuck his hands in under his head. He pursed his lips for a moment, humming under his breath as he seemed to think of the correct words, and he nodded to himself before starting. “This story also belongs to Yoongi,” he stated, “so I can’t tell you the whole thing, okay? I can only tell you my side of it, my view on everything that happened.”

Jimin nodded against his hands, his cheeks resting on top of them. “Okay,” Taehyung said, a giddiness seeping into his voice. “The first thing you have to know is that I’ve always loved pirates, ever since I was a little boy. There was just something so free about them, how they could go wherever they wanted and do whatever they wanted without caring about what others thought. They didn’t care about the emperor’s law or whatever it is the mariners think is order.”

The last word made him snort and roll his eyes almost as if he thought the officers of the law were so stupid for believing they knew the first thing about justice, and Jimin almost smiled.

“Anyway. I was born in a port town on the upper coast of the mainland,” the quartermaster told him. “My mother was a whore and my father, well… let’s just say my mom was a pretty lady and had plenty of customers, men who showed up and never came back after they were done.” He grinned and pressed his elbow against Jimin’s arm when Jimin’s eyes widened in surprise. “She was a good mother,” Taehyung said fondly. “People frowned at what she did, of course, but she always took care of me, she even sang me to sleep every night.” He heaved a soft sigh before continuing, “At least until she died when I was ten years old. Some disease, probably. She didn’t get help from a doctor until it was already too late.”

Jimin’s eyes widened even further as his heart tightened in his chest, feeling both a pang of sadness for the pirate, and a twinge of confusion at his light tone. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, but Taehyung only shook his head, smiling wider than before.

“Don’t be,” he crooned. “She was an amazing mother, and I’m happy I got to spend even the first ten years of my life with her.” He fell silent for a few seconds before picking up where he’d left off. “Anyway, after she died, it was just me. After spending a few weeks failing miserably to survive properly, I ended up being taken in by the tavern’s owner. I worked for him, you know, served the customers, cleaned pots and pans and all that. It was pretty tiring for a kid, but he kept me off the streets and fed me twice a day, so I did my best.”

He shifted slightly, shuffling as if he couldn’t quite stay still, and his grin took on its rectangular shape. “The tavern was the closest one to the harbor, so every time sailors would stop by to resupply, they’d rest there,” he said by way of explanation, “and sometimes, those sailors were pirates. I loved their visits so much; they used to let me sit with them after I brought them their drinks, and they would tell me stories about their adventures, where they’d gone, what they’d seen.”

Taehyung looked near exhilarated, chuckling to himself as he recalled the days of his childhood. “I admired them so much,” he gushed, turning his head slightly to muffle the words into his hand when his voice grew loud enough to make one of his crewmates stir in their bunk. “They were so genuine in their ways, you know? They knew what they were and they didn’t make any false pretense about it. They were so much fun, way more fun than the uptight mariners that would stop by every now and then, with their commands and their demands for respect.”

The smile melted off his lips and turned into a frown, the shift happening in the blink of an eye. “Well, you saw what they’re like,” he huffed irritably. “They serve the law, so they think they’re better than the rest, like their job makes them holy.”
Jimin nodded as he thought back to the mariners he’d first approached back at in Goto Port, how standoffish they had been before learning the identity of Jimin’s captor. They’d been utterly disinterested in helping him until they’d realized they could draw some sort of benefit from it.

“Anyway,” Taehyung said and shrugged his shoulders as best he could. “That was my life for the next seven years, working at the tavern, and I loved every moment of it. There was barely ever a boring day, with customers coming from all around the world, so even though I never went anywhere, it felt like I was seeing the world.” His smile lasted only for a moment. “But then, out of nowhere, the mariners decided to close the book on my life.”

A shudder made its way down Jimin’s spine, born by the coldness that surrounded the quartermaster’s words as he spoke of the mariners. Once again, he remembered Taehyung’s expressionless rage when faced with Son Jukan, and a part of him wanted to reach over whatever few inches lay between his and the pirate’s hand and clasp it.

“See, two pirate ships happened to dock at the harbor at the same time, and, well,” the quartermaster pursed his lips into a frown, “drunk pirates tend to get pretty loud and aggressive. It’s all territorial shit, you know, we were here first and that kind of garbage.” He sighed and closed his eyes. “The brawl began in the tavern,” he said, “and it escalated to the point where the entire harbor ended up a battlefield, and sure as the tide, it called on the attention of a nearby mariner warship.”

When he looked at Jimin again, his expression was grim. “They killed most of the pirates and apprehended the rest,” he said slowly. “They checked all nearby alleys and houses to make sure they hadn’t missed a single one of them, and sure enough, they came to the tavern to investigate. There they found me, kneeling on the floor while tending to an injured pirate.”

Jimin noticed the way the quartermaster’s hands clenched underneath his head. “It was just a kid,” Taehyung whispered, “twelve or thirteen or something, younger than me but still old enough to sail under a black flag. He’d gotten hurt during the fight, so I’d dragged him back to the tavern to treat him.” He swallowed audibly, as if the words hurt his throat. “The mariner saw his brand, the tattoo of their crew’s crest on his chest, and declared him guilty, and when I tried to stop him from taking the boy, he turned on me and decided that I must’ve been a pirate as well, so he put me in chains and dragged me back to their warship.”

“B-but you were innocent,” Jimin said before he could stop himself, pressing a hand to his lips when a grunt sounded from somewhere in the room, prompted by his exclaim. “Anyone could’ve told the mariners you were innocent.”

“Aye, they could’ve,” the quartermaster mumbled, his brows knitting into a frown, “but no one tells a mariner like Son Jukan what to do.” He clenchd his jaw and nodded when Jimin’s eyes grew wide. “That’s right, it was Jukan, Commander Son Jukan at the time. He was so determined to root out every single pirate in that town, he didn’t care when I told him I wasn’t one. He didn’t even care when the injured pirate told him I wasn’t one. All he cared about was that I’d been in a pirate’s presence and tried to help them.”

_Only a pirate would care so much for other pirates_, the vice admiral had told Jimin, hissing the words as if they were a curse. The thought made Jimin’s chest tighten uncomfortably, the knowledge that Taehyung had once gone through exactly what he himself had causing his heart to ache.

“So he put me in the brig with the rest of the pirates they’d apprehended and sailed away,” the quartermaster said quietly, resentment hiding in his deep voice. “They told us they’d take us to some mariner base for a public execution. Hanging, you know, a way to properly demonstrate to the world what’s done with outlaws.” His face twisted into one of disgust. “I tried to plead with them, I tried to tell them I was innocent, that I wasn’t a pirate, but no one would listen. No one, except Son Jukan’s.
partner and closest friend, another commander by the name of Min Yoongi.”

Just like that, Taehyung’s expression smoothened out into a smile, the mere mention of the pirate captain’s name easing the tension his past brought on, and Jimin almost found himself smiling back, the pirate’s fondness almost contagious.

“Did you know his hair is actually the color of silver?” the pirate asked in a tone of hushed awe, nodding enthusiastically when Jimin’s brow arched in surprise. “It was when I first met him. He dyes it now, but back then, with his silver hair and pale skin, he was called the White Fox.” He grinned against his arm, curling in on himself as if he could barely contain his happiness. “I remember thinking he looked like a spirit of some sort when I first saw him,” he said and chuckled brightly. “Like he wasn’t really human. Hoseok told me years later that there’s actually a small error in Yoongi’s pigmentation, which is why his hair is so white and his skin so fair, but,” he shook his head and pressed his lips together in an attempt to stifle the smile that was threatening to split his face in half, “but I still like to think of him as a guardian from another world, you know, someone sent to watch over me.”

Taehyung drifted off for a few seconds, caught up in his awe for his captain, and Jimin let him have his moment, watching him intently and registering every emotion that moved across his face, every glint of his eyes. He’d never quite seen reverence as strong as this, as if the quartermaster was brimming with so much of it he could barely keep it contained; if Jimin didn’t know Min Yoongi the way he did, he knew he would’ve found himself afflicted by the awe and admiration, and praised the thought of the pirate captain without a trace of doubt.

“Anyway. Back to the story.” Taehyung tore himself out of his momentary silence and looked at Jimin. “So I was locked up in the brig when I first met him,” he said, his tone so light compared to barely a minute earlier. “Yoongi wasn’t there to see me, but to hear a report from the mariners on watch duty. They had a few soldiers stationed at the brig at all times, you know, to keep an eye on us and to listen for anything the pirates said that could’ve been useful.” Something akin to mischief settled in his eyes. “I told Yoongi what I’d told everyone else, that I was innocent and had no place in either of the crews, that he could ask anyone and they would say the same.”

His lips stretched into a toothy grin. “He told me to shut my mouth and shove my lies up my arse,” he said, only to instantly have to bury his face into the mattress to muffle his laughter when Jimin’s face contorted into a disgruntled frown.

“Charming,” Jimin said dryly, huffing as he watched the pirate’s shoulders shake.

“He’s great at first impressions, isn’t he?” Taehyung asked breathlessly when he’d sobered up enough to speak, and his smile was fond when he resumed his story. “I’d tell him the same thing every time I saw him. We were at sea for days, and he stopped by once every evening to hear the reports, so I had plenty of time to get under his skin with my constant repetition.” He paused to chuckle, the sound soft with affection. “Finally, he got so irritated that he dragged a stool opposite of my cell and told me to convince him,” he crooned. “To tell him what had happened and why I’d been mistaken for a pirate.”

“And I did. I told him about how I’d lived and worked in that tavern ever since my mother died, about how I liked listening to the pirates who stopped by, and how I’d been in the middle of trying to stop a little pirate kid from dying when Son Jukan had barged into the tavern. I told him I’d tried to explain it to Jukan, but he’d dismissed it instantly and put me in chains without bothering to hear what I had to say.”

His gaze fell from Jimin’s face as he spoke, his eyes glazing over as he recalled his past, unfocused as they settled on Jimin’s collarbones. “Yoongi was silent throughout my entire explanation,” he
murmured. “He let me speak from start to finish, and when I was done, he just… looked at me for a while. He just looked, and it felt like he was staring into my soul.”

A shudder crawled its way up Jimin’s spine and settled at the base of his neck; he knew what Taehyung was speaking of, the captain’s intense gaze, the one that made him feel as if he was being cracked open from the inside out, forced to bare every secret, every dark corner of his mind.

“And then he stood up and left,” the quartermaster continued. “He walked out of the brig without saying a word, and I figured it was hopeless, you know, that there was nothing more I could do than just… than just wait for my death.” He closed his eyes and his jaw stiffened, his voice turning strained as if the words hurt his throat. “I remember when the warship pulled into the harbor somewhere in China,” Taehyung said quietly, his hands fisting the mattress’ sheets. “They wanted to get as close to Shanghai as their laws reached, thinking a public execution would rattle the pirate port.”

He drew a deep breath, hiding the faintest trace of a quiver. “I saw Yoongi when they led us to the dungeons,” he said, “He looked angry as he watched the mariners lead me away, staring at me with that same look, but he didn’t say anything. On our way to the dungeons, I heard the mariners whisper amongst themselves about how the two commanders had been arguing, and I thought that maybe Yoongi had made an effort on my behalf, an attempt to reason with Jukan, but that Jukan had eventually changed his mind instead.”

Taehyung finally opened his eyes again, and Jimin almost wished he hadn’t. There was so much sorrow, so much anger brimming behind his irises, clear as day even in the darkness of the bunks. “We were given one night in the dungeons,” the quartermaster mumbled, shifting his hand from underneath his head to better clutch onto the sheets. “One more night to live. We all knew we were going to die. The pirates were eerily calm, like all the life had gone out of them on the way over, and I knew it was an effect of the chains. Men who value freedom over all, for them to suddenly be tied down, imprisoned…” He swallowed thickly. “I was scared to death, but I couldn’t even imagine what it must’ve felt like for them.”

Another shiver racked Jimin’s body, this time born in the familiarity of Taehyung’s words. It was precisely how he himself had felt when Son Jukan had had him chained up, as if every ounce of life had been drained from him upon being bound with shackles that tore his freedom away from him.

Suddenly, he wished Taehyung wouldn’t say any more.

“They came for us in the morning,” the pirate breathed, his eyes glistening. “They tied our hands behind our backs so our chests would be bared in some fucked up sign of vulnerability.” He ground his teeth, his jaw creaking in protest. “The square was full of people. So many people had gathered to watch a bunch of pirates die, and they looked so satisfied, so pleased about it.”

Jimin’s heart was beating painfully in his chest as he watched the quartermaster curl in on himself, and he wanted to tell him to stop, that he didn’t have to say anything else, that he shouldn’t speak about it if it made him hurt this much, but Taehyung continued before he could do more than part his lips.

“I tried to explain one more time,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “I tried to tell the hangman that I was innocent, but he didn’t listen. He didn’t even look at me. Instead, he tied the noose around my neck and pulled it tight, and then all there was left to do was to get it over and done with.”

When his fingers dug into the mattress so hard it threatened to tear, Jimin couldn’t bear it any longer. Without hesitating, he reached out and placed his small hand on top of Taehyung’s and squeezed
gently, rubbing his thumb against the pirate’s knuckles to coax him to ease his tension. “It’s alright,” Jimin told him, soothing the quartermaster much in the same way Taehyung had done for him earlier that night. “I’m… it’s okay.”

The pirate took a deep breath and nodded, pressing his forehead against Jimin’s hand before continuing. “J-just as the hangman was about to pull the lever and, and hang me,” he managed shakily, “someone raised their voice and demanded that the execution be interrupted.” He pressed further into Jimin’s touch. “At first, I didn’t even realize what was going on,” he whispered. “It was all I could do to just… breathe. Alive. For even a few seconds longer.”

A tremor went through him, and Jimin tightened his grip on the quartermaster, wishing there was more he could’ve done. “It was Yoongi who called for the interruption,” Taehyung told him quietly. “He started arguing with Jukan right on the spot, even though their superior officers were present. Yoongi didn’t care. He told the hangman to free me, that I wasn’t a pirate and that I shouldn’t be standing up there at the gallows, but Jukan…”

When he raised his head again to look at Jimin, his expression was grim, anger seeping into his voice. “Jukan turned to their seniors and told them Yoongi wasn’t thinking straight,” he seethed, speaking through gritted teeth. “He told them I had somehow ingrained the idea of my innocence in Yoongi, that it was likely I had some sort of blessing and that I should die as quickly as possible, if only to free Yoongi’s mind. His superiors listened, of course, and signaled for the hanging to resume.”

While Jimin held his breath in dread for what was to come, Taehyung’s expression morphed into one of confusion, as if he was struggling to grasp at his own memories. “Everything was a blur after that,” the pirate said slowly. “Suddenly the hangman was lying on the ground with a dagger buried in his neck and everyone was screaming. It was absolute chaos and I had no idea what was happening, but I felt someone cut the ropes that bound my arms and tear the noose away from around my neck, and then we were running, diving straight into the mass of screaming citizens.”

He blinked rapidly and turned his hand so he could hold onto Jimin’s, curling his fingers into a tight grip. “Yoongi had to fight off so many mariners, so many of his friends,” Taehyung breathed, his voice unsteady, “but he never let my hand go. I… I don’t remember how we got away. I remember gunshots and Jukan chasing us, and I remember falling into the river that flowed through the city.”

When he paused to draw a quivering breath, Jimin once again wished he’d stop speaking, dreading what was to come. “I probably passed out somewhere along the way,” the quartermaster said, his eyes glistening, “because I woke up on a riverbank somewhere, my body just barely out of the water. I was okay, just a bit dizzy, so I tried to sit up, but something was weighing on my shirt. I… I turned around, and there he was.”

Tears fell silently from his eyes, yet he didn’t blink. “Yoongi was lying on the ground behind me, one hand still clutching the collar of my shirt,” he whispered, his gaze never straying from Jimin’s. “He was unconscious, and… and his left hand was gone.” His voice was near monotonous. “His arm had been severed at the elbow. I don’t know when or how, but it was gone and he was bleeding out. Yoongi was dying, all because he tried to save me.”

Jemin bit into the inside of his lower lip, hard, barely daring to breathe as he listened. His chest felt unbearably tight, his heart aching, and it was all he could do to not cry.

“I did the only thing I could think of,” Taehyung said, hollow. “I burned the wound shut and tried my best to keep him alive. It was… it was horrible. I had to hold him down while I did it, and he screamed when I pushed the fire against his arm, so loud I was sure the mariners would hear him.” He closed his eyes for a moment and sniffled, his tears spilling without pause. “I moved him away
from the city. I carried him on my back for as far and long as I had the strength to, walking for several hours every day. I picked berries and crushed them and kept Yoongi hydrated that way, but I knew it wasn’t gonna be enough. I knew if I didn’t find proper food and shelter, he’d die.

“And then I did. In the middle of nowhere, I found a farm. It was a small one, with three sheep and a horse and some chickens, but I thought they had to have something that could help Yoongi. So I carried him over there and called for the owner, and that was a mistake.” In an instant, Taehyung’s tears stopped falling, his expression turning hard as stone. “News travels fast, much faster than what I had with Yoongi on my back,” he said, his voice suddenly steady. “The farmer knew who Yoongi was, he recognized him by his silver hair, and he told his son to take the horse and ride out to the city to fetch the mariners.”

There was not a single shred of hesitation in his voice when he spoke. “The son was two years older than me,” he said stiffly, “and he was the first man I ever killed. I didn’t even hesitate. When the farmer pulled Yoongi off my back and threw him to the ground and told his son to fetch the mariners, it was like my senses had disappeared and my body acted all on its own. I grabbed a rock from the ground and beat him until I crushed his skull, and then I did the same to the farmer.”

Jimin felt a pang of dread, his blood running cold in his veins, but amidst his state of shock, he realized Taehyung’s grip on his hand had loosened considerably, as if he was giving Jimin the choice to pull away after what he’d heard. As if the pirate knew how horrorstruck his actions would leave Jimin, as if he wanted to give Jimin the choice to distance himself from Taehyung in case he suddenly felt unsafe in his presence, along with the reassurance that he wouldn’t be judged for it. Jimin felt as if a knife had sunk through his heart, tears burning hot behind his eyes, and he clutched hard onto Taehyung’s hand with both of his own. He refused to let go, refused to let the pirate believe that Jimin was afraid of him. Not Taehyung, never Taehyung, who had saved him time and time again and never asked for anything in return.

“I’m here,” he said again, his voice thick as he struggled to hold his emotions in check. “I’m here, Taehyung.”

The relief that flooded the quartermaster’s face almost made Jimin lose his fight against the tears that stung his eyes, breathing deeply as Taehyung returned his firm grip before resuming his horrible story. “I didn’t feel a thing,” he murmured. “The farmer’s son was innocent, just like I’d been, but I killed him all the same. Only the thought of him bringing the mariners to take Yoongi… it’s like it took away my rationality.”

He shook his head slightly and closed his eyes before once again pressing his forehead against Jimin’s hand. “I gave them a proper burial, at least,” he said quietly. “Once I had made sure Yoongi was comfortable, I took their bodies out back and dug two graves for them. I apologized and said a prayer, even though there was no one there to hear me anymore.” He relaxed visibly, his shoulders slumping as he moved on from the dreadful topic. “By some miracle, Yoongi recovered,” he crooned. “I doubt it was my clumsy attempts at healing him that did the trick. It’s more likely it was just because Yoongi’s too stubborn to die.”

The pirate looked up at Jimin, the makings of a grin tugging at the corners of his lips. “When he woke up, he told me I was an idiot for getting my hands dirty,” he said and chuckled, the sound soft and filled with awe. “He was so angry, but he couldn’t even move, so I just sat on the floor next to his bed and had him yell at me until he passed out again.” The memory made him smile, and the sight of it filled Jimin’s chest with what he could only interpret as relief. “Slowly, he got his strength back,” Taehyung told him. “It took Yoongi nearly a month before he could move around properly again, but we got by just fine on the farm. There was food and clean water, so we survived.
“Then we had to decide what we were going to do next. Yoongi was a traitor, and in the eyes of the mariners, I was a pirate.” He huffed out the words before a lopsided smile graced his lips. “I remember when I pointed it out, that Son Jukan still thought I was a pirate,” he mused, grinning toothily. “Yoongi smiled and ruffled my hair and told me, if that’s what they think we are, maybe we should live up to their expectations.”

He muffled his chuckle into the back of Jimin’s hand, and Jimin found himself smiling despite himself. “So we decided to become pirates,” the quartermaster said and nodded thoughtfully to himself. “Yoongi dyed his hair black to make sure no one recognized him, and he made me wear a mask so that no one would ever really know my face, but it would still be another year before we even got around to setting sail. First, we had to restore Yoongi’s mobility to his left arm. A prosthesis was a good start, but in the end, it’s just a lifeless thing, some pieces of metal and ceramic thrown together to resemble a hand, so we spent a whole eleven months tracking down the Rune of Animation.”

Jemin quirked a brow in curiosity. “The Rune of Animation?” he echoed, his voice still thick from the emotions he hadn’t quite managed to quell just yet.

“Aye,” Taehyung said with another nod. “It’s how he moves his left hand as if it was real. He can make any inanimate object he touches move according to his will.” The look of reverence was back in his eyes now, glinting in the dark room. “If he wanted to, he could make this entire ship come to life,” he told Jimin in a hushed voice, brimming with awe. “He could make the Life of Agust swing her sword, could make the bird in her arms flap its wings.”

While the pirate chuckled excitedly at his own words, Jimin remembered how the iron bars of his cell had bent under Yoongi’s touch, needing only the slightest brush of his fingers to break off from the ceiling and curl out of shape. He recalled how the warship’s deck had split open when the captain had pressed the palm of his hand to it, and the memory sent a shudder down his spine.

“We considered several other options,” Taehyung continued, breaking Jimin out of his thoughts, “such as the Rune of Regrowth, or a Blessed Rune related to reptiles, you know, since they can grow their limbs back. There were lots of options, but the Rune of Animation seemed like the best one.”

The quartermaster smiled at Jimin before shifting so he was lying on his back, still holding onto Jimin’s hands as he stared up into the ceiling. “It took us almost a year, but we found it,” he said. “It was by sheer luck, too. The rune was stuck in the skull of a dead man, right where the motor control functions of a brain is located. Yoongi took it, and suddenly he could move the fingers of his prosthetic arm.”

He chuckled, the sound stirring several of his fellow crewmen. “It was hilarious, at first, before he learned to control it properly,” Taehyung grinned. “He’d accidentally bend the prosthesis completely out of shape or accidentally have it break apart. The threads of his clothes would undo and redo themselves when he was wearing them, and he couldn’t walk barefoot on deck without accidentally causing the planks to spring loose, and-”

“Shut yer trap already, li’l Tae.”

The sudden voice made Jimin’s flinch so violently he almost fell off the bed, having completely forgotten they were surrounded by nearly the entire crew. “You shut up, Xiao,” Taehyung shot back into the room without bothering to lower his voice, grinning as he kicked with his feet. “I thought bears hibernated all winter, I’m sure you can sleep through me talking to Chim for one night.”

The carpenter only groused something incoherent in return before he shifted in his own bed and
became quiet, much to Jimin’s relief. His nervousness must’ve shown on his face, for Taehyung turned to face him again and grinned widely, as if he found Jimin’s reaction unbelievably amusing. “We met a lot of our crewmen while we searched for the rune,” the pirate told him with a small nod at something behind Jimin. “Xiao was one of them. Namjoon and Jin, too, and I don’t think we would’ve ever found the rune without Namjoon’s help. We also met Hoseok, Rodel, and Raji, our master gunner. We were already a crew before we set sail, a family that’s never stopped growing ever since.”

His smile was so soft it made Jimin’s heart ache. “Brothers aren’t always born by blood, you know,” Taehyung murmured and squeezed Jimin's hands. “Sometimes, they’re bound by something much stronger.”

His words made a flicker of warmth stir in the depths of Jimin’s chest, spreading out to his arms and his stomach and his neck, and he found himself nodding slowly before he could stop himself. He watched the quartermaster’s grin take on its rectangular shape before he curled up closer to Jimin, humming as he tangled their legs together and held Jimin’s hands to his chest.

“You know, Chim,” Taehyung crooned, his breath ghosting over Jimin’s collarbones. “I thank every god, every deity, every existing force of nature for Min Yoongi’s existence, every single day. There’s nothing in the entire world I wouldn’t do for him, nothing.” His smile was audible from his voice. “And everyone here, every single one in this crew could tell you a story just like mine. Jeongguk could tell you about the horrors he saw after he found his Blessed Rune, when people would come from far and wide and kill each other in order to own him and use his blessing for their own benefit.” There was a tightness to his tone, but he carried on without pause. “Hoseok could tell you about how Yoongi broke him out of the hell he was forced to live in when the eastern emperor had him experiment on living humans to find a cure for his dying empress. And…”

He let his voice trail off without continuing, heaving a soft sigh as he shook his head. “Those stories aren’t mine to tell,” the pirate huffed before settling comfortably against the mattress again. “My point is that no one is here for glory or for gold or any of that crap. I mean, sure, those things are nice, but… we’re here because Yoongi gave us a home and a family. A place where we can be what we are and be at peace with our existence.”

A brief silence settled between them, during which Jimin thought back on everything he’d heard. He would’ve never expected such a tragedy to stand in the blonde pirate’s past, his childishly cheerful nature revealing not a single hint to the horrors he’d had to survive. The horrors all of them had had to survive, judging by Taehyung’s slip about Jeongguk and Hoseok, and at the center of them all stood Min Yoongi.

Jimin frowned at the conflicting emotions stirring in his chest. He didn’t know what to think or feel; he had just been told a dreadful story where the pirate captain was, as the entire crew kept insisting, a good man. He had sacrificed everything for Taehyung’s sake, all his years of work with the mariners, his friendship with Son Jukan, his own reputation and his future. He’d thrown all of it away to save a stranger accused of a crime he hadn’t committed.

Half of Jimin wanted to believe it. Half of him wanted to believe that Min Yoongi was a good man, that he wasn’t cruel, but he couldn’t. The faint ache in his cheek reminded him of what the pirate captain could be, of what he had been almost every time he’d been in Jimin’s presence.

His thoughts filled him with an unwelcome twinge of self-judgement; if Jimin couldn’t find goodness in someone’s heart after learning about how he’d put his own life on the line to save someone else’s, what did that say about Jimin himself?

Almost as if Taehyung had heard his thoughts, he raised his face from where he’d nestled it into the
crook of Jimin’s neck and looked at him the instant the question had crossed his mind. “I didn’t tell you any of this to make you feel, I don’t know, obliged to like Yoongi or something, Chim,” he told him firmly. “Not at all. He’s been mean to you and he’s made you feel scared, so you have every right to hate him, and right now, he deserves to be disliked by you.”

Jimin blinked owlishly down at him, his lips parted in surprise, and his expression made the pirate chuckle. “I just wanted to tell you,” Taehyung stated easily. “I wanted to explain that whatever the mariners say, Yoongi is not a traitor. He’s a man who was willing to give up his entire life to save someone innocent.”

The quartermaster waited for Jimin to slowly nod before emitting a contented sound and nuzzling back against Jimin’s chest. “I hope you’ll get along one day, though,” he hummed, smiling against the fabric of Jimin’s shirt. “I like you, Chim, and I want you to feel at home here. Just like the rest of us do.”

With that, Taehyung fell silent for the rest of the night, his breath slowly evening out as he fell asleep half draped over Jimin, who remained awake for long after the blonde pirate’s soft snores began filling the room’s silence. He went over the story over and over again and tried to marry the thought of the hostile pirate captain together with Taehyung’s silver-haired hero, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t seem to do it.

_He did save you_, a little voice in the back of Jimin’s head said. _He knew what Son Jukan would do to you, so just like he did for Taehyung once, he came to save you._

For several long minutes, Jimin stared dead ahead into the darkness of the night, attempting to make sense of his thoughts. He recalled what Namjoon had told him about making a choice, about deciding what he wanted his place in the crew to be, he thought about Taehyung’s words about the crew being closer than family, and he remembered how Yoongi had looked at him when Jimin had told him he had refused to divulge any information regarding their location when Son Jukan had demanded him to.

Finally, Jimin decided to let it all go for now. He could barely make sense of his thoughts any longer, too tired to mull it over, and in the end, it was as Taehyung had said; the story’s purpose hadn’t been to muddle Jimin’s judgement of Min Yoongi. If Jimin so desired, no one would fault him for holding onto his strong dislike for the pirate captain.

_Perhaps he is a good man_, Jimin thought dimly as he closed his eyes and let his body be claimed by his exhaustion. _And perhaps one day, he’ll let me see it too._

Chapter End Notes

:((((

I made myself cry. Again.

Christ, when will I STOP MAKING THINGS SO SAD?! LIKE, DOES EVERYONE HAVE TO HAVE A TRAGIC STORY IN THIS FIC????

Apparently yes, yes they do.
"Things will get better, I swear!" YEAH WELL I'M A FECKING LIAR AREN'T I. GODDAMN.

Okay, but can you IMAGINE little 10-year old Taehyung getting all chummy with a bunch of pirates and being invited to sit with them and just grinning so widely while they tell him stories? BECAUSE I CAN IMAGINE IT. AND GODDAMMIT IF IT DOESN'T MAKE ME SMILE LIKE A FOOL. THE THOUGHT IS LIKE MY SAVING GRACE IN THIS CHAPTER.

AND THE VMIN FRIENDSHIP IS THE BEST THING IN THE WORLD I'M SOBBING ABOUT THAT AS WELL. AND BROTHERS TAEGI, I'M DROWNING IN TEARS, SEND HELP PLS.

Oh, and, uh, SURPRISE, black-haired Yoongi is actually silver-haired Yoongi! Woo! I mean, he’s never gonna be silver-haired Yoongi again for the entire duration of the story, but still! Woo! xD

MONDAY IS CHAPTER 10, WOO, DOUBLE DIGITS, BABY. I have no idea what the chapter name will be this time, BUT STILL. CHAPTER 10.
Chapter Summary

Over the following days, Jimin spent nearly all his time up in the crow’s nest, having been officially instated as Agust’s new lookout by Namjoon the morning following his escape from the warship. He had a feeling it was the first mate’s way of giving him some space to himself, something he immensely appreciated; sitting up in the crow’s nest was as close to peaceful as Jimin imagined he could ever be aboard the pirate ship, and it gave him ample opportunity to observe how the crew functioned in their daily lives.

Chapter Notes

Brace yourselves, shit’s about to NOT go down. For once. Like, what even is this? I’m so confused. Where’s the blood, the pain, the torture?

//is a lost lamb

Music for this one;
Skyrim - The Banned Mare (I basically replayed this song 118231283 times while writing the chapter)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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The crow’s nest was a small space at the highest point of the main mast, twelve meters above the ship’s deck, and even though his job had been utterly and completely uneventful thus far, Jimin loved every second of it. He felt at peace so high up in the air, hardly affected by the vessel’s steady rocking on the ocean waves, which had the mast swaying back and forth; on the contrary, it felt almost soothing, as if the sea was attempting to lull him into comfort.

The many years he’d spent in Jeju’s forests had left him incredibly sure-footed, with an impeccable sense of balance, and so he would effortlessly walk back and forth over the mast’s topgallant yard, never for a moment worried he’d fall. When he stood at the edge of the sails, all he could see was the ocean, wide and never-ending and more beautiful than Jimin could’ve thought possible. The surface of the sea drank the sun’s rays and made them glimmer on the waves, a sight he knew he’d never tire of.
Jimin was nervous at first, when Namjoon told him to inform Lucya that he was to take over her position as lookout; with no common language to communicate in, Jimin resorted to a variation of awkward gesturing and pointing, after which the sniper emitted an amused chuckle and said something in Russian before handing him a brass spyglass. It was a pretty thing, aged yet beautiful, and Lucya showed him how to use it, how to fold it out fully as well as halfway, for a shorter yet sharper range of view.

When he bowed his head in gratitude, Lucya smiled and placed a hand on top of his head in an affectionate gesture before walking away. Jimin just stared after her in surprise, momentarily forgetting that she was wanted across the seas for killing some four hundred people.

Jimin spent the entire first day familiarizing himself with the masts and sails, memorizing how many rungs were lined up the main mast, how many on the mizzen mast and the foremast. He counted every knot of the shrouds and learned the names of every rope and stay from Taehyung, even though he didn’t have to; working the sails was Rodel’s job as the main rigger, along with the ship’s many deckhands.

Rodel was the pirate Jimin saw most frequently during his hours in the crow’s nest, seeing as he was constantly checking on the sails. They never truly interacted, however, apart from an occasional nod of the head or a wave. Partly it was due to the fact that Rodel was mute - Jimin distinctly remembered Taehyung telling him the mariners had cut off Rodel’s tongue upon capture - but the former acrobat also seemed to be just as wary of Jimin as Jimin was of him; he always seemed to speed up a little whenever he moved past Jimin’s post.

Rodel did, however, have one of his deckhands explain the basics of reeling in and releasing the sails to Jimin, as well as show him how to check the security of the buntlines and braces, simple tasks Jimin could do without straying from his post at the crow’s nest. He was hesitant at first, worried he might accidentally cause something to go wrong with the sails rather than secure them, but upon encouragement from Taehyung later the same day, Jimin felt more confident.

He didn’t have to sleep in the cell again after the night Taehyung had told him all there was to know about his past. The quartermaster blatantly refused to let him even climb the steps down to the brig, dragging him back to the bunks and shoving Jimin into his own bed, stating that he would bunk with Jeongguk from now on. “My bed’s gonna be empty otherwise,” Taehyung told him with a brilliant grin. “It’d be a waste if you didn’t take it, Chim.”

Jimin pushed himself up onto his elbows and threw a nervous look in the direction of the companionway. “I don’t think I’m allowed to sleep here,” he said, but when he tried to sit up, Taehyung all but threw himself on top of Jimin, flattening him against the mattress and simultaneously knocking the air out of his lungs. “T-Taehyung!”

“You’re too stubborn,” the blonde pirate mused, laughing when Jimin made an attempt at squirming out from under his weight. “Don’t worry so much, it’s not like Yoongi checks on who sleeps where, anyway. He’s cooped up in his own quarters during the night, so he’ll never know.”

It was hardly a realistic argument, seeing as the entire rest of the crew slept in the bunks and any one of them could easily report to their captain about Jimin’s whereabouts, but when Taehyung threatened to squeeze Jimin in between him and Jeongguk to make sure he didn’t return to the brig, Jimin had very little option than to agree.

When he woke up the next day, he felt as if he’d slept for a year, energized and lively, and he decided it was worth the risk of upsetting the captain’s temper.

For the most part, Jimin tried his best to stay out of everyone’s way. No matter how much he enjoyed...
the crow’s nest, he was far from comfortable in the pirates’ midst, startling every time a noise erupted from somewhere or when someone addressed him out of the blue. The pirates, on the other hand, didn’t seem to mind his presence at all. With the exception of Hisashi, they didn’t glare at him or show any form of hostility towards him; on the contrary, most of them seemed perfectly content with his presence.

It was most likely thanks to Taehyung, who was always there the second Jimin climbed down from the mast, as if he knew exactly when he would leave his post. The quartermaster never missed the opportunity to throw an arm around his shoulders and chat animatedly about everything and nothing and demanding Jimin tell him every last detail of what he’d seen up in the crow’s nest, even if the only answer he could give was, “The sea.”

In fact, Taehyung seemed to love that answer the most, smiling so wide his cheek must’ve ached every time Jimin said the words.

It wasn’t only the quartermaster who did their best to make him feel at home aboard the Agust. Hoseok would whistle sharply to get his attention every time he walked past the main mast and then wave up at Jimin, one time with so much enthusiasm he accidentally smacked an unsuspecting Sungsin over the head, which had every crewman present laughing until they cried, a cheery choir Jimin had joined up at his post, giggling so hard he had to grab onto the sling to not fall over.

Taehyung, Jeongguk, Hoseok and Jin flocked around him whenever he left the crow’s nest to eat, both at midday and in the evening. He listened to their antics while he ate, nearly choking on a mouthful of taters when the quartermaster animatedly told the story of how Jeongguk once had to come drag him out of a brothel after he’d wandered in, thinking it was simply another tavern.

Apart from the occasional giggle, Jimin remained as silent as he could even during meals, for one very particular reason; when food was being served, everyone aboard gathered in the galleys, including the captain.

It served as a secondary reason why Jimin enjoyed his time up in the crow’s nest so immensely, the fact that it put him as far away from Min Yoongi as he possibly could go aboard the Agust. The last thing he wanted to do was to give the captain another reason to flare up at him, to resort to harsh words or violence, so even after Yoongi had forgiven Jimin for his mishap with the mariners, Jimin was just as keen on staying away from him as before.

Avoiding him was easy enough during the days - or nights, depending on when Namjoon wanted him to keep watch - but when it was time to eat, the captain would join his crew in the galleys. The first time Yoongi walked through the doors, Jimin tried to make himself as small as he could so as to not draw attention to himself, a task that failed miserably when Taehyung decided to loudly call his name while shoving more food into his plate. Jimin threw a tense glance over at the captain, but Yoongi didn’t look away from the conversation he held with Raji to spare him a single glance, and Jimin emitted a relieved sound, the tautness of his nerves easing, if even by a mere fraction.

He wasn’t in the least surprised by the intensity of his own awareness of the captain’s presence. On the contrary, Jimin had half expected himself to run and hide at the mere mention of him, but thus far, he hadn’t been given a reason to do so. At least not more of a reason than he already had; the now fading bruise on his cheek still served as more than enough of a reminder of why Jimin should stay as far away from him as possible.

However, on the third evening of their voyage towards Shanghai, Jimin felt the smallest of cracks dig itself into his resolve.

He was wrapped tightly in a soft blanket - given to him by Taehyung - and seated with his back
resting against the mast, content and prepared for the long night to come when his attention was pulled down to deck by a buzz of laughter that echoed up to the crow’s nest. Jimin pried his eyes away from the lilac, star-spattered sky and shuffled over to the edge of his post to search for the source of the sound, and his eyes widened at the sight of Yoongi, standing together with Namjoon and Jin with a wide smile tugging at the captain’s lips as he still chuckled at something the cook had said.

It was the second time Jimin was forced to hold onto the sling for security, utterly thrown off guard by the pirate captain’s cheerful expression, having never seen anything but a frown or scowl, never anything but anger or annoyance. It made him look several years younger and much less like the man who had treated Jimin so cruelly upon his arrival.

This must be the man Taehyung speaks of so fondly, Jimin thought dimly. The good man. He watched Yoongi nudge Namjoon in the side and say something that had the first mate sputtering nervously while Jin descended into another fit of laughter, one the captain was quick to join.

Not for the first time, Jimin found himself unable to sort out his thoughts about the enigma that was Min Yoongi. Violent and aggressive, yet a man who’d come to save him from what would certainly have been his death. A pirate captain with a scowl that made Jimin’s blood run cold in his veins, and a bright smile that showed every last one of his teeth, along with the pink flesh of his gums.

We’re here because Yoongi gave us a home and a family, Taehyung had told him in the black of night, in a voice brimming with reverence and awe. A place where we can be what we are and be at peace with our existence.

Jumin shook his head and pried his gaze away from the captain, wishing he could rid himself of his confusion. He scooted back in the crow’s nest until his back rested against the mast, and he craned his head so he could look up at the black flag, barely moving in the soft, evening breeze. Jimin knew what it looked like even without seeing the white painting; he’d memorized it along with the names of every single rope that surrounded his post.

A fox’s skull, lying sideways over a pair of crossed daggers. The feared symbol of the Black Fox of the East, the man who had betrayed his fellow mariners to save the life of an innocent boy. The feared symbol of a good man.

Jumin spent more time staring up at the flag than he’d like to admit, trying his utmost to decide whether the apparent sadness of the fox’s skull was true, or if it was simply a trick of his mind. The shape of its jaw and eye sockets seemed somehow melancholic, as if it was crying out in sorrow, but then again, Jimin thought firmly as he wrapped his blanket tighter around his shoulders and tried not to listened to the captain’s laughter, I probably wouldn’t think that if I didn’t know the tale behind it.

These were the words he reminded himself of every time he felt his determination waver.

On the fourth day at sea, Namjoon gave Jimin a book on Blessed Runes from his library, a study by some scholar under the service of the eastern emperor, and the first mate simply grinned smugly when Jimin asked him how he’d acquired such a precious book. Jimin had half a mind to press further, but if there was one thing he’d learned since boarding the Agust, it was that he should not ask questions he didn’t truly want answered.

Thus he settled for profusely thanking Namjoon before climbing up to the crow’s nest and taking a seat, cross-legged with the book in his lap, making sure to look up from the intriguing text every few minutes to scan the horizon for any signs of land or threat.

The book was extremely educational. Over the course of that day, Jimin learned about the seemingly
endless classifications and categories of Blessed Runes. The Blessings of Nature were divided into four categories; mammals, oviparous animals, aquatic animals, and plants. He was amusedly surprised by the record of a Rune of the Rose, where a woman had possessed the ability to disappear in a flurry of rose petals, every single red blossom fluttering according to her will. He also read the short paragraph about two possible extensions of these four types; a prehistoric, reptilian blessing had been recorded, when a man had found a Blessed Rune inside the skull of a gargantuan fossil, and the man had gained the ability to shift into a lizard of monstrous size.

There were also speculations about a mythological category, the idea taking shape after someone claimed to have seen a man take on the shape of a *Kitsune*, the nine-tailed fox from ancient Japanese folklore, but since no actual proof had ever come to light, the author had written it off as mere conjecture.

The four established categories of Blessings of Nature were further divided into more complex subcategories, Jimin learned; his own blessing, the Rune of the Canary, belonged to the finch family, a subcategory of the oviparous animals that contained countless of bird types, many of which Jimin recognized from the forests of Jeju Island. The book stated it would be impossible to identify every last Blessing of Nature, seeing as how there seemed to exist a rune for every varying species, even one for every breed of dog.

One thing they all had in common, however, was the skinchanging. According to the scholar, it was rare for a blessing to affect the wielder’s appearance when the blessing itself lay dormant; it seemed to depend on the wielder’s control of his blessing, or his lack thereof. Jimin raised a hand and ran it through his hair, pursing his lips as he thought about his own blessing and wondered which one was the case for him. While it was true he did not have the slightest idea how to go about skinchanging, every other aspect of his blessing seemed to resonate deeply within him, all the way down to a bird’s instincts, which spurred him on in various different situations.

That day, during supper, Jimin carefully tapped Xiao on the shoulder and asked if the carpenter could tell him about skinchanging. The large man only stared at him at first, his wide eyes making Jimin regret ever approaching him, but then Xiao emitted a rambunctious laughter and patted the empty seat on his side in a gesture for Jimin to take a seat. “I was wonderin’ when ye’d come lookin’ for my help, pretty bird,” the carpenter boomed and turned to the others seated around the same table, grinning so wide Jimin could see where he’d lost one of his molars. “Told ya guys I was a clever one.”

“Clever enough to fall asleep on your axe twice in one week,” Hoseok mused from one table over and nodded at the fresh bandage wrapped around the carpenter’s arm. His words had the rest of the pirates guffawing loudly, and even Jimin couldn’t hold back his nervous giggle as he sat down next to the large man.

“Hey now, we all wanna sleep with the ones we love, eh?” Xiao huffed and sent a pointed look at Taehyung, who was leaning over the table, his face buried in his arms as he laughed. “Just like how li’l Tae sleeps with his sailor boy, I sleep with my axe. ‘S the same thing.”

“I really hope that’s not true,” a voice said from the doorway, and Jimin didn’t have to turn around to know who it was; the captain’s voice was enough to draw his body taut as a bowstring, his short fingers gripping his seat even as everyone around him howled with laughter. “You asked me to hold that axe of yours once.” Yoongi snorted with a sardonic grin. “Now I’m wondering if I should’ve asked you where the fuck that shaft has been first.”

Jimin kept his eyes focused steadily on his hands where they clutched onto his seat, yet he could almost feel it in his skin when the captain’s gaze briefly swept over him, a mere passing glance
before he went to fetch his own portion from Jin. Jimin sat perfectly still until Yoongi settled opposite of Namjoon a few tables down, at which point Xiao startled him out of his tension by launching into a messy explanation of how skinchanging worked, how to bring it about and how to control it.

It was hardly informative, what with the carpenter stressing the importance of feeling, how Jimin would have to simply rely on his body knowing how to assume the shape of a canary, seeing as how it was as natural of a shape as his human one. When Jin pointed out that Jimin would never learn anything from such a vague explanation, Xiao pursed his lips into a pout that looked amusedly uncharacteristic on such a big man and told Jimin that if he thought about it too hard, he’d never be able to transform.

“It comes from yer feelings,” he said and gestured vaguely towards his own chest. “‘S like breathin’, like blinkin’, like movin’ yer arms and legs. The nature of yer blessin’ is part of ya, pretty bird, and even if yer mind don’t know it yet, yer body does.” He smiled widely down at Jimin. “‘S why yer hair’s so pretty. Yer voice too. Just as naturally as ya exist in this form, ye ought’a be able to exist in yer canary’s shape.”

While the others rolled their eyes and Jin huffed, “That’s hardly an improvement, you big bear,” Jimin simply looked at Xiao and slowly nodded his head. On some level, he understood what the carpenter meant; when Jimin had felt the most threatened, standing before Son Jukan in his outrage, it wasn’t his conscious mind that had brought on the shift of his hand, but his instincts. It was what he’d felt in the heat of the moment that had called on his blessing’s powers, and his blessing had responded.

Upon seeing Jimin’s reaction, Xiao grinned and patted him on the shoulder with a heavy hand before grabbing his mug of ale and raising it over his head. “Yer all a bunch of arseholes who don’t appreciate my brilliant self,” he declared loudly, “but the pretty bird here knows I speak the truth! He’s the smartest one outta all of ya!”

Jimin had half a mind to slide in under the table simply to disappear from sight, but he settled for hiding his face in his hands when the galleys filled with laughter. Taehyung hurried over and put an arm around his shoulders and shouted, “Ain’t that the truth, you arseholes!” and Jimin found himself affected by the gleeful mood, smiling when he lowered his hands in time to see Lucya raise her own tankard in salute before downing its contents in one go, which in turn prompted an even louder ruckus.

That was the first time Jimin dared to genuinely laugh in the presence of the entire crew.

On the morning of their sixth day at sea, Jimin was standing atop the crow’s nest, counting down the remaining minutes before dawn. It was only the second time he’d been tasked to keep watch overnight, and the first time, he’d been too tired to properly appreciate the beauty of the break of sunrise, how the first rays danced softly over the ocean waves. This time, however, he was prepared, near giddy with excitement as he waited, admiring the slight orange tinge on the horizon.

The ocean at night was something he knew he’d never grow tired of seeing. The calm sea reflected the stars and the moon like a mirror, the glassy surface only ever broken by the waves created by Agust’s hull. It was silent, peaceful, and at times like these, Jimin felt content in his existence, momentarily forgetting to worry about the pirates or their captain, even forgetting to miss home.

He was leaning out over the edge of the crow’s nest, his hand gripping firmly onto the stay to keep from falling as his eyes traced every last star in the sky, every fading glint spattered across the constantly lighting blue. There was a tune playing in his head, a soft melody that he allowed into the world in the form of a quiet hum, crooning the song he’d used to sing back home even as home was the furthest thing from his thoughts.
Jimin smiled as his eyes strayed to the near empty deck of the ship; he could already imagine it, how the dark vessel would gleam almost golden in the light of the morning sun, how the sea sprayed sails would glimmer all around him.

He wasn’t quite sure where his impatience came from, but he could barely contain himself.

“Don’t you look giddy so early in the morning.”

Jimin almost released his grip on the ropes in shock, quickly pulling himself back up straight and turning around to see both Taehyung and Jeongguk making their way up to the crow’s nest, the former smiling brightly up at Jimin. “Don’t scare me like that,” he chided and moved closer to the mast to balance out the additional weight of the small surface. “I could’ve fallen.”

“You could’ve,” Taehyung agreed casually as he took a seat with his back leaning against the mast, “but you wouldn’t have. And you didn’t.”

Behind him, Jeongguk rolled his eyes and smiled almost apologetically at Jimin, who chose not to comment on the quartermaster’s cryptic statement. “What are you two doing awake?” he asked instead and sat down next to Taehyung. “The sun isn’t even up yet.”

“Jeongguk couldn’t sleep,” the blonde pirate hummed, smiling when the navigator shuffled as close as he could and wrapped his arms around his midst. “He always gets too exhilarated when we’re nearing land, so I thought we might as well come keep you company.”

“We’re nearing land?” Jimin echoed, quirking a brow when Jeongguk nodded. “How do you know?”

“You mean apart from the fact that I’ve sailed to Shanghai over two dozen times?” the young pirate mused with a near teasing grin and chuckled when Jimin pinned him under a pointed glare. “I’m the sailing master. The navigator, the cartographer. It’s my job to know, isn’t it? We’ve been at sea for almost six days already, which is longer than usual, but we did take a short detour to throw off any possible trails the mariners might’ve had on us.” He looked quite pleased with himself. “We’ll reach Shanghai within two hours,” he declared, grinning when Taehyung reached up to pat his cheek.

“Right,” Jimin huffed and threw a glance at the horizon. “Shanghai.”

The quartermaster raised his voice before Jimin could even begin to worry about how he would survive in the infamous pirate port. “Do you know why we’re heading to Shanghai?” he asked, his smile near exuberant, an excited sound slipping past his lips when Jimin shook his head. “There’s been trouble stirring on the eastern side of the world, on Yoongi’s side of the sea, and to discuss how to deal with it, all of them have been summoned.” He leaned forward, and his hushed voice was brimming with awe as he spoke, “The Four Cardinals of the Sea.”

Jimin’s eyes widened in surprise, the skin along his spine pricking at the familiarity of Taehyung’s words; uninvited, the memory of Son Jukan rose in his mind, speaking about the Four Winds, the Four Cardinals with a voice laced in venom. Emperors, the vice admiral had called them, arrogant and cruel, boasting of their crimes and wearing crowns on their heads for the horrors they’ve committed.

If there was one thing Jimin had learned over the past week, it was to not pay heed to what the mariner had said, but even without Jukan’s hateful words to stir Jimin’s apprehension, the thought of seeing such renowned pirates gathered all at once made his stomach twist. Especially since one of them, the southern captain, scared Jimin within an inch of his life, and he’d never even seen him, he’d only ever heard of the Red Plague’s actions, the horrors he’d committed in the south.
Taehyung seemed completely oblivious to his inner struggle. “I’ve only ever seen the Pirate Prince of the West before,” he hummed, his eyes drifting to the sky as he recalled the memory, wearing an expression as if it was his most precious one. “He sailed his ship to Shanghai when we happened to be stopping by, and I stood next to Yoongi when the Pirate Prince came to offer his greetings.” He looked at Jimin again, a hint of mischief seeping into his smile. “You know, since Shanghai, even though a port open for all pirates, wherever they’re from, is still located in the east, it’s technically on Yoongi’s territory.”

Behind him, Jeongguk nodded thoughtfully. “I didn’t understand the language he spoke, Taehyung went on, “but he bowed his head just like one does in the east and smiled politely and wanted to shake Yoongi’s hand.” He bared every last one of his teeth in a wide grin. “Yoongi refused,” he told Jimin. “The Pirate Prince has a blessing as well, the Blessing of Persuasion. Whomever makes direct contact with him submits their free will to him for an uncertain period of time.”

The quartermaster emitted a bark of laughter, sounding so incredibly smug. “He probably thought Yoongi didn’t know,” he chortled, kicking his feet in giddiness. “And Yoongi had this icy smile on his lips when he told the Pirate Prince that he was more than welcome in the east, as long as he didn’t accidentally brainwash anyone out of Yoongi’s crew.”

“Politics between pirates can be really entertaining to the onlooker,” Jeongguk said and shook his head at Taehyung’s state. “There are no official rules, of course, but there’s still a hierarchy built solely on the reputation of a pirate and other pirates’ respect of him.”

“And we’re on our way to see the ones standing highest of them all,” the quartermaster cut in, looking at Jimin with a burning glint in his eyes. “And you’re coming with us, Chim.”

Jimin’s lips parted and closed again, gaping at the mere suggestion. “I-I’m what?” he managed, his voice suddenly meek. “I’m not sure if I, uh, if I want to see them. Or if I’m even welcome.”

Taehyung sat up straight and placed both of his hands on Jimin’s shoulders, gripping him firmly. “If you’re worried that something’s gonna happen to you, don’t,” he said slowly, his voice completely free of hesitation or concern. “When the Four Cardinals come together in Shanghai, a truce is called between all crews, no matter their current relations. They could be at war with one another, but to us pirates, Shanghai is a safe haven, so no one is going to hurt you, alright?”

He waited for Jimin to nod before continuing. “And this is the opportunity of a lifetime,” Taehyung told him, his lips curling up into his smile again. “The greatest pirates of our time, all gathered in one place. It’s something everyone alive, man or woman or child, could only ever dream of seeing, and you, Chim, who stand under the protection of Min Yoongi, have the chance to be there.”

When Jimin still hesitated, the quartermaster pursed his lips and knitted his brow in a way that was almost endearing, and Jimin knew he was lost already before the pirate asked. “I want you to be there with me and Jeongguk and everyone else,” Taehyung pouted, blinking owlishly up at Jimin. “Won’t you come, Chim? Pretty please?”

Suddenly, Jimin understood why Namjoon had chuckled in amusement back when the quartermaster had first asked Yoongi if Jimin could stay on the ship when he’d first been brought there; once Taehyung turned on his boyish charms, there was no refusing him. “Alright,” Jimin said with a groan, although it was difficult to keep the frown on his face when the blonde pirate emitted a triumphant sound and threw his arms around his neck. “Damn you and that look.”

“You’re not the first to fall victim to it,” Jeongguk mused, having watched the exchange with a smug grin tugging at his lips, “and you definitely won’t be the last. And not to break you two apart,” he added and nodded at something behind Jimin’s shoulder, “but I think we’ll reach our destination
Jimin turned his head as best he could with Taehyung hanging from his neck, and his eyes widened when he found the sailing master was correct; a faint strip of land had appeared on the horizon, in the exact direction the Agust was sailing. “Oh, wait,” Jimin huffed and squirmed out of the quartermaster’s hug to grab his spyglass and fold it out to get a proper look.

The sheer size of the land confirmed Jeongguk’s suspicion; it was too large to be an island, an enormous mass stretching out across the horizon, slowly but surely taking up more and more of it until it was all Jimin could see. “You’re right,” he told the navigator without lowering the spyglass, too enthralled by the sight. “I see land.”

He vaguely registered Taehyung’s chuckle before he felt him shift, and before he could pry his eyes away from the horizon, the quartermaster’s loud voice startled him to the point he almost fell from the crow’s nest for a second time that morning.

“Chim sees land!” Taehyung shouted, his voice carrying far across the open waters. “Get ready for landing, everybody!” His grin was playful and mischievous when he straightened up, and it only widened when Jeongguk laughed and pulled him into an embrace. “That’s how you do it,” he told Jimin, who could only shake his head in resignation, one hand pressed firmly against his rapidly beating heart. “You’ll be the one to wake up the entire crew whenever you spot something on the horizon, so you’d better start practicing soon, Chim.”

Jimin only muttered something incoherent, still too shocked to think of a proper retort. He ignored the two pirates’ smug smiles and turned his attention down onto the deck, where crewmen were beginning to emerge from the companionway, the ship slowly but surely waking up to do as told, to prepare for landing.

As Jimin raised the spyglass to the horizon once again, he tried his best to fight off the tension in his belly, the unyielding ominousness brought on by the nature of their destination, even after Taehyung’s reassuring words. Shanghai, he thought and took a steadying breath. The very heart of piracy in this world.

He lingered for a moment longer after Taehyung and Jeongguk began their descent from the crow’s nest, but finally, when the sun’s rays began climbing over the sea to his side, Jimin folded the spyglass and nodded in determination. “I won’t be afraid,” he said to no one and everyone, to the ocean and sky and everything in between. “Even amidst a sea of pirates, I won’t let them see me afraid.”

Chapter End Notes

Ahhhh, peaceful days….

For now.

IN BEFORE THEY’RE OFF TO THE HEART OF PIRACY, YO-HO-HO, LMAO, WHAT EVEN IS PEACE ANYMORE AT THAT POINT??

This was one of those dreaded “middle chapters”, you know, where nothing REALLY
happens, nothing epic and impactful. I feel like every long-chaptered fic needs to have a chapter like this every now and then, you know, a break from all the action and drama, just a peaceful chapter of the daily life and perhaps a buildup to what’s about to happen, you know, what’ll go down when the peacefulness… stops.

BECAUSE YOU KNOW ME. YOU KNOW THAT PEACEFULNESS IS GOING RIGHT OUT THE WINDOW ANY MOMENT NOW, AND THEN IT'S RIGHT BACK TO SUFFERING. AND WHAT A BEAUTIFUL SETUP I HAVE FOR SHIT TO GO WRONG. SHANGHAI, THE PIRATE PORT, WITH ALL FOUR CARDINALS GATHERED AT ONCE. BOIIIIIIIIII-

//cackles

But no, in all seriousness, I felt it was incredibly refreshing to have Jimin just… sort of exist on the pirate ship for a few days. Like he had a SHITTY start to his life there, but in this chapter we can sort of see how he could fit into the life aboard the Agust, and I’m just soooo RELIEVED to be able to give him some peace of mind for a change xD

ANYWAY. CHAPTER 11 - The Pirate Port, Shanghai - WILL BE UP IN A FEW WEEKS. WOO!
The Pirate Port, Shanghai

Chapter Summary

The harbor was full of life, more people than Jimin had ever seen moving about the sturdy piers, chattering loudly and shouting amongst one another in languages he’d never heard before. Their clothes varied from man to man; some wore dark leather and dull colors, while some were dressed in silken shirts of every color of the rainbow. Some had skin the color of sand, others the color of peach, and one party of men looked like they’d been carved from ebony, dark and tall and strong.

Jumin had never seen so many people all at once, and in his state of awe, he momentarily forgot about their creed and the fact that every last one of them were pirates.

Chapter Notes

Ayyyy, we back from the dead, and boy, I missed tStS so much! Ahh, but now my baby’s back! Time to tortu- I mean, time to follow Jimin’s adventures again!

//cough

There’s an important notice at the end of this chapter, make sure to read it!

No music this time, I ended up not really listening to anything as I wrote this... sorry! x)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

True to the promise Jimin made to himself, when he stepped off the Agust and onto the docks of Shanghai, he wasn’t afraid. In fact, the sensation that filled his chest at the sight of the port was quite the opposite of fear.

The harbor was full of life, more people than Jimin had ever seen moving about the sturdy piers, chattering loudly and shouting amongst one another in languages he’d never heard before. Their clothes varied from man to man; some wore dark leather and dull colors, while some were dressed in silken shirts of every color of the rainbow. Some had skin the color of sand, others the color of peach, and one party of men looked like they’d been carved from ebony, dark and tall and strong.

Jumin looked and looked and looked, his gaze finding red hair, blonde hair, black and even white hair. He saw pink skin covered in tattoos and reddened, grinning faces smudged with dirt, and no man seemed to share their age with another; young boys barely aged ten were running back and forth along the piers, youngsters were drinking long and deep from tankards the size of their heads. Old, grey, toothless men were bickering with those half their age, leaning their weight heavily on walking sticks or the sheathes of their swords.

Jumin had never seen so many people all at once, and in his state of awe, he momentarily forgot
about their creed and the fact that every last one of them were pirates.

It was nothing short of a miracle the Agust had found the space to dock, as well as a vacant bollard; every last inch of the piers seemed to be occupied by either a pirate ship or a dinghy. Struck speechless in his amazement, Jimin turned slowly, his mouth hanging open as he let his gaze travel over the impressive ships that towered over and around him.

Opposite of the Agust stood a ship with a figurehead that resembled a skeletal horse, rearing and throwing its head back. Next to it was one carved in the shape of a woman with a fish’s tail, and across the waters, on one of the other piers, Jimin could see a double-masted ship with a figurehead the shape of a rabid tiger, vicious and roaring, its long teeth bared in an obvious threat.

The only thing the countless ships had in common was the black flag, fluttering at the highest point of every single mast, each flag proudly portraying the crew of pirates that served aboard its vessel.

The ships looked absolutely magnificent. And absolutely terrifying, Jimin thought dimly as he turned back to look at the pirates moving about the docks, however the fear that should’ve accompanied his musings didn’t quite reach his chest. He remembered Taehyung’s words about how historic this day was in the eyes of every living pirate, and he could sense it, through the shouting and the laughter, through the rough voices and drunken calls; the air was alight with a near palpable anticipation.

“They’re all here for the meeting.”

With a startled yelp, Jimin nearly jumped out of his skin, having been so lost in his awe he’d failed to hear the rest of the crew make their way off the Agust. Namjoon had walked up right beside him without him realizing, and the first mate emitted a cheery chortle at his surprise. “Shanghai isn’t usually this crowded,” he told Jimin with a smile, dimples digging into his cheeks as his gaze swept over the harbor. “Pirates from all over the world have come to chance a glimpse at the Four Cardinals, if only just one of them.”

Jimin threw a cautious glance over his shoulder, searching the docks for any sign of Yoongi before voicing his thoughts, albeit carefully. “Jeongguk told me he’s sailed here a dozen times,” he said slowly. “So you and… you and your captain have been here at least as many times.”

“You’re thinking everyone here would be used to Yoongi’s presence by now?” Namjoon mused, his smile evolving into a toothy grin when Jimin nodded. “You still don’t realize exactly how powerful he is, do you?” There wasn’t a shred of spite in his words, and he chuckled good-naturedly before moving past Jimin and towards the shore end of the pier, shaking his head as he went. “Perhaps Shanghai will finally give you an inkling, Jimin.”

A frown marred Jimin’s brow as he watched the first mate leave, unsure of how to interpret his words; while he had seen more than enough of what Min Yoongi was capable of, Jimin also lacked a comparison. Having grown up only with tales and stories of what pirates did, the crimes they committed, Jimin had no one else to compare the captain to. “Perhaps I don’t want an inkling,” he murmured to himself and heaved a soft sigh. “Perhaps I prefer not knowing what he really is.”

He easily trumped over his curiosity this time; Jimin had barely grown accustomed to Yoongi’s constant presence in his daily life. He wasn’t quite ready to be served an even bigger reason to fear the man more than he already did.

Suddenly, the pirate port didn’t seem quite as charming as it had only a moment ago.

“What’s got ya lookin’ so serious, pretty bird?”
Again, Jimin startled, although he managed to shut his lips on the yelp before it could escape his lips this time. He turned to face Xiao, craning his head so he could look up at the mountain of a man, and he nervously returned the carpenter’s grin. “Nothing at all, Xiao,” he said and waved a hand to dismiss the pirate’s questioning gaze. “I’m simply… taken aback. A bit. By,” he gestured vaguely towards the harbor, “all of this.”

“’S a pretty sight, ain’t it?” Xiao boomed and placed a heavy hand on Jimin’s shoulder, grasping tightly so he could drag him along in the direction Namjoon had walked. “Home sweet home, ‘s what I call it.”

“Y-you’re from here?” Jimin asked as he struggled to keep up, stumbling over thick coils of rope and crates of merchandise spread along the pier. “From Shanghai?”

“Born and bred, pretty bird.” The carpenter raised his free hand to point towards the western part of the harbor, where enormous wooden buildings rose from the shore, reaching twenty meters tall, their walls gaping open where they faced the sea. “Those be shipyards,” Xiao told Jimin. “My old man owned one of ‘em and I worked there until he croaked. I got piss drunk after I threw his body in the sea - ‘s how pirates are put to rest,” he added quickly when he noticed Jimin’s horrified expression. “Anyway, I drank too much, got in a brawl with the wrong people, and ended up havin’ to hand over the shipyard to the captain of the pirate I beat half to death.”

Jimin wondered how he could seem so utterly content with the sad words he spoke, grinning as his gaze swept over his previous home. “I’m sorry that happened to you, Xiao,” he ventured carefully, only to wince when the carpenter’s grip on his shoulder tightened in a squeeze before he was released, a rambunctious laughter making its way past the big man’s lips.

“Worse things could’a happened, pretty bird, so don’t worry yer pretty little head about it,” he said with a grin. “Plus, I ain’t got a clue ‘bout how to run a business, so it was only a matter of time before I fucked it all up.”

Without giving Jimin the chance to respond somehow, Xiao strode past him and raised his voice to usher a group of youngsters out of his way, speaking what Jimin could only interpret as chinese. The young men responded in fashion, chattering so rapidly Jimin gave up on even attempting to understand them; not that he could’ve even if they’d spoken only one word per minute. Vaguely, he remembered Taehyung telling him Yoongi spoke russian, and as he trudged after Xiao towards the shore end of the pier, he wondered how many languages the captain could actually speak.

“Chim!” As he stepped off the docks and onto shore, he found the quartermaster waiting for him together with Jeongguk, Namjoon and Jin, looking like he could barely contain himself where he stood, waving enthusiastically at Jimin and beckoning him. “Isn’t this amazing?” Taehyung all but gushed, latching onto Jimin’s arm and pulling him close as he turned in every fathomable direction, his eyes hungrily drinking in their surroundings. Even here, he wore his mask, but his grin was audible from his voice alone. “Look at all these pirates, Chim, there are so many!”

“There are,” Jimin agreed, and he found himself smiling despite himself, unable to fight off the contagiousness of Taehyung’s excitement. He raised a hand to the quartermaster’s shoulder, not to push him away, but rather keep him balanced while he was too preoccupied gawking at a passing group of fair-skinned pirates, too lost in his awe to focus properly on standing. “What are we waiting for?” Jimin asked Namjoon and threw a glance at Agust, where the crew was still disembarking.

“Yoongi,” the first mate said simply, pretending as if he didn’t notice when Jimin’s smile twitched and faltered. “There are still several hours left before the meeting starts, so we’ll have time to loiter about in the city. Yoongi will want to establish a thing or two before we separate.”
“Establish?” Jimin echoed, a curious lilt to his voice.

“Establish,” Jin agreed, looking torn between amused and irritated as he raised his hand to beckon the pirates of their crew to them. “This may be a pirate port, but it’s also a haven for pirates. There are a few unspoken rules, and, well,” he shot a brief smile at Jimin, “you know how pirates feel about following rules, even their own. Yoongi will want to remind everyone of what not to do here.”

Jimin was barely given enough time to process the cook’s words before his attention was pulled back to Taehyung, quite literally; the quartermaster tugged insistently at his arm with so much enthusiasm Jimin worried he might accidentally pull it out of the socket of his shoulder. “Chim, Chim,” Taehyung half whispered, half shouted, his eyes glued to a foreign pirate stepping off an impressive ship two piers down the harbor. “Do you think that could be the Long-toothed Tiger of the North? They look northern, don’t you think? Or at least western, but it’s not the Pirate Prince, I can tell. It could be the Long-toothed Tiger.”

Jimin was surprised by his hesitancy to recognize such an infamous pirate; the Long-toothed Tiger was, after all, one of the Cardinals, thus Jimin had imagined Taehyung, who was so enamoured by pirates, would know what they looked like.

His thoughts must’ve shown on his face, for Jeongguk leaned over to explain. “The northern Cardinal has only once set foot in Shanghai before,” he told Jimin in a hushed voice, as if he was loath to disturb Taehyung’s state of awe. “Some nine years ago. And since they rarely leave the north, the mariners feel no need to spread their bounty posters this far east.”

“So no one knows what they look like?” Jimin asked, to which the sailing master shook his head. “Perhaps any northern pirates that have sailed here for the meeting know,” he said with a shrug, “but I doubt any eastern or southern pirates would recognize them. Speaking of which,” something wry seeped into his smile, “the southern Cardinal’s bounty is said to have been raised again. The Red Plague decided to attack a mariner base that the western coast of Australia and burn it to the ground. Apparently, they left no survivors.”

Jimin felt fear rise to his throat, where it settled in the form of a lump that made it hard to breathe as he listened to Jeongguk’s words. He tightened his grip on Taehyung’s shoulder without realizing it and he considered going back to the ship; he had promised the quartermaster he would come, yes, but if the mere mention of the Red Plague made the air freeze in his lungs, standing in the same room as him would be nothing short of crippling.

All of a sudden, an impatient huff sounded from directly to his right, and when Jimin turned, his nervousness increased tenfold when he was met with Yoongi’s profile; he hadn’t heard the captain approach, nor had he recognized his presence, and that thought alone sent a shudder down his spine.

It wasn’t quite fear what made Jimin press himself against Taehyung’s side in an attempt to put as much distance between himself and the captain. He wasn’t afraid, but this was the closest they’d been ever since Jimin had apologized, and it was as if he could feel the air between them grow heavy with tension.

Yoongi didn’t seem to notice his conflict. The captain’s eyes were trained on Jeongguk, a frown marring his brow. “None of that matters here,” he said, his voice rougher than usual; he’d likely been asleep until Agust had pulled into the harbor. “Every life is worth just as much as the next in Shanghai, so it’s useless to engage in any pissing contests.”

“Yes, yes, we know it’s useless,” Hoseok mused, having walked up to the others alongside Yoongi. “There’s no need for modesty, oh great captain Min Yoongi, we all know you’d come out on top
either way.” He grinned as he danced out of his captain’s reach, narrowly dodging a hard smack up the head. “What with the mariners’ obsession with you, the Red Plague will have to step up his game even further if he ever wants to reach higher than you. Which is ironic, really, since you—”

“Unless you want to spend the morning sowing your own fucking chest shut, you’d better leave that sentence unfinished,” Yoongi interrupted harshly while the rest of his crew failed made a valiant attempt at suppressing their laughter. Not for the first time, Jimin wondered if every last one of them were crazy as they snickered at their captain, who was glaring at Hoseok with murder in his eyes.

“Since Yoongi’s so short,” Taehyung supplied in a hushed voice, whispering directly into Jimin’s ear in between poorly controlled chortling, and Jimin felt his heart sink to his stomach when Yoongi turned his head a fraction in their direction. He was certain the captain had heard, but he never even looked at them, instead opting to heave a frustrated sigh before resuming what it was he’d been saying.

“The meeting starts at midday in the Hall of Black Sails,” he stated and crossed his arms over his chest. “You all know the way Shanghai works; cause no harm to the city itself, set no ships on fire, and try not to kill anyone while we’re here.” His lips curled into a stony smirk before he added, “but if you absolutely must, at least don’t let the Pirate Priestess catch you.”

That certainly had the lot of them sobering up, and it was Jin who recovered first, the lines around his lips becoming infinitely more well-defined. “That crone is here?” he asked stiffly and ignored Namjoon’s touch when the first mate gently took his hand. “In Shanghai?”

“Aye,” Yoongi said. “She’s to be the mediator of this meeting.”

Jin didn’t calm down until Namjoon leaned close and whispered something in his ear, and the cook blinked out of his daze, a deep frown marring his brow. “T-that changes everything,” he stated, gnawing at his lower lip for a moment before turning to face the rest of the crew. “Do not kill anyone even if you absolutely must. I’ll be expecting every last one of you to be alive for supper tonight, and mark my words, I’ll come dance on your dead bodies if you fail to show up!”

A resounding, “Aye, sir,” rose from the crew, to which Jin nodded in content, finally turning to lace his fingers with Namjoon’s. Jimin kept his eyes on the cook, feeling an ominous premonition stir somewhere in the depth of his chest, brought on by the pirate’s reaction. The Pirate Priestess, he repeated to himself, frowning in confusion. He’d never heard mention of a particularly religious crew of pirates, nor a captain that would go by that name.

He parted his lips to ask Taehyung, but just as he did, Yoongi dismissed his crew and walked past him, moving so abruptly Jimin emitted a startled sound before he could stop himself. The noise caught the captain’s attention and he came to a halt, turning to look at Jimin with a brow arched in impatience, seemingly under the belief he had something to say.

When the captain raised his voice, it was Taehyung he addressed, not Jimin. “Keep an eye on the songbird, quartermaster,” he said curtly, his impatience as clear in his voice as it was on his face.

“Will do, captain,” Taehyung chirped brightly, completely unaffected by the near palpable tension. “I’ll make sure our Chim doesn’t get lost in this big, scary city.”
Jimin knew it wasn’t what Yoongi had meant. He knew it wasn’t his wellbeing the captain was concerned about, but the possibility of him running away again, even when there were no mariners around, and Jimin felt a rush of offense rise in his chest. He raised his head and made himself meet Yoongi’s gaze, his teeth digging into the inside of his lower lip as he watched the captain struggle with whether or not he should correct Taehyung’s interpretation, frustration obvious in his expression.

Finally, he seemed to decide to simply let it be, muttering something akin to, “Fucking hell,” under his breath before he turned and steered his steps towards the inner parts of the city. With an exhale quivering from relief, Jimin watched him leave, and he couldn’t help but notice the way the crowd of the harbor parted to make way for him, their loud conversations falling silent as the eastern Cardinal stormed into their midst.

Their reverence was clear as day, obvious in their hushed voices, their wide eyes and gaping mouths. Perhaps Shanghai will finally give you an inkling, Namjoon had told Jimin in regards to Yoongi’s reputation, and Jimin couldn’t help but agree; they’d barely left the pier yet he’d already been shown an example.

Taehyung was quick to pull him out of his musings, quite literally; he tightened his grip on Jimin’s arm and tugged him into motion, chattering endlessly as he walked in the same direction Yoongi with Jeongguk following silently.

“There are so many places I want to show you, Chim,” the quartermaster said cheerfully. “We have to walk along the River Crossings, and I want to show you the Rouge Market. Oh, and then there’s the Hall of Black Sails itself. It’s amazing, Chim, it’s made of a pirate ship that was thrown ashore by the waves of a tsunami. It’s turned upside down, but it’s completely intact, and—”

Jimin tried his best to keep up with all the places Taehyung named, but it was a difficult task when he himself was busy turning his head in every possible direction as they walked, amazed by the structures that made the outer parts of Shanghai. Most of the buildings here were made out of wood, stacked high on top of one another to tower three or four or five stories tall. The roofs seemed to be made out of ship hulls, sloping and curved, and some carried engravings of names, surely the names the vessels had borne before they’d been turned into ceilings.

The further into the city they walked, the denser the buildings became, resulting in narrow alleys and walkways built into the upper stories of the houses. They became even taller as well, rising so high they blocked out the sun; lanterns hung from the walls of every building to ensure those walking along the ground would see in the darkness, even as the sun stood high in the sky.

As they drew closer to the so-called River Crossings, Jimin’s attention was pried away from the city’s structure when he noticed something he would’ve rather gone without realizing; wherever they went, he felt the gazes of the pirates they passed linger on him, looks that had his skin prickling in discomfort. They would turn from whom they were conversing with to stare at him, their gazes almost hungry, predatory in a much different manner than he’d felt before.

Jimin did his best to pretend not to notice, pushing back at the urge to claw at his own skin, to scratch off their dirty looks. It’s fine, he told himself even as he made sure to walk as close to Taehyung as he could without tripping. As long as I don’t provoke them, they won’t lay a hand on me.

He managed to take his mind off the pirates’ looks when they reached the River Crossings, his eyes widening in awe as he took in the countless rope bridges that stretched across the river that ran through the entire city, according to Jeongguk. They had to climb up some three stories to reach the lowest one; the highest bridge was a link between the two tallest buildings in this part of Shanghai, twin lighthouses standing on their respective side of the river.
“Be careful not to fall,” Taehyung said with a grin as he watched Jimin lean out over the ropes that made the bridge’s rail. “There’s sharks in this river, Chim, and they’d swallow you whole the second you’d hit the water.”

“Are you trying to tell me you think I’m small, quartermaster?” Jimin huffed and straightened up, no offense whatsoever in his voice, at least not until the blonde pirate replied.

“Bitesize.”

That prompted a high-paced chase across the many bridges, a game of catch that ended with Jeongguk almost falling five stories when a hysterically cackling Taehyung attempted to hide behind him, using his lover as a human shield to block Jimin’s playful strikes.

They moved deeper into the city along the river, walking crisscross over the bridges until Taehyung suggested they’d continue south to reach the Rogue Market. “I have something I wanna buy,” the quartermaster said, and so they left the rope bridges in favor of delving back into the depths of Shanghai.

The Rogue Market was situated in a small city square, every inch of the poorly lain cobblestones occupied by a merchant tent or stand, or customers. It was vastly different from the marketplace back in Jeju Village; instead of crops and fruits and cloth, their products seemed to consist mostly of jewels and weaponry, stacks of swords and knives and even pistols standing on display at every makeshift table.

The market was absolutely filled to the brim with pirates, loud voices rising from every inch of space, shouting for bargains, laughing over jests, or simply discussing the origins of whatever weaponry they desired. Jimin couldn’t help but wonder why they were eager to buy the swords at all; every single one of them were already armed with at least one blade, sheathes clattering against one another as the pirates clumsily shuffled through the masses.

*How many swords can it take to kill a man,* he thought solemnly, a frown marring his brow.

Taehyung was quick to pull him out of his dark musings. “Come on,” he chirped and took Jimin by the hand before diving into the dense crowd, effortlessly guiding the three of them through the mass of pirates. “If she’s still in business, she’ll be at the far end of the stands.”

Jemin had very little chance to ask who it was Taehyung was speaking of, having to dedicate all of his focus on not ramming into someone as they walked. His shoulders kept bumping against the pirates in the crowd, and he caught himself holding his breath, his nerves on edge as he expected every man he accidentally brushed against to flare up in anger.

The crowd wasn’t as dense where Taehyung finally came to a halt, stopping in front of a stand at the very edge of the Rogue Market. “Hello there, lady Changying,” the quartermaster said loudly and released Jimin’s hand in favor of clapping his own together twice before bowing his head to the owner of the stand. “You look like you’re doing well.”

*Well* must’ve meant something completely different to Taehyung than it did to Jimin; the lady seated on a stool in the merchant tent was old and withered, with only one eye and half of her right leg missing. She was thin as a reed, her skin hanging loose around her neck and arms, and when she raised her head to look at the quartermaster, her shoulders trembled from the effort it took.

She squinted at the three of them, her gaze stopping on Taehyung, and then she smiled, her lips stretching into a toothless grin. Suddenly, she looked twenty years younger. “Well, if it isn’t my sun boy,” she squeaked and raised a hand to pinch the quartermaster’s cheek. “What brings you back
from the sea so soon?”

There was only a trace of an accent to her voice, Korean falling easily from her lips. “It’s the meeting, lady Changying,” Taehyung said with an exaggerated roll of his eyes, as if he couldn’t believe she even had to ask. “The Cardinals are gathering here at midday. You know that, right?”

The woman shook her head with a snort, waving her hand as if to bat away his words. “I’m too old to care about what trouble you youngsters get yourselves into these days,” she declares, pinning the pirate under a suspicious glare. “But you know this, sun boy, so why have you come here today?”

“Oh.” With a grin, Taehyung turns to Jimin and places both hands on his shoulders, and before he could protest, he was pushed in front of the others. “This is Chim,” the quartermaster said happily. “He’s my new friend, and he needs shoes.”

Jimin blinked in confusion at his words, and only now did he realize what the old woman was selling. Straw shoes of various designs and styles were lined neatly along the makeshift table the was sitting behind, ranging from simple, three-strap sandals to more intricate, sturdier types. No doubt they were all made by the old lady, and only as Jimin’s eyes trailed over the footwear did it dawn on him what Taehyung meant.

“Tae— I mean, q-quartermaster,” Jimin started, a protest already on the tip of his tongue, but the blonde pirate interrupted him before he could even begin.

“You need shoes,” he repeated firmly, grinning behind his mask, “and lady Changying’s sandals are the best. Look,” he raised one of his feet to show off his own pair, dirtied but undoubtedly of the same make, “I’ve been wearing these for almost a year now and they haven’t began to fray.”

“But I can’t buy them,” Jimin persisted, feeling heat rise to his cheeks. “I have nothing to pay her with.”

“Which is why I’m buying them.” Taehyung ignored his meek stutters and leaned forward to look at his feet and then at the sandals. “I think these could fit nicely,” he mused and picked up a pair of very plain sandals with three straps that would bind the foot and two that would circle the ankle. “Try them on, Chim.”

Again, Jimin parted his lips to protest, but was interrupted when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned around and found Jeongguk grinning down at him, looking just shy of smug as he observed Jimin’s near distressed state. “You can either try them on willingly,” the sailing master said, his eyes glinting with mischief, “or we can make you do it. It’s your choice.”

Jimin could hardly take his threat seriously, what with the way the two of them were beaming at him, but he knew this was a battle he’d never win, no matter how much he protested. Thus he pressed his lips together and nodded, the skin of his cheeks burning as he sat down on one of the empty stools around the stand and took one of the sandals from Taehyung.

It fit perfectly against the calloused sole of his foot, and he fumbled with the straps for a bit before standing up again to see how it felt. The straw was surprisingly gentle on his skin as he took a few steps before turning and walking back, the feeling of not having to make direct contact with the dirty ground filling him with an immense sense of relief.

“How’s it feel?” Jeongguk asked, although the smirk on his lips told Jimin he already knew the answer.

“Good,” Jimin said hesitantly and offered the old lady a nervous smile, one she returned with
enthusiasm, the grin occupying over half of her sunken face. “It feels really good.”

“Great,” Taehyung chirped and passed him the other shoe before turning to Changying. “How much are they?”

“Five silvers, but,” she emitted a squeaky giggle when Jimin hopped over to the stool to take a seat, suddenly loath to put his bare foot against the ground, “for this sweetling, I’ll say three.”

“Ah, lady Changying, you’re the best,” the quartermaster all but beamed, his eyes crinkling as he grinned under his mask. “Isn’t that great, Chim?”

Jimin parted his lips and closed them again, a lump settling in the base of his throat. The warmth in his cheeks spread upwards and made his eyes sting, and he quickly ducked his head in a bow, murmuring a quiet, “Thank you,” his voice thick with emotion. He could feel their eyes on him, offering nothing but warmth and comfort, but he didn’t want them to see him cry. He didn’t want anyone to see him cry, so he fiddled with the straps of the other sandal and made an attempt at discreetly wiping his tears with the sleeve of his shirt.

The silence around them lasted only for a few seconds. Not ten seconds after Jimin had bent down to tie his sandal, a near deafening screech rose from somewhere to their left, startling him so hard he almost fell off the stool. “Who-” Jimin jerked upright in time to watch a small group of children, barely aged seven, come charging in their direction, waving frantically with their arms as they ran.

“You guys!” Taehyung exclaimed, his voice just as loud, and he dropped into a crouch just in time to catch the three young boys against his chest, laughing as they crashed hard against him. “Look at you, you’ve all grown so much!”

“Because you haven’t seen us in ages,” one of them declared in a high-pitched voice, giggling when the quartermaster playfully nuzzled his cheek. “Stop that, Unknown!”

“Nuh-uh, I don’t wanna,” Taehyung voiced and closed his arms around the children as best he could, huffing as he attempted to lift all three of them at once. All of them laughed when he failed and almost fell onto his behind, and one of them squirmed out of his grip and went to Jeongguk instead, grinning as he tugged at the navigator’s sleeve until he was hauled into the pirate’s arms.

Jimin watched them with eyes wide in surprise, the straps of his sandal all but forgotten. The children couldn’t have been older than six, yet they were dressed much like the rest of the pirates at the Rogue Market, loose shirts tucked deep into their trousers, bandanas keeping their matted hair out of their eyes. At their waist, either in a pocket or stuck through a belt, they carried knives, real daggers of unpolished steel.

“Who..?” he asked quietly, unsure of what to feel as he watched Taehyung hoist the two boys into his arms and stand up straight in an impressive display of his strength. “Who are they?”

“Pirates, the lot of them,” the quartermaster told him brightly, his tone softening slightly when he noticed Jimin’s apprehensive expression. “They’re orphans, Chim. It’s not uncommon. Children with no family tend to find work aboard ships, where they scrub the deck and wash linens and help in the galleys. Sometime it’s a mariner ship, sometime it’s a merchant vessel, and sometime it’s a pirate ship.” He chuckled behind his mask when one of the boys tried to climb up onto his shoulders. “Lively little bastards, aren’t you?” he mused and laughed along with them. “How’s your captain been treating you? Is he here to see the meeting, too?”

“Aye,” the boy in Jeongguk’s arms said and nodded enthusiastically. “He said the entire crew can go
take a look, but if we’re not back by the time we raise anchor, he’ll sail back to open sea without us.”

“Ah, yes,” the sailing master hummed in a tone of exaggerated melancholy. “The life of a pirate is a hard one, indeed.” He grinned when the child heaved a deep sigh and nodded his agreement. “But I bet the lot of you are more than capable of living it, aren’t you?”

The three of them voiced a simultaneous, “Aye,” and Jimin found himself unable to stop smiling. They made an almost precious sight, the two grown pirates carrying the young; they looked almost like a family.

“Well then,” Taehyung huffed and leaned forward to let the two boys back down onto the ground while the child in Jeongguk’s arms flailed like a fish out of water to be freed. “If you’re in a hurry to get back to your ship, we should get to the Hall of Black Sails quickly, so you won’t be late returning.” He made a sound of thoughtfulness, as if he couldn’t quite think of a way to make his words come true. Then he snapped his fingers and straightened up, grinning behind his mask. “What do you say, boys, should we race?”

“Race!” they all agreed, and without a moment of hesitation, they took off as if shot out of a cannon, sprinting towards the edge of the marketplace.

“Come on, Chim,” Taehyung called in urgent glee as he moved to follow, laughing when the children yelled at him for being slow. “Hurry!”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Jimin stressed, leaning forward to finish tying the straps of his sandal as quickly as he could. He jumped to his feet as soon as he was done, a wide smile tugging at the corners of his lips as he watched both Taehyung and Jeongguk chase after the children, deliberately giving them the lead as they ran, but before he went to follow them, he turned to face the old lady. “Th-thank you, lady Changying,” he said and pressed his palms together in the same way the quartermaster had upon their arrival before bowing his head low.

“You’re most welcome, sweetling,” she told him, her voice squeaky with age. “I hope you’ll find comfort walking in those shoes.”

“I’m sure I will,” Jimin assured her and straightened up again, curling his toes simply to test the feeling of the sandals. “Take care. And I hope we’ll meet again.”

“We will,” she stated without a shred of uncertainty in her voice. “Sure as the tide, Agust’s sails will bring you back to these shores, where all you pirates belong.”

Perhaps it was the urgency of having to chase after Taehyung and Jeongguk and the children that stopped Jimin from correcting the old woman on her assumption, or perhaps something else entirely. Whatever it was, Jimin only smiled and waved in farewell before taking off, following the delighted screams of the young boys as he delved back into the depths of Shanghai.

Courtesy of his Blessed Rune, Jimin’s sense of hearing was good enough to keep him aware of the boys’ location even though they were out of sight. He sprinted through the narrow alleys, dodging every pirate that crossed his path as he passed buildings shaped like ships - one of the rooms of a house was definitely made out of a captain’s quarters - and he felt near giddy for every step he took, the sound of his sandals scraping against the ground making his heart soar.

Slowly, however, the smile faltered from his lips when he realized that while his sense of hearing was definitely impeccable enough to lead him to whom he was chasing, he knew absolutely nothing of the city he was running through. Every alley looked the same, splitting into a crossroads of three or four different directions, and eventually, when Jimin had been running for so long his lungs began...
to hurt, his previous cheerfulness gone, replaced by a steadily building sense of dread.

He slowed into a brisk walk, breathing heavily as he turned his head to observe every building he passed, trying his best to make sense of their stature, how close they were situated, anything that could help him realize where he was, how close he was to something akin to a main street. The buildings were as complex as they were similar, however, with every other house standing out for one reason or another. The repetitiveness of impressive structures made it impossible to tell them apart from one another.

“This is bad,” Jimin whispered under his breath as he came to a halt at another crossing. He stood there for several seconds, undecided, before he decided to retrace his steps and return to the marketplace, from where he could find his way back to Agust. No one could fault him for that, not even the captain.

He nodded to himself and moved to turn around, only to immediately freeze when he caught movement in the corner of his eye. Immediately, his breath caught in his throat and panic gripped hard at his spine; it was a small group of pirates, standing by the corner of one of the buildings Jimin had just passed, all of them leering at him with that same look to their eyes as the ones he’d felt before.

*Keep walking,* his instincts screamed at him, breaking him out of his state of paralyzing fear. *Don’t let them know you saw them. Keep walking, pretend you know where you’re going.* He almost stumbled on his first step, his legs numb and prickling. He tried his best to breathe, the air quivering as he drew it into his lungs and trembling just as much as he exhaled, and it made him feel almost dizzy. *It doesn’t matter where you go, as long as you keep walking.*

Jimin tried to listen for anything that could guide him out of the alleys, but all he could hear was the sound of his own blood rushing in his ears. He kept his eyes forward in a valiant attempt at ignoring every pirate he passed, but every time one of them turned their heads after him, he felt his resolve crack just a little bit more.

Vaguely, he realized he was biting into his lower lip so hard he almost drew blood. *Calm down,* he told himself, over and over and over again, and every time he repeated it, it was less effective. *Calm down, calm down, you have to calm-*

When one of the pirates following him emitted a wry chuckle, Jimin promptly forgot the entire meaning of the word *calm.* Suddenly, there was only one clear word in his mind, all previous thoughts of nonchalance as good as gone.

*Run.*

He sped up before he could stop himself, building his pace for a sprint. His eyes fixated on the nearest corner and braced himself to start running as soon as he’d walked around it, to grant him a few seconds’ headstart before his followers would catch on.

It was a decent plan of action, but as soon as he turned the sharp corner, he collided hard against someone, a startled, high-pitched yelp tearing its way up his throat at the sudden impact. “Whoa, careful.” He almost fell backwards, but someone grabbed his arm and helped him regain his balance, their grip strong and firm. “Are you alright?”

Rather than answer, Jimin sharply turned his head in the direction he’d come from, alarm ringing in his ears as he searched the alley for his pursuers. He found none; the street was far from deserted, but none of the pirates paid him any heed, talking or laughing amongst each other.
A heavy wave of relief crashed against Jimin’s chest and his knees almost folded under his weight, a shaky exhale gusting past his lips. “Thank god,” he whispered and raised his free hand to rub at his chest in an attempt to calm his frantic heartbeat.

“Hey.”

Jimin startled at the proximity of the voice and turned around, only to flinch again when he found a stranger’s face merely inches from his own. “Shit,” he cursed and took a step back, panic quickly spiking once again as he realized what had just happened. “I-I’m so sorry, I’m sorry for running into you, I’m, I wasn’t being careful, I—”

“Slow down for a second, boy.” Jimin did as told, immediately pressing his lips together, mostly in surprise at the heavily accented voice. He blinked repeatedly as he stared at who he’d run into, dimly registering a mess of shoulder-long hair pushed back by a speckled piece of cloth, bright, yellow eyes and thin lips before the stranger spoke again. “I can’t understand if you speak so fast,” they said with an almost sheepish smile. “Are you alright?”

Although Jimin couldn’t be certain in his judgement of the stranger’s gender, their strong frame and energetic face carrying features of both, their smooth voice portrayed the gentle softness of a woman. She was taller than him by a centimeter or two, and more muscular, her bare arms corded with strength.

“I-I’m alright,” Jimin said slowly, his eyes flitting to the thin scars that framed the woman’s chin, starting just beneath her lower lip and reaching all the way down to her jaw. “I’m sorry f-for running into you.”

She smiled widely at that, and Jimin’s muscles tensed momentarily at the sight of her teeth, every last one of them razor sharp. “It’s alright,” she hummed and let go of his arm, utterly unaffected when he took a cautious step backwards. “I wasn’t watching where I was going. It was my fault as much as yours.” She placed her hand against her chest as if she didn’t quite trust her own, awkwardly spoken words to get the message across properly. “Where is your hurry?”

“My… oh, where I was going. I, uh…” Jimin hesitated; the woman was obviously a pirate, clad in a sleeveless leather vest and tight-fit trousers, yet she was unarmed, and Jimin couldn’t feel a single trace of hostility radiating from her calm posture. “I got separated,” he ventured carefully, pausing when she furrowed her brow in confusion. “Uh, lost, I got lost. From my… from, uh, from m-my crew.”

The word felt strange on his tongue, but as a foreign pirate, crew was likely a word she knew. True enough, she nodded, but her smile also took on a curious manner and she inclined his head as she studied him. “Not sure where you stand, boy?” she asked good-naturedly, a deep chuckle falling from her lips when Jimin nodded, sheepishly. “Do you know their names?”

Again, Jimin hesitated, wondering how he should go about speaking Yoongi’s name; he was uncertain if it something he was even allowed to say, that he was currently sailing along of the Cardinals.

The woman’s smile faltered as she watched him struggle, her brows knitting together as she observed him. “You’re on their ship by choice, right?” she asked with a genuine hint of worry to her tone.

Jimin’s eyes widened at that and he quickly shook his head to deny her entire question. “I am, I am,” he said urgently, surprising even himself by his reaction. “I’m not a prisoner.” She nodded contentedly, the smile returning to her lips, and he could see no reason to not tell her the truth. “My… th-the captain’s name is Min Yoongi,” Jimin said in a hushed voice and watched as her eyes
She only looked at him for a moment before pursing her lips and emitting a low whistle, a toothy grin quickly stretching her lips. “A Cardinal, huh?” she mused and and nodded again. “I’m impressed. Well, boy, I can’t say I know where they are, but I know where they will be. I can show you the way to the Hall of Black Sails. That’s where the Four Cardinals will be, uh… will be…”

Her voice trailed off and she cursed in some language Jimin couldn’t understand. He knew what she wanted to say, however, and he carefully raised his voice to suggest, “They’ll be gathering?”

The woman’s grin was almost as bright as Taehyung’s. “That’s the word, gathering,” she said cheerfully. “Thanks. Right, so they’ll be gathering in the Hall of Black Sails at midday. We can go together.”

“A-are you sure?” Jimin stuttered, although the thought was highly welcoming; she seemed like a genuinely kind person, and the pirates who’d been following him had been quick to disappear as soon as he’d made contact with her. “I don’t want to take up any more of your time.”

His words made her grin, her sharp teeth on full display as she reached out and ruffled his hair. “What a polite pirate you are,” she hummed, chuckling at how his shoulders tensed from the contact. “I’m going there myself, boy. It’s no trouble.”

“Alright,” Jimin said and managed a small smile. “Thank you.” He hesitated again before tipping his head forward slightly. “My name is Jimin.”

“Jimin,” the woman repeated and nodded. “I’m Talya.” She reached out with her right arm, her hand open as if expecting Jimin to take it. Albeit confused, he carefully did as prompted, and she laughed as he jerked slightly when she closed her fingers around his hand and shook it enthusiastically. “Nice to make your… nice to… ah, screw it, uh, nice to meet you, Jimin.”

He couldn’t suppress the small giggle that bubbled past his lips at her attempted formality. “Nice to meet you too, Talya,” he said.

Although she was a foreigner, she seemed to know her way around Shanghai’s narrow streets better than Jimin could ever hope to. Most of the time, she didn’t even seem to look where she was going, lost in the many stories she did her best to tell him as they walked. She had been all over the world, it seemed like, beginning her journey somewhere in the north before sailing without a proper heading, content to simply let the tide carry her ship wherever it wanted. She told him of her son, a boy of fourteen currently undergoing his own journey, sailing with his own crew somewhere across the seas.

Talya laughed when Jimin asked her where her crew was, and she told him they were a restless bunch, unable to simply walk around in the manner she did. “I just hope the first mate hasn’t gotten himself in trouble,” she said with a deep sigh. “He likes the sight of blood too much.”

Jimin wasn’t sure what to say to that, so he pressed his lips together and decided to say nothing at all.

After nearly an hour of walking, they arrived at a city square, much grander than the one where the Rogue Market was located. Talya raised her arm and pointed towards the western side of it, and Jimin’s eyes widened in an almost comical manner when he saw what must’ve been the Hall of Black Sails.

Just like Taehyung had told him, the building consisted of an upturned pirate ship, but the size of it was far beyond anything Jimin could’ve imagined. In its prime, it must’ve been grand enough for a
crew consisting of many hundreds, and even now, with a great part of the stern missing, it still looked enormous.

Dimly, Jimin wondered what monstrosity of an ocean wave had managed to throw a ship like this onto land.

He was pulled out of his musings when he looked to the entrance of the ship, outside of which he saw Taehyung, frantically pacing back and forth, clearly in the process of rambling at Jeongguk, who was trying his best to calm the quartermaster down. The three young boys were playing amongst themselves somewhere to the side, blissfully unaware of the blonde pirate’s immense worry.

“Found your friends?” Jimin looked at Talya, who had followed his gaze and watched Taehyung’s distress with a smile on her lips. “They look worried,” she stated, chuckling when Jimin nodded. “Go to them.”

He took a step in their direction, but changed his mind and turned back to her. “Thank you, Talya,” he said and bowed his head. “It was really nice to meet you. Really.”

“Ah, don’t talk like we’ll never meet again, Jimin,” she huffed and patted him on the shoulder. “I’m sure we’ll see each other soon.” Her grip on him tightened, a firm and somehow reassuring squeeze. “In the meantime, think about this; if you don’t know where you stand in a crew, assert yourself. Don’t wait for someone else to tell you what you are.” She let him go in favor of jabbing a finger at his chest. “First you tell yourself what you’re going to be, and then you show everyone else your decision.”

Surprised by her words, Jimin only stared at her for several seconds before he nodded slowly, a smile finding its way onto his lips when she waved her hand in a shooing motion. With one last nod, he turned around and jogged across the square, cupping a hand around his lips and calling out to his friends.

“Chim!” Taehyung all but screamed and broke away from Jeongguk to sprint towards him, throwing all thoughts of caution to the wind in favor of charging straight at Jimin and throwing his arms around him to envelop him in a bone-crushing embrace. “I thought you’d been attacked or kidnapped or worse! Shit, and I just ran away from you, I’m so sorry, Chim, I got too caught up in the children’s game.”

“I-it’s alright, Ta-quartermaster,” Jimin wheezed, smiling even as the pirate’s shoulder pressed hard against his windpipe, and he waved at Jeongguk when he came hurrying up to the two. “I’m just slow, I didn’t chase you fast enough.” He patted Taehyung on the back when he felt the quartermaster shake his head against his temple. “But I’m alright. I’m alright, see?”

“But it was my fault,” the blonde pirate insisted, seemingly more shaken about what had happened than Jimin. “And Yoongi even told me to keep an eye on you.”

Jemin had half a mind to tell him it wasn’t what the captain had meant with those words, but before he could do more than part his lips, Jeongguk’s voice pulled both of their attention to him, a tinge of nervousness to it as he said, “Speaking of Yoongi,” and nodded towards the northern side of the square.

Taehyung and Jimin almost knocked their heads together in their hurry to look in the given direction, and true enough, the pirate captain had just stepped out onto the city square, accompanied by the majority of his crew. He was speaking with Xiao, nodding as he listened to the carpenter animatedly explain something, his arms moving as he spoke.
“Thank fuck, he would’ve killed me if he’d arrived before you,” Taehyung said with a relieved sigh, momentarily allowing himself to slump against Jimin before he straightened back up again, inhaling sharply before smiling underneath his mask. “You won’t tell on me, right, Chim?”

“Wha- of course not,” Jimin said, and the incredulity of his voice made the quartermaster laugh.

“Thanks,” he hummed and grabbed Jimin by his wrist. "Let’s go.”

Jimin made sure to stay somewhat hidden behind Taehyung as they walked up to meet the rest of the crew. He was nervous, his tension brought on by everything he’d told Talya; he fidgeted at the memory of the intensity of Yoongi’s gaze, the one that made him feel like the captain was looking directly into his soul.

His fretting was all for naught, however; as they met halfway across the square, Yoongi only glanced at him, seeming neither content nor discontent with his presence. “The meeting will start soon,” he told Taehyung and rolled his eyes at the excited squeal his little brother emitted. “Let’s go inside and find our place.”

Stepping into the upturned ship was easier than Jimin would’ve thought; its ceilings - now it’s floors - were flat and easy to walk across. Stairs and ladders had been rebuilt inside of it to allow them to move across the many stories, and doorways had been carved low so as to not cause them to stumble when moving between rooms, but apart from that, the gargantuan vessel seemed to have been left untouched.

The interior of the ship was lit up by multiple lanterns, the dim light casting eerie shadows on the walls as they moved deeper and deeper, further through the seemingly endless hallways. Yoongi seemed to know where they were going, taking one of the lanterns off the walls and leading the way. He guided them through a series of rooms and up a final set of stairs before he came to a halt before a pair of heavy doors.

“Some have already arrived,” he said and hung the lantern back on the wall, and true enough, Jimin could hear muffled voices coming from the other side of the doors. He swallowed thickly and reached for Taehyung’s arm, but rather than simply letting him hold onto him, the quartermaster took Jimin’s hand in his own and gave it a reassuring squeeze just as Yoongi pushed the doors open.

The room was wide and spacious, with chairs and benches filling out the floor closest to the walls, which were painted with what looked like a map of the world, although it was difficult to tell, what with it standing upside down. Countless lights hung from the ceiling, chained to what had once been the floor, and at the far back, a row of tall windows stood, upturned like the rest of the ship.

The room was half full of pirates, but what captured Jimin’s attention was the woman kneeling at the very center of the room, her hands clasped against her lips, which were moving as she spoke silently to herself. Her hair was black as night, tied into a tight bun at the base of her neck, and she was dressed in a blueish gown that covered every inch of her body, all the way to the long, loose sleeves and the high collar. None of the others in the room paid her any heed, although it was difficult to tell; as soon as Yoongi had opened the doors, they had all gone silent.

“The Pirate Priestess,” Taehyung whispered into Jimin’s ear, so quietly he almost missed it. Almost on reflex, he turned to look at Jin, remembering his apprehension at the mention of the woman’s title, and true enough, the cook’s expression was stony, an unfamiliar darkness to his eyes as he stared at the Priestess.

When Jimin turned his eyes back to her, he noticed she was kneeling directly at the center of what looked like a compass, engraved into the floor, its hands decorated with intricate, winding designs.
They were aligned according to the true cardinals; the western hand pointed to the true west, the eastern to the true east, and so on and so forth. They were the obvious guides for where they were to stand; Yoongi led them to the rows of benches and chairs that stood at the end of the compass’ eastern hand.

As they shuffled to their seats, Jimin finally noticed the other pirates in the room. The western side was occupied, a startlingly blonde pirate standing at the head of his crew, thin lips stretched into a smile as he observed the newcomers. He was dressed in fine silks and colorful velvet, hardly expected of a pirate’s attire. Jewels hung heavy from his ears and around his neck, each and every gem as piercingly green as his eyes. The Pirate Prince, Jimin recalled and vaguely noted that his name had been appropriately chosen; he looked like the very image of royalty.

Much to his distress, the southern part of the room had also been filled. Jimin couldn’t identify their captain, however; the Red Plague had been infamous already in his childhood, some fifteen years ago, which meant the man should’ve looked at least somewhat aged, but the man standing at the front looked every bit as young as Jimin himself, his dark skin lacking even the makings of a wrinkle. His hair was shaved clean around his ears, which held countless gilded piercings. He was incredibly tall, towering at least a head and a half taller than Jimin, and there was something incredibly unsettling about the way his lips quirked into a smirk as he watched them take their seats.

*I shouldn’t have come*, Jimin thought and clutched tighter onto Taehyung’s hand.

While the rest of the crew began filling out the benches and chairs, Jimin opted to stand, a decision he quickly came to regret when he realized it meant he would be positioned closer to Yoongi. He wasn’t given a chance to change his mind, either, when Taehyung slid up next to him and winked at him as if to commend him for his quick thinking. Hoseok came up to his left and placed a hand on his shoulder, giving it a firm, reassuring squeeze.

As soon as they’d settled, the chatter in the room resumed. The two other crews were speaking only amongst one another, conversing in languages Jimin couldn’t even begin to identify, and he was eternally grateful for it; the last thing he wanted was to be addressed by any of these strangers, these pirates that made his skin crawl in discomfort.

“I can’t believe we’re here,” Taehyung whispered next to him, shamelessly turning his head to look at each and every one of the strangers, his hushed voice laced with awe. “I can’t believe this, Jeongguk, *look at them all.*”

While the sailing master murmured something in agreement, Jimin closed his eyes and pretended he couldn’t hear the foreign pirates. *I really shouldn’t have come,* he thought.

After some ten minutes had passed, new voices erupted from behind the doors they’d arrived through, and once again, everyone in the room fell silent as they waited for the appearance of the last Cardinal. Jimin was torn between his damned curiosity and the will to keep his eyes shut tightly, and when the doors were pushed open, it was the former that won.

The man who stepped into the room first had hair the color of gold tied into a loose braid that reached all the way down to his waist. He seemed rather irked, his sharp brows pulled into a scowl, his eyes narrow and jaw clenched as he moved towards the northern seats without sparing anyone as much of a glance. He was clearly not dressed for the weather; his heavy coat hung open, portraying a strong, broad chest smattered with scars, the white lines running criss cross over his skin like forks of lightning.

What momentarily made Jimin forget his tension was the sight of Talya, looking perfectly content as she walked in along the rest of the crew. Her eyes instantly found Jimin and she offered him a subtle
grin before taking a seat on one of the chairs, two seats down from who must’ve been her captain.

After the initial surprise, Jimin realized he should’ve guessed she was part of the northern crew; after all, she hadn’t seemed as affected by the fact that he sailed with a Cardinal as one would’ve imagined after seeing the pirates’ initial reaction to Yoongi’s appearance at the harbor. She’d also come off as confident and strong, with not a shred of hesitation in any of her actions.

There was something soothing about her presence and Jimin took a steadying breath, one that caught in his throat when the Pirate Priestess suddenly stood up straight and began to speak.

“Cardinals,” she said, her voice crystal clear and just as sharp. “We have come together on this day to discuss the disturbances occurring across the eastern seas. Ungodly acts committed by ungodly men, vile even in the name of piracy.” She walked along the edges of the open space in the middle of the room, her pale eyes trailing over every single one of them. “By the end of today, we shall reach an agreement, a sacred pact before the eyes of gods and men alike, and we shall strive to purge this unholy evil from the face of this earth.”

She returned to the center of the compass when she’d circled the room once. “But let us first lay ourselves bare for all the gods to see,” she said melodically and slowly raised an arm towards the southern crew. “The Red Plague of the South, Cardinal Jalen Kayote.”

It was the young man Jimin had observed that took a step forward and bowed his head before the Priestess, the unsettling smirk still playing on his lips. Jimin barely managed to catch himself from physically recoiling, and he felt Taehyung give his hand a firm squeeze.

“The Black Fox of the East,” the Pirate Priestess carried on, her eyes turning to Yoongi. “Cardinal Min Yoongi.”

The captain mimicked the southern Cardinal’s actions, taking one step forward before tipping his head. Jimin noticed his movements were much stiffer than the other’s.

The Priestess didn’t seem to mind, however, turning gracefully to face the man standing opposite of them. “The Pirate Prince of the West,” she chimed, and he bowed before she could even speak his name. “Cardinal Elyas Lowe.”

“It’s my honor to be here again,” the captain said smoothly, although the smile on his lips took on a near sardonic tinge when he straightened up, his eyes trained on Yoongi.

Neither his words nor actions seemed to perturb the Pirate Priestess, who finally turned to face the northern crew. Jimin leaned forward slightly, his curiosity of Talya’s captain piquing; the blonde pirate looked almost angry as he watched the woman in the center of the room. “The Long-toothed Tiger of the North,” she crooned, her voice taking on the chill of winter as she called the name, “Cardinal Talya Sabelsdottir.”

It took Jimin several seconds to realize the Pirate Priestess hadn’t raised her arm towards the blonde man at the front of the northern crew, but instead at the woman seated to his right. He blinked, confused, his eyes widening as he watched Talya stand and bow her head before the Priestess, and only when she straightened up again did it dawn on Jimin just who he had ran into, who he had spoken so easily with, who had told him to find his own place in his crew.

The northern Cardinal emitted a bark of laughter when her eyes found his, completely ignoring the surprise of everyone else in the room. With a grin full of razor sharp teeth, she raised a hand and waved at Jimin, who felt his breath die in his throat, the entirety of his body drawing itself taut as a bowstring as every eye in the room fell on him.
Oh, he thought dimly as he felt a familiarly intense gaze carve its way into his very soul. *I really shouldn’t have come.*
“You’re speaking of the Rabid Conflagration,” Yoongi stated, fingers drumming against his arm in impatience. “The pirate who infused himself with the Rune of Fire.”

Jimin’s eyes widened at that; he remembered hearing the villagers back in his hometown speak of a pirate who’d burned several towns and villages to the ground along Korea’s eastern coast.

The priestess nodded solemnly. “Yes. His actions have carved fear into every beating heart in the east,” she said slowly, the melancholy of her voice nowhere to be found in her impassive expression. “I fear we can no longer turn a blind eye on such a man.” Her alarmingly pale blue eyes settled on Yoongi. “He must be stopped.”

Chapter Notes

it is 1AM and I'm an hour late, BUT HOLY FECK AM I EXCITED ABOUT THIS CHAPTER, SO WHO EVEN GIVES A FRICK???

MUSIC TO GO WITH THIS TENSE-AS-FECK CHAPTER;
The Man From UNCLE - Circular Story
The Man From UNCLE - The Red Mist
Brand X Music - Altered States

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jimin was completely and utterly paralyzed. Every last cell of his body had seized up in dread, prickling and painful as it crawled up his spine and settled at the base of his skull, mingling with the sensation of being throttled, his airways tightening under the near crushing stares of the Four Cardinals and their crews.

He couldn’t move.

It felt as if the room’s walls were closing in on him, as if the pirates’ eyes were physical touches against his skin, filling him with an urge to hide, to curl in on himself, to step in behind Taehyung and out of sight. Numbly, he realized it would’ve been for nothing, since the quartermaster was one of the pirates gawking at him in surprise, his eyes wide above the edge of his mask.

He felt Taehyung’s hand tighten around his and heard him whisper something, but the words were distorted, unclear in his ears; his heartbeat was hammering against his eardrums and threatened to render him deaf. *Look away*, Jimin pleaded inwardly, his lips moving around the silent words.

He didn’t have to turn his head to feel Yoongi’s piercing gaze, the intensity of it boring into his skull
and lighting his skin on fire, blood rushing to his cheeks to make him feel lightheaded. Jimin refused to meet it, his eyes trained on Talya, whose cheerful grin was slowly faltering as she came to realize her mistake, concern settling into her brow in the form of a crease as she observed Jimin’s obvious struggle.

Before she could speak, however, before Jimin’s panic could properly escalate, Yoongi turned away from him, relieving him from the most intense of stares to fixate it on the northern Cardinal instead. “Is there anything you want from our lookout, Sabelsdottir?” the captain asked curtly, and instantaneously, all eyes were redirected to him.

It was near overwhelming, the way their collective gazes suddenly shifted away from Jimin’s person, and he latched onto Taehyung’s arm with both hands to ensure his legs wouldn’t give in. His breath quivered as he exhaled, his skin tingling with the sudden lack of tension. He glanced at Yoongi, nervous to find anger in his features, but the pirate captain’s full attention was on Talya, his expression portraying not a shred of the same discomfort Jimin felt when pinned under the eyes of so many pirates.

The northern Cardinal blinked, her gaze shifting from Yoongi to Jimin and back again, and the grin was swift to return to her lips. “Apart from saying hi to the kind boy I met on my way to this… this gathering?” she mused and winked at Jimin, who almost smiled at the her over exaggerated intonation on the word he’d taught her. He didn’t quite manage a smile, although he did ease his grip on Taehyung’s arm. “Nothing, for now.”

Yoongi frowned at that, but nodded his head all the same and raised his arms to cross them over his chest. “Then perhaps everyone could stop staring at him as if they’ve never seen a human being before,” he said snappishly. “Or is that the reason this gathering is held, to gawk at the songbird?”

Some of the pirates threw a last, suspicious glance in Jimin’s direction before they turned their eyes to the Pirate Priestess instead, and Jimin momentarily closed his eyes and drew a calming breath, relieved that the suffocating moment had passed. When he looked up again, he found Talya inclining her head at him, quirking a brow in curiosity, to which he shook his head and forced a smile in an attempt to reassure her that he was alright.

Yoongi’s sardonic question seemed to have snapped the priestess out of her reverie, her eyes lingering on Jimin for a second or two longer than everyone else before she turned away. “I fear the reason we have gathered is far more dire, Cardinal Min Yoongi,” she said, her sharp voice silencing any hushed murmur buzzing through the room. “As you must know already, there is a threat rising from the eastern horizon, a dreadful terror, hungry and all-consuming, eager to swallow everything in its path.”

Small voices rose from the other three corners of the room, and Jimin realized every Cardinal had one of their crew translate the priestess’ words for them, even Talya, who spoke decent enough korean; a man with skin the color of ashen cocoa and an ear full of glittering studs was leaning forward to whisper in her ear, his lips curled into a wry smirk as he repeated the Pirate Priestess’ words to his captain.

“You’re speaking of the Rabid Conflagration,” Yoongi stated, fingers drumming against his arm in impatience. “The pirate who infused himself with the Rune of Fire.”

Jimin’s eyes widened at that; he remembered hearing the villagers back in his hometown speak of a pirate who’d burned several towns and villages to the ground along Korea’s eastern coast.

The priestess nodded solemnly. “Yes. His actions have carved fear into every beating heart in the east,” she said slowly, the melancholy of her voice nowhere to be found in her impassive expression.
“I fear we can no longer turn a blind eye on such a man.” Her alarmingly pale blue eyes settled on Yoongi. “He must be stopped.”

The southern Cardinal snorted at that as soon as his translator had finished speaking, and his tone was laced with dangerous amusement as he spat out something in a language Jimin couldn’t understand. He didn’t quite need to, however; Jalen Kayote’s voice was deep and rough, containing not a shred of sympathy as he spoke. “Why must we stop him?” his translator asked instead of his captain, nary an accept to his speech. “He is a pirate, like the rest of us. If he spreads terror, is that not a good thing? Isn’t that our ultimate goal? He should be celebrated, not hunted.”

The Pirate Priestess turned to look at Jalen, completely ignoring the translator. “Had the circumstances been different, I might have agreed, Cardinal Jalen Kayote,” she told him, “but something ungodly lies in his actions, an act of blasphemy even amongst our kind.”

There was a bite to her voice, as if she wanted to warn the southern captain from speaking so thoughtlessly again, and when he only shrugged and emitted a dry scoff, she turned back to Yoongi. “His primary victims are always pirates. He seeks them out with an intention to destroy, as if he wants to end all piracy in the east. Much like-”

“Much like a mariner would, aye,” Yoongi bit off, a tightness to his jaw. His lips curled down into a scowl as if the words left a sour taste in his mouth, and Jimin wondered if he was thinking of Son Jukan.

“Just so.” The Pirate Priestess seemed completely unperturbed by his interruption, simply nodding her head before continuing. “And the mariners in turn have been acting most peculiar in return,” she conceded and looked down, her eyes trailing the eastern needle of the compass engraved into the floor. “They have sent out their wanted posters, they have created an infamy for this ungodly pirate, but they have made no true effort to apprehend him.”

The ghost of a frown marred her brow, yet her voice was the same as she began listing the horrors the Rabid Conflagration had committed. “He has burned villages, towns, cities, people to the ground,” she said calmly. “He has burned countless of pirate ships and sent them to the crushing depths of the sea, all within a span of two months, and what have the mariners done to stop him?”

The western cardinal emitted a dry snort, his wide smile only spreading further. “Nothing, judging by your tone of voice,” he sing-songed, seemingly utterly at peace with the thought.

“Nothing indeed,” the priestess said and nodded again. “And that is not all.” Much like a child would, she inclined her head as she looked at Yoongi, as if curious to read his reaction to her words. “Rumors speak of a vow this ungodly man has sworn, a promise born in his greed and his ambition, born out of the very sins that make him human.”

Jimin found himself pressing further into Taehyung’s side, keen on getting as far away from the Pirate Priestess’ gaze as he could. There was something incredibly unsettling about it, unblinking and cold, and he wondered how Yoongi could meet it without even a trace of uncertainty.

“The Rabid Conflagration has sworn to become the new eastern Cardinal,” the Pirate Priestess conceded, and for the second time since the gathering’s initiation, every eye in the room fell on Yoongi, even Jimin’s. “He hungers after your title and command, ravenous enough to kill his own kind to achieve the desires installed in him by the devil.”

The room fell silent after she’d spoken. Everyone stared at Yoongi, waiting, holding their breath in anticipation, as if they wanted to see him lose face, to see him break out of his composure. From where Jimin stood, he could see the captain’s jaw move ever so slightly, clenching as he chewed on
whatever words he wanted so speak.

It was Namjoon who broke the silence and drew the others’ attention away from his captain. “The mariners would’ve acted by now,” he stated, his brows knitted into a thoughtful frown. “I’ve heard of this pirate. His face has been in the papers on multiple occasions, and the reward on his head is enormous, courtesy of the cities he’s leveled with the ground.”

Halfway through his sombre musings, Jimin’s attention was pulled to Jin; he stood next to the first mate, but he didn’t seem to be listening at all. He was glaring at the Pirate Priestess with so much hatred, Jimin thought it a miracle she hadn’t fallen to the floor, dead. What did she do to you, he thought, wondering what terrible act could fill the kind, smiling cook’s eyes with so much venom.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Namjoon said slowly. “The mariners should’ve amassed a fleet to take him down already, unless—”

“Unless they want the Rabid Conflagration to succeed in his goals.”

Yoongi’s voice was austere, giving away the tension that drew his spine taut as a bowstring, and Jimin noticed how pleased the western Cardinal looked, his ever-present smirk wider than ever. “They’re leaving him undisturbed to kill me,” Yoongi said stiffly. “They’re opting to let a maniacal dog run loose in order to end my reign,” he spat out the word, “no matter the damage he causes elsewhere.”

Talya frowned at his words, pursing her lips as she listened to her translator. “Would they really?” she asked when she’d heard enough, her eyes flickering between Namjoon and Yoongi. “They risk the lives of many thousands just to see you die. How could they do such a thing?”

Jimin only needed to glance at Yoongi’s face to read the answer to her question. A bitterness had seeped into his scowl, one Jimin could only associate with Son Jukan, who, a little over a week ago, had vowed to do whatever it took to kill the pirate captain. This isn’t the law, he remembered thinking, imprisoned by the vice admiral for a crime he was innocent for, and truly, the idea did not seem as foreign as Jimin might’ve thought.

Before Yoongi could give an answer to Talya’s question, the Pirate Priestess raised her voice again, instantaneously silencing the noise in the room. “The mariners’ cause is not the most pressing threat at this hour,” she declared and turned to face Yoongi. “The Rabid Conflagration must be stopped, but to fight the Blessing of Fire, the ruination of all, you will need help.”

She raised her right hand and hovered it above the engraving of the compass, shifting until it stood above the south-eastern point. “You must seek the aid of the Blessed Oracles,” she told the captain. “Deep in the jungles of eastern India, they reside in their temples, worshipping sacred deities, the gods who gave us the Blessed Runes. To battle fire, the ruination of all, you will need their guidance. They are strict and follow their own laws, as commanded by their gods. They have always been loathe to assist our kind, but…”

Her voice trailed off, and slowly, her gaze shifted until it landed on Jimin, who felt a thrill of dread run down his spine, cold as ice. The priestess’ eyes seemed to seep past his skin and into his very soul, ominous and terrifying even as the words she spoke were soft. “Perhaps they will heed your newfound innocence.”

Jimin parted his lips and closed them again, confusion seeping into his dread. Hesitantly, he turned to look at Yoongi, and his breath caught in his throat when he found the captain looking back at him, something unreadable residing in his eyes. It wasn’t anger, yet somehow, that fact made Jimin even more nervous; suddenly, he had no way of knowing what to expect from the pirate captain.
The contact lasted only for a mere second before both of their attention was pulled elsewhere. “What about the mariners?” Talya asked, waving a hand in the air. “This fire pirate may be the biggest threat, but we have to find out what the mariners are doing. If they’re working together with the Rabid Con… Confla… ah, shit.”

“Conflagration,” the pirate behind her said in an almost smug tone of voice, as if he found his captain’s struggles amusing.

“Right, that.” She seemed completely unperturbed by her crewman’s attitude. “If the mariners are working with the Rabid Conflagration, we have to know,” she stated, an ironic grin finding its way to her lips as she turned to the Pirate Priestess and ducked her head in a mock bow. “To stop their hypocrisy. That’s a sin, isn’t it?”

The priestess was unamused by her antics, a tightness settling into her jaw, but she nodded all the same. “It is,” she said. “The gods will not stand to be mocked. To preserve their holy light and expel those who would seek to dampen it, we must not sit idly by and allow our own kind to join hands and dine with the forsaken devils who sail the name of the law.”

Talya rolled her eyes at the Pirate Priestess’ words and snorted, utterly unafraid, before she turned to look at Yoongi. “I will help however I can,” she told him, sharp teeth bared in a cheerful smile. “My crew is small, like yours, but two Cardinals are better than one, right?”

