Chasing the Horizon

by Musicania

Summary

"Now or never, Im Jaebeom. What's it going to be? Would you like to run away with some pirates?"

Notes

In honour of my Call My Name album arriving, enjoy chapter 1 for the new fic I'm working on.

Also, yes, I suck at summaries. What else is new 😊 thanks for clicking despite the crappy summary. I'll change it if something else comes to mind.
Jaebum looked around at his room for anything that he might have forgotten. Bare wooden walls looked back at him. He didn’t have many things to be forgotten, a few sets of plain shirts and pants, a single pair of shoes. No valuables because those were material objects that distracted from what was really important. Only a single earring sewn into the hem of his sleeve, for its protection and to serve as a reminder. All of his earthly possessions fit into a single backpack, a backpack that Jaebum had been forced to sew himself using his bedsheets since his father wouldn’t allow Jaebum to buy a real one. You have no need for such a thing, he’d said. You neither have any possessions nor any place to go. His intention had probably been to inform Jaebum how enlightened he was, how he wasn’t tied down by his desire for earthly possessions but all it had done was remind Jaebum how empty his life was.

But now Eunji had died. Eunji had been his neighbour. They’d played together as kids, as much as his father had allowed Jaebum to play with other children. Now that Jaebum thought about it, it wasn’t really so much playing as it had been simple conversations over the fence that separated their houses. Still, Jaebum had fond memories of her and had missed her when she moved away to Seoul several years ago in hopes of finding someone to marry outside of the small population they had in Goyang City.

She’d returned a few months ago, now considered to be too old to be married and had settled back in her childhood home with her parents. Jaebum had seen a sort of salvation in her. Her father loved Jaebum, who was constantly over at their house with medicines as his wife was chronically ill. The man would always comment how lucky he’d be to have a son-in-law like Jaebum. With Eunji’s return Jaebum admitted to having wild fantasies of asking her to marry him and running away from Goyang City, running away from his father.

And then Eunji had died.

Jaebum still remembered the panic on her father’s face as he ran over to their house and clinic, pounding on the door and pleading for them to hurry, to save Eunji. Jaebum remembered the noises Eunji made as she struggled to breathe, remembered the fear in her eyes. Remembered as his father simply kneeled beside her, took her hand and prayed instead of doing anything to save her.

But worst of all, he remembered how his mother had died the same way ten years prior. He remembered being nine years old, sitting at the kitchen table, when his mother started choking, when his mother starting gasping for air. Remembered how his father had calmly sat next to where she’d fallen onto the floor, peacefully eating his breakfast as Jaebum held her close, begging his father to help. Remembered that when she finally fell quiet, when her heart finally stopped beating. His father had looked down at him and said, “this happened because you loved her more than you loved God.”

For a while Jaebum believed him. He believed that his mother died because of him. That he must have done something to upset God. He promised he’d be better and dedicated his whole life to studying and obeying his father's orders, thinking it would help keep death away from others he cared about.
It was only when he got older and his father started teaching him more about healing and herbal medicine did Jaebum put it all together. He was thirteen when his dad mentioned a plant called hemlock, explaining to Jaebum that being a healer sometimes wasn't enough to save someone. That sometimes the kindest way to save them was the end their mortal life.

He was fifteen when he actually saw his dad use it. An older woman had come into their home after falling down a set of stairs. She had several broken bones and his father said she had internal bleeding as well. There was really nothing much they could do to help her. Jaebum's father made him stay and watch but Jaebum had to excuse himself when he realized he'd seen that reaction before. He'd seen someone die this death before. He had already seen his father use hemlock to kill someone.

He made the decision to leave that day, to take his belongings and run away from the monster who'd killed his mother. He enjoyed learning about medicine and healing, but he no longer had any interest in learning from someone who saw nothing wrong with using that knowledge to play god. It felt wrong.

He'd packed his things—he'd had fewer of them then—but when he'd actually prepared to leave he realized he had nowhere to go, no one to go to. How whole life was in that clinic and the only person he had was his father, as monstrous as he was. He'd let fear change his mind back then.

He'd unpacked and spent his days healing the wounded and hating his father.

And then Eunji had died.

That was enough for Jaebum. He saw the look his his father's eyes as they sat with Eunji's parents after her death, knew the message behind them, 'this happened because you loved her more than God.'

Jaebum didn't even believe in God, not anymore. He hadn't since he was fifteen and realized what his father had done. He wasn't in love with Eunji either, just in love with the idea of being free and she seemed to be the only thing he could find that might give him the freedom he was searching for.

But Jaebum still felt guilt for her death, even though he was not the one directly responsible. He didn't poison her, but his father would have left her alone if it wasn't for Jaebum.

So he'd packed up his things and was determined this time. He'd raided his father's herbs and added some borage to his father's bedtime tea. It wasn't the strongest sedative they had, but valerian root had a horrible smell that his father would recognize.

He would never tell anyone how his hand has hesitated over the hemlock, how tempted he was to use that herb instead, but he'd moved on in the end. Jaebum might have been a lot of things, but a murderer wasn't going to be one of them. He refused to be like his father in every aspect he possibly could and killing another human was a similarity he wasn't willing to share, no matter how he thought his father might deserve it.

He picked up his bag and crept quietly out of the house. Even with the sedative, Jaebum was willing to risk nothing. He wasn't stopped as he exited the house, the late spring air colder than Jaebum would have expected, but smelling sweeter than Jaebum had ever smelled.

A smile split his face when he made it to the end of his street without getting caught, growing wider with every step his feet carried him away from the building he used to call home.
It took Jaebum three days to walk to Incheon, the port town closest to Goyang City. He might have been able to do it in two since he wasn’t carrying very much to slow him down, but it was the first time in his entire life that he’d been outside of his village and he was in no real rush. He knew his father would never come after him; he didn’t care enough about Jaebum to waste his energy and time like that. He liked manipulating Jaebum, but he was certain his father carried no paternal affection for him, like how Jaebum had no filial feelings for his father.

It wasn’t even that Jaebum came across anything particularly exciting or different from what he’d had back at home, the villages he passed were remarkably the same in terms of that they looked like and what they offered travellers. But the simple fact that it wasn’t home was enough for Jaebum to slow his pace and allow himself time to wander, just looking around at something that wasn’t home for the first time in his life.

As he walked, he tried to imagine what kinds of things he’d see once he left Korea. He liked to listen to stories that the retired sailors in the village shared, the older men always glad to have an eager ear to talk to. At the time, they were just stories, something that Jaebum could picture before he went to sleep in order to dream of a better life.

It wasn’t until he entered Incheon and caught his first ever glance of the Yellow Sea, a body of water so large Jaebum couldn’t even fathom it’s size, that it really hit him that he had a chance to live all those stories he’d listened to. He could go to Jeju, China and maybe even Japan if he could find a ship that was looking for another crew member.

He was somewhat disheartened when he reached the harbor and only found two ships resting within it. He truthfully wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, but he certainly thought he’d have more of a choice than just two. And as he made his way closer to the piers he realized that he only really had a choice of one. He admitted that he did not have any knowledge whatsoever about ships, but even he could see the splintered hull of one of them, what look like a hole blown straight through the front of the ship. Other portions of the wood looked scorched, as if the ship had been on fire at some point. Again, Jaebum knew less than nothing about sailing, but he did know he did not want to get on that ship.

The other one was smaller with a different rigging system for the sails, one that Jaebum had never seen before. He wasn’t sure what kind of ship it was, military or merchant perhaps?

As he began to walk to the end of the pier it was tethered to he could read the name carved into the ship. Ahgase. Baby bird. Jaebum thought it a strange name for a ship—to name a vessel of the sea after a creature of the sky—but he kind of liked it. It made him realize that he was not too different from a baby bird himself, finally leaving the nest with no idea where he would end up, if he would fly or just go barrelling straight into the ground. Though the name seemed odd for a ship, Jaebum found it oddly fitting for him personally.

The only person he could see that might be connected to the vessel was standing at the end of the pier, a leather-bound book in his hands that Jaebum assumed held some kind of list as the man was looking between it and a pile of crates and barrels that were stacked on the pier next to him.

As he got closer Jaebum still couldn’t determine if the man was a member of the crew or a merchant who was supplying it. He was young, likely around Jaebum’s age. He was dressed casually, loose fitting pants and an even looser white shirt draped across his chest and arms, tucked in at the front to reveal a broad-buckled belt tied around the man’s hips. He seemed far too handsome to be a seaman Jaebum decided when he was only a few steps away, looking far more like a prince than a sailor.

He looked up when Jaebum got close, making Jaebum stop in his tracks. “Can I help you?”
Jaebum looked up at the ship next to them. “I was wondering if you knew who the Captain of this ship was?” He asked, trying to hide his nervousness.

The man nodded. “He’s away at a meeting at the moment. I’m the Quartermaster though, is there anything I can do for you?”

Jaebum knew from the stories he’d listened to that the Quartermaster was the second-in-command. The one who oversaw the crew and the supplies. If the Captain wasn’t here, this man was the next best person to talk to.

Doing what would either turn out to be the stupidest or best thing Jaebum had ever done, Jaebum answered, “I’d like to join your crew.”

The man seemed taken aback by Jaebum’s words, his eyebrows raising slightly as he turned more fully to face Jaebum, closing the book in his hands as his eyes moved to take in every detail about Jaebum from the worn shoes on his feet to the haphazardly made backpack on his shoulders. Jaebum had never felt more exposed, but the man’s eyes seemed kind when they met Jaebum’s once more. “What is your name?”

“Did I hear that you retired?” Jackson asked incredulously, dropping into a chair across from one of his dearest friends.

Hyunwoo smiled so wide his eyes nearly disappeared. "Captain Wang," he chuckled standing up and pulling Jackson back out of his chair and into a half hug. "What on Earth brings you to this tiny place?"

"I was looking for Captain Shownu, the most feared pirate in the China Sea only to find out he retired."

Hyunwoo chuckled. "It was a forced retirement. Jooheon and Minhyuk revolted. Turned the whole crew against me."

Jackson turned and looked at a pair of men who were leaning on each other as they laughed at something a third man was saying. "That Jooheon and Minhyuk?"

Hyunwoo glanced fondly over Jackson's shoulder at the duo. "Naturally."

"What did they do?" Jackson asked, curious as a woman came over and set a beer on the table in front of him. It wasn't even noon yet, but Jackson supposed pirates did have a terrible fondness for liquor.

"Jooheon's brother-in-law died. Jooheon decided to quit pirate life to help his sister raise her daughter. Naturally Minhyuk followed along—he'd follow Jooheon into the mouth of the leviathan itself," he rolled his eyes, but his voice was warm. "Hoseok needed no convincing other than the word 'child' and Kihyun decided that he needed to be there too to ensure the girl was getting proper nutrition."

"And the next thing you know you're on babysitting duty," Jackson finished with a smile.

Shownu could be terrifying. He was tall and broad and muscular and very capable with an assortment of weaponry. Jackson was an accomplished fighter in his own right and he wouldn't dream of challenging the man in front of him. But Hyunwoo, the man under the pirate, Jackson personally felt was far more suited to a simple life playing with children than a life on the seas.
Under the muscle and the tattoos and the years of cultivating a name that made people flinch was a truly kind soul, a gentle man who just wanted to take care of what was his.

"I'm happy for you guys," he said honestly, trying to imagine what retirement had in store for him, if he'd live long enough to make it till then.

"I'm sure you are, but that is not all you're here to say, is it?" Hyunwoo asked with a knowing, almost resigned expression.

Jackson let his smile slide off his face, his fingers playing with his untouched beer. He braced himself for the reaction he knew he was about to get, but was unwilling to let the question go unasked. He'd made his crew travel for two more days to make landfall in Incheon instead of in Busan just so he could find Hyunwoo and ask him this question.

He looked up and met Hyunwoo’s eyes. “Have you heard anything about Ching Shih’s whereabouts?”

Hyunwoo looked at Jackson for a moment before the disappointment started to creep in, the exasperation following soon after. “How long are you going to keep looking for her?” Hyunwoo asked gently and with far more patience than Jinyoung had for the topic these days. “How many years has it been?”

“Ten years,” Jackson replied, having a hard time that it had been so long. He still remembered the day ten year old him swore his revenge, the day that his life as he’d known it had been torn to shreds.

Sometimes he felt like two different people. Part of him felt like he’d lived an entire lifetime on the sea, as a member of Ching Shih’s crew and when he escaped and formed his own. Yet other times he’d wake up and it would take him a moment to remember that he wasn’t at home, that his mother wouldn’t walk through the door to wake him up and his brother wouldn’t be waiting for him to go and play. Some days he felt like the Jackson he was now and the Jackson he was before. Some days he felt like both and others he felt like neither.

He could see the question in Hyunwoo’s eyes, the one he’d heard so many times before. ‘Isn’t it time to give this up?’

But one of the reasons Jackson valued Hynwoo’s friendship so much was because he didn’t judge. He might not have agreed with Jackson, but he wasn’t going to argue with Jackson’s choices and he’d help as long as he thought Jackson wouldn’t get hurt. “The last I heard of Ching Shih she was headed for Thailand. She was looking for something there, but I can’t remember what it was.”

Jackson exhaled, not sure what to feel about that information. It was accurate, he was certain of that. Hyunwoo and his crew were among the most infamous group of pirates in the Yellow Sea, which always made Jackson chuckle, because underneath their ferocity they were all softies. But Hyunwoo knew the waters between Korea and China like no one else Jackson had come across and he had far more contacts on either side than Jackson did. If he heard Ching Shih was heading to Thailand, then Ching Shih was heading to Thailand.

“Any idea how recent that information is?” Jackson asked. It would take them over two weeks to sail to Thailand from where they were; Jackson wanted to know how far behind Ching Shih he already was.

“Two months,” Hyunwoo said, his expression almost apologetic.
Two months was a long time. Jackson tried not to let his frustration show but he finally drank from the beer that had been placed in front of him, draining about half of it before setting the mug back onto the table, which was as good an indicator as any for anyone who knew Jackson well. Jackson didn't drink much, especially for a pirate.

Hyunwoo eyed him carefully before taking the glass away from him entirely.

