Candent Skin

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Summary

This is the tale of a spirit who fell in love with freedom and a prince who had never gone any further than his palace walls. The story of a boy whose skin glowed like a thousand suns and a young heir with the weight of a dynasty on his shoulders. The legend of two lovers that made all the frontiers they knew disappear because there was no world that could endure such love as theirs.

Notes

Dreamt in a Dream once upon a time in December.

Here's the playlist of songs I listened while writing it / inspired this fic [spotify](https) / [youtube](https) Ć

See the end of the work for more [notes](https)

Part 1

«I am a lost traveler in the desert

I wish to find the oasis even if it turns out to be an illusion. »
Once upon a time, there was a boy whose skin glowed like a thousand suns.

The legend said when he was born the night was as clear as day, no stars were to be seen in the dark blue sky. In the middle of the heated sands of the vast desert, the sound of a deafening howling was the only thing that could be heard under the gloom.

After hours of endless walking through dunes that looked exactly equal one from the other, the woman couldn’t resist anymore, she broke waters while being trapped in the arid landscape. All life inhabited the desert stopped momentarily as if they were caught inside the last grain of an hourglass waiting for its drop.

Short was the night but long was the suffering as the labor continued. No wind blew on their direction which meant no sandstorms but also meant the hottest dawn they had lived so far. Sweat falling from her face mixed with salty tears and pressured teeth that caged a yell inside her throat. Hands on her hands holding her stinging grip and words of encouragement surrounded her in a tight hug.

Another cry directed to the vacuum tearing apart her vocal chords and reddening her sore throat. She used her last strengths to push harder and make way to new life right under the sight of the distant brightest star. A different cry emerged from a pure soul breathing for the first time extending his tiny arms towards the raising morning sky.

And when the sun rose completely on the skyline after listening to his mother’s adversity, it was so amazed by his presence that dropped a single golden tear on his forehead. That tear contained the same light that made crops grow and birds sing. That was the day of the birth of a star.

He grew up being special from that moment.

Since his origins were extraordinary, he was no ordinary boy. The boy had the power of changing his entire body and become something different; he could turn into almost any animal he had seen. He could easily fly like an eagle through the blue sky or crawl like a snake through the warm sands of the dunes; he could be clever and fast as a desert fox or be slow and wise as a turtle.

The boy with candent skin lived with his family in a small valley surrounded by dunes. His tribe used to be part of a bigger group of nomads wandering from one water concentration to another in a perpetual crossing. That was until one faithful day at a young age, the boy turned into a raptor and spotted with his hawk eyes a jewel in the middle of the brownish sands.

That was the day when they established their life as sedentary. No more never-ending walks under the burning sunlight that once had loved him as its own child but made hundreds perish with the same mantle that protected them.

There, on their new home, every day the sun shone on the horizon illuminating the giant sand mounds and reflecting on the oasis as a perfect mirror. Something similar happened when the sunlight touched his temple and his face was enlightened as if he radiated his own light. That’s why he was often called «the son of the sun» or simply referred to as «the boy with candent skin». However the most common of his nicknames was «shapeshifter», he was easily identified with that epithet.
He loved his powers more than anything else. It was what made him special, he was the only one in the world who could do something like that. To change, live like an animal, fly high, swim deeper or just hide under a thousand different skins. Nevertheless, what made him different also made him feel apart.

Some people from the tribe said his laughter and his presence made the valley exist, that life in the valley existed because of him. Those big attributions weren’t more than exaggerations as far as he knew, life in the valley existed because of all the people who actually lived there and gave it a purpose.

Although, others whispered at his back, questioning why a kid would receive such power when he was barely capable of handle it by himself. Many were the rumors that circulated on the small village, opinions were divided by those who saw him as a powerful entity considering him as something that had to be adored and admired from afar and, on the other hand, those who were afraid of the possibility that one day that skinny little boy would grow up to exterminate them all.

He was with them in the tribe, but he was not one of them completely.

He was a limited spectator of the life he supposedly created. Mothers warned their children of playing with him and often he would find difficult to keep a friend even when he would never harm anyone. Others would politely refer at him as a divine creature, a shapeshifter they must adore like a god and thus, do not disrespect him in any possible way.

His mother had tried to explain the villagers he was just a normal kid apart from his abilities but he had grown used to that trait. Some older women pitied him and allowed him to be close them while they did their manual labors but most of his days he spent his time exploring.

As years went by, he had discovered all the secrets of the valley, all the animals and rocks on the floor, all the water slopes and treetops, everything life had to offer. However, the boy didn't love his home as he used to; he had seen all the nature and imitated every animal he had come across in his life.

Days became grey and lifeless. Even the hot temperature of the desert didn’t cheer him up anymore. Not long ago he loved going to the oasis’ lake and play for hours to placate the heat of the sunlight but lately, he didn’t laugh as often as he used to.

Such was the case that one day he went to visit the old wise grandma who lived in a tent in the middle of the valley. The grandma was pleased to see him but instantly knew something was wrong. His eyes didn't spark as usual like when he discovered a new bird or when he made some joke becoming a lizard scaring all the women while they collected fruit.

The grandma asked him what had him so blue those days and, with a melancholic expression, he answered. “Every man and woman look the same to me, I have become every animal which walks on this ground and I know every rock on the floor. I had listened to nature and I have become one with the desert. Still, there’s no skin or feathers which suits me anymore. I want to know where the water comes from, I want to catch a star, I want to climb further than the dunes and chase the horizon.”

The grandma stared at him. He was known for being an untamed soul and she could perceive in the voice of his ancestors he was not going to change or give up now he discovered the sky above his head and the infinite of possibilities. Great expectations for such a young heart.

After a while she sentenced. “You'll never find what you are looking for if you keep following what
only your eyes can see.”

The arcane words of the woman made the young boy’s blood boiled. *Why everything had to be always so cryptic?* His cheeks turned red as he left the tent without hesitation. He was an impatient child after all.

From that day on, he decided to find his own road no matter how long it would take.

*Not much time passed.*

When he was eleven summers old the village prepared a big celebration in honor of the summer solstice. He enjoyed that day more than any other celebration. On normal days people were either too scared or too intimidated by him, but at this party, everyone was invited to the feast. He felt like he was at the same level than everybody else and could speak with the adults, play with the children and help the old ladies with the preparations even if it was just for a few hours.

His mother would scold him saying that a special day like that he shouldn’t be working like any other day, but that was what he liked the most, the chance of sharing with people, to be like them. If that was the case and he wanted to help so badly, his mother suggested him to go a pick some spices near the lake.

His feet took him there, to the center of the valley. Usually, the women from the tribe reunited there some evenings. But with the preparations for the celebration, the place was completely isolated and in quiet harmony.

While picking the herbs and other ingredients his mother had asked for, he was suddenly seduced by a sweet scent that confused all his senses. It was something he had never felt before.

The smell didn't come from the newly bloomed flowers or the juicy fruit that hung from the trees but somewhere he couldn't find just with his intuition, but his soul. It was like a thick cloud emanating from the bottom of the lake. It became stronger with every step he took; it was like he couldn't fight against the strong wish of following that scent. He wanted to follow it, even if that meant reaching the bottom of the lake drowning his lungs with water.

*He was bewitched.*

Still, under the spell, he heard his name being called by his mother. The celebration was about to begin. He shook his head and rushed towards her direction with the plants she asked.

Drums were playing and people were dancing. Some women were disguised under elaborated masks and others painted themselves like animals or braided some feathers on their hairs.

The young boy let one of the little girls play with his long brown hair, she used some striped feathers and wooden painted beads to decorate it. The girl smiled when she finished, looking at her piece of art and then went in search of another target.

The feast began a couple hours later, they had enjoyed a good hunting that day, trees were especially generous and the environment overall was just blissful. With the celebration, it was inaugurated the period of abundance and unconcern, life was easier and people were happier. In general, it was a great place to live and for the last six years they had lived there without the need of moving or looking for another place anytime soon. Children had born there, elders had passed away there. The Valley had history written on the sand.
He saw the purple smoke coming from the lake in the distance, reaching the sky like a cloud and then spreading everywhere, searching for him. *Calling him.* Navigating in between the trunks of the trees and following the pulse of the drums. *No one else could see that?*

He sneaked out of the celebration without anyone noticing. As he got closer and closer to the lake he could still hear the brief mumble of the crowd, weakened with every step he took. It was like everything else was slowly getting mute, even the animals and other sounds of nature.

From solid soil to slippery mud, his feet could taste the wet ground as he approached, the transition didn’t affect him. He could walk through quicksand and didn’t realize until being six feet under.

He was known for being a curious boy, often going further than he was supposed to. Of course, he never got lost; he was clever enough to know where to step and when it was time to comeback.

With almost twelve years he was more independent than most children of his age. Most mothers wouldn’t allowed their kids near the dangerous animals of the desert, his mother just forbid him going too far to never come back. For some reason, he had the feeling of being disobeying the only unwavering thing his mother asked him to do.

He reached the shore of the lake in a short time; the moon was reflected in its surface like a shining mirror. Bright and captivating, like a pair of eyes he didn’t know yet. He was tempted to touch it but that would have destroyed the painting. The scent became from above, from the bottom of the lake that radiated with intensity, now more than ever.

The boy extended his arm to touch it, the temptation was stronger every second that passed; his fingertips softly stroked the surface creating small waves that followed his trace. Water was one of his favorite elements, so flexible and graceful.

“The solstice.” A voice announced from behind.

When he turned back he realized it was the old grandma of the tribe. All her features were enlightened by the moon light, her long white hair looked wither and even all her wrinkles created shadows on her face.

“It’s today.” The boy nodded in response. “Summer is here. Solstices only happen twice in a year, every six months, either winter or summer. This is the only time when the lake looks like this, a night every six months.”

“You can see it too?” The boy fully turned to see her face.

“I do. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” The boy nodded again. “I don’t know much about it, but it happens every solstice. Be careful with it.” She said as she started to walk back to the bustle.

He was alone now. The words about the solstice were still echoing on his head. He stood up to go back to the celebration as the old lady did but he hesitated in the last second. Then he walked almost in trance directly to the lake.

This was the path his feet were determined to follow. *His own path.*

His body was starting to get wet, the water reached his hips, and then his chest and neck until it finally covered his face completely.

Then he was gone.
There were tales about portals to other places, distant kingdoms lost in the forest or in the middle of the mountains.

The first thing he noticed when he crossed the portal was how cold and silent the world could be. It was like being in the womb of his mother once again but without the warm tenderness of a human body.

And then all the sensations at once.

Like a bright light in the middle of the night.

His lungs were heavy as a human; he could have turned into a fish if another second passed by. He was able to resist enough to see the light on the other side, a light that guided him from above, he swam until passing through the water again.

The boy made a big splash with his hands trying to reach for air. He took a deep breath before having time to realize where he was. He didn’t know that place. He had appeared in a water body like the lake but this one was smaller. Round shaped, surrounded by wood constructions and stone borders. White and orange fishes bigger than an adult’s arm passed next to him and green plants floated on the surface.

The water was exceedingly cold, colder than the coldest night in the desert.

He could feel the decreasing temperature directly on his bones. For a child born in the burning sand, he had never felt the icy breeze of an oncoming cruel winter.

“Lady Go! I am telling you I heard something!”

He didn’t understand what the voice said, but someone was coming and he couldn’t help but feel afraid of the unknown. It was a strange feeling, he knew it was another language, they were communicating but he wasn’t able to comprehend.

He acted quickly and turned into a bird, one he had seen before. Small with black and red feathers, disguising himself as an animal had always worked in the desert, he didn’t realize that in the middle of that scenery a red spot would stand out more than he thought.

“I heard it here; it came from one of the ponds. It was like if the water was boiling. Come quickly!”

“Prince Jeongguk, do not run inside. You know it is not allowed.”

“But Lady Go, we’ll miss it if we don’t hurry!”

The bird boy sat on a branch of a plum three whose leaves were completely gone. Even though he could have flown away from there and go somewhere else, he stayed because the voice he heard before wasn’t frightening; in fact, there was something cheerful about it that made him stay.

Suddenly the voice sounded closer and closer followed by eager steps.

“It was…here.”
Someone opened the sliding door letting escape all the warmth from the inside. The figure emerged in the middle of the nightlight that came from the moon. It was a boy, just like him

“My prince, are you sure it wasn’t one of the koi fishes that our king adores with passion?”

A woman with pale skin, black hair, and a long dress came too. It was something he had never seen before, clothes like those. Back at home, he would use vestments made of the leather of hunted animals, the oasis attracted some variety of boars and perhaps something else but her dress was made of green and white fabric, a ribbon right under her chest and a flower ornament on her hair.

Suddenly the called prince looked up.

The boy’s eyes sparkled like if all the stars of the universe were contained inside of them. There was something that made them wet as rain and deeply full with void, like if he could almost see the infinity of a starry night sky inside of them. He had a long nose that fit with his features perfectly and chubby rosy cheeks that only stood out more his prominent front teeth.

He was wearing a similar outfit, a long white tunic that almost reached his feet, white pants as well underneath but the rest of his clothes were different. His topcoat was violet, an intense shade of violet with a fancy golden embroidery right in the middle of his chest. He looked skinny even under all the layers. His long black hair was tied into a ponytail, only a few locks escaped framing his face.

He was beautiful.

“Look! Right there!” He pointed at the bird on the branch and for an instant, the boy forgot he was pointing at him. “I’ve never seen a bird like that.”

The woman stared at him and smiled. “It’s true. We shall call Master Young tomorrow; he would gladly add it to his book of species. What a gorgeous little friend.”

“But… it made so much fuss for a little bird. I heard it, Lady Go. It was like…” The prince started imitating the sound of the water movement what made the lady beamed fondly.

She accommodated one of the missing hairs behind the boy’s ear and getting to his height she said. “I believe you and I’m firmly convinced it was one of the fishes that live in the pond. They grow bigger every year. In fact, if they grew bigger one of them might eat you in one bite.”

The prince held his breath. “No, they won’t. I feed them sometimes. Father said they won’t bite the hand that feeds them.”

“The king is wise of course. And it will be wiser if we go back inside, it’s getting colder and perhaps snow starts falling soon.” She rubbed his back and then stood up. “Hopefully that little bird will be here tomorrow. It’s quite odd it didn’t fly with its flock.”

“Maybe it’s hurt. We should take it inside and take care of it.” The boy offered with a sweet voice and then extended his hand widely like if he was intended to catch it.

“It will be hard to catch it, even if-”

But before she could complete the sentence, the red spot had jumped into the young prince’s palms. His face was the reflection of amusement while he gently touched the bird’s feathers with his fingertips gaining enough confidence to stroke it with his whole hand.

His touch felt tender, soft like a kiss, familiar like home.
“Your Highness, you surely have a gift.”

“Can I take it inside? It is too cold in here. Please, Lady Go, please.”

“I don’t see why not. I will ask for a cage first. It looks like it’s not even trying to escape but the queen won’t like to see a bird flying inside I’m afraid.”

The prince nodded with excitement and cupped the bird boy on his warm hands just then he returned inside the palace with a smile on his face.

III

Gold cage

He had never been caught in a cage before.

The boy couldn’t fly or escape through the metallic bars even though if they looked so thin from the human’s eye perspective. It was a styled prison, there were delicate gold flowers welded on the sides and even the feeders were made of shimmering gold.

But as beautiful as it could be, it was still a prison.

The young prince couldn’t fall asleep that night, thinking about the sound of the boiling water that came from the pond. He was on his way to his room, waiting to meet Lady Go who would help him to get ready to sleep when he heard it. The big and sonorous splash came after that.

It reminded him to the sound he made when he threw himself on the river during summer days when he was able to play outside more often. But that day was the day winter started, it had been a cold autumn already and it would only get colder and colder. Lady Go was so sure it was one of the fishes but they tended to get quieter during winter days.

He walked down the aisle carrying a candle as his only companion.

One of the servants had put the cage in one of many isolated rooms where its song couldn’t be heard by the queen. His mother wouldn’t like to be disturbed in the middle of the night and a caged animal was going to create some commotion until it became accustomed to the closed room.

He entered the room. It was empty; the only thing in there was the gold cage. The prince sat on the wooden floor and stared. The bird inside the cage moved as it recognized him. He wasn’t able to reach it from there, it was hanging from the ceiling a few centimeters lower.

On the other side, the boy bird was sleepless as well, unable to get some rest even though the travel through the portal left him exhausted. When he spotted an already familiar silhouette coming into the room, his tiny bird heart jumped in anticipation.

“Hello…” he said. The boy didn’t understand him again but it sounded like a salute, he was sitting on the floor at a short distance from the cage.

“I don’t like you being held there. I’m sorry about that but it was the only way they’d allow you to stay, the night will get colder. I wanted to see if you were comfortable… After Master Young check his registers you can go. I promise.” He smiled.

And then he stood up and slowly walked away without taking the eyes of the golden object as he
was hypnotized by the caged bird.

The following morning, after getting dress, the prince ran through the aisle even if Lady Go was at his heels begging him not to.

“Your Highness has not finished his breakfast. Master Young will come soon I promise but please eat some more.”

“I am not hungry, Lady Go. I will wait for Master Young inside.”

“I called for him after the sunrise, my prince. Please do not disregard your health due to impatience, it is just another bird.”

It wasn’t another bird and Jeongguk knew.

“Lady Go, could you lower the cage for me?”

Lady Go sighed. There was no way of changing his mind so she went outside to find a servant that could fulfill the order of the young prince. It was a radiant morning, there was no glance of the sunlight but the white clouds glowed in the sky. There were a few birds left that sang under the dried cherry trees.

Master Young, an old man with grey hair and short view but wiser than anyone else in the palace, came to see the caged bird later that morning. Jeongguk had managed to snatch a bunch of seeds from breakfast for the bird that gladly ate it all before the man came in.

“Master Young!” The prince shouted.

“Your Highness, Lady Go.” He politely bowed. “It’s a beautiful morning, isn’t it?”

The bird boy was curious about that many people in the same room. The old man opened the gate waiting for him to come out. At first, he hesitated for a second but then saw the young prince holding his hands together ready to catch him and as he had done the day before, he jumped into his palms.

Something told him it was not time to transform back into a human at that precise moment. He waited until the man took a look on his feathers, his beak, and his tiny claws. Then he spoke with solemnity. And even if he didn’t understand, the old man finished caressing his head and then abandoning the room to leave him, the woman and the prince alone.

Luckily, the prince had fed him before but even with the stomach of a bird, his hunger was still human’s. He’d have to change soon but again, he was in an unknown place full of strangers who didn’t know anything about him.

Was that what he was looking for when he left the valley?

“Your Highness, perhaps it’s time to release it outside. It must be hungry and you heard Master Young, it probably got lost from its flock.” Lady Go encouraged him.

Master Young had said that he had seen that bird before in a drawing from a book of foreigner birds and other species. The bird was said to be from a very distant place, across land and sea. The theory of the old man it was that came inside of a ship by mistake but he went revising the royal library’s annals.
He had made a promise and he was going to keep it because that’s what he had been taught.

Lady Go accompanied him to one of the internal gardens, he wasn't allowed to leave the palace at any cost, and that meant not going through the tall and dark walls that surrounded the property, which still was big as a small town. After being wrapped in a thick coat he undertook his way to the opened area holding the cage with his small hands.

“Your Highness.” One of the young servants bowed and then referred to the woman. “Lady Go, Lady Myung is looking for you at this instant. Queen Soo has requested quince tea but she couldn’t find it.”

She found one of the guards not too far from them, that made her secure enough to left the prince alone while she attended her duty.

“I will escort you in when I come back. Do not take off your coat your majesty.”

The young prince nodded in response and when the women were gone he opened the gate of the cage, waiting for the sudden departure of his ephemeral pet. Perhaps the reason why he didn’t want to let it go was because, in the past couple months, it was the closest thing he had as a friend.

“Go away already. Do not stay any longer.” The bird boy stared at him. “At least you can go wherever you want. I wish I could fly too, it must be nice.”

The bird just stepped outside the cage but didn’t move farther. It seemed like it didn’t have the intention to leave the prince.

And that’s was indeed what was happening. The bird boy didn’t have another place to go and next to the young prince was the safest for him at that moment. He was tired, tired of being a bird and couldn’t hold much longer.

“What is-” The prince murmured. “No…”

For a second the bird laid still on the younger’s body and the prince let a tear roll down his face when he thought it was gone but then, right in front of his eyes, under a light veil the little bird became a young boy.

He had never seen someone like him; his eyes were closed as he was deeply asleep but even in that state his features were ravishing. He looked like the sun had kissed him the day he was born, his skin was tan and even in the cold garden, the prince thought of the summer days just by looking at him.

His long brown hair was full of feathers and small beads and he was only wearing light clothes made of brown leather. Even if he had agreed not to take off his coat, it was his first instinct after laying the eyes on the boy.

The prince held him tightly against his chest trying to warm him up a little. He couldn’t believe what his eyes just saw, in a moment it was a bird and in the other, it was a boy like him, but that could wait, he needed to keep him alive.

“Guards! Guards!” He cried for help.

The boy with cendant skin heard the prince’s blurred voice inside of his head like if he was dreaming.

A dream that became true.
The older boy slept until the next morning.

The young prince had made Lady Go and the guards promise they wouldn’t say a word about it until he was completely recovered. He could figure it out something to tell his mother later. Jeongguk asked for a guest room on one of the palace wings where people were rarely seen, not so far from his own room which was in a reserved area.

He couldn’t explain how he had found the boy in the first place. Maybe if he told Lady Go in private what happened she would believe him but the guards were responsible if an intruder passed the palace’s walls and that meant they couldn’t allow him to be there.

Lady Go had to take him almost forcibly to get some rest himself, the prince as stubborn as he was, was still a child. Jeongguk was afraid he would lose his miracle if he left him alone just one second but trusted his handmaid enough to believe on her words, no one was going to touch the boy under her vigilance.

The following day, the boy woke up in the middle of a room he didn’t know. It was like any guest room in the palace, a large dark wooden bed was placed in the center, green curtains fell around the structure wrapping it up; there was an embroidered tapestry behind the headboard that showed the image of a tiger in the mountains. There were a few furniture asides, a small table and two chairs made of the same wood and a big circular carpet covering half of the surface of the room.

During his life, he had never gotten the chance of sleeping in a fluffy warm bed with duck feather pillows and thick blankets; it was like resting in a cloud. During five minutes he lied in the bed, staring the ceiling incapable of believing where he was. But then he remembered he was in a foreigner place full of things he didn’t know. He was curious by nature but the overwhelming feeling filled his chest completely and made him think he was drowning, the tears came after that.

He was sobbing when Lady Go came in. He covered himself with the white sheet, the handmaid tried to take it off of his face but the boy just made a mess and tangled himself with the cotton fabric. She tried to calm him down with some sweet words but the boy’s bawling was louder.

The prince rushed when he heard the weep coming from the guest’s room. He didn’t know what to do either, Lady Go was still trying to reassure the older boy but she was failing at her task. He seemed to be in the middle of a tantrum, sobbing and breathing with difficulty. Jeongguk had to think fast otherwise other maids would stalk to gossip about it.

He approached the bed and started to sing a sweet lullaby that Lady Go used to sing to him when he was a toddler. The melody felt like a hug and his gentle voice was a perfect company, even for a ten-year-old boy it was already angelic. After a few notes, the boy under the sheets started to calm down and even the handmaid was surprised of how he almost immediately reacted to the soft voice of the prince.

“I think he does not speak the common tongue, your majesty. He seems to be an outsider judging by the way he was dressed up.”

The brunette was staring from the cocoon he created with the blanket and the sheets, just his eyes and part of his nose were visible. When Jeongguk stopped singing he rapidly tapped his hand asking
him to continue. The prince looked into his eyes and intoned another melody, more cheerful, that was one of the songs the children learnt to play around.

His eyes sparkled like if they irradiated sunlight, he had incredible long lower eyelashes and as soon as he started to clap following the rhythm, the sheet lowered showing his dashing rectangular smile which caught Jeongguk’s eye right away making him lost the beat.

“H… hello…” He tried to communicate buy shyly hid behind Lady Go’s skirt.

She kindly stroke the prince’s hair while holding a smile. It was nice to see him with someone of his age for once, that palace was full of dusty old men and stiff ladies of the court.

The boy with the candent skin hadn’t seen the prince closely until that moment. Not only his appearance but what he had made with his voice was beyond beautiful. He had heard songs like those before, the women in the tribe sang for the little ones, including himself but this was different. The prince’s voice made him think in colors, all the shades of pink and orange like a sunset, he thought about the feeling you get when the sun touches your skin for the first time during summer, the warmth on his tummy made him giggle and that’s when the other boy stopped singing.

He said something and run behind the woman’s skirt before he could response. He wanted to reply but it was impossible for them to have an actual conversation, none of they could understand each other but still…

“Hi!” He said on his native tongue and jumped off the bed.

The prince blinked a few times before showing his face again. His rosy cheeks got redder when he held his gaze. The older boy wanted to understand what he was saying, but he couldn’t, although that didn’t stop him from trying to interact with him.

Touching a prince wasn’t allowed. Not even his closer handmaids were able to do it without permission. Lady Go was the one who prepared all his baths and brushed his hair but when the foreigner boy cupped the prince’s face with his hands she couldn’t help but let escape a little squeal. They could cut his hands for touching him.

The prince, in the other hand, wasn’t touch affectively very often. In fact, the occasions where he shared spare time with his relatives were counted on the fingers of a hand, rare occasions besides celebrations and feasts where all the royal family gathered together. He used to spend time with his older brother, but since the boy reached the age fourteen he was a least frequent visitor on that side of the palace. His duties of crown prince interposed with his brother’s affection.

So when he felt the warm hands of the smiling boy around his head, his heart skipped a beat and he stayed still like a statue. After that, he took the hands off and stared at the maid who held a horrified expression.

She gulped and then lowered to their height. “Your Highness, we must discuss this. The queen is not going to like having a stranger hosted on the palace without her knowledge.”

“But… Lady Go… you said it yourself, he doesn’t know the common tongue and his clothes don’t match any near region. He’s going to die outside, please. Can we keep him here for a few more days? I will tell my mother when the time comes.”

“It is risky keeping secrets from the queen… Do you understand he could be a savage?” She looked at the older boy. He was still carrying the sheets like a cape, his long brown hair was messy but he smiled at her and his eyes were the purest thing she had ever seen.
“A week. I will give you a week; we will have to prepare an alibi. Until then, he must not leave this dormitory by any chance.”

She was risking her neck by allowing that.

Perhaps she should have informed the queen right away but they were children. That child was harmless. It was still a mystery how he got into the palace, most intruders infiltrated hiding under the wagons that entered to the palace with supplies for the royal family and the court; he might have gotten in in the same way, the boy was small enough to pass unnoticed by a distracted guard.

“Your majesty must promise he will eat this time. I will get the table ready in the small salon; do not leave this room until then.”

“Yes, Lady Go. You may go.” She half bowed before leaving the room.

Both kids sat on the carpet on the floor. The older boy stared at the young prince who attempted to communicate with him making gestures while he tried to copy his moves. Jeongguk pointed at himself first.

“I am.” He said and the boy repeated. “Jeongguk. Prince Jeongguk.”

“Gukk. Jeon…gukk.” He mumbled. “Jeongguk.” He achieved it at his third try and smiled brightly at his progress. “Jeongguk!”

Then the prince pointed at him and said slowly. “You…are?”

“Jeongguk.” The boy repeated once again like a parakeet.

“No, I am Jeongguk.” He pointed at himself again and then pointed at him.

In his tribe there wasn’t such a thing as own names; although he understood the concept of having a “name”, sometimes a distant merchant would come with an eccentric name but his family maintained the old tradition of being called after their attributes. So, even if he was called many names, he didn’t have one of his own.

“You don’t have a name?” He shook his head in response. “Oh.”

The prince nervously played with his fingers avoiding the other’s gaze. Then the idea illuminated his face. The younger boy reached for the inkwell, brush, and paper that were always available somewhere in the guest room for visitors who needed to write a letter.

Jeongguk started pressing the wet brush against the paper, making strokes and lines up and down, left to right. The first drawing was detailed enough for a ten-year-old; the prince was especially skilled in drawing and other ways of art with all sorts of tools.

It was the dried cherry tree where he stood the night of his arrival.

“This is a tree. Tree.” He pointed at his drawing and the boy repeated it.

“Tree.” He said and then he translated it into his own tongue and the prince repeated it too.

Lady Go was able to feed both of them without raising suspicion as the younger boy managed to sneak a considerable amount of food from the table. After that, they spent all afternoon until sunset drawing and naming things; after the handmaid got another brush, they both drew their own things.
Although the older boy didn’t have the same ability than the prince, he managed to satisfy his curiosity of the names of certain things.

It was like a game for them, trying to guess what the other was going to draw and learnt the correct words for each thing. They spent the whole week like that, at the second day the prince found the old scrolls he had memorized when he was younger and started to read it to the foreigner, Lady Go had supplied them with some books of Master Young’s library. Jeongguk kept reading fairy tales aloud making the elder awe with every new story. Step by step the language barrier was starting to crack.

After a few days, the older boy was able to say short sentences in the common tongue, even started to learn some manners imitating his younger friend. Now he could tell Jeongguk which color the sky was or if he liked the food and probably his favorite thing, requesting for a song.

“Jeongguk sing to me!”

He would insistently beg for the younger’s sweet voice, through the melodies he was also able to memorized words more easily. Lady Go was surprised at their progress while she was busy hiding the fact that the prince didn’t leave the room from dawn to sunset. She wisely alleged to the cold weather and how the prince didn’t like to go outside during this season; that was enough for the queen for a few days and what seemed like a week quickly extended to two.

Although, something they kept as a secret even from Lady Go happened during the first days. Jeongguk drew a beautiful blue magpie and as he had done before he pointed at his drawing waiting for the other boy’s answer.

“Bird.” Jeongguk said.

“Bird.”

The other boy repeated the word but instead of translating the word, he showed his hidden talent, in front of the prince’s eyes, his body shrugged and his skin was covered in black, white and blue feathers, just like the drawing. He had a beak and small black claws and stared at Jeongguk expectant.

“Whoa.” Was all what he was able to say. “That… how…” He blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes with his hands.

He didn’t forget about the episode in the garden the first day but it was too incredible to be true. The prince even started to believe in Lady Go’s story about him being an outsider, it made him feel he was dreaming but then he wasn’t. He was right in front of the shapeshifter that travelled through a portal during the solstice.

The older boy didn’t stay longer like a bird. He transformed right back while holding a wide smile.

“How did you do that?” The prince was still holding a surprised expression.

“I… animals…” The boy wasn’t capable of explaining it even if the right words existed.

Then he reached one of their previous drawings, a green frog and without the minimum effort he reduced his size again and became completely green and sticky. Then he jumped to the prince’s lap making him hold his breath for an instant.

He transformed again and giggling hugged the prince who was still trying to understand what just happened.
“You are cute.” The boy displayed a squared smile.

To be fair, even though ‘cute’ was the only adjective along with ‘pretty’ he knew in the common tongue, he really meant it.

The young prince was still processing what he just saw. Indeed, he hadn’t dreamed it the first time. That intruder wasn’t an intruder, it was a magical creature that had cross paths with him. Many tales were told about magic creatures but in most of the old women’s stories those were hideous and scary—and most of the time were used to make Jeongguk sleep at night but he… he wasn’t evil or vicious and definitely wasn’t dangerous.

But others wouldn’t understand it and the heir knew that. His people had strong beliefs and strange elements, outsiders were always considered as threatens. He had heard the whispers of the countless horrors brought by wars and had learnt what humans were capable of.

“Listen, you can’t show this to anyone. Only to me, only Jeongguk. Nobody else can see you changing.” The prince firmly grabbed the boy from his shoulders. “Just Jeongguk.”

Somehow the boy understood. The prince was deadly worried and his emotions were easier to read than his words. He wouldn’t metamorphose whenever someone else was around, not even Lady Go. But also, the younger was more than curious about his new friend’s ability.

During the times they were alone, the elder would put a show for him. Showing all the animals he had ever seen in the desert and trying to replicate some of the drawings of the younger boy. In one occasion he tried to copy a dragon from one of the embroidery tapestries hanged on the walls but one of his abilities limitations was the fact that he couldn’t change into a mythological creature unless of course, he could see it in person.

The other flaw of his gift was that after spending several hours as any animal would tire him and even might drop him unconscious if he wasn’t careful. Followed by that, he would return to his human until he had some rest and has his energy back.

All those things he had discovered with the years, even a big power always comes with its limitations. His mother had found him more than once sleeping for days before recovering for spending too much time turned. Often would get scolded but as time passed by, he had learnt read the signs that his body was giving him if his body started shaking and his eyes twitching there was a good chance he was running out of power.

The handmaid had kept the secret. But she knew sooner or later bad viper tongues would speak, and she would have to be ready for that, couldn’t just justify the prince’s friendship as a mere whim if she wanted the boy staying in the palace for a longer time. She could intercept for him once he had learnt more of the local manners and customs in order to stand out the least possible.

It was a madman’s idea and she knew it, there wasn’t in history any register of an outsider orphan living in the same environment as a prince. The queen might as well decide to curtail her head off along with that child’s, the risks were bigger than hopes but when she saw the heir interacting with someone who wasn’t part of the court, someone who didn’t hold any resentment due his royal roots, someone of his own age… she had to try. Give them that little hope she had.

Lady Go was clever; she had managed to bring clean clothes for their visitor and even sneak him to the prince’s baths to clean him and disentangle his long brown hair, finding feathers and beads she had never seen before. As the boy was progressing with the use of the language he would start little
chats with the maid, he was talkative even if sometimes couldn’t find the right words, he would gesture in a mimic dialogue or represent words through similar sounds.

When he was with the prince, nevertheless, his highness would act as his unofficial translator. He was the only one able to understand what the boy wanted to say even if he didn’t speak any word in the common tongue. He connected his ideas even if the boy used half sentences; somehow he knew exactly what he was thinking.

As Lady Go watched them together she knew something must’ve been done.

V

Snow falls

He was a curious as any eleven years old kid. Sitting on his room during the nights when sleep couldn’t catch him, he stared at the half-moon shining outside. Was that sky the same he had seen in the desert? It didn’t look the same to his eyes but there was something familiar on the way stars shone here and there. The cold wind blew whistling through the threes of the garden.

The temperature was getting lower every day, any of those nights it could start snowing. Or that’s what Jeongguk had said; he didn’t know quite well what snow was as there was no ice back home. Strange new words came every day.

Winter was a season that went unnoticed in the desert. They knew the cold weather arrived when the nights came faster and the days were shorter. Unlike the other side of the portal where the cold was noticeable as soon as it knocked the doors of the palace, the winter he knew was gentle.

The boy couldn’t conceal sleep anymore, he was wide awake. As far as he knew, Jeongguk and everyone else was sleeping, and the young prince’s room wasn’t far from his own. He took a glimpse outside the hallway before opening the doors of his bedroom, as soon as he placed a step outside, he turned into a tiny white mice, almost invisible.

Then he ran unnoticed through the hallways, as he walked past the rooms, he used his smell sense to locate the heir who was lying comfortably on his large bed. Quickly he found a small hole in one of the walls; he successfully crawled through the tight entrance and approached to the prince’s bed. The boy suddenly changed into his human form again and climbed to the bed where the younger was sleeping like a log. As he got closer he could hear the sound of his breaths coming from his nose, he made more noises than some animals.

His plan was to wake him up to play together, but as he saw the young prince resting so comfortably, the slumber returned stronger than ever. Perhaps it was the warmness coming of his blanket, for a child born during the hottest season he didn’t know what the cold was until he went through the portal and as well, he didn’t know what was like missing the warmth of the sun.

In that cold night, Jeongguk was a warm oasis.

The young prince was known for having such a heavy sleep but when a pair of cold feet touched his calves under the blanket he almost screamed due to the sudden contact and temperature contrast. Then he saw the giggly face of his friend under the cloth even without any light in the room.

“Yay!” He whispered. “Your feet are cold… what are you doing here?”

“I’m cold.” The elder buried his face on Jeongguk’s robe as he accommodated next to him.
“Yes, I have noticed.” Nothing on his words indicated he was kicking him out. “You can stay for a moment but then go back to your room. Do you understand?”

“Yes… but I’m cold there.”

The younger turned around to face him. The boy with candent skin hid a rectangular grin covering his face with his hands.

“Fine, you can stay but no one can see you. Otherwise, it will be bad for both of us. I mean real trouble.”

The elder nodded enthusiastically and the prince turned to his right again. As soon as he did that he could feel the boy’s arms and legs tangling around his body prisoning him in a hug.

“Jeongguk sing to me.”

“It’s late. Tomorrow I’ll teach you a new song.”

“Please. Jeongguk sings prettily.” His eyes shone with eager.

The younger sighed deeply and took a breath of air.

“Round, round, go round, Waterwheel, go round… Go round, and call Mr. Sun…”

Both of them fell asleep before they get to the second part.

Early in the morning when Jeongguk woke up the boy with candent skin was no longer next to him. Although what remained was what the older boy had left behind, a little fading trail of warmthness and an empty bed that used not to be so large before. It was like he hadn’t been aware of the spacious room until there was someone else there, someone who now was missing and, at the same time, missed.

Like most of his days, it began with Lady Go opening the doors with both hands, usually finding the heir far gone into the dream land where he was almost untouchable and extremely difficult to reach. Nevertheless, she was still getting surprised every new morning when she found the boy with wide opened eyes abandoning the bed even before she stepped inside.

“Your majesty… are you awake already?”

Lady Go was the servant in charge of taking care of the young prince, she along with some handmaids were responsible for dressing, grooming, feeding and everything in general that involved etiquette and manners the heir had to acknowledge as part of the royal family.

Apart from the ladies of the court, he had writing and calligraphy lessons with the old wise masters along with the studies of geography, astronomy and, when he’d reach certain age, war art. Until the day arrived as happened with his older brothers, he would fulfill that time with other activities such as painting, drawing and playing an instrument of his choice.

As a prince, he had his responsibilities set from the moment he was born, even though he was third in the succession line of the throne, as part of the heirs of the Jeon dynasty there were disciplines he had to learn, even against his will.

During the coldest season, the prince couldn’t escape from his duties and lessons. For this reason,
right after sharing breakfast with his friend he had to run from one wing of the palace to the other in order to fulfill the obligations his title demanded.

He knew the sooner he finished with his tasks the sooner he would meet the boy with the magic of the animals again. That’s why those days the younger showed a special eagerness in every activity he was imposed to do. Not complaining even once when he had the chance, his whining was just a waste of the time he could use playing, drawing or even singing.

The other boy spent lonely mornings and part of his afternoons locked in a room on his own. Somedays when she had no further obligations, Lady Go will join him and tell him stories while brushing his long mane as they waited for the prince to come back.

That day, however, against the tide and all schedules, was different.

The prince was walking his way down the hallway when one of the maids opened the door that led to one of many hidden gardens. He couldn’t escape of the glacial whiteness reflected on his eyes as they started glimmering at the sight of the icy carpet extended over the entrance.

The night before it had snowed.

And that only meant one thing, for a foreigner who had never witnessed the miracle of snow falling from the sky above his head it was an act of magic itself. And as the boy with candent skin had shared his magic with him, this was his opportunity of giving something of his world in return.

Even if he heard Lady Go’s desperate pleas begging him to stop running through the hallways, the young prince wouldn’t until he had thrown open the doors of the boy’s room.

His Highness was always received with a warm squared smile, in part because he was expecting the young heir and in part, because his mouth was already full with a big spoon of rice even when he was supposed to wait for his company to start eating.

During the first days sharing meals with the prince was as messy as it was comical. As the weeks passed by he had become better with the use of cutlery but it was hard to forget that he almost plucked one of his eyes out with a chopstick the first time they sat together on a table.

“Jeongguk!” He greeted.

“Let’s go! It’s snowing!” He grabbed his wrist and dragged him out of the room.

“But food…” The boy cried out as he was separate of his precious morning meal.

“We can have breakfast later, you have to see this. Let’s go!”

The excitement of his voice echoed on the hallways while their steps resonated on the wooden boards. Jeongguk found their way to the internal garden where the shapeshifter had appeared the first time. This was a completely different scenario than he had seen when passed through the portal on the pond.

The sky was tinted of the lightest shade of grey as little snowflakes fell from its clouds. The trees around the water where he had seated once as a bird were now completely naked and its dark trunks contrasted with the radiant landscape. The water where the fishes used to move frenetically were now calmed as the winter had casted a spell on them not allowing any move.

Everything was covered in white, a color that was strange in the desert. But strange didn’t mean it wasn’t beautiful, it was unknown, it was rare. His eyes sparkled with a brand new shine as he had to
rub them a few times before believing it was not a dream.

Neither of them was properly dressed for the occasion, snow was an important guest that required certain dress code but in the rush of the moment, the best gowns were forgotten. Same happened with their coats, Jeongguk was at least dressed with more than one layer of cloth, the older boy was still on his thin sleeping robe and barefoot, he definitely was the least prepared to face the cold weather but that didn’t stop him from smiling as he touched the surface for the first time.

“This… snow?” Was the first question he formulated after he buried his fingers on the granulated and moist texture. “It’s cold.” He confirmed with a bright smile on his face.

The astonishment of his eyes was the same he had had the first time he saw a butterfly as a toddler, the same he had the first time he had turned into an eagle at the age of seven and the same the first time he had listened Jeongguk singing just a few weeks ago.

The attack came in a spherical and compacted shape that hit directly onto his face. Without understanding much of what was going on he fell under an ambush that the little prince and his invisible army were leading. It took a few more attacks until he was able to catch up and fight back.

When Lady Go arrived at the scene, both of them were shaking, wet and cold. A pair of lips of purple shades and giggling faces that didn’t regret a thing, not even after being scolded and sent straight to take a warm bath to recover the temperature.

At the young age of eleven years, he had seen the world around him with deep admiration, holding and saving every memory as a precious treasure. He didn’t know but if he would have been still on the desert that would be the day of his twelfth birthday. And Jeongguk –without even knowing- had given him the most amazing gift ever, a universe covered in white, snow.

VI

A Name of his Own

A month had passed just like a fugue wind. The older boy kept crawling to the prince’s bed every night, looking for a lullaby and a warm embrace that helped him sleeping. He didn’t speak like a native but was close; every day that passed he would use less of his mother tongue and more of the common instead. Jeongguk had discovered that the foreigner –who now was less and less an outsider- was indeed a chatterbox in any language.

He had told the prince the most magnificent stories that sounded more and more like fantasies. Tales of moving dunes made of sand, diverse and colorful animals and plants, about flying in a flock and swimming in lakes no men could measure to know how deep they were. His stories were more entertaining than the scrolls the masters brought for him; often songs were now paid with stories as the boy was able to expatiate with words.

Jeongguk was more than curious about his life on the other side of the portal, he dreamt about the warmth of the desert where days were longer during the hottest seasons, where people ate with their hands, where parents were affectionate with their children and where there were no such thing as titles that ruled men beyond their senses.

“Don’t you miss it… the life in the desert?” He asked one particular sleepless night when after three stories the prince couldn’t conceal sleep.

The heir was facing the shapeshifter who stopped his story after the younger questioned him. The
The boy thought about it for a minute.

“I miss my mom and… other things. The sunlight on my skin, the water… my home.”

He didn’t talk much about it that night but even if he missed all those things he wasn’t sure if he was going to be able of going back, the idea of never returning home was certainly scaring for a twelve years old boy but his life on that side of the portal made him happy as well. Even during those long mornings when the prince had to take care of his duties, he would wait for his comeback as if they had been separated for ages and not hours.

