The Swan Prince

by E_A_Adrem

Summary

pledge IV

clause I

from the Kingdom of Noseraas to its inhabitants

No one with the markings of a male, shall or will, marry another person of the same gender unless—and only when—he is chosen to wed the Emperor's firstborn son, by the firstborn himself.
This is not the story of a boy who changed the world but of a boy whose life was changed.

"Ghosts live here."

The rickety old door was pushed open to reveal an entryway littered with cobwebs.

"Good thing for you." The gentleman stepped into the cottage. An explosion of dust motes careened over the dank space. "I don't believe in them." He whistled—"What a mess."—and proceeded to pluck a string dangling from one of the overhead beams. A rain of dust came toppling down onto his boots and up his freshly pressed trousers. He sneered at the floor.

"I would advise you not to touch anything until we're in agreement that you'll be buying the house," came the feeble voice of the other man. The light from outside framed his hunched-over silhouette. He planted his cane firmly on the ground with each successive step further into the dimly lit abode.

The younger bowed in apology. "Though, I can't imagine anyone's lived here before." He took note of the mismatched towels hung up over the kitchen wall's curved gap. Of the four, one was a purple so vibrant that he postulated the color had been nothing short of man-made. "At least, not anytime soon."

"You're right. It's been a few decades since my last tenant."

The gentleman grimaced. "Decades?" He laughed to ease the flurry of doubt within but the sound came out stilted. He directed his gaze to the stone hearth at the forefront of the living room. "What a beautiful area." He dusted the bricks with the back of his hand. "Did you know? Most homeowners these days tend to favor blanketing up in fear of calling upon Cserx to grant them a year's worth of warm fires." He finished with swiping his white handkerchief over the area he was planning to take a seat on.
The old man remained attentive to the seemingly bottomless, black pit within the hearth. There were only three logs curled up around the ashes like he had last left them. "Someone died there."

The gentleman screeched as he stood straight back up.

"No, not there. Over there." The old man pointed to the other half of the hearth.

"Mr. Jeon, please." The gentleman reached down to pluck the handkerchief from the hearth's stones. "Enough with your games."

Jungkook smiled. He reached up to rub the back of his wrinkly hand over the parched skin on his cheek. "Do you know the story of the swan?"

"That silly nursery rhyme?" The gentleman scoffed. "Clearly. There's not a child within the city of Noseraas who hasn't. A 'tried and true' warning to be on one's best behavior lest the Wombledon Witch curse you."

Jungkook pulled a chair up to the center of the fireplace. He sat facing the entryway. "But do you know the story of the swan?"

"You don't mean an animal has a tale to tell?" He furrowed his eyebrows, a grimace pulling either corner of his puckered lips tight over his face.

Jungkook smiled softly.

Three turns of the sun until Saturday. Jungkook stepped over a shrubbery. A thrush darted past. In his haste to make a path for the speeding bird, he tripped over the coiled roots of a very familiar plant. Eyes alight, Jungkook turned his head around to see that his original assumption held true. Pressed in around a pile of fallen twigs was a Gojak tree.
Measuring no more than a foot in height, the tree's rope-like branches held a scattered cluster of ripe Gojak's—violet berries whose thick, outer skin changed color with each new peel. Tiny raised bumps along the flesh were what gave the fruit its scrumptious flavor. The stories went that the Gojak's were so much a rarity that even the King of some neighboring country never had them lined up during a feast.

Jungkook swallowed the clump of saliva that had begun to settle over his tongue. Like a pup who had found a group of chickens to chase around the village square, he flipped over. Ignoring the dirt at his knees, he crawled forward until the tip of his nose nearly bumped into the bark. The smell oozing off of the wood reminded him of the time Uncle had accidentally spilled a bottle of rum over the rose-scented candle he had set out for the lady he had brought over that weekend.

Jungkook was just about to reach for a Gojak when the roar of thunder overhead pulled him from the task at hand. He looked up at the sky to see the light gray from this morning's drizzles shifting into a gapless black. Had night fallen so soon? Jungkook gasped. Uncle would come in search of him with a whip if he didn't hurry back to the river soon.

With haste, Jungkook plucked as many of the triangular-shaped fruits as he could fit inside his dingy vest without squishing them. The sky above clapped. He jumped. In turning to head back the way in which he had come, the shallow bleating of a sheep carried over into his ears. Jungkook stopped. A Gojak slipped out of his grasp and plopped onto the ground with a hollow thud. He furrowed his eyebrows. Gojak's aren't meant to sound hollow.

The bleating sounded off once more. A cluster of trees with thick, green bushels obscured the forest beyond. Without waste, Jungkook hurried over to the trees. On top of a mound of compacted dirt was a lamb whose leg had been tied to a wooden crate with rope. Jungkook gasped.

The lamb continued bleating. Her round, dark eyes captured Jungkook's molten brown ones. Jungkook let the Gojak's fall from his vest. They tumbled down the mound of dirt. He had just taken to his knees when the crate transformed into a treasure chest teeming with monies of all sorts—from rubies, emeralds and sapphires to the more elusive Rhurb.

With this much wealth, maybe he could convince Uncle to let him leave. Seven days' worth of welding were beginning to take a toll on his body in ways he could never have imagined. The most worrisome was losing his ability to see at a distance.

The lamb whimpered.

Drawn from the tumultuous clamber of thoughts in his head, Jungkook gave the lamb a firm nod.
How dare he give in to his selfishness when something was in desperate need of help.

Jungkook was reaching for the rope when a loud crash reverberated through the calm quiet. He looked up to find the trees had curved in around him; their branches twisted in such a way to reveal a number of frightening faces that leered at him. Eyes on the trees, Jungkook reached for the lamb. His hand grasped something that trailed over his fingers like ink through water. He directed his gaze to the lamb in time to see that its appearance had morphed into a black canvas of something so unnaturally dark a chill swept over his body. The ink-like substance trickled away into the ground.

"How dare you trespass onto my land with such vile intentions."

Jungkook turned around to find a figure swaddled in the same black matter the lamb had been. He retreated until his back smacked into something rock hard. He dared not look back.

The darkness seeped away from the looming figure to reveal a beautiful woman whose facial features seemed to have been carved from the finest opal. Two large, thick horns the color of food burned onto a skillet curved behind her skull like the smoke left over from an open fire. Lavender hair looped around her horns. The flowers entwined within were blooming 'cept for the one that sat closest to her scalp.

"You must have come in search of the infamous treasure." She drew near—"What other reason would you have to reach for the box first than to satisfy your own voracious greed."—and grabbed his chin. Jungkook shut his eyes. "Can't speak? What is it this time?" She slid her finger along his jawline. "Has the urge to soil my flesh with your filthy hands entrapped you so? Or could it be you're afraid." She glowered at him before yanking his head to the side. Jungkook's eyelids shot open.

A vibrant emerald fire flowed within the constraints of an invisible path carved underneath the flesh of her right cheek.

"What a beautiful face. Delicate. Gentile. Trustworthy." She leaned in as if to kiss Jungkook. "Tell me." She brushed a thumb over his plump bottom lip. "If you had been born a girl, would you have cried?"

The woman pulled away. She stood and shoved her hand into the tree trunk nearest her. The tree shuddered before shooting a spark of splinters up her arm. Jungkook watched with frightened eyes. Not a single shard of wood was managing to blemish her skin.
The splinters took on the shape of a staff. At the top was a swan whose head had been replaced with the hilt of a knife.

"Swans mate for life. They bring eternal happiness to the one they fall in love with." She thrust the staff at Jungkook. A green mist encircled his wrists, pinning his arms together and raising them high up above his head. Jungkook squirmed around to free himself but the mist seared into his flesh with each movement. "From this day onward, you must make the person you love fall in love with you. If not, your body will sprout feathers as white as the first layer of snow across the Hort River. You'll grow a beak. Your physique will change. And then you'll no longer be." The swan twisted its neck so that the hilt pointed at Jungkook's heart.

Jungkook dug his heels into the ground. If only he could stand. Maybe then he could overpower her.

"Such is the fate of a degenerate. Respect me who has no name."
pledge IV

clause II

Every sound and able-bodied man and woman will marry in order to partake in a domestic lifestyle together. If and when any pairing of the same sex is discovered to be in a communal relationship under one roof, both persons involved will be subject to defamation by the general public.

When Jungkook came to he was laying amongst a pile of dried leaves that smelled faintly of the apple pie his neighbor liked to bake every Sunday morning.

His nostalgia was short-lived as the events from the forest consumed his conscious. He pressed his cheek to the ground. The smell of damp dirt did little to calm his racing mind.

"Such is the fate of a degenerate."

The nausea in Jungkook’s stomach churned. Not only had the woman misunderstood his actions but he himself had been unable to explain. He jabbed his canine into his lower lip. The blood from the knick intermingled with his tears as they trailed into the corner of his mouth. The taste reminded him so much of home.

Jungkook took one last step forward before his legs gave way to the trembling in his muscles. He collapsed onto the ground. Streaks of sunlight poured over his being. He closed his eyes to see if a nap would conceal the worries that threatened to eat him whole but his belly had other plans. His stomach twisted around the hollow space where a meal or two would be most welcome.
Jungkook glanced up at the sky. He couldn't see past the branches and their leaves. The incessant rumbling in his stomach dragged him to his feet. Sleep would have to wait.

He drew closer to the sound of running water. Jungkook used whatever force he could pull from deep within and sprinted the rest of the way to the gap in the trees. He dashed through and kept running well after his shoes had sunk into the water. He dropped to his knees and drank as much as his stomach could hold before trudging back up the slope. He found a boulder that looked out over the clear blue stream.

Jungkook looked up. The sky was clearer than he had ever seen before. He had his reasons for never gazing up past his shoes on the off-chance that he was allowed to accompany his uncle outside and they were all because of Uncle.

Jungkook sighed. He pushed his legs out from underneath his chin; taking careful inventory of the state of his clothes. His breeches were two tones darker than the standard navy color, his white socks were dingy with the dirt from his trek through the forest and his coat sleeves had a number of slits where he had come into contact with a thorn or two.

His stomach growled. He hung his head low. He had thought he would have been able to find a fish or two to catch but now all he could do was mentally laugh at the idea. Even if he had, there was no way he was ever going to capture one. He didn't know how.

From beyond the line of trees appeared someone with a basket of apples perched on their hip. Jungkook practically toppled over in his hurry to hide behind his coat. How hadn't he heard the approaching footsteps? He pressed a finger to his ear. Was his hearing that bad?

A soft tune flowed out from within the stranger's throat. The song sounded exactly like the one Jungkook's mother used to lull him to sleep with as a baby. He sat up before he could let the sadness crawl into his being.

Jungkook's attention returned to the stranger. He felt a familiar warmth spread over his cheeks as his eyes landed on the person's well-endowed behind. Was this being a woman or a man? He recalled what Uncle had said to do when someone's appearance couldn't be verified through their appearance.

"Jungkook, boy. Take them by the ass and give those cheeks a good squeeze. If she makes the sweetest noise your ears will ever hear than you'll be cursed not to think she's a woman." He had chugged down another bottle of rum before relaying the rest of his theory. "If he turns around to land a blow than you best run away because that there is a full-fledged man."
Jungkook fidgeted with his lapel. He didn't doubt the truthfulness of Uncle's words. He had seen the trick work in favor of his finding a woman each and every time but the gesture seemed inconsiderate. Not to mention crude. What if someone didn't like being touched from behind?

Jungkook pushed a puff of air out through his nostrils. Forget this. What he wanted most was one of those succulent apples. He stored away his fear of being ignored before quietly slipping off of the rock. The sound of his beating heart displaced the sound of the wind careening through the trees. Not far from the stranger, Jungkook slowed his walk to a careful side-step of every rock and pebble that littered the land.

The stranger was bent forward—an apple shoved into the stream as he ran a thumb over the skin. There was the crunching of wood as a squirrel jumped from one branch to another.

Jungkook proceeded to switch his gaze from the basket to the person's bed of caramelized brown hair. The streaks of strawberry blond intermixed within rivaled the sun's magnificence. Jungkook hadn't thought the meeting out through to this point.

"Well? What is it?"

Jungkook registered that the voice was extremely deep. Almost near that of the sheep broker back home.

That aside, Jungkook still needed to find a way to ask the stranger for help without eliciting his rage.

"I won't ask again. Otherwise, I'll suspect you're only out here to steal my apples and for that, I'll have you arrested."

Jungkook swallowed. He didn't mean any trouble. He leaned over to snatch an apple from the basket. He would explain later. But the sole of his shoe slipped over the grime that coated the boulders.

Jungkook shoved his behind out and stretched his arms out as far as he could but the gestures did nothing to steady his stance. The loss in balance was instantaneous. He grabbed at the cloth tied around the stranger's waist before he fell back onto the grass. The man's eyes widened as he toppled over face-first into the stream.
Jungkook winced. There was something definitely wrong with his calf but he didn't dare check now. The stranger was unmoving. Crinkled eyebrows and a frown replaced Jungkook's pained expression. What had he done?

Not a second longer went by before the man burst free from the stream. He turned and glared at Jungkook with a wicked scowl spread tight over his impeccable features. A piece of bark stuck to the crown of his head.

Jungkook stumbled back. He ripped a pile of grass from the ground and threw it at the stranger as he came to stand above him.

"I see you're not a thief but a skirt stealer." He stepped on Jungkook's chest. Jungkook shook his hands.

"Well, you're carp out of luck because I'm not a girl!" He swung the flap on his skirt wide open. Jungkook shoved his arms over his eyes.

The man growled. "Look at me, damn it. I'm a man. I'm wearing pants." He nudged Jungkook's hand. "This is an apron, I'm wearing." No response. "What kind of person would you even take me for to brazenly brandish my lady bits to a man in the middle of somewhere!" Spittle flew out of his mouth.

Jungkook flinched. What had he gotten himself into? He waited until the man's ragged breathing slowed before lowering his arms to steal a glance at his assailant. Unruly hair, brown eyes and a pair of lips that gleamed in the shade. The only blemish to be found rested on the corner of his eye.

The man's eyes drew closed into slits. "Can't speak? What? Did Nomera come and steal your tongue in the middle of the night?"

Jungkook shook his head. He couldn't speak. No matter how much he wanted to he had never been given the opportunity to try. At least, not while under the care of Uncle.

The man sighed. He made sure to punctuate each stomp down the slope with a grumble. Jungkook stood and slid a hand through his hair. Something wet and sticky greeted his fingers. He grimaced. His hand came back with a smudge of mud.
With a fumbling gait, Jungkook approached the man who was busily plopping his apples back into the basket. Jungkook looked over the Drit he had pulled from his coat pocket. Prior to accompanying Uncle on the errand, he had been tasked with completing, Jungkook had completed yet another transaction. He hadn't had time to hand the money over to Uncle. Maybe Uncle would come in search of him for that reason alone. Jungkook shook the thought away. He liked the idea of living without him.

The man took notice of the red coin. He glowered. "You're not from here."

Jungkook took the man's hand and placed the coin in the center of his palm. A pensive mark formed on the skin between his eyebrows.

"We use Jorps here. Besides,"—The man reached out to pluck the coin from his hand—"I don't want your money." Jungkook pulled back with a frown. What person didn't like money? Even the sweet old lady who used to feed the birds around the fountain had said money was a necessary evil.

Jungkook's stomach growled.

The man sighed. "Would you like an apple?"

Jungkook made an excited sound as he leaned forward for a bow.

The man quickly shot out of the way before Jungkook's head could knock into his stomach. "Chop, don't you talk?"

Jungkook shook his head. He glanced up to find the man eyeing him with a cool detachedness. Jungkook quickly looked back down, his ears flushing red. What did he think of him? Did he hate him for not being able to speak? Jungkook stood there for some time wondering if anyone would miss him when a light bop on the back of his head pulled him from his thoughts. He stood up straight to find the stranger's hand outstretched towards him.

Jungkook took the apple. The droplets rolling off of the orange-red skin gleamed underneath the sun's vibrant rays. He looked up to thank the stranger with a smile but the man had already moved on.
Jungkook sped after him.

"Don't you have somewhere you need to be?"

Uncle's face popped into his head. Jungkook shook his head.

The stranger pursed his lips. After a moment's deliberation, he spoke up. "Why don't I treat you to a meal?"

Jungkook burst into a grin. A smushed bit of apple came tumbling out of his mouth. The man grimaced. Jungkook looked away embarrassed. Maybe this man wouldn't mind having him around.
"My name is Taehyung."

Jungkook fidgeted with his fingers. The man had yet to say whether or not to come in. The wind chimes hanging over Taehyung's mantel tolled twelve times. Taehyung turned to face Jungkook. "Aren't you coming in? The bugs will get in."

Jungkook dipped his head forward. He practically smacked into the wall in his rush to close the door behind him. Taehyung shook his head.

Jungkook watched Taehyung disappear around the wall up ahead. His eyes landed on the stream of colorful pebbles embedded into the mantle. The cottage back home had a fireplace but Uncle was always much too stubborn to light the fire. He believed Cserx—the God of fire who granted longevity to humans during the harsh winters—was a farce.

"You're welcome to take a seat anywhere you'd like."

Jungkook thought back on Taehyung's name. Unlike his, the syllables flowed much more freely. He felt a twinge of sadness crash into his heart. Would Taehyung let him speak? Would he mind hearing his voice? If there was one thing Jungkook knew best was that you needed to have a charm of some sort to make yourself likeable. No one likes a bore. But what did he have to offer? He hadn't even a means of communication.

Jungkook pressed his fingers to his lips and blew a puff of air out through the puckered opening. What did his voice sound like to other people? He had never been able to tell because he had stopped trying to pronounce words around the age of seven.

"Are you okay with plant-based meats?"

Jungkook looked up to see Taehyung's upper half jutting out over the edge of the wall. Jungkook nodded. Truth be told, he had only ever had animal meat. Uncle would always go and buy pounds of pork or duck—lamb if it was in high demand—instead of saving the few extra Drits towards much-needed repairs around the shed. Jungkook thought about throwing Taehyung a grin but by then he had already retreated.
With slow sweeps of his eyes, Jungkook took careful inventory of the cottage as he ventured deeper inside. There wasn't much of anything to see. A wooden table whose varnish was peeling at the corners. Two stacks of books that rested on a wooden ledge set above a tiny tipi. A bar stool with a cushion whose seams were beginning to unravel and coil where the threads were thinnest. Off to his side were two windows—one on the wall connected to the fireplace and another closest to the only other visible door in the cottage.

"As you can see, my house is just the basics."

Jungkook swirled around to find Taehyung's frame blurred by a curtain of antique trinkets and colorful beads hanging from the kitchen entryway. The kitchen was sectioned off with a white brick wall that had a curved half-opening. Jungkook approached the gap. Seeing that there was a ledge connected to it on the other side, he stuck his hand in and gently rapped against the marble.

Taehyung carried the tomatoes he had been washing over to the ledge. "I don't know how to cook, either. So I apologize if what you're going to taste is horrible." Taehyung tilted his head to the side, eyes downcast on the knife that made smooth cuts through the vegetable's red flesh.

Taehyung's silky bangs flopped over to the right, revealing more of his immaculate skin. Two tiny scars cut through the corner of his left eyebrow. A small stud dotted his earlobe. Taehyung looked up. Jungkook quickly turned around. A zap of warmth shot over his face.

Placing his hands into his pockets, Jungkook ventured over to the mahogany cabinetry set up in the corner between both windows. The etching of a beautiful woman welcomed him. Long hair fell around her shoulders like silk drapes and a brocade composed of two arrowheads was pinned on the space just above her heart. Of particular interest was the tiny bird that perched on her shoulder. All of the birds he had come to approach would fly away before he could even think to greet them. How had she managed to make a bird pose for her?

Jungkook reached out to brush aside the spec of dust that hugged the frame's corner when a loud bang yanked him to the kitchen.

Taehyung was on his knees, a rag in hand as he quickly moved to dry up the water he had spilled. Jungkook dropped to his knees. Taehyung's eyes momentarily widened. "You'll mess up your clothes..." he mumbled under his breath as he slipped his apron off. Without warning, he reached over to tuck it underneath Jungkook's knees but Jungkook shooed him away.
"Stop," Taehyung said. "There's no need to make an even bigger mess of the situation."

Jungkook tipped his head forward. Even though this wouldn't be the first time he would be cleaning with his breeches, Jungkook didn't press the matter any further.

Not long after they had finished cleaning did the soup begin to boil. The smell of toasted garlic bread, fresh barley, and roasted nuts infiltrated the stagnant air. Jungkook took a seat on the hearth by Taehyung.

"You can sit at the table." When Jungkook did not budge, Taehyung added: "I'll be there as soon as this side of the tofu finishes searing."

Jungkook looked down at his bowl of tomato soup. He couldn't see his reflection. His hair must have been a mess.

"I promise."

Jungkook looked to Taehyung who was busy pressing his finger into the tofu to check for consistency. How could someone be so kind? To a stranger, no less. He hadn't done anything to deserve this kindness.

Jungkook carefully raised himself from his seat, arms outstretched to balance the bowl. He had just finished unfurling his right leg when a jolt of pain zipped through his calf. He winced. He slid his foot forward and the pain seized his muscles. He fell forward. The bowl of soup splashed against the wooden chair.

"You!" The metal pliers clanged against the stones as Taehyung rushed to Jungkook's side. "What's wrong?" Taehyung rolled him over. A new wave of blood was beginning to bloom around the splinter embedded into Jungkook's calf. Taehyung knocked on the back of Jungkook's head with a knuckle as he stood to walk away. "I'll be right back."

