A New Dawn Rises

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Summary

The kingdom of Reilania was controlled by a corrupt, power hungry king. The outer kingdom consisted of 4 regions, which the king kept tightly under his control, denying them resources and wealth. As his thirst for power grew, he decided to gain more influence by marrying each of his sons off to a suitor from the regions that opposed him. Little did he know, he was bargaining for much more than he planned with both his own children and the outer regions.
I'm finally back with another fic, and this one is gonna be a monster haha! I've written a lot in advance, and I can say this is probably going to hit 100k words. As such, I just wanted to explain something real quick about it.

It focuses on 3 couples, chankai, xiubaek, and seho, relatively equally, but not all at once. So the story may focus on a single couple at one point, but all 3 play different parts in the story and some couples may form much later in the story, so just a warning I guess? Don't just read for one specific couple cuz you need all 3 for the full story :)

Lastly, but certainly not least, a HUGE shoutout and thanks and much love to my beloved GD, because she helped me create this world and turn this story into the giant work that it is, so yes!

I WILL NOT BE RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS REGARDING WHO TOPS OR BOTTOMS.

Jongin was working in his small workshop when he heard the radio downstairs chime the tune of the royal decree. Jongin lived with his uncle, who was the leader of their region, and therefore in direct contact with the king, so Jongin was used to hearing an incoming message. His uncle didn't like it for him to listen though, so Jongin never paid much attention. This time, however, his uncle called him down from his workshop right after the decree ended.

Jongin lifted his goggles onto his forehead, then stretched his single arm up into the air and stood up from his desk where he'd been working on his latest robotic invention. Jongin had been unfortunate enough to be born without his left arm, so he'd had to make up for it with numerous inventions. Most people probably would have been upset or bitter about the disability, but Jongin always saw it as a challenge. It was something that spurred his imagination on and gave him inspiration for robots that made household chores and just about anything else easier.

When Jongin reached their small joint kitchen and living room, his uncle was sitting on the couch with his head in his hands. Jongin could already tell that whatever the decree had entailed, it was going to bring a lot of trouble and probably pain to his uncle and the people of their region.

Jongin and his uncle, Jongsoo, lived in the Sous Mountains, one of 4 regions outside of the kingdom of Reilania. The central kingdom comprised of the king's palace, looming on a hill over the small surrounding town. Only the wealthiest of people lived in that town, usually people that took resources from the outer regions and made high profits off of them. The outer regions were the Sous Mountains, Nefret, Lorencia, and the Golden Meadows. The king stripped these regions
of any resources they could provide, leaving them struggling to exist while the central kingdom prospered. Even the people of nobility within the outer regions, like Jongin and his uncle, lived in poverty. Most of the outer regions despised the king as a result, but there was little they could do to change anything. A royal decree that left his uncle this disheartened couldn’t bode well for them.

Jongin walked over to his uncle and sat beside him on their small couch, wrapping his arm around his uncle. After a moment, the man sighed and hugged Jongin tightly. He only ever got this way when he was really upset.

“Uncle, what's wrong?” Jongin asked softly, rubbing the man's back.

“The king sent out a decree.”

“I heard the radio earlier...Was the decree bad this time?”

“Yes,” his uncle sighed. “The king is calling for the outer regions to send suitors for the princes.”

“Is that so bad?” Jongin asked innocently. His uncle nodded.

“This is no doubt a political move. The king wants stronger control of the outer regions. This decree went out to all of them, demanding them to send suitors.”

“He has enough control over our regions already,” Jongin pouted.

“It will never be enough for him. Besides, Lorencia and Nefret have always been a bit more aloof and harder to control.”

Each region specialized in some kind of skill or trade that the king desperately wanted to control, and for the most part, did control. The people of the Sous Mountains specialized in engineering. It was a way of life, having to live on the side of cliffs and mountains. They had to invent just to survive. As such, their skills were passed down to anyone born there. Some engineers were more apt than others, and those were the ones the king often took to work for him within the kingdom. The rest simply crafted with what little the king was willing to provide to them in order to live in the jagged, steep terrain.

A little beyond Sous was Nefret, covered in deep forests with towering trees. Nefret was the last region still overflowing with plant life and not a lot of technology. That was probably why the king felt so determined to control it. He wanted to bring it to the current, 'sophisticated' state that the rest of the kingdom was in. Nefret was old-fashioned, having very strong customs and natural medicines rather than following along with the scientific boom. What little technology they did have was forced on them by the king. Jongin had heard the people lived in the grand, ancient trees, but he'd never visited. He would love to see the architecture one day, but he would never have the money or means to travel there.

To the north of the kingdom was Lorencia, the frigid, mountainous mining region. The people there were distant and reserved from what Jongin had heard. Most of them were miners or
blacksmiths, also a target in the king's eyes. Most of the ore they mined ended up in the hands of the kingdom as well, the best going to the king and the wealthy, leaving the remaining ore to be distributed to the outer regions. Most of the ore ended up back in Lorencia or in Sous, since they crafted the most, but some went to the Golden Meadows as well.

The Golden Meadows was the final region. As the name suggested, it was full of rolling hills and was the only other region with a decent amount of plant life. These plants mostly went towards raising different livestock in the area. Most of the animals there were endangered, so they were used for products more so than meat. The most common animals were pigs, goats, sheep, and poultry. Cows and most larger animals had long gone extinct, and pigs were on the verge due to over-eating within the kingdom. A ban had since been put on them and miniature pigs had become the popular pet option.

The leader of the Golden Meadows was a big supporter of the king, unlike the leaders of the other regions, so the king was a bit more lax with that region. Sometimes Jongin wondered if giving in to the king was the best chance for their survival, but as his uncle always told him, the king would never be satisfied. He wouldn't stop until the outer regions ceased to exist as their own identities, and Jongin's uncle wouldn't let that happen.

Jongsoo sighed, leaning back on the couch and cuddling Jongin close. His parents had died in a technological malfunction some time ago, so Jongsoo had taken Jongin in as his son, having no children of his own. Jongsoo often hugged Jongin close like this when he was troubled. Jongin nuzzled closer, his goggles resting against Jongsoo's jaw.

“The king asked specifically for suitors of nobility from Lorencia, Sous, and Nefret.”

“Not the Golden Meadows?” Jongin asked.

“I told you, Jongin. This is political. And worst yet, he wants all eligible nobility from those regions. That includes birthers, Jongin...That includes you.”

His uncle sounded so pained when he said the last sentence. Jongin's mind was reeling, hardly even thinking of just what the word 'suitor' had entailed.

In addition to women and men, there was another type of person, called a birther. They were men, but they were born with extra birth passages as well as a uterus, so they were capable of giving birth to children. They were a rarity, and no one knew exactly what caused a birther to be born. Even in the womb, development was often hard, and some birthers were born with weak health or some deformities. That had been the case with Jongin's arm. Despite this, birthers were highly sought after for their unique and rare anatomy, and it was no surprise that the king wanted both the women and birthers from each region in order to pick someone for his sons.

“Jongin, I have to take you to the kingdom with all the other eligible suitors. I can't go behind the king,” his uncle explained, sounding close to tears. “If he found out I hid one of the birthers, he'd see it as betrayal and our region would become a target. But I can't do this to you...I can't let
them take you.”

“Uncle, there's no guarantee they would even want me,” Jongin soothed. “How many other suitors are there?”

“Including you, there are 6 available suitors from our region. The king has 3 sons, so he'll pick one from each of the 3 regions.”

“When does he want this to happen?”

“We're to depart for the palace tomorrow. He's sending over a travel tank to pick us up.”

“That's so soon...” Jongin muttered. “Do you know how he's going to choose?”

“No...But the king likes perfection.”

“Then I doubt he'll pick me,” Jongin soothed, wiggling his armless shoulder.

“He likes rarity as well, Jongin. I don't know what to expect. If he does choose you, I won't be able to fight to keep you by my side. This could be the end of everything, Jongin.”

“He won't pick me,” Jongin repeated, snuggling closer. “It'll be ok.”

JongsOO snuggled Jongin closer, stifling a couple of tears. Jongin had never seen his uncle this scared before. He knew the king was a horrible man, and Jongin would be lying if he said he wasn't terrified about the reality of the situation, but there was no way the king would want someone like him. They would just go through the formalities and then be on their way back home like nothing had happened. The thought of Jongin marrying one of the princes was preposterous. He was of nobility, but there was no way the royalty would want him.

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Jongin spent the rest of the evening packing while JongsOO went out and informed the other suitors within the region about the decree. When JongsOO returned, Jongin was surprised to see him with layers of clothing and jewelry in his arms. He sighed and set them down on the couch, pulling out a suitcase to carefully pack them away. When Jongin asked, his uncle simply explained that the king expects the suitors to appear in their region's best attire.

They retired for the night shortly after that, neither one of them really knowing what else to say to each other. Jongin was awoken early the following morning by the sound of metal grinding along the bumpy cliff terrain. His uncle came into his room shortly after that to inform him that the travel tank was there. The king certainly didn't waste time when he'd made his mind up about something.

Jongin tiredly grabbed his suitcase he'd added wheels and a handle onto to make it easier for him to transport. He'd packed a few of his most vital inventions to help him around since they would be staying in the palace for a few days while the king debated which suitors to pick. Jongin
really didn't think he would be staying in the castle for long, so there was no reason to pack his life away. He didn't even have much to pack away to begin with.

His uncle left the house first, helping Jongin down the steep steps of their house on the cliff to the more stable ground below. Jongin had fallen once and since then, his uncle had always been a bit too protective of him. Jongin glanced around and saw 5 other young women standing nearby, looking at the massive travel tank waiting for them. Jongin had never seen one in person before. The design was very simple and boxy, with sharp, geometrical edges and curves. It looked like a large tube connected to the front of a tank, with sharp hooks built onto the tracks, enabling it to travel easily over any type of terrain.

Jongin had to admit the design was good for a streamlined product, but it certainly wasn't the least bit attractive or welcoming. Travel tanks were mostly used to transport soldiers, so looking welcoming wasn't really the intention. Jongin just would have felt a bit less scared if they'd sent iron steed carriages to pick them up. A metal horse built onto a carriage was much less intimidating than a giant tank with no windows there to take them away.

A royal guard from the palace got out of the tank and directed all of them to the cylindrical compartment. The door opened upwards, revealing a dull, silver interior with bench areas on either side of the compartment for them to sit. For a man who wanted to marry his sons off to the outer regions, this certainly felt more like a military operation than a joyful event.

Jongsoo directed Jongin and the other women into the tank, then sat down beside Jongin himself. The king had wanted each of the regions' leaders to come as well, as a spokesperson of sorts for each suitor. Jongsoo was expected to pitch the strengths and weaknesses of each suitor to the king to make his decision easier. Jongin knew royal marriages were always arranged and usually for political gain, but this seemed so sad. Jongin almost pitied the princes.

The journey took up much of the day and Jongin's body was aching from the uncomfortable bench inside the tank. He had completely lost track of time since there were no windows and only a dim light at the top of the tank to light their compartment. When the door finally opened again, it was dark outside. Travel tanks, despite being rough and bare bones in design, were fast and could tear across even the thickest of forests.

The suitors from the Sous Mountains were the first to arrive out of the 3 regions, so they were taken to the guest quarters to have a small meal and rest for the evening. They would all be meeting the king the following day. It was slowly starting to sink in as Jongin paced his room that night. It was uncomfortable being alone, since he and Jongsoo lived in such a small house together. As Jongsoo had told Jongin, however, he couldn't show him any favoritism, not even staying together as family. Jongin was anxious and scared on his own, and he wanted to go home.
As he laid down on the heavenly bed in his room, cuddled underneath too soft blankets, he thought about the following morning when the king would see them all. Jongin had heard terrible stories of the king and his anger. The man was picky and greedy, and short tempered when he didn't receive exactly what he wanted. Jongin couldn't imagine the following day going well. He sighed and closed his eyes, trying in vain to get some sleep and dream of his little workshop and stiff bed back home.

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The following morning, Jongsoo entered Jongin's room, waking him up gently, saying they needed to get prepared to meet the king. Jongsoo had brought a suitcase with him, and Jongin wasn't surprised when he pulled out one of the outfits he'd come back with the night of the decree. He pulled Jongin out of bed, since he was rather hard to wake up in the mornings, and slowly helped him out of his clothes and into the outfit he'd prepared.

Normally, Jongin was fully capable of doing this himself, and had different inventions to help him if there was something like a tie that he couldn't do himself with one hand. This morning, however, Jongin could almost feel despair radiating off of his uncle. The man wanted to get Jongin ready himself, to care for him and pamper him. Jongin wasn't going to deny his uncle that. Besides, he hardly knew how to put on such an intricate outfit.

Jongin stood while his uncle helped him slip into a long, golden yellow robe. The fabric hung off his shoulders, ruffling a bit before cutting off at his elbow. There was a simple belt, adorned with golden thread details and a topaz pendant in the center that his uncle tied perfectly around his waist. Completing the look was a sheer yellow fabric, hanging down from just underneath his shoulders to the ground, fanning out a bit behind him. It was the most elegant outfit Jongin had ever been in, and while it couldn't compete at all with the beautiful, colorful hanboks the royalty wore, Jongin felt beautiful.

His uncle had him sit on a seat in front of the mirror in his room and he gently applied a small amount of blush and eyeliner, making Jongin's soft black eyes much more striking than before. The yellow of the robe complemented Jongin's skin tone well, and the blush brought out the liveliness in his face that he never saw under his soldering mask and layers of dirt and grease. Jongin felt almost like a new person, but he liked how he felt and looked.

His uncle completed the look by placing a gold diadem on his head. It had curved, almost vine like details, with small dewdrop shaped topaz gems hanging down along Jongin's forehead. This was too much for him. He was an inventor, not a delicate, beautiful person wearing a gold diadem.

“I can't do this,” Jongin whispered.

“You can, Jongin. We just need to stand before the king and let him pick a suitor. After that, we can go home.”

“I'm not meant for this.”
“You’re nobility, Jongin. This is what it would be like if we weren’t living in a poor region.”

“But we do live in a poor region.”

“Yes, I know. Enjoy this for a few nights, then everything will be back to normal.”

“I guess,” Jongin sighed.

“You look beautiful, Jongin.”

Jongin flushed and smiled up at his uncle. The man still looked so worried, and Jongin couldn’t understand why. They both knew the king wouldn’t choose him, so why was there reason to worry? Was his uncle afraid of presenting him to the king?

Jongin didn’t get the chance to ask his uncle before they were summoned by one of the servants. Jongsoo helped Jongin to his feet, then led him by the waist out of the room. The other suitors from Sous were in the hallway waiting for Jongin and Jongsoo. Jongin’s heart was pounding as they were led through the hallways.

The ceilings were high, and the doorways had beautiful arches over them. The castle walls were a peach tone, matching well with the pinkish red and brown detailing. Accents of rose gold adorned every carved detail on the walls, and Jongin was amazed. Even the floor was made of beautiful tan marble. There was more wealth packed into the walls of this castle than Jongin’s entire region had ever experienced.

The throne room was just as impressive. The king sat upon a golden chair, the back looming high above him with red velvet cushioning. The walls and floor resembled that of the hallways, but this room was large enough to easily hold 50 people within it. Surely the king didn’t need this much space to himself.

The suitors from the other regions had arrived and were already standing in attendance of the king. As Jongsoo lined up the suitors from Sous, Jongin’s eyes couldn’t help but wander to the others in the room. The people of Nefret were all dressed in beautiful, colorful cloths and silks, wearing harem pants and crop tops. Jongin had never shown that much of his skin before, but he was enthralled by the outfits. Looking just beyond the people of Nefret, the suitors from Lorencia were all dressed in colors of silver, white, and peach, resembling their snowy region back home. Their clothes were thick, even for dress clothes, and Jongin could tell they were made more with practicality in mind than beauty. Still, he could see gems woven into the cloth that glistened any time they moved. Everyone in this room was dressed to perfection in order to impress the king.

The king himself was seated on his throne, looking around at all of them, already judging them from afar. Beside him was a tall man, dressed in a mint green hanbok with golden detailing. As Jongin looked at the fabric closer, he saw intricate flower patterns softly woven into it. Glancing
up from his attire, the man had a soft, youthful face with wide, innocent looking eyes. His hair dipped down into his eyes a bit and a slight curl had been added to it. Jongin had to admit the man was attractive. He hardly looked fit to be in the presence of the king. He looked too pure for his company.

The king got up from his throne, and immediately everyone in the room, Jongin included, bowed their heads. The king told them to be at ease a moment later, and he walked over to the suitors from Lorencia, looking at them long and hard. With the people he found particularly interesting, he would grab their chins or another part of their body to observe it in further detail. Jongin found it invasive and shallow, but he didn't expect much from the king, especially considering the fact that he'd ousted all of these people from their homes simply for the sake of political marriages.

As the king walked along, observing different women and birthers, he began talking about how these marriages would bring honor to not only their people, but their regions, and how he wanted only the best for his sons. Jongin honestly stopped paying attention at that point, just wanting this scrutiny to be over. His eyes drifted back to the man still standing beside the throne, and that was when he realized that man was looking directly at him.

Jongin's heart raced, not sure what to make of the extended eye contact they were having. The man was probably looking at Jongin so intently because he'd noticed his missing arm. The few times Jongin had met strangers, he'd often gotten intrigued looks. This felt somewhat different than those looks though. There was some kind of spark and almost longing in this man's stare. It was only when the king was before Jongin that he broke away from the trance he'd been in with this other man.

The king raised his eyebrow, grabbing Jongin by the chin and tilting his head so he could see his jawline. The king made an impressed hum, then tilted Jongin's head so he was looking right at him. The man ran his fingers along Jongin's bottom lip, and it took all of Jongin's strength not to cringe or lash out and bite him. This must have been why his uncle was so worried. The king was slimmer than any of the rumors Jongin had heard of him.

“Nice, plump lips and a strong jaw. Impressive for a birther...The only birther of Sous region now that I look at it.”

The king turned Jongin slightly, and his eyes narrowed. Jongin's heart pounded even harder, but this time it was out of pure terror at the angry, disgusted expression that was quickly appearing on the king's face.

“What mockery is this!?” The man shouted, grabbing Jongin by the front of his robe and jerking him around violently. “You dare to show this deformed filth before the king!?”

“Your majesty!” Jongsoo gasped. “Jongin is the highest ranking nobility out of all the suitors as a direct family member of mine! He's not filth!”
“What makes you think I would marry my son off to a deformed birther? Nobility or not, you should have some common sense.”

“I was following your decree, your majesty. I meant no disrespect.”

Jongin was fighting back tears. He wanted to scream at his uncle for not saying more to defend him, for bowing down to the man that was insulting and manhandle him, but he knew his uncle couldn't. As he'd said, he had to remain impartial to Jongin, because his reaction could make fate for their region even crueler than it already was. Judging by Jongsoo's hand clenched into a shaking fist at his side, it was taking every ounce of his strength not to fight back. Jongin wanted to fight back himself, but he knew that would only end in his own demise. All he could do was let the king manhandle and belittle him before everyone else in the room. This was utterly humiliating. This was why his uncle had been so worried.

“And you!” The king shouted, turning his attention directly to Jongin and pulling him uncomfortably close to his own face. “What gave you the idiotic notion that you were worth anything? That the king would choose a deformed birther to be the bearer of his son's heir!? I wouldn't dare risk the chance of having a hideous monster as my grandchild. What do you have to say for this disgrace!?"

“I'm sorry,” Jongin whimpered, the tears falling down his cheeks as the king manhandled him more.

“What was that? For such an offense, a small apology hardly makes up for it! Get down on your knees and beg for forgiveness!”

Jongin felt the man tugging him towards the ground, but another set of hands stilled the king's, keeping Jongin from completely losing his balance. Jongin dared to look up and saw the man from earlier, looking livid at the king.

“This is no way to treat a nobleman that came to see you at your own request, father,” the man growled, his voice surprisingly deep. Jongin's eyes widened as he realized this man was one of the princes.

“You'd do best to stay out of this, Chanyeol,” the king threatened.

“I won't. You're mistreating one of my suitors, one of the very people within your kingdom that has done nothing but listen to you and come as told. Even a king has limits to how they can treat their people, father. Making a scene like this is hardly appropriate. He is a birther and of noble blood. He's meant to be here.”

The king growled and released Jongin's robe, roughly pushing him back. The prince quickly steadied Jongin so he didn't fall to the ground, and Jongin could have sworn he felt the prince lean just a bit closer and pat his back in comfort before letting him go. Jongin wiped at his eyes, failing to stop the tears now that they'd started flowing. Jongsoo rushed to his side, hugging him close and no longer caring about maintaining distance now that the king had let him go. The king had already turned away, stomping back to his thrown while hissing more insults under his breath. Suddenly, another person spoke up.
“If you knew the first thing about birthers, you would know that weak health and deformities are common occurrences, and aren’t always passed on to their children. An unhealthy birther could easily give birth to a perfectly healthy baby, and a perfectly healthy birther, or even woman for that matter, could give birth to a less than perfect birther. There is no way to definitively say that he’s any less perfect than anyone else in this room.”

The king turned around, glaring at the culprit. It was one of the birthers from Nefret, a young man with soft features and a slight, natural pout to his lips. The king stormed over to him, looming over him since this birther was much shorter than Jongin.

“You dare to speak up without permission in the presence of the king?”

“I simply wish to inform you of important information, your majesty,” the birther replied, sounding somewhat antagonistic. The king laughed in disbelief.

“You, a mere birther, wishing to inform the king? What's your name?”

“Baekhyun,” the birther replied.

“Baekhyun...” The king repeated. “You'd do well to hold your tongue. I'll remember this incident.”

“Please do. And remember what I told you well.”

The king's eyebrow twitched with anger, and Jongin almost thought he was going to snap again. This Baekhyun was certainly far more brave than Jongin ever could be. To Jongin's surprise, however, the king turned away, returning to his throne and looking down upon all of them, like they were filthy ants hardly fit to be in his presence.

“That will be all for today,” the king announced. “Many of you are still tired from the journey, so I will evaluate you in a few days' time. You're dismissed.”

The leaders of the other regions quickly led their suitors away, eager to get them away from the king and the oppressive state of the room. Jongsoo kept Jongin pressed to his side, shielding him from further view of the king. As Jongin was leaving, he caught sight of the prince once more, and again the man was staring at him, this time looking worried and like he wanted to follow after them. How could this man be related to the king? Even from afar, Jongin could tell this man had more of a heart than the king ever had.

As soon as Jongin was back in his room, he broke down in Jongsoo's arms, crying until his makeup was a streaky mess on his face. Jongsoo rocked him back and forth and soothed him, apologizing again and again for having to put Jongin through all of that and promising they would be home soon. Jongin just wanted to be out of this awful castle and out of these robes that obviously weren't meant for him. His uncle granted him at least the second wish, helping him take off his makeup and get into some of the more comfortable clothes Jongin had brought from back home.
Jongsoo stayed with Jongin in his guest room for the rest of the afternoon, comforting him and reminding him of things he loved back home, like his small workshop and scaling the cliffs with some of his own inventions. Jongin had laid down in bed, completely emotionally spent after the whole fiasco. It wasn't hard to fall asleep either, having not slept well the night before. His uncle sat by his bed, rubbing his back and humming Jongin's favorite lullaby, the one that never failed to put him to sleep. It was only the middle of the day, but Jongin wanted to sleep for an eternity, or at least until it was time for them to pack up and go back home.

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Unfortunately for Jongin, his nap only lasted a couple of hours, and he woke up feeling more miserable than he'd felt before going to sleep. His uncle had left the room by then, so Jongin was completely alone. He sighed, staring around the unfamiliar space. Sleeping on the bed a second time, he'd gotten a bit more used to it, and it was something he wouldn't mind continuing to sleep on. Of course there was no way he would get to experience this kind of luxury beyond the next few days. The king had made it apparent that Jongin was not what he wanted for his son. Jongin wondered if it would even be worthwhile for him to unpack his suitcase or even show up to the final evaluations.

It was easier for Jongin to get his clothes out of the closet than it was digging them out of his suitcase. He would just take out a couple pairs to wear for the next few days before going home. This trip had honestly felt like more of a waste of time than Jongin would have imagined. He dragged himself out of bed and opened his suitcase, digging through it for one of his tools that he'd made to help him pick up clothes and hang them easily. Finally, he pulled out a hanger-like contraption with dull claws at the corners. There were buttons on either side at the handle that Jongin could press to grip the fabric with the claws. He stood up, opening the closet so he could start hanging his shirts.

Down the hall, the prince from earlier was walking by, peeking into each of the rooms and briefly greeting the suitors he came into contact with. Finally, he stopped at Jongin's door, which was left cracked open. The prince was about to knock when he spotted Jongin inside, bending over his suitcase, looking like he was fumbling with something. The prince was about to ask if he needed help, but Jongin stood up, triangular contraption in hand, carrying a shirt within its claws. The prince gawked as he watched Jongin hang his shirt with ease. He'd never seen such a contraption before, but Jongin was able to do everything by himself. The prince hardly needed to offer assistance. When Jongin had finished his work and was putting his contraption away, the prince finally decided to address him, clapping his hands softly.

“That's quite the tool you have there,” the prince complimented.

Jongin jumped in response to the sudden voice, but as soon as his eyes made contact with the same man he'd been dazedly staring at earlier in the day who'd gotten the king away from him, Jongin relaxed, smiling softly and bowing. This man was a prince after all. Jongin had to show respect.
“Please, you don't need to bow to me,” the prince said gently, his voice sending chills down Jongin's back because it still surprised him how deep it was. “Instead, may I come in?”

“Yes, of course!” Jongin gasped.

He walked over to the door and gently pulled it open, bowing again as the prince walked by him into the room. The man was just a bit taller than Jongin, which was surprising since Jongin himself was fairly tall, especially for a birther. Up close, Jongin found the man even more attractive. He had beautiful, full lips that were pulled into what seemed like a permanent smile. His eyes seemed to twinkle with excitement, and Jongin found himself questioning once more how a man like this could be related to the horrible king that had accosted him earlier. As if on cue, the prince took Jongin's hand, running his thumb along it softly.

“I'm so sorry for the way my father treated you. It was completely uncalled for, and I should have stepped in as soon as it started. Will you forgive me?”

“There's nothing to forgive!” Jongin gasped. “You still stepped in and stopped him and for that I'm so grateful. It was my fault for appearing before the king like this.”

“No. He made the decree, and you followed orders. You have no faults, and a missing arm is hardly anything to be degraded to that level. I really can't apologize to you enough for what he did to you.”

“It's really alright,” Jongin sighed. “I didn't expect much upon coming here. Having you apologize is already more than enough. Thank you so much…”

“Ah, my name is Chanyeol,” the prince stated.

“Prince Chanyeol.”

“Please, just call me Chanyeol when we're alone. The formalities make me uncomfortable.”

Jongin smiled and nodded. There was something so warm and welcoming about Chanyeol. Even after the horrible incident, a smile was naturally gracing Jongin's face in the presence of this man. It almost made him wish he could get married to him, or at least get to know him. Jongin didn't think any kind royalty existed with how the outer regions were treated. Now that he'd found this man, suddenly he was confused about how to feel and what to think.

“Your name was Jongin, wasn't it?” Chanyeol asked.

“Yes, thank you for remembering.”

“I couldn't forget,” Chanyeol said softly. “You were beautiful today.” Jongin flushed and looked down.

“T-Thank you…”

Chanyeol was still holding Jongin's hand, and Jongin was glad he didn't have another, because he was sure he wouldn't know what to do with it and it would be awkwardly drooping by his side.
Chanyeol must have realized he was still holding Jongin's hand, because he quietly cleared his throat and lowered Jongin's hand back to his side. Jongin smiled and motioned for Chanyeol to sit on the chair in front of the vanity in the room.

“Please, make yourself comfortable if you would like,” Jongin stated.

Chanyeol smiled and sat down on the chair, turning so he could watch Jongin carefully reorganize and buckle his suitcase. Jongin had no clue what to talk to the prince about, or even why he was so interested in being with Jongin. Was he supposed to be here? Jongin thought the king was choosing their suitors, so why was Chanyeol here at all?

“That contraption you were using earlier, does it have a name?”

“I usually just call it my hanger,” Jongin explained, sitting on his bed so he could face Chanyeol.

It seemed the prince wanted to talk, and Jongin would humor him. At least he was getting a little bit of his wish to know the man better.

“Where can you purchase them? I've never seen such a thing before,” the prince marveled. Jongin giggled at the question.

“It's not something I bought. I made it.”

“Are you serious!?” Chanyeol gasped, eyes widening comically. Jongin couldn't stop himself from smiling. Chanyeol was so pleasant.

“Yes. You know the people of Sous specialize in engineering?” He asked. Chanyeol nodded enthusiastically. “Well, our skills are universally passed down, so everyone there can craft and create to some degree. Growing up without a second arm, I've made lots of things to make it easier. It's a way of life for me to create after all.”

“You're amazing, Jongin,” Chanyeol said, sounding genuinely awed.

“Really, I'm not. There are plenty of inventors within the Sous Mountains.”

“Yes, you are,” Chanyeol insisted. “You're smart, you're adaptable, and you're strong.”

“I'm anything but strong, I can assure you of that!”

“Not just anyone can handle my father treating them like that, especially while maintaining a calm composure. You were amazing today, Jongin, and I think you'll continue to be.”

Chanyeol got up from his seat and walked over to Jongin. He awkwardly lifted his hand, looking like he was going to cup Jongin's cheek with it, then he decided to pat his head gently instead. He smiled, this time showing off his perfect white teeth. Everything about Chanyeol was so unreal and charming in Jongin's mind. This was what it was really like to be among the magnificence of royalty.

“It might take a bit more effort, but I know you can impress the king and prove him wrong,”
Chanyeol stated. Jongin's eyes widened. He hadn't even planned to appear before the king again.

“I don't know about that...” Jongin mumbled. Chanyeol smiled and ruffled Jongin's hair.

“I know you're scared, but I'd love to see you more and see you prove him wrong.”

“I'll try...” Jongin whispered, not knowing what else to say to the prince. Chanyeol smiled and dropped his hand from Jongin's head.

“I'm sure you're tired after everything that happened today, so I'll let you get some rest. Would it be alright if I come see you again tomorrow?”

“Yes!” Jongin answered before thinking about any implications this visit could have. “Yes, I would like that.” Chanyeol smiled and nodded.

“Then goodbye for now.”

He waved before leaving the room, and Jongin couldn't stop smiling. There was something really cute and soft about Chanyeol. He was completely different from what Jongin imagined the princes would be like. Part of him wondered if this was just Chanyeol being flirtatious or playing some sick game of encouraging Jongin before the king tore him down again, but it didn't feel that way. The way Chanyeol spoke to him made it feel like he genuinely wanted to talk to Jongin and get to know him. He'd even called Jongin beautiful. No one had ever said that to him before other than his own family.

Chanyeol made Jongin want to try again as a suitor, and that scared Jongin. He'd been so determined to go home, but speaking to Chanyeol just made Jongin want to talk to him more. He was so confused now. He knew living in the kingdom near the king would be exhausting and upsetting, and after today, Jongin never wanted to be near the king again. But if it meant he could be by Chanyeol, maybe it was worth it. Jongin had never felt so swept away before. He needed to stop thinking about all of this. Chanyeol would come to see him again the following day, and that would be when Jongin made his final decision about what he would do.

Chapter End Notes

And so here begins our tale. Poor Jongin struggles right from the get go OTL But I promise he's not too badly tormented :* Not making that promise about all the characters though >.> I've actually been really excitedly writing this fic for a while now and it's 63k words and I'm still far from done lol! So brace yourselves for a long ride~

I'm going to do my best to update this weekly since I've written so much in advance XD So be back next week with another chapter :D Love you guys~
As nice as the previous day was with Chanyeol's unexpected visit, Jongin doubted the prince would actually keep his word and come the following day. In order to distract himself, Jongin had spent much of the evening drawing plans for a new grappling hook gun. He'd designed one a few years ago, and a few others in Sous had loved his design and even custom ordered them, but it felt too clunky, especially since its purpose was for climbing and scaling the mountains. He'd brought along a few other blueprints for other designs he'd been working on, and he was glad he had. It gave him something to do while he waited out the days in which the king would pick one of the other suitors.

To Jongin's surprise, however, shortly after he'd woken up and gotten changed, there was a knock on his door. Jongin had expected it to be Jongsoo checking in on him or perhaps coming to take him to breakfast, but when he opened the door, a servant was standing there with a tray carrying two plates and lots of food. Jongin gasped and quickly opened the door the rest of the way, letting the man inside so he could set the tray down on the table. Behind the servant, Chanyeol entered the room, wearing a pink floral hanbok this time, with a smile just as radiant as Jongin remembered it. Jongin bowed his head in greeting to the prince, who nodded back at him. Chanyeol thanked the servant as the man took his leave, then gently shut the door and turned to Jongin.

“Good morning!” He greeted, voice quiet but full of excitement.

“Good morning...” Jongin replied.

“You didn't think I'd actually come back, did you?” Chanyeol asked with a laugh.

“I'm sorry...”

“There's nothing to apologize about. I'm happy I could prove you wrong. You haven't had breakfast, right?”

“No, I haven't.”

“Then let's sit down and eat! If you don't mind, that is.”

“I would love to,” Jongin said, smiling from ear to ear.

He knew the king wouldn't pick him, but he could enjoy Chanyeol's presence and friendship while he was here, couldn't he? Jongin was so lonely in this room, and Chanyeol was going out of his way to see him. It was ok to enjoy this, wasn't it?

Jongin sat down at his small table across from Chanyeol and gawked at the food on his plate. Sous was a mountainous region, so most of what they lived off of was plants they found on the
cliffs as well as birds and whatever grain the kingdom was willing to share with them. Jongin had never seen biscuits, pancakes, or yogurt before. Even the small amount of pigeon that had been served with the meal looked more luxurious than anything Jongin had ever eaten back home.

“Are you excited?” Chanyeol asked, smiling knowingly at Jongin. The latter nodded shyly. “Well, dig in!”

Jongin took his fork and stuck one of the pieces of meat with it. They'd already been cut into bite-sized pieces and Jongin wondered if Chanyeol had requested that just for Jongin. He could relish the extra care put into this meal, right? Chanyeol was so nice and thoughtful, something Jongin never would have expected of the current royalty.

“Do you have a tool that helps you cut your meat with one hand?” Chanyeol asked curiously, taking a bite of one of the biscuits.

“Yes, but it's in my suitcase. It looks a tad weird to use, but it's basically a knife with a small fork connected to it. You stab the meat with the fork first, then hold it almost like you would a drawing compass, but the knife can be positioned to cut the meat. Not the most elegant tool, but effective.”

“You're so amazing,” Chanyeol marveled once more, making Jongin blush. “I want to know more of what you've created.”

“I brought some things with me,” Jongin said, trying not to get too excited. “I can show you after breakfast if you'd like.”

“I would love that!”

Jongin happily shoveled his food into his mouth, a bit less gracefully than he should have considering he was in the presence of the prince. Chanyeol simply smiled at him and ate at a similar pace, wanting to keep up with him. When their meal was finished, Chanyeol had one of the servants take away the tray, thanking them for their work. Jongin was happy to see Chanyeol appreciating the people that were of lower class than him. It filled Jongin with some strange sense of hope.

When they were alone again, Chanyeol sat at the table, smiling excitedly, almost like he was about to get some sort of gift. Jongin had never seen someone take so much interest in his inventions. He was often complimented back in Sous, but everyone was used to seeing things like this, so it was strangely elating to be showing his work to Chanyeol.

Jongin pulled out a couple of his simpler inventions, like his clothes hanging tool, then showed Chanyeol some of his shoes and gear he used for scaling cliffs, like his old grappling hook gun. He'd brought it along to look at it directly when drawing the blueprint for the new design. Chanyeol was completely in awe, handling each item with care, even though they'd seen plenty of use back in Sous. Finally, Jongin pulled out a small robot that stood on four legs. At the end of each leg were more tiny claws perfect for grabbing just about anything smaller in size. The head had pointed ears and a small muzzle. Jongin had modeled it after a picture of a dog he'd seen in an
old book. It was his most intricate work.

“Jongin, this is so cute! What does it do?” Chanyeol asked excitedly.

“A lot of things,” Jongin said, tapping the robot's head and turning it on. “I programmed a simple AI for it, so it does a lot of different things if you ask it to. It helps me stir soup when I need to add another ingredient. It can also climb up clothing, so if I have a tie on my clothes, it'll tie it for me. It can also climb up walls and if you give it a duster, it cleans the higher shelves pretty thoroughly.”

“This little guy can really do all that!? Jongin, you're a genius!”

“You're far too kind.”

“No, I'm not! Seriously you're so amazing. Does this little guy have a name?”

“I like to call it Nido. It sounds cute.”

“It is cute!”

“I was working on updating my grappling hook. I drew these plans last night,” Jongin said, pulling out the papers to show Chanyeol. “The one I made is good but it's hard to handle and I'd like to extend the coil so I can hook onto higher cliffs. And I was working on updating the radio in my uncle's house! Sometimes the reception in the mountains is bad, so the decrees and other basic calls come through patchy. There’s not much we can do without updating the reception poles themselves, but I've worked on the radio a bit just for fun. These were plans I drew up last night for another radio update.”

Chanyeol smiled, watching Jongin ramble on about everything he'd made or planned to make. Jongin was so enthusiastic about his work and he was extremely talented. Chanyeol couldn't just let the king get away with how he'd treated him the day before. Chanyeol didn't realize Jongin had stopped talking until he cleared his throat, regressing into his shy exterior once more.

“Sorry, I'm rambling...This must be boring.”

“Jongin, this isn't boring at all! This is unbelievable. You have to show my father just what you can do!”

“I don't know if that will change anything,” Jongin mumbled sadly. “And I don't know if I have the strength to confront him again.”

“I understand if you choose not to,” Chanyeol soothed, rubbing Jongin's back. “But I think you could blow my father away as soon as we get him to look past the physical part that he dislikes. If you could bring your suitcase and show him everything you've done, he would definitely be impressed. And I would love it if you would continue to try and win him over.”

“May I ask why you're so eager for me to return? When you visited me yesterday, I thought you were simply being courteous to all the suitors as well as apologizing to me...But today, you didn't bring everyone breakfast like this, right?”

“No, I only brought it to you, and I've only talked to you this much.”

“Why? I don't understand...”
“I don't get a say in who my father chooses for me to marry...But I really, desperately want it to be you,” Chanyeol admitted quietly. “Since the moment I laid eyes on you, and even more so since the moment we started talking. I can't force you to do this, and I'll understand if you choose not to continue, but if there's a chance in the world that it could be you...I would do anything. I would plead with my father, and I would argue with him however long it took to convince him that you're the best.”

“Why?” Jongin asked, feeling tears in his eyes. Chanyeol was telling him everything he never thought he would hear, and he wanted so badly to believe in him, but he was scared.

“You're beautiful, you're kind, and you're talented. I think it would be an honor to marry you,” Chanyeol said softly. His cheeks turned bright red at that point and he cleared his throat. “But I can't force this decision on you, and I technically shouldn't see any of the suitors before the day of the evaluations, so I'm going to get out of here before I get us both in trouble. I hope to see you tomorrow, Jongin!”

Chanyeol rushed out of the room, leaving a dazed, teary eyed Jongin behind. How on earth had the prince decided that someone like him would be the best choice for him? Jongin couldn't fathom it, but he also couldn't stop himself from thinking of the possibility of marrying Chanyeol. He hardly knew the man, and the sensible side of his brain was telling him to leave it be, but from what he'd experienced so far, Chanyeol seemed extremely honest, and Jongin couldn't deny that he was charming. Thinking about living a life with such a considerate, kind person was more than Jongin had ever imagined for his life up until this point. Facing the king scared him so much, but the possibility of being with Chanyeol for a longer time than just a few days was so enticing. Jongin couldn't say he didn't want it anymore.

His uncle entered the room shortly after that, looking worried. He looked the place over, then looked Jongin up and down. Jongin raised an eyebrow at him and the man sighed.

“I saw the prince leaving your room. What was he doing in here? Was he harassing you?”

“Not at all. He had breakfast with me and was talking to me.”

“What?”

“Uncle, I need to tell you something. I think...I want to go to the evaluation.”

“Jongin! With the way the king treated you-”

“I know, uncle, I know...But I think I want this. And if you think about it, if I marry one of the princes, I can also work for change in our region.”

“Jongin...I don't want to lose you to them.”

“You won't lose me,” Jongin soothed. “I promise.”

“Alright,” his uncle sighed, hugging him close. “If this is what you really want, I'll let you go and I'll support you in any way I can.”

“Thank you, uncle.”
Jongin hugged the man back, feeling tears stinging at his eyes once more. Jongin was honestly terrified, and he still didn't know if he was making a giant mistake. He wanted to trust Chanyeol though, and he wanted to spend more time with him. Perhaps if they spent more time together, what spark they had now could really blossom into love. Jongin wanted to help his people as well, and this was one certain way to do it. Even if this was risky and the road was rough, it was worth it to try.

Jongin woke up early the following day to get ready for the evaluation. He was nervous, and he was still afraid of just what the king would say to him, but if Chanyeol was on his side, that had to mean something, right? He was going to stand tall and do whatever he could to prove himself. He didn't want to let the king walk all over him without even knowing him.

Jongin dressed in one of his casual outfits. Dressing beautifully wasn't going to get him anywhere. He needed to show his practical, inventive side. He knelt down in front of his suitcase, making sure he had everything that he wanted to show the king packed up. He patted Nido's head for a small bit of comfort. At that moment, someone knocked on the door before opening it.

"Are you ready?" Jongsoo asked softly.

Jongin nodded and got to his feet, dragging his suitcase along behind him. They met with the other suitors in the hall and proceeded to the king's throne room again. The suitors from Nefret and Lorencia arrived around the same time, and soon they were all standing in a line, waiting for the king to judge them once more. The king looked just as unamused as he had during the initial evaluations. For someone that had demanded so many people to leave their lives behind, he certainly wasn't treating them like they were worth much of anything, even though they were supposed to marry his sons. Chanyeol was standing at the king's side once more, and as soon as he spotted Jongin, he broke into a wide smile, which set Jongin a bit more at ease.

The king started with the suitors of Lorencia. There were only 5 to choose from, but he took his time, questioning each of them and looking them over once more. Finally, he settled on a birther, as tall as Jongin if not taller, with a strong jawline and sharp brows, named Sehun. The king had been impressed with his strong looks, but Sehun had also demonstrated a vast knowledge of different ores and had a sophisticated air about him. Even Jongin was somewhat intimidated by him. Sehun would be marrying the second prince, Junmyeon.

Next the king judged the suitors from Nefret. Nefret was known to have a large amount of women and birthers in that region, as it had established a safe haven for them. There were 11 suitors for the king to go through and inspect. After briefly talking to each of them, the man turned to the leader of Nefret, an older woman by the name of Nayoung, for the final decision.

"Which of these suitors has studied the most about herbal remedies?"
“That would be Baekhyun, your majesty,” she replied, pushing forward the same man that had spoken out against the king a couple days before.

“You...” The man grumbled.

Baekhyun simply smiled, though Jongin could sense the sneer behind it. The king looked him over, then began asking him questions about cases of headache, fever, or an aching stomach. With each one, Baekhyun knew just what remedy to go to and all the herbs needed to create it. Finally, the king sighed.

“I suppose you would be fit for Minseok.”

Minseok was the eldest prince, and many had heard even in the outer regions that he often struggled with his health. Jongin almost wondered if the man was putting a suitor from Nefret with his son just to see if it could improve his health at all. That seemed too upstanding of the king though, sad as it sounded. Jongin wasn't going to assume the man had any heart at this point.

Finally, the king made his way to the people of Sous. He talked happily with the women, sometimes getting a tad flirtatious himself, which gave Jongin chills. When it finally came time for him to judge Jongin, the king walked right past him, not even acknowledging him. Jongin saw Chanyeol glare at his father, then leave his spot beside the throne to head straight for his father to confront him.

“Father, I believe you skipped someone,” Chanyeol stated.

“I will not consider that birther. He's not even dressed for the occasion.”

“You're wrong,” Chanyeol said, blocking his father with his body as the man tried to move around him. “Jongin came dressed especially for the occasion. He's prepared to show you just what he has to offer to the kingdom, and only a fool would choose to ignore that. You said you wanted to choose the best suitors for your sons, right? Then you would do well to watch Jongin.”

Chanyeol looked over the king's shoulder at Jongin and nodded, smiling softly at him. Jongin was at a loss of words. He knew Chanyeol was going to be rooting for him, but he hadn't actually expected him to obstruct the king while he was evaluating. He had to be serious about Jongin at this point, so Jongin would also take this seriously. The king turned around and glared at Jongin.

“Well, get on with it! You have something to show me, then show it. Stop wasting time!”

Jongin nodded and pulled his suitcase forward. He knelt down and took a deep breath before opening the latch and pulling out his clothing hanging device. He'd packed one of his shirts to demonstrate the use, so he picked the shirt up with ease holding it out before the king.

“You've created a claw, fascinating,” the king sneered.
“Correct, and with it I'm able to do something that requires two hands with one. I'd consider that rather effective, wouldn't you?”

Jongin wasn't sure where the sudden boldness had come from, but the way Chanyeol was staring at him in awe, looking proud that he was talking to the king so confidently was enough to keep Jongin's mood up. The king seemed taken aback that Jongin had dared to take his insult and turn it into a compliment. Now was his chance to really wow him since he'd gotten the upper hand for the moment.

“In addition to that, I've created a little friend that's capable of doing finite detailing and just about any chore you ask him to. Nido, come out!”

The small robot hopped out of the suitcase and walked in front of Jongin, sitting and awaiting another order. Jongin saw the king's eyes widen and he forced himself to hold back his smirk. Jongin tossed the shirt back into his suitcase in a heap.

“Nido, fold my shirt please. And then would you bring me my cliff scaling boots?”

The robot nodded, walking with a hop in its step over to the suitcase. Everyone in the room watched in awe as the robots arms extended long enough to reach both sides of the shirt and fold it neatly back into the suitcase. After that, the robot grabbed the boots inside the case, gently lifting them over the rim and placing them in front of Jongin.

“Thank you, Nido!”

He slid off his shoes and kicked on the boots. There were ties on the front end, so it was time for Nido to show off once more.

“Nido, one last thing. Can you tie my shoes for me?”

The robot nodded and tied the shoes into perfect knotted bows. Jongin smiled and knelt down, tapping Nido on the head playfully before turning it off and putting it back in his case. After that, he grabbed his grappling hook, looking up at the ceiling to find a support beam that would hold his weight. Finally, he looked at the king, who looked surprised, but eager to see more.

“This is less practical in Reilania, but in Sous, the mountain sides are steep and climbing is essential. Obviously that's hard to do with one hand, so I created a grappling hook that's strong enough to hold my weight and help pull me up. Allow me to demonstrate.”

Jongin aimed his grappling gun and shot it towards one of the support beams, watching the hook wrap around it a couple times. Jongin tugged to make sure it was secure, then pressed another button, retracting the cord and lifting himself into the air. Gasp resounded throughout the room as Jongin ascended. When he was at the ceiling, he glanced down, seeing both nervous and
excited faces in the crowd. He took a deep breath to calm himself. There was one more trick up his sleeve.

“Naturally, this helps climb, but you can't always escape falling. This last creation I'm still working on to make for a perfect landing, but every invention takes trial and error to perfect. Let's see how it performs today.”

Jongin pressed another button on his grappling gun, and the coil unwound, dropping Jongin towards the ground. More gasps resounded through the room, and Jongin kicked the heels of his boots together as he neared the ground, activating small jet packs within the soles of the shoes to cushion his landing. He lost his balance slightly, but managed to stick the landing without falling forward. He smiled motioning his hand to the boots, then completely retracted his grappling hook from the ceiling.

“I'm still working on the balancing part, since it's still possible to use the jet packs and be off balance and fall all the same, but it's a work in progress. I've made every single one of these inventions single-handedly, and I'm hardly struggling to live without my second arm. I hope you'll consider me as a proper suitor to your son.”

Jongin bowed forward, showing the king more respect than he actually felt for the man. He heard someone clapping and lifted his head just enough to see Chanyeol applauding, beaming smile on his face. Jongsoo and the other Sous suitors joined in after that, and soon enough, everyone from Nefret and Lorencia were clapping as well. The king growled irritably under his breath.

“Yes, you've proven yourself well,” he grumbled. “I'll decide on the Sous suitor after I consider all the options available.”

Jongin smiled at Chanyeol, wishing he could thank him for giving him this opportunity. Instead, Jongin got back in line with the other suitors, and listened as the king finished talking to all the other women from Sous. When he was done, he asked for everyone to leave the throne room, so he could think in peace, and informed them he would announce his decision later in the evening.

As soon as the suitors had all left the throne room, Jongsoo rushed to Jongin, as did the other Sous women, and they hugged him close, rubbing his back and complimenting him left and right.

“You represented the Sous Mountains perfectly,” Jongsoo told him, cupping his cheeks. “We're all so proud of you. Your parents would be proud of you too!”

Jongin smiled and hugged Jongsoo close. He knew this was only the beginning, and there was a chance that the king still wouldn't choose him, but he'd won the battle for that day. He'd proven himself to be more than capable. And Chanyeol had helped him accomplish this. Jongin would have to thank him as well, regardless of what happened.
Chanyeol watched as his father sat on his throne, grumbling to himself. Jongin had really made an impression for his father to be this conflicted. Chanyeol had known Jongin would impress, but even he had found himself falling harder for him than he already had.

“You know who the clear choice is, don't you?” Chanyeol asked.

“I still don't want that deformed boy becoming part of the family.”

“Is that really all you can look at!? He just demonstrated inventions that even our own employed engineers would struggle to perfect to that level, and all you can see is his missing arm!? Father, this is my future. Don't let your prejudice take away from giving me the best partner. That person is Jongin.”

“Very well,” his father growled. “You can marry the boy! Just be sure to pretty him up any time I have to look at him.”

“Thank you, father!” Chanyeol said excitedly.

“You may take your leave, I'm sure you want to tell the boy the news. Just be sure to have him looking presentable by tomorrow's banquet.”

Chanyeol nodded, bowing before leaving. As soon as he was out of the throne room, he ran to the guest quarters. When he got to Jongin's room, he was resting on his bed kicking his legs and stretching. Chanyeol knocked on the door and didn't wait for Jongin to call him in. Jongin got to his feet, bowing and looking anxious.

“My father decided to choose you!” Chanyeol exclaimed. “Jongin, you're my suitor!”

Chanyeol grabbed Jongin by the waist, pulling him close before lifting him up and spinning him around in excitement. Jongin's hand naturally found its way to Chanyeol's shoulder, and he couldn't help but laugh as Chanyeol spun him around. When Chanyeol set him down again, their bodies were closer together than they'd ever been before, and Jongin's heart was racing. Chanyeol gasped and pulled away slightly, clearing his throat a bit.

“Sorry, I got a bit too excited,” he mumbled. Jongin smiled and shook his head.

“I'm glad to see you're so excited. The king really chose me?” Jongin asked, not quite believing it. Chanyeol nodded, hugging Jongin a little tighter.

“I told you he would! I'm so happy, Jongin!”

“You're really happy?” Jongin asked. “I don't mean to doubt you, but...I just can't fathom that you would want me...”

“Jongin, I'd decided on you since the moment I saw you,” Chanyeol said softly. “That was probably why my father wanted the princes to stay out of the evaluation, but I couldn't help it. I can't wait to start wooing you.” Jongin smiled and felt Chanyeol's hand slide down to his.

“I look forward to it too,” Jongin replied, daring to hold Chanyeol's hand back.
There was another knock on the door and Jongin glanced over to see Jongsoo standing in the doorway. Jongin glanced between Chanyeol and his uncle, and Chanyeol let go of his hand in favor of bowing his head to Jongsoo.

“I apologize for barging in on your nephew,” Chanyeol stated. “In my excitement, I forgot to contact you as well. Jongin has been chosen as the suitor from the Sous Mountains.”

“It’s an honor to hear that, your highness,” Jongsoo stated. “I hope he’ll serve our kingdom well.”

“I know he will,” Chanyeol soothed. “And I promise to look after him and make him happy.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll let Jongin spend the rest of the evening with you. I’ll come back again tomorrow.”

Chanyeol reached for Jongin’s hand and squeezed it briefly before walking past Jongsoo and taking his leave. Jongsoo walked to Jongin and hugged him close, not saying anything.

“I’ll come back and visit you,” Jongin mumbled into his shoulder. Jongsoo nodded.

“You’re always welcome back home. I’m going to miss you so much...but never forget just how proud I am of you. You were amazing, Jongin.”

“I love you, uncle...” Jongin mumbled, feeling tears in his eyes. Reality was starting to sink in that he would be staying in the palace.

“I love you too, Jongin.”

They held each other for some time, then spent the rest of the evening together. Jongsoo tried his best to talk about how great this would be for both Sous and Jongin, but Jongin knew he was trying his hardest to be positive despite his fear and sadness. Jongin tried to reassure him that he trusted Chanyeol and knew he would look after him, but only time would prove to both of them whether this was going to be a good or horrible change. Seeing Chanyeol’s excitement though, Jongin couldn't help but feel excited despite the anxiety.

~*~

The next morning was a solemn affair. Jongin was inseparable from Jongsoo while the other suitors slowly packed up to go back home. The only thing that got Jongin to leave Jongsoo’s side was the king asking to meet the leaders of the 3 regions. It was mostly to bid them farewell and all the other formalities, but it was making Jongin realize more and more that he was going to be alone in the palace from now on. Well, alone other than Chanyeol. Perhaps the other suitors could become his friends as well.

Jongin made his way to the palace entrance, where the other 2 chosen suitors were talking with
their regions' returning suitors. Jongin shyly made his way over to Sehun and smiled at him, giving him a small wave. Sehun smiled back, though it seemed forced. Jongin looked around for Baekhyun, and found him animatedly talking to some of the other people from Nefret. Jongin made his way over to that group instead.

“Hi,” Jongin said timidly. Baekhyun smiled warmly, which set Jongin at ease.

“Hey! You were pretty awesome yesterday! You must have really wanted to be a suitor, huh?”

“I don't really know,” Jongin mumbled. “I just knew I didn't want to be treated like I was nothing.”

“Damn right!” Baekhyun agreed. “I was just talking to them about the princes, trying to get some more details. Unlike you, our princes didn't come to the evaluation, so we have no clue what they're like.”

“Oh,” Jongin stated blankly.

“Minseok is the oldest prince,” one of the girls explained. “He's known for his beauty and grace, but also his weak health.”

“Figures they'd stick me with him,” Baekhyun sighed. “They probably just want me to play doctor cuz surprise, surprise, their medicine is lacking. They could learn a thing or two from Nefret.”

“You might want to watch your tongue, Baekhyun,” another girl warned. “It almost got you in trouble on the first day.”

“Whatever,” Baekhyun shrugged.

“Thank you for that by the way,” Jongin spoke up.

“Of course. I wasn't going to let him talk about you or any other birther that way. You can always come to me if you need help, alright? We're all in this mess together now. I extended the offer to Sehun, but he's pretty quiet.”

“Seems that way,” Jongin agreed. “Which prince is he marrying?”

“Junmyeon,” the first girl stated. “He's the middle prince, and the one the king regards in highest favor. Rumor has it he selected Junmyeon specifically to marry the Lorencian suitor because relations are shaky up north.”

“This is such bullshit,” Baekhyun grumbled. “Forced arranged marriages are outdated already.”

Jongin pouted slightly. He wasn't exactly keen on the idea of an arranged marriage, but he was still excited to become closer to Chanyeol. Maybe Baekhyun was just in a bad mood because he hadn't even met his match yet. Then again, maybe he didn't want to be a suitor at all.

“Your prince is pretty well known for his fierce nature,” the girl commented to Jongin. “Chanyeol's won lots of battles for the king. I'd watch your back around him. Don't want him to snap on you.”

“He wouldn't do that...” Jongin defended. “We've had a few conversations already and he's
really nice.”

“Must be nice to be at least a little love struck through all this,” Baekhyun sighed. “At least yours is known for something other than his good looks and bad health.”

Before Baekhyun could insult his mystery prince any further, the leaders of the regions returned. It was really time for them all to leave now. Jongin made his way back over to the Sous suitors and Jongsoo. They exchanged hugs, Jongsoo's lasting particularly long. Jongin pulled away and glanced around to find even Sehun giving hugs to his region's leader. Baekhyun looked like he was almost in tears when he hugged his leader. This must have been really hard on all of them. Baekhyun was right. They needed to stick together.

The royal guards ushered everyone towards the travel tanks outside the palace, and only Jongin, Baekhyun, and Sehun were left standing at the palace entrance. Jongin sniffled, wiping at his eyes and trying to tell himself this would be ok and something good would come from all of this. He tried to convince himself he would fall in love with Chanyeol and be happy with him.

He felt an arm wrap around his shoulder, and he was pulled closer to Baekhyun. At the same time, Baekhyun's other hand made its way to Sehun's back, giving him a few comforting pats. They were all going to be a family now, for better or for worse. They remained at the entrance, watching the travel tanks drive off, and only moved when a few servants told them they needed to move them into their new rooms and get them ready for the introduction banquet later that night. Their new lives were finally starting, and Jongin was scared, but he couldn't help the excited feeling in his gut. He would make this a good thing, no matter how hard he had to work.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! Back with chapter 2 and we get to see more of Jongin~ If you couldn't tell, Chankai is the first couple focused on in the story lol. And on that note, this story mostly focuses on one couple at a time, but the others pop in and out at various points, and the plot develops over the course of all 3 couples developing. So stick with it even if it seems like it's developing slowly at first. Things are gonna get wild, I assure you haha! For now, we'll meet the other 2 princes in the next chapter :D
Chapter 3

The servants led Jongin and the other birthers through the palace, splitting when they came to a fork in the hallway within the eastern wing. Jongin was guided down the middle hall, towards a room lined with golden trim and an intricately carved arch above the door. The servant opened the door and gently guided Jongin inside.

It was a spacious room, possibly larger than Jongin's entire first floor of his house back in the mountains. Within the room was a large bed, at least twice as large as any bed Jongin had seen, with a canopy and the most beautiful, intricately embroidered mint green bedding. Jongin walked over to the bed and gently ran his fingers along the blanket. It was softer than any fabric he'd ever felt before.

“We've brought your luggage here already,” the servant explained, motioning to Jongin's suitcase in the corner of the room. “The closet over there is yours. The prince has already filled it with some clothes, but he made sure to leave room for whatever it was you brought. If you'd like anything sent from your home, let him know and he'll see that it gets done.”

“Thank you...” Jongin mumbled.

“I'll give you some time to unpack, then I'll come back to help you dress for the banquet.”

“Thank you. I'll see you then!”

The servant bowed before leaving, shutting the door to give Jongin some time in the room alone. Jongin glanced around, unable to keep his jaw from falling in awe. The room was beautiful, the walls a soft cream color with large windows overlooking some of the garden as well as the courtyard entrance to the palace. Looking beyond the palace gates, Jongin could even see some of the surrounding town. He'd never gotten to see the central kingdom this close before.

Turning back to the room, Jongin noticed another closet across the room. He looked at it curiously, not sure he would really ever need two closets, but it looked beautiful in the room all the same. He noticed a doorway on the other side of the room, and opened it to find a large bathroom. Jongin couldn't believe how large and pristine everything seemed to be in the palace. Even the toilet was decorated with a painting of flowers on the back of it. Jongin was fairly certain the tub was larger than his own bed back home as well.

He turned the faucet on the sink, and stuck his finger under the water. His eyes widened when the water that came out was warm. All of Reilania, including the outer regions, had basic plumbing, but most of the outer regions had only 1 option for temperature, which was cold. In addition, the plumbing in the Sous Mountains was a struggle, since they lived on the mountain itself. Most of the pipes had been built over the mountain, which led to a lot of damage from the elements, so they
were constantly having to be fixed. Jongin had never experienced such a luxury as this bathroom, and this was *his* now. He honestly didn't know how to let it all sink in.

Jongin returned to the room and decided to unpack his clothes into his closet. He didn't quite know what to do with his cliff scaling boots, but he'd probably find a use for them somewhere. Finally, he decided to set Nido on the table in the corner of the room. The servants seemed eager to help Jongin with everything now, but he still wanted to be able to live the way he had back in Sous.

Jongin thought about taking a nap to pass the time and recover from an emotional morning, but he honestly felt like he would ruin the bedding if he did, so instead, he worked a bit more on the blueprints he'd shown Chanyeol. He wasn't there to fix the radio anymore, but he could easily send the blueprints to his uncle so he could make the changes. Jongin sighed, already missing his uncle. This was going to be a lot harder than he'd initially thought to adjust to.

Jongin poured his everything into working on the blueprints in an attempt to forget about his sadness. He hadn't even realized how much time had passed until a servant knocked on his door once more.

"It's time to start preparing for the banquet," the man explained through the door. "Would you like to prepare by yourself or would you like assistance?"

"Assistance would be nice," Jongin answered. "I've never really...worn nice clothes or makeup before. I don't know how to do it myself."

"Very well. I'm going to come in and help you then."

Jongin nodded, even though the man couldn't see him. He was flustered in this palace, and there was so much he didn't know about. Thankfully, the servant entered with a soft smile on his face and walked over to Jongin's closet, pulling out one of the rose colored hanboks that Chanyeol had put in there. Jongin got to his feet, nervously waiting to be directed into his clothes. The servant was gentle in his instruction, and took time to explain to Jongin how each piece was to be worn. Jongin had turned on Nido so the robot could learn and take notes as well.

Once Jongin was in his hanbok, they moved over to the vanity with a giant mirror. The servant showed Jongin the different types of makeup and how to apply them, and told him that he could always ask a servant to do this for him, since even the princes asked for this to be done. Jongin simply smiled and glanced over to Nido, who was now sitting on the vanity.

"Nido, you're taking notes, right?" Jongin asked the robot. Nido nodded, cocking its head to the side afterwards. Jongin smiled and turned his attention back to the servant. "I think I'll be able to do it, but if I struggle, I'll definitely ask."

"You're quite talented," the servant complimented. "It's not easy to wow the king. I can understand why the prince is so taken with you."
“Thank you...” Jongin mumbled gently. “I just hope this will be a good fit for me. I'm not used to the royal life.”

“Prince Chanyeol will look after you,” the servant soothed. “It's not my place to meddle in your relationship, but Prince Chanyeol is a good man, and I'm proud to serve him. He won't leave you to struggle alone.”

“Thank you for reassuring me. I really needed it.”

The servant smiled, then fluffed Jongin's bangs a bit. After that, he carefully placed the topaz diadem that his uncle had given him on his head. The servant turned Jongin to face the mirror. Again, that beautiful Jongin that he hardly recognized was staring back at him. It wasn't a Jongin that he disliked seeing though. He actually liked feeling beautiful. He hoped Chanyeol would find him just as beautiful as well, even if he was missing an arm.

When Jongin was finally ready, the servant led him out of the room and to the main dining hall. Jongin had never been there, and as with the rest of the palace, it was overwhelmingly grand. The table stretched across the room and could probably easily seat 20 people. The king was seated at the head of the table, waiting for everyone to arrive.

Jongin glanced around and noticed the other suitors were already present, standing further into the room. Baekhyun had been given heavy makeup, and was dressed in an aqua blue hanbok. Jongin couldn't believe how different he looked. The same could be said for Sehun, with his eyeliner and silver, shimmering hanbok. They were all made to look so beautiful. The princes would all be arriving for the banquet, so the suitors had to look their best. Jongin was curious to see the other princes as well. If they were anywhere near as charming as Chanyeol, Jongin figured Baekhyun and Sehun would gradually soften for them and relax a bit.

Jongin didn't have to wait much longer before the princes arrived. The first person to arrive was a man dressed in a navy blue hanbok with gold trim. His features weren't as soft and round as Chanyeol's, but he had round cheeks that seemed to glow when he smiled. He walked over to the wall across from Sehun, and Jongin figured he was Junmyeon, the middle prince.

The next prince to enter even had Jongin skipping a breath in shock. He was short, just a bit shorter than Junmyeon, but he made up for the lack of height in beauty. He had jet black hair, lightly curled for the occasion, and winged eyeliner, making his already sharp eyes appear even more pointed. A sheer golden fabric was decoratively covering his lower face, but Jongin could still see plump lips underneath. He was wearing a ruby red hanbok, with a gold diadem on his forehead, adorned with rubies. This had to be the eldest prince, Minseok. The rumors weren't false after all. He was almost inhumanly gorgeous.

Minseok walked across the way from Baekhyun, giving him a gentle smile, which Baekhyun didn't particularly return. Lastly, Chanyeol entered the room. Immediately, his eyes met with
Jongin's and they smiled at each other. Chanyeol looked so excited and happy just to see Jongin. He was wearing a sky blue hanbok this time, and his hair had been curled slightly as well. He was so handsome. Even if Jongin wanted to be cautious in this relationship, he couldn't deny how attractive he found Chanyeol.

When they were all standing on either side of the room, the king motioned for them all to walk towards the table in the center. When they were standing behind their chairs, the king got to his feet, smiling sickeningly sweetly at everyone in the room.

“Thank you for gathering here. Tonight starts the beginning of your new lives and new relationships. It’s my honor to introduce each of my sons to their fellow suitors.”

The king raised his hand in the direction of the beautiful prince in red. The prince bowed slightly in response.

“My eldest son of 27 years, Minseok. I’ve chosen Baekhyun of Nefret for you. He’s 24 years of age and the most knowledgeable of their practices.”

Baekhyun bowed, and Jongin thought he saw Baekhyun fighting back a grimace. Jongin glanced back to Minseok, who was smiling softly, and Jongin couldn’t help but feel sorry for Minseok, since it was obvious Baekhyun wasn’t happy about the situation. Perhaps Jongin empathized with the princes too much. They just all seemed so different from their father. The king motioned towards the other prince beside Minseok.

“Next, my second son of 25 years, Junmyeon. For you, I have chosen Sehun of Lorencia, a young, promising ore analyst of 23 years.”

Much the same as Minseok and Baekhyun, Sehun and Junmyeon bowed to each other. Jongin was surprised to hear that he and Sehun were the same age. Sehun seemed much more mature. Perhaps it was just the difference in their cultures. The people of Lorencia were often more serious and quiet. When the two had finished their bows, the king motioned to Chanyeol, the only remaining prince to be introduced.

“And lastly, my youngest son of 24 years, Chanyeol. You were present at the evaluation, so you know very well that I’ve chosen Jongin for you. He’s a young inventor of age 23 from the Sous Mountains. I’ll leave it to both of you to further acquaint yourselves.”

Chanyeol smiled widely at Jongin, bowing to greet him formally. Jongin bowed back, wishing he didn't feel so nervous. It was an excited nervous at least.

“You may take your seats,” the king explained.

Jongin carefully pulled the chair out, trying not to drag it ungracefully across the floor. That
was something he still struggled with when the chairs were heavier. Thankfully, he managed to get himself seated without any extra fuss. Chanyeol's smile seemed to be impossible to wipe off his face, but it was helping to calm Jongin down in the midst of all these formalities. When everyone was seated, the king motioned to the feast laid out on the table.

“This feast has been prepared in celebration. But first, I must inform you about your living arrangements. To further promote amicable relationships, the suitors have been moved into the princes rooms.”

Jongin's eyes widened. He was going to be sharing a room with Chanyeol already? Was that why there was a second closet in the bedroom? Jongin glanced at the other suitors, and they looked just as shocked and irritated. Baekhyun looked like he was biting his tongue trying not to say something about this.

“The marriages will not be right away. I'll give you time to get to know each other first. I consider that a kind gesture, so I hope you'll take advantage of it. I will not be dining with you tonight either, since I wish for you to get to know each other in a less formal environment. I expect great things from all of you.”

They bowed their heads as the king walked away, leaving them in the room with their food. Junmyeon was the first to move after that, standing and offering a toast to the suitors in the room and wishing to get along with each of them. He definitely seemed like the most sociable one of the group, aside from the times Chanyeol had talked excitedly to Jongin. Minseok seemed much softer spoken compared to his younger brothers.

Following Junmyeon's toast, the group started grabbing food. Minseok took off his gold fabric, and as Jongin expected, his face was flawless, although his skin looked almost unhealthily pale. Minseok smiled at Baekhyun once more, looking almost bashful, but Baekhyun paid him no mind, glancing around the table trying to decide what food to eat. Jongin could see Minseok visibly deflate at that, and he felt really bad for him. Baekhyun was being really rude. Even if he wasn't happy with the situation, this wasn't Minseok's fault. Minseok didn't give up, however, and stood from his seat, grabbing a dish and holding it out for Baekhyun.

“Would you like some of this?” He asked. Baekhyun finally looked at the dish, then sighed.

“Thank you, but I don't eat meat,” Baekhyun stated, grabbing one of the vegetarian dishes not too far from him and putting some on his plate.

Minseok sighed, setting the dish back on the table. He placed what Jongin didn't think was nearly enough food onto his plate, and nibbled away at it, looking like he was trying not to break down. Jongin wanted to shout at Baekhyun to stop being so standoffish, but he didn't want to cause a scene at the banquet. He knew they were all still on tight leashes and the king could easily send them away if they acted out too much.

Jongin glanced over to Junmyeon, hoping that he would notice, but Junmyeon was receiving
even colder treatment than Minseok was. Sehun wasn't even bothering to respond to him, simply eating the food and not sparing him a glance. Junmyeon didn't seem as disappointed as Minseok, but he did give up trying to converse pretty early and focused instead on eating his food as well. Jongin turned back to Chanyeol, only to find him smiling at him as always. He leaned forward and placed a few different foods on his plate.

“Don't hold back, Jongin!” Chanyeol urged.

Jongin smiled before glancing back at the others. He heard Chanyeol sigh, then glanced back at him in time to see Chanyeol lean even closer to him, almost to where their noses were touching.

“Let them be,” Chanyeol said so softly only Jongin could hear. “They'll sort themselves out, but it's not our business to meddle in. Besides, if we lighten the mood, it might help a little.”

Jongin smiled, thankful that Chanyeol had noticed as well. He really was a considerate person from what little Jongin had experienced of him. Jongin picked up his fork and took a bite of one of the vegetables Chanyeol had put on his plate. His eyes widened and he hummed in excitement. Chanyeol laughed and gave him a little more.

“It's good, right?”

“Yes!”

Chanyeol sat down and took a few bites of his own food, then started asking Jongin about each dish he tried and comparing which ones they liked best. It was just talking about food, but Jongin was smiling so much. Something about Chanyeol just made him feel so at ease. He noticed Minseok and Junmyeon smiling at them as well. Maybe Chanyeol was right. The mood had lightened up a bit, even if they were the only ones really talking.

After they'd all had their fill, servants brought out dessert, which was just as delicious as the main meal had been. When it was time to clear the table, the princes each stood up and asked for their suitor to follow them back to their rooms. Jongin was worried about the others, given how rough dinner had been, but this worry was soon replaced with another one. He was going to be spending the night in Chanyeol's room, and there was only one bed. He'd never slept with another man before, especially one that he was meant to wed. How was this going to work? What if Chanyeol expected things from him? What if he was only being nice for this purpose?

When they got to the room, Chanyeol turned to Jongin, gently holding his hand. He must have realized how nervous Jongin was since his hand was shaking. To Jongin's surprise, Chanyeol very timidly pulled him forward, hugging him and placing his cheek on the side of Jongin's head.

“Don't be nervous, ok? I won't do anything to you. I want to get closer to you and wait until it feels right for both of us, however long that takes.” Jongin wrapped his arm around Chanyeol, snuggling closer.
“Thank you,” he whispered.

Chanyeol loosened his grip enough to place a kiss on Jongin's forehead above his diadem. He smiled and brushed through Jongin's hair a bit, and Jongin strangely really liked the feeling of Chanyeol doting on him.

“Let's get ready for bed, alright? There's a pair of sleeping garments in your closet. You can change in the bathroom if you'd like more privacy.”

Jongin smiled and nodded, grabbing the clothes from his closet then heading to their bathroom. He took his time washing his face to remove the makeup. As he was trying to undress himself from his hanbok, he found it wasn't quite so easy to do with one hand, and he hadn't brought Nido to help him. He shyly opened the door and found Chanyeol readying the bed for them.

“Um...Could you help me?” Jongin asked quietly. Chanyeol glanced up and nodded, rushing over to him.

“What did you need?”

“I don't really know how to take this off by myself...with one arm...”

Jongin could feel his cheeks heating up, but Chanyeol simply smiled, not saying anything as he gently loosened the belt around Jongin's waist, then untied the top of his hanbok. After that, he put his hands on Jongin's shoulders and smiled.

“There you go. You can handle the rest yourself I'm sure. If you'd like I'll hang it back in your closet, or you can use your hanger and do it yourself. Whichever makes you feel more comfortable.”

“Thank you,” Jongin said with a bashful smile.

He really liked how much freedom and courtesy Chanyeol was showing him. He really didn't feel like he had anything to fear when he was with him. It wouldn't be hard at all for this to turn into a nice relationship. It already was.

When Jongin was done in the bathroom, Chanyeol went in after him. The sleeping garments were a simple pair of pants with a jacket that tied loosely shut. Jongin had Nido tidy it up for him while Chanyeol was changing, then Jongin worked on hanging his hanbok back up. He'd never been in such soft, luxurious outfits before. Even the sleeping garments were more comfortable than any outfit Jongin had ever worn back home. Jongin set his diadem down on the vanity in the room, staring at it for a moment and feeling just the slightest bit homesick. This was still a lot to get used to all at once.
Chanyeol returned and walked over to the bed, looking at Jongin with slightly flushed cheeks. Jongin heard him clear his throat and wondered if Chanyeol was just as nervous. That was surprisingly comforting to realize.

“Would you like to put some pillows in between us? At least for the first few nights until we get to know each other? I don't want to make you uncomfortable...”

“Yeah, that would be great.”

Chanyeol grabbed some of his pillows and lined them up on the bed in between where they would both be sleeping. After that, they slipped under the covers together, staring at each other despite the pillows in between them. Chanyeol yawned and stretched, then leaned forward to whisper to Jongin.

“Goodnight, I hope you sleep well.”

“Goodnight! I hope you sleep well too,” Jongin replied quietly.

Chanyeol smiled once more, then closed his eyes, snuggling into his pillow to sleep. Again, Jongin couldn't believe how soft and innocent he looked. Only Jongin would ever get to see this side of him. He felt blessed, though he knew it was cheesy. For how scary being a suitor had initially been, Chanyeol was making Jongin feel like every second was worth the struggle. He couldn't wait to know more about the prince.

~*~

Minseok led Baekhyun back to his room. It was a smaller room compared to some of the others in the palace, but it was cozy. He had been given one of the rooms with a fireplace in hopes of helping him stay warm and avoid getting sick so easily. It didn't really work, but Minseok liked it all the same. His bed had cream colored bedding with intricate designs embroidered onto it. He sat down on the edge of his bed, looking at Baekhyun nervously. He needed to try one more time to come to some understanding with him.

“I know this situation isn't ideal, but I'd like to get along with you,” he stated. “I'm sure we could become friends if we just talked to each other. I want to get to know you.”

“I hate to tell you it's all one-sided,” Baekhyun answered bluntly. “I have absolutely no interest or intention of getting along with you or becoming friends. You tore me away from my people and my life for selfish reasons, and you expect me to just go along with it and become your little pet? Thanks, but no thanks. I won't be tied down by royalty, and I sure as hell am not going to be your special little birther. Feel free to complain to your father about me. I'd love to be sent back home.”

“I'm sorry,” Minseok mumbled. “I know my father used forceful means to get you here and didn't give you the chance to say no. I can't change that, but I do want to make this work somehow. I don't want to just use you. I want to have a relationship with you...even if we aren't necessarily in love.”

“Like I said, you're the only one that wants that. I can't forgive the king for everything he's done to the outer regions, and I don't want to get friendly with his children either. You're all spoiled and
selfish, and at the end of the day, you only want us for your own merit.”

“That may be true for my father, but that's not how I feel...”

“Save it,” Baekhyun sighed. “Let's just go to bed.”

Minseok sighed and got off the bed, grabbing some clothes from his closet and shutting himself in the bathroom. He came out some time later, looking much paler and softer in appearance without the makeup. Even Baekhyun was thrown off for a moment. It was a little scary how much livelihood had been added to Minseok's face through makeup compared to his natural complexion.

Baekhyun brushed past him, heading into the bathroom afterwards to change. When he came back out, he was surprised to find Minseok already curled up in bed on the side nearest to the fireplace. He really looked small and frail laying there in the large bed. Baekhyun was angry at himself for feeling some level of pity. Of course they would pair him with the charity case. It wasn't going to change his mind though. He laid down in bed, facing away from Minseok. He was grateful when the other didn't make any move to get closer to him.

~*~

The silence continued even after Junmyeon and Sehun go back to his room. It wasn't until they were undressed and Junmyeon was laying in bed reading that Sehun finally spoke up from the nearby table.

“I don't want anything to do with you...”

“So you can talk,” Junmyeon said simply, not looking up from his book. “I gathered that much from how you acted at dinner. So we won't have anything to do with each other. My father expects you to sleep here, but that will be it. I'm not going to force myself upon you or make you be romantic when you're clearly not interested. So go to sleep when you feel like it.”

Sehun hummed getting up and sliding under the covers beside Junmyeon. It took a while before Sehun fell asleep, but Junmyeon minded his own business, reading his book and not even glancing at Sehun. When he was finally asleep, Junmyeon sighed and set his book down on his lap, looking at him. Sehun was curled into a ball with his hands in fists in front of his nose. Junmyeon couldn't help the small smile that formed on his face.

“You act tough, but you're actually soft under all of that, aren't you?” He asked quietly.

He sighed and set his book on the bedside table, then realadjusted himself in bed. He looked at Sehun once more, noting how his usually stern face had softened. He looked like a sleeping child now, completely at peace with the world. Junmyeon could only hope that Sehun would decide he could feel that way when he was awake around Junmyeon as well.

“Goodnight Sehun,” he whispered before rolling over to sleep.
After the banquet, Chanyeol started taking Jongin on dates pretty much every day. Sometimes they were simple walks around the gardens or the castle, and other times Chanyeol had food prepared for them. They seemed to never run out of things to talk about. Chanyeol took interest in even the smallest project Jongin had done, and Jongin found he loved to hear about Chanyeol's stories about training the royal guard. Chanyeol had a playful bone in his body, so he often managed to make even boring training routines into games. Jongin really liked that about him.

After the first two weeks, they stopped putting the pillows in between them. It took a little while longer before either of them were brave enough to cuddle each other. Once they had, it became impossible to separate them. Jongin loved snuggling against Chanyeol and even wrapping his legs around Chanyeol's while the other held him close. It was even better to wake up hearing Chanyeol's heartbeat and feeling him run his fingers through Jongin's hair and down his back. Chanyeol was a giant, warm cuddle buddy, and Jongin felt immature for labeling him that way, but he loved every second of being held.

One morning, Chanyeol didn't wait for Jongin to wake up naturally. Instead, he was gently shaking and calling out to Jongin, trying to get him to wake up. Jongin whined in response, nuzzling closer to Chanyeol's chest to try and block out the sound. He felt Chanyeol laugh, then heard him plead once more.

"Wake up, Jongin. There's something I want to show you!"

"Can't it wait?" Jongin slurred out sleepily.

"Nope. If we don't do it now, we can't do it at all."

"Fiiiiine," Jongin whined.

He pushed himself up sleepily then watched Chanyeol head to the bathroom to get changed. They still weren't at the point of showing each other their bodies in a casual manner, but it would all come with time, Jongin figured. He was happy that Chanyeol was making such a great effort to date Jongin rather than just live with him. He liked going on their little dates, even if it meant he had to wake up early in the morning.

When they'd both gotten changed into their hanboks, Jongin with the help of Nido this time, Chanyeol took Jongin to the gardens nearest to their wing of the castle. Jongin had been here before, but there was something different this time. Chanyeol laid out a blanket for them on the grass underneath some of the trees, and then Jongin realized what it was. The blossoms on the trees had opened, revealing a beautiful, light pink flower. Chanyeol walked Jongin over to the blanket and they sat together, underneath the trees, watching some of the petals fall lightly to the ground. Jongin closed his eyes and breathed in the air. The blossoms even gave off such a sweet, delicate scent. Chanyeol smiled and leaned closer to Jongin, wrapping his arm around his back and resting their heads together.
“It’s beautiful, isn't it? This is the first morning of their bloom.”

“It was worth waking up early,” Jongin said with a laugh. Chanyeol hugged him closer.

“I thought so. These trees are pretty special, you know.”

“Why's that?” Jongin asked.

“Well, they're hard to grow for one thing, but they also were my mothers favorite thing in the garden. Minseok is the only one that remembers her at all, but he always tells me that she smelled just like these trees. So I love to sit here and smell them. It's the only way I can feel close to her.”

“Chanyeol...”

“It's alright,” Chanyeol soothed. “She died giving birth to me. I owe her my life and I'm grateful to her. And now, I can bring you here and show her my own family as it forms.”

“I think that's a wonderful idea,” Jongin said gently.

He leaned upwards and dared to kiss Chanyeol on the cheek. He earned a flushed smile in return, and Jongin immediately curled up against him, making himself comfortable. It wasn't much longer before he was asleep again in Chanyeol's arms. He was just too comfortable and warm.

Chanyeol smiled as he watched Jongin sleeping against him. A flower petal fluttered down from the tree, landing on his nose. Chanyeol bit back a laugh as Jongin's nose scrunched up in response, even though he remained asleep. Jongin was probably the cutest person Chanyeol had ever met. It had been attraction at first sight, but every minute spent with him just had him falling harder and harder.

Carefully, Chanyeol brushed the petal off Jongin's nose, holding his breath in an attempt to not wake him up. When Jongin was still sleeping peacefully against him, Chanyeol took a deep breath and leaned down, barely touching his lips to Jongin's nose where the petal had been. Jongin sighed sleepily and snuggled closer right after. It took every ounce of self control for Chanyeol not to crush him in a hug after that. He couldn't believe they were really dating each other and snuggled together like this. He'd relish every second of it, and he'd let Jongin sleep half the day away on top of him if it meant he got to sneak kisses onto his nose.

Chapter End Notes

And we finally met the other princes :D Except their relationships aren't going so well OTL  You guys know me, so you know I'm gonna angst it up eventually lol! But for now we still have cute soft chankai dates :3 It's kinda crazy going back over the first chapters for this story cuz it's taken 3 just to set up the premise and introduce the characters. I can't even say the main plot has come into play yet lol! This story is still
in its baby stages, so hang tight and brace yourselves~
Junmyeon had tried his best to talk to Sehun over the weeks following the banquet. He'd often invite him to tea in their room, or for private meals. He never pushed Sehun into talking, but he genuinely wanted to at least get to where they could compromise with each other. Sehun made it more and more apparent that he wanted nothing to do with Junmyeon, however. He kept his responses short and often bordering on rude, but Junmyeon knew he had to make this work, for the kingdom if nothing else.