Jimin felt a twinge of glee at the prospect of Talya remaining close, a sentiment Taehyung seemed to share, gripping at Jimin’s hand and grinning behind his mask as he turned to look at his brother. However, before Yoongi could even begin to form a reply, Elyas Lowe emitted a sardonic little chuckle and raised a hand as if to swat away Talya’s offer.

“You waste your breath, Sabelsdottir,” he chimed, his tone as mocking as the sweetness of his smile. “The Black Fox here is too proud to accept the help of others. Or too self-obsessed. I forget which one.” His eyes were sharp and unamused as he turned to look at Yoongi. “It has been a while since I last suffered an insult from him, after all.”

Yoongi barely had time to curl his lips down into a sneer before Talya snorted and shook her head. “I really don’t think I asked for your opinion, Lowe,” she told the western Cardinal. “So how about you shove it up your arse and keep it where no one will ever hear it instead.”

Somewhere right of Jimin, Hoseok smacked a hand over his mouth to muffle the amused sound that threatened to spill from his lips, and Taehyung’s grin grew so wide it must’ve made his cheeks ache. “Wow,” he breathed out, his hushed tone brimming with exhilaration, and Jimin found himself nodding.

Elyas Lowe was clearly not a man to take a slight easily. Offense flared across his face, his jaw clenching heavily, and when he spoke again, the spiteful amusement was gone from his voice. “Whatever was I thinking,” he said snappishly as he straightened his posture. “Truly, it was naïve of me to expect a woman to be anything but soft. So eager to please, aren’t you? What, do you imagine you’ll gain the Black Fox’s favor if you do as he says, that he’ll fall into the palm of your hand if you spread your legs for him like a bitch in heat?”

A shudder seemed to pass through the room, the bystanders drawing a simultaneous breath while Talya’s crew moved to stand at once, their hands instantaneously going to their weapons, but their captain only threw her head back and laughed, the sound bright and breathy. “You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you, pretty boy?” she retorted once she’d sobered up, unfazed by his insults. “You wear more silks than my mother did at her wedding.”
Her grin was near feral, her sharp teeth gleaming in the light of the lanterns along the wall. “Who’s the lucky man, eh, Lowe?” she taunted, inclining her head as she deliberately gazed over his crew. “Who out of these fine men will be claiming you when we are finished here? All of them, maybe?”

Jimin could tell the instant Elyas’ patience ran out. His expression morphed into one of contempt, and before anyone could do as much as blink, he broke away from his position at the head of his crew. “It seems like the northern cat needs to be brought down from her high seat,” he seethed as he stormed towards her, the veins of his hand prominent as he reached out towards her.

Talya never moved a muscle. She only watched him draw closer, unafraid of the spell he could so easily put her under, and Elyas smirked triumphantly, clearly under the belief she was unaware to the blessing he possessed.

However, when his touch was mere inches from her arm, the braided pirate from Talya’s crew lashed out, his hand closing around Elyas’ wrist to prevent him from touching the northern Cardinal. “Back the fuck away, bastard,” he growled, “unless you want me to break… to…”

Slowly, his voice trailed off, the muscles of his neck protruding as he suddenly found himself unable to speak. He swallowed repeatedly, his jaw clenching so hard the bones creaked in protest, and Elyas’ lips curled into a smile, Jimin realized what had happened.

“Perhaps this one will be enough,” the western Cardinal said, his eyes trained on Talya as he leaned forward and whispered into the braided pirate’s ear. “On your knees, scum.”

Every pirate in the room seemed to hold their breath as they watched the northern man struggle, every muscle in his body straining as he attempted to resist the powers of the Blessing of Persuasion. Taehyung had explained it to Jimin, how upon Elyas’ touch, any man would be forced to succumb to his will, but it was horrible to watch as the pirate slowly complied, his spine bending as he began lowering himself towards the floor.

As soon as his knee touched the ground, a ripple of near palpable rage went through the room, the air crackling with tension. A soft snarl rolled past Talya’s teeth as she turned to face Elyas, and Jimin found himself unable to breathe as he watched the northern Cardinal’s body begin to change. Dark, rough fur blossomed along the sides of her face and her neck, spreading all the way to her hands, where sharp claws grew out of the tips of her fingers. From the upper row of her teeth, her canines grew out, reaching past her lower lip and down her chin, sharp as knives and long enough to crush through Elyas’ torso.

It was a skinchanging much like Xiao’s, but the shape Talya assumed was far more terrifying; the Long-toothed Tiger of the North looked near demonic, her yellow eyes gleaming in the dim light of the room, slitted pupils trained on Elyas, hungry, like that of a predator observing her prey.

“Tell me, Lowe,” Talya drawled, her voice barely human, a feral rumble surrounding every syllable, “how quickly does your blessing work? If I tried to bury my teeth in your neck, would you be fast enough to take control over me before I crushed your spine and your airways?” She emitted another snarl as she leaned forward, pressing a claw-like hand against her crewman’s shoulder. “Unless you want to find out the answer right here and now, let him go.”

Both crews stood with their weapons drawn, ready to engage in a battle even in these closed quarters. All eyes were trained on Elyas, waiting; the challenge had been lain at his feet, made for him to direct the coming turn of events. His eyes shifted from Talya’s claws to her teeth and finally to her eyes, and finally, he heaved a deep sigh and straightened up, smacking the braided pirate’s hand away from his person.
“How utterly dull,” he stated, his previous smile returning to his lips, albeit tighter than before. “Why does friendly banter have to turn into such a hectic affair?”

While Jimin drew a relieved breath, Talya emitted a near cheerful bark of laughter, immediately shattering the tension as she morphed back to her human form. “You tell me, oh beautiful bride-to-be,” she chortled as she helped her crewman stand, patting him on the shoulder before directing him back to his previous spot.

Elyas’ smirk twitched at the mocking name, but before another argument could ensue, Yoongi raised his voice, his tone laced with impatience. “I appreciate your offer, Sabelsdottir,” he said curtly, offering the northern Cardinal a stiff bow of his head, “but your help will not be necessary. The Rabid Conflagration sails on my domain, thus it is my task to stop him in his path. I will see to it myself.”

That certainly brightened Elyas’ mood, wry amusement returning to his smirk as he looked at Talya in a very spiteful manner. She paid him no heed, however, choosing instead to quirk a curious brow at Yoongi. “So you plan on fighting an armada all by yourself, then?” she asked, a genuine dourness to her tone. “The fire pirate is one thing, aye, but if the mariners are involved, you and your crew will be twenty against two thousand. Will you risk your crew for the sake of your pride?”

She spoke utterly without malice, but Jimin knew her words would strike a nerve within Yoongi, and true enough, when he chanced a glance at the captain, his jaw was clenched taut, the tips of his fingers digging into his arms at the mere suggestion. Next to Jimin, Taehyung shifted, his excited smile from before nowhere to be seen as he looked at Yoongi, concern marring his brow.

Talya seemed to notice the captain’s shift quickly enough; she heaved a sigh and raised her hands as if in defeat, her brows knitting together in something akin to worry. “I don’t want to insult you,” she said slowly, pausing slightly to find the right words. “It’s not my intention. But I also don’t want a pirate-killing, rabid dog to become the new eastern Cardinal. And,” she turned to Jimin and smiled, “I don’t want my new friend to die where I could save him.”

A part of Jimin felt thankful, overwhelmed that a pirate as well-known and powerful would make such an important decision with his safety in mind. He almost smiled, but quickly decided against it when Yoongi shot him a sour glance, near sulking, as if he thought it was all Jimin’s fault he had been dragged into such a political situation.

Suddenly, an impatient voice rose from their left, and Jimin startled; he’d almost forgotten the Red Plague’s presence, having been too captivated by Talya’s skinchanging, but Jalen was speaking now, barking out foreign words in a tone of contempt as he looked at Yoongi.

“You can do whatever you want, northerner,” his translator said with a brief glance at Talya. “I, for one, will not lift a finger to help. What’s happening is a good thing. We need a new eastern Cardinal. This one is too soft. He doesn’t do what a Cardinal should. He doesn’t make proper use of his title, choosing to sail peacefully rather than live as a pirate should.”

For every word Jalen spoke, the translator became more and more nervous, focusing his eyes on the floor rather than look at Yoongi. “H-he’s a coward,” he stated. “If he did as expected of a Cardinal, this would never have happened. In the south, no one would dare raise their swords against Jalen Kayote. That’s because they know. They know what I do to those who think themselves better than me. The eastern pirates seem to have no such fear.”

Jalen’s eyes traveled over Yoongi’s crew, his disdain clear as day as he spoke. “This, this is not a crew th-that inspires respect,” the translator stuttered, struggling to keep his voice audible. “A band of weaklings. No one would be afraid to challenge this crew, nor their captain, who…” The boy
pressed his lips together and swallowed thickly, his eyes flickering to Jimin before he spoke. “Nor their captain, who has the gall to bring his little w-whore to a meeting of Cardinals.”

For a moment, Jimin didn’t know what the man was talking about. He heard Hoseok, Jeongguk and Xiao hiss out a simultaneous curse, one Talya echoed in her own tongue, and he felt Taehyung shift next to him, the quartermaster gripping hard onto his arm, but not until he looked at Jalen did his words sink in. The southern Cardinal was looking back at him with an expression of utter contempt, his eyes cold and judging, and Jimin felt his stomach churn when he realized the Red Plague had meant him.

A wave of fear-mixed disgust crashed hard against Jimin’s chest. His skin contracted and he recoiled, bile rising to the back of his throat as he attempted to pry himself away from Taehyung’s hold. He wasn’t even certain why; all of a sudden, the mere thought of anyone’s touch filled him with an urge to claw at his skin, to rid himself of the physical remains of the Cardinal’s words.

Before he could, however, Taehyung pushed him aside, urging him to move until he suddenly couldn’t see Jalen anymore, his vision blocked by a black coat hanging off squared shoulders, and in his state of mind, Jimin failed to notice the way Yoongi straightened his back, the slight shift causing an enormous change in his posture and the aura that came with it.

“My crew is none of your concern, Kayote,” the captain spat, his voice brimming with poorly suppressed anger; for every word he spoke, his outrage became more and more obvious, until it was so palpable, Jimin could feel it vibrate in the air around him. “It is certainly not yours to insult, you scumfuck piece of shit, and if you want to keep your guts inside your rotting, disgusting, blood-bloated body, I suggest you keep your fucking mouth shut!”

If Yoongi wasn’t the only thing standing between Jimin and the Red Plague, perhaps he would’ve recoiled at the frightening harshness of the captain’s voice. Now, however, he latched onto it, screwing his eyes shut as he let it drive away the southern Cardinal’s words.

Jalen emitted an amused snort, his lips quirking into a spiteful grin as he spoke, this time without the help of his translator. “You will die before you can try,” he mused, his voice heavy with mirth. “You are weak.”

Jemin felt Yoongi shift, unfolding his arms to reach for something at his waist, but before he could draw one of his knives from his belt, the Pirate Priestess, who had silently watched their argument, calmly stepped up before Jalen, the look in her eyes dreadfully cold as she reached out and pressed a hand to the southern Cardinal’s chest.

The shift was instantaneous; the smile faded from Jalen’s lips and was replaced by a look of anguish as he stared down at her. The priestess was shorter than him by a head and a half, yet there was not a trace of fear in her expression as she regarded the captain.

“Yours might be the Blessing of Blood, Cardinal Jalen Kayote,” she said, and for the first time, there was anger in her voice, like stones scraping against ice, “but the gods granted me the blessing to touch that which flows through all living beings.” The Cardinal’s body jerked, a gurgling sound rising from his throat. Behind him, his entire crew rose to their feet, panic in their eyes as they hesitated to draw their weapons for fear their actions would cost their captain his life. “Choose your words carefully if you are to accuse another pirate of sin,” the Pirate Priestess crooned. “Such arrogance before the eyes of gods will call upon you the heavens’ justice.”

His breath was becoming thinner and thinner for every passing second, and when Jimin finally looked at him, his eyes widened in shock as he watched the skin beneath the priestess’ hand was beginning to flake, as if the very cells were drying. Jalen tried to push her away, his hands shoving
weakly against her shoulder, but she didn’t budge nor relieve him. All she did was look, her eyes void of mercy as she watched him struggle.

“Stop it, Yeona!”

Jimin flinched in surprise and turned on the heel, his eyes widening as he watched Jin break away from Namjoon, his face contorted in pain, as if he was the one suffering through whatever it was that ailed Jalen. “Stop it,” he repeated, his voice thin as he looked at the Pirate Priestess. “It... it’s enough already.”

To Jimin’s immense shock, the priestess did as told. Without lingering for even a second, she withdrew her hand, her palm glistening with moisture, and she turned around without sparing the Cardinal a second glance when he toppled forward, drawing breath as if he’d been drowning. He hissed a curse, glaring at the woman with murderous intent, but she paid him no heed, her eyes trained on Jin, who seemed to regret his outburst now.

Slowly, a smile graced her lips, just as cold as the rest of her, and the cook recoiled visibly. “It has been too long, has it not, Seokjin?” she asked, her voice frightfully gentle. “Have these past three years been enough to ease your nightmares?”

Jin looked almost small where he stood, battling against the urge to curl in on himself, his shoulders tensing. “I’m sure you know they have not, Priestess,” he said stiffly and clasped his trembling hands behind his back. “You made sure to carve them deep, after all.”

She regarded him for a moment before nodding and turning away to walk back to the center of the engraved compass. As soon as she looked away, Jin’s posture slumped, and he might’ve fallen if not for Yoongi, who quickly reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing firmly as he supported his weight. “Joon,” the captain said quietly, but the first mate had already moved up next to Jin, quickly curling his arms around his waist and coaxing him to walk back to their seats, murmuring quietly against the cook’s temple.

Jimin could do nothing but watch, alarmed, his chest filled with worry at the sight of Jin, how fragile he looked all of a sudden. Seokjin, the priestess had called him, after he’d spoken what must’ve been her own name, and for the second time, Jimin wondered what it was the priestess had done to him.

The heavy silence stretched on for several seconds longer, interrupted only by Jalen’s ragged breaths as he attempted to regain his composure. The tension in the air was near suffocating, thus Jimin was relieved when Talya decided to break it by clearing her throat and resuming the discussion where it’d been interrupted.

“So,” she said tentatively and clapped her hands together, “back to my offer.” She looked at Yoongi, who frowned in return, not quite recovered from what had happened. “Will you accept my help?”

He parted his lips and closed them again before shaking his head to clear it, frustration rapidly seeping back into his demeanor. “What about the north?” he asked curtly, almost if he was playing for more time.

Talya smiled at that, waving a hand as if to dismiss any potential worry he might have for her domain. “My son sails the northern seas,” she told him. “If there is trouble, he will handle it.”

“And what would you do, then?” Yoongi crossed his arms once again, distrust marring his brow. “I will sail to India and seek out the Oracles,” he declared, “a task that does not require two ships or two captains.”
She merely shrugged at his dismissive tone. “I’ll sail further east and try to get any information on the mariners,” she mused before flicking her head towards the pirate who’d been translating for her. “Qasim here used to serve the law. He was a ranked intelligence officer until he got bored of their rules, so I’m sure he knows where to begin.”

The pirate mimicked Talya’s shrug, a wide, smug grin playing at his lips. “Never been to the east before,” he said in fluent korean, “but I know plenty about the law on this side of the world.” He looked at Yoongi and his smile grew wider. “You wouldn’t happen to know a vice admiral called Son Jukan, would you, Cardinal?”

The tone of his voice indicated he was more than well aware of Yoongi’s acquaintance with Jukan. The captain stiffened, his eyes narrowing as his lips formed a scowl, but before he could speak, Talya reached up and smacked her crewman’s head, hard, before pushing down at the back of his neck, forcing him into an awkward bow.

“Ignore him,” she huffed, pursing her lips in annoyance when the pirate only snorted. “Half of what comes from his mouth is absolute shit. He’s trying to get under your skin.”

He’s doing a good job of it, Jimin thought with a nervous glance at Yoongi, who looked like his patience was just shy of snapping once again, much like it had with Jalen. For several seconds, all he did was glare at Talya, barely blinking, as if he was attempting to read every secret she carried.

Jemin could hardly blame her when she squirmed slightly under the intensity of his gaze.

Finally, Yoongi heaved an exasperated sigh and nodded, brows knitted together in annoyance. “Fine,” he drawled, speaking as if the word left a sour taste on his tongue. “Fine, damn it, if you’re so bloody set on it, I have no reason to refuse.”

Talya’s lips spread into a sharp grin, a chuckle rolling past her teeth as she nodded. “Great,” she said cheerfully and offered Yoongi a gesture of salute before turning to look at the Pirate Priestess. “Are we done here, then?”

The woman paid her very little heed, sparing her only a glance before turning to the other two Cardinals. “If either of you wish to affect the choices made here today, speak now,” she told them. “You may join your hands in this alliance, or hold your tongue and go in peace.”

“Peace sounds more tempting,” Elyas said without hesitating, sparing Talya a brief, condescending look. “I have no desire to play house with a vicious wildcat and a proud fox.”

“Our captain already made his thoughts on the matter clear,” Jalen’s translator uttered stiffly before the captain could even make an attempt to raise his voice, his breath still passing thinly as he massaged his throat.

The Pirate Priestess nodded in content before turning her back on the two to raise her arms, one to beckon Talya, the other to beckon Yoongi to the middle of the room. “An alliance between Cardinals is a sacred pact,” she declared in a raised voice as she took both captains’ right hands and guided them together. “If broken by an act of treason, it will call upon the anger of the gods, and the traitor will be judged without escape, without fail.”

While the grin stayed on Talya’s lips, Yoongi’s expression still carried his frustration even as they shook hands, yet neither of them showed hesitation upon the priestess’ promise of certain death. Again, the room was alight with tension, but it was a different kind than before, accompanied by anticipation, something akin to excitement, and Jimin barely dared to breathe as he watched the captains seal their alliance.
“Until the Rabid Conflagration has been vanquished,” the Pirate Priestess said and placed her own hand upon their joined ones, “these two crews are now one, bound before the eyes of gods and men.” Her eyes fluttered close and she drew a breath, and her voice seemed to almost echo as she spoke, “I shall pray for your survival.”

Chapter End Notes

BOI WE ADVENTURING NOW.

//ahem

but first.

BISH I’MA FIGHT JALEN, HOW DARE YOU CALL JIMIN THAT, THROW UP YOUR HANDS, YOU ABSOLUTE DICK, I’LL KICK THE SHIT OUTTA YOU. RIGHT AFTER CAPTAIN MIN YOONGI CURSES YOUR ARSE TO HELL AND BACK, THAT IS.

AND WHAT THE FLYING FECK DID THAT CREEPY-ASS PRIESTESS DO TO JIN?!???! I’MA FIGHT HER TOO, GODDAMN.

Also. Feck off, Lowe, no one likes you. Pff. There's the door.

//snorts

Hooooly crap, there are SO MANY MOMENT I LOVE IN THIS CHAPTER, LIKE GODDAYUM. Talya, Yoongi, Jimin, EVERYONE, ahhhhhh, this was so much fun!! Couldn't stop writing once I'd started (legit sat down for 6 hours straight after I came home from work) AND IT WAS SO WORTH IT.

I'm gonna go collapse into bed now. GOOD NIGHT.
Chapter Summary

He looked at her, surprised by her words. “What do you mean?” he asked.

With a snort, Talya reached out and caught a lock of his hair between her fingers. “Such a beautiful color isn’t a human trait,” she told him warmly. “And your voice is much sweeter than any I’ve ever heard.” She released his hair to poke his chest. “Blessings are alive just as much as we are, Jimin, and yours resonates deep within your soul.”

Chapter Notes

IT'S 2AM AGAIN BUT HERE IT IS WOOOOOOOOOOOO-

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jimin kept himself pressed firmly against Taehyung’s side as the crew stepped out of the Hall of Black Sails, his gaze flickering nervously to the strange pirates around them. His tension was near overwhelming; he could feel the others’ eyes on him, gazes both familiar and foreign, and a part of him wished the street could open up and swallow him whole, if only to spare him the tangible stares.

He knew what the pirates of Yoongi’s crew wanted to ask him, he knew they wanted to know how he’d come to know the northern Cardinal, and while he dreaded answering the captain’s questions, it wasn’t him that made Jimin so anxious. It was the unfamiliar crews, those of the south and west; they had departed from the meeting first, foregoing the formal farewell the Pirate Priestess had bid of Yoongi and Talya, yet they were waiting outside, their gazes heavy as rocks each time they passed over Jimin.

“I can’t believe you actually know her, Chim,” Taehyung said in a hushed voice as they filtered out into the city square, his eyes wide and almost twinkling as he looked at Talya, who was walking a few paces in front of them, her crew walking by her side while she cheerfully chatted with Yoongi, who only nodded mutely in response to whatever she said. “She’s amazing, isn’t she? Did you hear what she said to the Pirate Prince? Did you hear what she said to the Pirate Prince? Did you?”

“Yes, we were all there to hear it,” Jeongguk hummed, a wide smile playing on his lips as he observed the quartermaster’s excitement. “Her skinchanging was impressive as well. She looked much fiercer than Xiao.”

“She really did,” Taehyung agreed with a fervent nod of his head. “But what animal was that? The Long-toothed Tiger, they call her, but it wasn’t a regular tiger, at least not one I’ve seen before.”

The navigator pursed his lips in thought. “Maybe tigers look like that in the north.”

“But there are no tigers in the north.” The blonde pirate hesitated for a moment before speaking a
hesitant, “I think.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t know,” Taehyung sighed and descended into a momentary silence, although his cheeriness was quick to return. “But what about the Pirate Priestess and her blessing?”

Jimin was grateful they chose not to question his acquaintance with Talya just yet. He wasn’t nervous to tell Taehyung where he’d met the Cardinal, but in this very moment, all he wanted to do was keep silent and stay out of sight from just about every unfamiliar face, of which there were plenty. Every second of their attention left pinpricks of discomfort in his skin, and he wished nothing more than to return to the Agust as swiftly as possible.

Suddenly, Taehyung froze in his steps next to him, jarring Jimin to a halt as well. His discussion with Jeongguk came to an abrupt pause as the air around them seemed to grow taut with tension, one that made Jimin shudder even in the warm breeze. “Taehyung?” he ventured and turned his face to the quartermaster, but from the corner of his eye, he caught what must’ve been the sight that caused not only Taehyung, but the rest of the crew to freeze.

Jalen Kayote was standing in the middle of the city square, holding one of his crewmen’s wrists in what looked like a vice grip. The pirate was making a valiant effort to remain standing, but his legs kept quivering, his face contorted in pain as he seemed to grow weaker and weaker under his captain’s touch. No one in his crew said a word, every last one of them simply looking at their fellow pirate with an odd sense of solemn contentedness, as if what they witnessed was nothing out of the ordinary.

The Cardinal, on the other hand, seemed to draw strength from the touch. The dry, cracked skin of his chest, where the Pirate Priestess had left her mark and rendered him weak, was smoothing out and returning to its proper state, almost as if he were draining the life right out of his crewman and taking it for himself.

When Jalen released the pirate, Jimin realized, to his horror, that it was indeed the case; the captain’s hand was slick with blood, blood that seeped from a wide gash in his crewman’s wrist. The pirate staggered upon release and was quickly led aside by the rest of the crew before he could collapse, pale as death, and the Cardinal emitted a contented sigh and raised his hand to his lips, grinning as he pressed his tongue against his palm to lap up the red liquid.

The sight alone was terrifying enough, but it couldn’t even begin to compare to the dread that cut through Jimin’s chest when Jalen turned to look directly at him just as he lowered his hand, his white teeth stained with blood as his smirk seemed to grow even wider.

The translator’s words rang shrilly in Jimin’s head and he recoiled at the same time as Taehyung threw an arm around his shoulders to pull him further against his chest, but before the quartermaster could do more than emit a sharp hiss behind his mask, a shape appeared in between the three of them and Jalen, blocking him from view. Jimin felt Taehyung tense against his back and heard Jeongguk’s sharp intake of air, and in his momentary state of alarm, Jimin couldn’t identify the pirate until they raised their voice.

“Jimin,” Talya said brightly and reached out to place a hand on his shoulder. “Would you walk with me for a bit?” She grinned sharply at his obvious surprise and raised her eyes to meet Taehyung’s wide ones. “If it's okay with your friends.”

The quartermaster, with his arm still around Jimin’s chest, only blinked at her for several seconds before turning to Yoongi for answers. The captain didn’t immediately react, his narrowed eyes
focused on Jalen and his crew until Namjoon tapped him on the shoulder and nodded towards where Talya and Jimin were standing.

“I want to borrow Jimin for a little,” the northern Cardinal told the captain in a voice of unwavering cheeriness. “To speak before we say goodbye.”

Yoongi seemed surprised by that, parting his lips and closing them again without a word. His brow knitted into a frown as his eyes fell on Jimin, who fidgeted nervously under the by now familiar intensity of his gaze, although he made sure to meet it without looking away. He could read the silent question, the wonderment of how he seemed to stand on such friendly terms with Talya, but he chose not to voice it now.

The captain took all of three seconds to consider it, and then he nodded curtly, his eyes briefly leaving Jimin’s to flicker towards where the southern Cardinal’s crew was still standing. “Don’t take too long,” he drawled when he turned back and waited for Jimin to nod before addressing the rest of his crew. “Unless the lot of you have any business to conduct before we leave Shanghai, return to the Agust and prepare to cast off. We sail as soon as the songbird returns.”

A choir of agreement rose from the crew before they took off, most of them following after their captain and steering their steps towards the harbor. Namjoon muttered something about taking Jin’s mind off what had happened and gently coaxed the cook to follow him towards the western exit of the city square while Hoseok departed with a mention of Chinese herbs.

Taehyung didn’t immediately move, even after Yoongi had given Jimin permission to go; the quartermaster only looked at Talya, his grip firm around Jimin’s chest, and the northern Cardinal smiled, a warm curl of her lips. “I promise I won’t eat him,” she mused, a teasing lilt to her voice. That certainly snapped the quartermaster out of his daze, so abruptly he gave a little start. “A-ah, uh, no,” he stuttered, an expression of reverence-mixed shock settling on his features, as if he couldn’t quite believe another Cardial had just addressed him. “I mean, good. Don’t. Eat him, I mean.”

Behind him, Jeongguk was snorting into his hand, for which Taehyung elbowed him in the ribs as soon as Talya’s attention returned to Jimin.

“My ship’s waiting at the eastern pier,” the Cardinal said and motioned for Jimin to follow her to the alleys leading away from where Yoongi and his crew had gone. Her crew was already leaving, choosing not to linger or wait for their captain, hardly a care in the world as they chatted animatedly in a language Jimin couldn’t understand. “We can walk halfway and I’ll show you how to get back to the Black Fox’s ship.”

Jimin nodded and stepped after her, although not before turning to smile at Taehyung and Jeongguk. “I won’t be long,” he promised and raised a hand to wave at them as he walked after Talya. “Wait for me.”

The quartermaster chuckled behind his mask and enthusiastically returned his wave. “Yoongi already said we would, Chim,” he sing-songed, emitting a bark of laughter when Jimin furrowed his brow. “See you soon, songbird.”

Jimin parted his lips to chastise him for his teasing, but settled for a mere huff before turning around to scamper after Talya. “Songbird?” she repeated curiously when he fell in beside her. “The Black Fox called you that as well.”

“Oh.” He pursed his lips slightly and wondered how to best explain the name that was most likely meant as a slight. “I, um, I have a blessing,” he ventured carefully. “The Blessing of the Canary, so
“A songbird,” Talya finished for him and nodded, humming as if she’d never heard anything quite as fascinating. Then she chuckled and smiled at him. “It suits you,” she stated fondly. “It’s cute.”

Jimin almost tripped over his own feet, caught off guard by her bluntness, and he wondered if all northern pirates were like this, or if she was a special case of her own, almost unnaturally friendly. “R-right,” was all he could say, embarrassed by the sudden compliment. “Right, uh… oh.” He glanced at her, uncertain if he was allowed to ask. “You have a blessing as well, Ta- Cardinal.”

Talya seemed to almost jerk at the title, and she threw a near startled look at him before a bark of laughter burst past her lips, loud and cheerful. “Ó Guðir,” she managed in between her cackling, waving a hand as if to deflect Jimin’s words. It took her several seconds to recover, several long seconds, during which Jimin only stared at her, alarmed by her sudden glee. “Oh, please don’t call me that,” she said breathlessly when she sobered up, still chortling as she dabbed at her eyes. “I’m still Talya, even if you now know I’m a Cardinal.”

She contorted her face into a pompous grimace at the title before emitting another chuckle and shaking her head. “Don’t think of me as different now,” she told him when she finally stopped laughing altogether. “You can still speak normally to me. And correct my mistakes when I speak.” She turned to look at him, brows arched in expectation. “You wanted to ask about my blessing?”

It took Jimin a moment to remember that he had indeed wanted to ask, breaking out of his state of surprise with a startled blink before he regained his composure. “Oh,” he uttered and nodded. “Oh, yes, if you wouldn’t mind telling me of it. I’ve never heard tell of an animal with such a… frightening appearance, so I’m curious.” He curled his lips into a sheepish smile. “Talya.”

The smile she offered him was near radiant. “Good,” she said and nodded, content with the use of her name. “My blessing is the Blessing of the Sabertooth Tiger. Do you know what that is?” Jimin shook his head, having never heard of anything of the sort. “I’m not surprised,” Talya mused. “The animal doesn’t exist anymore. It’s, uh… the last one died thousands and thousands of years ago. Or more.”

Jimin’s eyes widened at that, his lips parting in surprise. “It’s extinct?” he asked, awestruck as she nodded. “But… how?”

“It’s easy, really,” she said simply. “Let me see, yours is a blessing of Nature, just like mine. Where did you find your Blessed Rune?”

“Inside the body of a dead canary,” he ventured slowly.

“Right. So did my great grandmother.” Talya chuckled at his confused frown. “When my great grandmother was young,” she explained, “she found the fossil of a sabertooth tiger, and in its bones was the Blessed Rune.” There was not a hint of uncertainty in her voice, as if every word she spoke was as obvious as it could be. “Because the sabertooth tiger is ex… extinct? Right, because it’s extinct, its Rune wouldn’t manifest in another specimen when my great grandmother died. Instead, it appeared inside of her when she died, inside her bones.”

Jimin’s eyes widened in something akin to horror at what he heard, and again, Talya emitted a chiming laughter. “It’s not as bad as it sounds,” she promised with a sharp grin. “Where I come from, we don’t bury the skulls of our dead, but put them on altars so the spirit will not have to be buried. So when my great grandmother’s daughter was to put her skull on the altar of the dead, she found the Blessed Rune.”
The northern Cardinal hummed contentedly to herself, a fond smile tugging at her lips. “Ever since then, the Rune of the Sabertooth Tiger has passed from mother to daughter,” she told him. “I’m not sure if it is because the rune can’t manifest somewhere else, or if the sabertooth tiger’s spirit thinks of my family as worthy.” She turned to face Jimin and patted a hand to her chest. “My name, Sabelsdottir, means Daughter of the Saber. Every woman in my family has taken the name for themselves when they’ve earned the sabertooth’s blessing.”

Jimin listened intently, awed by what he was hearing; halfway through her tale, he remembered reading something about prehistoric blessings in the book Namjoon had lent him, but it felt almost surreal to witness it with his own eyes, to hear tell of it from someone who truly possessed such a blessing.

“My family has always been in tune with the blessing,” Talya said and nodded to herself. “As you can see, my eyes are yellow and my teeth are sharp. My sense of hearing is also better than most, even in this form, and I have these… instincts that aren’t really human.” She glanced at him with a brow quirked in amusement. “But you know all about that, right?”

“Huh?” He looked at her, surprised by her words. “What do you mean?” he asked.

With a snort, Talya reached out and caught a lock of his hair between her fingers. “Such a beautiful color isn’t a human trait,” she told him warmly. “And your voice is much sweeter than any I’ve ever heard.” She released his hair to poke his chest. “Blessings are alive just as much as we are, Jimin, and yours resonates deep within your soul.”

He had half a mind to tell her that he couldn’t change his skin, at least not by choice, but for some reason, her words prompted a warmth to seep into his body from his chest, his heart humming with something akin to pride. He found himself smiling as he looked down at his chest and brought up a hand to touch it, and he was so caught up in his preening, he almost missed the question that fell from Talya’s lips.

“How would you like to come sail with me?”

Jimin’s head snapped back up in shock, eyes wide as he stared at the Cardinal. “W-what?” he stuttered, hardly daring to believe he’d heard her right.

She chuckled at his expression, her smile as fond as ever. “Would you like to sail with me?” she repeated, as casually as if she’d asked him if he was enjoying the spring weather. “To come with me to the north, as part of my crew?”

Jimin was at a complete and utter loss. Every thought in his mind had vanished in the blink of an eye, so caught off guard by the sudden question he came to a halt, stopping dead in the middle of the narrow street. “You… you want me to sail with you,” he said slowly, the words feeling foreign on his tongue.

Talya turned to face him, smile set on her lips as he nodded. “Yes.”

Jimin’s throat felt oddly tight. “To join your crew,” he managed to say.

“Yes.”

“On your ship.”

“Yes.”

For what felt like an eternity, Jimin could only stare at her, his breath flowing thinly past his parted
lips. His mind was empty, not a sole coherent thought remaining, yet his chest was flooded with a mixture of emotions; surprise, confusion, shock, anxiety, flattery, and even more confusion still. He gaped at her like a fish out of water, wondering what on earth he should tell her, what on earth he wanted to tell her.

Then, suddenly, the turmoil in his chest came to a halt and left an odd sense of calm behind, and he knew what his answer was. “No,” he said, his firm voice surprising even himself. “I… I’m honored by your offer, Talya, but no.” The words fell easy from his lips, with hardly a trace of doubt. “I already have a place on a ship, even if… even if I don’t know what that place is yet. It’s still mine, and it’s where I want to be.”

The smile never faded from Talya’s lips; on the contrary, as she listened to him refuse her, it grew even wider, and by the time he’d gone quiet, she seemed almost content. “I thought as much,” she said warmly and chuckled at Jimin’s expression before motioning for them to resume walking. “But it was worth a try. They seem like good people, that crew, and they protect you well. Especially the Black Fox,” she added as an afterthought. “Min Yoongi.”

Jemin’s breath caught in his throat and he coughed, struggling to maintain his incredulous stare as his eyes stung. “W-what?” he pressed out, wheezing.

Talya rolled her eyes and shook her head while she patted him on the back to clear his airways. “Oh aye, he looked like he wanted to gut that bastard, Jalen, after what he said to you,” she said in a tone of amusement. “And he did that… that posturing thing to hide you from Jalen’s sight.” She straightened her back and shoulders and pulled her brows into a scowl in an attempt to mimic Yoongi’s expression before emitting an amused snort. “He even snapped at me when I waved at you.”

She clicked her teeth together as if to imitate the way Yoongi had acted towards her, but her voice was nothing but warm when she spoke again. “It is a good thing,” she told him firmly. “The sea is a dangerous place, so I’m glad to know you have people who care about you and want to keep you safe.”

All Jimin could do was nod mutely, his previous clarity now replaced by an even denser confusion. He was fully aware of all the times Taehyung had taken a stand for him and kept him from harm, but he couldn’t remember a time when Yoongi would’ve done the same. Except, of course, when he had rescued Jimin from the brig of Son Jukan’s ship, but Yoongi hadn’t done it by his own will. Taehyung had been the one to ask him, to make him come for Jimin.

Surely, Jimin told himself, yet there was a twinge of doubt in the far back of his mind. Surely...

“Are you alright, Jimin?”

He jerked, having descended so deep into his thoughts he’d failed to notice how far they’d walked, as well as missed anything Talya might’ve said on their way. “Is something wrong?” she asked, the ghost of a frown marring her brow as she studied his face. “You seem troubled.”

“O-oh,” he stuttered, and for a moment, he considered sharing his concerns with her, his uncertainty in regards to Min Yoongi. He chose not to, however; his feelings were his own, he reckoned, his own to sort out and clarify. “I’m fine,” he told her with a small smile. “I only… had something on my mind.”

The Cardinal nodded as if she understood him perfectly. “Well, I’m afraid this is where we say goodbye,” she said and flicked her head to her left, where the entrance to the eastern piers lay. “You can reach the southern pier by following this street until you reach the river, and when you cross,
"turn left at every corner." She grinned widely at him and reached out to place a hand on his head, the gesture gentle and comforting. “I’ll see you again, Jimin,” she crooned. “I know I will. Hopefully before this is all over, but if not, then remember what I told you.”

He emitted a quiet giggle at her affectionate touch even though confusion still brimmed in his chest. “About what?” he asked.

The smile on her lips was incredibly bright. “Everything,” Talya said, and with that, she turned on the heel and left, raising her hand in a final gesture of farewell before she disappeared around the corner.

Jimin stood in her wake for several seconds, staring at the point where she’d disappeared, silently wondering what her cryptic words meant. He attempted to remember anything particularly meaningful she’d told him, but nothing stood out properly. Then again, most of what she’d said had been quite impactful.

With a faint pang of wistfulness, he realized he’d miss her presence, even if he’d only known her for all of two hours, and he absentmindedly wondered if she had such an effect on everyone who met her. “Be safe, Talya,” Jimin murmured quietly before turning on the heel and steering his steps in the direction she’d pointed out.

As he walked, his thoughts strayed back to what the northern Cardinal had said about how Yoongi’s crew protected him well. It was true, he realized when he recalled each time he’d been in a state of distress; not only Taehyung had been there to help him, directly or indirectly, but Jeongguk and Hoseok as well, and Jin and Namjoon. And everyone else, too, everyone who’d risked their lives to save him from the mariners, and every small gesture they’d made since then.

But Yoongi was a completely different matter. While it was true enough his aggressive behavior had eased significantly after the conversation they’d had in his quarters, Jimin wasn’t sure what to think of him. The captain’s presence alone triggered a heavy tension within him, but it was different from before. Rather than fear, the nervousness that would creep up Jimin’s spine consisted of uncertainty and apprehension; he didn’t know where he stood in Yoongi’s eyes, and so he didn’t know how to behave around him.

Thus the thought of him protecting Jimin was as foreign as it could be. Yoongi even told me to keep an eye on you, Taehyung had said, voice urgent and laced with concern, but surely he’d mistaken his captain’s indications. Surely Yoongi hadn’t given Taehyung that command with the intention to keep Jimin safe.

But then again, a small voice in the back of his head whispered, surely Taehyung would know what he truly meant. They are brothers, after all.

He furrowed his brow at the thought, but before he could dwell further on it, his shoulder collided against something, hard, the impact jarring him out of his musings. A startled yelp fell from his lips and his eyes widened when he turned and realized he’d walked right into someone, too deep in his thoughts to pay heed to his surroundings. “I-I’m so sorry,” he said and bowed his head before the man he’d crashed against. “I wasn’t being careful, I’m sorry.”

His apology was met with an amused snort. “Look at this one, so polite,” the pirate snorted, not a shred of warmth in his voice. There was something familiar about him, Jimin thought when he straightened up, but he couldn’t quite place him. “What’s got you so distracted, hmm, boy?”

A heavy discomfort settled in the pit of Jimin’s stomach and he took a step back, feeling a shudder prick its way down his spine. “N-nothing,” he stuttered and shook his head, keen on putting as much
distance between this man and himself as quickly as he could, if only to ease the unwelcome sense of fright in his chest. “I, uh, I’m really sorry, but I have somewhere I need to be, so…”

He left the sentence unfinished and turned around to walk away, but as soon as he did, he found his path blocked by two other pirates, tall and built like men of the sea, both wearing the same lecherous grin. “Where’s your hurry, pretty one?” one of them said, something dark and revolting in his voice.

“I don’t think he likes us very much,” the man Jimin had walked into remarked and placed a hand on Jimin’s shoulder to turn him back around. “But you are a pretty one, aren’t you?”

With a near violent ripple of dread, Jimin realized why the man seemed so familiar. It was one of the pirates who had followed him before he’d ran into Talya the first time; the two blocking his escape undoubtedly made up the rest of them.

Crippling fear curled around Jimin’s throat, and suddenly, he couldn’t breathe. Run, his insides screamed at him, desperate, terrified. Run, now.

“L-let me go,” he said, his voice thin and meek as he attempted to pry himself away from the pirate, a trembling hand reaching up to remove the grip on his shoulder. “Don’t.”

“You belong to the northerners?”

Jimin looked up at him, confusion seeping into the dread that clogged his airways. “Be-belong?” he echoed even as he struggled to push away the hand that held tightly onto his shoulder, a painful vice grip digging bruises into his skin.

“We saw you with the northern Cardinal,” one of the pirates behind him clarified, his voice thick with something that made bile rise to the back of Jimin’s throat. “But you don’t look like one of ‘em. You one of their little playthings?”

The implication behind his words made Jimin’s stomach turn and he flinched almost violently at the memory of Jalen Kayote and his harsh accusation. “N-no!” he exclaimed and fervently shook his head. “No, I’m not!”

As soon as the words left his lips, he realized it was the wrong thing to say, for the pirate holding him by the shoulder grinned sharply, a chuckle rolling through his teeth. “Good,” he rumbled, his roaming eyes feeling like the touch of knives against Jimin’s skin. “That means you’re free for the taking.”

They barely gave him time enough to process their words before he was shoved roughly against a wall, the pirate’s free hand landing on his waist in a vice grip as the man pressed in close, his warm breath gusting heavy against Jimin’s ear.

It was as if every last cell of him seized up, fear crippling him to the point he couldn’t move. His airways drew themselves shut and dread clawed deep into his chest, shredding through every string of sanity he possessed. Let me go, he wanted to scream, but his voice wouldn’t come. Don’t touch me!

In the end, all he could do was screw his eyes shut and do his best to wrench himself away from the pirate’s touch when he felt his hand slide up his chest until it gripped his jaw. “Look at the mouth on this one,” the man all but growled, his sour breath fanning over Jimin’s cheek. “These lips will look so fuckin’ good stretched around-”

Stop it, Jimin cried inwardly, the alarm coursing through his body rendering himself deaf to the man’s words. He tried to summon his strength, he tried to push the man away from him, but all he
accomplish was to have his arms pinned hard against the wall, the harsh grip too strong to fight. *Stop it, stop it, stop it, st-* Taehyung.

The quartermaster’s name rose quickly to his mind, and a choked sob spilled from his lips. *Taehyung*, his thoughts screamed, desperate. *Taehyung, Jeongguk, Hoseok, Yoongi, anyone, please, make them stop, help me-*

“That one doesn’t belong to you.”

It was as if the world had come to a halt. The terror in his chest ceased to suffocate him, the blood rushing in his ears settled, and he couldn’t believe it was real, but when Jimin opened his eyes, there he was.

Yoongi stood at the end of the narrow street, his face set in a stony mask as he took in the scene, his eyes flickering from the pirates holding Jimin’s wrists against the wall to the one pressing him against it, and finally, they settled on Jimin, who drew a quivering breath, his lungs filling with air. The captain looked the same as always, a deep frown carved into his brow, yet in this very moment, his intimidating presence was nothing but comforting.

“That fuck do you want?” the pirate closest to him spat and Jimin dimly realized he had to be one of the only human beings in Shanghai who didn’t know Yoongi’s face. “What do you mean, he doesn’t belong to us? Is this one yours?”

Jimin wasn’t quite sure what made him lash out - perhaps it was the several implications that he had to belong to someone he’d heard ever since setting foot in the pirate port - but he raised his voice before Yoongi could even part his lips. “I’m not,” he bit out, tears burning behind his eyes as he made another effort to pry himself away from his assailants. “I don’t belong to anyone!”

He realized he should’ve bitten his tongue as soon as the words left his lips, a sentiment Yoongi certainly seemed to share. The captain’s expression hardened, his lips curling down into a scowl. “Right you are, songbird,” he said snappishly. “Well then. I suppose I should fuck off, since I clearly have no business with you.”

All he did was flick his head in an indication of where he would go, but the small gesture alone was enough to give pass for the horror that had consumed Jimin prior to Yoongi’s appearance. “Wait,” he cried before he could think twice, and when the captain inclined his head and arched his brow in something akin to challenge, Jimin bit into his lower lip hard enough to draw blood, tears spilling hot from his eyes. “He-help me,” he said, his voice cracking around the words. “Please.”

For a split second, yes, it was as if the world had come to a halt. Yoongi’s expression shifted into something Jimin couldn’t have identified even if he’d seen it, even if he hadn’t been blinded by his tears. All he knew was that the intensity of the captain’s gaze had never been as piercingly strong as it was when he took a step in Jimin’s direction, and Jimin had never been so relieved to feel it dig its way into his core.

“Wait, what the fuck?” the pirate pressed up against Jimin spat, confusion apparent in his voice as he glared at Yoongi. “The fuck’s going on? Does he or does he not belong to you?”

“He does not,” the captain said coldly, his voice low and rough.

“Then you can piss right off, can’t you, bastard?” It was one of the others who spoke now, the one holding onto Jimin’s wrists. “You’re a pirate, right, you know how it works,” he barked and tightened his grip on Jimin, who couldn’t swallow down the whimper that rose to his lips, born both by pain and disgust. “First come, first serve and that shit. If you want a go at him, you wait your
“Do you know what I really fucking hate?” Yoongi interrupted loudly, and Jimin couldn’t blame his three assailants for going silent; the captain sounded positively outraged, every syllable coated with a promise of pain. “People who treat life as if it’s something to be bargained with.” Every step he took echoed in the narrow street, the soles of his shoes hitting hard against the dirty cobblestones. “Something to be sold.” The words left his lips in the form of a snarl. “Something,” he hissed, and Jimin squeezed his eyes shut when he heard the soft ring of steel, the sound of Yoongi drawing one of his daggers, “to be owned.”

It was over as quickly as it’d began. The first blood-curdling scream rose at the same time as the pirate who’d pushed Jimin against the wall was torn away from his person, and the two others were quick to follow, their cries silenced within mere seconds of one another.

Jemin barely had time to draw a quivering breath before silence fell heavy over the alley, free of every threat upon his life, yet full of the scent of death.

Before he could even open his eyes, Jimin felt a hand close around his wrist, gentler than the one that had pinned him against the wall but harsh all the same as it tugged him towards the end of the narrow street. He staggered to keep his balance, and when he finally dared to open his eyes, he had to remind himself to not look back, to not take in the sight he wouldn’t be able to bear.

He tried to be sorry, truly, he did; another three lives lost because of him, yet instead of empathy, what seeped into his veins was relief, and gratitude.

Yoongi said nothing, dragging him along in complete silence, one that lasted as long as Jimin’s sanity; the pirates’ touches lingered on his skin and he needed to get rid of them, fast, lest he’d lose his mind. With tears still falling from his eyes, he brought his free hand up to his shoulder and dug in his nails, his breath hitching as he clawed at his skin, desperate to free himself from it, from the repulsive feeling.

As soon as the captain noticed, he came to a halt and turned on Jimin, his prosthetic arm lashing out to take hold of Jimin’s hand and pry it away from himself. “Stop doing that shit,” Yoongi barked at him, his voice somehow strained. “What do you imagine you'll accomplish by making yourself bleed? And stop crying, for fuck’s sake, you...” For a moment, his voice trailed off, before a sound akin to a scoff fell from his lips, dry irony seeping into his obvious irritation. “Or am I wrong again, songbird?” he asked. "Are you not crying this time either?"

For a moment, Jimin didn't know what the captain was speaking of and he parted his lips in confusion, the question resting on the tip of his tongue just as it dawned on him, and he felt a bizarre urge to smile wryly, an urge he was quick to suppress. “That’s right,” he said instead, his voice thick with emotion as he closed his eyes against his tears and did his best to draw a calming breath. “I'm not crying. The sea’s overflowing again.”

The faintest trace of sardonic amusement accompanied the snort Yoongi emitted upon hearing his words. “I thought so,” he drawled and released his grip on Jimin’s right hand, although the other stayed firm, still strong and unyielding as he resumed his stride and tugged Jimin along with him. “If you touch your shoulder again, I’ll tie your hands behind your back, songbird. You can wash yourself when we return to Agust, but don’t rip your fucking skin off.”

All Jimin could do was nod, nod and sigh in content as the dread in his chest dissipated completely. “Thank you,” he mumbled, the words falling so easily from his lips compared to the last time he’d spoken them, even though his voice was so quiet he doubted the captain could hear him.
They walked the rest of the way in silence, neither saying a word until they reached the pier where Agust waited, already prepared to cast off. When Taehyung all but threw himself over Jimin, Yoongi finally released his arm and told Jin to heat water for a bath. The captain ignored their questioning gazes and said nothing more before stalking off to oversee their departure, nothing of the men he’d killed, nothing of Jimin’s helplessness.

Dimly, Jimin thought back to what Talya had said about the captain, and he found himself understanding her words better than before, if only just a little.

When he sat with Taehyung in the small washing room behind Hoseok’s infirmary and scrubbed at his skin until it was red and raw, Jimin told him everything but for the inner pleas that had crossed his mind at the time. How he, in his desperation, had wished for any one of them to come, even though he’d known their help could only have resulted in his assailants’ deaths. How he’d been so afraid of the pirates’ intentions, he’d wished for them to die, and felt relief when that wish had been granted.

When Namjoon sought him out in the infirmary an hour later, when Agust was already out at open sea, and told him Yoongi wanted to speak with him, Jimin had made a promise to himself, a promise founded by everything he’d seen ever since boarding the pirate ship. A promise fuelled by the desire to never have to rely on anyone else to kill on his behalf again.

A promise to grow strong.

When Jimin climbed the stairs to the quarterdeck and found Yoongi speaking with Lucya, he learned the captain’s thoughts resonated with his own.

“You’re hardly fit for close-range combat,” he told Jimin flatly, “so Lucya will teach you how to properly work a bow and arrow. That way, you can stay up in the crow’s nest or as far away from the heart of a brawl as possible, and no one will have the chance to make you claw at your own skin again, unless you give them that chance. An arrow will be enough to stop them if they try. That is,” he added and quirked a brow in obvious challenge, “if you think you are capable of such things, songbird.”

Jemin pressed his lips into a thin line and nodded, his hands curling into fists at his sides. “I am,” he said firmly and met the captain’s gaze without faltering. “But I won’t take anyone’s life. An arrow doesn’t have to kill to stop someone from reaching me.”

Yoongi snorted at that, as if he found his words utterly amusing. He turned to Lucya and exchanged a few words with her in what must’ve been Russian, and Jimin watched the sniper nod, her pale eyes trained on him. “Listen to what she tells you,” the captain said when he addressed Jimin once more, “and if you don’t understand a word she’s saying, well,” the ghost of a wry smirk graced his lips, “improvise.”

With that, he took his leave, striding past the two of them and steering his steps towards the quarterdeck stairs. Jimin hesitated for a fraction of a second, gnawing at his lower lip before he turned on the heel and raised his voice. “Thank you,” he said, this time loud enough for everyone nearby to hear.

Yoongi turned to look at him, a glance that lasted a moment longer than necessary, and then he nodded curtly before leaving Jimin to begin his training.

Chapter End Notes
THIS
IS
YOONN

//kicks Jalen into an endless pit, along with those three ded pirates
AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!

//clears throat
Okay, calm. I can be calm, I AM calm.
….. nope.

YOONN

One day, I will stop doing mean things to Jimin. One day. I swear.

BUT NOW HE GON’ LEARN ARCHERY FROM LUCYA. DO YOU SENSE THAT BEAUTIFUL STUDENT/TEACHER FRIENDSHIP COMING, BECAUSE I SURE DO.

I only realized afterwards how I made Jalen’s blessing seem like something vampiric… it’s not the Blessing of the Vampire, though :’D it’s quite similar, though… the Blessing of Blood. I’m not gonna give away what it entails, since that would be a SPOILER, but you can imagine the possibilities~

BOI I FEEL LIKE I’M FLYIGN LIKE I WENT FROM THAT TERRIBLE SCENE THAT I COULD BARELY GET THROUGH (i’m so sorry Jimin ;_;) TO THE FLUFFIEST SHIT WE’VE SEEN SO FAR (it wasn't even that fluffy.) BUT STILL.

I’M GOING TO BED NOW.

//falls over and dies
The projectile flew across the rift between the masts in half a second’s time and emitted a resounding *thunk* when it hit the very heart of the target and pinned it to the middle of the mast, the piece of wood clattering from the force of it. The rope that had kept the target dangling came loose, the impact of the hit jarring it out of place.

A shuddering exhale gusted past Jimin’s lips as he watched his handiwork, blood rushing in his ears. Perhaps it was the relief of finally firing the arrow or perhaps something else entirely, but his senses were alight and restless, an unfamiliar, unrecognizable urge stirring hard in his chest.

He felt alive, and not until Lucya lightly tapped him on the shoulder did he see why.

The setting sun stung the corner of Jimin’s eyes as he stared at his target, the muscles of his arms straining under the continuous effort it took to hold the arrow nocked against the bow, the string drawn taut. Three minutes had passed since he’d drawn the arrow, three excruciatingly long minutes during which he hadn’t moved a single inch, hardly daring to blink as he waited for the precise moment to finally release.

Lucya stood next to him atop the crow’s nest, her eyes flickering over every inch of his body, her gaze intense and critical. It was as if she was determined to catch him in a mistake, such as arching his back too far or letting his elbow drop too low, and Jimin would’ve taken pride in her silence if he wasn’t so busy glaring at the top of the foremast, where his target dangled back and forth, moving to the rhythm of Agust’s peaceful rocking atop the sea.

The waves kept the ship leaning slightly to the left, and the round, makeshift target Xiao had prepared for them refused to line up with the mast.

As Jimin blinked the sweat away from his eyes, he wondered why on earth Lucya felt it was necessary to torment him this way. Of course, he knew *why* - to hone his patience and teach him to wait for the most opportune moment, as well as taking that opportunity the very instant it presented
itself - but it didn’t stop him from wishing the sniper could be satisfied with a perfect hit to the
target’s center.

She’d chastised him some ten minutes ago, when he’d done just that, burying an arrow in the target’s
middle without waiting for it to line up with the foremast, expressing her discontent with the ghost of
a frown and a curt tone of voice. It had been an honest mistake; every instruction was given to Jimin
in russian, and while body language and gestures functioned well enough to convey what it was
Lucya wanted him to do, the finer details were lost in a string of words that made very little sense in
Jimin’s ears.

Thus there he stood, hardly daring to blink, determined to not make the same mistake twice. He’d
managed well enough in his training thus far, and he was damned if he was going to fail now.

When Lucya had handed him her bow and a quiver full of arrows a few moments after Yoongi had
told him he was to train under her tutelage, Jimin had confidently displayed his preexisting
knowledge of how to work the weapon. The sniper had arched her brow in contented surprise and
rounded him a few times to make minor adjustments to his posture as he drew an arrow, and then
proceeded onto delving directly into the depths of their training.

Jimin had quickly learned that using a bow and arrow for hunting was very, very different from using
a bow and arrow for combat.

Two days had passed since, two days that had left Jimin more physically exhausted than he could
remember being in years. Four hours of the first day had been spent firing arrow after arrow into the
top of the mizzen mast in a rapidfire succession, with Lucya clapping her hands to set his rhythm,
granting him a mere three seconds of rest between each release of the bowstring.

When she had shown him what to do, he had stared at her in utter disbelief, and while he couldn’t
understand her explanation at first, somewhere, in the back of his mind, after he’d drawn and
released some twenty arrows in a span of one minute, he imagined it must’ve meant something akin
to, “In combat, there is no time to let your muscles go soft between every arrow.”

It had taken Jimin almost the entirety of those four hours before he got his aim under control, his
movements becoming more and more precise each time he emptied his quiver. Not only was he out
of practice, but during the years he’d spent learning and using the bow and arrow, never once had he
used it in the way Lucya taught him. The first session alone left him sweaty and drained, the muscles
of his arms and chest aching when the sniper finally signaled he could stop.

His relief had only lasted so long; after a short break, Lucya had insisted on showing him how to use
a bow to fend off assailants who came too close to be fended off with an arrow. After teaching him a
variety of ways he could use the bow in close combat, she had motioned for him to grab onto the
bow in her hands much like an opponent would so she could demonstrate how to get them to let go.

After a swift series of moves, which included using the bowstring as a means to gain momentum,
Jimin’s behind was firmly planted on the deck and his nose was bleeding profusely from the impact
of Lucya ramming the grip of the bow into his face with barely restrained force.

The sniper had apologized all the way to Hoseok’s infirmary and for the entirety of the time it took
the doctor to patch him up. As soon as Hoseok’s initial concern had passed, he’d seemed terribly
amused, failing his valiant attempt at suppressing his grin as he listened to Lucya’s frantic words, and
truly, even Jimin couldn’t bring himself to be even a little bit upset; to see the usually stoic woman so
distressed was as close to endearing as he thought she could come.

He’d tried his best to reassure her that he wasn’t angry; it took several shakes of his head and several
more smiles - painful ones, courtesy of his nose - before she finally settled, her movements hesitant as she reached out to put a hand on top of his head. He’d sat perfectly still, waiting, hardly daring to breathe until the small smile graced her lips once again.

When he’d reminded himself of the terrible number of people she’d killed in her life, he found himself oddly calm, catching barely a trace of the fear he’d felt when he’d first met her.

Later that day, when Jimin, on pure impulse, smacked Xiao up the head as reprimand for teasing her violent streak, a light strike that left Jimin shocked with himself, Lucya emitted a chiming laughter, an unusually loud one that the entirety of the galleys joined their voices to, fuelled on by Jimin’s startled remorse.

“See, Xiao, even Chim thinks you need to learn to think before you speak,” Taehyung declared brightly, grinning as he watched Jimin apologize to the carpenter, even as the big man guffawed so violently he spilled beer from his cup.

“Ain’t that the truth of it!” Xiao boomed as soon as he sobered up enough to speak, raising his right hand to show the small circle of whitened skin at the center of his palm, where Jimin knew Lucya had once buried a bolt of her crossbow when the carpenter had touched her rear. “Ya got off easy with only a bleedin’ nose, pretty bird.”

The laughter in the galleys had been contagious, and Jimin had found himself clutching his throbbing nose as he smiled, the cheeriness worth the dull ache of his face.

When he’d resumed his training with Lucya the following morning, Jimin learned that however sweet she could truly be, once she donned the face of a tutor, she was just as ruthless as she’d been prior to the incident with his nose. While she certainly took greater care in not denting any other part of his face, she still drove him to train until his arms were so weak he could barely climb up to the crow’s nest when he was needed for his duty as the lookout.

Jimin had almost balked when Lucya had followed him up, dreading another series of bone-breaking activities, but she had merely shown him how to properly stretch his muscles, indicating how important it was to allow oneself some relief in between such rigorous training.

Said relief had lasted for only an hour before she’d brought him the bow again and asked him to practice.

Thus there he stood now, a day and a half later, having barely set down the bow ever since he’d first picked it up. The end of the fourth minute of holding the arrow nocked was approaching, and his muscles were tingling in protest, begging for a release he couldn’t grant them until his target aligned.

Lucya raised her voice when he began to fidget, speaking softly as if loathe to disturb his concentration. He knew she was telling him to be still, to hold his composure, and he tipped his head in a minuscule nod, refusing to blink, let alone look away from his target lest he miss his chance.

When it finally arrived, it was in the middle of Lucya’s sentence, and the thrill of its sudden appearance sparked something deep within Jimin’s chest. It was merely a makeshift target, the first of many he’d have to impale, but during the split second before he released the arrow, his heart seized and his breathing caught in his throat.

Every cell of him seemed to push itself to the surface of his skin, tingling, and it was as if his instincts took over, drawing the arrow one millimeter further back before releasing it in an almost aggressive manner.
The projectile flew across the rift between the masts in half a second’s time and emitted a resounding *thunk* when it hit the very heart of the target and pinned it to the middle of the mast, the piece of wood clattering from the force of it. The rope that had kept the target dangling came loose, the impact of the hit jarring it out of place.

A shuddering exhale gusted past Jimin’s lips as he watched his handiwork, blood rushing in his ears. Perhaps it was the relief of finally firing the arrow or perhaps something else entirely, but his senses were alight and restless, an unfamiliar, unrecognizable urge stirring hard in his chest.

He felt alive, and not until Lucya lightly tapped him on the shoulder did he see why.

When he tore his eyes off the target, the sight that greeted him caused him to recoil so violently he almost stumbled off the crow’s nest. “Wh-what is—?” he began, his voice thin as he took in the state of his arms. “What on earth...?”

The outer side of his limbs were lined with what looked like half-grown feathers, a sporadic pattern of prickly-looking thorns stretching from his wrists to his shoulders. The higher up they reached along his skin, the more developed they seemed; the feathers that surrounded the base of his arms were softer, their peach pink color the same hue as his hair.

He barely noticed when Lucya gently took the bow from his hand, careful to not jar him out of his moment of startled awe. He held his breath as he stared at his arms, feeling utterly lightheaded as he watched some of the small feathers grow, soft down sprouting from the rachides. It was as if time had frozen and sped up all at once; all around Jimin, everything stood still, but the feathers grew at an unnatural speed.

It was an odd sensation, yet as far from unwelcome as it could be.

All of a sudden, much to his disappointment, they began to draw themselves back into his skin, retracting from sight. “Oh,” Jimin breathed, his brow knitting into a frown as he watched the feathers disappear, one by one. He wanted to stop them, he wanted to keep them on his skin, but he didn’t know how. After all, he didn’t even know what had urged them to grow in the first place.

Only when the last feather had drawn itself back did Lucya raise her voice, startling Jimin, who’d forgotten all about her in his momentary state of shock. “Arrow,” she said, her voice slightly stilted, and Jimin’s eyes widened when he realized she’d spoken the word in korean, her accent thick. “One arrow must be... must be perfect.” The faintest of smiles graced her lips as she placed her hand against Jimin’s arm and squeezed gently. “For a perfect arrow, you must wait.”

Jimin only looked at her for a moment before slowly nodding his head, uncertain as to the meaning of her words. Likely she spoke of the task he’d finally completed, pinning the target to the mast, but a part of him felt as if she was attempting to comfort him, to ease his disappointment. *Patience*, Jimin drew from her words, and he nodded once more, smiling.

Content with his response, Lucya shuffled over to the shrouds, switching back to russian as she threw a few words over her shoulder and gestured down towards the deck, where the crew was beginning to gravitate over to the galleys. One glance at the horizon told Jimin it was time for supper, so he scurried over to the main mast and took the faster route down, giddy to tell Taehyung about what had just happened.

The quartermaster nearly knocked over his cup when Jimin told him, his excited grin taking on its rectangular shape as he grabbed hold of Jimin’s arm and turned it in an attempt to find the small feathers. “‘They’re not there *now,*’ he told Taehyung, who offered him a sheepish smile in response. “But I could really see them growing, Taehyung, it was so *odd.*”
His awed voice earned him a round of laughter from around the table. “How was it the first time you grew your fur, Xiao?” Hoseok asked of the carpenter seated one table over, lips curled into a sly smirk. “Did you manage to cut yourself on your claws?”

Xiao pursed his lips in an attempt at offense, but it was rather short-lived as he turned to grin widely at Jimin instead, almost as eager as he was. “I ain’t got a clue how it happened, pretty bird,” the carpenter told him, “but I woke up one mornin’, all covered in fur. I didn’t even realize at first, seein’ as I’m hairier than most, but—”

“Oh, do stop talking.” Jin interrupted with a grimace, frowning as he shifted in his seat next to Namjoon. “No one wants to imagine your hairy chest while eating.”

His words prompted another wave of laughter to ring through the galleys, one Xiao himself joined, his booming guffaw drowning the others’. “It was early winter when it happened, however,” the carpenter mused once he’d sobered up enough to speak. “Could be the bear in me thought it was time to hibernate.”

“What an excellent excuse for laziness,” Namjoon said with a chuckle. “I dare say we’re lucky our captain chose the Blessed Rune he did, or we might have to listen to him speak of hibernation every time he sleeps through the day.”

Almost as if on instinct, Jimin threw a glance in the direction where Yoongi always sat when dining in the galleys, only to find the seat empty. The sight prompted him to frown despite himself; Jimin hadn’t seen much at all of the captain ever since their departure from Shanghai, which was understandable, what with all the hours he’d spent concentrating on his training, but now that he took a moment to think about it, he hadn’t seen Yoongi at supper the previous night either.

“Worried?”

He turned his head back to his table so quickly it hurt his neck and parted his lips to protest, but the sight of Hoseok’s warm smile made him hesitate. “Don’t be,” the doctor told him kindly. “He has a habit of isolating himself when he has too much to think about, but if you listen, you can hear him even now.”

When Jimin frowned in response to his words, hearing nothing but the chatter of the crew, Hoseok heaved a frustrated sigh and turned around in his seat. “Shut up for a second, you animals!” he shouted, grinning when every last one of them fell silent, startled by his sudden outburst. Content, he turned back to Jimin, and nothing more needed to be said.

Jimin heard it.

The muffled sound of a piano’s song filled the silence, a solemn melody echoing from somewhere near the ship’s stern. It was a beautiful tune, soft yet brimming with emotion, and before his eyes, Jimin saw the magnificent organ piano he’d been so oddly drawn to the one time he’d visited the captain’s quarters.

At the time, he’d wanted to touch it, he’d wanted to hear its song. Now that he did, all he could do was listen, listen so intently he failed to notice the warmth with which Taehyung looked at him. Every note of the melody seemed to linger on his skin, and he felt an odd, inexplicable urge to join his voice to the piano’s song.

“Well,” Jin huffed and rose to his feet, jarring Jimin out of his musings. “I’d better take a portion up to him and force it down his throat, lest he starve himself to death.” He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Namjoon’s temple before making his way to the kitchen at the same time as the rest of the
crew resumed their earlier conversations.

Jimin watched him leave, his thoughts muddled by dazed confusion. It must’ve shown on his face, for Taehyung leaned closer, the ghost of a frown marring his brow as he took a look at him. “Are you alright, Chim?” he asked quietly, the crease settling deeper between his eyebrows when Jimin started in surprise and turned to look at him.

“Y-yes,” Jimin said, hardly convincing with the slight stutter of his voice. “I… I think so.” He couldn’t quite put it to words; the sensation in his chest had vanished as quickly as it’d appeared, gone as soon as the piano’s song was drowned out by the chatter in the galleys. “I only… the piano, it…”

For some reason, his words made Taehyung smile, the smallest curl of his lips, and he leaned closer still, until he could whisper in Jimin’s ear, his voice almost unnaturally calm as he spoke hushed words that sent a shudder rippling down Jimin’s spine. “Maybe it’s the songbird in you.”

The quartermaster retreated before Jimin could do more than widen his eyes in stunned surprise, his nerves drawing themselves taut. How? It shouldn’t have been possible, truly, for Taehyung to put his inner conflict into words before even Jimin himself could tell what that conflict was, yet he’d done so either way, as if he somehow knew Jimin’s heart better than Jimin did.

How, he thought again as he stared at Taehyung, who was once again grinning widely as he retorted to something Jeongguk had said, to which the rest of the table responded with laughter. How can you know?

Jimin left the question unspoken, although he wasn’t quite certain why. Instead, he simply sat there, drifting in and out of the conversation, his thoughts straying to the piano’s song, and if it truly was the Canary within him that had resonated so strongly with the melody.

He didn’t find relief from his musings until hours later, far into the wee hours of the night, when it was his turn to climb to the crow’s nest and keep watch over the horizon around the Agust. Jimin had crawled into bed soon after supper, but he hadn’t succeeded in falling asleep, tossing and turning in his bunk, his thoughts haunted by the solemn melody. The urge to sing was near overwhelming, so much so he felt it necessary to keep his jaw clenched as he climbed up onto deck, as if worried he might not be able to hold his voice in any longer.

He halted as soon as he’d climbed through the companionway, surprised by a choir of laughter rising from the forecastle. “Who..?” he mumbled to himself and made his way closer, squinting against the bright light of the lanterns that had been hung from the base of the foremast to illuminate the deck in the black of night.

Jimin’s surprise grew when he found not one or two pirates, but what looked like half the crew seated in a circle on the deck, chattering amongst one another and occasionally emitting sounds of triumph or defeat, both accompanied by laughter from everyone else. They were all slightly hunched over and huddled close, and even in the midnight chill, they seemed to be radiating a comfortable warmth.

“They’re all here!” He turned to the source of his name and found Taehyung waving at him from his seat in the circle, squeezed in between Jeongguk and Namjoon. “Over here,” he beckoned, his voice brimming with an alarming amount of glee. “I thought you were sleeping.”

“I was,” Jimin said as he made his way over, taking his time in rounding the circle so he could peer into the midst of the circle, where a haphazard pile of odd playing cards was lying on the deck, next to a pile of gilded coins. A prize pool, no doubt. “What are you doing?”
“Playing Hangman’s Mercy,” Taehyung sing-songed and showed him the five cards in his hand, cards that made very little sense to Jimin; unlike the ones he’d seen in play in the inn of Jeju Village, these were decorated with skulls and knives, and gold. Only the hearts were familiar. “You should join us.”

Jimin shook his head at that and threw a glance up at the empty crow’s nest. “I can’t,” he said, smiling when Taehyung pursed his lips into a pout. “I have watch duty right now, so I have to- whoa!”

He’d moved to take a step towards the main mast, but the quartermaster reached up and looped an arm around his neck to pull him down, grinning when Jimin staggered and dropped to his knees. “Just a few games,” he insisted, chortling at Jimin’s startled whine. “Rodel can take over for you while you play, can’t you, Rodel?”

Jimin struggled to turn his head in Taehyung’s grip, a protest rising to the tip of his tongue as he watched the mute pirate push away from where he’d been leaning against the foremast, a small smile on his lips as he nodded at Jimin before striding right past him, steering his steps towards the main mast. “Wa-wait, I-”

The quartermaster interrupted him once more, this time by pushing a finger into his cheek and directing his attention back to the circle. “Even Lucya’s playing,” he chirped and nodded at where the sniper was seated next to Xiao, a speckled fur coat draped across her shoulders. “Come on, Chim, you deserve to have some fun after all your hard training.”

As if to show her agreement, Lucya smiled at Jimin before she flicked two cards into the circle’s midst, one with a picture of a detailed skull, the other with a rain of coins, and next to her, Xiao emitted a rumbling groan of dismay. “Yer wrinin’ me dry, lady,” he grumbled and reached inside his coat before tossing six gilded coins onto the small pile on the deck while the rest of the circle snickered at his misfortune.

“If?” Taehyung urged, clearly determined to have Jimin play. “She says it’s fine if you take a break.”

He parted his lips and closed them again, unsure of why he was resisting so wholeheartedly. “But I don’t have any money,” Jimin mumbled, reluctant to ruin their obvious fun.

Jin raised his voice before Taehyung had the chance to, a kind smile gracing the cook’s lips. “Then you’ll play for the fun of it,” he said and shifted where he sat to make room for Jimin in between him and Hoseok. “You have nowhere else to be right now, so join us.”

His smile was somehow contagious, and Jimin found himself nodding, giggling softly at the delighted sound Taehyung emitted before he drew his arm away to let Jimin make his way to the other side of the circle and take his seat. “I’ve never played before,” he said once he’d made himself comfortable, glancing left and right along the circle.

“I’d be surprised if you had,” Namjoon told him with a smile. “Jeongguk invented the game aboard this ship, and the goal is to-”

“To kill everyone else,” Taehyung interrupted loudly, right before he slammed two cards down onto the deck, one portraying a dagger, the other a skull with a red number nine drawn into the upper left corner. Slightly alarmed, Jimin watched as the quartermaster raised his hand and pointed directly at Jin, whose smile curdled like sour milk. “I sentence you to death by hanging, Jin!”

While Hoseok chortled at Jimin’s obvious shock, the cook pursed his lips in irritation and glared at
the cards in his own hand before he emitted a dry huff and held out his cards for Taehyung to take. “I cannot believe this is how you treat me after I gave you an extra serving of stew at supper, Tae,” Jin muttered, although he couldn’t quite hide his smile when the quartermaster chuckled in excitement.

“You can watch us finish this round and learn,” Jeongguk said cheerfully as he drew two cards from the neat pile in the middle and added them to his hand, the toothy grin on his lips serving as an ominous premonition for the play he was about to make. “You’ll pick it up in no time.”

Two hours further into the night, Jimin sullenly decided that the navigator was a liar.

“That’s what happens when you let your Eight of Skulls be taken away from you, Jimin,” Hoseok chimed as he extended his hand to relieve Jimin of his cards, having declared his death only moments earlier. “You have to hang onto the big values if you want to survive us doing our best to have you hanged.”

“I didn’t let Lucya take anything,” he huffed in protest, his voice coming out a whine, lips pursed into a permanent pout as they all laughed at his misfortune. “She just happened to pick the right card.”

“No, you just happen to be easier to read than any book in Joon’s library,” Jin said with a cheery laughter and slid a hand into Jimin’s hair to ruffle it when he settled into a sulk. “Oh, lighten up, Jimin, we’re only having fun.”

Jimin snorted at that, having been the first one to be hanged in almost every round they’d played since he’d sat down in the circle. His annoyance was short-lived, however; as the turn shifted to Taehyung, he couldn’t suppress his smile as he watched the quartermaster raise two near identical cards high over his head and loudly declare, “Two hearts as one,” before he turned to Jeongguk, his smile blindingly bright. “Now you have to kiss me again.”

“For the hundredth time, those are not the rules, Tae,” Hoseok said, but much like the rest of them, he only grinned as he watched the navigator happily comply to Taehyung’s antics, emitting a joyful chuckle as he brought his hands to the quartermaster’s face and pulled him into a kiss.

While the rest of the circle either laughed or made sounds of feigned disgust, Jimin placed two fingers to his lips and whistled, smiling so widely his cheeks hurt when the sharp sound made the two break apart to join the laughter.

The game resumed soon enough, after Jeongguk had pressed his lips against Taehyung’s temple one final time, and just like every other round, Jimin tried his best to follow the game and learn.

Hangman’s Mercy was a game of combinations, he’d realized quickly enough, but the combinations themselves continued to leave him utterly stumped. He knew what a Card of Daggers and a Card of Skulls did when played together - it was a direct attempt at someone’s life - and he knew that the higher the cards’ values, the more people one could target, with a higher chance of killing them all. However, one could also resist said attempts, by playing a Card of Skulls with a higher value than the one that was threatening one’s life.

It was a game of clever decisions, foresight, and timing, three aspects Jimin seemed to be utterly void of.

He knew the Cards of Gold were used to bribe the player to one’s left, but into what, he was clueless. Namjoon had told him the purpose of the Cards of Hearts was to charm one’s opponents into missing their turn, or, when combined with a Card of Gold, to steal a card from the player seated to one’s left.
Then there were the values, ranging between one and ten - apart from the Cards of Daggers; they only reached up to four - and they were an absolute nightmare to keep track of. The Cards of Daggers were easy enough. They were used to target anyone from the participating players, as many players as the card’s value allowed. However, the values of the Cards of Hearts and the Cards of Gold were as lost on Jimin as the string of russian curses Lucya emitted after Namjoon had had her hanged and claimed the prize pool two rounds prior.

All in all, the game seemed to revolve around knowing when to play which cards, when to accept one’s fate and when to resist whatever it was an opposing player attempted to subject one to. All in all, Jimin was utterly and thoroughly lost.

“The next round will be my last,” he declared when the game ended with Jeongguk’s victory, a bright grin playing on his lips as he dragged the prize pool towards himself, the gilded coins clinking softly against each other. “I need to relieve Rodel from the crow’s nest.”

“And recover from your endless series of losses,” Hoseok quipped, only to emit a startled yelp when Jin flicked a coin at him, the piece of metal hitting his temple. “I was only teasing!”

“And I was only tossing coins,” the cook deadpanned before smiling at Jimin.

Xiao dealt the cards, five cards for every player. There were eleven of them seated in the circle with a few more standing by to watch, and Jimin waited patiently until everyone had received their cards before he picked up his own and looked at them.

He barely managed to keep his eyes from widening at the sight of the card furthest to the right in his hand, the Ten of Skulls; the most powerful card if you intended to have someone hanged. It could only be resisted by the exact same card, and Jimin knew there were two more - Taehyung had mentioned they were using three decks to play with such a sizable group - but even so, it was as close to a certain death as Jimin had come since he’d joined the game.

He hoped the others couldn’t tell how swiftly his heart was beating when he noticed he had a Three of Daggers sitting in his hand as well. If he combined it with the Ten of Skulls, he could send three players to the gallows with hardly a chance of survival.

The rest of his cards brought a frown to his brow before he could stop himself. There was hardly anything unusual about the Four of Gold and Six of Hearts he held, but the last card showed no neatly painted image like the others did, nor a value anywhere on its surface. Nothing but a deep red cross had been drawn onto the card, which Jimin hadn’t seen in play before.

“I swear, pretty bird, ya gotta be doin’ that on purpose.”

He quickly looked up and found the rest of the circle staring back at him, with Xiao grinning widest of them all. “Yer not supposed to make it so obvious if yer cards are shit,” he mused and shook his head, seemingly finding Jimin an utterly lost cause. “Let’s go easy on ’em this turn, lads and lady, what do ya say?”

Taehyung nodded in poorly hidden enthusiasm while the others voiced their agreement, and so Jimin lost his chance to ask about the mysterious card before the game began.

The first turn passed without trouble. Namjoon played One of Daggers and Three of Hearts in an attempt to charm Hoseok into missing his turn, which the doctor chose to accept without resisting. Lucya played Five of Hearts and Four of Skulls, neither of which Xiao could resist, so the sniper blindly picked one card from his hand and discarded it.
When it was Jimin’s turn, he played his Gold and Hearts, a combination which Jin chose to not resist. Instead, he held up his deck and quirked a near challenging brow at Jimin as he waited for him to take one of his cards, and Jimin tried his best to find any trace of uncertainty or distress in the cook’s expression as he hovered his hand over each card in turn. When he paused over the one furthest to the side, Jin’s jaw gave a slight twitch and Jimin felt a rush of triumph as he took that card, only to have that triumph deflate when he found himself staring at a Two of Gold.

“It’s all in the bluff, Jimin,” the cook told him with a wide smile and chuckled when Jimin rolled his eyes and huffed as he added the lousy card to his hand.

The second round passed with only one attempt at a hanging, when Hoseok played a Two of Daggers and Six of Skulls and chose Lucya and Jeongguk as his victims, but both of them succeeded in resisting him, though the latter looked far from pleased as he had to give up his Eight of Skulls to survive.

The prize pool had time to grow over the first three turns, with everyone who had the opportunity targeting Jeongguk with two Cards of Gold to make him push a generous amount of the night’s winnings into the circle’s midst. “You will all regret this when I win another round,” the navigator promised sullenly.

It wasn’t until the fourth turn when Jimin’s plans began to fall apart. Hoseok played the same combination Jimin had used on Jin in the first round, Hearts and Gold of too high values for him to resist. Not the Ten of Skulls, Jimin chanted inwardly as he held up his cards for the doctor to choose, hoping and praying his face didn’t portray the nervous stutter of his heart when Hoseok hovered over that very card. Not this one, not this one, any card but this one.

It was the wrong thing to wish for. While the doctor didn’t take the Ten of Skulls, he drew the Three of Daggers, thus relieving Jimin of his only means to inflict a certain hanging on more than just Jin.

“Oops,” Hoseok uttered, smiling as he watched Jimin’s face fall, not a shred of remorse in his voice. “I hope I didn’t put a dent in your plan of action, Jimin.”

He tried his best to keep a neutral face, but when a chuckle went through the circle, he knew he’d failed, his pout slipping through his best attempts. “It’s fine,” he said in a tone that was too nonchalant as he reached for the orderly pile in the middle to draw two new cards into his hand.

It was not fine.

His new cards were the worst ones he’d drawn so far, One of Skulls and Two of Hearts, and again, it must’ve shown on his face, for he saw Jeongguk’s grin widen and Namjoon’s smile take on a bit too much sympathy. I’m in trouble, he realized and gnawed at his lower lip, wondering how on earth he should handle his cards from now on.

If he’d learned anything during the many times he’d had to watch the latter half of Hangman’s Mercy after being hanged early, it was that after four rounds of fairly peaceful play, there weren’t many cards left in the game but the Cards of Skulls, which meant the so-called reaping would begin either this turn or the next.

I have to do something, Jimin thought and stared at his cards with fierce concentration, as if they would reveal the secret to surviving the game if he only looked hard enough. They know I can’t resist if they try to have me hanged.

He racked his brain as best he could, but no matter how he tried to combine the cards in his mind, he saw no other end but his inevitable hanging. Something, he chanted inwardly, not ready to give in
now, when he’d come further in the game than ever before, *something, something, anything at all...!*

Suddenly, a soft rustle of clothes sounded from behind Jimin, but before he could pry himself away from his state of intense focus, let alone turn around, a hand reached over his shoulder and went for his cards. He parted his lips to protest, but the words died on the tip of his tongue and he froze where he sat as he watched the familiarly pale limb take the odd, crossed card from his hand and flick it into the circle’s midst.

“Ten of Daggers,” a low voice drawled, the words spoken just above Jimin’s head, and with his breath caught in his throat and his heart stuttering nervously in his chest, Jimin watched his most prized card follow what he now, belatedly, realized must’ve been a wild card, “and Ten of Skulls.”

The silence that followed was deafening.

Ten promises of certain death, one for each and every player apart from Jimin himself. Certain, uncontested victory.

Before the reality of the combination could manifest in Jimin’s mind, he turned around in his seat and stared up at Yoongi, his shock so immense he didn’t even remember to close his parted lips. He gaped at the captain, who returned his look in silence, the faintest trace of amusement settling in the way he arched his brow.

Neither of them said a word, and the silence lasted for what felt like an eternity before the rest of the crew, whose presence Jimin had completely forgotten, broke out into a loud series of protests.

“That was *so* not fair, Yoongi!” Hoseok all but shrieked and jabbed an accusatory finger at the cards resting on top of the pile. “You can’t play a Ten of Daggers like that!”

“You weren’t even *playing, Yoongi*,” Jeongguk complained in the voice of a petulant child, looking thoroughly chastised where he sat, crossing his arms firmly over his chest while next to him, Taehyung was laughing so hard he could barely sit upright. “You weren’t part of the game.”

“Did Jimin have those cards all this time?” Jin asked of no one in particular, staring at them as if they’d offended his very soul.

“Don’t tell me you actually waited until the prize pool had grown to this size before you decided to step in,” Namjoon scoffed and buried his face in his hands. “This is why we don’t invite you to play anymore, Yoongi.”

The flood of complaints broke the captain out of his state of silence, and certainly not in the way Jimin would’ve ever expected; as his crew voiced their endless protests, Yoongi descended into a fit of laughter, the cheerful, breathy sound ringing loudly in Jimin’s ears.

*Oh,* he thought numbly.

“This is not funny, Yoongi!” someone - Jimin couldn’t quite tell who - said loudly, his words only fuelling the captain’s glee.

“I really fucking disagree,” Yoongi chortled when he sobered up enough to speak, the smile on his lips so wide it made his eyes crinkle. “You should’ve seen your faces, you all looked like you’d been shot in the arse.”

“Well, we might as well have been,” Jin retorted, although he was having a hard time fighting off his smile. “Seeing as our own captain just stabbed us all in the back.”
Before Yoongi could do more than emit a gleeful snort, Taehyung finally managed to raise his voice, panting hard as he braced himself against Jeongguk’s side. “O-oh my god, that was priceless,” he wheezed, his face flushed from laughter, his grin so wide it looked almost painful. “And I don’t think Chim even realizes he just won the game.”

That finally tore Jimin’s attention away from the captain, his lips snapping shut as he turned around, eyes wide in bewilderment. “I-I what?” he stuttered, blinking repeatedly as he looked around the circle. “I won?”

Next to Taehyung, Jeongguk heaved a deep sigh and shook his head, but when he looked up at Jimin, he was grinning. “Yes, you idiot,” he said slowly, deliberately, “you won.”

“You successfully hanged us all,” Hoseok added in a tone of mock hurt before he reached out to pat Jimin’s shoulder. “Didn’t think you had it in you.”

A nervous chuckle found its way past Jimin’s lips when the rest of the circle voiced their cheers, clapping their hands and laughing as heat spread to his cheeks and he flushed under the attention. “I, uh,” he began, his thoughts still straggling after the shock of Yoongi’s sudden appearance. He glanced at the prize pool, a generous pile of gilded coins, but rather than claim it for himself, he turned around again, not quite daring to meet the captain’s gaze. “I-

“No.”

The instantaneous interruption drew his eyes up before he could think twice, looking at Yoongi in confusion. “No?” he echoed carefully, his voice portraying his uncertainty.

“No,” the captain agreed, the ghost of his smile still playing on his lip as he looked down at Jimin. “You’ve got some ridiculous notion in your head that because I played the winning combination, I should be the one to claim the prize.” He flicked his head as if to shake off the mere idea much like one would an annoying fly. “I don’t want it, songbird,” he said and grinned as he lifted his gaze to the rest of his crew. “Seeing you all so upset is more than enough for me.”

His words triggered another wave of complaints, loud enough to rouse the crewmen that were sleeping below deck, and while Yoongi emitted another bark of laughter, Jimin turned back to look at the glimmering coins that were now his own. He couldn’t help but giggle to himself when Taehyung flashed him a blindingly bright smile, a sound that escalated into laughter as he watched Hoseok, Jeongguk, Jin and Xiao throw playing cards at Yoongi until the captain was forced to escape for fear of his safety.

Vaguely, Jimin realized he couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed as much as he did now. The giddiness was still present in the depths of his chest hours later, when he was lying on his back atop the crow’s nest, smiling to himself as he stared up into the steadily lightening sky, rolling a single gold coin in his hand. He and Taehyung had hidden the rest under the mattress of his bunk, hardly a secure location, but Jimin couldn’t even begin to imagine anyone in the crew would attempt to steal from him.

After the pirates had retreated to their bunks for the night, Jimin had quickly climbed up to the crow’s nest to take over for Rodel, apologizing sheepishly over and over again for taking so long. However, he mute pirate had merely waved away his apology and grinned, nodding his head down to where they’d been playing and raising a thumb at him before climbing down the shrouds and leaving Jimin alone with his thoughts.

And so there he was, unable to stop smiling as he replayed the night’s events in his mind over and
over again, every repeat beginning with the feathers along his arms and proceeding onwards from there. He paused at the memory of the piano and closed his eyes to recall the exact tune, a faint hum rising to his lips, but he was content in never giving it a voice, at least not now, in the middle of the night, when there was no one there to hear it. He giggled to himself every time he thought back to the immense surprise written all over his friends’ faces when Yoongi had played the winning hand.

Even the thought of the captain couldn’t make his smile falter, although a faint tension did settle in the depths of his chest each time he recalled the way Yoongi had laughed, as well as his words.

“If I didn’t know any better, Park Jimin,” he mused to himself as he pushed up into a sitting position and looked around, admiring the peaceful horizon, “I’d say you’re beginning to find your place here.”

His thoughts briefly drifted to Talya, and he wondered where she was, how she was, what she would’ve said if she’d seen how content he was with being part of this crew.

Jimin squinted against the light radiating from the east, a clear sign that the sun was about to rise and bathe the sea in its gilded glow. He blinked rapidly until his eyes grew used to the light of the first rays, but when they finally did, when he could properly observe their surroundings, the giddiness that had persisted for hours and hours suddenly vanished in a fraction of a second.

Every muscle in his back drew itself taut as a bowstring as his eyes fell on the foreign, dark sails on the horizon, the first ship he’d seen ever since they’d departed from Shanghai. Even from this distance, Jimin could tell the vessel was sailing their way, and a sound akin to a meek, “Oh,” spilled from his lips as he reached for his spyglass, his movements so jerky he almost knocked the glass off the edge of the crow’s nest. “Sh-ship sighted on port side,” he attempted before even raising the spyglass to look, but in his tension, his voice came out thin and quiet, far from enough to alert anyone aboard Agust.

When he pressed the spyglass to his eye and magnified the approaching vessel, it was just in time to see row upon row of gunports be pulled open, the cannons they concealed pushed out as far as they went. It was a sign of preparation, even Jimin knew as much, preparation for one thing and one thing only.

A thrill of dread went through him at the sight and settled deep in his chest, but when he raised his voice again, it carried loud and clear across the waters.

“Hostile ship sighted on port side!”

Chapter End Notes

And because we can’t have nice things, here’s a cliffhanger and a definite promise of pain and violence.

…………

BUT DID YOU //SEE// THAT YOONMIN THOUGH??!!!?!?!?!?!

THAT!!!!! YOONMIN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
AND JIMIN’S slight SKINCHANGING?!?!?!?!?!?

ALL. THE. THINGS. AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-

Okay.

:D

So Hangman’s Mercy is a game I invented myself, eheheh. Obviously, all the rules aren’t stated here, but I was wondering, if enough people would be interested, maybe I could actually try to make something out of it, you know, design the cards and sell it as an actual game. Or something. I dunno x)) I MEAN, I SO WANNA PLAY IT, EVEN THOUGH IT COULD RUIN EVERY LAST ONE OF MY FRIENDSHIPS. I MEAN, the goal is literally to have every other player hanged…

BUT WHO CARES. THERE WAS YOONMIN IN THIS CHAPTER. I'M FECKIN' LIVING.

except I'm not living at all, seeing as it's 2:30AM here, so I'm actually almost DEAD. BUT STILL.

ALSO, WHAT IS THIS I SEE ABOUT 2000+ KUDOS+?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?! ARE Y'ALL CRAZY?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!

//dies
A Dance of Ships

Chapter Summary

From where Jimin stood up in the crow’s nest, the chaos that ensued on Agust’s deck was all but a blur. As soon as the warning call fell from his lips, the previously slumbering crew burst into action, emerging out of the companionway in a rush, their tiredness nowhere to be seen. Orders were called out left and right, crewmen shouting for gunpowder, for firearms, for anything and everything they could possibly need to take on the hostile vessel.

Jemin watched as they readied the cannons, pushing them out through the gaps in the rail and tightening the ropes so the recoil of fire wouldn’t jar it too far out of place. He watched pistols and muskets change hands, he saw stacks upon stacks of gunpowder be brought up on deck and placed next to the cannons, and he felt his stomach churn with dread for what was to come.

Chapter Notes

I AM A DAY LATE AND I AM SO SORRY BUT HOLY SHIT THIS IS SO FECKIN’ INTENSE I CAN’T STOP SCREAMING I’M GONNA DIE AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-

MUSIC AGAIN, GOOD SHIT, GOOD SHIT, AHHHHHHHHHHHHH-

Future World Music - The Prayer
Brand X Music - All Or Nothing
Epic Score - Our Time Is Now
Killer Tracks - Brood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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If Jimin hadn’t been so preoccupied clutching onto the top of the main mast for purchase to keep himself grounded, he would’ve surely marveled at how the pirate ship’s deck was suddenly like an
ant’s nest, where the workers moved around each other in what seemed like an almost practiced dance. Then his awe would’ve fallen from upon realizing that for the dance to be practiced, the Agust must’ve come under attack before, more than once.

Dimly, he realized how deep the pirates’ trust in his words went; they had began preparations even before spotting the hostile ship, fully convinced Jimin wouldn’t lie about such a thing. The thought made his heart ache, and if he hadn’t been so afraid, surely he would’ve let himself smile.

When Jimin saw Taehyung emerge from below deck, he parted his lips to call out to him, perhaps to seek reassurance, but his voice betrayed him as he watched the quartermaster drag Jeongguk behind him, steering away from the coordinated chaos and towards Hoseok’s infirmary. The doctor threw open his door to greet them and reached out to take hold of Jeongguk’s arm and gave a tight nod when Taehyung shouted, “Take care of him, Hoseokkie!” in a voice strained with heavy anxiety.

A fresh ripple of dread went through Jimin at the sight of the navigator’s expression, his usual cheerful cheeriness nowhere to be found. He looked almost terrified, reaching for Taehyung’s hand even after the quartermaster let him go, and it took several of Hoseok’s stern words to convince him to step inside the infirmary. Taehyung attempted a brave smile to soothe his lover, one that faded the instant the doctor closed the door and was replaced by a stony sneer, his jaw tightening as he pulled his mask out of the pocket of his trousers and raised it to his face.

A shudder trailed down Jimin’s spine at the memory of how utterly devoid of emotions the quartermaster had been when they’d rescued Jimin from Son Jukan’s ship; he wondered if this would be another display of that, another instance of the cold, silent rage that so heavily contrasted Taehyung’s nature.

“Jimin!”

He startled so violently he almost threw himself off the crow’s nest at the sudden call of his name. Quickly, he turned around to find Namjoon standing halfway up the shrouds, his eyes narrowed in a squint as he glared at the approaching ship, the sun’s rays preventing him from reading their colours. “Can you make out their flag from this distance?” the first mate asked, his voice loud to be heard over the deck’s ruckus. “I need to know if we need to take special precautions against someone with a blessing.”

“J-just a second,” Jimin said, his voice wavering as he struggled to unfold the spyglass, his hands trembling. He screwed his eyes shut for a moment to clear the nervous blur from his vision before raising the device to his eye and peering over at the hostile ship, squinting against the strong light of the sun. “They have two flags,” he told Namjoon. “One is a singing skull with missing teeth, a-and below that, a black, burning skull.”

“They sail under the Rabid Conflagration’s colours,” the first mate stated, a crease marring his brow. “But it’s not him. It’s one of his underlings.” He leaned back against the shrouds for a moment, his attention momentarily waning as he racked his brain for a name, a face, a bounty. “Deadman’s Melody, Chuljae,” he said to himself, so quietly Jimin could barely hear him. “Wanted along Korea’s western coast for…”

His voice trailed off for a moment, apparently struggling to remember a proper cause for the hostile ship’s captain’s bounty. He couldn’t seem to think of any, but rather than calm him, that only served to increase his concern. “There has to be a reason for a man like the Rabid Conflagration to recruit this crew,” Namjoon stated firmly before turning around to descend the shrouds back to the deck. “You’d best stay up here, Jimin, and keep an arrow at the ready in case we need you.”

He was gone before Jimin could reply, his words ringing loudly through Jimin’s mind, and with a
near violent shudder, he realized he would have to fight.

“My bow,” he whispered and looked around, his heart sinking in his chest upon realizing he’d left it by his bunk earlier that night. He knew he’d have to go get it; he wouldn’t be able to bear staying helpless up in the crow’s nest while a battle raged around him, while his friends fought and risked their lives.

With his pulse hammering in his ears, he threw a frightened glance at the approaching vessel before stepping over to the edge of the crow’s nest and lowering himself to begin his descent.

If Jimin had thought the deck had looked chaotic from where the crow’s nest, it was nothing compared to how it was when he reached the deck. The pirates were running left and right, moving around one another in a dance Jimin did not know. He could feel the floorboards of the deck quiver under the endless movement of the crew, and for a moment, Jimin didn’t dare move from where he stood, pressed flush against the main mast. All he could do was close his eyes and breathe, breathe through the dread that brimmed steadily in his chest.

I will not die, he told himself over and over. None of us will die.

“Ready the claws for boarding!” someone shouted, and Jimin drew a final breath before breaking away from where he stood.

He darted through the ever-shifting crowd and to the companionway, where he skid to a halt to avoid colliding into Sungsin, who was hauling two barrels of gunpowder up onto deck through the narrow opening. Without waiting for the big man to finish his task, Jimin grabbed onto the ledge of the companionway and swung himself down, foregoing the occupied ladder. He landed heavily on all fours and instantly pushed himself back onto his feet, his heart thundering in his ear as he listened to the commands being called out above him.

“Found you,” he breathed when his eyes landed on the bow propped up against his bunk, a mixture of relief and nausea stirring in his gut. He made his way over on unsteady legs and was quick to tie the quiver of arrows around his waist, working swiftly in spite of his trembling fingers, but when he took the bow into his hands, he felt almost worse than before.

The weapon was heavy in his hand, weighing so much more than it had each time Jimin had held it for practice, as if stones had been tied to each end. It’s your fear, a small voice in the back of his head said, his skin crawling with the realization. It’s your fear what weighs you down. It cripples you, more than you would think.

For a mere fraction of a second, Jimin wanted to argue, even if it was with himself. He’d told himself time and time again to not be frightened, to not let anyone see his fear, yet even as the words rested on the tip of his tongue, he knew they were lies. The skin of his neck was contracted in dread and his chest felt almost aflame with terror, so intense he had to draw a deep breath before he could find his voice again.

“I am afraid,” he whispered to himself and tightened his grip on the bow as he forced his feet to move back towards the companionway to rejoin the chaos up on deck, refusing to falter under the new weight of his weapon. “Only a madman would be at peace now.”

The companionway was free for him to climb and he made quick work of the ladders, stumbling slightly as he reached the top, narrowly dodging the sheathed sword of a crewman making his way past. “Watch it!” the pirate snapped, and from his voice alone, Jimin recognized him as Hisashi. “Stay out of the way if you don’t want me to run you through!”
Had the situation been different, Jimin would’ve stopped to tell the man to shove his katana up his own arse, but when his eyes caught the ship on the horizon and realized how close it had come, all thoughts of a retort were overrun by the seizing sensation in his chest. “Two minutes until contact!” a vaguely familiar voice called out, voice ringing clear through the chaos. “All cannons, wait for my command!”

The choir of, “Aye, captain,” that followed did little to jar Jimin out of his state of horror, unable to pry his eyes away from the hostile vessel, and so he failed to see where he was going, staggering backwards until something collided heavy against his shoulder.

He recoiled with a startled sound, disoriented in his shock, but a hand grabbed hold of him before he could stumble too far, the grip cold as stone as it tugged him out of the crew’s way. “What are you doing down here?” Yoongi asked in ill concealed impatience, a tightness to his jaw that made his voice sound half a growl.

“I-I had to get my, my bow,” Jimin stuttered thinly and threw a quick glance over his shoulder, his nerves jolting at the sight of the hostile ship. “I-"

The captain didn’t grant him time enough to say anything more, instead turning to push him in the direction of the main mast. “Get back to your nest, songbird,” he barked, his voice austere in his tension, a building aggression brimming beneath his poor restraint. When Jimin looked at him again, properly, he could tell Yoongi’s knuckles were white as he drew one of his daggers, and the ceramic of his prosthetic hand was rippling, perhaps out of his control. “Keep your position and stay out of sight, and out of the line of fire!”

He moved to leave, but Jimin reached out and took hold of his arm before he could stop himself. “Wait,” he managed and forced down his own fright when the captain turned to him with bottomless impatience seeping into his scowl. There was something Jimin had noticed when he’d first seen the hostile ship, something Yoongi had to know before it would be too late. “Th-they’re sailing out of the sun,” he said and made himself meet the captain’s glare. “They’re attempting to ensure that we’ll be blinded by the rays, s-so you should… you should angle the ship so it won’t happen.”

There was a flicker of surprise in the Yoongi’s eyes, but it was gone as quickly as it came, replaced by a sense of grim understanding. “Namjoon,” he called out and turned away from Jimin to address his first mate, who had taken over the helm. “Be ready to turn us around as soon as Agust digs her teeth into their ship!” He spared Jimin one last glance, and with that, he was gone, calling out more orders to get his crew ready for the battle to come.

Briefly, as Jimin watched him leave, he wondered who was to stand in the line of fire if not him, and the thought made his blood run cold in his veins.

None of us will die, he told himself once more as he turned to rush towards the main mast and strapped his bow around his shoulders, and as he began his climb, he almost believed it.

Halfway up, however, that belief died in his chest when a choir of unfamiliar voices rose from somewhere to his left, a chorus of roars and cries of battle that made the hairs of his arms stand up in dread. In horror, Jimin turned his head, only to find the enemy ship had almost reached them, the strong rays of the sun shining bright and blinding through the gaps of their sails.

“Wait for first fire!” Yoongi shouted down on deck, striding along the row of cannons. “Let them make their choice, let them make their choice and be absolutely fucking sure, and then show them no mercy!”

A part of Jimin wanted to scream, to ask if the captain was demented for willingly choosing to wait
rather than fire, but he never had the chance. Not with his heart beating in his throat and threatening to suffocate him, not with his mind screaming at him to climb, to hurry, to reach the crow’s nest as quickly as he could. Not when the enemy vessel lined up with Agust, not when the hostile crew rose onto their ship’s rail, ready to board, and certainly not when Yoongi’s voice rose once again.

“Brace for impact!”

For a split second, everything was still.

Then the sound of cannonfire tore through the air, immediately followed by a devastating hit against the Agust’s hull, and Jimin lost his footing on the mast.

The impact jarred the entire ship out of balance, rocking it so violently against the waves of the sea, it was impossible for Jimin to keep himself standing on the thin rungs of the mast. His heart seized in his chest as he was suddenly made weightless, his feet losing their purchase, and every cell of his body pulled themselves taut in nothing but pure and utter fear.

It lasted only for a fraction of a second. The instant his feet slipped from the steps, an odd tremor went through his arms, and when he tightened his grip on the rungs in sheer desperation, his nails dug deeper than what was humanly possible. In his horrorstruck state, Jimin could barely process what had happened, but when his body slammed hard against the mast and he struggled to find his footing, he realized the tips of his fingers had taken on the sharp claws of a talon, digging deep into the mast to keep him grounded.

Jimin didn’t linger to marvel at the changing of his hands; when the Agust jarred again, this time from the force of their own cannons’ release, he ground his teeth and forced himself to climb, his breath leaving him in sharp hisses. “I will not die,” he promised, his voice quivering around the last word as the sound of steel meeting steel accompanied that of the cannons. “None of us will die..!”

The muscles of his arms seemed to almost cry out in relief when he finally reached the crow’s nest, a relief that was drowned by a fresh wave of terror as he stood up to take in the sight that spread out before him.

The two ships were sailing side by side, the gap between them shrouded in the smoke of the cannons, the sea hidden from sight beneath a heavy shroud of grey. Through the clouds, flashes of red and white kept sparking, always followed by the sound of cannonfire, always accompanied by a spray of debris as the sides of both vessels were torn apart by the other. On deck, pirates from both crews were ducking under the rail, a few brave ones rising to fire their pistols whenever they had the chance.

The screams made Jimin’s chest ache, and he would’ve raised his hands to cover his ears to shut them out, but then another command rose from the captain of the Agust.

“All hands, brace yourselves!” Yoongi shouted, his voice echoing through the chaos. “Namjoon, ram those fuckers, and sink our claws into their hull!”

Jimin barely had the time to grab onto the topmast stay before Agust turned suddenly, its balance shifting as the vessel crashed against the hostile ship’s side, the impact almost throwing Jimin off balance even as he clutched onto the ropes. Several new cries and screams broke out across both decks, their voices drowned by the hiss of metal flying swift through the air and the deafening crunch of wood as the cleaver blades were released from Agust’s hull and dug their way into the enemy vessel’s side.

“Hard to port!” Yoongi called before sinking to his knees on deck and bracing his right hand flat
against the floorboards, and as Namjoon put all his strength into turning the wheel as far as he could, the two ships shifted, almost as if locked in a dance, turning around each other until suddenly, Agust was the ship with the sun on its back.

Through a high-pitched ring of his ears, Jimin could hear the hostile ship’s confusion, the tense shouts and urgent commands, but they were winded now, caught off guard by the sudden shift, some still struggling to regain their balance. They weren’t granted much time to do so, however; Yoongi took his chance where he saw it, pushing himself back up onto his feet to call out, “Lead the charge, quartermaster!”

Jimin could feel the tremor of movement all the way up to the crow’s nest, and with his breath caught in his throat, he watched Taehyung lead the boarding party, silent and swift as he leaped over the gap between the ships and sank his sword into the first pirate he encountered. The others were quick to follow; Xiao with his axe, Hisashi with his katana, Namjoon wielding two identical swords, and many more, more than Jimin could count.

He blinked hard against the blur that rose to his eyes, refusing to look away no matter how much he wanted to. None of us will die, he chanted inwardly, but he had to make sure, he had to see it all. Every splash of blood against the deck of the hostile ship, every recoil of a pistol being fired, every cut of a blade against flesh.

Every man who fell and never stood back up.

For what felt like an eternity, all Jimin did was look, his bow strapped tight over his shoulders. Its string dug deep into his chest and threatened to suffocate him, and he knew he had to draw it, if only to save himself, but his hands wouldn’t move. They remain clenched tightly at his sides, his now human nails digging into the flesh of his palms as he watched Taehyung fight his way through the crowd, unflinching and without hesitation as he cut down man after man and painted himself red with their blood.

None of us will die, Jimin thought for the umpteenth time, but at what cost?

The sight of an arrow hitting the quartermaster’s newest opponent square in the chest finally tore Jimin’s attention away from the battle and to his right, where he found Lucya standing at the foremast topgallant, holding her crossbow and firing bolt after bolt into the heart of the battle. To the stranger, her aim seemed all but random, but Jimin knew every single release of her weapon was calculated and precise, a killing blow to add to the number of lives already claimed by the White Death.

The sight of her gave him courage, if only a smidgen of it. He drew a deep breath and took his bow from his shoulders, his jaw clenched tight as he readied himself for what was to come. His hand was trembling as he let go of the topmast stay to take an arrow from his quiver, his eyes fluttering shut in his attempt to calm himself. He listened to the sounds around him, the cries of battle and pain, and when he couldn’t bear his helplessness any longer, he opened his eyes and walked over to the edge of the crow’s nest.

With a sharp inhale, Jimin nocked the arrow and drew, and then he was lost.

I will not take anyone’s life, he had told Yoongi upon the beginning of his training. An arrow doesn’t have to kill. So he’d said, yet wherever he looked now, all he saw were lives ready to be claimed. All he saw were targets and ways to kill, someone’s head, someone’s chest, someone’s back. There was no clear shot for him to take, none that would result in an injury rather than death, and the mere thought made his throat constrict in terror.
Suddenly, he saw an arrow shoot down into the chaos from a new angle, the projectile narrowly missing Xiao’s neck. Jimin’s head snapped up and his eyes widened at the sight of an archer standing at the topsail yard of the hostile ship’s main mast, his face contorted into a scowl as he grabbed for another arrow to fire. The pirate was almost standing as high up as Jimin, but he didn’t seem to notice him, and when he nocked the arrow and hesitated, Jimin understood why.

Jimin had the sun at his back and the archer couldn’t see him, squinting even as he directed his aim down towards the deck. Holding his arrow to his bow, Jimin followed the pirate’s gaze down to the deck, a thrill of cold dread creeping up his spine at the sight of Hisashi, who’d left himself completely open, lost in the excitement of his bloodlust. He was overpowering one of their enemies, toying with his prey, utterly unaware of the projectile lining up with his back.

The decision to act came easy, but when Jimin raised his own arrow to the hostile archer, he hesitated. His hands trembled as he attempted to line his shot up to the pirate’s hand, wanting to do no more than simply disarm him, but the quiver of his arms spread to his arrow and disrupted his aim. “Be **still,**” he pressed out through gritted teeth, barely daring to breathe as the cells of his body refused to comply. “I have to take the shot, I **have** to, there’s no one else, I-”

The words died in his throat when Jimin realized he’d taken too long.

It was as if time had slowed down around him, a quivering exhale leaving his lips as he watched the hostile archer release his arrow. His heart stopped beating in his chest, his ears went deaf to the chaos all around him, and without knowing if the arrow found its mark in Hisashi, Jimin released his own, the string of his bow vibrating next to his ear as he let it give his arrow wings, a thrumming he could feel in the very core of his chest.

The projectile missed its mark. Rather than the bow in the pirate’s hand, the arrow shot right through his extended limb, the sharp tip digging its way through the flesh of his arm and emerging on the other side, along with a sharp spray of blood that painted the dark sails of the mast a blackish red. A ragged scream tore its way up the pirate’s throat and he dropped his weapon as pain exploded up his arm, and he barely managed to grab onto the ropes of the mast to keep from falling.

Air traveled in sharp, high-pitched exhales past Jimin’s lips to leave him winded where he stood, his blood running cold in his veins. “I-I’m sorry,” he whispered thinly as he watched the hostile archer curl in on himself and cradle his impaled arm, blood seeping from his wound and staining his shirt. “I’m not, I didn’t-”

Another cry of pain erupted from several meters below him and pushed his guilt right out of his mind, the familiarity of the voice jarring him out of his paralyzed state. He looked down, his eyes wide in worry, and when he saw Hisashi lying on deck with an arrow buried in his shoulder, it was as if his heart had stopped beating in his chest, all emotions draining from him to leave him utterly hollow.

None of us will die.

The words rang through him like an alarm, loud and deafening. Jimin had never liked Hisashi, a sentiment that had obviously been mutual, what with the way the pirate always sneered at him and whispered hushed curses under his breath, but now, as he lay on the deck, writhing in pain and clutching his injured shoulder, Jimin felt as if it might’ve just as well been himself who had gotten hit.

He heard someone call out Hisashi’s name, but before they could reach him, one of the crewmen from the hostile ship broke away from the crowd and moved up to finish the job, raising their sword to run it through Hisashi’s chest. Every coherent thought vanished from Jimin’s mind at the sight,
leaving only one basic instinct behind, powerful enough to overwhelm him.

*Protect.*

He was only vaguely aware of what he was doing when he reached for another arrow, his jaw clenched and his lips curled down as he drew the projectile and fired as soon as his aim was clear. The arrow buried itself in the deck by the hostile pirate’s feet and he jerked away, startling out of his charge and forcing him to back away from Hisashi.

With hardly a trace of dread, Jimin watched Xiao bury his axe so deep in the pirate’s neck it looked like the blade would be stuck there for eternity before the carpenter lumbered over to Hisashi to take him into his arms.

“None of us will die,” Jimin whispered, fire burning under his skin as he reached for his quiver. “I won’t let it happen.”

The next arrow fell easier than the first two, and the one after that was easier still, until he was firing with barely an ounce of hesitation. One arrow connected sharply with a cannon on the hostile ship, startling the pirate who’d been about to light it and fire and blinding him to the blade Namjoon shoved through his neck. Another arrow hit hard against the blade of a sword and threw it off its course, sending it flying far away from Xiao’s back. One buried itself in a pirate’s foot and stopped him in his attempt to sneak behind Taehyung and catch him off guard.

Dimly, Jimin thought back to when the quartermaster had ran his sword through Minjoon’s foot back in Jeju Village, and he felt something akin to contentedness stirring in his chest, glad to have returned the favor.

Suddenly, a deep, deafening sound cleaved through the air, so loud it made Jimin drop his last arrow, a startled gasp falling from his lips. The sound reverberated through his entire being and made him curl in on himself, both of his hands flying up to cover his ears. “Wh- what-” he croaked, his own voice drowned out by the rumbling sound. It was like the churning of thunder or the bellow of a humpback whale, and it seemed to emit from the very core of the hostile ship.

When the noise receded, if left his ears ringing painfully. He staggered where he stood, his shoulder hitting the top of the main mast as he struggled to regain his composure, the string of his bow pressing hard against his temple. “Wha-”

“Now’s your chance, men!” a strange voice called, cutting through the crushing silence left behind by the loud noise. “*Kill them all!*”

The words jerked Jimin right out of his daze, panic rising like a tide in his chest. One glance down past the edge of the crow’s nest told him it was the enemy vessel’s captain who’d spoken, and likely he who had produced the sound somehow; while Agust’s crew were retreating in the aftermath of the deafening sound, the hostile pirates seemed unafflicted, crying out in charge as they stepped over their fallen comrades.

Quickly, Jimin reached for an arrow, only to realize he’d dropped his last one from the crow’s nest. He emitted a hissed curse and didn’t hesitate twice before strapping his bow around his shoulders and lowering himself to the rungs of the mast, his ears still ringing as he began his descent.

It was only one arrow, there was hardly anything he could do with it, but he needed it, he needed it more than he needed this battle to be over, for he wouldn’t be able to bear the helplessness of simply staying up in the crow’s nest and watching. It was his sanity, his remaining string of sanity in an insane world, and he had to find it again.
Jimin heard someone call his name when he got close enough to the deck to let go and jump the rest of the way, but he paid them no heed, his eyes searching frantically for his last arrow. He moved through the chaos, flinching every time the sound of gunfire or cannonfire hit hard against his eardrums, persisting through the shoves and the impacts of people running into him, and when he finally saw his arrow, resting miraculously unharmed at the edge of the companionway, he almost wanted to cry.

He never reached it. Just as he extended his hand to take it, a hand clamped down hard on his shoulder and pulled him back. “Let me go,” Jimin said shrilly and attempted to claw at the hand holding him, his eyes still placed on his arrow. “Let me—”

“The fuck do you think you’re doing, songbird?!” Jimin knew the voice, but he didn’t stop struggling. He was too consumed by what he couldn’t recognize as panic, and only his arrow could soothe him. “Do you have a damn death wish?!” Yoongi shouted, an austere urgency to his voice as he dragged Jimin further away from what he so desperately needed. “I told you to stay out of the line of fire!”

“My arrow,” Jimin breathed and finally pried his eyes away from the projectile in favor of looking at the captain, but his gaze never quite made it to his face before he caught sight of something else, something on the hostile ship’s rail that made his heart seize in his chest. “Oh my god…”

From over Yoongi’s shoulder, he saw one of their enemies draw a pistol from his vest and raise it in their direction, his eyes set on the captain’s back.

“Get the fuck back to the crow’s nest!” Yoongi shouted and tried to shove him back, but Jimin latched onto his sleeve and refused to let go. “There’s no time!”

“No!” Jimin fervently shook his head and attempted to tug the captain out of the way, crippling panic building swiftly as he watched the pirate take aim. “You have to—”

“Stop fighting me, songbird, now’s not—”

Jimin watched the pirate cock his gun, and terror dug its claws deep into him. “Behind you, Yoongi!” he screamed and made a last effort to tear at the captain’s clothes just as Yoongi turned around.

Just as the pirate pulled the trigger.

The sound of the gunshot was lost in the chaos of the battle, but Jimin cried out all the same, a sound of horrorstruck shock tearing its way up his throat when he felt the bullet find its mark. It jarred Yoongi forward upon impact and sent him barreling into Jimin, who lost his footing under the sudden weight, and they crashed hard against the deck.

A series of violent coughs rose up Jimin’s throat, the fall having knocked the air straight out of his lungs as he was crushed under the captain’s weight on his chest. The back of his head throbbed painfully and his lungs were aflame, but none of it mattered as his mind caught up with what had happened.

Sheer terror tore deep into him as he looked down at Yoongi, his throat constricting in dread. “No, no, you can’t—”

“Ahh, fuck!”

Jimin almost wanted to cry when he felt rather than heard the curse be hissed against the skin of his chest, relief crashing hard against his chest when the captain stirred, groaning as he pushed himself
“Piece of shit,” he snarled as he rose to his knees and rolled his left arm, the joint crackling in his shoulder.

Rendered mute by his shock, all Jimin could do was stare, his breath passing thinly through his parted lips. The round bullet had hit Yoongi’s prosthetic limb, connecting with the side of his forearm to bury itself there, splitting the ceramic open and spreading deep cracks along the limb. Beneath the pristine mineral, plates of hard metal ran thick and heavy, cradling the bullet and preventing it from piercing through.

“I’ll teach you to fire at my back,” the captain snarled and reached for the pieces of ceramic that had fallen onto the deck, the mineral reshaping itself under his touch until he was holding a white knife in his hand. “I’ll engrave the consequences into your fucking skull!”

True to his words, when Yoongi hurled the dagger at the pirate who’d shot him, he aimed at his head, and while Jimin couldn’t bear to look, he knew the dagger had hit its mark when the captain hissed something that sounded like, “Good fucking riddance.”

Surely, had Jimin been a crueller man, he would’ve smiled at the irony of Yoongi’s words and actions.

When he gathered himself enough to raise his voice, the captain interrupted him before he could even begin, but not by snapping at him. No, Yoongi took a step away from him and raised his voice, calling out something in a language Jimin could vaguely recognize as russian, and then he was moving, walking towards where the two ships were connected with long strides, aggression all but seeping from every pore of his skin.

“Be ready to release the cleavers!” he barked as he drew both of his daggers. “Every man still standing, brace for impalement!”

A rain of bolts covered him from all sides as he crossed over to the hostile ship, the sniper shooting down pirates as if they were rats. Taehyung and Namjoon were quick to move to their captain’s side, slashing through every man who managed to get through the hail of projectiles, and all Jimin could do was look, his legs lacking the strength to raise him from where he kneeled on deck, his heart beating loudly in his ears.

Yoongi’s pace never faltered, not when he buried one of his daggers into the eye of a foolish assailant, nor when he dug the other into a hostile pirate’s chest and opened him from collar to waist. He didn’t pause until he reached the vessel’s main mast, where he sheathed both of his knives and widened his stance before pressing his right hand flat against the thick pole. Behind him, Taehyung and Namjoon braced themselves, facing twenty men with not a shred of fear in their eyes.

For a moment, there was nothing. All Yoongi did was stand there, his hand against the mast, his brow knitted into a tight, concentrated scowl, giving cause for nothing but confusion.

Then Jimin heard it. A crack of wood, louder than he’d ever heard before, as if a tree was attempting to twist itself out of shape, followed by a chorus of crackle, endless and deafening, and with eyes wide in terror-mixed awe, Jimin watched as the entirety of the main mast began to bend under Yoongi’s touch.

Screams rose from the hostile crew as the mast thrashed where it stood, severing the ropes that bound its sails. The yards folded in on themselves and added to the mast’s girth, and suddenly, it looked more like a lance than a mast, the top taking on the shape of a spearhead, giant and sharp and utterly dreadful as it curled to face the deck.
“Stop him!” someone shouted in horror, but it was too late. With a snarl like an animal, Yoongi pressed harder against the main mast’s base, and as if shot out of a cannon, the spearhead rammed into the deck, crushing through the floorboards and sinking through the entirety of the ship, bending as far out of shape as possible as it tore its own vessel in half.

Even the Agust was shaken by the impact, but Jimin hardly felt it, his breath caught in his throat as he stared. “The Black Fox of the East,” he whispered, a shudder rippling down his spine.

Yoongi staggered when the entire ship quaked and lost his connection to the mast, but the damage was already done; nothing could save the vessel from sinking anymore, a giant rift torn right through it to let in the sea. Shellshocked, Jimin watched Taehyung swiftly sheathe his sword and move to his brother’s side, taking some of Yoongi’s weight as they hurried back towards the rail.

“Release the cleavers!” Namjoon called when they were close enough to cross over, and the giant blades retreated into the Agust’s hull with a sharp ring, freeing it from the weight of the sinking ship just as the three had made it safely back on board. The crew staggered from the sudden shift and Jimin almost fell over, but he dug his nails into the deck and stayed on his knees, his eyes never leaving the wreckage left behind by Yoongi’s mere touch.

The captain, on the other hand, was out of breath and panting, beads of sweat trickling down his temple, his legs trembling from the amount of strength the display had cost him. He leaned heavily on Taehyung where he stood, drawing deep lungfuls of air, and he didn’t straighten up until he heard a voice coming from the devastation he’d left in his wake.

“You’ll never be safe from him, Min Yoongi!” The man who stood by the hostile ship’s rail must’ve been its captain, his face contorted in rage and terror as he struggled to maintain his balance in the chaos that was his vessel. “The Rabid Conflagration will come for you!” he promised with venom in his voice. “He’ll tear down your reign and strip you of your titles, and you will burn in the flames of hell!”

With his chest still heaving from exertion, Yoongi turned to face the him, a bored scowl on his face as he regarded his defeated opponent. “He’s free to try,” he stated irritably, his voice hoarse from his labored breathing. “I’ll make sure to shove his entire fucking ship up his arse when he does, and I’ll give him your regards.” Without another word, he turned to Namjoon and flicked his head. “Fire what’s left in our cannons,” he said stiffly. “I’m sure they’d rather die on the spot than drown.”

While the first mate nodded and turned to relay his orders, Yoongi addressed the rest of his crew, tension seeping into his voice. “Take all injured men to the infirmary,” he called out, his brows knitted in what could only have been bitter concern. “Everyone strong enough to walk, go do whatever Hoseok tells you to.”

His words jarred Jimin out of his lingering state of shock, suddenly reminded of what had happened to Hisashi. Without sparing the captain a glance, he forced himself to stand and almost stumbled in his hurry to reach the infirmary, his dread resurfacing at the pained cried that sounded through the open door. He tried to push it down, truly, he did, but the splatter of blood that trailed his way to the infirmary did little more than fuel the flames of his panic.

His breath hitched in his throat when he reached the doorway, one of his hands latching onto the frame to keep himself standing. Rodel was standing closest to him, pressing a bloodied rag against his waist and grimacing in pain. Xiao stood by the bed along with Hoseok, the big man bleeding from several cuts along his arms and chest, but none compared to the state of Hisashi, whom the carpenter was holding down while Hoseok prepared to pull the arrow out of his body.

Through his horrorstruck daze, Jimin noticed Taehyung sitting in the corner of the room with
Jeongguk, cradling the navigator’s head against his shoulder and murmuring quietly against his temple, repeatedly stroking his hair while Jeongguk held onto him as if his life depended on it. He looked almost small, his skin pale and his strong frame trembling in the quartermaster’s arms, and the look on Taehyung’s face was near heartbreaking, a mix of anger and sorrow settling deep in his frown.

“Jemin!”