Jungkook listened in to the sound of Taehyung's heels clacking against the floorboards as he retreated further and further away. He bit down on his lip until the pain gave him somewhere to focus. He hated to think that he had messed up something that rightfully belonged to Taehyung. How much clumsier could he get?
Moments later, Taehyung returned with a basket full of medical items. He cleared the table before helping Jungkook onto the tabletop. "Lay down." Jungkook was beginning to do just that when he felt Taehyung's warm fingers grip his forearm. "Face-forward." Even though this position left him vulnerable, Jungkook did as told.

After cleaning and dressing the wound, Taehyung handed Jungkook a corked bottle teeming with petals from a Jenepia. "Should help with relaxing you," Taehyung said when he noticed Jungkook hadn't yet taken a sip of the yellowish liquid. "The Jenepia is a flower that comes from the mountains. Freshest flower you'll ever come across."

Jungkook took a sip. The taste was like having a piece of chocolate slipped into your stuffed mouth: there yet subtle.

Afterwards, they sat through a quiet dinner together. Jungkook wanted to reach out and apologize to Taehyung but even if he could, he wouldn't know how to string the words in his head together. The thought of communicating with Taehyung in baby talk left a defeated feeling behind.

"Don't be sad about it."

Jungkook looked up, startled. Had he...

"The rug can be washed and the chair can be wiped with a wet rag."

Oh. Of course.

Taehyung looked up from his plate full of tofu and radishes. "Okay?"

Jungkook nodded. He pointed to the rag strewn over the hearth and then to the floor while he swirled his hands around.

Taehyung cocked his head to the side. "You want to... clean up?"

Jungkook jumped in his seat. His torso bumped into the table. The silverware clanged against the wood. He hung his head in apology.
"Finish eating first."

Jungkook gave a firm nod, eyes alight. He returned to cutting through his own tofu; completely oblivious to the way a delicate smile played over Taehyung's lips.

Taehyung looked out the window as he finished the last of his soup. The first strokes of dust had already settled over the land. He sighed. Another night without rain. He turned to face Jungkook who was seated facing the fire. "Since it's already this late, why don't you stay the night. Tomorrow morning you can head on your way."

Jungkook nodded. He didn't have anywhere to go and as much as he would have loved to stay in this stranger's care, the reality was that he had no right to intrude on Taehyung's life.

After the household tasks were completed, Taehyung guided Jungkook over to the bathroom. "Do you know how to work the faucets?"

Jungkook pretended to turn a knob in the air.

Taehyung nodded. "Left is for cold in case the water is too hot." The door thudded shut behind him.

Jungkook lowered himself into the tub. The ends of his shoulder-length hair sprawled over the surface of the water like the coils of a tendril newly-formed. The soft smell of Jasmine had yet to loosen its grip on his nose. He took a deep breath in. The sight of that woman's lavender hair flashed before his mind. He snapped his eyelids open but the fear in his brain did not relent.

The image continued to materialize until he saw her in her entirety; dark, menacing. Jungkook struggled to rid himself of the images from earlier. He shut his eyes. And re-opened them. He sunk into the water until the bridge of his nose was close to being submerged completely. The image of the lamb dispersed replaced instead with a hurried need for air. After a moment's deliberation, Jungkook burst free from the water. He grabbed either side of the tub until the muscles in his fingers screamed for him to release his grip.

Such is the fate of a degenerate.
Sitting upright, Jungkook wrapped his arms around his legs and laid his forehead to the tops of his knees. What had he done wrong? Jungkook couldn't understand how someone would hurt that woman to the point of breakage. He hoped she could find reason to rediscover the beauty carved into this boring world but what he really wanted most was to break the curse. What did falling in love feel like? Surely, he would recognize the feeling.

Jungkook trudged back to Taehyung's room. Thick droplets of water plopped onto the ground.

"You should dry your hair..." Taehyung swiveled around in his chair. "Wait. I don't know your name. Is there any way you can tell me?"

Jungkook feebly shook his head.

"So you can't read or write?"

Jungkook looked away. He was so useless. All he could do was draw. And even than his artistic ability was that of a newborn calf leaving her first marks on the mud.

Taehyung pulled Jungkook over to the desk. He sat him down in the chair previously occupied by himself. "Wait here. I'll be back in a minute. And dry your hair," he called over his shoulder.

Jungkook's eyes lingered on the door for several seconds before he turned back to the desk. He faced the notebook Taehyung had been writing in earlier. A series of figures with big bellies and thin backs greeted his vision. A thoughtful line appeared in the space between Jungkook's eyebrows. The tip of the goose feathers stem was coated with a black substance. He reached out to grab ahold of the feather when smack! went something behind him.

Jungkook flipped around in his seat to see Taehyung shoving the chair in through the door frame. He shot up to help.

Taehyung shooed him away. "I told you to wait, didn't I?" he said as he carried the chair over to the desk.
Jungkook looked down at his shoes.

"Ah. Please don't be like that. I'm not scolding you." Taehyung placed the chair next to Jungkook's. "Come, take a seat. There's something you should know before you leave."

Taehyung pointed to the cluster of figures Jungkook had been examining earlier. "These are numbers. But what you'll be acquainting yourself today with is..."—a crisp sound cut through the silence as Taehyung turned the page—"the alphabet!" He grinned at Jungkook. "Do you think you could tell me your name if I show you the alphabet?"

Jungkook moved his head up and down. Was he dreaming? He would be able to express himself. His heart swelled.

Taehyung placed his hand on the table, palm-up. "Lend me your hand."

Jungkook felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as he slid his fingers into Taehyung's much warmer hand. He looked away, hoping that Taehyung wouldn't comment on the rough patches of skin scattered over his hands.

"I'll need you to look this way if you're going to understand what I'm saying."

A blush crept up the back of Jungkook's neck. He turned his head back around to see Taehyung had already slid something into his hand. "Let your hand take to the pen. Don't force your grip. Else you'll always get cramps." Taehyung proceeded to bend Jungkook's fingers until they embraced the pencil at a correct angle. "Does this feel uncomfortable?"

Jungkook shook his head. Strange, yes. But not uncomfortable. Or maybe he hadn't yet made out the difference between these two words.

"Okay. Good. Because this is how you hold a writing utensil."

Taehyung sat up, the soles of his mules sliding against the floorboards as he moved the pot of ink up closer. "Not much different from grabbing a soup spoon or knife, right?"
Jungkook smiled. He tapped on the pencil in his hand. The decorative leaf glued to the top bounced.

By the time Taehyung had finished sounding off all 26 characters of the alphabet to Jungkook, they had managed to find that his name was a very uncommon one. "History goes that Amendment Q was created to keep people from naming their children Jeonghwan but the clause did little to deter that. So Amendment Q became Pledge XVII." Jungkook watched as Taehyung's hand flew over the paper. Every curve was punctuated with a light lift. Almost like waltzing.

When Taehyung's hand stopped, Jungkook's name had been rewritten at the top of the page in cursive. Beautiful.

"You should practice whenever you get the chance."

Taehyung smiled. Jungkook's heart fluttered. That boxy smile really was the cutest thing after baby ducklings.

#

Jungkook jolted awake in the middle of the night. The back of his nightshirt was soaked in sweat despite the coolness teeming around the small bedroom. He rubbed a hand through his hair as he sat up. Thoughts of Taehyung crossed his mind. Had he woken him up?

With careful but sure steps, Jungkook climbed down the bunk bed's wooden rungs. At the foot of the bed, he glanced at Taehyung. He was drooling on his pillow. Jungkook smirked as he headed out to use the restroom next door.

Seconds after relieving himself of the fluids in his bladder, Jungkook headed for the kitchen. A drink of cold water sounded like the perfect solution to his throbbing headache but he didn't know where the dirt mug was. He resigned himself to drinking tasteless water from the faucet.

As he drifted off to sleep, Jungkook wondered if Taehyung could love him given his shortcomings. Jungkook would do anything to stay with Taehyung—the home that allows him to express himself without an ounce of judgment or hatred.
Chapter End Notes

Hope whoever is reading, enjoys.
“So make sure you don’t take the path littered with cobblestones,” Taehyung said as he finished wrapping a slice of yesterday’s pie. He looked over at Jungkook who had been standing in the corner of the kitchen for some time now. “Do you have everything?”

Jungkook nodded. Taehyung had given him a soft blanket and enough food to supply him for an entire day, when, in reality, all he needed was some water and a fruit or two. At least, if Jungkook were to believe he could make it to the city before nightfall.

At the door, Jungkook stopped to stare at Taehyung’s wooden shoes. Two tiger’s heads were embroidered on the toe caps with colorful, vibrant threads similar in thickness and coarseness to that of a spider’s silk. Even though Jungkook had only known Taehyung for a little over a day, he couldn’t imagine not coming home to him and those dazzling shoes.

“Hey.” Jungkook looked up. Taehyung was smiling at him. Him, of all people. Jungkook zeroed in on his earring to keep from focusing on his moist lips. “Twas nice meeting you.”

Jungkook nodded. He glanced up at Taehyung’s impeccable face. Something pushed against his chest. He realized that it was his heart.

Moments after Taehyung shut the door, Jungkook turned around to see the cottage for the final time in what he knew would be forever. He had promised himself he wouldn’t look. Jungkook opened his mouth to say Taehyung’s name but only a warble of noise escaped his chapped lips. He stood there for the length of some time before pursing his lips and with a dismissive shake of his head, venturing on into the forest.

Jungkook found himself looking out over a large plot of land when the sky erupted into a fury of pelting raindrops. He hunched over as he slapped Taehyung’s crudely drawn map over his head. Without being able to see very far in front of him, Jungkook dashed off in the direction he had come in hopes of finding Taehyung’s cottage for temporary shelter. Halfway there, he felt something slide into his shoe. He looked down to see he had stepped into a growing pile of mud oozing out from around a thick tree trunk. As he struggled to loosen his foot, he failed to notice that the land sloped downwards. With one last heave forward, his foot slipped out of the shoe and he tumbled forward into a shallow stream of mud and twigs of varying states of matter. By the time he realized that the thing he held balled up in his hand was Taehyung’s map, the figures and letters were no longer recognizable.
Jungkook trudged to a slow before the faintly familiar stoop. He pressed his back to the cottage wall before letting gravity drag him to the floor. With a voiceless sigh, he brought his knees up to his chin. The rain continued to pour over the darkened forest. Jungkook couldn't bring himself to acknowledge the map tucked into the pit of his folded legs and so he continued looking out over the murky space, his strands of wet hair obscuring a good portion of what he could see.

The front door opened. Jungkook looked up to see Taehyung stepping out of the cottage with an orange tabby in hand. "Look at that, Emille." Taehyung shut the door behind him. "S'rainin' har-

Taehyung stopped and stared at the muddied, wet boy who sat hunched over himself in the outermost corner of his stoop. "Jungkook! Oh, my constellations."

Jungkook looked away, suddenly aware of what he must look like.

"Are you okay?" Taehyung asked as he set Emille down. "If I had known it was going to rain, I wouldn't have sent you out there."

Jungkook looked to the side. Taehyung had changed his shoes to a pair of plain beige loafers. You're not mad?

"Come on inside."

But I put your hard work to waste.

"You can take a bath while I make a soup."

But I'll get your house dirty.

"Come now. There are no evil Gofens inside."

Gofens? What are those? Jungkook looked up into Taehyung's face and offered him a meek smile.
As Jungkook clasped the last of the buttons on Taehyung's canvas-like shirt, he looked up into the mirror. The idea of Taehyung having seen him muddied and dirty left him feeling deflated. Of course, Taehyung didn't seem like the type to care but Jungkook had only known him for the span of a day and some hours so who knows what he was truly thinking. Jungkook pushed his damp tresses away from his face before heading out into the dining room.

"Are you finished?" Taehyung asked as he pushed his head through the kitchen's makeshift curtain. "Wow."

Jungkook's eyes dropped down to the table. The bottle of Jenepia from yesterday rested in between a spool of gauze and a basket. "You can keep that shirt." Taehyung's laugh came from deeper within the kitchen.

Jungkook looked up with wide eyes. What did Taehyung mean? Jungkook had thought he would comment on how unfitting sharing shirts between strangers is.

"Let's get that wound checked up before I go."

Jungkook swallowed. He pointed to the door before pretending to walk away.

Taehyung grinned. "That's right. I work. Now that the rain has let up, there's no excuse for me not to show up." He took a seat on the hearth. "But don't let anyone know." He threw his head back and laughed a laugh so loud that Jungkook couldn't help but drink in the sight with his eyes.

As soon as Taehyung left, Jungkook took to practicing the alphabet on the used napkins from earlier. He wrote really tiny in case Taehyung didn't show up sooner than later.

Jungkook committed his name to memory before moving on to practicing what he thought Taehyung's name would be written like. He jumped from fruits to eating utensils to dates and articles of clothing before coming to a slow on the types of ingredients Taehyung had used to create his past two meals. He had made him a rice porridge soup earlier that had undoubtedly tasted nothing short of disgusting.

Jungkook smiled to himself. If he were being honest, his rice porridge never tasted all that great,
either. He spent the rest of Taehyung's time away rummaging through his kitchen. Differences in character aside, there was bound to be some likeness between stomachs.

After what had only seemed like an hour-long nap, Jungkook awoke to the sound of a door opening. He sat up and remembered where he was upon seeing the colorful glass flower hanging over the open stove.

"Jungkook!" Taehyung hollered from the foyer. "I have a surprise."

Jungkook stood up and pretended like he was intent on looking out through the window when Taehyung walked up to him. Jungkook jumped.

"Sorry," Taehyung mumbled. "Were you deep in thought?"

Jungkook shook his head.

"Oh, right. Maybe I'm acting too familiar..." Taehyung sucked in his teeth as he turned to look at Jungkook with a distasteful expression. He scratched the back of his head. "Let me know if I'm making you feel uncomfortable."

Jungkook shook his head. He grabbed the fountain pen from behind his ear and wrote down the simplest seven-letter word he had seen to date.

Taehyung smiled. "Okay," he singsonged as he swung the red cloth off of the basket. Inside was some type of confection in the shape of a carrot. "Time to eat."

As it turned out, Taehyung worked as a self-employed mediator between the Governing Body of Noseraas and the Aniing—the animals sub-classified with the intelligence equal to that of a human. Since much of the land still belonged to nature herself, the Aniing were proprietors of a grand percentage of the produce imported into the capital from the surrounding area. When Taehyung wasn't translating important documents for the Governing Body to understand, he was busy trying to make sense of the growing change in language. Where before every sound that poured out of the Aniing's mouths belonged to Pribet—the language spoken only amongst themselves—now they were becoming a warble of sounds teetering eerily close to that of the sounds used to pronounce words in Ciclanish—the Kingdom's official language.
"The language is dying, I tell you." Taehyung tapped one finger against the kitchen table as he let out a hearty sigh. "Guess change really is inevitable."

Jungkook reached out to grab ahold of Taehyung's hand but he shot up out of his chair before he could offer him the only type of reassurance he knew to give in situations like these. He wished he could say something.

"But, don't worry about it! I'm making it seem like a sob story and myself, a sap." Taehyung laughed out loud but the sound came out clipped. He sighed before turning to face Jungkook head-on. With a smile, he said: "Not all change is bad."

Jungkook felt that same unfamiliar feeling from before slam into his chest. What was this sensation coursing through his body and offering him the kind of warmth only accessible through a fire?

"What do you say we visit the barracks tomorrow afternoon? There's someone very special I want you to meet."

Taehyung flicked two fingers into the air—a gesture Jungkook had come to understand as meaning "well" or "great work."

Jungkook nodded. Who was this someone? Who had managed to make Taehyung feel like presenting them was an accomplishment worth exulting about?

Chapter End Notes

Cheers to whoever is along for this ride. Hope that you are having an amazing July and remember to take care of yourself. Another amazing month is soon upon us. <3
While Taehyung was at work, Jungkook tried to recite each curve and mark set out on the worn parchment before him.

Ciclanish.

An odd name for a language he had no reason to say was either beautiful or ugly. This was the only language he had ever been exposed to and even then, the words had been punctuated with a certain nuance that his Uncle had perfected well enough to the point of belonging only to him. A delicate smile tugged at the corner of Jungkook’s lips. What did feel good was being able to associate the object of his attention with a name as clear as the skin on Taehyung’s skin.

Jungkook sat back in his chair and sighed. How could he bring himself to tell Taehyung that he was the most beautiful boy he had ever met? Would he laugh? Quite possibly. Jungkook himself wasn’t very attractive, to begin with. A straight nose gave way to a pair of upper teeth that jutted out over his lower lip when he smiled. A set of small, round cheeks gave way to a jaw as wide as the mountains to the East. Add onto that a voiceless body and there wasn’t much else apart from his work ethic to propel him forward into a relationship of his own. His uncle was right. He was a brute. And a brute cannot love a star without snuffing out its light. He gripped the pencil.

After what seemed like several more hours of studying, Jungkook stood up and headed for the door. He stepped outside to find a cool breeze rustling through the surrounding trees. He glanced up at the chimes hanging over the entryway. Out of the twelve glass cylinders, ten were currently illuminated by the sun’s warmth. As Taehyung had stated before his departure, at 12 o’clock, all twelve should dazzle with colors crafted from the sun’s brilliant rays.

“Jungkook!” From the base of the clearing, Taehyung appeared. His head was bent over to the side, his hands intent on scouring through the contents of his knapsack. “I’ve got another gift from Mrs. Nundaberry. She sends her best regards and hopes to meet you soon.” Taehyung continued walking forward, completely oblivious to the ginormous potted plant he was heading straight for.

“Taehyung, wait, you’ll—”

Taehyung looked up in time to see the object of Jungkook’s worry. He slammed to a halt and with a staccato laugh, turned to look at Jungkook with an embarrassed smile. “Almost fell there, didn’t I?
Good thing I have you to nurse me back to health.”

Jungkook flushed red. What did he mean? What-

“Can you guess what the surprise is this time?”

Jungkook shook his head. Taehyung grinned as he slipped the yellow fabric away from his outstretched palm. “Muffins!” he shouted. “And scones, too. Whole lot of ‘em.”

Jungkook bobbed his head up and down. Taehyung was a child the most when it came to eating. A wise and favorable idea popped into his head just then. The flush running over his body concentrated at the base of his stomach. He pinched the side of his shirt. Now was the time to be excited.

“Let’s snack on these before going to see that someone special I promised you.” Taehyung winked.

The boys had barely just sat down when Jungkook reached for the rag set out on the center of the table. Over the rim of his mug, Taehyung watched as Jungkook wrote something into the uppermost corner of the stained rag.

Jungkook held up the rag. Taehyung leaned in. “Powo?” His lips popped open. “Power! That’s great, Jungkook.”

Jungkook looked down momentarily before shaking his head. Any more compliments and he wouldn’t be able to contain his smile.

“But it ends with an er. Not that it matters much. I understood you.”

Jungkook shook his head.

“Oh.” Taehyung uncrossed his ankles. “That’s right. Why strive for less when we can have more?”

Jungkook nodded.
"Wait!" Taehyung snapped his fingers. "I understand. You’re curious. You want to know who's in power!"

Jungkook threw his ring and middle finger in the air. What he really wanted was to hear Taehyung's voice even if that meant playing the part of an ignorant fool.

"Well, there's a King. That King has two sons. And as for the oldest, let's just say he's not the greatest."

Jungkook cocked his head to the side. He reached for the rag and in taking a moment to collect his thoughts, wrote down the one symbol whose meaning he had chosen to carefully remember earlier that morning:

°|°

Taehyung threw his head back and laughed. "Take the line, flip it to the side and remove the uppermost circle."

Jungkook did as told but the result was less than favorable. Taehyung stood and guided Jungkook's hand along the rag to form the correct positioning. "There. Now you've got the symbol used to signify confusion." He grinned again. Jungkook caught a whiff of the barley mint he had been chewing on.

"There are star-studded awful rumors about him. For one, he's said to have ravaged a northern village's entire economy by burning the land they need to grow their only export. Mrs. Huerne was devastated when she told me about her brother. He was forced to give up his citizenship when he couldn't meet that year's special quota of Jenepia for the King. The prince has also slaughtered animals in front of a group of Aniing for show and taken a keen interest in the Kingdom's internal affairs, only to end up depleting as much of the internal revenue as he can before the turn of the frost. There's a lot more, too. Best of all?"

Jungkook swallowed the ball of saliva that had accumulated in his mouth. He couldn't quite understand Taehyung's revulsion with the eldest prince. They were only just rumors. If living with Uncle had taught him but one thing, it was to never judge a person without first getting to know them. Rumors are easily spread for a plethora of reasons. The truth?; only when people best identify with it.
Taehyung shook his head as he spoke. "He's been trying to court me."

Jungkook stared at Taehyung without really seeing him. Had he heard him right? Was the prince trying to court him?

Taehyung snatched the empty mug up off the table before storming into the kitchen with a prolonged groan. Jungkook took the moments thereafter to repeat Taehyung’s words in his head. He rubbed his palms against the starchy fabric of his trousers. What kind of feeling was pushing through his chest? He didn't have a name for it.

Taehyung reappeared with both cheeks puffed out. "What kind of a fool would take him up on his offer to court?" He dropped into his chair, the tea in his mug nearly splashing over onto the table. His scowl deepened. "Sad thing is that he has all the privilege of asking another male to an engagement of the romantic sorts." A pause. He sighed. "Pledge IV is in his defense."

Pledge IV? Jungkook opened his mouth to mimic Taehyung's words but Taehyung shot up off of his chair before he could so much as push out a puff of air. "I could never love him. But let's not dwell on that." All seriousness had vanished from his countenance as he turned to Jungkook. "Time to go see that friend!"

Jungkook nodded. As much as he didn't like the thought of admitting this to Taehyung now that he knew there were others who sought his heart, the truth was the truth and he couldn't change his thoughts on the matter at the spark of another's judgment.

Get to know the person. Make a fair basis. Everyone deserves an honest inspection to their own trial.