Junmyeon never forced Sehun to talk about himself, but he filled the silence at their meals with his own stories. He told Sehun about some of his more embarrassing, failed negotiations, as well as how he used to be afraid of the dark as a kid and often slept with either Minseok or Chanyeol until he hit the age of 13. Sehun almost seemed interested when Junmyeon told him that story, but he quickly masked it with indifference. Junmyeon wanted to show Sehun his whole self though, even the more embarrassing side. He hoped it would make Sehun feel more comfortable, knowing Junmyeon was a person that made mistakes and had fears and didn't expect perfection or really anything from him.

One thing Junmyeon hadn't admitted to Sehun was that he was a rather touchy person. He obviously didn't have a problem controlling himself during the day, but at night, when he was sleeping, he had a tendency to cuddle pillows or really anything he could get his hands on. He'd done well to avoid snuggling Sehun thus far, but of course he rolled over one night and cuddled right up against Sehun's back.

Junmyeon was asleep, so he didn't entirely realize what he was holding, but he felt something warm nestle against him, almost like it was cuddling back. Junmyeon sighed, liking this feeling, but after a few minutes, whatever he was holding, jolted forward, shaking him off and waking him up. Junmyeon glanced up sleepily to see Sehun sitting up and looking at him in shock.

“What was that?” Sehun asked. Junmyeon sat up tiredly.

“Sorry, I didn't realize I was holding you. I usually hold a pillow...”

“You startled me...” Sehun mumbled. “I thought you were going to...”

“I wouldn't ever do that to you,” Junmyeon reassured. “I'm sorry for holding you. I really didn't mean to, I was asleep. I won't do it again, and if I do, feel free to pull me off.”

Sehun nodded, looking worried. He scooted a bit further away in the bed, then laid down, facing away from Junmyeon. The latter sighed, running his hand through his hair. He'd been doing so well up until that point, but now Sehun was probably going to be even more closed off to him. For a second, Junmyeon could have sworn Sehun snuggled closer to him though before pulling
away. He wanted so badly to just understand how Sehun was feeling or be able to talk honestly with him. It wasn't even about trying to make this arranged relationship work. Junmyeon just wanted to get to know Sehun and how he was really feeling.

It wouldn't happen any time soon though, and Junmyeon definitely had to give up for that night. He grabbed one of the spare pillows and laid down, facing away from Sehun. He hugged it close, noting immediately how much emptier it felt than holding an actual person.

~*~

Jongin got adjusted to the palace life quicker than he thought he would. Chanyeol had brought him to the palace workshop after their first few dates together. Jongin was allowed to spend as much time there as he wanted and could work on whatever invention he pleased, or choose to assist the palace engineers on their projects. Jongin truthfully liked to do a bit of both.

The engineers were working on upgrading transportation systems, and Jongin had been going over blueprints with them. Apparently they wanted to try and use some of the technology Jongin had used on his scaling shoes on their iron steed carriages. Iron steeds were machines shaped like horses, with carriages built directly onto the back. Real horses had long since gone extinct, so these were a flashback to the past. The engineers wanted to try and add the jetpack to the carriage to balance it and cause it to hover, making the trip easier on both the steed as well as the passenger, since there would be no jostling of the carriage on the ground. It was an ambitious project, but Jongin was really enjoying working on it.

Of course, when he finished in the workshop, Chanyeol was always waiting for him. Jongin thought it was cute when he'd stay late and return to their room to find Chanyeol laying on the bed with a pout. He was a tad clingy, but Jongin really liked having someone cling to him like that. He never would have imagined the prince would act this way, especially with a birther that he was arranged to, but Chanyeol had wanted Jongin since the beginning. Chanyeol had been different from Jongin's expectation since the start.

When Jongin got back from the workshop one evening, Chanyeol was in their room, dressed in his rose pink hanbok, and had laid Jongin's yellow one out on their bed. He smiled when Jongin arrived, and kissed him on the nose before wiping away some of the grease on Jongin's cheek.

“Wash up! I've set up a dinner date for us.”

“Really?” Jongin asked excitedly.

“Yes, so don't take too long, alright? But don't rush yourself too much either.”

He leaned forward and kissed Jongin's forehead before patting his back and pushing him towards the bathroom. Jongin loved to take long baths, having never gotten that luxury back home,
so Chanyeol always let him take his time in the bathroom, even when they had plans that evening. Chanyeol was always so considerate with him. Jongin was pretty sure he was past the innocent crush phase. It hadn't been that long since they'd met, but Jongin really, genuinely cared for Chanyeol. He was thinking he might even love him.

Jongin took a quick bath, not wanting to keep Chanyeol waiting, then had Nido help him into his hanbok. Jongin had moved Nido into the bathroom since he and Chanyeol had yet to really see each other undressed. When Jongin was done, he left the bathroom to find Chanyeol reading a book at the small table in their room. He set it down and walked over to Jongin, wrapping his arms around his waist and kissing his forehead. They hadn't kissed each other on the lips yet, but Jongin really liked the shy, innocent kisses Chanyeol gave him.

“Ready to go?” Chanyeol asked, failing to contain his excitement.

“Lead the way~” Jongin singsonged, snuggling closer.

Chanyeol led him by the waist out of their room and up to one of the palace towers, where they could overlook the garden, the kingdom in the distance, and even see the Sous Mountains farther away. Jongin had never seen them so far away before, and it filled him with nostalgia and longing to see them again. It was really hard to leave everything behind, but Chanyeol realized that and did everything he could to look out for Jongin and make sure he wasn't lonely. He really was a blessing in Jongin's life. If it had been any other royalty, Jongin didn't think he could have handled being chosen. Then again, Chanyeol was the one that convinced him to try in the first place. He motivated Jongin to give his all.

A feast had been prepared on a table low to the ground, and two pillows had been placed beside it. Chanyeol helped Jongin sit down, then sat beside him. He lit a few of the candles on the table, and the servants left them to their dinner. This time, they didn't chat too much during the feast. Instead, they watched the sun set in the sky. It was only when Jongin was staring longingly at the Sous Mountains that Chanyeol spoke up, snuggling closer to him.

“Will you tell me about where you lived?” He asked. Jongin looked at him in surprise.

“You want to know about Sous?”

“Of course! It's the place you were born and my father has only told me the closed-minded opinions he has about the land. I want to know how it was to you.”

“It was breezy,” Jongin said, thinking back to the cliff tops. “We all got a pretty good workout climbing the mountains,” he laughed. “But it was home. We built houses along the cliffs, so they were small and cramped. Any piping that was normally built underground was built above the mountains, so it got damaged a lot and we always had to repair it, but that was just one more challenge in our eyes. It was terrain that really inspired you to create new inventions.”

“Was it hard living there?” Chanyeol asked. Jongin shook his head.

“It was much less glamorous than the palace, yes, but it wasn't a garbage heap like the people of the kingdom think it is.”
“I don't think that way...” Chanyeol mumbled, pouting. Jongin smiled and leaned against him.

“I know you don't, but with the way the king treated all the bithers, myself included, I don't think he particularly likes any of the outer regions.”

“No, you're right,” Chanyeol sighed, wrapping his arm around Jongin's waist to cuddle him. “My father did this as a political move, but I really wish he'd learn a thing or two about how much we need the outer regions and how they're just as amazing if not more so than the main kingdom.”

“I wish he would too,” Jongin agreed. “Sous will always be my home, and I'll always be proud of it and what we've accomplished there.”

“I can only imagine. I'm incredibly proud of you, so I'm sure Sous is a fascinating place. Maybe we'll take a trip and see it some time.”

“You'd really be willing to take a trip there?” Jongin asked. Chanyeol nodded, kissing his cheek.

“Of course! It's your home. I'd be an idiot not to visit with you. I want to learn more and see it for myself as well.”

“We'd all welcome you there,” Jongin said. “We'd give you the biggest feast we could muster! I bet you wouldn't recognize anything since we get most of our vegetables from the cliffs and meat from birds in the area. It would be completely local delicacies!”

“I'd love to try everything!”

Jongin smiled and placed his hand on top of Chanyeol's. Chanyeol hardly felt like royalty. He didn't know a lot about the outer regions, but he was intently listening to everything Jongin had to say, and was showing so much interest when no other member of royalty had. Jongin believed Chanyeol when he said he wanted to visit Sous with him.

“So you said your houses were small in Sous. Did you live with your parents?” Chanyeol asked next. Jongin frowned slightly.

“I used to, but they died in an accident when I was 15, so I've lived with my uncle since then.”

“Oh Jongin...I didn't know, I'm so sorry.”

“It's alright,” Jongin soothed, rubbing Chanyeol's hand. “I want to tell you about me.”

Chanyeol nodded and hugged him tighter, resting his chin on Jongin's shoulder. He was so warm, Jongin felt like he had a living blanket wrapped around him. He felt so loved and cared for. Chanyeol had become his pillar of support now, and Jongin felt strong and secure beside him.

“My parents were working on one of the lifts leading to the higher cliffs. The mountain wasn't stable there, but we didn't realize it at the time. The whole team working on the lift was crushed in a rock slide as well as the lift when it fell on top of them. No one survived.”

“Jongin, oh my God...”

“It was really hard at first,” Jongin said quietly. “I missed my parents so much, it was
unbearable. My uncle was devastated as well. We became each other's support. He became my second father and looked after me. He wouldn't let me do anything remotely dangerous after that, but I honestly didn't mind. The incident with my parents scared me. After my father died, my uncle took over as the leader of Sous, and he made that whole area off-limits. There haven't been anymore devastating accidents since then."

"I can't believe you went through that," Chanyeol mumbled, kissing his neck. His voice was shaky and Jongin glanced over to see tears in his eyes. He patted Chanyeol's hand again.

"We've both had our losses. You lost your mother, didn't you?"

"I never knew her though. If I lost one of my brothers, I don't think I could go on."

"It's hard, and I'll always miss them. But I still have people that love me and take care of me, which helps keep me going. I have you now too, right?"

"And I'll always be here," Chanyeol muttered into his shoulder, hugging him tighter.

Jongin smiled and leaned his head on top of Chanyeol's. It felt good to get this off of his chest. Other than his uncle and the other Sous people affected, no one had really shared in his grief or his suffering. Chanyeol cared though. This wasn't just Chanyeol seeing him because of an arranged marriage, Jongin was sure about that now. Chanyeol's feelings for him were sincere and honest. Chanyeol was sincere and honest.

"My mother used to sing this lullaby for me," Jongin said, trying to brighten the mood. "It's a Sous lullaby. It never failed to make me go to sleep. My uncle couldn't sing, so I got used to sleeping without it, but that's probably my favorite memory of my mother."

"Would you sing it for me?"

"W-What!?"

"Just a little bit. I'd love to learn it."

"I-I'll try...I don't have the best voice either."

"I'm sure you'll sound fine~"

Jongin took a deep breath and started singing. His voice was a bit shaky, but he could at least hold the tune unlike his uncle. Chanyeol listened as Jongin sang of a little boy, probably very reminiscent of Jongin when he was younger.

"When up you go,
to the sky,
and climb the steep Evenfall,
see that your step,
won't make you fall."
“Hurry boy and snag
the campanulas clinging to Lass.
Then, with mirth,
you sing along
to the winds of Dur,
in one single hop.

“At the top of Mount Sous,
dance, young boy, with dragonflies,
but if you won't
come back, back down to sleep the night,
won't you reach, oh boy of Sous,
won't you reach your Shangri-la.”

It was every child's upbringing in Sous, so it was something they all related to. Lass was one of the steeper peaks that Jongin had often climbed to bring home flowers to his mother. Dur was a peak just across the way from Lass, and as the wind blew through the mountains, Dur always seemed to make the most beautiful sounds that echoed through all of Sous. Jongin couldn't believe how nostalgic it felt to sing it again. He actually got choked up as he finished the last refrain, and Chanyeol kissed his cheek in response.

“That was beautiful Jongin. No wonder it lulled you to sleep every night. I think if I heard you sing that to me, I would fall right asleep as well.”

“You're flattering me too much,” Jongin fussed, very flustered. “But I'm glad you liked the lullaby. It means a lot to me.”

Chanyeol hummed and rocked Jongin a bit, still cuddling him close. Jongin laced his fingers with Chanyeol's and lifted their hands up, playing with them slightly in front of him. Chanyeol laughed and brought his free hand up to Jongin's shoulder where his arm was missing. He gently rubbed Jongin's shoulder, resting his hand on it afterward.

“Did you lose your arm in an accident as well?” Chanyeol asked softly. Jongin shook his head.

“I was born without it. I'm sure you heard Baekhyun that day when he explained, but carrying birthers isn't easy and development in the womb is hard, so they're very uncommon to begin with. Often, they have weak health or birth defects. I was unlucky enough to be born without one of my arms.”

“I think it used to. Growing up was hard, especially in Sous, but as I got better with tools, I started making it easier on myself. I made plenty of inventions to help myself out.”

“Did you ever consider building yourself another arm?”

“Oh, loads of times,” Jongin sighed. “I even built a few strap on tools that resembled arms. The problem is a lot of technology and medical understanding is required, and that's pretty much all kept within the kingdom. In Sous, we use what Lorencia can send us after the kingdom takes the best of it. And no one in Sous has enough medical knowledge to perform the surgery required to connect a bionic arm to a human body, so it's never been an option for me.”

“But if it was an option, you'd do it?”

“Probably. I might want one that I could take on and off, since sometimes it's easier not to have something metal hanging off of you, but it would certainly make parts of my life much easier. I could even modify it if I wanted to.”

“I bet you'd make it one of a kind.”

“You're flattering me again,” Jongin whined. Chanyeol laughed and snuggled closer, sighing after a moment.

“I didn't know it was so bad in the outer regions,” he mumbled. “My father's the one that oversees the resource distribution. I knew it wasn't fairly distributed, but I didn't think it was that bad...”

“It's not easy living in the outer regions,” Jongin sighed. “It's no wonder your father set all these marriages up. There's a lot of hostility within the outer regions towards the central kingdom.”

“Do you hate the kingdom?” Chanyeol asked. “I wouldn't blame you if you did.”

“I don't know what to feel,” Jongin answered honestly. “But I know I like you and I trust you.” Chanyeol smiled and kissed his cheek once more.

“I promise I won't let you down~”

“I believe you.”

Jongin leaned back against Chanyeol, letting himself relax. He really did trust Chanyeol. He knew that would be unheard of to any other person from the outer regions, but Chanyeol was the one person he knew he could trust. Jongin didn't know why he wasn't anxious or doubtful of Chanyeol, considering their marriage was arranged and he seemed perfect. He just felt so real and down to earth, and he was willing to learn about the outer regions, unlike his father. Jongin could tell his heart was in the right place, and that was what really mattered.

Jongin ended up falling asleep on Chanyeol shortly after that. Chanyeol was just so warm, it was impossible for Jongin to not doze off and curl up on him. When Chanyeol noticed Jongin was passed out on his lap, he laughed softly and kissed the top of his head before lifting him up into his arms and carrying him back to their room. Chanyeol carefully set Jongin on the bed so he could
sleep while Chanyeol quietly got ready for bed. He'd wake Jongin up after that to see if he wanted to change out of his hanbok.

Jongin opened his eyes sleepily shortly after being set on the bed. He sighed, snuggling deeper onto their mattress. He glanced forward and saw Chanyeol pulling off his hanbok in the distance. He could feel his cheeks heat up, but his eyes just couldn't look away. Chanyeol had a long body with a decent amount of musculature. To Jongin's surprise, however, Chanyeol had a bit of a round stomach. Chanyeol turned around at that point and gasped, covering his chest with his sleeping shirt.

“Jongin! I didn't realize you were awake. I would have changed in the bathroom, I'm sorry…”

“It's alright,” Jongin said with a yawn. He sat up and smiled at Chanyeol. “You have a tummy!”

“I...Yes?” Chanyeol responded not sure what Jongin was rambling about while half asleep.

“It's cute! Can I see it?”

“Er, yeah I guess…”

Chanyeol walked over and lowered his shirt to his side so Jongin could see his full body. It was Jongin's first time seeing Chanyeol without any top on. He rubbed Chanyeol's stomach, feeling the slight bump and giggled.

“Don't laugh,” Chanyeol whined. “I can't help it, I love dessert! And no matter how much I work out, it doesn't go away!”

“I like your tummy,” Jongin soothed, leaning forward to kiss it, which earned bright red cheeks from Chanyeol. “I don't want you to get rid of it.”

“Well, I won't as long as you don't tell the royal guard. They'd never let me live it down.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” Jongin giggled. Chanyeol smiled and ruffled his hair.

“Get changed for bed, alright? Bathroom is free.”

Jongin nodded and got off the bed. He grabbed his sleeping clothes and was about to go into the bathroom to change, but he turned around instead. Chanyeol had already finished changing by that point. Jongin took a deep breath, then gathered his courage to speak up.

“Will you help me change?” He asked.

Nido could easily help him change, but Jongin wanted to get closer to Chanyeol. They were going to be married eventually. They needed to be comfortable around each other. Just as Jongin wanted to see more of Chanyeol, he wanted Chanyeol to see more of him as well. He wanted him to see him as he was, and to love him as he was. Chanyeol looked surprised at the request at first, but then that same old smile grew on his face and he walked over to Jongin, wrapping his arms around
his waist.

“\textit{I'd be happy to help,}” he said softly.

Jongin lifted his arm so Chanyeol could unfasten the sash of his hanbok. Chanyeol was being slow and meticulous, treating it almost as a formal event. He cautiously slid Jongin’s top off of his shoulders, letting it fall to the ground. Normally Jongin would have panicked, not liking to treat such beautiful clothing so carelessly, but he was too caught up staring into Chanyeol's eyes, waiting to see signs of disgust, or anything really.

Chanyeol’s eyes traveled slowly across Jongin's body, taking in the musculature he hadn't realized would be there. It made sense, given Jongin was always building things and scaling mountains, but with how gentle his personality was, Chanyeol hadn't expected him to have such a strong looking body. His eyes stopped on Jongin's shoulder where his arm should have been. Chanyeol couldn't understand how his father had thought Jongin was deformed or filthy. He was beautiful, and even his missing arm just meant one more soft, yet broad curve on his body. He was truly beautiful.

Jongin reached for Chanyeol's shirt, gently gripping it and looking up at him, eyes begging for him to set his mind at ease. Chanyeol slowly wrapped Jongin's night garment around his shoulder, then held it up so Jongin could slide his arm into it. After that, Chanyeol wrapped his arms around Jongin, snuggling him close.

“You're beautiful,” he whispered.

He felt Jongin tremble against him and slowly grip tightly at the back of his shirt as he returned the hug. Chanyeol kissed Jongin's head, then pulled back long enough to tie the knot at the front of his shirt. He helped Jongin the rest of the way out of his hanbok, then hung it in Jongin's closet while he slipped on his pants. After that, they finally got into bed together.

Chanyeol was holding Jongin's hand, gently running his thumb along it. Jongin was almost back to sleep when Chanyeol spoke up softly this time.

“We should give each other nicknames~”

“Hm?” Jongin hummed sleepily.

“Cute nicknames that only we can call each other!” Chanyeol continued.

“You want that?” Jongin asked. For someone described as a fierce fighter, Chanyeol was painfully soft.

“I'd love that...Do you not want that? It's a stupid idea isn't it?” Chanyeol pouted. Jongin shook his head.
“I want it as long as I get to call you something cute too.”

“Of course!”

“Then what do you want to call me?” Jongin asked. Chanyeol hummed in thought.

“Nini!”

“Nini?” Jongin repeated. “I guess I’m alright with that.”

“Then what about me?” Chanyeol asked, looking excited to receive his new name. Jongin smiled as he thought about it.

“Yeolie,” he said softly, snuggling against Chanyeol’s chest.

Chanyeol smiled, rubbing Jongin’s back and wrapping his arms around him. They really had become inseparable when they were sleeping together. Chanyeol yawned, then kissed Jongin’s head one last time.

“Goodnight Nini,” he whispered into his hair. He felt Jongin place a soft kiss on his collarbone.

“Goodnight Yeolie~”

~*~

On the days when Jongin didn't feel like going to the workshop, but Chanyeol still had to train new recruits to the royal guard, he would find Sehun and Baekhyun instead. While the two weren't particularly hospitable to their princes, they were both overwhelmingly kind to Jongin. Sehun was much more quiet than Baekhyun, but Jongin could tell he cared in his own shy way. The two had become pretty close in their attempts to avoid their princes. Jongin found it a bit silly, but he had to take a step back and realize that if his prince hadn't turned out to be the man that Chanyeol was, he would probably be acting exactly the same way these two were.

More often than not, they were in the garden together. Baekhyun, while he acted bitter, couldn't help but admire some of the plant life in the garden that wasn't native to Nefret. Sehun really just wanted to be around people he was comfortable with, so he went wherever Baekhyun went. Jongin liked spending time with them, but sometimes they upset him with their fowl opinions of the kingdom and the princes. Jongin didn't think either Junmyeon or Minseok were terrible from what little they'd interacted, and he definitely didn't like when Baekhyun and Sehun threw jabs at Chanyeol. He hadn't told them about how close they were becoming, but he was hesitant to, not wanting to jeopardize the friendship he had with them.

“Minseok wasn't at breakfast today,” Baekhyun sighed, picking cherries off one of the trees. “He wasn't feeling well enough to grace us with his presence.” His tone was sarcastic.

“You think he's faking it?” Sehun asked disinterestedly, grabbing one of the cherries from Baekhyun's basket to eat.

“Not sure,” Baekhyun grumbled, swatting Sehun's hand away when he reached for another.
“He definitely doesn't seem well, but sometimes I think he just lays in bed for the hell of it.”

“Maybe he really doesn't feel well,” Jongin said. “He still tries to have lunch with you whenever he can, so I don't think he'd fake an illness.”

“I don't think he's faking it, but I do wish he'd give up trying to woo me. I'm just not interested, no matter how pretty he dresses.”

“I dunno, Chanyeol and I get along really well. I don't think the princes are as toxic as the king,” Jongin spoke quietly, not wanting to get caught for speaking ill of the king.

“I'm sure they aren't, but there's so much more to this than just the politics and the people themselves, Jongin,” Baekhyun sighed. “I had a life back in Nefret. We were taken against our will to be bartering items as far as the king is concerned. Even if Minseok is an absolute angel, I'm not interested in playing into their little political charade.”

“I feel the same,” Sehun stated.

Jongin frowned, not sure what to say. He knew there was a large part of this marriage that was political, but he couldn't force himself to focus solely on that. He liked Chanyeol too much to push him away even if he didn't like the way the king was handling his relations with the outer regions.

“You should watch out too,” Baekhyun warned Jongin. “Chanyeol seems like a real charmer, but I don't trust any of the royalty.”

“Chanyeol is a good person,” Jongin instantly defended. “You might see it as insincere flirting just for the sake of marriage, but I know Chanyeol's not like that! He genuinely listens to me and cares for me!”

“You love him, don't you?” Baekhyun asked softly, his mocking tone completely gone to Jongin's surprise. The question caught him off-guard.

“I'm not sure...Love is such a big feeling, but I know I care about him, and he cares about me...”

“Then maybe this will work for you,” Baekhyun said, sounding supportive for once. “Maybe something good can come from all this hell. I'd really hope so. I just can't be so naive and accepting myself. I almost envy you, Jongin...Almost~” He stuck his tongue out playfully, and Jongin felt a bit better that he was at least accepting how Jongin felt.

“I still think you're making a bad decision,” Sehun stated, which made Jongin pout. “But it's your life, not mine.”

Jongin smiled, knowing that was as positive of a response he would get from Sehun and Baekhyun. He watched Baekhyun swat Sehun's hand away again when he tried to reach for another cherry, and he giggled. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted someone approaching. He looked over and saw Minseok walking over, wearing a royal blue hanbok and golden leaf decorations circling around his ear and resting just above his temples. As always, Jongin thought he was beautiful. He heard Baekhyun sigh beside him.

“Well, here's my cue to leave.”
He nodded at Sehun and the two walked away. Jongin didn't bother to follow them. He watched as Minseok's face fell from across the garden. He honestly felt bad for Minseok. He was just like Chanyeol, not hiding his feelings behind any sort of mask. It was obvious Baekhyun was hurting him by doing this, and Jongin was too empathetic for his own good. He didn't want to see Minseok hurting.

“Good afternoon,” Minseok greeted him, putting on a gentle smile despite how sad he obviously was.

“Good afternoon!” Jongin greeted back. “How are you feeling?” Minseok laughed bitterly at the question, and Jongin felt bad for asking something so stupid considering the situation.

“I'm well enough. Thank you for asking. Usually only the servants and my brothers ask me that. Do I look ill today?”

“Only a little bit,” Jongin admitted softly. Minseok nodded and sighed.

“You and Chanyeol are lucky. I'm jealous of you.”

“Why!?” Jongin gasped. He could hardly imagine a prince being jealous of him.

“You two get along so well. I wish I could talk to Baekhyun like that. He just thinks I'm a charity case...Though that's basically all I am. Even my father only uses me when he needs to persuade someone who thinks more with their lower region than their head.”

“Don't talk like that...”

“It's the truth though,” Minseok sighed. “But I don't want to drag your mood down any further. You and Chanyeol have a date later right? He's pretty eager for it.”

“Yes, that's right.”

“Have fun, alright? And take care of my baby brother.”

“I'm not sure I'm the one who takes care of him...It feels more the other way around.”

“Trust me, you do more for him than you could ever realize. He's happy, which is something none of us have really been in a while. So thank you for that.”

“Y-You're welcome...”

“I'll be off then.”

“Have a good rest of the day.”

Minseok smiled, but it didn't really reach his eyes. As he was walking away, Jongin couldn't help but notice how small he seemed within the loose hanbok. The palace had its own personal doctor, so why didn't Minseok seem healthier? Maybe the kingdom needed Nefret and their medical knowledge more than they let on.
Jongin was about to turn around and head back to his room when he collided with another body. Two arms wrapped around him and something nuzzled into his neck. Jongin laughed and wrapped his arm around Chanyeol, happier than ever to see him.

“Found you~” Chanyeol singsonged. “Were you getting some fresh air?”

“Mhm. Baekhyun and Sehun were picking cherries earlier but they left.”

“Think you're ready for out date?”

“You really are eager, aren't you?” Jongin laughed.

“I have something extra special for you today! I can't wait to show you!”

“Then let's not wait! I want to see!”

Chanyeol grabbed Jongin's hand and quickly walked back into the palace. It had been a few weeks and Jongin had started to wonder if the excitement between them would start to fade as they used their nicknames and became more accustomed to each other. He was glad to see Chanyeol still so excited over this. Jongin never would have expected just what Chanyeol had for him.

Chanyeol had dragged him all the way to the doctor's office. When he opened the door, the doctor as well as someone that Jongin recognized as one of the highest ranking palace engineers were standing there talking. Chanyeol led Jongin inside and nodded to the two. They parted, revealing a bionic arm resting on the table in the room. Jongin's eyes went wide and he gasped.

“It's yours,” Chanyeol said softly, letting go of Jongin's hand in favor of holding his waist. Jongin's hand covered his mouth as his eyes watered. “It's your wedding gift from me.”

“Oh my God,” Jongin uttered, barely able to speak.

“I asked our head engineer to design it, but I asked for a few special touches. Our doctor is a certified medical engineer, so he can perform the surgery if you want this. I also asked that the arm be removable after the surgery so you can use it as you see fit. I know you're talented and capable of anything you put your mind to, but I wanted to give you this.”

“I don't...I don't know what to say,” Jongin stuttered. “You've given me so much and now this? I have nothing to give you in return!”

“You don't need to give me anything,” Chanyeol soothed. “You've already given me more love, attention, and happiness than anyone has in a long time.”

Jongin was reminded of what Minseok had told him shortly before. He didn't know much about Chanyeol's life in the palace before he arrived, but Jongin couldn't imagine any of them were happy, living directly under the king's watch. Maybe what he really needed the most was attention rather than physical gifts.

“I don't want to pressure you, Jongin. We don't have to get married any time soon. I know you're not ready for that, but I wanted you to have this. It will be a pretty big procedure and it'll
take some time for you to recover and get used to this, but I'll be by your side the whole time, I promise.”

“You're really ok with me? You're really willing to do all of this for me? With nothing in return?”

“It will make you happy, which will make me happy. I get something in return. And even if I didn't get anything in return, I would still do it. I love you, Jongin.”

Tears finally escaped Jongin's eyes and he thrust himself towards Chanyeol, his forehead colliding with his chest and knocking some of the air out of him. He heard Chanyeol laugh and felt him hug him tightly.

“Thank you so much,” Jongin said through tears. “Thank you so, so much, Yeolie!”

Chanyeol laughed at the nickname and kissed the top of Jongin's head. After that, he walked over to the doctor and the engineer with Jongin still squished against him. Jongin pulled away and wiped the tears from his eyes, trying to look presentable for the two men. They smiled gently at him. For as awful as the king was, the people in the palace were overwhelmingly kind.

“We'd like to perform the surgery in a couple of days if that's alright with you. It will be a long procedure, but we'll take care of you,” the doctor soothed. Jongin nodded. “We'll do some tests on you now just to make sure you're healthy and we know exactly how to treat you and take care of you.”

They did a basic checkup on Jongin, then looked in detail at his shoulder and took some measurements. The engineer hadn't completed the shoulder piece yet, wanting to make sure it fit onto Jongin perfectly. By the time they'd finished, it was late in the evening, so Chanyeol simply ate dinner with Jongin in the dining hall. After that, they cuddled up together in bed, talking softly about all the things Jongin wanted to do with his new arm.

Jongin knew Chanyeol was sincere at this point. He'd listened to Jongin's stories and done something for him without expecting anything in return. He'd told Jongin that he loved him, and Jongin was pretty positive at this point he loved Chanyeol as well. Political or not, he wanted to be with Chanyeol. He wanted to marry him.

~*~

The day of the surgery arrived, and Jongin was extremely nervous. He was glad that Chanyeol had promised to be beside him, because Jongin didn't think he'd be able to handle it alone. He'd never been put under or operated on before, and while he trusted the doctor and engineer, he was still afraid of the whole situation. Chanyeol was seated on his other side, holding his hand. The doctor had allowed him to be there for the operation as long as he stayed on the side they weren't operating on. Jongin wondered if Chanyeol would get squeamish, but he'd seen battle and blood before. He could probably handle this. Jongin sure needed him there.
Chanyeol held his hand, whispering soft encouragements to him as the doctor worked on sedating him. Jongin's iron grip slowly loosened on Chanyeol's hand, but he held onto consciousness for a little while longer, staring into Chanyeol's eyes and trying to listen to what he was whispering to him. Finally, Jongin blacked out, and the operation began.

When Jongin came to, it was much darker in the room, and he slowly realized that the sun was setting in the sky. He groaned, his body feeling heavy and lethargic. His shoulder ached, and when he could focus his eyes, he glanced over and saw the long metal arm rested carefully on several pillows, propped in just the right way so Jongin didn't move and hurt himself. He looked over to his other side, and saw none other than Chanyeol, still holding his hand and rubbing it gently while reading a book. Jongin grunted, trying to make a noise, but his brain didn't seem awake enough to form words yet. Chanyeol's head shot up from his book and he shut it, then he leaned closer, holding Jongin's hand up to his cheek.

"Nini? Are you awake?"

"Mm," Jongin managed.

"How do you feel?"

"Tired..."

"I bet," Chanyeol said, laughing softly. "Everything went well. They don't want you to move around much for the first 24 hours, but you're all done."

"Does that mean I have to sleep here?" Jongin asked groggily. Chanyeol smiled and nodded, brushing Jongin's bangs from his face.

"Yeah, it could hurt you if you lift your arm up right now."

"Are you going to leave me?" Jongin asked worriedly. He could hardly think straight, but the one thing he did know was he didn't want Chanyeol to leave him.

"No, I'm going to stay. I promised I'd be by your side the whole time, remember?"

"Where will you sleep?"

"I've slept on the ground before during military drills, Jongin. I'll be fine no matter what, ok? Don't worry about me. Let's talk about your arm! Aren't you excited?"

"Mhm," Jongin hummed. Chanyeol leaned over and reached for his metal wrist. Jongin let out a worried grunt. "Don't move it!"

"I'm not, Nini. Don't worry. Does it hurt?"

"Yes..."

"Do you need me to get the doctor?" Chanyeol asked. Jongin shook his head and whined.

"It's not unbearable..."

"Alright, let me know if it gets worse. I want to show you something about your arm, Jongin."
Jongin nodded slowly as he watched Chanyeol reach for his metal wrist again. He flipped up a small flap on his arm, revealing a little button. Jongin watched him dazedly, curious what that button was for. Chanyeol pressed it, and Jongin heard a quiet winding sound. Soon, a music box began to play from within Jongin's wrist. He instantly recognized the tune.

“It's...”

“I had the engineer design a music box with that lullaby you sang for me. I researched it and made sure the tune was exactly right. This way if you ever had trouble sleeping, you can listen to it.”

Jongin felt his eyes watering again. He still didn't feel completely awake, but his chest almost ached with emotion. Chanyeol had done so much for him, and he'd gone so far as to research a simple lullaby from his homeland and give it to Jongin in some form. He was the most considerate person Jongin had ever met, and he didn't even know how to express how much this meant to him or how much Chanyeol meant to him. He knew one thing that would be a close comparison though.

“I love you,” he whispered. “I love you, Yeolie...”

Chanyeol smiled warmly, leaning close and brushing Jongin's bangs off his forehead so he could kiss it. He giggled and rubbed his nose softly against Jongin's.

“I love you too, Nini.”

Jongin could only repeat that phrase, slurring his words sometimes with tears running down his cheeks. Chanyeol wiped his eyes, answering each of his 'I love you's with one of his own. Finally, when the music box stopped playing, Chanyeol reached for the button so it would wind again.

“I tried my best to learn the words. Do you want me to sing it to you?”

Jongin nodded as much as he could muster. Chanyeol leaned closer and grabbed Jongin's hand in his once more. After that, he quietly sang along with the music box, his voice so low it gave Jongin chills. He continued to sing, even if his voice cracked or he messed up the words, until Jongin finally fell asleep again. To Jongin's delight, Chanyeol was still beside him the following morning, cuddling his hand and sleeping with his head against Jongin's hand on the bed. Jongin definitely loved him. There was no doubt about that.

Chapter End Notes
Here we are again with another chapter~ First off, HUGE shout out and thanks to GD for writing the lullaby for me because I am the least poetic/prettty worded person in the world, so she came to the rescue XD We're still mostly focused on Chankai, but that will be changing pretty soon (after next chapter) and that's when things pick up. Chankai is kinda the scene setting couple, so I'm sorry if it feels like they're dragging a bit. There's just so much to set up and I also didn't want to skimp on their own story in comparison to the others. But we're seeing tidbits of the other couples, and after the next chapter, a different couple will become the focus (for plot related reasons >.<). So enjoy the soft chankai while it lasts lol!
Learning how to use a second arm was a lot harder than Jongin had originally anticipated. They started out slow, simply moving Jongin's limb for him so he could feel what it was like. Chanyeol was by his side during every doctor appointment, and he made sure to regularly move Jongin's arm, starting with each of the fingers, then the wrist, then the elbow, and finally the shoulder. Jongin was grateful he was so willing to help, because this all still felt so foreign to him, and his shoulder was still sore and recovering from the surgery. He didn't think he could do this on his own.

Chanyeol was always trying to cheer Jongin up. Whenever Jongin got frustrated during the exercises when he had to move his hand himself, Chanyeol would be cheering him on, or daydreaming about things they would do with each other in the future once Jongin got the hang of his new arm. He never failed to make Jongin smile, which was what he needed, because his new arm had him particularly frustrated.

“We should go to Sous first,” Chanyeol said, holding Jongin's arm while Jongin rotated his wrist. “I bet you're dying to see how this thing climbs.”

“I don't think I'll be at that level any time soon,” Jongin pouted. “This is a lot harder than I imagined it would be...”

“Well, you're basically training your brain and muscles to control a metal object attached to them. It's complicated, so you need to cut yourself some slack.”

“I know,” Jongin whined. “I just want to be normal...”

“You're amazing, Jongin. Even if you struggle with something, that's not going to change,” Chanyeol soothed. “We don't have to go to Sous right away. We could wait a year or so. Maybe we could make the trip our honeymoon...or we could go once you're feeling up to it. I don't want to stress our marriage too much.”

“Why not?” Jongin asked. “Doesn't your father want us to be married as soon as possible?”

“Yes, but he also is willing to wait for us to both consent, which is a blessing. I don't think we'd be able to push it out for more than a year, but that gives us time to get comfortable at least.”

“I'm comfortable with you now,” Jongin said simply. “I don't want to wait that long to get married...” Chanyeol's eyes widened at that.

“Jongin...Are you sure?” He was trying to be considerate and make sure Jongin was serious, but even Jongin couldn't miss the flash of excitement in his eyes and the lilt in his voice.

“Positive. I want to get married, Chanyeol. I want to be with you.”

“Then let me do this,” Chanyeol stated, getting up from his seat so he could kneel on the ground, Jongin's hand still in his. “Jongin of Sous, will you marry me?” Jongin smiled and nodded.
“I would love to~”

Jongin leaned forward, wrapping his good arm around Chanyeol's shoulders. Chanyeol laughed and hugged him back rocking from side to side. When they finally broke apart, Chanyeol returned to his seat and continued to help Jongin with his arm therapy. The entire time, they couldn't stop smiling at each other and randomly giggling. Jongin was so excited. He didn't think he'd been this excited over something in a long time. He'd thought this decree and life at the palace would have meant misery, but his life had gotten so much better with Chanyeol in it, even if it meant Jongin would be in close contact with the king.

After Jongin's therapy was over, Jongin went to the workshop to see what he could help with. Luckily, his surgery hadn't stopped him from using his good arm, so he was still able to craft with one hand. Chanyeol in turn headed to the throne room, where his father was. Chanyeol bowed at the entrance of the room, waiting for his father to command him to come in. When he'd received permission, he walked over to the throne, standing before his father.

“What is it that you need?” The king asked.

“I have a request,” Chanyeol stated.

“What is your request?”

“I would like to be wedded to Jongin. We've both decided it's time.” The king grimaced slightly before managing to hide it.

“You're sure you want that boy?”

“There's no one else I could ever want more. You chose him as well, father. You know his worth, and I love him.”

“Very well,” the king sighed. “When would you like the ceremony?”

“In a couple of months. We need time to prepare obviously, and Jongin would like to have better use of his bionic arm before the wedding.”

“I'll send out invitations and a royal decree later,” the king stated. “You're doing well, Chanyeol. Your brothers' relationships are both struggling.”

“It's because I was able to prove to you that the one I liked the best was the one for me,” Chanyeol stated simply. “And Jongin rose to the challenge because I confronted him. We were on better terms with each other from the very beginning.”

“Perhaps,” the king grumbled. “Don't forget the purpose behind this marriage. It's not all fun and games. We need Sous under our control.”

“Yes father,” Chanyeol sighed.

He didn't care about whatever political benefits his father sought out of their relationship. He wasn't going to focus on any of that. All he wanted was to give Jongin love and a happy life.
“Was that all you wanted to tell me?” The king asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you may leave now. Congratulations on your marriage, Chanyeol.”

“Thank you, father.”

Chanyeol bowed once more and left the room. After that, he ran out to find each of his brothers and tell them the good news. His father may have had shallow intentions for this marriage, but his brothers were both genuinely ecstatic and happy for him when he told them. Junmyeon even offered to help plan the ceremony, which Chanyeol took him up on because he was terrible with this sort of thing. It was going to be a busy couple of months, but Chanyeol couldn't wait.

~*~

After the royal decree went out, Jongin's uncle was the first to contact the palace to confirm his spot at the wedding. It was finally starting to set in that Jongin was getting married. It had been months since his uncle had come to the castle to visit, and Jongin was going to be getting married in front of him this time. It was a reality Jongin never would have expected to find himself in.

Jongin knew his uncle was probably worried about him and against this marriage because of both the fast pace as well as marrying into royalty. Even Jongin found himself pausing and questioning whether he'd lost all his sanity. Jongin was normally cautious and slow to grow close to people, but Chanyeol seemed to fit so perfectly into his life. Jongin felt like he was complete with him, and that was why he couldn't deny the feeling in his gut that this was the right thing to do. It wasn't like he had much choice in the matter anyway, given he was betrothed to Chanyeol. The wedding would come one day, but Jongin was excited to make it sooner rather than later.

He worked his hardest to get control over his new arm. He wanted to show his uncle when he arrived that he was doing well, and that Chanyeol had given him so much already. He also wanted to show his uncle just how much he loved and trusted Chanyeol. Their relationship had been short, yes, but that didn't mean it hadn't been fruitful. Jongin's life and entire being had changed after meeting Chanyeol, literally.

On top of helping Chanyeol decide details about their wedding, Jongin was working even harder at his therapy. Chanyeol kept him from pushing himself too hard, which Jongin honestly needed. He knew it would take time to get used to having this arm, but he wanted so badly to be better with it than he was.

He'd moved on to grabbing and holding objects, having gotten used to moving each joint. He'd started with simple objects like pillows or clothes, things he could crush in his hand without ruining. Once he got the hang of that, he started working on having a delicate touch. The doctor
had bought several old plates and teacups for Jongin to practice with. Most of them were chipped or in bad condition, so it didn't matter when he dropped them, which happened quite often.

Chanyeol liked to practice outside in the garden, partially because they could sit on the blanket and cuddle, but also because Jongin could get some fresh air, and if the cups landed on the blanket, they didn't break as often as they did on the tile floor. Jongin got discouraged easily, so Chanyeol was always looking for little ways to help him improve or give him a bit more confidence. Chanyeol was honestly the only reason Jongin was doing as well as he was. Every time Jongin got frustrated or looked like he was going to cry, Chanyeol forced him to put it down for a bit and cuddled him until he wasn't upset anymore. Chanyeol was just as invested in this as Jongin was.

One of the times they were in the garden, Jongin was happily seated on Chanyeol's lap. He was working on picking up a teacup with a bit of water in it. He'd been doing well not to crush the cups, so they'd added another challenge for Jongin. Now he had to hold the teacup and lift it to his lips without spilling it. It seemed like such a simple task that he wouldn't even have to think about if he were using his real arm, but this bionic arm was all new for Jongin. Jongin had already spilled water all over himself and Chanyeol several times, but every time he panicked or tried to get off Chanyeol to clean him up, the latter just kissed his cheek, told him he was doing a good job, and encouraged him to keep practicing. Jongin really couldn't believe he'd found someone like Chanyeol.

Jongin had just barely managed to lift the cup to his lips, but as he tipped it to sip, it slipped from his fingers and landed on his and Chanyeol's laps. Jongin groaned and got off from Chanyeol, tired of dropping water on himself repeatedly.

“I give up,” he grumbled. “I'm never going to get it!”

“Hey! You will,” Chanyeol soothed.

He got up and turned Jongin to face him. Jongin's eyes were already watering, but when he spotted the red spot on Chanyeol's hanbok, the tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Oh my God,” he uttered. “Yeolie, can you look at the back of my hanbok?”

“Huh?”

“Just...Is there blood?”

Chanyeol's eyes went wide and he span Jongin around instantly, trying to find blood. He spotted a red spot near his crotch, then glanced at his own hanbok, finding the blood that Jongin had spotted first. Slowly, Chanyeol turned Jongin back to face him.

“There's blood, isn't there?” Jongin asked. “I started my bleed...I'm so sorry!” He started crying into his hands at that point, and Chanyeol quickly pulled him into a hug.
“Hey, shh! It's ok, why are you crying? Are you in pain?”

“I bled on you!” Jongin sobbed. “Aren't you disgusted? It got all over your hanbok! What if it doesn't come out? I ruined it!”

“Nini, shhh,” Chanyeol repeated, cupping his cheeks and looking at him gently. “This isn't disgusting. It will never be disgusting to me. This is part of your body, and I love it just like I love you. It's alright if it got on me. It got on you too.”

“But I'm used to it,” Jongin mumbled.

“And I'm going to be soon enough too. Jongin, we're getting married. We're probably going to have children some day. If I can't handle your bleed, what kind of man am I?”

Jongin's lip trembled as he tried and failed to stop crying. He was grateful Chanyeol was being so gentle and kind about this, but he still felt so embarrassed. He could feel his bleed was coming and he usually prepared pretty well for it, but he hadn't planned for it to come so suddenly. Chanyeol sighed and wiped his teary eyes, breaking Jongin out of his upset daze.

“Let's just get you looked after, alright? I think you've practiced enough for today. Let's get changed and cuddle in bed. Does that sound good?”

Jongin nodded and sniffled. Chanyeol laughed affectionately, leaning forward to kiss his forehead, then wrapped his arm around Jongin's waist. He used his own body to block the view of the bloodstain on Jongin's clothes as they walked back to their room. Once they were there, Chanyeol left Jongin to wash in the bathroom, and changed out of his hanbok before rummaging through Jongin's closet for his special undergarments. Birthers and women wore special undergarments with extra padding during their bleeds, and changed and washed them fairly frequently, so Jongin no doubt had a couple pairs. Once he found them, he opened the bathroom door just long enough to place them on the counter for Jongin. After that, Chanyeol changed into his sleeping garments and waited for Jongin to come out.

Jongin came out some time later wearing his sleeping garments, eyes red and puffy from crying. Chanyeol was sure he probably cried in the bathroom, but he wasn't going to deny him of relieving his feelings. Instead, he motioned for Jongin to come to him and he pulled the covers back. They got in together, and soon their legs were tangled together and Chanyeol was holding Jongin to his chest, rubbing his back and kissing his head. Jongin slowly relaxed, sighing every so often when Chanyeol massaged a bit of his back that he knew was always tense from Jongin's late nights crafting.

“Are you feeling ok? Are you in pain?” Chanyeol asked.

“It's not too bad,” Jongin mumbled. “I'm sorry for being such a mess...”

“Shh, you don't need to apologize to me about anything. You did nothing wrong. I just want to look after you. Are you hungry?”

“I'm alright,” Jongin sighed. “A little tired...”
“Well, an afternoon nap sounds lovely, doesn't it?” Chanyeol asked. Jongin smiled and snuggled closer.

“Thank you, Yeolie...”

“I love you, Jongin,” Chanyeol said seriously, dropping his nickname. “No matter what, I'm always going to love you and look out for you. So don't be afraid or upset when things like this happen. We're going to be a family soon, Jongin. These kinds of mishaps will all become special fond memories to me.”

“You'll always hold me like this when I'm on my bleed and I'm crying?” Jongin asked. Chanyeol nodded.

“Of course. Even if I have to drop everything I'm doing to come to you.”

“What about if I get sick?”

“You know I would never leave your side.”

“And when I get pregnant and I'm whiny and grumpy?”

“I'll be doing my best to serve you.”

“And when I'm old and ugly?”

“You'll always be beautiful to me,” Chanyeol whispered, rubbing his nose against Jongin's. Jongin snuggled closer, sniffling quietly.

“I love you, Chanyeol...You mean the world to me. I'll always be here when you need me too, even if I can't do anything to help you.”

“Would you be by my side when I'm sick or hurt?” Chanyeol asked. Jongin nodded rapidly against his chest. “What about if I was upset or struggling?”

“I would do anything I could to cheer you up.”

“And when I'm old and bald?” Chanyeol asked next. Jongin giggled and nodded.

“I'd try to find a way to make your hair grow back,” he said, laughing when Chanyeol pouted slightly. “But if not, I'd love you even if you were bald. Chanyeol smiled and kissed his nose.

“Then you're giving me everything I could ever need in my life.”

“Thank you, Yeolie...” Jongin said softly. Chanyeol smiled and snuggled closer, rubbing his back again.

“You're welcome, Nini. Let's take that nap now, hm? I wasn't even practicing with a new arm and I'm tired. You must be exhausted!”

“Mm,” Jongin hummed, feeling more tired than he realized he was. “Sleep well, Yeolie.”

“You too, Nini.”

They fell asleep cuddled together like always. When they woke up, Chanyeol had a servant
bring food to their room and they ate at their small table. Then Chanyeol spent the rest of the evening gently rubbing and massaging Jongin's back as he rested on the bed with his head on Chanyeol's thigh. This marriage was definitely the right choice for Jongin.

~*~

After Jongin had spent the day resting and snuggling Chanyeol, he approached his therapy with a whole new spark. Chanyeol was still with him every step of the way, encouraging him and thinking of ways to make him smile or new fun challenges for his arm. By the time the wedding date approached, Jongin was able to grab objects delicately and precisely. He still had more things to work on of course, but he was doing well enough not to embarrass himself at his own wedding by dropping something.

As the days grew alarmingly closer to the wedding, Jongin found himself feeling both anxious and excited. He really did want to marry Chanyeol and knew they would get along just fine, but it would be a huge step in their short relationship, and he couldn't help but be a little nervous. Not only that, but there would be a wedding and a feast for them with royalty and nobility from both the kingdom and the outer regions. He wasn't usually concerned about his image, but since he was marrying into royalty, he knew he had to be now. He doubted Chanyeol would be upset if something happened. If anything, the king would be the one who got angry with him for giving a bad impression, and that was the last thing Jongin wanted.

Jongin's uncle was another person making Jongin nervous. He was so excited to see his uncle again, and he'd missed him terribly in the time they were apart, but he was scared how his uncle would treat him now. He hadn't been fond of the idea of Jongin marrying into royalty, and he knew this marriage was much sooner than his uncle ever would have wanted. He also hadn't seen Jongin with his new arm. Jongin was scared his uncle wouldn't recognize him as the same Jongin now that he'd spent so much time at the palace. Jongin liked his life as it was, so he hoped his uncle would come to accept it as well.

Jongin's uncle arrived 3 days before the ceremony and would be staying in the guest quarters along with many other noblemen and women that the king had invited. Jongin was at the palace gates waiting for his uncle when he arrived in an iron steed carriage. Jongin gripped at his metal hand nervously, waiting for his uncle to notice him as he stepped out of the carriage. As soon as their eyes met, it was like everything was back to the way it was before Jongin had gone to the palace. His uncle ran to him as fast as he could and soon he was pulled into a tight hug.

“Oh Jongin, I've missed you so,” Jongsoo whispered.

“I missed you too, uncle,” Jongin mumbled into his shirt, the rough fabric giving him nostalgia.

Jongsoo pulled away enough to look Jongin over. He immediately noticed the second hand wrapped around his waist, and he gently lifted it up, eyes going wide as he inspected it. Finally, they met Jongin, still looking surprised.
“Jongin, this is...”

“A gift from Chanyeol,” Jongin said softly. “He's been helping me through therapy the past few months.”

“You're happy with him?” Jongsoo asked. Jongin smiled and nodded.

“I love him, uncle. I know it started as something we both feared, but I really have grown to love Chanyeol.”

“That's all I've ever wanted for you,” Jongsoo sighed, hugging Jongin close again.
“Congratulations on your marriage, Jongin. I'm so proud of you.”

“Thank you, uncle,” Jongin whispered, already tearing up. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Jongin.”

Jongin never should have doubted his uncle. He's always wanted the best for Jongin, and nothing would change that. Jongin wanted the best for his uncle as well. If he could somehow change anything in Sous, he would try his best, and he knew Chanyeol would be right there at his side, supporting him.

After Jongin saw Jongsoo to his quarters, he headed to the throne room for a quick rehearsal. The room had already been extravagantly decorated, and Jongin really would love to stay in that room and look at the beautiful hanging lights and delicate ribbons if the king weren't always in that room. Chanyeol and several other people would be there for this rehearsal, so Jongin wasn't too worried. He could handle being near the king if Chanyeol were there with him. Jongin still feared the man and knew he wasn't liked by him, even if the king hadn't blatantly called him deformed since their first meeting.

Chanyeol was already there, in position. They'd been trying on their wedding attire in the days before, making sure everything was perfect. The hanboks were floral, full of rich colors and lots of golden detailing. There was jewelry to match them, and Jongin had never seen anything more beautiful. He couldn't wait to dress in the hanbok, but he also couldn't wait to see Chanyeol dressed in one as well.

The wedding ceremony wasn't too long or complicated. Jongin and Chanyeol would stand before the king and profess their vows, then kneel before the king as he gave them his blessing. The final step was to exchange wedding bangles, crafted in beautiful golden swirls, around their left upper arms. Jongin was glad he had his metal arm now, because he actually had something to place the wedding bangle on.

Despite the ceremony being simple enough, the rehearsal still seemed to take hours, and by the end of it, both Jongin and Chanyeol were tired, and the king was irritable. When it finally ended, Chanyeol and Jongin made their way to the garden, their favorite place to be together. They sat
under the tree Chanyeol had shown Jongin on one of their first dates, enjoying the fresh evening breeze and being done with complicated ceremonies for the moment. Jongin sighed and leaned on Chanyeol's shoulder.

“We're really going to be married in a few days,” Chanyeol said gently, resting his cheek on Jongin's head. “Are you excited?”

“Yes... But I'm a little nervous as well.”

“That's to be expected,” Chanyeol said, laughing gently. “I'm nervous too. But we'll get through it and not much will change if you think about it. We already live together, and I'm not going to suddenly abandon you once we're married.”

“I know,” Jongin sighed. “I think it's just the ceremony and appealing to the nobility that has me the most worried.”

“You'll blow them away, I know you will.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“You blew my mind the minute I saw you. Not everyone is like my father. They'll love you, Jongin. And even if they don't, I'm your husband, not them, and I love you more than anyone.” Jongin giggled.

“That's a relief~”

“Should we give each other kisses on the cheek for good luck and strength over the next few days?”

“Yeah, I think that's a great idea!”

Jongin sat up and watched as Chanyeol turned his cheek, tilting it up in expectation of his kiss. Jongin had other plans, however. He leaned forward, pressing his lips against Chanyeol's. He felt Chanyeol gasp, but he happily returned the kiss. When they finally broke apart, Jongin was smiling cheekily while Chanyeol was flustered.

“I think that's a better luck charm than the cheek,” Jongin said happily. Chanyeol nodded in a daze.

“Y-Yeah...”

“Let's go eat, I'm hungry!”

Chanyeol let himself be pulled to his feet by Jongin. The kiss seemed to have shocked him more than Jongin thought it would, but it was obviously a good, flustered kind of shock since Chanyeol couldn't wipe the smile off his face for most of the evening. That had been their first kiss on the lips, since they'd both been trying to keep things really tame prior to their marriage, but Jongin was desperately looking forward to kissing Chanyeol more, as well as doing other things with him. Chanyeol's lips were so soft, and Jongin couldn't wait until they could explore and learn more about each other.
The morning of the wedding, Jongin was taken to a separate room to get ready. Despite being able to dress himself on his own without even Nido's help, Jongin still let the servants dress him this morning. His hanbok was far more extravagant than usual, a beautiful golden yellow with lavender and magenta flower patterns and gold trim. They had prepared a special diadem for him, also with floral patterns and adorned with topaz, amethyst, and pink diamonds. Jongin had never seen something so beautiful, and he couldn't believe it was for his own wedding.

It took a few hours to get him completely ready, his hair softly curled and a soft blush and liner decorating his face. When he stepped out of the room, Jongsoo was waiting for him, wearing his best clothes from Sous, a beautiful navy blue suit with ruffles and intricate buttons that he'd crafted himself. He held his arm out for Jongin, and they walked with elbows linked to the throne room. They didn't say anything to each other, but the way Jongsoo was smiling with teary eyes was enough for Jongin to know he was happy for him.

When they got to the throne room, the guests were already standing around the red carpet leading up to the throne. Chanyeol was standing before his father, while the princes and other suitors were on either side of the throne. Chanyeol's hanbok was similar to Jongin's, though the colors were softer and more pastel. His hair was curled more than usual, and Jongin thought it looked adorable, covering bits of his matching diadem. He looked unbelievably beautiful, and Jongin couldn't believe this was really happening.

Jongsoo walked Jongin up to Chanyeol, joining the crowd after that. Jongin's eyes met Chanyeol's, and they both smiled shyly, trying their hardest to contain their excitement in front of everyone in the room. The king stood from the throne, and everyone bowed their heads, Jongin and Chanyeol included.

“We gather here today to unite Chanyeol of Reilania and Jongin of Sous,” the king stated. “Let us now listen as the vows are given.”

Chanyeol and Jongin turned to face each other. Chanyeol grabbed Jongin's hands in his own and held them up. He couldn't stop smiling, and Jongin knew he probably looked just the same. Chanyeol took a deep, shaky breath before speaking up.

“Jongin, the minute I saw you, I knew you were the one. I promise to give you my everything, to be by your side during the good times and the bad, and to make every day of our marriage happy and worthwhile, until death do us part.” Jongin smiled, knowing exactly what he wanted to say back.

“Chanyeol, since the moment we met, you've been by my side, cheering me on. I wouldn't be here without you, and I hope I'll stay by your side for the rest of my days, returning the love and care I've received from you. Until death do us part, I'll be beside you.”
Chanyeol leaned closer, resting his forehead against Jongin's and smiling even wider. Jongin wanted so badly to just wrap his arms around Chanyeol and kiss him, but the king's words were coming next, and Jongin wouldn't dare disrespect him. As if on cue, the king cleared his throat, and Jongin and Chanyeol backed away from each other enough to kneel before the king.

“This marriage binds together the kingdom and the outer region of Sous. May the relationship prosper and grow stronger. I give my blessing, and hereby bond Jongin and Chanyeol together.”

Jongin and Chanyeol bowed their heads while the king placed a hand on each of their shoulders. After that, they stood back up, and Minseok approached them, holding a pillow with two golden bangles, with floral designs to match everything else. Chanyeol grabbed one of the bangles, exchanging smiles with Minseok in the process, then gently lifted the sleeve of Jongin's hanbok, carefully placing the bangle around the upper part of his bionic arm. After that, Jongin grabbed the other bangle, placing it on Chanyeol's upper left arm. They stood there, staring at each other and trying to process the moment. Finally, Chanyeol pulled Jongin close, wrapping his arms around his waist, and Jongin let his arms fall around Chanyeol's neck. Rather than kiss, Chanyeol rubbed his nose against Jongin's, and they both started giggling as the rest of the room applauded.

“I now pronounce Chanyeol and Jongin husbands!” The king shouted above the applause.

As the people continued to cheer, several ribbons and confetti burst from contraptions on the ceiling. Servants brought in tables and a feast, and the wedding immediately shifted into the grand celebration. Jongin and Chanyeol were the first to partake in the food, but they happily passed it around to others once they had their own plates. Jongsoo stood by Jongin's side, congratulating him and hugging him every now and then. He even shook hands with Chanyeol at one point.

“Take care of him,” Jongsoo asked softly. “I'm trusting him to you.”

“I'll treasure him and make sure he's happy,” Chanyeol promised.

Jongin smiled, watching the two interact. He had a feeling that if Chanyeol ever visited Sous, his uncle would really come to love him. Chanyeol was open minded and eager to learn, two things that Jongin's uncle loved in a person. Before he could join the conversation, he was pulled into another set of arms.

“Congratulations, Jongin!” Baekhyun exclaimed, rocking him from side to side.

Jongin laughed and hugged him back. When he pulled away, he noticed Sehun was at his side as well, smiling more than Jongin had honestly ever seen him smile.

“We both are really happy for you,” Sehun said softly.

“Yeah,” Baekhyun agreed. “We really want the best for you, and if you think this is it, you've got both of our support. And if you ever need anything, you can always come to us. Consider it your gifts from Nefret and Lorencia since our leaders couldn't be here for the wedding.”

“Thank you, both of you,” Jongin mumbled, wiping at his eyes in an attempt not to cry. He
really was so incredibly happy.

“Uh-oh! Don't cry!” Baekhyun playfully teased. “Prince Chanyeol, you're already failing your job!”

Chanyeol rolled his eyes and was at Jongin's side in a matter of seconds. Jongin couldn't help but laugh at how quickly Chanyeol seemed to gravitate towards him. Chanyeol pulled Jongin along and they continued to greet different noblemen, receiving gifts and well-wishes from them. At one point, the leader of the Golden Meadows approached them. He was an older man, probably in his late 30s, by the name of Dongyul. He bowed before them, and Jongin noticed his hair was thinning and some of it was starting to turn gray. Being the leader of a region was never easy work.

“I offer my congratulations on your marriage,” he said once he'd lifted his head. “If you would allow me, I have a gift to present the both of you.”

“By all means,” Chanyeol replied.

Jongin was glad Chanyeol was handling most of the talking and receiving of gifts. Dongyul nodded and turned around, talking to a few other people from his region. Soon, they approached with a small pink cardboard box with a few holes cut into it. He held the box out to Jongin and nodded at him, urging him to open it. Jongin timidly pulled off the top, and dropped it in shock as he gasped. Inside was a small white pig with black spots, wearing a little pink skirt and a ribbon around its neck. Jongin timidly reached for it, grateful he'd practiced so much with his metal arm. Soon the pig was curled up in his arms, squeaking and sniffing Jongin. Chanyeol reached over and gently ran his fingers along the pig's head.

“He's our strongest of the most recent litter. A miniature pig, so he won't grow too big for you to handle. He'll make the perfect pet and good company for you.”

“Thank you so much!” Jongin gasped. “I love him...”

“Hopefully not more than your new husband,” Dongyul chuckled. Jongin looked at Chanyeol and smiled mischievously.

“It's a close call~” He teased. Chanyeol pouted, but couldn't help but continue to pet the pig.

“What should we call him?” Chanyeol asked. Jongin hummed in thought.

“Lottie seems cute,” Jongin suggested.

“Yeah, I like it,” Chanyeol agreed. “Lottie~ He's our first addition to the family.”

Jongin loved hearing that word. They were a family now. They thanked Dongyul once more, and he told them he'd also brought a few items to take care of the pig, and he'd have them delivered to their room. Jongin carried Lottie around for the rest of the celebration, not wanting to put him down in case he misbehaved, but also because he was too cute and Jongin was enjoying cuddling him. The only time he let him go was when Chanyeol wanted a turn holding the little pig. Pigs had become endangered, so to receive one as a gift was really something magnificent. Jongin couldn't believe his life had come to this point. It was changing so fast, but he was happily going along with
Eventually, the guests started dispersing, and the servants began cleaning up. Jongin and Chanyeol excused themselves so they could go get Lottie set up with a bed and food. Jongsoo stopped by a little later to visit with them. Jongin and Chanyeol had changed out of their wedding hanboks by then, and Jongin was sitting on the ground playing with Lottie while Jongsoo sat at the table with Chanyeol. As Jongin expected, Chanyeol was a sponge, soaking up anything Jongsoo had to say about Sous and their traditions, or things that Jongin loved. By the time Jongsoo left, he seemed much more at ease, and he winked at Jongin, which was his subtle way of saying he approved. Jongin was glad it had taken less time than anticipated for Jongsoo to come to love Chanyeol. He really was an amazing person, something you wouldn't expect out of royalty related to the king. Jongin knew he would be alright with Chanyeol at his side.

As the evening drew in, Lottie fell asleep on his bed, and Chanyeol and Jongin finally had time to themselves. Chanyeol pulled Jongin close, holding him around the waist and finally kissing him like he'd wanted to all day. Jongin sighed into the kiss, nibbling at Chanyeol's lip and giggling when their noses brushed or bonked against each other. Eventually, Chanyeol stopped and pressed their foreheads together. His hands gently rubbed circles on Jongin's hips, pressing their bodies together.

“Hi husband,” he whispered, failing to keep himself from smiling.

“Hi,” Jongin whispered back, kissing his lips again.

“How would you like to spend our first evening married together?”


“Cuddling for sure. Kissing, hugging, talking...”

“I want that and more,” Jongin stated. Chanyeol's eyes widened and Jongin could actually hear him gulp.

“Jongin...Can we...do more?” He asked nervously. “Like the stuff married couples do?”

“That's what I meant,” Jongin said with a giggle. Chanyeol was so nervous he couldn't even say the words.

“You're really ok with it and ready?”

“Yes. I want this.”

Chanyeol let out a shaky breath, and his hand cautiously made its way to Jongin's hanbok ties. Jongin decided to help him, feeling a sudden boldness. He placed his hand over Chanyeol's and helped him untie it and shimmied out of the top of his hanbok. He'd changed in front of Chanyeol enough times for this to not be scary for him, but knowing there was something new in store for both of them had his heart was pounding in his chest.
Jongin pulled at Chanyeol’s hanbok, and soon they were both standing there before each other with bare chests. Jongin lifted his arms while Chanyeol awkwardly pulled his pants down. This was something new for both of them. They'd maintained their modesty with each other despite living together, so they'd never seen more than each other's chests. Once Jongin was bare before him, Chanyeol instantly put himself in the same position, wanting to be on equal ground and not make Jongin too uncomfortable.

They stared at each other for a few minutes, not really saying anything, but letting their hands wander. As Jongin got a bit more comfortable, he pressed himself against Chanyeol, snuggling against his chest and wrapping his arms around him. Chanyeol was really warm and his skin was so soft, not calloused like Jongin's after years of inventing and living in the mountains. Chanyeol didn't seem bothered by that at all thankfully. In fact, his hands couldn't stop roaming over Jongin's skin.

Slowly, Chanyeol walked Jongin back towards the bed, and they flopped on top of it together. Jongin tangled his legs in between Chanyeol's, giggling as Chanyeol planted soft kisses down his neck and naval. They stayed snuggled together, kissing each other and sometimes tickling each other. It made it a lot less nerve wracking when Chanyeol grabbed the body oil from his bedside table and poured some on his hands. He kissed Jongin again, halting all of his movements at that point.

“Are you sure you're ready?” He asked, checking once more.

Jongin nodded slowly, trying to calm down. He was ready for this, but he was nervous and excited all at once, so he was sure he was shaking slightly. Chanyeol kissed him again and told him to stop him if he gets uncomfortable. Seconds later, they were back to cuddling with each other, kissing and nibbling softly at each other's jaws and necks. Chanyeol's arm snaked around Jongin, and very carefully, he began stretching him.

Jongin was glad he was pressed so close to Chanyeol because he could cling to him while he got used to the feeling. Chanyeol was being slow and cautious, and Jongin was honestly grateful. It was a strange feeling to get used to at first, but soon he found himself enjoying it, moaning softly into Chanyeol's chest. Chanyeol was cuddling him with his other arm, sometimes rubbing his back and pressing soft kisses onto his head. Jongin felt like he could never be close enough to Chanyeol. He made him feel so loved and safe.

Eventually, Chanyeol rolled them over so Jongin was on his back and he was above him. He leaned down and pressed a few kisses to Jongin's forehead, nose, and lips, then smiled softly.

“Are you ready?”

Jongin nodded and wrapped his arms around Chanyeol, pulling him close again. Chanyeol slowly pushed in, and again Jongin was faced with a new feeling that he wasn't entirely sure how
to interpret. Chanyeol was gentle though, and held still until Jongin had relaxed again before starting anything. As Chanyeol began to move, Jongin found himself a mess of quiet mewls and utters of his name. Jongin knew it would feel good, but not this good. Chanyeol was making his own little noises, sometimes pressing his head into the crook of Jongin's neck. His movements were always soft, never too rough, but they were both reeling from them. Jongin could almost feel a tingling, warm feeling inside, and it was like nothing he'd ever experienced before. Making love to Chanyeol was everything Jongin could have ever hoped it would be.

As Jongin could feel himself coming closer to his high, Chanyeol suddenly pulled out. Jongin pouted, and was about to ask what was wrong or if he'd done something wrong, but Chanyeol rolled them over so Jongin was laying on top of his stomach, looking down at him.

“Chanyeol...What's wrong? Why did we stop?” Jongin asked quietly.

“We haven't stopped,” Chanyeol said softly. “We're just shifting positions a bit.”

“You want me...on top?” Jongin asked, not entirely understanding what Chanyeol meant. He was still fairly innocent and naive about these things of course.

“I want you to do this to me, Nini.”

“W-What? You mean, you want me to top you?”

“Mhm.”

“B-But...Can a birther even do that? To a prince even?”

“Nini,” Chanyeol sighed lovingly. “You're just as much a human and a man as I am. You know you can do this. The fact that I'm a prince has nothing to do with this. You are no lesser of a person than I am, and I never want you to think like that. We're two people in love, and I want to experience you just as much as you experience me. This isn't just about giving me an heir, and I think it's better if we don't aim for that right away. You're still young and we're both still feeling our relationship out. So for now, I really want to feel you as well. Are you ok with that?”

“I-I can try,” Jongin said softly. “I don't know if I'll be any good...”

“You don't have to be perfect,” Chanyeol soothed. “You just have to be here with me, loving me like you have up until now.”

“I can do that,” Jongin whispered, leaning down to kiss Chanyeol.

He grabbed the body oil from before, and started mimicking Chanyeol's earlier movements. To his surprise, Chanyeol seemed just as sensitive as him, and soon he was clinging to Jongin and moaning, his deep voice managing to give Jongin chills. This was a side of Chanyeol that only Jongin would ever know, a side that Chanyeol would only ever dare to show him. He felt so close to Chanyeol, and he loved him so dearly. He wanted to make him feel as good and loved as he'd made Jongin feel.

Jongin pressed inside of Chanyeol when he was ready, and it was an all new experience for
him. Being a birther, he'd never expected to be on this side of the intercourse, since most people saw birthers as child bearers more than anything. Chanyeol wasn't like that though. He loved Jongin through and through and saw him as another person with equal standing to him. Jongin couldn't have asked for a better husband.

Chanyeol was a mess underneath Jongin, wrapping his legs around him and clinging to him like his life depended on it. He was kissing Jongin on any surface of skin he could find, moaning against him and tickling Jongin with his breath. It didn't take long after that for either of them to reach their highs, tangling their limbs together more than they already were and breathing heavily. Jongin had never felt something like this before, and his body was trembling with both energy and exhaustion.

As they slowly calmed down, Chanyeol got up to go to the bathroom and clean himself off. He brought a washcloth back and gently cleaned Jongin, letting him stay there on the bed and be pampered. Finally, when Chanyeol was done, he put the washcloth back in the bathroom and curled up beside Jongin, pulling the covers over them. They cuddled together and Jongin sighed happily.

“I love you, Yeolie...”

“I love you too, Jongin. So incredibly much. Thank you for making this the most special night of my life.” Jongin smiled and snuggled closer. Chanyeol was really cheesy, but Jongin loved that about him.

“I could say the same thing to you.”

“Let's not rush kids, alright? I know my father will want them sooner rather than later, but I just want to get to know you and love you like this. The kids will come when they come.”

“Yeah, I like that plan,” Jongin sighed contentedly.

They laid beside each other for a while longer, and eventually Jongin was spooning Chanyeol, holding him with both his arms. He wasn't sure his metal arm was all that comfortable, but Chanyeol didn't say anything. He already seemed like he was asleep. Jongin yawned and pressed one last kiss to Chanyeol's nape.

“Goodnight Yeolie. I love you,” he whispered. It was silent for a moment and Jongin was certain Chanyeol had already fallen asleep, but soon, he spoke up.

“Night Nini. I love you too.”

Chanyeol was obviously half asleep, but he still placed his hand on top of Jongin's and cuddled closer to him. Jongin closed his eyes, enjoying Chanyeol's warmth. This was definitely what he wanted to come back to at the end of every day. This was his family now.
HEYO~ I got impatient and decided I wanted to upload 2 chapters this week, so surprise! Here's the first chapter :D The next one will be up on Friday (my time anyway), when I normally post my updates~ So here we have it, the big Chankai chapter lol! The focus will shift from them a bit starting next chapter, but they're still gonna be pretty important to the story, so don't worry^^ Just gotta give some development to the other couples as well~ And I know I keep warning about this, but for real now, it's time to brace yourself for the angst cuz the next chapters will get progressively more angsty lol! But hey, for now we won't rain on our Chankai parade~ Also, the pet pig was my beloved GD's idea and we sobbed over miniature pigs for a while while planning this lol!
Married life for Jongin wasn't that much different than before. He still spent much of his time in the workshop, but nowadays he came home to an extra clingy Chanyeol. Jongin was usually eager to see him as well, so he'd gotten into a habit of forgetting his goggles on his head instead of taking them off in the workshop where he kept them. Chanyeol always told him he was cute when he did that though and helped him wash the grease and grime off of himself, sometimes even taking a bath with him. That was the biggest change really. They were far more intimate than they were before, and Jongin loved it.

His wedding bangle had a tendency of shifting around on his metal arm, and Jongin was terrified of losing it, so he remedied the situation by soldering it to his bionic arm. He didn't take it off all that often, and even if he did, it was much harder to lose an entire arm than it was a bangle. When Jongin had first showed Chanyeol his work, Chanyeol had been amazed, admiring and complimenting how well Jongin's bangle matched his arm and 'enhanced the design.' Jongin loved Chanyeol's compliments and how much he supported Jongin in his engineering pursuits.

He tried his best to encourage Chanyeol as well, sometimes sneaking by to watch him train the new knights. Chanyeol was a whole different person in front of the men, strong and unrelenting in his discipline. It fascinated Jongin, since he knew such a different man, but it was good to see Chanyeol so disciplined as well. When they had children, at least he knew Chanyeol had it in him to be strong and go through with the necessary discipline.

The more Jongin thought about children, the more alright he was with having them. He knew Chanyeol didn't want to rush it, and when they slept with each other, Chanyeol was very mindful of Jongin's body and cycle. Jongin loved how much attention Chanyeol put into taking care of him and making sure he was ok and not pushed into something before he was ready. It was of course too soon to be trying for kids, but whenever Jongin thought about having kids with Chanyeol and playing with them together, his chest felt like it would overflow with happiness. He wanted that to become a reality.

A few months seemed to pass in the blink of an eye like this. Jongin was working for the kingdom, so the king generally didn't say much to or about him. It seemed as long as Jongin stayed out of his path and made himself useful, the king had no problems with him. On the days when Jongin didn't work or during the evenings after he finished working, he often played with Lottie in the garden.

The little pig had basically become the first 'baby' of their family, demanding attention and love by rolling over so one of them could scratch his tummy, and hopping around on the furniture when
he needed to let off some energy. Chanyeol and Jongin tried to take him to the garden to play with him daily since he tended to get out of control and misbehave otherwise. Jongin loved seeing Chanyeol rush home from the knights only to take Lottie to the garden and roll around on the grass with him. Sometimes Chanyeol would come home with a grass stained hanbok, Lottie's skirt looking just as messy, but Lottie slept best those nights, so Jongin knew Chanyeol played with him well. Jongin also joined in whenever he could. The garden was becoming their favorite place to be with each other. Jongin was finally adjusted to married life in the palace, and everyday was filled with some small joy or surprise.

~*~

Unlike Jongin's life, the other suitors weren't nearly as happy as he was. Junmyeon could probably count the amount of words Sehun had said to him on his fingers, but he never pushed him to speak. Instead, he let Sehun avoid him, but anyone could tell neither of them were particularly comfortable with the other. Baekhyun, on the other hand, was sometimes outwardly antagonistic towards Minseok, and Minseok never fought back or demanded any respect from Baekhyun. He simply accepted whatever treatment he was given.

Baekhyun made it a habit to avoid Minseok and spend as little time in their bedroom as possible. He only slept there and often left before Minseok was even awake in the mornings. Minseok was a late sleeper, so it wasn't hard. One morning, however, when Baekhyun was going to go pick more fruit from the garden, he forgot his basket. The only thing that kept him from losing his mind in the palace was tending to the plants in the garden. They weren't the plants of Nefret, but being around nature was the only thing that calmed Baekhyun.

When Baekhyun went back to their room, he was surprised to see Minseok awake. Minseok didn't even notice him, frantically rubbing at his bed sheets with a wet cloth, tears in his eyes. It was only when Baekhyun let the door shut behind him that Minseok looked up and flipped the covers over the area he was just cleaning.

“Baekhyun...” He gasped. “What's wrong? Did you need something?”

“What are you doing?” Baekhyun asked warily.

“I just spilled something on the bed.”

“Why did you hide it? You're acting really suspicious...”

“It's nothing, really!” Minseok insisted. “I just don't like making a mess.”

“Why not just let the servants do it for you? They usually wash your bedding, don't they?”

“It's just a small spot...Nothing to worry about!”

Baekhyun's eyes narrowed. Minseok was a quiet person, but he was being extra jumpy right now. He was hiding something, and Baekhyun wasn't about to just let it slide. He didn't trust anyone in the royal family.
“You’re lying to me,” he said flatly.

“What?” Minseok asked.

Baekhyun didn’t say anything more and walked over to the bed. Minseok's eyes widened when Baekhyun grabbed the bedding, and Minseok cried out for him to stop right before Baekhyun yanked the covers back. Minseok had tried to hold them down, but Baekhyun had been much stronger. There was a deep red spot on the bedding, and Baekhyun recognized it as blood.

“Are you hurt?” He asked, a hint of concern overcoming him despite his bitterness earlier.

“I-I...”

“You should go to the doctor. That seems like quite a bit of blood.”

“I'm not...It's not...” Minseok stuttered. Finally, tears ran down his cheeks. “I started my bleed,” he whispered, almost so quietly Baekhyun didn't catch it.

“I'm sorry, what did you just say?” Baekhyun asked, his tone suddenly icy and dangerous. “A bleed is nothing to joke about.”

“I'm not joking,” Minseok whimpered. Baekhyun ignored him, anger flowing in his veins.

“You royalty just think nothing of birthers. You use us for your own pleasure and make jokes about our bodies—”

“I'm not joking!” Minseok finally snapped, surprising Baekhyun. He'd never raised his voice at him before. “I really am a birther,” he stated quietly.

“Are you fucking serious?” Baekhyun asked, shocked but still very angry. Minseok nodded slowly. “So the king dragged me from my homeland just to marry another birther? Is he stupid? There's no need for me to be here if you're a birther!”

“He doesn't know,” Minseok mumbled. “Nobody does.”

“Oh that's even better,” Baekhyun snarled. “Maybe he'd let me go home if he knew.”

“You can't tell him!” Minseok gasped, rushing to Baekhyun and grabbing his wrist with both his hands. “Please, you can't! I don't know what he'll do if he finds out...”

“He'll probably marry you off to some other nobleman for political gain. Kind of like what he's doing to all of us now!”

“Please don't tell him!” Minseok begged, more tears running down his cheeks. “I'm scared of him! Please!”

“Let go,” Baekhyun hissed, twisting his wrist free from Minseok. “You royals only care about yourselves, not all the other people who are hurt by your actions. I can't stand you.”

“Baekhyun, please!”

“I'm leaving.”
Baekhyun turned and left the room, his fruit basket long forgotten. Minseok sighed and rested his face in his hands, breaking down completely. He’d told Baekhyun because he’d hoped he would understand what he was going through, but that had been a mistake. All he could do now was try to clean up his mess and pray Baekhyun wouldn’t tell the king the truth.

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Baekhyun spent much of the morning stomping around the garden, just trying to let some of his anger out without thrashing anything. Not even the plants seemed to be calming him down. It wasn't until Jongin and Sehun made their way to the garden with Lottie that Baekhyun was able to calm down with the help of a distraction.

He watched as Jongin played with Lottie. Even Sehun had gotten down on his knees and was tickling the pig every now and then. Baekhyun smiled, but he couldn't get his mind off Minseok. He was still livid that Minseok had hidden that from the king, because Baekhyun wouldn't have been chosen if the king was looking for a suitor for another birther. A relationship between two_birthers was extremely uncommon in the kingdom, and unheard of in royalty. Birthers were usually just treated like women, wed off to whatever dashing prince or nobleman the king chose.

He couldn't help but relate to Minseok and sympathize with him though. He knew the king was a horrible man, and terrifying when he was angry. It wasn't that surprising Minseok feared him, and hiding a secret this big would no doubt get him in trouble. Baekhyun didn't see the king caring much for Minseok's own happiness either. It was probably in Minseok's best interest that he kept it hidden. Baekhyun couldn't fault him for looking out for himself. In the end, Baekhyun would do the same. As angry as Baekhyun was, it wasn't Minseok's fault he was in this situation, and if it wasn't Baekhyun he married, it would be another nobleman. Minseok's fate was sealed one way or the other.

Baekhyun glanced up from his daze as several servants rushed away from the gardens towards the palace entrance. Sehun and Jongin glanced up as well, and they could vaguely hear the servants shouting something frantically.

“Prince Minseok fainted in the hallway! Quickly, get the doctor!”

Baekhyun's eyes widened. He knew Minseok's health was bad, but he hadn't passed out before. He was on his bleed, but it was unusual for a birther to faint during that time. Something was wrong, and Baekhyun's overprotective side was already getting the better of him. He brushed it off in favor of tuning into Jongin and Sehun's conversation though.

“Do you think Minseok is going to survive long enough to be married?” Sehun asked, sounding genuinely worried.

“Sehun,” Jongin warned gently. “Don't even think like that.”

“At this rate you might be married pretty fast, Baekhyun,” Sehun stated. “Or sent back home...”
“Let’s not think about that,” Baekhyun sighed. “I think the one we really need to worry about is Jongin.”

“Huh? Why me?” Jongin asked.

“Don’t act all innocent!” Baekhyun teased. “We both know you and Chanyeol are going at it almost every night! You're gonna be pregnant before you know it!”

“We're being careful,” Jongin huffed, turning a shade of red. “Chanyeol said he doesn't want to stress kids and let it happen when it happens.”

“Well at least there's that,” Baekhyun sighed. “Sehun and I are going to miss you once you become a full-time papa though.”

“It's not happening any time soon!” Jongin whined. “Besides, you two will probably become parents someday too...We'll still be friends.”

“Let's not think about those days,” Sehun grumbled.

Baekhyun laughed and continued to poke fun at Sehun and Jongin. Even with those two, he still felt anxious to get back to Minseok, but he wasn't about to go running just because Minseok was struggling. He had to keep everything in perspective.

Instead, Baekhyun eventually left Jongin and Sehun to wander the gardens, looking for any types of medicinal plants he could use to help Minseok. As expected of the kingdom, everything growing there was essentially for frilly decorations. Nefret was home to hundreds of different plants, each with their own medical benefit. Most required a certain ecosystem, so growing them in the main kingdom would be hard, but with how much water the king hogged within the main kingdom, he could easily grow anything. This was such a waste. It was no wonder the people in the main kingdom succumbed to illness so easily.

By the time Baekhyun headed back to his room, the sun was starting to set. He stopped by the kitchen and asked the servants if he could have a few bags of uncooked rice. They looked at him like he was nuts, but Baekhyun explained he needed them for medicinal use and wasn't feeling well. That seemed to be enough to convince anyone to do what he asked. Even the least knowledgeable person of Nefret probably knew more about self remedies than anyone in the kingdom.