That made Jackson smile. Hyunwoo was only two years older than Jackson but he always acted like he was Jackson’s father. “Thank you hyung,” Jackson said, grateful for more than just the information.

“Take care of yourself Jackson,” Hyunwoo replied, referring to more than just Ching Shih.

He said his goodbyes and passed on his best wishes before stepping out of the bar to find Jinyoung leaning casually against the exterior wall, using his knife to clean under his nails.

He looked up when the door opened, a sly smile crossing his face when he saw it was Jackson. "I found us another crew member."

Jackson raised his eyebrows, pleasantly surprised. "Okay. How long has he been sailing?"

Jinyoung’s smile grew. "Never sailed a day in his life."

Jackson paused and narrowed his eyes slightly. "Can he fight?"

"No idea."

"Can he read a map?"

"I didn't ask him."

Jackson took a deep breath to avoid throttling his quartermaster. "Has he seen a ship before?"

"Yes, he's seen at least two." Jinyoung said with a grin, his eyes alight with mischief.

God Jackson hated this man sometimes. He resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose in exasperation. "Why should I let a man on board my ship who has no sailing experience, likely doesn't know how to fight and probably can't read a map either?"

Jinyoung's expression softened. "Because he needs us." He said simply.

Jackson stared at his quartermaster for a long minute. Jackson personally was always a sucker for a sob story, always tried to help where he could, and was usually scolded by Jinyoung for doing so. Scolded for wasting their time or resources, which was fair because it was Jinyoung’s job to ensure they had enough resources to keep them alive at sea. The fact that Jinyoung was suggesting Jackson allow a man who was essentially useless onto their ship to drain those resources was… intriguing.

"Let me see him first."

Chapter End Notes
Okay, so here we are at the start of another fic! I've missed writing chaptered fics. I am not giving up my title fic series, but I'm in a bit of writers block for eclipse for the moment, so enjoy this in the meantime.

I have about half of this entire thing written so far, but I probably won't start posting it until closer to the holidays. I want it all to be mostly done first instead of writing chapter by chapter as I go. I just wanted to get a feel for the interest behind the idea and this world. I hope you like it and it piques your interest! I'm going to try writing in dual POVs for this one, most chapters will start with Jaebeom and end with Jackson.

Also, borage and valerian root are actually herbal sedatives (according to google at least) and valerian root is apparently supposed to smell horrific. Just in case you where wondering if I made that up. I didn't.
Jaebum stepped tentatively off the ramp and onto the deck of the Ahgase where another member of the crew, Youngjae, was waiting for him. After a few more exchanged words, Jinyoung had turned and summoned the boy from within the cabin and asked him to show Jaebum around the ship while he went to go find the captain, a man named Jackson Wang.

The ship seemed somehow smaller now that Jaebum was on deck and he once again found himself wondering what kind of ship this was. It didn’t quite seem large enough for a passenger ship and the four cannons that he saw lining the railings, two on either side, didn’t seem enough for a military ship—though there was also the fact that neither Jinyoung or Youngjae were wearing a uniform of any kind. He supposed merchant made the most sense.

The ship had a single mast, slightly closer to the front of the ship than the back, the sail collapsed at the moment against the thick wooden post. There were a more ropes strung up that Jaebeom assumed were for additional sails, but it seemed like they too weren’t open. The back half of the deck was covered by a decent sized cabin, the deck continuing around it in what looked like a small walkway that allowed someone to walk all the way around. It had small windows embedded into the walls, probably to let in light and fresh air. They were all open, as was the door, but it was still too dim inside for Jaebeom to make out many details. There were decorations hung along the edge of the roof: beaded figures and glass ornaments.

“Welcome aboard the Ahgase,” Youngjae said with a broad smile when Jaebeom turned away from the ship and focused on him instead. “I’m Youngjae, the boatswain on this ship.” The sailor said, extending a hand toward Jaebeom.

He looked young, younger than Jaebeom at any rate. His hair was a deep brown, though some of the strands looked like they’d been lightened by the sun. It was windblown in a dozen different directions and Jaebeom could see that his ears were littered with piercings. Through the thin material of his white shirt Jaebeom saw what looked like tattoos inked on each of his upper arms, though he couldn’t make out enough detail to determine what they were of. A simple black eyepatch covered his left eye and Jaebeom felt saddened that someone so young had already lost one of his eyes.

“Jaebeom,” Jaebeom replied with a smile of his own as he reached out to shake Youngjae’s hand.

“First time on a ship?” He asked.

“Is it that obvious?” Jaebeom replied, somewhat sheepishly.

Youngjae laughed. “When you’ve been on a ship as long as I have it is.”

“Well then I feel slightly less embarrassed to admit that I don’t have a clue what a boatswain is.”
Youngjae laughed loudly, his head thrown back. It was an odd feeling, making someone laugh. As a healer he was supposed to be stoic and serious and he didn’t actually talk too much to his patients other than to give instructions or explain what he was doing. He didn’t even often have conversations with people his own age, most of them having moved out of the city as soon as they were old enough. It was nice, Jaebeom decided with a smile.

“I’m in charge of making sure that everything on the ship works and that all of our equipment is in good working condition.” He explained before waving a hand toward the cabin. “Come on, I’ll show you around the inside.”

The inside was simple, the back wall was lined with cabinets of various heights and widths, a simple wood burning stove with a small cooking surface tucked in one corner metal piping going up through the ceiling, a closed door filled the corner on the other side of the room. Most of the room was taken up by a large wooden table which was filled with various maps, another crew member leaning over one with a silver tool in his hand that Jaebeom didn’t recognize.

“Mark-hyung, this is Jaebeom,” Youngjae said. “He’ll be joining our crew.”

Mark looked up and eyed Jaebeom carefully and Jaebeom was struck to find that yet another member of this crew somehow looked more suited to life in a palace than life on a ship, which only made Jaebeom feel even more plain in his simple shirt and trousers. Mark dressed similarly to both Youngjae and Jinyoung, wearing a loose shirt and pants. His shirt was the finest out of all of them, a rich red wine colour that hung open at the front to expose some of his lean chest.

“Nice to meet you,” Mark said, his voice quite deep and soft. “I’m the navigator on board.” Which explained all the maps that he was looking at. Mark’s gaze slid to Youngjae. “Osaka is about two and a half days from here.”

Youngjae nodded. “Maybe Jackson will get nothing and we’ll get to go see the festival.” He said hopefully, moving towards a hole in the floor to the left of where Jaebeom was still standing. It was surrounded by a simple rope railing and as Jaebeom stepped closer he noticed a set of steep steps leading underneath the deck.

“Living quarters,” Youngjae explained as he descended into the dark.

Jaebeom followed, squinting as his eyes tried to adjust to the sudden darkness. There were no windows down here, which made sense because a portion of it was underwater. There was another large table at the base of the stairs, similar to the one Mark was using for his maps, two benches sat on either side of this one too. There seemed to be much more space down here and some furniture had been brought down between the table and the back wall, this one lined with cabinets as well, with crates currently filling the space.

It took a moment for his eyes to recognize the hanging white shapes under the front of the ships as hammocks that were strung up between the thick beams that supported the deck above their heads. A row of four at the front, another row starting of two closer to where Jaebeom stood, small trunks of all different sizes and colours rested on the floor next to each of them.

“I’ll have to string up another one for you at some point today,” Youngjae said thoughtfully. “We have some extra trunks you can choose from as well.”

Jaebeom thought it was kind that Youngjae chose not to mention the fact that Jaebeom obviously didn’t have remotely enough possessions to fill a trunk. “Thank you,” he said, turning to look at Youngjae, startled when he noticed that the boy had his eyepatch flipped up onto his forehead, two eyes looking back at Jaebeom. “Your eyes…” he said before he could stop himself.
Youngjae looked at him in confusion before reaching up and grabbing the eye patch. “Oh, right, I forget that most people who don’t sail think these are for injuries.”

Jaebeom tried to think of another reason for an eye patch other than an injury.

“On restocking days I usually wear one because I’m going in and out between the cabin and the deck a lot. By wearing an eyepatch my left eye is always accustomed to the dark so I don’t have to wait for it to adjust when I come down here, I just switch the patch to my other eye. It just saves time,” he said with a shrug.

“That’s… That’s brilliant,” Jaebeom said, surprised at how simple but how ingenious the concept was.

Youngjae sent him an amused look. “Just leave your bag on the table. I’ll get your bed hooked up at some point today.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for your Captain to return? I mean, I’m not even officially part of your crew yet,” Jaebeom said, tentatively sliding off his backpack.

Youngjae laughed and shook his head. “Jackson likes picking up strays. It’s usually Jinyoung that we have to worry about. If he sent you aboard then you’re basically already one of the crew; Jackson’s approval is merely a formality at this point.”

Jaebeom wasn’t sure he liked being referred to as a stray by someone younger than him, even though that’s essentially what he was, but he pushed it aside and let himself feel relieved that he’d been able to find a crew willing to take him aboard instead. He did as Youngjae asked and set his bag on the table before following Youngjae back up into the cabin.

“This are technically the Captain’s Quarters, but Jackson doesn’t use them,” Youngjae said as he opened the door next to all the cabinets. “We use it as storage for all the things we pick up during raids.”

“Raids,” Jaebeom echoed, startled as he looked into the room. Fine silks and paintings were hung along the walls, a small chest of jewels sat on an unmade bed next to another chest filled with coins, weapons and silverware rested on the floor beside sealed crates that contained god only knew what.

Jaebeom swallowed nervously and turned back to Youngjae. “Is this a pirate ship?”

The thought had never even entered his head. The ship seemed too small, the port too far north for pirates. Their flag was a bird for god’s sake. What kind of pirate ship was named after baby birds? He’d heard so many stories about pirates from the sailors in the village, heard so much about their cruelty and their desire for treasure. He felt a bit faint at the knowledge that he was inside a pirate ship at the moment.

“Is that a problem?” A voice asked from behind him, Jaebeom turning to find Mark watching him closely from his place at the kitchen table, a serious expression on his face.

Jaebeom realized with a rush of unease that from his position in the doorway to the captain’s quarters Mark was now between him and the door out onto the deck, the door off this ship. From his new angle he was also able to see a sword holstered to the broad belt secured around Mark’s hips.

He was trapped.
Something must have shown on his face because Youngjae placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Whoa, there is no need to panic. We’ll let you go if you want to leave. We’re pirates, not monsters.” He said soothingly.

The stories that Jaebeom had heard growing up made it seem like there was little difference between the two. He swallowed, unsure what to say when new voices reached his ears, all of them turning to the door to find a pair of teenagers playfully push each other around the deck, laughing loudly.

More pirates.

Jaebeom felt his breath quicken slightly.

Outnumbered four to one.

"Hey," Youngjae said, his voice so soft as he moved to stand in front of Jaebeom "I meant what I said. If you don't want to stay you don't have to. We'll let you go freely."

Jaebeom looked back at Mark, whose expression was still frustratingly blank to the doorway where the two newcomers had appeared.

"Who's the new guy?" One of them asked. Both of them looked like children and Jaebeom was slightly startled to see them. Despite his youthfulness though, the boy who had spoken had beautifully exotic features—at least compared to the people in Jaebeom’s town—his skin tanned and his ears, neck and fingers dripping with jewelry. His pants were high quality leather and his shirt was patterned silk, both wrapped perfectly around his slim figure, his shirt unbuttoned to show a generous slice of his chest. A long knife was sheathed in a blood red leather case at his hip. He was the closest to matching the image that Jaebeom always had in his head of a pirate. Too young and too handsome but there was a dangerous quality to his features, a calculating look in his eyes as he studied Jaebeom curiously that just whispered cunning. He might have looked like a child but Jaebeom suspected that this kid could outsmart him six ways to Sunday.

"Leaving," Mark said shortly. "Didn't seem to have realized he'd stumbled onto a pirate ship."

The newcomer snorted. "Wow, you're lucky we're nice bro. There are other ships out there that would hold you hostage, use you as a slave or just outright kill you for making such a stupid mistake."

His friend looked over his shoulder, His cheeks still slightly padded with baby fat and his eyes wide as he watched the conversation unfolding in front of him. He too looked like a child, not a pirate. What kind of ship was this? Why were they all so young? Was that normal for pirates? They were also all clean and relatively well-mannered and polite. That didn't fit any of the stories Jaebeom had heard from back home.

He looked at Mark, who seemed to be the oldest of everyone he'd met so far. "Are you really pirates?"

A laugh carried through the room, one that didn't come from Mark, but a new voice Jaebeom hadn't heard before, husky and deep and somewhere behind the duo in the doorway.

The kids moved aside and another stranger stepped into the cabin, eyes moving quickly around the room, seeming to assess who was there and what was going on, before his gaze landed on Jaebeom. “You must be Jaebeom,” he said, his voice soft as if he were talking to a frightened animal.
Jaebeom was a bit taken aback by the man in front of him. He didn’t stand out physically in any exceptional way—if you didn’t count his handsome features. He wasn’t the tallest in the room, nor was he the broadest. His shirt was black and hung on his frame in a way that made it impossible to determine his strong he was. He wasn’t dressed remarkably, simply in black from head to toe. His hair was a dark brown and swept carelessly off his face. A long thin sword hung at his hip. Visually he didn’t look exceptionally intimidating or imposing, but there was an aura to him that seemed to command attention.

Jaebeom swallowed. “You must be Jackson.”

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Jackson heard voices as he walked up the ramp, seeing Bambam and Yugyeom blocking the doorway where it sounded like the rest of the members were.

"Wow, you're lucky we're nice bro. There are other ships out there that would hold you hostage, use you as a slave or just outright kill you for making such a stupid mistake."

Jackson frowned. What the hell? Was Bambam threatening the new guy? That didn't sound like him. Bambam knew better.

After a pregnant pause an unfamiliar voice asked hesitantly, "Are you really pirates?"

Jackson tried and failed to hold back a laugh. They actually got that a lot. He knew he and his crew were a little…unorthodox. But he was proud of his men and he was proud of the life and creed they'd taken on, even if other pirates thought they were something of a joke.

Silence fell from within and Jackson gently nudged Yugyeom and Bambam aside so he could step into the cabin and see the newcomer.

