The Brothers Kim

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The Brothers Kim

by LaurelEvermore

Summary

Transported to an unknown era, Subin, a teenage girl raised with western values, wakes up in the body of a serf. In this unknown land, she encounters the aristocratic Kim brothers and finds herself entangled in the webs of deceit; woven by rivalry, politics and hunger for power.

||BTS AU||

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
"Leave him alone!"

With thundering footsteps, Subin rushed to the shorter boy’s side with a threatening glare. She waved her bag about as she tried to swat the pair of taller boys who were preying on her friend. "I said, 'leave him alone'!" she shouted once more, her voice shrill and raucous. "Are you guys deaf?"

The pair of taller boys sniggered at her as they backed away from the shorter boy who was covering his head with his bag. "Look, it's the bin girl!" one of them taunted as he pointed at Subin. He smirked as he leered at the shorter boy who ran and cowered behind her. "You're lucky you got a tough girlfriend, though no one knows why she'd ever want to stick with a pathetic wimp like you."

"Yeah," the other boy agreed. "But I guess it's a match made in heaven: Bin girl and Junkpoop!"

Subin narrowed her eyes at them both. "He's not my boyfriend," she said through gritted teeth. "And if I catch you picking on him again I'll--" Subin approached the pair who started backing away.

"Chill!" one of the boys said. "Geez, you're like friggin' Amazon woman."

"Yeah," the other boy agreed once more. "We were just having fun--"

"You call that fun?" she retorted. "Get outta here before I get my brother on you!"

Upon hearing those words, the pair started slinking away but not before addressing the short boy who was using Subin as a shield. "This ain't over. We'll be back for you tomorrow, Junkpoop."

The other boy snickered, "Yeah, Junkpoop!"

Subin had a threatening stance which made the dumber of the pair jolt. When they were finally out of sight, Subin turned to Jungkook who looked like he was about to burst into tears.

"Thanks, Subin-noona," he said to her meekly in Korean. He pushed his round glasses further up his nose bridge as they started slipping down.

Subin sighed, "I've told you before, don't call me that."

He looked taken aback, "I'm sorry, Subin" he apologised once more. His brows furrowed as he tried to mentally remind himself time and time again how Subin hated being referred to as 'noona'.

"When are you ever going to learn to defend yourself, Jun?" She asked as she gestured for both of them to start making their way to the parking lot. "It's been three months since you transferred to our school and you still haven't made any friends in your class."

Jungkook stared at her timidly. "I'm sorry..." he replied in Korean again.

This irritated Subin. "Jun, you can't keep speaking in Korean. You're in London now. You have to try and speak English if you want to adjust faster."

Jungkook peered at her with an uncertain expression. "But, it's so hard, noo--"
Subin gave him a warning stare.

"I mean, Subin" he finished. "Can't I just speak Korean when I'm with you?"

"But that's the thing" she replied exasperatedly, "You always hang out with me so you won't improve your speaking because I can understand you."

Jungkook looked at her innocently. "But I can understand English better now! My listening has improved. Listening to you speak English has helped me a lot."

"That's great and all but practising your speaking is more important" she replied. "What's the point of you being able to understand everyone but not being able to express yourself?" Subin shook her head in dismay at Jungkook. "Sometimes, I wonder how you'll be able to cope once I leave school."

Jungkook looked at her anxiously, "You're not going to our school's sixth form?"

Subin shook her head, "Nope. I'm planning to go to college instead. Or maybe move to a better one near central."

A worried expression graced Jungkook's boyish features. "But... that means I won't see you anymore."

Subin glanced at his direction and saw that he looked like he was about to cry. She sighed, "Jun, you can't expect me to stick around forever. It's my final year in this crappy secondary school. You think I wanna stick around with all these arseholes for another two years? Hell no!"

Jungkook looked at her pleadingly and then sighed in resignation. "You're right" he murmured. "I know you hate our school a lot." He looked up at the grey sky, "Why couldn't we be in the same year? Then we could leave this school together."

Subin was about to reply when the sound of a car horn honking caught her attention. Both she and Jungkook turned and saw that Subin's older brother had finally arrived to pick them up.

"Get a move on!" he shouted as he leaned out his car window. "I still got a report to write!"

Subin and Jungkook rushed to the beaten up red car. Once they were inside, Subin couldn't help noticing the putrid scent of her brother's car that immediately triggered her car sickness. "Bloody hell," she complained as she climbed into the front passenger's seat. "When was the last time you cleaned this thing?"

"Quit your complaining and get on" he grumbled. He turned to Jungkook, who was sitting at the back, and gave him a friendly smile as he spoke to him in Korean. "You alright there, Jungkook?"

Jungkook smiled back politely. "I'm good, Yoongi-hyung."

Once their seatbelts were buckled, the car spluttered back to life and they started driving away.

Subin had a sly smile as she glanced at her brother, who she knew was dying to ask Jungkook the usual question whenever he was in the car with them. Inconspicuously, she started counting down the seconds to when he'd ask the question.

...Eight, seven, six, five--

"How's your sister, Jungkook?"

Damn it, Subin thought. Missed out by five.
"She's okay" Jungkook replied, oblivious to Yoongi's true intentions. "She's just started her dissertation now so she's been very stressed."

"I can imagine" Yoongi answered a little too keenly. Subin giggled under her breath at her brother's so-obvious behaviour. "Does she need any help with the citations or anything? I have some good references."

"I think Noona's almost done with it" Jungkook replied. "But she did say that the hardest part was writing the methodology--"

"Oh, if she needs help with that, I'm also writing mine so..."

Subin smirked at the sight of her brother trying so hard. Why couldn't he just be straightforward about it and ask her out on a date or something?

"Hey, Yoongi, is dad back home now?" Subin asked, to clear the awkwardness in the car when Jungkook failed to respond to Yoongi's indirect proposal.

Yoongi grunted, "Yeah, he arrived this morning." But then, he frowned at her. "Why can't you be like Jungkook and refer to me as ‘oppa'? I'm your elder, you know."

Jungkook seemed to have snapped out of his daydream as he added, "Subin doesn't like it when I call her ‘noona' either."

"Dad doesn't mind it" Subin replied dismissively. "And we're in the UK, it feels weird when I call you ‘oppa' in public. I feel like a koreaboo."

Once they had dropped Jungkook off at his house, Yoongi and Subin continued their conversation.

"Why are you looking for dad?" he asked her. "You better not be asking for more money again."

"I'm not" Subin huffed. "I have this essay I need to write for my coursework so it's really important. It's about our family history and stuff and I figured dad will be able to help since he just came back from South Korea." Subin frowned, "It sucks to be Asian. Everyone else in class has it easy because they're all either part Irish or Scottish or Welsh or something."

Yoongi was disinterested, "A family history essay? Sounds boring as fuck."

"Better than some crappy report you gotta write" she retorted. Subin thought for a moment. "Maybe I should've just asked Jun. He's really into all that Korean stuff."

"Yah, that 'Korean stuff' you're referring to is actually our culture" Yoongi reminded her pointedly.

Subin hmphed. "Whatever. But anyway, how's dad? Did you talk to him yet?"

Yoongi grunted. "He's doing okay. It's not like he's the type to cry anyway."

Subin silently agreed with her older brother's statement. It had been two weeks since she had last seen her father after he had left unexpectedly for South Korea to attend her grandmother's funeral. As the plane fares were too expensive for all three of them, their father had decided to go alone leaving Yoongi, who was a university student, in charge of the house while he was gone.

When Subin found out that her maternal grandmother had passed away, she didn't feel anything inside. It wasn't like she was very close to her anyway. She had only met her a few times when she was younger. Naturally, she was closer to her paternal grandparents as her father kept in touch with
them and so she and Yoongi did too.

"Hey, Yoongi. What was my mom like?"

Yoongi glanced at her briefly before fixating his eyes back on the road. "Why are you asking about her all of a sudden?"

"Nothing much. It's just that I have to write about my family history and dad doesn't like talking about her." Subin continued to stare out the front car window. "And with my grandma gone, you're pretty much the only person I can talk to about her."

Yoongi was silent for a moment. "She was a nice lady" he eventually answered. "She was a lot nicer than my mom, I can tell you that."

Subin smiled slightly. "Really?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I remember her giving me loads of chocolates when I was a kid. And she was quite a good cook too." His eyes softened as he spoke about her. He peered at Subin briefly again and mentioned, "You kinda resemble her, you know. You have the same kinda hair and the same kinda eyes."

Subin inspected her features in the rear-view mirror. "I wish I could have met her" she whispered wistfully.

Yoongi was silent.

"You should talk to your mom too. Invite her to your graduation next year."

Yoongi's lips thinned at the idea. "She's not worth the plane ticket" he muttered disdainfully. "Let's not talk about her anymore," he said as he parked their car outside their apartment building. "Talking about her just brings back bad memories."

~*~

The door to their apartment opened with a satisfying click as Subin turned her key and pushed it open. Inside, she saw her dad's pair of boots left neatly near the entrance. She inhaled and a fresh, pine scent greeted her nostrils.

Subin sighed contentedly. Dad's definitely back. "Dad!" she shouted. "Dad, are you here?"

In just a few moments, Subin saw a burly man with a round face appear from the living room. He smiled at the sight of his daughter and son as he approached them. "Subin-ah, Yoongi-ah!" He had his arms outstretched to hug her and Subin noticed the sweat patches near his pits. She avoided him completely.

"Dad, you haven't showered yet, have you?" she asked with a hint of disgust.

He chuckled, "You're as sharp-tongued as usual, Subin-ah. The first thing you ask your dear appa is whether he's showered yet..." he put his hand to his heart and mimicked being shot, "I'm hurt."

Yoongi sighed at the sight of his dad. "I told you to shower and go to sleep already. Don't you still have jet lag?"

He shrugged, "Yeah, but I feel so wide awake at the moment so I decided to tidy up." He gestured for the Min siblings to follow him into the living room where he had his two large suitcases open.
Subin gaped at the eccentric souvenirs their father had bought. There were a lot of food items that they couldn't buy in London but what intrigued her most was an antique looking thing that she found next to, what looked like, a pile of dirty laundry.

"What's this?" she queried as she delicately picked up the book to inspect it. The title was written in Hangul so Subin couldn't understand.

Her father looked up from where he was hunched over. "Oh, that was your grandmother's *magnum opus.*"

"A what now?"

"*Magnum opus*" Yoongi repeated for her. "It means 'masterpiece' in Latin."

Subin peered down at the large book in front of her and decided to open it. When she did, she saw that the book had a lot of printed Hangul with a few illustrations of old-style Korean paintings and calligraphy. To her, it looked like some sort of History book.

"Your grandmother was a historian" her father explained as he sauntered over to her. "She dedicated most of her life trying to prove that your mother's family was related to someone famous in history."

At this, Subin looked at her father curiously. "Someone famous?"

He nodded. He looked over her shoulder as Subin flipped the page to a painting of what looked like a young, rich woman adorned in vibrant silk robes. "She was adamant to prove that you were related to someone called Kim Gyuri." He pointed at the picture and read out the caption beneath it, "'Kim Gyuri, the deadly princess who infamously brought down the thriving House of Kim.'"

Subin stared at the picture and immediately felt intrigued. "We were really related to someone famous in history?"

"Not *we,*" Yoongi clarified, "*you.*"

"Huh?"

"It's from your mother's side of the family" he explained. "We're only half-siblings so my side doesn't count."

"Well, we don't know for sure if your mother's side of the family really was related to this Kim Gyuri" their father added. "Most of the evidence burned down during the feudal era so your grandmother could only speculate but...oh!"

Subin and Yoongi glanced at their father who suddenly started scavenging through his suitcase as he searched for something. "I almost forgot... this is for you, Subin-ah."

"What is it?" she questioned as she took a small leather box from him. "Please don't tell me you bought gaudy earrings again."

Her father frowned at the mentioning of his last birthday present to her. "I'll have you know that those earrings were not gaudy."

Yoongi snorted and their father glared at him.

Subin opened the box and was astonished to see a ring made with the clearest colour of green jade. It had a simple design and as Subin picked it up to inspect it, she saw that there was something
engraved inside the inner ring in what looked like ancient Chinese characters.

"It belonged to your grandmother," her father told her. "It was mentioned in her will that you inherit it."

Subin continued to peer at it, "Is it real jade?" she enquired. "It kinda looks like a plastic ring. You know, like ones you can get from Claire's or Accessorize."

"I'm pretty sure it's real" their father replied. "It's been in the family for a long time so you should take care never to lose it."

Subin slipped the ring into her forefinger and admired it at arms' length. It was a little loose around her slender finger but she had to admit that the ring was pretty from afar.

"I'm gonna go and start my report" Yoongi declared as he started shuffling towards his bedroom. "You should probably start on your essay now too, Subin, since you have your grandmother's book now."

At this, Subin jumped to attention, "Oh yeah. I can use grandma's book!" Subin stared down at the large book in front of her, pleased that she somehow found something to use for her essay without having to look too hard for it. If she really was related to someone famous in history then, she'd be able to write something intriguing that will hopefully bump her grade up in her coursework. And that was something she was desperate to do so that she could enter the college of her dreams.

"You should clean up your room first, though, Subin-ah" her father advised her. "The apartment doesn't look like it's been cleaned since I left so I can already guess that your room is no better."

Subin tried her best not to roll her eyes at her dad. She hated cleaning up the most. "I'll do it later" she replied dismissively.

"You should do it now."

"But dad--"

"Subin-ah," his voice was stern. "You have to learn to keep your room clean. For a young lady like yourself, I'm quite disappointed. Even your brother's room is cleaner-- and he's a guy!"

"Yah!" Yoongi complained, "I'm still here, you know."

"Just because I'm a 'young lady'," Subin repeated while making quotation marks with her fingers, "doesn't mean I have to be tidy all the time. Why do you have to be stereotypical for, dad?"

"Because I feel like I'm failing your mother whenever I see the state of your room" he answered her honestly. "Just tidy up, okay? Before you end up tripping over something and hurting yourself."

Yoongi smirked, "Dad's got a point. Your room is so messy that I won't be surprised if you end up buried alive in there, what with all those stacks of folders everywhere."

"Shut up, Yoongi. It's not like you've never done GCSEs before."

"Yeah, yeah. But that doesn't really excuse your pigsty of a room. Just make sure you don't end up dying in there," and he chuckled. "Imagine that, 'death by folder avalanche'."

Subin waved her hand dismissively as she made her way to her room. She hated it when her dad used her mom in that way-- he knew that she would always end up doing what he'd ask with the
slight mention of her. And she abhorred it, even more, when her brother was compared to her.

Subin opened the door to her room and she was immediately greeted by the piles of strewn papers and dirty clothes that she hadn't had the time to put in the laundry basket. There was clutter everywhere: she had pencil shavings on the floor, piles of revision books and folders formed mountains, and her collection of shoujo mangas lay forsaken on the last pages she had read. Subin was aware that her room was a mess-- heck, it actually did bear some resemblance to a pigsty-- but it was her mess and she knew where everything was.

She plopped herself on her bed, carefully avoiding her laptop which was charging on the floor. "Let's see what else I can find out about this Gyuri chick" she murmured to herself as she opened the front page of the book again.

Subin squinted as she stared at the lines and lines of Hangul.

Oh, crap, she thought and started laughing at her misfortune. I forgot that I can't read Hangul.

Subin sighed as she started flicking through the pages, admiring the pictures and taking note of the fashion. They looked pretty ancient and very Asiatic. Subin hardly knew anything about Korean culture or history as she had been born in the UK and had lived there all her life. She didn't really care much that she didn't know a lot about her culture or her language; all she really cared about was the fact that she could at least understand Korean even if she couldn't speak it.

As long as I can watch K-dramas without subtitles, life's good, she thought.

But she knew that her ability to understand came with shortcomings as it meant that she always had to rely on a native's assistance. And that normally meant Yoongi or her dad.

She sighed dejectedly as she realised that she would have to go to Yoongi for help in translating her grandma's book.

Forgetting that she had her laptop charging close by, Subin got up from her bed and failed to notice that her foot was not standing on firm ground. In a quick instance, Subin's world suddenly turned before her eyes as she fell backwards, slipping on her laptop which had skidded forward across the wooden floor.

A flash of bright light blinded her vision as she tumbled backwards, later submerging her in a dark and unfamiliar abyss...

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader!

Please refer to my twitter account @LaurelEvermore for my update schedule for this fanfic. I normally post everything writing and K-pop related here.
Subin groaned as she was stirred awake by the sound of cattle lowing.

*Wait... cattle?*

Her eyes fluttered open immediately and she squinted, shielding her eyes with her hands as the bright rays of sunlight glared down at her.

*What the...?*

Subin pushed herself up, her hands meeting the soft, earthy grass that surrounded her. She blinked a couple of times in disbelief as she took in her surroundings. She was in a field of dry, brown grass with cows grazing nearby. Subin rubbed her eyes, her mind working overtime as she tried to comprehend where she was and what had happened to her. She felt so disorientated.

"Wasn't I in my room just now?" she thought aloud as she continued to survey the field around her. "Dad?" she called out, "Yoongi?"

She stood up and noticed that it wasn't just her surroundings that had changed: her clothes had too. She was no longer wearing her hideous school uniform but instead, she was wearing swathes of dirty rags draped over her body like a giant nightshirt. Dirt caked her nails and her arms and legs were smothered in filth.

What the hell happened to her?

"Dad? Yoongi? Where are you guys?" she called out again. "Come on, this isn't funny," she said, convinced that her brother and father had set her up in some sort of prank.

Subin pursed her lips as she tried to remember what she had been doing last. She distinctly remembered being in her room, reading her grandma's book before tripping over something on the floor and falling backwards.

"Oh, God."

A dreadful feeling overwhelmed Subin as she considered what could have happened to her. "Maybe I hit my head and now I'm hallucinating?" she chuckled nervously as she patted her head just to check she didn't have a concussion. Her dirty hands felt her hair and she immediately noticed that it was very dry-- almost like straw.

This confused her even more.

"I swear I used conditioner last night..." she muttered to herself. But then she shook her head: she had more pressing matters to attend to.

*Where the hell am I?*

Subin observed her surroundings again and could just about make out the outline of a village or town nearby. If anything, maybe the people there could help her with her curious predicament. Hopefully, she could find someone that would be kind enough to help her get back home.
I swear to God, Yoongi and dad, she internally said to herself. If I find out you guys abandoned me here somehow...

Subin started making her way to the town, all the while pondering over how she managed to get to the field. She was in her room not so long ago and she had wanted to go to Yoongi for help with translating. As she clawed through her memories, she managed to remember seeing a bright light consume her before waking up wherever she was. Subin halted as a sudden thought entered her mind.

A white light? No... it couldn't be.

She glanced around and doubt started gnawing at her sense of rationality. Suddenly, her brother's voice echoed in her mind.

Just make sure you don't end up dying in there.

Subin felt the dread in the pit of her gut rise up as she looked at the blue sky ahead of her. "Damn it" she cursed. "I'm dead, aren't I?"

~*~

Subin trudged along the dirt path glumly. If I really did die, heaven sucks, she kept thinking. As she finally drew near the town, the doubt in Subin's mind grew even more.

In front of her were rows of what looked like traditional Asiatic buildings that had sloping tiled rooves and heavy wooden doors framed by decorative archways. As Subin continued to walk along, she couldn't help being fascinated by the hubbub that lay before her. The people in front of her wore robes of varying colours and textures; some wore silks that had intricately embroidered patterns while the less fortunate, wore simple garments which looked like it was made of scratchy material.

The sound of chickens clucking caught her attention as she looked to her left and saw caged animals, mostly fowls and smaller creatures, being sold. While on her right, she heard the clanging of metal as a blacksmith hammered molten metal against an anvil. But all around her, she heard the overlapping of voices as merchants screamed their voices raw in an attempt to persuade pedestrians to purchase their product.

Amidst the business of the scene before her, Subin blinked numerous times. She couldn't believe what she was seeing: it was like she was suddenly thrown into a historical K-drama. Subin rubbed her eyes and blinked again. Maybe she was in a K-drama. Which one could it be? 'Scarlet Heart Ryeo'? 'Hwarang'? 'Queen Seonduk'?

Subin didn't mind dying as long as heaven was like a K-drama. Who knows, maybe she might find her prince in this weird paradise?

She decided to try her luck with one of the locals. "Excuse me..." she said meekly to a well-groomed gentleman. The man took one look at her and stuck his nose up in the air before continuing to walk away.

"Well, that went well" Subin muttered to herself sarcastically. "I guess even arseholes exist in heaven."

A moment later, another person was passing by and Subin attempted to ask again. This time, the person didn't ignore her. "Excuse me," she began. The young man stopped at his tracks and gazed down at her. "Erm, do you know where I am?"
He looked at her quizzically. "You're in the capital" he replied.

This baffled Subin. "The capital?" She searched for a sign that indicated she was in London but found none. "The capital of what?"

The man shook his head, "You poor confused, young woman." He handed her a crude piece of silver which resembled a coin. "Here, take this and buy yourself something to eat. You must be so hungry that you can't even remember where you are."

Subin accepted the coin and the man walked away tutting, completely dismissing her question.

"Well, at least I have money," she told herself as she studied the coin in her hand. Just as she was closely inspecting it, a delicious aroma suddenly wafted to her nostrils making her mouth water and her stomach gurgle. Subin sniffed the air and her feet started moving towards the tempting smell as if an invisible fishing line was reeling her in.

By God, that smells so good...

Subin took a few steps towards the aroma, her nose leading the way, as she breathed in the enticing vapours that made her stomach grumble demandingly. She didn't even know how hungry she was until her stomach started gurgling as if it had a mind of its own. Subin patted her stomach as if it was a separate entity, "Calm down, stomach. I'm gonna get us something to eat now." She peered down at her measly coin. "I just hope this is enough to get us something."

Hurriedly, Subin crossed the busy dirt road that was ladened with traffic, avoiding carts filled with fresh vegetables and fruit. The hot-tempered merchants yelled at her but she couldn't care less. Once she had set her mind to something, she was determined to get it done. And anyway, living in London had taught her not to fear traffic. After all, she had life insurance-- well, it might not matter now if she really was dead.

Subin peered up at the establishment before her and saw that it had, what looked like, cursive Chinese characters. Not that Subin can tell the difference between Chinese, Japanese and Korean anyway. But that didn't matter when her eyes spied the source of the delectable odour that had tempted her to cross the road. In front of her were freshly made steam buns, so plump and perfect, that it made Subin's mouth water.

She could almost feel the steam bun in her mouth: her teeth sinking into the soft texture of the dough and her tongue being caressed by the sweetness of the seasoned meat inside. Her stomach growled.

But just as she was about to catch the attention of the steam bun vendor, a sudden force caused her to topple over. It all happened so fast. In one instance, Subin was facing the vendor but in the blink of an eye, she was suddenly facing the ground, with her palms outstretched to soften her fall. Subin grimaced as she tried to get up, only to find that something heavy was pinning her down.

"Ugh..."

Correction, she thought to herself. Someone.

"Ugh..." she heard the person groan again.

Subin tried to shuffle from underneath whoever was on top of her and she was surprised to find that the person wasn't as heavy as she first thought. "Get off me!" she grunted.

The person rolled over and Subin discovered that it was a young boy. He was wearing scruffy, discoloured rags that were tattered around the edges. The boy peered down at Subin and then his
face scrunched up in disgust as he put his hand to his nose. His crescent eyes narrowed, forming a scowl as he said to her, "Ew. You stink!"

Subin was bemused by the boy's remark.

He looked around wildly and saw that the fruit he had been carrying in his hands, before colliding into Subin, were scattered everywhere. They appeared to be persimmons. Quickly, the boy started gathering the fruit back into his arms, not bothering to apologise to Subin.

Subin's first instinct was to reprimand the boy but seeing him gather the fallen persimmons reminded her of her coin. Where did it go?

"My steam bun..." she muttered dejectedly as she realised her coin was nowhere to be found. It must have rolled away when she had collided with the boy. She glared at him, "Hey, you owe me money!"

The boy looked at her incredulously, "What?"

She got up from the dirt floor and towered over him. While standing up straight she realised that she was about a head taller. "I said, 'you owe me money'. You bumped into me and now I've lost what little money I had."

"I do not owe you anything, peasant" he snarled disdainfully.

"Peasant?" Subin repeated, baffled by the boy's sharp tone. "Who are you calling peasant, you cheeky little shi--?"

"There!"

"Stop him!"

"Stop that thief!"

The boy's head jerked to face the direction behind him and saw a group of ruddy-faced men fast approaching. His eyes rounded as he swiftly barged past Subin and started running.

Subin, still sore about losing her coin, pursued him. "Hey! Get back here!"

The boy kept running and Subin watched in surprise as the boy peeled away his rags to reveal the vibrant silk robes he was wearing underneath. He turned to face her and smirked as he slipped into the crowds, blending in with the richer folk who wore similar attire.

*That cheeky brat was actually a rich kid in disguise!*

"Got him!"

With a steely grip, Subin felt the arms of the ruddy-faced men clamp down on her as they pulled her to the side.

"Wait!" she shouted at them. "You've got the wrong person--"

"You thought you could trick us, eh?" one of the men barked. He peered at Subin and inspected her closely. "Well, we're gonna make sure a street rat like you gets the punishment it deserves!"

Subin struggled against their clutches, "You don't understand, I wasn't the one who stole the fruit!"
"I bet you were accomplices with that runt!" another man exclaimed.

"No, I'm not--"

With a violent tug, the tallest of the three men grabbed Subin by the collar. He scowled at her, "Whoever steals from us must be punished." He turned to the other two men. "Tie him up. We're gonna flog him till he bleeds."

~*~

Subin eyed the tallest of the three ruddy-faced men fearfully as he hovered over her, casting a shadow. The other pair had bound her to a pole, her hands tied up above her head and her legs tied together so that she couldn't move. Subin had tried begging them to see reason and to realise that she wasn't at all in cahoots with the cheeky brat. But to no avail. Her pleas fell on deaf ears.

The man took out a long whip and flexed his muscles by trying it out as if practising his aim. The whip made a sharp cracking sound as it made contact with the floor, soon to make contact on Subin's back. Her legs trembled beneath her and her teeth chattered uncontrollably.

"You're making a mistake!" she begged again. "Please, you've got the wrong person-- I'm innocent!"

One of the men cackled, "Heh, that's what all thieves say. You shoulda thought of that before you went and stole from us."

"I told you," Subin screeched. "I didn't steal anything!"

"Silence!" the man with the whip ordered. "You should save your cries for when my whip hits you..." The man lifted the whip above his head as he prepared to lash out.

Subin closed her eyes in terror, a scream escaping her mouth as she prepared for the worst. But just as the man was about to strike Subin, an arrow pierced through the air, deflecting the whip's trajectory. Loud shouts of pain were heard from the ruddy-faced man as he crouched down, mortified that an arrow had penetrated through his hand.

When Subin finally opened her eyes, she found that the two other men had fled, leaving the tallest cradling his arm in pain. Subin blinked away her tears that had started welling up in her eyes.

"Are you alright?"

Subin blinked again and saw that a young man with tousled black hair was standing before her. He eyed her worriedly as he took out a small dagger and cut through the rope that bound her feet and arms. Subin collapsed onto him, her legs like jelly, after her traumatic experience.

"I am now" she replied.

He smiled at her and Subin took note of his long eyelashes and straight but bushy eyebrows. His face was so close to hers that she started blushing. *Damn, this guy's kinda cute*, she thought.

"It was a good thing I got to you when I did" he stated.

Subin nodded meekly as she pushed herself away from him. "Thank you, I owe you one. If it weren't for you, I would have been punished for--" Subin stopped herself midway her sentence as she remembered the cheeky brat from before. His smirk was engraved on the back of her mind and it made her blood boil when she suddenly thought of how she would have been punished for something she didn't do.
I swear to God, I'm gonna whoop his ass if I ever see him again!

The young man looked at her quizzically. "Well, if you're okay now, I have to get going..." he started moving, attracting Subin's attention.

"Wait, what's your name?"

The young man's lips curled into a smile as he looked back at her. "If you knew, I'd have to kill you."

This alarmed Subin.

He chuckled, "I'll tell you next time." He looked her up and down, "And since I haven't told you my name, I won't ask for yours."

Subin raised her brow at him. What's with all the secrecy? she thought inwardly. And then she thought, next time? There will be a next time?

The young man smiled briefly before he started walking away again. "See you around, Rags."

Rags?

"Hey, my name's not Rags! It's--" but when Subin looked around, the young man was already gone.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 2 of The Brothers Kim.
Subin's stomach grumbled in protest for the third time. She sighed, "I know, I know, but I have no money. I can't buy us a steam bun anymore..."

Subin gazed from afar and watched as a man slurped noodles from a bowl and smacked his lips appreciatively. Watching the man eat so heartily made Subin stare in envy. She wanted to eat food too.

It had been a few hours since she narrowly escaped being punished by the band of ruddy-faced merchants and so far, she had been wandering around the town aimlessly, still without any idea of where she was and how she could get back home.

"This place is a madhouse..." she muttered to herself. "They seriously wanted to punish me?" she shook her head as she tried to rationalise her situation. Subin knew that she definitely wasn't dead: her earlier encounter with the ruddy-faced merchants reinforced that. And, judging by her surroundings, she knew she wasn't in London anymore. Could she somehow have ended up in Korea? China? Japan? If not those three, then maybe she was in some other Asian country.

Subin sighed as she watched a pair of giggling ladies pass by with their fans hiding their faces. They wore beautiful robes with flowery patterns that heightened their air of femininity. Seeing those robes reminded Subin of the pictures she saw in her grandmother's book. She cocked her head as she thought about this. Could she have... time-slipped?

"But why would I have time-slipped here?" she asked aloud. "Nevermind that, was time-slipping even possible?" she shook her head and sighed, "It just doesn't make any sense."

For the next hour or so, Subin attempted to ask the locals for more information but with hardly any luck. Most of the people she asked either ignored her or, seeing that she was asking questions, actively made sure that they didn't cross her path at all. It was like she had an invisible bubble around her that repelled anyone from coming near or otherwise, made her invisible.

As Subin continued to amble around town, now hungry and tired, she suddenly heard cries for help coming from the back of a dark alleyway. Curious, Subin skulked over.

From where she was hiding, Subin watched as a gang of grubby looking thugs cornered a young boy that Subin immediately recognised: it was the cheeky brat from before! She watched as he continued to struggle against the vice-like grip of one of the thugs who had him by the scruff of the neck.

"At last, we've finally caught you, you stinkin' thief!" the man snarled. "Do you know how much we've suffered because of you continuing to raid our merchandise?"

One of the other men eyed him up and down and grabbed his hand. "Let's torture him slowly. We should cut off each and every one of his little fingers just to teach 'im a lesson."

The boy snatched his hand away, "Let me go, you ruffians! Before you regret it!"

The group of thugs laughed at the boy's empty threats.
"Oh, yeah?" one of the other men taunted. "Regret what? No one's gonna come and save you, boy."

"Yeah, you're all ours now. You should say your farewell to your hands before we chop those pretty little things off..."

Subin watched as the boy continued to try and break free from the man's clasp. He thrashed his short legs about as if he wanted to kick the man in the shins but to no avail. From afar, he looked like a fish out of water which only amused the men even more.

"Serves him right" Subin muttered under her breath, enjoying the show a little more than she should. "That cheeky brat must've got caught stealing." She scoffed, "Karma's a bitch. You shouldn't have left me when you did." She got up from her hiding place and turned her back on the spectacle. "Well, it's none of my business what happens to him now." She was about to walk away when she suddenly heard his alarmed shrieks for help.

"Help! Please! Help! Anybody! Help!"

Walk away, Subin, she told herself inwardly. Walk away.

"Help! Help! Help!" the boy continued to shout, his voice increasingly growing desperate. "Anybody!"

Nope, don't you dare go back there. He left you to get punished, remember?

"Help! Please! Oh, anyone, please help!"

Subin sighed. I'm going to regret this.

As swiftly as she could, Subin pivoted on her step and charged towards the thugs' direction wielding a hoe that she found forsaken on the ground. With the best battle cry she could muster, she screamed while flailing the hoe about, stunning the thugs by the abrupt appearance of an insane, scruffy-looking peasant.

The thugs backed away as Subin approached them, overwhelming their ears with her banshee-like screaming. Even the young boy was startled by her. Subin, seeing that the young boy was now free from the man's grasp, stopped screeching and stood in front of him while using the hoe in her hands to deter the thugs from coming closer.

The thugs blinked and after a while, started to relax when they realised that Subin was just a typical ragged peasant. One of them started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Subin asked, her eyes darting from one thug to the next to make sure they didn't make any sudden moves.

The thug who had been laughing addressed the young boy behind her, "Is this what you meant by us regretting it?" He eyed Subin. "This is what you consider a threat to us?"

The thugs started laughing again making Subin realise that her element of surprise had already worn off.

The boy gaped at her and Subin watched as his face showed signs of recognition. He frowned. "You stupid peasant!" the boy screech from behind her. "If you were going to help then you should have brought better reinforcement!"

"Shut up, okay?" she snapped at him. "At least I came. I could have just left you here, but I came
"Oh yeah? Who asked for your help anyway?"

Subin gave him a deadpan expression. "Really now? That's rich coming from you. If it weren't for me, your hand would've been chopped off by now!"

The boy was uncannily quiet all of a sudden and Subin saw that it looked like he was holding his tongue. A displeased expression riddled his face for a moment before he sighed and walked in front of her. "Just stand behind me," he said coolly as he glanced back at her. "I will protect both of us."

Subin watched as the boy got into a defensive martial arts stance. From the back, she could see that the boy seemed cool and collected and she was quite impressed. Maybe he was some sort of karate expert? Subin watched him in anticipation as he breathed in and out slowly as if he was channelling his inner chakra. If anything, Subin was expecting some epic battle scene to unfold, like the ones in the anime, 'Naruto'.

But all her expectations were dashed as when the thugs stopped laughing and suddenly took an abrupt step towards them, the boy's defensive stance crumbled and he rushed behind Subin once more.

Subin's mouth was ajar. She turned to face him and saw him cowering behind her.

"So much for protecting me," she told him sarcastically. She rolled her eyes as she faced the thugs, "I guess chivalry is dead even in this time period."

The thugs advanced towards them from every direction, causing Subin and the boy to retreat backwards.

"I've had enough of fun and games" one of the thugs grunted. "It's time you receive your punishment!"

Subin turned to the boy, who was whimpering in fear. "Any bright ideas?" she asked him, trying her best not to let her fear overwhelm her too.

He shook his head energetically.

Subin gulped. Great, she thought. Just when I avoided trouble, I had to go and get myself into more trouble. Her eyes darted around her as she searched for inspiration on how she could escape the new predicament she was in. Normally, a hero should come in about now, she said to herself inwardly. She thought about the young man who rescued her earlier and hoped that somehow, he'd sense she was in danger and come rushing in again. This is your cue, hero. Save this damsel in distress!

Fed up with waiting, one of the thugs lunged forward and Subin and the boy squealed in fear.

But before they could lay their hands on them, the sound of galloping horses and thundering footsteps caught everyone's attention. The thugs turned around in bewilderment and their eyes rounded in surprise when they saw a band of soldiers, bearing a green flag with a flower emblem, heading their way.

"Look!" one of them pointed out.

"That flag!"

The thugs were immediately fear-stricken as one of them exclaimed, "It's the Jade Lotus!"
The thugs scattered immediately, leaving Subin and the boy rooted to the ground. Subin was in awe of the effect seeing the flag had on the thugs.

*Oh? Has rescue finally come?*

She glanced up at the person leading the contingent, half-expecting the leader to be as charming as the actors she normally sees in K-dramas. She gazed at the leader amorously, anticipating the romantic cliché encounter damsels normally had when they met their princes. But her hopes were soon shattered when she saw that her tall, dark and handsome saviour was actually short, stout and, well... kinda ugly.

The leader snapped its horse's reigns, encouraging it to go faster as he pursued one of the thugs who had made a run for it. As he disappeared, the other soldiers followed suit in pursuing their targets. Subin blinked in confusion at why the soldiers had decided to rescue them.

"Cousin Namjoon!" the boy behind her blurted as one of the soldiers, who was on horseback, approached them.

Subin eyed the approaching soldier and noticed that he wasn't dressed like the others-- he was wearing red robes as opposed to dark green ones. The man named Namjoon had a princely air about him that made him appear dignified and well-off. He led his horse towards the pair and Subin watched as he climbed off it with ease as he rushed towards the boy with a concerned expression ruining his princely features.

"Taehyung!" he called out to the boy as he closely inspected him. "Are you hurt anywhere? Did they hurt you?" he examined his cousin's body attentively, searching his arms for any scratches or cuts.

Taehyung struggled against the probing hands of his cousin which was currently latched onto either side of his face. "I am fine, cousin" he replied insistently. "They did not manage to harm a hair on my body."

Hearing his young cousin's reply, the taller of the pair sighed in relief. "Thank goodness" he murmured, his furrowed brows finally relaxing.

*My, oh my! Now, that's more like it!*

Subin admired Namjoon from afar, taking note of his dark, charcoal hair and strong angular jawline. She watched as he smiled weakly, revealing a pair of pronounced dimples that made the teenage girl within her squeal internally.

Oh my God! This guy's gorgeous! she thought as she continued to ogle at him from afar.

But just as she started admiring his physique and princely aura, his demure appearance in her eyes abruptly crumbled as Namjoon, having confirmed that his cousin was safe, smacked the boy at the back of the head as he lectured him for his careless behaviour.

"You stupid child!" he berated him. "What are you doing pretending to be a peasant again? You know how dangerous it is for you to be wandering around without security. You could have gotten killed!"

Taehyung retorted as he rubbed his head gingerly, "I am fine, cousin! You know how much I detest being in the house all day. I just want to see more of the capital. It is not like any harm befell me while I was away..."

Subin listened to the pair as they bickered over their situation. They spoke about stuff that Subin had no idea of. *Nobles? Peasants? Assassins? What?*
Namjoon, finally noticing that he and his cousin were not alone, regarded Subin with suspicion. He addressed her guardedly, "And who might you be?"

"She is the foolhardy peasant that tried to rescue me" Taehyung replied in her stead.

Namjoon was surprised by Taehyung's statement. "She tried to save you?" He peered at Subin and his earlier coldness melted away. He bowed to her in thanks whilst uttering, "Thank you for saving my idiotic younger cousin."

But before Subin could reply, the leader of the brigade returned. "Master Namjoon," he spoke in a deep voice, "the others have apprehended the men who were trying to harm the Young Master."

Namjoon answered curtly, "Good. I will see to their punishment personally." The leader bowed in reply before departing on horseback. Namjoon turned his attention to Subin once more. "What is your name, young miss? For your bravery, the House of Kim shall reward you."

Subin's ears pricked up at his words. The House of Kim?

"Young miss?" Taehyung repeated in shock as he inspected Subin closely. "This peasant is a wench?"

Subin turned to him. "Yes. I am a woman if that's what you mean by 'wench'." She frowned as she realised, "Hang on, you thought I was a guy?"

Taehyung replied, "More like an 'it'."

Subin had to restrain herself from kicking him in between the legs.

Taehyung turned to Namjoon as he protested. "Cousin, you need not reward her. All she did was wave a hoe about-- it was you who did the actual rescuing."

Subin glared at Taehyung, "Hey, I think I deserve a little bit of credit for buying them time to rescue you."

Taehyung loured at her and she returned it. Namjoon watched as the pair engaged in a childish staredown which amused him profoundly. It had been a long time since he'd seen anyone challenge Taehyung openly.

Seeing that they were going nowhere with the conversation, Namjoon cleared his throat to catch their attention. "May I know your name then, young miss?"

Subin broke away from the staredown first as she fumbled for a reply, "My name is..." but then she grew unsure of whether she should reveal her name. If I'm really in the past, she kept thinking, then didn't that mean that I have to be careful of my actions? Wouldn't everything I do here affect the future? What if I trigger some kind of butterfly effect? Subin pondered about this and asked herself, what if I already altered the future by saving the cheeky brat? Oh crap!

Namjoon gaped at her expectantly as Subin, unknown to him, went through internal turmoil as she debated revealing something as simple as her name. Tentatively, he asked her, "Do you not have a name?"

"What do they call you, peasant?" Taehyung asked impatiently. "If you have no name, we can just call you 'peasant' from now onwards" and he chuckled deviously.

"Do not be rude, Taehyung" Namjoon scolded. "Be grateful that she saved you or else you would
have lost your hand." He addressed Subin, "If you do not have a name then we shall bestow one upon you."

Taehyung's jaw dropped. "Cousin?" he looked at Namjoon questioningly. "You are not serious, are you? Bestowing a name upon a peasant would only mean that--"

"Yes," Namjoon affirmed. "I plan to reward her by making her a servant of the Kim household."

Taehyung was astounded. "Are you mad, cousin? You barely know this wench!"

"This wench saved your life" he reminded him. "And shall be properly rewarded for her bravery." He turned to Subin as he stroked his chin in thought. "Hmm... what shall I name you? Perhaps... Yeseul? Or Yeona?"

Subin jolted back to attention. What? He's going to name me?

Taehyung shook his head in disagreement. "If you are going to name her, cousin, then you should give her a name that would raise her worth as a woman." He sauntered over to Subin and inspected her. "Because she is plain looking, you should give her a beautiful name to compensate."

Subin watched Taehyung as he thought for a while. Suddenly, his eyes twinkled as he suggested, "I know! Gyuri. This wench shall be named Gyuri."

Subin froze at the sound of that name. Gyuri?

"Gyuri..." Namjoon repeated with equal consideration. He smiled as he nodded approvingly, "Excellent suggestion, Taehyung!"

Subin was dumbfounded. "Wait...Gyuri? That's my name?" She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Namjoon nodded. "Yes. From now onwards, you are Gyuri."

Subin froze at the sound of that name. Gyuri?

"Gyuri..." Namjoon repeated with equal consideration. He smiled as he nodded approvingly, "Excellent suggestion, Taehyung!"

Subin was dumbfounded. "Wait...Gyuri? That's my name?" She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Namjoon nodded. "Yes. From now onwards, you are Gyuri."

Subin, now Gyuri, stood motionlessly on the ground as she stared at the pair. Of all the names they could have chosen, they had to pick Gyuri...

As Subin continued to ponder at the revelation of her new name, a carriage arrived and Taehyung went inside. Namjoon climbed back onto his horse and gestured for Subin to join Taehyung in the carriage.

"We shall go home now and you shall come with us" Namjoon declared. "Let us get you settled into your new role."

Subin nodded numbly, still in disbelief at the sudden turn of events. As they rode inside the carriage, Subin couldn't help thinking about what her dad had read out from her grandma's book...

Kim Gyuri, the deadly princess who infamously brought down the thriving House of Kim.

Subin stared at Taehyung who was sitting opposite her. Could it just be a coincidence that they had named her Gyuri as well as the fact that they were from the House of Kim?

Subin felt the familiar feeling of dread creep up her chest. Hot dang it, she cursed inwardly. I have a bad feeling about this. She turned her attention to outside as she quietly worried alone.

Kim Gyuri, huh? It seems as though I now know where I am, she thought. Or more importantly, when I am...
Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 3 of The Brothers Kim!

I hope you are enjoying the story so far~
Subin's mouth was agape as her eyes attempted to absorb the scenery before her: the Kim household was huge.

As the carriage entered through the impressively carved gate, she couldn't help but gawk at the vibrant greenery that exhibited an array of blossoming flowers and finely grown trees. The lake shimmered like a glittering blanket as the sun shone high above the blue sky, painting a picturesque scene before Subin's eyes, one that rivalled those only found in her K-dramas.

I'm definitely not in London anymore...

The carriage eventually came to a halt and soon, Subin was standing in the Kim household's courtyard, next to Taehyung. Namjoon jumped off his horse in time to greet a man with youthful features, who had come to welcome them home.

Subin gaped at the man approaching and noticed how graceful his steps were. He was a relatively short man, much shorter than Namjoon, but he exhibited the same princely air around him making them very alike in manner and aura. The man wore blue robes with golden embroidery, his hair bound neatly in a bun and his complexion, a healthy amber colour.

He smiled kindly upon seeing Namjoon and Taehyung, briefly glossing over Subin, who stood rooted to the ground, uncertain as to how to act in front of another handsome man.

Wow, things just keep getting better and better! she thought while modestly eyeing the man up and down. This guy's eye-candy too!

The man glanced at Taehyung and his smile slowly slipped away. "Taehyung, what are you doing wearing the servant boy's clothes again?"

Taehyung scratched his head timidly as he stared down at the floor in shame. "Brother... I was just--"

"You snuck out of the house again, didn't you?" he interrupted.

"Yes, Brother Minseok..." he murmured. "I apologise for my conduct."

The man, named Minseok, sighed at his younger brother. "You really are troublesome, Taehyung. When will you ever be cured of your tomfoolery?"

"Now, now, cousin" Namjoon interjected. "I have already scolded him for his actions." He peered down at Taehyung. "He will be under stricter supervision from now onwards. I shall place one of my men to guard him at all times so that he never leaves the house without security."

Taehyung looked like he was about to protest but Namjoon's steely gaze silenced him.

Minseok nodded in approval, "Very well." He turned to look at Subin, who had been listening to the Kims' conversation quietly. "And who may you be?"
Subin suddenly felt very flustered at having Minseok's attention directed at her.

When Subin failed to answer, Namjoon spoke up. "This is Gyuri."

Subin peered at Namjoon and he smiled politely. Right... I'm Gyuri now.

"Gyuri?" Minseok repeated.

"Yes," Namjoon responded. "She was the peasant who helped rescue Taehyung from danger today."

Minseok rounded his eyes in surprise. "I see."

"And to reward her, I have brought her here to work for the household. I hope that this is agreeable to you, cousin?"

Minseok nodded, "Of course! Loyalty shown to the Kims shall always be rewarded." He gaped at Gyuri. "And since you also rescued my younger brother, it is only right that this is how we, as a household, reward you."

Gyuri rubbed her neck bashfully. "Ah... it was nothing really."

Minseok turned to Taehyung again, "I hope you expressed your thanks properly, Taehyung."

The youngest of the Kims hmphed. "She did not do anything special, brother."

"I guess saving your life counts as nothing special then" Gyuri huffed.

Taehyung narrowed his eyes. "Look, just because you happened to come in when you did does not mean I have to thank you." He crossed his arms over his body. "It was cousin Namjoon who rescued both of us. He is the one we both should be thanking."

"You're right," Gyuri admitted and she turned to Namjoon. "I forgot to thank you." And then she turned to Taehyung. "But you still haven't thanked me for distracting the thugs."

"If I remember correctly," Taehyung began, "I did not ask for your help."

"Oh?" Gyuri said playfully. "Then who was it that was screaming at the top of their lungs a while ago?" Taehyung watched as Gyuri contorted her face while she mimicked Taehyung's cries for help in a theatric fashion.

Namjoon and Minseok watched in surprise and then started chuckling under their breaths. Gyuri was surprisingly talented at impersonation. Taehyung, on the other hand, looked at her lividly as his ears turned pink with embarrassment.

"That is enough!" he chided. "How dare you make fun of me!"

Satisfied that she had annoyed Taehyung immensely, Gyuri smirked. Serves you right for leaving me behind before.

Minseok spoke, "Well, I am glad that both of you escaped unscathed." He turned to Namjoon as he gestured for the reigns of his horse. "I have to go to the palace now so can I use your horse?"

"Certainly."

Like Namjoon, Minseok mounted himself onto the horse with ease. Once he was comfortable, he
turned to his younger brother, "Taehyung, please escort Gyuri to the maids' quarters."
"But brother--" 
"You can return the servant boy's clothes on the way" he added. "And Gyuri," he said eyeing her.
Gyuri jolted to attention.
"Welcome to our household."
The trio watched as Minseok galloped away on his horse, leaving puffs of dust at his trail. Once he had disappeared past the gates, Namjoon faced the young pair and addressed them. "You heard your brother, Taehyung. Go and take Gyuri to Madam Zhou."
Taehyung was visibly displeased. "Fine." He turned to Gyuri and gestured for her to follow. "Come along, ugly Gyuri," he said to her contumaciously, "I will show you the way."
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The maids' quarters were not far from the main courtyard. Gyuri followed Taehyung to a relatively small building that was separated from, what appeared to be, the main house. Gyuri expected the maids' quarters to be horrendous but to her surprise, it looked quite comfortable.

*Wow, this place is bigger than our flat in London.*
"You better count yourself lucky" she heard Taehyung mutter. "At least now your meals are now guaranteed and you have somewhere warm to sleep."
Gyuri glared at him before pulling faces behind his back.
"I saw that!" he snapped, surprising her.
"Geez, you must have eyes behind your head."
He scoffed, "No, you are just too stupid to realise that I can see your reflection from the looking glass above." Taehyung pointed to an octagonal concave mirror that had a red, black and yellow pattern. Something about it looked eerie and creepy as if looking at it directly might send a malignant force to haunt you. Not that Gyuri was superstitious anyway.
Taehyung led Gyuri to the entrance of the maids' quarters before walking away. He turned to her, "Ask for Madam Zhou."
"Madam Zhou?"
"Yes," he said rolling his eyes. "Do not tell me you are dumb too."
Gyuri narrowed her eyes at him. "Seriously, what's up with you? Why do you keep insulting me?"
To her astonishment, Taehyung smiled. "Because I find insulting you enjoyable," and with those words, he sauntered away.

*This kid's a lunatic,* Gyuri huffed.
Gyuri peeped inside the maids' quarters warily, as she murmured in a small voice, "Hello? Anyone home?" but there was no reply. With small steps, she ventured further inside the building, admiring the oriental-style architecture in spite of the minimalistic decoration.
"What are you doing here?"

Gyuri jumped at the sound of a feminine voice. She turned to face the owner of the voice and found that it belonged to a young woman with long, black hair that was bound in a thick braid. She was wearing dull-coloured robes but her features were soft and demure, almost doll-like. To Gyuri, she appeared to be around her age, making her feel somewhat at ease.

"I'm looking for Madam Zhou" Gyuri explained. "Erm, Taehyung told me to find her."

"Taehyung?" the young woman repeated her eyes as round as saucers. "You mean, the Young Master sent you here?"

Gyuri thought for a second. "Erm, I guess so."

The young woman gave Gyuri a once-over, clearly exhibiting a doubtful expression. "Wait here, I'll go and fetch Madam Zhou."

The girl was true to her word as in less than a minute, Gyuri found herself in the presence of a middle-aged woman whose hair was bound by a frugal wooden hair stick. She glanced at Gyuri, her sharp eyes closely inspecting her as if measuring her character against a mental checklist she had concocted in her mind. Gyuri nervously stood her ground, waiting for the woman to say something. It felt like she was on trial.

"Mayu tells me the Young Master brought you here" Gyuri heard her say. Her voice was quiet and sort of raspy, indicating to Gyuri that Madam Zhou was someone who wielded a lot of authority. Weakly, she nodded.

Madam Zhou scrutinised her further, "Well, it seems as though we will be having another addition to our house." She turned to the young woman from earlier, "Mayu, tell Pho to bring out a set of clothes from the storage cupboard. If Kalyani is back from her tasks, tell her also that they will need to make room for another person," she briefly glanced at Gyuri, "our new addition will be sleeping there from now onwards."

Mayu nodded before disappearing through the halls.

Madam Zhou turned her attention to Gyuri once more. "Tell me, child. What is your name?"

Gyuri shifted on her feet. Something about Madam Zhou's penetrating gaze made her nervous. "It-it's Gyuri" she stuttered.

"Gyuri..." Madam Zhou repeated as if in thought. "What a pretty name." She turned her back to her and signalled for her to follow. "Well, Gyuri. I hope you will serve the Kims well. Judging by your appearance, it seems as though you were plucked from the streets and given an invaluable opportunity."

"I'm not really sure I'd call it 'invaluable'" Gyuri replied. "It was more like I was shoved into a crappy situation and just got swept away by the current--"

Madam Zhou abruptly halted and swerved to face her. "You will do well not to speak in that way" she murmured, her lips thin and her eyes narrowed. "The walls have ears, Gyuri. You should be mindful of what comes out of your mouth, now that you are in the Kims' residence."

A cold sensation shot down Gyuri's spine at Madam Zhou's chilling warning. Why had she warned her like that? Was she in some sort of danger?
Madam Zhou's features softened and she continued walking ahead of her. "Since you are new here, I will let your earlier comment slide," she said quietly. "But next time, you may not be so lucky." She led Gyuri through a small corridor where they eventually arrived at what appeared to be a primitive bathroom.

Gyuri didn't know how to react to seeing the buckets filled with water that lay in one corner and the wet wooden stool in the centre of the small room. It was only then that it dawned on Gyuri how austere the hygiene situation was in this unknown time period.

Madam Zhou turned to face her again as she ordered, "Take your clothes off."

"What?" instinctively, Gyuri wrapped her arms around her chest at Madam Zhou's preposterous suggestion. "Why?"

"Is it not obvious?" she remarked. "You need to bathe and you cannot do so with your clothes on."

Gyuri was sceptical. "You expect me to bathe in here?" she pointed at the damp room and Madam Zhou nodded.

"It seems to me that you have not cleansed your body in a while."

At this, Gyuri gaped down at her clothes and legs and only then realised that she didn't even have any shoes on. She eyed Madam Zhou, "Okay" she consented. "But I'd prefer it if I bathe alone."

Madam Zhou wasn't fazed by her request. "It will be quicker if I help you. I have a duty to ensure that every servant in this household is clean and without disease."

"I assure you," Gyuri said, trying not to sound too offended at what Madam Zhou was hinting at, "I'm not as dirty as you think."

Madam Zhou hmphed. "We shall see."

After much bickering, Gyuri eventually complied and let Madam Zhou help undress her. It felt very odd for Gyuri to strip in front of another woman. It wasn't like she's never been in the presence of other naked girls before-- after all, she did Physical Education in school so of course, she had her fair share of locker room scenarios-- but she's never once shown her body to a woman older than sixteen.

Gyuri covered herself shyly as Madam Zhou helped her take off the last of the rags she had been wearing. It was only when Madam Zhou stood still behind her did Gyuri attempted to speak. "You poor child..." she heard her murmur with what sounded like a hint of pity. "You are practically a living corpse."

Curious as to why Madam Zhou had said that Gyuri looked down at her body and gasped.

In front of her was a body deprived of nourishment, clearly indicated by the bones of her ribcage protruding through her green-tinged skin. Her legs were scrawny like she had no muscles in them, and her arms were no better. Gyuri inspected herself closely, bewildered as to how her body had suddenly become so dangerously thin.

"You poor child..." she heard her murmur with what sounded like a hint of pity. "You are practically a living corpse."

"Wait a second..." she leaned her head over a bucket of water to gaze at her reflection. "Oh, my God." Gyuri blinked numerous times and even prodded her cheeks just to make sure that the reflection she saw in front of her was actually hers. She watched in disbelief as her reflection
mimicked the same actions she performed on her face, from the pinching of the nose to the opening of the mouth.

"Are you okay, Gyuri?" Madam Zhou asked, concerned that the naked girl in front of her was suddenly acting very strange.

Gyuri turned to face her, forgetting altogether that her body was in full view. "This isn't my face!" she exclaimed in panic. "My face has changed!"

Madam Zhou arched her brow. "Gyuri--"

"I'm in some other chick's body!" Gyuri yelled, panic slowly consuming her. "I mean, I thought it was weird that my hair felt so dry and the fact that I wasn't getting back pains like usual--" Gyuri stopped midway her sentence as she explored her body again. "Oh my God, my boobs are gone!"

Madam Zhou watched in confusion as Gyuri grabbed hold of her breasts as if checking that they were indeed hers.

"Gyuri, I am not completely certain what you are talking about but I need you to sit down so that I can help wash your--"

"Mate, I'm practically back to an A-cup!" she whined. "This is so messed up. Never mind almost getting whipped for no reason-- I have no boobs!"

Madam Zhou gaped at Gyuri who went on a long-winded oration on the importance of her bust size. Not knowing how else to cease her confusing blubbering, Madam Zhou picked up one of the water buckets and threw the ice-cold water at Gyuri, causing her to shriek and jump in surprise. Finally, Madam Zhou was able to get a word in.

"I have no time for your chattering" she declared sternly. "So please sit down and sit still while I scrub you clean."

Gyuri sniffled as she sat down on the damp stool obediently. "That was cruel" she complained. "The water is freezing cold!"

Madam Zhou sighed as she approached her while rolling up her sleeves. "It would have been warm if you had stopped your jabbering sooner."

"Really?"

"No," Madam Zhou flatly admitted. "Now, stay still."

After Gyuri had been given a very thorough washing by Madam Zhou, she was led to the maids' chambers where a set of clothes was already waiting for her. Madam Zhou turned to her and asked, "I assume you can manage to dress yourself?"

Gyuri eyed the robes that were neatly folded on top of a futon. She noticed that there were four futons in the room and assumed that she will be sharing the room with three others.

"I-I'm not really familiar with these clothes."

Madam Zhou didn't look surprised. "I should have thought so. Your life as a peasant must have deprived you access to such garments." She picked one of the layers up and proceeded to dress her. "Well, be thankful that not only will the Kims provide you with a place to sleep and food to eat, they will also clothe you and take care of you."
Gyuri allowed Madam Zhou to dress her, dropping the towel she had wrapped around her body onto the tatami floor. "Madam Zhou, what are the Kims like?"

Madam Zhou was quiet for a while as she helped Gyuri into her undergarments. "They are very powerful people, one of the most well-known in the kingdom."

This made Gyuri think. "So... are they like princes?" she asked, suddenly fantasizing about Namjoon, the most attractive Kim she had encountered so far.

Madam Zhou shook her head, "No. They are not princes."

"Oh..." Gyuri couldn't help feeling slightly disappointed. If they were, at least she'd be able to fantasize an epic love story like the one in 'Scarlet Heart Ryeo'.

"They are part of the aristocracy" Madam Zhou informed her. "They are one of the nobles closely related to royalty."

"Oh!" Gyuri's mood suddenly lifted. "How are they related to royalty?"

Madam Zhou peered at her quizzically. "Child, are you not from these lands? How have you not heard the news that has been sweeping throughout all of Benkei?"

_Benkei?_

"Erm... I'm, er, kinda dumb" Gyuri admitted against her will. She mentally kicked herself for letting Taehyung's earlier insult save her. "So, I'm not really familiar with what is going on around the area."

Madam Zhou didn't make any attempt to refute her lack of intelligence. "Well, the eldest master of the house, Master Minseok, is engaged to the princess. They are to wed soon, solidifying the Kims' relation to royalty."

_A royal wedding, huh?_ Gyuri mused. _I wonder if it'll be as extraordinary as Prince William's and Kate Middleton's?_

But just as Gyuri was lost in thought, an unwanted presence suddenly burst through the door, startling the two women inside. Gyuri immediately covered her chest as Madam Zhou had not finished binding it.

"Ah, good. I see that you managed to find Madam Zhou after all" Taehyung observed.

"Young Master," Madam Zhou bowed to Taehyung. "What are you doing here? It is inappropriate for you to be here."

"You got that right!" Gyuri screeched. "Get out you little perv! I'm getting dressed for goodness sake!"

Madam Zhou was aghast, "Gyuri! Mind your tongue!"

"It is fine, Madam Zhou" Taehyung replied calmly. "I am already used to the new servant's sharp tongue." He had an impish look about him that Gyuri did not like one bit. "And I do not see why you bother to cover yourself," he remarked as he turned towards the door. Gyuri watched as he glanced her up and down as he looked over his shoulder. "There is nothing interesting to see anyway."
Gyuri's jaw dropped at Taehyung's insult. "You cheeky little--!" she grabbed hold of a nearby pillow and launched it at him, much to the horror of Madam Zhou.

Taehyung quickly dodged it by disappearing through the door. But before he left, he stuck his tongue out mischievously.

*Related to royalty or not,* Gyuri mumbled internally. *There's one Kim that I'm not keen to get to know at all.*

And that was Kim Taehyung.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader! Thanks for reading chapter 4 of The Brothers Kim!
"Ow, ow, ow!" Gyuri howled. "Please, Madam Zhou, this is torture!"

Madam Zhou rapped a narrow stick on Gyuri's slackening arms, forcing her to straighten them up again. Gyuri bit her lip as she tried to keep the buckets of water from touching the floor. "You are not leaving until the two hours has passed, Gyuri," she told her sharply. "But why?" she whined for the tenth time. "Why am I being punished? I didn't do anything wrong!"

Madam Zhou rapped Gyuri's arms again, with broader strokes this time as the buckets of water nearly reached the floor. Gyuri could only whimper in pain. "The fact that you have not realised what you have done wrong is precisely why you are being punished," she told her sternly. "It shows that you feel no remorse."

"Madam Zhou, I can't feel remorse if I have no idea what it is I should be remorseful for!" Gyuri retorted as she struggled to keep her arms perpendicular to her body. "Please, can you just tell me what it is?"

Madam Zhou sighed, "You are being punished for misbehaving in front of the Young Master."

Gyuri's eyes widened. "Seriously? You're making me carry these buckets of water for the next two hours because of that little perv walking in on me?"

Gyuri felt another sharp tap on her arms as Madam Zhou struck her. She cried out in pain. "That is not how you address the Young Master" Madam Zhou pointed out. "And it will do you no good to keep behaving in this manner. The Kims are your masters now and you will do well to remember that."

Gyuri watched as Madam Zhou started walking away, leaving her alone outside of the maids' quarters, carrying a bucket of water in each hand. "Wait, are you just gonna leave me here?" she shouted after her.

Madam Zhou looked over her shoulder. "Yes. Once you are done with your punishment, I will come and start your training." She narrowed her eyes, "And do not even think about putting down those buckets of water even for a second" she warned. "I will be watching you."

With graceful steps, Madam Zhou disappeared inside the maids' quarters. Gyuri craned her neck behind her just to make sure that Madam Zhou was indeed gone. Cautiously, she started relaxing her arms. "I would not do that if I were you."

Gyuri jumped in surprise at the sudden sound of someone's voice. She turned to find the source of the voice and she scowled when she saw who it was. "Ugh, why do you always pop up at the wrong time?"

Taehyung strolled over from the other side of the courtyard with the same impish smile. He was
wearing vibrant robes, a stark contrast to what Gyuri saw him wearing earlier. His long hair was fashioned into a bun and only then did Gyuri notice that Taehyung walked in the same gallant manner as his brother and cousin.

He grinned at her, his large almond-shaped eyes twinkling with mischief. "I see that Madam Zhou has taken the liberty to discipline you." He smirked while gesturing at the wooden buckets in Gyuri's hands.

Gyuri huffed. "It's your fault I'm doing this right now" she complained.

"I beg to differ" he replied back. "You should not have thrown that pillow at me." He drew closer to her and Gyuri took note of his cocky attitude. Something about the way he was acting irked her but she couldn't pinpoint what it was. Taehyung continued, "For a peasant, you really are quite dumb."

"I am not dumb" she responded hotly.

He smirked, "You clearly are." He peered at her face as if inspecting her, "and now that you are all clean, I see that you are quite ugly too..."

Gyuri dropped the buckets of water as she launched herself at Taehyung. "That's it, you're having it!"

Startled by her abrupt movements, Taehyung pounced backwards as Gyuri hunted him down. Taehyung shrieked as Gyuri chased after him like a relentless predator prowling hungrily for its next victim.

"Stop chasing me, you crazy wench!" he shouted at her.

"Not until I wring your neck!" she shouted back.

The pair raced around the courtyard, catching the attention of the servants passing by, who watched on in wonder at the spectacle before them. Squeals of fright escaped Taehyung's mouth while Gyuri continued to chase after him with zeal. It was only when Taehyung had reached a dead-end did they stop running. The pair stared at each other trying to anticipate the other's next move. Both were visibly tired as they were panting and gasping for breath.

"You... run... well" Taehyung spoke in between gasps.

Gyuri smirked, "And... you... scream... like... a... girl" she replied back.

Taehyung loured at her.

Without warning, Gyuri charged at Taehyung and rugby tackled him to the ground to prevent him from escaping. Taehyung landed on his back with a thump with Gyuri on top of him.

"Aha!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "I gotcha now!" she gazed down at him as she declared, "Now I can finally get revenge for losing my coin earlier!"

Taehyung struggled and squirmed from underneath her, his brows furrowed as he glowered. "What are you doing? Get off me this instant!"

Gyuri took hold of his robes by the collar, her hands balling into fists as she did so. "Not until you apologise, you little brat. I'm always getting into trouble because of you."

Taehyung retorted defiantly, "I have nothing to apologise for. If you are always getting into trouble it
is because you are too ignorant to know when to stop."

Gyuri frowned at him. "So you're not gonna apologise?"

"No, I am not" he responded boldly.

Gyuri scoffed. "Fine, then. You leave me no choice." Gyuri started gargling as if she had mouthwash in her mouth, alarming Taehyung.

"Wait, what-what are you doing?"

She smirked at him before continuing to gargle, even louder this time, to accumulate more saliva. She grinned down at him when she had a mouthful.

Taehyung's eyes were the size of saucers. "D-do not dare do what I think you are about to do!"

Gyuri shaped her lips into a spout as she leaned forward, a string of saliva escaping the narrow hole that was her lips.

"Gyuri, stop what you are doing right now!" Taehyung panicked. "Stop!"

But Gyuri didn't and the string of saliva grew longer and longer, threatening to snap and land squarely on Taehyung's frightened face. He struggled from underneath her more energetically now as he desperately tried to get Gyuri off of him.

"Get off me, you peasant! Get off!" he screamed whilst thrashing about. But Taehyung was too late. He had flailed about so much that the string of saliva broke, landing on his nose. He froze immediately, paralysed and in shock at the warm liquid substance on his face. Gyuri watched as his face switched from an expression of shock to disgust and then, to anger.

"Argh!" he screeched as he finally pushed Gyuri off from above him. Gyuri tumbled to the side as Taehyung got up and used his sleeve to wipe the spit off his face. "You are disgusting! You disgusting peasant! You horrid wench! You--!"

Taehyung stopped midway his tirade when he spotted Gyuri on the ground, laughing heartily. She was laughing so hard that tears were springing from her eyes. The sight of her clearly mocking him only enraged Taehyung even more. With vengeance in mind, Taehyung took the opportunity to charge at Gyuri while she was defenceless. "Now it is your turn!"

Gyuri, sensing the shift of gravel on the floor, quickly turned and saw that Taehyung was advancing towards her. She pushed herself up quickly but not quick enough as Taehyung had caught up with her and was making a grab for her hair.

"Oh, hell no!"

The pair struggled against each other as Taehyung, driven by petty retribution, attempted to pull her hair while Gyuri tried to avoid his lean arms. Taehyung and Gyuri were locked in a stalemate as despite Gyuri being taller than Taehyung, Taehyung was somewhat stronger as he had more energy. Gyuri, on the other hand, was still ravenous in her newly discovered impoverished body. Keen not to lose, Gyuri and Taehyung held onto each other tightly.

"You are going to pay for what you did!" Taehyung shouted.

Gyuri scoffed, "Not if I get to you first."
With one last push, Gyuri managed to trip Taehyung up, causing him to fall unflatteringly to the ground. Swiftly, Gyuri sat on top of him again and this time, targeted his ears. She squeezed and pulled and twisted his earlobes as she ridiculed him, "How do you like that now?"

Taehyung struggled against her nimble fingers that stretched and tormented his earlobes. It felt like she was trying to rip them off. Yelps of pain escaped Taehyung's mouth as Gyuri continued to pinch them raw.

"Stop it!" Taehyung howled. "Stop it now!"

"Say 'sorry' first" Gyuri ordered. "Then I'll let you go."

"No!" Taehyung protested and Gyuri pinched even harder, resulting in louder cries.

But while Gyuri was occupied with torturing Taehyung, she had failed to notice that a stranger was quickly advancing from behind her.

"What is the meaning of this?" a loud voice boomed.

Gyuri jolted.

She had been so busy with punishing Taehyung that she didn't notice that the stranger was now standing in front of her. Gyuri looked up warily and her eyes were greeted by a pair of angry ones. The person that was looming before her had a scary expression as he shot daggers at her. The first thing Gyuri observed was that the person was a man. He had long black hair that was loosely tied into a bun and he was wearing dark silk robes that had an intricately embroidered pattern in gold. He continued to scowl at her, causing Gyuri to avert her gaze.

The stranger's eyes then narrowed as it travelled down from Gyuri's face to Taehyung's. His thick brows knitted even closer to each other as he glared at his brother. "Taehyung?" his voice was icy, "What are you doing on the floor?"

Taehyung pushed Gyuri off, while she was distracted, with ease and dusted his front. "Third brother..." he began. "I--"

"It seems you have been disgracing yourself again" he interrupted.

Taehyung weakly protested, "Brother Junmyeon, it is not what it appears to be--"

"I think it is exactly what it looks like" he snapped. His eyes darted from Taehyung to Gyuri and then back again. "Clearly, you have been rolling around on the floor while arguing with a maid, disgracing yourself in front of father and the servants."

Taehyung pouted, "That is unfair, brother! You speak as though I am guilty when I am the victim in this!" He directed Junmyeon's attention to Gyuri, "She is the one that started this!"

Gyuri was astounded by Taehyung's fabrication. "It's not my--!"

Junmyeon looked at her and Gyuri was immediately silenced. Yikes, she thought inwardly. This guy's as scary as my Maths teacher.

"I do not care whether or not this maid started things" he stated with a steely gaze. "What I care about is how a Kim, like yourself, is debasing himself and stooping to the level of peasants; acting like an uncultured swine and in turn, embarrassing the rest of the family." His frown deepened as he said, "You bring dishonour to the rest of us, Taehyung."
To Gyuri's surprise, Taehyung didn't say anything back. He just bit his lip while glaring at his older brother as if trying to withstand his insults. But it didn't escape Gyuri's notice that Taehyung's small hands were clenched into fists.

Junmyeon sighed, "Get up" he ordered. "Go and clean yourself up in preparation for supper later."

Without a word, Taehyung did his brother's bidding and left without giving Gyuri a second glance. Once he was gone, Junmyeon turned to look at her. "I assume you are a new maid" he commented, his expression impassive.

Gyuri nodded from the floor.

"Well, since you are new, I do not expect that you have been taught how things work here, in the household." He crouched down so that he was at eye level with her.

Gyuri leaned backwards as Junmyeon's face came into clearer view. She couldn't help noticing how, even though he was intimidating, she found him quite alluring in that dark and sexy way. *Get your mind out of the gutter, Subin!* she scolded herself.

"I-I'm not really familiar with anything yet..." she admitted.

Junmyeon's expression was still unreadable. "No worries. You will soon be acquainted with how we do things here." He got up from his position and scanned the area. In a loud voice, he addressed the servants who were spectating from afar, "Where is Madam Zhou?"

The servants broke into whispers while one of the maids went to fetch the head maid. Not a moment later, a flustered Madam Zhou appeared from the maids' quarters, clearly aggrieved when she spotted a dusty Gyuri on the floor.

Madam Zhou bowed to Junmyeon. "You called me, Master Junmyeon?"

Junmyeon didn't waste time, "Is this one of your new recruits, Madam Zhou?"

Madam Zhou glanced at Gyuri briefly and then nodded in reply. It was only brief but Gyuri could already tell that Madam Zhou was itching to hit her for making a blunder.

"It seems that this one has escaped your disciplinary action" his statement was said with no malice but his body language suggested otherwise. "I caught her wrestling on the floor with my younger brother."

Madam Zhou's eyes widened, "Wrestling?"

Junmyeon merely nodded. He glanced at Gyuri with little emotion. "See to it that she is disciplined properly."

Madam Zhou bowed as she replied, "I will, Master Junmyeon. On behalf of Gyuri, I apologise."

"You should not need to apologise" he declared before walking away. "Because mistakes like these should not be happening in the first place." And with those cold words, Junmyeon departed without looking back.

~*~

From his quarters, Namjoon stared out of his window and at the night sky. It was a clear summer's night and the dark sky was speckled with stars that winked at him from above. Namjoon sighed
contently as he gazed up at them, momentarily forgetting his worries of the rumours that were sweeping amongst his men. His smile slipped briefly as he recalled them again. But with effort, he pushed the idea to the back of his mind once more.

*There will be no war,* he tried to reassure himself. *The new emperor will not allow it.*

But even though Namjoon tried to think positively, he had no idea what the new emperor will be like. No one did. And he feared that the new emperor will be a greedy man that wished for expansion of their already vast kingdom.

As Namjoon considered this, he was suddenly distracted by the sound of a young woman's voice. He squinted his eyes as he looked out his window and found that one of the maids was being punished outside with four buckets of water filled to the brim. The maid was carrying two buckets at either end of a wooden pole which she shouldered. Namjoon strained his ear and finally understood what she was saying: it was a colourful array of curses that Namjoon was too shy to repeat.

He looked on at her from afar and chuckled as he continued to listen to her. *Clearly, she does not know that she is being too loud,* he thought. *Or, that if anyone heard her, she would be punished even further for such vulgar language.*

Namjoon, amused by the maid's chantings, decided to pay her a visit.

~*~

Gyuri continued to curse as if it would alleviate the pain she was experiencing on her shoulders. She grimaced as she tried to adjust the weight of the heavy buckets evenly between her aching limbs. She was dogged tired.

It had almost been six hours since she had been sentenced to hours of pain by Madam Zhou. After Junmyeon had left, Madam Zhou had decided to discipline her by making her carry more buckets of water for a longer duration.

"Gyuri, do you know what these buckets represent?" she had asked with muted fury.

Gyuri shook her head.

"One of these buckets represent 'discipline'" she informed her. "And the other represents 'dedication'. These are the two values which I expect all the servants in the Kim household to have." She gestured at the two buckets, "but it seems that you do not possess these values as you blatantly disregarded your earlier punishment to wrestle with the Young Master."

"Madam Zhou, in my defence--"

"Silence" Madam Zhou ordered. "I am not done talking." She pointed to the two additional buckets. "I realised that what you lack is not only discipline and dedication but determination and desire as well."

Gyuri was baffled by her comment.

"In order for you to learn your lesson, you will have to carry all four buckets that represent these four core values which you lack."

"All four?" she had exclaimed in shock. "For two hours?"

Madam Zhou shook her head. "No, all four for *eight* hours."
"What?!

"I was going easy on you by only giving you only two hours before. But obviously, that was not enough of a punishment if it did not deter you from committing the same mistake again." She shook her head before adding, "No, eight hours will do. You will not eat until those eight hours are up."

Gyuri continued cursing as she struggled to stay standing up straight. She was feeling lightheaded now. How long has it been since she had last eaten anything? She thought she was starting to see double.

"Two more hours," she muttered to herself. "Just two more hours. We can do this..." But despite her newfound determination, Gyuri's legs started to give way and she collapsed on the floor, dropping the buckets and spilling its contents on the floor.

"Oh, shit!" she exclaimed. But she couldn't help feeling slightly relieved that the additional weight on her back had finally been lifted. Delicately, she moved her fingers about as they had been fixed in the same position for the past few hours. "Ow, ow, ow..." she moaned as she tried moving her arms and shoulders: they were both stiff and sore.

"Are you alright?"

Gyuri jumped at the sound of someone's voice. She blinked several times while trying to locate where the voice had come from. She had been standing in the heat for so long that she couldn't tell whether she had imagined it or not. But she needn't wait too long to confirm her suspicion because when she blinked again, Namjoon revealed himself from the shadows and stood where there was better illumination.

"Oh... it's you" she whispered weakly.

Namjoon knelt down so that he was on eye level with her. "Hello, Gyuri." He inspected her appearance and a worried expression flitted across his charming face. "What happened to you? Why are you still out here?"

Gyuri swallowed before replying as her mouth was dry. "I was being punished" she explained and she started swaying a little.

Namjoon looked at her alarmingly, "Punished? Whatever for?"

But he didn't get a reply as before he could, Gyuri fainted in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 5 of The Brothers Kim.
"You would think that she'd be full by now."

"Isn't that her fourth bowl of rice?"

"Poor girl, she must have been starving!"

The maids peered through the crack in the door to look at Gyuri, who was stuffing herself with all the food she can lay her hands on. Madam Zhou was watching her from across the table, silently judging her table manners with her lips pursed into a slight scowl.

The maids heard a soft chuckle and their eyes darted from Gyuri's gorging to Namjoon, who was leaning against the kitchen counter, observing Gyuri with mirth exuding from his eyes. Seeing the slight smile playing on his plump pink lips made the maids swoon from afar.

One of the maids sighed, "Oh, my!" she said in a dreamy voice. "Master Namjoon's smile is ever so dazzling!"

"Do you think it was the new girl who made him smile?" enquired another.

"No way!" another maid replied. "How can she be the reason for his precious smile?"

While the three peeping maids quarrelled quietly amongst themselves, Mayu watched what was happening from afar.

"She's a funny one, isn't she?" Mayu heard someone say from beside her. She turned to her left and saw that it was Pho. Pho gave her a toothy grin as she continued, "Did you see her chase the Young Master yesterday? It was quite the entertainment!"

Mayu smiled at her friend. In a quiet voice, she responded, "Yes, it was indeed."

"I heard from Kalyani that she will be staying with us." She smirked, "Kalyani was obviously annoyed when she found out about it."

"You know what Kalyani's like" Mayu replied. "She already finds our room crowded with three people sharing."

Pho shrugged. "Well, I can't wait to find out more about her. I think that we'll be great friends."

~*~

Gyuri continued to chow down the food, only taking a break to sip on water so that she could eat even more. She didn't know what came over her but it was like she had lost control of her body and the one pulling all the strings was her stomach, rather than her brain.

Gyuri chomped away at her fifth bowl of rice, grains flying everywhere. She reached out for the grilled mackerel and started picking at it so that she could chew bitesize portions of the meat, before stuffing her face again with more rice and slurping at the chicken broth soup. She continued this cycle until she heard a light cough which made her look up.
Madam Zhou was staring at her with an unimpressed expression. Her lips were thinned into a narrow line, her eyes twitching ever so slightly at the sight of food all over Gyuri’s face.

Gyuri, realising how she must appear to Madam Zhou, laughed lightly, embarrassed at her current appearance. "Er... it's really delicious" she stated awkwardly. "Compliments to the chef!"

Madam Zhou breathed in slowly but she refrained from berating her which Gyuri found odd. It was only when she realised that they were not alone, did she find out why. Gyuri looked behind Madam Zhou and saw that Namjoon was eyeing her from the back. He was grinning at her, a lot wider now, which revealed his unmistakable dimples.

Gyuri’s jaw dropped open, causing the contents inside her mouth to spill down her chin. She cursed at herself once she realised what she’s done. Damn it, Subin! Now’s not the time to get distracted by that guy’s killer smile! She rushed to wipe away the food that had dribbled down her chin with her sleeve. All the while feeling embarrassed that she had made a fool of herself to not only Madam Zhou but to Namjoon too. Gyuri heard Namjoon chuckle as he joined them on the table.

"I see that you have recovered" he commented as he pulled out a chair to sit next to Madam Zhou.

Madam Zhou was startled, "Please Master Namjoon, it is not appropriate that you--" she started getting up.

"It is alright, Madam Zhou. Please do not worry about formalities. I just simply wanted to talk to Gyuri." He turned to face her and then back to Madam Zhou again. "Do not worry. I will explain this to Junmyeon or to Uncle if they end up walking in on us. They are the only two who really care about stations."

Reluctantly, Madam Zhou sat down again. "As you wish, Master Namjoon."

Namjoon turned to face Gyuri again, "You scared me last night, Gyuri. Do you remember what happened?"

Gyuri tried to think back but her memory was a little fuzzy. All she could remember was buckets of water, chasing that cheeky brat and meeting the scary brother. Although, she did have a slight recollection of standing outside in the heat with four buckets of water instead of two.

"Not really" she answered.

Namjoon explained to her, "You fainted last night. You fainted from hunger."

Gyuri nodded in acknowledgement as if Namjoon had suddenly enlightened her. "Ohhh! Now, that explains why I'm still a little dizzy."

Namjoon watched her intently, "I hope you did not mind but I performed a basic check up on you while you were unconscious."

"A basic check up?" she repeated. "What do you mean?"

Namjoon looked away awkwardly to the side and Madam Zhou took it as her cue to intervene. "What Master Namjoon meant by that is..." she cleared her throat, "he assessed your current health by examining your body."

A small tapping was heard as Gyuri dropped her oriental spoon.

"And he discovered that you are extremely malnourished and you need to eat more--"
"Bruv!" Gyuri suddenly exclaimed, startling both Madam Zhou and Namjoon. "You mean to say that you saw me naked?!" she crossed her arms over chest. "Bruv, that ain't cool."

Madam Zhou and Namjoon exchanged looks with each other, both baffled by Gyuri's diction.

"Gyuri, I understand why you may be upset," Namjoon explained, "but rest assured, I am a physician in training so I know what I am doing--"

"Bruv, that doesn't excuse the fact that you peeped at me while I was unconscious!" she turned her body to the side as if to further conceal herself. "You better not have done anything fishy..." she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Gyuri!" Madam Zhou hissed. "That is not how you speak to Master Namjoon!"

"It is quite alright, Madam Zhou. Gyuri has every right to be upset." He stood up from his chair. "And since she is able to speak just fine, I am sure that she will recover quickly and start work soon." He paced towards the door where the huddle of maids quickly dispersed. Before leaving he turned to look at her, a small smile still playing on his lips. "Try not to get into any more trouble, Gyuri." And with that, he left.

~*~

After Gyuri had eaten her fill, Madam Zhou immediately started her training. For the rest of the day, Gyuri shadowed Madam Zhou in her tasks as the head maid, giving her a tour of not only the main house but also the individual houses of the brothers too.

"You mean to say that each of the Kims has their own houses?" she asked in awe.

Madam Zhou wearily replied, "Yes, that is correct."

"Wow! This family's loaded. Move over Queen Elizabeth, Buckingham Palace ain't got nothing over the Kim household!"

Madam Zhou arched her brow at Gyuri, choosing it wise to ignore her ramblings. After two hours of shadowing, Madam Zhou had grown accustomed to Gyuri's peculiar references, most of which she believed must have been the consequence of Gyuri being without food for so long. *That poor girl, she tutted to herself internally. She has been starved for so long that now, half of what she says is gibberish.*

Madam Zhou led Gyuri to the maids' quarters after the end of their quick orientation. "Master Namjoon has instructed me to let you rest for today. Tomorrow, you will start work for real."

Gyuri blinked. "Wait, so what am I supposed to do now?"

Madam Zhou sighed. "You will rest in your quarters." She gestured for Gyuri to return to her quarters and obediently, Gyuri did.

*Well, I'm not gonna pass on a day of chilling,* she thought to herself. She stretched her arms as she approached the hallway which led to the bedrooms. When she reached the door she faintly recognised, tentatively she pushed it open.

Inside, were three other girls roughly her age. Gyuri blinked and as she stared at them, she thought she recognised one of the girls. *Hm. Wasn't that girl's name Mia or something? Or maybe it was Maya...*
Gyuri scrunched her face in thought as she racked her brain for the girl’s name. While she did this, the other three girls gave her peculiar looks. To them, she looked like she had smelled something funky to which they responded by sniffing the air around them.

After a while, one of the girls finally spoke. "Hi!" she greeted cheerily and Gyuri noticed how her voice was quite ardent like she was waiting for Gyuri to arrive. "My name is Pho. You're Gyuri, right?"

Gyuri backed away slightly as the short and excited girl bounced up to her and slowly closed the distance between them. "Er, yeah. Yeah, I'm Gyuri."

"Oh!" she squealed excitedly. "It's so good to finally talk to you, I've been dying to speak to you ever since I watched you chase the Young Master. I thought you were so cool and intriguing! I mean no one else would do such a thing and--"

"Okay, Pho" the-girl-who-cannot-be-named interrupted. "I think you're overwhelming Gyuri a bit."

Pho, realising that she was invading Gyuri's space, decided to back away a little. "Sorry about that. I get excited really easily."

Gyuri smiled awkwardly as she eyed Pho. She couldn't help picturing her as an excited puppy since her large brown eyes were sparkling like they were keen to get her approval. "No problem," Gyuri managed to respond as Pho took a few steps backwards, letting Gyuri observe her in her entirety.

Pho was a relatively short, thin girl with long black wavy hair that was braided at the back and tied with a plain, dark ribbon—much like all the other maids in the household. Her garments were the same as Gyuri’s: a plain light-coloured traditional robe paired with a long, traditional dark skirt. When Gyuri looked around she noticed that everyone was wearing identical clothing—much like a uniform.

"So Gyuri, which one are you?" Pho asked keenly.

She looked at her quizzically, "What do you mean?"

"Were you selected or were you recommended?"

"What?"

"She's asking how you got your job" a different girl replied.

Gyuri turned to face who had answered and saw that it was someone she had never seen before. She was a little taller than her and had sharp features. Gyuri would have considered the girl as attractive if only she wasn't glowering at her. Her thin eyebrows were creased into a frown and her lips were puckered into a haughty expression, giving off an annoyed vibe. It didn't take much for Gyuri to realise that the girl who answered did not welcome Gyuri's presence at all.

"I-I'm not sure..." Gyuri responded to Pho's question. "I don't think I was either of the two."

The tall girl scoffed, "You're not sure?"

Gyuri couldn't help feeling slightly agitated by her tone.

"Well, let's put it this way" Pho interjected, sensing the tension in the room. "Mayu," she said pointing to the girl next to her, "was recommended by a patron while Kalyani was selected for service. Almost all the maids in the household got in through either of these two ways." She pointed
to herself, "I was also selected from the guild."

The tall girl, named Kalyani, turned to Pho. "Why do you even want to know?"

"Because I wanna know who her master is" Pho replied.

"Master?"

The three maids turned to face her, evidently confused as to why Gyuri had sounded so shocked.

"Hold up a sec," Gyuri began. "Don't all of you serve the Kims?"

"Yes," a soft voice escaped the lips of the girl named Mayu. Gyuri was surprised at finally hearing her speak. "But each of us is in charge of ultimately serving one of the Kim brothers. Did Madam Zhou not explain this to you?"

Kalyani rolled her eyes, "Clearly she hadn't or else the new girl would know already."

Mayu ignored her remark. "The Kim brothers each have a personal maid to attend to their needs. Often, they choose who serves them either by asking for a recommendation or by selecting someone from the guild of servants--"

"That's the place where trained maids can advertise themselves," Pho helpfully added.

"Right, and that person becomes their master" Mayu concluded.

"Well, I didn't get here through either of those methods" Gyuri explained. She thought for a while as she tried to find the best words to describe her weird predicament.

It's not like I can tell them the truth, she thought. They won't believe me if I say I suddenly woke up in someone else's body and ended up in a different time period too. But then again, how I ended up in the Kim household isn't really out of the ordinary...

Gyuri thought about all the movies she's watched and how being rescued seemed to be a common occurrence. She cast her memory back to how Namjoon rescued her and the cheeky brat and how he offered to take her in as a servant of the household. If she rationalised it, she ended up with a very simple explanation.

"I was adopted," Gyuri said.

The trio exchanged strange looks with each other, disbelief clearly written on their foreheads.

"What do you mean by that?" Pho enquired curiously.

"Well, Master Namjoon took me in after I helped Master Taehyung" Gyuri responded, copying how the other maids addressed the Kims.

The trio raised their brows in surprise.

"You mean you were rewarded?" Pho's voice was high-pitched to signal her shock. "That's incredible!"

"It is?"

Kalyani chipped in, "Being rewarded is a rare occurrence. The Kims are well-known for their generosity when it comes to rewards. So far, only men have been rewarded for their valiant
behaviour." She eyed Gyuri with envy, "You must have done something merit worthy for them to reward you with such an opportunity as this."

"That's true!" Pho nodded enthusiastically, "It's very difficult to get a prestigious job like this. I still consider myself as very lucky to have caught Master Junmyeon's eye."

Gyuri's ears pricked up at the sound of that name. She remembered Taehyung addressing the scary brother with the same name. "You're the scary brother's maid?" Gyuri pried.

Pho giggled at Gyuri's description of her master, "Yes. But I wouldn't call him that out loud if I were you." She looked around warily as she pressed her finger against her lips. "The walls have ears so you must be careful of what you say."

Gyuri chuckled nervously. It was the same warning she had received from Madam Zhou. "I'll do that next time." She glanced at the other two, "And what about you? Who are your masters?"

Mayu was the first to reply. "I serve Master Namjoon."

"Master Namjoon, eh?" Gyuri repeated. This girl's lucky, she thought. He seems to be the most decent out of the Kims so far... but then she remembered how he had admitted to 'examining' her body while she was unconscious and she immediately discarded her good impression of him.

Gyuri turned her attention to Kalyani. She replied proudly, "I serve the Young Master: Master Taehyung."

Gyuri immediately pulled a face at the mention of the brat's name. How unlucky, she tutted to herself.

"Hang on a sec," Pho declared. "Since it was Master Namjoon who rewarded you, does this mean you will serve under him?"

The four exchanged looks with each other. Gyuri couldn't help noticing the mildly alarmed expression that Mayu exhibited. The news seemed to be disagreeable to her. Mayu immediately interrogated Gyuri, "Was it truly Master Namjoon who rewarded you?"

"Er, yeah."

The crease on Mayu's smooth forehead deepened. But then her expression changed. "Wait, since you were rewarded, did he also grant you your new identity?"

Gyuri considered this. "No, it was Master Taehyung who did."

Mayu's expression relaxed but in turn, Kalyani became more vocal. "What? It was the Young Master who named you?"

Gyuri nodded, baffled as to why Kalyani was against her this time.

Pho's large eyes shifted from looking at Kalyani to Mayu. "It seems as though Gyuri may serve either Mast Namjoon or the Young Master."

Pho's words hung in the air as the trio turned to look at her.

"What? Is it something bad?"

"Not for you," Kalyani snapped. "But it will be for Mayu and I."

Mayu's face was scrunched up in worry. "If you serve under either Master Namjoon or the Young
Master it means that one of us is being replaced. There can only be one personal maid. It is possible to have two but--"

"Two is too many," Kalyani abruptly interrupted. "One will be like a third slipper: pointless."

"Look," Gyuri stated, trying to defuse the tension in the room. "We don't know for sure yet. No one has told me about anyone being replaced--"

"But it won't be long until they do," Mayu responded anxiously.

"And when they do," Kalyani said fiercely, "I will make sure that your life here will be a living hell." Kalyani gave Gyuri a threatening glare before pushing past her shoulder to leave. Mayu eyed her worriedly before swiftly following Kalyani's lead, leaving Pho and Gyuri alone in the room.

Pho rubbed her neck, "I'm sorry about Kalyani. She's a good person in general but this job means everything to her."

"No, it's okay. I understand where she's coming from but it's not like I asked to be rewarded by the Kims."

Pho was sympathetic. "Don't worry about it for now." But even she looked uncertain with what will happen in the future. "But if you get a chance to choose, which of the Kims will you choose to be your master?"

Gyuri arched her brow. "Can I even choose?"

"Probably not. But say if you do, who will you choose?"

Gyuri was quiet. To her, it was a no-brainer which of the two she preferred more.

"Definitely Master Namjoon."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader! Thanks for reading chapter 6 of The Brothers Kim.
Gyuri sighed as she hoisted the bucket of laundry down the stairs, grunting with effort and sweat beading on her forehead. "This is unfair" she muttered under her breath.

"Did you say something?" Madam Zhou queried.

"No," Gyuri was quick to reply. "Nothing."

It had been a few days since Gyuri started working as a maid and it was safe to say that she hated every moment of it. To her dismay, she was made to scrub floors; sweep the courtyard and wash the laundry. Gyuri huffed as she cast her memory back to her first day on the job.

When Gyuri first discovered what her 'reward' for saving Taehyung entailed, she was appalled. Never in her fifteen years of life had she ever done chores as intense as what she had to do in the past few days.

At first, she had an optimistic image of what life as a servant would be like. She imagined caring for her allocated master and re-enacting the romantic scenes she had watched in her K-dramas. Maybe, her master would fall in love with her and they'd engage in a romantic but forbidden romance? Gyuri had fangirled at the prospect of such things happening. It would be like an epic romance story, one that rivalled the likes of Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet.

But like most things, reality was a lot crueler than her quirky imaginations.

Gyuri tasted the familiar flavours of disappointment as the few days passed by. There were no romantic encounters or possibilities of love blossoming between Gyuri and her master. And how could there be when Gyuri didn't have a master, to begin with?

Contrary to what Pho speculated, neither Namjoon nor Taehyung became Gyuri's master, much to the relief of Kalyani and Mayu. When Madam Zhou came to collect her on her first day, she was immediately informed that she would work as a relief maid. At first, Gyuri thought her role was convenient: all she had to do was help the other maids whenever they needed her. But that was before she discovered that her new role was essentially to be everyone's lackey.

Gyuri believed that Madam Zhou was punishing her.

Ever since Gyuri had wrestled with Taehyung, Madam Zhou had never let Gyuri out of her sight, not to mention the fact that she had given her the worst job available. It was like she didn't quite trust Gyuri and she probably believed that making her everyone's gopher was one of the ways of keeping her out of trouble. While Gyuri felt it was unfair, she had to admit that she couldn't blame her. If she was ever left alone with Taehyung, she would probably end up strangling him.

Gyuri huffed as she trailed after Madam Zhou, carrying a bucket full of linen that needed washing. It was so heavy it felt like her arms were going to pop out of their sockets.

"When you are done with the sheets," Madam Zhou began, "I need you to sweep the courtyard."

"Yes, Madam Zhou" she murmured tiredly as she struggled with the heavy basket.
Madam Zhou walked briskly ahead and only stopped when she suddenly heard one of the other maids calling after her.

"Madam Zhou!" Gyuri heard someone say from afar.

Madam Zhou inclined her head slightly as the young maid approached her. "What is it, Ada?"

The young maid was flushed from running. "Pho was taken ill." She gasped for breath, "So now we are one person short of serving the Kims' tea later."

A worried expression crossed Madam Zhou's face for a brief second before it returned to its usual placid countenance. "What about Kalyani? Mayu?"

Ada shook her head. "They're already serving. Pho was meant to join them along with me."

Madam Zhou was quiet once more.

"If I may be so bold as to suggest something" Ada finally said after what seemed like ten minutes. "Go on" Madam Zhou prompted.

Ada's eyes met with Gyuri's. "Might I suggest Gyuri serve tea with us?"


For the past few days, Madam Zhou had meticulously ensured that Gyuri never got close to any of the Kims so to her, having Gyuri serve tea to them was like running a marathon despite avoiding exercise: it was both reckless and incredibly unpredictable.

Madam Zhou pursed her lips. "I do not think that is a good idea."

"Madam Zhou, we are understaffed" Ada pleaded. "Gyuri is able-bodied and she is a relief maid, after all."

Still, Madam Zhou was reluctant to budge. She eyed Gyuri from behind her and scrutinised her face as if calculating if she could trust Gyuri not to get into any trouble.

As much as I am against it, Madam Zhou pondered, it is far worse to provide poor service to the Kims as opposed to the probability of Gyuri making a mistake.

"Fine" Madam Zhou murmured finally as she turned to face Ada. "Since we have little choice."

Ada gave a sigh of relief.

"You're really gonna let me serve?" Gyuri was astounded.

"Yes," Madam Zhou answered hesitantly. "It shall be a trial run. Someday, you may have a master to serve so it will do you some good to acquaint yourself with the Kims as early as possible." She gave her a warning look, "Just ensure that you behave cordially towards all the Kims."

Gyuri already knew which of the Kims she was referring to. She nodded slowly. "I'll try my best."

~*~
With damp sleeves and aching arms, Gyuri heaved the basket of wet sheets from where she was sitting near the stream and started making her way back to the maids' quarters. Three or so hours had elapsed since Madam Zhou had left her and without a doubt, Gyuri knew it was almost time for her to help serve tea to the Kims for the first time.

"Damn it," she cursed as she set the basket down on the ground while she rotated her shoulders. She sighed as she looked up at the blue sky while breathing in the fresh air. "What the hell am I doing here?" she murmured to herself. "I should be back home studying for my GCSEs..."

Gyuri surveyed her surroundings and took in the fresh and vibrant greenery of the Kims' household grounds. Currently, she was outdoors near the stream where the laundry maids did their tasks. Normally, Gyuri would take her time to appreciate the natural scenery since, in London, all she ever saw were grey concrete walls. But, in her current situation, all she could appreciate was the few hours of rest after a long day's work.

"Man, I miss the internet" she contemplated as she lifted the basket again. "I miss Snapchat" she complained further. "And YouTube." She sighed dejectedly, "I miss listening to music and watching TV."

As Gyuri made her way back, her mind inadvertently began to think about all the things she missed from back home. She missed being in a familiar place; she missed her dad and brother and most of all, she missed just being a normal teenage girl.

"This is child labour" Gyuri grumbled while eyeing the basket and then inspecting her blistered hands. "I should report them to the authorities!"

But then Gyuri's usual playful behaviour faded as she was overcome by a wave of anxiety and sadness.

Gyuri swiftly wiped away the tears that were forming in the corners of her eyes. She didn't want anyone to witness her crying, not even the other maids.

Even though she had befriended Pho and was sort of in good terms with Mayu, she didn't feel comfortable sharing with them her woes especially when it might impact the future if she happened to reveal too much. And because of such reasons, Gyuri felt burdened and isolated by the secret she harboured.

"I can do this," she told herself resolutely. "I'm not a wuss" she added while hastily wiping her tears away. "I'll find a way back home somehow. Just like Marty and Doc did in 'Back to the Future'."

Gyuri continued down the path with her newfound optimism. With every step she took, she tried to keep the doubt that was nagging at the back of her mind, at bay as it threatened to taint what hope she had left with the murkiness of anxiety.

So many questions flitted through her head, making her uneasy and frustrated at her lack of knowledge.

So far, all she knew was that she was in the kingdom of Saim and currently residing in the capital, Benkei. Gyuri had tried to figure out whether Saim was an ancient name for either Japan, Korea, China or another country but with little luck. It was during these times that she wished her school had taught her world history rather than sticking strictly to the British history syllabus.

And to top it all off, there was one thing that really baffled her- why hadn't she time-slipped to medieval Britain? Surely, there was some sort of rule with time-slips that you will be transported to a
primitive time in the country you were in? If that was the case then, why had she been sent to Saim?

"It's because I'm Asian, isn't it?" she mumbled bitterly. "Even time-slips can be discriminatory..."

As Gyuri continued to hobble with the wet sheets still dripping in her old wicker basket, she suddenly felt a sharp pain at the back of her head as a small pebble hit her. She yelped, "Ouch!"

Gyuri reached for the back of her head while searching her surroundings wildly. Where had the pebble come from? Gyuri looked up to the sound of rustling and witnessed two birds quarrelling high up in the trees. Could the pebble have come from above? She pursed her lips, "Stupid birds."

Gyuri kissed her teeth before picking up her fallen basket and continuing with her trudge towards the maids' quarters. But as she did so, little did she know that somewhere, hidden behind the bushes, someone was stifling their triumphant laughter at having hit a bullseye.

~*~

Gyuri eyed the identical blue-patterned porcelain cups that carried different flavours of green tea. She gulped as the fragrant and inviting fumes beckoned to her, tempting her to take a sip even though she knew it was forbidden to do so. Gyuri sniffed the delicious aroma and a flowery scent greeted her nostrils, enveloping her in a sea of nostalgia that reminded her a lot of her dad. She sighed as images of him drinking green tea every morning flashed in her mind's eye, serving as a harrowing reminder of how far away she was from home.

Madam Zhou, seeing her dazed expression, called out to her, "Gyuri? Do you remember which tea is which?"

Gyuri jolted as she broke away from her daydream. "Erm, yes, Madam Zhou."

But Madam Zhou was sceptical. "Just follow Ada's lead" she instructed firmly before ushering her into the single file behind Mayu and Kalyani.

"Try not to mess up" Kalyani jeered from beside her. "Or else."

Gyuri tried to stop her teeth from chattering. "I'm just serving tea" she managed to say rather nonchalantly, "How hard can it be?"

~*~

It turns out that 'tea' for the Kims did not hold the same definition as the 'tea' Gyuri was accustomed to.

Gyuri blinked in surprise as she was led to the main house where the Kims dined together every week. As the family normally ate in their own quarters, a gathering was often seen as a special occasion, especially in the presence of the lord.

Gyuri watched in silence as one by one, the Kims sat down in their designated seats along the long, rectangular table that was filled with a multitude of dishes. A savoury odour wafted to her nostrils, causing her rebellious stomach to grumble in protest and her mouth to water in anticipation.

They call this tea?! Gyuri was gobsmacked as she eyed the exotic delicacies hungrily. And I thought tea time was just a couple of sandwiches and a cuppa.

"Is everyone here?" Gyuri heard a gruff voice ask from the head of the table. She turned to face the owner of the voice and found that it belonged to an elderly man with pronounced wrinkles and a
long, wispy beard, peppered with silver hairs.

"Not yet, father" Gyuri heard a kind voice reply. She soon discovered that it was Minseok, the elder brother, who was seated at the right-hand side of the man he called 'father'. "We are missing Junmyeon and Jongin."

The old man hmphed and Gyuri noticed his gnarly face contort into a displeased expression.

"I believe cousin Jongin has been ill as of late" Gyuri heard a familiar voice point out. She craned her neck slightly and saw that it was Namjoon who answered. "And I believe cousin Junmyeon had been summoned to the palace so he may be returning late-"

But just as Namjoon said that the door abruptly opened and in came a dishevelled Junmyeon. Strands of his black hair escaped his hair bun and his cheeks were rosy as if he had been running. "I apologise for being late, father-"

"Just hurry and sit down, boy" the old man commanded sharply.

Gyuri jumped at the old man's sharp tone.

With his gaze averted, Junmyeon hurriedly took his seat which was farthest away from the old man. As Gyuri watched him humbly sit down, she couldn't help pitying him. It was a stark contrast to the scary brother she first encountered a few days ago since compared to the true alpha of the household, Junmyeon was like an obedient, mewing cat.

In silence, Gyuri watched the Kims eat their food noiselessly. Only the sound of chopsticks clattering against porcelain dishes could be heard against the faint chewing sounds coming from the Kims' mouths. It didn't take much for Gyuri to conclude that dining together was considered by the Kims as a formal affair, one which they were obligated to participate in rather than something they did out of their own volition.

Gyuri shifted uncomfortably in her standing position as she waited for the Kims to finish eating. The atmosphere was tense and suffocating—nothing at all like the tea times she had with her family. As surreptitiously as she could manage, Gyuri peeped at the Kims.

At the head of the table sat the sharp-tongued old man who had the dignified air of a lord. He wore majestic dark garments, like the other Kims, and his long silver hair was bound loosely in a neat bun. He ate quietly, his ailing body poised straight emitting an aura of pride despite his sickly complexion. Gyuri knew without a doubt that the old man must have been Kim Hyesung, the current head of the family.

"Where is the tea?" Hyesung's voice boomed from the table.

With quick reflexes, the maids quickly moved from their position to serve the freshly brewed tea. Gyuri, not being accustomed to the speed and precision of the movements, lagged behind by a few seconds.

"Here it is, my lord" Ada replied, taking care not to meet Hyesung's intense, dark eyes. She poured the tea with grace and elegance, her hand barely shaking at all.

Gyuri watched in amazement from afar.

"Ahem."

Gyuri turned her attention to the person sitting in front of her and saw that it was Taehyung.
"I want my tea," he said bluntly, a sliver of a smile playing on his lips.

Gyuri bit her tongue to avoid saying anything back. *Just my luck,* she grimaced inwardly. *It had to be the cheeky brat I must serve.*

Gyuri gave her best polite smile but only succeeded in giving a forced one that made her look unflatteringly like a Cheshire cat. "Here it is, Young Master" she replied as she poured out his tea.

Once she was done, Taehyung took a tentative sip and sneered. "Ugh!" he exclaimed. "You gave me the wrong tea!"

Flustered, Gyuri glanced back at the teapot to check on the leaves. She inhaled the vapours. "No, I haven't" Gyuri answered back. "I served you jasmine tea."

Namjoon, sensing that Taehyung was up to no good again, took a sip of his tea before Taehyung could object. He looked up at Gyuri, "You are right. This is jasmine tea." He turned to Taehyung and scowled at him. "Quit horsing around, Taehyung."

Gyuri nodded towards Namjoon's direction thankfully.

"I was just having fun" Taehyung muttered, evidently annoyed at his cousin for spoiling his prank.

While the rest of the Kims continued with their tea, Taehyung looked up at Gyuri who was still hovering nearby. She turned to look at him and quickly stuck out her tongue.

Taehyung was aghast that she had dared to act so impudently in the presence of his father. He turned to look at the others, ready to publicly humiliate Gyuri, only to find that no one had witnessed her childish behaviour. Everyone was occupied with sipping their hot brew.

She smiled at him smugly as she pulled another face at him.

Taehyung responded by narrowing his eyes.

"Is everything okay, Taehyung?" Minseok asked from the other end of the table.

"Y-yes, brother" he fumbled in reply.

Minseok eyed him suspiciously. "You were just giving me the evil eye just now."

"N-no I was not" he turned to Gyuri and saw her stifling a giggle. "I just had something in my eye, that is all."

Minseok nodded before continuing with his drink.

"Do you want some more tea, Young Master?" Gyuri asked, gloating a little.

Taehyung curtly replied, "Yes."

As Gyuri poured out the tea, Taehyung tried to devise a plan to humiliate her. He didn't forget what happened last time they saw each other and as petty as it was, he wasn't going to let bygones be bygones. Messing with Gyuri was too much fun to pass on and as much as he hated to admit it, he found her somewhat entertaining.

He smirked when he finally realised what he could do.

Once Gyuri had finished filling his cup to the brim, Taehyung watched as Gyuri slowly backed
away from the table. But as she was doing so, he sneakily stuck out his leg from behind her, causing her to trip.

Taehyung chuckled under his breath as he watched Gyuri fall but unexpectedly, she fell sideways, landing on Namjoon and spilling hot jasmine tea all over his garments.

A shriek escaped Namjoon's lips as the hot tea stained his clothes and touched his skin. Havoc arose on the table as Namjoon jumped, spilling his tea in the process and surprising the other Kims who were midway drinking theirs.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!" Gyuri fervently apologised as she grabbed a nearby napkin and proceeded to dab at Namjoon's lower garments.

The maids rushed to find other cloths and napkins which they used to clear the spilled tea while the Kims spluttered and coughed at having drunk theirs far too quickly.

All the while, Taehyung watched in amusement at the mayhem he caused and the grin on his face only grew wider when he saw a panic-stricken Gyuri. However, his grin was soon replaced with a surprised expression when he saw what Gyuri was doing.

Silence befell the other Kims when they spotted the spectacle before them.

"Gyuri!" Ada hissed after a few moments of silence.

Gyuri looked up from her hunched position, only to be greeted by stunned faces with jaws agape.

"What are you... doing?" Kalyani muttered.

"I'm trying to clean Master Namjoon's lower garments-" she stopped midway her sentence when she saw the baffled looks of the other maids. "Oh."

From an onlooker's perspective, Gyuri being hunched down, at crotch level with Namjoon, appeared suggestive of something other than her innocently trying to get rid of a stubborn stain near his groin. Alongside the rapid motions of her hand stroking Namjoon's inner thigh and his flushed face, Gyuri realised what the others might have mistaken her intentions for.

Her face grew crimson with embarrassment.

Everyone stared back at Gyuri, speechless at what they'd witnessed. It was a scene so unexpected that they didn't know how to react.

"Er, excuse me-" briskly, she ran away from the main house with her gaze averted in humiliation.

Once she had left, Taehyung glanced at his cousin who was equally pink with embarrassment. "She is pretty 'handy', huh?" Taehyung murmured to him while stifling a devious chuckle.

For that comment, Namjoon glared at him before playfully smacking him on the back of the head.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader! Thanks for reading chapter 7 of The Brothers Kim.
Huhu. And my crude sense of humour strikes again. Sorry about that, I couldn't help it. >.<

Please anticipate the next chapter~
Gyuri was in a daze while she swept the courtyard with a broom made from coconut palm fronds. It had been a couple of days since she had served the Kims their tea for the first time and she was already certain that it would also be her last.

After the disaster of a meal, Madam Zhou had given her a look that Gyuri was familiar with: it was the look of disappointment. Madam Zhou had not bestowed a punishment on her yet which made Gyuri nervous. Would she have to carry buckets of water again? Or will she give her harder tasks from now onwards? Gyuri chewed on her lip apprehensively. The notion of her pending punishment had led her to have sleepless nights, making her grouchy and paranoid.

Gyuri started sweeping the courtyard more energetically as she suddenly imagined Taehyung's smug face grinning up at her from the gravel below. Her mood soured at the thought of him triumphantly laughing behind her back.