He trudged back to his and Minseok's room, a bag of rice in each arm. He somehow managed to get the door open and wasn't surprised to find Minseok curled up in his sleeping garments under the covers on the side of the bed closest to the fireplace, which was already burning. Baekhyun walked over to the fireplace and set the bags down as close as he could without them catching on fire.

“What are you doing?” Minseok asked tiredly.
Baekhyun turned around to see him propped up on his elbow. He looked paler than usual, which was actually really scary. Baekhyun got up from the fireplace and walked over to Minseok.

“Heating up a couple bags of rice,” he said simply.

“Why?”

“You'll see,” Baekhyun sighed. He sat down on the edge of the bed near Minseok, glancing him over. Minseok managed to push himself up into a sitting position.

“What is it?” He asked.

“I'm just wondering how someone can be so miserable and sick yet be part of royalty,” Baekhyun grumbled. Minseok's face fell.

“There's a lot the royalty lacks. Besides, I've always been like this. It's fairly normal for me...”

“You mean passing out on your bleed? That's not normal, Minseok.”

“It is when you have anemia.”

“You're anemic?” Baekhyun asked, eyes widening. “Are you taking any kind of measures to deal with it? Does the kingdom have some magic food or injection you can get?” Minseok shook his head. “What the hell kind of idiot doctors are here!? There are so many different herbs and plants you could be eating to supplement that.”

“Really?” Minseok asked, getting somewhat excited. “Like what?”

“Well, the best option is this vegetable called Caulfroux. We grow a lot of it in Nefret. Eating a certain amount each day can easily help with anemia.”

“I wonder if the doctor can import it,” Minseok mumbled. “Let me write that down...”

He grabbed his journal off his bedside table and opened it to a blank page, but paused with his ink pen before writing anything. Baekhyun raised an eyebrow at him.

“I don't know how to spell it,” Minseok muttered, flushing slightly. “Will you write it for me?”

Baekhyun stared at him, somewhat dumbfounded. They really didn't know much about medicinal remedies in the main kingdom, and the people were obviously suffering because of it. Minseok was so naive and genuine though. He wasn't acting high and mighty. Instead, he was asking for Baekhyun to teach him and was literally ready to take notes. He'd never expected someone from the royal family to stoop so low as to admit they weren't all knowing or all powerful.

“Sorry...Nevermind,” Minseok said quietly after a moment of Baekhyun not moving. “You don't have to write it down.”

“No, it's ok!” Baekhyun gasped. “I was just shocked, that's all. You have so much grand technology in the kingdom, I can't understand why you don't have more advanced knowledge of medicine. Surely with all the technology available, you'd be able to achieve great things.”
“I'm sure we would,” Minseok sighed, leaning back against his pillow a bit. “But that would require that time and manpower be invested into making it happen. My father focused mostly on medical engineering, making limbs and the like. Jongin's arm is one of a kind, and the surgery surrounding it was masterfully done, but we don't have the hundreds of remedies that Nefret has for any type of ailment, nor do we have some magic pill or food that solves anything and everything. We're far from that.”

“It's no wonder people die so easily in the kingdom. If you can't even treat anemia...”

“You're right,” Minseok said darkly. “People do die easily here, and my father does nothing.”

Minseok seemed so upset suddenly. His gaze had drifted to the fire, but Baekhyun could see sadness as well as bitterness in his eyes. Minseok obviously wasn't a fan of the way his father ran the kingdom. That was reassuring at least. If push came to shove, Baekhyun could probably get along well enough with Minseok.

“Are you feeling ok now?” Baekhyun asked, shifting topics. Minseok shrugged.

“Lightheaded, but that's fairly common. My bleeds are pretty heavy. I faint during the worst days sometimes. Everyone has just gotten used to it and says I'm sick. I'm not going to correct them otherwise.”

“How have you managed to hide your bleed and your basic biology all these years? I don't understand...”

“The doctor knows,” Minseok explained. “He helped my mother give birth to me, so of course he knows. But she begged him not to tell my father. She knew he would marry me off as soon as I came of age, and she feared who I would be wed to. The doctor honored her wishes, and has helped me hide it all these years. As long as I'm brought to him, nothing gets revealed.”

“Your mother was a kind woman, thinking so far ahead.”

“She was...” Minseok agreed. “She died giving birth to Chanyeol though, so she wasn't there to protect me or teach me anymore. The doctor does what he can, but there are some things men just can't know or understand about birthers and women.”

“Yeah, that's true I guess. So the doctor helps you through all this...”

“Yes. He gets me padded undergarments every month and if I faint, he looks out for me as best he can.”

“Every month? Can't you just wash them, or is that beneath you? It's such a waste of fabric...”

“It's not beneath me,” Minseok said irritably. “I'm fine cleaning up after myself. I've cleaned plenty of my own clothes and my bed sheets as you saw, but don't you think it would be suspicious for me to keep those kinds of things hanging around in my room? The doctor having them would be suspicious too since each of the female servants have their own and don't go to him for them. He has no reason to keep them or have them. So I get rid of them every month. Everything I can't get the blood out of as well as the undergarments get burned. I know it's a waste, but I can't afford to let someone find them.”

“I guess I see where you're coming from,” Baekhyun sighed. “So the doctor's the only one that knows about you? Not even your brothers know?”
“Only the doctor...and you now. I love my brothers and I know they would protect me if they needed to, but I was too scared to let them know. The less people that can let it slip, the better.”

“Then why did you tell me?” Baekhyun asked.

“You caught me cleaning blood off my bed, so it's not like you were going to accept it if I frantically thought up some dumb lie. Besides, you're a birther too. I thought I could trust you. I understand if you choose to tell my father though. What I'm doing is selfish and putting you in a bad situation as well. I'm sorry for that.”

“I'm not going to tell him, I promise,” Baekhyun stated, looking Minseok in the eyes. “I was really angry, and honestly I still am, but this wasn't your fault. It never was, and you're a victim as well. Even though I lived in Nefret, it wasn't perfect there either. Bandits from the kingdom would often come and kidnap birthers, selling them as sex slaves within the central kingdom. My parents went missing during one of those raids, but they managed to hide me so I wasn't kidnapped. I haven't seen them since. Nayoung, the leader of Nefret, is my grandmother, so she took me in after that.”

“Baekhyun, I'm so sorry you had to go through that,” Minseok uttered, eyes wide with shock. “I had no idea that was happening...” Baekhyun shook his head.

“I didn't expect you would. Nayoung has brought the issue up with the king, but he did absolutely nothing about it, just sent her away. Since then, we've set up strongholds protecting our birthers, and we've been able to fight them off pretty successfully, but I can understand the need to hide your identity for your own safety. No matter how mad I am, I'm not going to out you. You can rest easy.”

“Thank you, Baekhyun...That means a lot to me. I can try bringing the bandit issue up with my father again.” Baekhyun laughed, shaking his head.

“No offense, but I don't think he'd listen to you either.”

“No, but he listens to Junmyeon. If I told him, I'm sure he'd find a way to make my father take actions.”

“You're sneaky, aren't you?” Baekhyun asked, smirking. Minseok finally smiled cheekily, and Baekhyun had to admit he liked the look.

“You have to be when dealing with the king. If you can't get it done yourself, get someone who you know can do it for you.”

Baekhyun smiled and got up from the bed. He walked over to the fireplace and felt one of the bags of rice. He nodded to himself, then lifted it up, bringing it over to Minseok.

“Do you have any cramps right now?” He asked.

“My stomach hurts...”

“Set this on your stomach, trust me.”

Minseok let Baekhyun set the bag down on his stomach and lay it out so it covered most of it.
Minseok's eyes widened as he felt warmth resonating from the bag, soothing his aches. He relaxed against his pillow, hugging the bag so it wouldn't move.

“It's a natural form of muscle and pain relief,” Baekhyun said gently. “I have another one over there so when this one gets cold, let me know and I'll switch them. Also, don't throw your undergarments out this month. We'll keep them with mine and if anyone asks, just say my bleeds are heavy and I change frequently. It isn't too weird for them to be in my closet, right?”

“Thank you so much, Baekhyun…”

“I can only do so much, but I'll try to look out for you, ok? I'll talk to the doctor about having a few different types of herbs and vegetables sent over from Nefret. I'll just say I want to make some natural remedies for myself or Jongin and Sehun.”

“Why are you doing so much to help me all of a sudden? Do you pity me?”

“Maybe a little,” Baekhyun admitted. “But I think I empathize with you more than I pity you. You're a birther, and you're in this alone. I can't leave you completely by yourself knowing that. Besides, you trusted me enough to tell me. Trust means something, Minseok, and I'm not going to treat it lightly. We'll call a truce on our forced marriage and relationship thing for now, and I'll just take care of you as a fellow birther.”

“Thank you…Maybe some day I'll earn your trust too,” Minseok said hopefully. Baekhyun laughed and crawled over to his spot beside Minseok.

“Don't count on that.”

Minseok pouted, but Baekhyun could tell it was playful. For the first time in the 3 or 4 months they'd been pushed together, Baekhyun felt like he was seeing the real, genuine Minseok. Not the sickly, depressed person that everyone in the castle knew him to be. Baekhyun really liked this side of Minseok. He knew this Minseok wouldn't appear very often, especially now that Baekhyun knew just what hell he was going through, but he was happy it had finally surfaced. Already, Baekhyun was feeling protective over Minseok. It happened with every birther he felt concerned for. He hated to admit it to himself, but he also really liked Minseok's smile. It was beautiful.

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As Baekhyun spent more time looking out for Minseok, he spent a bit less time with Jongin and Sehun than usual. He kept it hidden that he was even bothering with Minseok, since he didn't really want to admit he was getting soft for someone of royalty, but it just wasn't part of his very being to deny help to a birther that needed it. What he didn't know, however, was during that time, Jongin was in need of his advice as well.

Normally, Jongin's bleed would have come by that point, but it was late. It was actually more than late, and Jongin was starting to worry. He knew what the most likely cause was, but he wasn't sure he was ready yet. Baekhyun's teasing words kept repeating in his head, and he was dying to ask Baekhyun for advice on what to do, since he knew Baekhyun would have something helpful to say, but he was scared. He didn't want to be judged for what was going on inside of him now. He didn't want to be told it was too soon for him to be pregnant. He knew that, but he was pretty sure
that was what was happening.

Finally, Jongin decided to go to the doctor. That was the best place after all, since he would be able to confirm it. Jongin hadn't mentioned anything to Chanyeol yet. He didn't want to tell him anything until he was sure. He didn't know how Chanyeol would feel about it. They'd been being careful and trying not to have kids, so Jongin was scared Chanyeol wouldn't want this if he was in fact pregnant. They were happy with just the two of them and their little pig. Jongin didn't want to upset the balance with a new baby.

Jongin was anxious when he laid down on the bed in the doctor's quarters. The man pulled out a bronze, square looking machine with some sort of screen. Jongin had never seen a screen in person before. He knew the kingdom had advanced technology and the screen displayed moving images, but no one in Sous had ever been lucky enough to experience it first hand. Jongin knew these types of machines were used to assess broken bones as well as survey bone structure for metal limb construction. They were luxurious machines, and the engineer in Jongin was dying to take it apart and learn what it was made of, but now was not the time for that.

"Alright, Jongin," the doctor started. "This is an ultrasound. It will allow me to see what's going on inside your stomach. You're sure you've missed your bleed?"

"It should have come and gone by now," Jongin stated. The doctor nodded.

"Then I'm going to use this on you, alright?"

Jongin nodded and let the doctor carefully untie the top of his hanbok, shifting it to reveal his stomach. Jongin let out a shaky breath and watched as the man turned on the machine. The doctor took a slender object with a rounded end, and rubbed a bit of oil onto it. After that, he placed it on Jongin's stomach, sliding it around and watching the images on the screen. Jongin was fascinated by the screen itself, but he couldn't even begin to tell what was being displayed. Did his stomach really look like a giant black hole with strange things floating around it?

The doctor paused his movements at one point and hummed. Jongin stared at the screen, trying to figure out anything that was going on. All he could see were blobs and shadows and the slight interlacing of the screen. Finally, the doctor pointed to the screen.

"Right there, Jongin," he said softly. "That's your baby."

"I'm really pregnant?" Jongin asked, staring at the blurry dot on the screen.

"That's right. Are you afraid?"

"A little," Jongin admitted. "This was sooner than we imagined..."

"Well, you're in healthy condition, so I can assure you that you and your baby aren't at risk, if that will make you feel any better."

"Do you think Chanyeol will be upset?" Jongin asked quietly. The doctor's eyes widened.
“It's not my place to speak for Prince Chanyeol, but knowing him, I can't imagine he would be anything less than thrilled. Would you like me to tell him?”

“No, I want to do it,” Jongin said quickly. “I'm just nervous...”

“I know this is very soon in your marriage, but you have support, Jongin. I'll take care of you, and I know Prince Chanyeol will as well.”

“Thank you...”

“I'm going to check a few more things and then I'll let you be on your way, alright?”

Jongin nodded and let the doctor give him a checkup. As Jongin looked at himself in the mirror, he noticed he'd put on just a bit of weight. He wasn't showing by any means, and the doctor said he was still early on in the pregnancy and needed to be careful. Jongin was slowly letting it all sink in that he was really pregnant and had to look out for more than just himself now. He was going to get rounder, and he was going to have to give birth and raise a child. It was all so overwhelming, and while Jongin wanted kids someday, he was scared to have that day thrust upon him so suddenly. He could only hope Chanyeol wouldn't be upset with him.

When Jongin was done with the doctor, he went to go find Chanyeol. Unsurprisingly, he found him in the garden, playing with Lottie and laughing happily. Jongin smiled at the scene. He really loved Chanyeol, and he knew by this point that Chanyeol would support him, no matter what. He just wanted this to be what Chanyeol really wanted as well. Jongin walked over to his husband slowly. Chanyeol got to his feet, rushing to Jongin so he could wrap his arms around him and rest his forehead against Jongin's.


“Hi,” he whispered back. Chanyeol rubbed his back, seeming to notice how tense Jongin was.

“What's wrong? Are you upset?” Do you want to go back to our room and cuddle?”

Jongin felt his eyes watering. Chanyeol had only been his husband for about 4 months, but he already knew him so well. He could just tell when Jongin needed affection or needed to be held. They would be alright together.

“I need to tell you something,” Jongin stated, his heart beating fast against his chest.

“What's wrong? Did something happen? Did someone upset you?” Chanyeol asked frantically. Jongin shook his head and smiled, grabbing one of Chanyeol's hands and placing it on his stomach.

“I'm pregnant.”

Chanyeol's eyes widened almost comically, then shot down to his hand on Jongin's stomach. Jongin felt him rub it gently, almost tickling him. He watched as Chanyeol's eyes filled with tears
and felt his hand on his stomach start to shake.

“You're really pregnant?” He asked. Jongin nodded again.

Chanyeol suddenly hugged him close, lifting him up and swinging him around just like he had the day he found out they were to be wed. Jongin couldn't help but giggle and snuggle against Chanyeol as he span around. When Chanyeol finally set him down on the ground again, he kept him close. Jongin could feel Lottie hopping against them, oinking and squeaking because he wanted to be part of the fun.

“It's sooner than we planned,” Jongin mumbled.

“That's fine, Jongin. We said they would come when they came, and we have a baby now. Nini, we're going to have a baby!”

“You're really ok with this?”

“How can I not be!? Nini, you're my husband! I love you, and you're going to have our baby. I'm overwhelmed with excitement! I'm so proud of you!”

Chanyeol hugged him close again and Jongin finally relaxed against him, resting his head on Chanyeol's shoulder. He sighed as Chanyeol rubbed his back and sniffled back tears of happiness. Jongin always was more worried than he needed to be.

“I'm so happy, Yeolie,” Jongin said. “I'm nervous and a little scared, but I'm really excited. We're going to have a baby...”

“We're going to have a baby,” Chanyeol repeated fervently. “Thank you so much, Nini. I didn't think I could get any happier, but you always prove me wrong.”

Jongin giggled and kissed Chanyeol's neck. After that, he broke away long enough to scoop Lottie into his arms since the pig was starting to get upset from being ignored. Chanyeol then swooped Jongin off his feet, carrying him in his arms back to their room. Jongin was a mess of giggles and smiles the entire time, enjoying the fact that Chanyeol was already pampering him and daydreaming about their future child. As they curled up together that night, Jongin fell asleep with Chanyeol's hand cupping his stomach. Their family would be gaining one more person a little sooner than expected, but they were both so excited. They would figure out all the more complicated things along the way.

Chapter End Notes

HERE WE GOOOOOOO!!!! The xiubaek begins :DDDD And a big revelation on Minseok's part~ But at least it made Baekhyun come around >.> And there was still some chankai softness in this chapter too lol, so it wasn't complete angst XD But the
story starts getting interesting now so I can't wait to post more of it~ I hope you guys will enjoy it too :3 I've been dyiiiiiiing to post the xuibaek part of this story lol! How many of you had a suspicion about Minseok btw? I'm curious~ I'm so, so excited to start sharing the next several chapters because I seriously binge wrote them cuz I was having so much fun^^
Chapter 7

Jongin and Chanyeol waited another week to tell anyone, wanting to relish the good news by themselves a little longer. Finally, Chanyeol announced it to the king, knowing it could be bad to hide the news from him for too long. The king offered his congratulations, but Jongin could almost feel the lack of sincerity in it. All the king seemed to be interested in was the fact that he would have a royal child linked to Sous that he could use as leverage. Nobody spoke this thought out loud of course, but Jongin was sure even Chanyeol acknowledged this fact.

Once they told the king, he naturally made a royal decree announcing the news. Jongin wondered for a moment how Jongsoo would take the news, but he didn't have to wait long to hear from the man. Jongsoo contacted the palace through his radio, which had a special communication system added to it since he was the leader of Sous and sometimes needed to respond to the king. Once his call was received, Jongin was brought to the communication room to answer it.

It was a small room filled with different towering machines covered in buttons. As Jongin looked closer, each button was labeled with a different radio system in either the kingdom or the outer regions. The king could access literally anyone. Nefret seemed to have the least buttons, and Jongin figured that was probably because they still didn't embrace technology all that much other than what the king forced on them.

Jongin sat and answered the call by pressing the flashing button. There was a small funnel shaped object with a microphone built into it that he spoke through. Jongin had seen a similar microphone on his uncle's radio, but naturally, the king's system was far superior.

“Jongin, it's your uncle,” Jongsoo started. Jongin smiled, already hearing the concern in the man's voice.

“Hi uncle! I've missed you.”

“I heard the news, Jongin. You're pregnant...I can't believe this day has already come...”

“I'm really happy, uncle. Chanyeol and I are really excited.”

“He's taking even better care of you now, right?”

“Yes, he is. He comes home early almost every day to check up on me. We always spend our evenings together.”

“Good. And you? How are you feeling?”

“Some days are worse than others, but I'm alright. The hardest things are the morning sickness and the cravings. I miss Sous food.”
“I’m sorry to hear that, Jongin, but it’s probably for the best you aren’t stuffing your mouth. Don’t want you to be too round throughout your pregnancy, right?”

“You’re mean,” Jongin pouted.

His uncle laughed, and they continued to talk for a little while longer. Jongin was glad his uncle didn’t lecture him at all about being pregnant so early. It wasn’t like his lecture would change anything after all. His uncle was slowly letting go and trusting Jongin to make his own decisions and live his own life.

When Jongin told Baekhyun and Sehun, neither were all that surprised, and as Jongin had anticipated, Baekhyun gave him his “I told you so.” Immediately following that, however, Baekhyun told him that he’ll look after him and take care of him if he ever needed anything. Baekhyun was rough around the edges, but he really was a kind person. Jongin was pretty sure he’d even softened up to Minseok somehow. He saw them interact every now and then, and Baekhyun always seemed gentle compared to his usual curt responses with Minseok. Jongin was glad to see that though. Minseok seemed like such a kind person.

The hardest part of the pregnancy was adjusting to the extra weight and the pains from his body making room for the growing baby, as well as the morning sickness. Some days Jongin was fine, but other days he hardly got out of bed, feeling too queasy to accomplish anything. Those were the days when Chanyeol did as little as possible with the royal guard or got someone else to take over so he could stay with Jongin, looking out for him and making sure he got food and water, even if Jongin didn’t want it. Chanyeol was actually being a very good caretaker, better than Jongin had anticipated.

The cravings were driving Jongin nuts as well. He’d grown up his whole life on the Sous food to the point where it was simply ordinary for him, but he suddenly couldn’t stop craving mountain pheasant and other Sous dishes. He also always wanted to eat pancakes, which probably wasn’t the most healthy for him. Still, when he had a late night craving for pancakes, Chanyeol always got out of bed and helped a servant cook them for Jongin. They weren’t perfect, but Jongin thought it was sweet that Chanyeol always helped. Chanyeol felt bad for asking a servant so late in the night, so he tried to help, but he also wanted to learn so he could make them specially for Jongin.

It was an even bigger surprise when Chanyeol called Jongin to one of the castle towers one evening for dinner. Jongin’s eyes widened the instant he saw the table set with nothing but Sous vegetables and flat breads, with a cooked mountain pheasant right in the middle. Jongin burst into tears, his hormones working against him now as well, and hugged Chanyeol the instant he walked over to him.

“How did you know?” Jongin asked, still mushed against Chanyeol’s chest.

“You were mumbling about the pheasant in your sleep,” Chanyeol laughed. “I called your uncle to learn how to cook it and the servants and I managed to make this. It might not be like it
The only other problem he was having was a fast weight gain. Jongin was worried about being overweight with the baby, but Chanyeol always soothed his worries, telling him that as long as he was happy and healthy, the weight was alright. He'd further soothe Jongin by laying beside him every night and rubbing his stomach, smiling softly and whispering sweet nothings to Jongin until he fell asleep. That was definitely Jongin's favorite part of the day. He loved when Chanyeol would daydream about the baby, or tell Jongin stories of his childhood and talk about how their baby would get to do the same thing. Jongin could feel Chanyeol's enthusiasm, and he was grateful for it, because it made being pregnant a lot less scary.

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Another month passed by and Minseok discovered he'd bled through his favorite pair of sleeping pants. He groaned as he frantically scrubbed at the red stain. It simply wasn't coming out, which meant he would have to burn his pants later that evening. Baekhyun would probably get mad at him for doing so, but Minseok was still too scared to let himself relax. He folded the pants up and hid them as best he could in his closet, then put his hanbok on for the day. Baekhyun had already left before Minseok had even woken up, so he wasn't aware Minseok was on his bleed, but Minseok would have to let him know later.

He had a meeting with some of the king's officials that morning, so he wouldn't be able to take care of anything until later that day. The king hardly ever called Minseok in for meetings, but when he did, it was usually because he needed a sweet, beautiful face to deliver the message laced with sugar rather than vinegar. That was all Minseok was really good for in the king's eyes.

What Minseok hadn't anticipated was a few servants coming to his room to clean it and change the sheets while he was away. Luckily, he'd spot checked the bed, but one of the servants had opened his closet to find his sleeping garments to wash them. The man sifted through a few sets of clothes before finding them, immediately spotting the blood. The servant didn't think much of it, thinking Baekhyun had taken the pants and bloodied them. He did think it rude to take Minseok's clothes when he'd been provided with his own, however, and to ruin them was even worse.

The servant piled the clothes into a basket and left the room. As he was walking to the washroom, he spotted Baekhyun watering a nearby arrangement of flowers. The servant grimaced,
not liking how overbearing Baekhyun was being in his new environment. He really had no respect for any sort of hierarchy.

“It's a servant's job to water the flowers, my lord,” the servant stated, still maintaining his respectful tone.

“Well, you aren't giving them enough water then,” Baekhyun answered bluntly. “They're wilting.”

“We have our orders and we follow them, my lord. A very specific amount of water is designated. If you have your complaints, take them up with the king.”

“Ah yes, the king, of course,” Baekhyun muttered, his tone a bit mocking.

“You need to respect the royalty, my lord. You may be on your bleed, but that doesn't give you the excuse to be so rude about the royal family!”

“Excuse me!?” Baekhyun snapped. “How dare you speak that way about me. A birther's bleed is natural, and you have no right to belittle it or say my disrespect is because of it. I have my own reasons for how I feel, and for your information, I'm not even on my bleed!”

Baekhyun stormed away, not sparing the servant another glance. The man looked down the basket of clothes in his hand, and his brow furrowed. The pants were obviously freshly ruined, so how had the blood gotten there? If Baekhyun wasn't the culprit, perhaps Minseok was really hurt. If he was hiding and injury from the king and the doctor, it wouldn't be good. Everyone in the palace knew of Minseok's weak health. The servant needed to confront someone about this.

The servant made his way to the washroom and separated the pants out of the load before washing the clothes. He would bring them to the doctor and the king later. This was an awful lot of blood to lose, and the prince was no doubt suffering in silence from this. A few other servants spotted the bloodied pants and whispered amongst each other. The servant tried to keep the pants from everyone's view, but it was hard. By the time he left the washroom after cleaning the load, the word had spread to several servants throughout the palace. The man wasn't the least bit surprised when another servant told him the king and the doctor wanted to see him.

The servant brought the pants with him, wanting to have the physical proof so he wouldn't be accused of spreading a rumor about the prince. Not so surprisingly, that was the first thing the king accused him of.

“You're the servant that's been speaking ill of my son around the castle.”

“I meant no harm, your majesty. I found a pair of the prince's pants soaked in blood. I wanted to bring it up with the doctor, but somehow the word spread.”

“Blood?” The king asked, looking at the pants more closely. “Minseok hasn't been in battle recently. Why would he be injured?” He asked, glancing to the doctor.

“Perhaps it's not his blood, your majesty,” the doctor stated.
“I initially thought that as well,” the servant explained. “I thought perhaps it was Lord Baekhyun's, but he told me he was not on his bleed. I believe Prince Minseok is wounded, your majesty. I wished to report it to you and the doctor.”

“Very well,” the king stated. “You may be dismissed, but bring Minseok here. I wish to talk to him.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

The servant bowed and rushed out of the room, leaving the pants with the doctor. The man frowned at them, then turned his attention to the king.

“Your majesty, with all due respect, I believe this is an issue between myself and Prince Minseok. I can look after his physical condition.”

“No,” the king stated flatly. “Minseok has no reason to bleed, especially that much. If he's injured, he had to get it somehow. There's something he's hiding from me, and I won't let him leave until I know what it is. That boy has always been pathetic and weak, but this is far too much.”

The doctor frowned, but held his tongue. There was nothing he could say at this point to dissuade the king. He could only hope Minseok could find a way to lie about this. He would do whatever he could to help him.

Minseok arrived in the room shortly after that. He looked tired, but better than normal. Baekhyun had requested a few herbs from Nefret and shared them with Minseok, and they'd definitely helped his condition improve. Whether Baekhyun knew the truth about Minseok's body, the doctor didn't know, but they would both have to tread carefully around the king during this confrontation.

“You wanted to see me, father?” Minseok started softly. The king nodded.

“It has come to our attention that you are injured and bleeding.”

“What?” Minseok asked. “Father, I'm not injured. My health is fine.”

“Then what have you to say about this?”

The king motioned to the doctor, who was holding Minseok's bloody pants. Minseok's eyes widened and his heart started beating rapidly. He and the doctor exchanged worried glances. Minseok had hidden those pants, so how had they gotten to the king of all people? How was he supposed to lie his way out of this? He remembered Baekhyun had said he would help Minseok cover things up, so maybe he would keep his word this time around.

“Perhaps Baekhyun borrowed them,” Minseok stated.

The doctor sighed to himself and the king's eyes narrowed. He got up from his throne, pacing
back and forth.

“IT's funny you should say that, because a servant asked Baekhyun about it already and he isn't on his bleed. How then, could this be his?”

Minseok bit his lip. Baekhyun had already been asked. Now he was looking even more suspicious and had no way out of this. He could lie and say he was injured, but his father would bring up his earlier statement. The king was a ruthless man, and Minseok wouldn't be surprised if he forced him to show him whatever injury he was hiding. He couldn't think of a way out of this.

“You're lying to me!” The king shouted. “Tell me the truth, Minseok!”

“Your majesty, please,” the doctor urged. “Let me examine the prince.”

“No! Minseok is hiding something and I want to know what it is! If you know what's good for you, you'll tell me the truth!”

Minseok closed his eyes, gripping his hands together tightly. He was so scared, but his father wasn't going to let go of this. Minseok knew he was forceful and capable of several different forms of torment and humiliation. His threats were never empty, and Minseok was terrified. There was no way out of this.

“I'm on my bleed,” Minseok said quietly, tears falling from his eyes.

“Prince Minseok-” The doctor started, but the king motioned for him to be silent.

“You're what? Repeat what you just said to me,” the king demanded darkly. Minseok gulped and let out a shaky breath.

“I'm on my bleed. I'm a birther...”

“Did you know this?” The king shouted at the doctor. The man nodded weakly. “I should have you killed for keeping this from me!”

“Father, please!” Minseok begged.

“And you!” The king yelled, turning back to Minseok, rushing forward, and grasping his arms in a crushing grip. “How stupid are you!? You should have known how much political gain I could have had with a birther!”

The king threw Minseok to the ground, and his back hit one of the nearby pedestals displaying a few vases. They came toppling down and shattered around Minseok, cutting his hand. The kind paid no notice, looming over him dangerously.

“Your majesty, it was the queen's wish,” the doctor interjected. The king glared at him.

“Of course that old hag would try to screw me over in the end. You two played right along with it! How foolish could you be? A birther doesn't stay young and appealing forever! Minseok is already past his prime! I could have married you years ago!”
“Father, please! I wasn't trying to—”

“Silence!” The king growled. “I will hear nothing more from either of you. Minseok, from this day onward, your engagement with Baekhyun is no more. You will be marrying the leader of Golden Meadows. Dongyul has waited years for an advantageous marriage to appear, and he's one of our closest allies. Your qualities as a birther will serve him well.”

“Father, please don't do this,” Minseok begged.

“Enough! I don't want to hear anything more from you. Get out of my sight! Both of you!”

Minseok got to his feet and rushed out of the throne room before his father could antagonize him further. He ran to his room, not bothering to address any of the servants or even his own brothers. Once he got to his room, he slammed the door shut and slid down to the ground, crying harshly. His hand was bleeding, but he didn't even notice, smearing blood over his hanbok as he tried to wipe his eyes. His secret was out, and any safety he'd once had was gone. Everything was going to change for the worse now.

~*~

Baekhyun was in the garden weeding. He was still furious about the way that servant had treated him. For having 'orders' they certainly didn't take care of the gardens. Baekhyun could see an improvement just from the few months he'd been taking care of it after the servants. The people of the kingdom really couldn't do anything right.

Baekhyun heard the sound of someone running towards him and got to his feet, trying to clean the dirt and grass stains off his hanbok. He really wasn't meant for these kinds of elegant outfits. Soon, he spotted Jongin running towards him. Baekhyun grabbed his arms as Jongin reached for him, taking a few deep breaths.

“Jongin, you shouldn't run so fast. You could fall...”

“Did you know about Minseok?” Jongin asked, still out of breath. “Did you know he was a birther?” Baekhyun's eyes widened and he pulled Jongin towards the wall, trying to shield them from view.

“Where did you hear this, Jongin?” Baekhyun asked quietly. Jongin's eyes watered.

“The king found out earlier and has been in a rage throughout the palace. Chanyeol told me to go to our room while he tries to calm the king down, but we're both so confused.”

“Oh no,” Baekhyun whispered. “Do you know where Minseok is?”

“Chanyeol said he was in his room, refusing servants and visitors. He wouldn't let Chanyeol or Junmyeon in to talk to him either...”

“I need to go to him,” Baekhyun muttered. “Jongin, please don't spread anything about Minseok more than what's going around. I promise you, he had his reasons.”
Jongin opened his mouth to ask Baekhyun what he meant, but Baekhyun had already rushed off, leaving Jongin alone in the courtyard. Jongin sighed, just wanting to understand what was going on. He didn't think any less of Minseok now that he knew he was a birther. He just wanted to know why this was happening. He was scared to see the king's wrath firsthand.

As Jongin turned to leave, he spotted Chanyeol heading towards him, looking completely defeated. Jongin had never seen him so upset before. He rushed over and hugged Chanyeol, pressing himself against his chest. Slowly, Chanyeol's arms wrapped around him and he rested his head on Jongin's shoulder. Jongin heard Chanyeol sniffle, and he hugged him even closer.

“I don't understand, Jongin...Why did he lie? I've never seen my father so angry...”

“I'm sure he had his reasons,” Jongin soothed, thinking of Baekhyun's words. “He's still your brother.”

“I'm just...so tired, Jongin,” Chanyeol sighed. “I want to go back to our room.”

Jongin frowned slightly, not liking that Chanyeol was avoiding the subject, but he couldn't deny him. He was tired as well, and he honestly wanted to shut himself and Chanyeol in their room, away from the cruel world of royalty.

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Baekhyun ran to Minseok's room, stopping only to catch his breath once he was right in front of the door. He knocked gently, receiving no response. He sighed, then turned the knob, finding it unlocked.

“Minseok? It's me, Baekhyun. I'm going to come in.”

He didn't receive an answer, but he wasn't told to go away either, so he figured that was as much of an invitation as he was going to get. He opened the door and entered, shutting it quietly behind him. Minseok was curled up beside his fireplace, hugging his knees and sobbing. Baekhyun almost couldn't stand the sight. Seeing Minseok in pain didn't sit right with him. No birther deserved to hide their identity for their own safety. And Baekhyun had outed Minseok without meaning to, even after he told him he would happily take the blame.

He walked over to Minseok and knelt down on the ground in front of him. Minseok didn't even bother glancing up at him.

“Hey,” Baekhyun greeted softly. “I'm so sorry...You're on your bleed, aren't you? I didn't know, otherwise I would have lied about being on mine. I'm so, so sorry, Minseok.”

“It doesn't matter,” Minseok sobbed. “None of that matters anymore. He knows, Baekhyun! He
Minseok had looked up at Baekhyun, and his face was covered in tears and snot, his eyes swollen from crying. Baekhyun almost cringed at the sight. Minseok was having trouble speaking between the sobs that shook his body. Baekhyun looked away, not wanting to stare Minseok in the eyes anymore, and he noticed the dried blood all over his hanbok. His eyes widened as he tried to find the source. It was on his sleeves, so it didn't seem likely it was from his bleed.

“Baekhyun, he's, he's,” Minseok stuttered, still not able to talk through the tears. Baekhyun finally spotted his injured hand and grabbed it gently.

“Minseok, you're hurt...Did he do this to you?”

Minseok opened his mouth to speak, but right at that moment, his door opened and several servants entered the room. They walked over to Baekhyun and grabbed him by the arms, pulling him roughly away from Minseok. Baekhyun fought back, but there were too many servants to break free.

“Let go!” Baekhyun shouted.

“The king has ordered you and Minseok remain separated. Your engagement has been called off, so you no longer have permission to enter his personal quarters.”

“What!?” Baekhyun gasped. “Forget about that, just let me look after him for a bit.”

“These are orders from the king. They cannot be negotiated.”

The servants dragged Baekhyun, kicking and fighting, out of the room. He called out for Minseok, but the latter simply watched with teary, hopeless eyes. Baekhyun couldn't believe this was actually happening so fast. He wasn't even upset about not being engaged anymore, but Minseok was hurt and Baekhyun didn't trust the idiots of the palace to take care of him. Not only that, but he was on his bleed. Baekhyun had wanted to watch him closely because of his poor health.

Once the servants had dragged Baekhyun far enough away from the room, he started struggling free of their grips again. Finally they let him go.

“What the hell was that about?” Baekhyun snapped. “You didn't even let me finish talking to him!”

“You are not to see Prince Minseok anymore, in private or in public. Your engagement has been called off.”

“So are you going to send me home or keep me locked up here?”

“For now, you will be staying in the servants' quarters, but will be treated as a guest of the palace. The king will make his decision about whether you stay or go once he's done arranging
Prince Minseok's new engagement.”

“You and your king really don't care about Minseok or his feelings at all, do you?”

“You will refer to him as the prince, like the rest of us. You are no longer of importance to him. You will be watched by the other servants to make sure you're obeying the king's decree.”

Baekhyun scoffed, but the servants ignored him and tugged him towards his new room. They told him his items would be delivered in the morning, and a servant would bring him any item he needed from Minseok's room that evening. Baekhyun was fuming. Could they really not see how upset Minseok was? And that he was bleeding? How could they not care at all for one of the people they serve?

He couldn't believe how fast the king had moved to use Minseok as a birther the minute he found out. Minseok's fear had been completely justified, and Baekhyun felt guilty for unintentionally outing him. He couldn't just let this happen. If nothing else, he needed to check up on Minseok somehow and make sure he was ok. Baekhyun didn't even know what fate awaited Minseok, but breaking off their engagement no doubt meant he had someone else planned for Minseok to marry. He really was just as much of a victim to the king as Baekhyun was. He was more of a victim really, because no matter what happened, he couldn't escape.

Minseok was too kind for this sort of life. He'd never forced Baekhyun into anything during their engagement, and had accepted the cruel treatment since the beginning. Thinking back on it, Minseok had always put up with Baekhyun's harsh words as well as the obvious bad opinion of him throughout the castle. It was probably the overwhelming guilt he was feeling at the moment, but he really regretted how he'd treated Minseok and not being there for him when he needed someone in this castle full of people that hardly cared about anyone but themselves. He couldn't let it end just like this.

~*~

Baekhyun tried to get to Minseok during the days, but the servants had forced him into working in the gardens. Normally, Baekhyun would have been thrilled about this, but he knew it was only a way for them to keep him monitored and under control. This was why he was so disgusted with the royalty. He knew no one would be paying attention to Minseok at the moment when he really needed someone in this castle full of people that hardly cared about anyone but themselves. He couldn't let it end just like this.

He found his opportunity at night, when the servants were all asleep. Baekhyun snuck out of the servants' quarters and headed to the garden. Minseok's room had overlooked a certain part, and there were vines and ivy snaking up the wall of the castle. Baekhyun could climb to his window. It wasn't the easiest form of entry, but Baekhyun had always been fairly active and good at climbing. The people of Nefret lived in the trees, so he was no stranger to climbing trees or other forms of vegetation.
He took a deep breath and began scaling the wall, grateful that the vines at least seemed strong enough to hold his weight. With how the servants failed to water most of the plants properly, Baekhyun had had his doubts. Finally, he reached the window, groaning when it was shut. He knocked on the glass, hoping Minseok would notice and be willing to let him in. After a few knocks, he saw Minseok rush to the window and open it.

“Baekhyun?” He asked in shock. “What are you doing here? At the window even?”

“Just let me in before I fall, please?”

Minseok nodded and stepped aside so Baekhyun could climb into the room. Once he was safely inside, Baekhyun groaned and shut the window. He turned and glanced Minseok over, noticing how pale he was and how a cloth had been carelessly tied around his injured hand. Of course he wasn't taking care of himself.

“What's going on?” Minseok asked. “You could get in trouble for being here...”

“They dragged me away before I could finish talking to you. Besides, your hand was hurt and I doubt you treated it. And by the looks of things, you've been skipping meals, which is really stupid since you just finished your bleed and need to replenish your strength. You know how easy it is for you to pass out.”

Minseok gripped his injured hand and looked down at the ground sadly. Baekhyun sighed, knowing he probably was too blunt as always. He gently grabbed Minseok's wrist and walked over to the table. He'd brought his leather bag of herbs with him, and he was going to make sure Minseok's hand was looked after.

They sat down and Baekhyun unwrapped the cloth in silence. Minseok didn't say anything as he watched Baekhyun clean his hand with a wet rag he'd gotten from the bathroom, then grind up a few different herbs to make a paste to put over the wound.

“Did your father do this to you?” Baekhyun asked softly, wrapping a new cloth bandage around Minseok's hand.

“He didn't intend to injure my hand. He pushed me down and I hit a pedestal. The vase on top fell on the ground and broke, and I cut my hand on one of the pieces.”

“Your father still pushed you, which meant he intended to hurt you...That bastard...”

Baekhyun knew speaking ill of the king would really get him in trouble in the palace now, but alone with Minseok, he wasn't afraid. Minseok knew where Baekhyun sat in regards to royalty, and frankly, after what the king had done to Minseok, Baekhyun was pretty sure Minseok didn't like the man all that much either.

“Baekhyun...He's marrying me off to Dongyul from Golden Meadows,” Minseok said shakily, and Baekhyun saw he was holding back tears.
“Isn't he a bit old for you?”

“That's not even the worst of it...He's my father's biggest supporter. He's not an unkind man from what I've experienced, but he doesn't view birthers and women as anything more than a means to produce heirs, and I would be forced to go live in his region with him. He strikes deals constantly with the king about resource distribution...Part of why the other regions hardly have any access to livestock products is because he and my father arrange to keep it all between themselves.”

“So he's a slimy kind of guy.”

“Baekhyun, I'm so scared...I don't want to marry him. He's coming next month to court me...I don't want this!”

Baekhyun watched as Minseok broke down crying again. This was all his fault. Not intentionally, of course, but he would have covered for Minseok and protected him if he could have. He'd let Minseok down and now he was suffering a fate far more scary than Baekhyun had been. He owed it to Minseok to do something to help him, but what? As Baekhyun milled it over in his head, an outrageous thought occurred to him.

“I have an idea for how you could try and get out of this, but it's really risky and dangerous...”

“What?” Minseok asked, looking desperate.

“Your new suitor is coming next month...The king wants everything to go smoothly, but it won't be so easy if he has to cover up a scandal.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Let's have a baby together.”

“What!? Baekhyun, I don't think that would work...If you got pregnant, my father would kill you without a second thought.”

“Maybe if I got pregnant, but it would be different if it was you,” Baekhyun explained. Minseok's eyes widened. “Listen, you're the king's bartering item right now. You're how he's going to strike up a great deal. But if you're pregnant, that makes it so he can't use you. You'll put a stop to his plans, at least temporarily.”

“He'd still find a way to get rid of you and the baby though...”

“Maybe, if we give him that opportunity. We could use his moment of regrouping and planning what he'll do about the situation to escape.”

“This seems too risky, Baekhyun... Besides, you're free of our engagement. There's no reason for you to sleep with me, and I wouldn't force that upon you.”

“I'm offering to do this, Minseok. I could have protected you from all this if I'd known. I want to help you, so I'm willing to do this. But if you're not comfortable with this, I understand. It's extremely risky, and we could both end up in a lot of trouble, but this is the only thing I can think of that would put an immediate stop to your marriage.”
Minseok bit his lip, deep in thought. Baekhyun knew it was a bad idea, and it was putting both of them in great danger, but they needed to do something so shocking the king would have to take a moment to react to it. It wasn't ideal, but if Minseok was pregnant, the king wouldn't marry him off to another man. He would have to take care of the baby and Baekhyun first, and that would be the small window of opportunity they needed to escape.

“Do you really think we can escape my father?”

“I can already promise you that I have more allies and more knowledge of the land than the king does. I'd make sure we'd be safe.”

“So we cause a scandal and run away...” Minseok sighed.

“Your other option is to just try and run away on your own. Or try and fight with your father and convince him not to marry you off. I don't think you'd have much success with that though.”

“If we do this,” Minseok said quietly. “You're really ok with being on the run, being an enemy of the king, and towing me with child around? You're really fine with even having a child?”

“If we do this, I wouldn't abandon you,” Baekhyun said, looking completely serious. “The child would be my child and my responsibility as well. Regardless of whether we have a relationship or not, I would be serious about the child...If this whole plan makes you uncomfortable though, don't go through with it.”

“No...Let's do this,” Minseok muttered, looking up at Baekhyun. “I won't get far trying to escape on my own. If you're willing to help me, I'll do anything.”

Minseok knew this was a bad idea, but it really was about as bad an idea as any other option he'd thought of to get away. At least this way, he would have someone else with him. Minseok didn't think he had the strength to survive alone, and Baekhyun knew far more about taking care of poor health than Minseok did. If anyone was going to be able to properly look after him, it would be Baekhyun.

“Alright,” Baekhyun said, letting out a shaky breath.

He got to his feet, gently taking Minseok by the wrist and leading him over to the bed. Minseok sat down, looking up at Baekhyun. He was suddenly extremely nervous, and his bed and room felt foreign to him, even though he'd lived in them most of his life, and had shared them with Baekhyun for the past 4 months. Thankfully, Baekhyun seemed to realize how lost Minseok was.

“Do you know anything about birther reproduction?” Baekhyun asked. Minseok shook his head.

“Not really...”

“Alright, so I'm going to tell you a few things. There is a fertilization pathway leading from the rectum to the uterus. There is a muscle separating the two areas, that opens when you're properly stimulated while having intercourse. When that happens, you'll feel a warm, almost tingling sensation in that region. If we want to do this right, we need to make sure you're feeling that.”

“O-Oh...” Minseok mumbled, cheeks flushed. Baekhyun sighed and sat down on the bed.
“Look, I know it's awkward, but it's your body. You need to learn these things.”

“Right...So then, how are we going to do this?”

“Go ahead and get undressed. I'm going to grab something from your bathroom.”

Baekhyun got up and headed to the bathroom, finding some body oils. He'd never really done this with anyone before, but he'd explored his own body enough to know how to take care of Minseok. His mind was racing, and he couldn't believe he was the one that had suggested this. How had he convinced himself to go through with this for a prince of all people? Still, Baekhyun couldn't abandon Minseok when he was in a situation like this.

When he returned from the bathroom, Minseok was sitting on his bed naked with his legs hugged to his chest. Baekhyun smiled at him, trying to make the situation less awkward, and slipped his own hanbok off. Baekhyun was used to stripping down in front of other men since Nefret only had a public bath, but he thought it was cute that Minseok still looked away, giving him privacy.

Baekhyun crawled onto the bed in front of Minseok, and their eyes finally met, traveling along their bodies. After a moment, Minseok finally spoke up.

“Have you done this before?”

“No, but I'll take care of you, ok? Tell me if it gets uncomfortable or if you need to stop. It's alright to take this slow or decide it's not what you want.”

“I want this,” Minseok insisted shyly. “I trust you.”

Baekhyun nodded and leaned forward, gently pushing Minseok down onto his back. Neither of them really knew how to make this a comfortable experience. It was mutual consent, but they weren't in a relationship with each other, and had never touched each other intimately, so going from nothing to intercourse was making them both nervous.

Baekhyun tried his hardest to make sure Minseok was comfortable and aware of everything he was doing so he wouldn't get frightened. Baekhyun knew it was probably making Minseok more nervous and embarrassed when he explained about stretching him, but Baekhyun wanted to put Minseok first, and that meant making sure he was up for everything Baekhyun was going to do.

Minseok's hands were in fists on either side of his head as Baekhyun worked on stretching him. It didn't hurt, in fact he couldn't deny it was starting to feel really good, but he didn't know what to do with his hands. If this were a normal relationship, he could hold and kiss the other person, but this was far from that kind of relationship. He doubted Baekhyun would be willing to do that. Minseok finally ended up grabbing Baekhyun's shoulders as soon as he started pushing into him.
Baekhyun paused all his movements at that moment, trying to read Minseok's face.

“Are you alright? Did that hurt?”

“I just...it was different,” Minseok mumbled, feeling embarrassed. “I-I'm alright, but...can I just hold you?”

“Yeah, do whatever will make this a more comfortable, pleasant experience for you.”

Minseok wrapped his arms around Baekhyun's neck as he slowly started moving again. Minseok wondered if Baekhyun could feel him trembling against him. His body was shaking from a mixture of pleasure and nerves. He felt Baekhyun rub his side with his hand, comforting him, and Minseok relaxed just a bit. Baekhyun had noticed, and he was being gentle. Minseok wished they could have stayed engaged. Maybe once they'd gotten over their differences, they could have had a fruitful relationship with each other. As it was now, Minseok knew Baekhyun was only doing this out of a feeling of obligation and pity. There would be no feelings in this, merely a child and a scandal. How had Minseok's life really come to this point of desperation?

Minseok's mind was wandering a mile a minute as Baekhyun continued to move. He couldn't stop worrying about the future, or wondering if this was the right thing to do. It definitely didn't feel right. Minseok felt like he was trapping Baekhyun into this fate, even if Baekhyun had been the one to suggest it. Finally, Baekhyun stopped moving, bringing Minseok out of his thoughts.

“Are you ok? Do you want to stop?” He asked, looking softly into Minseok's eyes.

“No, I'm just...distracted. I'm sorry, I'm ruining this.”

“Shh, there's nothing to ruin, Minseok. I want you to be comfortable, ok? If you're not liking something, let me know. If you need me to stop, tell me.”

“How can I stop thinking?” Minseok asked, wishing there was an easy answer to this question.

“Close your eyes,” Baekhyun said in a whisper. He waited until Minseok had done what he asked. “Don't think about anything other than what your body is feeling. Redirect your thoughts to something positive.”

Minseok nodded, keeping his eyes shut. He didn't know how successful he would be, but he would at least try. Baekhyun started to move again, and Minseok tried to focus on what felt good. He shifted his body slightly and a small moan escaped his lips as Baekhyun hit a new spot. Minseok tried to bite back another moan, but Baekhyun whispered into his ear that it was alright. Baekhyun was being a little vocal as well, so Minseok tried to just let himself go.

Baekhyun reached his high first, and gently stroked Minseok to a climax so he wasn't left hanging. Minseok wasn't used to having someone else touch him like that, but he definitely liked it. Baekhyun slowly pulled away, and Minseok let his grip loosen. Baekhyun headed into the bathroom and returned with a wet cloth to clean both of them off. Minseok sighed and closed his eyes as Baekhyun ran the warm cloth along his skin. He opened them in surprise when he felt
Baekhyun tucked his blanket up to his shoulders.

“Rest,” Baekhyun said gently. “I didn’t hurt you, right?” Minseok shook his head.

“I’m alright…”

“I’ll be back tomorrow night. One time probably isn’t going to work so…better safe than sorry.”

“Right…So I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Mhm. Sleep well.”

“You too.”

Minseok watched as Baekhyun got his hanbok back on and slipped out the window, giving him one last awkward wave. Minseok couldn’t even begin to figure out what he was feeling. The only thing that was strangely clear to him was his lack of regret at what he’d just done. He was scared of his father and scared of the man he was supposed to marry, but even with all the risks, he didn’t regret what he’d just done with Baekhyun. He didn’t even feel that guilty about it. Perhaps he’d finally reached his limit.

He hadn’t felt the sensation Baekhyun had described, so he didn’t know if what they’d done had even accomplished anything. Baekhyun would come back though, and they would try again. This was going to be Minseok’s nightly routine from here onward. He knew it was simply an agreement between them rather than a relationship, but Minseok had felt so alone and afraid since his identity had been discovered. Baekhyun was a companion that he desperately needed, and the only person trying to do something, albeit dangerous and stupid, to help him. Minseok had to believe in him and trust him.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaaaand the angst hit :’D I always have to torment xiubaek, my poor babies OTL. But hey, the story is gonna get exciting from here on if nothing else~ This chapter was like 7k words lol! Leave it to xiubaek to get me to write even more than I already did XD. What will our poor bubs do now? Stay tuned to future updates to find out~
Baekhyun visited Minseok’s bedroom the next few nights, and each time, he slept with Minseok. Baekhyun had started bringing a few herbs to burn as a form of incense and natural relaxers, in hopes it would calm them both down. They were slowly starting to learn about each other's bodies. Minseok had learned how to touch Baekhyun when they were first starting, something Minseok had asked to do for him in hopes it might help them become more comfortable.

Baekhyun was also trying to learn how to please Minseok better, but Minseok still hadn't felt the feeling he'd described. There was some kind of disconnect and Minseok couldn't figure out where it was. Physically, he knew Baekhyun was pleasing him and taking care of him, but there was something lacking. Minseok wondered if he wasn't quite as turned on by simply the physical action, or perhaps they weren't doing enough. All they could do was try new things and pray it worked.

When Baekhyun came the next night, Minseok bit his lip nervously, trying to think of how to phrase his request. He and Baekhyun usually got undressed and laid in bed for a while, working up to the event at hand. Minseok stopped Baekhyun as he hovered over him though.

“What is it?” Baekhyun asked. “Are you ok? Do you need anything?”

“I'm fine,” Minseok answered. Baekhyun was always concerned with his well-being, and Minseok found himself growing fonder of Baekhyun because of it. “I was wondering if we could try something new today...”

“What is it?”

“I...I want to kiss,” Minseok admitted, feeling his cheeks flush. That was harder to admit with Baekhyun hovering just above him. “I'm not feeling that sensation you told me about, and I wanted to see if being a bit more physical with each other would help...If you aren't comfortable, then I understand...”

“No, let's give it a try,” Baekhyun agreed. “If you're not feeling stimulated, then we obviously need to change something. This is my first time in this position so I don't really know everything there is to know about pleasing you...”

“You're doing fine,” Minseok soothed. “I just want to try a few more things. We're both learning still.”

“Yeah...I guess....”

Minseok felt weird, asking Baekhyun to do so much for him simply out of obligation. He didn't even feel Baekhyun was obligated to do this with him, but Baekhyun seemed intent on going through with his part of the plan. Baekhyun was a patient person and willing to do just about
anything to help someone in need. Minseok couldn't help but fear he was taking advantage of Baekhyun though, even if this was his initial idea.

Baekhyun leaned down, softly pressing his lips against Minseok's. They fit together surprisingly well, and Minseok's heart fluttered. He knew it didn't mean anything, but that had been his first kiss. Would Baekhyun laugh at him for being inexperienced if he admitted that to him? Minseok loved how soft Baekhyun's lips were. It was an innocent kiss, but it left him wanting more.

Minseok wrapped his arms around Baekhyun's neck and hugged him closer, deepening the kiss. He hummed as Baekhyun got a bit more ravenous with his kisses and started to touch him. Minseok kept his eyes closed and tried to let himself go, moving his body in ways to make Baekhyun's actions feel even better. Baekhyun seemed to hold Minseok a bit closer and tighter than before, and Minseok swore it felt like a genuine, loving embrace, even if those weren't the feelings behind the action.

He pressed his knees into Baekhyun's sides as he carefully pushed inside of him. This time, Baekhyun's mouth journeyed from Minseok's lips down his jaw and neck, leaving soft kisses and nibbling on some of his more sensitive skin. It wasn't enough to leave any marks, but it was enough to send goosebumps across Minseok's skin. This was definitely making a difference compared to their past attempts.

As Baekhyun began to move, their lips joined once more and the hungry, passionate kisses continued. Minseok wanted them so badly, honestly more than he wanted the sex. A small part of his mind contemplated how pathetic and love deprived he was, but most of his attention was on how good Baekhyun was making him feel, and how much he wanted this to continue.

He finally felt that tingling, warm sensation and it was almost hard not to laugh. It tickled in a sense, but it also made Minseok feel so overjoyed because it felt so wonderful. Baekhyun came with a moan, and Minseok threw his head back, reaching his own high. Minseok was so overwhelmed with pleasure that his body almost felt numb and heavy. Was that what having sex was really like as a birther? Was that what having passionate sex was like? Minseok wished he could understand all the confusing feelings he was having, but the nature of this relationship made everything so complicated, and he was afraid to ask Baekhyun.

Baekhyun slowly pulled away from Minseok, laying down in bed beside him and letting his body calm down. Minseok's heart was beating out of his chest, and he swore he could still feel that tingling sensation. He rolled over onto his side to face Baekhyun and smiled shyly.

“I felt it,” he whispered. “I think it worked, Baekhyun!”

“Good,” Baekhyun said awkwardly. “Then we'll keep doing this...It's better to be safer than sorry, so we'll keep up what we've been doing to make sure it works...”
Minseok nodded, letting the thought sink in. He and Baekhyun were really attempting to get him pregnant. It was still so strange to even fathom, given their current situations. Minseok still couldn't bring himself to regret anything he was doing though. If anything, he felt empowered, though he knew it was stupid and naive to feel this way about doing something so dangerous.

Baekhyun pushed himself up on his elbow and brushed his finger through Minseok's hair, causing the latter's breath to hitch in surprise. Even the slightest touch from Baekhyun seemed to be doing that to Minseok right now. Was this also part of that feeling he'd experienced? Or was this something different? Minseok desperately wished he could ask someone about this.

“l'm going to go now,” Baekhyun said gently. “You're feeling alright?”

“I'm fine,” Minseok answered. “Be careful going back to your room...”

“I will.”

Baekhyun smiled and got up from the bed. Minseok watched as Baekhyun got dressed once more, and he felt an uncomfortable sadness in his chest that couldn't be reasoned away. Perhaps he was just scared and lonely, but the sight of Baekhyun leaving afterwards really had started to hurt.

Minseok bid Baekhyun farewell from his bed, not feeling the energy to get out of it all of a sudden. As soon as Baekhyun was gone, Minseok sighed, looking around at his now empty room. Baekhyun had left the burnt herbs on a plate, so Minseok would have to clean them up in the morning. For now, he didn't want to touch them though. Their smell reminded him of what had just happened, and Minseok swore he could smell Baekhyun in the room still. Baekhyun smelled like fresh flowers from the garden, and Minseok wanted to breathe him in and never let the smell fade.

That was when it slowly started to make a little more sense. Minseok didn't want Baekhyun to leave him. He wanted him there throughout the night and by his side in the morning. Baekhyun was Minseok's only form of comfort, but it was more than that now. Minseok wanted Baekhyun now, both physically and emotionally.

Minseok's hand drifted to his stomach, cupping it. He wasn't supposed to feel these things for Baekhyun. What they were doing wasn't romantic, and it wasn't love. Minseok needed to stop himself while he still could. They were having a child for the sake of angering the king. Minseok honestly pitied the baby in this situation, but he'd already decided he would love the child and be the best parent to them he could possibly be. He just couldn't stop wishing that Baekhyun's motivations for being the other parent were different. Minseok wished that Baekhyun actually wanted this future with him, and wasn't just providing Minseok with the means he needed to halt his marriage.
He shook his head, trying to get the depressing thoughts out of his mind. Baekhyun was only doing this because he felt guilty and sorry for Minseok. He couldn't let his heart get involved any further. As he drifted off to sleep, he couldn't help but wish Baekhyun was still in his bed beside him. Minseok felt like he was getting lost in the waves that seemed to be constantly hitting him. He wanted Baekhyun to hold him through everything and tell him it would all be ok. He was already too far gone.

~*~

The following day, Baekhyun was called to the throne room. He was scared for a brief moment that the king had found out what he'd been doing with Minseok and he was going to be executed, but the king had a very different message for him instead.

“As I understand it, you're very knowledgeable about pregnancy,” the king stated.

“That's correct, your majesty. In Nefret, we're taught many medicinal practices, including those for pregnancy.”

“Good. I have a job for you. With the discontinuation of your engagement to Prince Minseok, I was debating sending you home, but you've been requested to be one of Jongin's caretakers during his pregnancy.”

“I was requested?” Baekhyun asked, fairly surprised.

“Yes, by Jongin himself. It seems he trusts you the most. I expect you to take care of him. He's carrying my grandchild now and I won't forgive any failure.”

“Understood, your majesty.”

Baekhyun forced back a grimace until he was finally out of the throne room. That man really couldn't be pleasant about anything even if he tried. This was a good thing though. Baekhyun didn't trust the people of the palace to look after Jongin, and it meant he would be able to continue with Minseok as well. He would have to start figuring out where they would go once the king found out about what they were doing. Baekhyun couldn't help but find it funny that the king had just granted permission to stay in the palace to the one person that was actively thwarting one of his plans.

Baekhyun told Minseok the news later that night after they'd slept with each other. Minseok was laying in bed closest to the fire, and his back was aching a bit, so Baekhyun was gently massaging it for him.

“So today the king assigned me to be Jongin's caretaker during his pregnancy.”

“Really?” Minseok asked, rolling over onto his back to look up at Baekhyun.

“Mhm. He said he was thinking about sending me back to Nefret, but he decided to keep me as his slave. But Jongin asked for me, so I'll happily do it.”

“I see...”
“But this also means I'll be able to stay here with you and look after you as well. If I request something to help Jongin with his pregnancy, I can share some of it with you too.”

“That's good, I suppose. Do you think...we'll succeed?” Minseok asked, placing his hand on his stomach.

“It might take us some time, but we'll try our best. I'll do everything I can to keep your health up.”

Minseok nodded blankly. He still didn't know what to feel about what they were doing, but he was becoming more and more aware of his feelings for Baekhyun. He was fairly certain it wasn't just residual physical feelings from sleeping together, though that certainly wasn't helping. Minseok longed for Baekhyun during the day, and while he was certain some of it was loneliness, he couldn't deny there was something else. Minseok felt like his entire being lit up each and every time Baekhyun kissed him, even if it was just a simple peck. Baekhyun meant safety and security, but he meant something more as well. Minseok didn't want to fall for him, but it was starting to feel impossible, especially with their late night rendezvous.

“I should probably let you rest for the night,” Baekhyun sighed, getting out of bed to gather his clothes. Minseok sat up frantically.

“Wait!”

“What is it?” Baekhyun asked, looking him over worriedly. “Does your back still hurt? Should I heat a rice bag for you?”

“It's not that, just...Will you stay?” Minseok asked, feeling like his heart would beat out of his chest. Baekhyun's eyes widened.

“You mean over night? Minseok, I can't. What if we get caught together?”

“Just for a little while longer...You can leave before the morning. I just want you to stay a little while longer...Can't you?”

“Are you hurting?” Baekhyun asked again. Minseok bit his lip, not wanting this kind of response.

“No, I just want you here...”

Baekhyun sighed, and Minseok knew he'd pushed too far. Of course Baekhyun wouldn't want to stay with him. He was only doing this because he pitied Minseok and felt it was his fault he was found out. Baekhyun probably still hated Minseok because he was trapped in the palace. Why would he stay with him longer than what he felt was his obligation.

Minseok rolled over, facing the fireplace instead of Baekhyun, and tried not to listen to whatever rummaging he heard around the room. He felt the bed dip and heard Baekhyun sigh beside him, settling underneath the covers. Minseok rolled back over to face him, eyes wide in both hope and surprise. Baekhyun managed a small, awkward smile.
“I'll stay for a little while until you fall asleep...We used to sleep in the same bed for months before this, so I don't really mind.”

“Thank you,” Minseok whispered.

He dared to snuggle just a bit closer to Baekhyun, so he was comfortably nestled beneath his blanket. As he drifted off to sleep, he gradually moved closer to Baekhyun, his body naturally wanting to be pressed against him. He was scared Baekhyun would push him away, but Baekhyun made no such motions, simply let Minseok cuddle up to him. Minseok longed for Baekhyun to hold him, but he knew that was really asking for too much.

He dozed off shortly after that, and he could have sworn he remembered gripping Baekhyun's arm. When he woke up the following morning, however, Baekhyun was nowhere to be found in his room. Minseok sighed, stretching his hand out to feel the empty spot beside him. The sun was out already, so of course Baekhyun would have left, but Minseok wanted more than anything for him to have still been there.

There was no denying the pain Minseok was feeling in his heart now. He was falling in love with Baekhyun. Why had he not tried to progress their relationship more when they were still engaged? Baekhyun had been avoiding him then, but if they'd come to terms, Minseok would be happily spending time with Baekhyun without having to hide their relationship. He knew that was all just an ideal world and there was no use wishing for it now, but Minseok wanted it so badly. He wanted Baekhyun to want him, but he knew that was impossible. All he could do was take comfort in the fact that the bed was still a little warm from where Baekhyun had laid, and he would be coming back again that evening. It was Minseok's own little mix of happiness and misery.

~*~

After that night, Baekhyun started staying until Minseok fell asleep. It was probably just pity like the rest of Baekhyun's actions, but Minseok was grateful. Minseok really couldn't stand to be alone anymore, and every second spent with Baekhyun was precious. Minseok couldn't believe how fast he'd fallen for someone he knew would never love him. He still wondered if it was just his body convincing his head he was in love with him, but with how desperate he felt, that seemed like wishful thinking.

One evening, Baekhyun arrived a little later than normal. As soon as Minseok laid eyes on him, he could tell Baekhyun wasn't feeling well. Minseok hopped out of bed and rushed to the window, helping Baekhyun inside. Baekhyun smiled tiredly at him.

“Hey...I need to tell you something...” He said quietly.


“I'm on my bleed. I don't think we should, you know...I'm sorry.”
“You came all the way here to tell me that?” Minseok asked.

“Well, it's the only way I can really talk to you...”

“Are you in pain? You should rest for a bit! Here, lay down! I have those rice bags, let me get one heating for you!”

“Minseok, I'm fine...I just probably won't come around for a while until my bleed ends.”

“Oh...”

It made sense given Baekhyun had to climb the wall to get to Minseok's room and that was an awful lot of work to do for no turnout, but it still made him sad. He didn't want to go a whole week or so without seeing Baekhyun. He could barely handle the daytime when he wasn't allowed to even be in the same room as him.

“I'm sorry for not being able to do anything more for you...”

“No, no! It's alright,” Minseok gasped. “Rest for a while though. It had to be tiring to get up here. Lay down for a bit and then go, alright?”

Baekhyun sighed, but rubbed his back before nodding. Minseok figured he must have been in pain. He rushed over to his fireplace and set the rice bags near it. After that, he tugged on Baekhyun's arm and led him over to the bed, helping him lay down on the side closest to the fireplace, Minseok's usual spot. Minseok tucked Baekhyun under the blanket, hushing him when he tried to protest, and went back to get the rice bags. He placed one of them on Baekhyun's back and gently massaged the area around the bag. He heard Baekhyun sigh.

“Does that feel better?” Minseok asked softly.

“Yeah...Thank you.”

“You've been taking care of me up until now. I'm more than happy to look after you.”

Baekhyun hummed and snuggled into the covers. Minseok couldn't help but smile at the sight. Baekhyun was really cute, and it felt nice to be able to do something for him. Minseok had been treated like he couldn't do anything for most of his life. Being able to do something for someone else he cared about was honestly more fulfilling than anything he'd accomplished for his father or the kingdom. Minseok really was helplessly love struck.

When Baekhyun was situated, Minseok crawled into bed, sitting near him so he could reach over and rub his back. He couldn't help but wish they'd been like this when they were still living together. Minseok really had missed out on so much during that time.

“Is it weird that I keep wishing we could go back to the way things used to be?” He asked suddenly. Baekhyun shook his head and smiled.

“I think that's pretty normal. There's always times you wish you could return to.”
“What time do you wish you could go back to?”

“Hmm...Maybe when I was a little boy. Growing up was really fun and everything was so much simpler.”

“What was your childhood like?” Minseok asked. Baekhyun sighed, a small smile on his face.

“I spent a lot of it playing outdoors. In Nefret, the houses we live in are built within the trees, so we naturally do a lot of climbing. I played with a lot of other kids and helped my grandma with the gardening. I liked to pick up creepy looking bugs and scare her with them too...I was a bit of a brat,” he laughed. Minseok smiled, easily imagining how Baekhyun would have been as a kid.

“That sounds really nice,” Minseok agreed.

“What was your childhood like? You have such huge gardens, I'm sure you and your brothers got lost in them all the time.”

“No,” Minseok said, smiling bitterly. “I was pretty weak and sickly as a little kid as well. I was kept inside most of the time. I would watch my brothers play outside a lot of the time from my window.”

“Oh...”

“But it wasn't so bad. I read a lot of books with interesting stories. My brothers would come play with me in my room a lot too. The doctor made sure we always had a few different games to play. I think I still have some...”

Minseok got off the bed to rummage through his bookshelf. Baekhyun watched him, slowly letting it sink in that Minseok had been stifled for most of his life. He hadn't received the proper care for his body, and he'd been living in fear and hiding all his life. It was really sad, and made Baekhyun wish he could take Minseok away from all of this and show him what having fun was actually like. That was more or less the plan since they would have to flee if Minseok actually got pregnant. Baekhyun just wished he could have avoided the path they were headed down now.

Minseok came back with a board in hand. He set it down on the bed and placed a small wooden box on the side. Baekhyun opened it curiously, seeing a lot of intricately carved pieces. The board had a beautifully etched map of mountains, plains, and rivers. Minseok pulled out a couple of wooden pieces of men on horses and placed them on the board.

“It's an adventure game. My brothers and I used to play it all the time.”

“It looks amazing. Do you still remember how to play?”

“More or less. You set up monsters around the board and you have to fight them and save the land within a certain number of turns...There's this counter that you press the button for and it randomly gives you a number and that's how much damage you or the enemy deal. It was mostly just fun to make believe we were all knights slaying ogres...”

“Can we try playing it now?”

“Yeah, of course, if you want to...”
Baekhyun nodded excitedly and propped up on his elbow so he could watch Minseok set up the board and explain the game. Baekhyun had never really played a game like this, but he thought it was interesting. Minseok was having a lot of fun just teaching him how to play it. Baekhyun was a quick learner as well, so it didn't take long before they were both strategizing and working together to beat all the monsters. It was late in the night by the time they finally beat the game.

“Ah, I need to get back to my room,” Baekhyun whined.

“You can sleep here. I really don't mind. It would be easier for you to climb back down if you leave just after the sun has started to rise anyway...”

“It’s really ok if I stay here?”

“I would like that. I’ve missed you since you stopped sleeping here,” Minseok whispered. Baekhyun smiled and nuzzled into the pillow.

“Well then I’ll keep you company tonight~”

Minseok nodded and packed the game up, placing it back on his shelf. After that, he curled up in the spot that Baekhyun used to occupy. It was a little colder since it wasn't close to the fireplace, but Minseok snuggled closer to Baekhyun to remedy the situation. To his relief, Baekhyun cuddled a bit closer as well. As they were dozing off together, Minseok heard Baekhyun whisper one last thing to him.

“Thank you for taking care of me.”

Minseok smiled and snuggled closer, finding Baekhyun to be much warmer than sleeping near the fireplace had ever been. Unsurprisingly, the following morning, Minseok woke up alone, but he’d been carefully wrapped up in the covers and pushed a little closer to the fireplace. A note was left on his bedside table and Minseok felt his heart flutter as he read it.

Thank you for looking after me. I'll come back soon. Let's play that game again!

Minseok held the note to his chest, feeling a little silly about how happy it made him feel. Baekhyun had said he would come back, and Minseok wanted to think it wasn't just because he felt obligated to do so. He wanted to believe they were growing closer.

To Minseok's surprise, Baekhyun came back again that night and the night after, despite his bleed. Minseok tried his best to make sure he had the rice bags warmed for him and the game board set up. They spent a lot of time simply talking, but it was such a nice change from having sex and not interacting past that. Baekhyun had always been someone Minseok could rely on since he found out he was a birther, but now he was starting to feel like a friend. It still wasn't quite the relationship Minseok longed for, but he would happily take a friend in this world over a lonely
When Baekhyun's bleed ended, they resumed their previous attempts. Something was different this time however. Minseok could have sworn Baekhyun seemed more eager and interested than normal, and Minseok felt far more sensitive. He was sure it was because his feelings for Baekhyun were getting more intense as the days went on, but Baekhyun was being more passionate than normal, and it was making Minseok's heart do flips. Even the way he moved and kissed Minseok felt like it had changed. Minseok knew it was dangerous to hope, but he wanted so badly for this to not just be in his head and for Baekhyun to start feeling the way he felt as well. He was too afraid to outright ask, but hopefully in time, their feelings would come forward. Everything would be changing in their lives soon, with the arrival of the leader of Golden Meadows.

~*~

The month seemed to pass by in a flash, and soon Minseok was called to the throne room to meet his father about his arranged dates with Dongyul. Minseok was anxious, to say the least, and he still had no idea if what he and Baekhyun were doing had been at all successful. He would have to play along and go on dates one way or the other, and he could only hope he would feel some kind of sign soon.

His father seemed ecstatic to have Dongyul arriving at the palace. Minseok hadn't thought about how his father would be pushing their relationship, but there was one thing that Minseok had forgotten. His father had forced Minseok and Baekhyun to share a room, so he was probably planning to do the same with Dongyul. Minseok couldn't fathom sharing a room with the man, and on top of that, he and Baekhyun could only meet in the privacy of his room. Minseok needed to do something to protect that.

“Dongyul will be arriving around lunch time. You will dress for the occasion and dine with him.”

“Yes father,” Minseok agreed, knowing it was useless to argue.

“After that, you will entertain him accordingly. I will be setting up your dates since your last engagement went so poorly.”

“May I make a request, father?”

“Only if it’s worthwhile.”

“I wish to maintain living in separate rooms for the time of our engagement.”

“Excuse me?”

“I need my privacy, father. I don't know this man at all, and suddenly sharing my entire life with him isn't going to make things better. You said it yourself that my last engagement went poorly. I wish to learn from that experience and try something new.”

“Very well,” the king grumbled. “You make a convincing point, but only for the beginning of your engagement. You will be married and you will live with him. Your privacy will come to an
end sooner or later, so don't let yourself become pampered.”

“Yes, father...Thank you for your consideration.”

Minseok bowed and left the throne room. Several servants whisked him away to change him into his ruby hanbok and paint him to look as beautiful as possible. Minseok was honestly tired of spending so much time painting himself over, but his beauty really was the only thing his father found worth promoting. Minseok felt like everyone viewed him with such a shallow perspective because of it. Only Baekhyun had really bothered to look past his beauty, and that was mostly because he'd focused initially on his poor health. Minseok knew Baekhyun viewed him as more than that now, but it was tiring being looked down upon by everyone who met him.

Dongyul arrived just in time for Minseok to arrive at the dining hall, and he only had to wait 5 more minutes for Dongyul to be seated at the table with him. He seemed like a kind enough man, but he spent a large amount of time talking about the policies he agreed with that the king had put in place, and Minseok frankly couldn't have cared for them less. He often didn't see eye to eye with his father, so he had to smile awkwardly throughout much of the conversation.

Towards the end of the lunch, the man reached for Minseok's hand, holding it in between both of his. Minseok wanted so badly to pull away. He wasn't comfortable with becoming physical when he'd only spent a mere 2 hours with the man, but this also just felt wrong. Minseok felt no spark, no thrill, when he was with this man, and even less when he touched him. All he could think about was how he wanted Baekhyun to hold him instead.

Unfortunately, Minseok had to spend the rest of the day entertaining the man and showing him around the palace and to his room in the guest quarters. Dongyul was at least respectful of Minseok's personal space and didn't try to get any closer.. Their first 'date' hadn't felt like much of a success however. Perhaps it was still better than Baekhyun's defiant attitude during their dinner, but this man just seemed to look at Minseok as if he were property.

Even the way he addressed him sometimes was uncomfortable. He'd already started calling Minseok 'his birther.' It wasn't even his fiance or betrothed, or even future husband. He had already assumed Minseok was his property, and that was a viewpoint the king shared about birthers. Minseok had never wanted to be found out for this very reason. At least Baekhyun treated him like he was a person.

Baekhyun's visit was the redeeming part of Minseok's day. It was like Baekhyun's touch was erasing every single bad memory and touch Dongyul had given him. Baekhyun seemed worried about how everything had gone as well, and Minseok desperately needed someone to confide in.

“I felt so uncomfortable,” Minseok told Baekhyun as they were lying together after their nightly activities. “He wasn't outright rude, but he called me 'his birther.' He was basically the king's biggest fan as well...”
“Already sounds like an asshole to me. Did he force himself on you?”

“Not really. He held my hand at one point but I think he realized I wasn’t comfortable.”

“At least he's not pushing you...And your father isn't going to make him stay here?”

“I asked him if I could still have my own room during the engagement...So we're still safe to meet.”

“Good,” Baekhyun soothed, rolling over onto his side so he could face Minseok. “You survived today, so let's just rest now. I'll look after you tonight.”

Minseok smiled and nodded, snuggling closer. They'd started cuddling after they slept with each other, and it was Minseok's favorite thing in the world. Baekhyun wrapped his arm around his waist, gently rubbing and massaging his back. Baekhyun still burned his herbs, so Minseok fell asleep to the soothing smell of incense and the warm arms of Baekhyun. He knew this was hardly a safe haven, but Minseok felt so secure in this room with Baekhyun. Despite the fact that he was now having to entertain another man by day and going behind his father's back by night, everything felt alright with Baekhyun. He felt like he could get through all of this with Baekhyun at his side. He loved him.

Chapter End Notes

And we're back with more xiubaek~ A little softer and not quite as angsty (?) this time~ But uh oh, feelings are starting to form >.> What's gonna happen in the future now that Dongyul is in the picture? Will your author ever stop asking dramatic questions in her ANs? Will she ever stop writing stupidly long ANs (probably not). Find out next update~
Minseok's life had become a rocky balance of putting on an act for Dongyul during the day and letting himself completely go with Baekhyun in the evening. He didn't dare tell Baekhyun his feelings, but he no longer held himself back or stopped Baekhyun from giving him any affection he had to offer. Most nights ended in them holding each other close and exchanging sleepy kisses. Baekhyun was always the one to stop once he realized they'd been kissing for a while after they'd finished their previous activities. Minseok hated when Baekhyun caught himself and pulled away, but he was hardly in a position to ask for more than what Baekhyun was already giving him.

Everything got more complicated when Minseok woke up feeling ill one morning. He'd assumed it was his bleed, since he usually got a bit nauseous. That worried him because it meant what he and Baekhyun had been trying to achieve hadn't happened. Minseok wasn't sure how long they would be able to keep this up, considering how much the king was pushing his dates with Dongyul. What if Minseok didn't get pregnant before his marriage to Dongyul? This would have all been for nothing, and his feelings for Baekhyun would just cause him far more pain than he needed.

To his surprise, however, his bleed hadn't started. Minseok checked his journal, since he always kept track of his bleed in it. He usually had a fairly constant cycle and it wasn't common for him to have a late bleed. His eyes widened as he looked at the date of his last bleed. He'd lost track of time between spending it with Baekhyun and seeing Dongyul in the more recent weeks, but it had been almost 2 months since his last bleed. He'd never had a cycle as irregular as that.

Minseok sat on his bed, resting his hand on his stomach. If he hadn't had his bleed yet, there was a pretty high chance they had succeeded after all and he was pregnant. They'd been trying so hard for this, but now that Minseok thought about it, he'd never considered being a parent or having a child growing inside him. It was suddenly a bit overwhelming. It was Baekhyun's child though, and Baekhyun had promised to help him, even if they never had a real relationship. Minseok needed to let Baekhyun know. He didn't know the first thing about pregnancy, but Baekhyun did. Minseok needed Baekhyun to calm him down and help him sort through all his thoughts. Unfortunately, his father had planned another date for him with Dongyul, and Minseok would have to wait until the evening. It was always so miserably hard to wait until he could see Baekhyun.

Minseok's dates with Dongyul were always tiring. The man wasn't unkind, but he still treated Minseok as a weakling and as someone that he owned. He promised him possessions and whatnot upon their marriage, but Minseok really couldn't care less. He had to pretend he was flattered and enjoying his time though. If the king caught wind that he wasn't trying his best with this second engagement, Minseok was afraid of what he would do to him. It was so exhausting feigning interest.
The day dragged on, and Minseok hardly made it through his date with Dongyul. His stomach was still upset and eating a few of the dishes that had been served made everything way worse. As soon as he'd parted from Dongyul, he rushed to his room and vomited. It was definitely seeming more and more likely that he was either pregnant or had a stomach ailment. He wasn't at all feverish though, so that didn't seem likely.

Minseok ended up resting in bed for the rest of the day, asking for his dinner to be brought to his room. He tried his best to eat it, but he stopped as soon as the nausea worsened again. If this was how being pregnant was going to be, he wasn't sure he could handle this. Jongin didn't seem this nauseous and he was already almost 4 months along. Was it because Minseok's health was so bad to begin with?

Despite his worrying, Minseok found himself exhausted and actually dozed off shortly after dinner. He only woke up again when he heard the shuffling sound of Baekhyun slipping in through his window. He tiredly pushed himself up in bed, wishing he could feel well enough to properly greet Baekhyun. The other took a look at his dinner tray and frowned.

“Are you feeling ok? You didn't eat much...”

“I don't feel well,” Minseok answered softly. Baekhyun's frown grew deeper.

“Lay down. I brought some herbs with me. I'll look after you.”

Minseok nodded, doing as told. He knew he needed to tell Baekhyun about his suspicion, but he didn't know how to do it. At that point he didn't even know if he had the strength to do it. Baekhyun simple fluffed the pillows around him and tucked him under the covers before sitting on the side of the bed to pull out his bag of herbs. Minseok watched tiredly as Baekhyun lit the usual herbs for incense, but this time, he pulled out a small stone bowl and a rock and started mashing different herbs in them.

“I'll add hot water to this later, and it will become a tea. It's really good for soothing the stomach. Jongin's has been acting up, so I used this for him earlier.”


“Yes, but he didn't like the taste much.”

“I don't care if it helps,” Minseok mumbled.

Baekhyun mashed the herbs up, then got a kettle and set it above the fireplace. During the time it took to heat the water, he massaged Minseok's back and neck, hoping to at least soothe him a bit. He talked a lot of Jongin, since that was his primary job now. He checked in on Jongin at least once a day, giving him massages, making him different herbal remedies, and keeping him company when none of that worked and Chanyeol was away. Minseok hated the amount of jealousy he was feeling. He wanted Baekhyun to be with him all day and care for him.
“Baekhyun...” Minseok started, somewhat nervous. “I missed my bleed...”

Baekhyun froze for a moment, and it was only when the kettle started to screech that he rushed over to pull it from the fire. He walked to the table and mixed the crushed leaves into the kettle, letting them steep before using a small metal strainer to pour them into a cup. He brought it to Minseok and sat back down on the edge of the bed.

“You're sure you missed it?” He asked.

“It's been almost 2 months since my last bleed. Do you think I'm...”

“I think so,” Baekhyun whispered. “We'll really just have to keep an eye on you. We can't go to the doctor and ask him to confirm it with his weird machine. So you think you're experiencing morning sickness right now?”

“I think so...Baekhyun, what do we do now? Am I supposed to tell my father?”

“No! Not yet. It's too early in the pregnancy, and we need to be sure in the first place that you're really pregnant...Your father could do a lot to harm you and you could easily lose the baby. We need to play it safe and hide it for now.”

“I'm scared, Baekhyun...How are we going to get away with this? Do you think we made a mistake?”

“We did something really dangerous and stupid, Minseok,” Baekhyun sighed. “But I'm going to take care of you. Let's wait until you're further along, or until your father pushes the marriage too far and you have to put a stop to it. I'll start setting aside food and whatever money I get to get us out of here. I'll keep some of the herbs the doctor orders for me too. That way I can take care of you as well as Jongin.” Minseok nodded slowly and pressed his hand to his stomach.

“I'm pregnant...” He muttered, staring at the fireplace dazedly. “It's taking a while to let it sink in. Is that strange? Normally people are happy about this...but I feel so anxious.”

“That's also normal, and given why this baby came about, I think fear and anxiety is the natural reaction. It's going to be ok though. I'll take care of you and the baby, I promise.”

“Will you hold me?”

“Drink your tea first.”

Minseok pouted, but pressed the cup to his lips to take a sip. It was extremely bitter and Minseok almost gagged while swallowing it. Baekhyun laughed quietly.