Although there was one matter that Jeongguk couldn’t comprehend entirely, how couldn’t he have a name of his own? For the elder it didn’t seem like a big matter, he tried to explain it to the young heir several times but he kept insisting it was something everyone should have, at least while he was on his world.

“You give me a name.” The boy sentenced.

He would gladly accept any name the younger gave to him.

“It’s not that simple. It has to be something special. Uh… let me think.” The young heir complained.

He gave a lot of thought to it. The prince researched and consulted with the ancient masters about names’ etymology, spent a lot of sleepless nights watching the other boy sleeping, thinking about a name that would suit him better but couldn’t find something that fit him.

His friend needed a name better than ‘shapeshifter’, something resplendent, bright as he was; easy to carry and at the same time, it had to be remarkable enough as his own nature.

As days went by he thought he might have figured out something.

*Kim.*

His name had to be Kim.

Kim meant gold. Something precious and shining just like him.

Many men he respected were named Kim, generals, astronomies even kings.

Jeongguk was happy with his progress; at least he had one part of the matter solved. Now he only needed the second part, the way he would refer to him.

Just as another morning he woke up ready to have breakfast with him. The name thing still floating among his thoughts, Lady Go didn’t return when she had said she was going to set the table so he went a step ahead and walked towards his room.

The wooden boards announced every step he was getting closer. Snow kept falling outside; the wise old men announced a heavy storm would hit them any day soon at the pace blizzards approached.

The younger boy kept fantasizing about the days where the hot temperatures would return, he could
show his friend the gardens of the palace, the forest near the lake and all the animals that lived on his kingdom. He knew some places to brag about, even if he was a prince who couldn’t spend much time outside.

The idea made him smile. Perhaps that day they could do some drawings and he would tell him about his favorite place under the cherry blossoms. There were hundreds of possibilities.

Except for that time when he opened the doors and found a scene, he had been afraid of for a long time.

One of the guards apprehending the boy and Lady Go with him.

His blood freeze as the snow that kept falling outside.

“How long has he been here?” The queen inquired. Her voice denoted her characteristic solemnity, one people around knew it was better to be afraid of.

Her royal majesty Queen Soo, second wife of the king and Jeongguk’s mother. The queen had an elegant beauty that was envious all over the kingdoms, with her long swan neck and sparkly doe eyes that she had inherited to her son, clear skin, high cheekbones and a smile that was rare to appreciate those days. Her winter gown was marvelously decorated with embroidered flowers and a large ornament on her head tangled with her black shiny hair in a position of what symbolized a crown she didn’t need to wear to be recognized as who she was.

She was sitting in the middle of the room and two of her loyal servants were next to her, Lady Go was right in front, still on her knees barely looking up.

“He was found three days ago, your grace.” She began lying. “He passed through the walls hiding under the supply wagons and the prince met him when he fainted on the garden. As his Highness has a generous soul he asked me to take care of him until he was strong enough to find his family. Although from what I heard, he is an orphan.”

Lady Go had planned the plot on her head, ready for that moment, but her hands still trembled with every glance the queen directed towards her. She knew the days the wagons entered the palace well enough to make the alibi match with the dates, otherwise, it would have been suspicious.

“How long has he been here for three days and you waited this long to tell me, Lady Go?” Her voice was accusatory, demanded an answer the maid couldn’t give without infuriating her.

“My apologies, your grace.” She lowered her bow until her forehead touched the floor. “It was the prince’s request to wait until the child was healthier to explain his situation.”

“There is no a situation to talk about. He is an intruder and a low caste orphan, he does not belong here. You have listened to a ten years old’s request instead of concurring directly to my person.”

“I am aware, your highness. That is why I am begging for your forgiveness and protection towards this particular child, to whom the prince has developed a special affection close to a friendship.”

“Friendship? That is nonsensical.” She sniggered. “Who were the guards in charge of protecting the fences that day?”

One of the handmaids whispered something to the queen. Lady Go gulped, unsure if there was something else she could do.
“I beg you, your majesty.” Her voice cracked.

“Raise your head Lady Go.” The woman demanded. “I have had enough of your pleading.”

The queen was sitting on her wood chair, upholstery covering all the walls and paper windows fluttering due to the strong winds that made trees bend.

“I have come to a decision. You must learn the value of honesty Lady Go, and careful because there would not be new opportunities for you. Nevertheless, your services are still required since it will take several years of training to find someone as efficient as yourself.”

Perhaps there was a bit of hope for them, the queen’s tone was consistent yet calm. Notwithstanding, she remained undaunted while dictating her orders word by word as if they were the minimal she could do.

“Make hang the guards who were in charge. Ten lashes for Lady Go and her disobedience and I am being generous with you.” Her stare was cold as the frost. “In regards of the child, send him outside as soon as possible. No one else must know about this intromission as if forcing the entrance of the palace was a matter of dismissing.”

“Your Highness, please, forgive the child’s life… I could take charge for him. I... can take any punishment you consider for me. Please, he would be taken as an apprentice; he’s clever and caring, please...”

“He had come to become acquaintance the prince more than anyone beyond those walls should. Knowledge is dangerous and that is the last thing I will say about this matter. I will not listen to any complaint from now on. If another word comes from your mouth I will order to get your tongue cut off.”

Lady Go silently sobbed as the queen abandoned the room.

She had taken the risk too far, she knew she had to send the child far away in order to protect him and she failed.

Now he was under custody and she’d have to explain that to the little prince.

The look on his face broke her heart into a million pieces.

“But… but why? Lady Go! I have to speak to her, I can convince her… I have to… there must be something I can do. Lady Go, please tell me there’s something I can do.” His cheeks were wet and his eyes red and swollen.

Lady Go hugged him. “I am sorry my child. I should have insisted more, I wish I had.”

She wanted to say something hopeful as that he was going to survive well by himself but he was a little child. The chances were scarce and she couldn’t lie to him to make him feel better even if she wanted to.

It was night time already and the young prince knew what that meant. The gates were going to be open and he was going to be outside by himself. The kid that had been scared of being alone and cried until he sang for him. The one he could proudly call his friend.

There had to be something he could do.

He broke Lady Go’s hug and ran as his own life was on risk.
Burst into the queen’s chamber unannounced was considered as a sign of disrespect itself but bursting into her chamber clamming for something that was already sorted…

It was a deaf moment where the only thing that could be heard was the sound of the queen’s hand slapping him stronger enough to leave a bruise and a thin line on his left cheek bleeding due to one of her sharp rings.

“*Behave yourself as what you are.*” Was the only thing she said while the tears fell down his face. The anger on her voice was more than tangible.

She spoke with one of her servants. “Heal him, princes cannot have scars.”

But the prince refused to be escorted back. He walked directly to his room and locked himself in knowing every second it passed the boy with candent skin was out somewhere on his own.

“He won’t listen, Lady Go. The queen had spoken and we must heal his wound.”

“I will take care. That’s it for now, Lady Myung.”

Lady Go opened the doors just to find an empty room.

The guards couldn’t release him so far from the palace. As he sneaked out of his room he could still see the bodies of the men who were hanging with strong ropes around their necks. People who died under his mother’s commands, he couldn’t lose anyone else because of her.

His cheek was still aching and the snow that fell wasn’t as beautiful as the one he had known his entire life, this blizzard was vicious and merciless. His steps sink deeper and deeper as he walked further infiltrating into the woods. The last fading trace of sunlight disappeared on the horizon.

The words escaped from his mouth before he knew what name to call for.

“*Taehyung! Taehyung! Where are you?! Taehyung!*”

Taehyung was his name. It tickled his tongue saying it the first time but he needed a name to claim for if it was the case, a name to cry for.

“It’s me! It's Jeongguk! Taehyung! Where are you?!”

He had been exiled just an hour ago, the prince had heard the gates opening, he had to be close somewhere near there, the woods where his safest option. He could spend the night turned into an owl or any other little animal to survive. But knowing Taehyung was alone during the night… that he couldn’t crawl to his bed when he was homesick… it was all new outside, he had to find him.

“Taehyung! Taehyung!” He was running out of breath.

The crooked silhouettes were emerging as scary shadows and horrifying monsters, every little sound could turn into a threatening but under that, every pair of eyes could also be the pair of brown eyes he was looking for under those giant trees.

The wind’s whistle rumbled on his ears, with shaky hands and half closed eyes he was still wandering around, hoping his voice could be heard even in the middle of the most dense snow storm.
What he could hear was the unmistakable howling of the owners of the night, the wolves that came out to hunt as soon as the light was gone.

He had to find Taehyung and comeback now more than ever. The steps on the snow were getting more numerous and the shadows were now multiplying and yellow eyes as well.

“Taehyung…”

The words that came after that were caught on his throat as he was getting surrounded by a big pack of wolves. The only light he had was the suffering moonlight but even under that tenuous glow, several sets of sharp teeth and claws could be seen. Their hot breathing spread out like the smoke of a moribund bonfire ascending to the sky, they just needed the smallest sign to attack.

His heart stopped at the sight of all those pairs of eyes staring right at him, tongues gloating waiting for a piece of his tender skin. Weeks of starving made their instincts more animalistic than ever and their anxious moves rougher.

The prince felt he had a bird trapped inside his ribs, fluttering and scared to death as he was as one of the biggest, most corpulent wolves advanced towards his direction, trapping him against a dry trunk.

He closed his eyes letting a single teardrop fall down his cheek.

That was before another wolf appeared on the scene taking place in front of him, one that unlike the others had brown eyes and confronted the pack on his behalf.

The boy with candent skin didn’t understand the situation. When he was kicked out of the palace his possibilities were reduced but he knew he had to come back somehow. The guards left him on his own near the forest but even if he could turn into any animal he spotted, he couldn’t stay in the wild forever.

The sun was already escaping and with it, his last chance to find refuge.

He turned into a tiny owl and accommodated into a hollow tree to wait for its return early in the morning, perhaps then he was going to be able to locate the palace again. His heart was sad because he missed the prince like bees missed flowers in autumn. And again, he was in a strange place alone, was that what he was looking for when he left the tribe?

Then he heard it, in the distance, carried by the wind. A soft whisper almost inaudible.

“Taehyung.”

Was a word full of familiarity even if that was the first time he had ever heard it. He looked around because he thought he had recognized that voice, maybe it was just the sound of the branches clashing together but he heard it again.

“Taehyung!”

He felt an uncontrollable impulse of following that voice, he was being called and he knew the owner of that voice. He flew nimbly through the trees avoiding any obstacle he came across. The prince was nearby and if he was alone in the woods it meant he was in great danger, that was the hour beasts came out to play.

“Taehyung.” This time it came in form of a whisper.
He was getting closer.

By the time he found him, the younger was completely surrounded by a wolf pack.

The boy plummeted down and, in the halfway, changed his shape imitating the wolves’ appearance, their fur, their claws, their teeth, their howling, and their ferocity. Soon enough, he was just like them and just in time to interpose on their way to the prince.

The wolf boy growled even if another six ferocious animals were in front of him. However, wolves moved in packs and every pack had its leader, usually the most formidable of them all and this one was ready to pick a fight for their prey.

He knew there was no way of getting out of there without a battle so he gave the first strike straight to the strongest wolf’s neck. Bites and scratches in an entangled dispute that could only have one victor. The wolves were fighting to survive; he was fighting to save someone.

The cry of the loser wolf was a soulless sound in the void of the woods. As the leader was done, others tried to face him unsuccessfully until there was no contender standing; the creatures disappeared in the dark like sorrows of the night.

The boy was exhausted to the point he couldn’t hold the transformation anymore. He came back to his wounded human form while his chest moved rhythmically up and down. He turned around to face a pale Jeongguk whose eyes were open wide as he was still shocked.

“You called me.” The boy with candent skin said.

“Taehyung.” He answered in a low mumble. “Your name is Taehyung and you… saved my life.”

Taehyung smiled and a trail of blood ran down his chin before collapsing on the cold snow.

Taehyung was heavier than he looked like, longer than him and in result harder to hold on his back. The young prince could spot the palace’s gates in the distance as they got closer, just a few more meters and they would be there.

His body was cold and numbed, his mouth was purple and his teeth chattered more and more with every centimeter they walked. They were like a stain in the middle of the white canvas snow was, with the dawn at their heels; home was just around the corner.

“We are home, Taehyung.” The prince announced as he stepped in front of the gates. Several guards had spotted them already.

And then his eyes closed falling into the darkness and the mysteries of that night.

VII

Royal Matters

“Do you understand the gravity of what you have done, Jeongguk?”

The prince gulped but nodded in response. “Yes, father. I understand.”

Jeongguk was standing in the middle of the throne room where he had no place to hide, right in the
spotlight. In front of him, the detailed but yet incredibly uncomfortable wooden chair his father sat where he dealt with important matters, royal matters. The place was covered in the finest tapestry and lamps hanging from the roof with gold borders and elaborated fabrics with embroidered power symbols, tigers and dragons.

“You could have died in the woods with no companion. It was an imprudent act.”

The king had requested a private meeting just the two of them. No advisors, no queens, no handmaids serving tea, no princes or princesses asking what happened, just his father and him. That didn’t make things easier, even if he didn’t have the queen’s icy glare; he had a vocal range that would make grown-up men shiver and every word he dictated was another dreadful step closer to a sentence.

The man in charge of ruling the kingdom had to handle all kind of troubles every day, invasions and famines, politic alliances and other current affairs related to the wellness of his people but he still had the curiosity to inquire into what had the palace murmuring in the shadows.

The sovereign was known for his patience and wisdom, both qualities he inculcated on his descendants. The years had been generous with his health, it was expected his reign to be lasting. A few white hairs were now visible and the wrinkles of his eyes were starting to get more pronounced as the years went by. Father and son shared the nose as their distinctive trait, along with an identical mole right under their lower lips, although his factions were rough and his skin was hardened by the sun unlike the prince’s soft and still chubby child features.

“I cannot understand why you did something this dangerous to save an ordinary burglar.”

“Father, I can assure you Taehyung is nothing like ordinary and nothing like a burglar. Yes, he propounded the walls of the palace but he was not trying to steal anything. Where he comes from, people do not need to take goods from others like that.”

“And where does he come from?”

The prince bit his plumped bottom lip while considering his answer.

“Father, did I ever lie to you?”

This question astonished the king who didn’t expect his question was avoided by any chance.

The third prince was known for his sincerity; even in the most trivial matters, he would never lie to anyone, not even once. For the short life of a ten years old not lying might not seems as a lifetime’s achievement but he had succeeded where others had failed, his brothers had lied about simple things, blaming each other for breaking vases or starting brawls, however in the moment of the truth, Jeongguk always had the last word as prince of candor.

“You have not.” He gave his son the reason.

“If I told you...” He took a deep breath before cutting the distance between that intimidating chair and him.

He whispered on the king’s ear while the monarch listened carefully to every word of his fantastic tale. The man couldn’t help but laughing off his story, it was too marvelous to be true, something that could come out the imagination of a little child and definitely could’ve been invented after hearing some maids’ tales.

“Is that true?” The king asked.
“I swear on my heart is the truth. I would not lie to you, father.”

The king stroked his hair, obviously, he hadn’t believed and the prince knew that.

“He saved my life. Allow him to stay in the palace, I beg you. I won’t ask for anything else while I live.” The boy kneeled on the floor in front of him, completely lowering his head without hesitation.

“Stand up, son. No prince or king should ever kneel.”

“I won’t until you allow him in the palace, if you send him outside again I will go after him, again and again, no matter how many times I have to freeze in the snow.”

The look on the king’s face burnt almost as much as the little-unhealed wound on his cheek, by the time, the scar was unavoidable.

The king remained summited in a long lasting silence that felt like an eternity.

Right at the moment when the man in the throne was about to speak and break the little boy’s heart, the prince lifted his head one more time with his last hope reflected on his eyes that were loaded with tears.

“I have taken a decision already.” The king spoke out.

The prince held his breath.

“As long as you stay out of trouble, he can stay.” He granted his son the only thing he had ever wished with his whole heart, and the monarch was aware of that. “As Lady Go has suggested one of the masters might want to take him under his wing and make him his apprentice.”

The prince’s watery eyes were full of light he couldn’t hide his lips curling into a smile as he thanked his father not once but a million times. As soon as the kid abandoned the room trying his best not to run through the hallways, his majesty chuckled and shook his head.

The prince was full of joy.

Nevertheless, that was the first and the only time he had ever lied to his father.

Lady Go was waiting outside the room with her still inflamed hands, body part where she had received the lashes without complaining or sharing a tear. Worse was the pain on her heart of knowing she couldn’t do anything to save that boy who smiled so candidly, worse was the punishment the guards had to face due to her lie and those deaths were going to be recorded on her memory for the rest of her life.

The young heir closed the door behind him. He had a few tears running down his cheeks but his face was glowing with joy. Just then Lady Go could sigh of relief. And incredibly heavyweight was taken off her shoulders in seconds.

“How’s him?” Jeongguk asked while they walked through the hallways holding and balancing his hands with the maid of the court.

“Just a light fever due to the effort. I used a snow compress on his forehead and he squirmed a little but that was it. It’s you the one who I am worried about, your highness, you have not slept properly yet.”
At the mention of sleep, the prince unconsciously yawned.

“I’ll just make sure Taehyung’s okay and then I’ll go to sleep, I promise.”

“Taehyung?” The handmaid asked with curiosity.

“That’s his name. Kim Taehyung.”

“Kim Taehyung.” She repeated. “You were finally able to discover it.”

The young boy nodded with a smile on his face. He opened the already familiar door and saw his friend resting, still covered in some scratches from the previous night and with the white cloth on top of his forehead placating the fever, the same boy with radiant tan skin and dark brown long hair.

A pair of eyes explored the room until he located the prince’s stare.

Two pairs of eyes twinkled like shooting stars.

VIII

Flower buds

“Are you sure is this way?” Taehyung asked without letting go the sleeve of his white robe.

He had spent two weeks locked inside while recovering. For obvious reasons, the elder had been transferred into a different wing of the palace, to one where most of the eunuchs and wise men resided, after all, it was on the king’s hope he would become one of them one day and that had come to the insurance he had given to the queen when she claimed for his total removal from their lands.

No matter how distantly the place where the shapeshifter was sent, as long as he was still on the domains of the palace, Jeongguk was going to find him. Compass work, they’d meet somewhere. The queen would often show her displeasure about their encounters but not much after Taehyung established inside the palace, it was announced her majesty was expecting another prince or princess in a few months.

In such state and, considering Jeongguk’s pregnancy had been difficult enough, she remained most of her time inside in company of her maids, although she always had one or two little birds who would inform her of the prince’s activities. He managed to meet his obligations in order to avoid any kind of punishment she would consider, never late for his lessons but without spending more time than necessary on them. The rest of the time it was his; that was the deal.

“I am. And you promised you won’t cheat, we have to get away from here without using your powers. Just don’t separate from me.”

They were standing in the centric part of the palace, where the squared shape labyrinth made of leafy bushes covered with a white top coat was. Not even a little branch out of place, people in charge of that task knew how to keep it perfectly the whole year.

“Father told me a secret once; you have to follow the border of one wall… This way!”

Taehyung kept giggling no matter how many times they had turned into the wrong direction. The prince was grimly determined to find the way out without any other help besides his own instincts.

“And… here!” Jeongguk thought he had found the exit or that they had ended in another dead end,
instead, he bumped into someone.

He was taller, bigger in every than last time Jeongguk had seen him back during autumn days when he and one of his sisters had traveled to visit distant lands, learn the manners and sympathize with another king.

“Hyungnim!” The young prince shouted before hugging him.

The crown prince smiled brightly as he rubbed his head as he had always done since they were children.

Jeongsuk was the eldest son and first in the line of succession, thus he would be the king one day. He had the demeanor of a future monarch in all its splendor, broad shoulders and sharp jawline characteristic of his lineage. After all, they were brothers of the same progenitors. Same doe eyes as Jeongguk, brown as his; although his skin had always been paler and his lips thinner.

The story of the future king’s birth was commented all around the kingdom.

When the current king ascended the throne he was only eighteen years old. He contracted nuptials with the daughter of one of the most influential man’s back in the capital. The wedding was celebrated in style, along with all the ministers and the king’s family; years of prosperity were announced in the nation’s future.

Although, as the years went by there were no heirs for the couple, the counselors were starting to get worried about Queen Hae’s condition, afraid she might even be sterile. For a king, it was important to have a legacy that followed his steps and become the ruler of the kingdom, and in the times they were, many descendants meant more prosperity and better chances for their people.

Unfortunately, at the age of twenty-five, seven years after the appointment as king, there were still many rooms empty in such a big palace. Finally one faithful day Queen Hae was confirmed of being expecting a child, the news flew fast and many prayed for the welfare of her pregnancy.

The baby was stillbirthed.

It was a sad autumn day for everyone in the kingdom, especially for the royal family.

Next spring of the following year, it was announced the daughter of another important family was eligible and qualified to become queen. The advisors celebrated the news and persuaded the king of taking that flower of youth hand’s in marriage.

Jung Soo caught the king’s eye as soon as she walked into the palace. Owner of a unique beauty, only a king would be worthy of her, or that’s what the men next to their majesty had said. In fact, she was a gorgeous lady in full bloom; the monarch didn’t need much proof to recognize her as such.

The second marriage was even more acclaimed than the first. People were enthusiastic after eight years without a royal newborn. The one person who didn’t celebrate the revelation was Queen Hae.

She had been prepared for accepting royal issues like that, she would have to live with the idea of her husband sharing multiple beds in order of having more heirs but no words could cure her envy the day Jung Soo set foot in her domains. Destined to surpass her in everything, beauty, youth, and charms; the first queen became a sour fruit too soon for her age.

Wishing more than ever she was capable of giving birth to a prince as soon as possible, she started to
become more sullen every day. Even the queen mother preferred Queen Soo’s company before hers when she was alive. Everyone was delighted with the new consort.

Warmer days with greener crops and enough rain came with her arrival. In the middle of those joyful days, the second queen started showing her small bulging womb while proudly walking through the gardens of the palace. Queen Soo gave birth a year after her wedding. She not only had given the king a healthy heir, but she also gave the nation a firstborn, their future, Jeongsuk.

Queen Hae got pregnant no longer after that.

She gave birth to a delicate princess named Haewon.

The kingdom was jubilant once again. But the queen knew they didn’t cheer in the same way they had cheered on the prince’s birthday.

A girl who was a princess but not a ruler. Unfairness since the moment she breathed for the first time on that bittersweet world.

Finally, two years after, the first queen brought to life a prince. The one she would believe firmly until her last days was the truthful heir of the throne, Jihun.

Jihun, unlike his older sister, would listen to all his mother complains about why he should rule the kingdom instead of his brother. And one day, he would start to believe it.

Queen Hae was still resentful towards the second queen, her son and the favoritism people had for them. Her own hatred started poisoning her body driving her more insane every year. How the crown prince grew stronger while his own children were skinny and languid on their first days.

Her vicious spirit paled when she heard Queen Soo was pregnant again. It was written on the stars it was going to be another boy. On her head, the idea of that woman stealing the life of her progeny was feasible, seducing the king and the people.

She was consumed by an irrational hate towards an unborn child, such was the case one day she completely lost her mind when she saw the other queen walking with her watermelon shaped stomach in the garden while she displayed her pearled smile to the king.

She was blind with anger, waiting until the king said his goodbyes to grab the jade pin she had on her black silky hair and walked determined, directly where they were. Roughly, while her dark eyes full of irascibility sparked, she nailed the sharp object on the queen’s shoulder unleashing the first stab. When she pulled out the needle, blood started gushing from the wound and Queen Soo howled hysterically.

Soon the guards were surrounding the scene but they couldn’t stop Queen Hae soon enough to prevent her from stabbing the prominent womb although the queen screamed and fought back to prevent she could harm her baby. Soo held her hands against her stomach crying out for help and trying desperately not to fall on her knees.

When the king succored to the scene he saw his dear wife bleeding to death in hands of her maids and the guards who were carrying her inside while one of them ran searching for the doctor. Queen Hae freed herself from the guard’s grip and fled as fast as she could. The king ordered her immediate capture and followed the retinue around Queen Soo.

Queen Hae was found deep inside the labyrinth with her throat shattered and thick blood covering her corpse; her lifeless white eyes were still open. Her madness took over her body and guided her to her own destruction.
Queen Soo went into preterm labor and a miracle happened. The baby was born alive and intact. His mother was on the limit of her capacity but she resisted, her skin was in an ill yellowish tone and she had lost too much blood but she survived somehow.

From that day on, she would lose part of her light. Condemned to be paranoid even during daytime but mainly during long nights where nightmares would often come to haunt her. Protective towards her family and reluctant towards strangers, her youthful smile was forever erased.

That was the day Jeongguk was born, in the middle of the destruction and tragedy, like a rose from a bush of thorns, the third prince who overcame the death and came to the world crying as every human does.

Because we all overcome the world somehow, even if it’s during our weakest hours. No, especially during our weakest hours.

That’s why he was born in adversity just to raise up beyond the sky’s limits.

“You shouldn’t be playing here,” Jeongsuk said. “and who are you?” He looked at Taehyung who hid behind the prince’s robe.

“He’s Taehyung, he’s my friend.” Jeongguk introduced the future king to the shapeshifter.

“Hello Taehyung, my name is Jeongsuk, I’m Jeongguk’s oldest brother.” The boy with candent skin waved towards his direction, still hidden behind the younger. “Let’s go inside and drink some tea, Haewon wants to see you too.”

The boy with candent skin was undeniably happier during warm spring days. Not because he didn’t like winter but because they were able to play outside. During the three months of winter, they spent more time indoors due to the cold weather, sneaking out of the palace on the sunny days when the temperature was bearable enough. But spring, on spring there was no excuse for not playing outside.

Finally, the snow had started melting and the sleeping nature revived with soft tickles of sunlight. Flower buds were more colorful and plump every day, weakened grass reappeared waking up with the dew of the cool mornings and all sort of new creatures peeped out in the gardens of the palace.

Two months hadn’t passed fast enough for them, now that he wasn’t a secret anymore, Taehyung didn’t spend more days alone locked inside his room, instead, he had a new schedule helping Master Young with his animals’ registers. The boy had an especial ability to remember names and characteristics but more important, he had an inexhaustible curiosity of how the world worked only a wise and patient person like Master Young could satisfy.

Often Lady Go found herself giggling of his inexorable questions while she passed next to the room where the Master kept writing letters.

“Master Young, why is the sky blue?”

“Master Young, why is spring called spring?”

“Master Young, what are stars made of?”

“Master Young, what is a king?”
He had a long list going on and with every answer, ten new doubts appeared. Master Young, for his part, was happy someone finally was so eager to listen what he had to say. The little boy was like a sponge absorbing all the new knowledge, the wise old man had taught him among other things, about science, stars and the way monarchy worked, including Jeongguk’s role in it as the third prince. Usually, Taehyung was easy to find as he was sewn to Master Young as a shadow, following through the hallways on his march.

That was until his sparkly eyes met the prince’s.

Jeongguk had to attend his lessons every day. Reciting Confucius’ wisdom about what was expected from a noble to behave was the closest to Chinese torture he had ever known. At least it was for a ten years old who only wanted his spring days to be as youthful as his body.

On one particular afternoon, while sitting on the wooden planks of the corridor that led on to one of the cloisters, he was trying to read a new proverb Master Young had given him when suddenly an unusual red panda casually walked out from inside of the palace.

“Tae?” He chuckled. “What are you doing here?”

The red panda shook its orange body and turned back into a boy.

“Master Young fell asleep. I was bored.”

“I’m studying, Lady Go says we can’t play until I finish.” He puckered his lips into a grimace.

“I will wait.” The elder said not less optimistic.

Tae sat on the edge of the wooden floor and balanced his feet while the younger finished his readings. Although it was hard for the young prince to concentrate with the elder next to him, he kept humming melodies and moving his feet following the rhythm and occasionally if he sneezed due the flowers’ pollen he accidentally turned into a random animal. It was funny to watch how he passed from a large hare to a feathered duck and from a giant wild boar to a delicate butterfly.

It took him a bit longer than what he expected but he memorized the words reluctantly just to play along with his friend. He tapped his shoulder and Taehyung beamed to him making the clouds apart.

“What do you want to do?” The prince asked while sitting next to him.

The elder gave it a thought.

“Tell me a story.” He spoke out.

“Uh… I don’t know many stories.” The younger scratched his head. “But…” His eyes focused on the scattered pile of scrolls and his eyes lighted up as he had an idea. “I can read you my favorite story if you want me to.” The shapeshifter nodded enthusiastically.

The prince had no choice but to start his tale. He searched among the papers for the beautifully illustrated parchment his father had ordered for him when he was five years old. Back then Lady Go was the one who read it for him but as he grew older he was able to understand Hanja and thus to read it. The scroll was yellower and deteriorated but it was still as heavy as he remembered it. He unrolled the first frame of the story, Taehyung sat on the floor next to him. Curiosity shone on his eyes like a couple dark pearls.

“A long time ago.” He began showing the first drawing that included two silhouettes guarding against the skies. “Hwanin the Lord of Heaven lived with his son Hwanung over the clouds where
they could watch everything from above. Hwanung craved ruling on Earth, therefore, his father allowed him to come down along with three thousand followers, including the Guardians of Winds *Pungbaek*, the Rains *Usa*, and Clouds *Unsa*.

They moved to another frame as the prince rolled and unrolled the long sheet. The following showed the long entourage going down through a cotton-like cloud’s path.

“Hwanung and his retinue descended from heaven to a sandalwood *Shindansu*, a divine tree on the peak of Mount Taebaek where he founded *Sinsi*, the “City of God” and became the Heaven King.”

Again they passed to the other scene. The words were written and readable but the boy knew the story by heart already. The younger resumed his narration. He was getting to his favorite part and knew the elder was going to like it as well.

“Near the sandalwood, there were a tiger and a bear living in a cave, they came to the tree every day to pray to Hwanung, their wish was to become humans and they begged him to make it true. The King decided to give them a trial to corroborate they were worth it; for one hundred days they wouldn’t see the daylight and would eat only garlic bulbs and divine mugwort to which both agreed.”

The older boy emitted a big *Oh* while forming a perfect “o” with his mouth. The prince kept unrolling the scroll where both animals were portrayed in the cave after their meeting with the god.

“As the days went by, the tiger started feeling the hunger’s symptoms and impatience caught him with its claws. He abandoned the cave unable to keep his will.” The drawing showed the tiger running away from the cave. Tae couldn’t help but rush the process unrolling the whole scroll.

The drawings were deployed all over the corridor of the cloister.

“Hey! It’s not supposed to be like that! You have to read it part by part, this is what the tale is about!”

Taehyung held an innocent expression and then burst into laughter spreading to the young heir who cackled along until his belly began to hurt. Cicadas were starting to show up to their own scene adding melody to the laugh concert. Now they had to move from frame to frame to follow the story.

“The younger cleared his voice before continuing. “Nevertheless the bear stayed. And as her reward, on the twentieth-first day, the King transformed her into a woman named Ungnyeo.”

The illustration showed the bear passing from its animalistic self into a human being in a way the boy with candent skin felt on his bones. It made him shiver; it made him feel happy knowing he wasn’t the only one. There was written in history, he was just like Ungnyeo somehow. There was a spark dancing on his eyes as he kept staring at the drawing without wanting to pass to the next one.

Jeongguk retook the thread of the story one more time. The prince took the boy’s warm hand and pulled him to the following frame. “Hwangung fell in love with her at first sight and made Ungnyeo his wife. She gave birth to their son to whom they named “Dangun” who became the first king. He founded Gojoseon which means ‘Land of the Morning Calm’. That’s the end.”

Taehyung beamed while the young boy kept rolling up the parchment.

Perhaps that was his favorite story too.
Most days if the shapeshifter was walking behind Master Young he would ignore and drop everything else to run towards the young heir’s direction.

“Jeongguk! Jeongguk!” He would almost tear everything apart just to be by his side. “Can we go play outside?”

The young prince looked at Lady Go with supplicant eyes.

“Not further than the limits you already know. And return before the sun is down, no excuses.” The handmaid said trying to be stricter with the boys; knowingly they didn’t have all the freedom of the world as she wished they had.

She also had scolded the older boy several times about the fact he kept formalities away when talking with the prince. They had to follow a protocol even if he didn’t understand it completely and that included calling the prince by his title or others similar to ‘your grace’, ‘your highness’ among others.

Coming from a place they didn’t use names in the same way they did, Taehyung never got tired of calling Jeongguk by his name. Why calling him ‘your highness’ if he wasn’t older than him? Why calling him ‘your grace’ even if the prince was quite graceful? He had a beautiful name and his lips tickled a bit every time he pronounced it. Back in the days, he wasn’t as fluent as he was now, pronunciation was often a problem, he felt that if he didn’t recite some words daily he would forget how to say them and he didn’t want to forget Jeongguk’s name.

“Thank you, thank you, Lady Go.” Taehyung hugged her as he naturally did with everyone and both kids undertook their way to one garden where they wouldn’t disturb anyone.

“Tae, I can’t see it. Can you reach it?”

It wasn’t the first time they had thrown one of the fabric balls the handmaids made beyond the walls. Jeongguk climbed one tree trying to get a better view but the shapeshifter was one step ahead and had turned himself into a hawk. He easily overflew the walls and spotted the colorful round object in a matter of seconds. Then he grabbed it with his sharp claws creating a tiny cage for it as he transported back, the boy chirped as he dropped the toy back to the prince, making sure he was going to catch it.

“I got it!” He yelled, still climbed on the top of a red pine.

Nature was now on it greenest after a few rainy days. However, the sunlight that dried the sky’s tears also encouraged all the creatures, small or big, to take a step out of their lairs, including two little curious birds.

The tree was a bit taller than what he remembered and the ground seemed too far away from his feet. Jeongguk gulped and held the fabric ball closer to his chest without knowing what branch was steadier and where to step first.

“Jeongguk come down!” Taehyung was a boy again and he was waiting on the base of the trunk for the prince to descend.

“Uh… I think I’m stuck…” There was a hint of fear on his voice. His reluctant gaze traveled all over the tree.
“Wait there.” Was the only thing the elder said.

“Tae?”

The young prince felt the base of the tree trembling and then he saw a few branches full of leaves moving frenetically as a furry head appeared between them. His friend had adopted the form of medium size panda bear who now was staring at him with black marble eyes.

Jeongguk grinned as he stretched his hand to touch his thick fur. The boy turned into a bear buried his cold nose on his cheek tickling the younger that burst into laughter instantly. With no further indication, the prince moved from the branch he was standing and climbed on his back while closing his hands around his neck and adjusting his legs around him as a baby would do with his mother.

Taehyung grabbed the fabric ball with his mouth and without much effort, he climbed down at a slow pace while carrying the young heir on his loin. Jeongguk was more than rapt with this new transformation. Every time his friend chose to use his powers it was a reminder for him of what he was capable and that he hadn’t dreamt it all.

Tae had explained to him he sometimes got tired after being transformed during long time periods but if he changed back fast or stay turned just for an hour or two he wouldn’t be as affected as that day when he spent almost eight hours as a bird. He also told the prince if he was hurt during his transformations it would damage his human form as well, furs al feathers weren’t shields, he had to be careful no matter how big and threatening was the animal he chose to become.

Still, there were days he turned just for fun, like that day. He liked Jeongguk’s amazed expression every time he appeared in a new shape, big and furry, tiny and sticky, light and fast, slow and heavy. No matter how many times he had transformed already, the prince would always be wonderstruck and blinked a few times before mumbling some ‘whoa’ and longs ‘oh’.

But one of the things he liked the most about the prince was that even if he had changed into a giant scary wolf the boy had never been frightening not even once. He had never been afraid of Taehyung’s powers even if he knew he could turn into a beast in any second he wished to, he knew he was incapable of hurting him and under any skin he chose to wear, he was still Taehyung, the boy with candent skin who had crossed through a portal the first cold night of winter.

And Taehyung had turned into something bigger than any animal he had known.

He was now his best friend.

Taehyung changed back to his human form while Jeongguk was still climbed on his back, the younger boy felt upon him while giggling, he was still lighter than the shapeshifter and that meant faster, without losing any minute, he stole the object back from the elder’s hands, taking advantage of his position.

“Come on! Try to take it away from me!” Jeongguk yelled with a smile on his face.

Taehyung didn’t lose more time and run behind the younger while endless laughs floated on the air of the warm vernal day.

“Catch it!” Jeongguk yelled.

“I got it! Now’s your turn!” Taehyung would catch the round object with his hands and throw it back immediately in an endless game that would keep them entertained for hours.
Every pass was further. They had returned back inside the palace but they still had fun on the hallways knowing if some maid caught them they were going to be the ones in trouble. As soon as one of the internal gardens was located they moved there. Sunlight was almost gone; an ombré orange sunset was painted in the sky. However, it was still light enough to play a bit more.

“Tae, Tae! Here!” Once again the shapeshifter was able to capture the ball effortlessly.

The last vestige of clarity was gone; soon they were going to be summited in complete darkness. Just a few more minutes.

“Jeongguk!” He gigged while shooting the toy.

“Ah, you have to throw it further, it’s not fun otherwise.” The young prince insisted. “Like this!”

Jeongguk threw the ball ignoring a pond was behind them. The older boy went ahead and caught it with the tip of his fingers, making tiptoes on the rocks around the pond. It was wet and slippery where his feet were and, with a wrong move, he lost his balance falling directly into the pond making a big splash splatting water all over the dry ground.

The prince laughed at this and rushed towards the water body’s direction to help Tae come to stand up. Only when he was closer to it he realized the waters were completely quiet, no movement, no bubbles in the surface. His face got pale like moon dust.

“Tae! Tae! Taehyung!” Jeongguk called his name over and over again, his thin arms removing water frenetically trying to find him somewhere.

“Your grace, what’s wrong?” Lady Go who was in their search heard the commotion coming from the outside.

“Tae fell on the pond. I can’t find him, Lady Go, help me please!”

“What? Guards! Guards!” She cried for help. “Your grace, please do not fall there too!” She ran towards the pond and quickly jumped in looking for the boy too.

Jeongguk was already crying when the guards arrived, as the minutes went by it was harder to determine the boy’s location if it was necessary they would empty the pond but it was clear he wasn’t there.

The prince’s tears were large enough to refill the pond in a matter of seconds. Lady Go hugged him tightly while he wetted her dress and sobbed louder and louder.

As the moon finally rose, they went back inside against Jeongguk’s wishes, who only wanted to stay there to make sure Taehyung wouldn’t return in the middle of the night.

*He couldn’t just evaporate in the water, could he?*

Nevertheless, they weren’t aware…

That was the day of the summer’s solstice.

IX

*The returned*
It was the sound of the boiling water.

Bubbles on the surface when the frost came back.

The prince attended as fast as he could, almost running over some guards and maids.

Unable to contain his emotions, hoping he hadn’t lost his mind or was daydreaming again. How cruel imagination could be with him?

*He knew*. He knew he wasn’t crazy.

He knew when he'd open the door to the garden, he would be there.

Four brown eyes. Two faces. Six months apart but more like an eternity.

“*Jeongguk!*” Accompanied with a square-shaped smile.

The boy with candent skin waved, soaked hair and cold shaking hands.

*The same Taehyung.*

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**Part 2**

« *My child, I know you're not a child*

*But I still see you running wild*

*Between those flowering trees.*

*Your sparkling dreams, your silver laugh*

*Your wishes to the stars above*

*Are just my memories.*

☼

*And in your eyes the ocean*

*And in your eyes the sea*

*The waters frozen over*

*With your longing to be free. »*

(...)

— Antonia Michaelis, *The Storyteller*

X

*A thousand miles apart…*

Once upon a time, there was a moonlight prince who fell in love with the brightest star although he was never afraid of burning out.
The prince had learnt the one he had named during the most ruthless winter he had ever seen in his short life wasn’t an illusion. He hadn’t drowned when he fell on the hot waters of the pond the first day of summer, instead, he returned to the place he had come from. The desert.

For six months he went through winter and spring all over again. Even if his winter had no point of comparison and no snow falling from the skies, it didn’t mean it wasn’t less perverse. While the young prince’s kingdom was under the heat of sunlight he was under a grey thick personal storm. Something similar happened on the other side of the portal.

Taehyung was at home but… why he was so dismal? Seeing his mother had brought momentary joy to his life. Of course, he missed the familiarity of the desert and everything about it some days but still…

After a while he found himself surrounding the lake, trying to find the violaceous cloud of perfume that had guided him before, seeking for a light, a sign that there was still there, the magic of the hidden portal. He dived on the waters every night he could sneak to the oasis, reaching the bottom, a place where his lungs burnt in flames and his throat cried for air. Despite his efforts, he didn’t go further than that and often ended up frustrated because he couldn’t go back as he wished to.

He didn’t want to believe it but the wise grandma was right: it only happened during the solstice and not in a different date.

The boy with candent skin could have tried to live his old life again but he refused it.

He was Taehyung now. The only on the tribe with a name and not only that.

He had changed more than he had ever changed physically and everyone had witnessed that when he appeared in the middle of the lake wearing exotic clothes and crying for a name no one had heard before. He had learnt a language no one else spoke there and turned into animals that were atypical of their biome. The boy even walked and talked on his native tongue differently, almost like a foreigner.

He had become a foreigner on his own home.

And the differences that made him apart before now were even more emphasized. He wasn’t only the shapeshifter, now he was a traveler who told unbelievable stories of a mythical place somewhere beyond the lake. Non-believers grimaced at the mention of his tales; children opened their eyes widely and tried to learn the songs he sang trying to comprehend as he had done not so long ago. His mother was the one who filled him up with hugs and kisses enough to cover the Earth when he reappeared, by far the happiest person with his return.

Nevertheless, after a few days, the enthusiasm lessened and his stories passed from fresh news to old legends. It was expected him to take his place back but while the fantastic tales he told were just that for the others, it was true for him. A truth he couldn’t erase or forget a truth he knew had happened.

When spring visited them he started counting the days with incessant impatience. He spent most of the time turned; making his body swollen and getting tired enough to sleep until a new day would rise. He had to know if he was going to be able to come back. He had consulted with the old lady who just told him magic worked in mysterious and capricious ways not even she understood.

So he waited, waited for days to run, for the temperature getting hotter until the point it was almost unbearable, waited for a celebration he used to yearn before but for a completely different reason.

Jeongguk.
The name he knew he couldn’t forget but didn’t want to take the risk either. Missing his friend had
pushed him to the limit between imagination and reality, promising to himself everything they had
been through had happened just a few months ago. Now the date of their first meeting was coming
again and the only thing he could do was watch the time fall like leaves.

“My child.” His mother passed her hand through his hair in a tender gesture. “You look tired.”

A guilty feeling invaded his body forming a knot on his stomach.

“I...” The words were caught on his chest.

“You’re going to again, aren’t you?” Her eyes were melancholic but her smile was sincere.

He nodded, unable to meet her eyes.

“And why are you so sad? You told me you liked it there a lot.”

“Mom... aren’t you sad I’m leaving again?”

“My child. I’ve seen you grow up for almost thirteen years and I’ve never seen you happier than
when you spoke about that place you called palace. If that’s the case I can’t keep you away from
coming back, you’d be sorrowful in here and I don’t want that. I missed you with all my heart my
precious sunshine and I’ll miss you dearly but you’ve proved you can come back by yourself. Come
back when you feel like.”