Hoseok’s voice snapped him right out of his state, the urgency of it almost startling him. “Grab the clean towels from the cupboard,” the doctor said without taking his eyes off Hisashi, his face contorted in what seemed like equal amounts of pain as the wounded pirate was experiencing. “We need to stop the bloodflow, so when I pull out the arrow, I need you to press down, hard, alright?”

“Yes,” Jemin breathed out, his voice barely audible as he hurried over to the cupboard to take as many towels as his small hands could carry. When he turned back around to the bed, he felt a wave of nausea rise halfway up his throat to set his airways on fire; Xiao had shifted to give Hoseok better access to Hisashi’s shoulder, and it gave Jemin a clear sight of the wound.

The skin around the arrow’s shaft was purple and black and caked with blood, the liquid refusing to clot as more and more poured out from the wound without pause. A part of his skin was bulging, as if the bone underneath had snapped and was jutting up, protruding in an almost sickening manner.

“Pass me one of the towels,” Hoseok said urgently and Jemin complied with trembling hands, his chest aching as he watched the doctor press the rag to Hisashi’s lips. “Bite on this instead of your tongue, and scream if you must. This will hurt like a bitch.”

All that left the pirate’s lips was a garbled sound as he did as told, sinking his teeth deep into the piece of cloth, and then he was given only two seconds to prepare himself before Hoseok closed his hands around the arrow and tugged.

The scream that tore through the air was blood-curdling and shrill, a horrifying sound that made Jemin want to claw at his own ears if only to make it stop. Hisashi’s spine arched off the bed even with Xiao’s efforts to keep him down, his body convulsing in the shocks of searing pain that burst from his shoulder, the veins of his neck straining against his skin as he drew himself taut as a bowstring.

It was over as quickly as it had begun. Hoseok pulled the arrow out of him in a matter of seconds and signaled Jemin to do as asked, and it was with trembling hands that he pressed the towels against Hisashi’s shoulder, his eyes burning as he watched the rags be soaked with blood. “Harder,” the doctor told him in an unsteady voice, but when Jemin moved to comply, he felt a hand push against his arm.

“G-g-get away f-from me,” Hisashi wheezed, his eyes glazed over even as he tried to focus on Jemin, the muscles of his face not quite managing its usual scowl. His entire body was trembling now, rendered weak and useless, not an ounce of strength in his attempt to push Jemin away from him. “Do-don’t - ngh - don’t… don’t t-touch me.”

A ripple of something unidentifiable coursed through Jemin as he stared at the injured pirate, eyes wide in shocked disbelief. “Hisashi,” Hoseok said warningly, but the man only shook his head weakly, lolling from side to side.

“I d-don’t want him t-touching me,” he rasped, wincing as another flare of pain shot through him, but he kept his eyes on Jemin even as they threatened to flutter close. “Fu-fuckin’ get him away fro-from me.”
For a moment, all Jimin could do was stare. He knew Hisashi didn’t like him, just as little as Jimin liked him, but even now, when he lay dying, he was too stubborn to let go of his pride for long enough to allow Jimin to try and save him. As if the mere thought disgusted him.

Slowly, the stirring in Jimin’s chest turned into anger, hollow anger, and when he felt a hand settle on his shoulder, he shrugged it off with more force than necessary. “Do you think I enjoy this?” he asked shrilly, his eyes stinging. “Do you think I enjoy seeing you like this? To have to hear your screams and hold you down while you bleed?! Because I don’t!”

He was shouting now, his throat aching around his words, but the fire in his chest wouldn’t settle. “You’re an arse,” he yelled and shook his head, unaware of the tears that spilled from his eyes as he clutched the bloodied rags hard in his hands, “an absolute piece of shit, but even you don’t deserve this! No one does, so I’m going to do my best to save you, but you’d better shut up unless you want me to-”

“What the fuck’s going on here?”

Jimin didn’t know when Yoongi had appeared in the infirmary’s doorway, but in his anger, he turned on the captain, whose eyes widened at the sight of him. “You make him see!” he cried and jabbed a finger at Hisashi. “You make him understand, you tell your crewman to forget his pride and arrogance and let me help him if he wants to live!”

Yoongi’s confusion was apparent on his face, his brows arched in obvious surprise at Jimin’s outburst. He looked from him to Hoseok and from the doctor to Hisashi, and he sent another quick glance at Jimin before clearing his throat and addressing the injured pirate. “Stop being a such a prick, Junji,” he said curtly, clicking his teeth when Hisashi emitted a weak groan. “There are others waiting to have their wounds treated. Just let the songbird do his job so you can live to despise him as you have so far.”

“Thank you,” Jimin said snappishly and turned back, ignoring all the eyes he knew were trained on him in favor of pressing the towels back against Hisashi’s wound as firmly as he dared. None of us will die, he thought once again and pressed his lips into a firm line as tears continued to roll down his cheeks, determination burning beneath his frustration. I won’t let it happen.

Chapter End Notes

JIMIN
SAID
HIS NAME.
YOONGI’S NAME.
HIS NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNAMMMMMMMMMEEEEEE-
HE ALSO YELLED AT HIM. ACTUALLY YELLED AT HIM. AND YOONGI JUST... HE JUST... AHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!
Yoonmin is alive, PRAISE THE LORD HALLELUJAH!!!!!!
Okay but Jeonggukkie :((((((( I SWEAR I’LL LET YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM, WHY HE IS THE WAY HE IS. ONE DAY, I SWEAR!!!

OKAY!!! OKAY, OkAy, okay, time to calm down.

Okay, let me tell you. LET ME //TELL// YOU.

There’s a scene in the next chapter that I’ve been waiting to write since I started planning tStS. SINCE I STARTED PLANNING IT. THIS SCENE, HOLY SHIT, IT’S SUCH AN EPIC ONE, OH MY GOOD LORD, I ACTUALLY CAN’T WAIT TO GET TO WRITE IT, LIKE HOLY SHIT, I’M A DAY LATE AND I’M DYING, BUT I WANNA WRITE THAT SCENE RIGHT THE HECK NOW.
Joy Where We May Find It

Chapter Summary

He waited until Jeongguk had fallen asleep before he stood and made his way to the doors, where he halted to glance back at the bed. The two of them seemed to finally be at peace, lying dead to the world in a tangle of limbs, so close it would’ve been impossible to tell where one of them ended and the other began.

Jimin felt a pang of affection for them, more so for Jeongguk when he realized the navigator had been awake to hear Taehyung tell his tale to Jimin and let it happen without interrupting. He trusted Jimin enough to know the truth, and that thought alone made his heart swell in his chest.

We’ll be alright, he thought as he climbed up to the crow’s nest to begin his watch. All of us, eventually, we’ll be alright.

Chapter Notes

AYYYY LOOKIE, IT’S 2AM AGAIN, AHAHAHHAHAHAHAHAHA, BUT BOI IS IT WORTH IT ISTG!!!

10k words. i need help.

OKAY. Okay, so this is very important. VERY IMPORTANT, RIGHT HERE.

When you reach the line that reads “we have to seize joy where we may find it”, PLEASE. PLEASE, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD AND ALL THAT IS PURE, YOU HAVE TO PLAY >> THIS SONG << ON REPEAT, OVER AND OVER. IT’S SO GODDAMN IMPORTANT, OKAY? I CANNOT STRESS IT ENOUGH.

Please. Legit, serious, lower-case, correct grammar and proper punctuation, please.

Okay. OKAY NOW WE'RE GOOD TO GO.

The sun had already began to set when Jimin finally left the infirmary, exhausted and hungry. He blinked hard against the strong light of the setting sun; he’d refused to stray from Hoseok’s side for long enough to eat, let alone rest, opting to help the surgeon treat all those injured in the naval battle, as well as keep a constant eye on Hisashi.

He wasn’t quite sure why he felt such a strong need to ensure the pirate’s condition remained stable, but every time Hisashi had as much as turned on the cot, Jimin had been there to make sure he was
alright, or to ask him what he needed. Hisashi had protested as much as he could in his sorry state, but with his captain’s orders fresh in mind, there was very little more he could do than grumble and sulk, and let Jimin do whatever needed to be done.

Aside from Hisashi, Jimin had helped Hoseok patch up Xiao and Rodel, standing by the surgeon’s side either with a mess of clean cloths in his hands, or holding whatever tools Hoseok needed to go about his treatment. He’d also assisted Lucya in cleaning up a scratch in her arm, one even the sniper herself seemed uncertain about when she’d acquired it. It barely bled, but Jimin had refused to let her shrug it off without properly washing it, fretting an infection.

Hours and hours had time to pass before every crewman had been treated to the best of Hoseok’s abilities, and only then had Yoongi let himself be examined. Jimin stood by and watched as the doctor took a pair of medical pliers and pulled the led bullet out of Yoongi’s prosthetic limb, and while the captain felt nothing, Jimin winced at the sound of the removal, a sharp scratch of metal against metal. He tried his best to battle the shudder that prickled its way up his spine at the memory of Yoongi being shot right before his eyes; the mere thought of it made his stomach turn and his hands turn clammy.

Thankfully, the captain failed to notice his tension; Hoseok kept him busy with a rapidfire of questions concerning his health, regarding everything from muscle aches to cramps to spontaneous bruising, all of which Yoongi answered in a tone of tired irritation. “I’m fine, Hoseok, stop your worrying,” the captain had finally stated as he attempted to shoo the doctor away from him. “This is nothing different from the countless times I’ve been shot before.”

“If you think I’m gonna stop worrying just because you let yourself get shot so often,” Hoseok retorted snappishly and lightly smacked Yoongi’s shoulder with the pliers, “you’re even more stupid than I thought.”

Rather than argue, Yoongi had simply rolled his eyes before standing up and making way for the door, sparing Jimin a quick glance before leaving the infirmary. “To sleep,” Hoseok commented offhandedly once he was gone, and Jimin let it go without question.

It was only now, when he walked out onto deck, that Jimin noticed the state of the Agust. The ship truly looked like it had been through hell; parts of the rail had been blasted off by cannonfire, leaving debris scattered everywhere. The portside quarterdeck stairs were utterly destroyed, and the foremast shrouds were hanging loose from the yards, their base ravaged by battle.

“Finally, you emerge, pretty bird,” Xiao greeted him as he stepped past the main mast to get a proper look at the deck. The carpenter was carrying several planks of timber towards the most noticeable gap in the rail, grinning when he noticed Jimin’s disapproving frown. “Don’t worry yer pretty li’l head ‘bout old me. ‘S only a few scratches.”

Jimin begged to differ, having been present to observe the doctor close two of said scratches with needle and thread, but Xiao dropped the planks by the destroyed rail before he could do much in terms of protest. “Jin’s lookin’ for ya,” the big man told him and motioned towards the galleys. “Said he’d ask me to drag ya outta the infirmary by force if ya didn’t come willingly for supper.”

At the mention of supper, Jimin’s stomach growled loudly; he had barely eaten all day, refusing the lunch Jin had sent to the infirmary and forcing his portion on Rodel, who looked like he could barely stand, bloodloss making him faint. “Well, no need to manhandle me this time, Xiao,” Jimin said with a sheepish smile and reached up to pat the man’s arm. “Don’t work too hard, or I’ll tell both Hoseok and Jin and watch the two of them tie you to the mast.”

“Ya wouldn’t, pretty bird,” the carpenter said in an overly dramatic voice that was only half jesting;
he knew better than Jimin how the two could be when worried.

With a airy giggle, Jimin turned and made for the galleys. Supper was almost over, it seemed, with crewmen filtering out of the door to return to their duties or withdraw below deck. Most of them greeted him on their way out; one stopped to ask Jimin if Hisashi had come to terms with his pride, and laughed when Jimin said that it was definitely not the case, what with the pirate’s stubborn sulking even in his weak state.

“Canary,” Jin said when he made his way to the cook’s station, his expression half a frown, half amused. “I was beginning to worry I’d have to ask someone to drag you here and force feed you.”

“Xiao already told me, yes,” Jimin said with a small smile. “I’m alright, Jin, really. I wasn’t one of those hurt in the battle.”

The cook scoffed while he filled a plate with a kind of stew that smelled pleasantly of sweet potatoes and fish. “Of course you were,” he stated in a voice that bore no room for arguing and turned to pin Jimin under a stern glare. “You might not have bled, but it was your first battle at sea, wasn’t it? Of course you’d be hurt.”

Jemin parted his lips to protest but quickly closed them again, his smile twitching and fading. He could hardly deny Jin’s words, no matter how much he wanted to; it was true that he hadn’t suffered any physical injuries, and his time in the infirmary had distracted him from his thoughts, but now, there was a gnawing guilt steadily crawling back into the back of his mind, a guilt he couldn’t quite place.

“You look conflicted,” the cook said and set down the bowl of food in front of him before taking a seat opposite of Jimin, concern marring his brow.

Wordlessly, Jimin nodded. “Half of me believes I could and should have done more,” he mumbled and poked at his food with a spoon, “while the other half hates me for the things I did.” He recalled the overwhelming remorse that had struck him after he’d fired his first arrow and watched it bury itself through the hostile pirate’s arm. He knew the man was dead now, not by his hand, but Jimin couldn’t help but wonder if he would’ve survived if not for the arrow. “I don’t know which half to listen to.”

Jin was silent for a moment, his lips pursed in thought as he regarded Jimin, and then he heaved a soft sigh and smiled, a look of fondness taking over his features. “You’re too gentle for a pirate’s life,” he said kindly, chuckling when Jimin frowned at him, unsure of his insinuation. “It’s a good thing, canary. This world is full of people who harm without a shred of guilt, people who take others’ lives and never lose a wink of sleep for it.” He reached out and playfully tousled Jimin’s hair. “We don’t need more of those,” he mused, “so take pride in your guilt.”

“Take pride in it,” Jimin echoed, his frown only settling deeper when the cook nodded sagely. “How can I do that when the rest of you fight to protect one another? When you risk your lives and taint your hands with blood to keep the ones you care about safe?”

“Because it is not your task,” Jin said simply. “‘Tis no one’s task, really, but us pirates have willingly chosen this path as our own. It is not one you have to follow, Jimin.” He heaved another sigh, this one much deeper than the one before. “I’d love to feel the way you do, in truth,” he huffed and propped his elbow up on the table so he could rest his chin in his hand. “I steer clear of battles for reasons that are too long and too dull to explain, but know that I envy you your remorse.”

Jemin didn’t know what to say to that, so he sat in silence, confusion filling his senses until Jin broke out of his reverie with a smile. “Eat,” he said and nodded at the still steaming bowl of stew. “We’re a
long way off from Kolkata and the meals will turn less and less exciting as we go, so enjoy the freshness of this one while you can.”

Again, Jimin parted his lips, but he could think of nothing at all to say, so he did as told instead, nodding silently before lowering his eyes to his bowl. It did look delicious, and when his stomach growled in hunger again, he pushed his sullen thoughts to the back of his head and ate.

It wasn’t until he’d finished that he remembered he wanted to ask the cook something. “Was Taehyung and Jeongguk at supper?” he wondered as he put his bowl into the wash basin. “They left the infirmary without a word hours ago.” He frowned at the memory of Jeongguk’s pale cheeks and the tightness of Taehyung’s jaw as he’d guided the navigator outside. “Jeongguk seemed really unwell.”

The anxious expression that settled over Jin’s face was almost painful to see. “They didn’t come,” he said quietly. “It seems it was worse for Jeongguk this time, so it’s taken Taehyung longer than usual to calm him down.” He shook his head upon noticing Jimin’s alarmed look. “Would you bring them something to eat?” the cook asked and reached for two clean bowls to fill with food. “They won’t be below deck. Yoongi lets them have his quarters whenever this happens, so that Jeongguk may recover in peace.”

Jimin’s worry only deepened at that, and he nearly dropped the tray of food in his hurry out of the galleys. He carefully balanced his way up the stairs to the quarterdeck, dread simmering in his chest as he tried to recall ever hearing what it was that plagued the navigator, but all he came to realize was that never once had he seen Jeongguk on deck immediately following a conflict. He hadn’t been there when Jimin had first been taken aboard the Agust, nor when they’d rescued him from Son Jukan.

“Take care of him,” Taehyung had told Hoseok right before the battle, and the doctor had taken Jeongguk in without pause.

Jimin balanced the tray on his left arm when he reached the doors to the captain’s quarters and raised his right to knock softly. It was merely a way to signal his presence rather than ask for permission to enter, as he didn’t want to startle the two, thus he didn’t expect anyone to open the door, and he certainly didn’t expect it to be the captain himself.

“What are you doing here, songbird?” Yoongi asked in a voice utterly void of hostility; on the contrary, he spoke softly, as if loathe to make too much noise, a stark contrast to the exhausted frown that marred his brow. His left hand was holding the door open, the metallic limb glinting in the last rays of the setting sun, the absence of its ceramic shell a reminder of what had happened during the battle.

Jimin swallowed thickly before replying, forcing himself to meet the captain’s eyes. “Jin sent me,” he said, gripping hard onto the tray; for some reason, he hadn’t expected Yoongi to be here, a thought that, he realized belatedly, was absurd. Not only were these his quarters, but Taehyung was his brother and Jeongguk a man of his crew, Taehyung’s lover, no less. Of course the captain would be here. “He… he told me to bring them something to eat.”

He trusted Yoongi to know who he meant by them, and sure enough, after only a moment of silence, the captain nodded and stepped aside to let Jimin pass. Gingerly, he stepped past Yoongi and into the quarters, only to come to a halt at the sight of his friends.

Taehyung was seated on the floor by the edge of the bed, his back to the doors as he watched over Jeongguk’s sleeping form, gently stroking the navigator’s arm. Jeongguk was clutching the quartermaster’s hand in both of his own, gripping firmly even as he slept, as if Taehyung’s touch was
the only thing standing between him and a fit of nightmares.

Jeongguk, who liked to tease Jimin about his height, looked so unbelievably small in this moment, it made Jimin’s heart ache.

“Make sure they eat.” He startled so hard he almost dropped the tray, having momentarily forgotten Yoongi’s presence. “I need to get some sleep or I’ll pass out where I stand.” he stated gruffly, squinting even in the dim light of his quarters. “You stay here, songbird, and take care of them.”

It wasn’t an order or a command, Jimin realized, but a request, one he was more than willing to fulfill. “I will,” he promised, his voice quieter than intended, but the captain heard him all the same, and with a small nod and an incoherent mutter of gratitude, Yoongi stepped outside and carefully pulled the door shut behind him.

For a moment, Jimin remained where he stood, hesitant to intrude on the almost painfully tender spell that hung heavy over the two lovers. The only source of light in the room was the setting sun outside the tall windows above the organ piano, its golden rays not quite reaching the bed, but close enough still to illuminate Taehyung where he sat, his blonde hair glittering like gold in the light.

He looked almost like the angels Jimin’s mother had told him of in his childhood, the angels who came to take the souls of the dying to live forever in the sky, and the sight was both beautiful and terrifying.

Then the quartermaster turned to look at him, a small smile gracing his lips. “Chim,” he said, his voice hushed and hoarse. “You’re here.”

Jimin’s hesitance faded in the blink of an eye and he exhaled softly before walking over to the bed. “Of course I’m here,” he whispered and set the tray down on the round table in the middle of the room before taking a seat on the floor next to Taehyung. “Are you alright?”

It was a dumb question to ask, he realized belatedly, but the quartermaster smiled all the same, heaving an exhausted sigh. “I’m tired,” he said quietly and turned back to look at Jeongguk. “And worried.”

Jimin nodded and followed his gaze, his brows knitting in worry. The navigator’s face was lax in his sleep, but he was still pale, and there was a definite dampness to his hairline, as if he’d been sweating profusely only moments prior to falling asleep. “Why,” Jimin began, but the words caught in his throat. It was unsettling, seeing Jeongguk look so… frail. “What happened to him?”

Taehyung was silent for so long, Jimin began to think he shouldn’t have asked, that perhaps it was too private of a thing. Then, however, the quartermaster shifted and raised his voice to answer, and he sounded so heartbreakingly sad, Jimin truly wished he hadn’t asked, suddenly afraid to hear the answer.

“He was a slave,” Taehyung murmured and reached out to gently thread his fingers through Jeongguk’s hair. “You can imagine why. He found his blessing when he was only thirteen, still a boy, it took only one display of his abilities for people to view him as a profit rather than a human being.”

He bit out the word with venom in his voice. “First his family, then his friends,” he said, “and eventually, strangers. It was never enough for them, whatever he turned into gold, their greed was never sated, and when he finally began to refuse to do as they asked, they forced him. They hurt him if he said no and made him do whatever it was they wanted. After all, they said, it cost him nothing to make the rich, so why should he not?”
Gently, Taehyung curled his fingers around the hands that gripped his and rubbed little circles into Jeongguk’s skin, the soft touch a stark contrast to the anger hiding subtly in his voice. “Word spread like wildfire,” he whispered, “and soon, people came to pry him away from his home. He was taken away, and anyone who resisted were either killed or imprisoned. The people who took him had the authority to do so, and they abused their own status to get their hands on him.”

“Who?” Jimin asked quietly even as he dreaded the answer. “Who took him?”

Taehyung emitted a hollow chuckle at that. “Not pirates, that’s for certain,” he said with a hard smile. “No, they were noble men who wanted more of the wealth they already had. Or,” he added dryly, “commoners willing to do whatever it took for a taste of nobility. He never stayed in one place for very long, not when he was so coveted. A boy who can turn anything he touches into gold, who wouldn’t want the chance to own him?”

Jemin reached out and placed a hand on the quartermaster’s shoulder before he could stop himself, wanting nothing more than to ease Taehyung’s tension. It proved to be of little success as the quartermaster gritted his teeth so hard his jaw creaked, angry tears glistening in his eyes.

“Everything within reach, they wanted him to turn, everything from cutlery to doors, and they’d punish him when he didn’t,” he hissed, “and when golden tables and beds and mirrors weren’t enough anymore, the noble men made him turn his hands on the one thing they all had in abundance.”

A crippling sense of dread settled deep in Jimin’s chest at the insinuation, and his voice was hushed and thin as he spoke the word Taehyung had left out. “Servants,” he breathed, his eyes widening in horror when the quartermaster nodded.

“The sweetest boy to ever live,” he said thickly, “and they made him turn human beings into gold. They made him kill for the sake of profit, be it their slaves or servants, even the tutors who came to teach their children, and now…”

He turned to look at Jimin, a tremulous smile on his lips. “Ever wonder how Hoseok managed to calm you down so quickly when you first came to us?” he asked. “You had a fit of panic, yet he brought you out of it easily enough.” He didn’t wait to see Jimin nod before turning back to Jeongguk. “That’s because he does it to Jeongguk every time we go into battle,” he said. “The sounds, the noises, the screams, all of them, they hurt Jeongguk and force him to remember and relive all the shit his, his owners put him through.”

Taehyung paused for a moment to rub his face against the sheets, both of his hands too occupied with holding the navigator to wipe away his tears. “We came across him a year and a half ago,” he mumbled with his face pressed against the mattress. “We were sailing by Busan and stopped to resupply, and in the market square, his master was selling him off to the highest bidder.”

There was a rueful smile tugging at the corners of his lips when he straightened up again. “Jeongguk had almost killed the bastard’s wife when she’d attempted to force him into turning a young servant girl into gold,” he said dryly. “His hands only touched the noble woman’s dress, but it was too close either way, so they paraded him like some animal in a cage and had him turn his own chains into gold, whipping him when he wouldn’t.”

He slid his free hand up to Jeongguk’s shoulder, and when Jimin followed the trail of his touch, he realized, to his horror, that underneath the loose collar of the navigator’s shirt, several faint, pale lines ran crisscross over his skin, marks carved into his back for his disobedience.

“I didn’t hesitate,” Taehyung continued, “and Yoongi didn’t, either. I killed the bastard and Yoongi
bent the cage of shape to let Jeongguk out. He looked so scared, small and curled in on himself, a boy only fifteen years of age.” There was a softness to his smile now, and he leaned in to chastely press his lips against Jeongguk’s temple.

“He probably thought we were trying to steal him,” he crooned, “but Yoongi only told him he could do whatever he wanted. If he wanted to turn away and run and never look back, no one would hold it against him, but if he wanted to board the Agust and sail with us as an equal, he was welcome to do so.”

His hand returned to Jeongguk’s hair, where he played gently with the short strands at his neck. “He flinched away from me when I reached out to help him stand,” he said quietly. “I thought he was afraid of me, but he explained, he told me he was cursed, that I’d die if I laid a hand on him. He told me that everything he touches turns to gold, and I,” he paused to chuckle almost sheepishly, “I told him it sounded like something out of a song of heroes.”

The smile on his lips had regained some of its usual cheeriness, and Jimin dared return it when the quartermaster turned to grin at him. “He looked at me as if I was crazy,” Taehyung hummed. “He was so shocked he forgot to stop me from touching him, and when I took his arm to pull him upright, nothing happened. I was fine.”

A soft sigh fluttered past his lips and he threw a quick glance towards the door. “Yoongi gave Jeongguk the gloves from his hands and had him wear them,” he said, a near overwhelming look of fondness in his eyes, “and told him we would depart from the harbor at sunset. He’d have until then to decide what he wanted to do.”

“I think I can guess the choice he made,” Jimin murmured and chanced a smile, one Taehyung returned with a hushed chuckle.

“By the time Yoongi and I made our way back to the ship, hours before our departure, Jeongguk was already there, waiting,” he said. “He stood up straight when he noticed us and bowed his head deep before Yoongi, and asked him for a place on his ship. He looked so nervous, as if fearful Yoongi had changed his mind already, but Yoongi only nodded and welcomed him aboard, and told me to find a place for him.”

He sighed again, a hint of wistfulness slipping into his voice. “It took so long before Jeongguk grew comfortable around me,” he mumbled almost absentmindedly. “He would flinch every time I tried to touch him or back away whenever I came too close. At first, I thought it was because of the horrors of his past, but even when he became friendly with Jin and Hoseok, he would always be careful around me.” He rested his head against the mattress so he could look at Jeongguk’s face. “He probably was afraid of me in the beginning.”

Jimin wanted to part his lips and protest, the mere thought so utterly ridiculous. Whenever Jeongguk looked at the quartermaster, it was with so much love, the notion of him ever being afraid of Taehyung was as farfetched as could be. He sought the quartermaster’s touch and closeness whenever they were together, he smiled so much more brightly when he had Taehyung in his arms, Jimin refused to believe Jeongguk could ever have feared him.

“But,” the quartermaster said before he had the chance to argue, “I suppose I’m too stubborn even for him.” He grinned and scooted closer to press a kiss to the tip of Jeongguk’s nose, chuckling when the navigator stirred in his sleep. “It took some time, but slowly, he stopped refusing my touch, and eventually, he came to believe me when I told him I loved him.”

His words drifted off into a soft hum, crooning a wordless melody as he brushed his thumb along Jeongguk’s cheek. He seemed content now, more so than before recalling the navigator’s horrible
tale, and Jimin was glad to see his features free of some of his worry, if even just a shred.

Jimin let the silence carry for a moment, his grip on Taehyung’s shoulder staying strong while his eyes went to the windows above the piano, through which the sun was no longer shining. He couldn’t say how long ago it had set, but it reminded him of what had brought him to these quarters to begin with. “You need to eat,” he said and stood up to fetch the tray. “It’s probably cold by now, but Jin made stew on fish and potatoes.” He held up one of the bowls and nudged it against Taehyung’s cheek. “Eat, or Jin will have my head.”

The quartermaster grinned up at him. “We wouldn’t want that, Chim,” he said and straightened up, making no effort to take his hand away from Jeongguk.

“If Jeongguk was awake, he’d say something about how I can’t afford to lose more of my height,” Jimin said with a snort of mock offense, and grinned when Taehyung had to bite into his spoon to not laugh. “He’ll be alright, Tae. You know that, right?”

Slowly, the quartermaster nodded, his smile still in place when he looked at Jeongguk. “I know,” he murmured, his gaze lingering on the boy for a moment before turning back to Jimin, his eyes glistening once again. “Thank you.”

Jimin nodded and placed the tray on the floor next to the bed, huffing as he sat down next to Taehyung and nudged his side. “I’m here,” he said softly. “I’ll be here to watch over the two of you, so try to sleep after you’re done eating. I’ll keep an eye on Jeongguk.”

It took several minutes of hushed arguing before the quartermaster finally agreed, grumbling under his breath as he set down his empty bowl on the tray. His grouchiness was quick to fade, however, once he could pull Jeongguk against his chest and bury his nose into his hair, sighing in content before murmuring another quiet, “Thank you, Chim.”

“Sleep,” was all Jimin said, smiling as he pulled the sheets up to Taehyung’s shoulder. “You need rest more than I do.”

It was only half the truth - Jimin hadn’t slept since before the game of Hangman’s Mercy they’d played the previous night - but as he took a seat on the edge of the spacious bed, he felt wide awake, his head clear of his prior exhaustion as he watched his friends finally be at peace.

Hours into the night, when Jimin rose to his feet to prepare for his turn up in the crow’s nest, he heard a soft rustle of clothes and turned to find Jeongguk awake, his eyes glimmering in the darkness as he looked at Taehyung, who was fast asleep in his arms. “I wasn’t afraid of him,” the navigator mumbled. “I was never afraid of him, I… he was like the sun, so warm and kind, and I feared I might accidentally take it all away. With only a touch, I could’ve torn that kindness away from everyone, so I would…”

His voice trailed off for a moment and he hugged Taehyung closer to his chest, burying his face in the quartermaster’s hair, his shoulders shaking. “I could never be afraid of him,” Jeongguk whispered, on the verge of tears. “Never.”

For a moment, all Jimin did was look at the two, his heart tightening almost painfully in his chest. He could never have imagined the things Jeongguk had been through in his life, all the horrible things he had to remember for the rest of his life. He could never have believed it, not with how cheerful the navigator was, always quick to laugh and tease, never showing even a hint of what he carried on his shoulders.

Jimin couldn’t begin to imagine what it was like, yet he understood all the same. In his eyes, too,
Taehyung was like the sun, a spirit much too bright for this world and all its cruelty. Just like Jeongguk, Jimin had been saved by the quartermaster, not only in times of distress, but every day that had passed since he’d been taken aboard the Agust.

Jimin understood, and thus he sat back down on the bed and placed a hand on Jeongguk’s head, a soft smile on his lips as he caught the tears staining the boy’s cheeks. “I know,” he said and gently tousled his hair. “And Taehyung knows it, too, I’m sure, but if you worry, then tell him. Some words are difficult to say, but if speaking them can give the both of you peace of mind, try not to hesitate.”

It took a moment for Jeongguk to answer, sniffling as he nodded against the top of Taehyung’s head. “But not for now,” Jimin added with a little chuckle. “You both need your rest, so sleep, and tell him tomorrow.”

He waited until Jeongguk had fallen asleep before he stood and made his way to the doors, where he halted to glance back at the bed. The two of them seemed to finally be at peace, lying dead to the world in a tangle of limbs, so close it would’ve been impossible to tell where one of them ended and the other began.

Jemin felt a pang of affection for them, more so for Jeongguk when he realized the navigator had been awake to hear Taehyung tell his tale to Jimin and let it happen without interrupting. He trusted Jimin enough to know the truth, and that thought alone made his heart swell in his chest.

We’ll be alright, he thought as he climbed up to the crow’s nest to begin his watch. All of us, eventually, we’ll be alright.

The following days aboard the Agust were almost unnaturally peaceful. The majority of the crew spent their time moving about the ship on Xiao’s orders, helping in any way they could to restore the vessel and repair the damages caused by battle. Those too injured to move rested, heavily observed by Hoseok, who looked just about ready to pummel anyone who dared oppose his orders.

Jimin seemed to be the busiest one aboard the ship; between his duties as lookout, he spent as much time as he could in the infirmary and tended to Hisashi, who was slowly but surely beginning to recover. Hoseok had shown Jimin how to help the pirate exercise his injured arm, and while Hisashi grimaced and spoke to him in curt, snappish replies, he let Jimin guide his movements without much struggle.

Yoongi seemed to disappear as soon as Taehyung and Jeongguk emerged from his quarters, well-rested and cheerful. The captain closed the doors to his quarters with a loud bang, and when two days of absolute silence had passed, Jimin couldn’t fight his curiosity any longer. He approached Namjoon where he stood by the wheel and carefully posed his question, narrowing his eyes when the first mate only grinned, as if he was privy to a secret no one else knew.

“I’d say you can wait for at least three more days without worry,” he mused, chuckling when Jimin pursed his lips in protest. “Yoongi always sleeps for days after using his blessing to this extent. Last time he bent a ship out of shape, no one but Jin saw him for five days, and that’s because Jin brought him food.”

He threw a glance over his shoulder and lowered his voice in a theatrical manner. “Xiao woke him up to ask him for our supply records, and, well,” he chuckled again, “I won’t tell you exactly what happened, but next time you look at Xiao’s face, know that the scar on his brow is courtesy of a sleep-deprived Yoongi, not some fierce battle.”

Unsure if the first mate was jesting or not, Jimin settled for a tense smile and a nod, and decided to avoid making noise around the captain’s quarters to the best of his abilities.
True to Namjoon’s words, Jimin didn’t see a trace of Yoongi until they were approaching the coast of Singapore some three days later. The sun had already set and the moon stood high in a sky free of clouds, beautiful and round and surrounded by stars. It was a magnificent sight, and many of the pirates were enjoying it, leisurely spread out across the forecastle to soak in its beauty.

Jimin was seated on the rail, one hand lightly holding the shrouds while his legs dangled over the open sea, his eyes trained on the beautiful sky. He could hear Taehyung and Jeongguk whisper amongst each other where they sat behind him, curled up underneath a blanket with their backs against the rail, occasionally offering Jimin a candied plum from the little box Jin had given them. It was as perfect of a night as it could be, and Jimin found himself humming to himself, a soft tune passing his closed lips as he allowed himself to simply enjoy his existence.

“Sir.”

He was torn out of his contented state when a hushed voice sounded from some ways behind him, drawing his attention to one of the crewmen, who had appeared next to where Namjoon sat with Jin. “On starboard side,” the pirate said and pointed, and when Jimin followed his gaze, his eyes widened at the sight of a wooden raft floating some fifteen meters to the right of the Agust.

There was a man seated on the modest vessel, a bald man dressed all in white, his face shining pale in the light of the moon. He looked to be meditating, his hands resting on his crossed legs, unmoving but for the gentle rocking of the sea, and just as Jimin was about to turn around and ask if they ought to help the man, he noticed another raft not far away from the first, and then another, and another still.

“Mooncatchers.”

Jimin’s eyes widened at the voice and he turned around to watch Yoongi make his way towards them, rubbing sleep from his eyes as he squinted at the rafts. “Monks, of sorts,” he said, his voice thick and hoarse from disuse and lingering exhaustion. “They believe we draw our life’s energy from the moon, and in spring, while the citizens of Singapore spend one entire week celebrating the moon’s gift to mankind, the Mooncatchers take their rafts to the sea and pray.”

He sent a look at Namjoon, who nodded in agreement to his words. “We’re lucky,” the first mate stated with a smile and turned his gaze on the horizon, raising a hand to point when he found what he was searching for. “If the Mooncatchers are out at sea, it must be the first day of their celebration. ‘Tis a good opportunity to enjoy ourselves for a change, wouldn’t you say, Yoongi?”

While he turned to the captain, Jimin focused on where Namjoon had pointed, his eyes catching a cluster of lights on the horizon, tiny dots of shimmering colors spreading further the longer Jimin looked. It must’ve been the city of Singapore, he realized, or the City at Sea, as he’d heard visitors call it whenever they’d stopped by Jeju Village on their way south. A city that spread for miles and miles along the coast, the heart of trade in Asia, the place all seafarers wanted to visit at least once in their years of sailing.

Amidst his admiration, Yoongi seemed to have found an answer to Namjoon’s prompt. “Adjust course,” he called over his shoulder to the helmsman. “And reel in our colours. We don’t want to draw any unnecessary attention to us.” He turned to Taehyung. “Rouse the crew and tell them we’ll pull into Singapore in some thirty minutes,” he said, smiling when the quartermaster all but jumped to his feet. “Tell them they can take part if the celebrations if they want to.”

“Aye, captain,” Taehyung chirped and hurried off, making no effort to hide his excitement as he kicked open the companionway and made his way down with a loud, “Wake up, you lazy bastards!”
Jimin couldn’t help but giggle at his enthusiasm, a sound he hid in the palm of his hand when he heard the tired crew bark at the quartermaster in protest for being roused from their sleep. “Why is he so excited?” he asked of Jeongguk, who turned to look up at him in surprise.

“You’ve never heard of the Festival of Lights?” he asked, humming when Jimin shook his head. “It’s an old tradition that has its root in Singapore, where, according to legend, seven humans came together to fight the darkness that threatened to swallow the world. The humans each had a Blessing of Light, each its own kind, and they expelled the darkness and freed the moon.”

“It was almost five hundred years ago,” Namjoon chimed in, “but the tradition has stayed strong in Singapore. Each and every year, they spend the week following the triumph’s date celebrating and honoring the memory of the seven heroes, filling the city with the light of their colors. They sing and dance and play music through the nights, and paint each other to match that of their legendary saviors.”

Jimin made a sound of awe and turned to look towards the city on the horizon once again, a giddiness settling in the pit of his stomach. “The Festival of Lights,” he murmured to himself, unaware of how wide the smile on his lips was.

The Mooncatchers seemed utterly undisturbed by their presence as the Agust sailed past them towards the harbor, their rafts rocked by the ship’s waves. Jimin didn’t know where to look. The monks were a sight in and of themselves, sitting cross-legged with their eyes closed against the night sky, only a small candle lit in a lantern by their feet.

The city of Singapore, however, was a spectacle of lights in every color of the rainbow, shining and bright even in the black of night. The lights became more and more clear the closer they sailed, and slowly, the music played in the harbor reached out to welcome the ship, the tunes reverberating deep in Jimin’s chest.

“I want all of you to behave while you’re ashore,” Yoongi told his crew when they drew close to the docks, addressing everyone who intended to partake in the festivities. “We don’t need anyone realizing who we are, so if you can get your hands on a mask, wear it. I know they wear them during the first days of the celebration, to symbolize the darkness or some shit like that.”

Next to him, Namjoon snorted at his choice of words while Jin rolled his eyes, but the captain went on as if he hadn’t noticed. “Behave,” he said with a definite bite to his voice before his frown smoothened out and the ghost of a smile graced his lips. “And have fun. We set sail at sunrise, so make sure to return by then.”

Jimin could barely contain himself for long enough to listen. His attention was stolen by the decorations he could see from where they pulled into the harbor, countless round lanterns hanging from every free nook and cranny of the buildings, illuminating the streets as if it was daytime. Some of the lanterns were tied to rooftops and floating in the air, the patterns of their cloth casting beautiful shapes on the walls and streets, making the alleys seem almost alive. The cobblestones were covered in what looked like colored sand, green, yellow, red, pink and blue swirling together into endless, haphazard patterns, disrupted only by the footprints of those celebrating.

The inhabitants of Singapore were running left and right, laughter and chatter rising from every corner. They all seemed to be dressed in white, or as close to white as they came, yet the pristine clothes had been tainted by colors, the same colors that filled the streets. The people didn’t seem to care, however, their glee never once diminishing as they ran barefoot over the colorful streets.

Then there was the music. It sounded from every street and alley, instruments playing joyful, fast-paced melodies while countless voices sang their chorus. The sounds seemed to latch onto something
deep within Jimin’s chest and pull, and he was so captivated by it all he almost failed to hear Yoongi’s final words.

“Hoseok and Lucya will stay behind to look after the injured,” the captain said just as they released the anchor and came to a halt by the docks, “and to make sure nothing happens. The rest of you, remember my words.” He snorted when his crew voiced their agreement and flicked his head in a telltale gesture of dismissal. “Off you go, then.”

While the rest of the crew couldn’t seem to get off the ship quickly enough, Jimin hesitated, looking between the harbor and the infirmary door, a sudden uncertainty dampening his excitement.

“What are you waiting for, Chim?” Taehyung called from a few paces down the dock, giddy impatience clear in his voice.

“What about those who can’t join the celebration?” he asked, unmoving where he stood by Agust’s rail. “What will they do?”

He watched the quartermaster part his lips and close them again, understanding flooding his expression, and he smiled at Jimin and walked back towards the ship, chuckling to himself as he went. “You really are kind, Chim,” he mused once he’d climbed back up onto the rail, his voice incredibly fond. “You spend so much time worrying about everyone else, you seem to forget to worry about yourself most of the time.”

“I’m not-”

“But,” Taehyung interrupted firmly and poked Jimin in the chest, “you have to let yourself live, too, just like we do. We’re pirates, Chim, we will always be in danger wherever we go, so we have to seize joy where we may find it. A chance like this doesn’t come very often, and so now, even though some of us are still injured and bedridden, you should not feel guilty for this.”

He lowered his hand to take Jimin’s, his smile near blinding. “Come on, Chim,” he said, “let yourself live as freely as we do.”

As if on cue, the music shifted, a playful tune starting in the heart of the harbor, beckoning everyone who heard it, and when Jimin felt that pull in his chest again, there was little more he could do than return Taehyung’s smile and nod his head. “Alright,” he said, giggling when the quartermaster emitted a triumphant sound and tugged him towards the docks, where Jeongguk was waiting for them both.

Forgoing Yoongi’s words about wearing a mask, the three of them ran straight to where the music was loudest and the crowd densest, grinning broadly as they let themselves be swept along the ever-shifting mass of people. There were stands of food lined up along the buildings, bathed in the lights of the colored lanterns, the chefs’ voices barely breaking through the sounds of music rising from every corner. Banners and decorative ribbons hung between houses, each serving as a rack for even more of the colorful lanterns, each even more beautiful than the one before.

The air itself seemed to be alight with the celebrations, humming with the cheerful joy the citizens of Singapore radiated. Everywhere Jimin looked, all he saw were smiling faces and beautiful lights, the lanterns bathing even him in their rainbows, and he couldn’t help but laugh along with the crowd, utterly unsure of what it was they were laughing at.

Suddenly, something light collided with his shoulder and burst into a cloud of yellow that enveloped his head and had him waving his hands to disperse. “What was-” he began, but the words died in his throat when he saw his shirt had taken on the color of the cloud, the bright yellow settling into the
stitches of the fabric. “What-”

“Over here, Chim!” He looked up and found Taehyung standing next to a large pot full of what looked like colored powder, the same yellow that now decorated Jimin’s shirt. “This is where all the colors come from,” the quartermaster explained cheerfully and scooped up a handful of powder only to let it fall back into the pot. “It’s the colors of the heroes. The citizens throw this at each other to, what was it Namjoon said, paint each other to match their saviors or something.”

At first, Jimin missed the underlying threat in Taehyung’s words, smiling widely at the explanation, but then he noticed the quartermaster’s wicked grin as he grabbed a handful of purple powder from a nearby pot. “Don’t you dare,” Jimin said warningly and took a step back, preparing to run when Taehyung followed, slowly raising his hand. “Tae, I swear if you throw at at me, I’ll-”

He never quite had the chance to finish his own threat before he felt a handful of powder hit the back of his head, bursting into a cloud of bright blue. “What the- Jeongguk!” he exclaimed and turned on the heel to shoot a murderous glare at the navigator, who almost doubled over in laughter at the sight of him, blue melding into the soft peach pink of his hair. “You’re going to regret that, I’ll make sure of it!”

Jimin turned around just in time to duck under the powder Taehyung tossed at him, hissing as he went for the row of pots, taking one handful of green powder and one of purple. “Now,” he said and straightened up, a grin stretching his lips as he watched the two quickly put as much distance between themselves and him, “you’d better be ready for my most terrible vengeance, you arses!”

What followed was a short-lived war of chase and throwing powder at one another, the three of them darting through the endless crowd as they gave their all to inflict as much paint on the others as possible. It left all three of them breathless with laughter, especially when it was called to a halt by an old lady, who dropped a small bowl of red powder on top of Taehyung’s head after he’d all but thrown himself out of Jeongguk’s aim.

“It’s alright, Tae,” the navigator managed through his fit of laughter as he helped Taehyung stand. “Red’s my favorite color, so you look all the more beautiful now.”

“Listen to you, smooth talker,” Jimin snorted and shoved his final handful of green paint against Jeongguk’s neck, grinning when the boy emitted a startled yelp and jumped away, almost pulling Taehyung down to the ground once more.

After they declared the war a tie between Jimin and Jeongguk - “Taehyung, you were beaten by an old lady, you can’t count as a victor anymore.” - they followed the moving crowd until they finally found the heart of the city’s music. A large orchestra was playing in the middle of a large square, and all around them, people were dancing and singing along, the tune as familiar to them as the air they breathed.

“Come on,” Taehyung said and took both of their hands in his, laughing as he pulled them both into the dancing crowd. Without a shred of doubt or hesitation, the quartermaster closed his eyes and let himself be claimed by the songs, smiling bright as ever as he danced, and as Jimin watched Jeongguk follow his head, he couldn’t bring himself to feel even a little bit shy.

Spurred on by the excitement in the air, Jimin did as the rest of them, laughing as he let the joyful music guide his steps and make him dance. It felt almost unreal, the amount of glee that brimmed in his chest, put there by nothing more than the buzzing atmosphere and the endless melodies that made him feel so alive, as if there was nothing else in the world apart from what he felt in that very moment.
It was perfect.

Suddenly, his lungs were aflame with an unstoppable urge, the need to let go and release the sensation in his chest so overwhelming he couldn’t have stopped it even if he’d wanted to. It was as if he was drunk, drunk on the music, on the dancing, on the sheer exhilaration of everything and everyone around him, and so, with a smile so wide it made his cheeks ache, his eyes fluttered close and he allowed his senses to claim him.

Amidst a crowd of hundreds of smiling strangers, Jimin sang for the first time in what felt like an eternity.

He had never felt a rush like this, a thrill spreading throughout his body and to the very tips of his fingers as he sang the high notes of crescendo, citing the words of the strange song as if he’d known it all his life. It was like drawing breath for the first time in days, weeks, months, every cell of his body quivering in delight, adrenaline and endorphins coursing to every corner of him. His voice was a combination of his own and that of the Canary, but he couldn’t hear it over the sound of his heart thundering in his ears, pure and unadulterated joy rendering him deaf and blind to his surroundings.

*This*, a small voice in the back of Jimin’s mind whispered, *this is what it means to be free.*

He didn’t stop singing until his voice could carry on no further, his throat sore and his lungs short of breath. It was as if he awoke from a trance when he finally let his voice trail off, the last tone quivering with his emotions as he opened his eyes again, blinking in confusion when he realized the square had gone very, very quiet.

The orchestra had ceased playing and the dancing had come to a halt all around him, the crowd somehow rendered mute as every last one of them had turned to stare at him, their eyes wide in what he could only interpret as utterly shellshocked awe.

Their stunned attention was heavy on his skin and he fought the urge to shrink back, instead choosing to turn his head in search of Taehyung and Jeongguk, who had disappeared from his side. He couldn’t make them out in the sea of people colored by paint, and just as he began to worry he’d lost them, he caught something familiar through the crowd in the corner of his eyes and he turned, only to have every nerve in his body draw themselves taut at the sight of the black clothes.

Yoongi stood at the edge of the crowd, his dark attire setting him aside from the rest, and behind the mask he’d donned, his eyes were wide just like the others’ as he stared at Jimin, his dark orbs glittering in the light of the lanterns.

Jimin’s world came to a stuttering halt at the sight of him. Suddenly, he could feel no gaze on him but the captain’s, he could see no one else but the man clad in black, and as he watched Yoongi draw a bated breath, he could hear the sound of it in his very eardrums, as loud as if someone had screamed in his ear.

*Oh*, Jimin thought numbly, his chest feeling as if it was about to burst.

It took someone crashing hard against his side to break him out of his state of shock, the impact instantly followed by a deafening applause and cheer, one that left Jimin winded and bewildered. “Wh-what,” he managed when he finally tore his eyes off Yoongi to find it was Taehyung who hung from his shoulders, laughing as he almost throttled Jimin. “T-Taehyung, what are you-”

“That was amazing, Chim!” the quartermaster interrupted, his voice laced with awe and admiration as he hugged Jimin tightly against his chest. “I’ve never heard a voice like that, never, hell, it was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard!”
“It was,” Jeongguk agreed, awestruck, before Jimin could reply, his voice loud to be heard over the roaring cheers of the crowd. “Even the musicians stopped playing so they could hear you.”

Belatedly, Jimin realized the citizens’ applause were meant for him, the crowd flocking around them to shout praise in a language he did not know. “M-my voice,” he stuttered and ducked his head, feeling his cheeks flood with warmth. “I, I only…”

Whatever it was he wanted to say, the words died in his throat when he glanced back to where Yoongi had been standing and realized he was gone. For reasons he couldn’t even begin to fathom, his absence filled Jimin with a sudden need to explain himself, although he didn’t know what for. All he knew was that he had to find the captain and make him see.

“I, uh,” Jimin said absently at the same time as the orchestra began playing again, the crowd around them shifting to resume their dance. “I have to go, I… I’ll be right back, I only have to…” He couldn’t have finished his sentences even if he’d wanted to, unable to place the odd sensation in his chest, and so he left a confused Taehyung and Jeongguk behind and delved into the dancing crowd, his mind set on one thing and one thing only.

What is wrong with me, he thought over and over as he darted through the mass of people, driven by an urge he couldn’t name to explain something inexplicable to a man he’d once sworn he’d never sing before in all his life.

Jimin had no idea what it was he wanted to say, but he knew he had to say it, lest he lose his mind.

Making his way through the dancing crowd proved to be a lot more difficult than he’d anticipated. They shoved him from every direction, too caught up in their joy to notice his struggle, too entranced by the music to hear him ask to let him pass. It was all he could do to stay on his feet as he moved towards the edge, a task he failed just as he was about to break free; someone collided hard with his back and sent him stumbling, and he would’ve fallen if not for the strong hand that took his arm to hold him upright.

“Th-thank you,” Jimin said breathlessly and straightened up, only to have the air knocked out of his lungs as he found himself standing face to face with whom he’d been looking for.

Whatever undefined explanation he’d wanted to offer was pushed far out of his mind as he found himself pinned under Yoongi’s gaze, a shudder rippling down his spine. The captain said nothing as he released Jimin’s arm, and Jimin had to tear his eyes away from Yoongi’s for fear of his own sanity, which seemed to be teetering on the very edge, his emotions a jumbled mess in his chest.

His gaze didn’t make it very far; it caught on a smudge of yellow paint on the captain’s cheek, just below the edge of his mask, no doubt courtesy of one of his crewmen. Jimin focused on the color, barely blinking as he stared at it while struggling to gather his thoughts, a struggle that was made near agonizing by Yoongi’s complete and utter silence.

All they did was stand there, and when Jimin began to feel like it was making him lose his mind, he did the only thing he could to save himself.

Jimin couldn’t have explained what possessed him to do what he did, but slowly, with his breath still passing his lips in labored exhales and the music thrumming deep within his chest, he raised his hand to the captain’s face, and carefully, ever so carefully, he brushed his thumb over the paint on Yoongi’s cheek to wipe it away.

Yoongi said nothing. He did nothing, he simply stood there, his dark eyes glimmering behind the mask as he stared at Jimin, rooted to the spot either by surprise or incredulity that Jimin would do
something as bold as touch him. All he did was look, his gaze unreadable and tense and brimming with something that suddenly made it impossible for Jimin to turn away.

For what felt like an eternity, they only stood there, amidst the festival’s lights and music, amidst the dancing crowd and laughing, cheering spectators. For what felt like an eternity, there was nothing else, nothing but the intensity of the captain’s eyes, the one Jimin had come to know so well, the one that no longer filled him with fear.

_Calm down_, Jimin thought numbly, his hand trembling slightly where he touched Yoongi’s cheek. The captain noticed the small shift and finally moved, inclining his head in a way that, perhaps on accident, had Jimin’s touch pressing more firmly against his skin. Quickly, Jimin averted his gaze and moved to withdraw his hand, but then his eyes fell back on the smudge on Yoongi’s cheek, and he felt whatever small amount of air he still had in his lungs leave him in a quivering exhale.

In his daze, Jimin had failed to realize that his hands were still stained with the colored powder he’d thrown at Taehyung and Jeongguk, and so, rather than wipe away the paint on Yoongi’s cheek, he’d smeared it further, blending purple into the touch of yellow.

“Oh no, I-I’m sorry, I, th-there was some paint on your cheek, and I… oh no, but my hands, I-I swear I didn’t mean to-”

Throughout his nonsensical rambling, he kept his hand pressed firmly against Yoongi’s cheek, and he didn’t notice until the captain reached up and took it in his own, the fingers of his prosthetic hand curling around Jimin’s to guide them away from his face. His grip was more gentle than what should’ve been possible, and if it wasn’t enough to interrupt Jimin’s mess of an apology, the hushed words that fell from Yoongi’s lips certainly were.

“Such a beautiful voice, songbird,” the captain murmured as he released Jimin’s hand, his voice laced with something Jimin, in his state of rapt awe, couldn’t even begin to place, “but I wonder, will you ever let me hear it again, or was this my one chance?”

He chuckled at his own words, the sound wry rather than joyful, and with a sigh and a shake of his head, Yoongi turned around and left, disappearing into the crowd without sparing a glance over his shoulder.

All Jimin could do was watch him leave, his lips parted as if on the verge of speech as he stared after the captain, his words ringing clearly in his mind. His body felt oddly numb, his senses dull to everything but the frantic pace of his heart, and the one, single coherent thought that still remained in his mind.

Jimin never knew the touch of metal could be so soft.

Chapter End Notes

//dies a thousand deaths

I WILL NEVER STOP SCREAMING ABOUT THIS, HOLY FRICK, I’VE BEEN WAITING TO WRITE THAT SCENE SINCE BEFORE I WROTE THE FIRST CHAPTER. JIMIN SINGING FOR THE FIRST TIME, HIM BEING SO CAUGHT UP IN HIS HAYWIRE EMOTIONS THAT HE DOESN’T EVEN REMEMBER HIS OWN APPREHENSION TOWARDS YOONGI,

AND JEONGGUK. OKAY SO FIRST I MAKE MYSELF CRY BECAUSE OF JEONGGUK, AND THEN I MAKE MYSELF FLAIL AROUND LIKE POSSESSED THANKS TO THE SCENE™. WHAT A FECKIN’ ROLLER COASTER THIS CHAPTER WAS ISTG.

AND YOU ASKED FOR THIS!!!! DON’T COME YELLING AT ME, BECAUSE YOU AAAAAALL WANTED JEONGGUK’S BACKSTORY!!!!!!! WELL NOW YOU HAVE IT!!!!

//bursts into tears all over again

((I mean, lmao, I would’a had JK’s backstory in there either way, but now I can blame you guys for it and be all "BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR" :'D))

Now excuse me while I, emotional mess that I am, cry myself to sleep

The Festival of Lights doesn’t really exist, in case someone was wondering. It’s based on both Singapore’s own Festival of Lanterns (or Mid-Autumn Festival), and India’s Holi, the Festival of Colors. It’s sort of a combination of the two~

Also, lmao, I have no idea if Singapore has ever been the heart of trade in Asia :D:D:D GOOD THING THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION, AYYYYYY~
Furthermore, it was an almost startling discovery for Jimin to realize just how content he was in his life aboard the Agust. He smiled when Taehyung told the rest of the crew about how he’d sang, and while he refused to sing for the others to hear, it was more due to shyness than anything else, even with Yoongi present, seated at the same table in the galleys. Jimin laughed when Xiao threw an arm around his shoulder and declared that he would sing instead, a laughter that turned breathless when the carpenter began to belt out a song in a terrible voice.

Perhaps it was the fact that he was no longer nervous around the captain that caused his nerves now.

Chapter Notes

WE. PASSED. 3000. KUDOS. WHAT. EVEN.
AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-
I love you all so much, oh my god <3

Also, I have no music to offer you this time, because all the music I listened to while writing this was Bollywood music, WHICH IS THE BEST SHET EVER OH MY GOD.

Kabhi khushi, kabhi gham~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The remainder of their journey to Kolkata in India went without trouble. The five days they spent at sea following their departure from Singapore were as close to peaceful as they could be, with the only sign of disarray being Jimin’s own inner turmoil and the brooding it brought with it, whether he was up in the crow’s nest or working the bow with Lucya, or assisting Hoseok in the infirmary.

The strange confusion had settled in his chest at the night of the Festival of Lights, after Taehyung, Jeongguk, Yoongi, as well as half of Singapore had heard him sing. It was an odd sensation, one he couldn’t place no matter how hard he tried, and the uncertainty alone made restless, so much so that Hoseok felt the need to ask him if he was alright on the second day of their journey.

“I’m alright,” Jimin answered halfway through the process of changing Hisashi’s bandages, although his voice sounded uncertain even to his own ears. “I mean, I think so, I…” He heaved a light sigh and frowned as he went about his work. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “Physically, there is nothing
wrong with me, but my thoughts are a mess and I can’t seem to calm down. I’ve tried whatever I can, Jin even brewed an herbal tea to soothe my nerves, but it hardly had any effect at all, and—"

“Do you ever shut up?” Hisashi interrupted loudly from where he sat at the edge of the cot, glaring up at Jimin in half-murderous impatience.

“Hisashi,” Hoseok said in warning, but Jimin, by now used to the pirate’s attitude, simply huffed and shook his head without sparing him a glance.

“No, I don’t,” he said, unimpressed, as he rolled the fresh bandages over Hisashi’s shoulder. “Is there something you’d like to do about it?”

Jimin watched the pirate part his lips and close them again, contemplating whether or not he should rise to the challenge, but in the end, he settled for shifting his gaze and muttering a sullen, “Fuck’s sake.”

“That’s what I thought,” Jimin said snappishly before resuming his monologue, too focused on wrapping Hisashi’s wound to notice Hoseok’s amused smirk, the grin brought on by the irritable pirate’s submission. “As I was saying, it’s been days and I haven’t been able to even sleep properly. My thoughts keep me awake and distracted, and I don’t know why.”

It was only half the truth. While he might not have been able to name his inner turmoil, he knew what had laid the base for his it; it had began with Yoongi and what he’d said, with Jimin’s hand on his cheek and the gentle touch of the prosthetic limb. The more he thought about it, the more strange the whole thing seemed; every other time the captain had laid a hand on him, no matter the situation, it had been firm, even harsh, and so the softness of his touch amidst the festival in Singapore had left Jimin’s thoughts in an absolute mess.

Furthermore, it was an almost startling discovery for Jimin to realize just how content he was in his life aboard the Agust. He smiled when Taehyung told the rest of the crew about how he’d sang, and while he refused to sing for the others to hear, it was more due to shyness than anything else, even with Yoongi present, seated at the same table in the galleys. Jimin laughed when Xiao threw an arm around his shoulder and declared that he would sing instead, a laughter that turned breathless when the carpenter began to belt out a song in a terrible voice.

When Yoongi amusedly stated that perhaps if Xiao practiced hard for some hundred years, he might sound half as good as Jimin had, color rose high to Jimin’s cheeks and he found himself smiling. It was a jest, he knew, made at Xiao’s expense to make the others laugh, but Jimin took the compliment to heart either way, and when his eyes met Yoongi’s, the smile stayed firm on his lips, strangely unperturbed by the tense nervousness that used to gnaw at him.

Perhaps it was the fact that he was no longer nervous around the captain that caused his nerves now.

Thus it was a relief when Jimin finally spotted land on the horizon five days into their journey, eager to find distraction from his thoughts. “Land sighted,” he called from the crow’s nest and raised an arm to point while the other held the spyglass to his eye. “In the line of our heading.”

The pirates on deck gathered at the rail to look out over the sea, with Taehyung nearly bouncing in excitement as he signaled for Jimin to come down from his post. “I’ve never been to Kolkata before,” he chirped as soon as Jimin was within earshot. “Last time we sailed to India, Yoongi made me stay on the ship because of the amount of mariners nearby, so I’ve never been to one of the cities before.”

“You might not be going now, either,” Jeongguk teased, chuckling when the quartermaster sent him
a sour look. “Yoongi’s only taking a few of us to see the Blessed Oracles. You can’t bring an entire crew into a jungle.”

“Don’t listen to him, Tae,” Namjoon, who was leaning against the rail, said amusedly. “Yoongi can’t say no to anything you ask, so even if he hadn’t planned to take you along, you can always sway him.”

Jimin giggled at that, remembering all the times Taehyung had convinced Yoongi to do his bidding, if only for something as simple as giving him an extra piece of meat from his plate at supper. “He’s right,” he said and patted the quartermaster’s head when he draped himself over Jimin’s shoulders. “You, if anyone, will be sure to go ashore.”

Yoongi emerged from his quarters just as the Agust was about to reach the small islands clustering at India’s coast. “Take us up Hooghly River,” he told Rodel, who was positioned by the helm. “Keep an eye out for a secluded lagoon where we could leave the ship. Just as in Singapore, we don’t want to raise suspicion while we’re here.”

He moved down the stairs to join the others at the forecastle, glancing out over the islands before turning to his crew. “After we find a good place to drop anchor, the majority of us will go ashore,” he said. “We need to resupply; we’re running low on both food and gunpowder, as well as medicine, so while only five of us will continue to search for the oracles, everyone who can come ashore will come ashore.”

He turned to Namjoon. “As first mate, you’ll be in charge while we’re away,” Yoongi said. “Make sure these lazy bastards do whatever it is you tell them to.”

“Lazy bastards, he says, as if he isn’t the one who spends the most time asleep on this ship,” Hoseok quipped and quickly slipped out of the captain’s reach, sparing himself a smack to the head.

“Arse,” Yoongi grouched before turning back to Namjoon. “Make sure to keep a constant eye on your surroundings. The mariners or the Rabid Conflagration might not know where we are, but they are still looking for us.”

“I know,” the first mate said and nodded, smiling. “Try not to worry too much.”

Yoongi only rolled his eyes at that, as if the thought of him worrying was nothing short of ridiculous, but he turned to address the others without denying it. “Taehyung and Jeongguk,” he said, snorting when the quartermaster immediately lit up with a smile. “You two will come with me. We’ll need Jeongguk to find our way to the temple, and you,” he reached out and roughly tousled Taehyung’s hair, “would sulk for days on end if I separated the two of you, so you will come as well.”

The quartermaster only grinned, deaf to the accusation of his childlike behavior. “Thank you, Yoongi,” he sing-songed, chuckling brightly when the captain shook his head, the ghost of a smirk on his lips.

“And Hoseok,” Yoongi went on and looked at the doctor, who was still maintaining a safe distance from his captain. “You know more about whatever toxins or venoms we might be exposed to in the jungle, so I’d like for you to come as well, in case one of us ends up needing treatment.”

Hoseok nodded thoughtfully at that. “Hisashi has recovered well enough by now to manage without me,” he said slowly. “As long as he continues to rest in my absence, he should be just fine.” He offered Namjoon a cheeky grin. “So you’ll have to forgive one lazy bastard this time, Joon,” he mused and chuckled when the first mate returned his smile.
“Good,” Yoongi said with a huff. “And finally, the songbird.”

Jimin’s brows arched in surprise, his lips falling open when the captain looked at him. “Me?” he asked, incredulous; he’d expected to be left with the rest of the crew, possessing no trait that could be of use when venturing into a jungle. At least not to Yoongi’s knowledge; Jimin had grown up in forests, but he’d never told the man as much.

“You,” was all Yoongi said, choosing not to elaborate on his choice before he addressed the rest of them once more. “The party due the journey to the Blessed Oracles, prepare whatever you may need for the trek. I’d prefer to see the lot of you armed. There are tigers, wolves and all sorts of threats in these jungles, and I don’t want to see any one of you fall prey to a predator.”

Jimin pursed his lips at that, wondering if the last words were meant for him, but ushered the thoughts away when the captain dismissed the lot of them and made his way back to the helm. “Keep to the starboard side,” he told Rodel in passing. “There will be a fork in the river some ways up the mainland, and it will bring us to Kolkata.”

“I’ll ask Jin to prepare food to last us four days,” Hoseok said and steered his steps for the galleys. “We should be able to find fruits and nuts in the jungle, or Jimin might even be able to hunt some small critters for us,” he playfully nudged Jimin’s side as he walked past him, “but it’s better to be prepared.”

“This is so exciting, isn’t it, Chim?” Taehyung said in a voice of awe, barely able to contain himself in his glee. “I wish we see a tiger. Or a black panther, or even a wolf. Oh, and there are bears as well.” He turned to Xiao with a rectangular grin playing at his lips. “Who’s more impressive, you or the bears in India?”

The carpenter snorted so violently, it sounded more like a sneeze. “Those sloth bears ain’t got a fightin’ chance against my black bear, li’l Tae,” he said and proudly straightened his back. “I’d send ‘em running back to their holes with only a roar.”

“Or you could try singing for them,” Namjoon remarked, grinning, “and the result would surely be the same.”

While the crew descended into a fit of laughter, Taehyung tugged Jimin towards the companionway and down to the bunks, where he eagerly began to dig through his things. “What do you think I could need?” he asked as he tossed his trusted sword onto his bed. “Four days in a jungle is a long time.”

“Water,” was the first thing that Jimin could think of, and he giggled when the quartermaster rolled his eyes at the boring suggestion. “It’s the most important thing, Taehyung. Any water we find in the jungle might be fouled and undrinkable, and I’m sure you’d rather die fighting a tiger than from thirst.”

“That is true,” Taehyung said with a sigh. “Alright, water. What else?”

Jimin pursed his lips in thought, recalling the times he’d ventured into the forests of Jeju Island for days at a time. “Something to shield you from the sun,” he offered. “A straw hat or a scarf around your head. The sun can make an exerted man turn crazy and delusional. Oh,” he added and moved over to his own bunk, where he sank to his knees and dug his hand in under his mattress to draw out a small pouch.

“I will buy something like that in Kolkata,” he said cheerfully and gently shook the small bag, grinning at the soft rattle of coins, the coins he’d won in their game of Hangman’s Mercy. “It’ll be
the first thing I can buy on my own.”

Taehyung’s smile was near blinding. “I’ll do it, too,” he said, “and we can both wear the same.”

It took the Agust several more hours to reach Kolkata, sailing up the winding Hooghly River. They’d reeled in their black flags to pose as regular ship - however regular the vessel could seem, with its dark wood and sails - and they passed several others on their way, small merchant ships and sail boats. Most of the riverbank was covered by threes and forestry, the jungles reaching far, but every now and then, they’d sail past a small village and see children playing in the waters while their mothers washed their colorful clothing.

They found a secluded lagoon some kilometers away from the city of Kolkata, the small bay well-hidden behind tall trees and their thick leaves. They dropped anchor there and lowered the small dinghies, and with the exception of Hisashi, Sungsin and Rodel, the crew made their way ashore.

Jimin felt oddly conscious about the bow he’d strapped around his shoulders and the quiver at his hip; he felt as though he was walking into battle as they arrived at the border of Kolkata, even though he was the least armed one. Taehyung carried his sword at his waist, as well as a knife through his belt, a decision made after Jimin had pointed out that a sword would be too big a blade to use when building shelter. He wore his mask, and paired with his leather vest, he looked more suited for war than a visit to a temple full of oracles.

Jeongguk and Hoseok were certainly a strange sight to behold for Jimin. He’d never seen them in combat, but now, as they walked next to their captain, they bore weapons just like the others. Jeongguk carried twin broadswords at his waist, their grips gilded and glittering, and Hoseok was armed with both a blade and a pistol. He’d even shown Jimin the small explosive he’d slipped into his satchel and laughed when Jimin had stared at him in horror.

“You can never be too safe, Jimin,” he’d hummed as he flung the bag over his shoulder, and if Jimin hadn’t been so worried to hear the answer, he would’ve asked what on earth the doctor thought he’d need a bomb for in a jungle.

The sound of laughter tore Jimin out of his concerned musings and he looked around, a smile working its way onto his lips at the sight of a group of girls playing around in front of a white stone house, under the watchful eye of their mother. They were dressed in beautiful silken dresses, colorful and embroidered with silver and gold to match the bangles that hung around their wrists and ankles, the bands tinkling softly as they ran.

One of the girls caught Jimin’s gaze and quickly looked away, whispering something to her friends before pulling them towards the house, giggling as they went. “Oh, looks like our pretty bird’s taken an interest in a different kind of pretty birds,” Xiao said slyly and smacked Jimin’s shoulder hard enough to have him staggering. “A bit young for ya, ain’t they?”

Jimin furrowed his brow at that, pursing his lips in distaste at the carpenter’s insinuation. “I wasn’t looking at the girls,” he stated, rolling his eyes when Xiao only chortled. “I was admiring their dresses. They’re really beautiful.”

“Sari,” Namjoon said, smiling when Jimin looked at him in confusion. “The dresses, they’re called sari. Women all over India wear them. You’ll see as we draw closer to the heart of the city.”

True to his words, the further they strayed into the more populated areas of Kolkata, the streets were turned into a beautiful display of colors, all stemming from the garb the women wore. No matter the material of their sari, they were colorful and bright, draped loosely around their bodies and flowing gracefully as they walked. The men wore robes as well, but their colors were not half as vibrant as
the women’s, mostly white or dim pastel.

When they’d walked deep enough into the city, Yoongi pulled his crew to a halt and turned to address those who’d venture to the Blessed Oracles. “There’s a temple in the heart of this city,” he said, frowning, “where we’ll find someone who might be able to help us. She’s not fond of pirates, but she will know where we can find the oracles, so we must ask.”

“We should separate here,” Namjoon said in response. “There is hardly a need for all of us to enter that temple. The rest of us may as well start acquiring whatever supplies we need.”

Yoongi nodded at that, pinning his first mate under an almost stern look. “Take care of the crew in my absence, Joon,” he said, his features only softening when Namjoon smiled and nodded. “Good. We’ll see you lot in a few days.”

Rather than voice their usual, “Aye, captain,” the crew raised their right hand and clapped their fist to their chest twice before nodding, a gesture Taehyung, Jeongguk and Hoseok mirrored, and only when Yoongi nodded again did they disperse, walking off in groups of three or four.

Jin smiled widely at Jimin’s bewildered expression and waved his hand at him in farewell before taking off with Namjoon, and only then did Jimin realize that this was the first time since his arrival that the crew would separate from their captain for longer than a few hours. Oh, he thought, a small smile gracing his lips. They’ll worry about him.

The thought kept the smile on his lips as they made way for the temple, walking along Kolkata’s crowded streets and passing more colors than Jimin could name. Yoongi seemed to know the way, turning the corners as if he’d walked this path time and time again and answering any and every question Taehyung could think of, every wonderment related to the city.

When they’d walked for the better part of an hour, the quartermaster suddenly pulled Jimin to a halt in the middle of the street, his eyes lighting up as he looked at something to his left. “Over there,” he said and pointed to where a young man was seated in front of a small sewing shop, beautiful scarves of sheer silk hanging from the sill of the open windows. “They sell scarves.”

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Jin smiled widely at Jimin’s bewildered expression and waved his hand at him in farewell before taking off with Namjoon, and only then did Jimin realize that this was the first time since his arrival that the crew would separate from their captain for longer than a few hours. Oh, he thought, a small smile gracing his lips. They’ll worry about him.

The man didn’t seem to speak a word of Korean, but he smiled and motioned for them to do as they pleased, so Taehyung quickly dug his hands into the pile and pulled out a scarf the color of the night sky, embroidered with flecks of gilded yarn that resembled stars. “Look at this,” he crooned and wrapped the shawl over his head. “How do I look?”

“With your hair, you look like the sun shining in the middle of the night,” Jimin said instantly and reached out to poke Taehyung between the eyes, giggling when the quartermaster smiled widely. “It suits you.”

“Thank you,” he sing-songed before turning back to the display. “Now, for you.” He studied the scarves critically, humming under his breath and shaking his head for every choice he dismissed.

“You can’t wear one that outdoes the color of your hair,” he muttered to himself, and Jimin had to bite into his lower lip to not laugh at how serious the quartermaster was in choosing the correct color. “But the color can’t be dull, either. It has to be impressive enough, or it won’t be worth the...”

His voice trailed off for a moment before he emitted a sound of triumph and chose a shawl of
peacock green, its edges a soft yellow. There was an intricate pattern of silver trailing the lines of the edges, twisting and swirling before meeting at the top and growing into what looked like roots of a tree, slowly fading into the vibrant bluegreen color.

With a touch that was almost reverent, Jimin took the delicate fabric and held it up, admiring it before loosely wrapping it around his head. “I like it,” he said quietly, smiling when Taehyung nodded fervently in his enthusiasm.

“Good,” the quartermaster chirped and turned to the merchant, pulling out his own pouch of gold coins and taking one out to show it, brows arching in question. “How many?”

The man’s eyes widened at the sight of the coin, clearly overwhelmed by the value of it. He shook his head and said something Jimin couldn’t understand, and Taehyung seemed equally as lost as him until a voice rose from behind them, gruff with impatience.

“He says it’s too much,” Yoongi drawled, his arms crossed over his chest. “Even one of those coins is too much for both scarves.”

“Oh,” Taehyung hummed, frowning. “But we’ll have to pay somehow.”

Jimin nodded in agreement, and without hesitating for even a moment, he took two gilded coins out of his pouch and walking up to the merchant, smiling as he reached for his hand. “Take it,” he said and pressed the coins into his palm, quickly curling his fingers over them before he could protest. “They’re really beautiful, so they’re worth it.”

He was vaguely aware of Yoongi translating his words for the man to understand, and Jimin felt his lips curl up into a wide smile when the merchant clasped his hand in both of his and bowed his head repeatedly, murmuring words of gratitude. It took quite a bit of coaxing to get him to release Jimin’s hand again, and when he finally did, he waved at them all until they’d reached the end of the street and turned the corner.

“Keep it,” Jimin told Taehyung when he held up a coin for him to take, to pay for his half of the purchase. “You bought me my shoes, so now we’re even.”

The quartermaster’s eyes crinkled with the width of his smile as he let the gilded coin fall back into his pouch before he all but skipped over to Jeongguk to ask him what he thought of the beautiful shawl.

It took them another hour of walking before they finally reached the temple. It was a small and modest building, not like the grand temple they’d passed some time earlier. It stood at the corner of a street as part of another building, seemingly consisting of only three rooms, with a small, rounded dome melding into the plain roof.

“You’ll have to take off your shoes,” Yoongi told them as he stepped over the threshold and into the first hall, which was lined with shelves for sandals and footwear. He was quick to step out of his own, and by the time they were all barefoot, a woman appeared in the doorway to the next room, dressed in white from head to toe.

She said nothing, only looked at them all in turn before fixating Yoongi with a questioning glare, seemingly not too pleased to see them here. The captain didn’t seem surprised, however, and spoke as if he couldn’t sense her distaste. “We seek the path to the temple where the Blessed Oracles reside,” he said. “We are in need of their guidance.”

The woman gave him a long look, only interrupted when it flickered shortly to Jimin, her brow
twitching slightly before she turned back to Yoongi and nodded. Jimin frowned at her behavior, wondering why she’d looked at him and none of the others, but followed all the same as she led them into the temple.

As the woman walked, she raised a hand to ring several small bells that hung from the roof on her way, murmuring what must’ve been prayers as she passed several small statuettes, no doubt idols of her worship. One of them had more arms than Jimin had time to count, one the head of an elephant, and one was seated atop a roaring lion.

“The oracles dwell deep within the jungle,” she said suddenly, speaking clearly in korean. “There, they go about their worship undisturbed, safeguarding the gifts given to us by the gods, the Blessed Runes. They only welcome those worthy.” She threw a snide look at the group from over her shoulder, as if to say she clearly did not consider them worthy. “You may seek them out if you so desire, but you’d be fools to expect an audience with the revered pujari.”

“We expect nothing,” Yoongi said curtly, dismissing her jab. “We need their help and we will ask for it, and hopefully,” he paused for a fraction of a second to glance at Jimin from the corner of his eye, “they will make an exception for us and hear what we have to say.”

The woman said nothing more until they’d reached the end of the hallway, where she turned around to face them. “Strangers may tread no further in this temple,” she stated. “I will fetch your map, but you must wait here.”

Yoongi simply nodded at that, and so she left, disappearing through the doorway with a flick of her sari. “You’d think we came bringing the plague,” Jeongguk huffed as soon as she was gone, brow arched in something akin to offense. “I suppose that’s what you get for being a pirate.”

“This is a holy place to them,” Hoseok said and patted the navigator’s shoulder, a tight smile on his lips. “We’re just about the least holy people to come wandering in, so we should be thankful she agrees to help us at all.”

Jimin nodded absently, the frown still set firm on his brow as he stared at where the woman had disappeared. There was something in the way she’d looked at him that left an unsettling stir in the pit of his stomach, one that had escalated when Yoongi had done the same, looking at him when speaking of the oracles. “What did you mean when you said the oracles will make an exception?” he asked at last, curiosity getting the best of him.

Much to his surprise, the captain mirrored his frown to portray a sense of uncertainty. “I don’t know,” he said slowly, “but there is something in what the Pirate Priestess said that makes me believe it will not be a wasted journey.”

His words only served to increase Jimin’s confusion, but before he could press further, the woman returned, a paper scroll in her hands. “This will show you the way,” she said and held it out to Yoongi, though it was Jeongguk who took it from her, his jaw locked tight. “I’d ask you to bring it here upon your return, but perhaps it is too much to expect from the likes of you.”

“The likes of us will return your map to you when we’re done with it,” the navigator said stiffly before Yoongi could do so much as part his lips to reply; his offense was obvious now, in the crease of his brow and the downwards curl of his lips.

“Easy, love,” Taehyung whispered against Jeongguk’s neck and gently tugged at his arm to distract him while the others addressed the woman in white.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Yoongi said and curtly bowed his head, a distinct tightness to his
movements, and without waiting to be dismissed, he turned and flicked his head in the direction they’d come from, seeming eager to get out of the temple as quickly as possible.

“I’m sorry,” Jeongguk said once they were outside, his jaw still set taut as he glared at the ground as if it had been the one to offend him. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I shouldn’t have raised my voice at her.”

Yoongi heaved a sigh at that and raised a hand to the navigator’s head and lightly mussed up his hair. “Don’t look so bloody devastated, brat,” he snorted, a smirk tugging at the corners of his lips when Jeongguk’s hard expression shifted into something akin to a childish pout. “Hoseok’s right, however. We are what we are, and while we may forget it at times, they will not.”

Sullenly, Jeongguk nodded, and the captain pushed him upright before withdrawing his hand and taking a step back. “So, trusted navigator,” he said in an overly pompous voice, one that made Jeongguk chuckle despite himself, “what is to be our heading?”

“West,” he said instantly, even before unfolding the map. “As far as I know, this city isn’t built at the jungle’s edge, so we’ll have a fair bit to travel even before we reach the jungle.” He made a sound of confirmation once he’d scanned the cartograph. “See, they’ve marked the oracle’s temple here,” he said and showed the others. “It’ll take us almost half a day of walking to reach the edge of the jungle, and then, depending on the terrain, we might have to spend two nights in there before we reach the temple.”

“Half a day of walking,” Hoseok repeated in dismay, seeming almost distressed at the mere thought. “With everything we’re carrying, we’ll be exhausted before we even reach the edge. Isn’t there an easier way? We could travel by horse, or even carriage.”

Yoongi nodded at that. “I doubt anyone would be foolish enough to lend horses to a band of pirates,” he drawled and looked around, “but a carriage should be easy enough to find.”

True enough, finding a carriage large enough for the five of them was hardly a challenge, but to find someone to take them to the edge of the jungle was another matter entirely. No one wanted to take a group of men infamous for their vicious nature out to a secluded area, even if they offered to pay quite royally. After all, the pirates could just take their gold back as soon as they’d killed their escort.

It wasn’t until Jimin hesitantly approached an old man preparing to take off in his carriage pulled by two bullocks, a pair of pale, oxen-like creatures, that they found luck. The man peered down at Jimin while he explained where they had to go, using their map to show it, and while he was fairly certain the old man didn’t understand a single word he said, as soon as he finished speaking, the man spared the four pirates behind him a brief glance before nodding, a toothless grin splitting his face.

He said something Jimin couldn’t understand when they all climbed up into the modest carriage, his voice amused and cheerful, and when everyone turned to Yoongi for a translation, the captain looked away, pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed before saying, “He said we’re lucky to have such a beautiful boy in our midst, because the sight of him makes it worth the risk of escorting a band of pirates.”

While Hoseok and Jeongguk laughed at his words and Taehyung threw an arm around Jimin’s shoulders and shook him, cheering, Jimin himself tugged his new shawl down over his face to hide the blush of his cheeks, muttering something incoherent as he tried his best to fight off his embarrassment.

Thanks to the carriage, their journey to the jungle where the oracles resided was considerably shorter and easier than it would’ve been otherwise. After four hours of peaceful albeit somewhat
uncomfortable riding in the cart drawn by bullocks, the old man finally tugged at the reins to coax his oxen to stop. He turned in his seat and pointed to his right, and some two hundred meters away, across a field of tall grass, the jungle rose from the ground, stretching over hills and valleys as far as the eye could see.

“I know where we are,” Jeongguk said as he slipped down from the carriage, his eyes trained on the map. “I know where we have to go.”

“Good,” Jimin hummed, loath to think of the alternative. Before he climbed down from the cart, he turned to face their escort and bowed his head in thanks before taking the pouch from his belt and handing it over to the old man. “Thank you for taking us here,” he said, smiling. “I hope this is enough for your trouble.”

The man only returned his smile and hid the pouch inside his robes without bothering to check its contents, speaking a few words and patting Jimin’s head before moving his hand in a shooing motion. “How much did you give him?” Taehyung asked in wonder as they climbed down from the cart.

“Nine pieces, I think,” Jimin said, waving a hand as the old man departed and snorting when the quartermaster gaped at him in surprise. “It’s not like I’ll need them in the jungle, and I still have some aboard the Agust. He deserves them.”

“Is this because he called you beautiful?” Hoseok asked shrewdly, a bark of laughter falling from his lips when Jimin attempted to kick his shin. “Oh, how violent, our beautiful bird.”

“Stop that,” Jimin said loudly, his voice almost a whine. “He was sweet, and he went miles and miles out of his way to bring us here. He deserves the reward,” he insisted and adjusted the shawl around his head, throwing one end over his shoulder in a demonstrative manner that only served to fuel the doctor’s amusement. “Let’s stop wasting time and go.”

He stormed off without waiting for the others, keeping a feigned pout on his lips until Taehyung caught up with him and playfully nudged his side. “You’re really kind, you know, Chim,” the quartermaster said, and all Jimin could do was smile.

The jungle was lit with life as they walked past the first lines of trees, the sounds of birds chirping contentedly filling Jimin with an immense sense of reminiscence, as if he’d returned home after years of absence. He turned his head to look left and right, hungrily drinking in the familiar sight of dense forestry surrounding him from all sides, and as he breathed in the earthy scent of nature, he felt more confident than he had in weeks.

Even though Jeongguk was the one to lead their way, Jimin walked at the head of their small group, moving gracefully across the winding terrain. He’d stopped to take off his sandals and tied them to his belt so he could step more securely, sighing contentedly at the feeling of moss underneath the bare soles of his feet.

When they had walked for barely half an hour, they came across a cluster of abandoned bungalows, small, run-down huts and wooden cottages barely standing at the base of trees and thick bushes. “There used to be a village here,” Jeongguk told them, tapping a finger against the map, where the name was still written, “but the river north of it ran dry a decade ago, so they were forced to move.”

“Be careful,” Jimin called to Taehyung, who’d walked up to one of the huts and reached out to touch the moss growing on the surface. “They provide shelter from the strong sun, so all kinds of creatures could be living there.”
“All the more exciting,” the quartermaster said cheekily, but withdrew his hand all the same.

The deeper they delved into the woods, the more at peace Jimin felt, his heart beating happily in his chest as he walked along the trees, humming along to the birds’ songs. He let his hand trace the rough tree trunks and carefully touched their leaves as he walked past, his footsteps soundless and swift. The smile on his lips was constant; the beauty of the jungle made it impossible to stop.

Each time Jeongguk reached for his compass to ensure they stayed on course, Jimin pointed out several other ways to tell where they were. “South is where the spiderwebs are,” he told the navigator and pointed to a cobweb on the side of a sapling tree. “Their webs shine in the sun and attract their prey.”

Eventually, their trek became a hike uphill, a climb up the gentle side of a cliff. According to the map, the temple of the Blessed Oracles resided up on a mountain, at the birthplace of a waterfall, and so they were faced with quite a tiring journey to reach the top. “Watch your step,” Jimin told them as they climbed higher and higher, warily eyeing the edge of the cliff. “You never know where the ground loses its stability.”

“How do you know all of this?” Hoseok asked, his voice plagued by his labored breathing as he paused to lean heavily against a tree. “Were you raised by a forest? Or are you secretly a tree sprite?”

Jimin laughed at that. “Yes to the first, no the second,” he mused and looked around. “There was a forest at the edge of my home village, and I’ve spent almost every day of my life in those woods.” He smiled widely at the doctor’s hum of understanding. “This kind of environment is like a second home to me.”

And where is your first home? a small voice in the back of his head asked, and Jimin felt restlessness stir his inner peace when he found he couldn’t immediately answer that question.

“Perhaps I don’t need to know,” he murmured to himself as he resumed walking, glancing back at the pirates before pushing the thoughts to the far back of his mind.

They walked for countless hours, the heat of the sun slowly beginning to tear at their endurance. They were all sweating from exertion, which in turn attracted mosquitoes to bite at them and seek their blood, and finally, when they reached a small clearing in the dense forestry, Yoongi called for a break.

“We’ve walked far enough to deserve rest,” he huffed, wiping sweat off his brow as he spoke, scowling deep under his own touch. “And I swear I’m going to burn this jungle to the ground if I have to endure another bite of these fucking insects.”

“Don’t be like that, Yoongi,” Taehyung said cheerfully, somehow managing to maintain his bubbling energy even through his obvious exhaustion, his vest sticking to his damp skin in a way that would surely make any other man squirm and grimace. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Aboard my ship, in my quarters,” the captain said gruffly and reached out to take the flagon of water Jeongguk offered him. He drank deep, the apple of his throat bobbing every time he swallowed, and he emitted a contented sigh when he lowered it again. “I’m not made for this kind of shit,” he muttered and passed the flagon to Hoseok.

They settled comfortably in the clearing, either sitting or lying down on the uneven ground, basking in their moment of peace. Jimin, however, remained standing; he was far from tired, feeding on the energy the jungle seemed to radiate, and so he was happy where he stood, gazing out over the edge of the cliff and admiring the scenery beneath them.
There was a river running at the mountain’s base, most likely a product of the waterfall depicted on the map. It was active, unlike most forest rivers, flowing fast and urgent as it carved its way through the trees. If Jimin closed his eyes and concentrated, he could hear it from where he stood, the splash of water against the river’s rocks; it filled him with a sense of serenity to know he was far away from it.

“Stop complaining, captain,” Hoseok was saying when Jimin turned his attention back to the crew, a smile gracing his lips at the sight of the doctor chucking peanuts at Yoongi’s side to get him to do as told. “We all know you’re too lazy to climb more than the stairs to your precious quarters, but you could at least try to find something good in being here.”

“Stop throwing those at me, you-fine,” Yoongi barked and rocked to his feet, muttering under his breath about insubordination as he turned his head. “So where am I supposed to find all these good things you speak of? In the flowers? The scenery? The bloody pleasurable company?”

His last words had Taehyung laughing so hard he had to lean against Jeongguk to stay seated upright while the navigator hid his grin behind the map and Hoseok rolled his eyes with a sigh at his captain’s hopelessness. “To name a few,” the doctor grinned, joining Taehyung in his laughter when Yoongi shook his head in disbelief and turned away.

“Well,” the captain mumbled as he gazed out over the endless jungle that spread out before them. “I suppose the scenery isn’t terrible.” He walked over to the edge of the cliff to get a better view, placing a hand against an old, rotted tree trunk for stability as he leaned out.

Jimin saw it happen as if time had slowed down. He saw the moss and dirt under Yoongi’s feet sink deeper than it should’ve, he heard the sound of roots crackling in the unsteady ground, and with a thrill of sudden dread, he realized what was about to occur. Before he could think, before he could cry out in warning, he lashed out, reaching for Yoongi’s arm just as the jut of land caved in under the captain’s weight and threw him out over the edge of the cliff.

Jimin’s hand closed around Yoongi’s arm, but it was too late; rather than pull him up to safety, Jimin was dragged down with him, his heart seizing in his chest as he was made weightless before their fall.

“Yoongi!” he heard someone scream through the wind howling in his ears and the horror screaming in his chest. “Chim!”

Terror tore hard at his senses as they plummeted from the sky, gravity tearing them down faster than his mind could comprehend. The distance between the top of the cliff and the ground had seemed so far, yet as they fell, Jimin only had time to register Yoongi hissing out a frantic curse before the river at the base of the cliff rushed up to meet them, eagerly welcoming them into its restless waters.

Jimin crashed hard through the surface and plunged deep, pulled down by harsh currents, and as he thrashed against the cold water of the river and struggled to hold his breath, he cursed himself for never truly learning how to swim.

Chapter End Notes

……… oh.
Oh no.

Uh...

SATAN’S AT IT AGAIN, AYYYYYYYYY-

//clears throat

Well! :D I suppose :D I should just :D say :D see ya next week! :D

:D:D:D::DD:D:D:D:D:D:D::D
Chapter Summary

Jimin couldn’t breathe.

His eyes stung as he searched for something to save him in the water, his skin throbbed from when he’d hit the river’s surface, the impact startlingly painful. Panic dug its claws into his chest, and he couldn’t breathe.

He glimpsed a hint of shimmering sunlight, glittering in its reflection on the violent waters of the river that pulled him further and further down, jostling him around until his vision was full of darkness once again. Desperate, he threw out his arms, flailing in an attempt to grab onto something, or perhaps swim; he wasn’t quite certain which it was. All he knew was that he had to do something, lest the overwhelming terror in his chest consume him in his final moments.

Chapter Notes

WELL LOOK AT THIS, SURPRISE SURPRISE. YOU THINK YOU’RE THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN PLAY GAMES, HUH, BIGHIT, WELL, GUESS AGAIN.

//maniacal cackle

Ahem. Okay.

One quick comment on this matter, however. To those who wonder why I choose to keep an update schedule when I seem to overshoot it so often (their phrasing wasn’t this nice, btw :’D); I won’t go into detail about why I do it, but please be aware that it’s for my own sake, not yours. I love every single one of my readers, but don’t misunderstand; I’m not writing this story for your sake, and I don’t owe you anything. :)

((IT’S A TINY MINORITY OF MY READERS THAT BEHAVES LIKE THIS, I KNOW THAT, PLS KNOW I LOVE YOU ALL, I JUST FELT LIKE I NEEDED TO MAKE THIS POINT!!! <3))

Right. Okay, so now that that’s outta the way… OKAY! RIGHT, SO!! THERE WAS A CLIFFHANGER, YES?? THE MOST LITERAL CLIFFHANGER TO EVER EXIST?? OKAY, TIME TO DEAL WITH ALL THAT SHIT NOW, WOOOOOO!!

//throws confetti
Jimin couldn’t breathe.

His eyes stung as he searched for something to save him in the water, his skin throbbed from when he’d hit the river’s surface, the impact startlingly painful. Panic dug its claws into his chest, and he couldn’t breathe.

He glimpsed a hint of shimmering sunlight, glittering in its reflection on the violent waters of the river that pulled him further and further down, jostling him around until his vision was full of darkness once again. Desperate, he threw out his arms, flailing in an attempt to grab onto something, or perhaps swim; he wasn’t quite certain which it was. All he knew was that he had to do something, lest the overwhelming terror in his chest consume him in his final moments.

And then, all of a sudden, he was thrown up through the surface.

Shocked, Jimin drew a lungful of air, gasping as oxygen flooded his senses and lit them on fire right before he was dragged down again, a startled noise leaving his lips in a flurry of bubbles before he had the sense to ground his jaw and hold his breath. The unyielding currents of the river handled him as if he weighed nothing, turning him until he couldn’t have told left from right or up from down.

His chest burned with the need to draw breath, his airways prickling and begging him to just inhale; surely there was oxygen in the water, enough to keep him alive. The thought burst into his mind and refused to leave, clouding the rest of his senses and carving a heavy tension into every muscle in his body, yet his jaw remained locked, his instincts refusing the thought with every fibre of his being, even as he felt like he was being torn asunder from the inside out.

Do something, he wanted to scream at himself, thrashing with his arms in an attempt to reach something to hold onto. The very tips of his fingers brushed over wet, slick stone, his nails scraping against the rough surface before he was jarred away from it and back into weightlessness, slowly drowning in the strong arms of the river. I can’t drown, I can’t, I can’t die here.

Suddenly, the currents hurled him hard against a rock jutting up from the bottom of the river, the surface of it smooth and unyielding. Pain exploded throughout his shoulder as his side crashed against the dense wall, an exclaim tearing its way up his throat before he could fight to suppress it. A spray of bubbles burst from his lips, carrying the last of his breath, and dimly, he realized he was lost now, the need for air too strong to resist any longer.

Perhaps in desperation, his mind attempted to recall the last time he’d felt so helpless, so weak, and behind his tightly shut eyelids, he saw himself kneeling in a cell, chains hanging heavy around his neck and ankles. Crippling, grounded, a wingless bird that had lost its freedom to fly, an ability it didn’t even possess to begin with, yet the loss of it had been devastating all the same.

Until he’d been saved.

I’ve come for you, songbird, a voice had told him, laced in bottomless rage, yet it had been Jimin’s salvation and he’d clung to it like a lifeline, choosing its fury rather than his helplessness.

This was the thought that crossed his mind when his supply of air ran out and he parted his lips to inhale, and just as the first gulp of water rushed into his lungs, a hand closed tight around his arm and pulled.

As soon as Jimin was dragged up above the surface of the river, a horrible, gurgling sound rose from his throat, air clashing with the water in his lungs and causing him to feel as if he was choking. He couldn’t think, his chest convulsing near violently, torn between drawing in as much air as it could whilst fighting to expel the suffocating liquid. His muscles were spasming, his legs kicking without
his command, and his hands quivered with panic as he gripped at the hand holding him tight, his nails scraping hard against metal.

He vaguely registered a solid surface against his back and the sun blinding his vision before a weight pressed heavy against his chest, pushing once, twice, forcing the water in his lungs to rise to his throat, and with the third press, Jimin retched, his body drawing itself taut as water gushed past his lips. He turned on his side and heaved, tears blinding his vision as he struggled to breathe through the waves of water pumping out of his lungs, one of his hands coming up to claw at his throat in his desperation.

“Come on, songbird, get it all out,” a voice told him urgently, sounding just as out of breath as Jimin felt, and he squeezed his eyes shut when he felt a hand smack down against his back, hardly a gentle pat. It served its purpose, however; it shoved another wave of water out of him and he gagged, his body quivering like a leaf in a storm. “Breathe.”

*I’m trying,* Jimin tried to say, but nothing but a series of wet coughs made it past his lips. His throat convulsed and he dug his fingers deeper into the straining muscles of his neck, his nails almost ripping through skin when they were suddenly pried away from him.

“I told you to stop doing that shit,” Yoongi hissed, the metallic fingers of his prosthetic limb holding his hand in a vice grip while the other remained pressed firmly against Jimin’s back. “Breathe, songbird.”

“I’m trying,” he managed at last, his voice a hoarse croak, instantly followed by a racking cough. His throat convulsed as a final splash of water rose to seep past his lips, and then air flowed deep into his lungs and he gasped. Oxygen flooded his senses like a rush and he drank deep and greedy of the warm air, tears of relief stinging hard at his eyes.

*I’m alive.*

Jimin stayed on all fours for countless seconds, breathing loud and high-pitched as he struggled to recover from the shock of nearly drowning. He vaguely registered Yoongi retreating from his person, releasing his hand as he sat down on the stony riverbank, and Jimin squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his brow against the rough ground, a bizarre urge to laugh stirring in his chest.

*I’m alive,* he thought again, and when he did laugh, hoarse and thin, the captain did not comment.

When Jimin’s breathing began to settle, he turned so he was lying on his back, his chest heaving as he stared up into the foliage of the dense jungle, dappled sunlight shining through to warm his skin. He was thankful for the hard stone underneath him, uncomfortable as it were; he felt lightheaded now, as if he’d faint as soon as he raised his head.

“Thank you,” were the first words out of his lips, smiling around them as he spoke. He couldn’t quite bring himself to look away from the beauty of the jungle’s ceiling, the sight of nature grounding him in his recovery, but he could feel Yoongi’s gaze on him and basked in its reassurance. “Thank you, I… thank you.”

The captain emitted a dry scoff, as if he found Jimin’s gratitude irksome. “Why’d you reach out for me?” he asked gruffly, his left hand scraping against the rocky riverbank as he shifted in his seat, and the soft sound cut through the air’s warmth and sent a shudder down Jimin’s spine. “If you can’t swim. You knew we were standing above a river, so you should’ve let me fall.”

Again, Jimin felt a bizarre urge to laugh, although this time, it was at the ridiculousness of Yoongi’s statement. He could never have done that, he knew; whether his attempt to save the captain had been
conscious or an act of instinct, Jimin could never have simply stood by. “If I should’ve let you fall,” he said, “then you should’ve let me drown.”

“Wha-” From the short exclaim alone, he could hear Yoongi’s incredulity at his statement. “How the fuck could I have done that?” the captain barked, sounding so utterly affronted by the mere suggestion, Jimin couldn’t help himself.

A string of bright, airy giggles bubbled past his lips, the sound like chimes against the roaring of the violent river, and only when he sobered up did he finally tear away his eyes from the foliage and turned them to Yoongi, the smile on his lips so wide his cheeks ached. “Precisely,” was all he said, as if it was all the explanation he needed to give.

“You…” The captain parted his lips and closed them again before heaving a deep sigh, reaching up to drag his fingers through his hair, pushing the wet bangs out of his face. “You are bloody impossible, songbird,” he stated.

Jimin was fairly certain his sudden, carefree giddiness was a mere product of the fact that he’d almost died, but when Yoongi spoke, he couldn’t quite force himself to suppress it. “So are you, fox,” he said instead, his voice void of nervousness or tension, and his smile only widened at the sight of the captain’s irritably confused frown.

“Fox?” Yoongi repeated and narrowed his eyes as if attempting to gouge whether or not he was being ridiculed.

Jimin nodded almost thoughtfully before turning his gaze back to the beautiful foliage. “You keep calling me songbird,” he mused, “so I suppose I should call you fox in turn.”

He heard the captain scoff, but there was hardly any malice in the sound. “That’s bloody stupid,” Yoongi deadpanned, his voice dully monotonous.

Jimin simply rolled his eyes at that, the smile firm on his lips. “Then what should I call you?” he asked, unsure of what it was he was hoping to achieve by bickering with the captain about such a small matter.

“By my name.”

The answer was instantaneous yet spoken almost apprehensively, and in the blink of an eye, all the tension, all the nervousness Jimin had always felt in Yoongi’s presence returned, although it bore a certain unfamiliarity, the same kind he’d felt in the heart of Singapore. He parted his lips and closed them again, not a sound finding their way past.

He must’ve taken too long in replying, for Yoongi emitted a low chuckle, the sound void of glee, just as sombre as it had been when he’d released Jimin’s hand amidst the dancing crowd of the Festival of Lights. “Is it so hard?” he wondered quietly, his voice unbearably soft. “To say my name.”

Yes, Jimin thought, although he did not know why.

“You’ve called it once.”

It was hardly a truth Jimin didn’t already know, but Yoongi’s words made him stiffen all the same. He remembered it vividly; in the heat of a naval battle, when he’d watched a pistol be aimed at the captain’s back, he had called out Yoongi’s name in an attempt to make him see. In a fit of desperation, he’d reached out for the captain in the only way he’d known how, to make him realize the threat upon his life, a life Jimin couldn’t have borne to see lost.
Suddenly, the giddiness in his chest was gone, replaced by something far more important. Suddenly, the small matter of names weighed as heavy as any other, and slowly, Jimin turned his head, the smile gone from his lips as he looked up at the captain. “You remember that?” he asked, his voice a mere whisper.

He was surprised Yoongi heard him at all over the roaring of the river, but the captain snorted at the question, the sound utterly without malice or ire. “S hard to forget, songbird,” he said and shook his head.

He didn’t look at Jimin again after that, busying himself with folding the sleeve of his shirt up over the length of his prosthetic limb, yet his expression remained painfully downcast, a crease settled deep into his brow. The air was far from peaceful, the tension between them near palpable and steadily becoming harder to endure, desperate to be quelled. For a moment, Jimin could only look from where he lay, uncertainty flooding his veins as he watched the captain resign himself to their silence, his jaw clenched as he went about wiping off his metallic arm as best he could.

The sight caused Jimin to ache, an odd sensation twisting deep in his belly, and when he could bear the silence no longer, he parted his lips, his voice quivering around the first syllable as he murmured, “Yoongi.”

The captain halted his ministrations as if he’d frozen to the spot, his head snapping up so fast it must’ve hurt his neck. He looked at Jimin with eyes wide in surprise, perhaps even shock, and the tension in the air shattered at the same time as it doubled in force. Jimin recognized it, he knew this feeling; it was the same that had plagued him ever since the Festival of Lights, but this time, he wasn’t alone in it.

This time, Yoongi didn’t leave.

He knew the captain could feel it too, the same kind of pressure that pushed hard against Jimin’s chest and made it difficult to even breathe. He had to, otherwise he would’ve spoken already, he would’ve broken the near deafening silence that hung heavy between them rather than simply stare at Jimin, his previous dejection nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps Jimin was delusional, his mind playing tricks on him as a result of his brain still recovering from its lack of oxygen, but in that moment, he could see himself reflected in Yoongi’s expression, the doubt, the hesitation, the inability to identify the overwhelming feeling stirring in his chest.

Oh, Jimin thought and swallowed against the thickness in his throat, perhaps he does see.

He didn’t know what it was he wanted to say - perhaps it was something as simple as telling Yoongi that he should call Jimin by his name, too - but whatever it was, he knew he didn’t want to say it lying down. He was overcome by a need to speak to the captain as an equal, so he moved to push himself upright, but the instant he shifted his right hand, pain shot up his shoulder and he winced, the words resting on the tip of his tongue turning into a sharp exclaim before he could even begin to voice them.

Startled, Jimin shifted onto his left side, bracing his arm against the stony surface to take pressure off his right, a dull ache throbbing at the fall of his shoulder. He ground his teeth hard and attempted to push himself up, the muscles of his neck straining as he tensed under the ripples of pain, and when he finally managed to sit upright, a small sound akin to a whimper found its way past his lips.

“Songbird.” Jimin took a deep breath and looked at Yoongi, who had moved closer, a mere ghost of worry framing the frown that marred his brow as he kneeled before him. “What is it?” he asked, his eyes tracing the length of Jimin’s right arm, limp and trembling. “What happened?”
“I don’t know,” Jimin pressed out and raised his good hand to push at the collar of his shirt in an attempt to get a proper look at his shoulder. “I think I hit something in the river, I…”

He vaguely remembered a burst of blinding pain amidst the chaos of him nearly drowning, an unyielding impact against his back. Tentatively, he brushed his fingers over his shoulder, only to flinch when he found an unnatural dent in his skin, jutting slightly out of place. The wince travelled all the way to his right hand and he jerked it away on instinct, a motion that only served to trigger another pulse of throbbing pain in his shoulder. “It hurts,” he hissed, his voice high and sharp.

“You can still move it, so it’s not broken,” Yoongi said and reached out, moving Jimin’s hand out of the way so he could place his own against his shoulder, thumbing at his skin without much finesse. “It’s dislocated.”

Jimin’s jaw ached with how hard he was gritting his teeth, struggling to hold back the cries that burned in his throat. Dimly, he wondered if the captain’s callous touch was a product of years and years of harsh survival, a life that hardly allowed for carefulness and gentle consolation, or if Yoongi himself was simply so impatient at heart, rough by nature.

Jimin drew a quivering breath and raised his voice to ask, “How do I fix it?”

“You don’t,” Yoongi said flatly and positioned himself properly on his knees in front of Jimin, his left hand coming up to rest against his arm. “I do.”

He nodded and bit into his lower lip to stop it from trembling. “Will it hurt?” he managed, his voice oddly firm.

“Yes,” the captain said, but whereas his answer was blunt and instantaneous, his movements were not, his hands hesitating. His eyes narrowed slightly as he glanced at Jimin’s face and he seemed to be driving an internal battle, his jaw moving as if he was chewing on his own words. “We’re far from the sea, songbird,” he said quietly at last, and Jimin couldn’t tell if he’d won or lost, “but it may still overflow.”

In spite of himself, Jimin smiled, a trace of something akin to trust and affection flickering in his chest upon the realization that the captain’s words were ones of comfort. A promise of unavoidable pain, but also a vow of reassurance that, if the pain would be too much for Jimin to bear, he would not be judged for any tears he might shed.

He’s a good man, he remembered Taehyung saying, over and over, and even in Jimin’s current state of mind, he couldn’t bring himself to be surprised at how readily he agreed.

“It won’t,” he said and looked up to briefly meet Yoongi’s eyes, hoping he could properly convey his determination. “I won’t let it.”

The captain gave a small nod before his grip on Jimin’s arm and shoulder turned firm, and Jimin only had time to draw a deep breath and hold it before Yoongi twisted, his thumb pressing down against the bone of his arm and pushing it back into place with a blood-curdling pop.

A strained cry burst past Jimin’s lips before he could stop it and he jerked forward, his muscles drawing themselves taut and forcing him to curl in on himself. The top of his head hit something damp and firm and he pushed against it for leverage, his eyes screwed shut as he struggled through the ripples of throbbing pain that coursed from his shoulder to the rest of him.

“Breathe.”

He felt the repeated word rather than heard it, Yoongi’s chest reverberating with his low voice under
Jimin’s brow, and Jimin nodded as best he could, inhaling sharply through his nose as he waited, waited for the spasms of pain to dissipate and fade. “I’m alright,” he pressed out, his lie obvious from his voice alone, crackling pitifully. “I’m alright, I just… I need a moment.”

He could feel a small shift in the captain’s posture and imagined him nodding. Beyond that, Yoongi made no effort to move, seemingly content in allowing Jimin to lean against him for as long as he needed. His hands were still holding Jimin’s arm and shoulder, and Jimin took his promise of reassurance to heart, his eyes remaining shut as he leaned further against the captain’s chest.

“Have you healed injuries like these before?” he asked after a moment of silence, seeking a distraction from the dull numbness of his arm. “You seem well versed in how to do it.”

Yoongi snorted, the sound lighter than before. “Once or twice,” he drawled. “Before I learned how much strength was too much for my left arm to bear without throwing my shoulder out of place.”

Jimin stilled at that, his eyes fluttering open at the realization of the captain’s words. He remembered Taehyung speaking of the time it had taken Yoongi to grow used to his blessing, but it had been in a tone of humor; he’d never mentioned the physical struggle that must’ve come with it. He tried to imagine it, losing an arm and having to grow accustomed to a new one, an prosthetic limb that functioned only as much as his control over his blessing allowed.

With a chill down his spine, he wondered just how much trial and error had led to the captain’s deft hand in healing such an injury.

Suddenly, Yoongi shifted, moving his hands to grab both of Jimin’s arms and push him back, his movements careful and nervous. When Jimin looked up, confused by the sudden change, he saw apprehension carved into the captain’s frown, as if he was rendered uncomfortable by the words he himself had spoken.

He released Jimin’s frame and rose to his feet, quickly busying himself with looking around and settling on looking up the river. “I can’t see the cliff from here,” he muttered gruffly, as if he was speaking to himself rather than Jimin. “The river must’ve carried us further than I thought.”

Jimin followed his lead and turned to gauge their surroundings, but there wasn’t much he could make out through the trees’ foliage and density. “We could make our way back upstream,” he suggested slowly. “Would the others wait for us where we fell?”

“No,” Yoongi spoke the word with such certainty, Jimin couldn’t help but arch his brows in surprise. “In case of separation between those who sail aboard the Agust,” the captain said by way of explanation, “the place to reunite will always be our destination. It’d be bloody foolish of them to wait, or worse, start looking for us. It’s more likely to have them end up lost as well.”

“So they’ll wait for us at the temple of the Blessed Oracles,” Jimin stated and watched the captain nod. “And how will we find our way there?”

“We follow the river,” Yoongi said and jerked his head in the direction they’d came from. “There was a waterfall drawn on the map next to the temple. I don’t know much about jungles or forests, but I assume that waterfall is the source of this river.” He fell silent for a moment before turning to send a quick glance at Jimin from the corner of his eye. “Can you walk?”

“Yes,” Jimin said without giving it much thought and looked down, tentatively flexing the fingers of his right hand. They moved well enough, but his shoulder voiced its protest, reviving the dull ache that’d almost faded already. “I think so,” he corrected himself and smiled wryly. “At least the problem is not in my legs.”
"Your arm will heal faster if you rest," Yoongi said slowly, the frown marring his brow deepening when Jimin only shook his head. "You won’t be able to walk around like that, songbird."

"I will be," Jimin countered simply and rose to his feet, albeit with some effort; he kept his right arm cradled with his left, so he lacked any proper balance on the uneven riverbank. "We don’t want to be out in the open when the sun sets. I doubt the predators in this jungle are scared of humans."

He felt something tightening slightly around his waist as he stood and looked down, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips at the sight of the shawl he’d bought in Kolkata. The sheer scarf must’ve slipped from his head during his fall, only to wind itself around his waist and left shoulder, the wet material sticking to his shirt. "Help me with this," he told Yoongi, foregoing any formalities as he peeled the shawl off himself. "I’ll use it as a sling for my arm."

The captain looked like he wanted to protest, but all he did was roll his eyes and mutter something incoherent under his breath before walking over to help. He folded the scarf once and tied its ends together behind Jimin’s neck while Jimin kept his arm raised to measure the correct length. He tried to not think of their proximity as Yoongi reached around his head to tie the knot, keeping his eyes trained firmly on a pair of colorful birds sitting high up in a tree above them.

"Thank you," he said nervously when they were done and his arm could rest comfortably in the makeshift sling.

The captain nodded, but he didn’t immediately retreat. "You keep saying that, songbird," he muttered, his voice low and raspy, and when he raised his eyes from Jimin’s arm to his face, Jimin swallowed hard against the urge to shudder.

"You keep giving me reasons to, Yoongi," he breathed, too afraid to raise his voice above a whisper lest he shatter the illusion of stillness that enveloped them both. He waited for Yoongi to look away and turn, to take a step back and reestablish the distance between them, but it took him an eternity to do so, seemingly determined to trace his gaze over every inch of Jimin’s face, the frown on his brow only sinking deeper.

When he finally did retreat, Jimin released the air he’d kept inside his lungs in a quivering exhale and shook his head to clear his mind, his thoughts in a complete disarray. Numb, he watched the captain walk away, his shoulders set square and tense as he made his way along the riverbank, a stubbornness to his strides.

"Calm down," Jimin told himself as he moved to follow the captain, his eyes trained on the ground to ensure he didn’t misstep in his daze. *Don’t think too much.*

The first few hours of their hike passed in complete and utter silence. With their path as good as laid out for them, a simple task of following the river upstream, there was no need to discuss directions or movements. Jimin, still plagued by his confused tension, was too nervous to raise his voice first, and Yoongi was quiet by nature, Jimin had learned aboard the Agust. Thus silence hung heavy between the two, broken only by the sounds of their surroundings.

In an attempt to distract himself, Jimin shifted his attention to the jungle itself, listening to the choir that surrounded them from every corner. The distant trill of birds never ceased, nor did the beats of their wings, and if he truly focused, he could make out the low chatter of a group of monkeys, the animals keeping a safe distance from the two intruders.

Soon enough, Jimin’s nerves settled and he found himself enjoying their hike as well as he could, what with his arm still injured and the fact that the two of them were still lost. The sounds of the jungle stilled the turmoil in his chest and lulled him into a comfortable state of mind, even with the
moist heat of the jungle causing sweat to trickle down his temples and back.

He would glance at Yoongi’s back every now and then, wondering what was going on in his head, but Jimin deemed it best not to ask; if the captain desired silence, he would not disturb him.

It wasn’t until the sun began to set that Yoongi finally broke the silence, so abruptly it startled Jimin and almost caused him to stumble over a root. “We need to find somewhere to rest,” he said, his voice hoarse from hours and hours of silence. He stopped dead in his tracks and turned around to look at Jimin, brows arched in what could only be expectation. “Let’s hear it, songbird. How do we survive until dawn?”

Jimin didn’t realize he’d been gaping at the captain in surprise at his sudden question until Yoongi inclined his head in what must’ve been impatience. He was quick to close his mouth, his teeth clicking audibly, and he cleared his throat to buy himself some time before looking around. “The most important part is fire,” he said tentatively. “Fire is the only thing that’ll keep animals at bay. The ground is safest; most predators can climb trees, and walking into an unfamiliar cave is like asking to be killed.”

He eyed the river with a slight frown; he knew it was their closest chance at finding their way, but a river meant water, and water meant traffic in the wildlife, whether it be animals or insects. “We’ll want to move as far away from the river as we dare,” he said and looked at Yoongi, feeling that twinge of nervous tension in his chest again when he found the captain’s eyes on him. “Fire, uh, fire will keep the animals at bay, but we’ll be eaten alive by mosquitoes if we stay too close to a source of moisture.”

Yoongi snorted at that, huffing an incoherent curse under his breath at the mere thought before he looked around, peering into the dense foliage. “I’ll mark the trees so we’ll find our way back here,” he said when he turned back and tapped a finger to the hilt of one of his daggers. “That way, we can get as far away from these fuckin’ bloodsuckers as possible without getting even more lost than we already are.”

Jimin couldn’t help but emit a small giggle at the captain’s dismay, though he was quick to shake his head when Yoongi turned back to him, a brow arched in question. “Nothing,” he said quietly before clearing his throat again. “Right, so… uh, should I look for a good spot for us to stay, or..?”

“My apparently dumb arse would’ve looked for a cave,” the captain said dryly, “so yes, songbird, if we’re to make it through the night, it seems you ought to be the one to do the looking.”

Jimin wasn’t certain if it was a jest or not, but he found himself smiling all the same, another giggle brimming in his chest, and he pressed his lips together and lowered his head in an attempt to hide it from Yoongi. “A-alright,” he said when he regained control of his expression, avoiding the captain’s eyes. “Come with me.”

They walked for another fifteen minutes until Jimin finally found a suitable spot; it was a small clearing in the dense forestry, barely three paces wide, but still big enough for both of them to be able to lie down on the even ground. “Over here,” he called over his shoulder and watched Yoongi sheathe his dagger, having just carved a deep cross into one of the nearby trees. “We can sleep here.”

The captain came up next to him and gave their assigned spot a brief glance, nodding even as he pursed his lips, obviously not satisfied with the state of their lodging, or lack thereof. “We need to get a fire going before dark,” Jimin told him and shifted awkwardly. He would’ve been more than willing to collect firewood on his own, but with his right arm in its current state, he could hardly lift anything that required two hands.
Yoongi seemed to have read his struggle on his face; he emitted a sound that was half a snort and half a chuckle and took a step back. “I’ll get the firewood, songbird,” he said and moved to turn, but paused in the middle of his step. “Do you still have water?”

Jimin reached for the satchel at his waist and jostled it slightly, nodding when he felt the shift of water in the small flagon inside. “Yes,” he said.

“Then drink,” Yoongi said curtly and turned away. “You look dehydrated as all hell.”

How on earth the captain could see that, Jimin had no idea, and he was gone before he had the chance to ask. “I’m not even thirsty,” he muttered petulantly to himself, but did as told either way, clumsily working the satchel open with his left hand. He used his right arm to cradle the flagon against his chest as he uncorked it, wincing at the dull sensation in his shoulder when he jerked the damn thing open.

He had been thirsty, he realized when he took his first sip, the lukewarm liquid quenching the dryness in his mouth and throat. He drank carefully, taking no more than what he thought was necessary and sighing in content when he lowered the flagon again. He shook it gently and worried his lower lip at the amount that remained; barely half the flagon’s contents were left, and with no telling of how long it’d take them to find their way to the temple, all he could do was hope it’d be enough.

While he waited for Yoongi to return, Jimin did his best to prepare for the campfire, using his feet to clear a small patch on the ground where they would be able to build it. He walked along the edges of the clearing and picked up every sizable rock he found and carried it to the middle the middle, but when he’d circled the open space twice, he’d barely found enough stones to make half a circle for a small fire.

“We need more,” he mumbled to himself, toeing at one of the rocks.

“More what?”

An indignant yelp spilled from Jimin’s lips before he could stop it and he turned so fast he almost lost his balance, his heart hammering in his chest at the sight of Yoongi, an armful of broken branches and twigs in his arms. “You scared me,” Jimin said, unable to keep the accusing tone away from his voice.

“I can tell, songbird,” the captain said almost amusedly as he made his way into the clearing and unceremoniously dropped the firewood onto the ground. “What do we need more of?”

Jimin frowned at him for a moment longer before shaking his head and turning back to the incomplete circle of rocks. “Small stones to trap the fire,” he said. “I couldn’t find enough of them around here, but I think there should be more by the riverbank.” When Yoongi said nothing, he looked up, only to almost roll his eyes at the captain’s obvious disbelief. “We can’t start a fire without a way to keep it under control,” Jimin stated. “We don’t want to burn down the jungle?”

“Don’t we?” Yoongi countered in a voice heavy with irony, as if burning down the jungle was preferable to having to walk all the way back to the river to fetch some stones. All Jimin could do was mimic his expression of disbelief, and the captain emitted a dry scoff, throwing his hands up in defeat. “Alright, alright, I’ll get the bloody stones.”

Irritation seeped from every step he took as he disappeared into the dense forestry once again, muttering under his breath as he went, and Jimin found himself smiling in spite of himself, reminded of what Hoseok had said only minutes before they’d separated; the captain was lazy.
The sun was setting fast, the jungle becoming darker and darker for each passing minute. Jimin fidgeted nervously as he waited, suddenly all too aware of how defenseless he was in this very moment; he’d lost his bow in the river, and even if he’d still had it, his right arm was out of commission, which meant that if any animal, big or small, decided to come charging at him now, there was very little he’d be able to do about it.

Finally, his tension became too much to bear and he set about starting the fire, quickly piling up the branches and shoving handfuls of fallen leaves into their midst. He flicked open his satchel once again and took out the small flint rock he’d packed, along with a small but firm iron hook. “As long as I watch the fire,” he said to himself, his heart stuttering in his throat, “it’ll be fine. I won’t let it get out of hand.”

It took quite a bit of effort and no small amount of pain to create the sparks to start the campfire. With Jimin’s dominant hand barely functioning, he had to hold the iron hook in his left while his right supported the weight of the push and pull along the flint; not only was his attempts clumsy, but every drag hurt his shoulder. The dull ache spread down his arm and up his neck, and by the time he finally managed to send a burst of sparks into the waiting pile, his temples were throbbing with a painful headache.

He resisted the temptation to blow on the small sparks and have the leaves ignite properly. He didn’t dare risk it, even in his state of steadily mounting dread, so he settled for letting the sparks eat at the leaves and branches, heating them up without breaking out into a proper flame.

“Hurry,” Jimin whispered to the decreasing sunlight. “Hurry, you idiot.”

The dark had already had time to settle by the time he finally heard footsteps coming from the edge of the clearing, heavy and clumsy enough for him to know just who they belonged to. “Where were you?” Jimin asked, relief mingling into his distress even as he kept his eyes on the pile of branches, intently watching the leaves crumple and smoke, the sparks flickering and spreading. “How could it take so long?”

“The fuck did you expect, songbird?” Yoongi retorted snappishly, sounding considerably out of breath. “You sent me to fetch a pile of stones, did you imagine I was going to come running with them in two seconds?”

As if to demonstrate the effort it had cost him, he dropped the rocks he’d gathered next to Jimin, who didn’t even blink at the heavy thud they made upon hitting the ground. He reached out to grab one, frowning slightly as he searched for the opening of whatever sack the captain had carried the stones in. He worked as quickly as he could, placing the rocks in a neat circle around the smoldering pile, and when he was content with the circle he’d made, Jimin finally leaned in and blew at the sparks, a sigh of relief gusting past his lips when the twigs and branches instantly began to burn.

“Why so tense?” Yoongi huffed and bent down to pick up the fabric he’d carried the stones in, and with a twinge of annoyance, Jimin looked up, lips parted and ready to once again explain that without fire, they were as good as dead in the darkness.

All those words died on the tip of his tongue, however, when his eyes landed on the captain’s bare back, the light of the fire illuminating the sheen of sweat that spread across his pale skin. Dimly, Jimin realized that the sack in question must’ve been Yoongi’s shirt, the thought absent as he stared, unable to pry his eyes away.

Intricate patterns of black ink spread left and right across the entirety of the captain’s back, and even in the darkness of the night, Jimin recognized the shapes for what they were. He recognized the winding lines that made the shores, the lines that marked the borders of every land’s reach. He
recognized the islands, having sailed past most of them only a few days past.

Into the skin of his back, Min Yoongi, the Black Fox of the East, had carved his world, all the countries that resided on the eastern part of the earth, every country he’d been made to rule over.