“Jongin's reaction was even worse.”

“It's so bitter...”

“It helps, I promise.”

Minseok stared at Baekhyun for a moment. He was making an awful lot of promises. Minseok
wasn't sure why it was giving him such mixed feelings. On one hand, he was happy to be hearing those words of reassurance and he'd wanted Baekhyun to look after him as well. On the other hand, however, it filled him with a sense of dread. Minseok was scared to read too far into Baekhyun's words, and he was scared he would be let down or abandoned when things got tough. Baekhyun didn't seem like the type to do that, but Minseok had never been lucky in life, so this felt too good to be true.

He finished his tea as best as he could, and he was glad that it did soothe his stomach. Baekhyun got him all tucked in once more and cleaned up after himself so no one would know he'd been there in the morning. After that, he crawled into bed, letting Minseok snuggle up to him. He wrapped his arms loosely around Minseok that night, and he didn't rub his back or kiss his head like he did on most nights when they laid together. Was he distracted? Or was he upset? Either way, Minseok could already tell he was pulling away, and that terrified him. It didn't help that he woke up the very next morning to an empty side of the bed that was cold rather than warm.

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Minseok's morning sickness ended up being fairly constant, and it was a struggle just to pretend nothing was wrong around the other people in the palace. They were used to him seeming ill, so nobody went out of their way to suspect anything. The hardest challenge was pretending to be well and enjoying himself around Dongyul. Most of the time they spent together was during a meal and then a simple walk afterwards. Minseok found it a struggle most days to not throw up by the smell of certain foods or from forcing himself to eat so Dongyul wouldn't suspect anything. Minseok had hardly been holding up this act for long, and he was already so tired of it.

He took relief in the evenings when Baekhyun would come to him with herbs or various foods he had prepared for Jongin and saved for him as well. Minseok was pretty sure he would never be able to carry a baby without Baekhyun constantly looking after him. His father would be disappointed in him if he realized just how little use Minseok was to him. Minseok was frustrated with himself that he still let that depress him so much. He'd come to terms with his father's obvious lack of care for any of them, Minseok especially, but some dumb part of him craved love and attention and wanted to be useful in even the smallest way. He didn't even think he would be useful or worthwhile to Baekhyun in the end.

Baekhyun was still being distant with him as well. It was like as soon as Minseok got pregnant, their relationship shifted from comfortable friends of sorts to that of a caretaker and patient. Minseok missed when Baekhyun would kiss him, though he really shouldn't have been surprised since they started doing that purely to help Minseok along, but he'd thought there was at least some feeling growing between them. Perhaps it really had been completely one-sided this whole time. At least Baekhyun still held him when he asked, but he had a feeling that was probably out of pity because Minseok often asked when he was feeling too ill to sleep without some form of comfort.

Baekhyun had made oils for massaging Jongin, so he brought those every night as well. Minseok was amazed that Baekhyun knew which points to massage in order to help get rid of
nausea as well as relax stiff muscles. Minseok was honestly jealous of the level of knowledge the people of Nefret had. If he'd been born there, he probably wouldn't be struggling as much as he was. Of course, that would mean he wouldn't be a prince either, and none of this would have come to pass in the first place. Minseok hadn't ever been fond of his role in life, but now he really resented it. If he'd been someone else entirely, maybe he could have met Baekhyun under regular terms and they would have fallen in love with each other.

Minseok was almost dozing off one night as Baekhyun massaged his legs. He'd been on his feet a lot that day walking around with Dongyul, and the instant he'd told Baekhyun he was sore, he'd started working on massaging him. As Baekhyun finished up, he tucked Minseok tighter under the covers and started cleaning up his things. Minseok sighed, watching Baekhyun tiredly as he worked.

“Will you sleep with me again?”

“Hm?” Baekhyun asked. “I sleep with you every night. You don't need to ask me.”

“That's not what I meant...I want to have sex with you again.”

“Minseok...I don't think that's a good idea. Besides, you're already pregnant.”

“I miss you,” Minseok muttered, feeling tears gather in his eyes. Baekhyun sighed.

“Let's talk about this another time, ok? You're not well enough for that anyways.”

“Then will you at least hold me until I fall asleep?”

“Of course.”

Baekhyun slid under the covers and Minseok was snuggled against him in seconds. Baekhyun wrapped his arms around him and combed his fingers through Minseok's hair, something that usually soothed him to sleep. Minseok was struggling to sleep that night however. He knew Baekhyun was only doing this out of a feeling of obligation, but he wanted it to be more so badly that it hurt. Of course Baekhyun wouldn't want anything more from Minseok now that they'd accomplished their goal. He was simply taking responsibility for his part of their agreement. Minseok had been foolish to get so attached.

It was even harder seeing Baekhyun in the gardens or with Jongin. Minseok wanted desperately to join them, but he was always with Dongyul. So instead, he just watched from afar, wishing he could be someone else entirely.

Jongin was getting much rounder and looked so healthy and happily flushed. Minseok wished he could look like that instead of the pale sickly being he was. Maybe Baekhyun would find him more attractive then. Despite Minseok's looks being the only thing worth noting about him, they'd never once entranced Baekhyun. Minseok really didn't have anything to offer him. It was no wonder Baekhyun didn't want anything from him.
Jongin was absolutely stunning. He was showing quite a bit and the doctor had told him he was too heavy, but Baekhyun had immediately told him he was healthy and didn't need to worry. He needed the food to get the strength to carry both himself and the baby. Baekhyun insisted that being round was a sign of being healthy. Truthfully, Jongin had been very anxious about his appearance since he started showing. It was reassuring to hear those words from Baekhyun. Jongin was glad he made Baekhyun his caretaker. He'd been missing Baekhyun since he was taken from the princes' quarters, so this gave him the chance to see him again. Baekhyun knew what he was doing as well, so Jongin felt reassured going into this pregnancy with him looking out for him.

Chanyeol had been an absolute angel the entire time as well. He was always complimenting Jongin on how beautiful he looked and how much he liked his baby bump. He was also doing everything he could to learn tips from Baekhyun. He'd already learned which herbs to use to make tea for Jongin in the evening and he was learning how to give him amazing massages as well. He'd backed off his duties with the royal guard significantly since he wanted to be with Jongin and experience all of this together. He was still the perfect husband, 8 months into their marriage.

Jongin had wondered how their marriage would fair with the addition of a baby, but as with their marriage, their relationship didn't change all that much. If anything, Jongin got clingier and whinier, but Chanyeol was still as gentle and willing to oblige him as ever. Their little pet pig was still a bundle of energy, so they walked him in the garden every evening, and when Jongin was tired and needed to sit down, Chanyeol would roll around on the grass, playing with Lottie until he was tuckered out enough for them to consider going to sleep.

Jongin loved watching Chanyeol get covered in grass stains and dirt as he played. Jongin was never really one for the pristine, clean life, coming from the Sous Mountains, so it made him happy to see someone else not caring so much about the formalities of royalty. Jongin wanted their children to have a childhood full of adventure and fun, and plenty of dirt of course. Having Lottie would be nice as well. Jongin had never had a pet growing up, but Lottie filled him with so much joy, he hoped his child would be just as happy.

On one of the evenings after they'd played with Lottie until he was fast asleep, Jongin was curled up in bed with a few pillows giving extra support. His back had been getting sore between carrying the baby as well as working in the workshop. He was still actively trying to improve the design for the iron steeds, and his pregnancy had slowed him down a bit, but he wasn't going to just drop everything because of the baby. Chanyeol had asked him not to overdo it and often stayed with him in the workshop to make sure he wasn't lifting anything too heavy. More than anything, it was just hard bending over his stomach to do detailed work on his inventions.

As such, Chanyeol had worked hard on learning how to massage his back. When Chanyeol rolled Jongin over onto his side, Jongin always knew that meant a massage, and he was honestly
grateful. This evening in particular, Jongin was sore all over, so Chanyeol did his best to loosen up his muscles. He even gave Jongin a hand massage, which had goosebumps traveling up and down his skin. When they finally were in bed together, Jongin felt completely relaxed, like he didn't have a care in the world. Chanyeol wrapped him up in his arms and rubbed his belly, something he did every night as a way to soothe Jongin but also to interact with their baby.

“Do you think we're going to have a boy or a girl?” Jongin asked.

“I don't know...I'd be fine with either. Having a baby is already amazing as it is.”

“A boy would be better for royalty, wouldn't it?”

“I don't know. I don't foresee myself taking over my father's place on the throne, so the need for an heir really isn't there. I just want to have cute kids.”

“You want more than one?” Jongin asked with wide eyes.

“Eventually, yeah,” Chanyeol said with a laugh. “I wouldn't force that on you so soon after this little one is born. Or at all if you don't want anymore kids.”

“I wouldn't mind it, but I do want to get through this pregnancy first.”

“I'll hold you to that,” Chanyeol teased, kissing Jongin's cheek before nibbling on it softly.

“I'm going to hold you to your word too,” Jongin whined, trying to playfully escape from Chanyeol. “We'll grow our family slowly, but surely.”

“Sounds like a wonderful plan to me.”

Chanyeol kissed Jongin's nose before rubbing his own against it. Jongin giggled and snuggled closer, closing his eyes for the night. As scary as pregnancy had been for Jongin in the beginning, he was happier than ever, and had wonderful people supporting him. It was much easier to deal with the aches, nausea, and changing body when there was someone by his side to hold him and love him even on his worst days. Chanyeol was still shaping up to be the best thing that had happened in Jongin's life, and he couldn't wait for their family to get one more person into the mix.

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Minseok was on yet another date with Dongyul. He'd learned how to mostly block him out while still looking vaguely interested by this point. They were walking through the gardens, and Dongyul was telling him about all the plants that had been donated from his land and how Minseok would love to walk through the fields. He was often talking about what Minseok would love about the Golden Meadows, probably because he could tell he needed to sell this marriage to Minseok. He talked often about how they had a vast array of dairy products, more than even the kingdom had available, and how Minseok could have meat for any of his meals that he wanted. Minseok honestly could hardly stomach the thought of meat with how nauseous he was, but he tried to seem grateful.

As they walked through the garden, they spotted Jongin and Chanyeol playing with Lottie.
Minseok couldn't help but smile. Lottie had been a very kind gift from Dongyul, and one of the few things that convinced Minseok that Dongyul wasn't completely horrible. Dongyul must have noticed his long stare, because he reached for Minseok's hand, holding it in front of him.

“I can give you all the pigs you could ever want. You could have a whole family as pets. And I'd serve you the finest meat.”

“Oh...That's very kind of you...”

“I'll treat you right, Minseok, give you everything you want.”

“I appreciate your offer and it's very generous...”

Minseok looked back at Jongin and Chanyeol and noticed that Baekhyun had joined them, nagging at Jongin about something. Minseok suddenly felt like he couldn't breathe. It was so hard seeing Baekhyun being so close but not being able to go to him. His nausea got worse when he was upset, and all Minseok wanted to do was lay in his room until Baekhyun came to him later.

“Minseok? Minseok?” Dongyul called out to him, breaking Minseok out of his daze.

“Yes...?”

“Are you alright? You look ill...”

“I'm sorry, I'm not feeling so well today,” Minseok mumbled. It was the truth, but Dongyul didn't need to know why.

“You shouldn't have pushed yourself to see me. I won't be upset if you wish to rest instead of seeing me.”

“I'm sorry...Would it be alright if I returned to my room? I think I need to lie down for a while.”

“Would you like me to take you there?”

“No, I can get there on my own. Thank you...”

Dongyul nodded, looking like he wanted to protest, but instead he wrapped his arm around Minseok's waist and led him back into the palace. Minseok didn't notice Baekhyun glance up at him at that moment, or the look of worry on his face that slowly shifted into a frown. Baekhyun clapsed his hands into fists and quickly focused his attention back on Jongin and Chanyeol. He didn't like this uncomfortable feeling brewing in his chest.

Later that night, he wasn't surprised to find Minseok sleeping in his bed when he climbed through the window. Minseok had been sleeping more in an attempt to try and ease the nausea, and Baekhyun wasn't sure it was working at all. Minseok really wasn't in the best condition to be having a baby, but they would have to pull him through this somehow. Baekhyun still felt weird, thinking about how close Dongyul had been with Minseok before. Minseok seemed completely unaware at just how chummy he was becoming with Dongyul.

“Good evening,” Minseok mumbled, sitting up in bed.
He always managed to wake up to greet Baekhyun when he climbed through the window. Baekhyun grunted in response, getting straight to fixing tea. Minseok didn't like the lack of response, so he pushed himself out of bed and walked over to the table where Baekhyun was at. Still, Baekhyun didn't even look up at him. This was way more distant than usual.

“Are you alright...?” Minseok asked.

“Fine. What about you?”

“I'm...as well as I usually am.”

“You seemed pretty peppy earlier,” Baekhyun stated flatly. “You were walking through the garden with Dongyul practically hanging off of you.”

“You saw me?” Minseok asked nervously.

“Hard to miss when you were making such a show of everything.”

“What are you talking about? What was I making a show of?”

“Giving Dongyul your hand, letting him lead you around by the waist. It seems like you're really enjoying it all. Makes me wonder why we went through with this stupid plan in the first place.”

“Baekhyun, I'm not enjoying this!” Minseok snapped irritably. “I have to put up with those kinds of actions because my father will easily hear wind of it if I don't. I wasn't feeling well this afternoon, so Dongyul held me by the waist to support me. I didn't ask him to, but I can't just shove him away when he does those things, can I? You told me to lay low and play along with this, so I'm trying!”

“It just seemed awfully friendly and willing to me.”

“Baekhyun...Are you jealous?”

“Hell no! Why the hell would I be jealous!?” Baekhyun immediately denied.

Minseok's shoulders sank, and he took a few steps backwards, dropping back onto his bed. The tears were seconds away from falling, and Minseok didn't have the power to stop them. He knew Baekhyun didn't care for him that way, but it was so painful having it shouted in his face and vehemently denied. What was Minseok even hoping for in a relationship like this? He couldn't take this anymore.

“You don't have to be so disgusted,” Minseok whispered, a few tears falling onto his thighs. “It's ok to be jealous...I would like you to be jealous.”

“Minseok?” Baekhyun asked cautiously, realizing he'd been way too harsh seconds before.

“You think I like being with Dongyul? I hate it! It makes my skin crawl,” Minseok sobbed, hugging his legs close. “You're the one I love, not him! You're the one I want, but I can't have you...so what am I supposed to do?”

“You what?” Baekhyun gasped.
“I love you...I have for a while. I love you so much more than I could ever love him!”

Minseok dropped his forehead onto his knees, sobbing uncontrollably. He was so tired of putting up with this. He knew Baekhyun wouldn't ever feel the same way about him, but he didn't want to be dragged along anymore. How had he ever thought he could get through this without being in a relationship with Baekhyun? How were they even supposed to be together in the first place?

“Minseok...I don't know how to respond,” Baekhyun finally answered. Minseok glanced up from his knees, eyes already a puffy mess.

“Do you hate me?”

“No, I don't,” Baekhyun quickly stated. “I care about you, Minseok, I do...I just don't know if I can care about you like that. I want to look out for you and take care of you, and I want to raise our child somehow...but I don't know if I can return your feelings. It's not you, I promise. I just...Everything that's happened so far at the palace has made me so angry and bitter, including what you're going through and what we're doing to try and get you out of this mess. I can't even think about other feelings right now. I'm sorry...”

“But you care for me?”

“I care for you,” Baekhyun affirmed. “I care about you a lot, and I'm going to get you out of here somehow.” Minseok's lips quivered and he dropped his legs in favor of holding his arms out to Baekhyun.

“Then just hold me, please?”

Baekhyun sighed and set down what he was doing so he could walk over to Minseok. Minseok clung to him as soon as he was within arm's reach, and Baekhyun rocked from side to side, trying to soothe him. Minseok was still a crying mess, and Baekhyun hated seeing Minseok like this. He hadn't even thought about the possibility of Minseok falling in love with him. He'd thought Minseok was just as hesitant and somewhat resentful about the situation as Baekhyun had been, but apparently that wasn't the case. Minseok needed someone at his side throughout all of this though, and even if Baekhyun could only be there for him platonically, he was going to be that person.

Once Minseok had calmed down, Baekhyun continued to make the tea. Minseok was tired of drinking it, but it did help. With how much he'd cried, something bitter might help straighten him up at least. To his surprise, when he took a sip, it was really sweet. Minseok's eyes went wide and Baekhyun giggled at his reaction.

“I experimented a bit with different honeys and made the tea sweeter. Is it better?”

“Yes...Thank you...”

Minseok finished his tea easily, and Baekhyun tucked him into bed. Minseok grabbed Baekhyun's sleeve, looking at him with a pleading expression. Baekhyun nodded, knowing what
Minseok wanted already, and climbed into bed beside him. Minseok snuggled up to him, wrapping his arms around his waist tightly. Minseok was hurting still, knowing Baekhyun didn't and probably couldn't return his feelings, but at least he'd admitted he cared. Even if it was just pity, Minseok wasn't completely worthless to him. As he fell asleep that night, he wished he and Baekhyun could be anywhere but in the palace, and he wasn't royalty, and Baekhyun actually loved him.

Baekhyun brushed through Minseok's hair, staring at his puffy, red eyelids and pale complexion. It was hard seeing him this way, and Baekhyun hated that he was the cause for the tears earlier. He hated that he felt such a strange anger and had taken it out on Minseok. That was completely unlike him, and Baekhyun didn't know what it meant. Was he jealous? Could he be jealous if he didn't want Minseok all to himself? Wasn't that what jealousy meant? Did he just want Dongyul away from Minseok because he knew it made him uncomfortable? Maybe that was it. Baekhyun never wanted Minseok to feel so miserable, especially when he was such a kind person. Regardless of his feelings, Baekhyun wanted to protect Minseok. That had to be what was causing him to act this way.

What was he supposed to do about Minseok's feelings though? It was cruel to just ignore them or deny them while continuing to hold him by night. He knew this was hurting Minseok more than anything, but Baekhyun didn't know what to do. He'd already planned to be dedicated to Minseok when they'd agreed to go through with this, but would he feel the same fluttery feeling of love in his chest? His feelings were so confusing. All Baekhyun knew for sure was he had to take better care of Minseok, and he couldn't let him get so hurt and upset. He needed to take care of him physically and emotionally, especially while Minseok was in the earlier stage of his pregnancy. Minseok needed him, and Baekhyun couldn't let him down, no matter what that meant regarding his own feelings.

Chapter End Notes

*coughs* Angst, angst, angst, angst >.>

So, I'm going to keep my chapter comments short this time around because I need to address something that's becoming really irritating for me, and it's going to be wordy, so bear with me. I'll bold the important part for those of you who don't care for my rambling, though I would appreciate it if you would read this.

I've been getting a lot of comments regarding top and bottom, pretty much entirely regarding Seho. This has been more prominent on AFF than AO3, but I've gotten the comments on both sites. Some of you are just curious, I get that, but I've also gotten some fairly rude comments, and honestly, I'm sick of it. I'm sick of even the simple "who tops in seho?" And here's why. It's a slippery slope on a couple of levels, because sometimes it leads to extremely closedminded heteronormativity, but as an author, it also leads to something else. If someone doesn't like how I wrote a ship, then they will complain or leave a rude comment. And I'm sorry, but I don't need that
crap. And not everyone does this obviously, but I've been told, even for this story already, that they wouldn't read it because they didn't read so and so as a top. And that pisses me off. You don't have to read my story, I appreciate those that do, but I'm not gonna hold you down and make you read. If you don't want to, that's fine, but don't come and take a piss on me for not writing what YOU want me to write. This is my story, and I will always operate this way. Now, the other reason getting top/bottom comments has irritated me so much is it's ALL been about Seho, including the aforementioned comment in which they wouldn't read. For God's sake, I've written 16 chapters, 100k words, and Seho aren't even a couple yet! So they aren't having sex! I haven't even written it yet and I'm nowhere near writing it 16 chapters in! The past 3 chapters have been about xiubaek, and yet I've received comments that pretty much only talk about Seho tops and bottoms, who weren't at all in those chapters. And it makes me feel like you don't actually care about my story at all, just who puts their dick in who. And on that note, here's my philosophy on this subject. I DO NOT WRITE A TOP OR A BOTTOM. THEY ARE BOTH MEN. THEY BOTH HAVE THE NECESSARY PARTS AND CAN BOTH DO WHATEVER ACTION THEY DAMN WELL WANT TO DO. And I will write them however I damn well want to write them, but for those that can't figure out what I'm implying, they switch. I get in mpreg stories it's a bigger deal to some people who gets pregnant, but fucking hell, that's not the ONLY thing my story is about, so stop leaving me comments about a couple that isn't even in the story yet. I appreciate comments, I really do, but I don't like these comments. And as such, I've made a new rule and it will be added to my forewords for pretty much all my stories, because I've been getting these comments on all my stories since I started writing like 5 years ago. I WILL NOT BE RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS REGARDING WHO TOPS OR BOTTOMS. PERIOD. THE END. I don't want to fight with people, and like I said, you don't have to read my fic, I won't fault you, but I'm still a person with feelings and wishes, so I'd like them to be respected. If you don't want to read, just leave. Don't leave me a nasty comment, because it doesn't change anything, just makes me feel bad and you a shit person.

I'm going to end my rant now, and I'm sorry for all the wonderful readers who aren't the problem. This story has actually received so many excited, wonderful comments that I'm amazed. And I don't want to downplay those or focus on the negative comments only. So thank you all sooooooo much for loving this story and leaving me excited comments. They really make my week and keep me writing, especially when I fall into a writing slump, which I'm kinda in right now rip XP I hope you will all continue to love this story and it can cheer you up and keep you going the way all your comments keep me going. Thank you all so much!!!
Chapter 10

After the night when Minseok confessed to Baekhyun, their relationship shifted. It was subtle, but Minseok could tell Baekhyun was being more gentle with him, like he would break if he were too harsh. It was probably true, but Minseok wasn't sure he wanted Baekhyun's pity. Baekhyun's actions often contradicted how he apparently felt. He would be so kind and loving when he held Minseok, but he wouldn't let himself get carried away. It was like he was pulling himself away from Minseok, and Minseok couldn't understand why. He wanted Baekhyun to be by his side and love him, so if he wanted that as well, why was he denying himself that? Was he afraid of what might happen to both of them? They were in danger regardless of if they loved each other or not. Was he just humoring Minseok and pulling away as soon as he possibly could? Minseok didn't want that either, though he desperately needed someone at his side right now. He was tired of trying to understand their relationship and wishing for it to be simpler.

Baekhyun was struggling himself. He'd made it his goal to put Minseok's health and happiness first. If that meant holding him all night and soothing him when he wasn't feeling well, Baekhyun would do it. That strange anger wouldn't stop hitting him though. Baekhyun knew he wanted Dongyul away from Minseok. It always struck him the worst when he saw them together and could see Minseok's discomfort. He felt bad for even suggesting that Minseok was enjoying his forced dates. It was all because of that uncomfortable anger growing in his chest, and Baekhyun couldn't tell if it was him being protective or jealous. Minseok's words had caught him off guard, but now that the idea had been placed in his head, Baekhyun couldn't tell if he was jealous or not.

He tried to ignore the muddled mess going on in his head and chest in favor of checking on Minseok's health from afar. More often than not, Minseok looked pale and Baekhyun could tell when he was trying not to throw up because he hid his mouth behind his hanbok sleeve and closed his eyes briefly. Dongyul didn't even seem to notice that Minseok was struggling, or maybe he thought this was just the way Minseok was since it was known that his health was poor. Baekhyun hated seeing him that way and having to wait until the evening to provide him with any kind of relief.

Minseok didn't bring up his feelings again to Baekhyun for a few weeks. Their relationship felt somewhat rocky to both of them, so they were both being careful not to upset the other. It was only on an evening when Minseok was feeling particularly tired that he confronted Baekhyun again.

“I miss you...” He said softly.

Baekhyun was confused for a moment, since he'd visited Minseok literally every evening and stayed through much of the night. Then he remembered the last time Minseok had said something like this and he tensed up slightly. Minseok wanted to be intimate with him again, and Baekhyun wasn't sure what to do. He knew if he said yes, that would get Minseok's hopes up, but was that a
reason to worry? They were going to have a child together and Baekhyun was already planning to have Minseok in his life permanently. They had been intimate with each other for a while already, so this was no different.

The thing that was holding Baekhyun back the most was that weird feeling in his chest. Rather than anger, it was nervousness now. Baekhyun had never been afraid to interact with another human before, and even when he'd first started having sex with Minseok, their interactions never made him this anxious. What was changing? Why was he so worried now? As he thought about it more, he realized it was because he wanted this. He wanted the intimacy, and he was afraid to abuse it and hurt Minseok with their ambiguous relationship.

“You don't have to love me,” Minseok whispered after several minutes of silence. “You don't have to put your heart into it...I just want to feel you.”

“Don't talk like that,” Baekhyun said gently, brushing his fingers through Minseok's hair. “You don't need to convince me by putting yourself down and disregarding your feelings. I don't want you to do that.”

“I just miss you,” Minseok mumbled, eyes tearing up. “I know you don't love me but I can't help it!”

“Shhh,” Baekhyun hushed, leaning closer and resting his forehead on Minseok's. “I care about you, Minseok. Don't equate my feelings to nothing...Besides, I miss you too.”

“You do?”

Baekhyun hummed before connecting their lips, kissing Minseok for the first time in over a month. While Baekhyun held him readily, he hadn't been doing anything beyond that level of intimacy with him. His heart beat faster as Minseok returned the kiss, and Baekhyun was starting to realize he missed this far more than he had realized. Perhaps his feelings weren't so confusing after all, and it was just his stubbornness that was holding him back.

Baekhyun made love to Minseok that night, being as gentle as possible and kissing Minseok on every inch of skin he could. Minseok didn't have much energy, so it was mostly Baekhyun doing the work, but he could tell just how happy this was making Minseok. He'd missed the taste and feel of Minseok's body as well. Baekhyun hadn't realized just how wrapped up in Minseok he'd become, and how in denial he'd been about that very fact.

Why was there even a reason to deny and push away from Minseok? All Baekhyun's mind was circling back to was the fact that Minseok was the son of the king and Baekhyun had wanted to get as far away from being that man's pawn as possible. As soon as they were found out though, they would both be traitors. Baekhyun would be a wanted man and Minseok would be in danger of the king's wrath. The king was going to be Minseok's enemy as well, and Minseok had known that and accepted it when deciding to be with Baekhyun. Why was it so hard for Baekhyun to let go of that fact?
He'd always been stubborn and a bit insecure while trying to mask it with false confidence. He'd used his knowledge as a means to protect himself and give people a reason to keep him around, especially in the palace. He didn't think Minseok would abandon him, not with how much he was clinging now and with a child involved. Baekhyun was just afraid to let his guard down and let someone else into his life. He'd struggled with that even back in Nefret. He'd grown up trying to be overly independent, and now he was pushing people away because he didn't know how to let them be close.

As Baekhyun held a sleeping Minseok that night, he let his thoughts slowly sort themselves out. He was feeling protective of Minseok, but there was something more as well. He really didn't like seeing Dongyul near Minseok, and it was no doubt because Baekhyun's feelings for Minseok were changing. He'd wanted to be intimate with him again, which meant that regardless of if Baekhyun admitted it or not, he wanted Minseok. That meant something else as well.

“I'm jealous,” Baekhyun whispered, brushing through Minseok's hair again. “I don't like it when you go back to that man...I don't like when he touches you, or when he ignores it when you're sick or struggling. I don't want you to go back to him, but what can I do? I'm so powerless and scared, Minseok...I don't even have the guts to tell you this when you're awake. How am I supposed to protect you and look out for you? What do I do?”

Baekhyun hugged Minseok tighter, finding instant relief when Minseok cuddled back in his sleep. Minseok was so at peace like this, and Baekhyun had to do anything he could to keep that peace. He would need time to sort through all of his feelings, but for now, he could hold Minseok and give him the attention he needed. Maybe as he stopped being so defiant and just let himself be with Minseok, he would be able to understand everything he was feeling, and he'd have the strength to admit it all to Minseok.

Baekhyun struggled to sleep that night, too stressed about their relationship and what they were going to do. He'd started putting away food and medicine for them for when they decided to flee, but it was hardly a solid plan. He only calmed down enough to sleep when Minseok wrapped his leg around him in his sleep, keeping Baekhyun from shifting and keeping him warm. Minseok was calming, and Baekhyun was finding it harder to leave him every time. He only managed to pull himself away as the sun was rising because he knew the servants would be up soon. What was Minseok doing to him?

~*~

Minseok sighed as he looked in the mirror after the servants had dolled him up for another lunch with Dongyul. He was wearing an emerald hanbok with golden detailing, as well as a diadem in the shape of leaves circling around his forehead. Within the leaves were small emeralds, and his eyes had been painted with a heavy amount of liner. He looked beautiful, but he looked tired. Not even the makeup could hide the exhaustion and illness he was feeling.

It had been almost 3 months since Minseok had missed his bleed, and it still hadn't come, so he was certain he was pregnant at this point. The morning sickness was still hard to bear, even with
Baekhyun taking care of him every night. On days like this particular day, Minseok was lucky if he could eat anything at all without throwing up. How was he supposed to get through this? He just wanted to go back to bed, but he had to keep this up. He and Baekhyun weren't ready to flee by any means, and his father hadn't pushed for marriage yet. He had to keep this act up as long as he could.

Minseok hardly touched his lunch with Dongyul, but he tried to nibble enough to where it wouldn't be questionable. Dongyul loved walking through the gardens, and truthfully, Minseok loved the gardens as well, but he much would have rather been by himself or with Baekhyun. At that moment, he was dying to get back to his bed. He didn't know if he could go on a walk through the gardens without throwing up.

Minseok looked for Baekhyun while they walked through the gardens. He knew they wouldn't be able to interact, but just seeing him would give him the strength to pull through. Unfortunately, Baekhyun didn't seem to be around, and Minseok's nausea was starting to make him dizzy. He grabbed Dongyul's arm and closed his eyes when it got to be too bad, and Dongyul quickly gripped him to support him.

"Prince Minseok? Are you feeling ill?"

"I need to sit," Minseok managed.

Dongyul helped him over to a nearby bench and carefully sat him down. Dongyul was beside him, rubbing his back and repeatedly asking what was wrong and if he needed help. Minseok knew he was worried and trying to help, but honestly he just wanted him to be quiet and let him rest. He had to repeatedly swallow in an attempt to not throw up right in front of Dongyul. He was still dizzy and he was starting to fear he would pass out.

Not much further away, Baekhyun was making his rounds through the gardens, watering everything. His eyes widened when he spotted Minseok and Dongyul at the bench, and he ducked under a tree to watch from afar. He could already tell Minseok wasn't well, considering he was holding his head and Dongyul was frantically rubbing his back and asking him questions. Baekhyun wanted to go over there so badly, but he didn't dare approach while Dongyul was with Minseok. It was unbearable seeing him like this though. Minseok needed help.

Dongyul got to his feet and held Minseok's hand in his. Baekhyun's hands formed into fists yet again, and he pushed back the anger in favor of the fear and worry he was feeling for Minseok. Dongyul rubbed Minseok's back with his free hand.

"Let me take you back to your room. You need to rest."

"I'm resting now, just give me a minute," Minseok pleaded.
He didn't want Dongyul entering his room. That was his own personal space, and only Baekhyun was allowed to share it with him. Dongyul was refusing to listen though.

“Please! I can take care of you. I'll watch over you while you rest, just let me take you to your room.”

“I'm really alright. I don't want to burden you. I can have one of my brothers help me.”

“We're to be married, Minseok! This is not a burden. Please, let me help you.”

Dongyul tugged on Minseok's arm, trying to lift him up so he could grab him, but Minseok resisted. He didn't feel well enough to stand or walk back to his room, and he didn't want to reveal that to Dongyul. He didn't want to let him into his room. He didn't want to be looked after by him. That was Baekhyun's place, no one else's.

Baekhyun took a step forward. Dongyul was starting to get forceful with Minseok now, and Baekhyun was terrified about what might happen. Minseok was obviously uncomfortable, so why was Dongyul pushing him so much? This needed to stop, but Baekhyun knew he and Minseok would be reprimanded if the king learned they interacted. Why was Baekhyun so powerless when Minseok needed him the most. If this didn't stop soon, Baekhyun would have to intervene. He couldn't let this go on.

Luckily, as Minseok was struggling to remain seated, he noticed Junmyeon walking through the garden with Sehun. Minseok called out to him, perhaps a bit too frantically, but Dongyul was jostling him about so much he really was about to throw up on him. Junmyeon rushed over, and Dongyul instantly ceased his movements, not wanting anyone to get the wrong impression. As soon as Junmyeon was in arms' reach, he knelt on the ground in front of Minseok, looking him over.

“Are you alright? You look so pale...”

“He's not feeling well. I wanted to take him back to his room, but he was being stubborn,” Dongyul stated. Junmyeon looked at Minseok worriedly, waiting for further explanation.

“I didn't want to be a burden,” Minseok muttered. “I just wanted to rest...”

“I'll take you to your room,” Junmyeon said gently.

He stood up and wrapped his arm around Minseok's back, lifting him with ease. Minseok wrapped his arms around Junmyeon's shoulders, resting his head against his neck and closing his eyes, trying to will away the nausea. Dongyul frowned and cleared his throat.

“I wouldn't want to disturb you while you seem busy yourself. Please, I can take Minseok to his room.”

“We weren't that busy. Minseok needs his rest, so I think it would be best if I took him and he had some time alone. He doesn't sleep well when others are fussing over him.”
Minseok hugged Junmyeong's shoulders tighter. That was partially true, with Baekhyun being the only exception. Minseok had been sick enough growing up that Junmyeon and Chanyeol had both learned he just needed time to sleep on his own. Junmyeon had also witnessed some of Dongyul tugging on Minseok, so he was probably trying to get Minseok away from him.

"I'm sorry your date is coming to an end, but Minseok is ill," Junmyeon stated. He bowed his head and started to walk away, but Dongyul grabbed his arm, forcing him to stay still.

"I appreciate your concern for your brother, but he's my fiance. This is a problem between us, and I would like to take care of him." Junmyeon's eyes narrowed.

"If you would like to take care of him, you can start by letting go of my arm. He's ill. He needs time alone to rest. And while you may be betrothed, he is not your husband, and he is not your possession. You need to respect his wishes. I suggest you back off and let me go, unless you want to make new enemies within the palace."

Junmyeon's tone was threatening, and even from afar, it sent chills down Baekhyun's spine. Finally, Dongyul sighed and let go of Junmyeon. Junmyeon bowed his head once more as a form of goodbye, then turned to Sehun, telling him he was free to do as he pleased since he needed to take Minseok back to his room. After Junmyeon had left the area, Dongyul stormed off in the other direction, and Baekhyun finally breathed a sigh of relief. He owed Junmyeon for saving Minseok from that. Baekhyun hadn't even gotten involved and he'd been too obvious. One thing was for sure though, he needed to start planning their escape route. Minseok couldn't stay here much longer.

Junmyeon quickly brought Minseok to his room, settling him down on his bed. Minseok sighed, finally relaxing and closing his eyes. He felt Junmyeon gently lift his diadem off his head, then sit down beside him on the bed. Minseok opened his eyes and stared tiredly at Junmyeon, knowing he probably wanted to talk about what just happened. Junmyeon gently combed Minseok's hair out of his face.

"Thank you," Minseok mumbled. Junmyeon shook his head.

"Was he hurting you?"

"No, I just...don't feel comfortable having him in my room. Do you think I'm foolish?"

"No," Junmyeon soothed. "I think you're honest, and I think you're doing the best you can in the situation our father put you in. One of these days you will have to be with him though."

"I know," Minseok sighed. Junmyeon rested his hand on Minseok's forehead.

"You feel a little warmer than usual...Would you like me to call the doctor?"

"No. I just need to rest," Minseok stated, but he could tell Junmyeon was skeptical.

"I'm worried about you. You seem really pale and weak as of late..."
“I'm not neglecting my health, I promise.”

“I'll always be here if you need help or someone by your side, you know that right?”

“I know, Junmyeon. Thank you.”

“I'm going to let you rest, but I'll check in on you later.”

Minseok hummed and held Junmyeon's hand, giving it a squeeze. Junmyeon was kind and always tried to look out for his brothers, even if from afar. Minseok wished he could reassure him that what he was experiencing wasn't illness but rather morning sickness, but he was afraid to let anyone else know what he was planning. He was scared that Junmyeon would abandon him if he knew how far he'd strayed from his father's plan. Minseok wouldn't expect his brothers to support him. That would put their lives in danger with the king as well. It was just hard doing this alone, and Minseok found himself longing for Baekhyun once more. He would try to sleep for now. At least that would pass the day away quicker.

When Baekhyun arrived later that evening, Minseok was throwing up in his bathroom. He'd slept for a while, but in the end, the nausea had won. When he got out of the room, his hair was unkempt, his makeup was smudged, and his eyes were watery from throwing up. He looked like an absolute mess, but he still managed to smile when he saw Baekhyun.

“It's bad today,” he whispered in an attempt to explain his horrible appearance.

Baekhyun rushed forward and pulled Minseok into a firm hug, rocking from side to side and resting his head on Minseok's shoulder. Minseok was surprised, not used to Baekhyun being the one holding him this closely. He wrapped his arms around Baekhyun's back and rubbed it.

“What's wrong?” He asked. Baekhyun held him tighter.

“I'm so sorry,” he whispered. “I saw Dongyul with you earlier and I wanted to stop him so badly but I didn't want to go near you because I knew it would be bad. I'm so sorry I couldn't help you...”

“I didn't even know you were there...But it's better that you didn't help me. Dongyul would have instantly complained to my father. You kept us both safe, Baekhyun. And I'm alright. My brother helped me back to my room and Dongyul hasn't bothered me.”

“I don't want you around him,” Baekhyun mumbled. “He's too rough with you and he obviously doesn't love you or care about your health. I don't want him to touch you.”

Minseok smiled and leaned his head against Baekhyun's. This was the first time Baekhyun was being so honest and open about how he felt regarding Dongyul. Minseok didn't want to be around him any more than Baekhyun wanted him to, but he had no choice. He could only take comfort in one thing right now, and that was Baekhyun.

“You're jealous after all, aren't you?” Minseok asked. He was expecting Baekhyun to deny him
again, but instead Baekhyun continued to hold him tightly.

“He doesn't deserve you...You deserve so much better than him. It makes me angry. And I can't do anything.”

Minseok sighed and pulled away just enough so he could cup Baekhyun's cheeks. He'd never seen Baekhyun look so upset and unsure. Baekhyun brought his hands up to meet Minseok's and they stared into each other's eyes for some time. Even looking ill with smeared makeup, Minseok looked so beautiful. Baekhyun had denied how attractive Minseok was for the longest time, but now, he felt like he was just drowning in Minseok's very presence.

“You know my heart belongs to you, don't you?” Minseok said gently, rubbing his thumbs on Baekhyun's cheeks. “You are the one I've chosen, not him. You will always mean the world to me.”

Baekhyun bit his lip. He hardly felt worthy of Minseok's love either, especially with how confused he was and how much he'd denied him before. Minseok was looking at him with such loving, kind eyes. Baekhyun hoped he could understand a little of how he was feeling right now.

“You are the only one who gets to know me intimately,” Minseok continued, placing Baekhyun's hands on his stomach. “You're the one whose baby I'm carrying. You are the one I've chosen, not him.”

“I don't deserve you either...”

“You've been here for me when no one else was. You've cared for me in ways no one else would or could. I love you, Baekhyun.”

Baekhyun sighed, letting Minseok pull him into another hug. He still felt weird knowing Minseok felt so deeply about him and he didn't know just how to answer, but he knew one thing. Minseok needed someone to hold him and look out for him, and Baekhyun would be that person. He wanted to be that person.

When they pulled away, Minseok undid the tie on his hanbok and let Baekhyun slide it off of him. Minseok was too ill for making love, but he took comfort in letting Baekhyun change him into his sleeping garments. After that, he sat at his vanity and let Baekhyun gently clean his face of the smeared makeup. When Baekhyun was finished, he leaned forward and pressed his lips against Minseok's. The latter sighed and wrapped his arms around Baekhyun's neck, letting himself be carried to his bed. Baekhyun laid him onto the bed then crawled in beside him, and Minseok instantly rested his head on Baekhyun's chest, wrapping his arms around him.

They were silent for some time, and Baekhyun just rubbed Minseok's back as he watched the fire burn in the fireplace. Finally, Baekhyun sighed and leaned his cheek on Minseok's head.

“If I'd known your health was so bad, I never would have gotten you pregnant. You're
suffering."

““This was the only way,” Minseok muttered. “Besides, it's what's brought us this close together. I don't regret it at all.”

“I just wish I could take better care of you. If we were in Nefret, you would have been on a special diet and receiving so much extra care. I can only do so much here...”

“I wish I could have been in Nefret as well...”

“When we flee, I'll hide you in Nefret. The forest is vast, and there are plenty of ways to disappear.”

“Really? I think I'd like that...To just disappear with you for a while. To just disappear in general from this life.”

“We're going to have to do it soon. You're going to start showing soon, and your morning sickness is really bad.”

“People are starting to get suspicious,” Minseok stated. “How are we going to get away from here?”

“I've been thinking about it. I can run away from the palace first, before they have a chance to kill me. Then in the evening, I'll help you climb down the wall, and we'll run away.”

“How are we going to get far from the kingdom? As soon as my father sees I'm gone, he'll send men after me. And if he knows I'm pregnant, he'll no doubt send them after you as well.”

“There's a man that delivers the herbal shipments I ask for from Nefret. I know him personally, and I can ask him to smuggle us out on his cargo wagon. He can drop us off in the forest in Nefret, and then you and I will go into hiding on our own. I know that land better than any royal soldier. I can keep us safe.”

“I trust you,” Minseok said, snuggling closer. “I know you'll take care of us. Just tell me when it's time. I'll do my best to keep everything under wraps until then.”

“Soon. I won't make you go through this much longer.”

Minseok nodded and lifted his head so he could kiss Baekhyun's lips. After that, they snuggled together under the covers. Baekhyun ended up falling asleep with Minseok spooning him, his body pressed flush against him. Baekhyun could feel the very beginning of a baby bump pressed against his back, and it only made everything feel more serious. He had to get Minseok out of here soon. For both his sake and the baby's.

~*~

After Minseok had gotten ill on a date with Dongyul, the man seemed determined to look for any signs he could find on their next dates. Minseok had to admire his effort, but he truthfully didn't want the extra attention. Junmyeon had gotten more concerned as well, which scared Minseok even more. Junmyeon was smart and quick to catch onto people when they were hiding information from him. Minseok had to be extra careful around him.
Unfortunately, Junmyeon would find out about what was going on firsthand. As he was walking through the gardens early one morning as the sun was starting to rise, he walked past Minseok's window. He was surprised to see someone open it, since Minseok was usually cold and preferred his window stay shut. He almost couldn't believe his eyes when someone started crawling out of the window and descending down the vines on the wall. Junmyeon ducked behind a tree and waited until he could get a clear view of who it was. At first he thought maybe Dongyul had bothered Minseok during the evening, but as his eyes finally landed on Baekhyun, Junmyeon could no longer understand why he'd come from Minseok's room. What was going on?

Junmyeon left the gardens and headed back into the palace. Sehun had made a habit of disappearing while Junmyeon was on his morning walk, and this morning was no exception. Junmyeon didn't mind as much though. He was far too worried about Minseok at the moment to deal with his own relationship problems. As soon as Junmyeon figured Minseok would be awake, he headed for his bedroom. He knocked on the door, asking if he could come in, and was grateful when he heard Minseok softly answer. Junmyeon made sure to shut the door behind him, not wanting anyone else to even hear what he was about to talk to Minseok about.

“Morning,” Minseok said happily.

Junmyeon could already tell Minseok didn't look well. It hadn't been that long since he'd gotten ill on a date either. Something was wrong, but Minseok was being extremely stubborn about receiving help. Junmyeon had so many questions.

“Did you need something?” Minseok asked when Junmyeon didn't respond right away.

“I wanted to ask you about some things...”

“Me? That's surprising,” Minseok joked. “What was it you needed?”

Minseok sat down on the edge of his bed, looking at Junmyeon expectantly. Junmyeon sighed and sat down next to Minseok, grabbing his hand and holding it in his. Minseok's brow raised, since Junmyeon wasn't normally this clingy. The only time he'd clung to Minseok like this was when he was upset or worried when he was a little kid.

“Are you alright? What's wrong?” Minseok asked.

“I want to ask you that. Minseok, I saw Baekhyun leaving your window this morning...What's going on?”

Minseok's heart sank, and he felt a wave of nausea hit him. It was probably his morning sickness mixed with anxiety, but he had to gulp and try to calm himself down. This was bad. Junmyeon wasn't supposed to know.

“Is Baekhyun looking after you because you're ill? You're not supposed to meet him, Minseok! Do you know how angry father would be if he found out? If you're afraid to go to the doctor, I can
“It's not that, Junmyeon...”

“Then what's going on?”

“I can't tell you. Not unless you promise you won't tell a soul, not even Chanyeol.”

“Minseok...”

“I mean it, Junmyeon.”

“I won't tell. You know I wouldn't do anything to hurt you...But I'm worried.”

“Baekhyun sees me every night. He has been for a while...I love him, Junmyeon.”

“Minseok...What are you thinking? You can't be with Baekhyun! Do you know how much trouble you could get in if father found out? Baekhyun could be killed!”

“I know. That's why you can't tell a soul.”

“So this whole time you've been seeing Baekhyun after all your dates with Dongyul?”

“Baekhyun and I were engaged first. Father can't just expect me to go along happily with every plan he has for me. I don't love Dongyul, and I'm so uncomfortable with him!”

“But Minseok, if the king finds out, you're going to make an enemy of him. This is just as dangerous for you as it is for Baekhyun.”

“Junmyeon, I'm miserable,” Minseok whimpered. “I'm so tired of all of this and Baekhyun is the only person who provides me with any relief. I know what I'm doing is wrong and stupid, but I need him...Please don't tell anyone.”

Junmyeon sighed and hugged Minseok close. He'd observed for a while how upset and lifeless Minseok had been. He was worried for him, but this wasn't his life to critique. All he could do was try to support his big brother.

“I won't tell. Just promise you'll be careful, and you won't let this get out of hand. I don't know what's going to happen to you if you insist on your relationship with Baekhyun.”

“I don't know either...But he makes me happy.”

Junmyeon sighed in defeat, hugging Minseok tighter. Even after he left Minseok's room that day, he couldn't stop thinking about it. There was no way a relationship of any kind with Baekhyun could end well. Minseok had never been such a risk taker, it was honestly terrifying Junmyeon. It was even worse when Junmyeon saw Minseok on his date with Dongyul. He looked just as ill as he always did, which was something else Junmyeon needed to worry about, since nobody else seemed to notice or care.

He almost felt bad for Dongyul, but at the same time, he knew that man had his own selfish
reasons for agreeing to the marriage, and he never had the best intentions for Minseok as one of his primary focuses. This whole situation was just heartbreaking. Minseok could have been happy, just like Chanyeol and Jongin. Then again, Junmyeon hardly knew what was going through Baekhyun's mind. From what Junmyeon had observed, Baekhyun hadn't been overly kind to Minseok either. Junmyeon was still so confused.

Minseok made it through his date with Dongyul, but shortly after that, Junmyeon saw him rushing back to his room. Junmyeon was actually scared that his brother's health was taking a turn for the worse. What if Minseok was seeing Baekhyun because he felt like he didn't have much longer to live? Junmyeon didn't want to think of that extreme, but seeing how ill Minseok looked, it really was hard not to question it. Junmyeon cared way too much about Minseok to just sit on the side and watch him suffer alone.

Later in the evening, Junmyeon decided to visit Minseok again. He figured Baekhyun would probably either be there already or would be coming soon, but Junmyeon needed more answers. He knocked on the door, calling out to Minseok that it was him so he wouldn't panic if Baekhyun were in his room. When Minseok told him to come in, Junmyeon was surprised not to see Baekhyun. Minseok was already in bed, but he sat up and smiled at Junmyeon, patting the spot beside him.

Junmyeon shut the door behind him and walked over to Minseok's bed, taking off his shoes and sitting down beside him. They'd slept together as kids many times. Junmyeon had been afraid of the dark, so Minseok had let him sleep with him. Sometimes even Chanyeol joined them if he was feeling left out. This felt nostalgic to be beside Minseok in his bed again.

“Baekhyun's not here yet?” Junmyeon asked softly. Minseok smiled and glanced at the window.

“He'll be here soon. He'll probably be scared when he sees you.”

“I won't do anything to him. I just wanted to check up on you again.”

“I'm alright,” Minseok sighed, leaning back on his pillow. “Baekhyun looks after me in the evenings.”

“So he is taking care of you?”

“Yes...”

“Minseok, are you ill? I'm really worried about you. If there's something going on, you can tell me. I won't tell anyone, I promise. I'm just so scared that you're...”

Junmyeon couldn't finish his sentence, but he reached for Minseok's hand again, holding it tightly. Minseok bit his lip, trying to decide whether to tell Junmyeon the whole truth about Baekhyun. Junmyeon had already accepted that they were seeing each other without leaving Minseok, so maybe it was alright to let him know everything. Junmyeon was smart and good at appeasing others, so he might actually be able to help them flee if he knew what was really going on.
Minseok sighed and pulled Junmyeon's hand over to his stomach, resting his palm on it. He was just barely starting to show, which was a little concerning since he wouldn't be able to hide it much longer. He took a deep breath before finally speaking up.

“I'm pregnant...The baby is Baekhyun's.”

Junmyeon's eyes widened and he sat up to stare at Minseok's stomach in shock. Eventually he stared back at Minseok, trying to form words.

“Minseok, why...how...when!?”

“When father found out I was a birther, Baekhyun snuck into my room one night to check on me. It was the first time he ever climbed through my window. I told him how scared I was and that I didn't want to marry Dongyul. We made a plan with each other then and...If I got pregnant, father wouldn't be able to marry me off to Dongyul, not without having to do something about this first. We were going to run away during that time and go into hiding.”

“Oh Minseok...What have you done to yourself?” Junmyeon asked, feeling tears in his eyes. “Why would you put yourself in so much danger? Father might kill you if he finds out, and he'll definitely kill Baekhyun and the baby!”

“I know,” Minseok whispered, gulping back tears. “It was a terrible idea, but Junmyeon, I wanted out so badly. This felt like the only way. Baekhyun agreed to go through this with me and promised to take care of me and help me with the child.”

“So when you told me you loved him, was that a lie as well?”

“No...I do love him. That's why this has gotten so hard.”

“Does he love you?”

“I don't know what he feels for me. He gives me so many mixed signals, but I know he cares for me.”

“So he's really just willing to do something that could get him killed?”

“He felt guilty. He knew I was a birther and had promised to take the fall for me if need be, but due to miscommunication, he ended up unintentionally helping to expose me instead.”

“Still, that's...I'm worried. Minseok, this isn't going to end well! You could get hurt or killed. And what if Baekhyun abandons you?”

“He won't. I trust him...But I'm getting scared. It's getting harder to hide the morning sickness and I'm starting to show. I'm not going to be able to hide it much longer. Baekhyun is putting together a plan for how we're going to escape, but I'm worried that someone else will find out soon and cause more trouble. If Baekhyun gets discovered or captured...Junmyeon I can't bear to lose him. I don't want to ask you to betray father, but please...if something were to happen to Baekhyun and I couldn't protect him, would you help him in my stead?”
Junmyeon sighed and snuggled closer to Minseok, hugging him and rubbing his stomach. He wished he hadn't been so distant with his brother. If Minseok had had someone to talk to, this might not have happened. This was the first time Minseok was asking Junmyeon for something like this. He was really serious and really worried about Baekhyun. Minseok loved him. Junmyeon couldn't just throw that away. He loved his older brother, and now that he knew what lengths Minseok went to to try and get out of his marriage to Dongyul, Junmyeon couldn't turn a blind eye. He had to help him somehow.

“I'll look after both of you, I promise. No matter what happens, I'll make sure you both leave the palace safely.”

“Thank you...”

Minseok hugged Junmyeon back, feeling more relieved than he had in months. Having Junmyeon on his side and looking out for him meant that if things went awry, they still had a chance.

As they were hugging, Minseok heard the familiar rustling of the vines outside. He pulled away and smiled a Junmyeon, receiving a soft smile in return. As soon as Baekhyun was inside the room, he glanced up and spotted Junmyeon, gasping and cursing.

“This isn't...I wasn't...He looked sick so I thought I'd check up on him—”

“Baekhyun, he knows,” Minseok explained softly. “He knows about us and the baby. It's ok.”

“O-Oh...Um, I guess that's alright then. You're um, you're not going to throw me out the window?”

Junmyeon sighed and got off the bed. Minseok watched worriedly as Junmyeon approached Baekhyun. Junmyeon gripped Baekhyun's arm and pulled him over to the corner of the room, speaking in a low tone and making it hard for Minseok to pick up on the words.

“Listen to me,” Junmyeon started, glaring daggers at Baekhyun. “You better treasure my brother and take care of him. You put him in a dangerous position, but he trusts you and loves you. If you even think about abandoning him, I will hunt you down and kill you myself. Have I made myself clear?”

“Y-Yeah...I'm not going to abandon him. That I can confidently promise you.”

Junmyeon sighed before nodding and pushing Baekhyun towards Minseok. Baekhyun looked back at him nervously, but was soon distracted as Minseok reached for him and hugged him close. Baekhyun pulled out a leather bag and started talking softly about making some tea and feeding Minseok more Caulfroux since he was showing signs of anemia.

Junmyeon couldn't deny that Minseok instantly lit up with Baekhyun nearby, and Baekhyun
was treating him entirely different than when they had first met. Perhaps their relationship had become something good for the both of them in the time Junmyeon hadn't been watching. As he saw Minseok excitedly press Baekhyun's palm to his small baby bump, Junmyeon smiled. He was upset and worried about Minseok, but for the first time, Junmyeon could tell Minseok was happy. Minseok was finally doing what he wanted to do in his life, and Junmyeon would do everything he could to protect that small bit of happiness and freedom he'd achieved.

Junmyeon crept out of the room, locking it so they would have their privacy. When he got back to his room, Sehun was already fast asleep in his bed. Junmyeon thought about his brothers and their relationships, and he couldn't help but wonder where his would go. He didn't mind an arranged marriage, but he and Sehun hardly talked to each other or had a relationship. Junmyeon was a little envious of his brothers, but being happy for them was a much more satisfying feeling. Junmyeon would deal with his own life once he could stop worrying about everyone else's.

Chapter End Notes

Here I am! Back again with a much shorter an this time lol! I've been pretty excited to post this part of the story!!! The next few chapters especially! Baekhyun's starting to feel jealousy and Junmyeon found out~ But luckily he's on Minseok's side lol! It only took 10 episodes for Junmyeon to have a role in the story OTL But for real, he's gonna have a pretty important part in this story, so stay tuned! Sehun too btw, he just hasn't come into it all just yet~

And that's all for this week! Things are gonna get pretty exciting soon so stay tuned!!! Thanks as always for reading and I love you guys!!!!
Chapter 11

Jongin was looking particularly round at 6 months pregnant. It was a bit upsetting, considering he wasn’t even eating all that much more than usual, but the doctor had assured him that he was healthy. Chanyeol often comforted him by saying he was a big baby himself when he was born, so their baby was just taking after him. Jongin always thought it was cute when Chanyeol said things like that or got really excited about their baby. That was basically every moment they were together, but it never got old to Jongin.

One thing that did drive him nuts was how hard it had become to get out of bed and off of basic furniture. Chanyeol usually had to help him out of bed in the morning, and more often than not, Jongin had to whine until he would do so. Chanyeol had gotten into the habit of wanting to snuggle Jongin as much as possible, which was normally fine except a lot of the time Jongin was hungry or had a baby weighing down on his bladder. In an attempt to get Chanyeol to help him, Jongin had started pulling on his ear. It was efficient, although Chanyeol wasn’t the biggest fan of the treatment.

He made sure to get back at Jongin though. As his stomach had gotten bigger, his belly button had started poking out more. Chanyeol almost always poked it the instant he would see Jongin, earning a pout and a whine in return. It would always end in tickles and hugging each other close while kissing. Sometimes Jongin would tug on Chanyeol's ears as he kissed him, giggling as it was Chanyeol's turn to pout.

Their lives still revolved around each other and their little pig. Jongin would come on walks with Chanyeol and Lottie, but he would have to sit and rest after. That was his favorite time though because Chanyeol would always play with Lottie and make Jongin giggle as the little pig squealed with happiness. Their lives were so peaceful and wrapped around each other, they hardly saw the storm brewing within the castle walls. It would catch them both completely off guard.

Unfortunately for Minseok, his health would not go unnoticed for much longer. After his failed date with Dongyul, he'd struggled through a few more, but he knew Dongyul could tell he was ill. It was only a matter of time before he complained to the king. When Minseok was finally called before him one morning, his mind was racing with excuses as well as the need to tell Baekhyun it was time to leave. He would have to bear his father's berating first however.

“Dongyul has informed me that you have been feeling unwell as of late,” the king stated.

“I believe it was just a stomach ailment,” Minseok stated. “I'm feeling better today.”

“A stomach ailment shouldn't have lasted you more than a few days. You've been ill on dates for a few weeks now.”
“He's exaggerating. I'm feeling fine.”

“Don't argue with me,” the king warned. “I've arranged for the doctor to see you today. As soon as he learns what's wrong, you will both report back to me.”

“Yes father,” Minseok sighed in defeat.

The king waved his hand, motioning for Minseok to leave his sight. Minseok needed to find Baekhyun and let him know they needed to get ready to leave. He'd wanted to do it before going to the doctor, but unfortunately the man was waiting for him right outside the throne room. The king must have realized Minseok wouldn't want to go.

“Let's go, Prince Minseok,” the doctor said gently.

“Can I run an errand very quickly first? I promise I'll come by later.”

“The king has given me strict orders to check up on you now. I'm sorry, Minseok. I can't go against him.”

Minseok frowned. He knew the king had been livid that the doctor hid the fact that he was a birther. He'd probably threatened the doctor's own life as well as his family's. It was no wonder the man wasn't going to step a toe out of line, but Minseok needed to see Baekhyun.

“This will be quick. You can run your errand when we're done.”

Minseok sighed in defeat and let the doctor lead him by the wrist to his quarters. He checked Minseok's temperature and weight, surprised that he'd gained some despite his apparent symptoms. After that, he asked Minseok question after question about what he'd been feeling.

“When was your last bleed?” The doctor finally asked. Minseok froze for a moment, debating what to say.

“I can't remember...”

“Really? You always wrote down the dates in your journal. Have you stopped doing that?”

“With everything that's been going on recently, it slipped my mind...”

That wasn't entirely a lie. He'd been focusing more and more on Baekhyun, so he'd neglected his journal quite a bit. He also didn't really need to update it about his bleeds since he was pregnant, but the doctor didn't know that. Minseok had wanted to get out of this without the doctor examining him further, but unfortunately, the man wasn't going to let anything slide.

“I'm worried about your body. If your bleeds have been irregular, there might be something wrong. I'd like to do an ultrasound.”

“It's really nothing!” Minseok insisted. “I just forgot to write them down in my journal.”
“Then you shouldn't have anything to worry about during the ultrasound,” the doctor soothed, assuming Minseok was afraid of the machine.

Minseok gnawed on his lip nervously. The doctor was going to find out, and there wouldn't be enough time to contact Baekhyun before everything was revealed to the king. Minseok needed to warn Baekhyun, but there was no way the doctor would just let him leave. He was trapped.

The doctor had Minseok lay down on a bed, and began preparing the machine. He undid the top of Minseok's hanbok, and his small baby bump was visible. It didn't look definite enough to not just be some added weight though, so the doctor didn't really react to it. It was only when he'd started the ultrasound and found something with the probe that he was finally shocked.

“Minseok...Are you aware of what that is on the screen?” The doctor asked quietly. Minseok stared, recognizing the growing fetus easily, but he didn't know what to say. “Minseok,” the doctor spoke up again. “You're pregnant. Were you aware?”

“Yes,” Minseok finally answered quietly. There was no use lying anymore.

“Why didn't you come to me? No wonder you've been struggling! Oh Minseok...”

“I couldn't...”

“You know I would have taken care of you. Was Lord Dongyul forceful with you?”

“What?”

“Did he force himself upon you?”

The doctor assumed the baby was Dongyul's. Minseok considered going along with that narrative, but Dongyul would easily deny it. After all, he hadn't even hugged Minseok, let alone slept with him. His bluff would be called immediately. There was no way out of this.

“No...” Minseok mumbled, feeling a couple tears slip down his cheek.

“Minseok, are you alright? You know you can tell me anything.”

“Can you keep it from my father?” Minseok asked. The doctor stiffened and sighed.

“No, I can't do that again, Minseok. This is good news, isn't it? Your father would be happy to hear about your progressing relationship.”

“The baby isn't Dongyul's,” Minseok finally admitted. “I can't tell you whose it is, but Dongyul has never touched me that way.”

“Minseok...I don't understand. Were you...Did someone do this to you?”

“No, I consented,” Minseok explained, a sob escaping afterward. “You really can't keep this from my father? Just for a little longer?”

“No, Minseok, I can't. He expects an answer as soon as you and I leave this room. I'm sorry.”
Minseok covered his eyes with his hands and cried silently. How were he and Baekhyun going to get out of this now? As soon as his father found out the truth, he would do everything he could to keep them separate, and he might even kill Baekhyun instantly. Minseok needed to get him out of the palace, but he couldn't even do that much. Everything was crumbling apart.

“Taking a closer look, you’re about 3 months pregnant, Minseok,” the doctor stated softly, patting Minseok's head lightly to comfort him. “The baby looks healthy, and I imagine the trouble you've been having was morning sickness. I want to keep a close eye on you from now on, alright? No more hiding from me.”

Minseok nodded, knowing the doctor was only trying to make him feel better in the current situation. He'd always tried his best to look after Minseok since he'd been the only one that knew everything about him for most of his life. Minseok wished he could be comforted by the man's words, but they only reminded him more of how trapped he was and how desperately he needed to escape. He needed Baekhyun by his side, safe and sound.

The doctor finished with Minseok and helped him fix his hanbok. Minseok was staring at the door, preparing to make a break for it. As soon as he started to move, however, the doctor grabbed his hand, looking at him sadly.

“We need to report back to the king.”

“Can't you tell him for me?” Minseok asked.

“I'm sorry...You need to be the one to explain the baby to him.”

“Then let me run that errand, please! I'm begging you!”

“The king won't wait, Minseok. I'm sorry...”

Minseok sighed once more in defeat, letting the doctor pull him out of his quarters. As they walked back to the throne room, Minseok glanced around, begging the universe for Baekhyun or Junmyeon to appear in his sight so he could try to communicate with them somehow. Unfortunately, nobody appeared in the hallways, and Minseok and the doctor arrived at the throne room all too soon. The doctor gently pushed Minseok into the room, following after him. The king was glaring at both of them expectantly. When Minseok and the doctor stood before the throne, the king finally spoke up.

“Well, what have you found?”

“Your majesty,” the doctor started hesitantly, glancing at Minseok briefly. “Prince Minseok is pregnant.” The king's eyes widened and he sat forward in his seat, chuckling to himself.

“That Dongyul doesn't waste time, does he? You've used your charm yet again, Minseok.”
Minseok pressed his hand to his stomach, terrified of telling his father the truth. His eyes met the doctor's once more and the man sighed.

“Your majesty, there's more. Minseok is 3 months along now.”

“3 months...Has Dongyul been here that long?”

“The baby isn't his,” Minseok stated quietly. The king's face quickly morphed from shock into rage.

“What did you say?”

“The baby isn't Dongyul's...We haven't been intimate with each other.”

“You wretched little whore!”

The king lunged forward, gripping Minseok roughly by the arms and shaking him angrily. The doctor rushed over, trying to pull the king away from Minseok. The king turned on him and punched him away, sending him to the ground. His sight turned back to Minseok and he smacked him across the face, leaving the skin instantly red and stinging.

“Who was it!? The king demanded at the top of his lungs, smacking Minseok once more. “WHO WAS IT!?”

With each second Minseok didn't answer, he received another smack on the same cheek. His skin was starting to go numb and tears were falling from his eyes from both pain and fear. He wrapped his arms around his stomach, scared his father would try to hit him there. He could handle blows to the face, but he couldn't let his father hurt the baby. He had to bear the pain and remain silent.

“Your majesty, please!” The doctor pleaded, getting to his feet again and trying once more to separate the man from Minseok. “You can't take your anger out on him, you could really hurt him!”

The king growled and used the hand he'd been hitting Minseok with to once again hit the doctor. This time he fell harder, groaning in pain and not getting up immediately afterwards. Minseok didn't want anyone else to get hurt. He'd imagined his father would be livid with him, but the doctor hadn't done anything to deserve his beating. The king returned his attention to Minseok, gripping him by the cloth around his neck.

“If you know what's good for you, you'll tell me!”

“No,” Minseok dared to hiss back.

The king's eyes widened and he smacked Minseok across the face again. After that, he threw Minseok toward the ground, and he landed harshly on his hip. Minseok whimpered as he tried to get up and scoot away, still cupping his stomach in an attempt to protect it. The king was breathing
raggedly and Minseok could see veins appearing on his forehead from anger. The king walked over to a nearby pedestal and grabbed one of the vases from it. Minseok's eyes widened. He needed to get away.

Down the hall, Junmyeon had been having another fruitless meeting with Sehun. As soon as he heard his father screaming, he jumped to his feet. His father was loud, so it was easy to make out what he was yelling. Junmyeon's heart sank as soon as he realized who his father was screaming at.

“Minseok!” He gasped. He rushed out of the room, but stopped in the doorway to turn back to an alarmed Sehun. “Stay here! Don't go to the throne room!”

Junmyeon ran down the hall after that. He didn't need Sehun seeing his father being this way to Minseok, but he was also afraid that his father would attack anyone that got involved at this point. As Junmyeon approached the throne room, he saw Chanyeol running there from the linking hallway, Jongin following several steps behind him.

“Junmyeon, what's going on?” Chanyeol cried out.

“No time to explain, just stop father!” Junmyeon shouted.

They both rushed into the throne room and saw the king with a vase elevated above his head, about to strike down on Minseok, who was on the ground. Chanyeol and Junmyeon rushed forward, each of them grabbing the king by one of his arms and forcing him to stop. Chanyeol was gripping the hand holding the vase, trying in vain to get it out of the king's grasp.

“Let go of me!” The king shouted.

“What are you doing, father!?” Chanyeol cried.

“Your whore of a brother got pregnant by someone other than Dongyul! He deserves to be beaten!”

Chanyeol's eyes widened and he glanced down at Minseok. What on earth was going on? When had Minseok even done this? Chanyeol had been so far out of the loop with his eldest brother.

Jongin walked into the room, catching his breath from moving faster than he had in months. He saw Chanyeol and Junmyeon holding the king back from Minseok and gasped. He went to Minseok's side, slowly kneeling down with difficulty and hugging Minseok close. He was crying and shaking, and his cheek was red and swollen. Jongin needed to help protect him. Minseok collapsed against him, sobbing quietly and letting himself be held.

“Father, you need to calm down,” Junmyeon urged. “You're handling this rashly. Beating Minseok isn't the answer. You could seriously harm him or the baby!”

“That baby deserves to die! And Minseok deserves to be punished! He's betrayed Dongyul as
well as me!”

“Father, please,” Chanyeol insisted this time. “There has to be a better way to handle this.”

“Who is the father?” The king snarled, ignoring Junmyeon and Chanyeol. “Was it one of the servants? Should I have them all beheaded to be sure?”

Minseok shook his head, clinging to Jongin. His father was threatening to hurt innocent people now. Minseok couldn't handle much more of this.

There was silence for a moment, and for a second, Junmyeon thought perhaps the king was calming down. He and Chanyeol were still holding him tightly for good measure. Instead, the king was thinking, connecting dots of who the father could have been. Finally, his eyes narrowed.

“It was that Nefret whore, wasn't it?” He growled. “He's the only other person that knew where your room was besides the servants. I'll kill him.”

“Father, no!” Minseok screamed. Junmyeon closed his eyes, realizing Minseok had just given the answer away in the heat of the moment.

“So it was him!”

“I forced him to do this!” Minseok lied. “I threatened him! Please, he's a victim! Leave him out of this! It was my fault!”

“I'll have him publicly executed,” the king growled. “And I'll have you seated in the front row of the audience!”

“Father, stop!” Minseok begged.

“And then I'll make sure to get rid of that bastard child of yours!”

“This is too much father!” Chanyeol shouted, tears gathering in his eyes.

“It's what he deserves! He'll marry Dongyul. We'll make it so none of this ever happened!”

“You're not thinking clearly,” Junmyeon stated. “You know this isn't going to be so easily solved. You need to step away from this and calm down.”

“Don’t you dare lecture me!” The king yelled.

“Think about Nefret! You originally planned to marry Baekhyun off to Minseok in order to form an alliance with them! As far as they know, you've been keeping Baekhyun a captive here since his engagement with Minseok ended! Do you really think they'll sit back and accept it if you execute him in a rage? You need to think of the bigger picture!”

“He's a traitor to the king! He deserves to die!”

“All I'm asking is you think this through! Nobody has to die right this instant.”
The king let out an angry growl, but finally stopped fighting against Junmyeon and Chanyeol. Junmyeon really was the only person that could get through to the king. The man beckoned for one of his guards.

“Arrest Baekhyun. Do not kill him. That's for me. However, rough him up and teach him what it means to go against the king.” As the guard left the room, Minseok pleaded one last time.

“Father, please! Don't do this...”

“You don't have the right to ask me for anything!” The king snarled, raising the vase once more to strike at Minseok.

Jongin cuddled Minseok as close as he could, preparing to take the hit, but it never came. When Jongin glanced up, Chanyeol was holding the king's wrist in a frighteningly tight grip, his eyes dark with rage.

“You already made one mistake by beating my brother,” Chanyeol said darkly. “Don't you dare hit my husband. I will not hold back if you do.”

The king scoffed and pulled his wrist free. He glared once more at all of his sons before setting the vase down and storming out of the room, leaving them alone. Minseok was panicking, mind completely blank of any way to save Baekhyun. He needed to do something, but he felt so dizzy and lightheaded. He tried to push himself up, but his world span around him and he plummeted against Jongin's chest.

“Baekhyun...” He whimpered before losing consciousness.

“Minseok!” Jongin gasped. “Chanyeol, he's fainted!”

“Shit!” Chanyeol gasped, kneeling down beside Minseok.

“Take him to my quarters,” the doctor spoke up weakly, limping over to them. “I'll look after him.” Chanyeol nodded then looked up at Junmyeon.

“Are you coming?”

“I'll meet you later. I need to go make sure the guards don't hurt Baekhyun too badly. I promised Minseok I would look out for him if something like this happened.”

“So you knew?” Chanyeol asked sadly.

“I was the only one, and I found out by pure chance. We'll talk about this later. For now, just take care of Minseok. Stay by his side and make sure he's safe.”

Chanyeol nodded and gently grabbed Minseok from Jongin's arms. The doctor walked over to Jongin and carefully helped him up to his feet since Chanyeol couldn't, and the 3 of them left the room. Junmyeon sighed and followed after them, wanting this whole ordeal to be over. He was surprised to see Sehun standing outside the throne room, looking rather worried.

“Are you going to save Baekhyun?” He asked.
“I'm going to try my hardest to save both of them,” Junmyeon replied tiredly. “I'm sorry you had to witness that.” Sehun shook his head.

“You'll be going against the king yourself if you save them. Aren't you worried?”

“He's gone too far this time, and I'll protect my brothers with my life if I have to. I'm sorry, but I need to go now. Baekhyun needs me.”

“I'll help you,” Sehun said suddenly. “Baekhyun is my friend...I won't let the king kill him.” Junmyeon smiled, feeling like he was finally seeing the real Sehun for once.

“Thank you. I'm going to need your help. For now, head back to our room and I'll get you as soon as I've made sure Baekhyun is safe.”

Sehun nodded and watched as Junmyeon ran off. He never would have thought that Junmyeon would risk going against the king. His impression of Junmyeon had always been that he was the favorite child and worked hard to keep that relationship up. Perhaps that was just Junmyeon's own way of surviving in this godforsaken castle.

~*~

Baekhyun had just finished making more oil for Jongin. His body was starting to ache more as he got rounder, so Baekhyun had started teaching Chanyeol how to massage Jongin's back. He'd set some of the oil aside for Minseok as well, placing it in a small bag of supplies he'd been preparing for their escape and journey. He hadn't prepared as much as he'd wanted, but at least it would be enough for them to get to Nefret. Once they were there, Baekhyun knew all the places where he could harvest the herbs and plants he needed. It would be tempting to visit the main colony, but for their own safety, they would have to remain hidden. Baekhyun couldn't put Minseok at risk of being found, and he couldn't put his colony at risk of being traitors to the king.

There was a loud knock on the door of Baekhyun's room, causing him to jump. He quickly hid the bag of materials under his bed. The last thing he needed was to be accused of stealing. Before he could even head to the door, a guard burst through, several following after him. Within seconds, Baekhyun was shoved out of the room and thrown onto the ground.

“What the hell!?” He shouted. He received a kick to the stomach in response.

“Silence! You're under arrest by order of the king.”

“What? Why?”

The guard ignored him, instead motioning for the other guards to move in. Baekhyun was kicked and beaten, the armor of the guards easily skinning his sides, arms, and legs. He tried in vain to fight back or get away, but there were too many of them. What was going on?

“Stop!” A voice shouted from down the hall.
Baekhyun looked over at the source tiredly, grateful yet again for Junmyeon's sudden appearance, this time to save him instead of Minseok.

“Your highness, these are orders from the king.”

“Your orders were to arrest him, yes. But dealing with prisoners falls under my list of duties, and I will handle Baekhyun personally.”

“But the king ordered for us to—”

“Would you like me to tell the king that you disregarded my authority?” Junmyeon threatened.

“No, your highness. My apologies.”

“I'll be taking Baekhyun to the dungeon now.”

Junmyeon walked over, lifting Baekhyun roughly from the ground. Baekhyun still didn't understand what was going on, but he was hoping Junmyeon was only going along with the act in order to get him out of there. As they started heading down winding stone staircases towards the dungeons, however, Baekhyun was starting to panic.

“What's going on?” Baekhyun asked. Junmyeon stopped and looked around, making sure the coast was clear before replying.

“The king found out about Minseok and the baby.”

“Oh God,” Baekhyun uttered, feeling almost queasy from worry. “Is Minseok ok? What did the king do to him? Tell me he's ok!”

“Shh,” Junmyeon hissed, looking around again frantically.

Junmyeon took a few more steps to make it seem less obvious that he was conversing with Baekhyun in case anybody came by. Finally, after a few moments, he sighed, looking at Baekhyun with both sadness and exhaustion.

“The king was rough with him, but Chanyeol and I stopped him before he could really hurt Minseok or the baby. Chanyeol and Jongin are with him now, so he'll be safe.”

“Oh God...Thank you so much. I'm so sorry...”

“I promised Minseok I would help him, and I'm going to keep that promise. I promised I would look after you as well. I have to lock you up for now, but I'll come back for you, trust me. I'll find a way to get you two out of the castle.”

“What are you planning?” Baekhyun asked. Junmyeon sighed.

“I'm not sure yet. I need to make a few calls.”
They reached the cell and Baekhyun let Junmyeon lock him up without a fight. At least in the cell, he was safe from anymore beatings. His skin was stinging and he could already feel some bruises forming. Once Junmyeon had locked the cell, he leaned forward to speak quietly.

“I'll come back later, so hold tight.”

“Wait, Junmyeon!” Baekhyun whispered as the prince started to back away. “Under my bed, there's a bag. It contains ointments and remedies that I was setting aside to take care of Minseok. We're going to need that, no matter where we go.”

“I'll make sure to grab it. Don't forget the promise you made me, Baekhyun. I'm trusting you to take care of my brother.”

“I will. Just keep Minseok safe.”

Junmyeon smiled sadly and nodded. Baekhyun was only focusing on Minseok, and Minseok was only focusing on Baekhyun. It was obvious how much they cared for each other, whether they realized it or not. Junmyeon had to protect them.

Junmyeon made his way back from the dungeon, stopping by his room long enough to get Sehun. After that, they headed to the communication room, an area that usually only the king accessed. When they arrived, Junmyeon finally told Sehun what he would be doing.

“I need you to stand watch.”

“Won't that look suspicious?”

“You wanted to talk to your family back in Lorencia, so I was contacting them for you. Tell that to anyone who asks. If someone comes, knock quietly on the door before they get close enough to talk to you. That will let me know I need to wrap it up.”

“What are you going to do?” Sehun asked.

“Make some calls and pray that we have more allies than enemies.”

Sehun didn't seem satisfied with the answer, but he nodded and let Junmyeon go into the room anyway. Once Junmyeon was inside, he connected to the private radio of the leader of Nefret. If anyone was going to look after Minseok and Baekhyun, it would be Lady Nayoung.

“Nayoung speaking,” the woman answered after a few moments of static.

“This is Prince Junmyeon of Reilania.”

“My prince, what reason have you to contact an old woman such as myself?”

Junmyeon had always had a lot of respect for Nayoung. She was a very warm person, even when in a formal setting. He could only hope she would be willing to take care of his older brother.
“I have a favor to ask of you, one of great importance and secrecy.”

“I'm listening, my prince.”

“Baekhyun and Prince Minseok are in danger. As you've probably heard from the king, he called off Baekhyun's engagement with Prince Minseok, but kept him working at the palace. Baekhyun and Minseok had a relationship behind the scenes, and my brother is pregnant. The king found out and plans to kill Baekhyun and get rid of the baby.”

“Oh my word! Oh Baekhyun...”

“They planned to run away together in order to protect themselves and their child. While I don't doubt Baekhyun's ability to survive on his own, I don't think that's the safest option for Minseok. Therefore I would like to ask for your help in sheltering and protecting them.”

“You're planning to break them out?” Nayoung asked in surprise.

“I know what I'm asking is extremely risky, and could put Nefret at great risk, but you'll have my support. Should they be discovered, I will take the full blame. In addition to this, if you protect them, I promise the child will be recognized as a proper heir and representative of Nefret in the royal family. You will also be invited to a formal council I plan to create with the leaders of the outer regions.”

“You've certainly thought out your end of the deal quite thoroughly. I suppose I should suspect nothing less of Prince Junmyeon the negotiator.”

“Honestly, I feel like what I'm offering hardly equates to what I'm asking you to do, but I'm desperate.”

“Why are you so desperate? Forgive me for asking this way, but what do you have to gain from taking responsibility and putting your life on the line for one of my people and the mistake he made?”

“Minseok loves him. I cannot watch my father tear my brother away from the one person who has ever made him happy. I cannot watch my father slaughter my brother's lover as well as his baby. Please, Lady Nayoung, I'm begging you. Please take Baekhyun and Minseok under your wing.”

“You needn't beg. I know your intentions are pure, and Baekhyun, foolish as he is, is my grandson. I could not bear to see him executed. He has also chosen Minseok, and Minseok is carrying one of our own, so he will receive the kindest treatment Nefret has to offer. If you can get them both to Nefret, I will protect them.”

“Thank you, Lady Nayoung,” Junmyeon sighed, bowing even though she couldn't see. “I cannot thank you enough. I'll send them on their way tonight.”

“I'll be waiting for their arrival.”

“I'm going to go now before anyone notices I've been here and contacted you.”

“Good luck, my prince.”

“Thank you...I wish you the same.”
Junmyeon stopped the call and left the room. Sehun was standing anxiously by the doorway. Junmyeon grabbed him by the arm and they started walking towards the servants' quarters.

“Well? What's the plan?” Sehun asked in a whisper.

“We'll be sending them to Nefret tonight. They'll receive protection there. I have another favor to ask of you.”

“What is it?”

“I need you to pack food for them. It's a bit of a journey to Nefret and they won't be able to stop in any towns. I also need you to sneak into Baekhyun's room. He told me he hid a bag of medicine to use for Minseok on the journey under his bed.”

“What if there are guards around his room?”

“Tell them I sent you to look for more clues of Baekhyun's betrayal to the kingdom.”

“You're taking an awful lot of responsibility here.”

“I'm the only one the king trusts. He won't find it suspicious if I'm looking for more information or putting Baekhyun in the dungeons. I have to play both sides right now. It's the only way we're going to get both of them out of this alive. I have to go check on Minseok now. Will you do this for me?”

“I'll do it for Baekhyun,” Sehun corrected.

Junmyeon sighed, too stressed to be hurt by the fact that Sehun was still being distant even at a time like this. He patted Sehun's shoulder, then headed off towards the doctor's quarters. They didn't have much time to get this escape together, and Junmyeon was going to need all the help he could get.

~*~

Chanyeol and Jongin sat beside Minseok as he rested in one of the beds in the doctor's quarters. Jongin was holding a towel filled with ice gently against Minseok's swelling cheek. It was already starting to bruise, and the deep colors seemed to make Minseok look deathly pale in contrast. Chanyeol sat on Minseok's other side, holding his hand and crying. He'd been crying ever since they'd gotten Minseok away from the king, and Jongin knew no amount of comfort would probably be enough to stop the tears.

“Why would he do this?” Chanyeol asked through a few sniffles. “I just don't understand. He knew it wouldn't end well...”

“Think about it,” Jongin started gently. “The king wasn't accepting of our relationship either, but you didn't give up on me. If the king were to suddenly cut me out of your life, would you do nothing?”

“Of course not! I would fight to get you back.”

“This was Minseok's way of fighting for what he wanted. He knew it would be dangerous and
the king would be angry.”

“I just wish he hadn't done it alone. If he'd told me, I would have helped him...I ignored my brother when he was struggling and needed someone to depend on. Even Junmyeon knew. Minseok couldn't trust me...”

“I doubt that's the case. Minseok loves you and trusts you, you know that. Now that we know what's going on, we need to do everything we can for him.”

Minseok let out a soft groan, capturing both Chanyeol's and Jongin's full attention. After a moment, his eyes opened, and he blinked several times, taking in the room around him. As soon as he was awake enough to remember what happened, he shot up from the bed so quickly Chanyeol had to grab him so he wouldn't lose his balance.

“Baekhyun!” Minseok gasped. “Where's Baekhyun? I need to go to him!”

“Shh, it's ok,” Chanyeol soothed. “Junmyeon is taking care of Baekhyun right now, so you don't have to worry. You need to take it easy, alright? You're in bad shape as well.”

Minseok let out a shaky breath and let Chanyeol gently prop him up against the pillows behind him. Minseok was still somewhat in shock. He hadn't expected his father to be kind, but his reaction had been far more severe and scary than Minseok had anticipated. He'd gotten poor Chanyeol and Jongin involved in all of this as well. Chanyeol had obviously been crying and had only wiped the tears away in a hurry as soon as Minseok woke up.