He's beautiful. The thought leaped unbidden into Jackson's head, but it wasn't exactly wrong. The man had sharp intense features that were undeniably masculine and yet also somehow incredibly pretty. He was among the taller men in the room and he was far broader than any of them, the plain clothes he wore did nothing to hide the intimidating breadth of his shoulders.

His eyes were slightly panicked as they landed on Jackson. He could see the man’s throat bob as he swallowed. “You must be Jackson.”

Jackson smiled and nodded. "I am Jackson, the Captain of this ship. This pirate ship," he said, just making sure that everyone was on the same page.

"I… I think this was a mistake." Jaebeom said, his eyes moving to each member of Jackson crew. He was at least smart enough to realize he was outnumbered and surrounded.

No, that wasn't entirely fair, Jackson thought. While getting on a ship without asking who owned it wasn't the smartest move, Jackson understood. He understood that they didn't look like pirates, and neither did his flag. The name Ahgase didn't exactly strike fear into people's hearts the way some other pirate ship names did either. It might have been a stupid mistake, but it was an honest one and Jackson admitted that it was also a fairly easy one to make as well.

Plus he knew a reason that, at one point in his life, would have gotten his ass on any ship that had been in front of him no matter what it or its crew had looked like. Desperation. Jinyoung had said that Jaebeom needed them and Jackson wasn't about to abandon someone who needed help.

"Why don't we talk out on the pier?" He suggested. "You can get to know me a little and if at any
Jaebeom looked at him curiously for a moment before nodding slowly. "Okay." He glanced towards the stairs that led to the living quarters. "My things…"

"I'll get them," Youngjae said, Jackson sending him a grateful smile.

Jaebeom sent a glance at all the crew members between him and the door before taking a hesitant step forward. When no one tried to rush him, he moved again, a little quicker until he was out on the deck next to Jinyoung, who offered Jaebeom a smile and murmured something Jackson couldn't pick up as Jaebeom past him on his way to the ramp off the ship.

Jinyoung caught Jackson's wrist when he tried to follow. “Don’t be an asshole and scare him off.”

Jackson sent him an offended look. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m never an asshole.”

Jinyoung just looked at him. “I’m serious, be gentle with him. I recognize the look in his eyes from back home.”

Jackson softened and gently squeezed the hand that Jinyoung still had wrapped around his wrist. “I understand. I’ll do my best to get him to come with us, alright?”

Jinyoung looked at him for a moment longer before nodding, heading inside and calling the maknaes to come help him load if they were finished fooling around in town.

Jackson jogged down the ramp, slightly concerned to see Jaebeom continuing up the pier towards the shops. For a moment he thought Jaebeom was just leaving, no matter that Youngjae had not returned his things. But the thought had no sooner entered his head when Jaebeom plopped himself down on a stone bench just outside a supply store.

Jackson sat down next to him.

"You probably think I'm a complete idiot," Jaebeom said, not looking at Jackson.

"Well, maybe not a complete idiot," Jackson said with a grin, unable to resist a little teasing. Jaebeom sent a less than impressed look Jackson's way which made Jackson chuckle. "I've done far stupider things than walking onto an unknown ship. Everyone on that crew has. Especially Bambam, so don't let him give you any shit for this."

Jaebeom looked at him in confusion. "Bambam?"

"The one in the leather pants," Jackson clarified.

"Oh."

Jaebeom fell silent after that, watching as Youngjae jogged off the ship, leaving Jaebum's bag at the base of the ramp, waiting there until Jaebeom gave him a wave to confirm that he'd seen where Youngjae put his stuff. Seemingly satisfied, Youngjae turned to help Jinyoung and the youngest of their crew roll water barrels up onto the ship.

Jackson turned back to the man sitting next to him, wondering where to start. His rest of his crew had all joined willingly—Jinyoung being the only exception; he hadn’t had to convince someone to sail with him in years and this was a totally different situation than he’d been in with Jinyoung. Jaebeom’s personality seemed to be the total opposite from the very little he’d observed of the man
"Can I ask where you wanted to go?" Jackson asked eventually.

Jaebeom just shrugged, looking a little uncomfortable. "Nowhere in particular, I just…"

"Wanted to be anywhere but here?" Jackson guessed after Jaebeom's voice just trailed off.


"We can take you away," Jackson said. "You don't have to join my crew or anything, but I'd be willing to take on another passenger for a week or two if you just wanted a ride to anywhere but here."

"You would do that?" Jaebeom asked, looking skeptical. "Why?"

Jackson shrugged and turned back to the ships. "I know what it's like to wish that you were absolutely anywhere else."

Jaebeom didn't reply for several moments. "Where are you going?"

"Thailand," Jackson answered, turning back to Jaebeom. "Have you ever been before?"

Jaebeom shook his head. "Youngjae will be disappointed. He wanted to go to Osaka."

Jackson barked out a laugh of surprise. "Of course he did."

"Where is Osaka?" Jaebeom asked.

"Japan."

"Oh," Jaebeom said, sounding somewhat...wistful?

"Can I ask why you wanted to be a member of my crew?"

Jaebeom looked at him sheepishly. "Your ship seemed like the better bet given my options," he explained, pointing to the only other ship in the harbour that had obviously sustained some kind of cannon fire and hull damage. "I mean, I know I'm not an expert or anything, but being able to see straight through a ship is bad, right?"

Jackson laughed, not missing the small smile that crossed Jaebum's face.

It dimmed a moment later. "I honestly didn't think it was a pirate ship. I assumed merchant."

Jackson nodded. "I can see that. I'm aware that my crew, my ship and my flag don't really fit the stereotype for pirates."

Jaebeom nodded.

"Still, let this be a lesson for you. My crew are idiots, but they're harmless; they're good people. Not everyone is like that. Should you not choose to come with us, promise me you'll be more careful in the future?" Jackson asked, feeling weirdly protective over this absolute stranger.

Jinyoung said Jaebeom reminded him of the people from home. The people Jinyoung left behind were beaten, starved and generally treated like slaves. Jackson was weak for people who needed help and, from everything Jackson had picked up about the man so far, it seemed like Jaebeom needed help.
It was also that Jaebeom just seemed so...vulnerable? No, that wasn't the right word. Perhaps naive was better. He obviously wasn't trying to make stupid choices and he seemed to understand in hindsight what he'd done; he just seemed to lack the experience needed to be able to help him navigate a world that admittedly played by several different sets of rules all at once.

"Thanks for, you know, not killing me," Jaebeom said, his expression sober. "Or taking me hostage, or whatever else it was Bambam said."

"I believe it was ransoming you off," Jackson supplied helpfully.

Jaebeom rolled his eyes in a way that was almost endearing. "Right, thank you."

Jackson smiled. "You're welcome."

"So not all pirate crews have hearts then?" Jaebeom asked.

Jackson snorted. "No, they don't. I've been sailing these seas for half my life and nevermind pirate crews, I've never seen two pirates that have the same moral code." He turned to look at the sea. "Everyone out here is doing it for their own reasons. There are some crews I've seen that would stab their own members in the back if it meant getting even an inch closer to whatever it was they were after."

Jaebeom sent him a concerned look.

Wow, Jackson was doing a terrible job of this recruiting thing. Jinyoung was going to stab him in the back.

"Of course, there are some who would kill hundreds to protect their crew." Jackson hurried on to say. "My crew... Most of us have no one; our families are either dead, lost or have been disowned. We've made our own little family and, as irritating as they can get when we're all stuck on a seventy-five foot ship for two weeks, I wouldn't trade any of them for anything. I'm lucky to have found them."

Jaebeom studied the Ahgase once more, a slight frown marring his handsome features. His eyes eventually, however, slid back to the damaged ship a few slips away. "How popular is this port?"

"Incheon?" Jackson asked, surprised by the question. "It's actually quite popular. It's rarely this empty." He suspected there was bad weather on the China side of the sea which was holding up merchant ships; the rainy season seemed to have started early this year. "It's the closest port town to Seoul and acts as the port of entry for goods and ships going to and from China." Jackson suddenly realized why Jaebum had asked. "You won't have to wait too long for another ship to come long. Actual merchant ships this time." Jackson said, feeling something like disappointment that Jaebeom didn't want to join his crew.

Jaebeom hummed to indicate that he'd heard, but made no further comment.

Jackson wracked his brain for anything he could say that might get Jaebeom to want to stay but came up empty. He'd said all the highlights, hadn't he? That he and his crew might have been pirates, but they were good people. That they were a family that cared for and protected each other.

It was only then that Jackson realized that not everyone was looking for a family. That some people had been hurt by their own far too many times for the word to have positive meaning, who flinched at the mere mention of the word. He himself had struggled with it, desperate for someone...
to genuinely care for him and yet also terrified when he got close to finding it because family meant someone else he could lose, someone else who could hurt him.

He thought of Jinyoung, who had taken years to call Jackson his family and actually mean it.

He thought of Bambam, who had given up everything to protect his.

But what else was there to say? He was a pirate. Did he and his crew raid other ships? Yes, they did. Did they steal things that didn’t belong to them? Yes. Did they hurt or kill people? Only when they had to, but yes. He didn’t think that the honest truth was what Jaebeom was looking for. He couldn’t see Jaebeom being the type of person who wanted to steal things and hurt people. Despite knowing nothing about the man, Jaebeom seemed to have a soft, gentle manner about him and Jackson didn’t see him as someone who was hiding a bloodthirsty personality, who was seeking a life of murder and crime.

"I don't mean to interrupt," a voice called down from the ship. Jackson raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sun and found Youngjae leaning over the railing at the tip of the ship, hands cupped to his mouth so his voice would carry further. "But we're loaded and the winds are perfect to sail us out of here so if you want to figure things out now…"

Jackson hadn’t realized how long the two of them had been sitting there, lost in thought. He actually had to take a look next to him to make sure Jaebeom hadn’t left without him noticing.

He hadn’t, but Jackson felt uneasy as he got to his feet. He had a feeling he knew what Jaebeom’s decision would be, but felt compelled to ask the question anyway. "Now or never, Im Jaebeom. What's it going to be?" He asked. "Would you like to run away with some pirates?"

Jaebeom’s expression was raw and desperate as he stared out at the Ahgase, his indecision clear on his face. He stayed like that for a moment and Jackson found himself holding his breath.

Then, out of nowhere, Jaebeom’s entire demeanor changed before Jackson’s eyes. His shoulders straightened and his expression hardened as he looked up at Jackson with certainty in his eyes. “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'm ready to get this fic going! Just so you know I've already written a substantial amount for this one (about 35k words) and it's almost certainly going to be my longest fic yet. It'll probably come in at around 40-50k words and based on my rough planning somewhere around 22 chapters.

Now I've done some research about pirates (because I have a fondness for learning all about things that have no real-world application beyond fanfiction) and have based the Ahagase off of a ship called a sloop. It was one of the most popular ships for pirates because despite it's small size (well, actually because of it) it was fast. It also had a pretty shallow hull (the body of the ship that goes underwater) so they could get closer to shore and over rocky bits of sea floor. They were about the length of two city buses back to back and some of them could hold up to 75 men, but at the same time it could be sailed by just one. Google has helped me out with some images that you can use while reading. This (and this) is what I'm using for the Ahgase. The story is set in the 1700s.
Okay. I think that's everything you need to know! Let know what you think!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

WARNING: if anyone is squeamish about mentions of vomit, maybe skip the first half of this chapter. It's not really graphically described or anything, but I know that some people can be sensitive about things like that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jaebeom hurt. Oh god did he hurt. Breathing hurt; burping hurt; sneezing was excruciating. He had no idea how many muscles were in his torso, but he now knew that vomiting used all of them.

He remembered his stomach in knots as he agreed to join Jackson’s crew, or at the very least agreed to sail with pirates until they reached Thailand. He remembered his stomach churning as they untied themselves from the pier and Youngjae, Jackson and Jinyoung worked ropes to turn and unfurl the sails to catch the wind. He remembered how his stomach had positively lurched when the ship started moving, when the pier became smaller and smaller and Jaebeom realized that he was at sea, that he’d done it. He escaped his father and was finally free for the first time in his twenty years alive.

He should have known all that stomach unease would lead to him puking his guts out at the back of the ship. He was funny, he thought as he groaned and leaned his head against the railing. Now that he was finally free was the first time he found himself wishing for death as his stomach still refused to settle after almost a full thirty six hours aboard the Ahgase. He’d made it maybe an hour before he’d started throwing up, Jinyoung shuffling him off to the back of the ship for some privacy where he’d stayed ever since. Mark had brought him a blanket and an unevenly stuffed woven mat with an apologetic smile and an “I know it’s not comfortable, but it’s all we have and at least it’s better than the floor, right?” A pillow and blanket had been brought over to him later when it became obvious that he wasn’t going to be sleeping below deck.

Next to him, Jackson made a sympathetic sound and reached out, using his fingers to brush Jaebeom’s bangs out of his eyes. Jaebeom would normally have an issue with a complete stranger touching him like that but he was too tired and too sore to care at the moment. “I know I’ve said this like a million times, but you will stop puking. Eventually.”

“Thanks,” Jaebeom said, closing his eyes. “That makes me feel so much better.”

Jackson chuckled at Jaebeom’s sarcasm, squeezing his shoulder before dropping his hand. Despite being Captain of the ship, he’d spent the better part of the last day and a half hidden at the back behind the cabin, sitting on a lumpy mat in the three foot walkway next to a vomiting stranger. Sometimes a sweet kid named Yugyeom—the one who had arrived with Bambam on that first day—would join them, bringing food for them and trying to help Jackson coax Jaebeom into eating some of it. Jaebeom had always refused.

He should have known this would happen. He had the luck for it. His life seemed to have been nothing but a series of shitty events one after the other so far, why wouldn’t he get seasick as he tried to make a new life for himself? He wished he had some of his herbs from back home, ginger perhaps, that would help his stomach settle but he doubted the pirates had anything on board that would help.
"Hi hyungs," Yugyeom said tentatively as he appeared around the corner with a plate in his hands, sitting down on the mat next to Jackson and folding his long legs underneath him. Jaebeom wasn't sure how old Yugyeom was but he suspected he'd tower over all of them when he was fully grown. "How are you feeling Jaebeom-ssi?"