"That stupid git" she muttered through gritted teeth. "It's all his fault. I swear down I'm gonna-"

Gyuri abruptly stopped midway her sentence when she suddenly felt a sharp pain at the back of her head again. She whipped around hurriedly and searched her surroundings in every direction. When she looked above her, she saw that there were no birds.

Where could the pebble have come from this time?

"What has the world come to?" she asked herself. "First my rotten luck with that brat and now, it might even start raining stones. Great. Just great." Gyuri shook her head dismissively and decided to ignore it. She was too preoccupied with her current problem to investigate further.

But as the saying goes, once is an accident, twice is a coincidence but three times is a pattern. And with that in mind, Gyuri soon realised that when a pebble hit her at the back of the head for the third time, it was not nature that was conspiring against her but some unknown fiend.

Gyuri set her mouth in a hard line as she feigned ignorance of the perpetrator's intention to annoy her. Theatrically, she looked around in an attempt to lure the culprit to try and hit her with a pebble again. From what she knew already, the crook was obviously stationed somewhere behind her for the stones to hit her at the back of the head successively.

Gyuri peered behind her and took note of all the possible hiding places the miscreant could be hiding in. Behind her was a bare flowering tree that had budding flowers on its branches. Nearby were also coniferous shrubs that were large enough to conceal an adult. She deducted that the arsehole must be behind one of the two possibilities.

While Gyuri pretended to sweep the courtyard, she noticed, from the corner of her eye, movement from one of the nearby brambles. Swiftly, she avoided a flying pebble directed at her and swerved to confront the rascal behind the thicket. She stomped up to the bushes and seeing that Gyuri was fast approaching, the culprit panicked, causing the foliage to shake as it tried to make its getaway.

"Get outta there and show yourself!" she exclaimed hotly. "I know you're in there so there's no use in hiding anymore."
Gyuri waited patiently for the perpetrator to reveal itself and soon enough he did.

"Hey, ugly Gyuri."

Gyuri’s eyebrows snapped together as she glowered at Taehyung. "I should have known" she sneered. "Of course, it had to be you."

Taehyung grinned at her artfully. "You are as sharp-tongued as usual" he playfully remarked.

With little patience, Gyuri retorted, "What do you want, tosser?" "Tosser?" Taehyung repeated. He was baffled by her choice of language.

Gyuri sniggered to herself as she realised that Taehyung was unfamiliar with contemporary British insults. *Oh, this opens up so many future avenues!* she thought inwardly.

"I mean, Young Master" she corrected.

Taehyung eyed her dubiously. But then, his lips formed into a roguish smile as he grinned. "How have you been since tea a few days last?"

Gyuri narrowed her eyes. *Dick,* she thought. "I’ve been better" she muttered in reply. It was evident to her that Taehyung was pushing her buttons on purpose. Keen not to give him the satisfaction he hoped for, she forcibly smiled, her voice thick with sarcasm. "Madam Zhou has given me a lot of work thanks to a certain somebody."

Taehyung maintained his impish smile. "I am glad to hear that the incident during tea has not greatly impacted your work ethic." He grinned at her smugly and Gyuri noticed that he had a slingshot in one hand. "But I dare say, your conduct during tea offered quite the entertainment for everyone. Cousin Namjoon especially."

Gyuri’s face reddened. She shot daggers at him before taking a step forward, startling Taehyung.

"What do you want from me?" she questioned him icily. "We obviously don’t get along so why not just keep out of each other’s way?"

Taehyung arched his brow. "And why should I do that?"

"Because then we won’t be at each other’s throats anymore" Gyuri reasoned.

Taehyung let out a hhmph as he chuckled.

"What?"

"I do not think you are aware but you are residing in Kim land. As long as you and I live in the same household, it is inevitable that we will always cross paths." He smirked, "And that means our little feud will continue until one of us leaves."

Gyuri let out an irritated sigh. The thought of having to go through such childish antics for however long she was going to be in Saim depressed her. "You're being ridiculous, Young Master," she said finally. "Why carry on this dispute when we can just stop it here? I don’t want to keep having a showdown with you every time we meet."

"What are you trying to suggest?" Taehyung asked suspiciously. "Are you... calling for a truce?"

Gyuri considered this. "Yes."
Taehyung was in disbelief.

"As much as I dislike you, I don't really want to keep getting punished by Madam Zhou for retaliating for the stuff you do to me-"

"Correction" Taehyung abruptly interrupted. "You receive punishment because of the idiotic things you do to yourself. I am not to blame at all."

Gyuri bit the insides of her cheeks to stop herself from retorting.

"But you wanted to call a truce, correct?"

Gyuri hesitantly nodded.

"Fine. Let us call a truce."

A small smile started forming on Gyuri's lips. *This brat may not be so bad after all...*

"But," Taehyung added, "before we call this truce, there's one thing I need you to do for me."

*Ugh. I spoke too soon. *"You can't call in favours! That's not how truces work!"

"Then, we do not have a deal."

Gyuri eyed Taehyung crossly. *The audacity of this kid! "Fine" she grumbled. "What is it?"

Taehyung had a wily grin. "I am going to need you to strip."

~*~

*How stupid.*

Gyuri fluttered her eyelashes flirtatiously at the man in front of her as she slowly lifted her skirt to reveal her ankle. "Oh, my leg hurts! It hurts!"

The man's eyes bulged and he turned his face away, furiously blushing. "P-please, dear maid! You-you should cover yourself up!" He averted his gaze but Gyuri noticed that he was still sneaking peeks at her exposed ankle.

*Seriously? Is this guy actually falling for it?* Gyuri continued to pretend her leg was hurting, slowly hitching her skirt up a notch as each second passed.

*And here I was, worried that the kid was asking for something sketchy.*

She sighed internally as she cast her memory back to what she and Taehyung had talked about earlier...

"You want me to *what*?" Gyuri had exclaimed. She crossed her arms over her chest defensively. "Ew, no. *No!*" she eyed him like he was chewing gum stuck to her shoe. "You're way too young to be asking for things like that!"

Taehyung was taken aback by her response. "Huh? What?" his face scrunched up in confusion and then his eyes rounded as he registered what she was hinting at. "No! I think you misunderstand. I do not want you to strip for me" he rushed to explain. "I need you to strip for my bodyguard."

Gyuri continued to give him a repulsed look. "How is that any better?" She shook her head as she
imagined herself doing a strip show for a guy she barely knew with Taehyung watching in the background. She shuddered. "I'm not that kind of girl. Go and find someone else to do your kinky fetishes."

"Like I said, you misunderstand" Taehyung insisted. "I need you to strip so that you can distract my bodyguard while I sneak out of the house." He gestured to a man wearing green robes nearby. "Ever since that day we were saved by my cousin, I have been unable to leave the household without him tailing me everywhere."

Gyuri glanced at the man in green who was stationed not too far away from them. It astounded her that she didn't notice his presence until Taehyung pointed him out.

"Still," she mentioned, "why do I have to strip to distract him? Can't you just bring him with you?"

Taehyung scowled. "He attracts too much attention and I do not need a chaperone. I only suggested you strip because I know he is weak to such things."

"But regardless of that, what you're asking of me is too much. And anyway, you were given a bodyguard so that he can protect you."

Taehyung huffed, "I do not need to be reminded of that by you. All I want to know is whether you will help me or not."

Gyuri contemplated this. Is it worth degrading herself for the sake of future comfort?

"Okay," she agreed at last. "But if I help you, do you promise that you won't do pranks on me anymore?"

Taehyung nodded as he solemnly replied, "I promise."

"And if we bump into each other, you won't acknowledge my presence?"

Taehyung raised his brow. "Is that what you want? For me to ignore you?"

"If it means living here peacefully, then yeah. You ignore me and I'll ignore you. Just pretend that the other doesn't exist."

He smiled wryly. "As you wish."

"Okay then," Gyuri replied determinedly. "What do you need me to do?"

Gyuri forcibly smiled as she giggled in a flirtatious manner at the guard with rose-tinted cheeks. When she discovered that 'stripping' meant revealing either her wrists or ankles, she almost collapsed from pure disbelief.

*How stupid,* she thought to herself again. *Who would've known that showing off your ankles was considered scandalous?*

She stole a glance at the wall behind the guard and saw that Taehyung had successfully climbed over. He looked directly at Gyuri and nodded to her thankfully before disappearing into the outdoors.

*Okay, mission accomplished.*

Gyuri dropped her skirt. "Oh, I apologise!" she exclaimed with mock mortification. "I didn't mean to flash you."
The guard wouldn't look at her in the face. "It is quite alright, dear maid." When he finally plucked up the courage to eye her steadily, Gyuri noticed the pink glow in his cheeks. "Do you require a physician? I can fetch Physician Koh-"

"Nah, I'll be fine" Gyuri hastily interrupted.

"Oh, but you were in so much pain earlier," the guard remarked. "If you change your mind, Physician Koh lives just nearby. I would accompany you but I have to look after the Young Master-" the guard turned to search for Taehyung and was stunned to see that he wasn't where he last saw him. "Young Master?" he surveyed the vicinity and found that he was nowhere to be seen. He turned to address Gyuri, "Have you seen-?" but he was stunned again to find that Gyuri too, had disappeared.

~*~

With discoloured rags as his disguise, Taehyung hummed to himself cheerfully as he trudged towards the main city with a skip in his step. At last, he thought to himself, freedom away from that stupid guard. He grinned as he approached the familiar sounds of creaking wooden wheels and merchants shouting. The low-key buzzing of the busy market streets caressed his eardrums causing his grin to spread even more.

He sighed contentedly, this is what life is about.

Taehyung whistled as he ambled through the bustling market streets, stealthily eyeing up the vibrant fruit that was on display. Which one should I get today? he asked himself. He glanced at the market stalls and spotted the familiar orange fruit that he had targeted last time: juicy persimmons. Taehyung debated whether he should steal them again today. It has been a while since I stole them last... he thought. He shrugged as he made up his mind to execute his plan.

With cat-like reflexes, Taehyung covertly approached the fruit stall from the side, using the huddle of scruffy customers as his shield. While the vendor was occupied with tending to her customers, Taehyung sneakily reached his scrawny hand out to the nearest persimmon. He could almost taste the delicate sweetness when suddenly, someone's hand intercepted his.

Startled, Taehyung glanced up.

"Did you not learn anything from last time?" he heard a steely voice ask.

Taehyung's eyes widened when he saw who it was. "Gyuri?"

Gyuri glared at him as she inconspicuously tugged his hand away from the fruit and pulled him to the side. "I can't believe you!" she spat. "What are you doing trying to steal again?"

"That is none of your business" he snapped. Taehyung snatched his hand away from her grasp.

"And what are you doing here anyway? Why did you follow me?"

"I had no choice" she replied. "The guard found out almost immediately that you went missing so I had to sneak out."

"You managed to sneak out without being spotted?" Taehyung was amazed. "How?"

Gyuri smirked. "I have my ways." But then her serious demeanour returned, "But that's beside the point. If I knew you were gonna steal again I wouldn't have helped you."

Taehyung rolled his eyes.
"Don't you know that stealing is bad?"

"I do not need you to lecture me" he sneered. Taehyung started walking away and Gyuri ran after him.

"What are you gonna do now?" she questioned him. "You better not try to steal again. While I'm with you, I won't allow it."

Taehyung halted in his step, allowing Gyuri to catch up. "Look," he said while frowning. "Just return home if you are going to reprimand me. I have business to attend to."

Taehyung raced ahead and Gyuri trailed behind him. For a few minutes, they walked in silence. Taehyung walked briskly, ignoring Gyuri, who was eyeing him like a hawk. After a while, he eventually turned to her and shouted, "Why are you still following me? Go away already!"

"I won't" she simply answered, which infuriated him more.

"Fine" he scowled. "At least I can explain to them why I came empty-handed today."

Gyuri looked at him quizzically, "They?"

Taehyung marched ahead with renewed irritation. The pair strolled in silence as they meandered through the bustling market streets until they eventually reached the less attractive side of town.

Gyuri surveyed her surroundings warily. Taehyung had led them to a desolate street that was dark and eerie and reminded her so badly of the ghetto streets in her neighbourhood. Immediately, she was on guard. She glimpsed at Taehyung, who was a few steps ahead of her, who didn't appear bothered by the imminent danger they might be in. Shadows danced on the walls as they continued to venture deeper into unknown territory, all the while making Gyuri jumpy from the growing anticipation that something bad might happen.

"L-let's turn back..." Gyuri whispered as she suddenly heard the screeching of a cat which startled her.

Taehyung smirked. "Why? Are you scared?"

She frowned at him, "N-no. I-I'm just worried about you. What if those thugs find you again? We were lucky that Master Namjoon came last time."

"Those ruffians will not dare to attack again" Taehyung reassured her. "They now know who we are."

At this, Gyuri eyed him curiously.

Taehyung stopped walking as they exited the desolate street. "We are here" he murmured. He scanned the field of rich, green grass and spotting two profiles in the distance, he smiled. Energetically, Taehyung raced ahead.

"Hey! Wait up!"

But Taehyung didn't. He ran with vigour while calling out to the two people on the horizon. "Chun Chun! Gulnar!"

The two profiles turned their heads around at the sound of Taehyung's voice and Gyuri soon discovered that they were two small children. The children gave toothy grins at the sight of
Taehyung approaching them.

"Papa!" the young boy exclaimed with outstretched arms. Taehyung kneeled to the ground as the little boy hugged him.

Gyuri tentatively trailed behind. Papa? She watched as Taehyung lifted the little boy and spoke to the small girl who seemed to be just a few years older.

"How have you been, Chun Chun?" she heard Taehyung ask the young lass.

Chun Chun replied, "We're doing well, Tae. We've been rationing the persimmons you got us last time but we're almost out."

"Are you gonna get us more food, Papa?" the little boy asked while in Taehyung's arms.

Taehyung had a small smile. "I will try."

While Taehyung played with Gulnar, the little boy, Chun Chun eventually noticed that Taehyung didn't come unaccompanied. She hid behind him immediately once she spotted Gyuri.

"Tae... who's that?"

Taehyung glanced behind him and explained, "Chun Chun, Gulnar, this is Gyuri." He pointed to her and then added, "She's going to help me get food for you today."

"What?" Gyuri replied. "I'm not-

"Are you an orphan too, Gyuri?" Chun Chun asked.

Gyuri stared back at the young, scruffy lass and observed her closely. She appeared to be around seven or so years old. Her long black hair was matted to her forehead and her skin was a delightful caramel hue. Despite her grubby appearance, Gyuri noticed that her dark eyes were shining with hope and optimism as if seeing Taehyung had lifted her mood a little.

"Er, no..." Gyuri replied. "I-I'm not."

"Papa, what is the lady doing here?" Gulnar asked. Gyuri noticed that he had a slight lisp as he spoke. "If she's with you is she... our Mama?"

"No!" Taehyung and Gyuri shouted in unison.

"Gulnar, you must not assume that just because she is with me, you can call her 'Mama'" Taehyung brashly added. "She is just a..." he glanced at Gyuri briefly, "a friend."

"You're pretty," Chun Chun said randomly as she inspected Gyuri's clothes. "Are you a princess?"

Gyuri chuckled, "I wish I was." She turned to face Taehyung who had released Gulnar. "Young Mast-

Suddenly, Taehyung jumped to her side and covered her mouth, bewildering the children with his odd behaviour. He laughed nervously before hissing at Gyuri, "Do not call me that in front of them" and he jerked his head towards the children. "They do not know my true identity."

Gyuri nodded showing Taehyung that she understood. Finally, he removed his palm. He turned his attention to the two children. "I ran into some trouble earlier so I could not get you guys any food." He glanced at Gyuri, "but Gyuri said that she will help me get some for you today. What do you
guys want to eat?"

"Persimmons!" Gulnar shouted enthusiastically.

"No, meat buns!" Chun Chun exclaimed.

"Wait a sec," Gyuri interrupted. She grabbed Taehyung's shoulder and steered him away. "What do you mean I'm gonna help you get food? I already made it clear that I'm not gonna help you steal!"

"So, you are not going to help me even when it is for them?" He frowned at her. "I did not expect you to be so shallow."

"I-" Gyuri was caught off guard.

"Well, that is quite the surprise. You will let these poor children starve?" Taehyung looked pitifully at the starved children who were scavenging for scraps.

Gyuri was overwhelmed with guilt.

"Fine. If you are really not going to help then, I insist you return home." Taehyung turned away.

"Wait," Gyuri called out to him. She sighed as Taehyung waited for her reply. "I'll help you."

Taehyung smirked.

"But I'm only gonna do it for them. I'm still not happy about having to steal."

Taehyung nodded in acknowledgement. "Do not worry. We are not stealing."

"We're not?"

"No," Taehyung responded sardonically. "We are just retrieving something that was taken from us."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 8 of The Brothers Kim.

What could Taehyung have planned?

Find out next time...
Taehyung peeped from behind the wall to look at the steaming hot meat buns being sold across the road. He gulped as he eyed the succulent, white bread that was oozing with a mouth-watering aroma. Even from afar, he could already imagine his teeth sinking into the soft dough.

Taehyung hid behind the wall again.

"Are we really doing this?" Gyuri asked from behind him. "You're rich. Why can't you just buy the food?"

Taehyung sighed for the third time. "I thought I already explained it to you. Why should I pay for something that is rightfully mine?"

"Still..." Gyuri muttered dubiously. "It just seems so wrong. Even if you say that you used to own the land that grew the food, it doesn't erase the fact that you're stealing from the new owners."

"The new owners" Taehyung rebuked contemptuously, "are no other than the Lees. They do not deserve the money that goes to them."

Gyuri was still uncertain.

After Taehyung and herself had left the orphans in the field, they had returned to the busy market streets to 'retrieve' food. Taehyung had explained to her that the food they were going to be acquiring belonged to the Lees' tenants. And the Lees were no other than the Kim family's rivals and surprisingly... their relatives.

"Just because the Lees are the new landowners doesn't mean that you can take food from the tenants. I mean, don't you feel bad for the tenants? They work hard to sell their produce."

Taehyung scoffed. "Why would I feel bad? Part of the profit that they earn will always go back to the Lees in tithe."

"Tithe?"

"Yes," Taehyung replied. "So, the more I steal from them then the less the Lees will get in return."

"But that also means the tenants will get less for themselves!" Gyuri protested.

Taehyung was unfazed. "It is not like I take from the same vendors each time. And anyway," he pointed out with a grin, "It is not like I am taking without good reason."

Gyuri curled her lip. "I'm starting to question whether you are. Why do I feel like you're doing this more for yourself than the orphans?"

Taehyung smirked. "You are right. I will not deny that I do find the act of taking from the Lees thrilling."

I knew it... Gyuri thought. This kid's an adrenaline junkie. "Alright, let's just get this over and done with. The sooner we get the food, the better."
Gyuri emerged from behind the wall and proceeded to approach the meat bun vendor. She glanced behind her one last time and saw Taehyung give her a brief nod.

*That's the signal, she thought. Okay, now to distract the vendor.*

Gyuri walked up to the vendor who was a stocky middle-aged man with a bushy beard. Seeing Gyuri, he jerked his chin towards her as if to indicate what she wanted from him. He did not smile nor did he utter a single word. It was like he had sworn an oath of silence, making it hard for Gyuri to approach him.

She smiled at him awkwardly as she attempted to grab his attention. Gyuri and Taehyung had discussed that while she distracted the vendor, Taehyung would sneakily take a few meat buns.

"Oh!" she groaned as she clutched her stomach. "My stomach! It hurts!"

The vendor, startled by her sudden cries of pain, drew closer to her as if to assist her.

"I think there must be something wrong with me!" Gyuri continued to whine. "Sir! Please help me!"

With her exaggerated ruse, Gyuri managed to draw the attention of not only the vendor but also the pedestrians nearby. Taehyung observed with a sly smile at Gyuri's melodramatic performance which was both embarrassing and incredibly entertaining at the same time. Her shrill voice and terrible acting were so perplexing that it successfully gathered a large huddle of onlookers who most possibly mistook her cries of pain for some sort of street performance. Regardless, with the vendor preoccupied, Taehyung was able to swipe more meat buns than he originally hoped for.

Once he was satisfied that he had enough, he turned tail to run. But that was until he spotted a cloth bag filled to the brim with coins. He stopped at his tracks immediately. The bag of coins was at the far end of the wooden cart but nevertheless was within his reach. All he had to do was lean in. But doing so would mean compromising his getaway position as the vendor was not too far away.

Taehyung engaged in a debate with himself: should he take the risk?

*To hell with it. There is no way I am letting the Lees get a single penny!*

While Taehyung attempted to loot the vendor's hard-earned money, Gyuri continued with her shrieks of discomfort that had escalated to unsightly rolling on the dirt floor. She clutched her stomach in pain and assumed the foetal position to further emphasise her phantom stomach ache.

"What could be wrong with her?" she heard someone ask.

"Might she have eaten something bad?" another one suggested.

"It must be the meat buns!" someone else shouted. "They must be expired!"

The huddle broke into murmurs of agreement which eventually led the vendor to speak. "Tis not my meat buns!' he proclaimed in a bid to defend himself. "This lass hadn't even bought any!"

"How can we believe you?" a woman questioned. "This young'un's rolling 'round the dirt right in front of your stall!"

"Yeah!" a group of others chanted in unison.

Gyuri peered from the ground and found that the vendor had grown beet red with anger. "Tis not my meat buns' fault!' he insisted crossly. With eyes burning with rage, the vendor gazed down at
Gyuri who was still pretending to be sick. "Tell 'em you, hussy! Tell 'em you ain't eaten any of my meat buns."

Gyuri resumed her groaning. "My stomach... it hurts..."

"You should take her to a physician!" the woman ordered the vendor. "You should take responsibility for her!"

"Yeah!"

"She's right!"

"You should get her treated!"

Gyuri groaned inwardly as she listened to the crowd berate the angry vendor who was still insisting that he was not to blame. She felt slightly guilty for causing a scene that could potentially impact his livelihood in the future.

That kid better be done now, she mumbled inwardly. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up before things get out of hand.

"Fine!" Gyuri heard the vendor shout. "I'll bring her to a physician."

Gyuri peeped at the vendor with one eye open and saw that he was displeased with how things had turned out. With subdued anger, the vendor stomped towards his cart, all the while grumbling under his breath.

"Are you okay, young miss?"

Gyuri opened her eyes and was speechless to see that it was an attractive young man. She was in disbelief at his ethereal semblance that was likened to a mystical elf: he was simply gorgeous. The strapping man, clad in what looked like military attire, crouched down to help her sit up.

"That salesman will bring you to a physician" he informed her, his voice soothing. "Do not fret. We will ensure that you get the proper treatment for food poisoning."

But just as a tongue-tied Gyuri was about to correct him, she was suddenly side-tracked by the jarring sound of the vendor's gruff voice.

Everyone turned to look at what had made him shriek and were startled to discover him brawling with a scrawny, young boy. Gyuri's face fell when she spotted Taehyung stuck in a deadlock with the vendor as they played tug-o'-war over a pouch.

What is that kid doing?

"Let go, you thief!" the vendor commanded. "How dare you try to steal from me!"

Taehyung grunted with effort as he refused to yield. When he saw that Gyuri was signalling for him to let go, he pulled just a little harder to incite the vendor to exert more effort.

"You want the money?" he grunted mockingly. "Fine, take it!"

All of a sudden, Taehyung let go of the pouch, causing the vendor to lose balance and tumble backwards. Taehyung sniggered as the vendor fell on his backside with a loud thump. But he couldn't revel at the vendor's misery for long as suddenly, he noticed movement from the corner of his eye.
Taehyung’s eyes rounded when he saw Gyuri charging towards him. In the blink of an eye, Gyuri hooked her arm around his neck bulldozing him and forcing him to run along with her.

"Let’s get out of here!” she screeched into his ear.

Not needing further encouragement, Taehyung obliged and the pair sprinted away, leaving a crowd of confused pedestrians and a disgruntled vendor, gaping after them.

~*~

"Wow!"

"You got so many, Tae!"

Gyuri watched as the two children clambered on top of Taehyung's rucksack which contained the fluffy meat buns. With their grubby hands, they reached in and took one in each hand, their eyes shining with glee.

Gulnar made expressive sounds of appreciation as he sunk his small teeth into the meat bun. He smiled happily, his cheeks puffed up as he munched enthusiastically. "It's delicious!” he exclaimed. "Thank you so much, Papa!"

Taehyung smiled at the little boy fondly. "Anything for you, Gulnar" and he ruffled his long curls.

"Where did you get them from?” Chun Chun asked in between bites of her meat bun.

Taehyung exchanged looks with Gyuri. "A kind man gave them to us" he lied. "Actually, we were able to get them thanks to Gyuri."

Gyuri arched her brow at him. But before she could reply, Chun Chun leapt up to her and gave her a surprise hug.

"Thank you so much, Gyuri!” she said with sincerity. "These meat buns will last Gulnar and me until next week.” She released Gyuri and licked her sticky fingers before reaching into the rucksack for another.

A small smile crept up Gyuri's lips as she watched Chun Chun and Gulnar eat their fill. When they had left them earlier, Gyuri saw a pair of starved children, picking at what was left of their overripe persimmons. The image of their sunken cheeks and bony bodies was what ultimately convinced Gyuri to comply with Taehyung’s plan. Now, seeing the pair happily eat made Gyuri realise that she had done well even though the means weren't exactly morally correct.

Seeing Gyuri watching the children eat, Taehyung went up to her. He offered her one of the meat buns. "I believe I owe you one."

Gyuri gave him a small smile as she accepted it. He sat down on the grass beside her as they both eyed the children together.

"You really care about them, huh?” she commented.

Taehyung hummed in agreement.

An awkward silence occurred as they ate their meat buns. Gyuri continued to stare at the children from afar and Taehyung did the same. After a while, Gyuri spoke again.

"Hey, can I ask you something?”
Taehyung turned to face her direction.

"These kids," Gyuri began. "Are they... yours?"

Taehyung almost choked on his meat bun. "W-what?" he spluttered. "No! Of course not!"

Gyuri nodded in acknowledgement.

"What made you think they were mine?"

Gyuri was thoughtful. "Well, Gulnar calls you 'Papa'."

Taehyung shook his head at her. "Gulnar calls me 'Papa' because he wants a father figure." He pointed at Chun Chun "but Chun Chun calls me 'Tae' because she knows better than her brother."

"Oh, so they're siblings?"

Taehyung affirmed, "Yes. I met them a year or so ago searching for food near the markets. I was just exploring at the time but seeing these orphans struggle every day for the measliest of scraps struck a chord in me and I decided to help."

"By stealing food?" Gyuri's tone sounded judging.

Taehyung rolled his eyes. "Can we move past that already?"

"Okay, okay" Gyuri surrendered. Her eyes crinkled as she added smilingly, "You're kinda like Robin Hood."

Taehyung was confused. "What is 'Robin Hood'?"

"Oh, right" she murmured. "Erm, let's just say he's like a hero. Someone who steals from the rich and gives his loot to the poor. It's kinda like what you're doing."

Taehyung grinned smugly. "I guess I am like a hero."

Gyuri nudged him playfully, "Don't get all cocky now. Even Robin Hood was still considered a criminal." She turned her attention to the kids again, "so they're orphans, huh? Do you know anything about their parents?"

"No" Taehyung murmured. "And I do not plan to ask. As far as they know, I am an orphan too."

"Why do you hide it from them?"

"Because they will treat me differently if they knew" he answered. "And I am not ready to reveal my identity yet. People always look at me differently when they find out my family name." Taehyung’s face darkened as he added solemnly, "It is all everyone can think about once they know."

Gyuri took note of Taehyung's abrupt change of demeanour. *I guess even he has secrets...* She murmured tentatively, "Can I ask something else?"

"Why do you request permission to ask something?" Taehyung responded with a hint of annoyance. "Just ask."

Gyuri frowned slightly as she proceeded. "Well, I've noticed that there aren't any ladies in the house. During tea, it was just you and your father and your brothers and your cousin."
At this Taehyung nodded. "And what of it?"

"Well... where are they?"

Taehyung hesitated to answer. But eventually, he said, "They are no longer alive."

Gyuri was taken aback. "Oh."

"Apart from my cousin, who is married to one of the Lees" Taehyung explained, "there are no other ladies in our branch of the family. My mother... and my brothers’ mothers... they all passed away before I can remember."

"Oh..." Gyuri said again. "I-I'm sorry for asking."

Taehyung smiled weakly. "What is there to apologise for? It is not like not discussing them will bring them back."

"No, I guess you're right." She looked above at the blue sky where not a cloud was in sight. "I guess we have something in common then."

At this Taehyung eyed her questioningly.

"Me too. I never got to meet my mother" she elaborated, to which Taehyung’s eyes softened.

"In some ways," he mumbled, "we are orphans as well: two individuals deprived of their mother’s affection..."

Gyuri agreed weakly. "Is that why you pretend to be an orphan? To give the children hope?"

Taehyung shrugged. "I am not really pretending, though am I? Even if I was born in a wealthy family, my situation is no better than the orphans—" Taehyung abruptly stopped as if he had said too much. Flustered, he coughed to clear his throat. "But enough about me. Tell me more about yourself."

Gyuri rubbed the back of her neck nervously. "There-there's not much to talk about..."

"Nonsense! Just now you spoke of your mother." His lip curled into a doubtful expression. "Actually, I find it quite peculiar that you were unable to declare your name when we met but just now, you remembered something about your mother..."

*Oh, crap! This kid's onto me!*

"Er, that's not true. I-I mean, I said I never got to meet my mother. That-that doesn't mean I remember something about her." Gyuri looked around wildly, "I'm-I'm an orphan!"

"But when Chun Chun asked earlier, you said you weren't..." Taehyung persisted, his eyes narrowed. "Gyuri," Taehyung’s voice was suspecting, "are you hiding something?"

"No!" she exclaimed rather too quickly. Not knowing what else to say, she blurted, "Stop trying to get something out of me, you—you— tosser!" And with those words, Gyuri unknowingly slapped Taehyung in the back, almost hurling him face-flat in the grass.

Taehyung grimaced at her strength. "Ouch! That hurt you stupid peasant!" She had hit him so hard that he suspected he would find a handprint outlined under his shirt.

Once Gyuri had collected herself, she apologised profusely. "But anyway," she began, keen to
recover the good ambience they had. "I gotta say that I kinda admire you for what you're doing."

"Huh?" Taehyung was immediately distracted by her surprising statement. "You? Admire me?"

"Yes," Gyuri begrudgingly admitted. Wow, this kid is so easily pleased. She observed how Taehyung's eyes had widened to the size of saucers with his lips slowly curling up into that smug but strangely cute smile. "You kinda surprised me" Gyuri added, just to sweeten him up. "You're a lot nicer than I gave credit for."

Taehyung hmphed triumphantly at hearing such words. "Well, you should not judge a book by its cover" he replied proudly and his smile widened into a box-like shape.

Gah, this kid's so full of himself, Gyuri thought, but she herself couldn't help returning his smile. "And I thought that Master Namjoon was the only nice one in the family."

Taehyung scoffed. "You are just saying that because you have an attachment to Cousin Namjoon."

He wiggled his brows suggestively as he continued, "Especially with your frisky conduct during tea."

Gyuri's cheeks reddened. "I don't have an attachment to him!" she objected, still blushing. "And that was your fault, you tripped me up!"

Taehyung merely stuck his tongue out playfully.

"Geez, there's no winning with you, is there? You're such a child."

Taehyung smirked as he responded, "But you admire this child."

"No, I don't" Gyuri denied huffily. "But while we're on this topic, how old are you anyway?"

Taehyung cocked his head. "This will be my twelfth summer."

Gyuri pursed her lips. "You're twelve?"

"Almost."

"Then that makes you younger than me!"

Taehyung blinked. "So?"

"So? Is that all you have to say for yourself? You should be treating me with respect—I'm your elder!"

Taehyung merely grunted. "You hardly act like my elder. You are just as childish as I am."

This Gyuri couldn't refute. Her behaviour for the past week had been equally as bad as Taehyung's — as much as she hated to admit it.

"It is too bad you had to have an attachment to Cousin Namjoon" Taehyung suddenly said. Gyuri peered at him and he continued, "he is quite the catch but it is unlikely that he will be interested in someone like you."

Gyuri spoke bitingly, "Well I don't care because I don't like him that way—"

"He is attracted to mature women" Taehyung interrupted.
Gyuri blinked.

"Stations do not matter to Cousin Namjoon" Taehyung divulged in a matter-of-fact tone. "He has a more peculiar taste. He is attracted to women much older than him and since he is older than you, I doubt he will ever see you as a love interest."

Gyuri was bewildered. "Why are you telling me this? It's not like I said I liked him."

"I was just informing you" Taehyung responded. "Because I am aware of how delusional the maids can be."

Gyuri noticed Taehyung pout. "Sounds to me you're kinda jealous that the maids like Master Namjoon a lot" Gyuri teased.

Taehyung frowned. "I am not jealous!" he protested. But Gyuri saw that he clearly was. "I adore my cousin. He is like a brother to me" and Taehyung mumbled, "he has been more of a brother to me than my actual brothers..." Gyuri watched as Taehyung fiddled with the blades of grass near his legs. "But I cannot comprehend why the maids favour him so much. I mean, I am equally as charming, am I not?"

Taehyung stared at Gyuri expectantly and she fumbled. "Yeah, sure. You're charming too, I guess."

Taehyung wasn't convinced. Gyuri thought he was going to question her lack of conviction when suddenly, he smiled at her. "But that does not matter anymore. Even if Cousin Namjoon has many admirers, I now have one of my own."

At this, Gyuri grew curious. "Who?"

Taehyung's smile was gentle. "You."

Gyuri was flustered. She averted her gaze as her heart suddenly skipped a beat. Damn, that was unexpected. Calm down, Subin! He's a kid for goodness sake!

She laughed awkwardly, "You're such a tease! I'm not your admirer."

"Yes, you are" Taehyung insisted. "You said so earlier."

"Yeah, I said that I admired you for what you are doing. But that doesn't mean I admire you... in that way."

Taehyung was confused. "I do not see the difference. Either way, you are still my admirer. If you admire my actions then you admire me also."

"No, there really is a difference" Gyuri contended. "And anyway, I can't admire you in that way." She said bluntly, "I don't go for kids."

Taehyung watched as she got up from beside him to join Chun Chun and Gulnar who were playing. From afar, he eyed her closely, taking note of her candid smile and quirky mannerisms.

"That is fine," he whispered under his breath, "because I am not going to be a child forever."

Chapter End Notes
Hi reader! Thanks for reading chapter 9 of The Brothers Kim.

'Tithe' = tax
The raging red embers engulfed the thatched houses, consuming the village in a blazing inferno. Grey smoke climbed to the inky sky, its smouldering fumes carried the suffocating scent of burning wood, gunpowder and decaying flesh.

Kim Hyesung watched in tranquillity as the village before him caved into chaos. The sound of distant screaming; the sight of the villagers fleeing and the taste of fear in the air surrounded Hyesung but, he remained unfazed. He felt nothing. Not even a sliver of remorse.

"Ye monster!" he heard a woman shout.

Hyesung peered down from the comfort of his stallion, his face still impassive.

"Ye will rot in hell! Damn ye!" she continued to scream hysterically as she struggled against the ropes which bound her to a wooden stake.

Hyesung remained motionless as his underlings buried the area around her feet with dry tinder, creating a mound ready for lighting. Hyesung watched as they worked mechanically, like him, they showed little emotion. And, so they should. For even the slightest sign of sympathy to the enemy would signal weakness. One, which could cost them their lives.

"Are you sure about this, brother?"

It was only when he heard his younger brother speak did Hyesung allow his mask to slip off. He turned to the youngest of the Kims who looked on at his elder with the most apparent concern.

"It must be done, Hosam" Hyesung murmured solemnly. "They are the enemy."

"But they are innocent people!" he replied pleadingly. "Surely they need not perish—?"

"No," Hyesung replied sternly. "We cannot let anyone of influence live." He looked down at the glaring woman in front of him, "especially her."

The woman screeched at him contemptuously, "This is not the end! Ye will not succeed in ye’s campaign!"

Hyesung looked on as his henchmen completed piling up the kindling. "At your signal, My Lord" he heard one of his men say. He was carrying a glowing torch.

Seeing the torch-wielding man, Hyesung noticed a flash of fear reflect on the hysterical woman’s eyes. It was only briefly but, the corners of Hyesung’s mouth twitched into a smile: he enjoyed seeing the terror in his enemies’ eyes.

"Any last words, Oracle?" Hyesung jeered mockingly.

The woman held her breath as she watched the man lower the torch towards the pile of dry wood beneath her feet. Soon, she will be consumed by the hot flames like her kinsmen. But despite her fears, the woman regained composure and managed to speak coherently. She snarled at Hyesung and the other men that had gathered around her stake to watch. To them, she was just a delirious
woman; a desperate villager; a fake shaman.

Oh, how they were all wrong.

The woman let out an ominous cackle that sent chills down the spines of all the men present. "Hear this, Kim Hyesung," she sneered. "I need not place a curse upon ye for ye have already tied ye's fate when ye began this barbaric task." She smiled malevolently. "I will give ye the gift of knowing ye's future."

Hyesung scoffed at her remark. "My future?"

"Aye," she affirmed. "Mark my words, the House of Kim will crumble. All of what ye dreamed of will collapse. Ye's efforts are futile."

Hyesung, not feeling at all threatened, waved his hand dismissively. "Burn her."

At his command, the footman dropped the torch.

The woman watched in horror as the dry wood came alight with the flames rapidly growing. She edged herself closer to the pole as if she could escape the flames that were licking at her feet.

"Ye will fail!" she screamed desperately. "The Kims will fail!" she eyed Hyesung and seeing his blasé countenance further enraged her. She shouted exasperatingly, "A daughter!"

At this, Hyesung was intrigued.

Amidst the crackling of the burning wood and plumes of smoke, the woman's cries were barely audible. "The house of Kim will be brought down by ye's own daughter" Hyesung managed to hear the woman screech."A daughter of Kim will unravel and thwart all that ye have worked hard for. Mark my words, Kim Hyesung!"

~*~

The sound of the door sliding open disturbed Hyesung from his reverie.

"Father?"

Hyesung turned away from the window to see that Minseok had finally arrived.

"Ah, Minseok, there you are." He beckoned for his eldest to join him at his desk, where a mountain of scrolls was messily pushed to one side.

"You called for me?" Minseok queried as he crossed his legs to sit down on the cushion opposite his father. Spotting the bottle of soju and the two cups nearby, Minseok took it upon himself to pour a cup and offer it to him.

"Yes, I want to speak to you" Hyesung answered as he accepted the cup gladly. "How are the preparations for the ceremony?"

Once Minseok had finished pouring himself a cup, he replied, "Everything is going smoothly. The wedding will go through as planned."

Hyesung gave an acknowledging nod. "Good." He took a long sip before saying with satisfaction, "Our family is one step closer to the throne."

Minseok hovered his cup before his lips. "I am marrying the Princess for love rather than political
"So, you say." Hyesung murmured as he eyed his son steadily. "But I hope you have not forgotten the true reason behind this arrangement."

"No," Minseok responded with thinned lips. "I have not."

Hyesung's eyes formed into half-moons as he stroked his wispy beard. "You are my heir apparent, Minseok. One day you will stand to inherit all that I have worked hard to build for the last twenty-five years." Suddenly, Hyesung heard an ominous cackling ringing in his ears and he shuddered. He pushed the memory away into the deep recesses of his mind. "You must ensure that our legacy withstands the test of time."

Minseok was pensive. "I know, Father. I understand what I must do and what is at stake."

Hyesung met eyes with Minseok and saw the determination in them. "Alright." He took a long sip of his soju before continuing, "Have you heard any news of the new emperor yet?"

"Only whispers amongst the men in court" Minseok responded. "It seems that his arrival is only known by the elders of the Park family. Even the Princess does not know."

Hyesung hummed uncertainly. "The Parks are taking great care not to reveal his identity even now." He scoffed, "they do not even reveal it to us, their allies. Did we give any reason for them to doubt our loyalty?"

"It is most probable that they are just being cautious, Father" Minseok interjected. "He is the only male heir, after all."

"Still," Hyesung deliberated. "These are worrying times. Just as our great kingdom is going through times of strife, our emperor had to suddenly pass away." Hyesung shook his head glumly, "It surely reminds one of their mortality" and with that Hyesung glanced down at his gnarly palm.

"Father, you must not speak that way. You still have a lifetime ahead of you."

"Ah, but only a foolish man would jest that he will live longer than what he is due. Park Jisoon was such a man. As emperor, he promised to rule for thirty years. In the end, he fell short by five."

Minseok agreed solemnly. "He was a great man. And it is not only my, but everyone else's, hope that the new emperor will be just as inspiring as the late emperor."

"Indeed" Hyesung murmured. "Pray that he is."

The two men fell silent as they both took long sips of soju.

Minseok finished his first and was about to speak when he was abruptly interrupted by someone at the door.

"Father?"

Minseok looked behind him and then glanced back at the old man. He saw Hyesung's lips curl into a frown when he recognised whose voice it was.

"Shall I tell him to come in?" Minseok asked cautiously.

Hyesung gave him a reproachful look but eventually, he nodded.
Minseok faced the door again and called for Junmyeon to enter.

In a few moments, Junmyeon appeared through the door, his robes immaculately pristine and his hair, neatly bound. He briefly met eyes with Minseok before glancing up at his father. Seeing the coldness in his eyes, he lost his nerve and averted his gaze. He decided to look down at the floor instead.

"Greetings, Father" Junmyeon murmured politely while bowing to him.

Hyesung remained silent as he watched his third son.

"And greetings to you too, brother" he added, turning to Minseok.

Minseok bowed in return before asking, "What brings you here, Junmyeon?"

Junmyeon was caught off guard at the sudden question but then quickly composed himself. He snuck a glance at Hyesung before answering, "I came to inform Father that I have been accepted for a position in court.

"Really?" Minseok's tone was jubilant. "That is excellent news, brother!"

The corners of Junmyeon's mouth stretched into a small smile at his brother's reaction. He peeked at his father to see if he shared his enthusiasm. To his discouragement, Hyesung's visage remained unfazed.

"Is that all?" Hyesung grunted.

Junmyeon's eyes flickered. His father's unfeeling words were as icy as his stare. "Ye-yes" Junmyeon muttered. "I-I apologise for disturbing you..."

"Show yourself out" Hyesung uttered coldly and Junmyeon retreated backwards. With a hurt gait, he exited the room not daring to look back.

Once Junmyeon was out of earshot, Minseok sighed at his father.

"Not a word, Minseok" he warned.

"But Father—"

"Not a word" he spoke firmly. "No matter what you say, I cannot accept him."

Minseok looked away sadly. "As you wish, Father. As you wish."

~*~

"And where is he now?" Namjoon questioned as he carelessly glanced over a few scrolls that the tutor had left open.

The elderly man sighed despondently as he continued to tidy things away in his classroom. "I have not the faintest clue. The Young Master has not been attending his lessons for the last couple of days and in truth, Master Namjoon, I am at my tether with him."

Namjoon chuckled at the elder's ramblings.

"It is not a laughing matter, Master Namjoon! That child is beyond help. Why, one time, I caught him spiking my tea with ink." He bared his teeth to reveal his blackened dentures. "It is taking weeks
Namjoon's eyes widened with amusement. He replied, "Taehyung is not a bad child, Tutor Wentai. He is just—"

"Undisciplined?"

"Yes, I guess that is the right word for it" Namjoon eyed another set of scrolls that referred to the human anatomy. "He is just going through a phase. You know what boys are like. He will grow out of it soon."

The elderly man hummed doubtfully as he finished putting away the scrolls that he had been using earlier that day. "If only the Young Master could be like Master Jongin, such a model student."

Again, Namjoon chuckled. "Tutor Wentai, not everyone can be as bright as Cousin Jongin."

The tutor agreed. "Indeed. Well, there still might be some hope left for the Young Master. After all, if I recall correctly, you were quite the trickster when you were his age."

"Not this again" Namjoon muttered under his breath.

"Why, when you were a lad," the tutor reminisced, "you used to pull tricks as ingenious as the Young Master."

"That was a long time ago," Namjoon whined while rolling his eyes, "I have matured since then."

"Exactly!" the tutor exclaimed. "But this profound change in your character was not realised until much later. Even in your teens, you were a carefree person." The tutor continued to amble around the classroom as he stacked away scroll after scroll, "You used to always sneak out of the household to paint and do all sorts."

Namjoon rubbed the back of his neck. "Yes, I did use to do that..."

"Perhaps," the tutor suggested while inspecting a piece of paper in his hand. "You became more mature after entering the military. Maybe, the Young Master should do the same when he is of age."

At this, Namjoon was quiet as he contemplated the elder's words. He was indeed right that that time of his life was when his outlook on life had changed. Joining the military had worked for him: it had made him more aware, more thoughtful and most of all, more disciplined. Could the same be done for Taehyung?

Namjoon thought about this as he busied himself with eyeing the opened scrolls. He still couldn't find what he was searching for. "I wish there was some sort of way to keep all these scrolls in order," he said to himself.

The elder snickered. "That is what I say to myself every day. Be grateful that the medical journals you are searching for are kept in here rather than the old library: that place is a labyrinth."

"Tell me about it" Namjoon agreed. "I wish uncle would hire someone to organise it—" Namjoon suddenly stopped midway his sentence as he came across something that caught his eye.

The tutor approached Namjoon to see what had made him speechless. "Ah, do you remember this?"

Namjoon nodded as he continued to gape at the painting of a magnolia tree. Its delicate hues of pinks and greens gave off a mystifying and surreal ambience despite its life-like resemblance. Something
within Namjoon stirred as his eyes took in the beauty of the artwork.

"Yes," Namjoon managed to reply, his voice somewhat breathless. "I painted this a long time ago."

The tutor nodded, "That is right. You gifted it to me when you finished your studies."

Namjoon's eyes traced the brush strokes of the painted branches, his mind subconsciously recollecting the flicks of the hand as if he was holding an invisible paint brush like it was an extension of his body. It had been so long since he last painted anything yet his body tingled at the memory. Suddenly, his trail of thought wandered into an area of his memory that he didn't want to touch. Memories of her long ebony hair, her bright smile and her silvery voice resurfaced, triggering both fond and painful thoughts that made his heart ache. He looked away.

"I-I should- I should probably go" Namjoon mumbled as he hastily covered the painting up with the scrolls again.

Tutor Wentai eyed him understandingly. "Yes, it is getting late. You are off to the sanatorium again?"

"Yes- yes, I am" he replied, still slightly perturbed.

The tutor stared at him intently and wondered if he should pry. Instead, he said, "Well, if you happen to come across the Young Master, please remind him that he has homework to turn in."

"Right, of course" Namjoon murmured. He turned at his heel and hurriedly paced towards the door.

"Oh, but before you go," the tutor called, "I have found the medical journal you were looking for."

Namjoon halted at his step and doubled back to the tutor. He handed him a large scroll. Namjoon opened it eagerly and beamed when he saw that it was indeed what he had been searching for: it was a scroll on reviving techniques.

"Thank you, Tutor Wentai. I will make sure to return it to you once I have finished with it."

The elder smiled as he watched Namjoon leave the classroom with a relatively cheerful appearance compared to the one he was exhibiting earlier. Once he was gone, Tutor Wentai turned his attention to the piece of art that was buried underneath several scrolls. He sighed pityingly as he glanced down at the beautiful painting.

"That poor boy" he whispered to himself. "I hope that he too will grow out of it." He breathed out heavily once more, "It is time that he moved on from loving her."

Chapter End Notes

Hey reader, thanks for reading chapter 10 of The Brothers Kim.
You're so Gullible!

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mayu was humming faintly along to a jolly tune when she was abruptly interrupted by the sound of scurrying footsteps and the appearance of a skittish Gyuri.

"Gyuri, is something the ma—?"

"Shh!" she hissed hurriedly as she rushed to hide behind one of the large clay pots in the corner.

Baffled by her conduct, Mayu wanted to question her further when she suddenly heard Taehyung's voice call Gyuri's name. In a few moments, Taehyung appeared.

"Hello, Mayu" he greeted distractedly as he peered into the pantry.

Mayu bowed. "Good afternoon, Young Master. Do you need something?"

Taehyung continued to crane his neck but stopped when he didn't find what he was looking for. "No, I am just searching for Gyuri. Did you happen to see her? I thought I saw her run past here a moment ago."

Mayu turned to look behind her where the clay pots were. She shifted her gaze back to Taehyung as she answered brazenly, "No, I'm afraid I didn't see her."

"Oh. Is that so?"

"Yes," Mayu lied through her teeth. "Is there something you want to tell her? I can pass a message to her if it pleases you."

Taehyung had his lips pursed. "That will not be necessary. But if you do find her, please tell her I wish to speak to her." He surveyed the pantry once more before leaving.

Mayu let out a sigh of relief once Taehyung was out of earshot. Lying had never been her forte but she was glad that she was able to pull it off. As she deliberated whether it was a mistake to lie to the Young Master, the sound of faint rustling suddenly caught her attention. She turned and found that Gyuri had emerged from her hiding place.

"Thank you so much!" Gyuri said gratefully.

Mayu smiled. "No worries." Although, she couldn't help sweating as she mulled over her lie. "Why were you running away from the Young Master?"

Gyuri frowned. "It's because he's been sticking to me like chewing gum lately."

"Chewing gum?" Mayu repeated, befuddled.

"Er..." Gyuri fumbled to explain, "I-er, I mean glue. The Young Master has been sticking to me like glue."

Mayu nodded understandably. For the past couple of days, she had noticed how the Young Master's demeanour towards Gyuri had changed significantly. Before, Taehyung and Gyuri were like oil and water: they didn't get along. Watching the pair was like a source of entertainment for the maids as the
pair would always have covert showdowns. However, nowadays, Taehyung and Gyuri were like two peas in a pod. And no one could understand where Taehyung's sudden change of behaviour had come from.

It was a mystery to them all.

Mayu pondered over what she had witnessed over the past few days and said without thinking, "Maybe... the Young Master likes you?"

"W-what?" Gyuri snapped to attention. "No way! How can you say such a thing?"

"Well, how else can you explain why he's been acting so warm towards you?" Mayu replied thoughtfully. "He's been requesting your presence very often."

"He's just making my life harder" Gyuri huffed. "Why, last time, he made me clean his room twice! And because I didn't finish my tasks set out by Madam Zhou, I had to miss out on dinner."

"Yes," Mayu thought aloud. "I do remember that happening."

"And what's worse" Gyuri continued, "do you know what he calls me?"

Mayu tilted her head as she looked at her questioningly. "What?"

Gyuri pulled a face that mimicked Taehyung's cheeky box-like smile, "Hey, ugly Gyuri."

Mayu stifled a laugh.

"It's not funny, Mayu!" Gyuri whined. "He's making my life a living hell."

Mayu continued to giggle. "You're exaggerating, Gyuri. I think this is just how the Young Master shows affection. He's never requested a maid as often as you." She looked up at the ceiling in thought. "Kind of think of it, I don't think he even asks for Kalyani as often as he asks for you..."

Gyuri rolled her eyes as she groaned. "Don't remind me," she pouted. "Kalyani hates me now, doesn't she?"

Mayu fumbled with the vegetables in front of her. "No... she doesn't."

But Gyuri could tell that Mayu was lying. She knew that Mayu wasn't the type to lie with a straight face twice. "That's not true though, is it?"

Mayu shuffled uncomfortably.

"It's okay. I could tell by the way she's been acting that she's livid."

"Please understand. Kalyani is the Young Master's personal maid so for him to request you instead of her is a bit..." she looked at her uncertainly.

"I know" Gyuri admitted. "It doesn't make me look good at all." Gyuri sighed heavily to signal her weariness. She stared at Mayu with envy as she pondered over their difference in situation. "What is it like working for Master Namjoon?"

Mayu blushed slightly as she fumbled. "He's-he's very polite" she mumbled shyly. "And very attentive too. In fact," she said, her voice seemingly rising in pitch, "he doesn't treat you at all like a servant. He treats you like an equal like-like you're a lady."
Gyuri tried to hide her smile as she observed Mayu's love-struck expression. *What do you know*, she thought inwardly, *Mayu's part of the Master Namjoon fan club."

"Actually," Mayu continued to speak with her eyes brimming with adoration. "Master Namjoon was the reason why I was able to get this job. It was because of him that I am able to support my family now."

"He really is a swell guy, huh?" Gyuri murmured amusedly.

Mayu couldn't agree more.

Suddenly, a face appeared from behind the door which made Gyuri freeze. Mayu looked over her shoulder and her jaw dropped from the shock. "Young Master!"

Taehyung stood still as he loured at the two maids.

Gyuri's voice was squeaky. "Young Master," she said, "I didn't see you there—"

"Why have you been hiding from me?" he interrupted angrily.

"I-I haven't been hiding from you—"

Taehyung took a step forward and darted a look at Mayu who immediately left the pantry. Once they were alone, Taehyung resumed, "You have been avoiding me."

Gyuri let out a sound of disbelief, "No, I haven't!"

Taehyung gaped at her dubiously. "I do not understand" Taehyung murmured. "Have I done something for you to avoid me?"

Gyuri shuffled on her feet. It was clear to her that Taehyung won't stop bothering her unless she confronted him squarely. "Yes," she bravely declared. "You won't stop badgering me."

"Huh?"

Gyuri's lips thinned as she inspected Taehyung's puzzled expression. "You've forgotten your promise, haven't you?"

"What promise?"

"We agreed," she said, trying to keep her frustration at bay, "that you would ignore me if I helped you out with the orphans."

Taehyung’s eyes suddenly showed a glimmer of recollection.

"Does that jog your memory?" Gyuri taunted, her arms folded over her chest. She observed as Taehyung nodded slowly.

"I apologise" he weakly murmured, "but I cannot fulfil our promise."

"Figures," Gyuri uttered while rolling her eyes. "You've been doing the exact opposite."

Taehyung ignored her sassy remark. "I cannot fulfil our promise because I have another to fulfil." He pulled something out of his pocket and offered it to her. "It is from the orphans" he explained. "They made it for you."
"Really?" she accepted the item in Taehyung's hand. It was some sort of bracelet made from twisted threads of coloured cloth. "They really made this for me?" she was surprised that the orphans had thought of her at all. It had been a while since she had last seen them. She gazed at the twisted cloth with admiration. Even though it was made of a grubby material, she couldn't help adoring it like it was the most precious gold.

"They keep asking for you" Taehyung added. "They keep begging for me to bring you again."

Gyuri smiled weakly as she continued to eye the bracelet as she put it on her left arm. She teased, "It seems they've grown very attached to someone other than you."

Taehyung couldn't help smiling at her playful reaction. "Will you come?" he questioned. "I do not think that I can keep avoiding their pleas for much longer."

"Sure, I'll go" Gyuri consented, which surprised Taehyung. He didn't think that she would comply so easily. "But on one condition."

"What? You want something in return?"

Gyuri had an intelligent glint in her eye. "Of course, I do."

He looked at her sceptically. "What is it?"

"We're not gonna steal ever again" she replied firmly. "I don't care about your personal vendetta against the Lees. If you want me to come with you, you can't steal."

"But how else am I going to procure food for the orphans?"

Gyuri waved her hand around the pantry as if to showcase it.

"Seriously?" he asked, bemused.

"Yep," Gyuri's tone was perky. "I just don't want what happened last time to happen again..."

"But nothing bad happened last time. Sure, we were almost caught but we managed to get away."

"I wasn't talking about that" she mumbled under her breath.

"Pardon? Did you say something?"

"No," Gyuri answered hastily. "So, do we have a deal? I'll go with you as long as there is no stealing involved."

Taehyung was hesitant. He focused his gaze on Gyuri's unshifting stare as if they were engaging in a staring contest. Eventually, he backed down and agreed. "Fine" he conceded. "We have a deal."

~*~

Namjoon studied the scroll in his hands enthusiastically like a young child would with its new toy. His eyes sparkled with fascination while his head bobbed up and down in agreement as he absorbed in every word.

"I see..." he mumbled to himself. "So, if one compresses the chest area multiple times, it will increase the chances of the patient living by much more..." He stared out the window in thought. "If only I could go and see it in practice, I would be able to understand it more."
Namjoon carefully tidied the scroll away as he prepared to go to the sanatorium. It was the only place he could go where he felt like he was doing a world of good, even though it was also the place that reminded him of her the most. He shook his head violently as he tried to banish such melancholy thoughts. Seeing his paintings again had rattled him a lot more than he anticipated.

Eager to shift his mind to something else, he glanced out the window again and was glad to find a distraction. Outside, Gyuri and Taehyung were walking alongside each other, probably making their way towards the gate. Namjoon watched them with little interest until he suddenly remembered what one of his men had reported about Taehyung last time: he had managed to slip away multiple times even under a strict watch.

Namjoon pinched his nose bridge and sighed. "When will he ever learn?"

He already suspected that Taehyung was up to no good again by sneaking out to the village without proper security. He stared at the young pair and noticed how they were talking quite animatedly. This piqued his interest. When did Taehyung and Gyuri get so close?

"I guess I can make one stop before the sanatorium," he thought aloud. "I better make sure this rascal does not get into any trouble."

~*~

The sun shone down brightly, making Gyuri wince as she shielded her eyes. Why's it sooo hot? She whinged internally. And so sunny too. I can't believe I miss the drab British weather.

Taehyung looked at her as he carried the bundle of food in his arms. "I hope the orphans like this," he said to himself more than to her. "I promised them I would get them more delicious food."

"They'll like it" Gyuri replied. She turned to his direction and noticed him struggling with the large basket. "You need help?"

Taehyung was defiant, "No, I can manage."

But Gyuri noticed his arms quivering because of the weight. That stubborn kid, she thought to herself. Unable to resist helping him, she snatched the basket from his arms before he could object. Gyuri heard him gasp in relief and she smirked.

"Geez, you need to work on your arms. You're so weak."

Taehyung glared at her. "I am not weak!"

They continued strolling down the market streets as they made their way to the field. It was a busy day as usual and Taehyung was used to making the journey to the orphans alone but, for some reason, having Gyuri with him made the journey feel different. Sneakily, he peered up at her and watched her scrunch her face in mild annoyance as she squinted at the path ahead. Taehyung hid his grin. For some odd reason, he was in a good mood.

"Isn't the guy meant to be carrying the stuff?" Gyuri queried haughtily. "It feels like I'm the guy here."

"It was you who snatched it off me."

Gyuri shrugged. "That's because I pitied you."

Taehyung arched his brow.
"I felt like I was taking advantage of a weak kid."

"For the last time, I am not weak" he retorted saucily. "And anyway, carrying baskets are for women."

Gyuri let out a shriek of laughter.

"What is so funny?"

"You can't even carry a basket so doesn't that mean you're weaker than the average woman?"

Taehyung pursed his lips as he realised his mistake. "Girls are stupid" he grumbled when he saw Gyuri snickering. "You know what, why do they even exist?"

Gyuri stopped her giggling and gaped at Taehyung. Was he asking a rhetorical question? When she voiced this out to him, he replied, "No, I really do not see their purpose in this world. Girls are stupid and useless and..." he glared at her, "annoying."

"You're being unreasonable" Gyuri dismissively countered. "If it weren't for women," she said matter-of-factly, "you wouldn't even be here."

"What do you mean?"

"You know..."

But Taehyung just stared blankly at her.

Gyuri stopped at her tracks. "Wait... you don't?" she asked, her eyes widening in surprise. "You don't know?"

Taehyung continued to gape at her like deer fixated on headlights.

"Well, this is, er, awkward." She scratched her head and darted her eyes in every direction apart from his. "No one told you about..." she paused as she chose her words carefully, "the birds and the bees?"

Taehyung continued to look at her, baffled. "What is that?"

Oh, boy...

Gyuri smiled impishly as she suddenly saw an opportunity to mess with him. "Tell me, how do you think babies are made?"

Taehyung was taken aback by the sudden question. "Er..." he thought for a while before answering, "Cousin Namjoon said that children are made when a man and a woman 'spend the night together'." He shrugged as he added, "whatever that means."

Oh, this innocent child!

Gyuri tried to keep her face straight. "Well, just so you know, a baby is made because of this."

Taehyung watched Gyuri point to her lips and was startled when she suddenly leaned in so that their faces were only inches apart. She grinned at him mischievously as she whispered, "Babies are made through kisses."

As Gyuri said those words, Taehyung inadvertently sneaked a glance at her lips. They were slightly
parted and they were plump, pink and kissable. He gulped.

"And do you wanna know something else?"

Taehyung's eyes met hers.

She dropped her voice even lower as if she was revealing a sacred secret. "It's the men who give birth to children."

"W-what?"

She pulled away and nodded insistently. "It's true. Their stomachs swell up and the baby lives in their stomach for nine months."

"That is a lie!"

"Oh, but is it?" she asked. "Have you ever wondered why your father or your brothers have never mentioned it to you?"

Taehyung bit his lip as he pondered over Gyuri's words. The truth was, he had no idea why none of his family had mentioned it to him. Perhaps because it was such a sensitive topic? And because he had no idea, he didn't know whether to trust Gyuri. Either way, the possibility of accidentally bearing children because of a shared kiss, scared him. He should protect his lips at all cost... just in case.

"No," he murmured in reply. "And I do not wish to know any more." He briskly raced ahead of her while covering his mouth with his hand. "The orphans are waiting for us," he mentioned, his voice muffled. "Let us hurry."

Gyuri chuckled, pleased that she had succeeded in fooling him.

Oh, Kim Taehyung. You're so gullible!

~*~

When Taehyung and Gyuri arrived at the field, they were immediately greeted by the orphans, who were eagerly awaiting their arrival.

Gyuri was surprised when the orphans ran up to her and gave her a big hug, their big brown eyes glittering with excitement. Gulnar was exceptionally thrilled when he spotted the twisted fabric around Gyuri's left arm.

"Chun Chun!" he called for his sister. "She's wearing it! She's wearing it!" he pointed to Gyuri's arm happily as he continued to bounce up and down with unrestrained glee.

Seeing what his little brother was gesturing at, Chun Chun too, demonstrated her enthusiasm. "Do you like it, Gyuri? Gulnar and I worked hard to make it for you."

"It's beautiful" Gyuri replied warmly as she proudly showed off her ragged bracelet. "I like it a lot."

Feeling slightly left out, Taehyung gestured at the basket as he spoke, "We brought you some bread today."

Immediately, the orphans turned to the contents of the basket and their attention was fully diverted. They ate hungrily, their small, grubby arms reaching in for the flat pieces of bread which ultimately led to the sound of smacking lips and ravenous munching. It was like the orphans were always permanently hungry.
Once they were finished, Gulnar approached Gyuri which surprised Taehyung. Normally, Gulnar would approach Taehyung first.

"Gyuri," he said sweetly.

"Yeah?"

He looked up at her shyly as he asked, "Can you be my Mama?"

Gyuri’s heart almost exploded from the cuteness.

"Gulnar!” Taehyung shouted, slightly embarrassed. "What did I tell you? Gyuri is not your Mama."

"But why not, Papa?" Gulnar innocently questioned. "She's already accepted the family bracelet!"

He pointed to the twisted cloth Gyuri was wearing and then pulled his sleeve up. He revealed that he too was wearing something similar. "Chun Chun and I are wearing one too!"

Chun Chun grinned as she pulled her sleeve up to reveal a bracelet as well.

Taehyung inspected the ragged bracelets and commented, "So you made Gyuri one but not me?" He tried to hide it but he was slightly wounded that the orphans had taken a greater liking to Gyuri than to him.

Noticing his dejected expression, Chun Chun interjected, "That's not true, Tae." She quickly scavenged through what little belongings they had and was glad to find what she was looking for. She grinned as she revealed what it was.

"What is that?" Taehyung murmured.

Gulnar's eyes brightened when he saw what his sister was holding. "Chun Chun, is that—?"

"Yep. It sure is." She unravelled what she was holding and Taehyung and Gyuri discovered that it was a red string.

Gulnar suddenly grabbed hold of Gyuri's hand and pulled her closer to Taehyung, whose hand he also took hold of. He smiled up at them both while stretching their hands out in front of them so that Chun Chun had better access to their palms.

With the tip of her tongue sticking out, Chun Chun worked fastidiously, concentrating her efforts as she tied one end of the string around Gyuri's pinkie finger and the other, around Taehyung's.

"There!" she exclaimed once she was done.

Gulnar squealed in delight.

Taehyung and Gyuri exchanged curious looks as both glanced down at their hands that were connected through a red string.

"Chun Chun," Taehyung began. "What is this?"

"It's a red string," she replied enthusiastically. "The red string of fate!"

"Now, Papa and Mama are... married!" Gulnar squealed delightedly. "We can be a family now!"

"What?!" the pair shouted in unison.
"This is our gift to you, Tae" Chun Chun said with a wily smile. "Now, you have somebody to rely on." She pointed to both ends of the string. "They say that those who are bound by the red string are destined to be together regardless of time, place or even circumstance. The red string can get tangled, it can stretch for miles but it will never break. Because at the end of that string is someone you are fated to be with regardless of what obstacles may come."

She peered up at them both with a toothy grin as she joined their palms together so that they were holding hands. "And that's our hope for you, Tae and Gyuri. We hope that you will always be together— no matter what."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 11 of The Brothers Kim.

I hope you enjoyed today's chapter. Please stick around for what will happen next...
When Subin was eleven, she came across an anime called ’Noragami’. Yoongi, her brother, had been watching it on his computer while supposedly studying for his A-levels. She was young back then and she remembered being obsessed over loom bands so she didn't pay much attention to animes or K-dramas or anything Asian for that matter. But when she did start paying more attention to ’Noragami’, she managed to learn something about the red string of fate.

"Yoongi,，“ she remembered herself saying. "Does everyone have a red string connected to them?’"

Her brother briefly tore his eyes away from the computer screen. "Er, I guess so. But it's more of a metaphorical saying."

Subin glanced around her body. "I don't see a red string connected to me at all."

"Idiot," her brother said while rolling his eyes. "Didn't I just say it's a metaphorical saying?"

"Yeah, but what's that?"

Yoongi sighed irritably. "It's a figure of speech. Meaning, don't take the saying literally." He frowned at her when he noticed her blank expression. "The red string of fate is invisible to the human eye. Only people with superpowers can see it."

Subin, naïve as she was, questioned further. "So, you mean only God can see it?" she pointed to his computer screen. "Like Yato?"

Keen to get his younger sister off his case, he agreed. "Yeah, yeah, just like Yato."

Subin was thoughtful as she looked down at her hand.

The concept of her being destined to be with someone because of an invisible red string was quite hard to grasp but nevertheless, very exciting. Growing up in London, she had watched all the Disney films and was exposed to all the fairy tales but, she couldn't help feeling that none of those things applied to someone like her. For one thing, all the Disney princesses were Caucasian. She, on the other hand, was Asian. And the only princesses she could somewhat relate to was Princess Jasmine and Mulan— and Mulan wasn't even a princess. If Subin was ever going to meet her true love, it was probably going to be through the red string of fate, not some glass slipper.

Yoongi resumed watching the anime and Subin did too. But even though Subin looked like she was paying attention, her mind was elsewhere. Thoughts of the red string of fate filled her head. Most of which were questions she was dying to know the answers to. For instance, what could the person she's destined to be with look like? How old was he? Was he taller than her? Was he Asian too? But most importantly...

When will they meet?

~*~

Gyuri and Taehyung stared down at their joined hands that was also connected by a red string.
Even though Gyuri knew she should be thinking about other things, she couldn't help noticing how Taehyung's hand was almost as big as hers. She glanced upwards and meeting Taehyung's crescent eyes by accident, she finally remembered who he was, who _she_ was and where they currently were.

She snatched her hand immediately.

"Ew, no!" she blurted as she wiped her hand against her skirt. "I can't marry him!"

Taehyung scoffed as he untied the knot on his finger. "I should be the one saying that! Who would want to marry an _ugly_ girl like you?"

Gyuri glared at him and he glared back. Gulnar and Chun Chun watched as the pair engaged in a childish stare down completely disregarding what the red string symbolised.

"So, we can't be a family then?" Gulnar's sweet voice interrupted Gyuri and Taehyung's feud, forcing the pair to look at the young child.

Gyuri's eyes softened. "Oh, Gulnar" she cooed as she crouched down to meet his eye level. "We can still be a family but I just can't be..." she darted a look at Taehyung, "I just can't be married to _him_.

"But he's our Papa" Gulnar protested.

"I know but—"

"We are just friends" Taehyung interrupted, cutting Gyuri off. She turned to him questioningly as he proceeded, "Gulnar, you have to understand that you cannot get what you want just because you will it." He eyed the child sternly as he added, "It is uncomfortable for both Gyuri and me to be forced into an arrangement like this without our consent."

Taehyung's tone must have sounded aggressive to Gulnar because suddenly, his face scrunched up and tears started to fall.

"Gulnar, don't cry" Gyuri murmured in a soothing voice as she captured him in a hug. Gulnar took big gulps of breath as he hiccupped and sobbed at the same time. "There, there" she continued to comfort him.

"I'm sorry for the trouble" Chun Chun said guiltily, her eyes refusing to leave the floor. "All we wanted is for you two to stay together."

"But why would you wish for something like that?" Taehyung asked softly, taking note that the young lass looked like she was about to burst into tears too.

Chun Chun peered up at him as she replied, "Because we don't want you to be lonely anymore, Tae."

Hearing this, Taehyung was lost for words.

"Gulnar and I..." Chun Chun began, "we have each other. But you, when you're not with us, you're all alone."

"We just wanted someone to take care of you too" Gulnar managed to say in between sniffles. He pushed himself away from Gyuri's embrace so that he could face her, "And we like you, Gyuri. So, of course, we want you to have someone to take care of you as well."

Gyuri smiled at the boy's tear-stained face, a warm and fuzzy feeling overwhelming her. "Don't
worry," she reassured him. "I'll take care of your Papa for you." She shifted her gaze to Taehyung who was baffled by her statement. "I'll take care of him because your Papa is still a kid too."

Taehyung was about to argue with her but Gulnar beat him to it. "Papa isn't a kid!" he objected but he didn't stay fussled for long as he registered Gyuri's words. He squealed happily, "So... does this mean you'll be our Mama?"

Again, Gyuri gaped at Taehyung who was eyeing her questioningly. She faced Gulnar again, "Yes," she replied. "I'll be your Mama."

Gulnar and Chun Chun couldn't contain their excitement.

"But that doesn't mean I'm married to him" Gyuri clarified, pointing to Taehyung. "I'll be your Mama but not his..." she snuck a look at Taehyung as she hesitantly continued, "his wife."

"That's fine!" Chun Chun agreed almost immediately. She jumped into Gyuri's arms and hugged her and soon, Gulnar was hugging her again too.

Taehyung stood staring at the trio from afar, unsure of what he should do. So, Gyuri was going to agree in the end? What was the point of him scolding Gulnar if she was going to say 'yes' anyway?

Gyuri, sensing Taehyung's troubled expression, whispered into the orphans' ears. "I think your Papa is feeling a little down. Why don't you go and cheer him up?"

The orphans eventually let her go and rushed up to Taehyung's arms, overwhelming him with a surprise hug that led him tumbling down on the grass. Gyuri eyed the orphans fondly as they squealed with laughter at having bulldozed Taehyung to the ground. It was pleasant to see their smiles replace their frowns, even though she just signed up for something she had no experience in.

Never mind, she thought. As long as they're happy.

A small smile sneaked up her lips as she continued to stare at them. It was only when a gust of wind led a strand of her hair astray was she reminded of the red string that she still had wrapped around her pinkie. While tucking her hair behind her ear, memories of her conversation with Yoongi, a long time ago, flooded her mind.

The red string of fate, huh?

Gyuri continued to watch the trio who were still wrestling on the ground. As she continued to stare at them, her eyes unavoidably fell on Taehyung's profile. She watched him closely, her eyes unknown to her, evaluating him against her internal set of standards. Ultimately, it led her to two conclusions: Taehyung wasn't bad looking—in fact, he was kinda cute, just like his brothers—and he had a kind side to him that, despite her previous objections, she deeply admired. Her smile widened as she continued to watch him interact with the orphans.

Maybe, if he was a few years older, I might...

Gyuri shook her head suddenly.

What the—? What was I thinking? She furrowed her brows as she tried to shake off the strange feeling that was creeping into her heart. No, Subin. Don't start catching feelings now. He's a kid for goodness sake. A cheeky little—

Taehyung cried out theatrically as the orphans pretended to capture him like a prized animal. More fits of laughter were heard. The smile on Gyuri's face appeared again, her earlier train of thought
completely abandoned. Gyuri realised that Taehyung was a good person and, if it weren't for their rough meeting, in the beginning, she probably would have grown to like him a lot more than she did already.

And just for that moment in time, Gyuri admitted that she saw Taehyung in a positive light, one that overrode her previous prejudices against him. But little did she know, that it wasn't just her who was seeing the other in a new light. For, just a short distance away from her, Taehyung had changed his mind about her too.

~*~

Hidden behind a delipidated wall, Namjoon watched from a safe distance as the pair mingled with two orphans in a game of cuju. A sliver of a smile spread across his lips as he witnessed Taehyung let the scruffy young lass score a goal against him. He chuckled at Taehyung's exaggerated feigned disappointment as he let the ball pass through his legs. Seeing Taehyung play cuju with Gyuri and the orphans reminded him a lot of the times he used to play cuju with his cousins when they were younger. Namjoon's smile suddenly slipped: how long has it been since all of them just got together to play cuju?

Namjoon looked away as he reminisced his happy childhood memories. He remembered having cuju competitions with his cousins all the time. Jongin and Taehyung weren't born back then so he would play with Minseok, Junmyeon and...

Namjoon sighed.

What was up with him today? Why was he always thinking about the past?

He cast his memories aside as he tried to focus on what was happening in front of him now. He had followed Taehyung and Gyuri with the intention of confronting the sly pair for sneaking out of the house without security. He was about to approach them, catch them by surprise, when he suddenly saw the pair playing cuju with two orphans, nearby the river. Instead of challenging them, he decided to watch.

Was this the reason why Taehyung kept sneaking out of the household?

Namjoon arched his brow as he observed Gyuri play cuju competitively. It was her turn to score a goal against Taehyung and when she did, she celebrated enthusiastically, waving her arms in the air while hooting in celebration.

Gyuri really is a strange girl.

After a while, Namjoon decided to slink away. He was content that Taehyung was in no danger and he decided that reprimanding him could be done later. He's just playing cuju... he thought to himself. There is no harm in that.

As Namjoon sneaked away, he began contemplating on all that he had witnessed. Seeing Taehyung happily play with others around his age made Namjoon hesitate in interrupting their game. After all, when he was a young boy, he had his cousins to play with. He had grown up with playmates that were around the same age as him so he hardly ever felt lonely. But Taehyung's situation was different. As the youngest Kim, he didn't have as many people to play cuju with. And with that reason in mind, Namjoon decided to leave him be.

As he began his journey back to the main road, Namjoon's resolve to leave Taehyung alone suddenly crumbled. Namjoon halted at his step as a terror-stricken scream grated on his eardrums,
causing him to turn around. In the far-off distance, he witnessed the orphans huddled together near the bank of the river, screaming their lungs raw. Gyuri and Taehyung were nowhere to be seen.

A hair-raising sensation overwhelmed Namjoon making him shudder despite the warm weather. What had happened to them? He had only turned his back on them for a second!

With his eyes darting wildly around the vicinity, Namjoon searched desperately for any sign of Taehyung or Gyuri. As he was doing so, the unintelligible screams of the orphans, that had grown hysterical, became more comprehensible to him.

"Gyuri!"

"Please save Papa!"

"Tae, hang on! Gyuri will save you!"

"Mama, be careful!"

Namjoon restlessly bolted from his hiding place to find out what had happened. As he sprinted down the field, his view of the river became clearer. He stopped briefly, his eyes widening, when he spotted Gyuri, gliding through the water as she swam to a flailing Taehyung who was struggling to keep afloat. How the hell did Taehyung end up in a dangerous situation in a blink of an eye? Namjoon ran with renewed vigour, desperate to help in any way he could to save his idiotic, younger cousin.

When he finally reached the orphans, he saw that Gyuri had managed to pull Taehyung out of the water and was carrying him in her arms, bridal-style. She waded through the shallow end of the river, where she placed a lifeless Taehyung down on the riverbank. The orphans, oblivious to his presence, ran to Gyuri in a hurry. Namjoon did the same.

"Taehyung!" he heard Gyuri shout while shaking him. "Hey, Taehyung! Wake up!"

Namjoon watched as Gyuri tried to shake Taehyung awake but to no avail. The orphans, witnessing Taehyung's lack of response to Gyuri's vicious shaking, started sobbing at the realisation that Taehyung had drowned. Namjoon felt the familiar wave of panic overwhelm him as he willed his legs to move, his mind frantically trying to keep his panic at bay.

"Move away from him!" he heard his voice shout.

Gyuri and the orphans looked up briefly as Namjoon crouched down next to Taehyung's lifeless body. He inspected his cousin quickly, checking his neck for a pulse like he had learned from the medical scrolls he had been reading. At the same time, he spoke to the trio who were sobbing in the background.

"What happened?" he questioned fiercely.

The young girl replied. "We were- we were playing cuju" she stuttered, her eyes never moving away from Taehyung. "But the ball... it fell into the river."

"I told him to leave it" Gyuri murmured, her face showing signs of shock. "I told him that the current had carried it too far out for him to reach—"

"Papa!" the little boy wailed. "Papa, come back!"

Namjoon turned his attention back to Taehyung. His hand was shaking uncontrollably as he tried to
feel for his pulse. You idiot, he cursed inwardly. You cannot die on me, Taehyung! You must not! He searched Taehyung's face for any sign of waking up but there was none. Namjoon tried his best not to get swept away by the sound of sobbing that was growing louder by the second. He refused to give up. He will not let a single person die under his watch—especially not his own cousin.

Taehyung, please wake up, he begged internally. You cannot die like this... I promised your brother that I would look after you...what will I tell him now?

Suddenly, Namjoon remembered the medical scroll he had recently been reading before following Taehyung and Gyuri. It was a new concept, one that had rarely been practised in Saim but was apparently, very effective.

It was the art of resuscitation.

"It is not too late," he said, loud enough for the trio to hear. "We can still try something to save him."

Gyuri was immediately attentive. "He's still alive?"

Namjoon nodded. "Yes, his pulse is weak but he is most definitely alive." He glanced at Taehyung who was still unconscious. "But he will not be for long if we do not act immediately."

"What are you going to do?" Gyuri asked keenly.

"I am going to attempt to revive him."

Gyuri watched as Namjoon positioned himself next to Taehyung with his hands interlocked together. She watched him in confusion as he hovered his clasped hands above Taehyung's chest like he was about to perform CPR but with the wrong hand position. It was only then, did Gyuri realise, that what Namjoon was attempting to do could potentially kill Taehyung. It appeared as though Namjoon was not experienced in CPR at all.

Without a moment to lose, Gyuri pushed Namjoon aside and assumed the CPR position herself. Okay, Subin. You can do this. You passed your silver Duke of Edinburgh Award, remember? We got this!

"What are you doing?" Gyuri heard an irritated Namjoon shout. He was surprised by Gyuri's hidden strength.

"I-I'm sorry Master Namjoon" she rushed to reply. "I'll explain everything later—"

Gyuri clawed at the back of her mind as she tried to remember the proper CPR procedure that she had invested so much time learning earlier that year. As composed as she could be, Gyuri reached her hand out to Taehyung's pale face and tilted his head back by the forehead and opened his mouth, giving her better access to his airway.

Oh God, oh God, oh God, she kept thinking as she swiftly carried out the steps to CPR. CPR in practice is so much harder than theory...

Once she was satisfied that she had executed the steps in the correct order and that it was okay to begin the rescue breaths and compressions, Gyuri positioned herself above Taehyung's agape mouth. Here goes nothing—!

Namjoon and the orphans watched in shock as Gyuri kissed Taehyung.
Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 12 of The Brothers Kim.

I hope you are enjoying the story so far.

Please look forward to next time...
"Oh, no!" Gulnar shouted. "The ball!"

"Someone get it before it goes to the river—" Taehyung stopped midway his sentence as soon as he witnessed the ball fall into the water. "Too late" he muttered.

Gyuri, Taehyung and the orphans gathered around the edge of the river bank as they eyed the worn leather ball that was slowly drifting farther and farther away from them.

"What do we do now?" Taehyung heard Chun Chun say.

"I'm sorry, Papa" Gulnar murmured guiltily. "It's my fault we lost the ball."

Taehyung looked down at the small child whose eyes looked mournful. "Worry not, Gulnar. It is just a ball."

"But it's the only one we got, Tae!" Chun Chun protested. She furrowed her brows at her brother as she scolded him. "Thanks a lot, Gulnar! Now, we have nothing to play with."

Taehyung felt Gulnar hold onto his sleeve tightly as he cowered away from a furious Chun Chun.

"That is enough" Taehyung ordered. "You must not fight over something like this, it is just a ball—"

"But it's not just a ball!" Chun Chun shouted exasperatingly. Taehyung was startled by Chun Chun's sudden outburst. She eyed him with tears welling up in her brown eyes. "We don't have many things, Tae. That ball was given to me by an old friend before he—" she averted her gaze as she wiped her tear away hastily.

Seeing his sister start sobbing, Gulnar too, started tearing up. "I'm—I'm sorry, Chun Chun..."

The sound of sniffling filled the silence amongst the group. Taehyung exchanged looks with Gyuri who was also unsure on what to do to cheer the orphans up. He shifted his gaze from Gyuri and stared intently at the ball. It had floated a little further away from them again and was approaching deeper waters. Currently, it was wedged in between two rocks.

*What if I reached in and grabbed the ball quickly?* He inspected the murky, green river water, trying to gauge how deep the river was. *It does not appear to be that deep,* he thought. *And the ball is not too far away. As long as I am careful, I can reach for it and—*

"No."

Taehyung turned to face Gyuri who was shaking her head at him. "Don't you dare do what I think you're planning to do."

"What are you, psychic? How do you even know what I am thinking—?"

"I can see it in your eyes" Gyuri answered sternly. "And it's a bad idea." She pointed to the ball which was still caught in between two rocks but had shifted slightly further away. "It's too far out now and the current is quite strong. You should just leave it be."
Gyuri turned her attention to the orphans who she attempted to cheer up by distracting them with another game. While she did this, Taehyung resumed observing the ball. The sound of snivelling could still be heard as the orphans reluctantly let Gyuri lead them away. Seeing the orphans so visibly upset made Taehyung regretful that he couldn't prevent the ball from escaping. And perhaps it was his paternal instincts but, suddenly, he felt the urge to do something to alleviate their woes.

Taehyung set his eyes on the ball again.

*I can do it,* he thought. *I will get the ball and the orphans will be cheerful again.*

With Gyuri distracted by the orphans, Taehyung sneakily crept away as he searched for a long branch. He will use it to try and steer the ball towards his direction so that he wouldn't have to go too deep in the water. When Taehyung finally found one he could use, he proceeded with his plan.

Taehyung approached the edge of the river bank and took one cautious step into the river. A sharp and cold sensation shot up his leg as the cool water soaked into his skin, making him shiver. Despite the chills climbing up his body, Taehyung willed himself to go deeper as he didn't have much time before the ball disappeared for good. With a determined gait, he continued to wade in, his scrawny body quickly being submerged into the cool water. Taehyung winced as the water reached past his waist, forcing him to bite down on his bottom lip to stop himself from crying out in surprise at the sheer cold. It would be bad if Gyuri overheard him.

With his arm outstretched, Taehyung tried to manoeuvre the long branch to free the ball loose and draw it closer to where he stood. The water level, just below his shoulder, constantly warned him to be careful. After a third unsuccessful attempt in reclaiming the ball, Taehyung huffed out of frustration and decided to edge a little closer.

*Just a little bit more...*

With one mighty flick, Taehyung managed to free the ball while also drawing it closer to him. He smiled triumphantly. The ball was within his grasp! All he had to do now was reach out for it and—

"Young Master!"

Taehyung twisted his neck around only to be greeted by a panic-stricken Gyuri who was watching him from the safety of the river bank. She shouted at him, "What are you doing? Get out of the river immediately!"

Taehyung offhandedly replied, "I am fine. I have almost got the ball!" He turned his attention back to the ball which he was guiding with the branch. With his two hands battling the current from sweeping the ball away again, Taehyung pushed with all his might to swivel his body around so that he could flick the ball towards the river bank for Gyuri to reach.

Everything had been going smoothly until suddenly, a strong surge of water swept in, overpowering Taehyung.

"Young Master!"

Taehyung lost his footing as the strong current knocked him backwards, carrying him downstream with nothing to stop his course. With the water so much deeper, Taehyung thrashed his arms about as he desperately tried to keep afloat. A wave of panic overwhelmed him as he gasped for air, gulps of water invading his opened mouth as he screamed for help while also trying to breathe. He choked and spluttered with every struggle.

"Help!" his voice was raspy and gruff. "Help!"
His vision darkened as he sank into the river, immersing him into the dark depths of the unknown. Taehyung frantically struggled as he fought for air. Was he going to die? Will he see light again? So many thoughts flitted across Taehyung's mind as his life seemingly flashed before his eyes.

He thought it was the end. He thought he was going to die. But suddenly...

He managed to pull through.

Taehyung gasped for breath. He had managed to get his head above water.

"Help!"

With aching limbs, Taehyung flailed his arms about, exhaustion quickly creeping up on him. From the corner of his eye, he spotted Gyuri dive into the river and was curiously gliding across the water like a sea creature. He had never seen anything like it but he didn't have time to spectate. She was still a good distance away from him and he was already drained from desperately trying to keep afloat. In danger of being immersed into the darkness again, Taehyung struggled to keep himself from sinking further.

"Tae, hang on! Gyuri will save you!"

"Mama, be careful!"

The orphans' voices were being drowned out by the gushing of the river. Taehyung gasped for breath as he fought to stay above water. With his last ounce of strength, he managed to stay afloat long enough to notice Gyuri drawing near. However, his remaining energy wasn't enough: Taehyung was exhausted.

He wanted to surrender.

And with his has last breath, Taehyung called out Gyuri's name before his world dimmed and he fell into a painless slumber.

~*~


Taehyung surveyed his surroundings for any sort of clue as to where he was. But all he could see was an empty space like a white room or a blank canvas. Like his eyes, his other senses detected nothing. He couldn't hear anything; he couldn't smell anything and there was nothing for him to reach out and touch. For all he knew, he may have already died.

"Hello?" his voice sounded small. "Hello? Is anyone here?"

"Hello?"

Taehyung swerved around quickly at the sudden sound of a feminine voice. Once he did, he spotted a dazzling woman wearing white linen clothes: it was something he'd never seen before. The woman asked him, "Was it you who spoke earlier?"

"Erm, yes. Yes-yes, you are right" he fumbled, stunned by her beauty.

The woman peered at him and then smiled, taking Taehyung by surprise. He didn't expect her to be even more alluring when she did that.

"It's good to know I'm not the only one here" she spoke, her voice melodic and pleasant to the ears.
"I was beginning to think I was all alone."

Taehyung returned her smile, "No worries. I guess we are both here together."

"Do you know where we are?"

Taehyung looked around again but eventually shrugged. "I do not, I am afraid."

The woman sighed. "Well, I guess we should explore for the time being. Maybe we can find out where we are if we do."

Wordlessly, Taehyung followed the woman who had begun walking ahead. For some odd reason, Taehyung was experiencing a strange, fuzzy feeling in his chest accompanied by a low-key aching. It was like he recognised this woman yet Taehyung was certain that he had never laid eyes on her before. He eyed her curiously as he thought, who was she?

The woman, noticing his stare, stopped walking. "Are you alright?" she approached him swiftly, concern riddled across her dazzling features. "Is something wrong? Why are you crying?"

"Huh?"

Taehyung touched his cheek and was startled to find that tears were freely flowing from his eyes. He stared at his hand in confusion, "I-I do not know..."

Suddenly, a sharp pain pierced through Taehyung's chest, rendering him breathless. He collapsed onto the floor, the air in his lungs knocked right out of him.

"Hey!" the woman shouted as she ran to his side. "Hey! Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Taehyung continued to gasp for breath as he curled into a ball on the white floor.

The woman, not knowing what to do, searched her surroundings and started to call for help. It was only when minutes passed did she realise that they were all alone.

Turning her attention back to him, she alarmingly asked, "What's wrong? What can I do to make it stop?"

Taehyung continued to wheeze on the floor as another sharp pain overwhelmed him. It was like he was being kicked by a horse in the ribs, overpowering him with the most agonizing pain. Rendered breathless, Taehyung struggled to reply. It was as if his airways were being tightened like the mouth of a sack.

The woman eyed him desperately as Taehyung struggled to answer. Concerned by his erratic breathing, the woman suggested, "Listen, I'm going to try and help you breathe, okay?" She thought for a moment before adding, "You might not like what I'm going to do but hopefully, it might help."

Gasping for breath, Taehyung nodded frantically. He would do anything to stop the pain he was experiencing.

The woman positioned herself near Taehyung's head and took hold of his cheeks. In response, Taehyung's eyes rounded at the closeness of the woman's face. Up close, her features were delicate but worn. Yet again, a sharp stabbing pain pierced through Taehyung's heart but this time, it was different. To Taehyung, it was more like a pain synonymous with a desperate longing, one that he still couldn't understand why he was feeling.
"Hang on," she told him, causing Taehyung to focus on her again. And without warning, the woman crashed her lips on top of his.

~*~

"He's waking up! He's waking up!"

Taehyung opened his eyes and was immediately greeted by the sight of a young woman hovering above him.

"Taehyung?" she uttered, her voice sounded uncertain and worried. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes..." he feebly replied. He was still partially disorientated and incredibly exhausted to recognise who was beside him. All he could remember was the woman in white. Where was she? Was she still here? By the sound of the person's voice beside him, it wasn't her.

"Let me have a look at him." It was a man's voice this time. Taehyung tried to focus his eyes on who had spoken but could only make out a bright light and darkened faces as they were obscured by the shadows cast by the sun.

"Cousin, can you sit up?"

Taehyung looked towards the direction of the voice and immediately knew who it was.

"Cousin- cousin Namjoon?"

Namjoon smiled at him weakly as he shifted his position so that Taehyung could see him better. "You rascal," he said playfully. "You had us all worried."

"Tae!"

"Papa!"

Suddenly, the orphans clambered into Taehyung's arms as he slowly sat up on the damp grass. Taehyung was almost knocked back down by their combined strength.

"We thought- we thought you were-you were gone!" sobbed Chun Chun.

"Papa! Papa! Don't- don't leave us again!" Gulnar wailed.

Taehyung comforted the orphans by hugging them back. "I-I am sorry" he softly murmured. But then he remembered, "the ball—"

"It's here."

Taehyung looked up and saw Gyuri. He noticed that her cheeks were slightly red and her clothes were damp too. She approached him, with the ball in her hands, as if she was going to hand it to Taehyung peacefully. With his hands outstretched, Taehyung prepared himself to catch it until Gyuri unexpectedly, launched the ball and it bounced off his head with a loud slap.

"Ouch!" he screeched after snapping out of his initial surprise. "What was that for—?"

"You idiot!" Gyuri shouted as she stomped up to him. The orphans backed away as Gyuri drew closer to Taehyung. "You scared the hell out of us! I told you not to go into the water. This ball isn't worth it if the price to pay is your life!"
Taehyung blinked in surprise as Gyuri scolded him, her face glowing bright red like a tomato. "Calm down" he replied dismissively. "I am fine."

"How can I calm down when you almost died?" she asked, exasperated. "You almost drowned—"

"Gyuri," Namjoon interrupted. Gyuri stopped midway her utterance. "That is enough," he told her, his voice stern. "Taehyung is still weak. The best thing we can do for him now is to bring him back to the house to recover."

Gyuri had her lips set in a hard line. She looked like she still had so much to say. "As you wish, Master Namjoon."

Namjoon peered at Taehyung and gave him a small smile. But Taehyung noticed that there was no warmth behind it. He knew immediately that he was going to hear an earful when he got home.

~*~

Namjoon let out an audible sigh once he had finished closing the doors to Taehyung's quarters. They were finally back at the Kim household and fortunately, they had arrived without rousing too much suspicion. Namjoon, being the respectable man he was, had managed to get the pair past the guards at the gates without hassle. However, their appearance did not escape the guards' curious stares. And why wouldn't they be curious? Seeing their masters in drenched clothing and faces as dark as thunder would lead anyone to question what could have transpired hours before.

With furrowed brows, Namjoon eyed his cousin from where he sat next to his bed. "There really is no saving you."

Taehyung rolled his eyes. "Please, cousin. Enough" he begged. "I already know that what I did was stupid and reckless and I will not do it again—"

"But that is the problem, Taehyung" Namjoon interrupted. "I fear that what you say holds no substance. You just say what you need to say to get out of the situation but you never truly uphold your promises."

"That is not true—"

"Is it not?" Namjoon retorted. "Last time, you snuck out of the household and you almost had your hand chopped off. I give you a guard and yet you still sneak away unattended. This time, you snuck out and you almost drowned." He threw his hands up in the air to indicate his vexation. "Whatever next?"

Taehyung was quiet for once. "I apologise" he murmured. "I know I have been misbehaving lately but—"

"But, what, Taehyung?" Namjoon shouted. "How many times do you have to get into trouble before you realise that you cannot keep acting however you want to? If it were not for Gyuri, you would already be dead by now."

At this Taehyung was attentive. "What do you mean?"

"Gyuri was the one who rescued you" Namjoon explained. "She was the one who pulled you out of the water and revived you."

"Gyuri did?" Taehyung asked, surprised. Suddenly, the woman in white's face appeared in his
mind's eye. "Are you sure it was her? Not someone else who rescued me?"

Namjoon gaped at him, puzzled. "Yes, it was her. Who else would it have been?" He looked up at the ceiling as if he was lost in thought. "It was quite astonishing. Gyuri jumped into the river and swam like a fish to your rescue."

"I... I should thank her" Taehyung murmured, remembering that he had not done so yet.

Namjoon frowned at him. "Yes, you should. Gyuri has not only saved your life once but now, twice." He paused. "But now that I think about it, why is it that, whenever you are together, you always get into trouble?"

Taehyung was quick to reply. "She has nothing to do with it."

"Really, now?" Namjoon sounded dubious. "It seems to me that you only ever get into trouble when Gyuri is with you."

"What?" Taehyung exclaimed. "That is incredulous!"

But Namjoon wasn't convinced. Taehyung watched as Namjoon straightened his sleeves, a habit which signalled to Taehyung that Namjoon had made up his mind. "I think it would be best if Gyuri leaves our household."

This made Taehyung jump up on his bed. "No!" he shouted, flustered.

Namjoon raised his brow questioningly. "And why not?"

"Be-because..." Taehyung began but was unsure of what to say. Even he didn't know why he rejected the suggestion so passionately.

"You and Gyuri never got on in the beginning" Namjoon reminded him. "And the fact that she is always with you whenever you are up to no good leads me to think that she is a bad influence."

"But she saved me!" Taehyung protested. "Why would you dismiss her when she saved me? You have to honour her reward!"

"Under the light of these recent events," Namjoon said solemnly, "being rewarded matters not." He turned to leave.

"Wait!" Taehyung called out to him desperately.

Namjoon halted.

"Please... do not dismiss her."

Upon hearing this, Namjoon turned to look at Taehyung.

"Please, Cousin. Please... spare Gyuri." Taehyung played nervously with his bed sheets. "Do not cast her away because of me."

"And why should I listen to you?" he asked testily. "Will you behave if I let her stay?"

Taehyung meekly nodded. "I will."

"I do not believe you—" Namjoon turned towards the door again.
"I solemnly swear!" Taehyung shouted frantically. Namjoon faced him again. "I solemnly swear," Taehyung repeated determinedly "that I will behave from now onwards and I will do as you say."

Namjoon eyed him carefully. "Taehyung, you do realise that solemnly swearing is a sacred oath?"

"I do" Taehyung replied.

"And such oaths should never be made unless you intend to keep them until your grave?"

Taehyung nodded. "I am aware."

Namjoon curled his lip in thought. "Alright. Since you have made such an oath, I will give heed to your request just this once."

"Thank you, cousin—"

"But woe betide if you break it, Taehyung" Namjoon warned. "As soon as you do, Gyuri will be out of this household, is that clear?"

Taehyung nodded. "Yes, cousin."

Namjoon turned to the door again. "Oh, and before I forget, do you remember anything from when you were unconscious?"

The woman in white's face suddenly flashed before Taehyung's eyes again and he blushed. He averted his gaze as he stuttered, "No-no, I don't- I don't remember anything."

Namjoon hummed as he thought. "I see."

"Why do you- why do you ask?"

"Because it is a shame," he told him vaguely, a smirk dancing on his lips. "It was your first, after all." He murmured quietly, "And it might have been Gyuri's first too..."

"First what?" Taehyung queried. "What are you talking about?"

Namjoon eyed him evenly as he revealed. "Why, your first kiss, of course."

Chapter End Notes

Hey reader. Thank you for reading chapter 13 of The Brothers Kim.

Just who could the woman in white be?

Please look forward to next time!
"My-my-my first kiss?!” he stammered, his eyes as wide as saucers. "What? When? How?"

"When Gyuri revived you," he explained, "she had to perform something she called 'Cardiovascular Pulmonary Resuscitation'."

Taehyung looked at him, puzzled. "What now?"

Namjoon merely shrugged. He was too ashamed to admit that he didn't know a lot about CPR. "I saw it with my own eyes, cousin. And the fact that you are in front of me right now is the living proof that her method of revival works."

"But what has that got to do with her..." his cheeks reddened as he continued, "with her kissing me?"

"It seems that this method of revival requires mouth-to-mouth contact."

Taehyung’s cheeks continued to redden further. It still felt surreal to him that, not only did he almost die from drowning but that, he had also lost his first kiss while he was unconscious. Inadvertently, his hand reached up to his lips and he traced them slowly, casting his memory back as far as he could. Why couldn't he remember anything?

Suddenly, his conversation with Gyuri, moments before meeting the orphans, surfaced from the back of his mind.

"Babies are made through kisses."

Taehyung froze.

"Cousin..." he mumbled with a dazed look about him. "How... are babies made?"

Namjoon was taken aback. "Why do you ask?"

"Because... I just need to know."

Namjoon scrutinised Taehyung’s nervous expression. What was eating him up? "I-I told you before how babies are made—"

"Yes," Taehyung interrupted. "But you failed to tell me with detail."

"Cousin, I do not think this sort of conversation is something you want to be having with me."

Taehyung watched as his cousin rubbed his neck to show his discomfort. Seeing Namjoon act so awkwardly further confirmed his suspicion that what Gyuri had told him was right.

"It's the men who give birth to children."

Taehyung instinctively stared down at his stomach. The thought of a baby growing inside his abdomen frightened him. He wasn’t ready for fatherhood, let alone becoming an adult. He still felt it was too soon and that he was too young.
Namjoon peered at him curiously when Taehyung suddenly cried out, "I do not want to be a father!"

"Huh?"

"Cousin" Taehyung said once he had collected himself. "I think I might be... pregnant."

Namjoon blinked at him. "Wha-what?"

Taehyung averted his gaze ashamedly as he wrapped his arms around his abdomen. "You said it yourself, cousin" he whispered. "Gyuri and I... we kissed."

Namjoon shook his head in disbelief as he attempted to internally grasp what Taehyung was on about. "Cousin, I think you are mistaken. You are not with child. In fact, there is no way that you can be."

"Really?" Taehyung asked keenly. Namjoon watched as Taehyung jolted up from his resting position as if he was about to climb out of bed. "Are you certain about this?"

"I am very certain" Namjoon reassured him. "There is no way you can bear a child unless you are a woman and you have had..." his voice trailed off and Taehyung observed how his cousin's cheeks were rosy. "You need not worry about it. Just trust my word when I say that you are not pregnant."

"But... I have had my first kiss."

Namjoon was confused. "How is that related to being with child?"

"Are babies... not made through kissing?" Taehyung asked uncertainly. "And is it not the men that carry the child?"

Namjoon's mouth was ajar. Oh, cousin... "That is false. Where did you hear such lies from?"

Taehyung's eyes rounded either from shock at being lied to or, because he was relieved. *That stupid Gyuri...* he thought inwardly. "It matters not where I heard it from" he replied. "But if babies are not made from kissing... how are they made?"

Namjoon shuffled on his feet. "Er..."

"Cousin," Taehyung prompted. "Will you not tell me?"

Namjoon met eyes with Taehyung, who was searching his dark eyes with curiosity. He knew that there was nothing to be ashamed of when explaining how mankind procreate but having to do so to his younger cousin made him shy if not, embarrassed. After all, it was such an intimate and sensitive topic.

He sighed. "Fine, I shall tell you."

In response, Taehyung sat up attentively.

Namjoon took a deep breath before finally revealing to Taehyung the truth behind what happens when a man and a woman spend 'the night' together...

~*~

Namjoon's train of thought was interrupted as he noticed a few of the maids passing by. He was currently ambling across the courtyard to return to his quarters when, from the corner of his eye, he suddenly observed movement. He glanced up briefly and spotted the maids looking at him before
masking a giggle which unavoidably escaped their lips. As they neared him, he acknowledged their presence by giving them a quick but friendly smile which, without fail, made the maids giggle even louder.

Namjoon couldn't help feeling a little bored by the maids' reactions. He was getting tired of the attention he was receiving, not because he disliked the source but, because it made him feel like all women were the same.

And whenever he started thinking like that, he ended up comparing every woman to her.

Namjoon shook his head to disrupt his current stream of consciousness. _Here I go again_, he thought, _why am I always thinking about her?_ He couldn't understand why he was still so shaken up by the painting and why his mind couldn't let her go. It had been five years already. He had succeeded in forgetting her temporarily but something stopped him from burying his memories of her again.

"Gyuri!"

Namjoon abruptly stopped. He glanced towards the direction of the maids' quarters where he could hear voices overlapping. _Oh, yes. I wonder how Gyuri is faring..._ Namjoon thought as he changed his course and started heading for the maids' quarters. He had almost forgotten about how she had saved Taehyung's life and how she was somehow well versed in revival techniques which were still a new concept in Saim.

Curiously, Namjoon pondered about Gyuri. Who was she exactly? When he met Gyuri, he believed she was just a normal serf, one that desired a better situation than the one she was currently in. Namjoon was impressed by her bravery and so decided to reward her but little did he anticipate how fond Taehyung would grow of her as time went by. But that wasn't the only thing he didn't anticipate. Namjoon didn't realise how he too, would be affected by her presence.

"Gyuri, where have you been all day?" Madam Zhou asked sharply. "I have been searching for you everywhere."

Namjoon watched from the entrance as Gyuri replied, "I was with the Young Master."

"The Young Master?" she repeated dubiously. Madam Zhou inspected her appearance with one brow raised. "But why are your clothes wet?"

"Erm..." Gyuri struggled to reply.

From behind the wall, Namjoon watched her worriedly. Before they had parted, he had made Gyuri swear that she will not say anything about what happened earlier that day. After all, what good would it do for the rest of the household to know that Taehyung had almost drowned?

"I accidentally fell into the lake" Gyuri responded rather convincingly.

Namjoon breathed a sigh of relief.

"The lake?" Madam Zhou stated, still not believing her. "Why were you near the lake in the first place?" Madam Zhou continued to interrogate Gyuri who, somehow, managed to evade every one of her questions.

From afar, Namjoon couldn't help being impressed by Gyuri's skilful acting ability which, he consequently reminded himself to be wary of. It appears Gyuri was quite artful in deception.
"I do not want you to go near the lake again" Madam Zhou finally instructed her. "Especially if you are with the Young Master. He is not an accomplished swimmer so it is very dangerous."

Again, Gyuri managed to feign ignorance. "Of course, Madam Zhou."

Madam Zhou straightened the creases on her robes before continuing. "Good, well, now that is out of the way, I would like to address why I have called everyone here." She gestured to all the other maids who were gathered around the common room.

Namjoon backed away silently. *Gyuri seems fine*, he thought. *There is no more reason for me to be here.*

"It has come to my attention," Madam Zhou began, "that a large quantity of food from the pantry has gone missing."

Namjoon froze.

"And," Madam Zhou continued, "that is unacceptable. Our great kingdom is going through hardship due to famine but that does not excuse anyone from stealing." Namjoon spotted Madam Zhou leer at the maids, "especially not from the Kims."

"Madam Zhou" one of the maids called out, "how much food is missing?"

"At least three baskets full" she replied.

A gasp escaped the mouths of all the maids present as they erupted into whispers.

"And if I do not address this now, more might go missing."

Gyuri exchanged looks with Mayu, who was nearby. "What will happen if the person gets caught?" she whispered worriedly.

Mayu's brow was furrowed with concern. "It's very likely that she will get flogged."

Gyuri bit her lip. Memories of her narrowly escaping being flogged fleeted through her mind, reminding her of the terror she felt when she saw a whip aimed at her for the first time. The sound of it cracking on the floor as the ruddy-faced man demonstrated its lethalness echoed in her ears causing her to shudder. Just imagining the painful stinging sensation on her back was enough to deter her.

"I will give you all one chance to own up" Madam Zhou declared, interrupting her reverie. "If no one does, I will have no choice but to punish everyone."

"But, Madam Zhou," a different maid spoke up. "how do you know it is one of us? What if it is one of the servant boys? Or even the kitchen staff?"

Murmurs of agreement followed suit.

"Silence!" Madam Zhou's voice resonated around the small common room. "Only the maids and kitchen staff have access to the pantry" she explained. "And I have already spoken to the kitchen staff. They are innocent."

Again, the room erupted into murmurs but, this time, they were of disagreement and objections.

"How can you be so sure?"

"It was definitely the kitchen staff!"
"Who would dare to steal from the Kims?"

Gyuri watched as an uproar erupted in the common room. Some of the more proactive maids contested Madam Zhou's verdict while others, like her, eyed each other in suspicion, wondering who the culprit could be. Gyuri glanced at either side of her and noticed that Pho was as white as paper.

"Are you okay, Pho?" she enquired. "You're not looking so good."

Pho smiled at her weakly. "I'm just feeling under the weather" she replied, her voice hoarse.

Gyuri approached her and felt her forehead. Her palm was immediately stung by her high temperature: she was burning up like a furnace. "You've got a temperature!" she exclaimed. "Pho, you should be in bed."

"I can't. I still have work to do" she said in between coughs.

"Everyone, silence!" Madam Zhou's voice boomed over the bickering of the maids. "If no one admits to the thievery, I will have no choice but to sanction everyone with no meals for three days."

"What?!"

Gyuri watched as all around her, the maids descended into chaos at Madam Zhou's warning. Three days of no food was potentially a death sentence for a maid. There was no doubt that they would still have to work the long hours despite the lack of meals. Gyuri heard Pho cough beside her, drawing her attention. She stretched her hand to rub her back for her to calm her coughing fit and was startled to find that she could feel the indents of her spine through the thin material of her robe.

Gyuri couldn't help but worry over Pho. Three days without food? Pho might not survive! Especially not with her current condition...

"Well?" Madam Zhou had finally managed to regain order over the maids. "Will no one own up to it?" She surveyed the room, her gaze meeting with each and every one of the maids present.

The maids glanced at one another with the same accusatory stare, no one daring to come forward. Eyes shifted from one direction to the next, suspicion hanging in the air like a tangible cloud. Gyuri shuffled uncomfortably as she felt others' gaze gloss over her.

Madam Zhou waited patiently for someone to come forward but no one did. With her patience wearing thin, she announced finally, "If the culprit does not hand themselves in now, there will be no food for everyone!"

Whispers erupted amongst the group again but all Gyuri could focus on was Pho coughing from beside her. She eyed her worriedly as the room continued to descend into disorder. Gyuri tried her best to soothe Pho's coughing fit which was a lot more violent than before. She rubbed her back repeatedly while Pho's body shook from underneath her fingertips. There was no way Pho will survive those three days at this rate.

"It was me!" Gyuri abruptly declared. She knew that the only way to move on was to admit her guilt even if she had only taken one basket's worth instead of three. "I stole the food."

Silence befell the room as all eyes turned to her.

Madam Zhou was surprised. "Gyuri? It was you?" she asked in disbelief. "You did it?"

"Yes," Gyuri replied, which caused the rest of the maids to break out into their own conversations.
Namjoon couldn't believe what he was witnessing. *Gyuri took all the food? Impossible!* He never expected her to be a thief. It just seems out of character...

As he watched Madam Zhou prepare her rod for Gyuri's punishment, Namjoon's eyes shifted to Gyuri, who was glancing back at Pho. Even though she should be worrying about being flogged, Namjoon couldn't help noticing the concern that was directed towards the sickly maid.

Wordlessly, Namjoon gaped at Gyuri who demonstrated a brave front despite the fear in her eyes. *Could Gyuri be...?* He glanced from the ashen-faced maid to Gyuri and realised the reason behind her valiant behaviour. Namjoon smiled to himself. *Gyuri really is a strange girl,* he thought, before emerging from the shadows.