He buried his face and watery eyes on his mother’s lap. Sobbing because he’d miss her as well but
smiling because he knew she was right.

The drums announced the beginning of the celebration.

“You must know…” The old lady told him before he jumped into the lake that night. Just like a year
before she was standing there, ageless wrinkled expression. “Now the portal has been used, it must
keep working in order to exist. Otherwise, it’ll be closed again.”

His face got pale, shining under the moonlight. “That means I have to go and come back every time
if I want both sides to coexist?”

She nodded. “It will be open every summer and winter solstice, be careful. Taehyung.”

She disappeared in the gloom, leaving him half body into the waters.

Taehyung hadn’t had told anyone about his name.

XI

but together at the end

Nefarious were the days where the young prince was on his own. He tended to be cranky and
moody with everyone he came across with. As the years went by even the maids got used to his bad
temper, when the days became hotter the spirit started decreasing. He tried his best to be happy
during those last spring days but he knew as soon as fruit started to grow bigger and colorful the boy
with candent skin would be soon gone for six long months.
Taehyung was aware of the discontent of the young prince, often he tried to lift his mood, after all, it was a bittersweet situation for him. He had found he needed the balance, spending a half year with Jeongguk and the other half back in the desert. For one side, he wanted to go back and see his mother, being at home for a few days perhaps being under the warm sun in the middle of the irrepressible sands but, on the other, he wanted to stay as much as the prince wanted him to.

It was the only way of keeping the portal opened, or that’s what the grandma had said.

Six months—half year—was a long period of time and it seemed to be longer while they were separated. Now almost five years had passed by and none of them could get used to the idea of the boy leaving again that year.

Such was the case, one time they had tried to cross the portal during the solstice together when they were younger, about the third year the shapeshifter visited the heir. What started as a crazy idea strengthened as the warmer days were closer.

It was something reckless and risky at the same time, Jeongguk had never been in the desert and he didn’t know if he was going to like it to begin with, if they were successful he’d have to stay there during six months and, as his friend did once, learn all the ways of surviving on that new environment.

Nevertheless, he was impulsive, rubbing the limits of imprudence sometimes. Not the qualities a prince should’ve had, but the ones he had born with.

That last vernal day both of them were waiting around the pond, according to the elder, there was something that made him sure it was able to cross, *something he saw with more than his senses.*

“That’s how I found you.” He said. “I knew I had to cross before it was gone. It’s not the same when I’m here, there’s no strong impulse that leads me back. Instead, it’s like I hear my mother’s laugh and feel the warmth of her embrace.”

That made the elder smile widely. The memory of his mother always brought back all the warmness of the desert.

“Do you think she’s going to like me? Your mother?”

“She has heard about you. I wish you could meet her, I’m sure she’d love you as if you were my brother.”

There was something on the younger’s stomach, nervousness. Taehyung hadn’t met Jeongguk’s mother in the best terms he could’ve ever imagined. Even after all those years, there was still a bit of resentment towards that uncertain lowborn who always reappeared in the palace. But in all his stories about his tribe, Taehyung’s mother was always a current character, a strong woman but also a tender mother who always had open arms for a hug; somehow it reminded him more of Lady Go than the queen.

There wasn’t a fixed excuse to justify his sudden departure every summer and autumn and his arrival before the first snow fell. Neither Lady Go or Master Young knew what to believe. They were more creative than Jeongguk with their alibis, Taehyung’s presence—or to be more exact, his absence—wasn’t notice by others who weren’t close with Jeongguk, and those who asked for him always received an elusive answer.

Still, the prince had other worries to think about. If they crossed through that portal, it would mean he was going to be as gone as Taehyung was when he vanished during those long months. Lady Go
would be concerned about them; in fact, his disappearance could cost her own life.

Again, they were young, didn’t think much about the consequences of their actions but the immediate actions that would lead to future adventures.

Taehyung told him they had to jump at that moment. Holding his hand as he had done before but this time there was a light tremble that crossed his entire body like breeze. The uncertainty of the moment mixed with the tickle on their fingers, the last sight of sunlight, still hot against their faces at the moment they took a step ahead.

The sound of the water splash disoriented all the prince’s senses. Thought he was gone for a second but then he realized Taehyung had crossed alone, his hand had let go his at one point when he faded through the portal leaving Jeongguk alone, floating on the pond among koi fishes, pink lotuses and the shine of the first stars.

He couldn’t go back with him to the desert; just the shapeshifter could go through those two worlds. Taehyung was gone once again and Jeongguk was still there; it had happened before and they had said their awkward goodbyes too many times but that time, that time the tickles on his hand where Taehyung’s was not long ago hadn’t gone with the boy to the land of hot sands.

The prince held his hand against his chest, his heart was still beating to the beat of the wind, agitated and startling. The voice of a maid interrupted his cloud of thoughts, he forgot he was still lying on the surface of the pond, for a second he considered being on floating on the sky, far away from home.

Six months didn’t pass fast enough.

XII

Wild Horizons

It was during the prince’s sixteenth winter on Earth things started to change.

He wasn’t a child anymore and neither was Taehyung.

But he still behaved like a kid every time Master Young confirmed the solstice was just around the corner. Preparations began weeks in advance, with the years he had to get to know all the elders favorites and he needed time to gather them all, from bergamot and jasmine tea, warm clothes for the moment he crossed the pond, shaking for the cold, all the snacks and sweet treats he adored among other little things the elder was always happy to see again.

“Good morning.” He smiled to Lady Go.

“Your grace is feeling in a good mood today.” She remarked while serving breakfast.

Lady Go hadn’t changed much in the last five years; she remained as the same polite lady who cared fondly for the prince and his friend in extension. Just a few white hairs were visible on her dark hair but her smile was as youthful as when she was the prince’s age. The prince was almost taller than her nowadays, counting every centimeter he gained trying to grow up faster.

“I am. Taehyung will be here soon.”

“Where is he the rest of the year? I never seem to understand how you know exactly when he’ll be back.”
“I’ve told you already, he lives in a desert somewhere beyond the pond but he only can cross the first day of winter.”

“A prince should not tell lies, your highness.” She reproached him.

He just snorted.

“When you finish your breakfast, direct to the throne’s room. The king wants to see you.”

“Did he express why?”

The prince wasn’t concerned but curious because his father would usually meet him in the gardens where both walked under the sunlight or send for him to have tea in one of the elegant rooms inside the palace. The throne room was somehow intimidating, attached to other significations more than father-son relationships, it was more of monarch-heir dynamic.

“He did not. It seems you’ll have to figure it out by yourself.”

The prince finished his meal in record time walking, almost running through the hallways to meet his father.

“Your majesty, the third prince had come as you requested.” One of the guards announced.

“Come in, son.”

His father had aged fast. The weight of a kingdom on his shoulders and the responsibilities that implied were enough to limit his sleeping hours. The kingdom was still in a period of abundance and relative peace with the neighbor nations but the threatens were always out there and a king couldn’t allow himself to feel at ease even on the most tranquil days.

“Your grace.” The prince bowed. “I am glad to see you are feeling better.”

The king was reported feeling ill a few weeks ago. Nothing to be concern about it, the doctor assured, nothing some rest couldn’t solve. It had scared everyone the monarch was indeed much better, the color had returned to his face and his eye bags were almost gone.

“I am jubilant as well. My apologies for calling you to the throne room instead of meeting for tea, after a short absence my presence is much need in here than what I thought thus I will be brief. From the near kingdom across the river a caravan of presents have arrived to celebrate another year of peace between our nations, exquisite jewels Hwayoung claimed as hers faster than anyone, although I consider this would suit your taste better than hers.”

One of the servants approached carrying a small wooden box. It contained a shining bracelet made of round onyx beads that resembled his dark deep eyes. It adjusted to his wrist like if it was made for him. The prince instantly grew in affection with it as a gift from his father.

“Thank you, father. It is marvelous.” He couldn’t stop smiling.

That night was the night. Taehyung always was back for that date and he couldn’t help feeling excited and slightly nervous, touching the still strange unaccustomed bracelet with his hands, moving it from one side to another trying to think about something else.

“What are you doing?” Hwayoung asked with a curious expression.
She was one of his sisters, a year younger than him, daughter of one of his father concubines, she didn’t live in the same wing of the palace he did but she still visited very often. Too often for Jeongguk’s taste. Not that he didn’t like his sister but she was more than a princess, a royal pain.

“Nothing.” He cut playing with the bracelet his father had given him.

“It doesn’t seem like you’re doing nothing.” The girl tiptoed trying to catch a glimpse of the newly acquired jewel on his arm. The prince quickly moved his arm to avoid her gaze.

The prince was sitting on the same cloister where he told Taehyung the tale of Hwangung years ago. Waiting for the sun to come down when the birds played their symphonies altogether. He just wanted to be alone for a moment, or rather than alone, without his sister.

“What do you want, Hwayoung?”

“When is Taehyung coming back?” She asked opening her eyes trying to act cute, a trick that didn’t work with her older brother.

“Someday.” He avoided the direct answer.

“You know. Tell me, tell me!” She pocked his face.

“Why you want to know?”

“I like him. He’s nice, nicer than you. I’ll ask father to marry him when I grow up.”

When she said that Jeongguk stayed still for a second before jeering loudly. The young princess felt offended.

“What makes you think he’s going to marry you?”

“Father told me I can get whatever I want. I want to marry him.”

“Taehyung is not a thing you can obtain, he’s a person.”

“Why wouldn’t he marry me?”

“Because you’re greatly irritating.” The prince said with a mocking tone.

“That’s not true! I don’t know why I’m telling you this, you’re not Taehyung.”

“I don’t know either. Can you just go away and bother someone else?”

“Why are you so mean?!” She made a tantrum before leaving.

The sun was finally gone; Jeongguk undertook his way to the same pond where his friend appeared every year at that date.

The water started boiling. It was a cold night outside, enough to snow but not yet. Taehyung’s arrival inaugurated the snow season thus it couldn’t snow before that; although it was cold enough to shiver while being outdoors. He should have to be in bed already but the prince knew too well the cycles of the guard’s rounds and when they switched positions.

He got closer to the surface, knowing Taehyung would be there at any second. The moon was
reflected on the water, small waves were created with his fingers ruining the perfect round figure. A few clouds paraded on the firmament without a fixed course but his waiting was still lonely.

Bubbles rose slowly at first and then all at once like little pearls adorning the top of the pond. The sign that announced his advent like fallen brown leaves announced autumn. Now all the leaves were gone and the empty cherry three that had always been there as a silent witness made him company.

The water kept bubbling but nothing happened. Something was wrong, Taehyung wouldn’t miss the date, something had gone terribly wrong. The bubbles he had admired minutes before now weren’t as remotely beautiful as they were just a second ago.

“Taehyung…” The prince whispered, removing the waters desperately. “Taehyung!”

But he wasn’t there and Jeongguk was swallowed into the gloom of the pond that caught him with its claws.

Jeongguk woke up with a cold coat of sweating on his face. His breathing was heavy and agitated; he was still looking for air as if he had drowned while sleeping.

“Are you alright?” Taehyung was lying right next to him. His long hair was still wet against the sheets of the prince’s bed.

“I had a dream… and you weren’t there. I think that’s what is called ‘nightmare’.” He looked at the elder’s eyes, he was still half asleep.

“Ah, don’t worry. I’m here.” Taehyung trapped him in a bear hug.

“So annoying. when you’re going to go to your room?” The younger didn’t move a centimeter from his cozy position.

“You should have arranged it beforehand.” The elder hid his face on Jeongguk’s back.

The prince didn’t respond; instead, he closed his eyes while feeling the warmness of the embrace.

It had been prepared for weeks.

The morning that followed Taehyung’s reappearance was always a mess. Lady Go would hug him tightly as a mother who waited for her son’s return as well; she had become his mother on the other side of the pond somehow.

“You’re here… but when?”

“He crossed the pond last night.” The prince affirmed gaining a glare from the handmaid. 

“I’ll tell Master Young, don’t get in trouble in the meantime.”

“When have we ever…” The elder began to say.

“Do not answer that question.” The prince grabbed Taehyung along with him through the hallways as the maid sighed.

Jeongguk hadn’t had the chance to notice late at night but now in the daylight, he could see the elder
clearly. He was now taller than Lady Go and taller than him, the months in the desert had brought the candent beige color with a light golden glow back to his skin and somehow he was always the clear image of the summer days in the middle of the winter.

He had changed physically, the elder was more handsome with every day that passed by and the months they weren’t together, Jeongguk could only hang on the image he had on his memories. Now he had the elder in front of him radiating his own light while the prince gravitated around him.

“You look old.” Jeongguk mocked while they sat on the tea table where everything was specially prepared for them.

“You’re still the same.” Taehyung took a sip of his tea.

“I’m taller, I have almost surpassed Lady Go and she’s one of the tallest women in the palace.”

“Oh but your face looks so cute.” The elder said while pinching his cheeks with both hands.

Jeongguk pushed them aside as he tried to hide the furious red that covered his cheeks like a pair of juicy apples. The elder smiled, glad he could still make the younger flustered no matter how hard he tried to avoid it.

“I should’ve never taught you that word.”

“You’re cute.” He said that carelessly but the prince couldn’t meet his gaze.

He cleared his throat and changed the subject of the conversation. “How’s your mother?”

Taehyung’s face lightened up. “She was happy to see me again as always. Asked a lot of questions as everyone.”

“People are still afraid of you?”

“I wouldn’t call it being afraid but they aren’t as close as we are, or as Lady Go is with me… although she doesn’t know about my powers.”

“I wish we could tell everyone, it’s something that makes you extraordinary.”

“It would only bring troubles… it’s always like that. I’m okay as long as you like me like this.”

Jeongguk played with his black bracelet nervously. “Of course I do…” He mumbled.

“Oh, that’s new.” Taehyung recalled while reaching for his wrist to admire the new piece.

“It was a gift from my father.”

“It looks good on you, matches your eyes and hair.” The boy contemplated with his big brown eyes.

“Thank you…” Jeongguk’s heart kept pounding at one unstable rhythm.

It wasn’t the first time he had been that close with the boy with candent skin but the difference was he was now painfully aware of it, aware of the closeness of his face, the tender touch of his hands and the length of his eyelashes for the first time.

There was something that made him blush whenever Taehyung stared for more than ten seconds into his eyes and there was something that made his mind numb and his mouth dry every time he looked at the elder.
“Taehyung!” A high pitched voice almost broke the sliding door. “My handmaid had said you were here!” Hwayoung tried to run over her older brother but was caught before she could strangle the older boy with her thin arms.

“You entered unannounced to a private meeting of older people.” The prince scolded her, pulling her black braid lightly.

She extended her arms still trying to grab Taehyung who only giggled and pet her head while she was still held. Princess Hwayoung was always a cheerful presence, she hadn’t witnessed the sorrows and bitterness of the world, lived a fantasy life inside the palace. She wore vivid colors on her clothes and sparkling jewelry on her ears and hair, her cheeks were pink as peaches and her big round eyes were always twinkling with mischief.

“Please, I haven’t seen him in a long time neither. Let me stay just five minutes…”

“No. you’re leaving right now. Lady Go said you have music lessons every morning and to me, it doesn’t seem like you’re a good student.”

She pouted before retiring from the room without keeping her eyes off the shapeshifter.

“You’re being mean with her.”

“I’m not if we allow her to stay she won’t leave you alone while you still here.”

The prince had always been possessive towards his friend when the curtain fell and the secret of his existence was revealed many eyes were fixed on the boy with candent skin who was a mystery for everyone. His older brothers all reacted differently, Jeongsuk had received him with open arms, Haewon raised an eyebrow and Jihun not even that as he didn’t seem worth his attention.

His younger sisters on the other hand… well both of them were a bit enamored with him. Hwayoung forgot all her manners and education and always ran in his direction every time she saw him, pretty much what Taehyung used to do with the prince when they were younger, although they were grown-ups now, he kept doing it sometimes. And little Miyoung, the latest addition of the royal family born during summer days of the first year of Taehyung’s visitation, she considered him one of her brothers, naturalizing his presence completely.

But brand new eyes were on the prince’s eyes that year, there was something that made his stomach shrinks every time he thought of his sister spending too much time with Taehyung, spending his time with the boy. They were trapped inside of an hourglass, sand falling and time running, six limited months, he wasn’t going to share more than he needed.

“I’ve missed you.” The elder said suddenly taking Jeongguk by surprise. “But I think I missed these rice cakes more than you.”

Jeongguk shook his head and sneered at him. “I’ll order to cover the pond with a giant rock next winter.”

“Your majesty wouldn’t do something like that.” Of course, the only time he used honorifics when they were alone was to mock him somehow.

“The prince would do as it pleases him.”

“Surely he will.”

They burst into laughter. Laughing was the best part of having him back, endless amount of laughs.
The cold months didn’t last long but the warm spring exploded like the realization of the first love, unnoticed at first but expanding everywhere when was less expected.

Taehyung kept crawling to his bed whenever he could; it was something normal for them since they had technically grown up together because they did **everything** together. Especially since they were kids sharing meals, baths, even sometimes shared lessons, thus, sharing beds wasn’t a major problem for them.

But that year, that year something changed.

The prince who always concealed sleep faster when the boy with candent skin was next to him now had severe problems related to insomnia. Almost like he was daydreaming every time the elder laid down next to him, unlike the shapeshifter who fell down into dreamland, Jeongguk had every time more difficulties to close his eyes for a few hours.

Often, even in half slept in the dark, he would hear the elder’s constant breathing. Consciously of his proximity, he would feel the urge of touching his face, tracing his features with his fingertips as if he was trying to memorize them, the kind of memoir which is accessed only through touch. And his hands were dying to caress, stroke, rub and feel the heat of his golden skin.

“Jeongguk, are you sleeping?”

The prince gasped when he heard the elder’s voice.

“I’m not now.” Jeongguk rubbed his eyes with his hands. “I thought you were sleeping.”

“I tried to.” His breath tickled on the younger’s lips.

And then he put his icy cold feet on the prince’s legs as he got accustomed to doing whenever he had the chance. Jeongguk held another gasp.

“Why you always make this? I swear…”

Taehyung giggled in the shadows.

“Sing to me.” He demanded, softly kicking the prince’s calves.

“Of course, I knew something was missing.”

“Sing to me, Jeongguk.” He insisted. “Your voice has come nicer this year; I want to hear more of your singing.”

It was truly his voice had changed as well, there was something on his diction and the way he recited poems and memory lessons that didn’t go past by the elder. Melodic like the sound of the wind caressing the fields on an autumnal morning, soft like silk sheets and tender like the secret whispers and stolen kisses.

Jeongguk cleared his throat afraid it might fail due to the lack of warm out.

“**Down by the river by the boats… Where everybody goes to be alone…**” His singing was a mixture
between a melancholic lullaby and a velvety whisper.

Taehyung reached for one of the loosen locks of his bangs and played with it until the younger effortlessly fell asleep.

The awaking of the vernal season brought bright colors back to the nature like a painting. Humming birds looked out to the palace like curious visitors introducing a new day with the morning dew and the fireflies and crickets closed the evenings with the sunset palette on their back. But don’t ask the plum tree for narcissus, and don’t ask spring not to play havoc because it acts in the way it does for a reason.

Now the prince was sixteen years old and as his brothers had done before he had to attend to royal duties more often, learn the truth art of war and fighting skills, among other things princes did. Although Jeongguk excelled in all those activities beyond of what was expected, there was one thing, and just one thing he couldn’t manage to master.

Horse riding.

No matter how hard he tried to succeed in this essential skill for a member of the royal family, he kept failing. Both of his brothers had natural talent with the horses, Jeongsuk with his elegance and long hair following the flow of the wind and Jihun with his ability to jump and ride in the roughest grounds. But Jeongguk, the third prince struggled with horse riding as no other prince had before.

Even Taehyung was a best rider than him, but when you are capable of turning into a real horse it is supposed you’d get to learn how they think. The prince had received a magnificent specimen on his sixteenth day of naming, but the black stallion didn’t fall for his charms right away.

The shapeshifter sat on the top of a tree while eating sweet tangerine segments, laughing his head off every time Jeongguk ended up on the ground. His witnessed lack of skill just made the prince feel in desperately need of improving faster than ever. He had fallen four times in the last hour, climbing back to the horse’s loin every single time. The white cuffs of his pants were all covered in mud, ruined by the dirt, and even his face was covered in a trail of dust and sweat.

No one said it was going to be easy.

Taehyung kept watching his new favorite spectacle, bare foot hanging from the tangerine tree like a monkey, lying on a comfortable chair bed of branches using leaves as cushions. The elder didn’t pity him until he saw the way the prince stared at his older brothers, his eyes weren’t full of envy but admiration and a strong wish of being as good as them.

Then he descended of the tree still smelling like ambrosial citrus. Quickly he crawled inside the stables and chirped loud enough just to be heard by the young boy. He kneeled where Taehyung was hiding and the elder couldn’t contain his laugh himself much longer, a stain of dirt adorned his cheeks and the tip of his nose. He wetted his thumb and faded the filth away.

“That’s gross!” Jeongguk complained pushing away his hand. “What do you want? You came here to laugh of me in person?”

Jeongguk was upset, that was for sure. But the shapeshifter knew he could always lift his mood somehow, without saying a thing, he turned around and carried the prince on his back. After that, he turned into a splendid horse just as good as the stallion the king had given to him.

“What are you…?” And before the prince could ask something else, the shapeshifter undertook his
Jeongguk didn’t have much time to replicate; he just grabbed his mane and twisted the hair around his hand, his legs around its loin trying to assure his position. Taehyung didn’t try to drop him every time he could, instead he taught him to follow his instincts, to think fast and to not think at all.

He was able to understand the primary mistakes he was committing when he rode the other horse; he wasn’t paying attention to his position or the way of grabbing properly. Now he became aware of many things, and mostly to enjoy the wind on his head and the rush of adrenaline riding a horse gave to him.

His excitement didn’t go unnoticed. Not so far away from them, his older brothers watched over his new feat. The second lap began just in time for the king’s daily walk through the gardens; he could also catch a glimpse of the improvement his youngest son had done, his pride was reflected on an approval smile he directed towards the prince, one that was hard to see often.

“Ask the third prince to join the next hunting. He might have the skills to become a general in the future.”

“He does indeed, your majesty.” The minister pointed. “It resembles to his father at that age.”

That just made the king grin again.

“He is clever enough to become a great strategist.” The crown prince agreed with the king. “Next year he would be taller and wiser I hope.”

“Growing up does not necessary brings that quality along, for someone who still wastes his time playing outside at that age…”

“He’s young. Let him being a kid a little longer, Jihun.”

The second prince grumbled with indifference and ran away with his horse until he got lost in the horizon.

They didn’t notice how long Taehyung kept turned into a horse until the sun started setting. It was the second week of a daily routine of training in which the prince kept gaining more confidence as a rider but not enough to go back to his intimidating horse.

Taehyung turned back to human when they were back in the stables; he petted the stallion’s neck until he found his weak spot behind its ear. Then he called the prince to do the same and start creating a bond with the animal so next time he tried to ride it, it won’t throw him into the ground. Jeongguk approached slowly and clumsily started stroking its dark pelage until the animal moved its tail.

“What’s his name?” The elder asked, still caressing its mane. He shook his head when his eyes crossed his sight, he was tired.

“Uh… I haven’t figured it out yet…”

“No wonder he doesn’t like you…”

“Well… why don’t you choose a name for him?”
“Really? Let me see…” He stared at the horse’s eyes for a second. “Hēisè.” (黑色)

“That’s original.” Jeongguk scratched the back of its ear as the older boy had done before.

“He is black.” The stallion neighed in agreement. “You see? He likes it, don’t you Hēisè?”

“He likes you more than me.”

“Yes, of course he does, but I’ve found out he likes carrots more than people.”

“You have been bribing my horse? That explains it all.”

“He had fallen for me you can’t change that.”

In a moment while caressing the horse, their hands met and the prince’s heart skipped a beat. But the shapeshifter’s vision was numb. He had been transforming daily for long periods of time and that day wasn’t different, he had run out of energy in an instant. Jeongguk saw his face getting paler and his eyes losing the focus.

“Tae?”

The elder grabbed Jeongguk’s right wrist where the black beaded bracelet was. His legs failed, he couldn’t stay standing up much longer, unintentionally his index finger kept attached to the bracelet and when he collapsed on the ground, he pull it with him breaking the string.

The onyx beads covered the soil like constellations covered the sky.

“Taehyung!”

Even if he was taller, his body was always slimmer than the younger’s. Without much effort he carried him on his back and returned to the palace where he called for Lady Go immediately. The maid acted quickly preparing a compress with cold water and some medicinal herbs.

“What happened to him?”

“He’s exhausted…” The prince gulped.

The maid opened the thick blanket on the floor so Jeongguk could place him carefully. She knew there was no case on telling him not to worry and go back, he’d stay there until he’d open his eyes again. Taehyung had a little fever, normal considering he reached the point where he was tired enough to faint.

Jeongguk blamed himself. He knew Taehyung’s powers had limitations and he knew too well he had been overusing them just to help him. Lady Go went to look another cloth leaving the prince and the shapeshifter alone.

“I’m sorry, Tae. I really am.”

It was late at night when Taehyung –in a still disoriented state opened his eyes- little by little while getting used to the weak light of an almost fully consumed candle lost in an isolated corner. The fainted yellow still could lighten up the face of the prince who had fallen asleep sat on the floor with his arms crossed on top of his legs.

The elder displayed a fond smile and reached for his nape.
Jeongguk worried too much.

He caressed the soft and warm back of his neck.

His eyes located the empty spot on his wrist where the beaded bracelet used to be not long ago. He remembered the sound of the string breaking before fainting, the bracelet exploding and the black pearls falling all over the place like raindrops. Jeongguk didn’t worry about it not even for a second. It made Taehyung feel guilty, especially considering how precious it was for him, a gift from his father who he adored.

The young boy slept profoundly, he even snored sometimes when he was too tired after a long day. That was his quietest moment, looking younger than ever. Oh, but Jeongguk had changed and the elder had noticed too. It hadn’t been an abrupt change, in fact it was still in motion, but were the little details he had noticed during his staying that made the difference. Year after year he grew a bit taller, stronger, faster; the baby fat that used to adorn his chubby cheeks as a child was now almost gone, his jaw was getting shaper along with his other features. He was handsome already but all over the years his beauty became more virile and vibrant.

They weren’t kids anymore.

The prince had more responsibilities nowadays, people expected great things from him and so did Taehyung. Often he would catch him training with his sword, studying under the candle light and tracing invisible maps on his head while they talked. He knew how hard the younger kept holding the distant memories of their shared childhood trying to root on them like a seed, but now that wasn’t possible.

He couldn’t stay as a seed now that his feelings had bloomed.

Perhaps the prince didn’t listen to Taehyung’s heartbeats because he was too afraid his owns were heard instead but while the room felt silent, the drums of the shapeshifter’s pulse were as loud as the ones back in the tribe.

Loving Jeongguk had happened a long time ago. Falling in love with him wasn’t recent either but what had differed to other years he visited the palace was the passion inside him, burning his veins with acid and shattering his guts like a flare seeking being freed even if that meant wreck him in two. Even the most tender gesture like touching his nape would sparkle a fire that grew wilder and more uncontrollable with every unspoken word and absent action they shared.

He couldn’t suppress his feelings much longer before they’d annihilate his body. He had many skins, feathers, scales, furs, tails and ways to become any animal he had seen however his love towards the prince was the most eager, wild and untamed beast he held on his body.

The room received the morning’s halo light through a window. It might have been a bright day.

“Don’t open the door, the prince is still sleeping.” That was the voice of one of Jeongguk’s maids, Taehyung recognized.

“Why is he here anyways? This is not the place of the prince.” Two maids whispering behind the doors, probably without knowing they were disturbing the peaceful silence before birds began to sing.

“He stood up all night taking care of the other boy, the one who’s always with him.” The voices were mixed in a webbed conversation outside the room.

“Kim Taehyung? He’s a concurrent visitor, although I’ve no idea who’s him.”
“The third prince cares a lot for him. I wouldn’t annoy him if I were you.”

“He’s friend with the crown and a clever boy, no wonder the prince has interest on him.”

“I would say too interested.” The hallway went silent.

Taehyung saw the prince tilting his head aside, still deeply sleeping while the elder was more awake than ever.

“What do you mean?” A reluctant tone broke into the absence of sound.

“You know perfectly what I mean.” The same voice answered.

“Don’t make accusations if you don’t know what you’re talking about, Yura. What you’re saying is serious; your tongue might be ripped off if someone hears you.”

“Don’t point me as if you haven’t thought the same.”

“What the prince does or not is none of our business and you know that.”

“Hyerim is right.” That was Lady Go’s voice, he could tell a mile away. A general gasp was heard. “What are you ladies doing in here? Go back to your labors. Yura, you stay.”

“Yes, Lady Go.” The voices said unison.

“Lady Go I-” The maid’s words were cut sharply.

“I have been extremely patient with all of you.” Lady Go stated. “With you in particular I had extra care.”

“I-I know Lady-”

“Do you see this, Yura?” Lady Go’s voice was scarier even than when she scolded them. He couldn’t see her but was able to picture every gesture and expression of her face without problem. “These are scars on my hands from when I got lashed because I irked her majesty, Queen Soo, in defense of the boy who’s inside that room. If you dare to open your mouth to spill your poison all over the palace I will personally make it look like the least dreadful sanction you can receive. You are not gossiping about other maids and servants, you are spreading rumors about the son of the king. Remember that, maid’s words are not more than empty shells in this ocean.”

The voice of the handmaid trembled. “Y-yes. I’m sorry, Lady Go. It won’t happen again.” It was easy to tell the maid had accomplished her goal of intimidate the insolent servant.

“I can assume that. Go with the others and have the table set; I’ll wake up the third prince.”

The first thunder hit in the sky. The promise of a shining morning vanished.

Lady Go softly opened the door and got closer to the sleeping prince.

“Your grace, it’s morning already.” She whispered.

Jeongguk shook his head. Then he touched the bed sheet mark on his cheek caused by sleeping sitting with his head on the elder’s body.

“Is Taehyung…?” Was the first thing came out of his mouth.
“He’s still sleeping. You can come back later; I will keep him under vigilance if that makes your majesty a bit more serene.”

“I’ll come back soon.” He said in a low voice, more for Taehyung than for the maid. “Let’s go.”

When they were gone it finally poured, the rain and the tears.

The prince noticed Taehyung’s mood was abruptly decayed after the incident on the stables. He would spend more evenings inside the palace than under the sunlight he loved almost as much as he loved food and Jeongguk knew him too well to know something was out of place when he showed a sudden lack of appetite after eating just eight rice cakes.

“Tae…” His voice resounded in the empty dark room. He had been looking for the boy around his usual hiding places in the palace but he was nowhere to be seen.

He found the shapeshifter taking a nap with a ton of drawing books on his lap.

“Tae! Wake up! Lady Go discovered we ate the matcha cakes for the tea ceremony!”

Taehyung jumped out of the bed spreading all the books on the floor.

“What? We must exile for what’s left of our lives. You can live in a cave for the other half of the year I can bring you food and-”

Jeongguk was chortling with delight, unable of containing himself, Taehyung’s scared expression was always something to laugh at loud.

“You scared me…” The elder sighed of relief.

“Uh…” Jeongguk took a glimpse down the hallway with a terrified expression. “That was actually truth we should left the palace for a few hours…”

“Does she know about the honeyed rice bean cakes?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then we still have time to run away.”

“You think?”

“Taehyung! Your highness!” The maid’s voice made the walls quiver and their bodies shiver.

“At the count of three…” The prince announced.

Her steps felt closer as if a mountain was walking.

“Three!” The elder grabbed the prince’s wrist and he followed his steps outdoors.

Soon they were out of the hawk eye of the handmaid and totally out of breath.

“That was… close…” The prince grabbed his tummy trying to catch some air.

“Too close…” The elder agreed next to him.
Somehow they ended up near the stables; neither of them had been there since Taehyung fainted. There were a few clouds on the sky but not a sign of more rain than what they had had for the last few days. Some dragonflies pry around them, still attracted by the humidity on the gardens.

“I’m sorry about the other day, it was my fault.” The younger said in a remorseful voice.

“I heard the first ten times. You don’t have to apologize for something you don’t control.”

Jeongguk played nervously with his fingers. There was something on his mind.

“My father invited me to go hunting with him and my older brothers when the weather gets better, they said I have a natural talent for horse riding.” He bit his lower lip before speaking again. “I feel like an impostor.”

“You don’t have to be one. Hēisè just needs to get used to you, c’mon. Come with me.”

The horse balanced its tail scaring the flies away. The elder got closer and immediately emitted a whinny when it recognized the boy.

“Hi boy, how are you? Miss me?”

Jeongguk cleared his throat making the elder roll his eyes.

“Come closer, touch his mane. He is a spoiled foal under that shinny fur. And don’t forget to talk to him.”

So did the prince, while he shyly touched its horsehair, the elder pull a carrot out one of the pockets of his robe.

“You carry a carrot with you?” The younger grinned.

“I can turn into any animal; it’s useful to have at least one at hand.” He gave the younger the vegetable.

“Of course…”

“He’s not going to eat your hand you know?”

“I know… wait, are you sure?” The prince opened his eyes widely when Hēisè tried to catch the carrot with its big teeth.

“Give him his carrot.” Taehyung pushed the young boy closer to the horse.

Jeongguk reluctantly fed his horse with amused eyes when it devoured the carrot in two bites and licked the younger fingers.

“You see, it won’t bite you.” Taehyung patted the horse’s loin.

“It doesn’t mean I can go hunting with him just yet.”

Taehyung bit his thumb while thinking. He knew they were already in trouble, a little bit more risk wasn’t going to suppose a problem, right? And he had managed to avoid the prince’s presence whenever there were people around but now they were alone, just the two of them.

The prince spoke before he could formulate the idea. “Let’s go beyond the walls.”
The boy with candent skin blinked a few times before nodding.

It wasn’t they hadn’t sneaked out the palace before; indeed they had done it plenty times. The first time was when Jeongguk was thirteen, he told Taehyung about the little village behind the hills not so far from the palace and the elder felt curious right away. Trick Lady Go was beyond more complicated than tricking the guards, back then the maid was always around them like a buzzing bee.

The last spring days had been extremely vaporous, windy rainy days or radiant sunny evenings. Neither of them knew how the plan was set in motion, when they realized they were half way out the gates when the guards changed their positions. It wasn’t difficult to escape when your best friend is a shapeshifter and can easily play havoc somewhere. A porcupine on the kitchen? Oh my, how come?

For Taehyung it was easier to overfly the walls whenever he felt like, although without the prince it wasn’t remotely as funny. And just like that, Jeongguk and Taehyung both in common clothes and dirty feet arrived to the village where no one had ever seen the prince and they were just two boys walking lost in the crowd.

Under the disguise of an ordinary façade they were able to roam all over the streets without drawing attention towards them. Just with the knowledge it was a separate time of their lives, a secret extension of time almost mythical, where the only things that mattered were how the parallel lines of their paths were crossing constantly and how loud their laughs were.

They ate food on the streets, played with other children and watched a play in the middle of the dusty theater where the action took part. Both clapped along and laughed at the comical situation while the actors behind the colorful masks intoned their lines trapping the audience’s interest with their motley tales.

At sunset they went back to the palace, grubby clothing and matted hair, complicity laughs floating in the air even when Lady Go caught them and prepared an extra cold bath for both.

Perhaps what was magical about Taehyung, Jeongguk thought, wasn’t his wonderful ability of being able to turn into animals or crossing through portals in water bodies to a total different place but his capacity of just with a single stare, a shared smile, completed the prince’s world.

Nevertheless, escape with two horses was more than a complex operation. It required an extra careful handling of difficult situations where something can go wrong at any moment and they could get caught by someone else than the handmaid. It required slyness and intelligence, and overall-

A broken scream. “THERE’S A PORCUPINE ON THE KITCHEN! AGAIN!”

...a best friend who was also a shapeshifter.

The prince passed the gates hidden behind both horses while the guards succored the situation back in the palace. Soon after that, Taehyung turned into a woodpecker and flew until he found Jeongguk waiting for him near the spot where the river could be heard from a near distance.

“A Porcupine?” Jeongguk arched an eyebrow.

“What can I say, they are adorable.” Taehyung shrugged.

“That trick it’s getting old, don’t you think?”
“We are out, let’s go before someone notices.”

Both rode their horses, Taehyung took Bi, one of the kindest mares among the herd and the one willing to follow them everywhere as long as they had food. Jeongguk jumped to the stallion’s loin full of fear, stiff legs and tensed chest; he had lost the confidence on that particular activity but after a few minutes he knew Hēisè wasn’t going to drop him anymore.

Now, if the horse actually moved…

“C’mon boy, let’s go.” Finally they were on going.

After following the trace escarped by the colossal amount of water running down the hills they decided it was time to give the animals some rest. Jeongguk felt reenergized after managing to keep on top the horse without falling for that long. The prince looked majestic while riding the tall black horse, almost if they were made for each other; he just needed a bit more of confident.

They found a quiet place where the river was calm as a painting, perfect for the horses to drink some water and pasture around. Taehyung made a bed of flowers his new napping place and closed his eyes while feeling the gentle touch of the sunrays filtering through the tree tops as if the leaves drew dots on his skin on purpose, shinning like a crystal reflecting everywhere.

The young heir laid next to him. He took a deep breath filling his lungs with the scent of the moment, their moment of youth when the air was the purest. No polluted adulthood or responsibilities, just the now they had.

“Tae…” The prince faced the shapeshifter who was still lying upwards with a peaceful expression.

“Spring will be over soon.” He cut his words, eyes still closed.

“I know.” Jeongguk bit his lip. “You’re leaving again.”

“That’s the way it is.”

“Don’t you miss it… summer?” That was not the question he had formulated but still he was interested on his answer.

“The desert is a constant summer even on winter. Although it’s different to summer, summer is… unique.”

“How long has been since you experienced summer and autumn?”

“Six years…”

“And still you don’t miss it?”

Taehyung thought about it for a second.

Summer, the hottest season of the year but also… laughs and sunlight, fruits and diving in lakes… Thinking about summer always leaded him to the feeling of staring directig to the sun almost going blind but now the image was replaced with a total eclipse of a brighter satellite. He opened his eyes like butterfly wings directing his glance towards the source of light he had on Earth.

“I have my own summer.”

Jeongguk gulped and then tilted his head on the elder’s direction, getting closer almost breathing the same air Taehyung exhaled. He almost reached for his lips when the boy with candent skin turned
away abruptly shattering the prince’s glass heart. He felt the knot on his throat as if he was swallowing sand.

The elder ran out of words, he didn’t know what to say about it.

Trouble. Was one of the first words he had acquired into his vocabulary when they were younger, the first approximation meant ‘if we/you do this something bad it’s going to happen.’ An inconvenience, the way the maids were talking about… they were right, Jeongguk was a prince and he was… what was he? An inexplicable nature event.

He couldn’t, they couldn’t.

If they did that something bad was going to happen.

That was a boundary they couldn’t transgress.

It pierced Taehyung’s soul worse than physical pain, made him feel heavy. Why the ‘right’ thing felt so bad?

“Jeongguk I—”

“Help! Somebody help me!” The desperate scream popped their bubble. “Somebody help me! Gyo fell on the river I can’t find him!”

The woman was screaming not so distantly from them, all the commotion was produced upstream. Jeongguk acted quickly, grabbing the reins of the black stallion and focusing on the rescue of the child with fierce determination.

“See if you can find him through air, I’ll follow the river.” He directed the order to the elder, it hurt him a little looking back.

“I got it.” Taehyung turned into a hawk with big sharped claws. He chirped once before taking flight to the south where the screams came.

With his improved vision, the shapeshifter pointed with a loud shriek at where the river flow was taking the small creature. Jeongguk undertook his way following the prey bird in a perfect synchronization, dodging rocks and trunks with agility. When Taehyung saw the red face and small hands of the infant he plummeted as a bird but landed as a boy splashing into the moving waters.

The younger overtook them until he surpass them with enough distance to elaborate a plan while the elder grabbed the child with his arms. The prince spotted a losing branch thick enough to stop them. He dismounted the stallion and pushed the trunk above the water, he was able to hear the untamed sound of the flowing water right next to him.

“Taehyung! Careful!”

The elder turned around just in time to catch his indications. With a quick spin, his legs ended up in the surface feeling all the impact against the wooden trunk. Jeongguk resisted the weight and the hit with all his strength giving Taehyung enough time to push the child out to the shore and then swimming back when Jeongguk dropped the branch that was dragged by the stream short after that.

Both of them were heavy breathing with all their capacities to the maximum. The kid cried and the strident sound of his voice was actually the most tranquilizing thing they had ever heard.

“Gyo! Gyo!” A woman appeared next to them and hugged the still weeping infant. She looked like
one of the women who washed the clothes next to the river, no wonder how the child ended up playing near there.

Taehyung smiled with relief.

“Thank you… Thank you so much…” She lifted her gaze and with a shocked expression thanked them once again. “You are… your grace. Your grace I am eternally grateful.”

She kneeled in front of them with the kid still on her arms.

“There’s no need… for real. I’m glad we were helpful.”

“Bless your majesty. You are the saviors of my Gyo.” Tears fell down her cheeks.

Jeongguk smiled too, although his broken heart told him otherwise.

XIV

Wildest Dreams

Every second they were apart clenched the elder’s chest.

*It's for the best.* He repeated like a mantra trying to convince himself. In any moment he was going to be gone and the prince would forget about it. Nevertheless Taehyung knew he wouldn’t forget about it.

It was one of the hardest things he had ever had to do. The proximity of Jeongguk, his soft lips so close… *too close*… how he wished they were able to go back to the desert together and get lost in the dunes a thousand miles away from there, a place where he could say everything he wished clear and aloud.

They hadn’t spoken for days, barely crossing paths in the hallways of the palace even if none of them connected to their rooms. Always attracting each other into the same orbit, they couldn’t help catching a glimpse from the other from time to time. Jeongguk got tense every time he met the elder’s gaze, cheeks red as hibiscus, lips closed as a coffer.

The prince was out for hunting with his father and his brothers that day and, even if Taehyung wished to join them in disguise, he felt too guilty to follow Jeongguk under the circumstances they were facing. He felt the interior of his pocket burning with every step he took, heavier than rocks; he might as well just leave without saying a word.

That was the night of the solstice and Taehyung was going home. His heart ached every second the sun descended a bit more. Jeongguk hadn’t returned by sunset and if he didn’t want to say goodbye, the elder wasn’t one to blame him.

He hugged Lady Go when both met in the hallways, the maid somehow knew he was leaving again but as usual she did not ask questions which answers’ weight she didn’t want to carry. She pinched his cheek as when he was a child, which just brought back the heavyhearted memories of their easier times.

His road to the pond had never been that lonely; he had never noticed how dark the hallways were when the light was gone. The internal garden where the pond was remained as quiet as always. It was a part of the palace that was rarely visited, just another garden, just another pond.
The candle he carried on his hand melted a bit more before he decided it was time to go. At least the night was clear and the stars shone in the same sky above their heads; that was his only consolation, although he was having a hard time convincing himself.

“Good-bye.” He whispered to the stars before taking the first step into the pond, the second followed the sequence.

The steps were almost as sonorous as his breathing, as if every stride was about to smash the weak wooden planks of the floor. The sliding door was violently opened with one movement. Two pairs of eyes met in the halfway.

The vision of that presence that hurt and also healed, that face that was covered in wrinkles every time he laughed, those eyes deeper than beyond the pond and those lips he wished were his to be taken. That worried expression he always carried when something was wrong overshadowed all the features he loved.