“Are you feeling alright?” Chanyeol asked, cupping Minseok's uninjured cheek.

“I don't know how I feel,” Minseok answered honestly. Chanyeol's lip quivered and he hugged Minseok close.

“I'm so sorry! I'm sorry I wasn't talking to you more and checking in on you. I'm sorry I wasn't there when you needed someone to depend on. If I'd known about any of this, I would have helped you and protected you. I'm so sorry, Minseok!”

“Shh,” Minseok hushed this time, hugging Chanyeol back tightly. “I didn't tell you about this because I didn't want to burden you. You have so much going on in your life Chanyeol, and even a baby of your own to worry about. I was happy that you were living your life so well. I wouldn't have wanted to drag you down with my problems.”

“You wouldn't have dragged me down...”

“For the longest time I wanted what you and Jongin had,” Minseok admitted. “I didn't quite get it, but I found something that I want to protect.”

“And we'll help you protect it as well,” Jongin stated. Chanyeol nodded and released Minseok so he could rest on the pillows once more.

“The king wants Baekhyun and the baby dead...” Minseok muttered.

“There's no way we're letting him accomplish that,” Chanyeol soothed.
“You’ll be enemies of the king then...”

“So be it. He's gone too far this time,” Chanyeol said angrily. “He hurt you...”

Minseok sighed, letting Chanyeol hold his hand and snuggle closer. Chanyeol had always been the gentlest of the 3 brothers. It was a wonder he'd become so renowned as a soldier. All Minseok could see was his baby brother cuddling closer to him when his feelings were hurt.

“Um...Minseok, can I um...” Jongin asked shyly with his hand hovering above Minseok's stomach.

Minseok smiled and nodded, placing Jongin's hand on his stomach with his own. Jongin smiled, rubbing it gently and feeling the small baby bump that had formed. Chanyeol joined in afterwards, sniffing and giggling simultaneously. He really was the same old softy. It felt strangely comforting to be sharing this experience with Jongin and Chanyeol though. Minseok hadn't been able to be happy or celebrate his pregnancy with anyone other than Baekhyun, and even that felt more bittersweet than anything.

As they were all cuddled together, Junmyeon entered the doctor's quarters. He forced a smile with the doctor, who was icing his own bloody lip. Junmyeon leaned closer and whispered that he needed to talk to his brothers alone. The doctor nodded, leaving them alone in the room. As soon as Junmyeon walked over and sat on the bed at Minseok's feet, the latter was sitting up, staring at him expectantly.

“Baekhyun is in the dungeon. I kept the guards from hurting him too badly.”

“Junmyeon, you have to get him out of here!” Minseok urged.

“I'm going to get you both out. Tonight.”

“Junmyeon, how are you going to do that?” Chanyeol asked.

“I've asked the leader of Nefret to take them in,” Junmyeon explained quietly. “Later tonight when the king has gone asleep, I'll sneak Baekhyun out of the dungeon and send him and Minseok on their way.”

“Is there anything we can help with?” Chanyeol asked.

“If you could clear a pathway where the royal guard won't be watching, that would really help.”

“I can definitely do that,” Chanyeol agreed.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Minseok asked, looking at both of them. “If father finds out you had anything to do with this...”

“We'll deal with it if it happens, Minseok,” Junmyeon soothed. “For now, we want to keep you and Baekhyun safe.”

“How are you planning to get them to Nefret?” Jongin asked next. Junmyeon sighed.
“We might have to steal one of the iron steeds.”

“I might have a better option,” Jongin stated. The others looked at him in surprise. “I’ve been working on upgrading some old iron steeds. They aren't used anymore so the king wouldn't know if they go missing or not. I've also upgraded the design so it's quieter when running. It'll be perfect to get them out of here.”

“Jongin, you're a genius!” Chanyeol exclaimed. Minseok smiled, holding Jongin's hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Thank you, all of you, for helping me,” he whispered. Junmyeon smiled and stood up, ruffling Minseok's hair.

“You're welcome. We'll meet up again after dark. For now, let's have Chanyeol and Jongin take you to your room. Jongin, do you have any old clothes Minseok could wear? It's better not to send him off in a royal hanbok...Baekhyun as well.”

“Yes! I'll get those ready.”

Junmyeon nodded and left the room, needing to go find Sehun and help him get everything to the iron steed Jongin had mentioned. This would be risky, but they had to succeed.

~*~

When night had finally fallen, they put their plan in action. Chanyeol and Jongin helped Minseok into some of Jongin's old clothes, then Jongin went to get the iron steed and bring it to the palace entrance. Minseok and Chanyeol followed behind at a slower pace. Minseok was limping a bit from when the king had thrown him onto the ground. He'd noticed a bruise on his hip and thigh when he'd changed, but nothing appeared broken or severely hurt, so he hadn't mentioned it to Chanyeol.

Junmyeon and Sehun headed in the direction of the dungeon. Sehun was in charge of making sure the coast was clear, while Junmyeon crept down to the dungeon. A few guards were stationed in front of Baekhyun, but it wasn't nearly as many as Junmyeon would have expected. Chanyeol had worked it out wonderfully. Junmyeon could easily take down the two guards that were there.

Junmyeon had soaked a cloth in an anesthetic he stole from the doctor's office. He wore a glove to make sure it didn't affect his own hand. After that, he crept up on each of the guards, holding it in front of their mouths until they passed out. Junmyeon had to be grateful that the king had stressed medical anesthetics so much. The one the doctor used worked like a charm.

Junmyeon stole the keys from one of the guards, then went to Baekhyun's cell. As soon as he'd unlocked the door, he pushed a pair of Jongin's clothes into his arms.

“Change into those. We can't have anyone recognizing your clothes.”
“Are these Jongin's?”

“Yes, he offered them. Minseok is wearing them as well.”

“Minseok's still doing well?”

“Yes, he's with Chanyeol and Jongin right now. We're going to join them.”

“You're all helping to break us out...”

“Of course,” Junmyeon huffed. “We're not going to let the king get away with this. I've contacted Lady Nayoung in Nefret as well. She'll be taking you two in.”

“What!?”

“I know you wanted to go into hiding with just Minseok, but you'll be much safer with Lady Nayoung. She's more than willing to look out for you and Minseok, and Minseok needs all the help he can get right now. Even I can tell he's struggling with the pregnancy.”

“You're right,” Baekhyun sighed. “I didn't want to get anyone else involved...but it's too late for that.”

“Exactly. We're on borrowed time so hurry up and change!”

Junmyeon turned away as Baekhyun slipped into Jongin's clothes. They were a bit loose and too long on him, but his body was aching from the beating earlier, so he was happy they weren't tight. When he was done, he walked over to Junmyeon, managing an awkward smile. Junmyeon grabbed his wrist and started walking out of the dungeon. Sehun was waiting for them at the top of the steps.

“Sehun? You're in on this as well?”

“I was worried about you,” Sehun mumbled before turning to Junmyeon. “The hallway is clear, so let's go.”

Junmyeon nodded and draped a traveling cloak over Baekhyun's shoulders, keeping the hood up so no one would see his face. After that, Sehun and Junmyeon stood on either side of Baekhyun, trying to hide him from sight as they walked.

The walk through the palace was clear and Junmyeon found himself once again thanking Chanyeol for putting the guards in other areas of the castle that night. When they arrived outside, Chanyeol, Jongin, and Minseok were standing beside an iron steed. Minseok was wearing a traveling cloak just like Baekhyun to hide his face as well. The carriage had been completely modified, no wheels attached to it. Instead, Jongin had used his jet pack technology to make the carriage hover. Junmyeon understood how it would be quieter. There would be no wheels rattling against the ground making noise. It would also be smoother to ride in, which would be a good thing, considering how easily Minseok got ill these days.
As soon as Minseok and Baekhyun set eyes on each other, they both froze. Baekhyun was covered in bruises and scratches, and Minseok's cheek was swollen and bruised. They both looked like they'd seen better days. Finally, Minseok broke into a run towards Baekhyun, and Baekhyun rushed forward to meet him. They collided against each other, sobbing and holding the other tightly. Baekhyun eventually pulled away and cupped Minseok's cheeks, trying not to cry as he looked at just how bad the injured one looked.

“That monster...” Baekhyun whispered, sniffling back tears.

“I'm so sorry,” Minseok sobbed. “I wanted to come to you and warn you, but I couldn't.”

“Shh,” Baekhyun hushed, hugging him close and rocking him. “You have nothing to apologize for. I'm sorry this happened. We're gonna be alright.”

“I don't want to interrupt, but we need to get you two on the road,” Junmyeon said softly.

Minseok frowned, but let Baekhyun lead him over to the iron steed. At the carriage, Chanyeol was trying not to burst into tears again. He hugged Minseok tightly, whispering goodbye. Baekhyun hugged Jongin, telling him a few last minute tips about dealing with the last part of his pregnancy. Even Sehun hugged Baekhyun before helping him into the carriage.

“I packed you food and your bag that you'd hidden,” Sehun explained. Baekhyun smiled and ruffled his hair.

“Thank you, Sehun. Take care of yourself.”

Minseok turned to Junmyeon and was immediately embraced. Minseok was struggling to fight back the tears, knowing he would be separated from his brothers for a long time if not forever. It was harder than he ever would have thought to say goodbye. He'd done enough crying though, and he wanted to be strong. Junmyeon pulled away and rested his forehead against Minseok's.

“I promise I'll get you back home soon,” he whispered. “I'll make the palace a place where you can live and be safe...Just wait for me.”

“I will,” Minseok whispered. “Take care of everyone. Thank you for everything.”

Junmyeon smiled, wiping some of his own tears away. Baekhyun helped Minseok into the carriage and Jongin shut the door.

“I've updated the steed's map, so it should just take you straight to the Nefret colony,” he explained. “If you need to stop, simply command it to do so. Same can be said for starting again.”

“Thanks Jongin,” Baekhyun said.

“Don't stop in any populated area for any reason,” Junmyeon added. “The steed will take you the back routes thanks to Jongin.”

“Right. I guess it's about time we get going then,” Baekhyun said, trailing off and looking between them and Minseok. “Thank you all again for helping us.”
“Look after yourselves and keep Minseok safe,” Chanyeol said. “We'll see you again soon.”

Minseok managed a smile and nodded. Jongin commanded the horse to start, and the carriage set off, dashing through the palace gates. The others watched until they were gone before heading back into the palace, afraid to linger in case anyone saw them outside. The palace felt empty and ominous that night, but both Chanyeol and Junmyeon were determined to get Minseok and Baekhyun back, no matter what that meant.

In the carriage, Minseok finally broke down crying, clinging to Baekhyun like his life depended on it. Baekhyun was crying as well, holding Minseok tightly and trying in vain to comfort him despite his own tears. It was good that the iron steed didn't need to be directed, because neither of them were in the right emotional state. They ended up crying until they were exhausted, and fell asleep curled up around each other. It was going to be a rough transition, but they would make it through. They had to.

Chapter End Notes

SURPRISE!!!! It's my birthday today, so I decided to do a double update this week hehe! And I'm excited I get to post this chapter because this has been building up for quite some time and this is really going to set a lot of things in motion, so yay! Poor xiubaek though OTL But now they're away from the kingdom, which has been needing to happen for a while. So you'll see how the story develops in the coming chapters :3

And that's all for now! So I'll be back again on Friday for another chapter! As always, thank you guys for reading and I love you!!!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

It took a week traveling by iron steed for Minseok and Baekhyun to reach the main colony in Nefret. They'd stayed off the main roads like Junmyeon had suggested, stopping only when Minseok was feeling ill or they needed to relieve themselves. During the journey, Baekhyun kept the curtain drawn shut on the window since staring at the passing scenery made Minseok motion sick, but Baekhyun also didn't want to risk anyone seeing their faces. From what little they gathered passing by small villages along the kingdom and Nefret border, the king had sent out the royal guard for a hunt, though he hadn't mentioned what they were hunting. The king was probably still trying to keep everything under wraps for the sake of good impressions. At least it helped Minseok and Baekhyun sneak around easier. No one knew they were what the king was looking for, so no one was particularly trying to find them.

They reached the main colony at night. Baekhyun stepped out of the carriage cautiously. He glanced around, breathing in the fresh forest air that he'd missed so much. The trees around them towered higher than the eye could see, and the main colony was built on the largest, widest ancient tree, which stood before them. Baekhyun turned and helped Minseok carefully out of the carriage. Baekhyun heard a sound from the tree tops above and quickly hugged Minseok to his chest, hiding him from view. He kept his own head down as well.

“We wish to speak with Lady Nayoung of Nefret,” Baekhyun called out calmly.

“What business would someone from the kingdom have with her at this hour?” A voice called from the tree tops.

Baekhyun followed the sound, spotting one of the wooden walkways connecting some of the houses hidden in the trees. Along that walkway, several warriors holding bows readied with arrows were aiming right at them. Baekhyun held Minseok tighter out of instinct and gulped. He needed to pick his words wisely. He wasn't sure if everyone in Nefret knew they were fugitives yet.

“Please, we mean no harm!”

“Stand down!” A woman's voice called. Baekhyun sighed as he recognized the owner.

“Lady Nayoung, these people are trespassers from the kingdom.”

“They aren't bandits. I was informed of their arrival a few days ago. You can stand down and return to your posts.”

“Understood, my lady,” the warrior stated with a bow.

Slowly, the soldiers dispersed. Baekhyun gently led Minseok closer to the massive ancient tree, noticing he was limping a bit against him. They hadn't really had time to stop and look at each other's injuries, and Baekhyun hadn't had the proper medicine to treat them even if they had
stopped, but Baekhyun was definitely going to take a look at Minseok later.

As they came closer to the roots of the ancient tree, Minseok glanced up, seeing stairways carved into the trees and pathways snaking through the tree branches. He could only stare in awe at the structures built directly onto the trees. He'd heard of the architecture of Nefret and how it was mind boggling to see, but he never could have imagined the level of intricacy involved. The houses blended in with the treetops, yet they managed to be so grand in size, spanning across the top of the forest as far as Minseok's eyes could see. When he stopped gawking and returned his view to what was in front of him, the woman from before was approaching quickly. She pulled Baekhyun into and hug, holding Minseok as well.

“Oh thank goodness you two made it safely. You're going to be alright now. Let's get you inside!”

She ushered Minseok and Baekhyun towards the tree, and carefully Baekhyun helped Minseok climb the steep carved stairs leading around the trunk and up into the large building at the top. When they were inside, Minseok was surprised to find the inside of the house just as polished as the outside. It wasn't like staring at the grand palace walls, but there was beautifully carved furniture as well as some designs etched onto the wooden walls. In the middle of the main room, the tree grew through the center, some leaves wrapping around it. Minseok found it beautiful.

Nayoung took them to a room down a slim hallway. As soon as they were inside, she pushed each of them down onto a pillow on the ground in front of a short table. She knelt in front of Minseok first, cupping his cheeks and inspecting his face. She looked so genuinely upset and worried, despite not even knowing Minseok.

“He wasn't kind to you,” the woman sighed sadly before dropping her hands from his cheeks. “I'm Lady Nayoung of Nefret. You can rest easy here.”

“Thank you...My name is Minseok.”

“It's a pleasure to meet you, my prince.”

“Please, I'm hardly a prince right now. Calling my Minseok is fine.” The woman smiled and nodded.

“Nana, what have you heard about the main kingdom?” Baekhyun asked.

Minseok was surprised by the nickname, but he vaguely remembered Baekhyun telling him he was the grandson of the current leader of Nefret, so perhaps an affectionate nickname wasn't out of line. Minseok was somewhat jealous. He never would have dared to call his father anything remotely affectionate. Perhaps he could have with his mother, but she'd died before he ever would have gotten the chance.

“The king is definitely trying to search for you two in private. He's informed the leaders of the outer regions, excluding the Golden Meadows naturally. It seems he wants to keep this covered up from Lord Dongyul.”
“Has he demanded the outer regions turn us in if found?” Minseok asked.

“Yes, but that's not going to happen. Now that you're safe within the Birth House, you will receive protection from all of the people in Nefret. I'll explain the situation to the colony tomorrow.”

“The Birth House?” Minseok asked, looking somewhat shocked.

“The name sounds strange, right?” Baekhyun asked with a bit of a laugh. “The house we're in right now is called the Birth House. It's a safe haven for all women and birthers. Remember how I told you we suffered from bandits from the kingdom? The Birth House is under 24 hour protection and was built specifically to house and take care of women and birthers. It's probably the safest place you can be in Nefret.”

“Oh wow,” Minseok muttered, looking around at the room they were in. “This is really amazing.”

“This was Baekhyun's old room,” Nayoung said, smiling as Minseok's eyes widened even more and he looked at Baekhyun inquisitively. “We hadn't gotten any new additions to the Birth House, so we kept his room the way it was before he left. You two can make yourselves at home here.”

“Thanks Nana,” Baekhyun said, wrapping his arm around Minseok's waist. “We really appreciate it.”

“Now then,” the woman sighed, returning her attention to Minseok. “As I understand, you're pregnant at the moment. Are you aware of how far along you are?”

“About 3 months,” Minseok said, cupping his stomach with one of his hands.

“Nana, Minseok has been having really bad morning sickness. He also has struggled with anemia in the past. I was feeding him Caulfroux to help offset the anemia, but he's still struggling with the pregnancy.”

“Hopefully his morning sickness will lessen soon since he's getting into the second trimester. Forgive me for saying this, but you seem very pale and malnourished. I think it would do you well to be put on a special regulated diet.”

“Whatever you're willing to share with me, I'll be grateful,” Minseok stated, bowing his head. Nayoung smiled and cupped his uninjured cheek.

“There's no need for formalities here. You're part of the family. We'll happily take care of you.”

“Thank you...” Minseok mumbled.

Baekhyun rested his chin on Minseok's shoulder, snuggling him closer. He could tell Minseok wasn't used to this sort of treatment, having received nothing nearly as warm back in the palace. Baekhyun knew they were still fugitives, but he was feeling so much better being back home with his friends and family. He hoped Minseok could slowly feel at ease as well.

“Have you two eaten recently?”

“No...Do you want me to help you prepare food?” Baekhyun asked.
“No, stay here and rest. You've had a rough journey. I'll be back soon.”

Nayoung got to her feet and left the room. Minseok slowly relaxed against Baekhyun, who was still holding him. They didn't say much during the time that Nayoung was gone. Minseok was mostly taking in the new scenery.

“Your room is really nice,” Minseok eventually started. “It's very cozy.”

“It gets a little cold at night though since it's in the trees. We should ask Nana for another blanket so you don't get cold.” Minseok smiled and rested his head on Baekhyun's shoulder.

“Thank you for looking after me.”

“I promised you I would,” Baekhyun said softly, resting his cheek on top of Minseok's head.

They stayed snuggled together until Nayoung came back holding two bowls in her hands. She set them down on the table in front of them, and Baekhyun excitedly lifted the spoon of Minseok's bowl, picking up some of the contents and blowing on them before feeding it to Minseok. Nayoung and Baekhyun watched with a smile as Minseok's eyes lit up. Baekhyun prepared a second spoonful and fed it to Minseok as soon as he'd swallowed.

“It's rice porridge with Caulfroux dumplings and plenty of other herbs. Some are for flavor, others are to help with a queasy stomach,” Nayoung explained.

“It's delicious!” Minseok said when he finally got a break in between Baekhyun spooning food into his mouth.

“Nana is an amazing cook. I didn't get to learn a lot of her recipes before I left.”

“But you learned enough remedies to keep Minseok healthy up until this point, so I'm grateful I taught you those first.”

Nayoung kept them company, making small talk mostly with Baekhyun. After Minseok was about halfway through his bowl, he frowned at Baekhyun to start eating his own instead of feeding him. Nayoung chuckled at that, which caused Minseok to blush. He wasn't used to being pampered to this extent, even though he was a prince. This attention was different than that of a doctor or a servant. This felt so warm and close. When they were finished, Baekhyun got up and walked over to a small wooden closet, opening the door to reveal clothes.

“Even my clothes are still here! You're the best Nana!”

“Well, I'd hoped you would come back to visit me, so I kept them there.”

“I'm finally back,” Baekhyun said, and Minseok could sense a strange, melancholic atmosphere between the two. Before he could say anything, Baekhyun had already changed topics, however.

“Nana, do you think it would be safe for Minseok and I to go to the bathhouse? We haven't bathed in a week and I think it would do us both some good.”

“Yes, of course. I'll send a couple guards down with you to protect the area since it's night
“Thanks Nana!”

“Would you like some clothes for Minseok?” She asked. Minseok opened his mouth to say he didn't want to cause any trouble, but again, Baekhyun beat him to a comment.

“Yes please! If you had some long sleeved shirts that aren't too tight and some pants, that would be great! Minseok gets a little cold at night.”

“I'll go ahead and get them. I'll bring another blanket as well.”

“Thank you,” Minseok mumbled in defeat.

As Nayoung got up to go fetch Minseok's clothes, another man entered the room. He was wearing wooden armor, carrying a small jar of what looked like a cream. Nayoung smiled, greeting him warmly.

“Ah, Yifan! What brings you here?”

“I fetched the ointment you asked for,” the man answered.

“Oh wonderful! Go ahead and give it to Baekhyun. I'll be right back,” Nayoung stated before leaving.

“Baekhyun...?” The man named Yifan asked.

Minseok followed Yifan's eyes over to Baekhyun and found Baekhyun frozen in place, staring in shock right back at Yifan. There was some kind of tense atmosphere between the two of them, and Minseok had a feeling it was better to ask later. He stared at Yifan, noting his strong brow and extreme height. The ceiling of the Birth House was almost too low for him to stand comfortably.

“Um, here,” Yifan finally stated, clearing his throat and handing the ointment to Baekhyun. “For your injuries.”

“Thanks...” Baekhyun responded, awkwardly taking the jar.

Nayoung returned after that, and Yifan took that as a chance to leave the room. Nayoung handed Minseok his clothes before helping him to his feet. Baekhyun was at his side in an instant, seeming to have recovered from whatever he'd been feeling with Yifan in the room. Nayoung bid them off and Baekhyun took Minseok carefully out of the tree once more, walking a bit further into the forest towards a small building on the forest floor.

“This is the bathhouse,” Baekhyun explained. “The water supply hasn't been great since the king keeps most of the water pumped into the main kingdom, but we have decent hot water. That building over there is where the bathrooms are located. The king forced plumbing on us, I'm guessing just so he wouldn't have to fathom the thought of pee on a tree.”

“I see,” Minseok muttered, taking in both locations.
Baekhyun led Minseok by the hand into the bathhouse. Again, it wasn't nearly as grand as the baths in the palace, but Minseok found himself charmed by the stone flooring with drains and spigots to pump the water out of. There weren't any hanging sheets to provide privacy, which was very different for Minseok. Even when he'd heard of a public bath in the kingdom, sheets were offered as privacy.

“I know it's new for you, but no one will come in, so don't panic,” Baekhyun soothed, as if reading Minseok's mind.

“A-Alright...”

“Set your clothes over on that wooden shelf,” Baekhyun stated, undressing with ease.

Minseok caught sight of several bruises and cuts on his skin from the royal guards, and his stomach churned uncomfortably. Baekhyun turned back around when he noticed Minseok hadn't moved at all. He noticed what Minseok was staring at and sighed, walking over to him and hugging him. Instantly Minseok snuggled against him, wrapping his arms around him.

“I'm alright,” Baekhyun whispered. “I wasn't hurt that badly. That ointment Yifan brought will have me healed up in no time.” He felt Minseok hug him tighter. “Let's just focus on getting cleaned up for now, hm? You've been limping so I want to look at your leg.”

Minseok nodded and Baekhyun pulled away, helping Minseok strip out of his clothes. Before Minseok could get chilled from the cool night air, Baekhyun had walked him over to one of the spigots and sat him down on a stool that was there for the purpose of sitting and washing. Minseok definitely wasn't used to this type of bath, so Baekhyun did most of the work. He grabbed a bucket and started pumping hot water into it from the spigot, then grabbed one of the sponges and wet it before lathering it up with soap.

“I'll wash you, ok?”

“I can do it...” Minseok mumbled shyly, but Baekhyun shook his head.

“I want to.”

Minseok sighed and let Baekhyun lightly scrub his skin. Baekhyun was being really gentle with him and Minseok swore he was massaging him while scrubbing. Maybe that was why Baekhyun was insisting on washing Minseok. As Baekhyun continued to work, Minseok gradually relaxed, closing his eyes. He only opened them again when he heard Baekhyun curse under his breath. He'd been cleaning Minseok's sore leg. When Minseok glanced down, he noticed a fairly large bruise covering the side of his thigh and hip.

“Minseok, what happened?” Baekhyun asked, looking up at him worriedly. Minseok sighed, remembering the incident with his father.

“The king threw me onto the ground when he learned about the baby...I landed on my thigh and hip. They were sore, but I hadn't realized they'd bruised this badly...”
“That monster,” Baekhyun growled. Minseok leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Baekhyun's neck, surprising him.

“I'm fine. Like you said earlier, I'll heal.” Baekhyun sighed and hugged Minseok back.

“I just wish I could have protected you…”

“You're protecting me now.”

Baekhyun didn’t seem satisfied with the answer, but he stood up to pour the warm water over Minseok’s body to wash off the suds. After that, he took some more soap and began scrubbing at Minseok's hair. Again, Minseok found himself almost dozing off. Baekhyun's touch was so soothing. It was like the terror they'd been feeling for the past week was finally departing from his body, and leaving exhaustion in its stead.

When Baekhyun had finished washing off Minseok's hair, he wrapped a thick cloth around him to keep him warm and dry him off. After that, he started scrubbing his own body. Minseok watched, wishing he could be brave enough to ask if he could help. They'd slept with each other numerous times, but something like this felt so much more intimate. When Baekhyun grabbed the soap to wash his hair, Minseok decided to risk asking.

“Can I wash your hair?”

“Hm? Yeah, I guess,” Baekhyun answered, his cheeks flushing slightly.

Minseok really liked seeing this side of Baekhyun. He acted so independent most of the time, it was nice to see him flustered by someone doing something for him. Baekhyun sat down on the ground in front of Minseok with his back facing him. Minseok couldn't stop smiling as he washed Baekhyun's hair. He hadn't ever done this for someone that wasn't one of his younger brothers. He really liked being able to pamper Baekhyun for once.

When they'd finished bathing, Baekhyun quickly wrapped a cloth around himself to keep warm and dry off, then held Minseok's hand as they walked back to where their clothes were. It was probably because Minseok was experiencing all of this for the first time, but Baekhyun was being more touchy than usual. Minseok wasn't going to complain of course. He loved how it felt to hold Baekhyun's hand.

Baekhyun grabbed the cream colored harem pants and showed Minseok how to put them on since Minseok had only ever worn hanboks. They were surprisingly comfortable. After that, Minseok slipped on a blue silk shirt that draped off his shoulders slightly. Baekhyun wore a green sleeveless miniature vest, the silk only just covering either side of his chest and not meeting in the middle. Minseok hadn't ever seen Baekhyun in his native clothing before, and he really wished he had earlier. Nefret clothing used a mixture of dyes to create beautiful, vivid colors. Baekhyun looked beautiful, and Minseok couldn't deny the extra exposed skin was a nice touch.
Baekhyun held out a pair of light blue flats, and Minseok realized he'd been staring too long. Minseok quickly took the shoes and slipped them on. Baekhyun smiled knowingly and slipped his own green pair on, then grabbed their old clothes before leading Minseok out of the bath house. When they got outside, one of the guards Nayoung had sent to look after them offered to take their old clothes and hide them with the iron steed, and Baekhyun happily accepted. He led Minseok back up the old tree to his room. When they were inside, Minseok let out a long yawn, rubbing his eyes. Baekhyun smiled and pulled the covers back on his bed.

“It's not like the palace beds, but it's still comfortable,” he explained. “You should really get some rest.”

Minseok nodded tiredly and walked over, plopping down beside Baekhyun. His bed essentially consisted of a thick cotton mattress on the ground with blankets draped over it, but it beat sleeping while sitting up in an iron carriage. Baekhyun helped Minseok lay down and wrapped the covers around him. When Baekhyun remained sitting up, Minseok looked up at him worriedly.

“Are you not going to sleep?” Minseok asked.

“I'm still a little too alert to fall asleep,” Baekhyun said gently, rubbing Minseok's back. “And Nana is bringing another blanket by, so I want to be awake for that. But I'll go to bed soon, I promise. If you're tired, don't force yourself to stay awake.”

“Will you hold my hand and stay by my side until I fall asleep?”

“Happily~”

Minseok slid his hand out from under the covers and Baekhyun held it with one of his, using the other to gently rub Minseok's back. Minseok was a bit cold, but Baekhyun was managing to lull him to sleep all the same. Neither of them had slept well in the past week, so it probably wasn't that hard. Still, Minseok felt more comforted than he had in days falling asleep beside Baekhyun with their hands intertwined.

Nayoung came back some time later, and Baekhyun turned and held his finger to his lips before nodding at a sleeping Minseok. Nayoung smiled and quietly walked over, handing an extra blanket to Baekhyun. He slipped his hand out of Minseok's so he could unfold the blanket and tuck it around him. Minseok sighed sleepily and Baekhyun couldn't help but smile. After a moment, Nayoung placed her hand on Baekhyun's shoulder.

“I'd like to speak with you,” she whispered.

Baekhyun nodded, knowing he was going to have to explain everything to her eventually. He checked Minseok one last time to make sure he was fast asleep, then followed Nayoung out of the room. Once the door was shut, they went into a nearby spare room. Baekhyun was expecting Nayoung to start accosting him, but instead, she pulled him into her arms, hugging him tightly.
“Oh my love, what on earth happened? Do you know how scared I was when Prince Junmyeon contacted me? Or when the king sent out a decree wanting you dead or alive? How did it get like this, Baekhyun?”

“I did something really stupid, Nana,” Baekhyun mumbled into her shoulder. Nayoung pulled away to cup his cheeks.

“Just tell me. It's going to be alright.”

“Minseok and I were engaged and I was so angry at first...But then I found out by accident that he was a birther. He'd been hiding it all his life and the king didn't even know.”

“That's not hard to fathom considering how little the king cares for anyone other than himself.”

“Minseok hadn't been getting any of the proper care he needed as a birther. His health is poor to begin with, but they couldn't even help him with basic anemia. He was living in constant fear, and when I found out the truth, he begged me not to tell anyone. I was really angry at first because why was I needed if he was a birther? But then I realized he was alone and in a bad position himself...so I promised I would look out for him. But I failed...”

“How did you fail?”

“The king found out and I couldn't help Minseok. He called off our engagement and promised Minseok to Dongyul.”

“Dongyul...That's a strange match,” Nayoung grumbled. “Of course the king would try and strike up a deal with their region though. Golden Meadows has quite a bit to offer.”

“The king is a monster,” Baekhyun said angrily. “Minseok was so scared of the new engagement, but the king was demanding success. He wouldn't even let Minseok and me meet each other. So I started checking on Minseok secretly during the night...”

“And this is where the baby came about?” Nayoung asked, no judgment in her voice. Baekhyun nodded slowly.

“I did something really dumb, Nana...Minseok wanted out of the engagement so badly, and I wanted to help him...”

“You thought creating a scandal would put a stop to it?”

“Or at least buy us time,” Baekhyun sighed. “I'd planned to hide in Nefret away from the colony with Minseok, but everything went wrong...Minseok's morning sickness was so bad. He really wasn't healthy enough to have a baby and I would have known that if I'd looked closer, but I...” Baekhyun trailed off as a few tears rolled down his cheeks. Nayoung hugged him close again, rubbing his back. “The king figured out something was wrong with Minseok and forced the doctor to look into it,” Baekhyun said between sobs, clinging to Nayoung. “I should have been with Minseok. The king attacked him, Nana! That's why he's hurt. I wasn't there to protect him when he needed me!”

“Shh, you know if you'd been there, the king would have killed you right then and there. Then what would have happened to Minseok? I don't understand how you even got to me alive.”

“Prince Junmyeon found me when the guards were beating me. He planned to get me and Minseok out of the palace, and that's when he called you. I never wanted to make you an accomplice, Nana. I'm so, so sorry...”
Baekhyun broke down crying into her shoulder. It had been so long since he'd cried, but being with Nayoung always brought Baekhyun's innermost feelings out. She was his grandmother and one of the most important people in his life, and he felt like he'd failed her this time.

“What you did was foolish, but it wasn't wrong,” Nayoung finally spoke after a moment. She cupped Baekhyun's cheeks once more so she could look into his eyes. “You did this because you wanted to help Minseok, and he wanted your help. I will always support helping someone in need, Baekhyun, even if it means I'm going against the king. Minseok is safe here with us now. Everyone in Nefret will take care of him. You have protected him. And we'll protect you as well. There's nothing to be sorry about, do you understand?”

Baekhyun nodded, his lips quivering as he tried to stop crying. Nayoung hugged him close again and let Baekhyun cry for as long as he needed. When he'd finally tired himself out, Nayoung lifted his chin, smiling at him softly. She'd always been affectionate with Baekhyun, and he hadn't realized just how much he'd missed it.

“You need rest, my dear. You'll be safe here.”

“Thank you for everything Nana...” Baekhyun mumbled, wiping his eyes.

“I should thank you as well. I'm going to be a great grandmother~” Baekhyun flushed at the thought. “Are you and Minseok doing alright? You seem close, but I don't want to assume your relationship.”

“I don't really know what our relationship is. Nana, I'm so confused. I can't tell what the nature of my feelings are, but I want to protect him and keep him safe. Does that mean I love him?”

“I can't make that call for you, Baekhyun,” Nayoung said softly, wrapping her arm around Baekhyun and leading him back to his closed door. “But give it a little time. You two were in a very dangerous position before, and now you can truly be together and explore your feelings for each other. Don't try to push him away, and you might just find he's someone you can't live without. From what I can see, he already feels very intensely for you.”

“He told me he loved me...but I couldn't answer him. I didn't know how I felt. I'm the worst, aren't I?”

“No, you're honest. It's better to be truthful with him than to lie to him. But you do need to eventually give him an answer. For tonight, just sleep. Tomorrow is a new day, and you can both help out around the house.” Baekhyun smiled at the thought.

“Alright, thank you Nana. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight my dear.”

Baekhyun quietly opened the door and waved goodbye to Nayoung before shutting it. He turned, glad to find Minseok still fast asleep. He'd been worried about Minseok waking up and finding him gone. Baekhyun kicked off his shoes and slipped under the blankets. Minseok instantly rolled over and wrapped his arm around Baekhyun, snuggling right up against his chest. This would be the first night Baekhyun didn't have to sneak away and leave Minseok alone. He would
get to wake up cuddled with him the following morning. That thought soothed Baekhyun to sleep, and his grandmother's words about them truly being together echoed in his head. Maybe this was what he really needed to sort his feelings out.

~*~

The king's men weren't far behind Minseok and Baekhyun. The following day while Baekhyun and Minseok were slowly waking up, they heard shuffling outside the door. Nayoung burst into the room shortly after that.

“The royal guard is in Nefret! My men guarding the outer ring of trees spotted them! We don't have much time! We need to get you two hidden!”

Baekhyun shot out of bed, lifting a terrified Minseok out of it a few seconds later. Minseok seemed frozen in shock, so Baekhyun did most of the work. He made their bed and slipped shoes on his feet as well as Minseok's. He scanned the room to make sure there were no traces of them. Luckily, they hadn't been there long enough to mess up anything other than the bed.

Baekhyun knelt down on the ground, and Minseok watched him anxiously. How were they supposed to hide from the royal guards? Wouldn't it be best to run away? Why was Baekhyun stalling? Suddenly, Baekhyun lifted one of the planks of his floor, revealing a small cavity underneath.

“Minseok, we need to hide in here!”

“You have a secret compartment?” Minseok gawked.

“The entire Birth House is built with them. Like I said, we're no strangers to bandits. I'm sorry to rush you but we need to hurry! Come on!”

Minseok nodded, kneeling down beside Baekhyun. He carefully slipped his legs into the hole. The hidden area was shallow, so they would have to crawl on their hands and feet. He was glad he wasn't further along in his pregnancy, or this would have been a lot harder to squeeze into. When Minseok had managed to get into the space, he crawled out of the way so Baekhyun could join him. Baekhyun repositioned the plank, and fastened a few locks on the underside so they would be locked into the space.

It was dark, so Minseok couldn't make out much, but it looked like there was a blanket on the ground. Baekhyun crawled over to it and laid down, holding his arms out for Minseok to join him. Minseok cuddled up against him, gripping Baekhyun's vest anxiously. Baekhyun wrapped his arm around Minseok's back and rubbed it.

“It's gonna be ok,” Baekhyun whispered. “Just stay really quiet. Nana will handle this.”
Minseok nodded, knowing there was nothing else they could do. At one point they heard someone walking above them, but relaxed when Nayoung whispered she was just making sure they were hidden. After that, all they could do was wait out the whole experience. Minseok jumped when he heard a royal guard start speaking outside, but Baekhyun held him tightly to reassure him.

“We're here searching for the traitor Baekhyun and the eldest prince, Minseok. The king has reason to believe they're hiding in Nefret.”

“Does he?” Nayoung asked, feigning ignorance. “Why would he believe that?”

“The traitor is your grandson, and bonds in Nefret run deep.”

“So the king believes I'm hiding them from him? I'm appalled.”

“Allow us to search, and perhaps you can prove your innocence,” the guard stated. Nayoung scoffed at his tone.

“Search all you want. I don't normally let the royal guard into the Birth House, but like you said, I'll prove my innocence.”

Baekhyun and Minseok heard several feet storm through the Birth House. They held their breath as men stomped right above them, looking through every inch of the room trying to find them. After what felt like an eternity, the feet finally left the room, and Minseok sighed quietly in relief. They stayed completely silent and listened for the men to leave the Birth House.

“Have you cleared my name?” Nayoung asked irritably.

“For now. However we still believe they'll head for Nefret, so the royal guard would like to request you let us stay.”

“Denied,” Nayoung answered immediately. “I will not have my people tormented by your presence. The king made an arrangement with me that people from the kingdom will not be welcomed in Nefret unless personally invited or arranged. I expect that to be upheld.”

“That arrangement was regarding bandits from the kingdom-”

“No, it specifically regarded anyone from the kingdom. Not even the king himself can trespass uninvited on our soil. You have searched my colony and found no trace of them. I do not intend to take them in against the king's will. You have no reason to loiter in my house! My men will treat you as intruders if you insist on staying.”

“Very well,” the guard answered irritably. “But the king expects complete compliance, so you will turn them in if you find them within Nefret.”

“Of course. Family doesn't excuse being a traitor to the king.”

“We'll take our leave then.”

“My men will follow you and make sure you leave our borders. Forgive me, but I must do this for the privacy and safety of my people. None of them are particularly comfortable with people from the kingdom.”
“I've noticed.”

“Should you resist leaving our borders, my men will treat you as enemies and open fire. You've been properly warned.”

Baekhyun and Minseok listened as the feet moved further and further away. They didn't dare move until Nayoung had given them the clear that the men had left their colony. They weren't sure how much time passed before Nayoung entered the room with a heavy sigh and knelt down on the floor, knocking on the plank.

“My men have confirmed they left the Nefret border. You're safe to come out now.”

Baekhyun undid the locks and pushed the plank upward so Nayoung could lift it. After that, Baekhyun let Minseok get out first. It was a struggle to climb up out of the hole, but Nayoung helped lift Minseok so he could get his feet out. After that, Baekhyun slipped out, obviously much more accustomed to this. He sat on the floor with his legs dangling into the hidden area.

“Thank you, Nana,” Baekhyun said. “You're a lifesaver.”

“It was nothing,” Nayoung replied with a light chuckle. “Those buffoons are easy to deal with. You two are safe here with us.”

“I'm so sorry,” Minseok muttered, looking down at his hands in his lap. “You're all having to take so many risks because of me. I'm so sorry...”

Nayoung sighed and hugged Minseok close, resting one hand on the back of his head and rubbing his back with the other. Minseok had never been embraced like this by someone other than Baekhyun or the occasional hug from his brothers. He vaguely remembered his mother holding him like this when he was really little. The feeling of someone holding him so softly and protectively had his eyes watering.

“You're family, Minseok. This is what family does. They protect each other, no matter what that means.”

Minseok broke down crying, clinging to her as she rocked him gently. He was a complete stranger, yet she already considered him family. Minseok hadn't felt this supported in a long time, between his brothers helping him escape and Nayoung taking him in like one of her own. Baekhyun watched, smiling sadly. It was hard seeing Minseok so easily upset, but he was glad Nayoung was being so accepting with him. Minseok deserved love and acceptance. The word family kept repeating in his mind. Minseok was part of Baekhyun's family now. The realization left Baekhyun feeling somewhat giddy. Maybe this was love after all.

Chapter End Notes
And here's the second update of the week :D I've been really excited for this part of the story because we actually get to see one of the outer regions :DDD We'll get back to the kingdom eventually, but the outer regions will be playing bigger parts in the story from here on, Nefret especially if you couldn't tell lol XD And finally a chapter where xiubaek got to kinda unwind rather than be in constant distress, but they can't relax too much. But it's a start, right? Lol!

Thank you all for leaving such sweet comments and birthday wishes! I love you all so much!!! I'll be back again next week with the next chapter ;3
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took some time before Minseok finally started to breathe easily. What helped the most was Nayoung inviting Minseok to help her and the others work in the gardens. Minseok was glued to Nayoung's side, partially because he was nervous, but he was also intently listening to everything she said and learning how to take care of the different crops they grew. Baekhyun couldn't help but stop his own work and stare at Minseok as he watered a plant or listened to Nayoung as she taught him how to plant the seeds. Minseok seemed so fascinated about the simplest things, and it was a constant reminder to Baekhyun how sheltered a life Minseok had lived.

Baekhyun was happy to be back in the garden as well. He'd enjoyed taking care of the palace garden, but being here with the rest of his colony was where he was happiest. They were all accepting Minseok as one of them, which also set Baekhyun at ease. His protectiveness over Minseok only seemed to grow stronger now that they were able to spend more time together. He just wanted to give Minseok the happy life he deserved.

As they were finishing up in the gardens, Baekhyun squinted up at one of the trees, smiling as a purplish pink fruit caught his eye. It was about time for these fruits to start growing, and they were Baekhyun's favorite. Minseok had probably never even heard of them before. Baekhyun couldn't wait for him to try them.

He hopped up and grabbed the lowest branch of the tree, then started climbing higher up to reach the fruit. As Nayoung started gathering the others to head back to the colony, she caught sight of Baekhyun and sighed.

“Baekhyun! Don't climb so high up! You might fall!” She called. Minseok followed her line of sight and gasped when he saw how high Baekhyun was.

“I'll be fine, Nana! I've climbed higher than this before!”

“And you've fallen out of that very tree before,” Nayoung grumbled back.

Soon enough, Baekhyun was climbing down and running over to them. He rinsed off the fruit under a nearby spigot, then held it up for Minseok to take.

“It's a parufa fruit,” Baekhyun stated. “It's my favorite! Try it!”

Minseok took it gently from him and rolled it around in his hands, observing the vivid colors and smooth texture. He'd never seen a fruit like this before, but that wasn't very surprising. Other than the cherry trees in the garden and a few other fruit trees, the kingdom didn't really see a lot of
“Just bite into it. You don't need to peel it or anything,” Baekhyun explained.

Minseok nodded and took a bite. His eyes widened, surprised at how soft and sweet the fruit was. Baekhyun smiled knowingly.

“It's good right?”

Minseok hummed and took another bite. Baekhyun wrapped his arm around Minseok's waist and they walked with the others back to the Birth House. As Minseok nibbled on the parufa fruit, he would hold it up to Baekhyun's mouth and let him have a bite here and there. Minseok leaned closer to Baekhyun, smiling to himself. He never would have imagined feeling so free and at peace. They were still wanted by the king, but here in Nefret, it really felt like they were living peacefully and didn't have a worry in the world. Minseok had Baekhyun by his side at all times. It almost felt too good to be true.

As they made their way back to the Birth House, the sun started to set. Baekhyun decided to take Minseok on another detour, having plenty to show him about Nefret at night. They stopped in a small patch of blue flowers, and Baekhyun told Minseok to just wait until night fell. Finally, as it got darker, the plants started to glow with vibrant blue light. Minseok's jaw dropped and Baekhyun laughed, pulling him forward and kneeling down beside the flowers. Minseok knelt beside him, looking at him excitedly for an explanation.

“These flowers are called Lunamaris,” Baekhyun stated, brushing his finger over them. “Their petals produce a powder that emits its own light.”

He held his fingers up to show the blue powder glowing on them. Minseok excitedly brushed his fingers over one of the petals, holding it up to show Baekhyun his own blue fingers. Baekhyun smiled and intertwined their fingers, holding their hands up in the air. Minseok looked at him with a look of both curiosity and anticipation. A light flashed out of the corner of Baekhyun's eye, and he turned to look at it.

“Ahh, the other thing I wanted to show you is here!”

“What is it?” Minseok asked, sounding somewhat disappointed after Baekhyun broke eye contact.

“Fireflies,” Baekhyun answered, pointing with his free hand towards the hovering bugs. “They like to gather around the Lunamaris.”

“I've only read of fireflies...This is my first time seeing them. They're beautiful...”

Minseok stared in awe at the nature around him. He wished he'd left the confinement of the palace sooner. He wished he could have lived in Nefret and experienced this sort of thing every
day. A simple life in the forest beat being royalty any day.

Baekhyun watched as Minseok got lost in the sight and his own thoughts. The lights were glistening in his eyes, and a beautiful blue hue was cast on him from the flowers surrounding them. Minseok had always been beautiful, but now that Baekhyun was seeing him truly happy for the first time since he'd met him, he was breathtaking. They were still nursing him to better health, but already his face was flushed with more color and he'd gained a healthy amount of weight for how far along he was in the pregnancy. Minseok was finally prospering, and Baekhyun found himself wanting to hold him even closer than before.

Baekhyun leaned closer, lowering Minseok's hand, which was still intertwined with his. Minseok looked at him again, and their eyes met. There was silence around them as they simply stared into each other's eyes. Baekhyun slowly leaned forward, and Minseok closed his eyes, waiting for their lips to touch. Seconds before they would have kissed, someone called out to them.


“Yes, what do you need?”

“Nayoung wanted to check up on Minseok before dinner was served. She said he would be with you.”

“Alright, we'll be in soon.”

“Very well. I'll be standing guard.”

Baekhyun turned back to Minseok and smiled before plucking a few of the Lunamaris plants. He held them up to Minseok for him to take.

“We'll put them in a vase in our room,” Baekhyun stated. “They still glow even when they've been picked. They make really good natural light.”

“Oh...Alright.”

Baekhyun got to his feet and helped Minseok up, then the two of them headed back to the giant tree. They passed by Yifan on the way, and he bowed to both of them. Baekhyun didn't stop to acknowledge him, to Minseok's surprise. Then again, Baekhyun always seemed to act strangely around Yifan. Minseok wondered why that was the case. Once they were back in their room and Baekhyun was setting up the flowers, Minseok decided to ask.

“Do you not like Yifan?”

“Hm?” Baekhyun hummed. “I like him just fine, why?”

“You seem uncomfortable around him...”

“I'm not really...He and I were actually on pretty friendly terms before I went to the palace.”
“Then what's changed? Is it because I'm here?”

“Why would you say that?” Baekhyun asked, frowning. “That makes it sound like it's bad that you're here.”

“Well, it might be if your friendship is being affected...”

“It's nothing like that,” Baekhyun soothed, walking over and sitting beside Minseok on the bed. He wrapped an arm around his back and leaned on his shoulder. “I just haven't seen him in a while and a lot has changed in both our lives. I feel a bit like a stranger to him now, so it's harder to talk to him. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah...But you shouldn't feel nervous. You two were close before, and nothing too drastic has changed, right? You two can still be friends. All you need to do is sit and catch up with each other.” Baekhyun smiled and kissed Minseok's cheek.

“Maybe you're right,” he sighed. “For now, let's go find Nana. She wanted to check up on you.”

Minseok nodded and followed Baekhyun. He felt like Baekhyun hadn't really taken his words seriously. Baekhyun still seemed like such a closed book to Minseok. Why was it so hard to read him? Even when Baekhyun held him close or kissed him, Minseok couldn't understand the emotion behind the actions. Maybe there weren't any feelings there at all. Maybe this was just how they would be with each other from now on, an ambiguous relationship. Minseok didn't want that.

~*~

Minseok would find out a short while later why Baekhyun was really acting the way he was around Yifan. Minseok had spent much of his day in the garden with Nayoung. She was teaching him a few herbal remedies for headaches and nausea, since she thought he would benefit from them. Minseok honestly wanted to learn everything she and Baekhyun had to offer. Nefret was such a different place from the kingdom, and Minseok was already in love with both the land and the people. Despite tension with the kingdom, everyone treated Minseok with respect and like he was part of the colony. Minseok desperately wanted to be part of this colony.

Minseok came back to the Birth House tired and sweaty from a day in the garden, but he was immediately excited when he saw Baekhyun sitting on the walkway behind the Birth House, nibbling on a parufa fruit. Minseok quickly walked over to him and plopped down beside him, dangling his feet in between the wooden railing beside Baekhyun's.

“Hi~” Minseok greeted, leaning his head on Baekhyun's shoulder and snuggling his arm.

“Hey! Did you finish in the garden?”

“Mhm. Nayoung taught me about that tea you always made me today. I told her you added honey to it for me. She laughed but said she'd try it herself next time since the tea really does taste bad.” Baekhyun laughed and rested his head on top of Minseok's.

“You're fitting right in here. Before you know it, you'll know more than me.”
“I doubt that,” Minseok laughed. “But I really love it here. The land is beautiful and the colony is amazing. I’ve never felt so free before in my life. I feel like a new person.”

Baekhyun hummed and took another bite out of his fruit. Were they really free here? The kingdom hadn't come back looking for them, but they were by no means free to live in peace. Baekhyun didn't want to bring Minseok down with that reality though. This was the happiest Minseok had ever been, and Baekhyun wanted to protect that happiness at all costs.

“Baekhyun?” Minseok asked when he hadn't responded. “Are you ok?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, I was just thinking...”

“About what?”

“Just...We're not really free here,” Baekhyun sighed, and Minseok's face fell. So much for not bringing down his mood. “The king is still looking for us, and I'm worried. That's all.”

Minseok felt guilty. Baekhyun wouldn't be worrying about any of this if Minseok hadn't gotten him involved. What if Baekhyun was regretting all of this now? Minseok couldn't do anything. He couldn't take back what they'd done. He could only ride the waves with Baekhyun as they came.

“We'll be safe here,” Minseok said, trying to convince himself. “We'll be ok.”

“Yeah, you're right,” Baekhyun sighed. He slipped his arm out of Minseok's grip so he could wrap it around him and hold him close. “We'll be ok here.”

Minseok wrapped his arms around Baekhyun's waist. Baekhyun still seemed a bit distracted, but he at least didn't seem too upset anymore. As soon as Baekhyun had finished his fruit, he hugged Minseok close with both arms, and they watched the sunset cuddled together. Minseok had never experienced simple moments like this, but they were becoming his favorites. Baekhyun didn't need to make love to him. He just needed to be by his side and hold him.

Once the sun had gone down, they joined Nayoung in making some dinner, then Minseok headed off to the bathhouse. He preferred to bathe in the evening alone. He was starting to get self conscious about his stomach. He was approaching his 4 month mark, and Nayoung and Baekhyun had been feeding him well, so he was noticeably showing now. He'd even had to ask for larger pants since the ones Baekhyun had given him became too tight. Minseok knew this was a natural part of being pregnant, but he was still shy about it. He didn't know how Baekhyun would feel about him either. Minseok knew it was silly to worry about something like that, but Baekhyun still felt so far away from him, even if he'd started being more physically affectionate with him. Minseok was scared Baekhyun would lose interest in him as he gained weight.

When Minseok was finished, he headed back to the birth house. He bowed to the warriors on duty on his way. Nayoung kept the colony heavily guarded at all times, so the warriors often worked in shifts. There was always someone stationed near the bathhouse and restrooms at night.
When Minseok reached their room, he was surprised to find the door cracked. He glanced inside and spotted Baekhyun and Yifan standing across from each other. There seemed to be tension between them, so Minseok stayed outside the room, listening to what was going on.

“Baekhyun, we need to talk,” Yifan spoke. Minseok heard Baekhyun sigh irritably.

“What is there to say, Yifan? You know the situation I'm in!”

“I want to hear from your own mouth what happened and how you're feeling right now.”

“I got Minseok pregnant,” Baekhyun stated. “It was consensual and we knew it would lead to something like this happening. I wasn't mistreated or forced into this against my will, so you have no reason to be so upset.”

“That's not true and you know it! From the very start you were forced into this! We were seeing each other, Baekhyun! I was going through the courting process! But you were taken from your home, and I couldn't do anything to stop them because we weren't married.”

“I know,” Baekhyun said quietly. “But that doesn't matter anymore. I was taken and this is my life now.”

Minseok pressed his hand over his mouth, feeling almost numb. Baekhyun had mentioned that he was taken from his old life, but Minseok had never realized he'd been romantically involved with anyone. He'd gotten Baekhyun mixed up in this mess, and Baekhyun never should have been involved in any of this in the first place. Minseok was the one who didn't belong in this picture.

“I just want to know how you're feeling. Is this really what you want, Baekhyun?”

“Yifan, I'm going to be a father. I can't abandon Minseok or our child, and I don't want to. They're a part of my life now. Whatever you and I had in the past, it can't be anymore.”

“I understand...But know that if you feel this isn't the life you want, I'll do whatever is in my power to help you and make you happy.”

Baekhyun didn't respond, and Minseok quickly hid in the spare room once he saw Yifan leaving the room. When Yifan had left, Minseok slowly slid down the wall, hugging his knees close. Maybe this was what Baekhyun meant earlier when he'd said they weren't free. He felt responsible for Minseok, so he was denying himself his own freedom and happiness. Maybe the reason Baekhyun couldn't ever fall in love with Minseok was because he'd always had someone else on his mind.

Yifan was tall, strong, and noble-hearted. There was no way Minseok could compete with someone like that. Minseok was frail, powerless, and frankly, useless. Baekhyun would be so much better off with someone like Yifan by his side. He'd be safe from the kingdom, and he wouldn't have to spend every day looking after Minseok. This was a much better fate for Baekhyun.

What did that mean for Minseok though? As long as he was in Nefret, Baekhyun would be tied
down by him. Minseok didn't want to leave, but he couldn't keep pushing himself on Baekhyun. He'd suffered enough for Minseok already. Minseok couldn't live with the guilt of knowing he was holding Baekhyun back from being happy. He loved Baekhyun too much for that. He had to let him go.

Surviving on his own would be hard, and truthfully, Minseok didn't know if he'd be able to live alone, especially if he ran away and hid somewhere uninhabited in Nefret. Nayoung and Baekhyun had taught him a few things, but certainly not enough to survive on his own without the colony. This was for the best though. Baekhyun and the people of Nefret were all too kind. They didn't deserve to become enemies of the king. Baekhyun would still be a traitor of course. Maybe if Minseok went back and reasoned with the king he could save Baekhyun at his own expense. Minseok would at least have a place to be if he married Dongyul.

Minseok rubbed his hand over his stomach, his eyes welling up with tears. He didn't want to lose the baby. That was probably the only part of Baekhyun he would ever get to have. He'd fought so hard to take care of the baby up until now as well. The baby was a part of him, and he wanted to raise them and love them. He didn't want to let them go. How was he supposed to clear Baekhyun's name with the king without losing the baby in the process? He really was powerless.

Minseok hugged his stomach and pressed his forehead into his knees, crying silently. Regardless of what he did in the future, he had to leave Nefret. He couldn't risk their safety any longer, and he couldn't force himself on Baekhyun anymore. He'd been selfish up until this moment, and he had to make things right, no matter how hard it would be.

Minseok wiped at his eyes and stood up, letting out a shaky breath. He would leave that night after Baekhyun had fallen asleep. He knew the guards' posts well enough to be able to sneak past them. He just had to see Baekhyun one last time before leaving. When he entered their room, Baekhyun was staring out the window. As soon as he heard Minseok, he jumped to his feet and headed over, cupping Minseok's cheeks.

“Hey! I was getting worried. You were gone for a really long time.”

“I got hungry, so I had a bit of food,” Minseok lied. Baekhyun smiled gently in response.

“The baby was hungry, huh?” Baekhyun's smile shifted to concern again as he ran his thumb gently along Minseok's cheek. “Your eyes are red...Are you ok? Did something happen?”

“I got soap in them,” Minseok lied again. Baekhyun smiled and kissed his forehead.

“You should let me wash your hair. I'd make sure it didn't get in your eyes.”

“Maybe I will next time,” Minseok agreed, forcing a smile. Baekhyun hugged him close, then led him over to their bed.

“It's late and I'm sure you're tired. Let's call it a night, alright?”
Minseok nodded, letting Baekhyun slip into the bed first. As soon as Baekhyun was situated, Minseok laid down next to him, snuggling Baekhyun tightly and pressing his face to his chest. He was probably acting suspicious in Baekhyun's eyes, but he didn't care. He needed to hold him like this one last time.

“Minseok, are you feeling ok?” Baekhyun asked gently, running his fingers through Minseok's hair.

“I'm fine. I just want to cuddle for a bit.”

Minseok heard Baekhyun laugh gently, then felt him wrap his arms around him, rubbing his back and placing kisses on his head. Minseok didn't want to leave this behind, but he knew this affection wasn't meant for him. Baekhyun had been confused about his feelings throughout all of this, and Minseok owed it to him to let his heart follow who it wanted to follow. Minseok wanted Baekhyun to be free and in love with whoever he fell for. Baekhyun had given Minseok the opportunity to love and prosper, and he wanted to do the same for him, even if it meant he couldn't be with him.

Minseok almost dozed off in Baekhyun's arms, but as soon as Baekhyun rolled over in his sleep, Minseok was painfully reminded that it was time to leave. He quietly slipped out of bed and put his shoes on, then walked over to one of Baekhyun's drawers and opened it slowly, trying not to make a sound. Baekhyun kept his ink and papyrus paper in this drawer. Minseok wasn't bold enough to say goodbye in person, but he wanted to apologize for all the harm he'd caused somehow.

Minseok sat beside the Lunamaris that Baekhyun had put in a vase on their table and wrote a letter to Baekhyun. He paused and stared at the flowers for a moment, feeling his eyes water again as he remembered the evening Baekhyun had first shown them to him. He furiously wiped at his eyes a few seconds later, trying not to break down. He needed to do this. It was the right choice. Minseok finished the letter and sat there for a moment, gathering the strength he needed to get up and walk out of the room. It was tempting to just forget everything and crawl back into bed with Baekhyun, but then guilt would eat Minseok alive. It was time to leave.

He got to his feet and crept out of the room, stopping in the doorway one last time to look at Baekhyun sleeping peacefully in bed. Minseok whispered goodbye and let out a shaky breath, exiting the room and quietly shutting the door behind him. After that, he crept through the hallways of the Birth House, feeling a bit guilty for not saying goodbye to Nayoung either. It was better to leave quietly like this though. They would all try to stop him and take care of him if they knew, and Minseok couldn't lose his resolve.

He crept down the tree, sneaking through the bushes on the ground and avoiding the guards. He didn't know where the guards Nayoung had stationed on the outer parts of the forest were, but he would keep an eye out for their posts. At least for now, he could get a decent distance from the colony. Once Minseok had gotten out of sight from the nearest guards, he started walking. He
wasn't sure how long he walked, but his feet were aching and he was pretty sure his shoe had rubbed a blister into his heel. He was tired and wanted to sleep, but he didn't feel far enough away from the colony to rest yet.

As he continued to walk on, his foot suddenly sank down in the ground, and he cried out in surprise. He stumbled forward, falling further into the mud. He felt muddy water surrounding him and he writhed around desperately, trying to crawl through the slippery mud. When he'd finally gotten on relatively solid ground, he was covered in mud and his shoes had both fallen into the water. He glanced around and gasped when he realized he'd stumbled upon a swamp. There was so much algae and plant life springing up from the water he hadn't even realized it was there. He'd noticed the air was a bit more humid and there was a strange smell though. If Minseok couldn't even recognize a swamp, how was he supposed to live on his own in a foreign land?

Minseok sighed and crawled forward, wishing his body would stop shaking. The tears were finally falling and he regretted ever leaving Baekhyun's side. He had to keep thinking of Baekhyun's happiness though. He still couldn't turn back now. He would just have to keep going as he was.

When Minseok's feet ached from walking barefoot on the ground, he finally sat down by one of the trees near the swamp. He was too tired to force himself to keep walking, and he was shivering from falling into the water earlier. He was done for the night. He hugged his legs to his body as tightly as he could, trying to keep himself warm. He was so exhausted he started dozing off against the tree. As he slept, he dreamed of being back in the Birth House snuggled against Baekhyun, while Baekhyun whispered sweet nothings to him and repeatedly said he loved him. It was the reality he so desperately wanted but couldn't have. A tear ran down Minseok's cheek as he snuggled closer to the tree, trying to find some semblance of warmth that could compare to Baekhyun.

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Baekhyun rolled over, unconsciously reaching for Minseok to snuggle him closer. When his hand met with air beside him, Baekhyun's eyes opened, blinking tiredly in an attempt to locate Minseok. When the spot next to him was empty, Baekhyun sat up in a panic. He glanced around the room, trying to find Minseok somewhere inside. When the room was empty as well, Baekhyun glanced outside, trying to see if Minseok had simply gone to the restrooms. After Baekhyun didn't see any movement outside their window, he got out of bed to look for Minseok himself. That was when he spotted the note on the table. Baekhyun walked over to it and shakily picked it up, reading it by the light of the Lunamaris.

Dear Baekhyun,

I'm so sorry for all the pain and trouble I've caused you.
I never wanted to put you or your people at risk, and I'm sorry I made you a traitor to the king. I'll find a way to clear your name someday, so please, stay safe until then. I'm sorry for leaving so suddenly, but I realized my presence is causing you trouble, and you don't deserve that. You started this with me because of guilt and obligation, and you shouldn't have to force yourself through all of this. You deserve to be happy, no matter what that means. Thank you for taking care of me and looking after me when no one else would. I got to experience love with you, and I hope you can experience it yourself someday. I want you to be free, Baekhyun. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine on my own. Take care of yourself and please be happy.

I love you,

Minseok

Baekhyun dropped the paper back on the table and kicked his shoes on. What on earth was Minseok doing? Why would he decide to leave? He had to know it wasn't safe for him to be out in the open, especially alone. Where did he get the idea that he was causing Baekhyun trouble and he needed to be free? Was it because Baekhyun hadn't responded to his feelings yet? Nayoung had warned him about this, but he hadn't thought Minseok would get the idea to run away. Baekhyun needed to find him and clear everything up. He needed to tell Minseok what he'd been feeling the past few weeks.

Baekhyun ran out of the Birth House and started heading into the forest. It was only when a pair of strong arms grabbed him and pulled him back that he was brought to a stop, kicking and trying to get away.

“Let go!” Baekhyun shouted.

“Baekhyun, calm down!” Yifan urged, dodging one of Baekhyun's legs to his groin. “What's going on!? You know it's dangerous for you to leave the Birth House at night of all times!” “Minseok ran away! I need to find him! Let me go!” Baekhyun begged, trying to pull himself away from Yifan. Tears were already running down his cheeks. “He's alone and it's dangerous and he's
probably scared. I need to find him, please Yifan!”

Baekhyun stopped struggling and started crying instead. He was terrified of Minseok being alone, since there were plenty of ways to get hurt in the forest. He was scared Minseok wouldn't be found, that he wouldn't come back. Baekhyun didn't think he could live if something happened to Minseok. He didn't think he could live without Minseok. He heard Yifan sigh, then felt him pat his back.

“Earlier, you acted like Minseok was your responsibility, but that's not how it is, is it? You love him,” he said gently. Baekhyun looked at him with quivering lips, then finally nodded.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered.

“There's nothing to apologize for, Baekhyun. This is what I wanted you to tell me in the first place. I only ever wanted your happiness. If that isn't with me, then so be it.”

“Yifan, please let me go look for him! I need to get him back!”

“Stay here. I'll be back soon with extra guards. We'll go out and search with you.”

“Thank you, Yifan...”

The guard smiled and ran back towards the Birth House. Baekhyun wiped his eyes, thinking about what Yifan had just told him. Minseok had said something similar in his letter. He'd wanted Baekhyun to be happy and experience freedom and love, even if it wasn't with him. Minseok was still convinced that Baekhyun didn't have any feelings for him. Baekhyun had hurt Minseok through his own negligence and stubbornness. He needed to find him and apologize.

Yifan returned soon with 8 other guards and the carriage Minseok and Baekhyun had arrived in. Baekhyun looked at it in confusion and Yifan simply smiled.

“Prince Minseok is pregnant. I'm sure he's going to be tired when we find him. This will make his journey home much easier.”

“Yifan, thank you,” Baekhyun mumbled, managing a smile himself.

He was grateful Yifan was being so understanding. He was a true guardian, putting the safety and happiness of others before himself. Baekhyun hoped someday he would find someone that would love him as much as Minseok loved Baekhyun. Yifan deserved that probably far more than Baekhyun did.

They ran into the forest, calling out for Minseok and checking different directions. Yifan alerted the guards on some of the outer forest posts to keep their eyes open for Minseok. It was going to be a long night of searching, but Baekhyun wouldn't stop until Minseok was back in his arms, safe and sound. Even if he searched the whole night for him, he wouldn't give up.
As Baekhyun wandered, he started getting closer to the swamp, and his heart sank as he realized Minseok knew nothing about the nearby swamp. If he'd wandered off there, he could have easily gotten hurt or lost. Baekhyun had to search the swamp to be sure. He crept around carefully, trying to find solid ground. He noticed a disturbance in the mud nearby the water, and his stomach churned uncomfortably. Someone had fallen in the swamp, but it didn't look like they'd remained there for long.

Baekhyun continued to walk through the area, and finally spotted someone leaned up against the tree. They were covered in mud, but after a closer look, Baekhyun realized it was Minseok. He cried out his name and rushed over, pulling a barely awake Minseok to his feet and into his arms. Baekhyun sobbed into Minseok's shoulder, hugging him as tightly as he could.

“What the hell were you thinking!?” Baekhyun cried. “Why would you run off on your own? Do you know how dangerous that was? I was worried sick!”


“Why else would I be here? To find you! Why did you run away from me, Minseok? What was that note about?”

“I don't want to hold you back,” Minseok said in a shaky voice. “You deserve so much better than this...You deserve to be happy.”

“Who said I wasn't happy!? I am happy, Minseok! Happier than I've been in months!”

“What about Yifan?”

“What...?”

“You were seeing him before you were taken to the kingdom. That's why you were so awkward with him...I'm keeping you from him, aren't I?”

“You heard us...didn't you?” Baekhyun asked quietly. Minseok nodded, a tear falling down his cheek. Baekhyun sighed and pulled Minseok closer, still cupping his cheeks. “Listen, Minseok. It's true, Yifan and I were seeing each other. In Nefret, there's a courting process where you meet under supervision and get to know each other before proceeding with any sort of engagement. Nana enforced it after a few bithers were abused in their marriages. Yifan was getting to know me, and I enjoyed his charms, but that was so long ago. I don't even think about Yifan anymore. You're my world now, Minseok.”

“You never wanted this world in the first place,” Minseok whimpered. “How can I keep clinging to you when I know this was forced upon you? When I know there's someone so much better for you?”

“Who the hell decides who's best for me?” Baekhyun asked, trying not to get too irritated with how Minseok was talking. “Who decides this isn't what I want now, even if it wasn't what I wanted in the first place? That's not fair, Minseok!”

“Why would you want me though? I'm not strong or smart or anything worthwhile...”
“Who said you weren't worth anything!?” Baekhyun asked, getting angry this time. “The king? Dongyul? What the fuck do they know!? They never bothered to even look at you, so what would they know? You're kind, you're patient, you're one of the most loving people I know. Even when you feel ill or you're struggling, you always smile at me and treat me kindly. Even when I was a jerk to you, you never were anything less than wonderful. You've always put me before your own needs. And now that we're here, you're learning my culture and participating with my people. Do you know how much that means to me, Minseok? I never thought anyone from royalty would give a rat's ass about my people, and you're here living among us and working with us. How could I not fall in love with you? If there's someone who doesn't deserve this kind of love, it's me, not you. But I'm selfish, and I'm going to cling to you, even if I don't deserve you.”

“Baekhyun...”

“My heart belongs to you, Minseok,” Baekhyun said softly, taking one of Minseok's hands and pressing it to his chest. “It has ever since the night I agreed to sleep with you for the first time. I just didn't know it yet. No one has made me happier...so please, don't leave me.”

Minseok bit his lip, trying in vain not to start crying. Baekhyun actually did love him. He wanted him. It was a bit too much for Minseok to digest all at once. He rushed forward, pressing his face into Baekhyun's chest and crying, wrapping his arms around Baekhyun as if he would disappear if he let go. Baekhyun hugged him back, kissing his head every now and then.

“I love you!” Minseok cried, and Baekhyun hugged him even tighter.

“I love you too. Let's go home, ok?”

Minseok nodded and glanced up at Baekhyun, smiling. Baekhyun leaned down, pressing their lips together, and Minseok sighed happily. This kiss was different than all the others. It was full of love and passion, yet gentleness as well. This kiss didn't end quickly like the others usually did. Instead, it lasted longer than any ever had, and Baekhyun cupped the back of Minseok's head to deepen it. It was only when they heard footsteps approaching that they managed to stop.

“Baekhyun!” Yifan called. “Where are you?”

“Over here!” Baekhyun shouted in reply. “I found Minseok.”

The guards and Yifan approached, the carriage following after them. As soon as Yifan caught sight of Minseok, he breathed a sigh of relief. He walked over to them and knelt down before Minseok, bowing his head.

“I apologize for any pain you've endured, my prince. Please, allow us to take you back to the Birth House.”

“I'm sorry for running away and causing you all trouble,” Minseok mumbled, feeling embarrassed. Yifan shook his head.

“It's our pleasure to protect you. We'll escort you both safely back.”

“Thank you, Yifan,” Baekhyun said. He glanced Minseok over, noting that he really needed
another bath and his shoes were gone. “Let me carry you.”

“It's fine! I can walk to the carriage,” Minseok gasped. Baekhyun ignored him and lifted him into his arms.

“Not without shoes. Your poor feet are probably a mess.”

Minseok sighed and snuggled closer to Baekhyun, letting him carry him to the carriage and help him get in. He was really tired and his feet were a mess. He needed to get used to the fact that Baekhyun was doting on him because he loved him, not because he pitied him or felt responsible for him. It almost felt unreal, but Minseok knew this was the truth. Baekhyun really loved him.

Baekhyun crawled into the carriage beside Minseok, and instantly, they were snuggled together. Minseok was shivering from being wet and muddy, and Baekhyun was the best blanket. It didn't take long before they were both fast asleep, curled around each other. Yifan glanced into the carriage, smiling at both of them, feeling a twinge of pain in his chest.

“Weren't you courting Baekhyun?” Another guard asked him quietly as they walked.

“I was, but not anymore. Baekhyun fell in love with someone else.”

“I'm sorry for you.”

“It's alright,” Yifan sighed. “As long as Baekhyun is happy, I'm content. I think Prince Minseok will love him more than I ever could. They're meant for each other.”

The other guard nodded and patted Yifan on the shoulder. Yifan knew as soon as Baekhyun had brought Minseok back with him their relationship was over. He'd just wanted closure and to hear Baekhyun's true feelings from his own mouth. Yifan would carry out his duties as a guard and protect them both now with his life.

When they arrived back at the colony, Yifan gently woke Minseok and Baekhyun so he could put the carriage away. Baekhyun still wouldn't let Minseok walk without any shoes, so he carried him to the bathhouse, asking one of the guards to fetch some clothes and shoes for Minseok and leave them on the shelves inside the bathhouse. Baekhyun helped Minseok peel off his muddy clothes, and Minseok shyly held his stomach, trying to hide it with his arms. Of course Baekhyun noticed.

“Are you cold? Let's get you cleaned up quickly...”

“I'm not too cold,” Minseok mumbled. “It's just...I'm showing more now...”

“Are you worried I'm not going to like it?” Baekhyun asked incredulously. Minseok nodded, afraid to look him in the eyes. “Minseok, look at me.”

Baekhyun waited for Minseok to do so, and he leaned forward and kissed him as soon as he
had. Baekhyun moved closer, pressing his body against Minseok's and holding his palm to Minseok's stomach.

“You forget I grew up in the Birth House,” Baekhyun whispered once he'd pulled his lips away from Minseok's. “I've seen pregnant women and birthers all my life, and it's not something to be disgusted with. It's a beautiful thing. Our baby is growing, Minseok. That's wonderful, don't you think?”

“You don't find me ugly?”

“You've always been beautiful, Minseok. And everyday you get more and more beautiful. A baby is only going to amplify that.” Minseok smiled, placing his hand over Baekhyun's on his stomach.

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Now let's get you cleaned up before you get sick! Your health still isn't great, and I'll be damned if you get sick on my watch.”

Minseok laughed and let Baekhyun pull him into the bathing area. Again Minseok sat on a stool while Baekhyun squatted in front of him, this time taking his time to clean the mud off Minseok's feet and legs and look at the blisters and scratches on his feet. Minseok wasn't expecting Baekhyun to press a kiss to the top of his foot when he was done, however. Baekhyun lowered it to the ground so gently, like even his foot was sacred. Minseok never would have thought someone would treat him this way, let alone the person he loved. Minseok didn't ever want this to end.

Baekhyun finished with Minseok's legs and scrubbed his body and arms free of all the mud clinging to them. After that, he wrapped Minseok in a cloth so he wouldn't getcold and started washing his hair. He tipped Minseok's head back as he was washing and rinsing so the soap wouldn't get in his eyes.

“See,” Baekhyun whispered. “I told you you should let me wash your hair. No soap in your eyes.”

Minseok smiled and leaned against Baekhyun, not caring if his hair got Baekhyun's clothes wet. Baekhyun didn't seem to care much either, and hugged Minseok back, leaning down to kiss his forehead. Finally, Baekhyun fluffed Minseok's hair with a cloth until it was mostly dry. After that, Baekhyun helped Minseok dress in the clothes the guard had left while he was bathing, and they headed back to the Birth House together.

As they were walking to their room, Nayoung was standing in the hallway. She smiled knowingly at both of them, then wished them goodnight, saying she was happy they were both safe. Minseok thanked her and apologized for any trouble he caused, and Nayoung brushed it off as always.
Once they were in their room alone, Baekhyun pulled Minseok into their bed, wrapping both of them in blankets and holding Minseok close. He placed his hand on Minseok's stomach, rubbing it gently. They didn't say anything for quite some time.

“You alright?” Baekhyun asked when Minseok had been staring off into space. “You're not going to leave me again, right?”

“No, I won't,” Minseok soothed, turning his head to kiss Baekhyun on the nose. “I was just thinking...In all this time we've been together, we never really talked about having a baby together. We're going to be parents, Baekhyun...I know it's late, but it's finally starting to set in.” Baekhyun hummed and nuzzled against Minseok's neck.

“I can't wait to meet them. I bet they'll be the most beautiful child in the land. And probably the most rambunctious if they take after me.” Minseok laughed gently.

“I just hope we can raise them and love them well. I don't want them to go through the life my brothers and I went through.”

“We will,” Baekhyun reassured. “We'll love them unconditionally and do everything we can to raise them well. You don't need to worry about that. We'll protect them.”

“Yeah...We will.”

Minseok rolled onto his side and kissed Baekhyun's lips. Their kisses lingered, though they didn't get particularly heated. Minseok was just cherishing the feeling of Baekhyun's lips against his, and his hand planted firmly on his waist. Everything finally felt right with the world, and Minseok had found the place where he belonged. The road ahead of them still wouldn't be easy, but at least they were together. They were finally in love. Minseok slept more peacefully that night than he ever had, wrapped tightly in both of Baekhyun's arms. This was where he belonged.

Chapter End Notes

AND BAEKHYUN FINALLY SAID THE MAGIC WOOOOOOORDS! It's been a long time coming lol! I've been dying to post this chapter for so long lol! So here we finally have some soft and loving xiubaek after all that angst lol! You guys survived wooooo!!! The next few chapters are going to get back to what's happening at the palace, but don't worry, that doesn't mean we won't see xiubaek anymore~ The next few chapters are actually gonna get pretty exciting (well, there are some that are a little less exciting than others XP) so I'm excited to share more with you guys! And finally, in the next coming chapters, Seho is going to be entering the story OTL That's been a long time coming too XP

That's all for this week! I'm trying to continue powering my way through this story, so I'll be back again next week with more! Until then, I love you guys and thank you for reading!!!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The palace was in a state of disarray after Minseok and Baekhyun had escaped. The king was furious, and Junmyeon couldn't even calm him. Chanyeol had kept the royal guard in the same positions he had the night of the escape so it would look like he'd simply changed the rotation rather than done something different for that evening. The king thankfully hadn't suspected either Junmyeon or Chanyeol of assisting them, his rage reserved for Minseok alone, but Chanyeol and Junmyeon were still on their best behavior around the king.

The king had sent Dongyul back to the Golden Meadows, telling him that Minseok was too ill and needed time to rest and recover. The king's pride really would be his own downfall. He refused to admit that Minseok had gone against him. Instead, he was constantly sending the royal guard out looking for him. If they ever did locate him, the king would force him into marriage with Dongyul. There was too much to gain from that marriage for him to simply let Minseok go.

Minseok and Baekhyun had become taboo topics within the palace. The king went into a rage whenever they were brought up, and every day he cursed at the royal guard for still not finding them. Junmyeon and Chanyeol both longed to know how Minseok was doing, but they didn't dare contact Nefret. They would just have to trust Lady Nayoung to protect the two of them.

It was still hard for them to get used to the palace without Minseok and Baekhyun. Chanyeol missed his eldest brother's presence more than ever, and still blamed himself for not paying enough attention to what was happening. Jongin was getting into the final months of his pregnancy, and while Chanyeol was taking amazing care of him, he couldn't deny that he missed Baekhyun as well, as both a friend and a caretaker.

They didn't speak of their sadness often, since they didn't want to garner negative attention from the king's servants or worse, the king himself. There were times when they were alone in their room, however, that they cuddled each other close, and Chanyeol cried in Jongin's arms. He was definitely taking this the worst out of everyone that had helped them escape. Jongin felt completely powerless to cheer him up. All he could do was distract Chanyeol, which thankfully wasn't too hard since their baby was going to be coming very soon. Whenever Chanyeol got too sad, Jongin redirected his attention to Lottie, or thinking of a names for their baby.

When Jongin got into his 8th month of the pregnancy, he no longer fit into hanboks comfortably. They weren't designed to accommodate a baby bump this large. As a result, Chanyeol asked for a tailor to come and take Jongin's measurements. A short time later, Jongin had several new hanboks, designed for a female body, so the skirt could comfortably sit around his stomach. Jongin was shy to try them on at first, but the instant Chanyeol saw him in one, he applauded,
begging Jongin to try on the rest.

Jongin smiled, feeling a bit more comfortable. The clothes were definitely easier to wear than the hanboks he'd been wearing up to this point, and there was no sash around his stomach with this design. Jongin looked at himself in the mirror in their room, and he couldn't deny they looked beautiful on him. Chanyeol had asked for lots of bright, warm colors, and Jongin really loved the way they looked on him.

Jongin went back and forth from the bathroom, trying on each outfit then coming out dramatically and posing for Chanyeol as he sat on their bed waiting. With the last outfit, Jongin tried his best to pose with his hip forward, and Chanyeol burst out laughing, clapping wildly. Jongin pouted at first, but as soon as Chanyeol opened his arms for him, he rushed over, hugging him as close as his stomach would allow. Chanyeol looked up at him, rubbing his back and placing soft kisses on his stomach.

“You're so beautiful,” he whispered. Jongin flushed and wrapped his arms around Chanyeol's neck, kissing the top of his head.

“These clothes are wonderful, Chanyeol. Thank you for getting them for me.”

“Of course. I just want you to be comfortable. The tailors had styles based on some of the outer regions too! There was one for Nefret that revealed the baby bump, and I was so tempted to ask for it for you, but I didn't want your tummy to get cold.”

Jongin giggled and played with Chanyeol's hair. There was a moment of silence as his thoughts drifted to Minseok and Baekhyun in Nefret.

“Do you think Minseok is wearing clothes like that?” Jongin asked quietly. Chanyeol's face fell and he sighed.

“I hope so...” He mumbled, rubbing Jongin's stomach. “He's probably starting to show quite a bit now...”

“I bet he'd look beautiful in Nefret clothes.” Chanyeol nodded, resting his cheek on Jongin's stomach.

“I miss him...I'm so worried about him. And I can't even do anything to find out if he's safe and well. I'm so powerless, Jongin.”

Jongin hugged Chanyeol's head against his stomach, rubbing his back with his metal arm. Chanyeol had always been confident and optimistic, so it was hard seeing him this way.

“They're safe,” Jongin reassured. He felt Chanyeol hug him tighter. “They're safe and Minseok is healthy. Baekhyun is the best person to take care of him, so I know he'll be alright. And when they finally come back to the palace, we'll have our own baby to show them.”

“Do you think that will ever happen? My father isn't going to change about this...”
“Somehow. I know it will happen. We'll make it happen, no matter what needs to be done.”

Chanyeol nodded against his stomach and Jongin felt tears soak into the fabric of his skirt. Jongin knew what he was promising Chanyeol was idealistic, but he would do everything in his power to help make it a reality. Minseok and Baekhyun never deserved this fate, and Jongin wouldn't just sit there and watch his husband suffer over it. Even if it took months, Jongin would try to find a solution to the problem. After all, that was what being an engineer of Sous was all about.

~*~

Minseok stretched his arms up into the air, rotating his hips a bit in an attempt to relieve some of the pressure on his back. He was about 5 months along now, so working in the garden was starting to hurt his back too much. Nayoung had moved him to cooking instead. Most of the colony shared the food they harvested and took turns cooking it. Minseok was standing beside a large pot over an open pit fire a short way away from the ancient tree. Because they lived in the tree tops, they did most of their cooking on the forest floor so no fires started near their homes.

He was stirring a soup that Nayoung had taught him to make and season. It was a somewhat long process, so he sat down every now and then to rest his feet, but as he got rounder, Minseok found he couldn't stay in one position for too long without getting uncomfortable. Their baby had become pretty active as well, rolling around often, so sometimes Minseok had to readjust his position just to bear the baby's movements.

As he was stirring the soup, a pair of arms wrapped around him and someone rested their chin on his shoulder. Minseok smiled and turned his head so he could kiss Baekhyun on the side of the cheek.