~*~

*Crap,* Gyuri kept internally cursing. *Oh, crap, crap, crap!*

In front of her, Madam Zhou had prepared a thin rod which she was already acquainted with: it was the same rod used to punish her when she was carrying buckets of water a week or so ago. She eyed the sharp instrument warily and gulped.

*I didn't expect to meet you again, stick of pain.*

Madam Zhou beckoned for Gyuri to come closer. Reluctantly, Gyuri approached Madam Zhou while the other maids spectated in a huddle. Murmurs escaped their mouths as they darted dirty looks at her, making her feel like she truly was guilty.

*We're doing the right thing,* she internally told herself. *We'll be fine. It won't hurt a lot.*

But as much as Gyuri tried to reassure herself, she couldn't avoid the beads of sweat that started to form on her forehead. It was like she was more afraid of the *idea* of being hit rather than the *actual* pain itself.

When she was finally in front of Madam Zhou, Madam Zhou signalled for her to show her hands.

"You're going to flog me there?" Gyuri's voice was squeaky from fear.

Madam Zhou nodded. "Open your hands, Gyuri."

Hesitantly, Gyuri did as she was told but she couldn't help flinching. She shut her eyes tight while her hands shook uncontrollably. The maids watched with bated breaths as Madam Zhou lifted her arm with the thin rod in her hand. With an impassive expression, Madam Zhou averted her gaze slightly as she prepared to strike down. But before she could do so, she was suddenly interrupted by a loud voice.

"Stop!"

Madam Zhou froze and looked towards the doorway, where the voice had come from. So, did the othermaids. When Gyuri dared to peek, she was greeted by an unexpected visitor.

"Ma-master Namjoon?"

Namjoon grinned at Gyuri fondly, revealing his famous dimpled smile. The maids, who were gaping from both sides of the common room, swooned at him and the room was filled with hubbub once
Madam Zhou peered at Namjoon, flustered. "Master Namjoon!" she addressed him with her head bowed. "What brings you here?"

"I was just passing by," he replied, "when I overheard a lot of noise coming from here." He approached Gyuri and Madam Zhou, his eyes trailing from the rod in Madam Zhou's hand and Gyuri's outstretched arms. "I could not help overhearing your conversation." He inspected Gyuri closely. "Is it true that you stole three baskets worth of food?"

Gyuri blushed under his intense gaze. There was something about Namjoon that made her nervous. Earlier on that day, she didn't have much time to converse with him properly, save from when they were talking about Taehyung and her rescuing him. Apart from that, Namjoon and her had hardly interacted with each other so she didn't know where she stood with him. Apart from that, last time they saw each other, apart from today, was during tea time... and that didn't end well.

"Ye-yes" she answered feebly with her eyes averted. Something about Namjoon's smile told her that he could see through her façade.

In response, Namjoon arched his brow. "Are you certain?"

What's up with this guy? Gyuri inwardly asked. Didn't I just admit to being guilty? "I am" she answered cautiously.

"Huh," he grunted. "That is odd."

"Master Namjoon." It was Madam Zhou. "I beg your pardon but Gyuri has admitted to thievery of the pantry and was in the middle of being punished—"

"That will not be necessary" he interrupted.

This made everyone in the room look up at him.

"Gyuri is innocent" he elaborated. "She is not the culprit."

Madam Zhou peered at him, puzzled. "If not her, then who?"

Namjoon met eyes with Gyuri before turning his attention to Madam Zhou. "It is me." "What?" Madam Zhou uttered in shock before apologising for her rudeness. "That is ludicrous! How can it be you, Master Namjoon?"

He smiled at her charmingly. "I do beg everyone's forgiveness" Namjoon sincerely uttered before directing his attention to Gyuri. "And more so to Gyuri. You need not lie anymore for my sake." Gyuri looked at him questioningly as Namjoon proceeded with his explanation. "I have been feeling very peckish lately so sometimes, during late at night, I would take something from the pantry to eat." He gave a shy laugh before continuing, "And before I knew it, I have already consumed three baskets worth."

Madam Zhou eyed him doubtfully but tried to hide it. "But how is this related to Gyuri?"

"Gyuri caught me sneaking into the pantry" he explained while gesturing at her. "I wanted to keep my snacking a secret so she kindly offered to bring me snacks late at night to save me sneaking out and having my secret discovered." He eyed her steadily before adding, "So Gyuri does not deserve to be punished. If anything, I should be the one to be flogged."
Madam Zhou was taken aback by Namjoon's suggestion. "Master Namjoon, please do not apologise. It was a misunderstanding."

"Thank you, Madam Zhou" he responded. "Now that my secret has been discovered, will you let Gyuri honour her promise to me without interference?"

Madam Zhou nodded. "Certainly."

"Great." He darted a look at Gyuri before saying, "Will you excuse us? There is something I must discuss with Gyuri in private."

Gyuri blinked as Namjoon signalled for her to follow him.

"Go," Madam Zhou mouthed to her while she ushered her to quickly follow Namjoon, who was pacing ahead.

Chapter End Notes

Hey reader. Thanks for reading chapter 14 of The Brothers Kim.

Please look forward to next time!
Gyuri trailed after Namjoon and followed him until they were out in the courtyard and away from prying eyes. It was already late in the afternoon and it will soon be time for supper. As quickly as she could, Gyuri attempted to match Namjoon's stride which was long and fast-paced. Just as she was about to fall in step with him, he abruptly stopped, causing her to bump into him.

Namjoon peered down at her curiously as she tended to her forehead, which had collided with his sculpted back.

"Ow..." she groaned. "Geez, you must have a back made of iron or something!"

Namjoon was startled but then, he chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Gyuri asked. "Don't tell me you're the type who enjoys seeing others in pain."

"Quite the contrary" he replied. "I enjoy it more when I see that my patients have recovered." He peered down at Gyuri and pried her hands away so that he could inspect her forehead. As he did so, Gyuri couldn't help observing his well-defined jawline and his broad shoulders. With Namjoon so close to her, his fine and princely features were suddenly in high definition. His neat eyebrows, his mesmerising dark eyes, his full lips...

Gyuri had to make a conscious effort to tear her eyes away before Namjoon noticed. *Hold your horses, Subin!*

Namjoon stepped back. "It is safe to say that you will live," he told her playfully. Seeing her face, Namjoon asked, "Is something wrong? Why is your face red?"

Alarmed, Gyuri slapped both her cheeks with her hands. *Damn it, not now!* "Must just be the weather," she laughed awkwardly. "It's kinda warm, don't you think?"

"Yes, I guess so." But Namjoon didn't appear convinced. "Gyuri... are you alright?"

"Of-course." "Because if you need someone to talk to, you can do so with me."

At this, Gyuri was startled. *Crap! Did he catch me checking him out?* "What-do you mean by that?"

Namjoon eyed her steadily. "I want to talk about what happened earlier today with Taehyung..." he quietly uttered. "What you did today... I am truly thankful for. You saved my cousin's life."

*Ahh, it's about the brat* she thought. "No need to thank me" Gyuri replied. "In fact, I should be thanking you. You saved me from getting hit back there."

"That was because you did not deserve such punishment. You were actually doing that to help someone, were you not?"

Gyuri was taken aback. "How did you—?"
Again, Namjoon chuckled. His laugh was like tinkering bells that made Gyuri's heart flutter. But it wasn't just his smile that tugged at her heartstrings. Gyuri couldn't help staring at Namjoon's smile which revealed his unmistakably charming dimples. He was like an innocent cherub in adult form.

"I could tell from the way you were looking at her that you were concerned for her welfare" Namjoon explained. "And," he added while giving a lopsided smile, "you do not seem like the type to steal three baskets full of food."

"Well, it's nice to know that you have a lot of faith in me, Master Namjoon."

Namjoon's smile slipped slightly. "That is because I have decided to trust you, Gyuri."

This made Gyuri look up.

"You..." Namjoon started, "actually know more than you let on, do you not?"

"Wha-what do you mean?"

"CPR" Namjoon said, enunciating each letter carefully, "that is what you called the revival technique you performed on Taehyung, correct?" He eyed her steadily, his gaze seemingly colder than before. "How did a maid like yourself learn of such a technique?"

Gyuri's eyes darted upwards as she searched for inspiration. "Erm, I-er... It's kinda hard to explain."

"Are you literate?" he enquired, attempting to pry further. "Can you read? Write?"

"Yes," Gyuri immediately replied but then regretted it. Oh, shit... I can read and write but only in English! What if he was on about ancient characters?

"Really?" Namjoon was genuinely surprised. "It is very rare to find a serf that is educated." His eyes seemed to sparkle at the news. "This is excellent!" he suddenly proclaimed, his earlier coldness ebbing away. "I have been searching for someone to help me with my work—" he leaned in abruptly, surprising Gyuri by his proximity, "you can help me with my work at the sanatorium."

"Huh? Sana-sanatorium? What the hell is that?"

"Yes," he replied. "I need help with treating the patients there. While it is not a prerequisite to be educated, it is very well advantageous." Namjoon's dimples appeared again as he grinned. "It will be most helpful when it comes to administration work..."

"Hang on, Master Namjoon" Gyuri interjected. "I-I don't think I'm cut out for such a responsibility" Gyuri rushed to say. "The truth is, I learned CPR from just, er, watching someone else do it" she lied. "And it's been a long time since I, erm, read anything or wrote anything. I think I must have forgotten."

"Oh..." Namjoon's voice sounded disappointed. Gyuri was afraid that Namjoon wouldn't believe her but then she heard him utter, "It cannot be helped if that is the case." He gestured for them to continue with their stroll. They ambled peacefully across the gravel courtyard, passing by the tree that was close to blooming. Once Namjoon was near his quarters, he turned to address her, "Before you leave, will you do something for me?"

Gyuri looked up at him attentively. "Of course." Though, she couldn't help being wary.

"Will you bring mochi tonight? I like the red-bean kind."
She gaped at him questioningly.

"You do not recall?" he said while tilting his head slightly. "You will need to bring me snacks every night from now on."

~*~

"So... you just bring him mochi every night?" Pho questioned again. "You don't do anything else?"

Gyuri sighed for the third time.

Two weeks had passed since she had agreed to go along with Namjoon's idea, which composed of her bringing him snacks late at night. She had been sceptical at first but had gone along with his plan so as not to expose him in his lie. After all, it was the least she could do after he had rescued her from getting flogged that night.

"What were you expecting?" Gyuri questioned while getting ready for the long day ahead. "Of course, I just bring him snacks," she paused as she thought, "but sometimes we talk."

Pho was made excited by the news. "Ooh, what do you talk about?"

"Pho, that is enough" Mayu ordered from the other side of the room. "Leave Gyuri be."

Pho pouted as she finished tidying her robes so that her appearance was immaculate. "Oh, c'mon, Mayu. I'm sure you're just as curious as I am. Don't you want to know what Master Namjoon does in his spare time?"

"Mayu would know if only Master Namjoon called on her" Kalyani interrupted. Everyone turned to Kalyani who was frowning as she finished changing into her robes. She continued, "She should be bringing Master Namjoon snacks, not Gyuri."

Pho's eyes darted from Mayu and Gyuri who were unable to face each other.

"If I were you," Kalyani addressed Mayu, "I would be upping my game." She sneered at Gyuri before resuming, "If you don't watch out, she might end up stealing Master Namjoon's favour too."

"Don't be like that, Kalyani" she replied, but Gyuri noticed her voice wavering slightly. "Gyuri's not trying to steal any of the Kims' favour—"

"Oh, yeah?" Kalyani scoffed. "Then, why does the Young Master ask for her all the time?"

At this, Mayu didn't know what to say. She peered at Gyuri as if she was wondering about the answer to that question too.

"He hasn't been doing so recently" Pho pointed out. "Maybe it was just a one-off?"

Gyuri gave her a thankful nod. The truth was, Taehyung hadn't requested her presence at all for the past two weeks. Whenever they crossed paths, he would avert his gaze and ignore her. It was like his personality had taken a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn. And Gyuri couldn't understand why.

"Regardless" Kalyani persisted, "it is plain as day that Gyuri has been trying to oust me from being the Young Master's personal maid."

"Hang on a sec" Gyuri retorted. She couldn't stand by and let Kalyani accuse her any longer. "You're wrong. I'm not trying to steal your position or anything."
Kalyani hmphed. "If that isn't true, then you must be trying to take Mayu's job instead."

"Wha—?"

"You should be careful," Kalyani warned Mayu, completely cutting Gyuri off. "If Gyuri wins Master Namjoon's favour, it's not only you who will suffer but your family will too."

Gyuri was about to defend herself when suddenly, a curt and sharp voice boomed from the doorway.

"What are you all still doing here?"

The four maids swerved around to find Madam Zhou glowering at them while tapping her foot. She had both her hands folded over her chest as she spoke again, "You should all be out by now! Did you all forget what day it is?"

The maids exchanged looks with each other as they energetically dressed faster.

Kalyani was the first to finish. "I was just leaving" she replied, before brushing past Madam Zhou.

Madam Zhou inspected the remaining three. "Well?" she prompted. "Did you all forget?"

"No, Madam Zhou" Pho responded meekly as she rushed to put her shoes on. "We'll be out soon."

"Soon is not good enough!" she snapped. "Today is the wedding ceremony and everything must be perfect." Madam Zhou pinched her nose bridge as if trying to relieve the pent-up tension. "The wedding reception will be taking place in the Kim household as opposed to the palace. So, everything should be in order before the princess' arrival, is that clear?"

"Yes, Madam Zhou" Gyuri and the others murmured.

Madam Zhou sighed before urging the trio, "Get a move on, then!"

~*~

Taehyung huffed as he scrutinised his reflection in the mirror. Despite being dressed in the finest silks with the most vibrant colours, Taehyung couldn't help feeling dissatisfied. Something was bothering him. Or rather, someone.

"Are you ready, cousin?"

Taehyung looked over his shoulder to address Namjoon, who had appeared at his door. "Almost" he answered, his voice clipped. He turned back to his gaze at his reflection.

Namjoon, sensing that something was off, approached his younger cousin with caution. "Is everything alright, Taehyung?"

"Yes," he responded pointedly. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you seem upset about something." He sat down on a nearby stool and added, "Not to mention the fact that you have been avoiding me as of late."

Taehyung grew crimson. "I-I have not been avoiding you!"

"Oh?"

Taehyung fumbled with his belt while occasionally sneaking glances at his cousin through the
mirror. In response, Namjoon continued to gape at him, his dark eyes boring into his reflection as if
he was staring through to his soul. When Taehyung accidentally met Namjoon's penetrating gaze, he
had no choice but to give in. Namjoon had a gift for seeing through people as if they were an open
book.

"Fine" he conceded. "I admit that I have been upset with you."

Namjoon shifted in his seat while continuing to eye Taehyung. "What have I done to upset you,
cousin?"

Taehyung turned to face him. He challenged Namjoon into a staring contest without having to say
anything. Namjoon took up the challenge although, he was puzzled as to why Taehyung was now
giving him the silent treatment. Eventually, Taehyung’s eyes started to water and he backed down,
visibly upset that he had lost in their trivial competition.

He muttered begrudgingly, "It is because Gyuri has been spending so much time with you."

Namjoon’s eyebrows were raised in surprise. "You have been refusing to talk to me... because of
Gyuri?"

Taehyung nodded reluctantly.

"But, why?"

Taehyung shifted uncomfortably on the spot. Namjoon observed how Taehyung's cheeks were tinted
rose. "There- there is no particular reason why" he replied. "I just do not like how frequently she has
been visiting you." Taehyung met eyes with Namjoon and Namjoon noticed the seriousness behind
them. "Why have you been asking her to bring snacks to you every night?"

"She was in trouble" Namjoon answered coolly. "I only did that because she needed help." He
raised his brow as he added, "Apparently, someone has been stealing food from the pantry."

Taehyung looked away guiltily.

Noticing his blameful expression, Namjoon asked, "Do you know anything about this?"

"Er..." Taehyung continued to avert his gaze as he responded, "No."

But Namjoon already suspected that he did. At least I know now who the culprit is, he said inwardly.
Namjoon examined his cousin closely. Seeing Taehyung’s flushed expression made the corners of
his mouth curl into a wily grin. "But why are you so bothered about Gyuri spending so much time
with me?" he enquired. He couldn't resist teasing his cousin a little.

Taehyung looked up, his cheeks noticeably redder than before.

"Have you... developed a liking for her, cousin?"

"What?!" Taehyung immediately replied, "No! She is just a maid! A maid—friend! A maid-friend-
thing!"

Namjoon watched as a flustered Taehyung tried to explain his relationship with Gyuri. It was both
amusing and entertaining to see his cousin so tongue-tied over a girl. He must have developed a
fondness for her after their kiss... he thought. He smirked, it seems spring has come for him at last.

"You know, Cousin Junmyeon will not be pleased to hear you associating yourself with servants"
Namjoon pointed out, "and calling them 'friends' especially."

Taehyung frowned at the mention of his older brother. "I do not care about his opinion" Taehyung replied haughtily. "Brother Junmyeon never approves of anything I do anyway." Namjoon watched as Taehyung frowned deepened as he spoke, "All he ever does is scold me. He does not even let me play with fourth brother unless he is present."

"You must understand," Namjoon informed him, "Jongin has always been sickly and Junmyeon is just worried for his health."

"But what has that got to do with me being unable to play with Brother Jongin?" Taehyung questioned. "He does not allow me to play with him, let alone speak with him in private." He clicked his tongue, "Face it, cousin, Brother Junmyeon hates me."

Namjoon peered at Taehyung sympathetically. "That is not true, cousin."

"You need not cover for him" Taehyung replied with a wry smile. "Like I said, I do not care for his opinion." Taehyung smiled warmly at Namjoon. "It is enough for me to have you by my side."

Namjoon was surprised by Taehyung's heartfelt words. He returned his smile before playfully ruffling his long black hair. "Let us go," he told him bashfully, "we must not be late for the coronation."

~*~

Upon hearing approaching footsteps, the pair of maids lifted their heads. Seeing that it was Junmyeon, they hurriedly bowed them again so as not to meet his gaze.

"Greetings, Master Junmyeon," the maids said in unison as they curtsied.

Junmyeon gave them an acknowledging nod. He surveyed the room he was in and spotting his brother staring out to the deck, he waved his hand dismissively at the maids to instruct them of his desire for privacy. Swiftly, the maids complied, leaving him and Jongin alone in the room.

When the sliding doors were finally drawn, Junmyeon approached his brother, who was still fixated on the beautiful scenery before him.

"How are you feeling today, Jongin?"

Jongin turned at the sound of Junmyeon's voice and gave him a small smile. "Never better, brother."

Junmyeon sat beside him on the deck which overlooked a hidden part of the courtyard. In front of the pair was a picturesque image of a tranquil garden, filled with exotic flowers and shrubs that were pleasing to the eye. Junmyeon had a similar view of the scenery from his quarters but he never truly appreciated its beauty as much as he did when he was at Jongin's.

He turned to his younger brother, whose skin was sallow and as translucent as paper. Seeing his brother in better spirits automatically made his day brighter: it gave him hope that his illness was slowly, but surely, receding.

"I will be leaving for the coronation soon" Junmyeon informed him. "So, I will not be back to visit you until later."

Jongin nodded. "You will finally get to meet the new emperor" he observed. "Are you excited?"
"I would not say I am excited" Junmyeon replied, "but I am curious to see what kind of man he is."

Jongin turned his attention back to looking at the garden. The weather was pleasantly warm with summer already upon them. He eyed the bright, blooming flowers enviously. How he wished the sun could kiss his skin too, like the blossoming plants that beckoned to him. But alas, he could not. When will he be able to walk amongst nature like his brothers? He was afraid that he was bound to his bed forever.

Junmyeon, noticing his brother's wistful expression, tried to divert his attention. "I do not know how things will turn out at the coronation. Pledging our allegiance to a man the kingdom has never seen has caused quite the stir in court."

Junmyeon succeeded in interrupting Jongin's thoughts. "I can imagine" he murmured. "There must be some doubt as to his ability to rule."

"Indeed" Junmyeon agreed.

The brothers sat in silence as they both contemplated the significance of the imminent coronation. Today was the day that the new emperor will finally reveal himself to the rest of the kingdom, after spending the last decade or so in hiding. It was a momentous occasion as it signified the beginning of a new era—one which everyone hoped would be peaceful and in contrast to the late emperor's reign, which was, towards the end, driven by a sudden interest in expansionism. With the growing unrest amongst the disgruntled working class, his untimely death, for a minute minority, was a blessing in disguise. However, it was lamentable that the late emperor had consequently bequeathed his son with a plethora of problems that could either make or break him.

Jongin hoped it was the former rather than the latter. He snuck a glance at his brother and tentatively asked, "How are you feeling... about Brother Minseok's wedding?"

Jongin watched Junmyeon flinch. "It does not matter how I feel." But as Junmyeon said this, Jongin noticed the woe in his dark eyes. "His wedding has nothing to do with me."

"But his union to Princess Chayoung—"

"You do not need to concern yourself with that" Junmyeon abruptly intervened.

Jongin eyed his brother with concern. "But, brother..."

"Enough, Jongin" Junmyeon snapped. He suddenly got up, his earlier warmth was replaced with an unfamiliar coldness. "I must leave now," he told him with his back turned, "I will visit you when I return."

Jongin's eyes trailed after Junmyeon's lonely profile as he left his quarters. He sighed. Jongin had always believed that his situation was pitiful but he truly wondered whether that was the case at all. For while he lacked the ability to venture out of his own home, he had never been subjected to the pain that his older brother experienced on a daily basis.

"I guess true happiness is fleeting" he murmured.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 15 of The Brothers Kim.
I hope you are enjoying the story so far.
Streamers of green and gold fluttered in the wind as the large crowd waited for the appearance of the new emperor. It was still early but the palace grounds were already buzzing with anticipation. All the clan leaders from the kingdom eyed each other, acknowledging the other's presence but nonetheless regarding everyone with the same wariness they would if they were on enemy grounds. After all, it wasn't long ago since their forefathers were at war with each other.

But for this particular day, they were all united in one thought only. And that was the desire to find out what kind of man was the new ruler of their great kingdom.

Masked by the decorations of grandeur that graced the palace walls, the clansmen were a melting pot of conflicting interests. Like mantises in the grass, they blended in the background but their intentions were as noticeable as a cicada's cry.

With one glance, Zeren could see through their cordial smiles and dignified postures as he surveyed the vicinity with eyes like a hawk. In his imperial attire, Zeren did his duty as the emperor's bodyguard by scouting the palace grounds for any sign of danger. He observed that stationed in all corners of the palace grounds, were the late emperor's imperial guards: men that Zeren still didn't quite trust. After all, it had only been two weeks since he and His Majesty had arrived in the capital.

Zeren knew that danger followed His Majesty everywhere ever since he left the safety of the temple. In fact, he knew since long ago that His Majesty was always destined for the roughest of roads even from boyhood. And staring at the large crowd of people, Zeren realised that they had finally reached that rough road.

The problem was, they were just at the beginning.

~*~

With graceful steps, Princess Chayoung made her way to her younger brother's quarters, where he was still being groomed for his coronation.

"Your Majesty?" she spoke, her voice soft and modulated. Chayoung waited outside the emperor's quarters for an answer.

"Come in" he heard his voice say.

Chayoung entered his chambers and her eyes were immediately greeted by an attractive, young man with an ethereal appearance. He was wearing red imperial robes that were embroidered with golden phoenixes: a symbol of his royal status as the next heavenly sovereign of Saim.

He smiled at her fondly, making his eyes form thin crescent moons before signalling for the royal maids to grant them privacy. The anxiousness that Chayoung was feeling before entering his room melted away almost instantly as she returned his kind smile. She was grateful that, even though they had been separated since infancy, he treated her with brotherly kindness as if they had never parted at all. Was what the elders told her about him a lie? Her brother seemed perfectly fine when he was with her.

"Sister, how dashing you look" he complimented as his eyes took in her
appearance. Chayoung shuffled on her feet shyly. "You will be the main highlight of the day."

"You jest, Your Majesty" she replied softly. "We both know that today you are the main highlight. While it is my wedding day, it is also your coronation."

The young emperor-to-be looked at her apologetically. "Forgive me, sister. If only father had not passed away so soon..."

"Please, Your Majesty" Chayoung urged. "There is no need for you to seek my forgiveness. It is only right that you are coronated today. How can I wed without the emperor's blessing?"

The young man peered at her uncertainly before shifting his gaze back to the full-length mirror in front of him. He inspected his reflection closely, his crescent eyes searching the man in the looking-glass, who stared back at him with anxiety and doubt. Am I really ready for this? He thought to himself. While his sister and the rest of the kingdom saw a young emperor-to-be, all he saw was a young man, barely in his twenties, inheriting a kingdom he knew nothing about.

Clothed in royal garments, he was able to hide away his insecurities that threatened to expose his true thoughts. It was as if each unfamiliar layer hid a part of himself—parts which were vulnerable and had no place in his life now. To be a good emperor, he must conceal his flaws so that his enemies cannot use it against him. He must be perfect. But with every layer of imperial clothing he put on, his shoulders felt heavy and burdened by the weight: a load symbolic of the expectations and hopes of his people that now rested on his shoulders.

Sensing his nervousness, Chayoung stood behind him so that her reflection was gazing back at her too. "Are you okay, Your Majesty—?" she reached her hand out to touch his shoulder but in one frantic motion, the young emperor suddenly flinched and swatted her hand away.

Chayoung was momentarily stunned by his abrupt reaction. She bowed her head immediately. "I beg your forgiveness, Your Majesty" she fumbled, "I did not- I did not mean to offend you."

Shaken up, the young emperor slinked further away from her. "No," he murmured while trying to control the tremor in his hands, "I apologise." He peered at his sister with a mournful expression, one that Chayoung thought exhibited a hint of shame. "Forgive me... I am just nervous about the coronation and the responsibility that comes with it."

"I understand" Chayoung replied sympathetically with her gaze still averted. She could only imagine the pressure her poor brother must be feeling.

"It is all just..." he paused as he searched for the right word, "overwhelming. I fear I will not live up to father's expectations."

At this, Chayoung raised her head. "You will, Your Majesty" she replied determinedly. "You carry his legacy and I have no doubt that you will do him proud by taking care of our great kingdom." Chayoung dared to look at the young emperor in the eye as she uttered, "It is your kingdom now."

He smiled weakly. "Thank you, sister."

Chayoung was relieved to see the crease on her brother's forehead relax. Since he had arrived two weeks ago, she had scarcely seen him smile genuinely. In an attempt to divert his attention from the pending formalities, she asked carefully, "How do you find the capital so far?"

"Fascinating!" he replied. "There are so many things Benkei has that the temple does not. For
instance, the scenery is most diverse and the architecture is most exquisite."

The princess listened attentively as the young emperor described his journey and all that he had observed up until that moment. She enjoyed seeing him in awe of his surroundings and the customs of which he was now part of. The manner he told his tales had a child-like innocence to it that it made her feel like she was seeing Saim through his eyes. For Chayoung, it was refreshing.

"But I did encounter something distasteful" she heard him say.

Chayoung peered at him curiously. "Oh?"

"On my way to the palace, I witnessed a case of thievery." The emperor eyed his sister solemnly as he revealed his account of what happened two weeks prior...

~*~

"Your Majesty!" Zeren hissed as the young emperor-to-be paced ahead of him. "You mustn't stray too far ahead!"

The young man turned and frowned at his companion. "'Your Majesty'?" he said while arching his brow, "Zeren, I already told you, please just address me as you normally do."

Zeren pulled a face. "You know that I can't."

The young man searched around him and found that no one was paying any attention to them. "But you should," he insisted while gesturing to the pedestrians that were ambling by. "We will draw attention to ourselves if you keep calling me 'Your Majesty'."

At this, Zeren was thoughtful.

"And we do not want that, now, do we?"

Zeren pursed his lips. He could see from the young man's playful expression that he was enjoying getting his way with him. Even as a child, his mischievous and witty nature were what made him stand out from the other boys in the temple. Sometimes, Zeren wondered how he had come to befriend such a carefree person like him.

"Fine," Zeren conceded hesitantly. "But once we are in the palace, I can't call you that anymore."

The young man eyed him sadly. "It really is the end of our time in the temple," he mumbled. "If even you, my closest friend, stop calling me by my name then it is almost like my life until now has been erased."

Zeren was regretful. "I'm sorry, Chim."

The young man perked up immediately. Hearing his name made his lips curl into a grin. "No worries. I know that you did not need to leave the temple, yet you chose to. And for that, I am grateful."

"How can I ever let you go by yourself?" Zeren asked. "You won't survive a day without me."

Chim grinned at his friend playfully. "That is true. Since childhood, we have been inseparable." He stared at the horizon, where he could just about see the striking, golden palace rooves in the distance. It was a daunting reminder of how close he was to completely abandoning his carefree life. "At least for now, we can still be ourselves."
Zeren followed his gaze. "But we mustn't dawdle for long. The elders are waiting for you. Not to mention Her Highness too."

Chim was quiet. "Yes, I will finally be able to meet my sister after so long..."

The pair, disguised in old military attire, resumed their trudge to the palace on foot. It had been a long and tiring journey from the temple, where they had been living for the past decade. Dusty and weary from their voyage, a sense of relief overcame them when they finally reached the inner circle of the capital. What they saw waiting for them, left them intrigued. All around them were sights they had only ever heard from in tales told by travellers that had passed their old home. Large, imposing buildings greeted their eyes wherever they went, with each one more extravagant than the last.

Chim and Zeren gawked in awe as they tried to absorb the breath-taking scenery. The sound of the market streets humming with life was like foreign music as they weren't accustomed to so much noise, so much variety and in general, so much life. It was like being amongst people for the first time. Gone were the fruit trees and rural grounds that encircled their old reality. There were no hilly paths and large landscapes of green but instead, dirt roads and exquisite buildings paved their path. It was a stark contrast to the tranquillity that Chim once was surrounded by.

"I wonder if the palace maids really are charming beauties."

Chim turned to his friend questioningly.

"What? Don't tell me you aren't curious about them. After so long, we are finally going to be around women," he gave his friend a wily smile, "you especially."

"You have such impure thoughts" Chim replied, blushing slightly. He arched his brow and added, "Do not tell me you chose to come along because of that reason?"

Zeren snickered, "Well, I will admit that it played a part in convincing me to go."

"Pervert."

"Hey, desiring a woman is not perverse" Zeren informed him. "Just because we grew up amongst the celibate does not mean we too must be celibate." Zeren paused as he discreetly watched a pair of lavishly dressed women saunter past them. "And besides, you are expected to claim a bride soon, right?"

Chim gave an unsure look. "Yes, that is correct."

"Then, you should really acquaint yourself with women more. After all, the future of our kingdom is in your hands." Zeren gave a sideward glance and sneakily added, "Well, more like your peni——"

"Oh! My stomach! It hurts!"

Zeren stopped midway his sentence as a shrill voice caught his and Chim's attention. There, not too far away from them, was a young woman who was clutching her stomach in pain. A huddle had started to encircle around the meat bun stall she was in front of.

"It looks like that woman is ill" Chim observed from afar.

Chim heard Zeren cluck his tongue. "I bet it's just some circus performance."

"What?" Chim was astounded by Zeren's lack of sympathy. "How can you tell? What if she really is ill?"
"Chim," Zeren said his name sternly, "we can't keep going around helping every sick person that we meet."

"But if we can do something to help, then we should—"

"No," Zeren replied sharply.

Zeren's tone startled Chim. "No?"

"No," he replied a lot more firmly than before. "Have you already forgotten what happened last time?"

Chim was quiet. After a while, he responded, "No... I have not."

Zeren crossed his arms over his chest as he reminded him, "Remember what happened with the traveller? Well, he wasn't as ill as we thought..."

During their travels, Chim and Zeren had encountered a traveller collapsed on the road. He appeared to have collapsed because of the sun. Without hesitation, Chim did his best to help the poor man by giving him his portion of their rations so that he can regain his strength. He gave him his remaining loaf of bread and his half-empty flask of water. While he and Zeren left in search of help, the beggar, not being ill at all, stole their supplies and horses, leaving Chim and Zeren stranded on the road. They had been swindled! It was a miracle that they had made it to the capital at all.

"But we are safe now" Chim argued. "And what can that woman steal from us? We have nothing of value."

Zeren frowned. "You are of value."

"What?"

"Chim, if anything happens to you, our kingdom is doomed."

Chim's eyes softened. "Relax, Zeren. I will be careful."

Zeren watched as Chim ran towards the growing huddle of pedestrians, who were being drawn to the cries of the ill woman like flies to a beacon. He shook his head as he muttered, "He's too kind for his own good."

As Chim approached, he overheard the shouts of the spectators, who were arguing with the meat bun vendor.

"What could be wrong with her?"

"Might she have eaten something bad?"

"It must be the meat buns! They must be expired!"

Chim slipped through the crowd so that he was at the front of the circle. While the proactive pedestrians engaged in verbal fencing with the vendor, Chim paid attention to the woman, who had curled up into a ball on the floor. He was surprised to find that the woman was a lot younger than he initially thought.

"Are you okay, young miss?"

The woman's eyes opened and Chim watched as her features morphed to show an expression of
surprise. Chim hoped that his cheeks had not turned pink. Like he had practised many times before, he tried to remain composed as he helped her up. "That salesman will bring you to a physician" he informed her, in a voice he hoped was reassuring. "Do not fret. We will ensure that you get the proper treatment for food poisoning."

Chim watched as the young woman continued to gape at him, making him slightly uncomfortable. He had never been in close contact with a young woman before so he couldn't help feeling shy. But that wasn't going to stop him from offering his help. After all, the monks had taught him to be hospitable to all sorts of people: be it a beggar, a noble, a child, a woman.

He gazed at the woman expectantly, but before he could get a reply from her, they were both suddenly side-tracked by the vendor's gruff voice. Chim was startled when the woman suddenly got up, her earlier pain gone. A puzzled expression riddled her face which rapidly changed to one of alarm when she saw that the vendor was arguing with a young boy.

"That stupid brat" he heard her mutter.

She was about to run ahead when Chim suddenly stopped her, "Wait!"

The young woman turned to face him.

"Are you okay now? Do you not feel pain anymore?"

She tilted her head at him in confusion but then realisation dawned in her eyes. "Erm, yeah. Don't worry," she laughed awkwardly, "I'm fine now—"

"But your stomach—"

"It's good!" she replied hastily, still distracted by the boy and the vendor who were now playing tug-o'-war with a pouch. "I gotta go."

The young woman raced ahead but Chim managed to catch her by the sleeve of her arm. She turned to him again, bewildered that he was still following her.

"You should not run, it will be bad for your stomach" he explained.

The woman tugged herself free, "Let go, I need to help him—"

"Help him?" Chim repeated. He peered at the boy and soon realised what was going on. "Are you in league with that thief?"

The woman froze which confirmed Chim's suspicions.

"Sorry!" she shouted before bolting away.

Chim shouted after her, "Wait! Stop!"

But by then, he was already too late. The young woman had managed to escape with her accomplice along with a bag of meat buns.

~*~

Chayoung tried her best not to scowl. "You should be careful, Your Majesty" she uttered with concern. "What if you had gotten hurt?"

"You need not worry, sister. I can take on a thief or two."
"Still..." Chayoung murmured.

Chim had a small smile. After two weeks of staying at the palace, it was the first time he had properly opened up to her. "How about you? Are you feeling nervous?" He realised that he didn't know a lot about her.

"Nervous about what, Your Majesty?"

"Why, your marriage, of course," Chim replied. "I heard that it was arranged by father."

Chayoung's cheeks were tinted rose.

"It is to one of the clansmen if I am not mistaken."

"Yes," Chayoung answered. "I am betrothed to the Kim's eldest son, Kim Minseok."

"Kim Minseok..." he muttered under his breath while deep in thought. He met eyes with Chayoung, "But were you not attached to one of the other brothers? In your last letter, you spoke of a Kim Junmyeon—"

"That was a long time ago" Chayoung interrupted. Chim noticed his sister fumble with her sleeve. "Minseok is my fiancé" she stated, before looking at her brother resolutely. "My duty is to him now."

"Well, sister, as long as you are happy with him, I have no qualms."

"Oh yes, I am very happy" she responded eagerly. "He has treated me kindly since we were children and I have grown fond of him." Chayoung peered up at him as she spoke, "But now, all I worry about is you."

"What do you mean?"

"Your Majesty, after you are coronated, you must find a bride."

Chim's face grew grim.

Chayoung continued, "You have the duty of providing heirs. You cannot do as father did and only produce one son. You must produce plenty—"

"I am aware of my imperial responsibilities, sister" Chim spoke icily. "But like father, I only have the capacity to love one woman. I do not wish to bed many young maidens just so that I can produce an heir."

"But you must!" Chayoung replied. "You, of all people, should know how much pressure there is for only one prince. His life would be in danger at all times—"

A knock on the door caused Chayoung to fall silent.

"Your Majesty?" It sounded like Zeren.

Chim shifted his glance from Chayoung as he ordered, "Come in."

Zeren appeared and bowed upon seeing that Chim was not alone. "Greetings, Your Highness" he addressed Chayoung before turning his attention back to Chim. "Your Majesty, it is time."

Chim sighed at those words. This is it, he thought inwardly.
"But before we go" Zeren suddenly spoke, interrupting his reverie, "there is still the small matter of
your regal name."

"My regal name?" Chim repeated.

"Yes," he replied. "The royal eunuch is asking as he will be announcing your name during the
coronation. What shall I tell him?"

Chim hesitated. He knew that he couldn't use the name that the monks had bestowed upon him ever
since he had started living with them in the temple.

"Jimin."

Chim turned to Chayoung.

"Tell him," she said while looking at her brother, "to call him Jimin."

Zeren nodded understandingly. "Jimin" he spoke with awe, "so be it." He eyed his friend with the
utmost respect, "Long live Park Jimin, the new emperor of Saim!"

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 16 of The Brothers Kim.

At last! Jimin has finally made an entrance. Will he and Gyuri cross paths again?
With their breaths bated, the men at court eyed the entrance of the palace, where they were expecting the new emperor to make his anticipated appearance. Hushed whispers could be heard as the men exchanged looks with each other when they spotted one of the eunuchs emerge. He sounded the drum and all murmurings ceased. Everyone peered up expectantly.

"His Majesty, Park Jimin, the emperor of Saim!"

The new emperor materialised from the shadows, revealing his face for the first time. Reluctantly, his subjects kneeled before him but not until they had fully digested his features in a blink of an eye.

The first thing the clansmen noticed was that their new emperor was undoubtedly a young one. Even from the back of the palace grounds, one could discern his age from the size of his frame and the way he walked. He was not a very tall man and his gait was somewhat unrefined, indicating to the men present that His Majesty had not yet acquired the gallant stride, of which all royals possessed.

But like an unpolished jade, the clansmen could see that the new emperor had the potential to rule. He may not have received the education that all emperors before him had received, but only time will tell if this will prove a disadvantage to his reign. After all, he was now the Mandate of Heaven: the just ruler—the Heavenly Son of Celestial Saim—and only he could cease the turbulence which rippled across the kingdom.

One by one, the clansmen approached the new emperor and swore their allegiance to him, reciting a sacred oath that vocalised their undying loyalty and love for their kingdom and ruler. It was a revered ceremony, one that the people of Saim took seriously to demonstrate their patriotism.

"...I am your humble servant" one of His Majesty's loyal subjects would say, before rising to make way for the next person.

~*-~

"Gyuri!"

With a sudden jolt, Gyuri broke away from her daydream. "Huh? What? What's up?"

Kalyani scorned at her from the other side. "Are you still not done?" She gestured at the partially polished deck of floorboards outside one of the Kim brothers' personal living quarters. "The Kims will be arriving from the palace soon—why are you not finished yet?"

"I'm going as fast as I can, alright?" she retorted while scrubbing more vigorously, "There's just so much to clean."

"Quit your whining" Kalyani sneered. She rolled her eyes as she tutted, "Of all the people I had to work with, it had to be you."

Two hours before, Madam Zhou had distributed the tasks amongst the maids. Gyuri had hoped that she would be given something easy but, to her dismay, she had been allocated to clean quarters. And to make matters worse, she had to work with Kalyani, who hated her to the core. Gyuri was immediately apprehensive: she detested paired work.
For Gyuri, 'working in pairs' often meant 'doing work for two'. As Subin, she never had any luck when it came to paired work in school. Often because she was always paired off to an idiot or a lazy arse, who couldn't care less about the task at hand. And more often than not, Subin ended up doing all the work by herself while her partner just signed off their name in the end.

Gyuri bit the insides of her cheeks to stop herself from lashing back at Kalyani. While she detested working with lazy bums, nothing could compare to her loathing towards stuck up teenage girls who looked down on others. If anything, whenever Gyuri met those type of girls, she was always reminded of the plastics from the film, 'Mean Girls'.

"Honestly," Kalyani grumbled as she scowled at Gyuri, "why couldn't I have been put on flower-making duty instead?"

"And why couldn't I have a more hardworking partner?" Gyuri muttered under her breath.

"What?" Kalyani snapped. "Did you say something just now?"

Gyuri gave her a sarcastic smile. "Nope. Nothing."

Kalyani narrowed her eyes at her before continuing with her task. With a half-hearted effort, she completed her end of the deck before pushing herself up from the floor. "Oh, look at that," she said while dangling her empty bucket, "I'm all out of water."

Gyuri ignored her and continued cleaning.

"I guess I'll have to go and refill it at the well" she stated, indirectly telling Gyuri of her plan to depart. Kalyani peered at Gyuri when she did not receive any sound of acknowledgement. She hmphed when she saw Gyuri fixated on cleaning the floorboards, blatantly ignoring her presence. Fine then, Kalyani thought to herself, I'll ignore you too, you arrogant wench.

With subdued annoyance, she got up hastily to leave but halted when she suddenly remembered that the house next door was out of bounds. A crooked thought immediately entered her mind accompanied by a roguish smile. This wench needs to be taught a lesson, she thought as she eyeballed Gyuri inconspicuously. I'd like to see how she gets out of this one.

"You should head over to the next house without me" Kalyani uttered, trying to mask her grin, "I'll come and join you once I'm done re-filling my bucket."

Gyuri gave Kalyani a sideward glance. She knew from her flippant tone that Kalyani was not in any hurry to return from the well. "Okay" she replied while rolling up her sleeve. "I'll see you in the next one."

When Kalyani was finally out of view, Gyuri let out an audible sigh. "I guess even bitches exist here too" she muttered bitterly. She huffed as she lifted her bucket and hoisted it to the next house, which was across the courtyard. "And here I thought I would be able to see the coronation today."

Gyuri pouted as she mused about the coronation. Before Kalyani had snapped her out of her reverie, she had been fantasizing a grand scene, one that she had seen many times in her historical K-dramas. There would be beautiful decorations, prim and proper ladies and often, a majestic ruler with a tragic past.

Oh, how she wished her life in Saim was a lot more interesting.

"Why couldn't I have switched bodies with a princess?" she asked herself aloud while making her way inside the house. "It sucks that I'm a maid."
As Gyuri contemplated this, her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a melancholy tune. Gyuri halted in her steps as she listened to the music drifting from inside. Strings were delicately plucked to produce a sorrowful melody, one that conveyed a sense of hesitance and grief as if the musician was lamenting the passing of a loved one. She listened attentively, her heart aching at the richness of the sound produced. So much emotion was conveyed through one instrument. In her mind's eye, she was suddenly seeing the image of Yoongi and her dad, who she hadn't seen for almost a month. Their faces were burned at the back of her mind as the music continued to envelop her in its bittersweet melody; her eyes growing moist the longer she listened to the music and thought of them.

How did a piece move her so much?

Curious to find out who was playing such a poignant melody, Gyuri peered through the crack in the sliding door. There, at the far end of the room, was a pale-faced boy hunched over a stringed instrument. She gaped at him in wonder, taking in his ghostly appearance. Like the shade of moonlight, his skin was as translucent as paper while his eyes, which were framed by very long lashes, were half-closed as if he was in a trance.

Gyuri was mesmerised by the elegance of his hands as they glided across the guzheng with ease. With each string that was plucked, a chord in her heart was struck and a new image of her family flashed before her eyes. It was like she had been enchanted by his music. In fact, when was the last time her ears were greeted by a sound other than the cockerel's crow in the morning? To Gyuri, hearing music again was a novel experience. But what she found most peculiar about the whole ordeal was the instrumentalist himself. Who was he? And why was he playing such sad music on a joyous occasion like today?

Knowing that it wouldn't be wise to suddenly interrupt, Gyuri slowly backed away from the door. She decided that she would come back later, maybe even ask Kalyani about him when she arrived. But before she could, she suddenly tripped on her bucket causing the remaining water to spill across the floor. Gyuri cursed under her breath as she fumbled to clean the mess up as quietly as she could, desperately hoping that the boy on the other side didn't hear.

"Who is there?"

"Oh, damn it."

"Brother? Is that you?"

Gyuri inspected her surroundings wildly as she tried to figure out what to do. Maybe she could run and hide before the boy walked over to her side?

But before she could act, the sound of approaching footsteps was abruptly heard. The door slid open and soon, towering above her, was the pale-faced boy. He looked down at her curiously, his dishevelled dark brown hair was tied into a ponytail with stray strands framing his small face. Gyuri observed how he was wearing white robes—ones that she knew were often used as pyjamas. Seeing that it was a young lass in front of him, the boy blushed slightly as he covered himself with a pale blue jacket that resembled a kimono. As he did so, Gyuri noticed how there were intricate patterns embroidered on the sleeves. After spending a month in Saim, Gyuri had learned that only the nobility wore heavily adorned clothes. And seeing the boy wear something expensive led her to deduct that he was someone of high status: he was one of the Kims.

"Who are you?" he questioned Gyuri cautiously. He narrowed his eyes as he inspected her appearance and then the puddle at his doorstep. He frowned when he recognised the clothes she was wearing. "You are a maid. You should not be here."
"I'm-I'm sorry, Master" Gyuri fumbled as she tried to wipe away the puddle at the same time. "I didn't mean to disturb you—I didn't know that someone was still here."

He surveyed the vicinity as if he was searching for someone. "You should go before my brother comes" he replied. "He will not like it if he finds you here."

Gyuri nodded. "Right away, Master" she muttered with her head bowed.

The boy watched as Gyuri prepared to leave. But before she did, he suddenly spoke again, "I have not seen you before. Are you new?"

Gyuri meekly nodded in reply.

The boy considered this. "Actually, I am quite bored at the moment," he said out of the blue. "Will you accompany me for a little while?"

"Accompany you?" Gyuri repeated uncertainly. "But you just said I should go..."

The boy's mouth stretched into a playful smile. "Yes, that is true" he replied. "But I just thought it would be nice to talk to someone. It is rare for me to have a visitor, save from Tutor Wentai, Physician Koh and my brother." He gestured at the deck. "And you came here to clean, right? You might as well clean while you are here."

Gyuri eyed him sceptically. One minute he wants me to leave, the next he wants me to stay. "Okay," she warily answered. "It's not like I can refuse what the Kims want anyway. Gyuri placed her bucket and rag down as she prepared to polish the deck.

Pleased, the young boy gave her a small smile before returning to his room.

From the corner of her eye, Gyuri watched as the boy settled next to his instrument as he resumed playing the same tune from before. Immediately, she was once again transported into a meditative state as the fluttering music carried her into the recesses of her memories. Gyuri closed her eyes as she let the music wash over her, filling up the courtyard with a melancholy tune that, by the end, left her at the brink of tears. Gyuri hastily dabbed at her eyes before her tears had the chance to escape. She sniffled while she applauded him.

"You play so beautifully" she commented. "But that piece... why does it sound so sad?"

"Some people may interpret it as sad" he replied while admiring his guzheng, "but to me, it conveys a longing for something unattainable."

Gyuri watched as he subtly turned his attention to the garden overlooking his room. It may have been her imagination but, Gyuri thought she saw a hint of sadness in his dark eyes.

He murmured, "True happiness is fleeting."

Puzzled by his utterance, Gyuri wished to pry further but was mindful of her station. Instead, she asked, "Erm, master?"

The boy turned to face her.

"I know this may seem odd but, may I know your name?"

The boy looked taken aback. "My name?"

"Yes."
The boy continued to gape at Gyuri before letting out a small chuckle. "My name is Jongin" he replied. He smiled as he added, "I am the fourth son of Kim."

"Master Jongin..." Gyuri muttered under her breath. She eyed him curiously and guessed that he must be at least a few years older than her, if not, her age.

"And you?" he enquired, somewhat entertained by something as trivial as introductions. "May I know yours?"

Gyuri fumbled in reply, "It's Gyuri, Master Jongin."

"Gyuri..." he repeated to himself. "You have a lovely name."

Gyuri grinned sheepishly.

"But it does surprise me that you do not know all your masters." Jongin tilted his head slightly as he questioned, "Did Madam Zhou not educate you?"

"Err..." Gyuri scratched her head awkwardly. "She did but I'm not good with names." She thought for a moment before asking, "Are there any other Kims I should be aware of?"

"Well, there are six of us in the household, including me" Jongin explained. "But..." he paused as if he was debating whether to continue, "there used to be eight of us."

"Eight Kims?"

Jongin nodded. "Our cousin lives with the Lees now that she is married" he elucidated. "And the other one..."

Gyuri observed how Jongin was reluctant to continue. She eyed his solemn expression as he gnawed at his bottom lip. "The other one was exiled a long time ago."

Oh...

"Is that person your cousin too?" Gyuri dared to ask.

Jongin shook his head. "No. The one that was exiled was second brother. Brother Se—"

"What are you doing here?"

Jongin and Gyuri looked up at the sound of a steely voice. There, standing at the entrance was no other than Junmyeon, the scary brother. Junmyeon shifted his gaze from Jongin to Gyuri, his scowl deepening the longer his eyes lingered on her profile. Under his fierce glare, Gyuri retreated backwards, intimidated by his piercing eyes.

"Brother Junmyeon" Jongin began. "I can explain—"

"Get out!" he shouted at Gyuri. "How dare a lowly servant like yourself enter these quarters without permission?"

Gyuri jolted in surprise before scrambling to her feet. "I-I apologise, Master" she stuttered, her voice squeaky.

Jongin watched as Gyuri scurried off without a second glance. He felt terrible that Junmyeon had berated her even though it was he, who had requested her to stay. Once she was gone, he met eyes with his brother whose sharp features did not soften at all. Jongin was about to admonish him for his
rude behaviour when he noticed how flustered he was as if something was troubling him.

"Brother, are you alright?"

Junmyeon refused to meet his eyes. "Get ready for the wedding reception" he ordered, before stomping away.

Jongin watched as Junmyeon left with a defeated stride. It was then that he realised that the cause of his brother's outburst was not solely due to his overbearing protectiveness but because of the painful memory which stayed rooted in his heart. A painful memory that resurfaced because of the wedding ceremony between his first love and their eldest brother.

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Gyuri wiped her brow once she reached the safety of the courtyard. Her unexpected encounter with the scary brother had left her shaken up but, most of all, shocked that the brother the pale-faced boy was referring to was no other than Junmyeon. How could a mild-mannered person like Jongin be related to a ruthless guy like him?

"It's such a shame" Gyuri pondered aloud. "Master Jongin seemed like a nice guy." She scrunched her face up in thought as she tried to visualise his face. "And he was kinda cute too. I guess that's the last I'll be able to see of him."

As Gyuri trudged towards the next house, she suddenly heard someone calling her name.

"Gyuri!"

She turned and found that Pho was running towards her.

"At last! I found you!" she exclaimed in between pants. Pho's untidy appearance suggested to Gyuri that she had been running around. "You have to go back," she said, once she finally caught her breath.

Gyuri halted in her step. "Go back? Go back where?"

"The kitchen" Pho replied, breathing heavily. "The guests will be arriving soon and we're short-staffed."

Oh, no, Gyuri thought inwardly. That must mean I'll have to serve drinks or something. Gyuri bit her lip as she remembered the last time she served tea. "But I haven't finished cleaning—"

"Never mind that!" Pho interrupted. "Madam Zhou is requesting that we all return so that we can be debriefed again." She peered behind Gyuri. "Where's Kalyani? Isn't she supposed to be with you?"

Now that she mentions it... Gyuri joined Pho in looking around. "I don't know" she answered. "She went to refill her bucket but she never returned."

Pho sighed. "Okay, well, just go back. I'll search for her."

Gyuri watched as Pho sprinted ahead before Gyuri could say anything. Great, she thought inwardly, I guess I'm stuck with tea duty. Glumly, Gyuri sighed before scampering back to the kitchens while carrying her bucket and rag.

As she approached the building, she was surprised to see that the Kim household had undergone a noticeable transformation.
"Woah."

In front of her, vibrant paper garlands embellished the walls, coating the area with a festive ambience. A platoon of entertainers, dressed in equally colourful robes, were preparing their act with some even demonstrating their skill in juggling, singing and dancing. In one corner, Gyuri noticed a huddle of servants, carrying crates of what appeared to be fruit and other delicacies which were being hauled into the kitchens. In another part of the courtyard, she observed a band of musicians who were tuning their exquisite instruments—most of which were either string or percussion.

Gyuri's mouth was agape as she witnessed all the incredible sights before her. For her, it was like going to a fairground and she couldn't help but feel excited. As she scanned the area, she suddenly noticed a flustered Madam Zhou trying to instruct a lost musician on where to prepare his instrument. Gyuri decided to approach her. But as she was doing so, she ended up colliding with a scruffy-looking servant that she had never seen before.

"Oh, sorry" he apologised, his eyes darting around like he was on edge.

Gyuri raised a brow at his skittish behaviour. *What's up with this guy?* She asked herself internally. He eyed him closely and noticed how he had something tattooed on his arm. It resembled a flower. Following her gaze, the unknown servant tugged at his sleeve so that his tattoo was concealed. He smiled at her awkwardly.

"Do you know where the kitchen is?" he asked. "I'm actually from the palace" he quickly added while subconsciously tugging at his sleeve.

Not thinking much of his odd behaviour, Gyuri replied, "Yes, it's that way." And she pointed to the other side of the courtyard.

The scruffy servant nodded thankfully before scuttling off.

Gyuri watched him intently as he left. Something about his odd behaviour, despite not paying much attention to it, had triggered her instincts which warned her to stay clear of him. "He looks like he's high" Gyuri observed and then dismissively shrugged before approaching Madam Zhou once more.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Hi reader! Thanks for reading chapter 17 of The Brothers Kim.

Who could that strange servant be?

Find out next time!
"Sister!" Namjoon bellowed, "There you are!"

Like an excited puppy, Namjoon approached the glamorously dressed woman who was standing underneath the blossoming magnolia tree.

It was late into the summer evening and Namjoon had finally returned to the Kim household for the wedding celebrations which were already fully underway. Upbeat music spilled across the courtyard as many guests indulged in the liquor and delectable dishes prepared in honour of the newlywed couple. While the guests mingled over the entertainment and food provided, Namjoon had taken the opportunity to search for his older sister, who he hadn't seen since her wedding a month or so ago.

The woman peered over her shoulder and gave Namjoon a warm smile. "Joonie!" she exclaimed while extending her arms out to him. "I am so glad to see you."

Namjoon took her outstretched hands into his and held them gently. "How are you, sister?"

"As you can see" she replied with a sly smile, "I am quite well."

Namjoon continued to grin. But then, his smile slipped. "Why are you standing here all alone?" he queried. "Where is brother-in-law?"

Namjoon felt his sister's hands stiffen against his. "He is..." her voice trailed off as she looked past Namjoon's shoulder.

Following her gaze, Namjoon spotted the man in question laughing heartily amongst the company of several young maidens. Namjoon scowled.

"That scoundrel," he muttered. He turned to look at his sister and she noticed that his brows were furrowed, ruining his princely features. "How dare he leave you alone! I should have a word with him—"

"Joonie, there is no need" she hastily interrupted.

"But, sister—"

"Please, Joonie" she begged. "It will only make matters worse between my in-laws and I."

Reluctantly, Namjoon backed down, the tension in his arms easing away. "It is unfair, sister" he grumbled. "You should not have married that bastard, Lee Jongsuk." His eyes were forlorn as he stared into hers. "You deserve better."

The woman smiled weakly. "I had no choice. It was Uncle's wish that I married one of the Lees."

"Yes, but it should not have been him."

Namjoon watched as his sister gave a light laugh. "On the contrary, I think I am fortunate that it was him. At least it was not Minho."

The pair exchanged knowing looks in agreement. Out of the Lee brothers, Minho, the eldest of the
pair, was considered the worst. While Jongsuk was an incurable flirt, Minho, on the other hand, was a despicable misogynist.

Namjoon frowned at his sister's prospects.

Either way, she was fated to marry into a family that he did not approve of but had no say in the matter. After all, the Lees were an important ally; they were an influential family; they were part of the Jade Lotus. And being part of the Jade Lotus meant that the Kims, Parks and Lees were bound together by a sacred pact—a brotherhood—that needed to be solidified even further by the act of holy matrimony.

"Are you sure everything is well?" he asked Taeyeon. "The Lees have not been too dreadful to you, have they?"

Taeyeon shook her head slightly. "They are tolerable, to say the least."

Namjoon slowly released his grasp on her so that there was ample space between them.

"Joonie?"

Namjoon stared at Taeyeon with woeful eyes. It saddened him that his sister had to sacrifice her life and chance at happiness for a mere formality, binding her to a man that neither cares for her nor treats her the way a good husband should. For Lee Jongsuk, his sister, Kim Taeyeon, was no more than a transactional marriage. A marriage that was no better than a trade of livestock between two farmers.

"If father was alive, he would not have wanted you to marry him" he murmured solemnly. "I feel as though I have failed him by letting Uncle sign your life away to him."

"Do not blame yourself" Taeyeon kindly replied. "I already knew my duty as the only daughter of Kim."

Namjoon eyed her doubtfully. He could tell that she was only saying that to comfort him.

"But what about you?" she suddenly questioned, diverting his glum thoughts momentarily. "Now that Cousin Minseok is married, are you not considering marriage too?"

Namjoon was taken aback.

Taeyeon inspected her brother closely before gesturing at the many guests that swarmed the household courtyard. "Look around, dear brother. This place is teeming with eligible maidens. Handpicked by Uncle, no doubt." Her tone was sarcastic as she added, "He must be looking for our cousins' prospective wives."

"Prospective wives?" Namjoon repeated, puzzled. "If you are referring to Junmyeon, I doubt that he will settle down any time soon." He thought for a moment before mentioning, "And Jongin and Taehyung are still quite young."

"That has never stopped Uncle before" Taeyeon replied, her voice icy and impertinent. "I would not be surprised if he has already arranged your marriage for you too."

Namjoon whipped his head around wildly before hissing, "Sister, enough!"

"Why? It is not as if I am lying."

"No," Namjoon agreed, "but your tone is offensive." He glanced around warily again. "What if
Uncle hears you? It will cause unnecessary problems."

Taeyeon pouted. "Uncle has never taken kindly to me anyway..." she mumbled.

Namjoon eyed her pityingly.

"But that is beside the point" she continued, "while it is still early, you should marry a maiden of your choice."

"Sister, please do not rush me" Namjoon replied in a low voice. "I... I have no desire to marry yet."

Taeyeon gaped at him questioningly but said nothing. Eventually, she spoke again, "If you have no maiden in mind, I can introduce you to someone."

Namjoon suddenly looked up.

"She is called Lu Ten. She is a frequent visitor of the Lees and is of excellent breeding—"

"I am not interested" Namjoon interrupted.

"Then what type of maiden does interest you?" Taeyeon pried. She lowered her eyes as she made slight notions towards the guests who, she noticed, were sneaking glances at the pair. "Must I point out to you that you are as eligible for marriage as Cousin Junmyeon?"

Namjoon followed her gaze and indeed noticed the sudden weight of the stares directed their way.

Taeyeon observed, "If it is not the daughters that are eyeing you up, it is the mothers." She subtly pointed to a plump woman who had been eyeing Namjoon up hungrily. "You are like prized game in this party. All the mothers want you for their daughter."

Namjoon accidentally met eyes with the plump woman and he turned around abruptly. Flustered, he replied, "It is a shame but, I am not interested in marriage for now."

"Then you must hurry and gain an interest" Taeyeon urged him. "For it is better you marry a maiden of your choice in a hurry than being hurried to marry a maiden chosen for you."

~*~

Taehyung blew on his fringe for the third time. He was so bored. "Ugh" he groaned. "I hate banquets." He watched as the snobby guests laughed and cheered as the jesters made a fool of themselves with the same ridiculous routine he had seen time and time again. He frowned. "They are not even that humorous" he mumbled to himself.

Just as he was about to leave the entertainment grounds, he suddenly noticed Gyuri offering the guests tea. He stopped and waited for her to come around to his side. When she finally did, he tried his best to address her as usual.

"I see you are at tea duty again" he spoke, his tone somewhat nonchalant.

Gyuri's eyes rounded, evidently surprised that Taehyung had initiated conversation after two weeks of silence. Taehyung observed how her mouth opened as if she was about to say something but then, she closed it again and her brilliant eyes dimmed in resignation as she assumed her lifeless demeanour. She briefly glanced at him before pouring tea into his cup without uttering a word.

Taehyung watched her expectantly, awaiting her usual snarky remark but, none came. Alas, once his cup was full, she bowed to him politely before moving on to the next guest.
Taehyung was baffled. Why had Gyuri ignored him?

"Wait!" Taehyung called after her once she had finished serving everyone on his table.

Gyuri turned to face him, the teapot still in her hands. She had already walked away from the entertainment grounds and was on her way back to the kitchen, to refill her pot, when Taehyung had stopped her.

"Yes, Young Master?" she said in that infuriatingly polite tone.

Taehyung chose to ignore it. "Why did you ignore me back there?"

"I apologise" Gyuri replied innocently. "I did not wish to keep the other guests waiting."

He narrowed his eyes. "But that is not the only reason... is it?"

Her eye twitched. Taehyung could see that she was exercising her best efforts not to break her composure. Eventually, she answered in a low voice, "You're one to talk."

"Pardon?"

Gyuri searched her surroundings before audibly huffing. "I should be asking you why you've been ignoring me" she clarified.

At this, Taehyung remembered his and Namjoon's conversation from two weeks ago and he blushed. "I-I—it is complicated" he mumbled while shuffling on his feet.

Gyuri arched her brow.

"But I am talking to you now so can we just... talk?"

Gyuri hmphed in disbelief. "Fine," she snapped. "What do you want from me?"

Taehyung's lips thinned at her uninviting tone. "To talk. Like we used to."

"But what about?" she retorted impatiently. "Look, Young Master, if you haven't noticed, I'm actually working right now—" Gyuri turned to leave but Taehyung stopped her again.

"Wait!" he urged. "Why are you being like this? Have I done something to upset you?"

Gyuri scoffed in disbelief. Seriously? This kid must have a memory span of a goldfish. "You don't remember?"

"Remember... what?"

Gyuri sighed. She searched his face and seeing no sign of recollection, she divulged, "You're a complete idiot."

"What?"

"Two weeks ago, you almost drowned and you scared me to death!" she half-shouted. "Not to mention the fact that the orphans were scared out of their wits!"

Taehyung watched in consternation as Gyuri unbottled her pent-up anger from two weeks ago; unleashing a torrent of words that spouted out of her mouth like word vomit. By the time she was done, Taehyung was stunned speechless at having been scolded by a maid.
"Don't you dare do that again" she added sternly. "If you don't know how to swim, don't go in the water at all."

"I promise you, I will not be reckless again" he calmly assured her. But inside, Taehyung couldn't help bubbling with glee that Gyuri had been worrying over him. Even though it was humiliating to be scolded by someone beneath his station, he couldn't help but bask in the attention Gyuri was giving him. Briefly, he looked away to hide the smirk that was creeping up in the corners of his lips.

"Good," Gyuri curtly replied, satisfied that she had got the message across. "Well, if that's all, I should probably go—"

"Hang on," Taehyung cut her off. "It is my turn to speak."

Gyuri eyed him expectantly.

Taehyung cleared his throat while fidgeting with the cuff of his sleeve. As bravely as he could, he began, "How would you- how would you feel about becoming my..." he looked up at her shyly, his face reddening, "... becoming my personal maid?"

Gyuri blinked. "...What?"

"I have- I have been thinking of asking Madam Zhou" Taehyung resumed in a flurry, "to assign you over to me." He added hastily, "This way you would not have to do grunt work anymore. You will only have to look after my needs."

"Young Master..." Gyuri murmured, still stunned at his sudden proposition. "That's- that's very kind of you."

Taehyung smiled.

"But..."

"But?" Taehyung repeated, his smile slowly slipping.

"But, I'm gonna have to decline" Gyuri finished. "I can't be your personal maid."

Taehyung was bewildered. "Why not?"

"Because you already have a personal maid" Gyuri explained. "You have Kalyani."

"So?"

"What do you mean 'so'?"

"So, what if I already have one? If it bothers you that much, I can have her dismissed—"

"No!" Gyuri immediately protested. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what do you mean?" Taehyung huffily asked. He narrowed his eyes at her before nodding in acknowledgement. "I see" he sneered, "it is because of Cousin Namjoon."

Gyuri was taken aback. "Huh? Master Namjoon? Why's he bringing him up?"

Taehyung scowled at her as he spoke, "You do not wish to be my personal maid because you prefer Cousin Namjoon's company." He furrowed his brow as he added, "You have become smitten by him, just like the other maids!"
Gyuri fumbled as she replied. "I-I have not!" But she couldn't prevent her cheeks from flaming.

Lately, Gyuri had been visiting Namjoon in his quarters to bring him snacks every night and she couldn't deny that she enjoyed his company. He was an interesting and handsome, young man who was passionate about many things, most of which were Philosophy and Medicine. Whenever they conversed, he spoke to her as if she was his equal, patiently explaining difficult concepts and telling her tales of his time in the sanatorium. One would think that after two weeks of doing this, one would grow bored or run out of things to say but strangely enough, Gyuri didn't grow tired of Namjoon at all. If anything, she had grown fonder of him and had started thinking about him more than she should.

"That's absurd" Gyuri continued to deny, "I don't prefer anyone's company."

But still, Taehyung was doubtful. "Then, I want you to serve me" he declared determinedly. "I will replace Kalyani with you—"

"You can't!" Gyuri exclaimed, alarmed. *Kalyani would kill me if I take her place!*

"You can't- I can't be your personal maid, Young Master."

Taehyung's face was as dark as thunder. "You cannot? Or you will not?" he asked contemptuously. "You are my admirer" he stated crossly. "Not his. You should be thrilled that I am offering this opportunity to you!"

"Is this what this is all about?" Gyuri scoffed in disbelief. "Young Master, like I said before, I'm not your admirer" she spoke sharply. "And I'm not Master Namjoon's either."

"Then why can you not work for me?" he persistently questioned.

"Because I don't want to!"

Taehyung blinked. "You... you do not want to?"

"That's right. Why would I ever want to work for an immature brat like you?" Gyuri snapped. "You always call me 'stupid' and 'ugly' and you always play pranks on me. Working for you as your personal maid will be like a living hell."

Gyuri observed as Taehyung averted his gaze as he tried to hide his wounded expression.

"Fine," he spat, "if being with me is such a living hell then, I will not bother you anymore, stupid Gyuri!" Taehyung swiftly turned tail and marched off before Gyuri could say anything more.

Once he was gone, Gyuri let out a frustrated sigh, mentally kicking herself for lashing out at Taehyung. "Stupid, stupid, stupid me!" she hissed while facepalming herself. She didn't mean to reveal what had been bothering her. She was just so stressed because of all the work she had been given, not to mention the fact that she hadn't had dinner yet so she was hungry. And whenever she was hungry, she became irritated easily.

Gyuri sighed once more. "I need to apologise..."

"Was that Master Taehyung just now?"

Gyuri quickly turned and found a well-groomed gentleman standing behind her. His long hair was tied up into a topknot to reveal a slender face with a bronze complexion. Gyuri noticed that he was dressed differently from the other guests as he was wearing turquoise robes with the imperial crest of flowers embroidered in green. It didn't take Gyuri long to recognise that the man before her was an
imperial guard.

He continued to gape at her, a playful glint twinkling in his eyes as he scanned her up and down, evidently doing more than inspecting her attire.

Warily, Gyuri took a small step back from his penetrating gaze. "Yes," Gyuri replied hesitantly, "that was the Young Master." Remembering that she was still carrying her teapot, she offered it to him. "Did you want some refreshment, sir?"

The imperial guard waved his hand. "Oh, no." He chuckled softly. "Please, call me Zeren" he insisted. "I'm not a guest here. I'm here as Her Highness' personal guard."

Gyuri regarded him with suspicion. If he really was the princess' guard, why was he asking about Taehyung instead of protecting Her Highness?

"Oh," Gyuri managed to say. "Is that so...?"

Zeren nodded. He cocked his head to the side as he inspected her closely. "And what's your name, young miss?"

Gyuri noticed him take a tentative step forward as he leaned in, trying to close the gap between them. Startled, she took another step back. "My-my name's Gyuri" she stuttered. There was something about him that made the hairs at the back of her neck stand erect.

"Gyuri?" he uttered her name as if he was tasting wine. "I like it. It suits you." He smiled at her flirtatiously to reveal an imperfect band of amber teeth. "A pretty name to suit a pretty lady."

Gyuri returned his smile but did so awkwardly.

"Say, did you know that some people call me cute?"

"Oh?" Gyuri replied, feigning interest. Why's he suddenly bringing himself up? Gyuri gave him another smile as if to agree but, inside, she was sceptical. To her, he kind of resembled a turd.

Zeren nodded enthusiastically. "It's true. And if you're pretty and I'm cute then, together we'd be 'pretty cute'." And he winked.

Gyuri froze as she internally cringed. Oh, my God, she thought. Is this guy trying to... flirt with me?

Zeren continued to grin at her as he resumed, "You know, for some reason, I was feeling a little off before going to the banquet today."

Still recovering from her initial shock, Gyuri hummed in reply.

"But that was until I met you" he purred while wiggling his eyebrows. "You definitely turn me on." "Right," Gyuri abruptly said as she inched further away from him. There's no way I want to stick around for any more of his cheesy pick-up lines! "It's been nice talking to you, Sir Zeren but, I gotta go and tend to the other guests—"

Gyuri turned tail and ran before Zeren could stop her, all the while mentally telling herself to steer clear of sleazy creeps like him.

In amusement, Zeren watched her leave while quietly chuckling to himself. "Gyuri, huh?" he murmured under his breath. He smirked as he nodded determinedly, "It seems I've found a potential conquest."
Hi reader! Thanks for reading chapter 18 of The Brothers Kim.

What could Zeren be up to?

Find out soon!
Adorned in her graceful ceremonial wedding garments and bedazzled with jewels of all sorts, Chayoung sat upright as she waited for her palanquin to enter the Kim household. For Chayoung, the journey to the Kims' residence was a novel one as she had never once left the palace since birth. And because it was her first time, she inevitably experienced a ripple of anxiety mixed with excitement. Even now as her palanquin entered through the large, carved gates, she couldn't quite believe that she was beyond the palace walls.

"Your Highness" she heard her footman say as her palanquin came to a halt. "We have arrived."

Taking that as her cue, Chayoung prepared to climb out of her carrier and set foot on mundane land-ground that her feet had never once touched since departing the palace. She inhaled deeply to steady her nerves.

All her life she had been told that the royal family was unique. She had been drilled in lessons of etiquette and propriety while other girls her age were being taught how to cook, sew and clean. Chayoung had always been envious of peasant girls: they had skills which, in her eyes, made them so accomplished. While they toiled away in the fields or houses or markets, Chayoung sat and learned about decorum and how to be an obedient wife. For her, her existence as the princess had always seemed meaningless. As a young girl, she had been reminded every day that she will fulfil her duty by marrying into a powerful family. Nothing else was expected of her: no one cared about how intelligent she was or what she liked or disliked—that was the extent of her usefulness.

Like a flower on a mountain, Chayoung was revered and segregated from the common person. She was neither human nor goddess: she was a decorative doll. And because of that, she was out of touch with reality.

But that all changed when she met him.

The doors swung open and Chayoung blinked away the sudden surge of light that glared down at her. It was already late in the evening but sunlight still shone from the sun since today was the summer solstice: the longest day of the year. Once her eyes had adjusted, she was greeted by the sight of the person she was destined to spend the rest of life with—her husband, Kim Minseok. Immediately, she felt reassured.

Minseok smiled at her kindly, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he offered her a helping hand. Gladly, she took it and her palm was enveloped in his, wrapping her in a warmth that reached down to her chest. Even though she had been resentful of her position in life, she couldn't help but feel thankful that she was born a princess rather than a peasant. For despite living in a solitude but luxurious palace, she had found someone who understood her and gave her life a new purposeful meaning.

Side by side, Minseok and Chayoung entered the courtyard, where they were greeted by excited guests. Like rain, petals fluttered down, gracing their path in a flower road as the newlywed couple joined in with the festivities that were fully underway. Wonder filled Chayoung's eyes as she searched the audience who beamed at her, an unfamiliar feeling of happiness filling her up. She had so long been eclipsed by the shadow of her brother that she couldn't remember the last time anyone celebrated anything related to her.
"Are you nervous, my princess?"

Chayoung turned to Minseok who was peering at her curiously. How her heart leapt when she heard those words! Shyly, she responded, "I am fine, my love." She couldn't help blushing every time Minseok spoke so endearingly. He reminded her that she wasn't just the princess of their kingdom anymore, she was also his princess now.

The pair sat at their designated pedestals which overlooked the rest of the festivities. The extravagant banquet before her was not on the same calibre as the banquets held at the palace but Chayoung didn't mind. All that mattered to her was that she was next to her husband, who she adored deeply.

Minseok meekly smiled. "You must be very tired" he observed. "But, not to worry, we shall be back in the palace soon."

"We do not have to go back to the palace, you know" Chayoung answered. "I can stay and live here, with you and your family."

Minseok looked troubled. "It is not safe, my princess" he murmured. "The palace is the safest place in the city. And besides, you are not accustomed to life outside the palace walls. How can I ever deprive my wife of the standards she is accustomed to?"

Chayoung pouted. "I am not as fragile as everyone thinks." A crease formed on her forehead as she frowned. "We are equals now, my love. I can adapt to life outside the palace and besides," she mentioned while gesturing at the Kim household, "I think I would enjoy living here."

"Still..." Minseok mumbled, "living here might prove uncomfortable after a while."

Puzzled, Chayoung gaped at her husband with a quizzical stare. In return, he gave her a knowing look and she soon relented, having understood the meaning behind his gaze. She averted her eyes as she weakly protested, "But it is unorthodox for the husband to live in his wife's home..."

"But you are not like every other wife" he reminded her. "You are the emperor's sister. I am sure His Majesty would prefer it if you remained in the palace. After all, it has been many years since you had last lived together."

Minseok observed as Chayoung gave an audible sigh. But before he could say anything to comfort her, she suddenly agreed, "You are right," and smiled warmly at him. "At least life at the palace will be more bearable now that you will be there with me."

Chayoung felt Minseok gently squeeze her hand. "Today is the start of our happy life together," he told her, before planting a kiss at the back of her palm. Chayoung gaped at him bashfully as he pulled away.

When was it that I fell in love with this soft-hearted and considerate man?

Chayoung was still in disbelief at how blessed she was to have found love despite the circumstance of their union. When she discovered that she was to marry Minseok, she just accepted her fate obediently. She didn't dare hope for anything in return. She didn't dare hope for attention, for happiness or for love to blossom between them but she was very fortunate that it did. Chayoung never once expected that she could be as happy as everyone else. And for once, she was thankful that she was Princess Chayoung rather than just Chayoung. After all, if it weren't for her title, how else would she have met the love of her life?

Minseok turned his attention to the festivities below them and Chayoung followed suit. Everyone was dancing gleefully along to the upbeat music. It was a joyful banquet that lifted the moods of the
attendees, allowing everyone to briefly forget the instability that plagued their fragile kingdom. With the festive spirit in the air, Chayoung couldn't help but radiate with bliss. Everywhere, the sound of jubilant laughter and singing surrounded her, causing her lips to curl into a smile.

*I hope His Majesty is enjoying a similar scenery at the palace*, she thought as she swept her gaze across the crowd. *It is a shame that we could not celebrate together.*

But as she continued to observe the crowd, a pair of piercing, dark eyes suddenly caught her attention causing her to freeze. Chayoung's smile slowly faded as she realised who was staring at her with such intensity.

It was Junmyeon.

From across the courtyard, Junmyeon continued to gape at her, his eyes forlorn and his lips set in a hard line. When he saw her looking at him, he turned away and quickly busied himself by kicking back a shot of liquor. Upon discovering that his jug was empty, he scowled as he signalled for a maid to refill it with soju. Chayoung could tell that Junmyeon wasn't enjoying the festivities at all. A wave of guilt overwhelmed her as she continued to watch him drink the night away as if he were trying to drown away his sorrows.

*It cannot be helped*, she internally reminded herself. *We were young and naïve back then.* She shook her head subtly as if to shake off the guilt that was slowly consuming her. *You are married now. Forget about the past and live in the present!*

But as much as Chayoung wished to lock away the memories which threatened to resurface, she couldn't avoid a small part of her that ached at the sight of Junmyeon's despondent reaction- the same small part of her that once harboured romantic feelings for him. Not being able to bear it any longer, Chayoung looked away.

"Congratulations on your marriage, Princess."

At the sound of a taut voice addressing her, Chayoung looked up. From her side, Minseok grew tense as he curled his fingers tightly around hers. She gaped at Minseok briefly and noticed him clench his jaw.

"Thank you, General Lee" Chayoung replied as she turned her attention back to the man before them.

General Lee nodded politely but his cold gaze was at odds with his body language.

From his seat, Minseok observed the proud way in which he carried himself as his broad shoulders were straightened like he was flaunting his chest. In his fine robes and semi-tied hair, General Lee exuded an intimidating aura, most likely because of his military prowess. From the distance, anyone could see that General Lee feared no one, but in turn, everyone feared him. But to Minseok, all he could feel was contempt towards the man and the family he belonged to. After all, the Lees were known for their underhandedness and General Lee Minho was no exception.

"Fancy that, Princess" he spoke with a slight sneer, "you are now married to one of the brightest and most powerful men in the kingdom."

Minseok smiled wryly at his compliment. He knew that Minho wasn't sincere.

Minho continued, "Not to mention that he has also been appointed to be His Majesty's advisor." He smiled sarcastically as if to provoke Minseok. "I guess one can say that he is the one that pulls the strings in this kingdom-"
"Hold your tongue!" Chayoung exclaimed suddenly, startling both Minseok and Minho. "I will not have you insult not only His Majesty but my husband too, General Lee."

Sensing that some of the guests had turned towards them, Minho cleared his throat. "I beg your pardon, Princess" he rushed to say, his neck reddening, "I apologise if I had offended you with my careless remark."

"You will do well not to speak like that again" Chayoung answered curtly. "Please do not overstep your position."

Minho reluctantly bowed. "Of course, Princess" he muttered and Chayoung noticed him purse his lips. "If you will excuse me, I must greet the other guests."

Minseok watched as Minho briskly walked away, evidently humiliated at having been scolded in public. He grinned in satisfaction at having witnessed his detested cousin-in-law amble away in shame. Minseok turned to his wife who was also flushed in the face. "You surprise me, my princess. It was very brave of you to stand up to him like that!"

"He deserved it. How dare he question you as His Majesty's advisor? You earned that position fairly."

"But some people may see my rise to such an important political position as the consequence of having married you." Minseok smiled at her weakly and Chayoung saw the resignation in his eyes. "I have yet to prove my worth to the rest of court."

"My love, you are an excellent politician regardless of the circumstance behind our union." Chayoung squeezed his hand in a bid to comfort him. "Do not pay attention to what others say, especially not General Lee. He is just bitter that the advisory position did not remain in his family's grasp."

Minseok gave a child-like and innocent smile. "You are right, my princess. If only I could be as brave as you when it comes to confronting people." Minseok averted his gaze as he confessed, "Sometimes I worry that you have married the wrong man. General Lee is very charismatic and has many military achievements under his belt. I, on the other hand, am just a scholar with a powerful name just like his-"

"Stop comparing yourself to him" Chayoung snapped which startled Minseok again. "You are the better man" she insisted tenaciously. "You are kind, smart and very wise. If I had married General Lee, I would have been very unhappy. Why, he is an egotistical, chauvinistic and manipulative fool that knows nothing more than to demean others mercilessly!" She eyed Minseok sternly before continuing, "You, on the other hand, are affectionate and caring." Her voice softened as she tenderly spoke, "And that is what I love about you."

Before Minseok could reply, a sweet melody escaped the strings of a nearby erhu, catching Minseok's attention. It was a slow and passionate tune that suddenly gave him a bright idea. He extended his arm out to Chayoung while eyeing her lovingly. "My princess, let us not ruin our wedding celebration by thinking of General Lee." His eyes crinkled in the corners as he smiled. "Will you do me the honour of being my partner for this dance?"

Chayoung's eyes rounded in surprise at his sudden suggestion. It was unheard of for royalty to dance, let alone dance in front of their guests. But seeing Minseok's earnest expression made it hard for her to refuse. *Just for tonight,* she thought, *I can let myself enjoy just for tonight."

"Of course, my love. I would be happy to."
Gyuri dared to peer behind her and sighed in relief when she discovered that she was alone. "Phew," she uttered while wiping her brow. "Thank God that creep isn't following me."

After her narrow escape from the imperial guard, Gyuri had rushed to get as further away from him as possible. She surveyed her surroundings and found that she had managed to arrive nearby the kitchens, where she had a good overview of the festivities. A long sigh escaped Gyuri's lips when she spotted Minseok and Chayoung dancing gracefully at the centre of the courtyard.

"Oh! They're so cute" she cooed while observing how Minseok never took his eyes away from his bride. As the couple glided across the dance floor in their strange but alluring dance, Gyuri couldn't help but sigh in envy at their enamoured expressions.

"That's relationship goals right there" she murmured to herself. "Why can't I get a guy that looks at me like that?"

While Gyuri pondered about this, she failed to notice someone approaching her from the shadows. The shadowed figure smirked when he saw Gyuri gazing at the couple with a wistful expression.

"I hope you are not skipping duties" he spoke, making Gyuri jump.

"Bloody hell!" she exclaimed as she turned while clutching the teapot in her hands tightly. "God, you scared me!"

The shadowed figure emerged from the darkness and Gyuri discovered that it was Namjoon. He grinned at her, revealing his dimples while wearing an entertained expression. Clearly, he was still amused by Gyuri's odd choice of language. "God did not scare you" he pointed out, "I did."

Namjoon walked over to join Gyuri's side before glancing at the festivities below them. "What are you doing all the way over here?"

Gyuri shuffled on her feet. "I-er, was just taking a break."

"Yes," Gyuri replied enthusiastically, "I haven't seen anything quite like it."

Namjoon continued to smile as he listened to Gyuri's account of what she had seen during the banquet. It didn't come as a surprise to him that Gyuri was captivated by the vibrancy of the affair. After all, it must have been her first time serving at a banquet.

"But there's one thing that kinda bothers me."

"Oh?" Namjoon peered at her attentively. "And what would that be?"

"There was this creep" Gyuri proceeded to explain. "He says that he's the Princess' bodyguard but he was asking about the Young Master."
"He was asking about Taehyung?" he repeated. "Why? What did he say?"

Gyuri cocked her head to the side as she thought. "Actually, all he asked was if it was the Young Master that was with me." Gyuri elaborated, "I was speaking to him before I met the bodyguard- Zeren- I think that's his name."

Namjoon tugged at his bottom lip as he pondered. "Zeren..." he mumbled to himself. He didn't recall ever meeting anyone with that name. "Did he say anything else?"

"Erm..." Gyuri fumbled as she debated if it was relevant to inform him of the flirty turd's flirtation attempt. In the end, she decided that it was too embarrassing to divulge. "N-no. That-that was it."

Namjoon contemplated the name some more.

"Master Namjoon?" Gyuri suddenly spoke, breaking his meditative state.

"Hm?"

"Do you know where the Young Master is?"

"Why do you ask?" He tugged at his bottom lip again as he thought. "Now that you mention him, I remember seeing him sulking in a corner somewhere by himself." He eyed Gyuri questioningly. "Do you know why?"

Namjoon watched as Gyuri averted her gaze guiltily. "It's a long story..." she mumbled. "I may have said something insensitive."

Namjoon eyed her intently. "Indeed," he replied. "Taehyung does not normally pull a tantrum unless someone he cared about has hurt him so."

"He-he doesn't care about me" Gyuri protested.

Namjoon inspected her face and saw that she was flustered.

"I'll try to be nicer" Gyuri grumbled, "but the Young Master can be so unreasonable sometimes."

Namjoon spoke sympathetically. "I agree but please try to understand his position." Namjoon searched his surroundings before continuing, "I should not be telling you this but Taehyung is very unhappy."

"He is?"

Namjoon nodded. "He is not very close to his brothers nor my uncle so he has had a very lonely childhood. As his cousin, I can only do so much to support him but what he really needs is a friend in the household." Namjoon locked eyes with Gyuri as he said, "That is where I hope you can help."

"Me?" Gyuri was baffled. "What can I do?"

"You can be his friend."

Gyuri blinked.

"I know that it is improper to ask a servant to befriend its master but, I hope that you can support Taehyung and show him kindness where his true family is lacking."
Gyuri nodded slowly. On some level, she could empathise with Taehyung's loneliness as she herself had experienced something similar. While growing up, she never really had a close relationship with Yoongi, her half-brother, because of the large disparity in their ages. Her closest relationship was with her best friend, Liha, who was the same age as her.

"Okay," Gyuri consented. "I will try my best."

Namjoon was relieved to hear it.

Gyuri tilted her head to the side as she stated, "You must really care about the Young Master, huh? He's very lucky to have a nice cousin like you, Master Namjoon."

Namjoon grinned bashfully. "Yes, I would do anything for Taehyung." Gyuri watched as his eyes softened as he turned to look at the inky, black sky. "He is like a brother to me."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 19 of The Brothers Kim!

Look forward to next time.
"Stupid Gyuri..." Taehyung muttered under his breath as he kicked a pebble near his foot. He pouted as he sat down near the grass, not caring at all that his expensive garments would be soiled by the dirt. At that point in time, Taehyung didn't care about anything apart from what Gyuri had said to him.

"Why would I ever want to work for an immature brat like you?"

Taehyung sulkily ripped blades of grass from the ground beside him and proceeded to tear them into smaller pieces. He knew that engaging in such pointless actions won't solve anything, but he needed a distraction from the hurt he was feeling in his chest. He grunted out of frustration as he threw the torn pieces of grass away in frustration. Why was he so bothered by what Gyuri had said?

"You are not that good of a maid anyway" Taehyung mumbled huffily. "I was only trying to be nice..."

But deep down, Taehyung knew that he couldn't lie to himself. The truth was, Taehyung had become somewhat aware of his feelings towards Gyuri. Ever since he had learned about their shared kiss, he couldn't stop thinking about her. At first, he thought he would feel angry at her for lying to him about how babies were made. She had purposefully lied to him to make him look like a fool. Taehyung had planned to confront her about it but, every time they crossed paths, the first thing he always thought about was her lips. Learning about their kiss had the opposite effect on him: it had made him more aware of her. And because of that, he had been avoiding her like the plague.

"Stop thinking about her, stupid!" he scolded himself as he placed his hands on his cheeks out of embarrassment. "She is not even that pretty or smart or—"

Suddenly, the woman in white's smile flashed in his mind's eye.

Taehyung was tongue-tied. He shook his head violently to be rid of her image. Why did I suddenly picture her? The woman in white was still a mystery to him and he almost forgot all about her until that moment. Who was she? And why does my heart ache every time I think of her?

Just as Taehyung started revisiting his memories of the woman in white, he suddenly heard footsteps approaching from the shadows. He looked up. A scowl formed on his lips when he saw who it was.

Gyuri emerged from the shade and gaped at Taehyung with a relieved expression. "There you are," she remarked as she strolled towards him. "I've been looking all over for you."

Taehyung turned his face defiantly so that Gyuri was facing his cheek. A sharp hmph escaped his lips. Seeing that Taehyung was still upset, she took it upon herself to sit next to him on the grass. In response, he inched further away.

Gyuri sighed. "I'm sorry" she sincerely apologised, "I didn't mean what I said."

Still, Taehyung refused to look at her.

"Can't we talk about it?"
Taehyung reluctantly turned his head and peered at Gyuri, who appeared regretful. "I thought being with me is like a 'living hell'" Taehyung retorted, emphasising her words. "So why are you here trying to talk to me?"

"Like I said," Gyuri repeated, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it—"

"Yes, you did" Taehyung abruptly interrupted. "You think I am an 'immature brat'.' Gyuri observed how Taehyung's brows were knitted close together as he glared at her. "And because I am an 'immature brat', you do not wish to work for me. Well, guess what? I was only offering you that job out of pity, stupid Gyuri!" He got up to leave but Gyuri obstructed his path. "Get out of my way" he grumbled.

"Stop being so childish" Gyuri chided. "I already said that I was sorry. Why do you have to make things so difficult?"

Taehyung's crescent eyes narrowed. "I am not making things difficult. You were the one who started it." He tried to push past her but Gyuri side-stepped so that they were facing each other again.

"Young Master, please," Gyuri pleaded wearily. "I'm sorry for being a dick. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Taehyung paused as he locked eyes with her. "A dick?" He didn't quite grasp what Gyuri had said. Ah, crap. "I mean, idiot" she corrected.

Taehyung was quiet.

"I tend to run my mouth when I'm tired and hungry" Gyuri explained. "And I say things that I don't mean." She searched Taehyung's face for any sign of being forgiven but he remained impassive. "So, what I said before... I didn't mean at all. It was my stomach talking, not me."

"If that was the case then, you have an unruly stomach" he replied and Gyuri witnessed Taehyung's lips curl into a small smile.

Relief washed over Gyuri. He smiled, she thought internally, that's a good sign. "It's true" she admitted, eager to get him to talk more. "Sometimes, I think my stomach has a mind of its own."

Taehyung chuckled softly. "You are such a strange person, Gyuri. Everyone knows that the heart is where all thoughts are stored."

Gyuri was about to correct him when she changed her mind. It's better I just nod along, she thought. "So... am I forgiven?"

Taehyung's smile suddenly vanished. Eventually, she heard him mumble, "Yes... I forgive you."

"Really? That's great—"

"But I want to know why you rejected my offer" Taehyung suddenly added, cutting her off. "I want to know the truth this time." Taehyung watched Gyuri fumble with her sleeve while her eyes darted upwards in a nervous fashion.

"You already have a personal maid" she eventually replied. "So, there's no need for me to work for you."

"But I want you to."
Gyuri blinked. "Huh?" She searched Taehyung's eyes, still confused. "Why?"

"Because I li—" Taehyung abruptly stopped midway his sentence and Gyuri watched his face flush pink. He stumbled on his words, "Nothing, forget-forget what I said..."

Gyuri cocked her head to one side as she continued to peer curiously at him.

Taehyung covered his mouth in embarrassment as he fidgeted, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Stupid Taehyung, he cursed internally. What were you thinking?!

"Young Master," Gyuri spoke, catching his attention. "The reason why I can't be your personal maid is because it would put Kalyani out of the job." She scratched her head as she admitted bashfully, "In all honesty, I don't mind being your personal maid at all" and then she mumbled under her breath, "if it means getting out of grunt work..."

"Really?" Taehyung was surprised.

Gyuri nodded.

"So, you turned my offer down because you were concerned about Kalyani?"

"Well, yeah" Gyuri answered. "I'd feel bad if someone lost their job because of me."

"I see..." Taehyung's voice trailed off and Gyuri witnessed a shy smile appear. "So, you refused because of Kalyani and not because..."

Again, Gyuri peered at him curiously. "Not because of what?"

"Huh?" Taehyung's head darted up. "Oh, erm, nothing." But Gyuri noticed that, suddenly, Taehyung seemed to be in a chipper mood. "But I still want you to work for me."

"Young Master," Gyuri replied wearily, "I already explained to you that I can't."

Taehyung's lively expression remained unfazed. "Yes, you can" he insisted. "I can just have two personal maids."

There's no reasoning with this kid! Gyuri groaned internally. But just as she was about to refuse him for the second time, she suddenly remembered what Namjoon had told her:

"...What he really needs is a friend in the household."

Suddenly, Gyuri had a eureka moment. "You know what," she pointed out, "I don't want to be your personal maid."

Taehyung's jaw dropped. "What?" His voice was squeaky from shock and disappointment. "Why not—?"

"I want to be something better" she finished. "No, correction. We can be something better."

This made Taehyung blink. "Something better?" he echoed, unsure as to what Gyuri was hinting at. He pointed to her and then to himself. "We can?"

"Yep," Gyuri happily declared. She pointed her nose up to the sky proudly as she added, "We can be blood brothers."

Taehyung gaped at her disbelievingly before letting out a cross between a scoff and a laugh.
"Why are you laughing?" Gyuri questioned with a frown. "I'm serious about this."

Taehyung was sceptical. "You want to be blood brothers?"

"Yep," Gyuri affirmed. "Why not?"

"But... you are a girl."

"So? Would you rather we be called blood sisters?"

Taehyung considered this. "No," he eventually replied. "But why blood brothers?"

"I don't know" Gyuri replied while scratching her head. "I mean, being friends just seemed too boring and 'blood brothers' sounds cool."

"No, what I mean is," Taehyung elaborated, "why must we define it as a sibling relationship?"

"Well, what do you suggest then?"

Taehyung thought deeply. Under close inspection, he eyed Gyuri and was suddenly reminded of what Chun Chun had said about the red string of fate. "Why not... soulmates?"

Gyuri was taken aback. "Soulmates?" she repeated. She observed Taehyung's earnest expression and felt slightly uncomfortable with the way he was looking at her. For Gyuri, 'soulmates' was suggestive of something other than the friendship she was offering. "I think- I think being blood brothers would do" she nervously replied.

Taehyung pulled a face. "But I already have four brothers."

"Well, now you have a sister too," she said while grinning at him. "From now onwards, you can rely on me as an elder sister and I will treat you like I would my younger brother."

Taehyung was doubtful. "But what does having you as my sister actually entail?"

"It means," Gyuri explained, "that you will have someone to support you, protect you and talk with you whenever you need them." She smiled at him kindly as she added, "I can be the shoulder you cry on when you want to cry."

"I do not cry, though," Taehyung remarked while rubbing his nose. But all the same his eyes brightened up. "So, does this mean I can always come to you when I need to?"

Gyuri nodded. "Yes, but that doesn't mean you can abuse that power. Being your sister means I deserve respect as your elder."

"You are not that much older than me, you know" Taehyung pointed out playfully.

Gyuri stuck out her tongue. "True, but I'm still older."

Taehyung continued to grin until he asked solemnly, "So, are we blood brothers forever?"

"Hmm... I guess so."

Taehyung appeared disappointed. "But I do not want you to be my sister forever" he murmured under his breath.

Gyuri looked at him questioningly. It was only faint, but she had managed to catch every word.
"Huh? Why not?"

Taehyung met eyes with her and Gyuri saw that they were unwavering. He answered seriously, "One day, I want you to consider me as a man."

Gyuri was speechless. She gazed into Taehyung's crescent eyes which were passionately boring into hers. Something about them made her face heat up with the intensity. Not knowing how to react, she reached out her arm and ruffled his neat hair as if she was trying to scrub away her embarrassment.

"Ow! Gyuri, quit it!" he complained while swatting her hands away. "That hurts!"

Gyuri giggled nervously. "Geez, Young Master, you're such a tease" she eventually told him, her cheeks still feeling hot. "You're ten years too young for that kinda talk."

An annoyed expression flitted across Taehyung's face as he attempted to fix his hair. Once he was done he replied, "So, you mean you will consider me as a man in ten years' time?"

Gyuri pondered about this. She couldn't help noticing that his tone sounded hopeful. Ugh, I'm no good at lovey-dovey talk... she groaned internally. She awkwardly smiled before responding, "Perhaps." But her voice sounded strained.

All the same, Taehyung was pleased. "Do you promise?"

Seeing Taehyung's puppy-eyed expression made her feel guilty since she didn't mean what she said. After all, she might not even be in Saim in ten years' time. "I promise" she carelessly swore. It's not like things will change between us in the future, even if I stay, right?

"You better not go back on that promise!" Taehyung said excitedly.

Gyuri laughed. "I won't. But if you want me to consider you as a man in the future, you should probably work on your upper-body strength. I don't find weak guys attractive."

Taehyung huffed. "For the last time, I am not weak!"

"But you're so scrawny" Gyuri mentioned while offhandedly waving her hand. "I even managed to lift you bridal-style."

Taehyung arched his brow as he abruptly stood up so that he was towering over her. "I can lift you up bridal-style too!" he exclaimed. Without warning, he attempted to lift Gyuri up from the ground, causing her to squeal in surprise.

"Put me down!" Gyuri shouted while clinging onto Taehyung's shoulders.

Taehyung smirked as he succeeded in lifting her up by a few centimetres. "See? I am not weak" he remarked, but Gyuri could feel his arms shaking. Suddenly, he dropped her onto the grass as they toppled over. "You are just fat!"

Gyuri kicked him from the ground. "Hey! That's not how you speak to your elders, Taehyung!"

Taehyung blinked, surprise evident in his eyes. "You-you just called me by my name."

Gyuri, realising her mistake, tried to amend it. "But-but I can now, remember? I'm your sister."

A smile spread across Taehyung's lips. While being his sister wasn't what he hoped for, he was still content that he and Gyuri had at least drawn even closer than before. "Okay, I guess when it is just us two, you can call me by my name." He offered his hand to her to help her up. "But anyway, you
will see. One day, I will be able to carry you bridal-style properly."

Gyuri accepted his help and noticed how Taehyung's hand wrapped around hers so easily. "When that day comes," she said as she got up, "I'll give you a reward."

"Really? What kind of reward?"

"It's a secret." Gyuri playfully tapped the side of her nose. "You'll just have to wait and see."

"Why can you not just tell me now?" Taehyung whined.

Gyuri grinned as she signalled for them to make their way back to the main grounds. It was almost time for the fireworks display to begin. "Then it won't be a surprise anymore. You'll just have to work hard until then."

Taehyung scrunched his face.

"Why do I feel like you're not going to stop pestering me from now onwards?"

"Because I really want to know!"

Side by side, Gyuri and Taehyung walked along the path back to the centre, where the sound of people celebrating was loudest. While Taehyung continued to relentlessly pester her, Gyuri gazed down at her hand which he had held only moments ago. *Time sure flies by quickly...* she internally spoke. *Not too long ago, his hand was smaller than mine.*

She peeped at Taehyung who was still badgering her. "Such a troublesome kid," she told him affectionately. "I feel like you're going to be a troublesome little bugger."

~*~

As the pair joined the crowd in waiting for the fireworks to begin, little did they know, that lurking in the shadows was a suspicious figure, who had been tailing them. The suspicious figure, concealed by the blanket of shadows, peered at the couple from its vantage point, taking care not to be seen.

*Is that the target?* the figure signalled to its comrade using complex hand gestures.

From afar, a cloaked assassin emerged and signalled back, *Yes. He is one of them.*

The suspicious figure nodded in acknowledgement.

With fluid hand movements, the cloaked assassin signalled something back to the suspicious figure before merging with the shadows again.

Determination filled the suspicious figure's eyes as it deciphered the message.

*Tonight, the House of Kim will fall.*

~*~

Gyuri and Taehyung watched as the royal staff lit the first fireworks in honour of Minseok and Princess Chayoung's marriage, illuminating the inky sky with bright colours like a sudden splash of paint on a plain canvas.

"Wow."
Gyuri turned to her left, where Taehyung was gaping up at the sky with his mouth ajar. "Is it your first time seeing fireworks?" she enquired.

Taehyung nodded absentmindedly.

*How cute*, Gyuri thought as she stifled a giggle. *In the end, he's still a kid.* She turned back to look at the sky as more fireworks were launched but suddenly stopped when she noticed an obscure silhouette on the roof. *What is that?* She wondered as she squinted her eyes to try and discern what the silhouette could be. But just as she was doing so, something fast pierced through the air, only narrowly missing both Gyuri and Taehyung as it whizzed through the gap between them.

A pained grunt was heard as the man in front of her collapsed to the floor, an arrow protruding from his back.

Gyuri's eyes bulged at the sight. *What the—?*

The next thing she knew, screams replaced the cheerful laughter as the crowd broke down into anarchy. All around her, a stampede ensued as the alarmed guests scrambled for their lives while a torrent of arrows, from all corners of the household, flew in every direction.

Stunned and confused by what was happening, Gyuri surveyed her surroundings only to witness bodies crashing to the ground as sharp arrows claimed their victim. The smell of gunpowder lingered in the air as blood pooled around the fallen bodies, staining the gravel in crimson. Pots and plates shattered as they were knocked to the floor: an orchestra of chaos.

Gyuri couldn't believe what was happening.

"Protect Her Highness!" she heard someone shout.

She turned to her right and saw that Zeren, the flirty turd, and a group of imperial guards had surrounded themselves around Minseok and the Princess like a human shield. In fact, some of the guards had even swarmed around the other Kims, reminding Gyuri that she had one of the brothers right next to her.

*Taehyung*.

With quick reflexes, Gyuri swerved around and immediately found Taehyung, petrified on the spot. His crescent eyes were as wide as saucers, fear etched on his boyish features. Gyuri was relieved to find that he was okay but, her relief was short-lived when she suddenly spotted the scruffy servant, from before, aiming an arrow at him. Her heart stopped.

"Taehyung!"

~*~

It was dark. It was *warm* and dark.

"Gyuri?" Taehyung's voice was muffled as he spoke with his face buried in Gyuri's embrace. He couldn't hear the panicked screams and the thundering of footsteps any longer. All he could concentrate on was the rapid beating of Gyuri's heart and how his own heart was palpitating against hers.

Slowly, Gyuri released him and searched his face with a concerned expression. "Are you okay?" she asked worriedly. "You're not hurt?"
Taehyung shook his head weakly. He couldn't help noticing how close they were to each other and how he had a perfect view of her lips. "No."

"Thank goodness" Gyuri murmured with a weak smile. "Thank goodness you're safe..."

Suddenly, Gyuri started swaying to the side, alarming Taehyung. "Gyuri? What is wrong—?"

Unable to stay upright any longer, Gyuri abruptly collapsed onto him, showcasing the arrow that had struck her on the back of her left shoulder.

Taehyung's eyes widened. "You are bleeding!" he exclaimed fearfully. "Gyuri, you have been shot!"

Gyuri could only chuckle wryly as she leaned on Taehyung for support. "No shit... Sherlock."

"Do not talk!" he anxiously shouted, ignoring her sass. "Just stay still. We—we need to get some help! We need- we need a physician—I need to get Cousin Namjoon!" He searched the chaotic scene but it was all in vain.

It was every man for himself.

Not knowing what to do, he peered down at Gyuri, who he was now cradling in his arms. Her deathly pallor and half-closed eyes frightened him. Like the blood seeping from her wound, her face was losing colour. "Do not close your eyes, Gyuri!" he shouted while desperately shaking her. "Stay awake! Stay with me!"

"Such a... troublesome kid" she muttered feebly. With a small smile, she reached her hand up to him and he clung to it tightly. It was deathly cold. "This... makes it the third time I've saved you" she croaked. "Such a... troublesome kid—"

And without warning, Gyuri's eyes closed.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thanks for reading chapter 20 of The Brothers Kim!

Who could be trying to bring down the Household of Kim?

Find out soon...
The first time Subin ever watched 'Peter Pan' was when she was six years old. After watching the film, Subin was convinced that the likes of fairies and pirates and mermaids were real. She had often believed that one day, Peter would visit her room at night and whisk her away to Neverland and she would soar high above London, past Big Ben, St. Paul's Cathedral and even, Buckingham Palace.

Subin truly believed that Peter would teach her how to fly.

So, when she flew on a plane for the first time, she was excited to think that she might somehow fly past Neverland in the process.

"Yoongi, can you see Neverland?" she remembered her six-year-old-self ask.

Yoongi scowled at her from the window seat. He had been napping before his little sister had shaken him awake just to ask a silly question. "No, of course not" he snapped. He was always cranky after waking up. "Neverland doesn't exist, stupid."

"Yes, it does!" she insisted. "Peter says it's the second star to the right and—"

"—Straight on till morning" Yoongi finished. "Yeah, yeah, I've seen the film, Subin. And Neverland isn't real. We're going to South Korea, not Neverland." He turned to face the window and refused to talk to her again throughout the whole flight.

Subin was disappointed to hear Yoongi dismiss Neverland so easily. She knew they were going to South Korea, but she didn't really care. The only place she cared about was Neverland.

And when Subin and her family finally arrived in South Korea, instead of feeling excited, she was shocked. South Korea was nothing at all like how she'd imagined.

Raised in England, Subin had become accustomed to being surrounded by people of different ethnicities. In her class, she had made friends with children that were tall, short, dark-skinned, fair-skinned, skinny and chubby. She had friends who were originally from India, Hong Kong, Philippines, Poland and the Caribbean: almost every country you could think of, someone in her class was probably once from there.

Subin had grown up in a diverse society and was proud to say that she was the representative for Korea in her class. It had made her feel important, irreplaceable, exotic. But when she visited South Korea for the first time, that sense of individuality suddenly evaporated into thin air. She wasn't unique anymore. She was just one amongst a million.

"Are you excited, Subin -ah?" her dad had asked her as they climbed into a taxi. "You're going to meet your grandma for the first time."

Subin, still recovering from seeing so many Koreans, was sceptical. She gaped up at her dad. "What if she doesn't like me?"

"Why wouldn't she like you?" her dad questioned. "You're her granddaughter so of course, she'll like you!"
"But, dad, I can't speak Korean" Subin fussed. She looked up at him doubtfully, "Will she be able to understand me? Can she speak English?"

Her dad just gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, Subin -ah. Everything will be okay."

And her dad was right.

When she finally met her grandma, she was surprised to discover how friendly she was.

"Subin -ah, my dear" she would coo every time Subin appeared in front of her. "Are you hungry? Do you want to eat?" Her grandma would peer at her with honeyed eyes as she spoke endearingly in Korean. Thankfully, Yoongi was always there to translate.

"She's asking if you want to eat" he would tell her. And Subin would either nod or shake her head.

After a few days with her grandma, Subin had grown very attached to her. She was a kind, old lady who lived alone. Her grandpa had passed away before she was born, and her aunts and uncle had moved to other parts of South Korea. Subin learned that her mom was the only one of her siblings that left home completely. After marrying her dad, her mom had moved to the UK, where Subin was later born.

On the last day of their holiday, her grandma had taken her to her private study, which was a library filled to the brim with books. Subin remembered thinking how Belle, from 'Beauty and the Beast', would have sung in glee if she had walked into the library with her.

"I want to show you something important," her grandma said as she signalled for Subin to sit down on her lap. After two weeks of being immersed in Korean, Subin finally had a basic grasp of the language.

Subin followed her grandma to a comfy chair and sat on her lap obediently. Once she was comfortable, her grandma pulled out a large book and carefully opened it.

"This is my life's work" she explained in Korean. "Before I retired, I used to be a History teacher."

"You were a teacher?" Subin repeated in English while gaping behind her.

Her grandma nodded. "I love History a lot." She pointed to her book while she spoke, "Some people say that living in the past is counterproductive, but I believe that to move forward, sometimes we need to learn from mistakes made in the past."

Subin peered at her grandma quizzically.

Seeing her reaction, her grandma chuckled. "I guess that was a little complicated for you, huh?" She gestured at the book in her hands and told her, "Look, Subin -ah, this is what Korea was like a long, long time ago."

Subin gazed down at the book and inspected the beautifully printed pictures of ladies adorned in colourful robes. The art style was ancient and unfamiliar but nonetheless captivating.

"This is Kim Gyuri" her grandma pointed out. "She was a princess who allegedly brought down the House of Kim."

"She's a princess?" Subin echoed dubiously. The woman in the picture didn't look like a princess at all—she was wearing neither a tiara nor a gigantic frock.
“Yes,” her grandma affirmed. “But you know what? Kim Gyuri may be our ancestor.”

“Our... ancestor?”

Her grandma nodded. When she saw Subin’s puzzled expression she elaborated, "That means she might be related to us."

Subin looked down at the picture again and noticed the jade ring on her grandma's hand. It was a deep shade of green that contrasted with her milky skin. Noticing Subin’s stare, her grandma brought her hand closer so that Subin had a better view.

“It's pretty, isn't it?”

Subin nodded in agreement.

“This ring was passed down my family for many generations” her grandma explained. "But no one knows who owned it first and why it has been in our family for so long." She pulled it off her middle finger and gave it to Subin to hold. Subin inspected the ring closely and noticed that there was something written inside.