“Taehyung!” The prince cried out. Raindrops fell from his starry sky.

He ran towards the shapeshifter, sloppily walking in the water. His cuffs were as wet as his cheeks; he was shivering although the weather wasn’t as remotely cold as when he reappeared every year. The cherry blossom behind them was shaken with a soft breeze, releasing a swirl of pink petals on their garden.

“You came.” The elder smiled.

“I’m here… I wasn’t going to… I’m sorry. I wished I had returned earlier but… it doesn’t matter now. I’m here.” Jeongguk’s voice was choppy and a bit raspy.

“I’m sorry too. I…” He revised his pocket but the prince hugged him before he could find the object.

“I… don’t want you to go.” Taehyung could feel the strength of his arms wrapped on his back, clenching his lungs in a good way.

“I know… but I have to. I’ll be back, yes? I’ll be back in winter.”

Jeongguk sobbed.

The water claimed for its passenger before he could say anything else, in the shallow surface of the pond his feet were deep on the other side. Before vanishing completely, he reached for the object on his pocket and squeezed it with his hand on the prince’s hand. It felt cold to the touch.

“I couldn’t find the missing piece, I’m sorry.” Was the last thing he said.

Jeongguk looked at it while the shapeshifter disappeared on the waters of the unknown portal he had to cross and shared one more tear. He admired it for a long time, water to his knees while he was standing in the pond alone.

Wasn’t that pond deeper or they just grew up too fast?

Then he broke the silence with a single yell full of wrath. He cursed the moon above his head for taken his miracle away one more time, that greedy moon that ran along with the father of the skies making time moving, making their lives moving instead of staying quiet for once. He cursed until his lungs were free of smoke and when his redden eyes were completely dried.

Little he knew mother Lune was the one as sad as him, watching over them on every occasion they exchanged their brief sorrowful goodbyes. His onyx bead bracelet shone under her light, a single white jade bead in the middle of the jewel. Jeongguk remembered going back to the stables a few
days after Taehyung fainted, the place was empty and all the beads were gone.

Except for the one that had slipped into his pocket that day, the same he was carrying around right now. The matching black rounded piece. A white light completed the spot as Taehyung completed him. Now he had a piece of him, the alabaster presence that stained his shadowy rock cave, the one that stood out on his monochromatic existence.

That was when he knew a part of his heart was sewed to Taehyung’s with golden strings.

Lady Go’s face was enlightened by the same white rays when she walked towards his direction. The word comfort was written on her hands and her eyes as she got closer. The prince took a step out of the water.

“He’s gone.” The maid words made it truth.

“Lady Go…” He sobbed. “I don’t want to hide anymore. It hurts a lot.” His voice was broken in as almost the same quantity his heart was.

The maid nodded. Watery eyes as the prince’s. “I know my child.” She dropped the formalities as if she was tearing down a wall. “I know. You don’t have to say a thing.”

He rested his head on her shoulder, looking for one of her nest-like hugs.

“But I want to. I want to say it.” The prince gulped before looking at the stars. “I’m not sorry for loving him. I’m not sorry for falling in love with him, Lady Go. I love him and it hurts and I love him and I’m happy and…I love him. I love him so much.”

And on his eyes the moon and on the moon his eyes. Tears of a truth never said aloud until that moment drained off his body through wounds that won’t scar his skin. Bled until his corroded self built on denial and angst was destroyed.

Lady Go limited herself to hug that soul in pain. She didn’t mention the fuss on the palace. She didn’t mention the notice of the king falling from the horse in the middle of the hunting. She didn’t mention his father dying on the other room not so far from them. Just hugged him as if her life depended on that.

Prince Jeongsuk became king that summer.

XV

Sovereign’s Will

One of a king’s most important tasks was not only rule with benevolence, ensure the kingdom’s security and wellness, it’s also assure their safeness by raising the monarch who would take his place in the future. If the qualities of the best sovereigns were numered into one single manuscript, Jeongsuk probably would’ve had all of them and more. If there was a person who was entirely capable of taking that charge without hesitation was the crown prince.

“Long live the king! Mansae! Mansae!”

During the coronation day an unusual aura of melancholy flooded the palace. The prince was crowned as the new king in the blink of an eye after his father’s death, not that they had an alternative, their people needed a ruler over grief and that’s what they received.
Queen Soo and other concubines were reunited in one area, not far from them Jeongguk’s sisters and the second prince, Jeongguk next to them. He had to keep his head up no matter what, being there for the crown prince. He couldn’t cry anymore, he had to stand up and stay still while his older brother was being coroneted.

In moments like that he wished Taehyung was next to him squeezing his hand. Knowing exactly what to say to comfort him, offering his cushioned shoulder to hold his tears like a locket. He was there when Jeongguk fell from the tree at age eleven, it wasn’t a big tree but the younger got more scared of the sound of the hit than the actual hit itself. The young prince cried for three minutes until the elder kissed his forehead and tickled his chin; he could use some of that right now.

The black and white bracelet felt warm against his skin. Due the nature of its materials –onyx and white jade- some might think it was the opposite but now with the white bead hanging on the same string, it felt familiar, somehow as if Taehyung was holding his wrist.

The prince thought his heart was growing bigger and further from the logic every day. The elder’s rejection had broken it into more pieces he could collect but still he found himself missing him. He loved Taehyung and there was no way of denying it anymore but a part of loving someone was also accepting the way he had chosen to love him back.

“Long live the king! Mansae! Mansae!”

The afternoon irradiated yellow and orange colors lost through trees and birds.

“Father.” He had cleared his throat when they were alone lost in the middle of the woods, guards on every corner but at a respectable distance. Their horses were inspecting the ground with their curious noses.

“Are you enjoying the hunting, Jeongguk?” He asked while caressing the mane of his beloved brown mare. “Those last pheasants you shot were barely damaged. It seems like you mastered the bow and arrow long before I did when I was your age.”

“Did I?” The young prince never knew how to react to the king’s compliments. “I consider I still need practice while riding and shooting.”

“Nothing time can’t solve.” The king touched his chest as he was looking for something and blinked a few times before speaking again. “There was something you wanted to say?”

“Oh… well yes. Father…” The prince took a deep breath. “May… may I ask a question?”

“You may.” The king’s figure rose on top of the mare even with all the weight of the kingdom on his shoulders.

“At certain age… princes and princesses start having more responsibilities and… they have to… we have to… contract nuptials with important men’s heirs in order to make the kingdom prosper.” Jeongguk felt all his clothes were itchy and heavy. “I believe I have reached certain age in which we can discuss this kind of… matters.”

“You have been thinking about marriage? Since when?” The king showed a little grin.

The young prince blushed. “For a few months now, I know Jeongsuk has been engaged since he was my age and Haewon might be married by the end of summer.” Jeongguk gulped. “I don’t want to get marry right know, father. Nevertheless I’ve… I’ve been feeling… different towards someone.” Jeongguk bit his fingernails unable to hide this habit from the king.
His father shook his head. “You must be careful, son. Many might try to reach you for your position.”

“No. It is not like that… I’ve known this person for a long time and… even though I’ve been hurt recently…”

“Have you fallen for one of the young maids? It’s likely to happen at your age.” The king tried to inquire.

“Not precisely.” Jeongguk could hear his pulse throbbing on his ears. “Father…”

The king seemed to feel a little annoyance on his left arm as he showed some difficulty to move it but he kept listening to his youngest son.

“Father I don’t have intention on getting marry any time soon but I’ve fallen in love.” He made sure they were making eye contact when he recited the followed words. “I’m in love with Taehyung.” He finally could open his locked chest to let the butterflies fly free. “I love him.”

There was a discomfort glare on the king’s face, something that bordered between wrath and lack of understanding. His face turned red all sudden and one of his forehead veins protruded giving him a displeased appearance Jeongguk had never witnessed on his life.

“Father, say something. I implore it… please…”

Right in front of his eyes the king fell down his horse with a sentence trapped on his chest, the words he would never tell to the third prince.

The prince was horrified. He dismounted as fast as he could just to find his father fighting to stay alive while his eyes were red and his face was swollen. Jeongguk cried for help, some guards were already heading to the scene not so far from them.

The king was taken back to the palace where he died hours after Jeongguk said goodbye to the boy with candent skin.

He overthought about that every day. Perhaps if he didn’t say a word about it… perhaps if he had kept his mouth shouted nothing of that would have happened. He didn’t thought about the regular pains of the king and his previous health states, he only thought about the look in his face while he confessed him how much he loved his best friend and couldn’t help but feeling guilty and responsible somehow.

Jeongguk didn’t want to but he promised he would be more careful with his feelings from that moment onwards. Not only had he hurt himself in the process but also someone else, he blamed himself and if Taehyung didn’t love him in the same way he did, there was no point on showing his feelings anymore.

He had decided to close his chest again, inside there were just empty cocoons and dried wings, it would come dusty and lifeless as everything around him at that moment. He hanged the key in the bracelet on his wrist while locking the cage ribs of his chest indefinitely.

“My king live the king! Mansae! Mansae!” Everyone proclaimed.

That time he raised his voice along with the crowd.
A thousand nights could be comprehended in just twelve hours of darkness.

What it felt like a distressed suffering in the desert worse than the insolation caused by the abrasive rays of the sun that won’t placate its heat not even for the most miserable soul, worse than having a fever on the hottest day of the year or even worse than being bitten by a snake whose poison could drag the most sensible man insane was, undoubtedly, being heartbroken among the arid dunes.

Unable to conceal sleep, eat and even depriving himself of drinking water until reaching dangerous limits. It was his way of healing through the pain, to feel somehow physically what he was feeling emotionally. He was wrecked.

When his mother held him in her arms all he could do was reducing himself into an emotional swirl. She kindly embraced him without saying a word until the boy combusted one night, confessed her all the lies he had to tell to keep the prince safe but the more he spoke the more he started to think none of them seemed to be reason enough to keep all those feelings hidden.

As days went by he started to feel again. Little things at first, the wind on his hair, the sun on his skin… the hole he had on his chest was closed but not cured. Worse than the pain were the thoughts, his own imagination created a monster which grew tormenting him with all the possibilities.

Every time he closed his eyes, the image of Jeongguk getting closer that day, his plumped lips and that little mole he had under them, the ticklish sensation of his breath invading the air and the ardent desire of meeting his mouth at the moment he stared longer than five minutes. But the prince was back in the palace fulfilling his royal duties while he was in the desert missing him dearly.

Taehyung didn’t know what to do anymore.

He consulted the only person he knew could guide his lost soul once again, the wise grandma.

“I have been waiting for your visit since you came back, Taehyung.”

“Uh… I…I need some advice. It’s from my upcoming travel back through the portal.”

“I know. You’re leaving in a few days again. However you don’t seem to be as eager as other times.”

Taehyung gulped. “I want to go back but I feel guilty… should I feel this way for loving someone?”

“Love… is many things. It’s dark and it’s light, it’s bitter and it’s sweet, it’s water and it’s fire, it’s sun and it’s moon…. Love is what you want it to be. The thing is… you choose the path that will guide you there but it’s like walking through the night, you won’t know where the path goes until you reach the end. Walk your path, shapeshifter. Or trace one.”

The boy always left her tent with more questions than answers. The wise grandma was never completely clear with her advices, she tended to complex the words in a way Taehyung knew he would have to complete the missing information.

Often the old grandma mentioned something else the day of the solstice, some words as farewell but that year she didn’t. The only thing she could’ve told him was just to add another worry to the boy.

The oasis was drying out.
He turned into an eagle and flew so far away the oasis looked like a little dot on the horizon. There were nothing more than dunes and the unstable wind who liked to trace figures on the sand at night. The sky was a dark blue cloak covered with stars, the more he looked the more stars there were there. The darkness and the void of the universe above his head never felt overwhelming for him, it reminded him to a pair of eyes that followed the same paradox, a space of void deeper than infinity but, at the same time, full of brightness and light.

Taehyung wished there was a sign telling him he was doing the right thing, just a guide from skies or someone who told him he was doing what he was supposed to but found himself questioning it once again.

Why he couldn’t love Jeongguk?

The redundant answers his brain formulated weren’t satisfying. There was no shaman or alchemist, no doctor or witch, no tonic or incantation, potion or antidote that could help his weakened hear, just the wind lulling him with gentle whispers.

The morning of the solstice the sun shone with ten times its intensity greeting his most beloved son with a last bath of rays that would linger on his brownish golden skin until the day of his return. It was like he was carrying the sunlight with him like a candle incorporated on his body.

That night when the moon met him for her greeting everyone in the tribe were celebrating. After a tight hug from his mother he stepped towards the lake without looking back. He had walked that route many times before; perhaps he had been tracing his own path since he was eleven. Choosing to follow the intense cloud that smelled like a potpourri of all the smells he had learnt to love in the other side of the portal, tangerine and bergamot flowers, rain-touch dirt, chamomile and quince tea, ink from the books and Jeongguk’s bedsheets, all inviting him to go back.

So he did. Taking a deep breath and diving into the oasis moonlight to the other side. Feeling the quietness of the world for an instant where only the sound of his moves in the water and his heart pounding on his ears could be heard. The point where his lungs were almost consuming itself until he reached the light of the distant land he didn’t know exactly where was located. Well, maybe he knew where it was located… it had a place on his heart.

The first breathing was always like reborn into a new world. The sudden increase of air reached his lungs before everything else, after that were the sounds, the lights, the water pouring down his locks.

“It was true.” A gentle voice whispered.

Hearing a voice speaking the familiar foreign language was the second thing that made him realize he was back. Although it wasn’t the same voice he had got used to hear during the years. This one was known, it wasn’t the voice he wanted to hear. It was Lady Go’s voice instead of Jeongguk’s.

“It was true… you come from a faraway land the other side of the pond indeed.” The handmaid was so perplexed she almost forgot to hand the shaky boy a blanket to protect his defenseless and dripping body from the aversive cold breeze.

“Lad-y-y Go…” He attempted to say.

“Oh dear, I’m sorry. Here you have.” She covered his shoulders with the blanket and helped him to get off the pond.
Lady Go was one of the fewer if it wasn’t the only the prince would trust the secret of Taehyung’s arrival in order to protect him. She looked beautiful under the moonlight, always preserved like a piece of art, the light also showed a few white hairs among her hair strands and slightly pronounced dark circles under her dark marble eyes.

“Where… where’s Jeongguk…?”

She looked at him with tender eyes full of empathy and grabbing the shapeshifter’s shoulder while telling him all the story of the six months he was missing.

During long days and even longer nights a growing kingdom needed to be defended from all externals threatens, needed more lands in order to establish its power among the other growing nations, to demonstrate they were capable of standing and emit a war cry to whoever decided to set a step on their lands without their permission.

General Lim had been the head of the nation’s army since the times of the prince’s grandfather, served as well during the last king’s ruling and now he was a valuable piece for the new monarch, Jeongsuk. However, after being enrolled for so long it was time he trained a successor who was able to command a force that represented all the power of the sovereign. And Jeongguk was the pupil he was waiting for.

Fast thinker, clever with strategies, a fighter in all the meanings of the word, quick learner and with a good manage of all sort of weapons. The third prince had entrusted himself into the labor of becoming the perfect apprentice. It was the way he had found to escape from the palace during those months where his thoughts travelled distant and wild.

He needed something to focus on, something different from those thoughts; otherwise he was going to lose his mind. That’s why he requested to his eldest brother to send him to the battlefields where he was going to be able of experiencing what he had heard only through warrior tales. He had found on his way out the walls of his luxurious prison by attaching himself to new boundaries and facing new challenges.

That was what Jeongguk had been doing during the months of the elder’s absence. He had been waiting unconsciously some days and completely aware others his arrival. Knowing he had an expedition scheduled during the possible week of his advent he asked Lady Go to wait for him every night until the solstice day arrived, that night her presence was crucial and without questioning much the maid agreed.

After a month of the shapeshifter’s arrival there wasn’t still news of the prince who now was used to be gone for long periods of time, last time he had spent two months out before returning just for a week, then undertaking for a new mission.

Snow fell more like ice stones and less like snow the early morning of the prince’s return. For once it was the boy with candent skin who was waiting for his comeback and not the other way around. Acknowledging from the distance how the sound of his horse’s gallop sounded, how the sound of a dozen of horses coming was like. The prince was home.

His room was also different. He was transferred to a more spacious wing, the one where Jeongsuk’s chamber used to be, Jeongguk had gained the benefit of a bigger room, apart from the noises of the common wings. That didn’t stop the elder from waiting in the middle of the hallway for him.

The way he walked also had changed, he stepped harder on the wood planks like someone who
handled authority, upright like a military would do, like an adult would do. No more a child. He was
taller, muscular and heavier, not only in physical terms but beyond. Although his bunny toothed
smile hadn’t changed and the way his eyes sparked when they met Taehyung’s in the middle of that
quiet hallway.

The elder ran towards him, he never cared about titles, heritage or hierarchy and he wasn’t going to
start now. Hugged the prince as if he intended to break his body in two, while his hands quivered,
and his chest was inflated with all the stored feelings he was holding. For a second it seemed they
were able to fly free.

“Lady Go made it.” The prince breathed with relieve. “You’re here, you’re back.”

“You are back. Look at you, captain.” Taehyung flashed a beautiful square shaped smile.

Jeongguk giggled before hugging him again. The prince hadn’t realized he had been holding his
breath for six months until he felt the tightness of Taehyung’s hands. He greeted his longest friend on
Earth wearing the perfect mask on his face, feeling the arms of the boy around his back and the
embrace that clenched his ribs breaking every bone.

He had promised to himself for the sake of their friendship he was going to do things in the right
way. Maybe Taehyung didn’t love him in the way he wanted him to, but he loved him somehow,
otherwise he wouldn’t keep coming back even after acknowledging the repercussions of his return.

Jeongguk tried to imagine if one day the shapeshifter decided not to comeback. The idea of not
seeing him again was more painful than having him around even if his heart ached; he knew it was
just temporary, he would heal.

The boy with candent skin irradiated light surpassing the moon itself. His smile was stolen from the
tail of a comet and his eyes always sparked reflecting the prince’s face, he could see his own
bittersweet happiness on those bright eyes he had yearned for half year.

Perhaps their hug lasted more than it should have but there was no one else in that hallway who
could notice.

Or that’s what they thought.

XVII

Ceremonials

Taehyung had to swear allegiance to King Jeongsuk as one of the first obligations after his return.
The monarch had grown used to his presence although many ministers and counselors were still
cautious about his rumored back and forth. No one knew exactly where he came from, always a
shady mystery. Lady Go spread the rumor of his ‘orphan’ past, and as a personal favor Master
Young confirmed the story of the boy travelling every year to receive education, all interwoven in
the same web of lies.

The two boys spent brief moments together. Somedays just for a quick meal and others just for a
greeting in the middle of the garden before the prince had to go back to his duties. He was busier
than ever those days with the role of captain the elder had predicted. And as Master Young was
unfortunately going older and blinder every year, Taehyung found himself spending his time writing
letters that travelled all over the kingdom, from west to east, from south to north, he distributed information for the palace, often finding out things before everyone else.

He knew small secrets that looked more like rumors carried by birds and others that were worth of shattering tongues if they were divulged somehow. Taehyung arched one eyebrow while reading aloud the last letter of the stack on Master Young’s desk. The first line wrote “To the friend who only comes to visit during summer”.

“Ah, don’t read it, I recognize the sender. It seems personal; I’ll have it delivered later.” The wise man cut his reading. “That’s all for today. You may leave.”

Taehyung was still a bit puzzled when he left the room by closing the sliding door with a soft move; he got surprised by the presence that was waiting for him outside.

“I thought Master Young was with someone else, an old minister or someone of the court. Your voice gets deeper every year.” Jeongguk mocked.

They used to say they’d use Taehyung’s voice to distress the guards since he could imitate everyone in the palace like a parrot but never had the chance. The elder had learnt to read aloud for the almost full blinded master of the library and acquired a particular way of modulating and intonate the words to the point it was pleasing to hear.

He cleared his throat before imitating Master Young’s voice. “Only time can contribute with education, patient stands out as a quality every person should possess.”

Jeongguk burst into laughter while clapping in amusement. It was similar to the sermons he used to punish two little imps a few years ago. Even the gestures were correct.

“What are you doing here? I thought you had sword training.”

“Yes. I already beat everyone so I passed next to the kitchen and maybe I… got us a little snack on my way here…” The prince lifted one of the long white sleeves of his robe showing a couple stolen honey cakes.

“Your majesty… I’m impressed I must say; you’ve become a true thief in such short time.”

“Shut up, let’s go before Master Young scold us with an hour lecture about well behavior.”

Their relationship wasn’t the same as before but the prince had created an invisible bridge between them. Pretending last visitation didn’t end as it end, pretending it didn’t hurt seeing Taehyung so little, pretending he hadn’t told his father he loved him just before he died… Jeongguk wasn’t good at lying but for sure he had become excellent at ignoring the truth.

He invested on their friendship once again. Building from the foundations he thought where destroyed. Jeongguk didn’t know –how could he?- the shapeshifter felt just like him. Both devoured the sweets in just seconds while wandering around the hallways, laughing at some nonsense joke they invented and no one else understood.

The elder made a great effort on suppress the words he had been saving. He didn’t know how longer he was going to be able to keep his mouth shut; perhaps it was for the best, both playing to be pretenders in an imaginary world of controlled chaos. Only chaos was not there to be controlled, it escaped through slits and little holes here and there where it could see the light.

They saw the light coming from the outside, the winter weak sunlight reflected on the white snow of one of the gardens and both of them had a retrospection moment where they shared the same
memory. Taehyung’s eyes shining like ice and diamond dust, amazed by the wonders of winter.

Without hesitation the younger pushed the shapeshifter through the door, he landed on the mattress of granulated icy stones uttering a big complain due the burning cold.

“Not fair, it’s not fair! Since you’ve come captain there’s no point on playing games with you. You always win! Even in mahjong! And I used to beat you in mahjong without blinking.” He stood up and shook the snow off his clothes.

Jeongguk couldn’t stop laughing as every time he had the chance to annoy Taehyung. Just in the moment when the younger tilted his head back a projectile made of solid ice hit him on his opened mouth.

“Your majesty.” He heard the calling before he could return the attack. Lady Go wasn’t surprise she found them together. “I’m sorry but the king has requested your presence in the throne room immediately. He didn’t specify why but I believe it’s important.”

He sighed. “I’ll be there in a second. Thanks, Lady Go.” He turned around to meet Taehyung’s sad stare. “I… we’ll talk later.”

The elder tried his best to smile widely while still shaking the remains of the cold dust. “We will.”

Jeongguk had to travel that night, into a mission it required especial care. A reduced quantity of men and the stealth of the darkness, not much were said but the order was given. It was a transportation assignment he had done it before only that now the person who came back with them was rather more important than wars for territories.

She was stunningly gorgeous like a flame in the woods, like a lantern guiding the lost ones through the night. Hyesung shone like a firefly. She smiled widely to the third prince who grabbed her hand as he guided her into the carriage. They had met months ago in the middle of summer but now she glowed like a shooting star.

The prince took extra preventions with everything. After all, he had never carried a bride before.

The fuss created on the palace the following days revolted around the mysterious young lady brought to the palace and Taehyung seemed to be the only one who didn’t know her in person. For the following weeks he heard about the beauty and the grace of Lady Hyesung, about her manners and all the things made her perfect.

Until one day he heard half of a conversation between some handmaids.

“Lady Hyesung is a remarkable young woman. She plays the konghou so delicately, I’ve heard her practicing the other day. It was captivating.”

“It is the most suitable candidate. I believe it was about time for a wedding taking place in the palace since Princess Haewon’s wedding last year, it’s been a long time.”

A wedding.

Those words didn’t mean much at first, he knew about the festivities and had witnessed several unions all over the years, back in the desert and there, in the palace. Although when the word
‘wedding’ stuck on his head he couldn’t help but to think about it.

A few days after he finally met Lady Hyesung but not under the circumstances he had wished to. She was floating down the hallway where the sunlight enlightened everything, the young lady laughed and just then, Taehyung recognized the person who was next to her.

The third prince laughed along.

Usually the prince was very shy with strangers and limited his actions to formalities and courtesy chats, but he seemed to be really comfortable around her. It was undeniable she was charming and charismatic, her aura was cheerful and her smile warm but there was something on the elder’s stomach that told him otherwise.

Perhaps was the way the prince smiled or how she hit him lightly for something he whispered.

“Ah… Taehyung!” The prince finally saw him standing in the hallway. “Allow me to introduce you to Lady Hyesung. She’ll be our new permanent company.”

“Nice to meet you, Taehyung. I have heard so much of you, I’m glad we finally meet.”

“The pleasure is mine.” He bowed politely.

“Lady Hyesung is an old friend of our family. I visited her last summer while I was training.”

“He still can’t win against me on checkers. I’m a tough contestant.”

“That’s true she won.” The prince admitted his defeat. “I’ll take Lady Hyesung for tea, would you like to join us?”

“Oh… I still have to help Master Young. Maybe another time.” The shapeshifter excused himself.

The prince couldn’t help but feel a bit sad but in the moment he didn’t think much about it. On the other hand, Taehyung’s mind kept contemplating invisible lines since the younger mentioned summer time.

The letter started with “To the friend who only comes to visit during summer” and just after that, the following day Lady Hyesung appeared on the palace. She smiled and made the prince laugh in a way he thought was only possible when they were together.

He had never experienced jealousy before. He hadn’t tasted the bitterness seeing someone taking his place provoke. The shapeshifter saw their figures fading in the distance, walking towards the tea room and the conjectures were built on his head in just a second.

Perhaps Jeongguk was the one contracting nuptials.

What if Jeongguk was the one getting married?

Taehyung had to go looking for the most trustworthy source of information he had in the palace besides Jeongguk. The one who knew everything that happened just due the fact she habited the place and often people thought she wasn’t listening.

“Tell me everything you know about Lady Hyesung.” He demanded.

“You don’t speak to a young lady like that.” The little voice complained. She was missing two teeth on her smile but still manage to sound intimidating. 
“Oh… Sorry Princess Miyoung. I didn’t mean to sound so rough. Could you please, please tell me what you know about Lady Hyesung?” Taehyung kneeled and joined his hands together to beg her.

“Sit down, you promised to play with me if I told you what I know.” She proclaimed.

Little princess Miyoung was the youngest resident of the palace. Was born the same year Taehyung arrived for the first time and now was eight years old and very aware of the power she had as a one of the crown heirs. She was never mean to Taehyung; she only wanted a play partner. She stared at the elder with her big brown eyes, a little playful mole next to her right eye, same black shiny hair than the rest of her family and those round rosy cheeks like a pair of peaches.

The elder pouted before sitting on the table in front of her and grabbed the porcelain doll. “Princess Miyoung I, Lady Yoo need your help.” He faked a perfectly feminine voice making the child laugh.

“Lady Hyesung is really pretty.” Were the first words that came from the princess. “And she’s going to live with us now. I hope she teaches me how to play the konghou someday.”

“I can teach you how to play the konghou, you don’t need her.”

“Do you know how to play it?” The little princess frowned.

“I can learn… Miyoung… do you like me better than Lady Hyesung?”

The girl nodded in response. “Of course, you’re the one who always plays with me and let me braid your hair.”

“I need you to tell me why Lady Hyesung is here.”

“She’ll be my sister in law that means she’s getting married with Jeon-” Miyoung sneezed in that right moment. “Jeon…”

“Miyoung please…”

“Princess Miyoung, it’s bath time.” One handmaid called.

“I have to go. But she’s going to married Jeon-.” She pronounced the name but with the lack of teeth the shapeshifter didn’t comprehend entirely.

Taehyung wanted to hide under a table forever.

Only nighttime brought some calm to his messy thoughts. Lately he found himself missing the vast infinity of the desert’s starry night, the shapeshifter found the comfort he was looking for while sitting on the rooftop where only the wind blew his worries away. He extended his arms as if he could touch the shining dots above his head, he wondered what were stars made of, silver dust and happy tears or children’s laugh and dandelion’s wishes, sweet dreams and ice butterflies or love thoughts and velvety mist.

The vernal apparition had brought warm days and cool nights where he could collect thoughts and shoot them to the sky trying to group constellations, perhaps stars were made of inconclusive lost thoughts condemned to wander until they collided and came back to Earth.

There, hiding under the veil of the gloom he would always remember the person who appeared on the early morning hours when everyone else was supposed to be resting comfortably. Haewon was
often depicted as a cold character, too serious or emotionless but that night Taehyung learnt that all those were lies.

Haewon was human. Even before Taehyung and Jeongguk found how to sneak out of the palace she had been doing the same for even a longer time, she was the Excellency in terms of stealth and precision, the perfect huntress and the enemy you wished wasn’t yours… He had never seen her crying before.

From the privileged peripheral vision he had from the roof, he could see her wet cheeks and heavy chest. The princess was alone in the arms of the darkness; only a small flame enlightened her face as she kept a candle on her hands that it was almost consumed by the evil wind. Under the embrace of the gazebo she cried her sorrows with mournful silences, the big tears that kept rolling down her face were the only prove she was in great pain.

She kept sobbing as her chest trembled but managed to light the flame with her shaky hands. A big flying lantern she didn’t want to let go but kept escaping from her hands reached the skies right in the moment when the wind ceased its sabotage attempts. That was the only light on the sky, one that flight higher and higher until it reached something beyond.

It had a word Taehyung had read before and, with the years, had got to understand its true meaning. 

Love.

It was a lantern that flight with the impulse of a broken, failed love, the sort that was released when someone died in a moment of total mourning and grief. It didn’t have a name but ‘love’ was valid enough and Taehyung wasn’t one to judge about names. Love also had a face.

He heard the mute sound of her knees collapsing on the ground along with her remained strength. Flowers would grow of the soil where her tears were spread like seeds, white lilies she sowed. Her trembling hands buried themselves on the dirt trying to placate the quake movement. Part of the princess’s heart was gone with that lantern.

If the lantern was consumed by the fire at some point, Taehyung didn’t see it.

Perhaps stars were made of flying lanterns that carried the souls of sundered lovers and saved them until they could meet again.

That night, when it was still dark enough to walk like a shadow, Taehyung went to Jeongguk’s room. He could heard the prince’s breathing, almost snoring, proving he was fully sleep and in a better place where dreams made everything look amusing.

The shapeshifter slightly touched his cheek with his fingertips. For a second he wondered what would life look like for him if he was the one with a lantern wishing to fly as high as the sky limits due the loss of his love.

Perhaps he was about to lost Jeongguk and he didn’t even know. There wouldn’t be room for him in a marriage. But he didn’t think about that in that moment when he felt the soft skin on his fingers, it was a constant ticklish sensation like the flapping of wings.

Time had passed since the last time he visited his chambers, it was odd to be back, he felt the familiar amenity of the sound the prince made while sleeping, but at the same time, it had been so long he almost felt like an intruder once again.
What if Jeongguk woke up in that moment and saw him caressing his skin like a creeper of the night? Would that awoke all the feelings he thought were buried somewhere inside his dusty chest? For a second he wished him to be awake. He imagined the fantasy of running away in the middle of the night and it was almost as tangible as the face of the object of his affection.

But Jeongguk was asleep and he was there imagining things like someone who dreams too much. Taehyung left the room instead of spending the night as many times he had done before. The place in bed next to him wasn’t his to claim, he had lost that privilege in the moment he swore he was going to abandon his selfishness.

Little he knew the prince had become such a good pretender.

“Good morning, your majesty.” The handmaid greeted the princess who looked as the last trace of life had left her body.

“Hyerim, do you have idea why there is a basket full of pears and a bouquet of wild flowers next to my window?”

“Aren’t them from your husband? It’s the season, your grace.”

She didn’t believe those words but the gifts came handy for a broken heart. Haewon held the barrette she refused to abandon closer to her chest; she didn’t smile that day or many after that but that small gesture warmed something inside her.

Sun was shining.

If Jeongguk was getting married… the idea was absolutely devastating. He had lost his chance to tell him the truth and now…

“Taehyung, may I talk with you?”

Hwayoung, the middle princess tried to intercept the distressed boy who walked with no fixed course around the palace. He had already passed three times in front of the room where the princess was drinking tea before she could gather some courage to step in the middle of the hallway and wait for him.

The shapeshifter was so abstracted on his endless walk he didn’t realized the princess was in front of him until he almost ran over her. His gaze was as distended as his mind until the princess brought him back to reality.

“Oh, princess Hwayoung.” He shook his head.

“I was… uh… wondering if you’d like to join me for tea. I have ordered some treats and I thought you would like to…”

“Sorry… I don’t feel in a good mood. I’m sorry but I’ll just make such a dull company. It would be another time.” He showed a weak smile that made the princess close her lips into a thin line trying to hold back her own anguish.

He didn’t return his eyes to see the princess again. If he had done it he would had seen the appalled expression of someone who had never been denied anything on her life.
The shapeshifter directed his path to the outside after that.

“Tae! Tae! Wait!” The prince called for him in the garden.

Spring was in full bloom already and the sun kissed the prince’s face. The trees moved along with the wind in a dance while the shapeshifter sat on the soil, hiding his grief by eating a dozen of pears by himself. The figure of his friend eclipsed the sunlight.

“Hi… I thought you were drinking tea with Lady Hyesung.” He bitterly pronounced her name while Jeongguk sat next to him.

The prince shrugged. “She’s busy. Trying dresses…Wedding plans…”

The shapeshifter gasped. “I can’t believe you’re getting married. I guess it was something that was going to happen eventually but I was expecting at least to have the chance to tell…”

“What? No. No, wait. I’m not… I’m not getting married.” The prince even giggled. “Why would you think that? Jeongsuk is the one marrying Lady Hyesung, he needs someone to rule next to him and he’s been spending entire summers on her domains since they were children. I even went with them last time.”

“You’re… you’re not getting married?”

“Not now at least.” The prince blushed furiously. “But what you were going to say? You didn’t want me to get marry without telling me what?”

“Such a relief.” The shapeshifter stretched his arms.

“Tae… what you were going to say?”

“I’m glad you’re not getting married… at least not now.”

After saying that, Jeongguk couldn’t hide the blush on his face, he avoided the elder’s look.

“How could I get marry and not even telling you? It’s not like there was someone I…” He stole a pear from Taehyung’s pile and put it entirely on his mouth.

“When is the wedding?” Taehyung attended to ask.

“The last day of spring.”

The wedding took part the last day of spring as Jeongguk had said. During the morning the dew of the grass was dried by the warmness of the sunlight. Everyone was getting ready for the ceremony, including the prince and the shapeshifter.

The bride wore an infinite layered gown, red and blue with embroidery dragons and flowers all over her gown. A big crown with several accessories adorned her head exalting the purity on her face, undoubtedly the best complement was her smile. Next to her, the king with his own matching gown and serious expression, he smiled when no one else was watching but as a king he had to keep his posture and manners.

The nation had a new queen by the evening. There was something on Queen Hyesung eyes… the
way she looked at Jeongsuk that made Taehyung wonder if he looked at Jeongguk in the same way because that was how love looked like. Stares even in the most public places and secret gestures in a language only two people spoke.

The anticipated date was also the day the shapeshifter had to go back to the desert. Much had happened during those months, he saw the third prince less times than he was used to, he was now fully committed to his military role but he was not going to miss any minute of his last day on the palace.

They both sneaked out the celebration when the sun started went down. They sat in a bench under one of the leafiest cherry trees and while a rain of petals covered the scene the prince pressed his hands into fits a few times before looking on his pocket.

Both were wearing special gowns for the occasion. Jeongguk’s was silky purple and Taehyung’s was light blue, it was uncomfortable to wear and both barely could move without being in danger of creating a fissure somewhere. Too many layers of clothes for the still burning heat of the evening.

“I… I had the missing bead from the bracelet.” Jeongguk confessed. “I wanted to give this to you before you leave again. Oh…” He shyly extended the complementary bracelet to Taehyung.

It looked almost the same than the one Taehyung had given to him before his departure, the only difference was that where the onyx beads were, white jade ones replaced them and one single black bead occupied the center.

The elder looked enchanted by the new jewel hanging on his wrist.

“I thought if we’re going to be apart at least you could have a piece of me since I have a piece of you here.” Jeongguk instinctively touched the black and white bracelet as he always did when he was nervous.

He wanted to say he already had a piece of him attached to his heart, the bracelet wasn’t more than a metaphor knowing he had already belonged to him for a long time.

Taehyung thought his chest could’ve exploded in that very moment.

The gallant light that guided his return was now more somber than ever as he walked every step towards the pond illuminated by the moonlight. Cherry blossoms in bloom and the question ‘Will we meet again?’ always burning on his pupils like a candle.

“I will be back.” Taehyung beamed. “I always come back to you.” He joined their pinky fingers tying a promise. Their brown eyes spoke more than their mouths.

Taehyung’s eyes were divided between Jeongguk gaze and his bracelet. He didn’t want to go but already felt the magnetic power of the pond calling him. He put a step into the water but quickly looked back to find the prince’s was still staring with his piercing black as night eyes. Then he looked at the bracelet and before disappearing on the waters, he ran towards his direction and kissed his cheek fast enough to astound the young prince who, in the warm night of spring, blushed resembling to ripe cranberries.

“Until we meet again.” Taehyung was smiling while Jeongguk kept trying to figure out what happened.

A faint glow covered his skin and without stop looking at the prince, Taehyung dived in the waters
as many times he had done before.

XVIII

*Smoke Vestiges*

Long were the nights when the young prince rolled on his chambers unable to conceal sleep but longer were the lingering memories of some spring days under the blooming trees. The burning mark of a pair of lips was still warm on his left cheek under his skin. The bed felt emptier since Taehyung stopped visiting him at night but specially now all the feelings he assumed were disguised as a long lasting friendship emerged from the ashes of his chest, burning from inside to the outside.

How could he even conceive the idea of forgetting his feelings for Taehyung?

It was way beyond his possibilities. And the indelible tickle on his cheek was proof enough.

He almost sleepwalked like a ghost through the hallways, seeking for a bit of moonlight that guided his noctambulant steps. It was still summertime and he had five more long months until the elder’s comeback but his feet guided him to their garden.

It was theirs. The cherry tree and the white plump that overflowed of ripe fruit, the circular pond where the half moon was reflected like a mocking smile. Oh he had cursed that moon many times before in need of finding a causer of his misery knowing he was the only one to blame. A phosphorescent orange large fish moved its tail greeting the prince and some crickets lent their instruments for the lonesome occasion.

Morning arrived after the darkest hours, dying the skies with the most violaceous and pink shades of its repertoire, painting some colors to the grey life of that moonlight prince. He only noticed the first yellow ray of sunshine when it covered his face and the birds joined into one voice. Then he saw the cerulean pond and the fresh dew-bathed grass. Just then, he left.

Jeongguk walked towards the throne room where some counselors were already in a meeting, Burst in like a neglected teenager more than a prince and demanded an audience with the king, prioritizing their blood bond before rank.

“I wished you’d do that more often, sometimes they won’t leave me alone.” The king relaxed after he ordered all his men evicted the room for their private meeting. “Now delight me. What’s so urgent you couldn’t even dress up properly?”

“Your majesty, Jeongsuk. I request a private meeting because I would like to tell you something about…” He gulped. “About the king’s death…”

Jeongsuk’s face went somber. They avoided speaking about that for a long time, a year had passed already and the smell of blood from the wounds of losing a parent was never completely gone. He straightened on his wooden seat and waited for his brother’s explanation.

“The day he passed away… I was telling him something important and I wish I could share it with you since there had never been secrets between us but I’m afraid it might affect your vision of my person as it did with father. That’s why I’m being greedy and asking for two favors instead of one, ones only the king can guarantee me, ones I wished I had asked to father.”

“You never masked your words with second intentions, brother. Go ahead and do your request.” Jeongsuk encouraged him.
“My first request is that… I will not contract nuptials and I will not agree to any arranged marriage.”

The room went silent for a complete minute while their gazes met. The king was trying to read his brother, decipher what was behind those words. He finally raised his voice again.

“If I had to be fair, that would also have to exclude our sisters and the second prince. It’s a duty of the royal family to assure and strengthen the ties among families, why would I meet your demands before the others?”

“I have given his majesty a lot of territories under General Lim’s guardianship and I will commit to keep adding lands to your domain. Although I believe I won’t be able to accomplish such mission acknowledging I have a wife waiting for my return.” The prince bit his lips.

“Jeongguk what you’re asking… I’ve been king for not longer than a few seasons and I don’t have heirs who are suitable for the task. I can’t promise those loyal landlords more than what father already promised to them.”

“I understand but there are other ways to show off your power… The big city in the north, the one we thought it was impenetrable; I can give it to you. No, I will give it to you as sign of my allegiance and when I return you’ll grant me what I’m requesting.”

“You are aware of the fact that territory belongs to the ones who rule beyond the walls. They are already fighting a war and we’ll trespass the limits of our neutrality.”

“I am.” The prince answered with solemnity. There was a spark on his eyes that resembled to his father but also his mother, fierce and fearless together hand to hand.

“What’s your second request?” The king inquired already fascinated by his determination.

“I will tell you when I return.”

Taehyung kept admiring the white beads on his wrist, adoring every single one of them but specially the black onyx pearl right in the middle, the one used to belong to Jeongguk. He played with it constantly, moving the bracelet from one end to another. His arm covered the sunlight while he moved it, unable to hide his smile.

He was lying face up, counting spongy clouds that transited the sky as casual visitors, never staying for too long, they mutated into different shapes, never the same. They were in the middle of spring and the heat was rising faster than new trees. He would lie if he said he wasn’t anticipating the end of the vernal season.

“Taehyung.” The voice broke the spell. “Can I talk with you?”

It was odd seeing the wise grandma out of the oasis, normally she wouldn’t risk to expose her face under the brave sun. Her skin resembled to the thin paper he used in the palace, Taehyung hadn’t noticed how deteriorated she was until he saw her under daylight, walking slowly almost out of breath after just a few steps.

He stood up right away, concerned for her condition, guided her back to the tranquil shadows of the leafy trees, both sat under a tall and thick trunk whose top wasn’t visible. From where they were they had a brief sight of the lake the boy with candent skin knew too well.

“What’s the matter?” Taehyung asked without losing more time. Perhaps she was feeling ill.
She recovered her breath before raising her voice again. “I should’ve told you this last time but I didn’t believe it was going to get worse. Join me, I can walk.”

The boy followed her while taking care of where they stepped on. Slowly moving towards the water body in the middle of the small jungle where the life flowed with lightness. The light from the skies reflected on the surface of the lake like a giant mirror. Suddenly she stopped and stared at the water.

“The oasis is drying.” She announced with her eyes fixed on the horizon.

“What?” Taeyhung tilted his head.

“Is getting dry, the water will be gone soon and the portal will be closed forever.”

“No. No, it can’t be… It can’t be happening I found the oasis years ago and…”

“You did find it for a reason. Look at it.”

He didn’t want to; he didn’t want to face it. He knew if he saw it with his eyes it would be real, it would become an image he couldn’t erase. Finally, he turned around and stared at the lake. The water had descended almost one third of its volume, the scorching heat was drying it, they used the water of the lake to survive and even animals came looking for relief. And now it was getting reduced by every hour that passed by.

“What do we do? What can I do? It can’t… It can’t… I can’t stop…”

“It won’t last long, maybe two more years… more, maybe less. I can’t tell you how long but you have to know so when the time comes…”

“The time for what?”

“To choose what you want.” Her voice pierced his ears and reached the deepest of his self.