There was a sarcastic comment on the tip of Jaebeom's tongue that he would have let loose had it been anyone but Yugyeom. He was finding that actually saying the sarcastic remarks that he'd been suppressing for years was rather enjoyable and, no matter how petty it made him, they made him feel just a little bit better. Jackson seemed to enjoy them, laughing and occasionally tossing back a few of his own. But Yugyeom just seemed so young and had this innocence about him that Jaebeom had a hard time releasing his frustrations and his temper on the poor kid.

"He hasn't thrown up in over an hour so I'll call it a win." Jackson answered for him. Jaebeom had stopped actually puking about a day ago—there was no food left in his system to throw up anymore—but the dry heaves had continued and Jaebeom wasn't even able to keep water down for extended periods of time yet.

"Yay!" Yugyeom cheered. "This calls for lunch."

Jaebeom felt his stomach roil just from the word 'lunch' and he eyed the plate in Yugyeom’s hands disdainfully.

"Hey, none of that," Jackson scolded, swatting Jaebeom's knee lightly. "We only get good food for like a week out of port. I'm not letting you waste this plate by puking it up too."

"I'm not puking because I want to!" Jaebeom whined.

"I know," Jackson said kindly, rubbing the knee he'd just hit comfortingly.

"What do you mean you only get food food for the first few days out of port?" Jaebeom asked. At the moment he didn't think he'd ever stop vomiting but, should his stomach ever decide to get it together, he wanted to know what he'd have to be eating that didn't qualify as 'good food.'

"That's when we usually run out of the fresh food we buy."

Jaebeom sent him a puzzled look.

"Food doesn't keep well at sea," Jackson explained. "Eggs, cheese and meat only last a few days. Fruit and veggies usually last a week or two, depending on the type. After that our food is either dried, salted or pickled and while it tastes alright, it's still nothing like the fresh stuff."

Jaebeom eyed the plate of vegetables and rice Yugyeom had brought. It wasn't any different from the meals he'd had back home. He'd truthfully never thought of rice and vegetables as a particularly fancy meal. It had been commonplace, normal. But what Jackson said made sense. They were in the middle of the ocean. They couldn't exactly go and pick things off the vine or tree or go buy them at the market could they? They only ate what they brought onto the ship and it would be a waste of food to bring more food than they could eat before it spoiled.

He didn’t want to be the guy who was ungrateful, the guy who let good food go to waste. Especially since he wasn't even part of the crew, but a pity passenger. How rude would he be to keep wasting the food of the people who had kindly taken him away?

“Please Jaebeom-ssi?” Yugyeom asked, pouting a little in a way that kind of made him look like a six year old.
“Oh god, fine.” He said, accepting the plate that Yugyeom passed over with a beaming smile.

He eyed the food.

He also didn’t want to be the guy who literally puked himself to death.

No, *rice*, he told himself. You can handle rice for god’s sake.

*Couldn’t handle water but, sure, let’s try rice.*

The sarcastic part of his brain was clearly trying to make up for lost time.

He picked up the metal spoon and scooped up a small amount of rice, trying to think non-nauseous thoughts as he put it in his mouth and swallowed as fast as possible. It didn’t exactly go down *well,* but it didn’t immediately come back up either.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Jackson watching him carefully, as he had been doing for the past day and a half. “We can always turn around?,” Jackson said, his voice sounding a bit tentative as he probably saw the struggle on Jaebeom's face just to keep the food down. “Perhaps you’re just not meant to be on a ship.”

Jaebeom thought about that for about three seconds before deciding that he'd rather drown in a puddle of his own vomit than go back home. Of course, he felt that was far too crude to say, so he settled for shaking his head. "No. I won't go back there again." He said with finality before shoving more rice in his mouth.

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Jackson eyed the man next to him. Despite the paleness of his skin, the slight tremor of the hand that was clutching his spoon and the fact that he was obviously still unwell, his voice had carried an edge to it that Jackson didn't think Jaebeom was capable of in his condition. He wanted to ask what this man had run away from, for Jackson recognized that edge, recognized the look in Jaebeom's eyes as one of absolute conviction. Jaebeom had left something behind in that harbour that Jackson had a feeling he would rather die than go back to.

He sighed internally. Jinyoung was right, not that Jackson would ever tell him that. Jaebeom did need them. Well, perhaps not them specifically, but he'd needed an escape, needed to get away from Incheon. It seemed like Jackson's merry band of misfits that he'd managed to collect had gained another misfit at least temporarily.

But Jaebeom’s reasons for running away were a worry for another day. Jackson’s current worry was keeping him *alive* until they managed to get anywhere which meant feeding him and keeping him hydrated was Jackson’s current priority.

He seemed to have a weakness for Yugyeom—the maknae was pretty good at putting his baby face to good use—so Jackson let him take over trying to get Jaebeom to eat. The kid did pretty well too, getting Jaebeom to eat far more than Jackson had so far.

Eventually though he pushed the plate into Jackson’s hand. “I can’t eat anymore right now,” he said. “Take it back inside so someone else can finish it and the food won’t go to waste.”

Jackson hesitated, not wanting to leave Jaebeom, but eventually nodding. “I’ll be back soon.”

“It’s not like I’m going anywhere,” Jaebeom replied, making Jackson smile.
“Don’t die while I’m gone.”

“I make no such promise.”

God Jackson hoped Jaebeom kept his sarcastic humour even when he was feeling better. Watching him go up against Jinyoung would be legendary.

“How’s the puking princess?” Bambam asked when Jackson sat down at the table in the main cabin where all the other members of his crew were gathered for dinner.

Jackson sent him a look to make sure Bambam knew he didn't approve of the nickname before answering. “Seems to finally be settling a little. Gyeom gave him puppy eyes and got him to eat something.” He said, passing Jaebeom’s leftovers to Mark who happily accepted them at the same time as Jinyoung slid a full plate in front of Jackson.

“Wow, he fell for that?” Youngjae asked, eyes wide.

“Is he ever going to be in for a rude awakening,” Bambam agreed with an amused smile.

“Hey,” Yugyeom said, using his longer-than-everyone-else's leg to kick Bambam from the other side of Mark. “I’m lovely, thank you very much.”

"Did you find out anything more about him?” Jinyoung asked.

"Yeah, will we have the Korean navy breathing down our necks or anything?” Mark asked.

Bambam snorted. "Doubtful, he's boring."

Jackson looked at him. "When have you even spoken to him since he’s been on board?"

"I didn't; I went through his bag."

"You went through his stuff?” Jackson asked, surprised. "Why?"

Bambam nodded towards Mark. "It's like Mark said. I'm all for taking on strays, but not if they're going to cause us more trouble than they're worth."

Jackson was torn. Sure, he had stolen tons of stuff from other people in his career as a pirate, but he didn't invade his crew's privacy like that, and he expected them to extend one another the same courtesy. But technically Jaebeom wasn’t a member of their crew, and Bambam and Mark had a right to be concerned about who they were allowing to sail with them.

And Jackson would be the first to admit that he was incredibly curious about Jaebeom. Even after sitting with him for almost two days Jackson hadn't really learned anything about him. He didn’t seem to be much of a talker— though Jackson suspected that was just because he was sick and didn’t want to open his mouth more than he had to—but he was really good at deflecting questions he didn’t want to answer and it wasn’t until they were already talking about something else that Jackson noticed what Jaebeom had done. Jackson could tell he was smart, he was sarcastic and he didn't complain all that much even though the poor guy must have felt awful. It was possible that Bambam had more information about Jaebeom by going through his things than Jackson did by talking to him.

Jackson sighed. "Alright, what did you find?"

"Nothing," Bambam replied. "Literally, the guy has nothing. A few articles of cheap, plain
clothing, a handful of coins that might buy a few days at a crappy hotel. That's it. That’s all he has. I honestly think the guy might have come out of a monastery or something. No books, no photographs, no jewelry nothing. Even his backpack looked like he might have made it himself."

"Well that's a decent skill to have at least," Youngjae commented.

"I doubt he'd be so desperate to get away if he escaped a monastery," Mark said. "It's not like monks were going to go chasing after him."

Bambam shrugged. "I dunno man. I'm just saying that I got nothing about him from his bag."

Jackson was almost disappointed. He didn't condone going through someone's things, but it didn't seem like Jaebeom was going to open up to him any time soon and he wanted some kind of information about the man.

"He wasn't a monk," Jackson said thoughtfully. "He's very sarcastic and comes up with some pretty colourful language sometimes. I'm no expert, but I'm pretty sure that's frowned upon in a monastery."

The rest of them smiled.

"He might fit in well as a pirate after all then," Youngjae said.

"I don't think he'll stay," Mark predicted. "I know that I don't know him, but I don't think this is the life for someone who had lived as simply as Jaebeom seems to have."

"I don't think it's about how he lived," Jinyoung said, his expression strangely serious. He met Jackson’s eyes. "It's about what he's trying to get away from."

If anyone of them had changed their way of living to become a pirate, it was Jinyoung. Jackson still sometimes wondered why Jinyoung had stayed. He understood why Jinyoung came aboard his ship but, despite being closer with Jinyoung than any other person, Jackson didn't know why he'd stayed once they arrived in Japan all those years ago. He’d never asked and Jinyoung wasn’t one to volunteer sentimental information like that. He cared for all of them, his actions showed that, but Jackson couldn’t remember hearing an emotional phrase leave his lips. That just wasn’t the type of person Jinyoung was.

He was grateful for his quartermaster though; Jinyoung was without a doubt the sole reason Jackson was still alive.

Jackson sighed. “Well he’s with us for now, until Thailand at least, and he seems like a reasonable enough person; I don’t think we’ll have to worry about him stabbing us in the neck in our sleep.”

“Speaking of Thailand, think we can open up some more sails?” Youngjae asked. “It’ll take us a month to get there at this rate."

He did not have to remind Jackson of that. Jackson was already two months behind Ching Shih and while he didn’t want to fall further behind, more sails open meant more speed. More speed meant they’d hit the waves harder and create more movement on board. When Jaebeom had first started puking Jackson had Youngjae close all but the mainsail, which he’d lowered a little too. They were currently moving at about half the speed they were capable of and, yes, Jackson was frustrated by that but the miserable look on Jaebeom’s face was too hard for him to ignore. “Give him another day. He seems to be moving in the right direction.”

Bambam sighed, but none of the crew made any other arguments.
“Good thing you’re so paranoid and have us stockpile food and water all the time,” Yugyeom chuckled. “Or we’d starve to death by the time we got there.”

Jackson sent him a serious look. “What did I tell you about joking about things like that?”

Yugyeom ducked his head, his expression falling. “Sorry,” he muttered quietly to the table.

Jackson wanted to make some comment about how Yugyeom would really be sorry if a storm or an enemy ship damaged the Ahgase and they were left drifting aimlessly at sea, essentially helpless to stave off starvation or dehydration, but he knew the kid didn’t really mean it. He wondered sometimes if the others—Mark and Youngjae aside—really understood how dangerous sailing could be. But, then again, it was his job to make sure they never did. And while he knew most of them thought he was a little insane—which in fairness, he probably was—the safety of the people he let onto his ship was something that Jackson took very seriously.

He always kept the ship overstocked, something that occasionally irritated Jinyoung because the ship wasn’t that big and there simply wasn’t always enough space to put everything—which was he’d given up the captain’s quarters. With this delay he suspected they’d probably have to make a stop somewhere along the way, possibly in Taiwan or the Philippines, just to make sure they had enough supplies should anything go wrong.

He’d been on a ship to see so many things go wrong and he tried to be prepared to make sure that none of them happened again, tried to make sure that no one on his ship suffered or was hurt because he failed to take something into consideration. Even if the kids took it as a joke, even if the kids thought it was just another ‘Jackson’ thing.

That was fine. As long as they were safe.

Chapter End Notes

I forgot to mention something in the last authors note: this will be updated twice a week (Sunday/ Thursday) for the foreseeable future. There are a few chapters in the middle that I haven't finished yet (and one I haven't even started) but I'm optimistic that I'll finish them up by the time it's their turn for posting.

Also, because she'll be mentioned like a million more times before this fic is over so I might as well tell you know, the 'shih' in Ching Shih is pronounced the same as 'she'

Okay, that's all. See you wonderful people on Thursday ♡
Jaebeom woke up sometime in the middle of the night. He didn’t exactly feel sick, but he didn’t feel great either. He finally felt well enough to sleep downstairs on his third night aboard the Ahgase and while the hammock Youngjae had hung for him was more comfortable than he thought it would be, the snoring of a few crew members kept pulling out of sleep. One of the members—Jaebeom thought it might have been Bambam?—kept mumbling quietly in a language Jaebeom didn’t understand, which probably wouldn’t have woken him from a deep sleep but he was so used to sleeping alone and in utter silence and the noise of having other people just sleeping in the space around him was so foreign.

Frustrated, he decided to get some fresh air and after a moment of struggle he managed to get to his feet and out of his hammock. He glanced over to make sure that the wood burning stove in the corner of the room was still going safely, warming the sleeping members below the deck which, according to Yugyeom, could get quite cool and damp sometimes. Unlike the stove upstairs, this one didn’t have a cooking surface, which made sense to Jaebeom since it was so dark down there cooking would just be impractical. Though Jaebeom suspected that it shared the same piping for ventilation so the smoke didn’t threaten the sleeping crew.

The embers were dull so Jaebeom crossed over to it, using the faint light streaming in from upstairs to make out the edges of the large table where the seven of them had sat a few hours, talking and drinking. Well, the crew had been talking and drinking, Jaebeom had sat there and mostly listened, watching the dynamic between everyone and trying to learn more about the pirates he’d decided to sail with. They were close, that much was obvious, and Jaebeom wondered what had happened to these people for them to all be so young and yet so bonded. They must have already been together for some time in order to have a closeness like they did which means they were essentially children when they decided to become pirates. What had happened to them that they ended up on a ship alone together?

They were kind though, allowing Jaebeom to just observe, not pushing him to drink or join the conversation but not really making him feel left out either. He didn’t feel like one of the crew, but he didn't once feel like they didn’t want him there.