While Taehyung scoured through his room in search of a second coat, Jungkook wrote down the only word he knew would best encapsulate what he thought about the prince trying to court him. He ripped the corner from the paper and carefully folded it before tucking it into the makeshift pocket on the inside of his shirt.

Jungkook caught sight of something strange on his body. He looked down at his hands. The hardened places on his skin from years of welding and hammering stones were beginning to smooth out. His lips pressed against each other. When had he become this unworthy of another's love?

Chapter End Notes
Can anyone guess who the eldest prince is? Uhuhuhuuu
Upon approaching a long, rectangular brown box, Jungkook realized who they had come to see. The sound of neighing, grunting horses stroked his ears as they stepped into the stalls covered overhead with planks of varying shades of blue.

Taehyung greeted every horse as he ran past. He slowed to a crawl several paces away from a stall obscured in near darkness. With wide but sure-footed steps, he approached the wooden gate that concealed the lower-half from view.

"Niyva's bound to get upset if you keep her waiting any longer." From around the bend at the farthest end of the stables, a man appeared. As he stepped into the light, Jungkook noticed the dried blood stains covering his green jacket and brown pants.

"Did she survive the night?"

"Of course. You're talking about a horse who didn't sink in the river."

"When the weight of her load was intended to drown her."

The man sighed. "You know I don't bring it up to scold you."

Taehyung's shoulders began to tremble. Jungkook stepped forward, hand poised to grab him by the arm and pull him into an embrace when the heaving suddenly stopped. Taehyung swiveled around to face the stranger. His grin was spread so wide over his face that Jungkook felt like it might splinter if touched.

"Yah, I know!"

The man glowered at him. Taehyung popped his hands over his mouth and mumbled an apology. With a sheepish smile, he introduced the two.
"Jungkook, this is Hwiyeon. He's my very, very important stable hand. My children's guardian!"

Taehyung threw himself at Hwiyeon's arm. "What would I do without you?"

Hwiyeon stood still as Taehyung pretended to silently sob into his shoulder. Jungkook took the opportunity to peruse the man who stood two full heads taller than Taehyung. A green sleeve draped over his left shoulder like a cloth caught between the canes of a rose bush. Rusted brass buttons clung to his jacket and a gold chain hung limp from the left lapel. Brown corduroy boots stained with mud and fecal matter hugged his overwhelmingly large feet.


"Labor was intensive." Taehyung pulled back. He approached the stall and peeked over the edge of the wooden gate. "Bucketloads of blood loss. More than customary. Might be a while before she's able to walk again."

Jungkook blinked. Eyes as blue as the ocean stared back at him. He double-checked to make sure that what he had seen was not a play on the light coming in through the window. True enough to his startling discovery, Hwiyeon's eyes were blue. Did such a color exist? Come to think of it, was such a hair color even possible? His hair was as red as the strawberries found in the vineyard some walking distance away from his shop. So bright and tantalizing that Jungkook wondered why the baker back home had difficulty recreating the color in an artificial manner.

"The color should fade soon."

"What?" Taehyung turned to look at Hwiyeon. "What are you saying that for?" But it was Jungkook whom Hwiyeon had spoken to.

Jungkook blinked. He hadn't realized he had been staring. A blush spread over his cheeks.

"My cousin takes great pleasure in experimenting on my hair whilst I sleep." Hwiyeon's unsmiling face softened to reveal the glimmer of a smirk. "Too bad she forgets I don't frequent the city. Sorry, you had to see me like so."

Jungkook shook his head.
"Oh... You don't speak?"

"But he sure can write," Taehyung chimed in. "Right, Jungkook?"

Jungkook smiled without looking up from the sheet of paper he had grabbed on his way out of the house. Some of the ink had blurred together in his haste to communicate with the stranger.

"Do you happen to carry a pot of ink everywhere you go?"

Taehyung gasped. "So awfully crude, Hwiyeon."

"This is something I would have expected you to already know. That is if the two of you aren't complete strangers."

Taehyung groaned. "Not this again, Hwaby. The world is more than just a book. Stop taking notes." He started pushing Hwiyeon away. "Come on, Jungkook! Come meet the water to my glass."

Jungkook looked up, startled that either man hadn't waited to see his response. With a frown, he tucked his writing utensils away before hurrying after the two friends.

He turned the corner to find Taehyung struggling to get a horse's attention. Beige skin accentuated the creamy color of her mane. Two black rings dotted her hind.

"Niyva, please. Sweet girl, why do you hurt me so?"

Niyva continued munching on the mound of hay laid out before her.

"Talking to her like you're some poet isn't going to help, either."

Taehyung pretended to swing at Hwiyeon. "Oh, shut it."
Jungkook shuffled forward. "Don't look, Jungkook!" Taehyung pretended to shield himself from Jungkook's contemplative gaze. "This is embarrassing..." Niyva swung the side of her rump into Taehyung before walking away.

Jungkook’s soft smile faded into a look of surprise when he noticed where she was headed.

"Niyva, darling, wait! I haven't even introduced you two.” Taehyung fell to his knees as if struck by an arrow.

Hwiyeon sighed and took a seat on the dusty floor. The horse at his side sputtered before following his lead.

Jungkook swallowed as Niyva slid her nose underneath his hand. She urged him to pet her. Jungkook offered her a meek smile. Their eyes met. Jungkook’s world stilled. Do you know who I am? Her eyes were unwavering, contemplative masses of a sixth sense no human could ever obtain. Do you know what I carry inside? He pressed a kiss to her head and closed his eyes for the span of a brief second. Please. Let's keep this a secret between us.

#

Jungkook felt his heart hammering as he prepared to board Niyva. To think that he was going to feel Taehyung in front of him throughout the ride. His scent, his body, his laughter. Everything and anything would be his to immerse himself in as he pleases. Jungkook struggled to contain the warmth that consumed his body. Any second longer of this and he would have a hole in his chest to show for his feelings.

"Boy."

Jungkook looked over his shoulder to see Hwiyeon standing next to the black horse, rein in hand.

"You're with me."

Jungkook’s rampant heartbeat sputtered to a slow. He tried not to show his disappointment as he was helped onto the horse. Upon stroking her mane, he noticed two white rings sprawled out over the skin on her spine.
"Her name's Gina."

Jungkook's attention turned to Taehyung as he saddled up. His baggy pants had been replaced with pants that hugged every centimeter of his flesh. Where before his thighs were hidden, now they were on full display. Taehyung swept his left leg over Nivya's back with so much gentleness, Jungkook couldn't help but wonder if all of his touches were calm and caring. Almost like a swan. Jungkook froze.

Such is the life of a degenerate.

No. Not now of all times.

"Kook."

Jungkook looked back to find Hwiyeon staring at him. Jungkook blushed. What was it with this stranger and staring?

"Raise your arms."

Jungkook did as told. He was too immersed in the present situation to notice how Taehyung eyed them both with a solemn expression.

"Good. You're balanced." In reaching for the reins, he called out to Taehyung. "We're all settle-"

"Let's go!" His hair snapped back as he propelled Niyva into a sprint over the moist earth.

Hwiyeon set out after Taehyung at a considerably slower pace. Jungkook tried to pay it no mind, instead focusing on the way Taehyung's hair bounced around as he careened through the forest.

Minutes later, Taehyung brought Niyva to a slow beside Gina. The two horses greeted each other. "How are you enjoying the ride? The view?"
Hwiyeon spoke in his wake. "The ground is wet. This isn't a game, Kim Taehyung."

Taehyung sighed. "Granny Hwaby is worse than soldier Hwaby."

"I could care less if you fall off. I'm indebted to the horses, not some whiny 22-year-old who hasn't the slightest-"

"Race you two over-the-hill!" Taehyung was gone in a flash.

"See now why I didn't let you ride with him?"

Jungkook felt the strain in his chest pop. So it wasn't Taehyung who had been against the idea of letting him ride with him.

He was just about to urge Hwiyeon to go a little faster when a third horse sped past them. This horse was different from the ones Jungkook had seen in his lifetime. Two resplendent yellow horns jutted out from the base of its skull. Hooves marked with sharpened talons gave way to a trail of white glitter that seemed to come from the horse's hooves. She was beautiful. And seemingly dangerous.

But what Jungkook's attention lingered on long after the horse had disappeared from view was the rider. What was with this strange feeling settling into his stomach?

"You need to give up."

Jungkook pretended to not know what Hwiyeon was talking about. What did he know? Could he sense the curse spewing over his veins? Was this a fake love to begin with? Were his doubts founded on sane ground?

"Understand it now. Taehyung can't be yours."

Jungkook squeezed his thighs. Something was not right.

"You don't know so let me tell you now. In a time when all three kingdoms were plagued with
nothing but daughters, King Pesteruos—the current prince's great-great-great-grandfather—devised a plan in order to keep the royal treasury from falling into some common folks hands. Pledge IV. Clause I. Only the eldest prince can choose to marry whom he wishes. Thus, the daughters were wedded off to one another and if not for the miracle that was King Nevaeh, Noseraas' royal bloodline would have ceased to exist."

Jungkook thought it his imagination but he could have sworn he felt the muscles in Hwiyeon's arms tighten.

"Do you understand? If you love Taehyung than..."

Fight for his love.

"Let him live his life."

Jungkook could feel the frustration taking on the form of tears. He tried to blink them away. He couldn't cry. He couldn't give up. He wasn't worth much but that didn't mean he was incapable of making Taehyung happy. There was no way that radical King would know.

"We're heading back."

From up ahead, the ear-splitting neigh of a horse shot through the air. Jungkook took the moment to snatch the reigns from Hwiyeon's hands.

"Give me that!" Hwiyeon seethed.

Gina bounced from side to side at the loss of command on her neck.

Jungkook prepared to disembark Gina when she broke into a run. Jungkook leaned forward to see if he could soothe Gina with his words but his breath against her ear startled her. She reared backwards.

Hwiyeon grunted as Jungkook slammed into him.
"Hold on!"

In his haste to disembark from Gina, Jungkook yanked on the reigns. Gina roared.

"Jungkook!" Taehyung shouted.

Instead of feeling bone to earth, Jungkook felt his airway being cut off. He opened his eyes to see the forest floor sprawled out in front of him in a dizzying blur of gray, green and brown. With a glance upwards, he realized that Hwiyeon had grabbed him by his shirt collar.

Gina came to a slow. Hwiyeon released his grip on Jungkook. Jungkook sputtered and coughed as his body struggled to acclimate itself to the sudden influx of oxygen.

In a moment, Taehyung was at his side. One knee was jammed into the pile of mud Jungkook sat in.

"Jungkook. My constellations. What were you thinking?" He pushed him forward to check for scrapes or scratches against his backside.

Jungkook focused on Taehyung's worried countenance. He was responsible for this and yet, he wanted nothing more than to have Taehyung understand where he was coming from. He wanted to hold Taehyung's attention; to steal his gaze; to have his warmth.

"Was an accident," Hwiyeon said. "I made the turn too sharp." Jungkook noticed how he slipped the side of his jacket over his thigh.

This was wrong. Jungkook was going about this the wrong way. He didn't want a love formed from Taehyung's endless kindness.

Taehyung turned to Hwiyeon with a scowl. "Who was the one who said to be careful!?"

Hwiyeon pursed his lips. "I apologize."
"Bring him to the castle. The country's greatest physicians have taken up residence there." Jungkook had been too immersed in his fear and reconciliation to pay the stranger any heed. But now that he looked at him, he couldn't help but feel insignificant. Here was the person who was destined to have Taehyung for himself. A peachy brown bed of hair fluffed out over his head. Sharp dark eyebrows framed two clear-cut, half-mooned eyes. Two round cheeks did little to hide the perfectly-structured longness of his thin face.

"I'll happily decline."

Hwiyeon bowed. "Prince Hoseok."

Hoseok raised a hand. "Please. Call me Hoseok."

Jungkook felt the momentary pause in Taehyung's steps. Yes. That's it. Get to know the prince, Taehyung. He could be the love of your life.

Before Taehyung could turn around to scold Hwiyeon again, Hoseok sped away in the opposite direction.

Taehyung stomped his foot into the ground. "There he goes! Because I wasn't one to take him up on his offer, he ups and runs away. Coward! Who does that youth think he is?"

Hwiyeon pulled Gina up beside Niyva. "I can only imagine."

"He asked me how my day was! Does he expect me to throw myself at his boots?" Taehyung huffed. "Good Nomera. I can't stand his duality. Bad by nature, kind by desires."

"Have you ever thought that the rumors are just that? Rumors."

"Please. His family tree has had a lineage tainted with evil deeds and wrongdoings. Oh! And bringing Hevi along is going to do nothing to change my mind."

"People will speak out of spite."
"Stop being so-"

Jungkook grabbed a hold of Taehyung's wrist. In his other hand was half a sheet of crinkled paper.

Taehyung read over the three-word sentence. He blew a strand of hair away from his face before boarding Niyva. The scowl on his face had softened. "Maybe I am overreacting." Silence as he placed his hands in front of Jungkook's abdomen. "What would you do, Jungkook?"

Jungkook tried not to sigh as he lifted the paper back up again for Taehyung to read.

U shoold tri.

"Yeah. Maybe. Just maybe."

Only, Jungkook wished he had written three completely different words.

Chapter End Notes

Ermahhoneybeepropolis what are we thinking so far, guys? Who's our favorite character to date? Hopefully, this story isn't disappointing. I would hate to think those like two of you who are reading are bored to death. On another note, have a wonderful week! Even if someone says cruel things to you or about you, know your worth because you are your own person and no one can change that so long as there's love between you and yourself. (Wow. Was that wordy or what.)
Shortly after Taehyung helped Jungkook into his bed, a faint knock sounded on the front door.

"Who could that be?" Taehyung asked.

Jungkook shrugged. Hopefully, it was Hwiyeon. He hadn't the chance to apologize to him for not only the scolding but for having injured his thigh.

Taehyung excused himself with the promise of returning immediately afterwards. His voice bled through the walls. "What is the meaning of this, Prince?"

Jungkook's eagerness deflated.

"And who is this?"

"I believe a check-up of your friend is in proper order," came the distinctly calm voice of Prince Hoseok. Jungkook could picture him standing before Taehyung with the wave of authority Taehyung needed in a future partner. Taehyung was groundless. He needed someone who could anchor him.

"Are you doubting my abilities as a healer?"

"You misunderstand me. I'm here to see that a citizen of my kingdom is with good health."

Taehyung scoffed. "Right. Because you do this with every citizen."

Silence on the Prince's side.

Taehyung must have slammed the door wide open because a loud thwack reverberated through the air. "I won't say no this time. But, I'd like it if you keep those leeches away from my friend's chest."
Taehyung said something else but Jungkook couldn't make out the words.

Shortly thereafter, the door to the bedroom crept open. Taehyung popped his head around the crudely painted door frame. "Jungkook. Are you awake?"

Jungkook sat up in response. Taehyung hurried over. "No, no. Stay down."

Jungkook touched Taehyung's forearm. Their eyes met. Jungkook refused to relent despite the rampant beating of his heart. Taehyung sighed. "Okay." He fluffed the pillows as he told Jungkook that a physician was here to see him. "Is that alright? He's from the castle. I can tell him."

Jungkook shook his head. He motioned for the person to come in.

Taehyung turned for the door with a frown. "If you need something, anything, don't hesitate to cause a ruckus. I'll leave the door to the hallway open in case. Okay?"

"Okay."

Taehyung turned to look at Jungkook with astonishment. His lips turned up to reveal the boxy smile Jungkook only had to recall to keep himself from dwelling on thoughts of what would become of him if he didn't break the curse.

"You know you're a very handsome boy, Jungkook. Smile some more. Your energy is amazing."

Jungkook felt his lips part open. He didn't understand. Did Taehyung say that out of likeness or kindness? As much as he wished for the former, Jungkook realized it may as well have been the latter. Surely, Taehyung knew about Pledge IV, Clause I. But did it matter to him as little as it mattered to him?

As Jungkook waited for the physician to complete his check-up, a loud clatter cascaded into the room. Jungkook struggled to free himself from the physician's workings.

"Please. Won't be much longer."
Taehyung's disgruntled voice cut through the air. "What is the meaning of this?"

Jungkook's eyes darted to and from the physician and entryway. He could see beads of sweat forming on the physician's small forehead. He discreetly swiped the side of his hand over his own brow.

"Please. Take it. A gift."

"Why? So you can accuse me of having stolen something from you only after you unjustly raid my home?"

The sound of a chair scraping against the floorboards ripped through the air. Jungkook urged the physician to hurry up. He had to make things right between Taehyung and Prince Hoseok. Things couldn't end like this. He couldn't let the path to earning Taehyung's heart open up like this, no matter how amazing it felt to know that he would have the advantage.

"I have no interest in accusing the innocent of wrongdoings."

The physician interrupted Jungkook's concentration by saying: "Take the herbs I'll have prescribed to you." He started to pull away. "And-"

Jungkook lunged for the foot of the bed, feet nearly tangling on the sheets as he stepped off of the mattress. With intention cemented into place, he dashed into the dining room only to find Taehyung downing a cup full of a familiar piss-colored drink.

Jungkook slammed the cup away from Taehyung's lips. A deafening crash sliced through the silent space. The liquid seeped out over the floor, making sure to slip into the flower-like carvings that covered the wooden floorboards.

Taehyung shot up off the chair. He turned to face Jungkook with an angered expression. "Uncalled for! What was that for!?"

Jungkook felt a quiver of doubt shoot through his veins. He shut the feeling out. He had no reason to backtrack on his stance. He knew what he had seen. There was no other drink like it.
He didn't want to see Taehyung fall victim to the alcohol.

"You're not answering me." Fists clenched. Shoulders tight. Lips pursed together in a thin, unbreakable line.

Jungkook swallowed. All he could feel was the anger that rolled off of Taehyung in spumes.

Jungkook reached for a napkin on the table. He hadn't realized he was shaking until he tried to pull a quill pen from his shirt pocket.

Taehyung must have noticed too because he slid a foot forward. Jungkook flinched. Taehyung’s entire body deflated. He ran a hand through his hair as he slammed back into the chair he had nearly toppled over earlier. "I... I'm sorry, Jungkook." He propped an elbow on the table, his eyes scouring over a small space on the surface. "Why did I do that? I must have frightened you. I'm sorry. Terribly sorry."

Jungkook took a seat on the other end of Taehyung. He wished Taehyung would stop pulling so hard on his hair. The pain he was subjecting himself to was completely unwarranted and only temporary in his mistaken sense of a solution. Jungkook slid the note across the table.

I thot it waz beer.

Taehyung’s eyes popped out of their sockets for a brief moment. He looked at Jungkook from underneath his bangs before darting them back to the note. "It's only apple juice. Picked fresh from the orchard."

An immense wave of relief bolted through Jungkook's being. He released the tension coursing throughout his body with a quieted sigh. Of course. Taehyung would never be Uncle. Taehyung was full of compassion wherein Uncle struggled with the concept of understanding.

Taehyung shook his head. "Can we say this was a huge misunderstanding and call it an evening?"

Jungkook nodded. He stooped to clean up the broken glass when a warm hand cupped his shoulder. He looked up to see Taehyung offering him a meek smile. "Let me."
Jungkook shook his head. Together. He started picking up the glass before Taehyung could object.

"Jungkook, what would you have done?"

Jungkook glanced at his hands. The skin was almost done smoothing over. Where would the feathers first grow? If Taehyung loved him, he would tell him. Right?

Tu ruff.

Taehyung tilted his head to the side, his silver earring clashing against the side of his slender neck. "I was too rough, wasn't I?" He sighed. "You would think someone who has had years of experience dealing with others would know how to present himself in a situation like that."

Jungkook shook his head intensely. You can't say that about yourself.

Taehyung took a seat in front of Jungkook. "Jungkook, could it be you..."

Jungkook tried his hardest not to swallow. Was Taehyung going to ask him for confirmation on the state of his intentions? If Taehyung said yes to acknowledging his feelings of love, Jungkook would risk everything. He wouldn't worry about the prince or Pledge IV. He wouldn't be consumed with thoughts of Clause I. He would be the boy who had changed his fate.

"You love-"

Yes.

"People so much because there's not an ounce of hate in your blood?"

Taehyung's eyes were shining. They were blindingly bright and inviting. For the wrong reason.

Jungkook forced himself to hold his upright position even though all of his energy had been knocked
cold from his body.

Taehyung reached for the thing on the table. Jungkook looked over the delicate intricacies of the round knob. A brown wristband of sorts wrapped around the circle. Three black lines pointed to different stripes contained within the thick glass.

"He gave me this. A watch. He did it to mock me. He thinks I should see that science is the future of tomorrow even though I'm content dealing with mother nature and her advances... At least that's what I thought. But maybe he didn't give it to me to ridicule me."

An audible tick consumed the momentary silence.

Halfway through writing down the last of his thoughts, Jungkook wondered if what he was doing was the right thing. The best thing. For him.

Love was supposed to be fair. Taehyung was supposed to be able to choose for himself who he wanted to marry. But wasn't he being unfair to all parties involved by inching Taehyung along towards the one who had come before him? Jungkook bit back a saddened smile. He didn't want to give Taehyung reason to fall in love with another man. He wanted someone on his side of the playing field, too. He wanted Taehyung for himself.

Jungkook flipped the paper over. Taehyung's crinkled eyebrows softened as he read over the three words. A faint smile tugged at both corners of his lips. "I'll... give him another chance. And maybe apologize, too." He looked straight at Jungkook. "Because that's what you would want, right?"

Jungkook's heart slammed against his chest. His stomach churned. What he wanted was far from reality. Taehyung was looking at him.

Taehyung was everything. His everything.

There's still time. Jungkook pressed two fingers against the inside of his wrist. A beating heart. He was still alive. He wasn't a swan. There was still hope.

He looked back up at Taehyung whom had since turned to look out the window at the settling dusk.