Slowly, Jimin rose to his feet, barely daring to breathe as he walked closer to the captain, his eyes wide as he stared at the tattoo. He could read the countries’ names, the names of their cities and the names of the seas that surrounded them. He could see the winding rivers and the mountains, but it wasn’t them that drew him in, that made him reach out and press his hand against Yoongi’s back.

Too lost in his state of awe, Jimin didn’t notice the way the captain tensed under his touch nor his sharp intake of air. All he could do was look, look at the smaller names written haphazardly across the entire map, beneath the names of the places where Yoongi had first met them.

On Korea’s eastern coast, next to the name of a harbor city, he read the words *Taehyung, my brother*.

Jimin felt his heart constrict in his chest, a shuddering breath gusting past his lips as he trailed his hand along the captain’s back, his touch featherlight as he searched for the others. He found Hoseok’s name halfway up the mainland, directly below Korea’s capital city. He found Namjoon and Jin close to the northern border between Korea and China and Jeongguk at the southern shore. He found Xiao in Shanghai, Hisashi in Fukuoka, as well as several other names, and he traced his hand over each and every one of them until he finally stopped at Korea’s southernmost island.

For a moment, everything ceased to exist, every sound faded away, every breeze of the wind went still. For a moment, there was nothing, nothing but Jimin’s heart beating hard in his ears as he stared, unblinking, at the island that had been his home. Below its name, Jeju, a single word was written, not a name, but something that must’ve been of equal value.

*Songbird.*

Suddenly, Jimin wanted to cry.

“What are you doing?”

The question was spoken quietly, the captain’s voice soft and utterly void of even a trace of hostility, but Jimin recoiled as if he’d screamed, as if the skin of his back had burned Jimin’s hand. “I-I’m sorry,” he stammered, blinking hard as he turned away before Yoongi could see his face. “I’m sorry, I… I don’t know why I just…” He ground his teeth around the first sob that threatened to rise up his throat, fervently shaking his head to make up for the words he couldn’t speak. “I’m sorry.”

He could feel the captain’s gaze on him, boring into the back of his head, but he couldn’t bring himself to meet it, not with tears burning hot in his eyes nor with his voice threatening to break.

It hurt.

There was a pain in his chest he couldn’t explain, white-hot and intense, and it was all he could do to not sink to his knees and crack under it. It was only a tattoo, only a map of the world at Yoongi’s feet, yet he could feel it, its unmeasurable importance, and it was too heavy a thought to bear. Why, Jimin cried inwardly, gripping hard at the front of his shirt. *Why does it hurt so much?*

He didn’t know how much time had passed before Yoongi decided to break the silence, forcibly prying Jimin out of his own thoughts. “I’ll take the first watch,” he said slowly, his voice oddly clear, laced in something that only served to feed the ache in Jimin’s chest. “Get some rest, songbird.”
Jimin managed a jerky nod, his movements stiff and clumsy as he moved to lie down next to the fire, his back to the captain all the while. He couldn’t look at him, not for fear of what Yoongi might see on his face, but for fear of what he might see on Yoongi’s. The thought of anger, of apprehension, of pity, of just about any possible emotion frightened Jimin more than he could tell, and so he couldn’t look at him.

It felt like hours had passed before Jimin’s body finally eased out of its crippling tension and allowed him to rest, and however fitful he knew his sleep would be, he succumbed to it easily, wanting nothing more than to free himself from his thoughts, if even for only a little while.

Chapter End Notes

:(
I'm...

........

//bursts into tears

I-I mean..!

I mean THIS IS ONE BIG BATCH OF YOONMIN. YOONMIN, YOONMIN, YOONMIN ALL AROUND, HOLY SHET, LIKE-

JIMIN. SAID. YOONGI'S. NAME. I'M SCREAMING.

YOONGI FIXING JIMIN’S SHOULDER, AND THE WHOLE “The sea may still overflow,” ARUHEILAUHVKADHS YOU SMOOTH TALKER ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!!!

AND YOONGI’S TATTOO. I'M ACTUALLY CRYING?!???? I wAs on thE veRGe oF teArS isTG.

YOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONNNNNNNNNNMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM?N

Nah, okay, I mean, yeah, because we all KNOW they're gonna fall head over heels in love with each other, all of these interactions seem a LOT MORE ROMANTIC than they actually are :D like, yeah, there's definitely SOMETHING between them, but they don't know what it iiiis~

This story will kill me one day, I swear. Even when things are fluffy, I die. AND WHAT A WAY TO GO IT’LL BE, BOIIIIIIII-

In truth, he didn’t dare hope. He didn’t dare let himself believe that what had come to be his name mattered as much as the names of those the captain loved most in this world. That he mattered as much.

In a feeble attempt to distract himself, Jimin began to push himself up from the ground, careful to not put a strain on his right arm as he sat up, biting back a groan at the stiffness of his spine. He blinked hard, his head swimming with fatigue, and he looked around, his gaze intentionally avoiding Yoongi as he resumed his search for what it was that could’ve woken him.

Chapter Notes

HEY HO, HERE WE GO AGAIN, WOOO!!

Some of you might notice that this chapter is shorter than what the word count on my twitter post was, and that's because I decided to cut out a piece of this chapter and save it for the next. Dun' worry, there's still plenty of GUD SHIT left in this one!

SO. LEGGO, HERE WE GO, YOONMIN TIME ONCE AGAIN, AYYYYYY-

No music because my headphones broke and I had to write this without music and I'M SO SAD AND AHHHHHHHHHHHH-

Okay. ON WITH THE SHOW.

When Jimin woke from his far too short slumber, he wasn’t certain what it was that had roused him. He felt groggy and disoriented, as if he’d been coaxed from the deepest part of his sleep, and part of him wanted to simply close his eyes and drift off again, the aching muscles of his body hungry for more rest.

He didn’t, however, choosing instead to shift where he lay and blink hard against the paleness of the early morning as he searched for whatever it was that had woken him. The air was warm and still, not a sound to be heard in the small clearing, the first rays of the sun not quite reaching above the horizon yet. “Why,” Jimin groaned in a voice near whining, his sleep-drunk mind refusing to clear way for his thoughts.

He turned as far as his injured shoulder allowed and craned his head the rest of the way, squinting as he looked at the small fire he’d built in the night. It had burned out, quite recently, if the billowing smoke still rising from the blackened branches was any indication. Jimin frowned, another thick
groan falling from his lips at the thought that Yoongi hadn’t kept the fire alive, but the sound trailed off into a soft exhale when he looked past the campfire and saw the captain himself.

Yoongi was seated on the ground next to the fire, his knees raised to his chest and his arms crossed over them to cradle his head. He was sound asleep, his face for once slack and serene, void of its usual stiff tension; he looked smaller this way, more peaceful than Jimin had ever seen him. The lack of the crease in his brow and the hardness of his jaw made him seem so much more befitting of his youth. The skin under his eyes was dark with exhaustion, and Jimin felt his tired frustration at the lack of the captain’s care with their fire fading.

Instead, a small smile graced his lips upon the realization that Yoongi had let him sleep longer than he should’ve; while Jimin was still exhausted, he knew he should’ve taken over the captain’s place as lookout sometime in the middle of the night, before the light even began to show itself on the horizon. “Just like this,” he whispered into the morning air, “you give me more reasons to thank you.”

Jimin looked at him until the memories of the night came creeping back, his smile twitching as he thought of the tattoo on Yoongi’s back. Songbird, he had read amongst the rest of the crew’s names, as if he was just as important as the rest of them.

He was quick to turn away when he felt his emotions begin to rise in his chest once again, swallowing hard to keep them at bay. Don’t, Jimin told himself sternly and closed his eyes, forcing himself to take deep, calming breaths. Don’t overthink it. Don’t misunderstand.

In truth, he didn’t dare hope. He didn’t dare let himself believe that what had come to be his name mattered as much as the names of those the captain loved most in this world. That he mattered as much.

In a feeble attempt to distract himself, Jimin began to push himself up from the ground, careful to not put a strain on his right arm as he sat up, biting back a groan at the stiffness of his spine. He blinked hard, his head swimming with fatigue, and he looked around, his gaze intentionally avoiding Yoongi as he resumed his search for what it was that could’ve woken him.

As Jimin tilted his head back to glance up into the jungle’s dense foliage, he noticed, with a thrill of dread, exactly how quiet it was. Gone was the various singing of birds and the croaking of frogs, the sounds of apes chattering high in the trees. Barely an insect’s wingbeat could be heard in the silence of the early morning, and when Jimin lowered his gaze to the treeline surrounding the clearing where he sat, his heart ceased to beat in his chest as he realized why.

A tiger stood between the trees, enormous and hulking, its silent presence alone more than enough to drive away any nearby animal, critter or otherwise. It was massive, much larger than Jimin would’ve ever imagined a tiger could grow to be, built large with muscle and raw strength. Its striped fur was more red than orange, a striking contrast to the jungle’s green. It all but radiated peril, and Jimin found himself unable to breathe, his lungs rendered useless by the fear that tore mercilessly at his chest.

Its piercingly yellow eyes were trained on him, unblinking as its nose twitched and its muzzle moved around a soft snarl, the sound reverberating through the air of the clearing. It didn’t look away, not even when it moved to the side to stand more firmly on the uneven ground, its paws hitting heavy against the earth, shifting easily over the winding roots.

When the animal’s full body came into view from behind the dense trees, Jimin drew a sharp inhale before he could stop himself and instinctively recoiled, his mind reeling with what he saw.
The tiger stood on six legs rather than four, every limb thick with strength and equipped with claws that could open a man’s chest with a single swipe. It moved with all the grace of any feline, effortless and fluid as it stepped over the roots, as if this was how it had learned to walk, on more legs than its species allowed.

*This can’t be real,* Jimin cried internally, refusing to accept what it was he was seeing. It had to be an illusion, an apparition brought on by his terror, but no matter how hard he tried to convince himself, no matter how hard he attempted to grasp at his rationality, the tiger looked the same. *It can’t be.*

A numbness spread through Jimin’s body the longer he stared, his blood carrying fear-driven adrenaline to every corner of him. The animal didn’t stray from the edge of the clearing, but rather than comfort him, it only served to make Jimin’s dread escalate. *Don’t move,* he told himself over and over, knowing it was only his own stillness that kept the predator at bay. *Don’t move, or you’ll die.*

It was a hard command to obey when every last one of his instincts screamed at him to flee; every second he waited felt like a lifetime, the muscles of his body tightening until he felt he might snap in two. Without breaking eye contact with the beast, he parted his lips, and the first word he managed was a name, although he spoke it as if it had been a plea.

“Yoongi,” Jimin breathed, his voice a thin, high-pitched whisper as he stared at the tiger, his heart twisting in dread as he watched its ears twitch in response to his voice. He waited, unsure of what it was he wanted to captain to do; the animal could likely kill them both before Yoongi would have the chance to draw even one of his daggers. “Y-Yoongi.”

He heard a sound akin to a soft groan to his right and watched the tiger’s ears twitch again, its nose flaring, and through his dread, Jimin saw an opportunity, a flicker of sudden determination forcing its way through his helplessness.

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, steeling himself for what he was about to do. It was stupid, he knew, but if he was to die at the hand of a vicious predator, he would try to do what Yoongi had done for him so many times already.

*Quick, you must be quick,* Jimin chanted inwardly, swallowing down his fear as he looked up again, meeting the tiger’s glare without cowering. *Say the words, and say them right.*

Weeks and weeks had passed since he’d last used it, but when Jimin parted his lips again, the Canary’s voice fell from him as easily as ever, the sharp trill echoing through the clearing, and in the fraction of a second it took the tiger to respond, he broke their eye contact and stumbled to his feet, lunging to the side just as the animal emitted a sound like the rumble of thunder, a deafening roar.

He saw Yoongi jerk upright where he sat, brutally torn from his sleep by the tiger’s bellow, but with hardly a second to lose, Jimin did little to be careful as he all but threw himself at the captain, ignoring his startled exclaim in favor of reaching for one of the daggers at his waist. With his teeth gritted hard, he drew the blade out of its sheath and pushed himself back up, turning on the heel to face the predator.

The tiger broke its charge barely two meters away from them, its fur bristling along its back as it emitted another growl, sharp as a hiss. “Get back,” Jimin cried shrilly and brandished the dagger, the grip of his left hand quivering and clumsy. He wasn’t quite sure whom his words were meant for; while the sight of the blade might’ve stopped the beast’s approach, it was hardly threatening for an animal of that size, thus his words might as well have been for whom he was trying to protect.

“Fuck, what the *fuck?*” Behind him, Yoongi was struggling to his feet, staggering in his sleep-drunk
state; Jimin felt his prosthetic hand clamp down on his shoulder for stability, and while it triggered a
dull ache in his right arm, he didn’t move, his eyes never straying from the tiger. “What is that
thing?” Yoongi spat, his voice hoarse and thick with what Jimin could only recognize as dread as he
took in the creature in its abnormality. “What—”

“Be quiet,” Jimin bit off when the tiger emitted another snarl and began to pace, its eyes once again
focused on him as it moved sideways, forcing Jimin to turn along with it to keep himself standing
between the animal and Yoongi. “Don’t move a muscle until I say so.”

He suspected the captain wouldn’t comply easily, too headstrong to do anything but take command
in a situation of danger. Thus he was prepared when he felt Yoongi shift behind him, likely to reach
for the other dagger at his waist. As quickly as he could, Jimin took his right arm out of its sling and
reached behind himself to grab hold of the captain’s wrist, a trembling exhale gusting past his lips at
the sensation that shot up his arm.

“Songbird,” Yoongi hissed in warning, his breath falling hot against Jimin’s neck, but he ignored it,
his movements mirroring the tiger’s. “Release me.”

“Be quiet,” he repeated, this time as a whisper, barely audible. His grip tightened, both around the
dagger and the captain’s wrist as he watched the animal circle the two of them, and when the tiger
broke its pacing to walk towards them instead, Jimin felt every muscle in his body draw itself taut,
fighting to keep his hands from trembling. “Be quiet…”

It was as if time had slowed down as he watched the predator approached, his heart beating loud in
his ears. He held his ground, his stance wide and defensive even in his fear, refusing to cower when
the tiger emitted another soft snarl, a low, rumbling sound as it drew close, so close that Jimin had to
raise his arm to keep the dagger leveled with the creature’s face.

He felt Yoongi’s metallic hand clamp down harder on his shoulder when the tiger stepped within
arm’s reach, raising its great head to properly fixate its glare on Jimin; only now, when they stood so
close, did Jimin realize just how big the animal was, standing almost as tall as he did. There wasn’t a
sliver of fright in the beast’s eyes, even with the blade of the dagger almost touching its muzzle, and
Jemin dimly wondered what he looked like in its eyes, if he seemed all the terrified little bird he felt
like.

Do it, he told himself, his fingers tightening around the dagger. Do it, do it now, kill it or you won’t
have another chance. He could’ve done it; when the tiger shifted ever so slightly, the blade came to
rest against its cheek, grazing but not enough to break the skin underneath its rough, red fur. Do it!

Jemin tried, truly he did, but no matter how loudly his thoughts screamed at him to move his hand, to
push the blade through the tiger’s skull, he didn’t move. He could feel his own thoughts reflected by
the captain, fed into his body through the hard grip on his shoulder, but all he could do was stare, his
body frozen where he stood.

Suddenly, a distant, deep ringing echoed through the air, reverberating through the trees and causing
the very ground beneath their feet to quake. Startled, Jimin recoiled with a sharp gasp, the dagger
slipping through his fingers, and he heard Yoongi’s whispered curse at the same time as the tiger
snarled, torn out of its reverie by the sound of what must’ve been a bell ringing.

Before Jimin could regain his composure, he was pulled backwards, so roughly he would’ve fallen if
not for the grip on his shoulder. He was thrown into a momentary disorientation, through which he
heard the animal’s sharp roar and the sound of heavy footsteps retreating, accompanied by the
whisper of steel swiping through air and Yoongi’s voice, loud and urgent as he snapped at the tiger
to, “Get back, you bloody freak, back off!”
When Jimin looked up, he found himself to be the one standing behind Yoongi, their positions switched. The captain seemed infinitely more confident in his stance, towering over both Jimin and the animal, one hand holding firmly onto his second dagger while the other held Jimin in place in a vice grip.

The tiger had recoiled the instant Yoongi had surged forwards, drawing back several paces until there was a safe distance between them, and truly, even as the beast lowered its upper body towards the ground in a display of threat, an offensive stance braced on six legs, Jimin couldn’t say who had the upper hand. Neither one of them showed a single trace of fear, the air between them crackling with tension so heavy Jimin felt his own legs begging to fold under the pressure.

Then the ringing of the bell sounded again, the deep sound quivering through the foliage and rustling its leaves. “What the hell is that sound?” Yoongi spat without taking his eyes off the tiger, perhaps instinctively shifting backwards to better hide Jimin from sight.

“I don’t know,” Jimin breathed, wincing as he cradled his right arm, his side pressed against the captain’s back, and even through his state of dread in the face of the tiger, he remembered what hid underneath Yoongi’s black shirt. He shook his head in an attempt to rid himself of the thoughts, sinking his teeth into the inside of his lower lip and biting hard. “I… I don’t know.”

None of them moved another muscle until the bell tolled for the third time, somehow louder than before; it echoed through the clearing as if they’d been standing right beneath it, haunting yet calming, and when the final remnant of the sound had faded, the tiger straightened up and turned away, its threatening demeanor gone in the blink of an eye.

Shocked, both Jimin and Yoongi could only stare as it walked away from them, hardly caring for the dagger still raised and ready in the captain’s hand. It padded gracefully back to the edge of the clearing, baring its back without concern, but when it reached the first line of trees, it stopped and turned around to look at them, silent and expectant.

“What the fuck is going on?” Yoongi muttered and turned where he stood, his grip on the dagger remaining every bit as strong even in the lack of hostility from the animal. “Is it controlled by the sound of the bell?”

“I don’t know,” Jimin said again, hardly daring to move with the tiger’s gaze still fixated on him. “Wh-why is it looking at us? Why isn’t it leaving?”

Instead of answering, the captain released his grip on his shoulder and bent down to pick up the dagger Jimin had dropped, moving slowly so as to not startle the beast, but even when he straightened back up again, now wielding double the threat, the tiger did not move, utterly unperturbed.

“What the bloody hell is it…” Yoongi’s curse trailed off halfway through, the frown marring his brow only deepening even as something akin to understanding flickered across his face. Wordlessly, he sheathed one of his daggers and threw a quick glance at Jimin before taking a step forward, twigs and leaves crunching loud under the sole of his shoe.

The sound caused a near violent shudder to tear its way down Jimin’s spine, alarm rising fast in his chest, but just as he was about to ask the captain what on earth he was doing, the tiger turned back around and resumed walking, striding soundlessly into the dense forestry. Realization dawned slowly on Jimin, his eyes widening when he looked between the animal and Yoongi. “It wants us to follow?” he asked, his voice breathless in his disbelief.

“I have no bloody idea,” the captain snorted, seemingly far from content with the possibility, “but
this deep in the jungle, there’s only one place where that sound could come from, and if this thing is somehow connected to the temple of the Blessed Oracles, the only reason for it to fuckin’ stare at us like that is because it’s waiting for us to follow.”

Jimin parted his lips and closed them again, too lost in his incredulity to find the proper words to respond. Instead, he looked back at the tiger, and true enough, as soon as it realized Yoongi hadn’t moved past his first step, it stopped and turned around to glare at them once again. “It can’t be,” he said slowly, shifting backwards rather than following after the captain. “How on earth could the oracles control an animal like that?” He shook his head, his lips curling down into a deep frown. “It can’t be. They don’t control it. You can’t have already forgotten that it attacked us only minutes ago.”

“Then let’s hear your brilliant idea, songbird,” Yoongi scoffed and turned to face him, frustrated impatience obvious in his scowl. “Tell me why it didn’t kill us both just now, when you were stupid enough to put yourself in between. It certainly wasn’t because of you.”

An icy chill seeped into Jimin’s veins at that, offense replacing the anxious worry in his chest. Suddenly, he could taste bile in the back of his throat, and the dull ache in his right shoulder seemed all the more prominent. “Stupid,” he repeated stiffly, the word leaving a foul taste in his mouth. “Stupid, is that right?”

“Yes,” Yoongi retorted snappishly, cocking a brow almost in challenge. “What else would you call it? You don’t even have the function of your dominant hand, yet you thought the best course of action was to, what, to stop me from interfering?”

“I was trying to-” Jimin ground his teeth around the rest of his words, interrupting himself before his voice could escalate and crack, or worse, before he could tell the captain exactly why he’d done what he did. “Fine,” he bit out instead, his jaw clenched tight in anger. “Have it your way, then. Since I’m so stupid, I’ll just do as you say. Let’s follow an enormous tiger into territory we don’t know, because that, apparently, is the clever thing to do.”

Had Jimin been calmer, he might’ve been startled by how quickly Yoongi’s anger grew to match his own, a scowl digging deep into the features that had been so soft not minutes ago. His jaw moved with whatever harsh words he undoubtedly wanted to speak, his posture straightening in the same manner Jimin had seen it do whenever the captain’s temper flared, but for all the rage he all but radiated, Yoongi said nothing. Instead, he shoved his other dagger into its sheath and turned around, hissing something incoherent as he walked towards the tiger, who hadn’t moved throughout their spat.

Fuming, Jimin lingered to draw a few lungfuls of air in a futile attempt to calm himself, but when he eventually followed after the captain, he was just as angry, heat simmering in his chest. He slowed down when he was close enough, keen on leaving as much space between himself and Yoongi as he could, trudging several paces behind him.

His apprehension was hardly limited to the captain; he had no desire to move closer to the tiger than absolutely necessary. In his state of ire, he couldn’t quite call his suspicion a product of fear, but perhaps it was an instinct brought on by his blessing, the hesitance to put even an ounce of trust in a feline beast that had attempted to attack not only him, but Yoongi as well.

His lips curled down at the latter thought and he shook his head to drive it away. Don’t be stupid, he told himself with a sense of wry irony and sent a sharp glare at the captain’s back before turning his attention to his right arm, which was still out of its sling. With his teeth gritted hard to not emit a single sound, he used his left hand to bring his right to rest in the sling once again, wincing at the surge of discomfort in his shoulder.
Jimin didn’t look up from his ministrations until he felt a pair of eyes on him, and he did little to quell his irritation as he briefly raised his head to meet Yoongi’s gaze. “What?” he asked, curt and standoffish before returning his attention to his arm, struggling to keep his movements calm and careful as he adjusted his limb to rest more comfortably.

The captain didn’t immediately answer, silently observing him with that familiar intensity, the last thing Jimin wanted to be subjected to in this moment. When Yoongi finally spoke, his voice was tense with his own ire. “Your arm—”

“It’s fine,” Jimin snapped as soon as he knew what it was the captain wanted. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he realized that Yoongi was likely concerned, but Jimin was hardly in the mood to admit it, stubborn in his anger.

“But—”

“I said it’s fine.”

He paid no heed to the captain’s frustrated sigh. “Are you going to sulk the rest of the way?” Yoongi asked in a tone that suggested just how ridiculous he found the mere thought.

“Yes,” Jimin replied flatly, huffing as he finally managed to get his arm to sit right in the sling without his shoulder aching with every step he took. “I see no reason for me to do anything else.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, you...” He could see the captain’s prosthetic limb curl into a fist, the metal creaking in protest, and he half expected him to ram it into a nearby tree. Strangely, the thought of Yoongi turning on him rather than a tree didn’t even cross his mind. “You’re bloody impossible, songbird,” the captain gritted out, his voice rendered austere by the apparent effort it took to not lash out.

“You said that already,” Jimin retorted, although he stopped himself before he could think back to when it’d happened; recalling that Yoongi had saved him from the river would only serve to sway his ire.

“Aye,” the captain agreed, “and you keep proving it to be true.”

Jimin bristled at that, raising his eyes to glare at the back of Yoongi’s head and hoping it would catch fire. “Well,” he seethed, “what else can you expect from someone who’s stupid enough to try and save the great Min Yoongi from a six-legged tiger?” He didn’t realize his slip until the captain turned to look at him again, and Jimin was quick to avert his eyes, an agitated sigh falling from his lips. “It doesn’t matter,” he said curtly, flicking his head in the direction they were heading. “Just... just walk.”

He felt Yoongi’s eyes on him for several seconds longer, his gaze heavy as ever, before he finally turned away with a muttered curse, after which silence settled over the odd party they made.

The tiger seemed completely undisturbed by their raised voices, content in ignoring them as it led them deeper and deeper into the jungle. Rather than following the river, it walked its own path, yet Jimin could tell they were moving parallel to the stream, keeping a weather eye on their surroundings whenever they turned too sharply for his taste. The constant lack of animals kept him on edge; he knew it was courtesy of the tiger, but a part of him reasoned that if even the birds up on the highest branches of the jungle’s trees sought refuge from the animal’s presence, so should he and Yoongi.

He kept his thoughts to himself, however, allowing the silence in the air to carry.

They walked for what felt like hours. The sun had time to rise high in the sky, its unforgiving rays
seeping through the foliage and making their trek that much more unbearable. Jimin was already sweating before the ground beneath their feet began to slope upwards; after a meagre ten minutes of climbing over thick roots and steep rocks, his began to feel as if he was expelling every drop of moisture that existed in his body.

Halfway through their climb uphill, Jimin realized, with a sense of petulance, that Yoongi had been right. He knew the temple was situated somewhere along the cliffs of a mountain, and so, as they made their way higher and higher, he had to accept the fact that the tiger was indeed leading them to the temple of the Blessed Oracles.

Half of him was relieved, eager to no longer be lost, while the other half, the one that clung stubbornly to his ire, resented how smug the captain would undoubtedly be as soon as he was proven correct.

“Songbird.”

Jemin jerked out of his thoughts, startled by the low roughness of Yoongi’s voice, made hoarse by the hours he’d gone without using it. The captain had come to a halt a few meters ahead of him, standing by what looked like the edge of the jungle, light shining strong beyond the treeline. “We’re here,” Yoongi told him, a strange look on his face that Jimin resolutely ignored as he climbed the rest of the way to come stand next to the captain and see what it was he wanted to show.

As soon as he pushed away the foliage in his way, all of Jimin’s sullen thoughts vanished to make way for his awe, his eyes widening at the sight of their destination. The temple was enormous, standing taller than any building Jimin had ever seen, its walls decorated with pillars and idols and statues, all made out of the same pale red hue of rock as the mountain it had been built on. It seemed to have been carved out of the ridge itself, its outer walls melding with that of the surrounding mountain on all sides but one.

The jungle was alive all around the temple, large trees growing along the cliffs surrounding it, their leaves crowding its walls and casting beautiful shadows on its countless idolatries, dappled sunlight illuminating their features. A grand stone stairway rose from the ground and carried up to the temple’s entrance, an impressive archway that led deep into the shrine’s inner sanctum.

Birds of every color Jimin could name perched along the temple walls; unlike the rest of the jungle, these birds seemed utterly unafraid of the tiger's presence, content in their cheerful trilling even as the animal lumbered towards the temple.

“Oh my god,” Jimin whispered as he stepped out of the forestry, enraptured by the sheer beauty of the majestic temple. He had to tilt his head back to see the very top of it, and he might’ve stumbled in his steps if not for the faint touch to the small of his back guiding his way. “It’s so beautiful.”

A quiet hum of agreement sounded from behind him, but before Jimin could turn, a near deafening screech erupted from atop the enormous stairway, startling him within an inch of his sanity and prompting him to recoil so violently he backed right into Yoongi’s chest. “What the-”

“Chim! Yoongi!”

Jemin blinked rapidly through his disorientation, and relief swelled hard in his chest when he saw the figure bounding down the stone stairs, looking almost like he was flying in his hurry. “Taehyung,” he said, sighing, his lips stretching into a wide smile as he straightened up. “They made it.”

The quartermaster completely ignored the tiger’s presence, sprinting past it as if he didn’t even realize it was there. “I was so worried,” he cried, barely slowing down even as he spread his arms wide,
ready to envelop Jimin in what would likely be a bone-crushing embrace.

He never quite reached so far, however; when he was a meagre two meters away, Yoongi pushed his way past Jimin and raised an arm to receive Taehyung directly against his chest, the collision drawing a huff out of him, the sound traveling along with half the air in the captain’s lungs. “Fuck’s sake, Tae,” Yoongi grunted, rolling his eyes when the quartermaster closed his arms tight around his shoulders. “Be a bit more careful, would you?”

Taehyung arched his brows in question, and Jimin, too preoccupied with muffling his giggles at the quartermaster’s antics, failed to notice when the captain whispered something in Taehyung’s ear before detaching himself from the embrace. The quartermaster’s eyes went wide, alarm replacing his glee as he took in the state of Jimin’s right arm, and his approach was far more careful this time.

“Are you alright, Chim?” he asked and raised his hands to hover over the sling, as if not touching him was a true hardship. “What happened to you? We saw the river take you away deeper into the jungle and I wanted to come after you, but Hoseok told me I couldn’t, that we had to keep going, and I—”

“Let him breathe, Tae.” Jimin leaned away from Taehyung to peer past him and saw the doctor and Jeongguk hurrying towards them, both of them looking immensely relieved. “Glad to see you safe,” Hoseok said and sent a quick smile at Yoongi before turning to Jimin, his brow furrowing in worry. “What happened to your arm?”

“I collided with something in the river,” Jimin said and rolled his left shoulder in a shrug, attempting a reassuring smile to ease the doctor’s concern. “The impact dislocated my shoulder, but I’m alright, I promise. He…” He looked over at where the captain stood, too busy tousling Jeongguk’s hair to notice Jimin’s glance, and Jimin found his earlier irritation as good as gone. “Yoongi pushed it back into place,” he finished and turned back to Hoseok. “It hurts a bit when I move it, but at least I can still move it.”

The doctor’s worried expression did falter at that, if only to be replaced by surprise. “Oh,” he voiced, a small, unreadable smile gracing his lips as he, too, sent a glance at his captain. “I see.” He shook his head when Jimin inclined his head in question. “I’m glad to hear you’re alright,” he said. “Although I would still like to have a look on your shoulder, if only to make sure it’s positioned right.”

Jimin nodded at that and parted his lips to reply, but he barely had the chance to speak before Taehyung emitted another delighted sound, once again succeeding in startling Jimin. “Oh, you brought them here, didn’t you, big girl?” the quartermaster chirped and all but skipped over to the six-legged tiger, who had taken a seat at the bottom of the grand stairway. “Come here, I have to thank you.”

Shocked, Jimin watched the pirate throw his arms around the animal’s neck and none too gently pull it close towards him to bury his face against the fur of its throat. “T-Tae,” he exclaimed and took several steps forward, worry trumping his apprehension in regards to the tiger and granting him the courage to scurry closer. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t look so frightened,” Jeongguk said, grinning at his shellshocked expression. “They get along well. She loves him.”

“They get along,” Jimin repeated monotonously, his voice laced in disbelief, but before he could do more than glower at the navigator for chuckling at his obvious confusion, the tiger emitted a rumbling sound and rolled over onto its back, pulling Taehyung down with it until he was splayed over its stomach. The quartermaster emitted a cheerful laughter and pushed himself upright so he
could run his fingers along the tiger’s chest, scratching it until it purred.

“She came to greet us when we got close enough to the temple,” Hoseok said brightly, amused by Jimin’s reaction. “She’s a guide of sorts, I think. She serves under the oracles.”

Yoongi scoffed at his words, looking almost as skeptical as Jimin felt. “How the bloody hell do you get a freak like that to serve anything?” he asked, a nervous tension to his jaw as he watched his brother jostle with the tiger’s four front legs.

“Don’t call her that,” Taehyung said, pouting beneath his mask. “She’s not a freak. She’s good. She helped you find your way back, didn’t she?”

“Aye, she did,” the captain conceded with a huff.

With a sense of defiant hesitance, Jimin looked over at him, waiting for him to show some sort of triumphant smugness for having been in the right whereas Jimin was wrong, but Yoongi only met his gaze with a brow arched in question, as if wondering why he was staring. Silently, he shook his head and made to turn back to Taehyung, feeling oddly content, but he caught a hint of white in the corner of his eye and looked to the top of the stone stairway.

A woman had emerged from the grand archway of the temple entrance and was descending the stairs, moving as gracefully as the tiger had in the jungle. Just like the women of Kolkata, she was dressed in a sari, but hers was made out of cloth rather than silk, its shape resembling the robes of a priestess. She was barefoot, but anklets chimed bright with every step she took, accompanied by the soft tinkle of the bells she’d tied in her hair.

“You have arrived,” she said when she reached the bottom of the stairs, her voice gentle and high. She pressed her hands together and murmured a word of greeting, and her eyes swept over Yoongi and Jimin, her expression unreadable and blank, before she gestured towards the temple. “I bid you welcome. The great oracles have been expecting you.”

Yoongi nodded and flicked his head in a silent command for his crew to follow, a trace of exasperation seeping into his frown when Taehyung emitted a sound of protest. “Quartermaster,” the captain said, but the impatient tone of his voice fell on deaf ears.

“She can come inside the temple, right?” the quartermaster asked of the woman, reluctant to climb off the animal’s stomach. “She did before.”

“Vahana may do as she pleases,” she replied smoothly. “If she wishes to accompany you to the courtyard, she may do so.”

Her answer was hardly an affirmative, but Taehyung grinned widely either way and quickly stood up, holding out a hand for the tiger to nose at. “Come with us, girl,” he said, beckoning her as he took a step back, and much like a pet would follow its trainer, the animal rose to its feet and padded after him, climbing the wide stairs with ease.

“Vahana,” Jimin repeated slowly, warily observing the tiger. “Is that her name?”

He wasn’t certain who the question was meant for, but it was the woman who answered. “No,” she said simply, “but it is what we call her.”

Her statement left him more confused than before, but he chose not to press, too distracted by the temple’s magnificence. Up close, the idolatries and statues were even more beautiful, incredible in their detail as they towered over the visitors. There were faint traces of color spread across their features, likely faded by the passage of time, but they seemed reverent all the same.
Much like in the smaller shrine they’d visited upon their arrival in Kolkata, the woman, no doubt a priestess, spoke silent prayers to every statue they passed as she led them through the first hall, dark and wide. Their steps echoed through the near empty space as they walked, and when Taehyung leaned in closer to Jimin to whisper in his ear, the sound bounced off the walls as loudly as if he’d shouted.

“What happened after you fell in the river?” he asked quietly, frowning as he took in the state of the shawl they’d bought together. “How did you get out? It looked terrible from where we stood. I’ve never seen a river as violent as that one.”

Jimin kept his eyes on the floor, far too aware of more than only the quartermaster’s gaze on him. “I… later,” he mumbled, hardly keen on the thought of relaying how Yoongi had not only saved him from the river, but fixed his shoulder and let him sleep through his watch as well when the captain himself could hear him. “I’ll tell you later.”

He could almost feel Taehyung’s confusion, but before the quartermaster could do more than look at him with concern obvious in his eyes, they reached the end of the hall and stepped out into a beautiful courtyard. The open area bore resemblance to the jungle that grew by the temple’s feet, with saplings and plants in various colors and sizes growing on every available patch of soil. Plates of stone had been lowered into the ground to forge a pathway through the yard, winding around the small pond in the very middle, its water clear and blue as sapphires.

At the head of the pond stood a giant bell, hung between two stone pillars, and Jimin imagined this had to be the source of the deep ringing that had summoned the tiger back to its home. Even the bell was beautifully decorated, with twisting patterns and foreign letters and symbols engraved into its surface.

“You will go no further than this,” the woman said when she reached the end of the courtyard, pausing before a pair of heavy wooden doors. “The Blessed Oracles reside within, and only a chosen few are allowed entry to their sacred sanctum.”

The lot of them turned to look at Yoongi, who was frowning at her words, impatience obvious in the crease of his brow. “If we’re not allowed into their sanctum,” he drawled, “how will we let them know why we have come? We are here to seek their help. How will they know what for if I can’t speak with them?”

“They will hear it all and they will know,” the woman declared calmly, unintimidated, “but not from you.” She turned away from the captain and raised her hand, rings of brass and silver chiming around her wrist as she pointed at Jimin. “They will hear it from you.”

Simultaneously, all of them turned to look at him, mirroring his expression of confused surprise. “Me?” Jimin wondered nervously, his voice thinner than usual.

“Yes,” she said and nodded, turning her hand to beckon him. “Come. The oracles are waiting for you.”

“I…” Jimin looked to the others for advice, at a complete loss for what to do, but Taehyung and Jeongguk seemed just as confused as he was, both reflecting the same kind of bewilderment he felt. Hoseok was hardly any better, suspicion in his eyes as he looked between Jimin and the priestess, as if expecting some kind of trap.

Yoongi, however, seemed deep in thought, something beyond confusion tracing the lines of his frown. He looked at Jimin as if he was attempting to read the answer on his face, and Jimin waited, standing still before the intensity of his gaze.
He wasn’t certain how much time had passed before the captain finally heaved a sigh and nodded, stepping down to let Jimin pass. “Tell them what you know, songbird,” he said slowly. “Tell them why we need their help.”

Jimin parted his lips, wanting to tell Yoongi that he couldn’t, that he didn’t know enough to convince anyone to do anything, let alone to help them in what was likely to be a battle that would determine the fate of the eastern seas. However, those words failed him; there was something in the captain’s gaze that gave him pause, a brimming emotion he could only recognize as trust, and so the words that left his lips were spoken in determination, his voice firm. “I will,” he promised. “I will make them see.”

Yoongi inclined his head in a nod and spoke a quiet, almost soft, “Good,” when Jimin walked past him.

The woman touched her hand to the wooden doors and they opened with a creak, dust falling from its hinges. “I will guide your way,” she said and stepped into the darkness inside, the only source of light the sun’s rays reflected in her white robes.

With a deep breath, Jimin steeled himself and followed after her, and as soon as he’d walked far enough, the doors creaked to life behind him, beginning to swing shut as slowly as they’d opened. Startled, he turned around, struggling to calm the erratic pace of his heart as his instincts protested wildly against the thought of being trapped within the temple, but the sight of his friends gave him strength, however fleeting the glimpse was. He saw Taehyung take off his mask and smile at him just before the doors closed, the walls rumbling with its echo, and he drew strength from it, forcing away his own tension to make way for the trust they placed in him.

*I will make the oracles see*, Jimin told himself as he turned to face the darkness of the sanctum. *For their sake, I have to.*

Chapter End Notes

Uh-oh, trouble in yoonmin paradise, uh-oh.

JIMIN BEING ALL PROTECTIVE OF YOONGI WHEN FACING VAHANA, someone hold me pls i’m so soft right now. BUT THEN YOONGI TURNED THEM AROUND, ISTG THESE TWO BOTH NEED TO PROTECT SO BAD, THEY’RE SO DUMB I LOVE ‘EM.

And because we can’t have nice things, they end up fighting about it. AhhhHHH, misunderstandings, I swear to LUCIFER (ironically, heheheheheheh~), they need to get their shit together! Yoongi needs to learn how to choose his words better, and Jimin needs to NOT jump to conclusions, ahhhhh, save these children from themselves before I die!

Also. AlsO A SIX-LEGGED TIGER ARE YOU KIDDING ME I’M-

Interesting fact; Vahana, the tiger’s “name”, is what the Hindu gods’ mounts are called. There are several different kinds - peacocks, lions, buffalos and so on and so forth - and this tiger, who “serves” the Blessed Oracles, who in turn serve the gods, was dubbed accordingly.
And of course Taehyung would get along with a tiger. Of course he would, baby tiger that he is.

//softness level increases

MKAY, so the scene I cut out was Jimin's whole interaction with the Oracles. It would've reached far beyond 10k if I had kept it in, and would've resulted in another 2-3-4AM post, which I do NOT have the strength for right now xD SO I CUT IT OFF AND LEFT Y'ALL HANGING FROM A PRETTY SPECTACULAR CLIFFHANGER, IF I MAY SAY SO MYSELF, OHOHOHOHOHOHOHO-

pls don't kill me in my sleep.
The Blessed Oracles' Gift

Chapter Summary

There were six of them, all dressed in the same white and red robes, but the man sitting in their midst looked far more reverent than the others. His clothes were the same apart from a heavy necklace of stones, but he seemed almost a hundred years older than the others, his face sunken and riddled with the deep creases of age, framed by a fine, long beard. His head was bald and his eyes seemed blind, pale and glassy as they flickered to Jimin, and his thin neck trembled with the effort it took him to raise his head.

“Child,” he rasped, his voice thick and hoarse, as if he spoke through a veil of dust. “Finally, you have come.”

Chapter Notes

HELL. TO. THE. YES. HERE WE GO, IT'S ORACLE TIME, IT'S JIMIN TIME, IT'S TIME TIME, I'M GONNA GO DIE NOW, GOODBYE.

BUT FIRST. MUSIC!!!!!

Ramin Djawadi - Maester (basically replay until they leave the temple!!!))
Jonas Göbel - Empty Streets
Killer Tracks - Brood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The overwhelming darkness inside the sanctum lasted only for a few seconds after the doors had slid shut. Slowly, the walls themselves came to life with a pale, blueish glow, dim yet strong enough to illuminate the spacious hall where they stood. Half of Jimin was relieved while the other half wished the darkness had remained; much like outside, idolatries were carved into the walls, and the eerie glow made them look almost frightening.

“You have nothing to fear here, Jimin,” the woman said, her voice just as monotonous as before, yet there was a certain softness to it now. “No harm will come to you within these halls.”

Rather than appease, her words made Jimin's anxiousness escalate, if only just a little. “How do you know my name?” he asked, relieved to at least find his voice steady.

“The wise oracles know all,” she answered cryptically, her words hardly an explanation. “They told me you would come, and they told me I would know you as soon as I saw.”

“Oh.” Jimin didn’t know what to say to that, a frown marring his brow. He thought back to how the woman at the small shrine in Kolkata had looked at him, as well as what Yoongi had told him about the Pirate Priestess and how there had been something she'd said that led him to believe they
wouldn't be turned away from the oracles.

*But why,* he wondered. *Why me?*

He decided against asking, instead allowing a silence to settle over them as they walked, straying deeper and deeper into the temple. They passed seemingly endless halls and empty rooms, high in roof and wide to cast eerie echoes of their footsteps. The sanctum seemed to lack even a single window; none of the sun’s natural light was let in to brighten up the darkness, the blueish glow remaining the only source of light wherever they went.

The temple was not deserted, Jimin quickly noticed. In some of the rooms they passed, he saw both men and women of varying ages, all dressed in similar kinds of robes. Some of them carried tomes and frail scrolls while others conversed quietly amongst themselves; they reminded Jimin of scholars, even those who were mere children. Without fail, each and every one of them looked at the two passing wherever they went, silent until they had passed.

*Are all of them oracles?* he wondered.

Jimin wasn’t certain for how long they’d walked when they reached a room more lit than the others, the same blue light radiating from a large well in the middle of the hall. The water was unbelievably clear, the well running deeper than Jimin could tell from where he stood, and it would’ve been perfectly calm, undisturbed, if not for the young boy standing barefoot on the surface.

Awestruck, Jimin came to a halt to look with eyes wide as the boy moved back and forth across the well, the water carrying his steps as if he weighed nothing. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be dancing, the white robes hanging off his shoulders fluttering along with his graceful movements. His lips moved mutely without pause, and he appeared too lost in his ritual to even notice Jimin’s stare.

“The boy is praying.” Jimin turned to the priestess, who had stopped alongside him and watched the dancing boy with a small smile on her lips. “He cannot speak,” she said, her voice quiet to not disturb the boy, “so he makes use of his blessing and thanks the gods like this. Every movement holds a special meaning, one only he and the gods know.”

Jimin wanted to ask what the boy’s blessing was, but the words never quite reached his lips. Instead, he simply nodded, somehow entranced by the smooth, fluid dance, and not until the priestess cleared her throat and motioned for him to follow her did he look away, blinking away his wonder.

They didn’t walk for much longer after that; only a few minutes of silence passed before the woman came to a halt before a set of stone doors, heavy and thick and engraved with the same images as the walls. “This is the oracles’ own sanctum,” the woman said and turned to face Jimin, who felt his nervousness rise. “They will hear what you have to say, but they will also ask things of you. You must answer their questions and you must answer in truth. They will know it if you lie.”

Jimin nodded stiffly and drew a deep breath in an attempt to calm down, his left hand curling into a tight fist. *I will make them see,* he thought again as he watched the priestess turn to the doors. Much like with the heavy wooden doors at the end of the courtyard, these began to open with merely a single, delicate touch, the stone rumbling as it shifted to reveal the innermost sanctum.

“Enter,” she said and moved aside to let him pass, and Jimin nodded again, latching onto the determination in his chest as he stepped into the residence of the Blessed Oracles.

He wasn’t sure what it was he’d expected. Hardly a throne, but some kind of seat to signify the oracles’ reverence, their status and importance. However, while the sanctum was certainly the
grandest of the halls he’d seen so far, with statues serving as pillars for the roof and lanterns of blue light hanging off the walls, the men and women inside were seated on thin straw mats on the floor.

There were six of them, all dressed in the same white and red robes, but the man sitting in their midst looked far more reverent than the others. His clothes were the same apart from a heavy necklace of stones, but he seemed almost a hundred years older than the others, his face sunken and riddled with the deep creases of age, framed by a fine, long beard. His head was bald and his eyes seemed blind, pale and glassy as they flickered to Jimin, and his thin neck trembled with the effort it took him to raise his head.

“Child,” he rasped, his voice thick and hoarse, as if he spoke through a veil of dust. “Finally, you have come.”

Under the six oracles’ gazes, Jimin felt smaller than he had in a long time, but he forced himself to rise above his apprehension and took a few steps deeper into the sanctum. “Yes,” he said, his voice echoing off the walls. “I have come to seek the guidance and help of the Blessed Oracles.”

“We have been expecting you for weeks,” one of the others said gently. He was young, perhaps even as young as Jimin himself, but when he stood to greet Jimin with a courteous bow of his head, he radiated a maturity that made him seem that much older. “It is good to have you here at last.”

Jimin parted his lips, hesitating; they seemed to have known he would come, he and no one else, and he found himself inwardly repeating his earlier wonderment of why they would know who he was. He struggled for a moment with deciding whether or not he should ask, but he lost his chance when another one of the oracles raised their voice.

“You come to us injured,” she said, frowning as her took in the state of Jimin’s right arm. “Who has done this to you?”

There was something in her tone of voice that made Jimin mirror her frown, an insinuation that his injury would’ve been caused perhaps by those currently waiting in the temple’s courtyard. “No one,” he told her. “I fell in the river on our way here and was thrown against a stone.” He saw her posture ease and resisted the urge to deepen his frown, instead choosing to appreciate her concern for his wellbeing. “It’s not broken,” he said and attempted a reassuring smile. “It will heal quickly enough.”

“It will indeed,” she said and turned to the oracle seated next to her. “Om, help the child.”

The man nodded and rose to his feet, inclining his head in question as he stepped up next to Jimin. His features were sharp, with a beak nose and thin lips that might’ve seemed intimidating if not for the smile on his lips. “Will you allow me?” he asked and raised his hands to hover over Jimin’s shoulder. “It won’t hurt.”

“What won’t hurt?” Jimin asked warily, a shudder rippling across his skin as the oracle lowered his touch to his arm, his hands unnaturally warm. “What are you…”

Jimin’s voice trailed off into an incoherent whisper as he watched the man’s hands begin to glow against his shoulder, a bright, golden light seeping into the dimness of the room. A comforting heat seeped through his shirt and deep into his skin, sinking through muscle and nerve until it reached his bones. The warmth flooded to the rest of his body like a rush of vitality, carried by his blood to the very tip of his toes.

The sensation was gone as quickly as it’d come, another shiver prickling his spine when the oracle pulled his hands away. Jimin emitted a shuddering exhale, and when he attempted to move his right arm, the dull ache was gone. “It… it doesn’t hurt,” he murmured, eyes wide in awe as he lifted his
arm out of its sling, flexing his fingers. “What did you do?”

“You know where you are, child,” the eldest oracle said. “You know who we are.”

Jimin looked from the old man to the one who’d touched his arm. “You,” he began, his mind still reeling. “You have a blessing.”

“All of us do,” the oracle, Om, said kindly. “Mine is the Blessing of Mending. I can heal anything my hands touch, as long as they are wounds of the flesh.”

“You can heal…” Again, Jimin’s voice tapered off into a momentary silence, confusion brought on by the man’s words. “You can heal?” he repeated slowly, his thoughts straying to Jeongguk and his blessing. “You can heal?”

The oracle arched a curious brow at that. “Control is learned,” he said simply as he took his seat once more. “Surely you saw the pupils residing in these halls. They have all come to learn the control required for their blessings.” He seemed confused by Jimin’s surprise. “Min Yoongi’s blessing is one of Abnormality as well,” he said slowly, “yet he controls it perfectly, doesn’t he?”

Jimin parted his lips and closed them again, realizing the truth behind Om’s words. He had never thought to place Yoongi’s blessing in the same category as Jeongguk’s, but now, he realized that it had to be so. “I see,” he mumbled and nodded slowly, his brow furrowed in thought until he noticed the silence in the room and realized they were likely waiting for him to speak. “I, uh, I…”

He sank his teeth into his lower lip and hesitated, for once not due to uncertainty. “Thank you,” he told the man who had taken away the ache in his shoulder, a small smile on his hips as he bowed his head in gratitude. “Thank you for healing me.” Om returned his smile, and he felt a bit braver as he turned to the elder oracle. “And thank you for receiving me,” he said and bowed before the rest of them as well.

“You are most welcome here, child,” the old man rasped, his necklace rattling as he nodded his head. “It has been years since someone like you walked these halls.” Jimin felt his smile faltering at that, bewildered, but the oracle continued before he had the chance to ask. “Now I would hear why it is you have come.”

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Jimin had an inkling the oracles seated before him already knew - after all, they had stated they’d been expecting his arrival - but he complied all the same, thinking back to the gathering of the Cardinals and what the Pirate Priestess had said. “There is someone we have to stop,” he said after some struggle to find the right words. “There is a threat rising in the east, a pirate blessed with the Rune of Fire. His rampage across the coasts of Korea and Japan have reached a point we can no longer ignore, so we have to stop him, but we lack the power to do so.”

He paused, unsure of how to proceed. “We…” his is the Blessing of Fire,” he said slowly. “Fire cannot be stopped by brute force or secret tricks. It burns everything in its path and leaves nothing but ashes behind, and this man, the Rabid Conflagration, he… he hunts his own kind. He kills without mercy, all for the sake of fame.”

The oracles listened in silence, hardly moving a muscle while he spoke. They all looked at him apart from the eldest, whose eyes were closed; if not for the already deep wrinkles of his brow knitted into an even deeper frown, he might as well have been sleeping.

Made nervous by their alert attention, Jimin clasped his hands behind his back, seeking anything to hold onto. “He wants the Eastern title,” he stated, a slight quiver to his voice, “and he will stop at
nothing to achieve it, so…”

He knew the words he had to speak, but they felt off to his own ears; he knew the Rabid Conflagration had to be stopped, but his reasoning differed from that of the Pirate Priestess and the Cardinals. “He’s executing people,” he whispered, the words alone causing his heart to ache in his chest. “He has burned towns and cities and all its people. Children have been turned to ash only for the sake of feeding his reputation, and the mariners do nothing, they don’t even try to bring him to justice, so we…”

The words wouldn’t come to him no matter how hard he tried. Jimin knew he had to convince the oracles, he knew he had to make them see, but he realized now he didn’t know how. All he had were words, words given to him by someone else, someone with reasons that strayed from his own. “We have to stop him,” he said again, because that was the only thing he knew for certain. “He has to be stopped before his fire has the chance to destroy us all.”

Silence followed the final echo of his words, heavy with tension as the oracles took their time to consider what he’d told them. None of them said a word, not even when their gazes fell from Jimin and shifted to one another, communicating with only a look, and it fed Jimin’s nervousness, his fingers clasping each other hard behind his back. Please, he thought. Please understand, please.

It was the eldest who spoke first, his necklace rattling as he raised his head and looked at Jimin, his pale eyes reflecting the blue glow of the lanterns. “Child,” he said solemnly, “it sounds as if this is not your burden to bear.”

Whatever Jimin had expected, it certainly wasn’t this. His lips parted silently in his surprise and he simply gaped at the oracle for a moment, wondering what on earth he should say. “I,” he began, struggling to conjure an appropriate response. “I’m not…”

Slowly, his bewilderment began to dissipate, only to be replaced by an unsettling stirring in the depth of his chest. There was something off about the old man’s words; they sounded wrong to his ears, untrue and unfair, and when Jimin tightened his grip on himself again, it was to remind himself to be careful.

“Perhaps it isn’t,” he said, his voice lacking his previous tension, “but I want it to be. I don’t want to stand by and watch those I care about be hurt, I don’t… I don’t want them to suffer because I’m an outsider.”

The words were near painful to speak, and they forced him to remember the tattoo he’d seen on Yoongi’s back. He’d read his own name spelled in ink across the captain’s skin, as if he was just as important as the others, thus he felt something akin to offense rise in his chest at the suggestion that he was not.

“He will come for the crew I sail with,” Jimin said, words flowing easy now. “The Rabid Conflagration seeks to burn through them all, and I cannot let that happen. He needs to be stopped, if not for the horrors he has committed ever since he first set sail, then for the sake of saving those I couldn’t bear to see die.”

“You care,” the youngest of the oracles said with a curious tilt of his head. “You care so much for them.”

It was an odd statement to hear, if only for how readily Jimin agreed, the mere thought of another option nonexistent. “I do,” he said firmly, nodding. “Of course I do. How could I not? They gave me a home when my own people decided all I was good for was bargain. They saved me, again and again, whether it was my life or my sanity, and they never asked for anything in return.”
Jimin wasn’t certain what it was that prompted him to speak the words he’d never said out loud, his previously muddled thoughts suddenly clear. He had never quite let himself dwell on them, scared of the decision he’d have to make if he did, but now, he realized how obvious his own answer was and how ready he’d been to make it.

“I could spend my entire life repaying them and it wouldn’t be enough,” he murmured, more to himself than to the ones who were listening. He threw a fleeting gaze over his shoulder, almost as if expecting to be able to sense the others’ presence through the countless doors that stood between them. “After all, they’ve saved it at least five times over.”

He couldn’t quite hide the smile that graced his lips at the thought of what Taehyung would say if he heard him. The quartermaster would likely laugh and tell Jimin he was being ridiculous, or pull him into an embrace and ask him what had happened to make him say such things.

“They are pirates, yes,” Jimin said when he turned back to the oracles, the smile fading off his lips as his tone grew severe, “but they are good men. All of them, and I will bear the weight of anything you can give me to make sure they don’t die.” His voice echoed off the walls, strong and resolute in his words. “If I have to be a pirate to bear this burden with them, I will become one,” he declared, not a trace of doubt in his chest. “Right here and now, I will take on the label as a pirate.”

None of the six seemed eager to interrupt him, each of them radiating rapt attention as he spoke. “I do not know why I’m here,” Jimin said, a frown creeping over his brow. “I don’t know why you chose to only let me in, oracles, but there is someone out there, someone who wants to kill my friends, and I will not stand by and watch it happen.” The faintest of quivers seeped into his voice and he swallowed thickly, shaking his head. “I can’t.”

The silence that followed was the longest one by far. The oracles didn’t look away from him this time, their eyes wide and brimming with something Jimin couldn’t place, and the longer the silence lasted, the more he began to dread he’d misspoken. That he’d thrown away his chance to earn their favor.

A sound like a low hack pulled his attention to the eldest, but rather than a cough, the smile on the old man’s lips indicated a chuckle, the sound hoarse yet bright. “You are kind, child,” he croaked when he sobered up. “More than you know. There is an innocence to you, a purity I am certain they can see, just as clearly as I do.” His gaze fell on the door behind Jimin before he closed them and breathed deep. “My eyes may be weak and my ears dull,” he crooned, “but I can feel it from here. Their worry. Their need to protect.”

Jimin felt his heart seize in his chest at the same time as the oracle looked up at him, the soft smile still twisting his aged lip. “Why?” he asked in a whisper, his voice almost awed. “You have told me of them, you have told me what they are, but who are you, who stand worlds apart from the cruelty of their lives, to them?”

The first thought to rise to Jimin’s mind was his name, forever engraved in the tattoo on Yoongi’s back, swiftly followed by thoughts of Taehyung, precious memories of nights spent whispering amongst each other in the bunks of the Agust. He thought of Jeongguk, who teased him for his short stature but always made sure he was eating enough and that he wasn’t cold up in the crow’s nest.

He thought of all of them, every last soul aboard the Agust, and while he might not know what he was to them, he knew what they were to him.

“I don’t know who I am,” he ventured slowly, a near sheepish smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Perhaps I did, once, but the person I used to be seems almost a stranger to me now. I’ve changed, I know it, and I know it’s because of them.” He paused for a moment, his smile widening
before he corrected himself. “I know it’s thanks to them.”

He considered his own words for a moment before rolling his shoulders in a shrug and heaving a soft sigh. “Whoever I am, I know I’m not pure, oracle,” he said, “and I’ve done things to strip me of any innocence I might’ve had. People have died because of me and I’ve let it happen, I’ve even hurt people with my own hands, I…”

The smile slowly faded from his lips as he spoke, taken away by his own words, until all he could portray was a sense of conflicted sorrow, his brow knitted tight as he struggled to find the right words.

When the oracle spoke again, his expression mirrored Jimin’s own, his previous awe replaced by the look of a grieving man. “Innocence is of the heart,” he murmured, “and purity comes from the soul.” He shook his head and drew a quivering breath, as if to brace himself for what was to come. “Few possess a nature as gentle as yours, child. Few possess a kindness as genuine, and one by one, the mercy of your heart touches those around you.”

He looked at Jimin, his eyes glistening with tears. “I fear you will not be able to do what needs to be done,” he whispered, raising both hands as if he was reaching for Jimin, weak and pleading. “‘Tis a horrible thing, child, horrible, and it will taint you. You will carry the weight of it in your heart for as long as you live.”

Alarmed by the old man’s sudden shift, Jimin stepped forward, worry making him forget any thoughts of reverence before the Blessed Oracles. He kneeled before the man and took his hands in his own, the urge to soothe brimming in his chest. He didn’t know what to say, but the oracle seemed to draw strength from his touch alone.

“It is a horrible thing,” he said again, tears tracing the wrinkles of his cheeks, “but if you are willing to set your soul aside for the sake of others, I will give you what it is you seek.” Somewhat unsteadily, he pushed himself upright from Jimin’s arms reached behind his head, his frail fingers unclasping his heavy necklace. Only when it came loose could Jimin properly see it for what it was, and his eyes widened at the sight of the runes engraved into every stone, more than he could count, tied together on a string of leather.

“Th-those are…” he breathed, shock hushing his voice. “Those are all Blessed Runes.”

“They are the gods’ gift,” the old man rasped as he let his hand trace over the length of the necklace. The runes responded to his touch, lights of every existing color flaring up against his fingers, but they didn’t infuse him with their blessing. They only pulsed with light, like a string of beating hearts. “The first oracles of this sacred temple sought to gather the worst runes of them all, to spare the world the horror they could bring, and the protection of these blessings have passed from generation to generation.”

He looked to the woman seated to his immediate right. “My daughter will bear this necklace after I die,” he said. “Like I have, she will devote her life to their safeguarding, and when her time draws near, she will choose whomever she deems fit to continue her task.”

“But how?” Jimin asked, unable to tear his eyes off the necklace. Each symbol was different, flaring with a color of its own, and the steady flicker of their light was almost entrancing. “How can you touch them without taking their blessings?”

“Any being already carrying a blessing may freely touch a Blessed Rune,” the oracle told him as he fiddled with the string that bound the runes together, his fingers trembling as they worked. “Every oracle carries a blessing. It is a necessity; to understand the gods’ gift, one must first possess it.”
The stone he untied radiated a faint, greyish light, the symbol sound and spiralling, and vaguely, Jimin registered the other oracles’ shock, a ripple of tension traveling through the room. “To stop the fire that would consume this world,” the old man whispered and held up the small stone, “I will give you the Rune of the Storm.”

“High Oracle,” Om ventured carefully, a trace of warning in his voice, but the eldest paid him no heed.

“I…” Overwhelmed, Jimin slowly raised a hand towards the rune until his fingers hovered over it. “I can’t take it,” he murmured, awestruck by the grey-glowing symbol, its light growing stronger by the mere presence of him. “I already carry a blessing. This is not mine to wield.”

“I know of your blessing, precious canary,” the oracle said, his voice quivering. “No one can possess more than one, but the gods are generous. They allow us to borrow strength beyond our own through runes unfamiliar, as long as we hold the stone in our hand.”

Jemin’s eyes widened at that; he couldn’t remember reading anything of the sort in the book Namjoon had given him. “But,” he said hesitantly and withdrew his hand, suddenly wary of the sheer power the rune seemed to radiate, “but I can’t even control my own blessing. How could I ever use this one?”

The old man’s lips curled into a tremulous smile. “Simply because you cannot see your wings does not mean they do not exist,” he rasped, his voice quiet as a whisper. “The Canary is one with you. It will come when you need it the most.” He reached out and took Jimin’s hand in his own, fragile fingers turning his palm upwards. “Promise me, child, that you will only use this blessing to stop the flames,” he breathed, tears once again rising to his eyes as he placed the rune in Jimin’s hand.

“Promise me you will not tear yourself into more pieces than you must.”

It was as if the oracle’s emotions were seeping into Jimin through his touch; when his tears fell once more, Jimin closed his hands around the old man’s and leaned forward to touch his brow to his knuckles, his own eyes pricking. “I promise,” he whispered, clutching the rune tightly in his hand as he looked up, wanting nothing more than to take the oracle’s sorrow away. “I promise I won’t.”

The old man nodded and drew a deep, hoarse breath, a small smile finding its way to his lips as he let Jimin go. “I will keep your heart's safety in my prayers,” he crooned and grabbed at his robes, as if resisting the urge to curl in on himself. “Now, you must go, child, lest I come to my senses and take that dreadful blessing from your hands.”

At a loss for words, Jimin could only nod before standing, mutely parting his lips before bowing his head deeply, first for the eldest and then the others. “I can't thank you enough,” he said when he straightened up. “I swear I'll bring this rune back to you once the Rabid Conflagration has been defeated.”

The other oracles said nothing, only nodded in farewell, some with a look of tension on their faces. Om offered him a smile, one Jimin couldn’t quite return before the heavy stone doors behind him began to open, rumbling as they went. “Thank you,” he whispered again, bowing his head one last time before turning around and walking out of the sanctum, the Rune of the Storm held tightly in his hand.

The priestess was waiting for him outside, having not moved since opening the doors the first time. “I will guide you back to your companions,” she said and motioned for him to follow. She seemed utterly incurious about whether or not the oracles had granted him the help he’d come for; she didn’t ask when Jimin removed the sling from around his neck, nor when he pushed the rune stone into the pocket of his trousers.
The hallways were emptier than before. The boy who’d been dancing on the water of the blue well was gone when they passed the room, as were most of the halls; Jimin only saw one other, a man sitting in the far corner of a grand hall, immersed in a tome the size of his torso.

“Dhyana,” the priestess said suddenly, just as Jimin was about to part his lips to ask where the others had gone. “Meditation. Twice every day, those who study their gods’ gift retreat to their rooms to contemplate what they’ve learned and find peace in their knowledge.”

Jimin emitted a quiet hum at that, nodding slowly to himself as he let silence settle once again. Control is learned, he thought, repeating the words Om had told him to himself. Could he learn it as well?

He was lost deep in thought all the way to the wooden doors of the courtyard, where he returned to reality just in time to stop the priestess from opening them. “Wait,” he said and took a hesitant step forward, worrying his lower lip as she turned to look at him in question. “Those who study here all carry the powers of a Blessed Rune, right?” She nodded, waiting. “If so, could anyone wielding a Blessed Rune come here to learn?”

She regarded him for a long moment, her eyes tracing every inch of his face as if she was attempting to read his intentions there. “You are not asking for your own sake,” she stated after a moment.

“No,” Jimin agreed, nodding towards the wooden doors. “What I want to know is if a pirate could have the right to come here to learn control of their blessing.”

The priestess’ brow furrowed at that, the rings in her ears chiming as she, too, turned to glance at the heavy doors. She looked at it for longer than Jimin, as if she could see right through it, and when she finally turned back, she heaved a sigh before pinning Jimin under a near soft gaze. “That,” she said, “depends on the pirate.”

Without further explanation, she turned and placed her hand against the doors, willing them to open with only a touch. The blue light disappeared from the walls as the sun was once again let in, its rays blindingly strong; Jimin had to blink hard several times before his eyes grew accustomed to the stark contrast of the pale glow of the sanctum. When he could finally see, he found Taehyung, Jeongguk, Hoseok and Yoongi standing in the middle of the courtyard, waiting, all of them looking at him, wide-eyed.

A small smile graced his lips as he stepped outside, a sense of comfort settling deep in his chest at the sight of them. “They agreed,” were the first words out of his mouth, his gaze seeking Yoongi’s; he needed the captain to know, to understand that Jimin had kept his promise. “The oracles agreed to help us.”

Yoongi’s eyes widened and his lips fell open, worry seeping from his expression to make way for his relief, hiding subtly behind a mask of surprise. Wordlessly, he moved to take a step towards Jimin, his right hand twitching, but before the heel of his shoe could even touch the ground, he was shoved out of the way by a much more animated Taehyung.

“Chim,” the quartermaster cried as he made his way over to Jimin, his arms spread wide as if intending to embrace him.

“Be careful, Tae,” Hoseok said loudly, concern obvious in his voice, but Jimin only emitted a cheery giggle and raised his own arms to pull Taehyung in, the sound turning into a groan when the quartermaster held him tight enough to make him feel as if he was being crushed. “Are you alright, Jimin?”
“I am,” he managed breathlessly, craning his head so he could see over Taehyung’s shoulder. “One of the oracles used his blessing to heal my shoulder. It doesn’t hurt anymore.” He couldn’t help but smile at the doctor’s skeptical expression, clearly dubious of healing through means other than medicine. “I promise I’m alright, Hoseok.”

“I’d still like to examine you,” Hoseok said, but he smiled all the same.

“How were the oracles?” Jeongguk asked, grinning as he took hold of Taehyung’s shoulders in an attempt to pry him away from Jimin, an effort the quartermaster heavily protested.

“Kind,” Jimin said, huffing when he was finally freed from Taehyung’s vice grip. “I think they knew why I was there before I could even begin to explain. They called the Rabid Conflagration the fire that would consume this world, and…” He paused, hesitant to tell them what the eldest oracle had said about him; it seemed an odd thing to relay, that he was somehow pure.

Instead, he turned to Yoongi and took the Blessed Rune from his pocket. “They gave me the Rune of the Storm,” he said, watching the captain’s eyes flicker between the rune and his face. “I… it will help us in the battle to come.”

It took Yoongi a moment to find his words, seemingly at a loss for what to say. Jimin watched his struggle in silence, waiting, and when the captain’s gaze finally settled on him, the first words out of his mouth were, “Who will wield it?”

His voice lacked any sort of hostility or doubt, yet it weighed heavy as ever even so. Swallowing thickly, Jimin closed his hand around the rune and moved it against his chest, his heart beating hard against under his touch. “I will,” he said firmly. “When the time comes, I will do what needs to be done.”

A brief silence followed his words, a moment during which no one said a word, their eyes either on Jimin or Yoongi. The two only looked at each other, assessing, the tension between them near palpable; whereas the captain’s expression was utterly unreadable, Jimin knew his own probably portrayed his stubbornness, along with a something akin to challenge.

It was Yoongi who shattered the tension, by doing something as surprising as nodding, contentedness settling over his features. “Good,” he said slowly. “Thank you, songbird.”

He could feel the three others’ eyes boring into the back of his head, but no one said a word until the temple priestess raised her voice, having followed the reunion in silence. “I have arranged to have you escorted back to Kolkata,” she said smoothly and clapped her hands, and instantly, the six-legged tiger came striding out from behind one of the courtyard trees. “Vahana will take you to the edge of the jungle, where a carriage will wait to take you to the City of Joy.”

“Thank you,” Jimin said, speaking before anyone else could. “For everything.”

The woman inclined her head in what could’ve been a bow before turning around to walk back inside the sanctum. When the doors slid shut behind her, Vahana emitted a rumbling huff and turned around to guide them out of the temple without much finesse, impatience obvious in the way she turned to look at them when they didn’t immediately follow, much in the same manner she had when
she’d first come for Jimin and Yoongi.

“I was worrying we’d have to walk all the way back to Kolkata,” Hoseok said with a contented sigh as they set out. “It took us four hours in that oxen cart, and while that was slow as all hell, it’d likely take us eight by foot.”

“Do you think Vahana would come with us?” Taehyung wondered, smiling behind his mask as he walked up next to the tiger and slid a hand into the fur of her neck. “I don’t want to leave her.”

“You are not bringing a tiger aboard the ship,” Yoongi said monotonously, rolling his eyes when the others laughed at the quartermaster’s pout. “Where the bloody hell did you imagine you’d keep it?”

“She could sleep with me and Jeongguk.”

“Uh,” the sailing master said, a skeptical smirk on his lips, “no, she couldn’t.”

“Traitor,” Taehyung muttered.

“Do you think Jin would agree to feed her?” Hoseok teased, laughing when the quartermaster reached out to smack his arm. “I can see it now, Jin losing his mind over how fast his pantry would run dry every single time he’d restock.”

Jimin smiled as he watched Taehyung make a spectacle of accusing the others of having no love or understanding for animals, making sure to keep a secure distance between himself and the tiger. No matter how fond the quartermaster was of it, Jimin was still wary, hesitant to walk too close. Rather than join them in their fun, he reached out and tapped Jeongguk on the shoulder, smiling when the navigator turned to face him.

“I have something to tell you,” Jimin said and motioned for him to fall in next to him. “Something about what the Blessed Oracles told me.”

He explained what Om had told him about learning control over a blessing of Abnormality, how the oracle himself had learned to hold himself back even though his blessing worked in a similar fashion as Jeongguk’s. He told him that while the priestess hadn’t agreed with the prospect of a pirate studying at the temple, she hadn’t rejected the thought either.

Jeongguk listened without interrupting, his eyes displaying his rapt attention even as they remained focused on Taehyung. Only when Jimin finished speaking did he turn around, a sense of frightened hope settling over his features, as if he didn’t quite dare to believe what it was he was hearing. “You think I could learn to control it,” he said slowly, lowering his gaze to his gloved hands, the leather creaking as he clenched them. “To learn to touch things without…”

He looked up at the quartermaster once more, eyes wide as he watched him fool around with Vahana, cheerfully scratching at her ears and neck. For a long while, Jeongguk said nothing, his lips pressed together as he considered the reality of what he’d just heard, and Jimin let him brood, silently walking by his side.

“I want to,” the navigator said at last, his voice quiet and solemn, “but I don’t know if I can. It would take years, surely, and I have a duty to fulfill. I have people who rely on me to do my job as sailing master, and I can’t fail them. I have to-”

“I’m going to interrupt before you say something even more ridiculous.”

Both Jeongguk and Jimin turned around to look at Yoongi, who’d been walking close enough to hear everything they’d said. He looked almost angry, brows knitted tight in his ire, but while the
sailing master cast down his eyes, sullen, Jimin waited, for some reason doubting the captain’s anger was born of disappointment.

“The only thing you have to do in your life, brat,” Yoongi said sternly, “is what you want to do. If what you want is to turn around and walk back to that temple and learn, that is exactly what you’ll do. No one will fault you for it and no one will stand in your way, and if what you fear is that you’ll lose your home aboard the Agust if you leave, you…”

His voice trailed off and he came to a halt, his frown deepening, morphing into something almost rueful. “That will never happen, Jeongguk,” he said. “If there is a chance for you to learn how to enjoy your life more than you do now, we will only support you. It doesn’t matter what your role aboard the ship is. We’ll drag you to the temple by force if we bloody have to, and we’ll be there to welcome you back when you’re done.”

He raised his right hand to beckon the young pirate, and Jimin held his breath as Jeongguk left his side, warmth spreading from his chest. “Tell me now, Jeongguk,” Yoongi crooned and settled his hand around the sailing master’s neck. “Do you want to turn around?”

For a moment, Jeongguk only looked at him, blinking rapidly against the wetness in his eyes. It felt so private, the moment they shared, but Jimin couldn’t look away, emotions stirring deep in his core as he waited.

Finally, the sailing master shook his head, a bright smile gracing his lips. “No,” he said, his voice thick yet brimming with joy. “One day, I will want to, but not now. We’re facing a threat more severe than ever, and I couldn’t bear to leave you now.” He chuckled, a few tears spilling down his cheeks. “Maybe,” he said with a sniffle, “maybe when this is all over, I can come here and learn, but… not now.”

Slowly, a smile spread over Yoongi’s lips, wide and bright as he pulled Jeongguk closer until he could rest his brow against the sailing master’s, his eyes falling shut. “Then when this is all over,” the captain murmured, “I will bring you here myself. And I will stop Taehyung from smothering you.”

A wet laughter found its way past Jeongguk’s lips, and he straightened up, grinning as he turned to look at where Taehyung and Hoseok were walking ahead. “You’ll have to deal with a sulking Taehyung for weeks and weeks,” he mused, chuckling again when Yoongi emitted a dry scoff. He moved to turn back to the captain, but halted, his eyes pausing at Jimin instead and widening in surprise. “Whoa, what’s wrong, Jimin?”

Jimin’s brows arched in confusion and he parted his lips to ask what the sailing master meant, but Yoongi spoke first, amusement clear in his voice. “Your sea overflows far too easily, songbird,” he remarked, smirking.

Only when the captain’s words sank in did Jimin realize he was crying, tears falling silently from his eyes. He hadn’t noticed, too captivated by the precious moment he’d witnessed to realize the moment his own emotions had become too much to bear. “Sh-shut up, Yoongi,” he stuttered and reached up to rub at his eyes, pouting behind the security of his hands. “It doesn’t.”

The last thing he expected was for Yoongi to emit a bark of laughter at the meek retort, nor the firm touch to his shoulder when the captain walked past him. “If you say so,” he mused, leaving Jimin behind, stunned, as he went to fall in with Taehyung and Hoseok.

“What was that?” Jeongguk wondered, looking from Jimin to his captain and back again, pursing his lips when Jimin only shook his head, not quite sure of the answer himself. “Well, at least he ceased your crying.”
Dimly, Jimin realized he was right; while his thoughts were all but calm, the wetness of his eyes was gone, leaving more than room than he would’ve liked for his inner turmoil.

What are you doing? he wondered over and over again as he followed after the others, staring hard at the ground as he walked. He wanted to tell himself to not overthink things, to calm down, but the thoughts were half-hearted even to himself, and he found himself spending the rest of the trek in silence, his confusion only rising.

It took them hours and hours to reach the edge of the jungle, and true enough, just like the priestess had promised, there was a carriage waiting for them at the small sand road some fifty meters from the treeline. This one was pulled by four oxen rather than one, and they seemed far more impressive than the one that'd pulled the old man's cart, obviously younger and corded with muscle. The man steering the cart was dressed much like those Jimin had seen at the temple, in robes of white and red, and he raised a hand to wave them over as soon as he saw them.

Prying Taehyung away from the six-legged tiger proved to be the most difficult task, the quartermaster unbelievably attached to the animal. “I'll miss you, Vahana,” he said and rubbed his brow against hers, smiling when the tiger emitted a snort. “You'll wait for me to come visit you again, right?”

Vahana nudged his chest and huffed, and that was all the farewell she gave before she turned around and disappeared back into the jungle. With a fond chuckle, Jeongguk put his arm around Taehyung's shoulder and coaxed him into walking, murmuring something in his ear and kissing his temple.

As soon as they'd taken their seats in the carriage, the man holding the straps of the oxen promised they would reach Kolkata within three hours if the road was without trouble. He offered them water from a large flagon and told them he had two more if they grew thirsty on the way.

Jimin fell asleep one hour into their ride, right amidst the discussion of how the Rune of the Storm could work against the Rabid Conflagration. The sheer exhaustion that had accumulated over the past two days gnawed at his senses until he finally couldn't fight to keep his eyes open any longer, succumbing to rest with his head on Taehyung’s shoulder.

He dreamt of blue light and feathers the colors of peach, dancing gracefully on the wind and beckoning him to join their fun. He told them he couldn't, that he didn't know how, but an old voice reassured him, saying, Simply because you cannot see your wings does not mean they do not exist. Smiling, Jimin nodded, and without even knowing how he did it, he flew, dancing on the wind alongside the feathers.

When he woke up again, it was to someone gently shaking his shoulder, a voice speaking softly in his ear. “We’re here, Chim,” Taehyung whispered, carefully coaxing him out of his sleep. “The others went to return the map, but we're leaving as soon as they return.”

With a groan, Jimin pushed himself upright, his neck throbbing with stiffness from sleeping in such a poor position. “Taehyung?” he slurred, his voice thick.

“Aye,” the quartermaster chuckled, playfully poking his cheek. “You slept for almost two hours. How are you feeling?”

“Like I weigh a tonne,” Jimin huffed, although he smiled when Taehyung emitted a bright laughter. “I'm just so tired. I haven't slept properly since we left the Agust.”

“I know.” There was a softness to the quartermaster's eyes as he looked at him, smiling behind his mask. “Yoongi told us,” he said. “He told us to be quiet and let you sleep for as long as you would.”
Surprised, Jimin lowered his gaze to his lap, but Taehyung followed, leaning forward so he could see his face. “Did something happen between you two?”

The question made Jimin frown, not because he didn’t want to answer, but because he wasn’t certain where to begin. So many things had happened after Yoongi and he had fallen from the cliff, and they all played a part in his state of confusion. However, there was one that weighed heavier than all the rest, the mere memory of it causing a stir strong enough to leave him unable to calm down.

“I saw,” he began, the words catching in his throat and forcing him to close his eyes and take a deep breath before trying again. “I saw his back, I… I saw his tattoo.” He felt Taehyung’s grip on his shoulder tighten, if only by a fraction, but a noticeable shift all the same. “I saw all of your names, everyone, written in ink where you first met. I saw his entire world, a-and…”

It was as if saying it would make it real, as if it would confirm what Jimin didn’t dare let himself believe. The words were on the tip of his tongue yet refused to leave his lips, stubborn in their fear of how overwhelming it would be to have them confirmed.

“I’m here, Chim,” Taehyung crooned against his hair, pulling him tight against the safety of his chest. “It’s alright.”

Jimin nodded, his throat burning with the need to cry. “No one has ever cared the way you do,” he whispered, his voice quivering. “Ever since my mother died, there was only Jihyun, and sh-she cared, but not like this, not like-” He cut himself off when he felt a sob rise to his lips, and he clutched the front of Taehyung’s vest. “I didn’t dare to hope you could be my home,” he breathed. “All of you, everyone aboard the Agust, I was too scared of letting myself think of you as my home, but then… but then I saw-”

“You saw his tattoo,” the quartermaster murmured, his smile audible from his voice alone, muffled as it was behind his mask. “You saw your own name amongst all of ours.”

It was as if a dam had burst. All the emotions that had been strung taut ever since Yoongi had pulled him from the river were unfolded and set loose, bursting through his efforts to keep them under control. His entire body was racked by his sobs, tears pouring down his cheeks, and all he could do was hold onto Taehyung and succumb to his conflict.

Jimin didn’t know for how long they sat there, in the dim light of the carriage. Taehyung kept stroking his back and whispering soothing words into his hair, allowing him to cry for as long as he needed. Vaguely, he knew it wasn’t sadness that made him cry, not sorrow or anguish what had caused his pain, but his tears fell all the same, steadily releasing the pressure that’d been strung around his heart.

It wasn’t until his sobs turned into small sniffles, his tears finally beginning to run dry, that the quartermaster coaxed him to raise his head, his touch ever so gentle. “Do you know how Yoongi’s tattoo works?” Taehyung asked, smiling when Jimin shook his head. “It’s the one part of his blessing he can’t control. You see, the ink in his skin is as much inanimate as any object he can bring to life with his touch, and since it’s always in contact with him, it has a habit of shifting outside of his conscious control.”

He lifted one of his hands to Jimin’s face to rub away his tears. “His tattoo changes according to his own emotions,” he said softly. “You say you haven’t dared let yourself think of us as your home, Chim, but if you saw your name on Yoongi’s back, it means he thinks of you as part of his.”

His words sank deep into Jimin’s chest and had him crying all over again, warmth spreading throughout his entire being. He heard Taehyung chuckle brightly and swatted at his chest, unable
gather himself for long enough to tell the quartermaster to stop laughing.

“You have a home with us,” Taehyung whispered as he pulled Jimin into another embrace. “Now and forever.”

When the others returned, Jimin had finally stopped crying altogether, although his eyes were still swollen and red. He offered them all a reassuring smile before they could even ask, the soft curl of his lips coming easy; it was as if a weight had been lifted from his chest, and his steps felt lighter than they had in years when they left Kolkata, steering their steps towards the Agust.

This walk felt like the shortest one yet; the lagoon was located only a few kilometers away from the city, barely an hour on foot, and there was a giddiness to Jimin that made time pass faster. He couldn’t wait to see the others again, even the ever-stubborn Hisashi. He missed the crow’s nest and the beautiful view of the endless sea, the night sky that always seemed only just outside his reach, as if his hands could almost touch the smattering of stars.

They were jesting about how many things Namjoon might’ve broken in their absence - the first mate was notoriously clumsy - when the small forest surrounding the lagoon came into view, its treetops a stark contrast to the orange sky and setting sun. “Finally,” Yoongi groused, looking like he was about to fall asleep where he stood. “I could sleep for an entire week.”

“And you will, no doubt,” Hoseok said with a grin, to which the captain rolled his eyes while the others laughed.

“If only you’d let me,” he scoffed, “but no, every damned time I try, you wake me up after only a day and complain… complain about…” His voice slowly trailed off as he gazed over the forest’s treetops, a frown settling deep into his brow. “What the hell..?” he muttered, coming to a halt.

Jimin turned to see what it was that confused the captain, and just as his eyes found the Agust’s main mast over the top of the trees, the stillness of the air was torn asunder by a deafening explosion.

“Wha-” The very ground underneath Jimin’s feet quaked with the force of it and caused him to stumble, his ears ringing sharply. He staggered backwards and would’ve lost his balance if not for Hoseok grabbing his arm to steady him, his voice oddly distant in Jimin’s ears.

“What’s going on?” the doctor shouted, his voice urgent with panic.

“Hostile fire,” Yoongi barked, cursing as another explosion tore through the air, the very ground quaking with the force of it. “Fucking- it’s coming from the lagoon!”

Frantic with dread, Jimin raised his eyes to the treetops once more, and felt his heart sink to his stomach at the sight of the second pair of sails, pristine and white, flying a familiar colours.

“It’s the mariners,” Taehyung said loudly, struggling to keep his voice in control as he held Jeongguk close to his chest, the sailing master growing paler for each passing second. “They’re trapping the Agust in the lagoon.”

“W-we have to help them,” Jimin breathed, his voice quivering with fear. “The others, they’re caught, they… Hisashi, he can’t fight, we-”

“I know,” Yoongi bit off, his eyes frenzied as he stared up at the flag flying at the top of the mariner ship’s main mast. “Fuck, fuck, I know who sails that ship…!” Jimin saw his jaw move with unspoken words, his gaze sweeping rapidly over the trees, and when he finally turned away, he seemed to almost radiate authority. “We have to get back to the Agust as quickly as he can,” he said loudly, “but the commander of that ship is a dangerous bastard who will do what he can to stop it from
Another explosion fell as he spoke, this one closer than the previous two. “Taehyung and Jeongguk,” Yoongi shouted, his voice carrying over the detonation’s echo, “enter the forest two hundred meters east of where we stand now! Hoseok and the songbird will go straight forward from here, and I’ll take go two hundred meters from the west! And,” he added gravely, his voice leaving no room for argument, “if your paths cross with the commander, run.”

Dimly, Jimin realized that the captain had chosen the path that’d take him closest to the mariner ship, but before he could do anything to quell the dread the thought brought on, Hoseok began to run, tugging him along towards the forest edge. Jimin struggled to keep up, panic rendering his legs numb, and when the fourth explosion went off somewhere to their far left, he almost fell, the ground uneven beneath his feet.

“Come on, come on,” Hoseok chanted, his voice laced with alarm. He had drawn his pistol from his hip, holding the firearm in his right hand while his left clutched Jimin’s arm. “We’ll be safer amongst the trees, just-”

Whatever it was he’d been about to say, Jimin would never know, for as soon as they stepped within ten meters of the treeline, at least fifty mariners came charging of the forest to meet them, roaring as they raised their swords.

It was sheer instinct that made Jimin bury his heels into the ground and pull hard at Hoseok’s arm, tearing him out of the momentum of his sprint. “Back!” he cried shrilly, dread gripping hard at his chest as he struggled to run, fear screaming in his chest. “It’s a trap, run!”

In his panic, he could barely hear the sound of gunfire right behind him, Hoseok firing bullet after bullet into the wave of enemies running them down. Everywhere he looked, all he saw was chaos. The mariners outnumbered them ten to one, seeming almost like a tidal wave rushing up to drown them, and it tore the air right out of his lungs, leaving nothing behind but terror.

“I need my sword, Jimin!” Hoseok shouted and attempted to free himself from Jimin’s grasp. “Keep running, I’ll hold them off!”

“No!” Jimin yelled, refusing to even consider it. “I’m not leaving you! We have to find the others!”

He ignored the doctor’s growled curse and looked around, frantic in his search. He saw Taehyung and Jeongguk far to their left, the quartermaster tearing through mariners with his sword at the same time as he forced Jeongguk to keep running, the sailing master clutching one of his broadswords tightly in his hands, looking terrified out of his mind. “Taehyung!” Jimin screamed, a moment of relief flooding his veins as he watched the quartermaster glance towards him, only to have that relief be torn right out of him when Taehyung raised his voice, laced in frenzied horror.

“YOONGI!”

Jemin turned so fast he almost fell, his eyes widening at the sight of the captain squaring off against a mariner of obvious high rank, his garb finer than the rest of the soldiers’. The mariner kept reaching for him, trying to catch Yoongi in his grip, but the captain was quick, slipping out of his reach every time he tried.

Until he didn’t.

He moved forward to bury one of his daggers deep into the mariner’s shoulder, but the victory was short-lived; the action brought him within the mariner’s reach, and the man’s grin was horrifyingly
triumphant as he caught Yoongi’s left hand in his own.

A shuddering breath had time to leave Jimin’s lips before the air between Yoongi and the mariner detonated.

With eyes wide in horror and his heart ceasing in his chest, Jimin watched as the explosion travelled up Yoongi’s prosthetic arm, shattering the metallic limb and sending pieces of it flying left and right, but it didn’t stop there. Suddenly, there was blood in the air as the imploding current tore all the way up to the captain’s shoulder, and with a ragged scream that reverberated deep in Jimin’s very core, Yoongi lost what remained of his left arm.

For a fraction of a second, all Jimin felt was emptiness, an endless hollow consuming him as he fell to his knees, the air in his lungs leaving him in a quivering exhale, the mere sight of the captain falling to the ground rendering him deaf to the sounds of war raging around him.

For a fraction of a second, everything was quiet.

Then terror crashed violently against his chest and forced him to curl in on himself and brace his hands flat against the ground, his entire body convulsing. The blood coursing through his veins burned with agony, his breath a sharp hiss as dread made his throat constrict and threatened to suffocate him. He couldn’t think, he couldn’t see, he couldn’t hear, anguish claiming every last one of his senses, and finally, it became too much to bear.

The last thing he remembered was the scream that tore its way up his throat, a blood-curdling sound that made the very ground underneath him quake. All he could do was scream, scream as he screwed his eyes shut, as his spine bent painfully, as feathers burst from his arms and back and turned him into a creature neither human nor animal.

All he could do was scream as the last string of his sanity broke.

Chapter End Notes

*I’m sorry.*
A Cry of Anguish

Chapter Summary

Faintly, he could taste blood on his tongue.

His arms and shoulders were draped in feathers, wings spreading wide at his sides, and from his knees down, the skin of his legs had turned coarse and dark, his feet shaped like talons, clawed and dangerous. Gone was the softness of his features and the gentleness of the canary, leaving behind nothing but a frightening, inhuman form.

Chapter Notes

I’m still sorry. Even more so, now.

Oh, and to my shame, I completely forgot that Jin calls Jimin "canary," and that it's super important. He hasn't done it in like 15 or so chapters, but please pretend he's always done it, okay? Okay. Good.

Have some heartbreaking music while we’re at it;

- Brand X Music - Last Chance
- Brand X Music - Altered States
- Ramin Djawadi - See You For What You Are
- Ramin Djawadi - Truth

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jimin was a boy of nine the first time he saw death in battle. The victim had been a hawk, fierce and strong, a predator of the skies that, at the time, had spied a nest full of newly hatched flycatchers and set its aim on it, ravenous. It had dove out of the sky, quick and without mercy, eager to satiate its hunger with the defenceless babes.

What the bird of prey hadn’t thought of, however, was the protective mother; with her newborns threatened, the female flycatcher had attacked without a shred of regard for her own life. She’d been fierce in her assault, digging her talons into the hawk’s throat, refusing to surrender even when the predator caught her wing in his beak and broke it.

The bird had fought with her life on the line, furious and protective, and before her wrath, even the hawk had fallen from the sky, his hunger costing him his life.

Had Jimin been more sane when he reached out for Yoongi’s unconscious body, he might’ve thought back to that moment and seen himself in the flycatcher. Protect, his instincts screamed at him, drowning out the panicked shouts of his friends and the startled cries of the surrounding mariners. Protect, save him, now, whatever it takes.
Faintly, he could taste blood on his tongue.

His arms and shoulders were draped in long, thick feathers, wings spreading wide at his sides, and from his knees down, the skin of his legs had turned coarse and dark, his feet shaped like talons, clawed and dangerous. Gone was the softness of his features and the gentleness of the canary, leaving behind nothing but a frightening, inhuman form.

Blinded by his own insanity, Jimin hardly realized what it was he was doing. His ears were ringing with a pitch nearly deafening, his blood roaring in his veins, and as he reached the captain, he didn’t hesitate before kicking off the ground and burying his talons into the arm of the man hovering over him, the man who’d caused the explosion.

The man who’d hurt Yoongi.

The mariner emitted a sharp cry of pain and recoiled as Jimin’s claws sank deep into his flesh, tearing through muscle and nerve, all the way down to the bone. “Get away!” Jimin screamed, his voice barely human, shrill and sharp as the blade of a knife, his throat burning around each syllable. “Get away from him!”

When the man attempted to pry his talons away, Jimin shifted, folding his wings to press down hard and force all of his weight onto the mariner’s arm. Caught off guard, he staggered and fell, and Jimin refused to let go even as they went down, only digging his claws in deeper. There was a primal need burning within him, an urge to assure that this man, this predator would never turn his eyes on Yoongi again, not for as long as he lived.

“No!” The word fell from Jimin’s lips at the same time as he shifted, taking one of his talons away from the man’s arm to bury it in his chest instead, deaf to the sharp cry it drew from the mariner. “No, no, no!” he shrieked, his voice echoing across the battlefield. “You don’t touch him, never, you don’t hurt him!”

Lost to his own rage, Jimin saw none of it as he turned back to the mariner underneath him, a furious hissing rolling through his gritted teeth, and when he shifted again, his claws sank into the skin of the man’s throat.

The terrible gurgling sound he emitted was lost in Jimin’s endless cries, the high-pitched ringing in his ears rendering him deaf to what he, in his sanity, would be devastated to hear.

By the time the mariner ceased struggling underneath him, Jimin’s feet and legs were painted in a smatter of red, yet he didn’t stop. Or perhaps he couldn’t; so blind he was to his surroundings that he hardly even noticed the mariner’s sudden stillness and his lack of cries. “You don’t!” Jimin cried, his
heartbeat thundering against his eardrums. “None of you, no one, you stay away from him, you—”

He cut himself off abruptly, his instincts flaring up so violently he almost twisted his neck in his hurry to turn around. More people were emerging from the forest now, charging through the treeline to attack those dressed in white and blue, but one of them was running straight for Yoongi, ignoring the ongoing battle in favor of reaching for the unconscious captain.

There was something familiar about the man, but all Jimin could see were the swords in his hands as he drew near, and Jimin was moving before he could think.

*Protect*, he cried inwardly, his entire being aflame with the need to keep Yoongi safe.

The air folded under the sweep of his feathers and bent to his wings’ command; his bloodied talons never touched the ground when he pushed away from the dead mariner, his body airborne until he barrelled directly against the pirate’s chest, sending him crashing into the ground, gasping as the air was shoved out of his lungs.

“Get away!” Jimin shrieked and beat his wings in a threatening manner, blind to the man’s shellshocked stare. “Get away from him, all of you!”

“J-Jimin,” the pirate said, his voice loud and distraught, an inkling of fear hiding somewhere in the deep baritone. “Jimin, you have to calm down. It’s me, it’s Namjoon, I’m a friend.”

A flicker of recognition sparked somewhere in the depths of Jimin’s chaotic mind, but he drove it away with a frantic shake of his head, refusing the risk, his instincts sensing a trap. “No!” he screamed and moved back until he was standing over Yoongi’s unconscious body, his wings spread wide, shielding. “Stay away from him!”

“We need to get him out of here, Jimin,” the pirate shouted, distress dripping from his voice. “He’ll bleed to death if you don’t let us take him!”

Ignoring his protests, Jimin looked down at the man he was trying to protect. The skin of Yoongi’s face was almost ghostly white, so much paler than usual, and framed by blood, seeping steadily out of his shoulder. The sight of him made Jimin emit another deafening cry, an incoherent scream that seemed to pulsate through the air; when he looked up at the pirate again, his swords were lying by his feet as he clutched his ears, his face contorted in pain.

Somewhere in the back of Jimin’s chaotic mind, he wondered if death hurt less than this.

There were more of them coming now, all radiating the same kind of panicked urgency as they drew closer and closer, approaching from all sides. He saw fear on all of their faces; if it was fear of him or fear of the state of the man he was trying to protect, he couldn’t tell, but in his state of insanity, it didn’t matter.

“Stay back!” he screamed, his voice crackling in throat, raw from abuse. He beat out his wings, the air whistling around the sharpest feathers, and while they all came to a halt, their palpable dread continued forwards and seeped into Jimin’s skin to amplify his hysteria. “He’s hurt, you don’t touch him, I won’t let you hurt him anymore!”

“Jimin, we’re not going to hurt him!” the first pirate tried again, his voice turning more and more agitated for each passing second. “We have to get him back to the ship, Hoseok needs to help him!”

“Liar!” Jimin shrieked and widened his stance, his talons digging into the blood-stained ground. “Liar, liar, liar, you’re lying, all of you, you want to hurt him, but I won’t let you! None of you, all of you, just stay away!”
“Canary!” The new voice jarred his attention away from the pirate and to his left, where another man was walking towards them, unarmed, his hands held out in front of him as if in surrender. "Canary," he said again, the word quivering on his lips. "Jimin, canary, you have to let us take him. Please, he won’t make it if we wait, h-he’s going to die. Yoongi will die.”

Jimin paused, his eyes wide as he stared at the man, distantly familiar just like the first pirate. His chest was heaving in his panic, his breath a high-pitched whistle, but through the ringing in his ears and the agony in his chest, Jimin heard a weak voice calling his name somewhere deep in the back of his mind.

“Canary,” the woman whispered, smiling as she raised a trembling hand towards him. She’d been bedridden for weeks, her body too frail to even stand, but when he took her hand and kissed it, she looked so happy, as if her sickness suddenly didn’t matter anymore. “Will you sing for me again, my sweetest boy, my canary?”

Wordlessly, Jimin nodded, merely a child, incapable of understanding the meaning of a last wish, and he sang until his voice cracked, until her hand hung limp in both of his.

“Canary.” The voice brought him back and he startled, suddenly disoriented where he stood. “Please,” the pirate urged, tears glistening in his eyes. “Please, you have to let us take him.”

“I… he…” Jimin blinked hard, his mind reeling as he looked at the man. Jin, he thought dimly, confusion tearing into the volatile anguish in his chest, his name is Jin. “He’s hurt,” he said shrilly, his voice hoarse from screaming. “Y-Yoongi’s hurt.”

A sob tore its way past Jin’s lips and he nodded, his hands still raised as he moved closer. “I know, canary, I know,” he said thickly, “but we can help him, alright? We can save him, but to do so, you have to let us take him.”

He stood within Jimin’s reach now; if he only extended his wings as far as he could, he would touch the man’s throat and the sharpest feathers could surely cut his skin. He didn’t, however. The air was still around him, a moment of peace amidst all the chaos that plagued him, and as his mind began to clear, he believed he could trust this man, this man whose name he knew was Jin.

He realized his mistake the instant he began to lower his wings. A series of panicked shouts rose from behind him suddenly, swiftly followed by another detonation, the ground quaking with the force of it. A sharp cry of anger left Jimin’s lips, the sound almost a hiss as he turned on Jin, who looked utterly shellshocked, his eyes wide in horror as he looked past Jimin, likely at whatever it was that had caused the explosion.

It didn’t matter to Jimin. All that mattered was the fact that he had tried to trick him, to get him to lower his guard so his friends could strike, to finish what the mariner had started. Anger rose hard in Jimin’s chest, rearing its head like a manic beast, and he followed its lead, releasing all the air in his lungs in a deafening shriek. Fury, anguish, terror and despair tore at his insides, crippling emotions that he would carve into the man’s chest by force for his betrayal.

He never made it that far. In his rage, he failed to notice the pirate approaching him from behind his back until it was too late. Something hard was rammed into the back of his head with brutal force, enough to knock him off balance, a pained exclaim rising up his throat as he staggered off and away from Yoongi’s body. “W-what…” Jimin gritted out, his words sounding distant in his own ears as he struggled to regain his composure.

The impact of the blow spread to every last inch of him, attacking each muscle in his body and tearing the strength right out of him. He tried to turn and failed, barely reaching halfway before his
knees gave in, and the last thing he saw before his vision turned black and his body grew limp was a pirate with hair the color of the sun driving his sword through the fallen mariner’s heart over and over, Jimin’s own fury mirrored in his eyes.

-Yoongi, Jimin tried to say, but his lips wouldn’t move. Yoongi. All there was was darkness, a complete blackness consuming him from all sides and dulling his senses. He couldn’t see. He felt nothing but the throbbing ache that spread throughout his body, numbing him; he tried to raise his hands, but his arms refused to listen. Yoongi.

Somewhere in the distant, he heard shouting. He couldn’t tell what they were saying, their words blurring together, but there was dread in their voices, panicked urgency clear as day even to Jimin. He felt his body shift slightly, his side pressed up against something warm, and there it was again, the screaming, but this time, it was accompanied by a wetness, as if the source of the horrible sound was crying.

Jimin tried to turn his head to find whomever it was who was so lost in their terror, but to no avail. Please don’t cry, he wanted to say, the familiarity of the distressed voice causing his heart to twist painfully in his chest. Please.

The ache in his body suddenly drew itself up to his head, pain exploding underneath his skull. He wanted to cry out, but all he could manage was a groan, the sound too small to be heard in the ongoing chaos. It hurts, he thought hazily, feeling as if a wet cloth was wrapped around his brain, turning him weak and incoherent.

“C-canary?”

The voice spoke almost directly into his ear, quiet and trembling, and he tried to reply, but again, the only sound that made it past his lips was another groan, although it was louder this time. His eyelids were heavy, more so than his limbs.

“Hoseok,” the voice said urgently. “Hoseok, he’s waking up.”

A new voice hissed a distraught curse at his words. “You have to take him away from here, Jin,” it barked, strained and austere with fervent concentration. “We can’t risk having him see this.” Something clattered to the floor and another curse was spat out. “Take him to Yoongi’s quarters, now, I’ll see to him later.”

There was an odd scent in the air, like something burning. Jimin wrinkled his nose in distaste, his eyes opening by only a sliver. His vision was blurred and even the dim light of the room felt almost blinding, an unpleasant twinge settling behind his lids. “Wha’s ha’ppnin’?” he slurred, groggy and winded.

“Nothing, canary, nothing at all.” He felt a pair of strong arms close around his frame and pull him upright, securely holding him as his legs struggled to find purchase on the floor. “Come on,” the voice crooned, a distinct tension to its softness. “Let’s have you lie down, alright? It’ll make you feel better.”

Jimin frowned, clutching onto the arms that held him. The voice said nothing was going on, but he could still hear crying and muffled screams, the sounds loud in his ears and feeding the dull throb of his head. “Wha’s goin’ on?” he asked again, his throat thick, as if he’d swallowed a piece of wet fabric. He blinked hard against the lights of the room, weakly struggling to resist the grip that was dragging him away from them.
“Canary, look at me.” It took more effort than Jimin could’ve imagined to turn his head, squinting as his eyes attempted to focus on the face in front of him, his vision swimming. “You need to rest,” the man said gently and attempted a reassuring smile, but there were tears in his eyes and on his cheeks. “I’ll tell you what happened after you’ve slept.”

It did sound appealing, what with him barely succeeding in moving any limb of his body, but then he heard that familiar sob again and he turned away to find whomever it was who was so sad.

The clearer the room became, the stronger horror rose in Jimin’s chest until it was all he could do to just breathe.

Taehyung was curled up on the floor in the corner of the infirmary, crying hysterically into his hands, his entire body shaking with the force of his sobs. Jeongguk was sitting next to him, his arms closed tight around the quartermaster’s body, his eyes wide and his jaw clenched so hard it seemed like to break. He wasn’t crying, but he looked like he’d witnessed every last circle of hell, dread marring his features.

Hoseok stood over the bed with his back to Jimin, but he could see the stains of blood along his arms, reaching as far up as his elbows. His hands were moving at a frantic pace over something Jimin couldn’t see, and when he turned slightly, his face was pale as a ghost, his lips pressed into a thin line. Namjoon sat on the other side of the bed, a thin, skin-colored tube with a silver hook dug into the fold of his elbow, blood seeping steadily from his vein into the funnel. He seemed tired, leaning his back against the wall behind him, his eyes fluttering, his skin as pale as the surgeon’s.

Jin couldn’t see where the tube ended until Hoseok moved aside to reach for something, and in an instant, Jimin felt the ground disappear from underneath his feet.

Yoongi was lying on his back on the bed, his chest bare and heaving, his inked skin sweaty and shining in the dim light. The sheets underneath him were damp and dark with blood, and he was strapped down to the cot, a belt of leather tied tight around his waist, another reaching from the side of his chest to the left side of his neck. The tube that drained Namjoon of his blood was hooked into Yoongi’s arm to give back what the hemorrhage had cost him, if only a fraction of it.

A sturdy piece of leather had been shoved between the captain’s teeth to spare his tongue, the material creaking as he bit into it so hard the bones of his jaw crackled. His hair was caked with blood, as was the left side of his face and neck, and when Jimin’s eyes found what caused his pain, “O-oh my god,” he breathed in horror, his legs threatening to fold.

Yoongi’s shoulder was red and gaping, the flesh burned raw where the bleeding had been at its worst. His arteries had been closed with string and the bleeding had ceased, but the wound was still open while Hoseok searched frantically for clean cloth and bandages to seal it with. The captain was still in pain, growling around the piece of leather, the sound breaking as he strained against the belts that bound him.

In an instant, it all came rushing back to Jimin. He recoiled almost violently as he remembered, his throat constricting in dread as he recalled the sight of the mariner causing a detonation with his bare hands, an explosion that tore Yoongi’s entire arm to shreds. He remembered Yoongi’s scream and he remembered his own, and then there had been nothing but darkness, nothing but an unbearable anguish, one that had threatened to consume him alive.

“Canary,” Jin tried, but Jimin shook his head, a high, cracked sound falling from his lips as he attempted to get out of the cook’s arms, his vision blurring for every second it took to pry himself away. “Jimi-”
“No,” he whispered, his voice quivering as he reached out, desperate. It wasn’t enough to see, he needed to feel Yoongi’s life with his own hands. He needed to feel the beat of the captain’s heart lest his own give in. “Let me go, please, please, I-I have to… I can’t!”

He couldn’t tell if Jin eventually released him or if he squirmed out of his hold by force, but suddenly he was staggering over to the bed, his legs weak and trembling for every step he took. He blinked hard against the tears in his eyes, feeling as if he couldn’t breathe properly. His insides were screaming, crying out in agony so fierce he wondered how he was still alive at all; being alive could not be such a painful thing to bear.

Vaguely, he registered falling to his knees by the edge of the bed, his hands trembling as he reached out. “Yoongi,” Jimin breathed, barely audible even to his own ears. He flinched when the captain’s body seized in a fit of pain, his muscles straining against his skin. A hoarse sound rose from around the piece of leather caught in his teeth, and Jimin felt a sob in the base of his throat, one he couldn’t suppress.

“Yoongi,” he said again, his voice breaking around the name. “Yoongi, Y-Yoongi, please.” He didn’t know what it was he was asking for, but the plea was all he had to hold onto as he leaned forward and pressed his brow against Yoongi’s chest, his hands coming up to rest over his heart. As soon as he felt the rapid beat of the captain’s heart against the palm of his hand, Jimin broke, his body racked by a wave of near violent sobs. He pulled back and buried his face in his hands as he cried, feeling all too much all at once; it was all he could do to not scream, the crippling pressure in his chest too much to bear.

“You need to get him out of here, Jin,” Hoseok said in a brave attempt at sounding stern, but the quiver of his voice betrayed his own state of turmoil. “He’s going to trigger another fit of panic if he… if he doesn’t…” Slowly, his voice trailed off into silence, one that spread throughout the infirmary, but it wasn’t until Jimin felt a touch to the top of his head that he looked up from his hands.

Yoongi was looking back at him, his eyes barely open, as if his eyelids weighed at least a tonne. The piece of leather had fallen from his mouth and he was breathing hard, air passing his lips in sharp exhales, but when Jimin hurried to take his hand, his good hand, the one he’d raised to touch him, the captain smiled.

It was a frail thing, a faint curl of his lips, but it filled Jimin’s senses with relief so intense, he might’ve cracked under it.

“Wh-why are you sad, s-songbird?” Yoongi asked weakly, his voice hoarse and strained with the effort it cost him to speak. “Is the sea o-overflowing again?” He coughed ever so lightly, but it was enough to triggering a tremor that jarred his damaged body. “It really does ha-happen too often.”

Jimin felt as if his heart would break, another sob racking his frame as he leaned forward and pressed his forehead against Yoongi’s knuckles, fresh tears spilling down his cheeks. “No,” he said, his breath hitching in his sorrow. “It—it’s not the sea. Not this time.”

He clutched the captain’s hand tightly in both of his own, holding onto it like a lifeline, and it took all the strength in the world to look up, blinking away the blur of his eyes so he could see Yoongi’s face as he whispered, “This time I’m really crying.”

His words caused the captain’s smile to widen, twitching in the corner as a spasm of pain went through him. “How rare,” he chuckled, the sound a mere wheeze, his fingers curling weakly around Jimin’s. “S the… ’s the f-first time I’ve seen you cry, then.”
In spite of all the near painful emotions that clawed at him from the inside, Jimin laughed, the sound wet and breathless and causing even more tears to fall from his eyes. When he sobered up, he parted his lips to tell Yoongi how ridiculous his words were, but when he looked up, the captain’s eyes had fallen shut, his hand limp in Jimin’s grip, and whatever relief Jimin had felt was torn away from him in an instant.

“Yoongi,” he called, dread rising fast in his chest as he watched the captain’s head loll to the side, eerily lifeless. “No, no, no, Yoongi, Yoongi, come back, please, come back!” Dimly, he heard Taehyung’s cries grow louder, the sound digging cracks into his heart. “Yoongi,” Jimin cried, desperate as he held onto the captain’s hand. “Yoongi, Yoongi, Yoongi, come back, please, come back!”

Suddenly, arms closed around his chest and pulled him away from the bed, strong in their grip when he began to kick and scream, pleading. He needed to be near Yoongi, he needed it more than air, if only to ensure his heart continued to beat in his chest.

“You can’t be in there, canary,” Jin told him loudly, his voice strained as he struggled to keep Jimin under control. “You need to let Hoseok do his job, and he won’t be able to concentrate like this.”

“Please!” Jimin cried, feeling as if he’d been submerged in icy water as he was dragged outside, trying and failing to free himself from the cook’s hold. “Please, I have to see him, I have to, I can’t… let me go!”

Unwittingly, he dug his nails into Jin’s arms, deaf to the sharp hiss that fell from his lips. He couldn’t breathe properly. His airways were constricting, depriving him of oxygen until he felt the darkness from before begin to rise once more, clawing at his sanity. With Yoongi out of sight, the captain might as well be dead for all he knew, and the mere thought was unbearable.

He vaguely heard Jin shout something, his words dull in Jimin’s ears, and suddenly he was jostled into someone else’s arms, bigger and stronger than the cook’s. Refusing to give in, Jimin resumed his flailing, only faltering when a deep, gruff voice spoke hushed words against the top of his head, concern lacing every syllable.

“’S alright, pretty bird,” Xiao told him, holding him easily as he struggled. “The cap’n will be alright, he will, Hoseok’s kept us all alive through worse.” There was a tightness to the way he spoke and Jimin didn’t want to hear it, but he did, a broken whimper falling from his lips as he attempted to free himself. “Come on, now, pretty bird, let’s get you-”

“Oh, fuck’s sake, Xiao, move.”

The arms around Jimin’s body disappeared and was replaced by a harsh grip on the collar of his shirt, tugging him forward so abruptly he staggered, his hands coming up to clutch at the intruding limb for support. “Let me-”

“You’d better calm the fuck down, you hear me?” It was Hisashi who spoke, his voice an irritated snarl as he leaned in close until his face was right in front of Jimin’s. “What do you think you will to accomplish like this, huh?” the pirate barked, shaking him by his shirt when he couldn’t immediately form a coherent reply. “You think screaming like a little child is going to solve a single fucking thing?”

Shocked, Jimin parted his lips and closed them again, utterly lost for what to do. Hisashi was having trouble standing upright, hunched over as his injured shoulder ached, but even so, he'd pushed away from where he'd been leaning against the wall to reach out for Jimin.

“I-I'm,” he began, his dread momentarily retreating to give way for his startled state, but the pirate
interrupted him with another harsh shake to the collar of his shirt.

“No, this isn't how you save anyone,” he said loudly, his voice carrying far over the sea. “This isn't how you saved me, so you'd better calm the fuck down if you want to help the captain survive!”

Tears burned hot behind Jimin's eyes and he bit into his lip, trying his utmost to keep them from falling. The dark numbness of his mind had dissipated, forced away by Hisashi’s words, but they left him feeling more helpless than he ever had. His chest was brimming with an overwhelming need to do something, anything at all to help, and the knowledge that there was nothing he could do was crippling.

When his tears eventually did fall, he cast down his gaze to hide them from Hisashi, who released his shirt without a word, huffing as he took a step back. “Someone take him,” the pirate snapped, and only a moment later, Jimin was pulled into an embrace, calloused fingers rubbing circles into his back. Quiet, foreign words were murmured against his hair, and he allowed himself to cry silently against the sniper's shoulder.

Lucya held him close, gently rocking him back and forth where they stood while crooning words of comfort into his ear and hushing him when his breath hitched pitifully. “Life,” she whispered in Korean, one of the few words she knew.

Jimin could only nod and hold onto her tighter. *Life,* he repeated to himself, as if it was a prayer. *Yoongi will live. He has to.*

He barely noticed when Lucya began to lead him towards the quarterdeck, gently coaxing him into moving his feet. His legs felt heavy as led, but Jin was at his side to help him as well, one hand at his waist, the other holding his arm. It was a slow walk, and by the time they reached the captain’s quarters, Jimin was exhausted, both his mind and his body begging for rest.

Jin gently pushed him down onto the mattress, a tremulous smile on his lips as he coaxed him to crawl under the thin blanket. “I'll bring you Sleeper’s Drought if you’re still awake when I come back,” he said, lingering by the bedside even after Lucya had gone. “Close your eyes for me, won’t you? All of us will be here when you wake.”

Jimin nodded, tears still falling silently from his eyes, and Jin chuckled, the sound thick with his own emotions. “He won’t die, canary,” he promised and leaned forward to press a soft kiss against Jimin’s forehead, the simple touch seeping into his skin and stilling his nerves, enveloping him in a comfortable warmth, the like of which he hadn’t felt since before his mother had fallen ill. “I swear it.”

The cook brushed Jimin’s hair away from his brow, his thumb stroking his temple for a moment before he stood, leaving behind only a fraction of his warmth as he made for the doors, closing them behind himself with a soft *click.* He left Jimin alone in the darkness of the night, and all he could do was curl in on himself and hope, with every fibre of his being, that all of them were right.

“Please,” he murmured before sleep could claim him, speaking to whatever spirits or gods could hear him, gripping hard onto the sheets underneath him, “please let him live.” He turned his head and pressed his face into the pillows, hiding his words from the world. “My home is in him. Without him, I’m lost, and I…”

He drew a quivering breath, his voice barely audible as he closed his eyes against the room that seemed so empty and cold without its resident. “I want to be home again,” Jimin whispered into the darkness, “here, with him, with all of them. I don’t want to be lost anymore.”
//cries a lifetime’s worth of tears

O-okay, I'm okay, I'm good.

…… no I'm not.

//hysterical sobbing

THEY’RE ALL HURTING SO MUCH. I’M FECKIN SAD.

AND THEY ALL COME TOGETHER TO HELP THE SONGBIRD COPE, I’M IN FUCKING TEARS, WOW, HOW ABOUT YOU, HOW YOU DOIN’????? EVEN HISASHI. IS THIS FRIENDSHIP I SMELL???? I DON’T EVEN KNOW. HELP.

Fun fact; the entire story of the Songbird and the Sea was born out of the phrase, “I’m not crying. It’s the sea. The sea is overflowing,” along with its “counter-phrase,” which finally made its appearance in this chapter. “It’s not the sea, not this time. This time I’m really crying.” /clenches heart// HARD. HITTING. DIALOGUE. IS. LOVE.

Also fun fact; I interviewed a friend of mine who’s an MMA fighter and asked him how it feels to be knocked out and wake up after it. Used what he told me to simulate what Jimin felt after Namjoon rammed the hilt of his sword into the back of his head to incapacitate him, as well as what it was like to wake up after it.

Third fun fact; I did research into blood transfusions, and after extensive reading of essays and shit in medical journals, I learned that they were first invented around the 1650s and that they used tubes made out of everything from silver to ivory, to animal arteries. I also learned that severed limbs’ wounds don’t actually bleed that much. In the immediate shock following a dismemberment, the severed arteries tend to close up and shrink, which reduces the amount you bleed. Man, writing this story is SO FECKIN’ INTERESTING ISTG. And heartbreaking, but ayy, what else is new, amirite?

//hurls self off a cliff

((Even though Namjoon is the one giving blood to Yoongi here, I don't actually know if their blood types match… I know the info is very attainable, since blood types are HUGE over here, but I wanted it to be Namjoon, so… :D then again, the difference in blood types wasn’t discovered until the early 1900s, so I suppose this is just as accurate as it can be~))

Seriously though, this chapter took one hell of an emotional toll on me. I’ve had nightmares for the past two days, all of which included BTS and, uh, death, so, um, yeah, while I absolutely love this chapter, the gruesomeness of it and the emotions, I’m very happy that it’s over now! Not that I can guarantee the next chapter will be any better…. AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-
The Songbird's Heart

Chapter Summary

Jimin woke with a start, a high ringing echoing throughout his body as if someone had screamed right into his ear. His heart was beating wildly in his chest and his skin was damp with sweat, icy even in the room’s warmth, and he felt as though he was suffocating. He’d been dreaming, he knew, but he couldn't remember any of it, nothing but the immense dread clawing at his sanity in the darkness.

It had felt hauntingly real, the ringing like a lingering, echoing scream, a cry that had been carried by his own voice.

Chapter Notes

I'M SO EXCITED I COULDN'T WAIT, I NEED TO DROWN Y'ALL IN TEARS RIGHT THE HECK NOW.

Alright folks, we’ve got another one of those SUPER IMPORTANT SOUNDTRACKS IN THIS ONE. So open up THIS SONG RIGHT >>>>> HERE <<<<<< and when you reach this line - The air was silent and ocean still as glass, and he couldn’t resist its beauty. - YOU PLAY THAT SONG ON REPEAT UNTIL THE END OF TIME. GOT IT?

Until then, you can play BrunuhVille - Black Heart on repeat.

Okay, let’s go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jimin woke with a start, a high ringing echoing throughout his body as if someone had screamed right into his ear. His heart was beating wildly in his chest and his skin was damp with sweat, icy even in the room’s warmth, and he felt as though he was suffocating. He’d been dreaming, he knew, but he couldn't remember any of it, nothing but the immense dread clawing at his sanity in the darkness.

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Disoriented, Jimin attempted to sit up, only to realize the pressure on his chest that made it difficult to breathe wasn’t an imaginary one. A mop of sun blonde hair obscured his vision, stirring slightly as its owner groaned, roused from sleep by Jimin’s shifting. As carefully as he could, Jimin lay back against the mattress, hoping Taehyung wouldn’t wake, but the quartermaster raised his head and looked up at Jimin, his eyes bloodshot and heavy.
“Chim.”

His voice alone was enough to dig a crack deep into Jimin’s heart. He sounded as if he’d screamed until his throat had gone raw, a mere rasp of a noise making it past his lips. “I’m sorry,” Jimin said quietly and attempted a small, reassuring smile. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

With a sigh, Taehyung lowered his head back to his chest. “’S alright,” he croaked, his eyes glistening in the darkness. “Better awake than trapped in the nightmares.”

The ringing in Jimin’s ear grew a bit stronger at that, and he shook his head lightly to be rid of it before attempting to raise a hand to the quartermaster’s head to stroke his hair. He couldn’t quite move, however; not only was Taehyung draped over his left side, but Jeongguk was asleep against his right, one hand holding Taehyung’s while the other gripped hard onto the rags of Jimin’s shirt.

“Jin threw us in here and locked the doors,” the quartermaster said with a noise that could’ve been both a chuckle and a sob. “Said he wouldn’t let us out until we had slept.” There was a wetness soaking Jimin’s shirt, and Taehyung’s voice quivered with his tears. “He made us drink Sleeper’s Drought, but it doesn’t… it doesn’t take away the nightmares.”

With his arms trapped beneath the weight of his friends, all Jimin could do was listen to the quartermaster cry, the cracks in his heart digging themselves deeper. He fought resolutely against the sting in his eyes; whatever sorrow he felt after the night’s horrors, he knew it was ten times worse for Taehyung.

“I’m sorry, Tae,” he heard himself whispering, the back of his head throbbing as he pressed it into the mattress. “I’m so sorry. I wish there was something I could’ve done, anything, but-”

“Don’t.” The quartermaster blindly reached up and pressed his hand down over Jimin’s lips to muffle his words, frowning through his tears as he looked up at him. “Don’t you dare say it,” he said hoarsely, swallowing hard to keep his voice steady. “There was nothing you could’ve done to stop it from happening, so don’t you dare think it’s your fault, Jimin. Don’t you dare blame yourself for it.”

Shocked by the graveness of Taehyung’s words, Jimin could only nod. The quartermaster seemed almost angry, brows knitted tight as he glared at Jimin until he deemed it safe to withdraw his hand without hearing the same words ever again. “I’m sorry,” he muttered and buried his face against Jimin’s chest once more, “but you’re the last person who should ever utter those words, Chim. If anything, you saved him. Without you, I… he might’ve…”

He couldn’t seem to say the words, and Jimin couldn’t fault him for it. They were too horrible to even think of, so he shook his head to be rid of them and raised his eyes to the ceiling, staring at it as if it held all the answers in the world. “I can’t even remember what happened,” he whispered. “It’s all a blur. I remember seeing that mariner, I remember him grabbing Yoongi’s hand and… and he…”

Jemin ground his teeth around the words, the ringing in his ears growing louder. “After that, all there is is hatred. I was so angry, I’ve never been so angry in all my life, and it just…” He struggled to find the right words to explain what had happened, but no matter how hard he tried, they wouldn’t come to him. “It consumed me,” he said shakily. “I don’t know what I did, I couldn’t even think, let alone be aware of anything around me. I…”

A horrible thought suddenly dawned on him and he closed his eyes against the room’s darkness, dread rising like bile in his throat. “That commander,” he croaked, violent images flashing in his mind, accompanied by faint, pained screams. “W-what happened to him? I… did I-”

“No.” Taehyung pushed himself up on the bed until he was hovering over Jimin, and he raised one
hand to brush back the hairs on Jimin’s brow so that there would be nothing obscuring their sight of one another. “You didn’t kill him, Chim,” the quartermaster said firmly, the previous quiver of his voice gone. “I did. You drove him away from Yoongi, but you did not kill him.” There was a hard look to his eyes, determined and unyielding. “It wasn’t you.”