He tried to learn more about them, about their relationships and it became clear enough that the eldests’ opinions carried the most weight. Mark seemed to be the oldest, which Jaebeom figured based on the fact that every other member called him ‘hyung’ at one point or another. Jackson or Jinyoung seemed to be the next oldest. The youngest two were Bambam and Yugyeom and they seemed to be the ones that could cause the most amount of trouble. They seemed to enjoy toeing the line, but would back off when Jackson or Mark told them to. They might have listened to Jinyoung too but Jinyoung seemed to enjoy getting pretty close to that line too.

He was pretty sure half the crew were Korean. Youngjae, Jinyoung and Yugyeom used more complex words and sentence structures than the other three did. Jackson, Bambam and Mark were obviously close to fluent themselves, but the way they pronounced some words was slightly off and sometimes they’d pause, as if they were searching for the words. He didn’t know enough about other languages though to be able to figure out where they were from.

Overall the evening had felt…comfortable, which he wasn’t expecting to find among a group of pirates. Perhaps because they were so young or maybe they were putting on something of a show.
for Jaebeom, but sitting around the table will all of them felt like he was having dinner with a family. Jokes were passed around and no one was spared some good-natured teasing—not even Jaebeom—but there was an obvious genuine affection between the members. Jackson seemed to have been telling the truth that day on the pier when he said his crew were a family. Watching them made him rethink everything he’d ever heard about pirates.

Shaking off the memories of the previous night, Jaebeom opened the door hatch and placed another log from the bin next to it inside, blowing gently so the embers flared back to life and caught some of the bark on fire. Satisfied the fire would keep going and the crew would remain warm Jaebeom closed it securely and began to climb up into the cabin, his feet slowing on the top step when he heard someone singing softly. Given the deep, husky tone Jaebeom knew it must be Jackson, but Jaebeom hadn’t expected Jackson to have such a soulful, emotional voice.

“A salty wind wets the outside of my lips. Even if my hands and feet are tied, I know how to be free.

“A sea song, a lonely song. A few and a few, should we cross the waves?”

Goosebumps covered Jaebeom’s arms and he shivered a little at the haunting sound of the song Jackson was singing. The song was sad, lonely and was so at odds with the chatty, laughing, happy Jackson that Jaebeom had sat opposite to the night before around the table. His voice conveyed a pain so deep that Jaebeom’s breath caught in his chest.

He finished walking up the stairs and pulled open the door that led out onto the deck, wincing at the loud creak from the hinges as the door swung outward.

Jackson stopped singing, turning to look towards the cabin to see who was coming out. He gave Jaebeom a gentle smile, none of the anguish that Jaebeom had heard in his voice showing on his face. “Hey, you feeling okay?”

Jaebeom nodded, squinting a little from the brightness of the moon. During his nights spent out at the back of the ship he’d been shocked at how bright it could be considering it was the dead of night. The ocean around them just acted as a giant mirror, reflecting the moonlight back up on them and allowing Jaebeom to see Jackson clearly even though he was on the other side of the ship. “Just couldn’t sleep. I’m not really used to having people around me while I sleep I guess.”

Understanding crossed Jackson’s face. “Ah,” he said. “You’ll get used to that eventually.”

There seemed to be a lot to get used to aboard a ship.

“What are you still doing awake?” Jaebeom asked, crossing so that he was standing next to Jackson at the front of the ship.

“Keeping watch,” Jackson replied. “The pirates on the Yellow Sea are mostly friendly to us, but it’s never a good idea to just sleep blindly and give anyone the opportunity to get the jump up on you.”

That was a terrifying thought.

“Plus one of us needs to make sure that we don’t veer off course,” Jackson added, pointing behind him to the steering wheel which Jaebeom noticed had a rope tied around the support post and one of the spokes to keep it from spinning and turning the ship unexpectedly.

Both of those seemed like very legitimate reasons to be awake in the middle of the night, even though he thought it seemed a little lonely to be out there all alone.
Jaebeom turned back to the sea. It was a calm night and the waters around them were fairly still and extended as far as the eye could see. Jaebeom looked around, trying to find some obscure shape in the distance, something that wasn't ocean or sky, anything that indicated land was close.

He found nothing.

"Does it ever scare you?" He asked quietly. Jackson looked over at him curiously. "The fact that there is nothing out there." Jaebeom clarified, nodding at the endless expanse of ocean surrounding them.

"Nothing out there," Jackson repeated before shaking his head, a small smile on his face. "Im Jaebeom, everything is out there." He grabbed Jaebeom’s shoulders and turned him a little to the left. “This way is Japan. I swear Jaebeom, I’ve travelled so many places and I’ve never tasted sushi like I have in Japan. And their beef; truly exquisite.” He turned Jaebeom the other way. “China is this way. They have the most incredible things there. Every time I go there I see something that I’ve never seen before. Like pink dolphins.”

Jaebeom turned to look at him in surprise, trying to figure out if Jackson was tricking him or not. “Pink dolphins?” Jaebeom had only heard about dolphins, but none of them had been pink.

Jackson nodded and released Jaebeom’s shoulders. “Pink dolphins,” he repeated with a smile. “The species isn’t pink, they’re called white dolphins even though they’re actually grey, but as they age they turn a pale shade of pink.”

Jaebeom looked back at the sea. The world was truly more astonishing than he’d ever imagined.

Jackson leaned against the railing beside him. “The whole world is out there Jaebeom. The ocean is the front door to everywhere.”

It was strange, Jaebeom thought as he leaned his elbows against the smooth wooden railing next to Jackson. With just a few words from Jackson, the sea didn't seem so frightening anymore.

Jackson stayed up even after Jaebeom had returned to bed, his mind going over their conversation and wondering if he’d really been honest.

Because the truth was the sea did scare him. The sea could be harsh and unforgiving and deadly; a man who wasn't afraid of the sea on at least some level was a fool.

But that wasn't why Jackson feared it. He feared it because it used to trap him. At sea there is nowhere to go, nowhere to escape the monsters he used to be on board with. While he had an amazing crew now, that wasn't always the case.

It was why he'd named his ship the Ahgase. He used to be kept primarily below deck as days sometimes bled into weeks he was stuck without any fresh air or sight of his surroundings except through the water stained window in the room he'd been locked into. The first sign he had that the ship was approaching land were the seabirds. Birds can't survive on the sea indefinitely and most species remained close to the islands or mainland where their nest was, venturing out to sea for food. Seeing a bird had always signalled that freedom was approaching for him. He still wasn't free, but on land he had far more space between him and the monsters. Where he could barricade the door to prevent them from coming in and where he could close his eyes and pretend he was alone and that he was free.

The birds had represented freedom to Jackson, and that was what this ship meant to him too.
wasn't easy getting a ship, and the Ahgase certainly did not look as good as it did now when he'd stolen it five years ago. He'd done things he wasn't proud of to get it, but he tried to atone for those with his actions since. Getting this ship was the first step in his plan for revenge, but it was also a massive step in his quest for freedom. Having his own ship, being able to sail wherever he wanted…it was something Jackson didn't know if he'd ever get.

Still, despite his freedom, it had taken him a long time to appreciate the sea. Probably not until around the time Mark had joined his crew. His crew back that had been everyone but Yugyeom—and Jaebeom obviously—and it was at that point that he realized that the ocean wasn't so isolating when you were sailing with people you actually liked. He began to love sailing; being able to take his new crewmates to places they'd never been to before was more enjoyable than Jackson had thought it would be. Places that he'd hated as a kid were somehow not so bad when Bambam dragged him around them. His goal hadn't changed, but he admitted that he was far less frustrated than he used to be when he didn't find any information. He didn't mind so much when the boys asked if they could stay a few extra days, or if they wanted to stop at another country on the way to look for more clues about Ching Shih's whereabouts.

He looked out over the waters that, at the moment, were still and peaceful—reflecting the moonlight and brightening the darkness around them. It looked like it was covered in glittering diamonds and even after ten years on the water Jackson still had his breath taken away sometimes by its beauty.

But he knew better than to take it at face value. He knew the monsters that swam below the waves, and the ones that lurked on top; he'd sailed on ships full of them. Which was why he refused to sleep unless one of his crew was keeping watch. Being ambushed scared him more than the sea. The sea could be fickle but it always gave warning signs if you knew what to look for.

Humans gave no such indicators before driving a sword through your heart.

"Sseun-ah," a quiet voice said from behind him.

Jackson hummed in response but didn't turn to look around as Jinyoung came up behind him, taking the spot next to him that Jaebeom had vacated.

"You can go sleep now, I'll take watch," Jinyoung said, hints of worry in his tone.

Jackson turned to look at his quartermaster then, seeing those hints of worry reflected in the creases beside his eyes. Jackson smiled, marvelling at how far the two of them had come considering how they'd first met. Jackson had hated him. Hated how Jinyoung could just throw away everything that Jackson had desperately wanted. Jackson would have done anything to have his family back, but there was Jinyoung, willingly running away from his.

Jackson didn't understand at the time how much Jinyoung had suffered at their hands. Jinyoung hadn't understood how much Jackson had lost, how hard Jackson had fought to get where he was and how hard he was still fighting.

He was glad though. Glad that they’d managed to get past everything. Glad that they were together and that Jackson could count on Jinyoung. In the years Jackson had been kept prisoner he’d forgotten how much value there was in being surrounded by people you trusted, by people you cared about, and Jinyoung had been one of the people who helped remind him.

"I'm okay," Jackson said. "You don't have to stay up. I'm not tired yet."

"You have to sleep Jackson." Jinyoung scolded. "You can't keep doing this to yourself."
Jackson's smile grew. "You can banish me below deck all you want, but I know I won't sleep. There is no reason for both of us to be awake so you might as well go back down."

"No," Jinyoung said stubbornly. "I'll just stand here and guilt you into sleeping if I have to."

Jackson chuckled, impulsively reaching over and giving Jinyoung a rare one-armed hug. Jinyoung looked surprised but leaned into it, pressing his forehead into Jackson's temple. "Thank you Jinyoung." Jackson said quietly before releasing his quartermaster.

Jinyoung's surprised expression remained in place. "For what?"

"For staying," Jackson said simply, not explaining any further before turning and heading toward the cabin.

"What did you and Jaebeom talk about?" Jinyoung asked, stopping him.

Jackson turned back around to find Jinyoung studying him curiously.

"The sea," Jackson answered simply. "Why?"

Jinyoung kept looking at him, his expression almost thoughtful. "You're different with him," he said eventually.

"What?" Jackson asked, surprised.

Jinyoung shrugged, leaning back against the railing behind him, the light reflecting off the sea around him made him look like some kind of mythical siren. "I don't know. You just...seem different after you talk to him. Softer somehow. Like how you were when we first found Bambam."

Jackson thought about that. He did admittedly have a huge soft spot for Bambam. He had been so weak when Jackson found him and he'd looked so young. But Jackson learned that despite his age and his frail figure his personality was huge. Jackson adored the boy even as he worried his mouth would get him killed one day.

But Jaebeom wasn't like that. He was… Jackson didn't know. "He's different than Bambam."

Jinyoung nodded in agreement. "He is."

Chapter End Notes

So I actually tried to look up traditional Korean sea chanteys but I found nothing (not surprising) but I did find a song that AKMU (an insanely talented brother-sister duo if you haven't heard of them) have released that was called Chantey and it's honestly so hauntingly beautiful so this is what Jackson was singing so you can listen to it if you want. Honestly it would sound so good with the softer side of his raspy voice...

Also, pink dolphins are actually a thing!! They're a species called the Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin (and Google informs me there is also another species of pink dolphin that lives in South America too called the Amazon river dolphin). You can read more about them here or just see google image results of them here
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When Jaebeom ascended the steps the next morning the first thing he noticed was a smell that was something unlike Jaebeom had ever smelled before.

It only got worse when he opened the door to the deck, almost gagging as the bitter, acrid smell hit his nose. He looked up at the sound of a chuckle and found Mark, leaning casually against the steering wheel with a scarf tied around his mouth and nose.

"What is that smell?" Jaebeom asked, reaching up and covering his own nose with his shirt.

Mark nodded on top of the cabin; Jaebeom stepped closer to Mark before turning to find Youngjae sitting on top of it, scooping something out of a small metal bucket and smearing it across the cabin roof.

"What is he doing?" Jaebeom asked.

"Waterproofing." Mark answered. "A storm is coming and the cabin leaked last time we had rain. The whole ship could use re-tarring actually, but a quick patch job will get us through this storm."

Jaebeom looked at him sharply. "A storm?" He asked, feeling panicked. He looked around but the only thing he could see was water. "We're in the middle of the ocean!"

Mark nodded. "Not the most ideal place to be, especially given its typhoon season."

Jaebeom felt his heart stop, his shirt slipping through his fingers and falling from his face. He'd seen typhoons from the safety of inland Korea. To experience one on a small ship in the middle of the sea… "We're all dead."

Mark chuckled and reached forward to squeeze Jaebeom's shoulder. "Relax, it's probably not a typhoon. I've actually never been in one of those before and they generally don't come this far west at this time of year."

That wasn't really all that comforting. Jaebeom looked up, frowning at the blue sky and light wispy clouds drifting by. "It doesn't look like a storm is coming." He commented, wondering how the crew knew something was coming when it just looked like the start of a beautiful day to Jaebeom.

"Storm indicators are a bit of an uncertain science," Yugyeom's said from above their heads, Jaebeom using a hand to shade his eyes from the sun to see Yugyeom suspended from the small top of the mast…taking down the mainsail? "See how thin the clouds are? How fast they're moving? Good indicators of bad weather blowing in."

"Are you taking down our sail?" Jaebeom asked incredulously. That seemed to Jaebeom to be completely counterproductive. Shouldn't they be opening it up and…trying to outrun the storm or something?

"We have to," Youngjae called from atop the cabin. "The wind is far too powerful during storms. The pressure could tear holes in the sails, or even snap the mast and then we'd really be in trouble."
There was so much more to sailing than Jaebeom had ever imagined or taken into consideration when he had the stupid idea to get on a pirate ship.

"We replace them with storm sails: basically just smaller, sturdier versions of the ones we regularly use." Youngjae explained as he jumped down from the cabin roof, the bucket on one hand and a trowel in the other.

Jaebeom eyed the bucket warily and tucked his nose back into his shirt. "What is that stuff?"