So wait for me. I'm not too far behind.
Jungkook awoke to find a note taped to the bedroom door. Upon making sense of the drawing, he smiled to himself. Taehyung was doing much more than just offering him a loaf of bread.

Jungkook stood up from his bent over position. He wiped a hand over his brow. The feeling of hatred wasn't in direct attribute to his excessive labor but to the sweat that dripped down his face as a result of having meticulously picked berry after berry from the bushes before him.

Uncle had said the difference between a man and a boy was the amount of work they put in. Jungkook looked down at his hands. A strange sadness flit over his being. Did it hold true? Would Taehyung only ever see him as a brother if his work ethic disappeared? A dark shadow caught in Jungkook's periphery. He looked up in time to see an owl gliding over the canopy. He sighed. As of now, what he wanted was to open the doors to Taehyung's heart and see if there was even the slightest attraction.

Jungkook hadn't yet finished walking by a scattered patch of Gobles—tiny, jelly like plants that resemble the underside of a woman's ruffled petticoat—when a disgruntled complaint cut through the air. Jungkook's ears perked up. The hollers sounded off from somewhere beyond his line of vision. He skirted around an overgrown patch of ferns to find himself confronted by a peculiar situation. He blinked twice to correct his vision but the sight had yet to alter its appearance.

A white ball of fluff jutted out from within a burrow. The fluff twitched and bounced but no bottom was attached to it.

Jungkook cocked his head to the side as he stooped to face the fluff. Upon closer inspection, he realized the checkerboard pattern belonged to the pair of trousers cinched to the mysterious figure's bottom. So there was a rump.

"Hey! Is someone there!?"

Could this be one of the elusive Aniing Taehyung had mentioned working with?

Jungkook stretched his hand out—"You hooligans! Don't you dare do anything you'll regret"—and
laid to rest the tip of his index finger on the center of the round tail. A loud yelp snapped Jungkook to attention. He fell back onto his bottom, one side of his hand scraping against a chip of glass on the ground.

Jungkook scrambled forward. After sucking the blood dry from his palm, he forced his hands into either side of the tight space. His knuckles scraped against the burrow's rough interior.

Without warning, Jungkook began to pull back. Not wanting to stain the Aniing's trousers, he tried not to press into the creature with his left hand. But the blood continued to persist.

He looked to the handkerchief draped across his thigh. With a stream of mental apologies directed at Taehyung, Jungkook slipped the fabric from his pant pocket and looped it around his palm. After securing the garment, he returned to the task at hand.

He would have sought another way to free the rabbit from his predicament, if not for the intimidating voice that skipped into his ears. "Well? Are you going to help or not?"

With one firm affirmation, Jungkook tugged once more. The rabbit yelped.

"Fair warning! Fair warning. My fairies, you're not doing anyone any favors by pulling so abruptly."

Jungkook meant to apologize but the relief of feeling the rabbit slipping free from the burrow's tight confines yanked him from his original intentions. In his haste to make room for the Aniing to stand, he stumbled back into the ground.

He looked over at the rabbit in time to see him wiggling his nose. Jungkook's heart fluttered. On top of being small and soft, the rabbit's mannerisms were sugar-inducing. He came to stand over Jungkook with both gloved hands wrapped around his back.

Jungkook’s enthusiasm faded when he noticed the rabbit eyeing him with murderous intent.

"Now why would you touch my tail without permission? I could care less if you're Prince Hoseok himself." The rabbit approached Jungkook. Jungkook noticed that the Aniing was dressed. A beige vest wrapped around a long-sleeved dress shirt with gold intricacies marked around the cuffs. Attached to the top of his ears were two round spectacles that looked to be magnifiers of sorts. At the bottom of his torso hung a bell whose golden chain disappeared into the lower half of his vest.
The rabbit was very well dressed. Even more so than the visitors who liked to come into town and preach about the dangers of forming a society far removed from the seven entities teachings.

"There's no greater evil than to touch someone without their permission. I'm no wild animal, you know."

Jungkook raised his hands up in defeat. Even though now was the time to voice his thoughts, he couldn't do so. His mind was stuck in a perpetual loop; in horror that he may say the wrong thing and cause even more of an uproar.

Jungkook dipped the tip of his tongue against his bottom teeth but not even the taste of saliva greeted his buds. His mouth had gone completely dry.

"So, nothing to say?" Before Jungkook could begin to write out his thoughts, the Aniing spoke up. His voice came out softer and quieter. "You did save me." He hopped back. The dust caught on Jungkook's shoes. "You don't speak."

Just as Jungkook opened his mouth to say something, the realization hit him. The Aniing wasn't asking a question. He was making a statement.

Jungkook nodded.

Almost as a sigh, the rabbit sat back on his legs. His gray fringe fell flat against his face, nearly obscuring the patches of brown that embraced either corner of his forehead.

But I can understand what you're saying. Please, I can do this. For myself... For Taehyung. "I-"

"Well, whatever. Nevermind that. Since you helped me out of that predicament, you're entitled to my services for a day. You have me until sunset. Whatever you'd like."

Jungkook sat up. Eyes alight, he reached for the basket. The rabbit furrowed his brows. Jungkook took a stick and drew a strawberry into the ground as best he could. His lines weren't very smooth or well-defined but they were infinitely better than when he had first begun.
The rabbit chuckled. "Don't worry, young one. I understand."

Jungkook's heart leapt. He couldn't help the grin that overtook his surprised features. "Thank you!" he shouted. The words rung clear and bright.

The two spent most of what remained that morning picking the freshest strawberries from a well-hidden patch. Jungkook learned that Mr. Lepitun had been on his way home from a very important meeting when the fresh smell of carrots had pulled him from the main path. Upon discovering that the smell belonged to the remnants of a half-eaten cookie, he had gone and smacked his hips around a bit in frustration. The walls had caved in around him, trapping him inside. Thankfully enough, he had kept his tail out far enough so as not to be swallowed whole. If not for Jungkook, who knows what would have become of him.

"I'm getting old," Mr. Lepitun said. "I can no longer distinguish the smell of a savory carrot from that of a confectioner's tasteless substitute."

Jungkook offered to give him a carrot from Taehyung's cottage but Mr. Lepitun said no. "We'll bake that cake and I'll be on my way. With that out in the air, is there a special someone you have in mind?"

Jungkook's cheeks involuntarily flushed pink.

Mr. Lepitun smiled. He reached up to touch his glasses.

"Sweets acquire a taste all their own when baking for someone in particular. That's because baking involves gifting the process with your best intentions."

Jungkook nodded along. Even though what Mr. Lepitun was saying amounted to nothing more than overtly sweet words, Jungkook liked hearing his viewpoint. He could gain insights beyond what he had come to understand. There was a world beyond being told that you were the consequence of a marriage that should never have happened.

Hours later and Mr. Lepitun bid farewell to Jungkook. As Jungkook watched him go, he remembered the other super special thing he had to do for Taehyung. He pulled the purple, blue and red flowers from his pocket. The blue and red ones he hung above the kitchen entryway. The purple he took with him into the bathroom. Jungkook's soft smile never once faded.
As Jungkook finished tidying the kitchen up, he turned to glance at the cake that was sitting on the island. He ogled at the cream that tipped over the edge just enough to appear as if the design had been etched onto the bread. A thin layer of sliced strawberries rested in the space between two terribly cut circular pieces of bread. On top was a small cracker and two strawberries placed carefully next to each other so as to resemble the unity Jungkook had to Taehyung. Because, even if Taehyung had yet to make a decision on the type of relationship he wanted with Jungkook, the boy would always be Jungkook's first and last love.

Jungkook took a deep breath in. Good thing the toasty smell didn't cling to the air or else Taehyung would know about the cake before Jungkook could present him with the surprise.

"He's going to love it," Jungkook whispered as he turned to check the time chimes outside. His wholesome smile was as thick and buttery as the cake he had crafted.

Not long after Jungkook had finished dusting the hearth did Taehyung show up. Taehyung was never one to be quiet. Even now as Jungkook scrambled to hide the cake in the small space between the windowsill and a potted plant, Taehyung's melodic humming invaded the space around him. He could attribute the rush of blood throughout his body to his rampant heartbeat. But, surely, that wasn't the reason why.

Jungkook rushed into the bathroom in time to hear the front door opening. But, this time, Taehyung's melodic voice did not greet his ears. Shrugging the absence off as nothing more than a drained sort of spirits, Jungkook hurried to fix his hair into place before spritzing the underside of his shirt collar with the perfume he had busied himself with making as soon as Mr. Lepitun had departed. The smell wasn't at all fragrant but maybe Taehyung would be able to recognize his failed efforts.

A heated burst of energy prickled over Jungkook's skin at the thought of being close to Taehyung.

Jungkook wiped the comb on the inside bottom of his pants before heading out to welcome home the man who brightened his days.

Taehyung looked up to greet Jungkook with that endearing smile. "There you are!" Taehyung guided him into the chair on the other side of him. Jungkook couldn't hide the stretched out grin that encapsulated his mouth as he took a seat. The warmth of Taehyung's fingers stayed on his elbow long after he had let go.
"I have something to say." Taehyung took a hold of Jungkook's hands. Jungkook looked up, hoping that the sweltering happiness coursing over his insides weren't showing on the outside. Even though Taehyung would normally do something like this without second intentions, Jungkook couldn't help but want to see the gesture as anything but an act of his kindness. Jungkook unwrapped his crossed ankles. He looked into Taehyung's bright face. The mole on the underside of his nose seemed infinitely more endearing now that he was this close to finding out something that Taehyung was ecstatic to share. With him, of all people.

"You know how you said I should give the prince a chance? A chance to prove the rumors wrong."

Jungkook's body went slack. He struggled to keep his smile in place.

"Well," Taehyung said. "I did just that. And it's true. About the rumors being just that."

A chill swept over Jungkook's upper body. He understood now. Taehyung's enthusiasm. The smile. The glimmer in his eyes. The reddish look of his cheeks wasn't because of the heat. Taehyung was flustered. About Hoseok. The one he was supposed to be with all along.

But maybe it wasn't so. Words were powerful. Taehyung wasn't yet done. Maybe he would end the conversation by saying that he would give not only Hoseok but Jungkook the benefit of the doubt. That there was something—anything with which Jungkook could play to his advantage.

Jungkook swallowed.

"As it turns out, those bloated rumors of him are false. He explained it to me in great detail." Taehyung let go of Jungkook's hands. "His younger brother says those things about him. Although I find it unsettling that he would let his flesh and blood say such awful things regarding his character, it did get me thinking." Taehyung smiled to himself. "Prince Hoseok is kind. He has everyone's best intentions at heart if he lets his brother degrade him in name." Taehyung took a deep breath in. "The prince is fit to rule a Kingdom. That much is true. And he might be fit to hold something else under his name."

Jungkook's heart plummeted into his legs. The circulation in his lower half cut off. How could he still be sitting without a means to circulate blood?

Taehyung burst into laughter. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves, right? He hasn't won me over just
yet.” He winked before ambling into the kitchen.

Jungkook slipped out of his chair. He approached the windowsill.

Taehyung reappeared with a cake in hand. Jungkook needn’t know who made the cake to compare its splendor. Unlike his, the dough was marbled and punctuated with bits of hardened chocolate. Everything was neat and structured. Peaches and cream dazzled the senses.

"Hoseok made this one himself for me. As a means of apology. What do you say we both enjoy his hard work?"

Jungkook offered him a feeble nod. As Taehyung preoccupied himself with setting the cake onto the table, Jungkook knocked his cake aside.

Taehyung looked up with a puzzled expression. "What was that?"

Jungkook pretended to look for the culprit. "Squirrel."

Taehyung chuckled. "Those scoundrels. We’ll have to share some with them later."

Jungkook chanced a glance at the ground to see a large chunk of cake hanging limp over the wooden beams used to hold up the roses. One strawberry lay cut in half amongst a mess of buttered cream and baked dough.

Pledge IV.
Clause I.
Hoseok.

Jungkook wondered if love was synonymous with hurt and if so, what would the end result be.
That night, as Jungkook stood before the mirror in the bathroom, he perused the length of his body. In doing so, he discovered a short feather as white and smooth as the cream on any cake sticking out from the side of his torso.

Respect me who has no name.

*You degenerate.*
The following morning, shortly after awakening to the sound of his hunger, Jungkook took to the kitchen. Taehyung was always saying how hungry he was and with little to no time to cook during his busiest times, Jungkook thought to make him a soup as recompense for his hard work. But not before he could learn another chunk of Ciclanish.

One day soon he would be able to communicate with Taehyung in complete sentences. One day the feelings in his heart would swelter into rhythms pounded along by the rolls of his tongue. He smiled at the thought.

As the sun pressed itself against the horizon, worry began to seep into Jungkook's stomach. Taehyung had yet to arrive. Normally, he would be home several hours before dusk could dip his toes over the sky.

As Jungkook continued stirring the soup inside of the earthenware pot, his mind flitted to thoughts of Hoseok. Jungkook glanced at the dishes piled high into the sink. What was the palace kitchen like?

The image of an elongated room with black and white tiled floors and huge bay windows seeped into his mind. The room was bright and inviting. Everything was white and clean and clear. Strewn over the glass cupboards were throngs of vines and potted plants whose thick, luscious leaves would grapple with the windows for comfort. The sun, in all of its untarnished beauty, would filter in through the open space like glitter caught in the pause just before a breeze. And at the center of it all would be Hoseok with his dazzling smile.

Taehyung would be holding onto the marbled kitchen island as a bout of laughter consumed his entire sense of belonging. He would be happy. Like all great relationships, he would belong—fitting comfortably into Hoseok's immaculate life as if the two were meant to be together since the ushering of humanity.

Something outside ruffled the tree's leaves. Jungkook dragged his attention away from the vivid visualization hampering his energy. He let go of the wooden spoon before ambling towards the entrance. But before he could step outside, a tiny prick poked the side of his torso. He lifted his shirt up just high enough to see another tiny white feather had sprung up from the circular cluster.

Time was not on his side. But all he needed was love.
Nothing was for sure.

The minutes before 8 PM inched along until it became apparent that Taehyung wouldn't be home in time to see the night swaddle the remaining inklings of light from the comfort of his kitchen table.

A familiar sensation jabbed at Jungkook's heart. He didn't need a string of sounds to dictate what he was experiencing. The tears that rolled down his face were explanation enough.

Jungkook crawled into bed without doing any of his nightly rituals. He couldn't even recall to shut the front door.

#

Jungkook peeled his heavy-lidded eyes open to find himself surrounded by wisps of dark matter. They circled around him countless times before molding themselves, slowly, one by one, into swans with blood red beaks and translucent white bodies. As they moved to and from the moonlight shooting in through the window, he could see thin, ghost-like streaks of spider silk fastened around their beaks as if they had been meticulously drilled into place. Upon closer inspection, he realized that the red in their beaks was being trickled in from the blood in their beating hearts.

Something fell to the floor up ahead. Jungkook drew his attention to the door. From the bevy's center appeared the woman from before. Her hair was now a delicate honey blonde that brushed against her shoulders like leaves falling against a body of water at the first flight of warmth.

Jungkook struggled to loosen himself from the ground. The woman drew closer. She wore an emerald green dress with silver embroidery that matched the silver cufflink cinched around her left wrist. Jungkook continued thrashing about. The blood in his ears pulsed. Had it been established that he would die today? But he had yet to become a swan. He couldn't. He wouldn't. Not yet.

A muffled voice trickled into the room and just like that, the woman's presence was replaced by someone so concerned with his wellbeing, Jungkook couldn't stop the tears from falling over. He was relieved and yet, he wanted nothing more than for Taehyung to understand the pain he was causing him by opting to continuously receive him with open arms.

Taehyung brushed back Jungkook's bangs. Jungkook knew he was covered in sweat but Taehyung didn't mind. He didn't care. Jungkook's chest tightened.
"You're okay. It's okay. You must have had a bad dream."

Taehyung's voice brought Jungkook solace. He wanted nothing more than to fall deeper into his comforting touches but that would be a crime against his goal. Taehyung had to love him selfishly. Endlessly. With the kind of passionate fervor humanity uses to span the length of time. Not how he loves most other things that may or may not currently include Hoseok.

Jungkook could feel the dip in the mattress as Taehyung readjusted his weight. He moved his hand from the top of Jungkook's head to the side where he pulled his fingers back through the hair behind his ear. "I'm glad you're okay. You'll be fine. I'm right here and I won't leave."

But you will walk away. Jungkook grit his teeth. I can't hold you captive. There's nothing keeping you here forever.

"It was just a nightmare."

Knowing Taehyung's attention was focused on him, Jungkook couldn't help the guilt that seized his body. He burst into a fresh stream of tears. Don't, Taehyung. You're not allowed to do this. Taehyung pressed a kiss to the top of Jungkook's head. Not unless you want me to carry your name on my lips.

Jungkook tightened his hand around his torso. How much longer?

#

"Jung, Jungkook!" Jungkook cast a glance over his shoulder to see Taehyung vehemently waving his hand. What mattered was not the parchment paper nestled in between his closed fist but the gleeful smile that consumed his handsome face.

"This here says your family lineage dates back to the early-Kionk age where people wore pleated skirts that doubled as removable umbrellas and practiced meditation atop mountaintops." Jungkook chanced a glance at the rolled up paper. Could it be? Would he finally be able to know his family name? "Only one other Jungkook was listed on the registry but he died several years ago. So this has got to be your family tree." Taehyung didn't stop grinning as he unraveled the worn document over the porch's stoop. Jungkook skinned over the names until he approached the bottom. He didn't know his father's name but he could recognize his mother's. There she was. Jeon Aejeong. 5230 J.B.
Jungkook swallowed. To her immediate left was a man by the name of Im Daejoon. His father. Surely. Jungkook's palms started to sweat. Here was the valiant man he remembered as having been nothing short of nurturing. Here was the name of the man who shielded him in public for his wrongdoings and scolded in the same light behind closed doors. Discipline and kindness wrapped into one being. Jungkook's heart swelled. The tears plopped down onto the paper before he could think to wipe them away. With an embarrassed gaze, he forced himself not to look directly into Taehyung's eyes.

Taehyung held the paper up while Jungkook brushed his tears away. Taehyung's brow crinkled with confusion as he glanced over the bottom of the paper. Jungkook tried to peek over the side but Taehyung briskly stood up. Confused, Jungkook trailed after Taehyung into the house. He grabbed ahold of Taehyung's wrist before he could get any further.

Taehyung stared at Jungkook for several seconds. Jungkook's fear mounted. What was wrong? Right before drawing his eyes away, they flitted over Jungkook's torso. Jungkook's heart constricted. He would have written the truth out for Taehyung to read if it meant he could have him. But he knew that kind of forced love propagates resentment. If anything, he wanted the expected turmoil of a successful relationship.

Abruptly, Taehyung gripped Jungkook by the shoulders. His intense gaze pierced into Jungkook's round eyes. "Don't think ill of it. No matter what, you are your mother's child and nothing can change that. This is just a silly old piece of paper, anyways."

Jungkook regained sense of his surroundings as he took ahold of the family tree. There, where his name and birthdate should have been inscribed below his parent's names, a thick, white flower occupied the space.

Jungkook looked up at Taehyung. His expression had softened.

Why wasn't his name listed? Where was his surname? Under law, women were required to replace the first two letters of their family name with the last two letters of her husband's. He was alive, wasn't he?

But, worst of all, why was there a large, white flower centered in the space where his name should have been? He didn't need anyone to tell him what the symbol meant. His uncle had mentioned it to him a plentiful amount of times during his drunken stupors.
"White flowers represent the end of a life."

Jungkook stumbled into the wall behind him. Taehyung pried the paper from Jungkook's hand before reaching up to brush aside the strands of hair that perched on his brow bone. "Don't think too much on it. Things could have happened. They do all the time. Sometimes a family will forget to register the baby because the parents can't decide on a name until weeks later and by then, they start to put it off more and more. Babies require a lot of attention."

Jungkook nodded along but he wasn't really listening. Despite knowing better than to distrust his mother, what if the man he remembered as his father wasn't actually his father? Jungkook hurled the thought away. A misguided truth was one thing. Lying was an entirely different thing. Surely, the matter of his name did not apply to the latter.

"Taehyung," Jungkook whispered.

Taehyung pulled his hand away. "Yes?"

Jungkook scribbled something onto his wrist. He lifted his arm up for Taehyung to see.

Taehyung cocked his head to the side ever-so-slightly. "You want to see swans?"

Jungkook grinned. Taehyung smiled. "As soon as I make it back from work. I promise not to get sidetracked this time."

Jungkook nodded but unlike last time, he didn't let hope settle in his bones.

Hope was something that was left at the door.

Chapter End Notes

To anyone who is still here, thank you. Anddd on another note, how's the story coming along?
The day dwindled by. Soon, seven out of the twelve chimes were lit. Jungkook took a seat in front of the cottage. To his left, two red mushrooms with snow-capped heads sprouted up around a patch of composting vegetable peels. Jungkook smiled. Even amidst death, life grows.

He stood and ambled into the house. Taehyung hadn't shown up and yet, unlike two days ago, he felt resigned to admit that there was nothing brewing inside. He wasn't sad. He wasn't happy. He felt nothing. Taehyung had the right to choose. Jungkook would be understanding. But he also wouldn't yet give up.

The following morning, Jungkook slipped out of bed to find Taehyung seated at the table with a large coffee cup in hand. The steam rolled over his nose as he pulled it up to his lips.

Taehyung smiled as he spotted Jungkook standing before the entrance into the hallway. "No work today." He drew the cup back up to his lips. "So let's go see those swans. I've got the perfect place."

Jungkook felt his heart pick up speed. What he wouldn't do to be the reason for Taehyung failing to show up on time for his other compromises.