“Did you know that only the rich could afford jade?” her grandma asked as Subin wore the ring. It hung loosely around her small, infantile forefinger. "One day,” her grandma began, "I will pass this down to you."

“You will?” Subin was surprised.

Her grandma nodded. "You must never lose it, okay? This ring will bring you back to your roots. It will bring you back to where you belong."

Subin stared at the jade ring in fascination.

Where I belong...

~*~

Gyuri’s eyes fluttered open at the sound of voices overlapping in the background. She groaned. Where am I? A throbbing pain pulsed through her head as she squinted, trying to discern where she was.

"Gyuri?” she heard someone say tentatively. "Gyuri!” the person repeated, much louder this time. "Cousin, she has woken up!"

Gyuri’s head turned to the direction of the approaching footsteps and vaguely recognised the two figures approaching. She attempted to sit up, only to groan in pain as her upper-body felt sore and heavy with fatigue.

"Steady!” she heard the person exclaim as he rushed to her side to help her up. It was only when he was right next to her did Gyuri realise it was Taehyung. "How are you feeling?” he gently asked as he offered his arm to her for support.

"Bloody... fantastic” she managed to croak. Her throat was so dry that it felt like her tongue had turned into sandpaper.

"Here.” Seeing her discomfort, Namjoon offered her a saucer of water which she accepted gladly. Ravenously, Gyuri quickly drank the refreshment to quench her parched throat. Namjoon and
Taehyung watched as she drank the water with a voracious appetite. Once she was done, she wiped the water, that had dribbled down her chin, with the back of her hand. She returned the pair's stare.

"What?"

Taehyung was the first to speak. "Thank heavens you are okay!" Without warning, he wrapped his arms around her and brought her close to his chest.

Gyuri blinked in surprise. "Young-Young Master?"

"Cousin!" Namjoon exclaimed, "You are suffocating her!"

"Oh!" Taehyung released Gyuri immediately. "I-I apologise" he stuttered, his cheeks flaming. "I-I am just so relieved that-that you are awake" he explained, flustered. "No, I am just so relieved that you are alive!"

"Please be gentle with her, cousin" Namjoon scolded, "she is still recovering." He addressed Gyuri, "How are you feeling, Gyuri? Does it hurt anywhere?"

Gyuri was about to shake her head when she suddenly felt a sharp pain shoot down from her left shoulder. She winced.

"Your body will feel sore for a while" Namjoon informed her.

"What- what happened?" Gyuri questioned as she massaged her head with her right arm while avoiding moving her left. "How did I get hurt?"

"Do you not remember?" Namjoon questioned. "You were shot by an arrow."

Taehyung murmured solemnly, "You got hurt while trying to save me."

Gyuri's eyes darted from Namjoon to Taehyung like a pendulum. Her mind was still foggy and thinking made her head hurt. But with some effort, the events that had led up to her near death came crashing down on her like an unexpected avalanche.

*Flying arrows; the scruffy peasant; Taehyung; Pain.*

Gyuri remembered how she had witnessed the scruffy peasant aim an arrow at Taehyung and how her legs moved out of their own accord to try and reach him in time. She remembered how she had shielded Taehyung with her embrace and how the razor-sharp arrow pierced through her flesh, rendering her immobile.

"You have been out cold for five days" Namjoon divulged, "but at last, the worst has passed."

"I've been asleep... for five days?" She still couldn't comprehend how much time had elapsed since the wedding. It felt like only yesterday.

"You were one of the lucky ones" Namjoon added. "It is fortunate that you were able to overcome the poison."

"Poison?" Gyuri anxiously repeated. "The arrows were poisoned?"

He nodded grimly.

"Oh, my gosh..." Gyuri uttered in disbelief. Suddenly, she remembered the sound of bodies crashing to the floor and she shuddered. "Is everyone okay?" she rushed to question, alarmed. "Madam Zhou?
"They are fine." Taehyung replied, but Gyuri couldn't help noticing his mournful expression. "You should focus on recovering—do not trouble yourself over others."

"But—"

"Taehyung is right." Namjoon interjected. "You should focus on your own recovery for now." He inched closer to Gyuri so that he was sitting next to her on the bed. "May I? I need to see your wound."

Gyuri gulped as she hesitantly let Namjoon peel back the top of her robe so that he could peer down at her exposed shoulder. Even though she should be worrying about other things, she couldn't help feeling self-conscious about her current appearance.

Oh, God. I've been asleep for five days! My breath must stink, and my hair must be oily and disgusting. She averted her gaze, only to find an embarrassed Taehyung, who had turned around. Great, she groaned internally. Even he must find the sight of me repulsive.

Namjoon leaned back as he finished. "Your wound is healing slowly" he enlightened her. "But unfortunately, it will leave a scar."

"The most important thing is that she will recover," Taehyung remarked after he had turned around. He gazed at Gyuri with concern. "I was so worried about you" he fussed. But then his expression darkened as he reprimanded her, "Stupid Gyuri! Why did you risk your life for?"

"To save you, of course."

Taehyung's face reddened.

"Did you manage to catch the culprit?" she asked, turning her attention to Namjoon.

Namjoon shook his head solemnly. "The investigation is still in progress. We did manage to apprehend one of the assassins, but they ended their life before we had the opportunity to interrogate them." He frowned as he continued, "It seems they intended to die if their plan to eliminate us failed."

"Who would want to do such a thing...?"

"It must be General Lee." Taehyung contemptuously suggested. "He has always been jealous of Brother Minseok."

"Hush!" Namjoon castigated Taehyung. "Do not accuse anyone if you have no firm evidence of it, cousin."

But still, Taehyung continued, "I bet he orchestrated it for revenge—"

"That is quite enough, Taehyung."

Everyone looked up at the sound of a curt voice booming from the other side of the room.

"Cousin Junmyeon!"

Not too far away from the trio stood a scowling Junmyeon who was standing nearby the entrance. With an arrogant gait, he entered the room as he addressed Taehyung. "You will do well to hold your tongue when it comes to matters such as these" he lectured, before stealing a glance at Gyuri,
"especially in the presence of a servant."

Taehyung bit his bottom lip and Gyuri noticed how his hands balled into fists. He stared at Junmyeon with his brows furrowed in a glower.

"Cousin," Junmyeon addressed Namjoon, "as the servant girl has woken up, please help her move from this room immediately and send her to the maids' quarters to recover—"

"No," Taehyung suddenly refused, "you cannot!"

Everyone turned to face Taehyung, startled by his abrupt outburst. Once Junmyeon had regained his composure, he narrowed his eyes at him. "And why not?"

"Gyuri is still in no condition to move" Taehyung reasoned, "she can barely sit up. The maids' quarters are far too cramped and too busy, so she will not be able to recover quickly." He briefly glimpsed at Gyuri before decidedly declaring, "Staying here is the better option."

"I hate to admit it, but Taehyung is right, cousin" Namjoon agreed. "It will be better if Gyuri stayed in his quarters."

Junmyeon's face contorted into a displeased expression. "Preposterous!" he blurted. "A servant girl resting in a room fit for royalty?" He shook his head in disapproval. "That is absurd!"

"This servant girl," Taehyung said through gritted teeth, "saved my life. I believe she deserves a reward for her bravery, correct?"

Taehyung glared at Junmyeon stubbornly, forcing him to engage in a staring contest. At last, Junmyeon pursed his lips and unwillingly yielded, "So be it." With a slight sneer he spoke, "You may reward her as you wish. But remember this, Taehyung, servants, and nobles do not mix." He glanced at Gyuri as he added, "We are a different species entirely."

Junmyeon swiftly departed, leaving the trio staring after him.

Once he was out of sight, Taehyung's tense body finally relaxed. "I apologise for my idiotic older brother," he told Gyuri with a sigh. "He is very selfish."

"Do not speak ill of your brother, cousin" Namjoon lightly scolded. "He is not an awful man. His ideas are just... misguided."

Gyuri could only wonder as she confessed, "I think he hates me."

"It is not just you" Taehyung reassured her. "He hates everyone" he paused for a moment as he thought, "me most of all."

"Your brother does not hate you" Namjoon consoled.

But Taehyung remained unconvinced. "Yes, he does. If he does not hate me, then why does he always treat me so coldly?"

Namjoon fumbled, "Junmyeon cares for you but just has trouble showing affection..."

"But he has no trouble showing affection to Brother Jongin?" Taehyung challenged. "Face it, cousin. Brother Junmyeon hates me because I am the son of father's third wife. He does not care for anyone apart from Brother Jongin, who is his real brother." He scoffed as he spoke bitterly, "Brother Minseok and I are just his half-brothers, so we only receive half of his care or even less than that. But
that does not matter anymore." He eyed Namjoon resolutely, "I have you and, now, I have a sister too."

"A sister?" Namjoon echoed, puzzled.

"Yes," Taehyung affirmed happily, "Gyuri says that she will be my sister from now on."

Namjoon peered at Gyuri with a surprised expression and she shied away. She couldn't help feeling self-conscious whenever Namjoon's eyes were directed at her.

"I am glad that you two are getting along" he commented amusedly.

"Indeed" Taehyung replied, "we will be getting along just fine from now onwards, right, Gyuri?"

"Erm, yeah, sure" she erred.

Namjoon arched his brow at her while trying to mask his grin. He turned to Taehyung, "That is all very well, but we should probably leave her to rest." He addressed Gyuri, "I will inform Madam Zhou of your status and ask her to send you a meal filled with nutrients. You are to rest until I instruct you otherwise."

"When will I be able to move around again?" Gyuri enquired.

Namjoon was pensive. "I think it will take about two weeks for you to recover completely. You were fortunate that Taehyung was able to find me in time. If the arrow had stayed in your body for longer than an hour, the poison would have spread throughout your organs and you would have been beyond recovery."

"Seriously?" Gyuri was astonished. She turned to Taehyung gratefully, "Thank you, Young Master. You saved my life."

Taehyung weakly smiled. "It was the least I could do. You saved my life thrice already."

Namjoon stood up from the bed and stretched his legs, "Well, I shall go to Madam Zhou now." He faced Taehyung as if beckoning for him to follow.

"I will leave in a minute" he responded.

With a small nod, Namjoon left first. Once he was gone, Taehyung bashfully approached Gyuri and perched himself on the edge of the bed. "So... how are you feeling? Are you comfortable?"

"I guess so" she replied feeling slightly awkward. She was still preoccupied with her bad breath and appearance. Keen to divert her attention she asked, "By the way, is this really your room?"

Taehyung smirked as he replied, "Yes, I thought that you would be more comfortable here since the maids' quarters are quite noisy."

Gyuri nodded thankfully. She had to admit that it was a lot quieter. As she admired his room she suddenly noticed something peculiar. "Hang on a sec," she pointed out, "there's only one bed." With a questioning expression, she asked, "If I have been resting in your bed, where have you been sleeping?"

Taehyung had a small smile. "On my bed too, of course."

"W-what?" Gyuri was flustered. "You mean—?" She examined the bed and only just realised how spacious it was. "Young Master—"
"Taehyung" he corrected. "You can call me by my name, remember?"

Gyuri nodded to show that she remembered. "Yeah, well, Taehyung, we shouldn't be sleeping on the same bed. It's improper—"

"I did not want to let you out of my sight" he interrupted her. "Not when you were on the verge of death." Gyuri stared into Taehyung's crescent eyes and noticed the haggardness in them. He looked like he hadn't slept properly in ages. "I was really scared, Gyuri. I thought you were going to die."

Seeing the gravity in Taehyung's expression made Gyuri realise how narrowly she escaped death. Like the sun, it dawned on her that dying in this unknown era would mean her existence potentially being erased from the future too. If she died here, what would happen to her? Would she disappear in the future too? Would she leave behind Yoongi? Her dad?

No, I can't let that happen, she thought determinedly. No matter what, I must find a way to get back before I end up getting killed in this era.

With a forced smile, she teased, "Get you, worrying about me!"

"I am serious, Gyuri. Please, no matter what, do not do that again."

"Huh?" Gyuri was baffled. It was unlike Taehyung to put her before himself. "But then you could have died!"

"My life is not important."

"What? Of course, it's important!" she shouted. Something is really odd about him today. "Unlike you, I'm just a servant. If I die, you could replace me easily but you, you're a noble and me, I'm just one amongst a million—"

"No," Taehyung interrupted. "Gyuri, you are not." With earnest eyes, he declared, "For me, you are irreplaceable. You are not one amongst a million, you are one in a million." Taehyung held her hand and squeezed it. "And I do not ever want to experience almost losing you ever again."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thanks for reading chapter 21 of The Brothers Kim!

So... the story is progressing nicely. Anyone excited for the drama ahead? Because I sure am!

Please anticipate the next chapters...
Namjoon grinned from his desk as he watched Gyuri's face screw up in concentration. "Are you having trouble already?"

Gyuri looked up from the desk and chuckled awkwardly. "Kind of."

"Which one?"

Gyuri watched as Namjoon sauntered over to her side, where she was hunched over a pile of papers. It had been almost a week since Gyuri had been shot by an arrow and so far, she had been recovering swiftly. Being indisposed, Gyuri was instructed not to do any work to allow for a quick recuperation. But with nothing to do, she had soon grown bored and restless. Noticing her agitation, Namjoon had given her a task. He had asked her to organise his medical records for the sanatorium.

Gyuri pointed to a symbol on the scroll. "I can't remember what this one means" she admitted.

"This one?" Namjoon glanced at the scroll and told her, "This one is for a patient with an eye disability."

"Oh," she managed to say as she watched Namjoon put the paper to one side. "I'm sorry, Master Namjoon. It seems I really have forgotten how to read."

Namjoon smiled at her kindly. "Do not fret, Gyuri." But then he cocked his head to one side as he thought. "Maybe... I can help refresh your mind?"

Gyuri looked up at Namjoon, who was hovering behind her. When he saw her looking, he smiled, revealing his dimples. Gyuri's heart fluttered at the sight. *Geez, Subin, you and your raging hormones!* She scolded internally. She couldn't understand why but lately, she had become a lot more aware of Namjoon's presence. Every time he visited her for a check-up, she would subconsciously check if her breath stinks and if her hair was neat and tidy. It was only when she was around Namjoon did she start worrying about her appearance.

"Well, only if it's not too much of a bother..." she replied shyly. In truth, she really was keen to learn how to read ancient characters for real. Not because she wanted to read books but because of the opportunities that would present themselves to her. And one of them was impressing Namjoon and spending more time with him.

Namjoon sat beside her on the desk with their elbows almost touching. Currently, they were in the library section of his quarters. Gyuri stiffened at the sudden contact of their arms brushing against each other. She jolted.

"Sorry" she quickly uttered.

Namjoon just gave her a brief smile. He didn't seem to mind at all how close they were. Was it only Gyuri who felt self-conscious?

"We can start from the basics" he began as he produced a plain sheet of paper, an ink brush and ink pad. With elegant strokes, Namjoon started writing cursive, Chinese characters but to Gyuri, all she saw were fancy scribbles.
"What does it say?" she questioned after Namjoon had finished.

Namjoon chuckled. "It says, 'Gyuri'."

Gyuri's eyes rounded in surprise.

"This character here means 'stride of man'," he explained, "while this one means 'merit'." He gave a satisfied nod. "Taehyung sure knows how to name others well."

Gyuri flinched at the mention of Taehyung which Namjoon noticed. He gaped at her curiously. "Speaking of my cousin, how are things between you two?"

"Everything's good" she replied as casually as she could manage. "We're getting along quite well."

But inside, she thought, *Too well.* Every time she thought of Taehyung, she couldn't help but think about what he had told her, and she reddened.

"*For me, you are irreplaceable. You are not one amongst a million, you are one in a million.*"

Namjoon hmphed, interrupting her reverie.

"What?"

"From my perspective, it seems as though Taehyung has grown *very* attached to you. Why he hardly visits me anymore."

Gyuri giggled nervously but then she impishly teased, "What's this, Master Namjoon? Are you jealous that the Young Master is spending more time with me?"

Namjoon had a slight smile. "What would you say if the answer was 'yes'?"

"Wha—?" Gyuri was flustered. His answer had taken her by surprise.

Namjoon stared at her, his mesmerising dark eyes searching her face closely. Without warning, he leaned in, startling Gyuri by the closeness of his full lips. Gyuri had to remind herself to breathe.

With a husky voice, he asked, "Gyuri... have you been blind to it all this time?" His words were laced thickly with an innate desire she was unfamiliar with.

"B-blind to-blind to what?" she nervously stammered. She sneaked a glance at his lips and observed how pink they were. Inadvertently, she thought, *I bet he's a good kisser...* of which she had to quickly dismiss before her face gave away what she was thinking.

"Blind to..." he whispered sensuously while drawing closer.

"Blind to...?" Gyuri murmured, still fixated on his lips. She was frozen to the spot, the hairs on her arms standing erect.

"Blind to..." Namjoon's voice trailed off again. "Blind to... this." Suddenly, Namjoon swiped his hand that was holding the ink brush upwards, marking Gyuri's face with a thick, black stroke.

Gyuri was stunned. *What the—?*

Seeing her gobsmacked, Namjoon's composed expression crumbled and he started laughing raucously. He pulled away, wiping the tears that had formed in his eyes, leaving Gyuri blinking in surprise. Registering that Namjoon was just teasing her, she shot daggers at him before dipping her fingers into the ink pad and threatening him with it.
Namjoon halted immediately, his eyes wide with fear. "Let us not do anything reckless now—" But before he could escape, she brushed her soiled fingers across his jawline, marking him with inky fingerprints.

Now, it was Namjoon's turn to blink in surprise.

Gyuri chortled at Namjoon's flabbergasted expression, an unattractive snort escaping her lips before she could stop herself. At the sound of her peculiar laugh, Namjoon soon followed suit and joined in. He had never heard a woman laugh so candidly before, all trace of reservation absent even in the presence of the opposite sex such as himself. It was then that Namjoon felt something in his heart stir like a newly planted sapling unfurling its small leaves for the first time.

Gyuri never failed to intrigue him.

"Look at us!" he managed to say once he had calmed down. "We are like children acting unbecomingly."

"It was you who started it, Master Namjoon" Gyuri replied with a smile. "I didn't expect this childish side from you. I thought the Young Master was the only one who acted this way."

Namjoon had a lopsided grin. "Well, now you know that it is not only Taehyung who can be fun around here."

Gyuri maintained her amiable smile as she watched Namjoon wipe away the inky handprint. It may have been her imagination but Gyuri thought his words implied a deeper meaning to what they seemed on the surface. While she contemplated this, her eyes suddenly wandered back towards the ink pad where she noticed a baroque pattern of a flower engraved onto the rosewood lid.

"This flower..." she murmured, "it's so pretty."

"Oh?" He peered at the ink pad and replied, "That is our clan's crest—the Jade Lotus."

Gyuri looked up. "The Jade Lotus?" she echoed.

As if sensing her curiosity, Namjoon elaborated, "Yes, it is the clan that our family belongs to." Namjoon took hold of his ink brush again and started writing swiftly. "The Jade Lotus," he began, "composes of three families: Park, Lee, and Kim." He pointed at the three characters written on the page. "It is also the clan which currently presides over the rest of Saim."

"But aren't the Lees your relatives too?" Gyuri asked, remembering what Taehyung had told her before.

Namjoon nodded sourly. "Yes, that is correct. We are related to them through my sister's marriage." He pursed his lips before continuing, "And we are now related to the Parks through Cousin Minseok's marriage to the Princess." He drew a circle around the three characters as he concluded, "I guess you can say that the Jade Lotus unified not only Saim but our three families also."

Gyuri inspected Namjoon's expression closely. "Do you not approve of this unification?" she innocently questioned.

Namjoon glanced around his room to ensure that he and Gyuri were truly alone. "Careful, Gyuri" he warned. "It is unwise to say such words." He checked his surroundings again before murmuring, "But you speculate correctly." He leaned closer towards her ear as he spoke, his warm breath tickling her cheek. "I have not told anyone this, but I do not fully support the marriage between my sister and Minister Lee."
Gyuri nodded, blushing slightly as Namjoon pulled away.

"But what can I do?" he asked hopelessly. "The Jade Lotus is stronger when the three families are united. If the Jade Lotus did not exist, Saim would still be at war with each other."

At this, Gyuri was interested. "What do you mean?"

"Before the Jade Lotus was established, Saim was divided into many factions that were run by different warlords." Namjoon drew a brief diagram of their kingdom. "The clans that lived in these factions were constantly at war with each other. Some clans were more threatening than others so as they grew in power, they absorbed weaker clans as well as the land they owned. This was the case with the Park Clan, the Lee Clan, and the Kim Clan. All three families were once separate, thriving clans before they decided to unify."

"Why did they decide to join forces?" Gyuri asked. "If they were doing so well before, why unify?"

"Because a bigger threat arrived" Namjoon responded wryly. "The Waekugin."

"The what?"

"Waekugin" Namjoon repeated. "They are the foreign merchants from the New World, who arrived in search of trading opportunities."

Gyuri nodded attentively.

"Before Saim was unified, the prevailing warlord had made a deal with the Waekugin. He would trade Saimese goods in exchange for gold, making his territory richer." Namjoon wrote down the character for 'gold' next to the symbol for 'warlord'. "The problem is, the warlord exchanged goods that did not belong to his territory—whatever demands the Waekugin had, he would fulfil them by invading other territories that had it."

"So, you mean he invaded other territories solely for trade purposes?"

Namjoon's mood was sombre. "Yes, that is correct."

*It's not that unusual for warlords to invade others in this era, Gyuri pondered. In History, most countries invade others for all sorts of reasons.*

"Many people perished under his regime" Namjoon continued bitterly. "And all for what? In exchange for gold, countless communities were destroyed, forcing to extinction a heritage we should have protected." He shook his head. "While his clan prospered under this regime of pillaging, thousands of lives suffered. He was truly a ruthless ruler and the Waekugin, a formidable enemy."

"And then, what happened?" Gyuri asked curiously. "What did the Jade Lotus do to change things?"

"The Great Emperor, Park Yueran was the one who oversaw the unification" Namjoon explained. "Before he became emperor, he formed a pact with the Kims and the Lees and they combined forces to unify the nation. Eventually, they ousted most of the Waekugin from Saim."

"Most?"

"Yes," Namjoon affirmed. "Most."

"So, you mean some of the Waekugin are still here?" Gyuri asked, confused. "Why?"

"Expelling the Waekugin is not easy" Namjoon began. "Some of them have been living in Saim
since the warring era before Saim was unified. This was about a century ago. When the Waekugin first came, they brought with them their families and some even took in Saimese wives."

"I see" Gyuri murmured.

"They are not to be trusted," Namjoon said in a low voice. Gyuri glanced up at his direction and saw the sudden coldness in his eyes. "I have heard of many atrocities committed by their kind... it is a shame that we could not, even as the strongest clan, purge them out of our kingdom completely."

Gyuri watched the flame in Namjoon's eyes spark with a muted rage that she found uncharacteristic of him: she had never seen him direct such strong hatred towards anyone before.

"Why do you detest them?" she ventured to pry. "I mean, surely not all the Waekugin are bad—?"

"They tried to enslave us" Namjoon abruptly interrupted. "How can I not despise them?"

Gyuri was taken aback.

"The Waekugin are savages" he uttered vehemently, his eyes an icy inferno. "They are arrogant savages that feel like that they are entitled to everything. Gyuri, if Great Emperor Yueran had not ousted most of the Waekugin, our kingdom would have crumbled under their influence. We would have become a vassal state—a pawn in their empire." He gazed down at the piece of paper intently as he contemplated the prospect. "Our nation would have been flooded by rivers of blood had they been successful in their plan."

Not wanting to antagonise Namjoon, Gyuri silently nodded. From the way he spoke, Gyuri could sense that he was very passionate about the subject.

"But you mustn't base your opinion on someone just because of their past" she eventually mentioned.

Namjoon looked up, baffled. "What do you mean?"

"The Waekugin" she responded, "you said some of them took in wives and brought their families."

"Yes... but what has that got to do with anything?"

"Well, don't you feel sorry for the children who had no part to play in this?"

Namjoon grew quiet. He had never thought about the Waekugin mongrels. Frankly, he couldn't care less about them. "I do," he eventually answered but Gyuri wasn't convinced. "I pity those half-caste children, born of two worlds yet never completely belonging to either one."

"They are not accepted in Saim because they carry the blood of the enemy" Gyuri murmured. "But they don't belong in their home country either because of their Saimese heritage." With empathy, she asked, "How would you feel if you were in their shoes?"

Namjoon searched Gyuri's face which showed compassion for the Waekugin. He couldn't comprehend why Gyuri was taking everything to heart. "Why do you care about them?"

"Because being stuck in the middle is difficult" she spoke softly. "And it doesn't help when everyone around you assumes your personality before getting to know you."

Namjoon saw her pained expression and voiced his observation. "You speak as if you have experienced such prejudice."

"What?" Gyuri fidgeted nervously. She averted her gaze as she replied, "No, that's not- that's not
true."

But inside, she couldn't help but be reminded of her own experience. Even though she was Asian, Subin had lived in the UK all her life. As a child, she didn't mind being unique—she embraced it. But being different from everyone else had constantly reminded her that she didn't fully belong. Even amongst her dad and brother, she was the odd one out: she couldn't speak Korean. And amongst her peers, she was the only Korean around. It was like playing 'piggy-in-the-middle'. But Subin was always in the middle: she could never be fully Korean, nor can she ever be fully British. And if that was the case, will she ever belong anywhere at all?

"It is fine if you do not want to tell me" Namjoon replied. "But anyway," he said, changing the subject, "the Waekugin are just half of the problem. What threatens our people now is famine."

"Famine?"

Namjoon gave a wry nod. "Rain has not fallen in Saim for a long time. Because of the drought, we have been unable to grow enough crops to feed the whole nation." Namjoon wrote the symbol for 'food' on the paper as he sighed. "And because of that, there have been so many cases of malnourishment back at the sanatorium..."

Namjoon furrowed his brow in worry, ruining his princely features. While he busied himself with pondering over the problems in the sanatorium, Gyuri distracted herself by organising the documents she had been studying earlier. She squinted her eyes as she tried her best to read what was written.

_I wish I knew how to read this so that I can help more..._

But just as she was searching through the stack of papers, she suddenly came across a black, leather-bound book that was buried deep underneath his other belongings. Curiously, she lifted the book up and inspected it.

_What's this?_

Gyuri opened the book to the first page and her eyes rounded. Inside, was a detailed close-up painting of a flower, its petals painted in the delicate hues of pink while its branches, the contrasting colour of black. With her finger, she traced the corner of the page, her eyes lingering on the life-like image. As she turned the page, her eyes were greeted with even more watercolour paintings of nature that it made Gyuri question how it was possible that such images could be produced by the strokes of a brush.

Gyuri continued to ogle at the contents of the book, her admiration for the art growing by the minute. It was only when she came across a painting of a woman did she hesitate to turn the page.

"Wow."

Hearing her gasp, Namjoon turned his attention to her. "Gyuri? What is it?"

Gyuri continued to gape at the portrait of the woman. With gentle splashes of black, her long, black hair was captured in a still image. The details of her garments, so delicately painted, exuded an aura of elegance. Something about her, even if it was a painting, was enchanting.

"Who is she?" Gyuri questioned when she noticed Namjoon by her side.

But Namjoon didn't respond.

Curious, Gyuri looked up and discovered Namjoon's mouth slightly agape. A mellow expression
graced his face as he continued to gaze at the painting. "She is—"

But before he could complete his utterance, a sudden knock on the door diverted his attention.

"Master Namjoon?"

Gyuri and Namjoon turned to the doorway where Mayu was waiting.

"Lord Hyesung is asking for you."

The mellowness in Namjoon's eyes hardened as he composed himself. "Tell Uncle I will be with him shortly" he replied.

Mayu glanced at Gyuri before curtsying and scurrying off to pass the message.

With one last glance, Namjoon abruptly shut the sketchbook. He met eyes with Gyuri and smiled awkwardly. "I will return shortly," he told her, but Gyuri couldn't help noticing how his voice sounded pained.

"Very well, Master Namjoon."

Once he was gone, Gyuri looked down at the sketchbook again and wondered why Namjoon had looked so melancholy. "Who could that painting of the woman be?" she pondered aloud.

But inside, Gyuri was most curious to know if Namjoon was the one who painted her.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thanks for reading chapter 22 of The Brothers Kim.

Which Kim are you rooting for?
"That will be all" Jimin uttered dismissively as he shooed the royal maids away. From his desk, Jimin let out a long sigh as he pinched the bridge of his nose. A throbbing pain pounded at his forehead as he moved his fingers to massage his temples: he had a migraine.

"Are you okay, Your Majesty?"

Jemin looked up to find Zeren peeping through his door.

"I knocked earlier but you didn't answer."

Jemin groaned slightly while Zeren approached him with concern etched on his face.

"It has been a long day" Jimin replied wearily when he saw Zeren's expression. "I am fine, so you need not worry."

But Zeren wasn't at all convinced. "If you were fine, you wouldn't look like a ghoul right now."

"Thanks," Jimin replied sarcastically, "I shall take that as a compliment."

"I'm not joking, Your Majesty" Zeren retorted. "I'm worried about you. You're overworking yourself." He frowned as he flapped his arms in dismay. "You've been locked up in your office for five days straight!"

"I am fine" Jimin repeated insistently but then a confused look crossed his features. "Has it really been five days?"

Zeren arched his brow.

"Did I not see you yesterday?" Jimin continued to ask. "Or the day before?"

"See!" Zeren shouted exasperatingly. "You can't even remember what day it is."

Jemin covered his face with his hands as if to try and wake himself up. "I have just been very busy with everything that is going on in the kingdom" he reasoned. "Frankly, all this," he said while gesturing at the documents, "has been very overwhelming."

"Of course, it's overwhelming!" Zeren exclaimed. "You've done nothing but work from dusk till dawn since the day of your coronation!"

Jemin winced as he signalled for Zeren to lower his voice. "What else am I supposed to do?"

"Rest!" Zeren half-exclaimed. He lowered his voice when he saw Jimin glaring at him for being too loud. "Your Majesty, I understand your position as emperor, but you mustn't forget that you are human too."

Jemin pulled a face as he brushed him off. "I am an emperor before anything else."

"Well, if you are so hellbent on fulfilling your imperial duties," Zeren said as he folded his arms across his chest "then you should try not to neglect your filial duties too."
At this, Jimin was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Zeren sighed. "Your Majesty, the royal staff have begun to notice how you shrink away from female interaction."

"Oh..."

"You are making it too obvious" Zeren hissed after searching around his office. "And don't think I haven't noticed how you spend all your time in here just to avoid them. I know you, Your Majesty. You tend to avoid your fears instead of confronting them."

Jimin snickered at Zeren's words. "Nothing escapes you, does it?"

"It's the curse of being your friend" Zeren replied while shrugging. "But anyway, you must solve this. After all, you will be choosing your empress soon. You have to acquaint yourself with women so that you can produce heirs—"

"Do not pester me about that too, Zeren" Jimin groaned. "You are like my sister."

"But Her Highness is right."

"As my friend, you should be siding with me" he murmured curtly. "And besides, you should understand my position better than anyone else. It is difficult to suddenly undo what the monks had instilled in us back at the temple."

"The monks?" Zeren echoed. "Oh, Chim, don't tell me—?"

"Yes," Jimin affirmed. "Now do you understand why I am wary of women?"

Zeren shook his head in disappointment. "Chim, the monks only told us that because they are celibate. They gave up all their worldly desires, but those rules do not apply to you!"

"I am an emperor" Jimin reminded him. "In some ways, those rules do apply to me."

Zeren was thoughtful. "You have a point. But relinquishing your desire for women isn't one of them." He eyed him carefully as he spoke, "Women are not temptresses that you should resist. In fact, you should be indulging in their presence!"

Jimin looked like he was about to argue with him when a sudden knock on the door caused the pair to fall silent.

"Your Majesty?" a meek voice spoke tentatively. It sounded like Minseok.

"Come in" Jimin responded after exchanging looks with Zeren. They will have to resume their conversation another time.

Cautiously, Minseok entered Jimin's office. He subtly glanced around, trying not to show the slight judgement in his eyes as he took in the state of the emperor's office. To Minseok, it was like he had stepped into the slums: a stark contrast to the grandeur that encapsulated the whole palace.

"I came to give you a status report on matters of state" Minseok informed him after bowing down respectfully. He peeked at Zeren, finally noticing his presence, and gave him an acknowledging nod.

"Please, continue" Jimin responded as he straightened his back. He wasn't in the mood to hear more bad news but knew that his brother-in-law wouldn't disturb him unless it was important.
"It is about the famine" Minseok proceeded to talk. "The situation is growing worse with shortages of food causing panic amongst the worst affected areas."

Jimin internally groaned as he sunk deeper into his chair. "Is this about the Xanshu region?"

Minseok nodded. "But I am afraid that is not all." He pursed his lips as he spoke solemnly, "There have been reports of protests as well. The people are refusing to pay tithe to the lords because of the famine. Some serfs have even started hoarding their yield."

Jimin let out an audible sigh as he pondered on how to solve yet another pending issue. He was swarmed by so many responsibilities that he didn't know where to begin. Which trouble should he prioritise first? He didn't know anymore. It was like he had been thrust into a whirlpool of ceaseless obstacles that was slowing suffocating him. As soon as he solved a case, two more would fall to his lap, scarcely giving him time to breathe. And he was exhausted. He knew that he couldn't continue for much longer.

Noticing Jimin massaging his temples, Minseok ventured to enquire, "Your Majesty? Are you alright?"

"No," Zeren answered for him, "he's not." He turned to address Jimin, "Your Majesty, I must insist that you continue after resting or at least after taking a break—"

"Enough, Zeren" Jimin spoke sharply.

Zeren was taken aback.

"I am fine" he addressed Minseok. He made rolling motions with his hand to signal for him to continue.

Minseok peeked at Zeren's concerned expression and cleared his throat. "Well, apart from the famine, there has been little progress on the investigation of the assassination attempt made at the Kim household."

Jimin's lips thinned.

"Although," Minseok continued, "one of the survivors from the attack did mention witnessing a flower tattoo on one of the perpetrators."

"A flower tattoo?" Jimin thought aloud. He shifted his gaze towards Zeren and then back to Minseok. "Does the flower tattoo mean anything?"

Minseok was grim. "It is not for definite but there have been reports of a rebel group that have been spotted with flower tattoos raiding Waekugin land." His voice was low as he added, "But what is most frightening is that there are rumours circulating that they were also responsible for the series of assassinations in the Seoncheul region last year."

Jimin sat up attentively. "Who did they assassinate?"

"Mostly landlords and politicians" Minseok gravely replied. "No one knows why they assassinated them nor what they aimed to get out of it. Our bureau of investigations could only speculate that they were anarchists who wanted to disrupt the peace." He paused before adding, "If I may say so, Your Majesty, it is not the first time that the Kim household has faced threats like these. The rebel group must have targeted us for the very same reason they targeted those based in Seoncheul."

"And what would that reason be?"
Minseok glumly answered, "To terrorize and weaken the Jade Lotus."

Jimin perched his chin on top of his interlocked fingers as he brooded over this shocking piece of information. *It seems I have received the short end of the stick...* he thought sardonically. "Well, for now, we shall have to look into the flower tattoo. Perhaps even get a sketch of it so that we can..." Jimin's voice trailed off as he pinched his nose bridge again. His migraine was growing worse.

"Your Majesty, you must really rest" Zeren insisted. But knowing that Jimin wouldn't listen to him, he immediately turned to Minseok. "Tell him, Advisor Kim. His Majesty won't listen to me, but he most definitely will listen to you."

A crease formed on Minseok's forehead as he scrutinised Jimin's grimacing. "Zeren is right, Your Majesty. You should rest."

Jimin, not being able to stand the pounding in his head any longer, finally surrendered. "Alright," he responded feebly. "But instead of sleeping, I would like to get some fresh air instead."

Zeren asked almost immediately, "Where to, Your Majesty? Would you like to walk along the gardens?"

"Excellent suggestion," Minseok agreed. "Your Majesty, strolling along the picturesque scenery during the summer will help you relax."

Jimin's eyes darted from Zeren to Minseok slowly. "No" he replied. "I would like to go somewhere else." He shifted his gaze towards his high window which connected to the veranda that overlooked the capital from afar. That was when an idea came to him like a bolt of lightning.

"Zeren?" he said as he continued to stare out the window.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"How many imperial uniforms do you have?"

Befuddled by his question, Zeren responded, "Two, Your Majesty." He exchanged looks with Minseok who was equally as confused as he was. "Why do you ask?"

Jimin directed his gaze at the pair with an impish smile dancing on his lips. "Good, because I am going to need you to lend me your second set."

~*~

"Over here?"

"No," Gyuri replied, "left a bit."

Namjoon nudged the wooden table by an inch and glanced at Gyuri for guidance. "What about now?"

With her hands, Gyuri formed a picture frame and used it as a reference point. "Yep! It's perfect!"

Namjoon let out a sigh of relief as he walked away from the wooden table. He nodded approvingly when he saw his handy-work. "Now all we have to do is wait for them to come."

A few days ago, Gyuri had been summoned by Lord Hyesung for an audience.

With her heart pounding against her chest, she nervously approached his quarters which was the
grande of all the houses in the Kim household. Gyuri swallowed when she was finally in front of him, her legs trembling under Hyesung's steely gaze.

"Are you Gyuri?" he enquired, his low voice intimidating.

Gyuri nodded, refusing to meet his eye.

"I have heard from my nephew that you were the one that saved my youngest son, Taehyung."

At this, Gyuri dared to look up. "I-I didn't do anything special..."

Hyesung hmphed and Gyuri immediately shut her mouth. Was it a good hmph? Or a bad one?

"You boldly shielded my son at the expense of your own health" he stated while gesturing to her shoulder with his brow arched. "To me, that shows not only bravery but loyalty to our house." The corners of his mouth twitched into a slight smile, "Do you not consider your behaviour 'special'?"

Is this a trick question? Gyuri internally asked. "Erm..."

Observing her hesitance, Hyesung unexpectedly burst out into laughter, startling Gyuri and the guards who were stationed outside his door. His booming voice resounded around the room, dispelling the tangible heaviness in the atmosphere. Witnessing Hyesung laugh, Gyuri's tense shoulders started to unwind and soon, Gyuri was smiling along with him. Something about his laugh reminded her a lot of her dad.

"You are a modest child," Hyesung remarked after he had composed himself. "It has been a while since I have come across your kind."

Gyuri smiled bashfully in response.

"But" he spoke, his voice suddenly low and cold, "it is the modest types that one must look out for the most." As he finished his sentence, Hyesung's earlier iciness returned, making the hairs on the back of Gyuri's neck rise. She shuffled uncomfortably under his piercing stare, unsure as to what had caused Hyesung's sudden change in demeanour. But just as she was about to ask, his perceptive eyes glossed over and returned to its amiable shine.

"Do you know why I asked you to come here?"

Gyruri warily shook her head.

Hyesung leaned back on his high, elevated chair as he stared down at her. "I wish to reward you."

"Reward me?" Gyuri was astounded.


Gyuri blinked at Hyesung's suggestion. Huh? He's willing to reward me that extravagantly? She was at a loss for words. When Gyuri received the notice that Kim Hyesung was summoning her, she immediately feared she had done something unacceptable and was about to be severely punished. Never had the possibility of being rewarded crossed her mind at all.

"Well?" Hyesung prompted after a while. "What is it?"

"Erm..." Gyuri fumbled, her eyes darting upwards for inspiration. She didn't know what to ask for. What did she desire most?
"...Because of the drought, we have been unable to grow enough crops to feed the whole nation."

Gyuri blinked as she suddenly remembered what Namjoon had told her not so long ago. "I know what I want now."

Hyesung was attentive. "Oh? And what would that be?"

"I want..."

~*~

"Gyuri?"

Gyuri turned to her left and found Namjoon peering at her.

"Thank you."

She gaped at him quizzically. "For what?"

"For doing this" he replied with a dimpled smile. He glanced upwards as he noticed people entering. "You could have asked my uncle for anything, yet you used your reward to establish something that could help the poor." He waved his arm about as he showcased the dusty interior of the storage room that was steadily filling up with sweaty bodies. "It will be slow at first, but I am certain that your soup kitchen will definitely help reduce the number of cases of malnourishment." He tilted his head to the side as he pondered aloud, "Why did I not think of establishing one in town sooner?"

Gyuri grinned as she welcomed more people into her soup kitchen. "That's because your head is only filled with thoughts about medicine and your work at the sanatorium."

Namjoon chuckled and Gyuri's heart fluttered at the sound of it. "I guess you are right" he agreed. He directed his attention to her, his mesmerising dark eyes unreadable. "But it is not only thoughts of medicine that fill my mind."

Gyuri searched his eyes and found a hint of sadness hidden in the resigned glimmer of his irises. "Master Namjoon—?"

"Physician Kim!"

Gyuri and Namjoon swerved around at the sound of a panicked voice and discovered a grubby, young lad panting from the doorway. He approached Namjoon hurriedly. "Please come quickly!" he urged. "You're needed desperately back at the sanatorium!"

Namjoon wasted no time in gathering his belongings but suddenly halted when he remembered that Gyuri would be all alone. "I will join you shortly, Yujin" he reassured him when he noticed the boy's quizzical expression. "Gyuri, will you be alright by yourself?" he worriedly asked. "Madam Zhou should be coming soon so you should not be alone for long."

"I'll be okay" she responded while trying to disguise her doubt. She surveyed her surroundings and saw numerous pairs of hungry eyes staring back at her. "You should go."

"Are you certain?" Namjoon questioned, ignoring the lad's whinging from the exit. "I can wait until Madam Zhou gets here before I go."

Horrified, the lad glared at Gyuri as if urging her to discourage him from staying. "Yes, I'll be fine" she quickly responded, getting the hint. "You should hurry, it seems pretty urgent."
"Alright" Namjoon eventually conceded. "I will return as soon as I can."

"You don't have to worry, Master Namjoon. I can take care of things here" Gyuri called to him as he left the storage room.

With a kind smile, Namjoon looked back at her one more time before swiftly departing.

Once he was out of sight, Gyuri focused her attention on the haggard faces of the peasants who had entered the storage room.

"Now then" she began as she clapped her hands and rubbed them together. "Who's first?"

The filth-covered peasants exchanged cautious looks with each other.

"Is the food really for free?" one of the peasants asked. "This isn't some scam?"

"Of course, this isn't a scam!" Gyuri exclaimed. She was confused as to why anyone would scam a peasant in the first place. She scuttled over to the wooden table that had a steaming clay pot filled with hot barley soup. With a ladle, Gyuri filled a small bowl and offered it to the peasant who had spoken up. "Here, please have some."

Sceptically, the peasant accepted it while the others around him drew closer to inspect the steaming contents.

"It looks like real food to me."

"Smells good too."

"I want to try some!"

The peasant opened his mouth and took a wary sip while the others watched him in anticipation.

"Well?" a middle-aged woman asked. "How is it?"

The young peasant smacked his lips appreciatively. "It's darn delicious!"

In less than ten minutes, the storage room was filled with overlapping voices as the small gathering of peasants rushed to get a bowl of their own. Overwhelmed by the positive response, Gyuri set to work and rushed to serve as many bowls as fast as she could. Within half an hour, she had already run out of bowls and still had so many waiting in line for their first serving.

I'm knackered, Gyuri internally said as she wiped the sweat away from her brow. This is what it must be like working at McDonald's during peak hours.

"I'm sorry, sir" Gyuri spoke with sincerity as a burly man that reeked of alcohol stepped forward. "But I don't have any bowls left."

"What?!" the man exclaimed with a slur. "So, you mean I waited in this queue for nothing?" He turned to his right and frowned when he spotted the guy in front of him slurp on his soup loudly. He addressed her angrily, "This ain't fair, little madam. You can't just go around saying you're giving away free food and not serve everyone." He pointed to the guy he was looking at earlier. "How come he got some and I didn't?"

"Sir, it's because I don't have any bowls left. I would gladly give you soup but—"

"It's because I'm homeless, isn't it?" he spouted while swaying slightly. "I know what hussies like
you are like. You discriminate against us homeless folk because you think we're lazy."

Gyuri was taken aback. "Sir, I'm doing no such thing—"

"Why are you serving free food anyway?" he suddenly asked. He peered at the barley soup and then spoke contemptuously, "What's the catch? This food's probably your scraps, aren't they?"

"What? No—!"

But the man interrupted, "You look like you're well-off." He eyed her up and down. "You're probably a servant from some big-shot house who's come here to look down on us simple folk."

"That's not true!" Gyuri retorted. "I came here to help—"

"Well, we don't need your help!"

Suddenly, the burly man threw his hands in front of him and knocked the clay pot off the wooden table, spilling what remained of the barley soup onto the ground. The surrounding peasants gasped at the sound of the clay pot smashing, their eyes rounded in both fear and surprise as the burly man went on a rampage.

"Don't look down at us! We don't need your charity!"

Gyuri squealed in fear as the burly man kicked away the table, almost harming her in the process. As she staggered backwards, the burly man towered over her, his pungent stench overpowering her nostrils.

"Arrogant bitches like you should be the ones suffering!" he shouted while raising his leg as if to kick her.

Fearfully, Gyuri squeezed her eyes shut as she protected her head in anticipation for the first of his heavy blows. But as she waited for it, she abruptly heard a loud grunt and her eyes flew open from both terror and curiosity.

"That's not how you treat a lady" she heard a familiar voice say.

From the floor, Gyuri blinked in surprise as she took in the recognisable turquoise robes and the distinct imperial crest of flowers embroidered in green.

The burly man struggled against the bronze-faced guard who had him in a tight headlock. "Le-let me go!" he gasped while tapping the guard's arm in submission.

"Nah-uh-uh" the guard tutted playfully. "Bad guys like you need to be taught a lesson." He tightened his grip around his fat neck a little more, causing a vein in the burly man's temple to pop. "How about I choke you a little? Just for fun?" he whispered with a sinister smile.

The burly man wheezed in reply, unable to form coherent words.

"That is enough, Zeren."

Gyuri shifted her attention to the other imperial guard who was approaching her. He kneeled as he asked in a soothing voice, "Are you alright, young miss?"

Gyuri blinked as she took in the man's ethereal appearance, her brain sparking to life as it worked hard to figure out why the man looked familiar to her. "Ah!" she exclaimed, startling the man. She had finally remembered where she had seen the pair before. "You're the elf prince!"
"Elf prince?" Jimin repeated. But then, he too was experiencing the same wave of recognition at the sound of Gyuri’s voice. "Wait a minute—" He inspected Gyuri again and then shouted back while pointing at her, "You are that scammer!"

"Scammer?" Zeren echoed while still choking the burly man in his hold. "What are you two on about?"

Gyuri pointed to Zeren and suddenly shouted, "The flirty turd!"

"Turd?" Jimin was confused.

Zeren tilted his head at Gyuri and he too finally remembered her. "Hey, what do you know, it's the pretty lady!" he exclaimed excitedly. "What a coincidence!"

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 23 of The Brothers Kim.

What do you think will happen now that Gyuri has met Jimin and Zeren again?

Find out soon...
Under the golden rays of sunshine, Jimin inhaled contentedly, taking in the pleasant summery fumes that surrounded him. It had been a while since he last allowed the sun to kiss his pale skin, made even pastier by the countless days he had spent indoors ever since ascending the throne. Jimin closed his mono-lid eyes as he basked in the sun's warmth. It reminded him of his time back at the temple which felt like a lifetime ago. How he used to enjoy nature's company as he hiked up and down the rocky mountain paths to collect water; how he used to climb tall, gnarly trees to reach the juiciest of apples and how he used to wade in the water to catch river fish with his spear.

Jemin truly yearned to return to his carefree life. But alas, this was his reality now. His time at the temple will remain nothing more than vignettes of memories or a nostalgic dream.

"This isn't right, Chim. It's not fair, it's not right, it's not proper."

Jemin opened his eyes and wearily gazed at Zeren, who was ambling alongside him. "Oh, quit your whining already. It is only a uniform."

"It may just be a uniform to you but it's my uniform!" Zeren huffed as he folded his arms across his chest sulkily. "And I only have two sets. You could've ordered a set to be brought to you."

Jemin rolled his eyes. He had forgotten that Zeren abhorred sharing clothes. Even as a child, Zeren was very particular with sharing his belongings and getting changed in front of others.

"Now, it's gonna be all sweaty and smelly and I'll have nothing to wear tomorrow!" Zeren continued to whinge. "You know what, you better get me another made, and you better not be stingy about it."

Jemin raised his brow. "I will get you one made, do not worry" he placated.

"You better" Zeren retorted sassily as he kissed his teeth and simultaneously rolled his eyes.

With slight annoyance, Jemin picked up his pace. The pair were currently strolling along the capital, both disguised in vibrant, turquoise imperial uniforms. Jemin glanced ahead as they walked along the busy dust path, merchants and peasants stopping to peer at the pair as they ambled by. Wary of their stares, Jemin pursed his lips uneasily. Learning about the flower tattooed assassins made him jumpy but most of all, paranoid that he may be in imminent danger. Only then did he begin to regret not taking the safer option by staying at the palace.

"And you're so much chubbier than me!" Jemin suddenly heard Zeren exclaim.

"What?"

Jemin turned to see Zeren theatrically shake his head with an exaggerated forlorn expression. "My poor uniform" he uttered with mock distress, "stretched beyond recovery..."

Jemin was about to quarrel with his friend when he suddenly met eyes with him. Zeren stared back knowingly. Ah... I see. He thought and began to relax.

"Oh, Chim. You really should lose that baby fat. People will think you're still a child" Zeren playfully lectured but, despite his untroubled countenance, his eyes showed a glint of intelligence.
"Maybe we should spar when we get back."

Immediately, the people around them began to avert their gaze as they lost interest in the pair. Jimin breathed a sigh of relief and tossed Zeren a thankful glance of which he acknowledged with a smirk.

*He really is a good friend,* Jimin thought as he matched his gait with his so that they were side by side again. *What would I ever do without him?*

Jumin proudly stood by Zeren's side, who continued with his mindless chatter. He knew that Zeren was misbehaving on purpose to not only distract him from worrying about his hidden enemies but to also diffuse the unwanted attention being garnered by their presence.

Jumin peered up at his friend, who was a few inches taller than him.

When he first met Zeren at the temple, he was a quiet boy with an angry outlook on life. Jimin knew little about Zeren's origins apart from the fact that he was a refugee, like many of the orphans he lived with. He had a secretive side to him that made it hard for others to approach and to this day, Jimin still remained ignorant of his past. Despite Zeren being a carefree person, Jimin never ventured to learn how Zeren had ended up in the temple. He feared that prying would only result in opening old wounds and undoing the monks' efforts in curbing Zeren's resentment towards his unknown fiend. Jimin was just glad that Zeren was able to overcome his hatred to reveal his cheerful side.

"I'm starving" Zeren grumbled as he patted his stomach. "We've been walking for ages. Let's go and eat something."

"But it is too soon to return."

Zeren arched his brow. "We don't have to go back to... you know" he said with emphasis towards the end of his utterance. "We can eat at a tavern here."

Jumin was sceptical.

"Oh, c'mon! Not too long ago, we were eating rice balls out of coconut leaves!"

"That is not why I am uncertain" Jimin replied. He scratched his head as he asked, "Zeren, do you have any money?"

Zeren was about to respond with confidence until he remembered. "Oh..."

"I guess eating in luxury has made us forget the hardships of the outdoors" Jimin mentioned with a chuckle.

Zeren wasn't amused. "What should we do? Should we head back?"

Jumin was about to reply when someone suddenly barged past him, stunning him for a moment.

"Oh!" the peasant exclaimed when he saw that he had bumped into an imperial guard. "I beg your pardon. I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" he profusely apologised while bowing.

"Watch where you're going next time!" Zeren half-shouted. "Don't you know that he's—"

"Zeren" Jimin interrupted.

Zeren locked eyes with Jimin, who looked at him warningly.

"That is enough" he finished. Jimin turned to address the peasant with an amiable smile, "It is okay.
It was an accident."

The peasant gaped at Jimin thankfully but still retained a semblance of fear. "Thank you, kind sir. I shall be more careful next time. It's just that I was rushing to—oh!" The peasant swerved to face where he was going, and his eyes widened when he spotted the growing crowd of peasants that had congregated around a shanty-looking building. "Oh! I hope there is still some soup left!"

"What's going on over there?" Zeren queried, following his stare. "Why are they all crowding around?"

"It's this new soup kitchen" the peasant answered quickly, "the people running it are giving away free food."

"Free food?!" Zeren shouted, his eyes bulging in disbelief.

Startled, the peasant nodded meekly. "Yes. If you would excuse me," he muttered while edging away, "I need to get there before they run out." And with that, the peasant sprinted to the distance before Jimin or Zeren could ask anything more.

"Did you hear that, Chim? Free food! We should go there and get some!"

Jemin curled his lip.

"Uh-oh, I know that face," Zeren remarked. "What's wrong?"

"It is a soup kitchen" Jimin pointed out.

"And?"

"It is a soup kitchen that is giving away food to the poor."

Failing to see what Jimin was hinting at, Jimin explained, "We cannot eat there. Zeren, I am anything but poor. I would feel bad if I take food that could go to someone else that needs it more."

"But I need it" Zeren countered. "I need food to tame my stomach before it tames me."

Jemin could only confusedly stare at Zeren's reasoning.

"Relax, Chim. If you're gonna feel bad about taking free food, then don't take any." Like the peasant, Zeren started creeping towards the crowd. "And I'm starving so..." Zeren skipped ahead, forcing Jimin to follow.

He really is a good friend, Jimin thought as he reluctantly trailed behind him, but as a person, I can only wonder...

~*~

"Hey, what do you know, it's the pretty lady! What a coincidence!"

Gyuri darted her eyes from Zeren to Jimin like a pendulum. She couldn't believe that the two people she prayed to never meet again were standing before her. "W-what are you doing here?"

Not knowing which of the pair she was addressing, Zeren spoke up regardless, "We're here because we heard we can get free food. So..." his voice trailed off as he glanced around the storage room while still restraining the burly man under his hold. "Where's the soup?"
Gyuri peered down at the ground where a smashed clay pot was at the centre of a lamentable spillage.

Following her gaze, Zeren's eyes widened. In a blink of an eye, he released the burly man from his grasp and karate chopped his neck, forcing him to lose consciousness and land face flat on the ground.

As the burly man collapsed, Zeren dragged his feet to the spillage and fell to his knees in despair. "This is cruel" he whispered dramatically, "it's not fair, it's not right, it's not proper..." He eyed the soup stain on the floor. "Poor soup..."

While Zeren mourned over the spillage, Jimin turned his attention to Gyuri. With unyielding determination, he took hold of her wrist and clamped down on it tightly.

Startled, Gyuri jolted. "What are you doing?" she asked while tugging her hand free. "Let go of me!"

"No" he answered firmly. "You should pay for those meat buns that you stole last time." With slight pressure, he squeezed a little tighter and she winced. "I have not forgotten, you thief."

Gyuri attempted to pry his fingers off her wrist but to no avail: he had a vice-like grip.

Suddenly, Jimin started heading for the exit, dragging Gyuri along with him.

"Wait!" Gyuri shouted alarmingly, "Let go! Where are you taking me?"

"To the meat bun vendor," he replied without bothering to look at her. "I have a funny feeling that he will be pleased to see you."

Gyuri fought against his forceful grasp while at the same time, screaming for help. She looked back at the peasants, who had cowered to the far corners of the storage room, for assistance, but none dared to move.

"You are wasting your breath" Jimin informed her. "The people know better than to interfere in the work of justice."

"You don't understand!" Gyuri claimed. "This is all a misunderstanding—"

"Tell that to the meat bun vendor" Jimin cut in. "It is up to him to decide what punishment you should receive." With a forceful tug, Jimin yanked on Gyuri's arm, dragging Gyuri out onto the busy street.

"Let go of me!" Gyuri continued to scream. "Help! Someone, help!"

Noticing how much attention Gyuri was drawing, Jimin hissed at her, "Be quiet!" but that only seemed to make Gyuri scream more.

Jimin was about to clamp his hand over her mouth when he suddenly noticed something bright heading for his direction. Abruptly, he released Gyuri's wrist as he swerved to avoid a sharp blade that was aimed directly at his arm. With quick reflexes, Jimin drew his own hwando long sword from his belt as the attacker's sword clashed with his, the sound of clanging metal offending both party's ears.

Jimin winced as he struggled to maintain his footing. He glared at his strong opponent, who had come at him unprovoked. "Who... who are you?" he managed to ask as he attempted to free the hilt of his sword from his opponent's.
The stranger prevented his attempt. "I should be asking you that."

Jimin furrowed his brow as he searched the stranger's dark eyes. There was nothing familiar about the man, but he couldn't help feeling that he may have seen him somewhere before.

"Are you okay, Gyuri?" the stranger suddenly enquired, confusing Jimin as he was still staring directly at him.

"I-I'm fine" Jimin heard the thief reply.

"You two know each other?" Jimin questioned the stranger.

The stranger merely stared. "That is none of your concern."

He must be a thief too... Jimin thought and his frown deepened. He eyed him up and down and noticed how he was well-dressed. A thief in disguise.

"For someone who serves His Majesty, you sure are bold to engage in dark desires in broad daylight. Especially while wearing the imperial crest."

Jimin's face flushed at what the stranger was hinting at. "How-how dare you! I was doing no such thing!"

"I can forgive you for succumbing to your needs" the stranger continued. "But" he uttered darkly, "I will not forgive you for touching one of my people."

The stranger jerked his sword free, momentarily catching Jimin off guard as he sought to recover his bearings. In one swift movement, the stranger lifted his blade higher with the intention to cut Jimin, only to freeze when he felt the cold tip of a sword prod him at the back of the neck.

"Not so fast."

Jimin's eyes widened when he spotted Zeren with his hwando aimed at the stranger's neck, his normally laidback expression, hardened into a cold and sinister glare. With the slight movement of his irises, Zeren peered at Jimin and seeing that he remained unharmed, Zeren spoke chillingly to the stranger, "You're lucky that my friend isn't hurt. If he had so much as a mark on his skin, this sword" he pressed the tip lightly on the stranger's neck, "would already be stained with your blood."

The stranger remained motionless on the spot. Both Jimin and Zeren stayed still too, anticipating any sudden movement that could lead to an unwanted outcome that all were keen to avoid.

"M-master Namjoon!"

The sound of a shrill woman's voice made the trio turn their attention towards a middle-aged woman, who came rushing up to them.

"Lower your swords immediately!" she screeched at the pair. "How dare you point your swords at Master Namjoon!"

Zeren's hardened eyes softened slightly as he inspected the woman before him. "Hang on a sec, I know you... You're from the Kim household. You're Madam Gout, right?"

"Zhou" she corrected, bemused by his offensive mistake. She narrowed her eyes at him and then exclaimed, "I remember you! You are the imperial guard that shielded Master Minseok that night!"

With the sudden appearance of Madam Zhou, Zeren began lowering his hwando and Jimin
reluctantly did the same.

Namjoon, who was still wary of the pair, enquired, "Madam Zhou, do you know these guards?"

"I do not know them personally" she replied, "but I recall seeing him," she said pointing to Zeren, "during the wedding banquet. He introduced himself as Zeren, Her Highness' personal guard."

Zeren sheathed his hwando and gave a slight bow. "I apologise for my earlier behaviour. I did not know you were from the House of Kim. I was only trying to protect His Maj—"

"Zeren" Jimin interrupted.

Everyone turned to Jimin and he cleared his throat nervously. "He was only trying to protect me, his-his, erm, friend. I am -I am a new imperial guard and I have just started learning the ropes."

Namjoon inspected him warily. "But why were you man-handling Gyuri?"

"Gyuri?" Jimin repeated and then glanced back to the female thief. He locked eyes with her and witnessed the pleading look on her face. It was almost as if she was begging him not to say anything. "My apologies" Jimin finally replied, "I seem to have made a mistake." He turned to Gyuri and stared at her intensely, "I was after a scammer who had swindled a poor meat bun vendor not too long ago. Gyuri, here, is the spitting image of her. But I see now that I am wrong."

"Gyuri is not a thief" Namjoon stated matter-of-factly. "But I see now that I misunderstood the situation too. Forgive me for assuming you were attempting to bring Gyuri to the red-light district."

Jimin reddened as he replied through gritted teeth, "Apology accepted."

The two men stared at each other with mutual dislike. Zeren, on the other hand, had turned his attention back to Gyuri.

"Pretty lady!" he exclaimed, breaking the impromptu stare-down between Jimin and Namjoon. "I'm so glad you're okay." He approached her and without warning, suddenly wrapped his arms around her in a tight embrace.

Madam Zhou gasped in horror while Jimin and Namjoon watched on in bewilderment.

"Let-let go of me you-you creep!" she screamed as she violently pushed him away.

Zeren staggered backwards but still maintained his flirtatious smile. "Ow, that hurts!" He dramatically clutched his shirt where his heart would have been. "Didn't you miss me? Because I definitely missed you~"

But before he could attempt to embrace her again, Namjoon obstructed his path. "I think that is enough, sir."

Zeren squirmed under Namjoon's icy stare and conceded almost immediately. He raised his arms in defeat, "Alright, alright. No more touchy-feely."

Jimin shook his head in embarrassment. Noticing the heaviness of the atmosphere, Jimin stated, "It seems we have overstayed our welcome." He glanced at Zeren and told him, "We shall leave now."

Zeren looked like he was about to protest but instead nodded in acknowledgement.

As the pair prepared to depart, Gyuri suddenly called after them. "Wait!"
Jimin and Zeren turned.

"What's your name?"

Jimin exchanged looks with Zeren, who gave him a brief nod. This time, the pair knew who Gyuri was addressing.

"Chim" he responded simply. "My name is Chim."

"Chim..." she echoed and then smiled as she said his name again, "Chim Chim."

Jimin eyed Gyuri curiously as she directed her smile at him, catching him by surprise. "Thank you, for saving me."

~*~

"What was that about?"

"What?"

Jimin arched his brow at Zeren as he closed the door to his private quarters. They had finally arrived back at the palace and were just about to start eating their lunch.

"Why did you embrace that scammer?"

Zeren looked up from his bowl of noodles and slurped the soup before replying. "Oh, you mean Gyuri?"

Jimin nodded.

"I was just checking if she was armed."

"Huh?"

Zeren continued to slurp on the broth before Jimin confiscated his bowl. "Hey!"

"Explain yourself, Zeren" he ordered.

With a sigh, Zeren elaborated. "I was doing a security check. She was a servant from the House of Kim. As far as I'm aware, the assassins that infiltrated the wedding banquet were disguised as servants. I was merely checking if she had a weapon hidden underneath her robe."

Jimin returned Zeren's bowl. "I see..." he murmured.

"Were you surprised?"

Jimin gaped at his friend who had a wily grin. "Yes" he reluctantly admitted. "It is inappropriate to be so intimate with a woman you are unfamiliar with."

Zeren chuckled. "Well, not intimate with yet" he teased.

"Pervert."

"Call me whatever you want, you're the one missing out." Zeren continued to eat his noodles with fervour.

"But that man..." Jimin pondered aloud as he suddenly thought of Namjoon. "He seemed familiar."
"Oh," Zeren said between slurps, "you mean Kim Namjoon?"

"Was that his name?"

Zeren nodded. "Yep. Don't you remember? He attended the coronation and pledged allegiance to you."

"Oh... so that is where I recognised him from." Jimin was pensive. "But how come he did not recognise me?"

"It's a good thing he didn't!" Zeren half-shouted. "We would've been in trouble if he did."

Jimin stared down at his hands as he recalled how much force Namjoon had exerted with his sword. He clenched his fist at the memory. "I cannot believe that I am now related to that fiend."

Zeren tilted his head at Jimin. "But you know what Chim, I noticed something about you today."

Jimin responded distractedly, "Oh? And what is that?"

"You normally shy away from female interaction but today with Gyuri, you didn't."

Jimin glanced up immediately and met Zeren's mischievous eyes. "That-that is because she was a thief! A scammer! How can I ever be attracted to someone like her?"

At this, Zeren perked up. "Oh? So, you find her attractive?"

"Wha—? No!"

Zeren chuckled in amusement.

"Do not even dare to think of such things!" Jimin continued to complain.

"Well, if you don't like her, I guess I'll just make a move."

Jimin eyed his friend in confusion. "Zeren, there are plenty of women out there."

"I know" Zeren responded before slurping a noodle. "But Gyuri... there's something about her that I like."

"You say that about all the women you come across" Jimin muttered under his breath.

He shook his head in dismay as he pondered over the possibility of his close friend involving himself with a scammer like Gyuri. The thought alone left an unpleasant taste in his mouth despite drinking the highest quality of tea.

Suddenly, Jimin recalled what the monks had taught him about women: *Women are like sirens. They are attractive at first but, in time, they will lure you to your demise.*

And Jimin agreed.

He sneaked a glance at Zeren who was happily slurping on his noodles, oblivious to the pending trap he was about to fall into.

*I will not let her be your downfall*, he thought to himself tenaciously. *As your friend, I will protect you from your siren.*
And Jimin believed that that siren was no other than Gyuri.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 24 of The Brothers Kim!

Will Jimin be successful in helping Zeren evade this elusive trap or will he be the one to fall victim to it?

Find out soon...
The flame on the candle flickered as General Lee Minho shuffled the documents on his desk. With his forefinger and thumb, he tugged at his bottom lip as he examined them closely, his beady, black eyes narrowed and hooded by his long, straight lashes.

"Master Minho?"

Minho tore his eyes away from his documents momentarily as he looked up. "Come in" he replied, beckoning the messenger behind his door to enter. In a few moments, he was joined by one of his staff.

"I have a letter for you, sir" the young servant boy disclosed as he approached Minho's desk with his hand outstretched.

Without batting an eye, Minho gestured for the boy to leave the letter on his desk as he resumed his reading. Once the servant boy had left, Minho dropped his pretence and tore the letter open immediately.

His eyes scanned the contents of the page with eager speed. Once he had finished, he grunted. "So, the Kims think it was us?" he said aloud. "Bumbling buffoons." With a displeased expression, he dangling the piece of paper atop the flame of the candle and watched as it caught alight. "How dare they suspect us for the assassination attempt!" he sneered contemptuously. With narrowed eyes, he observed how the last of the letter burned away into cinders, the spirally handwriting of his informant incinerated into ash.

Minho mumbled under his breath, "It is a good thing that I have planted a pair of eyes in that despicable household..." He furrowed his brows as he cast his gaze towards the pale moonlight seeping through the drawn curtains. "As I suspected, the Kims are not to be trusted." He spoke solemnly, "No one is to be trusted..."

~*~

Minseok stretched his legs as he jumped off his horse with ease. It had been a while since he had been back at the Kim household, mainly because he had been occupied with his new role as the emperor's advisor. With a wary stride, Minseok approached the main house swiftly, subtly noticing the increased number of green guards that were surveying the interior.

Father must have increased security since that night, he thought internally.

With every step he took, he heard the gravel crunching beneath his feet, the sound somewhat triggering his memories of that night when he heard the thundering of panicked footsteps and the crashing of lifeless bodies.

Minseok inadvertently shuddered.

I am fortunate that I escaped with my life, he said inwardly. But who or what could those assassins have wanted?

While Minseok contemplated this, he suddenly heard strained grunting coming from the left.
Curiously, Minseok tip-toed over to the shade, where he spotted Taehyung trying to press himself up from the ground. Minseok stopped on his tracks as he curiously watched Taehyung midway completing a push-up.

"...Ten."

"What are you doing?"

Taehyung glanced up from the ground and hurriedly got up. With a flustered expression, he dusted his front as he fumbled to explain, "B-Brother Minseok!" He glanced around and tried to disguise the embarrassment in his cheeks. "I-I was just, erm, I was just trying to do some, erm, exercise."

"I see" Minseok replied with amusement. Since when was Taehyung interested in maintaining his physique?

"W-what are you doing back?" Taehyung asked.

"I was going to see father" he replied. He arched his brow. "What about you? What are you doing?"

Again, Taehyung fumbled awkwardly. "Just, erm, just exercise!"

"But why?"

Taehyung shyly rubbed his neck. "I-I want to grow stronger."

"Stronger?" Minseok repeated quizzically. Taehyung never used to care about his strength...

"Yes." Seeing the questioning gaze riddled on Minseok's face, he elaborated, "I want to grow stronger so that I can fulfil my promise to her."

At this, Minseok grew even more curious. "Her?"

Realising his mistake, Taehyung clamped a hand over his mouth, his cheeks ablaze. "I-I mean—" he searched his surroundings wildly and settled for the floor. "Forget I said anything. Forget I— it-it means nothing..."

Minseok eyed his younger brother amusedly. So, now he has secrets too? Only a while ago, he had been reprimanding Taehyung for sneaking out into the village unattended but now, he was keeping secrets to fulfil his promise to an unknown 'her'. Minseok hid a small smile that was emerging from the corners of his lips. Taehyung is maturing, he observed. But just who could 'she' be?

"If you want to improve your strength, you should practice your martial arts more" Minseok advised.

Taehyung looked up bashfully. "Will you teach me then, brother?"

Surprised, Minseok's cat-like eyes widened. Taehyung never used to ask for help. "I am afraid I am far too busy to teach you personally" he responded.

Disappointed, Taehyung cast his eyes down. "Oh..."

"But you can ask Cousin Namjoon or perhaps even Junmyeon to help you. In truth, they are much better at martial arts than I."

"Cousin Namjoon is always away at the sanatorium" Taehyung muttered sulkily. "And Brother Junmyeon..." he scowled, "can care less about helping me."
Minseok was thoughtful. "If only second brother was here..."

Taehyung glanced up immediately. "Second brother?"

"Yes, out of all of us, second brother excelled the most in martial arts."

Taehyung inspected Minseok's expression closely. He knew from the way his brothers spoke of their exiled brother, that he incited a schism of opinions. While Namjoon and Minseok often spoke fondly of his character, Junmyeon, and occasionally Jongin, did not. There was something about their second brother that eluded Taehyung. As the youngest of the Kims, he hadn't the opportunity to personally bond with him as he was merely an infant when he was exiled. Why he was exiled he had no idea. His brothers, cousin and even father hardly mentioned him, so he scarcely knew anything about him apart from his name and the fact that both of them were born from the same womb. Sometimes, he would forget his second brother even existed until Minseok or Namjoon spoke of him by accident.

"Brother Minseok?" Taehyung said tentatively.

"Hm?"

With a small voice, he asked, "Will second brother... ever come back?"

Minseok's feline eyes widened temporarily before softening again. He murmured, "No... I do not think he ever will." His eyes were forlorn as he added, "And it will be unwise to ever ask that question again, Taehyung."

"But—"

"It is for your own good" Minseok interrupted.

Taehyung blinked in bewilderment. He couldn't understand why no one ever wanted to speak about their second brother. What could he have done to have made him an unspeakable subject?

Minseok fixed his robes before clearing his throat. "I must go now, Taehyung. Father is expecting me."

Taehyung nodded wordlessly as he bid his elder brother farewell.

~*~

"Damn it", Gyuri cursed as she hauled the basket full of food down the busy dirt path. "These things are heavy."

"Do you need a hand?" Mayu asked while also cradling a large basket of food. "I told you not to carry too much in your basket."

Gyuri forcibly smiled. "I'll be fine—we're almost at the storage house anyway."

A few days had passed since Gyuri had started going to the soup kitchen daily. After a rough start, Namjoon and Madam Zhou had ensured that, for the soup kitchen to operate smoothly, someone should always accompany Gyuri.

"But Master Namjoon, it was only that one time. I can manage the soup kitchen by myself" Gyuri had protested. "The man who attacked me was drunk and I doubt it will happen again—"
"I cannot risk it, Gyuri" Namjoon interrupted. He stared into her eyes with his neat brows furrowed deeply. "It is not only rowdy peasants that you must be wary of" he uttered in a sombre tone. "If I had not got there in time, who knows where those imperial guards might have taken you."

"They were only trying to help" Gyuri replied weakly.

But Namjoon remained unconvinced. "That is what they claim to have been doing," he said as he watched Jimin and Zeren walk off into the distance. "But no one knows what their true intentions are..."

"Gyuri?"

Gyuri snapped out of her reverie and looked up at Mayu, who was peering at her quizzically. "Yeah?"

"Is this the storage house you were on about?"

Up ahead, Gyuri witnessed a large crowd of vagabonds waiting outside the shanty building. With their heads hung low and some even squatting outside the door, Gyuri's jaw dropped open in surprise at how large the huddle seemed to grow as each day passed.

She stuttered, "Ye-yeah, this is- this is it."

Mayu glanced back at the huddle of grubby individuals with her eyes bulging. "You weren't kidding when you said your soup kitchen is high in demand."

"Nope," Gyuri replied, still slightly overwhelmed. "Not at all."

At the sound of approaching footsteps, the peasants furthest from the door gazed upwards and excitedly stood up when they spotted Gyuri and Mayu approaching with their wicker baskets, brimming with food.

"Little Madam!" one of them shouted. "She's here! Everyone, the little madam is here!"

Immediately, the crowd got up to greet Gyuri, their hungry eyes eagerly glancing inside the wicker basket to see what food she will be serving today.

"Hey, everyone," Gyuri said cheerily as she fumbled for the key to open the storage house. "How are you all?"

"Little Madam," spoke one of the older peasants. "What do you have for us today?"

"Is it soup?" another one queried.

"Ooh! Ooh! I hope it's chicken noodle soup!"

Gyuri chuckled as the keen peasants followed her and Mayu eagerly inside the storage house, where she had a new clay pot ready. After the last incident, Madam Zhou had been generous enough to purchase another clay pot to replace the one that had been shattered by the drunkard. With Mayu's help, Gyuri was able to serve the starving peasants bread and beef stew and this time, she had a sufficient quantity of bowls to satisfy the growing demand.

All around her, the peasants one by one fell into silence as Gyuri handed them their bowl of stew. But the silence was short-lived as it was imminently replaced with unattractive slurping noises and ravenous chomping alongside the clattering of wooden spoons against clay bowls. Gyuri wiped the
sweat from her forehead in contentment as she watched the vagabonds settle down on the tables to eat.

*Phew*, she said internally. *At least today ended uneventfully as well.*

"We should probably start packing up" Mayu suggested after moments had passed. "Madam Zhou will be needing us to serve tea to the Kims later."

"Yeah, you're right." Gyuri surveyed the vicinity and nodded. "I guess I should throw out the scraps." Gyuri sauntered over to the clay pot and began removing the beef bones used to create the broth for the stew. Once she was done, she turned to Mayu. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

Mayu, already accustomed to Gyuri's odd choice of language, merely nodded in acknowledgement.

As Gyuri left for the communal dumping ground, she suddenly encountered the sound of mewling coming from a dark alley in between the storage house and a derelict building. Curious, Gyuri peered into the alleyway.

"Hello?"

Slowly, she crept forward until she saw a pair of topaz eyes staring straight at her.

"Hi there, kitty."

No longer obscured by the shadows, the small feline cautiously approached her, revealing its grey fur and black stripes. With a guarded stance, the scrawny cat halted a few metres away from Gyuri and continued to gape at her, its large eyes watching her every move.

Noticing how the cat was watching her intently, Gyuri crouched down. It was then that she saw how the cat was particularly interested in the small bowl of scraps she had in her hands. "Are you hungry?"

As if understanding her words, the cat meowed in response.

"Well, it's your lucky day" Gyuri replied as she set the bowl down. "It's not much but you can probably gnaw the meat still attached to the bones."

Warily, the cat crept closer until it was right in front of Gyuri.

"Go on" she prompted. "It's all yours."

Hungryly, the cat lapped at the bowl and soon, a low grumbling was heard from its stomach. With honeyed eyes, Gyuri watched the cat eat, quietly contemplating whether it will run away if she reached out to pat it.

"You must be starving" she murmured. "When was the last time you ate?"

But all she got in response was a faint purring when the cat eventually had its fill. Satisfied, the cat licked its grubby paw and only stopped when it noticed Gyuri's hand outstretched. Its topaz eyes watched her intently before swiftly turning tail and strutting away.

Gyuri, flabbergasted by the cat's ungrateful nature, scoffed in disbelief. "Typical" she uttered after kissing her teeth. "They only notice you when you have food." She shook her head. "I guess I just got food-zoned."

After picking up the bowl, Gyuri resumed her walk to the dumping ground, suddenly occupied by
memories of her own cat back at home. "I hope dad isn't overfeeding Mao Mao," she said aloud. "That cat's already chubby as it is."

As she strolled along the path, memories of back home filled her mind once more. "I bet exam season has already started" she pondered aloud. "Normally, I'd be waiting for Yoongi to pick me up at the car park." Gyuri looked up whimsically at the road ahead. "And Jun would be talking in Korean and I'd be lecturing him." She smiled weakly at the thought. "That kid... I hope he's practising his English while I'm gone." Gyuri's small smile slowly slipped away as she thought of Jungkook, Yoongi and school.

But before she began wallowing in sadness again, she shook her head violently to shake off the negativity that threatened to pull her into a depressive state. "Think positively, Subin!" she reprimanded herself. "Just shake it off; shake it off" she sang and started smiling once more. "Good ol' Taylor Swift, always coming to the rescue!"

With her optimism restored, the bounce in Gyuri's step returned and she started to quietly sing along to some western pop songs that she hadn't sung in a long time. "I kissed a girl and I liked it. The taste of her cherry chopsticks~"

"Ohhh, so you like women too?"

Gyuri swivelled around quickly and jumped when she saw who was standing right behind her. "Oh, holy mother—!

"Hi, pretty lady!" Zeren greeted brightly. "Fancy bumping into you again."

Gyuri backed away from Zeren, who was invading her personal space. "Where the hell did you come from?"

Revealing his imperfect teeth, Zeren continued to grin as he replied. "From the palace obviously. I'm here on a break with my friend." He gestured at Jimin who was glaring from behind. "We were just about to visit you at the soup kitchen."

Great, Gyuri groaned. She peered at Jimin who was eyeing her disapprovingly. It was evident that he still wanted to bring her to justice but was probably refraining from doing so in case Namjoon appeared again.

"Mind if we join you?"

Gyuri reluctantly answered, "Sure. Erm, but we've already finished for the day."

Zeren didn't seem at all fazed. "That's alright. We've already eaten." He leaned forward as he added, "I just want to get to know you a little better" and he winked.

~*~

Jimin frowned. He couldn't believe it. How was Zeren able to talk to women without feeling the least bit uncomfortable?

From his seat at the other end of the storage room, Jimin observed Zeren talk animatedly with Gyuri. It wasn't long ago that Gyuri had been regarding Zeren with suspicion but looking at them now, one would think that they were long-lost friends—and Jimin couldn't get his head around this sorcery!

*I do not understand him,* Jimin pondered, *how is he able to speak to them so effortlessly when both of us had received the same education at the temple?*
Jimin continued to gape at them from afar, his eyes scrutinising Gyuri's every movement. When they parted a few days ago, he had resolved to ensure that his friend wouldn't fall into Gyuri's trap. A trap that only siren-like women made to tempt weak-hearted men such as Zeren. But unfortunately for Gyuri, Zeren had another form of defence: a strong-willed Jimin, to come to his rescue.

What does he like about her anyway? He continued to question himself inwardly. She is neither attractive nor is she trustworthy!

He watched as Zeren chortled at something Gyuri said and speedily averted his gaze when he accidentally met eyes with her.

Damn it! He cursed. He ducked his head lower when he suddenly heard footsteps heading his way.

"Chim Chim?"

Chim Chim? Jimin wondered. He looked up immediately and found Gyuri peering down at him.

She scratched her head shyly. "Can I talk to you?"

Jimin was on guard. "What about?"

Tentatively, Gyuri sat on the stool next to him. "I just want to thank you for the other day" she replied quickly. "Thank you for not telling Master Namjoon about..." she raised her brows, "you know."

"If you are referring to not telling Kim Namjoon about your stealing, you do not need to thank me" Jimin replied curtly. "Do not misunderstand. I did not do that to spare you" he explained. "I did that to avoid further qualms between our families."

"Our families?"

"I mean the families we serve" Jimin quickly amended.

"I see" Gyuri muttered but then suddenly, directed her charming smile at him. "Thanks anyway, Chim Chim."

"Why do you call me that?" Jimin asked. "That is not my given name."

Gyuri tilted her head to the side. "But it's cute. It sorta reminds me of a song I used to know." She smirked as she said in sing-song, "Chim, chim-ney, chim, chim-ney, chim, chim, cher-ee~" before humming the rest of the tune out to him.

Jimin just looked at her with a puzzled expression. It is a lot worse than I thought, he grimaced inwardly, this wench is mad. "Excuse me," he said while getting up. "I need to speak with Zeren."

Swiftly, Jimin walked over to Zeren, who was currently occupied with trying to flirt with Mayu.

"Zeren" he called out to him.

Zeren looked over his shoulder. "Yes, Your Maj—I mean, Chim?"

With a low tone he spoke, "Can I have a word?"

Reluctantly, Zeren tore himself away from Mayu, who seemed relieved that he had left.

Once they were at a safe distance, Zeren whispered, "Is something the matter?"
"Zeren" he hissed, "you should not talk so intimately with her." He gestured to Gyuri who was busy wiping the tables with a rag. "She is a thief."

A sigh escaped Zeren's lips. "Loosen up, Chim. I was only trying to be friendly. There's nothing wrong with talking to them—" he stopped midway his sentence as he suddenly remembered something. "Which reminds me, you still need to overcome your irrational fear of women!"

"It is not irrational" Jimin retorted sorely. "And I am not afraid of women. I- I just do not trust them..." as Jimin said this, his eyes drifted towards Gyuri's direction and then back again. "And nor should you."

Zeren sighed again as he helplessly gaped at his friend. "Oh, c'mon, Chim. If you're always thinking like that, you'll never get a wife." He thought for a moment before asking, "Surely, you must have a preference?" He leaned closer as he subtly hinted to Gyuri and then to Mayu. "Which do you prefer? The quiet type?" he asked as he gestured to Mayu, "Or the outgoing type?" and he gestured to Gyuri.

Without hesitance, he replied, "Neither."

Zeren frowned.

"We should return now" Jimin spoke before Zeren could ask him again. "I must complete today's quota as soon as I can."

Zeren watched as his friend walked over to the entrance with heavy steps, his shoulders slightly slouching from the invisible weight of the responsibilities slowly piling on top. Pityingly, Zeren tutted, unsure of what he could do to alleviate his friend's troubles.

*Oh, Chim, what am I to do with you?*

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 25 of The Brothers Kim.

Will Jimin overcome his fear of women?

Until next time...
"Is it really necessary that I come?" Taehyung asked for the third time. "I mean, Cousin Namjoon did not mention anything about needing me to go to the sanatorium."

Gyuri frowned. "I already told you, Master Namjoon passed the message onto me. He says that it's important."

Taehyung glanced at her dubiously.

Many weeks had passed since Taehyung had ventured out into town with Gyuri. While he walked alongside her, his crescent eyes inspected his surroundings closely, subtly taking note of the dark green-uniformed guards that were tailing them from a good distance.

*It is not surprising,* Taehyung internally spoke. *Cousin must have ordered them to guard my every move.*

With a mindful step, he continued walking, somewhat reassured that help was nearby if ever he needed it. *Since when have I become so cowardly?* Taehyung asked himself while wryly smiling. Even to him, he found his sudden softness laughable.

*Not so long ago, I abhorred the prospect of them following me. Now, I rely on their protection...*

"So, what have you been up to nowadays?"

Taehyung turned his attention to Gyuri, who was peering at him. He replied, "Nothing much." With a quizzical stare, he continued, "Why do you ask?"

"It's because I haven't seen you around lately."

He grinned. "It sounds like you miss me."

"Hah! You wish!"

But in truth, she kind of did. Lately, Taehyung had been disappearing off by himself and hardly calls for her as a maid anymore. While Gyuri had been longing for this to happen, the sudden change had surprised her, making her feel uneasy as the distance continued to grow between them. Did Taehyung not find her company agreeable anymore?

She looked at him now. "But seriously, what have you been up to?"

"Like I said," Taehyung replied offhandedly, "nothing much."

Gyuri frowned at his answer.

"What?"

"Nothing" she snapped, evidently annoyed by his secretiveness. "Forget it." Gyuri walked further ahead, eventually outpacing him.

"Gyuri! Wait up!" Taehyung broke into a light jog to catch up to her. Once they were in step, he let
out a long sigh. "Why are you angry at me?"

"I'm not" she responded sharply.

But Taehyung thought otherwise. From the way Gyuri refused to meet his eye and the way her lips pursed into a thin line, Taehyung knew that Gyuri was anything but pleased.

He tried a different approach. "Have you... noticed anything different about me?"

Still refusing to look at his direction, Taehyung tugged at her sleeve until she gave in.

"What?" Gyuri hissed. She gave him a once-over and returned to facing forward. "No. I don't see anything different."

"Nothing?" Taehyung sounded disappointed.

Hearing the hint of discouragement in his voice, Gyuri peeked at his direction again but still noticed nothing of significance. "Did you grow taller?" she guessed.

"Nothing?" Taehyung shook his head. "I did but that is not what I am referring to."

Gyuri continued to roam her eyes over his profile but still couldn't see what it was that Taehyung wanted her to see. "Erm, did you... gain weight?"

"No!" Taehyung scoffed. "Do you not see how much stronger I have gotten?" Taehyung showcased his right arm and flexed his muscles. "Touch it!" he commanded. "Feel it right here."

Reluctantly, Gyuri obeyed and poked the small bump of flesh underneath his sleeve. It was still a little soft but Gyuri knew better than to hurt Taehyung's sensitive feelings. "Wow!" she exclaimed awkwardly. "Have you been bulking up?"

Taehyung grinned at her proudly.

"Is this what you've been up to?"

At this, Taehyung's cheeks grew rosy. He nodded. "I-I wanted it to be a surprise but..." he glanced up at her shyly, "it is not worth it if you are going to be angry at me for keeping it from you."

A pang of guilt hit Gyuri hard in the chest. This kid, honestly...

"I'm sorry for snapping at you" Gyuri murmured. "It's just that, we haven't been talking lately and I was starting to think that you found me boring."

"I can never find you boring!" Taehyung quickly responded with zeal. "Why, Gyuri, you are the least boring person I have ever met."

Gyuri smirked. "And you're the most obnoxious brat I've ever met."

Taehyung was aghast.

"I'm kidding" she quickly added. "But why have you been trying to bulk up? Is this part of your duties as a young master?"

"Do you not remember?" Taehyung questioned expectantly. "It is part of our promise."

Gyuri was at a loss for words. "Our-our promise?" She cast her memory back to the night of the attack and how she had carelessly sworn that she will consider him as a man in ten years' time. Her
cheeks burned at the realisation. "You mean, you're bulking up... for me?"

Taehyung nodded.

"Wow." Gyuri was speechless.

Taehyung huffed, "I am disappointed in you for forgetting."

"I didn't forget" Gyuri denied. "But I'm surprised that you're taking it so seriously."

"Of course, I would take it seriously! A promise is a promise."

Gyuri nervously smiled. *Well, at least I only promised to consider him as a man. It's not like I promised to marry him...*

Eager to erase the discomfort she was feeling, Gyuri lightly pushed him. "Aren't you a cutie?" she cooed. "Get you trying to tug at my heartstrings."

Taehyung arched his brow at her.

"You're a natural player, aren't you?" she continued to chatter. "I bet you'll be an absolute heartthrob when you're all grown up." Gyuri gazed at the sky as she wondered aloud, "I can already imagine it. You'll have all the girls eating at the palm of your hand with how gentlemanly you are."

Still confused by her utterances, Taehyung asked, "Gyuri, what are you talking about?"

"Oh," she stopped at her tracks and giggled. "Right, I-er forgot. Erm... I mean..." She searched the sky as she attempted to re-word her earlier ramblings. "I guess what I'm trying to say is, you'll make some lucky girl really happy one day."

With a steady gaze, Taehyung sincerely asked, "Can it be you?"

Gyuri immediately froze on the spot.

Taehyung's dark eyes searched hers intensely, making the surroundings blur all around them.

"Ge- geez Taehyung, you're- you're such a flirt!" Gyuri managed to stutter once she had recovered. She looked away momentarily as she tried to calm the rapid palpitations of her heart. *This kid is gonna end up giving me a heart attack one day.*

With a slight scowl, Taehyung continued to gaze at her. "Gyuri, I—"

"Oh, look!" she suddenly exclaimed. "We're here!"

Gyuri raced ahead before Taehyung had the chance to complete his utterance. He sighed. *Ten years is too long...* he thought as he watched Gyuri jog even further away. It was like every step she took symbolised the distance it will take for his feelings to reach her heart. He balled his palm into a fist as he silently confessed, *I wish I can be worthy of you now.*

~*~

"Gyuri!"

"Mama!"

As soon as Gyuri opened the door to the sanatorium, the pattering of small feet filled the room as the
orphans competed to get to the door first.

"Mama, you're here!" Gulnar piped as his grubby little hands latched onto her skirt.

Chun Chun soon followed. "We've been waiting for you."

Both Gulnar and Chun Chun grinned at the sight of Gyuri, but their toothy smiles soon started to slip when they noticed who was behind her.

"Tae?"

From behind Gyuri, Taehyung appeared, his eyes wide in surprise. It had been so long since he had last seen the orphans that he hardly recognised the pair: they had grown taller in the time he was away.

"Chun Chun... Gulnar..." He crouched down so that he was eye-level with Gulnar, his arms extended as if inviting him for a hug. "I have missed you two."

Gulnar glanced up at Chun Chun, who had slipped her hand in his. She ushered for him to stand behind her as if she was protecting him from Taehyung. Seeing Chun Chun act protectively, Taehyung searched their wary countenances, unsure as to why they were frightened of him.

"Chun Chun? Gulnar?" Taehyung repeated softly. "What is the matter?"

Gyuri quickly intervened. "Chun Chun, why don't you and Gulnar go to the other room? I need to have a word with Tae." She gestured for the door that led to Namjoon's office.

Chun Chun nodded wordlessly as she held onto Gulnar's small hand and tugged for him to follow. With befuddled eyes, Gulnar reluctantly allowed Chun Chun to steer him away, briefly glancing back at Taehyung, who shared his confusion.

Once they were gone, Taehyung turned to Gyuri. "What is going on?" he questioned. "Why are they acting that way?"

"Don't you remember?"

"Remember what?" Taehyung asked, vexed. The orphans had never acted so wary of him before and it wounded him to see them react that way. It was almost as if...

"They know who you are."

Taehyung glanced up immediately. "What? How did they—?"

"When you almost drowned, remember?"

Taehyung could only vaguely recall.

"I tried explaining to them that you had your reasons for keeping your identity a secret but... Chun Chun doesn't seem to believe me." Gyuri scratched her head. "Even I don't understand why they're so frightened of you."

It didn't take Taehyung long to figure out why. "It is not me they fear" he spoke sadly. "It is my name."

Gyuri tilted her head at him questioningly.
But instead of elaborating further, Taehyung dejectedly sighed before enquiring, "Will you ask if I can speak with them?"

"Alright," she replied. She could tell from Taehyung's mournful expression that this wasn't the first time this happened.

~*~

"Chun Chun, why can't we talk to Papa anymore?"

The scruffy lass scowled at her brother before snapping, "How many times do I have to tell you? He's not your Papa." She stomped off to the other side of the room, where a cushion was vacant. Huffily, she sat on top of it with her thin brows furrowed. "We can't rely on him anymore, Gulnar. He's one of them."

Gulnar appeared doubtful. "But Papa has never treated us badly—"

"But that doesn't mean we should let him fool us!" she retaliated.

Gulnar blinked in surprise. He fidgeted with his tattered sleeve as he tried his best to understand what was going on. But alas, Gulnar was too young and innocent to understand the intricacies of betrayal and deceit. All he knew was that he liked Taehyung. Taehyung was his Papa. And to Gulnar's eyes, Taehyung could never do anything so wrong that would make him hate him.

He eyed his sister. Why is Chun Chun so angry? He kept pondering. While he held Taehyung with high regard, he knew that Chun Chun always had his best interests in mind. After all, she was his sister. She had taken care of him for as long as he could remember. Before Gyuri came along and became their Mama, Chun Chun's face was always the first one to pop into his mind as his primary caregiver.

A knock on the door interrupted Gulnar's thoughts.

"Mind if I come in?"

Gulnar and Chun Chun stood up attentively as Gyuri peeped through the crack in the door before sliding inside. "Tae... wants to speak to you" she informed them.

"Papa does—?"

"No," Chun Chun quickly rejected.

"But I want to speak to him!"

"We have nothing to talk about" she retorted. She addressed Gyuri, "Tell him we don't want to."

"You mean you don't want to!" Gulnar clarified.

Gyuri watched as the orphans started bickering with each other, their high-pitched voices grating her ears as they competed in a screeching contest. She was about to shout for them to stop when someone else beat her to it.

"That is enough!"

Chun Chun and Gulnar stopped immediately and shifted their gaze towards the owner of the voice. It was Taehyung. He let out a long sigh as he entered the small office, his gaze sweeping across the two orphans, who were stood rooted to the spot.
"Taehyung..."

With woeful eyes, Taehyung gave Gyuri a weak smile. "Will you leave us for a moment?"

Gyuri nodded understandingly.

Once Gyuri had left, he turned to the orphans again. "I guess I owe both of you an explanation."

At this, Chun Chun scoffed. "You needn't bother, Tae. Gyuri explained it to us already."

"Really? What did she—?"

"You lied to us" Chun Chun interrupted. "You lied to us and told us you were an orphan. That you were one of us."

Taehyung watched as she reached her hand out to Gulnar, who shifted his gaze from Taehyung to Chun Chun confusedly. Hesitantly, he inched closer to Chun Chun, who immediately steered him further away from Taehyung.

"You're one of them" she continued to say. "You're one of the people who took our parents from us."

Taehyung took a tentative step forward. "Chun Chun I—"

"Stay back!" she yelled.

Taehyung halted, a wounded expression on his face.

"How can we ever trust you, Tae? You hid the fact that you were a noble from us."

"What else was I supposed to do?" he asked. "I knew that you would react like this. I knew that you hated my kind and believe me, I never wished to be born a noble either."

Chun Chun looked away, hesitant to believe anything that Taehyung said.

"I am sorry for hiding it from you" Taehyung continued to explain. "If only things were different, I would never have lied—"

"But you did!"

Taehyung looked down ashamedly.

"Tae, our mother and father are gone because of your kind" she cried, her voice wobbling. "They were serfs that worked for a family just as wealthy as yours."

Taehyung and Gulnar watched as tears started streaming down her big brown eyes, staining her cheeks with miniature rivers. "They're not with us today because the lord sold our father to the mines and our mother to another lord."

Seeing his sister cry, Gulnar too, started sniffing. Soon, both orphans were blubbery in sadness at the harrowing reminder that they were all alone. It was like their fragile illusion of happiness had shattered and reality had finally hit them: they were parentless, homeless and living in poverty.

"We-we no longer have a family because- because..." Chun Chun's words were drowned away by her crying that only seemed to grow stronger the more she thought about their situation. "We-we don't even know if they're- they're alive..."
Before they were separated from their parents, Chun Chun had promised them that she will be brave. She had Gulnar to care for and for a while, she pretended that everything will be okay. But while she allowed Gulnar to cry and express his emotions as any healthy child would do, Chun Chun, on the other hand, bottled hers up. She wanted to believe that by sparing Gulnar of the burden she had to carry, he will grow up happily, oblivious to the pain she experienced at the loss of their parents. By taking it upon herself to fill the emptiness they had left behind, she had forgotten that she too needed someone to care for her.

And when she met Taehyung, she was relieved to be treated like the child she was. For a brief moment, she needn't tackle all the problems she faced, at the tender age of seven, alone. She had an older brother to rely on.

Taehyung approached the orphans determinedly and wrapped his arms around them. At first, Chun Chun squirmed under his embrace but with every shaky gulp, she soon conceded, and her small hands grabbed onto Taehyung's plain robes while she cried into his chest. Gulnar too, swept by his sister's outburst, sobbed into Taehyung's clothes, his runny nose mixing with the saltiness of his tears.

"There, there" Taehyung comforted the orphans while rubbing their backs. "I am sorry for what my kind has done to your parents. Nothing that I say can ever make up for what happened to them." He spoke soothingly, "But all I can do is make it up to you." He pulled himself away from their embrace as he swore, "I will never let anything bad ever happen to you. To both of you."

With puffy eyes and a runny nose, Chun Chun sobbed as she replied, "But how can you- how can you be sure of that?" She hastily wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "You're a noble. On top of that, you're one of the Kims—"

"You have no reason to fear me" Taehyung insisted. "I may be a Kim but, I am no different from you." He smiled feebly. "You and Gulnar and Gyuri... you're my family, remember?"

Hearing this Gulnar leapt into Taehyung's embrace again and wrapped his tiny arms around his neck. Surprised, Taehyung hugged him back. No words were needed for Taehyung to understand that Gulnar had already forgiven him. He eyed Chun Chun and inspected her expression. Seeing the reluctance in her features, he prompted her with a kind smile, his arm outstretched as he beckoned for her to join in.

"There is still room for one more."

At last, Chun Chun joined them and soon, the orphans were enveloped in the warmth of their beloved Tae. In him, they found an older brother and a father, both of which they were deprived of due to the cruel nature of the world they lived in. As Taehyung hugged the orphans, he experienced a strong surge of protectiveness, one that led him to chant in his mind repetitively that he will protect them no matter what.

With determination, he told them, "Chun Chun, Gulnar, always remember that I will never abandon you." He pulled them closer as he promised, "As long as I live, you will never have to walk alone again."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 26 of The Brothers Kim!
All will become clearer in due time.

Look forward to the next chapter!
That Female Physician

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From the sick bay, Namjoon emerged into the foyer, where he spotted Gyuri pressing her ear against his office door. With nimble steps, he tiptoed over to her and whispered, "Have they reconciled?"

"Oh, bloody hell!" Gyuri exclaimed in shock as she jumped out of her skin. Alarmed, she covered her mouth as she glanced at the door. When a few moments had passed with no sign of movement, she sighed in relief, relieved that she had not been caught eavesdropping.

"Geez, Master Namjoon, you scared me!" she hissed with a hint of annoyance.

Namjoon chuckled apologetically. "So, how did it go? Have they reconciled?"

Gyuri gestured for the pair of them to move further away from the door. "I think they have" Gyuri answered. "I heard Chun Chun crying a little and the Young Master comforting her."

"That is good."

Gyuri smiled in agreement. "Thank you again, Master Namjoon, for letting me use your office. I would have used the soup kitchen but there wouldn't have been any privacy." She curled her lip in thought. "And Chun Chun was so reluctant in meeting the Young Master. Thankfully, you were able to convince her to come."

"The orphans needed a check-up anyway" Namjoon replied. "And from what I have seen, Taehyung cares deeply about them."

Gyuri silently agreed. "But there is one thing I don't understand."

"Oh? What is that?"

"I don't understand why the orphans were so afraid of the Young Master when they found out he's a noble."

Gyuri watched the light in Namjoon's eyes dim. "They were afraid?"

"Yes," she responded, "but I don't know why."

Namjoon's voice was low. "Gyuri, do you know anything about Chun Chun and Gulnar's past?"

For a moment, Gyuri was silent. She cast her memory back to when Taehyung had nearly drowned and how she had visited the orphans by herself while Taehyung stayed at home and recovered. During that time, the orphans had opened themselves up to her, telling her tales of their life right before they became vagabonds.

They were the children of farmhands.

"Chun Chun may have mentioned that their parents used to be farmers" she replied. "But she never mentioned much after that."

Namjoon nodded solemnly. "I see..." He looked away momentarily before asking further, "Did she mention what house she was from?"
"Huh?"

"Like, who owned the land that their parents served—their lord?"

"No, I don't think so." Gyuri shook her head. "She never mentioned it." She gaped at Namjoon and tried to decipher the troubled look that ruined his princely features. "But Chun Chun and Gulnar served a lord? Like you, Master Namjoon?"

At this, Namjoon shifted his gaze back to her. "Yes" he eventually replied, but Gyuri couldn't help noticing the hesitance in his voice. "Like me." He let out a long sigh as he averted his gaze, clearly showing signs of discomfort. "They have reason to fear us and... I do not blame them."

Gyuri gaped at him questioningly.

"Often, serfs that work as farmhands, butchers, servants," he glanced at her briefly, "are bound to the land. Along with the land, they..." he paused as he spoke warily, "are also property of the lord."

Gyuri blinked. "...Property?"

Namjoon nodded. "And like property, they can be sold, traded and even..." he paused as he gaped at her ashamedly, "disposed of."

Gyuri's eyes rounded in shock.

"But you should not be alarmed" Namjoon quickly added. "That is a last resort." Namjoon watched Gyuri's reaction closely and noticed how she was subtly backing away, fear evidently etched on her face.

"Oh... erm, I see" she murmured.

"It is just how society is" Namjoon uttered bitterly. "Our society is divided into classes that govern how we live for the rest of our lives. Some are fortunate to be born part of the bourgeois while others are cursed with misfortune to be born as part of the proletariat." He glanced around him warily as he dropped his voice even lower as he closed the gap between himself and Gyuri. "And just between you and me," he whispered, his breath tickling Gyuri's ear, "I think that Saim is in dire need of much reform."

Namjoon pulled away soon afterwards and Gyuri hurriedly hid her rose-tinted cheeks. She stammered, "So-so I take it you are not- are not like the other nobility, Master Namjoon."

Namjoon tossed her a lopsided smile. "I guess you can say that." He proudly grinned, "I never really was one for societal conventions."

"Really?" Gyuri was astonished. "I always pictured you to be a sensible law-abiding citizen."

At this, Namjoon tilted his head, puzzled.

"Like, I would expect you to continue living at the Kim household; continue working here, in the sanatorium and then eventually settle down with a noble lady."

"I guess I do give that sort of impression." He shrugged as he admitted, "And you are probably right. I will most likely end up staying at the household and it is very likely that I will continue my work as a physician." He paused as he thoughtfully spoke, "But as for my future wife, she does not necessarily need to be someone of noble birth."
Gyuri regarded him with a quizzical stare. "Oh?"

With a soft smile, he quietly muttered, "I guess I am like my father in that regard."

Gyuri peered at him curiously. What did he mean by that? But before she could ask him to elaborate further, Yujin, the young, grubby-looking lad, appeared from the sick bay.

"Physician Kim" he called. Namjoon glanced up and he proceeded, "It's time for the patients' check-up."

"Thank you, Yujin." The boy nodded curtly before disappearing again. Namjoon turned back to Gyuri, "I guess I will speak to you again after." He turned to leave.

"Wait!"

Namjoon halted on his steps. He glanced over his shoulder.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

~*~

Namjoon frowned slightly as the elderly man in front of him swerved his head to look at Gyuri again. "Face straight please, Mr Feng" he instructed him. "I cannot check how your eye wound is healing if you keep turning the other way."

The elderly man apologised half-heartedly but continued to glance at Gyuri. "Do my eyes deceive me, Physician Kim?" he enquired. "Correct me if I am mistaken but I believe I see a young miss over there with the face of an angel."

"No, you are not mistaken" Namjoon replied while gently trying to examine his eye. He peered up at Gyuri and saw that she was currently serving noodles to the patients that he had already examined. "That young miss you are seeing is Gyuri. She is my helper for the day."

"Oh," Mr Feng said with fondness. He glanced at her again. "She is a pretty one. Much better than that stubborn lad of yours."

Namjoon chuckled. "Mr Feng, the only stubborn one is you."

"I most certainly am not" the elder huffed. But then his earlier poutiness ebbed away when he saw Gyuri again. With a coy smile, he pried, "Is she a mistress of yours?"

Namjoon quickly corrected him, "No, of course not." He observed his array of vials and bandages as if he was searching for something. "She is a maid in our household."

"Ahh," Mr Feng let out a sound of acknowledgement. "I see. Then, she must be your personal maid."

My personal maid? Namjoon froze and before he knew it, he started thinking, if only she was. With rapid movements, Namjoon shook his head violently to straighten his muddled thoughts. What? Why did I suddenly think that?

"She's- she's not my personal maid" he mumbled.

Mr Feng eyed him curiously. "Oh? Really? That is a shame."

Namjoon forced a smile.
"Are you already attached to someone?"

At this Namjoon was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I have a granddaughter..."

"Mr Feng," Namjoon quickly interrupted, "I am not looking for a wife."

Mr Feng pouted. "I see. But, if you ever change your mind..."

"I will know who to enquire" he finished politely, "thank you, Mr Feng."

Mr Feng hummed in response. He directed his attention to Gyuri again and watched as she smiled at the patients, revealing her pearly teeth. Seeing her candid smile had stirred something in Mr Feng's foggy memory like a small ember catching light amongst the most incinerated of ashes. He pondered, "She reminds me of someone..."

Namjoon hummed disinterestedly as he finally located what he was looking for. "Who?"

"That female physician."

Namjoon froze.

Mr Feng groaned, "What was her name?" He scratched his head in thought as he continued to mutter, "she was really smart for a woman and—oh!" Mr Feng gasped as he finally remembered. "Her name was—"

"Master Namjoon!"

Catching their attention, Mr Feng and Namjoon glanced up.

On the other side of the room, both men witnessed Gyuri struggling to keep an incredibly touchy patient from groping her. "Master Namjoon!" she screeched again. "Help!"

In one swift motion, Namjoon darted to her rescue with Mr Feng watching from his bed. With a quirked eyebrow, he observed Namjoon's uncharacteristic behaviour. How strange... It was the first time he had witnessed Namjoon express an emotion other than the platonic concern that he was accustomed to seeing. As Mr Feng continued to observe Namjoon's apparent protectiveness, a sly smile crept up his lips as he recognised what it was that he was witnessing. "I see, so that is how it is." With a smug smirk, he uttered under his breath, "No wonder he declined my offer so hurriedly." Mr Feng watched as Namjoon treated Gyuri's acquired scratches with the utmost care, his hands oh so gently touching hers that one could mistake it as a sign of affection. But while he did so, something else started nagging at the back of his mind. He frowned. "But is he even aware of it?"

With his good eye, Mr Feng observed the pleasant atmosphere blossoming between the couple which only served to confirm his earlier suspicions. He tutted at the realisation. "It seems they have a long way to go before they even realise it." He sighed, "And I thought I was the blind one." He shook his head slowly as he locked his gaze on Namjoon. "You need not search for a wife at all" he mumbled, "for it seems you have already found one."

~*~

"Mother, why does Father hate me?"
Lady Sooki turned to face a young Junmyeon, who was peering up at her with gloomy eyes. "Oh, Junmyeon, why do you say that?" She kneeled down so that she was eye-level with her son. "Your father does not hate you."

Junmyeon remained doubtful.

"Your father cares for you deeply" she continued to reassure him. "As do I." She stretched out her hands to cup Junmyeon's soft cheeks. "You are his son so of course, he loves you."

Junmyeon smiled weakly as his mother pecked him on the forehead. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Of course, I am sure!" she replied with confidence.

"But why does he treat me differently to Brother Minseok and Second Brother?"

Lady Sooki appeared taken aback.

"Why does he always ask them to accompany him when hunting but never me?" He gaped at his mother questioningly. "Mother, did I do something to upset him?"

Lady Sooki pulled him close, burying him in her chest. "Oh, my poor son," she said mournfully while stroking the back of his head. "No, you did not do anything wrong."

"Then, why?"

Lady Sooki loosened her embrace so that she was facing Junmyeon once more. "Do not mind your father" she murmured and Junmyeon noticed the strain in her voice. He searched her chocolate brown eyes and was startled to find that they were woeful. "He has always been a stoic man, so he finds it difficult to express his love for you."

Junmyeon eyed her dubiously.

"Just remember that you are a Kim and no matter what, no one can ever take that away from you." She smiled at him affectionately, "And if you work hard enough, there will come a time when your father can no longer overlook your talents."

Hearing this, Junmyeon's child-like eyes brightened. "Is that true?"

Lady Sooki nodded in affirmation.

"Then I shall work hard so that I can shine bright like the sun!"

His mother chortled at his enthusiasm. "Yes, you should do that from now on." She caressed his cheek affectionately. "Shine as bright as you can so that your father will have no choice but to accept you..."

~*~

Junmyeon let out a deep breath to calm his nerves.

"Brother? Are you alright?"

He turned to look behind him and spotted Jongin peering up at him from his bed.

"Jongin" he spoke softly. "I apologise, did I wake you?"
The pale boy weakly smiled. "No, I—" suddenly, he started coughing and Junmyeon rushed to his side. "I-I am fine" Jongin managed to wheeze once his coughing fit had subsided. He attempted to sit up and Junmyeon helped him. "What-what are you still doing here?" he asked once he was upright. "Are you not supposed to meet with Father?"

"I was about to leave" he replied, observing Jongin's frail disposition. "But since you are awake, I can stay for a little longer—"

"And keep Father waiting?" Jongin interrupted. He raised a brow at his elder brother. "You should go, brother. Father does not like to be kept waiting." He smiled at him affably. "You must not let your nerves get the better of you."