Jimin blinked mutely up at him, his lips parting and closing repeatedly before he finally nodded, relief flooding his senses. Taehyung nodded his head as well, huffing as he sat back down on the bed, his strength leaving him to sag against the mattress once more. Jimin wanted to say something, to reassure him somehow, but before he had the chance, he felt Jeongguk shift against his side. When he turned, the sailing master’s eyes were open, glimmering as he looked at Taehyung.

“I killed him,” the quartermaster said again when he’d settled. “I drove my sword through his chest over and over and over until Jeongguk dragged me away from him. Just like you, I was so angry I couldn’t think. All of a sudden, it was as if I was back at that river where Yoongi first lost part of his arm, only this time, the man who did it was right there.”

His hand jerked slightly, as if his touch was recalling the sensation of moving his blade in the way he had. “He deserved to die,” Taehyung mumbled bitterly. “I’d kill him a hundred times over if I could.”

Jimin found himself nodding before he think twice, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t summon his guilt for agreeing so easily with the quartermaster’s harsh words. He tried to, he truly did, but every time he tried to argue that no man deserves to die, the image of what the mariner had done to Yoongi flooded his mind and left nothing but vicious hatred behind.

They lay in silence after that, although none of them slept. Jeongguk lay too still against Jimin’s side and Taehyung’s breathing remained uneven in his ire, and even when Jimin closed his eyes and tried to succumb to his exhaustion, his mind was wide awake, refusing to grant him even a wink of sleep.

Dimly, he wondered if he would ever sleep again.

Jimin didn’t know how much time had passed when he heard a slight rattle from the doors, a key sliding into the lock before they were opened to reveal Jin. He didn’t move from the doorway, only stood there for a moment, allowing the dawn’s light seep into the quarters, and when he finally spoke, his voice was hollow and low, void of the warmth he’d shown Jimin the night before.

“Taehyung, Jeongguk, Jimin,” he said, gripping hard onto the doorframe as if to steady himself. “Rodel has died.”

It felt as if the room had flooded with icy water. Jimin felt a crippling chill seep into his bones, his breath stuttering as his airways drew themselves tight. “He’s dead?” he heard Taehyung ask in a small voice, although the words were oddly distorted in his ears. “When?”

“Just now,” Jin said quietly. “Four of his ribs were broken in the attack and one of them pierced his lung. He… he made Hoseok concentrate on Yoongi, waving him off and smiling as if he was fine, and by the time Hoseok finally got around to treating him…”

His voice trailed off, but the unspoken words were clear as day. They hung heavy in the room and added to the coldness that steadily wound itself around Jimin’s lungs. “When is the burial?” Jeongguk asked thickly, already rising from the bed.

“Now,” the cook said and motioned towards the forecastle. “Xiao is fetching the sailcloth as we speak, we… we’ll bury him at sunrise.”
The sailing master nodded before he went to crouch in front of Taehyung, carefully taking both of
his hands in his gloved ones. With soft, gentle murmurs, he coaxed the quartermaster into standing;
Taehyung’s spirit seemed to have fled him completely, his gaze blank as he stared at the floor.
“Come on, love,” Jeongguk crooned, managing a tremulous smile. “The sun can’t rise without you
there to beckon it.”

Jimin followed clumsily, his steps heavy, as if his legs suddenly weighed more than the rest of him
combined. The ringing in his ears had subsided, if only to give way for the horrible reality to settle,
his gut twisting near painfully, and in the end, his legs only carried him halfway to the doors before
they stopped as if met with an invisible wall. Fear bound him to the spot, fear of facing the
inescapable truth.

“No.” Jimin fervently shook his head, his hands clenching into fists at his side. “No, I have to,” he
whispered. “Of course I have to, b-but…” Blinking hard against the tears in his eyes, he made
himself take a step forwards, his legs trembling and unsteady. “Am I… would he want me there?”

The cook wasn’t quite successful in his attempt at a reassuring smile, but he walked up next to Jimin
and placed a hand on his back to guide him, his touch steady yet gentle. “Of course he would,” he
said as they stepped out onto the quarterdeck. “All of us do.”

The entire crew was waiting for them at the forecastle, both the sleep-deprived and the injured
standing as part of the half circle around Hoseok, who was kneeling on the deck. Spread out in front
of him was a large piece of cloth the same color as the Agust’s sails, and in the middle of it,
unmoving, lay the rigger.

Rodel looked the same as he always had, every time he’d passed Jimin in the crow’s nest, always
shy yet always smiling, hesitant in his greetings as if he was uncertain how Jimin would respond. His
lips were a bit paler, but he was dressed in the same clothes he’d always worn and his hair was just
as long and unruly. He might as well have been sleeping, the black sailcloth framing his lithe body.

Jin led Jimin to stand next to Taehyung and Xiao before taking his place beside Namjoon, his strong
facade crumbling slightly when the first mate took his hand. Silently, the cook looked at Rodel for as
long as he could manage before he averted his gaze to the sky, blinking hard as tears began to fall
from his eyes.

Next to them stood Lucya, stoic as ever, but the faint quiver of her hands gave her away as she
looked at the rigger. Dark circles marred the skin beneath her eyes and there was blood smeared on
the shoulder of her jacket, but if it was her own, she hid it well, her back straight and her chin raised
in salute. Hisashi stood to her left, leaning heavily against the hilt of his sword, which he used as a
makeshift cane. His face was twisted in anger, rage forcing him to grip his blade so hard his knuckles
turned white, and Jimin knew the pirate was plagued by the same sense of uselessness that haunted
him.

The crew didn’t say a word as Hoseok began to sow the sailcloth shut over the rigger’s body,
starting at his feet and working his way up. They were silent in their mourning, but that silence
screamed louder than Jimin could’ve imagined. Even the doctor, whose hands were steady as he
closed the cloth with needle and thread, kept his lips pressed together firmly, but the anguish was
apparent on his face, crying soundlessly as he worked.

The silence was tearing at Jimin’s sanity. He couldn’t look away from the rigger’s face, struggling to
remember all the times they’d interacted, and when he realized how few they were, guilt came
creeping into the back of his mind to feed his sorrow and twist it. Rodel had always been there, a
presence in his daily life aboard the Agust. He’d moved between the shrouds and masts with ease
every time he’d gone to check the condition of the sails and their binds, yet Jimin had never taken the
time to get to know him as anything more than the ship’s rigger.

It would’ve been so easy to beckon him and talk to him in the crow’s nest, but Jimin never had, and
now he never would.

He didn’t realize he was crying until Hoseok stood up and nodded mutely at Xiao, who stepped
away from Jimin’s side to lift Rodel into his arms, the rigger’s body now fully encased in the black
cloth. Two cannonballs had been tied to his ankles, there to ensure he’d be pulled down to the depths
of the sea and its final embrace. The weights clattered together as Xiao moved over to the rail,
sniffling as he went, tears dripping into his beard, where they glistened in the first rays of the rising
sun.

“W-wait,” Jimin cried and broke away from the circle before the carpenter could throw Rodel’s body
into the sea. “Wait, we… we should say something.” He reached out and took hold of Xiao’s sleeve,
his hand trembling as he gave a weak tug. “Anything,” he whispered. “A-a farewell.”

The carpenter’s smile was as heartbreaking as it was comforting. “He can’t hear us anymore, pretty
bird,” Xiao told him, his voice kind even in his sorrow. “All we can do now ’s hope the spirits of the
sea let him rest peacefully.”

With a gentle nudge, he freed himself from Jimin’s grasp and turned, pausing at the rail for long
enough to draw a deep, steadying breath before he let Rodel’s body fall from his arms and into the
sea. The dark color of the sailcloth melded with the dawn’s ocean as it began to sink, and slowly, the
rigger faded from their sight, pulled down to his eternal rest.

It was more than Jimin could bear, the crushing silence and the pressure it brought. He had to ease it
somehow, but when he parted his lips, the words wouldn’t come. His voice wouldn’t flow, not his
own nor the voice of the Canary, and all he was left to do was cry.

The crew stood by the rail until the sun had fully risen from the horizon. Red-eyed and sniffling, they
all followed Jin to the galleys, where he poured each and every one of them a cup of dark liquor, the
scent overwhelmingly strong. Once they’d all taken their glass, Namjoon moved to the middle of the
room and looked around, prompting a moment of silence before he raised his voice.

“One man less, but a family all the same,” he said solemnly and raised his glass, and the others
followed his lead. “To Rodel.”

“To Rodel,” they echoed, Jimin’s voice lost in their chorus. As one, they brought their mugs to their
lips and drank deep, emptying their cups in one long swig. The liquid burned Jimin’s throat on its
way down and he struggled not to cough as it made his chest fill with a prickling sensation. Warmth
spread from his lungs to the rest of him, but the hollow feeling remained; he felt so small, so helpless
where he sat, wringing the cup in his hands.

The silence was finally broken a few moments later, but it was hardly an improvement. “Yoongi will
be devastated when he hears,” Namjoon said, a deep frown marring his brow. “Not only Rodel’s
death, but that he couldn’t be present for the burial.”

“We’ll have to be careful when telling him,” Hoseok said thickly and rubbed at his wet cheeks. “If
he works himself up and goes into shock, his wounds might open and he’ll be at risk of dying all
over again.”

“He’ll be more upset to know if we keep it from him,” Jin pointed out, although there was a twinge
of uncertainty to his words. “He has never dealt well with loss.”

Hoseok snorted at that, the sound utterly without glee. “Has anyone?” he asked ruefully, shaking his head.

No one had an answer for him, and so they descended into another brief silence, this one only moments long. Once again, it was Namjoon who broke it; he stood up and turned to the crew, his expression hardening. “Today will be a hard day, everyone,” he began, “but we can’t afford to rest. As of now, we do not know if we have more mariners coming for us, and if they are, we can’t risk losing time. We need to make for Qinzhou as quickly as we can, to see Zhang Honghui and have him build another prosthesis for our captain.”

A murmur went through the galleys, but Namjoon silenced the crew with a quick flick of his hand. “Yoongi relies on all of us to carry on in his absence,” he said. “The world has not ceased to turn, and we can’t pretend that is has even in our time of grief. The mariners won’t wait nor will the Rabid Conflagration, thus we will do what Yoongi would expect of us.”

His voice grew louder, more determined. “We will not yield,” the first mate stated. “Even in our sorrow, we will sail as we always have, proud and without fear.”

Although their voices were a bit more hoarse, bearing a bit more emotion, the “Aye, sir,” that rose from the pirates was the same as always, resounding and somehow comforting. As the crew began to sift out of the galleys, Jimin closed his eyes and drew a deep breath, seeking strength in their determination.

_I will not yield_, he told himself, his fingers digging into the wooden surface of his cup. _I will do my part and I will protect this ship, and when all of this is over, I will mourn._ When he released the air he’d held in his lungs, his breath was steady, as were his steps as he made for the crow’s nest, from where he would watch over the crew that made his home.

The following days were quick to blur together, the gloom of their loss hanging low over the ship as they went about their tasks like they always had. As they sailed across the Bay of Bengal, Jimin spent more hours up in the crow’s nest than he could count, hesitant to leave even when his watch was over in the wee hours of the night and he was to switch with Lucya; more often than not, the sniper had to force him down with stern words and a glare that carried until his feet touched the deck.

He hardly slept. He woke with the rising sun after only a few hours of rest and sneak into the infirmary, where he sat by Yoongi’s bedside until the rest of the ship began to rise, watching the captain and praying to whomever could hear him to let him wake. Yoongi never stirred, and Jimin left the infirmary before he could be caught by Hoseok, silently promising to return the following day.

Taehyung and Jeongguk joined him in the crow’s nest as often as they could. The quartermaster shrugged and complained of boredom, but Jimin knew better than to believe the tired smile on Taehyung’s lips. He knew every day that passed without any sign of life from Yoongi took a heavy, heavy toll on the quartermaster, and that the only form of comfort he had came from the closeness of his loved ones.

Even up in the crow’s nest, Jimin was too far out of Taehyung’s reach, and so the two pirates would huddle close to him on his post whenever Hoseok shooed them away from the infirmary and ordered them to get some air.

Jimin was grateful for their company. Whenever he was alone in the crow’s nest, he caught himself thinking of Rodel, imagining the rigger moving back and forth between the masts like he’d always
done. The thoughts pushed him to the brink of tears and he had to grip hard onto the ropes of the main mast to ground himself, repeating his purpose in a whisper, over and over until his sanity returned.

Four days into their voyage, they reached the coast of Myanmar, where they pulled into a small port town to let Xiao disembark. While the Agust sailed the long way around Malaysia and Singapore, the same way they’d come, the carpenter would travel ahead of them on land. In his bear form, he would journey to Bangkok, from where he’d continue onwards by any means of travel available until he reached Qinzhou near the borders of China.

There, Xiao would help their mechanic, Honghui, prepare whatever materials he’d need to build Yoongi’s prosthesis, so that when the rest of the crew reached the small city, the work would be done as swiftly as possible.

While at the port town, they learned that the mariners had indeed flocked to the coast of India in search for them, their presence causing a disturbance in the flow of trade from Kolkata to various parts of the world. It was likely the mariners had sought to trap them within the Bay of Bengal, but thanks to Namjoon’s command, they had managed to escape in the nick of time.

As they returned to open sea, the Agust felt empty without Xiao’s presence. Suppers were much quieter without him there to try and ease the atmosphere and it became harder and harder for Jimin to be as strong as he knew the crew needed him to be. One night, when it the pressure finally became too much to bear, he broke down and cried when Lucya came to relieve him. The sniper held him through it all, until he had no more tears to shed, and he fell asleep in her arms, dreaming of storming seas and distant voices far out of his reach.

It wasn’t until another week on the sea that the tension brought on by Yoongi’s state was finally shattered. They were in the middle of breakfast when Hoseok came bursting into the galleys with a smile on his lips and tears in his eyes, claiming that the captain had woken up for only a few moments. “That idiot said he couldn’t understand why I was so shocked to see him awake,” the doctor sobbed, kicking a chair in what could’ve both frustration and joy. “Said he told me he’d sleep for a week.”

Jimin remembered the words; it had been right before the mariners’ attack, when Yoongi had complained about being worn out from all the walking they had done. The thought made him smile, the first genuine one in a long time, and it was mirrored by the rest of the crew and Taehyung, who looked like he’d been given back the sun.

He won’t die, Jimin said to himself and finally allowed himself to believe it, his heart swelling in his chest. He’ll come back to us.

The atmosphere aboard the Agust eased considerably after that. While they still mourned Rodel’s passing, now they had hope, hope that their captain would return, and with the news helping Taehyung recover a spark of his usual self, his smiles more frequent and bright, it seemed to lift the spirits of the entire crew.

That very evening, when Jin made a jest of how he truly hoped Xiao hadn’t stumbled into the lair of a real bear and fallen hopelessly in love, the laughter in the galleys was genuine. In that very moment, they all knew peace.

Two nights after the news, Jimin left the crow’s nest amidst his watch for the first time in nearly a fortnight. The air was silent and ocean still as glass, and he couldn’t resist its beauty. He made his way down to deck and walked along the rail, welcoming the tranquility that settled over him, as if the night itself manifested within his chest, calm and soothing.
He let his hand trace the wood of the rail, humming to himself as he listened to the gentle creak of the Agust as it drifted onwards. The dark ship seemed to almost meld into the color of the sea, separated only by the lack of the night sky’s reflection, the beautiful smattering of stars. It was a comforting thought; in that moment, Jimin felt one with the sea and sky, as if they were all that surrounded him.

Suddenly, the words that had eluded him so many times over the course of the past weeks came back, ready as ever. He parted his lips without hesitating and drew a breath, and let his voice fill the night’s darkness.

Sing, beloved wind, fly swift over the sea  
Take us forward, always, and listen to my plea  
A vessel sailing with freedom’s wings  
Beautiful and grand, like a ship made for kings  
On the horizon, you rise as its guide, darling sun  
So do your duty, see through this journey you’ve begun  
Sing, beloved wind, keep them safe in your arm  
I beg of you, please, always keep them from harm.

His voice carried over the calm sea, echoing in the night. He kept walking as he sang, one hand always braced against the Agust’s rail, and he fancied himself drawing a protective spell into the wood, smiling as he sang. He thought of Taehyung and Jeongguk, of Hoseok, Jin and Namjoon and all the rest of them and felt fondness rise in his chest and give strength to his voice.

Precious ocean, pray leave their souls out of your embrace  
Their lives they have given, oh, to travel by your grace  
So hated they are by a world harsh and cruel  
But they love you, they do, never doubting your rule  
Those you have taken, give them peace in their rest  
Cradle them, rock them to sleep ’gainst your breast  
Precious ocean, pray spare those whose time has yet to come  
Take them forward, for me, in spite of all that I’ve done.

He thought of Rodel, a hint of sorrow seeping into his smile as he looked out over the sea, hoping the rigger was at peace; surely, if the ocean was so serene, it couldn’t be a bad place for a soul to rest. To forever swim along its currents and bask in the beauty of nights like this one, to forever watch over the Agust from beyond. To know how much they missed him.

Finally, Jimin thought of Yoongi, and the emotions in his chest stilled, a calmness settling over him as he came to a halt before the figurehead, the armed woman, the Life of Agust. He looked up to the skies and his voice grew quiet, the final words of his song a secret just for him.

Beloved wind, darling sun, precious ocean, and my moon  
From all of you, I beg, bring him back to us soon  
A bad man to some and a good man to others  
Forever bearing the weight of the world for his brothers  
His heart is not his own, for he’s given it away  
To all those he loves, so they’d never go astray  
No tears will he shed, too proud and too strong  
So I’ll cry in his stead and hope he hears this, his song.

“His song,” he crooned one last time, his eyes closed against the darkness of the night. He felt truly at peace, his thoughts for once freed of anger and worry and distress. It was as if he’d awoken from a long slumber, full of energy and life, and as he breathed in the soft breeze of the night, he allowed
himself to believe everything would be alright.

With a contented sigh, Jimin turned around to make his way back to the crow’s nest, but he never quite made it that far. He never made it even one step; standing in his way, leaning heavily against the ship rail, was the man he’d been waiting for so long, the man he’d been praying to every god, deity and spirit he knew to return to him.

The man he’d been singing for.

Yoongi was looking at him in silence, his eyes glittering in the light of the stars. He didn’t say a word, only looked, as if he was seeing Jimin for the first time in his life, his expression filled with something Jimin began to think he could read. All he did was look, and Jimin did the same, allowing the silence to carry for as long as the captain needed.

He had waited for so long, yet now that Yoongi was here, he knew they had all the time in the world.

Jimin couldn’t have said how much time passed before Yoongi eventually moved. With obvious effort, the captain pushed away from the rail and moved closer, his eyes never leaving Jimin’s, not when he stepped past whatever boundaries existed between human beings, not when he stepped so close the air they breathed was the same.

Suddenly, Yoongi stood closer to him than he ever had, and Jimin was not afraid.

He watched, the beat of his heart slow and calm as the captain raised his right hand to trace the line of his jaw, the touch featherlight and hesitant. His thumb stroked the skin of Jimin’s chin two times and then three, before applying only a hint of pressure, coaxing him to turn his face ever so slightly to the side.

Jimin followed willingly, never once looking away as he allowed Yoongi to guide him, keeping the captain’s gaze for himself. He gave himself over to Yoongi’s touch and waited, patient, until the captain leaned closer still, his dark eyes flickering across Jimin’s face before he inclined his head, his breath ghosting warm over Jimin’s skin.

“Forgive me, songbird,” he murmured, the gentle grip on his jaw quivering slightly as pressed his lips against Jimin’s cheek.

Oh, Jimin thought, the peaceful pace of his heart stuttering.

Briefly, he wondered what it was Yoongi was apologizing for. After all, the choices were many; it could’ve been for frightening him so and it could’ve been for calling him stupid in the jungle outside of Kolkata, but the soft touch of lips to Jimin’s cheek took him back to the very first time they had met. The bruise Yoongi had left on his face that night had long since faded, not a single trace of its existence remaining, but he kissed Jimin’s cheekbone as if it was still there, so tender Jimin felt his heart might break.

Perhaps, he thought, the apology was for all of the things he’d done, but when Yoongi pulled away and began to retreat, his eyes downcast, doleful guilt marring his brow, Jimin realized he didn’t need to know.

“Yoongi,” he said softly and reached out before the captain could turn away, taking his face into his hands and bringing him back to meet his eyes. Much like Jimin had, Yoongi followed easily, although it seemed his compliance was a product of shock, uncertainty brimming in his gaze as it searched Jimin’s face for an answer.
He looked so utterly lost, Jimin couldn’t help but smile as he leaned closer, close enough to see the smattering of pale freckles across the captain’s cheeks, a beautiful imperfection he’d never noticed before. “I already have,” he whispered and drew a trembling breath before he closed his eyes and kissed Yoongi’s lips.

It was a quick and instantaneous thing, the jarring of his world. All around him, the earth stood as still as it had when he’d sung his song, the night just as warm and the breeze as soft, but suddenly, none of the stars mattered, not the moon or the sea or the creaking of the Agust as it sailed smoothly on the still waters. Everything he knew narrowed down to the two of them and to all he wanted to convey through nothing but the touch of their lips, every emotion, every word he’d ever left unspoken.

All he could do was feel.

For a moment, the captain simply stood there, surprise rendering him motionless for so long Jimin began to fear he’d done something incredibly wrong. However, just as a prick of tension began to rise in him, Yoongi sighed softly against his lips and pressed back, his hand finding its way back to Jimin’s cheek, and Jimin felt his nervousness dissipate, leaving nothing but a hum of warmth behind.

A small shudder trailed its way down his spine when Yoongi stroked the skin of his neck, his touch more delicate than Jimin would’ve thought him capable. It was as if he was afraid, worried Jimin might break or vanish off the face of earth if he wasn't careful enough. He could feel it in the way Yoongi's lips moved against his own, hesitant yet yearning, as if he didn't quite know what to do with himself.

Anxious to ease his worry, Jimin lowered his hands to Yoongi's chest and curled his fingers into his shirt, gently pulling him closer until there was hardly a hairsbreadth of space between them, and the contented sound the captain emitted had his heart singing in response. The hand on his neck became a bit firmer, and the pressure against his lips grew more confident.

When the emotions brimming in his chest became too overwhelming to bear, Jimin broke their kiss, but he didn't move from where he stood, closing his eyes as he breathed, struggling to catch his thoughts. He felt lightheaded and numb, but the smile was ever present on his lips, put there by the continuous stroke of Yoongi's thumb against his cheek.

When he finally felt like he could think again, he looked up and giggled softly before he could stop himself, a mere whisper of a sound fluttering past his lips at the apprehensive expression on Yoongi's face. The Black Fox of the East, Jimin thought, the fondness in his chest so strong it brought a warm sting to his eyes. The intensity of the captain’s gaze had become all but familiar by now, yet as Yoongi slowly began to ease away from his state of concern, it filled with what Jimin could only name as adoration, reverence replacing his usual frown.

When Yoongi’s lips curled into the smallest of smiles, it was all Jimin could do to not kiss him again.

“You should be resting,” he murmured and let go of the captain's shirt so he could push softly against his chest, gently coaxing him into taking a step back. “Hoseok will be upset to know you left your bed.”

Yoongi didn't show any signs of having actually heard him; he didn't look away from Jimin's face, almost as if he still worried he would vanish as soon as he blinked. Slowly, Jimin brought one of his hands to the captain's and curled his fingers around it, another chuckle escaping his lips when Yoongi finally reacted, his smile faltering as Jimin guided his hand away from his cheek. “Come on, Yoongi,” he said softly and took a step towards the infirmary, carefully tugging the captain along by his hand.
They walked slowly, Yoongi's steps heavy from the effort it cost him to even stand upright. Jimin guided his way, their fingers intertwined, and as he glanced at the captain from over his shoulder, he had to press his lips together not to smile too widely; Yoongi seemed all but a lost child, still gazing at him with wide eyes full of wonder, as if all he knew to do was look and hold onto the hand that tugged him along.

For the first time, Jimin felt as if he was the one to show the captain something he didn’t already know. Yoongi had taught him more than he could recall, if even unintentionally; thanks to him, Jimin had learned more than he ever would have on the small island of Jeju. He had seen more of the world than he ever thought he would, he had experienced its wonders and horrors, and he had lived through it all.

But now, by something as simple as a mere touch, Jimin was the one to show Yoongi the way through a part of the world he seemed utterly lost in. It wasn’t to say Jimin himself knew any better; never in all his life had he experienced anything quite like the emotions now brimming in his chest, but whereas Yoongi seemed to need the security of Jimin’s hand in his to feel secure, Jimin simply went where his emotions told him to go, blindly trusting the whispers of his own heart.

No tears will he shed, too proud and too strong, he thought, reciting the words of his song in his mind and smiling as he tightened his grip on the captain. The words had left his lips only minutes ago, but already they’d been made false. Whatever pride Yoongi possessed was gone in this very moment, where he willingly gave himself over and revealed a vulnerability Jimin wouldn’t have thought he’d ever be allowed to see.

If Jimin hadn’t already cried a lifetime’s worth of tears, the stinging wetness in his eyes would’ve surely spilled down his cheeks already.

Guided by the lantern on the wall inside the infirmary, Jimin led Yoongi to his bed and helped him lie down, both hands on his back to ensure no pressure was put on his left shoulder. The captain gritted his teeth and groaned, the muscles of his neck and chest straining as a spasm of pain went through him, but when Jimin touched his arm in worry, Yoongi drew a deep breath and forced himself to relax.

“Songbird,” he murmured, his voice hoarse and thick. It was all he said; his lips remained parted as if there were more words waiting to be spoken, but all he did was look up at Jimin. When Jimin hummed softly in question, the captain closed his lips and swallowed thickly before raising his hand to cup his cheek once more, his eyes glistening in the dim light.

With a small sigh, Jimin leaned into the touch, allowing his eyes to momentarily flutter close before he turned his head and brushed his lips softly against the palm of Yoongi’s hand. “Sleep,” he whispered and straightened up, taking the captain’s hand and guiding it back to the mattress. “I’ll watch over you and the Agust in the night, so rest, Yoongi, and come back to us.”

He waited by the bedside until Yoongi nodded his head, seemingly torn between seeking Jimin's presence and wanting to do as bid. With another hushed giggle, Jimin leaned forward and pressed his lips to the captain's brow much in the same manner Jin had done to him many nights ago. He lingered a moment longer than necessary before straightening up, and with a final smile, he turned around and left the infirmary to take his place up in the crow’s nest.

It wasn't until hours later, when he climbed into Taehyung's bunk instead of his own after his watch, that he began to properly realize what the night's events could truly mean. His heart beat fast and fervent in his chest, and the quartermaster must've either heard or felt it, for he turned around in the narrow bed and opened his eyes, bleary as he peered at Jimin in the dark.
“Chim,” he rasped, his voice thick with sleep. “What's got you smilin’ so wide?”

There was a definite warmth spreading across Jimin's cheeks, but he only shook his head, even as the smile on his lips grew tenfold. “I'll tell you tomorrow, Tae,” he said quietly, huffing when Taehyung threw an arm over his shoulder and pulled him close.

Truly, as Jimin drifted off listening to the quartermaster's serene breathing, a peaceful sound amidst the chorus of snores in the bunks, he felt more at peace than he had in a long, long time.

Chapter End Notes

…

……………..

… but can you hear me screaming?

//inhales

22 CHAPTERS. IT TOOK 22 FECKIN’ CHAPTERS, BUT HERE IT IS, THE SMOOCH OF THE CENTURY. OF. THE. CENTURY.

I'M

HOLLERING

YOOOOOOONNNNNNMMIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIINNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN-\n
I’m sorry for my nonexistent modesty, BUT THIS IS THE MOST SATISFYING KISS IN THE HISTORY OF EVER. NOTHING WILL EVER FECKIN’ TOP THIS, I’M IN HYSTERICAL TEARS, IT WAS SO SOFT AND SO BEAUTIFUL AND SO PERFECT, I’M CRYING.

//clears throat

Rest in peace, Rodel. We might not have known you as well as we could’ve, but I will miss you all the same, my little acrobat.

//sniffles

O-okay.

Of course Taehyung would never, ever let Jimin know he killed that mariner. Never in a million years. You bet your asses he told everyone on board who saw what happened to keep their mouths shut, and as the quartermaster, WELL, AHAHA, he might be a ball of fluff in most cases, but YOU DON’T DISOBEY THE QUARTERMASTER WITHOUT CONSEQUENCES. So aye, Jimin will never hear it from the crew.

I always wanted Jimin’s realization of his feelings to be a calm one, like this. No “omg holy shet i have the feels for Yoongs omg what do i do ahhhhHH-” nothing like that;
after everything they’ve been through, I knew I wanted it to be that sort of “Oh,” realization, the kind he’s had on multiple occasions throughout this story. I wanted it to be peaceful, and holy SHET, I’m sorry, but this is so goddamn beautiful, I had to stop at multiple occasions because I was crying. It’s so soft, such a contrast to so many of their interactions, I just… I can’t :;

NOW, this is not to say he won’t be HILARIOUSLY nervous and shy and jittery in the chapters to come, but just this initial realization… I could die now, and I would die happy istg.

Okay. NOW. NOTICE. I'm taking next week off from tStS. I need a little break from working on it, to do some other things and “recharge,” freshen my perspective and stuff. And to recover from the emotional rollercoaster the last few chapters have put me through, NOT TO MENTION we’ll have the comeback next Monday and I’ll be too preoccupied with that, so NO CHAPTER NEXT WEEK. I REPEAT, NO CHAPTER NEXT WEEK.
As always, when the sun rose the next day, Jimin was the first one in the bunks to wake. He had only slept for a few hours, yet he felt wide awake, his senses alert as he stared up into the ceiling, remaining still where he lay and simply listening to his surroundings. He could hear the sound of the sea outside the walls of the Agust and the faint rustle of the sails in the wind, barely audible over the loud, rumbling snores that filled the bunks. They were loud enough to prompt him to wonder how he'd managed to sleep at all, a deafening choir and hardly the most pleasing to the ears.

Jimin had never felt so content.

He was unable to fight off the smile that tugged at the corners of his lips as he thought back to what had happened in the night, to Yoongi and the closeness they'd shared. He could recall it vividly, the captain’s gentle touch against his jaw and the hesitant press of lips to his cheek. And the kiss itself; Jimin wasn’t quite sure where his bravery had come from when he'd pressed his lips against Yoongi’s, but he was glad for it, eternally so.

Songbird, Yoongi had said after, and Jimin had never imagined what had come to be his name could be spoken with such emotion, as if he was more precious than the captain knew how to put to words.
The memory of it brought a warmth to his cheeks and chest, and he had to press a hand to his lips to muffle the giggle that rose up his throat. His heart felt too big for his breast, as if it had swelled larger than what his chest could accommodate, filled to the brim with more emotions than he knew what to do with.

Briefly, Jimin thought back to the moment he’d seen Yoongi standing on the deck in the middle of the night. He recalled the way the captain had looked, with the left sleeve of his shirt hanging loose next to his body, his right hand braced against the Agust’s rail to help him stand. He’d seemed so unlike himself. Not weak - Jimin had an inkling Yoongi would never appear weak in his eyes, no matter how battered he would be - but vulnerable. Gone had been the stiffness of him, the frown and the tension, replaced by all the emotions Jimin himself had mirrored, his heart reflecting Yoongi’s own.

He wondered when his feelings for the captain had began to change. When he’d seen Yoongi after singing his song, it had seemed so obvious; it was as if all the turmoil in his chest had settled the instant he’d seen the captain, as if he’d known all along where the pieces belonged.

Did I feel this way when I saw my name in his tattoo? he thought, closing his eyes and turning sideways in the cot. When he trusted me to see the Oracles? When he heard me sing for the first time and I touched his cheek?

He couldn’t quite tell; none of what he imagined seemed an impossibility.

With a soft chuckle, Jimin brought a hand up to his chest and pressed down, hard, as if it would serve to calm his heart. Unsurprisingly, all he accomplished was to feel the fast and steady beat against his palm, flaring up almost as if in challenge. Don’t resist, he imagined it saying. You couldn’t, even if you wanted to.

Sighing, he gave up on attempting to suppress his smile and opened his eyes again, only to startle so hard he almost fell off the bed.

Taehyung was peering at him from the other end of the mattress, his eyelids heavy with sleep. He looked like he’d only just woken up, squinting even in the dim light of the bunks, as if rays of the sun seeping in through the companionway were far too bright for so early in the morning.

“You scared me,” Jimin whispered urgently, patting at his chest as he settled back on the mattress. A lazy smile graced the quartermaster’s lips at Jimin’s reaction and he emitted a sound akin to a slurred chuckle before he reached over to poke at Jimin’s cheek.

“You're still smiling, Chim,” he mumbled, his deep voice even thicker from sleep, but he was smiling all the same, as if the sight of the one permanently etched onto Jimin’s lips was enough to prompt one of his own. “Have you even stopped for long enough to sleep?”

“I don't know,” Jimin said jokingly, his voice hushed to not bother any of those sleeping. “Might be I slept like this.”

Taehyung hummed at that and turned around to face him properly, tucking his hands in under his head for comfort. “Will you tell me what’s got you so happy now?” he asked, sounding as if he was on the verge of being reclaimed by sleep. “‘S morning, right?”

Jimin pressed his lips together, a sudden nervousness seeping into the near giddy emotions brimming in his chest. “Yes,” he said and swallowed thickly in an attempt to buy time, but when he parted his lips again, the words wouldn't come. “We… I mean, I…”
Surprised with himself, he pushed himself upright until he was seated on the thin mattress. He clasped his hands and wrung them, waiting, confused, as his excitement battled against his tension.

“Chim?” The quartermaster followed his lead and sat up as well, a hint of worry marring his brow.

“I’m alright,” Jimin said before Taehyung could even begin to ask, smiling sheepishly. “Really, it’s not something bad, I promise, I’m just suddenly… nervous.”

The quartermaster nodded almost fervently, as if he understood precisely what Jimin meant. “Take your time,” he said with an encouraging smile. “Tell me when it feels right.”

“Yes,” Jimin mumbled with a small nod. “Just one moment.”

It was an odd thing to struggle with - they had far greater worries and had faced worse still - yet as Jimin sat on the cot opposite of Taehyung, he found himself growing more and more tense, parting his lips and closing them again when his words betrayed him. He could feel the quartermaster’s curiosity and anticipation, could see it in the way he leaned forward in case Jimin would whisper, in the way Taehyung’s eyes searched his face for a hint.

He couldn’t have said where his hesitation came from; the closeness with Yoongi had felt right, so it wasn’t guilt what plagued him. It wasn’t regret, either, since the thought of seeing the captain and being so close with him again made his stomach stir with nothing but excitement. There was nothing bad he could associate with what had happened, thus his own reaction confused him.

Perhaps it was a product of how little he truly knew about Yoongi and how anxious he was to learn that which he didn’t. The thought of knowing Yoongi, of truly knowing him, was as intimidating as it was exhilarating. After all, he’d never had someone like that, he’d never known anyone in such a way, as someone dear.

As a beloved.

“I,” Jimin began, only to immediately stop and clear his throat. He threw a quick look around the bunks and shifted closer, as if the rest of the crew would hear his whispers through their deep sleep. “I… Taehyung.”

Taehyung, a small voice in the back of his head said. Yoongi’s brother, Taehyung.

“Yes, Chim?” the quartermaster wondered quietly, an encouraging hum in his voice. He was smiling, as bright and cheerful as he always did, and Jimin drew bravery from his spirit, taking a deep breath to steel himself before freeing the words caught on the tip of his tongue.

“Yoongi and I,” he said slowly, watching Taehyung quirk his brows already at the mention of his brother, “we… in the night, I was singing and he woke up and I… well, he was the first one to… we kissed.”

It was slow, the dawning of his words on Taehyung. For what felt like an eternity, the quartermaster only looked, his eyes growing wider and wider for every second that passed, his lips falling open. He said nothing, only stared at Jimin as if he’d grown a second head, so shocked it seemed he forgot to draw breath.

Just as Jimin began to fret Taehyung would think he’d done something terribly wrong, the quartermaster all but threw himself over him, pulling him into an embrace that nearly crushed his ribcage. He buried his face into the crook of Jimin’s neck and emitted a muffled sound, something akin to a cheer, but Jimin was too alarmed to identify it, startled by Taehyung’s reaction.
“T-Tae-”

“Did you really?” The quartermaster sat up straight before he could even begin to form an answer, and his smile was wider than Jimin had ever seen it, near blinding as he looked at Jimin as if he was the one who made the sun rise every day. “You and Yoongi?” he asked, his voice hushed with awe, as if he’d never heard anything better. “Truly?”

Jimin felt like a child, his shoulders hunched and his eyes trained stubbornly on his hands in his lap, his cheeks hot and his lips curled into a shy smile. He was painfully aware of just how excited Taehyung was, practically bouncing where he sat; it was contagious, and Jimin couldn't help but emit a little giggle as he nodded, preening under the quartermaster’s reaction.

Briefly, he thought back to when he'd been a mere boy of eight, when he, along with the rest of Jeju Village’s children had marveled in awe as Eunha, one of the older girls, told them how she'd kissed Serin behind the inn. He imagined his reaction had been much like what Taehyung was now; pure, unadulterated amazement and glee.

“I can’t believe this,” Taehyung whispered, grinning so wide his cheeks might burst. “I mean, I can, absolutely, Yoongi is more taken with you than I ever could've imagined, but…” His voice tapered off into a chuckle when Jimin raised his hands to his face in an attempt to hide just how fierce the flush of his cheeks was. “Careful now, Chim, or you might set yourself on fire.”

With an indignant huff, Jimin reached out and smacked Taehyung's arm, utterly without force, and the two of them descended into a fit of hushed laughter. Jimin did his best to keep his voice down, but even when someone from the crew emitted a sleep-drunk grunt somewhere behind him, he couldn’t seem to make himself sober up.

At least not until he realized the quartermaster had stopped laughing. Blinking away his glee, Jimin looked up at him, only to have his giddiness overtaken by surprise as he found Taehyung staring back at him with tears in his eyes.

Startled, Jimin moved closer and raised his hands in worry, but the quartermaster shook his head and chuckled, the sound wet, before he leaned forward and placed his brow on Jimin’s shoulder. “I’m so happy, Chim,” he said thickly, the words seeping through the fabric of his shirt and into his skin. “I’m happy you have found a home on this ship and I’m happy you’ve found someone you can care for, someone you can love.”

Jimin felt a rush of warmth spread from his chest, affection and fondness and endearment all at once. Smiling, he leaned his cheek against the top of Taehyung’s head and stared up into the ceiling, fighting against a familiar sting in his eyes.

“And for it to be my brother, of all people, I…” He could feel the quartermaster smile against his shoulder, wide and all but radiating joy. “I’m so, so, so happy you’re my friend, Jimin,” Taehyung whispered. “It was terrible, how we met, but I’ve never been as lucky as I was when you punched me in the face in that alley.”

A thick chuckle fell from Jimin’s lips before he could stop it and he shook his head, raising his hands to cup the quartermaster’s face and coax him into meeting his eyes. Tears were falling silently down Taehyung’s cheeks, trailing around the lines of his smile; Jimin had never seen someone look so happy whilst crying.

“Ah, please don’t cry, Tae,” he said and stroked his thumbs along the quartermaster’s cheeks to wipe away their wetness. “You’ll have me in tears as well, and you know I already cry too much.”
If possible, Taehyung’s smile grew wider still, and Jimin couldn’t quite hold himself together. He closed his eyes and leaned forward until his forehead touched the quartermaster’s, drawing a quivering breath when Taehyung pressed back against him. “Stupid,” he murmured, hoping his voice contained even a fraction of the fondness in his chest. “Stupid, stupid, you’re so stupid, Tae. I’m the one who’s lucky. I haven’t had a home or a family in almost as long as I can remember, and you gave me both. You showed me what it could be, what I could be, all of you did.”

He swallowed hard against the clump in his throat, wanting, needing Taehyung to see. “All the terrible things that have happened since the night we met, you saved me from all of them,” Jimin said, sniffling when he felt the quartermaster’s hands cover his own and hold on tight. “First you, then Hoseok, then Jeongguk and Jin and Namjoon and Xiao and Lucya, and…”

The smile that graced his lips was almost shy, and his vision was blurred when he opened his eyes to look down at the mattress. “And Yoongi,” he crooned softly, a fluttering sensation springing into the pit of his stomach.

He felt rather than heard the quartermaster’s chuckle, their bodies rocking with the motion of it. “I like how you say his name,” Taehyung said, laughing again when Jimin leaned back to pin him under a suspicious look. “You sound so… content. Like it gives you peace.”

Jimin parted his lips and closed them again, taken aback by how true the words were. When he thought of Yoongi, he could easily recall all the times the captain had invoked a sense of calm in him, a feeling of security forever present beneath the nervousness that had plagued him. Yoongi meant home, just like Taehyung did, albeit in a completely different way. Yoongi also meant a heavy flutter of his heart and a rush of warmth in his blood, an urgency he’d never felt before.

“It does,” Jimin said quietly, speaking to himself rather than Taehyung. “He does. I…” He turned to glance at the companionway and the sun seeping in, wondering if the captain was awake. “I feel strong when he’s near, like I can do anything.”

He didn’t turn back until he heard the quartermaster chuckle, the joyful sound containing a hint of amusement. “Go,” he said and flicked his head towards the companionway, snorting at Jimin’s apparent confusion. “You look like you can barely keep your arse on the mattress a second longer, Chim.”

Jimin emitted an incoherent sound at that, heat flushing his cheeks at the insinuation. “N-no, Tae, I’ll stay,” he murmured, staring at his hands, clasped in his lap, thus missing Taehyung’s incredibly endeared smile. “We’re still speaking.”

“And we have all the time in the world to continue speaking later,” the quartermaster said simply and reached out to nudge Jimin’s side. “I know what it’s like to be smitten, Chim, and I would’ve gladly fought anyone who’d kept me from Jeongguk at the time, so,” his nudging became more insistent, “go.”

Jimin hesitated for a second longer, until Taehyung nearly shoved him off the bunk in a final attempt to spur him into action. “Alright, alright,” he snorted, smiling fondly as he stood. “We’ll talk later.”

“Aye,” the quartermaster agreed before shifting to the neighboring bunk, whispering something inaudible as he crawled up next to Jeongguk. The sailing master immediately wrapped his arms around Taehyung and pulled him close, and Jimin giggled softly to himself before he steered his steps towards the companionway stairs.

Unlike any other morning, he didn’t stop to marvel at the beauty of dawn once he climbed up onto deck. Instead, he made way directly for the infirmary, his heartbeat growing faster for every step he
took; by the time he was close enough to reach out for the door handle, it was as if he’d ran for miles and miles without pause.

Again, Jimin wondered why he was nervous now when he’d been so calm in the night, but rather than allow himself to hesitate, he pushed down the handle and opened the door, holding his breath as he stepped inside.

The first thing he noticed was that Yoongi was awake. The captain’s piercing gaze settled on him as soon as he came into view in the doorway, as intense as ever, and Jimin found himself suppressing a smile, preening under Yoongi’s rapt attention.

The second thing he noticed was that the captain wasn’t alone.

“Oh, morning, Jimin,” Hoseok said and offered him a quick smile before returning to the task at hand, which was to help Yoongi sit upright in his bed. It seemed to have been going well enough, not a hint of impatient frustration on the doctor’s face, but when he tapped his captain on the shoulder to get him to resume what they’d been doing, all he received in return was silence and stiffness, an obvious rigidness to Yoongi’s posture.

Almost timidly, Jimin closed the door behind himself and walked closer to the bed, a small smile on his lips as he glanced at the captain before turning to Hoseok, “Good morning,” he said, his voice softer than intended, and the swell of his heart was near overwhelming when he turned to Yoongi to properly look at him for the first time since the night. “Good morning, Yoongi.”

For a moment, it seemed as though the captain wouldn’t answer him; his eyes were wide and searching, flickering across Jimin’s face, and his lips were parted in silence. Yoongi seemed almost surprised to see him, but before he could begin to fret, the corners of the captain’s lips curled up into a smile so endearingly fond.

“Morning, songbird,” he murmured, and Jimin felt as if his chest might burst.

Jimin walked up to the right side of the bed, fighting off both the flush of his cheeks and the wide smile that wanted to spread his lips as he looked away, vaguely realizing how easy it would be for him to reach out and take Yoongi’s hand in his own. The captain’s thoughts seemed to mirror his own, his fingers shifting slightly against the sheets as if beckoning him.

Yoongi is more taken with you than I ever could’ve imagined, Taehyung had told him only moments earlier, and once again, Jimin found his cheeks growing warm at the mere thought.

The sudden, heavy silence in the infirmary had time to carry for only a few seconds before Hoseok raised his voice, his eyebrows knitted in suspicion as he looked between the two of them. “What’s gotten into you?” he wondered, his eyes narrowing when Jimin quickly lowered his gaze to the floor while Yoongi hardly showed any signs of having heard him at all. “Why are you acting so odd?”

“We’re not,” Jimin said, but the upwards lilt of his voice made it sound like a question rather than an answer.

Unsurprisingly, the doctor was hardly convinced, breaking his frown to arch a curious brow at him. “Really?” he deadpanned, making no effort to hide his skepticism. “Well. I’m going to fetch this idiot some water,” he gestured towards Yoongi, who returned the jab with a murderous glare, “so the two of you can take that time to do… whatever it is you’re doing.”

Jimin thought he could sense a hint of amusement in Hoseok’s voice, but the doctor was up and walking towards the door before he could be certain. He threw Yoongi a curious look before
stepping outside, shaking his head as he went.

Jimin couldn’t have said who moved first, but almost as soon as Hoseok closed the door behind him, Jimin’s hand was caught in Yoongi’s, his short fingers curling around the captain’s. Warmth seeped into his palm upon the touch, and the smile returned to his lips when he felt Yoongi’s thumb brush carefully over his knuckles.

“Are you alright?” he asked quietly, nodding his head towards the door. “Hoseok seemed worried about you.”

The captain snorted, the smile on his lips turning wry. “I’m fine,” he said. “Apparently, I’m not in a state to be walking around in the middle of the night. He was chastising me for, as he said, being an idiot.”

“I told you he would be upset,” Jimin mused, the flush of his cheeks returning upon the memory of what they’d done.

“You did.”

Silence followed his words, during which Yoongi didn’t seem to be able to meet Jimin’s eyes. He kept his own gaze on their intertwined hands, his jaw moving around unspoken words, and Jimin waited, content to give him all the time he needed.

When the captain finally parted his lips, it was to emit a chuckle that was as nervous as Jimin had felt when telling Taehyung. “I don’t know what to say,” Yoongi muttered, the words spoken so quietly they could’ve easily been an incoherent cough.

A little giggle fell from Jimin’s lips before he could stop it, the tension in his neck easing some, surely a product of the immense endearment that rose in him. “I don’t either,” he said and smiled sheepishly when the captain’s eyes flickered to him for a brief glance. He could feel the warmth in his cheeks, but he persisted, gripping tighter onto Yoongi’s hand.

Another brief silence settled over them, and Jimin was reminded of his own thoughts from the night, when he’d realized how lost the captain seemed to be in moments like this. Just like before, Yoongi sought his touch, his grip on Jimin’s hand unhesitant, but his nervousness was palpable.

With a soft sigh, Jimin took a seat on the edge of the bed, forcing back his own tension in favor of guiding the captain’s way. “Did you get some rest?” he asked, inclining his head as he caught the small twitch in Yoongi’s smile.

“No,” he said, staring stubbornly at their hands. “How could I have slept after…” His voice tapered off for a moment, his lips remaining parted as he searched for the right words before he closed them and shook his head, abashed. “My thoughts kept me awake.”

The first twinge of apprehension flickered in the back of Jimin’s mind, unwelcome and unwanted. He couldn’t tell whether the tone of Yoongi’s voice was one of contentedness or doubt, and he felt his smile faltering, suddenly needing the captain to look at him, to let him know. Jimin regarded him for a moment longer, battling with himself, before drawing a deep breath and asking, ever so quietly, “Do you regret it?”

Instantly, Yoongi’s eyes rose to meet his, wide and alarmed, his grip on Jimin’s hand tightening. “No,” he said almost urgently and leaned forward where he sat. “Never, I would never, I could never, songbird, I…”

He shifted, his left shoulder moving as if he wanted to raise the arm that was no longer there, and
Jimin could see him grit his teeth, not only against the pain, but again the realization that he couldn’t. He hissed out a curse and his brows knitted into a distraught frown, one that made Jimin’s heart ache.

Quickly, he moved closer and reached out to touch Yoongi’s cheek, anxious to soothe him. “It’s alright, Yoongi,” he crooned, stroking the captain’s skin and coaxing him into easing out of his tension. He smiled when Yoongi looked at him and hoped it was encouraging, calming. “We have all the time in the world, don’t we? There’s no need to rush.”

The captain’s gaze was almost pleading, as if he was desperate to know Jimin understood, and he did. He knew Yoongi was straightforward and prickly by nature, hiding his kindness behind rough words and a near constant frown. It only dawned on him now, however, that the captain must’ve known it himself, how unfamiliar he was to being open in his affection.

“There’s no need to rush,” Jimin said again, his voice firm. “I won’t disappear. I’ll be here, in the home you all made for me.”

Yoongi only regarded him for a long moment, the same look of reverence in his gaze, until he finally nodded, sighing as he closed his eyes and leaned into Jimin’s touch. The tension in his shoulders eased, and Jimin pressed his lips together around the contented little sound that wanted to escape him, the emotions stirring in his chest near overwhelming.

When the captain looked at him again, there was a glint in his eyes, one Jimin recognized from after the kiss they’d shared. The warmth on his cheeks intensified and spread all the way to the tips of his ears, his heart leaping into his throat. Something within him hesitated, shyness rearing its head and causing him to flush at the thought of kissing Yoongi again, and in his nervousness, he lost his chance.

The infirmary door was thrown open and the two of them sprang apart, the captain releasing his hand at the same time as Jimin drew his back from Yoongi’s cheek, scrambling to rise to his cheeks when Hoseok walked in, carrying a flagon of water in his hand. “I hope you’ve sorted out whatever you…” he began, his voice tapering off as soon as he looked at the two, Jimin with his cheeks flushed in warmth and Yoongi awkwardly hunched over on the bed. “Did I interrupt something?”

The doctor seemed both exasperated and amused, the latter becoming more and more apparent when Jimin fervently shook his head. “You didn’t,” he said, his voice a slightly higher pitch than usual. “I-I was just… I have watch duty. I should go.”

“Your watch duty begins at noon, Jimin,” Hoseok pointed out slowly with a leisure gesture towards the open door. “The sun has barely risen from the horizon yet.”

“Right,” Jimin said, his eyes trained stubbornly on the floor as he nodded. “But I’m already awake, so I might as well just,” he rolled his shoulders in an attempt at a nonchalant shrug, “go.”

He thought he heard the doctor snort, but when he glanced at him, he seemed utterly unperturbed, shrugging in a far more convincing manner. “If you say so,” he mused, smiling. “Do make sure to rest, however, or I might have to slip Sleeper’s Drought into your supper one of these days.”

Jimin smiled sheepishly and nodded once more before walking over to the door. He paused in the doorway and looked back, the curl of his lips growing wider, brighter when his eyes met Yoongi’s. He didn’t linger, leaving Hoseok to resume whatever it was he’d been doing with the captain before his interruption.

_We have all the time in the world_, Jimin thought once he stood outside, inwardly repeating his own words to himself. He leaned his back against the closed door and emitted a contented sigh as he
looked around, basking in the familiarity of the Agust’s beauty in the early morning. *There’s no need to rush.*

With a smile so wide it made his cheeks ache tugging at his lips, he pushed away from the door and made for the main mast, eager to watch the sunrise from his spot atop the crow’s nest.

Contrary to what he’d hoped, Jimin didn’t see much of Yoongi over the following days. Not only was Jimin more determined than ever to keep a weather eye on their surroundings from the crow’s nest and watch for any possible danger on their way to the southern coast of China, but the captain was, after all, still recovering. Hoseok was more than adamant to make sure he rested; he’d even gone so far as to threaten to strap Yoongi to the bed should he try to venture another midnight stroll around the ship, which, according to the doctor, had almost torn his stitches open.

Hoseok had spared Jimin a curious glance at the mention of midnight strolls and Jimin had done his best to not give himself away, but his body betrayed him in the form of a light flush on his cheeks.

*He knows,* he realized three days after the night he’d sung Yoongi’s song, when Hoseok specifically called on him to bring the captain his supper, a task he’d saved for Jin or Taehyung every single night since the captain had grown strong enough to eat proper food. The doctor also made a point of asking Jimin for help every time he changed Yoongi’s bandages or applied a healing salve to the raw skin of his shoulder; perhaps he could tell the captain was distinctly less prickly in Jimin’s company.

If Hoseok noticed anything particular about the way Jimin held Yoongi’s hand and murmured soothing words to him to make the pain more bearable, he didn’t say anything about it.

Even when Jimin wasn’t on watch up in the crow’s nest, he was still busy. Lucya had used leftover timber to fashion him a new bow to resume his train with, and he worked it every day until his very bones ached. Under the sniper’s guidance, he practiced precision and aim, as well as stamina; Lucya showed him how to fire securely from various difficult locations, such as the shrouds, the topgallants, and halfway up the rungs of all three masts.

When Jimin put down his bow, it wasn’t to rest. As the days passed, he recalled more and more of what had happened when the mariners had attacked them outside of Kolkata. Most of his memory was still hazy, filled with nothing but darkness and an anger he couldn’t imagine himself capable of, but through the rage, he remembered wings instead of his arms, a thick plumage bursting out of his skin.

He remembered flying, however short it had been, and so he spent hours and hours attempting to take that form again, the one his body had assumed on its own in his moment of anguish. The problem was that he didn’t know how; he thought of what Talya had told him in Shanghai and of what Xiao had said, along with the Blessed Oracles’ words, all of whom agreed that the canary was one with him and that it would come to him on its own, naturally beckoned as his other half.

Jimin meditated, he tried to imagine himself as a bird, but no matter what he did, his feathers wouldn’t come, not in the same way they had before. On the fourth day of their journey, he succeeded in coaxing hard little rachis to sprout from the skin of his forearms, but they barely had any barbules, like the twiggy feathers of a newborn bird.

While Jimin was eager to learn the ways of his own blessing, he felt a sense of ominousness every time he thought of the Rune of the Storm. He kept the rune in his pocket, but it was as if he could feel the strength contained within it, the small stone exuding its unimaginable prowess. Every time he thought of touching it, he was reminded of the elder oracle’s words, of the dreadful nature of the blessing.
It took him several days before he dared touch the rune. He was seated up in the crow’s nest, with Taehyung tucked against his right side, sleeping, while Jeongguk drifted off against his left. Jimin was watching the horizon, alert and attentive while his friends slept, and after five minutes of pointing his spyglass in every direction he could reach, when his eyes began to feel winded from the mismatched enhancement of the glass, he decided to take the rune out for the first time since he’d received it.

Gingerly, as if handling something that could detonate at any given moment, Jimin turned the stone around in his hand so the symbol faced upwards. It was a swirl of grey, a crack splitting the engraving in two, and even in the light of day, it glowed in the palm of his hand. *It is a horrible thing*, the High Oracle had told him with sorrow in his voice, *but if you are willing to set your soul aside for the sake of others, I will give you what it is you seek.*

With his heart beating rapidly in his chest, Jimin drew a deep breath and squeezed his eyes shut before closing his hand around the rune.

For a moment, everything was as still as before, hardly a change in the afternoon breeze. Half of Jimin hoped everything would stay the same, almost pleading the blessing wouldn’t work in his hands.

Then a near violent, prickling current shot up his arm, and all of a sudden, the gentle spring air turned cold, strong winds biting against his skin. Startled, Jimin opened his eyes, only to find the sun had been swallowed by roiling clouds, the darkness of them shutting out the bright rays and the sky’s beautiful blue. It was a terrible sight, as if all the world’s light had been swallowed, consumed by a mouth of black, never to be seen again.

In his state of shock, he failed to notice the pulses of energy the Blessed Rune emitted, the skin of his arm contracting under its strength. All he did was stare, wide-eyed, as the clouds clashed and merged, heavy drops of rain spilling from their midst. The winds grew violent and threw the droplets of water against Jimin like a spray of little arrows, pelting his cheeks and chest where he sat.

“What,” he whispered, his breath quivering in what was undoubtedly fear, “what is this..?”

When a flash of light went through one of the clouds and a deep rumble like the roars of a hundred ravenous beasts tore through the silence, Jimin let go of the rune as if it had burned his hand. It clattered to the floor of the crow’s nest, the symbol flashing ominously before it settled, and as abruptly as the clouds had appeared, they faded from the sky, dispersing into thin air to let the sun shine through once more.

For several seconds, all Jimin could do was sit there, his chest heaving with his labored breath, as if he’d ran for hours and hours. His heart was hammering in his chest, his pulse beating furiously in his ears, fuelled by dreadful adrenaline. He barely realized he was trembling, his arms shaking as he pressed himself back against the mast, struggling to get as far away from the stone as possible.

*Remember,* he told himself sternly, fighting against the fear that gripped at his chest. *Remember why they gave it to you. Remember what will happen without it.* Nodding fervently in response to his own thoughts, Jimin forced himself to calm down, clinging onto the words for sanity. *Remember what you promise to sacrifice.*

Steadily, his resolve grew stronger than his dread, and when he reached out to take the small stone into his hand, his hand was no longer trembling. He tucked the rune back into his pocket and leaned back against the mast, heaving a deep sigh as he settled back into his position between his friends, whose own exhaustion had kept them from waking to witness the horrors Jimin had.
When Taehyung muttered something incoherent in his sleep and curled further against his side, determination was all that was left in Jimin, not a trace of fear remaining. *I will protect them,* he swore. *No matter what sacrifices I have to make, I will keep them safe.*

Even with these thoughts to guide him, Jimin couldn’t help but wonder why the powers of the Rune of the Storm came so easy to him when that of his own blessing resisted. It was an unsettling thought, that chaos was more natural to him than that which was his other half. *This chaos has a purpose,* he thought as he lay awake in his bunk after his watch. *You know what it must do, while your wings are lost.*

His brooding must’ve been obvious, for the next day, halfway through the morning, Hoseok called him into the infirmary, claiming he needed help in washing some bandages. He led Jimin past Yoongi’s bed, where the captain lay deep in sleep, and into the small washroom at the back, where the doctor motioned for him to take a seat on one of the small stools.

Before Jimin could even begin to ask about where the bandages were, Hoseok sat down in front of him and pinned him under a worried look. “You’ve been distracted lately,” he said, his eyes flickering across Jimin’s face, as if expecting to find the answer there. “Is there something troubling you?”

“No,” Jimin said instantly, the answer almost reflexive; while the rest of the crew dealt with the aftermath of the mariner commander’s attack, the last thing he’d wanted to do was add to their burden. Thus he’d grown used to hiding his concerns from just about everyone but Taehyung and Jeongguk.

The doctor was having none of it, however, frowning at his quick answer. “I don’t believe you,” he stated, pursing his lips when Jimin cast down his gaze. Jimin could feel his gaze on him, heavy as if it dug its way into his skull to crack open all the secrets his mind held, and true enough, when Hoseok spoke again, he had somehow drawn out the very core of his worry. “Does it have anything to do with your skinchanging?”

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Jemin jerked upright so fast it made his neck throb, his lips falling open as he stared at the doctor, who sighed at his reaction, nodding to himself. “Tell me,” he said after a moment of silence. “I might not be able to help, but at least I can lend you an ear.”

Even now, Jimin hesitated, reluctant to burden Hoseok with his problems, but there was something near pleading in the way he frowned, as if there was something more to why he wanted Jimin to confide in him. Slowly, Jimin’s apprehension faded and left him with no reason to refuse, so he drew a deep breath and nodded, taking a moment to find the appropriate words to express what plagued him.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he began, his brows knitting into a frown as he looked down at his hands. “No matter how hard I try, the Blessing of the Canary refuses me. It’s supposed to be a part of me, everyone has told me so, half of who I am, yet I can’t change shape, let alone make a single feather grow fully.”

He traced the lines of the Rune of the Storm where it lay in his pocket, his frown deepening still. “The Blessed Rune I received from the oracles comes easy,” he said quietly. “All I needed to do was hold it in my hand and a storm began to brew, yet…” He heaved a frustrated sigh and shook his head. “It is as if my own blessing rejects me,” he muttered. “As if I’m failing to be who I’m supposed to be.”

Hoseok observed him silently for several seconds after he’d stopped speaking, his lips pursed lightly in his contemplation. Jimin fidgeted slightly where he sat and the doctor must’ve noticed, for he
blinked out of his reverie and cleared his throat, taking on a rather solemn expression before he spoke.

“Did Taehyung tell you what happened after that son of a bitch tore off Yoongi’s arm?” he asked, a certain carefulness to his tone, as if he was worried to see how he would respond to the question. “Or do you remember it?”

Jimin felt a tightness seep into his jaw, gritting his teeth as the memories of his blind rage rose to the surface of his mind. “Not all of it,” he said, his tension audible even to his own ears. “I remember… I remember my anger. It was as if it consumed me. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t see, I…” His lips curled down into a scowl as he struggled with the gaps in his recollection. “All I knew was that I had to protect Yoongi. That I had to save him.”

“And you did.” Hoseok reached out to place a hand on Jimin’s knee, managing a tight smile. “Believe me, you did,” he said. “None of us could’ve reached Yoongi as fast as you did, let alone get that bastard away from him, but…” His voice trailed off for a moment and the smile faded from his lips, and he seemed reluctant to let Jimin go when he straightened up again. “I stood right next to you when it happened,” he said slowly. “At first I couldn’t see what had happened; I heard Taehyung scream Yoongi’s name and I couldn’t see him for all the mariners in the way, but I saw you fall to your knees, and…”

He pressed his lips together and swallowed, his brows curling up in worry as he looked at Jimin. “It looked painful,” he murmured. “The feathers burst out of your skin with such force I was surprised you didn’t bleed. They tore through the sleeves of your shirt as if they’d been made of sharp steel, and your voice…” He shuddered at the mere memory, and Jimin felt his throat constrict every cell of him waiting, nervous.

“I’ve never heard anything so painful,” Hoseok told him. “You screamed, and not only was it deafeningly loud, but you sounded so broken, as if you’d lost everything.” He managed a smile, however rueful it was. “Your voice disrupted the mariners’ assault,” he said. “It was explosive and they staggered, and then you were gone before I had the chance to regain my composure.”

He closed his lips for a moment, as if to chew on his own words, before he resumed his tale. “You were so lost,” he whispered. “You didn’t recognize anyone of us, not until Jin called you canary. You were so determined to protect Yoongi, you… I watched you spread your wings wide around him, almost as if they were a shield. As if you were ready to let them suffer any injury as long as the pain didn’t reach Yoongi.”

He frowned deeply at his own words, dragging his teeth across his lower lip as he stared up into the ceiling. Jimin could almost see the cogs turn behind his eyes, searching for the right words, and when the doctor spoke again, his words were slow, measured. “I won’t pretend I’m an expert in the ways of Blessings of Nature,” he said, “but if I were to venture a guess…”

His gaze settled on Jimin, who leaned forward without realizing it, wanting to hear everything Hoseok had to say. “I know Taehyung has told you this many times before,” the doctor began, “but you’re kind, Jimin, perhaps even too kind. You put others before yourself, and I think your blessing is refusing you because of it.”

“I’m not-” Jimin started, but Hoseok held up a finger to silence his protest.

“Namjoon once told me blessings are living things,” he said, “and yours,” he lowered his hand to point at Jimin’s chest, “might want to exist in you for your own sake, not for others’. When it burst through your consciousness during the attack, it might not have been for the sake of saving Yoongi, but for the sake of protecting yourself. Your blessing knew you’d lose yourself in your despair if you
failed to help him, and so, in order to spare your sanity, it came to you in that moment.”

Jimin parted his lips again, but he had no idea what to say. He wanted to rebuke the doctor’s words, but somewhere in the back of his mind, they made sense. For days, weeks, ever since the mariners’ attack, he had been near obsessed with the thought of protecting the Agust and its crew, what he had come to know as his home, and if Hoseok’s words were true, it would explain why the Rune of the Storm came to him so much easier. After all, chaos, even if used to protect something, was still chaos, thus the rune submit itself to Jimin’s control with little restraint.

_Blessings are alive as much as we are,_ Talya had told him in the alleys of Shanghai, _and yours resonates deeply within your soul._

“I know you haven’t been taking care of yourself properly ever since that day,” Hoseok said. “You don’t sleep as much as you should and you push yourself harder than you can bear, and you do it all for the sake of protecting us. Ever since you started to try your hand at skinchanging, that has been your goal, hasn’t it?” The smile that graced his lips was torn, as if he didn’t know whether to show fondness or concern. “Perhaps your blessing wants you to show yourself that kind of devotion.”

“I don’t…” Jimin began, his words failing him. It was an odd thing to think, that what kept him from the other half of himself was his need to protect his friends, those he cared most for in this world. It wasn’t as if he could help it; he’d seen the horrors of this world and what it could do, and he didn’t want to lose any of those he held dear.

Not again.

“Please don’t misunderstand me, Jimin,” Hoseok said kindly, waving his hands as if to deflect Jimin’s thoughts. “I’m not trying to tell you not to care, or that caring so much is a mistake. I’m happy that you do, really, more than I can ever put to words, and I know the rest of the crew is, too.”

His smile grew wider, and Jimin couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen the doctor look so overjoyed. “You’ve become a ray of sunlight for most of us here,” he said, chuckling when Jimin’s cheeks flushed with warmth. “I don’t think anyone could imagine this crew without you now, and we all love you just as much as you love us.”

Jimin could feel his eyes fill with tears and blinked rapidly to keep them at bay, a task that became increasingly difficult when Hoseok shifted out of his seat to crouch before him, placing both hands on Jimin’s knees. “But in loving you, we also care,” he crooned. “We also want you to be happy, just as happy as you’ve made us. We want you to be as strong for yourself as you are for us, and I know that’s what your blessing wants, too.”

“You are my blessing,” Jimin blurted out before he could stop to think, his voice thick with emotion. “Not like the canary, but a blessing all the same. All of you.” He sniffled, making a valiant effort at holding himself together before he smiled, his lips spreading so wide his cheeks ached. “Thank you, Hoseok,” he said, feeling as if his chest might burst with how much his heart swelled with affection. “For… for everything, really. Thank you.”

The doctor’s chuckle was bright and cheerful as he squeezed Jimin’s knees, seeming just as relieved as Jimin felt when he stood up straight. “Well then,” he mused, going for the door. “I’d best let you out of here before Yoongi starts suspecting something.” His grin took on an amused tone as he watched the color of Jimin’s cheeks darken considerably. “You’re not very good at hiding your emotions, you know.”

His tone was light and teasing, and through his embarrassment, Jimin jutted out his lower lip in a childlike pout, bravely attempting to pretend he wasn’t blushing like a maiden. “I am, too,” he
huffed. “You haven’t seen me try.”

“Not since Hangman’s Mercy, you mean,” Hoseok jested and threw open the door and escaped before Jimin could do more than send a murderous glare his way.

It was only when Jimin sat down for lunch that it occurred to him that the doctor could’ve meant the shift in his feelings towards Yoongi had been obvious since the night they’d played Hangman’s Mercy. The thought had him hiding his face in his cup, flushing red when Jin declared that he looked lovesick.

“If they only knew,” Taehyung whispered so quietly only Jimin could hear, laughing when he groaned and made an attempt to slide down under the table.

During the following days, Jimin kept Hoseok’s words in mind as best he could. It was harder than he could’ve imagined; setting down his bow early and leaving his watch in the crow’s nest on time took almost as much effort as it did to train until he felt ready to pass out. His body was unaccustomed to sleeping as early as he tried to now, but the sight of Taehyung’s overjoyed smile when he saw Jimin climb down the steps to the bunks two hours earlier than usual made him feel like it was worth it.

It had been almost two weeks since they’d sailed from India when they finally drew close to China’s southern coast. When they reached the island of Hainan, Jeongguk declared they would reach Qinzhou within two days.

On the latter of those two days, Jimin was walking along the edges of the crow’s nest, humming quietly to himself as he watched the horizon. Even as they were drawing close to their destination, there was still only ocean as far as the eye could see, the surface glimmering in the light of the sun. It was the warmest spring day by far, only a soft breeze to rustle the sails, the waves of the waters calm against the Agust’s hull.

It was perfect in every sense.

“Sing, beloved wind,” Jimin crooned, smiling around the words, “fly swift over the sea.” There was a contented stirring in his chest, something strange yet familiar filling him as he sang. The feeling spread from his core to the rest of him, filling him with a sense of peace. “Take us forward, always, and listen to my plea.”

A faint current went through his arms, as if the slightest hint of something unknown had seeped into the blood in his veins, and when he looked down, he saw soft feathers framing the skin of his arms, small but undoubtedly real, fluttering in the warm breeze. His smile widened and he looked away, closing his eyes as he allowed his calm to carry, imagining himself carefully reaching out a hand towards his other half, much like one would reach out to an untamed bird.

“Allow me my freedom, the freedom to be yours,” he sang, drawing words directly from his heart. “Just as you are mine, be it on the ocean or its shores.”

He could almost feel it when the feathers began to grow from the sides of his neck, the soft down brushing against his skin, and he couldn’t help but chuckle, the breathy sound carried by the wind. He didn’t look, however, content in keeping his eyes closed, although he couldn’t help but wonder what Yoongi would think of him right now, plumage growing out of his limbs to undoubtedly turn him inhuman.

As soon as the thought of the captain crossed his mind, the spring day’s peace was torn away from him.
Suddenly, a tremor went through the ship, its very core quivering with the force of it. Jimin’s eyes flew open and he emitted a startled yelp and latched onto the slings, frantically tuning his head and searching for the source of the quake, expecting a hostile vessel to appear out of nowhere. All there was was the sea, however, hardly anything but the sea in sight.

Then it happened again, more violently than before, and Jimin’s heart twisted in his chest at the sound of the accompanying voice, a harsh, anguished cry erupting from within the infirmary.

“Yoongi,” he whispered as the Agust seemed to come to life all around him, bending out of shape in its captain’s despair.

Chapter End Notes

Oh.

Oh no…

...

Okay, but...

BUT.

HHHHHHHHHHHHHHTHE SOFTNESS IS CHOKING ME, HELP!!!!

Also, you might feel like there’s, uh, “too little yoonmin” in this chapter, AND FRET NOT, THAT IS COMPLETELY INTENTIONAL, AND WILL BE MADE UP FOR NEXT WEEK. Like, there are still a lot of other ongoing things in Jimin’s life, so it can’t be all cuddles and romance… BUT BOI DO I HAVE SOME EXCELLENT YOONMIN SCENES PLANNED FOR THE FUTURE CHAPTERS, OHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOHOH, JUST YOU WAIT, YOU GUYS WILL //DIE//.

ALSO YAY FOR JIMIN AND HOSEOK BONDING!!! HOPEMIN FEELS, YO!!!!. Wait, is it hopemin? Jimhope? Uhh… oh wow this is awkward, uh, what is their “name”? xD oh god, wow, this is actually embarrassing :’D

//hides

BUT STILL. HOSEOK TELLING JIMIN TO TAKE MORE CARE OF HIMSELF

AND JIMIN AND THE RUNE OF THE STORM IS AN IMAGE TOO BADASS FOR MY POOR SOUL TO HANDLE. FORREALZ.
It was as if the Agust had come to life. The boards of the deck were roiling, bending themselves out of shape and curling like a body spasming in pain, the groaning creak rising from the wood sounding almost like a scream. The vessel was rearing, the hull rising from the sea and splitting itself open, twisting beneath the Life of Agust until her sword was pointing towards the sun.

Unbeknownst to the panicked crew, the figurehead’s lips had fallen open as if it had been the one to voice that dreadful scream instead of the ship’s captain.

While chaos ensued on deck, Jimin dug his nails deep into the rungs as he descended the mast, struggling to not lose his grip and fall while the boom attempted to throw him off. Several meters below him, the crew was running back and forth across the shifting deck, frantically searching for a place of security as the Agust seemed to break itself apart.
“Yoongi,” Jimin managed through gritted teeth, the muscles of his arms aching with the effort it took to stay upright. “Wait for me, Yoongi, please.”

He knew what was happening. After all, he’d seen the captain bend a hostile vessel’s mast out of shape and force it to spear through its own body. As soon as he’d heard the scream, he’d realized the ship’s tremors were caused by Yoongi’s blessing, seeping into the Agust and forcing it to portray every bit of the pain that must’ve plagued the captain himself.

The mere thought sent a shudder rippling down Jimin’s spine, his heart twisting in his chest.

As soon as he was close enough to the deck, he released his grip on the main mast’s rungs and jumped the rest of the way, barely managing to keep his balance on the roiling floor when he landed, his legs threatening to fold in protest at the leap. Hissing, Jimin persisted and made for the infirmary, shoving his way past those who had gathered in the doorway. He could hear voices coming from inside, their words drowned by the loud, near anguished creaking of the Agust as it thrashed on the sea.

He could barely recognize who it was that was speaking until another voice cut them off, louder and harsher and terribly familiar.

“How could you not tell me?!”

When Jimin broke through the mass gathered at the doorway, the cold sensation down his spine intensified until it felt like an endless prickle of needles. Jin, Namjoon and Hoseok stood inside the infirmary, distress ever so obvious on their faces, their hands raised halfway as if to be ready in case they would have to defend themselves. Shards of glass littered the floor, pieces of what had once been the doctor’s herb cabinet spread out in the room, and the wall lantern lay broken by the bed.

In their midst was Yoongi, kneeling on the floor and tearing at his own hair, looking so lost it made Jimin’s heart feel like it had shattered.

Hoseok stood closest to the captain, looking more torn than Jimin had ever seen him. Half of him seemed to want to move closer, to soothe Yoongi and pull him out of his despair, while the other half wanted to retreat, as if afraid of what would happen should he step too close. “Yoongi,” he began, his voice so, so tense, but the captain didn’t allow him to continue.

“Seven days,” Yoongi said, his voice strained, rendered austere by the effort it seemed to take not to scream. “I’ve been awake for seven days, yet you didn’t take the time to tell me!” Every word he spoke was louder than the last, and underneath him, the floor quivered, feeding off his rampant emotions. “All of you, everyone of you, you’ve had seven fucking days, but you didn’t think to tell me?”

“Yoongi, we couldn’t,” Namjoon stressed, a familiar urgency to his voice. “We couldn’t risk it, not when you were wounded, when you were-”

“Shut up!” A violent tremor went through the ship when the captain screamed, strong enough to cause the lot of them to stagger, struggling to keep their balance. “Rodel’s dead!” he screamed and leaned forward where he sat until his brow touched the floor. “He’s been dead for almost a fortnight, and no one told me!” He ground his forehead against the roiling wood before jerking upright, his eyes wild as he stared up at Hoseok. “Tell me how!”

All eyes turned to the doctor, a suffocating tension settling heavy over the infirmary, and Jimin could almost hear the thoughts racing in Hoseok’s mind, his lips parting and closing as he battled with the decision of what to tell his captain. “Yoongi, I-”
“Tell me,” Yoongi all but growled, the words falling through gritted teeth. “That’s an order.”

Every pirate present seemed to hold their breath as they waited, watching as the doctor drew a deep breath and closing his eyes for a moment before speaking, his voice thin and unstable. “H-he was injured in the attack,” he said, his eyes glistening as he forced himself to meet the captain’s, “and I didn’t realize how bad it was, I… I didn’t take his wounds as seriously as I should’ve, and he…”

Next to him, Jin turned away to hide the tears streaming down his face, his brows knitted into an expression of pained dread as he listened to Hoseok’s lie. Beside him, Namjoon stared up into the ceiling, his lips pressed into a thin line, silently shaking his head as if he couldn’t stand to hear the doctor take the blame, all for the sake of their captain.

“It was my fault,” Hoseok whispered hoarsely, his hands trembling where he kept them raised. “I… I’m so sorry.”

It was a terrible thing, to watch the anger drain from Yoongi’s eyes. Its absence gave way for all the anguish he felt, his sorrow so clear on his face it seemed unlikely to ever fade again. As if the cracks in his heart would never mend. “You’re lying,” he croaked and shook his head, his good hand gripping hard at his shirt. “You couldn’t, I know you couldn’t make that mistake, not you. You… you’re lying..!”

For a moment, the Agust ceased its thrashing, the deck stilling under the crew’s feet. For one moment, the only thing to disturb the silence was the sound of the sea.

Then Yoongi curled in on himself, and whatever semblance of control he still had on his blessing broke. A violent pulse burst through the vessel, strong as an earthquake, digging cracks into the floor and walls. Behind the crew, the main mast bent under the force of the captain’s despair, snapping the ropes that bound the shrouds and sails. The forecastle deck began to split, and beneath it, the hull tore itself open to draw in the ocean’s water.

Through the chaos rose Yoongi’s scream, filled with so much sorrow and grief, more than anyone should ever have to bear.

The sound broke Jimin out of his state of crippling despair. “Yoongi,” he breathed and took a step forward, a startled exclaim escaping his lips when the floor bent under his foot and almost threw him off balance. “Yoongi.”

“Stay back, Jimin,” someone behind him said urgently, but he shook his head and persisted.

He had to, lest his own heart break.

Whereas the others hesitated to both approach or retreat from Yoongi’s form, Jimin didn’t stop once he’d started. Hoseok tried to pull him back, his hand closing around his wrist, but Jimin tore himself free, deaf to the others’ warning words as he approached the captain as fast as he could over the quaking floor.

As soon as he was close enough, he sank to his knees before Yoongi, and he didn’t hesitate for even a second before he reached out and took the captain into his arms, pulling him against his chest. “Yoongi,” he whispered; it was all he knew to do, to call his name and hope he would hear. “Yoongi, Yoongi, please.”

The captain emitted a sound that was half a growl, half a broken sob, and he pushed against Jimin’s chest, fighting against his embrace. Jimin only tightened his grip and refused to let go, squeezing his eyes shut as he pressed his face against Yoongi’s shoulder, desperate to keep his own tears at bay.
“Please,” he said again, his voice quivering, “I’m here, Yoongi, we’re all here, y-you just have to… Yoongi-”

Suddenly, he felt someone else kneel beside him, but he didn’t have time to raise his head before a pair of strong arms circled the both of them and pulled them close. “Yoongi,” Taehyung murmured, his voice unbearably soft, unfaltering even as Yoongi startled, a choked sound spilling from his lips. “Listen to me, brother, listen.”

Contrary to his soothing voice, when Jimin looked up, he saw the quartermaster’s eyes carried all the dreadful panic he himself felt, wide in his alarm. “Breathe for me, Yoongi,” he said and brought a trembling hand to the back of Yoongi’s head, guiding him to settle against his shoulder. “Breathe, and listen, alright?”

The captain slowly ceased his struggling, his hand stilling against Jimin’s chest as he did as told. “Rodel’s at peace, Yoongi,” Taehyung whispered, lowering his head until he spoke into his brother’s ear. “He went without pain, I promise, and we gave him a good burial. The sea took him home again, back where he was born.”

When the captain’s shoulders began to shake, Jimin held him tighter and turned his head so he could press his lips against his temple, closing his eyes as he felt Yoongi’s hand grip the front of his shirt. His fingers trembled as they curled hard around the fabric, and Jimin wanted nothing more than to possess the ability to take his pain away.

“We couldn’t tell you,” the quartermaster went on, his voice never wavering, even when tears spilled down his cheeks. “He wouldn’t have wanted us to. Rodel knew you, Yoongi, he knew how much it would hurt, and he would’ve never wanted to cause you pain. He loved you too much for that.”

Yoongi drew a quivering breath and pressed harder against Taehyung’s shoulder at the same time as his grip on Jimin’s shirt tightened, tugging him forward, closer. “It wasn’t Hoseok’s fault,” the quartermaster said, “and it wasn’t yours, either. It’s no one’s fault.” He buried his hand in Yoongi’s hair. “Rodel was strong for us, and now we need you to do the same.”

Taehyung paused to take a deep breath, and when Jimin looked at him, the smallest, most heartbreaking smile graced his lips. “Be strong for us, Yoongi,” he crooned against the top of his brother’s head, “and cry.”

It was as if a dam had burst. As soon as Taehyung spoke the words, Yoongi broke, his entire body quivering with the force of his sobs. He buried his tears in the quartermaster’s shoulder, but his cries were loud and uncontrolled, and all Jimin could do was hold him close, so close and let him weep.

All around them, the Agust had gone still. The deck unfolded and returned to its true shape, settling on the sea with a deep creaking that Jimin couldn’t hear, deaf to everything that wasn’t the captain’s voice.

An eternity might’ve had time to pass before Yoongi’s tears finally stopped falling, his sobs gradually reducing into harsh pants, his breathing labored with the effort it had taken him to cry. He didn’t move, however, leaning heavily on both Taehyung and Jimin, and his grip on Jimin’s shirt remained every bit as strong, as if he couldn’t bear the thought of letting it go.

Carefully, Jimin kissed his temple again, his hands stroking Yoongi’s back to coax him into easing away from his tension. “It’ll be alright, Yoongi,” he murmured, so quietly he hardly expected the captain to hear him. “It’ll take time, but it’ll be alright.”

A shudder trailed down the length of Yoongi’s spine and Jimin felt it under his fingers, worry rising
in his chest. He shushed the captain softly before raising his head to glance over his shoulder, searching for anything he could drape over Yoongi’s trembling form.

The crew had gone, retreating from the doorway to give their captain the space he needed. Only Hoseok and Namjoon remained, the two of them halfheartedly attempting to clean the devastating mess in the infirmary, but as soon as Jimin turned to look at them, they straightened up, ready to help.

“I think he has a fever,” he said quietly, touching a hand to Yoongi’s neck, his skin warmer than should be even after crying. “Bring me something to cover him with.”

Hoseok complied before he could even finish the request, tiptoeing across the mess of broken glass until he was close enough to gather the bed’s blanket into his arms. He winced when he accidentally stepped on a shard, the piece shattering beneath the sole of his shoe, but no one seemed to notice, least of all Yoongi.

When Jimin reached out to take the blanket from Hoseok, he felt the captain’s hold on his shirt tighten, almost as if he worried the lack of Jimin’s hands on his back meant he was going away. Jimin was quick to reassure, pressing back against Yoongi and crooning words of comfort against his hair as he pulled the blanket over his shoulders. “I’m here, Yoongi,” he said softly. “I’m always here.”

He felt rather than saw the captain nod, still not lifting his head from Taehyung’s shoulder, and then they simply sat there, waiting silently and allowing Yoongi all the time he needed to recover.

When the captain eventually shifted, he looked like he was barely aware of where he was, his eyes unfocused and heavy. He seemed to barely be able to support his own weight, his hand coming up to Jimin’s shoulder to steady himself as he pushed himself upright, a groan spilling from his lips.

“He’s likely exhausted,” Hoseok said quietly, crouching next to the three of them to help Yoongi sit up. “I haven’t seen him use so much of his blessing’s energy in a long time.” He threw a quick glance over his shoulder. “Let’s get him to bed. Namjoon cleared away the glass as best he could, but be careful where you put your feet.”

With some effort and a lot of quiet encouraging from Taehyung, they managed to get the captain on his feet, although he swayed so badly where he stood, they had to well-nigh carry him to the infirmary bed. His fingers dug hard into Jimin’s shoulder the whole way, and even after they’d seated him on the edge of the mattress, he seemed loathe to let go, perhaps subconsciously seeking affirmation of his presence.

Once Yoongi lay down, it hardly took him three minutes to be claimed by his exhaustion, his eyes falling shut and his breath finally evening out.

“I knew this would happen,” Hoseok muttered as soon as he’d ensured the lapse hadn’t caused any damage to the captain’s shoulder. “I knew he would react this way, which is why I wanted to wait until we’d reached land, but he asked me why he hadn’t seen either Xiao or Rodel since he woke up, and…”

A sense of bitterness settled into his frown, the lines around his lips growing more well-defined. “Xiao’s absence is easy enough to explain,” he said, “but he noticed my hesitation when he asked about Rodel, and then Namjoon and Jin stopped by and Yoongi turned to them, and Jin can’t lie for shit, so…” He gestured vaguely towards the infirmary bed and shook his head. “It was the worst way he could’ve found out.”

“That’s not true,” Taehyung said thickly as he sat down on the floor next to the bed, rubbing at his
eyes. “He could’ve heard it from someone who wasn’t us. I don’t know how or who, but at least we were the ones to tell him.”

The doctor had nothing to say to that, so he only nodded, the movement stiff. “I’ll fetch him something to drink,” he said and made for the doorway. “Tae, do you want me to bring Jeongguk?”

“Yes,” the quartermaster said gratefully, a tremulous smile on his lips. “I’ll be here for the rest of the day.” When Hoseok left, he turned to look at Jimin, who stood still by the foot of the bed. “You’ll stay too, right?”

“I will,” he said before he could even consider Taehyung’s words. Not that it mattered; he couldn’t possibly have left now. He couldn’t even bring himself to look away from the captain, his eyes tracing every detail of him.

He looked so small with the heavy blanket pulled up to his chin, his cheeks and eyes still flushed from crying. It was near painful, how fiercely Jimin wished there was something he could do, something he could’ve done. Seeing Yoongi in pain hurt more than he could’ve imagined, and as he took a seat on the mattress, careful to not disturb the captain’s sleep, he cursed himself for feeling so powerless.

The hours of the day dragged on slowly. Together with Taehyung and Jeongguk and Hoseok, Jimin spent his time helping the doctor clean up and fix the herb cabinet and sort the medicine therein. The lot of them worked in silence, whispering if there was something to be said, which only happened two or three times before Jin barged in with a tray full of food, threatening to force feed them if they didn’t eat.

Jimin only left Yoongi’s side once, to find Lucya and ask if she could keep watch instead of him. She smiled softly at his attempts to convey his request and placed a hand on his shoulder, murmuring something in a voice warm and comforting before gently pushing him back towards the infirmary.

Briefly, as Jimin returned to his seat on the foot of Yoongi’s bed, he wondered if she knew.

The moon had stood high for several hours when Yoongi finally stirred from his rest. Taehyung and Jeongguk had fallen asleep where they sat on the floor, the sailing master’s arms wrapped tightly around Taehyung’s shoulders, and Hoseok lay draped over his desk, his face buried in his arms to muffle his snores, a small cup of ground herbs lying tipped over by his hand.

Jimin nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard Yoongi groan, having been looking out through the open infirmary door and listening to the night’s silence. He turned around so fast it made his neck throb and found the captain blinking heavily against the darkness, frowning as his eyes struggled to adjust.

“Fuckin’ hell…” Yoongi hissed, his voice slurred from sleep, and he winced when he tried to push himself upright, another curse falling from his lips.

“Yoongi,” Jimin whispered and stood, almost stumbling over his own feet in his hurry to help the captain. “Yoongi, are you alright?”

He ceased his struggling to look up at Jimin, his eyes growing wide as if he hadn’t expected him to be there. “Songbird,” he said slowly, an unreadable expression crossing his face, and when Jimin reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder to help him sit, a faint quiver went through his skin, like the ghost of a flinch.

A faint frown tugged at Jimin’s brow when he felt just how tense the captain was, but he resisted,
smiling instead as he helped him sit up in the bed. “How are you feeling?” he asked quietly.

“Like a pile of shit,” Yoongi muttered and emitted a thick, wry chuckle, one interrupted by another groan as he straightened up. Worried, Jimin tightened his grip slightly, and the captain sent a brief glance at Jimin’s face before looking away, his voice oddly tight. “How long was I out of it?”

“For hours,” Jimin said tentatively, sending a quick glance out the open door. “The sun will rise in an hour or two.”

There was something off about the way Yoongi refused to meet his eyes, staring stubbornly at the blanket in his lap, even though he made no effort to rid himself of Jimin's touch. “Shouldn't you be asleep, songbird?” he asked, and Jimin couldn’t quite decipher if the captain wanted him gone or if he was simply worried.

“Probably,” he said, choosing to believe the latter, “but I worry about you.” A part of him wondered if he should’ve let go of Yoongi’s shoulder, what with his obvious tension, but he didn’t. He didn’t want to. “Do you want me to bring you something to eat? Or drink?”

The captain huffed at that, shaking his head. “I don’t want to eat.”

“I know you don’t,” Jimin mused and gave his shoulder a squeeze, “but you should.”

Rather than reply, Yoongi only hummed, his gaze still downcast as he dragged his teeth over his lower lip and bit, so obviously at war with himself, and finally, Jimin couldn’t bear to watch it any longer.

“There is something on your mind, Yoongi,” he said quietly. “I know there is.” He sat down on the bed and moved his hands to the captain’s cheeks, gently coaxing him into raising his head. “Tell me. Whatever it is, I’ll listen.”

Jimin could sense Yoongi’s protest before he even began; he saw it in the way his brow twitched and his gaze flicked towards his face but not quite all the way. “I don’t-”

“Yoongi.” Jimin brushed his thumbs over the captain’s cheeks, and something in his voice must’ve affected him, for he finally met his eyes, flickering over his furrowed brow, worry seeping into Jimin’s expression. “Please,” he said, trying and failing to smile.

Now that his gaze had found Jimin’s, he suddenly seemed reluctant to let it go, some of his usual intensity creeping back into his eyes as he looked at Jimin, gauging, assessing. Perhaps unbeknownst to him, his teeth still grazed over his lower lip, his jaw tense under Jimin’s hands.

Finally, he heaved a deep sigh and closed his eyes, a rueful frown marring his brow. “I,” he began, only to immediately pause to take a steadying breath, turning his face for a second to press his lips against the palm of Jimin’s hand. “I… I worry I’ll hurt you again, songbird.”

He spoke the words so silently, Jimin almost missed them. They made him frown dolefully, his heart tightening in his chest as he watched Yoongi wring the blanket in his hand. “I get so angry at times,” he went on tensely, “and I don’t always know how to keep it at bay.”

There was shame in his voice, guilt marring every word, and his jaw twitched in Jimin’s hand, as if he wanted to pull away but couldn’t. “When I heard about Rodel, I don’t know what I could’ve done to you if I wasn’t wounded,” he said, his frown digging deeper as he spoke. “If I wasn’t as weak as I am, who knows what I would’ve done, to you, to Taehyung, to everyone, I…”

He shook his head as best he could in Jimin’s grip and brought his own hand up to cover Jimin’s, not
to pull it away, but to hold it. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he whispered. “I don’t ever want to do that again, I… I was horrible towards you in the past, and… and I don’t…”

He said nothing more than that, the words too difficult to speak, but it was enough. Jimin regarded him silently, never ceasing the stroke of his thumbs against Yoongi’s cheeks, the need to soothe so strong it almost hurt.

Briefly, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes, drawing a deep breath and releasing it in a soft sigh, and when he looked at the captain again, he realized this was the cause of his tension, not only now, but when Jimin had seen him after the night they’d kissed.

“You were,” he crooned, smiling when Yoongi winced. “And you’re brash and don’t think before you speak, and your temper is undeniably aggressive. But,” he added when he sensed the captain was about to speak, “you’re also gentle. And kind, and generous, and so many more things. You were and you are good to me.”

A little giggle fell from his lips when Yoongi looked at him again, eyes wide; just as he had before, he looked so lost, and Jimin smiled brightly and brushed the hair away from his forehead. “I meant what I said, Yoongi,” he said. “I’ve already forgiven you for all the horrible things that happened. And not just because I… because I feel the way I feel, but because you deserve to be forgiven.”

He leaned forward and kissed Yoongi’s brow, lingering when he felt the captain’s grip on his hand tighten. “You don’t hurt me, Yoongi,” he whispered when he pulled away ever so slightly, speaking the words against his skin.

Yoongi seemed utterly lost for words, his eyes glittering as he stared at him, almost as if he’d never seen another human being before. He closed his open lips and swallowed, and when he spoke, his voice was thick, this time not from sleep. “But-”

“No,” Jimin interrupted, refusing to hear whatever argument he wanted to speak. “It was not a question.” He angled the captain’s head a bit higher and firmly held his gaze, unfaltering in his determination to make him see. “You don’t hurt me.”

For several long seconds, all Yoongi did was look, so still it seemed like he was holding his breath. His eyes flickered over every fraction of Jimin’s face, searching for even the faintest hint of doubt, until he eventually gave up, another deep sigh gusting past his lips. This one, however, was accompanied by a small smile, the corners of his lips curling upwards. “Thank you, songbird,” he murmured and squeezed his hand. “For trusting me.”

The tightness in Jimin’s chest eased under the rush of fondness that rose with the captain’s words, and he returned the smile tenfold, so wide his cheeks ached. “You have nothing to thank me for,” he said softly.

Yoongi shook his head at that and emitted a snort. “I do,” he said, his smile widening when Jimin quirked a curious brow. Slowly, he took his hand off Jimin’s and reached out for his face, the movement hesitant still, as if worried Jimin would recoil from his touch. Jimin sat as still as he could, and when the captain’s hand settled against his cheek, so very carefully, he wondered if Yoongi would ever forgive himself for what he’d done.

“If I told you all the things I should thank you for,” he muttered, as if he spoke to himself rather than Jimin, “we would still be sitting here after dawn.”

His words pulled another giggle from Jimin’s lips before he could stop it. “That doesn’t sound so bad,” he mused and leaned into the captain’s touch, his smile growing wider when he felt a slight tug
of Yoongi’s hand, so faint he could’ve easily pretended to not have noticed. But he did notice and he knew what it meant, and even though he felt shy, his cheeks flooding with warmth, he let the captain guide him and leaned forward until he was close enough for their lips to meet.

The kiss was just as gentle as it had been that night, perhaps due to Yoongi’s uncertainty, but it was more than enough to have Jimin’s heart threatening to beat its way out of his chest. He briefly wondered how he could’ve been so calm when he’d first kissed Yoongi when it was all he could do to not lose himself in it now, but then the captain pulled him closer still and moved his lips against his own, and all thoughts were promptly pushed far out of Jimin’s mind.

A soft, high-pitched sound rose up his throat when Yoongi took his lower lip between his own and added a hint of pressure, so little but more than enough to send a rush of warmth spreading through Jimin’s body and leaving his skin tingling. He didn’t know what to do, clueless as to how to kiss like Yoongi did, but the captain didn’t seem to mind, sighing in content as he carefully coaxed Jimin’s lips apart before covering them with his own once again.

Through the warmth brimming in his chest, Jimin wondered what he would have to give for this moment to never end.

When he could finally break himself out of his daze for long enough to move, he momentarily overestimated the captain’s stability where he sat; in need of support, he braced his hands against Yoongi’s chest and leaned some of his weight on it, only to have the kiss break when the captain fell back against the mattress with a grunt.

Startled, Jimin lost his balance and smacked his forehead against Yoongi’s collarbones, drawing a whine out of him and forcing another groan out of the man before he could even begin to realize what had happened.

Never in all his life had Jimin been more mortified.

“I-I’m sorry,” he whispered shrilly and scrambled to sit back up, if only to bury his face in his hands, wincing at how warm his cheeks were. “Oh my god, I’m sorry, I-I didn’t mean to push you away, o-or down, I just, I only-”

He ceased his rambling when he realized Yoongi was shaking underneath him, worry rising fast, but when he looked, he found the captain struggling to suppress his laughter, breathless chuckles falling from his lips. Jimin would’ve been upset, too embarrassed to see the humor of the situation, but watching Yoongi laugh filled him with affection so strong, he felt as if his heart might burst.

“It’s not funny,” he said and made a half-hearted attempt at pouting, a pout that quickly turned into a concerned frown when the captain groaned through his chortling and pressed his hand to his chest, rubbing at the skin near his left shoulder. “Are you alright?”

His chuckles slowly ebbed out and left nothing but his smile behind, wide and full of so much joy. With his pale cheeks flushed from either laughter or their kiss, he reached up and brushed his thumb along Jimin’s jaw, his touch much less hesitant than before. “I am, songbird,” he murmured breathlessly, sounding so utterly content. “I was only surprised by how bold you are, to push me down like this.”

There was a teasing lilt to his tone and Jimin was certain his face was burning bright by now. He parted his lips to argue, but all that left him was a string of incoherent sputtering, high-pitched and thin, and unsurprisingly, it had Yoongi chuckling all over again. “Stupid,” Jimin hissed and turned around where he sat so his back faced the captain. He pressed one hand against his face to rub away the furious blush while the other clutched the mattress for stability, needing something to ground him.
lest he lose his mind.

He rolled his eyes and huffed when he felt Yoongi’s hand settle over his own, ever so gently coaxing him into easing his grip. Jimin shot a quick glance at him and regretted it immediately; truly, it wasn’t fair that the captain could look so fond as he watched his hand cover Jimin’s smaller one, as if the small action alone gave him more joy than anything else in this world.

Jimin drew a deep breath and attempted to will his heart into settling, but the thought barely had enough time to cross his mind before every tingling sensation he felt escalated, almost as if in protest. It’s futile, a little voice in the back of his head said, and when he looked at Yoongi again and found him dozing off, his eyelids drooping heavily, he realized it was true.

Unsurprisingly, he could hardly bring himself to be upset about it.

He let go of the mattress and turned his hand so he could the captain could take his properly. He didn’t say a word; Yoongi needed his rest, and Jimin had an inkling if he spoke now the captain would make an effort to stay awake, persisting through his exhaustion. Thus he sat silently and let Yoongi fall back to sleep, humming softly as he felt the grip on his hand loosen. Jimin tightened his own grip in turn, his heart singing in his chest as he watched the captain sleep, a rare sense of serenity having settled over his face.

Briefly, Jimin thought back to what Taehyung had said about him and Yoongi, about how Jimin seemed so at peace, and he felt it now more than ever. Even though he’d hardly slept for nearly a day, every last cell of him brimming with only happiness.

He hardly noticed when the sun began to rise, its light seeping in through the open door. It reached slowly for the foot of the bed, and even when it settled against Jimin’s back, he wouldn’t have stirred if not for the groan that sounded from the floor. Reluctant to look away from Yoongi, he turned and found Taehyung blinking hard against the sunlight, raising a hand to shield his face from it.

“Chim..?” he slurred, groaning as he sat upright, Jeongguk’s arms slipping around his shoulders. “‘S everythin’ alright? How’s…”

Whatever he’d been about to ask never quite made it past his lips when his eyes found Jimin, growing wide even in the light of the sun. His mouth hung open and he stared, seemingly rendered mute by something Jimin couldn’t see.

Frowning, Jimin parted his lips to ask what was wrong, but the quartermaster spoke before he had the chance, his voice hushed and brimming with awe. “Chim,” he whispered, “your arms…”

Confused, Jimin looked down at himself, only to have his heart leap to his throat at the sight of the feathers sprouting from the skin of his arms and shoulders, full-grown and beautiful, the soft pink color of them glittering like rose gold in the light of the sun. He had never seen them so big, nor so thick, like the plumage of all the birds he used to watch in the forests of Jeju.

Slowly, he let go of Yoongi’s hand and touched his neck, a shudder creeping down his spine as he felt numerous quills underneath his fingers, soft down sprouting from the base. The feathers grew smaller the further up he traced his hand; at his jaw, they were mere barbs, too young to be anything but bald.

When he lowered his hand again, the feathers had spread to the back of it, their growth slowly reaching his knuckles, and with a sudden rush of exhilaration, Jimin stood, his heart hammering in his chest as he hurried over to Taehyung. “Come,” he said and reached his hand to pull him upright, forgetting to lower his voice. “Come with me, fast.”
“W-what are you-” the quartermaster began, but his words were lost in a startled yelp when Jimin tugged him towards the door, wasting not a single second as he went. “Chim-”

“Quickly, quickly,” he all but sang, only releasing Taehyung’s arm when they reached the main mast, oblivious to the wide-eyed stares of the awakening crew as they passed. “Quickly, before it passes!”

He heard the quartermaster voice another confused question, his sleep-addled mind too slow for Jimin’s excitement. He couldn’t catch Taehyung’s words, too consumed by his glee as he began to climb, his eyes trained on the blue and orange sky high above them.

Wait for me, he cried inwardly, his chest feeling as if it was like to burst. Wait for me, my other half.

When he reached the crow’s nest, he was quick to pull his shirt over his head to free the feathers growing out of his shoulders and back, framing his spine. With a smile so wide it hurt his cheeks, Jimin closed his eyes and drew a deep breath, raising his arms as if to embrace the morning sky. He felt the sun on his skin, warm and comforting, and it beckoned him, its call resonating deep inside his very core.

It went through him in pulses, rippling through his veins and causing the skin of his arms to prickle in a way that was as far from unpleasant as it could be. Even without looking, he could feel the change happen; the bones of his arms rearranged themselves, his hands losing their shape to give way for their new shape.

Jimin had never felt anything so wonderful.

“Oh my god.”

A tremor of giddy excitement went through him and he turned around, finally opening his eyes to look at Taehyung, who had just reached the crow’s nest. The quartermaster’s eyes were even wider than before, but he was smiling now, his lips slowly spreading into his rectangular grin. “You’re so pretty,” he said, his voice laced with awe.

Jimin emitted a breathy giggle at his words, the sound much higher than usual, and with a deep breath to steady the pounding of his heart, he looked down at what his body had become.

The very center of his chest was bare, still as human as ever, but along his ribs and the side of his abdomen, his feathers had grown, small along the very edges of his plumage. They framed his body like a cloak, lighter than air and as soft as the breeze itself.

Nothing, however, could compare to what it was like to see his own wings for the first time. The feathers were long and slender, arching beautifully at the bend of his elbow. They were bigger than the rest of him; from where they began at his shoulder, the tips of his wings could’ve touched the floor of the crow’s nest if he’d let them hang loose. When he moved his arms, he could feel the air fold under their strength and grace, as if their feathers’ softness cleaved through the wind itself.

“It feels so,” Jimin whispered, so overwhelmed he was surprised he was even able to speak, “familiar.”

“It’s half of who you are, Chim,” Taehyung said with a chuckle, coming to stand before him. “You might not have willingly taken this shape before, but to the songbird in you, this,” he gestured to the wings, careful to not touch them, “is as natural as breathing.”

Jimin nodded, another giggle falling from his lips as he rolled his shoulders, simply for the sake of seeing what it felt like. His feathers shifted with the movement, ruffling slightly before settling back
down, almost as if they’d taken a breath, and Jimin felt something tug at the core of his chest, an urge he recognized so easily it surprised even himself.

With a little nod, he took a step backwards towards the edge of the crow’s nest and said, “I’m going to fly.”

The smile fell from Taehyung’s lips in the blink of an eye, alarm quickly taking its place. “Now?” he asked incredulously, raising his arms halfway as if uncertain if he should try to stop Jimin or not. “Chim, you only just now beckoned your wings for the first time, you… do you even know how? What if you can’t?”

Jemin’s smile was bright as ever as he regarded his friend’s worry. “Baby birds learn to fly by letting go of the branch they stand on,” he said cheerfully. “They trust their wings from birth, and they don’t fall.” He looked up towards the sky and hummed at the sight of the Agust’s black flag fluttering in the morning breeze, his heart beating fast in his chest. “As long as I trust in my wings to carry me, I won’t fall.”

He took another step back and looked at Taehyung again, an airy laughter rising from his chest at the sight of the quartermaster’s conflicted expression, half concerned, half excited. “Or,” Jimin said slyly, “I’ll end up in the infirmary with a cracked skull.”

He lingered for long enough to see Taehyung’s eyes widen in horror at the prospect, and with another cheery giggle, Jimin leaned backwards and let himself fall.

Vaguely, he could hear voices calling his name from far below him, sounds just as panicked as the quartermaster had looked. He smiled and closed his eyes against the currents of air that bit at his skin; even as the wind whistled loud against his ears, all he could hear was the rhythm of his own heartbeat, and the rush of adrenaline against his eardrums.

_I trust you_, Jimin thought, not a trace of worry in him as he spread his wings wide. _You, who are part of me._

Suddenly, the deck of the Agust ceased rushing up to meet him. The wind bent under his feathers and pushed him upright, his breath hitching as he came to a jarring halt some three meters above the Agust’s deck. He beat his wings once, twice, rolling his shoulders slowly with each movement, and an exhilarated giggle fell from his lips as the air held him steady, as if he weighed nothing at all.

The rush of adrenaline was more intense than he could’ve imagined, his heart hammering in his chest and his head swimming.

Below him, the crew was gaping, their voices loud as they called out to him, some laughing, some with a trace of panic seeping through their awe. He saw Jin standing with his arms raised halfway as if braced to catch him should he fall, the cook’s eyes wide in wonder. Next to him, Namjoon was grinning widely, his hands on Jin’s waist to keep him steady in his shellshocked state. Lucya stood by the helm, looking mighty proud as she smiled up at him, nodding contentedly when their eyes met.

“Chim!”

High above him, Taehyung was leaning out over the edge of the crow’s nest, waving frantically down at him, laughing as he watched Jimin stay airborne.

“I _told_ you I wouldn’t fall,” Jimin called and beat his wings a few times to rise a bit higher, the muscles of his shoulders protesting slightly at the effort it took. “I _told_ you!”
“You’re so amazing!” the quartermaster shouted, sounding just as excited as Jimin felt. “I can’t believe you can fly!”

A sharp whistle pulled his attention down before he could reply and he turned, his already exhilarated heart turning over in his chest when he looked towards the infirmary.

Yoongi stood in the doorway, the captain leaning heavily on Jeongguk as he stared up at Jimin with eyes wide as saucers. Next to them, Hoseok was laughing, raising both arms to wave up at him, with so much enthusiasm he almost smacked his captain up the head.

With all the unsteadiness of a baby bird learning to fly, Jimin landed before the captain, staggering slightly when his feet touched the deck. “You were right,” he said breathlessly before anyone else could speak, his chest heaving and his smile unbelievably wide. “All those months ago, when you told me I could fly. You were right, Yoongi.”

Yoongi seemed to be at a complete and utter loss for words, gaping, his tongue coming out to wet his dry lips as he looked at Jimin, truly looked at him, his eyes tracing every last one of his feathers. The captain’s hand twitched slightly, as if he subconsciously attempted to reach out to touch him, but he didn’t.

Instead, he spoke, his voice hoarse yet filled with awe. “You’re beautiful, songbird,” he murmured, and Jimin felt as though his heart had burst.

A bright laughter spilled from his lips and he reached up towards Yoongi’s face, overwhelmed by his emotions. Somewhere during the few seconds it took him to touch the captain’s cheeks, the feathers of Jimin’s wings melted away, smoothly pulling back into his skin so that it were his hands that cupped his beloved’s face.

In his pure, unadulterated joy, Jimin didn’t hesitate for even a second before he kissed Yoongi in front of all his crew to see.

It was shorter than the other times they’d kissed; the pirates aboard the Agust broke out shocked exclambs, loud cheers and high-pitched whistles, hooting and egging Jimin on until he was smiling so wide it was impossible to continue. He laughed against Yoongi’s lips and reveled in the feeling of the captain’s smile against his chin, in the feeling of Yoongi’s hand stroking the feathers on the side of his waist.

The crew was quick to flock around them, firing question after question or teasing remarks, jesting at Yoongi’s expense and praising Jimin for, as they said, *thawing the captain’s frozen heart*. They were quite relentless, persisting when Yoongi irritably barked at them to back off. Their teasing had Jimin laughing until he went breathless and he flushed so red he hid his face in the crook of the captain’s neck, comforted by Yoongi’s ever-present touch to his waist.

Jimin couldn’t remember the last time he’d loved so fiercely as he did then, or been loved so fiercely in return.

They didn’t break apart until Taehyung’s voice sounded from up in the crow’s nest, cheerfully announcing that he could see land on the horizon. Yoongi took the opportunity where he saw it and commanded his crew to ready the ship for landing, speaking in a tone that brooked no argument.

When the crew dissipated, all the while loudly complaining about how boring their captain where, Jimin pulled back from Yoongi and pressed a final kiss to his cheek before walking backwards towards the main mast. “I’d best do my duty as well,” he mused, smiling at the captain’s curious gaze. “Wouldn’t want to disobey a direct order.”
Yoongi snorted at his words, his lips curling into a smirk as he shook his head. “You are impossible, songbird,” he stated, sounding so utterly fond.

“So I’ve heard,” Jimin retorted cheekily before turning on the heel to begin his ascent to the crow’s nest, where he would surely be tackled to the floor and interrogated by Taehyung.

Truly, he wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Chapter End Notes

WHAT

IS

THIS FLUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUFFFFFFFFFFFFFF HELP ME I’M LEGIT CHOKING I //CAN’T// IT’S TOO //SOFT// I’M GOING TO //DIE//

I need to put the fluff tag back. I thought this AU couldn’t be fluffy in any way, BUT LOOK WhO PROVED HERSELF WRONG, WOW, THERE’S ENOUGH FLUFF HERE TO CHoke AN ELEPHANT.

Tell me how many times your heart spasmed throughout this chapter. I think mine did 14 somersaults. At LEAST. Maybe more. I lost count after Yoongi kissed Jimin in the infirmary.

THIS STORY WILL BE THE DEATH OF ME, MY HEART FEELS LIKE IT’S ABOUT TO EXPLODE.

OKAY. OKay, okay, alright, I, yes, I’m going to have to put an end to this fluff, yes, it is too much, too dangerous for my own health, yes, I need to get back that ANGST quickly, or I’ll DIE.

LMAO right, so this chapter was supposed to contain… four more scenes? Like, four full-length scenes more, ahhahahahah, we would’a had a 20k word chapter on our hands if I would’ve kept writing :D:D:D:D AND I KNOW YOU WOULDN’T HAVE MINDED THAT, but my sanity certainly would’ve xD
To Learn Again What He Already Knows

Chapter Summary

"There are more important things at play right now, threats I need to be ready to face, and I can’t do it with only one arm."

He straightened his back, and Jimin was reminded of when he’d done the same in the meeting of the Cardinals, the strength he possessed all but radiating from his frame. “It doesn’t matter if it causes me pain,” he said, every syllable clear and sharp. “I’d rather have that than watch helplessly when our enemies come to bury us.”

Chapter Notes

2:30AM

I am death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Why is it that every time I see your face, there’s a bigger chunk of you missing?”

Jimin pressed his lips together and threw an apprehensive glance around the small foyer, packed to the brim with as many of the Agust's crew it could fit. The pirates were filling the room from the walls, finding footing where they could; shapeless pieces of metal and white stone was scattered haphazardly across the floor, sometimes piled, sometimes not.

The armorer seemed utterly unperturbed by the presence of one of the world’s most notorious pirate crews, minding only Yoongi where he stood, leaning heavily on a wooden crutch.

“You’ve only seen my face once before, Zhang,” the captain stated dryly, to which the man retorted with a scoff, somewhat amused.

“Aye,” he said, “and once was enough for this lifetime, Min Yoongi.”

Zhang Honghui was perhaps one of the most peculiar men Jimin had ever seen. He was rangy and thin of build, with narrow shoulders and hips, and a neck so slender it seemed all but a miracle he could hold his head up straight. His arms, however, were cored with hard muscle, the lines sharp and framed by pink scars. Small as he was, he looked like he could bend the pieces of metal on his floor with his bare hands.

His face was shaven clean, not a single hair to be found amidst the lines of old age, even on his brow, yet an impressive mop of frizzy black hair sat atop his head. It was currently subdued, having been wrestled into a tight braid upon the pirates’ arrival, and Jimin vaguely wondered if the armorer was keen on keeping his field of vision unobscured in his new company.
“I appreciate your sentiment,” Yoongi snorted, his voice balancing the thin line between amusement and ire.

Zhang nodded curtly. “As you should,” he said, and then there was silence, one that lasted so long Jimin began to fidget, battling the urge to somehow shatter the tension that hung heavy over the room. He looked around again, but no one seemed to share his sentiment; Taehyung was observing what looked like a half-finished breastplate while Jeongguk played with a few locks of his hair, occasionally sending curious glances at the armorer.

He had just caught Hoseok’s mildly frustrated gaze when Zhang suddenly burst into a string of breathy laughter, his head thrown back and his hands meeting each other in a loud succession of claps. Startled, Jimin jerked back and nearly tripped over a rod of metal, barely catching himself before stumbling into Lucya’s chest.

“I have missed that stale face of yours, Min Yoongi,” the armorer said when he sobered up, silver and gold glittering in his wide grin. “I’ve been brimming with excitement ever since Yong Xiao arrived at my door some days ago.”

Yoongi rolled his eyes at the obvious tone of sarcasm and pursed his lips into a tight frown. “I can’t tell if you’re complimenting me or insulting me,” he said, although Jimin could tell there was no true bite to his words.

“You know I’m hardly in the business of complimenting people,” Zhang mused with a flick of his wrist, as if the mere thought was an irksome fly by his shoulder.

“So an insult, then.”

“I did not say that, either.”

Another momentary silence followed, this time broken by Yoongi in the form of a clearly irritated sigh, the captain taking his good hand off the crutch to pinch the bridge of his nose in what must’ve been an attempt to keep his calm.

The armorer seemed quite aware of his ire, yet did nothing to veer from it. On the contrary, his smile grew wider and he crossed his arms, tapping his foot against the floor to further feed Yoongi’s annoyance. “I trust you have proper payment prepared?” he asked briskly, making a show out of raising his hand to count. “There is the metal itself, both steel and iron, as well as the ivory, and, most importantly, my precious time.”

Yoongi arched a brow at that, unimpressed. “Let me guess,” he said. “No gold, only coins or precious gems.”

Another string of laughter fell from Zhang’s list, this one sharp and almost smug. “That is the way,” he sing-songed. “‘Tis only fair, after all.”

“Fair?” Jimin echoed quietly before he could stop himself. His voice was a mere whisper, but the armorer heard him all the same, and Jimin clasped his hands tight behind his back when Zhang turned to look at him, his gaze trailing from head to toe.

“Fair,” he agreed once his eyes returned to Jimin’s face, a grin spreading his lips. “There is a goldmine in your midst to give you all the precious metal you desire, thus it’d be too easy.” He threw a smug glance at Jeongguk, whose eyes widened, startled to be pulled into the conversation. “Since I am a man of fair play, I demand there to be effort behind what pays for the effort of my own work.”

Jimin didn’t know what to say to that; just like Yoongi, he was unsure as to whether the armorer had
spoken an insult or a compliment. He didn’t have to dwell on it for long, however, for Yoongi emitted a dry scoff at Zhang’s words and pulled his attention away from Jimin. “What fair play?” he asked, a faint, wry smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “We played cards last time I was here, and you’d hidden, what, nine aces in your sleeve? Ten?”

“Eight,” the armorer said with the tone of someone speaking of the weather. “And you won either way, Min Yoongi, so why are you complaining?” Without allowing Yoongi the time to answer, Zhang turned to the rest of the crew and sharply clapped his hands together. “The lot of you, get out. I will begin my measurements, something the lot of you are hardly needed for.”

“I will make use of your yard to prepare lunch for us,” Jin said and straightened up, already folding the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbows. “Will you eat with us, Honghui?”

The armorer smiled widely at the offer. “I will,” he said. “It has been a few years already, but I haven’t forgotten the taste of your grass carp stew.”

“You’ll have to settle for silver carp this time,” the cook mused and turned to the rest of the crew. “All of you, out. Fetch my supplies from the ship or there’ll be no food for you.”

With muttered groans and half-hearted complaints, the pirates began to filter out of the foyer and into the strong spring sunlight that fell on the small house. Jimin moved to follow after the others, but Taehyung caught his hand before he could take more than a few steps, smiling at him and silently telling him to stay. Jeongguk and Hoseok remained unmoving as well, the doctor for perhaps obvious reasons, and when Jin sent him a quick smile before trudging outside, Jimin returned to where he’d been standing and looked at Yoongi in time to see the captain glance over at him.

“The surgeon, the brother, and the goldmine,” Zhang counted once Jin had shut the door behind himself, looking at those remaining in order, his gaze finally settling on Jimin, “and the pretty bird.”

Surprised by the familiar words, Jimin parted his lips and closed them again, unsure of what he should say. “I beg your pardon?” he asked slowly, bringing one hand to touch his other in search of any stray feathers that could’ve given him away.

“That big bear, Yong Xiao, he spoke of a pretty bird that had flown onto the ship and hence refused to leave,” the armorer said and rolled his shoulders in a shrug. “Yours is the only new face to fit such a name, so I assumed it was you.”

“Oh.” A smile found its way onto Jimin’s lips, sheepish yet bearing a hint of irony. “I wouldn’t say I’ve refused to leave, seeing as no one has ever asked me to,” he mused and heard Taehyung chuckle next to him, “but yes, that is what Xiao likes to call me.”

Zhang emitted a thoughtful hum, looking at him for a moment longer before voicing a simple question, “Pirate?”

A little giggle fell from Jimin’s lips. “No,” he said.

“Not yet,” Taehyung corrected him at the exact same time as Hoseok did, and Jimin noticed the way Yoongi pressed his lips together in an attempt to not smile.

A rush of fondness rose in his chest, surely obvious even as he pretended to be annoyed and rolled his eyes at his friends’ antics. “Not yet,” he agreed, however, barely managing to keep his smile under control when he saw surprise flicker over the captain’s face, fleeting but obvious.

When he looked at Zhang again, the armorer was observing Yoongi, a hairless eyebrow arched, but if he’d noticed the subtle shift in the captain’s expression, he didn’t mention it. Instead, he only
grinned before turning around and steering his steps towards a heavy door in the foyer’s back wall. “Come on, then,” he said and pulled it open, motioning for all of them to step inside. “The sooner I get my measurements, the sooner I can start working on that arm of yours.”

He led them into a modest smithy with a small forge standing in the corner, framed by desks full of tools; hammers of all sizes and shapes and tongs for grabbing the hot metal lay scattered across the surfaces along with what looked like gears and nails, made of the same hue of metal as the shapeless pieces in the foyer. A garb of thick leather hung from a hook near the door, the material somewhat singed here and there, blackened particularly around the gloves.

“Take a seat over there,” Zhang said and motioned towards a plain stool while he rummaged through the tools, withdrawing ink and a pen from the mess. “And take off your shirt, Min Yoongi.”

His words filled Jimin with a sense of bashfulness and he quickly busied himself with staring at a cluster of papers that hung from the wall while Yoongi complied to the armorer’s command. It was ridiculous, Jimin knew - after all, he’d seen the captain out of his shirt more than once already - but for some reason, the thought of watching Yoongi undress brought a nervous warmth to his cheeks.

It took quite a bit of effort to pretend not to notice Taehyung’s amusement, his grin visible even through the confinements of his mask.

“Ah, yes, those would be my designs for the arm.”

It took Jimin a moment to realize it was him Zhang had spoken to. “What?” he asked and looked at the armorer, who in turn nodded towards the papers Jimin had been staring at so intently. When he turned to them again, he realized it was true; in his urgency to look just about anywhere besides Yoongi, he’d settled on several sketches of the prosthesis without properly seeing what they were. “Oh,” he uttered and felt the warmth in his cheeks intensify.

“It took quite some time to find an appropriate balance in the weight of the metal,” Zhang went on, thankfully oblivious to the nature of Jimin’s flush. “If it hangs too heavy off the shoulder, it will do more harm than good.” He clicked his tongue and returned to rummaging through his tools. “It was fine when it was only half an arm, but recreating an entire limb out of metal and ivory and keeping it as light as an actual arm…”

He left the sentence unfinished and heaved a dramatic sigh instead, a sound that spoke volumes of what he thought of the task he’d been given. “Right,” Yoongi deadpanned, looking thoroughly irritated where he sat on his stool. “I do so apologize for the trouble me losing my arm has caused you. I should’ve been more considerate.”

“You really should have,” Zhang said without a second of hesitation, once again showing off all the gilded teeth in his smile when he turned to face the captain, a thin tape measure in his hand. “Now, give me your arm.”

He spent the better half of an hour hovering around Yoongi’s right arm, taking every measurement imaginable; apart from the most simple ones, such as the length of his forearm and brachium, Zhang measured the flexibility of his elbow and wrist, the length of every joint of his fingers and their width, as well as the space between each digit.

When the armorer was done, he asked Hoseok to remove Yoongi’s bandages so he could properly measure his left shoulder and see exactly where the prosthesis should begin. The wound was as close to healed as could be; it was no longer red and raw, but scarred, the skin uneven and blemished pinkish and white in hue. It was still painful, if the tension in the captain’s jaw when Zhang began his measurements was any indication, the faintest of twitches flickering across his face when the
armorer smoothened the tape over the center of the scar.

“It will take me a week and a half,” Zhang stated when he finally straightened up, scribbling down the final numbers on his piece of paper. “You can do whatever you like in that time, but I will need you to return in eight days, so that I can model the ivory case to resemble your arm. And, of course, you will stay nearby over the course of the recovery period.”

He walked over to where Jimin stood and took his sketches from the wall, humming to himself as he compared his notes to the images he’d drawn. “Yong Xiao already assisted in acquiring the necessary materials,” he said when he looked up again, a sly smirk playing at his lip. “Feel free to spare me of the displeasure of your company for as long as you can.”

“Ever so charming, aren’t you?” Hoseok snorted in amusement and handed Yoongi his shirt so he could replace the bandages. “What do your other customers think of your attitude?”