"Pine tar." Youngjae answered. "When sap saturated woods are burned under pressure the resin within the tree can be drained and used for all kinds of things. We use it for waterproofing because it fills any cracks that might have formed in the wood and keeps water out which prevents wood eating algae and mold from accumulating under the ship and just prevents leaks in general."

"Smells horrible though." Mark commented, Jaebeom nodding in agreement.

Youngjae rolled his eyes. "You get used to it eventually. And it’s not like any of the other tars smell any better,” he said, heading back inside the cabin.

Jaebeom kept his nose covered as he looked up at the sky. “Are clouds really that good an indicator of bad weather?” He’d never heard of that or noticed anything about clouds other than the dark, thick clouds often brought rain.

“The clouds are the less accurate part of it,” Jackson’s voice called from somewhere. It took Jaebeom a moment to find him, his stomach dropping when he leaned around the sail and found Jackson perched at the end of the beam that jutted out over the sea at the front of the ship as he worked to undo the rigging for the sails.

“Please tell me you’re tied to something,” Jaebeom moaned as he walked closer to where Jackson was.

Jackson looked over his shoulder at Jaebeom with a cheeky grin that told Jaebeom that, no, he was not tied to anything that he was dangling about fifteen feet above the ocean with nothing to keep him from falling into it.

“It’s fine,” Jackson said. “I’ve done this a million times before.”

Jaebeom turned to Mark. “Does Jinyoung know he’s out there?"

Mark sent him a grin that was remarkably similar to the one Jackson had just given him. “Jinyoung sends him out there on purpose when he’s being annoying.”

“Pirates,” Jaebeom muttered as he made his way closer to Jackson, cursing the disregard they held for their own lives. “What else warns you about storms?” He asked, leaning against the railing next to the bowsprit.

“The barometer,” Jackson replied, going back to working on unravelling the sails.

“The what?” Jaebeom questioned.

“The glass thing hanging outside the cabin.”

Jaebeom turned and looked at the sculpted glass hanging outside the cabin that he’d walked passed dozens of times since he’d been on board and had always thought was just a decoration. It didn’t look any different to him. “What about it?” Jaebeom asked, turning back to Jackson.
“Honestly, I don’t understand how it works, but I know how to read it. When the water in the spout is low, there is going to be nice weather. When it’s high, bad weather is coming in. The faster it rises the more serious the storm is more likely to be.”

“And how serious will this one be?” Jaebeom asked, somewhat terrified of the answer.

Jackson’s hands still momentarily on the ropes before he sent Jaebeom a confident smile. “No big deal.”

Jaebeom studied him seriously. “Liar,” He murmured before turning around and going to look for Jinyoung to see if there was anything he could do to help.

Jinyoung was using thick wooden panels to cover the exterior of the windows and was happy to enlist Jaebeom into helping him cover the remaining windows. Jaebeom tried to hide his utter terror at being at sea during a storm but he was pretty sure he wasn’t successful because Jinyoung and Mark kept talking loudly about how everything they were doing was just a precaution, or that it was good practice even though most of what they were preparing probably wouldn’t be necessary.

He appreciated their effort, but he wasn’t as big an idiot as they apparently thought he was. He saw how Bambam scolded Yugyeom quietly for not securing the cannons properly. He saw how Jinyoung always looked up when the wind blew a little harder against them, his eyes finding Jackson to ensure his safety until he was back on the ship properly. He saw how Youngjae and Jackson exchanged short, concerned conversations.

One thing that he was pleasantly surprised about was how well they crew worked together, how many features the ship had to keep everything safe. It was clear that they’d done this before many times. That was good, wasn’t it? If they survived all those storms than this one should be okay too.

Right?

It was after the noon hour that the clouds above began growing larger, their bottoms darkening to deep grey. The sea reflected the grey of the sky and eventually dark ominous grey was the only thing Jaebeom could see when he looked out from the deck of the Ahgase. It was a terrifying sight, as if they were trapped within the brewing storm itself.

The wind that began to whip his cheeks grew colder. The ocean around them came alive in a way Jaebeom had never seen before, the tops of the swells swirled with white foam as the sea began to stir in connection with the sky. This storm was going to be big. Even Jaebeom could feel it, the tension on the ship and the static in the air making his hair stand on end.

The sails were the last thing to get put into place, Youngjae and Jackson checking and double checking that they were secure and rigged properly. Their usual sails were folded carefully and brought down to the living quarters for safe keeping. There were only two storm sails: the main one and one of the smaller sails. Both of them were about a quarter the size of their normal ones. It looked somewhat pathetic to Jaebeom, who was so used to seeing all the sails unfurled and filled but when the wind gusted and the sails snapped against the rigging so hard it sounded like a whip cracking he realized what Youngjae had meant about the wind being too strong. If the full mainsail had been up catching winds that were gusting at those speeds the mast would crack like a toothpick.

Jackson ushered everyone inside when the rain started falling. Jaebeom was horrified when he found out that Jackson was planning on staying out on the deck during the storm. “You can’t,” Jaebeom argued, balking when the rest of the crew just wished Jackson luck and descended below
deck. “You’ll be killed.”

“Someone has to,” Jackson said. “As the Captain of this ship that job falls to me.”

“The Captain only has complete authority during times of war,” Jaebeom argued, something that he hadn’t known and had been surprised to find out. He’d thought the Captain was in charge of just about everything but he’d learned fast enough that the Quartermaster seemed to have that title, though he admittedly hadn’t yet figured out if that was just Jinyoung's interpretation of the role, or if all quartermasters had that much power. The Captain only had full and undisputed control during battles, all of the Captain's other decisions could be negotiated if necessary.

“We are at war,” Jackson said softly. “Our opponent just isn’t human; it’s wind and sea.”

It was so poetic that Jaebeom would have been impressed if he wasn’t worried that Jackson would literally die in the hour or two. He didn’t know what to say though; it wasn’t like he wanted any of the other crew members to be the one to steer through the storm but the thought of losing Jackson scared him almost more than the storm they were about to sail through. Jackson was the one who Jaebeom felt the most comfortable with, the one who had helped Jaebeom the most and was realistically the only reason Jaebeom had gotten on that ship in the first place.

The wind gusted and the door slammed shut behind Jackson, making Jaebeom flinch and leaving the pair in relative darkness, the light creeping in from around the wooden panels covering the windows was all Jaebeom had to see Jackson look at him softly. “Go down and get settled. The boys will help explain what you’re about to go through. Try not to panic too much and trust that I’ll get us through this.”

It wasn’t that Jaebeom didn’t trust Jackson. Despite only knowing Jackson for less than a week Jaebeom had this feeling that Jackson could do just about anything. It was just that natural forces seemed to fit into that ‘just about’ category. How was Jackson, a single man in a wooden boat, supposed to go up against an angry sea and win?

He stepped forward and pulled Jackson into a hug, surprising both of them. “Please be careful,” Jaebeom begged. “Please stay safe.”

Jackson softened, leaning against Jaebeom and returning the embrace. “I will.”

⚓

Jackson approached the helm and picked up the rope that was hooked to the ground in two different places, tying it securely around his waist before taking the long scarf he had tied around his waist and looping it through one of the hooks too, just in case. It was somewhat of a risky move because if anything broke off the ship he didn’t have much leeway to move and get out of the way. But it was a risk he was willing to take because the only thing that spelled certain death during storms was being tossed overboard. He’d take the chance of being hit or pinned as long as it meant he stayed on board.

Jaebeom’s face swan behind his eyes, the stark worry in his eyes and the warmth of his embrace as he begged Jackson to be safe. It was strange. Not bad strange, just… It wasn’t something that Jackson had much experience with. He hadn’t been given much physical affection after he’d been taken by Ching Shih, in fact he outright denied it. He hated being touched by any one of that crew, especially since he knew they were only trying to replicate familial affection, trying to replace the family they had killed.

His own crew weren’t ones for hugs either since most of them saw him as a hardened, revenge
driven maniac, which he was. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been properly hugged, nevermind the last time he’d accepted it, the last time he’d returned it. It was nice, he decided. Warm. Jaebeom's arms made him feel safe instead of suffocated and that in and of itself was such a foreign feeling for Jackson.

The storm sail cracked behind him, the wind pulling it taught against it’s rigging, which snapped Jackson out of his thoughts. It was a dangerous time to get lost in thought; he could think more about the enigma that was Im Jaebeom should he survive the next hour. Storms at sea usually didn't last long, typhoons aside, but duration really didn't mean much when you were standing on the deck of a small ship just trying to survive and keep the ship in one piece. Some of the more severe storms could feel like days when Jackson was afraid the ship would be flipped over with every single wave that approached.

He knew it was stupid to steer a ship through a storm, but he'd been on a ship that had chosen not to and had almost died. Realistically, he understood that it was more of a combination of bad luck and poor leadership, but all Jackson remembered was nearly starving to death at sea. He'd been fourteen, the first time Ching Shih had allowed Jackson to go off her ship without her—it would also be the last as Jackson was able to sneak away from the crew and make his escape. He was sent with a higher officer to travel from Japan to Taiwan go check in on one of Ching Shih's businesses. The timing of the storm played a major part in it too. They'd been too close to the island when it hit, but the chief officer was as bad a navigator as he was a captain and didn't notice. The storm pushed them further west and since their positioning was wrong in the first place, they just kept sailing west when the storm was over, not realizing they'd missed the island entirely, ending up all the way in Vietnam.

Normally the distance between Taiwan and Vietnam was only about three days, but with a storm damaged sails it had taken them over a week. They’d planned on being at sea for four or five days. They were at sea for almost two weeks. Their water was gone and their food was scarce. It was the first time in Jackson's life where he genuinely thought he might die.

It was also the thing that allowed him to escape from Ching Shih's crew. When they’d reached Vietnam the rest of his crew was so weak, so happy to be alive and on land that they didn't pay as much attention to Jackson as they should have, allowing Jackson to slip away as soon as he was able.

No matter how fortuitous it all had ended, Jackson swore he'd never sail blindly through a storm again, no matter how dangerous it was. He'd gotten better at it too, at navigating the wind and the waves to reduce the possibility of damage to the ship. Sometimes that resulted in displacement, but as long as Jackson was able to keep a rough idea of their location then they could get safely ashore at their destination.

That didn’t mean he liked it. It was frankly his least favourite thing about sailing. It made him feel so small and insignificant and afraid, and Jackson hated feeling afraid. But the sea had a way of reminding you who was in charge and in the throes of a storm it wasn’t hard to remember that he was just a man in a wooden boat at the utter mercy of mother nature. He didn't like not being in control and standing on that deck, looking at the awesome power of the sea was a constant reminder that out on the waves Jackson was never really in control.

This storm didn't seem to be as bad as Jackson expected he realized with relief once they were closer to the eye of the storm, not that that was really saying all that much. It was still severe, but Jackson felt much better about their odds once the storm had progressed enough to give him a better idea of exactly what he would be going up against. It wouldn't be easy or enjoyable, but he was confident all the crew and the ship would come out the other side of this one okay. He wasn't
always so certain.

The ocean swelled and rolled around them, rocking the ship violently as Jackson just tried to hang on, tried to see anything through the rain beyond the steering wheel in front of him, tried to keep the ship pointed to the South-West, tried to ignore the absolutely massive ocean swells that sometimes swallowed the entire horizon in front of him, tried to ignore the waves coming up over the railing and hammering against him and the deck before draining back into the sea, tried to ignore the way the lightning seemed to consume the entire sky above him.

What he couldn’t ignore, however, was the splintering crack from above him, one that didn’t come from thunder, or the storm sail collapsing around him.

Chapter End Notes

I know you're waiting to know more about all the characters, and that is coming! But for now enjoy a few more crumbs about Jackson as Jaebeom faces one of the biggest dangers at sea.

In terms of facts and accuracy of this chapter: barometers are in indicator of bad weather this is what their barometer looks like. High air pressure pushes the liquid down the spout and back into the body, while low air pressure allows the water to rise up the spout. Low pressure means that the air is rising which leaves something of a vacuum underneath it which is often filled with air of a different temperature (usually cold) and the mixing of temperatures creates either rain or storms. They were invented in the 1600s so it would have been available for the time frame I've set this fic in.

Storm sails are also actually a thing and are still in use by sailors today. This is an example of what they might look like on a sailboat if anyone is curious (which I'm sure you're not but I learned a lot while researching how ships get through storms and felt like sharing). Pine tar also exists and has a million uses from waterproofing to being used in baseball (illegal in major leagues though) to allow more grip on the baseball/ bats as it's quite sticky.

And if anyone really wants to put themselves in Jackson's shoes, here is a youtube compilation of ships in storms to show you how terrifying the ocean can be.

Also as a follow-up to the note from chapter 4 (which I've since deleted), it's been brought to my attention that guest users can't leave more than one Kudo. I know that there is a glitch for Ao3 members that makes it possible for them to leave more than one so I wasn't sure of guests had something similar but that does not seem to be the case. I feel much more at ease knowing this. I love getting kudos; I love knowing that my words are enjoyed and appreciated. But I also just wanted those numbers to be honest. So I want to thank everyone who has left them for this fic♡
Chapter 6

Jaebeom was going to die. He was certain of that fact. There didn’t seem to be any other option.

He made it downstairs, clinging to the railing because the already churning seas made it hard to walk, to find the other five members settling down on some blankets at the front of the ship, looking relatively unafraid. Jaebeom tried to let that comfort him.

Youngjae pushed Yugyeom over, shuffling to the side to make space between him and Jinyoung. “Come and sit.”

It wasn’t like Jaebeom had anything else to do, so he went and seated himself between the two, Jinyoung throwing a blanket over his lap once he was settled. He wasn’t sure why a thin piece of fabric was supposed to offer him any safety, but he appreciated the gesture all the same.

“Your first storm is always the worst,” Jinyoung said, probably intending to be comforting.

It wasn’t.

Especially not when the storm really picked up and Jaebeom swore they were sailing through hell itself. The sea was hitting the ship so hard Jaebeom could feel the boards at his back vibrating, shaking as if the sea would burst through them at any moment.