#

"Jungkook, wait!"

Jungkook turned around to see Taehyung bent over in a huff. "You... can't..." He waved Jungkook over. As Jungkook approached, Taehyung stood and wrapped his hands around the scarf hanging loose over his neck. Jungkook tried not to swallow as Taehyung's knuckles brushed against his linen shirt underneath.

"Make sure you actually keep this tied around your neck. Catching a cold is no good."

Jungkook cocked his head to the side. He wanted to question Taehyung's reason for worrying when nothing but a slight chill embraced their bodies from time to time but he thought better than to doubt his assertions. Taehyung knew this forest better than he could ever imagine.
As they approached a bend in the trees, the sky began to darken. Jungkook's heart picked up speed. A ball of saliva accumulated at the base of his throat. He was about to reach over for a tree when Taehyung's warm fingers wrapped around his wrist. Jungkook looked momentarily startled before he realized that Taehyung had failed to grabbed ahold of the bushes next to him.

"Oh." Taehyung feigned a chuckle. "Sorry."

Jungkook burst into laughter. There was nothing to be afraid of. If that woman wanted him dead right now, she would have to answer to the love he felt this instant.

"How many siblings do you have? I never asked."

The wind carried with it the smell of moss and first frost as Jungkook moved to take a seat on the log next to Taehyung. He wondered if Taehyung remembered how they had first met. More importantly, if he liked to replay it from time to time.

Jungkook lifted up his closed fist.

"None, huh? Me, too. Only child."

Jungkook reached over for a stick but Taehyung continued without pause. "My father was killed in the war against Cves. People thought they could harvest his power. They thought they could control him to get to the center of everything else." Jungkook cautioned himself not to ask dumb questions but he couldn't wrap his head around the name Cves. It sounded similar enough to Cserx but no matter how hard he tried to remember, the memory of that god wouldn't surface, much less provide a reason to correlate the similarity between both names.

Jungkook eyed Taehyung with enlarged, inquisitive eyes. Taehyung's eyebrows shot up over his forehead. "Do you know who Cserx is?"

Jungkook tipped his head back and forth ever-so-slightly. Cserx was the god who granted a winter's warm fires. But, since his discovery of man-made fires, he had started to doubt Cserx's credibility.

"Cves is Cserx's father."
Jungkook motioned for Taehyung to continue.

Taehyung smirked. "One night, Cves retreated into the caves, only to never be seen again. People who believe in the gods continuous good say he left to replenish the blazing heat found in the center of this world. He did that for us. So we could continue to span the length of time." Taehyung threw the pebble in his hand into the pond. "Some people who lived through the war will say not to squander Cves' goodwill because it's not likely Cserx will do the same for us. He only puts up with our presumptuous selves because of his father's sacrifice."

There was a pause as Taehyung reached into his shirt sleeve. "Less and less people are believing." He pulled out a pendant engraved with a trail of numbers surrounding a suspended ember of fire. "My mother was a huntress. A woman of the wilds. And yet, unlike these self-proclaimed civil people in the Kingdom, she never once killed another sentient being."

Jungkook scraped his nail against the log. He knew what it was like to hear someone proclaim they were worthier. Uncle would constantly do it; so much to the point Jungkook had memorized the words like a mantra he was required to understand. An inescapable truth.

Jungkook glanced at Taehyung from the corner of his eye. His attention was focused on the beautiful bracelet. Jungkook looked away. Uncle's statement continued to hold true. When compared to Hoseok, Jungkook would never be able to match up, much less catch up. He had nothing going for him. He would never be able to stand next to the greatest.

And yet, for all the doubt inside, Jungkook still believed that he could try. That he could be someone. He wanted nothing more than for Taehyung to see him for who he was, too.

"The forests have yet to be regulated by trade. Life should remain this way."

Just as Jungkook reached out to grab ahold of Taehyung's hand, a large, white swan appeared from around the curve up ahead. The swan floated into the pond as if propelled forward by mother nature's volition.


Taehyung followed suit. He grabbed ahold of his forearm. If Jungkook hadn't been focused on the black swan, he would have noticed the faint blush that crept over Taehyung's cheeks as his fingers
gripped defined muscles.

Taehyung quickly let go of Jungkook's bicep. "Hey, sit down. They're not dangerous. They won't bite."

Jungkook stilled his trembling hands. He couldn't keep living in fear.

Jungkook turned to Taehyung. He pointed to the black swan before drawing a question mark into the air. He forced himself to take a seat as calmly as possible.

"Black swans are rare. Did you know some swans are born mute?"

Jungkook shook his head. The black swan had caught up to the white one. Now, they were snuggled up close to one another.

But are they really mute? Jungkook mused.

"In the same way that some swans are born black, some are born mute and no one knows why." Taehyung took a deep breath in.

Maybe we can't hear them because we've forgotten what it is to search for something. He could feel a string of feathers crowding up around his feet. He choked back his sorrow.

Even though he wasn't resigned to the thought, he couldn't help imagining a day where he would become a swan... before disintegrating. Jungkook unfurled his clenched fist. Taehyung was dangling the bracelet before Jungkook's face with a smile so bright and alluring Jungkook felt propelled to memorize every centimeter of his face. Jungkook smiled back. Maybe we've been surrounded by our definition of normal for too long to notice when someone is crying out for help.

#

Upon returning to the cottage, Taehyung took a seat next to Jungkook at the table. "I actually have something to tell you." Taehyung was all smiles. Jungkook braced himself.
"Hoseok invited us to the castle for an extravaganza. A game of QuaQuash."

Jungkook's eyes caught on Taehyung's wrist. What meaning did the bracelet hold?

He nose me? Jungkook wrote onto the back of his hand.

Taehyung practically jumped up. "Of course! Well, not too much. I'd rather he find out for himself but he does know your name and that you've been living with me these past few weeks." Taehyung grabbed ahold of Jungkook's hand. Jungkook tried not to look sad. Taehyung needed to stop reaching out for something he had no intentions of loving romantically. But maybe he did. If he did, wouldn't he let him know immediately?

"Tell me you'll come. We'll find a room for you."

Jungkook's heart clenched. We'll. Not I, but, we. Hoseok was leaving him far behind in the race to life.

"We'll only be a day. What do you say?"

Jungkook nodded. So long as I get a room next to you.

Taehyung immediately agreed. "You will. I promise."
They departed the second they finished what was a mixture of elements from breakfast and lunch. The suddenness of it all left Jungkook feeling drained and jagged. Maybe next time they could wait to tidy the house up some.

Upon entering through the castle's front gates, Jungkook glanced up to find Hoseok at the head of the perfectly structured staircase. A rich brown coat hugged his lithe upper body. Two gold patches of frosted leaves angled over either side of his padded shoulders. At his ear was an accessory that draped around his earlobe like an icicle caught in the stages between melting and reforming. But what caught Jungkook's attention the most was the gauze on Hoseok's hand. While slightly hidden from view, it showed that something serious had happened to warrant proper bandaging.

"Glad you could make it, Taehyung."

Jungkook stared as Hoseok came to a stand before him.

"And nice of you to have accompanied us. Jungkook."

Jungkook nodded but didn't know whether to return Hoseok's outstretched hand with a handshake or a squeeze to the wrist. He opted to bow instead. Caught off guard, Hoseok fumbled to follow suit.

Taehyung giggled. Both men's heads snapped up. A splash of color crept over their bodies. Taehyung's eyes landed on Jungkook's. The ball of saliva in Jungkook's throat grew larger. His heart stammered. Of the only other person he could have looked at, Taehyung had chosen to look at him.

A low cough cut through the tumultuous cycle of thoughts in Jungkook's mind. He glanced up to find Hoseok towering over him, a faint smile embracing either corner of his lips. Jungkook hurriedly stood up. Taehyung and Hoseok chuckled as Jungkook nearly stumbled over his own two feet. Jungkook's heart sunk. It was silly of him to think he could share a unique moment with Taehyung while in the presence of Hoseok.
"If you'll follow me." Hoseok gestured towards the horses off to his side. "A tour of the castle is in place, but, first, let me show you two to the palace grounds where we will soon be having our game of QuaQuash."

Jungkook nudged Taehyung in the side as they ambled towards the side of the castle where two tall men stood by either end of an iron entrance.

"Hope you don't mind my selection," Hoseok said as he came to stand before a horse Jungkook thought appealed more to the title of god than to that of a horse.

Braided into the creature's long, white mane was thin strips of brightly colored yarn. A glossy, smooth coat similar in color to the strawberry blond highlights found in Taehyung's voluminous hair covered the horse's muscled body. Two black swaths provided a stark contrast to the piercing white intensity of the horse's pupils. Everything about the horse whispered to the call of gentle winds and puffed out clouds; everything but the jagged outer shell that circled around its neck and traversed up to about mid-leg. Tiny patches of moss lay scattered around the shell's darkest crevices.

Jungkook came to a slow before a horse whose rump was facing him. The horse didn't bother to look up from munching on the grass. Jungkook took a deep breath in. He didn't know what to do and he definitely didn't know who to ask for help. Everyone else was busy boarding a horse with as much grace and reverence as Hoseok.

He felt his heart sink. Would he have to be the fool who had to walk because he didn't know how to ride a horse?

Just as Jungkook reached out to lay his fingertips on the horse, a soft tap on his shoulder blade paused him in his tracks. He glanced over his shoulder.

"She's ours." Taehyung grinned. "But, we shouldn't do that. If you touch a horse from behind, they'll frighten. Here. I'll help you."

Taehyung pulled Jungkook over to the front. The horse glanced at the pair from the corner of her eye. "Slow and steady." Taehyung drew Jungkook's hand up to her side.

The horse snorted but otherwise, was left unbothered.
Taehyung flashed Jungkook a grin. "See. Not too bad, huh?"

Taehyung held Jungkook's hand as Jungkook eased his leg over the horse's large body. As he angled his torso to take a seat, his left leg momentarily moved away from the feel of the horse. Jungkook reached out to grip the horse's thick mane but Taehyung squeezed his fingers in time to reassure him that, if anything, he would be here to hold onto.

Jungkook thanked him with a nod. He could feel the heat in his stomach jetting out over his veins.

"Are you two ready?" Hoseok asked. He came to a stop beside them. The sun caught on his jacket. The golden flowers lit up. Jungkook noticed how instead of drawing attention to his shoulders, the flare of light served to draw attention to his well-proportioned upper body. Jungkook glanced at his hands. Hoseok had long, thin fingers with well-manicured nails. Uncle had said the state of a man's hands didn't matter as long as you knew what to do with them.

Taehyung shook his head as he propelled himself onto the horse. A soft grunt flew into Jungkook's ear. A burst of heat exploded over his stomach. He scratched at his ears to redirect the reason for the change of color in his skin.

Hoseok drew his eyes into slits. "If you need another horse, let me know." A pause before saying Taehyung's name.

As the herd took off towards their destination, Jungkook turned around to mouth the word QuaQuash before shrugging his shoulders. He struggled to uphold the thin gap between them.

Eyes alight, Taehyung immediately jumped into an explanation. His body bumped into Jungkook's backside. Jungkook forced himself to not react.

"QuaQuash is a game of strategy. Players are divided into two teams of three or more people each. Maximum of 10 people. Each team will choose one player to start the game. While the other two teammates wait below, the chosen player will race to the top of a set of crystallized steps. At the top is a ball, which once removed from its pedestal, will queue the game to begin. The stairs disappear and it's game on.

The rest is kind of hard to explain but basically, with the help of a Lilet, you can create your own glass steps. The goal is to have the ball reach the opposing team's side first. Apart from predicting
where players will step, you also have to remember to create steps for yourself so you don't fall."

The color in Jungkook's face drained. Taehyung laughed. Hoseok drew his attention away from the gardener at his side to watch the pair from afar.

Taehyung gripped Jungkook's shoulder. Jungkook blushed. Hoseok looked away with a quieted huff, taking the time to trail his eyes over the trimmed grass on their way back to the short man at his side.

"Don't worry. No deaths allowed. The Lilet will guide you safely to the ground."

The horses trotted through a clearing of large, yellow leaves interlaced with rich hues of purple veins. They came to a slow. Before them was the largest plot of land Jungkook had ever seen. Miles and miles of green stretched out before him. Sprinkled throughout the well-fed grass were hills and the occasional wooden picket.

"The game starts a quarter from now," Hoseok said as he disembarked from his horse.

Taehyung looked around for any indication of the other players. "Where is everyone else?"

Hoseok pursed his lips. "They should be here soon."

Taehyung frowned as he helped Jungkook off the horse. "We should have set aside a little extra time for introductions. Do the invitees know how to play QuaQuash?"

Hoseok smiled as he peeled the coat away from his body. Even Jungkook couldn't help but admire the way a loose-fitted shirt made him look majestic. He glanced down at his own body. There was no way he could show off his own muscles and hide the cluster of feathers scattered around his torso. The linen shirt Taehyung had asked him to wear this morning was too thin.

"I think you'll be surprised to know who I invited. Look." Hoseok flicked a finger upwards. "They have arrived."

Everyone turned to see two horse-drawn carriages pull up by the entrance they had exited through
not long ago. A white head popped out from behind a pair of sapphire curtains.

"Taehyung! My little fluff'n."

Taehyung practically jumped up as he made note of the familiar figure.

"Mrs. Nundaberry!" Taehyung exclaimed. With a quick turn of the head to Jungkook, Taehyung said: "Quick, Jungkook," before grabbing him by the wrist and pulling him along, "I want you to meet Mrs. Nundaberry. The lady I mentioned several nights ago. By fairies, if she's here then that means..."

Jungkook noticed the door opening before Taehyung had the time to turn back around. He pivoted on the balls of his feet just in time to keep Taehyung from hitting the door head-on. Jungkook grunted as the side of the door jabbed into his shoulder.

"Oh dear! What have I done!?!" called a soft voice whose pronunciation was like that of a whisper-scream.

Taehyung dropped to his knees beside Jungkook who was busy trying not to look like he was in a whole lot of pain.


Taehyung pursed his lips. Jungkook did not relent.

"Fine." Taehyung sighed as he proceeded to help Jungkook up. Jungkook smiled... and grimaced as he felt a hard slap on his shoulder.

Taehyung harrumphed. "Fine, my tittler toes. Let me check on it."

"Goodness, I am so sorry, youngling." A small black-haired rabbit appeared before Jungkook. She tugged on his pant. "Lower yourself, dear, and let me apply this ointment to your skin."
Jungkook lifted his hands to refuse but Taehyung was staring at him with a look he couldn't refuse to disregard. Jungkook relented and dropped down to his knees. When prompted, he pulled back the tiniest bit of his shirt.

"This is a cream that will keep the skin from swelling. I really am sorry. Excuse my excitedness to thank- Wait!" Jungkook winced as her nails retracted into his tender skin.

She jumped back with a yelp. "Oh, oh, oh! Dear. I-I-I am so sorry!" She flung herself at a familiar figure. Mr. Lepitun. Jungkook smiled at him as he wrapped his arms around his wife. "I apologize with the utmost sincerity, youngin. She's not the best at containing her emotions."

"I-I got excited when I realized that you must be- Are you Jungkook?"

Jungkook nodded.

Mrs. Lepitun wrapped her paws around his arm. Unlike Mr. Lepitun's soft and silky fur, hers was textured. Clumps of black curly hair were few and far inbetween. "Oh, sweet Nomira. Thank you for saving my husband. May the Wanders of this forest bless you with goodwill and energy for the rest of your days."

Jungkook's heart dropped. His pupils contracted. He looked up and for a moment, that woman consumed his vision. She stood as aloof and unbothered as she had been that day he was cursed.

Jungkook came to attention when he felt Taehyung's fingers land on his side. Jungkook pulled back, fear in his eyes as he slammed into the carriage behind him.

"I-" Jungkook mouthed. Everyone was eyeing him with worried expressions underlaid by the occasional flicker into confusion. Taehyung drew back, a look of hurt contorting his otherwise soft facial features. His opinion was the most important and yet, Jungkook still couldn't bring himself to speak the truth about his predicament. Now was not the time. Taehyung would just have to live with the rebuff.

Hoseok ordered the game of QuaQuash canceled. "Our sole priority in this instant is to assure ourselves that Jungkook's injury is tended to. Guards? Guide our esteemed guest to the infirmary."
"Wait!" Taehyung stood up. "I'll go with him."

"Taehyung, I will advise you not do that. Since the basis for any reputable relationship between that of a physician and his patient is secrecy, it would be improper and unsolicited to hold court in the same room. I'll ask that you wait for Jungkook out here and only when he is finished, may you see him."

"I guess you're right." Taehyung kicked at something on the ground. "Do you agree with this, Jungkook?"

Jungkook wanted to reason that this isn't what he wanted. Far from the truth, he wanted to have Taehyung there with him. But, for that, Taehyung would need to see the side of him he had promised he wouldn't show unless his love had been garnered. He looked at Hoseok but didn't notice any signs of wanting to procure evil. He was doing whatever duty entailed him to be kind to a civilian of Noseraas. Here was the man Jungkook wouldn't mind entrusting Taehyung to.

Jungkook looked at Taehyung and shook his head. "I be okay," he mouthed before grinning the biggest grin he could muster. Turns out, the bigger the smile, the stranger you feel. Reality begins to blend into what you wish life was like until you not only feel guilt but remorse.

Less than a half hour later, Jungkook emerged from the infirmary both grateful and relieved that the physician hadn't asked him to remove his shirt. He would have seen the feathers and despite the comfort in Hoseok's earlier speech, Jungkook didn't have it in him to trust someone else to keep his secret.

Jungkook stepped away from the small hallway in search of the guards who had escorted him here earlier. But, upon turning into one of the larger, more elongated hallways, he found two well-dressed women standing before one of the large bay windows.

Jungkook approached the window nearest him. The potted plants separated him from view. He sighed, content to go unnoticed.

He discovered Taehyung at the exact same moment his ears dipped into the conversation off to his side.

"Can you believe this, Ahnyeon! What a charmer."
Jungkook watched as Hoseok came to stand next to Taehyung. He couldn't see Taehyung's face but he could make out Hoseok's sympathetic countenance. Furrowed brows. Fixated eyes. Rhythmic breaths. Whatever it was Taehyung was saying, Hoseok wanted to hear it all.

"I hear the boy is only 23," the other girl said.

Ahnyeon gasped. "Impossible. Do you really think Prince Hoseok will choose to marry someone the same age as himself?"

The other girl chuckled. "Why would it be otherwise? I've yet to see Hoseok this in love since Yejong's birth." Jungkook suddenly felt sick. He looked down to keep his head from overflowing with nausea. His stomach churned. Was this a headache? Had the physician given him something he wasn't supposed to take?

"He even asked me just the other night to direct him in baking a cake." There was a slight shuffling. Jungkook snapped his attention back up. His eyes were quick to find what his heart longed to have for his own.

Hoseok had drawn Taehyung into his side, one arm wrapped around his shoulders. His head rested atop Taehyung's bed of caramelized brown hair. The image materialized in Jungkook's eyes just as the woman finished saying what he could have guessed given a different set of circumstances.

"The poor soul ended up burning the back of his hand in his haste to move the pot of water away from the fire."

Jungkook suddenly felt dizzy. Of course. Everything made sense. The image of Hoseok's bandaged hand zipped into his mind. Hoseok had baked Taehyung that cake. Hoseok had gone the extra mile. Hoseok was in love and...

Jungkook reached out to steady himself. He knocked into the pots. They toppled over and crashed to the ground in one moment of deafening clatter. The women yelped as they stumbled around to the other side of the hallway. Before Jungkook could stand, they hurried over to him.

"Are you-" They both went silent as he gazed up at them from his hunched over position. Their mouths popped open; their eyes unblinking.
"I'm sorry. I should clean this up. I'll be right back." Jungkook hurried away before either of them could collect themselves enough to try and stop him.

Jungkook ran and ran—ignoring the constant pricks that ran up and down his thighs like oscillating waves—until he found a door he could push his way into at the corner of a long hallway. He slipped inside and shut the door behind him before dropping to the floor in a mess of tears and heart wrenching sobs.

In between his gasps for air, he looked up and found himself staring back at a portrait of the man he wished would let him win the war.

Hoseok.

By all accounts, Jungkook had wandered into Prince Hoseok's room.
Chapter Notes

Back again, for another round. I want to finish this series before the end of this year so look out for (hopefully) continuous (and therefore, even more random) updates! Thanks to those of you have stuck around and to all newcomers, I'm glad you decided to give this story a chance (given the apparent lack of intrigue... /sad sad/). Remember, take care of your health and love yourself!!!

Jungkook walked around a statue of two circling tigers to find Taehyung standing before a wall of glass panels. He reared the corner and discovered Hoseok standing not too far from him. From beyond the glass, a cobblestone pathway led to a fountain encircled by trees and other forestry but Jungkook's attention remained on the duos reflections. Even their shadows transcribed beauty.

Hoseok caught sight of Jungkook before Taehyung could. "Jungkook, a pleasure to have you back."

Taehyung swiveled around. He burst into that same bright, alluring smile Jungkook had grown accustomed to wanting for himself. Jungkook willed himself to keep quiet despite the longing in his mind to speak up about his predicament. He couldn't very well reveal anything now that he was in a state of turmoil. Even if Taehyung were willing to escape with him to some far-off land where Pledge IV was nonexistent, he didn't deserve to leave behind all that he had worked hard for. Who was he to demand Taehyung let go of the land he adored simply because of his selfish desire to belong to him. If only there were a way to make him his husband without being thrown out of the kingdom for failing to comply with civil law.

Hoseok stepped around them. An audible clack surfaced through the air as the heel of his boot moved from tapestry to marble floors. "Why don't you two join me for a meal? Afterwards, a guided tour of the castle is in place... As promised."