“Hi~” Baekhyun greeted happily. “How's the soup going?”

“Pretty well. You want a taste?”

Baekhyun nodded and leaned forward over Minseok's shoulder while Minseok got a spoon and dipped it in the soup. He blew on it a few times before tipping it into Baekhyun's mouth. He smiled as Baekhyun hummed, clearly enjoying it.

“That tastes great! You're so good at cooking, I'm impressed!”

“You're flattering me,” Minseok said, flustered. “Nana- I mean Nayoung, is the real cook. I'm just learning from her.”

“You aren't giving yourself enough credit...And you know you can call her Nana, right? She's your family too, so I bet she would like to be called that.”

“I'm just...We're not really related and I haven't been here for that long and I don't want to be
“It's not. She knows we're in love and having a baby, Minseok. You are family. But I also understand if you're not completely comfortable with being informal. Just know that she loves you and I don't think she would mind.”

Minseok hummed and focused his attention back on the soup. He'd gotten a bit more relaxed in Nefret over the past month, but Baekhyun knew Minseok was still considering himself an outsider and felt guilty for needing protection. That wouldn't change any time soon, but Baekhyun wanted to reassure him that he was part of Nefret now. The colony had accepted him a long time ago and he and Baekhyun were tied together, even if they weren't married. Baekhyun still wanted to make their relationship a bit more official, so he'd prepared something just for Minseok.

“I have a gift for you. It might make you feel a little more at ease.”

Minseok looked at him curiously and Baekhyun held out his hand, revealing 2 small rings with gaps in them. They looked like they'd been crafted using thin silver wire, weaving the tiniest glittering stones into them. Baekhyun picked one up and hooked it on his bottom lip, smiling at Minseok.

“They're traditional Nefret engagement rings. They're a matching pair and symbolize your love and commitment for the other person.”

“Really?” Minseok asked, taking the ring and looking at it curiously.

“These are our engagement rings, Minseok. I want to marry you someday.”

Minseok looked between him and the small ring in his hand, looking both touched and concerned. After a moment, he finally spoke up.

“Are we allowed to be engaged and get married? We're both birthers...I thought that was unheard of...”

“There's nothing stopping us except the fact that we're fugitives. Marriage between birthers is actually pretty common in Nefret. It's mostly the kingdom that has this idea that birthers aren't meant to marry each other.”

“So we can get married in Nefret?” Minseok asked hopefully. Baekhyun nodded, smiling widely.

“Our marriage papers wouldn't go through in the kingdom right now obviously, but once this passes and we aren't fugitives, we can get married.”

“Do you think that time will really come?”

“Junmyeon promised he'd do something. I want to believe in him. He's already saved my life and helped you when I couldn't. If there's anyone that could do it, I think it's him.” Minseok nodded, eventually smiling.
“Yeah...You're right.”

“So Minseok, will you wear the ring?”

Minseok nodded rapidly and slipped it on his lip. He and Baekhyun smiled at each other, then gently kissed, feeling their lip rings brush against each other's lips. After that, Baekhyun cuddled Minseok from behind as he continued to watch the soup. At one point, Minseok grunted, leaning against Baekhyun.

“You ok? Do you need to sit?” Baekhyun asked worriedly. Minseok shook his head.

“The baby is moving. I don't think I could sit even if I wanted to.”

Baekhyun pressed his hands flat on Minseok's stomach, trying to feel the movement. He gasped excitedly when he felt a jab against the palm of his hand. More jabs followed, and Baekhyun couldn't help but laugh, despite Minseok's obvious discomfort.

“The baby is kicking!” Baekhyun exclaimed. “Have they kicked you before?”

“Here and there, but this is the most active they've been about it so far,” Minseok sighed.

“A kicking baby means a healthy baby, Minseok,” Baekhyun soothed.

He pressed a kiss to Minseok's cheek, then rubbed his stomach as the baby continued moving around. Minseok gently placed his hand over Baekhyun's and experienced the feeling with him. Minseok had come so far in the short time he was in Nefret. Feeling his baby kick now was honestly one of the most precious experiences he'd had. He'd struggled for so long, but finally his baby was perking up and growing well. This moment made everything he and Baekhyun had been through in the past several months worth it. Finally, their whole family was starting to grow and prosper.

~*~

As Jongin neared the end of his pregnancy, Chanyeol didn't let him leave his sight. He'd taken some time off from the royal guard, appointing one of the higher officials to take over during his absence. Jongin himself had backed off his projects. He'd managed to perfect his plans for the iron steed carriage he'd sent Baekhyun and Minseok off in, and he'd given them to the other engineers to construct since he was too far along to comfortably work with metal and intricate electronics. They'd recently completed the first model and presented it to the king, who was in turn satisfied with their efforts. As such, Jongin wasn't needed at the moment for any groundbreaking projects, so he mostly doodled plans that he would start after he'd had the baby and had some semblance of a schedule again.

Chanyeol liked to watch Jongin work as he drew plans for different machines. Sometimes he just doodled machines he had no idea how to start creating, but Chanyeol couldn't believe so much
could come just from Jongin's imagination alone. It was fascinating to watch him work, and more often than not, Jongin sat on his lap as he drew, so Chanyeol got cuddles as an added bonus.

With the focus on their baby, Chanyeol's sorrow for his brother had subsided just a bit. He was still trying to think of a way to help him every day, but most of his attention now was on making sure Jongin was comfortable and wasn't alone. Chanyeol was too terrified of something happening when he wasn't by Jongin's side. He was probably a bit too clingy, but Jongin didn't complain about it. Rather, he found it comforting as the nerves started to set in for him as well. They were going to be parents soon.

Jongin ended up going into labor when he was drawing up plans for an electronic baby rocker. He'd been feeling contractions for much of the morning, but that had become a very normal thing for him. Starting in his last month, he'd been feeling contractions with even the simplest of movements. The difference this time around was his water broke, yet again on Chanyeol's lap. Jongin stared in horror, a mix of fear and embarrassment.

“Nini?” Chanyeol asked gently, trying not to get too nervous himself. “Are you ok?”

“My water broke...” Jongin whispered. “Oh my God, Yeolie, my water just broke on you!”

“That isn't the biggest concern here, let's just focus on the fact that your water broke! I need to get you to the doctor! Can you stand up?”

Jongin got to his feet using the table for support. Another contraction came and he groaned, this one feeling stronger than the last one. Chanyeol got to his feet and wrapped his arm around Jongin's waist, holding him up as they walked together. Jongin was starting to shake, terrified of actually giving birth. He'd been talking to the doctor about it and he'd reassured him that he would be just fine, but Jongin knew it was going to hurt and he was going to be exhausted by the end of it. Chanyeol kept a firm grip on him though, guiding him down the hallways towards the doctor's quarters.

“You know, this reminds me of the time you bled on me,” Chanyeol said with a laugh. Jongin looked up at him sadly.

“I really am a mess, aren't I?”

“No. This is just becoming another amazing memory of mine.”

Jongin managed a small smile before another contraction came, making him wince. They finally reached the doctor's quarters and Chanyeol knocked frantically before entering. As soon as the doctor caught sight of Jongin, he rushed over, helping him to the nearest bed. Chanyeol helped Jongin get undressed while the doctor placed several different towels and thick clothes around the bed to create padding and hopefully soak up most of the blood.

Jongin wasn't exactly comfortable with being completely naked even in front of the doctor, but
the man paid no mind to it and simply helped Jongin get into the proper position on the bed before covering him in a blanket, leaving his legs bare. He'd probably sensed Jongin's discomfort after all. Another contraction came and Jongin cried out, grabbing Chanyeol's hand for comfort. They were definitely starting to get stronger and more painful.

“Yeolie...Can you take my arm off?” Jongin asked. Chanyeol looked at him in surprise.

“Are you sure?”

“I feel like I might accidentally punch you or crush something with it, so yes, I'm sure,” Jongin answered tersely.

Chanyeol's eyes went wide and he rushed to Jongin's other side. Carefully, he loosened the different caps and wires connecting Jongin's arm to his shoulder, then pulled it from his socket. Jongin sighed in relief, not wanting to deal with controlling his metal limb while also trying to give birth. As soon as Chanyeol had set Jongin's arm on one of the other beds, he was right back to Jongin's side, holding his hand and waiting as the doctor inspected Jongin's current state.

“Your birthing passage is still dilating, Jongin, so it's not quite time to start pushing yet.”

Jongin groaned, and Chanyeol snuggled closer, kissing his head and trying to be a distraction, even though he was starting to freak out as well. A birther had a separate birthing passage leading from their uterus to a small opening in between their legs. Normally, the opening was so small it remained sealed, but during childbirth, it dilated in order to push the baby out. Jongin wasn't sure how long it was going to take for his passage to be fully dilated, but he hoped it wouldn't take too long.

As the contractions got stronger, Jongin was practically crushing Chanyeol's hand, whimpering anxiously. Chanyeol was panicking, despite his normally calm composure. When it came to Jongin, he hated seeing him in pain more than anything, but he knew he was powerless to take his pain away. So instead, Chanyeol snuggled his arm close, kissing his hand repeatedly and frantically blubbering encouraging words. Jongin found it a little cute how nervous Chanyeol was. Again he was seeing a side of him that no one else would ever get to experience, besides the doctor of course. Jongin just wished he didn't have to be in so much pain at the same time.

Finally, the doctor told Jongin he could start pushing, and that was when the real misery began. Jongin didn't even try to control the tears as he pushed in what felt like vain. Chanyeol was crying at that point too, but he kept his grip on Jongin's hand tight and tried to kiss his forehead and wipe away the sweat and tears with a small towel the doctor had given him. The doctor had administered some pain relief medication to Jongin as well, but even that didn't seem to make this any less excruciating.

Jongin felt like he'd pushed for hours, though he wasn't actually sure how much time had passed since they'd entered the doctor's quarters. He glanced over at the window and noticed the sunlight was becoming more orange and less intense, so he figured the sun was starting to set.
Finally, he gave one push that brought another cry into the room, this one high in pitch. Jongin heard the doctor gasp and saw him moving quickly, grasping at something and telling him to continue pushing. Chanyeol seemed excited as well and his voice was blending in with the doctor's. Jongin could hardly hear their encouragements though. His ears and mind were too focused on the high pitched cries that he now recognized as his baby.

The doctor continued his work that Jongin couldn't quite see over his stomach and legs, and eventually the man stood up with something bundled up in layers of blankets. Jongin groaned, his body slowly relaxing against the pillows and bedding. Chanyeol let go of his hand in favor of hugging Jongin's torso, kissing his head repeatedly and rocking him gently.

“You did it, Jongin! You did it! The baby's here!”

Jongin felt a new set of tears run down his cheeks, these tears of pure happiness, and he started laughing softly as Chanyeol continued to cheer him on. Jongin couldn't stop trying to look over the doctor's shoulder to see their baby. He didn't even know whether they'd had a boy or a girl or what their baby even looked like. After what he'd just gone through, he didn't have the patience to wait to see his baby. Thankfully, the doctor didn't take too long to clean the baby and bring it back over to Jongin.

“She's beautiful, Jongin,” the doctor said gently.

“She?” Chanyeol asked excitedly, and the doctor nodded.

“Congratulations. You had a baby girl. She's quite the heavy one, so it's no wonder she gave Jongin such a hard time.”

Jongin raised his arm, reaching desperately for the baby. The doctor ended up handing her to Chanyeol, since he could support her with two hands, and he carefully lowered her into Jongin's arm, being sure to support her where he couldn't. Jongin let out a sob when he finally caught sight of her. She already had quite a bit of hair for a baby, and Jongin could only imagine she got that from Chanyeol. She'd also inherited his ears that stuck out cutely, but she had Jongin's nose and lips. She was so utterly breathtaking, and Jongin couldn't believe she was theirs. She was absolutely perfect, and not a missing limb in sight.

“Oh Jongin, she's beautiful,” Chanyeol whispered, sniffling back his own tears. “You gave us such a beautiful baby!”

“You helped,” Jongin reminded, giggling a bit.

He watched as Chanyeol gently brushed his hand over her head. Even though the doctor said she was big, she was still so small compared to Chanyeol's hands, and even Jongin's. It was hard to believe that someone so small had taken up so much space inside of Jongin. She was extremely docile as well, already content and happy to be held by her parents.

“We've been discussing names, Jongin...But which one do you think suits her most?” Chanyeol asked. Jongin hummed in thought, looking down at their daughter.
“Hmmm...Hwayoung sounds like a good fit for her. Do you like it?”

“I think it's beautiful. It suits her perfectly.”

Jongin smiled and snuggled closer to Chanyeol, who'd sat on the edge of the bed so he could be nearer to Jongin and Hwayoung. The doctor moved around the room, cleaning Jongin and wrapping him in new blankets. When he'd finished up, he moved to Jongin's other side, gently placing his hand on Jongin's bare shoulder.

“I'd like to teach you how to breastfeed her, then I'll let you two have the evening together. I'll have the servants bring by some food later as well.”

Jongin nodded and Chanyeol helped him sit up just a bit. The doctor taught Jongin and Chanyeol how to hold Hwayoung and soon enough, she was happily breastfeeding. Jongin couldn't stop staring at her. It was unbelievable that he and Chanyeol had really made her. She was so warm, just like Chanyeol. Between the two of them, Jongin felt like he was surrounded by warm pillows.

As Hwayoung breastfed, she fell back asleep, giving Jongin and Chanyeol some much needed time to relax and let it all sink in. The doctor came back a little later with servants in tow, carrying a couple of trays with food. Lottie ran into the room, rushing by the servants feet and bouncing up on Chanyeol's leg. He laughed and the doctor helped lift Hwayoung from their arms so Jongin could sit up and eat and Chanyeol could give Lottie some snuggles. The doctor leaned over to let Lottie sniff and squeak at Hwayoung.

The doctor held Hwayoung, rocking her gently while Jongin and Chanyeol ate their dinners. Jongin hadn't realized just how tired he was until he'd started eating food and feeling infinitely better. He was still utterly exhausted and not ready to put his metal arm back on, so Chanyeol decided to hold the baby after their dinner so Jongin could just lay down and rest.

The doctor and the servants left after their meals, but let Lottie remain in the room. Jongin had readjusted himself on the bed to make room for Chanyeol to lounge beside him with Hwayoung. He rocked her and cuddled her close, sometimes bursting out into small giggles when he looked at her.

“She's so small, Nini! Her little head fits in the palm of my hand!”

“She'll grow soon. I bet she'll be as tall as you.”

“She can't grow too soon! She's my baby girl!”

Jongin smiled, jumping a bit when he felt a little snout sniff his fingers that were dangling off the edge of the bed. Jongin laughed softly and scratched Lottie's head.
“We've got the cutest baby and the cutest pig, don't you think Jongin?” Chanyeol asked.

“Yes...It's my perfect family.”

Chanyeol smiled and gently laid Hwayoung in a bundle of blankets beside Jongin's head. After that, He laid down beside him, cuddling close. Lottie hopped up on the edge of the bed, squeaking and whining, and Chanyeol laughed, sitting up to pick him up.

“Alright, Lottie, alright. You're a part of the family too.”

Lottie ended up curling up under the covers near their feet, his nose poking out from under the blankets. Chanyeol draped his arm over Jongin's waist, rubbing it lightly. Hwayoung was nestled in blankets between them so they could take care of her when she woke up later in the evening, Jongin was already dozing off, completely spent from labor. His body was still having some post-labor cramps, but he was finally starting to feel sleepy. Chanyeol leaned over Hwayoung and kissed Jongin's forehead before kissing his lips.

“I'm so proud of you, Jongin,” Chanyeol whispered, cupping Jongin's cheek. “You continue to amaze me more and more.” Jongin smiled softly.

“I love you Yeolie...Thank you for being by my side.”

“I love you too, Jongin...More than words can ever describe.”

Jongin hummed, snuggling a bit closer to Chanyeol and Hwayoung. Within seconds, he was fast asleep, leaving Chanyeol to dote over him and their new daughter. Chanyeol sighed happily, leaning down to kiss Jongin's head one more time, then gently rubbing Hwayoung's stomach.

“Thank you, both of you, for coming into my life. I promise I'll do my best to protect you and give you both happy lives.”

He laid his head down and decided to try and sleep. He was still feeling the adrenaline from all his nerves earlier, so he doubted he'd get to sleep any time soon, but he didn't mind. He was just happy to be resting beside his family, all of them happy and healthy.

Chapter End Notes

And the first baber has been booooooooorn :DDD I know we havent' touched much on the king or what's completely happening in the kingdom, but ya know, babies wait for no one, so we had to have our chankai XD It's been a while too and we need these softies to lighten the mood. But FINALLY! At long last! Seho's arc starts next chapter!!! A lot of big, exciting things will be happening soon, so get excited :D

Alright that's all for this week! Next week starts a new arc of the story more or less, so
get ready guys!!! But until then, I hope you enjoyed and I love you all ;***
Chapter 15

After the birth of Jongin's child, life in the palace seemed to change. Jongin was taking the time he needed to recover, and Chanyeol was still taking time off from the royal guard to be with him and their baby. The king seemed to be calmed by the news of a grandchild, but everyone in the palace knew it would only be a temporary peace. The king was still far too angry and caught up in finding Minseok and Baekhyun.

The biggest change came in the form of taking care of a baby. Jongin and Chanyeol were both going to the doctor regularly to ask questions. Much of their attention revolved around Hwayoung and Lottie now, since they couldn't ignore their pet either. It left them with much less time to spend with the others. Junmyeon of course still came and visited Chanyeol and snuggled their baby when they both needed a break, but their carefree days of walking the gardens were gone for now. Sehun had spent much of his free time with Jongin up until the birth of Hwayoung, and he too still visited and held her from time to time, but with Chanyeol always present as well, Sehun stopped feeling comfortable around Jongin, so he retracted to his own room.

Much of Sehun's free time was spent in solitude in his and Junmyeon's shared room. Junmyeon still tried to take Sehun out for dinner or tea or even a simple walk in the garden, but he knew he wasn't the one Sehun wanted to be with. If anything, it probably just made him more uncomfortable. Junmyeon wished he could do something to help. He knew Sehun had lost Baekhyun and now Jongin was preoccupied, so he was obviously lonely. Sehun needed to let Junmyeon into his life if he was going to help though.

The king kept Junmyeon on a tight leash as well. He didn't trust anyone in the palace, not even Junmyeon, but even the king couldn't deny Junmyeon was best at keeping public relations civil. Because the king had sent the royal guard out through the kingdom and the outer regions several times looking for Minseok and Baekhyun, the outer regions were on edge. Sous and Lorencia had already started denying entrance to the royal guards, and the king was sure Nefret wasn't far behind them. Something needed to be done to restore the balance.

The king called Junmyeon to the throne room one morning, looking as irritable as ever. Since Minseok had escaped with Baekhyun, the king wasn't particularly kind to any of his sons, even Junmyeon. Chanyeol had started purposefully keeping Jongin and Hwayoung away from him as a result. Of course, Junmyeon couldn't get away so easily.

"The outer regions are starting to oppose the royal guard," the king stated irritably.

"I warned you not to push so hard, father," Junmyeon sighed. "After all this time searching, we still haven't found Minseok or Baekhyun. It's unwise to continue harassing the outer regions."

"It was also your warning that had me lock Baekhyun up only for him to be broken out later"
that day!” The king shouted. Junmyeon bowed his head.

“I apologize, father. That was my mistake…”

“It wasn't your fault for predicting incorrectly,” the king grumbled. “That little whore had planned his escape much more thoroughly than I would have thought. He wasn't just a pretty face after all.”

Junmyeon clenched his fists at his side. The king hadn't spoken well of Minseok since the incident obviously, but it was hard to bite his tongue and bear the cruel words directed at his older brother. Junmyeon couldn't give away his involvement though. He still had so much to do, and he had to succeed.

“What should we do about the problems in the outer regions?” Junmyeon asked, changing topics back to the king's original complaint. “We need to proceed with caution.”

“Yes,” the king agreed. “That's why I'll be sending you to the outer regions to negotiate with the leaders.”

“Me?”

“Your brother is still taking care of his newborn child, so I can't send him and his birther to Sous to calm them. You're the best choice for the task. You have a way with words, and I know you'll be able to ease the tensions in the outer regions.”

“You speak very highly of me, father.”

“I've already contacted the leader of Sous about your visit. You can contact Nefret and Lorencia after that to plan your respective journeys. You'll be leaving in two days’ time.”

“That's very soon...”

“Is there a problem?”

“No, father...But I would like to make a request.”

“And that is?”

“I would like to bring Sehun with me. He's been feeling down lately with everything that's happened in the palace and I think the travel would be a nice change for him. I don't want to leave him alone either.”

“Very well. Perhaps this could improve your relationship. After your eldest brother's failure, I expect you to succeed as your younger brother did.”

“I'll try my best, father.”

“You may be dismissed.”

Junmyeon bowed and started walking away. As he was about to leave the throne room, his father called out to him one last time, so Junmyeon turned to face him.
“If you find your older brother and his whore, you will return them to the kingdom. Do you understand?”

“Yes father...”

Junmyeon left the room after that, wanting to get as far away as possible. Once he made it back to his room, he let out a sigh of relief. He wasn't surprised to see Sehun staring at him with a raised eyebrow. Junmyeon smiled softly at him and moved to his closet, sifting through some of his outfits, trying to decide which ones would be most appropriate. From what Jongin had said, Sous involved a lot of climbing, so wearing a hanbok hardly seemed appropriate. Perhaps Junmyeon would pack the clothes he wore under his armor for that occasion so he could move with more ease.

“What's going on?” Sehun asked, surprising Junmyeon. “You met with the king, didn't you? What did he want?”

Sehun had started keeping a closer eye on the king since the incident, and Junmyeon didn't blame him. At this point, the king was a bomb waiting to go off. They all had to be careful around him.

“The king is sending me to the outer regions one by one to try and calm the tensions. He stomped through their lands with the royal guard too freely and now they're starting to oppose him.”

“That's to be expected isn't it? The king has no sense of manners.”

“And that's why he's sending me,” Junmyeon sighed. “Of course Golden Meadows is exempt from all of this. My father doesn't need to work hard to keep them at peace. Although they don’t even know exactly what it is the king is searching for, so he still has to tread somewhat lightly.”

“So you'll be going to the other outer regions?”

“Right now, only Sous is confirmed, but I'm supposed to go to Nefret and Lorencia afterwards.”

“Good luck with that,” Sehun scoffed.

“I actually wanted to ask you if you'd like to come along,” Junmyeon said, walking over to Sehun. “I know you're not fond of me, but I think it would do you some good to get away from the castle. It's too oppressive here for even me to handle.”

“And I'd be happier and less oppressed with you?”

“I would hope so. I told you in the beginning I don't expect anything from you. I simply want to give you the chance for some fresh air. Besides, I'm planning to go to Nefret...”

“So?”

“Who do you think I'm going to see in Nefret?” Junmyeon asked in a whisper so low Sehun could barely hear it. “Lady Nayoung of course, but Baekhyun and Minseok as well. Don’t you miss Baekhyun? I wanted to give you the chance to see him.”
Sehun's expression softened and Junmyeon could have sworn he looked touched amid the second of vulnerability he showed. Soon, his stone like expression was back again and he sighed before slowly nodding.

“Fine, I’ll go with you if it means I get to see him,” he mumbled. Junmyeon smiled and patted Sehun’s shoulder.

“Great! We’re going to be leaving for Sous in a couple of days, so start planning what you’ll pack now.”

Junmyeon returned to his closet and started pulling out a few different outfits. It wouldn't be a long trip, but he was really excited to be getting away from this hell. He felt bad for going to Jongin's homeland instead of him, but he needed to talk to Jongsoo about his own plans. Being away with Sehun was an added bonus, and while Junmyeon had long since given up on them having any kind of romantic relationship with each other, he hoped he could continue to crack that icy wall that Sehun had set up in between them. He wanted to be on good terms with him, and he hoped once Sehun knew what Junmyeon really had planned for this trip, he would be a bit less wary of him.

~*~

The day of their departure, Sehun and Junmyeon took an iron steed from the castle to a launch pad that was privately owned by the palace. They would be taking a dragon glider to Sous, since the travel tanks would be a much rougher journey. Dragon gliders were large machines that flew through the air in the form of a dragon, as the name suggested. The wings were built along the side of the machine, and they shifted with the wind to keep the aircraft afloat. The front of the aircraft had an intricately sculpted dragon head, mouth open and looking ready to strike. They were a rare, but magnificent object to see flying through the sky. Sehun had never had the privilege of seeing one before, let alone riding in one.

As they approached the large machine on the platform, Sehun couldn't stop staring with his mouth agape. Junmyeon snuck glances and could stop smiling. Again, that genuine side of Sehun was showing, and Junmyeon desperately wanted to get to know him, but he knew better than to try. He just had to enjoy the glimpses he saw.

The pilot greeted them and helped them both walk up the steep metal steps into the body of the dragon while a few servants secured their luggage in another compartment. Sehun was surprised by how spacious it was inside the aircraft as well. This was a smaller dragon glider since it was specifically for the royal family, but the inside was beautifully decorated and furnished, with small tables in between the seats that faced each other. Junmyeon motioned for Sehun to head to one of the seats and his eyes widened as he sank into possibly the most comfortable seat he'd ever experienced.
Junmyeon sat across from him, chuckling softly to himself. He showed Sehun how to fasten the seat belt that was built into the seat for safety purposes, and Sehun was soon back to ignoring Junmyeon. Rather than ignoring him out of irritation this time, Sehun was still gawking at the view out of the window beside his seat. Junmyeon really loved seeing Sehun like this. He was so mystified and excited, and Junmyeon wished he could bring these kinds of emotions and experiences to Sehun more often. He really thought Sehun was cute when he was excited like this. He wanted to get to know him much better than just simple observations like this.

The pilot spoke over the intercom, his voice sounding tinny in the speakers, and soon the glider had powered on. Sehun gripped the table in front of him nervously, but his eyes were glued to the window as he waited for the aircraft to start moving. As the aircraft got faster, Sehun was pressed against his seat, and he gasped audibly when they finally left the ground. As soon as he'd gotten used to the feeling of being in the air, he placed his hands on the window, staring out at the ground below them and the castle getting smaller and smaller. Junmyeon didn’t say anything to Sehun during this time, just wanting to let him experience this and have fun while he could.

A little while later a servant came by and asked if they would like a meal. Junmyeon ordered for both of them, and soon they were presented with food on the small table in between them. Sehun was surprised the food still looked so tasty.

“Do you have a kitchen in this thing?” He asked in surprise. Junmyeon smiled and shook his head.

“The food is prepared beforehand and kept in a freezer to be heated later on the glider. It still tastes good though, that I can assure you.”

Sehun nodded slowly and curiously took a bite. He hummed, somewhat impressed with the taste, and continued to eat. Junmyeon again remained silent after that, letting Sehun be the lead of their discussions. Sehun was obviously having a good time though, and Junmyeon was glad he'd asked him to come along. Even if they didn't get any closer to each other on this trip, at least Sehun was relaxing and feeling less smothered by life in the palace. Even Junmyeon was starting to perk up considerably.

They landed on a landing pad on a flatter part of land in Sous some time later. It would still be a bit of a journey to get to the main heart of the Sous Mountains from there, but luckily the people of Sous had created a lift that would take them in between the two highest peaks. To Sehun's surprise, Junmyeon left his servants there, opting to carry his own luggage. They loaded into the lift and soon were on their way to the main Sous colony to meet with the leader. During that time, Junmyeon finally spoke up.

“This is really amazing. The people of Sous built this lift and their entire colony. It's no wonder Jongin is such a talented person!”

“I didn't think you'd be interested in these kinds of things,” Sehun said bluntly. Junmyeon sighed and gave him his usual smile.
“Of course I'm interested. Unlike my father, I think there's a lot we could learn from the outer regions, and I think they're all absolutely necessary to our kingdom. I've never gotten to personally visit them like this, so I want to learn everything I can about them while I'm here. I hope I can learn about Lorencia as well.”

“We'll see about that,” Sehun mumbled, ignoring Junmyeon and staring out the window again.

Junmyeon sighed and continued to take in the scenery around them. Sehun was such a hard person to read. He'd been enjoying the trip so far and had even gone out of his way to talk to Junmyeon a few times, but he was already retracting back into his shell now that they were on their own. Maybe it was pointless to hope for a good relationship with him.

When the lift landed in the Sous colony, several workers were waiting to greet Junmyeon and Sehun as soon as they stepped out. They bowed to Junmyeon, asking if they could take his luggage. To Sehun's surprise, Junmyeon shook his head, bowing to them as well.

“It's an honor to finally be here,” Junmyeon stated. “I'm happy carrying my luggage. I wouldn't want to put any of you out. But if you could direct my partner and me to the inn where we'll be staying, I would really appreciate it.”

Sehun tried not to grimace at the word partner, but he was grateful Junmyeon hadn't said fiance. He hadn't expected Junmyeon to be so polite and 'normal' around these people. He was the prince, so he could easily ask them to carry his luggage. Junmyeon was freakishly down to earth considering the man who raised him. Then again, with how disgusting the king acted, Sehun could believe it would have this kind of effect on all his sons. None of them particularly wanted to be like him.

When they reached the inn, one of the workers there showed them to their room. Sehun was surprised that Junmyeon had chosen an average room with two separate beds. It wasn't big or extravagant, even by Sous means. Junmyeon walked inside and set his luggage down with a happy sigh.

“Thank you so much! The room is lovely!”

“You're very welcome, my prince,” the woman stated, bowing to him. “Is there anything I can get you?”

“No, I think we're both fine. If you would let Lord Jongsoo know that we've arrived, I would really appreciate it.”

“Of course, my prince.”

The woman bowed again and took her leave. Junmyeon sighed, stretching his arms up into the air. He was wearing a thin shirt that crossed and fastened over his chest and some slightly tighter pants than what he'd wear under a hanbok so he could move and climb a bit more freely. Even
Sehun had worn some of his lighter Lorencian clothes, wearing a cotton shirt with a peach vest over it and straight cut pants. Most of the time in Lorencia they wore long fur jackets and layers of clothes to combat the cold, but Sous wasn't nearly as cold as Lorencia.

“When Jongin has a free moment again, I should ask him to modify our luggage so we can drag it like he did with his suitcase,” Junmyeon commented.

“You could have let them carry it for you.”

“They aren't my servants and aren't paid to do as I say. They're people that I'm visiting to make a good impression and hopefully get along with. I'm not going to walk all over them.”

Sehun nodded, not really impressed, and walked over to the window to look out. The inn was built on the edge of a cliff, and their room overlooked the chasm below. It was a little dizzying, but Sehun couldn't help but find it fascinating as well. This was the kind of place Jongin grew up in. It was a little exciting to learn about his homeland. Jongin had always struck Sehun as naive and easily fooled, but he was a good person and had kept Sehun company when he desperately needed it, so he was special to Sehun.

A short while later, there was another knock on the door, and the same woman from before opened it, telling them Jongsoo had prepared a meal for them and was ready to greet them. Junmyeon thanked her and motioned for Sehun to follow after him.

“Are you going to discuss matters of the kingdom with him? Are you sure you want me to come along?” Sehun asked in surprise. Junmyeon simply smiled at him, like he always seemed to do.

“I brought you along as a partner. I'm not going to exclude you from anything. I want to be open to you about my plans for the kingdom as well. Besides, I'm not going to have a meal and expect you to fend for yourself without me.”

Sehun nodded slowly, a bit more perplexed by this response of Junmyeon's. This was the most time they'd spent together and interacted with each other during their engagement, sad as it was. Whether he wanted to or not, Sehun was getting to know Junmyeon through his actions and respect for other people.

They were led from the inn up the hill towards a community center where Jongsoo had agreed to meet them. They were doing a lot of walking and climbing, and Sehun understood now why Jongin was as fit as he was when he first arrived to the castle. He also understood why Jongin's clothes had been so rough and clunky. The cliff ground was a bit slippery, so shoes with decent grip were needed. Sehun couldn't even imagine scaling the mountains like he saw several other Sous people doing as they walked. Judging from Junmyeon's look of pure awe as he watched them, he couldn't fathom it either.

When they reached the community center, the woman from the inn bowed and Junmyeon
thanked her for leading them all the way there. They headed inside and were instantly greeted with the smell of food. In the center of the room was a decent sized wooden table covered in local dishes, one of which Junmyeon vaguely recognized as mountain pheasant from the time Chanyeol had prepared it for Jongin. Jongsoo was standing at the other side of the table and he quickly rushed to them and greeted them with a bow and a handshake with Junmyeon.

“We're honored to have you here, Prince Junmyeon and Lord Sehun.”

“It's an honor to be here,” Junmyeon replied, and Sehun nodded awkwardly. He wasn't very good at talking or flattery.

“Please, don't reserve yourselves. I'm sure you're tired from your journey, so we've prepared a feast for you!”

“We'll happily partake,” Junmyeon said with a laugh.

The three sat around the table and Jongsoo explained each dish to them. Junmyeon was like a sponge, sucking it all in and commenting when he'd need to tell Chanyeol about a certain recipe to try. Sehun had thought Junmyeon was simply sweet talking everyone up to this point, but he seemed genuinely interested in the culture and the people of Sous, listening to even the simplest of stories Jongsoo had to offer, like how they got certain vegetables from the cliffs. Junmyeon was completely serious in his work. He really was the 'negotiator,' knowing exactly how to steer conversations and take interest in the other side and what they had to offer and what they needed in exchange.

This dinner was no exception of course. Junmyeon instantly apologized for his father's rude behavior and for bombarding them with the royal guard so often. Jongsoo sighed at that.

“It's not that we want to go against the king, but we haven't seen the prince or his lover, so it's hard on us to be constantly serving the royal guard and letting them storm through our village.”

“I completely understand,” Junmyeon stated. “And I don't doubt your sincerity. I believe you when you say my brother isn't here. I came to apologize in person for the king's behavior.”

“I wish he wouldn't send you out to do his dirty work, if I'm allowed to say,” Jongsoo grumbled.

“I wish the same, but also I'm grateful. If my father was in charge of these things, I'm sure the kingdom would have been at war much sooner.”

Sehun's eyes widened. He never would have expected Junmyeon to speak so openly against the king. Even Jongsoo seemed surprised by his response. Junmyeon of course already had a plan to redirect the conversation. He pulled out a small sepia toned photo taken by one of the cameras the engineers at the palace had designed. Like screens, cameras and photos were a rarity as well. Jongsoo hadn't ever gotten to see a photo before.

“I'm sure you're worried about Jongin after hearing the news of his baby being born,” Junmyeon said. Jongsoo sighed, nodding slowly and looking troubled.
“I wish he wasn't in the palace sometimes. It's so hard to gain clearance into the palace. I haven't been granted permission to visit him yet.”

“I figured as much,” Junmyeon stated sadly. He handed the photo to Jongsoo. “This is a picture of Jongin, Chanyeol, and their baby girl, Hwayoung. She's healthy and absolutely beautiful. They're all doing well.”

Jongsoo stared at the picture of Jongin holding a small baby bundled up in blankets, Chanyeol's arms around both of them. They were all smiling for the picture, and Jongin looked healthy, even in the form of paper.

“Jongin is safe at the palace?” Jongsoo asked, his voice shaking. “And his baby girl is safe and healthy?”

“Jongin is safe,” Junmyeon reassured. “Chanyeol wouldn't let anything happen to him or their baby. They're in good hands, I promise you.”

“Thank you,” Jongsoo sighed, sounding relieved. “She's so beautiful. Oh Jongin...”

“I'll talk to my father about granting you a visit or perhaps even granting Jongin a visit here when I get back. I'm sure he's dying to see you just as much as you want to see him.”

“Thank you, my prince.”

“It's nothing to thank me about. You're family now, and I wouldn't fathom keeping you away from your new family member.”

“Thank you. If only the king could have half the understanding you have, I think the kingdom would thrive.”

“I agree,” Junmyeon said simply. “I actually had something regarding the future of the kingdom to discuss with you. It's true the king sent me to mend the tensions he's creating, but that's not the only thing on my agenda.”

“What is it you would like to discuss?” Jongsoo asked, curiosity piqued. Sehun was waiting for Junmyeon to continue as well.

“I'm planning to create a council with the outer regions, specifically the leaders of each region. The princes would be present as well. The council would be designed for the purpose of discussing the needs of each region, and working together to achieve them.”

“That sounds very idealistic. Did the king think this up? It doesn't seem like him,” Jongsoo said after a moment. Junmyeon smiled, and Sehun saw confidence in it.

“No, this is my own idea. The king is unaware. But like I mentioned, the king isn't good at these things, and there needs to be change. I'm presenting the idea to each of the outer regions, and I'll happily take any criticism or advice you have for the council.”

“You said the princes would be present. Does that include Prince Chanyeol?”

“Yes,” Junmyeon answered. “And Prince Jongin. He's been elevated to the same status through his marriage to Chanyeol, and I would be a fool not to take his ideas and advice into consideration. If I can at all muster it, I would like Prince Minseok to be part of the council as well.” Jongsoo and
Sehun both stared at him in shock.

“There's no way the king would stand for that, considering he's searching for Prince Minseok, right?” Jongsoo asked.

“That's right, but I'll do what needs to be done to make this council a reality. My eldest brother by now has experienced enough cruelty at the hands of royalty to understand the need for change, so I think his presence would be invaluable to the council.”

“This seems like a very groundbreaking, controversial idea, my prince. I don't know if you'll be able to accomplish it.”

“I'm going to try my hardest and do whatever it takes. If I could have your support, I think I would feel even more confident about this council.”

“As long as you're willing to involve me and my nephew and his prince in the discussions, I think you have the best interests of Sous in mind. I trust you, my prince, and you have my support as well as that of Sous behind you.”

“Thank you, Lord Jongsoo. I promise, I won't let you down.”

Jongsoo smiled and got up from his seat in order to shake Junmyeon's hand. The latter got to his feet and met him with the same enthusiasm, and Sehun watched in awe and confusion. He knew Junmyeon was capable, but he hadn't actually expected him to start organizing something behind the king’s back. This was definitely risky, and Sehun honestly had no idea how Junmyeon would accomplish something so idealistic, especially if he wanted Minseok to be part of the council.

He didn't end up saying anything about it until they were back in their room at the inn. Junmyeon had already washed in the traditional standing barrel bath at the inn and was dressed in his sleeping garments. Sehun couldn't believe the same man that had spoken against the king and was plotting behind his back was now marveling to him about barrel bathtubs. When Junmyeon finally stopped yapping, Sehun decided to speak up about their earlier conversation.

“Are you really serious about that council?” Sehun asked.

“Of course. I don't make promises I don't think I can keep.”

“You really think you can make a council with Minseok of all people on it? You think the king will let you? You haven't even told him about this...I don't think it's wise to be so positive.”

“I'm not positive,” Junmyeon sighed, smile finally falling from his face. “I'm not positive, but I'm serious. I meant it when I said I would do anything it takes to make this council a success. We need it, Sehun, regardless of whether the king wants it or not. You and I both know I'm capable of working behind his back to accomplish what needs to be done.”

“And if the king refuses? Are you really willing to go against him? It wouldn't be pretty.”

“I know...but I'm prepared to fight. I can't sit by idly anymore.”
Sehun was silent at that, taking in Junmyeon's words. Finally, Junmyeon sighed and smiled at Sehun once more, walking over to his bed and pulling the covers back.

“Nothing is going to happen tonight, so there's no use stressing about it now, right? Let's get some sleep for now. The travel was long, and I'm sure you're tired. I asked them for separate beds so you could sleep more comfortably.”

“Thank you...” Sehun muttered quietly. “I'm not quite tired yet, so I'm going to look out the window for a while...”

Junmyeon nodded and got into his bed. Within 15 minutes, he was fast asleep, leaving Sehun alone with his thoughts. He sat at the window, staring into the dark chasm in between the cliffs. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small folding knife, playing with it as he contemplated Junmyeon's words.

Was he really serious about going against the king? His plans were so idealistic there would be no way Junmyeon would be able to accomplish them without fighting with the king. He had to know that himself. Was he really going to fight against him? Sehun didn't think he was spineless, but this was a bold move for him to be making. Perhaps that was why he wanted the outer regions' allegiance.

Sehun flipped the knife up, staring at the blade, then glancing at Junmyeon. He walked over quietly, blade still in hand. He hovered it over Junmyeon's throat, a mere inch away from his skin. After a moment of silence, Sehun finally sighed.

“How are you supposed to accomplish going against the king when you can't even defend yourself?” He whispered into the night air. “There's no way you'll succeed. You're too easy of a target.”

He dropped the knife from Junmyeon's neck, flipping the blade down and sticking it back in his pocket. He slipped into bed after that, not bothering to change into his sleeping garments. Sehun had always preferred to sleep this way, with a blade to protect him if he ever needed it. He glanced at Junmyeon's peaceful sleeping form one last time, then rolled over on his side, facing away. Junmyeon's words were foolish and naive, but Sehun couldn't help but wish there was some way in the universe it could become a reality. He wanted the best for his people, and Junmyeon's words were so hopeful, they'd almost convinced Sehun that Junmyeon wanted that as well. Sehun wouldn't be so easily fooled though.

Chapter End Notes

At long last, we begin the Seho arc. ARE YOU GUYS HAPPY??? YOU DAMN WELL BETTER BE LOL! I know this chapter wasn't too exciting but trust me, it was important. The next several chapters are really important too~ What is Jun planning
to do? And what's Sehun up to? Hmm...I know but you guys are gonna have to wait and see :P

And that's all for now friends! Things are gonna pick up from here on, so look forward to it :D Until then, I love you and I hope you enjoy!!!
Junmyeon and Sehun returned to the kingdom a few days later. Junmyeon was expected to immediately report to the king about his time in Sous. Junmyeon told him he'd calmed the tension successfully, but the king wasn't to send the royal guard to look for Baekhyun or Minseok anymore, as the people of Sous hadn't seen them and would turn them in if they did in the future. The king begrudgingly agreed, and Junmyeon sighed a breath of relief. He didn't mention any of his plans for the council to the king. That was going to be his trump card, and he had to make sure everything was ready first.

Sehun visited with Jongin and Hwayoung, keeping Lottie occupied while Jongin cared for Hwayoung. Chanyeol had started going back to the royal guard for short periods of time, so Jongin was glad to have Sehun's company. Jongin rambled on about Sous, asking Sehun question after question about what he saw and tried while there. Sehun could tell Jongin really missed his homeland, so he tried his best to give Jongin details and tell him what he liked. Truthfully, Sehun had liked being in Sous. Lorencia had a large mine at the base of a mountain, so the cliffs of Sous gave him a bit of nostalgia for his own homeland.

Junmyeon and Chanyeol joined them a bit later in the afternoon. Junmyeon had already contacted Nayoung from Nefret and planned to leave the following day. Jongin seemed sad, having missed Sehun even on the short trip to Sous, but Junmyeon promised Jongin he would be seeing his uncle soon, which perked him up. Junmyeon said he was still in the midst of planning, but he wanted to try and send Jongin to Sous since he was sure Jongin was homesick and would want to spend a good amount of time with Jongsoo, especially with the newborn baby. Chanyeol was of course invited as well, but Junmyeon kept details about his recent trip and plans vague from both of them. Sehun seemed to be watching him curiously to see what his next move was. He wouldn't have to wait much longer at least.

They spent the evening packing their bags with clean clothes, and the following morning, they were off in the dragon glider again, this time heading for Nefret. Sehun was less enthralled this time around, having gotten over his initial excitement of flying, but he still perked up as they started flying over hundreds of trees. Even Junmyeon was staring out the window in silent awe. Neither of them had seen trees this large or vast before. It was impossible to see anything through them with how many there were. They flew over the forest for some time, finally landing on a patch that had obviously been cleared off for this very purpose.

When they got out of the plane, suitcases in hand once more, a guard from the Nefret colony was waiting for them. He bowed, and Junmyeon returned the act. Sehun followed his actions, not wanting to unintentionally be offensive in an environment he was unfamiliar with. Sehun didn't know much about Nefret customs, but he knew they were a tight knit group and valued respect. That was probably why Junmyeon was already bowing to someone who was of much lower status.
than him. Then again, Junmyeon was soft at heart. Perhaps he would have bowed regardless as a form of greeting. Sehun wasn't sure he could read Junmyeon anymore.

The guard asked them to follow and offered to help carry their bags. Of course, Junmyeon declined, but asked Sehun if he would like the help. Sehun shook his head, not wanting to cause any trouble or have any favors weighing on his shoulders. Sehun knew the people of Nefret were kind, Baekhyun as a prime example, but Sehun still didn't trust them. He didn't trust anyone really.

They walked for some time and reached a giant tree in the middle of the forest as the sun started setting through the tree leaves. It was larger than Sehun ever thought a tree could be, and his jaw dropped when he spotted the houses built onto it and the surrounding branches as well as the wooden walkways linking through the trees. It was like nothing he'd ever seen before.

The guard helped them carry their luggage up the tree since neither of them were used to climbing the steep steps. As soon as they got inside, Junmyeon and Sehun were both fascinated with the interior of the house. Everything was so intricate, and Junmyeon couldn't believe they were literally in the trees. They heard footsteps from down the hallway and soon, Nayoung was before them, smiling gently.

“I'm glad you've arrived safely, my prince,” she started gently, bowing to Junmyeon. “And you, Lord Sehun.”

“I'm looking forward to talking with you, Lady Nayoung,” Junmyeon replied, bowing back. Sehun followed after him once more, feeling awkward for not saying anything.

“I'm looking forward to it as well, but I think there's someone else who needs to talk to you first,” Nayoung stated.

Junmyeon raised his head, looking at her hopefully. She smiled and turned back to the hallway, waving to someone down the hall. Junmyeon heard rapid footsteps getting closer, and soon someone had turned the corner and rushed towards him, slamming against him. Junmyeon grunted as he caught Minseok and hugged him close. Minseok giggled, hugging Junmyeon tightly, and Junmyeon couldn't believe how much he'd changed. He didn't think he'd ever seen Minseok this happy. He lifted his head from Junmyeon's shoulder and smiled brightly at him, lip adorned with a small ring.

“You came!” He said excitedly.

“Of course I did,” Junmyeon said softly.

Baekhyun walked around the corner and stood beside Nayoung, smiling while glancing between her, Minseok, and Junmyeon. He spotted Sehun and winked at him, which set Sehun at ease. Finally Baekhyun walked over to Minseok and Junmyeon, and Sehun noticed the matching lip rings.
“We've prepared some tea and snacks in our room. I'm sure you've both walked quite a bit and would like to sit down,” Baekhyun stated.

“Yes, come with us!” Minseok exclaimed.

He pulled on Junmyeon's hand and walked beside Baekhyun down the small hall. Junmyeon heard Nayoung chuckle, and he honestly couldn't believe the person before him was his brother. Minseok had never been this energetic, and Junmyeon could just tell he'd gotten healthier. His stomach was much rounder, and Junmyeon hardly recognized him with the flushed complexion and perky personality. Going to Nefret had done worlds of good for Minseok.

They reached Baekhyun's room and saw the table low to the ground covered in a rustic looking tea set and some vegetables and flat breads. Surrounding the table were pillows to sit on. Baekhyun helped Minseok lower himself down onto one, and Junmyeon finally got a good look at Minseok from the front. He was showing so much more than before, and Junmyeon couldn't believe how fast the baby had grown in the 4 or so months they'd been apart. Minseok was wearing a silk crop top in a light green color and darker green harem pants to complete the look. He fit right in with Nefret. Baekhyun was glued to his side as well. Watching the two of them together was setting Junmyeon more at ease by the second. He'd made the right choice.

“Go ahead and sit down,” Baekhyun said, motioning to the pillows across from him before sitting down beside Minseok.

Junmyeon nodded and gently pulled Sehun over by the arm. It was the most he'd ever really touched Sehun, and he half expected the latter to pull away in disgust, but Sehun was distracted by his surroundings, so he let Junmyeon guide him with ease. They sat down across from Minseok and Baekhyun, and Junmyeon admired Baekhyun's attire as well. He was wearing a lilac purple vest with matching harem pants. The colors were so vibrant, despite the people of Nefret being known for gardening. Junmyeon noticed the matching lip rings at that point and he looked at them both curiously.

“Are the lip rings a part of Nefret attire?” He asked. Minseok and Baekhyun both blushed and Minseok smiled bashfully.

“They're a Nefret custom of engagement,” Minseok explained. Junmyeon's eyes widened and he glanced between the two, unable to contain his excitement.

“I'm so happy for both of you!” He exclaimed. Sehun looked at Baekhyun with an expression he couldn't quite read, and Baekhyun cleared his throat awkwardly.

“We know it won't happen immediately with the way things are regarding us in the kingdom, but someday...”

Junmyeon opened his mouth to speak, but Nayoung entered the room, carrying some bowls of soup. She set them down in front of Minseok and Baekhyun first, telling Minseok he needed to be sure to eat all of it. Junmyeon couldn't help but like how protective Nayoung had become over Minseok. She really had kept her word about taking care of both of them.
“Is there anything I can help with?” Junmyeon asked. Nayoung shook her head with a smile.

“A guard is bringing the other bowls. I thank you for your offer, but this is time for you to reconnect with your family. I know Minseok has missed you terribly, and I'm sure it's the same for you.”

Junmyeon nodded, looking almost disappointed that he couldn't help. Sehun couldn't understand Junmyeon when he acted this way. He was so used to the royalty expecting to be served. Even back at the palace, when they'd had tea or meals together, servants had brought it for Junmyeon rather than him doing any of the work himself. Then again, he was always respectful and kind to his servants. Sehun hated how weird he was feeling. He was starting to empathize a bit with Junmyeon, and it was making him curious yet confused. He didn't want to feel this way about him.

A guard brought in Sehun and Junmyeon's bowls shortly after Nayoung left, and the group ate, chatting happily in between bites. When they'd finished the soup, Junmyeon decided it was time to show Minseok his new niece. He pulled out the picture out and passed it across the table to Minseok. Baekhyun leaned closer, looking over Minseok's shoulder at it.

“That's Hwayoung,” Junmyeon said gently. “She was born some weeks ago.”

“She's absolutely beautiful,” Minseok whispered.

“Jongin got through the labor ok?” Baekhyun asked, not bothering to hide his concern. Junmyeon nodded.

“It was hard from what Chanyeol said, but Jongin did it, and he's recovering well. Chanyeol's been taking great care of him.”

“Good,” Baekhyun sighed in relief. Minseok's face slowly fell as he stared at the picture.

“I wish I could have been there...I want to meet her...”

“You'll meet her soon, I promise,” Junmyeon soothed. “I meant it when I said I would get you two back to the kingdom.”

Minseok smiled at him, trying to remain positive. Junmyeon seemed so sure, but no one really knew how he was going to accomplish such a feat. Sehun again found himself feeling irritated with Junmyeon making such idealistic promises. He was too much of a dreamer.

Minseok glanced out the window and noticed it was dark outside. He tugged on Baekhyun's vest and whispered something to him. Baekhyun nodded, then helped Minseok to his feet. Junmyeon and Sehun watched curiously, waiting for Minseok to explain what he was going to do.

“It's getting late and I was going to go to the bathhouse,” Minseok stated. “Junmyeon, would you like to come with me? I don't think you've ever experienced a public bath before.”
“No, I haven't! Of course I'll come.”

Junmyeon got to his feet, and Baekhyun gave Minseok a quick kiss on the cheek before the two headed out of the room. After that, he sat back down across from Sehun, smiling at him knowingly.

“Surprised to see you going on a private trip with Junmyeon of all people,” Baekhyun stated, smirking a bit.

“I wanted to see you,” Sehun answered simply. “I still don't like him if that's what you're trying to imply.”

“Oh I'm sure,” Baekhyun laughed. “I didn't expect you to change all that much while I was gone.”

“You seem to have changed quite a bit. You hated the idea of royalty just as much as I did, and now you're engaged with a baby on the way.” Baekhyun sighed and nodded.

“Yeah, I really have changed,” Baekhyun admitted. “But I'm glad I did. I really love Minseok, and he's changed a lot for me. He's part of my people now, Sehun, and I never would have expected that from the royalty. It sounds stupid, but I believe in my future with Minseok, wherever it takes us.”

“Even if you're fugitives for the rest of your lives?”

“We can live here. Even if we have to hide every now and then, we can survive here, and we're not alone. I want to be with Minseok. He's more than just a royal figure, and I love him for who he is.”

“Junmyeon seems determined to clear your names. It's naive and unrealistic.”

“Maybe,” Baekhyun sighed. “But I owe Junmyeon a lot. He saved both my life and Minseok's, and honestly, if anyone can clear our names, it would be him. Whether you like him or not, Junmyeon is a capable man. I trust him.”

Sehun frowned, not really liking how wrapped up Baekhyun had become with both Minseok and Junmyeon. Still, Baekhyun had a point. Junmyeon had managed to help them escape, and he obviously had a plan, even if he didn't reveal it to any of them. Sehun was hesitant to trust him, but he couldn't deny that he wanted to. If Junmyeon could bring about change and save Minseok and Baekhyun, Sehun might just start believing in him for real. His opinions were starting to be swayed. He couldn't let himself give in.

Baekhyun must have noticed Sehun's internal struggle, because he got to his feet and offered to show Sehun the spare room he and Junmyeon would be staying in. Sehun agreed, feeling tired after the journey and not wanting to think about anything else while he was awake. The room Baekhyun took him to only had one bed, but Sehun had gotten used to sleeping with Junmyeon. He wasn't going to throw a fit about this. Instead, he said goodnight to Baekhyun and curled up in bed, trying in vain to stop thinking about Junmyeon.
Minseok brought Junmyeon to the bathhouse and told him to place his clothes on the shelves before heading into the bathing area. Junmyeon was already looking around in awe of the small bathhouse with no curtains or anything separating the bathing areas. Minseok smiled, having always found Junmyeon’s interest in other cultures admirable and frankly adorable. Minseok started undressing, but stopped after a moment when he realized Junmyeon might not have wanted to see him this way. His stomach was already on full display under the crop top, but still, Minseok didn't want to make Junmyeon uncomfortable.

“Do you mind if I...?” He started, motioning to his clothes. Junmyeon shook his head, slipping his own top off.

“Of course not. It's a public bath, isn't it? This is part of the experience. Besides, we're brothers. There's nothing to be uncomfortable about.”

Minseok smiled and undressed the rest of the way. After that he walked with Junmyeon over to one of the stools and told him to sit down. Junmyeon looked at him curiously and Minseok simply smiled, pumping some water into one of the buckets.

“It's a bit different than how we bathed in the kingdom, but it's nice. Baekhyun likes to wash my hair, so I thought I'd wash yours. Is that ok?”

“Yeah, of course! This is a very intimate kind of bath, isn't it?”

“It can be,” Minseok agreed. “I'm still not used to bathing when others are around, but Baekhyun swears it's pretty fun to have company to bicker with while you bathe.”

“You sound like you're doing much better,” Junmyeon said. “I was really worried about you, but I think it was wasted energy. You're doing well here.”

“It's nice,” Minseok stated, carefully wetting Junmyeon’s hair and starting to scrub soap into it. “The people here are wonderful, and they've nursed me to a state of health I don't think I've ever been at. I'm able to work and garden and cook. I've never felt this good before.”

“I'm so glad. And you and Baekhyun? He's treating you well? You seemed really close.”

“He told me he loves me, Junmyeon. I never thought I would have my feelings returned...but he does. He loves me.”

Junmyeon smiled and reached for one of Minseok's hands, even if it was covered in suds, and squeezed it tightly. He'd only ever wanted Minseok's happiness, and he'd finally found it, even if he'd risked his life to get there. Junmyeon was so grateful he'd sent them both to Nefret.

“I'm so happy for you, Minseok. I really am.”

“Can I tell you silly, intimate things?” Minseok asked. Junmyeon nodded.

“I want to hear anything you want to tell me.”

“Baekhyun and I have made love a few times since coming here...Sometimes I make love to
him, and other times he makes love to me. It's always so wonderful...But the thing I love the most is just being beside him, in bed or in the gardens. I love the soft kisses and the gentle touches. Those feel so much more wonderful to me than making love. Maybe it's because of how our relationship started, but I just love the soft gestures.”

“I'm jealous,” Junmyeon said with a soft laugh. “You and Chanyeol have both found such wonderful relationships. I'm really happy for both of you.”

“You and Sehun still aren't doing well?” Minseok asked sadly. Junmyeon sighed and tipped his head back so Minseok could rinse the suds out of his hair.

“I don't think there's a chance for us. I don't think Sehun will ever accept me.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“If he never accepts me, I'll let him go. As soon as I can cancel our engagement, I will. Sehun doesn't deserve to be wedded to me if he doesn't want to be, the same way you don't deserve to be wedded to Dongyul. I want to change this reality...Do you think I'm foolish?”

“No,” Minseok answered instantly. “I think you're an amazing person, and I think if anyone can do it, it would be you.” Junmyeon smiled.

“Thanks...Would you like me to wash your hair for now though?”

Minseok nodded and they changed spots. Junmyeon took his time washing Minseok's hair, enjoying the experience and listening to Minseok ramble about how much he'd learned about gardening and medicinal practices. Nefret had so much to offer, and Minseok was living proof of that. Junmyeon couldn't just ignore what the outer regions were capable of. They needed to bring them back into power.

After they finished up at the bathhouse, they put on their new clothes and headed back to the Birth House with their dirty clothes in hand. When they got to the main room, Baekhyun was waiting for them. He told Junmyeon that Sehun had already gone to bed, and he and Minseok would probably be going to bed as well. Minseok slept pretty soundly as of late and took a lot of rests when he needed them. Despite being healthier than before, it was still exhausting for him to be carrying a baby. Junmyeon bid Minseok goodnight and watched as he and Baekhyun headed to their room. Baekhyun paused in the hallway and turned back to Junmyeon.

“Thank you again, Junmyeon,” Baekhyun whispered. “I can't thank you enough for giving me and Minseok the chance to escape and live here.”

“I want to thank you as well,” Junmyeon said. “For keeping your promise and protecting my brother.”

“Of course. Nefret always protects their people. Besides...I love Minseok. I wouldn't let anything happen to him.”

“Thank you...I know I can trust him to you.”

“And I know I can trust you with our fates. I believe in you, Junmyeon. Whatever it is you're planning, I know you'll be able to accomplish it.”
Junmyeon smiled tiredly and thanked him before bidding him goodnight. Once Baekhyun had
gone to his room, Junmyeon walked to the spare room Minseok had mentioned to him and slipped
inside quietly. Sehun was asleep on the bed, and Junmyeon sighed, simply taking in the sight
before him. Sehun always looked so gentle and innocent when he slept, and Junmyeon wanted
more than anything during those moments to get to know him better. He'd seen enough of Sehun's
true self to know he was noble and devoted to the people he cared for. Junmyeon only wished he
could become someone Sehun cared for. He couldn't deny that he found Sehun physically
attractive, but even in the silence of their relationship, he'd grown attached to Sehun and wanted
to protect him and give him the happiness he wanted. That was why Junmyeon would let him go if
Sehun asked for it. Sehun deserved to decide his own future.

Junmyeon laid down on the bed with a sigh, tucking himself under the covers. He was just
starting to doze off when he felt Sehun roll over and one of his arms landed around Junmyeon's
waist. Junmyeon held his breath, waiting for Sehun to react, but he didn't. Instead, Sehun snuggled
closer, obviously still in a deep sleep. Junmyeon laid there in silence, enjoying how it felt to have
Sehun holding him. He'd learned something new about Sehun now. Just like Junmyeon, Sehun was
a cuddler in his sleep. If their situation had been different, they would probably be perfect for each
other.

Of course, the bliss didn't last forever, and Sehun woke up a little while later. He gasped as
soon as he realized he was holding Junmyeon, and quickly rolled over, escaping from Junmyeon as
far as he could muster. Junmyeon didn't move, feigning sleep so Sehun wouldn't be more
embarrassed. He wished the painful feeling in his chest would go away though. Why was he
starting to feel this way about Sehun when it was so obvious Sehun hated him? Junmyeon needed
to stop while he was still ahead.

~*~

The following day, Junmyeon and Sehun spent the morning in the garden with the other people
of Nefret. Minseok mostly watered the crops, so Junmyeon followed him, watering some himself.
He'd never done gardening work before, but he could understand why people found it peaceful.
Sehun and Baekhyun pulled weeds, which was a bit more physically taxing, but Sehun was happy
for the distraction. He was still feeling extremely confused and flustered about the previous
evening. Junmyeon hadn't said anything, so Sehun was sure he'd been asleep, but it still didn't
make it any easier for him to process his own actions.

When they'd worked up a sweat, Nayoung and a few others started working on lunch. Food was
often prepared in bulk and shared in Nefret, so the people took turns cooking for everyone. When it
was finally ready, they all sat in Baekhyun's room, Nayoung included, to discuss the reason why
Junmyeon really came to Nefret.

“I imagine the king wants you to convince me to let him search the colony again,” she started.

“No. He's realized in hindsight that that was a bad idea. He sent me to apologize and mend ties,
but you know I'm not really here for that.”

“Yes, so why are you here, Junmyeon of Reilania?” Nayoung asked, a slight smirk on her lips.

“I wanted to ask for your support,” Junmyeon stated.

“Support for what?” Nayoung asked next.

“I'm going to overthrow the king.”

Everyone in the room was shocked, Sehun included. Had Junmyeon been planning this all along? Was that why he was so calm and idealistic back in Sous? Overthrowing the king meant killing him, didn't it? Was Junmyeon actually strong enough to do that? Perhaps that was why he was going to the effort of talking to the outer regions. There was no doubt he had Chanyeol on his side, which meant at least some of the royal guard would be loyal to him as well. Junmyeon had a lot more up his sleeve than Sehun had initially realized.

“You think you have the power to do such a thing?” Nayoung asked, voicing Sehun's concerns. Minseok and Baekhyun both looked anxious. “It's going to be no simple task, and there will no doubt be people in the kingdom that view you as a traitor.”

“That's why I'm coming to you. The kingdom needs to change. My father has left it to rot for too long. I want to create a council involving all the outer regions as well as the royalty, so we can decide together what's best for the kingdom as a whole. The outer regions are still part of Reilania, and it's time they be treated as such.”

“You were serious about that council you told me about then,” Nayoung murmured. Junmyeon nodded.

“I want you to be a part of it, as well as Minseok and Baekhyun, as representatives of Nefret. Jongin, Jongsoo, and Chanyeol will be representing Sous in the council, and if you wish to invite more people to represent your region, I'll happily listen to your demands. I'm also planning on involving both Lorencia and Golden Meadows. If Sehun would like, he can be one of the people representing Lorencia.”

“What? Me?” Sehun asked, completely dumbfounded that Junmyeon had already planned so much for this council.

“Yes. You're a true Lorencian to your core, aren't you? I think your input would be extremely valuable to the council.”

“Before any of this happens though, you've got to get rid of the king, right?” Baekhyun asked darkly. “What do you plan to do about him? Will you kill him?”

“If he refuses to step down, then yes. After what he did to you and Minseok, and what I've seen of the outer regions and their struggles, he can't be left in power. He's gone too far, and change needs to happen, even if it makes me a traitor in order to initiate it. Haven't you been through a similar situation?”

“I guess...” Baekhyun mumbled. Junmyeon smiled, looking back to Nayoung.

“I wouldn't ask you to fight beside me, although at this point, I wouldn't turn down manpower if it's offered. I just want your support in the aftermath. It's going to take some time to rebuild the
kingdom and establish order.”

“I'll offer you whatever help my people can give. My warriors are trained to fight, and I'm sure some would be willing to fight for your cause. Of course I can't leave my own people unguarded, but I'll do what I can to help you.”

“Thank you, Lady Nayoung,” Junmyeon answered with a bow of his head. Baekhyun bit his lip, thinking everything over.

“I'll help as well, in any way I can. I can't really fight, but I can be a medic on the field.”

Junmyeon glanced at Minseok, instantly noting his look of worry and disapproval. Junmyeon shook his head as he looked back to Baekhyun.

“No, you're still a target along with Minseok. It's far too dangerous for you two to leave Nefret, and Minseok needs you here to help take care of him. But if there are others in Nefret willing to offer medical assistance or training on their practices, I know we would happily accept.”

Baekhyun nodded, and there was silence in the room for a moment. Junmyeon reached over the table to hold Minseok's hand, and Minseok looked at him with worried eyes.

“If I succeed, I'll restore both of you to honor. You're next in line for the throne, Minseok...”

“I don't want to be king,” Minseok immediately responded, surprising Baekhyun a bit. “I can't do it.”

“I'm sure you could,” Baekhyun soothed. Minseok shook his head again, looking hopefully at Junmyeon.

“I don't want to be king. I don't have it in me...But you do, Junmyeon. I want to pass the throne on to you.”

“Me?” Junmyeon asked, surprised this time.

“Father always did see you as the most capable. There's a reason for that. You're strong, Junmyeon, and you already have a vision for change in the kingdom. You care about the people, even in the outer regions. Your rightful place is on the throne, not me.”

“Minseok, this is a serious thing to simply pass on. Are you sure about this?”

“I don't want to lead the kingdom,” Minseok said softly, leaning against Baekhyun. “I only want to live in peace with my family. And you're the one who’s going to create that world for me, Junmyeon.”

“If that's really what you want, then I'll accept it,” Junmyeon stated. “Know that I still value your opinion above my own, and I want you to be part of my council, even if you're not at the head.”

“You know I'll be there,” Minseok said with a smile. “Do you know when you'll be able to go through with any of this?” Junmyeon sighed, shaking his head.

“It's going to take some time to plan everything. Sous and Nefret have both offered their
assistance and agreed to the council, but I need to tackle Lorencia next. I fear Golden Meadows is
too close to the king right now, and their favor is going to need to be won over after the rebellion.”

“How likely is it that Lorencia will side with Junmyeon?” Baekhyun asked Sehun. He
grimaced, not liking being put on the spot about something like this.

“Not very likely,” Sehun answered quietly. “Lorencia doesn't often come to the kingdom's aid.”

“Well, I'll have to win them over somehow too,” Junmyeon sighed. “They're next on the list of
places to visit. My father has angered them with his constant searches for you two. I imagine they
won't be so forgiving either. Another worry is making sure everyone is safe throughout the
rebellion. I don't think Chanyeol is going to be as willing to fight if his daughter and Jongin are at
risk. My support might be limited.”

“Let us know what you need,” Nayoung spoke up. “You've saved my grandson and his lover.
You have my trust and my support. Nefret will go to war with you.”

“Thank you, Lady Nayoung. For everything.”

Their conversation slowly drifted to less serious topics, but Sehun's mind seemed to be stuck on
what Junmyeon had said. He was really planning to rebel against the king. He was planning to take
the throne for himself, with Minseok's permission of course. What did that mean for Sehun? Did
Junmyeon have plans for him as well? Sehun didn't even know if Junmyeon had it in him to
succeed with this. He may have had a brain, but a rebellion took far more than just a good plan. It
took manpower and a strong following. That was what Junmyeon was trying to get now, of course,
but it seemed so risky. Junmyeon was taking a huge, life threatening risk. He really wanted change.
Could Sehun believe in the change Junmyeon wanted? He still wasn't sure.

They left Nefret a few days later, and it was much harder than Sehun would have imagined.
He'd enjoyed his time, and it reminded him of all the times he would stay with Baekhyun in the
gardens back at the palace. It was even harder for Minseok to say goodbye to Junmyeon. He'd seen
his brothers every day for so many years, and now he wasn't sure when he'd ever see them next.
Junmyeon reassured him it would be soon though, and promised again that he would get them back
to the palace.

Sehun still didn't know whether Junmyeon was being confident or idealistic, or if either of
those were a good thing. Still, he knew how hard it was to know Minseok and Baekhyun were
wanted fugitives. Sehun wanted to clear their names somehow as well, or at least Baekhyun's.
Minseok seemed to come as part of the package now. Sehun thought back to Baekhyun's words
about Junmyeon. If Baekhyun trusted him and believed in him, maybe Junmyeon wasn't as
hopeless as Sehun had thought. He was scared to put his faith in him. Nothing good ever came
from the kingdom. Sehun had had that mentality ingrained into his head all throughout his
childhood. One person couldn't just change that mindset.

As they were flying back to the castle in the glider, Sehun stared out the window, still so
confused about how he was feeling. Junmyeon didn't seem at all fazed that he'd just revealed his
huge plan to all of them. He just seemed calm and collected, as always.

“Are you sure it was wise to reveal what you're planning?”

“Hm?” Junmyeon hummed. “I need to in order to get support, don't I?”

“What about me though? You haven't gotten Lorencia's support. What if I choose to sabotage your plan? Are you sure it was wise to reveal it to me? I could tell the king easily.”

“That's true, you could,” Junmyeon agreed simply. “But I wanted to tell you. I trust you, Sehun, and I want you to be able to trust me. I'm not going to keep any secrets from you. You know what I'm planning. I won't ask you to support me. You can do with this information what you see fit. I know you're going along with this out of interest for your own region, and I'm more than happy to offer your region the change it needs after the rebellion. I don't expect you to support me through this if you don't deem it helpful to your region. But I won't lie to you.”

“You really are a naive fool,” Sehun muttered. Junmyeon smiled, used to Sehun's harsh words now and finding them somewhat endearing, though he wouldn't ever admit it.

“Yes, I'm sure I am. But I want to build a better world, for all of us. One where Minseok and Baekhyun don't have to hide just so they can be together. One where Jongin doesn't have to prove his worth just for being a birther with a birth defect. One where no birther would be forced into a marriage against their will.”

“It's too ambitious.”

“Maybe you're right,” Junmyeon sighed. “But I'm going to try.”

Sehun grimaced, looking back out the window. Why was he feeling so confused? It was obvious Junmyeon wouldn't succeed, right? So why was he starting to believe in him? Sehun wasn't supposed to feel this way. He needed to pull back before it was too late. He too, had his own agenda to accomplish. He couldn't let Junmyeon ruin it. He had to stay strong.

Chapter End Notes

And we're back with Seho! I had a work thing and I'm really crazy tired so I don't really have a lot of energy to write my AN, so forgive me. But this chapter was really important cuz Jun revealed his plaaaaan! And xiubaek came back into the plot :D And the soft xiuho brothers, I'm cry ;; And Sehun is feeling confused, hmmm~

And that's all for now friends! I'll be back again next week! So until then, enjoy and I love you guys!!!
When Junmyeon and Sehun returned, Junmyeon immediately sent out a request for visitation to Lorencia. He didn't hear back immediately, so he decided to visit Jongin and Chanyeol to see how they were both doing. Ever since the birth of their baby, they'd both been in their own little world, avoiding the king and focusing on taking care of Hwayoung. Junmyeon was glad they had a reason to stay out of the king's way, but he was still worried about both of them being in the palace. It definitely wasn't safe for them or their baby, considering how volatile the king was. Junmyeon was starting to think it was time to begin the second part of his plan.

Junmyeon visited Jongin and Chanyeol's room, a little surprised to find Sehun there as well playing with Lottie. Junmyeon couldn't help but find the sight of Sehun snuggling the pig adorable. Junmyeon found a lot of Sehun to be adorable. He just wished he wasn't so defiant and determined to hate him.

“Junmyeon! What brings you here?” Chanyeol asked, walking over to him with Hwayoung in his arms. Junmyeon smiled and held his arms out to take her.

“I wanted to visit my brother and my little niece.”

Chanyeol smiled and let Junmyeon take Hwayoung and cuddle her close. She was a calm baby, but she seemed to relax even more when she was held. Junmyeon loved holding her. He knew the idea of having children himself any time soon was impossible, so he could only enjoy his brothers' children as they were born.

“How was Nefret?” Jongin asked, looking up from the blueprint he'd been drawing. Chanyeol had started taking care of the baby more so Jongin could get back to working.

“It was nice,” Junmyeon answered simply before nodding at Chanyeol to lock the door.

Once Chanyeol had done so, Junmyeon walked over and sat at the end of the bed. Chanyeol sat beside him, looking at him anxiously.

“Minseok and Baekhyun are doing well,” Junmyeon said quietly. Both Jongin and Chanyeol sighed in relief. “They're both healthy and happy.”

“Minseok's baby is ok?” Jongin asked nervously.

“Yes. He's never looked healthier.”

“I wish I could have seen him...I really miss him,” Chanyeol mumbled. “I want him to meet Hwayoung.”

“He wanted to meet her too,” Junmyeon replied, poking Hwayoung's soft cheek gently. “And
I'll be damned if we all can't meet his baby when they're born. It's time to change things.”

“Do you have something planned?” Chanyeol asked. Junmyeon carefully handed him Hwayoung.

“I'm going to take the throne.”

“What!?” Chanyeol gasped. “You mean you're going to take it from father!? Jun, he's not going to just hand it over to you!”

“I know. I fully plan to kill him.”

Jongin's eyes went wide and Chanyeol's jaw dropped. He got up and put Hwayoung in her crib before returning to Junmyeon's side. Sehun was the only one that didn't seem shocked, so Jongin looked at him questioningly.

“Did you know about this?” He asked Sehun. He shrugged, focusing on Lottie rather than the rest of them.

“Junmyeon...How are you going to do this?” Chanyeol asked. “There's no way you can take him down alone...And what about Minseok? He’s next in line.”

“Minseok has already told me he wants to pass the throne on to me. And I'm not planning to do this alone. I've been asking the outer regions for help. I plan to unite them and the kingdom, so naturally, their support is invaluable. I've already gotten both Nefret and Sous on my side.”

“Really?” Jongin asked excitedly. “My uncle is supporting you?”

“Yes. I promised I would involve him on a council I plan to set up. You two as well.”

“So you have Sous and Nefret on your side, but what next?” Chanyeol asked.

“I'm working on Lorencia, but I think Golden Meadows is out of the question until the king is brought down. But I think even with just Sous and Nefret on my side, I can succeed. I would love to have your support as well, but I won't ask you to.”

“Are you joking!? There's no way I'm going to let you go into this alone, Junmyeon! You know I have sway with the royal guard! You need my support!”

“You're right...I do. But I can't ask you to put yourself or your family in danger. Hwayoung can't be here during all of this.”

“You've obviously thought about her already,” Jongin interrupted. “What are you going to do, Junmyeon? Tell us everything.”

“I want to send Jongin and Hwayoung to Sous. The sooner the better. I want your support, but I want your safety more than anything. Jongin isn't a trained soldier, and someone needs to take care of Hwayoung. Besides, Jongsu has been longing to see you and his granddaughter. I think he would love to have a long visit from you two.”

“And you would kill the king then?” Jongin asked.

“I would try, but I would need more manpower. If you could, I'd ask you to rally the people of Sous.”
“I'd be happy to,” Jongin answered easily. “I'll even help them develop armor and weapons so they aren't defenseless. I might even make something that turns the rebellion in your favor.”

“If anyone can do it, it would be you, Jongin. Thank you so much.”

“You've got us on your side,” Chanyeol soothed. “We'll fight alongside you in any way we can. And you know I'll be at your side here. I believe in you, Jun, and father has gone too far. I can't forgive him after what he did to Minseok. If anyone is going to be the new king, I want it to be you.”

“I agree,” Jongin stated. “We'll follow you.”

“Thank you, both of you. I'll contact Jongsoo and get your trip all planned out. Are you sure you don't want to go with him, Chanyeol?”

“I'm staying by your side. Jongin and I will be fine away from each other for a while.” Jongin walked over and snuggled up to Chanyeol.

“Besides, it won't be for too long. I'll be back soon,” he said softly.

Junmyeon smiled and nodded. He was grateful Jongin and Chanyeol were going to support him, but that was all the more reason he couldn't fail. He had to take the throne from the king. All of their lives depended on it now.

Junmyeon and Sehun left their room a little while later. Unsurprisingly, Sehun didn't say anything to him. He'd been fairly quiet during Junmyeon's conversation with Chanyeol and Jongin, but Junmyeon knew Sehun was still conflicted about what Junmyeon had told him last time. Junmyeon didn't expect him to support him, but he wasn't openly calling him a fool anymore, so maybe Sehun was accepting Junmyeon's vision for the future. He could hope at least.

Junmyeon received a response from Lorencia later that evening. His request had been denied, but Lorencia would be sending a representative to the main kingdom to speak on the leader's behalf. It wasn't what Junmyeon wanted, but he would take it over having no hearing whatsoever. When he returned to his room, he told Sehun the situation. Sehun seemed to be a mixture of shock and skepticism.

“Are you still going to talk to them about your plan?” Sehun finally asked. Junmyeon was surprised he seemed concerned.

“It's a touchy subject, so I won't be able to get too detailed about the rebellion, but I can appeal to them about the council. If I can even get through to the leader, I think I'll count that as a victory.”

“I don't think it's going to go well,” Sehun said quietly. “I'm not trying to rain on your parade, but I just don't have a good feeling about this.”

“Are you concerned?” Junmyeon asked, smiling just a bit. Sehun's cheeks flushed and he turned away.
“No. I was just telling you how I felt. Lorencia isn't as simple as you think.”

“Oh believe me, if I thought Lorencia was simple, I would have figured out how to get along with you. I think Lorencia is just as complex as any region, and I'm going to give your representative the respect they deserve.”

Sehun hugged his legs to his chest, looking out the window from the window seat. Junmyeon headed into the bathroom to take a bath, so Sehun had time to himself finally. He didn't know what his region was planning, sending someone from Lorencia to the kingdom. He knew it couldn't be good though. Lorencia hardly took action regarding the kingdom, so something was definitely going on. Sehun couldn't stop feeling anxious.

Why did he feel this way? He was scared for Junmyeon to meet the Lorencian representative. Why? Did that mean Sehun was worried about him? Had he gotten attached to Junmyeon without realizing it? Somehow, his optimism was drawing Sehun in. He wanted to believe in Junmyeon's crazy plan, which worried him for numerous reasons. Above all, he knew Lorencia wasn't going to go along with Junmyeon's plan. Perhaps that was why Sehun was so worried. This was only going to lead to trouble.

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Junmyeon and Chanyeol cleared Jongin's visit to Sous with the king, telling him that Jongin wanted to visit his family with his child for a short while. The king was reluctant to accept, not wanting the baby to be in one of the outer regions, but finally, he agreed. Chanyeol helped Jongin pack, and they spent the evening together. Jongin hadn't ever been apart from Chanyeol for an elongated period of time since they got married. This was going to be especially hard, since Jongin knew Chanyeol would be staying behind for the rebellion. Jongin was already so worried, even if Chanyeol was a renowned soldier.

Jongin spent that night cuddling with Chanyeol, trying not to cry. Chanyeol was soothing him, promising he would be ok and they would be together again before Jongin knew it, but it was still going to be hard to part. Jongin hated the thought of leaving Chanyeol alone at the palace, but he knew he had his own role to fulfill in this rebellion. He needed to rally Sous and make sure they were prepared for the fight, and he needed to protect Hwayoung and keep her away from the palace. He needed to do this, for everyone's sake. They needed to create a safer world for their daughter, even if that meant being apart for a while and risking their lives.

Jongin left the following morning, and it was a lot harder than he would have imagined. It felt like he was leaving Sous all over again. The palace had become his home, even in the state of disarray that it was. It was especially hard to leave behind the person that was his other half. Jongin hugged Chanyeol one last time, trying to tell himself that everything would be alright. Chanyeol would be alright.
It was hard on Chanyeol to leave Jongin and their baby as well. Once Jongin had left the palace, Chanyeol set his part of the plan into motion straight away. He started analyzing the royal guard, observing who each of them ultimately were loyal to. Those loyal to the king, Chanyeol made sure to keep note of, since he would have to deal with them on the day of the rebellion, whenever it came to pass. Those that were loyal to him, however, were slowly made aware of the fact that Chanyeol was planning to take charge of the royal guard and go against his father.

Junmyeon and Chanyeol both had to be very careful about who they talked to and what was said. Chanyeol didn't reveal any of Junmyeon's part in the plan. All he told his soldiers was he was planning to take over the royal guard, and was looking for those loyal to him. Junmyeon still had Lorencia to deal with and the other outer regions needed to prepare, so the rebellion couldn't happen right away. Still, Chanyeol could never be too prepared.

The representative from Lorencia arrived a few weeks later. He was a man looking about Junmyeon's age, perhaps a bit older, with strong facial features. It seemed it was a trait of the people of Lorencia, since Junmyeon was reminded of Sehun's own sharp features. This man seemed welcoming, happily shaking Junmyeon's hand and partaking in conversation as he led him to the guest quarters. The man introduced himself as Chulmoo, and Junmyeon wondered if he was sent simply because he was so pleasant. Perhaps Lorencia had a negotiator much like Junmyeon was for the king.

Chulmoo was tired, so Junmyeon left him in his room, saying he could have his dinner brought to him or join him and Sehun for a meal later. Chulmoo opted for the first option, saying he would join Junmyeon the following night when he was more rested. Junmyeon departed none the wiser, but Sehun was quick to visit Chulmoo after that. Sehun shut the door behind him so they could talk in private. He narrowed his eyes as he glared at Chulmoo.

“What are you doing here? What are your intentions?” Sehun asked.

“I have the same intentions as you and every suitor that came to the kingdom so long ago. I'm going to kill the prince and start a rebellion.”

“That task was supposed to be left to whichever suitor was chosen! I was the one, so why did Lorencia send you?”

“It seems our leader has lost his faith in you,” Chulmoo said darkly. “You've been at the palace for a year, Sehun, yet nothing has happened.”

“I've been studying palace life! I'm not going to go into this rashly!”

“What's holding you back?” Chulmoo asked. “You've had ample opportunities, and that prince is such a fool he trusts anyone. He's an easy target, so why haven't you struck yet? Are you afraid of death?”

“We were told we probably wouldn't survive when we were given our mission. Of course I'm hesitant, but I know the risks.”

“So why? You had 2 perfect opportunities. Word travels fast Sehun, and you've been going to the outer regions with him. You could have killed him and escaped with your life, but you didn't.
Why is that? What's going on Sehun? Are you getting soft for him? Have they tainted you?"

“That's not the case,” Sehun said, trying to keep his voice from wavering. “I'm simply assessing the situation, and I think you should do the same. I've been learning his strengths and weaknesses. There's more going on behind the scenes than you're aware of.”

“Then if you know him so well, will you help me kill him?”

Sehun froze. He really had been studying Junmyeon all this time, trying his hardest to remain distant from him, but now everything felt different. Junmyeon was already planning a rebellion, and while killing him would certainly start one, Sehun was starting to think Junmyeon's rebellion held more promise for Lorencia than if they rebelled themselves. Sehun didn't want to kill Junmyeon. He didn't think he could anymore. Junmyeon had really gotten to him. Chulmoo scoffed as Sehun remained silent.

“You really have gone soft for him. Stay away from him, and stay away from me. I don't want to have to kill one of my fellow brethren. I will complete our mission.”

Sehun left his room at that moment, feeling strangely numb. His heart couldn't stop pounding, and all he could think about was Junmyeon. Chulmoo would be trying to kill him during his stay. What was Sehun going to do?