“What other customers?” Zhang retorted smugly, sounding ever so pleased with himself. “With how much I charge you, I don’t need the business of anyone else to live a comfortable life.”

“If I didn’t need your services, I swear I’d toss you into your own furnace,” Yoongi said and rolled his eyes when Taehyung and Hoseok chortled at his words. “I’ll have Xiao bring you your payment after we’ve eaten.”

“Always a pleasure doing business with such honorable pirates.”

The captain ignored Zhang’s wry tone of voice and held his silence until Hoseok was finished with his bandages. He spoke a quiet word of thanks and waved the doctor off when he went to help Yoongi with his shirt, determined to do it on his own.

For the first time since their arrival, something akin to concern settled over Zhang’s face, although it was so faint it might’ve been a trick of the light. He watched Yoongi struggle to pull the shirt over his head, his eyes focused on the tightness of his jaw, and when the captain was done, Zhang spoke, his voice oddly monotonous. “Will you be alright to wear the arm I make for you?” he asked. “Have you healed enough?”

For all the tension that settled over the room, there was not a shred of doubt in Yoongi’s reply, his voice firm as he rose from his seat. “I have,” he said, “and even if not, I would wear it all the same. There are more important things at play right now, threats I need to be ready to face, and I can’t do it with only one arm.”

He straightened his back, and Jimin was reminded of when he’d done the same in the meeting of the Cardinals, the strength he possessed all but radiating from his frame. “It doesn’t matter if it causes me pain,” he said, every syllable clear and sharp. “I’d rather have that than watch helplessly when our enemies come to bury us.”

For a fraction of a second, no one in the room dared to even breathe, the tension so palpable it seemed to prick at their very skin. Jimin felt his heart twist in his chest at the captain’s words, knowing he meant every last one of them; the pain he’d already suffered was hardly a threshold for someone who cared so much.

*If our future is bound with pain, he thought solemnly, why must it only be yours?*

Taehyung took his hand and squeezed hard, silent in his worry, his face impassive behind his mask as he looked at his brother. Jimin knew the quartermaster’s thoughts were the same as his own, but they weren’t words that could be spoken now. Not when Yoongi was so willing.
Zhang was the one to break the silence, his toothy grin quick to return as he smacked a hand over his chest. “You almost set my heart aflutter, Min Yoongi,” he said and emitted a bark of laughter when the captain grimaced at the mere prospect. “Have it your way, then. I’d advise you to spend your final week of armlessness resting, but I have an inkling you won’t heed a word I tell you, so…”

He swept his arm in a dramatic gesture and bowed his head in what could’ve been a gesture of respect if not for the sardonic smile on his lips. “I bid ye leave my house anon,” he said in an overly monotonous voice.

“You had better work on your act if you want Jin to feed you,” Hoseok said around a chuckle. “He’s loathe to share his culinary art with bastards such as yourself.”

The armorer was unaffected by the harsh words. “Ah, but I actually enjoy your cook’s company,” he said sweetly. “Fret not, I treat him infinitely better than I do any of you.” He motioned towards the door once more, impatiently shaking the wad of papers in his hand. “Out you go. I need to concentrate lest you end up with two right arms instead of one of each.”

The instant they were out of the smithy, Yoongi heaved a deep sigh, something akin to a frustrated growl laying the undertone for the outdrawn gust of air. “I can’t stand that man,” he hissed and ran a hand through his hair, looking infinitely more exhausted than he had upon their arrival. “I swear, if I wasn’t relying on him, I would…”

He left the sentence unfinished, but by the way he curled his hand into a hard fist left little to the imagination. “I don’t like him, either,” Jeongguk said quietly, having been silent throughout the measuring. “He called me a goldmine.”

“He does that,” Taehyung said and slid a hand into the sailing master’s hair to give it a gentle, comforting tousle. “When he doesn’t know someone’s full name, he calls them by a byname he feels is appropriate.”

“He seemed concerned, at least,” Jimin said and turned to Yoongi, a small smile on his lips. “He doesn’t want to see you in pain.”

The captain huffed at that and shook his head. “He only wants me alive for the sake of what I pay him,” he stated dryly, but once again, there was little sincerity to his words, and Jimin’s smile widened when he realized Yoongi was only complaining for the sake of it.

They made their way outside to find where Jin would be preparing lunch. They didn’t make it very far, however; almost as soon as they stepped through the door, a bellowing voice sounded from a few meters down the pathway, and before Jimin could do more than flinch in shock, a pair of strong arms pulled him into a crushing embrace. “Wha-”

“How I missed ya, pretty bird,” Xiao boomed, his voice echoing across the nearby fields. “Eleven days’s too long a time ta be apart from ya, I swear. I need yer pretty laughter and pretty smile every damned day, or I won’t be able ta sleep right.”

“I-I missed you too, Xiao,” Jimin wheezed from within the confinements of the carpenter’s arms, struggling to breathe right. “The Agust’s too quiet without you.”

“Not accordin’ ta what I hear!” Suddenly, Xiao whirled around, Jimin still tucked firmly in his embrace, although he took one arm off him to jab an accusing finger at his captain. “You,” the carpenter said loudly, his momentary bravery faltering when Yoongi arched his brows. “Cap’n, sir, you, what is this I hear ‘bout ya and the pretty bird, huh? The two of ya, Jin said… are ya really… he said that ya were…”
“Eloquent as ever, I see,” the captain said in a dull voice and heaved another sigh, and he briefly caught Jimin’s eyes before he pinned Xiao under a sharp glare. “It is true, about the songbird and I, so do you think you could perhaps put him down?”

The carpenter merely gawked at him for a moment before he seemed to catch himself, jumping a little before he quickly let Jimin free from his embrace, placing him back on the ground as if he weighed nothing. “O-of course, sir,” he stuttered nervously and shuffled back a few steps for good measure. Jimin smiled brightly at his behavior; it would never cease to amuse him, the contrast between Xiao’s massive build and his meek nature.

Next to Yoongi, Taehyung emitted a sound of overexaggerated wonder, grinning so wide it was visible even with his mask, his eyes crinkling in the corners. “Don’t be jealous now, brother,” he teased, quickly dancing out of the captain’s reach. “There is no need to be possessive amongst friends, is there?”

“I’d say it’s far more likely he was worried about Jimin’s ability to breathe in that death grip,” Hoseok said, a lopsided smirk tugging at the corners of his lips when Yoongi turned his by now murderous glare on him. “Either way, ‘tis quite precious.”

“Fuck off,” the captain muttered and shoved his way past the lot of them, grumbling under his breath as he stalked off to find the rest of his crew. Jimin swore he saw the very tips of Yoongi’s ears take on the faintest hue of red, but it could’ve easily been an illusion brought on by the light of the sun.

“Yer in fer a tough one, pretty bird,” Xiao whispered as soon as the captain was out of range, grinning so wide his cheeks must’ve ached. “Wakin’ up ta that every day’s gon’ kill ya in due time. ‘S gon’ be even worse in the mornings, after a rough night.”

The others descended into a fit of hysterical laughter, one that escalated when heat rushed to Jimin’s face and caused him to flush at the insinuation. He smacked the carpenter’s arm before pressing his hands to his face in an attempt to hide not only how furiously he blushed, but also the smile that crept over his lips.

“I’ll take my chances,” he murmured and glanced in the direction Yoongi had gone, ignoring the cooing noises Taehyung emitted. “Gladly.”

The following ten days passed in a blur. They had dropped anchor by the riverbank and tied the Agust as close to Zhang’s workshop as they could come. The house stood a few kilometers south of Qinzhou, close enough to reach the city on foot yet far enough away to guarantee the peace and quiet of the countryside. There was not much to be done while they waited, so most of the days saw small groups of them going into the city to spend both their time and money on whatever they desired.

When they didn’t stray off to do whatever it was they did, they lazed around aboard the Agust, sleeping late and fishing from the rails, or swimming in the cool water of the river. They also assisted Xiao in restoring the ship, fixing whatever damage had been caused during Yoongi’s loss of control, rebraiding the shrouds and securing the sails.

Jimin, however, spent most of his days training, continuing to work the bow with Lucya while he simultaneously focused on learning how to better control his blessing. It was slow at first; it took him the better half of a day to successfully change his skin in the same way he had up in the crow’s nest again.

The presence of other birds certainly helped, their bright songs beckoning him as he walked across the seemingly endless fields around Zhang’s workshop. Jimin sang as well, in the voice of the
canary, and his feathers grew slowly, his other called forth by the peacefulness in his chest.

The strength of his wings was astounding even to himself, and flying filled him with a sense of completion, as if he was finally doing what he'd yearned to do all his life. Every time he took to the skies, it triggered something deep within his soul; he'd never felt quite as free as he did with his feet off the ground, climbing higher and higher into the skies until Zhang’s workshop was the size of a pebble to him. Finding balance in the air was tricky - on a windier day, he’d almost been knocked right out of the sky by a sharp gust - but for every passing day, Jimin felt more secure, his confidence in his wings growing.

Flying, as exhilaratingly thrilling as it was, was tiring. The muscles of his arms and back weren't used to such a strenuous task as keeping his body airborne, thus, more often than naught, his time spent flying left him more exhausted than his training with Lucya. On the evening of his first proper flight, he’d been so drained he could barely hold the bowl of dark rice Jin gave him at supper.

Jimin realized quickly he would have to change the clothes he wore regularly. His shirt, albeit sleeveless, still hindered the full growth of his wings, the feathers of his back straining against material. For three days, he simply removed the garment every time he set out to fly, but on the third day, when the winds picked up their pace, he had to look for his shirt for the better half of an hour after he’d landed, the gusts of air having carried it far.

He mentioned his predicament during supper that night, and Hoseok offered to tailor something new for him, jesting of his vast experience with needle and thread. Jimin could hardly laugh at the morbidity of it all, but he thanked the doctor either way and assured he would help in any way he could.

The following day, after his lesson with Lucya, Hoseok called him to the infirmary. It felt empty without Yoongi’s presence; the doctor had dismissed him on the second day of their wait, claiming if he was ready to wear his new prosthetic so soon, he could well enough sleep in his own bed. Hoseok smiled when Jimin knocked on the open door and reached for a piece of dark fabric from his desk.

“Try it on,” he said and tossed it the garment to Jimin, who caught it nimbly from the air.

It was a simple thing, a shirt with no sleeves and an open back to allow his feathers to grow without obstruction, held up by a firm knot around the base of his neck. The material was soft and fit snugly around his waist, and while it covered his chest and abdomen well enough, it left him bare almost all the way down to the small of his back.

“How does it feel?” Hoseok asked, drumming his fingers against his desk. “Is it too loose? Too tight?”

“It’s perfect,” Jimin said brightly, smiling as he tentatively rolled his shoulders. “There’s no resistance like this.”

There was something unfamiliar in the way the doctor’s lips quirked into a smirk, something he couldn’t quite place. “Good,” Hoseok said before he could question it, turning to clear away the excess fabric and thread from his desk. “I’m hardly a master tailor, so come find me in case it begins to come apart.”

“I will,” Jimin said slowly, still befuddled by the doctor’s mirth, but he shook himself free of it quickly enough, the smile returning to his lips. “Thank you, Hoseok.”

“My pleasure.”
Hoseok’s odd behavior left his mind as soon as he left the Agust to once again stray to the fields, eager to try his skinchanging without having to worry over something as trivial as his shirt. He drew the warm afternoon air into his lungs, breathing deeply, and as his feathers begin to grow, his wings taking shape, he somehow felt more thrilled than before.

The shirt was perfect, dipping low enough for the base of his wings to have all the room they needed. It was loose enough to not make him feel constricted, yet tight enough to keep the fabric from fluttering in the breeze. He barely noticed the garment’s presence once he had shifted; he might as well have worn nothing at all.

It wasn’t until he returned to the ship, nearly two hours later, that he was reminded of Hoseok’s teasing smile. This time, however, it was Taehyung that had him bewildered; the instant Jimin climbed up onto the Agust’s deck, warm and sweaty from his flight yet incredibly satisfied, the quartermaster ran up to crowd him, grinning so wide he might’ve burst at the seams.

“You look exhausted, Chim,” he said, far louder than necessary. He latched onto Jimin’s hand and tugged him towards the quarterdeck, making a show of heading for the galleys. “Do you need to rest tonight? Perhaps I should ask someone to take your watch for you.”

“What are you talking about?” Jimin asked, beyond confused by Taehyung’s behavior. “Tae, what are you-”

The quartermaster came to a sudden halt and Jimin narrowly caught himself before he barreled into his friend’s back. “I should definitely ask,” Taehyung decided before he could say a word, his grin sharp and wolﬁsh as he brought his free hand to his lips and called out, “Hey, Yoongi.”

Utterly bewildered, Jimin followed the quartermaster’s gaze and found Yoongi standing by the quarterdeck rail, seemingly in the middle of a conversation with Namjoon. Upon hearing his name, the captain turned, arching an expectant brow at his brother. “What is it, Taehyung?” he asked, his voice bearing the thickness of someone who had just woken.

“Well,” Taehyung began, “I was simply wondering if we shouldn’t give Chim here tonight off from his watch. After all,” he gave Jimin’s hand a sharp tug and yanked him forwards with little grace, “he looks so tired, doesn’t he?”

“Wha- no,” Jimin exclaimed and rounded on his friend, frowning in contrast to the quartermaster’s blindingly bright smile. “What are you talking about, I’m not tired. I don’t need to rest.” He moved to tell Yoongi the same thing, only to have his breath catch in his throat the instant he turned around.

The captain was staring at him, wide-eyed and still as a statue. His lips were parted halfway, as if he’d been on the verge of speech before his gaze had found Jimin, and now he simply stood there, looking at him as if he was attempting to burn a hole right through his chest. The air between them flooded with tension, the look in Yoongi’s eyes more intense than Jimin could remember it being in a long, long time.

He found himself growing shy without quite realizing why, warmth rising to his cheeks and his mouth running dry, and when he parted his lips to speak, his voice was thin, quivering with something that definitely wasn’t fear. “Yoongi,” he said, the name carried by a mere whisper, but the captain seemed to hear it well enough.

Yoongi gave a visible start and turned away, blinking repeatedly as if he was attempting to bring himself out of some sort of stupor. “I’m- it’s ﬁne,” he barked, his voice a tad too loud to be normal. “To rest, I mean. It’s ﬁne, I, I’ll have someone else take the evening watch.” He ran his hand through his hair and tugged sharply, sparing an incredibly confused Jimin another glance before quickly
looking away again, his jaw moving as he chewed on whatever words he wanted to speak.

“Rest,” was what he finally said, again, in a brave attempt at a calm voice, the strain clear as day. “However long you need, songbird. Rest.”

Before Jimin could even begin to refuse the offer, let alone ask what on earth was going on, Yoongi turned sharply on the heel and stalked off towards his quarters, leaving his conversation with Namjoon unfinished as well as a loaded silence in his wake.

Jimin had half a mind to follow after him, but before he could even move, both Taehyung and the first mate burst out into a string of breathless laughter, the sound echoed by all those who’d been close enough to witness the captain’s brisk departure. “I’ve never seen him speechless before,” Namjoon chortled, hiding his wide grin in his hand. “I dare call that foul play, Taehyung.”

“We are pirates,” the quartermaster declared slyly. “By nature, we don’t play fair.”

“What foul play?” Jimin demanded, frustration beginning to seep into his bewilderment. “What did you do to him?”

“I think the better question, Chim,” Taehyung drawled, his smile verging on demonic, “is what did you do to him?”

Jimin parted his lips and closed them again, his head beginning to hurt from the struggle to understand what on earth it was his friend was trying to tell him. “What?” he asked again, his voice almost a whine. “I don’t understand you.”

“Be grateful for that.” Jin stood in the doorway of the galleys, running a damp rag between his hands while he pinned the quartermaster under a stern glare. “Do ignore them, canary,” he said and motioned for Jimin to follow him. “Come eat your supper. That one,” he nodded at Taehyung, “can wait for the last serving.”

The smile melted right off the quartermaster’s face and he instantaneously released a string of complaints and apologies, but the cook merely waved him off and guided Jimin inside without sparing his condemned another glance.

Yoongi didn’t show himself at supper for the following two days, spending most of his waking time in his quarters. “He’s resting,” Hoseok told the crew at the same time as Namjoon said, “He’s sulking,” and while Jimin was lost as to what to make of the first mate’s statement, no one else questioned it.

When he finally did emerge, it was to shock the entirety of his crew. They were halfway through their meal when Yoongi appeared in the galleys’ doorway and wordlessly went to Jin to fetch his portion. However, rather than take his usual seat opposite of Namjoon and Raji, the master gunner, he walked over to where Jimin sat between Taehyung and Xiao.

“Move,” he told the stunned carpenter, a bite to his tone that brooked no argument. Xiao was quick to comply, all but throwing himself off the bench to leave enough space for the captain, who took his seat without much bravado.

Along with the rest of the crew, Jimin stared at him, his eyebrows rising to his hairline as Yoongi went about eating as if he couldn’t feel the dozens of pirates gawking at him in silence. He let it carry, taking his time in chewing his first mouthful, and only when he’d swallowed did he look up again, a brow arched in something dangerously similar to challenge.

Instantly, his crew turned away and resumed their previous conversations, the buzzing noise of the
galleys quick to return. With a contented huff, Yoongi returned to his meal, and Jimin followed his lead, although he couldn’t quite seem to fight off the smile from his lips, warmth settling in his chest and spreading to the rest of him.

Just as Zhang Honghui had promised, he finished the prosthesis on the morning of the eleventh day. As requested, Yoongi had frequented his workshop for the past three, to provide the armorer with a proper model for the ivory case that would envelop the metallic skeleton, as he’d called it. On the evening of the tenth day, Zhang had told the captain to return on the morrow and to bring his doctor and whomever else he felt would be a necessary presence for the attachment of the limb.

Thus Jimin found himself standing where he had last time, by the wall of the smithy, this time accompanied by Namjoon and Jin in addition to Hoseok, Taehyung and Jeongguk. The armorer had heaved a dramatic sigh upon seeing the lot of them and amusedly declared how terribly endearing it was to learn Yoongi required so much support for such a simple procedure.

Yoongi had threatened to break every bone in his left hand with his own hammer, and Zhang had laughed and said he would do the same, but to the prosthesis the captain was paying a small fortune for.

When the armorer brought forth the limb, Jimin gasped in awe before he could stop himself, his eyes wide as he took in the beauty of the prosthesis. It was magnificent, truly, like the arm of a porcelain doll. The surface of the ivory was smooth and pale and sculpted to perfection, a precise reflection of Yoongi’s right arm, every dip of his muscles present, every curve of his bones.

The only tell of its forgery were the thin lines around the elbow and wrist that showed where the plates of ivory had been attached, the rifts around the joints of the fingers that would allow Yoongi to properly move his hand. Zhang had even gone through the effort to carve the shape of his fingernails.

Two belt-like straps of strong leather were attached to the shoulder brace of the prosthesis, one to tie around the captain’s ribs, the other around his neck to ensure the arm would stay in place. The inside of the brace would bring the beginning of every piece of metal the prosthesis contained to settle firmly against his shoulder so that he would be able to move it as he would his right arm.

Zhang showed him how to attach the limb, pulling the straps tight around Yoongi’s chest while reminding him to take it off every night for at least a month, until his shoulder had grown accustomed to the new weight. The captain gritted his teeth through the process, his jaw twitching every time the brace pushed against his scarred skin, but he didn’t voice a single word of complaint.

“There,” the armorer said when he finished and straightened up, taking a moment to critically eye the fruits of his labor before he retreated to let Yoongi stand upright. “How does it feel?”

As he watched the captain rise from his seat, Jimin held his breath, perhaps unknowingly. So awestruck he was by Yoongi’s appearance, the prosthesis looking like it had always been part of him, the color of it a perfect semblance to the captain’s pale skin. He seemed somehow ethereal, and no matter how hard he tried, Jimin couldn’t fight off the image of a bird given back a lost wing.

Yoongi’s eyes were wide as he looked down at the arm, as if he couldn’t quite believe it was real. Ever so carefully, he raised his right hand to touch it, to feel the ivory under his fingers, a quiet, quivering exhale finding its way past his lips as he stroked the smooth surface. He seemed utterly lost for words, and Jimin found himself blinking hard against the sting in his eyes, his lips pressed together into a tight smile.

A concentrated frown settled over Yoongi’s brow when he withdrew his right arm, the muscles in
his neck tensing marginally as he began his first effort to move the limb. The lines of his chest became infinitely more well-defined, yet for what felt like an eternity, nothing happened. The prosthesis remained lifeless, hanging loose by his side, its stillness bringing an obvious frustration to the captain’s frown.

Then the fingers of it twitched to life, the index and middle curling slowly towards the palm. The movements were sedated, the rest of his fingers following reluctantly until Yoongi had formed a loose fist and raised it a halfway to his chest centimeters, the ivory allowing a smooth fold of his elbow before the effort became too much to bear. With a hissed curse, he let the arm go limp and sat back down, his chest heaving with his labored breath.

“It was a good first attempt,” Hoseok said quickly, eager to appease the captain before he could even begin to draw ire from the stiffness of his control over the limb. “Last time, you couldn’t move your arm for two days after you’d received it. This is good.”

“It will become easier for every passing day,” Namjoon assured him with a nod, confident in his smile. “You simply need to grow accustomed to it.”

Taehyung reached out and placed a hand on his brother’s shoulder, his soft voice muffled by his mask. “Try not to be so hard on yourself,” he murmured, brows knitted in worry. “It will take its time, but you will learn.”

All Yoongi did was nod stiffly, and every one of them knew he didn’t believe what they had said.

“Your recovery period begins today, Min Yoongi,” Zhang piped up, severing the tension by waving a finger in the air before pointing it at the captain. “I, to my great displeasure, have to request you stay near these waters for the following two weeks. If, by chance, you bend that arm so far out of shape you can’t undo it, you’ll have to waltz your pompous arse back here so I can do it for you.”

The armorer turned to Hoseok. “I’d suggest providing him with some sort of herbs or salve,” he said. “The skin around his shoulder will grow red and sore, as well as under the straps, so unless you want him to truly become as prickly as he comes off,” he shrugged and flashed his smile full of silver and gold, “find something to treat his pretty pale skin with.”

“Aye, sir,” the doctor said dryly, rolling his eyes when Zhang chortled at the heavy sarcasm in his voice. “Any more wisdom you’d like to graciously share with us?”

“The less I see of you, the better,” the armorer said without a second’s doubt, “so do try your best to ensure it does not happen.”

“Charming,” Jin huffed and promptly walked over to the door and pulled it open with more force than necessary, nearly smacking it against Zhang. “Let us return to the Agust. It’ll be a long day for all of us.”

The lot of them were eager to comply, each too worried about Yoongi’s state of mind to do more than bid a quick adieu to the armorer, who merely waved them off, expecting no further thanks.

As they made their way back to the ship, Jimin kept his eyes on the captain, frowning as he took in the tense state of his shoulders and neck, the stiffness of his jaw and the way his right hand twitched with the effort to keep it from clenching. It was near painful, to see him in such a state of frustration when he’d only just had his arm returned to him, and so Jimin picked up his pace until he fell in next to Yoongi, close enough for their shoulders to touch.

“It will be alright,” he murmured and brushed his hand gently against the captain’s right, hooking his
forefinger around Yoongi’s little and hoping the touch could provide even a sliver of comfort.

The captain turned to look at him, exhaustion already so obvious in his eyes, but he nodded all the same and curled his hand around Jimin’s. “I know, songbird,” he said quietly, with all the tension still evident in his voice. “I know.”

You don’t, Jimin thought wistfully, but he made himself smile all the same, if only for the sake of assuring Yoongi he would not be alone in what was to come.

Things didn’t become easier after that.

Jimin had hoped Yoongi would grow accustomed to the idea of slow progress being a natural occurrence so soon after regaining the function of a lost limb, but he was wrong. While the captain’s control over the prosthesis certainly improved for every passing day, it clearly didn’t happen quickly enough, and Yoongi began a rapid descent into a constant state of brooding exasperation.

He was not a patient man, that much Jimin had always known, but he could’ve never imagined the captain’s mounting impatience with himself. Ire hung low over his shoulders whenever the limb moved too slowly or in a way he hadn’t intended, and no matter how many times Hoseok told him it would take time, just as it takes time for a child to gain full control of their body, the captain’s tension remained just as stubborn, palpable wherever he went.

He worked the limb for hours and hours every single day. While Jimin attended his lessons with Lucya, Yoongi scaled the rungs of the main mast over and over, hissing a sharp curse every time his left hand grabbed on too loosely, or when he struggled to make his fingers let go. It distracted Jimin to no ends, terrified the captain might fall; he almost buried an arrow in Xiao’s foot before Lucya finally told him to put his bow down.

Every night, when Jimin returned from his flight in time for supper, Yoongi was nowhere to be found, refusing to interrupt his training before achieving whatever goal he’d set for himself for the day. He was working himself to the bone, yet no one sought to tear him away from what he did, knowing it would only end with all that tension released in the worst possible way.

It all seemed to accumulate late one night, one week into his period of recovery. Jimin was nearing the end of his watch when the muffled song of a piano filled the dark silence, a soft, melancholic tune coming from behind the closed doors of the captain’s quarters. He recognized it, even though he’d only heard it be played two times before, and he found himself humming along to the melody, closing his eyes against the night.

Suddenly, there was a misstep in the song, a key out of place. The music ceased completely and Jimin’s eyes snapped open, a sense of ominousness flickering in his chest. He waited, holding his breath, but even when the song resumed, he couldn’t rid himself of his tension. It was as if he could feel it in the very air, the captain’s frustration, causing every nerve in him to hum with anxiousness.

Don’t, he pleaded inwardly. Please don’t. But sure enough, the second mistake fell soon after, and Jimin was moving before he could stop to think twice.

Foregoing the rungs of the main mast, he called on his blessing and let his wings carry him down, his feet touching the quarterdeck just as the music started up again, a valiant third attempt to get it right. With a soft rustle, the feathers retreated back into his skin as he hurried over to the captain’s quarters, every movement light and soundless as he reached out and pulled one of the doors open.

He halted in the doorway, his heart pounding in his chest as he watched Yoongi where he sat by the organ piano, his hands moving slowly over the keys to coax the song out of it. His posture was stiff,
taut with ire, but for every sound he drew from the instrument, it eased, steadily guiding him away from his anger.

Until his left hand missed another key. All the tension came rushing back and the captain paused, drawing a deep breath through gritted teeth in an attempt to keep his calm. He curled his hand into a fist and stretched it out, as if its muscles were real, before settling the limb back over its position and trying again.

Jimin didn’t know what to do. It was only a matter of time before it would boil over, he knew it was, yet a part of him held him back and hoped Yoongi would succeed, knowing just how much it would mean to him to play the piece to the end. He wanted it to happen, he wished it more than anything, but like so many times before, his prayers went unheard.

Upon his next mistake, Yoongi lost whatever semblance of calm he had left.

A guttural curse left his lips and he smashed his hands down on the keys, forcing a deafening cacophony to rise from the organ’s pipes. Again and again, he beat the piano, as if it was all its fault he was struggling, all its fault he was in so much pain. The instrument’s frame cracked under the abuse, and when Yoongi growled another curse, he sounded as if it was his heart that had broken.

Unable to bear it any longer, Jimin broke away from the doors and rushed over to the captain’s side, his eyes burning with unshed tears as he reached out for his left hand to take it in his own. Startled by his sudden appearance, Yoongi flinched and attempted to tear himself free, but Jimin refused to falter, holding tight onto the cold limb until the captain ceased his struggle.

For what could’ve been several minutes, neither one of them said a word. The silence was broken only by Yoongi’s labored breathing, sharp hisses of air passing through gritted teeth, and Jimin could feel how much he wanted to pry himself out of his touch, to distance himself from him.

Slowly, Jimin raised Yoongi’s left hand with both of his own and pressed his lips to its knuckles, ignoring the captain’s sharp intake of air. “It’s alright,” he crooned softly against the smooth ivory before he looked up again. “It’ll take time, Yoongi, but it’s alright.”

Yoongi looked at him with an expression that was near anguished, his brows knitted tight in his despair. “You shouldn’t be here, songbird,” he said, his voice raw and hoarse. “I-I don’t…” Briefly, Jimin noticed just how hard the captain’s right hand was gripping his seat, his pale knuckles whitening even further in his forced restraint. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

He attempted to pull the prosthesis out of his hands, but Jimin only tightened his hold. “You don’t,” he said and sat down on the stool next to his beloved. “I will tell you over and over until you believe me. You don’t hurt me, Yoongi.”

He could sense Yoongi’s protest long before he could begin to voice it and robbed him of his chance, turning away to look at the piano. Carefully, he took one hand off the captain’s left and reached out to tentatively press one of the keys. “You will learn again,” he promised, “and until you do…” He looked at Yoongi again and smiled. “Teach me, and I will play what your left hand can’t.”

It was nearly instantaneous, the way in which the captain seemed to simply deflate. His shoulders slumped and he sighed deeply, the sound more akin to a chuckle, and he seemed tired, he seemed so, so tired, but when his eyes met Jimin’s, he smiled. “Have it your way, then, songbird,” he muttered, not a trace of anger left in his voice.

Carefully, Yoongi lifted his left hand and settled it on top of Jimin’s, his touch so very delicate as he guided his way over the keys to coax out the beautiful sounds. It was slow and what they played
lacked any form of coherence, hardly a melody at all, but Jimin couldn’t have asked for more, not when the captain had finally let go of his tension.

They had played for what felt like hours when Jimin finally took his hands off the keys, exhaustion stinging his eyes. “It’s late,” he said quietly and looked at Yoongi, who was staring intently down at the piano. “You need to rest. I do too, so…” He stood up from the stool and carefully touched the captain’s shoulder. “Remember to take it off and let your shoulder breathe.”

Yoongi only nodded, still not looking away from the piano’s keys, and Jimin heaved a light sigh, option to leave him to his daze. He turned to leave, but the very instant his hand left the captain’s frame, he raised his voice.

“Songbird.”

Jimin hummed softly and looked back at him. There was tension in his shoulders again, but this time, it lacked the anger and frustration and left his voice seem almost frail. “Would you,” he began stiffly. “I mean, the prosthesis, could you…” His voice tapered off and he drew a deep breath, closing his eyes in his struggle, and Jimin waited.

He would wait for the rest of his life to hear the question that was spoken so softly, as if Yoongi himself was afraid to hear it. “Would you help me take it off?” he asked, the faintest of quiver catching on the last word.

Jimin understood. He understood the gravity of the request and what it meant for the captain, an offer to willingly be open and unguarded, to be vulnerable, more so than ever before. Weak, Yoongi had called himself without the use of both of his arms, yet now when he had finally regained his left, he asked Jimin to see him return to his most fragile state.

Jimin could’ve cried.

“Yes,” he whispered and held out his hand for the captain to take, a tremulous smile gracing his lips. “Yes.”

Yoongi took it with his right, his touch quivering as Jimin carefully coaxed him to stand and guided him towards his bed, every movement slow and patient. He waited for the captain to sit down on the mattress before he helped him out of his shirt, sliding the fabric up to his chest and holding it there until Yoongi raised his arms. Jimin pulled it over his head and put it on the bed, his eyes tracing the skin of the captain’s chest, every scar and every line, until he reached the prosthesis’ leather straps.

Jimin worked the binds open, his right hand holding the limb upright when they came undone. He felt Yoongi draw an unsteady breath and hold it until his shoulder was finally freed from the prosthesis’ touch; he hissed through gritted teeth, and Jimin hushed him softly as he set down the limb on the floor so he could stroke the reddened skin of the captain’s neck, as gently as he knew how.

“Where is the salve Hoseok gave you?” he asked, his voice barely a whisper, but Yoongi heard him well enough. Wordlessly, he nodded towards the small cabinet at the head of his bed, where Jimin found the glass phial. He uncorked it and sank his fingers into the cool salve, bringing his hand to hover over the captain’s shoulder. “Are you alright, Yoongi?”

He waited for Yoongi to look at him, waited for any sign of apprehension or doubt, but all he found in the captain’s gaze was trust, so fierce he could’ve broken under the weight of it and been happy all the same.
“Yes,” Yoongi murmured and closed his eyes, wholly giving himself over to Jimin, placing his very heart in the palm of his hand.

Jimin took his time with the salve, ever so careful as he spread it over the scars of the captain’s shoulder and the chafed skin of his ribs and neck, murmuring soft apologies whenever Yoongi tensed under his touch, racked by a spasm of pain. When his touch crossed the captain’s chest, he felt the beat of his heart against his fingers, calm and steady, utterly at peace.

Jimin smiled and leaned forward, and pressed his lips against where he’d felt it, the rhythm that mirrored his own.

When he was done with the salve, he helped Yoongi lie down, adjusting his pillows and pulling the blanket up to his collarbones, ensuring he was as comfortable as he could be. “Sleep,” he whispered and straightened up, the captain’s gaze following every move he made. “I will come see you in the morning, if you’ll let me. I can help you with your arm again, or simply talk, or-”

“Jimin.”

It was so, so quiet, the hushed whisper of his name, yet it struck him as if Yoongi had screamed. All at once, his heart threw itself against his ribs and pushed the air out of his lungs in a quivering exhale, his eyes filling with tears, yet all he could do was wait.

“Stay,” Yoongi said hoarsely and reached for his hand, his eyes glittering. “Please.”

Jimin could never have refused him anything now, even if he’d wanted to. Slowly, he nodded and sat down on the mattress, hardly breathing as he pushed away the blanket and settled next to his beloved. He didn’t know what to do, the yearning in his chest threatening to consume him, and so he reached out, his hands trembling as he pulled Yoongi close, until Jimin could press his face against the crook of his neck.

“Thank you,” the captain murmured against the top of his head and kissed him there. “Thank you, songbird.”

It was overwhelming and too much to bear, but all Jimin could do was smile, even as tears fell silently from his eyes. Slowly, Yoongi’s warmth around him began to lull him closer to blissful sleep, and when he could fight it no longer, he closed his eyes and gave in to the adoring security of the captain’s presence.

When Jimin woke the following morning, roused by the rays of sunlight seeping in through the windows amidst the organ piano’s pipes, he was momentarily confused, his sleep-drunk mind struggling to remember everything that had happened. He groaned lightly and moved to turn around where he lay, only to find he was trapped by a weight around his waist.

With some effort, he braced his elbows against the mattress and pushed himself upright, squinting against the light as he looked down, only to have it all come rushing back to him, his heart turning over in his chest as his eyes landed on a head of black hair.

“Oh,” he breathed before he could stop himself, a warm smile gracing his lips.

Yoongi was fast asleep next to him, his face buried against Jimin’s waist while his right arm held him close around his hip. He seemed utterly at peace, his face wonderfully serene and his breathing even and deep, and Jimin might’ve simply combusted from the amount of affection blossoming in his chest.

He watched the captain for a long moment, enjoying a peacefulness that seemed everlasting before
the sound of distant voices brought him out of his reverie. He glanced to the doors and realized the crew must’ve been waking up, rising with the high sun and dragging their feet towards the galleys to eat breakfast.

As carefully as he could, Jimin loosened himself from Yoongi’s embrace, moving slow and gentle so as to not tear him from his slumber. It worked well enough, although the captain did mutter something incoherent in his sleep, and when he grabbed one of the pillows instead and pressed his face against it, Jimin had to smack a hand over his lips to muffle the giggle that rose up his throat.

Once he was safe outside the captain’s quarters, he let himself laugh softly, his heart singing in his chest. He could still feel it, the warmth of Yoongi’s breath against his skin, he could still hear the voice in which he had called his name. His emotions were simmering within him and he knew he had to free them somehow, lest they burst out of him on their own.

Thus Jimin hurried over to the helm and leaned over the quarterdeck rail, calling out to the first man he saw. “Xiao,” he said and smiled widely when the carpenter turned to look up at him. “Tell Jin I’ll be late for breakfast. I’m going for a flight, I’ll be back within the hour.”

He didn’t linger for long enough to hear Xiao’s reply; as soon as the words left his lips, he turned on the heel and made a run for the Agust’s rail, beckoning his blessing as he went. Without little doubt, he all but threw himself overboard, his wings saving him a mere fraction of a second before he would’ve hit the surface of the river.

Jimin laughed when he heard what must’ve been Xiao’s cheering shout, the sound dwindling as he rose higher and higher into the sky, the air bending under the will of his feathers. He climbed higher than he had before, so high he might’ve reached the clouds, had there been any nearby, and when he began to feel dizzy with exhilaration, he turned and set his eyes on the coast far south of him.

He could hardly bring himself to refuse the ocean’s call.

As he flew, Jimin parted his lips and sang, the voice of the canary drowned by the whistling air around him. Its fleetingness hardly bothered him; every note he sang carried the same emotions as those brimming in his chest, and he fed them to the wind, wondering if it would carry his voice back to Yoongi.

If his heart had a voice, he was certain it would sing of love and nothing but. Love for the skies and the glimmering sea, for his blessing and its gift, and for Yoongi.

Most of all for Yoongi.

Jimin had followed the coast for a quarter of an hour when his song came to an abrupt halt, his eyes catching something on the horizon. He bucked his wings and stilled in the air, his giddiness slowly dissipating as he looked out over the open sea, his eyes narrowing as he squinted at whatever it was he’d seen.

It was a ship, a small speck on the horizon, but a ship all the same. It seemed to be sailing his way, if not slightly to his west, its destination the river leading to Qinzhou.

“A simple merchant’s vessel,” Jimin muttered, but the words sounded false even to his own ears. He glanced over his shoulder and wondered if he should return to the Agust and warn them, but dismissed the thought quickly; he did not know who sailed the approaching ship, and he didn’t want to raise an alarm where it wasn’t needed.

Thus Jimin found himself flying out over the open sea, making sure to keep his altitude. He was far
enough up in the air to easily avoid being spotted, unless whoever sat in the crow’s nest decided to aim their spyglass up into the skies. He felt his heart beat fast in his chest, nervousness rising fast. While his wings had grown strong enough to carry him for much longer than they had now, he had never flown over the sea before.

He halted in the air when he drew close enough to spy the vessel’s colours. Black, he noticed immediately, his tension taking the form of a heavy weight in the pit of his stomach. Black sails meant pirates, and pirates meant threat, especially now, when Yoongi was so vulnerable.

With a hissed cursed, Jimin threw one last glance at the ship before moving to turn in the air, intent on reaching the Agust before the foreign vessel ever could. However, his eyes caught the flag fluttering atop the main mast, and his heart almost burst out of his chest.

With a thrill of dread, Jimin realized he recognized the flag. He’d seen it before, over a month prior, tied beneath the symbol of another pirate crew as a hail to the captain they served. “No,” he breathed, dread digging its claws deep into his chest as he turned in the air to look to where he knew the Agust was tied. The pirate ship below him was sailing directly towards the mouth of the river, the better half of an hour remaining until they’d reach it.

*It can’t happen*, Jimin thought and turned back again, staring down at the ship he knew to be hostile, the most prominent threat that could’ve ever drawn so close. *It can never happen.*

He could not allow it.

It took Jimin only a matter of seconds to swallow his fear and grab tight onto his growing determination, and after drawing a deep breath, filling his lungs with the pureness of the air, he bent his wings and dove.

The lower he went, the louder the shouts of the pirate crew became, more and more of them alerted to his presence. He heard them call out in confusion, unknowing what it was that was approaching their ship, and he heard them call out for weapons, but he stayed his course, descending from the sky without allowing even a shred of hesitation to sway his form.

*Wait for me, Yoongi,* he thought and closed his eyes as he neared his mark. *I promise I will return to you.*

Jimin landed heavily on the pirate ship’s forecastle, the boards of the deck creaking under the momentum; the very ocean seemed to fold under his resolve, the grand vessel jarring atop the calm sea. He paid no heed to the aggravated barks of the crew, stilling for only a moment to brace himself for what was to come.

*Don’t let them see your fear.*

Slowly, he straightened his back, his feathers retreating into the safety of his skin as he faced the hostile crew’s brandished weapons, swords and axes and pistols aimed at every part of him. He was one against four dozen, unarmed and certainly outnumbered, facing nothing but certain death.

Jimin didn’t even blink.

Instead, his eyes searched the pirates’ faces for the one he’d seen every time he’d walked around in Qinzhou, his bounty a grim reminder of his looming threat. He knew him by heart by now, his high cheeks and sharp brow, and a smile that spread so wide it seemed unnatural.

“I come bearing a message from Min Yoongi, the Black Fox of the East,” Jimin said, his voice carrying strong and steady even before those who could so easily kill him. He listened to the pirates
murmur lowly in reply to his words and watched them turn their heads, undoubtedly seeking a course of action.

A command.

He ran his tongue over his dry lip and smiled ever so sweetly when he finally found the familiar face amongst the many unknown, the same face he’d seen drawn on the mariners’ bounties, the face that belonged to the man who craved the death of his beloved.

You will not have it, he thought, his face portraying none of his true emotions. As long as I live, you will not have it.

“Surely, you would like to hear it,” Jimin mused, chasing his fear away to the very corner of his mind as he inclined his head in a sardonic bow before the pirate captain, the man who sailed under the black, burning skull. “You, who challenge the eastern Cardinal’s reign, oh ruthless Rabid Conflagration.”

Chapter End Notes

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............... WELL SHIT.

WE ROCKETIN’ FORWARD IN THE PLOT NOW, LADIES AND GENTS.

GUESS WHO’S NOT TIRED ANYMORE. THAT’S RIGHT, ME. NO SIR. SLEEP WHO? I ONLY KNOW CLIFFHANGERS.

Okay, but for real, okay? Yoongi being vulnerable with Jimin like this, holy shet and he said his name. H-he actually said his name, ho my god, yup, drown me in tears why don’t ya i am a wreck i am deadd i dont’ konw hwo to spel no mroe wow

okay no I really am tired i don't remember half of what I wanted to say here, okay, well, wow.

//bursts into tears

ALSO.

Me: -writes the scene where Jimin takes off Yoongi’s arm-
Also me: -realizes this could’ve been PERFECT material for their first time- “HECK.”

BY THE WAY. Zhang Honghui is an armorer, right? Like, he is literally an armorer. Because he makes prosthetics, he makes an arm for Yoongi. He’s an ARMorer. Geddit? Eh? Eh?

........................ I will not apologize.
ALSO.

Also.

… Jimin in a backless shirt.

OKAY THAT’S ALL THANK YOU GOODBYE SEE YA NEXT TIME
OHOHOHOHOHOHOHO-
The Rabid Conflagration

Chapter Summary

There was something familiar about his face, something that went beyond his bounties, but before Jimin could place it, the Rabid Conflagration finally spoke. “A messenger sent by Min Yoongi, you say?” he drawled around a chuckle, terribly amused. “What a brave soul you are, to come all this way alone.” He smiled, and his lips stretched so unnaturally wide, it made Jimin’s insides curl. “Or the biggest fool to ever live. I can’t quite tell which you are.”

Jimin’s throat was dry as a desert, but all he did was shrug, emitting a sound akin to a scoff. “Call me what you will,” he said curtly. “It won’t change why I have come, nor the fact that you want to hear what I have to tell you.”

Chapter Notes

As some of you might know, I found out my dog had passed away last weekend. He was 13 years old and had had a rough last year, and I couldn’t be there to say goodbye. It hurt like hell to know that, but I’m dealing with it. Took last week off of writing to cope, and while I’m still sad, I’m doing better now! I want to thank everyone who was so supportive and kind! I love you! <3

The sole inspiration for this chapter was MIC Drop. Over and over and over again, MIC Drop. AH, AND BAEPSAE!! And every Cypher… GO JIMIN GO!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The tension was suffocating.

Every pirate aboard the vessel was looking either at Jimin or their captain, angry glares and apprehensive glances thrown left and right. No one said a word, not the crew nor the captain, nor Jimin himself; he held the Rabid Conflagration’s gaze without faltering, the smile playing at his lip as he waited for the pirate to take the bait Jimin had thrown at him.

The man peered at him from amidst the pirates of his crew, his curious look a heavy contrast to that of his men. He’d pursed his lips in thought, an odd contrast to the sharpness of his jaw, the hollowing of his cheeks accentuating just how thin his face was. His dark hair fell in waves over his brow, unkempt and frayed, yet it couldn’t quite hide the paleness of his eyes.

There was something familiar about his face, something that went beyond his bounties, but before Jimin could place it, the Rabid Conflagration finally spoke. “A messenger sent by Min Yoongi, you say?” he drawled around a chuckle, terribly amused. “What a brave soul you are, to come all this way alone.” He smiled, and his lips stretched so unnaturally wide, it made Jimin’s insides curl. “Or the biggest fool to ever live. I can’t quite tell which you are.”
Jimin’s throat was dry as a desert, but all he did was shrug, emitting a sound akin to a scoff. “Call me what you will,” he said curtly. “It won’t change why I have come, nor the fact that you want to hear what I have to tell you.”

“You seem to think quite highly of yourself,” the pirate captain said. “I could burn you where you stand.”

His voice portrayed none of his crew’s hostility, but there wasn’t a doubt in Jimin’s mind that the man would gladly see through his threat. Dread churned deep in his chest, yet the smile remained on Jimin’s lips, ever so sweet. “You could,” he agreed and nodded, his fear hidden behind a mask of ennui. “And how boring wouldn’t that be? But I suppose you must do as you see fit. Go ahead, then. *Burn me.*”

He spread his arms wide as if in invitation for the Rabid Conflagration to do as he pleased, inclining his head in a curious manner. He waited, watching the pirate captain’s smile falter more and more, and for every second that passed, Jimin repeated Yoongi’s name in his thoughts, clinging to it for bravery.

When the Rabid Conflagration raised his hand, it took all the effort in the world to not break his act and cower, let alone turn away and attempt an escape. His breath stacked in his throat and his muscles drew themselves taut, but Jimin didn’t move. *He won’t do it,* he cried inwardly to suppress the dread tearing at his sanity. *He has already taken the bait.*

True enough, when the pirate captain swept his hand through the air, it was to dismiss his crew, a silent order for them to stand down. He chuckled, his eyes shining with amusement when he turned back to Jimin. “Let’s hear it, then,” he said. “This message.”

“Here?” Jimin arched an unimpressed brow, his lip curling down into a frown. “When I’m standing on the edge of your ship as if ready to be thrown into the sea?” he asked and made no attempt to hide his distaste. “I think not. Show me to your quarters, and I will tell you.”

*Slow,* he told himself to quell his hurry. *If he senses your urgency, he will know.*

“You lack the sense of common men,” the Rabid Conflagration said in a voice dull with amusement.

“And you lack the courtesy of a captain,” Jimin retorted, scoffing. “I’ve come all this way to spare you a pointless voyage, Conflagration. The least you could do is offer me a place to rest.”

The pirate captain emitted a bark of laughter at his words, grinning wide as he turned to his crew. “Listen to this one, men,” he chortled. “He seems to be mistaking us for merchants.”

The pirates snickered, spite lacing their jeers, but Jimin did not falter. The smile on his lips widened into something wry and full of disdain. “Perhaps I’m simply used to a better class of pirates,” he said, and while he made no effort to be heard over the guffaws, they caught his words all the same, their laughter dying down. “Even the drunken scum of Shanghai had the sense to conduct their business in private.”

The lie fell from his lips easily enough, the dark thoughts that came with it remaining hidden behind his bored expression. He remembered the pirates who had ambushed him in an alley and pressed him against the wall, speaking foul words into his ear while their hands roamed. He remembered how helpless he’d felt then, until Yoongi had come to save him.

*He won’t come this time,* Jimin thought, steeling himself. *This time, I will be the one to save him.*

“Theyir business,” the Rabid Conflagration echoed, his gaze falling from Jimin’s face to trail down the
A vileness seeped into his tone and spread to his crew; upon their captain’s prompt, they looked at Jimin with the same eyes the Red Plague had, tangible on the surface of his skin. This time, however, what Jimin felt was a dark anger instead of fright, and he let his smile vanish, bristling as he straightened his back.

“Mind your tone, Rabid Conflagration,” he said, his voice like the shrill scrape of rocks over ice. “You’d do best to not test my patience, or you will surely find yourself regretting it.”

The pirate captain’s brows rose to his hairline, his mouth falling open in surprise. He gaped at Jimin as if he could never have imagined being threatened so bluntly by someone standing where Jimin stood, alone against forty.

He took his chance where he saw it and heaved a deep sigh before the Rabid Conflagration could find his bearings. “Truly, why did I bother with this task,” he huffed with a shake of his head, making a show of his exasperation before he looked at the pirate captain again. “Will you tell me your name, at least?” he asked flatly. “Or will I simply have to keep addressing you by your title, as if you were nothing more than a frenzied, incensed dog?”

Where his foolish bravery came from, Jimin couldn’t have said. Every word he spoke was accompanied by an underlying rush of dread, cursing his recklessness, but his need to ensure the safety of his loved ones was stronger. Fear was a tell, he knew, so he made himself be as rough and aggressive as he knew Yoongi would’ve been.

You’re too mouthy for your own good, the captain had told him once in a fit of rage, a long, long time ago, and now, Jimin turned that into his strength.

His words brought the Rabid Conflagration out of his state of silence, the smile quick to return to his lips. “You have a sharp tongue, Harpy,” he said, his mirth returning in full force when Jimin narrowed his eyes at the byname. “Oh, do you not like your title? I find it rather fitting, now that I’ve seen you.” He nodded towards Jimin’s arms, now bare of his feathers. “You may not know my name,” he mused, “but I know you.”

A ripple of cold trailed down the length of Jimin’s spine, discomfort digging deep into his muscles. He hadn’t imagined the Rabid Conflagration would know him; after all, he didn’t consider himself someone to be known, at least not by strangers. He didn’t know how the pirate captain had learned of his existence, and it made his skin crawl with unease. “I’m surprised,” he said slowly, hiding his surprise behind a tone of dull boredom. “I didn’t expect someone like you to know my name.”

“Oh, but it is so fresh in my mind,” the Rabid Conflagration said. “After all, your bounty has only just been revealed to the people.” Jimin’s eyes widened by no more than a fraction, but the pirate captain must’ve noticed, his smile growing tenfold. “The Ocean’s Harpy,” he drawled, “made known to the mariners after you disrupted Commander Heo Byunghee in his attempt to apprehend Min Yoongi, and killed him with nothing but your blessing’s claws.”

It was as if Jimin had been submerged in icy water, the chill seeping into his very bones. It was jarring, his insides twisting and roiling as if attempting to refuse the truth, to resist that which made his very soul tear itself away from him. The pain of it was startling, as if his ribs were breaking to leave his heart exposed to the freezing chill, consuming him to take the life out of everything that he was.

Just as quickly as the coldness had come, however, a searing heat went through him, burning under his skin until it was all he could do not to scream. His mind turned on itself and tore at his sanity like
a wild, anguished beast, its claws sunk deep into all that made him who he was. All of him burned at
the same time as he froze, and through the chaos in him, Jimin heard a distant voice, old and laded
with sorrow.

’Tis a horrible thing, child, horrible, the High Oracle had whispered, and it will taint you. You will
carry the weight of it in your heart for as long as you live.

In his pocket, the Rune of the Storm gleamed hot against his thigh.

Throughout the hollowness inside him, Jimin did not move a muscle, yet the Rabid Conflagration
must’ve sensed his struggle either way, for his unnaturally wide smile grew wider still, spite ever so
obvious in the quirk of his lips. “You seem tense,” he remarked in a voice that indicated he had
found the weakness he’d been looking for in Jimin’s facade. “Are you not pleased with what you’ve
accomplished?”

The pirate captain’s words were oddly distorted, as if he was speaking through a veil of water, dull to
Jimin’s ears. He could’ve heard it from someone who wasn’t us, he remembered Taehyung saying
after Yoongi had heard of Rodel’s death, and a crack dug deep into his heart, his facade almost
shattering upon the realization that his friend had known what he had done all along.

They all must’ve known.

Hold on, a small voice in the back of his head called, fighting against the darkness rising steadily in
his chest. Remember why you came. Remember what you must do. You cannot break, not now.

Jemin knew it was true. He knew what he had to do to keep his loved ones from harm, and so he
made himself swallow the anguish in his chest and push down his volatile dread.

Forgive me, he
thought, drawing a steadying breath. I’m sorry. He closed his eyes and granted himself a fleeting
moment of mourning before he composed himself to address he who threatened the lives of everyone
aboard the Agust.

For a fleeting second, he considered rising to the Rabid Conflagration’s bait and arguing, to push the
pirate captain away from what he thought he could use against Jimin, but the urge was gone as
quickly as it had come. “I am not,” he said stiffly, prying his teeth apart to speak as calmly as he
could. “Unlike you and too many others, murder is not something I take pleasure in. It is not a thing
pleasure should be taken in. It is cruel and wrong, an unforgivable crime that will surely end in
nothing but more pain, more sorrow, and more regret.”

Surprise flickered across the Rabid Conflagration’s face, and Jimin knew he had not expected such
bluntness regarding an act nearly every pirate dabbled in. Killing came as naturally to this captain
and his crew as breathing, he knew, thus Jimin’s honest denial of its normality must’ve been an
unusual stance. Surely, to them, a reluctance to kill was nothing but fragility, one Jimin chose to lay
bare for them all to see.

His solicitude was not a weakness, and he would not let the Rabid Conflagration turn it into one.

“However it may be,” he said before the pirate captain could regain his composure, “it doesn’t matter
if you know my name or not. I am no one to know. I am not important. If you kill me here,” he rolled
his shoulders in a leisure shrug and made himself look bored as he spoke his blatant lies, “Min
Yoongi will not care. And that is what you want, isn’t it?”

Jemin inclined his head and quirked a curious brow. “You want him desperate, you want him
suffering,” he mused, seeing his answer clear as day across the Rabid Conflagration’s face. “You
want him to feel despair so consuming he’ll beg for you to kill him. To burn him.” He smiled as if
the words didn’t taste like bile on his tongue. “How precious.”

The smile on the pirate captain’s lips finally hardened, his jaw tightening as he looked at Jimin. His crew must’ve sensed it as well; from the corner of his eye, Jimin saw two pirates exchange a brief glance, a twinge of nervousness in their gaze.

When the Rabid Conflagration spoke again, however, his voice was calm as ever, laced with the same amusement it had borne until now. “Have it your way, then, Harpy,” he said and nodded. “We shall speak in my quarters.” He motioned for Jimin to follow him and made to turn, but paused halfway. “And, if you so wish,” he mused, “you may call me Oseong.”

“Oh, Oseong,” Jimin echoed, wondering if it was truly the pirate captain’s name. “I’d tell you my own name, but you haven’t asked for it yet.”

The Rabid Conflagration emitted another sharp bark of laughter. “I know your name, Park Jimin,” he said wryly, “but Harpy suits you better.”

Jemin ignored his mocking tone and said nothing, making a show of rolling his eyes before following the pirate captain, his back straight and jaw raised as he walked past the crew. They had lowered their weapons upon command, but the hostility remained, hanging low over his shoulders, but he refused to bend, curling his lips into a sardonic smile as he passed them.

How does he know, he wondered, ominousness stirring in the pit of his stomach. How does he know my name?

Jemin couldn’t fail to notice the countless black marks along the ship’s exterior, the wood of the rails and deck singed from fire. It’s all an act, he thought and clenched his hands on a frightened tremor. All of his smiles, they’re a mask, just like mine, but what he hides is rage.

The captain’s quarters were grander than Yoongi’s, Jimin noticed when he stepped past the heavy doors. Not only in size; idolatries of heavy gold stood in each corner, and the walls were covered in pale paint, various oceans and islands drawn across every surface. The windows at the rear wall were impressive and tall, with no organ piano to block the sun’s rays from seeping in through the pristine glass.

Without the instrument, the room seemed lacking even with all its riches.

“Have a seat, Harpy.”

Jemin turned to Oseong, who stood by a sleek table by the quarters’ western wall. The pirate captain motioned for him to sit down, and while he walked over to one of the chairs, Jimin remained standing. Unperturbed, Oseong shrugged his shoulders and took a seat, crossing his legs before fixating Jimin with a smile.

“I heard your captain was injured in the battle between you and the mariners,” the Rabid Conflagration said.

The words came easy to Jimin. “You heard what Min Yoongi wanted you to hear,” he said with a snort, crossing his arms. “The mariners think too highly of themselves. In their desperation to erase the Black Fox from existence, they must’ve forgotten what he is capable of.” He inclined his head in a curious manner. “Greed for success is a fickle thing, isn’t it?” he mused. “The mariners wished so fervently for success in their mission, they distorted the truth when they failed.”

“I see.” Oseong nodded thoughtfully. “So your captain never sailed to meet Zhang Honghui to acquire a new prosthesis?”
Briefly, Jimin wondered how on earth the Rabid Conflagration knew of the armorer who lived in such exclusion from the city of Qinzhou. “Oh, he did,” he said and made himself sound as uninterested as he could. “Commander Heo Byunghee managed some minor damage, blasting two fingers off the prosthesis’ hand. We sailed to Qinzhou to have them restored, but that was many weeks ago.”

Oseong’s brow gave the faintest of twitches, and Jimin’s smile grew sweeter. “If you were hoping to ambush Min Yoongi,” he said, “you’ve come too late.”

For a long moment, the Rabid Conflagration only looked at him, pale eyes searching his face for the slightest hint of deception. Or something else entirely; Jimin couldn’t tell what went on behind the pirate captain’s curious mask, but whatever it was, it made him want to squirm in discomfort.

“Why are you telling me this?” Oseong finally asked.

“I told you already,” Jimin said slowly, furrowing his brow in impatience, “I came to relay a message from Min Yoongi. He has grown weary of your endless tantrums, like that of a petulant child begging for attention.”

Once again, the Rabid Conflagration’s brow gave a twitch, and Jimin smiled upon realizing he’d struck a nerve. He shrugged his shoulders and leaned against the wall, his mounting tension growing more and more prominent; his following words would be the ones to decide the Agust’s fate.

“He has decided to accept your challenge,” he said. “He sent me here to guide your way to where he awaits.”

Oseong’s offense was hardly audible from his voice, but the stiffness in his jaw as he spoke was as clear a tell as any. “And where would that be?”

“Where better than the coast of his homeland, where Min Yoongi was first made known to the sea?” Jimin mused without a trace of doubt. “He has sailed his ship to the south-eastern coast of Korea, where he will wait to once again prove to this world that he and only he is worthy of the eastern Cardinal’s title.”

“How can I know this is not some trick?” Oseong asked in a tone of ire, his smirk having curdled for every word Jimin had spoken. “How can I know you haven’t come to deceive me, Harpy?”

“You can’t.” It was an exertion like no other, to keep himself from breaking under the pressure of his act. Jimin had never been so nervous in all his life, nor had he had so much relying on his capability of persuasion.

He could’ve vomited.

“Nothing I say can convince you of my intentions,” he drawled with another roll of his shoulders. “You will either have to take my word for it, or ignore what I’ve told you and waste your precious time on a fruitless voyage.” The smile that graced his lip was hard as steel, betraying none of his dread. “‘Tis your choice,” he said and tipped his head in a sardonic little bow, “captain Oseong.”

Another silence followed his taunt, and once again, the Rabid Conflagration stared at Jimin as if he was attempting to peer into his soul. His gaze made Jimin feel terribly exposed and vulnerable, yet he held it all the same, as if he had nothing to fear from a pirate known for burning down cities and all their people.

I will return to you, he promised again when he thought of Yoongi. No matter what, I will come back.
An eternity might’ve passed before Oseong finally looked away, heaving an exasperated sigh as he turned to study his painted walls. “Do you know why I covet your captain’s reign and infame?” he asked and snickered as if he could sense Jimin’s surprise at the sudden question.

“No,” Jimin said curtly. “And truly, I do not want to know. Whatever your reasons are, the destruction you have caused cannot be worth it.” His lips curled down into a scowl. “Nothing can be worth it.”

The Rabid Conflagration smiled widely at that. “Such a pure soul for a pirate,” he mused, and a shudder tore down Jimin’s spine at the familiar words. “But you are wrong, Harpy. There is so much to gain from the world I will create.” He raised a hand and ran his fingers over the painted walls, tracing the edges of the countries framing the sea. “A world where the lawless do not exist.”

“How idealistic,” Jimin scoffed. “If you sail under the mariners’ colours.”

His words drew a sharp bark of laughter from Oseong’s lips, wry and gleeful. “You misunderstand me,” he said and looked at Jimin. “I will not kill the lawless. I will kill the law itself.”

He pressed his hand over the depiction of Korea on his wall, the curl of his lips so wide his face might’ve split in two. “The Cardinals of the sea are weak. Their goals are too small, their sights too narrow. They dwell idly in their corners of the world and fight their pointless battles with the mariners. They do nothing to ensure this, our age of piracy, will survive for millennia to come.”

Underneath the pads of his fingers, the paint began to burn, a bitter, oaky smell rising with the smoke. “The mariners are merely a tool with which the kings and emperors of this world impose their laws on those they consider their subjects,” Oseong said. “If pirates continue the way they have until now, they will soon be struck down, buried in the earth by those with more power than they deserve.”

Flames flickered from where his hand was pressed against the wall, the wood crackling and turning black, a dark void replacing the painted mainland. The Rabid Conflagration seemed all but exhilarated by the sight, mania radiating off him as he watched the countries at the palm of his hand burn.

“The pirates of the world must come together as one,” he said, “and to make them see, I must erase those who might oppose me. Min Yoongi will burn by my hand, along with the rest of those too arrogant to see what their idleness will bring upon their world.”

_The fire that would consume this world_, the High Oracle had called Oseong, and now, with a thrill of dread, Jimin understood why.

“After the blinded fools have become ash, I will gather those who know what must be done in order for piracy to survive,” the Rabid Conflagration said and withdrew his hand, his unblemished skin a harsh contrast to the blackness of the wall. “And in their midst, I will stand, bearing the weight of what I will have created.” He looked at Jimin. “A king of the new world. I will liberate the seas and lead the pirates into the future they deserve.”

This time, the silence that followed was a product of Jimin’s astonished disbelief. All he could hear in Oseong’s words was greed, hunger, yet the man himself seemed deaf to what he’d said. He spoke of some sort of liberation of piracy, yet what he wanted was the same kind of power emperors held over common men.

The Rabid Conflagration looked at him with a sense of expectancy, as if he was waiting to hear what Jimin thought of his plans. A small part of him urged him to simply let the pirate captain indulge in
his delusions, but Jimin paid it no heed, ignoring that which would likely be the wiser thing to do.

“Your goal is pointless,” he said flatly, making no effort to hide his disdain. “Even if you were to kill every Cardinal, the pirates of the sea would still not follow you or bend to your command.” He pushed away from the wall and motioned towards the sea painted on the walls around him. “There is no pirate king. The Cardinals are not rulers, as you seem to believe. Min Yoongi does not command any of the eastern pirates. He does not hold any power over them.”

He looked to the blackened mark on the wall. “If you want to kill the law, turn your aim unto those who made it,” he said. “Every pirate has the freedom to choose for themselves, whether or not they wish to go to war for your cause. That’s what piracy is about, isn’t it? Freedom. They turned their backs on those who forced them to live their lives a certain way, and they will do the same to you should you attempt to command them.”

“You can’t know that, Harpy,” Oseong said.

“I can, and I do,” Jimin retorted snappishly. “I am a pirate, and I will not take commands from you. I chose to turn my back on the law when I learned of their twisted sense of justice and the foul methods through which they conduct it. Yours are no better, thus I will refuse you.”

Ire returned to the Rabid Conflagration’s features, but Jimin did not falter. His fear cowered before the abhorrence brought on by Oseong’s ideals and the thought that the slaughter of so many people had all been for the same goal as all the kings and emperors in history had coveted.

Power and rule.

“I serve no one,” he bit out. “Not the law, not an emperor, and certainly not a king.”

Oseong’s grip on the armrest of his chair tightened and eased several times before he spoke, his voice stiff. “You serve Min Yoongi.”

“No,” Jimin said without a second’s hesitation. “I do not serve, I sail alongside him. He has earned my trust and devotion, and he will keep it only for as long as I see fit to let him have it. He doesn’t demand blind trust or obedience, or regard those around him with disdain, as if they were lesser than him. That is what you desire.”

His voice grew more and more scathing for every word he spoke. “They must come together,” he said, reciting the Rabid Conflagration’s words. “You must make them see.” His lips curled down in distaste. “You are a pirate too, Oseong, yet you don’t see yourself as their equal. What you want is to stand above everyone else, as if you were better than them, and this is why you will fail.”

“It seems you are the idealistic one out of the two of us, Harpy,” the pirate captain said with a snort. “The world is not equal. No man is equal to another, not even you and your saint of a captain.”

Jimin chuckled before he could stop himself, the sound utterly without glee. “He’s no saint,” he said and smiled wryly. “I know he’s not. I know what he is and what he has done. Some of it, I’ve seen myself. He is no saint, but I know he does not take pleasure in any of the terrible things he does, least of all murder.” His voice was cold as ice now, shrill even to his own ears. “Should he ever turn into something like you, I would not hesitate to leave.”

Even if my heart would break, he thought, but he kept those words to himself.

The Rabid Conflagration arched a brow at him, amusement crawling back over his face. “Something, you call me,” he drawled, lips curling up. “Am I not human in your eyes, Harpy?”
“No,” Jimin replied without pause and inclined his head. “Are you human in your own eyes, Conflagration?”

Oseong had no answer for that, yet his smile grew wider in his silence. His ire was gone in favor of his previous mirth, and with its return, Jimin’s fright came crawling back, baring its teeth at the flicker of revulsion that had expelled it.

*Get out,* his insides pleaded. *Run, now.*

“I have done my duty,” he said curtly. “I was sent here to relay Min Yoongi’s message, not to bicker about whether or not it is true, nor the reasoning behind your massacres.” He nodded his head in another mocking bow and made himself smile, and truly, it was the most difficult one yet. “I will take my leave.”

Without waiting for dismissal, Jimin turned on the heel and made for the doors, struggling to keep the urgency out of his steps. Behind him, the Rabid Conflagration chuckled, the sound like pricks of a knife along his spine, the sensation intensified by the scraping of the chair’s legs against the floor as Oseong rose from his chair to follow.

The pirate captain fell in next to Jimin just as he pushed the doors open and walked out onto deck, and it took only a glance at the crew for Jimin to realize his sorry fate. His muscles drew themselves taut at the sight of the waiting pirates, their intentions clear as day long before the order fell from their captain’s lips. “Leave?” Oseong repeated gleefully, as if it was the funniest thing he’d heard ever since Jimin’s arrival. “I think not, Harpy.”

Immediately, two pirates broke away from the crowd and latched onto Jimin’s arms while a third pressed a knife to his neck, the sharp blade digging into the skin of his neck. Jimin ground his teeth on the pained exclaim that rose to his lips, the sounds leaving him as a hiss as he attempted to wrench his arms free from the pirates’ grip.

Panic burst through his veins and made his lungs constrict in his chest, his breath stuttering as the knife slid along his skin. “What are you doing?” he snapped at Oseong, and with the faintest of quivers to his voice, perhaps it was lucky the pirate captain ignored him in favor of turning to address his crew.

“Turn us around,” the Rabid Conflagration called to his helmsman, positively brimming with amusement. “Min Yoongi waits for us at Korea’s eastern coast. We mustn’t disappoint him.”

Jimin had never felt as relieved as he did then, when he felt the vessel turn away from the mouth of the river leading to Qinzhou. If not for the blade to his throat and the hostile pirates surrounding him, he would’ve fallen to his knees and laughed, his legs weak with solace.

*I did it, Yoongi,* he cried inwardly. *You and the others will be safe.*

His relief was easy to hide; not only were the two pirates restraining him gripping his arms with bruising strength, but he knew if he let his mask fall now, Oseong could turn back just as quickly. Thus the scowl remained strong on Jimin’s face, his teeth bared as he made another attempt at prying himself out of his captors’ hold. “Release me, Oseong,” he snapped, dread digging deep into his chest when the pirate captain turned his smile to him.

“You’re not in a position to make requests here, are you, Harpy?” he mused and raised a hand to stroke Jimin’s cheek. Every last cell of Jimin’s body drew itself taut, terror screaming inside of him at the touch, its heat just shy of burning. “You are amusing, however,” the Rabid Conflagration drawled, “and we share the same destination, so I shall keep you on my ship for the time being.
Perhaps until we find Min Yoongi.”

*You’ll never find him,* Jimin thought, swallowing hard to keep the words from leaving his lips. “What makes you think I want to suffer the displeasure of your company for any longer than I have to?” he asked instead, the words stiff with the effort it took to be still under Oseong’s touch.

The Rabid Conflagration’s smile was near manic. “Oh, I’m certain you do not want to,” he said and withdrew his hand, “but I wasn’t asking for your opinion on the matter.”

Jimin didn’t need the press of the knife to his neck to realize he had no way of escaping. It was a strange feeling; at the same time as his chest felt as if it was being torn apart by sheer terror, his triumph filled him with peace, a calmness in the knowledge that the Agust would survive.

Thus, when he raised his voice again, it was just as flat and steady as it had been. “Have it your way, then,” he said coldly and made another attempt at freeing his arms. Pain flared up his throat and a wetness trickled down the side of his neck, and he knew the blade had opened a slit in his skin. “But if I am to stay here, let me make something very, very clear.”

A ripple of burning heat went through him and the pirates holding him grew tense as barbs of his feathers grew out of the skin of his arms, bristling as he glared at the Rabid Conflagration. “You do not touch me,” Jimin said. “No one in your crew touches me. No one as much as thinks of laying a hand on me, and you will tell your men to release me this instant.”

Oseong chuckled at his words, unintimidated by his skinchanging. “Must I tell you again, Harpy?” he asked drolly. “You are not in a position to make-”

“It’s not a request,” Jimin interrupted. His voice was harsh and shrill, near inhuman as he fell deeper into the embrace of his blessing. He recalled the anger he’d felt after Yoongi had lost his arm, and when he spoke again, he felt the pirates holding his arms shudder, a tremor spreading from them to the rest of the crew.

“It’s an order.”

It was as if a candle had been blown out. The smile fell from Oseong’s lips as they fell open, his eyebrows rising to his hairline in utter shock. He stared at Jimin as if he’d never seen a human being before, gaping, while Jimin held his gaze without faltering, the knife at his throat all but forgotten as he waited.

When the Rabid Conflagration finally broke out of his daze, it was with a thin chuckle, portraying all the disbelief Jimin’s words had brought on. The sound became a chortle, which in turn grew into a guffaw, and soon enough, he was laughing so hysterically he had to brace himself against the ship rail lest he fall over.

All around him, his crew remained silent as a crypt.

“You really are amusing, Harpy,” he cackled when he’d sobered up enough to speak, dabbing at his eyes and fanning his flushed cheeks. “An order.” With a grin so wide his cheeks might burst, he turned to his crew. “You heard him, men. Release the Harpy.”

The pirates let go of Jimin’s arms as if they’d been burned, the knife nicking the skin of his neck in its hurried retreat. Jimin didn’t move, refusing to let his relief be seen, persisting against the numbness of his legs; he simply stood there, his back straight as a rod and his shoulders squared.

“Keep your eyes on him every second of the day until we reach Min Yoongi,” Oseong told his men, his eyes trained on Jimin. “If he so much as steps one foot off the deck, whether it be to climb the
mast or escape, shoot him. If he survives, bring him to be and I will burn his wings off.”

A cold shiver tore down Jimin’s spine, and he dimly realized he was like to die aboard this vessel. The dread in his chest became a gaping emptiness, but he met the Rabid Conflagration’s gaze without faltering. “I’m afraid it’ll be my arms that you burn, Oseong,” he said stiffly. “I will never show you my wings.” He looked away and at the pirates flocked around him. “Will I sleep in the brig?”

The pirate captain snorted. “Of course,” he said. “But I am a generous man, Harpy. I will let you leave whenever I am awake.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Jimin snapped. “I prefer imprisonment to your company.” Without granting Oseong the time to retort, he turned to the crewman who’d held the knife to his throat. “You,” he said. “Take me to my cell.”

“Is that another order?” the Rabid Conflagration asked smugly and chuckled at Jimin’s lack of answer. “A mere jest, Harpy. He will do as you say.”

The pirate nodded and muttered something incoherent under his breath before reaching out to take Jimin by the arm, only to quickly withdraw his hand when Jimin pinned him under a murderous glare. The man hissed a curse and flicked his head for him to follow, and without another word, Jimin turned his back on Oseong and his crew.

He was led below deck and through a seemingly endless row of bunks before they reached the brig. It was bigger than that of the Agust, the cells lined along the wall rather than built haphazardly in the middle of the room. It reminded Jimin of the cells of Son Jukan’s mariner ship, hardly a welcome thought at the moment.

The pirate slammed the iron bars shut behind him and locked the cell, and as soon as he’d left the brig, Jimin pressed his hands down hard over his lips and sank to his knees on the hard floor. Bile rose to the back of his throat and he gagged, but he refused to let it spill; if the Rabid Conflagration saw even a trace of his dread, he would use it to destroy him.

Yoongi, Jimin thought and squeezed his eyes shut as he drew a deep, quivering breath, pushing back against the fit of panic struggling to claim him. Help me, Yoongi, give me the strength I need to come back to you. Please, please, help me come back home.

“Please,” he begged of the silence. “Wait for me.”

Over the following days, Jimin didn’t leave the brig even once, choosing its safety over whatever terror he might face on the vessel’s deck. The hours passed slowly as he sat in his cell, his eyes closed as he listened to the sounds seeping through the floorboards and did his best to remain calm. He could hear the crew moving about the deck and his muscles would draw themselves taut every time he heard the Rabid Conflagration’s voice, but, to his immense relief, the pirate captain never strayed below deck to look for him.
Someone from the crew would unlock the heavy door to the brig once every hour to ensure Jimin was still there. He ignored the pirates every time they came, even when they brought him his meals; he was fed twice a day, some meagre scraps of bread and boiled roots that left him hungrier than before.

_They won’t kill me_, Jimin thought over and over, reminding himself of the words every time his calm would begin to crumble. _At least not until they learn of my deception._

It made his heart ache to think of the Agust and her crew. He knew they were worrying themselves sick. When he closed his eyes, he could see Taehyung tear himself to pieces in his attempt to find him. He could imagine Namjoon and Hoseok doing their best to calm him down, to keep him from doing something irrational.

Thinking of Yoongi grew more and more painful for every passing hour. He wished with every fibre of his being that Yoongi didn’t believe he had left them, especially after what had happened the last time they’d seen each other. Jimin quickly lost count over how many times he’d prayed they’d their faith in him and trust him to not have abandoned them.

_I didn’t leave you_, he thought and hoped with all his might Yoongi could hear him. _I’ll come back to you, so please, wait for me._

Late in the evening of the second day at sea, when the brig door was pushed open on the hour of his routine inspection, there were two pirates rather than one, and immediately, Jimin knew why they had come. He knew the look in their eyes; he’d seen it before, in the eyes of the lowly pirates in the alleys of Shanghai. Hunger and lust, and disdain.

“What do you remember my words?” he asked them coldly as they drew near the bars of his cell. He pressed himself against the wall, his back lined up with the hard surface, but rather than fear, what rose within him was a volatile combination of anger and loathing. “My order?”

“Shut your mouth,” one of them barked, yanking the cell door open with enough force to crack it against the wall. “You need to learn your fucking place. You think we don’t know what you are?” His gaze was heavy on Jimin’s skin, lecherous as he walked closer while his crewmate stood watch by the bars. “You need to learn your place, whore. You should be down on your knees for our captain, not pretending like you’re anything more than the dirt below his feet.”

“I’m warning you,” Jimin said, but the pirate ignored him, driven forward by some twisted clash of rage and want.

“I’ll show you where you belong,” he snarled, crowding Jimin against the wall, the bitter stench of rum clear on his breath as he pressed close.

As soon as his hand touched his shoulder, Jimin surged forward.

Feathers burst from his skin as he lunged at the pirate with enough momentum to send him staggering backwards and away. The cell was small, but Jimin spread his wings wide either way, and before the pirate could reach for the sword at his belt, he lashed out with his talons and buried them in the man’s arm.

They went down together, the pirate’s back hitting the floor hard under Jimin’s added weight, his claws sinking deeper into his flesh upon the impact. With a ragged cry of pain, he attempted to pry himself away from the harpy’s grip, but Jimin only tightened his hold, fighting against the wave of disgust that rose within him upon the feeling of the pirate’s warm blood against his talons.
“I ordered you *not* to touch me,” he hissed shrilly and turned to the man standing by the bars, sword halfway out of its scabbard. “Fetch your captain, or I’ll tear his arm off!”

The pirate was quick to comply, stumbling over his feet in his hurry to escape the brig. As soon as he was gone, Jimin drew a deep breath and recalled his feathers, pulling them back into his skin as best he could while his claws remained buried in the whimpering man’s arm. He had never shifted in such a manner, but he had promised to never let the Rabid Conflagration see his wings again, and he was intent on keeping that promise.

When the pirate returned with his captain in tow, only a smattering of Jimin’s feathers remained along the back of his arms, small and bristling as he leaned heavily on the pirate in his grip, held down by his claws. Oseong was smiling even now, his gaze shifting from Jimin to his crewman and back again, amusement shining in his eyes. “You sent for me, Harpy,” he stated calmly, as if what he saw was a common thing.

“He touched me,” Jimin spat and pressed down harder, shutting his eyes to the pirate’s sharp cry. “He and his friend opened my cell and laid their hands on me.” He shifted his glare to the man who’d stood watch by the bars, and the pirate flinched away from his gaze as if it had burned him. “I warned you,” he hissed when he looked at Oseong again. “I *ordered* you not to touch me.”

“You did,” the Rabid Conflagration agreed with a casual nod. “What now? Will you release him? Or do you intend to kill him in this cell?” His smile grew wider. “I thought you were above that.”

“Of course I won’t kill him,” Jimin said shrilly and straightened where he stood, “but as your crew seems to have forgotten a direct order, I thought I’d remind them with a demonstration of what happens if they choose not to heed it again.” As he spoke, he pulled his claws out of the pirate’s arm and stepped away from his person, the rest of his blessing retreating back into his skin as he looked down at the injured man. “*Get out.*”

The pirate scrambled away from him as quickly as he could, hissing a curse as he cradled the shoulder of his bleeding arm. With a dark glare at Jimin, he staggered out of the cell, but before he could take more than a few steps away, Oseong reached out and grabbed hold of his arm.

A look of bottomless terror had time to cross the pirate’s face before the Rabid Conflagration dug his fingers into the gaping wounds and hand burst into flames.

Jimin watched, horror-struck, as the man jerked violently in pain, a terrible scream rising from his throat as the fire burned his skin, white-hot and writhing around the entirety of his limb. He twisted and struggled to free himself, but Oseong’s grip was iron, his face an impassive mask as he held his own crewman until his skin was raw and blackened.

*A monster,* Jimin thought and wished he would’ve closed his eyes. *He can’t be human.*

When the Rabid Conflagration finally released the pirate, he let him slump to the floor without little care, not a trace of sympathy in his voice as he turned away. “Take him to the infirmary,” he told the rest of his crew and ignored the man’s wails of pain in favor of looking at Jimin, who stared back at him with eyes wide. “Did I frighten you, Harpy?”

“You burned him.” His voice was hoarse and quiet, hushed with disbelief. “Your own crewman,” Jimin breathed out, quivering. “You *burned* him.”

“I did, yes,” Oseong drawled, the ghost of a confused frown tugging at his brow. “You dug your claws into his arm.”
“He touched me with all the vile intentions I had warned him not to,” Jimin said and shook his head, struggling to comprehend what he’d just witnessed. “What did he do to warrant your violence?” There was bile threatening to rise to his throat again, sour and burning. “You could’ve cauterized the wounds and been done with it, but you burned his entire arm.”

The Rabid Conflagration seemed more bewildered than ever. “He disobeyed your order,” he said. “Was that not justice?”

“Justice for me, perhaps,” Jimin said, his voice finally breaking under the pressure of the horror swimming inside of him. “But certainly not for you.”

As he watched Oseong struggle to grasp the meaning of his words, he realized just how wrong the pirate captain was as a living being. He had turned his hand on his own crewman and hurt him until he’d screamed, yet he couldn’t see what he had done wrong.

While fear and terror tore at his senses, a part of Jimin was more glad than ever for his decision to board the Rabid Conflagration’s ship. To see the Agust and her crew subject to this man’s ways would’ve been worse than dying.

“You are full of contradictions, Harpy,” Oseong said at last, opting to let go of what which he could not understand.

“And truly, you deserve the title you’ve been given,” Jimin whispered, so quietly the pirate captain might not have heard him.

When the crew retreated from the brig and Jimin was once again left alone, he was teetering on the edge of uncontrollable panic. He dug his nails into the skin of his arms, scratching at himself in an attempt to rid himself of the feeling of hurting someone so readily. Justice for me, he had told the Rabid Conflagration, and it hadn’t been a lie; the pirate had deserved to hurt for what he’d meant to do, and that thought alone threatened to drive Jimin mad.

To ground himself, he thought of the time Yoongi had saved him from the alleys of Shanghai, when he’d pried Jimin’s hands away from himself in an attempt to stop him from clawing his own skin raw. He made himself stop now as well, clinging onto Yoongi’s words, but they brought tears to his eyes and he let them fall, the emotions rampaging within him too hard to bear.

Will you still call my name when you learn what I’ve done? he thought, sobbing quietly to himself within his bloodied cell. Will I still be a songbird in your eyes?

Surely, without the thought of the Agust and her crew, Jimin would’ve lost himself sometime over the course of the following days. Terror was ever-present now alongside the panic constantly brimming inside of him; every time he heard someone raise their voice up on deck, he would flinch and curl in on himself, counting seconds and waiting for the ship to be set aflame.

Before, he had feared the Rabid Conflagration well enough, but now, having seen the extent of his lack of sympathy, that fear had grown into a terror so crippling, it was all Jimin could do to simply breathe at times. “They won’t kill me,” he whispered to himself time and time again over the course of one day, his quivering voice hardly convincing. “Not yet, they won’t kill me.”

They had been at sea for five days when Jimin saw Oseong again. He was jarred out of his sleep at the break of dawn by the sound of the brig door opening, alarm rising fast in his veins when his sleep-drunk mind realized who had come to unlock his cell. He made himself scowl, but kept his lips pressed into a thin line; he knew his voice would betray him if he spoke now.
“Come with me, Harpy,” the Rabid Conflagration sing-songed, exuberant. “I have something to show you.”

Whatever it was, Jimin was certain he did not want to know, but he didn’t dare refuse lest the man pull him along by force. He held his tongue and rose to his feet, struggling not to stumble from the numbness of his legs, and as he followed Oseong out of the brig, he realized the pirate captain was humming under his breath. It had the dread in him grow tenfold; he did not want to know what could possibly bring the Rabid Conflagration such glee.

Jemin followed him up to deck, only to have his heart sink like a stone in his chest when he found what had Oseong in such good spirits.

Next to the Rabid Conflagration’s ship stood another vessel, tall and proud with white sails and streaks of the darkest blue, a symbol of peace flying high above its colors. The two ships were connected by a gangway, manned by two men on each end; pirates dressed in hard leather on one side, and men dressed in uniforms of white and blue on the other.

Jemin felt his stomach turn, his eyes wide as he stared at the vessel. He knew what it was. He had been aboard one just like it, a long time ago.

“There is someone here who would like to see you.” Oseong’s words tore him out of his state of ominous recollection. “You may not remember him,” the pirate captain mused, his voice dripping with mirth, “but I believe you’ve met my beloved brother.”

He turned around and lowered his head in a mock bow before one of the newcomers from the mariner ship, and Jimin needed only to see the gilded shoulder boards of the heavy coat on the man’s shoulders to know who he was, his high rank glaring from the prestige of his uniform.

“I knew it,” the vice admiral said coldly, hard contempt swimming in his eyes as he looked at Jimin. “I knew you were a pirate.”

Whatever fear had plagued Jimin over the past days faded in the blink of an eye, replaced by a rage so fierce it burned his insides. He remembered every word of the tale Taehyung had told him about the man standing before him, about everything he’d done to him and to Yoongi.

Jemin had never felt a hatred so strong.

“And I told you the last time we met,” he said harshly, the words falling from between gritted teeth, “you don’t know anything, Son Jikan.”

Chapter End Notes

………….. uh-oh.

uh-OH.

UH-HECKIN’-OH, JIMIN’S IN TROUBLE NOW.

As if he wasn’t before.
BUT HEY, YO, THE OCEAN’S HARPY, CAN I GET AN AMEN? ISN'T IT BLOODY HECKIN' PERFECT???

Okay, okay, so this chapter is basically one long conversation plus some SPICY DRAMA TOWARDS THE END THERE, and holy shet, I enjoyed writing this one SO MUCH. Oseong, the Rabid Conflagration, is an absolute psychopath, an incredibly hypocritical anarchist, but holy shet it he interesting to write!! And especially when he interacts with Jimin, BOI, they are MEANT to clash SO HARD on every single plane of existence!!

D R A M A, I LOVE IT!!!
Chapter Summary

One of these men had hurt those Jimin loved most in the past and the other was planning on doing it again. Two brothers. Two of the worst people he knew.

“Son Jukan,” he said slowly, contempt curling around every syllable of the vice admiral’s name. It seeped into the man’s expression and made it even sourer, his jaw clenching visibly. “And,” Jimin said and turned his scowl on his brother, whose childlike amusement was clear as day, giddiness in his smile as he nodded at Jimin, “Son Oseong.”

Chapter Notes

I’m a day late ((again)) due to sickness, and I’m legit shaking as I type this, BUT IT DON’T MATTER, BECAUSE THIS CHAPTER IS. ON. FIRE.

SAVAGE JIMIN, ROUND 2, FIGHT!!!!! Seriously, my heart’s beating like crazy in my chest, holy heck, this is some GUD SHET RIGHT HERE.

MOOSIC (all of ‘em are from the drama Signal);

- -
- -
- -
//passes out

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jimin could see them now, as he stood before the two brothers. The similarities between the two, the sharp brows and jaw, the high cheeks. He looked between the two, and all the fear he’d felt ever since the Rabid Conflagration had burned his own crewman had faded to give way for the anger that simmered in his chest.

One of these men had hurt those Jimin loved most in the past and the other was planning on doing it again. Two brothers. Two of the worst people he knew.

“Son Jukan,” he said slowly, contempt curling around every syllable of the vice admiral’s name. It seeped into the man’s expression and made it even sourer, his jaw clenching visibly. “And,” Jimin said and turned his scowl on his brother, whose childlike amusement was clear as day, giddiness in his smile as he nodded at Jimin, “Son Oseong.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw the vice admiral scowl in what must’ve been disgust, perhaps a product of the reminder of the name he shared with the Rabid Conflagration. He despises pirates,
Jimin thought, yet here he is, standing aboard a pirate’s vessel as if it was his own.

A rush of disdain went through him, brought on by Son Jukan’s hypocrisy. “This is quite the revelation,” he said flatly and crossed his arms over his chest as he looked at the mariner, matching his contempt with ease. “I wasn’t aware you had a brother.”

“Oh, you couldn’t have known.” It was Oseong who spoke, his voice sharp with joyless amusement. “Sometimes, Jukan himself forgot he had a brother,” he sneered. “After all, who could ever be as interesting and fascinating and good as Min Yoongi, Min Yoongi, Min Yoongi?” He chuckled, the sound utterly without glee. It was a stark contrast to the smile on his lips, only widening even in his ire, and whether his vexation was a product of the thoughts that accompanied his own words, or the stiffness that fell over Jukan’s face, Jimin couldn’t tell.

The tone of his voice was clear as day, however. “I’ve heard his name more times in my life than I have my own,” Oseong said and looked at his brother. “To my little Jukan, Min Yoongi was far more important than I could ever be.”

Oh, Jimin thought as the nature of the Rabid Conflagration’s words dawned on him. He hates him. He really hates Yoongi.

He bristled against his own will, his feathers prickling beneath the surface of his skin. “So in order to reclaim your brother’s attention, you want to kill Min Yoongi?” he asked and turned to the vice admiral before Oseong could do more than look at him. “And you. To think the mariners really were working together with the Rabid Conflagration for the sake of Min Yoongi’s destruction.”

Jukan’s lips fell open, a protest surely resting on the tip of his tongue, but Jimin carried on without allowing him the chance to interrupt. “I wonder, Son Jukan,” he said, “how many people have you allowed to die because of whatever petty vengeance it is you seek against Yoongi? How many children have died screaming as their flesh burned at his hand,” he pointed at Oseong, “for the sake of your own selfish desire?”

Perhaps unwittingly, Jimin took a step forward and raised his hand, and if Oseong hadn’t lashed out to keep his brother in place, Jimin might’ve lost said hand before he could curl it into the collar of Jukan’s uniform. “You don’t care about whom you have to sacrifice in order to see your own twisted justice be made,” he spat out, the words like venom in his mouth. “You imagine yourself on a pedestal and look down on us, as if we were worth nothing more than the dirt under the soles of your polished shoes.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” the vice admiral began and attempted to pry himself out of Oseong’s hold, but the pirate captain’s grip was iron, a manic smile on his lips as he stared at Jimin. “Release me, or-”

“I said it, didn’t I?” Jimin interrupted loudly, his blood burning in his veins. “I told you you were no better than a pirate.” He knew he shouldn’t say any more, he knew all his words could accomplish was to seal his own fate, but he didn’t care. Not before this man.

With a sound akin to a growl, he shoved Jukan backwards and away from him, briefly turning away to look to the mariner’s ship and all its crew. “I was wrong, wasn’t I?” Jimin said, his voice growing loud. “You are worse. Pirates don’t hide their intentions behind their precious law, they don’t make themselves known as a hero to the people and then betray the trust the people have put in them.”

This is not the law, he thought, but unlike last time he’d stood before Son Jukan, the words filled him with anger rather than despair.
The vice admiral struggled against his brother’s grip, hissing as he tried to reach for the sword at his hip, but no matter what he did, Oseong didn’t falter. Whereas Jukan looked ready to tear Jimin to pieces with his bare hands, the Rabid Conflagration seemed all but rapturous, as if he’d never been as elated as he was now.

“You call Yoongi a traitor,” Jimin pressed on harshly, “yet you’re blind to your own treason.” He recalled how lost he’d felt when the vice admiral had imprisoned him all those months ago, and wondered if every victim that had lost their life to Oseong had prayed for the mariners to save them, unknowing of what the mariners really were. “You’re a bastard,” he hissed, the words falling through gritted teeth. “A hypocritical, heartless bastard.”

“Enough.” With a snarl, Jukan tore himself free from his brother’s hand and stormed up to Jimin, his face twisted in rage as he lashed out to fist his hair and force his head back, baring his throat at the same time as he drew his pistol from his hip. “You can’t speak to me like this, scum,” he said, his voice quivering under the pressure of his fury. “You forget your place.”

Even now, when Jukan pressed the mouth of the firearm up against his jaw, Jimin did not fear.

“I know my place, Son Jukan,” he retorted hotly, the pain in his scalp only stoking the fire burning in his chest. “I’m a pirate. I am scum, I am a bastard, a curse to this world, but at least I have the guts to admit it. I know my place. You are the one who have forgotten.” The fingers in his hair tightened and he gritted his teeth hard against the exclaim that rose up his throat; he would not give the vice admiral the satisfaction of knowing he’d caused even an ounce of pain.

“Mariners are supposed to protect the people from pirates,” Jimin said, his voice shrill with rage as he held Jukan’s glare, metal pushing hard against his chin, “but when they refuse, we must protect the people from ourselves.” Even in the vice admiral’s grip, he turned his head enough so he could see Oseong, his disdainful hatred flaring at the sight of the pirate captain’s expression. “Particularly from the likes of him.”

The Rabid Conflagration seemed nothing short of exhilarated, hunger in his eyes as he looked at Jimin, and the maniacal smile on his lips widened tenfold when he was addressed. “I’m honored, Harpy,” he said gleefully and lowered his head in a mock bow.

“It wasn’t my intention to honor you,” Jimin hissed and looked back at Jukan, whose jaw was clenched so tightly, he could hear the bones of it creaking, lips pressed into a tight line as he chewed on his words. Jimin waited, and even with the pistol pressed so roughly against the skin of his jaw, he knew the vice admiral would not fire.

Jukan wanted Yoongi dead more than he wanted Jimin, and Jimin was his key to luring him out.

True enough, when the mariner finally did move, it was to shove the pistol back into its holster at his belt, hissing a curse as he straightened up. “I will take him with me,” he gritted out and yanked Jimin forward by his hair, pain rippling down his spine. “I will keep him chained in the brig until we find Min Yoongi.”

The smile quickly fell off Oseong’s lips, something akin to a petulant pout taking its place “Why?” he asked, frowning like a child about to lose his favorite toy. “There is nothing for you to get out of him. The Harpy already told me where Min Yoongi is. He’s waiting for me.”

“Have you learned nothing?” Jukan emitted a sardonic scoff, and the Rabid Conflagration’s brow twitched. “If Min Yoongi is waiting for you, it means he’s waiting for you to fall into his trap,” the vice admiral said dryly. “If you approach him recklessly, like some mad dog, you will not stand a chance.”
He pulled hard on Jimin’s hair and forced him to stand upright, sending another violent rush of pain through his skin. A hiss found its way past Jimin’s lips before he could stop it; it was as if his scalp was being torn clean off his skull. “When he learns I have captured one of his own, that traitorous fool will come charging into our midst to free his precious subject,” Jukan said. “He has done it before, and he will do it again.”

His words made Jimin think of Rodel, whom Yoongi had saved from the clutches of the mariners long before Jimin had known either of them. He knew the mariners had been the ones to cut out the rigger’s tongue and that Yoongi had levelled an entire mariner base with the ground in order to save him, facing odds worse than death to rescue his friend.

The memory of Rodel, along with the vice admiral’s contemptful voice brought sorrow to the volatile emotions brimming in Jimin’s chest and caused them to burst. Before he could stop to think, he raised his hands to his head, the nails of his fingers growing long and sharp as talons, and he dug them into the limb holding so tightly onto his hair.

His claws sank had time to hit bone before Jukan could free himself, cursing as he withdrew his hand and used his other to grip hard around Jimin’s neck. His talons tore the mariner’s flesh open and he felt blood trickle down the back of his head, and then he was shoved against the deck, his chest and arms taking a painful hit against the wooden flooring. Quickly, he turned, prepared to lunge at the vice admiral and do whatever it took to stop him from speaking of those Jimin loved in such a voice.

As soon as he’d pushed himself onto his knees, however, he felt the sharp blade of a sword slide under his chin, the tip of it settling against his throat. “I told you,” Son Jukan said loudly, the hilt of the sword clenched in his bleeding hand, “You forget your place!”

“Fuck you,” Jimin spat and felt the tip of the vice admiral’s sword prick his throat. “If you think I’d ever let you use me as bait to lure Yoongi into a trap, you’re even more stupid than I thought.”

He swallowed hard against the rage within him, the blade pushing harder against his skin. In his pocket, the Rune of the Storm beckoned him, burning against his skin through the fabric of his pants. *You promised,* he had to remind himself, over and over. *You promised the High Oracle you wouldn’t use it to tear yourself apart.*

“Do you have to take him?” Oseong’s voice brought him out of his inner battle, the wide, sharp grin back on his lips as he addressed his brother. “I haven’t laughed like this in years,” the Rabid Conflagration said gleefully. “I’d be sad to see him leave.”

“Then sad you shall be,” Jukan snapped and swept his sword aside in favor of reaching down to pull Jimin onto his feet, his grip like iron around his arm. “I will sail to the harbor of Busan. If you wish to partake in Min Yoongi’s execution, that is where you should go as well.”

The pirate captain snorted at that. “I think not,” he said and shrugged. “Strange as it may be, little brother, I have more faith in the Harpy than I do in you. I will sail farther east.”

“Have it your way.” Without another word, Jukan turned on the heel and made for the gangway to his ship, dragging Jimin along with him. Jimin went easily enough; between the Rabid Conflagration and the Son of the Sea, he gladly chose the latter.

He’d rather be restless from fury than from fear.

“Good luck, Harpy,” Oseong said as they left, smiling his unnaturally wide smile as he waved at Jimin, the gesture nothing but mocking. “Truly, I hope to see you alive after I’ve burned Min Yoongi from the face of earth.”
Jimin dug his heels into the unstable gangway and turned, fighting against Jukan’s harsh grip. “Yours will be the ashes spread into the sea, Conflagration,” he promised, and even now, the words tasted foul on his tongue. “Even if I have to be the one to do it.”

It was all he had time to say before Jukan gave his arm a rough tug, all but throwing him off the gangway and onto the deck of the mariner ship. Jimin staggered; if not for the vice admiral’s grip, he would’ve taken another fall. “Fetch the irons,” Jukan barked at his men. “I want him chained to the floor. Arms, legs, neck, everything.”

Unlike the last time Jimin had been aboard the vice admiral’s vessel, Jukan himself led him to the brig now, fingers digging bruises into his arm as he pulled him along. His subordinates trailed after them, carrying horribly familiar shackles in their arms, the chains rattling for every step they took.

_They don’t know_, Jimin thought, the fire in his veins burning every trace of dread that dared bare itself within him. _They don’t know the true nature of my blessing._

As Jukan dragged him into the depths of the brig, Jimin felt his heart lurch in his chest when he realized there were windows lined up along the eastern wall, small, barred openings in the pristine wood. _I can escape_, he realized, struggling to keep his face an impassive mask amidst his enemies. _If I can assume the shape of the canary, I can escape._

Jukan pulled open one of the cell doors and shoved Jimin inside, pushing him with enough force to have him stumbling. “Chain him,” the vice admiral commanded and stood back to let his men do their work.

With a sense of bitter familiarity, Jimin allowed the mariners to push him onto his knees, his jaw clenched tight as they closed the shackles around his wrists and ankles and attached their chains to the floor. One by one, they slid into place with a deafening _click_, and for every single one, a chill went through him, replacing the burning rage within him with one as cold as ice.

_Wait_, he told himself. _Don’t give yourself away._

He held Jukan’s gaze as the mariners worked, glaring up at the vice admiral and refusing to let him see even a trace of fear in him. He ground his teeth as he felt the heavy iron bangle be raised to his neck, the faintest tremor crossing his face as the shackle was snapped shut, the slightest stutter plaguing his breath under its weight.

“Good,” Jukan said curtly, his voice austere with restraint. He gave a jerky nod to dismiss his subordinates and let them pass him on their way out of the cell, leaving Jimin alone in its midst. “Set course for Busan right away. We’ll want to reach the harbor within the week.”

“Yes, sir.”

When the vice admiral didn’t retreat along with his men, Jimin knew what would come as soon as the doors to the brig were pulled shut, but even so, he had little time to brace himself before Jukan lashed out.

The vice admiral’s fist rammed hard against his cheek, carrying enough force to snap Jimin’s head to the side and blacken his vision. The chain around his neck dug harshly into his skin and he gasped, pain bursting through his skull and throat. His mouth filled with the taste of copper and he knew he’d bitten the inside of his cheek, but before he could so much as draw a quivering breath, Jukan grabbed the chain that bound his neck and yanked, pulling him as far upright as he could sit.

Son Jukan was silent in his rage, not a sound escaping his tight lips as he went about his retribution.
The second hit caught Jimin’s brow, the third his temple, and the fourth his cheek. Every blow was more painful than the last, his skin splitting open from the abuse, blood seeping hot down the side of his face. His skull felt as though it might crack, his head throbbing, yet no matter how many times the vice admiral punched him, Jimin held his tongue, his eyes squeezed shut as he endured Jukan’s rage.

_Yoongi._ He repeated the name in his thoughts over and over, once again clutching onto it for the sake of his sanity. _I’ll come back to you,_ he thought, biting down around a pained exclaim when another blow was dealt to his cheek, the bone beneath his skin on the verge of cracking. _Whatever it takes._

His resolve carried until Jukan adjusted his method and he kicked Jimin in the gut. Pain exploded from within him and shoved the air out of his lungs along with a strained, breathless cry, the sound wet with the blood that had gathered in his mouth. His spine curled and he leaned forward until his brow touched the floor, heaving as he struggled to survive the seemingly endless bursts of agony spreading to the rest of him from the pit of his stomach. Tears sprung to his eyes but he refused to let them fall, coughing to hide the quiver in his breath.

_This is nothing,_ he told himself, hissing through gritted teeth as he pressed his brow against the floor, desperate to relieve the pressure in his spine. _Nothing compared to what he has done to Taehyung and Yoongi._

Dimly, Jimin realized the vice admiral had ceased his onslaught and retreated, his breath labored from the effort the beating had cost him. All he did was stand there, panting and glaring down at Jimin, contempt and fervent hatred all but oozing off his person. “I will kill you,” he rasped thinly, and Jimin was reminded of the first time they’d met, when Jukan had been so crazed in his pursuit of Yoongi, he had shown his true colors so easily, mania in his voice. “You and all the rest of the scum sailing aboard his cursed ship.”

His words triggered a bizarre urge to laugh in Jimin, one he chose not to suppress. The chuckle left his lips, hoarse and wet with blood, and it hurt his lungs and made the painful throbbing of his skull worse, but he let it carry all the same. “Even your brother didn’t beat me,” he said when he sobered up, groaning as he made himself sit upright on the floor, a sense of dark satisfaction stirring in him when he saw the vice admiral’s unnerved expression.

Every movement hurt, but Jimin squared his shoulders all the same and spat out a mouthful of blood, the taste vile on his tongue. His lips were split and the corners of his mouth ached sharply when he spoke, but he refused to cower before the warning glare in Jukan’s eyes; in the vice admiral’s desperate actions, Jimin could see their beginning, and he would not let Jukan go without hearing them from him.

“It must be hard for you, Son Jukan,” he said hoarsely, his throat raw with the effort it had taken not to cry out in pain, “to realize how much of a monster you are. Just like your brother, who has burned men and women and children alive. _You’re_ the one who doomed those people, by allowing Oseong to roam free for the sake of your vengeance.”

Jimin was taunting him, he knew it; every word he spoke brought him closer to another round of painful blows, but he persisted all the same. Perhaps even out of insanity. “I understand now, why you adored Yoongi so much,” he said. “I may not have known him when he served on your side of the law, but if he was half the man he is today, I understand.”

His lips curled into a smile, twitching in pain. “You saw what he was and you knew you could never be the same,” he said coldly. “You, who wanted so much to be revered in the same way as he, could never be as good. So you clung to him instead, didn’t you? You latched onto him and turned your own brother away in favor of Yoongi.”
“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” the vice admiral said stiffly, his face turning paler for every passing second.

“No, but it’s simple enough to guess,” Jimin retorted, a harsh bite to his words. “You have to be blind not to see the reason behind Oseong’s obsession with Yoongi’s death. He says he wants to kill the law itself, but he wouldn’t need to kill the Cardinals to do that. He would only have to kill you and all the rest of the mariners, yet he is so, so adamant on getting his hands on Yoongi.”

He glared up at Jukan, daring him to argue, and when the vice admiral said nothing, Jimin sighed and eased his muscles, wincing at the dull ache in his very bones. “You both loathe him with such fervor,” he said. “I thought there must’ve been something he’d done to you, something terrible to warrant such hatred, but it really is so obvious now.” He smiled, a wry curl of his lips. “For your brother, it was jealousy, and for you, it was envy.”

He wanted to chuckle, but the sound left his lips as something akin to a snarl, shrill with his anger. “He must’ve been able to see it,” he spat. “He must have, or turning his back on you and your law to save someone innocent from your senselessness wouldn’t have come so easy.”

Jimin knew the choice had been far from easy for Yoongi to make, but the lie fell easy from his lips all the same. There was a dark and volatile desire in him to give back even a fraction of all the pain Son Jukan had caused those who sailed aboard the Agust, those who had welcomed him into their arms when he’d been thrown away from everything he knew.

“Is that why you despise him with such fervor?” he asked. “Because you realized how little you mattered in his eyes?”

“Shut up!” The vice admiral broke out of his stiff posture and lashed out to take hold of the iron collar around Jimin’s neck, forcing him to raise his chin and meet his eyes. “Shut up,” Jukan hissed shrilly, pale as death. His hands were shaking where they held onto Jimin’s shackles, and he knew he’d struck deep within the mariner’s emotions. “You will keep your mouth shut about things you know nothing about!”

“I won’t,” Jimin snapped and wrenched himself out of Jukan’s grip, clenching his teeth against the strain it cost his neck. “This time, you will hear what I have to tell you.” The chains rattled as he tried to move his hands, his shackles preventing him from moving closer to the vice admiral than he already was. “It’s high time you realize the gravity of your mistakes, Son Jukan.”

He raised his voice to interrupt the mariner before he could even begin to form his retort. “I wasn’t a pirate the first time we met,” he said loudly, his throat burning with the effort it took to speak. “You don’t have to believe me, but it is the truth. I had been taken aboard the Agust against my will, and when we landed at Fukue Island, I managed to escape. I sought out you mariners and hoped I’d never have to return to that ship, but do you know what?”

Even in his fit of anger, he smiled, the curl of his lips as cold as ice. “You showed me how wrong it was of me to put my faith in the law,” he hissed. “You, Son Jukan, a vice admiral of the mariners, a man who is supposed to bear the weight of the law with pride. You showed me what the law truly is.”

In spite of his shackles, Jimin was the one to tower over Jukan now, his harsh words silencing every
attempt the mariner made to speak.

“All I was was a captive,” he said. “A tribute thrown away by my people to live out my days aboard a pirate ship, and then die with no one to mourn me.” In the far back of his mind, Jimin marveled at how easy the words came to him, utterly void of pain. “But what you did to me sent me into those pirates’ arms. If you are the law, then Min Yoongi and the people who sail with him saved me from it.”

A spark of affection seeped into the volatile emotions in his chest, brought on by the mere thought of the crew, and he swallowed hard against the sudden thickness in his throat. “The Ocean’s Harpy exists because of you,” he said, sneering. “Perhaps I should be grateful. After all, without you, I would never have found the home they gave me. I would’ve escaped and lost the chance to see who Min Yoongi truly is.”

His voice softened against his will, as if he was incapable of speaking harshly about those who meant so much to him. “I might’ve had to live my life without knowing any of them,” he said. “Without ever knowing what a good man Yoongi is.”

“You sound as if you loved him.”

The vice admiral’s words were cold as ice and harsh in tone, as if Jukan believed they were an insult. To Jimin, however, they were strength, and so the smile that graced his lips was warmer than all the other, the anger within him retreating.

“As much as one can love a pirate,” he said and felt his heart twist in his chest, overcome by an urge to tell Yoongi that himself.

He might’ve laughed at Jukan’s bewildered expression if the truth behind it hadn’t been so sad. To the vice admiral, pirates were nothing short of inhuman, creatures no man or woman could ever love, thus he, while he knew Jimin’s words weren’t a jest, couldn’t comprehend the reality of what he’d said.

“None of it will matter when we reach the harbor of Busan,” Jukan said at last, stiff as a statue as he moved towards the cell door. “Min Yoongi will come for you as he did before. This time, I’ll be ready for him.”

“You will never be ready,” Jimin replied, smiling. “It doesn’t matter how big of an armada you call upon to help. He will never lose to someone like you.”

The vice admiral halted in the doorway of the cell, his bleeding knuckles gripping hard at the iron bars. For a moment, Jimin expected him to turn around and resume his beating, but after hissing a harsh curse, Jukan stepped outside and slammed the cell door shut, its bars rattling. “We shall see,” he spat, and with that, he left, storming out of the brig.

When the door closed behind him, Jimin allowed himself only a moment to wallow in his sorry state, swallowing down the sob that brimmed in his throat before he shifted to make himself as comfortable as he could kneeling on the hard floor. He took a deep breath, grimacing as a spasm of pain went through him, his head throbbing dully. Blood trickled down the side of his face from a gash just beneath his hairline, but he made himself ease out of his tension, enduring all of it to concentrate on what he had to do.

*It comes from yer feelings,* Xiao had told him many months ago, when Jimin had asked him how to change his skin into that of his blessing. *‘S like breathin’, like blinkin’, like movin’ yer arms and legs.*
“Like breathing,” Jimin whispered and drew a lungful of air, coaxing his heart into settling and forcing his rage to retreat to the far back of his mind. He made himself be calm in spite of his hopeless state, letting go of the suffocating sensation the iron collar around his neck brought on, of the chafing around his wrists and ankles.

_I promised I would return to you, Yoongi_, he thought and found determination in the captain’s image, _and I will._

Jumin closed his eyes and gave himself over to the darkness, urging his body to shift, to change, to assume the shape that would allow him to escape. His feathers stirred underneath his skin, like a rush of strength, filling him with peace even in his captivity.

For what could’ve been hours and hours, Jimin didn’t move. Not that he could’ve even if he’d wanted to, his shackles binding him to the floor. He kept his eyes closed and listened to the world around him; the sound of the sea flowed in through the barred windows, the vessel rocking steadily on the waves. He heard every drop of blood fall from his chin to the floor, the rhythmic tapping like the beat of his heart, slow and steady and comforting for all its morbidity. There were voices coming from up on deck, but Jimin ignored them all, hearing only that which gave him calm.

He couldn’t have said how much time had passed when he suddenly heard something new, a sound somewhat familiar. One he’d heard the last time he’d been where he was now, chained to the floor of a mariner vessel.

“I know you,” Jimin murmured, his voice hoarse after hours of silence. “I know what you are.”

It was a ship, a vessel smaller than that of the mariners, sailing swifter over the sea. The sound it made as it crossed the ocean was different from the one he’d been listening to ever since he’d been left alone. He couldn’t help but smile. “Have you come for me again?” he asked of the darkness. “Agust?”

As soon as the name had left his lips, a spark went through him, the very core of his chest thrumming in response to his thoughts. It rippled throughout his body, spreading to the very tips of his fingers to fill him with life, and when he parted his lips to draw a quivering breath, his lungs felt as if they might burst.

“Show me,” he said, his voice high, barely human any longer as he succumbed to the claim of his blessing. “Show me the other half of who I am.”

Jumin couldn’t have said when his bones began to shrink, but suddenly, the iron collar around his neck slid out of place, falling away from his person to clatter heavily to the floor. His arms came loose from their shackles to allow his feathers to burst out of his skin, warm and soft as they spread across his body, like the embrace of an old friend.

When Jimin finally dared to open his eyes again, the brig cell looked ten times larger than it had when he’d been locked inside it, the ceiling higher than he could ever hope to reach. The iron bars around him seemed just as thick as he was, the spaces between them three times as wide; surely, he could’ve walked through without so much as touching the bars.

_I did it_, he tried to say, but all that left him was a high trill of the canary’s voice, a pleasant chirp of a sound. With his heart hammering in his chest, Jimin looked down, and had he still had the face of a human, he would’ve smiled so wide his cheeks might’ve burst.

The entirety of his body was covered in feathers, soft and pink in color, stained darker where the down had caught on the blood of his injuries. He was so small, he could’ve fit inside his own hand.
He stood in a mess of his own clothes, far too big for his body; even the shackles lying next to him were monstrously large in his eyes. Ever so carefully, he raised one of his thin legs, his sharp talons scraping against the metallic surface as he moved to stand on top of it, exhilarated as he went.

Jimin was smaller than he’d ever been in all his life, but he’d never felt so strong as he did then.

*Wait for me, Yoongi,* he thought and looked around until he found one of the barred windows high above him. As quickly as he could, he hopped over to where his pants had fallen and struggled to pull the Rune of the Storm out of his pocket with his short beak, huffing when he took it in a secure grip before turning around. Bracing himself, he spread his wings from his body and gave a tentative flitter, a thrill of anticipation rushing through him. *I’m on my way.*

Flying came easier to him than it had in his hybrid form. It was as if his body had always known how to fly in the shape of the canary; as soon as he beat his wings with the intention to fly, he broke from the ground, his movements sharper and more precise than they’d ever been. Truly, it felt as natural as breathing.

Jimin reached the window in the blink of an eye and he easily slipped through the bars, only to be torn out of his exhilaration and be brutally reminded of what had brought on his skinchanging to begin with.

A foreign ship was sailing right towards him, its black sails carrying it fast over the waves, much faster than Son Jukan’s vessel could move. The ship was armed for combat, cannons pushed out far along its deck, and its crew stood on the rails, draped in dark furs and painted leather, brandishing axes and swords and chanting words that made no sense to Jimin’s ears.

The ship’s figurehead was the head and torso of a vicious feline with canines long enough to crush through a man’s chest. High up on the main mast fluttered a black flag, the skull of the same long-toothed beast painted across the dark fabric.

Somewhere behind Jimin, a high-pitched whistle tore through the air to sound a warning of approaching hostiles. Startled, he turned in the air and bristled at the sight of Son Jukan standing by the rail of his ship, barking out orders at his men to brace for combat. The vice admiral didn’t seem to notice Jimin, the little bird hardly worthy of his attention, and Jimin felt a dark sort of glee, wishing he could see the man’s face when he realized the brig was empty.

When the strange ship drew nearer still, sailing faster than Jimin had ever seen a vessel move, he beat his wings and rose higher in the air, keen on putting as much distance between himself and the two ships before he could be caught in the battle to come. He turned to the direction from whence the foreign ship had come and took off, only to freeze in midair when his eyes found the captain of the vessel.

She stood next to the helm and called out commands to her crew in a language Jimin couldn’t understand, one hand gripping the arm of the helmsman while the other was raised in the air. There was blue and white paint on her face and limbs, and her yellow eyes all but shone with anticipation as her ship drew closer to combat, sharp teeth bared in a wide grin.

Jimin recognized her with ease, a rush of ominous premonition rising in him. He tried to call out to the captain, but the bird’s trill that left his beak was drowned out by the deafening roar of mariners and pirates alike, both sides braced for vicious combat.

*Don’t do it,* Jimin thought desperately, and without a moment of doubt, he turned and dove towards the northern Cardinal’s ship, dread rising strong in his chest. *Turn around, quickly, and escape while you still can, Talya.*
THIS

IS

SPARTAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA--

HAPPY HECKIN' HALLOWEEN, Y’ALL, TALYA IS IN THE GODDAMN HOUSE.

I'M SO HECKIN' EXCITED I THINK I'M ABOUT TO EXPLODEWAIHKLSDÓAD-

ALSO. ALSO I BROKE THE CAPS LOCK BUTTON BECAUSE JIMIN IS A BIRD NOW. ANActual LITTLE BIRD. I CAN'T, I REALLY CAN'T WITH THIS STORY ANYMORE, IT GIVES ME TOO. MANY. FEELS.

LMAO some of you thought the end battle was coming now, with the Agust's crew rockin' up to save Jimin, BUT HAHAHAHA, NOPE! Y’mall forget about Talya~~ Hehehee, I think only one of you realized it might be her who gets Jimin out of trouble with the mariners, since she was, after all, looking into them and digging into Jukan’s relationship with Oseong. So fret not, tStS will still continue for a little while longer~~

JOIN ME IN DEATH. NEXT WEEK’S GONNA BE A BATTLE AT SEA BETWEEN THE LONG-TOOTHED TIGER OF THE NORTH AND THE SON OF THE SEA. WE FINALLY GET TO SEE WHAT GOOD SON JUKAN ACTUALLY IS FOR. AND TALYA.

ISTG I'M GONNA KEEP THE CAPS LOCK BUTTON IN FOR THE FOLLOWING 4 DAYS.

((okay but i'm legit dying i'm so sick xD))
Before Jimin had the sense to look away, abashed, she began to change, dark fur blossoming from every inch of her skin. Her canines grew out over her lower lip, her face steadily becoming unrecognizable, her snout forming and her ears growing in size. Her skinchanging went beyond what Jimin had seen in Shanghai, and when her spine curled and she lowered herself onto all fours on the deck, he could do nothing but stare as she took on the full shape of the sabertooth tiger.

The Long-toothed Tiger of the North was a beast unlike any other, more terrifyingly beautiful than any creature Jimin had ever seen, limbs and body thick with raw strength. Even in this form, Talya’s fur was painted in the same colors her skin had been, and truly, her form was like that of a god, radiating an aura of power.

Chapter Notes

MOST. KUDO’D. YOONMIN. FIC. ON AO3. THAT’S US, BABY.
//blasts confetti EVERYWHERE
ALSO 8000+ KUDOS?!?!?!
//hurls confetti machine into the sun
A L S O T A L Y A V E R S U S S O N J U K A N?!?!?!?!?!?!?
//bursts into flames
WE LIVIN’ SO LARGE NOW, AYYYYYYYYYYYY-
MUSIC. FECKIN’ MUSIC;
Two Steps From Hell - Norwegian Pirate ((also known as TALYA’S THEME SONG, Y’ALL))
BTS - NOT TODAY

AHHHHHHHHHH-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The northern Cardinal’s ship was faster than Jimin could’ve imagined a ship to be, sailing over the rough waves and towards the mariner’s vessel so quickly, he feared he might not reach her in time. The ship was narrow and its sails were square and dark, with an odd symbol painted in white across its midst, likely the rune of its captain’s blessing.
Perhaps its speed was an illusion, a mere figment of Jimin’s dread; his instincts screamed at him as he flew closer, begging him to turn around and get as far away as he could from Son Jukan and his men, the mariners braced for battle.

_Talya, _Jimin tried to shout when he reached the ship’s rail, but once again, all that left him was a melodic trill of a bird, muffled around the Rune of the Storm in his beak. _Talya, turn back._

She couldn’t seem to hear him even though he flew so close, consumed by the same exhilaration that seemed to radiate off her crew as they prepared for the clash. She fed the unending roar that rose from her men, her hand raised high over her head in a manner of charge, and when she heard the sound of the mariners’ sharp whistle, she laughed, feral glee dancing over her face.

*She has no fear,* Jimin thought, a chill settling deep within him. _She has no fear, and it’ll be her doom._ Fearlessness is recklessness.

He couldn’t remember who had been the one to tell him those words - a part of him wondered if they had been whispered to him by his own blessing - but he knew they were true. He knew what fate could befall even predators when they knew no fear, thus he tightened his grip on the Rune of the Storm and beat his wings hard to reach the northern captain.

Jumin staggered when he landed on the rail by the helm, the rune nearly slipping from his beak in his unfamiliarity of his own form. He was quick to shake himself out of his daze and look up, and found Talya staring down at him, her eyes wide in a shock that mirrored his own.

“**Jumin?**” she exclaimed loudly and lowered her hand so she could reach out towards him, halting just shy of his small body. “Jumin, is that you?”

How on earth she could’ve recognized him in a shape he’d only just assumed for the first time, Jimin couldn’t even begin to imagine, but he was glad for it; explaining himself in this form would surely have been quite a task. _Turn back,_ he attempted to say, a sharp trill leaving his beak. _You must, it’s too dangerous._

Briefly, he noticed the sharpness of Talya’s nails, resembling the claws of her blessing, but even though hers was a natural enemy of his, a feline to his avian, he did not fear her. “Calm, Jimin,” his friend said and took him in her hands, holding him ever so carefully. “What are you doing here? Where is your crew?”

Far from here, Jimin trilled even though he knew she wouldn’t understand. _Just as you should be._ He glanced at Jukan’s ship and his feathers bristled at the rapidly dwindling distance between the two vessels. The mariners were armed with pistols and swords, a stark contrast to Talya’s men, who bore naught but axe and shield, one or two of them holding sleek wooden bows. _Talya-_  

“**Did they do this to you?**” Jimin looked up at his friend and found worry etched deep into her brow, her yellow eyes trailing the bloodied feathers around his head. “That is Son Jukan’s ship,” Talya said and nodded towards the mariners’ vessel. “**Did they take you? Did he hurt you like this?**”

In his distress, Jimin had all but forgotten the throbbing ache in the side of his face, but upon hearing the vice admiral’s name, it returned in full force. Grimly, he nodded his head - as grimly as a canary could - and Talya’s frown changed, a flash of anger crossing her face.

“Then we will pay them back ten times over,” she said and held Jimin to the furs around her chest, her right hand leaving his body to rise up over her head again. She cried out, her voice resembling a roar as she called to her crew in a foreign language, and when they replied and the chorus of their voices shook the very sea, the sharp grin returned to Talya’s lips, feral and exhilarated.
No, Jimin said, his high voice muffled against the cardinal’s clothes. Turn back, you must!

His pleas fell on deaf ears; Talya barked something at those of her men who stood closest and pointed to the main sail’s rigs. They nodded their compliance and moved in concurrence to the lines on each side of the ship, deftly working to untie the knots. The sails sprang free and caught the wind, and with a jarring start, the ship burst forward on the sea, racing towards the mariner vessel.

“Geir, Refur, Lárus!” Talya shouted and leaned over the rail, drawing the attention of her crew. Jimin followed her gaze and saw a familiar man with braided blonde hair nock an arrow to his bow and draw it. A thrill of dread went through him at the sight of the small, compact bomb tied to the arrowhead, its fuse lit and burning. Two other pirates followed the archer’s lead, each taking aim at different parts of the mariner ship, and then they waited for their captain’s command, standing firm on the rocking ship as if they’d done it all their life. “Fire!”

They released all as one, the arrows whistling through the air. The blonde man’s projectile buried itself halfway up the main mast while the other two caught the rail and gunport, burying deep into the wooden surface. Jimin watched, wide-eyed, as the mariners scrambled away from the targeted areas, stumbling over each other in their hurry to escape the inevitable detonation.