Taehyung hurriedly agreed. A quake of jealousy cut through Jungkook's senses. The moment faded, leaving behind a numbing guilt. What good would not being able to control his emotions be when it came time for Taehyung to choose a romantic partner? Jungkook glanced down at his torso. Taehyung's happiness would in no way ever be tied to him. He was meant for things far beyond Jungkook's capabilities.

As they ate, Jungkook wondered why Taehyung had yet to inquire about his health. His heart kept pulsating erratically. Taehyung was close and yet, nowhere near enough.
Jungkook took a bite out of his pasta. The thick sauce dribbled down his chin.

Hoseok watched him without expression. "Would you like a napkin?"

Taehyung whipped around—"Jungkook!"—and nearly toppled over into him in his haste to wipe away the sauce. Jungkook flushed red. What was Taehyung doing? To be embarrassed in such a manner in front of the Prince! What was he? A child? A beggar with no hands? At this rate, he would never be able to compete with Hoseok. Jungkook pulled the napkin away from Taehyung and as he wiped himself clean, slowly turned his head away.

Taehyung's worried expression slipped into a wounded countenance. The moment of weakness was but a flit in time; quickly swept under the scheme of today's excitement as Taehyung turned back to Hoseok.

Jungkook continued eating in silence as the other two delved deeper into their conversation about matters Jungkook wished were a part of his life history so as to be included in the endless bout of laughter and smiles. But, alas, he was nothing more than the nephew of a town drunk who had taken it upon himself to craft him into a blacksmith worthy of living under his care.

Jungkook hadn't known much about the outside world prior to meeting Taehyung but he always held firm to life's central doctrine even as things went from terrible to dreadful. His father had promised him that he would one day find someone with which he could share his happiest moments.

Taehyung's laughter spilled out over the elongated table. The sun caught on the gold-plated cutlery, casting a bright, almost glitterized finish over the air. The left side of Jungkook's lips turned upwards. Yes. His father's promise had held true. He had met that fervent person. A sharp pain cut through Jungkook's foot. His smile fled. Too bad those moments had the favorable possibility of being few.

After a grueling half hour of lunch, the trio stood up. On their way out of the sunroom, Jungkook caught sight of a portrait hung up between two thick, emerald curtains. A small child with smooth dark hair and ruddy cheeks was framed by the wide physique of a burly man. The man wore a cornflower coat whose sleeves spooled out over the floor like the shedded skin of a snake. His mouth was drawn into a thin, tight knot and yet, the artist had managed to give him an aura of playful enthusiasm as if no matter how much the man tried to remain serious and imposing, his true nature was never too far below the surface.

To their left sat a woman whose piercing green eyes were shaded by a thin, black veil that draped over her forehead. In her arms lay cradled a small baby whose mass of wild brown hair peeked out over the flowered cover that was tucked in around its tiny frame.
Jungkook’s eyes trailed down to their feet. A white flower dotted the space between mother and child; the same style flower that had been uncovered on his family tree.

"There used to be a white flower in that vase over there." Jungkook turned to see Hoseok pointing at the thin vase that sat precariously close to the edge of the fireplace. "When my mother was alive, she would switch out the flower at the slightest browning of its petals." Jungkook glanced at Hoseok from the corner of his eye. Here was a man who spoke without an ounce of sentiment in his voice and yet, he could see the longing in him to return to a time when his mother was more than just a ghost of the stories she left behind. "So, when she died, there was no one bothered enough to fill in the role of upkeep." Hoseok glanced at Jungkook. His attention remained on the young woman. "As soon as I was of age to spend my first Jorps, I had a delicate white flower crafted by the world’s most skilled glassworker ten towns over."

The more Hoseok continued to reveal, the more Jungkook began to question.

"Now that I’ve had years to think over the matter, I’ve realized something."

Jungkook swallowed. He looked at Hoseok with a still gaze.

"She was honoring the death of someone important to her. Something most people couldn't put together because of the hatred that clouded their eyes. Flowers aren't delicate because of their appearance. They're delicate because of their abhorrence to death." Hoseok reached for Jungkook. "Tell me. Do you know?" A short puff of air escaped through the part between his lips as he snapped Jungkook’s shirt button in place. "White flowers represent death because, without light, someone’s colored world ceases to exist."

Jungkook’s lips cracked open. He couldn't move. Did Hoseok know? Jungkook kept his eyes on the thin, black etching of Hoseok’s jacket. One clean shot with an arrow would be enough to cut through his heart. There wouldn't be any pain. Any fear.

Jungkook glanced down at his hands. A small white feather peeked out from underneath his jacket sleeve. He looked back up.

Hoseok’s frame was lithe and sharp. More bone than muscle or meat. He wouldn't be able to expend himself with the same energy Jungkook had accumulated from years of grueling, heavy-handed work.
But, Hoseok didn't need strength to mesmerize. His voice was enough to enthrall the hundreds of thousands of followers he would one day have as a support system.

Jungkook returned his attention to the portrait. The King's thick, deep-set brown eyes gazed back at him with the same steely luster of the many statues he had worked on as a blacksmith. Jungkook took a deep breath in. Had he ever committed a mistake worth being killed for?

Jungkook tugged his sleeves down as far as they would go before heading to join his crush: Together, Taehyung and Hoseok, are the happiest of them all.
The trio headed for the stables after their tour of the castle. So far, everything Jungkook had seen seemed so far out of his reach. He would need thousands of centuries to accumulate the amount of wealth and prestige Hoseok had in this lifetime.

They approached a storeroom the size of twelve cottages put together. Easily enough space to keep tens of people sheltered from the elements. Jungkook stepped inside to find one half of the space occupied by twenty-two stalls. Bright lights eradicated the places where shadows would have taken up quarters given any other windowed abode. The second half of the storeroom was filled with white sand that gleamed under the brilliant lights.

"What is the meaning of this?" Taehyung asked. He shielded his eyes as he tried to look up at the ceiling. "Why is it so bright in here?"

Hoseok smiled. "Licoturés. The room is illuminated thanks to stones that absorb light from the wavelengths reflected off of bodies of water." Hoseok led them over to a part of the storeroom where five large pools of water stood one against the other in a perfect row. He peered inside. "As you can see, there's enough water for the light coming in from the windows to reflect off of. This place will never run out of light so long as there is a sun."

"A gift from Mother Nature, herself, if I may say so," Taehyung said.

Hoseok stood silent. He bent his arm before his stomach and smiled. "You wouldn't be wrong. Mother Nature has given us lots of things for which to be grateful." Hoseok smiled at Taehyung before venturing towards the horses that had been let out of their stalls.

"These three are in the process of being trained. Two will be conditioned in defense while the third will replace the one we lost to sickness four weeks prior. She will be in charge of carrying disabled guests."

"You didn't mention the loss to me," Taehyung interjected. His energy dissipated as he took a step back to look at Hoseok front and center.

"I didn't want to worry you."
"Well-

"I sincerely apologize if that was the case. I had no ill intentions."

Jungkook bit his tongue. How much longer would they talk to each other as if he weren’t in existence? Is this what it feels like knowing you have lost the war? Being forced to watch the enemy advance without reprieve from the pain of knowing you had done everything in your power to fight back and could now do nothing.

Jungkook’s eyes scoured the storeroom. They landed on Hoseok’s horse. He crept forward.

"You can touch her," Hoseok said. In a matter of seconds, he was at Jungkook’s side. Jungkook shivered up inside as Hoseok pulled his shirt sleeves up to his elbows. Sinewy forearms greeted his vision. "She much prefers the company of another female but she won't bite back a kind hand."

Hoseok ran his hand over the thick shell wrapped around her neck. "This is Hevi. She's one of the few remaining descendants of the Lagerous."

Jungkook frowned.

"Do you know who they once were?"

Jungkook shook his head. He had not grown up on fairy tales and children’s bedtime stories. His childhood had been littered with jagged bottleneck truths and missing persons of interest.

There once lived a farmer who liked to fashion necklaces from the broken rocks and debris off of the coast of an island known as Güeill. During this era, there lived a number of large, weathered turtles that liked to feed off of the small island’s vast expanse of tuna. Unlike the townsfolk who feared the ocean and its many unknowns, the farmer became increasingly acquainted with the Lagerous after each visit to the island. He learned to love them; for, at times, the smaller of the Lagerous would approach his boat with components for future necklaces thrown into a basket.

You see, the Lagerous were named after the townsfolk’s fear and anxiety. They presumed the Lagerous to be dangerous. Their large size added on to their apprehension. But, dangerous was a misconception and one that was detrimental in altering that animal’s time in history.
No amount of explaining on part of the farmer could change the townsfolk’s collective thinking for he, too, was an outcast. His child had drowned off of Güeill's coast nearly a decade prior to this story's happenings. And as for his wife, well, she went and married another man in some city not too far from the town. After their daughter's death, she became increasingly distraught; quoting her "less-than-adequate fishing lifestyle" as the fraying point to the loss of their girl. She was gone one night with no more than a printed handkerchief left in place of her spot on the shared matrimonial bed.

One day, more and more children began disappearing off of the north-side coast of Güeill. The townsfolk looked to the Lagerous as the answer to these unsettling cases. They were carnivores. They were large. And they liked to forage closer to the town as the days grew more frigid.

But, such was not the case. The Lagerous only had a taste for fish and they were as docile as the sheep that would be let out of their pens once a week. They would never harm a human.

After the fourth disappearance, the townsmen grabbed arms and gasoline in search of the devilish creatures. On their way to Güeill, they set fire to the farmer's property.

One by one, the Lagerous were arrowed to death on the one spot not protected by their thick armor: on the nape. The mothers would stand before their children in hopes of shielding them from the onslaught of arrows but the villagers would shoot them before lighting their bodies while the babies squealed in agony. The mothers were far too heavy to push out from underneath.

The farmer—oblivious to the happenings occurring on the mainland—was fishing for supplies to make more necklaces when the second-in-line approached. Thick splotches of blood plopped onto the white sand behind him as he ran forward. The ground trembled and the pebbles jumped about with each heavy-footed step. This time, the farmer did not feel ecstatic to see his friend.

The Lagerous slammed to a halt, his head lolling to the side as he tried to focus on the person standing before him.

The farmer whistled for his horse. "What- ... What happened?" His hands shook as he reached out to touch the charcoal-colored giant. A roar of screams emerged from the forest, followed by a screeching chorus of hollers and yips. Bright flames jumped from branch to branch. In between the thicket, an approaching brigade of horses could be glimpsed. "What is going on!?” The farmer boarded his horse, a shock of pain shooting through his side. He coughed into his hand. Blood as dark as the Lagerous' lay splotched over his palm. He bit back a moan of protest. Not now.
The Lagerous nudged the farmer in the opposite direction from both the caves and the encroaching men. He did not budge.

The farmer brushed aside a lump of dirt from the Lagerous' eye. His fingertips rested on the Lagerous' thick, impenetrable skin. "Quick. Let's be quick. Don't waste time telling me what I should or shouldn't do." The Lagerous looked visibly saddened. His mouth parted to reveal the whisper of a broken smile when an arrow cut through the air, slicing through his nape. A current of arrows poured over in quick succession. The Lagerous stumbled backwards, his eyes wide and full of fear. The farmer reached out to propel him upward but what could he do? He would be crushed.

The Lagerous toppled over onto the ground in a cloud of broken seashells and white sand streaked red by the terrors of violence.

The farmer reached up to scrub aside the tears that had enveloped his eyes. This couldn't be happening. "What right do you all have!?" he shouted. A string of gargled coughs emerged. More blood.

The men broke free from the treeline. An ecstatic cheer followed by a stream of shouts and stampeding horses hooves.

The farmer quickly jumped down from his horse, his frail left ankle twisting under the impact. He winced in pain. The Lagerous' whimpers were becoming increasingly shallower. The farmer took his stained handkerchief and slipped it over his friend's eyes before taking the centermost arrow and plunging it deep inside his neck. A puff of air escaped through the giant's nose before an unsettling stillness enveloped the bubble of air around them.

The farmer kissed his friend goodbye before boarding his horse in search of the babies that were holed up in the caves. As he rode, the farmer took notice of his left hand. His grip was slack. His left hand felt the same way it had that morning he pulled his daughter's body from the tangle of seaweed and thornbrush.

Hoseok slipped his hand into his coat pocket. A black—almost green—iridescent handkerchief appeared between his slim fingers. He handed it to Jungkook. "You'll worry Taehyung."

Jungkook rejected the handkerchief. Better for the both of us.

Hoseok took a deep breath before continuing.
"The farmer went in search of the newborn's. You see, they're susceptible to attack because Lagerous are born blind.

Upon arriving, the farmer was greeted by a pile of bloodied flesh and limbs. He looked to the open pit where the newborns' bodies were being thrown into the hungry fire. He caught sight of a stout man with a brooding face. As he turned to face the farmer, his cleft lip became apparent. "Where are they?"

"You're destroying innocent animals!" The farmer turned and urged his horse back out of the cave. A shock of warmth came in the form of a rifle bullet to his left shoulder. Upon catching a whiff of the sea salt air, the farmer retched over the side of his horse before toppling over into the ground with a silent oomph. A trail of red oozed out over the water's surface as the waves pulled in and out over his limp body. He glanced to the side to see his horse struggling to catch her breath. Two arrows stood embedded in her rump and another three were scattered randomly over her body. The last thing the farmer saw before the sea whisked him and his horse into oblivion was the head-in-command of the Lagerous. He, too, had been heavily injured.

Jungkook took a deep breath in. Is that how the story ends? "Do Lagerous not gyet-"

"Any retribution?" Hoseok cocked his eyebrow at the empty space before him. "The head-in-command told the farmer one final thing. "I will gift you with my armor so that you may live a long, fruitful life."

And he rejected it, Jungkook mused.

"Gift the treasure to my horse," the farmer said. "She's never had a family of her own." The head-in-command readily agreed. And so, while both the farmer and the head-in-command sunk to the place where ocean and land meet without air, the horse washed ashore Güeill's opposing island. Uninhabited and uncontrolled, many more places of wonder awaited this new breed of injured horse.

Hoseok turned to watch Taehyung walking a horse. Even from afar, Jungkook could see why the prince had set his eyes on him. He exuded happiness, confidence and above all else, an irrevocable sense of compassion.

"As it turned out, a bypassing lunatic had kept the four children locked up in his chicken pen. He had been planning on throwing them to the ocean in hopes of achieving immortality."
Fairytales or history? Jungkook thought. This all seems like a cautionary tale.

Jungkook watched as Taehyung slipped his palm underneath the horse's snout. The horse snatched the apple out of his open hand in one fell swoop. Taehyung fell back in laughter.

Everything was perpetually everlasting.
Upheaval

While Taehyung and Jungkook waited for Hoseok to return from the washroom, they took to the gardens outside of the sunroom. Dried leaves crunched under their boots as they came upon two evenly matched rows of trees.

"Do you smell that?"

Jungkook shook his head.

"Here. Take this and press it to your nose," Taehyung said as he handed Jungkook a small, brown twig clamped around a honey-gold bud. A spicy sweet smell caressed his sense of smell as the twig knocked against the underside of his nose.


Grateful that he hadn't grabbed his left, Jungkook let his shoulders drop back down to his side. His frantic heartbeat decelerated.

"Remember. You have to keep your coat on at all times. Or else..." Taehyung choked back a swallow. His eyes dropped to the floor. "Or else you'll wake up one day lost to the cold." He looked back up, tears rolling down over his cheeks. "I... M-my cousin. I never told you about my cousin."

Jungkook handed Taehyung his handkerchief. He refrained from wrapping his arms around Taehyung's supple body. He didn't know if he'd be able to pull away at all.

"He was four years older than me. Fourteen when he joined the war against Cserx's father. I begged him not to go; not to follow in my father's blind, irrational footsteps. But, there was a certain allure to my father's words. There must have been because when it came time for the Kingdom's ragtag caravan to depart, I awoke to find his bed empty. He was too headstrong. Too rash. Taehyung paused. The last remnants of light were whisked away from his skin as the darkness finished engulfing the surrounding area. "He reasoned that he'd find Cserx's father, collect the bounty a rogue company had promised for his head and return to us with, not only the tales of many adventures but, with the knowledge and expertise needed to run the school we both hoped to built in the future. I
thought he was being selfish and unfair for choosing to leave us. But, I realized several years later that it wasn't so much himself that was being selfish. I was being too demanding. You see, he was afraid of dying the way his mother had lived. Without skills. Without money. Without a way to make the future a present." Taehyung rolled the beaded necklace wrapped around his neck in between his fingers.

Jungkook grabbed ahold of Taehyung's hand. The navy silk sleeve slipped down his arm, revealing a patch of smooth, tan skin. Taehyung tried to pull his hand away but Jungkook held on firm. "Jungkook, what are you- You're pressing down too hard." There was fear to Taehyung's movements. But, the fear could not overpower his doe-like inquisitiveness.

Jungkook's grip slackened but the intensity in his eyes did not dissipate. He leaned in, the edges of his black bangs brushing against his eyelashes. He pulled ink and pen from his shirt pocket. His knee knocked against the inside of Taehyung’s thigh.

Taehyung remained silent as Jungkook dipped pen to ink before meticulously sliding the tip against his forearm.

Jungkook slipped his bottom lip into his mouth. He had been waiting for this. Hopefully, his feelings would run true to Taehyung even if they weren't reciprocated.

"Dun reed yet," Jungkook mumbled as he pulled away from Taehyung. Taehyung obliged.

Jungkook hurriedly sealed the pot of ink before standing and pointing to the moon. "U cun reed now."

Taehyung started to skim over the letters.

"Out loud please," Jungkook whispered.

Taehyung nodded.

"I give you the moon so maybe you can hold it up... for me."
Taehyung looked up at Jungkook, his left eyebrow creased slightly at the inner corner. "Jungkook, I-
"

A calm "Yoo-hoo" sounded from up ahead. Hoseok's physique came into view as he stepped into the circular space. There was nothing to disrupt the silence that stretched out through the air.

Jungkook watched with a disillusioned countenance as Taehyung's mouth opened wide to reveal a burst of happiness; his eyes alight and bright, his hand quick to pull the sleeve of his shirt down over his forearm.

"Hoseok!" Taehyung shouted as he jumped out of his seat.

Disheartened, but not surprised, Jungkook offered the scene unfolding before him a meek smile. For once, he was grateful for the insignificance his life played. This way, he wouldn't have to muster up the courage to conceal his sadness from privy questions.

"Let me show you both to your rooms. It's getting late."

"Of course! Where is-"

"Behind you," Jungkook said.

Taehyung glanced over his shoulder to see Jungkook standing but an inch away from him. "Ah, yes. Let us go, then." Taehyung strode forward, only stopping to turn around when he was several feet ahead.

As they walked, Taehyung fidgeted with the hem of his shirt sleeve. Twice he tried to slip ahold of Jungkook's wrist. Twice he failed.

Eventually, Taehyung knocked his shoulder into Jungkook's arm with a playful grunt. "About earlier. Things... don't have to be awkward, okay?"

Jungkook nodded. Of course they didn't. Taehyung didn't deserve to cradle his capsule of emotions. Jungkook mustered as much goodwill and happiness before pulling back his lips to reveal one of the
most natural smiles he could offer. He tapped on a tooth for effect.

Taehyung smiled. "There's nothing on your teeth. I promise."

Jungkook glanced away. His body was heating up on its own accord. Here it was again. The resolve to keep his affection at bay dissolved the minute he thought just how precious Taehyung was.

Before the uncomfortable silence could return, Jungkook slipped the last strip of paper from his trousers.

Taehyung kept his eyes on Hoseok's back; glancing every so often at Jungkook.

Jungkook handed Taehyung the note. Their eyes connected. The moonlight caught on Taehyung's irises, turning them into a playground full of dancing light. Jungkook bit back the desire to lean in and have for himself the taste of a man who had given him the sense of belonging.

Taehyung read the note. Is uh popular saing round my town. The ting on ur arm. Eberyone says it. "Thanks for being honest with me," he whispered.

They approached the set of stairs that led to a balcony above the sunroom.

"Secret entryway," Hoseok said. He threw a grin over his shoulder.

Jungkook looked down at his hands and wondered: would his hands or feet turn first? Would his heart constrict? A sharp pain cut through his leg. He hurried up the stairs. Hoseok shifted his eyes to the side. The liveliness in his face had vanished. His feigned enthusiasm had been replaced with a cold, calculating mentality.

Jungkook swayed from side to side for but a brief moment before a temporary blackout knocked his vision askew. He heard the yelp. Followed by the scuffling of feet. He snapped out of his trance to see Hoseok leaning over the guardrail, a familiar bracelet strapped around the hand that clutched onto Hoseok's wrist. Taehyung!

Jungkook rushed forward. He slammed into the railing and as his mind connected to form,
materialized the sight of Taehyung's frightened eyes.

"I can't... much longer," Hoseok said in between gritting his teeth. Jungkook snatched ahold of Taehyung just as Hoseok let go.

"Don't let go of him!" Hoseok shouted as Jungkook slipped headfirst over the railing.

"You're okay, Taehyung." Jungkook's mind stood still as he took note of Taehyung's unmoving form. His shoulder slammed into granite before he had time to rouse Taehyung awake. But he was well and that was what mattered most in this instance.

Several seconds passed by. Jungkook pressed a kiss to the crown of Taehyung's hair. I remember how in love I was with your hair when I first saw it. A pause as he took a shallow breath in. No. How enamored I was with you.

"There they are!"

Jungkook sat up to look at the speaker of the voice but the pain in his shoulder yanked him back down.

"Here. I'll rush him to the infirmary." Hoseok peeled Taehyung away from Jungkook before he had time to object.

"Did I do that?" Jungkook slowly sat up with help from the two attendants at his side. He looked down at his large hands. His eyes flit about. Had he almost hurt Taehyung?