Junmyeon feebly smiled back. "You are right." He got up. "I shall visit you later."

With as much courage as he could muster, Junmyeon left Jongin's quarters with his shoulders straightened as if he possessed more confidence than he did. But once he was out of sight, Junmyeon let out another long sigh.

_Compose yourself, Junmyeon_, he internally thought. _You can do this._

As he approached his father's quarters, Junmyeon's pace slowed down, each step noticeably becoming smaller and smaller just so that he could delay meeting with his father by even a second. He swallowed.

Despite his cold exterior and proud outlook, Junmyeon always found meetings with his father nerve-wrecking. It wasn't because Hyesung was an intimidating man nor was it because he was hard to please. No. The truth was, what made Junmyeon nervous the most was the inevitable conclusion of their meetings: it always ended with Hyesung bitterly berating him and uttering his disappointment.

_Not this time_, Junmyeon chanted to himself. _This time will be different._ He ran his hand across his hair and straightened his robes so that he was presentable. _Now that Brother Minseok is gone and with Second Brother exiled, Father cannot ignore me for much longer._ He breathed in, as he remembered his mother's words, _it is now my time to shine._

With renewed confidence, Junmyeon knocked on Hyesung's door and waited anxiously for his reply.

"Come in," he eventually heard his father grunt.

Junmyeon proceeded inside, his clammy palm clenched tightly.

From his elevated chair, Hyesung glared down at Junmyeon, his sharp eyes inspecting him closely. Junmyeon fought the familiar prickling sensation of the hairs on the back of his neck standing erect. He always felt that way whenever Hyesung's gaze was locked on him.

"Father" he greeted while bowing politely.

Hyesung nodded in return and swiftly ordered, "Sit down."

Glancing down at the cushion in front of him, Junmyeon obediently sat. With his eyes averted, he questioned, "You called me, father?"

"Yes," he replied curtly. "I wish to know what is happening in court."
Junmyeon shifted in his seat. "A lot has been debated in court" he replied, "with the most important being the emperor's choice of empress."

At this, Hyesung revealed a hint of interest.

"So far, the two most popular proposals are from the princess of Huaxia and the princess of Nihon."

Hyesung nodded while stroking his wispy beard. "I see."

"But His Majesty has yet to make the decision."

Hyesung hummed in thought. *Both options are advantageous, he contemplated, but either choice can greatly affect Saim's standing in the world.*

"However," Junmyeon continued, "what has most stirred the ministers at court is..." he eyed his father steadily, "the Waekugin."

Hyesung abruptly froze.

"Recently," Junmyeon spoke solemnly, "we have received word that foreign diplomats from the colonies of New Britannia have designs to visit His Majesty."

"They claim to wish to improve relations."

Hyesung's face soured. *Those barbarians, he thought bitterly. Is this another one of their tricks? 'And? What did His Majesty decide?'*

Junmyeon thinned his lips. "He has decided to meet with them."

Hyesung's face darkened. Noticing his father's displeased reaction, Junmyeon opened his mouth to say something when suddenly, Hyesung slammed his fist against his desk. "This is outrageous!"

Junmyeon jolted.

"What is His Majesty thinking?" he shouted heatedly. "Is he not aware of their past attempt to colonise us? What if it is a hoax? The Waekugin are not to be trusted!"

Junmyeon watched in bewilderment as his father ranted passionately on the subject. While he knew how detested the Waekugin were, he was not aware of his father's strong aversion. And, how could he be? His conversations with Hyesung were only limited to greetings and weekly reports. He had never conversed with his father on anything apart from politics and the weather. Not even once.

"Working with them may be advantageous" Junmyeon stated, in an attempt to impress him.

Hyesung looked at him, puzzled. "I beg your pardon?"

"Father, the Waekugin possess advanced technology that can prove beneficial to Saim" Junmyeon began. "That advanced technology is not limited to medicine and weaponry. Father," Junmyeon spoke eagerly, "if things go well, Saim can have improved medicinal practices and Jongin might—"

"You foolish boy!"

Junmyeon blinked in surprise.
"How dare you even consider Saimese relations with those barbarians!" His frail body shook with a seething rage that Junmyeon had never witnessed before. "Those barbarians are greedy, ambitious demons that sought to destroy our race!" he shouted. "If our ancestors had not led a campaign against them we would have been at their mercy!"

"I-I apologise, Father, I was naive to think that—"

"No, you were not thinking at all" Hyesung snapped. He glowered at Junmyeon. "I did not raise you to be an idealistic fool."

"I-I am sorry, Father—"

"You really are a disappointment" Hyesung sneered.

Junmyeon felt a stab in his heart.

With a dismissive wave of the hand, Hyesung ushered for Junmyeon to leave. "Go."

Junmyeon pursed his lips as he bowed to Hyesung in goodbye. As he walked away, Junmyeon bit the inside of his cheeks to keep his tears from springing. The familiar flavours of blood flooded his taste buds, overwhelming him with memories of his adolescence when this bad habit began. It reminded him of all the times his father had uttered those dreaded words to him repetitively, building the growing resentment he had for everyone around him.

As he approached Jongin's quarters, he hesitated outside, taking in great gulps of breath to help conceal his misery.

What was I thinking? He thought. Today was no different from any other day. He clenched his fist a little tighter. And to think that things will ever change...

Suddenly, he remembered his mother's words and he lowered his eyes. A mixture of shame, resentment and a sense of betrayal filled his chest.

"Mother, I am afraid you were wrong" he spoke bitterly, "Father will never accept me."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 27 of The Brothers Kim.

Let the drama unfold...

Please stay tuned for next time!
An upbeat and cheerful tune filled the imperial office as Zeren whistled a trot song. Jimin frowned at him from his desk.

"Are you ready yet, Your Majesty?" he asked as he fixed his robes in front of the full-length mirror. He turned to face Jimin and arched a brow when he spotted him still crouched over his desk. "What are you doing? Aren't we going to the village today?"

Jemin glanced up at him briefly and then back down at the book he was reading. "No, I am not."

"What? Why not?"

"Because I do not want to."

Zeren folded his arms across his chest. "Your Majesty, we agreed that you at least take a break once a week."

"Yes, but I feel like these breaks are meant for someone else other than me."

"Huh?"

"Zeren," he said, pushing his book away. "I feel like you are enjoying these excursions much more than I am."

"Wha—?" Zeren was flabbergasted. "I- I am not!"

Jemin raised his brow dubiously.

"Okay. Fine" Zeren surrendered with his hands raised. "So, I do enjoy our weekly visits. But that doesn't mean you can't."

"It is not that I do not enjoy them" Jemin replied, "but rather I am sceptical about how you enjoy them."

Zeren looked at Jimin confusedly. "What's wrong with the way I—? Oh!" Zeren's eyes widened with enlightenment. "I see." With a devious smile, he continued, "Don't tell me you're still unhappy about me getting close to Gyuri."

Jemin's lips thinned. Dismissively, he spoke, "If you really want to go, you can go. I am not going to stop you." With renewed energy, Jimin buried his nose under the book he was reading to disguise his irritation.

Zeren sighed. "I cannot go if you aren't, Your Majesty."

Jemin peeked up at him from the rim of his book. With a covert gaze, he observed his gloomy expression hidden by his platonic countenance. Jimin knew that while Zeren was practised at concealing his emotions, the one emotion he couldn’t hide very well was disappointment. And seeing his friend shelter his upper lip with his bottom lip—a habit he only exhibited when he was attempting to contain his sadness—hinted that Zeren was indeed very disappointed.
Jimin let out a long sigh. *I cannot win with him.* "Fine," he conceded as he propped his book down. "I will go."

Immediately, Zeren's mood lifted. "Really?"

"Yes," Jimin replied with a slight smile. "But only for a short while. As you can see, I have so much work to do," he gestured at the pile of books he had on either side of his desk, "so I must really complete them before I meet with the Waekugin ambassador..."

Zeren's eyes hardened at the mention of the Waekugin. He lowered his voice, "Are you really going to meet with them?"

"Yes," Jimin affirmed. "I must."

"But, Your Majesty—"

"I know what you are going to say, Zeren" Jimin interrupted, "but what is done is done. I have already agreed."

Zeren looked at him sceptically.

"It is important that I try to mend the relations between our people and the Waekugin" Jimin explained. "While Saim prospered without their help in the past, the same cannot be said about now." He lowered his eyes while propping his chin on top of his interlocked fingers. With a pensive expression, he resumed, "Trade with the Waekugin is something we must consider. Especially when reports from our vanguards have confirmed that the New World has advanced technology which will prove beneficial to Saim." He gazed up. "Zeren, we must not let Saim fall behind."

Seeing the sombreness on his face, Zeren answered, "But it's not like we are letting Saim fall behind by not involving ourselves with the Waekugin. Other kingdoms, like Nihon, have resisted Waekugin influence and are thriving without their input."

"Yes, you are right" Jimin admitted. "But that is what we only see on the surface." He gazed down at his right hand where his jade, imperial ring rested on his forefinger. "While it seems that Nihon is prospering, we cannot know for sure if that is the case. After all, their situation is different from ours: they do not suffer the famine that we do."

Jimin continued to stare at his imperial ring as he rubbed his thumb across the clear band of jade. On the day of his coronation, the royal eunuch had presented him with the imperial ring—the same one that his father, and the emperors before him, had worn. Seeing the jade ring reminded him of his imperial duty to make decisions that would benefit the kingdom. Yet, why did it suddenly remind him of his father's decision to expand?

Before his father had died, he had grown increasingly interested in expanding Saim territory, going as far as even invading neighbouring kingdoms on the grounds of self-defence. Even after a few weeks on the throne, Jimin was still ignorant of his true motivation for expansion. He had attacked another kingdom unprovoked.

But why?

What could have possessed his father to suddenly act that way?

"Either way, Your Majesty," Zeren spoke, "I advise you to exercise caution when it comes to dealing with the Waekugin. It is not only the Waekugin that we must be wary of but the hidden enemy too" and with those words, Zeren exchanged knowing looks with Jimin.
Of course, Jimin internally thought, *I must not forget the men at court, who I have left disgruntled with my decision...*

As Jimin opened his mouth to reply, a sudden knock on the door caught his and Zeren's attention.

"Your Majesty?" A feminine voice was heard from the other side of the door.

Jimin locked eyes with Zeren briefly before answering, "Come in."

In a few moments, a young, royal maid entered, carrying a neatly folded imperial uniform. She bowed to Jimin before extending her arms out in offering. "I have brought your imperial uniform, Your Majesty."

"My uniform?" Jimin echoed. "I did not..." he glanced at Zeren, "Ah, I see."

Zeren grinned sheepishly as he collected the uniform from the maid. From the sudden brushing of their hands, the maid grew flustered and she lowered her head shyly, occasionally daring to meet Zeren's eyes but then hurriedly averting it again.

"Thank you" Zeren uttered with a charming smile.

The royal maid meekly nodded before retreating to leave the imperial office.

Jimin, who was watching from behind, eyed Zeren's actions intently. He questioned him, "How do you that?"

"Do what?"

"*That*" Jimin replied. "How are you able to speak to women so easily?"

Zeren shrugged. "I don't know. I just..." he thought for a moment, "I just talk to them. It's not that difficult—" he stopped midway his sentence as he noticed Jimin's dubious expression. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because that was not just talking" Jimin pointed out. "It looked you were..."

"What?" Zeren asked curiously. "It looked like I was what?"

Jimin mumbled, "*Wooing* her."

Zeren blinked before bursting into laughter. "You have a sharp eye, Your Majesty." He wiped a tear that had started to form on the corner of his eye. But as he was doing so, a brilliant idea suddenly crossed his mind. "You know what, why don't you try it?"

"Try what?" Jimin asked. "Talk to them? Zeren, I already—"

"No, not that." He eyed Jimin mischievously as his lips curled into a coy grin. "Why don't you try wooing?"


"And are you implying *I* am?"

Sensing Zeren's unimpressed tone, Jimin quickly interjected, "No, what I am saying is, I simply do not possess this ability, nor do I wish to."
"Oh, c'mon, Your Majesty. Wooing a woman is what we men do. It hurts no one and you also flatter a lady by showering them with compliments."

"Empty compliments" Jimin muttered under his breath.

Zeren frowned.

"I see no point in it. Leading a lady on is a dishonourable thing to do."

"Yes, but the thing is, you are not leading a lady on. Wooing for you will be a challenge, a rite of passage per se, that should help you overcome your irrational fear."

Jimin sighed. "For the last time, I am not afraid of—"

"Then, prove it" Zeren abruptly challenged. "Prove to me that you are not afraid of women by wooing one."

"What? That is incredulous! I am not going to—"

"Don't tell me you're going to back out from a challenge" Zeren taunted.

Jimin clenched his jaw at Zeren's words.

Zeren smiled secretly at Jimin's reaction. I knew it. "You've never backed away from a challenge before, Your Majesty, so don't tell me you're going to start now."

Jimin continued to lour at Zeren. "That is unfair, Zeren. You are using my pride against me."

"If it's the only way to help you, then I have no other choice" Zeren replied with a shrug. "You've always faced every challenge unflinchingly in the past. You even swam stark naked in the river during winter" he reminded him. "Surely wooing a woman isn't as difficult as that?"

With his lips pursed, Jimin reluctantly replied. "No, you are right...

"Then, are you up for it?"

Jimin stared at Zeren's unwavering gaze. He recognised the way his eyes sparkled with mischief and how his body was hunched forward in a provoking manner: he was serious.

Reluctant to surrender, Jimin swallowed. "Fine. I will take you up on this challenge."

Zeren's smile widened.

"But in return, I challenge you to do something too."

"Oh?" Zeren replied flippantly. "Whatever it is, I bet I can do it—"

"I challenge you to stay five metres away from women at all times."

"Wha—?" Zeren was astonished. "That's- that's—!"

"Do not tell me you cannot do this?" Jimin playfully taunted. "Were you not saying how confident you were earlier?"

Zeren scowled at him. "You're really annoying, Your Majesty."

Jimin smirked. "So, are we really doing this?" He offered his hand out to Zeren.
Hesitantly, Zeren pursed his lips before eventually accepting his hand. "Fine. Let's do this."

The pair eyed each other determinedly as they uttered in unison, "Challenge accepted."

~*~

What the heck is Chim Chim doing...?

As inconspicuously as she could manage, Gyuri peeped at Jimin, who had approached Mayu, from the other side of the storage house. She arched her brow as a nervous Jimin fidgeted with his imperial uniform, occasionally darting his eyes up at the ceiling as he struggled to form coherent sentences.

"Hi, pretty lady."

Gyuri turned to her side and found Zeren smiling at her. "Oh, hey, Zeren." She peered at him curiously when she saw how far away he was. "What are you doing all the way over there? Come closer" she beckoned.

Zeren laughed nervously. "Er, I caught a cold, so I shouldn't." He feigned a cough while covering his mouth. "Unless..." he wiggled his eyebrows playfully, "you really want me to pass it on to you?"

He blew her a flirtatious kiss which she dodged. "That would be sinfully scandalous" he purred.

Gyuri grimaced. "You know what, you stay there." She chuckled slightly when she spotted his disappointment. "I don't want to catch whatever disease you're carrying. I might turn into a lech like you."

"You like my attention really" he huffed. "And" he added, "I'm not a lech."

Gyuri scoffed.

"I thought we already discussed this?"

"Yeah," Gyuri affirmed. "But you're still lecherous."

Zeren looked like he was about to protest but Gyuri beat him to it. With a sharp tilt of the head, she gestured to Jimin and Mayu. "What's going on over there?" Gyuri whispered.

Zeren followed her gaze and smirked at the sight of a flustered Jimin. "What does it look like?"

Gyuri glanced at the pair again. Currently, Jimin was starting to sweat profusely from his nerves. While Mayu, on the other hand, was gaping at him uncertainly. She seemed to be concerned with the way Jimin was struggling to speak.

"He looks like a fish out of water" Gyuri observed. She turned to Zeren who was chuckling under his breath, mirth exuding from his mischievous eyes. "What's really going on, Zeren? Poor Chim Chim looks like he's about to faint!"

"He's a tough nut," Zeren told her without looking away. "He's really going all out."

"What do you mean?"

Zeren tossed her a lopsided grin. "That's classified information, pretty lady."

Gyuri pouted. She turned her attention back to the pair who were still awkwardly conversing with each other. "Well, whatever it is, Mayu and I need to return now so—"
Suddenly, Zeren grabbed her wrist. "Wait" he hissed. He pointed at the pair and Gyuri's eyes widened when she noticed Mayu giggling. Jimin too was bashfully laughing.

What the—?

"Well, what do you know" Zeren uttered as he loosened his grip on Gyuri. "He actually managed to do it."

"Do what?" Gyuri eagerly asked. "What did Chim Chim just do?"

"Make Mayu laugh."

Gyuri looked at him, puzzled. She glanced back at the pair and took note of the harmonious ambience that was blossoming between them. Something about the way Jimin acted around Mayu reminded her of the way shy guys in her class used to look at her friends when they...

Ohhhh, Gyuri had a eureka moment. Now I get it! "Does Chim Chim like Mayu?"

"W-what?" Zeren was taken aback.

"He does, doesn't he?" Gyuri insisted, taking a step closer. "No wonder he was so shy!"

"Shh!" Zeren hissed while gesturing for Gyuri to lower her voice. He surveyed his surroundings warily. "Try not to be so loud."

"Sorry" Gyuri whispered apologetically. "But did I get it right? Does Chim Chim like Mayu?"

Zeren had a conflicted look about him. "Hmm... I guess you can call it that."

"OMG!" Gyuri squealed.

Once again, Zeren urged her to be quiet by pressing his forefinger against his lips.

"This is such juicy gossip!" Gyuri snickered. "I can't wait to tell Pho about this! Mayu's got a secret admirer~" she sang.

"You can't tell anyone else about this" Zeren immediately instructed. "You weren't even supposed to know."

"I can keep a secret" Gyuri replied enthusiastically. "And besides, I think that Mayu and Chim Chim might actually make a cute couple."

At this, Zeren grew interested. "Why do you say that?"

Gyuri snuck a look at Mayu and Jimin enjoying each other's company. "You see, Mayu's a nice, quiet girl and she's kinda shy too. Apart from Master Namjoon, she doesn't speak to any other guys in the household—not even the male staff."

Zeren was thoughtful. "I see..."

"So, if Chim Chim's single... then, I think they'll make a great pairing!"

"But the thing is, His Maj—I mean Chim is afraid of women."

"Huh?" Gyuri was astounded. "Chim Chim's afraid? Why?"
Zeren vaguely responded, "It's a long story." He attempted to leave his answer at that but with Gyuri's unrelenting stare, Zeren eventually divulged, "Chim and I, we grew up in the temple which was devoid of female interaction."

"You grew up in a temple?" Gyuri repeated. "What? Like a Buddhist temple?"

Zeren nodded.

"Wow" she replied in amazement. But then she looked at him sceptically. "For some reason, I can't picture you as a monk."

"That's because I'm not."

Gyuri gave him a quizzical look.

"Chim and I may have grown up amongst the monks but once we reach a certain age, we can decide whether or not to pursue that way of life."

"I see..."

"And anyway," he added, "I don't think you and I have the same image of monks."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"The monks that raised us... they were warrior monks."

Gyuri's eyes rounded. "Oh."

"So, life with them wasn't exactly peaceful." He laughed softly. "They taught us many things but the one thing they didn't was how to interact with the opposite sex."

"But you seem pretty used to it" Gyuri pointed out.

Zeren grinned. "Only because I didn't stay at the temple for as long as Chim." Gyuri was about to ask him to explain further but Zeren quickly interjected, "So, now I worry about his future. Chim chose not to live as a monk," he lied, "but he doesn't have the skills to deal with women. At this rate, he might end up a shrivelled bachelor."

A worried expression riddled Zeren's features as he cast his gaze towards Jimin. Seeing him so concerned for his friend touched Gyuri's soft side. The last thing she expected was for Zeren to be so caring.

"You know, there is a way we can help him."

Zeren turned to her.

"Why don't we try and get those two together?"

"Huh? You mean—?"

Gyuri nodded.

A small smile started curling up at the corners of Zeren's lips. "I like how you think, pretty lady."

Gyuri couldn't help but share Zeren's wily grin. "By getting those two together hopefully, Chim Chim can overcome his shyness towards women and Mayu will find herself a nice guy."
"How do you know he's a nice guy?"

"Oh... erm..." Gyuri twiddled with her thumbs as she recalled how Jimin had helped her out when she had 'fainted' a while ago. "He just seems like a nice guy. I mean, when I spoke to him, he was pretty reasonable so..." 

Zeren, content with her answer, didn't question her further.

"And I think it's kinda cute that he's a little awkward."

"Oh?" Zeren eyed her quizzically.

"It's quirky" Gyuri mentioned. A sudden image of Jungkook smiling flashed before Gyuri's eyes and she shook her head to be rid of it. "Chim Chim's like a quirky awkward potato."

"Potato?" Zeren repeated, confused. "He's not a vegetable."

Gyuri sniggered. "Ah, never mind." She beckoned at the pair, who were now comfortably talking with each other. "So, what do you say, shall we try and set these two up?"

Zeren grinned.

Gyuri needn't hear his answer for his face said it all. With a firm nod, Gyuri and Zeren sealed a pact to bring two unsuspecting souls together.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 28 of The Brothers Kim.

Now the question remains, will Zeren and Gyuri be successful in playing matchmaker?
In Plain Sight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tutor Wentai was no ordinary man: he was a scholar. And as a scholar, he was very passionate about Philosophy, Science and of course, the Creative Arts. But while he revelled in the delights of knowledge and the discovery of new and exciting concepts, what deterred him most from being a scholar, particularly a tutor, was a disengaged student. And for a while, Tutor Wentai did not enjoy the tutelage of the youngest of his Lord's sons. That was, until recently.

"So, Great Emperor Yueran unified Saim before he became the leader of the Jade Lotus?"

Tutor Wentai nodded. "That is correct, Young Master."

Taehyung peered down at his book in thought. "Then that must mean the Parks have been leading Saim for three generations now."

"It will be four once the emperor produces an heir" Jongin added from beside him. Taehyung glanced at his brother and he continued, "It is very likely that he may already have offspring that we do not even know about. As the only male heir, His Majesty has the biggest responsibility to produce heirs so that the Park dynasty will continue."

Tutor Wentai nodded approvingly at his star pupil. Out of all the Kim brothers, Jongin, by far, was his favourite. He glanced at Taehyung from across the new library, where they were holding their lesson. Normally, the seat across from him was always vacant, but as of late, Taehyung had been punctually occupying it.

"But what will happen if he does not produce any male heirs?" Taehyung addressed Tutor Wentai. "Who will the throne go to?"

Tutor Wentai cleared his throat. "That will not happen" he spoke bluntly with confidence. "His Majesty will definitely bear a son."

Jongin persisted, "But say that he does not. What will happen then?"

Jongin turned to look at Tutor Wentai. Even he too was curious.

"Then," Tutor Wentai began, "the next eldest male in his family will inherit the throne."

"The next eldest male?"

"Yes," he replied, "this might be his nephew, distant cousin or in rare cases, brother-in-law. Any male relative may be eligible for the throne although, he must prove the legitimacy of his claim."

"But what if there are no males left?" Taehyung continued to question. "Then what will happen?"

At this, Jongin knew the answer. "Then there will be civil war."

Taehyung was taken aback by his brother's words. "Huh? Why?"

With a dark expression he responded, "With no clear heir, no one knows who should rise to the throne." He gaped at Taehyung as he explained further, "As you know, Saim was unified a century ago. Under the Jade Lotus, the clan leaders are kept in order. Without an emperor to lead them, the
clan leaders will fall into anarchy as they compete for the throne.” His eyes narrowed at the prospect. "Saim will fall because of man's greed for power."

"That is correct, Master Jongin" Tutor Wentai praised grimly.

"But what if the emperor has daughters?" Taehyung questioned even further. "Surely they can inherit the throne instead?"

With a wry smile, Tutor Wentai replied, "That cannot be. The throne can only be inherited through the male lineage."

"It is unheard of for a woman to inherit the throne" Jongin added when he noticed Taehyung’s confusion. "Women do not bear the same weight of importance as men."

Taehyung looked like he was about to contest Jongin's statement when Tutor Wentai interrupted him. "Young Master, while I am pleased you are engaging with your classes, such forward thinking is unnecessary for our History lessons."

"But I was just stating a hypothetical scenario."

"Yes," Tutor Wentai agreed, "but it is a morbid scenario that we should not be discussing during our History lesson." He sighed wearily. "We should avoid adding oil to the fire by not speculating on what ifs. As it stands, the issue of the succession and the royal family is already a sensitive topic."

"Because of the new emperor?" Taehyung ventured to ask.

Tutor Wentai was hesitant to respond.

"I have heard things about the new emperor" Jongin interjected while fiddling with his ink brush. "Brother Junmyeon says that he has a peculiar aversion to women. Is that true?"

Still, Tutor Wentai remained silent.

"The emperor dislikes women?" Taehyung echoed. "Why?"

Jongin shrugged. He was just as clueless as Taehyung. "If it is true, then there will definitely be an issue with the next heir. So far, it is only a rumour."

With a coy smile, Taehyung uttered, "Maybe the emperor prefers the company of other men..."

Finally, Tutor Wentai found his voice again. "Blasphemy, child!" he exclaimed. "You must be cautious of what comes out of your mouth!"

"I only jest, Tutor Wentai," Taehyung said while stifling a laugh. He glanced at his older brother who had turned away to hide his amusement. "It is too early to tell what kind of man the emperor will turn out to be. He has only been on the throne for less than three months."

"Regardless of whether you jest or not" Tutor Wentai responded hotly, "it is unwise to speak ill of His Majesty like that."

Taehyung rolled his eyes.

The elder tutted to himself. And here I thought the Young Master had finally matured...

"But how did the Jade Lotus manage to maintain the peace with the clan leaders?" Jongin questioned. "Even if they had lost against the Jade Lotus, surely, they could have combined forces to
"Excellent question!" Tutor Wentai exclaimed. "The Jade Lotus was able to prevail over the clansmen because there was trust between the families." He picked up his ink brush and began writing fervently on the sheet of paper in front of him. "It was your great-grandfather who coined this adage."

Taehyung and Jongin leaned forward as the elder showed them what he had written.

"Kin before Kim" Taehyung read aloud. "What does that mean?"

"Brotherhood before oneself."

Taehyung turned to face Jongin, who had an enlightened expression. "That is what it means."

"Indeed" Tutor Wentai answered. "Your great-grandfather was a firm believer in trust and loyalty as the firm foundations to a successful clan. He believed that by putting the needs of the others' before one's own, internal strife can be avoided."

"So, he taught the Jade Lotus to be selfless?" Taehyung questioned dubiously. "I do not see how that could have stopped the other clans from rebelling."

"That is because that is only half the answer" Tutor Wentai explained. "The other half of the solution was to appease the clansmen through strategic marriages."

"Marriages?" Jongin repeated.

"Yes." Tutor Wentai started writing on the sheet of paper in front of them again. "Over the past century, the children of the Jade Lotus have been married off to the clansmen to unify the kingdom." With bold strokes, Tutor Wentai swiftly wrote the names of many clan leaders. "In fact, Lord Hyesung himself had made strategic marriages too."

At this, Taehyung was attentive. "Father did?"

Tutor Wentai eyed him steadily as he nodded. "One can say that the marital unions between the Jade Lotus and the clansmen are like alliances."

Alliances, huh? Taehyung mumbled to himself. Of course, I already knew Father was not the type to marry for love...

The elder turned to Jongin as he leaned over to show him what he had written. "For instance, your mother, Lady Sooki, was from the Geon clan."

Jongin watched as Tutor Wentai wrote down his mother's name.

"Do you know what the Geon clan is renowned for?"

Jongin shook his head.

"They are very well-known for their military background."

Jongin eyed the sheet of paper where Tutor Wentai had written his mother's maiden name against the character for 'military'. "I see." His eyes dulled as he muttered, downcast, "It is a shame that I cannot uphold that reputation..."

Taehyung peered at his brother but said nothing.
Sensing the awkwardness that was creeping into the room, Tutor Wentai continued keenly, "As for you, Young Master" he said, addressing Taehyung, "your mother, Lady Junghye, was from the Song clan." The elder elegantly wrote his mother's family name before writing another character next to it. "The Songs are highly acclaimed for their weaponry."

"My mother's family are blacksmiths?" Taehyung asked eagerly.

Tutor Wentai nodded. "They are the finest Saim has to offer."

The elder watched as Taehyung's eyes filled with awe. Had he known how little Taehyung knew about his mother's side of the family, he would have avoided the topic completely. For in less than a minute, he was soon bombarded by Taehyung's excited questions that only served to illustrate how distant the Kims were to each other.

*How can a family know so very little of their own ménage?*

"Young Master, I am afraid that I do not know a lot about the Songs" Tutor Wentai confessed once Taehyung had finished his tirade. "I am but a mere tutor, not a registry officer."

Taehyung's shoulders slumped. "Oh..."

"The best person to enquire about such matters would be Lord Hyesung or perhaps Master Seok—" Tutor Wentai abruptly stopped and coughed to clear his throat. "I beg your pardon, I mean—"

"It is okay, Tutor Wentai" Jongin replied kindly. Words were not needed to communicate the acknowledgement that transpired between the two. "We should just resume the History lesson."

The elder nodded thankfully.

"But before we do" Jongin interrupted, "there is something that has been bothering me as of late."

"Oh?"

"And I was wondering if you could shed some light on the matter."

Tutor Wentai sat up attentively. "Of course. Ask away, Master Jongin."

He spoke tentatively, "What do you know about... the White Hibiscus?"

The elder's eyes rounded.

"The White Hibiscus?" Taehyung repeated as he directed his attention from Jongin to Tutor Wentai. "What is that?"

Tutor Wentai shuffled uncomfortably. "Where- where did you hear about them from?"

Jongin replied, "From the newspapers brought by the pedlar. That is what the investigations bureau is calling those responsible for the attack, correct?"

"Master Jongin, we really should not be discussing this here—"

"You mean, they have a name now?" Taehyung questioned. The image of Gyuri's ashen face flashed before his eyes and he shuddered. "They know who the culprit is?"

"Young Master—"
"From what has been said," Jongin cut in, "they are calling them the White Hibiscus because of the flower tattoo found on one of the captured assassins." He paused as he eyed his brother gravely, "They say that the assassin had a tattoo of a hibiscus flower on his arm. It has also been speculated that they are the same rebel group responsible for the series of disruptions in Seoncheul."

Taehyung was speechless. He remembered hearing about the disturbances that plagued Seoncheul last year but didn't think much of it. He had no reason to. However, things were different now. By surfacing, this threat had created a ripple on his uneventful existence by harming someone he had grown to care for and he wasn't going to allow them to get away with it.

"Do you know anything else about them?"

"No," Jongin answered before turning to the elder. "That is where I hope you can enlighten us, Tutor Wentai."

The elder anxiously pursed his lips.

"I was hoping you know the reason behind the hibiscus tattoo. There must be something about it that the bureau is hiding from us." He peered down at his ink palette, where their family crest was engraved. "The assailants would not have branded their skin with it for no reason. For us, our clan was named the Jade Lotus because it symbolised 'royalty' as well as 'purity'." He traced his finger across the rosewood lid. "One might interpret the Jade Lotus' insignia as a connotation for the wish to establish a strong and wealthy Saim."

"But what could a white hibiscus symbolise?" Taehyung queried. He searched his brain for what he knew about botany and was dismayed at how limited his knowledge was.

The pair stared at Tutor Wentai expectantly.

Reluctantly, he answered with his gaze averted, "A hibiscus flower symbolises a 'fleeting beauty' or 'personal glory'."

The brothers attentively nodded.

"It is just my speculation, but I think that the rebel group uses the hibiscus flower as a satirical symbol to mock the Jade Lotus." He looked up momentarily, "In the language of flowers, lotuses are revered by the Saimese while hibiscuses are weeds for they are common flowers. By branding their bodies, they must be using it as a symbol of triumph which they hope their cause will be. In some sense, it is a mark of insurgency, judging by their actions so far."

Jongin murmured, "I see...

Tutor Wentai peered at Taehyung and took note of his dubious expression. "Do you not concur, Young Master?"

He hummed in response. "No, I agree with the latter of your speculation but..."

"But?"

"But it just seems nonsensical for a rebel group to brand themselves to mock the Jade Lotus."

"It is just my speculation, Young Master" Tutor Wentai clarified. "In truth, I remain as clueless as you."

Taehyung nodded in acknowledgement as he entered his state of reverie. While Tutor Wentai
resumed the History lesson, he glanced out of the window, where he spotted the garden from afar. It was a beautiful summer's day and the flowers were in full bloom. He rarely took the time to admire the wide variety of shrubs and flowers but at that moment, he noticed something peculiar. He narrowed his eyes just to confirm that he did not see a mirage and that it was indeed what he thought it was.

"Now, I understand."

Both the elder and Jongin turned to him.

"Understand what, Taehyung?" Jongin asked.

"The White Hibiscus" he replied. "I think I know the significance behind it."

This piqued Tutor Wentai's interest. "Oh? Pray, do tell, Young Master."

Taehyung eyed the pair before pointing to the window. "Look out to the garden and tell me, what do you see?"

Jongin leaned forward as he made his observation. "I see... flowers" he answered. "And trees and bushes."

"Yes, but what stands out to you the most?"

Jongin narrowed his eyes as he searched the garden again. There were so many exotic flowers competing for his attention that he was unsure of what to say. He surveyed the garden again and eventually settled on the majestic specimen that called out to him the most. "I guess that would be the magnolia tree."

"And what about you, Tutor Wentai? What catches your attention the most?"

The elder peered out of the window and was immediately drawn by the vibrancy of the chrysanthemums. They were a lovely shade of auburn. When he voiced out his observation, Taehyung smiled at his answer.

"Do you not see? The answer is simple."

Confused, Jongin questioned, "What do you mean?"

Taehyung gestured to the window again but this time, directed their attention to a part of the garden. "Did none of you notice the hibiscus flowers in the corner?"

Tutor Wentai and Jongin craned their necks to see where Taehyung was pointing at. In the far corner of the garden was a large patch of blooming white hibiscuses. Once they located it, their eyes widened in disbelief.

"How did I not notice that?"

"Since when was that there?"

"The White Hibiscus," Taehyung explained, catching their attention once more, "may be a rebel group but at the same time, they represent the lay people." He glanced at the garden with sombre eyes. "Like just now, none of you noticed the hibiscus flowers because they were being outshone by the other flowers. They were hiding in plain sight."

"I see" Jongin let out a sound of realisation. "We overlooked them like weeds on the ground much
like how the nobility overlooks the poor..."

"Precisely" Taehyung affirmed. "Last year, they attacked Seoncheul. This year, the attacked us, here, in Benkei." He addressed Jongin, "Do you know of any other attacks around Saim?"

His brother nodded slowly. "There were other articles, mainly regions that the Waekugin occupy—"

"What if they are all connected?"

Tutor Wentai interrupted, "Young Master, that is really too much of a stretch to assume that."

"But what if they truly are connected?" Taehyung persisted. "Tutor Wentai, I think that this is what the White Hibiscus is trying to get across."

The elder locked his gaze on Taehyung, uncertain as to whether he should be impressed or anxious about the way he thought. He did not anticipate for Taehyung to possess such a brilliant mind; a mind that was dangerously close to the border of high intelligence and pure madness.

Where had he been hiding his talent all this time? Tutor Wentai thought. If he had only applied himself sooner, he could have surpassed Master Jongin. He gaped at him secretly. There is no doubt that the Young Master has untapped potential that needs much honing.

"Tutor Wentai," he heard Taehyung address him. The elder looked up just in time to see the clarity in his crescent eyes. "The White Hibiscus is a warning," he said solemnly. "If we keep overlooking their plight, the struggle of the people, it will not be long till they make us face their direction." Taehyung lowered his voice as he uttered, "And when we do, I am afraid that it may be too late."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 29 of The Brothers Kim.

A lot of themes will come into play soon. I hope you didn't find it too boring.

Also, if you are not already aware, this book is turning into a webtoon! Please find 'The Brothers Kim' on Line webtoon for more info and also check out my profile on Twitter @LaurelEvermore. Sammy, the artist is also on Instagram @Sammy_575. I hope you will continue to support us in this amazing development!
"Are you cheating on Papa?"

Gyuri glanced up from the ground, where she was trying to coax the stray cat to come closer. "Huh? What?"

"Are you?" Gulnar persistently asked, his brows furrowed into a frown.

Gyuri stared at Gulnar, unsure of how to answer. Currently, they were outside the soup kitchen, trying to feed the stray cat when Gulnar suddenly asked her something unexpected.

"I—" Gyuri stopped midway her sentence when she noticed the cat scramble away. Internally, she cursed, Damn it. Why is this cat so hard to get close to? "No" she answered as she got up. "Why do you ask?"

Gulnar continued to pout at her. "Because you keep talking to that man." The little boy gestured to Namjoon, who was currently talking to the peasants inside the storage house. "I don't like him, Mama" Gulnar continued to say. "Please don't leave Papa."

Gyuri peered down at Gulnar, baffled by his statement. How does a five-year-old even know what cheating is?

"I agree" Chun Chun said from beside her. Gyuri turned to face her and saw her lips curled into a small frown. "Tae is the better man, Gyuri. You two are meant for each other."

"Hah!"

All three swerved around to look at the young, grubby lad who was busy slurping on his bowl of soup.

"Little Madam isn't even a good match for Physician Kim" he stated snootily. "He's a noble and she's a servant. I don't understand why you would even think Physician Kim would look her way." He slurped his soup noisily before adding, "Physician Kim is out of Little Madam's league."

"Who are you to say that?" Chun Chun sneered. "Gyuri is not out of that physician's league!"

"Yeah!" Gulnar passionately protested.

Yujin snorted as he pointed his nose up at the air proudly. "Hah! Well if it isn't Little Madam, then it is that Tae of yours. He is no match for Physician Kim."

With his eyebrows snapped together, Gulnar huffed. "Take that back!"

"Don't you dare insult Tae!" Chun Chun squeaked. "You don't even know who he is!"

Gyuri watched as Chun Chun and Gulnar engaged in a screaming match against Yujin, their voices rising in pitch as they continued to squabble.

"Guys, enough—"
"Mama and Papa belong together so, only Papa can marry Mama in the future!" Gyuri heard Gulnar argue. "No one else!"

Gyuri was stunned.

"I'm right, aren't I, Mama?" Gulnar queried as he gaped up at her. "You and Papa will stay together forever, right?" His big eyes bore into hers. "We'll always be a family?"

Taken aback, Gyuri fumbled, "Gulnar, I'm—" but before Gyuri could complete her utterance, she was suddenly distracted by a commotion of voices.

"Look over there!"

"What's going on?"

"Do you see that?"

Gyuri swivelled her head around to find a crowd of people flocking to the sides of the street. It must have been something extraordinary, for everyone had gathered in an excitable manner.

"Mama?"

Gyuri peered down at Gulnar, who had drawn closer to her. "What's happening? What's everyone looking at?"

"I'm not so sure" she replied distractedly as she got on her tip-toes to see over everyone's heads. "Let's go and see..." Hurriedly, Gyuri paced over to join the throng, where the hubbub was loudest. As she wormed to the front of the compactly pressed huddle, she suddenly heard throaty shouting above the buzzing of the crowd.

Her eyes widened when she finally located the owner of the voice.

"Is there a physician nearby?" a faired-haired stranger shouted to the crowd. He looked around desperately but all he could see were blank faces staring back at him. "Please! My friend needs help!"

"Can they not understand you?" a tall and muscular man asked the blonde gentleman in a strange but familiar language. "I thought you said you can speak their tongue?"

"I can!" the blondie replied exasperatedly. "But I think they are too distracted."

"Distracted by what?" a leaner man queried. "We need to find a medic in this God forsaken city as soon as possible! Brahms," he said anxiously as he gestured to the poorly man he was supporting, "will not last much longer."

The man, whose arm was draped across the lean man's shoulder, groaned.

"I know that, Archie" the blondie replied hotly. "But they are too distracted by our appearance. It is not like they have seen our kind before." He shifted his attention back to the bystanders. "Please, can anyone help us?" He glanced around desperately but still, no one dared to answer.

While the blonde gentleman continued to shout cries for help, Gyuri glanced around her and heard the civilians' dubious whispers.

"Is he speaking our language?"
"What is he saying?"

"Shouldn't someone help him?"

"Mama?"

Gyuri peered down at Gulnar, who was tugging on her skirt.

"Who are they?"

Gyuri looked up once more as she inspected the small band of men. Dressed in black, double-breasted coats, the dusty travellers fussed amongst themselves while the fair-haired man pursued his incessant pleas.

I can't believe it... Gyuri spoke internally. This can't be.

The fair-haired gentleman swept his gaze across the crowd and accidentally locked eyes with Gyuri. Immediately, she froze. It was only for a short moment but Gyuri's eyes were lost under the exotic hue of his irises: while one was the ocean, the other was coal. Gyuri couldn't avoid being enchanted by the odd-eyed stranger. Even though Gyuri should be accustomed to seeing his kind, everything about him fuelled her curiosity. It was like she was seeing them for the first time. From his golden hair down to his westernised attire, Gyuri was speechless.

No, if they're here then that must mean—!

"The sanatorium is this way!"

Gyuri jerked her head to the side at the sound of a voice she recognised. And sure enough, her ears did not deceive her when she spotted Yujin pushing through the crowd to get to the band of foreigners.

"Mama?" Gyuri peered down at Gulnar, who was tugging on her skirt again. He looked at her questioningly and she soon realised that she hadn't yet replied to him.

"I-I don't know..." she responded evasively. But in truth, she had some idea of who they were. Suddenly, Namjoon's words rang in her mind as she focused her attention on the band of men again.

"A bigger threat arrived..."

Gyuri took a sharp intake of breath as she eyed the tall, pale-faced men. Their features; their style of clothing; their culture was all too familiar to her. It may have been a different era but Gyuri couldn't help feeling an obscure wave of relief at seeing something she recognised from watching movies and studying about at school.

There was no mistaking it; they were one of her own; they were her kinsmen.

Gyuri swallowed nervously as she realised that the barbarians Namjoon was referring to were no other than the people she identified with most.

"...the Waekugin."

~*~

"Are you the medic?"

Namjoon tried his best not to reveal his astonishment at seeing the band of men before him. "Y-yes"
he stuttered, his eyes scrutinising their appearance.

"Good," the fair-haired stranger said in relief. He turned to his companions and spoke hurriedly in a foreign tongue, earning an eyebrow raise from Namjoon. In a few moments, his companions came forward with a man mounted between them.

The blonde gentleman addressed Namjoon again, "My friend is gravely ill and needs help." He pointed to the red-haired gentleman, who was groaning in pain. "Please, help him."

Namjoon swiftly nodded and gestured for the men to follow him to the sick bay of the sanatorium. My questions can come later, he thought. And there was no doubt that there were many questions flooding his mind presently.

As the tall, pale-faced men hoisted their indisposed companion on top of one of the free beds, Namjoon took that moment to absorb their appearance. The strangers towered above him like pillars, their staunch frames like an imposing structure compared to Namjoon's lean but toned body. Everything about them made the hairs on Namjoon's arms stand erect. The very beings that he detested were right in front of him yet, he was the one helping them. With a cautious gaze, he inspected their ill companion and took note of his features.

Despite his ghastly complexion, the man was undoubtedly young. From the blink of an eye, Namjoon registered his fiery locks that were the shade of copper which matched his thick, straight brows that fringed his emerald-like eyes. Namjoon was about to inspect him further when suddenly, the man groaned in pain before rolling to his side and spilling the contents of his stomach on the sheets underneath him.

Immediately, the two men backed away, in fear of spoiling their shoes. Only the fair-haired gentleman approached the red-head with concern dripping from his voice. "Brahms!" he shouted. "Hang in there! Help is nearby!" He turned to Namjoon with a pleading look before backing away to allow him space.

With a sharp intake of breath, Namjoon fought back his prejudices as he tried to focus on the task at hand. Forget what they are, Namjoon reminded himself. Remember what she told you... A fleeting image of a beautiful woman with long, ebony hair flashed in his mind and he exhaled. Remember what you promised her.

"Yujin!" Namjoon shouted. "Yujin, come quickly!"

Within seconds, the scruffy lad appeared at the doorway.

"Fetch me clean water from the well" he ordered. "Quickly, boy!"

Yujin nodded and scuttled off as fast as he could.

"What is wrong with him?" the fair-haired man enquired anxiously. "Do you know what it is?"

Namjoon worked fastidiously as he replied, "I am not so sure yet." He looked up briefly. "But I will try my best to save him." He turned to his array of primitive surgical instruments and tried to gauge which of them he needed. Despite the time he invested in studying medicine, Namjoon was still lacking in experience: he was still a physician-in-training. And because of his limited knowledge, he couldn't pinpoint what it was that the stranger was suffering from.

Oh, how he wished she was there. She would know what to do.

"Master Namjoon?"
At the sound of a feminine voice, Namjoon looked up and found Gyuri at the doorway.

"I thought you might need some help" she explained when she saw his questioning gaze. "I saw Yujin just now and he said—"

"Come here and search through those documents over there" he interrupted. Gyuri blinked in surprise but Namjoon's voice only grew urgent as he spoke again. "Hurry!"

Without a moment to lose, Gyuri scrambled to the pile of documents and started rummaging through them. "What am I looking for?"

"A medical journal on diseases, digestive disorders, long-term illnesses..." Namjoon's voice trailed off. "You remember the journal I asked you to read before, correct?"

Gyuri nodded fervently. Ever since she had recovered from being hit by an arrow, Namjoon had been teaching her how to read. But while she would have preferred reading young adult novels like 'Clockwork Angel' and 'The Enemy', Namjoon's library only had medical journals. And because of that, Gyuri had become quite fluent in recognising some of the most obscure medical jargon in existence.

"What is wrong with him?" the fair-haired stranger asked again. "Will he be okay?"

Namjoon glanced at the stranger and pursed his lips.

"What is taking so long?" the muscly gentleman asked, his voice gruff and low. "Are they going to help him?"

"Can we even trust them?" the leaner of the trio hissed. He eyed Namjoon suspiciously. "What if he has no idea? What if—?"

The red-head retched again causing everyone in the room to dart their eyes in his direction.

The brawniest addressed the blondie, "Ask him what is going on."

"Why is he not doing anything?" the leaner of the pair complained. "What is he waiting for?"

Suddenly, the agitated pair started arguing with the blondie, their voices growing increasingly loud as they fired question after question at him.

Namjoon, unable to concentrate with the all the noise, raised his voice angrily, "Please! Enough!"

Everyone in the room jumped.

"I cannot concentrate with all of you shouting!" he reprimanded. With his eyes focused on the blondie, he spoke, "If you want to help your friend, I must insist that you ask them to wait outside."

The fair-haired gentleman looked hesitant to comply.

Namjoon added sternly, "There are too many people here and I cannot concentrate."

At the sound of the red-head groaning, the blondie eventually conceded. He gave a brief nod before relaying the message to his companions, who exhibited the same reluctance. However, after much persuasion, the trio eventually started to leave.

"We will wait outside" the fair-haired man stated calmly, but his odd-coloured eyes were anything but composed.
As he started to depart, Namjoon called out to him. "Wait."

The fair-haired man halted.

"Not you. I need you here to help me diagnose the issue."

He turned to his companions and with a brief nod, the duo left the room without him.

"Master Namjoon?"

Namjoon turned to his side and saw that Gyuri had located the journal.

"Excellent" he murmured. He turned to the blonde gentleman and proceeded with his usual routine. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Brahms" he spoke while gesturing to the red-haired man, "fell ill not so long ago. I do not know how but suddenly, he just started vomiting and has not stopped doing so since."

Namjoon nodded as he made note of the symptom.

"We were travelling from Isariyah while following the Galsaek river by horseback. Unfortunately," he lowered his voice, "we fell victim to thieves on the way and we lost most of our provisions including our own medical supplies. We were fortunate enough to make it to Benkei."

"And what has your friend consumed in the last twenty-four hours?" Namjoon enquired while still making notes.

"Because most of our supplies were stolen, we have had to forage from the land."

"So, you have been hunting?"

"Somewhat" he answered bluntly. "However, we fish most of the time."

At this, Namjoon looked up at him. "Fishing?"

"Yes."

"At the Galsaek river?"

The blondie nodded.

"You do realise," Namjoon pointed out, "that the fish from Galsaek river is inedible?"

The fair-haired man blinked. "...What?"

Namjoon was about to elaborate when he heard grunting from the doorway. "I have- I have the water you asked for!" he heard Yujin screech. In acknowledgement, Namjoon nodded before instructing Gyuri, "Can you mix salt and sugar together and dilute it into the clean water?" He pointed to the clay pots on the far side of the room. "I need you to boil the water over the fire while stirring the salt and sugar together."

"Okay" Gyuri answered as she got on with her task.

Upon seeing Namjoon give orders, the fair-haired man questioned, "Why is the fish from the Galsaek river inedible?"
"To put it simply, the river is polluted" Namjoon explained. "Most of the underdeveloped settlements near the Galsaek river use it as a means of disposing their waste." He gaped at him solemnly. "High dosages of this unclean water may have led him to catch the plague."

The fair-haired man's odd-coloured eyes widened with fear.

"But not to worry" Namjoon reassured him. "It is not the first time I have encountered this illness."

The blondie was about to respond when Gyuri cut in. "Master Namjoon" she beckoned for him, "the water is ready."

The fair-haired gentleman watched as Namjoon strode over to Brahms to help him sit up. Gyuri followed suit with a porcelain bowl filled with a sweet and salty concoction.

"What are you going to do?" he anxiously queried. Seeing Brahms sweating and writhing in pain made him nervous.

"Your friend is seriously dehydrated" Namjoon pointed out while Gyuri tried to make him drink. "This brew shall help ease the symptoms."

Brahms spluttered as he drank, his features contorted in pain. He opened his eyes, revealing a hazy look, while uttering in a delirious manner, "Unhand me, you savage. Do not dare touch me!"

Namjoon ignored his ramblings as he restrained him. And following his lead, Gyuri did the same although she couldn't help being fascinated by the peculiar situation she was in. *I wasn't imagining it, I really can understand them.* But she could only revel at this newfound revelation temporarily for she was soon greeted by more unanswered questions. *If the Waekugin are speaking in English, then was I speaking in Saimese all this time?*

Gyuri furrowed her brow as she pondered over this while tending to Brahms simultaneously. It baffled her that she was able to speak in Saimese, if she was speaking it, for she had never learned the language. All this time, she had believed that she was communicating in English. Could the time-slip have somehow made her into a polyglot?

*It seems that there is more to this time-slip that I need to figure out,* she thought.

"That is enough, Gyuri." The sound of Namjoon's voice brought her back to her senses. Gyuri stopped and watched as Brahms calmed down, falling into a deep slumber in Namjoon's arms.

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"Is he safe now?"

Gyuri inspected the tall men, who were peering at their red-headed companion. It still felt surreal to her that they were speaking in her language, a language that was at the tip of her tongue but for some reason, she was unable to speak it. It was like an invisible force was preventing her from forming the right notions.

*What is this?* She inwardly groaned. *Why am I struggling to speak English?*

The fair-haired stranger responded with a relieved smile. *Yes, Brahms will be okay now.* He turned to Namjoon and Gyuri. "My companions and I thank you for your help" he spoke amiably. "We are so relieved that Brahms will recover."

"It was no trouble" Namjoon replied but Gyuri couldn't help noticing the stiffness of his tone. "He
will be healthy in no time."

The fair-haired stranger translated Namjoon's words to the other pair and they grinned after hearing them.

"I guess I can rest soundly knowing that Brahms is in capable hands" the blondie uttered while sneaking a glance at the red-head, who was resting on the bed. He met eyes with Namjoon and Gyuri again. "On behalf of the New Britannia Colony, I thank you truly." He placed his hand on his chest to show his sincerity.

Namjoon cordially nodded.

"I wish to pay for the services" the blondie stated while trying to reach for his pouch. "How much do I—?"

"No, no money is needed." Namjoon waved his hands to signal his insistence.

"Oh?" the fair-haired man murmured. "Then, as a token of good will, we, as a kingdom, owe you a favour." Namjoon was taken aback when the fair-haired gentleman bowed. "That, I solemnly swear." He glanced up and asked with his hand still on his chest. "May I know the name of Brahms' saviour?"

Namjoon reluctantly replied, "I am Namjoon. Kim Namjoon from the House of Kim."

The stranger's odd-coloured eyes flashed. "Charmed to make your acquaintance, Sir Namjoon." He raised his head and Gyuri noticed the subtle change in his body language. Something about the way he was looking at them sent chills down her spine. "My name is Vernon" he replied while extending his pale hand towards them. "Vernon Montgomery, consulate of the New Britannia Colony." His smile was soft but his eyes offered no warmth. "I hope we can become firm friends."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 30 of The Brothers Kim.

What could Vernon have in store for the Kims?

Find out next time...
The sound of the sheets rustling stirred Chayoung awake. "My love?" She pushed herself up from the silk sheets to peer at Minseok, who had his head buried in his hands. "What is wrong?"

"Hm?" Minseok peered over his shoulder as Chayoung drew close to him. "Forgive me, my princess, did I wake you?"

Chayoung tilted her head at him as she wrapped her arms around his back to embrace him. "What is the matter?" she asked, still peering at him.

Minseok let out a sigh before forcibly smiling. "Nothing, my love."

"You are lying" she huffed. "You always sigh like that when something is troubling you."

Minseok weakly smiled as he reached out his hand to caress her cheek. "I apologise" he mumbled. "I guess I can never lie to my wife." He leaned in close to gently peck her soft lips.

Chayoung's cheeks heated up at the sensation of Minseok's lips against hers. Once he had pulled away, Chayoung spoke, "Is it about work? Is that what you are worried about?"

The smile on Miseok's face slowly faded as he hummed in response. "I guess I am a little stressed about all the responsibilities."

"Do not fret" Chayoung whispered soothingly. "Things will get better and you are doing well so far."

Minseok allowed Chayoung to envelop him in her arms as she brought him closer to her chest. Something about being wrapped in his wife's embrace was comforting—it was like she had the power to melt away his insecurities and sadness.

"Yes, I guess you are right..." he muttered softly, but the anxiousness he was harbouring still stayed rooted in his chest...

A while ago, Minseok had visited the Kim household after receiving word from Physician Koh of his father's current health status. Minseok knew from experience that whenever Physician Koh called for him, something was amiss. And sure enough, Minseok was right to anticipate the worst.

"Father?" he called from Hyesung's doorway after peeping inside the dark room.

Hyesung's heavy-lidded eyes fluttered open at the sound of his firstborn's voice. "Minseok" he uttered feebly as he attempted to push himself up from his bed. "I was not expecting you until later."

Minseok rushed to his side to help his father up. "Gently, Father" he spoke while taking hold of his gnarly hand. "Where is Physician Koh? Why is he not here—?"

"I sent him away" Hyesung replied as he sat up. Suddenly, Hyesung started coughing, his frail body overcome with a tremulous fit that rattled his bones.

From his shaky composure, Minseok tried to disguise the concern which caused his forehead to crease. He had never seen his father so weak; so frail; so vulnerable. All his life, Hyesung was a man
of power, legality, and strength. He was a man that stood tall and proud like a defiant mountain that yielded to no authority. And yet, right before him was the same man, so debilitated and in need of assistance.

Minseok's heart broke at the sight of his father; the very man he admired was now just a pitiful shadow of his former glory.

"I received a telegram from Physician Koh" Minseok divulged as he supported his father's weight from the side. "It said that your condition has grown worse."

"Ignore that bumbling buffoon" Hyesung retorted dismissively. "My health has neither improved nor deteriorated since you had seen me last—" Hyesung started spluttering again, causing Minseok to purse his lips into a thin line.

"Father, please take heed of Physician Koh's medicinal advice. He is only trying to help."

"No one knows my body better than I" Hyesung stubbornly answered. "And I know that my health is already beyond recovery." He eyed his son with a grave expression. "Minseok, before I depart this lifetime, I need you to swear that you will do what is best for our clan."

Immediately, Minseok was troubled. "Father—"

"Swear it" Hyesung urged, his voice hoarse. "You are my heir apparent, Minseok. As soon as I depart, my legacy will be passed down to you."

Minseok searched his father's obsidian dark eyes that showed such strong determination. He may be a shadow of his former self but Minseok could see the willfulness etched so deeply in his features. Whenever it came to the clan, Hyesung's undying loyalty and commitment were unrivalled across all the Kims. There was no doubt in Minseok's mind on how important the clan was to Hyesung.

"I solemnly swear it."

At the sound of those words, Hyesung's rigidity relaxed. He gazed at his son, relief evident across his frail body. "Very good" he muttered with satisfaction. "Very good..." Hyesung leaned back against his pillow accompanied by a sigh of reassurance. "I know I can trust you, Minseok. With the clan in your hands, I have nothing to worry about."

Mineok was about to utter something in reply when Hyesung abruptly started hissing in pain, his gnarly features wrinkled and contorted into an unpleasant sight. "Father?" Minseok uttered in worry. "Father? What is wrong?"

Hyesung continued to write in agony until he fell to his side while clutching the silk blankets that were draped in front of him. With a laboured breath, he gasped, "H-hand me- hand me that-that... over there." Minseok followed where Hyesung was pointing to and saw that it was a peculiar clear mechanism that had a pointed needle at the end.

"Hurry!" he huffed.

Without further delay, Minseok did his father's bidding and passed the contraption to him. Once it was in his possession, Hyesung did the unimaginable and stabbed himself with it. A horrified gasp escaped Minseok's lips as he watched his father push the flat end of the primitive syringe deeper into his thigh. Hyesung grunted in relief as he continued to push the colourless liquid in the syringe into his bloodstream. Once he was done, he pulled the needle out, his body seemingly weaker than before.
"...Father?" Minseok's voice was barely a whisper.

Hyesung grunted to show that he was still conscious. Disdainfully, he looked down at the needle in his hand. "I...I did not want you to see that, my son."

Minseok noticed the shame in his father's voice. With both horror and wonder, he asked, "What is that? Why did you stab yourself with it?"

"It is what is keeping me alive." Hyesung smiled wryly. "It is both my curse and my saviour." A puzzled expression formed on Minseok's face to which Hyesung's eyes flickered with sardonic amusement. "My son, this is my fate. I am doomed to inject myself with this serum in the days I have left—"

"Father, do not—"

"No," Hyesung interrupted. He eyed Minseok steadily. "You must listen." With a solemn voice, he spoke, "I do not have long to live. But before I leave this world, I want to ensure that the future of our clan is in good hands."

"I already swore an oath to you that I will take care of the clan" Minseok reassured. "You have my word."

Hyesung was relieved to hear it again.

"But, Father," Minseok tentatively remarked, "my brothers... should they not also play a part in running the clan?"

The elder's eyes flashed, and he furrowed his thick, silver brows. "What do you mean?"

"Well, there is Junmyeon..."

Hyesung narrowed his eyes.

"...he has shown great enthusiasm and loyalty. He is a very capable person and I am sure he will—"

"Enough, Minseok." Hyesung's voice was edgy. "Do not bring him up again."

"But, Father—"

"You are my heir apparent, Minseok" Hyesung repeated. "Amongst your brothers, it is only you who know how important our legacy is." He glanced towards his bedside where a candle was flickering in its lantern. "And only you know of the prophecy which threatens our existence..."

~*~

"So, is it true?"

Gyuri peered to her side and saw Pho's large, brown eyes boring hers. "What's true?"

"The Waekugin" she whispered as she glanced to either side of her. With her hand cupping the side of her mouth, she resumed, "I heard they have light-coloured hair and light-coloured eyes." She leaned back as they continued to make their way to the storage house. "You were there, weren't you? When they came? I've heard all sorts about them."

Gyuri's eyes shifted uncomfortably to the side.
A few weeks had passed since the Waekugin had first appeared in the capital. During that time, Gyuri had been going to the soup kitchen as well as the sanatorium to help Namjoon with the sick patients.

"Yeah..." Gyuri managed to answer. "They do have different coloured eyes."

"And their hair too?" Pho keenly queried. "I heard one of them has hair like straw!"

*She must be talking about Vernon...* Gyuri thought. "Y-yeah, that's right. One of them does."

Pho squealed.

Gyuri watched as the naïve lass started chattering in excitement, the basket in her arms jumping along to the rhythm of her step. "Aren't you afraid of them?"

The doe-eyed girl tilted her head to one side as she arched her brow. "Why would I be?"

"Well... because," Gyuri fumbled. "They're Waekugin. Everyone else seems to be afraid of them. Or at least wary of—"

"Well, I'm not" Pho abruptly stated. "I think they're interesting to look at."

*Huh?*

"I've never seen the Waekugin before" Pho explained. "I knew that some had settled near Isariyah, since that's the city closest to the sea, but the Waekugin seldom come to the capital."

"I see" Gyuri murmured. *So, they have their own segregated settlement...* She chewed on her lip as she pondered about what Pho had told her. "It's strange..." Gyuri said after a while. "If the Waekugin hardly come to the capital then why does Master Namjoon speak so ill of them? It's like he has something personal against them."

Pho carelessly answered, "Oh, that's probably because of what happened to that female physician. Physician Ha—" Pho stopped midway her sentence as she quickly covered her mouth. Realising she had revealed too much, she chuckled nervously. "Never mind. Forget I said anything."

"That female physician?" Gyuri repeated curiously. She eyed Pho, who grinned at her awkwardly. *Master Namjoon has never mentioned a female physician before.* "Physician who?"

"Erm..." Pho directed her attention towards the road ahead and started to quicken her pace. "Never mind. Just forget I ever mentioned it!"

"Pho—"

With a quickened step, the lass raced ahead to evade Gyuri's prying questions. Once she was a good distance away, she beckoned to her from the distance. "C'mon, Gyuri, we're almost at the storage house now!"

But before Gyuri could attempt to continue their conversation, Pho resumed skipping ahead leaving Gyuri dawdling behind.

*That female physician...* Gyuri mulled over her friend's words, her features morphing into a frown. Something about those words bothered Gyuri especially when they had something to do with Namjoon. *What could she mean to him?* She pondered. *Was she a relative? Was she a friend? Was she someone special?* *Was she—?*
Fervently, Gyuri shook her head to dismiss her train of thought.

*It's none of my business...* she reminded herself as she attempted to keep her worry at bay. *Why am I bothered about her anyway? It's not like I—*

Gyuri halted on her tracks as a wave of realisation hit her like a tonne of bricks.

She had been avoiding thinking about it for the longest time. After all, even when she was back in her own time as Subin, she had never been good at dealing with her feelings. Growing up with Yoongi and her dad, she had learned that being inarticulate with her emotions wasn't all that bad: that's just how her family was. Feelings, for the Mins, just never came naturally to them.

But unlike Yoongi and her dad, Subin was a teenage girl trapped in another teenage girl's body. A body that possessed a heart that was more susceptible to catching feelings unlike her own.

Gyuri raised a hand to her chest as she felt a tight squeezing around her heart. There was no doubt about it; the feeling was unmistakable. It was something she joked about but never wanted to fall victim to.

Gyuri bit her lip as she realised what that feeling was.

...It was no other than that dreaded thing called 'love'.

---

The door to the storage house creaked open and Pho bustled quickly inside while Gyuri trailed a few steps behind. When Pho finally looked in front of her, she was astonished to find two tall figures eyeing her curiously.

"Oh! You must be a friend of—"

Pho let out a surprised scream which made the bronze-skinned man jump backwards.

"Pho!" Gyuri's alarmed voice was heard from the doorway. "Are you okay? What hap—?" Gyuri stopped midway her sentence when she spotted Zeren wide-eyed and Jimin with his brow raised.

"Why are the imperial guards here?" Pho urgently whispered as she ran to her side. "Are we in some sort of trouble?"

Zeren sauntered closer to them as he chirruped, "Don't worry, you're not in trouble." He grinned as he explained, "We're actually both friends of Gyuri."

Pho turned to Gyuri for confirmation.

"Give or take" she reassured.

"Actually," Jimin corrected from the back of the storage house. "We are more like acquaintances."

At the sound of his melodic voice, Pho's ears pricked up and her eyes rounded when they took in Jimin's ethereal appearance. Clad in his turquoise imperial uniform, Jimin took a step forward so that Pho had a better vantage point of his gorgeous features. Under closer inspection, Jimin was a very handsome, young man that stood tall despite his short stature. From his penetrating, brown eyes down to his chiselled jaw, Pho would have fallen head-over-heels for him if it weren't for the scowl that tugged at his lips.

That scowl alone ruined what could have been her ideal romantic encounter.
"We are not that close to be considered as 'friends'" Jimin corrected Zeren. He momentarily locked eyes with Gyuri before addressing Zeren again. "So, we should not mislabel things."

Zeren's smile stayed plastered on his face. "Ignore Chim," he said to Pho, "he's just grouchy." With the same smile, he beamed at Gyuri. "Where's Mayu?" He glanced behind her as if the taciturn lass would magically appear. "Is she not coming today?"

"She's needed back at the household" Gyuri answered, her lips pursed slightly after hearing Jimin's comment. "Which is why Pho is with us today." She gestured at the doe-eyed maid, who still regarded him with uncertainty.

Zeren glanced at Pho again but this time, with a mischievous glint in his eye. "Oh, so your name is Pho?"

The doe-eyed lass watched as Zeren's lips twitched into a smirk. "Yeah, that's right."

Zeren tucked the bottom of his lip under his teeth to stifle his laughter. With as much composure as he could muster, his voice wobbled, "Like-the, like-the... soup?"

Pho frowned as she watched Zeren burst into a fit of giggles, clearly entertained by the knowledge of her name.

"It's not funny" she muttered, pouting at the bronze-skinned guard.

"Whatever possessed your parents to name you that?" Zeren crassly queried, his arm clutching the side of his stomach. "Were they hungry when you were born?"


Zeren attempted to suppress his laughter after hearing the lass' name again but to little avail. "I'm sorry" he apologised, his hand muffling his covered mouth. "That was rude of me. I'm sure you're as tasty as your name sounds."

A sharp hmph escaped Pho's lips as she loured at Zeren before turning to Gyuri. "Should I start unpacking the food?" she asked, determined to ignore Zeren's presence completely.

Gyuri nodded and Pho got on with unloading the contents of her basket. Once Pho's back was turned, Gyuri elbowed Zeren in the hip and he yelped.

"Ouch!"

"Was it really necessary for you to make that joke?" Gyuri hissed at him.

Zeren rubbed his hip while replying, "I couldn't help it. I didn't want to miss out on the opportunity."

Gyuri tossed him an unimpressed look to which he grinned.

"But never mind that. We have a problem" he pointed out, his grin slowly slipping off. "How are we supposed to bring Chim and Mayu together if Mayu isn't here?"

The pair glanced back at Jimin, who was keeping himself busy by helping Pho unload without being asked.

"We'll have to put our mission on hold" Gyuri answered in a whisper.

"But Chim still needs help with overcoming his fear" Zeren urged. "If we don't act soon, he won't
A sigh escaped Gyuri's lips as she contemplated Zeren's words.

Over the last few weeks, Jimin and Mayu had been conversing more and slowly but surely, Jimin had been showing progress in overcoming his fear of women. From the sidelines, Gyuri and Zeren observed the pair inconspicuously and were delighted to discover that the pair were warming up to each other.

Gyuri thought that Jimin was improving.

But that sense of achievement was only fleeting for whenever Jimin visited again, it was as if he had not spoken to Mayu three days prior.

"It's like his confidence with talking to women just regresses back to its base!" Zeren complained. "We have to make sure he gets a lot of female interaction today or else he'll just go back to being a hermit. It's like he has a finite amount of tolerance."

"Is that why you've been coming almost every day?"

Zeren gave her a lopsided grin. "Well, that's one of the reasons why. Of course, I came to visit you too~"

Gyuri cringed at Zeren's flirty advances and shook her head at him. "Let's just focus on what to do with Chim Chim."

"Alright." Zeren backed away and pondered with his thick brows furrowed. "Well, there's no way he'll strike a conversation with Pho" Zeren mentioned. "It took all he had just to start one with Mayu."

"Then, what if I ask Pho—?"

Zeren waved his hand dismissively. "No, don't do that. It will only scare him off. Chim hates women that come on too strong."

Gyuri followed Zeren's gaze and found herself staring at Jimin from afar. Currently, he was setting out the bowls on the side furthest away from Pho, clearly indicating his discomfort towards the unfamiliar lass.

Oh, Chim Chim... she groaned internally. Why are you such an awkward potato?

But while Gyuri was thinking such things, she didn't notice Zeren's gaze shift onto her profile and how a sly smile was creeping up his face.

"Why don't you go and talk to him?"

Gyuri snapped her head round to meet eyes with Zeren. "Huh? What? Me?" she fumbled, her voice rising. "Why?"

"Because he already knows you" Zeren elaborated. "You're a familiar face. He won't be as wary towards you as he would be towards Pho."

With a reluctant stare, Gyuri nibbled her lip. "But I get the feeling that Chim Chim doesn't like me that much."

"You already know why" Zeren hinted knowingly and Gyuri eventually understood.
"Fine" Gyuri consented. "Just leave it to me."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 31 of The Brothers Kim.
Will Gyuri act on her newfound realisation?
Find out soon!
"Your Majesty!"

Jimin looked up from his desk, blurry-eyed and exhausted. "What is it, Advisor Kim?"

It was still early in the morning but Jimin was already in front of his desk, going through the imperial edicts that needed his approval. He was almost three-quarters of the way down one stack when his brother-in-law suddenly brought him back to reality.

"I have news of the Waekugin!" Minseok said in a flurry, his feline eyes wide and somewhat alarmed.

Jimin shifted in his seat in response. Anything related to the Waekugin always warranted his unsolicited attention.

Once Minseok had caught his breath, he resumed, "Your Majesty" he began, and he swallowed nervously, "they have arrived."

Jimin's eyes flickered.

Seeing his grave expression, Minseok continued, "Unfortunately, one of them has fallen ill. They are resting in my cousin's sanatorium as we speak."

"One of them is sick?"

"Yes," Minseok affirmed.

"How long have they been under the care of your cousin? News like this should have been reported to me immediately!"

"I apologise," Minseok mournfully replied. "We did not receive word of the Waekugin's arrival until recently. The ambassador insisted that they rest first before meeting with Your Majesty."

Jimin let out a long breath as he composed himself. "How are they?" he enquired, worry replacing the agitation that was surging through his being.

"After much observation, my cousin has confirmed that one of the men is suffering from cholera. It seems that the unsanitary practices in destitute areas near the Galsaek river have led to his unfortunate sickness."

"We should get him proper help immediately" Jimin suggested while fiddling with his ink brush. "The Waekugin are our guests. We cannot have them suffer and accuse us of inadequate hospitality."

Minseok nodded in agreement. "I will send someone to him immediately." He was about to leave when he suddenly remembered something. "Oh, and Your Majesty?"

Jimin glanced up from his papers once more.

"Please be careful when you go on your excursions to the village" Minseok warned. "I must confess that it unnerves me whenever you leave the palace with so little security."

"Zeren is more than enough security" Jimin responded dismissively. "You need not worry."
"I do not doubt your body guard's ability at all" Minseok quickly replied. "Forgive me if that is how it sounded." He eyed Jimin as he revealed, "What I am more concerned about is Your Majesty's health. The Waekugin gentleman was able to catch cholera from his travels. From what my cousin has told me, this plague is contagious, and it has the most undesirable symptoms should one be unfortunate enough to acquire it..."

~*~

Through the foggy window of the storage house, Jimin eyed the sanatorium. It was a shoddy building that was in desperate need of repair as prominent cracks decorated its pillars like tiny fissures on the walls. Jimin's lips formed a tight line the longer he deliberated on the fact that one of the Waekugin, his esteemed guests, was being hospitalised in an environment more befitting of a peasant.

The thought alone made him blush.

_I hope that the royal physicians have come to visit him already_, he mused as he distractedly distributed the loaves of bread to the vagabonds. _This will reflect badly on the kingdom if one of the diplomats perish under our hospitality._

"Chim Chim?" Jimin snapped out of his reverie as he directed his attention to the sound of a feminine voice. He had been so immersed in his thoughts of the Waekugin that he hadn't realised who was in front of him. A frown tugged at his lips when he saw who it was.

"What?" he replied curtly.

Gyuri nervously fiddled with her sleeve. "Can I- can I talk to you?"

After distributing the last of his loaves, Jimin leaned back against the wall while regarding her with suspicion. He didn't know why he always acted so coldly towards Gyuri. When he was with Mayu, he didn't mind her presence at all. But with Gyuri... There was just something about her that made him feel he had to always stay on guard.

"About what?"

"Erm..." she mumbled. "I- I guess I just wanted to chat with you. Get to know you more."

Jimin arched his brow at her response.

"You come to the soup kitchen so frequently" Gyuri pointed out. "And you even help out when you don't need to." She scratched her head as she continued to remark, "And I guess it's strange that we've never really had the chance to talk."

Jimin remained quiet as he stared at the young maid.

"So..." Gyuri said, her voice losing confidence, "do you wanna... talk?"

"If you have time to talk" Jimin answered coldly, "then you have time to work instead." He was about to walk away when he spotted Zeren glaring at him from the other end of the storage house. _What?_ Jimin mouthed.

Zeren's face morphed into an unimpressed expression as he leered at Jimin. It appears he had been
watching them from afar. *Talk to her!* Zeren mouthed back.

*I do not want to.*

Zeren's eyebrows arched even higher. *Don't forget our challenge,* his gaze said.

Jimin scowled.

*I've been keeping my end of the deal,* Zeren signalled by emphasising the distance between himself, Pho and Gyuri with his arms. *So, you should keep yours.* He jutted his chin out as if to point at Gyuri, who had started to retreat. *Talk to her!*

Jimin rubbed his neck as he reluctantly cleared his throat to catch Gyuri's attention. "On second thought..."

Gyuri peered at him.

"We should- we should talk" he stuttered. Begrudgingly, he added, "You are right. Even though I have been coming to the soup kitchen frequently, I have not had much of an opportunity to talk with you."

Gyuri smiled, taking Jimin by surprise. It was the same smile that, unknown to him, made his heart flutter ever so slightly. "Great, then, erm..." Gyuri searched the storage room for inspiration. "What should we, er, talk about?"

Internally, Jimin groaned, *I really do not want to do this...* But as much as he disliked talking to women, his unbroken streak of accomplished challenges was something he took pride in. For Jimin, breaking it because of a woman would be his greatest tragedy. "I do not know" he grumbled. "You suggested it, so you pick a topic."

Gyuri furrowed her brows at his unenthusiastic tone. "Fine then" she retorted. "Why don't we start with something easy?" She folded her arms across her chest as she brazenly demanded, "Tell me about your childhood."

Jimin matched Gyuri's impudent stare. "There is nothing interesting to say."

"Sure, there is" she coerced, "I mean, you grew up with monks, right? Why don't you tell me more about them?"

"How did you know I grew up with monks? I never told you that."

"I heard from Zeren" Gyuri carelessly divulged.

Jimin frowned as he quickly shot daggers at Zeren's turned back. "I see..." He met eyes with Gyuri again before questioning, "what else did he tell you about me?"

With a sly smile, Gyuri replied, "He told me that you're as stubborn as a mule. You're also witty when you want to be and..." Gyuri's voice trailed off and Jimin gaped at her expectantly.

"And?" he prompted.

"And..." Gyuri began but then just smiled. "The third thing he told me is confidential."

Jimin was perplexed.

"It's nothing bad, I promise you" Gyuri reassured him, but her unflattering grin was anything but
comforting. She leaned in closely as she teased, "But I gotta say, you have a good eye. She's definitely a keeper."

"She?" Jimin repeated, even more puzzled. "What are you talking about? Who is she?"

Gyuri backed away and refused to say anything more on the topic much to Jimin's dismay. Instead, she shifted the conversation onto something else. "I've always wondered, what's it like working in the palace?"

Reluctantly, Jimin replied, "It is... interesting to the say the least." He pinched his nose bridge as he was suddenly reminded of the mountain of papers that he needed to read before meeting with the Waekugin consul. Thinking about it made his head hurt.

"Really?" he heard Gyuri say. "Is it as grand as everyone makes it out to be?"

"It is the royal palace" Jimin wearily responded while fighting the urge to roll his eyes. "So, of course, it is grand."

Ignoring his sass, Gyuri questioned further, "Then, have you seen the emperor?"

At this, Jimin flinched.

"I heard he's handsome" Gyuri continued to say while trying to imagine what he looked like. "All the maids back at the household say he's gorgeous."

Heat rose up Jimin's cheeks at the unexpected compliment. She thinks I am handsome? Surprisingly, Jimin felt a tinge of happiness at Gyuri's words. After all, it was his first time being complimented by a woman other than his sister. The royal maids in the palace were too afraid to ever approach him. And there was also the matter of his reluctance to approach them...

"But then again," Gyuri added, "I might be wrong. He might just be a wrinkly, old man. You never know."

Jemin's face instantly fell. "The emperor is not an old man!" he exclaimed, causing the peasants eating in the storage room to turn to his direction. Feeling the weight of everyone's stare aimed at him, Jimin averted his gaze in embarrassment, his face flushed crimson.

"I was just- I was just joking" Gyuri awkwardly laughed it off while trying to divert everyone's attention back to their food. "Geez, Chim Chim, I didn't know you were a royalist."

"I am not—"

"Mama!"

Jemin and Gyuri jumped at the sound of a high-pitched voice. When they had turned around, they were both startled to find a little boy running towards them from the entrance.

Jemin eyed him in bewilderment. Mama?

The little boy approached Gyuri with his short arms outstretched. In response, Gyuri bent down to receive his embrace. "Gulnar" he heard Gyuri say. Her smile widened when she spotted a young girl trailing behind him. "And Chun Chun too! I didn't think I'd see you today."

"We wanted to surprise you," the girl said as she leaned in to hug Gyuri as well.

"Yeah!" the boy agreed. "We came with Papa!"
"Papa?" Jimin was even more confused.

"Hey, Gyuri."

As if on cue, another person appeared through the door. In a blink of an eye, Jimin saw a young boy smiling at them from the doorway, his mouth stretched into a box-like smile. With a confident stride, the boy sauntered over to Gyuri and the orphans, his crescent eyes never wavering from Gyuri.

"Taehyung" Jimin heard Gyuri call him. "What are you doing here?"

"Visiting you, of course" he answered and Jimin noticed how his voice sounded juvenile. "I wanted to see what the soup kitchen is like." He broke away from their stare and took a quick glance at the musty storage house. "So, this is what you do while you are away from the household."

Jimin observed from a short distance as Gyuri started conversing with the young boy named Taehyung. It befuddled him that the small children called him 'Papa' and Gyuri 'Mama'. Never had it crossed his mind that Gyuri could possibly be married and a mother.

So, he is her husband?

Jimin inspected Taehyung inconspicuously. Judging by his boyish features and squeaky voice Taehyung was younger than Jimin. And the children too, looked much too grown for Gyuri and Taehyung to have conceived together.

Something is amiss.

"Pretty lady! We've run out of..." Zeren stopped midway his sentence when he noticed the additional people in the room. The orphans and Taehyung stared back at him blankly. "Oh, hey there" he brightly greeted before addressing Gyuri, "more friends of yours?"

"Why are the imperial guards here?" Taehyung asked Gyuri, completely shunning Zeren. "Is something the matter?"

"No," Gyuri quickly replied. "Taehyung, these are friends of mine." She gestured to the bronze-skinned guard, "This is Zeren" and then to Jimin, "and this is Chim Chim."

"Chim will suffice" Jimin corrected. He directed his gaze at Taehyung, mentally sizing him up while Gyuri proceeded with the introductions.

"And this is Chun Chun and Gulnar" she concluded as she gestured to the young children. The young pair peered up at Zeren and Jimin warily as they drew closer to Taehyung. "Say 'hi' to them, guys. Don't be shy."

"Hello, young'uns" Zeren greeted as he kneeled so that he was eye-level with the little boy. "Are you here for some soup too?"

"No..." Gulnar meekly responded, "we're here to see Mama."

"Mama?" Zeren repeated. "Did you lose your mother here?" He got up from his crouching position and bellowed across the room, "Did anyone lose a child?"

"He's not lost!" Chun Chun corrected. "He was talking about Gyuri!"

Zeren's eyes rounded. "Huh?"

"Mama, can we go now?" Gulnar asked as he pulled on Gyuri's skirt. "Papa promised us that we can
play cuju once you've finished working."

"But, Gulnar, I'm still—"

"Wait" Zeren interrupted. "You're their mother?" With bulging eyes, Zeren blinked several times in disbelief. "Since when did you have kids?"

Gyuri was taken aback. "No, Zeren, you've got it all wro—"

"Who's the father?"

Before Gyuri could respond, Gulnar pointed to Taehyung. "This is Papa!"

Zeren shifted his gaze to Taehyung and his eyes widened. "This kid's the father? You never told me you were married!"

Taehyung and Gyuri exchanged looks.

"We're- we're not married!" Gyuri rushed to explain, her cheeks turning bright pink. Zeren glanced at the lad beside her who had turned away to hide his reddened cheeks. "Taehyung's like a brother to me!"

"He's like a brother to you?" Zeren repeated dubiously. "But why do your kids say he's the father?"

"They're not my kids!" Gyuri swiftly responded. Noticing Gulnar's wounded expression, she elaborated, "I'm-I'm not their real mother but I-I take care of them. I'm like their adoptive mother and Taehyung, their adoptive father."

"Oh!" Zeren let out a sound of acknowledgement. "I see." He turned to look at Jimin and noticed the relieved expression on his face too. "You almost gave me a shock there, Pretty lady."

"Mama, can we go and play cuju now?" Gulnar whined.

"I brought the ball!" Chun Chun interjected as she revealed the worn, leather ball in her hands. "We can play in the same teams as last time." She peered up at Taehyung. "Right, Tae?"

Taehyung had a distracted look about him. "Er, yes..." He stole a glance at Gyuri and pursed his lips. "But we cannot play near the river anymore."

"We can play outside!" Gulnar suggested enthusiastically. "There's a small field nearby."

Jimin listened to the young children chatter noisily, their high-pitched voices grating against his eardrums. Despite their ceaseless screeching, the orphans' excited voices overwhelmed him with a surge of nostalgia that reminded him of the way his younger brothers used to talk back at the temple. A small smile curled up Jimin's lips as he recalled a fond memory of him and Zeren competing against each other in a game of cuju. It had been so long since they had last played.

"...Chim Chim?"

Jimin jolted back to his senses and turned to face Gyuri. "Yes?"

"Do you wanna go?"

"Huh?" He glanced around and saw that everyone was looking at him. "Go where?"

"To play cuju. We're all going after we're done here."
"We should go, Chim!" Zeren chimed excitedly. "It's been a while since we last had a match."

"But I—"

"We're definitely coming" Zeren finished his sentence for him. "It's only a quick match, right? We can make time." He snuck a glance at Jimin who was still stunned from being cut off. "And besides, cuju is too fun to miss out on!"

~*~

'Just go' he said. 'It would be fun' he said. Stupid Zeren ...

Jimin hissed as he felt a slight sting ebbing from his forehead.

"Sorry" Gyuri muttered as she cautiously lifted the cold, damp cloth from his face. "Did that hurt?"

"A little bit" he grumbled.

With extra caution, Gyuri continued to dab Jimin's forehead while she spoke. "Are you sure you don't want to go to the sanatorium?" she asked him again. "Master Namjoon will be happy to have a good look at you."

"I am fine" Jimin insisted. "It is only a small scratch."

About an hour ago, everyone had arrived at the small field that Gulnar had told them about. It was a small plot of derelict land, overgrown with weeds and wildflowers. Jimin was sceptical about going along but ultimately went after much convincing from Zeren.

"C'mon, Chim" Zeren had told him before the match. "It'll just be like old times."

"Zeren, you know I cannot stay long.

"Just a couple of games" his friend persisted. "Please?"

Reluctantly, Jimin gave in, unable to deny Zeren of the opportunity to showcase his hidden talent. "As long as you do not get too competitive" Jimin warned. "There are children here."

"Relax, Chim" Zeren replied smirkingly. "I'll go easy on you."

Oh, how Jimin should have known.

"Ouch!" Jimin hissed again as Gyuri lifted the damp cloth. "You are pressing too hard."

"You should clean it yourself then" Gyuri rebuked as she handed him the cloth. Jimin scowled as he accepted it.

Currently, the pair were sitting in the sidelines, watching the others play as Gyuri tended to Jimin's wound. Under the shade of a large tree, Gyuri sat next to him, their bodies much too close for Jimin's comfort. Unobtrusively, he scooted a little further away.

"Zeren has quite the kick, huh?" Gyuri commented as she watched the orphans, Taehyung and Zeren play from afar. Presently, Zeren was in possession of the ball.

Following her gaze, Jimin scoffed in reply, "He has strong legs. The boys back at the temple used to call him a dark horse because of his leg power." He inspected the damp cloth and saw small spots of
blood. "I wasfortunate that the ball only scratched me."

Gyuri turned to look at him while trying to stiflesagiggle. "You should have seen your face though! One moment you were standing straight and the next thing we see is you sprawled face flat on the grass!"

Jimin pursed his lips as Gyuri chortled at his misfortune.

"I'm sorry. I know it isn't funny," Gyuri said in between gasps, "but it was just... hilarious."

A grunt escaped Jimin's lips as he heard Gyuri snort with laughter. With his patience wearing thin, he tutted, "I feel sorry for your husband."

"Huh?" Gyuri replied as she tried to compose herself. "My husband?"

"Yes. He must have a hard time with your sense of humour."

"Hey, leave my sense of humour alone" Gyuri replied jokingly. "It's not my fault you got hit. And anyway, what husband are you on about?" she asked. "I'm still single."

Jimin blinked. "You are?"

"Why do you sound so surprised? Of course, I am!" She playfully smacked him on the arm. "Don't tell me you thought I was married to Taehyung!" Gyuri huffed, "I thought we already cleared that misunderstanding."

Jimin breathed out a sigh of relief. Thank goodness... But then his face scrunched up in confusion. Huh? Why am I relieved to hear that?

"It's too soon to think about stuff like marriage" Gyuri mused. "But what about you?" she suddenly questioned. "Are you already attached to someone?"

"No... I am not" he murmured. Not yet.

"Really?"

Jimin peered at her.

"Then, that's great!" Gyuri lips stretched into a smile and Jimin's heart stirred. It was the same feeling he had earlier but this time, it was a lot stronger.

"W-why is that a good thing?" he ventured to ask, his cheeks suddenly feeling warm.

"Oh, because you and—" Gyuri abruptly stopped and grinned bashfully. "Ah, I can't tell you. That's a secret." With a wily grin, Gyuri continued to gape at him before her smile suddenly dropped. Jimin watched as she pointed at his raised hand that was holding the damp cloth. "That ring..."

"Huh?"

Following her gaze, Jimin's eyes rounded when he spotted his imperial band of jade still sitting neatly on his forefinger. Curses! I forgot to take it off! Slowly, he dropped his arm to hide his hand, silently praying that Gyuri wouldn't ask more about it. But to his dismay, Gyuri asked with a solemn voice.

"Where did you get that ring from?"
"Where did you get that ring from?"

The words left Gyuri's mouth before she had time to think. Gyuri watched as Jimin shifted uncomfortably from opposite her, his eyes darting in every direction to avoid meeting hers.

"It was- it was a present from my parents" Jimin fumbled in reply. But internally, he was cursing at himself for forgetting to take off something as important as his imperial ring.

"Can I see it?" Gyuri asked rather enthusiastically as she leaned in to close the distance between herself and Jimin.

In response, Jimin shuffled back. "W-why?"

"I just wanna have a look at it" she replied, inching closer. If I'm not mistaken, that ring is...

"No, I rather not" Jimin answered uncomfortably. He hid his hand behind his back. "It is too..." Jimin paused as he searched for the right word, "embarrassing."

"Huh?"

"The ring is made of poor material" Jimin lied. "It is of the cheapest quality—"

"I don't care about that" Gyuri insisted as she drew even closer. "I just want to see..."

But still, Jimin refused. "No."

"C'mon, Chim Chim" Gyuri pouted. "I'm just gonna take a quick look, I'm not going to do anything else with it—"

Without warning, Gyuri launched herself from her sitting position and pounced on Jimin to inspect the ring he was working so hard to conceal. Jimin scrambled backwards as he tried to defend himself.

"What are you doing?" Jimin screeched as Gyuri managed to wrestle on top of him. "Unhand me!"

"I just want to see your ring!" Gyuri growled back. "Why are you being so difficult?"

Like a ravenous pauper, Gyuri continued to reach for Jimin's right hand while he squirmed from underneath her. "Get off me!" he bellowed as he attempted to wriggle free. "Get off me this instant!"

Gyuri continued to claw after Jimin's hand while using her weight to pin his body down. By sitting on top of his midriff, Jimin was rendered immobile. With only his arms free, Jimin fought back Gyuri's advances with his left while he stretched his right as far as he could.

_I must not let her see it!_ He panicked. _This ring will give away my identity!

The pair continued to wrestle on the dry grass, both consumed with relentless fervour not to lose to the other. On multiple occasions, Gyuri reached out for his ring but failed as Jimin was quick to swat her prying hands away. Growing frustrated, Gyuri shifted her weight to her knees to gain a better
reach, momentarily allowing Jimin to break free from her grasp.

That was all it took for the tables to turn.

Gyuri let out a yelp of surprise as Jimin grabbed hold of her wrists as he pinned her down, reversing their position. With her back landing with a soft thud on the dry grass, Jimin glared down at her, his face as black as thunder and his eyes burning with a muted fury. He spoke authoritatively, "You are not going to see my ring, do you understand?"

Gyuri nodded, suddenly made speechless by the angry, young man on top of her. From their earlier struggle, loose strands of hair had escaped his top knot, peppering his face to create a dishevelled appearance. Gyuri swallowed as she took in the view from the bottom. Hot dang it, even when he's angry he's still handsome... Instead of being frightened of him, she abruptly became shy by their precarious situation.

Oblivious, Jimin continued to glower at her. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're- you're too close..." She turned her cheek as she murmured, "And you're heavy."

"I am too close?" Jimin echoed, puzzled.

He inspected Gyuri's face and noticed the rosy glow spreading across her countenance. Her long, raven hair sprawled across the dry grass was like a silky blanket; her dark brown eyes were averted but showed a hint of nervousness, and her plump, pink lips were parted slightly to reveal her pearly whites. Jimin's heart skipped a beat when Gyuri locked eyes with him, a vulnerable expression gracing her features as she continued to gawk. There was something about the way she was looking at him that made Jimin's heart jump wildly in his chest. And it didn't help that Jimin's body was also responding to her seductive charm.

He gulped when he finally realised what Gyuri's words meant. Hurriedly, he fumbled to get off her. "I- I—"

But before Jimin could get another word in, an unexpected fist suddenly flew at him causing him to propel to the side. Saliva spewed from his mouth as he staggered sideways.

"What are you doing to Gyuri?!"

Gyuri and Jimin turned to the perpetrator and their eyes widened in disbelief when they saw who it was.

"T-Taehyung!"

With his fist throbbing in pain, Taehyung scowled at Jimin as he shielded Gyuri behind him. "Gyuri, are you alright?" he panted as he took a quick glance at her. "Stay behind me. I will protect you from this scoundrel."

"Taehyung, you've got it all wrong—"

"What was that for?" Jimin interrupted from the ground. Gingerly, he touched his lip and grimaced when he saw blood stain his fingers. "This is all a misunderstanding—"

"Oh, yeah?" Taehyung spat. "Then what were you doing on top of Gyuri? Were you trying to take advantage of her?"

Jimin's face coloured at the accusation. "I-I was- I was not!"
"Chim?" Zeren called as he jogged towards the small huddle. Behind him, the orphans followed closely. "What's going on over here?"

"We heard yelling," Chun Chun remarked while observing the scene before her.

"Mama, why are you on the floor?"

Taehyung shouted, "You corrupt imperial guards! How dare you try and take advantage of my person!" He turned to Zeren. "I just caught your friend trying to molest Gyuri!"

Zeren's eyes flew open. "What? Chim was?"

"No, he has it all wrong!" Jimin protested hurriedly. "It is all a misunderstanding!" He addressed Gyuri, "Tell them what really happened! I am innocent!"

"He's right" Gyuri clarified. "He—he didn't do anything wrong..."

Taehyung didn't look convinced.

"It was my fault. I was trying to look at his ring when he didn't want me to and we ended up in that... position."

Zeren turned to Taehyung. "See! The pretty lady said it herself. It was a misunderstanding." He folded his arms across his broad chest. "I think you owe Chim an apology."

"Are you certain he did not wrong you?" Taehyung queried, ignoring Zeren.

Gyuri meekly nodded. "Chim Chim's innocent."

Reluctantly, the young boy turned to face Jimin with his gaze cast down in shame.

Jimin scoffed as he watched him engage in a staring contest with the floor. That is right, he internally spoke. You must feel dreadful for having hit someone innocent. You are fortunate that I am forgiving —

Taehyung looked up.

Jimin's eyes rounded when he finally locked eyes with Taehyung. Instead of the remorseful expression he was expecting, he saw something else that made him feel on edge.

"I... apologise" Taehyung mumbled, but the hardened look on his crescent eyes sent him a different message.

Jimin clenched his jaw as he matched Taehyung's unrelenting stare.

Stay away from her.

~*~

"Ouch!" Jimin hissed as Zeren slapped his bruised face with a cold, wet cloth. "You are pressing too hard!"

Zeren retracted his arm away. "I'm not good at this, Your Majesty" he grumbled. "We should get one of the royal maids or even the royal physician to tend to you."

Jimin snatched the cloth from his hand as he gently dabbed at the corner of his lip. "No" he
responded moodily. "We do not need to cause a fuss."

Zeren sighed as he let Jimin tend to himself.

The pair were finally back at the palace grounds and were presently hiding away in the royal physician's apothecary. After parting with Gyuri and the rest of the group, Zeren and Jimin had snuck back into the palace to avoid being noticed. Jimin knew, as well as Zeren, that his injured appearance will more than likely attract unwanted attention.

"I am certain there must be something in here that can help cover up my bruise" Jimin pondered aloud while glancing at the wooden encasements that surrounded them. "Zeren, do you know anything about medicine?"

"No, Your Majesty" Zeren replied. "And anyway, the herbs here are for medicinal purposes only" Zeren informed him. "Not cosmetic purposes. The best remedy for your bruise would be the balm of time."

Jimin frowned. "I cannot return looking like this. My sister will definitely scold me if she sees."

"And she will berate me more for not protecting you."

Jimin looked up from where he was sitting and met eyes with Zeren's mournful expression. "I'm sorry, Chim. It was my fault you got hurt the first time. I got too excited when I saw the ball."

Jimin laughed lightly. "You have not changed at all, Zeren. You and your mighty horse kick."

"But I guess my horse kick was nothing compared to that lad's punch."

Immediately, Jimin's face soured.

"He got you good" Zeren continued to say as he inspected Jimin's purple bruise and cut lip. "He hits hard for a young'un."

"Do not speak of him" Jimin snapped. Memories of Taehyung's threatening glare was etched at the back of his mind. "How dare he assault me?"

"Well, I guess I don't blame him for punching you."

At this, Jimin swerved around. "What?"

"Don't misunderstand" Zeren explained, "but from anyone's point of view, seeing you on top of Gyuri did look like you were taking advantage of her—"

"Zeren!"

"But I know what you're like, Chim. You're not forward at all." He turned his face away as he mumbled under his breath, "It's actually a shame. I thought your hot-bloodedness had finally awoken and you were rid of your irrational fear..."

Jimin glowered at his friend. "I heard that."

"But at least you were not in dire trouble" Zeren consoled himself. "I am glad it was not as threatening as your encounter with Kim Namjoon."

Jimin scowled at the sound of that name. Had Gyuri not mentioned that Namjoon was a physician, he would not have learned that the cousin that his brother-in-law spoke of was no other than
Namjoon himself. Jimin was more than bitter when he realised that he owed it to Namjoon for treating the Waekugin ambassadors as soon as they arrived.

"Regardless of whether that lad posed a threat or not" Jimin retorted, "I should not have been hit unlawfully."

Zeren nodded in agreement. "But you know what, Chim?" He began pacing the cramped space that was filled with all sorts of wooden boxes that contained dried and aromatic herbs. "For some reason, the lad that punched you looks kinda familiar."

Jimin grunted dismissively as he continued to delicately dab at his split lip.

"Where have I seen him before?" Zeren mused as he continued to pace. And just like that, he remembered. "Ah! I remember now!"

Jimin jolted at Zeren's startling voice and accidentally knocked his bruise. "Ouch!" he hissed. "Stupid Zeren, look at what you made me do!"

"Chim! I finally remember where I've seen that boy from" he said excitedly. "If I am not mistaken, he is Kim Taehyung; the youngest of the Kims."

Jimin stopped what he was doing and stared. "Kim Taehyung?"

Zeren nodded.

"That child... is one of the Kims?" Jimin uttered in disbelief.

"Yes, I remember seeing him in the Kim household on the night of the wedding ceremony."

Jimin narrowed his eyes. "I see." He scoffed as memories of his encounter with Namjoon and Taehyung replayed in his mind.

"I will not forgive you for touching one of my people."

"How dare you try and take advantage of my person!"

A wry smile crept up his lips. "It seems that the Kims care deeply about their servants" he muttered under his breath.

"Pardon?" Zeren spoke. "Did you say something, Chim?"

Jimin looked up, a hollow smile still plastered on his face. "No," he lied, "nothing." He glanced down at the cloth and squeezed it tightly.

*I do not think I will get on with any of the Kims at all.*

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Soft light filtered through the cracks of the tattered curtains stirring a drowsy Brahms awake. He groaned, his iridescently fringed eyes fluttering open to reveal his striking green irises.

"Where am I?" he croaked. His throat was as dry as sandpaper. "Vernon?" he called out as his vision adjusted to the dim room. "Amadeus? Archie?"

"Ah, you are awake."
Brahms followed the stranger's voice and his eyes met a weary-looking Namjoon. He recoiled backwards on the bed, suddenly on guard at the sudden appearance of an unfamiliar man. In a blink of an eye, Brahms noticed that the man before him walked gallantly despite his humble attire. Currently, Namjoon was wearing plain, beige robes that were vacant of any illustrious embroidery.

Namjoon cautiously approached him, a saucer of water in his hands. "You must be thirsty," he said as he offered the saucer to Brahms.

"Get away from me!" Brahms shouted as he slapped the saucer away with the back of his hand.

Namjoon was taken aback.

"Where are my companions?" he asked angrily. "What have you done with them?"

Namjoon gaped at the red-haired foreigner confusedly. "I cannot understand you," he said as he picked up the emptied saucer. "I do not speak your tongue. But you need to drink water. You have lost a lot of fluids while you were indisposed."

"Where are they?" Brahms' voice was hoarse. He darted his eyes to all corners of the room as if searching for a sign as to where he was. "I swear on the King's name that you will pay with your life if harm befell them, you savage—"

"Brahms!"

The pair turned around and a mutual sense of relief washed over them.

"Vernon..." Brahms managed to utter, his eyes blinking in disbelief at the sight of his companion unharmed. "You are alive."

The fair-haired gentleman swiftly walked over to his bedridden friend. "It is I who should be saying that" he responded with an equally relieved smile. "My friend, how are you feeling?"

Brahms opened his mouth to respond but upon noticing Namjoon loitering behind, he hesitated.

Vernon was quick to notice. "Will you please excuse us, Sir Namjoon?" he spoke in Saimese. "I would like to speak with Brahms in private."

Namjoon gave a slight nod. "As you wish" he replied, before departing.

Once the door had shut, Brahms spoke, "Where are we?" His voice was still low as if he was paranoid that Namjoon would overhear.

"We are at a local hospital" Vernon answered as he perched himself at the end of Brahms' bed. "We are finally at the capital."

Brahms' sharp features softened at those words. "I see..."

"But how are you feeling?" Vernon enquired. "You had all of us worried. You were in and out of consciousness for the past two weeks."

As if by Vernon mentioning it, Brahms suddenly felt queasy. "I feel... terrible" he admitted as he massaged his temple. "I cannot remember much of what happened before—" Suddenly, Brahms' body tensed up as he recalled the neighing of distressed horses; the clashing of long swords and the piercing sound of gunshots. He clutched the edge of the bed as he heaved into a vacant wooden bucket next to him.
Vernon looked on alarmingly. "Brahms?" He quickly got up as he searched for the jug of clean water that Namjoon had been giving to his friend. "Here," he offered the whole jug to him, "this should help you feel better."

Brahms groggily looked up and with both hands, he seized the jug from Vernon and drank hungrily. Trails of water escaped the sides of his mouth as it dribbled down his chin. Once it was empty, he wiped the residue away with the back of his hand.

"Better?"

Brahms nodded. "Better."

"You need to rest it out. Do not push yourself. Archie and I will deal with the emperor—"

"Have you already seen him?" Brahms interrupted.

"Not yet. But they have sent a royal envoy to relay the message on when and where the meeting will take place."

"Be vigilant" Brahms muttered in a sombre tone. "We do not know if we can trust them yet." He tightened his grip on the blanket draped on top of him. "Especially not after we were ambushed."

Vernon returned his solemn gaze.

"We should tell King Hiram about this. Our lives may be in danger here—"

"The king will not show us empathy. He made it clear that we must succeed in this mission no matter what."

"But we could have died—!"

"And he would have sent other diplomats to replace us" Vernon cut in. "We cannot show weakness, Brahms. The king expects us to succeed and succeed we shall."

Brahms ran his pale hand through his copper-shaded hair. "This is a suicide mission, Vernon, and you know it. Only a few weeks in and we have already encountered hostile parties."

"We have little choice. We need to do this for New Britannia." He eyed his friend who exhibited a ghastly expression and sighed. "But enough talk about that. For now, we should focus on your recovery. When the envoy came, he also mentioned that the emperor has extended the use of his royal infirmary should you wish to be moved there."

Brahms scowled. "I rather stay here. Who knows what they might do to me."

"Very well," Vernon answered. "I shall inform Amadeus and Archie of your decision." He got up to leave. "We are currently housed at a nearby tavern. I believe Amadeus will be the one to check up on you later."

But before Vernon could take a step, Brahms abruptly queried, "Are you okay?"

The fair-haired man looked back at his friend. "Why do you ask?"

"Because..." Brahms' voice trailed off as he hesitated to explain.

Vernon tossed him a weak smile. "I am fine, Brahms. I hardly think about it anymore."
But Brahms remained doubtful.

"I cannot change what happened in the past" Vernon stated in a bid to convince his friend. "But the future still remains unwritten." He eyed him determinedly. "New Britannia is my home now." He turned his back as he proceeded towards the exit. "And Saim will only become my home again once it has fallen under New Britannia's sphere of influence."

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave comments! It's starting to get hard to stay motivated with writing this story and posting since I often feel like I am not really benefiting from doing so. Some feedback would be appreciated just so that I keep my self-doubt at bay. Other than that, I really do hope you are enjoying the story.
White noise.

That was all Taehyung could hear as he glanced around the blank vicinity. He blinked several times after rubbing his eyes, still in disbelief that he was here again.

If I am here, then—

"Hello?"

Taehyung turned around and his eyes rounded.

"It's you..." he heard a feminine voice say. "You're okay."

Taehyung remained tongue-tied as he eyed the woman in front of him. He couldn't believe it. It was her—the woman in white.

She peered down at him with the kindest smile, her soft and feminine features still as beautiful as the last time he saw her. Taehyung couldn't help but be bedazzled by her smile and just like last time, a squeezing pain reverberated in his chest the longer he stared. There was just something about her that gave him a feeling of nostalgia, but he didn't know what. Why did she feel so familiar to him despite not knowing her at all?

"Y-yes" he replied, his voice breathless. "Thank-you for before..."

The woman in white replied, "Well, I'm glad you're okay. You had me worried."

Taehyung dared to meet her eyes and as soon as he did, his cheeks heated up. Why was he so nervous around her? "I-I apologise for worrying you."

She chuckled at his stiff response before approaching him. "You look a little different" she observed as she leaned in to inspect him. "You've grown taller."

"I have?"

The woman in white circled Taehyung as he nervously stood his ground.

"Yes," she replied.

Taehyung watched as she walked ahead of him, her white dress swaying against her calves. "I don't suppose you know where we are?"

"No," Taehyung mumbled as he rubbed the back of his neck. "We never got to find out last time."

"Yeah, you're right." She curled her lip in thought. "Well, since we're both here again, shall we continue that walk from before?"

Taehyung managed a nod.

The woman in white doubled back so that both she and Taehyung were side by side. Under closer
inspection, Taehyung noticed that the woman in white was a little taller than him. And because she was a little taller than him, he managed to get a perfect view of her face. There was no doubt that he found her attractive. Her black hair sat just past her shoulders and her dark-brown eyes were framed by long lashes. But most importantly, Taehyung couldn't avoid staring at her lips.

He blushed as he recalled what happened the last time they met.

"This place... it's lonely."

Taehyung snapped out of his thoughts. "Huh?"

The woman in white continued, "After you disappeared last time, I didn't know what to do." She gave him a sideways glance. "I was stuck here alone."

"You were?"

"Yeah."

The pair continued to aimlessly amble ahead, the nothingness that surrounded them offering no sense of time or direction.

The woman in white looked up as if expecting to see the sky. "And while I was wandering by myself I kept thinking that this place looks a lot like winter."

Taehyung followed her lead and stared upwards too. But alas, all he could see was nothingness: blank nothingness. There was no way of knowing when the sky ended and when the land, they stood on, began.

"Like a fresh layer of snow, everything is covered" she murmured while smiling weakly. "It's both beautiful and lonely."

Taehyung gaped at her wistful expression and bit his lip. It had tormented him not knowing why she made his heart ache so much. Every fibre of his being longed to know more about her as if there was an invisible force pulling him to her like a magnet—telling him that, somehow, she was someone precious to him. Someone he knew but didn't know; someone he cared about without having to know the reason why. But the main question that plagued his mind was: who was she?

Taehyung cleared his throat which caught the woman's attention. She tilted her head at him.

"I-I kept thinking about you" Taehyung shyly admitted, his face growing hot.

The woman in white raised her brow in surprise. "You... were thinking about me?" she repeated, surprised by his declaration. "Why?"

"I feel like we know each other" he answered. "But the strange thing is, I am certain we have never met before."

The woman in white was thoughtful.

"Have we?"

"...No" she replied, but Taehyung noticed that she was hesitant. "I don't think we have. But I understand what you mean." She searched his eyes. "For some reason, I feel like I know you too."

Taehyung swallowed nervously before forcing himself to say, "When I left, I kept wondering if we would ever meet again. I have a lot of questions." Taehyung halted at his step and the woman in
white followed his lead. He locked eyes with hers. "Who... are you?"

Silence.

Taehyung gulped as he watched her intently, scrutinising her blank expression. After moments had passed, to his relief, a soft chuckle escaped her lips which made his heart flutter.

"That's right," she said while smiling. "We haven't introduced ourselves yet, have we?"

Taehyung nodded, suddenly embarrassed by how he had framed the question.

The woman in white continued to direct her smile at him as she spoke, "My name is..." 

~*~

"Young Master?"

A woman's voice caused Taehyung to open his eyes. As soon as he did, he found Kalyani looming over him with a concerned countenance.

"Are you alright, Young Master?"

Huh?

Taehyung stirred and soon discovered that he was lying on his bed. What am I doing here? He felt a sharp pain throb at his temple as if someone was hammering a nail at his skull. He grimaced.

Kalyani continued to fuss over him. "You should rest more, Young Master. I will go to Physician Koh and request a tonic..."

But Taehyung couldn't hear what Kalyani was saying anymore. Everything to him sounded like a high-pitch sound causing him to wince in pain. With his eyes firmly shut, he held his head as if to block out the noise but to no avail. It was only when a sudden, blurry image of a woman's smile flit across his foggy memory did he have a moment of clarity.

"Young Master?"

Taehyung's eyes flew open and he saw Kalyani staring at him worriedly. Just as she was about to speak, something warm slid down his cheek and landed on the blanket draped in front of him.

Concerned, Kalyani attempted to ask again, "Young Master, what's wrong?"

But Taehyung didn't know either. He returned her questioning stare as he asked the question both wanted to know the answer to.

"Why am I... crying?"

~*~

The twisted and damp linen sheets made squelching noises as Gyuri pounded at them with a wooden paddle. But while sweat beaded on her forehead and her arms ached from beating the laundry, the only thing occupying her mind was thoughts of Namjoon. Images of how his eyes crinkled when he laughed; how his dimples magically appeared when he smiled, and the way his eyes sparkled when he spoke all made her heart flutter as the mosaic images converged into that one perfect picture.
Gyuri smiled.