When Sehun returned to his and Junmyeon's shared room, Junmyeon was already asleep. Sehun sat at the window seat, staring down at the garden below. What could Sehun do in this position? He could let Junmyeon be killed, and Chulmoo would take the fall, not him. Sehun's life would be spared in that scenario, and he could possibly return back to his region if he could get away from the palace in the rebellion that followed. How would that leave the kingdom though? Junmyeon would be dead, and the king would still be around. He was the one that needed to be killed, and Junmyeon was the one planning to do it. He wanted to involve the outer regions as well, with pure intentions for all of them. It would be more helpful to Sehun and his people if they joined with Junmyeon and fought against the king. How was he going to get his people to believe that though? With how determined Chulmoo was, Sehun didn't think he would bother listening to him, or delivering the message of Junmyeon's rebellion back to Lorencia. It seemed hopeless.

Sehun could protect Junmyeon. It would mean going against Chulmoo and possibly making himself an enemy of Lorencia, but Junmyeon would be alive to wage his rebellion. Sehun would have to trust him to take care of him in the aftermath and protect him from Lorencia. Sehun paused as a realization hit him. He trusted Junmyeon to do that. Not only did he believe in Junmyeon's plans, but he trusted him. He really had gotten soft for him. Junmyeon trusted Sehun wholeheartedly though. He willingly told Sehun information that could put his own life and rebellion at risk because he trusted him and wanted him to know what was going on. Sehun couldn't just ignore that. Junmyeon trusted Sehun and had always been respectful of him and his boundaries. Sehun wanted to give Junmyeon at least a little of that trust and respect back. He couldn't let Chulmoo kill him. He had to protect him.
Sehun curled up in bed beside Junmyeon. He rested his forehead against Junmyeon's back. It was the closest he'd ever dared to be to Junmyeon, and he'd never realized how warm Junmyeon was. He couldn't let him die. He had to fight for what he believed in, and now that was Junmyeon.

~*~

Chulmoo continued to entertain Junmyeon, putting on the nice front. Sehun had started coming to all their meetings, watching Chulmoo like a hawk. Junmyeon had figured it was because Sehun had been longing to interact with someone from his region again, and he often tried to let Sehun have as much time and freedom to come and go as he pleased. He was surprised Sehun seemed so stuck to his side, even when Chulmoo wasn't with him. Was there something going on? Or was Sehun starting to open up to Junmyeon and this was his way of wanting to be with him? Junmyeon didn't want to get his hopes up, but it was hard not to when Sehun stayed by his side so often.

Sehun tried again to reason with Chulmoo in secret, asking him to trust him and that he had a plan, but Chulmoo of course didn't listen. He simply told Sehun that he needed to remember where he really came from, and that the royalty wouldn't bother helping him. Sehun would normally believe that, but he'd seen enough of all the princes to know they were different. If anything, all of the princes had proven they would risk their lives for the people they cared about, and they all wanted the kingdom to change. It had taken him so long to accept this reality, but now that he had, Sehun found himself frustrated with how closed-minded Chulmoo was being. His efforts would only be fruitless.

Sehun returned to his and Junmyeon's room and curled up in bed beside Junmyeon. Just as Junmyeon was dozing off, he felt Sehun wrap his arms around him and snuggle closer. Junmyeon held his breath for a moment, his heart beating as he waited for Sehun to realize what he was doing and pull away like he had before. It didn't happen though, and Sehun remained snuggled against him. Junmyeon timidly reached his hand down and placed it on Sehun's on top of his stomach. Still, Sehun didn't pull away, and Junmyeon felt a rush of excitement. Maybe Sehun was coming around after all. Maybe there was hope for them.

Sehun stayed close to Junmyeon as he slept that night, afraid to let go of him. Chulmoo wouldn't hesitate to kill Junmyeon, but he would hesitate to kill Sehun. Like most of the outer regions, loyalty among their own people ran strong. Sehun would be the strongest shield Junmyeon could have at this point. Sehun knew Chulmoo would probably try to strike at night, so he slept lightly, listening for anything that broke the silence. Finally, he heard the door creek, and he leaned closer to Junmyeon, using his own body to cover him. A figure approached in the darkness, and Sehun glared at Chulmoo, spotting a dagger flashing in the moonlight.


“I told you to trust me. I know what I'm doing, and if you're going to get to him, you're going to have to go through me first,” Sehun said just as quietly

“Don't make this hard, Sehun. I can take you back with me. We can escape tonight before anyone finds out.”
“No. This is what I've chosen. Now leave before he wakes up. Junmyeon is a light sleeper.”

Chulmoo clicked his tongue in irritation, but left the room all the same as Junmyeon grumbled in his sleep. Sehun breathed a sigh of relief, relaxing against Junmyeon. He was actually quite the deep sleeper, but Chulmoo had bought Sehun's lie. Sehun couldn't let this continue. Chulmoo was serious about killing Junmyeon. He had to warn him before it was too late. Chulmoo wouldn't hesitate to kill Sehun the next time. He'd chosen his side, and now he was just as much an enemy to Chulmoo as Junmyeon was.

~*~

The following evening, the king held an official banquet to welcome the representative of Lorencia. Sehun still remained in the same room as Junmyeon at all times, keeping his distance. Junmyeon had noticed Sehun seemed upset though, but as expected, when he asked, Sehun swore it was nothing and wouldn't say another word. Junmyeon was so confused. It felt like he and Sehun were making so much progress, and Sehun was even starting to be affectionate, but he still wouldn't tell Junmyeon anything. Junmyeon just desperately wanted Sehun to rely on him, even for the tiniest thing.

When it was time for the banquet, Sehun was surprised at the amount of noblemen from the main kingdom that had come. It was a large feast, and Sehun was grateful, because it would be all that much harder for Chulmoo to attack Junmyeon. Of course, Junmyeon was too eager for his own good. As soon as Chulmoo had discussed meeting in private to talk about the future of their region, Junmyeon had happily accepted, wanting to discuss his own plans as well. Sehun panicked, knowing Chulmoo would assassinate Junmyeon the minute he got him alone. Sehun couldn't let him go.

Once the dinner ended, Junmyeon looked like he was going to follow Chulmoo out of the dining hall. Sehun stopped Junmyeon, holding his arm tightly as he watched Chulmoo continue, expecting Junmyeon to follow. Junmyeon looked at Sehun worriedly, placing his hand on top of Sehun's.

“Are you alright?” Junmyeon asked. “Do you feel unwell?”

“I just...I need to talk to you...Air...I need fresh air!”

“Should we go to the gardens? I was going to meet Chulmoo to discuss some things...”

“Please come with me! Please?”

Sehun seemed so nervous and desperate, and Junmyeon couldn't deny he seemed a little pale. He nodded and gently wrapped his arm around Sehun's waist, hoping he wasn't pushing his boundaries. Sehun relaxed against him as they walked together in a different direction, heading to the gardens. Junmyeon's discussion with Chulmoo would have to wait until Sehun was feeling better.
They walked a ways, the cold night air actually helping Sehun calm down just a bit. Junmyeon had Sehun sit on one of the benches, surrounded by rose bushes so they could have some privacy from the large banquet. After a few moments of Junmyeon rubbing Sehun's back, Sehun decided it was finally time to tell Junmyeon the truth about what was going on.

"Junmyeon...That man, he's not here to negotiate with you...He's here to kill you."

"What?" Junmyeon gasped. "How can you be sure?"

"Trust me, Junmyeon, I know! He told me so!"

"He told you that? Why?"

Sehun opened his mouth to speak again, but another voice cut through the night air, sending chills down his spine.

"You got him alone for me, Sehun. I'm grateful."

Sehun stared up in horror as Chulmoo approached both of them. He must have seen Sehun lead Junmyeon away from him. Junmyeon got to his feet suddenly, standing in front of Sehun protectively and reaching back to hold his hand. Sehun stood up as well, wanting to be ready in case he needed to run away with Junmyeon.

"What is it you need, Chulmoo?" Junmyeon asked calmly. "I'm sorry I didn't follow you. Sehun was feeling unwell, and I wanted to look after him. I'll join you later if you'd give me a moment."

"No, here is just as fine a location as any. I'm sure Sehun has told you what I'm here for. It seems he hasn't told you what he was really here for though. Sehun was the one who was supposed to do this, not me. Are you sure you want to protect him?"

Junmyeon glanced at Sehun, seeking answers. Sehun could only look down in shame. He couldn't lie to Junmyeon about this, not anymore. They both glanced back to Chulmoo as he unsheathed a dagger. To Sehun's surprise, Junmyeon's grip on his hand tightened at that moment, and he didn't move from his side, despite what he'd just been told. Sehun frantically reached into his clothes with his free hand, searching for the small knife he always kept with him. As soon as he found it, he slipped it into Junmyeon's hand that was holding his.

Chulmoo charged at them after that, and Junmyeon pushed Sehun out of the way so he wouldn't get hit. Sehun fell to the ground, crushing a bit of the rose bush and getting cut by the thorns. He watched as Junmyeon dodged Chulmoo, strategically striking with the small knife Sehun had given him. Neither of them had made a mark on the other, but Chulmoo's knife was bigger, so it was harder for Junmyeon to get in range to attack him. Then again, Junmyeon wasn't trying to kill Chulmoo, just fend him off.
“You're a fool,” Chulmoo growled. “You trust so easily, anyone could kill you.”

“It doesn't have to be like this,” Junmyeon pleaded. “I don't want to fight you, and if you'd listen to me, I think you'd find we have very similar interests.”

Chulmoo scoffed and whipped his dagger past Junmyeon's face, just lightly grazing his cheek. Sehun gasped as Junmyeon lost his footing trying to dodge the blow. He rushed forward, grabbing Junmyeon and hugging him close right as Chulmoo brought his dagger down upon him. The metal plunged deep into Sehun's shoulder, and he cried out in pain as he clung to Junmyeon tighter. He heard Junmyeon scream his name, and everything else was like a flash. Junmyeon didn't hesitate to strike Chulmoo while he was distracted, slitting his throat cleanly with the small knife. Chulmoo's body sunk to the ground, and Junmyeon held Sehun close, carefully lowering him to the ground to inspect the wound. Sehun could feel both of them shaking, but as he registered the threat was gone, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Sehun! Are you ok!?” Junmyeon gasped. “Hold still, let me check your wound!”

“Junmyeon...What he said-”

“Shh, we'll talk about it later. Just rest against me, ok?”

Sehun sighed, doing as told. He was in a lot of pain, so resting against Junmyeon's chest honestly felt like a great idea. He listened to Junmyeon's rapid heartbeat as the latter carefully pulled the bloody cloth away from Sehun's right shoulder. The dagger was still inside, and Junmyeon wasn't going to pull it out without having the doctor nearby. He needed to get Sehun to the doctor's quarters.

“Your highness?” A voice called. Junmyeon glanced up to see a knight from the royal guard approaching.

“Over here!” He called. The guard rushed over as he saw Chulmoo dead on the ground.

“What happened!? Should I alert the king?”

“No!” Junmyeon gasped. “Keep this quiet for now. Get Chanyeol, and tell him the Lorencian representative attacked me and Sehun. Clean this up and keep it quiet from my father at least until the banquet is over. You know how big a scene he'll make before the other nobility.”

“Yes, your highness.”

“I'm going to take Sehun to the doctor. I'm sorry to trouble you with this.”

“Of course not, your highness. As long as you're safe. It's my duty to protect you and serve you.”

“Thank you.”

Junmyeon carefully picked Sehun up, trying not to jostle his injured shoulder much. He walked away from the guard, taking Sehun to the doctor's quarters. He was grateful most of the palace
guests were still in the dining hall, since it made sneaking Sehun through the halls easier. Sehun tried to get down and insist on walking, but Junmyeon shushed him again. Sehun let himself be limp in Junmyeon's arms after that. He hardly deserved this kind of treatment from Junmyeon after the way he'd acted towards him for the past year, but Junmyeon wasn't going to let his care be denied. Junmyeon really was too kind for his own good.

The doctor was shocked when Junmyeon came to his room with Sehun in his arms, but he quickly got started on treating Sehun's wound. He ended up having to numb the area and stitch the wound together. Junmyeon held Sehun's hand through much of the treatment, and Sehun couldn't find it in him to pull away. Instead, he clung harder whenever he happened to feel the prick of the needle despite his numb skin.

Even after Sehun was treated, when he was laying in bed under the influence of some pain medication used for bionic limb surgeries, Junmyeon was still at his side. Sehun's hand was still in his, and he rubbed it gently with his thumb, looking deep in thought. It was only then, when they were completely alone together, that Sehun could finally speak up.

“You know I wouldn't kill you, right?” He asked Junmyeon, looking at him with nervous, hopeful eyes. Junmyeon sighed and nodded.

“I know. You had plenty of chances to kill me up until this point, and you saved me just now...but I'm still disappointed. Of course I'm disappointed about Lorencia, and I can only imagine how my father will react when he hears the news, but there's more than that. For a moment, I had the foolish notion that maybe we were getting closer. Maybe things were going to work out between us.”

“Junmyeon...”

“I thought you were finally opening up to me, Sehun...but that wasn't the case. At least not in the way I wanted. You were trying to protect me from assassination, which I greatly appreciate, and I would hope that means you don't completely hate me or mistrust me...But your heart is still as closed off to me as ever. When you held me at night, that wasn't out of love, was it?”

“Junmyeon, I don't hate you...I believe in you. I wanted to protect you...”

“I'm glad to know that,” Junmyeon said softly, smiling sadly. “But it doesn't change the fact that you aren't happy in our engagement. I don't want to force you through this, Sehun. I told you I wanted to create a world where a birther never had to be forced into marriage again. That world starts with you, Sehun. Once the rebellion is over, I'm going to call off our engagement. You'll be free to leave.”

Junmyeon got to his feet, getting ready to leave. Sehun reached for his hand, not fully aware of why he was acting this way. All he knew was he didn't like what he was hearing for some reason, and he didn't want Junmyeon to leave.

“Junmyeon, wait...”

“I won't make you stay for the rebellion,” Junmyeon continued, pulling Sehun's hand away from his and letting it drop. “If you want to leave, I'll send a couple guards with you so you're
protected. I don't think Lorencia will welcome you at the moment, given what's happened, but I'll make sure you're protected. I'll calm things down and you can return home. Just give me some time, alright?"

Sehun called out to Junmyeon once more, but Junmyeon ignored him, leaving him alone in the room. Sehun felt tears stinging at his eyes, and he could only lay there in shock. Why did this hurt so much? He'd worked so hard to keep himself distant from Junmyeon, so why was it so painful to see him walk away?

Without realizing it, Sehun had warmed up to Junmyeon. Did he love him? Sehun couldn't even begin to fathom that feeling, but it hurt to see Junmyeon in this state. It hurt to know that Sehun had hurt him, even though he was trying to protect him. Along with trusting Junmyeon, Sehun had become loyal to him, almost devoted to him. Maybe that was why this hurt so much. Sehun thought back to their trips abroad together, and his feelings felt like they became even more muddled. Sehun had briefly been alone with Junmyeon, without the royalty or prejudice to get in his way, and he'd really liked the man he saw. Junmyeon was a kind, genuine person, and Sehun cared for him. That was why this hurt so much.

He didn't want to let Junmyeon down, but he had. Sehun didn't want Junmyeon to leave him, but he had. What was he supposed to do now? He couldn't even begin to know the answer. Sehun hadn't realized how much of a constant presence Junmyeon had become in his life until it was too late. All he knew was he was alone now, and it was far more scary than taking the blow from Chulmoo had been.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! This chapter and the next are really intense, so I decided to post them together, so you get a double update this week! Lots happened this chapter! Junmyeon's plan for the rebellion continues, and now we all know what the heck was going on with Sehun. And the Seho angst is starting (continuing???). Will they ever be happy? How is the king going to react to the assassination attempt? And how is Junmyeon going to work all this out? And what is poor Sehun going to do? Find out Friday when I post the next chapter :3 It's an exciting one!
The king was furious when he heard of the assassination attempt. He tried to have Sehun executed for being a fellow Lorencian, but Junmyeon spent hours pleading with him that Sehun was innocent and had gotten hurt protecting Junmyeon. Finally, the king decided to redirect his anger towards Lorencia as a whole, and ordered for the royal guard to storm the region. Junmyeon knew his pleading would be useless here, and his father was out for blood. The only thing he could do was use this to his advantage. It was time to start his rebellion.

Junmyeon went to Chanyeol first to talk about his father's most recent order. Chanyeol was already one step ahead of Junmyeon. Neither of them really wanted to see Lorencia destroyed, so Chanyeol had already put men loyal to him in charge of the siege. That way, if nothing else, they could contain the damage to Lorencia, even if the royal guard couldn't disobey a direct order from the king. Junmyeon wanted to take care of matters before it even came to that however.

He secretly contacted Sous and Nefret, telling them it was time to act. As his father sent the royal guard out in the travel tanks, Junmyeon and Chanyeol sent out some dragon gliders, masking them as an aerial strike in the siege, but in truth, they were headed to Sous and Nefret to pick up reinforcements. With half the royal guard in Lorencia, it was a perfect time to strike the king. Chanyeol had left some of his supporters in the kingdom as well, so they would have a much higher chance of taking over the castle.

Junmyeon didn't want to leave Lorencia to fend for itself however. If his rebellion failed, there was no telling what kind of bloodshed Lorencia would experience. They had betrayed the kingdom, but Junmyeon knew they ultimately wanted change. He could still try to make an ally out of them. He contacted them shortly after the royal guard left the kingdom. The travel tanks were fast, so there was only so much time before they would be upon Lorencia.

“This is the leader of Lorencia,” a man's voice answered.

“This is Prince Junmyeon of Reilania.”

“Ah, my prince...”

“I'm sure you've realized by now that your assassination attempt failed,” Junmyeon stated simply. “Your assassin has been killed and my father is furious. As we speak, the royal guard is on its way to overtake Lorencia. He won't stop until blood has been shed.”

“Is this a threat?”

“No. It's a warning. I understand Lorencia wanted change, but if you'd been a bit more cooperative, you could have joined me in overtaking the king. I still plan to do so, but I'm afraid Lorencia has to be a distraction. I don't want meaningless bloodshed, however, so I'm warning you in advance so you can prepare your people. I'm going to try and stop the royal guard before it's too
late, but you may have to defend your people.”

“Why are you telling me this? I tried to kill you.”

“Believe me, you're far from forgiven. But there are plenty of innocent people in Lorencia that will suffer from my father's wrath. And I'm planning to kill him and take his place. I know better than to create enemies.”

“I see...”

“I don't have much time left to talk to you, so I would like to propose a truce. I will be creating a council after the rebellion involving all the leaders of the outer regions, Lorencia included. I want to change this kingdom for the better, and I can't do it without everyone's cooperation. If you choose to go against our truce, I'll do whatever it takes to protect my kingdom, but for now, I'll do everything in my power to keep you and your people safe. Don't overlook my generosity.”

“I understand, your highness. Thank you for your consideration.”

Junmyeon ended the call at that point. There was one other person he needed to warn of the rebellion, but he was dreading doing so. He hadn't talked to Sehun since the incident, and he hadn't returned to Junmyeon's room, opting to stay in the doctor's quarters. He wanted Sehun to be safe during the rebellion though, so he needed to get him out of the palace before it began.

Junmyeon arrived at the doctor's quarters, nodding at the man when he entered the room. The doctor left, giving him some time alone. Sehun was sitting at the window, looking outside. He nervously looked over at Junmyeon when he saw him enter. Junmyeon smiled at him sadly and walked over, sitting down across from him.

“Junmyeon,” Sehun started softly, not knowing what else to say to him.

“The king sent the royal guard to Lorencia,” Junmyeon explained gently, knowing this news would make Sehun panic. As he saw Sehun's eyes widen, he quickly continued. “I'm going to use this time to strike and take him down. I'll do my best to save Lorencia, I promise...but it's not safe for you to be here. I don't want you to get hurt, so I'm going to have someone escort you from the palace, ok?”

“I'm not going,” Sehun said adamantly. Junmyeon sighed and got up from his seat.

“Please, Sehun. This is going to be dangerous and you could die. Let me protect you. I owe you that much, don't I?”

Sehun bit his lip, still not looking all that convinced. Junmyeon didn't have time to argue with him though. He told Sehun once more that a guard would come by later to escort him, and he left the room. He would have to wait for his reinforcements to arrive, but it was finally time to put everything into action. He couldn't let himself get distracted.

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Minseok paced back and forth in their room anxiously. The dragon glider had picked up the warriors Nefret had chosen to help in the rebellion a little over an hour ago, so they all knew the rebellion was going to take place in a matter of hours. Minseok hated being so far out of the loop. He was terrified something would happen to his brothers. He was completely powerless, especially so far along in his pregnancy.

Baekhyun had been trying to reason with him and calm him down all morning, but no distraction seemed to work. Minseok was so anxious he almost felt nauseous, and he'd been having contractions all morning. He was far enough along that contractions were to be expected even if he wasn't going into labor, but Nayoung and Baekhyun still made sure to keep a close watch on him. Pacing back and forth helped the contractions a bit, but Minseok was still so anxious, he felt short of breath.

At one point, a sharp contraction came, and Minseok stopped in his tracks, leaning against some furniture to keep his balance. Baekhyun had been sitting on their bed, trying to talk to him, but as soon as he saw Minseok falter, he jumped to his feet and was at his side in seconds.

“What happened? Are you ok?” Baekhyun asked worriedly.

“I-I think so...just a contraction...”

“You need to be careful, Minseok. Don't push yourself so much. Lay down for a bit, ok?”

“I can't sit still! I'm so worried and oh God!”

Minseok clung to Baekhyun as another contraction came, this one leaving his legs shaking. These weren't normal contractions like what he'd been feeling over the past few weeks. These were stronger and more painful. Baekhyun was basically holding Minseok up at this point.

“Minseok? You need to sit down, come on. Lean on me.”

Minseok tried to move, but another contraction came and he cried out for Baekhyun to stop moving. He felt liquid in between his legs and let out a shaky breath.

“Baekhyun...I think my water just broke...”

“Sit down on the bed! Let me check!” Baekhyun gasped.

They tried to move together once more, but another contraction came and Minseok again found himself clinging to Baekhyun just so he wouldn't lose his footing.

“Baekhyun, I can't! This hurts,” Minseok whimpered. Baekhyun cursed under his breath.

“NANA!” He shouted as loudly as he could.
He held Minseok tightly as he waited for a response. He called out to her again when he didn't hear anything, and finally footsteps sounded from down the hall, getting louder as they got closer. Soon, Nayoung had burst through the door, looking more panicked than Minseok had ever seen her.

“What is it, Baekhyun?”

“Minseok is going into labor. The baby's coming.”

“They wanted out early, huh?” Nayoung sighed, relaxing a bit. “Help him to the birthing room. We're going to deliver your baby, alright Minseok?”

Minseok nodded weakly, and leaned against Baekhyun as he walked with him out of the room. They had to cross one of the wooden pathways leading from the main Birth House to a side room designated for giving birth. Baekhyun stopped with Minseok whenever another contraction came, so it took them a while to reach the room. As soon as they were there, Baekhyun helped Minseok lay down against a pile of pillows and blankets.

“Baekhyun, we're going to need hot water. Can you go fetch some?” Nayoung asked. Baekhyun stood up to leave, but Minseok grabbed him in a tight grip.

“Don't go!” He begged.

“Minseok, I'll be right back. It's ok. I need to do this for you, alright?” Baekhyun tried to soothe. Minseok shook his head and clung tighter.

“Don't leave, I'm scared.”

“Minseok...”

Nayoung walked over and patted Minseok's head gently to comfort him before heading to the door. She opened it long enough to call out to someone.

“Yifan! Minseok is going into labor. I'm going to need hot water to be fetched frequently! You know the drill.”

“Yes, my lady,” Yifan responded from one of the walkways before rushing down the tree to get the water. Nayoung returned to the room and knelt down beside Minseok, cupping his cheek.

“There, now Baekhyun can stay with you. It's going to be alright, Minseok. You're going to be just fine, and the baby will be here soon. Aren't you excited?”

“I don't know,” Minseok answered honestly.

Nayoung chuckled and patted his head again. Yifan returned shortly with the first bucket of hot water and Nayoung thanked him. She turned back to Minseok and Baekhyun and set it down nearby.

“Alright, Minseok. We're going to need to undress you. You're going to be alright. You're with family, and we're going to deliver your baby, ok?”
Minseok bit his lip and nodded, letting Baekhyun carefully remove his pants. Nayoung draped a spare blanket over his legs so he wouldn't get too cold, then helped Minseok position his legs. Baekhyun scooted closer to her so he could see how far along Minseok was.

“He's not quite ready to push the baby out,” Nayoung stated.

“So now we wait,” Baekhyun sighed.

Minseok held his hand out, and Baekhyun instantly took it, being sure to hold it tightly. Minseok was no longer distracted by his worries about the rebellion, but he was facing something far more terrifying. He wanted this day to be over already.

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The dragon gliders returned from Nefret and Sous as the sun began to set. Junmyeon had arranged for them to land away from the palace so the king wouldn't know of their return and wouldn't be suspicious. Junmyeon and Chanyeol met the reinforcements, planning to sneak them into the palace. More men had showed up than Junmyeon had expected, and he felt a bit more relieved. A man from Sous approached both Junmyeon and Chanyeol, holding what looked like a grappling hook.

“This was designed by Prince Jongin to aid in the rebellion,” the man stated. “It's a grappling hook, but it also has a small laser that can be used to stun enemies. Jongin made sure it was a low-grade laser to prevent fatalities.”

“You husband really is one of a kind,” Junmyeon told Chanyeol, nudging him with his shoulder.

Chanyeol placed his hand on the grappling hook, admiring the craftsmanship of it. Jongin never failed to impress Chanyeol. Even when they were miles apart from each other, Jongin was still doing something to protect him. Chanyeol couldn't let his efforts go to waste. They would overtake the king, and Jongin and their daughter would be able to live peacefully in the palace.

The group made their way to the palace, and Junmyeon left Chanyeol in charge of sneaking them into the palace. He'd already set up his royal guard in such a way to sneak them in. Those that were loyal to him met with the reinforcements once they were inside the castle gates. The men of Sous took to scaling the castle walls, planning to attack from above and catch the rest of the soldiers off guard. They were all given armor to protect them from blows, and Junmyeon and Chanyeol began directing them on where to go.

The objective was to take over the palace with as few deaths as possible. They would be capturing the soldiers and detaining them in the dungeons or locking them in spare rooms until the castle was securely under Junmyeon's control. At that point, he would try to reason with the king,
and take whatever action necessary to get him off the throne if his negotiations failed. Once they
had succeeded, Chanyeol would contact his men heading for Lorencia and call off the military
attack, since the king would be dead and they would automatically have to follow his orders as the
next in control.

They waited until nightfall, then Chanyeol finally motioned for them to move in. Junmyeon
crept through the palace, waiting for Chanyeol and his men to start their assault. Junmyeon heard
the cords of the grappling hooks extend as the men of Sous descended on unsuspecting guards, and
soon shouts and cries echoed through the halls. Junmyeon let out a shaky breath. The rebellion had
begun.

As Junmyeon carefully made his way to the throne room, he was grateful he'd gotten Sehun out
of the palace. He hadn't seen him off, but he'd sent two guards to stay with him and lead him away.
Junmyeon had warned the doctor of his plan as well, asking him to stay in his quarters for his own
safety and they would come to him if they needed him. The man had been the closest thing
Junmyeon or either of his brother had had to a father, and he didn't want him to suffer anymore at
the hands of royalty.

Junmyeon waited as he watched men from Nefret and the royal guard stun and knock out the
guards placed through the hallway leading to the throne room. They dragged them to a nearby
spare room, locking the door. After that, the royal guard kept watch, and the people from Nefret
moved on to the next hallway. Junmyeon walked by the guards, nodding at them in thanks. He
placed his hand on the sword at his side. He didn't want to fight against his father, but he had a
feeling it would come down to a fight to the death for the throne. His father had never been one to
give up simply.

Junmyeon reached the throne room and entered quietly, shutting the massive doors behind
him. His father was seated on his throne in the dark, resting his chin on one of his palms. He
looked like he'd been expecting Junmyeon, so he'd no doubt heard the mayhem going on outside of
the throne room. Junmyeon approached cautiously, stopping a safe distance away from him.

“I should have known you would be the one to betray me, Junmyeon,” the king started darkly.
“Tell me, was Minseok's escape your doing as well?”

“Yes father,” Junmyeon answered. The king laughed bitterly.

“I should have known. You've become too good at what you do. My own weapon has turned
against me.”

“Stand down, father. I've taken the palace.”

“So what? You've taken the palace, but how long will this last you? Do you think my men will
follow you blindly?”

“Most of them already do, father. And Nefret and Sous are on my side. I've got more support,
so please, don't make this hard. Stand down, and give up the throne.”
"You think I'm going to just give my entire kingdom up to some spoiled brat that made a few friends!? You're a naive fool, Junmyeon!"

"Perhaps, but I would rather do this amicably than through force. I will fight you if I have to, father."

"Is that so? Then fight me you coward!"

The king threw a dagger at Junmyeon and he narrowly dodged it, unsheathing his own blade. His father had pulled a short sword out from a sheath beside the throne and lunged at Junmyeon. His father had always been a strong fighter, and he had at least a foot on Junmyeon in height, so he was able to push Junmyeon back easily. Junmyeon at least had speed on his side.

As his father slashed across his armor with his sword, Junmyeon was glad he'd come prepared. He was struggling to keep distance from his father, and while he wasn't wearing armor and Junmyeon had managed to land a few blows, it wasn't enough to deter his father from his rampage at all. Junmyeon was grateful the throne room was so large, because it gave him plenty of room to dodge and try to disarm his father.

Finally, Junmyeon was quicker than his father, disarming him and kicking the sword away before he could reach it again. Junmyeon held his own sword at his father's throat, asking him once more to stand down. The king laughed darkly, leaning close enough that the tip of the sword pierced the skin of his neck.

"You're such a foolish boy...and you'll die a foolish boy!"

The king slid a small knife out from his hanbok sleeve, dodging Junmyeon's sword as he tried to bring it down across his shoulder and chest. The king charged at Junmyeon slamming him against the wall and plunging the dagger into his side just below his armor. Junmyeon had dropped his sword when his father shoved him against the wall, so now it was all he could do to hold his father's arm still and keep him from pulling his knife across his stomach.

"You will never take this kingdom from me! You will die here tonight, and I'll kill every last one of your men. I'll kill that blasted Chanyeol as well. You're all completely worthless to me. But you, Junmyeon. You had so much potential, and you wasted it away."

"This wasn't a waste," Junmyeon wheezed. "You will fall. If not by my hand, then by someone else's! Your reign is over!"

"Who?" the king mocked, pushing the knife deeper into Junmyeon, causing him to cry out. "You were too weak to kill me, and that fool Chanyeol won't be able to do it either! You've both failed!"

"They might not be able to kill you, but I can," a third voice spoke up from behind the king.
Within seconds, a blade pierced through the king's neck, causing Junmyeon to wince and look away. He heard the man gurgle as he choked on his own blood. Whoever was behind him pulled the knife to the side, cutting through the king's neck. He was shoved to the side, landing on the ground with a heavy thud, and Junmyeon was faced with none other than Sehun. He clutched the now gaping wound on his side, the dagger having fallen out when the king tipped over.

“Sehun...” He uttered weakly before falling forward.

Sehun quickly caught him, hugging him close and carefully lowering him to the ground. Sehun pulled Junmyeon's armor off of him, cutting away any straps that got in his way. As soon as he could see the wound, he cut off some of his hanbok, then pressed it against Junmyeon's wound, causing him to hiss in pain.

“Don't move,” Sehun whispered. “I need to put pressure on it, I'm sorry.”

“Why are you here?” Junmyeon asked tiredly. “I thought I sent you out of the palace.”

“I told you I wasn't going to leave, so I refused. I hid in the palace and waited. I knew you were going to need my help somehow.”

“I'm sorry...I really was in over my head, wasn't I?”

“Shh. That's not true. I stayed because I wanted to support you, Junmyeon. I believe in the future you want to create...It takes a lot to get me to follow someone into a battle they may not win, don't you know?”

“Oh yes...I know well how hard it is to sway you,” Junmyeon said weakly, a pained smile on his face. “Thank you for coming back for me...”

“Junmyeon? Hold on! Stay with me! You aren't allowed to die, you hear me!”

Junmyeon could hardly see straight, and his head was becoming too heavy for him to hold up. He wanted to comfort Sehun and talk to him more, since this was the most sincere he'd ever seen Sehun, but he was just too tired. He heard Sehun cry out for help, then saw someone else storm into the room. He thought he heard Chanyeol's voice, but he couldn't be sure. As someone lifted him into their arms, Junmyeon blacked out.

Chanyeol ran through the halls towards the doctor's quarters, with Sehun following right behind him. As soon as they entered, the doctor gasped and prepared a bed for a medical procedure. Sehun and Chanyeol could do nothing but wait for news. Sehun glanced down at his hands, noting they were covered in blood. He would need to wash up again before he saw Junmyeon. He didn't want to appear before him covered in Junmyeon's and the king's blood. He just hoped and prayed at this point that he could appear before Junmyeon again, and that it wasn't too late for him.

~*~

Junmyeon's eyelids felt heavy as he tried to open them. His entire body felt like it was being
weighed down. He'd never felt so weak before. What had happened? He remembered the rebellion and his father's attack. Was he dead? He couldn't be if he felt this awful. So where was he? He tried to focus his eyes and finally recognized the room he was in as one of the private rooms in the doctor's quarters. He tried to sit up and groaned as pain shot through his body. He felt someone place their hand on his head, gently patting it. He turned his head and saw Sehun still at his side, wearing a peach hanbok as compared to his own region's clothes. His eyes traveled down to his hand and found it intertwined with Sehun's.

“You're awake,” Sehun whispered. “We didn't know if you would come back from this...”

“What happened?”

“Chanyeol brought you here after you got hurt. He called off the attack in Lorencia, so the troops are stationed there, awaiting your future orders. News of the king's death has already spread, and the royal guard loyal to you is keeping a close watch on the palace. You did it, Junmyeon...”

“You did it, not me. I wouldn't be here without you, Sehun...You've saved my life twice now. For someone that hates me, you do an awful lot to keep me safe...”

“I don't hate you...I never did.”

“But you were so cold...You didn't want anything to do with me.”

“When I came to the palace, I thought the entire royal family would be made of monsters. I thought you would all be heartless. I was right about the king, but wrong about the rest of you. I don't know how you all grew up to be such kind people with that man as a father...”

“We weren't really raised by him, so that's probably why. The servants looked after us when we were little, and my eldest brother became our caretaker when he was old enough.”

“I tried so hard to hate you, to hate all of you...but I couldn't. I was told by my people in the beginning to kill you, Junmyeon. I wanted to hate you so badly, but I couldn't...When I found out you wanted to kill the king just as much as I did, I knew you were the right person. I went against my own people for you...I don't hate you. I can't hate you, Junmyeon.”

“If you'd talked to me, I would have understood...I never wanted you to suffer on your own.”

“I know. I wish I had. I wish I'd done a lot of things differently. I wish I'd gotten to know you instead of being stubborn for a year. You said you didn't want me to be in a relationship I wasn't comfortable with...but I wasn't unhappy, Junmyeon. It took me too long to realize that.”

“We weren't in love, Sehun...”

“No, but that didn't mean I was unhappy. You were kind to me and respected me when I wanted distance. You had a strange sort of charm, and I think as soon as I got away from the palace with you, I finally realized I cared for you. You're right, we weren't in love...but I care for you and I'm loyal to you. That has to count for something. I understand if you can't trust me anymore, but I don't want to leave your side. I want to be with you again, Junmyeon, without any external forces driving us apart.”

“Sehun...I'm going to be the king. Being beside me isn't going to be easy...And I can't drag you into a harsh relationship like that. I fought for your freedom to marry whoever you want.”

“I know you did...And this is what my heart is telling me right now. We might not work out in the end, but I would be honored to be by your side. I would be honored to be your husband, or at
least try and give a relationship a chance.”

“As the king, I'm wary. This marriage could be advantageous, and I don't want it to be seen that way. I don't want to force you into a political marriage, and that's exactly what this would end up being. I can't go against my promise, Sehun.”

“As a man, what do you feel?” Sehun asked. “Not as the king, but as Junmyeon.”

There was a moment of silence. Sehun felt a little disheartened, especially when Junmyeon pulled his hand away from his, but then he held it in the air, reaching for Sehun.

“Come here,” Junmyeon whispered. “There's no man I trust more with my life, and no man I would want more in my life.”

Sehun leaned forward and carefully laid down on the edge of the bed beside Junmyeon. Sehun rested his head on Junmyeon's shoulder, carefully draping his arm over his torso, avoiding the area where Junmyeon's injury was. Junmyeon carefully brushed his hand along Sehun's injured shoulder, as if trying to show his own worry for him, then wrapped his arm around Sehun's waist and sighed, resting his cheek on top of Sehun's head.

“You know,” Sehun started shyly. “Those times when you held me at night... I didn't want to pull away. I really like being held... I like when you hold me.”

“I've always been quite the cuddler,” Junmyeon laughed softly, trying not to jostle his wound. “I would hug Minseok when I slept in his room. I never really broke the habit.”

“I think we can make this arrangement work then,” Sehun teased.

“Then... Sehun of Lorencia, will you be my fiance?” Junmyeon asked. Sehun smiled and nodded.

“Yes. I think I would like that, King Junmyeon of Reilania.”

Sehun snuggled closer, enjoying cuddling with Junmyeon. Even if what they felt for each other wasn't love, this felt right to Sehun. There was no reason it couldn't become love either. Sehun wanted to give this a try. He wanted to give to Junmyeon after everything he'd done for him and the kingdom. Sehun wanted this relationship to prosper, and as they laid there together, he didn't think he would have to try all that hard. In the end, perhaps a marriage to royalty wouldn't be as bad as Sehun envisioned it. Not with Junmyeon at least.

~*~

Minseok cried out as he tried to push in what felt like vain. He'd been struggling for hours and the sun had set enough that Nayoung had to go out and grab both Lunamaris and a few lanterns to light the room. She was hoping the Lunamaris would provide some form of comfort, since Minseok loved the flower. Sadly, Minseok was too upset and frazzled to be comforted by much of anything.
“Minseok, you're tensing up too much. You need to relax, dear,” Nayoung soothed, rubbing his sore muscles with a warm washcloth.

Minseok whined, breaking down into tears again. Baekhyun crawled closer to him, having been beside Nayoung trying to help her with the delivery. Calming Minseok was the most important thing right now though, so Nayoung could handle the delivery on her own. Baekhyun sat right beside Minseok, draping his arm lightly over Minseok's chest so he could hold his shoulders. Minseok gripped his arms tightly.

“Baekhyun, I don't want to do this!”

“Shh, you're gonna be ok. Listen to me, alright? Don't try to push. Don't do anything. We're just going to breathe, alright? Follow my lead and take a deep breath. Ready?”

Minseok nodded and took a deep breath in time with Baekhyun. They continued to breathe deeply until another contraction came and Minseok whimpered through it. Still, Baekhyun coaching him on breathing made it a bit less painful. As Minseok got the hang of breathing in time with Baekhyun, the latter started coaching him on when to push as well. Whenever Minseok got the least bit distracted or panicked, Baekhyun was cupping his cheeks, bringing his attention right back to him. Minseok couldn't fathom having done this without Baekhyun.

Finally, Minseok pushed as Baekhyun had coached, and his grip on Baekhyun tightened to the point of breaking his skin. Minseok let out a small cry, but it was overpowered by another cry entering the room. A wide smile formed on Baekhyun's face as he realized what happened before Minseok did. Minseok seemed to be in a daze, not really comprehending what had happened until Baekhyun had leaned over him, hugging him tightly.

“You did it!” Baekhyun whispered excitedly. “Minseok, you did it!”

Minseok looked past Baekhyun's shoulder and saw Nayoung stand up, holding the baby in her hands and bringing them over to one of the buckets and starting to clean the blood off of them. Minseok's eyes filled with tears as he watched. He'd had the baby.

Baekhyun held Minseok as he cried harder from both relief and exhaustion. Baekhyun rocked him gently and kissed his head, holding Minseok until he calmed down. After that, Baekhyun gently rested Minseok against the stack of pillows and blankets again and crawled over to his legs, starting to clean him up. As he worked, he rested his cheek on Minseok's knee, hugging his thigh gently and staring at him affectionately.

“I'm so proud of you, Minseok. You're amazing.” Minseok laughed and managed a small smile.

“I couldn't have done it without you.”
Baekhyun smiled, kissing Minseok's knee before getting back to work. As soon as he'd cleaned up most of the blood, he gently wrapped Minseok in a blanket and rested beside him, brushing his fingers through his hair and giving him soft kisses. Finally, Nayoung walked back over with their baby in her arms, now wrapped in a warm, soft blanket.

“He's a healthy little boy, absolutely beautiful,” she started, handing him gently to Baekhyun. “A birther as well.”

“Really?” Baekhyun asked excitedly.

He cuddled the baby close, playfully poking and tapping his stomach. Minseok watched anxiously, wanting to see his baby but feeling too tired to sit up and grab him. He heard Baekhyun hum in thought.

“I dunno...He's kinda ugly.”

“You're so mean!” Minseok whined. “Let me see him!”

“I'm joking!” Baekhyun laughed. “He's beautiful, Minseok. There's no way he could be ugly. He's our baby.”

Baekhyun leaned down and carefully placed their baby in Minseok's arms. He was so small, and Minseok could see himself in his small face. It brought tears to his eyes again. They'd gone through so much misery, but holding their little baby now made everything feel completely worth it.

“What should we name him?” Minseok asked. Baekhyun hummed in thought again.

“Minhyung? It sounds similar to both of our names. That might be cute, don't you think?”

“Yeah...Minhyung...”

They talked quietly to their baby, and Baekhyun started talking to Minseok about breastfeeding him. Nayoung had been cleaning up the room at that time, but she figured it was about time to excuse herself. She patted Minseok on the shoulder and kissed Baekhyun on the cheek, then turned to leave.

“Wait, Nana!” Minseok called, using her nickname for the first time. She turned and looked at him curiously. “Thank you...for everything.”

She smiled and walked back over to Minseok, kneeling down beside him. She kissed his forehead, then rested her own forehead on his. It was the first time she'd been affectionate with him as if he were her own grandson, like Baekhyun.

“You're welcome, my love. I'm so proud of you. Thank you for blessing me with my first great grandchild.”
Minseok reached one of his arms up and hugged her in response. After that, she left the room to give Minseok and Baekhyun some much needed time to rest and be together. Baekhyun helped hold Minhyung as he breastfed, then rocked him to sleep while Minseok rested himself. When they were both tired and ready to sleep, Baekhyun laid Minhyung on a bundle of blankets arranged like a small nest, then curled up beside Minseok under his blanket.

“I really am proud of you,” Baekhyun whispered, kissing Minseok's lips afterwards. “You're honestly one of the strongest people I know.”

“You're flattering me,” Minseok sighed, snuggling up to Baekhyun's chest. “But I'll accept your compliments.” Baekhyun chuckled and kissed the top of his head.

“I'll have the next baby, alright?”

“I think one baby is more than enough for now,” Minseok grumbled, and Baekhyun laughed quietly, not wanting to wake up Minhyung.

“Yeah, I guess you're right.”

Minseok closed his eyes, listening to Baekhyun's heartbeat. He heard Baekhyun whisper into his ear that he loved him, and Minseok whispered it right back to him. After that, he was fast asleep, the baby having worn him out completely. It didn't take Baekhyun much more time to fall asleep beside him. They were both exhausted from the ordeal, and all thoughts of the rebellion had left their mind. They would take just this one night to dream about their new family. News of the rebellion could always wait until tomorrow morning.

Chapter End Notes

Was that a chapter or what lol! We finally had the rebellion and the king is DEAD!!!! Courtesy of Sehun :3 Now that we've gotten this far, I'd like to state that I thought of a dumb pun for Seho that they were the cutthroat couple, cuz they both slit someone's throat. Let me have my fun, ok! But hey, on a Seho note, they finally talked to each other. And they still aren't necessarily in love with each other, but there's enough feeling there for them to want to give it another try. And poor Minseok OTL Got so anxious he went into labor lol! But he and the baby survived and everything is ok~ His baby is actually based on another kpop idol but I used their Korean name (which I had to look up to see if they even had one lol!). Otherwise, I think this chapter pretty much speaks for itself so I'mma shut up lol!

And that's all for this week! We're nearing the end of this story finally! It's been a long time coming XP But don't worry, Seho is only just starting lol! I won't deny you more of them~ So stay tuned til next week~
Junmyeon was on bed rest following the rebellion. Sehun was watching him like a hawk, knowing Junmyeon wasn't the type to stay still for long, even when he was seriously injured. Much to Sehun's expectation, Junmyeon called the leaders of the outer regions to the palace for a meeting, despite not being able to get out of bed. Sehun tried to convince Junmyeon to postpone the meeting, but the kingdom had been in a state of unrest since the king died. He needed to enact his plans sooner rather than later.

Sehun understood this, so they compromised that Junmyeon would hold the meeting in his room. Chanyeol and a few other royal guards would be present in case any of the leaders tried something. Chanyeol had been weeding out those still loyal to the king from the royal guard, and many had already pledged their oaths to Junmyeon despite having been detained during the rebellion.

Junmyeon had a dragon glider sent out to each of the regions to pick up the leaders. Jongin was also coming back with Jongsoo at that time. Chanyeol waited anxiously for the glider to return to the palace. As soon as he saw Jongin step out of the plane with Hwayoung in his arms, he started rushing forward. Jongin met his eyes and ran towards him, holding Hwayoung tightly to keep her from jostling around too much. As soon as they were within arm's reach, Chanyeol had enveloped both Jongin and Hwayoung in his arms, kissing Jongin on the head repeatedly and sniffling back tears. Eventually Jongin looked up at him with teary eyes and a wide smile.

“Welcome back! I missed you so much!”

“We missed you too,” Jongin said, holding Hwayoung up so Chanyeol could take her. “I can't believe you did it! You and Junmyeon are amazing!”

“We couldn't have done it without you or the rest of Sous and Nefret.”

“Is Junmyeon doing alright?”

“He's hurt, but he'll pull through. He's strong.”

Jongin nodded, frowning just a bit. Jongsoo and the other leaders approached at that point. Nayoung and Jongsoo seemed completely at ease, but Chanyeol could already tell Dongyul was furious. The leader from Lorencia, an older man named Hyunki, seemed anxious, which was saying something since he was renowned for having a stone face.

Chanyeol led them all to Junmyeon's room, bidding Jongin farewell for a little while longer so
he could protect Junmyeon. Sehun was almost always with Junmyeon, but he'd left the room to
give Junmyeon the privacy a diplomat would need. As soon as the leaders entered his room,
Junmyeon weakly pushed himself up a bit in his bed.

“Welcome,” he greeted. “I apologize for having to meet you this way, but I wanted to clear the
air as soon as possible. I'm sure you all have a lot of questions.”

“We're just happy to see you well, my prince,” Nayoung stated, bowing her head. Dongyul
scoffed at her words.

“He committed regicide to take the throne. He's no king.”

“Dongyul,” Jongsoo urged in a wary tone.

“You were in on it as well. You were all traitors to the king! And now you expect me to serve
this man!?"

The royal guards in the room tensed up, cautiously reaching for their weapons, but Junmyeon
held up his hand, motioning for them to stop.

“I've brought you all here because I want to discuss the future of this kingdom. This is the very
first council meeting. I plan to set up regular meetings to discuss whatever is lacking in the
kingdom or the outer regions. I do not wish to preserve the inequality my father created.”

“What will these meetings accomplish, prince?” Hyunki asked, speaking up for the first time.
He seemed skeptical, but he was remaining respectful, to Junmyeon's relief.

“I think that's mostly up to each of you. I've only briefly visited some of the outer regions, and I
can't even begin to know all the problems you have. These meetings will be held in order to correct
those wrongs, and do whatever we can to restore balance to the kingdom. As I understand it, each
of the outer regions are lacking in resources, even those that are produced within that very region.
We can't continue to live that way. These meetings will be a chance for each of you to come to me
with your complaints. I'm not prepared today, but I'll be sure to write everything down, and we'll
work on solving the issues together. Until now, my father lorded over the entire kingdom and kept
you out of the loop. I don't want to continue in that way. He stripped your regions of everything
that made them unique, and I want to work to restore them to their full grandeur.”

“So you come to us with pretty words and empty promises,” Dongyul sneered. “The king
promised to increase the water supply in my region and provide me a husband to wed! Can you fix
those problems? Or do you not care now that you've killed the king?”

“I think you've been lied to,” Junmyeon sighed. “You don't know what really happened to
Prince Minseok, do you?”

“What?” Dongyul asked. “He's ill, is he not? Has he passed...?”

“Oh no,” Nayoung spoke up. “I've been looking after him and he's plenty healthy now, but he
was in bad shape when I first met him.”

“My father told you Minseok was ill, but that wasn't the case,” Junmyeon explained. “Minseok
was pregnant, from his previous engagement. My father didn't care and tried to tear their family
apart, wanting to kill the baby then give Minseok to you like nothing happened. He was deceiving
you from the very start.”
“That's...” Dongyul uttered, speechless all of a sudden.

“I sent Minseok to Nefret behind my father's back to protect him and keep him alive. He will not be a bartering item, however. My brother is free and happy, and I will not force him into a marriage when he has a family already. Your request for water, I can fulfill. In fact, I think water distribution will be one of the first things we all talk about. I know all the outer regions struggle while the kingdom uses water lavishly. I am not your enemy, Dongyul. I want to be your ally. I want to work alongside you, not above you. Please, give me a chance and trust me.”

Dongyul grimaced, but lowered his head in acceptance all the same. Junmyeon turned to Hyunki next, giving him a gentle smile despite their recent history.

“The royal guard is currently stationed in Lorencia. I would like to leave them there in light of recent events, however they will not attack. Any violation of this should be reported to me immediately and I will give a severe punishment. I do not wish to harm your people, but I can't trust you just yet. Can you understand my sentiments?”

“Yes, my prince,” Hyunki agreed, bowing his head. “My sincerest apologies for my haste and misled judgment.”

“You're forgiven, Hyunki. I would like for us all to sign a peace treaty and move onward together. All of this will pass in time. I just need to make sure the rest of my kingdom is secure and safe as well. There's one other thing I would like to speak to you about.”

“What is it?” Hyunki asked, looking up at Junmyeon once more.

“I would like your permission to carry on my engagement to Sehun.”

“My prince?” Hyunki gasped, finally breaking his emotionless exterior. “You really still want to marry someone from my region? You know what Sehun was ordered to do to you...”

“Yes, I'm aware. Sehun was very honest with me. He's saved my life twice now, and there's no one I trust more than him. Like I said, I do not hold your people or your region at fault. I would be honored to have Sehun as my husband. We've both discussed it and agreed to this engagement.”

“It would be an honor to have one of my people stand beside you at the throne, my prince,” Hyunki finally stated. “Thank you for your mercy and consideration.” Junmyeon smiled and nodded.

“I'm sorry to end this meeting so abruptly, but I'm still recovering. You're all welcome to stay in the guest quarters of the palace. We'll meet more over the coming days to discuss the council in further detail.”

The leaders bowed and Chanyeol politely ushered them out. Nayoung stayed behind, walking to Junmyeon's bedside, gently reaching for his hand.

“You've seen better days, my prince,” she said gently. Junmyeon smiled and managed a small laugh.

“A rebellion doesn't come without risks.”
“I'll prepare some medicine for you while I'm here. It will help you recover faster.”

“Thank you, Lady Nayoung. Tell me, how is Minseok?”

“He's wonderful. He wanted to come with me, but he needed his rest, so Baekhyun made him stay behind in Nefret.”

“Is he alright?” Junmyeon asked worriedly.

“Oh yes, he just needed some rest. He'll come in a few weeks when you're both in better shape for your coronation.”

“Thank you, Lady Nayoung, for everything. I never could have done this without your help.”

“Thank you for giving me something to believe in, my prince. I'll follow you wherever you choose to lead us.”

“Hopefully, it'll be to a better future.”

“I'm sure it will be.”

She squeezed Junmyeon's hand and left the room, nodding at Chanyeol as well. As soon as they were alone, Junmyeon urged Chanyeol to go spend time with Jongin, and Chanyeol couldn't deny the order. As he was walking down the hallway, he saw Sehun approaching with a tray of food for Junmyeon and he smiled. Sehun really was the best caretaker Junmyeon could have right now. Hyunki stopped in the hall once he saw Sehun, and Sehun bowed to him nervously.

“You made the right choice, Sehun,” Hyunki started quietly. “I apologize for not trusting you.”

“I accept your apology,” Sehun mumbled. Hyunki glanced at the tray.

“That's for the prince?”

“The king, yes,” Sehun stated. Hyunki smiled and chuckled.

“Yes, I think you are meant for him.”

Sehun looked at him curiously, but Hyunki continued down the hallway. Chanyeol walked over to Sehun and patted his shoulder, nodding him towards Junmyeon's room. When Sehun entered, Junmyeon was holding his side, taking deep breaths. Sehun sighed and placed the tray above Junmyeon's lap.

“You're pushing yourself,” Sehun said gently. Junmyeon smiled and shrugged.

“It was worth it. There's so much to be done, and we owe it to the people to make up for my father's wrongdoings.”

“That's it for today though. You need to look after your own health as well. You're going to let me take care of you from now on, ok?”

“Alright.”
Sehun helped Junmyeon sit up a bit more, then carefully spooned food into his mouth. Junmyeon wasn't used to receiving this much attention, but he didn't want to deny it. He wanted every ounce that Sehun could give him.

When Sehun finished with the food, he placed it on the table in their room. When he returned, he leaned down, brushing Junmyeon's bangs from his forehead and placing a soft kiss there. Junmyeon's eyes went wide, not expecting Sehun to be that affectionate with him. After that, Sehun moved to the other side of the bed and laid down beside Junmyeon. Junmyeon reached for his hand and intertwined their fingers, laying their hands down on his chest.

“I talked to your leader about marrying you. He said he would be honored,” Junmyeon whispered. Sehun hummed in response and snuggled closer. “I wanted to know if you would be alright getting married at my coronation...”

“You want to be married so soon?” Sehun asked. He didn't seemed shocked, mostly curious.

“I need you by my side, Sehun. I can't do this without you.”

“You're sure you can trust me?”

“With my life. Don't you know that by now?” Junmyeon asked with a wide smile. Sehun smiled softly and cuddled closer, nuzzling into the crook of Junmyeon's neck.

“Thank you for giving me another chance.”

“Thank you, Sehun. For trusting me and ensuring I was still here to give you another chance.”

Sehun smiled and relaxed against Junmyeon. They'd both gotten pretty comfortable holding each other. It seemed they were both very clingy people, when they stopped trying to force themselves not to be. Sehun felt Junmyeon kiss the top of his head.

“Even if we get married, we'll take our relationship slowly, alright? I won't push you into anything you aren't comfortable with.”

“I know you won't.”

“I'm looking forward to getting to know and love you, Sehun.”

“Yeah...Me too.”

Junmyeon sighed and rested his cheek on top of Sehun's head. Shortly after that, he was asleep. He spent a lot of time sleeping, his body needing all the rest and energy it could get to recover. Junmyeon had a lot of work ahead of him and an entire kingdom to fix, but he wasn't alone. He would make sure he wasn't alone. He wanted the whole kingdom to be involved in all of this. And if all else failed, Sehun would be by his side through it all.
When Chanyeol got back to his room, Jongin was already there, rocking Hwayoung in her crib and singing his lullaby to her. Chanyeol went over and sat beside him, watching as Hwayoung slowly settled down and closed her eyes. When she was finally asleep, Jongin sighed, leaning against Chanyeol.

“It feels so good to be with you again. I missed you so much.”

“Me too, Nini. It was hard to sleep without you two here.”

“You must be tired then,” Jongin pouted. “Get dressed and lay down! I'm here now and I want to cuddle you.”

Chanyeol did as told, wanting more than anything to hold Jongin in bed again. When they were both in their sleeping garments, they laid down in bed and Jongin hugged Chanyeol's head to his chest. He ran his fingers through his hair, humming quietly and kissing him every now and then.

“You know,” Jongin started softly. “Hwayoung and I couldn't sleep well without you either. The only thing that started putting her to sleep at night was the music box you made me. I would sing to her and it soothed her. I think she must have known that music box was something from you.”

“She's a smart girl, just like her father. I'm just sorry I couldn't be there with you.”

“You're here now, and she's already much more at peace. Hopefully we'll never have to be apart for that long again.”

“I don't plan on it,” Chanyeol sighed, yawning at the end. Jongin kissed his head.

“Close your eyes. I'll sing you to sleep tonight. That way you can sleep just as well as Hwayoung.”

Chanyeol nodded, holding Jongin as he started singing the familiar lullaby. Chanyeol would never tire of Jongin's voice. He'd been practicing with Hwayoung since the first time he sang the lullaby for Chanyeol so long ago, so his tone was much more confident than before. As Chanyeol drifted off to sleep, all he could think about were the beautiful blossoms of his first dates with Jongin, and the overwhelming warmth cuddled within his arms. Finally, Chanyeol had returned to his home.

~*~

It took a few weeks for Junmyeon and the leaders of the outer regions to agree on a treaty and commit to the council. The hardest person to sway was Dongyul. He still wasn't pleased with Junmyeon's presence or how he acquired the throne, but the threat of becoming an enemy to the rest of the kingdom out of his own stubbornness was real, and Junmyeon was being exceedingly patient with him. They ultimately swayed him when Junmyeon promised to redirect the waterways and deal with the poor harvest issues within the Golden Meadows as one of his first tasks.
Once the treaty was signed, they began preparing for Junmyeon's coronation ceremony. A royal decree was sent out to all the kingdom and outer regions announcing the event. The leaders worked together to prepare most of the ceremony since Junmyeon was still on the mend. Nayoung spent much of her time tending to him alongside Sehun. By the time the week of the coronation ceremony arrived, Junmyeon was able to stand and walk short distances on his own, but they still didn't want him to push himself.

A few days before the ceremony, nobility began to arrive from the different regions. Junmyeon greeted each of them, allowing them to stay in the guest quarters. It wasn't until a certain iron steed arrived from Nefret that the entire royal family came to greet them. Jongin and Chanyeol had been visiting Junmyeon and Sehun in their room when the news reached them. Almost immediately, Jongin stood up and sprinted from the room, leaving Chanyeol behind with Hwayoung. The rest of the group moved much slower to the palace gates, having a baby to carry and an injured prince.

When Jongin reached the palace gates, he saw Baekhyun get out of the iron steed. He looked so much better than when Jongin had sent him off, bruises long gone and dressed in beautiful lavender Nefret clothes. Jongin watched as Baekhyun turned and helped Minseok out of the carriage, dressed in a very similar style, but his clothes a vivid cherry red. Jongin's eyes widened when he spotted the small bundle in Minseok's arms. He'd had the baby!

Jongin ran forward, and Baekhyun turned just in time to catch an armful of Jongin as he hugged him. Baekhyun laughed and held Jongin close.

“Hey, Jongin! It's good to see you!” Baekhyun greeted. Jongin pulled away and glanced between Baekhyun and Minseok.

“You had the baby!”

“This is Minhyung,” Minseok said softly, holding the baby so Jongin could see him.

“Can I hold him?” Jongin asked excitedly. Minseok nodded and carefully passed Minhyung to Jongin. “He's so small! Hwayoung was a big baby when she was born.”

“You haven't even introduced us to her!” Baekhyun huffed. “You're such a bad host!”

“Chanyeol has her! He's coming, but I got too excited,” Jongin pouted.

Baekhyun laughed and wrapped his arm around Jongin's back, hugging him once more. They'd been gone for so long, but it already felt like they'd never left the palace. Much to Jongin's word, Chanyeol appeared with a small baby in his arms, and Junmyeon, Sehun, and Nayoung followed some distance after him.

“Jongin, that's not fair! You know I can't run with Hwayoung!”

“Yeolie, look!” Jongin called, lifting Minhyung up. “Minseok had his baby!”
Chanyeol's eyes widened and he trotted over, holding Hwayoung close. As soon as he was within reach, he cupped Minhyung's head in one hand, holding Hwayoung in his other arm. His eyes watered and he looked over to Minseok, who was smiling warmly at him. Chanyeol then wrapped his free arm around Minseok, hugging him close.

“Welcome home,” Chanyeol greeted. “I'm so happy to see you.”

“I'm happy to be back,” Minseok whispered, wrapping his arms around Chanyeol's neck.

When he pulled away, Minseok cupped Hwayoung's cheek in his hand. She was beautiful, and Jongin hadn't been exaggerating that she was much bigger than Minhyung. Of course she had some months on him in terms of age, but he could already tell she'd inherited Chanyeol's height.

Junmyeon and Sehun approached next, Sehun holding Junmyeon's arm to help him walk. Nayoung was at Junmyeon's other side, smiling warmly as she met Baekhyun's eyes. Junmyeon's eyes landed on the baby in Jongin's arms and he gasped.

“I'm sorry I kept it from you,” Nayoung started gently. “Minseok wanted it to be a surprise. Little Minhyung was born the day of the rebellion. That was why Minseok couldn't come see you when I first arrived.”

“You little sneak,” Junmyeon huffed, going over to Minseok. Immediately, the two embraced, and Minseok giggled.

“It's a wonderful surprise though, isn't it?” Minseok asked. Junmyeon sighed and pulled away, looking him over.

“Yes, it is. You look well.”

“I've never been better.”

Junmyeon rested his forehead against Minseok's, smiling widely. It felt unreal to have Minseok back safe and sound, looking healthier than ever.

“Welcome home,” Junmyeon said softly.

“I'm back. Thank you for making this possible.”

“I promised you I would make the palace a safe place for you.”

Minseok hugged Junmyeon again, then started fretting about his injury. As Junmyeon was trying to wave off his worries, Baekhyun approached and knelt down before him. Junmyeon gasped and tried to reach for Baekhyun, but it hurt to bend over, so he couldn't.

“Baekhyun, you don't need to kneel before me! We're family...”
“I have something to ask of you,” Baekhyun said seriously. Minseok and Junmyeon looked at him curiously.

“What is it?”

“I would like to ask for Minseok's hand in marriage.” Minseok gasped and Junmyeon smiled, glancing between the two of them.

“It's up to Minseok whether he wants to marry you or not, but you have my blessing.” Baekhyun looked up at Minseok and reached for his hand.

“Minseok? Will you marry me?”

Minseok nodded rapidly and pulled Baekhyun to his feet, hugging him close. They both started laughing from happiness, and Minseok wouldn't stop peppering Baekhyun with kisses. It was only when Minhyung got a bit fussy in Jongin's arms that Baekhyun took him and calmed him down. Junmyeon took that time to finally get a good look at their baby. He was incredibly proud of both of his brothers and their children.

“If you'd like, we can hold your marriage here at the palace,” Junmyeon stated.

“That would be nice,” Baekhyun agreed.

“Is it alright if I make a request?” Minseok asked.

“Anything,” Junmyeon replied.

“I want to have a traditional Nefret wedding...Can we do that?”

“We certainly can,” Nayoung said warmly. “Prince Junmyeon and I will work on it together.”

“Yes! I think it would be a wonderful experience to have in the palace.”

“Thank you,” Minseok said gently, hugging Baekhyun by the waist.

They stood for a while longer, talking happily until Nayoung and Sehun fussled at Junmyeon that he needed to rest. Baekhyun smirked at Sehun as he watched him being protective, and Sehun tried his best to ignore him, despite his ears turning pink from embarrassment. The royal decree had also announced that Junmyeon and Sehun would marry after the coronation, so there was no doubt Baekhyun knew that. Sehun was slowly learning to let his pride go though, so it wasn't so bad that Baekhyun knew. Sehun wanted to stop being distant with Junmyeon, and part of that was allowing himself to be affectionate with him, even when they were in public. Sehun could handle being slightly flustered around others, especially when he saw the way Junmyeon smiled at him.

~*~

The coronation took place a few days later. Junmyeon was feeling strangely calm about becoming king. He'd already had to go through hell to get there, so he was braced for ruling the kingdom. What had him the most nervous was his marriage to Sehun immediately following the coronation. He still wasn't sure marrying so soon was the right thing to do for their relationship,
even if it would act as another form of a treaty with Lorencia. Still, Sehun seemed eager to go through with it, and Junmyeon trusted Sehun to voice his concerns if he had any.

Junmyeon was sitting in front of his vanity dressed in a crimson red hanbok, his eyes gently lined with eyeliner. He'd never been one to really wear a lot of makeup, but for an occasion like this, especially his wedding, he wanted to look as beautiful as possible. There was a knock on the door and soon Minseok walked inside. He walked over to Junmyeon and placed his hand on his shoulder. He was wearing his emerald hanbok and leaf diadem, wearing his usual winged eyeliner. It had been a while since Junmyeon had seen Minseok this way, and it was like a wave of nostalgia was hitting him. His family was finally reunited again. They were all going to be ok.

Minseok helped Junmyeon to his feet and they walked with their arms linked to the throne room. The other noblemen and women had gathered in the throne room already, and Minseok would be leading Junmyeon before them, performing the coronation and the wedding as the eldest prince. As they slowly walked forward down the red carpet towards the throne, Junmyeon spotted Sehun, wearing a rose colored hanbok to compliment Junmyeon's. He had eyeliner and light blush as well as lightly curled hair, and Junmyeon had to force himself to look away and focus on the coronation so he didn't make a fool of himself. Sehun really was beautiful.

Minseok stood before Junmyeon, and Nayoung joined him at his side, holding a pillow with a crown on it. It was golden with scarlet detailing, covered in rubies and diamonds. Junmyeon knelt down before Minseok, and they exchanged gentle smiles with each other. Junmyeon was happy that Minseok could be here and would be the one performing his ceremony. There was no greater honor than to be crowned and married by his older brother’s hand.

“Prince Junmyeon of Reilania,” Minseok started. “You kneel here before the people of the kingdom to become their new king and ruler. A king must put his people first and do everything within his power to help his kingdom prosper. He must lead with confidence and understanding, and work towards equality and peace. Do you, Junmyeon of Reilania, vow to become this king.”

“I do. I promise to serve my people well, and lead them into a better era.”

Minseok nodded and took the crown from Nayoung, gently placing it on Junmyeon's head. Junmyeon kept his head bowed while Minseok took a royal scepter from Jongsoo as he brought it to him. He placed it gently on each of Junmyeon's shoulders before handing it back to Jongsoo. Finally, Dongyul walked to Minseok's side, holding a pillow with a golden emblem and diamond embellishment forming the family crest of a dragon. Dongyul made brief eye contact with Minseok, and it seemed like in that moment, he was communicating his apologies and well wishes for Minseok in his gaze. Minseok smiled at him, then took the crest from the pillow, carefully draping it around Junmyeon's neck.

“This is the family crest, bearing the history and lineage of our family. In giving you this crown and this crest, I dub you King Junmyeon of Reilania.”
The crowd cheered as Junmyeon slowly got to his feet. He turned and bowed to everyone present, then stood up and waved to them, trying his best to make eye contact with everyone in the room. He wanted to show his people that he cared about each and every one of them as individuals, and would work hard to restore their kingdom to balance. Only time would be able to prove his sincerity and resolve of course.

“In addition to Junmyeon's coronation,” Minseok continued, “we would like to promote Chanyeol to leader of the royal guard.”

“He will discuss with me before issuing a command,” Junmyeon explained, “but he’s a strong soldier that has more than proven himself worthy, and the knights trust him. I leave the ultimate decisions regarding the royal guard up to him as my defense commander.”

The crowd cheered again and Chanyeol bowed, his ears slightly flushed from the sudden attention. Jongin patted his back and snuggled Hwayoung closer afterward, proud of his husband.

“In addition, Prince Jongin will become my head engineer,” Junmyeon stated, and suddenly Jongin was bright red. “We'll be working together to solve several problems within the kingdom. I promise you, we'll serve you all to the best of our abilities.”

The crowd cheered once more and Jongin leaned on Chanyeol as the latter hugged him close. Already, Junmyeon was focusing on the other people who would be working alongside him rather than himself. He was the humble, determined king the kingdom desperately needed. When the cheers died down, Minseok began speaking again.

“And lastly, we've also gathered here today to witness the joining of King Junmyeon of Reilania and Sehun of Lorencia in matrimony.”

Sehun walked forward at that moment, standing beside Junmyeon. They linked their arms together and turned back to Minseok. Hyunki had walked up at this point, carrying one last pillow with the matching wedding bangles.

“You may now give your vows to each other,” Minseok stated, smiling at Junmyeon almost like a proud mother.

“Sehun,” Junmyeon started gently, turning to face him. “There is no one in this world who I trust more than you, and I hope I will become that kind of man to you. I will strive everyday for your happiness, and love you with all my heart.”

“Junmyeon,” Sehun started in response. “In truth, I think you're one of the most foolish humans I've ever met in my life, but that's ok. You've taught me so much in our time together, and I'm grateful every day for this opportunity to be with you. I promise to be by your side through the good times and the bad, and to love you and trust you unconditionally.”

“You may now exchange bangles,” Minseok stated after a moment.

Hyunki held the pillow out to them, and Junmyeon picked up one of the bangles, lifting
Sehun's sleeve and slipping the bangle onto his arm. After that, Sehun did the same to Junmyeon with the remaining bangle. Junmyeon placed his hands on Sehun's waist and Sehun wrapped his arms around Junmyeon's shoulders, leaning closer. Junmyeon pressed a soft kiss to Sehun's forehead. Sehun clung tighter to Junmyeon, pressing his face into his shoulder to hide his blush.

“I now pronounce King Junmyeon and Prince Sehun husbands!” Minseok exclaimed.

More loud cheers erupted through the room, and Sehun and Junmyeon broke apart to link arms once more. They waved to the people in the room as they walked down the aisle. Junmyeon was still recovering, so unlike Chanyeol and Jongin's wedding, they hadn't planned a huge feast after the wedding, but every guest in the palace would be treated to the finest meals as honorary guests.

As people began leaving the room, Junmyeon stood in the hallway near the throne room and briefly said goodbye to each of them and thanked them, Sehun at his side through it all. Once it was just the princes remaining, they all headed to the garden to spend an afternoon with each other, resting and relaxing for what was probably the first time in months.

When Sehun and Junmyeon returned to their room later that night, they were both exhausted. Junmyeon washed up first, then Sehun followed after him. By the time he got out, Junmyeon was already curled up on his good side, looking minutes away from passing out. Sehun snuggled up beside him and wrapped his arm around Junmyeon's waist, careful to avoid his injury. Junmyeon looked over his shoulder and smiled, managing to strain his neck and kiss Sehun's nose.

“We did it,” he whispered. Sehun hummed in response, cuddling closer. “Don't worry about rushing our relationship. We'll take it as slowly as we need to. I just want you to be happy.”

“I am happy,” Sehun whispered. “And I look forward to our future together.”

“Yeah...Me too.”

“Goodnight, Junmyeon.”

“Goodnight, Sehun.”

Sehun was the one to place a soft kiss on the back of Junmyeon's neck this time. He nuzzled against it seconds later, and sighed contently as he drifted off to sleep. They had both promised each other love, and while they both knew they weren't ready for that kind of commitment yet, they also both knew they would get there someday. They'd already been through so much together, they'd become an irreplaceable part of each other's lives. It was only a matter of time before love followed.
Heeeey, look who's already back! Tbh I wanted to get this post up yesterday but like, life keeps getting away from me? So here we go!!! I've officially finished writing this story, so I'm hoping to post a bit more often cuz I'm going out of the country in a couple weeks and I don't want to leave you guys hanging if I get distracted traveling lol! So this was mostly a transitional chapter, but heeeeeeey Sehun and Junmyeon already got married lol! And Minseok and Baekhyun are going to get married now too! And Minseok got to crown Junmyeon the new king *wipes tears* Ok, I'm gonna shut up before I start sobbing over Minseok lol!

And that's all for now folks! I'll be back again at my usual-ish time on Friday for another update~
Junmyeon and Sehun spent the first few days of their marriage talking to each other. They would have their meals brought to their room, and spent a few days just laying on their bed together snuggling and talking. Junmyeon was tired from the coronation ceremony, so the leaders of the outer regions had given him a week off of meetings to rest. Nayoung was still visiting him regarding preparations for Minseok and Baekhyun’s marriage, but she would also take some time to look after him when she came.

When Junmyeon was a bit more comfortable on his feet, he and Sehun starting walking through the gardens. Sehun showed Junmyeon his favorite flowers, and told him about some of the times he and Baekhyun spent in the garden, picking cherries off the trees even if they weren’t supposed to. They were simple stories, but Junmyeon laughed at each one and seemed to enjoy himself. Either that or he had incredibly poor taste in jokes and laughed at anything. Sehun was starting to fear it was the latter.

Junmyeon was a romantic though, and he always found some way to charm Sehun. One evening he invited him to dinner in one of the towers. When Sehun got there, his favorite flowers decorated the walls and vases were placed around as well. There was a low table and pillows had been set around it, looking similar to the tables in Nefret when they’d visited. Junmyeon was also one to love other cultures and try to incorporate some of their customs into his own lifestyle.

Junmyeon arrived shortly after Sehun and took his hand, leading him over to the table. They sat cuddled together on the pillows, nibbling on their food and watching the sunset. Sehun had heard from Jongin that the view from the tower was beautiful, but he’d never bothered to look for himself. Now that he was finally seated there, surrounded by flowers and watching the sun turn shades of purple and orange, Sehun had to admit Jongin was right. It was nice being able to snuggle closer to Junmyeon as the night breeze set in as well.

Sehun was enjoying himself too much to take into account that leaning on Junmyeon might wear him out eventually. Junmyeon fell backwards at one point and Sehun toppled over with him. Immediately, Sehun was propped up on his elbow, looking Junmyeon over to make sure his wound hadn’t opened. Junmyeon was simply laying there laughing though.

“Are you alright?” He finally asked in between giggles.

“Did you do that on purpose?” Sehun pouted. Junmyeon shook his head.

“No, I lost my balance, but it was pretty funny.”

“I thought I was too heavy,” Sehun whined, lightly smacking Junmyeon's chest.
“You'll never be too heavy,” Junmyeon soothed. He tugged on Sehun's arm after that. “Lay back down, the view is nice from here.”

Sehun sighed and rolled his eyes, laying back down beside Junmyeon. He wasn't wrong. They were able to see more of the sky from this angle, though it felt a little silly to be laying on the floor looking out the window at the sky. Then again, Sehun was learning that Junmyeon really loved these silly, simple things. It was an endearing quality of his, and Sehun was finding himself enjoying them just as much.

They laid there in silence as the sunset turned into a starry sky. Sehun had turned on his side so he could snuggle closer to Junmyeon, and the latter had wrapped his arm around his waist. Sehun hadn't realized his gaze had shifted from the stars to Junmyeon until Junmyeon finally turned to face him. Sehun blushed and quickly looked back at the sky, though he swore he heard Junmyeon stifle a soft laugh.

“It's really nice being able to just spend time like this,” Junmyeon sighed. “I don't think I've rested and just watched the stars like this since I was little.”

“Really?”

“Mhm. My brothers and I would look at the constellations. Minseok had books on them, so he knew the most about them. He would tell us stories about the stars. I can't remember any of them now...What a waste.”

“It's fine,” Sehun soothed. “We had pretty clear skies in Lorencia when storms weren't raging, so we learned about the stars as well. I think I liked the story of Orion the most when I was younger.”

“Do you remember it? Will you tell me?”

Sehun smiled and nodded. Junmyeon snuggled closer and listened intently as Sehun told him several of his favorite stories. They weren't even aware of how much time had passed before silence fell between them. They stared into each other's eyes, and slowly, Junmyeon leaned closer to Sehun, looking like he was going to kiss him. Sehun's heart was beating, but it wasn't because he was afraid or wanted to get away. He closed his eyes, and soon Junmyeon's lips were pressed against his. Sehun wasn't surprised at how soft they were, nor was he surprised when Junmyeon pulled away just a short while later. He was obviously taking this slow for Sehun's sake, and it was greatly appreciated. That had been Sehun's first kiss though, and it left him feeling a lot more flustered than he would have thought.

“It's late. We should go to bed,” Junmyeon whispered, brushing his fingers through Sehun's hair.”

“Yeah...”

Sehun sat up, his cheeks still feeling flushed, and helped Junmyeon get up from the ground. They walked with their arms linked together down the hallways back to their room. Sehun was still
getting used to Junmyeon being affectionate with him in public, but so late at night, there were hardly any people in the halls, so Sehun wasn't too upset.

When they crawled into bed that night, Junmyeon was the one that clung to Sehun this time. They were both extremely clingy people, and Sehun actually really liked being held by Junmyeon. He was always warm and had a strong grip without being painful. This night, Junmyeon pressed gentle kisses onto the back of Sehun's neck, and he was pretty sure his hair stood on end as it sent tingles through his body. He liked when Junmyeon held him and kissed him like this. He was still a little too shy to admit it, but he really liked this. He really liked Junmyeon.

~*~

Finally, the day of Minseok and Baekhyun's wedding arrived. Nayoung had been sending for people of Nefret to travel to the kingdom for the wedding as well as to help her set up. Most of the colony had arrived in time for the marriage. It was always a communal celebration in Nefret, so Junmyeon had made every effort he could to accommodate everyone from Nefret in the palace for the wedding. Minseok was honestly so grateful Junmyeon was his brother. Only Junmyeon would go to so much effort to give Minseok the perfect wedding.

Traditional Nefret weddings happened at dusk, but there was a lot of preparation leading up to the event, so Minseok still spent much of the day getting ready. There was a customary plant-based body dye that was painted onto the couple to be, usually in vine or flower patterns on the torso. Minseok was a bit anxious as he watched a few of the women from Nefret paint his stomach. He was still losing weight from the pregnancy and his stretch marks were still very prominent. He knew Baekhyun wouldn't care about any of that, but Minseok was still anxious all the same.

Once the girls finished painting Minseok's stomach, they placed a few gems throughout the design and began helping Minseok into his wedding garments. He was glad he'd left Minhyung with Chanyeol and Jongin for the day, because he could hardly imagine trying to prepare for this while taking care of a baby. He honestly couldn't believe this was really happening. He and Baekhyun had been through so much, and they were finally making it official. The thought alone had Minseok close to tears.

The girls helped Minseok into shimmering white silk harem pants. After that, he slipped on a sapphire crop top with intricate beading that dangled from the shirt down onto his stomach, just meeting the vine designs. There was one more piece of clothing left for Minseok to put on, but that wouldn't happen until they were in the courtyard. It was a bit too cumbersome to wear otherwise and could easily get damaged.

Once Minseok was in his outfit, the girls started doing his makeup and curling his hair. Minseok normally hated putting on makeup after all the times the king had forced him to, but he couldn't stop staring at himself as the girls worked. He didn't wear heavy liner, instead keeping a
very soft look. They decorated his cheeks with a yellow blush, making them pop. Minseok had never seen Nefret makeup before, but he loved how he looked now. He felt beautiful, and he was excited for Baekhyun to see him this way as well.

Finally, they finished his makeup and hair and lightly placed a flower crown on his head. After that they taught him the customary movements involved in the wedding, and taught him the steps to the dance that followed the ceremony. Minseok was nervous, knowing he was going to mess it up, but the girls reassured him that Baekhyun knew the dance well and would lead him. Minseok hadn't seen Baekhyun all day since he was busy preparing himself. He really wanted to be with him again. It was almost unbearable for him to go even a few hours without Baekhyun. He'd gotten so clingy since he'd gone to Nefret, but Baekhyun never pushed him away, only held him closer.

As the night drew nearer, people began gathering in the courtyard, and Minseok and the girls moved into their respective positions outside as well. Nefret weddings also happened outdoors, so the courtyard had been decorated with torches and vases of Lunamaris glowing in between them. It was a beautiful mixture of orange and blue light, and the sight alone sent chills down Minseok's back. At this point, the girls finally helped him into the last part of his clothing. It was a long, sheer fabric jacket that dragged along the ground behind him like a veil. Within the fabric, real flowers of pink and red and Lunamaris had been woven in. It was absolutely breathtaking.

The girls left Minseok at this point to join the crowd. Now, it was simply time for Minseok to wait for the signal that the wedding had begun. Junmyeon and Nayoung would be leading the ceremony, and Baekhyun and Minseok would be entering the courtyard from opposite sides, meeting in the middle.

Finally, Minseok heard the sound of drums being played, and his heart skipped a beat. It was time for him to process into the courtyard. He took a deep breath and began walking forward. As he entered the courtyard, he saw Baekhyun enter from the opposite side, and his heart did flips. Baekhyun was wearing a flower crown as well, his hair curled cutely around it and looking just a tad messy, but purposefully so. His makeup was a bit more drastic than Minseok's with darker shadows around his eyes, but nothing that made him look too serious. He was wearing a similar beaded crop top, but his was lavender. He too had the traditional body painting and the shimmering harem pants. The jacket flowing behind him was decorated with purple and red flowers along with Lunamaris. It was taking all of Minseok's self-control not to race to him and kiss him there.

They met in the middle and held one of their hands up, pressing their palms together. After that, they walked in a circle, the trailing jackets forming a nest around them before they finally knelt down, palms still pressed together. Nayoung walked forward at that point, placing her hand on the back of each of their heads, at which point they bowed.

“Tonight, we join Minseok and Baekhyun together as one. One being, one entity. To live and to breathe together. To love and to hold each other for the rest of their lives.”
Nayoung lifted her hands and Minseok looked up at Baekhyun. His eyes were tearing up despite his best efforts, but Baekhyun looked just as emotional. Baekhyun smiled warmly at him, and took the hand his palm had been pressed against in both of his.

“Minseok,” Baekhyun started, his voice somewhat shaky. “You are the other half of my soul. I've journeyed far to find you, almost lost you before, and fought to keep you by my side. I cannot have any other person beside me in this world. You're the one.”

Minseok closed his eyes, letting out a shaky breath. It was so hard not to cry just hearing Baekhyun's words, but Minseok had his own that he'd prepared for Baekhyun. He couldn't stop without letting Baekhyun hear them. He grabbed both of Baekhyun's hands in his own

“Baekhyun...You gave me life. Before you, I was empty and wasting away. You breathed life into me, and gave me a reason to go on. You gave me love and a family. With you, I'm home...With you, I'm complete.”

Baekhyun bit his lip, and Minseok could tell he was working to hold back the tears as well. They'd been through so much, this felt unreal for both of them. They'd fought to stay together and risked their lives for this love, and finally they were able to be with each other without hiding. They had finally won.

Nayoung reached for a bundle of Lunamaris that had been prepared, and gently shook it above them, sprinkling them both with the glowing blue powder.