He had expected the violent shaking, the feeling of being tossed around like a leaf in the wind. What Jaebeom hadn't anticipated was the noise. Yes, he expected thunder, but that was the thing he heard the least. The ocean roared through the boards of the ship and he could hear the swirling of the waters even from where he was. The whole ship was alive with sounds as everything not nailed down sound slid and moved with the riotous motion of the ship. The things in the cupboards smashed around with such force Jaebeom wondered if the simple latch would hold or if all the contents could come spilling out and scatter across the floor. A small part of his brain wondered if he’d be seasick again from the violent movements but the was pretty sure he was too afraid to throw up.

He now realized why the most of the furniture had been bolted to the floor. The cupboards had been locked shut but even from across the ship he could hear the contents been thrown around. The crews' trunks slid back and forth with the waves, most of them only moving a few inches, but his own trunk was mostly empty and it was moving several feet before Mark before got up and tucked it between his own trunk and the wall. The lantern hanging from the ceiling was swaying back and forth, casting shadows that grew and shrunk dramatically with its movements that somehow just made everything all that much more frightening.

For the first time he wished he’d taken Jackson up on his offer to take him back to Incheon. He’d wanted to get away, as far away as he could, but living in the same country as his father could only be better than dying in the middle of the sea. And so far the sea seemed to be repeatedly trying to kill him.

He flinched at a particularly loud clap of thunder which seemed to prompt Jinyoung to taking his arm, wrapping it up with both of his before he leaned close to Jaebeom's ear. "Relax," he said so quietly Jaebeom barely heard it over the cacophony of noises around them. "We'll be okay," he said
before dropping his head on Jaebeom's shoulder. His voice was quiet, but filled with a confidence that Jaebeom found reassuring. Same with the grip he had on Jaebeom's arm and the weight of his head on Jaebeom's shoulder. Grounding. Everything around him was being thrown around and it kind of made Jaebeom feel like he was too. Jinyoung was a solid, still presence that somehow made him feel like he was being anchored in place.

He closed his eyes and tried to relax and focus on Jinyoung's presence instead of the absolute chaos that was currently happening on their ship.

On his other side he felt Youngjae take his hand and press just a little bit closer, grounding Jaebeom from both sides. "You'll be fine, hyung."

Hyung.

Even through his terror the word startled him.

Jaebeom had never really been called that before. There might have been a few kids when he was in school, but he'd never really been close enough with anyone to have earned that honorific. Being the doctor's son had its benefits, but it came with a certain amount of distance too. He didn't do the same things as the other kids his age, didn't really play or hang out with them much outside of school hours. He worked, he took care of their parents and grandparents and while he enjoyed helping people it drew professional boundaries around him that few people were willing to cross. It was hard to see someone as just your classmate when they were at your house taking care of your grandfather when you got home from school.

Even in the middle of what felt like the end of the world Jaebeom was struck by the word, by the notion that Youngjae thought of him as an older brother figure instead of the virtual stranger that he was. So far the crew had simply addressed him as Jaebeom-ssi, which was how most people in his life addressed him: with respect but with a distance that sometimes just left Jaebeom feeling very alone.

Jaebeom felt his throat tighten at the word and at their gestures. He should have meant nothing to them considering he'd been on board their ship for less than a week but here they were, essentially cuddling him in an attempt to make him feel better, feel safer. And it was working. These pirates that Jaebeom had met by pure chance, these people that Jaebeom had almost walked away from, had wanted to run away from, were somehow turning out to be among the kindest people that Jaebeom had ever met.

All of them startled when something smashed into the deck above their heads. It was small and localized and sounded nothing like the crashing of the waves they'd been hearing for what felt like hours. Something was wrong.

Jinyoung and Youngjae both jumped up at the same time before turning to one another and immediately started arguing. “Sit down, I’ll go make sure everything is okay,” Jinyoung said, his tone making it clear that he expected no arguments.

Youngjae disagreed. “You sit down. I am the boatswain on this ship and that sound was made by some kind of equipment malfunction. This is my area of expertise and I’ll be of far more help to Jackson that you will be,” Youngjae said, his expression and tone so different from the Youngjae that Jaebeom had come to know so far.

There was a tense silence while the two just stared at each other before Mark said loud enough to be heard, “Sit down Jinyoungie.”
Jinyoung sent him a betrayed look but acquiesced, dropping back down on the floor next to Jaebeom as Youngjae carefully made his way across the heaving deck to ascend the stairs. Jinyoung was tense as he stared toward the stairs, looking like it was taking everything in him not to follow.

Tentatively, Jaebeom reached out and put his hand on Jinyoung’s knee, looking to offer some comfort to Jinyoung the way the other man had done for him but unsure if it would be welcome from a stranger.

Jinyoung turned to him, a tight smile on his face but his eyes were grateful.

“Jackson is okay, right?” Jaebeom asked, hoping for more of the confidence that they’d given him so far.

No one answered.

⚓

Jackson felt hands pulling the sail off of him. At least he hoped it was and that it wasn't the wind yanking it off of him. If they lost their only-been-used-four-times storm sail Youngjae and Jinyoung were going to take turns killing him.

"I told you we needed to get the mast fixed." Youngjae's scowling face appeared as the sail was pulled off of Jackson, his voice loud enough to be heard over the roaring of the wind, rain and sea.

Jackson sighed, the wind whipping it away long before it reached Youngjae's ears. He knew that. But getting the mast replaced would take time and Jackson had gotten good information that he didn't want to sit on. Of course that didn't explain why he hadn't gotten it fixed in the dozen or so ports they'd been to since then, but he was sure he'd never hear the end of it even if he had a good excuse. The mast was old and the wood was starting to weaken; Youngjae had told him months ago they should look into replacing it. He wasn't entirely surprised that the force of the wind was able to rip the rigging supports right out of the wood.

Jackson hated when ignoring his problems came back to bite him in the ass.

"I get it, I'm sorry, you were—"

A wave slapped into the ship so hard that it made Jackson stagger, the rope around his waist keeping him upright.

Youngjae had no such restraints and it was pure luck that Jackson's reflexes kicked in in time and, after a truly terrifying moment, was able to grab hold of Youngjae’s shrittails. He pulled and was able to redirect Youngjae down towards the deck instead of toward the railing which was dangerously close to the sea as the ship climbed over swells almost as tall as it was.

The look Youngjae sent him was pure fear and Jackson tried to make his expression calm and unafraid even though he was shaking at the realization of how close Youngjae had just come of being tossed overboard. Jackson would have never found him again. There was simply no chance of that happening, no matter how hard or how long he looked.

He pulled Youngjae closer to him, helping him to his feet and giving him a tight hug. "You can yell at me later. Go back inside. Right now. Please."

Youngjae was trembling and he nodded weakly after nearly squeezing the life out of Jackson.
Jackson kept a tight hold of Youngjae until they'd descended the wave, making sure there was time until the next one hit for Youngjae to make it inside safely before letting him go.

Once Youngjae was safe, Jackson checked their direction to see how far the sea had changed their course while his hands were off the wheel. As he fixed their course he prayed that this storm would be over soon.

⚓

When the thunder was nothing but a faint rumble and the seas had calmed enough that the crew could walk across the deck without fear of being tossed into the sea, Jackson stomped on the deck three times, the signal to the members below that the storm had passed and they were safe.

His fingers were numb and clumsy as he worked the ropes to untie himself, his thighs trembling a bit from having been tensed for so long keeping him upright against the wind and the sea swells. He was chilled and every part of him was soaked to the skin.

Jinyoung was the first one out onto the deck, his eyes immediately finding Jackson and scanning him from head to toe, like he always did, making sure Jackson was okay. "You're safe?"

Jackson nodded. "Fared better than the sail at least," he said, nodding at the storm sail which lay crumpled across the deck. Jackson was relieved that it had at least stayed on board instead of being dragged through the ocean beside them.

Jinyoung got that look on his face. "Jackson, you know how much I love saying I told you so. I always appreciate you giving me so many opportunities to do so."

Jackson rolled his eyes, intending a snarky reply but a shiver rolled through him as the cold wind slapped his soaked shirt against his chilled skin.

The humor in Jinyoung's face melted away. "Go inside and get warm."

Jackson nodded, stepping carefully over the sail that the maknaes were trying to sort out and towards the door as Jaebeom's broad figure filled the doorframe.

He looked like crap if Jackson was honest, pale and exhausted, and Jackson softened a little despite his exhaustion. "You okay?"

Jaebeom ignored the question, his eyes taking in Jackson's appearance with a frown before moving aside. "Me? I'm fine. Look at you though. Get down there and put on something warm. Several warm somethings. I'm going to make you tea."

Jackson was surprised by the offer, as Jaebeom hadn't shown any interest in preparing food of any kind since he'd been on board, but Jackson was curious about what he would come up with so he just nodded and headed down to the living quarters.

Mark was righting the contents of the cupboards down there when he noticed Jackson. "You okay Jacks?" He asked, crossing the room and carefully looking him over.

Jackson nodded. "I'm fine. I was ordered to come down and change."

Mark smiled. "And we all know better than to argue with Jinyoung."

"Actually, it was Jaebeom," Jackson remarked as he crossed to his trunk, peeling off his shirt as he went.
"Jaebeom?" Mark repeated, the surprise in his tone obvious.

Jackson sent him an amused look. "Yeah. And he's making me tea right now so it looks like you've been relieved of Jackson duty this time around."

They didn’t really have a medic on board, but Mark had picked up enough about the basics from his many years at sea that the crew went to him for minor injuries or illnesses. He always took it upon himself to ensure that Jackson didn’t get sick whenever he sailed them through storms.

“Huh,” Mark said, Jackson catching the skeptical look on his face as he slid a dry shirt over his head. "Let me know if you still want me to make you something after."

Jackson chuckled, changing out of his saturated pants as well. "I'm sure that won't be needed. He doesn't seem like the type to offer if he didn't know what he was doing."

"Still," Mark said.

Jackson just smiled and headed back upstairs in time to hear Jaebeom mutter to himself, "Of course they had ginger this whole time."

"Everything okay?" Jackson asked, sitting on the bench as he eyed all the open cupboards that were definitely not open when Jackson went downstairs.

Jaebeom looked over at him, frowning in apparent displeasure at what he saw. "That's not warm enough. And your hair is still soaked," he scolded before disappearing down the stairs, reappearing seconds later with one of his own blankets and one of the ship’s towels.

Jackson was startled when, instead of just handing the blanket to him, Jaebeom decided to wrap it around Jackson’s shoulders, making a few small adjustments until he was satisfied that Jackson was properly covered. Jaebeom then picked up the towel and started gently running it through Jackson’s hair, as if Jackson was a child.

Jackson was so startled by the action that he just froze for a moment. He was a pirate for fuck’s sake. And here was Jaebeom, a potential runaway monk who not even an hour ago thought he was going to die, treating Jackson like he was a five year old. Bambam even did a double take as he walked past the door. Jaebeom didn’t notice, his entire focus apparently on ensuring Jackson’s hair was dry, but Jackson noticed the weird look the younger boy sent him.

Still, it...kind of felt nice. To be taken care of. He was so used to taking care of others, which Jackson had never had a problem with. He liked making sure that the people he cared about were okay. But he had never really accepted their help in return. Their questions were always answered with ‘I’m fine’ regardless of whether or not it was actually true and no one had pressed the issue any further, either because they didn’t care or because they did and they knew Jackson didn’t want to be pushed. But Jaebeom, in his ignorance, hadn’t even asked. Just took it upon himself to take care of Jackson.

Jackson wouldn’t exactly say that he liked it, but it wasn't as uncomfortable as he thought it'd be either.

“Better,” Jaebeom announced eventually, breaking Jackson out of his thoughts as he set the towel down on the table and turned back to the open cupboards. “Do you have any other herbs stored around the ship?” He asked.

Jackson pulled the blanket tighter around him, enjoying the warmth. “Not that I’m aware of.” He noticed then that Jaebeom had lit fire in the stove while he'd been below deck, the heat reaching
where he was sitting on the bench and adding another layer of warmth and comfort.

Jaebeom hummed. “Then I guess I have to make do with these,” he muttered, talking more to himself than to Jackson.

Jackson watched as Jaebeom sorted through the small wooden pots that he knew they kept the herbs in, opening each one and looking inside, putting them right back in the cupboard, occasionally setting them off to the side and sometimes bringing them to his nose to sniff, Jackson only realized he was identifying them by scent after Jaebeom said the names of one of the herbs out loud.

"Most of these are just used for cooking," he sighed, sounding a bit frustrated.

Jackson just blinked at him. He'd thought they were fairly well stocked in terms of medicinal herbs. Mark had never complained that they were missing anything at any rate.

Jaebeom went to work slicing the ginger into the pot of water on the stove top before adding smaller amounts from some of the other jars he'd set aside.

Jaebeom seemed to know exactly what he was doing and he handled the herbs with a familiarity of someone who had done this a million times before. "Are you an herbalist?" Jackson asked.

He didn't miss the way Jaebeom's hands seem to falter for a moment. "Not exactly…" he replied.

"Work in an apothecary?" Jackson tried again.

Jaebeom just ignored him that time.

"You seem very comfortable with the herbs," Jackson continued, trying one last time to pull information from Jaebeom, but the man seemed determined not to share anything about himself.

"You should consider getting a basic medicinal herb set when we arrive in Thailand." Jaebeom said eventually, carefully stirring the contents of the pot.

Jackson sighed, wishing to know more about Jaebeom but accepting the subject change. "We're not going to Thailand anymore," he said.

Jaebeom stopped what he was doing and turned to look at him in surprise. "Why not?"

"The rigging for the mainsail is broken. The mast is too old and the wood is starting to rot. The wind ripped out the top support. Youngjae can probably make a temporary support but it's not going to get us all the way to Thailand. We'll probably stop in Taiwan now." He still had to ask the rest of his crew if they were okay with that, but he didn't anticipate any objections. He suspected that several members would be quite pleased by the news actually.

"Oh. Will we be there soon?" Jaebeom asked.

Jackson shrugged. "That will depend on what Youngjae can do with the mast. Usually we’d make it by the end of today, but if we have to rely solely on our smaller sails it’ll be…maybe two or three more days?"