All three bombs went off at once, the very air trembling under the force of the explosions. A portion of the ship rail on the ship’s starboard side was blasted open along with the deck, three gunports burst open to let their cannons fall into the sea, and the main mast gave a devastating crackle as it began to fall, a large, gaping hole in its midst robbing it of its stability.

The sight of fire reminded Jimin of the first time he’d been saved from a mariner ship, his blood burning in his veins.

While the mariners called for water to douse the fires left behind, Talya emitted a triumphant cheer and leapt over the rail, still clutching Jimin to her chest as she walked out amongst her men. More commands fell from her lips without a shred of doubt, as if she had been born to give them; her men obeyed easily, her own grin mirrored on each and every one of their faces as they went about lighting the cannons lined up along the rail while the helmsman lined the ship up to fire.

Before the cannons could release, however, Jimin felt a ripple of dread in his skin, brought on by an abrupt shift in the wind. It was unnatural, as if some strange entity had fed strength into it, and it filled him with an ominousness that had him thrashing in Talya’s grip, desperate to find its source.

When he turned his head to the mariner ship, he found his answer standing on its deck, looking positively demonic as he stood surrounded by fire and debris.

Son Jukan stood at the very centre of his vessel, his stance wide and secure as he moved his arms in deliberate, heavy gestures, as if he was attempting to tear rifts into the air itself. It might’ve looked silly, if not for the fact that the wind around him seemed to be responding, following the direction of his arms, growing and growing until the fires were pushed down under its weight and the sea began to roil around him.

A blessing, Jimin thought numbly, his little heart beating fast in his chest. He bears a blessing.

With a sound like a snarl, the vice admiral pushed forward with his right hand while he drew his left close to his chest, his movements labored and fierce. For a fraction of a second, the air stilled completely, and Jimin dug his talons into the skin of Talya’s hand on sheer instinct.

The winds crashed against both ships mere seconds before the cannons fired. As Talya’s ship was jarred forward so violently the northern Cardinal lost her balance and fell, the mariner vessel was
pushed back, retreating several paces on the sea. The cannons released, the entire ship quivering with
the force of it, but every last one of the cannonballs missed their mark, shooting past the arching
figurehead of Jukan’s vessel.

A hissed curse fell from Talya’s lips as she pushed herself upright on deck, thrown off by the sudden
shift in balance. Her hand had formed a cage around Jimin to keep him from being crushed under her
weight and she released it now, allowing him room to breathe again. “What on earth was—” she
began and looked around, but whatever she’d been about to say died on her tongue when she turned
around. “Oh, fucking- brace!”

The word left her as a scream, and Jimin only had time enough to see the mariner ship lined up on
their port side, cannons ready and burning, before Talya pulled him hard to her chest with both hands
and threw herself onto her side on the deck.

The sound of cannonfire was deafeningly loud and the crack of wood louder still. Every cannonball
hit the pirate ship and jerked it violently to the side, pushing it hard against the sea and spraying
debris all across the deck. Jimin flinched within the confinements of Talya’s hands, unharmed but
terrified; he cried out and almost dropped the Rune of the Storm when he felt the northern Cardinal
flinch above him, a sharp hiss spilling from between gritted teeth.

_Talya, _he trilled, worry tearing at his insides. _Talya, are you hurt?

If she was, she didn’t show it. As soon as the impact had passed, Talya rose to her feet and hurried
towards the helm, calling out orders as she went. Her crew set to action immediately, either preparing
for their next attack or pulling injured me towards the centre of the deck, none of them deterred by
taking a full hit of cannonfire.

“Listen to me, Jimin,” Talya said urgently after exchanging a quick word with her helmsman. “There
is something on that ship I must have. Son Jukan received something before he sailed from Korea,
and it’s cru- cruci- fuck, it is important.” She spoke as fast as she could, her eyes shifting between
Jimin and the mariner ship. “I will board that ship,” she said and laughed when Jimin emitted a sharp
sound of protest. “I will board it and distract them, but I will need your favor.”

A loud creaking sound briefly pulled Jimin’s attention to the deck, where the pirates were making
ready to fire hooked harpoons from what looked like enlarged crossbows, sturdy chains attached to
the butts of the iron spears.

“Qasim will tell you,” Talya said and jerked her head at the helmsman, whom Jimin only now
recognized as the same man who had translated for her at the meeting of the Cardinals. “He can tell
you better.”

It was harder than Jimin could’ve imagined, to quell the dread within him when his friend set him
down on the damaged rail next to the helm and turned to her crew. They stood ready to fire but she
held them off, waiting for her ship to come in perfect line with that of the mariners. “Steady,” Jimin
imagined her saying, her words unfamiliar in his ears, but when she swept her hand to the side in a
cleaving motion, it was hardly a challenge to decipher what she commanded.

_“Fire!”_ 

The crossbows released all at once, firing five harpoons at the hostile vessel. On its deck, Jukan
mirrored the sweep of Talya’s arm, but unlike the northern Cardinal’s, his gesture gave birth to a
harsh wind. The air bent and roared as it was forced to grow, yet it only carried enough strength to
blow three of the spears out of the way before they drew too close to stop.
The two remaining harpoons dug themselves deep into the hull of the mariner ship, one of them hitting just beneath the legs of the figurehead. As soon as they’d found their mark, the pirates locked the chains in place by a lever and drew them taut, and with the bigger ship as leverage, Talya’s vessel turned sharply, pulled closer by the binds.

“Release these chains! Break them off, now!”

Jimin heard Jukan’s voice erupt from somewhere aboard the mariner ship and the dread in him grew stronger still, but before he could as much as squeak in distress, Talya reached out and placed a finger to the center of his brow. “Worry not, Jimin,” she said, and the grin that graced her lips was every bit as feral as the blessing that burned within her. “I will show you what northerners are made of.”

As soon as they words had left her lips, she reached up and pulled the first from around her shoulders, not a trace of hesitance in her movements as she shed the leather vest that covered her chest. The bare skin of her torso was painted in the same colors as her face, various patterns of blue and black and white drawn over the hard muscles of her stomach and breast.

Before Jimin had the sense to look away, abashed, she began to change, dark fur blossoming from every inch of her skin. Her canines grew out over her lower lip, her face steadily becoming unrecognizable, her snout forming and her ears growing in size. Her skinchanging went beyond what Jimin had seen in Shanghai, and when her spine curled and she lowered herself onto all fours on the deck, he could do nothing but stare as she took on the full shape of the sabertooth tiger.

The Long-toothed Tiger of the North was a beast unlike any other, more terrifyingly beautiful than any creature Jimin had ever seen, limbs and body thick with raw strength. Even in this form, Talya’s fur was painted in the same colors her skin had been, and truly, her form was like that of a god, radiating an aura of power.

A deafening cheer rose from her crew upon her skinchanging’s completion and Talya joined her voice to it, a rough, dreadful roar rising from her maw, the sound ringing in Jimin’s ears for long after it had faded. The helmsman, Qasim, chortled and said something Jimin didn’t catch, but the Cardinal understood him well enough, nodding her great head. She looked at Jimin one more time and he numbly imagined her smiling before she took off, leaping over the rail and onto the deck, her movements graceful and strong.

“She will board as soon as we come close enough.” Startled, Jimin turned to look at the helmsman, who was smiling the same smile he had in Shanghai, sardonically amused. “Son Jukan is a proud bastard,” he said. “He will go after her, which means you can freely enter his quarters unnoticed and find the letter we need.”

Jimin inclined his head in confusion and Qasim snickered as if he could sense it. “The eastern emperor sent a letter to that vice admiral,” he said and nodded towards the mariner ship. “We don’t know what it says, but why else would an emperor converse with a mariner if not to discuss the Rabid Conflagration, who has set parts of his kingdom aflame?” He smiled. “Our captain decided it is worth a flash attack on his ship to find out.”

Jimin’s eyes widened in shock at his words, but he was hardly given any time to consider what he’d heard before another blood-curdling roar rose from behind him. He turned just in time to see Talya sprint across the deck of her ship, spurred on by the cheers of her crew, and when she reached the rail, she jumped, the ship rocking under the force of it. As if she had wings to carry her, she leapt over the gap between the two ships and snarled as she landed heavily on the deck of the mariner vessel.
Jimin couldn’t fault the mariners who staggered backwards and away from her, frightened by her vicious appearance. Fear draped itself over those who stood closest and sent them reeling away, but Talya didn’t let them go far. With a thundering growl, she lashed out at the one who stood closest and sank her abnormally long fangs into his pistol-wielding arm, drawing a pained scream from him and forcing the weapon out of his grip.

She released him quickly enough and whirled around to snap at the others, following them when they scrambled away. She was truly like a beast, and when she buried her sharp teeth deep in the throat of one of the soldiers, Jimin looked away, loathe to watch such a gruesome display.

“Son Jukan may have the wind on his side,” Qasim said, his voice bearing far too much amusement, “but not even the wind can protect you from the Long-toothed Tiger’s fury.”

The cries of war quickly became screams of terror as the mariners struggled to escape the vicious beast, but no matter where they went, Talya followed. There was nowhere to run where she couldn’t follow, unless they chose to abandon ship and throw themselves into the sea.

“Here he comes.”

Jimin turned quickly, his tension growing tenfold when he saw the vice admiral make his way towards the forecastle, where Talya was rampaging. He drew his sword as he went, a pistol in his other hand, and a thrill of dread went through Jimin at the sight; no matter how fearsome, even a sabertooth tiger would fall to a bullet.

“They’re readying their firearms,” Qasim said and turned to shout an order to the rest of the crew before addressing Jimin once more. “You have to go now and find the letter as fast as you can. Our captain can’t dodge bullets forever, and we can only escape as soon as we have what we came for.” He reached out towards Jimin and quirked a curious brow. “Leave that rune with me. You might lose it if you take it with you.”

Jimin’s feathers bristled without his intention, every instinct of him screaming to not let go of the Rune of the Storm. I can’t give it to you, he tried to say, a reproachful trill leaving his beak. It is not yours to possess.

The helmsman smirked as if he had understood his words. “It will not be mine,” he said, amused. “I already have a blessing of my own, one I will show to you as soon as you’ve brought the letter.” He glanced towards the mariner ship and his smile grew wider still. “I swear on my captain’s life I will return that rune to you when you come back.”

For a moment, Jimin wondered why Qasim hadn’t sworn on his own life, but then he heard the sound of a gunshot and he knew he had no other choice. Quickly, he moved closer and dropped the rune into the helmsman’s hand, feeling oddly light as soon as he’d let it go. You will return it, he said shrilly, the voice of the canary sharp as a whistle. I will make sure you do.

He didn’t linger to hear Qasim’s sardonic reply, but spread his wings and took to the skies, flying swift over the unruly skies. It felt unnatural, the wind thrashing out of its own control, and it took more effort than before to cross even the short distance between the two ships.

Jimin glanced to the deck as he flew high above it, dread tearing at his chest as he watched Talya dart around on the deck, avoiding the muzzles of Jukan and his mariners’ firearms by hiding either behind the foremast or another one of the white-clad soldiers. She bit hard into their arms or waist to keep them still and shield her from bullets, snarling whenever one of the others drew close with the intention of attacking her with a swords.
Wait for me, Jimin thought as he dove towards the open doors of the captain’s quarters. I will be quick, so wait for me.

Another wave of cannonfire went off just as he’d entered the cabin, this time fired by Talya’s crew. The mariner ship gave a violent jerk and the furniture inside the quarters shifted, some of it falling over and rolling over the wooden floor. Jimin remained in the canary’s skin, afraid he might not be able to change back if he assumed human form now. As quickly as he could, he flew over to the vice admiral’s desk and began digging through the messy piles of letters and orders spread out across it, searching for anything that could indicate a royal decree.

Hurry, hurry, he told himself, his nervousness rising for every shot he heard outside and for every scream, praying none of them came from Talya’s pirates. He rifled through the papers with little finesse, his sharp talons ripping the papers he discarded as useless in his rush to push them aside. Hurry, before it’s too late.

His dread escalated when he’d searched through every piece of paper atop the desk and found nothing, his heart beating hard and fast in his chest. Where are you, he asked of the room and rose into the air, beating his wings nervously as he looked around. Where are you, where are you, where are-

His eyes landed on a fallen side table in the corner of the quarters, broken glass spread out beside it, likely the remains of a decorative vase. Beneath the shards lay a pristine envelope, and even in the dim light of the room, Jimin could see the gilded sigil stamped on the letter’s back.

Please, he trilled and flew over to the fallen table and took the envelope in his beak, carefully pulling it out from underneath the pile of glass. Please, please, please be what I’m looking for. He leaned close to inspect the sigil, and true enough, it was the same mark he’d seen in the newspaper every time one of the eastern emperor’s decrees had been a topic of writing.

I’m coming, Talya, he thought and took the letter into his beak. Be ready to escape.

Jimin had barely had time to beat his wings once before the doors were thrown open with enough force to have the hinges rattling in protest. “That cursed beast,” Son Jukan hissed, clutching his left arm, which was bleeding profusely from his bicep, his prestigious coat stained a deep, deep red. “I will have her skinned, if I so have to use my own men to-”

His eyes found Jimin and he went still, eyes widening as he looked from the envelope in his beak to the rest of him, the color draining from his face. Jimin stood rooted to the floor as if paralyzed, shocked by the vice admiral’s sudden appearance; all he did was stare as realization slowly dawned upon Jukan, rage replacing his confusion.

“You,” he spat and took a step forward. “Harpy.”

His approach broke Jimin out of his startled daze. You won’t touch me again, he trilled, the canary’s voice high-pitched and sharp, and when the vice admiral took another step towards him, he broke off the ground, beating his wings fast as he darted towards the gap between Jukan’s legs. The mariner tried to catch him, lashing out with his uninjured arm, but Jimin was faster; he felt Jukan’s fingers brush against his feathers, but while the vice admiral had to waste time on turning around to chase him, Jimin was free to fly straight for the doors.

He turned sharply as soon as he’d left the quarters and shot up towards the skies, hoping to mislead Jukan by hiding in the sails. He flew as fast as his wings allowed, rounding the rigs and lines of the broken main mast before crossing the gap to the foresails, his heart pounding in his throat as he went.
Jimin chanced a glance down to the deck and saw Talya still holding her ground against the mariners, supported by the archers at her ship. She was bleeding from a gash at her ribs but stood firmly all the same, growling and snapping at any mariner who dared step too close. The sight of her bloodied muzzle was enough to keep the lot of them at bay, shuffling nervously while those with firearms attempted to get a clear shot of her.

*Retreat,* Jimin called out, his bird’s trill lost in the sounds of war. *I have the letter, now we must escape.* Talya showed no signs of having heard him, thus he set his eyes on her ship; if Qasim saw the letter, he could call upon his captain and engage in whatever plans of escape they had.

Jimin flew out from the security of the foremast, but he never made it to the pirate ship. As soon as he left the mariner vessel’s sails, the winds around him shifted, growing violent as they pushed him away from Talya’s ship, drawing him back down whence he’d come. Startled, he turned his head and found Jukan glaring up at him from where he stood on the quarterdeck, his right arm raised as if he was reaching for Jimin, his hand forming a claw.

“You will not escape from me,” the vice admiral shouted, his voice austere with rage. “Not again. I will not allow it!”

Panic tore at Jimin’s chest when he realized the winds were too strong for him to fight, his small form easily pushed off his course. He resisted with all his might, but every beat of his wings had him staggering in midair, losing the balance of his flight to the vicious gusts of air pushing him down. *Please,* he cried, and even his voice was swallowed by the harsh winds. *Please, let me go.*

Below him, Talya lunged at the mariners upon hearing Jukan’s voice, snarling as she attempted to reach the vice admiral and stop him in his attempt to pull Jimin out of the air. “Hold her back!” Jukan barked at his men, who complied with no small amount of hesitance, trembling as they put themselves in the tiger’s way.

*You won’t have me again,* Jimin cried and continued to struggle even though he knew it was helpless. *You won’t have me, I refuse, you won’t have me in chains ever again. I’d rather cut off my wings than be imprisoned by you, I—*

His own words gave him pause, his eyes widening as a thought dawned on him, a plan of escape. It would hurt, surely, and his success was all but guaranteed, but right now, his only chance was to use the winds against him who controlled them. *You won’t have me,* he trilled again. *Ever.*

With a deep breath, he closed his eyes and ceased the movement of his wings, allowing himself to be claimed by the winds of Jukan’s blessing. Far below him, he heard Talya emit a distressed cry, the sound akin to a yowl of pain, but he held onto his determination and let himself fall, counting every fraction of a second as he went.

*Wait,* he thought. *Wait for me, Yoongi.*

When there was barely three meters left between him and Jukan, Jimin’s eyes flew open and he made himself shift, breaking out of the canary’s form until he was clutching the emperor’s letter between teeth rather than a beak. He heard the vice admiral emit a startled curse, caught off guard by the abrupt shift in Jimin’s size, and he had no time to change his winds before it was too late.

Jimin crashed hard against Jukan’s chest, his shoulder taking the brunt of the hit against the vice admiral’s jaw. The collision’s impact shoved the air out of Jimin’s lungs and the momentum of the crash knocked them over, the weight of his hybrid form pressing down on Jukan’s injured arm.

The two of them skid along the deck, jarred by the impact, and Jimin recovered faster; before the
momentum of his fall had time to settle, he slipped back into the form of the canary, the letter clutched tight in his beak as he flew back up into the air.

*Let’s go,* he cried when he passed Talya, who seemed to understand him without error. She emitted another deafening roar and turned, easily breaking away from the mariners to follow Jimin back to her ship.

While Jimin landed clumsily on rail by the helm, toppling over as soon as his talons found support, Talya changed out of her skin as soon as she touched the deck, unabashed by her nakedness as she assumed her hybrid form and shouted an urgent command for her crew. They obeyed immediately, releasing the harpoon chains from the crossbows at the same time as they braced the cannons for one final round of fire.

“*Jimin.*” She came rushing up to the quarterdeck and took Jimin into her hands, her warmth seeping into his exhausted form. “Only a little longer,” she told him before turning to Qasim. “Are you ready?”

“Always,” he replied smoothly and let go of the helm.

With a nod, Talya signaled for her crew to light the fuses and fire, but what burst from the cannons weren’t gunpowder or cannonballs. Instead, blasts of dark haze erupted from each muzzle to create an opaque smokescreen between the two ships, robbing both sides of sight of the other.

Next to Jimin and Talya, Qasim sank to his knees and braced his hands flat against the deck, his eyes closed in concentration. Jimin held his breath in waiting for a display of his blessing, expecting a tremor, a pulse, a ripple, anything at all to give away what the nature of his blessing was.

Nothing of the sort came, however, and his confusion must’ve shown even on the face of his avian form, for Talya emitted an amused chuckle above him. When he looked at her, she jerked her head to the side and raised her hands so Jimin could get a proper look of the sea on the starboard side of the ship.

His eyes widened at the sight that greeted him. All of a sudden, there were five of Talya’s ship sailing by their side, each duplicate heading in its own direction. They were identical in every way, down to the obvious damage in the vessel’s hull, brought on by cannonfire. Even the figures standing by the helm were the same; Jimin could see a little bird cradled in a woman’s hands, its feathers pitifully ruffled and bloodied.

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“The Blessing of Illusion,” Qasim said when he rose to his feet again, grinning down at Jimin’s shocked state. “The mariners will have to choose which out of the six of us to follow, and whichever they settle on following, they won’t be quick enough with only half a main mast.” He reassumed his grip on the helm and turned it, steering the ship through one of the illusions. “We’ll be safely out of their reach within a half hour.”

Jinin wanted to refuse to believe him - it couldn’t be so simple - but upon hearing the helmsman’s words, all the exhaustion that had built up in him ever since he’d flown onto the Rabid Conflagration’s ship came creeping from deep within him. *Stay awake,* he told himself sternly, but his aching muscles ignored him, his eyelids growing heavier for each passing second.

He couldn’t have said if he dozed off somewhere amidst his attempts to do the opposite, but suddenly, he was sitting on the deck, a slight chill seeping into his body. Blearily, he looked up and at Talya, once again dressed in her leathers. She was looking away from him, holding out an arm towards Qasim, whose arms were full of furs of all skins and colors imaginable.
Talya took the furs from the helmsman, but rather than wrap them around herself, she draped them over Jimin’s shoulders. He startled weakly, having not realized his own change back to human form; gone were his feathers and wings, the letter clenched tight between his teeth. Had he not been so tired, he would’ve shied away from her, but in his exhaustion, all he could do was let go of the envelope and give a small, grateful smile, and pull the warm furs tighter around his body.

“Here you go,” Qasim said and held out the Rune of the Storm for him to take. Jimin’s arm trembled slightly as he reached for it, quivering with exhaustion, and when he took the rune, all he wanted to do just then was sleep. “Be careful with that one. It’s a curse more than a blessing.”

“I know,” Jimin rasped, his voice hoarse even with the high pitch of the canary lingering.

“You can rest now,” Talya said and smiled at him, grasping firmly at his shoulders. “We will take you back home.”

*Home,* Jimin thought, warmth filling his chest as he closed his eyes. *I’m coming home, Yoongi.*

Chapter End Notes

HE’S COMING HOME, YOONGI. HE’S FINALLY FECKIN’ COMING HOME.

I mean, provided they actually find the Agust. Who knows~

:3

Wh-what are these NORMAL-LENGTH CHAPTERS, oh my god, I can’t believe this, TWO IN A ROW HAVE BEEN LESS THAN 8K, WHAT ALTERNATE DIMENSION IS THIS?? Are we still on earth?????

lel, thank heck for my sanity :'D

NORTHERN PRIDE, FECK YES, TALYA, FECK YES, AHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-

Talya’s ship is sort of a mix between a viking ship and a “common” pirate ship; like the vikings’ ships, hers is quite narrow and the shape of the sails are squared, but her ship has two masts rather than one, and instead of a tiller, it has a helm to steer the ship. It also has shelter at the far back, for sleeping, but everything else is done under the sky; cooking, eating, resting, medical care etc.

ALSO, if anyone is curious; Qasim is egyptian, Talya’s first mate, and the father of her child. He used to serve the law and was sent up north to assist in the capture of the Long-toothed Tiger, but when he met her, he was charmed by her way of life ((and her, huhuhu~)) and decided sailing under a black flag would be more… satisfying. He’s, uh, not the most MORALLY SANE person, but Talya keeps him in check well enough~

Also, yeah, Son Jukan, the bastard, has the Blessing of Wind, one of the few elemental runes. Together with Oseong’s, the Blessing of Fire, they have two of the most powerful blessings known to man. I mean, he’s an absolute cunt and lets his emotions get the better of him, which means his blessing doesn’t respond to him as well as it could, but eh~
It’s the third elemental rune we’ve seen so far; Jukan has the Blessing of Wind, Oseong has the Blessing of Fire, and the Pirate Priestess has the Blessing of Water.

HOKAY. WOW. OKAY SO. BOY WAS THIS EPIC AS SHET, I CAN’T BELIEVE I WANT TALYA TO STEP ON M- ADOPT ME, I MEAN ADOPT ME, WOW, YUP, OKAY.

I will continue to scream about this for DAYS, I tell you, D A Y S
“Are you sure they will be there?”

“No,” he said immediately, “but I hope with every fibre of my being they are.” There was doubt stirring in the back of his mind, but Jimin pushed it away, refusing to consider any other possibility. “Yoongi once told me that if the crew ever were to be separated from one another, the point of reunion would always be our destination. However, when I left, we didn’t have one. We had nowhere we needed to go, so…”

His lost his word for a moment and his jaw clenched in his silence, biting back that which sought to dig a crack into his resolve. Unblinking, he drew a sharp breath, and his voice was thicker than before when he raised it again. “So I can only hope they have kept their faith in me and waited,” he said hoarsely.

Yeah, mm, you might wanna grab a box of tissues for this one. Or, you know, twenty boxes. LORD KNOWS I NEEDED THEM WHEN I BAWLED MY EYES OUT AT A CAFÉ AND SCARED THEIR EMPLOYEES, YUP, THAT WAS FUN.

Music, music, um, I listened to Clean Bandit's "Symphony" on repeat throughout all of this, so... you can do the same 😊

“You look like you want to part the sea and run the rest of the way.”

Jimin barely shifted at the voice, only turning his head as far as he could without looking away from the horizon as he voiced his reply, an incoherent hum of a sound. He didn’t dare avert his gaze; the southern coast of China had come into view only minutes earlier, the bay of Qinzhou visible through the magnifying eye of a spyglass. As soon as Jimin had seen it, he’d climbed onto the ship’s figurehead to stand as far out as he could without falling into the sea.

Behind him, Talya chuckled at the undeterred concentration with which he looked at the horizon. “The empire won’t disappear if you blink, Jimin,” she said kindly and reached up to give his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “With this wind, we will reach the shores soon.” She huffed another laugh when Jimin only replied with another wordless hum and glanced at the horizon. “Are you sure they will be there?”

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“They had better,” Talya said, “or I will keep their songbird for myself and take him north.”

Her blunt words made him laugh, knowing there was a promise hidden behind her jest. An offer of welcome, should Jimin find himself without a place to call home. It warmed him and brought the tears closer to his eyes, but he blinked them away, pulling his furs tighter around his shoulders.

“You don’t have to wait for us, you know,” the northern Cardinal said. “You can fly faster than my ship, I’m sure. You can go on ahead.”

That finally pulled his attention away from the horizon, shaking his head before looking at her with a small smile. “No,” he said. “I… it would be rude of me when you have helped me so much.”

Not only had Talya lent him her own clothes, warm garbs of furs and leather and belts lined with painted beads to wear, but the ship’s doctor had seen to the wounds Jukan had inflicted on him. Vpha, Talya called the woman who wore a beast’s skull as a mask, a shaman who’d spent years of her life learning the arts of healing from spirits and gods alike. With deft hands, she had treated Jimin’s cuts with oils and salves, and given him a strong-smelling brew to drink for the pain.

He had been utterly bewildered by the shaman, frightened by her appearance, but both her voice and hands had been soft, and when she was done with his treatment, she had touched the skin over his heart and left behind a winding trail of white paint. “A blessed soul,” Talya had told him, smiling. “Favored by the gods.”

Her words had left him more confused than before, but he’d been too anxious to dwell on the cryptical statement. He still was. “You are not simply a means of travel for me, Talya,” Jimin said. He glanced at the horizon, as if he would suddenly be able to see farther than moments earlier. “You’ve taken me this far, so the least I can do is guide you the rest of the way.”

The northern Cardinal chuckled at his words, a sharp grin playing at her lip. “What a polite pirate you are, Jimin,” she said with obvious fondness in her voice. “The winds are good today. We will reach the shores within the hour, and then we will know.”

An hour had never felt as long as it did then, every second like an hour of its own. Jimin refused to look away from the horizon again, staring until his eyes stung and he was forced to blink. Every time he did, a prickle of dread rose in him, a fear of suddenly waking up in the cell of Son Jukan’s ship to realize his freedom had been but a dream.

“Wait for me,” he murmured, wringing his hands before clenching them tightly. “Please, please, wait for me.”

The closer to the mainland they sailed, the more nervous he grew, and the effort it took to keep his doubts at bay became more and more unbearable. By the time they reached the bay of Qinzhou, Jimin was tense as a bowstring, his jaw taut and aching as he guided their way towards their destination.
“You will rupture a vein like that,” Qasim remarked when he passed the figurehead to help reel in the foresails. “I’ve seen stone statues with more ease in their limbs.”

Jimin said nothing, deaf to anything that wasn’t his constant murmur of, “Please, please, please,” as he stared at the riverbank’s treetops. For all the vessel’s speed, the trek upstream was painfully slow, every passing beat of his heart painful as he waited, pleading. “I’m here, I’m home, please, please be—”

His words died on his lips when he heard a voice that belonged to no one aboard Talya’s ship, distant as it cried out in warning of an approaching ship, and Jimin had never known relief as strong as he did when a familiar black flag finally came into view from behind a cluster of trees, the white skull of a fox painted across the dark fabric.

“Oh, thank the gods,” Jimin whispered, tears springing to his eyes. “Thank the gods..!”

All he felt was joy, unbound and endless, at the sight of the pirate ship and its dark, folded sails. He nearly cried out in relief as he climbed down from the figurehead, his heart swelling in his chest until he felt as if he was about to burst. Talya grinned widely at his state of delirious glee and he parted his lips to tell her they had done it, they had waited for him, but before he could find the right words, an uninvited voice rose to the back of his head and tore all that happiness away from him quicker than it had come.

_The Ocean’s Harpy_, the memory of Oseong sneered at him, _made known to the mariners after you disrupted Commander Heo Byunghee in his attempt to apprehend Min Yoongi, and killed him with nothing but your blessing’s claws._

His airways drew themselves tight and he staggered backwards, horror rising in him like bile as he turned back to look at the Agust. “No,” he croaked, suddenly feeling cold as ice even in the warm summer air. Whatever joy he’d felt was instantaneously replaced by a flood of dreadful images, recollections full of blood and pained screams and a mariner drawing his final breath at Jimin’s hand. “No…”

“Jimin?”

Startled, he recoiled from the voice and backed farther still, his breathing uneven and shallow as he turned to Talya. Her eyes widened in shock and she raised a hand towards him, halting when he flinched violently, avoiding her touch. “Jimin, what—”

“No,” Jimin said again and shook his head, reaching up to press his hands over his ears, frantic in his attempt to shut out the screams. “No, no, go away, please..!”

It was as if he’d forgotten all about the mariner he had killed until now. In his state of tense distress, Jimin had, perhaps subconsciously, kept all the emotions relating to his horrible deeds suppressed in the far back of his mind, put there by the act he’d been forced to uphold before the Rabid Conflagration. His effort had persisted through his encounter with Jukan, and in his anxiousness to return home, he had forgotten Oseong’s words and the truth behind his actions.

But now, upon the sight of what he had killed for to keep safe, they all came rushing back at once, alongside an overwhelming tide of panic.

_Killed him_, Oseong’s voice taunted, manic in his glee, _with nothing but your blessing’s claws._

“Stop it,” Jimin pleaded, his voice a mere whine. He tried to breathe in the way Hoseok had taught him many months ago, but for every inhale, his airways seemed all the more tight. Pain flared up in
his knees and he vaguely realized he had fallen, his fingers digging into the muscles of his arms. His nails carved red scores into his skin, but rather than pain, he felt another wave of dread rise within him.

*Killed him,* the memory of Oseong spat, and Jimin echoed his words mindlessly.

“...I killed him,” he said shrilly, his voice a mere whistle. “...I-I did, I killed him, I did it, I...”

He heard voices above him, loud in their worry, but no one touched him for fear of what it might cause him. They were distant in his ears, as if they were far, far out of his reach.

As if he was all alone with the thoughts that made him fear himself.

Suddenly, he heard a voice far more familiar than that of anyone who sailed aboard the northern Cardinal’s ship, laced with the same kind of alarm that flooded Jimin’s veins. He knew it, he knew who it was, but before he could even begin to raise his head, strong hands took hold of his shoulders and pulled him forwards until he was pressed up against their chest.

It was a familiar feeling and a familiar scent, and Jimin felt as though he might break.

“Yoongi,” Jimin whispered, his voice cracking pitifully. His hands found the captain’s shirt and he gripped the fabric hard, pushing deeper into his embrace. “...Yoongi...!"

“Jimin!”

The use of his name, for all the frantic worry in which it was spoken, shattered whatever restraint might’ve remained in Jimin’s distraught state of mind. Tears spilled hot from his eyes and he sobbed, the sorrow in his chest threatening to consume him. *He won’t call me songbird anymore,* he thought and felt his heart break.

“I’ll...” Yoongi, he managed between fits of hysterical tears. He refused to look up, terrified of what he might see, if the captain’s face portrayed all the hatred and disgust Jimin felt within himself. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, please, you have to know-”

“Jimin,” Yoongi said again and attempted to coax him into raising his face, but Jimin refused, pushing hard against the captain’s chest. “What-”

“I killed him, Yoongi!” The words were like bile, burning his throat, painful as they left his lips. Had his hands not been gripping Yoongi’s shirt so hard it might tear, Jimin would’ve clawed at the skin of his throat to rid himself of the mere sensation of voicing the terrible thing he had done. “I killed him, I did, ” he cried. “I killed him, I remember it, I-I... please, I’m sorry, I didn’t I’m not-”

Even if all hopes of redemption was gone, he persisted, if only to make Yoongi see that he wasn’t a monster. “Please,” he said, desperate in his anguish.

Jimin didn’t remember moving, but suddenly he was kneeling on the floor of Yoongi’s quarters, his breath passing his gritted teeth in sharp, high-pitched whistles. The captain’s arms were wrapped around him, tight and unyielding as they held him close, so close. It was more than he could bear. He attempted to free himself from Yoongi’s embrace, having no right to stay in it, but the captain refused to let him go.

“N-no,” Jimin croaked and pushed against Yoongi’s chest, shaking his head as best he could. “I’m sorry, please.”

“What happened to you?” the captain asked, distraught. “What-”
Jimin continued to struggle, attempting to escape his arms all the while hiding his face. It was too much, he couldn’t bear to hear the softness of Yoongi’s voice nor feel the care with which he held him. He deserved none of it, he knew, but he didn’t dare confirm it. He didn’t dare look at Yoongi and see all that which he feared stare back at him.

“Stop fighting me,” the captain said, grunting with the effort it took to try and make Jimin be still. There was impatience in his voice, brought on by his state of stressed alarm, and when Jimin refused to listen, something akin to dejection seeped into his tone as well. “Listen to me, listen—what are you-songbird!”

It was as if every last cell of him had frozen all at once. The chaos in him ceased its rampage; for a blessed moment, his sorrow vanished and took all its darkness with it to leave him in a state of silent stillness. His tears ceased to fall and he raised his head, his eyes wide as he finally looked at Yoongi.

The captain looked terrible, the skin beneath his bloodshot eyes bruised and dark. His cheeks were thinner than they had been when Jimin had last seen him, a slight hollow in the skin between his cheekbone and jaw. His lips were dry and cracked, and there was a wetness to his eyes as he looked up at Jimin, brimming with a different sort of sorrow.

Slowly, Jimin raised his trembling hands to Yoongi’s cheeks, hardly daring to breathe. “Again,” he whispered thinly, his own tears on the verge of spilling once more. “Please.”

For a moment, the captain was lost, confusion marring his brow as he looked at him. Slowly, the nature of Jimin’s plea dawned on him, and he swallowed thickly before raising his voice. “Songbird,” he said hoarsely.

Jimin’s heart twisted in his chest and he leaned closer, closing his eyes as he pressed his forehead against Yoongi’s. “Again.”

“Songbird,” Yoongi said and pulled him as close as he possibly could. “You’re home, songbird, you’re here, I…” He drew a quivering breath, but it couldn’t keep the tears in his eyes from falling. “You’ve come home, songbird.”

Jimin cried like a dam had burst, sobbing uncontrollably into the crook of Yoongi’s neck. Every trace of pain he’d felt ever since landing on the Rabid Conflagration’s ship came rushing out of him now, until it was all he could do to simply breathe. The captain held him through all of it, his face pressed against the top of Jimin’s head, whispering words of comfort through his own tears.

Yoongi held him like would never let him go again, and Jimin did the same, his hands reaching around him to clutch tight at the back of the captain’s shirt and pull him closer, only closer.

Hours might’ve passed before Jimin managed to calm himself down, if only a little. He sniffled, tears still trickling down his cheeks, but he listened when Yoongi spoke again, his voice thick with emotion. “Tell me what happened, songbird,” the captain murmured into his hair, the fingers of his prosthetic limb rubbing circles into his shoulder.

Slowly, Jimin pushed himself upright, his hands braced against Yoongi’s chest. When he drew breath, it was painful, his throat aching with the effort it took. “I,” he began, rasping. He couldn’t bring himself to meet the captain’s eyes, staring down at where his hands curled into the wet fabric of his shirt. “I k-killed someone. A… a mariner. I did it, he told me, a-and I…” Panic rose like a tidal wave within him again and he gritted his teeth, giving his all to concentrate on Yoongi’s touch on his arms.
rather than the dread within him. “And I can’t even regret it,” he whispered. “I can’t regret it, and that terrifies me.”

He made himself look at the captain, his breathing thin and high as a whistle. “He hurt you,” Jimin said and hovered his hand over Yoongi’s cheek, suddenly afraid to touch. “He hurt you so much, he would’ve killed you if I… if someone hadn’t stopped him. He would’ve killed you, and I can’t stop thinking about how he deserved to die. He didn’t, no one does, I know that, but I…”

Ever so faintly, he placed his fingers to the captain’s cheek and felt more tears fall from his eyes when Yoongi leaned into his touch.

“I killed him,” he said, “and I regret it for all the wrong reasons. I… I’m a monster.”

“You’re not.” Before Jimin could even begin to cast down his gaze, Yoongi cupped his cheeks and made him meet his eyes. “You are not a monster,” he said, not a shred of hesitance in his voice. “Not you, never. I’ve never met someone like you before, who treasures life so dearly, as if it is the most precious thing in this world.”

“Yoongi,” Jimin started, but the captain shook his head, desperate to make him understand.

“You’ve seen a dirty side of the world,” Yoongi said. “Fuck, you’re living on the dirty side of the world now, but you don’t change. You never have. You have seen the world for what it is, yet you refuse to accept its injustice. You refuse to resign yourself to the shit most of us have agreed to live with. When all the rest of us choose to turn our backs on that which is right or wrong, you don’t. You face it all, even when you know how hard it will be.”

There was reverence in his voice now, and he smiled as he brushed his thumbs over Jimin’s cheeks, wiping away his tears. “You are beautiful, songbird,” he said. “Every part of you is beautiful, your heart more than anything.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips softly against Jimin’s. “You don’t lose that which makes you who you are,” he murmured when they parted, “and I love you for it.”

Briefly, as Jimin descended into another fit of sobbing, he wondered how much he could cry before he would run out of tears. “I do, too,” he managed to say between fits, his voice breathless and broken. “I love you, Yoongi.”

“I know, songbird,” the captain said and held him close. “I know.”

It seemed like an eternity before Jimin finally ceased his weeping, and when he did, he told Yoongi everything that had happened after he’d left the Agust. He told him of the ship he’d seen on the horizon and how he’d realized whom the colours belonged to. He told him how he’d landed on the Rabid Conflagration’s ship and convinced him to turn around with nothing but lies, leading him away from the Agust and its crew.

When Jimin told him about Jukan and what he had done, Yoongi’s grip on him tightened, rage seeping into his frame. “I’ll kill him,” he hissed and raised a hand to trace the bruises and cuts framing Jimin’s face, not quite trusting himself to touch them. “Fuck, I’ll kill him, songbird, I swear I will.”

His words brought dread back to Jimin’s heart and he shook his head, reaching up to take Yoongi’s hand in his own. “No, please,” he said. “Please don’t, I-I can’t stand it, please. There is enough hurt in this world, enough death, I…” He drew a quivering breath and attempted to keep his voice steady. “Too many people have been hurt because of me, so please, Yoongi, please don’t do it.”

The captain parted his lips and closed them again, his jaw moving with unspoken words. Slowly, the
tension in him eased and he gave a jerky nod, but the frown that marred his brow stayed every bit as firm. “Alright,” he said stiffly. “I won’t do it.”

It was a lie as clear as day, but Jimin was too exhausted to argue. “I will hold you to it,” was all he said before he guided Yoongi’s hand back to where it had rested against his waist. The tightness with which the captain restored his hold brought guilt to the back of Jimin’s mind; Yoongi must’ve worried himself sick in his absence, so much so that he felt the need to hold him so close now, as if afraid he would disappear again.

“I’m sorry,” Jimin said quietly and brushed his fingers through the captain’s hair. “You must’ve been worried.”

Yoongi chuckled at his words, a tired sound. “That is an understatement if I’ve ever heard one,” he said and leaned forward until he could rest his brow against Jimin’s shoulder. “It has been hell over here. Taehyung cried for three days without pause and he has been dead to the world since. He’s barely spoken to anyone. Jin, Hoseok and Jeongguk went into the city of Qinzhou every day to search for you while Xiao and Lucy scoured the fields and forests within a twenty kilometer radius to try and find you.” He smiled against Jimin’s skin. “I’ve never seen them so distraught.”

“And what about you?” Jimin asked carefully. Only a glance at the captain’s face had told him all he needed to know, but he wanted to hear the words from Yoongi himself.

“I was ready to strike Namjoon every time he told me we couldn’t sail away from here,” the captain mumbled. “I knew he was right, that if… that when you would return, this was the only place you’d know where to look, but I couldn’t bear it, to be so helpless. To be unable to do anything. I wanted to look for you. I thought…”

His voice cracked and he held Jimin tighter, burying his face as deep into the furs around his shoulders as he could. “I didn’t want to believe you had left,” Yoongi said thickly. “I knew you wouldn’t have, you couldn’t have. Not you. You would’ve explained. You would’ve said farewell, I knew it, but there was a voice in the back of my head that I couldn’t shut out, one that told me over and over and over that you were never coming back.” His hands trembled where they held onto Jimin, even the fingers of his prosthetic limb. “Every time I thought of you, it would tell me you had left, that you wouldn’t return, th-that you had died-

Only now, Jimin noticed the state the captain’s quarters. It looked like an earthquake might’ve passed through it, overturning the furniture and digging cracks into the walls. It was a terrible sight, but worst of all was the organ piano Yoongi was leaning against. It was cracked open and destroyed, its broken, white keys scattered across the floor. Some of them were smeared in red, drops of dried blood dirtying the once pristine surface.

The sight alone was enough to make Jimin feel as if his heart had split open.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered and moved his hands to Yoongi’s jaw, urging him to raise his head. “I’m sorry, Yoongi, I’m so sorry.” The captain’s cheeks were wet and his eyes shining, all the pain he’d suffered plain on his face to see as he looked up at Jimin. “I had to go, I had to keep you safe, whatever it took. There was no time to tell you.”

Jimin kissed him, wishing he could feed every emotion within him into Yoongi through his lips. “I kept hoping you’d know,” he said when they parted, struggling to wipe away the captain’s tears while his own fell silently. “Every second of every day, I prayed you wouldn’t believe I had left you. I would never.”

His voice trembled as he spoke, a quiver that passed to his hands and made them clumsy. “I love
you,” he cried and attempted a reassuring smile. “I love you so much, I could never have just left.”

He kissed Yoongi with more urgency than before and emitted a sound akin to a whimper when the captain’s grip on him tightened, pulling him close until not a hairsbreadth of space remained between them.

“I’m so sorry, Yoongi,” he murmured one more time, breathless as he spoke against Yoongi’s lips. “I’ve come back. I’m home.”

“You are,” Yoongi agreed in a whisper, his hands trembling against Jimin’s skin. “You’re home.”

Neither of them said another word for a long time, silent as they simply took bliss in one another’s presence. Jimin rested his ear against Yoongi’s chest and listened to the steady rhythm of his heart, drawing endless comfort from the sound. He felt safer than he had in a long time in the captain’s embrace, and he hoped Yoongi could draw the same kind of comfort from him, wishing nothing more than to soothe the pain he had suffered.

It was Yoongi who broke their silence, heaving a deep sigh before he raised his voice. “I can’t remember ever being so worried in all my life, songbird,” he said quietly. “You can’t even imagine it.”

His voice was a petulant mutter, and Jimin emitted a tired chuckle before he could stop himself. “Of course I can,” he said and sat up to get a proper look of the captain’s face. “When that mariner… when he did what he did to you, I thought I’d lost you. I thought you would die.” He brushed a few locks of black hair away from Yoongi’s brow and smiled at his frown and pursed lips. “I had to go Yoongi, so I could keep you safe.”

“That is my responsibility,” Yoongi protested gruffly. “As the captain of this ship, I’m the one who should be risking my life for the sake of your safety.”

Jimin snorted. “That is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” he said and tapped a finger to the captain’s brow before leaning forward to press his lips to the same spot. “Protecting someone is not only your privilege, simply because you hold command of this ship. I wanted to protect you and everyone else, so I did. I went willingly and without doubt, knowing it was what I had to do.”

He allowed a trace of smugness to grace his smile. “I’m a pirate, Yoongi,” he said. “A man free to do whatever I want.”

“Impossible is what you are,” the captain muttered, but he smiled when Jimin emitted a bright giggle. “I love you, songbird. More than you can ever know.”

Jimin flushed, suddenly feeling too much all at once. His heart might’ve burst in his chest, thus he did the only thing he knew to release it and kissed Yoongi again. He gave himself over to the warmth that spread through him and allowed it to chase away all the sorrow that remained, pushing them back to where they wouldn’t hurt him.

A shudder went through him when Yoongi parted his lips against his and deepened their kiss, the touch of tongue drawing a breathy sound from him before he could stop it. Jimin didn’t know what to do, but he followed the captain’s lead and parted his lips to welcome all the passion Yoongi would give him.

They kissed until Jimin couldn’t breathe, until there was a fire burning in his veins. Even after they had parted, Yoongi pressed his lips to Jimin’s neck to feed all of his love into his skin, a numbing sensation building under the pressure of his kiss.
“Yoongi,” Jimin whispered when it became too much to bear, his voice a breathy little sigh. There was a familiar heat in the pit of his stomach, one he knew would only grow if the captain kept up his ministrations, and now was not the time for it.

Yoongi groaned against his skin and drew a deep, steadying breath. “I know, songbird” he murmured and pressed another small kiss to Jimin’s neck before he sat upright, his eyes hooded and dark as he looked at Jimin. “You’re so beautiful.”

He preened under the captain’s words, his cheeks warm and his lips curling into a wide smile. “So are you,” Jimin said and raised his hands to hide his face, a fit of shyness brought on by the intensity of Yoongi’s gaze. He wasn’t very successful in his attempt, however; the captain easily moved his hands so he could kiss him one last time.

“I suppose I should go thank Sabelsdottir for bringing you home,” Yoongi said and leaned back to reluctantly pry himself away from Jimin. “And hear what she has learned about the mariners.” He groaned as he stood, his spine crackling from sitting still for so long. “Will you come?” he asked of Jimin and held out his hand to help him stand. “Or do you want to rest?”

Jemin smiled and let the captain pull him to his feet. “I’ll come,” he said. “I have more things to tell you all as well.”

As soon as he stepped out onto deck, he came face to face with a hysterically sobbing Taehyung. The quartermaster threw himself at Jimin without restraint, and the two of them went sprawling on the floor, the impact shoving the air out of Jimin’s lungs.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Chim,” Taehyung cried and all but crushed him in his embrace, squeezing until he could barely breathe. “I’m so s-sorry I lied about th-that mariner, I swear I am, I-I only… I knew you’d be so sad if-if you knew, so I… I..!”

It took Jimin a moment to realize what the quartermaster was speaking of, still winded from their fall, but even when he did, he could do nothing but smile, overjoyed to have his friend in his arms again. “I missed you, Tae,” he said and wrapped his arms around Taehyung’s trembling shoulders, his eyes stinging when the quartermaster’s sobs only grew more uncontrolled. “I’m here now, it’s alright. I’m home.”

When he looked up, the rest of the Agust’s crew was flocked around the two of them, either beaming down at him or crying; while Jeongguk, Namjoon and Hoseok smiled so wide their cheeks might break, Xiao and Jin struggled to keep their emotions under control. When Yoongi teased them about it, the lot of them turned on him at once and began rambling about how he was the last one to have a say in anyone else’s tears.

Jemin laughed where he lay on his back on the deck as he listened to them bicker, clutching a weeping Taehyung to his chest. There was enough happiness in him to make his chest burst and leave no room for sorrow, every bit of him thrumming with sheer, unadulterated joy. Finally, he had returned to the family that loved him every bit as much as he loved them.

Finally, he had come home.
ME. THAT'S RIGHT. M E. I DID.

“He won’t call me songbird anymore.” BISH I CRIED LIKE A BABY, THE COFFEE SHOP EMPLOYEES ALL FLOCKED AROUND ME AND TRIED TO FIGURE OUT WHY THE FECK I WAS SOBBING. HOLY SHET WHAT A PUNCH TO THE GUT.

AND THEN YOONGI CRIED. AND JIMIN CRIED. AND THEN THEY SAID THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER AND I CRIED SOME MORE, GODDAMN IT, THERE ARE SO MANY TEARS, I CAN’T, AHHHHHHHHH-

//implodes

Feckin' emotional roller coaster, what the heck @_@

Also don't think I don't know you're all cursing me for cutting yoonmin off when they were GETTIN' TO THE GOOD STUFF, MMMMMHM, I KNOW YOU, I SEE YOU, YUP.

Heh.

I'ma go to bed now, I'm super tired, holy FECK what a day
Chapter Summary

Instead of answering, Yoongi turned in his seat and looked at Jimin, who nodded and took a step forward. “I can,” he said and pulled the Rune of the Storm from his pocket to show Talya and her crew. “The Blessed Oracles gave me this for the sake of stopping the Rabid Conflagration in his path. Fire might be all-consuming on land, but it cannot win against the skies.” He curled his fingers around the rune. “When he comes for us, I will be ready. This time, I will do what needs to be done.”

While Talya grinned approvingly at him, Yoongi regarded him with a gaze full of fierce pride, so intense he couldn’t help but stand a bit straighter, made confident by it.

Chapter Notes

Ayyyy, it's a 3AM update this time, wooooooo!!!

I AM DYING, BUT WHO CARES, THIS FECKIN’ CHAPTER, I LOVE IT SO MUCH, AHHHHHHHH-

THERE AIN’T EVEN TIME FOR MUSIC. GOTTA GO FAST, BOIS, SO DAMN FAST.

((also, if there are any mistakes, forgive me, I didn’t proofread this time x)))

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Vice Admiral Son Jukan, the Son of the Sea of His Grace’s mariners, Protectors of the Eastern Seas,” Hoseok read aloud, frowning at the neat rows of the letter. ”By royal decree of Yi Yeonseong, Emperor of Joseon and all its lands, you are to resume your pursuit of the pirate known as the Black Fox of the East, the Eastern Cardinal without pause.”

The two crews were seated in the Agust’s galleys, Talya’s men on one side and Yoongi’s on the other. The captains sat opposite of one another, both of them turned in in their seats to look at the doctor, who had offered to read the letter Jimin had stolen from Jukan’s own quarters. No one made so much as a sound, far too eager to know if the Northern Cardinal’s dangerous venture had been worth its risk.

“For too long, Min Yoongi has gone unpunished for his crimes. His Grace’s patience is wearing thin. The heartless murderer of the crown prince must be brought to justice before he can fulfill his desire for war, by any means necessary.” Hoseok paused to give a disbelieving scoff at the words he’d just read, his grip on the letter tightening. “Evil for the sake of justice is not evil. Every man
knows this, your superior officers more than anyone. Do what must be done, Son Jukan, and you will not be held guilty for your brother's crimes.”

Jimin ground his teeth as he listened, his anger flaring for every word the doctor spoke. He wrung his hands, scratching at the skin of his knuckles until Taehyung made him stop, firmly coaxing him into letting go of himself.

“You sail under the His Grace’s colours,” Hoseok dictated. “Remember this and go valiantly into battle, but do not forget what His Grace has asked of you. Have you yet found the girl child? The Emperor of Joseon is waiting.” He scoffed again and turned the letter for the others to see. “There is a long list of titles here as well,” he said, “but I doubt anyone wants to hear those.”

Silence followed his words, broken only by the quiet murmurs of Qasim’s translations, whispered to Talya and those present from her crew. She listened intently, her eyes trained on the paper, and when her first mate was done, she heaved a sigh and leaned back where she sat, crossing her arms over her chest. “Well,” she said, “that was explanatory.”

“The letter tells us three things,” Namjoon said and raised his hand to count. “Firstly, the Rabid Conflagration is Son Jukan’s brother, Son Oseong. Secondly, Son Jukan is acting on the emperor’s orders, and lastly, both the emperor himself and the leadership of the mariners know of and condone the Rabid Conflagration’s actions for the sake of Yoongi’s capture.”

He glanced briefly at Hoseok before turning to his captain. “But what does he mean by desire for war?” he asked, frowning. “As far as I know, we aren’t planning to go to war against anyone.”

“I have no idea,” Yoongi said, scowling at the letter as if it had offended his very being. “I have never mentioned war to anyone, least of all Son Jukan or the emperor, so I don’t know where he pulled that idea from.”

“Perhaps it is only an assumption?” Talya offered and gestured towards the letter. “Perhaps the emperor is only being, how do you say, worried? Anxious?”

“Yes, suspicious.” The Northern Cardinal ignored the smugness of her first mate’s tone and looked at Yoongi. “There was a meeting of Cardinals in Shanghai,” she said, “and the mariners know I am in the east. They might fear war now.”

“It’s the Rabid Conflagration who wants war.” All eyes turned to Jimin, who pointed at the letter in Hoseok’s hands. “He told me he wants to unite the pirates of this world kill the law,” he said. “Whatever it entails, I can’t be certain, but he sounded as though he wants the mariners and the emperor himself dead.” He met Yoongi’s eyes with worry swimming in his own. “He wants war,” he said slowly, “but he desires your death more than that.”

His words hung heavy in the galleys for several seconds before Jimin looked away and swallowed thickly against the concern welling up within him. “The Rabid Conflagration wants to rule over pirates,” he said. “After the war is won, he wants to be king of the seas.”

Talya emitted a sharp bark of laughter at that, accompanied by the men of her crew as soon as Qasim had conveyed Jimin’s words to them. “King,” she repeated, every last one of her sharp teeth visible as she grinned. “He wants to be king of every sea, even ours.”

While the northerners guffawed, Jimin looked at Taehyung and Jeongguk and attempted a reassuring smile under their incredulous stare, mirrored by all who sailed aboard the Agust; he hadn’t had time
to tell anyone but Yoongi where he had been and who he had met in his absence.

“His cause is pointless,” Yoongi said with a scoff. “There is no king of pirates.”

His words had Jimin smiling despite the severity of his surroundings; they were almost the same as the ones he had told Oseong.

“Son Jukan might’ve convinced the emperor his brother’s desire is actually yours,” Namjoon said. “In order to ensure he is given free reigns in your capture.”

“Likely,” Qasim agreed, smiling his amused smile as he peered at Yoongi, “although hardly necessary. After all, you did kill his eldest son. When he came to bring you to justice, you destroyed all seven of his ship and killed him. True?”

The captain didn’t answer, unimpressed by the man’s arrogant manners. He held Qasim’s gaze without faltering, however, and beside Namjoon, Jin rolled his eyes in exasperation at the silent display of dominance.

Just like she had during the meeting of the Cardinals, it was Talya who came between the two, sighing as she pushed her first mate’s head down without much finesse, putting enough strength into it to make his brow touch the edge of the table. “Forgive him,” she said impatiently. “He was raised to lack common sense.”

“What about the end of the letter?” Namjoon mused, seemingly unaffected by the brief quarrel. “The emperor asks about a child. As far as I know, Son Jukan doesn’t have any affiliation with a child.” He turned to Hoseok for answers. “Could she be a lost daughter of the emperor?”

“No,” the doctor said, frowning. “I served his entire family during my time as their surgeon, and his youngest daughter is already a grown woman.”

“She could be an untrue child,” Talya said.

“Illegitimate,” Qasim offered mildly, hardly humbled by his captain’s scolding.

Hoseok shook his head. “The emperor was obsessed with his wife, both before and after her passing,” he said in a tone of disgust. “He never took another lover after she died.” He folded the letter and tossed it onto the table, as if loathe to touch it for any longer. “Whomever they are searching for, she is not related to the emperor.”

“Then she is of no importance right now,” Yoongi said with an impatient flick of his wrist. “None of what this letter tells us changes what our aim has been all this time. We will stop the Rabid Conflagration, no matter if the mariners or the emperor or the damned gods themselves have condoned his rampage.”

Talya nodded thoughtfully. “How will you do it?” she wondered.

“I will make sure that he dies,” Yoongi replied flatly. “If he despises me so much, he will come when I beckon him into battle.”

“Yes, but how will you fight him?” Talya asked of him, the ghost of a frown marring her brow. “His is the Blessing of Fire. None of my men possess the strength or blessing to combat something as deadly as fire. Who out of you can challenge him?”

Instead of answering, Yoongi turned in his seat and looked at Jimin, who nodded and took a step forward. “I can,” he said and pulled the Rune of the Storm from his pocket to show Talya and her
crew. “The Blessed Oracles gave me this for the sake of stopping the Rabid Conflagration in his path. Fire might be all-consuming on land, but it cannot win against the skies.” He curled his fingers around the rune. “When he comes for us, I will be ready. This time, I will do what needs to be done.”

While Talya grinned approvingly at him, Yoongi regarded him with a gaze full of fierce pride, so intense he couldn’t help but stand a bit straighter, made confident by it. Behind him, Taehyung and Jeongguk emitted theatrical little cheers, smacking his shoulder when he returned to their side.

“According to the songbird, the Rabid Conflagration is sailing east,” Yoongi said once they had settled, “so we will draw his attention to us. There is a famous jeweller in Hong Kong whose craft is favored by the eastern emperor. We will raid his estate and empty his vaults, and leave him alive to spread the news of his misfortune until it reaches the east.” He jerked his head towards the letter. “The emperor will be the first to know, after which Son Jukan and his brother will come running.”

“What will you do with the mariner?” Talya asked, although the smile on her lips suggested she already knew the answer. “Do you want me to distract him?”

“Yes,” Yoongi said bluntly. “We will wait for the Rabid Conflagration on the coast of the island of Lantau. I would have you keep Son Jukan away from there when the time comes.” He rose to his feet and, much to Talya’s obvious surprise, bowed his head. “We would be grateful for your help.”

It was a formality, Jimin knew, a way of showing ones thanks, but to the Northern Cardinal, unaccustomed to their ways, it must’ve looked like he was prostrating himself, a stark contrast to what she had seen last time they’d met. “I, yes, of course we will help, I mean,” she fumbled and raised her hands as if to deflect his politeness. “Stand, please, you do not have to go so far.”

Jimin pressed a hand to his lips to muffle the giggle that rose in him as he watched her struggle. Even Yoongi seemed to find amusement in her flustered rambling, snorting when he straightened his back.

“You may discuss the fine details of our plans later,” Hoseok said when they had settled, a small smile tugging at his lips as he turned to Jimin. “You need to rest.”

Surprised by the sudden shift, Jimin only looked at him for a moment before he realized what he’d said. “I- what?” he wondered, bewildered. “I’m fine.”

“You are not,” the doctor declared and swatted away his words with a sharp flick of his hand. “Not only do I see faded bruises along the side of your face, but you look like you haven’t slept in a fortnight.”

Jimin parted his lips to protest, but Hoseok’s words were true; he hadn’t slept for more than a few hours at a time ever since landing aboard the Rabid Conflagration’s ship. “But-”

“You didn’t sleep properly aboard my ship,” Talya said and nodded. “You stayed awake until it was impossible, and when you woke, you did it all over again.”

Traitor, Jimin thought, pursing his lips into a pout. He needed rest, he knew he did, but he didn’t want to leave such an important gathering for something as simple as lack of sleep. He was about to say as much, but then Yoongi spoke and he promptly forgot his protests.

“Rest, songbird,” he said. “Once you’ve slept, I will tell you whatever you want to hear.” For all the softness in his voice, his tone brooked no argument. Defeated, Jimin heaved a sigh and nodded, finding consolation at least in the smile that graced the captain’s lips. “Good. Hoseok.”

“Come,” the doctor told Jimin and led him to the doors, a hand pressed firmly against his back as if
he thought he might escape given the chance. “I see your cuts have already been taken care of.”

“Yes, by a woman aboard Talya’s ship,” Jimin said. “A healer, I think she called her.”

Hoseok nodded. “She did a fine job of it,” he said, observing the side of his face as they walked. “Are you hurting anywhere? Should I prepare Sleeper’s Drought for you?”

Jimin shook his head and smiled. “I won’t need it,” he said sheepishly. “I really am tired.”

“Of course you are,” the doctor scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Brave as you are, you looked like you could barely stand upright back there. Ideally, you would sleep through the night and wake in the early morning as you always do.”

Jimin parted his lips to point out that it was still midday, but the words died in his throat when he realized Hoseok was leading him to the quarterdeck rather than his infirmary or the bunks. “Um,” he uttered, only to be immediately silenced by the amused look the doctor pinned him under.

“You think I don’t know where you sleep, Jimin?” he mused and jerked his head towards the captain’s quarters. “The two of you aren’t very subtle about it, you know.” He laughed at the unimpressed look Jimin offered him and reached out to tousle his hair. “Are you sure you don’t need anything?” he asked. “I could bring you something to wear, if you want to change out of those furs.”

“Oh, if you would,” Jimin said gratefully. As comfortable as the garb Talya had lent him was, it was looser than he liked and left him bare around the waist. Hoseok nodded and ushered him off towards Yoongi’s quarters before going to fetch something for him to wear.

Jimin didn’t realize just how exhausted he was until he closed the doors behind him and leaned back against them, taking his time to properly breathe in the familiarity of the room. Despite the sorry state of it, he smiled as he walked over to the bed, eager to crawl under the soft sheets and sleep, and perhaps wake in his beloved’s arms.

He barely had time to sit down on the edge of the bed when the doors were pulled open again, but rather than Hoseok, it was Taehyung who appeared in the doorway, smiling ever so brightly as he made his way inside. “I come bearing something to wear,” he said and bowed as he held out one of his own shirts for Jimin to take, “and to share your bed for tonight.”

Jimin giggled at his antics and took the garment from him, smiling when the quartermaster threw himself onto the bed. “What about the meeting?” he asked as he fiddled with the furs’ ties. “Never imagined you’d willingly leave the presence of another Cardinal.”

“Why would I ever care about some Cardinal when you’ve come back home after so long?”

His words gave Jimin pause halfway through pulling the furs over his head, a fierce rush of affection for his friend blossoming in his chest. He drew a deep breath and closed his eyes when they began to sting, pressing the soft fabric against his face in a poor attempt to hide just how affected he was.

“Come on, Chim,” Taehyung said softly and coaxed him into shedding the furs, chuckling when he saw the wetness in his eyes. “What, did you think we didn’t miss you like mad every second you were gone? I’ve never seen Xiao so upset in all the years I’ve known him. I think he actually managed to lose some weight over these past weeks.”

Jimin chuckled, the sound thick with emotion. “I missed you, too,” he said and smiled, sniffling, “The only reason I didn’t lose my mind while I was away was the thought of you, all of you.”

“Don’t say that,” the quartermaster warned, “or you’ll have me crying all over you.” He draped the
shirt over Jimin’s shoulders and helped him with the sleeves, as if he was tending to a newborn foal. “Let’s not speak of any of it now,” he said promptly once he was done. “You need to sleep, and I’m here to make sure you do. But promise me you’ll tell me everything that happened to you while you were away tomorrow.”

“I promise,” Jimin said and nodded, laughing when Taehyung wrapped his arms around him and pulled him down against the mattress.

“Good,” the quartermaster said and fiddled with the sheets, pulling them up to Jimin’s shoulders. “Oh, and,” he grinned, a glint of mischief seeping into his expression, “don’t think I don’t know what that thing on your neck is.”

Jimin looked up at him, bewildered. “On my neck?” he asked.

“On your neck,” Taehyung echoed and reached out to poke his skin below the line of his jaw, where it was more sensitive than usual. Right where Yoongi had kissed him. “He kissed you there, didn’t he?”

Flushing, Jimin smacked his hand away. “Ho-how can you know?”

The smile on the quartermaster’s lips was wider than he had ever seen it, toothy and rectangular in shape. “Oh, my sweet, innocent hatchling,” he said sagely, his voice brimming with mirth. “Well, not so innocent anymore, I suppose…”

“What are you talking about?” Jimin snorted with a roll of his eyes.

“Do you remember your first day aboard this ship?” Taehyung asked overly sweetly. “I had bruises around my neck, right?” Jimin nodded slowly, vaguely recalling that to be the case, a smattering of purple and red framing the quartermaster’s collar. “Well, dearest Chim, there is a bruise like that on your neck right now.”

For a moment, Jimin only stared at him, struggling to grasp the meaning behind his words. Taehyung was on the verge of bursting into peals of laughter, he could tell, but he couldn’t see what was so funny. Then it dawned on him, and the flush of his cheeks grew ten times stronger. “Oh my god,” he squeaked and reached up to smack a hand over the mark on his neck.

The quartermaster threw his head back against the mattress and cackled, laughing until tears sprung to his eyes. “And, and you asked me if Yoongi was the one who’d done it to me,” he howled, breathless in his fit of amusement.

The quartermaster threw his head back against the mattress and cackled, laughing until tears sprung to his eyes. “And, and you asked me if Yoongi was the one who’d done it to me,” he howled, breathless in his fit of amusement.

“Oh, my god,” Jimin groaned and pressed his hands against his face, beyond mortified. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What, and miss this moment?” When he looked up again, Taehyung was grinning at him again, flushed from laughter. “I can’t believe you didn’t know what a love bite was,” he mused, chortling. “Ah, and now my brother leaves those marks on you.” He waggled his eyebrows in a lecherous manner. “How bold.”

Jimin kicked his feet against the mattress, whining against his hands. “Could everyone see it?” he asked, dreading the answer. “At the meeting?”

“Yup,” Taehyung said, playfully popping the p. “I mean, it’s really dark. And not very subtle at all. Honestly, I didn’t think Yoongi had it in him to be so—”

“Alright, let’s not talk about it in detail,” Jimin said loudly to drown out the rest of the quartermaster’s
words. He was blushing furiously, mortified; suddenly, Hoseok’s earlier statement made much more sense. “Just, just forget it. Please.”

Still smiling brightly, Taehyung threw an arm around him and pulled him close, until their legs were tangled and hardly a hairsbreadth of space remained between them. “I really did miss you, Chim,” he said, speaking against the top of Jimin’s hair. “So, so much. I’m so glad you’re home.”

The softness in his voice made Jimin smile, his embarrassment dissipating in the comfort of the quartermaster’s embrace. “I am, too,” he murmured. He closed his eyes and pressed his brow against Taehyung’s chest to be lulled to sleep by the steady beat of his heart.

It wasn’t long before his exhaustion claimed him, finally drawing him into a calm, peaceful rest.

When Jimin woke, it was to a room shrouded in darkness, its only source of light a small candle on the small table next to his bed. He knew Taehyung was gone before he even opened his eyes; the quartermaster had a habit of wrapping himself around whomever occupied the same bed as he, thus the lack of warmth and weight on him told him of his friend’s absence.

There was a hand in his hair, however, fingers brushing softly through the disheveled locks. It brought a smile to his lips and he turned where he lay, pushing firmer into the gentle touch. “Are you watching me sleep, Yoongi?” he asked without opening his eyes, his words slurred and thick.

The captain chuckled and moved to brush his thumb over Jimin’s cheek instead. “Yes,” he said, unabashed. “Jeongguk came and took Taehyung to their bed so I would have room, but I couldn’t sleep.”

Jemin emitted a drowsy hum and looked up at his beloved, seated on the edge of their bed. “Why can’t you sleep?” he wondered and turned to press his lips against the palm of his hand. “You must be exhausted.”

“I am,” Yoongi said. There was a smile on his lips, bordering on sheepish, as if he was exasperated with himself. “But with everything that has happened and everything that will happen…” He shrugged his shoulders and avoided Jimin’s eyes, his gaze trained firmly on where his hand rested against his cheek. “I suppose I’m too nervous to sleep,” he mumbled. “So many things can go wrong if I’m not careful enough with our plans, and it’s overwhelming.”

A tightness seeped into his smile. “In my family’s doubt, I have to be their pillar,” he said, almost as if he was scolding himself. “We all dread the inevitable clash between us and Son Oseong. All of us know it must be done, and in their fear, I have to give them strength. They look to me for reassurance.”

While he spoke, Jimin pushed himself upright on the bed and moved closer until he could draw the captain into his arms, his own sleepiness forgotten. Yoongi followed easily, sighing as he allowed himself to ease against Jimin’s shoulder. “Seeing you so serene in your sleep gives me strength, songbird,” he said quietly. “I want you to always be able to look like that. Peaceful. Free of worry.” He swallowed thickly. “Safe.”

“I’m never free of worry,” Jimin said with a chuckle, reaching up to stroke the captain’s hair. “Not when you insist on being so stubborn about bearing the weight of what’s to come all by yourself. I swear, all I ever do is worry.”

Yoongi smiled against his shoulder, snorting at the humor in his voice. “I’m sorry,” he said lightly
and curled his arms around Jimin’s waist. “I can’t help it.”

“I know. But we will live, Yoongi,” Jimin murmured against his temple, “and it won’t be your responsibility to ensure that we do. Like you said, we all dread the battle to come. It will be hard, but all of us are ready to bear the burden of it. It won’t be just you.” He waited until the captain nodded before he hummed and swayed slightly where he sat, rocking the two of them back and forth. “You do still need to sleep,” he said after a moment of silence. “Where else will you find the strength to be the Black Fox of the East, the most fearsome pirate on this side of the world?”

He made his voice pretentiously pompous as he spoke Yoongi’s title and was rewarded with a string of bright laughter, the captain’s shoulders shaking from it. “If I didn’t know any better,” he chuckled and sat up so he could look at Jimin, a brow arched in amusement, “I’d say you were mocking me.”

“No,” Jimin drawled, biting his lower lip to keep from smiling too widely. “I would never.”

Yoongi snorted and shook his head, mirroring his smile as he leaned in to rest his forehead against Jimin’s. “Thank you,” he said in a voice heavy with adoration. “Thank you, songbird.”

“I told you before,” Jimin said and brought his hands to cup the captain’s face, “you have nothing to thank me for.” He kissed Yoongi before he could even begin to protest and smiled when the captain grumbled incoherently against his lips before submitting.

For all the tenderness of the kiss, there was an urge simmering deep in Jimin’s chest, the same need for closeness he had felt upon their reunion. They had been apart for almost a fortnight, and the distance had yet to heal, lingering until all Jimin wanted to do was hold the captain close and never let go again. When Yoongi’s arms tightened around his waist and pulled him against his chest, fierce in his embrace, he knew the captain felt it too.

“Yoongi,” Jimin whispered against his beloved’s lips, “hold me.”

“I am,” Yoongi said, utterly oblivious to what he had meant. Jimin’s cheeks were burning with embarrassment, but he chuckled all the same, a sound that grew into a bright laughter at the captain’s obvious confusion. “Why are you laughing, songbird?”

Oh, Jimin thought, his heart swelling in his chest, I really do love him.

Instead of answering, he kissed Yoongi again and moved his hands to the back of the captain’s neck. Slowly, Jimin lay back and pulled Yoongi down as he went, until his back met the sheets of their bed. The captain leaned over him, his elbows braced on either side of Jimin’s shoulders to keep from crushing him under his weight.

Jimin pulled back just far enough to break their kiss and he smiled, warmth spreading to every part of him as he met Yoongi’s eyes. “Like this,” he murmured, “hold me, Yoongi.”

Even in his shyness, Jimin couldn’t keep from emitting another breathless giggle when the meaning of his request finally dawned on Yoongi. The captain’s eyes widened and his lips fell open, a distinct redness spreading across his pale cheeks as he stared down at him. “Songbird,” was all he said, fumbling for words.

“Yes,” Jimin replied, fiddling with the short hairs at Yoongi’s neck. “If you want to, I…” He drew a quivering breath and smiled, surging up to press his lips softly against the corner of the captain’s mouth. “Please.”

Caged as he was beneath his beloved, Jimin could feel the shudder that went through Yoongi as if it had passed his own body. He leaned back against the sheets and waited, looking up in wonder as the
captain closed his eyes and drew a sharp breath, hissing out an incoherent curse before he dipped his head and kissed Jimin with burning passion.

“Yes,” Yoongi whispered against his lips, his voice filled with every last bit of the affection blossoming in Jimin’s chest. “Yes, songbird.”

Jimin buried his hands in Yoongi’s hair and pulled him more firmly against him, until not a hairsbreadth of space was left between their bodies. The captain’s left hand settled against his jaw and coaxed him into an angle that allowed him to better deepen their kiss, the cool touch of the prosthetic limb triggering a shiver down the length of his spine. With a high, breathless sound, Jmin parted his lips under Yoongi’s and felt his veins fill with heat when the captain’s tongue met his own.

There was a feverish hunger in their kiss, one that had liquid fire pooling deep in the pit of Jimin’s stomach. He had never felt a pull like this, an urgency to be so close with another, and perhaps he might’ve been frightened by his own desires had the man above him been anyone other than Yoongi.

“I love you,” Jimin said breathlessly when the captain pulled away, only to kiss his jaw and then his neck, grazing his teeth over the mark he had left there hours and hours ago. “I love you so much.”

Yoongi’s breath stuttered against his skin and he rose back up to claim his lips, his fingers trembling against Jimin’s cheek. “I do, too,” the captain said, a faint crack in his voice, and when he leaned away to properly look at Jimin, the smile on his lips was all Jimin needed to know just how fiercely he loved.

Without looking away, Yoongi placed his hand against Jimin’s waist, fiddling with the hem of the shirt he’d borrowed from Taehyung. Wordlessly, Jimin nodded and failed to fight off the full-body shudder that claimed him when the captain slipped underneath the fabric and touched his stomach. His fingers left a burning trail along Jimin’s skin; by the time Yoongi had pushed his shirt up to his chest, Jimin wondered how much more he could take before he’d catch on fire.

Ever so carefully, the captain coaxed him into letting go and raising his arms so he could rid him of the garment, pulling it over his head to leave him exposed and bare. Jimin felt his shyness flare up once more, but he couldn’t turn away, not when Yoongi was looking at him in the way he did, as if Jimin was the most precious thing he’d seen in all his life.

A shuddering exhale left Jimin’s lips when the captain placed his right hand against his stomach. His thumb stroked the skin below Jimin’s navel before he traced the lines of his abdomen, silent in his admiration. Yoongi’s eyes followed the path his hand drew until it settled on Jimin’s bare waist, pressing his thumb softly against the tense muscles there.

“Beautiful,” he murmured thickly and looked up, his eyes dark and glittering in the yellow light of the candle. “So fucking beautiful.”

“Yoongi,” Jimin began, but whatever words had risen to his lips tapered off into a high-pitched sound when the captain lowered himself to kiss his collarbones, a torturous pressure in the way he moved his lips. It was the same way in which he had kissed Jimin’s neck upon their reunion, and when Jimin thought of what would come of it, he buried his hands in Yoongi’s hair once more and arched his back, inexplicably eager to wear the captain’s mark.

His breath hitched when he felt Yoongi’s hardness press against his thigh through the fabric of his pants, a fresh ripple of warmth coursing through him. His muscles tensed in nervous anticipation and the captain’s hand stilled immediately against his waist, the pressure against his hip and collar disappearing all at once. Yoongi pushed himself up so he could meet Jimin’s eyes, worry marring his brow.
“Are you alright, songbird?” he asked, a subtle breathlessness to his voice. “Am I... is it too much?”

Jimin was quick to shake his head and attempted a reassuring smile, wetting his lips before he spoke. “I’ve never,” he began, his cheeks warm in his shyness. “I only... I’ve never done this before.”

“You’ve never...” Again, it took the captain a moment to see the truth behind his words, still frowning when Jimin let go of his shoulders and curled his hands into the sheets. When he finally did realize, his mouth snapped shut halfway through his sentence and his eyes widened in a way that was almost comical. “You,” he said, his voice oddly hoarse, “you’re a virgin?”

Jimin flushed all the way to his neck and looked away, settling on staring up into the ceiling as he nodded. “Yes.”

Out of all the things Jimin had ever told him, this seemed to baffle Yoongi the most. For a moment, he was silent, his lips moving without a single word leaving them, and when he finally did speak, he sounded incredulous, stuttering as he went. “B- but you’re so,” he started, but changed his mind before he could finish his sentence. “Was there never anyone who... you’ve never...”

The captain’s complete loss for words drove away Jimin’s embarrassment and pulled a breathy giggle from his lips, endeared by Yoongi’s incredulity. “There has never been anyone with whom I wanted to be so close,” he said and turned back to meet his beloved’s eyes, preening under all the awed reverence he was met with. “Until you.”

An incoherent noise spilled from the captain’s lips and he inclined his head until he could rest his brow against Jimin’s collarbones, drawing a deep, unsteady breath. “The things you say, songbird,” he mumbled, chuckling. “You must be out to see me dead.”

Surely, Jimin had a witty retort waiting for him, but Yoongi kissed the centre of his chest before he could speak it. His hand trailed up Jimin’s side until it lay against his ribs, and his heart flared up against the captain’s touch, beating strong and fast.

Do you feel it? the very core of him cried out, reaching. Do you feel how much I love you?

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Yoongi asked, his warm breath triggering another shudder throughout Jimin. “We don’t- I mean, if you’re not ready, I... there’s no need to rush.” The tension in the captain’s voice gave away how flustered he was, struggling to calm down in his state of arousal so he could properly heed whatever apprehension he must’ve thought Jimin had.

It made Jimin smile so brightly his cheeks ached, fondness bursting in his chest. He reached down and took Yoongi’s face in his hands so he could guide him into a kiss, slow and sweet, and then another, his lips pressed against the captain’s cheek. “I want to be yours,” he said. “I trust you, Yoongi.”

Yoongi’s hand tightened on his waist and he turned to kiss Jimin again. “Mine,” he whispered against his lips, sheer adoration heavy in his voice, “as I am yours.”

“Mine,” Jimin echoed, blinking hard against the wetness in his eyes even as he smiled.

The captain gave him another peck before he sat up and rid himself of his shirt, pulling it over his head and tossing it haphazardly to the floor. The sight of him like this made Jimin tense all over again, only this time, it wasn’t nerves what made him still.

Yoongi’s chest, scarred and reddened by the straps which held his prosthesis in place, appeared luminous in the flickering light of the candle, every line and curve of his torso sharply defined. It was hardly the first time Jimin had seen him like this, but now, it filled him with an urge to reach out, to
touch.

So he did. He pushed himself up onto his elbow and raised his hand, only dimly aware of the way in which Yoongi looked at him, waiting. Jimin held his breath until his fingers touched the skin of the captain’s chest, featherlight as he went, trapped in an odd state of awe. Yoongi was just as warm as he was, the pace of his heart just as frantic, and he smiled when he looked up at his beloved, too overwhelmed to speak.

With a chuckle, the captain took Jimin’s hand in his own and leaned back down, entwining their fingers and pushing them against the mattress. Yoongi kissed his jaw and his neck, down and down until he reached the mark he’d drawn into his collarbones not minutes prior. He smiled, perhaps without realizing it, something akin to smugness or pride flickering across his face before he kissed it too, pecking the bruised skin.

The rare display of possessiveness made Jimin want to snort, but he didn’t dare part his lips when the captain continued further down his chest. He curled his free hand in the sheets and held them tight in an attempt to ground himself and not be lost in the disarray that were his thoughts. It worked well enough, for all of ten seconds, when Yoongi’s lips reached the dark skin of his nipple.

When the captain took the bud into his mouth and pressed his tongue against it, Jimin drew a sharp breath and quickly raised his hand to quell the sounds pulled from his chest by the wave of heat Yoongi stoked within him. He wasn’t fast enough, however, slowed by his haze of pleasure, and a moan spilled from his lips, high-pitched and breathless and embarrassing. He quickly turned away, his cheeks burning under his fingers when he pressed his hand over his mouth.

“Songbird.” Jimin shuddered when he felt Yoongi’s warm breath against the shell of his ear, but he refused to look, overwhelmed by his fit of shyness. “Songbird, you don’t have to feel embarrassed,” the captain murmured against his temple and kissed him there. “I want to hear you.”

“Why?” Jimin asked, his voice muffled as he spoke into the palm of his hand. “I sound so odd.”

“You don’t,” Yoongi said immediately. “You really don’t.” He placed his prosthetic hand over Jimin’s and brushed his thumb along his knuckles, the cool touch soothing in his hot embarrassment. “I want to hear you. You… I mean, I’m…”

The captain closed them again to clear his throat as if to buy himself some time. His sudden bashfulness piqued Jimin’s curiosity until it triumphed over his awkwardness and he turned back to look up at his beloved, who was now avoiding his eyes. “I want to know if you like it,” Yoongi told the rumpled sheets by Jimin’s shoulder. “I want to know if, if I give you pleasure.”

His ears were red and he spoke very quickly, as if it would miraculously keep Jimin from noticing how flustered he was. Jimin did, however - it was hard to miss - and giggled at the captain’s expression before he could stop himself. The sound pulled Yoongi’s eyes back to him, glaring, with his lips pursed in a pout so endearing, Jimin wondered where on earth he’d gotten the idea he needed to feel abashed before this man.

“You do,” he said and rose to kiss the pout off the captain’s lips. “But I still sound odd.”

Yoongi snorted and shook his head. “Odd is the last word I would use, songbird,” he mused, smiling as if he had found a secret no one else in the world knew. “I’ve told you before how beautifully you sing, have I not?” He pecked Jimin’s lips and sat upright. “I hear no difference now.”

Scandalized by his teasing, Jimin smacked the captain’s arm, his chest too far out of reach. “I am not singing now,” he sputtered indignantly, but when Yoongi laughed, he couldn’t help but do the same.
“You’re terrible, Yoongi.”

“I am,” his beloved admitted without hesitation, smiling so wide Jimin could see the pink of his gums, “but you love me, songbird.”

Jimin rolled his eyes in exasperated fondness and heaved a dramatic sigh. “I do,” he said, “although I can’t remember why at the moment.”

Yoongi only hummed in response and shifted slightly where he sat. He toed off his shoes and climbed onto the bed until he was kneeling before Jimin, a smile on his lips as he placed his hands against Jimin’s knees. There was not a shred of strength in his touch, no more than a silent question and a promise that he would wait however long was necessary.

The redness was swift to return to Jimin’s cheeks, his heart picking up its previous pace, but he nodded all the same and moved his legs to allow Yoongi to settle comfortably between his thighs. Like this, when Yoongi leaned forward to kiss him, Jimin felt his hardness right against his own and he shuddered under the pleasurable pressure the friction sparked in the depths of his stomach.

The captain groaned against his lips and the sound reverberated through him, coaxing another moan from him before he could stop it. For a moment, neither of them moved, slow to recover from the numbing rush. They breathed the same air, Yoongi’s brow resting against Jimin, until he emitted a breathless chuckle and rose so he could kiss Jimin’s forehead.

“See?” he said in a teasing tone. “Such a lovely voice.”

“I swear I’ll hit you again,” Jimin warned, but his words lost their strength when the captain rocked his hips against his again, his lips coming to swallow the whine that rose up Jimin’s throat.

Yoongi’s movements were slow even in his obvious urgency, his hand tightening and easing against Jimin’s waist as he struggled to ground himself. To Jimin, his strong grip was both a curse and a blessing; the friction between them was like an endless stream of heat feeding the liquid fire in the pit of his stomach until his body ceased to listen to his mind’s commands, twitching and squirming in Yoongi’s hands.

Just as Jimin began to worry he’d reach his peak like this, the captain stilled and moved his hand until he could trace his fingers along the line of his pants. “Can I?” he asked, his voice ragged and out of breath as he spoke against Jimin’s lips.

Jimin could only nod, not quite trusting himself to speak when the muscles of his abdomen drew themselves taut wherever Yoongi touched him. Blushing all the way down to his collarbones, he watched the captain fiddle with the straps of his pants until they were loose enough.

He didn’t pull them off immediately, however. Both of his hands settled on Jimin’s waist and he shifted backwards, replying to Jimin’s puzzled look with only a small smile before he lowered his head.

Jimin gasped when Yoongi kissed the jut of his hip with the same kind of pressure he had his neck and his collarbones. He held Jimin’s hips down and stopped him from squirming at the burning sensation his lips left behind, and when Jimin reached out to bury a hand in his hair to ground himself in the moment, Yoongi smiled against his skin and moved to draw another ring of purple and red just below his navel.

“Yoongi,” Jimin whispered, his voice high-pitched and quivering. There was fire in the pit of his stomach, stirring whenever the captain’s lips touched him again until all of him felt feverish,
shuddering in the warmth of the room. “Yoongi.”

“I’m here, songbird,” Yoongi said and gave his hip a reassuring squeeze before he hooked his fingers under the line of Jimin’s pants and began to rid him of his last piece of clothing. He moved out of the way so he could better pull them down, but he was too maddeningly slow; forgetting his shyness, Jimin put his hands over Yoongi’s and pushed them down, shuddering when he was exposed to the heated air of the captain’s quarters.

Not even when Yoongi settled back in between his thighs and looked at him, all of him, did Jimin feel shy. The weight of his beloved’s gaze made him feel as beautiful as Yoongi had told him he was, over and over, so he slowly lay back against the mattress with no attempt to hide himself, utterly content in his vulnerable state.

The fire in his stomach stirred when the captain’s hands settled on his bare thighs, one cold to the touch and the other as warm as he felt. Yoongi pressed his thumbs against the strong muscles of his legs and coaxed them away from tension, never straying close to where Jimin’s pleasure was the most intense. It was torturous, truly, but Jimin couldn’t find it in him to be impatient, not when his beloved was smiling in the way he did.

“Yoongi,” he crooned when the captain pushed one of his thighs towards his chest and kissed him there, grazing his teeth against the inside of his leg. He chuckled when Jimin shuddered under the tingling sensation and did it again and then a third time before he sat back and gently prodded against Jimin’s side, a silent request for him to turn where he lay.

Albeit confused, Jimin allowed Yoongi to guide him onto his stomach. He wondered if the captain wanted to take him like this and felt his cheeks flush with warmth once again when Yoongi raised his hips off the sheets, coaxing him onto his knees. “Wh-what are you doing?” he asked thickly, his stuttered voice muffled into the mattress.

“I don’t know,” Yoongi said and Jimin jerked slightly at the sensation of the captain’s breath against his most intimate place. “But I wanted to kiss you here as well.”

His words made little sense to Jimin, perhaps due to how muddled his thoughts were in his state of pleasure, thus he had no time to ready himself before Yoongi lowered his head to kiss him in the way he wanted.

It was an impossible thing, to keep the breathless cries from falling from his lips when the captain pressed his tongue against his rim, or when he curled it inside of Jimin, firm hands keeping his trembling legs apart. He had never felt arousal like this nor pleasure so intense, heady and all-consuming until every cell of him was left quivering.

Jimin closed his eyes and took the sheets in his hands, pulling hard at them for every overwhelming rush Yoongi ignited within him with even the smallest of movements. For every gasp, every high-pitched moan that spilled from Jimin’s lips, the captain groaned against his sensitive skin. Perhaps it was obscene, but all Jimin could do was attempt to stave off the rapidly building sensation in the depths of his stomach, barreling fast towards his peak.

He didn’t know if he was thankful or frustrated when Yoongi pulled away before he could reach it, a broken whine rising from his chest upon the loss of contact. “Are you alright, songbird?” the captain asked and kissed the base of his spine, so sweet in contrast to his prior ministrations.

“Yes,” Jimin slurred, his voice thicker than he’d expected. Blushing hot, he swallowed and tried again. “Yes,” he said and let go of the sheets so he could turn onto his back again, a nervous smile on his lips. “I-it felt a bit odd, but…” He drew a breath and made himself meet Yoongi’s eyes. “I
liked it.”

The captain’s smile was nothing short of reverent, adoring. “I was hoping you would,” he said and brushed a stray lock of hair away from Jimin’s brow before sitting up again. He reached for something in his bedside table, the light of the candle flickering in the room as he searched. When he pulled back, he was holding a small glass phial of a clear, yellowish substance.

“What is that?” Jimin asked and propped himself up on his elbows to watch Yoongi fiddle with the cork.

“Oil made from fruit seeds and herbs,” the captain said without taking his eyes off the small bottle. “Hoseok made this for me some months ago and told me it would make my skin healthier, but,” he shrugged his shoulders and huffed when he managed to open it, “I only ever used it twice.” Jimin’s bewilderment must’ve been written across his face, for Yoongi was quick to add, “It’ll make it easier. Preparing you. So… so I won’t hurt you.”

He grew more flustered for every word he spoke, the redness of his ears all the more prominent in the dim light of the room. “Oh,” Jimin uttered quietly, certain his cheeks were every bit as red, burning with shy embarrassment. He smiled, however, endeared by how thoughtful his beloved was, and he nodded before lying back down against the mattress. “Alright.”

Yoongi nodded, too, before turning the phial to coat his fingers with the liquid. He fumbled a bit and poured too much, huffing out a curse under his breath as he haphazardly closed the bottle again before turning to Jimin. The captain’s left hand guided his legs further apart and gave his thigh a reassuring squeeze, the ivory of his prosthesis warmed by Jimin’s skin.

“Tell me if you want me to stop,” Yoongi murmured and waited for Jimin to nod once more before he reached down and pushed his finger against where his tongue had been.

Jimin gasped at the foreign sensation and shut his eyes hard, his whole body tightening involuntarily. It didn’t hurt, but it overwhelmed in many other ways and kept him tense until Yoongi kissed his stomach over and over, making sure to keep his finger still inside of him. “Don’t hold your breath, songbird,” he said, stroking his thigh. “Breathe for me, and try to ease out of it.”

“Y-yes,” Jimin stuttered and did as told, drawing deep, quivering lungfuls of air until his body began to let go of its tension. It was slow, but his beloved’s presence alone made it easier, his lips against Jimin’s stomach coaxing his muscles into loosening their vice.

For several long seconds, Yoongi only moved his finger to prod lightly against his inner walls, allowing him all the time he needed to adjust. He had never done this to himself before; even in whatever fits of pleasure he’d had in the privacy of his home at Jeju, Jimin had never thought to touch himself where Yoongi did now.

It was strange and new, but far from bad.

When the captain pulled his finger out and pushed in again, Jimin’s muscles tensed just like before, but only for a moment before he relaxed. “There you go,” Yoongi cooed and kissed his thigh, smiling against his skin. “You’re doing so well for me, songbird.”

His words made Jimin laugh, breathless and high. “I don’t know what I’m doing, Yoongi,” he said, shuddering when the captain crooked his finger inside of him. “Just, just don’t stop.”

“I won’t,” Yoongi said and rose to kiss his lips.

It stung at first, when one finger became two, but the slick oil eased their glide, and with Yoongi
pressing gentle kisses along the line of Jimin’s jaw, his muscles quickly lost their tension. He found stability in holding the captain’s shoulders, his grip tightening and easing every time Yoongi moved either to push or pull.

“Yoongi,” Jimin gasped when the steady flow of pleasure flared up with no warning, suddenly ten times more intense. His muscles tightened under the force of it and he twitched where he lay, his head pressed back against the mattress as he breathed hard and deep to stave off the unbearable pull in his stomach.

The captain stilled immediately, alarm seeping into his features as he looked down at Jimin, reaching up to press his left hand against his cheek. “Are you alright?” he asked, his worry clear as day. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Jimin said, his voice trembling. “You- I don’t know what you did, it just suddenly felt so,” he looked away, his cheeks aflame with his blush, “good.”

“Oh,” Yoongi uttered, blinking in bewilderment for a moment before the smile returned to his lips, wider and more content than before. “Oh.” Tentatively, he pressed his fingers in as deep as they went and prodded against Jimin’s inner walls, and Jimin felt it again, a cracked moan spilling from his lips upon the jolt. “There?”

“Yes,” Jimin managed to say, reduced as he was to a trembling mess when Yoongi rubbed incessantly against that one spot deep within him. The captain held him in place by his hip and kissed his chest, murmuring praise into his skin, words that he couldn’t even begin to grasp in his state of inordinate pleasure.

Two fingers became three and it stung more than before, but the dull pressure was short-lived now that Yoongi had found what had to be a tie to the fire in his gut, pulling him away from the pain. It was driving Jimin mad, and when the captain wrapped his hand around his length and brushed his thumb over the swollen, leaking tip, it became too much to bear.

“Yoongi,” he whined, squirming where he lay. “Please.” Even Jimin himself wasn’t certain what he was asking for, but he needed it more than he needed air. “Please, I’m ready, I am, I-” His voice broke and he took Yoongi’s face in his hands, pulling him into a searing kiss. “I don’t want it to be over yet,” he pleaded against the captain’s lips. “I want to feel you. All of you.”

His beloved looked every bit as affected as Jimin felt, flushed and out of breath. “Alright,” he said hoarsely and carefully pulled his fingers away, crooning against Jimin’s cheek when he emitted a high-pitched noise of complaint. “Easy, songbird, wait for me.”

Jimin nodded and let go of Yoongi so he could sit upright, fumbling in his attempts to untie the straps of his breeches. His prosthetic hand didn’t quite function the way it should, clumsier than his right and losing its grip on the leather laces. He huffed out a curse, but before he could work himself up in frustration, Jimin pushed himself upright and placed a hand on Yoongi’s to interrupt him in his struggle.

“Yoongi,” he said, only to immediately pause, his words stacking heavy in his throat. Inwardly, he cursed his shyness before taking a deep breath and looking up at his beloved, a small smile on his lips. “I want to- can I touch you?”

Yoongi’s eyes widened and his opened his mouth to speak, but all that left him was an incoherent sound, low and strained. He was quick to snap his lips shut and nod instead, easily allowing Jimin to guide his hands away from the line of his breeches. Despite himself, Jimin’s smile grew at his eager compliance and he pulled at the straps to undo their knots, working them open until the garment was
loose enough to be pushed down.

Jimin hesitated, overwhelmed by his nerves, and he looked up at Yoongi in a silent plea, hoping he would understand. He wanted to touch his beloved, but he didn’t know how.

Smiling, the captain placed his hands over Jimin’s and gently coaxed them into moving. “As slow as you need, songbird,” Yoongi murmured against his temple, breathing sharply when Jimin hooked his fingers beneath the hem and gave a slight tug, mindful of the captain’s arousal.

“What if I get impatient?” Jimin asked and felt his tension dissipate when Yoongi emitted a bark of laughter, his abdomen quivering under Jimin’s hands. He gave no answer apart from a kiss to his cheek before standing so he could slip out of his pants, kicking them away to join his discarded shirt somewhere on the floor before sitting back down on their bed.

Yoongi’s lips fell open and he hissed when Jimin took him in his hand, the fingers of his prosthetic limb creaking as he fist the sheets. Jimin kept his eyes trained on his face, awed by his reaction; he had never touched someone else like this, thus he flushed with pride upon realizing what kind of effect he had on his beloved.

If he was clumsy in the way he touched Yoongi, the captain didn’t say a word about it, only spurred him on with low groans and gasps.

It wasn’t long before Yoongi took hold of Jimin’s wrist, emitting a shaky exhale when Jimin ceased his movements. “The oil,” he croaked, his voice much thicker than before. “We, I mean, I… I’ll need it.”

“Oh,” Jimin uttered and turned to pick up the phial from the sheets. He raised it for the captain to take, but changed his mind halfway and grazed his teeth over his lower lip before smiling. “Can I?”

“Oh, fucking- yes,” Yoongi cursed and ran a hand through his hair, tugging sharply at the black strands to ground himself. “Yes, you can.”

Jimin pressed his lips together to keep from smiling too widely, knowing he had been in the very same state as the captain not minutes prior. He understood it now, why Yoongi had seemed so smug when touching him; the delight that came with pleasing the one you loved was pleasurable in itself, every part of him brimming with warmth.

He took his time to warm the oil in his hands before he touched Yoongi again, preening under the broken sound that spilled from the captain’s lips. He kissed Yoongi’s shoulder and crooned softly as he moved his hand to coat his length in the clear substance, stroking him from base to tip once and then again, until he was as slick as his fingers had felt.

“Jimin.”

The low timbre of the captain’s voice made him shudder, the intimation of his name alone causing the white-hot sensation within him grow warmer still. “Yes,” Jimin whispered and rose to kiss Yoongi again, whimpering at the hunger with which the captain reciprocated, pulling him flush against his chest.

He allowed himself to be pushed down against the mattress and smiled when they parted, his breath hitching as he waited for Yoongi to settle between his legs once more. The captain guided his thighs to each side of his waist, stroking his skin as he went about adjusting them until they could both be comfortable.

“I love you,” Jimin said and raised his hands, beckoning his beloved into his embrace.
“I love you,” Yoongi echoed hoarsely and leaned down to claim his lips at the same time as he pushed inside of him.

Jimin’s back arched off the sheets of their bed with a broken whimper, his spine bending from the dull ache as Yoongi pushed, persisting until his hips touched the back of Jimin’s thighs. The stretch was greater than the captain’s fingers had prepared him for and he held tightly onto Yoongi’s shoulders, but he couldn’t keep the smile off his lips, his heart on the verge of bursting.

“I’m sorry, songbird,” his beloved rasped and pressed his lips to Jimin’s chin, his hands stroking the skin of his thighs, his stomach, his waist. “I’m sorry if I’m hurting you.”

“Y-you’re not, you don’t, I-” His words were a senseless mess, his thoughts in a disarray as he struggled to focus on anything other than the foreign fullness and the uncomfortable stretch that came with it. It hurt, but there was pleasure too, if not in the act, then in the knowledge that in this very moment, the two of them were one.

“Breathe,” Yoongi told him, just like he had before. His voice was taut with constraint and he leaned his head against Jimin’s shoulder, the muscles of his back straining with his effort to hold still. “Breathe for me, songbird.”

Jimin did, drawing a quivering breath before moving to take the captain’s face in his hands and coax him into looking at him. The sight of the concern that marred his brow made Jimin’s smile grow tenfold, affection blooming in his chest so fiercely it brought tears to his eyes. “You don’t hurt me, Yoongi,” he told his beloved, his voice a high-pitched whisper as he pulled him in to claim the captain’s lips with his own.

They kissed until they couldn’t breathe, with Yoongi struggling to be still while Jimin shuddered beneath him, distracted by the warmth the captain radiated all around him. He clung to it and held his beloved as close as he could, hardly a hairsbreadth between them as they waited for Jimin’s tension to ease.

They broke apart when Yoongi moved his hips again, pulling back a little before rocking back in. He was maddeningly slow in every movement he made, careful and hesitant, until the knot in the depth of Jimin’s stomach felt all the more unbearable. The ache was steadily fading; when the captain repeated his shallow thrust, Jimin gasped at the overwhelming sensation it fed him, but he couldn’t close his eyes, not when Yoongi whispered another apology against his cheek.

The captain frowned in such a different manner than he usually would, worry, guilt, and apprehension knitting his brow so tightly. He looked like he was the one who was hurting, a faint quiver in his right hand as he stroked the skin of Jimin’s chest, almost as if he believed Jimin would break.

Jimin was overcome with an urge to soothe Yoongi, to draw him out of his thoughts. There was a word resting on the tip of his tongue, one he’d never used even in a tone of teasing. It was stupid, ridiculous, really, and he couldn’t have said what possessed him to speak it now, but perhaps ridiculous was what he needed to reassure his beloved now.

Smiling ever so brightly, he rose to press his lips against Yoongi’s ear and whispered, “You won’t break me, captain.”

The change was instantaneous. A snort fell from Yoongi’s lips, followed by a string of contagious laughter, until his shoulders were shaking from it and he had to lower his head to rest his brow against Jimin’s chest. “You are,” the captain said breathlessly when he looked up again, and Jimin’s heart swelled at the sight of his wide smile, utterly free from worry, “absolutely impossible,
Jimin was dimly aware of the tears that fell down the side of his face, feeling too much all at once. He drew breath and parted his lips, perhaps to give some witty retort, but whatever words his already distracted mind could conjure tapered off into a quivering sigh when Yoongi rocked his hips again, careful in his movements. “Yoongi,” he whispered, if only for the sake of speaking his beloved’s name.

It wasn’t long before the captain grew more confident in the way he moved, putting more strength in every push and pull of his hips. There was far more pleasure than pain now, only a faint pressure at the base of Jimin’s spine every time Yoongi pushed inside him and fed the fire in his stomach.

Jimin learned fast to not even bother to try and stifle his moans; not only was it an impossible feat to begin with, but whenever he’d pressed a hand to his lips to muffle the high-pitched noises, Yoongi would guide his limb away and kiss him, greedy for every single sound. It was hardly intentional, but somewhere between Jimin’s lungs and his lips, every breathless gasp became a whimper, a mewl of a sound containing every bit of the pleasure the captain fed him with each thrust of his hips.

Jimin tried to stave off his inevitable peak for as long as he could, holding Yoongi’s shoulders in a vice grip to ground himself, but when the captain pushed Jimin’s thigh up against his chest, he knew he wouldn’t last long. Not only could he move easier like this, but the change in the angle had Yoongi pressing right against that same spot his fingers had found before.

“Yoongi,” Jimin gasped and arched off the mattress when the captain hit deeper within him than before. His breath hitched, the air in his lungs pushed out to give room for the numbing ripple of pleasure, every cell of him drawing itself taut under the force of it. “Yoongi, please, it’s too much, I can’t-”

A curse spilled from Yoongi’s lips in the form of a growl, spoken right against Jimin’s neck. “I know,” he rasped and kissed his skin without breaking the pace of his hips, hissing when Jimin tightened around him again. “I know, it’s alright, songbird, just, just let go.”

He wanted to hold on, he wanted the two of them to reach their peak together, but the captain made it impossible when he reached down and took Jimin into his hand to stroke him quickly. Pleading and desperate, Jimin pulled him up and kissed him, stifling his high cry against Yoongi’s lips when the knot in the pit of his stomach finally came undone and he was claimed by his orgasm.

His body strung itself tight, unbearably tight from the force of it, pleasure bursting all the way to the tip of his toes, curling against the sheets. It was as if he was coming apart in the most wonderful way and put together again, his breath catching in his throat as he arched until it was all he could do to hold on. He gripped hard at Yoongi’s shoulders, his nails surely having dug marks into his beloved’s skin by the time Jimin felt like he could breathe properly again.

Dimly, he realized Yoongi had stilled against him, trembling, his jaw slack while his eyes were shut tightly. Jimin shuddered at the sensation of a wetness inside of him, the captain’s seed spilling deep. It made him squirm, something he regretted the very instant he moved; all of a sudden, he was painfully sensitive, even the slightest shift inside him leaving him quivering.

“Easy, songbird.” Yoongi’s voice was utterly ruined, hoarse and cracking as he spoke against Jimin’s temple, his eyes remaining closed. His arms shook with the effort it took to remain upright, as if they were seconds from folding under his weight. “Deep breath for me,” he slurred and waited for Jimin to comply before pulling out of him.

A whimper of a sound spilled from Jimin’s lips upon the sensation, his hips twitching. He was numb
at the same time as he felt like his bones had melted, and when Yoongi slumped against the mattress next to him with a groan, he knew the captain’s state was the same as his.

“M sorry,” Yoongi murmured, fighting to keep his eyes open. “Did I hurt you?”

Smiling, Jimin shook his head as best he could; his body didn’t quite seem to want to listen to him. “You didn’t,” he said and reached out to push the captain’s sweaty locks away from his face. “Quite the opposite.”

Yoongi chuckled, his lips curling into a tired smile. “Good,” he said and nodded, his eyes falling shut. “S good.”

Giggling at the captain’s state, Jimin pushed himself onto his elbows and did his best to pull the sheets over their bodies, too blissful to pay any heed to the slick trickle on his stomach and between his legs. Once he was sure Yoongi was comfortable, he lay back down and squirmed closer until he could bury his face in the crook of the captain’s neck. “I love you, Yoongi,” he whispered and pressed one last kiss against his skin.

Yoongi was already half-asleep, but he wrapped an arm around Jimin’s waist and held him close all the same, mumbling something incoherent against his hair. Jimin didn’t need to hear the words to know what they were, however, so he smiled and closed his eyes, more content than he had ever been in the arms of his beloved.

Chapter End Notes

Ayyy.

//finger guns

…

………….. okay so.

SO.

S O.

SO THAT HAPPENED, AND HOLY FNUCKING FECK ON A STICK, I AM DECEASED.

SMUT HAS NEVER BEEN THIS DIFFICULT TO WRITE IN ALL MY LIFE, HOLY SHET. IT’S SO SOFT BUT SO GODDAMN INTENSE, I HAD TO PAUSE AND JUST //BREATHE// LIKE EVERY 3 SENTENCES.

I’m not joking. I’ve been writing that scene since Thursday. Almost a week of continuous writing. My heart has bust so goddamn many nuts.

BUT HOLY SHET WAS IT WORTH IT. LOOK AT THEM. LOOK HOW
GODDAMN SOFT THEY ARE, I CAN’T, I REALLY REALLY CAN’T.

Also. Captain. //cackles// I DID IT, AND I REGRET NOTHING, IT FITS SO WELL, IT'S SO GREAT AKJHSDLKJHSDLAGKFAS-

The MVP of this chapter is the word “beloved”. Holy shet, watch me burst into tears every time Jimin referred to Yoongi as “his beloved” in his thoughts. Fecked me up, it did.

Okay. OKAY, BUT LISTEN, RIGHT, IT'S 3AM, RIGHT, AND I AM LITERALLY FIGHTING TO KEEP MY EYES OPEN. I’m gonna go home now, hope I don’t fall asleep in the middle of the street.

BEST OF NIGHTS TO Y’ALL, AYYYYYYYYY-
As the Agust cast off for Hong Kong to see through their plan of drawing in the Rabid Conflagration’s attention, Jimin stood on the beach of the island of Lantau and waved, his hand raised high over his head for all the crew to see. He made a valiant attempt to keep his smile on his lips, but the farther away the ship sailed, the harder it became. They weren’t heading towards imminent danger, as far as he knew - Yoongi had told him the emperor’s favored jeweller had two or three guards at most - but worry gnawed at Jimin’s chest all the same, dreading all the ways in which their raid could go wrong.

Knowing his hesitance in regards to what they had planned to do, the captain had asked him if he wanted to stay behind during the raid. It was an offer Jimin had gladly accepted; while he had certainly come to accept himself as a pirate, he was far from comfortable with the thought of taking part in armed thievery.

He had felt guilty for thinking himself above a crime the others were ready to commit for the sake of their cause, but they had brushed off his apologies and reassured him in their own ways. Taehyung had thrown an arm around his shoulders and told him being a pirate meant he had the freedom to do as he pleased, even if it meant staying back while the rest of them went. Xiao had patted him on the back with enough force to shove the air out of his lungs, laughing as he boasted over Jimin’s purity to everyone who would hear.
Even Hisashi had told him to not complain about that which he had no power over, but from the tone in which he’d said it, it could’ve been an insult just as well. Jimin still wasn’t certain.

Then there was Yoongi, who had smiled ever so softly and reminded him of what had made him love Jimin to begin with. “You don’t change,” the captain had said, paying no heed to the teasing whistles of his waiting crew. “You haven’t lost that which makes you who you are, and that is not something to apologize for.”

His words had made Jimin smile, and so Yoongi bid him farewell with a kiss and a murmured promise to return to him as soon as he could. All Jimin had done was smile and nod, quelling the tension within him in favor of seeing them off in good spirits.

“Does it ever get easier?” he asked when he finally stopped waving, his worry getting the better of him and causing him to frown at the horizon as soon as the Agust was no longer visible.

“Watching them sail off to do something dangerous and foolish?” Behind him, Jin smiled, his voice laden with sympathy. “No,” he said softly and placed a hand on Jimin’s shoulder, “but you learn to live with it.”

“They have never failed to return,” Jeongguk said in a tone of stubborn finality, as if he wouldn’t allow any other outcome. “I’ve stayed behind many times over the past years to watch them go, and they’ve always come back. All of them.” He nodded at his own words, his lips pressed into a thin line. “They will be fine.”

From the corner of his eye, Jimin saw the sailing master wring his gloved hands, surely a nervous trait, and he knew the boy was every bit as anxious as he about the crew’s wellbeing. “I know they will be,” he said and threw another glance at the horizon. The sight of the empty sea only served to double his tension, but he kept his worry to himself, loathe to dissuade Jeongguk in his determination.

“Staring at the ocean won’t bring them back any faster,” Jin said after a moment of silence, clapping his hands together to jar them both out of their gloom. “Sabelsdottir and the northerners have likely set up camp already. We should join them unless we want to go without lunch.”

He tightened his grip on Jimin’s shoulder to steer him away from the shore and reached out to take Jeongguk’s arm, firm in his touch as he led them towards the inland. Talya had insisted on waiting with them for Yoongi’s return, claiming there was no need for her to take her leave before they had seen their heist through.

The kind way in which she had smiled at Jimin left him inclined to believe she had chosen to remain for the sake of his assurance. She had insisted on having her men set up camp without their help, ushering the three of them off to bid farewell of their crew.

“I think the Cardinal herself went hunting for food,” Jeongguk said as they walked. “Saw her walk off towards the woods before we left.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” Jimin said. “She could probably bring down a colony of bears all by herself.”

Jin hummed at his words, his lips curling into a smile. “Let us hope she does,” he said lightly. “After all, our canary needs all the strength and energy he can get.”

For a moment, Jimin believed the cook was alluding to the battle to come and the part he would play in it, but one glance at his friends told him it was not the case. Jin was smiling much too widely and
Jeongguk turned away, staring pointedly at a cloud in the sky. “What are you talking about?” Jimin asked, frowning.

“Oh, nothing,” the cook said. “I only meant you must be very tired after last night. It was quite an ordeal, wasn’t it?”

Jimin parted his lips and closed them again, beyond bewildered by his question. Judging by Jin’s tone of voice and his ever-growing smirk, he was hardly speaking of the things Jimin had suffered through during his absence from the Agust. Not to mention none of it had happened the night before, thus he was left racking his brain for what could’ve happened in the night to prompt such a reaction.

When it finally dawned on him what the cook meant, Jimin came to an abrupt halt halfway through a step and almost tripped. The dull ache at the base of his spine suddenly seemed all the more prominent.

“What,” he began, heat rushing to his cheeks alarmingly quickly. “What, um, how… what do you mean?”

The cook’s grin was wide and teasing, but it was Jeongguk who answered him. “Don’t you deny it,” he said with a petulant grimace, as if it was the last thing he wanted to think about. “You haven’t even tried to hide those marks around your neck.” He scoffed dryly, half slyly amused, half disgruntled. “And even without them, it’s not like you were very quiet.”

Embarrassment combusted throughout Jimin’s body and caused him to flush brightly all the way to the tips of his ears. He quickly reached up to grab at the open collar of his shirt and tighten it, sputtering like a fish out of water. He hadn’t even begun to consider the possibility that someone might’ve heard him and Yoongi in the throes of their pleasure, especially not at the time.

Now, he realized it had been a rather naive thought. “You were listening, Jeongguk?” he asked shrilly, mortified.

“Was I- no,” the sailing master exclaimed, equally as appalled. “No, no, why would I ever want to do that? Sounds carry over water, alright, and I woke up in the middle of the night and you were… I mean, I heard…”

His voice tapered off, flushing just as red as Jimin was by the time he finished speaking. Jimin might’ve found satisfaction in Jeongguk’s mortification had he not been so busy fighting off what was surely his own death by embarrassment.

It explained so much, such as Taehyung and Hoseok’s ridiculously smug smiles the following morning as they demanded Namjoon to pay some debt he owed them. It also explained the way in which Talya had so persistently nudged him towards Yoongi when the time of farewell had come, every last one of her sharp teeth visible as she grinned.

Jimin crouched on the ground and buried his face in his hands, groaning in his despair. His friends allowed him to wallow, one delightedly cheerful, the other still huffing under his breath about how he would never do such a thing. He wondered if Yoongi had been aware of the fact that the others had known all along. *He likely did know,* Jimin thought sullenly, recalling the captain’s content expression when they’d sat down for breakfast with both their own and Talya’s crew. *The bastard.*

Halfway through his musings, Jin cleared his throat and said, in as casual of a tone he could muster, “It sounded like it was a pleasant affair.”

Jimin rose to his feet so fast his head began to spin, his cheeks flushed scarlet by now. “Jin,” he cried
indignantly while the cook threw his head back and laughed, his voice echoing across the empty field. “It’s not funny.”

“It is so, so funny,” Jin managed through fits of high-pitched cackling, clapping his hands together in his glee. He laughed until he was gasping for breath, leaning against Jimin’s shoulder and coughing, and when he finally regained himself enough to stand upright, he returned Jimin’s murderous glare with a grin. “Oh, don’t be so dramatic, canary,” he said and lightly smacked him on the back. “At least you were discreet enough to go about your business at night.”

He jerked his thumb at Jeongguk, whose smirk curdled at the prospect of being the next target of the cook’s jests. “He used to be so shy,” Jin said, “but as soon as he fell between the sheets with our darling quartermaster, he began to proudly strut around the ship after every single one of their romps. Our sailing master glows the brightest when he knows everyone heard them.” He narrowed his eyes. “You and Taehyung are shameless.”

In contrast to the blush of his cheeks, Jeongguk smiled primly and squared his shoulders, looking mighty satisfied even in his embarrassment. “That is because we have no shame,” he said as if it was a thing to boast of. “We have long since stopped caring if someone hears us.”

“Much to the lament of the rest of us,” Jin said with a scoff.

Glad to no longer be the subject of his friends’ lighthearted ridicule, Jimin silently trudged on ahead and left the two to bicker amongst each other. Futile as it was, he kept one hand clasped firmly around the collar of his shirt to pull it tight as he walked, in hopes of hiding the marks Yoongi had left on his skin. He knew it would serve no purpose; after all, everyone he knew were apparently already well aware of what had happened in the night.

The thought made him want to smack Yoongi up the head, although he wasn’t quite sure why.

The camp was a cluster of small tents at the edge of a forest, raised around the makings of a bonfire. The tents were made of painted animal hides of various colors, sewn together with beaded string and propped up with sturdy, wooden sticks. Talya had explained them a necessity wherever they went; there was hardly enough space to rest comfortably aboard her ship, thus they carried tents so they could have more room when they reached land.

Talya was seated by the dormant bonfire when Jimin arrived at the camp, her furs thrown haphazardly over her shoulders as she worked on skinning a speckled buck. Perhaps skinning was a light term; the northern Cardinal was tearing the animal to pieces with her bare hands, the sharp claws of her blessing easily opening the hide. She looked to be humming as she worked, content in letting Qasim order her crew around to finish whatever work remained of building the camp.

“You’re cheeks are red,” was the first thing Talya said when she noticed Jimin, grinning. She made for quite a terrifying sight, if not for her sharp teeth, then for the animal’s blood, which caked her arms halfway up to her elbows. “Did you bid a proper farewell of your captain?”

“I waved him off, if that is what you mean,” Jimin said curtly, his voice a bit too loud to be nonchalant. He refused to meet her eyes and instead sat down on the ground next to her, staring pointedly at the animal she had caught as he fought down the warmth of his cheeks. “He said he would return by sunrise.”

The northern Cardinal nodded, still smiling that smug smile of hers, as if she knew every secret Jimin had ever held. “Hong Kong is close,” she said and returned to skinning the buck. Only now did he notice the vicious, gaping wounds in the poor animal’s neck, no doubt a product of Talya’s blessing. “If everything goes well, they will be back sooner.”
Jimin said nothing to that, frowning as he felt some of his earlier tension creep back into his chest at the thought of the raid not going well. Talya must’ve realized her mistake, for she raised a hand and snapped her fingers right under Jimin’s nose, chuckling when he recoiled, grimacing in distaste at the strong scent of blood that clung to her hand.

“Do not think of bad things,” she said kindly. “Worrying will not bring them back any faster, and bad thoughts bring bad luck. Instead, think of everything good that will come of the risk they take.” She smiled at him before resuming her work. “My son is barely a man yet. He still grows, but he sails the northern seas already. All on his own, without me to look after him. I could worry, like any mother would, but where would that get me? Where would that get him?”

She chuckled, fondness clear as day in her voice as she spoke of her child. “Instead of thinking what could go wrong, I think of everything that can go right,” she told Jimin. “He can become a great captain and he can earn the respect of my northerners. He can learn the ways of the world and become a better man.”

Jimin looked at her, smiling in spite of his tension. The northern Cardinal sounded so fiercely proud even though her voice was soft, all but exuding confidence and faith in her son and his survival. Somewhere in the far back of his mind, Jimin thought she was too young for someone so at peace in her own existence; surely, he would turn a hundred years old before he’d know how to live as freely as she did.

“I’m curious about their return,” Talya said suddenly and looked up, smiling slyly once more as she leaned back where she sat. “It will be interesting to see. Rings and necklaces of silver and gold and pretty jewels, earrings and bracelets and painted jade. I wonder what the Black Fox will bring back for his songbird.”

Her musings rendered Jimin a stuttering mess, fervently shaking his head while she laughed and nudged his leg. “I don’t need him to bring back anything for me,” he said, flustered. “As long as he returns to me, I will be happy.” He shrugged when Talya quirked a brow at him, amused by his gentle words. “I doubt he will think to bring something back for me.”

“Oh, he will.”

Jimin turned where he sat and watched Jin incline his head in a courteous bow before Talya before he took his seat on the ground next to him, swiftly followed by a pouting Jeongguk. The sailing master looked properly chastised, like a petulant child, but before Jimin could ask what had happened after he’d left them to argue, Jin spoke up again. “Yoongi likes pretty things,” he said. “Not on himself, mind you. He enjoys providing for those around him. All those rings our quartermaster has in his ears are gifts from his brother.”

He looked at Jimin and smiled. “Now he has you, canary,” he said lightly. “It would not surprise me if Yoongi returned with enough jewellery to weigh even your wings down.”

While the others laughed, Jimin hid his face in his hands and sighed, halfheartedly cursing his luck for being left to suffer at his friends’ hand. He didn’t know how to feel; on one hand, Jin’s words made him nervous, but on the other, the prospect of Yoongi wanting to bring him a gift was far from unpleasant.

“Rings, probably,” Jeongguk was saying when Jimin looked up again. “Necklaces would never show under the shirt Jimin has taken to wearing. It reaches too high around his neck.”

“Rings,” Talya agreed and nodded thoughtfully, her buck long forgotten. “Bracelets would break when he changes his skin to that of his blessing.” She grinned when the sailing master flushed from
being addressed directly by a Cardinal and turned to Jimin. “Rings will weave into your plumage. Bands of white gold will look pretty around the base of your feathers.”

“He might not bring any,” he argued meekly, but none of them paid him any heed, utterly engrossed in their discussion about what jewellery would suit him best. Jimin sighed, but found it impossible to be upset; his worry was dissipating as he listened to them speak, fond exasperation quick to replace it.

The day spent amidst the northerners was more lively than he could’ve imagined. They were an active sort, choosing action over rest; after devouring every last piece of the buck Talya had hunted, they trained and engaged in games of various kinds, such as trick archery and contests of precision, where they threw axes at a marked tree from increasing distances. Impressed, Jimin watched Qasim outshine several stronger men, his axe always landing at the very heart of the cross drawn into the bark.

The helmsman’s victory was short-lived, however, when Talya wrestled him to the ground after realizing he had made use of his blessing to fool them all. She hardly held back as she made him surrender, and Jimin might’ve been worried if not for the delighted laughter that spilled from Qasim’s lips as he was forced onto his back on the ground. Talya laughed, too, before she leaned down to kiss her first mate’s lips.

The northern Cardinal grinned when she saw Jimin’s surprised expression, her voice bright and clear as she told him Qasim was not only her married husband, but the father of her son as well. It made Jimin smile, but before he could express how glad he was they had stood by each other for so many years, Talya asked him when he and Yoongi was to be married and promptly turned him into a stuttering fool all over again.

His wallowing curse was much less halfhearted this time.

When the time for supper came, Jimin joined Talya’s three archers on their hunt in the forest. He didn’t speak a word of their language nor they a word of his, but under the silent guidance of Lárus, the man with golden, braided hair, they brought down a fat wild boar. Dragging the great animal back to their camp proved a more difficult task than the hunt itself, but Jimin was content all the same, having missed the feel of a bow in his hand.

At nightfall, Talya offered the three of them the biggest tent they had raised along with what were undoubtedly the softest furs they had, the pelt grey and spotted and warm. She refused to hear their protests, claiming she could suddenly no longer understand their words before hurrying off to her own tent, and so they were left to accept their fate and curl up under the lovely furs.

Jimin lay awake for long after the others had fallen asleep, doing his best to silently repeat Talya’s soothing words over and over to stave off his worry. Think of the good things that will come, he told himself and drew the furs tightly around himself. Think of how it will feel to see them again.

He couldn’t remember dozing off, but when he opened his eyes again, the sky was pale green, the color of early dawn. The sun had yet to peek over the horizon, but it was only a matter of time before it would, the black of night already retreating under its impending arrival. The camp was still, silent apart from the rumbling snores of two dozen sleeping pirates. It was a familiar sound and made Jimin smile as he sat up, careful as he went to not rouse Jin or Jeongguk from their sleep.

Halfway out the tent, however, he paused and turned back, reaching over Jin to gently shake the sailing master's arm. “Jeongguk,” he murmured, smiling when the man emitted a sound akin to a whine and attempted to brush away his hand. “Jeongguk, I'm going to the beach to wait for them.”
Jeongguk grunted incoherently, refusing to open his eyes, but when Jimin moved to let go of his arm, he said, “Promise me you won't disappear again.”

“I won't disappear again,” Jimin said and fought back a giggle when the sailing master nodded contentedly and buried his face back into the soft furs. “I promise.”