_Ugh. What's wrong with me?_

A long sigh escaped her lips as she noticed her lovestruck expression reflected in the water.

_Stupid Subin! Snap out of it!

She stared at her reflection in the stream and shook her head in dismay. "You can't fall for him" she warned herself. "You'll only end up broken-hearted in the end." Her reflection stared back at her determinedly but despite her attempts to dissuade her heart from harbouring such dangerous feelings, it remained unfazed. Like a germinating seed, her feelings for him had already taken root.

"This is bad..." she muttered. "You're meant to be finding a way back, remember? You can't afford to get distracted!" She let out a long breath as she focused on the cloudless sky above. It was still late in the summer—the longest summer she had ever experienced. She couldn't remember how long it had been since she last saw rain. "Yoongi... dad... I wonder how you're doing." With her brows furrowed, Gyuri attempted to conjure an image of her brother and father only to open her eyes in worry as an uneasy feeling swelled in her gut. "I'm starting to forget what you look like."

Gyuri dipped the linen cloth into the stream, her hand also plunging into the cool water. Against the hot rays of the summer sun, Gyuri welcomed the pleasant chilliness in her hands, the sensation momentarily taking her mind off her pending trouble. Instead, it allowed her to reminisce the time when Namjoon treated her scratches obtained from a touchy patient. Gyuri snatched her hand from the water as she blushed at the recollection.

"Get a hold of yourself, Subin" she groaned. "Now's not the time for this..."

But as she resumed her rhythmic pounding, her train of thought was already unavoidably revolving around Namjoon. Thoughts about what he was doing currently and whether he was taking care of himself danced across her mind, teasing her and stirring up emotions that, against her wishes, made her feel an array of things that she hadn't felt in a while.

And the more she thought of him, the more other topics connected to Namjoon popped into her mind like a spontaneous growth of mushrooms after a thunderstorm.

"_I hope we can become firm friends._"

Gyuri shuddered as she recollected the fair-haired stranger's voice. His odd-coloured eyes, the brilliant shade of blue and the contrasting depth of brown, engraved in her mind's eye. Even though she had no reason to suspect him, there was something about him that made her apprehensive: her instincts were warning her to avoid his path.

But that wasn't the only thing that eluded Gyuri of the Waekugin's presence.

"It still doesn't make any sense" she mumbled to herself. "I can understand what they're saying but I can't speak in my own language."

Gyuri closed her eyes as she cast her memory back to the last few days and how she had attempted time and time again to communicate with them. Nothing. Every time she tried, her lips failed to make the right notions and her words came out garbled and tongue-tied. It was like trying to speak a language you had never spoken before.

"This is so frustrating. And here I thought they might know how to get back home..."
Casting the wet sheets aside, Gyuri huffed as a stinging sensation suddenly invaded her eyes. She blinked. A warm tear slid down her cheek followed by another and another. Unable to maintain her nonchalant façade, a loud sob escaped her lips and soon, the mask, she wore, crumbled. Tears spilled down her cheeks as Gyuri allowed her bottled up anguish to escalate into uncontrollable sniffles. And just like an unexpected shower of rain, other emotions threatened to overwhelm her, finally free of the rigid restraint that was Gyuri's will to appear outwardly fine.

"Dad... Yoongi..." she hiccupped as she hastily wiped her tears away. "I really miss you..." She pulled her knees close and hugged herself tightly. "I wish I can go back home." Gyuri rested her forehead against her folded arms, all the while desperately wishing that the past few months she had been in Saim was all part of a very realistic dream. Even now, she was still convinced that she was asleep and that somehow, she will one day wake up and be back home, in her bedroom, where she was supposed to be.

"I wish I was back home" she repetitively chanted. "I wish I was back home. I wish I was—"

"You must never lose it, okay? This ring will bring you back to your roots. It will bring you back to where you belong."

Gyuri's eyes flew open. "What—what was that?" She blinked several times in confusion, the words echoing in her mind. "That ring..." Her grandma's jade ring appeared in her mind's eye again and her brows snapped together as she thought. "Could that ring... be a clue?"

Made hopeful by this thought, Gyuri sat up and thought aloud, "When I time-slipped, the last thing I was holding was grandma's book..." Gyuri stared intensely at her hand. "But when I woke up, I didn't have it with me." She frowned. "Was I wearing the ring at the time?" Gyuri cast her memory back as far as it could go. But all she could recall was a vague image of the ring hanging loosely around her forefinger. "What if that ring is my ticket back home?"

Gyuri sighed as she focused her attention on the sky. "It's a long shot" she murmured, "but it's better than nothing." She squinted at the sun's glare. "Maybe I dropped it when I woke up in that field?" she wistfully mused. But then she recalled a similar-looking ring around Jimin's hand and she chewed her lip. "I just hope it's still there."

With her faith somewhat restored, Gyuri got up to stretch her legs, feeling slightly better after her impromptu outburst. "Even if I do find the ring, what am I gonna do with it?" she pondered aloud. "Should I try chanting something like Dorothy in 'The Wizard of Oz'?" Gyuri peered down at her durable canvas shoes and started clicking her heels together. "There's no place like home. There's no place like—"

Gyuri slipped.

A wide expanse of blue occupied Gyuri's field of vision as she tumbled backwards, her body feeling light as her feet momentarily left the ground. Gyuri waited for gravity to take effect and for the inevitable pain of landing into the stream to slap her back. But to her surprise, both didn't come. For just as she was about to fall, two strong hands had grabbed onto hers.

"Stupid... Gyuri" Taehyung grunted, his voice strained as he helped to pull her forward. "You need... to be more careful." Taking a few steps back, Taehyung pulled Gyuri upwards so that she...
was finally upright.

"Thanks" she murmured as he let her hands go.

Taehyung was about to reprimand her when he was suddenly distracted by her face. "Have you been crying?"

Instinctively, Gyuri looked up to deny it but had only resulted in Taehyung getting a better view of her puffy eyes. She looked down immediately. "N-no..."

He leaned in. "You have!" With his brows knitted together, he approached Gyuri while she shied away. "Why were you crying?" he asked persistently. But then, his voice lowered as he gritted out, "Has someone been bothering you?"

"No!" Gyuri averted her gaze when she saw Taehyung's cross expression. "It's- it's nothing..."

But Taehyung remained dubious. "Gyuri, if someone has been bothering you, all you have to do is tell me their name and I—"

"That's not it" she cut in as she forced a smile. "I'm fine. Honest." Gyuri swept her skirt to the front as she sat down at the edge of the stream to resume her laundry washing. "I-I just accidentally hit myself with the paddle earlier" she lied. "That's why I had tears in my eyes."

Taehyung watched as Gyuri resumed pounding the linen sheets, his gaze burning a hole at the back of her head. His heart ached seeing Gyuri upset—no matter what the reason. Seeing her hunched over the laundry made him suddenly think of how lonely her back looked. Her shoulders, slumped forward, were stooped as if she was carrying a heavy burden that was slowly crushing her. A burden which he wanted to alleviate if only she shared some of it with him.

He sat down next to her.

"What are you doing?" she questioned when she spotted him dip one of the sheets into the stream.

"I am helping you."

Gyuri raised her brow as Taehyung clumsily wrung the sheet to squeeze out the water. Noticing her stare, he glanced up and revealed his cheeky box-like smile. "Why are you staring at me like that?" he asked, his smile growing wider to reveal his crescent-shaped eyes. "Are you finally falling for my irresistible charm?"

Gyuri scoffed before a smile curled at her lips.

"There!"

Gyuri looked at him.

"At last." Taehyung's voice was gentle. "You smiled."

Swiftly, Gyuri looked away to hide her reddening cheeks. "What-what are you doing here? You shouldn't be wandering nearby water. You can't swim."

"I wanted to spend time with you" Taehyung simply answered as he continued to submerge the sheets into the water. "And besides, the stream is fine. The water here is shallow."

The pair sat quietly next to each other, the steady trickling of the stream filling the silence that surrounded them. Content with just being near Gyuri, Taehyung continued to happily rinse the
sheets, somewhat convinced that he was being useful. But as the silence wore on, Taehyung couldn’t help but revisit the events which occurred not so long ago. The smile on his face slowly slipped away.

"Gyuri."

"Hm?"

"That imperial guard from before..."

Gyuri turned to him.

"...who was he?"

"You mean Chim Chim?" Gyuri focused her attention back to the laundry. "He's just a friend—"

"Is he a suitor of yours?"

"W-what?" Gyuri was astounded. "Suitor?" She had heard her dad mention that word many times before. Gyuri was quick to deny, "He's not my boyfriend! What makes you think that?"

Puzzled slightly by her diction, Taehyung explained, "Because you were so...intimate with each other—"

"No!" Gyuri fiercely denied, her face flushed pink. "That-that was an accident. I thought I already explained that to you."

"Then, why did you let him get away with it?"

Gyuri sighed. "Taehyung, I already told you, it was my fault. Chim Chim's innocent. I was trying to look at his ring."

"His ring?"

"Yes," she murmured, "I thought... I recognised it."

Taehyung observed how the light from Gyuri's eyes dimmed as she mulled over the imperial guard's ring. It baffled him why Gyuri had been so downcast lately. After they had returned from the field, Gyuri had not been the same. She was constantly distracted—dazed—and never quite herself even when Taehyung had snuck her expensive delectable treats from the kitchen. And seeing her in her wistful state convinced him that the imperial guard had something to do with it. After all, who else could have caused her to be so troubled?

Taehyung eyed Gyuri intently. If it were me, I would never make you sad. He got up abruptly and Gyuri peered up at him.

"Taehyung?"

With determination, Taehyung offered his hand out to her. "I know of a way to cheer you up."

I have decided.

"Hm?" Gyuri looked at him questioningly before reaching out to grab his hand. He held onto her tightly as he helped her up.

I will be the one to make you happy.
"Taehyung, what are you up to?"

No matter what.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader,

Writing this chapter made me feel squishy inside. >.< I hope it was to your liking!
"You're bad at this."

Taehyung hmphed as he tossed another flat stone across the lake and frowned when it sank.

Gyuri giggled from beside him. "You're really bad at this" she repeated, and Taehyung pouted. She picked up a smooth pebble from the ground and Taehyung watched as it skipped along the surface of the water with ease after she flung it. It skipped three times.

"How did you do that?"

"It's easy" Gyuri replied, "the key is how you throw it."

Taehyung observed as Gyuri demonstrated again but this time, the stone skipped four times.

Gyuri smirked. "Still got it."

Following her example, Taehyung took a step closer to the edge as he tossed another stone. But as he was doing so, he suddenly lost his balance, causing him to lose his footing too. Taehyung struggled to stay at the safety of the edge as he flapped his arms about. But before gravity could set his body into falling motion, a slender arm hurriedly wrapped around his waist, breaking gravity's momentum.

"Easy" he heard Gyuri say as he felt her body press against his. "What did I tell you about being around water?"

Taehyung gulped as Gyuri's warm breath tickled his ear. "To-to be careful."

"And just earlier you called me stupid for almost falling in" she teased as she unhooked her arm.

Taehyung nervously licked his lips at the closeness of their bodies. From where he stood, he could hear Gyuri breathing. When he turned to completely face her, his heart jumped. They were close —too close—but that meant he had a perfect view of her eyes; her nose; her lips. They were beckoning for him: tempting him.

"Taehyung?"

Taehyung snapped out of his trance and his eyes darted from her lips to her eyes. "Huh? What?" He took a step back as he tried to calm the erratic beating of his heart.

Calm down, Taehyung! What is wrong with you?

"You okay?" Gyuri questioned as she took a step towards him. "Your face is red."

Taehyung cupped both his cheeks: they were warm. "I-I am fine."

"Kinda think of it," she lifted her hand above her head as if measuring her height against his, "have you grown again?"
Taehyung was taken aback as Gyuri leaned in.

"You have, haven't you? Only a while ago we were about the same height." She hmp'd. "Now, you're like a centimetre taller than me!"

Taehyung chuckled as Gyuri pouted. "I guess that is the only thing I can beat you at." He tip-toed to emphasise his height even more. "It will not be long till I will be looking down at you like this."

"No fair!" Gyuri whined. "Stop growing! I'm older than you!"

Taehyung playfully stuck his tongue out. "Age does not matter when it comes to height."

"Well then," Gyuri said while grinning at him wickedly, "I guess I better do this while I still can!" Without warning, she reached up and ruffled his hair with her knuckles.

"Ouch! Gyuri, quit it!" Taehyung complained as he tried to swat her hand away. Once he had succeeded in deflecting her attacks, he grumbled, "You are so annoy—" but soon stopped midway his utterance when he spotted Gyuri's expression.

"You're growing up," she said simply but her eyes were melancholy. "Time really does fly by. Next thing you know, it'll be winter."

"...this place looks a lot like winter."

Taehyung flinched.

Noticing his discomfort, Gyuri queried, "Taehyung? Is something wrong?"

"What... what did you say?" His voice was barely a whisper. He looked up and Gyuri witnessed the confusion in his eyes. "Can you repeat what you just said?"

"Erm, sure. I said 'you're growing up'—"

"No. Not that" he interrupted. "That bit about winter."

Gyuri raised her brow. "I said, 'next thing you know, it'll be winter.'"

With such intensity, Taehyung locked eyes with Gyuri as if he was searching for something important. Eventually, he looked away. "I-I am sorry..." He rubbed his neck as he explained, "I-I had this strange dream last night and what you said about winter reminded me of something she said."

"She?" Gyuri repeated. "You were dreaming about someone?"

Taehyung nodded. "But it is nothing" Taehyung rushed to say. "We should just carry on—"

"We can talk about it."

Taehyung blinked.

"If it's bothering you, you can tell me about it. After all," Gyuri smiled at him kindly, "that's what sisters are for." She gestured for them to sit on the grassy bank that overlooked the lake. Taehyung crossed his legs beside her as he fiddled with the blades of grass. Gyuri spoke, "So, who were you dreaming about?" She had a wily grin as she suggested, "Someone special?"

Oblivious to what Gyuri was hinting at, he murmured, "I-I do not know..." He played with the grass in between his fingers. "I do not know her."
"Then, why do you seem so affected by her?"

Taehyung glanced up before focusing his attention on the grass again. One by one, he started pulling up each blade.

Noticing how his cheeks were flushed, Gyuri ventured to guess, "Did you have... an erotic dream?"

Taehyung's head shot up immediately. "What?" With amusement, Gyuri watched as he processed her utterance. "No! No! I-I was—"

"You know, it's perfectly normal for a boy your age to be having those kinds of fantasies—"

"Gyuri!" Taehyung shouted, his cheeks ablaze. "I was not having that kind of dream!"

"You sure?" Gyuri teased. She lifted her hands up in surrender. "Because I won't judge you if you were—"

"Gyuri!"

With mirth exuding from her eyes, Gyuri laughed heartily at Taehyung's embarrassment.

"Stupid Gyuri" he grumbled as he hurled the fistful of grass at her.

Gyuri tried to stifle her giggles as she brushed the grass off her clothes. "But anyway, tell me more about your dream. Why is it bothering you?"

"I do not wish to tell you any more" Taehyung huffed as he glared at her. "Lest you tease me again."

"I'm sorry" Gyuri cooed while playfully pushing him on the shoulder. "Don't be mad."

From the corner of his eye, Taehyung peeped at Gyuri's direction. She continued to pout at him, her almond-shaped eyes wide and her lips puckered. Even though he wouldn't normally yield, he couldn't help doing so. He could never be mad at Gyuri for too long.

"Fine, I shall tell you."

"Yay!" She celebrated by waving her fists.

"I dreamed of a woman..."

Gyuri shifted in her seat as she nodded attentively.

"...A woman dressed in white."

Gyuri carefully listened as Taehyung tried to give a detailed account of his dream; of how it left him emotionally confused and yearning for someone he recognised but didn't know; of how his heart ached and drowned in nostalgia even though they have never met before. It was a dream yet, why did it leave a lingering feeling of longingness?

"I do not understand it at all," he said as he buried his face in his hands. "The dream felt so real. She felt so real. But the odd thing is, I do not know who she is."

"Maybe she is your guardian angel?" Gyuri suggested.

"My... guardian angel?"
"Yeah," Gyuri affirmed. "My brother once told me that our dreams are like manifestations of our deepest desires." She sat up as she continued, "If you were dreaming of this woman, then maybe, she might be someone really important to you or, it could be your mind trying to tell you something through this woman. It's either that or, you're being haunted."

"That is not funny, Gyuri" Taehyung spoke gravely. "You know I do not like to speak of spirits."

Gyuri sheepishly smiled as she shrugged. "Hey, it was just a suggestion."

"But if she was someone important to me, who could she be?" Taehyung pondered aloud. He stole a glance at Gyuri, who was equally pensive.

_The most important person to me right now is..._

"What if she's your mother?"

Taehyung's eyes rounded. "My... mother?"

Gyuri affirmed, "Yeah. I mean, you mentioned that she felt somewhat familiar, but you didn't recognise her. It makes sense. Maybe she's your guardian angel."

Taehyung's eyes softened as he contemplated the possibility. "My mother..."

"Do you have any pictures of her?" Gyuri eagerly asked. "I know it was just a dream but—"

"I do not" Taehyung answered abruptly. His features hardened as he started plucking blades of grass again. "Father thinks it is bad luck to keep portraits of the deceased. He burned all paintings of my mother and my brother's mothers because he believes pictures prevent the deceased from moving on." Bitterly, he added, "That is why I do not know what she looks like." He sighed. "No one at home ever speaks of the past because it is too painful."

Gyuri observed Taehyung's lonesome expression. _No wonder Master Namjoon mentioned he was unhappy... _"I guess you miss her, huh?"

"How can I miss someone I have never met?" he questioned but Gyuri thought it sounded like he was asking himself more than her. "But I guess you are right. Perhaps the woman in white really is my mother."

"It's okay to miss her, you know. Maybe it's just your mind's way of coping. I mean, sometimes, I'd dream of home too."

At this, Taehyung was intrigued. "You do?" He gaped at Gyuri and witnessed the sadness reflected in her eyes. Tentatively, he asked, "Gyuri, do you remember your past now?"

"W-what?"

"Just now, you sounded as if you remembered."

_Oh, crap. He's onto me again!_

"W-what are you on about?" She nervously laughed. "Can't a girl dream of a home she'd like to go back to?"

Taehyung eyed her dubiously. "But earlier you mentioned something about a brother..."

_Subin, you are an idiot."_
"And before, you mentioned your mother too." Taehyung searched her eyes as he asked, "Gyuri... I have been meaning to ask, but before you came to the household, who were you?"

"Erm..." She looked around wildly for inspiration. "I-I don't know- I-I can't remember."

Taehyung remained doubtful.

"I mean, I know I must have come from somewhere, right? That's why I mentioned them, my mother and brother, I mean." Dang it, I have no idea what the hell I'm saying. "I must have a family of my own: a mother, a father and maybe siblings too, even if I can't remember them."

Taehyung arched a brow. "But just now you—"

"I'd like to find them one day" Gyuri rushed to say and Taehyung's eyes rounded in fear. "Maybe uncover my past too."

"You plan to leave?" Taehyung's voice sounded alarmed. "But that means I will not see you anymore."

Jungkook's face flitted across Gyuri's vision as Taehyung's words echoed in her mind. She blinked. They were the same words Jungkook had told her before she came to Saim. Gyuri shook her head rapidly. Why did I suddenly think of Jun?

"It—it was just a thought" she replied, still dazed. "I-I won't really leave. I have yet to find out how."

"What?" Gyuri questioned. "Why not?"

"Because you are a servant of the Kim household."

Gyuri was stunned by Taehyung's dullness. She had grown so comfortable around him that she almost forgot her place in that era: she was a servant—a servant whose life was at the mercy of the Kims.

"And," he spoke, his tone softening, "you already have a family." Gyuri watched as Taehyung slowly lifted her left arm to reveal the ragged bracelet made by the orphans. "We are a family, remember?" He gestured at the bracelet, "You, Chun Chun, Gulnar and I. And as a family, we should strive to stick together."

Gyuri glanced down at the ragged bracelet, the twisted pieces of cloth still intact since the day she received it. She had been wearing it for so long that she no longer considered it a separate entity. But while the orphans meant well when they gave it to her, Gyuri couldn't help but associate the bracelet as a symbol of the time she spent away from home. From the discoloured and tattered threads, Gyuri could identify how long she had been wearing it, subconsciously reminding her that the longer she spent in Saim, the more she was away from her true family.

And Gyuri couldn't stomach that thought. Not anymore.

Gyuri forced a smile as she agreed, "You're right."

But internally, she was conflicted.

When the time comes, will I really choose to stay? 

~*~
From the small crack in the window, Taeyeon let out a long sigh as she watched the carved gates of the Kim household come into view. It had been a fair while since she had last visited her home—not that she could call it ‘home’ anymore. Despite the familiar walls and the familiar servants, Taeyeon felt uncomfortable. She knew that her uncle would not welcome her with open arms if he heard of her unexpected visit.

"Who passes?"

The palanquin came to a halt as a security guard questioned her manservant.

"It is Lady Lee Taeyeon" the servant replied.

Taeyeon heard the crunching of footsteps approach her palanquin window. There was a soft knock.

"Lady Taeyeon?"

Taeyeon, unaccustomed to having her palanquin inspected, drew the sliding window by a fraction to reveal her face. Had she known who awaited her at the other side of the window, she would have refused to reveal herself. For if she had known, she would have avoided the re-opening of tired wounds and the inescapable heartache.

Taeyeon blinked when she met eyes with the man before her.

Briefly, the security guard's eyes reflected her anguish before returning to his placid countenance. He nodded curtly before he stepped away to command the sentry guards to open the gates.

As the palanquin entered the household, Taeyeon willed herself not to look back at the guard, who she knew was most likely yearning for their eyes to meet again.

Be strong, Taeyeon, she murmured to herself. You must let him go.

Taeyeon fixed her gaze down at her hands, her jade rings suddenly catching her attention. They were the rings her husband had given her; rings that bound her to him as his wife; rings that despite their beauty reminded her constantly of her miserable fate.

Taeyeon bit her lip as she fought the tears that started welling up in her eyes.

If only I had been stronger...

She shook her head to be rid of the memories of a naïve romance awoken by her abrupt meeting with the security guard. She didn't want to be reminded of an unfulfilled promise; of her failure to be brave and above all, of the decision to choose her station over love.

It is too late to change things, she reminded herself. You are no longer Kim Taeyeon. She held her head high as the household grounds came into view. You are Lee Taeyeon now.

As the palanquin came to a halt and her carrier was lowered, Taeyeon observed the interior of the Kim household, unsurprised that everything remained the same. She surveyed the courtyard and was delighted to find that the person she had come to visit, was steadily approaching her.

"Joonie!" she called out.

Namjoon's dimpled smile became visible as he drew closer. "Sister, what a pleasant surprise!" With his arms outstretched he took hold of Taeyeon's and held them gently. "As soon as I spotted your palanquin from my window, I came straight out," he told her excitedly. "What are you doing here?"
"I came for a visit" she replied with equal enthusiasm.

Namjoon glanced around her as if he was searching for something. "Brother-in-law did not come with you?"

Taeyeon's smile remained unfazed. "No, it is just me today."

Namjoon’s features showed a hint of displeasure that faded as quickly as it came. He remarked, "Well, it is not too big of a loss." He gestured for them to make their way to his private quarters, where their long and overdue conversation could finally take place.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, I apologise for the late update! It's almost Guy Fawkes' Night and I went to see the bonfire and fireworks event. For future reference, if you're ever wondering when I'll update, please check my Twitter out @LaurelEvermore since I post on so many sites so it's the easiest way to keep everyone notified. Other than that, thanks for tuning in! Please don't be afraid to ask questions or anything. It's actually a lot more fun for me to hear from you.

Till next time.
Taeyeon thinned her lips as she silently watched Mayu pour tea into a cup. Her steady gaze, despite being harmless, was as penetrating as a knife. Mayu gulped as she tried to calm her shaking hand that was holding the iron teapot.

“So, what brings you here today, sister?” Namjoon enquired as he smiled at Taeyeon from across the table.

Taeyeon shifted her attention from Mayu as she replied, “I came today because you have not been answering my letters.” She frowned at him crossly. “You have been ignoring my invitations to come and visit me at the Lee house!”

“I apologise,” Namjoon answered while guiltily grinning. “I have been dealing with the epidemic in the village as of late—”

“I do not understand why you are making that your priority” she interrupted while scowling at him. “That is the work of physicians: people beneath your class. You are a lord in your own right so, why do you demean yourself with work such as that?”

Namjoon’s smile slowly slipped. “Sister, you know that I am studying medicine now—”

“But that is the thing!” she exclaimed exasperatedly, “The truth is, I do not know why. Before I could understand why you wished to study it because of your position in the military but now, I just cannot make sense of it…”

“Sister—”

“…You were doing so well in the army. You had so much potential. Your men even gave you a nickname because of your innate talent…”

“Sister—”

“…You should have heard what they said when you abruptly left! Some even followed you out of the military, did they not? You were an excellent company leader…”

“Sister—”

“…If you had continued, you could have been general. You served in the same regiment as General Lee, correct? If you had stayed on, you would have been the head of the Guan Yu not—”

“Enough!” Namjoon slammed his clenched fist on the wooden table, causing Taeyeon and Mayu to jump. Hot tea spilled across the varnished surface as a porcelain cup toppled over.

Taeyeon stared at her brother, wide-eyed and afraid. It was uncharacteristic of him to ever lose his composure so when he did, Taeyeon knew she had crossed a line.

Seeing the fright in her eyes, Namjoon let out a long breath. “I apologise,” he mumbled, “I-I have not been sleeping well as of late.”

A worried expression crossed Taeyeon’s features. “You need to take care of yourself, Joonie. I do
not know why you are going all out to help these peasants, but you must also consider your health
and your position.”

“I know.”

“But I do not think you do.” Taeyeon’s brows furrowed as she explained, “While Uncle is the head
of the family, you are the lord of our branch of the Kim clan.” She pursed her lips as she stated,
“Frankly, I do not understand why you insist on remaining here when you can move into Father’s
house. It is yours now and has been since the day he passed.”

Namjoon watched as Mayu swiftly mopped the spilled tea. “I am aware of that. But I cannot just
leave the household, not when Taehyung needs me here.”

Taeyeon sighed. “Joonie, Taehyung is much older now. You do not have to—”

“I promised him” Namjoon abruptly interrupted.

Taeyeon observed the gravity of his expression.

“I promised him and his brother that I will look after him, sister. And I will honour that promise.”

Taeyeon sighed. “So be it. But you really should be living independently now since you are of
marriageable age.”

Namjoon looked up.

“You are Father’s only son and, it is his legacy that you carry on your shoulders” Taeyeon reminded
him. “And for that reason, you must find yourself a bride.”

“Sister, please” Namjoon groaned. “Not this again.”

“Namjoon,” she uttered sternly, “you should settle soon. You have left that house untouched for so
long that it is starting to rot.”

Namjoon got up from his seat, startling Taeyeon. “Sister, I really do not wish to talk about this. I
already have so much on my plate.” He grimaced as a throbbing pain pulsed through his temple.
“First, there is the epidemic and then, there is the Waekugin…” He pinched his nose bridge as he
recalled the men’s profiles; their colourful irises and their distinct foreign attire awakening memories
of bloodshed, screaming, her.

He didn’t want to revisit that part of his life. Not when he had been trying so hard to move on.

“I do not need you meddling with my life, sister” he spoke sharply as he fought against his growing
migraine. “You know better than anyone how suffocating that is.”

Wounded, Taeyeon folded into herself, her hands concealed by her long and elaborately decorated
sleeves. “I-I am sorry if you feel that I am suffocating you” she murmured meekly. “But I am only
trying to look out for your interests.”

Namjoon sighed when he spotted Taeyeon’s hurt countenance. “I am sorry…” he mumbled as he
sank back down on his seat. He let out another long breath as he buried his head in his hands. “I did
not mean to snap at you…”

Taeyeon played with her sleeves as she watched her younger brother massage his temples. With his
eyes closed and his brows scrunched in pain, Taeyeon noticed the dark rings under his eyes become
more visible. Worriedly she stared at Namjoon, his ashen complexion a stark contrast to her healthy, milky skin.

*Joonie, you must take care of yourself*, she internally spoke. *You are all I have left.*

Despite being endowed with all the privileges possible, Taeyeon had never once experienced true happiness. She had grown up with everything: the finest garments; the tastiest food; the most reputable society—everything a commoner would have only dreamed of experiencing—she had within her grasp. Yet, why wasn’t she happy?

*Happiness is the one privilege a noble cannot afford.*

“It is fine,” Taeyeon told him with a slight smile as she reached her hand out to hold his.

Feeling her soft palm, Namjoon faintly smiled back.

“I just worry about you, Joonie,” Taeyeon told him earnestly.

But Namjoon figured that Taeyeon was hinting at something else. He reassured her, “Do not worry, sister. I will not do anything that will give our relatives ammunition to fire us with” and with that, he gave her a knowing look.

Taeyeon blushed. Had she been too transparent?

“But enough about me, sister. How are things at the Lee household?”

Taeyeon shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “Things are… satisfactory.”

Namjoon worriedly peered at her.

“My in-laws have been tolerable” she carefully said. “And I have no complaints with my husband. He has been tolerable as well.”

“But are you happy?” Namjoon questioned, his eyes scrutinising her reaction.

Taeyeon was quiet.

“Sister?”

With her brother’s question circling her mind, Taeyeon fiddled with her sleeve. She was accustomed to the looks of envy targeted at her; used to the whispers of jealous noblewomen and even desensitised to the shower of forced flattery that came with her status. So, *yes*, at first glance, Taeyeon was happy. After all, she had married into a prestigious family and was living comfortably. She had everything she could ever want.

Except…

She didn’t.

“I am” she lied with a forced smile.

Despite her riches, the emptiness that had followed her all her life remained like a fathomless void. A void that she hoped to fill by focusing her energy on her brother’s happiness in place of her own. After all, that was the only way she could hide the torment of her shackled marriage. How else could she forget the bruises found on her husband’s neck? The scent of cheap incense that lingered on his body? The occasional rouge stain on his robes?
With no children to distract her, Namjoon was the only one she could rely on to divert her attention away from her husband’s infidelity.

“That is good to hear” Namjoon replied but his eyes were woeful. As he grasped his newly filled cup of tea, Taeyeon joined him, all the while contemplating on when it was that she had begun lying to her brother.

~*~

**Disgust. Fear. Hate.**

Vernon swept his gaze across the dirt road and took note of how the Saimese locals had stopped to gawk at him and his companion. It had already been a month since he and his companions had arrived in Benkei and still, the locals regarded them with distrust.

Vernon smiled wryly. *I cannot blame them. If I were in their position I too would be wary of our presence. After all,* he glanced at Archie who was scanning the vicinity with his bright, hazel eyes, *we do not exactly ‘blend in’.*

“How much longer do we have to stay here?” Archie complained as he continued to trudge alongside Vernon. “This place is dreadful. I hope we can sort this thing out with the emperor, so we can return to New Britannia soon.”

“How are you in a hurry to be back at sea?” Vernon enquired. “If I recall correctly, you detested the voyage to Saim.”

The brown-haired man scoffed. “Not as much as I despise being here.” With a sideward glance, he added, “I cannot comprehend why any of our ancestors would want to stay in such an uncivilised nation as this. I mean, look at them!” He subtly hinted at a wealthy-looking gentleman who was minding his own business. “Such uncouth clothing” he tutted. “Is he even wearing trousers?”

Vernon stifled a small laugh at his companion’s exaggerated repulsion. “Archie, the Saimese wear such garments as it befits the climate here. Their clothes are ill-fitting to allow better ventilation.”

“But still,” Archie argued, “it is unsightly.” He focused his attention on a huddle of finely dressed ladies, who immediately turned away when he caught them staring. Archie raised a brow as the ladies blushed and giggled behind their big fans. “And even the women here are unappealing” he muttered. “Exotic, yes, but hardly enticing.”

Vernon rolled his eyes. “When we return, you may satisfy your manly urges, but for now, I need you to focus on the task in hand. We are here for diplomacy reasons—not for a vacation.”

The taller of the pair tossed him a knowing look despite his carefree body language. “Yes, yes, roger that” he flippantly answered. “It is not like I would want to visit this place again. Not until they install a proper privy.” He scrunched up his face in disgust. “I do not think I can stand to do my business in that poor excuse of a lavatory for much longer.”

The pair continued to stroll down the dirt road, their leather boots rubbing against their sweaty feet. Vernon fixed his gaze ahead with the thought of a cold shower motivating his every step. With the sun’s glares mercilessly shining down on them, he felt incredibly hot and sticky. Dressed in his cotton shirt that was rolled up in the sleeves and suspended trousers, Vernon paced back to the tavern with Archie. After checking up on Brahms at the sanatorium, the pair had decided to return early to prepare for their meeting with the emperor later that day.

*It is finally time,* Vernon thought. *This is the beginning of a long series of negotiations to come.*
“All of this better be worth it” Archie faintly mumbled.

Vernon peered at the brown-haired man.

He eyed him gravely, his hazel eyes dark. “I do not understand what the king wishes to achieve through diplomatic means,” he muttered, “since New Britannia can seize this nation easily by force.” He lifted his right arm to pat his right hip, where Vernon knew Archie kept his pistol encased. “We are stronger now than in the past. I bet if our armada invades the coasts of this dreaded nation right now, we can easily defeat their armies.” He grinned malevolently. “Do you concur?”

Vernon forced a slight curl of the lips. “Violence is not the answer to everything, Archie.”

Archie studied Vernon’s face as if trying to decipher the enigmatic man. “No…” he responded, his eyes watchful. “But it is the fastest solution. After all,” he dropped his arm and locked his fingers together as he cracked his knuckles. “I can already guarantee that blood will be shed over this matter.”

Vernon watched as Archie smirked.

“And it definitely will not be shed on our side.”

~*~

With his chin resting on his propped-up arm, Jimin sighed.

“Our Majesty,” one of the interpreters addressed him with a clear voice, “if you were to accept the marriage proposal between yourself and the princess of Huaxia, the Huaxian emperor promises to establish an unprecedented treaty that will benefit both kingdoms.” The interpreter drew closer to the Huaxian envoy, who was a stout man with a long, ebony beard and coarse hair bound neatly in a plait. Harsh whispers were heard as the Huaxian envoy relayed his message, the interpreter regularly nodding while the rest of the men in court awaited his translation.

“On behalf of the Huaxian kingdom, the Huaxian emperor also extends a warm invitation for you to visit their kingdom should you wish to discuss the proposal in person.”

The men in court broke into whispers, filling the large hall with gruff murmurs of disapproval and debate. From his throne, Jimin observed as the silver-haired men passively argued with each other, with some beginning to raise their voices, turning the low hubbub into a raucous riot.

“Silence!” Minseok bellowed from Jimin’s right.

Jimin peered down at his brother-in-law from his pedestal. It was only in court did Minseok’s ferocity as a politician came into odds with his usual mild demeanour.

“Those who have qualms with this proposal can make their opinions known after the envoy from Nihon has had his say.” As Minseok said this, everyone shifted their gaze towards the brawny man who stepped forward.

Immediately, silence fell as the sharp-featured diplomat cleared his throat, the long scar on his cheek and his militaristic attire intimidating them. He leaned closer to his interpreter and started speaking, his voice deep and low.

“Our Majesty,” the interpreter nervously translated. “As you are aware, the kingdom of Nihon is a strong nation that has fought against foreign invaders.” The brawny diplomat spoke passionately to which the interpreter did his best to imitate, “Nihon is very proud to remain untouched by their
infective ideals. Ideals that threaten to poison the minds of your people—our people—which can destabilise the foundations and culture which make both Nihon and Saim unique.”

The Nihonese diplomat glared at the Huaxian envoy before speaking to the interpreter again. “The Emperor of Nihon offers the hand of one of his many daughters to you, in the hopes that you will accept and forge a union. From this union, the bulwark against foreign influence will be strengthened and the preservation of both kingdoms’ identity ensured.”

Whispers from the men in court filled the courtroom once more, forming a partition between those who favoured a union with Huaxia, and those who wished for a Nihonese-Saiinese alliance.

Jimin let out a long sigh as the men began to squabble amongst themselves again.

They had been in the courtroom for almost three hours, discussing matters of state which, quite frankly, Jimin had little interest in. While the men debated over who he should marry, Jimin was distractedly thinking about when the daily conclave would end and how keen he was to be out of the palace walls. But while Jimin’s train of thought led him to crave the feeling of fresh air blowing against his face, another thought spontaneously entered his mind, causing his train of thought to veer off its original course.

Jimin blushed as a vivid image of Gyuri underneath him suddenly appeared.

Not again… he internally murmured as he hid his mouth behind his hand. Why is she constantly on my mind? With his palm covering his mouth, Jimin concealed the embarrassed smile that he couldn’t seem to control.

Ever since their last encounter a week ago, Jimin had been experiencing a strange array of physiological symptoms that even his royal physicians couldn’t explain. Whenever he thought of Gyuri, his heart would flutter lightly, and sporadic images of her face would occupy his mind, causing him to either blush uncontrollably or smile like he had been stupefied. And currently, Jimin was experiencing both symptoms at once.

Could I have contracted a disease while I was in the village? Jimin pondered. Brother-in-law did say that there was an epidemic sweeping across the capital, but my symptoms do not seem to match those described.

Once the symptoms had subsided, Jimin sighed again.

Noticing his troubled expression, Zeren gaped at him from the left of his pedestal. “Are you okay, Your Majesty?” he whispered inconspicuously, his mouth barely moving.

From the corner of his eye, Jimin acknowledged Zeren’s utterance with a slight nod.

Zeren resumed his ventriloquism. “So, what are your thoughts? Have you decided on which princess you will marry?”

“I have not” Jimin mumbled back with his face still facing forward. He glanced at the men at court who were too engaged in a debate to notice Jimin and Zeren communicating secretly. “From what has been discussed, both kingdoms offer equally desirable assets that come with the marriage.” He pursed his lips as he murmured, “But what seems to spark the most debate is whether I should choose to accept a nation that welcomes Waekugin influence or one that fights against it.”

Zeren peered at Jimin with concern.

“Between the Three Great Kingdoms in Asia, Saim is in the centre” Jimin explained. “And with
Huaxia affiliated with the Waekugin, we, as a kingdom, are caught in the epicentre of not only a political struggle between two dissimilar nations but also a collision of political ideals.” With a serious glint in his eyes he uttered, “To the whole world, Saim is the last blockade before the Waekugin reaches Nihon’s impenetrable fortress.”

Zeren eyed Jimin’s tired countenance with pity. “I bet if you had the choice, you would have chosen to marry someone else entirely.”

At this, Jimin couldn’t resist glancing at his friend. “What do you mean?”

Zeren gestured for Jimin to face forward and he hurriedly did so. “The late emperor married for love” Zeren replied, and with a hint of sadness he added, “it is a shame that you can’t do the same.”

Jimin’s eyes softened. “My circumstances are different.”

“But if you could marry for love, would you?”

A brief image of Gyuri floated in his mind again. “No,” Jimin uttered determinedly as he tried to dispel her from his thoughts. “My kingdom must come first. I know my responsibility.”

Zeren frowned at Jimin’s response. “You’re only saying that because you’ve never been in love.”

“And you have?”

“Of course,” Zeren boasted. Jimin had to resist turning to face Zeren to give him a questioning stare. “I fall in love with every woman I lay eyes on.”

With a stifled laugh, Jimin coughed into his mouth so as not to attract too much attention. “You really are a pervert” he managed to respond.

“Love can make you a pervert, a fool, a beggar” Zeren listed with a slight grin. “Love will make you do the stupidest things that seem right even when you know it’s wrong. It will make you beg; it will make you crave; it is so powerful that it can possess you like an evil spirit.” He chuckled before saying, “Once you desire someone, you will be addicted to them… much like opium.”

Jimin was silent as he contemplated his friend's words. But just as he was about to reply, the heavy, courtroom doors suddenly burst open and a wide-eyed eunuch came rushing in.

Everyone in the courtroom was stunned into silence.

"Your-your Majesty!" the royal eunuch exclaimed, ignoring the disapproving stares of the politicians. "They are here!"

Minseok answered in Jimin’s stead. "Who?"

But as the question left his lips, the sound of leather boots tapping against the stone floor was heard as two men swiftly followed suit.

Everyone’s eyes shifted from the eunuch to the pair of gentleman clad in black suits, their eyes rounded and their jaws agape.

"Your Majesty," the eunuch said as clearly as he could. "May I present the consuls of New Britannia.”

Vernon came forward and lowered his head into a bow. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you…” Vernon looked up and Jimin could feel the blood in his veins go cold at the instance their eyes
locked into a stare down, "Your Majesty."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader,

Thank you for reading chapter 36 of The Brothers Kim!

This is the end of Arc 1.

Because November is a busy month for me, I've decided to go on hiatus until further notice. I have exams and deadlines coming soon so I need a break. Rest assured, I haven't dropped this story and it will resume again.

Just as a side note, I also opened a Ko-Fi account for those who might be interested in supporting me. I will be using Ko-Fi a lot more in the future but for now, I just wanted to make you all aware.

Please check my Twitter for future notices and see you all again soon! :)

"You are awake."

Brahms groaned as he pushed himself up on the bed, his green eyes slightly squinted. "Captain, I—"

"At ease, soldier," the brawny, black-haired man replied as he sat upright on his chair. "You need not worry, I have not been here for too long." He spoke calmly, "I just wanted to inform you that Montgomery and Dufresne have already visited the emperor yesterday. The negotiations have already begun."

Brahms managed a small nod at the mention of his companions.

"However, it will be a while till we can leave Saim or send for reinforcements," he continued with a slight frown, "the relationship between Saim and New Britannia is still at its infancy stage."

"Yes... It will take some time" Brahms remarked, "I do not think the Saimese trust us yet."

"No," Amadeus agreed, "and we should not trust them either." He eyed Brahms grimly, his brilliant blue eyes half concealed by his eyelids. "They may not trust us but all that matters is that they trust Montgomery. After all, it is his job to be the bridge of our two nations."

Brahms stared at the muscly man who wore a pensive expression, his black hair parted to one side and his jawline peppered with bristles. As confidently as he could muster, he reassured him, "Vernon is competent. He will succeed in this mission—he has shown his determination time and time again."

But Amadeus remained dubious. "Erwin, as a soldier, I trust your judgement," he professed, "but when it comes to that friend of yours, I am afraid I do not share your confidence."

"Vernon can be trusted" Brahms insisted. "Did he not prove his loyalty to our cause?"

Amadeus was quiet.

"There is no reason to doubt him, Captain. His loyalty lies with New Britannia—not with Saim. He is one of us."

"You cannot be sure of that" Amadeus argued. "He may have been raised in our land, but a mongrel born in a stable does not make it a stallion. He is a half-caste. A half-breed like him can never be fully one of us."

Biting back the words he wanted to retort, Brahms clenched his jaw. He knew too well that Captain Amadeus Jaeger was a stubborn and prejudiced man that listened to no reason. But as Vernon's closest friend, he felt a tinge of shame that he couldn't speak his mind and defend him in the same manner he had always done for him.

Why couldn't he be brave?

"You must know why the king chose Montgomery of all people" Amadeus spoke, interrupting Brahms' reverie. "It was not by chance that a young and inexperienced man like him was chosen for the position of consul."
"What do you mean?"

"The king," Amadeus cryptically stated, "is using his pieces strategically." A sardonic smile graced his lips as he added, "In the game of chess, we are all just pawns in his fingertips. But you see, some pieces are more useful than others." He stood up to pace around the small room, his dark smile unwavering. "But in the end, once we have played our part, we will be discarded like the disposable pieces we are." Brahms stared at him with a puzzled expression and he chuckled. "All of us have a role to play, Erwin." The smile that once graced his features dropped as he asked, "But are you aware of yours?"

Brahms tried to maintain eye contact as Amadeus' blue eyes bore into his. "Of course" he murmured. His eyes dulled at the gravity of his task. "My duty is always to my people."

Nodding in approval, Amadeus responded, "And you should do well never to forget that. Our duty to New Britannia comes before anything and anyone else. Nothing must ever come in between.

~*~

With his pale hands gliding over the taut strings of his guzheng, Jongin's full lips curled upwards into a slight smile. It was only when he was creating music did he find solace; unrestricted by his ailing body; free from inevitable worldly troubles and most of all, he was just surrounded by utter bliss. For him, music was like an escape from his reality. With music, he was not the sick brother in the family—he was just Jongin. It was the only activity that did not impede on his health; the only activity that put him on equal ground with the rest of his brothers; the only one that he could excel at without feeling cheated whenever anyone had to compromise their ability for his sake.

Jongin peered down at his beloved guzheng amorously. If music was his escape, then his guzheng was the door that made it possible.

"Jongin?"

The pale-faced boy glanced up from where he sat, his hands still hovering above the strings. "Brother..." he spoke softly, "I did not hear you come in."

A faint smile played on Junmyeon's lips as he drew closer. "You were so busy playing your guzheng that you did not hear me enter." He sat down on the cushion closest to his brother and admired the instrument near his lap. "The piece you were playing," he observed, "it sounded cheerful."

"There was a refreshing breeze earlier" Jongin stated without ever taking his eyes off his guzheng. "When it passed by, the trees outside swayed along with the wind and the leaves shimmered. The flowers danced, and the birds soared high." Finally, he locked eyes with him. "When the breeze reached me at last, it was like it was carrying the scent of life."

Junmyeon eyed his brother curiously.

"In other words," Jongin elaborated with a grin, "something good must have happened today." He tilted his head questioningly at Junmyeon. "How was your day?"

Taking note of his inquisitive stare, Junmyeon chuckled. "You know me too well" he replied. "Something good did happen at court today."

"Oh?" Jongin sat up eagerly. Seeing his brother in high spirits always gave him a surge of energy. "What?"

"I was appointed to be the liaison for His Majesty and the Waekugin."
Jongin blinked. "The liaison?" he repeated. He watched as his brother tried to suppress the smile that was threatening to grow even wider. "That is excellent news, brother!"

"Thank you, Jongin" he murmured bashfully. "I was quite surprised when His Majesty suggested it."

"Brother, it is only right that you get that position. You have worked tirelessly to learn their tongue. Even Brother Minseok cannot speak their language."

"Yes, but there were so many more qualified officials in court who have studied as rigorously as I." A boyish grin tugged at his lips as he modestly mentioned, "I cannot speak as well as they and yet His Majesty personally chose me to undertake this task."

"Then, His Majesty must have recognised your potential" Jongin concluded. "He must have a lot of faith in you to appoint you as liaison." He gaped at his brother, his chest swelling with pride. "Does that mean you will engage a lot with the Waekugin?"

Junmyeon nodded. "I will mainly be interpreting for the Waekugin who cannot speak Saimese. Apart from that, I am to work closely with them as well as Brother Minseok and His Majesty."

Jongin hummed in satisfaction as he directed his attention back to his guzheng. "It sounds like a very difficult role."

"One of the Waekugin diplomats speaks Saimese very well" Junmyeon divulged, to which his brother raised both his brows in surprise. "It astonished many of us."

"A Waekugin speak our language?" he thought aloud. "How very bizarre."

Junmyeon laughed lightly. "Indeed."

A short silence ensued as the brothers contemplated the Waekugin. But while Junmyeon was still grinning over being appointed by His Majesty for the liaison position, Jongin, on the other hand, was secretly watching him. He beamed.

You deserve that position, brother, he internally spoke. You have been working so hard all your life.

Casting his gaze down to his guzheng, Jongin allowed himself to get lost in the recesses of his mind. Like a film reel, his memories played before his eyes as he thought about his brother. He remembered how the candle lights in Junmyeon's room remained alight even nearing the break of dawn; how his brother, whenever he visited him, would have dark rings encircling his eyes like a sleepless badger and, how Junmyeon would endlessly mutter to himself in a foreign language as he proceeded with his daily responsibilities in court.

There was no doubt in Jongin's mind that his elder brother was a hardworking man—the most diligent individual he knew. And yet, why can't their father see that? Why were Junmyeon's efforts still going by unnoticed by the man his brother respected the most?

With a conflicted expression, Jongin peered up at Junmyeon, who was still quietly grinning to himself. It is unfair, he kept thinking. You work so hard and yet Father refuses to acknowledge your talents. Jongin averted his gaze back down to his guzheng, frustration overwhelming him. It upset him to find his brother mistreated all the time. Growing up, Jongin had always found it odd that Junmyeon never received the same treatment as his other brothers or himself. Their father had always given him the cold shoulder, dismissing his presence as if he was invisible.

But Junmyeon was anything but invisible.
No matter how many times his father belittled him, he kept getting back on his feet, diligently perfecting every part of himself that he deemed lacking so that he had no fault. He worked so hard that he excelled in Literature, Martial Arts and even Philosophy. Junmyeon outshone the rest of the Kim brothers like the sun. He had accomplished so much and yet, their father refused to acknowledge him, the brightest of the Kim brothers as if he was a shadow.

Why?

What could Junmyeon have done for their father to treat him like so?

Jongin peered at Junmyeon before tentatively asking, "Have you told Father yet?"

Junmyeon's grin faded away. "No... not yet."

"You do not have to tell him" Jongin quickly said in a bid to salvage what good ambience they had. "Brother Minseok will probably tell him when he visits."

A hopeful look fleet ed across Junmyeon's eyes before they dimmed in defeat. "No, Father would not like it if I keep this information from him." He forced a smile to reassure his younger brother. "I will tell him when he summons me for our weekly report."

Jongin stared at his brother woefully.

"Do not look at me like that, Jongin" Junmyeon's tone was sharp but his eyes showed no malice. "Please. Do not look at me as if you pity me."

"It is unfair" Jongin murmured as he averted his gaze. "You work just as hard as Brother Minseok and yet, Father refuses to acknowledge you—"

"Jongin—"

"I do not understand him at all" Jongin snapped as he glared at the floor. "It is like choosing a star over the sun!"

Startled, Junmyeon blinked. It was the first time Jongin had vented his frustrations.

"I do not understand why Father remains blind to your endeavours" he muttered, his voice trembling with subdued anger. "You bring so much to our family. You work so hard. And yet, he does not give you even the slightest praise that you deserve."

"Jongin..."

"Brother, compared to me, a sickly invalid, you definitely deserve the praise and attention that Father showers me. I have done nothing to deserve his attention. Nothing to deserve his praise. Nothing." His voice croaked as he looked away ashamedly. "I am no use to this family as I am, so why does he treat me better than you?" With a pained expression, he asked, "Why...?"

"Jongin, do not ever think of yourself in that way" Junmyeon sternly answered. "You are not an invalid. Sickly, yes, but you will get better—"

"Brother—"

"No. Listen to me" Junmyeon interrupted. "Do not ever question your worth as a Kim. Father treats me differently because..." Junmyeon's voice trailed off as he searched for the reason he had been seeking all his life. He had been asking himself the same question for so long that it had become
ingrained in his being—an unhealthy obsession that transformed into his drive to succeed just so that he could earn the slightest bit of acknowledgement in their father's eyes. But alas, Junmyeon knew that there was no use in pondering over the true reason behind their father's conditional love.

A sigh escaped his lips as he settled for the explanation their mother had given him long ago. "Father... is a stoic man" Junmyeon explained, "so, he finds it difficult to express his love. It is just his way of helping me to prepare for the challenges ahead."

Jongin gaped at him with doubtful eyes.

"Do not worry about me" Junmyeon added, "instead, you should focus on getting better so that you can learn Martial Arts or even Archery." He stared out to the garden, where the cicadas were singing their summery serenade. "While it is still summer, we should enjoy the outdoors as much as possible."

Jongin followed his brother's gaze and took in the bright colours of the picturesque garden before him. He knew that Junmyeon was trying to shift the conversation onto something else to avoid speaking about what truly troubled him. Such was his habit when he was uncomfortable.

Am I so unreliable that he cannot share his burden with me?

"You are right."

Junmyeon looked back at him.

"I shall try and recover."

A small smile spread across Junmyeon's lips again as he watched his younger brother resume playing the merry tune from before. But as he closed his eyes and swayed along to the effortlessly calming music, little did he know of the turbulence that still tormented Jongin.

You really do deserve more, brother, he thought. I should be receiving Father's scorn, not you.

With the cheerful music disguising the anxiety, worry, and concern he harboured for Junmyeon, Jongin continued to pluck the strings of his instrument with fervour.

Like the strings on his guzheng, the path before Junmyeon was taut and narrow. Treading along this path was like walking along a tightrope with one foot stepping in front of the other. It was difficult but not impossible. However, life for Junmyeon was not as simple as others'. While walking along the tightrope, Junmyeon must balance weights which resemble their father's expectations of him as well as the weight of his own ambition. He must tread lightly, carefully crossing the rope while evenly spreading the weight so as not to fall.

A frown riddled Jongin's features as he thought of his brother and the path he was embarking on.

To reach his intended goal, Junmyeon must avoid leaning too much on one side: everything must be equal. However, what if he can only carry one weight to get across? Will he continue to be enslaved by their father's wishes in the bid to please him? Or will he start living his life unbound by the expectations of aristocratic life?

He must choose.

But the main question is... will he choose correctly?

Jongin abruptly halted as he accidentally caught the wrong string, creating a jarring sound. "I
apologise" he murmured when he noticed Junmyeon wince. "I lost concentration for a moment."

"Are you tired?" he enquired. "It is unlike you to play a discord."

Jongin shook his head. "No, I am fine."

But inside, Jongin was far from fine. He smiled forcibly to conceal his inner thoughts.

Brother, you cannot continue bearing all the weight, he thought to himself, or it will lead to your downfall.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 37 of The Brothers Kim!

I'm finally back from hiatus so expect updates to resume again. Also, please check out my Twitter account as I will be posting chapter previews there after each update. You can find me @LaurelEvermore.

Till next time and Merry Christmas!
Mayu looked over her shoulder as she registered the sound of quick steps approaching her direction.

“Where are those silly maids?” an irritated Madam Zhou asked aloud as her hawk-like eyes scanned the vicinity. Spotting Mayu at the end of the corridor, she addressed her, “Oh, Mayu.” A tinge of relief was evident in her voice. “Have you seen Kalyani and a few other maids? I cannot seem to find those silly girls.”

Halting at her step, she replied, “No, Madam Zhou, I haven’t.”

An irritable look crossed Madam Zhou’s features again as she frowned.

“Do you need them for something?”

“Those girls are supposed to be helping the kitchen staff with serving supper” Madam Zhou gritted out in a low voice. “But I cannot find them anywhere!”

Mayu took a wary step back from the fuming Madam Zhou. Those maids, honestly… she groaned. She couldn’t believe her misfortune in having to be within range of Madam Zhou’s flaming wrath. Treading cautiously, she took another small step back before suggesting, “I can look for them if it pleases you, Madam Zhou.”

Immediately, the frown on the elder woman’s face softened. “Yes, that would be of great help.” She smiled fondly at Mayu, clearly reassured to have been offered a helping hand. “Thank you, child. Be sure to send them to the kitchens when you find them.” And with that, Madam Zhou scurried off in the other direction.

A long breath escaped Mayu’s lips once the head maid was no longer in sight. These chores are ceaseless… she thought as she trudged towards the maids’ quarters where she assumed the others would be. But while she crossed the courtyard from the main house, Mayu couldn’t help lamenting how she could have avoided giving herself more work to do.

Why did I have to offer my help? She internally berated herself. She huffed, if only I was as assertive as Gyuri…

Mayu’s shoulders slumped, allowing strands of hair to escape from where she tucked it behind her ear. Lately, all she ever thought about was how she wished she was more like the energetic lass. As she continued her path towards the maids’ quarters, she couldn’t help mulling over how a lot of things had changed ever since Gyuri had arrived at the household.

Before Gyuri came, Mayu’s days at the Kim household was filled with tedious routine. Like a mechanical wind-up toy, Mayu would wake up at the break of dawn, eat a measly breakfast and get on with her daily chores and activities. While she did not particularly find her chores enjoyable, she did relish the few moments she spent with Namjoon as she tended to his needs.

Her plump lips curled into a small smile at the thought of him.

Kim Namjoon.

Mayu couldn’t avoid the heat rising to her cheeks, tinting them rose. Even the mere thought of his name elicited a strong response from her, stirring the suppressed feelings she had been hiding for so long.
Calm down, Mayu, she told herself. She glanced around her to make sure no one could see her flushed expression. He is your master. Stop these foolish thoughts!

But as much as she wished to be rid of her romantic feelings, she couldn’t. Like every other young maiden, her heart was already too far invested in him to go back to the neutrality she once had.

And it was getting harder day by day to hide it.

She gripped the material of her robe nearest her chest as if to stop her heart from aching. “I’m so foolish” she mumbled. “There’s no way Master Namjoon will ever look my way.”

Suddenly, a distant memory of Namjoon and Gyuri sitting close to each other flitted across her mind, their faces jovial as if they were enjoying each other’s company.

He won’t look at you, but he will look at Gyuri.

A squeezing pain stabbed through Mayu’s heart.

“It doesn’t mean anything” she tried to reassure herself as she attempted to forget what she remembered. “Gyuri was ill at the time and she couldn’t work. Master Namjoon was giving her something to do.”

But he has never done that for any of the other maids before.

Mayu violently shook her head to dismiss the small voice that was feeding into her doubts. “Gyuri and I are the same” she reminded herself determinedly. “We’re both maids.” She glanced up at the maids’ quarters that she was now in front of. “Master Namjoon is out of our reach…” and as she said this, a brief image of an elegant older woman flashed before her eyes. “And she is still occupying his heart.”

The sound of muffled voices immediately caught Mayu’s attention as she approached the hallway leading to the maids’ private chambers. Mayu frowned as she recognised one of the voices: it was Kalyani. With soft steps, Mayu approached the room where the wooden door was slightly ajar. Voices spilled down the corridor as she drew nearer.

“Kalya—”

“So, what should we do? It’s not like we can sabotage her.”

Mayu abruptly stopped midway her utterance as she froze on her tracks. Sabotage?

“No, you’re right” she heard Kalyani reluctantly agree. “The Young Master will definitely act if he notices something amiss with Gyuri.”

Mayu quickly hid behind the wooden door, submerging herself in the comfort of the shadows. She knew it was wrong to eavesdrop on her fellow maids, but she knew better than to intervene in a conspiracy. After all, intervening may do more harm than good, and Mayu wasn’t about to compromise her position for anything. Inconspicuously, she peeped through the crack in the door and observed how Kalyani stood in between two others with their backs towards her.

Why are the other maids plotting against Gyuri?

“I just think it’s annoying how that wench is trying to steal all the Kims’ favours,” a stout maid remarked. “She’s even gone and won Madam Zhou’s favour too!”
The other pair grunted disdainfully.

“She’s a sneaky one that Gyuri” the first maid sneered. “Instead of asking for the most desirable items, she went and asked to establish a soup kitchen. Hah!” She laughed humourlessly. “So sneaky. Not only has she won the Lord’s favour for saving the Young Master, but she has also won the favours of both Madam Zhou and Master Namjoon.”

“Which is why we need to do something to teach her a lesson” Kalyani reiterated. “We can’t let her get away with this—”

“M...”

All of a sudden, the three maids swivelled their heads around to face the open door, where Pho revealed herself next to Mayu. The doe-eyed lass glanced from Mayu to the trio with a baffled expression. “Why are you hiding?” she innocently asked before addressing the trio, “And what are you all doing here? Madam Zhou will be furious if she finds us.”

Kalyani’s lips thinned as she exchanged concerned looks with the other two maids. “How long have you two been listening?”

“I-I just got here” Mayu rushed to say.

Pho raised her brow doubtfully. “Same here.” But then she frowned at Kalyani. “If you’re worried about us hearing your secret conversation, you needn’t bother…”

The pair of maids looked relieved.

“…because I heard all of it” Pho finished.

A gasp escaped the pair’s lips while Kalyani’s frown deepened.

“What are you thinking?” Pho reprimanded. “You’re planning to ruin Gyuri’s chances here just because she happens to be close to the Kims?”

Not liking Pho’s tone, Kalyani scowled. “Watch your tongue, Pho.”

“I didn’t expect much from Tweedledee and Tweedledum” she mentioned while gesturing to the pair behind Kalyani, “but you… I’m disappointed.” She shook her head. “This isn’t like you, Kalyani. You’re better than this.”

“Don’t act so high and mighty!” Kalyani scorned, her cheeks turning crimson. “You know as well as I that Gyuri is a threat to all of us.”

“She’s our friend—”

“No,” interrupted Kalyani. “She’s our foe.”

Pho was taken aback by Kalyani’s steely gaze.

“Everyone’s seen how that wench has got the Kims wrapped around her finger. How long do you think it will be before she starts using her hold on them to get what she wants? For now, everything seems okay because she is a maid. But what if that doesn’t last for much longer?”

At this, Mayu spoke up, “What do you mean?”

Kalyani eyed her steadily. “You know what I mean.”
Another gasp escaped the dumb pair’s lips as everyone exchanged anxious stares.

“Gyuri isn’t like that” Pho muttered but her voice lacked conviction. “She won’t do something like that. That—that’s not like her at all—”

Kalyani scoffed. “That’s what you said about Tzu-lin and look what happened to her.”

“Gyuri is *nothing* like Tzu-lin.”

Kalyani’s face morphed into a smug expression. “Oh, really?” She leered at Pho as if to challenge her. “That’s right. You were quite close to Tzu-lin, weren’t you?”

Pho looked down uncomfortably. “That was a long time ago…”

“Yes, but it must have hurt you the most when she betrayed us.” Kalyani lowered her voice as she spoke gravely, “Sweet, kind, goody-goody Tzu-lin. Who would’ve known that she was the type to try and social climb?”

Mayu peered at Pho from the side and noticed her fist clench. “That’s enough, Kalyani. You don’t have to remind us.”

“Don’t I?” Kalyani taunted. “It seems Pho has forgotten what kind of wench her close friend was.”

Mayu stared at Pho, whose closed fist was shaking slightly from how tightly she was clenching.

“Kalyani, that’s en—”

“Tzu-lin was a *harlot*” Kalyani interrupted with a sneer. “She was a hussy that tried to take advantage of Master Jongin.” She marched up to Pho as if sizing her up. “Or did you forget that?”

Tearing her eyes from the ground, the doe-eyed lass glared up at Kalyani. “No.” Her voice was icy. “I haven’t.”

“Then, you should already know what should be done to wenches who try to cross the master-servant boundary.” Kalyani folded her arms across her chest. “They need to be put in their place before they ruin it for the rest of us.”

Mayu watched as Kalyani sauntered back to where she was standing before breaking the stare down between herself and Pho.

“But Gyuri’s different” Mayu abruptly spoke.

Kalyani slowly turned to face her.

“What if you’re wrong about her?”

“Oh, I’m not wrong” Kalyani haughtily replied. “In fact, it should be *you* who should be the most worried when I’m proven right.”

“What do you mean?”

Kalyani scoffed in disbelief. “Gyuri may be close to the Young Master but she doesn’t spend as much time with him as she does with Master Namjoon.”

Again, an image of Namjoon and Gyuri sitting side by side flashed before Mayu’s eyes, awakening the small voice inside her head.
“Gyuri is special to him.”

“That—that doesn’t mean anything” Mayu stuttered. “She’s just giving him snacks at night and helping out at the sanatorium—”

“But aren’t you his personal maid?”

Mayu was speechless.

A triumphant expression graced Kalyani’s features. She hmphed. “I thought so. Both of you are naïve to trust Gyuri. If anything, the only good thing that came from Tzu-lin was that she taught us a vital lesson in order to stay in the Kims’ good graces.”

“Oh?” one of the maids asked confusedly. “And what’s that?”

Kalyani smirked as she responded with her gaze fixated on both Mayu and Pho. “To never fully trust anyone.”

~*~

High in the vast, blue sky, the sun glared from above causing sweat to bead on Gyuri’s forehead. But while she squirmed uncomfortably because of the sticky heat, what fuelled her discomfort more was the suffocating silence.

Gyuri peered at Pho, who was walking alongside her.

Ever since they had left the household together, Pho had been acting strange. In her usual manner, Pho had greeted her with a toothy grin, but something about her demeanour seemed lacklustre. Her big brown eyes, once sparkling with excitement, was now clouded with preoccupation, leaving an unfamiliar and lifeless version of what used to be a bright and cheerful lass.

Gyuri pondered on whether she should ask what was wrong.

“Gyuri?”

Startled, Gyuri fumbled in reply, “Oh, um, yeah?”

Without taking her eyes away from the dirt road ahead, Pho murmured, “I know you’re staring at me.”

Flustered, Gyuri looked away. “I’m sorry” she shyly apologised, “I-I didn’t mean to…”

“It’s okay” Pho responded with a weak smile, but as soon as the smile came, it faded away. “Is there something on my face?”

“No, there’s—there’s nothing.”

Pho resumed her silence.

“But there is something I’d like to ask you.”

At this, Pho hummed to indicate that she was listening.

“Did… something happen?” Gyuri carefully probed. “You seem… distracted.”

Pho stole a quick glance at Gyuri before fixing her eyes on the basket she was carrying in her arms.
“N-no,” she reluctantly responded, “nothing happened.”

But Gyuri knew better than to believe her. In the time she spent in Saim, Gyuri had become accustomed to Pho’s tell-tale habits and mannerisms that suggested her mood. And one of them was her tendency to avert her gaze when she was fibbing.

“Well, if there’s anything that’s bothering you, you can tell me you know.”

Pho peered at her.

“I’ll listen to your troubles” she offered while tossing her a warm smile. “That’s the least I can do as your friend.”

“She’s our foe.”

Pho flinched as she recalled Kalyani’s words.

Noticing her reaction, Gyuri pried, “Pho? Are you okay?”

The doe-eyed lass glanced up again and forced a smile. “I’m good. No worries.” But inside, memories of Tzu-lin tormented her.

Kalyani’s wrong, she kept thinking. Gyuri won’t betray us like she did. Gyuri’s different. She won’t put us all at risk. She’s—

“Gyuri?”

Gyuri turned to face her.

“What do you think of Master Namjoon?” Before realising it, the words were out of Pho’s mouth.

Gyuri’s eyes widened to the size of saucers. “Huh? W-what?” she stammered, her cheeks growing pink. “Why do you- why do you ask?”

Pho watched as Gyuri nervously tucked her long hair behind her ear. “Nothing. I just want to know what you think of him.”

“Erm, well, I-I dunno what to say” Gyuri mumbled, her eyes avoiding Pho’s. “I mean, he’s very kind. He’s also very smart and very… charming, I guess.” Gyuri paused as she attempted to keep a straight face.

“And what about the Young Master?”

Taehyung’s boxy grin flashed before Gyuri’s eyes and she smiled.

“He’s a good kid” she replied, much more composed than before. “He can be annoying at times, but he has a mature side to him too.” Gyuri’s smile unknowingly widened as she remembered how Taehyung had reacted to when she told him how babies were made. “He’s also pretty gullible which makes him so fun to tease!”

Pho watched as Gyuri quietly snickered to herself as she continued to carry the wicker basket in her arms. They were near the storage house now, but Pho’s mind was elsewhere.

“Gyuri, do you remember when I asked you, ‘if you had the chance to choose your master, who would you choose?’”
Gyuri tilted her head in thought. “Yeah, I remember.”

“Has your answer changed?”

At this, Gyuri replied with a questioning stare. “Pho, what’s going on? Why are you asking me all these questions?”

The doe-eyed lass chewed nervously on her bottom lip.

“Pho?”

“Alright,” she conceded, “I’ll tell you.” She abruptly halted on her step and Gyuri followed suit. “It’s the other maids,” she began, “they’re… concerned about you.”

“Concerned about me?” Gyuri echoed. “Why?”

“They’re worried about you getting too close to the Kims” Pho divulged. “They’re worried because you are in their good favour.”

“Me? In their good favour?” Gyuri was baffled. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes, Gyuri. You are.”

“But why would that be a concern to the others?”

The same perturbed expression flitted across Pho’s big eyes as she cast her gaze down. “Gyuri, have you ever wondered why Master Jongin doesn’t have a personal maid?”

Gyuri was quiet for a while as she processed her question. “Now that you mention it, why doesn’t he have one?” She looked up at the sky while deep in thought. “I always assumed you oversaw Master Jongin as well as the scary brother.”

Pho shook her head. “No, I only cater for Master Junmyeon’s needs.” Setting the basket down, Pho locked her gaze with Gyuri. “But before you came, there used to be another maid who I… who I used to work closely with.”

Gyuri observed how Pho anxiously gaped at her.

“Her name was Tzu-lin” she hesitantly revealed, “she was Master Jongin’s personal maid.”

“What happened to her?” Seeing the reluctance in Pho’s features, Gyuri quickly added, “It’s fine if you don’t want to tell me.”

“No… you should know” Pho eventually replied. She fumbled with her hands again. “Tzu-lin… she… she did something unforgivable.”

Gyuri eyed her curiously. “Oh? What did she do?”

With a grave voice, Pho revealed, “She tried to seduce Master Jongin.”
Those odd-coloured eyes.

Etched in Jimin’s mind were the contrasting colours of obsidian brown and ocean blue. Throughout the meeting, Jimin couldn’t help but be fascinated by the exotic hue of Vernon’s irises. They were unfamiliar, strange, foreign.

Everything about him was a blatant reminder that Jimin was at the presence of the Waekugin: the very beings who had slaughtered his ancestors a century ago. From the pair’s fair hair to their distinct westernised attire, Jimin regarded their presence warily. For Jimin, having the Waekugin before him was like plucking a mythical creature from a fairy tale and inserting them into reality: it was surreal. And despite studying as much as he could about them, nothing could prepare him for the abrupt meeting of their eyes and the cold vibes that emanated from their steely glare.

They mean business.

After much debating and negotiation, the meeting with the Waekugin concluded in a stalemate. Having allowed his ministers to be the forefront of the negotiations, Jimin had passed the time in court as a passive onlooker, merely speaking when required to but mostly observing as the drama in court unfolded. But despite their presence unnerving him, what astonished him the most was how the consul of New Britannia was so fluent in their tongue.

Quietly, Jimin observed Vernon from afar.

His speech, though quite informal at times, was articulate nonetheless. Like a native, Vernon spoke confidently, his high command in their language giving him an edge to his rhetoric that, at times, almost persuaded Jimin to agree with his outlandish proposals. By the end of his lengthy oration, Jimin concluded that Vernon Montgomery of New Britannia was a dangerously persuasive man—a master in the art of manipulation.

But little did the consul realise that Jimin was immune to such talents.

“It is therefore declared that the negotiations betwixt the kingdom of Saim and New Britannia will be adjourned to a later date” the royal eunuch announced.

An eruption of murmurs swept across the court as everyone clustered into smaller groups to discuss the verdict. But while everyone voiced out their dissatisfaction, Jimin continued to maintain a watchful eye. He frowned when he spotted an arrogant smirk lace Vernon’s lips as he nodded to his companion.

What could he be smirking about?

“Chim? Hello? You there?”

Jimin opened his eyes at the sound of Zeren calling him. “Hm? Did you say something?”

“I was asking if you were excited.”

A puzzled expression riddled Jimin’s face as the pair continued to amble through town. “Excited?
Excited about what?

Zeren curled his lip. “You haven’t been listening to anything I’ve been saying, have you?” He rolled his eyes. “Typical.”

“I apologise” Jimin murmured distractedly. “There has been a lot on my mind…”

Zeren watched as Jimin exhibited a pensive expression. With a more serious tone, he queried, “Are you thinking about the Waekugin again?”

Jimin looked up.

“I’m right aren’t I?” Zeren let out a sigh as he gaped at his hopeless friend. “You need to relax, Chim. That’s the reason why we’re out and about, right? No thinking about work while you’re out here.”

“How can I not think about them?” Jimin responded agitatedly. “The fate of our nation rests on whether or not I accept their proposal and forge an alliance.” He waved his arms in exasperation. “Even our relationship with the neighbouring kingdoms are dependent on the Waekugin—they are the crux of everything!”

“But worrying about it won’t solve the problem” Zeren reasoned. “It’s already been three days since your first meeting and since then, you haven’t been able to think clearly.” He shook his head. “Which is why you need to take a step back, relax and then, try and make a decision with fresh eyes.”

Stubbornly, Jimin muttered, “You are right…” As much as he hated to admit it, Zeren was a lot more level-headed when it came to matters of importance. “But before I do that, did you notice something unusual about the consul?”

Zeren tilted his head questioningly. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, you mean how he can speak our language? Yeah, I thought it was quite impressive too—”

“No, not that” Jimin interrupted. His brows knitted together as he pointed out, “His accent. It sounded… familiar.”

“Familiar?”

Jimin nodded.

“How so?”

“I do not know. There is just something about how he pronounced certain words that reminded me of something.”

Zeren raised his brow. “Perhaps he picked up a few dialectal words during his travels?” he suggested with a shrug. “It did take the Waekugin a while to journey from New Britannia to Saim.”

“Perhaps” Jimin hesitantly agreed. “Although, he seems too well versed to have learned them in such a short amount of time.”

Zeren could only shrug again in response.
“It is probably of no import” Jimin eventually said. “It just astonished me that is all.”

Zeren and Jimin resumed their stroll across town in silence. With a minutely aware gaze, Jimin’s shoulders began to relax as a soft breeze whistled by, cooling the back of his neck and providing brief relief from the stinging sensation of the sun’s merciless heat. He sighed contentedly. Surrounded by the quiet rumbling of the busy streets and the overlapping chatter of the civilians, Jimin, at last, reached a state of tranquillity and comfort, knowing that he was no longer in the confines of the palace’s stuffy and echoey walls. He grinned wryly.

_How ironic_, he mused. _To think that the absence of noise could be more deafening than the presence of screeching fishwives._

Jemin stifled a chuckle as they ambled past a line of women who were competing in a screaming match to sell their catch of the day. As he focused on the road ahead, Zeren asked, “So, are you excited? You never answered my question.”

Again, Jimin repeated, “Excited? Excited about what?”

“About seeing Mayu today” Zeren finally replied with emphasis. “It’s been a while since you’ve spoken to her.”

Jemin raised a brow. “But why would I be excited about that?” He faced forward again and noticed that they were nearing the storage house.

“Well… why wouldn’t you be?” Zeren coyly responded. “You’re interested in her, aren’t you?”

At this, Jimin abruptly halted. “What?”

Jemin looked over his shoulder. “What? You thought I didn’t notice?”

“I-I am not interested in her!”

“Oh, Chim” Zeren teased, “there’s no need to be shy about it.”

“Zeren, you are mistaken,” Jimin said firmly. “I do _not_ see Mayu in that way.”

“Sure, you do!” Zeren insisted as he retraced his steps so that he was next to Jimin again. He slinked his arm over his shoulder as he murmured, “I’ve seen how you look at her. You two are like Yin and Yang: harmonious!”

With a firm grip, Jimin unhooked Zeren’s arm from around his neck. “You are mistaken. Mayu is a good person but I do not see her in that light.”

“You’re lying” Zeren spoke uncertainly. “You’re just saying that because you don’t want to admit I’m right——”

“Zeren.”

The bronze-faced guard stopped midway his sentence as he locked eyes with his friend.

Jemin spoke chillingly, “I do _not_ jest.”

Seeing the seriousness in his eyes, Zeren had no choice but to surrender. “For real?” he remarked, still in disbelief. “But what about those times when I saw you two getting along so well? All this time I thought you liked her!”
“Yes, well, you thought wrong.” Jimin began walking again, leaving Zeren trailing behind.

“So, if not Mayu then, who do you like?” Zeren pried.

Jimin chose to ignore him.

“Tell meeeeee” Zeren whined. “Is it one of the royal maids? A noble lady? Who is it?”

A long sigh escaped Jimin’s lips as he pushed Zeren’s face away from his. “No one” he replied through gritted teeth. “Why do you assume I am interested in someone just because I said I did not like Mayu?”

“Because you have to have someone in mind already for you not to have developed an interest in her.”

A fleeting image of Gyuri immediately popped into Jimin’s head, automatically triggering the peculiar symptoms that he had been experiencing as of late. Jimin turned his face away from Zeren to hide the stupid grin that was spreading across his lips.

_Damn it, he cursed, not now!_

“Chim?”

“I am fine” he replied hurriedly, his hand plastered over his mouth.

Zeren curiously peered at him, taking note of how the tips of his ears had turned pink. Jimin's ears only turned pink when he was either angry or flustered, and Zeren knew that. “Why are your—?”

“Let us hurry” he interrupted as he barged past.

Zeren cocked his head to the side as he watched his friend briskly saunter past him. “What was that all about?”

~*~

The sound of the door opening caused Gyuri to turn around, a bowl of stew already in her hands. “Hi, welcome—” Gyuri stopped midway her utterance when she spotted who was at the door. “Oh, hey…”

Jimin briefly looked up before giving a curt nod and wordlessly slinking away. Surprised by his cold greeting, Gyuri frowned. _I guess he must still be angry at me for what happened last time…_

“Hi, pretty lady!”

Gyuri turned her attention to Zeren, who had entered the storage house with a bright smile. He surveyed the vicinity and voiced out his observation, “There aren't many people here today, huh?”

“No…” Gyuri shook her head. “I guess people are too scared with the plague going around.”

Zeren silently agreed. Save from a small group of filthy labourers, the soup kitchen was practically deserted. He stole a glance at Jimin, who was loitering nearby. In a quieter voice, he asked, “Is Mayu here today?”

As if on cue, Pho appeared from the corner.

“Oh…” Zeren muttered once he spotted the lass.
Pho frowned when she saw Zeren. “Sorry to disappoint you,” she remarked pointedly, before trudging off to the other side of the room to collect the already empty bowls left on the tables.

Zeren’s laugh was apologetic.

“Mayu won’t be coming for a while” Gyuri informed him. “She’s been busy lately.”

A hum escaped Zeren’s lips as he mused, “Not that it matters now, anyway…”

“Sorry?” Gyuri said as she leaned in. “Did you say something?”

Zeren glanced over his shoulder and beckoned for Gyuri to inch closer. “I was just talking to Chim” he whispered while warily darting looks at his friend. “He claims that he isn’t interested in Mayu at all.”

“What?” Gyuri half-shouted in astonishment.

Zeren pressed his finger to his lips as if warning her to be quiet. “I know” Zeren whispered harshly. He looked over his shoulder again and sighed in relief when he discovered that Jimin hadn’t heard. “I can’t believe it either.”

Following Zeren’s gaze, Gyuri took a quick glance. “So, what do we do now? If Chim Chim doesn’t like Mayu then, there’s no point in setting them up.”

“Well, we’re not really sure if he’s telling the truth” Zeren pointed out. “He could just be bluffing.”

“But what if he is telling the truth?” Gyuri questioned. “Our efforts will amount to nothing if we keep trying to pair them up.” She cast her gaze down as she admitted, “I’ve tried learning what Mayu thinks about Chim Chim but she’s so hard to read. She’s just as difficult to understand as Chim Chim.”

Zeren snickered, “They really are a match made in heaven—both are just as mysterious as the other.”

Gyuri could only sigh in agreement. The pair quickly separated as a peasant suddenly approached Gyuri to ask for a second helping of stew. Once they were alone again, Zeren resumed, “But there is something else we can do instead.”

“Oh?” Gyuri said as she readied another bowl of stew. “And what would that be?”

Zeren grinned coyly. “We can find out who Chim really likes.”

Immediately, Gyuri’s head shot up. “What makes you think he likes someone else?”

“It’s simple” Zeren answered as he folded his arms. “Because Chim didn’t fall for Mayu, then someone else must already be occupying his heart.”

Gyuri was quiet as she mulled over the possibility.

“So, all we have to do now is find out who.” With her brows knitted together, Zeren watched as Gyuri hummed while in deep thought. “What is it?”

Gyuri looked up. “Hm? Oh…” She shook her head. “Nothing.”

But Zeren didn't believe her. “Tell me.”

“Well…” Gyuri tentatively spoke. “Chim Chim has a fear of women, right?”
Zeren nodded. “Yeah, so?”

“So…” She fiddled with her hands. “So, have you ever considered the possibility of him… preferring men instead?”

Gyuri watched Zeren blink in surprise. Like a statue, his body froze as he processed her utterance, his eyes a window that exhibited the cogs in his brain that were steaming at the notion. *Chim prefer the company of men?* Zeren couldn’t get his head around the thought. *If it were true then, the person he likes must be the closest man to him right now, and that would be…*

“No,” Zeren firmly spoke as he shook his head. “He’s not interested in men. He-he can’t be.”

“But what if—?”

“No,” Zeren stressed.

Gyuri jolted.

“Do not question his masculinity” he snapped. “The person he likes is *definitely* a woman” and he muttered to himself, “it has to be.”

Not wanting to antagonise Zeren further, Gyuri meekly nodded. “It was just a suggestion…”

“Well, it wasn’t a very good one.”

“Zeren? Is everything alright?”

Like a skilled actor, Zeren turned to face Jimin with an amiable smile. Jimin raised an eyebrow from across the room. “Everything’s fine.” His tone was smooth. “We just had a mild disagreement over what to serve next, that’s all.”

Not bothering to pursue it further, Jimin nodded in acknowledgement before carrying on with his task.

As soon as his back was turned, Zeren grunted, “Let’s talk later” to which Gyuri had no choice but abide.

Following their discussion, Gyuri worked separately from Zeren. After much introspection, it became apparent to Gyuri that what she had suggested was considered a taboo. *How could I have forgotten?* She internally groaned. *This era is a lot more conservative than back home. Of course, Zeren would be mad.* She sighed as she continued with her tasks, silently worrying that she had made an irreversible blunder. *First Taehyung punches Chim Chim and now, I upset Zeren. Way to go, Subin.*

Gyuri collected an empty bowl from a nearby table and watched as the remainder of the visiting peasants exited the building. It had only been a couple of hours since they arrived but the soup kitchen was already quiet. A wry smile played on her lips as she noticed herself fidgeting: she was restless.

*How hilarious,* she thought. *I used to complain about work, but now that I have none, I’m actually craving for something to do…*

“Gyuri?”

Gyuri looked up to find Pho approaching her.
“Shall I go and throw the scraps away?” The doe-eyed lass gestured to the pot of meat bones on top of a table. “It looks like no one else will be coming, so we can start packing up early.”

Sweeping her gaze across the storage house, Gyuri mumbled, “We should, shouldn’t we?” She was slightly disappointed that she had to return so soon.

“Everyone’s left” Pho pointed out as she jutted her chin towards the empty tables. “I don’t really want to hang about and wait for the plague to get us.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Madam Zhou did tell us to return early.” Gyuri sauntered towards the table to pick up the meat bones. “You can finish up in here. I’ll throw these out.” A brief image of the stray cat flashed in her mind’s eye and she smiled. “You don’t have to wait for me either. I’ll go and help Master Namjoon once I’m done.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep. Just don’t forget to lock the door before you leave.”

As Gyuri started leaving the storage house, she suddenly felt a sharp poke on the shoulder. She tilted her head back.

“Where’re you going, pretty lady?”

Gyuri’s eyes rounded when she saw who it was. Oh, right. I forgot they were still here.

“Leaving without saying goodbye?” Zeren clutched his heart as he imitated being wounded. “I’m hurt.”

“I’m just throwing these out” she replied, gesturing at the pot in her hands. “I was going to say goodbye before I go.”

The imperial hmphed in doubt. “You need help?”

“I think I can manage.” She turned to leave but Zeren obstructed her path. “What are you doing?”

“You know,” he said with a smirk, “Chim still needs a conversation buddy.”

Gyuri’s face scrunched up in confusion. “Huh?”

“Since Mayu won’t be around for a while and Ms. Noodle is hardly welcoming” he elaborated with a flick of a wrist, “I guess that leaves you as the best candidate.”

A weary sigh escaped Gyuri’s lips as she glanced up from Zeren's pointed finger. “Zeren, Chim Chim doesn’t need my help anymore since he already has someone he likes.”

A puzzled look fleeted across his features. “What do you mean?”

“If Chim Chim already has a woman in mind,” Gyuri explained, “then doesn’t that mean he’s already over his irrational fear?”

“I-I hadn’t thought of that...”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Gyuri hummed triumphantly. "Well, if you’ll excuse me—”

“Wait.”
Gyuri flinched as Zeren jumped in front of her again, this time blocking her path by firmly planting his outstretched arm against the doorframe. “Why don’t we test your hypothesis?”

“What—?”

But before Gyuri could finish her utterance, Zeren was already executing his devious plan. “Chim!” he shouted while beckoning for his aloof friend to come over.

Quizzically, Jimin looked up to the sound of Zeren’s voice. From across the room, he regarded Zeren with slight suspicion as if trying to calculate what his friend could be plotting this time. But all that eased away when he suddenly met eyes with Gyuri. Curiously, Jimin’s half-moon eyes flickered as he took in her appearance. As his eyes trailed up and down her profile, Gyuri shifted uncomfortably under his scrutinising stare. There was something about the way he was looking at her that made her nervous.

Not knowing what to do, Gyuri awkwardly smiled at him. It had been a while since they had last spoken as their last meeting had left a foul taste in both their mouths. Even though their day was less busy than usual, Gyuri hadn’t had the chance to talk to him. She had been too preoccupied with figuring out why Zeren was offended to even remember Jimin’s presence. Hoping that Jimin would smile back, Gyuri was startled to find he had abruptly looked away, the tips of his ears bright pink.

*Was he still angry?*

But while Gyuri pondered over whether or not Jimin bore a grudge against her, Zeren blinked. It was like something in his mind just clicked after witnessing Jimin’s peculiar behaviour again. As Jimin approached the pair, Zeren took note of his rose-tinted cheeks and only then realised that it was a sign of embarrassment: Jimin was flustered. But why?

He inclined his head towards Gyuri and like a jigsaw puzzle, Zeren aligned the pieces together to finally form the final picture.

*Could Chim like…?*

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader,

Happy New Year! Wishing you the best for 2019!
The Emperor's Dog

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jimin was nervous.

From the corner of his eye, he stole a glance at Gyuri and quickly averted his gaze before she had the chance to notice. Curses, he grumbled under his breath as he masked his mouth with his hand. Even so much as the thought of her triggered his curious symptoms, let alone having her physically in front of him. Discreetly, he peeked at her again. From where he was walking behind her, he observed the silkiness of her ebony hair and how the top of her head was just below his chin. The slenderness of her profile and the swishing of her dress were just one of the few things that Jimin was acutely aware of.

Why does my heart beat faster when I am around her?

Earlier, when Zeren had suggested that he should accompany Gyuri to the dumping ground, Jimin had panicked. Ever since he had entered the storage house, his symptoms had been difficult to tame. Just Gyuri being in his line of sight had made him restless and fidgety, overwhelming him with a multitude of emotions that were contradictory and confusing.

Jimin was out of his depth.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

Looking up, Jimin saw Gyuri's unimpressed expression directed toward Zeren.

"Nonsense!" Zeren insisted. "Chim should come with you. What if you get harassed out there? At least Chim will be there to protect you."

"I'm just throwing these away" Gyuri huffed as she showcased the pot in her hands. "It's not like I've never been there before. The dumping ground isn't that far."

But Zeren was having none of it. Curiously hellbent on getting Gyuri and Jimin alone together, he addressed his friend, "Chim? Can you go with her?"

"He doesn't want to" Gyuri cut in. "You don't have to go" she addressed Jimin. "Don't let Zeren bully you."

Jimin shifted his eyes from Zeren to Gyuri as the pair bickered. But while their tiresome screeching interrupted the tranquillity of the empty storage house, Jimin couldn't drown out the internal turmoil within himself. His heart pounded at the idea of being with Gyuri alone.

What is wrong with me? He grimaced. He couldn't understand why he was excited by the prospect. She is a scammer! A thief! Snap out of—!

"I will go."

The words were out of his mouth before Jimin had time to register.

"Chim Chim?"

Jimin broke away from his reverie as Gyuri stopped and turned to face him. In that short instance, his
eyes rounded. Heat rose to Jimin's cheeks as their gazes connected, his lips only a breath away from hers. He stumbled backward as he hastily cast his gaze down, his heart drumming against his chest at the unexpected proximity. "W-what is it?"

"I'm really sorry!"

Jimin was puzzled. "For what?"

"For what Taehyung did to you last time," Gyuri looked away ashamedly. "It was my fault that you got hit in the face. I swear, I didn't know he was gonna do that."

With a soft gaze, he observed Gyuri anxiously play with her sleeves. Had she been worrying about it all this time? In truth, he had forgotten he was punched by the brat at all. "Do not fret," he reassured her with as much composure as he could muster. The image of Taehyung's hardened glare flashed before his eyes and he fought the urge to frown. "I have already forgiven him."

"Still..." Gyuri mumbled. "I feel bad about it."

A small smile danced on Jimin's lips as he gaped at the crease on Gyuri's forehead. Something about seeing Gyuri concerned about him made him feel a tinge of... happiness? Jimin's brows knitted in confusion.

"I told him off" Gyuri quickly said, misunderstanding his frown, "I made him promise not to behave that way again."

"Who is he to you, anyway?" He knew that Taehyung was the youngest of the Kim brothers, so him being reprimanded by a mere maid seemed unlikely. But that wasn't the only reason why he wanted to hear Gyuri's answer.

Gyuri shuffled on her feet. "I told you before... He's like a younger brother to me."

A younger brother?

Again, the curious feeling that was manifesting in his chest made itself known as it tugged at his heart. A younger brother, huh? Jimin's lips morphed into a smirk as he repeated Gyuri's utterance over and over in his head. Hearing Gyuri say those words was like a pleasant tune to his ears.

"I see..."

With a slight tilt of the head, Gyuri observed how Jimin's eyes were playful. He quickly turned away as he suppressed a goofy grin from surfacing. "We should hurry to the dumping ground" he hurriedly said as he increased his pace.

"Huh? Er, yeah, okay." She raced after him, matching his large stride.

As Gyuri and Jimin resumed their journey to the dumping ground, Gyuri couldn't avoid wondering how things were between her and Jimin. She snuck a look at his hand and pursed her lips when she saw that he wasn't wearing his ring. Gyuri hmphed. I guess he remembered to take it off today. Passing by the dark alleyway, Gyuri abruptly halted as she recalled the cat. "Hey, Chim Chim?"

Jimin looked over his shoulder.

She beckoned for him to follow her as she took a step into the dark alley.

Befuddled, Jimin watched Gyuri blend into the shadows. "H-hey..." He jogged after her. "Where are
you going?" Once he reached the mouth of the dark alley he was stunned to find Gyuri plunging deeper into the darkness. "Hey, this is not the way to the dumping—"

"Shh!" Gyuri hissed while pressing her index finger to her lips.

Jimin arched a brow. As he watched Gyuri creep forward, the pot of scraps outstretched in her hands, he followed suit. A frown accompanied his squinted eyes as he traced his hand across the wall for guidance. With only small pools of light seeping through the crevices of the dilapidated building, Jimin struggled to see what was in front of him. It was only when he noticed a pair of glowing eyes, did he manage to avoid stumbling on Gyuri's hunched profile.

"Here, kitty-kitty" Gyuri prompted.

Jimin watched in silence as Gyuri tried to lure the stray feline from the shadows with the pot of scrap meat. With wary steps, the cat lurked forward, its topaz eyes trained on the pot. As the cat hesitantly revealed itself, Jimin took note of the striped pattern of its grey fur and the scrawniness of its emaciated body.

A small smile appeared on Gyuri's lips as the feline cautiously approached her. The savoury smells of the meat bones, while bereft of meat, was seemingly enough to entice the small creature to come closer. Gyuri's smile widened when the cat finally took a tentative lick.

"Good, kitty" she whispered as the cat mewled in satisfaction.

With the cat occupied, Jimin carefully squatted down so that he was next to Gyuri. He whispered, "Whose cat is this?"

Gyuri continued to gape at the feline. "It's a stray. I've been feeding him every time we serve stew." She inclined her head so that she was looking at Jimin. "I think he's finally warming up to me. This is the closest he's ever been."

Jimin observed as Gyuri turned to face the cat again, her hand firmly gripping onto her skirt. To him, it looked like Gyuri was resisting the urge to touch it. When he voiced out this thought, Gyuri just shook her head.

"You know," Gyuri began, "you and this cat actually have a lot in common."

Jimin regarded her quizzically and she smirked.

"Both of you are hard to get close to." Once the cat had its fill, it got up and left like it always did. Gyuri sighed as she watched it leave. "The more I try to get close to him, the more he pushes me away." She got up to dust her skirt, simultaneously picking up the pot with both hands. "I guess it's better just to keep my distance."

Jimin opened his mouth to say something but changed his mind.

"We'll go to the dumping ground now," Gyuri said with a whimsical expression before leading the way out of the alley.

As Gyuri trudged ahead, Jimin trailed closely behind. There was something about her words that bothered him. *Me? The same as the cat?* He shook his head. *What did she mean by that?* But as he mulled over her words, he failed to notice that he had begun to outpace her.

"Chim Chim!"
Jimin turned and found Gyuri several steps behind.

"Wait up!" She jogged to close the distance between them. "Geez, it's not a competition to the dumping ground, you know."

"Ah, I apologise... I just want to get back to the others as soon as possible."

Gyuri's lips formed a hard line. "Oh, okay" she muttered, her tone somewhat hurt.

Jimin peered at Gyuri questioningly. Had I said something wrong?

"Hey, Chim Chim," Gyuri spoke softly, her face downcast, "do you... hate me?"

"W-what?" Jimin was startled. He abruptly stopped and Gyuri did too. "Why do you- why do you ask?"

"It's just that, I didn't really make a good impression when we met." She shrugged. "And since then, we've just... I dunno. We've never really cleared the air between us."

Jimin wiped the sweat away from his brow as he gestured for him and Gyuri to take shelter under the shade of a building. He fumbled for words as he deliberated her question. Do I hate her?

Seeing him hesitate, Gyuri rushed to say, "It's a stupid question, forget I said anything—"

"No," he answered finally.

Gyuri blinked.

"I do not hate you." His voice trailed off as he tried to think of a reason. "I am just... wary of you."

"Wary of me?"

Jimin nodded. While he was still unaware of how he truly felt for Gyuri, 'hate', certainly, was not it. "Well, can you blame me? The first time we met, I caught you stealing meat buns from a vendor."

"There's a reason for that!" Gyuri blurted. "It was Taehyung's idea. I was against it from the start—"

"And then, there was also the matter of you wrestling me to the ground."

Gyuri bit her lip as Jimin waited for her reaction. But as Jimin stared at her, he noticed a small greenfly tangled in her locks.

"I can explain" Gyuri eventually spoke as she stared down at her feet. "Remember the ring you were wearing last time?"

Jimin tensed up at the recollection. He tore his eyes away from the tangled fly to meet Gyuri's gaze. "Yes?"

"Well, that ring..." she murmured, "it looked familiar."

"... Familiar?" Jimin's eyes flickered as he tried to remain composed. "How so?"

"It looked like something I lost."

Jimin gave a discreet sigh of relief. There is no way it can be the same, he thought. That ring has always been passed down to the emperors of this nation. He recalled the inscription engraved in the
inner band of the ring and grew pensive. Only those that bear the weight will understand the significance of those words.

"There are many rings with that design" Jimin smoothly informed her. "After all, it is a popular accessory and jade rings are a popular way of flaunting one's wealth."

"I guess so..." Gyuri hesitantly agreed.

"If you work hard enough" Jimin continued to chatter, "you may be able to purchase an affordable version here, at the market."

Gyuri forced a smile as if to thank him for his advice. But as Jimin beckoned for them to continue with their stroll, inside, Gyuri couldn't help pondering more about the ring and its origins. There was something about it that didn't seem right to her.

If only the rich can afford jade, Gyuri thought, then could my ancestors have been wealthy? She scrunched her face in consternation, allowing the hubbub of the lively market street to blend in with the background. How else could grandma have gotten a ring like that? She stared at her hand as she tried to conjure an image of the ring around her forefinger, but with little luck. Instead, all Gyuri saw was her rough palm, the skin blistered and dry from washing laundry and scrubbing floors.

"Kim Gyuri, the deadly princess who infamously brought down the thriving House of Kim..."

Gyuri clenched her fist.

No... that Gyuri isn't me, she inwardly spoke. It's just a coincidence. We probably just have the same name or something. As they ambled by a market stall, she suddenly caught her reflection in a stone trough filled with water. She stopped and stared at it. Peering back at her was a face that she had grown accustomed to but knew didn't belong to her. And it frightened her that as the days went by, she was starting to forget what her own face looked like.

Kim Gyuri... she murmured. Who are you really?

"So, you forced me to the ground because you thought I had your ring?"

Gyuri tore her eyes away from her reflection and found Jimin eyeing her. "Huh? What?"

"I asked why you tackled me to the ground" he repeated with a brow raised. "Was it because you thought I had your ring?"

Gyuri smiled apologetically. "Sorry about that. I-I was just desperate to see if it was the same."

Jimin amusedly chuckled. "You really are a mad wench..." he muttered under his breath. He continued to gape at her and narrowed his eyes when he spotted the small greenfly still tangled in her hair. Had she not noticed it yet?

"That ring," Gyuri began with her eyes fixed on her hand, "it's something really important to me..."

Preoccupied with the fly, Jimin took a step toward her.

"And I may be wrong, but I just have this feeling that yours is the same as mine."

Jimin reached out his hand with the intention to free the aphid from her hair.

"So, if you don't mind, I'd like it if you—" Gyuri looked up.
There, in front of her was a pair of pink lips so dangerously close to her own. Her eyes rounded at the sight. Under close inspection, she followed the shape of Jimin's cupid's bow, so full and plump that she was both in awe and envy of such gorgeous pair of lips. *Damn, they look just like Angelina Jolie's...*

"There," she watched Jimin say, his warm breath blowing onto her forehead. "You are free now." He observed as the greenfly flew away, oblivious to how the sudden movement of his lips had caused Gyuri to tense up. When the fly was no longer in sight, he peered down and was startled by how close he was to Gyuri. Jimin stumbled backward.

"Why are you surprised?" Gyuri shouted in embarrassment, "I should be the one reacting like that!"

Heat rose to Jimin's cheeks as he instinctively covered his mouth with his hand. "For-forgive me. There—there was a fly—"

"Stupid, Chim Chim" Gyuri mumbled as she averted her gaze. "You scared the hell out of me."

But as Jimin was about to reply, a gruff voice suddenly interrupted them, "Look who we have here!"

Jimin and Gyuri turned to the owner of the voice and were immediately on guard.

Not too far away from them were three burly men, red-faced and slick with sweat. A pungent smell surrounded the air around them: a combination of body odour and stale ale clung to their skin and tattered garments.

Gyuri tensed up as she stuttered, "It's—it's him again."

The grubby man in the middle pointed at Gyuri. "I remember you" he slurred. "You're that hussy that refused to give me a bowl of soup last time!"

Gyuri inched closer to Jimin. "That's not true! We ran out of bowls that time. That's why—"

"Shut up!" he growled. He turned his attention to Jimin. "And you, pretty boy. You're that imperial guard that was there last time too."

One of the other men sniggered, "What? Was he the one that knocked you out?"

"Shut up!" The grubby man leered at his companion. "No, this one didn't do anything." He smirked while eyeing Jimin up. "He's weaker than the other one."

Jimin narrowed his eyes.

The grubby man took a brave step forward as his companions watched expectantly, their beady eyes keenly observing how Jimin would react. In response Jimin stretched his arm out, signalling for Gyuri to stay back.

"Chim Chim?"

"Whatever happens," Jimin calmly spoke, "you must stay behind me, okay?"

"But—"

"Gyuri," Jimin's voice was firm.

Seeing the determination in his eyes, Gyuri wordlessly nodded.
Having reached an understanding, Jimin turned to the grubby man. "I do not wish to fight you." He raised both his arms as if to surrender. "So, while I am still asking politely," he lowered his voice, "get out of our way."

A loud cackle escaped the grubby man's mouth. Seeing their leader's reaction, the other burly men laughed along too. "You think your imperial uniform scares me?" the grubby man taunted. "Hah! All imperial guards are just decorated wastrels." He glared at Jimin. "You are just the emperor's dog and I am not afraid of your bark." He reached for his weapon and drew out a long sabre. "A dog may have a ferocious bark, but it means nothing if it has no bite."

Jemin sighed as he dropped his arm. "This is your last warning."

Gyuri watched as both Jimin and the grubby man glared at each other. But while both were locked into a stare down, little did they notice how a growing crowd of peasants had started to encircle them. Curious whispers filled the air as the spectators waited to see the drama that was about to unfold.

"What's going on?"

"Is there a fight?"

"An imperial guard fighting? Why?"

Gyuri bit her lip in worry. The last thing she wanted was to run into the burly man from before. But none of that mattered now— not when Jimin was in front of her and was about to engage in a fight. I must do something! I have to stop them! She hurriedly looked around and suddenly remembered that Zeren was back at the storage house. But just as she was about to run and get him, Gyuri abruptly heard a long sword being unsheathed from its scabbard.

Jemin had drawn his sword.

With the tip of his sabre aimed for Jimin's throat, the burly man jeered, "I'll make sure to cut you up well. That, I promise you."

Jemin smirked as he raised his sword to a defensive position. "I would like to see you try."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 40 of The Brothers Kim!

I'm really sorry about the delay, I've been feeling unwell lately so writing has been difficult. Just a reminder that Twitter is my primary communication medium so, if there are any future delays, this is where you'll find out first.

I also want to give you a heads up that my upcoming university term is busier than the last so, it is very likely that there will be delays. BUT, the good news is that I won't go on hiatus unless I really have to (I will always try and update as much as I can).

Now, news about the webtoon.

The good news is, Sammy has been working hard and has almost completed the first episode :). The bad news is, she's injured her drawing arm while doing so... :( which
means, the release date may be delayed to the end of January.

So, with that said, I hope you guys will forgive us for the long wait. In the meantime, I will try my best to keep writing to make up for it.

Also, I have an Instagram now (for those who may be interested).

Till next time.
A loud thud was heard as a young boy fell on his backside. He grimaced.

“Too weak.”

The boy glanced up as his opponent towered over him, his staunch frame obscuring the glare from the sun so that it cast a shadow upon his face. The young boy scrambled backward causing the taller boy to frown. “Teacher, I want a stronger sparring partner” he whined to the elderly monk behind him. “Chim is too weak.”

“I am not!” a young Jimin protested as he pushed himself up. He grasped his wooden sword with both hands. “Come at me again, I can take it!”

The taller boy sighed as he observed Jimin’s appearance. Currently, the young boy had grazed elbows and dusty amber robes from frequently landing on the dirt. His scrawny arms, though firmly grasping his sword, was quivering from the weight. He shook his head. “No,” he told Jimin resolutely before turning to the monk. “I cannot spar with him any longer, Teacher. Chim is simply not on par with everyone else and I am getting tired of fighting weaklings like him.” He scowled. “Teacher, how am I to improve when my opponent provides no challenge for me?”

The monk shifted his gaze to Chim as he stroked his white and wispy beard. Seeing Chim’s determined stance, he spoke softly, “Ling, you may go.”

The tall boy gratefully bowed before sauntering off to join another sparring group.

“Teacher!” Jimin was appalled. “Why did you let him go? Our match is not over yet! I can—”

Suddenly, the elderly monk approached Jimin and reached for his nose. He pinched it hard.

“Ow!” Jimin screeched. “Let go!” With as much force as he could manage, Jimin tugged at the monk’s gnarly hand as he tried to break free. “Let go! It hurts!”

“You see, Chim?” The monk spoke calmly despite Jimin’s thrashing. “You cannot defeat your opponent if you leave yourself wide open.”

Eventually, he released Jimin’s nose allowing the younger to create distance between them. Jimin glared at his elder with tears in his eyes. “That was an underhanded trick” he muttered while wrinkling his red nose. “I was not ready.”

The elder chuckled. “When it comes to mortal combat, there are no such things as underhandedness.” He tilted his head slightly. “And you should always be ready. If it had been a dagger, what would you have done?”

Jimin glanced down at his sword. “I would have chopped your hand off before you had the chance!”

The elder chuckled again.

“What is so funny?” Jimin retorted. “I am serious! I can do it! I can—!”

“Chim, will you accompany me for a walk?” The elder interrupted. “There is something I want to show you.”
Jimin blinked. “But what about training?”

“You may be excused for a moment. This is much more important…”

~*~

With his sword raised, Jimin taunted the burly man, “I would like to see you try.”

The burly man belted out a loud battle cry as he charged at Jimin, his heavy steps, graceless and wild like an enraged beast. Jimin readied himself as the burly man swung his sabre like an axe.

A clash.

Metal grated against metal as the two swords collided. Despite the burly man’s evident inexperience with the sword, his blows did not lack power. Jimin winced as he tried to maintain his ground. Like a colossal wall, the burly man towered over him, his stocky frame eclipsing the sun. From up close, the putrid stench of stale alcohol and body odour was overwhelming, but none of that mattered to Jimin since all he could focus on was the eyes of his opponent.

They were brimming with bloodlust.

Breaking free from their deadlock, Jimin pounced back to create space between them. Come on, Chim. Do not hesitate now. He could almost hear the elderly monk’s voice ringing in his ears. He smiled wryly at the thought. Even now, you are still in my head, Teacher…

“You’re finding this fight amusing, eh?” the burly man gritted out while he flared his nostrils. “Why don’t you actually fight properly instead of dodging my blows like a coward?”

“Yeah! You weakling!” one of the burly man’s companions jeered.

“How cowardly!” another added.

Jimin’s expression was unreadable.

“You really must be all bark” the burly man scoffed. “I guess all the emperor’s dogs are like that.”

Low murmuring overlapped as the growing crowd whispered amongst themselves. Only then did it occur to Jimin that his unplanned duel with the burly man had become a spectacle.

“You imperial guards really are useless” the burly man spat. “The tithe that people pay puts clothes on your backs when it could be spent on feeding the needy instead.” He bellowed, “Why does the emperor employ cowardly men like you to protect him when it’s clear as day that even peasants like us can do a better job?”

More murmuring was heard as the crowd began to doubt Jimin’s credibility.

The burly man raucously laughed. “It seems that to be an imperial guard, all one needs to do is wear a fancy uniform and wield a sword.” He raised his sabre once more. “Well, then. Once I’m done with you, I can prove to His Majesty that he hired the wrong man.” But despite his taunts, Jimin remained silent. The burly man scowled. “Not much of a talker, eh?” He hmphted as he searched Jimin’s narrowed eyes. “Well then, let our swords do all the talking instead.”

~*~

“Tell me, Chim, how long has it been since you started learning the way of the sword?”
As the pair continued their ascent across the mountainous terrain, the sound of young boys’ grunting and the clashing of wooden swords echoed in the background. Jimin peered behind him to see a cluster of boys in bright amber robes relentlessly training under the sun. Equipped with only their wooden swords, the young boys exchanged blows with each other, their movements swift and lethal despite almost being performance-like.

Jimin clenched his fist at the sight. Why couldn’t he fight like that? “It has been five years, Teacher” he distractedly replied.

“And this would be… your tenth summer?”

Jimin nodded.

“I see.” The elder’s lips were set in a hard line as he followed Jimin’s gaze. From where they stood, they had a clear view of the temple and the large expanse of green that surrounded their home. The elder slowly turned away to continue with their hike. “Come now, Chim. We still have quite the distance to walk.”

Obediently, Jimin followed the elder as he led him deeper into the mountains. As they trekked further into the foliage, eventually straying from the usual path, Jimin began contemplating his earlier performance. Flashbacks of how the taller boy managed to strike a powerful blow replayed in his mind. The sensation of his opponent’s bloodthirst aimed at him; the image of his wooden sword raised; the sound of his battle cry…

The hair on Jimin’s arms rose as his memories all converged into one.

I am weak.

Jimin shook his head fervently. It was only then did he notice that the monk was no longer in front of him. “Teacher?” Jimin inclined his head only to be greeted by a short bamboo stick being thrown at his feet. He jumped backward just in time.

“Pick that up.”

Glancing up, Jimin found the elderly monk grasping a branch as if it were a sword. Against the backdrop of bamboo trees, the monk was poised ready for a fight.

“Teacher?”

“Come, Chim,” the elder beckoned. “Attack me.”

Reluctantly, Jimin lifted the bamboo stick from the ground while eyeing the elder warily. He had never seen the monk fight before. From his composed expression and kind features, Jimin had always perceived him to be docile compared to the other elderly monks at the temple. And it didn’t help that his bony frame made him look like a fragile twig adorned in vibrant cloth. As Jimin reached for the bamboo stick, he spoke, “Teacher, I do not really wish to—”

But as soon as he had a firm grip on the branch, the monk charged at him, startling Jimin into a defensive position. In an instance, the sound of wood splintering echoed in the forest as their bamboo sticks collided. Birds flapping their wings filled the silence as Jimin and the monk remained engaged in a deadlock, both refusing to bow down.