Taehyung bit his inner cheek trying to contain the tears that were already accumulating on his eyes. He didn’t want to worry about it… he didn’t want to choose between his family and Jeongguk. He couldn’t.

*But…* perhaps it was for the best. That was how it would end, no goodbyes but an abrupt cut between dimensions. If he didn’t cross anymore he wouldn’t risk the young prince’s life anymore… it wouldn’t suppose a problem for him…

His chest was shattered and his heart was ripped out of his body when he understood.

That was going to be the last time he was visiting the love of his life.

When the time came, he dived into the waters, aware of the already reduced size. It used to take longer to cross to the other side.

He asked the wise grandma if there wasn’t another way of going through, but portals were unpredictable, opened a few times every century and if they were in disuse disappeared faster than ice under the sun. He could spend years looking for another door, a fissure and still he wouldn’t be sure it would take him back to the palace.

The best he could do was going one last time to say goodbye.
He wasn’t surprised when Lady Go received him once again. The shapeshifter already knew the prince was on his way of becoming a conqueror but what concerned him was that the maid’s expression wasn’t bright as it used to be. It looked like she aged up in just a few months, worry wrinkles on her face and sleep privation reflected on her dark eye bags.

“Welcome back.” She covered him with the blanket. “I’m glad you have returned.”

“I’m glad to be back… where’s...?” The question got trapped on his tongue as the maid looked away avoiding his gaze.

“Let’s go inside first. It’s cold, I made some tea.” She grabbed his arm guiding him inside.

It was indeed, the coldest night but it wasn’t due the weather.

The beverage remained untouched on the little table. Not a soul emitted a sound on the hallway while everyone else slept; the candles were their only company.

“He hasn’t returned yet… he left a month ago, the disputed territory used to be part of the kingdom but got taken away and renamed. As part of an agreement it was supposed to stay neutral but the prince’s ambitious. General Lim and he planned a strategy…”

“Nevertheless he hadn’t returned yet? When he was supposed to be back?”

“Around two weeks ago. Right after the finish of the harvest, it was supposed to be a surprised arrival and neat peaceful conquest but there are never peaceful agreements on those situations.”

“Lady Go I have to go and find him… bring him back.”

“No. He wouldn’t want it… There’s nothing you can do. We must keep our faith; a letter came a few days ago... The situation wasn’t easy but neither impossible, he’ll return.”

“You don’t understand, Lady Go… I can help him somehow. I have to find him before it’s too late… I have to tell him-”

His voice got lost in the middle of the fuss. A retinue of guards moved to the entrance of the palace yelling different things, but under the incomprehensible and incoherent hubbub he caught one line, everything he needed to know.

“The third prince has return!”

Both the shapeshifter and the handmaid joined the crowd following their way to the gates. Taehyung ran through some individuals and probably had pushed the king himself if he was on his way. Jeongguk was there.

His hair was still wet from his travelling through the portal; he was wearing the clothes Lady Go had given to him minutes ago. Camouflaged, almost invisible to the residents of the palace who woke up with the rhythm of the disorder, the boy made his way going faster than anyone else. He was there at the moment two guards opened the heavy doors revealing the image.

A wounded and weakened prince carrying the old General Lim, right in the edge, collapsing in front of his eyes.

Taehyung held a gasp before running directly to them.
Jeongguk woke up twelve hours later, feeling the pain piercing all over his body, swollen arms, legs, inflamed muscles, itchy scars and new red lines inflicted by men. His breathing was irregular but the doctor assured he would survive with the proper repose. The shapeshifter had sneaked into his room turned into a mouse that went unnoticed into the mysteries of the night. Taehyung remained by his side unable to go. He remembered years ago when the prince unveiled himself to spend hours of his life next to his injured body, he was going to do the same.

“Tae?” His sweet voice sounded so low and fragile. “Tae is that you?” It might’ve been the pain and the fever but he wanted to know if he was hallucinating.

“I’m here. It’s me, Taehyung. I’m back.” He answered in a low voice hidden in the dark.

“Tae…” His lips trembled and his cheeks were covered in tears. “Tae don’t go.”

“I won’t. I’m here.” He grabbed his free hand, squishing it as hard as he could.

“I have to… tell you…”

“Don’t worry about it now. We are here. I’m won’t let you alone, I promise.” He kissed his forehead, he pressed his lips against the burning skin of his, wishing to placate the pain somehow.

Besides from the wound under his ribcage, others were mostly superficial. A few cuts and scratches all over his body, it was painful, to bleed and heal but he was healing little by little. After his return he started gaining strength as the winter flight above their heads, installing itself comfortably to stay during a long season.

After a week and a half the prince could already walk limping with the help of a servant.

He woke up one morning with his mind set into one purpose, reuniting with the king.

Jeongguk couldn’t walk fast without someone helping him but he insisted on walking that path alone. No matter how long it would take, he was going to get to the throne room alone. The third prince didn’t need to be announced to change the environment of the place, where everyone was agitated and talkative a sudden silence reigned better than some monarchs. The men cleared the room without a direct order, just commanded by the intensity of the prince’s glance.

The king waited in silence until his brother made the first approached and kneeled in front of him.

“General Lim has spoken with me before. I have acknowledge of what you did.”

“And… I came here to make my second request since the city is now under your domain.”

“Don’t force yourself. I will concede what you’re asking for.”

He looked deteriorated, his bandages were clean but was under reflected the horrors he had witnessed and none of them was free of blood.

“Before you explain what was so important you risked your life I’ll decree the following, you have already done much for the kingdom. It’s not your duty to be outside on the battlefield, you will rest until your strengths are completely restored and then you will rest some more. And I’m not demanding this as the king but as your brother, although if you need a written statement I can call a scribe.”
“There’s no need. I will follow your orders.”

“We agree. Now, go ahead, what’s that you wanted for granted?”

That night the prince rested uncomfortably on his bed, unable to rotate his position due to the pain. Then he heard the soft breathing of a south wind.

“Tae?” He spoke to the gloom.

“I thought you were sleeping. I’m sorry.” He sat on the edge of the bed; the prince could feel his weight on the mattress.

“I can’t… it still hurts.” His voice trembled. “Can you… can you come here? Please.” He shyly asked tasting the waters.

The shapeshifter hesitated for a second but finally laid next to him, embracing him into a hug. The prince couldn’t have wished for nothing more, he buried his face on the elder’s robe, breathing his essence, wishing to never forget how his honeyed skin smelled like.

He had missed him more than ever while being abroad fighting; long nights in which he didn’t know if he was going to be able to comeback, to see his face again. He didn’t know if he was going to be able of hugging him again, suddenly all their previous problems seemed to be irrelevant; he just wanted to listen what Taehyung’s chest sang.

“I killed someone.” The knot on his throat grew bigger. “I tried not to… I really tried but… the last night General Lim got cornered and this man nailed his sword into his thigh, he was ready to stab him but I was faster. I got there before he could finish it and I… I was the one who stabbed him in the chest; my sword got stained with thick red blood that under the nightlight looked like swamp mud. I crossed his chest and I saw his eyes at the moment the life was drained of his body… I have never seen something so horrible.”

The prince trembled, his lips, his body, and his voice. He didn’t know if Taehyung was going to be capable of facing him again but the elder pressed him closer until the tears soaked his clothes.

“It was him or General Lim and…”

Taehyung shut him up by stroking his hair tenderly, allowing him to cry. Jeongguk knew military men were not supposed to cry, after all they had to get used to that kind of situations. But he couldn’t help it, he couldn’t help feeling guilty knowing he had taken someone’s life.

“I’m here to bury all the pain and terrors you saw. Cry all you want, no one is going to tell you it’s not allowed. I’m not going to tell you it’s not allowed.”

And the prince spread a waterfall until his fountains were dried and his broken spirit was contained inside of those candent arms that protected him of the sorrows of the night. Wishing there was something else he could do besides hugging him as if the world was ending nevertheless that was all Jeongguk needed.

XIX

Youth
The process of recovery was lengthy and tortuous. Inner and outer damage healed at different paces. It required two months until the prince could ride his horse again; still he only took some morning wanderings inside the limits of the palace. Wounds healed and cicatrized into new marks he would carry on his body from that moment on. But the light shone in the sky and a new day was born, and with it, hope was also renewed.

He had got used to a new routine, some days he spent time inside reading and learning about political matters others he practiced outdoors, horse riding and shooting arrows, sword fighting and some days just feeling the heat of the warm sun on his body.

Jeongguk was brushing the stallion’s mane, taking care of the knots and spending extra time on the spots the horse enjoyed being caressed when he turned around and saw the radiant figure of the brunette boy. He couldn’t help but displaying a wide smile that occupied his entire face.

“Good morning.” The prince saluted.

Without saying a word, the shapeshifter grabbed his wrist right where his bracelet rested proudly and took him outside.

“What are you doing?” He asked in the middle of giggles and fond stares.

“We are going fishing.”

“What? We haven’t fished since I was… thirteen? And as far as I remember we both were terrible fishermen.”

“His majesty? Captain of the nation? The golden son who can do everything he proposes to?”

Jeongguk inflated one of his cheeks and then showed a cocky smirk. “Alright. If that’s what you wish, we’re going fishing.”

Taehyung found quiet brook where the water were peaceful enough to lodge a vast community of species ready to be disturbed by their contagious laughs. Their lack of ability was compensated by their imminent competition, just like when they were children, they gave up after a few tries but back their friendship revolved around doing thing to avoid boredom, nowadays it was more about doing anything that could give them some time together.

“I saw a big one sliding over there!”

“It’s chasing a shoal. Who catches it first, wins.”

So the competition began and both of them tried to sabotage each other in order to catch the fish. At the end, none of them got it, it seemed like years did not better for their fishing experience. The only they could possibly had caught was a cold or one hundred mosquitoes ready to bite.

Whenever Jeongguk felt a bit blue, a hopeful sunshine came to his way to rescue him during those days. Taehyung had thought they might need to recover some of their childhood memories together, as a good closer. He hadn’t be able of telling him about the drying pond or the possibility they were about to face, not after all he had been through.

Instead, he preferred taking him to adventures both of them had enjoyed some time ago, seeing he smiling was a priority. Everything evoked memoirs of their secret escapades when they were just kids playing to be explorers, the elder managed to keep his rectangular smile shining bright,
forgetting the rest of the problems, forgetting about everyone else.

Life was an experience that demanded to be lived. And there they were, running in the wild following the curse of the river with no further indications. Just the two of them, as if the world they left behind disappeared with every step they took and a new one was built with the touch of their feet on the soil. It needed someone screaming out of their lungs, someone willing to chase the dawn and the sunrise at the same time.

Some days they just ran. Jeongguk learnt to run again next to Taehyung, he remembered feeling of the wind on his face and the adrenalin on his veins telling him he was as capable of fly as the boy next to him. When the cliff got on their way, the question floated on the air shall we?

And they jumped, knowing there was water under them but at the same time ignoring it, they felt what was like flying together for once. Never letting go each other’s hands, never wishing to. The big splash made the world shake; they felt so deep into the crystalline waters they thought maybe there was not coming back.

Back in the surface their exhausted breathings matched and the incessant pantings barely gave them time to recover before bursting into laughter once again. Lately they were happier than ever, as if they could live in their lonesome planet in another galaxy, into an eternal present.

The power of laughing was also healing.

Under the cool shadow of the trees not so far away from the palace but further enough to be alone, the young prince and the shape shifter had successfully sneaked out without been noticed, once again.

That day the prince had to finish some assignments given by Master Young so he had brought with him his inkwell along with a brush and a few thin sheets to finish his duty paperwork before resting comfortably as the elder was doing. There was nothing much left to do. As usual, his presence alone was enough distraction for the young heir who made several mistakes while trying to focus his thoughts on the letters and papers for the ministers.

Taehyung was gracefully lying on the grass, arms extended towards the sky while trying to catch a white butterfly that danced around his long tan fingers until the insect rested on the tip of his index. The elder had learnt all over the years to stay quiet while his friend finished his tasks. Lady Go had explained to him when they were younger but he finally understood it when he grew older. On the other hand, even if the years had passed by, the prince still had problems concentrating when the shapeshifter was around.

Especially that spring when he was more than aware of the elder's movements and the gorgeous color of his skin that glowed when the light filtered through the leaves of the trees, marking spots where the prince had the urgency of pressing his lips against it.

Jeongguk cursed when he noticed he had written another character wrongly ruining all the work he had done previously. He ripped the page in two and when turned around to grab a blank new sheet he realized there were none left.

"What's wrong?" Tae asked and the sound of his voice made the butterfly fly away.

It was deeper, smoother after he took a nap and Jeongguk had a shiver every time he heard to him.

“I ran out of paper.” The prince lamented himself with a sour expression.
“Oh, you had much left to write?” The elder rolled on his stomach without caring of the dirt and the leaves on the ground. He was now facing the heir with those brown wooden eyes of his.

“No, it’s not... Just a poem I had to memorize and writing helps me.”

Taehyung looked down and then he raised his glare with an idea shinning on them.

“You can use me.” He sat on the ground in front of him, so close Jeongguk could see some remaining leaves on his long brown hair.

“W-what?” It was a miracle he hadn’t dropped the brush before the elder turned around.

Jeongguk just had time to babble a silly incomplete question before the boy with candent skin removed the white robe that covered his large sun kissed back. The prince held a gasp on the back of his throat while Taehyung tied his hair with a hair pin. It was like a plain of the desert where the sun always illuminated the dunes that were his shoulder blades.

“The ink is going to stain your clothes, it’s fine I can copy it later and...”

“I can wash it later, we were going to swim. You need to memorize it, don't you?” Taehyung insisted.

“Y-yes but...”

“I've been told I interrupt much of your education already. I don't want to be anything similar to an obstacle.”

“Uh... Stay still... It won't take much...” Jeongguk bit his already rosy lips; he hadn’t realized he wasn’t breathing properly.

“Take your time but I can't assure you I'll keep completely quiet if it tickles.” The boy announced innocently.

“The ink might be cold so it's important you try, alright?”

The faster he finished the poem the faster Taehyung would cover again and they would continue with their plans, that was what the prince thought for a second. The elder nodded enthusiastically and tensed his upper back. Jeongguk pressed his lips together into a thin line, afraid he might wound his lower lip until it bleed.

The prince wet the brush on the ink and traced a thick line that made the elder shivered due the sudden sensation produced by the touch; still he did his best and stood quietly. Following the line of his spine, from his nape down to almost reach his hips, he repeated the procedure once again, hesitating with every new approach, touching indirectly his skin, caressing it through the ink with every stoke. His breathing became heavy as if he was inside of a sauna.

When he finished he could read it perfectly, even using such a peculiar canvas, his lines were even better than the ones he had filled in the paper.

“What does it says?” The elder asked while pointlessly trying to catch a glimpse of the writing.

床前明月光，
疑是地上霜。
举头望明月，
低头思故乡。
“Before my bed, the moon is shining bright, / I think that it is frost upon the ground. / I raise my head and look at the bright moon, / I lower my head and think of home.”

“That's beautiful.” There was a radiant smile drawn on his face.

“It is.” Jeongguk said without thinking about poetry in particular.

For an instant the younger could admire his work thinking about the poem he now had graven on his mind, unable to replace the image he had in front of him. Suddenly Taehyung started lying down his back until his neck was resting on the younger's shoulder.

The nature went mute for a second. Or that's what Jeongguk thought because he could only listen to his heartbeat running wild. No birds, no brooks, no wind touching leaves and branches, just the sound of the drums on his ears.

Taehyung effortlessly reached the soft lobe of his ear, the touch of the tip of his fingers tickled and burnt under his skin.

Jeongguk turned his head towards his direction, meeting his dark wooden eyes and the smile on his lips. There was a moment when the intensity of their stares burnt down the field around them. Taehyung broke the moment standing up first. He knew, he knew they were about to cross the one boundary he had promised not to break. That was the last time he was going to pass through the portal, Jeongguk was going to be happier without him thus there was no need to ruin everything.

But the prince was one to take his own decisions as well, and he was tired. Tired of being confused, of thinking he was the only feeling that way. He caught his hand from the soil he was seating and brought him close enough to breathe the same air. Jeongguk grabbed his naked shoulders and pulled Taehyung closer until their noses almost touched.

“What are you doing?” He demanded. “What kind of game are you playing, Taehyung?”

The elder's mouth went dry. He wanted to explain it all to him but he knew he wasn't going to be able of it.

Due the lack of response, Jeongguk stood up and pushed him until his body collided with the trunk of the tree, not hard enough to hurt him but to call his attention to those dark eyes, hungry of answers.

“Tell me! I demand to know!” His voice was a broken sound that perforated a hole on the elder's heart. “Taehyung, please...”

His semblance became somber. Still he had no response which ended up destroying the prince's will. He slowly fell down on the wet ground along as the first teardrop fell with him. He sobbed and that noise made Taehyung surrender. He landed on the same ground.

“You can't like me...” The elder gulped and looked away.

“What are you saying?” Jeongguk lifted his gaze to meet his. “Who in the world told you that?”

“No one. I heard it... It has no importance.” “You... you can't like me the way you do because of me, because of what I am...”

“Taehyung. Look at me.” The elder refused. “Please. This is important.”

The shapeshifter met his passionate eyes.
“If you were the ground where I walk I would be seed to root in the deepest of you. If you were water I would drown myself until I would be full of you. If you were air, I would become ash to keep floating in the wind until I’d disintegrate in the eternity. If you were fire...if you were fire I would burn with you tonight.”

And after saying that, Taehyung destroyed all the walls and barriers extending his hand to touch his face. His contrite soul couldn’t help it anymore, they had repressed themselves for too long.

He kept staring at those wet eyes like rain he had met years ago, they were the same, dark marbles full of void and, full of life, full of infinity. He could see himself reflecting on those shining eyes, he could see it all. All those feeling he had been hiding for so long, those feelings that got him crying in desert for long sleepless nights, those feelings that consumed his soul, those feelings that made his heart beat.

He had been in love with his little prince for too long. Perhaps it was selfish to love someone under their circumstances but he had never got the chance to be greedy. Maybe this was their chance.

Taehyung got closer until their foreheads crashed together, while closing his eyes and slightly opening his mouth, he kissed his rhubarb lips without regretting any second of it. They kissed as if they had all the time on the world, as if they were the only two people in the world. That locus amoenus had become their secret in time and space, somewhere where they invented the rules as the kings of that parcel of ground.

Jeongguk licked his lips and grabbed the back of his neck, he shared a tear after their lips got separated. They were breathing the same exhilarating air, heavy and overwhelming. They mouths clashed again, like an agonistic encounter between old rivals except the violence of their actions was moved by the hunger of years apart.

They kissed until they went numb and the sun hid on the horizon. They kissed unaware of anything else. Jeongguk ruined the perfect writing on Taehyung’s back while conquering the desert with his hands, and the elder advanced on strange territories discovering irregularities of the ground of his abdomen.

It was like they had been kissing for years when they took a moment to breathe, their swollen lips were restless.

“How long?” Jeongguk asked. “How long have you feeling like this?”

“Too long. Years, perhaps always…”

“So… back then when…”

“I didn’t want to but… I had to. I had to decline and I regret it. If I knew…”

Jeongguk kissed him again. He didn’t want to hear it, he just wanted to recover their lost time. All those times he wished to kiss those lips, all the occasions he looked away to think about something else knowing he couldn’t want what he wanted. He needed to erase all the dark memories and replace them with the taste of his luscious mouth.

The fireflies started to show creating a perfect environment. Their yellowish green lights were the only thing they could see in the dark of the night but they knew how to find each other with something beyond senses. The insects overflew their heads and surrounded them but there was nothing that would separate them now.

“I’m sorry.” Taehyung said even out of breath. “I shouldn’t have…”
“I know.” Their hands were still tangled playing with their fingertips and inner palms.

“I think you should know… I love you. I love you so much.”

Jeongguk’s chest exploded with reborn butterflies coming from the place he thought it was well locked and secured. Those were the words he had been waiting to hear for years and now, under the gaze of the moon, he could breathe again.

“I love you, Taehyung.” He said in the elder’s native tongue, the one he hadn’t used in years until the moment was right. “I have loved you for ages.”

“Jeongguk there’s something I need to tell you.” The elder felt the twinge on his stomach.

“Before, I want to ask you something.” The younger grabbed his hands firmly.

The elder waited for the prince’s words. They came like a hurricane.

“Taehyung, would you stay after the solstice? Would you spend summer with me?”

Part 3

«One day,

I wrote a long, long letter to the moon

It would not be brighter than you

But I lighted a small candle

(…)

The dawn passes

And when that moon falls asleep

The blue shades that stayed with me disappears

Following into the deep night

The sound of you singing

Brings the red morning

A step, and another step. »

XX

Summer

Once upon a time there were two lovers who met in one remote and unlikely place they called theirs and perhaps, their story was meant to become cosmos.

The shapeshifter was speechless.

He needed to answer.
“I know you only can cross during the solstices but… if you don’t cross when the spring is over, you may cross during the next solstice on winter.” The prince didn’t let go of his hands.

_Solstices only happen twice in a year, every six months, either winter or summer. This is the only time when the lake looks like this, a night every six months._

“Jeongguk… I don’t know… I mean, it’s not that I don’t want to but…”

_Was that idea that outlandish?_

“You don’t have to answer right now. There’s still plenty time until summer but I’d like you to stay.”

_The oasis is drying._

“We should go back, it’s dark already.” Taehyung reached for his hand warming it in the cool evening.

Their hands didn’t let go each other all the way back.

Still dizzy, the prince could tell two things as facts. First, it was a wonderful day and second, he was madly in love with Kim Taehyung. Everything else was relative. It was raining, a storm scourged with ferocious winds but no weather could fade his smile away. _It was a beautiful day._

The prince had a look through the sliding door of Master Young's library before introducing himself in. Inside there were a pile of books on the desk and the silhouette of certain young man reaching for a book on the top of a shelf.

Jeongguk stole a kiss from his lips while the elder read the book unaware of his presence until a honeyed peck touched his florid lips.

“Oh!” The elder exclaimed. He hit Jeongguk lightly with the book. “You surprised me.”

The prince giggled before greeting him with a melodic voice. “Good morning, _my love._”

Taehyung felt the fireworks exploding on his cheeks and under every fiber of his body. “Good morning, _my prince._ Someone’s in a good mood.”

“I'm _always_ in a good mood.” He accommodated the elder’s missing lock behind his ear.

“No, you're cranky when you wake up. Let me guess, meat for breakfast?”

“Maybe... Maybe I'm just happy.” Taehyung tilted his head unable to contain a grin. “What were you doing? Can I help?”

“Classifying Master Young's manuscripts... You're distracting me.”

“Am I? _Oh, what a shame_...” There wasn’t a single gram of remorse on his body.

Jeongguk slid his hand inside the brunette's robe, exposing part of his glowing tanned skin. He loved seeing those collarbones bared; he couldn't help but seal a red mark with his mouth now he had the chance. Taehyung buried his fingers on his black charcoal hair, pulling it just enough to turn the younger into a mess. Their lips collided chasing the desire both bodies aspired, as if the source of their passion was contained somewhere inside their mouths, and maybe that was the case, whatever
was the answer they were willing to unravel the mystery.

“Wait, someone could come inside and see us.” The elder was out of breath but the prince didn't stop caressing his neck with his tireless tongue.

“I don't care...” The younger whispered on his ear.

Jeongguk knew where Taehyung’s weak spot was, he melted when the prince started biting his earlobe as if it was a piece of juicy apricot. The elder had to press his lips together to avoid letting out a deep whine.

“We have… uh… to be... uh… careful...” He couldn’t complete the fully sense of the sentence, he couldn’t even complete the sense of his thoughts.

“We have been careful... too careful in my opinion.”

The prince buried his lips on Taehyung’s vulnerable neck before noticing someone was approaching to the library. They heard the sliding door opening with a single move.

“Taehyung!” Hwayoung, the princess, expression was anything but content. “Oh, it's you. I thought Taehyung was here.” She pressed her lips together pouting. “Is that a kitten?”

As usual no matter if they were locked inside for the rest of the day, she was wearing her best clothes, pink and white dresses with a couple of layers and embroidery flowers and ribbons.

“Oh… it is? Yes, it's a cat…” The prince blinked twice before realizing the shapeshifter had disappeared into a furry white spotted animal he was now carrying. “A cat.”

“Look at the kitten, it’s so cute!” The princess rushed next to him to pet the shapeshifter without knowing his true identity. “Where did you find it?”

Taehyung purred while she stroked his hair.

“It… it was here when I entered.” Jeongguk was about to hyperventilate.

“Are you alright? It seems like you have fever or…” She attempted to touch his sweaty forehead. “Your face is red tinted.”

“Oh… I… I have to go. I better take this cat out before one of the guards finds it.”

“But it’s raining. You can’t just let him outside!” Hwayoung had developed a big affection towards the cat she just met; she did the same with all tiny or shiny things.

“Wait, why were you looking for Taehyung?” The prince inquired.

“I wanted to invite him to drink tea with me. You’re not invited.” She frowned.

“I didn’t want to go either.” The prince pressed his tongue against his inner cheek before speaking again. “I’m sorry for telling you this but Taehyung is too busy to spend time with you.”

“You are not him to decline my invitation.” The girl clicked her tongue already used to her older brother mistreats.

“Well he’s not going to answer either.” The cat meowed in response on his arms. “I have to take this cat outside if you excuse me.” He moved the animal abruptly from the princess’s hands.
“Hey!” She cried out while he was leaving the library.

The cat –Taehyung- stared with big feline eyes and pressed its paw against the prince’s chest.

“You think I’m being too harsh with her?” Jeongguk asked to the boy turned into animal he was carrying.

He meowed in response and the prince didn’t need to guess what he was trying to say. Carelessly he opened a window and threw the fluffy friend out of the palace in the middle of the rain.

“Tae… Tae…” Jeongguk called for him outside his room while knocking his door.

“I’m not talking with you.” The shapeshifter dryly answered when he opened the door. Then he closed it and opened again with theater manners. “At any cost.” Taehyung ended up pouting on the doorframe.

“Are you still mad with me because I threw you into the rain? I already apologized. Twice.”

“It took me half an hour to find an entrance and I was already soaking by the time.” There was bitterness on his words. The elder kept his head stock in the doorframe without any intention of letting Jeongguk in.

“Oh, come on! You shouldn’t take Hwayoung’s side but mine… And why did you turn into a cat anyways?”

“I had to think fast because certain prince is not being sensible when it comes to be discreet.” He mumbled as he pointed towards the younger.

“Then I suppose you don’t want to listen to my invitation…” The prince feinted with leaving.

“Wait!” The shapeshifter called. “What invitation?” He asked as curiosity sparked on his eyes.

“Since today’s weather is better than two days ago… I was thinking perhaps we could horse ride to the sea shore… I hope a cat is not scared of the ocean.”

Taehyung opened the door but still pretending being offended. “I’ll consider it. Does your invitation include some sort of bribery?”

“I might have asked for some honey-sesame cookies in advance…” The younger held a small fabric bag in front of the shapeshifter’s eyes.

“Do you truly consider I would sell myself so easily? A bag of cookies… what kind of trick…”

“I also brought dragon’s beard…” The prince tested.

The shapeshifter held his breath.

“Your highness has convinced me.” Taehyung smiled widely.

The sight of the blue waves brought back a melancholy feeling he never thought he would experience beyond the palace’s walls. There was no ocean in the desert and the way Taehyung missed the ocean was the same he missed Jeongguk during his months out. Waves made of sapphires
and foam made of pearls exploding into the surface like a beating heart after a love confession, anxious and flustered. The sound of the clashing waters breaking and demolishing the sands, attacking the shore enthusiastically after a storm and them, on the beach, inhaling the salt impregnated in the air while feeling of the serene flying miniscule water drops on their cheeks tasting the sugar of their mouths.

It felt like an oasis, *it felt like paradise*.

“Whoa… It’s been so long since I saw the ocean. I used to come here some days when you were out on expeditions.” The shapeshifter looked at the scenery trying to remember all the details of the last time he was there.

“You sneaked out without me? I feel betrayed.”

The prince took the last cookie from the fabric bag. Dragon’s beard was long go during their way there. The horses were grazing not so far from the sands.

“What I was supposed to do? Wait in the palace for you to comeback?”

The prince lowered his head. “That… was essentially what I did when you were in the desert.”

Taehyung’s heart shrank. “Oh… I’m sorry it’s not what I meant. If it makes you feel better it wasn’t easier on the other side.” The brunette reached his hands, interlocking their fingers together.

Jeongguk sighed. “I wish I could cross with you. I deeply wish it.”

*Careful with what you wished to the stars. It’s easily forgotten the biggest and shiniest star is always upon the skies.*

Taehyung bit his thumb before asking reluctantly. “I know a way you could experience it.”

“What?” Was all the prince could said before the elder took his hand and guided him towards the ocean.

The ocean wasn’t less threatened with the sons of the sky, summoning the specters of a tempestuous climax. As their bodies were dragged into the sinister and yet spectacular domain Taehyung indicated the young prince they were about to dive in, he had to take a deep breath before following his way under the sea.

The first thing Jeongguk noticed was the sound of the movements their bodies made under there, graceful like a dance; it got darker and darker as they descended. Taehyung found what he was looking for, a cave shaped rock construction below the water. They swam until they went in, it was difficult to see something else, in a moment the shapeshifter had caught his hand and wasn’t going to let him alone in the vast void of the sea.

Jeongguk felt what was like being trapped under the water, his lungs were burning out like a bonfire and the pressure of the water was pulsing on his ears until it was almost unbearable. He felt his chest in pain wondering how long it had pass since they went down; but most of all, he felt silence calm Taehyung always referred to.

When he thought he was not going to resist much longer, a light. He had never missed air so much as he took the first breath into a new world, filling his burned out lungs with life and relief. It took a few moments before Jeongguk could recover himself and assimilated what happened. They were inside a cave underground, lost from time and space, saved into the water arms.
There was no light but glowing mushrooms illuminated the cave and made them feel like they were in another dimension, the blueish faint brightness they irradiated was enough to locate the shapeshifter who kept swimming around naturally.

“That was… incredible. I can’t… what… how…” Were some of the numerous questions he had.

Taehyung grabbed him to one of the extremes and both of them were out of the water body.

“I found this place not long ago while I was turned into a fish. I have always wanted to show it to you, I thought you might like it, come, there’s more to see.”

Their clothes were soaking wet and it was easier to walk after they got rid of some of them. Some non-subtle glances were exchanged in the process, no they haven’t seen each other topless but not on their circumstances they were facing nowadays.

The humid cave was slippery everywhere, water dripped from every possible corner so they had to walk slowly, the sound of the drops falling and touching the ground was the only noise they could hear along with their steps.

“This way.” Taehyung indicated.

Even in the minimum light they had he saw what the shapeshifter meant. The cave’s ceiling was made of white rocks like alabaster, traversed by a million of lines that made it look like marble, they follow different directions and took some roads creating imperfect shapes. There were some formations where water accumulated as well but in those, there was a slight shine produced by the seaweed that lived inside them, they were like lakes of light.

They had found their own Ryūgū-jō.

The elder sat comfortably on the solid ground while the younger admired everything and finally took place in front of him. Jeongguk was still breathless and his chest moved continuously coming and going. He looked like a child while sitting with his legs crossed and his bright bunny smile illuminating the darkness.

“I’m glad you like it.” Taehyung couldn’t hide his fond stare.

“It’s extraordinary I must say I’m impressed.” His face glowed.

“It’s great, isn’t it? It’s like a secret place no one can reach.”

The younger nodded in response, still fascinated by the magic newly brought into his life by Taehyung. He suddenly grabbed the elder’s face with his hands and planted an unexpected kiss that made the shapeshifter tremble.

“You’re incredible Taehyung. Of your fingers flowers grow and the sound of your laugh makes daylight shine brighter. I’m glad you irrupted into my life years ago.”

Taehyung covered his face for an instant trying to recover from those words that reached the deepest of him. “I was thinking of you.” He finally pronounced it.

“Were you?” The prince rubbed his thumbs on his cheeks as the elder spoke.

“Lately it’s all I can think of.” Taehyung grabbed one of the younger’s hands. He spent a long minute tracing lines on the palm of his hand then he played with his knuckles tangling their fingers together.
“I’ve been thinking about what you asked me, about staying.”

The prince held his breath and tensed his body. He knew he was asking for the impossible but the idea of being separated after hiding their feelings for all those years was just impossible. Besides they had never tried to use the portal after a year, there was a chance…

If that was his time to choose, his mind was set.

“I want to stay.” His voice sounded as deep as usual, not trembling and not nuances denoting other hiding feelings. Just sincerity. The cave echoed his words. “Ask me again.”

The younger took a deep breath before raising his voice; he held Taehyung’s hand closer to his chest. “Taehyung, would you spend summer with me?”

“Yes.” The cave was shaken with the power of that single statement.

He didn’t know how, he didn’t know if it was going to work. Taehyung didn’t know how portals worked, the wise grandma had told him lack of use would shout down a portal but… how long until the lake dried? They had to try.

“I will stay with you.” He assured while planting a brief kiss on the prince’s lips.

“Can you say it again?” Jeongguk needed to know he wasn’t dreaming.

“I will stay with you, I won’t leave.” It was great saying that, Taehyung felt a breeze running out of his chest, relieving part of the concern that the question had brought to their lives.

Jeongguk kissed him deeply, allowing himself to enjoy that moment they shared distant from the other worlds they knew. His chest fluttered and what started as a gently touch became passionate; Taehyung pulled him closer until their bodies left no space between them. Their skin was still wet, so were their kisses. They coordinated their breathings and the move their bodies did while the air went in and out.

“Jeongguk, I love you.” He looked at his eyes but it felt like he was staring at his heart.

The prince felt goosebumps all over his skin. Neither of them were experts or knew what to do next, they exchanged a hunger stare full of anticipation, their breath felt heavy and intoxicating as if they were drunk after tasting each other.

Taehyung pulled off the last trait of clothes that were coating them. The nudity of their bodies glowed below the tender natural light. Their desire was guided by inexperienced hands and rough movements; wild kisses and starved grips.

The soil was rocky and a bit harsh, slippery and wet but for them it was like a cloud meadow. The younger kept pressing his lips tracing marks everywhere; Taehyung liked to pull his hair and creating knots all over it while tracing confused paths.

Galaxies. Their bodies were skies covered with scarlet and purple nebulas, more like hickeys and bruises; red crescents nailed on the tender flesh, lines connecting moles into constellations and several marks in places sun never reached.

It was a new day when they abandoned the cave.
“What do we do?” Jeongguk asked when Taehyung assured him it was the day of the solstice.

“I don’t know… I have never…”

“Stay with me.”

“I will.” He announced.

Their bond was stronger than ever during that night where the shapeshifter didn’t leave the prince’s side. He stayed there, laying next to his dearest prince and looking at his eyes, losing himself into two different ponds. Jeongguk rested on his chest, the only place he could conceive calm.

The following morning was the first day of summer.

Taehyung felt the sun blessing his skin once again; there were no light on the pond and no wish to trespass the portal. Nothing, the pond was just that the following day. But now, the new season he hadn’t seen for almost ten years was back.

It was the beginning of the sun’s season and Taehyung was part of it.

XXI

Bloom

“Jeongguk, may I speak with you?” Haewon was the best on keeping a straight face even when she had bad news.

“What is it?” He asked.

Jeongguk had a great respect towards his oldest sister, their relationship was different from what he had with Hwayoung, with her their main activity was teasing each other and constantly fighting or with Miyoung, who was the apple of his eyes and was undoubtedly his favorite. With Haewon was something else, she was older than him but also wiser and meticulous, if Jeongsuk was the perfect king and Jeongguk was the perfect warrior in the battlefield, Haewon was the clever strategist who often was cut out just for being a woman. And she was also a great huntress who spent all the time she could riding horses in the woods looking for new preys, messing up all her good gowns in the way.

They wander through a red wooden bridge; sun was almost reaching its summit and the peaches looked magnificent hanging from the trees ready to be stolen.

“I have a favor to ask you and I doubt I could repay in this life, although you may find a way in the future.”

“Sister, you won’t own me anything. We share a blood bond, we are family.”

“I know what my mother try to do… what she did was abominable, if she had succeeded you probably won’t be here and I can’t imagine that. I’m aware how much Queen Soo despises me but the king and you have overcome those prejudices.”

The princess seemed nervous, Jeongguk had never seen her so uneasy.

“Our brother, Jihun… he left the palace a few weeks ago taking your place next to General Lim. I don’t think he can fulfill the position as you did. You know Jihun, he’s… impulsive. They haven’t
return and I don’t want to concern the king.”

“What’s your plan?”

“It wouldn’t be wise to send a large group to end up the conversations, it will only make things more tense but I’m afraid they might have taken him as hostage to end up the negotiations.”

“I understand. You want me to bring them back.”

“I know Jeongsuk gave you orders to rest but… it would mean more than my life if you can bring him back. I know Jihun is not the best brother but he has his reasons to behave the way he does. Please, Jeongguk, I beg you.”

As captain it was his duty, as brother it was his responsibility. Lately he was dealing with all the titles associated to his name. In the military he was referred in certain way, into the palace walls and all around the kingdom he was acknowledged as a prince, a member of the royalty nevertheless the title he liked the most wasn’t related to his heritage and domains, au contraire, it was something related to his person itself and it was heavier than the others. And it was one he couldn’t exhibit as the others but not for that he wasn’t less proud of it. The title of “lover”.

“I promise I will bring him back, Haewon. You don’t have to worry, I give you my word.”

“Taehyung?” Lady Go asked a bit disorientated. “I thought you were leaving these days, you didn’t come to say goodbye.”

“Ah… about that. I’m not returning this year, at least not until winter.” The shapeshifter scratched his head while the handmaid raised an eyebrow.

“Interesting. May I ask if this has something to do with some whim coming from the prince?”

Taehyung blushed like a child; a slight shade of rose pink adorned his cheeks while he kept looking for the right words.

The woman shook her head. “I already know everything I need to, don’t worry about that. I’m glad of having you here for a while.”

She left the library leaving certain mystery in the air. Taehyung wondered what she meant with ‘everything’.

“You left early today.” The prince squeezed his hand in a false gesture of anger.

The shapeshifter was already resting on the prince’s large bed. The white robe he was wearing just made his tan skin stand out; it was like a wrapping that embraced all the curves of his body as he laid upside down.

Taehyung liked the prince’s room accommodation better, it was more spacious than his youth room; the chambers were located in a different wing of the palace, remotely found by the members of the court once the lights were out, just a few guards making their usual rounds. The place itself was more withdrawn, more intimate and the boy with candent skin loved that fact, almost as much as he loved the feeling of the blushed blankets and the flaming curtains of the canopy above them. The burning candles outside their shelter made the silhouettes reflect on the fabric like a theatre and they were the
The elder weaved their fingers together and brought Jeongguk next to him even if he was still completely dressed. “I’m sorry, I was awake and I thought Master Young might have needed help. And… you sleep like a log, you probably didn’t notice until you woke up.”

“I’d like to wake up next to you.” The prince protested. “I know we can’t allow ourselves a lot of moments but I’d love you were the first thing I’d see with the rising sun.”

The elder linked their pinky fingers. “I’ll stay a little longer but still, I consider we should be more careful.”

“I’m leaving in a week.” Jeongguk announced. “I have a special mission my sister asked personally, I couldn’t deny it.”

Taehyung straighten out. “I thought you weren’t allowed to undertake missions anymore.”

“I’ll make an exception for my family, it’s not highly risked like last time but Haewon believes my presence would speed up the negotiation process.”

The elder traced all the features of his face with his slim fingers looking for something to say next. Suddenly the idea struck him like a lightning.

“Take me with you.”

This time Jeongguk was the one who straighten and sat with a serious expression on his face. “I couldn’t… what if something happens to you?”

“I can take care of myself, Jeongguk. You just say yourself it wasn’t risky and you seemed to be forgetting something…”

After saying that the shapeshifter changed skin for a thick coat of spotted white and black fur, his hands become strong paws with sharp claws, just in the blink of an eye, there was a powerful snow leopard in front of the prince.

“That’s a big kitten.” Jeongguk pronounced in owe as the boy returned to his original form, the robe fell a bit showing part of his bare shoulders. “I don’t know, Tae. It’s not just that… you can’t spend the whole time turned.”

Taehyung’s long locks fell from his face and tickled the prince’s face as he placed his hands on his chest and stared directly to his eyes. “I don’t want to be separated from you.” He whispered on his left ear but it felt more like a purr even though he wasn’t a feline anymore.

Jeongguk bit his lips trying to clear his thoughts and not give up under pressure. “You were the one convinced we should be more ‘careful’, let me remind you. Why would you want to come along?”

“Because… you look terrific in the uniform… and you look even better when you take it off.”

Taehyung stripped part of his blue silk suited showing a single stripe of skin; his eyes were dark and lost in lust.

“You wouldn’t let me take decisions under any malicious state inducted by second intentioned necking, would you?” The prince was already breathing heavily and seeing blurry.

“Never…” Every letter came mischievously one after other as he redirected his attention to the younger’s pectoral without taking the eyes of his. Painfully slowly he started playing with the shapes
of his anatomy.

“Taehyung…” Jeongguk gulped loudly unable to end the sentence at his first attempt.

The elder was faster enough to catch the hand of the prince before he could interpose on his way, with an easy movement he grabbed his wrist and positioned behind his range on the headboard of the wooden bed. While still under the strong grip of the shapeshifter, this last started descending on his sculpted abdomen. The room turned into a sea of flames.

“Can I go with you?” He asked lifting his gaze momentarily.

Jeongguk hesitated. “Are you sure you want to go to that ugly place full of old people and…”

The prince’s words were caught on his throat as the brunette reached the limit marked by the garment he was wearing underneath the suit and at an unusual slow pace removed it. Jeongguk’s body shuddered when he felt the hot breath of his lover on his inner tight.

“You can come with me, you can.”

“Are you sure?” The elder licked a long trail of thigh.

“Yes… yes… You’re killing me.” He growled.

With one single move, Jeongguk turned the shapeshifter face up and kissed his lips with renewed appetite.

That night was longer than some days.

Nevertheless the following morning Taehyung was still lying next to him.

So far, their summer recalled a belated spring.

Ephemeral the life of the beauty.

Flowers’ life cycles were usually limited, born to blossom, bloom to perish. There weren’t eternal roses painted in the bushes during snow falls.

Although, even if most flowers died after a while, they had found every night they spent together they made another flower grow from the dust.

The anticipation and the stolen glances in between short brief encounters during the daylight planted and germinated the seeds. A prolonged wait during the afternoons until sundown evenings made leaves and stems got bigger as their desire sprouted.

The first buds were shaped with the touch of fingers as little dots that grew freely in a field of skin where the warmness of the friction made them burgeoned. Finally the flower buds reached their culminating moment right before blooming, getting reddish and throbbing.

Flowers got ready to feel the hummingbird beating their wings in a dance, finding the right angle while following the sweetest scents that leded to the valued fluid of life they drank as nectar and the brightest opened petals that would endure their wished intromission.

Then they would open all their petals slowly, letting the nature admire its entire splendor, more florid every second it passed. Rubicund and velvety pieces, curved in some areas, erratic and whimsical at
others, all combined in the same arrangement readymade by the gardener’s workforce.

Until, at one moment, the first petal would fall flourishing the others that would follow the first. All the flowers’ petals would embellish the floor, the white snow covered in red as the only proof spring had exploded in rampant ecstasies.