“May the forest and this earth be kind to you, and may you live long and prosper together as one.”

Junmyeon walked forward at that point, kneeling down nearby with a pillow in his hands, the wedding bangles resting on top of it. Minseok stared at them in awe. He'd seen both of his brothers marry before him, and it had felt like he would never get to experience this moment for himself. Finally, it was real though.

Baekhyun reached for one of the bangles first, gently slipping it up Minseok's arm where it rested on his bicep. Minseok took the other bangle and slipped it onto Baekhyun's arm. Junmyeon stood up, leaving them still kneeling in the center, and the drums began to beat softly again. Baekhyun wrapped his arms around Minseok's torso, and that was all Minseok needed before he lunged forward, pressing his lips against Baekhyun's and tightly wrapping his arms around his neck. The courtyard erupted into cheers as the drums beat louder, breaking into the rhythm for the dance.

Baekhyun giggled as he pulled Minseok to his feet after that. They slid their jackets off, stepping over them to begin their dance in the courtyard. The rest of the crowd would join in after them. Minseok was a lot less confident about this part of the wedding, but Baekhyun held his
hands throughout, moving a bit slower so Minseok could match his pace and follow his movements. Dances in Nefret weren't overly elegant, rather they involved a lot of jumping and foot movements. It was fun though, and Minseok couldn't help but laugh as he and Baekhyun sped up a bit.

Clapping resounded through the courtyard, and soon the rest of the people were dancing as well. Sehun had gently grabbed Junmyeon and they were doing their best to lightly dance. Chanyeol had Hwayoung in his arms and Jongin had Minhyung, so they mostly hopped around each other, taking turns cooing at each other or the babies. Minseok couldn't help but giggle at the sight. Eventually, Baekhyun span him around and pulled him close, holding him by the hips. His finger traced along one of Minseok's stretch marks that had been painted to be a vine and smiled. They rested their foreheads together, staring into each other's eyes.

“You look beautiful,” Baekhyun whispered. “Every inch of you.”

“Thank you... You're not too bad yourself,” Minseok teased back. Baekhyun laughed and rubbed their noses together.

“It's finally real, Minseok... We're married. Thank you for waiting and not giving up on me.”

Minseok nodded and lightly kissed Baekhyun's lips. They stood holding each other close and swaying to the music for a while. Finally, Baekhyun decided to pull Minseok back into dancing. The celebration went on well into the night, and only ended when people were getting tired and babies were getting fussy.

When they were all back in the palace, Baekhyun took Minhyung back from Jongin and tried his best to console the crying baby. As it turned out, he was hungry, so Minseok had to take him in the end. They were in the dining hall with the other princes and a few family members, Nayoung included. At one point, Yifan approached both Baekhyun and Minseok and knelt before him.

“Congratulations on your marriage. I wish you both the happiest of lives.”

Minseok smiled and leaned over so he could put one of his hands on Yifan's shoulders, the other still holding Minhyung to his chest.

“Thank you, Yifan, for everything you've done for me. I wouldn't be here without you, and probably Minhyung wouldn't be either.”

“You flatter me. All I did was fetch water.”

“Every little bit helps, Yifan, and I won't forget your kindness.”

Baekhyun smiled and placed his hand on Yifan's other shoulder, thanking him as well. Nayoung approached at that moment, so Yifan got to his feet so she could hug Minseok and Baekhyun close. She told them both how proud and happy she was for them, then took Minhyung
from Minseok since she wanted to hold him for a bit. Minseok glanced over to his brothers and noticed they were both waiting, as if they wanted to talk to him. As soon as he walked over, Chanyeol and Junmyeon pulled him into a group hug.

“We're so happy for you,” Junmyeon whispered.

“Congratulations, Minseok. You deserve this happiness more than anyone.”

“Thank you...I wouldn't be here without you two. Thank you for supporting me and helping me get this far. I'm grateful every day that you two are my brothers...I love you.”

“We love you too, Min,” Chanyeol mumbled, hugging Minseok close once more. “We're happy to have you back.”

Minseok paused for a moment, the words striking him a bit off-guard. Junmyeon and Chanyeol both noticed and looked at him in worry.

“What is it?” Junmyeon asked. Minseok sighed and looked between both of them.

“You've both done so much for me to ensure that I could come back, but I...I want to live in Nefret. They're my people now as well, and Minhyung is a birther. I want him to grow up with Nefret customs...I'm sorry for being so ungrateful.”

“Shh, that's not ungrateful,” Chanyeol comforted. Junmyeon held Minseok's hand, squeezing it tightly.

“This will always be your home, and you will always be welcome here, but we know you'll follow your heart and do what you think is best for your family. The kingdom is changing, Minseok. Living in Nefret won't make you a stranger, and I would hope you would at least visit us from time to time.”

“Of course I would. I'm part of your new council. Besides, I can't go long without my brothers. I miss you both too much.”

“Then it's going to be fine,” Junmyeon soothed.

He pulled Minseok into another hug, and Chanyeol joined in as well. Minseok whispered his thanks to both of them, and was reluctant to let go until Baekhyun came over holding Minhyung. It was well past his bedtime and they'd all had an exciting day.

Minseok and Baekhyun headed to his bedroom. It was strange to be back in that room after so much time in Nefret. Minseok worked on setting up Minhyung’s temporary bed out of a cushion and some extra blankets, similar to what he slept on back in Nefret. Baekhyun took that time to wash himself off and change into sleeping garments. The vines were still present on his stomach, though they would fade as time went on. After Baekhyun was done, Minseok washed up himself.

He returned to his room to find Baekhyun sitting with his legs crossed on the bed, staring at the
fireplace. Minseok sat on his usual side of the bed and looked at him curiously.

“It feels weird to be back...I don't think I've entered your room through the main door so comfortably in almost a year.”

“This room really does hold a lot of memories, doesn't it...”

Minseok pulled the covers back and snuggled under them, and Baekhyun immediately cuddled closer. Baekhyun's bed back in Nefret was much smaller than Minseok's, but they'd gotten so used to sleeping pressed together, they couldn't fall asleep apart.

“You sure you want to leave this behind and live in Nefret?” Baekhyun asked. “This is your home after all.”

“My home is wherever I'm with you,” Minseok whispered, kissing Baekhyun's lips. “You and Minhyung. And I want him to grow up in Nefret. I want him to have the childhood you had. This is still my home, but so is Nefret. I'm feeling a little homesick for it already.”

“Well, I can't argue with you when you put it like that. Thank you, Minseok, for proving me wrong time after time.”

“You make it sound like a good thing,” Minseok laughed.

“It is. I was closedminded and would have missed out on all of this if you hadn't changed my mind. I meant it when I said you were my other half.”

“I know you did,” Minseok whispered, snuggling closer. “I meant it too. I love you, Baekhyun.”

“I love you too, Minseok. So, so much.”

Minseok sighed sleepily, a wide smile still on his face. It took some time for him to fall asleep, the adrenaline from the wedding still rushing through his veins, but it was alright. He was laying there in Baekhyun's arms, and awake or asleep, there was no other place he would rather be.

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Minseok, Baekhyun, and the rest of the Nefret visitors were sent home in a dragon glider a few days after the wedding. It was a little emptier in the palace without Minseok and Baekhyun there, but they would be back. Gradually, the other visitors left the palace, and things slowly returned to normal. Junmyeon had already set up the first official meeting of the council about a month later, but he'd wanted everyone to have some time to rest and return to their regions before getting into business matters.

Jongin had taken a break from working with the palace engineers, though Junmyeon had given him a task to focus on for the first council meeting, but Jongin could do that in the comfort of his own room if he needed to. Taking care of Hwayoung consumed much of his and Chanyeol's
attention, though he was also dealing heavily with the royal guard since he was commanding them both at the palace and in Lorencia. It was rare for the two of them to get any time really to themselves.

One good thing about being back in the palace was Jongin could leave Hwayoung in the care of a servant while she took her nap and have some time to himself, or in most cases, time alone with Chanyeol. More often than not, they went to the garden, cuddling together and talking. The gardens had always been their favorite place, but now it had become like their own little escape from reality.

One particular afternoon, they’d been cuddling in the rosebush maze, a place they went to get a little more privacy. Chanyeol gently pushed Jongin to the ground and rolled on top of him, kissing him and nibbling at his neck. Jongin giggled and hugged Chanyeol. As soon as he felt Chanyeol messing with his hanbok though, Jongin playfully pulled on one of his ears.

“Yeolie, we're in broad daylight in the garden.”

“Yeah but no one's here,” Chanyeol pouted. “Hwayoung is in our room sleeping so we can't do anything in there.”

“What if someone sees us?”

“I took care of that already,” Chanyeol said, smirking. Jongin raised an eyebrow.

“How?”

“I asked one of my guards to be a lookout. Don't worry, he's standing far enough away that he won't be an issue either.”

“Yeolie, isn't that kinda abusing your power?”

“Nah, he's a good friend of mine. I didn't command him to stand watch, just asked if he would while I take you on a little private date.”

“You're so shameless,” Jongin teased. “But you know I can't deny you either.”

“So can we?” Chanyeol asked excitedly.

Jongin didn't answer, simply pulled Chanyeol into a kiss and brushed his body against him. He really couldn't deny Chanyeol, and he'd missed his touch more than anything. Having a baby definitely made things more complicated trying to give themselves alone time. Chanyeol had gone out of his way to set this up, and Jongin would be a fool not to take full advantage of it. Chanyeol made love to him after that, and Jongin once more felt that amazing, warm tingling sensation. He'd missed this so much.

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Junmyeon met with the other leaders and the princes for their first meeting about a month later.
Minseok and Baekhyun ended up not coming, but Nayoung was there to represent Nefret and they were both planning to be at the next meeting. The first part of the meeting was spent taking notes on each of the different problems the regions had. The most dire problem seemed to be the water distribution. When the king had first started his reign, he sent power drills underground, creating a system of tunnels and piping that connected to all the bodies of water in the outer regions. He kept them all mostly drained, hording the water within the kingdom. Junmyeon had already located the control source for the water ways, but he hadn't redistributed the water yet because he didn't want to accidentally flood any of the outer regions.

Their first meeting consisted of listing off all known bodies of water. After that, an engineer began doing calculations on how much water to redistribute. The kingdom would still need some water, but Junmyeon desperately wanted to return as much of it as possible so the outer regions wouldn't suffer either. Once the engineer finished his calculations, Jongin checked them over and agreed they were correct. Junmyeon took all of them down to the control room for the waterways after that and had them watch as he adjusted the levels, so they would know he did it as calculated in the meeting.

When they returned to the throne room, Junmyeon could already see outside the window that their fountain wasn't running nearly as well as before, but it was fine. It was still beautiful, and he knew the outer regions would benefit from this decision. As they returned to their seats, Sehun happily crossed the water distribution off of the long list they had accumulated. The meeting had already gone on for quite some time, so Junmyeon was planning to end it soon. Jongin had an update on the task Junmyeon had assigned him though, so Junmyeon passed the floor to him before ending the meeting.

“I've been drawing a lot of preliminary sketches,” Jongin started, pulling out scroll after scroll of drawings. “King Junmyeon asked me to tackle resource distribution, since right now there isn't an efficient way to get resources from region to region. I've developed a series of pathways spanning through all the regions and the kingdom. I tried to look at maps of the topography to make sure we could feasibly build them on the different landscapes. It would be harder in Sous and Lorencia due to the mountain regions, but if we can get ore and materials from Lorencia, we'll be able to create strong tracks that will withstand the different terrains.”

“And what would you put on these tracks?” Dongyul asked.

“Small freight carts. Each region and the kingdom would have their own carts in which they would place their resources. The carts would then be sent to the different regions, distributing resources without a huge amount of manpower and effort.”

“Will these tracks disrupt the forest?” Nayoung asked warily.

“I've taken that into account,” Jongin stated, pulling over one of his drawings. “For Nefret I was planning to make a station around where the landing zone is for dragon gliders. That way we aren't destroying anymore of the forest than what's been sanctioned off for technological developments.”

“How long do you imagine this project taking?” Junmyeon asked.

“It's going to take a few years I'm sure,” Jongin sighed. “The more help we get from the outer regions and the kingdom though, the faster it will go.”
“We’ll make this our priority,” Junmyeon stated. “Anyone that wishes to partake in the construction will be paid for their time and treated like a proper worker of the kingdom.”

“Paid, your majesty?” Jongsoo gasped.

Most of the outer regions didn't dabble heavily in money, using resources as their primary sources of trade, or trading what little wealth they'd accumulated among themselves. Junmyeon smiled and nodded.

“I know that some of the outer regions prefer not to dabble in money,” Junmyeon started, nodding at Nayoung. “And I more than respect that. However, I do not like the fact that the kingdom lavishes in wealth. It's time to spread that wealth back into the outer regions. Once these pathways are constructed, we'll meet again to focus on how to evenly distribute resources as well. The kingdom takes the best and leaves the mediocre to the outer regions. I want to enact a fair trade system. Whether we trade in money or in resources, we will share the wealth among all the regions.”

“Does everyone agree to the plans for a resource distribution system?” Jongin asked.

The leaders glanced among themselves then finally nodded. They talked a little while longer about necessary materials as well as logistics for the construction, then the meeting was finally adjourned. Construction would begin as soon as Junmyeon sent out a royal decree, inviting everyone and anyone from the outer regions or the kingdom to report to their leaders if interested in a job.

After the meeting, Jongin and Chanyeol were walking down the hallway hand in hand. Hwayoung was still in the middle of her nap, so they were going to enjoy their last bit of peace and quiet together. Chanyeol swung Jongin's hand back and forth, looking at him proudly.

“You're amazing as always, Nini. I can't wait to see your work on this resource distribution system.” Jongin smiled softly.

“Well, I think I'm going to be overseeing it more than working on it directly.”

“Why's that?”

Jongin stopped walking and smiled at Chanyeol, placing his free hand on his own stomach. Chanyeol looked at him curiously, not quite realizing why Jongin had stopped walking.

“I went to the doctor this morning,” Jongin said softly. “Yeolie, I'm pregnant again.”

Chanyeol's eyes doubled in size, and he instantly pulled Jongin into his arms, lifting him up and swinging him around as always. Jongin kissed Chanyeol as soon as his feet were on the ground again, and he snuggled close as Chanyeol rocked him gently.
“We're gonna have another baby,” Chanyeol muttered in awe. “Nini, we're going to have another baby!”

“I know! I'm really happy! Better get ready for two times the mayhem though.”

“I think we'll be able to handle it,” Chanyeol said. “We've got plenty of people to help us raise our kids.”

“Yeah, you're right.”

Chanyeol placed his hand on Jongin's stomach, rubbing it lightly. Jongin wasn't showing yet, but already Chanyeol couldn't stop holding it. He'd hoped to give Hwayoung another sibling, and Lottie could always use another playmate. Their family was gaining yet another member, and finally, the palace was a place Chanyeol could be proud to raise his children in.

Chapter End Notes

Heeeeey, here's the update finally OTL It's way later than normal but I was really tired so I took a nap instead of posting ,and I still am tired XP But I gotta update! So sorry if I'm kinda dead in this AN. It's 1 am where I am right now and I'm really tired OTL But hey, xiubaek got married!!! It only took 20 chapters for all the couples to get married OTL And one still hasn't even had kids yet OTL But hey, Sehun got his first kiss on the lips. That's a start, right XD Oh, and Jongin is pregnant again. Lol!

And that's all for now~ I'm freaking exhausted, so I'mma go to bed ;; But I'll be back with more next week!!! We're nearing the end you guys! Hope you enjoy!!!
A few months passed, and Minseok and Baekhyun were able to make it to the next few council meetings. Already, the outer regions were improving from the water redistribution, and jobs were being created throughout the land for the new distribution system. Nefret had increased their planting load to accommodate trade with the other regions as well as take advantage of the increase in water. There was still a lot to be figured out, but they had to prepare what they could before the next harvest. They were all looking forward to the first round of distribution, since it meant they would get resources from other regions they'd never received before.

Minhyung was a couple months old now, and Baekhyun and Minseok did their best to split the parenting evenly. When they went out and joined the others, they would take a cloth sash and wrap Minhyung in it before wrapping it around their own bodies to carry him. Nayoung took care of him a lot as well. She made it a point to take him from Minseok and Baekhyun every once in a while so they could have some time together for themselves. Minseok really appreciated that. Raising a baby was a pretty big commitment, but Minseok wouldn't want his life any other way.

Baekhyun had also continued mentoring Minseok about medicinal practices within Nefret. On one of their evenings when Nayoung was taking care of Minhyung, however, Baekhyun had a new herb to teach Minseok about, one that Baekhyun hadn't even tried himself before. He held up a small circular leaf to Minseok.

“What is this?” Minseok asked, taking it from him and sniffing it. It had a very sweet smell.

“It's called Borasynth,” Baekhyun explained. “It's an herb similar to mint, but rather than being used for aroma or flavoring, it has a fairly specific purpose.”

“What's that?”

“It's an aphrodisiac,” Baekhyun said, winking afterwards. Minseok flushed and looked down at it.

“Really? This little leaf?”

“Yep, from what I've heard, one leaf goes a long way.”

“You've never tried it?”

“Why would I?” Baekhyun asked, blushing this time. “I never had a reason to try it and well...you were the first person I ever had sex with so...” Minseok smiled and looked at the leaf again, twirling the stem in between his fingers.

“So you just eat it?”

“Yeah. I've heard it tastes kinda like mint but sweeter,” Baekhyun explained. Minseok hummed curiously, and Baekhyun cleared his throat. “Do you think we could try it?” He asked shyly.
Minseok's eyes widened.

“Right now?”

“I mean...Nana has Minhyung for the night. Now is as good a time as any...Are you not comfortable with it?”

“No, it's fine. You're right. Who knows when Nana will feel up to taking Minhyung for the night again. We should take advantage of our time alone. There's only one leaf though.”

“We can split it. I'm not sure I want to take a full leaf just yet.”

“It's that strong!?” Minseok gasped.

“I dunno, guess we'll find out~”

Baekhyun took the leaf from Minseok and carefully ripped it in half. After that, they both slipped it into their mouth, chewing it a bit before swallowing. It took some time for them to start feeling the effects, but soon enough, they were both flushed and aching to touch each other. Minseok took the lead this time, pushing Baekhyun down gently on the bed before kissing him passionately and slowly undressing him.

Baekhyun seemed to be more sensitive to the aphrodisiac than Minseok, already a moaning, somewhat whiny mess underneath Minseok. When Minseok began touching him, Baekhyun was squirming from pleasure. Minseok really liked being able to make Baekhyun feel this way though. He really liked that sex could be something pleasurable for them now and not just obligatory.

Minseok's body was aching to be touched as well, and he was grateful when Baekhyun's hands began roaming his body and pleasing him as well. As Minseok finally entered Baekhyun, the latter tipped his head back, his toes curling as he moaned. Minseok couldn't contain his voice either at that point. They could hardly make sense of what they were feeling, it was such an overwhelmingly good sensation.

They made love late into the night before the effects of the aphrodisiac finally began to wear off. As they laid there panting and holding each other, Baekhyun slowly tried to collect himself and his thoughts once more.

“That was nice,” he mumbled quietly. “But I think I like it better when we don't use it.”

“You think?” Minseok asked, smiling and rubbing his hand on Baekhyun's chest.

“Yeah...I like it better when you alone make me feel that good.” Minseok blushed and pressed a kiss on his cheek.

“I think I like it better that way too, but this was fun to try.”

“Yeah. Thanks for humoring me. I was kinda scared you wouldn't want to.”
“Why wouldn't I? We're married. I always want to make love to you and try new things.”

“I like hearing you say we're married,” Baekhyun said with a giggle. “It reminds me all over again that it's real and we're finally together.”

“I'll be sure to remind you every day then,” Minseok whispered, snuggling closer to Baekhyun. “I love you, Baekhyun. So, so much.”

“I love you too, Minseok.”

~*~

As Junmyeon recovered more and more, he gradually started participating in more of his plans for the kingdom. Sehun was by his side every step of the way. They would often visit the construction sites together, and sometimes Junmyeon would even bring along meals and refreshments for those working. Sehun still found it hard to believe how humble and caring Junmyeon was sometimes.

Sehun still didn’t want Junmyeon overdoing it however. Junmyeon had a tendency to push himself and work hard, and even though his wound had healed considerably, Sehun still worried about him. Even if there was a lot of work to be done, Junmyeon was only human. He needed rest and vacations just as much as his people did. As such, Sehun was always on the lookout for something nice that Junmyeon could partake in. With the return of water to the outer regions, Sehun had just the idea.

He approached Junmyeon in the throne room towards the end of the day. Junmyeon was reading through a draft of Golden Meadows’ trade agreement to discuss further with Dongyul at their next meeting. He didn’t even notice Sehun until he was leaning over his shoulder looking at the page as well.

“Looks complicated,” Sehun started.

“Oh, Sehun! I didn’t realize you’d arrived. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. If I were reading that, I’d need to concentrate as well.”

“Was there something you needed?” Junmyeon asked, folding the papers back up.

“It’s the evening already. Why don’t you rest? I wanted to talk to you.”

“You know how I am,” Junmyeon sighed.

“And that’s why I wanted to talk to you. I want to go on a trip, Junmyeon. A fun one.”

“Where do you want to go?” Junmyeon asked, somewhat surprised. “I’m pretty busy with construction. I don’t know how much time I’d have to go on a fun trip.”

“That’s the point, Junmyeon! You’re too busy! You need to take some time off. They reopened the hot springs in Lorencia. We should go there and enjoy them.”
“Lorencia had hot springs?” Junmyeon asked in awe.

“Yes, but they’d long since dried up when the king drained the water. Now that you’ve redistributed it, I wanted to go. I’ve never used them before, and you deserve a break.”

“I guess…”

“Take this as an opportunity to see what good you’ve done for Lorencia. Besides, you pulled back the royal guard from their land last month. It would be nice to show you want to visit the land and the people for nonpolitical reasons, don’t you think?”

“You really want to go on this trip, don’t you?” Junmyeon asked, pulling Sehun’s waist so he was sitting on the armrest of the throne. Sehun smiled and leaned down, resting his forehead on Junmyeon’s.

“I really want to go on this trip with you,” he whispered, kissing Junmyeon’s forehead.

“Alright,” Junmyeon sighed. “I’ll ask Chanyeol and Jongin to take over for a few days. It’s your home after all, and it’s about time I learned about it.”

“Thank you, Junmyeon!” Sehun exclaimed, hugging his shoulders. “I’m going to go start packing and let Hyunsik know we’re coming!”

Junmyeon laughed as he watched Sehun rush off. He really did have the excitement of a little child, and Junmyeon found it extremely endearing. Perhaps this trip was what he needed after all. He and Sehun had both been so caught up in the kingdom they hardly had time to themselves. Sehun wanted to go on this trip with him, so Junmyeon would be sure to treasure it, and hopefully it would strengthen their relationship even more.

Unsurprisingly, Chanyeol and Jongin were more than willing to take over for Junmyeon while he went on a trip with Sehun. They even insisted that he extend the trip to at least a week, but Junmyeon didn’t want to be away for so long. He felt a little bad since he knew Sehun probably would have loved it, but he couldn’t part from his duties for too long. He wanted to be proactive in the recovery of the kingdom.

They took a dragon glider to Lorencia the following week. Sehun couldn’t contain his excitement and spent the entire ride telling Junmyeon about the different animals he could see in the surrounding forest, as well as the different foods they would try. Junmyeon had always wished for their rides together to be like this, so he couldn't get enough of Sehun's stories. He wanted to try everything Sehun had to show him.

When they landed, Sehun hurriedly dragged Junmyeon to the inn they would be staying at. Lorencia consisted mostly of stone buildings, tightly packed along the cobblestone roads. The mountain loomed in the distance, and at the base, Junmyeon could see the entrance to the mine. The rooftops were all covered in snow, and Junmyeon was glad Sehun had forced him into one of his warm coats. He'd never seen this much snow before.
They made their way down the street to a cozy looking building with smoke puffing out of the chimney. Junmyeon was relieved when they got inside and he was greeted with warmth. The people working at the inn gasped and immediately bowed, offering to take Junmyeon and Sehun's belongings. Junmyeon smiled and shook his head, asking them to show them to their room. As always, he was polite and respectful, and Sehun felt himself softening for Junmyeon all over again.

When they'd settled into their room, Sehun told Junmyeon he wanted to go to one of his favorite restaurants. Junmyeon was honestly grateful he had Sehun guiding him, since he didn't know the first thing about Lorencian cuisine. They left the inn, waving to the owners, then headed down a few streets until they reached a small restaurant with a wooden sign hanging off the wall. Junmyeon had to stop and admire the simplicity, having never seen this type of restaurant or business before. It was surprising just how sheltered he'd been from anything other than the palace and the kingdom.

As they entered, they were greeted by an older couple, who immediately bowed as well once they realized who their guest was. Junmyeon walked over and shook hands with them, saying this was Sehun's favorite restaurant and he couldn't wait to try the food. The couple seemed flustered and worried, but Junmyeon assured them he knew it would be delicious.

As soon as they were seated, Sehun went through the menu with Junmyeon. They ordered a few kinds of bread as well as barbecued hare. Junmyeon had never eaten hare, mostly sticking to birds, but Sehun insisted it was delicious. As they waited, Sehun explained to Junmyeon that resources had been scarce in Lorencia for so long they were very strict with how their meat was partaken. They used every last bit of meat, not wasting any of it, and the fur was used to make their clothes to shield them from the cold. Junmyeon really respected the people for not wasting their resources. He just wished he could have done something sooner to help them. Hopefully, Lorencia wouldn't be struggling for much longer.

Their food was brought out a short time later, and Junmyeon's eyes widened when he saw the meat cooked and left on a stick. Sehun giggled, then picked up one end of the stick, showing Junmyeon how to eat off of it. It was a messy sort of meal, but Junmyeon had to admit Sehun looked pretty cute munching off the stick, especially when he got sauce on his nose. Junmyeon decided to try some as well, and again, his eyes went wide as rich flavoring hit his senses. Sehun had really good taste.

When they'd finished their meal, Junmyeon thanked the owners, telling them the meal was delicious and he was happy to be introduced to Lorencian cuisine at their restaurant. They tried to offer their meal as a special service, but Junmyeon insisted on paying, wanting them to be paid for such fine service. Sehun could see his people gradually letting their guard down around Junmyeon, and it was such a relieving feeling. Lorencia didn't trust easily, so Sehun knew they were wary of a new king, but Junmyeon was different. He would treat Sehun's people the way they should be treated.
Sehun took Junmyeon around to a few different shops, introducing him to some of his childhood friends and neighbors. They stopped at a blacksmith and jeweler's joint store, and Junmyeon couldn't stop gawking at some of the items on display. Lorencia was known for its intricately detailed clothing, so Junmyeon was in awe of some of the shirts that had gems sewn and weaved into them, as well as some of the beautifully sculpted armor. They took a look at the necklaces on display, and Junmyeon wrapped his arm around Sehun's waist as he snuggled closer to get a better look. He spotted a silver pendant with a oval moonstone embedded in the middle.

“Could I look at that one?” He asked the jeweler.

The man nodded and pulled it out for him. Junmyeon held it up, watching it shift in the light, then he held it up in front of Sehun, glancing between the two of them.

“Yes, I think I want this one. How much is it?”

“My king, you really wish to purchase this?”

“Of course. I would never dream of denying you money for your hard work. It's absolutely beautiful.”

“Thank you, my king.”

Junmyeon pulled out his money satchel and paid the man for the necklace. After, he opened the clasp and gently hung it around Sehun's neck. His hands lingered afterwards, slowly moving down to Sehun's waist. Sehun in turn placed his hands on Junmyeon's forearms.

“It suits you well, honorable king,” the jeweler complimented.

“Thank you,” Sehun mumbled shyly.

“Do you mind me asking why you're visiting?” The blacksmith asked Junmyeon. “We're not used to a king coming out here simply to sight see.”

“I can imagine,” Junmyeon agreed. “Sehun wanted to make the trip. It seems he thinks I've been working too hard,” Junmyeon laughed. “And he's right, as much as I don't like to admit it. He wanted to show me his homeland, and I've always wanted to see Lorencia, so we made the trip.”

“You best try our hot springs!” The jeweler said excitedly. “It's been ages since they've been filled, but I swear they'll rejuvenate you right on the spot!”

“We came to try the hot springs as well!” Junmyeon said excitedly. “I've never experienced them before.”

“Oh, you haven't lived then, my king!” The blacksmith chuckled. “There's nothing like Lorencia's hot springs!”

“I guess we better go try them then! I need to live, right?”

“Yes, live long and prosper, my king,” the jeweler said sincerely. The blacksmith nodded with him.
“Thank you,” Junmyeon replied. “Please, don't be strangers if we pass by each other again during our stay.”

“It would be our honor,” the blacksmith stated, shaking Junmyeon's hand.

Sehun and Junmyeon left the shop after that and Sehun leaned closer to Junmyeon, who had his arm around his waist. Sehun held his new pendent up, watching it shift as he tilted it.

“You get along well here,” Sehun stated. “The people warm up to you really quickly, which is surprising.”

“I'm sure part of it is people wanting to make a good impression, but I also want to make a good impression on them. I want their respect and allegiance, but I also want them to know I care about them.”

“I think anyone who interacts with you will instantly realize that. Even I did.”

“Yes, but you were a much harder egg to crack,” Junmyeon teased.

Sehun pouted and Junmyeon stood on the tips of his toes to sneak a quick kiss to his cheek. When they got back to the inn, they headed to their room. They'd gotten one of the nicer rooms that had a hot spring located on the back porch. They undressed, wrapping robes around themselves as they headed to the back. The ground was covered in snow, and they shivered as their skin met with cold air. The hot spring was instant relief though, and they sighed as they sat on the stone seating underneath the water so they were submerged in the water up to their shoulders.

They snuggled close together, wanting to be as warm as possible. Junmyeon understood why the blacksmith and jeweler had urged them to try this. The warm water was soothing his muscles and any ache he might have had. It was so relaxing Junmyeon was sure if he closed his eyes, he would fall asleep on Sehun's shoulder. He wrapped his arm around him instead, letting Sehun lean on his shoulder.

Sehun really loved being cuddled up beside Junmyeon. He was such a kind, respectful person, and he treated everyone he met like they were worth just as much as he was. It was the way Sehun would want to be treated of course, but they'd been oppressed by the late king for so long, it was shocking to experience Junmyeon. Sehun was happy though. He didn't think he'd ever been this happy before in his life. Junmyeon meant the world to Sehun, and he still didn't know exactly how far his emotions for him ran, but he knew he couldn't imagine life without Junmyeon now, especially their relationship. What he felt for Junmyeon ran much deeper than platonic feelings or simple devotion. He sighed and nuzzled into the crook of Junmyeon's neck.

“I think I love you,” he whispered, not intending for the thought to be voiced. Junmyeon gasped and looked down at him in surprise.

“What did you say?” He asked, excitement and hope clear in his voice.
Sehun sat up and looked at him shyly, clearing his throat. It was too late to take the words back, but it was something Junmyeon needed to know, right? Something he would want to know. There was no reason for Sehun to be as anxious as he was. What if Junmyeon wasn't ready for love yet though? They'd been getting along so well and obviously liked each other, and Sehun was scared to mess it up. Junmyeon must have realized he was anxious, and he cupped his cheeks, kissing him on the nose.

“Sehun, just tell me. It's ok, I promise. You know I'll accept whatever it is you tell me.”

“I love you,” Sehun said more confidently this time. “I-I love you, Junmyeon.”

Junmyeon pulled Sehun close, hugging him tightly. Despite being in the hot water, Sehun felt chills run down his spine as Junmyeon kissed his neck, shoulder, and any inch of skin he could reach.

“I love you too, Sehun.”

Sehun pushed Junmyeon away so he could look him in the eyes. They didn't say anything else to each other, their eyes communicating everything. Soon, Sehun was on Junmyeon's lap, kissing him passionately. Junmyeon was just as intense as Sehun. It was the first time they'd ever gone further than a quick peck, and Sehun had to admit he liked it.

They only broke apart when Sehun's shoulders started to get really cold and their skin was getting wrinkled from the water. They quickly wrapped themselves in their robes again and headed back into their room so they could change back into warm clothes. During that time, the mood died down a bit and Sehun was back to his reserved self. He sat on the window seat, running his fingers along his lips, thinking about what had just happened. He was staring dazedly at the snow, reminded of his new moonstone pendant that Junmyeon had gotten him. He'd missed the snow, the gems, and his people more than he'd realized. Junmyeon joined Sehun on the window seat shortly after, creeping his toes under Sehun's thigh.

“What are you doing?” Sehun asked, looking at him in confusion.

“My toes are cold,” Junmyeon whined. “You're warm.” Sehun smiled mischievously.

“Should we make out more to warm up then?”

He regretted his bold statement immediately and was bright red within seconds. Junmyeon simply smiled at him and tugged him off of the window seat. They curled up in their bed, snug under the covers, and Junmyeon began kissing Sehun gently, his hand resting on Sehun's hip. Sehun sighed into the kisses and pressed his hand on Junmyeon's chest, daring to brush his fingers over Junmyeon's nipple. Junmyeon deepened the kiss at that point, his own hand roaming along Sehun's body, and Sehun could have sworn he felt Junmyeon moan into his mouth.

Sehun's request to warm each other up was quickly answered as things got more heated
between them. Sehun's mind was reeling and he was lost in Junmyeon's kisses and his touch. Everything seemed to come to an almost painful halt when Junmyeon pulled away, panting slightly and cupping Sehun's cheek.


“I don't want to go too fast. That's all.”

“Oh...”

Sehun was surprised at how disappointed he felt. He knew Junmyeon was just trying to respect him and take their relationship slowly, but he'd really been enjoying that. He didn't want Junmyeon to stop. Thankfully, Junmyeon was back to kissing him gently within seconds and lulling him to sleep with quiet sweet talk.

They'd still reached a new level of intimacy with their relationship that night. It would only be a matter of time before they got even closer. Sehun could be patient. He wanted to do everything as they were both ready. There was nothing rushing them, so Sehun wanted to savor every new experience. For now, he would be happy knowing that Junmyeon had heard his honest feelings and returned them.

~*~

When they returned to the palace, Junmyeon got right back to work. Sehun wasn't exactly pleased, but Junmyeon made sure to cut himself off in the evening and spend the remainder of the night with him. Sehun could live with that.

Their trip had definitely brought them closer together. They spent many of their evenings kissing each other and slowly exploring the other's body, but Junmyeon always stopped before they could get further. Sehun was a bit frustrated, but maybe Junmyeon wasn't ready for that. He probably also didn't think Sehun was ready, but Sehun found himself longing for Junmyeon's touch and love more than anything. He wanted Junmyeon.

He wasn't exactly brave enough to say that to Junmyeon though, so it was probably for best that they wait a bit longer. Sehun was becoming inseparable from him though. Junmyeon had asked for another throne to be brought to the throne room so Sehun could keep him company. More often than not, Sehun didn't use his own throne, however. Instead, he would force his way onto Junmyeon's lap, interrupting him from whatever papers he'd been reading, and would cuddle close. Junmyeon never complained. He simply laughed and set his papers aside so he could cuddle Sehun closer.

“You know, you have your own throne for a reason,” Junmyeon teased one day as Sehun cuddled up in his lap.

“Yours is more comfortable.”
“Do you want to trade then?”

“Yours is only more comfortable when you sit on it.”

“Ah, so I'm a pillow for you then.”

“The finest quality,” Sehun said with a giggle. He snuggled closer and sighed. “It's break time.”

“So you're still the one that ultimately decides when I need breaks, huh?”

“Yep. You can't do it yourself, so I've taken on the duty myself. You should be grateful to me. It's a hard job.” Junmyeon laughed and kissed Sehun on the head.

“Oh, I'm sure it is.”

Junmyeon set his papers aside in favor of holding Sehun. One hand was cradling his head while the other was gently running along his thigh. They exchanged a few kisses, and Sehun ended up falling asleep on Junmyeon's lap. Junmyeon could only laugh to himself at the sight. Sehun really was a brat, stopping his work then falling asleep on him, but Junmyeon wouldn't have it any other way. He kissed Sehun's head softly.

“If you only knew what you do to me, Sehun,” Junmyeon sighed.

He hugged Sehun tighter, enjoying every second. It was almost hard to believe this was their relationship after the previous year of avoidance. Sometimes Junmyeon had to pinch himself to know it was real. Sehun was his husband now, and they cared for each other. They loved each other. It was funny how quickly life could change. Junmyeon was glad he didn't give up like he'd planned to. He was taking it slowly, but he'd finally found a fulfilling romance.

~*~

Baekhyun paced back and forth outside his room nervously. Minseok was inside with Minhyung, probably letting him crawl around. Minhyung had started sitting up and was just beginning to crawl, so they let him loose in their room. They didn't want him crawling anywhere else in the trees, since the walkways weren't exactly baby-proof and he could very easily fall from them.

Baekhyun took a deep breath and stepped into his room. As expected Minhyung was crawling around and playing with the pillow seats by their table. Minseok was sitting on the floor nearby, playing with him and helping him up whenever he was struggling to lift himself off the floor. He glanced up at Baekhyun and smiled widely, holding his arms out. Baekhyun sighed and walked over, but he didn't sit down. Instead he just held Minseok's hands, which had the other getting to his feet worriedly.

“Are you ok?” Minseok asked. “Did something happen?”
“I, um...I need to tell you something.”

Minhyung started fussing and Minseok quickly bent down to pick him up. He bounced him in his arms and cooed at him until Minhyung finally calmed down and snuggled into his hold. Minseok turned back to Baekhyun, worry still clear on his face.

“What is it?” He asked. Baekhyun took another deep breath.

“I've missed my bleed for 2 months now and I've gained some weight...I'm pretty sure I'm pregnant.” Minseok's eyes went wide.

“Really? I thought you were joking when you said you'd have the next kid!”

“I thought I was too,” Baekhyun pouted. “But it happened...Is this ok? It's sooner than you wanted, right?” Minseok's expression softened and he cupped Baekhyun's cheek with his free arm.

“Baekhyun, of course it's ok. You and I both know this happens when we sleep together, so there was a possibility of it happening every time we did. Did you really think I would be upset?”

“I just don't want you to feel overwhelmed. Minhyung is still young.”

Minseok wrapped his hand around the back of Baekhyun's neck before pulling him close and kissing him. After that, he let his hand drop to Baekhyun's stomach, rubbing it gently. He couldn't wipe the smile off his face.

“I'll never be overwhelmed because of our family. I'm really excited, Baekhyun! We're going to have another baby! Minhyung will get a sibling! I know I said one was enough for now, but 2 could be fun as well. Just as long as this is what you want.”

“I want this,” Baekhyun whispered, holding Minseok's hand on his stomach. “I want to have another baby.”

“Then congratulations, Baekhyun! I'm so happy and proud of you!”

Baekhyun pulled Minseok and Minhyung into a hug, and Minseok could feel him slowly relaxing. Minseok rubbed his back, kissing the side of his head and repeatedly telling him how proud and happy he was.

“Thank you so much, Baekhyun,” Minseok whispered. “For giving me the best family in the world.”

“I love you, Minseok!”

“I love you too, Baekhyun.”

Chapter End Notes
Heeeey, finally some soft Seho content :D I really enjoy making them little softies :’3 But there was some excitement in there too lol! Meanwhile xiubaek are off making accidental babies OTL So now Jongin and Baekhyun are pregnant lol! I remember getting a comment where someone was like, "wait they're both birthers so that means Baekhyun can have kids too" and I was just like yaaaaaaassssss that was my intention lol! But anyways, I don't have much else to say so I'll just keep it short~

Alright, and that's all for now! I'll be back again on Friday with another update! Still continuing my update train this week so hope you enjoy!!!
Chapter 22

Sehun watched from bed as Junmyeon slowly took off his hanbok to change into his sleeping garments. They'd gotten used to changing in front of each other, and usually Sehun tried not to stare, but he couldn't help it most nights. Junmyeon was shorter than him, but he still had a very muscular, attractive body. He longed to touch Junmyeon whenever he was changing, though he never did out of modesty. They hadn't had sex with each other yet, and Sehun was still wanting it, but he was unsure how to ask without getting embarrassed.

Sehun crawled over to the side of the bed that Junmyeon was near and dared to wrap his arms around Junmyeon's waist, pressing his forehead into his back. Junmyeon paused his movements and gently placed his hands on Sehun's.

“What is it?” Junmyeon asked softly. “Are you feeling alright?”

“I feel fine,” Sehun mumbled, growing shier by the second. “I just...I want to make love with you, Junmyeon.”

Sehun could feel his face flushing by the second. Junmyeon pulled away from Sehun long enough to turn around and face him. Sehun didn't have the bravery to look Junmyeon in the face, so he kept his head down. Junmyeon knelt down in front of him and cupped his cheeks, lifting his head so their eyes could meet.

“Sehun, you don't need to be scared or embarrassed,” Junmyeon soothed. “Are you sure you're ready?”

“I am. I want this, Junmyeon. Do you?”

“Of course I do. I just didn't want to rush you.”

“Please make love to me...”

Junmyeon smiled and stood up, undoing the tie on Sehun's shirt and sliding it off his shoulders. After that, he pushed him down on the bed, leaning over him and connecting their lips. Sehun sighed contentedly, calming down from his previous embarrassment and feeling want take over his senses. He wrapped his arms around Junmyeon's neck as he kissed him, and Junmyeon's hands began to wander as they always did, slipping Sehun's pants off and touching him gently. Junmyeon was always careful and gentle with him, and it made Sehun fall for him all over again.

Eventually, Junmyeon broke apart long enough to prepare some body oil so he could start stretching Sehun. Sehun let out a nervous breath when Junmyeon slipped the first finger in. This was something they'd never done with each other before, and Sehun trusted Junmyeon completely,
but he was still nervous about how it would feel or if he would bore Junmyeon. Thankfully, Junmyeon was slow and paused whenever he could tell Sehun was nervous and would ask if he was ok. Sehun would nod, but Junmyeon would still take his actions even more slowly and be sure to kiss Sehun until he could tell he'd relaxed.

As Junmyeon continued to stretch him, Sehun started to moan softly. Sehun's hands moved down Junmyeon's back, lightly grazing his skin with his nails and sending chills down Junmyeon's spine. He slipped Junmyeon's pants off and began to touch him as well, earning a moan from Junmyeon in return. Junmyeon's lips traveled down Sehun's jaw, kissing and nipping lightly at his neck, not enough to leave marks, but enough to tickle Sehun.

When Sehun felt like he was ready, he pulled Junmyeon down, rolling over on top of him so he was straddling his waist. Junmyeon looked up at Sehun in surprise, waiting for his next move. He didn't want to rush Sehun in the slightest, considering he apparently wanted to do this in his own way. Sehun took a deep breath and lowered himself down onto Junmyeon's length. Junmyeon held his thighs, rubbing them gently and whispering encouraging words. When Sehun was finally finished, Junmyeon held him still.

“Are you ok?” He asked gently. “You aren't hurting?” Sehun nodded.

“I'm fine...Can we just stay like this for a minute?”

“However long you need.”

Sehun leaned forward, resting his head in the crook of Junmyeon's neck. Junmyeon would have been impressed and made a comment on how flexible Sehun was were it not for the fact that he knew Sehun was uncomfortable. He wrapped his arms around Sehun and rubbed his back, trying to comfort him in any way that he could. Finally, Sehun sat up enough to kiss Junmyeon's lips and started moving.

Sehun's movements were awkward, and Junmyeon could tell he was still uncomfortable. Sehun was trying his hardest though, and Junmyeon didn't want to intervene. Sehun seemed stressed, and that had Junmyeon worried. Finally, he cupped Sehun's cheeks, causing the latter to cease his movements.

“Hey,” Junmyeon whispered. “It's ok. You don't need to push yourself. We can stop if you aren't comfortable.”

“I don't want to stop,” Sehun pouted, and Junmyeon could see tears gathering in his eyes. “I want to do this for you and I want it to be special, but I'm so terrible...I'm ruining this aren't I?”

“Shh! Of course not! Sehun, this is our first time together, you can't expect us to know everything. Don't be so hard on yourself.”

“I just want to make you feel good,” Sehun mumbled. “I love you so much and I want to give you everything I can, but...” Junmyeon smiled and pulled Sehun's head down so he could kiss his nose.
“I do feel good, Sehun. Being with you like this is already amazing, so you don't have to worry about me not liking this, alright? I love you so much, and nothing is ever going to change that. I want you to be happy and comfortable through all of this too, though. So don't ignore your own comfort just to try and make me feel good. That's not how I want to make love.”

“I am happy and comfortable with you...I just want to show you and make love to you, but I don't know how...” Junmyeon pulled Sehun in for another kiss.

“I love you, Sehun, so so much. Let's take this slowly, alright? Try to find something that makes you feel good, and we'll see if we can figure out how to please each other. I promise you, this will feel good for me, so don't worry.”

“Ok...I'm sorry...”

“There's no need to apologize. You haven't done anything wrong. You're alright.”

Sehun nodded and let Junmyeon kiss him again. Sehun experimented with a few different movements and finally found something that left him moaning into Junmyeon's chest. Junmyeon moved his hips upward to meet Sehun the next time, and Sehun finally felt like they'd made it work. Junmyeon was back to kissing and touching every inch of skin he could reach on Sehun.

Sehun felt a tingling, warm sensation as he continued to move, and he knew he was reaching his high. He leaned forward and moaned as he came. He felt Junmyeon squeeze his thighs as he reached his own high, and they were left panting and resting against each other. Junmyeon rubbed Sehun's back gently.

“Was that ok?” He asked. Sehun nodded, his cheeks somewhat flushed.

“That was amazing.”

“Good.”

Junmyeon rested for another few minutes before sitting up and rolling Sehun over so he was on his back and Junmyeon was above him. Junmyeon leaned down and kissed Sehun, his hands wandering from his neck down to Sehun's hips.

“Can we do more?” Junmyeon asked when he broke away. Sehun blushed, but nodded, wrapping his arms around Junmyeon's neck.

“Yes...I would like that,” he answered softly. Junmyeon smiled and rubbed their noses together.

“Now it's my turn,” he said with a giggle.

He adjusted himself and grabbed Sehun's thigh gently. He began moving, careful and soft as ever. They made love into the night, and Sehun was completely lost in Junmyeon's touch. When they were both exhausted, the snuggled up together, Junmyeon spooning Sehun and kissing his nape from time to time. Sehun was holding Junmyeon's hands in his own, their fingers intertwined.
“I love you, Junmyeon,” Sehun whispered, snuggling closer. “Thank you so much for being patient and waiting for me.”

“I'll always wait for you,” Junmyeon said back, kissing his nape once more. “No matter how long it takes. I love you too, Sehun.”

Sehun smiled, closing his eyes as they started to water again. Only Junmyeon could bring him to tears of happiness. He was glad he'd chosen this path for himself, and even more glad he'd finally been brave enough to ask Junmyeon for this. This night would always be a precious memory to him, and he hoped there would be many other memorable nights to come.

~*~

Baekhyun was glowing in his pregnancy, and Minseok didn't think he could smile any wider any time he saw him. Nayoung had been overjoyed when they'd told her the news of another baby on the way, and since then, she and Minseok were both doing their best to look out for Baekhyun. Nayoung was teaching Minseok more and more about giving massages, and Minseok would make tea for Baekhyun, adding a bit of parufa juice to it to sweeten it and make Baekhyun happy.

Baekhyun didn't struggle with his health nearly as much as Minseok had, but Minseok wouldn't wish that misery on anyone, especially his husband. He was grateful Baekhyun still felt up to gardening or playing with Minhyung, but he also made sure Baekhyun didn't push himself. The weather had become hot in Nefret, and the last thing Minseok wanted was for Baekhyun to pass out from working too hard. Baekhyun wore crop tops every day both to combat the heat but also to tease Minseok with his baby bump. His teasing usually ended in tickles and a kiss on his stomach from Minseok.

On the warmer days, Baekhyun would lay in bed and Minseok would wipe his body with a cool cloth, trying to provide some comfort. It was especially rough when Baekhyun's nausea acted up, but Minseok loved being able to take care of him. He loved doting on Baekhyun, but it also felt so reassuring to know he knew how to help the person he loved and could provide him with some comfort. Minseok had grown a lot in his relationship with Baekhyun, and he was finally proud of the person he'd become.

Nayoung was still kind enough to take Minhyung on some nights so Minseok and Baekhyun could spend some time together. Nayoung really was the best great grandmother a kid could have, and Minseok was so grateful to have a mother figure in his life again. Minseok was glad she was so willing to be a part of theirs and the baby's life as well. It made being a new parent much less overwhelming.

Baekhyun had become a lot clingier since he'd gotten pregnant. He longed for Minseok's touch and could never be too close. When they didn't have Minhyung during the night, they almost always made love to each other. This night was no different, but Baekhyun frantically stopped
Minseok, holding his shoulders at one point.


“You're not hurting me,” Baekhyun breathed. “But the baby is kicking and they're not showing me any mercy, so we might need to pause for a bit...”

Minseok laughed and looked down and Baekhyun's stomach, noticing it move. He remembered how it felt when Minhyung would kick him, and he wondered if Baekhyun loved it in the same way he did, despite the fact that sometimes it hurt. He glanced back up and noticed Baekhyun wiping tears from his eyes.

“What's wrong?” He asked again, kissing Baekhyun's nose and cupping his cheeks.

“I'm just happy,” Baekhyun mumbled shyly. “This is a little embarrassing given the timing of when they started to kick, but I'm so happy and excited, Minseok.”

“Me too, Baekhyun, me too.”

Minseok leaned back a bit and rubbed Baekhyun's stomach as the baby continued to kick. They were still connecting with each other, but Minseok didn't want to move away completely. Baekhyun grunted in pain a few times and Minseok rubbed his stomach a bit more quickly.

“Calm down, baby,” he whispered to Baekhyun's stomach. “You're hurting your papa. And I don't want to be rude, but you also interrupted us.”

Baekhyun laughed this time, and pulled Minseok's head down so they could continue kissing. They waited until the baby had finally calmed down before continuing their previous activities. Baekhyun couldn't stop smiling the entire time. Minseok was so precious and Baekhyun loved him with every fiber of his being. He couldn't wait for their new baby to get to meet him as well. Minseok had a heart of gold, and Baekhyun was grateful every day that they were married and had a family together. He couldn't see his life any other way.

~*~

A few months had passed since Sehun and Junmyeon's first night together. They'd gotten much more comfortable with each other, and Junmyeon had had Sehun top to see if he would enjoy that more. Truthfully, Sehun enjoyed sleeping with Junmyeon no matter what position, but he also liked that Junmyeon wanted to change things up and take his preferences into account.

Junmyeon still worked as hard as ever for the kingdom. The water redistribution had been a great success and Jongin's resource distribution project was moving along quickly. Junmyeon had been working with each of the regions about evenly distributing their resources. Nayoung had agreed to hold seminars with a few other people from Nefret to train the doctors and caretakers of the kingdom on the different herbs and remedies they had to offer. Junmyeon was also working
with Lorencia and Sous on a form of transportation between the different regions, since not everyone could afford to take a luxurious dragon glider. There was never a dull day for him when it came to running the kingdom.

Sehun had backed off substantially as the weeks passed, however. Junmyeon had been really worried about Sehun at first, but Sehun insisted he was just tired and needed some more time to rest. He didn't like leaving Junmyeon to work on his own, since he'd promised he'd be by his side no matter what, but he was so tired all the time. When his stomach started acting up, he knew he needed to see the doctor. He didn't tell Junmyeon about this new development though, since he didn't want him to worry. He had enough on his plate already.

Sehun sat in silence as the doctor looked him over. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with him, which was worrying him. Finally, the doctor asked Sehun when his last bleed was and if he’d been sexually active recently. Sehun's eyes went wide and he placed his hand over his stomach.

“Do you think I could be...?” He asked trailing off. The doctor smiled and nodded.

“There's one way we can find out. Would you like to do an ultrasound to be sure?”

Sehun nodded eagerly and laid down while the doctor got his machine ready. He left the doctor's office later somewhat in a daze. Without realizing it, he'd walked all the way to the throne room. He must have subconsciously been trying to get to Junmyeon. He was always able to calm Sehun down when he was thinking too much.

He opened the door to the throne room and smiled when Junmyeon was there, reading over a recent agreement he'd made with Golden Meadows. He glanced up from his paper when he noticed Sehun approaching and smiled, setting the scroll off to the side. Sehun immediately curled up on his lap like he always did, sighing and closing his eyes as he nuzzled into the crook of Junmyeon's neck.

“Hey, love,” Junmyeon greeted. “How are you feeling? Are you tired?”

“A little,” Sehun mumbled. “But I'm with my favorite pillow now so I'll be alright.” Junmyeon laughed and kissed the top of Sehun's head.

“I'm done with work for the day. Would you like to do something together?”

“I want a meal,” Sehun said, looking up at Junmyeon excitedly. “A giant feast!”

“Really? Do you think your stomach will be able to handle that? You've been feeling a bit under the weather lately, right?”

“How did you know?”

“I love you,” Junmyeon said simply. “Of course I notice when you're struggling, even if you don't tell me.” Sehun smiled and rested his head on Junmyeon's shoulder.
“I'm fine. I need a feast...I'm going to be eating for more than one from now on.”

Sehun felt Junmyeon freeze underneath him and he glanced up to see Junmyeon staring down at him with wide eyes. Slowly, Junmyeon's hand moved to Sehun's stomach.

“Sehun...Are you pregnant?” He asked, hardly able to contain his hope and excitement. Sehun smiled and rested his hand on top of Junmyeon's.

“Twins!”

“Oh my God!”

Junmyeon burst into laughter and hugged Sehun tightly, rocking him back and forth. Sehun wrapped his arms around Junmyeon's neck and kissed him, giggling against his lips from happiness. He was nervous to be having twins, but he knew Junmyeon would do everything in his power to take care of him. With how excited Junmyeon already was, Sehun knew they would be alright.

“Thank you so much, Sehun,” Junmyeon repeated over and over. “I can't believe we're going to have our own children! Twins on top of that!”

“Better start learning everything you can from your brothers,” Sehun warned. “We're going to have 2 right away, so it's gonna be a challenge.”

“Challenge happily accepted,” Junmyeon laughed, kissing Sehun once more. “I'm so excited, Sehun! Thank you so much!” Sehun sighed and rested his head on Junmyeon's shoulder once more.

“No, thank you, Junmyeon. For everything.”

Junmyeon snuggled Sehun closer and called for a servant to bring them dinner in the throne room, inviting Chanyeol, Jongin, and their children. He couldn't wait to tell everyone the good news. He would have to call Minseok later and tell him. They were all going to have families of their own now, and Junmyeon couldn't wait to meet his own children. Everything was finally coming together perfectly.

~*~

Jongin had already been ready to pop by the time Sehun's pregnancy was announced, so it wasn't a big surprise when he went into labor a few weeks later. Junmyeon was constantly making royal decrees between the two of them, first to announce Sehun's pregnancy, and next to announce the birth of Jongin's second baby girl, whom they decided to name Kyungmi. It would only be a matter of time before Baekhyun was going to give birth to another child as well. Junmyeon couldn't help but laugh at how fast they all seemed to be popping children out these days.

Minseok and Baekhyun were both overjoyed to hear news of Sehun's pregnancy, and they
called the palace to talk extensively with both Junmyeon and Sehun. Baekhyun was dying to go to the palace and look after Sehun, anxious that he was having twins, but he was in no shape himself to be taking care of someone else. He'd hit the last few months of his pregnancy, and his nausea had come back with a vengeance. Even Nayoung was hesitant to go back forth between the kingdom with Baekhyun like this, but Minseok had learned enough to look after him, and Nayoung wanted to work closely with the palace doctor to ensure Sehun would have a safe delivery. Twins were always rough on a birther.

As Baekhyun neared his delivery date, he got a lot more anxious. It was uncomfortable to sit still for long periods of time, and he didn't sleep as well anymore. He would take walks at night between the tree tops to try and calm himself and the baby down. Minseok would join him whenever he could, since they never went far enough to be out of range of hearing Minhyung if he started crying. Minhyung was already walking, and had learned to knock on the door of the room if he wanted to be let out or held. He slept through the evenings pretty soundly though, so it was rarely a problem.

One night Baekhyun got up with a groan, trying to roll out of bed without waking Minseok. He sighed as he breathed in the fresh night air. He always loved summer nights in Nefret. The lunamaries were in full bloom, and there were more fireflies than you could ever imagine. Baekhyun walked to the nearby wooden pathway, smiling as a few fireflies flitted around him. He heard a door open behind him and turned to spot Minseok approaching him. Minseok didn't say anything, simply wrapped his arms around Baekhyun's waist from behind and kissed his cheek.

“Can't sleep?” Minseok asked softly. Baekhyun sighed and shook his head.

“The contractions keep coming. I swear the baby's gonna come any day now...”

“Think you're ready?”

“As ready as I'm ever going to be. I love the baby but God, 9 months of carrying them sucks. I don't know how you survived with everything you were going through.” Minseok laughed and hugged him a bit tighter.

“I had a really amazing person by my side to help me through it all.”

Baekhyun hummed and leaned back, resting against Minseok. He closed his eyes as another contraction came. They always came with the simplest of movements, but usually walking helped pass them. Minseok kissed his cheek some more, playfully nibbling on his ear and causing Baekhyun to whine.

“Don't tease me!”

“Alright, alright,” Minseok laughed.

He turned Baekhyun in his arms and started kissing him. Baekhyun sighed into the kiss, letting himself be led and swept away by Minseok. It was only when Baekhyun's bladder was screaming at him that he pulled away with a giant pout on his face.
“I have to pee,” he whined. Minseok snorted and broke down laughing. “It's not funny! I was enjoying myself!”

“Welcome to pregnancy bladder,” Minseok sighed. “Come on, we should go if you need to pee. The bathrooms are down on the ground after all.”

“But I don't want to stop...”

“Then do you want to find a friendly tree to use?” Minseok asked. Baekhyun looked at him in horror.

“Minseok! People live in these trees! That's like peeing on someone's house! Our house even!”

“Well, your options are pee on our house or go down and use the toilet,” Minseok huffed, enjoying Baekhyun's whining and pouting.

“Fiiiiiiine! You're no fun!”

Baekhyun walked away, sighing dramatically as he passed Minseok. The latter laughed, watching from the tree tops as he headed to the bathroom. Minseok didn't like to leave him unsupervised, though he knew Baekhyun would be fine. He sighed and looked at the fireflies, remembering that night so long ago when Baekhyun had first shown them to him. They were such a normal sight to Minseok now, but they still felt so magical and filled him with awe. Nefret was a magical place, and Minseok was so happy and proud to call it his home.

Baekhyun stumbled his way back up the tree a short while later. Minseok had stayed outside to wait for him. Baekhyun looked a little panicked to Minseok's surprise, and he wondered if he'd seen a spider in the bathroom again.

“So, um...I peed but also, uh...my water broke...” Baekhyun said awkwardly.

Minseok's eyes widened for a moment, then he quickly walked down the hallway towards the room that belonged to Nayoung. He knocked gently and waited until he heard the woman's voice from inside, calling him in.

“Nana, Baekhyun's water broke. Will you help me?”

Shortly after, Nayoung came out with a shall draped over her shoulders. She called a few guards nearby and asked them to get hot water. Minseok went to Yifan next and asked him to wait in their room with Minyung in case he woke up and needed someone to look after him. After that, he helped Baekhyun to the birthing room, and the nostalgia hit him once more. He was doing it all over again, this time at Baekhyun's side. He could only hope he'd be as good at helping Baekhyun as the latter had been for him.

Baekhyun was a lot better at keeping himself on track and focusing on his breathing than
Minseok had been, so Minseok was able to be at Nayoung’s side. It was a long night and Minseok wished he could take some of the pain away when Baekhyun would cry after a particularly painful push, but holding his hand was all he could do. After hours, when the sun was finally starting to rise in the sky, Baekhyun finally gave birth, and Minseok was there to receive their baby girl into his arms. As soon as he cut the cord, Nayoung took their baby to clean her, and Minseok's attention was back on Baekhyun.

“How's the baby?” Baekhyun asked tiredly as Minseok cleaned him up. The latter smiled and kissed his knee, just the way Baekhyun had when he'd given birth.

“She's absolutely beautiful, Baekhyun!”

“She?” Baekhyun asked excitedly. Minseok nodded.

“Congratulations! You had a baby girl!”

“She better let me make flower crowns for her or I'm returning her,” Baekhyun said bluntly. That brought laughter from both Minseok and Nayoung.

Nayoung brought her over a short while later, and placed her in Baekhyun's arms. She smiled at him, then kissed his forehead before leaning over to kiss Minseok's. She left them to themselves as she cleaned the room. Baekhyun snuggled closer to Minseok and cupped their baby's cheek gently.

“She's so cute, Minseok...She's got your nose! But she's got my cheeks~” Minseok laughed and kissed Baekhyun's cheek.

“She's beautiful. Do you think she fits the name we were talking about?”

“Yeah, Yunhee definitely fits. God I love her already.”

“Even if she's too small for you to make her flower crowns?”

“She'll grow.”

Minseok laughed and helped Baekhyun readjust her. She was fussing and Baekhyun had a feeling she was hungry after all that work. Within seconds, she was breastfeeding and content again. They heard a knock on the door a few minutes later, and a soft voice calling out.

“Gramma!!! Papa!!! Dada!!!”

Nayoung opened the door gently and Minhyung rushed towards her, hugging her leg. Yifan stood in the doorway and bowed apologetically.

“He woke up and wanted to see all of you. Is that alright?”

“Yes, I think it's about time he meets his new baby sister,” Nayoung said gently, patting Minhyung's head.

“Baby, come here,” Minseok called, holding his arms out. Instantly, Minhyung rushed into them, giving Minseok a somewhat slobbery kiss. “Good morning baby!!! You wanna see daddy?”
Minseok scooped Minhyung onto his lap so he could be near Baekhyun. Carefully, Baekhyun reached for Minhyung and brushed through his hair.

“Look, baby. Your baby sister is here!”

Minhyung reached his hand forward, rubbing it awkwardly on Yunhee's head. Minseok reminded him to be gentle, and watched with a wide smile as the two siblings interacted. Minseok glanced up at Nayoung and Yifan next.

“Thank you both, as always. I don't know where our family would be without you two always watching out for us.”

“You're welcome, Minseok,” Yifan said gently. “Congratulations to both of you. It looks like you worked hard, Baekhyun.”

“Too hard! I'm gonna need a major nap.”

“Well, I think between all of us, we can arrange to help you with that.”

Nayoung and Yifan slipped out of the room after that, leaving Minseok and Baekhyun alone with their children. Minhyung lost interest in Yunhee pretty quickly, wanting instead to cuddle and play with Minseok. Baekhyun ended up falling asleep with Yunhee in his arms while Minseok got Minhyung fed and happy. Baekhyun ended up falling asleep with Yunhee in his arms while Minseok got Minhyung fed and happy. Minseok stayed by his side for most of the day, dozing when Minhyung went down for his nap and trying to take care of Yunhee so Baekhyun could rest. It would be hard to look after two little kids, especially if they were both high energy, but Minseok was looking forward to it. They had plenty of people here in Nefret to help them, so Minseok knew it would be ok. Minseok only felt more and more blessed with each passing day.

Chapter End Notes

AT LONG LAST SEHO FINALLY GOT SOME ACTION LOL! And Sehun's gonna have twins wooo~ I hope you guys don't mind that I focused on Baekhyun's birth rather than Jongin's. I was really burnt out on writing by this chapter and I was basically giving myself the rule that only write things in extreme detail if it hasn't been seen before (hence Seho got an in depth smut scene and Baekhyun got a more in depth birth scene). Everyone keeps wanting the babies to be NCT members cuz I made Mark a baby and I've just been sweating over here like, "um they're girls" lol! The rest of the kiddos will be ocs though, sorry friends OTL But aaaaah everyone's popping out babies now lol! Enjoy the overdose of fluff after all the angst of this story XD

Alrighty friends, that's it for now. There's actually only one more chapter after this, so we really are reaching the end of this story *wipes tears* It's been a long time coming. So stick around for that cuz I'll put it up soon! Probably complete with a
super mushy soft AN. So until then, I love you and I hope you enjoyed!!!
Sehun's stomach grew much quicker than either Jongin's, Minseok's, or Baekhyun's. He knew it made sense given he was having twins, but it was still a bit unsettling. His body was no longer just his own, and while he was happy and wanted kids, it was still hard to adjust to the constant change. At just a few months, he was probably already as round as the others had been in their middle months. Minseok had been pretty small when he was pregnant, so Sehun wouldn't be surprised if he completely surpassed him soon.

Junmyeon was always looking out for him though. He would often talk to Sehun about how he was feeling, and Sehun would tell him honestly if he was anxious or afraid. Junmyeon would continue talking to him until he calmed down. He always had a way of changing Sehun's perspective. It made the pregnancy a lot easier to bear. He also liked when Junmyeon pampered him on days where his body was aching.

Sehun had taken a step back from his duties, but he still went to meetings and took care of less taxing tasks for Junmyeon. It was hard for Sehun to sit comfortably through long meetings, but he would still do his best if Junmyeon had multiple issues to attend to. Sehun had just finished one of his shorter meetings at the construction site for the new resource distribution line. Junmyeon knew Sehun got restless staying in the palace all the time, so he tried to send him out into the kingdom every now and then. Sehun loved traveling, but he would get tired now with two kids in his belly, so trips to the kingdom were all he could manage.

When Sehun got to the throne room, he was surprised to find Junmyeon sitting in his throne with Chanyeol and Jongin sitting at his feet, all of them working with yarn. Sehun knew Junmyeon had left his afternoon free of appointments, but he didn't think he would spend it like this. Junmyeon looked up and saw Sehun approaching, immediately holding his arms out for him. Sehun stepped around Jongin and Chanyeol so he could hug Junmyeon and kiss him.

“What are you all doing?” He asked.

“Knitting,” Chanyeol said simply, holding up what looked to be a small knitted baby booty. “Junmyeon wanted to learn and I recently learned from Jongsoo when we visited him.”

“We're knitting things for the babies,” Jongin stated, trying in vain to untangle his metal arm from the yarn. “But it's not going well. My dumb arm keeps getting caught in the yarn!”

Sehun laughed gently then glanced at what Junmyeon was working on. Junmyeon held it up to him shyly.

“I was making sweaters for them,” he explained. “When you and I go visit Lorencia, they're going to need to be kept extra warm.”
Sehun smiled and kissed Junmyeon's head. He really was the cutest and most considerate person Sehun had met. He walked around Jongin to sit on his throne beside Junmyeon's, sighing as he lowered himself down. After that, he started trying to help Jongin untangle his finger joints from the yarn.

“Where are Hwayoung and Kyungmi?” Sehun asked.

“Nap time, thankfully,” Jongin said. “Our caretaker is going to get me if one of them wakes up. Hwayoung sleeps pretty soundly but Kyungmi’s a bit restless.”

Sehun hummed and got the last of the yarn untangled from Jongin. After that, he grabbed the knitting needles and looked at what Junmyeon and Chanyeol were doing.

“Can you teach me as well?” He asked. “We're going to have 2 babies, so it would go faster if I made some too.” Junmyeon smiled warmly.

“Have Chanyeol teach you. I'm a disaster at this. I have to ask him for help every round.”

Chanyeol scooted closer and began teaching Sehun how to start. Jongin pouted, wanting to knit as well, but his metal arm just didn't mix well with yarn. Kyungmi woke up a short while later though, so he cuddled her and fed her while the other knitted. Sehun couldn't stop smiling as he worked. He never would have imagined himself sitting in the palace with people that were his family now happily knitting clothes for all their children. He wouldn't trade this life for anything though. He was so incredibly happy.

~*~

Baekhyun and Nayoung frequented the palace in order to look after Sehun. Minseok came with them often in order to learn from them, but sometimes the babies were too fussy about traveling and he'd stay home with them instead. The palace doctor was working very closely with Nayoung, learning anything he could from her about birthers and general health. Junmyeon loved watching the two of them check up on Sehun together. He knew between the two of them, Sehun was in the best of hands. Nayoung was even learning a few things from the doctor about technology and medicine they'd produced. In the future, Junmyeon wanted to invest more time and funds into developing their medicine and procedures, but the kingdom was undergoing enough change as it was. Sharing their current knowledge was already doing more than enough to help the kingdom.

As Sehun hit the halfway mark of his pregnancy, he was basically over the whole excitement of being pregnant. Carrying 2 babies at once was tiring, and he was grumpy and exhausted. His nausea had its ups and downs, but when it was bad, he was miserable. It had gone away for a while, but as he headed into his final trimester, it came back with a vengeance, flattening him in bed on the bad days.
Junmyeon put Chanyeol and Jongin in charge of more tasks within the kingdom, and even Minseok and Baekhyun helped out with some of the outer region affairs, so he could spend more time with Sehun. He didn't like to leave Sehun alone for long hours at a time, especially when he knew he was struggling. On the bad days, Junmyeon would just spoon Sehun and kiss the back of his neck, whispering comforting words and how much he loved him. It couldn't make Sehun's weariness go away, but it boosted his mood and usually got him in the mood for cuddles and happy talk about the babies.

During one of their evening conversations, Junmyeon felt a jab to his hand that was on Sehun's stomach. Sehun whined in response, but Junmyeon sat up excitedly.

"Is one of the babies kicking!?" He gasped. Sehun pouted and nodded.

"They both are. Feel."

Sehun moved Junmyeon's hand around on his stomach, letting him feel the different jabs from each baby. Junmyeon couldn't wipe the excited smile off his face. Sehun winced as the babies moved in unison, but seeing Junmyeon so excited was endearing.

"You know I'd only ever put up with this for you, right?" Sehun asked, laughing a bit before wincing again.

"I'm honored," Junmyeon teased.

Junmyeon carefully rolled Sehun over onto his back and leaned over him, kissing him to distract him from the babies. His hands wandered along Sehun's body, rubbing some of his sore muscles. Sehun didn't like to go all the way with sex now that he was so far along in the pregnancy, but he loved when Junmyeon touched him, so the latter made sure to oblige him whenever he could. As Junmyeon pleased Sehun, he was distracted enough to ignore the babies.

Thankfully, the babies settled down in time for both of them to go to sleep. Sehun made sure to give Junmyeon a little of the care he'd shown him first though. He felt bad since Junmyeon was always doing everything he could to please Sehun and probably held himself back for Sehun's sake. Junmyeon always swore he was fine, but Sehun still liked to touch him as well. He couldn't wait until he wasn't pregnant anymore and he could comfortably move again. He would make love to Junmyeon frequently then to make up for all the time they were losing now.

~*~

Finally, Sehun approached his final month of pregnancy. Junmyeon had decorated his throne with several pillows, since Sehun still liked to squeeze himself onto Junmyeon's lap. He hardly fit now, but Junmyeon wasn't going to deny him any cuddles, so he simply tried to make it as comfortable as he could muster. Junmyeon was still working for the kingdom, but he'd already warned all the leaders of the outer regions as well as various people he worked with in the kingdom that he'd need to take a little time to take care of Sehun and the babies once they were born. He was
grateful just how much the leaders of the outer regions were willing to step up and keep the decisions of the council meetings going. In the year or so since Junmyeon had taken the throne, they'd accomplished a lot, and he'd gained each of their trust, even Dongyul's. He was glad he could trust them to take care of the kingdom as well.

Junmyeon was just about to leave his throne room for the day when Sehun stepped inside. Junmyeon smiled and fluffed one of the pillows. Sehun walked over with some difficulty, but nowadays it was hard for him to move in general. Junmyeon scooped him into his lap and snuggled him close. Immediately Sehun sighed and relaxed against him, gripping his hanbok as they cuddled.

“Hi love,” Junmyeon greeted softly. “How are you today?”

“Alright...I missed you.”

“I'm here now. Do you want to go eat? Are you tired? Should I have it brought to our room?”

“I think...” Sehun started, clinging to Junmyeon's hanbok a bit tighter. “You need to take me to the doctor...My water broke when I was walking over here.”

“Sehun, are you serious!?” Junmyeon gasped. Sehun nodded.

“It's time,” he whispered. “I'm scared...” Junmyeon hugged his closer, kissing the top of his head.

“It's gonna be fine. I'm gonna be right there with you the entire time, ok? Let's get you to the doctor.”

Junmyeon helped Sehun get to his feet and held him up while they walked. Sehun was leaning a lot on Junmyeon, which made it hard to walk, but Junmyeon didn't dare loosen his grip. As soon as they got to the doctor's quarters, Junmyeon opened the door, not bothering to knock, and helped Sehun onto one of the beds. The doctor rushed to the room from his office area and immediately began grabbing blankets and towels. Junmyeon helped get Sehun ready to give birth, then sat by his side as the doctor placed towels around him and began checking in on Sehun.

The doctor took an ultrasound to make sure the babies were in a position that Sehun could safely give birth. The doctor had been bracing himself to have to operate in order to insure Sehun's safety, but to his relief, the babies were both facing the right direction. Sehun could give birth naturally, but it would be a long struggle. Sehun gripped both of Junmyeon's hands in his and shifted himself so he was a bit more comfortable.

It was a long, agonizing labor, and Sehun was grunting and groaning in pain by the time the first baby crowned. Junmyeon and the doctor were encouraging him through his pushes, and Sehun was utterly exhausted. He was glad his body was naturally contracting because he was far too tired to continue pushing on his own. Once the first baby was born though, the second one followed only about 20 minutes later. Sehun was shaking as Junmyeon held him, rocking him and soothing him. Sehun had been given plenty of pain medication and had been numbed, but that had still been
an extreme ordeal for him.

It was only when the doctor came back with two small babies wrapped in soft blankets that Sehun perked up a bit. The man carefully laid one down on Sehun's chest, then gave Junmyeon the other one to hold.

“Two boys,” the doctor chuckled. “One's a birther.”

“Really?” Sehun asked tiredly.

“Yes, the one Junmyeon is holding is a birther.”

“Do you want to see him, Hunnie?”

Sehun nodded and Junmyeon carefully readjusted the baby on Sehun's chest so he could rest the other one on him as well. Sehun laughed with tears in his eyes as he stared down at both of his babies. Junmyeon brushed through his hair and kissed his forehead.

“They look just like you,” Sehun mumbled through tears. “They're both so cute...”

“They've both got your pout though,” Junmyeon teased, kissing Sehun's cheek. “What do you think you want to name them Hunnie?”

“I don't know...I'm bad with names. Help me...”

“Hmmm...It'd be cute if they rolled off the tongue easily. What about...Jinsun and Jungsoo?”

“Which would be which?” Sehun asked.

Junmyeon smiled softly. Sehun was obviously too tired to make decisions. He placed his hand on the baby in Sehun's left arm, the one the doctor said was a birther.

“This is Jinsun,” he said softly. He moved his hand to the other baby. “And this is Jungsoo.” Sehun nodded slowly.

“Yeah, I like that.”

Junmyeon smiled and kissed Sehun's forehead once more. The doctor cleaned him and left them alone to be with their children. Junmyeon helped Sehun adjust both babies so they could breastfeed. Sehun was passed out within seconds, so Junmyeon held both the babies for him while they fed. He didn't try to wake Sehun, knowing he needed rest after that whole ordeal. Instead, Junmyeon carefully placed each baby in cribs the doctor had brought in for the occasion. He curled up in bed beside Sehun after that, surprised when Sehun immediately rolled into his arms, whining in his sleep. Junmyeon smiled and rubbed his back.

“I'm so proud of you, Sehun. Thank you so much for giving me a family and a life full of happiness. I'm glad you're in my life everyday, and that will never change.
Sehun sighed sleepily and snuggled closer to Junmyeon. It took a while longer for Junmyeon to fall asleep, the adrenaline still rushing through his veins. He enjoyed holding Sehun as he slowly calmed down, and eventually he fell asleep. He was woken up a few hours later by the sound of one of the babies crying. He heard Sehun groan in his arms and he smiled, despite already feeling exhausted. Parenthood had begun.

~*~

A small boy, no older than two and wearing harem pants and a small vest, hopped out of the carriage of an iron steed. He glanced up at the tall gates of the palace, giggling before charging through them and into the palace. Baekhyun quickly ran out of the carriage after him, leaving Minseok with their daughter, giggling as he watched them go.

Baekhyun turned corners through the hallway, calling after the boy, but it was no use. Eventually, the little boy ran into a room that Baekhyun knew to be the palace workshop. He gasped as he thought of just how much trouble the boy could get into. He charged through the doors just in time to see his son collide with someone else's legs and fall back onto the ground.

“Minhyung! Come here!” Baekhyun exclaimed.

He rushed over and scooped the boy off the ground and into his arms, looking him over and brushing some dirt off his pants. He heard the other person laugh and he glanced over to see Jongin smiling at him.

“I'm glad it was you he ran into,” Baekhyun sighed. “He's nothing but energy.”

“The terrible twos have set in, huh?” Jongin asked, ruffling Minhyung's hair.

“Definitely,” Baekhyun sighed. He glanced Jongin over and smirked. “Must not have set in with Hwayoung yet considering you've got another one in the oven already.” Jongin smiled softly and rubbed his slightly protruding belly. “You and Chanyeol really can't stop going at it, huh? Are you trying for a son or something?”

“No, it just happened, like it usually does. Hwayoung is still pretty mellow though. She loves being with Kyungmi, so we're lucky they can entertain each other.”

“This one still doesn't know what to think of Yunhee, I don't think,” Baekhyun sighed. “Speaking of, Minseok was here too...”

“I'm here,” Minseok called from the doorway. He had Yunhee snuggled against him. “She's sleeping so I didn't want to wake her.”

“Papa, I run!” Minhyung whined. Baekhyun sighed. “Sorry for disturbing you, Jongin. I better take Minhyung to the garden before he explodes and tears your workshop apart.”

“It's alright, I was just heading there myself. Chanyeol is already there with the girls and I think Junmyeon and Sehun are there with their boys.”
“I can't wait to see them!” Minseok exclaimed. “I haven't seen them since they were infants, and now they're already half a year old!”

“They've grown quite a lot,” Jongin agreed. “They've been a handful for Junmyeon and Sehun to handle while running the kingdom, but they make it work. If nothing else, the region leaders get to cuddle a baby or two during the council meetings.”

Baekhyun and Minseok laughed and walked with Jongin to the garden. Along the way Minseok congratulated Jongin on the new pregnancy. As soon as they got to the garden, they spotted Chanyeol, Sehun and Junmyeon seated on a blanket. Chanyeol had both his daughters in his lap, braiding flowers into Hwayoung's hair while she made a flower crown for Kyungmi. Sehun and Junmyeon each had one of their babies in their arms, letting them sometimes get down and practicing lifting their heads. They were both getting to the age where they were learning how to crawl. Baekhyun let Minhyung down from his arms and he instantly rushed over to Chanyeol, hugging him around his neck.

“Uncle Yeol, play!”

“I'll play with you after I braid Hwayoung's hair, ok? You wanna play with Lottie for now?”

“Yeah! Lottie, Lottie!”

The pig had been resting at Chanyeol's side, but as soon as he heard his name being called, he got up and began running around as Minhyung chased him, giggling wildly. Baekhyun sighed and sat down beside Sehun, and Minseok and Jongin plopped down beside him.

“I still don't know how that kid came out of Minseok,” Baekhyun sighed. “He's so high energy!”

“He's still your kid,” Minseok reminded him.

“Yunhee seems really calm,” Junmyeon commented, lifting Jinsun's stomach off the ground as he started to get frustrated.

“She is,” Minseok said, looking at her affectionately. “I guess it's hard to believe she came from Baekhyun.”

“Hey!” Baekhyun whined. Minseok laughed and stuck his tongue out at him.

“So how has everyone been?” Minseok asked next. It's been a while since our last visit!”

“Great,” Junmyeou said simply. “The kingdom is doing better than it has been in years, and thanks to Jongin, we have a train system now.”

“It's still not completed throughout the whole kingdom and outer regions, but it's going well,” Jongin explained.

“Yeah, that's what we took to get to the central kingdom,” Baekhyun said. “After that an iron steed picked us up. That's your design too. Leaving your mark all over the kingdom, aren't you, Jongin~”
“He's talented like that,” Chanyeol sighed, smiling at Jongin.

“Alright lovebirds, get a room,” Baekhyun teased. He turned to Sehun and smiled at the baby in his arms.

“And you? How are you doing Sehun?”

“I'm really happy,” Sehun said shyly. He leaned closer to Junmyeon. “I love my kids and I love my husband...”

“Awww, that's the most honest I've ever seen you!” Baekhyun cooed. Minseok gave him a disciplining look. “Sorry, you were just really cute, I couldn't help it...I'm really happy for you though, Sehun.”

Sehun blushed but nodded. Junmyeon wrapped his free arm around him and kissed his cheek. After that, they settled the kids down to either play with Lottie or eat food, and they began to picnic together. Minseok sighed at one point, enjoying the breeze. He'd never gotten to spend so much time relaxing in the garden, but after living in Nefret, the garden felt like the closest thing to home. He smiled at Junmyeon, who met his gaze curiously.

“It's all thanks to you that we can be like this, Junmyeon,” Minseok said gently. “You changed the kingdom, like you promised.” Junmyeon shook his head.

“This could never have happened without all of you. You made this future possible, and every one of you was irreplaceable. I'm so grateful for all of you, and I love you all. Thank you for being my family, and standing by each other's sides no matter what happened.”

The group smiled at him and Sehun shoved a piece of bread into his mouth, fussing at him to eat instead of being such a sap. Laughter erupted through the garden, a sound that hadn't been heard in the palace in a long time. Everything was different now though, and they would continue to work towards a bright future. A new dawn was rising over the kingdom of Reilania.

Chapter End Notes

Here it is guys ;; The final chapter of A New Dawn Rises, complete with a soft fluffy ending OTL. This story has been such a huge project for me, it's kinda weird for it to be over. This has turned out to be my longest fanfic I've ever written at a whopping 135k words XP I am fried lol! But I'm really proud of this story and had so much fun writing it!

I can't believe how much love and support this story got as well. You guys have been amazing. I didn't expect much for this story since it focuses on 3 couples each at different points of the story, but it got so much love. I really can't thank you guys enough ;; I'm so happy you all loved and stuck with this story, and I got to meet a lot of new, amazing people through this fic too! I love talking to everyone that left a
comment and I'm so grateful for the support this story has received. So thank you all so, so much :3 You made this story even more of a joy to post!

I'm gonna take another little break to recharge and write some things before I start posting again, but don't worry! I'm never gone for too long lol! I've already started writing more stories, but it takes time for me to write in advance XP Until then, you're welcome to chat with me! If you want to see my random ramblings as well as updates (and whining lol) about future fics, my twitter (@Fan_Of_TA) is the best place to find me these days! So long for now everyone and I hope you enjoyed the final chapter of A New Dawn Rises!!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!