With that, Jimin crawled out of the tent and stood up, throwing a brief glance at where Talya was sleeping before he set off. He made himself walk slowly, knowing it would mean nothing even if the sea’s horizon would be empty. It was not yet sunrise, thus he refused to let himself expect to see the Agust when he reached the shore.

True enough, when he walked out onto the beach, the sea was still and deserted, its color blending into the horizon. It made for a beautiful sight, and Jimin did his best to enjoy it rather than dwell on the lack of life as far as his eye could reach. “They will come,” he said aloud and made himself smile. “He promised he would come.”

He walked back and forth across the beach as he waited, shedding his shoes to feel the coarse sand between his toes for every step. He drew meaningless symbols in the sand with his feet and hummed absentmindedly to himself, and when the sun finally began to rise from the horizon, it took more effort than he could’ve imagined to not begin to dread the worst.

By the time Jin and Jeongguk joined him, he had forsaken every excuse for a passtime and taken a seat in the sand, his knees drawn up under his chin. The sun had already detached from the sea and rose higher and higher the longer Jimin waited, as if it wanted to taunt him in his impatience.

“Don’t look so grim,” was the first thing Jin told him as he sat down in the sand. “Yoongi will be sad if the first thing he sees is your frowning face. He will be angry with me and tell me I should’ve kept you smiling somehow.”

Jimin snorted at that, a mere huff of a sound. “He won’t,” he said and pried his eyes off the horizon to look at his friends. The cook was calmest of the three of them, unfaltering in his confidence while Jeongguk shared Jimin’s worry, glancing at the sea every few seconds. “He can hardly blame you for my worry.”

“I’m sure he’ll find a way,” Jin jested and reached over to ruffle his hair. “Smile, canary. He will be here soon.”

Almost begrudgingly, Jimin made himself nod and lay down in the sand, huffing as he glared up at the sky. The wind was too still, he thought, knowing it would slow down the ship considerably. Briefly, he wished he possessed Son Jukan’s blessing so he could force the air to do his bidding and bring the Agust to these shores faster.

“I can hear you thinking,” Jeongguk said. He was hardly in a better state himself, drumming his fingers against his leg without pause. “You’re making me nervous.”

A snappish retort rose quickly to Jimin’s lips, but he ground his teeth before he could voice it. “I’m sorry,” he said instead. Nothing good would come from arguing, particularly when the two of them were agitated for the very same reason.

Silence fell over them after that, broken only by the soft rush of waves hitting the sand. Jimin closed his eyes and made himself listen to the sound and every other, catching every trill of nearby birds and the buzzing of summer insects by the water. The sounds made him think of all the times he’d sought quiet solitude in the forest of Jeju, but unlike back then, what soothed him the most now was the sound of the sea, not the songs of birds.
“Canary,” Jin crooned after what could’ve easily been an hour or three. He slid his fingers back into Jimin’s hair and chuckled when Jimin hummed in reply. “Are you sleeping?”

“No,” he said, his voice bleary as if he’d only just woken up. “No, I’m awake.”

“Good,” the cook said, “because I see familiar sails on the horizon.”

Jimin sat up so fast it hurt his neck, his eyes stinging with the strong sunlight. He refused to close them, however, ignoring the pale, dull colors of the world around him when he caught sight of the ship. It was hardly bigger than a small speck on the horizon, but even as his eyes blurred from how fast he had to adjust to the light, he recognized the vessel with ease.

“They’re back.” Next to him, Jeongguk stood upright, his smile as bright as the sun. “They’ve returned,” he said and reached down to pull Jimin onto his feet, giddy as a child. “They’ve come back.”

Jimin staggered as he rose, disoriented from lying motionless for so long. His bare feet slipped on the sand and he might’ve fallen if not for the sailing master’s grip on his arm. A smile was quick to grow on his lips as well, his heart surging into a rapid pace, fuelled by relieved impatience. “They’ve come back,” he echoed and felt like he could breathe properly for the first time since he’d bid the crew farewell.

He didn’t notice the feathers growing fast from his arms until Jin emitted a bright laughter and nudged his back, pushing him towards the sea. “Go,” he said, waving his hand in a shooing motion. “You will combust if you wait for them to reach the shore.”

Jeongguk nodded and let go of his arm, and that was all the assurance Jimin needed before he allowed his wings to grow and took to the sky. He flew as fast as he could, the still air bending easily under the command of his feathers. When he drew close enough, he heard a familiar voice call out to the crew, his smile audible even from so far away. “Pretty bird sighted on port side,” the pirate boomed and caused Jimin to laugh, fumbling with his flight.

He needed only a second’s vision of the deck to find the ship’s captain, waving up at him from beside the quarterdeck rail. Jimin dove and landed clumsily in front of him, the momentum causing him to stagger through his steps, but his beloved was there to catch him, laughing as he welcomed Jimin into his arms.

“I’ve come back to you, songbird,” Yoongi said, sounding every bit as relieved as Jimin felt, holding him impossibly close and pressing his brow against his shoulder, deaf to the high whistles of his crew. “I missed you.”

Jimin parted his lips, but before he could even begin to express how glad he was to see the captain again, another body rammed into theirs with enough force to send them stumbling together. Jimin emitted a startled yelp, but when another pair of arms closed around both of them, the sound turned into a bright laughter.

“I missed you too, Chim,” Taehyung said loudly, cheering as he spun them in circles as best he could, until they all were teetering on losing their balance.

They likely would’ve fallen if not for Xiao, who came rushing over to pull all three of them into his arms, holding them so tight Jimin struggled to draw breath. “Always a sight fer sore eyes, pretty bird,” the carpenter boomed, grinning down at him. “We were only done fer a day, but it felt longer than a year, a year, I tell ya, it was torture, can ya believe-”
“Enough,” Yoongi interrupted, his voice muffled where he was trapped between Jimin and Taehyung. “Let us go, both of you.”

While Xiao complied easily, Taehyung lingered, pressing his cheek against Jimin’s and humming contentedly as if he’d been deprived of his friend’s presence for far longer than he could handle. “Unfair,” he whined when Yoongi shoved him away, but his grin was wide as ever when the captain pulled Jimin into a kiss as soon as they had enough space.

It was a short one, both of them smiling too widely. “I missed you too,” Jimin said and pressed another quick peck to Yoongi’s lips before turning around in his embrace so he could face the others. “You too, Tae. And Xiao, and everyone else.” There was not a single face missing from the group that had sailed to Hong Kong. “I’m so glad to see you all safe. How did it go?”

His question was meant for Yoongi, but when the captain chose to bury his face against Jimin’s neck rather than reply, Namjoon answered, snorting where he stood by the helm. “It went as well as it could’ve,” he said. “The jeweller’s guards were unprepared and slow and the artisan himself a coward who threw the key to his vault at our feet as soon as he saw us.”

“A clever man, I’d say,” Taehyung piped up cheerfully.

“Indeed.” The first mate flicked his head towards the open companionway. “We took as much from his vault as we could carry,” he said and tapped a finger to his collarbones, where a new gilded chain hung heavy, the necklace decorated with seven precious stones, all in various colors. “He was shocked to be left alive. It wouldn’t surprise me if he went running up and down the streets as soon as we were gone, to tell everyone what had happened.”

The truth behind his words made Jimin’s smile falter. News about the Black Fox of the East’s raid must’ve traveled fast, thus it was likely the emperor already knew of it, and through him, both Jukan and Oseong. This was only the declaration, he thought and placed his hands on Yoongi’s arms, still tight around his waist. The war is yet to come.

As if the captain had heard him, he coaxed Jimin to turn around in his embrace until they faced each other. “Here, songbird,” he said quietly and took something from the inner pocket of his coat, humming as he took Jimin’s left hand in his own and raised it. “I have something for you.”

Jimin’s heart stuttered in his chest before it set an alarmingly fast pace as he watched Yoongi thread a ring onto his third finger. It was a thin band, carved and engraved with intricate, swirling patterns of pale green, the ring of the same color the sky had been when Jimin had woken up hours ago.

“It’s jade,” Yoongi murmured and brushed his thumb over the ring, a small, contented smile gracing his lips. “At first, I thought white gold would suit you best. Its shine is less glaring than silver or platinum and would bring out the rose of your hair rather than overpower it.”

“Yoongi,” Jimin whispered, overwhelmed, but the captain carried on without pause.

“What? I saw the jeweller’s collection of jade rings and imagined one of their color would cast a beautiful contrast with your hair,” he said, huffing slightly as if he believed his own words to be foolish. “Of course, I took the rest of the jade rings as well, so if you don’t fancy this one, there are nine others you can—”

Jimin kissed him before he could finish his sentence, feeling as if his heart might burst if Yoongi continued speaking for even a second longer. The captain sighed against his lips and pulled him closer, his hand tightening around Jimin’s and pressing the ring more firmly against his skin.
“There are nine others you can choose from,” Yoongi finished with a chuckle when they parted, resting his brow against Jimin’s. “If it doesn’t fit or you don’t like the design.”

“I want this one,” Jimin said immediately. “It’s the one you chose for me.” He looked down at it, an impossibly wide smile tugging at his lips as he turned the ring around on his finger with his thumb. “Thank you, Yoongi.”

Later, he would tell the captain to never pay for a gift in blood again, but in this moment, Jimin could barely bring himself to think of it.

They dropped anchor as close to the beach as they dared and crossed the rest of the way in dinghies, one of which Jeongguk nearly tipped in his hurry to pull Taehyung into his arms. The quartermaster was hardly any better, all but hurling himself off the small boat. The two of them ended up in the water, utterly uncaring about anything and everything around them as they clung onto one another.

While they rolled around in the water, Jin walked up to Jimin as soon as he stepped off the dinghy and reached for his hand to inspect the jade ring with a critical eye. “A good choice,” the cook told Yoongi, who snorted, grinning, while Jimin flushed and held his left hand to his chest, as if afraid the ring would fall from his finger.

They brought a crate full of jewels ashore, and when they arrived at Talya’s camp, Yoongi told her every man and woman from her crew could take an item of their choosing from the crate of jewellery as a gesture of gratitude for their assistance in the battle to come. She, as the captain, could take three.

The northern Cardinal told him she was more than happy to help in any way she could, but chose three items all the same; a long earring with thin golden chains and rectangular rubies, a bracelet of silver and black pearls, and finally, a necklace of amethysts and red gems. She gave the last one to Qasim, who hung it around his neck with a contented smirk.

After that, Talya told her men to make ready to cast off. Now that Yoongi had returned, her task would begin. She would sail towards Busan at the southern coast of Korea and keep vigil of the seas between the port and the island of Lantau. Her ship was quick enough to keep anyone from slipping past her unnoticed, thus she was confident she would intercept Son Jukan before he could even draw close to where Yoongi would wait for his brother.

When the time for farewell came, Talya pulled Jimin into a fierce embrace, smiling when he begged her to be careful. “We will see each other again when this is over,” she told him firmly. “When the Rabid Conflagration’s last flame has become ashes. I promise.” She sounded so certain, as if she knew for a fact it would happen, all Jimin could do was nod and draw strength from her conviction.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, Talya was gone out to sea, and then began the most taxing part of their plan to stop the Rabid Conflagration.

The waiting.

Jimin had never experienced a tension as heavy as the one that hung over the Agust over the following week. It weighed every last one of them down and caused every fit of laughter to be brief and forced, every conversation short and stilted. Even though they knew Oseong couldn’t possibly cross from Korea to China within only a few days, every last one of them kept a wary eye on the horizon, expecting his arrival for every waking moment that passed.

Jimin spent almost every waking moment up in the crow’s nest, staring at the sea until his eyes stung. More often than not, Taehyung and Jeongguk joined him, silent in their need for closeness. The sailing master seemed more nervous than most, wringing his hands and looking like he was
constantly on the verge of turning over and vomiting. Jimin wished there was something he could’ve done; Jeongguk had refused the offer to stay ashore during the battle, claiming it would be worse than all the terror his mind could throw at him in the middle of the fight.

“I will not leave your side,” Taehyung promised his beloved every night that passed without sight of the Rabid Conflagration. “Whatever happens, I will guide you through it.”

Whenever Jimin wasn’t on watch duty or sleeping, he spent his time with Lucya, assisting her in crafting bolts for her crossbow and arrows for his bow. She taught him how to best restring his bow should it snap, and she, just like Yoongi, made sure to tell him time and time again to never leave the crow’s nest once the battle had begun.

Hoseok made him a new shirt, one similar to the one Jimin had been forced to leave behind on Jukan’s ship during his escape. He was grateful for it; he felt far freer and more unrestrained with his arms and back bare.

Jimin tied the Rune of the Storm on a strap of leather around his neck, tucked away safely under the firm knots of his shirt. He would need both of his hands in the battle to come, to wield his bow and arrows. Once every day, Jimin made sure to hold the rune in his hand to ensure it still heeded his call, although it seemed unnecessary; the Blessed Rune seemed to feed on his darkest emotions, needing only a mere touch to beckon dark clouds and unruly winds.

*I will do what needs to be done,* Jimin told himself every time he released his grasp on the Rune of the Storm. *When the time comes, I will not hesitate.*

On the night of the ninth day since Yoongi’s strike against the jeweller in Hong Kong, the captain decided to visit Jimin up in the crow’s nest, cursing under his breath as he hoisted himself up onto its flooring. “How the fuck do you climb this so easily, songbird?” he huffed when Jimin pulled him upright, rolling the shoulder of his prosthetic limb. “I swear I thought I would lose my grip and fall three times on my way up.”

Jimin chuckled, the sound more akin to a cough. His smile didn’t quite reach his eyes as he glanced towards the horizon, loathe to look away for too long. Yoongi noticed his tension easily and placed a hand to his cheek, sighing as he brushed his thumb against the skin below his eyes. “It won’t be long now,” he said and attempted to smile when Jimin looked at him again. “With or without the wind’s favor, he will reach the coast of China soon.”

“I know,” Jimin said and placed his hand on top of his beloved’s. “I’m ready.”

For a long moment, neither of them said a word. There was nothing to be said; they simply stood there, drawing comfort from each other’s presence. Even in the night, the summer air around them was warm and pleasant, yet there was a chill in Jimin, one he could only distract himself from by gripping hard onto Yoongi’s hand. The captain returned his hold just as firmly, and nothing needed to be said.

“Do you think Talya is safe?” Jimin asked after a while, gazing out over the sea as if he would find her ship on the horizon.

“I’m certain she is,” Yoongi said. “That bastard, Jukan, bears one of the strongest blessings known to man, but he cannot wield it properly. I mean, he couldn’t when I still knew him,” he added, frowning as if the words left a foul taste in his mouth, “but I doubt he has changed much in these past few years. When we were younger, he would always let his emotions get the better of him. His temper would flare when he needed to be calm in order to call on the winds that were his own.”
He heaved a frustrated sigh. “His greed and ambition made him force his blessing to do his bidding rather than let it happen as it should, naturally,” he said, “and so it partly rejects his command.”

Jimin nodded silently. Yoongi had never spoken of the time he’d spent serving the law alongside Son Jukan nor had he expressed any kind of sentiment towards the man who had once been like a brother to him. As gently as he could, Jimin took the captain’s hand into both of his own and traced the path of his knuckles. “Do you miss him?” he asked quietly.

“No.” Yoongi’s answer was instantaneous, and he himself seemed agitated by it. “It may be cruel of me, but I was never able to miss the time we spent together,” he said. “We knew each other for years and years, yet when I made the choice to save Taehyung from the gallows, it was as if the bond between us shattered.”

He turned his hand around in Jimin’s. “Some bonds are too fragile to survive this world,” he said slowly. “We may mourn them and we may wish we could mend them, but once broken in the way my bond with Jukan did, there is no way to repair it. I suppose I could never understand why he was so adamant in his hatred of pirates. To me, pirates were… criminals. They were people who had done things the law demanded punishment for. But for Jukan…”

The rest of Yoongi’s words went unspoken. Perhaps he didn’t want to voice them or perhaps he didn’t even know what they were. He seemed to be deep in thought, absentmindedly toying with Jimin’s hand as he searched for what to say, and Jimin allowed him all the time he needed.

“Some bonds are stronger than others from the very moment they are made,” the captain said at last. “I had known Jukan for six years when I met Taehyung, yet by the time I had listened to his tale, the bond between us had grown strong enough for me to willingly turn my back on the only life I had ever known. To ensure the bond between me and Taehyung would not break, I shattered every other bond I had ever had.” There was a hard look to his eyes. “I have never regretted it. Never.”

“I know,” Jimin said and smiled when Yoongi looked away from their hands and at him. “I know you would never regret something so important. Just as I have never regretted leaving Jeju as a tribute. It was a horrible choice to make, but even back then, I could never regret it.”

All the night’s stars seemed to glitter in the captain’s eyes as he listened to him, reflecting all the reverence Yoongi had shown him time and time again. It was more comforting than anything could’ve been now; even with the terrible battle to come, they were still alive. They were still alive to love each other.

When Yoongi traced the lines of his ring, it was all Jimin could do to not cry.

“Some bonds,” the captain said very quietly, “are sacred. Precious. They are stronger, born out of our very hearts, but even the strongest bonds need to be cared for and loved. They need to be nurtured so they will never break.”

He took Jimin’s hand in his and raised it so he could press his lips against the jade band. “You are so, so precious to me, Jimin,” he said, a hoarse quiver to his voice, “and for as long as you want me to, I will ensure that the bond we share remains every bit as strong as it is now.”

At first, all Jimin did was nod, rendered mute by the rush of emotions in his chest. When he finally parted his lips, the first thing he said was, “Good,” and chuckled wetly, squeezing Yoongi’s hand. “Then I will ensure it grows stronger for every passing day.”

Nothing more was said. Yoongi stayed in the crow’s nest with him far into the night, their hands remaining joined even when the captain drifted off, leaning against Jimin’s shoulder while he kept
watch. He wouldn’t sleep for long, but even when he woke, neither of them said a word, content to simply exist in each other’s presence.

For hours and hours, they only sat there, until the greenish skies of dawn were upon them once more and Jimin saw a familiar ship rise from the horizon.

“Yoongi,” he said tensely. “He has come.”

The captain turned where he sat to look where Jimin pointed, an unyielding hardness seeping into his expression when he found the Rabid Conflagration’s ship. He rose to his feet and pulled Jimin up with him, and when Yoongi finally released him, it was to cup his cheeks and kiss him, hard, with all the desperation of a man standing before the gallows.

“Whatever happens, songbird, promise me you will live,” the captain said when they broke apart, his voice more fragile than Jimin had ever heard it. “Whether we win or lose, you have to promise me you will not let him kill you. Never you.” His hands trembled against Jimin’s cheeks, and his eyes were wet with tears. “Please.”

It was a foolish thing to swear, but so desperate was Jimin to soothe Yoongi’s distress, he didn’t hesitate before nodding. “I promise,” he whispered against Yoongi’s lips and drew strength even from his quivering touch, strength to quell his own fear. “I promise, Yoongi.”

It was only when the battle had already begun that Jimin realized his beloved never promised him the same.

Chapter End Notes

WELL.

THAT’S NOT OMINOUS AT ALL. OKAY.

I would like to dedicate this cliffhanger and aaaaall its ominous premonition to Wes, Ricmae, Shayne, AND ALL THE OTHER ANGST HELLIONS THAT MAKE ME SAD ON TWITTER EVERY GODDAMN DAY >:((( YOU GUYS SUCK AND I HATE YOU >:((((((

WOW LOOK AT HOW HAPPY THIS CHAPTER WAS WOW YOU JUST KNOW THIS MEANS I’M ABOUT TO FUCK SHIT UP REAL GOOD IN THE NEXT ONE WOW THIS IS SO GREAT WOW

also Yoongi lowkey proposed to Jimin and Jimin lowkey said yes, BUT YOU KNOW, EVERYDAY YOONMIN THINGS, YUP, WHAT ELSE IS NEW, UH-HUH

:D:D:D::D:D:D::D::D::D

RANDOM QUESTION, but have you guys noticed that yoonmin actually kiss A LOT in this fic? Like, after their first kiss, they be smoochin’ several timers per chapter :D:D::DD I just realized it now, ahahah xD
NEXT WEEK IS GRAND EPIC FINAL BATTLE TIME. BOIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII I AM HECKIN’ HYPED THIS SHET IS GONNA GO DOWN IN HISTORY I’M HOLLERING AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-

friendly reminder that Major Character Death is NOT tagged in this story, which means Major Character Death will NOT happen. So for all the sassing I do with my cliffhangers, none of the boys will die.
The Storm of Fire

Chapter Summary

The sea was churning.

Far off the shores of the island of Lantau, the waters that had been so peaceful in the night were stirring, waves rising higher and higher around the Agust’s hull. The bluegreen sky of dawn was nowhere to be seen, clouds of grey and black gathering to cast their darkness over the two opposing vessels. A rumble went through the heavens, ominous and resounding, like the drums of war signaling the battle to come.

All around them the sea was churning, and Jimin felt it in his very bones.

Chapter Notes

AaaaAAaAaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-

//implodes

- Brand X Music - Last Chance
- Two Steps From Hell - Freedom Fighters
- Brand X Music - Altered States
- Killer Tracks - Brood

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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He stood alone in the crow’s nest, bow strapped around his chest and a quiver full of arrows tied around his waist. He breathed deep and slow to stave of his fear, refusing to surrender to it in the face of the ship they were minutes from engaging, the one that flew the Rabid Conflagration’s colours.

“I will do what needs to be done,” he said to himself and clenched his fist around the Rune of the Storm, holding it to his chest. It burned in his grip, crying out to the skies it commanded, but Jimin ground his teeth and persisted, beckoning the dark clouds as fast as he knew how. “I will not
hesitate.”

Far below him, the Agust’s crew were moving about the deck, frantic as they prepared for the approaching clash. Taehyung and Jeongguk stood at the bottom of the main mast, one wielding a long, thin blade while the other held a broadsword. Their hands that held no weapons held one another, their fingers entwined tightly, and the quartermaster never stopped speaking, constantly reassuring his loved one in the face of battle.

Namjoon, Xiao and Hisashi took their stance by the starboard side rails, ready to lead those who would board the Rabid Conflagration’s ship. Behind them, Hoseok paced back and forth, a pistol in each hand. Halfway up the foremast stood Lucya, one arm wired in the sails’ rigs to keep her balance as she readied her crossbow.

“Find something to hold onto and be ready!” Yoongi stood by the helm, his left hand guiding the ship’s way while his other was braced against the rail. Jin stood beside him, ready to take hold of the wheel should his captain need to let go. “We face them full on!” he called to his crew. The entirety of the ship was quivering with strength, feeding from its captain’s touch as it prepared to bend out of shape.

“After their cannons are crippled, we will sink our claws into their hull and tear it asunder!” Yoongi shouted, not a shred of hesitance in his voice. “We will send their ship to the bottom of the sea, and then we will fight until every last one of them is dead!”

“Aye, captain!” the others replied in unison, mirroring their captain’s resolve. In the crow’s nest, Jimin closed his eyes and drew on the powers of the Rune of the Storm until he shuddered in its winds.

“If the east has forgotten what we are capable of, we will remind them now!” Yoongi went on, feeding strength into the hearts of his men as they drew closer and closer to the battle’s birth. “Show that bastard that not even his flames can burn us from the face of the sea!”

The pirates cried out as one, drowning even the rumbling of the skies. They raised their arms high and turned to face their foe, and the first drops of rain fell only moments before the two ships collided.

“Brace for impact!”

With a deafening crackle, the Life of Agust tore free from where she was bound to the ship, her lips parted in a silent cry of war. Furious, she held the bird tighter to her chest and reached as far as she could, raising her sword high over her head and arching, drawing all the strength Yoongi had to give her life. Deaf to the dreadful shouts of those who crewed the ship before her, she cleaved down and plunged her sword into its hull.

“Hold on!” Yoongi shouted and turned the wheel with Jin’s help, his right hand firmly holding onto the rail. The Life of Agust twisted her body along with the movement of the ship, turning and dragging her sword through the hostile vessel to tear its gundeck open. For every cannon she carved out of place, her blade sank deeper, until the two ships were locked to one another, side by side in the sea. “Release the claws!”

“All hands,” Namjoon shouted, his voice barely audible over the crackling of wood as the steel blades dug into whatever remained of the hull of the Rabid Conflagration’s ship, “fire!”

Every last one of the Agust’s cannons released at once, a chorus of booms going off along the vessel’s starboard side. Held tight by the Life of Agust’s sword, the two ships rattled on the sea, the
“Prepare to board!”

Yoongi’s command fell at the same time as a familiar voice shouted the same words from the midst of the hostile ship. Jimin turned to find its source, knowing just who it belonged to, but before he could even begin to look for Oseong amidst the frantic chaos, a hail of bullets came hurtling from the ravaged vessel, fired haphazardly at those standing ready to board.

As one, Namjoon and Hisashi threw themselves onto the deck to avoid the shots. Xiao was too slow; one of the bullets caught his hand, piercing his palm where he’d raised it to shield himself. With a sound like a growl, the carpenter stumbled off the rail and curled his bleeding hand into a tight fist, his body heaving as he battled against the steady flow of pain in his arm.

The growl on his lips grew into a feral roar when he straightened up again, black fur bursting from his skin in his rage. He launched himself over the rail, his precious axe forgotten, and what landed on the Rabid Conflagration’s ship was a bear, monstrously large and every bit as savage as the rabid beasts that even the greatest hunters feared.

Namjoon and Hisashi, along with the rest of the boarding party were quick to follow, their swords raised high as they threw themselves into the battle. All along the hostile ship, the gunners took aim once more, but many of their bullets remained unshot as a flurry of bolts came whistling through the air, fired from the Agust’s foremast.

One by one, Lucya killed the Rabid Conflagration’s gunmen, firing bolt after bolt at their chests, stomachs and heads until they fell. They attempted to counter and respond in kind, but every time one of them took aim, the sniper tugged at the ropes she’d wired around her arm and slipped out of sight behind the thick mast. She hid behind it and took the opportunity to reload her crossbow, and as soon as the bullets ceased their hammering at the other side of the mast, she returned to where she’d stood, ready to tear the life out of many more.

In the corner of his eye, Jimin caught movement halfway up the main mast of the Rabid Conflagration’s ship and turned, his eyes growing wide in dread. One of the gunners had climbed the mast to get a clearer shot of Lucya, whose full focus was on the deck, thus he had all the time in the world to take his aim.

“Lucya!” Jimin screamed, but his warning came too late.

The bullet tore through the sniper’s right knee, spraying her blood across the sails behind her. She cried out in pain as her leg folded under her weight, her crossbow falling from her hand in her struggle to hold onto the mast to keep from falling. The ropes around her arm tore into her muscles as she fought to stay upright, quivering in agony.

“Hold on!” Jimin shouted even though there was nothing he could do to help her where he stood. All he could do was watch, and with a thrill of dread, he realized the gunner might try his luck again now that Lucya could no longer slip in and out of hiding behind the mast. He reached for his bow, but he only had time to turn in the pirate’s direction before another shot was fired, this time from the Agust’s deck. The gunner on the Rabid Conflagration’s ship sagged only a fraction of a second later, his jaw shattered and bleeding where the bullet had hit him.

Stunned, Jimin looked down to see Hoseok push a new bullet into the barrel of his pistol, smoke still rising from the muzzle when he rushed over to the foremast to help Lucya get down safely.
The rain was falling in earnest now, pouring heavy over the two interlocked vessels. It plastered Jimin’s hair to his brow and made it hard to see, blinking hard as he searched for any trace of the Rabid Conflagration himself. It was near impossible to separate one face from the other where he stood, the two crews blurring together in their disarray.

Yoongi, however, seemed to tell friend from foe with ease. Every hostile pirate that neared the Agust’s rail to board was thrown back whence they came or into the sea, the ship lurching on its captain’s command. The rail broke and resumed its shape again and again, repelling those who had no place on it.

When one pirate buried his sword through the rail, thinking the ship itself was a living thing, it retaliated by taking the shape of a pike as sharp as a harpoon and piercing the man’s gut. Blood gushed from his lips and he lost his sword, and the Agust threw him into the sea.

By the small chance a pirate from the Rabid Conflagration’s ship made it past the vicious rail, they came face to face with Taehyung. Gone was the cheerful boy and his smile as bright as sunlight; the very instant the quartermaster found himself an opponent, he rounded on him like a lion bearing down on its prey, ruthless and without mercy.

The Agust’s crew looked to be taking the battle by storm, but Jimin hardly felt at ease with what he saw, dreaded alarm flaring in his chest as he searched for the most dangerous of their enemies amongst the chaos. “Where are you?” he asked of the humid air, pushing his wet hair out of his eyes.

“Where are you, Conflagration?”

Then he saw him, clear as day, standing at the Agust’s forecastle. The fighting was thickest between the two ships’ midsts, thus Oseong had somehow slipped past Yoongi’s perimeter and onto his vessel. There was fury in his eyes, rage twisting the face that had been so deviously charming when Jimin had last seen him. He was soaked from the rain, his left hand clenching and easing around nothing, as if attempting to bring out his flames while his right held a sword.

A spark of flames flashed in the Rabid Conflagration’s hand, and with his eyes set on Yoongi, he broke away from the foremast and headed for the quarterdeck.

“He’s here!” Jimin shouted, his voice ringing shrilly through the pouring rain. “The Rabid Conflagration, by the foremast on port side!”

The one to reach him first was Taehyung. With Jeongguk following a few steps behind, wide-eyed in his terror as he defended his beloved’s back from those who sought to harm it, the quartermaster went without doubt, fearless in his attack. Jimin watched them fight, hardly daring to breathe in his tension, and he was reminded of the very first time he’d seen Taehyung in battle, furious as he’d taken on Son Jukan amidst a burning mariner ship.

Keep the flames at bay, Jimin chanted inwardly as he watched his friend parry and strike, the ring of their swords loud in his ears. Don’t let him use his fire.

The quartermaster fought well, dodging his opponent’s strikes and driving him back with equal fervor, each swing of his sword strong and poised to kill. Taehyung was faster than the Rabid Conflagration, nimble where Oseong was strong, and he pressed on until it was all his opponent could do was retreat, moving backwards as best he could without stumbling.

Without warning, the two ships were jarred out of balance by a hail of cannonfire from the Rabid Conflagration’s ship, fired from the wrong side for the sole purpose of causing disarray. Taehyung staggered and Oseong found an opening in his defences, grinning as he swung his sword in a vicious arc at the quartermaster’s face.
The strike was too quick for Jimin to grasp, until blood burst from the left side of Taehyung’s face and he screamed. His sword fell from his hands and he reached up to clutch at his temple, staggering blindly upon the loss of one of his eyes.

The sound of his voice had terror sink its claws deep into Jimin’s chest, his ears ringing with alarm as he watched his friend fall to his knees before the Rabid Conflagration, defenceless as he pressed his hands to his bleeding face.

“Tae- Taehyung!” he cried, and immediately, the rain ceased its fall to give way for vicious thunder, the clouds above them flashing. “Tae-” Jimin’s voice died in his throat as Oseong raised his sword again, ready to grant the quartermaster a swift end.

Before he could begin his cleave, however, Jeongguk stepped over his beloved and lashed out with bare hands, blinded by anguished fury as he took hold of the Rabid Conflagration’s arm. “Don’t you dare!” the sailing master screamed and shoved Oseong backwards with all his might, away from where Taehyung kneeled in agony. Panic twisted the boy’s features, more than he knew what to do with, but for the sake of his beloved, he persisted, fighting against it with everything he had to give. “Don’t you dare hurt him!”

The Rabid Conflagration staggered, his opponents forgotten as he stared at his hand, eyes wide in shock at the gold spreading across his skin. His surprise was quickly replaced by horror as he realized what was happening to him, the muscles of his arm hardening where the gilded curse spread. Quickly, he pried his sword away from his stiff fingers and took it in his left, utterly unhesitant as he used the blade to sever his own limb at the elbow.

Only when a burst of flames erupted from Oseong’s arm to burn the stump shut did Jimin realize the rain had ceased to fall. Taut with panic, he looked up to see what had changed and caught sight of a blinding flash cleaving through the sky a mere fraction of a second before a bolt of lightning broke free and struck the Agust’s rail.

The crash of thunder made his ears ring, blinded by its flash, but even in his disorientation, Jimin immediately let the Rune of the Storm fall from his hands, horrified by what it had done. As soon as it lost its vessel, the powers of the rune grew weak, its lightning retreating far into the depths of the dark clouds. Rain began to fall once more, but it came unnaturally, weak and sporadic, as if the Rune of the Storm was struggling to stay strong, refusing to turn dormant even without a vessel through which to channel its blessing.

“What have you done?” Jimin asked shrilly as he took in the state of the deck. The rail had imploded where the bolt of lightning had struck, smoke rising from whatever pieces of wood remained. “What have you done?”

Only now, when it was much too late, did it dawn on him that the Rune of the Storm did not care who fell victim to its vicious bursts of power. To the blessing, there was no friend or foe, only targets.

Only prey.

In his state of numb horror, Jimin nearly fell from the crow’s nest when a violent tremor went through the Agust, the ship thrashing with its captain’s rage. He narrowly caught one of the rigs in his hand and held on tight, dread rushing to his chest as he watched Yoongi leave his post by the helm, all thoughts of strategy forgotten as he launched himself at he who had hurt his brother.

The two captains clashed with a deafening ring in the middle of the ship, Yoongi’s knives meeting Oseong’s sword with enough force to send the injured pirate staggering back. A curse fell from the
Rabid Conflagration’s lips as he regained his balance and raised his sword to parry Yoongi’s unrelenting onslaught, the movement of his left hand clumsy yet trained. All he could do was parry, crippled as he was, and make use of his blessing where he could.

Too afraid to touch the Rune of the Storm now, Jimin tore the bow from around his chest and drew an arrow from his quiver, his heart hammering in his chest as he took over the captain’s task of keeping the Rabid Conflagration’s crew away from the deck of the Agust. Arrow after arrow, he fired at those he knew to be hostile, burying the heads into their legs or knees to stop them in their advance.

Taking his eyes off his beloved to hold the line was the hardest thing Jimin had ever had to do, knowing any moment could be Yoongi’s last.

Whenever the skies gave pause to its infrequent rain and the heavy drops ceased to hit his skin, Oseong called on the powers of his rune. Flames burst from his arms, both the stump of his right and his sword-wielding left, and he lunged at Yoongi when they did, reaching for his face, his throat, his chest. The captain was quicker than him, however, ducking under every strike and using his left arm to deflect those he couldn’t avoid.

Ivory resisted fire, Yoongi had told Jimin time and time again over the past fortnight to appease his worry. He saw it now, when the prosthesis shielded its master from the Rabid Conflagration’s burning grip, unrelenting. Oseong’s hand was a limb of fire as he held onto Yoongi’s wrist, having dropped his sword to push against his opponent with all his might. He was larger than Yoongi and held an advantage like this, using every last shred of his brute strength to force the captain backwards when it was all Yoongi could do to not let the flames near his face.

“Hold on,” Jimin whispered to the wind, his voice high-pitched with worry as he fired another spree of arrows against those who sought to board the Agust and assist their captain. “Whatever it takes, hold on.”

Against his chest, the Rune of the Storm flashed ominously, flickering with the same ominous light that crossed the skies above.

For as long as the lack of rain allowed him, Oseong pushed Yoongi further and further back, until the captain’s shoulder collided with the main mast. The dagger fell from Yoongi’s free hand, but rather than secure his defence against the burning limb, he pressed his palm against the base of the mast, shouting, “Brace!” before unleashing a vicious tremor through the frame of his ship.

The Agust thrashed like an injured beast, quaking as if it was coming apart at its very core. Every man aboard, be it friend or foe, was sent reeling, struggling to stay standing as the vessel writhed with the force of Yoongi’s blessing. The Rabid Conflagration lost his grip on Yoongi’s arm and stumbled, jarred backwards and away from his opponent while Yoongi clung to the main mast for stability.

A devastating crackling sound rose from between the two ships, like that of bones breaking apart. Upon the burst of power from its captain, the Agust had rocked so violently on the sea, the claws buried into the Rabid Conflagration’s ship had sunk deeper still, until they had torn the hostile vessel open from deck to keel.

Cries of battle turned into screams of dread as the ship began taking on water, its frame swaying under the sudden weight. “She’s sinking!” someone shouted, their voice shrill with panic, and the disarray aboard Oseong’s vessel quickly descended into utter madness as every pirate, regardless of whom they served, fought to escape the churning waves rising to swallow the ship.
So distracted were they by the sudden chaos, neither Jimin nor Yoongi noticed when the Rabid Conflagration stood up amidst the chaos that was the Agust’s deck. Outraged and freed from the prison of the rain, Oseong conjured a massive bolt of fire in his hand, white-hot and dense, and hurled it at his own ship with no regard for those of his crew who stood in its way.

As if time had slowed its course, Jimin watched the burning bolt whistle through the air, gaining size as it flew, until it found its mark and hit Namjoon full in the chest.

“No!” Jin screamed from where he stood at the helm, terror etched deep in his voice when he saw the first mate fall, twisting in agony as the flames clung to his frame. “Namjoon!”

With a growl like that of a vicious animal, Yoongi took his knife from the deck and broke away from the main mast. His teeth were bared in his rage as he ran to the Rabid Conflagration, blind to everything around him until he drew close enough to swing his dagger and bury it deep into his enemy’s side.

Oseong screamed in pain when the blade sank into his obliques, pushed as deep as it could go by the momentum of Yoongi’s charge. Without pause, Yoongi twisted the knife, carving a bigger wound into the flesh of his stomach, his actions utterly without mercy even as blood burst from the Rabid Conflagration’s lips.

“B-bastard,” Oseong spat, his voice thick and garbled by his own life’s blood clogging his throat. His body convulsed as Yoongi tore the knife out again, tugging in a manner that ensured the blade would rip through as much of the Rabid Conflagration’s flesh as it possibly could. The dagger was soaked in red and dripping, staining Yoongi’s hand as he raised it again, wild with hatred as he moved to bury the blade in Oseong’s chest.

Moments before Yoongi’s dagger found its mark, Jimin watched as volatile sparks spreading all across the Rabid Conflagration’s frame, dancing over the skin of his arms and chest. With a ripple of dread, Jimin realized what he meant to do, but by the time his warning rose to his lips, Oseong emitted an inhuman cry of rage, and a blast of fire burst from within him.

It was as if a bomb had detonated, a pulse of sheer, destructive force spreading from where the Rabid Conflagration had released it. It tore Yoongi off balance and sent him crashing into the quarterdeck stairs, hard enough to shove the air out of his lungs and cause him to collapse to the deck, heaving. Jimin felt it all the way up to the main mast, a pulse of burning heat shooting past him where he held onto the edge of the crow’s nest, eyes wide in horror as he took in the devastation left behind.

When the blast had settled, the entirety of the Agust stood aflame.

The Rabid Conflagration’s fire burned through whatever wetness the rain had left behind, scorching the sails and their rigs. It spread unevenly along the deck, lighting the dark wood in bursts of flame and blackening it further, until the rails began to crumble and the boards of the deck creaked, weakening.

It was the second time Jimin saw a ship burn, and just like last time, he thought this had to be what hell looked like.

Every pirate aboard the two ships had been floored by the immense blast, thrown back by its force. They lay either dead to the world or writhing in pain, crying out as they fought to be rid of the flames that clung to their clothes.

Only Oseong remained standing, heaving, his torso still burning and his arms black as coal. His back was hunched and he swayed where he stood, heaving as pain crippled his form and made it a
struggle even to stand. The wound in his side had burned shut, but the damage it had caused lingered
to render him slow and weak as he turned, searching for the man he so wanted to kill.

When the Rabid Conflagration looked at Yoongi, struggling to rise from the deck, Jimin had never
been as afraid as he was then. Terror clawed at his chest as he watched Oseong take a laborious step
towards the captain, fresh fire bursting through the black of his arms.

The Rabid Conflagration smiled, a twisted, triumphant curl of his lips, and Jimin knew what he had
to do.

His quiver lay empty by his feet, every arrow spent to keep the hostile crew from boarding the
Agust, but he didn’t care. He dropped his bow and raised his right arm, his eyes never leaving
Oseong’s form as he called on his blessing. Feathers burst along his arm and he took hold of the
longest with his hand, gritting his teeth hard before he tore it out of his wing, swallowing the cry of
pain that rose to his lips. Tears stung his eyes but he blinked them away as he crouched to take his
bow in hand.

He held the quill to his bow much like he would an arrow and drew, and with a shrill scream of the
Rabid Conflagration’s name, he let the feather fly.

“Son Oseong!”

The quill pierced Oseong’s shoulder before he could do more than look up, tearing through muscle
and bone and sinking deep into the deck below him, its rose down caked with blood. The Rabid
Conflagration cried out in pain and raised a burning hand to press against where the feather had went
through him, hissing as he looked up in search of whom had called his name and dared harm him
further.

His eyes widened when he saw Jimin, who threw his bow to his feet in favor of pointing down at
Oseong, hatred framing every word as he spoke. “Look at you, Conflagration,” Jimin called, his
voice shrill and sharp with contempt. “Look at what has become of you and your pathetic lust for
death!”

“Harpy,” Oseong said, surprise slowing his pain-addled mind.

“Yes, me,” Jimin retorted hotly. “Your brother was naïve to think he could hold me captive, just as
you were so gullible to believe all the lies I fed you aboard your ship!” A flicker crossed the Rabid
Conflagration’s face, but Jimin pressed on without granting him the time to raise his voice. “He was
right there. Min Yoongi. When you sailed to Qinzhou, he was bedridden on the town’s coast with a
half-functioning prosthesis. If you hadn’t turned away, you would’ve found him unprepared and
defenseless, and you could’ve killed him!”

The Rabid Conflagration stood very still now, hardly seeming to breathe as he listened. The flames
of his body betrayed what he hid, however, bursting and crackling along his skin.

“Every word I told you was a lie,” Jimin went on, his throat burning. “and you swallowed them all
so easily! I told you, greed for success is a fickle thing! Look at where it has led you!” He swept out
his arm towards Oseong’s ship, and even though the man did not turn to see, Jimin knew he knew
how much he had lost. “Your men are dying and you ship is moments from sinking into the sea,” he
screamed, “all because you couldn’t tell lies from truth!”

His words echoed across the sea, followed only by silence, deafening and thick. For what could’ve
been an eternity, the Rabid Conflagration only stared up at him, his emotions laid bare in the way the
flames writhed.
Rage and hatred fed his fire, as Jimin had hoped it would.

Then Oseong smiled, a maniacal grin spreading his lips. “It doesn’t matter,” he said and spread his arms, one a mere stump, the other a formless mess of flames. “None of it matters, because I have won! All of your lives are at my mercy, mere flickering flames ready to be extinguished at my command!” He laughed, and to Jimin, the sound lacked even the slightest trace of humanity. “All of your lives are mine,” the Rabid Conflagration declared, “and I will start with yours, Harpy! I promised to burn your wings off, so you, who have caused me so much loss, will be the first to die!”

“If only you could kill me, Son Oseong,” Jimin called to feed his fury, “but you are weak!”

“We shall see,” Oseong spat and moved up to the main mast as fast as his injured body could take him. He pressed his hand against the base of it and widened his stance, growling as he pushed his flames into the thick wood. The fires around his torso moved to the length of his arm, his chest and shoulders left bare as he focused as much of his blessing to the palm of his hand. “I will burn you out of the sky, Harpy, and then your life will be mine!”

Jimin’s heart hammered in his chest as he reached up to tear the strap that held the Rune of the Storm from around his neck, his hands moving deftly to tie it around his wrist instead. He took the rune in his hand and closed his eyes as he gave himself over to its will, breathing deep when the storm’s winds grew strong once again, whistling with their blessing’s fury.

For all the tension in him, none of it came in the form of dread. There was not a shred of fear left in Jimin now, only determination, only the strength of the decision he had made. “I will do what needs to be done,” he murmured to the air around him, “and I will do it gladly.”

When the mast began to sway and break, made weak by the Rabid Conflagration’s fire, Jimin stepped up to the crow’s nest edge and turned around. He raised his head and looked at the black flag tied to the very top of the Agust’s main mast, his eyes tracing the lines of the white fox’s skull as he waited. “Gladly,” he said again, and, much like the first time he had ever flown, he leaned back over the edge and allowed himself to fall.

Through the whistling winds, he heard Oseong’s triumphant laughter, a horrible sound that made his blood curl. Jimin held his breath, waiting, and he was so close he could feel the heat of the flames, he called on his blessing and spread his arms wide, his wings bursting through his skin to stop his rapid descent.

Shock spread across Oseong’s face and he moved to retreat, but Jimin was too quick. Without a moment of doubt, he sank his talons deep into the Rabid Conflagration’s shoulders and pulled, lifting the man he hated most in this world off the deck of the Agust. Even crippled, Oseong weighed more than he did, but Jimin rose without strain.

His wings were strong, even when they knew what would happen.

“Songbird!”

A part of him wanted to turn back then, to look at his beloved and smile at him, to fall into his arms and kiss him again. To hold him and never let go. But the other part only grew stronger, his determination made all the more fierce from the knowledge that everyone he loved would be safe now, freed from the fire that would consume this world.

Thus he rose higher and higher into the darkness of the skies, towards the tempest he himself had created for the simple cause of protecting those he held dear. He went to it willingly and without doubt, knowing there was nothing else he would rather have done.
For a moment, there was only silence. Jimin heard none of the screams of his friends, none of Oseong’s outraged cries, not even the fierce, churning winds around him. There was only silence, and he reveled in it and allowed it to calm him in face of what was to come.

*I’m sorry, Yoongi,* he thought, the Rune of the Storm smoldering between the feathers of his wing. *I’m sorry I can’t keep my promise.* He smiled, tears burning hot behind his eyes. *But you will live.*

For one blessed moment, there was only peace.

Then a rumble exploded against his ears, the dark clouds above him roaring in their fury. A blinding gleam cleaved through the sky, violent and thrashing as it tore the blackness asunder. Jimin closed his eyes and surrendered to the storm’s hands, a shuddering exhale leaving his lips along with all the fear in him. “Live,” he whispered and hoped those he loved would hear him, “and be happy.”

With another flash, a bolt of lightning broke free from the darkness above, rippling, reaching, until it found its mark and pierced the songbird’s chest.

Chapter End Notes

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pls remember MCD is not tagged and will not happen OK BYE
Blessed

Chapter Summary

Wherever Jimin turned his head, wherever he searched, all he found was black nothingness. Above and around him, there was nothing to see as far as his eyes reached. Or perhaps his eyes were closed. He couldn’t quite tell; he wasn’t even sure he’d moved his head at all. The darkness was suffocating, pressing against him from all sides until he couldn’t breathe.

Not that he seemed to need air at all. His chest stayed still and his lungs empty, and his body went unaffected. In his state of immobility, he attempted to listen for signs of life from all around him, even from within himself. He waited for a heartbeat, the sound of a breath, but it was futile.

All there was was darkness.

Chapter Notes

In loving memory of Kim Jonghyun - may he take his place in the skies and sing forever amongst the angels.

Two Steps From Hell - Nero
Two Steps From Hell - After the Fall
BTS - Pied Piper ((THE MELODY IS SO PERFECT FOR THIS OKAY))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All there was was darkness.

Wherever Jimin turned his head, wherever he searched, all he found was black nothingness. Above and around him, there was nothing to see as far as his eyes reached. Or perhaps his eyes were closed. He couldn’t quite tell; he wasn’t even sure he’d moved his head at all. The darkness was suffocating, pressing against him from all sides until he couldn’t breathe.

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All there was was darkness.

Is this death? Jimin wondered, the first coherent thought to cross his mind. He tried and failed to raise his hands, his limbs rendered useless by the blackness around him. It must be. If it wasn’t, there would be pain.
The possibility came to him peacefully. Whereas one might’ve thought about death with terror, Jimin decided that if he was truly dead, it would all have been worth it. He had not feared in his last moments, and he would not fear now. I did what had to be done, he thought and fancied himself a smile. I do not regret it.

He could not remember what it was he had done or why it’d had to be so, but he knew he didn’t regret it.

Somewhere far in the distance, someone began to cry. Their voice was muted, dull, but the sorrow was every bit as loud to Jimin as it could’ve been, anguish curling around every broken sob. The voice was not alone; several more cries joined the first, each more distant than the other, but the sadness they bore was all the same.

Don’t cry, Jimin wanted to tell them, but his lips wouldn’t move. Even if they had, there was no voice in him, nothing to carry the words from his heart. Please don’t cry. Their tears made him ache with the need to soothe, to make them see he was not in pain. Live. Live, and be happy.

He didn’t need to recognize the voices to know who they belonged to. Dead to the world as he was, he knew.

The cries faded slowly, drifting too far for Jimin to hear, but the silence did not return. The faintest of hums held the quiet darkness at bay, a bodiless murmur rising to calm him in his unease. There were no words, hardly a voice at all, yet he found comfort and reassurance in it.

Dimly, Jimin realized it was inside of him, crooning silently within his very ears. I know you, he thought and attempted to smile when the soft murmur flickered in agreement, a bright lilt to its steady presence. Have you died, too?

His question was met with incredulity and it brought an image to his unseeing eyes, of a small creature shaking its head in denial where it sat on his chest. Tiny as it was, it peered down at him in wonder, as if it couldn’t quite comprehend why he would ever ask such a thing. I have died, Jimin told it in his mind. I did what had to be done, and I have died.

The creature shook its head again and the murmur within him crooned its refutation. Jimin frowned - at best he tried to, but his face remained serene - and wondered if the small thing was blinder than he, so much so that it could not see even the blackness around them. This is death, he said, but faltered in his surety under the creature’s eyes. Is it not?

Shaking its head once again, the little being stood on his chest and nudged him with its beak, prodding at his bare skin. The crooning in his ears flared ever so slightly and the darkness flickered and paled, startled by the creature and its wordless voice. Jimin could not understand what it meant, but when the black nothingness settled and the being rubbed at his chest again, he was struck by a sudden thought.

For all the darkness around him, Jimin was not cold. On the contrary, he was enveloped in warmth, not a trace of a chill reaching anywhere on his motionless body. Death, surely, was cold and harsh, a state that didn’t know the meaning of comfort, yet Jimin, for all his immobility and lack of sight, was warm, as if his skin was kissed by the sun itself.

Oh, he thought, bewildered. It was an odd thing to imagine. After all, he had gone to his death so readily. There was a promise he had broken to do it, too; he couldn’t remember it now, but it had been important. It had been so, so important, thus he knew he wouldn’t have broken it if there had been a choice other than death.
He did not want to let himself hope, but the creature’s presence fed life into him where it touched his skin and gave him strength even when he could not move. It was as if it was attempting to free him from the darkness, where he did not belong. It was hesitant and nervous, and when his heart surged up to meet its touch, Jimin knew it was waiting for him.

*If I’m not dead,* he said to it, *will you help me return?* He raised his hand to stroke the feathers of the creature’s head, smiling as his fingers brushed against its softness. *You, who are part of me.*

Unhesitant, his blessing beamed at him and bowed its head until it touched his chest, where it vanished to take its place in his heart. Light flooded his vision and chased away the darkness while the warmth around him seeped deeper into his skin, spreading to every last bit of him until he was strong enough to open his eyes.

His eyelids were heavy and his vision blurred the instant he managed to lift them, blinded by sunlight. He blinked and it only became worse, his eyes stinging and begging to be closed again, but Jimin refused. Instead, he took as deep of a breath as he could and blinked again and again, squinting, until he could see the lines of the strange ceiling above him.

His mind was slow and groggy, as if he had slept for days without waking. It took him several minutes to realize he couldn’t recognize the narrow room in which he lay, the wood of its walls lighter than that of the Agust. The ceiling was high and oddly curved, mismatched from the frames of the walls, as if it had been placed there on a mere whim. A window stood open next to where he lay, bright light reaching across his skin to embrace him in warmth.

Not that Jimin needed it; the bed in which he rested was a small mountain of blankets and furs, tucked up all the way to his chin. He felt unbelievably warm and safe, their weight on his body somehow soothing. There was a soft pillow under his head and an even softer mattress cradling his body, and he couldn’t remember the last time he had felt so blissfully comfortable.

Then came the ache.

There was a steady, painful throb in his chest and back, flaring up for every beat of his heart. It spread down his torso and up the right side of his neck, where it settled as a dull hum in his right ear. His throat ached when he swallowed, the channel thick and dry all at once. He grimaced, only to immediately wince when his jaw ached in protest to the small use of his muscles.

Jimin struggled to raise his left hand from underneath the many blankets so he could rub at his neck and soothe it. He was impossibly weak; all he managed to do was move his arm until it rested atop the furs before he lost his strength, his body flooding with numb exertion. A quivering exhale passed his lips and he craned his head to look at his trembling hand, as if he would find some sort of answer written in his skin.

Instead, he saw a familiar band of pale jade around his third finger, and all the ache in him ceased to matter.

A small smile graced his lip as he looked at the ring, his mind slowly recalling the moment when he had received the gift. He couldn’t quite remember who had given it to him yet, but he knew it had been someone dear.

Someone beloved.

With some effort, Jimin moved his thumb to brush over the band, his eyes closing as he reveled in the feeling of the smooth jade. *Thank the gods,* he thought and eased back against the pillow. *I didn’t lose you.*
Exhausted by the simple movement, he considered resuming his sleep, but an odd noise from the other side of the room urged him to open his eyes again. He turned his head and looked to the corner, where he saw a man seated at a desk, grinding herbs in a small stone pot. He was tall and dressed lightly for the warmth of summer, with dark brown hair pushed out of his brow in his concentration.

Jimin knew him. He knew him, and the sight of him made the smile on his lips grow wider still. “Hoseok,” he tried to say, but his lips failed to form the name right. It came out slurred and incoherent, but his voice was there and the doctor heard him all the same.

He jerked upright so fast he almost fell out of his chair, his eyes made wide by shock as he turned to look at Jimin. “Oh, fuck, you-” He interrupted himself before he could say anything more and leapt to his feet, reaching for the door next to his desk. “Jin!” Hoseok shouted as soon as he’d pulled it open, never once looking away from Jimin. “Jin, he’s awake! Jin, he’s awake! Quickly, fetch Yoongi from the shipyard, he should be there with Xiao and the others! Hurry!”

Yoongi, Jimin thought and closed his eyes, relief drawing a quivering breath from his lips at the mere mention of he who was his beloved. Yoongi. Warmth blossomed fiercely in his chest and made his eyes fill with tears, smiling as wide as he could even with the ache in his jaw. You’re alive.

He opened his eyes again when he felt a hand on his brow, another taking his trembling left and squeezing as hard as they dared. “How are you feeling?” Hoseok asked, frantic as he searched Jimin’s face for any sign of sickness. “Are you hurting anywhere? Do you know who you are? Can you remember what happened?”

Every new question was fired before Jimin could even begin to answer the last, the doctor’s usual composure in the face of peril nowhere to be found. He needed to soothe him, but when Jimin finally parted his lips and managed to speak, it was to ask a question of his own. “Ho-how are the o-others?” he croaked, his voice hoarse from disuse. “Yoongi and Tae-Taehyung… and Je-Jeong-”

He gave up on attempting to speak all of their names, his throat aching with the effort it took to carry his voice. He coughed weakly, a mere wheeze of a sound. Swallowing intensified the pain, but he needed to know what had happened to those he loved.

Above him, Hoseok heaved a deep sigh, laden with frustrated affection. “Unbelievable,” he huffed and shook his head, a wry smile tugging at the corner of his lip. “Even now, you worry more about others than yourself.” He patted Jimin’s forehead, the faintest of smacks, as if to reprimand him for his stubbornness. “Everyone lives,” the doctor said. “Almost all of us were injured in battle, but our wounds are healing and we live.” His smile grew wide. “Thanks to you.”

Jimin did cry then, tears spilling from his eyes without constraint. So relieved he was that he couldn’t possibly stop, all of him quivering with the force of his sobs. The pain in his chest flared, but he paid it no heed, clutching onto Hoseok’s hand with all his might as he cried.

We live, he thought, chanting the words over and over in his mind. All of us, we live.

Hoseok sat with him until his tears ceased to fall, stroking his hair and hushing him gently, crooning soft words against his brow. When Jimin eventually did calm down, the dull throb in his torso had spread up to his head, but the smile on his lips remained every bit as firm, his chest brimming with joy.

“Look at you, losing whatever hydration you have left in you,” Hoseok said and stood, coaxing him into releasing his hand so he could walk over to his desk. He grabbed the glass jug there and filled a mug of water, frowning when he returned to Jimin’s bedside. “Drink slowly. Your body might reject the water if you drink too fast or too much at once.”
Rather than wait for Jimin to take the cup, the doctor helped him sit and held it to his lips, his free hand steadying him by his shoulder. Every swallow hurt less than the last, but Jimin could only drink half the mug before his stomach began to protest and ache. “How,” he began, his voice flowing easier now. “How long have I slept?”

There was a tense set to Hoseok’s lips as he placed the cup on the window’s rack. “It would’ve been forty days tomorrow,” he said and propped the pillows of Jimin’s bed to the wall so he could lean against them. “We all knew you were alive, even though you have shown no sign of waking all this time.”

Jemin’s eyes grew wide as he listened, dumbstruck as he allowed the doctor to help him settle comfortably against the cushions. “Forty days,” he repeated hoarsely and looked down, his breath catching in his throat as he took in the sight of his body.

His arm was thinner than it should’ve been, gaunt and lean, the round bones of his wrist protruding against his skin. The shirt he wore hung loosely around his shoulders, hiding what was surely a thin, frail chest, the whole of his body weakened by time. He shifted his legs under the layers of cloth and fur, but they moved sluggishly, as if even the pelts were too heavy for them to bear.

“Thankfully, your body retained the reflex to swallow,” Hoseok said gently, rubbing at his shoulder to calm him. “I’ve fed you a mix of water, sugar and herbs, and while it has kept you alive, your body has grown weak in the absence of proper nutrition and exercise.” He must’ve noticed Jimin’s growing alarm, for he was quick to add, “But you are alive and awake, and you squeezed my hand only moments ago, so your mobility remains. You will heal, Jimin.”

He nodded and drew a deep breath, wincing slightly as the dull throb in his chest flared. Instantly, Hoseok moved to undo the loose ties of his shirt to examine his chest, concern marring his brow. “Do you remember anything?” he asked as he worked the straps. “Your memories might have been damaged, so tell me what you can recall.”

“Fire.” The word came easy to Jimin, images of burning red dancing before him when he closed his eyes. “I remember fire,” he said, his voice a mere whisper. “Everywhere. The ship was burning. I thought….” He stared up into the ceiling, blinking hard as his tears threatened to return. “Oseong would’ve killed all of us,” he whispered. “I had to do what had to be done.”

Hoseok halted his fiddling with the straps of his shirt and sat down on the edge of the bed, frowning in worry as he studied Jimin’s face. “Do you remember what you did?” he asked.

Jemin parted his lips and closed them again, his mind struggling to remember. “I,” he began, but tapered off just as fast. It was as if he was attempting to grasp at strings made of thin air, his memories slipping every time he thought he knew. “I stood in the crow’s nest,” he said, encouraged by the doctor’s nod. “I… I screamed at him. At Oseong. The Rabid Conflagration, I told him… I told him I had lied to mislead him from the crew. I made him angry.” He swallowed thickly. “I wanted him to be angry.”

“And then?” Hoseok prodded lightly.

“There was fire,” Jimin said again, “and a storm. I tied the Rune of the Storm to my wrist, and… and then…”

It all came rushing back to him then. How he, in his desperation, had succumbed to the rune and its terrible strength and given it all it had wanted from him. He had lifted Oseong into the sky, far away from those he loved, and the storm had done the rest.
After that, there had been only darkness.

“The lightning,” he said and knew from Hoseok’s grim look his memories were real. “It went through my chest.”

The doctor took his hand and squeezed it lightly before resuming his task of removing the shirt to examine him. “I imagine that’s what it felt like,” he said and carefully pushed the garb down from Jimin’s shoulders. “In truth, the bolt of lightning hit your back and moved across your skin. It went over your shoulder and to your chest, from where it jumped to Son Oseong.”

Indifference clouded his gaze as he spoke of the Rabid Conflagration, all of his warmth and empathy gone the instant the name fell from his lips. “I think it pierced his skull,” he said flatly, “but I can’t be certain. We did not pull him from the sea along with you, so if the lightning didn’t kill him, drowning did.”

He jerked his head towards his desk, where a glass bottle was tucked against the wall. It was empty but for a little stone at the bottom, the Rune of the Storm lying dormant and lifeless without a vessel to feed its strength. “Perhaps it kept you safe,” Hoseok said. “There was no cause for why the bolt of lightning went across your skin rather than through, but perhaps it was the rune’s way of protecting you.” He smiled, albeit tightly. “As dangerous as it is, perhaps it did not want you to die.”

Jimin gave a hesitant nod, unsure of whether or not he should be grateful. While the Rune of the Storm had undoubtedly saved all of the Agust’s crew from death by fire, it had also called on lightning to strike the ship amidst the chaos of their battle. It was a volatile thing, one he was eager to return to the hands of those who could control it better, but even so, Jimin closed his eyes and inclined his head in a small bow.

Thank you, he thought, for heeding my call when I needed you the most.

“It’s no wonder your chest aches,” Hoseok said, unaware of Jimin’s conflict. The doctor was looking at his bare torso, his brows knitted tightly into a frown as if the sight alone brought him pain. “They look as painful as they did when we pulled you from the sea. Look.”

Following his gaze, Jimin peered down at his own chest and drew a sharp breath when he saw the marks left behind by the storm. Forks of purple and red and brown twisted left and right across his collar and chest, reaching in the same manner the lightning itself had done before striking him. They mapped the course the lightning had trailed, each purplish line throbbing with the remnant of what he had so willingly beckoned.

“They will not heal,” Hoseok told him in a tone of bitter resignation. “The colors may still pale, but you will bear these scars for the rest of your life.”

“Good.” The word fell easily from Jimin’s lips, and he smiled at the doctor’s bewildered expression. “Then I will forever be reminded of that which matters most to me,” he said and brought a hand to his chest, his fingers trembling where he pressed them to his marred skin. “I will never forget how much I love, nor how much I am loved in return.”

It was a small price to pay, and he would gladly do it a hundred times over.

Hoseok parted his lips to speak, likely to voice his incredulity over Jimin’s spirit, but a rumbling noise from outside the door interrupted him before he could even begin. Startled, Jimin looked to the door and wondered what on earth could bring about what sounded like a frantic animal thundering up a set of stairs. The doctor did not share his confusion; with a light sigh and a wide smile, he rose to his feet and stepped away from Jimin’s bedside just as the door was thrown open so violently the
hinges rattled.

The man in the doorway was out of breath and heaving, his cheeks flushed from the exertion of his run. Sweat plastered his dark hair to his brow, just shy of falling into his eyes, wide as saucers as he stared at Jimin. All he did was look, and Jimin did the same, his breath stuck in his throat and kept there by the overwhelming rush of emotions within him.

Only when tears rose to his beloved’s eyes did Jimin speak, his lips curling into a smile so bright it made his cheeks ache. “I kept my promise,” he said and raised his hand, the one where the jade ring sat around his finger, “Yoongi.”

As soon as his name fell from Jimin’s lips, the captain broke away from the door, a sound akin to a sob tearing its way free from him as he came to pull Jimin into a fierce embrace. Jimin didn’t hesitate to throw his arms around Yoongi’s shoulders and hold him, tears spilling hot down his cheeks even as he laughed, delirious with joy. The strength of the captain’s grip had his chest throbbing dully in protest, but Jimin only held on tighter, refusing to let him go.

He would never let Yoongi go again.

“Songbird,” his beloved croaked against his neck, racked by endless sobs. “Songbird, Jimin, you’re awake, you—” His voice shattered and he pulled Jimin so tightly against him he thought he might break. All of him was quivering, his shoulders and his hand in Jimin’s hair, even his prosthetic limb where it pressed against Jimin’s back. “You live, songbird.”

“I love you,” Jimin cried in reply, his chest on the verge of bursting with the need to say it again. “I’m sorry, Yoongi, I’m— I’m so sorry I did this to you. To all of you, I didn’t know it would happen like this.” He drew a trembling breath and pressed his face against Yoongi’s shoulder, seeking comfort in the strength of his frame. “I’m so sorry I almost broke my promise.”

“But you didn’t,” Yoongi said thickly and sat up, his eyes red with tears. “You didn’t break your promise, songbird. You live.” He moved his hands to Jimin’s face and coaxed him to look up, his gaze flickering across every centimetre of him as if he felt the need to engrave him in his mind for an eternity. When their eyes met again, the captain’s body jerked with another sob and he pressed his brow against Jimin’s, shaking with the force of his tears. “You’re alive.”

It was all Jimin could do to hold on, placing his trembling hands over Yoongi’s where they held onto him, thumbs stroking his hollowed cheeks. “So are you,” he whispered, smiling. “You and I and everyone else, Yoongi, we live.”

So lost were they in their relief, they failed to notice the new set of frantic, thundering footsteps until the newcomers reached the open doorway. “Chim!” Jimin raised his head in time to see his friend tear what looked like a gilded mask from his face and throw it at the desk before he was pulled into another bone-crushing embrace. “You’re awake!” Taehyung cried and pushed his face against Jimin’s shoulder, seeking comfort in the strength of his frame. “I thought you would sleep forever!”

“Be careful, Taehyung,” Yoongi barked at his brother, as if he hadn’t held him just as tightly only moments earlier. He held Jimin’s left hand in his own, refusing to let go even now. “He’s hurt!”

“I’m alright,” Jimin said breathlessly, giggling when the quartermaster only squirmed closer. “I’m sorry for making you worry, Tae.” He turned his head as best he could in his friend’s arms to look at the sailing master, who stood fidgeting behind his love, more hesitant to reach out and touch. “You too, Jeongguk.”

“How are you feeling?” he asked, wringing his gloved hands in obvious worry. “Are you hurting?
Are you hungry? I can fetch you something to eat if you're hungry. Have you drank something?"

His rambled questions were the same as Hoseok’s had been and Jimin could only smile, fondness blossoming in him. “I’m alright,” he said again and raised his free hand for Jeongguk to take, ignoring the faint quiver of his arm. “I feel a bit weak and my chest hurts, but I—"

“I was so scared, Chim!” Taehyung interrupted, his loud voice oddly dull where he spoke against Jimin’s right ear. “You weren’t breathing when Yoongi pulled you from the sea and I thought you had died, but Hoseok made your heart beat again, and—”

“Ease up on him, Tae,” the doctor chided and walked closer to smack the quartermaster over the shoulder. “And ease up on yourself. You’re still recovering.”

Only when Taehyung pulled back did Jimin notice the scars on his face, crossing from his jaw to his left brow. His left eye was gone and the rift in his lid had been burnt shut by fire, scars of pale red spreading all the way to his temple. The wound had healed well and left his eye permanently closed to forever hide the grim truth of what had happened from the world.

“Taehyung,” Jimin began and hesitantly raised his hand towards his face, but the quartermaster shook his head and smiled, just as widely as he always had.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore,” he said and leaned forward until his cheek pressed against Jimin’s palm. “Hoseok did a fine job of healing me, and I still have my right eye to see with.” He chuckled and turned to look at Jeongguk. “My brave Jeonggukkie saved me. He fought his fears and pushed that bastard away from me and brought Hoseok to my side.” He took the sailing master’s hand in his and pressed his lips against his gloved knuckles. “My hero,” he said and grinned when Jeongguk flushed with the praise. “Just like you, Chim.”

Jimin’s cheeks were throbbing with how widely he was smiling now, fresh tears burning behind his eyes as he leaned against Yoongi. The ache in his chest was nothing compared to the joy in him, immeasurable and more valuable than anything in this world.

After Taehyung and Jeongguk came Jin and then Namjoon, bursting through the door in the same fashion as the others. While the cook cradled Jimin against him in a much more gentle manner than both Yoongi and the quartermaster, Namjoon only reached out to squeeze his shoulder, the dimples in his cheeks showing in the way he smiled. His movements were stiff, and under the collar of his shirt, Jimin saw bright red scars spread across his skin, courtesy of the Rabid Conflagration’s flames.

The two were followed by Xiao, Hisashi, and then Lucya. The sniper held a sturdy cane in her left hand, her weight leaning heavily against the staff, but her smile was wider than ever when she found Jimin awake. While the combined effort of Taehyung and Hoseok kept Xiao from throwing himself over Jimin and breaking the bed along with every bone in his weakened body, Lucya limped over to sit on the edge of his bed. She took his hand in hers and said, “Life,” one of the few words she knew of his language.

With a bright giggle, Jimin nodded and squeezed her hand as best he could. “Life,” he echoed. Contented, the sniper nodded as well before reaching out to take Hisashi by the wrist and pull him to Jimin’s bedside, jerking her head at Jimin. The pirate huffed and rolled his eyes, making a show of his protest, but he met Jimin’s eyes all the same, and when Hisashi told him he was glad to see him awake, Jimin smiled and took his hand from Lucya’s grip, murmuring a silent thanks.

“Where are we?” Jimin asked when the lot of them had settled in the room, none eager to leave. Only now did he recall the unfamiliarity of his surroundings, his brows quirked in curiosity as he attempted to turn around in Yoongi’s arms to look out the open window.
“The heart of Shanghai,” the captain told him and pulled him more firmly to rest against his chest, cradling his frail body. “The Agust went down in the fire, so we came here to make use of the shipyards and build her anew. And to hide from the mariners.”

“Oh,” Jimin uttered, a pang of sorrow flaring in his chest. He should’ve expected it as soon as he had remembered the flames consuming the vessel, but it saddened him all the same. He thought of the Life of Agust and the way she had led their battle, fierce just as Yoongi had made her. Perhaps it was madness, to pray for a ship’s soul to be at peace, but Jimin did it all the same, wishing her spirit had found its peace in the sea’s embrace, alongside Rodel.

“Don’t look so sad, pretty bird,” Xiao said and patted the furs over Jimin’s legs, lips spread into a toothy grin. “I’ll bring ‘er back to us real quick. I built ‘er once, I can do it again with me eyes closed.” He nodded enthusiastically when Jimin smiled at his words. “The Agust will sail again soon, I swear it.”

“I hope so,” Namjoon said with a huff, a sheepish smile on his lips when Jin smacked his hand away from his chest, where he had absentmindedly rubbed at his scars. “The mariners are suspicious as it is about the longevity of Sabelsdottír’s presence here. Who knows what they would do if they realized we reside here as well, grounded.”

Jemin sat up a little straighter at that, his eyes widening in surprise. “Talya is here?” he asked and looked at Yoongi. “Has she been here all this time?”

“Yes,” the captain said, snorting. “She refused to leave, claiming she had promised to see you after the battle was done. *It’s not the same unless he sees me as well,* she told me when I asked her of her plans to return to the north.” He lowered his head and pressed his lips to Jimin’s shoulder. “Like the rest of us, she has waited for your return, songbird.”

“Then I will go see her,” Jimin said and moved to rise, only to have both Yoongi and Hoseok push him right back against the bed. “What-”

“You are not going *anywhere* for another few days,” the doctor said sternly, waving a threatening finger at his face. “Not before I’ve seen you eat a proper meal and finish a cup of water without retching.” He tapped Jimin’s brow when he parted his lips to protest. “Today, you will do nothing but rest. On the morrow, we will see how well you can walk in the aftermath of what happened, and *then,* if and only if I deem you healthy enough, you may visit your northern friend.”

Jemin knew it was useless to argue, so he heaved a sigh and sank back against Yoongi’s chest, pursing his lips into a petulant pout. “Have it your way,” he huffed, although it was impossible to keep frowning when those he loved all laughed at his misery.

Truly, he has never been as happy as he was then.

In the night, when the others had fallen asleep or retreated to their rooms, Yoongi took Jimin’s face in his hands and kissed him, slow and soft, as if intent on forever etching the feeling of his lips into his memory. “Promise me again, songbird,” the captain murmured when they parted, remaining so close his breath gusted warm over Jimin’s chin. “Promise me you will live. Whatever happens, whatever reckless ideas come to your head, promise me you will live.”

His voice was thick and his eyes glittered in the darkness, so Jimin placed a hand on his cheek and brushed his thumb against his skin, wiping away his beloved’s silent tears before kissing him there. “I promise,” he said, “as long as you do the same.”

Yoongi leaned into his touch and nodded, his voice trembling when he spoke. “I promise,” he said
and rose to kiss him again before pulling him to his chest and settling more comfortably in the bed. “I will never leave your side, songbird.”

When they woke in the morning, the sun stood high in skies already, shining bright through the window. It was odd - Jimin had always risen with the sun, not after - but Hoseok assured him it was hardly an affliction caused by his injury and rather a product of his exhaustion. “Be patient with yourself,” the doctor told him kindly. “Time will heal you more than anything I can do.”

Jin borrowed the kitchen of the inn where they lodged to make breakfast for him, a thick porridge of rice and milk. It was bland and hard to swallow, but Jimin ate as much of it as he could, every bite leaving him hungrier than before. Confused by the sudden intake of sustenance, his stomach began to protest quickly enough, threatening to turn only after a third of the bowl.

The cook only smiled and assured him he would make more as soon as Jimin grew hungry again.

After breakfast, Xiao dragged Jeongguk and Hisashi with him to the shipyard to have them assist the reconstruction of the Agust. He would’ve taken Taehyung as well, but much like Yoongi, the quartermaster blatantly refused to leave Jimin’s side, saying it would have to be a matter of life and death for him to walk out the door.

The quiver of his hands had yet to fade by the time Hoseok suggested he attempt to stand up, trembling out of his control. It frustrated him, but when the doctor told him it was part of the cost of what had been done, Jimin decided he would not hate it. Instead, he curled his fingers and formed a fist, which he pressed against the edge of his bed when he struggled to rise, his legs numb in their weakness.

With Yoongi’s hands hovering over his arm, ready to hold him up should he fall, Jimin stood after several minutes of trial and error. He walked to the nearest wall of the room and back, every step clumsy, and by the time he reached his bedside again, he was breathing hard from exertion, sweat trickling from his temple.

“You did so well, songbird,” Yoongi told him and kissed his temple while Taehyung nodded fervently, smiling his rectangular smile. “I can’t believe how strong you are.”

There was no pity in his voice nor in his friend’s gaze, and Jimin smiled, proud even of the small steps he had managed.

He rose from his bed once every hour to walk however long Hoseok allowed him before he made him rest again. When he sat against the pillows under the window, Yoongi told him of what had happened after the news of the Rabid Conflagration’s death spread across the east. The glory had gone to the mariners, every oblivious soul praising Son Jukan for his success in finally slaying the monstrous pirate captain. The vice admiral had been summoned to the harbor of Busan, where the eastern emperor himself had raised him to the high rank of admiral, praising his name for all the world to see.

“His fame will forever be built on the thought that he killed his own brother,” Yoongi said, frowning as he traced his thumb absentmindedly along the jade ring on Jimin’s finger. “A man who places justice and the law over his own blood. A true hero.”

His words were scathing and laced with bitter loathing. Vaguely, as Jimin took the captain’s hand in his to draw soothing circles into his palm, he wondered if Jukan was truly so heartless as to bask in the death of his family. He hoped not, but the more he thought of the mariner, the more likely it seemed.
Before he could dwell too much on the matter, Taehyung decided the mood had grown too dark. To lighten it, he skipped over to Hoseok’s desk and grabbed the mask he had thrown there the day before, grinning from ear to ear as he showed Jimin the disguise. It was thin and ornate, made like the masks the people of Singapore had worn for the Festival of Light. This one was made of solid gold, however, the intricate patterns glittering in the same color as the quartermaster’s hair.

There was a golden sun where the left eye should’ve been, thin chains hanging from its rays, and if the precious mineral wasn’t enough of a tell who had made the mask, the design certainly was. “Jeongguk really is the sweetest boy to ever live,” Taehyung gushed and held the disguise tightly to his chest. “I love him more than I can bear, Chim.”

“He loves you too, more than he can bear,” Jimin said, giggling as he pointed at the mask. “That, if nothing else, is proof enough.”

At dusk, after Jimin had finally managed to walk out of the room and to the top of the stairs at the end of the hallway, he sat at the head of his bed and looked out the window, his arms crossed under his chin as he gazed into the sky. Hoseok and Yoongi were talking lowly in the doorway while Taehyung fetched them all something to eat, and Jimin was at peace.

The summer breeze fluttered through the open window, beckoning him, urging him to call on his other half now, after more than a month of its absence. Sighing, he closed his eyes and did what had become so natural to him, what was so familiar even now, changing his skin where he sat under the open sky.

His skin prickled and stung here and there, the ache most intense around the scars of his chest and back. Jimin peered at his trembling hands to watch his feathers grow, smiling even though the hurt; some of the feathers of his arms were short and stubby, halfway through their process of growing anew where they’d been lost after the storm.

His blessing remained every bit as strong as he was, fighting to recover from the sacrifice he had so willingly made.

“Songbird.”

He turned away from the window and looked at his beloved, his eyes brimming with tears. “Yes,” Jimin said, “I still am.”

When the morning came again, after Jimin, much to Jin’s delight, eaten all of his porridge, Hoseok announced he was going to restock his supply of herbs and oils. “I have never had to make so many different salves all at once,” he complained as he moved about the room, gathering all he needed for his visit to the shops of Shanghai. “Taehyung, come with me. I will need someone to carry everything I buy.”

“I want to stay with Chim,” the quartermaster said, the answer instinctual by now, but Hoseok did not accept it this time.

“A shame, then,” he said and clicked his tongue before striding over to where Taehyung sat at the foot of Jimin’s bed. He pinched the quartermaster’s ear between his fingers and tugged none too gently, deaf to the boy’s loud protests. “Yoongi will watch over your darling Chim in your absence, and he will be ever so grateful for all the precious herbs you bring him for the sake of easing the pain in his chest.”

Jimin muffled his laughter into his hand when the two disappeared out the door, Taehyung’s protests audible even after it had closed. Yoongi rolled his eyes and snorted where he sat next to the bed,
muttering something about loud and irritating before he went back to scribbling in a little leatherbound book, making note of the expenses that would go into the reconstruction of the Agust.

“Yoongi,” Jimin said some moments after Hoseok and Taehyung had gone.

“No.” The captain’s reply was instantaneous, fixating Jimin with an unimpressed look when he pursed his lips. “There is one of two things on your mind right now, songbird,” Yoongi said and turned back to his work, “and I will not assist you with either.”

Jimin held back a huff and shifted lower in his bed, until he could rest his head right next to where the captain had placed his book on the mattress. “Yoongi,” he said again, his voice ever so sweet as he peered up at his beloved. He fought the giggle that brimmed in his chest when Yoongi’s jaw clenched, an obvious sign of restraint. “Please?”

“Please what?” the captain asked in a meek attempt at sounding stern.

“Will you kiss me?”

Jimin pulled his lower lip between his teeth to not smile too widely when Yoongi sighed and set down his quill, grumbling as if the request was the most strenuous he could’ve asked for. “Fine,” he said and leaned down to press his lips to Jimin’s.

Contrary to his sullen facade, Yoongi kissed him sweetly, and Jimin closed his eyes and hummed in content, reveling in the burst of affectionate warmth he had gone so long without. “Again,” he said when the captain moved to retreat. Yoongi rolled his eyes again, but complied all the same, taking Jimin’s lower lip between his own.

“Again,” Jimin whispered when they parted, a giggle spilling from his lips when the captain followed without hesitation this time, burying a hand in Jimin’s hair and stroking his temple. When they kissed this time, Jimin surged up into it, deliberately slow as he guided his beloved to where he wanted him. All tension left Yoongi with a soft sigh, and Jimin knew he had won.

“Yoongi,” he murmured when they pulled apart, reaching up to brush his thumb across the captain’s flushed cheek. “Take me to the docks. Please.”

Half an hour later found the two of them standing at the entrance of the eastern harbor, Jimin leaning heavily on Yoongi’s arm. It hadn’t been a very long walk from the inn, but his steps were still slow and labored. The inhabitants of Shanghai had stared as they passed, shocked to see the Black Fox of the East escorting Jimin so carefully, guiding each step with murmured praise.

“Hoseok will have my head for this,” Yoongi said for the seventh time since they’d left the lodge, fretting at the mere thought of the doctor’s wrath.

“He won’t,” Jimin said with a huff, still out of breath from their walk. He tugged the captain forward in impatience, grinning as he went. “Not if I explain to him how I persuaded you.”

“I swear I will turn back and leave you here, songbird,” Yoongi muttered, an empty threat the both of them knew held not a shred of truth. He was quick to follow when he noticed the slight stagger in Jimin’s steps, taking his arm to steady him. “You should be resting.”

Jimin only hummed in reply, too eager to meet his friend again. They walked along the docks until they found the correct one, the pier deserted but for one foreign ship, as if the pirates who landed at Shanghai didn’t quite dare take their place next to a Cardinal. Smiling excitedly, Jimin attempted to walk faster, only to immediately stumble.
“Careful,” Yoongi said and held him by his shoulders, the worried rise in his voice carrying over the ruckus of the port. “You can barely stand, songbird, I knew we shouldn’t have-”

“Jimin?”

The voice rose from halfway down the pier and made Jimin turn away from the captain halfway through his reprimand. Yoongi heaved a frustrated sigh, but Jimin paid him no heed, smiling as he raised his hand to wave at Talya, who was trotting towards the two of them, grinning so widely her cheeks might burst.

“Jimin,” she exclaimed in joy and pulled him into her arms, lifting him easily from the ground and turning on the heel. “Finally, you are awake!” She set him down almost immediately, a worried frown replacing her smile quicker than Jimin thought possible. “You weigh nothing,” she said and patted his shoulders. “Are you eating?”

“I am now,” he said with a bright giggle, “but I went for a long while without. Don’t worry about me, I will be alright again soon.” He took her hands in his. “I’m glad to see you well, Talya. Yoongi told me you stopped Son Jukan from reaching us with ease.”

The grin returned to the northern Cardinal’s lips, every last one of her sharp teeth showing. “We did,” she said and offered him her arm to lead him to her ship. “He made a big show of his blessing’s winds, but his anger blinded him from seeing through Qasim’s illusions. For every ship he thought he sank, another took its place until I thought he would lose his mind.”

She spoke as if it had been a game for her rather than a moment of peril. “Then none of you were hurt,” Jimin said, although there was a lilt to his tone, turning his words from a hopeful statement into a question.

“Oh, Qasim took an arrow to the arm and Refur almost lost his right leg,” Talya said with a shrug, chortling at Jimin’s look of horror. “But worst of all was Geir.” She lowered her voice and leaned over to whisper in his ear, barely able to contain her mirth. “He lost his braid to Jukan’s silver winds. They cut his hair clean off at the base of his skull, and he has been sulking ever since.”

A nervous laughter spilled from Jimin’s lips, unsure if the northern Cardinal was jesting or not. When they drew close to her ship, however, he saw the blonde archer standing by the vessel’s gangway, looking more irritable than Jimin had ever seen him. Gone was his long braid of yellow hair, and whenever one of his crewmates passed him on their way to load some crates onto the ship, they struggled not to laugh, obvious in their amusement.

“His hair was precious to him,” Talya whispered before standing upright again, innocence seeping into her smile as she greeted her crewman. Her words were foreign to Jimin’s ears, but judging by the dull ire in the archer’s reply, she had likely teased him. He turned away and stormed off, his muttered curses followed by his captain’s laughter.

When Talya sobered up again, she turned to face Jimin, her grin nowhere near faltering. “But you,” she said and nudged his side, careful even in the friendly gesture, “I hear you defeated the Rabid Conflagration by bending the storm skies to your will.”

Jimin flushed and he glanced back at Yoongi, who merely quirked an impassive brow in return, as if to say he had brought this upon himself. “I didn’t-”

“Like the gods of the north,” Talya interrupted, marvel in her voice. “They told me you lifted him into the sky and struck him with thunder, calling on the tempest inside you to conquer his fire.”
“That is not how it happened,” Jimin protested, his voice meek and stuttered. “The storm came from a rune, not me.”

The northern Cardinal threw her head back and laughed, bright and freely, until she had to dab at her eyes, redness rising to her cheeks in her glee. “Every heroic tale deserves to be told in style,” she said and nudged him again. “It was a brave thing you did, and we will honor it for as long as we live.”

If possible, her words of comfort had Jimin more flustered than before, but before he could say anything more, a familiar voice sounded from somewhere above him.

“I see the bird has woken from his slumber.” He looked up and found Qasim standing by the ship’s rail on deck, leaning against it as he peered down at the newcomers, smiling his sly smile. “Did you sleep well?” he asked and chuckled when Talya heaved an exasperated sigh.

“Being shot through the foot has not made him less of a bastard,” she told Jimin, who merely smiled and waved up at the helmsman. The northern Cardinal clicked her tongue and jerked her head towards the main sails, commanding even in such a simple gesture. “Prepare the main sails. We cast off within the hour.”

It took Jimin a moment to grasp the meaning of her words, his eyes growing wide as he turned to look at her. “You’re leaving?” he asked, unable to keep the dolefulness from his voice.

Talya took his hand and smiled at him. “We have been ready to depart for a month now,” she said kindly. “My men have grown restless in their wait, so now that I have seen you alive and well, we must go. The north calls for us. We must answer and go where we belong.”

When Jimin did not mirror her smile, the northern Cardinal chuckled and tousled his hair before pulling him into another embrace. “Do not look so sad, Jimin,” she told him. “We will see each other again, here or in the north, where the chill would freeze your pretty feathers.”

Her jest pulled a chuckle from his lips, however quiet it was. “I hope not,” he said and returned her hug, holding her as tightly as his trembling arms could. “They have only just began to grow again. I would be sad to lose them so soon.” He smiled against her shoulder when she laughed, the curl of his lips lingering even when she gently coaxed him to let go and guided him back to Yoongi’s arms. “I will miss you, Talya,” he said, his voice thick with tears. “All of you.”

“And we will miss you, Jimin,” she said brightly. “Next time we see each other, you will meet my son. I want him to see the bravest, kindest boy this world has ever seen.”

With that, she turned and climbed aboard her ship, guiding her crew in her language. Jimin watched them raise their anchor and loosen the remaining ties to the pier, struggling to keep the smile on his lips as he watched the squared sails unfurl and catch the wind. “Come on,” Yoongi crooned against his temple and led him towards the end of the dock, guiding his way while he waved at northern ship as it sailed away from the harbor.

They stood at the very edge of the pier until Talya’s vessel was out of sight, swallowed by the blue horizon. Jimin waved until he could no longer see them, his hand raised high over his head, and when he finally lowered it again, he staggered slightly, his legs aching now. Yoongi steadied him easily, pulling him back against his chest and holding him when he shed what few tears he hadn’t managed to hold in.

“I really will miss her,” Jimin said after a moment.

Yoongi hummed against his neck and kissed him there. “You will see her again, songbird,” he said.
“I know,” Jimin conceded with a tremulous smile. “Soon, I hope.” He drew a deep breath and sighed, calmed by the scent of the ocean breeze and his beloved’s arms around his waist. “What happens now?”

“Before or after Hoseok strings us both from the roof?” Yoongi asked with a snort, smiling when Jimin laughed. “Now you regain your strength. It doesn’t matter how long it will take.” He held him closer still. “The sea will wait for us.”

Jimin hummed at his words, a hint of impatience in him as he gazed out over the glittering ocean. “There are still things we must do,” he said and placed his hands on Yoongi’s where they rested against his stomach. “After the Agust is reborn, we must bring the Rune of the Storm back to the Blessed Oracles. And we must ask them if Jeongguk would have a place in their midst, to learn control of his blessing.”

He turned around in the captain’s arms and looked at him. “When we have done all that must be done,” he said, “what will happen then?”

Yoongi smiled softly, the smallest curl of his lips, and he brought his hands to Jimin’s cheeks. “Then,” he murmured and leaned close to press a tender kiss to his lips, “we go wherever we want, songbird.”

It was a vow of sorts, a reassurance that their future awaited on the sea Jimin had grown to love so much, surrounded by the people he had grown to love even more. “Wherever we want,” he echoed, his smile as bright as the sun when he nodded and drew his beloved in for another kiss.

Truly, it was a promise sweeter than Jimin had ever heard.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

CAN YOU BELIEVE THIS IS THE LAST OFFICIAL CHAPTER OF THE SONGBIRD AND THE SEA?

sidenote, yoongi is whipped as heck in this chapter. how is he so whipped in this chapter??

CAN YOU ACTUALLY BELIEVE THIS FIRST INSTALMENT OF THE SONGBIRD SERIES IS ACTUALLY OVER? I mean, there’s still an epilogue to come, BUT CAN YOU BELIEVE? BECAUSE I SURE AS HECK CAN’T.

Seriously, this story has been in the works since APRIL. That’s over SEVEN
MONTHS. I-

I don’t even know what to say.

EXCEPT YES I DO. I want to thank each and every one of you who have stayed with me on this journey, whether you were here from the very first chapter or from the greatest cliffhanger of all times ((cough, lightning, cough))! You guys’ feedback has been amazing and so inspirational! You have never failed to make me smile and laugh with your comments, and I am so, so grateful for all of your kind words.

THANK YOU SO MUCH, EVERY ONE OF YOU. I LOVE YOU SO HECKIN’ MUCH.

I’ll go more into detail about my plans to publish the Songbird and the Sea as a book in the end notes of the epilogue, AND I will likely fall to my knees and thank you all over again, BUT WHO CARES. I LOVE Y’ALL SO MUCH, MY PRECIOUS SONGBIRDS.

//falls over and dies

I DO NOT ALLOW TRANSLATIONS OF THIS WORK.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Three long months had passed since they had returned the Rune of the Storm to the Blessed Oracles, where Jeongguk had decided to stay and learn control of his own blessing. It had been a tearful affair, with Taehyung sobbing uncontrollably and refusing to let his lover go when the time came to part ways. The sailing master had hardly been any better, returning Taehyung’s embrace every bit as fiercely, as if he would never let him go.

Not even the presence of the six-legged tiger, Vahana, had been able to console the quartermaster then. It had taken Yoongi and Hoseok to pry the two apart while Jin had extended his most sincere apologies to the temple priestess, who had followed the affair with rising disbelief.

Chapter Notes

MERRY CHRISTMAS, Y’ALL

Also, again, it’s Pied Piper on replay, because I swear to GOD that melody is the PERFECT “happy end of a long journey” kind of melody!!!!

There’s a very important note at the end of this chapter, so please take the time to read it!
<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The shores of Jeju looked just as Jimin had imagined them, fields of green grass and yellow and red flowers spreading far around lush forestry. He recognized these woods even though he’d never seen them through the eyes of the sea before, every tree familiar to him even now. The island was peaceful as ever, not a sign of unrest to disturb the beautiful image of serenity it made.

It was a sight Jimin had wanted to see ever since his departure so many months ago, although for vastly different reasons now. He stood in the crow’s nest, one hand wired into the rigs of the Agust as he leaned out over the edge to get as good of a look of the island as he could. His lips were curled into a wide smile, excitement brimming in his chest as he peered at what had once been his home.

I will see you soon, Jihyun, he sang inwardly, exuberant at the mere thought. You as well, mother.

“You had better come back to me, Chim.”

With a bright giggle, Jimin pulled himself upright and turned to look at his friend where he sat by the mast, lips pursed into a tight pout. “Don’t sulk, Tae,” he said and playfully tousled the quartermaster’s hair, nimbly dodging the irked swat Taehyung aimed at his shoulder. “I know you
miss your sailor boy, but he will return soon. Just like I will.”

“Soon?” If possible, the quartermaster’s frown deepened still and he reached up to rub at the scars of his left eye. “I hope your soon is sooner than Jeongguk’s,” he said sullenly. “I would die if you left me for so long, too.”

Three long months had passed since they had returned the Rune of the Storm to the Blessed Oracles, where Jeongguk had decided to stay and learn control of his own blessing. It had been a tearful affair, with Taehyung sobbing uncontrollably and refusing to let his lover go when the time came to part ways. The sailing master had hardly been any better, returning Taehyung’s embrace every bit as fiercely, as if he would never let him go.

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While all of this had happened at the foot of the temple, Jimin had been speaking with the Blessed Oracles, bowing his head as he handed the Rune of the Storm back to the High Oracle. He’d helped the old man tie it around his neck and consoled him when he cried, reduced to tears upon seeing the state of Jimin’s body.

“Forgive me, precious canary,” the High Oracle had said and taken Jimin’s hands in his own. “Forgive this old man for foolishly giving you a curse to bear.”

Smiling, Jimin had shaken his head and kneeled before the oracle. “There is nothing for me to forgive,” he had told him. “Curse or no, this rune heeded my call and saved all of us. Without it, my friends would have died alongside me, and the Rabid Conflagration would be free to claim the east for himself.” He had squeezed the old man’s hands firmly in his own. “To me, the Rune of the Storm was a blessing as pure as any other.”

The youngest of the oracles, Om, who bore the Blessing of Healing, had offered to expunge his scars and take away the tremors of his hands, claiming it fair since the rune that had caused Jimin his wounds had come from them. Jimin had thanked him but refused, smiling as he said he treasured his ailments as if they were his old friends now.

The oracle had looked at him as if he was mad, and Jimin had only laughed and bid them farewell.

While the rest of him had steadily been regaining its former strength, his hands still quivered now, although the tremors had become more sporadic. They seemed to come always when least convenient; thus far, they had turned archery into an impossible pastime. Only a few days prior, they had caused Jimin to miss his mark by quite a bit, so much so he had nearly impaled Xiao where he’d stood by the mizzen mast.

“Save yer Cupid’s arrow fer the cap’n, pretty bird,” the carpenter had boomed as soon as Jimin had come to apologize. “He’ll have me head if he finds out ya pricked someone else with it.”

While Jimin had flushed red in embarrassment, the rest of the crew had laughed, even Taehyung. The sight had brought a smile to Jimin’s lips; the quartermaster had been dejected in Jeongguk’s absence, following Jimin wherever he went and seeking contact more than ever before. Eager to soothe his distress, Jimin had complied easily and spent countless nights down in the bunks rather than the captain’s quarters.

Yoongi had been less than content with that, grumbling every time Taehyung stole Jimin away from him. “I might as well be the one who lost my love,” he had said petulantly one morning before
sunrise when Jimin had managed to escape the prison of the quartermaster’s embrace with a promise to return with breakfast. “I want to have you in my arms again, songbird.”

He had promptly ceased his whining when Jimin had kissed him oh so sweetly, after which the captain had pulled him between the sheets of their bed and kept him there until the sun stood high.

“You’re being dramatic, Taehyung.” Jimin said now and took the quartermaster’s hands to coax him into standing. “I’ve told you, I’m only going to see an old friend. I will be back before nightfall.”

“What if you change your mind when you see your friend?” Taehyung insisted. “What if you would rather stay?”

“Impossible,” Jimin said immediately, huffing for good measure. “The Agust is my home. I could never leave it, even for my birthplace.”

It had been Yoongi’s idea. When Jimin had mentioned how he missed Jihyun, his old friend from his hometown, the captain had offhandedly told him they could sail to the island of Jeju if he so wished. Awestruck by the sudden offer, Jimin had stared at his beloved for so long Yoongi had began to fret, before Jimin had thrown his arms around him and kissed him until he couldn’t breathe.

And so here they were, sailing towards the shores of what had once been Jimin’s home. He had grown more excited for every passing day, and now that he could see the island, it was all he could do to not call on his blessing and attempt to fly. He knew it wouldn’t end well; the damage caused by the bolt of lightning had yet to heal, his lost feathers still growing.

“Jimin!” Jimin looked down to the deck, where Hoseok was waving up at him. “We’ve almost reached the shallows,” the doctor called and motioned towards the island. “You’d best prepare to take off!”

With a smile and a quick wave, Jimin turned and pulled Taehyung into a bone-crushing embrace before making his way down the rungs of the main mast. It had taken him months to regain the strength and dexterity required to forego the shrouds, his muscles slow in the wake of the storm’s strike. He climbed the mast easily enough now, but he still clutched the rungs too hard whenever his hands trembled, more often than not causing blisters to break the skin of his palms.

“Can you help me ready the dinghy, Xiao?” he asked when his feet touched the deck, reaching up to pat the carpenter’s shoulder in passing. “You too, Hisashi.”

“We’ll do it fer ya, pretty bird,” Xiao said before Hisashi could even begin to speak, waving a great hand in the air as if to deflect the thought of Jimin doing any of the work. “S a big day fer ya, so leave the heavy liftin’ ta us. Don’t ya worry ‘bout it.”

Hisashi rolled his eyes and muttered something incoherent under his breath but complied all the same, allowing himself to be dragged away by the over-excited carpenter. “Thank you,” Jimin called after them and giggled at the sound of Xiao’s booming laughter. He was giddy with excitement now, a spring in his step as he walked over to the forecastle to look at the island again.

They were a few miles west of the village of Jeju, having opted to drop anchor there rather than closer to the harbor after Jimin had pointed out that seeing the Agust again would likely frighten the villagers within an inch of their lives. It would take him a few hours to reach the village on foot, but he was more than happy with the opportunity to walk the same trails he had walked so many times before.

From the forecastle, Jimin could see the forests he had spent most of his life in, full of the life of late
summer. The sight of them made him smile so widely his cheeks ached. He wondered if he would have the time enough to stray into the woods; he wanted to see if the bulbuls he loved so much were still there, in their old nest.

“You look like you’re about to fly off even without your wings.”

With a bright laughter, Jimin turned to Yoongi, who had come up to stand next to him. “I might,” he said and swept his hand along the shoreline. “I’m so happy to be here again.” He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his beloved’s cheek. “Thank you for bringing me here, Yoongi.”

The captain only hummed in reply, a trace of uncertainty to his smile. In his exuberance, Jimin didn’t notice his stiffness until Xiao called him over to board the dinghy and make way for land; before he could do more than move away from the rail, Yoongi took his hand and held him back. “Wait,” he said, something sheepish flickering over his face.

“What’s wrong?” Jimin asked, surprised by the captain’s sudden nervousness. Yoongi’s lips parted and closed again without a single noise passing, his jaw moving with unspoken words until Jimin took a step closer to him and raised his free hand to stroke his chin. “Yoon-

“You will come back to us, right, songbird?”

Yoongi spoke the words quickly and refused to meet Jimin’s eyes, as if his own question embarrassed him. It likely did. After all, the captain had been the one to suggest their visit in the first place, yet now that they were here, he seemed to worry Jimin would choose to stay on Jeju than return to the ship.

After overcoming his initial surprise, Jimin smiled, endearment blossoming in his chest. “First Taehyung and now you,” he said with a sigh and gently coaxed Yoongi into letting go of his hand so he could cup the captain’s cheeks and make him meet his eyes. “I couldn’t stay on this island even if I wanted to. The sea would call me back, and all of you with it.” He pulled his beloved into a kiss, soft and sweet, and reveled in the way Yoongi’s tension slipped away. “I am yours, Yoongi,” Jimin murmured against his lips. “No matter where I go, I will always come back to you.”

The captain nodded blindly, momentarily winded from the chaste kiss. It took an airy giggle from Jimin to bring him back to the present, his eyes rising quickly from Jimin’s lips to his eyes before he sighed, exasperated with himself. “Mine,” he finally said and pulled Jimin against him, smiling against the scars of his neck, “as I am yours.”

Yoongi held him until Xiao’s voice rose again, this time accompanied by an impatient bark from Hisashi. The captain huffed in feigned annoyance and let him go, although not before kissing him one more time. “I’ll be back before nightfall,” Jimin promised as he climbed into the dinghy. Jin handed him a little sack of bread, dried meat and fruits over the rail in case he would grow hungry while he was away, and then they lowered his rowboat into the sea.

The sea was thankfully still that morning, so rowing was easy enough, even with the crew making him laugh almost all the way to shore by shouting the most ridiculous things at him from the deck of the Agust. Xiao had him cackling so violently he almost tipped the little dinghy when he began to belt out a horrid version of an old song of love between a fair maiden and a young sailor.

Their jests ended when Hoseok said it’s likely Yoongi wrote that song for his fair Jimin and Yoongi pushed the doctor over the rail and into the sea.

When he reached the shore, Jimin made sure to drag the dinghy as far up on the beach as he could and tied the ropes around a large boulder closeby. He stood in the sand for a moment, smiling as he
looked at the Agust where it floated peacefully on the sea. Uncaring whether or not the crew could still see him, he raised his hand high over his head and waved, smiling bright as ever before he turned on the heel and made way for the forest.

“A shortcut,” he said to himself as he walked even though he knew it would take him longer to reach the village if he strayed from his path. He couldn’t help himself, however; seeing the life of the forest meant as much to him as seeing his old friend.

He sang in the voice of the Canary as he walked, crooning softly to the trees and all the life in them. His sandals swung from his hand, having untied them to feel the cool earth under his toes, his steps easy and familiar over logs and thick roots. The birds of the woods replied to his song in kind, delighted trills echoing from the trees as if they were every bit as happy to see him as he was to see them.

He found his way easily to the bulbuls’ tree and smiled when he found their nest empty. It was a good thing; it meant the babes had grown old enough to leave their mother and brave the world on their own. “I’m glad,” Jimin murmured and walked away, a strange sense of pride brimming in his chest.

When he reached the edge of the forest, he found the village of Jeju just the same as it always had been. The harbor had been built anew, the roof of the temple restored after it had been destroyed that night, so many months ago. The houses looked the same, rebuilt with the same colors and shapes. Truly, it looked like the village had never had an encounter with pirates.

Even from where he stood, Jimin could see life in the small town, its inhabitants moving back and forth between the houses. Part of him was happy to see such a peaceful sight, while the other part recalled what had earned the village their peace.

The scars on his shoulder and neck prickled, but Jimin merely shook his head and reminded himself why he had come before making his way down the small, grassy hill.

As he crossed the outskirts of the village, he wondered if its people would even remember who he was. It had been seven months since he’d last walked these streets, and even before he’d left, none of them had ever really known him, always apprehensive in his presence. Their limited knowledge on blessings had made them wary of him after he had found his own, thus it would hardly surprise him if they had forgotten who he was in his absence.

As soon as he stepped out from the alley and onto the main street, however, he realized the improbability of his musings. Jeju was a small village, after all, where nothing of interest ever seemed to happen, so when Jimin walked into their midst, the lot of them needed only the smallest glimpse of his rose hair to know just who he was.

It was incredible, really, how the entire street seemed to come to a complete standstill around him. One after the other, the villagers fell silent, their eyes growing alarmingly wide as they stared, as if they couldn’t quite believe what they were seeing. No one said a word, not even to whisper amongst one another.

Truly, it was as if they had all seen a ghost.

Whilst they gawked, Jimin smiled ever so brightly, amusement simmering in his chest. He fought the urge to laugh and looked around, recalling their names easily enough, until he spotted a young woman he knew as Jo Sunja. He had never been close with her, but he had admired her as a child for her spirit even in the face of those who would be the village’s hunters.
Ignoring the rest of their stares, Jimin walked up to her, curling his shoulders inwards slightly as a subtle sign of piety, so as to not frighten her out of her daze. “Good afternoon, Sunja,” he said and inclined his head in a polite bow, one she mirrored slowly, eyes wide and bulging. “Tell me, does Jihyun still live in her old house? Near the eastern edge of town?”

“Oh,” she uttered, her gaze fluttering from his face to his neck, where it lingered on the purplish scars before she nodded. “Yes, she… she does. In the same house.” She swallowed and lowered her voice into a whisper, hesitating only for a moment she said, “She has missed you, Jimin.”

Perhaps it was only his imagination, the apologetic undertone to her voice, but Jimin beamed at her all the same, glee brimming within him as he thanked her. Again, Sunja followed his lead and bowed only after he had, still too shocked to do much else but stare. Jimin didn’t mind, however, and turned to make his way to the easternmost part of the village.

He paid no heed to the rest of the villagers, who quickly scurried out of his way to let him pass. The lot of them stared after him, either at his face or the marks spreading across the top of his bare back, but even when the first disgruntled whisper fell from the onlookers, Jimin felt nothing but pride in his scars. He squared his shoulders as he walked, much in the same way he had seen Yoongi do so many times, and the smile stayed firm on his lips.

Only when he had almost reached the end of the main street did someone address him again, calling his name in a voice laden with shock. Jimin turned to his left, only to come to a complete halt in the middle of a step at the sight of the young hunter he had despised with a passion for as long as he could remember.

Hong Minjoon looked the same as he always had where he stood outside the town hall, flanked by his old friends. His surprise was by far the most blatant, utterly stunned as he stared at Jimin as if he couldn’t believe his own eyes. “Is that really you?” he asked slowly, the faintest touch of dread to his words. “Canary?”

The byname broke Jimin out of his daze, but for several long seconds, he did not move. All he did was look at the man who had spent the better half of a year making unsubtle advances on him only to cast him out for the sake of saving his own skin as soon as it had been convenient. Jimin expected to feel a flare of hatred or rage rise within him at the mere sight of the hunter, but the longer he looked, the calmer he became.

He doesn’t matter, Jimin thought. He means nothing to me now.

He considered simply ignoring Minjoon and resuming his walk, but there was one thing he dearly wished to do first. Something he had wanted to do for long before the hunter had thrown him away as tribute.

The smile returned to Jimin’s lips and he stepped up to Minjoon, who only stared, having not quite managed to shake his dumbstruck state. “Hello, Minjoon,” Jimin said much too sweetly, but the hunter didn’t notice his obvious intention. “How’s your foot?”

Before Minjoon could even begin to form an answer, Jimin drew his arm back, and, with as much strength as he could master, he punched the hunter in the jaw.

A chorus of gasps rose from all around them, loud enough to drown the startled exclaim that fell from Jimin’s lips upon the impact. A dull ache flared across his knuckles, the skin reddening, but the pain was overcome by the rush of satisfaction within him as he watched Minjoon’s friends scramble to catch him from falling, pulling him upright before he could hit the ground.
If possible, the hunter’s shock intensified even further, as did the subtle dread in him, seeping steadily into his expression as he clutched his chin and stared up at Jimin. “J-Jimi—”

“No,” Jimin interrupted, still smiling. “I think that’s all that needs to be said.”

Without another word, he turned on the heel and walked away, ignoring the others as he made his way to the house of his old friend. He curled his fingers as he walked, sighing at the thought of the bruises his skin would show by the time he returned to the Agust. At least this should make Taehyung laugh, he thought with a snort.

The first flicker of nervousness came to him when he drew close to where he knew he would find his friend. A hundred thoughts crossed his mind then, fretting how the old woman would react to the sight of him. He had missed her terribly, but he realized now what his friendship might’ve caused Jihyun, particularly with the way she had attempted to defend him when Minjoon had cast him out. She had always been prickly, but she could’ve grown to resent Jimin for causing her to be shunned by the rest of the village.

When he finally reached the two small houses at the edge of town, he found his friend sitting on the porch of her home, her back to him as she bent over a little desk. She was writing, he realized, a piece of paper smoothed out over the wooden surface, and in her hand she held one of the quills Jimin had made for her so many months ago, on the eve before his departure.

The sight made Jimin’s eyes sting with tears, his voice wavering as he spoke her name.

“Jihyun.”

She looked up, frowning at the interruption of her writing, only to promptly drop the quill from her hand as soon as her eyes found him. Like all the others, she gaped at him, but unlike the rest, she leapt to her feet with surprising agility for a woman of her age and pointed at him with a wrinkly finger, her entire hand quivering. She didn’t seem to notice the desk she had knocked over in her hurry to stand, nor the ink that was spilling over the steps of her porch.

While she struggled to voice even a single sound, Jimin walked closer, a small smile on his lips as he came to stand before his friend. “I’ve come to see you, Jihyun,” he said carefully, his hands clasped tightly behind his back to keep from wringing them in his tension.

For a long moment, all she did was stare at him, her gaze never straying from his. Her hand hovered over his chest, trembling still, until she slowly raised it to his face, ever so gentle in her touch as she brushed her fingers against the skin of his cheek. “Little bird,” she finally said, her voice a mere whisper. “Am I dreaming, or is it really you?”

A teary giggle spilled from Jimin’s lips before he could stop it, his smile growing wide with joy. “You’re not dreaming, Jihyun,” he said and reached up to place a hand on top of hers. “It’s me.”

The old woman burst into tears much in the same fashion of a broken dam, bordering on hysterical as she pulled him into her arms with enough strength to suffocate him. “Jimin,” she cried into his neck, “I can’t believe you’re here, after all this time! I can’t believe you’re alive, I thought— I thought you were—”

Whatever it was she had thought, she didn’t seem to want to say it. Instead, she pushed him back and held him at arm’s length, blinking furiously against her tears to get a proper look at him. “Where have you been?” she asked, finally noticing his scars. “What did those pirates do to you? Where did they take you? What have you done, all this time?”
Jimin didn’t know where to begin or which question to answer first, so he blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. “I punched Minjoon in the jaw.”

His words drew a breathless laughter from his friend and she pulled him back into her embrace, one he returned readily this time. As he held her, he noticed how thin she had become, but she spoke before he could begin to worry. “Good on you, little bird,” she said thickly and clapped him on the back. “You wouldn’t believe how obnoxious that youngling has been ever since you left. He struts around like some wounded hero of war and preaches to all who will hear how he saved this village from pirates.”

“He hasn’t learned anything, then,” Jimin said with a roll of his eyes.

“No,” Jihyun scoffed, “but hopefully he will this time.” She eased out of his arms and took his face in her hands, frowning as she studied his face. “Are you alright, little bird? Truly?”

Jimin smiled, as brightly as he knew how. “I am,” he said and nodded as best he could in her grip. “I’m better than I have ever been.”

The worried crease of her brow didn’t ease in the slightest, but she huffed and let him go all the same. “You must tell me what has happened since you were taken,” she said. “I want to hear every last detail, do you understand?” She waited for him to nod before turning away, sighing as she looked at the little desk she had knocked over. “Oh, I hope it’s not ruined.”

She sank into a crouch and picked the piece of paper from the ground, careful as she brushed the dirt from it. “I’ve been writing letters for you, little bird,” she said and folded the note. “Ever since that night. I wanted to send them to you, but I didn’t know how or where you were, so…” She glanced towards her house and hesitated for a moment. “Wait here.”

As quickly as she could, Jihyun disappeared into her home and left Jimin standing on the porch, confused yet overcome with fondness all at once. The thought that his friend had written letters for him in his absence filled him with such joy, he didn’t know what to do with it all. Giggling quietly to himself, he turned on the heel, spinning aimlessly on the spot in a meek attempt at releasing some of his exuberance.

When Jihyun returned, she was carrying a small stack of sealed envelopes, neatly tied together by string the same color as Jimin’s hair. “Here,” she said and deftly pushed the letter she’d been writing into the stack. “If you one day wake up and want to read my endless rambling and worrying.”

Jimin took the letters from her with both hands, holding them reverently. There were at least twenty envelopes in the stack, each with his name written on it, and if Jimin hadn’t cried before, he certainly did now. “I’ll read all of them,” he promised as he tucked them securely into the satchel Jin had given him, rubbing tears from his eyes when he looked up again, beaming. “I’ve missed you so much, Jihyun.”

His friend waved a hand as if to bat his words away, her eyes turning glossy once again. “You stop that,” she said snappishly. “It’s not good for an old lady like me to cry like this.” She heaved a dramatic sigh when he laughed and took his arm, sniffling. “Now. Let us visit your mother, and then you will tell me everything.”

The grave stood where it always had, surrounded by tall grass and flowers. Jihyun had tended to it beautifully, the stone tomb clean with a crown of wild lilies resting at its base. She had lit incense early in the morning and left it burning on a small stand atop the grave, the faint scent of ginger and herbs lingering in the summer air.
Jimin went to his knees before the grave and bowed once, touching his brow to the ground at its base before reaching out to stroke the smooth rock of the tomb, smiling. “Hello, mother,” he said, his fingers brushing over the name he himself had engraved in its surface many years ago. “I’m sorry I’ve been away for so long. You must’ve been lonely, but I see Jihyun has taken good care of you.”

“Of course I have,” the old woman said with a scoff, grunting as she sat down in the grass next to him. “You told me to.”

“Thank you,” Jimin said and took her hand in his without looking away from the grave. “It means the world to me.”

Jihyun hummed in reply, allowing him all the time he needed to find peace in the presence of his mother. It was odd; throughout his life, Jimin had made a habit of telling his mother everything, both before and after her death, yet now, after so long, his words seemed to elude him, catching in his throat and taking the form of fresh tears in his eyes every time he tried to voice them.

There was so much he wanted to say, but for the moment, he needed silence more than words.

When he finally did find his voice again, his words flowed without pause. He told Jihyun about everything he had seen and learned ever since his departure, about Son Jukan and his flawed justice, about Shanghai and the Four Cardinals. He told her about the Blessed Oracles and the trust they had placed in him and about the Rabid Conflagration, how Jimin had been chosen to stop the fire that would’ve consumed this world.

He had spoken for long over an hour when he stopped to gather his thoughts, and he was silent for so long, Jihyun must’ve believed he was done speaking. “What will you do now?” she asked, her voice still bearing the shock of hearing what he had done to bring down Son Oseong.

“Oh, I will return to the ship tonight,” Jimin said without a second’s thought, only realizing how odd it must’ve sounded when he noticed the apprehension crossing his friend’s face. With a sheepish smile, he squeezed her hand in his, and then he told her of the Agust and its crew, the ones who had given him a home, the people whom he had grown to think of as family.

The only thing he left out was Yoongi. He couldn’t quite say why he hesitated; perhaps it was the worry of being judged by his friend for whom he loved, or to see his friend struck with fear upon hearing the captain’s name. Jimin wanted to tell her and he promised himself that he would, but he would gather his courage first, so he could say it proudly.

What would you think, he mused inwardly and looked at his mother’s grave, if you knew your son had become a pirate? He couldn’t help but smile at the thought, imagining his mother scolding him for it first, speaking of all the horrors the world related to the name of piracy, before praising him for choosing his own course of life.

“Jimin?”

Startled, he turned quickly where he sat, having momentarily forgotten Jihyun’s presence. “Yes?” he said, his smile faltering slightly at the sight of her frown. “What’s wrong?”

“I asked when you would return here again,” she said, concern obvious in her voice. “Did you not hear me?”

“Oh.” Jimin’s lips curled into a sheepish smile. “I’m sorry, Jihyun,” he said carefully, “you have to raise your voice a little if you stand to my right. It’s my ear.” He raised a hand to tug at his earlobe as he spoke, his fingers absentmindedly tracing the scars left behind by lightning before he lowered it
again. “My right ear doesn’t work anymore,” he said. “I can’t hear anything.”

Her eyes widened in shock, her lips parting in silence as if she didn’t know what to say. For a moment, she only looked at him, sorrow rising to her expression as she placed a hand to his cheek, ever so gently. “For how long?” she asked, her voice suddenly hoarse.

“Ever since I was struck by the storm,” Jimin said and leaned against her touch. “When I woke up again, my hearing was just… gone. Everything sounded so dull from my right side, and as time passed, I realized it would not come back.” He reached up and took her hand in both of his. “It’s alright, Jihyun,” he said gently. “Don’t let it make you sad. I’ve come to terms with it, so it’s alright.”

The smile on his lips was bright as ever, made stronger still as he recalled the moment when he’d first realized it. It had been a heavy truth to come to terms with, but he had stood amongst his family when it happened, his hand in Yoongi’s as they’d walked along the shipyard and looked at the Agust, only half finished yet already resembling the beautiful vessel it was shaped after.

He hadn’t told the crew. At times, he wondered why he had made the decision not to, but he would be reminded every time Yoongi absentmindedly traced the length of his scars on his chest, the slightest frown marring his brow. Jimin knew the captain felt guilty about what had happened, as if he should’ve been able to stop it somehow, and the last thing Jimin wanted was to fuel that guilt.

Of course, he knew it was hardly a secret he would carry to his grave. There were only so many instances he could blame on lack of attention whenever a hushed word went without him hearing it. It was hardest to hide from Yoongi, who liked to whisper in his ear in various situations.

Jimin would tell him one day, when he felt he was ready to face his beloved’s sorrow.

“It was a small price to pay for what has been done,” he said now, fierce affection blooming in his chest as he thought of Yoongi.

He looked at his mother’s grave, thus failing to see the awe in his friend’s eyes as she peered at him. “You really are a kind boy, little bird,” Jihyun said and gently patted his shoulder.

Jimin emitted an airy giggle and shook his head. “They say the same thing,” he murmured and reached out to run his hand over the grave once again. His heart was beating loudly against his ribs, and he wanted to tell her now. He wanted her to know, no matter how she would feel about it. “I have someone I care about now,” he began. “Someone beloved.”

He did not need to look away from the tomb to feel his friend’s surprise. “Oh,” she uttered. There was a spark of joy in her voice, but she remained silent for a moment, clearly struggling to ascertain the possible identity of the person he loved. “Are they…”

“A pirate?” Jimin supplied when she left the question unfinished. “Yes, he is.”

If she felt any kind of distaste at that, she did not show it. “Is he the pirate who took you away from here?” she asked. “That blonde boy?”

Her question had Jimin sputtering in his hurry to deny it, a disbelieving laughter spilling from his lips. “Who, Tae?” He shook his head frantically, shuddering at the mere thought. “No. He’s like a brother to me, I’d never. Not to mention he has his own lover, but even so!”

Jihyun snorted, clearly amused by his reaction. “I see,” she said with a huff and jerked her head in a demand for him to elaborate, a request he was eager to comply to.

“He has a temper worse than yours, Jihyun,” he said, failing miserably at keeping the fondness from
his voice. “And he’s foul-mouthed and petulant at times and he struggles with his anger, and he’s too stubborn for his own good. But,” his smile softened, “he tries so hard to be good, as if he can’t see just how good he already is. As if he truly doesn’t know how gentle he is when it matters the most, or how only a few words from him can calm me or make me feel like I’m the strongest person in this world.”

His cheeks grew warm as he spoke of his beloved, but he met Jihyun’s gaze without faltering all the same. “I don’t think you would like him,” he said, “but I believe he could like you.”

She hummed at that, pondering his words for a moment. “Does he make you happy, little bird?” she asked then, her tone more serious than he had ever heard it.

“He does,” Jimin said and felt the truth of his words inside him, his heart ready to burst with adoration. “More than I ever thought I could be.”

In an instant, the stern tension faded from his friend’s expression and made way for a wide, toothy smile. “That’s good, then,” she said and nodded contentedly. “What is his name?”

Contrary to his prior worry, Jimin did not hesitate to tell her now. There was nothing in the world he wanted more in that moment than to tell her.

“His name is Min Yoongi,” he said and watched the smile fall from Jihyun’s face, the old woman’s eyes growing comically wide in recognition. It made Jimin laugh, bright and joyous, his chest brimming with pride as he spoke the name of whom he loved most in this world. “The Black Fox of the East.”

Chapter End Notes

SO

WHO SHRIEKED THE MOMENT THEY SAW JEJU IN THE FIRST SENTENCE? BET Y’ALL DID, DIDN’T YA?

I mean I shrieked when I wrote it, so… ahahahaha, so many of you said you wanted to see Jimin return to Jeju, AND I WAS LAUGHING SO MUCH BECAUSE THIS WAS THE PLAN ALL ALONG, AYYYYYYY-

Also, uh, yeah, Jimin kinda, uh, went deaf in his right ear. I mean, lightning can blow your eardrums if you’re CLOSE to it when it strikes, so if it actually HITS you, well… I’m sorry ;_; BUT IT’S ONLY IN ONE EAR OKAY HE CAN STILL HEAR SO PLEASE SPARE ME

//clears throat

Alright! So now, book one is FINISHED. DONE. OVER AND DONE WITH. I CAN’T BELIEVE- hoo boi, I can’t believe it! It feels so… WEIRD. Seriously, what the heck am I supposed to do on a weekly basis now??? WHAT WILL MY LIFE BE LIKE NOW THAT I WON’T UPDATE EVERY TUESDAY???!?!?!?! WHO EVEN AM I ANYMORE, AHHHHHHHHH-
ONCE AGAIN, I WANT TO THANK EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU WHO HAVE SUPPORTED ME THROUGHOUT THIS JOURNEY. I LOVE Y’ALL SO GODDAMN MUCH, YOU HAVE NO IDEA.

And now, onto more OFFICIAL business! As I mentioned last week, I have plans on getting The Songbird and the Sea published as a real book. Starting tomorrow, I’m going to fully revise the story and edit it to my best abilities, and then I will begin contacting literary agencies to see if there are any chances for me to get this story published.

ALSO! As you’ve noticed, there are several parts of the story that remain unsolved, such as Jin and Namjoon’s pasts, or THE CHILD that was mentioned that one time in that one letter and everyone freaked out about it, and that is 100% intentional! The Songbird and the Sea is the first book in a series of four (the Songbird series, hehehehe~), and I’ll probably get to working on the second one in a few months, depending on how the whole publishing idea works out.

YOONMIN WILL LIVE FOREVER.

One more time, from the bottom of my heart, thank you! I love you all!

I DO NOT ALLOW TRANSLATIONS OF THIS WORK.

SEQUEL NOTICE: I struggled for a long time with people re-posting and translating this fic without my permission and hesitated with posting anything related to the sequels, but all information regarding the follow-ups can be found in this twitter thread

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!