Naked bushes that wait for the sunlight to comeback soon enough to rebirth, sometimes in the middle of an early winter just a kiss of the sun would do enough to grow them back again and a new vernal season would begin skipping several months.

Born to blossom, bloom to perish.

“Taehyung…” The prince said without breath between kisses, having the elder sowing poppies all over his neck. Their eyes met in the middle while the younger bit his lips. Their hands were still together, they often remained together. “You are beautiful.”

Jeongguk grabbed the back of his neck pulling him closer where their lips could meet.

The boy with candent skin moaned on his mouth.

And the cycle would repeat.

XXII

Glory Ashes

Parts of the expeditions were always dull, the long walking through the desert of grass and the vast vegetation covering the forest like a painting. Jeongguk’s horse stepped hard even on the most sinuous route without difficulty. After travelling for three long endless days, the glance at the neighbor palace brought him certain relief. Of course he was still uneasy about Taehyung joining the trip but he had to trust on him if he wanted to achieve the best outcome of the situation itself.

During the past three days they hadn’t speak more than a few polite exchanges that wouldn’t raise any precipitated assumption among the few men that travelled with them. Taehyung was sent as a good will ambassador and pupil of renowned Master Young to prove there weren’t only bellicose soldiers with the prince, a signal of relative peaceful intentions. However the situation could turn violently at any second and both of them were aware of that.

King Jo needed the lands on the domains that were on the limit between the two kingdoms, long ago Jeongguk’s grandfather established with the old king those territories belonged to them but now their kingdom was facing a desperate famine and the monarch was about to take advantage of the newly named king Jeongsuk. He was appropriating illegally of those lands and something had to be done.

Jihun –the second prince- was sent with the mission of solve everything with diplomacy and eloquence rather than violence but apparently conversations didn’t end up well since now he was presumably a hostage along with the others who joined him on his path.

Jeongguk knew the prince’s wrathful character too well to know a simple joke in the court might had hurt his susceptible ego deeply enough to start a nonsensical verbiage ranting about everything and everyone who were in discrepancy with him. Perhaps it was time for Jihun to learn a lesson but he couldn’t decline Haewon’s petition, she would’ve done the same for Jeongguk if he was in that position and that’s how much she valuated all her siblings, even though they were born from different mothers.
The prince was still reluctant regard bringing the shapeshifter with him, perhaps he was right and he could take care of himself but Jeongguk had dealt with kings and politicians before, none of them were of his liking, often he would rather being the messenger before the negotiator, being the nexus was always easier. However, he was now prepared to set the conversations and go back to the palace as soon as possible.

The king of that region, unlike other rulers nearby, had lived four times Jeongguk’s life. He was old and already established for a long time; he wasn’t even considering abdicating for any of his sons any time soon. Instead he kept the old manners of the kingdom and words had to be spoken directly with him. Inside the palace tension reigned more than men, strangers were not well welcomed under their circumstances.

“Your Majesty. The third prince has arrived and wishes to hold a meeting in private with you.” One of the soldiers announced.

Jeongguk had reunited with General Lim earlier, who confirmed his worst suspicions, Jihun was being held against his will because his insatiable mouth won’t stop making bad use of the wordiness he was condemned to suffer since he was a child. On the best of the cases, he wouldn’t have to take his sword off and start an unnecessary war because a monarch had been disturbed in the middle of a negotiation’s table.

“Let him in, he can’t be worse than his older brother, can he?” The husky voice of the old man resounded on the back of his head.

They didn’t meet on the regular throne room; instead as far as he knew, the king’s chambers had been readjusted and modified in order of allowing the king to receive visits with no need of moving further than his bed. The man was too big to keep moving by himself, rarely left his room and couldn’t perform the basic tasks without help of his servants. No wonder someone like Jihun for sure had attacked his physical appearance when the chance came, only his brother had gone for such an easy susceptible matter as target, is what a plain person would do, thus, what the third prince had done.

Jeongguk wasn’t going to commit the same mistakes.

“How old are you?” The king asked while two maids combed his long white beard.

“I will be nineteen this summer.”

“The new king sends an insolent man and now he sends a kid to fix the problems that wouldn’t exist if he had some common sense instead of neglected advisors.”

“If your majesty requests for respect I will treat you with respect but I ask for a fair trait as well.”

The eyes of the man were barely opened but still the young prince could feel his piercing look. He deliberated for a minute before raising a hand and with one gesture he sent away every soul remaining on the room besides a thin young maid who served tea for two.

“End serving and leave.”

The maid nodded. She looked intimidated but was able of finishing her labor and once she put a wooden trait in front of the ruler she ran away as well the other servants and ministers had done.
“I’m listening.” Were the words the king spoke.

The prince sat on the small table, his tea was untouched. He cleared his throat before speaking out. “We both know why I’m here. I would not blame your majesty for throwing my older brother into a cell, he probably deserved it, and I don’t need further information about the incident.” He made a pause.

Even if he was a king and he was just a prince, Jeongguk knew well enough their kingdom was in need. He had seen the fields and the dried crops, a year with no rain could ruin a profitable ground for any kingdom without distinction.

“I know your people are going through a severe famine you need to remedy as fast as possible and that’s why you tried to usurp some of our lands.”

The king remained impassive. He was aware of their situation better than anyone else.

“Those lands belonged to us in the first place.” He raised his voice making the first statement.

“They did, until my grandfather and yourself made an agreement more than thirty years ago. Those lands are not yours to take any day, your highness.”

King Jo hardened his expression. He wasn’t used to hear things he didn’t like.

“I do not pretend to disrespect you but I also, as I state in the first place will ask for equity. That means do not underestimate me for my short age. The lands will remain as part of King Jeongguk’s propriety but you will be free to harvest them as the soil is fertile, once the crisis is abolished you will give one forth part of your income to our kingdom as payment for the interests and a fifth of the crops for ten years as tribute for the king in sample of your gratitude.”

The king smashed the table shaking all the plates on the surface.

“That’s nonsensical, the second prince had said…”

“The offer has expired. I have knowledge you locked him in, how do you think that make our kingdom looks like? We are not weak and we won’t endure such treatment especially when you are the ones asking for something.”

“What if I refuse? I can get that insolent bastard decapitated in less that would take you to find him.”

Jeongguk sighed. He didn’t want to get to that.

“In that case…”

The king hadn’t notice the entrance of an invader, a simple stray cat who wasn’t a simple stray cat. And suddenly the little kitten wasn’t a little kitten anymore, a gigantic tiger passed behind the king making him shudder due the sudden sighting. The blood abandoned the face of the monarch in a trice. He wasn’t able to scream but looked like the horror was caught on his chest unable to escape.

Taehyung sat on Jeongguk’s lap comfortably as if it was an ordinary cat but maintained his eyes linked to the king’s without missing any of his moves.

“Scared of the kitten, your grace?” The big feline purred.

The man gulped.

“King Jo you should know it’s not very wise to have half dozen of your soldiers guarding one room,
especially when you are lacking of men nowadays. It was easy for my… hawk eyes to locate the room.” He petted one of the tiger’s ears. “At the moment General Lim is freeing prince Jihun and it seems like you don’t have something else to negotiate. I will offer the deal one more time, will you take it?”

The monarch hadn’t been so surprised in any of the years of his long lasting reign. He agreed to the terms of a young prince without having much to argue. Nonetheless he did ask for one more thing in return.

Jihun didn’t say a word even after Jeongguk allegedly saved his neck. He was emaciated and a bit sleepless but it could have been worse, much worse. Both princes were aware of it in spite of that, the second prince didn’t direct the word to his younger brother not even after they left the palace of King Jo. Jeongguk was acclaimed for both, the men who came with Jihun in the first place and the ones who followed the young heir, the crowd was impressed of how fast the negotiations ended with the arrival of the third prince.

The soldiers who came with Jihun had spent weeks wishing to go back home and the youngest prince solved their dispute in less than a day. It was definitely something that didn’t go unnoticed, after all he was supposed to be the older brother, the second prince felt the sudden envy of someone who’s destiny to be surpassed for someone younger… a lingered feeling on his blood line.

He remained silent during the return journey, emotionless as if the faint flame that lived inside him was already dead. Not even the fond stare of his sister woke some sort of spark inside him; Haewon was relieved to see her brother in one piece although it was obvious the prince didn’t have a bit of gratitude inside his corroded body.

In fact the first time he opened his mouth back in the palace got him a sonorous slapping on his face. Haewon had discontent and courage tears about to fall from his eyes. “How dare you? After what he had done for you, how dare you to be this inconsiderate?”

The palpitating red mark of her hand was still marked on his face.

“I didn’t need to be saved. You should’ve trusted me in the first place instead of sending him on a rescue mission. Do you have any idea of how that makes me look like in front of the men I command? How am I supposed to ask for their allegiance when a child comes to save me?”

“Well you should have thought of that before insulting King Jo on his own house. What kind of captain would do that in their right mind? You weren’t thinking clearly.”

The second prince clenched his fists; he was about to combust again.

“At any rate you don’t need to answer to me. You’ll converse your actions with the King itself. And you better change your supercilious attitude before meeting him or that cell you were would start looking comfortable.” The princess wasn’t listening anymore, she was greatly irritated.

Wrath kept burning inside Jihun, the only flame that never abandoned his chest.

“And render thanks to the third prince. God knows you’d be rotting in a cell if it wasn’t for him.”

Haewon left the room before she could see the fire consuming it all.
“I am impressed. You did convince King Jo into such deal without opposition.” The King praised Jeongguk’s feat.

The prince lowered his head.

“He did agree to all the terms although he asked for one condition. I brought one letter sealed in wax; it remained closed because it was for your eyes only, your majesty.”

He didn’t know the content or the nature of the letter, it could be anything. Perhaps a war declaration, it was too soon to assume they had won. Still, the King didn’t seem threatened.

“You did well. Hand it to me as soon as possible.”

He delivered the letter and as the King unwrapped the envelope he noticed there was only one line written.

«It’s time. »

“Miyoung, what story you want me to read you?”

The princess lifted her gaze from the game board.

It was the fourth time she won against the shapeshifter in mahjong and he had promised something in return.

She smiled widely showing the tiniest dimple on her cheek. “I’ll let you choose.”

“Uh… let me see. Did I tell you the story of the goose with gold feathers?”

“Like three times… your stories always include animals.” The young princess protested while making her final move condemning Taehyung to an imminent defeat.

“Is that so? I like animals, all sorts of animals from pandas and tigers to ants and butterflies.”

Miyoung frowned. “Do you like spiders as well?”

Taehyung nodded. “Even spiders.”

“And cockroaches?” The princess held a disgusted expression.

“No, no one like cockroaches, Miyoung.” Taehyung shook his head and proceed to grimace reflecting the great dislike towards the insects.

The youngest heir laughed at loud. “Tell me the story of the rat that fooled the cat to be among the twelve sacred animals.” She suggested.

“Ah… but you know that story too well. What if I invent a new story instead?”

“Would you? One you haven’t told me yet?”

“Of course, I’m good telling stories as your brother is good at singing. Let me see… how does every story start?”

“Once upon a time…” The princess encouraged him.
“Once upon a time there was a boy living in a desert. The sands were of the same colors the sky was during sunrise, yellow, orange, and even under the right light some sort of red. The boy…”

“Doesn’t he have a name?”

“No, no yet at least. He was born in a place where names weren’t as important as in here.”

“How come?” The little girl was a chatterbox full of curiosity. She didn’t mind interrupt the story from time to time.

“Well… he was called many things… mainly epithets that would reflect some noticeable quality of the referred.”

“Oh… I don’t understand.”

“For example let’s say the boy was referred as the one with candent skin due the hue of his skin.”

“Then like you. You have radiant tan skin.”

Taehyung giggled. “Yes, like me. So uh… you could be ‘the girl with the pearled smile’ or the ‘smart princess’.”

“But that’s Haewon. I like ‘the girl with the pearled smile’.” She smile showing the gap where one of her tooth was missing making the elder burst into laugh.

“You’re adorable.” The shapeshifter pinched one of her cheeks. “Where was I?”

“Something about a desert.”

“Oh… the desert… the boy lived comfortably in the desert during a great part of his life until one day-”

“Sorry… I couldn’t help but I need to talk with Taehyung. Do you think you can continue the story later?”

Jeongguk was staring from the frame of the door, he didn’t know how long the prince had been witnessing the kind interactions with the youngest member of the family with a sugar gaze painted on his face. He felt bad for disturb such a lovely scene but he was wishing to share the good news with his lover when they had a chance to sneak out during daylight.

“I will end the story later, alright?” The shapeshifter tried to cheer up the little girl.

Her anger didn’t last long. She got used to understand the grownups world since she was just a tiny sprout. Miyoung nodded and said goodbye when the elder left the room.

Both of them were walking through the hallway with absolute normality, after all they needed to chat about the recent events and there wasn’t nothing suspicious on that, although if they were stared for longer perhaps someone would notice some small things, gestures that said more than words.

“Jeongsuk was pleased because the mission was a success.” He announced without hiding the pride on his voice.

“How wouldn’t he? You were marvelous. I think King Jo will think twice before trying a move like that now that he knows the kind of game tokens are into the board.”
“I told him you were the one who spotted where the guards were gathering around one room and that was the key to find Jihun. It was a clever observation that went almost missed.” The prince laid his hand and squeeze lightly his shoulder.

“Maybe you should take me out more often, as you can see I’m very useful.” Taehyung stared at his eyes with devotion.

“Only if you convince me next time as well.”

The shapeshifter wetted his lips before answering, aware the prince was looking directly to his mouth but he didn’t have the chance to say what he was thinking. Instead, an unstable shaking princess Hwayoung broke into the hallway, she was looking for the young prince but there weren’t good words on her tongue.

“You…” Her voice was cracking. “It’s your fault!” She cried out.

Jeongguk and Taehyung exchanged a confused look without comprehend what she meant.

As she got closer they could hear her uneven breathing and see her swollen red eyes, a sign she was crying recently.

“What’s wrong?” Jeongguk attempted to ask.

“Don’t act as you don’t know what you’ve done!” She accused him. “You ruined my life by bringing that letter, did you know? Did you know there was an agreement for me to contract nuptials with King Jo’s grandchild?” Her lips trembled as the sour tears full her eyes once again.

“Of course I didn’t! Jeongsuk opened the envelope in front of me how could I’ve known the content of the letter?”

“Why?” Jeongguk had never seen his sister like that, miserable. “Why you don’t have to get marry? Why you keep avoiding it? We all have to face it, don’t we? Haewon is engaged and Jihun is married. You’re older than me, why you’re not being pressed into this as well?”

Taehyung—who kept his mouth shout but his eyes wide opened during all the confrontation—couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. She wasn’t angry, she was hurt but under her judgment both emotions were the same and she needed to find someone to blame.

“You don’t have idea what I’ve been through. Don’t you dare to command or accuse me.” Jeongguk wasn’t screaming as his sister, he managed to keep his voice calm and steady even if there was a sight of irritation behind his façade.

“You always get what you want! It’s been like that since we were children, you got all the love from father and I had to conform with the expensive… gifts.” She didn’t think twice before tearing away the gorgeous neckless that was around her neck. Small pearls fell onto the ground into an explosion of luxury.

The room was quiet.

“You don’t have idea what I’ve been through. Don’t you dare to command or accuse me.” The prince’s voice made the girl shiver; even Taehyung felt the darkening on his voice. He stared at his sister. “Do you hear what are you saying? You have never left this palace in your life, Hwayoung, you don’t have idea how cruel the world can be, you haven’t seen or lived the sorrows I had… not knowing if you were going to be able to be back at home safe and sound? I feel sorry for you but not in the way you think.”
The princess burst into a mad laughter. She ended up falling on her knees right where some pearls were still spread. He broken spirit numbed her judgement.

As the prince and his companion leaved the hallway, under her shame and discontent the princess lifted her gaze. She wasn’t known for being the most observant among the ladies of her age but she caught something in the air.

“Now I understand.”

Those were the words that came out of her mouth that afternoon when the sun shining through the windows reflected its light on the small dots on the ground and somehow also illuminated the hidden knowledge.

Unexpectedly a shadow eclipsed the sunlight and offered her a hand.

“What do you want?” She asked with raspy voice without taking the hand.

“Just to have a chat.” The shadow answered.

This time, she accepted.

XXIII

Pale Anthems

The lovers enjoyed plenty the time they spent together. During the warmer summer days Taehyung showed off his special ability at finding little oasis lost in the woods where they could placate the heat using the help of the shadows and the observant nature. Jeongguk had recovered from his condition and resumed his position as captain when the king asked him to, often he would bring the shapeshifter with him. Taehyung was creatively useful, sometimes he would spend hours out and return with valuable information about the enemies across the rivers, others he would locate places to spend the night or fresh water sources that would save the life of many men.

They formed an invincible duo. The elder was the only confident in which the young prince trusted, their pillow talks had even political matters add to the cozy environment created by both of them. Taehyung even forgot about all the matter of the drying oasis back at the desert, he made himself consciously forget about it the first month but those days the idea of returning was starting to evaporate as well the water of the lake.

Until one night the shapeshifter had a horrible nightmare that brought the disguised memories back. He was in the desert but he was no longer himself, he had discovered the secret to stay turned forever, changing from one beast to another without being a boy ever again, lost in an spiral of own invention in which he wasn’t Taehyung anymore. His animalistic instincts faded all what was left of his humanity. He didn’t have intention of returning to his true self ever again, he was one with the desert, one with nature.

What had pushed him into such drastic measure was that he was forced to come back to his native land after losing the love of his life in one tragic evening. He could still see the prince being shattered by the sword blade in a battle he couldn’t win. The image was so palpable as he recovered his memories of the war scene where his merciless enemy got advantaged in a moment of weakness. Taehyung was overflying to the scene, ready to evacuate the younger from there but he got too late.

He saw the eyes of his lover as the steel perforated his ribcage and then he condemned himself to a
life of eternal transformation unable to heal his human pain and to forget those dark void eyes right at the moment he was needed the most.

Taehyung woke up with his forehead covered in sweat as he realized it was still dark and that was one of the nightmares. He made fuss enough to wake up the prince as well who slept next to him in such a pacific state in comparison.

“Tae… Tae. What’s wrong? You’re shaking.” The heir was concerned as he heard the irregular breathing of the boy lying next to him.

The shapeshifter, still with the heavy weight on his chest and the water accumulated on his cascades, embraced the prince closer to his chest and thanked all the existent deities for being next to him at that very moment.

“I… I… love you. I love you…” He pronounced the words as he kept placing sloppy kisses all over his head.

“I love you too.” Jeongguk held him tighter; the elder buried his face on his chest.

“I had a bad dream. I was an animal… always an animal.”

“It’s alright… it was just a dream. I’m here with you.”

“I know you are.”

Taehyung understood, his place on Earth wasn’t physical, it was somewhere located between the vast stars of universe’s eyes and the narrow space next to his wide chest.

“Your majesty, prince Jeongguk is here to report the details of his latest mission.” The guard politely announced.

“Let him in.” The king said with a raspy voice.

Jeongguk step in still wearing his armor. He kneeled in front of his brother and only when he allowed it he lifted his gaze.

Jeongsuk was sitting as usual with his back straighten on his wooden chair but he carried a haggard appearance as a heavy weight all over his body. His already pale skin was starting to look ill and yellow and the bright on his eyes was replaced for lifeless marbles. He tried to focus on his brother who was right in front of him. His forehead was covered in a permanent sweat layer.

He raised his voice with difficulty. “Inform me about the situation.”

“The flood has been contained and the villagers are secured. Fortunately there weren’t important damages that cannot be fixed in short time.”

“That’s…” His older brother coughed loudly. “…good news. Thanks, Jeongguk. You may leave.”

“Your grace… do you feel well? Shall I call one of the masters?”

He rested importance with a gesture.

“I’ll lie down for a moment after this. Thanks for your concern.”
Immediately some advisor and a group of ministers approached, occupying all the space in front of the king and pushing the prince out of his sight. He could still see his reddened eyes and tired expression.

Jeongguk wanted to ask his brother if he was fine, he wanted to talk with him as they used to when they were younger, days where they don’t have much things to worry. Even though Jeongsuk always had something to focus on, he always had time to spend with his younger brother, those days he looked like he had aged up all suddenly after a year. His younger brother was beyond concerned for his condition. Perhaps Hyesung would make the monarch see some sense if he spoke with her.

Unfortunately the image he got wasn’t as remotely as comforting he thought it was going to be. His sister in law was in an ever worse state, she hadn’t left her chambers in weeks since she got sick way before the king. It was almost painful to see her at that state, even if the she was being held in the claws of a silent monster such as illness, she still glowed with a spark on her white skin as if the light inside of her treat to keep shinning on the dark.

Jeongguk had visited her just a week ago with a promise of regaining health on her face but slowly that hope was starting to fade. Taehyung had visited her every day since she got sick and brought flowers he picked earlier on the gardens wishing for her soon recovery. None of them wanted to see the princess withered like the flowers after being cut.

“My brother in law, I’m glad you came to visit me… I’m afraid I cannot receive you in better conditions…”

“Your majesty don’t apologize, I’m the one who came unexpectedly. How are you feeling?”

A weak smile appeared on her face and faded right away. “I have had better days I admit. The doctor is not very optimistic himself but he wouldn’t tell me a word about it… neither my maids but I see it on their faces as I see it on your face, everyone pities the queen that won’t get any better…”

There was something on her voice that was out of place, he had never heard Hyesung speaking like that. Her eyes were unfocused and discolored, she used to be youthful but now she remained laying on a bed, covered in fever sweat. Fighting the illness had taken all her strengths even her lips were starting to get dry and bluish every day that she resisted.

“I just wished I had given him an heir before…” She started coughing just as her husband had done when the prince saw him.

Jeongguk had a knot on his stomach. The way she said that made him feel she wasn’t going to last long.

“Yura, bring me some tea.” She ordered to the handmaid who abandoned the room leaving them alone.

“Is there something I can do for you?” He kneeled next to her bed waiting for her response once he got closer.

“Hold my hand and make a promise to your queen as the captain you are.”

Her touch felt phantasmagoric against his skin.

“I want you… to protect Jeongsuk.”
“With my life.” He swore without hesitation.

“And now, promise me something as my brother in law.” She stared with her big eyes. “Take care of him as your brother… don’t let him… don’t let him down after I…” She sobbed before finishing the sentence. “After whatever faith has prepared to me happens.”

“Hyesung, don’t say that. We don’t know…”

Her eyes were already overpassed by tears.

“I promise.” Jeongguk squeezed her hand.

It was like the queen had found some comforting peace on his promises; Jeongguk saw in her the glow of the fireflies the night she traveled to the palace, almost as if time hadn’t had passed.

The king felt he was about to collapse when another batch of ministers appeared into the throne room. Another problem that needed his attention immediately as the men started speaking he made call Master Young, probably the eldest resident of the palace but also the only adviser he needed in a moment like that.

Every second that passed the queen was getting worse and worse and there was nothing that could be done at least by Jeongsuk alone. He was waiting the old master to bring some miraculous cure or a foreign potion that would reverse the enchantment his wife was under but so far even the wiser men of the kingdom had problems diagnosing the young woman.

Now the sovereign himself was facing the same disease and if it followed the same path than his queen the odds weren’t on his favor either. Perhaps there was still a chance to save his wife, nevertheless their possibilities hanged from a very unstable thread.

The wise man appeared into the throne room, he was the only person the king truly wanted to receive under the circumstances. Not talkative advisors, whining ministers or agitated messengers, just one person on the palace.

“Master Young… come in.” With a single move all the fellow men in the room stepped aside and proceeded to leave the room.

“Your majesty.” He bowed even if he was already unable to move much his body.

“Come closer I would like to hold a conversation with you and I would like you to be honest with me.”

“I am always honest with your majesty as I was with your father and your grandfather.”

Jeongsuk felt the fever taking his body once again. He needed to transmit his ideas to the man before he got lost into an unconsciousness swirl.

“Master, hear me up I have something important to tell you and I wish you register my words as a petition.”

“Anything you need, your grace.”

The almost blinded man got closer and grabbed a piece of paper and hardly sat on the floor where the only table of the room resided. The man had the brush full with ink ready to write the king’s statement when he froze due his sudden words.
“Make Jeongguk king.”

“Your majesty…”

“If Jihun gets to be king he’s going to doom what our predecessors achieved and I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

“Your grace I must warn you of speaking before your hour come…”

“I’m aware but I cannot leave this sort of matters to chance. I need your word, guide him. He will be a fair king.”

A voice broke through the room. “Your majesty, my apologizes for the irruption I have brought your tea.” A young handmaid appeared on the door.

“Bring it and leave. You have to go back and help the queen. Would you like some tea, Master Young?”

The conflicted gaze of the maid went unnoticed by both men.

“Thanks, your grace. I rather finish writing the statement, perhaps later.”

“As you wish.” The girl handed the hot infusion and then escaped of the room as quick as her feet allowed her.

“Jihun, I must speak with you.” Princess Hwayoung almost busted down the door.

“What’s that has you so concerned, princess?”

Hwayoung closed the door behind her after checking no one else was on the hallway. Her once beautiful features were puckering. All her delicacy was lost in a consternation grimace, the middle princess who always wore some coloring on her cheeks and lips now shone with the absence of her unmistakable traits.

“Do not act like you don’t know why I’m here. What were you thinking?”

“I’m afraid I have no idea what are you talking about.” The prince focused on a book he wasn’t even interested in.

The princess hurried and closed the book with a violent smack.

She was breathing difficultly. “Did you think I wasn’t going to figure it out? You’re poisoning your brother… the king and…”

Jihun caught her trembling wrist. “Careful. Your accusations are severe, sister.”

Hwayoung freed her hand. “But it’s the true. You are poisoning them.”

“I thought you were the one who wanted me to solve your problem with the arranged marriage.”

“Not by killing Jeongsuk. He’s your brother!”

“It didn’t seem to bother you when you specifically said ‘at any cost’?”
“This is wrong. This disastrous… you have to stop you have to bring an antidote quickly and…”

“I did what it had to be done.”

“Jihun… he’s not only the king… you’ve grown up next to him…”

“And I have grown up to see all the unfair treats I’ve got just because I wasn’t the first son. I have seen everything and I have lived it enough to know this is what he deserved.”

“What about Queen Hyesung? Did she ‘deserve’ it as well?”

“I had to test the poison in case I was being cheated.” There wasn’t a hint of repentance on his voice.

“Jihun…” Tears were running down her cheeks.

“You actually thought if I did something to help you to get out of your arranged marriage something else wasn’t going to disturb you in the future? You thought it was going to be the last man they would try to bind you?”

There was something insane on his voice Hwayoung hadn’t noticed until that moment. The princess remained silent acknowledging she had made a big mistake by sharing information with her older brother.

“You’re scared now but let me remind you we are together in this, little sister. You were the one who facilitated the information about the maids.”

“I didn’t want them dead.” She almost sobbed.

“I have told you. I did what it had to be done. Now it’s not time to regrets and I’m counting with absolute silence.” His voice made the princess shiver. Jihun was tired of his sister’s compassion.

“There has to be another way you don’t have to…”

The prince grabbed her shoulders, restricting her movement.

“Jihun, you’re hurting me…” Hwayoung cried.

He didn’t loosen up his grip while his piercing mad eyes stared into hers.

“Let go of me!” The princess shook her shoulder trying to free herself. “It’s not like you’re ever going to be the king anyways!” Hwayoung let out without realizing until the words were spited out. She felt the bitter flavor on her mouth after closing it and gulping with difficulty as if a snake nest was trapped on her throat.

The second prince released her with one violent move and Hwayong ended up on the floor. Keeping the tense silence, Jihun abandoned the room where the princess was still breathing heavily with big tears running down her pink cheeks.

She had committed a mistake, an enormous mistake.
The prince was worried about the monarchs whose health wasn’t in their finest; conversely it was terrifyingly worse every day. Taehyung had noticed the change in the palace’s aura; their habitants sleepwalked in a state of constant uncertainty that kept them lost on the fog of the last days of summer.

Summer was coming to an end and so was his year on the palace.

Jeongguk asked one of his maids to prepare him a bath after another long day, water always was the element that cleaned and purified everything, he could stay during hours until his skin wrinkled and the water got cold, he needed that.

The scent of the flowery bathing oils mixed with the steam of the heated waters overflowed the room. Rock and wood were everything that could be barely seen, under the mist it looked more like a dream than the nightmare the last days had been. Slowly Jeongguk introduced his body into the water feeling on his body the warm contrast in the cool night of summer.

He closed his eyes and allowed his thoughts to ramble freely like a smoke cloud around all the familiar and unfamiliar corners of his mind. As his mind disconnected from his head his body fell deeper on the waters until it reached his face, he held his breath and immerse completely for a few minutes before breathing the hazy air and fumes of the bathroom.

A flower potpourri floated next to him, petals of different colors kept appearing with every move the prince made as if they were hidden, growing in a garden somewhere in a distant land below him and someone decided to cut them making the colorful bouquet ascend to the surface.

Incense and candles were still burning when the prince felt a pair of hands sliding through his shoulders with ease. He didn’t even have to open his eyes to know who it was. The burning touch of his soft finger tips around Jeongguk’s collarbones. The prince opened his eyes and found the ethereal vision of Kim Taehyung.

“Did I scare you?” The shapeshifter asked before soaking his feet gently, barely touching the surface.

“Never.” The prince replied. “You’re the only one who always knows where to find me.”

“For a captain and brilliant strategist you’re very predictable sometimes. You always hide in the baths when you’re upset.”

Taehyung took off his robe and dived into the warm waters. With one move he found a place next to the prince, the elder removed the locks that were covering his face and kissed his lips quickly before accommodating himself behind him. That was something Taehyung did since they were little kids, coup his hands and drop the water above the prince’s head before starting playing with his hair.

“What brings you here this evening?” Jeongguk asked while moving his neck from one side to the other.

“You were tensed. I wanted to know if you were alright.”

The younger stopped his pendulum motion. “I’m worried for my brother and my sister in law.”

“Oh…” Taehyung started massaging the prince’s scalp. “I understand. The queen isn’t getting any better.”

“I’m aware. She… she talked to me as if she was on her last hours, Taehyung. I have never seen her
like that."

The shapeshifter extended the younger’s hair to get rid of the knots using his fingers. “I have visited her daily since then. When I appear with a bunch of flowers she always beams widely even through the pain.”

“Jeongsuk is not better but he resists because he’s committed to the kingdom more than he’s committed to his own wellness.”

“That’s something very noble to do.”

“Isn’t it odd? Just the two of them got ill, not even you or any of the maids, ministers that spend all their time with them.”

“Do you think someone is actually plotting something against the king?”

“I don’t know… I can’t find someone who could possibly have such resentment towards my brother.”

“Perhaps I can find something. I can investigate, some walls hear more than what you think.”

“Thank you. I’m heading to a neighbor kingdom tomorrow to pick a new medicine for the queen.”

Taehyung rested his chin on Jeongguk’s shoulder and then crossed his wet arms above his shoulder, attracting his body closer and embracing him into a hug he needed.

The prince relaxed his shoulders and let a big sigh out.

“When… when my father passed away, I wished you were here, like this.” Jeongguk tilted his head towards his direction and leaned his face against his moistened cheek.

“I should have been here. I’m sorry. I have lost an innumerable of important things in your life…”

The elder apologized with a soft voice that was almost a caress to the prince’s ears.

“Have I told you he fell off the horse when I told him I was in love with you?” The younger stared directly to his eyes.

“You told the king?” Taehyung asked with a big surprise on his gaze.

“It was the last thing he heard. I’ll never know what he wanted to say after that, I will always wonder what he was going to say.”

The brunette traced all his features with his thumb. “Jeongguk… your father loved you, that’s all you need to know. I don’t think that could change because of who you love.”

“Not everyone thinks the same.”

“Luckily for me, you do.”

“And I love you for that.”

Taehyung hugged him closer to his chest, resting his right hand close to his heart. The prince grabbed his wrist and softly rubbed his thumb through his knuckles. A moment after Jeongguk lowered his chin and kissed the silky back of his hand.

The younger turned around to face him. His face was covered in a shimmering glowing due the
steam of the bath and his cheeks were red for the heat on the air and, perhaps, something else that flooded the environment that lured them together.

Taehyung held his chin and planted a delicate kiss on bottom lip and then he did the same with upper lip without letting go of his grip. Finally he separated both of his lips and kissed him with his mouth opened, the red camellias of his cheeks detached from his face with the most tender breeze.

His touch mixed with the heat of the fumes and the strong scent of jasmine oil and rose petals inundated the scene creating a new atmosphere. The feeling was overwhelming, a dispute between senses and fantasies, a sensually sensorial experience in which perhaps the dew of flowers wasn’t much different from the sweat of passion.

Suddenly all the worries they had got lost among the lights of the lovers.

Under the darkness of the glooming night, the prince rested on his chambers where the dossal of the bed covered him with a red gold embroidered veil. His chest travelled upside down as he breathed in and out, deep gone into dreamland.

Outside trees and plants rocked to the wind’s symphony from left to right. Stars shone with sympathy and a full moon rose until it reached the middle of the sky as the indisputable proclaimed sovereign of the night. It was the perfect hour for escapes and summer serenades.

The door squeaked lightly with a reluctant move, the sound was almost imperceptible but with the quietness of the sleeping hours it felt louder. The steps were silent as if the feet that made contact with the floor were walking through a cotton field.

The hands were shaky and there was no way of stopping that, one move wrong would condemn the silver shadow, not much bigger than a deer and almost as fragile as glass. The sharp dagger was burdensome on those hands; it trembled with hesitation and the heavy breathing of the holder.

She didn’t know the prince wasn’t alone that night, he had a guard caring for his calm sleeping hours, one which heard was acute and whose eyes saw all the faded smoky moves of the figure even in that darkness. It was impossible to deceive those eyes permanently on vigil like two lanterns.

As the knife was held right above the sleeping heir who remained foreign to the scene, almost like a stone statue, sharper claws than the ones manufactured by men emerged from his side, rough roaring and teeth as dangerous as metal needles the warriors liked to show off when fighting their nonsensical little wars.

The tiger was in the room before she could realize.

Only a shapeshifter could notice the intromission and become aware of it before it was too late for his lover. The attempt of killing the prince was something he had anticipated as the worst of the nightmares persecuted him with bows and arrows and there they were, materializing the horror and gore of the situation.

Glory and gore came hand to hand; Taehyung followed his instincts rather than his conscience, knowing the position of the usurper and the movements of her gelid hands he knew where to sharp with a powerful hit capable of tearing half of her face in the act as if it was the skin of a ripe plum.

Tiger’s eyes were the last what its preys see prior to perish, an impending death, hunted by the skilled feline. If she saw his eyes, she was already dead.
She didn’t have time to scream, she barely had time to drop the dagger, the only thing that made some sort of resonance next to the gigantic cat’s roar was the metal touching the wood planks of the floor.

That night the bear turned into a tiger.

With the sound of the crepitate fuss the prince woke up under an uncertain cloak of fear, sweating and trembling. Only when he made light with the candles he was able to observe the true terrors of the painting. Laying on the wood floor the lifeless body of a maid used to be called Yura, a big puddle of scarlet dense liquid growing under her corpse, managing from her disfigured face. Next to her, sitting against the edge of the bed another impactful image, the boy with candent skin and tender hands shaking, just that now his skin was pale and ill and those hands were covered in blood. His face was wet in crystal tears and his glassy eyes couldn't meet the prince’s.

“Tae?” His voice was low. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

“She... She was... she was going to...” The sobbing words were almost incomprehensible. He tried to create a cohesive sentence but all he could do was breathing restlessly before creating a cascade of shiny precious stones. “Kill you. She was going to kill you.”

The prince was still confused but managed to hug tightly the boy who was crying disconsolately. Blood still on his shaky hands, Jeongguk hugged him and turned his sight away from the corpse on the floor, both of their clothes were covered in red.

“You saved me, Taehyung.”

“She was… going to…” He buried his head deeper on his chest trying to erase the memories of the recent events unsuccessfully.

Guards would have appeared in the room faster than rumors in front of a confusing and baffling crime scene but that night a major event was oozing of the palace’s walls.

Queen Hyesung had fallen asleep into a dream she was not going to wake up of.

“Where you think you’re going?” The voice that came from the darkness made the princess’ heart take a turn.

Hwayoung stared at the shadow that walked towards her direction, she wasn’t one of the sleepwalkers but she had the appearance of not had been sleeping well since she was a little girl a long time ago.

“Haewon you scared me.” The younger princess felt her blood pumping loudly through her veins. “What are you doing here?”

“You haven’t answered my question, where are you going this late?”

The younger avoided her gaze. “I’m leaving the palace, I will marry King Jo’s grandchild by spring as it was planned. I didn’t see the object of staying any longer.”

“Thus you decided evicting in the middle of the night?” Her older sister kept glaring with disagreement due her vague answers.

“I… I have nothing to do in here.” The princess kept biting her lips and moving her eyes from
direction to another.

She was dressed to travel immediately, all her belongings packed ready to go when the order was given.

“Don’t you consider suspicious abandoning the palace under the circumstances? You could leave in the middle of autumn when the health of the queen gets better.”

Hwayoung couldn’t hide her guilty expression even under the fading light that came from the guards’ posts.

“I must go. It’s… I don’t feel…”

“What is it, Hwayoung? You can tell me.”

She shook her head embarrassed. “No, I can’t. That’s why.”

“You are scared. Why?”

The second princess was about to hyperventilate. She couldn’t stop shivering as her eyes started getting watery and her throat closed.

“Haewon… I… I’m sorry…” Her lips trembled. Her tears started falling like a cascade.

Her sister tried to comfort her offering her shoulder but before she could tear up freely, a guard approached to them; his eyes were injected with the sadness only bad news could bring.

“Your majesties.” He made a pause. “I am afraid to tell you… Queen Hyesung has passed away.”

Hwayoung fell on her knees sobbing loudly while her older sister remained rigid like a column. The younger princess was crying not only because her sister in law was dead but also because her only chance of escaping of the palace was now extinguished. Her older sister, on the other hand, couldn’t face the announcement in any possible way.

Indeed, the spectrum of the night had taken the light of the royal chambers away.

XXV

*Gods, Mortals and Monsters*

Life was just a perpetual transformation of kind appearances into cruel realities, shining shooting stars turning into hard flaming rocks once they hit the Earth’s shell because even the translucent fragments of the sky could be dragged by telluric forces losing their wings and tails.

Young lovers often, on their reverie, mistook real pearls for baroques. The brightness might be similar but be aware of the grotesque distortion of the seconds, trusting blindly on their relatives without hesitation when the ugly features were more visible than what they thought.

They didn’t know who to trust in that moment when the dead servant stood still on the floor. Most of the commotion came from the royal chambers where the monarch’s last breath was released nevertheless there, there were just the two of them alone with the desolation of the death. The corpse had been covered with a blanked that got stained in red right away as a reminder for both of them.

The person who arrived was the only one who would know what to do in that sort of situation. The
handmaid’s eyes shone with surprise and confusion but mostly, a tremendous amount of terror because of what had been unleashed under that white blanket.

“Lady Go.” The prince sighed with relief. He was still embracing the shapeshifter refusing to let him go.

The maid closed the door introducing herself into the room, finally able of scan the whole scene she still believed it was unreal. She stared at the prince looking for a possible explanation on his eyes, one he was ready to give to her but wasn’t sure the handmaid was ready to hear.

“You have to change and meet the king immediately…”

“Lady Go, you have to listen.”

“I will, and I’m aware all this has an explanation but you have to be there. Queen Hyesung is dead, your grace.”

Jeongguk felt the cold water falling on his head with the notice of his sister in law. Not only a queen but the girl that played the konghou with gracious movements every summer when they went visit her, she had the charisma needed to make a king and a whole kingdom to fall in love with her in the blink of an eye and still she was a flower that had being picked too soon.

It wasn’t that they were being insensitive but there were many things happening at the same time and they were conscious of the way politics worked, the prince has to be there or face the raising assumptions, even a servant gained relevance post mortem if there was a story to tell behind it.

There weren’t euphemisms for death, no way of making it prettier or appealing. Death was death.

“Jeongguk, you have to go.” It was Taehyung’s voice what brought him back to reality.

“I don’t want to leave you here.” He said facing the shapeshifter.

“You won’t. I have to help Lady Go, people won’t notice my absence but you’re required.”

The handmaid left the room and returned with new clothes and helped the prince to clean himself, Taehyung removed the dried scarlet stains of his hands but every time he submerged his hands into the water he saw the blood running falling and dying everything around him and the reflection of his face on the dingy liquid. In a moment it was him but in the next it was the face of the horrified maid whose life he had taken with one hit.

Lady Go offered a hand to stand up; she saw how upset the boy was and knew how guilty he felt, some sort of remorse that couldn’t be erase easily and one he was going to learn how to live with. She found two guards of her trust to take the body of the servant, she was going to receive her burial when the causes of death were determinate and that’s where they had to prepare a clever alibi. Of course it couldn’t be taken off consideration she was trying to murder the prince in the first place but the maid doubted a bland servant could possibly diagram every move by herself.

There was plenty to prepare for the queen’s funeral, from the incense water to the grave clothes, the rites they had to follow at face value, several servants were needed in a royal funeral. Jeongguk had witnessed many funerals all over his life; his own father’s was by far the memory that would always come back when he’d think about dead.

His brother managed to keep his countenance solemn during all the mourning rites the subsequent
days, men weren’t supposed to share a single tear even though they had just lost the person they loved the most on Earth. He wasn’t just widower, he was a king that had lost his queen and their kingdom had lost her as well, he was obligated to share the grief.

There was still a veil of mystery surrounding the death of the maid but people were busy crying for they beloved queen. Even Queen Soo showed her affliction due the loss of her daughter in law, Princess Miyoung stood next to her sobbing endlessly in a way Jeongguk wanted to do as well.

Prince Jihun kept his face expressionless until he saw his younger brother across the room, he was also aware of the presence of Princess Hwayoung, unexpectedly inseparable of their older sister. Things weren’t working in the way the heir expected. He needed to elaborate a new plan in order to route the future events into the path of his convenience.

And he knew exactly where to begin.

They buried the queen on top of a hill three days after in a place where everyone would know which stone tomb belonged to her. Everyone retired first making sure of leaving the king a few instants alone next to the grave of his beloved wife. He wasn’t getting any better and the loss of Hyesung just made him miserable and deteriorated his already damaged health.

The palace remained silent for the following days.

Lady Go was a loyal servant to the crown. She was extremely sly for a maid and that never went unnoticed when she was named lady of the court, of a tradition of maids she had learnt how to be helpful whenever she was needed, to read people and their needs before they could even ask for something, being efficient, she had learnt how to be thoughtful and quiet and to withdraw when the situation required it.

Maids knew things many nobles and ministers ignored that’s why they kept them illiterate and ignorant enough to disregard useful information, they were gossip but if they were kept to line those rumors stayed as rumors and nothing else. A talkative servant could end up with her tongue chopped off but a clever one… that was another story.

She was preparing tea for Queen Soo, she was the only one who knew how the mother queen liked her quince tea, when the door was closed with a burst. The handmaid turned around to face the figure that stood calmly in the middle of the room.

“Prince Jihun. To what do I owe the honor of your visit if I may ask?” She bowed without taking her stare off his face, trying to unravel his purposes beforehand.

“I have been worried the last days since the unusual death of one of my sister’s handmaids. You might remember her, Yura. I believe was her name.” He wandered through the room touching small details like jars and pots without dedicating too much time to any of it, just to disconcert the maid.