"I wouldn't worry about it," Hoseok said. In turning to the attendants, he said: "See to it that my esteemed guest receives the best medical care."

The maids nodded and curtsied, one after the other but Jungkook's attention remained focus on the sight before him. Taehyung lay cradled in Hoseok's arms. The farther Hoseok retreated, the smaller Taehyung's frame became. Jungkook felt the pain of a thousand pricks running upside the length of his left leg just as the glass doors clinked shut behind the future rulers of Noseraas.
Distress

Upon exiting the infirmary, Jungkook asked to see Taehyung.

The maid solemnly shook her head. "I'm sorry, dear. He's at rest."

Jungkook dipped his head forward. He could hear his heartbeat but his skin felt cold to the touch.

The maid escorted him to his room. A larger, more intricate, door towered several feet down the hallway. Jungkook tapped on her shoulder.

"Whose staying in the room next to mine?"

"I apologize but I don't have that information to disclose."

Jungkook felt a frown overtaking his lips. He quickly replaced it with a quick nod and a smile. "Is ok."

"But I can tell you he has caramelized brown hair with-"

Jungkook's eyes grew wide. "brassy undertones."

The maid looked amazed. "Yes! Of course. How did you know?"

Jungkook looked down at the floor. We're both swans at heart.

"Well then, if you'll excuse me." She curtsied.

Not until she was halfway down the hallway did Jungkook step inside to a room enshrouded in darkness. The only source of light being the bright moonlight coming in from the two bay windows located at the other end of the room. He focused his attention on the carpet at his feet, breaking from
Jungkook waited several more minutes before stepping back into the hallway. He managed to successfully escape the castle without any questioning glances or remarks. On his way to the back end of the castle gates, he was confronted by his worst nightmare.

She came in the form of dark wisps of smoke; her head and hair being the only visible aspects of her figure. Jungkook stumbled backwards. He slammed into a tree trunk that quickly ensnared him in a grip so tight he knew would break the bones in his arms if he struggled to get away.

Her feet touched ground. Jungkook drew in a sharp intake of air. The temperature around him had suddenly dropped to freezing. As she pressed a hand to Jungkook's heart, a large circular star sign emerged before his chest. The shock of its immense power made him grit his teeth.

"You have but three days to make the one you love fall in love with you."

She slashed her nail on the space before Jungkook's heart. A thick, black gash emerged, followed by a torrent of wind that shook the trees' leaves.

"Consider this warning my respects to the dead." The gash swallowed the circle in a rush for pleasure. Before Jungkook could let the fear inside of him erupt, she was gone and he was left to grapple with the newfound knowledge bestowed upon him.

Several restless hours ticked by before Jungkook heard a timid knock at the door. He paid it no heed for the past several hours had been a cycle of short spasms between sleep and reality. The lines between the two had begun to blur.

Jungkook forced his eyes shut. He was well on his way to glimpsing another short bout of sleep when a weight sunk into the mattress at his side. His eyes shot open to find someone sitting beside him. A familiar voice seeped into his ears.

"Jungkook, it is you. Jungkook." Taehyung fell forward, his arms finding their way around Jungkook's sturdy neck. The bed sheets ruffled as Taehyung shifted his body so that one leg straddled Jungkook's outer thigh while the other pinned the bed between his inner thighs.
"Taehyung, what-

Taehyung silenced his voice with a kiss. Jungkook's hands trembled as he reached out to grab ahold of Taehyung's unbuttoned shirt.

Taehyung pulled away for a breath of air.

"Taehyung, wait. I-" Jungkook gasped. He glanced down to see Taehyung's fully-formed mound pressed into his crotch. He stifled a soft moan before looking back up at Taehyung with inquisitive, concerned eyes.

Taehyung started rolling his hips forward in deep, succinct circles. Just as the intensity of the movements escalated into an unbearable pleasure, Taehyung would slow down and inch his way back to a barely perceptible touch of flesh against flesh.

Taehyung's ravenous gaze was unflinching. He lowered his lips to a hover over Jungkook's reddened mouth.

"You're crying." Taehyung propped himself onto his hands. "Why? Does it not feel good?"

Jungkook shook his head. He opened his mouth to speak when the signatory acrid taste of alcohol sweltered over his taste buds. Taehyung was drunk. The memories of Uncle pricked at his being. As much as he wanted the events unfolding before him to be anything but a misguided attempt to do right, Jungkook knew that there was nothing he could do to change Taehyung's currently hazy world. "Hoseok."—Jungkook glanced down at his hands—"Hoseok would-"

Taehyung’s upper lip curled into a snarl. "I'm asking you! I don't care what Hoseok thinks."

"What we're doing is wrong!" Jungkook shouted. He pushed on Taehyung's arms.

"Why did you leave without saying anything? Why did you go without telling me goodbye?" Taehyung's facial features relaxed, the sharp upturn of his eyebrow softening as he leaned into the crook of Jungkook's neck. Jungkook looked up at the ceiling, wondering how far he could push his desires past reasoning.
Taehyung touched the patch of skin on full display between Jungkook's unbuttoned shirt. Jungkook shot forward, his hand grabbing ahold of Taehyung's wrist before he could traverse any further. "Stop!"

"What. Why? Why would you-"

The tears gushed over Jungkook's cheeks at unrelenting speeds. He struggled to keep them at bay.

"I don't want this."

Taehyung flinched. Jungkook pursed his lips. He knew this was his last chance of breaking the curse. All he had to do was tell him the three most beautiful words.

"I don't want you. I don't love you."

Taehyung stumbled out of bed. He grabbed the side of his head with his hand. "No... You're not right, Jungkook. You're not- You don't mean that."

"You've had the wrong idea all along. I've never loved you."

Taehyung reeled backwards, his facial features a collision between anguish and confusion. In a matter of seconds, Taehyung had fallen over into a slump by the chair he had first used to teach Jungkook the Ciclanish alphabet. Was it so long ago that the world was brimming with bountiful possibilities?

Jungkook swiped at his eyes with the back of his forearm. At this moment, the worst pain belonged to his beating heart. Never again would he experience the same kind of bliss that these past several weeks had brought him.

He scooped Taehyung into his arms, wondering if Taehyung would have liked to be his friend given a completely alternate set of circumstances. Would he have been inclined to love him as a prince? Could he have been Hoseok in some other lifetime?

Jungkook lifted the patch of sandpaper from the kitchen table. The magical contraption had been a
As per the instructions, Jungkook scratched the surface against Taehyung's skin. The blood from the knick pooled into the sandpaper. From the tool emerged a snow white owl whose red-orange eyes were in stark contrast to the blueberry-colored patches of feathers running upside its wings. Two twin golden tassels circled its underbelly in one large x.

Jungkook smiled as the bird set off in the direction of his master. Swans have wings but they don't fly. Humans have hope but they don't always win.

The sound of horses' hooves emerged from the darkness up ahead. Jungkook pressed one final kiss to Taehyung's forehead before slipping away into the surrounding darkness. He watched with a heavy heart as Hoseok reared Hevi to a halt several paces away from Taehyung's bundled body.

Hoseok perused his surroundings before disembarking. He dropped to one knee and in one swift motion, pulled Taehyung up from the forest floor. The leaves rustled as Hoseok walked back to his horse.

"Thank you," Hoseok whispered before climbing aboard. In the span of a gulp for air, Hoseok was gone; Taehyung alongside him.

Jungkook stayed glued to the damp forest floor. The memories of these past several weeks converged into a mass of sentiment that choked his airway everytime he tried to cry out in agony. His tears rolled into his ears. Maybe given another lifetime, he would have been able to showcase his love for Taehyung. If he were Noseraas' future King, he would have seen to it that Pledge IV Clause I and II were stripped from the land's law. He would have seen to it that love could be indulged in without the interference of manmade notions.
"Good morning, my love."

Taehyung struggled to sit up. He pressed one hand to his head as his eyes flitted over the white linen sheets strewn across his body. "I don't remember much of anything."

"Well, that's alright. You did have a nasty fall."

Taehyung watched as Hoseok placed a clear crystal tube full of a dull hyacinth-colored liquid on top of the drawer at his bedside. A familiar feeling enveloped his sensibilities. Purple. He couldn't remember why the color seemed so important to him.

Hoseok took Taehyung's hand in his gloved one. "The fall you had must have been terrifying." He preceded to slide a bracelet onto Taehyung's wrist. Small, yellow jewels dotted silver woodwork snakes clustered within amber-filled trinkets. From a small chain hung a sword whose amber-tipped edge glistened underneath the sun's rays.

Hoseok clamped Taehyung's hands in between his. "I would love it if you could wear this. For me."

Taehyung nodded. He offered to pull his hand away for closer inspection of the bracelet but Hoseok denied him the gesture. Something was amiss. Out of place.

Taehyung eyed his wrist. "My bracelet. Where is it?"

Hoseok looked at Taehyung through his long black lashes. A dense silence slinked over the room. Hoseok blinked and his static features disappeared to reveal a face full of innocent surprise. "Oh, that. Don't worry about it."

"Where is it?" The notion that the bracelet was important to him emerged but Taehyung couldn't pinpoint the reason why.

"Don't worry. It's in your room. Next to your wardrobe. Safe and sound."
Taehyung's shoulders relaxed. He wondered why he was ready to attack Hoseok for answers regarding the bracelet. After all, the piece was nothing more than an accessory. Right?

A screeching sound jumped up from the ground as the stool's wooden pegs scraped against the granite floor. "If you're feeling better by tomorrow morning, why don't we announce the ball for Sachuin?" Hoseok offered Taehyung an unsure grin.

Taehyung's eyes grew wide. Strands of hair from his pushed-back bangs fell onto his forehead as he leaned forward. An inescapable smile blossomed over his impeccable face. "You don't mean-"

Hoseok let his grin fly wide over his face. "Will you marry me in three days time?"

Taehyung flew into Hoseok's arms, his cheek pressed into the top of Hoseok's head. "Of course. I'll do anything to be happy with you."

The smile on Hoseok's face flattened as he heard the bracelet's trinkets clashing one against the other. Clink. Clack.

Clink. Clack.

Clink.

★

Jungkook knocked on Mr. Lepitun's door with paper and pen in hand. He offered him the brightest smile he could muster given these trying times.

★ ★

The day of the engagement ball arrived with due diligence. Families from various parts of Mush Try arrived to wish the eldest prince and his partner well-off. Carriage after carriage filed up the Kingdom's incline. While parents moved towards friends and acquaintances, the youngest of the
children flew off into the castle's grass in search of fellow playmates. Colorful kites filled the sky. The world was alight and bright.

At the other end of the Kingdom, cheers and chatter consumed the air as common folk went about celebrating the soon to be united couple. Baskets of bread floated around from head to head as families shared their freshly baked goods between each other. Teenagers made their way to the brick-and-mortar town circle to watch a dancing troupe perform their most intricate routine while children dashed in and around legs in search of mischief. The Kingdom's crest emblazoned the breast's of every child throughout Noseraas. A spear-headed boar with gold-tipped tusks encircled Jven—the goddess who had managed to save herself for vengeance only after sacrificing her two twins.

The future of tomorrow was today.

★

Jungkook stood before the only mirror in the cottage. He slid his gloved hand into the sleeve of his outer jacket before taking a couple of steps back to overview his current state of affairs. In the days since Taehyung's drunken stupor, his hands had turned into the tips of a swan's wings. Without jointed fingers, Jungkook could no longer grip anything like he had once done as a human.

From mid-waist down to his feet, a thin layer of feathers as crisp and clean as the underbelly of a sugar cookie covered his skin. He took a deep breath in as he fastened the cut strip of fabric from the purple flag that hung over the kitchen entryway into his hair. He pressed in tight before knotting the strip into a bow. The tips slipped over his shoulders like twin streams of frosting from a piping tube.

Jungkook recalled the memory of Taehyung jumping with excitement at the sight of a purple so vibrant not even Mother Nature could fashion it from her bosom. Now, Taehyung didn't have to be all that amazed. The possibility of purples from fairytale to fiction would be at his fingertips. On coronation day, The Queen is to be adorned in purple.

★

Jungkook was walking up the castle's incline when a young girl approached him. "Mister, let me help you." She wrapped her arm around his with the daintiest smile smoothed over her freshly-powdered cheeks.

"Oh, but you don't have to," Jungkook opened his mouth to say something else when a cough
erupted from his mouth. He quickly turned his head away, grateful that there was no silver dust and red blood flying free from his throat.

"I'm sorry."

"It's quite alright. Your health is most important." The girl made sure to lay her hand over Jungkook's as if to tell him he was going nowhere.

Jungkook froze. And waited for a scream of disgust. Or a look of confusion. Anything to signal that she had discovered his secret.

But she continued on without a change in expression. Jungkook smiled to himself. He felt the tension drain from his shoulders. The bittersweetness of this situation would have been enough to render him senseless to the last ounce of will coursing over his veins. He would have gone quietly if not for his resolution to see the one most important person in his life.

"My name is Arriette. What's yours?" The girl looked up at him from having readjusted her skirts.

Jungkook took a moment to look over the land. They were drawing nearer to the entrance. A guard stood watch over the incoming guests. Soon, he would have to let go. Find an entrance in the rear.

In the meantime, Jungkook racked his head over the names Mr. Lepitun had presented yesterday. He ultimately decided on the most conspicuous one, knowing very well that no one would have any curiosity to ask the quiet man with a cane for his name. Besides, the risk was low even if discovery were plausible. Amendment Q's prominence ended sometime during Taehyung's early childhood years; shortly after the second prince's birth. No one would remember such a short-lived law from more than two decades ago.

"Jeonghwan."

The girl's eyes lit up. Her red lips peeled back to reveal a pair of pearly whites. "What a pretty name! Who named you? Your mother or father?"

Jungkook hadn't thought this far along. He knew they would have both had a say in his name but it was uncommon in nobility for females to help in selecting a name. So, he chose the only option that wouldn't incite inquisitiveness or suspicion.
"Father."

The girl hiked her skirts up higher. "Did you know you fit all four attributes of your name?"

Jungkook cocked an eyebrow. "Oh. And what would those be?" Did this girl know about Amendment Q? Had he messed up in choosing this name?

"Righteousness, honesty, beauty and..." She frowned as she tried to recall the last one. "Oh!" She nearly tripped in her haste to turn to Jungkook with an excited squeal. "Creation." She sheepishly looked towards the ground. "At least, that's what the characters for Jeong represent."

Jungkook swallowed. Everything outside of his immediate vicinity receded into little more than the gentle wind that tickled the blades of grass. Creation? How forthcoming. Now, of all times.

He yanked himself away from the irony of his name's meaning to find himself underneath a golden archway lined with white-petaled flowers. He looked over his shoulder. The guard stood several feet away; his back turned to him. Jungkook had managed to successfully bypass security.

"Well, Mister, if you'll excuse me." Arriette carefully untwined her arm from around Jungkook's before dipping low to the ground in a curtsy. "I have to go find someone now." She was all smiles and blushes as she disappeared into the dwindling crowd.

Jungkook hoped that Arriette could find who she was searching for. It was evident that the person in question was what gave her reason to be full of hope and expectation.

Jungkook stepped closer to the ballroom. The sounds of violins, flutes, and trumpets filtered into the settling dusk around him. With its open archways and spacious floor plan, the ballroom beckoned guests forward. Purple, heavyweight bars seated masked dancers as they contorted every which way within the confines of their respective spheres. Circular tables occupied one-half of the room. Comfortably seating up to 8 people each, they were decked out in a range of radiant ornamentation from peacock-colored chair covers to shimmering tablecloths that illuminated the purple hyacinth on each table—placed high above the guest's heads so that they formed the outline of a boar's tusks.

At the perimeter of the ballroom's archways, ladies walked around with platters teeming with items from alcoholic drinks to feathered pens and blotting paper. Their muted gowns flared bright with the moonlight reflected off of the imperceptible crystals embedded throughout the body-contouring cloth.
Something hard hit Jungkook from behind. He looked around in time to catch sight of the woman who had slammed into him with her opulent fan. With nothing more than a slight shake of his head, Jungkook turned his attention to the elongated serving tables nearest the rose garden. The smell of apples, lemons, and cinnamon wafted into his nose as he moved to pull a strawberry-topped confection from its silver platter.

First, there was a rise in murmurs. Followed by a slow, steady stream of hands coming together before the entire room erupted into a rambunctious cacophony of claps and low cheers. Jungkook knew what it was he was going to find even before he could spot the brassy-toned male bent down on one knee before an older woman. She used her weathered hand to cup his cheek. The crowd shuffled inward, obscuring his view.

Jungkook pressed forward against the cluster of bodies. He had to break through. For all the misery crushing his sensibilities, Jungkook just couldn't get enough of Taehyung. He had to consume Taehyung from afar. Down to the last inch.

And just as soon be gone. Back into the darkness from which his body was destined to go.

The man next to him growled as Jungkook used his shoulder to slip through. His cane jammed into something soft but he had no intentions of apologizing. Not now. In this instant, all he cared to focus on was the surrender of his entire being to the call of his heart.

Mouth agape, Jungkook drank in the sight of Taehyung as he came to a stand at the front of the crowd. His beauty was ethereal, his movements constructed to radiate warmth and kindness as he went around in circles waving to near everyone who had come out to celebrate this important event with him.

Pants as white as the snow-peaked mountains to the East of the kingdom hugged his thighs down to the last sensual curve and crevice. The upper portion of his body carried with it the soft suppleness of lovers written into poems of eternal pleasure. On one side of his bangs, the tips had been dyed a blue-purple—the sharp contrast serving to draw attention to the pattern of jewels surrounding the side of his face.

The crowd began to thin out as they moved to dance alongside an enthusiastic Taehyung but Jungkook's feet stayed firm. His focus remained on the man whose exuberant smiles gave him reason to succumb to the erratic beating of his heart.
Taehyung searched the crowd. His eyes caught on Jungkook's and instead of rightfully turning away, he did the unthinkable. The unimaginable. Taehyung lifted his arm and with that all-too-familiar gummy smile, beckoned Jungkook forward.

No one paid either man any attention as everyone else had been drawn into their own separate worlds on the dance floor. The melodic sound of a harp joined the rhythmic swell of the string instruments. Jungkook swallowed. He had to get out of here.

The guests swirled to the right, concealing Taehyung from view. Jungkook couldn't walk fast, much less run so he opted to hide in plain view. Shoulders raised to his ears and chin brought down to his chest, he dropped down into the seat next to a woman who eyed him with a once-over cautionary look. Jungkook hoped that Taehyung had been lured away from the prospect of dancing with him, of all people. That way, Taehyung wouldn't have to witness the state of affairs Jungkook's hands had been reduced to in the days since their late-night rendezvous.

Jungkook clamped down on the top of his cane with both palms. A presence drew near. His knees began to shake. A pause. The person's silhouette splashed against the table. Jungkook reached for the cup of white wine set out before him just as the person standing over him spoke.

"Would you care to dance with me?" There wasn't an ounce of ridicule to his deep voice. He spoke plainly; matter-of-factly. Almost as if this were nothing more than a gesture of kindness for the noblemen and women present to witness.

Jungkook's heart withered. And just as soon as Taehyung grabbed his shoulder, Jungkook flipped the cup backwards. The liquid splashed onto Taehyung's chest, leaving his ornamental garb a mess of dripping liquid.

The liveliness from the crowd died down. The instruments ceased to play. The murmurs grew in volume. Notwithstanding the stares, the growing heat on the back of his neck, and the tightening knot in his mind, Jungkook threw the cup down onto the ground. The glass shattered and before he could think of staying rooted to the ballroom floor, Jungkook hurried away. Grateful for the shadows that ran alongside the ballroom's outskirts, Jungkook escaped into the gardens with nothing more than an aching heart and the last few memories of having seen his greatest treasure.

From tens of feet away, Hoseok hurried over to Taehyung. His countenance was expressionless, his steps propelled by the will to protect his betrothed.

"Are you alright, my love?" Hoseok placed his hand on the small of Taehyung's lower back.
Taehyung didn't say anything for the span of a few seconds. Slowly, but surely, he began to open his mouth. "I... I don't understand. Why did he do that?" Taehyung looked down at his chest—the liquid now having seeped through the fabric onto his skin. He began to shake. Something was amiss. Why had that man seemed so memorable?

Hoseok looked at Taehyung with questionable fervor. Taehyung would never again remember. Such was how life should be.

All was best in the land of Noseraas.

★

Jungkook made it back to the cottage in a mess of sweat and aching limbs. He couldn't breathe right. He touched the tip of his nose to find it replaced with something hard and long.

Not yet.

He inched his ailing body towards the fireplace.

There was still one last thing to do. To say. He couldn't go just yet.

★

Taehyung was told to change into a freshly-pressed set of clothes. He collapsed onto the floor just as soon as the door to his bedchambers clicked shut behind him.

The attendant at his side screeched as she followed after Taehyung. "Your grace, w-what's wrong?" In wrapping her hand around Taehyung’s forehead, she moved to unbutton his cufflinks.

Taehyung peeled her hands away. An aloof, silly grin formed over his dry lips. "There's no need for that."
"But-

"Oh, I know. This is your responsibility and you can get into a lot of trouble for not tending to me but I mean it when I say you don't have to preoccupy yourself with me."

"Please. If you're feeling unwell, I can go and fetch the physici-

Taehyung shook his head. "No. I just..." He took a deep breath in. "Do you ever get the feeling like you've done something wrong but can't pinpoint what it is even if you can deduce why it happened to be that way?"

The attendant went slack. "Your grace..."

"I must have wronged that man with the cane but I can't tell what it is I did." He lolled his head to the side, his attention catching on nothing in particular.

The attendant smoothed her dull skirts out. She refrained from making eye contact with Taehyung.

Taehyung dismissed her with a groan. "I'll change by myself." He noticed the way her frown grew more pronounced. "But, you can see to it that no one comes in. At all." A smirk danced over the corner of his lips.