Stunned by the monk’s strength, Jimin shifted his weight against the elder, whose bamboo stick was pressing down against his. While his features contorted in strained effort, the monk, in comparison, was cool and composed. How is he so strong when he looks so feeble? Was the thought that passed
“Not bad, Chim” the elder complimented as he amusedly watched him struggle. “But you are too rigid.” In one swift motion, the elder relaxed his arms causing Jimin to fall forward. But before Jimin had time to react, the monk deflected his stick to the side, leaving Jimin’s head vulnerable for an attack. Jimin took in a sharp intake of breath as the monk aimed his stick right in between his eyes. “Again, you are leaving yourself wide open.” Slowly, the monk lowered his pretend sword so that it was no longer directed at Jimin. “You still have much to learn.”

“I know I do” Jimin snapped once he had recovered his footing. He glared down at his hand which carried the bamboo stick before dropping it to the floor. “But no matter how hard I try, I always lose.” Jimin kicked the branch out of frustration.

“Chim—”

“Everyone my age has already become so accomplished” Jimin spoke bitterly. “Even the younger boys, who are three summers my junior, have improved more than I.” With tears of frustration, Jimin mumbled, “Maybe the other boys are right. Not only am I a runt but I will never amount to anything.”

The monk eyed Jimin pityingly. He was about to offer him words of comfort when he suddenly thought of a better idea. Wordlessly, he began walking away.

Upon hearing the monk shuffling, Jimin hastily wiped his tears. How embarrassing, he thought. I must appear childish to Teacher. A dull pain squeezed in his chest. Maybe he agrees with the others… Maybe he thinks I am useless too.

But before Jimin’s train of thought could spiral downhill even further, the monk spoke, “Chim, come and look over here.”

Jimin directed his attention towards the monk and begrudgingly trudged over to join him. “What are we looking at, Teacher?”

“These bamboo trees” the monk replied as he gestured to the wall of green around them.

Jimin observed his surroundings and took note of the tall, green stalks that seemed to reach the sky.

“They are tall and majestic, are they not?”

Jimin hummed in response.

The monk continued, “These bamboo trees have stood proud and tall for many years. They have withstood countless storms brought by Mother Nature’s elements and still, they continue to grow and thrive in spite of every obstacle they face.” He peered down at the young boy. “You and the bamboo tree are a lot alike.”

At this Jimin was puzzled. “Huh? How so?”

“Like all life, everything started out as small.” The elder crouched down to carefully unveil a bamboo sapling on the ground. “Even though some took root earlier than others, not all reach their full potential until much later.” He met eyes with Jimin. “And with time and nurture, the smallest of saplings will grow to be the tallest of trees.” The monk stood up and pointed at the tall bamboo in front of him. “Chim, like these bamboo trees, you have yet to reach your fullest potential. It will take time, so you must not be too hard on yourself.”
“But how long will it take until I am good enough?” Jimin asked. “I feel as though I am being left behind.”

“To live by the sword may not be the path for all.” The elder reached for the bamboo stick that Jimin had kicked earlier. “But that does not mean you are without talent.” He offered the bamboo stick to him.

Jimin uncertainly accepted it.

“Chim, your path is deeply entwined with the need to master all forms of combat.” He gestured at the bamboo tree. “Like the bamboo, the path you will embark on in later life is full of battles that even the sword alone cannot conquer.” He smiled as he prepared himself for another fight. “And as your teacher, it is my job to discover which form of combat will allow you to flourish faster…”

~*~

Gyuri watched in consternation as Jimin dodged the burly man’s lunges, his steps nimble and quick. While the burly man heatedly swung his sabre, Jimin successively avoided it. A sharp gasp escaped her lips as Jimin narrowly evaded his mighty swing. A clash. With bated breath, the crowd expectantly gawked as they waited to see what Jimin will do.

Stuck in another stalemate, Jimin planted his feet firmly on the ground as the burly man attempted to break his rigid defence. The sound of metallic friction rang in the air as Jimin deflected the burly man’s powerful strikes before jumping backward in retreat. A sigh of disappointment washed over the crowd as they voiced out their opinion.

“Why isn’t he attacking?”

“Are all the imperial guards like this?”

“What’s he hesitating for?”

“Oh! Isn’t that the imperial guard from the soup kitchen?”

Gyuri’s head swerved to the right and her eyes widened when she recognised one of the peasants next to her. She grabbed onto his arm. “You!”

The peasant jumped in surprise. “Little Madam? What are you doing here—?”

“You’ve got to help!” she pleaded. “Chim Chim—he needs Zeren—you have to fetch Zeren!”

“But I—”

“Please!” she cried. “We have to stop them before someone ends up getting hurt!”

Another clash was heard as the pair’s swords collided once more. Gyuri shifted her attention to Jimin and saw that he was being overpowered by the burly man. She urged the peasant, “Hurry!”

Unable to decline, the peasant nodded before sprinting back to the direction of the storage house. Once he was out of sight, Gyuri turned back to Jimin and was relieved to find that he was no longer within the burly man’s reach. With some distance between them, she noticed Jimin standing upright while his opponent was bent double and panting laboriously.

“Do you know why a dog barks first when it is threatened?” she heard Jimin ask as he began lowering his sword.
The burly man grunted as he tried to catch his breath.

“It is so that it does not have to engage in a meaningless fight.” He glowered at the burly man as he added, “Even beasts know when they are no match for an opponent. You cannot keep up so, you should have ran when you heard my bark.” Seeing that his opponent was exhausted, Jimin started turning away. “Be thankful I am merciful. After all," he murmured sarcastically, "I am just the emperor’s dog. I have more bark than bite.”

An eruption of whispers soon followed as Jimin turned his back on the burly man.

Relieved, Gyuri’s lips stretched into a big smile. So, this was Chim Chim’s plan all along! She thought as Jimin steadily made his way towards her. She glanced at the burly man and noticed how he was still gasping for breath. He must have noticed that he didn’t have a lot of stamina. Gyuri continued to smile as Jimin made his way to her. But before Jimin could take another step, a meaty arm suddenly hooked around her neck, catching her by surprise.

Jimin’s eyes widened as he spotted one of the burly man’s companions sneak behind Gyuri and capture her in a headlock.

Struggling to breathe, Gyuri’s face grew flushed with effort. She spluttered for air.

“Unhand her!” Jimin screeched as he stepped forward.

“Nah-uh-uh” he heard a voice say. He turned around and found that the burly man was struggling to get up. “Not until… I see you bleed, dog boy.” With the help of his other companion, the burly man stood upright as he panted, “Not so smug now, huh?”

A strangled yelp caught Jimin’s attention momentarily as Gyuri tried to claw herself free. The beefy man fought to restrict her.

“I am warning you if you hurt her I will—” he took a step towards Gyuri’s captor but halted when the beefy man tightened his grip causing Gyuri to whimper in pain.

“If you want to see the wench go free, you have to do as I say” the burly man declared.

Jimin slowly turned to face him, his face dark. With the sound of Gyuri’s laboured breathing, Jimin knew he had little choice. His voice was low as he questioned, “What do you want from me?”
A Pompous Fool

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Red.

That was the colour that stained the dirt ground as Jimin withstood the burly man’s punches and kicks. Punch after punch, Gyuri watched in horror as the burly man planted his large fists on Jimin’s abdomen, the sound of his pained grunting punctuating the rhythm of the burly man’s blows. With each heavy strike, droplets of red soiled the floor.

There was red everywhere.

Chim Chim! Gyuri squirmed against the beefy man’s hold, her nails digging into his flesh. She didn’t care that the beefy man was tightening his grip around her throat, nor that it was hurting her. All she could focus on was how Jimin needed help. Chim Chim, hang on!

“Stop resisting or I’ll snap your neck!” the beefy man sneered, his foul breath wafting to Gyuri’s nose. “You’ll stay still if you know what’s good for you.” The beefy man shifted the position of his bicep so that it was higher up Gyuri’s neck. She gasped for air. “I don’t want to have to strangle a little lady like you.” He lifted Gyuri’s chin up with his grubby fingers so that her eyes met his. “It’ll be a waste of your pretty face.”

Gyuri spat on him.

The beefy man’s expression darkened as he wiped her saliva away with his free arm. If looks could kill, Gyuri would have been a goner. “You, little lady,” he snarled, “have just asked for a death sentence.” Without warning, he wrapped his other arm around her waist as if he was about to crush her in his embrace. “I don’t care about what the boss says, you’re gonna pay for what you did!”

But before he had the chance to secure his grip, Gyuri quickly knocked her head back with all the force she could muster. An agonised yelp escaped the beefy man’s mouth as Gyuri’s unexpected headbutt collided with his crooked nose.

Here’s my chance!

Gyuri jostled free while her captor was still stunned. But instead of immediately bolting away, she faced her captor, who was covering his bloodied nose.

“You bitch!” he cursed as he inspected his bloodstained hands. “My nose… you broke it!”

Gyuri aimed her mighty kick straight for in between his legs causing the beefy man to howl. “Serves you right!” she shouted before sprinting to Jimin’s rescue.

~*~

Jimin braced himself as one of the burly man’s punches landed straight for his solar plexus. He toppled over, the air in his lungs knocked straight out of him. Saliva mixed with blood escaped his dry mouth as he crashed to the floor. Finally, the burly man’s companion released his arms, allowing Jimin to curl into the foetal position with what little energy he had left. Despite the numerous blows he sustained, he could no longer feel pain. His body had gone numb along with his other senses.
Gyuri… I hope you are safe.

From the ground, Jimin could hardly tell what was happening all around him. Swollen eyes prevented him from seeing clearly while punches directed at the side of his jaw had distorted his hearing. But even though he should be worrying about himself, all he could think about was whether Gyuri was safe and how badly he wanted to see her.

Gyuri… He inclined his head as much as his body would allow. Gyuri… where are you?

“You’re still moving, eh?” The burly man walked over to Jimin, his stocky profile blocking the sunlight. “You’re a persistent one, dog boy.” He crouched down to inspect his handiwork, allowing Jimin to see his bruised knuckles slick with blood. His blood. “How does it feel to be the one grovelling at another’s feet?” he taunted.

Jimin glared at him.

“Now you know what it’s like for us poor folk every day.” The burly man abruptly stood up to address the crowd. “See this?” he declared, “Take this as an example of what we can achieve despite our station.” He continued to shout, “Every day, we, the working class, are mistreated by the nobility. From their extravagant abodes, they look down on us, dismiss us, treat us like we are no better than the insects that crawl on the ground.” He waved his arms to emphasise his disdain. “While the emperor lavishes in abundance, our kinsmen toil the land under the merciless sun. He is not kind, he is not benevolent—he is just a pompous fool.”

The crowd gasped in unison while some protested.

“Anyone who believes in him is too blind to see that he has forsaken his people.” He surveyed the crowd which had grown agitated by his claims. “What has the emperor done to alleviate our suffering?” He turned to face every person present. “Nothing! The emperor doesn’t care about us! None of them do!”

Loud shouts from the crowd contested the burly man’s claim, riling those that agreed with him.

“The world is unkind to us born with no status” the burly man resumed. “To survive we have to force our way to rise.” He glared down at Jimin. “People like him are what stops us from rising. They are the ones that keep us poor while they enjoy all the riches our kingdom has to offer.”

The burly man raised his closed fist as he chanted, “Down with the Jade Lotus! Down with the people who protect it!”

The burly man’s companion let out a passionate battle cry which persuaded others to join in. Dissatisfied and resentful of their individual situations, the crowd’s cheer grew stronger as one by one, the onlookers saw the validity behind the burly man’s claims. For while plenty admired and adored their emperor, they had had enough. Many no longer wished to be at the bottom of the social ladder; it was time for them to climb.

The burly man smirked as he listened to the energetic chants of the people. Soon, the market street was teeming with curious bystanders and he preyed on their naivety. Oh, how ignorance is power! He crouched down so that he was towering over Jimin again. “You see, you shouldn’t have become the emperor’s dog.” He grabbed Jimin’s collar, forcing Jimin to face him. “Because once the hunt is over, the hound is boiled for supper.”

Jimin winced as the burly man abruptly released him and he fell to the ground with a thud. With his good eye, he watched the burly man pace over to his fallen sabre. He picked it up. “I made you a promise…” The tip of his sword dragged against the gravel as he walked back to Jimin, a smirk
playing on his lips. Once he was nearby, he aimed it at his throat. Jimin gulped. “I promised you that I’ll cut you up well.” He raised his sword and the blade glinted in the sunlight. “And that is a promise I intend to keep….” The burly man swiftly swung his sabre down in full force.

With his life seemingly flashing before him, Jimin shut his eyes as he prepared for the worse. But instead of meeting flesh, the burly man’s sabre clashed against another sword. Jimin heard a familiar voice shout, “Leave him alone!” Immediately, his eyes flew open and a mixture of relief and fear overcame him when he discovered who it was.

“You!” the burly man exclaimed as he scrutinised the woman’s features. “What are you doing free?”

Gyuri furrowed her brows as she gritted out, “I won’t let you harm him any more than this.” Her arms shook against his strong grip as the burly man pushed his sabre against hers.

He cackled when her sword tilted to the side. “Out of my way.” The burly man batted the sword to the side, knocking Gyuri along with it. She tumbled next to Jimin.

“Gyuri…”

At the sound of Jimin’s voice, Gyuri turned to the beaten man and quickly scooted over to him. “Chim Chim…” Her eyes trailed down his bruised and bloodied face. Seeing his injuries up close overwhelmed her with guilt. “Chim Chim… I’m so sorry.”

“You… mad wench” he croaked. “I told you… to stay back.”

“And let you die?” she retorted. “Never.”

But just as Jimin was about to reprimand her, the burly man suddenly let out another cackle. “How pathetic” he sneered. “Are you that weak that a wench must come and rescue you?”

Gyuri raised Jimin’s sword as she positioned herself in front of him. “Stay back!” Her hands trembled as she aimed the sword at the burly man. “Don’t come any closer or I’ll—”

The burly man lazily swung his sabre to the side, batting Gyuri’s away. “Or you’ll what?” he leered. “Cut me?”

Gyuri fumbled to straighten her sword, but before she could, the burly man immediately swatted it away with full force, disarming her completely.

“I was going to deal with you later,” the burly man said as he loomed over both Gyuri and Jimin. “But clearly you want to die first.”

Gyuri drew closer to Jimin as if to shield him.

“If that’s the case” the burly man resumed, “then I’ll make sure to send both of you off!” He raised his sword again to deal with the final blow.

Immediately, Gyuri flung herself above Jimin, covering his body with hers. It was like her body had a mind of its own. Despite every fibre of her being screaming for her to run, leave Jimin behind, her urge to protect him overrode her instincts to flee. She squeezed him tightly and Jimin grimaced. I’ll protect you this time, Chim Chim! But as she waited for the sharpness of the blade to strike her back, an abrupt strangled grunt came instead.

Gyuri dared to look up.
There, before her, stood the burly man, frozen in disbelief. His arms dropped to his side as if drained of all its strength. Gyuri followed the burly man’s gaze as he stared down at his chest.

*Red.*

His mouth was ajar as he tried to process why there was so much of it on his filthy garments. *This isn’t mine,* was the first thought that flitted across his mind. But in a split second, his blurred vision finally managed to focus on the sharp tip of a blade protruding through his chest—a sword stained in scarlet.

All too quickly, the blade retreated, taking with it, the remainder of his energy. And as if the world suddenly slowed down, Gyuri watched as the burly man collapsed to the floor. Blood leaked from his open wound as his face remained frozen in the same expression of disbelief. His eyes glossed over as the rage that burned within was extinguished like a naked flame. In shock, Gyuri trailed her eyes upward and watched as droplets of blood dripped from the assailant’s long blade. When she finally met eyes with their saviour, her eyes rounded.

“Ze-Zeren?”

There in front of her stood Zeren with a face as dark as thunder. His chest heaved up and down as he panted, his eyes wild and feral. Zeren lowered his sword as he shifted his attention from the burly man to Gyuri and then to Jimin. His features hardened when he spotted the state of his friend.

“Chim…” Zeren’s voice was barely audible. He was about to approach the pair when shouts from the burly man’s companions distracted him. As quick as lightning, Zeren drew his sword as the brawny men attacked him from both sides. Zeren skilfully avoided their blades with nimble steps. Like Jimin, he dodged their advances with ease. But unlike his friend, Zeren wasn’t hesitant with his sword.

With a fierce thrust, Zeren lunged his weapon straight through one of the men, rendering him immobile. An agonised grunt escaped his lips as Zeren yanked his sword back, a crimson fountain following behind.

Gyuri was horrified by the sight.

As Zeren continued to trade blows with the last of the trio, Gyuri’s eyes inevitably landed on the corpses. Pools of red spilled from their fallen bodies, triggering Gyuri’s memories of the night of the attack. The sound of clanging metal morphed into the explosion of fireworks; the scent of dry earth mirrored the smell of gunpowder. Paralysed, Gyuri’s breathing became sharp and shallow as her heart drummed wildly against her chest.

It was all coming back to her.

But just as she was about to witness Zeren fatally injure the beefy man, a hand reached out to Gyuri, tearing her eyes away from the brutal slaughter.

“Do not look,” Jimin croaked as he ignored the stinging of his wounds. He pulled Gyuri into a tight embrace. “You do not need to see this.”

“Chim Chim—”

“You really are a mad wench” Jimin interrupted as he buried his chin near the crook of her neck. Gyuri shivered as his warm breath tickled her skin. “Do not *ever* scare me like that again.”

~*~
The heavy doors burst open as Chayoung charged inside the emperor’s private quarters. “Your Majesty!”

Jimin glanced up from his bed, where the royal physicians were tending to his wounds. “Sister—”

“What happened?” she asked as she marched up to him, ignoring the bewildered stares of the male physicians. Her eyes roamed down her brother’s bruised and beaten body and she gasped.

“Your Highness,” Minseok spoke up as he obstructed her path. “You should not be here—”

“No.”

Chayoung and Minseok turned to the sound of Jimin’s croaky voice. He winced as he sat up. “No, it is alright, Advisor Kim. Let my sister pass.”

Reluctantly, Minseok retreated, allowing Chayoung to kneel by her brother’s bedside. “Your Majesty…” Her voice was barely a whisper as she inspected his injuries from up close. “Who did this to you?” She reached out her hand to touch his cheek but changed her mind. “What- what happened? Where is Zeren?”

Jimin signalled for the physicians to leave and with a brief nod, they did his bidding. Once they were alone, Jimin replied, “You need not worry, sister. I am fine.”

“You did not answer my question, Your Majesty.”

Jimin was taken aback by the sharpness of his sister’s tone.

“You have been beaten to a pulp and you expect me to believe you when you say you are fine?” Chayoung’s brows knitted together as her voice rose in pitch. “Forgive me, but that is something I cannot do.”

“Sister, I really do not want to make a fuss—”

“But you are hurt!”

Minseok swiftly intervened, “Your Highness, I believe His Majesty needs to rest.” He approached his wife cautiously. “He will tell us when he is ready—”

Chayoung abruptly stood up and turned to her husband. “No. You cannot keep dismissing his injuries as if they mean nothing!”

“I am not dismissing them—”

“Yes, you are!” she retorted. Chayoung turned to her brother. “Do not think that I did not know about your bruise from before, Your Majesty.” Her tone was taut. “I did not say anything because I thought it will only happen once but this,” she said while gesturing to her brother’s appearance, “this is too big for me to ignore.”

“Your Majesty, you are the emperor of this kingdom” Chayoung reminded him. “I understand that you need time to escape the palace, but I cannot allow you to keep doing so if you are going to return injured.” She searched his eyes anxiously. “I fear that one day, you might not return at all.”

Jimin guiltily averted his gaze. “I am sorry, sister…”
“So, will you tell me what happened?” she pried. “How did you get hurt?”

Jimin averted his gaze.

Chayoung remained silent as she waited for her brother to speak. But after a few moments, she soon realised that Jimin wasn’t going to divulge anything. She huffed, “Your Majesty—”

“Please, sister” he interrupted. Jimin wrapped his arm around his bandaged torso as if to alleviate the throbbing pain. “Just… do not ask about it— it is better if you do not know.”

Chayoung frowned. Wordlessly, she stood up and briskly turned away from him. “Fine.” She barged past Minseok as she headed towards the door.

“Sister, where are you going?”

“If you will not tell me,” she responded hotly, “then I shall go and find out myself!” Chayoung stomped out of the room, leaving a conflicted Minseok and a weary Jimin.

Minseok darted his eyes from the door to Jimin as if contemplating whether to go after his wife.

“You should go after her” Jimin decided for him. “She is probably going to search for Zeren.”

Minseok watched as Jimin leaned back on his propped-up cushion, his features contorted in pain. “Your Majesty… will you really not tell us what transpired out there?”

Jimin let out an audible sigh.

“I know you have your reasons,” Minseok quickly added, “but Her Highness is right. You cannot just leave us in the dark.” Minseok took a small step toward him. “When Zeren brought you here, almost half-dead, you scared us to death! If we had lost you…”

“But you have not.”

Minseok watched as Jimin ran a hand through his long hair.

“I may have returned a beaten man,” Jimin cryptically continued, “but I have also returned much the wiser.”

At this, Minseok grew curious. “What do you mean?”

“Advisor Kim…” Jimin’s tone was hesitant. “When did you find out you were… in love with my sister?”

Minseok blinked. “I… I-er, well,” he laughed nervously, “this question is quite unexpected —”

“How did you know you were in love?”

Minseok met eyes with the young emperor. Before him, sat the most powerful man in the kingdom; the mandate of heaven; the heavenly sovereign of Saim. But in Minseok’s eyes, all he saw was a man—a young man whose eyes reflected a semblance of childhood innocence when asking about the riddle of love.

He couldn’t help but chuckle at the paradox.

“You know you are in love when you cannot stop thinking about them.” Minseok’s smile grew as he
continued, “They are constantly on your mind and you cannot help but find joy at even the slightest mention of their name…”

A small smile graced Jimin’s lips as a certain name floated into his head.

“…They are the first thing you think about in the morning and the last thing you think about at night…”

A vision of her smile flashed before his eyes.

“…I guess you can say that it is like constantly being in euphoria especially when you know they return your feelings.”

Jimin observed how his brother-in-law beamed. *There is no doubt that he is thinking about my sister as he speaks.* But as he contemplated his brother-in-law’s words, visions of his own special person converged into a clear picture, triggering his peculiar symptoms. Jimin hastily covered his mouth as his goofy smile made an appearance.

Earlier, when he had pulled Gyuri into his arms, the only thought in his mind was how he didn’t want to let her go. His arms trembled from fatigue but still, he refused to release her.

“Chim Chim?”

Jimin felt Gyuri shift in his embrace. He squeezed her slightly to reassure her he was listening.

“Chim Chim, you can let me go now.” Her voice was muffled. “I’m okay—”

But still, Jimin refused to loosen his hold. With their bodies close together, Jimin surprisingly drew comfort from their shared warmth. It was the first time he had held a woman so close to him; the first time he was overwhelmed by the urge to protect; the first time he had let someone into his heart.

From this small action alone, Jimin finally understood what he felt towards Gyuri.

“Your Majesty? Is something wrong?”

Jimin snapped out of his reverie as he registered his brother-in-law’s voice. “Hm? Oh…” He lowered his hand away from his mouth. “Nothing…”

Minseok eyed him suspiciously. “If I may be so forward in asking, why do you ask about love, Your Majesty?” He watched as Jimin averted his gaze in a flurry. “Have you… taken a liking to someone?”

Jimin couldn’t ignore how Minseok’s tone was somewhat hopeful. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Perhaps.”

Minseok’s feline eyes bulged. But as his brother-in-law opened his mouth to interrogate him, Jimin leaned back on his bed. With his hand against his chest, Jimin was made deaf by the steady beating of his heart and the voice which screamed in his mind. A voice that bore a likeness to the monk that taught him to be wary of women.

*Women are like sirens. They are attractive at first but, in time, they will lure you to your demise.*

Jimin took a deep breath as he finally understood why he was wary of Gyuri in the beginning. He had been trying so hard to avoid her but like light, Gyuri managed to find a chink in his impenetrable armour. Unknowingly, she had infiltrated his heart, bewitching him in a spell that he
didn’t know how to be rid of. At last, it dawned on Jimin that Gyuri was never Zeren’s siren…

She was his.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 42 of The Brothers Kim!

I have to say, I'm quite proud of this chapter. This might be my favourite chapter by far.

I will try and keep writing as much as I can so please stick around~

Also, please check out the webtoon if you haven't already. We've put up the character profiles! Please anticipate the launch date in the future (we're trying our best).

Till next time!
The long howls of a grieving mother echoed along the halls of the sanatorium.

Namjoon watched mournfully as the haggard woman wept at the bedside of her child, her wails adding to the heaviness he felt in his chest. He reached out to touch her, comfort her, do whatever he could to alleviate her pain. But he knew that nothing he did now could bring back the woman's child from the afterlife.

He had failed to save him from the plague.

The grieving mother clung to her child's lifeless body with hot tears streaming from her eyes. With desperation she shook him, her voice high-pitched and delirious as she tried to rouse her child from his deep slumber.

"Please, Madam," Namjoon's voice was soothing as he reached out to comfort her. "He is no longer with us."

The woman wailed even louder. "No, no, no!" she cried, voice heavy with denial. "He's still with us. My boy hasn't left me—he's just asleep!"

Namjoon did his best to coax the aggrieved woman from her child's body, but she did not bow down without resisting. Eventually, he managed to pry her hands away and she grasped onto his robes like she had been reduced to a vulnerable infant. She cried noisily, burying herself deep into Namjoon's embrace as if it was the only safe place in the world left for her.

Sharing her anguish, Namjoon allowed her to smother him. Despite knowing that he had done his best to save the child, Namjoon couldn't escape from the guilt that gnawed at his insides.

*If only I tried harder. If only I knew more. If only—*

The door suddenly opened. "Oh, apologies, I did not know you were occupied."

Namjoon turned to the door and was surprised to find a blond gentleman loitering near the entrance. He gently pushed the woman away. "Sir Vernon—"

"I see you are busy," Vernon interrupted as he began turning away, "I can return later—"

"No, it is fine." He cleared his throat and the woman looked up with tear-stained eyes. "I will talk to you later, Madam," Namjoon spoke endearingly. "Please take care on your way home."

The woman nodded as she peeped at Vernon and then back at Namjoon. Briskly, she brushed past the blond gentleman, too mournful to even remember how much she feared the Waekugin.

Once the two men were alone, Vernon turned to face Namjoon and observed his weary visage. "Your dedication is admirable," he began as he approached the physician, who was busy covering the child's cadaver.

Namjoon tossed him a look as he walked unsteadily over to where the washing basin was. "My dedication means nothing if my patients die."
Vernon was silent.

With his head hanging low, Namjoon leaned over the counter. "I could not save him..." Vernon heard Namjoon murmur. "I promised that widow that I would save her child. I promised her that he would return but I—" He punched the table, causing a porcelain cup to roll over the edge and shatter. Namjoon sighed as he pressed two fingers to his temple.

"You tried your best," Vernon said in a bid to comfort him. "You cannot save everyone."

Namjoon glanced over his shoulder in time to see Vernon draw closer to him.

"But I am glad that you were able to save Brahms," Vernon placed his hand over his heart to demonstrate his sincerity, "of which I am eternally grateful for."

Namjoon managed a small smile.

"I have come to enquire as to when Brahms may be discharged from your care," he added. "As you can imagine, he has been very keen to recover in more comfortable lodgings."

"He can be released as early as tomorrow," Namjoon replied wearily as he dipped his hands into the cold water. "He has recovered quite well, and I am sure that recuperating under a different roof will benefit him." After drying his hands, Namjoon tottered to the other side of the room with Vernon following closely behind. "I will write you a list of things that... he must do to- to aid his recovery."

Vernon raised a brow as he observed Namjoon reach for a fresh sheet of rice paper and ink brush. He started to write with shaky movements, earning a questioning stare from Vernon, who couldn’t help noticing how he leaned on the table for support.

"He- he must drink plenty of clean water," Namjoon instructed. "And of course, he must avoid foraging in the lands from now- from now onward." He turned to Vernon, allowing him to see the dark shadows under his tired eyes. Like the linen he used to cover the corpse, Namjoon’s face was also pasty white. "Ensure that everything he eats is washed and cooked properly before consumption." Namjoon handed the piece of paper to Vernon and he accepted it.

"Thank you," he replied as he sceptically glanced at the sheet of paper.

Noticing his expression, Namjoon queried, "Is there- is there something the matter?" He gestured at the sheet. "Have I written something... illegible?"

"No, that is not it," Vernon answered quickly, his face slightly flushed. "Your penmanship is excellent. It is just that..." He cleared his throat as he hesitantly admitted, "I am afraid my reading ability is not quite on par with my other communication skills."

"Oh."

"But it is not something I cannot overcome." Vernon folded the piece of paper and tucked it away in his suit pocket. "I thank you once again." He bowed slightly and was about to leave when he suddenly halted. "Are you sure I do not have to pay for your services? I feel awful not doing so." Vernon rummaged through his suit pockets as if searching for his wallet.

Swiftly, Namjoon responded, "No, please, I insist. No money is needed."

Vernon was hesitant to comply.

"This sanatorium was not founded with profit in mind," Namjoon explained. "Its purpose is to
provide healthcare to those in need; to never turn a patient away." He smiled sadly as he remembered the person who taught him that. "With that in mind, I hope you will honour this sanatorium's ethos."

Seeing the determination in Namjoon's haggard countenance, Vernon obliged. "You really are admirable, Sir Namjoon. Most people would have jumped at the mention of money."

"Well, I am pleased to say I am not like most people." He gestured toward the door which led to the foyer.

Vernon followed suit. "No," he agreed, "you are very different from the Saimese I have encountered so far."

"Different?" Namjoon's tone was suddenly edgy. "How so?"

"I find you are more... open-minded," Vernon replied, carefully emphasising his chosen adjective. "You were the only one who helped us when we first arrived. Many had turned us away, too afraid of the colour of our skin, our eyes, our attire... of us."

Namjoon stopped to face Vernon.

"But you were not."

The pair stood apart from each other, both standing tall, with their eyes locked into an implicit stare down. As if trying to read his mind, Namjoon searched Vernon's unwavering, odd-coloured eyes but with little avail. Despite his deceivingly amiable appearance, he was not a man who could easily be read.

"I guess you could say I am not afraid of you," Namjoon said with a small chuckle, but something about it seemed forced. "Regardless of your appearance or your race, your blood is the same colour as mine."

"Indeed," Vernon muttered, a small smile gracing his lips. "It is reassuring to know you think of us that way—"

Namjoon watched as Vernon's expression suddenly morphed to one of surprise and then impassiveness as his gaze fell on his office, where the door was slightly ajar. Following his eyes, he noticed his blade mounted on the wall. "That sword," Vernon murmured as he continued to stare, his tone suddenly cold, "is it real?"

Namjoon was quiet. "...Yes," he eventually replied.

"How curious," Vernon's voice was noticeably low. "I was not aware that physicians here were also trained to wield a sword." He turned to face Namjoon, his body language somewhat stiffer. "I did not take you for a fighter, Sir Namjoon. Are you an accomplished swordsman?"

"Some will say I am..." Namjoon replied wryly as he tore his eyes away from the blade. "But that was a long time ago." He shifted his gaze to meet Vernon's. "I am a man of medicine now."

Vernon steadily eyed Namjoon before letting out a hum in response. "I see," he broke away from their locked gaze as he took a step forward, "well, I shall not detain you from your tasks any further."

Namjoon stepped aside to allow Vernon to amble by.

"Take care of yourself too, Sir Namjoon," the blond gentleman murmured as he passed, his voice returning to its original warmth. "It would be a shame if the physician became the patient." And with
those words, he departed.

Once Vernon was nowhere to be seen, Namjoon let out a long breath. He pinched the bridge of his nose to try and alleviate the pent-up tension that was slowly building up, but with little success. It was proving harder to suppress the sharp pain from affecting his train of thought. Damn it, he cursed as he squeezed his eyes shut. I must not fall ill now. His head pounded as each moment passed. Just a little more. I can keep going just a little more—

"Master Namjoon!"

The sudden sound of a voice calling out to him made Namjoon grimace as the throbbing pain pulsed at the same time. Reluctantly, he peeped through his lidded eyes and saw a blurred figure standing before him. Bright light poured in from outside, temporarily blinding his vision and causing him to wince.

"Master Namjoon!" the blurred figure shouted again, its voice loud and distorted. Like a jarred ringing in his ears, the blurred figure's voice grated on his eardrums. "Something bad has happened! Chim Chim, he..."

But Namjoon couldn't hear the rest. For as the blurred figure continued to jabber, the ground swayed underneath his feet and the room spun round and round like he was at the bottom of a whirlpool. Namjoon fought to maintain his balance as he struggled against the overwhelming pain. And like the sea current, it pulsed through his head repeatedly; wave after wave that increased in dizzying strength.

"Master Namjoon?" The blurred figure's voice was softer this time, much to Namjoon's relief. With a wary step, it drew closer, allowing Namjoon to see its face with a little more clarity. He squinted and for a moment, he thought he recognised who it was. "Master Namjoon, are you—?"

But before he could utter the blurry figure's name, Namjoon's vision went dark.

~*~

With his face flushed from exertion and his body curled in his bed, Jongin's frail frame convulsed as a violent cough overcame him.

"Is there nothing else you can give him?" Junmyeon demanded, his question aimed at the elderly physician. "He is in pain!"

"Master Junmyeon, I am afraid there is nothing else I can do. I have given Master Jongin the best herbal medicine there is to offer—"

"Your best is not good enough!" Junmyeon interjected in frustration. "There must be something else you can give him."

In the dimly lit room, the elder watched as Junmyeon abruptly marched over to his medicinal box that was filled with vials, gauze and all sorts of surgical contraptions.

"Master Junmyeon, please. You need to remain calm—"

"You are a physician" he seethed, "it is your job to make him better, not pathetic excuses."

Physician Koh was immediately silenced.

Desperately, Junmyeon returned to rummaging through the elder's medicinal box, his eyes darting
left and right as he searched for anything that appeared as though it will relieve his younger brother's pain.

All the while, Physician Koh eyed him with pity, paying no mind to the vehement tone at which Junmyeon uttered his words. After many decades serving the Kim household, Physician Koh was already accustomed to Junmyeon's fiery temperament. And today of all days, he judged that Junmyeon's mood was the foulest to date. *I cannot blame him,* he thought. *The earlier news must have come as a shock.* "Forgive me, Master Junmyeon" the elder muttered with complete sincerity. "I will try harder to find a more effective remedy."

"And so you should," Junmyeon snapped, "since our father pays you handsomely for your service."

Physician Koh lowered his gaze.

Unsuccessful in finding anything of use, Junmyeon ceased his futile search and glared at the physician. "You are dismissed. Please leave immediately."

The elder kept his eyes to the floor as he did Junmyeon's bidding, hastily collecting his things so as not to endure the intense glare for a moment longer. Once Junmyeon and Jongin were alone, he vented, "Such an ignorant fool! I cannot believe he used to be a royal physician!"

"Brother..."

At the sound of Jongin's wheezy voice, Junmyeon sprang to his side, where the younger remained curled up in his bed.

"I am here, Jongin," he replied soothingly, his earlier anger dissipating. "Can I get you anything?" He peered down at the pale-skinned boy whose eyes had a hazy look about them. At last, his cough finally subsided.

"You should smile more often, brother," Jongin croaked, earning a baffled look from Junmyeon. "Frowning will scare away your chances of marrying."

Confused, Junmyeon softly replied, "Marriage is the last thing on my mind." He paused. "But more importantly, do you need anything? Water, perhaps?"

"That is a shame," Jongin murmured, ignoring his offer. He smiled sadly as he mumbled under his breath, "I want to see you happily married before I..." His voice trailed off, too afraid to finish his utterance.

"Pardon? Did you say something?"

Jongin shook his head. "Nothing. But anyway, what did Physician Koh say to you earlier?"

Junmyeon stiffened. "You need not worry about it."

Witnessing his older brother's reaction, Jongin's face grew solemn. Wordlessly, he turned to face the veranda, where the sliding door was blocking his view of the garden. It was only afternoon, but his view of the gardens was already closed to him, submerging him in the lonely, dim-lit room to avoid catching a chill from the summer breeze.

Jongin felt his throat tightening at the sight of the screen doors.

Even though he knew he could easily pry them open, Jongin could not help but feel suffocated. For while the screen doors were meant to keep the cold *out,* they were also doing a good job of keeping
him in.

And Jongin feared they would continue to do so until his last breath.

"I am sorry, brother," Jongin abruptly spoke, breaking the silence that ensued. "It seems I will not be able to learn Martial Arts again this year."

Junmyeon regarded him with a small smile. "We have all the time in the world," he reassured. "Right now, your health is more important." He got up from Jongin's bedside to fetch a cup of water from the small table nearby. "So, just focus on recovering instead. Once you are better, you will be able to do all sorts of activities." Junmyeon turned his back on Jongin as he carefully poured water into a saucer.

"Will I really?" Jongin mused. "I feel as though that day will never come."

"It will," Junmyeon's voice was firm. He turned to face Jongin and the younger saw the determination burning within his elder brother's eyes. "I will do whatever it takes to make sure it does."

Jongin sat up as he accepted the saucer that was being offered to him. "Thank you."

As Jongin took small sips of water, Junmyeon watched him intently. Beneath the mask that he wore in the presence of everyone around him, Junmyeon was just a man who desired happiness. A happiness which he couldn't exactly define with tangible goals apart from the vague sense of achieving his personal ambitions. But despite his insatiable drive to succeed, Junmyeon knew that nothing would ever come above his brother's health.

For him, Jongin would always be his top priority.

And knowing what he does, the knots in his stomach tightened as he recalled Physician Koh's earlier words...

"I am sorry Master Junmyeon, it may be what we fear. Master Jongin may have the same sickness as Lady Sooki..."

Junmyeon's heart wrenched at the thought. No, he begged, Mother, please do not take Jongin yet.

Unknown to Junmyeon, lost in his ruminations as he was, Jongin stared from behind the rim of his saucer.

"Brother?" he called again, voice slightly raspy. "Brother, what are you thinking about?"

Hearing Jongin's voice, Junmyeon looked up. "Nothing." He leaned forward to collect the saucer from his hands while forcing a quick smile. "Do you want some more?"

Jongin shook his head. Lately, all his brother ever did was lie to him... and it hurt.

"Then, I shall leave you to rest." Junmyeon slowly got up from his side and paced over to the door, ready to leave. "If you need anything, I will be in my room."

Jongin pulled his bed sheets closer to his chest as if to conceal his uneasiness. Too many things are being left unsaid between us, he thought. But instead of voicing this out he said, "See you later, brother."

As the door softly shut behind him, the smile that stretched between Junmyeon's lips finally
disappeared. He breathed in slowly. *What am I going to do?* He asked himself while covering his face with his hand. *Mother, what should I do?*

With a weary gait, Junmyeon trudged to his room, his steps as heavy as the weight in his chest. Ever since his mother had passed away, he had taken it upon himself to look after his younger brother. After all, he was the only real family he had left. Neither his father nor his other brothers understood him as well as Jongin did: he was the only one who he could trust wholeheartedly; the only brother who he showed his real self to— the real Junmyeon beneath the cold mask.

But could the same be said anymore?

Junmyeon sighed as he approached his own quarters.

Was he... starting to show Jongin his mask too?

*I cannot keep lying to Jongin to protect him*, he thought as he hovered in front of his door. *I have to find a way to help him recover. There must be something that can help him...*

Suddenly, a pair of obsidian eyes flashed at the back of his mind’s eye causing the hairs on Junmyeon's neck to rise. He swallowed.

Something, or someone.

Reluctantly, Junmyeon turned to the other direction and started pacing, each step growing more confident than the last. Despite the fear that threatened to overwhelm him, Junmyeon charged forward. He knew what he was about to do required more confidence than he currently possessed, but he didn’t care. Not with what was at stake.

"*Master Jongin may have the same sickness as Lady Sooki...*

Junmyeon clenched his fists.

*For Jongin, he kept reciting in his mind, Do it for him.*

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 43 of The Brothers Kim!

I hope you all are enjoying TBK so far. If you don't know already, Viy, one of my readers, will be helping me edit TBK chapters from now on. Hopefully, this will bring better quality chapters too.

Once again, thank you for your support in both this book and the webtoon. It makes me smile whenever I see you guys comment that you found the webtoon through the book.

See you again soon!
The door creaked open, flooding the musty room with soft light. Undisturbed dust exploded into the air as Namjoon gently pushed the wooden door. He took a small step inside. “Hello?”

Scanning the dark vicinity, he inclined his head to search for any sign of life. And when his eyes settled on the figure before him, they rounded in surprise.

There, in front of him, sat a woman with her face partly concealed by long strands of ebony hair. From where Namjoon stood, the woman looked like a picture ready to be painted. Wearing dull, plain clothes, the woman continued to tend to her patients—bedridden vagabonds—whose eyes carried a look of adoration for the woman before them.

Who is she?

Noticing that cool air was drifting inside, the woman glanced over her shoulder, allowing Namjoon to finally see her face. A sharp intake of breath was heard as Namjoon took in the woman’s features in a blink of an eye.

She is beautiful.

With irises the colour of rosewood, fringed by long eyelashes, the woman gaped at Namjoon from where she sat. But despite her soft features that exuded an aura of attractive elegance, her face was marred by the frown that tugged at her lips.

It was only when Namjoon met eyes with her did he realise that the frown was aimed at him.

“You won’t find him here,” she replied as she stood up.

Namjoon blinked. “But the locals, they told me—”

“You won’t find a Physician Leu here, so please leave.”

Namjoon frowned at her tone. Had I offended her in some way? Refusing to accept her words, he followed her closely. “Wait, if he is not here, then when will he be back?”

The woman continued to ignore him as he trailed after her.

But just as he was about to ask again, she suddenly stopped, forcing Namjoon to an abrupt halt. The woman’s frown deepened when she turned and discovered him so near. Namjoon mumbled an
apology under his breath as he shuffled backwards.

“He’s... never coming back.” At the end of her utterance, her voice suddenly grew sorrowful as she cast her gaze down.

“Never coming back?”

Meeting Namjoon’s questioning gaze, she explained, “The Physician Leu you’re looking for was my husband. He... passed away not so long ago.”

Silence.

“I apologise for wasting your time,” the woman said, “but as you now know, he cannot help you.” She turned around while mumbling under his breath, “He dedicated all his life helping others when he should have been helping himself...” With a defeated step, she started walking away.

“Wait.”

Surprisingly, she did. The woman gaped at Namjoon expectantly, her lips still set in a firm frown.

“Please hear me out,” Namjoon begged. “I-I wish to learn medicine— I want to become a physician.”

“I already told you, my husband passed away—”

“You can teach me.”

The woman was at a loss for words.

Eagerly, Namjoon resumed, “You are a physician too, are you not?” He cautiously approached her, closing the distance between them, “Will you teach me?”

As the woman searched his countenance, Namjoon took the opportunity to do the same. Despite his earlier nervousness, Namjoon’s eyes remained fixated on hers, hopefully demonstrating his sincerity. In silence, the pair stared at each other as if trying to measure the trustworthiness of the other’s character. But while doing so, Namjoon couldn’t help noticing how her eyes seemed a little red and puffy as if she had been crying not too long ago. The woman, while deprived of any luxurious jewels or expensive ornaments, appeared beautiful to him even in her haggard state.

“No.”

Namjoon jolted to attention. “No?”

“No,” she affirmed. “First of all, I am but a physician’s wife.” She sighed as she corrected, “Was. I was a physician’s wife.” Namjoon opened his mouth to say something but the woman continued, “I am not educated the same way my husband was. I only know what I do from helping him in this clinic.”

“That is alright,” Namjoon keenly answered, “I will accept whatever you can teach me.”

The woman glanced Namjoon up and down before arching her brow. “Pray, tell me, why do you wish to learn from a poor physician when you can learn from those royal physicians in the palace?”

Namjoon blinked. “What- what do you mean—?”

“Do you take me for a fool?” the woman spoke pointedly. “I know who you are, Sir Namjoon.”
Namjoon’s jaw dropped. “How—?”

“Not only are you a noble but you are a soldier too,” she mentioned. “You already hold such a high position even at such a tender age, so why do you wish to occupy yourself with becoming a physician?”

“Because I—”

“Do you consider this vocation a leisure activity?” the woman’s tone was low and accusing.

“No, of course not—!”

“Then why learn from my husband? Why not from the royal physicians?”

“It-it is complicated…”

The woman scoffed as she turned away. “I see.”

“Wait!” Namjoon scrambled after her. “Please, I really wish to learn.”

“Tell me one good reason why I should help you.”

“Because I do not wish to see my comrades die anymore!”

The woman was stunned into silence.

Namjoon, flustered by his outburst, mumbled an apology before proceeding with his explanation. “You do not know what the battlefield is like,” he said, finally regaining his composure. “You do not know what it feels like to see your men, your comrade-in-arms, your friends perish before you and be powerless to prevent it.”

The woman answered him with a knowing stare.

“I wish to learn for their sake,” Namjoon continued. “While this siege persists, who knows how many countless lives will be lost in the name of victory. All I want to do is to reduce that number.”

The woman observed Namjoon’s sombre expression, his eyes suddenly unreadable. Despite his youthful appearance, there was something about his dark eyes that seemed aged as if his experience of warfare had somehow made him wiser.

When Namjoon finally snapped out of his reverie, he was surprised to find the woman smiling at him—a smile so warm that it melted whatever qualms he had stirring in his chest.

“Then let us get started.” Her melodic voice finally matched her alluring visage.

“Huh? You mean—?”

The woman nodded. “You’ve proven your selflessness, Sir Namjoon. And being selfless is one of the most important traits in being a physician.” She nodded approvingly, earning a bashful grin from the young soldier.

“Thank you so much!” His voice was squeaky from both excitement and relief. “I promise to work hard. I will not disappoint you…” His voice trailed off as he mulled over her name. Had she mentioned it?

Noticing his hesitance, the woman chortled. “Hanae,” she replied, her smile much more radiant
With a gentle touch, Mayu patted away the beads of sweat that started to collect on Namjoon’s forehead.

A soft groan escaped his lips. “Ha… nae.”

Mayu pursed her lips. “Even now, you’re still thinking of her…” Her eyes softened as she tried to ease the crease on his forehead by dabbing at his brow. “Why does she still occupy your heart, Master Namjoon?” She gaped at his sleeping face, reassured that her straightforwardness would remain unknown. Mayu sighed as she continued to stare at him, a mixture of adoration and wistfulness blooming in her chest. “Why does she occupy your heart… even though I’m right here?” Mayu leaned in as her eyes trailed down his face, following the movement of her cloth-holding hand. She had never been this close to Namjoon before.

Despite working under Namjoon for a while, she had never seen him collapse. Like the strong man he was, he had always been a pillar of strength, a meticulous individual that was careful of his health. But seeing him in deep slumber was like having Namjoon reveal his vulnerability to her for the first time. And as he slept fitfully under her watch, Mayu couldn’t help but be overwhelmed by the urge to touch him, embrace him, protect him from the stifling nightmares that seem to disrupt his dreams.

Dreams… where her aunt still lived on.

“Gyu… Gyuri.”

Mayu froze. Had I heard right? With wide eyes she searched Namjoon’s countenance while implicitly urging him to repeat what he had mumbled. Gyuri… Was he dreaming of Gyuri?

“How is he?”

Mayu jumped before swerving around immediately. Disguising her shock, she forced a smile when she saw who it was. “Not too good,” she replied, her teeth catching her bottom lip. “Master Namjoon’s fever is still quite high.”

Finally changed out of her ruined clothes, Gyuri tiptoed over to Mayu’s side, so that both were hovering nearby Namjoon’s resting body. She whispered, “What did Physician Koh say when he came earlier?”

“He says it’s just a fever,” Mayu answered, her eyes fixed on what she was doing. “Fortunately, he hasn’t caught the plague. Physician Koh says that he most likely collapsed from exhaustion.”

Gyuri sighed in relief.

“It was a good thing you were there when it happened,” Mayu said softly, “Master Namjoon’s condition might’ve gotten worse hadn’t you been there to get help at once.”

A small smile graced Gyuri’s lips. “I only wish I did more…”

Earlier, when she witnessed Namjoon collapse, she had feared the worse had befallen him. Having spent the past few weeks by Namjoon’s side, Gyuri had noticed slight changes in his manner. How his pallor had grown increasingly pale; how his utterances slowly decreased in eloquence; how his normally collected demeanour became flustered and irritable. Gyuri had seen the signs but had failed
to act up on it. And now, witnessing Namjoon in his weakened state, she was overwhelmed with guilt.

*I could’ve prevented this…*

“Me too.”

Gyuri looked up and saw Mayu peering at her.

“Me too,” Mayu repeated. “I wish I did more. I’m his personal maid, yet I couldn’t even prevent Master Namjoon from overworking himself.”

“He’s quite stubborn sometimes,” Gyuri said with a small smile. “I doubt he’d even listen if we told him to take it easy and rest.”

“Yes,” Mayu agreed, “he’s very hardworking. I can’t remember the last time he took a day off from the sanatorium.”

“Maybe he’s a workaholic,” she mused.

Mayu gaped at her quizzically. “A… work-a-holic?” she enunciated slowly. “What’s that?”

“Er,” Gyuri scratched her head as she chuckled at her mistake, “someone who’s addicted to working.”

Mayu let out a hum of enlightenment. “Ah, okay.” She turned to peer at Namjoon again. “But yes, I guess you can call him that. Master Namjoon is very devoted to medicine and helping others…”

“Yeah… Sometimes I wonder why he’s so kind.”

“He has always been this way,” Mayu responded immediately. “For as long as I have known him, Master Namjoon has always put others before himself. He’s like a saint. Sometimes I find it hard to believe that such a kind man can exist…”

Gyuri watched as Mayu let out a long sigh, her eyes undoubtedly brimming with adoration. She had suspected that what Mayu felt towards Namjoon was more than what she claimed, but just wouldn’t admit it. And seeing the same wistful look that she herself was so familiar with caused an uneasy feeling to stir in her chest.

“Yeah,” Gyuri agreed, her voice wavering slightly, “me too.”

~*~

Namjoon smiled as he looked down at the sketchbook in front of him. “Beautiful,” he murmured, quite pleased with his artwork.

“What’s so beautiful?”

*In a quick instance, Namjoon’s head shot up in alarm as his eyes met with the woman standing before him. “Er—nothing.” With hurried movements, he rushed to hide his sketchbook.*

*Hanae raised her brow.*

“W-what are you doing here?” Namjoon asked, still startled by her ’s sudden appearance.

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?” she replied teasingly. *Hanae took a step towards Namjoon, where*
he was sitting on the grassy slope. Spotting the paintbrush and palette, Hanae’s brow arched even higher. “Were you painting?”

Namjoon quickly shuffled to obstruct her view. “No, I- er, I was- erm…” He looked wildly around the tranquil scenery for an excuse, but found none. “I was, erm…”

“What’s that?” Hanae peered behind Namjoon and noticed a few sheets of paper on the ground. She headed straight for them.

“Ah—!” Quickly, Namjoon scrambled to block her path. “Please do not look at them,” he rushed to say. “It is- it is a little embarrassing.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Hanae dismissed. “Besides, I didn’t even know you painted.” She sauntered past before Namjoon had the chance to stop her.

Helplessly, Namjoon watched as Hanae crouched down to inspect his art. With water trickling from the nearby stream filling the silence, he waited nervously for her verdict. "It is- it is just a rough draft," he rambled. "I- I wanted to try my hand at painting and thought that nature would be my best subject. I know it is not that good——"

“It is excellent.”

He blinked.

Hanae turned to face him. “You painted this?”

Namjoon meekly nodded.

Glancing up from the painting, Hanae directed her attention towards the magnolia tree in the distance before looking down again. “You captured its likeliness,” she said in awe. “It’s so lifelike!”

“You think so?”

“Of course!”

A shy smile slowly appeared on Namjoon’s lips.

“You have talent for this, Sir Namjoon. It is indeed beautiful.” She peered down at the other paintings that were sprawled on the grass. “These are remarkable too.”

Namjoon gaped at Hanae as she studied the other paintings on the ground. But while she admired his art, Namjoon was admiring her.

From afar, Namjoon’s eyes inevitably traced the outline of Hanae’s side profile, committing to memory every single detail. From the way the sunlight revealed the small flaws in her skin to the way her long hair cascaded down her back, Namjoon absorbed each characteristic in a blink of an eye. And with every second that passed, Namjoon couldn’t help but arrive at the same conclusion each time.

She is beautiful.

“Do you only draw pictures of nature?”

Namjoon snapped out of his daydream. “Er, yes. M-mostly nature…” He tightened his grip on his sketchbook, bringing it closer to his back.
“You should try your hand at doing portraits too,” she suggested. “Maybe you might even get commissions.”

“Painting can only be a hobby for me,” Namjoon responded as he stared down at his paintings. “Like my father, I am expected to excel at the military and maybe even succeed the Guan Yu.” Suddenly downcast by the realisation, he murmured, “Even studying medicine is considered unbecoming.”

Hanae’s expression was solemn. “Does your uncle still not approve of you learning medicine?”

Namjoon’s lips stretched into a small smile that were at odds with the woe in his eyes.

“But why? You are part of the military. Does he not see the benefits of you learning this skill?”

“It is not just my uncle, though” Namjoon revealed. “Even my sister has qualms with me learning medicine.” He sighed. “I guess it is because they are afraid I will neglect my duties as a company leader.”

Hanae eyed him pitifully.

“But it is alright,” Namjoon half-heartedly said. “It is more important that I fulfil my duties as Father’s only son. That is what he would have wanted if he were still alive.”

“Still…” Hanae’s voice was small. She peered down at the array of paintings at her feet. “It is such a shame.”

Namjoon stared at the paintings alongside her. “It is strange, is it not? You would think that being born wealthy would allow more liberty, but it is no different from being born destitute. In the end, we are no more masters of our own destiny than everyone else. We are all the same: we are victims of circumstance.”

Hanae glanced at Namjoon, whose eyes were dim with resignation. Having spent so much time with him, she had come to realise that he was unlike every other noble she had come across. And because of that, she could not bear seeing him so forlorn.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, startling Namjoon. “I almost forgot. I have news to tell you.”

Namjoon gaped at her curiously. “News?”

With a big smile, Hanae divulged, “I have received notice to serve as a physician in His Majesty’s fifth company.”

“His Majesty’s fifth company?” Namjoon echoed, his face riddled with confusion. “But that is my company.”

Hanae’s jaw dropped.

“You will be a military physician?” Namjoon could feel his voice rising. “Why? How?”

“I- I was told there was a shortage of physicians. I- I didn’t know it was your company.” She searched his eyes with glee. “This is amazing, isn’t it? I will be able to help you…”

Suddenly, the vibrant scenery that surrounded the pair faded into grey as Namjoon watched his younger self share Hanae’s excitement. He helplessly observed them from afar, the once clear image blurring into a mosaic.
No... Not again...

With all his strength, Namjoon desperately fought to change the course of events, all too aware of the impending doom that was to come next.

It was the same sequence over and over.

"No!" Tears welled in his eyes as he attempted to warn his naïve self. "Stop her, you fool! Do not let her go—it is a trap!"

Undeterred by his shouting, the events continued to replay before him, forcing Namjoon to relive the nightmare that haunted his mind. Whether they were memories or dreams, Namjoon didn't know anymore. All he knew was that it was the same sequence each time. The same sequence that caused him to fall to his knees in defeat without fail.

Why was this happening?

“Namjoon?”

Namjoon rapidly turned at the sound of a familiar voice.

Huh?

“Namjoon, is that you?”

Namjoon blinked away the tears that blurred his vision, allowing his eyes to focus on the figure before him. They widened in disbelief. “Ha... nae?”

There, clothed in white, was the woman he had been yearning to see in so long. She smiled. “It really is you—”

Namjoon surged forward, his arms capturing her in his embrace, before she had time to finish her utterance. The woman nearly fell from the impact.

“I missed you.” Namjoon choked back the tears that threatened to fall. “I have missed you so much.” He squeezed Hanae tightly, drawing her close.

Hanae caressed his back in reassurance. “And I’ve missed you too,” she replied, her voice muffled against his embrace. Namjoon let out a sob as he held her closely, the heaviness in his chest finally lifting for the first time in so long. Like a vulnerable child he clung onto her, not wanting for this moment to end.

Eventually, Hanae pushed for them to separate and hesitantly, Namjoon complied. “Namjoon, I need you to do something for me.”


“But that’s the thing.” Her voice was mournful as she tried to pull her hand away from his grasp. “I need you to let me go.”

“What?” Namjoon was mortified. “No- no. I cannot- I will not!”

“Namjoon—”

“I cannot, Hanae! You know I cannot—!”
“It wasn’t your fault.”

Namjoon abruptly stopped.

“It wasn’t your fault, so don’t blame yourself for what happened—”

“But how can I not?” he shouted. “If I had not left you alone… If I had let someone else lead the siege… Then you would still be alive today.” Namjoon’s voice cracked. “You did not deserve to die that way… It should have been me.”

Hanae reached out her hand to caress his cheek. “I know you would’ve saved me if you could,” she reassured him. “And it pains me to see you suffer and deprive yourself of happiness in my stead.”

“I can no longer be happy,” he muttered miserably. “Not when you are no longer by my side.”

Hanae’s smile was kind. “Namjoon, you may not realise it yet, but there’s someone else out there that can make you much happier than me.” She pressed her hand against his chest. “And from the way your heart beats, I already know that she’s a very special person to you.”

Namjoon looked at her, confused. “I do not understand. There is no one—”

A familiar smile flashed before his eyes.

Seeing his tongue-tied expression, Hanae giggled. “Do you understand now? She is the one that can heal your inner wounds.” Her eyes were woeful as she uttered. “The same wounds that I left behind…”

Hanae stepped away from him, bright orbs starting to float at her feet. “Wait!” Namjoon leapt forward, suddenly frightened by their appearance. “What is going on- what is happening?”

“Take care of yourself, Namjoon,” she said, eyes glossy with tears. “Thank you for taking care of my family all this time…”

“Hanae, wait!” Namjoon tried to grab onto her hands but it was too late; they were already fading. “Hanae, I—!”

And just before the woman disappeared, Namjoon closed the distance between them, locking their lips together for the first and final time.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:

Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 44 of The Brothers Kim.

I hope this chapter clarified one of the many TBK theories that I have yet to reveal.

Happy Valentines Day!

And see you all soon~

Editor’s Note:
Hey there, readers! @Viylu04 here. The publication of this chapter marks the second one I’ve edited for TBK. I truly love this story, and I thank you all for loving it, too.

Also, I’m sorry (mostly >:D) on both our behalves for being evil and leaving on a double-cliffhanger. Please anticipate the next one a lot, and check out Laurel and Sammy’s TBK webtoon in the meantime!

[Insert some trashy, tumblr-worthy sign off here],

-Viy ed.
When Subin was thirteen, she had her first kiss.

It was with her boyfriend at the time, a guy named Isaac. He was an outgoing lad with striking blue eyes and brown curly hair. At first, Subin thought that Isaac was quite funny. He was often raucous in the classes they shared but he wasn’t a bad guy—he just wanted to have fun. And so, when he asked her out, Subin was surprised. After all, she was nothing like him. In fact, she was the exact opposite. Subin couldn’t understand what Isaac saw in her and had almost rejected him if it weren’t for her best friend’s intervention.

“C’mon, you should give him a chance!” Liha urged while poking Subin in the ribs. “He’s cute!”

Subin shielded herself from Liha’s excitable poking. “But I don’t know if I like him that way—”

“What isn’t there to like?” Liha interjected. “Isaac’s tall, smart,” she paused, “well, kinda smart and he’s really funny.” Liha’s voice went up a notch as she tried to suppress her squeal. “I think you guys would make a great match!”

“I don’t know…”

“Su, you gotta give love a chance. It’s like a rite of passage. You’re already thirteen. When will you start dating? When you’re thirty?”

Subin arched her brow at her friend before bursting into giggles alongside her. “There’s nothing wrong with waiting that long, y’know.”

“Well, yeah, of course not,” Liha replied flippantly. “But it’s not like I’m telling you to marry the guy either.” She put her hands on her hips. “Trust me, Su, Isaac’s a catch. Maybe you’ll start liking him along the way. You’ll never know unless you try.”

And so, Subin did.

On their first date, Isaac had invited her to watch a movie followed by lunch at McDonald’s. It wasn’t a glamorous date, but it was a lot like what Subin imagined first dates to be. Surprisingly, she had a lot of fun. She smiled a lot thanks to Isaac’s cheesy jokes, and she felt at ease the whole time she was with him. At some point, Subin started to think that maybe she did like Isaac… even if it was only a little.

“Do you know what a homunculus is?”

Subin looked up. “Homunculus?” she repeated as they started walking away from the bus stop. “What? You mean those things from that anime?”

Isaac cocked his head.

The sun had started to set, and pools of amber light illuminated the pavement in front of them.

“Anime? What anime?” Isaac regarded Subin quizzically before letting out a soft chuckle. “Oh, you mean ‘Full Metal Alchemist’? No, I wasn’t on about that.” He pulled his phone from his pocket and
showed it to her. “I was on about this.”

Subin peered at Isaac’s phone screen and almost immediately grimaced. “What the—” She met eyes with Isaac. “What the hell is that?”

“Nasty lookin’ fella, isn’t he?” He grinned. “We were learning about it in Biology the other day. Mrs. Gregory says that the bigger the parts of the body in the homunculus, the more sensitive it is to sensory input.” Isaac glided his fingers across the screen so that he could magnify the image. “Look, this means that the most sensitive parts in the body are actually the hands, tongue and lips.”

Subin hummed as she continued walking ahead. “Yeah, okay, but why show me that?”

Isaac stopped. “Because I…” And before Subin could register what was happening, Isaac’s lips were on hers.

~*~

A knock on the door caused Mayu and Gyuri to peer over their shoulders.

“Miss Mayu?”

There, hovering by the door, was the servant boy. Dressed in discoloured clothing, the young lad shifted his gaze from Mayu to Gyuri and back again. “I have a letter for you,” he said as he lifted the folded piece of paper in his hand. “I was told a reply is urgently needed.”

Mayu abruptly stood up.

Gyuri curiously gaped at her.

“I’m sorry, Gyuri,” Mayu blurted, her tone mildly alarmed. “Do you mind watching over Master Namjoon for me? I will be right back.”

“Sure—”

“Thank you!” Mayu bolted to the door before Gyuri had time to ask anything more.

Once both she and the servant boy had disappeared, Gyuri turned her attention back to Namjoon. With Mayu gone, the room suddenly felt much emptier. “I wonder what that was all about,” Gyuri mumbled to herself. “I hope it wasn’t anything bad…” She scooted closer to Namjoon by occupying Mayu’s seat. As Gyuri resumed wiping the sweat from Namjoon’s face, a sudden thought came to her: how long has it been since she and Namjoon had been alone together?

“Don’t go thinking about those things now, Subin,” Gyuri scolded herself, her cheeks flaming at the thought. “He’s just a…” but then, she paused.

What was he to her?

Under the glow of the flickering candlelight, Gyuri’s eyes traced Namjoon’s features, all the while contemplating that very question. The sound of his breathing, while barely audible, was the only thing distracting her from bringing her fanciful thoughts to the fore. And as if the world was conspiring against her, even the shadows teased her by dancing around Namjoon’s eyes, nose, lips. Like playful imps, they were provoking her into acknowledging the feelings that she so strongly denied.

You care for him.
Gyuri squirmed uncomfortably on her seat.

“You’re so stupid,” she berated herself. “Stop thinking about those things.” She shook her head fervently to banish such thoughts. “We can’t lose focus now. We have to get back home—”

“Let...go…”

At the sound of a husky voice, Gyuri almost leapt out of her stool. It was only faint, but she was sure she heard someone speak.

“…missed you.”

Gyuri let out a sigh of relief upon realising it was Namjoon who had spoken. *Geez, you scared the hell out of me.* She frowned at Namjoon as she tried to regain her composure. “Master Namjoon…” Gyuri tentatively whispered. “Are you awake?”

A low groan escaped Namjoon’s lips as he shifted in his sleep, his features slowly morphing to one of distress. He cried out, “No… Stop…!”

Gyuri jumped.

Alarmed by his shouting, she got up to help him when she noticed that his eyes were still closed. *Could he be having a bad dream?*

“It’s okay, Master Namjoon,” Gyuri spoke in what she hoped was a soothing voice. “It’s just a dream,” she murmured, “everything’s alright, you’re okay.”

But still, Namjoon’s distressed expression remained unchanged.

Remembering what her dad used to do, Gyuri placed her small hand on top of his, flinching slightly at his feverish temperature. *He’s still burning up…* she thought as she gently dabbed at his brow with her other hand. *It will be bad if his fever doesn’t go down.*

After a few moments, Namjoon’s writhing ceased.

Gyuri was relieved to see that it had worked. “That’s right, Master Namjoon, everything will be okay. You’re alright.”

But just as she was about to remove her hand, Namjoon unexpectedly spoke again, “…Please… not leave…” His hand shifted from underneath hers as if he was trying to grab onto something. “I cannot…”

Gyuri looked down at his slender fingers which were twitching with effort. “It’s okay, Master Namjoon. I’m right here.”

But again, Namjoon grew restless. Her words seemed to have lost their effect.

Unsure of what else to do, Gyuri threaded her hand into his, hoping that it would calm him down. His febrile skin stung her like hot steam and she winced. But instead of letting go, Gyuri squeezed his palm, hoping that it would be enough to reassure him. To her surprise, Namjoon responded by curling his fingers around hers.

“Master Namjoon?”

Gyuri glanced up as Namjoon let out a long breath, his expression peaceful once more. Like an
innocent child, he slept soundly while their hands remained intertwined. But while Namjoon was lost in blissful slumber, Gyuri, by contrast, became flustered by their connection.

Maybe she had a fever too.

“You’re unfair, Master Namjoon,” Gyuri mumbled as she turned her face away. She looked down at their joined hands, the warmth of his feverish skin blending with hers. “Why are you making it hard for me not to think about you?”

Despite her reservations, Gyuri stared at Namjoon expectantly as if waiting for him to respond. She knew from the way her heart raced that what feelings she harboured for him were growing despite all her efforts to quash them. Like a wilful seed, they continued to thrive even in the most barren of conditions. And it was only a matter of time before Namjoon found out. After all, even if Gyuri was hesitant to say it out loud, her heart couldn’t lie. Even the slightest touch or the merest look was enough to crack her rigid façade.

It was only Namjoon who had that power over her.

“I don’t want to fall for you,” Gyuri confessed, unable to contain her worries. “I can’t…” She looked across the room, where a full-length mirror stood in the shadows. Staring back at her was a young woman with a look so vulnerable that she almost didn’t recognise herself. “Because if I do, it will only make things harder when I find out a way to get back home.” She blinked and her reflection changed—it was someone in a school uniform—her school uniform. “And I must go home. I have to go back to where I belong.”

Gyuri shifted her attention from the mirror to Namjoon and saw that he was still sleeping, her secret confession unheard. She laughed at herself, both in relief and disappointment.

“What am I doing?” Gyuri scoffed, her voice wavering from nerves. She breathed in and out slowly to steady her palpitating heart. “I’m not normally like this.”

She peeped at Namjoon’s angelic face that bore an uncanny resemblance to a sleeping prince. With eyes perfectly fringed by long eyelashes and full lips slightly parted, Gyuri was entranced by his allure. Was this how the prince felt when he stared down at his sleeping beauty?

“They’re worried about you getting close to the Kims.”

Gyuri shook her head and forced herself to lean back. “Ugh,” she groaned, “something must be wrong with me.” She tore her eyes away from Namjoon as Pho’s voice echoed in her head. “I can’t…” she mumbled to herself as a wave of guilt washed over her. “Whatever it is I feel for you is wrong.” She stared at Namjoon again as the guilt weighed down on her, settling near the pit of her stomach like a hoard of butterflies. Gyuri clutched her abdomen as the fluttering anxiety suddenly grew into a dull ache. She winced as the ache turned into a sharp pain.

“Could it be…?”

Gyuri squirmed on her seat, immediately conscious of the fact that a month had passed since her last menstruation. And as if Mother Nature had orchestrated the whole affair, Gyuri was suddenly blessed with the urgent need to relieve herself.

She glanced back at the door.

“Where are you, Mayu?” she gritted out as she crossed her legs. Peering back down, Gyuri saw that Namjoon had become agitated again. He fidgeted in his sleep, a visible crease appearing on his forehead. Gyuri stared at their connected hands as she attempted to calculate how long she could
endure a full bladder. But as she pinched her legs even closer together, the dreaded possibility of an impending red stain soiling her skirt drifted into her thoughts.

It was enough to motivate her to make haste for the lavatory.

“I’m sorry, Master Namjoon,” Gyuri clumsily apologised. “I’ll be right back—” She stood up quickly and had almost untangled their hands when suddenly, Namjoon grabbed hold of her wrist, simultaneously pulling her back down.

What happened next caused Gyuri’s mind to go blank.

Entangled in his arms, Gyuri was dumbfounded to find Namjoon’s face right in front of hers. The warmth of his touch, his skin, his lips sent a strange tingling sensation coursing through her veins, igniting a foreign flame within her— something that caused her to see fireworks exploding in her mind’s eye like white flashes.

It was like being shocked with electricity.

With Namjoon’s lips pressed against hers, everything for Gyuri seemed to have stopped. Beyond herself and Namjoon, nothing else existed. It was like she was spirited away to a different world; where the wrong seemed right and the right seemed wrong. Where stations and age didn’t matter; where she could freely allow herself to love because she knew Namjoon was a man that could be trusted. Gyuri was excited and confused, but most of all, she felt a spark.

And it was the first time she had ever felt this way.

“Tzu-lin... she... she did something unforgivable.”

Finally regaining her wits, Gyuri pushed Namjoon away in embarrassment, accidentally striking him in the face. Namjoon fell back on his bed like a ragdoll, his eyes still shut in deep sleep.

“I- I’m—” Shocked by what had transpired, Gyuri sprinted to the door without a second glance. She decided to worry about apologising later.

But just as she was about to depart, Namjoon groaned. “Ha…nae.”

Gyuri left before she could listen to anymore.

When she finally reached the safety of a hidden corner, Gyuri collapsed against the wall, her legs wobbling with fatigue. The faint taste of medicine still lingered in her mouth, bitter and vile but the kiss was sweet.

Why were his lips so sweet?

“This is bad,” she muttered to herself as she tried to stop a smile from appearing. Gyuri slapped her hands against her cheeks and panicked when she felt how hot they were—she must look like a tomato right now!

But with the sound of her heart thumping against her chest, Gyuri knew that her flushed face was the least of her problems. For while she denied her heart of the chance to love, Gyuri realised that the feelings she harboured for Namjoon was no longer a wilful seed that she could control.

That wilful seed was now a flower in full bloom.

~*~
“Cousin, what happened to your face?”

Namjoon looked up from the book in his hands towards the door, where Taehyung was standing. It was the following morning and having already had his breakfast, Taehyung decided to visit Namjoon after hearing of his latest escapade.

“Oh? This?” Namjoon pointed to his right eye, where a purple bruise marred his skin. “I must have collided into something when I collapsed yesterday.” He closed his book and placed it aside. “That is what Physician Koh told me when I woke up this morning.”

“You should be more careful,” Taehyung reproached as he sat on the stool next to his bed. “Gyuri told me everything. It was fortunate that she found you as soon as she did.”

Namjoon rubbed his neck. “I must have overworked myself. I apologise for worrying you.” He peered at the door and then back at Taehyung. “Speaking of Gyuri, where is she? I have not seen her yet.”

Taehyung cocked his head. “Is that so?” He scrunched his lip as he thought aloud, “That is strange, I met her on the way here. I thought she already visited you.”

“Oh.” Namjoon was surprised. “No, she had not.”

“Did you need something from her?”

“Oh, no… nothing.” Namjoon looked away. “I- I just wanted to see her is all.”

Taehyung hummed. He searched Namjoon's dimly lit room, taking note of a basin and cloth near his bedside. “So, how are you feeling, Cousin?” he politely enquired. "I must say, it is unusual for you to be the one recovering in a bed.”

“Yes, I know,” Namjoon replied with a small smile. “I am feeling much better. Apart from the mild discomfort of waking up in drenched clothing, my head feels much clearer.” He placed his hand across his chest. “And strangely enough, my heart feels lighter too.”

“It sounds like that good night’s sleep has done you some good.”

“Indeed,” Namjoon agreed. He inspected his hand as if he was seeing it for the first time. “Although, I cannot help but feel like I am forgetting something important.”

Taehyung watched as Namjoon frowned. “Are you referring to your work at the sanatorium?”

At this, Namjoon shook his head. “No.” He paused. “Or maybe, yes… I do not know. I cannot remember what it is.” Namjoon sighed as he glanced out of his window, where the blue sky was replaced by angry, dark clouds.

Something about the gloomy weather unnerved Namjoon.

“Physician Koh has prescribed me bed rest for the whole day, so I cannot go to the sanatorium to check on my patients,” Namjoon absentmindedly spoke as he continued to gape outside his window. Suddenly, he glared down at his clenched fists. “I have truly failed as a physician.”

“Cousin, you really should be worrying about your health more right now,” Taehyung lightly scolded. “What good would you be to anyone if you are ill?”

“I know, but I cannot help it,” Namjoon grumbled. “The situation with the plague is not improving
despite my efforts.” He pinched his nose bridge. “I worry for those who do not have access to medication like we do. Without anyone to run the sanatorium, what chance do the people have?”

“Then, what if I run the sanatorium in your place?”

Namjoon’s head shot up immediately. “You, cousin?”

Taehyung nodded.

“No, absolutely not,” Namjoon rebuked.

Taehyung’s brow arched at Namjoon’s tone. “Why not?”

“You do not know a thing about medicine.”

“I can learn!”

Namjoon shook his head. “That is beside the point. I cannot risk you getting sick, especially when I can prevent it.” He met eyes with Taehyung. “No, you should stay put, here, in the household until further notice.”

“But, cousin!” Taehyung protested. “This is unjust! Are you saying I cannot go to the village at all?”

Namjoon calmly nodded.

“If you are going to forbid me from going, then you should forbid everyone else from going,” Taehyung reasoned. “My immunity to the plague is no different from the servants’ or the maids’ that go out daily to fetch supplies. Why can they go, and I cannot? They are susceptible to catching the plague as much as you and I.”

“Taehyung, I really do not want to be arguing with you right now,” Namjoon wearily responded as he picked up his book. “And need I remind you that you solemnly swore to me that you would do as I say.”

Taehyung looked away sulkily. “Yes, cousin…” He got up from his chair, suddenly downcast by Namjoon’s firmness on the matter.

Why is everyone always treating me like a child? He pouted. I cannot wait until I am a man!

Taehyung got up from his seat as he suddenly thought of a way to improve his bad mood. If there was one person that could cheer him up, it was definitely Gyuri. He started heading for the door.

But just as he was about to leave, something peculiar suddenly caught his eye. He trudged over to the corner to pick it up. “Cousin, what is this?”

Namjoon hummed distractedly before tearing his eyes away from what he was reading. “That is…”

Taehyung returned to Namjoon’s bedside with the item stretched out in his hands.

When Namjoon finally had a good look at what that item was, he explained, “That is my bandana.” Taehyung handed over the silk to Namjoon as he continued, “I won this many years ago during the annual juedo.”

“Juedo?” Taehyung repeated. He thought for a moment before exclaiming, “Oh! You mean that tournament between the Jade Lotus Clan members?”
Namjoon nodded. He traced his hand across the intricately embroidered silk, memories of blood, sweat and swords flooding his mind.

“Will you ever participate in it again, cousin?” Taehyung queried, his eyes trained on the silk. “I was too young to remember you competing.”

Namjoon handed the bandana back to Taehyung. “No, I do not think so.” He turned his attention back to his book. “My fighting days are over. I do not see the need to engage in mortal combat as a sport when I can use that time to help others instead.” Noticing Taehyung’s disappointment, he added, “Although, when you are of age, maybe I can watch you compete.”

Taehyung’s pitch rose. “Me? Surely not…” He blinked several times and Namjoon observed the excited glint in Taehyung’s crescent eyes. “I am not good with a sword or Martial Arts.”

“Well, maybe I can teach you.”

Taehyung glanced up. “Really?”

Namjoon nodded. “Of course. Even if my days in the military are over, that does not mean I cannot pass down the knowledge I have acquired to someone who wants it.” He grinned as he playfully mentioned, “Although, my men do say that I am a strict teacher.”

Taehyung’s lips stretched into a box-like smile. “That is fine! I am confident I can manage.” He flexed his right arm to showcase a small bump of flesh. "See! My muscles are already this big!"

Namjoon chuckled at the sight of his younger cousin. It was times like these that reminded Namjoon that his skills of warfare were not meaningless after all.

But just as he was about to interrupt Taehyung’s ramblings, a deafening scream pierced through the air, silencing the two.

Namjoon and Taehyung froze.

As the sky above shrouded the room in a veil of darkness, a cold chill shot down Namjoon’s spine, causing him to shiver. Even without his gift of foresight, Namjoon knew that something terrible had occurred.

He feared to find out what it could be.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 45 of The Brothers Kim!

I'm really excited about the development of this story as a lot of drama will soon unfold. What do you think is about to happen?

See you soon!
“It looks like it’s going to rain.”

Gyuri stared at Pho from across the storage house, where Pho was gazing outside the window. With the sky a melancholy grey, Gyuri couldn’t help but feel unsettled. She knew she should be used to drab weather, having grown up in the UK, but something about the dark clouds didn’t seem right to her.

Their presence was like an ominous sign.

“At last, the drought is finally over,” Gyuri heard Pho say as she sauntered over to help with unpacking the basket of food. “It’s a shame we might get caught in the rain,” she added while setting some vegetables aside. “Maybe we should return early before the rain falls?” Pho glanced at Gyuri after a few moments had passed and she hadn’t replied. “Gyuri?”

“How?” Gyuri turned toward her.

Noticing the somewhat dazed look on her friend’s face, Pho queried, “Is something bothering you?”

Gyuri shook her head. “Erm, no- no…” She fixed her gaze on her hands as she started organising the bowls.

Pho was unconvinced. “You don’t have to worry about those thugs returning,” she reassured.

Gyuri flinched at the mention of them.

“The imperial guards,” Pho continued, “they took care of them already.” Pho watched Gyuri shuffle on her feet. “We’re safe here,” she reiterated. “So, there’s no need to be anxious.”

“I- I just can’t help feeling uneasy…” Gyuri eventually confessed.

Pho observed how Gyuri refused to look up.

“It was scary, Pho.” Gyuri shuddered as she suddenly envisioned a sharp sword pointed at her. “I was lucky I didn’t get hurt but Chim Chim he…” She looked up and Pho finally saw the dark shadows under her eyes. “What if more of them come back?” Her voice was small. “What if they come back and try to hurt us again?”

“They won’t,” Pho confidently answered. “Not when the imperial guards are around.”

Gyuri searched the storage house but found no sign of Jimin or Zeren. Apart from a few peasants, the storage house was practically deserted.

Pho cleared her throat. “Even if the imperial guards aren’t here today, we’ll be fine.” She picked up one of the bowls and started filling it with broth. “And besides, you could have stayed at the household today if you weren’t up for it. Madam Zhou would have understood.”

Again, Gyuri shuffled on her feet. With thoughts of Namjoon suddenly floating into her head, her cheeks burned. “I- I would’ve stayed if I could…” she murmured. “But I didn’t want to let people down,” she hastily explained. “Not when they depend on the soup kitchen for their daily meal.”
Pho hummed doubtfully as she eyed Gyuri’s flushed expression. But instead of pursuing it further, she replied, “Well, there’s no point in us worrying about what might or might not happen.” As if on cue, the door opened, and more peasants entered the storage house. Pho gestured to them. “We have mouths to feed.”

Following Pho’s lead, Gyuri readied a bowl of stew and served it to the newcomers. But while she watched her hands serve the stew, her mind wandered to the deepest part of her thoughts.

*Everything feels surreal.*

Only yesterday, she had escaped death by the skin of her teeth. If it weren’t for Jimin and Zeren, Gyuri may not even be in the storage house at all.

*Chim Chim... Zeren... where are you?*

Gyuri glanced over her shoulder and out the window as if expecting the pair to make an entrance. She knew it was unlikely that they would, but part of her wished that they did. After all, ever since they had rescued her from the burly man, they had been coming to the soup kitchen almost every day. And after weeks of being by her side, Gyuri had gotten used to their presence. Not having to deal with Zeren’s flirtatious advances or hearing Jimin’s curt responses almost felt foreign to her— it was like a part of her was missing.

*Do not ever scare me like that again.*

A pang of guilt overwhelmed Gyuri as she suddenly recalled Jimin’s words. His bruised face peppered with cuts were painful to look at. Blotches of red stained his turquoise uniform like flicks from a paintbrush. And knowing that it was *her* who was the reason for his injuries made the knots in her stomach constrict.

*It’s my fault.*

“Little Madam?”

Hearing someone address her, Gyuri looked up and found a peasant waiting.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, before serving him his portion.

Uneventfully, the hours spent at the storage house passed by, and Gyuri soon realised that Pho was right: even without Jimin and Zeren, things would be fine. In fact, it almost unsettled her how everything seemed to go on as normal as if the previous day hadn’t happened at all. If it weren’t for the bruise she found on her neck, Gyuri may have deceived herself into thinking that yesterday was all a dream.

“There weren’t many people again today,” Pho observed as she cradled the pot of scraps. Gyuri let out a sound of acknowledgement as she locked the door behind them. Having little else left to do, the pair had decided to pack up early.

“I guess it’s a good thing,” Gyuri replied with her back turned. “We might be able to make it before it starts pouring down with rain—” She suddenly froze upon spotting the pot of scraps. Her voice was edgy. “Are you... going past the dumping ground?”

“Well, yes, of course,” Pho answered, unaware of Gyuri’s worries. “I have to throw these away before we—” Pho stopped when she noticed Gyuri’s expression. “Oh. Would you rather not go?”
“N-no,” Gyuri bravely replied. “It’s okay. I’ll- I’ll go with you.”

“Are you sure?” Pho stared at Gyuri sceptically and noticed how her hands were quivering. “You don’t have to.”

Gyuri forced herself to smile. “I- I think I’ll be fine.”

With a slight shrug, Pho marched ahead as Gyuri trailed slowly behind. Gyuri had hoped that Pho would be more insistent on her not coming but Pho hardly ever contested Gyuri’s words. After all, Gyuri hardly ever showed her vulnerable side to anyone. She knew it wasn’t Pho’s fault that she couldn’t see through Gyuri’s brave pretence. Ever since she arrived at Saim, Gyuri had been concealing her feelings, unknowingly mastering the art of deception. It was times like these she wished her dad and brother had encouraged her to be more open with her emotions.

Begrudgingly, Gyuri stared down at her feet. *I want to go back home…*

As the pair continued ambling down the dirt path, the anxiety that churned in Gyuri’s stomach grew stronger. Cold sweat collected on her palms, making them clammy, while her heart drummed against her chest.

She took a deep breath.

With each building they passed by, memories of her dreaded encounter with the burly men resurfaced. Their wicked smiles and pungent scent were ingrained in her mind while the bruise on her neck suddenly tingled at the memory of having nearly been strangled.

Gyuri placed her hand at the base of her throat as her breathing shallowed.

Despite knowing that there was nothing there, her airways tightened as if she was still trapped within the beefy man’s grasp. All too vividly, she remembered the choking sensation and how she almost saw stars because of the lack of oxygen. His repulsive scent: a mixture of alcohol and body odour, attacked her nostrils almost making her gag.

Gyuri trained her eyes on Pho’s back so as not to suddenly black out. She reached out to her.

“Heavens be damned!” The lass jumped as Gyuri suddenly grabbed onto her shoulder. “You scared me, Gyuri!”

“Sorry,” Gyuri panted as she tried to regain her balance.

Pho sighed as she picked up the bones that she had accidentally dropped. When she faced Gyuri again, she frowned. “Are you sure you’re alright?” She took a step closer. “You’re very pale.”

Gyuri grinned wryly. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Seriously, Gyuri,” Pho’s tone was firm. “You need to tell me if you’re not feeling well.” She glanced around the floor to see if she had missed any bones. “With the plague at large, the last thing I want to learn is one of my friends suddenly falling victim to it.”

“You don’t have to worry,” Gyuri reassured, her strength finally returning. “I’m fine… I- I just want to return as soon as possible.” Gyuri caught a glimpse of the stone trough and she involuntarily shuddered. They were almost where she and Jimin were attacked.

“Are you definitely sure?”
“…Yes,” Gyuri hesitantly responded. But just as Pho was about to continue walking, she blurted, “But…”

Pho turned around again.

“…there is something I wanna ask you.”

Pho nodded to show that she was listening.

With reluctance making her voice seem small, Gyuri asked, “How do you- how do you cope with it all?”

Pho was befuddled. “Cope with what?”

“Living here.”

“I don’t understand, Gyuri. What do you mean?”

“This place,” Gyuri explained, her eyes fixated on her feet. “So many things can happen here.” She looked up and Pho saw the weariness in her eyes. “At first I thought things were okay. I thought I could learn to live here—I had no choice—but I just…” Her voice cracked. “I just can’t. It’s just so… so different.”

Pho approached Gyuri as her profile started to tremble. “Gyuri, what are you talking about?”

“Everywhere we go, I can’t help but feel that we’re always in danger. We’re always on edge. As soon as one thing is resolved, another problem comes our way.” Gyuri whispered, “How do you deal with it…?”

Pho lowered her voice. “Deal with what?” She stared at her friend, confused as to what she was hinting at. “Tell me, Gyuri.”

Gyuri averted her gaze as she murmured, “…Death.”

Pho was quiet for a moment.

Gyuri dared to look up and found that Pho’s eyes had dulled with resignation.

Eventually, the lass mumbled, “You just do.”

Her answer surprised Gyuri. “Huh?”

“Look around you.” Pho gestured to the streets. “People die all the time.”

Gyuri glanced to where Pho was pointing at and witnessed many homeless people squatting. Some appeared to be asleep, but their bodies were very still.

“No matter what we do, we cannot escape it,” Pho spoke solemnly. “Death can come in the form of disease, old age or even man.” She eyed Gyuri. “We can try our best to avoid it but one day, it will come to claim us. So, why be afraid of the inevitable?”

Gyuri tightened her grip on the basket she was carrying. “Because this way of life— it isn’t normal.”

Pho was confused. “How isn’t it?”

Gyuri blinked and eventually realised her mistake. “No… nothing, ignore what I said.”
“I understand that you may be overwhelmed with what happened to you yesterday,” Pho said softly. “But you and I, we’re one of the fortunate ones.” She directed her attention towards a peasant who was begging for alms as a wealthy merchant passed by. “We have clothes on our backs, a roof over our heads and a meal waiting for us when we return.”

“But don’t you just get tired of it all?”

Pho turned to face her again. “Of course, I do.”

“Then, why don’t you just run away?” Gyuri asked. “Why do you choose to stay here?”

Pho scoffed. “Where would I go?” She met eyes with her friend. “Without this position, I’m just a peasant girl.”

“You could just go somewhere better—where it’s safer—where you’ll be free.”

Pho laughed causing Gyuri to frown. “There’s no place like that in Saim. If you’re a peasant, you will always remain so wherever you go.”

“But what if you’re wrong? What if there is a better place out there?”

Pho pursed her lip. “Gyuri, why are you thinking about these things?”

“Because I don’t know how anyone can live like this!” Unable to contain it any longer, tears sprang from her eyes, surprising Pho. Gyuri sniffled, dropping her basket as she hastily covered her face. “I’m just so tired of it all, Pho… I’m just so tired…”

Growing up in London, Subin had never been exposed to the true harshness of life. While she didn’t live in the wealthiest part of the city, she had always had everything she ever needed. She had a doting father, a supportive brother and dependable friends. But being in Saim alone had taken a toll on her both physically and mentally. She was surrounded by unfamiliarity. Death and disease lurked in every corner and at the tender age of fifteen, nothing in her life prepared her for the situations she found herself in. There was just too much suffering. Suffering that, even if she wanted, she couldn’t turn a blind eye to.

*How could anyone ever live like this without losing their sanity?*

“Gyuri…” Pho reached out to comfort her but before she could, Gyuri suddenly swatted her hand away. Startled by her reaction, Pho recoiled backwards.

“I- I’m sorry,” Gyuri stuttered. She took a step back, too stunned by her own actions. “I-I’m sorry—I-I have to go—”

Without a moment longer, Gyuri turned tail and ran in the opposite direction. She needed to escape. She ran as fast as she could, the desire to leave Saim growing stronger with every step.

“Gyuri!” Pho shouted after her. “Gyuri! Where are you going?”

But alas, Gyuri didn’t hear her. For while Pho continued to shout, Gyuri kept her sights fixated on the long dirt road ahead.

*There was no turning back now.*

~*~

Kim Hyesung was not a virtuous man.
He was a tyrant, a draconian, and devoid of feeling human emotion.

In some ways, to Taehyung, his father reminded him of Junmyeon. He didn't detest his father, but he was just indifferent to him. Hyesung never paid Taehyung any attention, never praised him and, Taehyung doubted he even knew the youngest Kim existed. His father had always focused his attention on his older brothers. Sometimes, Taehyung did not feel like he was a Kim at all. After all, Hyesung hardly acknowledged him. Apart from the time when Gyuri rescued him, Hyesung hadn't ever spoken to Taehyung before. He seldom ever did. So, when he found out that his father had died, he was surprised to find tears flowing from his eyes.

Why would Taehyung cry over a man who was his father only in name?

“Stop crying,” a croaky voice scolded.

Taehyung sniffed while glancing up and found that it was his third brother.

“Men do not cry,” Junmyeon lectured, his voice mellower than usual. “Especially if they are a Kim.”

Taehyung wiped away his tears with his sleeve, too mournful to mind the cold-heartedness of his brother’s words. He knew that malice was Junmyeon’s way of grieving. Sometimes Taehyung believed he was incapable of expressing anything else.

“I apologise for being late.”

The sliding door drew open and the Kims turned their heads in time to see Minseok enter the room. The others nodded as he took his normal seat at the dining table. As Minseok sat down, he couldn’t help but direct his attention towards the empty chair, which Hyesung usually occupied.

All the Kims followed his stare.

Without Hyesung at the head, the Kims collectively felt a sense of loss. For as long as they could remember, he had always been around to guide them, even if they didn’t always agree with his methods or appreciated his presence. He was like their morning star. And with him gone, all it left was fathomless darkness.

Namjoon peered at his cousins and observed their sullen expressions.

For him, losing his uncle was painful but he knew that what he felt was incomparable to the anguish the others were experiencing. For the Kim brothers, Hyesung was the last living parent they had left. But even if Hyesung was not Namjoon’s father, he had always regarded him as so. And losing a father figure for the second time hurt Namjoon more than he anticipated.

“I am pleased to see that everyone is present,” Minseok stated as he smoothed the crease on his robe.

“Cousin, why do you not sit at the head of the table?” Taeyeon asked from beside Namjoon.

The rest of the Kims directed their attention to her.

“Sister!” Namjoon admonished, his cheeks growing pink with embarrassment.

“What?” Taeyeon feigned innocence. “With Uncle gone, the next head of this family is Cousin Minseok.” She swept her gaze across the room to see if anyone would contest her. “Or am I mistaken?”

“It has not even been a day since our father died and already, you are suggesting something
disrespectful,” Junmyeon contemptuously muttered. He glared at Taeyeon from across the table. “Show some respect to the deceased!”

“I do not mean to offend,” Taeyeon replied, her tone remorseless. “But it is inevitable that Cousin Minseok will be the next head of our family.” She turned to face the eldest Kim brother. “Why prolong the process?”

Junmyeon was about to protest when Minseok slammed his fist on the dining table. “That is enough!”

All the Kims jolted. It was rare for Minseok to raise his voice.

Wearily, Minseok let out a long breath as he unclenched his closed fist. “Father just died,” he spoke tiredly. “Must we argue right now?” He met eyes with both Taeyeon and his brother. “We can discuss that later, but right now, we have other more pressing matters to attend to.”

“What sort of matters, brother?” Jongin asked from beside Junmyeon.

Minseok smiled weakly at the pale boy. “Matters such as Father’s funeral and the future of our clan.”

“I spoke with Physician Koh earlier,” Namjoon interjected, causing all eyes to fall on him. “He advises that because of the plague, we should cremate Uncle’s body as soon as possible.”

“Did Father have the plague?” Taehyung asked from beside him, his voice nasally from crying. “Is that what he died of?”

The rest of the Kims exchanged worried looks.

“No,” Minseok answered.

All the Kims gaped at him.

“Father was…” Minseok knitted his hands together. “Father was gravely ill.” He glanced up from his hands as he divulged, “He had the sugar sickness.”

Namjoon’s eyes widened. “He did?”

Taehyung turned to Namjoon. “What is the sugar sickness?”

“It is an ailment of the body,” Jongin explained.

Taehyung directed his attention to his fourth brother.

“It entails injecting a serum on a regular basis to live normally.”

“Where did you learn that?” Namjoon asked, stunned by his cousin’s knowledge.

Jongin managed a small smile. “I read a lot.”

“Well, getting back to the matter,” Minseok interrupted. “Father died because he was unable to take the serum on time.” His voice trembled slightly as he continued, “Madam Zhou informs me that she found his injection quite the distance away from his bedside, where he usually keeps it.”

“Could he have dropped it and it rolled away?” Taehyung wondered aloud.

Minseok could only shrug. “We do not know for sure.”
“So, it was Madam Zhou who found Uncle this morning…” Taeyeon mused. “Perhaps she was the one who—”

“Sister,” Namjoon gritted out. The flame on a candle flickered at his sharp tone.

Taeyeon tilted her head at her brother. “What?”

“Enough.”

Minseok nodded at Namjoon thankfully. “We do not know the true circumstance of Father’s death. All we know is that he most likely died because he could not take the serum.” He glanced at everyone in the dim room. “Unless someone has something they would like to share?”

All the Kims exchanged looks with each other.

While the rest of Kims murmured amongst themselves, Jongin peered at Junmyeon. He had not said anything for a while which concerned Jongin. Inconspicuously, Jongin observed Junmyeon’s countenance, which was impassive as usual, but somewhat colder and more worn. Jongin glanced down and saw that his hands were balled into fists, so tight that his knuckles had whitened with the tension.

Jongin furrowed his brows. What could he be thinking?

“And the ceremony?” Minseok’s voice brought Jongin back to the conversation. “What shall we do about that?”

“We really should not delay it,” Namjoon insisted. “It would be unwise to do so.”

“Are we not going to invite our other relatives to the funeral?” Taehyung queried. “We have relatives outside the capital, correct?”

The Kims exchanged uncomfortable looks.

“If you are talking about the rest of the Kim clan,” Namjoon responded, “we had severed ties with them decades ago.” He smiled meekly at his younger cousin’s confused expression. “They do not want to have anything to do with us.”

Taeyeon grabbed her brother’s hand as if to reassure him and Namjoon squeezed back knowingly.

“This,” he swept his gaze across the room, “is what remains of our clan.”

Suddenly, a sudden bolt of lightning tore across the sky, illuminating the dim room. All of the Kims were speechless as the rumble of thunder followed suit, finally signalling the entrance of rain. If it were any other day, the Kims would have celebrated the coming of rain as it had been months since the last downpour. It was meant to be a time of joy as their prayers for rain had finally been answered. But at that moment, all they could think about was how the heavens seem to reflect their grief in losing their progenitor.

It was like the heavens were crying with them.

“Actually,” Minseok corrected, once the thunder had subsided. “This is not the rest of our clan.”

Everyone turned to Minseok who had a grave expression.

“We have another brother we have yet to welcome.”
The rest of the Kims were silent for a few moments as they processed Minseok’s words.

Another brother?

Junmyeon was the first one to react.

“What?” he was aghast. “Brother, you do not mean…?”

Minseok nodded slowly. Against the backdrop of howling winds and peals of thunder, all the Kims were united in their surprise upon hearing the words fall from Minseok’s lips.

“Our exiled brother is coming home.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 46 of The Brothers Kim!

As promised, here is the latest chapter! I apologise for taking so long, I have been really busy with university which has been drying up my creative flow.

Anyways, I'm so excited to write the next arc of this story!

Sadly, that will have to wait as I have educational commitments to attend to. Therefore, today marks the start of my hiatus until June- July.

The good news is, by then, not only will I return with new chapters but the webtoon will also debut as well.

I will be active on social media for the meantime, so please don't hesitate to say 'hi'.

Till next time~
Everything was a blur.

Gyuri ran with all her might, tears forming at the corners of her eyes as she sprinted away from Pho. She didn't know what she was doing, where she was going, or why she was running, but she needed to escape.

All around her, the streets of the capital converged into a blur as if they were moving past her rather than the other way around. It was like watching the world fast-forward in time while she stood still, a bystander in her own life.

Ever since arriving at Saim, nothing had made sense to Gyuri. She had tried her best to survive, figure out how and why she had time-slipped to this era, but to little avail. Day after day, Gyuri had pushed her worries to the back of her mind like one would if they were packing a suitcase. Like a game of Tetris, she managed to keep her worries at bay; as soon as it became too overwhelming, Gyuri had miraculously found a way to reduce her anxiety, making it vanish like the geometric shapes from the said game.

But, unlike Tetris, Gyuri's worries were not compact shapes. They didn't vanish like she thought they did.

No— like a suitcase filled to the brim, her worries, fears and doubts threatened to spill out, only contained by the fragile zip that was her sheer will to stay intact. The shapeless fiends were uncooperative, persistent and heavy. Even though Gyuri had tried her best to forget about them, still they remained. And for a while, Gyuri's method of staying optimistic had helped her forget their presence. Disguising her anxiety behind a smile, Gyuri had continued with life on Saim as usual.

That was... until now.

Gyuri gasped for breath as she finally slowed to a light jog. She hadn't run like that in such a long time that her heart was beating erratically, and a painful stitch had developed in her side. But despite her fatigue, the sensation that overrode them all was the heaviness in her chest. A shaky breath escaped her lips as hot tears spilled from her eyes.

"Who am I kidding?" Gyuri said aloud as she wiped away her tears. "I'm not okay," she hiccupped, "I'm not okay at all..."

For a while, Gyuri trudged on aimlessly, following the dirt path that lay before her. With eyes fixed on the ground, Gyuri was only faintly aware of her surroundings. Curious whispers drifted to her ears followed by the scuffling of shoes. Without having to look up, Gyuri knew that it was the townsfolk probably gossiping about her, putting forward their assumptions as to why a young maid like herself was crying in the middle of the street.

I'm so tired of this.

Absorbed in her ruminations, Gyuri continued walking until the whispers died down and she was greeted with silence. Save for the howling of the wind and the bristling of grass, everything was peaceful—a striking contrast to the tempest in her mind. It was only when Gyuri noticed the unevenness of the path did she halt. Gazing up from the ground, Gyuri soon realised that she was no
longer in the village. A vast expanse of emptiness lay before her without a single building in sight.

"Where... am I?"

A soft pitter-patter greeted her ears before it suddenly grew into heavy drumming.

It had been months since she had last seen rain; an age since she had last been soaked through to the skin, and almost a lifetime since she had last felt comforted by its presence.

Mesmerised by the sudden downpour, Gyuri stood still as she allowed the precipitation to slice through her clothing, eventually reaching her sweaty skin, where the cooling effect was most welcome.

With the scent of petrichor making its way to her nostrils, Gyuri relished the nostalgia that the rain evoked. It reminded her of her life back home. Memories of many rainy days spent indoors, cuddled underneath the safety of her blanket while watching K-dramas flashed before her eyes. With the rain's rhythmic and hypnotic beat, Gyuri found solace like one would if they step into a hot shower. And just for that short while, all her fears were temporarily forgotten as if the rain had washed them all away.

If only I could stay like this forever.

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning tore through the sky followed by the rumble of thunder. Startled by the threatening sound, Gyuri jumped, shattering the enchantment as she was pulled back into reality.

Ominous, grey clouds cloaked the sky while bitter winds howled past her as it accompanied the torrential showers like a phantom banshee. Disorientated, Gyuri searched her surroundings and found that the vast expanse of emptiness was, in fact, a field. Gyuri scrambled toward a tall, gnarly tree in the distance, hoping that it would provide her shelter. She knew that it wouldn't do much good since she was already soaked to the skin but decided that anything would be better than being exposed to the unforgiving elements. In a blink of an eye, the rain had transformed from a calming drizzle to a foreboding storm.

As she curled up into a small ball at the base of the tree, Gyuri began to contemplate on what she should do next.

"I should go back to the household. Pho must be worried about me."

Burying her head into her knees, Gyuri thought about her friend and how she had left her so suddenly. She didn't know what came over her. While her mind tried to convince her to think rationally and return to the Kim household, her heart was set on leaving everything behind. Why should she return? She didn't belong there. This wasn't the life she was supposed to lead.

Gyuri sat still as she tried to work through her muddled thoughts.

Strong gales whistled by and rain poured down, but inside, Gyuri remained oblivious. So much so, that even when the rain appeared to have ceased, she didn't notice. Not registering how cold and numb she was, Gyuri remained in her curled-up position. She might have stayed like so for longer if it wasn't for what came next.

"Are ye all righ', child?"

Gyuri looked up.

There, before her, stood an elderly woman dressed in tattered rags that were singed at the edges. Her
long, silver hair was tied into a loose bun with a few strands framing her wrinkled but kind-looking face. She gaped at Gyuri curiously, her dark, brown eyes shining with an intelligent glint.

"Do ye need help?"

Gyuri shook her head. She was so lost in her thoughts that she thought the woman in front of her was a mirage.

The elder paused for a moment before gathering up the courage to ask, "Well, I was wondering if ye can help me."

Gyuri blinked.

"I was on my way to the capital," the old woman revealed, "when the storm came and led me astray. I am afraid I am quite lost."

"You can get to the capital by following the path," Gyuri murmured, finally finding her voice. "The path is just over there."

"Oh." The woman followed the direction Gyuri was pointing to and squinted. After a while, she added, "Say, if it is not too much trouble..."

Gyuri looked up again.

"...will ye accompany me?"

A reluctant hum escaped Gyuri's lips. All she really wanted to do was stay in her cocoon for a little longer.

"I am afraid I might get lost again," the elder added, noticing Gyuri's hesitance. "I am on my way to surprise my granddaughter."

At this Gyuri's eyes softened.

The elder was about to say more in a bid to convince her when she noticed Gyuri wobble to her feet. Clinging to the tree for support, Gyuri answered while shaking her limbs awake, "Sure, I'll help you get to her." She smiled wryly. "I should probably be heading back anyway..."

For a while, the sound of squelching mud filled the silence as Gyuri and the elder trekked side by side along the grass plain. Gyuri frowned as she tried her best not to slip as she waded through the mud, her skirt caked in soil and her hair clumped into dark, dripping tendrils. When they eventually reached the dirt path, Gyuri and the elder sighed in relief.

"At last," the woman mumbled, "firm ground."

Gyuri managed a small smile.

"I don' mean to pry," the elder said tentatively after a moment of silence, "but what's a young'un like ye doing back there? Were ye lost as well?"

"No... not quite."

The elder observed Gyuri's gloomy features. "I think my granddaughter might be the same age as ye."

"Oh?" Gyuri automatically responded, her thoughts elsewhere.
"Aye," the elder replied. "And like yourself, she too is haunted by troubles."

Gyuri turned to the elder.

"I may be old, but I can tell when one is unsettled," she spoke sagely. "Tell me, child, what is bothering you so?"

"N-nothing."

The elder let out a doubtful humph. She watched as Gyuri chewed her bottom lip in apprehension as they continued to amble.

Trying a different approach, the elder began, "My granddaughter is very energetic. She is very ambitious for a young'un. Causes her parents grief every time she does something reckless."

"She sounds like a handful," Gyuri murmured distractedly.

"Indeed," The elder chuckled, delighted that Gyuri had responded. "That girl would do anything for a bit of excitement."

Gyuri glanced at the elder who exhibited a warm expression. From the way the elder spoke of her granddaughter, Gyuri knew that she loved her dearly.

"Did you travel very far?" Gyuri questioned. "I'm guessing you're not from the capital."

"Aye," the woman replied. "I am from a small town far yonder." The elder flashed Gyuri a quick smile, revealing her crooked teeth. "It has been far too long since I had last seen my granddaughter. She was only a child when I saw her last."

Gyuri hummed in reply, suddenly reminded of how long it has been since she herself had last seen her family.

"But what about ye? Are ye going back to your family after this?"

Gyuri smiled forcibly. "If only."

The elder cocked her head to the side.

"I haven't seen them in a long time either."

The elder watched as Gyuri played with her sleeve, an uncomfortable silence brewing between them.

"Well, it is not too late. Ye can always try and make amends with them if that is what is keeping ye."

Gyuri shook her head. "No, it's not like that. I want to go home but the thing is... I can't."

"Oh?"

Gyuri mumbled, "It's complicated."

"Complications make life colourful. Surely it cannot be as bad as ye say?"

"But it is." Gyuri stopped as she spotted her reflection in a puddle. She clenched her fist as she stared at the girl in front of her. "It is so complicated that I sometimes don't know who I am anymore."

The elder was about to respond when Gyuri suddenly muttered, "I feel like I'm starting to forget." Her
voice quivered. "I'm starting to forget and... I'm scared."

Silently, the elder observed how Gyuri clung to her damp skirt, her knuckles turning white from the tension.

"It is all right to be afraid."

Slowly, Gyuri turned to the elder. The elder smiled as she gestured to the path ahead of them.

"We all have a path we must take," she explained. "Some are straightforward like a road while others meander like a river." She beckoned for her and Gyuri to continue their walk. "And when the time comes, we are sometimes confronted with two paths and we become unsure of which to take."

Suddenly, Gyuri and the elder reached the end of their path where it diverged into two.

"Which way?" the elder asked.

Gyuri pointed to the right.

The pair began their journey again but after a few minutes, Gyuri beckoned for the elder to stop. "I don't think we're going the right way." She scanned her surroundings. "I don't remember seeing those rice paddies."

Gyuri and the elder retraced their steps back to the crossroads where they followed the path on the left instead, blushing faintly at the irony.

"Each choice we make have consequences in the future," the elder continued, once Gyuri was sure of their location. "Sometimes the path we take can lead us astray, but once we are back on the right path, we learn that it is not only the direction that has changed but the person as well."

Gyuri eyed the elder dubiously.

"Ye say that ye don' know who ye are anymore."

Gyuri nodded.

"Well, does anybody really know who they are?"

"No," Gyuri answered slowly. "I guess not."

"We never really stay the same as we go through life," the elder mentioned. "One's self is not something that can be defined by mere words because the self is not static— it is ever-changing. Ye can even argue that we are just many people trapped in one soul." The elder turned to Gyuri knowingly. "'Tis just the matter of accepting the person ye are today and not worrying about the person ye were yesterday."

"I don't really understand how that's supposed to help me. All I want is to go back to where I belong." She shifted her attention to the horizon and was glad to spot the outline of the village. "I didn't ask to come here. I don't understand why I came to be here at all."

"But that is the point."

Gyuri turned to the elder.

"Ye do not need to understand everything right now. Just trust that there is always a reason why things have turned out the way they have." The elder joined Gyuri in staring at the distance as the
sky darkened and light droplets of rain started to fall. "There are no accidents in life—everything happens for a reason." She turned to Gyuri and gently took hold of her palm. Gyuri turned to her questioningly. "Just like how I found ye under that tree."

Noticing a small flower tattoo on the elder's wrist, Gyuri was about to point it out when she suddenly felt the elder place something in her hand.

"Take it," the elder said with a fond smile. "I believe it is something that ye seek."

Caught off guard, Gyuri inspected the small item and her eyes widened in disbelief.

"This is payment for helping me find my way," the elder added as she grinned at Gyuri's reaction. "I hope that it will help ye find yours."

"My grandma's ring!" Gyuri exclaimed, finding her voice again. Several questions whizzed through her mind as she inspected it, her fingers pressing hard just to ensure that she was not hallucinating. "How did you—? Where did you—?"

But when Gyuri looked up, the old woman was gone.

~*~

With more energy to her step, Gyuri made her way back to the Kim household with a wide grin stretched between her lips.

My grandma's ring! She thought as she excitedly admired the jade on her forefinger. I can't believe I have it back.

Despite being chilled to the bone and being weary from her long trek, Gyuri's smile never faltered as she gripped the jade tightly. The ring, while offering more questions rather than answers, resembled hope being restored. It signified a small step to solving the puzzle of the time-slip, but even more so, an item of comfort that reminded her of home. Knowing that she had something of her true self helped Gyuri remember that she was Min Subin, just an average teenage girl who should be studying for her exams.