“She tried to assault the third prince while he rested on his chambers; it is understandable he defended himself before she could complete her… task.” The woman remained undaunted.

“Task?” The second prince dropped one of the vases on purpose. “Oh, what a shame. I’m afraid I don’t seem to comprehend your words.”

“I am a servant, your majesty. I know how the life of a servant works and the limitations of our aspirations and ambitions. Killing a prince didn’t suppose something for Yura, not directly at least thus it was a given task.”
It was risky to deal with Jihun even since he was a child, many thought age would straighten up his character but a crooked tree without support would grow always in the wrong direction. The handmaid had got to feel sorry for that motherless child for a while but seeing the man he became didn’t spark any compassion, especially now she had many reasons to raise her suspicions.

“I came here to have a conversation with you, Lady Go and I feel attacked after just a few moments. No wonder you never contracted nuptials, condemned to be a tedious maid.”

“If your grace felt offended after a commentary of a tedious maid it must be because your ego is much more fragile that what I thought.”

The prince showed a bitter smile, almost a smirk. “Well, now that’s something.”

“I still don’t understand what is that you want from me.”

“It happens, Lady Go, I know you hold a great contempt towards my person but you are clever and soon or later would find someone to blame for the attempt of murder of your dearest protégé.”

“And the hint would lead me to you?” Lady Go already knew the answer.

“Of course no, I made my footprints untraceable.”

“Nevertheless you still came here to talk sloppily about such a serious matter?”

“I came here because I saw the opportunity of getting rid of my biggest obstacle without dirt on my hands.” The prince carelessly took a sip of the quince tea it was supposed to be for the queen.

“What on Earth makes you believe I would be part of your plan?”

“Because I acknowledge there are two people on this palace you care more than yourself. First my brother young prince Jeongguk and secondly, the filthy orphan that calls himself Kim Taehyung.”

The mention of both names made the woman listen carefully before speaking again.

“The reason why I bring both of them into this conversation it’s that I can confess easily to you I orchestrated the attack convincing that good for nothing handmaid she would have everything she always wished…”

“Of all the men you have under you commanded you decided to send a confused girl to do your dirty work.”

“Oh no, it was Princess Hwayoung’s idea, who would have known? Even if she didn’t know what I was planning, she was the one who handed me the entrance with the key included. Why sacrifice one of my good men when a disposable piece of trash like her would do it without even questioning it?”

With every word that came from his mouth, Lady Go’s repulsion grew bigger. She felt sick just by listening to him.

“However, since she died in such… unusual circumstances I was obligated to think something else and that’s when I remembered…” This time a sinister grin appeared on his face. “I am in possession of valuable evidence against certain bastard who came visit Queen Hyesung daily during her ailment and happened to be absent the day of her death which was also Yura’s. How convenient, isn’t it?”

“That’s incongruous and inconclusive and you know it.”
“It also happens that I’m the only heir of my dynasty and I know a lot of important people who would take step forward if I give the order. Imagine them as pieces into a bigger game, influences are everything for us and I dare to guess an orphan couldn’t understand much of that. Just a few twisted witnesses and high voices that would speak loud enough to echo my words.”

This time the handmaid knew she was facing a great disadvantage.

“I will ask one more time, Jihun. What do you want?”

“Respect, power, the position I deserve… to be a king.”

“Over my dead body.” She spitted unable to control her anger.

“Ah, but you were the one asking. When it comes to you, Lady Go what I want is simple in comparison.” The prince took a small bottle of one of his sleeves. “This is a dangerous and effective poison, the same that killed Queen Hyesung and the same that would be found on the chambers of the outsider if you disagree to my proposal.” He left the bottle on top of the table where the cold tea was. “This is a stronger dose different from what I used with the queen, would have anyone killed in just a few hours.”

The daggers of her eyes could’ve killed Jihun with one hit if it wasn’t his insanity was the biggest of the shields.

“And don’t say I’m not being generous with you Lady Go, I’ll even give you the chance of choose… Either you put this venom into the orphan’s tea and let him take the blame for what happened to the queen and the king or… you pour it into the third prince’s infusion and remove that obstacle from my path.”

“What kind of decision is that?”

“I could also plot a web of lies myself… find a way to incriminate both of them and by next week’s morning both would be hanging while their bodies rot and the people find out what they have done. But still I rather remain untraceable for my own good.”

He was still able to curve his lips into a smile.

“So choose wisely, which of your precious sons will pay for the faceless crime?”

“Nothing you do would give you anything of what you truly wish, you will always be miserable. You are the most sordid human being I have ever met if you have the decency of being called human. No… You are a monster.”

“Oh no, Lady Go. On the contrary, I’m more than that… I’m a god.”

“May I come in?” The familiar voice of the handmaid broke through the library. She was carrying a tray with hot tea, bergamot, one of the shapeshifter’s favorites.

“Oh, Lady Go. Please come in. I thought you were busy today.” Taehyung held one of the tray’s extremes lightening the weight.

“Ah, thank you. I was but… Queen Soo didn’t need my services for the rest of the evening.”

“Is that so? Would you like to join me for tea?”
The maid tried to keep her spirit up. “Of course, I couldn’t refuse.”

They sat on the floor and she poured two cups of smoky infusion; suddenly the fragrance overflowed the room. Lady Go wetted her lips with the cup before putting it aside.

“Is something wrong?”

She watched him as he stopped the cup a few centimeters away from his lips. He still preserved that caring and curious personality that the maid grew so used to… Taehyung was both, sensitive and sensible qualities that often were ignored could go so perfectly together.

The maid shook her head. “I was remembering when you first came to the palace… almost ten years ago. You were this big.” She pointed with her hands. “All wrapped with blankets. A crying mess and barely speaking the common tongue, look at you now. I could mistake you for a native.”

“You are exaggerating.” He sipped the tea without suspecting the kind of thought that came across the woman’s head.

“Taehyung… I don’t know how things work from the place you come from but…” She kept playing with her hands nervously as the boy drank more of the beverage. “I’m sure there are not half of the sorrows you have been through in here. Jeongguk or you… none of you have any fault and I want you to understand that.”

Taehyung left the empty cup on the tray. “Lady Go, you’re crying.”

Her cheeks started to get wet as she kept talking. “Oh, it’s alright. I have… I should go back to see if Queen Soo needs anything else but before…” She hugged the boy soaking his shoulder with her tears. “Listen to me, Taehyung. Have this… read it in a few hours when the moon is up in the skies, would you?” She handed him a letter. Her hands were shaky.

“I will… Lady Go, are you sure everything is alright… it doesn’t seem so and…”

“It’s alright. It will be alright.” She showed a weak smile before running out the room.

“Lady Go.” The prince greeted her on his room. “Come in.”

She always bowed just for courtesy. Both of them had bonded a different relationship beyond servant and prince but it was still part of the etiquette rules she had to follow. The wooden tray trembled a bit while she placed it on the small table.

“I have brought jasmine tea. I hope you don’t mind I couldn’t find white tea.”

“No. Don’t worry I’ll drink it.” He kneeled and got closer until he was in front of the cup. The younger lifted the cup with both hands and almost with one move he drank all the liquid.

“Lady Go, were you crying?”

She washed the tears from her cheekbones. “Just a little, I’m afraid I’m a bit nostalgic today.”

The maid stared fondly to that kid she had watched grow up since he was a baby with rosy cheeks and the smallest little hands. She had taken care of him since then, she was there the day he said his first words and took his first steps, the first time he got into trouble and when he fell in love. Unable to even compare him with his vicious older brother she only saw good things on the prince’s eyes
and somehow she was proud she had been part of that development.

“This is for you, your majesty. Don’t read it right away, wait until the moon reaches the highest position on the sky, would you?”

The prince seemed confused. “What is it?”

She made sure no one was near before hugging the prince as she had done with the shapeshifter earlier.

“An explanation… For a decision I had to make.”

Lady Go wrote one more letter, the one that didn’t have a meaningful importance for her but the one that was supposed to explain it all. She held it against her chest aware of what came next.

Wait. That’s all she had to do.

The moon reached the highest point, stars kept shining around it.

“To Taehyung, the purest soul I have seen walking these lands. My dear winter child who appeared with the first frost, I have many things to tell you, many things you never got to understand from this world and many things I hope you never get to understand from us. You overcame the language barrier and gained your place in this palace as no one had done it before. I’m nothing more than thankful with you, for being there for the prince and showed him the real nobility of this world that’s built beyond titles and reverences.”

“To Jeongguk, the child I saw growing up in front of my eyes since he first breathed after a catastrophe and screamed to the world ‘here I am!’. Thank you for never being corrupted it into the malicious wings that had taken many good men with them. I can’t say you are the same little prince than ten years ago but there’s something inside of you, in the way your face wrinkles when you smile that takes me back to those days. Never lose that light.”

Both letters ended the same.

“Great men had built magnificent realms and empires and many have perished trying to achieve the same greatness. I had the opportunity of meeting two marvelous young men who didn’t build any kingdom but fought other sort of war… they are fighting a silent war without knowing it and I must warn both of them because there will be moments where it might seem everything is lost and ruined but I believe in you. I have always believed in you and the extraordinary strength and intelligence you have. You were born in this world for a reason, the one you think it suits you better, call it glory, love, greatness or any other name of your preference. I am extremely proud of your chosen path no matter which is the result. Right where you are right now, the first step you take will take you closer.

I have taken the right decisions and I hope you can do it as well.

I can’t give you further information but remember,

Be aware of the baroques, appearances can be mistaken.

Always a friend, Lady Go.”
After reading those words both boys were puzzled, it felt almost like… a goodbye letter. If they didn’t know the handmaid better they could tell…

Taehyung arrived first, the library was closer to her room but when he opened the door, Jeongguk was two steps away from him.

The woman looked so peaceful in her lack of expression; she rested on her bed wearing all white clothes that were as pale as her skin. Winter had proclaimed her body draining all the colors like snow took the green of the nature.

Another letter was placed next to her along with a small empty bottle.

“Is she…?” Taehyung’s voice trembled like feathers.

Jeongguk saw her blue lips but only after touching her hands that were icy cold he could confirm the worst.

“What would she do that?” The shapeshifter grabbed her other hand. There was a big knot on his chest. Not much after that the first tear fell down his cheek.

Jeongguk managed to read the third letter with glassy eyes.

Inside there was a confession, she made herself responsible for Queen Hyesung’s death and the young maid that Taehyung had killed while being turned. She explained in detail her reasons but the more Jeongguk read the more he was sure it were pure lies, Lady Go would never kill someone, she was lying to save them from something else, from someone else. They were in great danger.

“She’s gone, Tae.” He shrugged the paper sheet.

“No… No… It can’t be true. Not Lady Go. She was just fine this evening she…” His sentence was cut with a big sob that escaped from his mouth. The shapeshifter fell on his knees burying his face on the blankets of her bed where his other drowned lamentations could be hidden.

The prince couldn’t look at her without sharing a tear. He clenched his fists and cursed until his lungs were as swollen as his eyes. He knew there was someone who was responsible somewhere inside the palace, someone who wanted them dead, Lady Go had explicit it on her letter… Jeongguk read it all over again trying to guess which detail he had missed and then he saw it, it was something discreet that she would only want them to see and decode… baroques were a type of… pearls.

Pearls.

The realization hit him like a tsunami.

There was just one person on the palace who always carried pearls with her.

Hwayoung.

XXVI

Eclipse

“Your majesty.” The maid bowed. “Princess Hwayoung is resting at this moment I wouldn’t
recommend disturb her on her sleep and-

“There’s no need to announce me. She knows the reason why I’m here.”

“Your grace, I insist…”

“Hwayoung, wake up. I know you’re not sleeping.”

The princess was clothed on her bed but she had been restless for endless nights. She wasn’t surprise to see her brother; it was something she anticipated it was going to happen sooner or later.

“Lady Go is dead.” He said with no qualms. “And I believe you have something to do with this.”

“Jeongguk…” She tried to raise her voice but still wasn’t able to face her brother.

“Of all the things you have ever done all over the years this must be the most selfish, destructive and unconscious act of idiocy, the greatest frivolous accomplishment you have ever achieved. People have died because of you, do you realized?”

“Jeongguk…” Her voice wasn’t broken, she was shattered. It was like there was and growing emptiness inside her body where her soul used to be. “Jeongsuk is going to die.”

“What?” He tried to stare directly to her lifeless opaque eyes. “What are you saying, Hwayoung?”

“He’s going to die soon. There’s no cure for the poison, I sent a guard to look for an alchemist, a shaman and the most famous doctor in the capital. None of them has an antidote. He’s going to die.”

Jeongguk slammed his hand against the furniture almost breaking it. “He’s not going to die, he can’t die.”

“I told him everything he needed to know… I gave it to him because I was mad with you and now…”

“Told who what? Stop babbling and speak clearly.”

“You don’t understand he won’t stop, he’s insane and he will kill us all.”

“Hwayoung, you told who what?” He space out between words to catch her attention. She gulped.

“Jihun.” Her voice cracked, she shivered at the mention of that name it felt like bitter poison. “He’s going to kill us all and then he’s going to destroy the kingdom to its foundations.”

“That narrow-minded bastard… I should have known.” Even if Jeongguk was still infuriated with his young sister, he knew he wasn’t going to get any accurate information from her using the same methods his sadistic brother used. “Hwayoung… you need to tell me everything you have told him so far and when I say everything I mean everything. There must be a way of stopping him…”

“He’s never going to be completely satisfied.” She said in a distant tone. “I have told him so much… I have…” She suddenly stopped sobbing. “Jeongguk.” Her face was pale. “Did you come here alone?”

He wasn’t able to comprehend her words until she raised her voice again.

“Taehyung is not with you?”
It was like blood was drained from his body.

Taehyung wandered lost in the night. He wasn’t sure what to do after seeing the motherly figure he had adopted in that strange place dead because, even after all those years, he was still an outsider, that realm was still unfamiliar in so many ways he wasn’t going to understand no matter all the time he spend inside those walls.

She had insured a copy of the letter was delivered to the ministers after her dead and now her body was being taken somewhere until the men of the court decided what to do with her, he didn’t know what sort of treatment “traitor’s” corpses received but it was difficult to expect some sympathy for the maid even if she had served for so long in the palace.

He ended up walking until he stumbled across an gazebo that wasn’t just a normal gazebo, it was the same place where he had spotted Princess Haewon the night she released the lantern that illuminated the night sky not so long ago. It was a dusty night, one of the first for a cool autumn that would take a lot of brownish leaves with it.

Taehyung was surprised someone else was in that place as if it had been waiting for him. Fortunately the princess didn’t show any sign of discontent or disgust due his presence instead, she shared the reduced space so he could lean on the railing next to her.

They had never had a close relationship. The shapeshifter liked to think she didn’t dislike him as other people in the palace; rather she remained indifferent most of the time. He knew the brave huntress princess but he knew so little about Haewon herself.

“It’s a beautiful night.” She tried to fill the blank spaces that were bigger than physical spaces.

“What’s that’s supposed to mean?” He asked with his heart still turned into stone after the loss.

“It means that it’s bearable enough to wait for another day to rise. I thought you liked nights… I have seen you here before.” The princess said. “On the rooftop, watching the sky with moonstruck eyes. Aren’t you ever scared of falling?”

“No, I’m not scared of heights. I’m only scared of much worse things, like people or what they can do.” Taehyung grabbed the wood railing with both hands until they turned white from the strength put on his grip. “I have seen you here too. Aren’t you scared of the night and its terrors?”

Haewon thought about it. “I’m only scared of much worse things, like myself and what I can do.”

Princess Haewon had grown to love the nighttime better than daylight, the night hid the beautiful things and encouraged the brave ones to find them unlike day hours where even the ugliest ones shone, no place to run from the sun rays.

“I saw you that time when you released a lantern into the sky.” He admitted feeling a bit guilty and ashamed for having witnessed such an intimate moment.

The princess didn’t seem to be upset. “I guess we are even… because I have seen you many times… with my brother.” None of her words sounded like a threat but the mention of the prince alerted all his senses. “On the woods and… inside the palace while your exchange stares like letter in the hallways.” She stared at his white bracelet with the single black bead acknowledging its meaning.

“Haewon, it’s not…”
“You don’t need to explain it. There are things I wouldn’t understand.”

They stood quiet for a minute, wind blew almost dodging them.

Days were the time for loud laughter and sincere stares with the reflection of eyes on each other’s meanwhile nights were meant for secretive talks in whispers and pounding heartbeats louder than frogs and crickets and invisible marks and love bites.

It was fascinating for the princess how all her beliefs about day and night hours were overthrown by them, all the things she thought belonged to one time or another were erased, they laughed really loud on their night encounters when the palace was the most silent and they whispered their love words on days when everything was more vivid, perhaps they were more like a sunset or a dawn, something in between, perhaps they were all of that since they had consecrated all of their hours.

“You two may think you invented the escapades outside the palace but I discovered that long ago.” She gulped. “Back when I couldn’t play any instrument even if I tried to… it was so frustrating once I ended up running and running and I just stopped when…” She stopped for a second. “Taehyung, do you know what a *kisaeng* is?” She asked while looking at the distance with not fixed objective.

The boy tried to remember where he had heard that word before, Master Young for sure had explained to him some time ago but still the designation seemed all blurred for him.

“Women who…”

“Women who are supposed to be artists, entertainers… courtesans.” She completed the idea. “I was thirteen when I discovered what a kisaeng was. A princess is not supposed to run out the palace but I always had the talent to disappear when no one was looking, at first I used to hide in the woods that’s how I learnt all the nooks and crannies around but one day that wasn’t enough so I ran towards the town.”

The shapeshifter listened to her story, mesmerized by her epic narration.

“I heard this woman playing a piece of sogak and I thought it was the most beautiful song I ever listened to… that until… her daughter started singing then I knew it was the most beautiful thing I ever heard. It was so easy for them, playing music as if it was something that was inside of them, so naturally. Then I found out her mother was a kisaeng.”

She made a pause, there was something on her eyes that was sweet a weak smile appeared on her face.

“A kisaeng it’s not supposed to be free and neither their offspring, if a kisaeng gives birth to a daughter she’ll have to follow the tradition, she’s going to be involved in the same treats. They can’t be emancipated unless someone paid for it. I didn’t know back then, I just heart their music in the court fewer counted times… that day they were rehearsing for some performance. And I… I was jealous because I couldn’t perform like them, me, a princess comparing herself to one of the lowest casts all over the kingdom.”

Taehyung saw what Haewon meant. When he and Jeongguk were still children they sneaked out when it was bedtime already and they ended up sneaking out their rooms to attend to a secret rendezvous guided by the melody of those women. They spied from a corner where they were unnoticeable, as if they were watching a painting from the outside, a theatrical piece of art with living porcelain dolls that lent their talents protected by no one but their non-written knowledge about life.

“I forgot about them for a while or that’s what I thought… I went hunting, followed the river, got lost
into the woods… and three years later I was wandering through the town when I heard it. Her voice was both, more clearly and cleaner than back then. I thought I had forgotten but in the second I heard it I recognized it. I needed to find it, just then I discovered I wasn’t jealous anymore, just curious. I had given up on music long time ago but she was still there, trapped in time, still singing.”

The figures danced with the music like if they were under water, the fabrics of their gowns flowed with the rhythm like purple and orange fins, spinning inside the room as if their energy was inexhaustible.

“I kept running and running I thought I was going to lose it if I wasn’t fast enough, all those years practicing to catch the most slippery preys weren’t a waste. I found the window from the kisaeng’s house, the voice had a face… her hair was being braided into one of those complex hairstyles they wear while she happily sang and moved her feet. Someone called her name and she turned around, her name was Byul and her beaming smile was as beautiful as her singing.”

Their ageless faces and crystalline smiles showed in every turned under the glamour of the intoxicating fog…

“I didn’t know why at first but I kept walking every day and sitting under that window as if it was more than a window of the place she lived but an aperture to her world. As she lived in a magical place beyond the palace’s walls where she was happy but I only stood a few moments every day, I didn’t know the whole story.”

…were masks that hid all the pains and scars…

“During one summer my father told me I had a suitor who wanted to contract nuptials with me, Lim Woojin, General Lim’s son. Suddenly I thought of Byul again… and my heart clenched almost suffocating me but I agreed because that’s what I was supposed to do, that’s was what I was instilled to do. When I think about it now, it is possible I also accepted so I could keep living in the palace otherwise I might had ended up moving somewhere far from the capital. I lived happily for a few months trying to adapt but I couldn’t erase the memory… always watching from afar without saying a single word…”

…for the profession they didn’t have the vow or the voice to decline.

“…but then when Jeongsuk was about to get married I understood I… I had fallen in love with her. I wanted someone to look at me in the same way the king and the queen look at each other… I wanted her to look at me like that.”

The princess voice’s broke. Taehyung couldn’t hide the surprise of his face, of all the possible turns of the story he didn’t expect Haewon was the one who had more in common with him than what he thought.

“What happened?” The shapeshifter asked.

“I decided to… run away, to free her and then I’d figure it out what to do next… I didn’t have a big elaborated plan just… I couldn’t stand the idea of her being there anymore… I was being a coward I knew what kisaengs do and still…I got married and I tried to cover a mountain of dust with a carpet, I tried to eclipse the sun with my hands and forget… but I couldn’t.”

She was sobbing but the tears won’t come out.

“I had the money and a fake name of some man of the court to free her… but she wasn’t there that day… no one had seen her for days until…nevertheless by nighttime I found her…” The hands of
the princess couldn’t stop tremble. “She was dead on the side of the street. Apparently the people who decided to have fun with her… didn’t take care. They had disposed her… they didn’t mind if she was a person or an object they just… used her.”

Taehyung felt his heart heavier and heavier, his own cheeks were already wet.

“She was never mine but… I belonged to her in so many ways. I didn’t know anything about her but I didn’t have the chance to know her either… those people took that away from me. I buried her alone no one will ever know who was she; no one will ever care… only me. So that night you saw me releasing a lantern… it was for her. It was for Byul.”

She finally looked at Taehyung to the eyes again.

“You might be wondering why I’m telling you this. It’s because I know how it’s to fall in love when you’re told you’re not supposed to. To love someone against the wishes of people who doesn’t even know you. Taehyung I know you love Jeongguk and he loves you back, I don’t want neither of you face the same tragedy I lived that’s why you have to run away from here… both of you, you are in great danger.”

“To run away? From who? Who is doing this?”

“The only person who could be so twisted and insane to… I thought he was going to be better with the years…that he was going to set aside some of his resentment but Jihun never understood.”

“Yes. You are right sister, I never understood.” The voice shocked both of them, when they turned around they saw the face of the prince enlightened by the fire of the torch on his hand.

“Jihun… listen to me, you don’t have to do this. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone.”

“Only because you forgot what they did to our mother it doesn’t mean I’m going to.”

“She tried to kill Queen Soo and her baby who’s also your brother. She did wrong and so are you, you have to listen to me.”

“Why would I? I don’t need you by my side anymore… do what you want, Haewon. You’re going to take their side anyways.” For a second Taehyung heard a sign of weakness on the prince’s voice. Perhaps there was a person under all that hate but he was long gone. “Grandfather supports me as their new king when Jeongsuk is gone. Soon everything is going to be controlled by me.”

The princess’ face blanched. The maternal side of their family was powerful and rich enough to hold a war, no wonder he was doing what it pleased him those days without considering the repercussions, he was looking for a conflict, he was looking to create chaos along with the chained actions.

Taehyung felt there was nothing they could possible tell him to change his mind, it was already dirty and rotten, every single one of his edges. There was no saving for who didn’t want to be saved. That conversation wasn’t taking anywhere either, it was almost like if he was trying to distract them…

“Haewon! This is a trap!” The shapeshifter shouted.

By the time he was able to speak out they were already surrounded by armed men. The shapeshifter froze for a second until he saw how one of the soldiers that were next with Jihun punched princess Haewon on the stomach, she was carrying a small dagger on her hand and she had time enough to hurt three of the four men that went after her. The sound of her fall and the dry sound her throat made after being hurt woke something inside Taehyung.
It was the animalistic fury that emerged too fast to be stopped; he wasn’t going to watch how another innocent person was taken down because of him. He was ready to fight. He jumped to one man’s throat breaking it with his tiger fangs as if it was a thin stick, then with a single change he was a dangerous desert snake and in one slip he had bitten two distracted men. As a sloth bear he was able to take three of them with one hit but his fourth metamorphosis was probably the one that caught the most attention since an elephant stepped into one man and knocked over two more with his trunk.

It took around twenty men to immobilize the infuriated creature and one critical hit with a spear to overthrow him, Taehyung kept fighting even with half dozen of ropes tied to his extremities restricting all his moves. As a human he was already powerless and vulnerable but that wasn’t enough for Jihun. He hadn’t just discovered his little brother weakness but also his biggest weapon and he was going to take advantage of it.

“Now what?” One of his soldiers asked. Many others were still terrorized by the amazing transformation they witnessed.

“Beat him but don’t kill him. I have an idea.” Jihun answered without even turning to look back.

Princess Haewon cried out until her lungs were empty and her throat was bloody.

The first punch was on the stomach, one soldier held him so his body couldn’t bend of the pain and he had to feel everything completely, another one, his face was full of bruises and scrapes, blood running down his chin but the men kept beating him merciless until one hit got him unconscious.

That night, the darkness wasn’t a better place.

“Move!” The prince ordered to the guards who were locking the exit. “If you don’t want to perish right now move.” He threatened but none of the guards move any inch.

Jeongguk was desperate. He wasn’t thinking rationality, the circumstances didn’t call for rationality, they called for action and if he had to take down ten, a hundred, a thousand or a million men to reach Taehyung he was going to do it.

“We have orders from Prince Jihun to not allow your exit, your grace.” One of the men replied.

“I revoke all his past orders; move or I will open your stomachs until I get all your bowels removed one by one.”

He saw the other guard visibly gulping. “My apologizes, your majesty.”

“Forget it. I’ll find my way out but when I return, I’ll remember every single one of your faces.”

All the palace was taken by Jihun’s payed loyal men. All the real soldiers were out with General Lim handing an attack near the frontiers, one that suddenly didn’t seemed to be fortuity. He was about to demolish the whole building with his fists.

“Jeongguk…” He heard a voice in form of a whisper. “Over here, come.”

From all the people who remained in the palace, she was probably the one he chose to trust. She dragged him to her room without losing any more time.

“Miyoung, what are you doing? Go hide, this place is no longer safe.”
“They have Taehyung, I heard them. Jihun is taking he and Haewon to some hiding place outside the palace. You have to follow them or they are going to be untraceable.”

His stomach took a turn. His anger was just growing like a crepitated flame.

“Listen. I know a way out it’s near the stables so it will only take a few minutes. Don’t let him hurt Taehyung, please.”

“I won’t. Show me.”

Jeongguk had never felt such amount of hate towards someone as he did with Jihun. His own brother was the person he hated the most on Earth. His fists were closed and his nails almost cut his palms from the pressure he put on them.

That sadistic bastard had thought about it all.

Still it was shocking for the prince when he entered to the stables and found that his brother had seriously injured the horse his father had given to him as a gift years ago. The one Taehyung chose to name and the one he slowly grew to love as his most loyal partner in the battlefield was now agonizing on the dirt.

He shared a tear for his friend when he ended up his suffering with his own sword and under the silhouette of the moon; he sworn there was no return or absolution for his brother.

He had to pay for all the pain he had caused.

Jeongguk had no horse but without even blinking he broke one of the sentinel’s neck and stole his horse to follow the fading trace his brother had left behind.

Their reunion was not going to be pleasant.

Taehyung regained consciousness slowly. His body ached as he was able to feel every single hit he had received that night. He was too weak to stand up and his head kept falling down, probably from the contusion. The shapeshifter heard the voices in the distance as vicious mumbles that discouraged him but he only saw Jeongguk’s face when he closed his eyes.

“Go ahead. Show us what is the best you can do, beast. Unless you have other better ways to entertain the prince.” One of the men shouted.

He was too damaged to transform again, he barely could open his eyes but when he lifted his head he saw it.

Taehyung wasn’t incarcerated in an average prison.

No. Jihun was beyond that.

Looking around he saw, he was locked inside a golden cage.

XXVII
Taehyung was trapped inside a cage made of gold. Every bar was made of solid golden metal just like the cage that had held him the first time he ever appeared in the palace after a cold dip through the portal. This time there weren’t tender hands from a gentle prince but either lascivious or hateful stares from strangers that were somehow worse than the wolves that inhabited the forests.

He was barely kneeling on the floor, grabbing the bars in an attempt of not falling physically apart with a weak wind whistle. He wasn’t in conditions of turning again, he couldn’t even stand up without tripping, he wished the limitations of his powers vanished for a few minutes, that’s all what he needed.

There were a few men inside the room, others were prowling through the hallways or watching over the perimeter. The giant metallic structure was placed right in the center of the room where the candle lights enlightened all the burden of the enclosure.

The shapeshifter tasted the oxide savor on his tongue; he had never liked the taste of blood but what he hated the most was the aftertaste that spilled scarlet liquid left, something sour mixed with pique and animosity, an endless crackling wish of revenge.

Princess Haewon was thrown in a room nearby, wrists and ankles tied up with ropes and her mouth muzzled in order to prevent her to keep screaming as if that was supposed to tame her spirit somehow. Her body might have been bruised but wounds would heal and she knew if she was angry there was only one person who could overpass her.

Jeongguk hadn’t become captain just because he was the son of the king. He was on his way to tear everything that stepped on his way apart. If a slaughter had to happen then it was going to happen but he needed to find Taehyung first and then he would take care of other less important matters as the insect of Jihun.

Hyesung and Lady Go’s dead was still fresh as cut grass, a heavy sensation filled his chest like water. He wasn’t going to allow more people to die under his brother’s blade; he was going to take every one of his men one by one if it was necessary.

They left a trail to track on the wet dirt and mud; a dozen of horses were difficult to hide even in the stealth of the night. Jihun had a house near the palace where he lived with his wife, a rich woman that was willing to turn a blind eye in order to preserve her comfortable life she had. The younger prince had been there just a few times, official events or short meetings, still he knew his way in.

The second prince wasn’t hiding, he was strutting, showing himself and his alleged power, he was provoking and succeeding on it. Nonetheless Jeongguk was going to stop him once and for all. Even the most dreadful night was overcome by a triumphant morning and the first sunrays were already showing on the horizon.

“What is that?” Jihun asked with a derogatory undertone staring at the bracelet hanging on Taehyung’s wrist.

The shapeshifter suddenly had the urgency of hiding it, his arm fell excrated when he released his grip from the cold bar he was holding. He needed both hands up to keep his body straight; he didn’t want to show how close he was from collapsing even if his swollen face was a reflection of that.
Jihun displayed a crooked smirk. “Now I understand why he protected that piece of jewelry fervently. I guess that wasn’t something written on Master Young’s registers.”

“You read his registers?” Taehyung could focus momentarily at the mention of the old wise man.

“Although my sister’s tales ended being truth you would understand a young dreamy mind like hers could create any sort of distorted story that would fulfill her vast imagination giving her an excuse of the lack of affection she was receiving from you, no more no less. Thus, I decided to verify the suspicions with precise information and the only source were Master Young’s writings.”

“He would never allow it.”

“He wouldn’t. He didn’t indeed but I have my ways.” The prince reached for a brown fabric bag he had taken with him from the palace. “I must admit, for someone of his age he offered quite a fight…”

The prince opened the bag and let the decapitated head of the elder rolling out of it until it landed on the edge of the cage the shapeshifter was locked it. Taehyung gasped and fell on himself. A second later immediately moved away from the vision of the foggy eyes of the old man. He wanted to throw up; the nauseating sensation on the back of his stomach wasn’t going to disappear, it was burning his throat already. That was another death added to Jihun’s growing record.

Jihun laughed without restraint, every sound that came out of his mouth was more and more obnoxious and distorted resulting into a loathsome cacophony.

Taehyung couldn’t stand up after falling down; he was too weak and disturbed to continue playing that game of cat and mouse just for the prince’s amusement but he knew as soon as he would quit following him, Jihun was going to come up with new strategies.

“I am bored. You are a dull guest; I don’t see what my brother saw on you. You’re not even putting up resistance.” He stared the shapeshifter for a few seconds before grinning. “I wonder, however… what my little brother will do if he found a few more scratches on his precious toy?” A sharp knife appeared on his hands.

Jeongguk shot two arrows and with a single whistle knocked down both sentinels that were on the tower. He used one more arrow with a rope tied to one of the extremes to assure his stability while climbing one of the rock walls. He knew he didn’t have the surprise factor, his brother was waiting for him, reinforcing the security and duplicating the rounds of the guards. Jihun wanted everyone under his claws but he didn’t wanted right away, there was no pleasure for him on that, he wanted to be the predator but he was about to become the prey.

General Lim was already notified and returning urgently to the palace, if things went as planned they would be back in just a few days and the third prince already had a strategy to crush the traitor’s little army. He needed to find Taehyung and Haewon after running away from there, he could start thinking about any possible revenge.

Jeongguk didn’t expect such denouement for him and his brother’s story. There was a part of him that wanted to believe everything was a lie, it was much more frightening knowing monsters weren’t just in the woods or miles away under the sea but close enough to breathe the same air and live under the same roof than him. It was more fearsome knowing he had born and been there during the becoming to a monster of his brother but now he was going to end it.

The prince broke in through one of the sliding doors that were connected to a garden. He sneaked in
trying to guess in which room his condemned brother was going to be holding his display. Slowly he checked the doors one by one, hid from the guards that walked in the hallways, calmly he slid one more door thinking it was going to be empty as the others but in the dark he saw a silhouette moving on the floor.

“Haewon?” He whispered as he got closer to her.

He cut the robes and bandages that imprisoned her.

“Jeongguk… You have to… stop him.”

“I’m going to.” He offered her his hand to help her standing up. “Can you walk?”

“I can do more than that. Do you have a quiver and a bow?” The princess didn’t lose any other second. She stood up right away dismissing her wounds and lacerations, most of them were superficial comparing to what they had done to Taehyung.

“Here.” The prince gave her what she asked. After that he unsheathed his sword.

“They are nearby. I heard Jihun’s morbid laughter from here, follow me, I think I know where.”

Haewon was more familiarized with the distribution of the mansion. She knew precisely where to look first. The darkness helped them with their disguise. They crawled, went forward at slow pace proceeding with caution. The princess was the best archer of the kingdom; she was faster than Jeongguk with her nimble arrows that could perforate steal if she tried hard enough. The prince on the other hand, was way more skilled with the handling of the blade, years and wars had created a deadly swordsman who was determined to find his target.

After taken down three more custodies they found the room where Jihun had Taehyung locked.

“In three. One, two… three.” Haewon whispered before her brother pushed the door with a demolishing move.

The room was almost empty with the exception of one giant golden cage in the middle. Inside, a little bird turned into a boy, curling and shaking on the ground, dangerously weakened. Jeongguk ran towards his direction and after spotting the puddle of blood that kept emanating from his body he forced the padlock, breaking it with the back of his dagger.

“Tae! Tae! You hear me! I’ll be there soon, hold on… Can you hear me? Taehyung, my love. I’m here, please don’t go. Please don’t tell me I’m too late.”

After the door of the cage was opened he grabbed the shivering body of the boy, turning him face up. His chest was soaked in red, and his eyes weren’t focus too white and cloudy. His mouth was marked as if he had been gagged recently, still he was breathing, that was all that mattered momentarily.

“Tae…” An almost inaudible sound came from his mouth.

“I knew… you’d come.” Taehyung lightly squished his hand before losing consciousness and fell on his arms, finally allowing himself to rest on the embrace of his most beloved person.

Jeongguk took his coat off and pressed it against the source of the dense liquid, only then, when the blood started stopping running he saw, stamped on Taehyung’s chest, craved with a sharp knife, there weren’t just random cuts and scratches.
He had used Taehyung as his personal piece of paper to deliver a message.  

This isn’t over.

“Jeongguk.” Haewon called for him as she spied through a window the escape of the remaining men. “They are gone.”

Jeongguk’s blood boiled. Jihun had escaped and got away after hurting Taehyung. No matter how clever or strong he thought he was, all the pain he had inflicted was going to have repercussions.

Taehyung laid against his chest, breathing in and out and Jeongguk could only thought about how wonderful that sound was.

“I’m sorry it doesn’t taste like Lady Go’s tea but…” Jeongguk approached to the bed where he was resting quietly.

Three weeks had passed since Taehyung’s kidnap. He still had some wounds and bruises on his face and the base of his neck although what the prince hated the most were the thin unhealed lines on his chest, it was hard to look at it but they were going to disappear with the time.

“A prince serving tea for a low cast? I could never expect that.”

The shapeshifter displayed a beaming smile that made the prince think life was good. His heart skipped a beat, he hadn’t seen that smile for too long and he had missed it dearly to the point it was almost unbearable. Jeongguk left the tea tray aside and held Taehyung’s hand with both hands before looking him at the eyes.

“I haven’t had the chance to tell you this but… I’m sorry, Tae. None of this your fault, you shouldn’t even…”

“I shouldn’t even been here.” The elder completed the idea.

“A part of me wishes you weren’t but the other is glad and relieved that you are.” Jeongguk rested his head on the other boy’s lap while kneeling on the floor. “I have been scared only a few times in my life, Tae. When the wolves surrounded me when I was in the woods, when my father fell from the horse in front of my eyes... when I had to kill a man for the first time but this time, this was by far the most terrifying experience of all. I thought for a second he had…”

The words were trapped; he wasn’t able to say them aloud.

“Don’t. We have the advantage now; you don’t have to worry about it yet. How’s the king?”

“He’s feeling better since the venom stopped being served with his tea. His mood hasn’t changed since Hyesung’s death, I can’t blame him but at least the poison isn’t as effective or immediate as Hwayoung had mentioned. I’m sure he was playing with her mind too.”

“I know you don’t want me to ask but… have you had any news from her?”

“Just through what she wrote to Haewon in a few letters. King Jo has been more than generous with her, it’s more she could have here at this moment.” Jeongguk lifted his head and stared at the shapeshifter. “I was going to take a walk and I wanted to know if you wanting to come with me.”

“I have been laying in this room for the past three weeks, of course I’d like to… and I’m not saying
this just because it’s you who’s asking.”

“I wouldn’t expect something different.” The prince offered his arm so he could tangle his hands around it and take small steps outside the room. “Hold me tight if you need it.”

“I always need it.”

Jeongguk smiled sincerely for the first time in almost a month.

They still couldn’t take walks together outdoors but dodge the public eye and the snooping servants was their specialty. After all they had been through some might thought they would finally have more liberties to express the affection they professed, that wasn’t the case. However, Princess Haewon had told all the hungry politicians Jeongguk went to save her, Taehyung just happened to be there with her that night and it was a miracle he wasn’t dead.

Jeongguk didn’t care about what a bunch of men would think about him spending great quantities of time with his always questioned childhood friend, Jeongsuk always kept the comments cut right away. He was more concerned about one individual who knew more of their secrets and who had been too quiet during the past weeks.

“We could lie. Invent a story of your being a deity. You would be untouchable.” Jeongguk mentioned casually when they were walking through the training room, there were plenty swords and blades, things that made the prince feel secure to have around.

“Uhm…” Taehyung pressed his index finger against one of the sharpest blades. A thin red line started to leak red thick liquid. “Deities don’t bleed.”

“Careful, you’re still healing from your other cuts.”

“He had seen me bleed, Jeongguk. And he had seen me turn more than once. He knows what I’m capable of.”

“He wants to use you against me. I can’t allow that. There must be a way out.”

“We’ll find it.” Taehyung reached for his hand.

That gesture, as much as Jeongguk loved it, didn’t tranquilize him. He knew he hadn’t time to relax not even for a second.

“A war will begin soon and I’m… I’m scared, Tae.” He announced. “I’m scared he could take you and do worse than last time and we both know he’s capable. It’s suicidal to fight against him without being ready for his tricks and skullduggery. Haewon says since Jeongsuk didn’t die as he was expecting their grandfather retreated his military support. He’s not willing to be contrary to the king. He was offering his men just if his grandson was denied his birth right as second prince, if Jeongsuk named me his heir.”

“That’s why he hadn’t tried to attack again.”

“It’s not the last we have seen of him. He must be planning something. I’m counting with that.”

A few weeks later, the last of that autumn clashed with a cold wave that took the last leaves away with a strong shake. It would be madness to start a war in the middle of winter, not enough resources to maintain an army. Jihun wasn’t going to move his token anytime soon, he was going to wait
patiently until the moment was right, and Jeongguk was going to be ready.

There weren’t visible marks on Taehyung’s body anymore. He was healed in the outside but on the inside, that was a different story. Jeongguk knew he had been through more than enough for anybody, both of them but Taehyung was the one who came from the distant land, he hadn’t grown up with all the terrors Jeongguk knew since he was a just an unborn baby.

The shapeshifter didn’t know how to face a war while the prince had been in more than any man should ever been. Jeongguk had questioned if he was going to return back home several times, it was normal for him being afraid before something that also involved Taehyung.

He didn’t want to spend another moment separated from him. Taehyung had become something more than a lover; the category didn’t fit him anymore, the title didn’t make him justice anymore. That’s why the prince had an idea that struck on his head like a visible ray of light.

He knew what he had to do.

“Where are you taken me?” Taehyung asked while being blindfolded. There was a ticklish sensation on his fingers and on his shoulder where Jeongguk’s hand was placed, guiding him through the unknown.

The sound of the sliding door and the sudden cold air that came from the outside took him by surprise, it was rare to surprise the elder those days but the prince liked to be still able to do it. He couldn’t hide the smile painted on his face while driving the shapeshifter through the hallways until they reached their destiny.

“You can remove the blindfold.” He authorized while closing the door behind them.

Taehyung took the piece of fabric that limited his vision, getting accustomed to the light he saw it, they were outside, not at any random place of the palace but their garden. The garden that saw them together for the first time, the scenery that witnessed their endless back and forth, it was now stripped off of any green leave or colored flower, instead a thousand of candles glowed enlightening the cool night of full moon.

“Jeongguk…” Taehyung was out of breathe, amazed by the view. He looked for his prince with sparkly eyes that were full of all the warmness autumn had taken away.

“We can’t… officially get married and I should have asked you before preparing everything but I had a good feeling you’d say yes.”

“You weren’t wrong but it won’t kill you ask at least once…”

Jeongguk kneeled near the pond, the shapeshifter got closer. Their eyes were interconnected without any chance of breaking that intense staring they shared.

“Tonight with the moon and the stars as my witnesses I take you as the only owner of my time and the untamed wind that guides my course in the most deserted field. I take you as my soul mate, my best friend and the person who knows me better than myself. Beyond age and death, beyond everything is above me. I love you forever and I write it on my heart with brushes of your kisses I will never love another soul more than yours.”

Taehyung extended his hand to help him standing up. Truly vows were never said.

“Take my hand and dye my galaxy of the colors your soul radiates. Take my lips if you think there’s where the secret of the universe lays. Or take my body and let’s destroy another planet tonight.
because there’s no world that can endure the love I hold for you.”

Jeongguk hugged him tightly, balancing their bodies together almost spinning.

“Taehyung… I love you so much, I love you more than I love my own life and that’s why I had to tell you before… before anything else happened.” Jeongguk’s face was covered in warm tears as he whispered on his ear, chin pressed on the elder’s shoulder.

“When I’m with you nothing else matters…”

“I’m sorry, Taehyung.” The younger’s voice made him shiver.

“I already told you none of this it’s somehow your fault.” He assured him while tangling his fingers on his hair.