The girl nodded vehemently. Her smile replaced the frown on her face. As she departed, her skirts ruffled and crinkled; the sounds a testament to the possible calmness Taehyung could experience. He held onto that gentle reminder as he moved to undress. Why was he stressed? What had he done wrong? There was always so many possibilities and never enough certainties. Shirt removed, Taehyung laid back down onto the porcelain floor. The coolness was a welcome shock to the warmth on his back. As he thought to move towards the bed, he began by first removing the ringlets around his neck and then, shortly thereafter, Hoseok's bracelet.

Taehyung groaned as an uneasy feeling burst over his stomach. He doubled over in pain. A numbing surge of heat coursed over his veins. His skin prickled. Beads of sweat began to form at the base of his temples. What was going on? Was he falling ill? Had he... had he been poisoned?

He opened his mouth to scream and, just as soon, the pain ceased to exist—the sole testament of his momentary ordeal being the peculiar throbbing at the base of his skull. Taehyung sat up. He swiped
at his brow. The color purple rang truer, deeper. There was something important about the color. His heart ached for someone in particular.

He had to see Hoseok. Something was just not right.

★

Jungkook kicked a chair up next to the fireplace. He had little upper strength left. After a number of exhaustive, consecutive attempts to try and light the wood left over from a time before Taehyung had been pronounced Hoseok's betrothed, Jungkook finally managed to get a fire started. The heat did little to warm his broken, but, empathetic, heart.

The woman had been wronged somehow, someway. It wasn't her fault. None of what was happening to him was any one person's fault. Life was, at times, just a collision of unforeseeable events. He had only hoped that his road wouldn't end like this. And so soon, too.

As Jungkook placed a piece of exquisite parchment paper before his two bare feet, he wondered how meaningful his life had been in the larger scheme of history. Being remembered for being alive was one thing but being remembered for having lived a life worth celebrating was something else entirely. The first of his last tears spilled over, dotting the snow-white feathers on his left foot.

★

Taehyung slammed into Hoseok on his way to find him.

Hoseok immediately cracked a big, bright smile. "Let me show you something," he said as he pulled Taehyung along by the wrist.

Taehyung felt like digging his heels into the ground. Unlike before tonight, Hoseok's touch did nothing to make him desire more.

Hoseok stopped before a glass box that contained an intricate design of circular spheres surrounded by seven different hues of pink-purple ringlets. "This is our solar system. Seven skies and an estimated twelve planets. When the stars align across every single sky, the moon shines brightest." Hoseok hurried over to the window. He pointed to the moon. As promised, a piercing bright light cut through the sparse number of clouds to illuminate the land.
"I just"—Hoseok kicked at the carpet with the toe of his polished boot—

"wanted you to know that I'll hold the stars up for you." He sheepishly looked up at Taehyung, a small, shy smile making him appear both innocent and distraught, all at once. "So trust me with your care?"

Taehyung's mind rushed to make sense of what he had just heard. Hoseok's words. They were oh so familiar. Where had he heard them before? He couldn't repress the influx of thoughts. Taehyung teetered backwards. Something strange was happening. Why would Hoseok?

Hoseok fell into step beside Taehyung, grabbing him by the elbow before he could trip and fall.

Taehyung shoved him back. "You..." He looked up through his disheveled bangs. Hoseok's eyes grew wide. Gone was the man with wondrous eyes illustrated by the love of a 23-year-old who would do anything to keep his partner's happiness from wavering.

Taehyung swiped at the air before stumbling into the wardrobe behind him. The wood rattled. "That day in the garden. You were there even before announcing yourself. You-" Taehyung gripped his wrist. "You took Jungkook's words and molded them to your liking."

Hoseok shook his head. With a quiver, Hoseok said: "My love, why aren't you wearing your bracelet?" He stumbled into the chair beside his display case. With a plop, he fell back into the seat.

"Don't my love me. That bracelet contains some type of magic. You cursed me. You poisoned my mind to believe something that may not have even been true!" Taehyung grabbed at the fabric over his heart. Tears stained the finely-woven silk.

Hoseok opened his mouth to say something but Taehyung cut him short. "Don't say anything!" He released a shaky breath.

"Jungkook... Jungkook was the first to mention holding the stars up for me. That's why he was upset. Because I couldn't remember who he was." Taehyung rolled against the wardrobe, his arm scraping against the metal intricacies. "That boy. All he wanted was to be happy."

Thwack! went the sound of a chair smacking against the hard floor. Taehyung cast a glance over his shoulder to see Hoseok aiming at him with bow and arrow.
"Everything I do, I do for you." Hoseok's bottom lip quivered. "He's not the only one that seeks eternal happiness. We all do. One thing leads to another. So don't... Don't tell me that what I do for you is wrong."

Taehyung stopped before the door.

The sound of the arrow being pulled tight against the bow jumped up from the silence. "Don't go."

"I was beginning to fall for you"—Taehyung reached for the doorknob—"but I see now that those intentions were for naught." He offered his wrist a sad smile. "Disgusting the lengths we go to for love."

Whoosh. The arrow impacted before Taehyung could even peel the door open a crack. The cluster of purple eel-like globs absorbed into his skin in a flurry of silver sparks. The arrow disintegrated. Taehyung toppled forward.

"Don't worry. There's no dark magic present." Hoseok dropped to his knees before Taehyung's head. "I only want the best. For you and I. Please, don't hate me for this."

Taehyung curled his fingers. Hoseok fervently favored the sciences and yet, here he was using magic harvested from Mother Nature's inner world.

Every single one of us are hypocrites.

★

From underneath the hanging limbs of a willow tree, a raspy voice erupted into being.

"Your punishment was too harsh."

The Wombledon Witch looked out over the forest. The stars did little to brighten the land this far into the foliage. But, the moon. The moon gave the area an unyielding, ethereal glow.
"No point in regretting anything now," she whispered before slipping the crown away from her head. Ringlets of lilac hair fell over her dainty shoulders.

The flowers on her crown came to life. All but the one that sat closest to her scalp. That particular flower withered before curling in at the edges with the burns that charred its luscious petals.

★

Father.

Hoseok hurried to the king's quarters. He needed a quick fix. And soon. Time was not on his side.

The familiar stench of strawberries and burning wood enveloped his sense of smell as he turned into the king's royal wing. His heartbeat escalated as he approached the grandeur doors. Two gold twin boars wrapped around the handlebars. Tomorrow everything would be better. Hoseok pulled the door open with a flourish.

A lightless void welcomed his vision. He faltered. The king never went to bed this early in the evening. Especially not before his first few rounds of festivities. Hoseok called out into the darkness as he readily searched for a match to light the lamps strung up around the room.

"Son, is that you?"

Hoseok froze, his hand hovering over an open notebook stained black from a spilled pot of ink. His father never called him son. Only ever Hoseok.

"It is, King Hyunseok."

"You silly boy. I thought I told you to call me papa."

Hoseok ignored his commentary. He concentrated on the half of the room where he believed the voice was coming from. "I need you to give me your most powerful magical tool. One that will make
A choked sound escaped the king's mouth. "Son, you know better than that. Love isn't meant to be contained. Much less controlled."

Hoseok took a step forward. A fire flicked on from one of the lamps nearest the desk. "He's right, big brother." Yejong fell back against the wall; one hand clasped around a crystallized cup. His green eyes slanted as he concentrated on Hoseok's undefined form. "Listen to what the despoiler has to say." A sinful smirk danced across his stained lips.

Hoseok froze. What was going on?

Yejong's arm went slack. He laughed. "Stop searching for a match and venture closer to the window. Pull the curtains back. Let some light in." He coughed. A sprinkle of blood dotted his palm. He tugged at his copper hair to clean himself of the red liquid.

"What is going on?" Hoseok hurried towards the window. He pulled the blinds apart. A flurry of light penetrated through, illuminating the room in its entirety. Hoseok took a step back and nearly tripped over a foot. His heart skipped a beat. The hairs on his body shot up. He knew who it was even before he could turn to see his father lying in a tangled mess on the floor. Shallow breaths escaped the king's parted lips. Translucent skin lay draped over his raggedy bones. Sweat dotted his brow.

Hoseok dropped to the floor beside his father. "What is going on? Yejung, answer me." His voice cracked. He shoved aside the tears that welled in his eyes. Now was not the time.

"Has Father never told you? Oh, brother. We're a spiteful family full of degenerates." A prolonged sigh escaped his lips. "Everyone but you."

"I don't understand. Yejung, you're not making any sense. Call for the physician. Father is..."

Hoseok couldn't bring himself to say the word. What if he were sending him away prematurely?

The King caught Hoseok's wrist between his stubby fingers. "Don't. This is it for me."

Hoseok crumpled inside. He wasn't ready to give up. So why would Father...?
"Your brother is right. I've wronged you both. There's nowhere else for me but Liftless." The King began to shudder.

Yejong stood and ambled over to the King. He kicked at him like a rag doll. His eyes grew wider, more deranged as the kicks grew in intensity. "Oh, old man. Don't you dare die just yet. You have the truth to-"

Hoseok stood and shoved Yejong away before slapping him across the face. Spittle flew out of his mouth. Hoseok took a step back. Why was Yejong so cold? What had he just done? Yejong fell back onto the bed in a state of absolute bliss. He sighed contentedly.

Hoseok turned back to his father. He brushed back his damp brown hair. "Father-

"Of course you wouldn't know. After Chungha died, I was the only one left to tell the tale."

Hoseok froze. "I'm tired of these rhymes and riddles. What about my mother? What of all this?"
Panic scratched at the corners of his frazzled soul. What were they omitting?

Before the King could say another word, Yejung opened his mouth. "Be quick about it, Hyunseok. If you wish to gain sympathy and remorse for your misdoings, you'll finish bleeding out before you can give Hoseok the truth he rightfully deserves."

"Bleeding?" Hoseok glanced at the floor around his father's body. Shock registered across his face.

"See, big brother. This is why you're fit to rule a kingdom. Haven't you noticed the pool of blood blooming over the floor?" Yejung struggled to sit up, eventually opting to stay down. His complacent smile never once left his sickly face. "Check his side. There's a slash. My parting gift to our hypocrite of a father."

Hoseok looked down to find the caps of his tan pants turned red from the blood that seeped into the cloth. He shuddered. True enough to Yejung's words, a large gash ripped through the side of his father's stomach. He doubled over to retch. Where before any other scents were indistinguishable from the room's customary stench, now the copper tang of blood assaulted his nose with unbearable intensity.
"Hoseok, no matter what, I never stopped loving you or Yejung. I did wrong by part of your mother so I promised to give you both the best life. I swore on behalf of your lives. Whether or not you returned the sentiment was beyond my intentions to shield you both."

Hoseok had been too busy contextualizing his life in regards to Hyunseok's words to notice Yejung crawling towards the king. Yejung leaned down and in one vicious stab, jammed a pen into the King's sturdy neck. The King gasped before gurgling up a bubble of blood.

Yejung fell back, his feet falling out from underneath his skinny body. "You take too long to get to the point, old man. Save the pity for your demons."

Hoseok scrambled to press his coat to the wound. What was Yejung thinking? What could warrant this level of savagery?

"N-no," the king whispered as he darted his eyes back and forth between the hand that pressed the cloth into his wound and Hoseok himself.

Yejung let out a curt laugh. "I'll see you in hell, Father." And with a saddened face full of regret, added on: "I love you."

Hoseok watched in horror as the king's life fled before his eyes. In a matter of timed seconds, the King's liveliness had been swept away by the vigor of darkness. Hoseok didn't understand. What had driven Yejung to this point? Hadn't he done well in protecting his little brother?

"What have you done!?!" Hoseok shot up off the floor. He forced his mind to carry the weight of his broken heart as he approached Yejung.

"Mother was raped twice."

Hoseok came to a sudden halt. The blood squelched under his boots.

"Once out of consensual force. She knew her duties as queen. But, that aside, what of the child she was forced to abort because the father was a commoner? A farmer. Had she been allowed to have the child, we would have had a bastard in the family."
Hoseok grabbed Yejung by the shirt. The cotton tore at the seams from the forceful pull. "How do you know all of this? Yejung, who told you this? How do you know you're not wro-" Hoseok clamped down on his tongue with a grimace.

"Wrong?" The word was never used around Yejung for fear of provoking his memories of the day he was nearly murdered. "It's okay, brother. You can say it." A lopsided smile tugged at the corners of his lips. "The second assault resulted in a sick child who couldn't experience the sun, lest he seek the embrace of death itself. Mother didn't conceive me out of duty or responsibility but out of our father's inability to keep himself away from her when under the spell of alcohol." Yejung broke out into a sob. His sharpened features melted into the countenance of a child burdened by the pressures of life. "She didn't love either one of us." Hoseok's heart constricted. This was the first he had seen him cry since the death of their mother a little over a decade ago.

Why hadn't he seen it before? Everything made sense. Their mother's aversion to being alone in a room with Yejung. The way she would sit staring out of a window while Yejung wailed in his crib. The night she tried to drown him. Yejung hadn't cried then. So bright and unyielding. So full of love and positivity. Of course, where there is light, darkness must tag along. The thing was that Hoseok never would have imagined that the shadows surrounding Yejung's presence were anything but physical.

"She put up with us out of obligation." Yejung dug his nails into his arms. "I was only ever a reminder of that life-altering encounter."

Through teary eyes, Hoseok cradled Yejung in his warm arms. "Why didn't you say anything? Why?" A sob broke out from between his lips.

Yejung coughed. The blood was thicker, darker. Hoseok tightened his grip. "How much did you take? We can still-"

"Don't. You wouldn't be honoring my wishes." He trailed his hand over Hoseok's arm. "I'm tired of this world. I know you'll care for this Kingdom well and more importantly, stomp out all of the rats in this lineage." He closed his eyes. "That's not all, brother. Check our mother's chest of treasures. You'll find it beyond the wine cellar. Behind a row of wheelbarrows." A feathery smile overtook his dry, cold lips. "Now, shut up. My head hurts." His eyelashes fluttered. Several breaths later, his body went slack.

"Yejung. Yejung! Wake up." Hoseok shook Yejung. His head lolled to the side. "Why didn't you say anything? You could have told me everything. I-" He broke down into a fit of anguished screams and tears.
After an endless bout of time, Hoseok forced himself to pull away from Yejung. He struggled to close his eyelids past the grime and crust. After carefully laying Yejung onto the bed, Hoseok fumbled out of bed. Hands and clothes stained red, he stumbled to the doorway. within the bounds of his grief. There was still one last thing to assure himself of. Yejong’s words had all of the playfulness from his actions and none from the stature of his personality. Hopefully, the assurance would come in the form of reprieve. Within the bounds of his grief, Hoseok began his journey to the wine cellar.

The incoming guards disregarded the prince as they rushed towards the King's chambers.

★

Taehyung awoke to find himself locked in his room. He kicked at the door while a fury of shouts and screams erupted from his sore throat. He stumbled backwards, a woozy feeling overtaking his head. He had to see Jungkook. Apologize. Set things right.

Wondering how he could escape the confines of Hoseok’s sentencing, Taehyung perused the room. The glass doors beckoned him forward. There was no one present. Only a garden and beyond that, the uncultivated, wild forest. He realized that the only way out would be through the bay doors.

That was a three-story drop. Suffice to say, the worst possible outcome would be death. He swallowed hard.

★

Jungkook slipped the pen between his toes. With a practiced bend, he gracefully arched his foot so that the tip of the pen touched the paper at a curve.

He wrote what he had always wanted to tell Taehyung in person. The sentence was short and to the point but contained all of his reasons for choosing to let Taehyung be happy with the person who made him happy.

He chucked the pen away before carefully slipping the paper between his teeth with the help of his tongue. His legs shook as he forced his body to carry him over to the fireplace. He dropped the paper onto the icy cold bricks before curling in on himself. A sharp numbness overtook his senses. The fire burning behind him did nothing to warm his body.
A string of soft sobs filtered in through the air. Soon enough, they changed in tone to resemble that of a swan's heart wrenching cries.

★

From the treeline off to one side of the cottage, a throng of animals of varying sizes, shapes and demeanors appeared. They stepped into the cottage's clearing, their countenances rife with immeasurable sadness.

"Mom, why aren't we doing anything?" A fawn with two black stripes running upside its forefront legs stepped further into the clearing. "We can't just leave him to die like that."

"It's black magic, Bambi." She nuzzled the back of her son's ear. He began to sob silently, the broken spaces between gasps for air a testament to his struggle to conceal the anguish that shook his tiny body to the core. "Only humans can heal their own misgivings."

The animals began to depart, one after the other in a single file line. The shadows welcomed them with the familiarity of a thousand sunsets.

Bambi looked one last time to the cottage with its open window. The shadows from the flames danced drunkenly across the damp earth outside. His fuzzy cheeks were matted down from the weight of his countless tears. His mother nudged him along into the forest.

Jagrulen üestme mazdru.

No world is as it is yesterday.

★

Taehyung threw all of his bedding outside. Without wasting any more time, he ran shoulder first off the balcony. He fell onto the bedding and bushes, his breath being knocked askew from the force. Worst yet, his ankle smacked onto a rock. The pain bolted through his nerves. An agonized gasp for air shot out through his lips. He didn't have time for this. He couldn't mellow in this pain. The quicker he moved, the sooner he could apologize to Jungkook. With a forced mental jolt of energy, Taehyung picked himself up from the ground and in struggling to push past his pain, began his journey home.
Hoseok arrived to find a weathered, brown box standing beside itself. The outside had been decorated with lace that had yellowed from its years of neglect. The lock lay smashed open. He peeled open the lid to find his mother’s jewelry and scarves clustered on top. But, surely, this wasn’t what Yejung had been referencing.

Hoseok took a deep breath in before scouring past those relics. He found a diary closer to the bottom. An emerald green cover loosely hugged the browned pages it contained. A moment of doubt zipped through Hoseok’s mind. What right did he have to look through his mother’s belongings? He set aside the diary for a moment of reflection. In recollecting his jumble of memories, Hoseok realized that if his mother had any intention of keeping her secrets forever, she wouldn’t have left behind anything for others to find. She couldn’t be angry with Hoseok for her own lack of introspect.

With a set determination to begin mending his tired soul, Hoseok peeled the diary open to the very last page.

The further he went into the book, the less sinister and more emotional his mother’s thoughts became. But, there was nothing that he didn’t already know.

Slowly, bit by bit, after each and every entry, Hoseok began to relax. There were no more secrets. He fell back onto his behind. The clumps of dust around him jumped up from the weighted jolt and from between the contents of the journal, a piece of paper slipped free.

Hoseok gingerly picked it up.

★

Taehyung continued going, going, going. Soon, he would be home.

★

The outside of the folded square read: Jeon "Jungkook" Jeonghwan. 1 year. 5454 J.B.
Hoseok's mind froze. His heart involuntarily clenched. Again, something was not right. The last Jeonghwan had died nearly a decade ago. The death had been turned into a debacle by his father who had spent the night drinking. But, that man had been 79. His mother would have had no reason to be acquainted with that Jeonghwan, unless, of course...

Hoseok pulled open the square. He knew the answer. He didn't have to check. But, as humans know best, concrete information is the only antidote for quelling doubt.

★

The cottage came into view. Taehyung felt his muscles begin to relax. There was no fire going. Jungkook must have fallen asleep. With a determined tip of the head forward, Taehyung tensed his muscles for the last stretch of the trek.

★

Inside, a cluster of midnight black baby hairs were clipped to the center. Behind them lay a glued piece of parchment with cursive penmanship.

*Jeonghwan will no longer go by his birth name. The woman who has claimed him as her own has decided to name him Jungkook. As promised, no one shall know that my nephew continues to exist. This is a testament to the strength of the Jeon family lineage. This is the promise I make unto my murdered sister—Jeon Aejeong. The Queen will not have her way. The true heir of this kingdom will succeed, whether in secrecy or not.*

★

*Hey, Taehyung.*

Taehyung slammed the door open. His bright, alluring grin fell flat as he took into account the mess of white feathers strewn over every inch. He fell to his knees in a bout of uncontrollable sadness. The Wobledon's Witch had soiled Jungkook. And Taehyung had been too caught up in his own feelings to have noticed.

*Hmm. What is it, Jungkook?*

Taehyung was a sobbing, screaming mess as he slid forward into the house, scooping as many feathers as he could into his arms. Jungkook's clothes lay strewn over the kitchen table like rags. The
scent of that perfume he never commented on infiltrated his nose.

*Do you know why swans mate for life?*

"We'll start over. Come back." He choked on his own breath. "Please."

*No. Why?*

He glanced at the fireplace. A sheet of paper. He picked it up.

---

*Check the door before you go.*

*Because love to them isn't a riddle. It's a rhyme.*

Taehyung turned his attention to the partially shut front door. Framed by the brown door, a large, cream sheet of paper hung in the center.

*A rhyme that needs to be punctuated with feelings.*

On it, three wobbly-written words stood proud and strong.

*Only than can they begin to make meaning of the heart's true existence.*
I

Love

You

The Swan Prince
Realization struck the possible tenant with crystal clear clarity.

The sprained ankle. The wooden cane. He turned around to confront the sickly old man with silver shadow hair. "You aren't-"

An empty hallway welcomed his vision. The front door stood wide open, the light from outside giving the dusty hardwood floor an unearthly illumination. The tenant shot up out of his seat.

Where the old man had sat mere seconds ago, his cane now lay over a cream-colored sheet of paper.

One single white feather descended onto the discolored paper. Right where the o in 'love' lay scribbled onto the surface.
King Hoseok raised his only child well until the age of fourteen before taking his own life with the taste of seven Swallips—the same poison that had taken the lives of both his father and brother.

Prince Jeonghwan became Noseraa's first ever boy king.

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