Gyuri skipped ahead as she relished the feeling of reassurance the ring provided. As she admired the ring some more, a sudden thought crossed her mind.

"Huh." Gyuri murmured as she twisted the ring on her forefinger. "That's funny. I swear the ring Chim Chim has looks exactly the same."

But before she could contemplate more about it, the sudden sound of galloping hooves caught her attention. She glanced behind her.

"Out of the way!"

Gyuri stumbled to the side as a dark-cloaked traveller darted past her, his horse almost trampling her in the process. She watched as the traveller came to an abrupt halt, causing his horse to topple over as he managed to avoid Gyuri in time. Panicked shouts escaped the traveller's lips as he tried to calm his fallen steed. Once his horse had regained its composure and was upright again, he glared at Gyuri as he pushed himself up and dusted his clothes.

"You silly wench!" he berated with a scowl forming on his worn face. He grimaced as he attempted to put some pressure on his injured leg. "Look at what you've caused!"
Gyuri's jaw dropped at the traveller's insolence. "I beg your pardon?" she remarked, her voice rising in pitch and her brows knitting together. She had initially felt concerned for the traveller's welfare, but his arrogant tone made her think twice. With everything that had happened to her recently, the last thing she needed was to be insulted.

The traveller scoffed. "You'll need to do better than that to beg for my pardon."

Gyuri blinked. She pursed her lips as she narrowed her eyes at the dark-cloaked traveller. "It means 'excuse me' you dimwit," she spat, earning an eyebrow raise from the man. "Why should I be the one to apologise when you were the one who almost got me trampled by your horse?" She gestured at the dirt path as she climbed out of the mud. "This path is wide enough for both of us. You should have been looking at where you were going!"

"I could say the same for you," he retorted. "I have been shouting for you to make way, but you were too busy traipsing about like you were walking on sunshine." The traveller flapped his arms as if impersonating Gyuri like she was skipping earlier. "If you hadn't been so distracted, none of this would have happened."

Not knowing what to say, Gyuri scowled at the traveller as he limped toward his horse.

"I can't believe this," the traveller grumbled. "Ten days of travel and not a scratch on me until coming across this negligent wench."

The traveller turned to glare at Gyuri, and she noticed how his sharp jaw was peppered with bristles. His lips, while chapped, were full and pillow-like while his long, raven hair was pulled into a partial ponytail. With his messy fringe adding to the broodiness of his intense, obsidian eyes, Gyuri swallowed as their gazes met. Something about the way he was looking at her sent a familiar chill down her spine, but she couldn't pinpoint what.

"I want compensation," he declared.

Gyuri blinked. "Wait... what?"

"You heard me," he replied. "I demand compensation for the injury you caused. I'll have to go to a physician and physicians cost money."

"That's absurd," Gyuri answered. "I can't compensate you—I don't have a penny to my name!"

The traveller glanced Gyuri up and down slowly as he pondered.

"Why- why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, instinctively covering herself. Gyuri backed away when she noticed the questionable gleam in his eye. "Don't you dare try anything funny on me, mister."

"I was just wondering," the traveller remarked as he drew closer to Gyuri. "You're a maid, aren't you?"

Gyuri shuffled back. "Yeah, and what of it?"

"Whose house do you belong to?"

Gyuri took another step back as the dark-cloaked traveller approached her. It was only when he was a metre away from her did she realise how tall he was.

"I- I belong to the House of Kim," she stuttered.
A blank expression crossed the traveller's rugged face. "The House of Kim?"

Gyuri nodded.

"You're a servant at the House of Kim?"

Finally regaining her confidence, Gyuri spat, "As hard as it may be to believe, yes," she reiterated, "I am."

The traveller paused for a moment as he inspected Gyuri, temporarily disappearing to his thoughts as he inwardly laughed at how his misfortune had turned to something fortunate. He grinned.

Without warning, the traveller hoisted Gyuri up on his shoulders, earning a surprised yelp from the confused maid.

"What are you doing? Put me down!" she screeched as she struggled against his grasp. "Let me go!"

"No can do," the traveller replied as he carted an uncooperative Gyuri and mounted her onto his horse. "You're my ticket through the household's gates."

A wave of panic overwhelmed Gyuri as she clung to the saddle of the traveller's horse. It was a lot farther from the ground than she thought. "What are you on about?" she shouted. "I'm just a maid so put me down!"

The traveller hoisted himself up, hissing slightly as he accidentally put too much pressure on his injured leg.

Gyuri tensed up as she felt her back hit the horseman's firm chest. They were too close. She turned to glower at him and immediately regretted it. Tossing her a smug smirk, the traveller reached for the reins of his horse, wrapping Gyuri in his strong arms. Almost teasingly, he let out a long breath, warming Gyuri's neck and causing her heart to skip a beat.

"Not so tough now, huh?"

Gyuri could only huff in embarrassment.

"Don't worry, I won't go too fast so that you don't fall."

Gyuri whipped her head around, alarmed. Somehow, she knew he was lying. "Don't you dare—!"

But before Gyuri could finish her utterance, the traveller had already prompted his steed into motion. Gyuri screamed in fear as she clung to the saddle for dear life. As the horse gained in speed, the dark-cloaked traveller chortled amusedly at Gyuri's hysterical reaction, his laugh sounding unmistakably like windscreen wipers.

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 47 of The Brothers Kim!

Long time no see! It's great to be back writing again. A lot has happened over my hiatus. Just a brief outline: I've finished my horrid exams and coursework, attended the BTS concert in Wembley Stadium (it was fantastic!) and soon, I will be graduating from
university in July.

It's been a hectic couple of months but just know that I've been thinking about you guys every day. I was worried I wouldn't be able to find my groove with writing again but I didn't want to disappoint you guys, so here I am, battling against my growing writer's block. I hope this chapter was to your liking.

I also want to officially announce that The Brothers Kim Webtoon will be launching on the 7th July 2019!

YES.

It is finally happening.

Just note that the chapters might be divided into shorter parts because it is simpler for Sammy but it will still roughly follow the same plot.

If you want to keep updated, please refer to our social media accounts.

Till next time!
“Our exiled brother is coming home.”

Junmyeon slammed his palms onto the table as he rose from his chair. “You cannot be serious!”

“Is that true?” Jongin queried. “Second brother… he is truly returning?”

Minseok maintained his unflinching gaze. Currently, all the Kims were staring back at him, their eyes wide with disbelief and their mouths slightly agape. “It has already been done.”

“Father would not have approved of this,” Junmyeon scolded. “If he were still alive, he would not have allowed this to happen. You are going against his wishes—”

“That may be,” Minseok interrupted. “But our second brother deserves to know of Father’s fate.” He looked down at his clenched fist. “I had hoped for him to reconcile with Father before he…”

Minseok swallowed as if trying to contain his grief. “It is lamentable that he did not make it in time.”

Everyone in the room was quiet for a moment as they thought of Hyesung. But while the rest of the Kims mulled over their late relative, Taehyung, on the other hand, was pondering over a relative he had never met.

_Sec_ond_ brother… he mumbled to himself, _are we finally going to meet?_

“We have not heard word of our exiled cousin for almost a decade,” Namjoon murmured, bringing Taehyung back to reality. “I wonder what he must be like now as a man.”

Taehyung stole a glance at the others who were contemplating Namjoon’s remark. Apart from him, everyone else seemed to have some recollection of what their second brother was like before he was banished.

Jongin turned to Minseok, suddenly alarmed. “What if he is dangerous?”

The rest of the Kims peered at Minseok expectantly.

“He will not be,” Minseok replied in the steadiest voice he could manage. Taehyung observed how Minseok’s lips curled slightly as if he was uncertain. “It is true that he has been away for a long time, but he is our kin. If anything, uniting what family we have left is what this household needs,” he turned to meet everyone’s eye, “now more than ever.”

Apart from Junmyeon, everyone hummed in agreement.

“You do not know what second brother will be like,” Junmyeon interjected, exasperated that no one seemed to be heeding his warnings. “He is effectively a stranger. What if he turns out to be worse than what you expect?”

“Surely he cannot be…” Namjoon reasoned but even he sounded unsure. “I remember him having an amiable character—”

“Father exiled second brother for a reason,” Junmyeon immediately cut in, “and we should honour it.” He swept his gaze across the rest of the Kims before directing his attention solely on Minseok.
“Brother, you have no right to repeal his banishment.”

“Well,” Taeyeon spoke, causing everyone to turn to her, “Cousin Minseok is the next head of the family.” Junmyeon scowled at her as she continued, “So, as the head of the family, he does have the right to do as he pleases. And if that is to undo our cousin’s exile—”

“Silence,” Junmyeon snapped, making her blink in surprise. “Your opinion is not wanted. By allowing second brother to return, all of you are defying Father’s wishes. Must I remind you that he is exiled and therefore no longer a Kim?” Junmyeon reiterated, “He is not one of us.”

“Second brother’s exile does not equate to his disownment,” Minseok clarified. “He is still our brother.”

“No,” Junmyeon argued, “he is not. Second brother was stripped of all his privileges as a Kim when he left this household.”

Minseok’s cat-like eyes narrowed. Having had enough of Junmyeon’s protests, he taunted in a low voice, “And to whose benefit was it for?”

A shade of crimson slowly bloomed on Junmyeon’s cheeks.

Taehyung, unaccustomed to seeing his third brother flustered, observed him carefully before turning his attention to Minseok. It was rare to witness his older brothers quarrelling. While Taehyung knew that Minseok’s demeanour changed when he was in court, he had seldom ever witnessed this side of him when at home. With his steely gaze and piercing eyes, Minseok was almost unrecognisable.

“Second Brother has suffered enough,” Minseok spoke, his voice returning to its normal cadence. “I had sent a letter requesting his return. Whether you like it or not,” he addressed Junmyeon, “he is coming home.”

Junmyeon clenched his jaw.

“And now that we have dealt with that,” Minseok resumed, “we should get back to the matter of Father’s funeral…”

Taehyung fiddled with his hands as he tuned out of the conversation. While the rest of the Kims fussied over the ceremonial customs, the youngest Kim remained preoccupied with the prospect of finally meeting their exiled brother.

“And to whose benefit was it for?”

His brows furrowed in concentration as he contemplated Minseok’s words. What had he meant by that? Taehyung mused. Was Brother Junmyeon somehow involved in second brother’s exile?

Taehyung darted a look at his third brother who had finally sat down, a scowl etched deeply on his features. It had never crossed his mind that Junmyeon might have knowledge of why his brother was exiled; Taehyung had always believed that only Minseok and their father knew. Even Namjoon, who was arguably the most intelligent person in their family, was unaware of the true circumstances behind their brother’s banishment.

“Wait.”

Everyone turned to Taehyung as if suddenly remembering his presence. He had been so quiet throughout their discussion that they had forgotten he was even in the room.
“Second brother…” Taehyung began, his mouth suddenly feeling very dry. “…was exiled ten summers ago…”

Minseok gave a tight-lipped smile, clearly unenthused by the regress in conversation.

“… but you never mentioned why.”

“Taehyung,” Namjoon called to him, aware of how his other cousins had exchanged solemn looks, “we have already moved on from this subject- we must really discuss the arrangements for Uncle’s funeral—”

“But it is unfair!” the youngest Kim objected. “Everyone knows something of second brother but I.” He turned to face the rest of the Kims. “No one speaks of him and because of that he is truly a stranger to me.” He clenched his fist as he uttered resolutely, “But he is my brother too. I deserve to know why he had been cast away.”

The Kims were quiet as they considered Taehyung’s words, all reluctant to explore the past any further than what was previously mentioned. Namjoon and Jongin exchanged nervous looks while Minseok and Junmyeon remained impassive.

After a while, Minseok feigned laughter, one so dry that it did not befit him. “Trust me, Taehyung, you are the fortunate one.”

Taehyung raised his brows questioningly.

“You are better off not knowing what transpired.” Minseok briefly glanced at Junmyeon, who was sitting quietly with a dark expression looming over his countenance. “What happened with second brother in the past is something we should strive to forget rather than uncover.”

“But what did he do?” Taehyung asked, exacerbated by all the secrecy. “Can you not tell me, brother?”

“It is more of what he did not do,” Junmyeon answered, surprising everyone.

Taehyung eyed Junmyeon whose features were morphed into a slight sneer.

“Know this, Taehyung,” he spoke coldly. “Second brother is a fool. He is a fool for not finishing what he started and that is what he has been paying for ever since.”

Taehyung was about to ask what he meant by that when suddenly, shouts and screams were heard, interrupting his train of thought.

~*~

“Help!” Gyuri screamed at the top of her lungs. “I’m gonna fall. I’m gonna fall!”

The dark-cloaked traveller winced as he signalled for his horse to come to a steady trot, his ears still ringing from Gyuri’s screeching. To his dreaded surprise, she had screamed all the way from where he had found her on the muddy path to where they were now, slowly approaching the gates to the Kim household. The traveller encouraged his steed to keep moving toward the carved gates, where two green-clothed guards stood as a sentry.

“You have to put me down,” Gyuri implored, her hands still gripping tightly onto the saddle. “Please. I’m terrified of this thing.”
The traveller let out an irritated sigh. “Not yet. We’re almost there.”

Gyuri turned to face him and the traveller saw how pale she was. “I swear if you drop me—”

“I told you I wouldn’t, didn’t I?” He tutted. “Can’t you just trust me?”

“How can I trust someone who carted me off on his horse against my will?” Gyuri rebuked.

The traveller was thoughtful. “Fair point, but why would I drop you when you’re my way inside the household? I have some use for you yet.” He lowered his voice so that it was barely audible, “I just hope it won’t have to come to that.”

Gyuri chewed her lip in apprehension as she peered down at the ground. Even though she wasn’t too far from the ground the height still made her dizzy.

“Rather than being worried, you should be honoured,” the traveller mentioned, breaking Gyuri from her reverie.

“Honoured?” Gyuri peered over her shoulder. “Why?”

The traveller tossed her a lopsided grin. “Because you were swept away by a handsome guy like me.”

Gyuri scoffed in disbelief. *This guy’s so full of himself!* But as much as Gyuri hated to admit it, he was right. The traveller, despite his unruly appearance, was quite attractive.

When they finally reached the gates, the guards approached them cautiously, their spears slightly angled towards their direction.

“Who passes?” the guard bellowed.

The traveller motioned for his steed to stop. From the corner of her eye, Gyuri noticed him grip the reigns tightly.

Was he nervous?

The traveller took a deep breath as he announced, “Kim Seokjin.”

Gyuri froze.

The guards exchanged looks of confusion, both uncertain that they had heard correctly. Gyuri immediately turned to face him, sharing the guards’ befuddled expression.

*Did I just hear right?*

Noticing her stare, the traveller simpered. He was amused by Gyuri’s gobsmacked expression. Feigning innocence, he arched his brows as if to ask, “What?”

Gyuri hurriedly faced forward. *No, he can’t be…* she tried to reassure herself. *This guy can’t be one of them. There’s no way that he’s one of the Kims!*

“If you really are Master Seokjin,” one of the guards managed to say, “then show us some proof.”

“That’s right,” the other guard agreed. “Master Seokjin was exiled. We cannot simply admit you, a stranger, who claims to be him. We need something to vouch for your declaration.”
Gyuri heard Seokjin sigh.

“Unfortunately, I have nothing to prove my identity,” he replied. “As you can see, I travel lightly.” Seokjin gestured to his untidy appearance. “On my way here, I had encountered thieves and by sheer luck managed to escape with my life. The letter which my brother sent me to prove my identity was lost amongst my belongings. If you bring Brother Minseok out, he can verify that what I have told you is the truth.”

The guards exchanged looks of scepticism.

“Our apologies, but if you do not have anything to prove your claim then we cannot admit you into this household,” the shortest of the guards explained. “We are under strict instructions not to let anyone in without a form of verification.”

“And we cannot risk the safety of our lord by bringing him out here,” the other added.

The shortest guard stepped forward, lowering his spear so that it would land on Seokjin’s chest should they meet. “If you have nothing then I must insist that you leave.”

Seokjin stood his ground. “Look,” he said while massaging his right temple in circular motions, “I have not just travelled for ten days and endured this wench’s screeching just to be turned away like this.” Gyuri shot him an offended look which he ignored. “I was summoned here by my brother and I will not leave until I’ve seen him.”

At the sound of Seokjin’s defiant tone, the guards grasped their spears with both hands while taking a defensive stance. “Do not force our hand, sir.”

The traveller’s horse whinnied as the pair of guards cautiously inched closer. Seokjin frowned as his horse started retreating on its own accord.

“Well, it seems they’re not gonna let you in,” Gyuri observed, “and they don’t seem to care that you have me with you.” She turned to face him. “Which is enough reason for you to let me go.”

Seokjin peered down at Gyuri and held her gaze. She didn’t like the way he was looking at her. “Tell me, wench, do your masters still care for their servants’ welfare?”

“Of course, they do,” Gyuri answered slowly, unsure of his intention. “Why do you ask?”

A coy smile spread across Seokjin’s pillow-like lips. “I apologise in advance.”

Before Gyuri could so much as blink, Seokjin had reached for his short sword which he had concealed behind his dark cloak. In one swift motion, he secured his grip on Gyuri with the tip of the blade pinned against her throat. Her eyes rounded in surprise as she gasped.

“If you don’t want this innocent wench’s blood on your hands,” Seokjin threatened the guards, “you will open the gates now and let me in.”

“What are you doing?!” Gyuri hissed while leaning as far away from the sword as possible.

“Relax,” Seokjin whispered into her ear, “as long as you sit still, you won’t get hurt.”

“Was this your plan all along?” Gyuri asked, her voice getting higher in pitch. “To kidnap me and then sacrifice me in front of the guards?”

He smiled mischievously. “Not quite. It would be a shame to see you go. I was just getting used to
your unbearable screeching.”

Gyuri gave him a fear-stricken look, completely missing the playful tone in his voice.

“Just trust me.”

“Trust you?” Gyuri’s shrieked. “How can I trust you when you have a sword aimed at my neck?”

Seokjin was about to reply when he suddenly noticed movement from the corner of his eye. He hitched the sword higher up Gyuri’s neck making her squeak. “I believe you’re heading in the wrong direction,” he addressed the guards. “Open the gates,” he pressed the blade closer to Gyuri, “or the wench perishes.”

Gyuri involuntarily whimpered causing the guards to hesitate.

“Let me in now or the girl will not live to see the next sunrise!”

Reluctantly, both guards surrendered their stances so that they could retreat to the gates. Begrudgingly, they granted access allowing Seokjin to pass through. Once they were finally inside the household grounds, Seokjin loosened his grip on Gyuri.

“See?” he said as he began lowering his sword. “All you needed to do was trust—”

Suddenly, Seokjin keeled over as Gyuri elbowed him in the ribs, catching him off guard. He spluttered.

“What… what are you… doing?” Seokjin gasped between breaths. Despite having the wind knocked out of him, he was still able to keep Gyuri’s prying hands away as she made a grab for his sword. “Stop it… you silly… wench!” Seokjin coughed. “Stop it… or we’ll both fall!”

“I rather fall than let you threaten to kill me again!”

As Gyuri struggled against Seokjin’s solid frame, little did the pair take note of the horse’s complaints. Made anxious by their thrashing, it grunted and whinnied to catch their attention but to little avail. Without warning, the horse suddenly stood on its hind legs, forcing Gyuri and Seokjin to tip over. A surprised yelp escaped Gyuri’s lips as she clung to Seokjin. With a loud thud, the pair landed on the gravel courtyard as the horse trotted away, an irritated snort escaping its mouth.

Gyuri groaned.

Baffled as to why the floor was soft but solid at the same time, Gyuri tried to make sense of her bearings. Surprisingly, she didn’t feel as much pain as she had expected after falling off a horse. Had she miraculously landed on a sack of grain that softened her fall?

She opened her eyes.

There, pressed against her cheek, was a man’s chest, rising and falling as he breathed. If Gyuri listened closely, she could hear the rapid beating of his heart. As she scrambled to get up, her eyes involuntarily trailed upward, unknowingly taking in the traveller’s features in a blink of an eye. With their faces so close, Gyuri noticed Seokjin’s bristly chin, stubble peppering his jawline, giving him a rough look. His curved nose was tanned from the sun, and his intense obsidian eyes were like a pair of black jewels.

Gyuri was startled to find Seokjin staring back at her.
“Get off me,” he grumbled as he shoved her away.

“Ouch! That hurt—”

“What is going on here?”

Gyuri and Seokjin turned to the owner of the voice where a puzzled Minseok stood peering down at them. With all the commotion, Minseok and the rest of the Kims had come out of their conclave to see what was happening. In the distance, Gyuri noticed two others approaching while three stayed behind.

“My lord!” one of the guards called out as he rushed from the gates. He aimed his spear at the traveller. “Please stay back. This man forced his way in—”

“It’s not safe,” the other guard interrupted as he positioned himself in front of Minseok. “My lord, he is armed.”

All eyes turned to Seokjin, who was still clutching his sword. He smiled wryly. “This wasn’t how I expected our reunion to go, but then again, I don’t remember our family being ever fond of peaceful gatherings.” Suddenly, he raised his sword in the air and stabbed the earth, making everyone jump. “You have not aged at all,” Seokjin met eyes with Minseok as he used his blade as a crutch to help him up, “Brother.”

The puzzlement on Minseok’s face morphed to one of surprise. “Seokjin?” He pushed the guard’s spear away so that he could draw closer to the traveller. “Is that you?”

The man smiled weakly as he stood up. “Greetings, Brother Minseok.”

Everyone watched in astonishment as Minseok lunged forward, capturing the traveller in a welcoming embrace. “It really is you! Look at how much you have grown!”

As Minseok and Seokjin exchanged pleasantries, Gyuri pushed herself up from the ground. So, he really is a Kim… Gyuri thought, panic slowly rising in her gut. She facepalmed herself. And I raised a hand against him and called him a dimwit.

Keen not to stick around for her potential punishment, Gyuri began slinking away. The last thing she wanted was for Seokjin to remember what she’d done. Why did he have to be one of the Kims? She kept thinking. Had it been anyone else, my actions would’ve been justified! But just as she was about to take a step further, she suddenly heard a familiar voice call out to her.

Gyuri nervously turned around and sighed in relief when she found it was Taehyung.

“What happened to you?” he asked when he finally arrived. He gave her a once-over and noticed her shivering. “You are soaked to the skin!”

“It’s a long story,” Gyuri replied, teeth chattering slightly. She had been so frightened by the horse ride earlier that she had forgotten how cold she was.

Taehyung quickly took off his cloak and wrapped her with it before she could protest. “Stupid Gyuri, you will catch a cold!”

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“I will get Madam Zhou to prepare your room,” Minseok concluded as Namjoon joined him. “You must be weary from your travels. Come, let us continue our conversation after you are settled.”
“It is good to see you, cousin,” Namjoon spoke sincerely as Minseok led the way. “We have much to catch up on.”

Seokjin offered a quick smile in reply. “Indeed.” He straightened his back as if to measure himself against Namjoon. “I can’t believe you’re taller than me now.”

Namjoon chuckled. “I was always taller than you.”

Seokjin was about to refute his cousin’s remark when he suddenly heard two people bickering in the distance. He stopped in his tracks. Looking over his shoulder, he spotted a young boy standing beside the drenched maid he was with earlier. Seokjin noticed that the boy was dressed in dark, embroidered clothing which was far too fancy for a servant. And if he wasn’t a servant, Seokjin deduced that he was of noble birth. He blinked.

Could that be—?

“Yes,” Namjoon affirmed, answering Seokjin’s question before he could even articulate it. “That is him.”

Seokjin turned to face his cousin.

“He was only an infant when you saw him last.” Namjoon gestured to Taehyung, who was walking alongside Gyuri. “Now, he is almost a man.”

Seokjin observed as his younger brother chatted animatedly with the maid. When he smiled, it surprised him to see how much Taehyung resembled their mother.

“Indeed, he has grown a lot,” Seokjin murmured, his eyes forlorn at the sudden thought of the past. Seeing his younger brother grown served as a reminder of the decade they had spent apart; ten summers of stolen time that he could never reclaim. “It is a shame that I was not there by his side to witness it.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:

Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 48 of The Brothers of Kim.

Finally, the long-awaited reveal of the second brother’s identity!

Please stay in tune for the development of the novel and sorry for the delay in the webtoon. It was meant to be released on 7th July 2019 (today) but because of technical difficulties, we had to postpone it to tomorrow (or today depending on the time zone you’re in).

*Just a side note, Sammy is based in the USA while I’m based in the UK, so we actually operate on different time zones.

I hope this chapter was to your liking and I apologise once again for the delay - we’ll do better next time!

Till the we meet again :)
The first thing that Gyuri noticed was that the days were becoming cooler.

Ever since the rain had fallen a week ago, something in the air had changed. The dry, auburn grass had started to flourish in rich greens and the breeze that passed by was slowly dropping in temperature. Were the seasons changing? Gyuri wasn't sure. Either autumn was coming, or she was starting to feel the beginnings of a cold.

A shiver ran down Gyuri's spine as she finished hanging the sheets.

Hoisting the wicker basket to her hip, she noticed that the jade ring had fallen out of its hiding place. Threaded through a piece of string and hung around her neck, Gyuri inspected it closely as if she was seeing the ring for the first time. With sunlight filtering through the clouds, the jade's deep hues caught the light brilliantly. Her smile was small as she fiddled with it between her thumb and forefinger.

"This ring will bring you back to your roots. It will bring you back to where you belong."

Gyuri clenched her fist around it. "But how?" she sighed. "How will it bring me back home?"

Over the past week, Gyuri had tried to figure out how the ring was related to the time-slip. Even though she had it in her possession, she still couldn't understand what she needed to do to return home. She had worn it, tapped her heels together like Dorothy from 'The Wizard of Oz' and even chanted the magic words, but like her other attempts, nothing happened. It felt like she had taken one step forward only to take three steps back.

"Ye do not need to understand everything right now. Just trust that there is always a reason why things have turned out the way they have."

Gyuri frowned as the old woman's words echoed in her mind. While the intricacies of the time-slip had baffled her, the mystery surrounding the ring eluded her more.

"Who was that old woman?" she murmured to herself. "And why did she have grandma's ring?"

With her brows knitted together, Gyuri attempted to conjure an image of the elder's face. There were only a few details Gyuri could recall with clarity. The elder's silver hair and singed clothing remained engraved in her mind but the most puzzling detail of all was the obscure flower tattoo that she spotted on the old woman's wrist. She bit her lip as she recalled a similar design branded on someone else.

"There's no way a kind old lady like her can be an assassin..." Gyuri muttered to herself, but part of her couldn't help but worry.

What if the old woman was related to the scruffy servant from the attack?

Gyuri let out a tired sigh as she focused her attention on returning to the maids' quarters.

The more Gyuri tried to uncover, the more confused she became. With each passing day, her list of questions grew alongside her unshakeable anxiety. All she knew for sure was that the ring was somehow related to her sudden appearance in Saim.
And... something else.

Gyuri stopped in her tracks as she ran her finger along the inscription that was engraved inside the ring. The characters were too complicated for her to decipher, but its uncanny resemblance to a certain someone's own jewel gave her some cause to remain hopeful.

"I need to see Chim Chim," Gyuri spoke resolutely, "he might know something about the ring." She eyed the inscription once more. "And what this says."

Gyuri stowed the ring safely back inside her robe and pressed her hand against it. There was something about having the jade close to her bosom that comforted her like the warm hearth of a fire. Not only was it a reminder of home, but also her lucky charm; a symbol of hope that one day, she would meet her family again.

Wait for me, Dad, Yoongi.

No matter what it would take, Gyuri was determined to return.

With a tenacious gait, Gyuri continued toward the maids' quarters, her mind already thinking of other ideas she could try regarding the ring. While crossing the main courtyard the sound of shifting gravel suddenly caught her attention. Gyuri halted.

That's weird, I don't remember seeing anyone come in here.

Made curious by the noise, Gyuri crept over to a hidden part of the household where the sound was loudest. She peeped behind the wall.

Clad in worn, dark clothes and armed with a sword in each hand, an unfamiliar man moved fluidly across the yard. He glided from one position to the next without hesitation; sabres swinging with such speed and synchronicity that it almost looked like they were an extension of his arms rather than separate entities.

Gyuri watched in amazement as the stranger moved elegantly, his loose robes trailing after him like a dark train. Like a seasoned dancer, the stranger leaped from one position to the next, his obsidian eyes focused and his expression unreadable as if he was lost in a world of his own. As he lunged and sliced at his invisible opponent, Gyuri chased after his profile, oddly mesmerised by the incongruency of his movements.

How could one execute such lethal and yet graceful strikes with such ease?

It was only when she managed to get a good look at his face did she realise the stranger was, in fact, someone she was already acquainted with: it was Seokjin— the elusive Kim brother.

A loud clatter rang through the air. Gyuri gasped at the abrupt noise. Enthralled, she had momentarily forgotten about the laundry basket in her hands and accidentally dropped it.

"Who's there?"

Gyuri immediately ducked her head, a string of curses parting her lips as she hurriedly picked up the fallen object. But before she could make a run for it, the sound of nimble footsteps was already fast approaching.

"Oh," she heard Seokjin say in a flat voice, "it's you."

Gyuri slowly glanced up and saw Seokjin with his brow arched.
"You're the wench from before."

A nervous chuckle escaped Gyuri's lips as she hastily stood up. "Greetings, Master Seokjin."

The dark-clothed man observed as Gyuri refused to meet his eye. He let out a curt laugh. "Master, huh?"

Gyuri dared to peer at his direction and saw that his expression was solemn. Up close, she noticed Seokjin's unkempt appearance, leading her to conclude that the eccentric man was still sleeping outdoors. With a leaf stuck in his wild, raven hair and his jawline sporting a full beard, Seokjin hardly resembled an aristocrat at all. Unlike the other Kims, he neither spoke eloquently nor did he dress in illustrious silk robes. In fact, Gyuri almost mistook him for a merchant because of his manner of speech and simple attire.

"What're you doing here?" Seokjin asked, frowning slightly. He glanced around as if to confirm she was alone. "Were you following me?"

Over the past week, the elusive Kim brother had been the topic of conversation for the maids. He inspired both fear and curiosity; a previously exiled Kim whose past remained unspoken like a dark fable. However, despite the notorious rumours that surrounded Seokjin, many of the maids were still keen to be his personal maid. After all, he still belonged to one of the most powerful families in Saim.

"No, Master Seokjin. I was doing the laundry."

Seokjin eyed her dubiously.

After the cremation of Lord Hyesung, Seokjin had witnessed the spotlight shift to his direction. Having lived a decade away from the household, he was unaccustomed to a luxurious way of life: how easy it was to request for someone to do his bidding; how everything he desired just fell onto his lap. He no longer had to starve, no longer had to worry about being ambushed, and no longer had to feel powerless. It was laughable how his strength as a man paled in comparison to the weight his family name bore. But in exchange for the privileges his name brought was the constant limelight, something he did not enjoy despite his contradictory behaviour.

It was exhausting, maintaining his guard.

In the last few days, Seokjin had contemplated whether life in exile was any different from the household. While his banishment was full of perils, it was simple—he was free. In contrast, life in the household was complex. Everything he did was subject to scrutiny, every word he uttered, every step he took—everything he did was observed with a watchful eye. He could not so much as move without having calculated the implications of his actions moments before executing them.

Seokjin quickly learned that life as an aristocrat offered a different type of challenge, one that threatened to break his independence, the very core of his personality. If he succumbed, it would shape him into someone he didn't want to be: a puppet under the Kim household.

"As much as I'm flattered by your interest in serving me," Seokjin uttered with forced politeness, "I'm afraid I must decline."

Gyuri watched as Seokjin sheathed his dual swords before running a hand through his damp fringe. While doing so, Gyuri caught a glimpse of his left ear—it was pierced—something she found unusual given none of the male aristocrats she had come across wore earrings. An involuntary grunt escaped Gyuri's lips taking Seokjin aback.

"Well, that's a relief," she replied without thinking, "because there's no way I'd want to serve you."
A long pause ensued as Seokjin watched Gyuri's eyes grow wide in mortification.

"Oh?" Seokjin hummed amusedly as he cocked his head to one side. "You don't wish to serve me?"

"I- I—" Gyuri surveyed her surroundings as if searching for inspiration. "I'm sorry, I- I didn't mean it like that—"

"Interesting."

Gyuri looked up and found Seokjin grinning at her.

"You're the first of the maids to say something so impudent to my face."

Gyuri rubbed her neck nervously. "I didn't mean to offend you, Master—"

"No worries," Seokjin interrupted with a tight-lipped smile. "It's not your fault that your eyes are defective."

"Huh?"

Noticing her bafflement, Seokjin elaborated, "Not only did you injure my leg through your carelessness, but it appears that you're also blind to the handsomeness before you." He gestured to himself. "So many of the maids in this household have already fallen for my charm. Some have practically begged to be my personal maid. Your disinterest in me must be because you're blind." He scoffed. "It all makes sense now."

Irked by his arrogance, Gyuri laughed dryly. "I'm not blind." Her brows knitted together as she retorted, "And it wasn't my fault you hurt your leg. You weren't looking at where you were going."

"Still insisting that, are we?" Seokjin's tone was playful. "You were fortunate that nothing happened to my face. If so, I wouldn't have let you off so easily."

"Even if something had," Gyuri rebuked, "it's not like it would have changed anything." Before she could stop herself, she added bitingy, "You're not as attractive as you think."

A look of surprise crossed Seokjin's features. "A maid that is blind and sharp-tongued." Gyuri blushed as she realised her mistake... again. "How refreshing."

"I'm sorry!" Gyuri hastily apologised while internally berating herself. "I swear it won't happen—"

"Well, it seems this household has taken in a feisty cat."

Seokjin's eyes twinkled with mischief as he leaned in, catching Gyuri by surprise. He was so close to her that she could feel his warm breath on her face. Gyuri tried her best not to stare at his lips but without warning, he suddenly tilted her chin up, forcing her to meet his stare.

"I just hope this cat doesn't end up biting the hand that feeds her."

With lips curled into an impish smile, Seokjin watched as Gyuri grew flustered by his touch. The way her cheeks bloomed into a rosy shade disappointed him, but he didn't let it show. *What was I expecting?* He thought. *In the end, all women are the same.* He was about to tease her further when suddenly, Gyuri backhanded Seokjin's arm away causing the man to recoil. He blinked.

"Don't touch me."

Seokjin was stunned by the ferocity of her tone.
Poised in a defensive stance, Gyuri glared at Seokjin as if she was ready to punch him. She stood defiantly, all semblance of her flustered state replaced by an unwavering death glare. Seokjin was surprised to find himself being intimidated by a little maid.

"You may be one of the masters in this household," Gyuri chided, "but you have no right to touch me without my permission."

Taken aback by her act of defiance, Seokjin blinked. Despite her small stature, Gyuri had an unexpected strong killer intent, one that Seokjin hadn't encountered since his time in the battlefields. "Is that so?" Unknowingly, he reached for the hilt of his sword which rested near his waist.

Noticing his hand curl around his sabre, Gyuri's eyes flickered. "Y-yes." Her voice shook slightly when she suddenly remembered the same blade being held against her throat not so long ago. "That's- that's considered assault, y'know!"

A look of confusion riddled Seokjin's features before his expression turned unreadable. Had I imagined her bloodlust? Cautiously, Seokjin released his blade, disguising his shame behind a hmph. He was embarrassed to find himself reaching for his blade because of a little girl. Had he grown so complacent that even a maid could threaten him?

"You should be careful with who you show your claws to," Seokjin warned, once he had regained his composure. "You're fortunate I'm merciful. Had I not been, you would've received punishment for your actions." Despite the edginess of his words, Seokjin was smiling.

Gyuri shivered.

Under his icy stare, Seokjin's obsidian eyes glimmered knowingly as if he knew all her secrets. Something about his gaze sent a familiar uneasiness that Gyuri couldn't quite put her finger on. It was almost as if she had been in the same situation before...

And then she realised.

"Lord Hyesung."

Seokjin flinched at the mention of his father's name. "...What did you say?"

"Lord Hyesung," Gyuri repeated with more confidence. She leaned in causing Seokjin to step back. "Master Seokjin, you're the spitting image of Lord Hyesung!"

Seokjin was silent.

"I thought there was something familiar about you!" Gyuri rambled excitedly, "Your eyes, your nose, your—" Gyuri paused as she sneaked a look at his mouth before hurriedly meeting his eyes again. "You look like a younger version of the late lord—"

"No," Seokjin quickly refuted, "I don't."

Gyuri was caught off-guard by Seokjin's denouncement. She observed as his frown deepened, evidently displeased by her innocent comparison.

"I look nothing like my father."

Registering the contempt in his voice, Gyuri bit her lip to avoid misspeaking again. It didn't take much for her to gather that the relationship between Seokjin and his father was complicated. Keen to avoid antagonising Seokjin further, Gyuri was about to apologise once more when she suddenly
heard someone calling for her. She turned around.

"There you are!" Gyuri heard a juvenile voice say.

Seokjin followed her lead and turned to find Taehyung approaching them from across the yard.

"I have been waiting for you for ages," Taehyung complained, his large dark robes swishing as he walked. "Mayu said you were doing the laundry and I wanted to help you out since you were taking so—" Taehyung abruptly halted when he noticed that Gyuri was not alone. "Second brother," he glanced from Seokjin to Gyuri with a look of puzzlement gracing his boyish features, "I did not know you were here."

Seokjin's expression softened at the sight of his younger sibling. "Greetings, Taehyung."

The younger awkwardly bowed back.

Gyuri watched in painful silence as the pair stared at each other, not knowing what else to say after their introductions. Her eyes darted from Taehyung to Seokjin like a pendulum as if expecting them to continue their exchange, but none came.

_Were they unable to continue because I'm here?_

Assuming it was her cue to leave, Gyuri cleared her throat. "Excuse me, Master Seokjin, Young Master," she bowed to each brother politely, "I shall leave you be now—"

"Wait!"

Gyuri halted immediately.

"Do not leave," Taehyung spoke excitedly, "I have news to tell you."

Seokjin observed as Gyuri gave Taehyung her undivided attention.

"Brother Minseok said he will continue funding the soup kitchen," Taehyung rushed to say. "He will continue to honour Father's reward to you."

"Really?" Sharing Taehyung's excitement, Gyuri's lips curled into a wide smile. "Is that true?"

"Yes! I worked hard to convince him and thankfully, he relented." Taehyung had a smug, boxy grin. "It was a good thing I was there to persuade him. Who knows what would have happened had I not done that."

"You did well, Tae," Gyuri praised, forgetting that Seokjin was nearby. "I don't know what I would've done without you."

At Gyuri's words, Taehyung looked down as if to hide his shy smile. "I need to go and visit the orphans today. I should tell them the good news."

Seokjin watched in silence as Taehyung looked at Gyuri endearingly.

Even though he had already been at the household for a week, he had not yet properly spoken to Taehyung. Instead, Seokjin had observed him from afar, secretly studying everything he could about his younger brother. From his favourite food to his least favourite pastimes, Seokjin had tried to learn it all. He was pleased to discover that Taehyung had grown up somewhat happily, completely sheltered from the horrors of life outside the household. However, what surprisingly piqued his interest the most was not the details of Taehyung's childhood that he had missed, but the peculiar
relationship he had with a certain maid. And seeing his brother interact with that same maid caused him to furrow his brow.

Seokjin suspected that Gyuri was more than she let on.

"I'm afraid that won't be wise."

Taehyung and Gyuri turned to Seokjin, who had suddenly spoken. They had been so absorbed in their conversation that they had forgotten Seokjin was nearby.

"Cousin Namjoon says that the plague in the village is still rife," Seokjin continued. "It would be unwise to go and risk your health."

"Master Seokjin is right," Gyuri agreed, "I'm also under strict instruction not to let you go with me when I visit."

Taehyung pouted. "Why? That is unfair!"

Seokjin heard Gyuri chuckle at his younger brother's childish reaction. It may have been his imagination, but Seokjin thought Taehyung enjoyed the maid's attention. He watched the pair closely. Judging by how comfortable his brother was around her, he deduced that Gyuri must be more than just a maid to Taehyung.

_Could she be his personal maid?_

When Seokjin voiced out this question, Taehyung proudly replied, "No, brother. Gyuri is not my personal maid." He revealed enthusiastically, "She is my sister."

At the sound of those words, unwanted images flashed before Seokjin's eyes causing him to wince.

_An infantile hand._

_A small shoe._

_An innocent smile._

Seokjin clenched his fist as the distant memories vanished as fast as they came.

"Master Seokjin?" Gyuri said tentatively, "Are you all right—?"

"I'm fine." Seokjin's voice was clipped. Before Gyuri or Taehyung could ask anything more, the elusive brother had briskly turned, suddenly in a darker mood. He walked away.

Confused by his abruptness, Gyuri asked Taehyung, "What was that all about?"

"I am not certain." He looked at Gyuri worriedly. "Was it something I said?"

"No, it can't be," she replied, sensing the hurt in Taehyung's voice. "It must be because of me."

Taehyung still looked unsure.

"Master Seokjin must just be tired," Gyuri tried to reassure him. "He was practising his swordsmanship before I came." She peered at Taehyung who appeared downcast. "How is he related to you anyway? Is he like the twin brother of Master Junmyeon? Because I can totally see the resemblance."
"No." Taehyung shook his head. "He is my true brother."

"Your true brother?" Gyuri was confused. You mean—?

Taehyung nodded. He glanced to where Seokjin was before he left, footsteps long faded away. "He is my true brother," he smiled sadly, "but it seems our bond is only limited to the blood we share."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 49 of The Brothers Kim!

Apologies for the late update. I had my graduation yesterday so I was really busy.

Guys, I'm officially no longer a student! I survived university!

I also want to give you a heads up that I'm probably only going to get busier from now on as my search for jobs continue. However, I will try to stick to a regular schedule because I want to finish this story. Thank you for always being patient and encouraging—it really means a lot.

But for now... the mysteries of TBK continues.

Till next time!
The Emperor's Paradox

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The royal maid had her eyes fixed on the ground as she closed the heavy, carved doors in front of her. She sighed. From the corner of her eye, she could tell it was a beautiful, warm day, but she was reluctant to admire the scenery.

She mustn't.

Having served in the palace for many years, the old maid had learned that keeping her head down was by far the safest option. It was a vital skill. Like the rest of the Saimese, the old maid believed that the eyes were windows to the soul; they revealed everything. From one glance alone, the eye of the beholder could perceive another's thoughts, another's intentions... another's emotions. And despite the young emperor being magnanimous, she couldn't risk compromising her invisibility. After all, the less she was noticed the more peaceful her days at the palace would be.

She knew better than to look up. The late emperor had made sure of that.

But despite knowing better, the maid couldn't help but be overwhelmed by discontent. How long must she remain docile?

Years of being reminded that she must never aspire above her station had convinced her to always play safe; to turn a blind eye to wrongdoing; to never interfere with things beyond her class. If she kept her eyes on the ground nothing could go wrong. She had aged believing that was the case... but what if it didn't have to be?

While one can enact a lie, the eyes are unable to deceive.

The old maid sighed again as she pulled away from such dangerous thoughts. It was all because of what she had overheard. News had spread like wildfire that a drunkard had incited a riot while dueling with one of the imperial guards. He spoke of profanities, insulted the emperor, but most of all, he spoke of something treacherous.

Revolution.

The maid shuddered.

Even the mere act of thinking about it could cost her life. Despite being uneducated, the maid was aware of her kingdom's history before the Jade Lotus. Tales from her elders had painted a different Saim— one that was full of instability, deprivation and conflict. While Saim at present suffered from similar affairs, none can deny that the Jade Lotus had restored widespread peace. Decades of warring amongst each other ceased under the rule of a formidable clan. A clan that united and became arbiters of a once ruined realm.

But what would happen should that clan be overthrown by an unlikely enemy?

The old maid shuddered again as she dismissed another dangerous thought. It had almost been a century since the Jade Lotus had unified Saim, leaving the blood of the enemy spilled at their wake. She was fortunate to not have witnessed the carnage her ancestors had and she was keen to keep it that way.
Better to be a flightless bird than to be a bird that can never fly again.

Resuming her routine of admiring the uneven patterns of the floor, the maid slipped into a reverie. She reminded herself that while her status was undignified, she was still affluent in other ways. Yielding to greed was something she mustn't risk. Only the naïve mistake her station as permanent—never rising in social class; never being more than a royal servant. But the truth was, it was quite the opposite: there was every opportunity to fall. And like every other day for the past decade, she must remain unnoticed to prevent that from happening.

After all, she was no better than furniture in the palace; only worth keeping if it still served a purpose. The swirls on the ground blurred into one as the maid eagerly shifted her thoughts to something more pressing: the young emperor's love life—or lack of it.

A while had passed since His Majesty had ascended the throne and still, he had not claimed an empress. Words were not needed to convey the worries that she and the other servants shared. After all, the prospect of an heirless emperor was enough to induce bouts of anxiety on anyone. Should the emperor suddenly pass away, Saim would be vulnerable. Would the neighbouring kingdoms attack? Would there be civil war amongst the clansmen?

The maid was so occupied by morbid thoughts that she failed to notice someone approaching. She blinked when a pair of embroidered shoes suddenly came to view.

These shoes... where have I seen them before?

She looked up.

In a blink of an eye, the maid registered a man wearing a eunuch's uniform. His brown eyes, while exhibiting a hint of curiosity, were encircled by dark crescents that contrasted with his pale skin. A yellowish bruise bloomed near the corner of his mouth while his other injuries remained hidden underneath his modest clothing. The man stood expectantly before the maid; his posture slightly hunched as if it pained him to stand straight. His face, while expressionless, displayed a haggardness that was a tell-tale sign of his fatigue and discomfort.

It didn't take the maid long to realise who the man before her really was. She bowed immediately. "Your- your Majesty!"

Jimin peered at the maid, unfazed by her startled reaction. He spoke softly, his voice coming out much croakier than he liked. "Is Her Highness still awake?"

Surprised by his question, the maid stuttered, "Y-yes, Your Majesty. Her Highness was awake when I- when I left."

There was silence as Jimin glanced at the carved doors behind her. Like the rest of the palace, the doors were decorated elaborately. It served as a reminder of how revered the person residing behind them was.

Her hands clenched as she waited for his command.

"You may leave now."

Ducking her head even lower, the maid hurriedly scampered away, relieved to be dismissed.

Jimin held back until the maid's footsteps faded away before facing the door. He took a deep breath. It had been weeks since he had last visited this part of the palace grounds, that he started doubting
whether it was a good idea to come at all. Swallowing his fears, he ventured inside. A loud, creaking noise filled the air as light flooded into the dimly lit room and he took a wary step forward.

Almost immediately, a heavy, musky scent attacked Jimin's nostrils, causing him to scrunch his nose in disdain. With his hand swatting the air around him, he swept his gaze across the large room. He glared at the incense burner in the corner.

What sort of remedy were the royal physicians trying this time?

"Your Highness?" he called out. "Your Highness, are you there?"

Jimin walked a little further until he encountered balls of scrunched up paper littering his path. Like his last visit, he followed the trail until it led him to the woman who was responsible for the mess. He let out a soft sigh when he found her surrounded by her sketches.

"Your Highness..."

Upon hearing his voice, the woman peered over her shoulder. Jimin watched as she studied his face, her kind eyes wavering between recognition and wariness. He held his breath as he waited to see whether it was one of her good days or bad days.

"...Chim?" A smile graced her features, showing the wrinkles in the corners of her eyes.

Relief washed over Jimin. Today is a good day.

"I have not seen you in a while." She beckoned to the seat opposite her messy desk, where piles of papers occupied the floor, "Please, come sit with me."

Jimin moved to oblige, but something on the floor caught his eye. He halted at his step as he picked up an uncrumpled sheet, his brows knitting together as he tried to decipher the contents of the page.

Noticing his hesitance, the woman enquired, "Do you know what that picture is of?"

Jimin shook his head. "No," he admitted. His eyes returned to studying the sheet. There was something about it that seemed surreal. Jimin could tell from what looked like trees and what appeared to be a mountain, that it was a sketch of a place, but he couldn't be certain. Not when there were strange, geometric shapes sprouting from the ground.

"I thought not," the woman replied with a sad smile. "No one ever does."

"Whatever it is, it is beautiful, Your Highness." Jimin placed the sketch on top of her crowded desk as he took his seat opposite her. He peered at her incomplete sketch and noted that it was a portrait. "You are very talented."

The woman hummed in reply as she picked up the sheet Jimin had been holding. It was a place that no one else but she knew of. Remembered. She discarded it before her other forgotten memories resurfaced, memories that, had she dwelled on, would have evoked more conflicted emotions.

She met eyes with the pretend eunuch. "To what do I owe your visit, Chim? Has my husband been misbehaving again?"

Jimin had a tight-lipped smile. "His Majesty has been behaving, I can assure you, Your Highness."

The woman scoffed as she tucked a strand of grey hair behind her ear. "I hope so. He rarely leaves his war council, so I do not see him often." The woman returned to sketching with her piece of
Jimin watched as the woman tutted under her breath as she went on a lengthy sermon on the importance of making peace instead of war. He listened carefully, nodding when it was appropriate and offering his opinion when she requested it. Jimin couldn't help but be impressed by her assertiveness and eloquent speech; how her way of thinking was so different from his own and how her cleverness remained undimmed despite her age. It made him wonder how magnificent she must have been during her prime.

"So, are you saying that emperors are neither equal nor above the people but actually beneath them?" Jimin was flabbergasted by the woman's bold claim. "Why?"

"Emperors can never be human," the woman replied solemnly. "They cannot act on their selfish desires, or they will risk losing their divinity and reverence. If the lay people witness the emperor succumb to such basely needs, then the emperor's darkest secret is revealed."

"The emperor's darkest secret?" Jimin repeated. He had never heard of such a thing. "What is that?"

The woman glanced around her as if to ensure the pair were truly alone. "Do you want to know?"

Jemin nodded.

She gestured for him to lean in and he followed. "All emperors bleed."

Jimin was puzzled.

"It presents quite the paradox, does it not?" The woman straightened herself as she elaborated, "An emperor cannot be human but is; an emperor cannot have desires but does; an emperor must not act on their desires but will."

"But how does that make an emperor beneath its people?"

The woman grinned as she added the finishing touches to her sketch. "Most emperors consider themselves above the people because they believe they have a divine right. They are next to God. But a true emperor is someone who puts his people above himself, sacrificing his own needs for the needs of all." She turned to Jimin thoughtfully. "A true emperor is neither God as he is not above, nor is he equal as he is not human. He is beneath his people because he cannot fit either of these categories. He is a hybrid. A hybrid that must remain humble so that his kingdom will thrive. If not, that kingdom will crumble."

Jimin was quiet as he contemplated her words. She was right. Often Jimin felt like he was two different people occupying the same body. On one hand, there was Chim, the boy who had grown up in the Temple, and on the other was Jimin, the emperor of Saim. At first, the divisions were clear cut but as time wore on, Jimin wasn't sure anymore.

And it was all because of her.

Jimin stared at the woman and observed her gnarly, small hands. From his seat he could see that she had aged well; a flower barely withered by the elements. Seeing her before him made him wish that his father was still alive. He would have known what to do about these troublesome feelings. He could have taught Jimin everything. Before he could stop himself, Jimin suddenly asked, "What about His Majesty?"

The woman looked up from her sketch. "What about him?"
"Do you think he had put the people before himself?"

The woman's brows furrowed. "Had?" she repeated. "Why do you speak as if he is no longer here?"

"My apologies," Jimin hastily replied, horrified by his blunder, "I mean—"

"My husband is a good man." The woman's voice was cold and sharp. "He may have his shortcomings but whatever he decides, he decides for the good of the kingdom." The woman narrowed her eyes at Jimin. "Watch your tongue, Chim. I may have granted you permission to speak freely, but he is still your emperor."

Jimin nervously licked his lips. It had been a long time since he had been chastised by anyone that it felt foreign. Becoming emperor had made him forget what it was like to be humble. "I am sorry I overstepped, Your Highness." He cast his eyes down in shame.

The woman's features eventually softened. "You are forgiven."

Just as Jimin was about to thank her, he suddenly spotted the completed portrait. His eyes widened. "That picture..."

The woman looked down at her sketch. "Oh, this?" She turned the page around so that Jimin could see it better. "It is my boy," she said with a cheerful smile. "My Jiminie."

Jimin blinked at the picture before him. It was of a young child, not much older than five summers. He had long hair that curled at the ends and big, round eyes. Jimin couldn't help but smile a little at the sight of the boy's pouted lips and puffy and pinchable cheeks. As his eyes took in the rest of the sketch, he noticed that the boy was carrying something in his hand—something that resembled a rice cake.

"My Jiminie must be ten years old now," Jimin heard the woman say softly. "He is a beautiful child, is he not?"

Jimin nodded, a dull ache in his heart making itself known.

"The servants say he resembles my husband." The woman let out a chuckle. "But I think he looks more like me. See here?" The woman pointed to his lips. "He inherited that from me."

Jimin chortled in agreement. "Yes... the resemblance is uncanny."

The woman grinned. "My Jiminie is a very bright child," she peered down at the sketch and stroked it proudly, "just like his mother."

Jimin took in a shaky breath.

"He loves rice cakes, you know," the woman mentioned. "I used to find him hiding underneath this large desk munching on them when no one was looking. He used to throw a tantrum because I would not let him have any more."

"Do you miss him, Your Highness?"

The woman looked taken aback by his question. Had he overstepped again?

"Every day." She met eyes with Jimin, and he saw they were shiny with tears. "But he is Crown Prince. It was necessary for him to leave my side."

Jimin had heard the story before. The story of why, as an infant, he had to leave the palace and go to
the Temple. Upon his return, his sister had revealed the details but Jimin knew there was more to the story than what was relayed to him. Something about it was amiss.

Feigning ignorance, he asked, "What do you mean?"

"It is not safe here," the woman simply explained. "The palace may be safe from outsiders but not from enemies within." She stared at the picture. "I could not let what happened to my firstborn happen to my Jiminie. I cannot re-live that pain again—"

Suddenly, the woman briefly froze, and her expression turned blank.

Jumin searched her countenance. "Your Highness?"

The woman blinked several times before looking at Jimin as if noticing his presence for the first time that day. "Chim?" A puzzled look riddled her features. "When did you get here?"

Jumin's heart sank.

No...

"Where is my husband?" She scrutinised her surroundings and the sketches scattered around her. "I should be by his side. Why am I still here? He needs me by his side—" The woman briskly got up and made her way to the door.

Jumin chased after her. "Your Highness!" He blocked her path before she could leave.

"Let me pass, Chim. I need to see my husband—"

"Do you not remember, Your Highness?" Jimin interrupted.

"Remember what?"

"You are ill. You were told by the royal physicians to recuperate in your quarters."

The woman had a doubtful look. "But I feel all right—"

"His Majesty is busy with his war council," Jimin blurted. "He instructed me to ensure that you rest."

There was silence as the woman searched Jimin's eyes. "Truly?"

A flicker of pain stung Jimin at having to lie so blatantly to her face. "Yes, Your Highness." He gestured toward her desk. "You were telling me a story and had just excused yourself to rest. I was just leaving, remember?"

The woman glanced back at her messy quarters and then to Jimin. "Y-yes, of course. I am sorry for keeping you."

"There is no need to apologise, Your Highness."

The woman watched as Jimin bowed, completely oblivious to the way Jimin's expression crumpled for a split second. As Jimin straightened himself to depart, the woman suddenly urged him to wait.

Jumin watched as the woman hurriedly fetched something from a tray near her table.

"Will you do a favour for me?" She stretched out her hand to reveal a sealed letter and familiar a box. It was the same box she always gave him after every visit. "Will you ensure that this reaches the Temple?"
Jimin reluctantly accepted the items.

"It is for the Crown Prince," the woman mentioned. "It is his birthday soon."

Jimin flinched.

When he first arrived at the palace, he did not know how to approach his mother. He had no memories of her. Raised by monks from a very young age, Jimin had no awareness of his royal lineage. He believed he was an orphan like the other boys. It was only when Zeren asked about his parents that he started wondering about them. Who were they? And if they were still alive, why had they abandoned him?

He was twelve when he learned the truth.

Jimin brought the presents close to his chest as he tried to choke back his emotions. For the past few months, Jimin had been taught to always put the people before himself; to be a good emperor. A part of him—the selfish part of him—had thought it was unfair how he had to endure and sacrifice everything. He never asked to be emperor. He didn't want to be. But learning of his mother's struggles made him realize that it wasn't only him who had to make sacrifices. In the end, an empress had to make them too.

Jimin stared woefully at his mother, the words he wanted to say left unspoken. If only he could tell her she needn't worry about him anymore. If only she knew her son was right there. When he first met his mother, all he wanted to say to her was that her son was finally home. He simply wished to be a family again, but alas, fate had a cruel way of reuniting them. It was already too late.

Jimin bowed again as he spoke softly, "As you wish... Your Highness."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 50 of The Brothers Kim!

First of all, I apologise for my absence- life has been hectic lately- but most importantly, we have reached a significant milestone!

When I started writing this story, I originally planned for it to only be 50 chapters long. I wanted to write a shorter story (50 chapters or less) but my imagination went wild during the planning and writing stage. Now, 50 chapters later, this story is still far from completion. There are still many events to explore, many mysteries to unearth, and as cheesy as it may sound, it's been really fun for me to share every moment with you.

I really want to express my thanks to all readers, silent and vocal, for keeping me motivated.

Whenever I read positive feedback it gives me a boost of confidence in my writing. At first, I didn't consider my stories loveable. I was content with just writing them for me. But reading your comments has convinced me that maybe I can be a published writer in the future. I'll keep at it for the time being.

To celebrate the 50th chapter, I want to invite you to join the Discord community for all
TBK readers! You can find the link on my Linktree.

I hope to see you there!

Editor's Note:

Hey, readers! Long-time no see, huh?

We hope you enjoyed the 50th chapter of The Brothers Kim. Imagine that, fifty chapters! It's especially impressive to me, since I have the bad habit of giving up on my projects before they're finished, and I've been watching her update weekly with minimal exceptions since chapter 15. That's not to say non-writers or new readers can't celebrate this occasion, though. Round Of Applause !! Being a student (though she did graduate recently) and all while writing this and communicating well with two other people who are not even in the same time zone as each other (much less her, as I'm currently based in China). TBK is also doing really well on Webtoon, so thanks to all of you who went to check it out and left the comments spoiler free!

On another note, Jimin and his mother's situation in this chapter is very sad. Alexa, play Despacito :(  

- Viy ed.
Jemin was trembling as he left the room, his head hanging low. The letter in his hand felt like lead; the box a deadweight at the end of his arm. He should be accustomed to the heaviness in his chest—a mixture of regret, frustration and sadness—but he wasn't. Each time he received the box, these unwanted emotions overwhelmed him, reminding him of the futility of his wishes.

No matter how much he willed it, he couldn't turn back time.

"How pitiful," Jemin scorned. Having arrived at his private quarters, he glanced at the box and the single lotus that decorated the lacquered lid: the emblem of his clan and the kingdom he ruled. "To be bestowed all this power yet be powerless to do anything..." He sighed as he gently placed the box and letter on his crowded desk. "I am no less helpless than the next man."

"I take it the visit to Her Highness didn't go well."

Startled, Jemin immediately sprung into a defensive position, his arms grabbing hold of the stranger's clothes. A surprised grunt escaped the man's lips as Jemin pinned him to the wall.

"Woah! Steady, Your Majesty, it's just me!"

"Zeren?" Jemin loosened his grip when he recognised the person's voice. "What were you doing lurking around? You frightened me."

The bronze-faced guard scoffed as he straightened his uniform. "That's my line." He was about to say more when he noticed Jemin heading for the dressing screen in the corner. He scrambled after him. "Your Majesty! Wait up!"

A scowl formed on Jemin's lips. Weeks confined indoors had meant being constantly addressed as royalty. He was sick of it. It was like each time he heard others say those words, an illusory ball and chain snaked around his ankles, his wrists, his neck. The last thing he wanted was for Zeren to remind him of his change in fortune—everyone in the kingdom occupied that job already.

He swerved around.

"I thought I told you not to call me—" Jemin abruptly stopped.

From afar, the young emperor spotted a dark bruise blooming around Zeren's left eye. A gash encrusted with dried blood marred his bottom lip while smaller cuts punctuated his cheek like angry freckles on his tanned skin. Jemin had been so preoccupied with his thoughts earlier that he hadn't noticed Zeren's injuries. Injuries which Zeren didn't have a few weeks prior.

"What... what happened to you?"

The imperial guard gave a half-hearted smile. "So, you've finally noticed?"

Jemin didn't reply.

"I dare say, the military police are quite scrupulous when it comes to their punishments," Zeren said bitterly as he limped toward his friend.
Jimin's brows furrowed. "The Guan Yu did this to you?"

"Oh no," Zeren smiled wryly, "even better. I had the honour of being beaten by their leader: General Lee."

Immediately, Jimin's face darkened.

Lately, the war general had been giving Jimin grief by reviving the notion of expansionism during their meetings in court. While Jimin had no interest in pursuing a line of acquisition like his father, he could not ignore that many of his councillors did. Deeming it as the late emperor's unfinished legacy, General Lee had proceeded to repeatedly mention the idea, his proposals becoming more outlandish than the last.

Like the frayed ends of his eunuch disguise, Jimin's patience had started to wear thin.

"He has no business laying a finger on you," Jimin growled, his irritation renewed. "I thought I made that clear to everyone. Where is he? I will see to it that he—"

"Slow down, Your Majesty!" Zeren called. He winced as he manoeuvred himself to face Jimin who was already at the door. "Before you go rushing off, I deserved to be punished."

"What?" Jimin's eyes widened. "What are you talking about?"

"It was punishment for my failure to protect you."

Jimin blinked.

"These bruises... these cuts..." Zeren lowered his head in shame. "They battered me within an inch of my life to mirror the wounds you sustained. Wounds that you shouldn't have received had I done my job properly."

"But—!"

"No," Zeren cut him off. "I know what you're going to say but what they did was right." He placed a hand on top of his heart. "I am your bodyguard, Your Majesty. I pledged to be your shield. I should have been there to protect you when it happened." His eyes flickered as he spotted the yellowish bruise near Jimin's chin. His voice was heavy with guilt as he mentioned, "You shouldn't have gotten hurt under my watch. You shouldn't have gotten that bruise at all..." Suddenly, Zeren fell to his knees.

Jimin ran to him. "Zeren—!"

"Forgive me, Your Majesty!" Zeren crouched down so that his forehead was pressed against the floor. "I have failed you."

Jimin was dumbfounded.

A long time ago, Jimin had once bowed to Zeren in the same manner, imploring his friend to swap water duty with him so that he could have more rest.

"I'll do it if you beg," a young Zeren had teased. "And if you'll be my lackey for a week."

Desperate and naïve, Jimin had complied willingly. It was only when he discovered Zeren had tricked him that he vowed to one day make Zeren do the same.

"There's no way I'll ever beg!" Zeren impishly replied when Jimin swore at him. "You'll never make
The young emperor stared at his friend now.

There was no triumph in seeing Zeren brought to his knees. Jimin didn't feel the satisfaction he imagined he would. Instead, all it brought was an emptiness created by their differences. The realisation that, in the end, Jimin was emperor while Zeren was nothing. Despite being close in proximity, Jimin had never felt as far away to Zeren as he did at that moment. And he despised it.

"Get up."

Against his advisors' counsel, Jimin had kept Zeren close. He granted Zeren status, promoted him as his bodyguard and announced that he was free to roam the palace as he pleased. Jimin had tried everything to balance Zeren's fortunes so that it matched his. It was the only way he could cling to the fantasy that he and Zeren were still equal; that they were still the same; that he was still Chim, the boy from the Temple. Without knowing, Jimin had come to depend on Zeren as his tether to the past. He had come to believe that if Zeren ceased calling him by his name then the person he was would cease to exist as well.

"I said, get up," Jimin repeated when Zeren remained stubbornly glued to the ground. "That is an order."

Jimin noticed Zeren stiffen at his tone. He kept his head hung in shame as he kneeled upright.

"What are you waiting for?" Jimin snapped, "Must I repeat myself?"

"I'm sorry," Zeren replied in embarrassment. He gestured to his legs and Jimin noticed them quivering. "I have no strength in my legs, so..." He reached out his hand and Jimin rolled his eyes as he helped Zeren to his feet.

"Thanks, Your Majesty."

Jimin was about to correct Zeren when he remembered his wounds. The young emperor pursed his lips. As much as it irked him to hear Zeren address him formally, guilt overwhelmed him more.

It was his fault that Zeren was punished.

Had Jimin not hesitated in fighting, Zeren wouldn't have had to endure a beating he didn't deserve. He had been too obstinate. While fighting the thugs, Jimin had clung to his old principles; had been too merciful, and perhaps had even acted selfishly. He had fought as Chim, a naïve altruist when he should have fought as Jimin, a decisive ruler.

"He is a hybrid. A hybrid that must remain humble so that his kingdom will thrive. If not, that kingdom will crumble."

Jimin smiled wearily as he recalled his mother's words. Perhaps it is time I choose one side over the other? He pondered. Wavering between two worlds is dangerous. If I stay as I am now, I will be the one to crumble.

"It was not your fault that I was hurt," Jimin said as he pulled away from his thoughts.

Zeren looked like he was about to protest.

"I was careless," Jimin continued, "I should have anticipated that my opponent would employ underhanded tricks."
"You were outnumbered." Zeren was quick to defend. "From the beginning, the odds were against you." He paused and scrunched his lip. "But the number of opponents doesn't matter. You're an excellent fighter, Your Majesty. Why did you hold back?"

"I did not."

"No." Jimin was startled by Zeren's sharp tone. The imperial guard narrowed his eyes accusingly. "You did."

"I assure you, I—"

"Under self-defence, it is right for you to fight back," Zeren suddenly recited, forcing Jimin to listen. "If enemies cannot be reasoned with words, communicate with them through one's sword. Isn't that what the monks taught us?"

"And communicate with my sword I did," Jimin insisted. "You were not there, Zeren, but I did fight."

"Well, perhaps you did but not to the best of your ability." He limped toward a stool as Jimin disappeared behind the screen. "Word has spread around the palace that an imperial guard allowed three thugs to beat him up. Before that, he danced with the aggressor rather than duelled." He hummed in displeasure as he addressed Jimin's shadow. "Care to clarify?"

"I was trying to avoid resorting to violence for as long as possible," Jimin answered, his voice hitching slightly as he changed into his imperial attire.

"And in exchange for your hesitance, you tarnished the honour of your imperial guards and sustained injuries in the process."

"What would you have me do?" Jimin asked with a hint of annoyance.

There was a pause.

"Fight properly."

"And then what? Slay them as if their lives do not matter? Rob their family of a husband, a father, a brother, a son?" Jimin emerged from the screen in his crimson and gold imperial robes. His expression was grave as he spoke, "Those men may have been scum, but they were living beings like you and I." He shuddered as he recalled the guttural sound the drunkard made before he was silenced forever. "They did not need to die...

"I know you disapprove of my methods," Zeren murmured, "but I did what I had to do to protect you." He rose to his feet. "Unlike you and I, those drunkards were ready to murder innocent people. Men like that do not deserve mercy."

Jimmie let out a sharp hmph.

"You disagree with me."

"Of course, I do." He pushed past Zeren to get to his desk, where a mountain of papers lay waiting for him. "All life is precious regardless of its sins. You should know that as well as I."

"You're too soft, Your Majesty," Zeren scolded. He watched as Jimin sat down. "I worry your reluctance to take another's life will lead to your downfall."
"Our kingdom is already filled with so much suffering," Jimin countered. "People die every day because of disease, poverty and even war. Are you suggesting that I must add to it as well?"

"No, as your shield, I will ensure that you'll never have to do so personally." Zeren winced as Jimin dropped a pile of heavy books to one side. "As emperor, you need not wield a blade as I will do it for you. I will be your extra pair of hands. But what I cannot do is hold onto something only you can."

"Oh?" Jimin met eyes with him. "And what would that be?"

"Our kingdom."

Jemin looked away.

"You must do what you can to keep yourself alive," Zeren continued, ignoring Jimin's eye roll. "The people's lives are in your hands."

"You need not remind me," the young emperor grumbled, "I am already aware that my life is not my own."

Zeren frowned. As much as he detested hounding Jimin, he knew it was his job to do so. After witnessing his friend bruised and bloodied, Zeren realised that he had grown complacent. He had forgotten that Jimin was first and foremost his emperor.

"Had your weapon been a spear would you have fought differently?"

Jemin shook his head. "No, be it a sword or a spear the outcome would have been the same." He scowled when he discovered another pile of papers under his desk. "I may be more skilled with a spear, but it means nothing if I cannot bring myself to harm another."

"Even if Gyuri's life was on the line?"

Jemin flinched.

Noticing his reaction, Zeren bolted upright. "So, you would have reacted differently..."

He peered at Jimin as he waited for the string of denials to erupt from his lips. Normally, Jimin would tell him to stop being foolish. He would say things like he didn't care for Gyuri; that she was a scammer and a thief and that all women were sirens waiting to lure men to their demise. Zeren waited for all of this to be articulated in Jimin's eloquent speech but to his astonishment, none came.

Zeren blinked.

"Advisor Kim had come in looking for you earlier," Zeren casually mentioned. If I am right, then... He observed as Jimin returned to flicking through the papers as if he hadn't faltered a few moments ago. "And he asked me something peculiar."

Jemin hummed as if feigning disinterest. "What did he want?"

"He asked if I knew the wench that captivated your heart."

Zeren noticed Jimin flinch again.

"What did you say?" Jimin asked.

"I told him the truth."
"And what is the truth exactly?"

"I think you already know without me saying it aloud."

Jimin stopped what he was doing as he regarded his friend with a wary stare.

"I didn't mention her name if that is what you're wondering." Zeren smiled playfully. "Advisor Kim kept pressuring me to tell him, but my lips were sealed." He cocked his head to the side. "Imagine how he would've reacted if I told him it was one of his household maids..."

Jimin's ears turned pink. "...How did you find out?"

"What? That you are enamoured with Gyuri?"

Jimin looked away in embarrassment. Hearing his troublesome feelings put into words caused his chest to stir like it always did at the mention of her name.

"You told me just now."

"What?"

"I had my suspicions before, but I wasn't certain." Zeren's smile was smug. "So, you do have romantic feelings for Gyuri." Zeren's grin widened as he stood on his feet. "She is the wench that occupies your heart and that's why you didn't fall for Mayu!"

Jimin blushed furiously as Zeren relentlessly teased him.

"What will you do now?" Zeren asked excitedly. "Will you tell her? Will you propose to her?"

"Wha—?" Jimin was so startled that he accidentally knocked a pile of books off his desk. "Propose to her?" he repeated, wide-eyed. "Why would I propose to her? I cannot marry her!"

"Well, sure you can," Zeren replied, unfazed. "You're emperor. You can marry anyone you want."

"Zeren, it is precisely because I am emperor that I have to be careful with who I choose to be my empress. I cannot just marry anyone. It has to be someone who can rule by my side."

"Then why can't it be Gyuri?"

Jimin's heart skipped a beat.

"You said before that you will only love one woman. Our kingdom needs an empress and Gyuri happens to be someone you are enamoured with, so why not make her your empress?"

"It is more complicated than that," Jimin replied, his heart racing at the thought. "You forget that she is of low birth and I also have proposals from Huaxia and Nihon to consider. I cannot just ignore my duties to our kingdom in favour of these fickle emotions." Jimin shook his head as if it will aid in dissuading his heart. "No, what I feel for her right now is just a phase."

"And what if it isn't?" Zeren challenged. "Your Majesty, I know that as emperor, you have to sacrifice a lot of things, but you can be selfish at least once. Gyuri may be of low birth, but you have the power to change that. If she is the one you desire, then make her yours. It is not a crime to love. Sometimes I think that residing in the Temple has made you selfless in the wrong ways. You never think about your happiness— only those of others."

"Is that not the purpose of being emperor?" Jimin sardonically questioned. "To live for the people?"
He glanced at the box his mother gave him. "And were you not lecturing me on my duty just now? Why should who I marry be any different to why I choose not to use my sword?"

"Those matters are separate."

"Well, I beg to differ." Jimin reached for the lacquered box and opened it. "Whatever choice I make will have a profound effect on the kingdom. Something as important as choosing who my empress will be must not be influenced by basely needs like desire or love." His eyes were mournful when he saw the contents of the box. Rice cakes. "Because whoever I choose will be condemned to share the same fate as I."

Jumin bit into one slowly, each bite filled with thoughts of his mother and her lonesome predicament. The thought of his future empress ending up like her saddened him. Wouldn't it be kinder if he could suffer this fate alone? He offered the box to Zeren while deep in thought. Before Zeren could say anything, Jimin suddenly asked, "Tell me, do you know why wildflowers do not bloom indoors?"

Zeren glanced at the wilting red and pink camellias that Jimin had locked eyes on. "Because they are out of their element?"

"Precisely." Jimin got up and walked over to the other side of his quarters. "We pick flowers because we are enchanted by their beauty." His touch was delicate as he traced the head of a flower. "We bring them inside because they make lifeless places like the palace more welcoming. They bring colour. But wildflowers do not prosper indoors." As soon as he lifted his finger a petal fell. "They wither quickly because they do not belong here."

Zeren was befuddled. "What are you trying to say?"

"Gyuri is like a wildflower," Jimin said softly. "She thrives best when she is in her element. If I force her in, she will eventually wither, suffocated by the burden of the palace air." He stared at the wilting camellias ruefully. "I do not want this for her. I do not want to be the cause of her misery."

Zeren hobbled over to Jimin so that they were side by side. "But what if it's the exact opposite?" He peeled back the withering flowers to reveal a single camellia in full bloom. Despite the unfavourable conditions, the flower in the vase stood proud and tall. "How do you know if Gyuri won't be happy here in the palace?"

Jumin gaped at the flower thoughtfully. "I do not."

Zeren grinned.

Jumin watched in puzzlement as Zeren procured tattered garments from the inside of his imperial robes. He offered them to Jimin with a determined look in his eyes.

"Then, why don't we go and find out?"

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 51 of The Brothers Kim!

Just a reminder that if you ever want to know when I'll next update, please check my Twitter or Facebook page (yes, I'm finally on there too). I'm trying my best to regulate my updates so that I don't leave you hanging for too long. I'm also working on creating
my own author website where I will post longer author notes that detail the background research and analysis of each chapter (without spoilers of course). An example would be:

Did you know that in the language of flowers, red camellias symbolise love, passion and deep desire while pink camellias a longing for someone?

And as for what is coming up next, all I can reveal is that there will be a 'jump' soon.

Till next time!
"Gyuri!"

Gyuri tore her eyes away from the clay pot and turned to Pho, who was on the other side of the storage house.

"Those are for the vagabonds, remember?" She quirked her brow as she gestured at the wooden spoon in Gyuri's hand.

"I know..." Gyuri took a guilty step back as she attempted to conspicuously wipe the saliva that started leaking from the corners of her mouth. "But I'm just so... hungry." She peeked into the pot and swallowed. "Can't I just have a quick bowl before anyone arrives?"

"You can have some if there are leftovers," Pho said with a slight smile. "And anyway, it's your fault for sleeping in."

Gyuri huffed.

Two weeks had passed since they had last ventured to the storage house together and with the sudden passing of the late lord, Gyuri, and the rest of the maids, had been overwhelmed. After all, who wouldn't be after being ordered to clean the whole household from top to bottom?

Gyuri knew the eldest Kim was a tidy man, having once glimpsed into his private chambers, but she couldn't fathom why the maids had to clean to the point of exhaustion. Day by day, the maids rose at the break of dawn to begin their tedious routine. With the amount of cleaning they did, one would think that the household had fallen to disrepair. It was only when Gyuri had mistakenly complained out loud and Madam Zhou had overheard, did she uncover the reason.

"This is how Lord Minseok grieves," Madam Zhou had divulged after scolding her for being loose-lipped. "By focusing on improving the household, he is distracting himself from the pain of losing his father."

Gyuri didn't whine any more after that.

Despite the stinging rawness of her hands and the unbearable ache in her lower back, nothing could compare to the pain the Kims were going through.

Gyuri cast her memory back to the events of last week.

She remembered how Namjoon had thrown himself back to his work in the sanatorium; how Jongin's grief was reflected by the poignant melody his guzheng sang and how Junmyeon seemed more agitated than before. There was no doubt that the Kim household was in silent turmoil—even though its walls withstood time's unforgiving course, its occupants did not.

Gone was the source that united the brothers, be it through filial piety, fear, or a combination of both. Like a bridge without its cornerstone, the Kims were vulnerable.

They were lost without Hyesung.
With Minseok as the new lord, things were different. He was kinder, more egalitarian, but it was clear that he didn't possess the tenaciousness that his father had. While Hyseung instilled fear, Minseok did not. There was a quietness to him that cast a shadow of doubt in everyone's mind. Like an ill-fitting piece in a puzzle, Minseok was an adequate substitute, but he lacked confidence. He had yet to prove himself as a leader. And while the rest of the Kims mourned their loss, the unspoken question lingered closely at the back of their minds: could Minseok fill the void Hyesung left behind?

It was only subtle but Gyuri sensed tension amongst the Kims that wasn't apparent before.

"He is my true brother, but it seems our bond is only limited to the blood we share."

Gyuri sighed as her thoughts finally drifted to Taehyung.

It had been a week since she had last spoken properly with him and she feared that he had taken Seokjin's brusque behaviour to heart.

Lately, Taehyung had been uncharacteristically quiet. He had kept to himself even when he knew Gyuri was free from her duties. He no longer met her by the river while she was doing laundry; no longer kept her company while she was sweeping the courtyard, nor pestered her about going to the village. Gyuri had seen so little of Taehyung that she had come to realise how much effort he put in to meet her. Without his persistence, their bewildering friendship may not have existed at all. And as much as she hated to admit it, she was starting to miss him.

_I wonder how he's doing_, Gyuri thought as she stole a sip of stew while Pho wasn't looking. Her stomach gurgled at the sudden taste of food, a cacophony of flavours inciting a riot amongst her taste buds. Allured by the taste, she stole another. _That troublesome kid, why does he make me worry about him all the time?_

"What do you think of Master Seokjin?"

Gyuri quickly hid the spoon behind her back as Pho turned to her. "M-master Seokjin?"

Pho nodded.

"Well..."

_"I look nothing like my father."_

Gyuri shuddered as she recalled the contempt in his voice. Out of all the brothers, she was keen to avoid Seokjin the most. "He's..." Gyuri curled her lip as she tried to think of the perfect word. "He's different."

"He's not like the other Kims at all, is he?"

"Definitely." Gyuri walked over to help Pho while at the same time discarding her spoon. "He's a brute. He's a lot worse than the scary brother— and that's saying something!"

Pho blinked in confusion. "Master Seokjin isn't a brute."

"You don't think he is?"

"No," Pho replied while shaking her head, "I think he's actually quite friendly."

Gyuri was taken aback.

"Master Seokjin is eccentric, that I admit, but he's also humble. Why I saw him helping the kitchen
staff the other day by chopping wood! He jokes around with them and he exchanges cooking tips as well. In fact, the stew we have today was made by Master Seokjin."

Gyuri’s eyes widened. She glanced back at the clay pot in shock. *He can cook?!*

"Unlike the other Kims, Master Seokjin really doesn't feel like a Kim at all," Pho continued. "Did you know that he insists on being called Jin rather than Master Seokjin? He doesn't dress in luxurious garments either." Pho giggled. "The new servant boy mistook him as one of Master Namjoon's men."

Gyuri listened as Pho continued to speak fondly of the elusive brother. It baffled her to hear Pho talk about him as if he was a saint: a complete contrast to the Seokjin she knew. At some point, Gyuri began to wonder whether she and Pho were even talking about the same person. How could a man who held a sword against her throat be the same man who cracks jokes with servants?

"Are you sure you're not describing Master Namjoon?" Gyuri asked dubiously. "The Master Seokjin I know isn't the angel you make him out to be."

"Of course, I'm sure. Why would I lie?" Pho put her hands to her hips. "He's a really nice person, Gyuri. Don't let his appearance deceive you." She turned back to unpacking the bowls. "I have to admit that I didn't expect Master Seokjin to be like this either. His reputation precedes him. Before he arrived, I have heard of only bad rumours about his character."

Gyuri stopped what she was doing. "What kind of rumours?"

Pho glanced around the storage house as if to check if they were alone. "You know," she gesticulated with her hands, "reasons why he was *exiled.*" Pho leaned in as she whispered, "No one knows if the rumours are true, but I heard that it had something to do with a death in the family."

"...A death in the family?"

Pho nodded solemnly.

"What did Master Seokjin do? Did he...?"

"No one knows," Pho said with a shrug. "It was just something I overheard when I first arrived at the household."

Gyuri chewed her lip.

Every fibre of her being still shuddered at the thought of being in close parameters with Seokjin. There was something about him that kept her on edge. Despite her bravado, Gyuri was intimidated by his unpredictability. Just when she thought Seokjin was an arsehole he surprises her by acting like a saint. Could Gyuri have judged him too quickly? If not, then was he kind to everyone but her?

Kim Seokjin was the epitome of bian lian: he had many masks, but which one was the real him?

"But do you think he could... you know?"

Pho shrugged again. "Surely Lord Minseok wouldn't welcome him in the household if he was dangerous, right?"

Gyuri was unsure.

"Well, either way, there's no use worrying over it," Pho said as she got back to work. "All that
matters now is that Master Seokjin is a reasonable master. It's quite refreshing having him around the household—"

"But is he really as nice as you say?"

Pho gaped at Gyuri from over her shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"It's just that I find it hard to believe he's nicer than Master Namjoon," Gyuri replied. "Whenever I cross paths with him, Master Seokjin always treats me coldly."

"Well, did you do something for him to treat you that way?"

Gyuri frowned as she recalled how they first met. "No... I don't think so."

Pho was quick to notice her hesitance. "You're hiding something." She watched as Gyuri nervously tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Something happened between you two, didn't it?"

"No! Of course, not—"

"Gyuri."

Pho had her brow arched. "What did you do?"

Gyuri swallowed as she tried to avoid meeting Pho's eye.

After her recent runaway attempt, Gyuri had finally confided in Pho. It was a tremendous weight off her shoulders. Even though she couldn't reveal most of what was troubling her, it was still liberating to talk to someone. It reminded her that she wasn't alone. Pho may not know everything, but she knew something.

"I didn't do anything wrong," Gyuri replied defiantly. "It was his fault for not looking at where he was going, and it was self-defence— that's why I did it!"

"What did you do exactly?"

Gyuri shuffled on her feet. "I may or may not have been the reason why he hurt his leg." Her voice was small. "And I hit him too— that I admit."

"You did what?!"

"In my defence, he had a sword pinned against my neck—"

"That's beside the point. He's one of the Kims!"

Gyuri winced at Pho's high-pitch screech. "It's not like I hit him that hard..."

"And what about his ankle?" Pho folded her arms across her chest. "You were the reason why he sprained it?"

"It was just a sprain?" Gyuri raised her brows. She scoffed before muttering under her breath, "What a wuss..."

"He couldn't walk for days," Pho added sternly. "I'm surprised he hadn't disciplined you. If I had done that to Master Junmyeon, I would've been flogged!"

Gyuri's eyes widened with horror.

"But I don't think Master Seokjin's like him," Pho quickly reassured her. "Master Junmyeon is
stricter on me because I'm his personal maid."

"Has he ever...?"

"Only once," Pho answered with a wry smile, "but it was when I was still learning the ropes. It hasn't happened since then."

Gyuri eyed Pho worryingly. It hadn't occurred to her that the Kims punished the maids. Ever since Namjoon had saved her from being hit by Madam Zhou, she had forgotten that danger still lurked within the household walls. Gyuri reminded herself to stay vigilant. Despite being overworked, she was fortunate not to have been treated poorly. After all, good fortune was not something maids usually have. It was something women in Saim did not have at all.

"Hey, Pho?"

Pho glanced behind her as she finished setting the table. "Hm?"

"If things were different and you can do whatever you want, what would you do?"

Pho tossed her a questioning look.

"Say, you were no longer a maid," Gyuri elaborated, "and you had all the riches in the world, what would you do?"

"I'm not sure," Pho replied distractedly as she crossed the room to check on the stew. "I've never thought about it before."

"There must be something you've always wanted to do." Gyuri trailed after her. "How about travelling?"

"Well... I've always wanted to see the ocean," Pho mused. "I've lived in the capital all my life. It would be nice to see the sea or the mountains."

"The ocean, huh? You could go fishing there. Maybe even swim."

"Yeah, maybe." Pho played with her sleeve once she was done checking. "But it would be more sensible to save my earnings." She smiled as she bashfully declared, "In truth, I'd like to have my own tea house someday."

Gyuri watched as Pho's face lit up at the thought of owning her own establishment. "A tea house?"

Pho nodded excitedly. "Yes." She straightened herself as she waved an arch with her arms. "It would be a quaint place. We'd serve freshly brewed tea sourced from local tradesmen and all sorts of confectionery too. Everyone would be welcome— it wouldn't matter whether you're a peasant or a noble."

Before Gyuri could respond, a familiar voice beat her to it, "That place sounds amazing..."

Gyuri and Pho glanced over their shoulders in time to see two figures appear through the door.

"...Would we be invited too?"

"Zeren!" Gyuri rushed to greet the bronze-faced man, who she almost didn't recognise.

"Hey, pretty lady," Zeren entered the storage room first and graced her with his signature flirtatious smile, "long time no see."
"It's good to see you—" Gyuri began to answer, but while doing so, her eyes couldn't help but be drawn to the person behind him.

Gyuri's breath hitched.

With his dark hair pulled into a loose man bun, like Zeren, Jimin was almost unrecognisable. Dressed in tattered garments, Jimin exuded a different aura. There was a quality to his untidy air that made him appear more at home than he ever was in his usual attire. In his pristine imperial uniform, Jimin had appeared stiff, on guard and uneasy. Now, it was the exact opposite. Gyuri couldn't help but be drawn by his ethereal looks.

Jimin's lips parted slightly as he met eyes with Gyuri. For a split second, his yearnful gaze drank in her presence, a mixture of desire and happiness seeping through the cracks of his self-restraint. He tore his gaze away before he could act on the urge to capture her in his embrace.

Gyuri looked away too, suddenly embarrassed but she didn't know why.

A sneaky grin played at Zeren's lips as he glanced from Jimin to Gyuri and back. "So, where is everybody?"

Upon registering that she and Jimin were not alone, Gyuri surveyed the storage house and noticed that it was still empty.

"That's odd..." Pho replied, voicing out Gyuri's thought. "They're normally here by now."

"Maybe they think we're still closed," Gyuri murmured. "We haven't been going to the soup kitchen lately."

Zeren limped over to the foggy window and peered through the glass. "Then, we'll have to let them know you're back in business." He turned to face everyone in the room, his eyes undeniably brimming with mischief. "Pho," he called with the straightest face he could manage.

The doe-eyed lass automatically scowled.

"Will you do me the honour of accompanying me?"

"Zeren?" Jimin shot him a questioning look.

The bronze-faced man just smiled. "Yes, Chim?"

What are you doing? His eyes asked.

Zeren's eyes twinkled in return. Creating an opportunity.

The bronze-faced man swiftly returned his attention to Pho. "What do you say? Shall we round up some peasants together?"

"Why should I go with you?" Pho rebuked. "If there are no peasants about, then Gyuri and I can— hey!"

Without warning, Zeren took possession of ten porcelain bowls and started sprinting towards the door. Regardless of his injuries, he was still agile.

"Put those back!" Pho shouted as she dashed after him. "Be careful with those! Those bowls belong to the Kim household!"
"Catch me if you can~" Zeren sang as he swiftly limped. He shot Jimin a meaningful look as he passed by.

Jimin needn't hear words to understand what that look meant.

~*~

"I'm glad to see Zeren so energetic," Gyuri chuckled as both she and Jimin spectated the chase from the foggy window.

Jimin hummed in agreement, too flustered to say anything else. With Gyuri standing close to him, he couldn't concentrate on anything but her proximity.

"He's acting like he usually does but I can't help noticing... why is he hurt?" Gyuri looked up at Jimin, causing the young emperor to hold his breath. Gyuri frowned as Jimin's bruises stared back at her. "And you too... you're still hurt."

*Tell her.*

Jimin shook his head to be rid of Zeren's voice.

"Are you all right?"

"I- I—" Jimin stepped back as he tried to calm his erratic heart. Curses, he grunted to himself. After weeks of not seeing Gyuri, her effect on him was tenfold. It took all he had not to wrap his arms around her and tell her how much he missed her.

"You should sit down." Gyuri offered a seat to him and he took it without protest. "Are you hungry? I know the food is for the vagabonds but there's so much and I doubt we'd finish it."

"No, I am fine. I am just..." He stole a glance at her and immediately regretted it.

*Was she always this beautiful?*

"...I am just a little weary, is all." Jimin looked away, completely missing the way Gyuri's features contorted with worry.

"I went back, you know."

Sensing a shift in her tone, Jimin tentatively looked up. Gyuri was preparing a bowl of stew for her and himself despite his refusal.

"That day when... when it happened. I went back for you but when I got back, you and Zeren were gone." Gyuri sat down opposite him on the table. "I thought something bad happened."

Jimin clenched his fist.

Aside from his uncooperative heart, the other reason why he couldn't look her in the eye was because of what transpired. He was ashamed. He had been beaten to a pulp and had almost failed to protect her. How could he show his face to Gyuri after that fiasco? It wasn't Jimin's intention to frighten Gyuri by disappearing, but his pride wouldn't allow him to look defeated in front of her. Not when he soon realised what she *meant* to him.

"I am sorry—"

"I was so worried about you!"
Jimin was surprised by Gyuri's outburst.

"You're such an idiot, Chim Chim," she scolded, "I thought more of them had come and carted you and Zeren off. You had me so worried." Eventually, Gyuri smiled, catching Jimin off-guard. "I'm glad you came today. Now I know you're okay."

Jimin's heart fluttered.

Despite being surrounded by people who pampered him, it was the first time Jimin felt like someone truly cared. Unlike everyone else, Gyuri was concerned about him rather than what he represented: she wasn't worried about Jimin the emperor but Chim Chim the boy from the Temple. In that instance, Gyuri had unknowingly dismantled the final defences Jimin's rational self had painstakingly built.

"Gyuri may be of low birth, but you have the power to change that."

Jimin pushed away his thoughts. Tempted as he was to embrace her, she wasn't his. Not yet.

"You need not worry about me," Jimin struggled to say as Gyuri dug into her stew, "I am an imperial guard after all. I was just doing my job."

"Of course, I'd still worry!" Gyuri chastised. "You were beaten half to death!"

Jimin winced.

"And," Gyuri added, her voice softening, "you're also my friend, Chim Chim. I don't want to lose you."

Jimin's expression suddenly became unreadable. "...Friend?" His voice was husky. "Is that what we are? Friends?"

Misunderstanding Jimin's intention, Gyuri explained, "Well, I- I thought we were past being acquaintances, so..."

Jimin smiled wryly, remembering their conversation from long ago. "Of course, but what if—" He looked over his shoulder as he heard a yelp outside. It sounded like Pho had finally caught up to Zeren. Jimin concealed his alarm as he turned back to Gyuri.

Tell her.

"Chim Chim?" Gyuri stared at him expectantly.

Jimin took a deep breath as he leaned in, his hand reaching out to touch her cheek. In all his life, nothing could compare to how vulnerable he felt as he uttered the words that could change everything between them.

"But what if... I want more?"

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 52 of The Brothers Kim!
I know. I'm such a tease with these cliffhangers.

Stay in tuned for what happens next!

P.S. 'Bian Lian' means 'face-changing' in Chinese. It's also a dramatic art. Please check it out on YouTube to understand what I mean!
Zeren bit down on his lip as he limped away from the storage house. Jolts of pain shot up his leg with every step he took, causing him to whimper. He cursed under his breath. As much as he was dedicated to helping Jimin's love life prosper, the throbbing pain made him think otherwise.

*The things I do for you, Chim,* he thought as he shielded the bowls from bumbling pedestrians. He scowled as a reckless merchant barged past, almost toppling him over. "I deserve a raise," he muttered once he had regained his balance.

"Found you!"

Zeren peered over his shoulder just in time to see a flustered Pho appear.

"I swear," the maid panted as she waded through the crowded street, "if you break any of those bowls—"

"I'll make sure to say it was because you were chasing me!" Zeren shouted before breaking into a jog.

Pho's jaw dropped. Despite his handicap, Zeren effortlessly weaved through the street like a peregrine. It took her by surprise to find that his supposed injuries hadn't hampered his stride at all. Compared to Pho who was tired and already out of breath, Zeren's energy seemed boundless.

The maid huffed and urged her legs to keep moving.

It had been half an hour since they started their unintentional game of cat and mouse and already, Pho's patience was running thin.

"Stupid guard," Pho grumbled as she kept her eyes locked on his back like a target. "How dare he make me sweat!"

But while her annoyance at Zeren occupied the forefront of her thoughts, the fear of incurring Madam Zhou's wrath lingered close by. Pho unknowingly sped up. The last thing she needed was to get on the head maid's bad side.

"Don't you dare drop them!" she shouted, suddenly alarmed at the thought of Zeren slackening his grip. "Or else it won't just be broken bowls you'll be dealing with!"

Zeren briefly glanced over his shoulder and raised a brow as if amused by her threat. But as he did so, two small children suddenly emerged from an alleyway, crossing his path.

"Look out!"

Swerving just in time, Zeren pivoted on his injured leg, narrowly avoiding crashing into the orphans. A surprised cry escaped his lips as he landed with an ungainly thud, masking the sound of smashed pottery that followed.

A collective gasp was heard as people stopped to stare at the spectacle.

Pho rushed over. "Are you all right?"
Zeren winced when he attempted to stand. As he tried to put weight on his leg, he hissed. "I'm fine, but I think I twisted my—"

"Yes, we're all right."

Looking up, Zeren noticed Pho hunched over the children. *Oh, she was asking them.*

"Are you sure you're not hurt anywhere?" Pho asked, her voice filled with concern. She addressed the young boy who seemed the most affected, "What about you?"

Made anxious by Pho's voice, Zeren looked over her shoulder. *Had harm befallen the children because of me?* Catching a glimpse of the pair, he noted how they appeared vaguely familiar. *Hang on, aren't they the orphans Chim and I had played cuju with a while ago?*

The lass glanced down at her brother who was clinging onto her, wide-eyed with shock. "Gulnar's fine," she said after giving him a once-over. "He's just startled is all."

Pho breathed a sigh of relief. "You should be careful when going onto the main road. You'll never know when lunatics like this guy," Pho gestured to Zeren, "will be carelessly running around."

The lass peered at Zeren and nodded. "We will next time."

Pho was about to say more when she noticed the young girl staring at her intently. "Is there something wrong?"

"Oh," she shook her head, "no, nothing. It's just your garments—"

"They're the same!"

Pho turned her attention to Gulnar.

"They're the same as Mama's!" the boy squealed excitedly.

"Mama?" Pho repeated, puzzled by his remark. Dusting herself off, Pho stood up as she exclaimed, "Oh! You must be referring to Gyuri." She laughed. "Yes, Gyuri and I wear the same uniform. You two must be the children she and the Young Master are looking after."

"Are they well?" the lass keenly asked. "They haven't come to see us in a long time."

"A lot has happened lately," Pho murmured. "The Young Master has been... he's been out of sorts but Gyuri is doing fine. She's actually at the storage house now if you want to see her."

"She is?" Gulnar's face lit up. He turned to his sister and tugged at her sleeve. "Did you hear that, Chun Chun?"

Chun Chun nodded. "We should go right now!"

"Wait!"

The trio turned to Zeren, who was still sprawled on the floor. "You can't go!"

"And why not?" Pho asked.

"It- it's not time." Zeren frantically looked around. "We still need to tell people about the soup—"

"Take care on your way there," Pho addressed the orphans, ignoring Zeren.
Zeren let out an uncharacteristic scream as he watched the pair leave.

"And as for you," Pho said, facing him, "give me back those—"

Crunch.

Zeren's eyes widened as Pho slowly lifted her heel, revealing several shards of pottery beneath her feet. She gasped. The shards were the same hue as the precious bowls Zeren should still have in his possession.

Pho met eyes with Zeren immediately.

"It was an accident," Zeren blurted, raising his hands as if to calm her. "I didn't mean to let go of them but then I fell..."

Pho's expression shifted from alarmed to thunderous as Zeren's empty hands confirmed her worst nightmare.

"...I'll pay for—" Zeren began to say but his words were soon replaced by a yelp as Pho lunged at him.

~*~

"But what if... I want more?"

Gyuri stared at the determined look on Jimin's eyes as she tried to process his words.

More? More of what?

The gears in her brain turned as she tried to make sense of the situation, her heart racing as if it already knew. Drawn to his unwavering gaze, Gyuri couldn't focus on anything but Jimin. It was as if every fibre of his being was screaming for her to look at him, overwhelming her with the intense pressure of deciphering the underlying message behind his words. Everything else faded into the background.

"More?" Gyuri nervously giggled, recoiling from his touch.

Jimin's eyes flickered as he watched Gyuri pull away.

"You must be really hungry, huh? If you're asking for more stew when you haven't even touched your bowl yet—" She hastily got up and headed toward the clay pot, desperate to avoid meeting his eye.

"That is not what I meant."

With bowl and spoon in hand, Gyuri hesitantly turned. "Then... what did you mean?"

"It is not the stew that I want more of," Jimin spoke resolutely. He braced himself as he declared, "It is you."

Gyuri dropped the wooden spoon.

"I- I know this is hard to believe," Jimin fumbled, suddenly looking unsure of himself. "Even I did not want to accept it at first, but I am tired of denying it. I do not want to run away anymore. I want to face myself, but the only way I can do that is if I face you first." Jimin took a deep breath as he professed, "Gyuri, I am in love with you."
There was silence.

Gyuri blinked several times as Jimin's words echoed in her ears. Her heart skipped.

*Chim Chim loves... me?*

The thought was so ludicrous that she didn't know how to react. Tongue-tied and flustered, Gyuri's mind was in disarray as she muddled through her thoughts. She was so caught up in her ruminations that she blurted without thinking, "No."

"No?" Jimin's heart sank.

"No, I don't believe you." Gyuri cast the bowl she had to one side before hurriedly wiping her palms on her skirt. "Quit joking around, Chim Chim. This- this isn't like you."

"I do not jest." Jimin briskly stood up. "Why would I jest about something like this?"

Gyuri averted her gaze. "I don't know. I thought maybe- maybe Zeren put you up to this!"

"He did not." Jimin moved away from the table so that he was standing before her. "No one did."

"Then what about Mayu?" Gyuri mentioned. "Aren't you interested in her?"

"What?" Jimin was perplexed. "I am not." He ran a hand through his locks and sighed. "First Zeren and now you. Why does everyone assume I am interested in her?"

"Because she's a good person," Gyuri replied, "and she's pretty and she's calm and your personalities mesh perfectly."

"That may be," Jimin considered, "but despite all those merits I do not see her in that light. It was not her who I ended up falling for."

Gyuri blushed as Jimin stared at her intently. "You're- you're just confused, Chim Chim." She laughed nervously before stepping back to create more distance between them. "It's probably because we shared a traumatic experience that you've misinterpreted your feelings from that time. Yeah, that's it!" Gyuri rambled, "Like when- when you're crossing a rickety bridge and there's someone on the other side. It's common to mistake your fear for attraction, so you're not really in love with me."

Confused by the latter half of Gyuri's reasoning, Jimin blinked. "What?"

"You're not really in love with me, Chim Chim," Gyuri repeated, "it's all just a misunderstanding."

"It is not a misunderstanding," Jimin replied, exasperated, "and I am not confused. Why do you not believe me?"

"Because you said, 'I love you' so easily." Gyuri balled her fist before looking away. "We didn't get off to a great start when we met. You were cold towards me for a while and we just started to get along as friends." Gyuri's voice shook. "Now you want to be more than friends out of the blue. Everything's just going too fast and it's too much for me to take."

Not knowing where to look, Gyuri returned to staring at her feet again. She knew that whatever she said would hurt Jimin. Whenever feelings were involved, her mouth would run as if it had a mind of its own, spitting out words that were brutally honest. She never intended to hurt anyone.

*Why do people have to be so complicated?*
"Perhaps you are right."

Gyuri looked up.

"From your point of view, I can see now that my sudden confession does appear dubious."

Gyuri watched as Jimin cautiously approached her.

"But it was not easy for me to tell you my feelings out loud," Jimin's expression was unreadable.
"For the past few months, I have been trying to stop myself from thinking about you. In fact," his laugh was humourless, "I do not even know what about you I find attractive."

Gyuri's face scrunched up in confusion.

"I mean, you are loud, you are uncultured, and you should have been the last person in this kingdom I would ever develop feelings towards..."

Gyuri scoffed in protest. "I'm not—"

"...and yet, here I am," Jimin finished. He smiled, causing Gyuri to hold her tongue. "For some reason, no one else has made me feel the same way you have. Every time I think about you, every time I hear your voice..." Jimin drew closer, closing the space between them again. "You make me feel... happy. I cannot believe you ended up stealing my heart too; you really are a thief."

Gyuri's cheeks burned.

"I know we have not known each other for a long time and I know we have only started to get along but you already occupy a large part in here," Jimin slowly reached for her hand and gently placed it on top of his chest.

Gyuri's eyes widened as she felt his heartbeat. It was a mirror of her own.

"I understand if my feelings make you uncomfortable," Jimin murmured, folding his hand around hers. "I will even understand if- if you reject me..." He trembled. "But please do not discard my feelings so lightly," he raised his eyes to meet hers, "because despite me standing right in front of you, it has taken all my energy and courage to tell you these words I would not normally say."

Gyuri searched Jimin's eyes which were earnestly boring into hers. A soft pink glow bloomed on the apples of his cheeks while his ears turned a rosy red. Gyuri had never witnessed this side of Jimin before. His touch, while gentle and warm, was hesitant, almost as if he was unsure of holding onto Gyuri's hand for too long. Before Gyuri could say anything, Jimin suddenly stepped back, his trembling hand finally releasing hers. Gyuri immediately missed the weight of it.

"I apologise for burdening you with this," he said while forcibly smiling. "I- I should probably leave." Jimin turned on his heel and headed straight for the door.

"Wait!"

Before Jimin could get very far, Gyuri tugged at his sleeve causing him to halt.

"That's not fair," she complained. Jimin turned to face Gyuri and she saw that his face was flushed like hers. "You- you can't just leave after saying all that. You didn't give me a chance to answer."

"You... already have an answer for me?"

Gyuri nodded.
Jimin gulped as he waited for the response that, little did he know, could change the course of history.

"Chim Chim, I..."

~*~

Jimin rolled to face the other side of his bed while still clinging onto his pillow. He sighed.

"That's the tenth time you've done that," Zeren commented. He hobbled from his seat to the end of Jimin's bed. "Your Majesty, you can't mope forever." Zeren observed as Jimin hugged his pillow tighter. "What did Gyuri say? Did she... reject you?"

Jimin peered over his shoulder and scowled.

A few hours had passed since the pair had returned from their excursion and still, Zeren was clueless. After escaping Pho's clutches, Zeren had limped back to the storage house only to find Jimin waiting for him with a dazed expression. Seeing Jimin shell-shocked, Zeren could only assume the worst.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty. It's my fault that she turned you down. I wouldn't have pushed you to confess if I'd known—"

"She did not turn me down."

Zeren watched as Jimin sat up.

"Gyuri," Jimin buried his chin deep into his pillow as he mumbled, "did not turn me down... yet."

"No?"

Jimin shook his head. "No."

"Then... what happened?"

Jimin planted his face into the pillow. His voice was muffled as he replied, "I do not want to talk about it."

"C'mon, Your Majesty, you can't just say that and not tell me," Zeren huffed. "What did she say?" Zeren observed as Jimin remained silent, his face still buried in his pillow. "Tell meeeeee," Zeren whined.

Jimin's voice was muted as he answered, "Can a man not have any privacy?"

"Not when he is emperor, no."

Jimin turned to glare at Zeren.

"Need I remind you how important it is that you sire an heir? It is so important that it is always on the court agenda."

"I know," Jimin grumbled. "You need not remind me."

"Well, it seems that I should." Zeren placed his hands on his hips. "Your love life, or lack of it, is a trending topic across the kingdom! It is practically a breeding ground for gossip." He shook his head as he ruefully mentioned, "If only the same can be said about what goes on in your chambers..."
Jimin's face reddened. "Fine! If you really want to know what happened, then I will tell you."

Zeren's face lit up as he watched Jimin sit cross-legged before him. Once he was settled, Zeren prompted, "Well?"

"Nothing," Jimin revealed sulkily. "She said nothing."

Zeren blinked. "Don't be like that, Your Majesty—"

"No, really," Jimin insisted. "Gyuri did not say anything, or rather she could not."

"What do you mean?"

Jimin rolled to his side while still hugging his pillow. "Just as Gyuri was about to answer, the door swung open and the orphans arrived. They would not let me anywhere near her, so whenever I tried to continue our conversation, they would pull her away."

"So, you never got to find out because the young' uns interrupted?" Zeren facepalmed himself.

Jimin nodded. "I do not know what I did but I think the orphans hate me."

"Maybe it was because you attacked Gyuri?" Zeren mused.

"What? I never attacked her!"

"No, I mean from when we were playing cuju. Those orphans probably recognised you from before."

"But that misunderstanding was already cleared up!"

"Well, in their eyes they may still view you as the hot-blooded stranger who tried to have his way with their adoptive mother. It's understandable why they wouldn't want you anywhere near Gyuri."

Jimin planted his face back into his pillow. "I screwed up."

"And you were so close to getting an answer too..." Zeren kissed his teeth. "Damn it! If only I stopped them on time."

Both men simultaneously sighed.

"But it was not all in vain," Jimin added, lifting his face. "Before I left, Gyuri managed to tell me that she would like to continue our conversation again soon."

Zeren's eyes rounded. "She did?"

Jimin nodded as he tightly hugged his pillow.

"Then it's not over!" Zeren threw his hands up in the air. "And here I thought you were moping because it was bad news. This is great. If she wants to see you again then there's a high chance it's not a rejection. Why didn't you just say so earlier?"

"Because there is no guarantee that it is not bad news." Jimin rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. "Even if she does happen to accept me, I have yet to tell her the whole truth. What if she changes her mind when she discovers who I really am?"

"We can cross that bridge when we get there. The most important thing is that you are finally acting
on someone you desire," Zeren feigned wiping a tear from his eye. "I'm so proud of you, Your Majesty. You're growing up."

Jimin broke into a smile as he tossed his pillow at Zeren's face.

Before Zeren could retaliate, an urgent knock on the door caught both the pair's attention. "Your Majesty?"


The door swung open and in came an unnerved eunuch.

"Thank goodness you are here, Your Majesty, I have been searching for you everywhere!" The eunuch let out a sigh of relief as he dabbed at the sweat forming above his brow.

Jimin and Zeren exchanged looks.

"What is the matter?" the young emperor enquired.

"Please, Your Majesty, you must come quickly! There are visitors waiting for you—"

"Tell them I will meet with them tomorrow," Jimin dismissed. His face soured at the thought of dealing with matters of court so late in the afternoon.

The eunuch nervously dabbed at his forehead. "That may pose a problem, Your Majesty. These visitors have been waiting for you since their arrival this morning. Her Highness and Advisor Kim have been entertaining them ever since."

Jimin frowned. *Sister and Brother-in-law have been entertaining the visitors? Are they that important?* He narrowed his eyes. "Who are they?"

"One of them introduced himself as the ambassador of Huaxia," the eunuch replied, "and the other..."

Jimin arched his brow at the eunuch's hesitance. He prompted him to continue, "Who is the other?"

The eunuch nervously revealed, "The other... the other claims to be your fiancée."

Chapter End Notes

Hi reader, thank you for reading chapter 53 of The Brothers Kim!

As hard as I try, life is unpredictable so my updates will most likely be sporadic. However, I do pledge that this story will have an ending. That much I can promise you.

For now, I thank you for your patience and support. I will keep trying my best.

Editor's Note:

I'd use this space to apologize for the wait and express my gratitude for your patience, but we have more important matters to discuss.
The CLIFFHANGER.

Give us your theories, your thoughts, heck, come to the comment section to scream, even! We try to read them all, and it really keeps us going. In the meantime, I'll be key smashing in the corner :)

End Notes

Hi reader! Thank you for reading chapter 1 of The Brothers Kim.

Just a disclaimer: I do not own BTS and the other idols that will later be mentioned in this story.

All the events that will occur in this story are purely fictional and a product of my imagination but are based on real historical events. Having said that, this story is therefore historically inaccurate.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!