A sweet kiss was planted on his lips. It was brief but still was meaningful; it was the seal of their love ceremony only the moon had been brave enough to assist.

“No. I’m sorry for doing this.”

Taehyung didn’t have time to react. Everything happened too fast in front of his eyes. He wasn’t able to fight, he wasn’t able to notice what happened until he was being sucked by the black waters of the pond, the moon kept shining while its figure was shattered with the moves of the restless awake shapeshifter.

That was the night of the winter solstice.

“Jeongguk! What are you doing?” He was still on such shocked state the voice that came out of his mouth didn’t feel like his, instead it was much more desperate and alarming.

“Come back for the next solstice and if I’m not the first thing you see when you are here, go back to where you came from and never, never return. Do you understand?” Jeongguk stared at him, hands cupping his cheeks for one last quick peck.

“Don’t let go of me. Don’t. I swear, don’t let go of me Jeongguk.” Taehyung cried knowing it was already too late.

“Promise me, promise it to me.”

“No! I won’t go, please don’t. Jeongguk I love you!”

“I love you too… I hope you would ever be able to forgive me for doing this…”

“Jeongguk!” He shouted one last time.

The prince let go of his hand and watched how his soulmate was drowned by the waters of the portal it wasn’t meant to be used ever again. Just then he left without looking back.

XXVIII

Oasis

Taehyung had forgotten how hot the summer was in the desert.
Years and years skipping summer in both sides had him used to the solid winter and vibrant spring nevertheless he had forgotten how scorching that season was on the other side of the portal. He went through a perfect humid summer on the palace, even when it felt insufferable there was always a fresh downpour that blessed the ground and their insolated cheeks.

Back at the desert, things weren’t as pretty as he remembered.

A year away could change a lot of things. It was one of the most difficult times the oasis had faced, the valley was dying. A year without rain, they had gone through an entire year without any water falling from the skies, not even the smallest of the drizzles, the arid winds took everything away from them. The nature was dying, animals were migrated to different water bodies where vegetation grew livelier and their predators followed them. Slowly, the plants started drying off, what was green before was now brownish and ill.

The water of the lake was all the tribe had left to grow their reduced field of crops and the only source of clean water to drink. Taehyung had noticed the diminution of the water level once again when he appeared in the surface, he had to climb his way out of the pit with the little energy he had on his body and the lack of encouragement to move. This time there was no one waiting for his comeback.

By the time he got out the lake his lips were blue and his fingers were wrinkled. His palace’s clothes were soaked and heavy limiting his moves. Jeongguk had sent him back to the desert to protect him but he couldn’t help feeling betrayed somehow by his decision, he didn’t question the words they had exchanged before were less true due the prince’s actions but there was something on his voice when he begged him to never return that made the boy anguish.

He was death scared he wasn’t going to be there to help, to be by Jeongguk’s side on the oncoming war. Taehyung knew the prince didn’t need his protection but it wasn’t about protecting him, it was about fighting next to him on a war that had become his as well. Jihun had hurt him but also hurt people he loved as much as Jeongguk, he wanted to have the chance to participate on the conclusion of his reign of terror.

Nonetheless, there in the desert, he was useless.

“I am aware he had joined forces with the northern kingdoms, what I am asking is if we still have some sort of advantage over him.”

“It’s difficult to tell, your majesty. We are calling our allies, all of them promised loyalty to your grandfather and your father. All of them were here to promise the same to King Jeongsuk the day of his coronation. We are counting with that.”

“Don’t assume it. Assure it. I want to know exactly how many men we have on our side. Will Jeongsuk join us today?”

“He’s receiving some ambassadors on the throne room, had asked for us to continue he’ll join us later.”

“Send the letters to the nobles and head’s families. Wait for their later response and communicate it to me directly. Wait for more orders, General Lim and I will be discussing the terms of the truce with the west forces.”

The prince commanded all the politicians to leave the room. He sighed loudly feeling the heavy
weight upon his shoulders; unconsciously he touched the black and white bracelet on his wrist, wishing to know if he was taken the right decisions.

The boy with candent skin spent his days watching how the sun rays of the burning summer evaporated a bit more of his only door back to the palace. He hadn’t seen the old wise grandma since he returned but many habitants had left the oasis to find a new place to live. It was risky; throwing themselves to the dunes without knowing what was next for them. His mother and a reduced group of natives stayed on the oasis refusing to leave the home that had been theirs for so long.

Taehyung didn’t know if he could call it his home anymore. As time passed he only found himself missing a person more than a particular place, there was always a possibility the lake would dry off before he could cross again, and just thinking about it horrified the brunette.

His mother found him one day, sitting on the shore of the lake. His skin was glowing under the sunlight as a thin layer of sweat covered his smooth face. Taehyung didn’t need to look back to know it was his mother who hugged him.

“My child.” She started with the saddest voice Taehyung had always heard coming out of her mouth. “There’s not much left for us in this place. I insisted we had to stay and wait for you to comeback but now you are here… perhaps is time for us to move onto a different land.”

He was anticipating his mother decision for a long time. He knew she wasn’t longer happy living on that depressing landscape, it was normal for them to look for another territory, that was what they always did, as much as they enjoyed their life as sedentary, as nomads they were going to find new places even more incredible than that little oasis of them.

“Mother I…” He started saying.

If Taehyung left with them… it was going to be like if he had dreamt it all. He wouldn’t have to go back through the portal and Jeongguk would live an easier life but… easy didn’t mean happy and Taehyung was the happiest next to his little prince.

“I can’t go with you. I wish I could follow you but I’m not longer part of the tribe and I don’t know if I belong to that place beyond the lake, I don’t even belong to Jeongguk but… it’s not about if I’m his or if he’s mine, it’s what we are when we’re together.”

His mother pulled him closer and embraced him with all her strength. “I know you have taken your decision ten years ago and you haven’t changed your mind since then.” She stroked his locks separating it and untangling them. “You have grown up so much; it’s difficult for me to imagine a life without you but I got used after you left every summer…”

The shapeshifter laughed quietly although tears sparked on the corners of his eyes.

“You will always be my son in my heart, since that moment you were born in the most extraordinary night of my life when the sky and the dunes split in two just for you. Taehyung.” It was odd hearing his foreigner name from those familiar lips. “I love you, my dear.”

“I love you too, mother. I couldn’t have asked for a better mother not even in a million years and I hope you can live many, many years more a healthy and happy life. I now I have told you stories about… that place but, not everything it’s that bad, it’s just sometimes tragedy stain all the good things on the world.”

“I understand. You keep choosing to go back for a reason… or many. You were always a good,
generous boy… don’t let your light to be extinguished.”

He shook his head. “I won’t. I promise.”

“We can’t cross the desert during summer… we will leave after you, right after the winter solstice.”

There weren’t many days left for the end of summer but they still had three more months to spend them together, their last three months together.

Jeongguk didn’t remember winter days were so cold, no wonder Taehyung always crept to his bed looking for warmthness. Those days the freezing temperature had stopped all the activity on the palace, the war didn’t cease but they had won over Jihun’s army the two times they had meet with them and many powerful lords that were on the second prince’s side withdraw their support for his campaign.

Jeongsuk had recovery from the poison after endless sweating treatments and herbs, the fact he didn’t receive a daily dose was what helped him the most to overcome and regain strengths. Even if his spirit was never going to be fully recovered, he had hope for his kingdom and that made him the light guiding the tropes and the people. The portrait of Queen Hyesung was hanged on the royal chambers like shrine; it was a reminder that if Jihun believed in some deity above him he was going to bury all his idols. There was no redemption for the prince.

The day of the solstice was every day closer. The snow started melting and the sweet fragrance of the blossomed flowers brought back an inevitable look to the past. They had to end up that dispute, they deserved a happy ending and Jeongguk was going to fight for it at any cost.

For infinite nights Taehyung stayed awake, praying for a miracle until one night, heaven heard his prayers and sent the biggest deluge the desert had seen on that oasis. Hours and hours and rain wouldn’t cease, the shapeshifter didn’t know where the raindrops ended and his happiness teardrops begin.

Summer had been rough; there were days where he thought he wasn’t going to make it until the end of autumn. He wasn’t going to be able to ever come back to the desert again, even if he tried, the portal to that place was going to be closed soon, he just needed to assure he was on the other side when that happened.

That sudden rain blessed it all. It touched leaves and dripped directly to the roots of the plants; trees that seemed to be turning into ashes were covered in a brand new green and the remaining people from the tribe danced for hours while splashing and roaring with laughter. After the shock of the first raindrops, all the residents started gathering the water into a different containers and reservoirs; everything would help with for the upcoming weeks they had left.

Taehyung was laying under the shadow of a palm tree, his skin was tanned and hardened, and his lips were too dried and brittle until the point it was painful to move them, little red wounds opened cracking as he was unable to wet them. He was saving all the water he could for the lake.

The first raindrop felt like an illusion, perhaps he was starting to hallucinate due the lack of hydration. It fell on the boy’s cheek, kissing his arid skin and waking him up from the reverie that guided him back to places his body couldn’t reach physically. He shook his head and opened both eyes, blinking a few times. The following drops were a confirmation of what he thought were just
tricks of his imagination, a downpour of hope.

He was going to return to Jeongguk. He was going home.

The day of the solstice it was the last time Taehyung heard the beat of the drums playing on the Oasis, a last big salute for the son of the sands and sunlight, the boy with candent skin who was now dyed with the scent of tangerine trees and sea salt, he was covered in kisses that painted his body like a new piece of art never created before. He had changed forever; he had changed a long time ago. The boy who was nameless a decade ago was undeniably, Kim Taehyung.

Time to choose had come again and his heart leaded him back to the portal one last time.

When the sun met the horizon line as if the star was bathing on the yellowish sands of the desert and the sky passed from the warm colors of the orange and red sunset, he sat on the tallest dune he could find and watched it disappear in a magic act brought by the brightest performer.

Walking through the oasis he saw the figure of someone he thought was long lost. The wise grandma was sitting on one of the trunks, observing the rise of the moon. She was smaller, reduced to the pass of the time and what it had taken for her. She didn’t turn around to know he was approaching; his steps were unique to her ears.

“Taehyung.” She softly whispered. Her glassy eyes met the shapeshifter’s brown eyes. “It has been a long time since we met for the last time.”

“I thought you were… I thought you were gone, with the others.”

“I wouldn’t go without seeing you again. You have chosen.” Her white hair shone under the moonlight.

“But you haven’t been here since I came back.”

“Haven’t I?” She asked to no one in particular.

“I…” The shapeshifter tried to resume the chat, although most of their conversations never leaded to something concrete.

“Taehyung!”

He heard the voice of his mother calling him and turned around to look at her but when he returned his gaze, the wise grandma was gone.

“Who were you talking to?”

“The wise grandma was saying good-bye. It’s a shame I didn’t see her before tonight.”

His mother, always sensible, seemed to be confused. “Dear… what wise grandma?”

“The one who lived near the lake in the oasis, she told me about the portal the first time…”

“My child, no one has ever lived near the lake, there are no tents there. And besides, the old women already emigrated.”

Taehyung looked back to the place the woman used to be sitting. The surface remained untouched as the wind blew silver dust away from the trunk. He was speechless, he couldn’t remember the
grandma spending any time with anyone else in the tribe, not seating on the feasts or chatting with the other women around the lake, even though she was always nearby.

His mother had come to tell him, *it was time.*

The boy with candent skin watched what was left from his tribe waving at him as his mother gave him a last big tight hug only mothers could give, he couldn’t distinguished the silhouette of any old woman among the crowd. Taehyung felt the broad tears rolling down her face as she showed a giant grin that threatened with escape from her face at any moment.

He was leaving.

He had prepared for that moment for months but now it was about to materialize, other type of downpour fell upon his head.

“Mother, please live well and don’t cry anymore.” Taehyung cleaned the tears of his mother face with his fingertips.

“I will, son.” She squeezed his hands a bit more before releasing his grip.

Taehyung turned around towards the lake, he set one step and then he looked back. He embraced his mother in one quick last hug. He couldn’t look back after that, he didn’t want his mother sees him crying. Instead, he walked directly to the lake, what was left of it, just a reflection of what it had been. Luckily the strong scent of the portal was still present.

He took a deep breath and before immersing, the shapeshifter saw in the distance, the wise grandma who wasn’t more than just a spirit that guided him and then faded with the wind like ashes.

Then, he was gone to reappear on the other side.

His mind was set, Jeongguk was going to be the first thing he saw when he crossed the portal.

**XXIX**

*The Rising Sun*

“This is his last attack, his desperate measure. Don’t give it to him, Jeongguk. We can defeat him easily any day, don’t fall for his games now.” Haewon sat next to the prince.

He was exhausted. Sleepless and physically consumed, Jeongguk had used all his strengths to stop his devious older brother and had succeeded on every warlike encounter they had. King Jeongsuk had tried to use eloquence and diplomacy to incarcerate him leaving the death threats aside. He was going to be condemned based on his crimes against the crown and the kingdom, all the misdeed he had committed would have their sentence after a trial, his brother was going to be hanged unavoidably.

The end of the war was something the young heir yearned more than anything else those days. He had requested to his oldest brother long time before for a second wish that involved disappearing of the public eye, vanishing from the life in the palace after fulfilling his duty as captain. He had a dream where after all the sorrows and destruction they had faced, they would retire to a house far in the mountains where no one else would bother him and Taehyung and they could live happily...
without worries. He had that idea a long time ago but the second prince had come across with his delusions of grandeur, risking everything he had ever wished for.

Jihun was decided to avoid his faith and get away with everything he had done but six months passed since he declared his intentions to be proclaimed king and even though they had had losses in both sides, he was more than far from that target. He was defeated; nevertheless he had one more ace under his sleeve, his last breath. They weren’t expecting him to go directly for an ambush in the palace, he had the surprise factor on his side; Jihun always knew how to exceed expectations.

The evening was quiet and Jeongguk was preparing for Taehyung’s comeback, it was odd receiving him the first day of the hot summer instead of the inaugural cold season that always came with the snow from the elder’s hand. There were two hours until midnight, the time of the elder’s arrival. There weren’t many soldiers in the palace even if they had increased the security almost duplicating the rounds since the entire royal family was staying in the palace for the forthcoming summer.

“He has all the books and registers of Master Young, he knows Taehyung is coming back tonight and he’s planning using that against me. I’m going to find him and kill him myself.” The prince walked down the hallway with the princess at his heels.

He was carrying his sword while his sister had her bow and arrow on her back, although she had proved to have full management with swords and blades, the princess always preferred being an archer. Jeongguk knew they would be the best team to find Jihun before anyone else and he had sent an entire group especially to the throne room where the king was, so far protecting him was their priority number one, he had promised it to his sister in law on her deathbed and he was going to honored that promise.

Both were heading to the focus of the conflict where the intruders had trespassed into the palace and where they commander presumably was. If they captured Jihun, the madness was over and the sand of the hourglass was falling already. Some soldiers were behind them and others were already directing to the same place where the riot was taking place.

“Your majesty, we have confirmation Prince Jihun is not with the invader group.” One of the soldiers approached to Jeongguk after the prince took down another man with his sword. “This might as well work as a distraction and we must escort you inside for your safety.”

“No. I won’t leave. We can’t rest until we find Jihun.” He looked for his sister in the middle of the commotion. “Haewon, we are heading back!” Jeongguk shouted.

“Where?! That snake is not here.” She shot one arrow straight to a man’s chest knocking him down right away. “Where shall we start searching for him?” She was out of breath.

“Inside, I’m telling you, he knows about Taehyung.”

Princess Haewon was about to argue when both of them heard a high pitched scream from across the palace. Their blood freeze when they identified the owner of the voice, of all the low things their brother had done during his entire life, this was only to satisfy his wicked side, merely because he wished to inflict pain to his siblings.

“Miyoung. That bastard has Miyoung.”

“Let’s go. I know where he’s going.” The princess undertook the race followed by Jeongguk.

Haewon knew her brother was broken since he was a little child. She always tried to understand how
his mind worked, she tried to help him several times but one of the children had received all the poison from their mother and had grown to hate one side of their family, one of the siblings had grown to be the rotten apple and that was Jihun.

Although the princess loved all her relatives, that love she used to hold for her true blood brother was transformed, corroded by the acid Jihun had threw at them with all his past and present actions. She only was grateful that blood tie had provided her with a great knowledge about how the second prince operated, she remembered from when they were children, the only place he could escape when things didn’t go the way he wanted was the maze of the central garden, right where their mother had taken her life.

It was the theatrical last scene Jihun had planned.

The final act of orchestrated destruction they were going to play as the main cast before the curtains fell down and the theatre closed.

The labyrinth survived every autumn with the same color, under the ferocious winters remained the same under the thickest layer of snow but now, after the delicate caresses of the spring it was on its greenest. All the bushes were taller, since the maintenance of it stopped being a priority some branches grew free in different directions during the season of blooming.

The princess had never liked that part of the palace, she was terrorized of getting lost, a claustrophobic sensation invaded her body making her head spin and her skilled archer hands tremble. The memories were still fresh from the evening her mother killed herself inside those bushy walls. She saw the eyes of the lifeless queen being removed from there and she could feel the continuous gazing from an unwanted presence inside that place as if she had never truly left.

When she tried to cover Jihun’s face so he won’t see the corpse of their mother the prince resisted, he wanted to see what they had done to her, he insisted on seeing her one last time, so he escaped his sister’s arms and stared for a long time as the guards carried the body. On his mind, his mother was dead because of the mistreats of a neglected group of people, it was because they stole her rights when they brought a younger queen. All the injustices she had suffered leaded her to her own tragic end.

Where Haewon felt imprisoned and unable to breathe, he felt his liveliest and he was taking advantage of that situation.

“Are you alright?” Jeongguk whispered while grabbing her hand. Even under the faintest light she seemed pale.

She nodded. “We have to keep moving. He’s going to be right in the center, where our mother died.” She took a deep breathe. “We have to split. There are two ways of reaching that part and we’ll have the advantage if we cover both sides.”

“Are you sure? I can stay with you if you don’t feel…”

“No. He has Miyoung. We have to find them before it’s too late.” Princess Haewon would have lied if someone asked if she was scared. It was dreadful to her to set a step inside that maze during daylight and now, under the gloom, things were much worse.

Jeongguk nodded, she explained the way to reach the center. Even if she had grown to hate that place she knew it as well as the second prince and she expected Jihun to believe otherwise, they had to make him believe he had some sort of advantage against them to topple the dastardly prince.
They walked fast enough to move forward the leafy structure but while being careful to see where she stepped in. There were a few soldiers of their brother scattered all over the place, either they circumvented them or kill them with a dagger in order to avoid further chaos that would reveal their exact location.

Princess Haewon saw the frightening figure of her mother wandering around the maze in one turn. It was as she remembered the last time she saw her, her throat shattered but now the blood that leaked from the wound was dark like mud and nauseating as if her corpse was decomposing under the sun. Her hair was a magpie’s nest and her clothes were the same she wore back then, all torn and rickety. Her white opaque eyes stared directly to hers and she grinned maliciously.

Haewon rubbed her eyes a few times, it was all an invention of her imagination but not for that she was less afraid of the sudden vision. She wasn’t real, her mother was dead and buried far away from the palace where only she visited her tombstone.

It took her a few moments to tranquilize her respiration before undertaking the path again.

Jeongguk, on the other hand, had his head cold enough to concentrate and his sharp eyes located their despicable relative waiting for them in the middle of the maze. There wasn’t a single mark of consternation or worrisome, he was as dauntless as always.

Then he saw it, little Princess Miyoung who had nothing to do with that messed up situation, being held with a dagger around her little fragile neck, tears rolling down her face and shaky hands and lips. He wasn’t going to forget him that act of cowardice not even in a million years, if there was a hell where flames burnt day and night for the souls of bastards like Jihun, he had already have one step in and Jeongguk was going to give him the push he needed to face his destiny.

Jeongguk wielded his sword holding it with both hands and walked directly towards their direction with no need of hiding anymore, Jihun wanted to see his face, he wanted to see the terror reflected on his eyes and he wasn’t going to concede him that wish.

“Look what the wind brought but if not other than our little brother.” Jihun smiled as if he was committing a mischief.

The war hadn’t destroyed him but it was closed. All the handsome features he used to have were erased, his teeth were yellowish and his eyes were injected with blood as if he hadn’t slept in months. He could act confident on the outside but Jeongguk knew better than anyone what war made to people, he was decaying with every second that passed. It was the end and both of them knew it.

“Let her go, Jihun.”

“Is that how you refer to your older brother? I see… I could have drag your bitchy mother instead of her but you know, I guess we all agree no one will ever miss that witch but the little princess here…”

“Stop playing your twisted games. I won’t say it again, let her go. It’s over.”

Princess Miyoung was unable to emit one single sound, she was paralyzed in fear.

“It isn’t over until I say it’s over. It will be over when the rightful owner of that throne sits there.”

“He’s sitting there, he’s been ruling for years but you are too blind to see it.”

“Lies! All lies that come out of your filthy mouth!” He shouted. “What I truly expected from a child who shares bed with a profane beast?”
“Don’t you dare to speak about him.” Jeongguk threatened.

He knew what he was doing; Jihun was trying to infuriate him again, to make him seeing all red and act hastily. The younger wasn’t going to fall for that but he also knew, he needed to keep him speaking as Haewon approached from the rear. The princess was nearby and it would only take one arrow to silence him forever.

“Ah, but you actually thought you both were going to live happily after this. Oh no, my dear brother. At contrary, I know all about your little pet, Master Young didn’t know about his beast side but he registered all of his arrivals and don’t think for a second I missed the dates… right during the winter solstice. Unfortunately you sent him back before he could entertain me a little more… I didn’t like that, little brother.”

Jeongguk kept biting his lips to prevent yelling something he might regretted later.

“I know he’s returning tonight, isn’t him? Well, a guest cannot be received without a dignified retinue, can he?”

The younger’s knuckles turned white around the sword handle.

“Fortunately I did take care of that in advantage; many of my men are ready to greet him right when he appears on the garden of yours.”

“That’s never going to happen. You can’t know that, you can’t…”

“Oh, but I know. I know it all, little brother.”

“Stop calling me that. You have lost your rights to call me brother. I’m nothing related with your repulsive being, not even with blood in the middle. You are calamity, a big strain in our family tree.”

Jihun uttered a loud burst of laughter that made the youngest princess shake.

It was just what Haewon needed to find them, the signal she needed.

“You think I’m lying? Perhaps you should go and see it by yourself if you don’t believe me. At this very moment they are surrounding that bland pond right next the plum and the cherry blossom, isn’t this the season to see them bloom? How poetic.”

“Jihun. You know you are not going to win. I offer you what Jeongsuk offered you before, the most merciful death you could ask for, even after all you have done.”

Jeongguk wasn’t going to fall, he knew Jihun was lying, there was no way he could have planned… could he? He didn’t need to hesitate at that very moment. The younger saw the moving silhouette of Princess Haewon, she was already tensing the string loaded with her sharpest arrow.

“I wouldn’t expect it otherwise. Perhaps I should confess all my crimes, shouldn’t I? What I’m saying is that even if you had an outstanding lover over the years, you should now our sister almost surpasses you.”

No. Jeongguk saw the arrow almost leaving the bow but the princess was listening to his words carefully.

“Falling in love with a kisaeng, who would have thought about that? I didn’t expect it but she wasn’t clever to erase her footprints, what a neglected behavior for a princess, going to the town just to contemplate a prostitute playing an instrument unskillfully.”
No. Haewon loosened her grip at the mention of the word kisaeng.

“I couldn’t allow our family name to be desecrated so I did what was right and bought her little precious doll…”

Jeongguk wanted to punch him to death, to destroy him with his own hands.

“A shame after using her she broke like porcelain.”

A heartrending scream came from behind the prince, Haewon was bathed in tears and she had dropped her bow and arrow to go after him with the only dagger she carried with her. Princess Miyoung used that moment to bit the prince and after he released her she ran without looking back to hide behind Jeongguk.

The princess attacked directly injuring both his arms with deep cuts but the second prince was a good contender and way superior in physical fights. Jeongguk jumped into the scene when the prince grabbed Haewon’s neck with his hands intending to asphyxiate her. She kicked until she could stab him in the stomach, after that he let her go momentarily while screaming incoherent curses.

“Go!” She shouted to Jeongguk. “Go and make sure Taehyung is safe! And take Miyoung with you. I will be the one who end this.”

“Haewon.” Jeongguk tried to say.

“Go!” She yelled one last time as she wielded her dagger. “Don’t let her see this.” She referred to Princess Miyoung who was scared to death shaking in one corner.

He trusted his sister would do as she proclaimed, so he abandoned the place while carrying his youngest sister. They had to find the exit before midnight.

“So this is how it ends?” Jihun pressed one of his hands against the bleeding wound the princess had inflicted.

“I shouldn’t be this merciful with you, especially after all you have done.”

“Don’t… don’t kill me here. This is the place of our mother…” He almost begged.

Haewon displayed a sour smile. “You have lost your privileges to choose where to die.”

“A shame, my dearest sister we never bonded as we supposed to. Both of us had been invincible.”

“Do not try to make your way out by talking I won’t fall for any of your tricks.”

“Who said something about talking?”

The second prince knew how to fake a surrendering. Jihun kicked the princess on the guts and before she could stand up, he stabbed her eye with her dagger and watched her falling on the floor as she teared her throat apart with a single howling to the moon.

Jeongguk walked inside the palace. All his steps took him closer to the garden of the pond, right where in just a few moments Taehyung was going to appear. The prince left his youngest sister safe on her mother arms and he saw the gratitude on the queen’s eyes as she hugged the princess with tears falling from her eyes.
He increased his pace, his heart beating unstoppably while it pounded trying to escape from his chest like a caged bird. All the hallways and doors were blurred; he was guided by his instincts to find that place his feet had taken him many times before.

His raven hair waved with the breeze, he was getting closer. Jeongguk heard the sound of boiling water even before opening the sliding door. His long strides transported him right next to the pond where he could see around there were no sentinels, no soldiers pointing at him as his calves were already wet with the water.

With the biggest impulse, the shapeshifter born from the dark domain underwater, he took the first air mouthful filling his lungs with the scent of the familiar place across the portal. He was back and Jeongguk was there. He couldn’t believe it, Jeongguk was there.

He was the first thing he saw.

He was the first person he hugged.

He was the first person he kissed.

“Taehyung.” The prince screamed without breath from his previous race.

“I’m here, I’m here my prince. I’m back.”

Jeongguk was crying without letting him go from his embrace.

“I thought… I truly thought he had planned something but he just wanted to trick me once again. You are here.”

Jihun didn’t know about the shapeshifter’s arrival until he heard both of his siblings talking about from his hiding spot. He had no men monitoring the pond but he knew that would scare the third prince enough to run away immediately and of course, the vicious prince also acknowledged a faster way out from the labyrinth.

After all those years he had learnt how to go in and go out as it pleased him. He also knew the best surveillance posts, all the entries and how to climb the roof without much effort. He was, as his mother a long time ago, envenomed with hate and envy, too blind to see what he had in front of him, too trusted on his own primary senses and instincts that guided all his actions.

Jihun wasn’t dead, but he was long gone into another world.

The second prince waited for the reunion of the separated lovers with patience. He didn’t have much time left but he was going to leave the world sowing the only thing he knew how to harvest, pain and desolation.

He tensed the string of the bow and aimed with the sharp head towards the direction of the prince. He wasn’t far from them and the wind wasn’t going to get in the middle.

Everything happened so fast, he wasn’t able to enjoy the destruction he was about to cause because another arrow came from the gazebo across the garden. It perforated his face and went through his left eye, killing him instantly as the prince fell down from the roof as dead weight.

On top of the gazebo, Princess Haewon with the dagger still nailed on her left eye and blood running from the wound like a cascade, she didn’t need both eyes to be the best huntress in the palace. If
Jihun thought he had defeated the princess stabbing her once he was mistaken. She was untamable and she had promised to herself to end with her brother with all the weapons she had to beat him.

*An eye for an eye leaves everybody blind.*

She had killed him. It was over.

But the arrow he was holding right after she shot him was also released before she could stop him.

“Jeongguk… I can’t believe you sent me back. I was so scared I wasn’t going to be able to come back, to see your face again.”

Jeongguk was still holding him on his arms, whispering to his ears sweet little words. “It’s already over, my love. It’s all over.”

Taehyung smiled widely. That’s all he wanted to hear.

He opened his eyes and blinked a few times before spotting the flash of something shining on top of the roof. Jeongguk was backwards unaware of the danger that threatened their meeting. None of them had left the pond.

Air abandoned his body as he understood; the figure he saw was the one of an archer that was aiming directly to them, directly to Jeongguk. He only had a second to take his decision, life or death decision.

Taehyung turned the prince almost throwing him to the waters and took his place receiving the arrow shot directly to the place where his beating heart was. The sharp weapon pierced his chest and almost crossed to the other side.

The shapeshifter fell on his knees creating a big splash on the water.

And there was, Jeongguk.

He was the first thing he saw.

And the last.

**Final Chapter**

« *Moon, oh blond moon*

*This is what happened to us*

*And our lives tremble like feathers*

*But there’re still summer nights*

*and your stars and your beauty*

*and you, so sweet, to watch over us. »

(...
It was the first day of summer and it was snowing.

Thin snowflakes fell from the cloudless sky like a glitter storm.

The tears washed out all his anger, his cholera. They gave him his childish face back, remained to who he was once upon a time. A kid discovering the world, watching the sun raising for the first time and, in the cruelest way, only the pain brought that back.

He held Taehyung on his arms before the rest of his body could touch the water. Blood was already dripping on the waters of the pond, every drop faded on the tiny waves created by the movement of their bodies. The elder was breathing difficulty.

“No! No! Taehyung! Taehyung, talk to me! Say something! Please don’t leave me!” He begged.

The shapeshifter extended his hand to touch his wet cheek, pushing away one of his tears. He was oddly in peace and that was what scared the prince the most.

“Jeongguk… I’m…”

“No, don’t say it. We will take you inside and remove that from your chest… We will save you. We…”

“It hurts.” He coughed a few times.

“Just hold on a bit more. Stay with me, we have to overcome this we have to. Guards! Guards! Help!” He screamed with all his strengths. “I don’t want to know what is life without you.”

“Jeongguk… can I ask you something?”

“Whatever you want, my love.”

Taehyung was wandering through the gardens while eating persimmons carelessly when he spotted the prince taking a nap in the middle of his lessons. A pile of papers right next to him but he comically slept sitting with his mouth half opened.

He approached quietly, trying to make the less noise possible, although with the years he was going to learn the prince slept like a bear on hibernation. That was just the second spring he had spent in the palace but he was more than adapted already, almost as if he had lived there forever.

He cut a segment of the ripe fruit and slowly touched the lips of the prince who wasn’t going to awake in any moment soon. A little orange strain tinted his bottom lip and before the brunette could clean with his thumb, he placed a delicate peck on his lips, almost like the touch of feathers. His giggles were what woke the prince up, who was unaware of the recent events.

“Ya! Be careful. If you ruin those papers I’d have to start again.” The young prince complained at the sighting of the juicy fruit on his hands while the shapeshifter sat curiously staring at his scrawls because that’s what they were for him, just a bunch of nonsensical writings on a piece of parchment.

“Let’s go play instead.” He insisted unable to remain quiet while the prince finished his tasks.
“I can’t. I told you, if you want to stay part of that deal implies that I can’t neglect my studies or they won’t hesitate to kick you out of the palace any day.”

Taehyung showed a big discontent grimace. “Teach me how to read then.”

“Why you want to know that? It’s boring. If you can read they are going to send you do all sort of dull works like this.”

“I want to understand what you write.” The elder pouted while contemplating the wonderful world of the writing he was external to.

“Fine. What you want to know?”

“This. What does it means?”

“Wisdom. It’s uh… something that you have when you know a lot… and you head grows big.”

“Like Master Young?”

“Yes, that’s why his head is so big.”

Taehyung burst into laughter before pointing to other writing.

“What about this?”

“This is the symbol of the king. My father is the king so this is relative to him.”

“Oh! The king allowed me to stay thanks to you.”

Jeongguk remembered. The only time he had lied to his father by telling him an extraordinary story created by his own imagination, although it wasn’t so far from the reality he had omitted some details of the shapeshifter’s origins and changed some other minor details. Of course, the king thought what every adult would think, they were just children, imagination ran wild.

“And what about this?”

Jeongguk froze when he saw what Taehyung was pointed at.

“Uh… that’s uh… that’s the symbol of ‘love’.”

“Love?” The foreigner was still trying to adjust his vocabulary to what he didn’t know and that was a strange new word for him.

“It’s what… what you feel for other person when you care about them…”

“I love you!” The boy with candent skin shouted without measuring his tone.

The young prince blushed furiously. “You can’t say that so… freely. It’s for… when people plans to get marry and… it’s gross.”

“I know what love is and I love you.” He did know the meaning of ‘love’, but he hadn’t found the equivalent for the world in that odd language.

“Can you stop? Why are you so interested in this after all? It’s boring.”

“Jeongguk.”
“What?” The prince asked innocently.

The shapeshifter grinned widely, showing two rows of perfect rectangular teeth.

“I love you.”

“Ya!”

The prince blushed harder.

"Hey, Jeongguk, have you ever wondered what stars are made of?" Taehyung tugged one of his sleeves.

"I don't know."

"If you ever find out, would you tell me?"

"Sure." The young prince was still trying to shake the tingling sensation off his hands.

"That's why I love you."

"Stop it!"

It was too late, Taehyung was already running, soon to be chased.

"I love you too." He whispered and only the breeze carried his words.

Since then.

It was unfair. This was not what was supposed to happen.

Jeongguk had a plan. He had the promise of his brother, the king backing him up.

He had asked one more thing to his brother, his second favor.

The Summer Palace on the other side of the kingdom. He had asked him to be gifted with the property that was going to allow them to live a quiet life in a place that was lost way beyond the forests, beyond what any men who could trespass mountains or walk through deserts could reach. He had asked to disappear from the public life, to disintegrate in the thicket, to become a mystery, a legend or a myth, to live next to Taehyung forever where no one could ever disturb them anymore.

He had earnt that right, they had earnt their happiness.

A happiness that was just to the reach of a hand but now it looked so far away from then, like a bird of white wings flying away, with every blink, it was further, escaping from them.

They had built their lives out of blood, sweat, and tears.

Oh, from the sorrows the great stories are knitted lusting for a life that was stolen.

“What is that you want? I’ll give you it all. The entire world and the stars, the skies and the seas… tell me.” Jeongguk held his neck with shaky hands without stopping looking at his big eyes. He got closer so he could hear the last wishes of his most beloved person in the world.

Softly, almost like a whisper, the shapeshifter spoke.
“Sing to me, Jeongguk.”

Even after all those years, even after all they had passed, he only wished to hear his singing one last time. Taehyung knew he didn’t have much time left; he had given his life to save the prince and didn’t regret any second of it. He was afraid but he didn’t want to worry Jeongguk. One of his tears fell right on his cheek.

Snow kept falling.

Jeongguk intoned a melody.

“I'm lying on the moon... My dear, I'll be there soon.”

No matter how many times his words cracked and even if he wasn’t able to sing without sobbing he was going to give that gift to him.

“Time's we're swallowed up... In space we're here a million miles away.”

Taehyung traced the features of his face with his weak pulse still running on his body.

“There's things I wish I knew... There's no thing I'd keep from you...”

The prince saw how little by little, the boy with candent skin started losing his last strengths. His hand fell slowly on the red tinted waters.

“It's a dark and shiny place...”

His eyes tired, as he was about to sleep started closing down the curtains.

“But with you my dear...”

His grip decreased and finally, his heart stopped beating.

“I'm safe and we're a million miles away.”

The voice of the prince broke right before finishing the song. Jeongguk hugged him unable of letting go him. He didn’t want’ to abandon him on those distant lands where he was going to be a stranger again. Taehyung had returned with him and now they had taken him away once again.

It was a clear night, no need of storms to accompany the suffering, just the snow falling the first day of summer and a big, rounded, shiny moon that stared from above.

The heart of the prince was so full of grief and sadness; no star could help but share a tear for them. People didn’t know how to love on Earth; they always ended up in tragedy somehow perhaps they didn’t deserve the ability of loving but then, the moon saw those lovers she had reunited more than ten years ago whose love was the strongest even in the afterlife and she cried too.

A tear of the moon fell from the sky and landed on the pond of the lovers.

Princess Miyoung heard a sound coming from the garden. She didn’t know if the palace was still under attack but she needed to follow that sound and find the source of it. She run and run and when finally located the right door, she thought she was dreaming.

A halo of light was surrounding the pond displaying an endless amount of colors she had never seen
on her life, the aurora extinguished in one light too bright to stare directly at it. It faded just a second after it began as if the rest of the world didn’t notice the intromission of the nature on her palace. The two figures that were kneeling on the pond turned into millions of resplendent white petals and with a swirl move were swallowed by the dark waters.

Ten years after, Princess Miyoung still visited the pond twice a year.

No one expected that little princess was going to be the one that unified the three kingdoms after marrying the first king of the new era, Joseon.

She was carrying a little life on her hands while mumbling some lullaby when her sister, Princess Haewon saw her on the garden where the first cherry blossoms were blooming.

“Your majesty, I didn’t know you were here.”

She smiled. Haewon was still beautiful, she wore the patch on her eye proudly, it was a badge that proved she was a survivor, where others might consider it out of place, she carried it with distinction.

“I always liked this garden; I think I will ask to be painted in here. Do you think they would have liked that?”

“No doubt about it.” Her sister carried the little heir on her arms as the baby slept deeply.

It was still a mystery only Queen Miyoung knew the truth. After all those years the memories fade but that one stayed with her until her last days on Earth. She had witnessed the most extraordinary miracle with her simple eyes and she had told the story to her own children and grandchildren and she was sure they were going to maintain the tradition.

The voices of the children were heard all over the kingdom as they sang the song of the lovers.

\[
\text{Nacre moon, nacre moon} \\
\text{Tell your amber sun to come around} \\
\text{Nacre moon, nacre moon} \\
\text{Blow the cotton clouds away} \\
\text{Amber sun, amber sun} \\
\text{Dry your lands so we can play} \\
\text{Amber sun, amber sun} \\
\text{Why did you make the sky cry?} \\
\text{Nacre moon, tell us a tale}
\]
The one of the lovers around the lake

Amber sun, is the sky crying for them?

Don’t cry sky, you’ll see them again.

The legend said if they sang it many times they would hear the sound of boiling water coming from a place, it was the song that opened portals around the world to distant lovers to find their way back to each other’s arms.

Many lived to tell legends but not many create a legend.

And, at the end of the day, true legends never die.

Epilogue

Meteor Shower

“There are forty two internal gardens inside the property. Most of them suffered some kind of remodeling all over the years but this wing is one of the best preserved and untouched areas; that’s why many tourists choose it as their favorite part of the tour. It is almost as if the presence of the original habitants of the palace could be still felt on its walls. Thankfully for all of us, a collector bought it at the beginning of 1994 and opened its doors as a tourist attraction, the income of the visits it’s what maintain the city alive and many local merchants remain afloat due its prolific interest.”

The guide with the name Sowon printed on her tag continued speaking.

“This year the main event that will be host tonight is the meteor shower that happens only once every one hundred years the day of the summer’s solstice. Due the altitude of the hill where the palace was constructed it has become one of the favorite places that gathers photographers, musicians, astronomy enthusiasts and a lot of curious to catch a glimpse of the wonderful nature phenomenon. The doors are opened to the different enclosures where the view is breathtaking and this year’s in particular it’s expected to be the biggest so far since 1817’s. We recommend the main garden as the location where it’s best viewed.”

She indicated the group of tourists to follow her.

“Now if you could turn to your left you will see the garden I was mentioning earlier. It is belief it’s one of the original parts of the palace built around the 1200’s, it still conserves its authentic structure of a controlled nature garden. Both trees, the cherry blossom and the plum, are said to be here since the construction of the palace that same year, and the pond was built by an ancestor of King Jeongsuk the Great, part of the Jeon dynasty that would play a major part on the consolidation of the Manchurian territories as one. In fact, it was mention in an old parchment it was Queen Miyoung’s favorite place, many historians agree with this since the valuable painting of she holding the first King of Joseon was portrait in a similar landscape and even with the minimalistic details it can be tell this was the place that inspired such piece of art. Currently the original piece is exposed on Seoul’s museum, however in the following room there’s a replicated painted around 1780 by one of Busan’s most famous painters… Please, over here.”

He wasn’t on the tour but he had caught part of the speech the guide prepared for the visitors. It was also his first time visiting that place and knowing some history was always good knowledge for the
backstory. The gardens were opened to the curious eyes of the strangers so he thought he could get some good photos from that garden that remained untouched for centuries before the big spectacle began.

He prepared his camera while taking a few shots just to make sure they were as neat as he needed them to be when a voice that came out of nowhere almost made him drop one of the lenses.

“Wow… that’s a big and beautiful…camera.”

Jeongguk turned around to find a handsome stranger who also carried a camera around his neck and with both hands on his waist kept admiring his professional and expensive set of exchangeable lenses.

“You are also here for the meteor shower?” The stranger asked.

He had a beautiful skin tone, golden like, sun kissed.

“Yes… I uh… I work for Spectrum Magazine and I was sent to cover the main event. I thought I could take some shots before.”

“Spectrum Magazine? Wow…” His mouth formed a perfect ‘o’.

“My name is Jeongguk by the way.” He offered his hand where a black and white bracelet was moving.

“Nice to meet you, Jeongguk. I’m Taehyung, less professional, more amateur photographer.” He extended his own hand where a white bracelet with a single white bead hanged.

When they hands touched for the handshake, there was something that made both of them stop for one second as if the air they were breathing suddenly disappeared.

“Have we met before?” The boy with the candent skin asked.

“I’m… not sure.” The younger with raven hair responded.

They hadn’t let go each other’s hands.

“Oh! Sorry!” Taehyung apologized although Jeongguk didn’t want him to. “Is this your first time in the palace?”

The younger nodded even if he wasn’t sure neither.

“Nothing to be afraid of. I know this place like the palm of my hand; I could tell it’s one of the most magical places on Earth.”

“Great, so you know where I should place my camera for the meteor shower?”

“Oh of course, that and many other things. You should stick around me.” The elder winked.

Jeongguk grinned without knowing why, he had the most adorable bunny toothed smile in the world.

“Maybe I should.” He agreed. “Let me pack my things and you’ll lead.”

“Perfect. I’ll be waiting outside.”
The younger finished packing his equipment and followed that stranger that was oddly familiar outside to watch how the sky fell down.

“What took you so long?” Taehyung asked in almost a complaining tone.

Jeongguk smiled and shook his head trying to get rid of that *déjà vu* feeling.

“I’m here.”

Perhaps stars were legends and when they got forgotten they came back to Earth as shooting stars to be remembered.

And that night, *it rained stars.*

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End Notes

A big shout out to my friend Ale, who destroyed it mercilessly after reading the first two pages but wandered in the desert with me until the end.

*Thank you.*

I always mention English is not my native language but this fic in particular was a challenge so I hope I can meet the expectations! Also, I took a lot of poetic licenses while writing the universe, although I did a big research for this story some things might not be accurate historically. And, as usual, I hope you can enjoy it as much as I did while writing it!

Thanks a lot for reading, for real that was a long ass ride and if you made it this far, I'm absolutely grateful!!!

As always feel free to leave a comment and kudos ♥

THANKS FOR READING!

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