Jaebeom nodded and went back to the tea without a word, the scent of ginger and oranges and something bitter that Jackson couldn’t identify soon reaching his nose. It seemed to take a while before Jaebeom was straining out the herbs, pouring the tea into one of their cups, adding a small amount of honey and setting it on the table in front of Jackson. “Drink all of it,” he ordered before
sitting down on the bench opposite Jackson.

Jackson eyed the tea for a moment, it didn’t look all that different from what Mark usually made, though the ginger scent was far stronger. He picked up the cup and tentatively took a sip. It wasn’t great but it was certainly no worse than what Mark would make him drink. The heat of the water and the ginger made him feel warmer almost immediately. “Thank you,” he said sincerely, looking across the table at Jaebeom, who only smiled in return.

Jaebeom was soon summoned outside to help Jinyoung clean up and restore the deck to normal conditions, leaving Jackson with explicit orders not to move from in front of the stove until his hair was dry and his tea was finished.

"What did he make?" Mark asked, emerging from the top of the stairs some time later.

"Ginger-orange tea," Jackson replied. "With one or two other things that I didn't recognize. He was upset that most of our herbs were just for cooking."

Mark looked surprised, reaching out and taking the mug from Jackson before taking a small sip of the tea, his expression thoughtful as he swallowed.

"Well?" Jackson asked, genuinely curious about what Mark thought.

Mark actually smiled in response as he handed the mug back to Jackson. "He did good," he replied, a hint of respect in his tone as he turned and headed out onto the deck to help the others.

Jackson smiled to himself as he took another sip of tea, wrapping his fingers around the warm mug. Mark wasn’t easy to impress, especially when it came to something like this as Mark took the crews’ health very seriously. The fact that he only had good things to say just mean that Jaebeom really did know what he was doing.

Im Jaebeom was turning out to be far more interesting than Jackson had thought he’d be.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize if this chapter is crap. I procrastinated writing this one and I feel like it feels a bit lazy? The next chapter should make up for it. It’s a big one and one of my favourites in this fic so far. See you Sunday ♡
Chapter Notes

Just a heads up, the angst really kicks in here. You finally learn some backstories and they aren't pretty. Just so you know what you're walking into (reading into?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Mainsail, jib, mast, bowsprit,” Jaebeom muttered, looking around the deck of the ship, trying to match the term to the part of the ship it belonged to. The mast was split from where the rigging got ripped out and he couldn't make a suitable hold to restring the mainsail so they'd been using the smaller sails to keep them moving. They would have no problem getting there, but it would take an extra day or two and Jaebeom was trying to become more familiar with how sailing worked and the parts of a ship in the meantime.

“What are you doing?”

Jaebeom looked over as Jinyoung leaned against the railing next to him. “Trying to remember the parts of this ship. I think Youngjae is going to test me on this later.”

Jinyoung laughed, Jaebeom smiling a little at the sound. He clapped Jaebeom on the shoulder. “Don’t stress yourself out, you’ll get the hang of things eventually.”

Jaebeom looked at him flatly. “Mark asked me to check his heading earlier and I was about two seconds away from checking his actual head before he explained that the heading meant the direction we were travelling in.”

Jinyoung doubled over with laughter, his elbows braced on the railing he’d been leaning against. “Wow, okay, maybe we should prioritize some sailing terminology,” he said, his eyes dancing with amusement.

“That’s what I thought, so I asked Youngjae for some help but he listed off about two dozen things that I did not understand and when he asked if I understood, I didn’t want to sound like an idiot and say no but I honestly only remember about five of them.”

Jinyoung sent him what he probably thought was a comforting smile. “Relax. We’ll probably tease you mercilessly about your lack of sailing knowledge, but we don’t really mean it.”

Jaebeom just stared at him, wondering why on earth he thought sailing with them was a good idea. “Wow, that is so comforting. It’s so hard to tell you’re a pirate.”

Jinyoung chuckled again. “I was like you once, you know. Desperate to get away from home, not knowing a thing about sailing but not caring as long as I was free.”

Jaebeom just stared at him, speechless. “You… What?”

Jinyoung’s smile dimmed a little. “We’re not idiots you know. We know there must have been a reason you agreed to sail with us, especially since you obviously had serious misgivings about pirates. To make the choice to come with us anyway… We assume there was something you wanted to get away from.” He cocked his head to the side curiously. “Are we wrong?”
“No,” Jaebeom whispered, looking away.

“We won’t ask,” Jinyoung said assuringly. “Your business is your own and we won’t pry. But I get it, okay? I understand what it’s like to not know a single thing about being on a ship,” he sighed and turned so that his back was to the sea. “When I first met Jackson he was the only one manning this ship.”

Jaebeom looked around at the ship. It didn’t seem all that large for seven men, but it seemed enormous for a single man to sail all by himself. Nevermind the loneliness of being at sea all alone for god only knew how long. His heart broke a little for Jackson in that moment.

“He was looking for a crew, but a fifteen year old kid didn’t inspire anyone to want to sign up,” Jinyoung continued.

“Fifteen?” Jaebeom asked, remembering that fifteen was the first time he’d thought about running away. He’d been too scared to leave his house. How in the world had Jackson found the strength to not only leave home, but to get a ship and sail to another country by himself? He turned around and glanced up on top of the cabin where Jackson and Mark were sitting and talking to one another.

As if drawn by Jaebeom’s gaze, Jackson looked down and met his eyes, glancing at Jinyoung curiously before cocking his head at Jaebeom. Almost as if asking if he was okay.

Jaebeom smiled.

“Fifteen,” Jinyoung confirmed, looking up as well. “I was only planning on using him. He was obviously desperate, not even caring that I didn’t know how to sail, only wanting someone else on the boat with him. I only wanted to get away. I told him I’d join his crew but was planning on ditching him the moment my feet touched foreign soil.”

Jaebeom turned away from Jackson to look at Jinyoung. “And yet here you are.”

Jinyoung smiled up at Jackson. “Here I am,” he answered, his voice warmer than Jackson had ever heard from the quartermaster, who was usually teasing and sarcastic.

“What made you stay?” Jaebeom asked, curiously. He had been wondering what he was going to do when they arrived in Taiwan. Once he stopped puking, he started to gain something of an appreciation for sailing. When there wasn’t a storm looming, it was fun and kind of exhilarating. There was no denying it was beautiful either. But he wasn’t sure if the pirate life was for him.

“Jackson,” Jinyoung replied simply. “He’s absolutely mad and has a few obsessions that aren’t healthy and that I worry will get him killed one day, but there is something about him that I couldn’t walk away from, that I still won’t walk away from.” Jinyoung paused and frowned a little. “He cares, more than any person I’ve ever seen in my entire life.” He glanced up at Jackson again. “He’d willingly put himself in harm’s way over and over again to protect what he cares about. I’ve seen him do it for members of this crew. Jackson single handedly killed over a dozen men and sunk an entire ship to save Bambam, and we didn't even know the kid at the time.”

“He did what?” Jaebeom asked, startled as he tried to imagine the gentle pirate he’d come to know over these past few days slaughtering an entire crew and destroying a ship. “What happened to Bambam?”

"Bambam has always been an idiot, but his heart has always been in the right place too,” Jinyoung said fondly.

“What?” Jaebeom asked again, confused.
“Bambam’s dad died when he was little, leaving his mom to take care of his two older brothers, him and his little sister all by herself. It...wasn’t easy. There was never enough for any of them and his mother was working herself into an early grave trying harder to provide for them. At eleven Bambam decided that it would be a brilliant idea to sell himself to a local pirate crew who was looking for more members, thinking he'd get rich and send loads of money back to help his mother and siblings."

"I take it that is not what happened," Jaebeom asked quietly.

Jinyoung shook his head. "He was essentially a slave. Locked under the deck and barely fed. His mother is a cook and Bam’s been helping her in the kitchen his whole life. I think that his cooking ability is probably the only reason they kept him alive; he was of use to them. We crossed paths with his ship completely by accident, and had no intention of fighting them. They had a reputation and we were two kids; what chance did we stand?" A fond smile crossed his lips. "But Jackson can't sit by and watch people suffer. I didn't even know what he'd done until he came back in the middle of the night, soaked to the skin, bleeding in various places and carrying a frighteningly thin thirteen year old. Those two are so close now," Jinyoung said. "Sometimes I swear they're real family."

"Aren't they?" Jaebeom asked, thinking of Eunji's family, who he'd secretly always thought of as his own. Her parents took care of him after his mother's death and he could always count on them if he needed anything, even if that was just a smile, or someone to tell him that they were thinking of him. Just something that showed he was important to someone. Which was why he felt so guilty that he'd caused them so much pain through his father's actions. He ignored the thought that maybe his leaving had caused them more pain.

Jinyoung smiled warmly. "I guess you're right."

As stupid as Jaebeom thought Bambam’s choice was—though he was aware he didn’t exactly have the right to give an opinion given that he’d wandered aimlessly onto a pirate ship himself—he couldn’t help but admire the boy a little. The intention behind his action had been so selfless and brave. He’d only really been interacting with Bambam for a few days, but he seemed so careless and carefree, always teasing and never serious. Learning how he came to be a member of Jackson’s crew changed how Jaebeom thought about him significantly.

He looked at Jinyoung, recalling how his first impression of him had been some kind of Prince. He wondered how wrong he’d been about Jinyoung.

“"You can ask," Jinyoung said.

Jaebeom blinked at him, startled. “Ask what?”

Jinyoung smiled. "You can ask why a rich kind like me ran away from home to become a pirate."

"You were rich?" Jaebeom asked, wondering if perhaps his first impression of the man wasn’t as far off as he’d imagined.

As a kid that was one the things Jaebeom had dreamed of. His family easily could have been rich; doctors were usually quite well off, but his parents refused to take any more from people than what they needed to survive. It wasn’t like Jaebeom had a problem with that, but don’t all kids dream of being rich? Of not having any worries? Of having servants to do all the stuff that you didn’t want to do? Why would Jinyoung leave that to become a pirate?

Jinyoung didn't answer, but his smile grew at Jaebeom's surprise.
Well… If Jinyoung was giving him permission. “Why would you leave all that behind and willingly adopt this kind of life?”

Jinyoung’s expression shifted with Jaebeom’s question, but Jaebeom didn’t know him well enough to be able to decipher what it meant. “Have you ever heard of the Jinhae Gunhangje Cherry Blossom Festival?”

“Oh, I have actually,” Jaebeom said in surprise. Someone from his village used to go down every year. He said that he’d been going cherry blossom festivals all over Korea but none were quite like the Jinhae Gunhangje.

"My family owns the orchard that the festival takes place on." Jinyoung said.

Jaebeom's eyes grew. He'd never been there, but the stories he'd heard... The sheer size of the property, the number of cherry trees, the cost person to get in and all the novelty items that were sold during festival season. "You weren't kidding when you said your family was rich."

Jinyoung smiled, but it had a bitter edge to it that kept it from being very joyful. "Rich by taking money that other people earned," he said.

Jaebeom looked at him curiously.

"There were people from the village that my dad hired since there was no way he was going to lift a finger to do anything, but he was always finding reasons not to pay them. They dropped too much fruit. The trees in their part of the orchard were sick and it must have been their fault. The blossoms on their trees weren't as big as everyone else's." The anger on his face was obvious. "He'd find any reason he could to not properly pay the people who kept his business alive."

"Why did people keep working for him?" Jaebeom asked.

"There isn't much down in Jinhae. It's a military city. If you're not in the military there are not many other places of employment. Some of them didn't have anywhere else to go. And my father didn't rip everyone off; he'd pay a handful of workers properly each year but it just created this toxic environment where everyone tried to throw everyone else under the bus in hopes that they would be the ones to be properly paid so they could afford to eat properly or to send their kids to school, or for dowries."

His anger was fading, sadness and something like resignation taking over his features. "When I was a kid I was so excited to take over the orchard. That I'd get to be the one who tended all those beautiful trees and who got to make so many people happy. But then as I got older I realized that wasn't the case. The orchard didn't have a legacy of making people happy, it's legacy was pushing people to their limits and then breaking them, using their broken bones to lift my family higher."

He took a long breath. "Part of me wonders if I could have made a difference if I'd stayed. If I could have changed something, anything, to make it better for those people, but deep down I know my father never would have let me. If he had any inkling as to what I was doing he'd have left the orchard to someone else. I was of value to him for one reason only. The way I would have run things wouldn't have made as much money, wouldn't have kept the Park family the richest on the southern tip of the peninsula. And the only thing that my father has ever truly loved is money. Despite being useful to him in terms of keeping the orchard in the family, he'd toss me aside in a second to protect his wealth. I'm sure he's long since taken a mistress to produce another male heir to replace me."

Jaebeom marveled at how their fathers could be so, so different and yet so remarkably the same at
the same time. So blinded by two very different things but both so willing to sacrifice their family for it.

"So after both my sisters were married and I knew they were safe and out of harm's way from my father, I just left. Didn't take anything with me except for letters from my sisters—they knew I was leaving—and I haven't looked back since." He looked at Jaebeom. "My life is so far from where it used to be, from where I thought I would be, but I'm happy. Travelling makes me happy, sailing makes me happy, and even these five absolute idiots Jackson's found make me happy. And that's all that matters, right?"

Happiness. That was all Jaebeom wanted. A place to belong, a place where he mattered and a place where he could be happy.

He glanced up at Jackson once more. Alone at fifteen and so desperate for a crew that he'd accept a man who couldn't provide any help at all in any way except for offering companionship.

He wondered if Jackson was happy.

He wondered if Jackson could make him happy, like he'd done with Bambam and Jinyoung.

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Jackson found Jaebeom sitting in the walkway behind the cabin. Someone had placed empty crates back there to create a makeshift bench which Jaebeom was sitting on with his knees drawn up to his chest, looking pensive.

"You okay?" Jackson asked as he sat next to him. "You're not going to start puking again are you?"

Jaebeom sent Jackson a half-hearted glare. "No, I'm just thinking."

That was what Jackson was afraid of. "About anything in particular?"

Jaebeom turned to look at him more. "You."

Jackson blinked, not having expected Jaebeom to be quite so forward. "Uh… I'm flattered?"

"Don't be," Jaebeom snorted, a smile curling his lips at Jackson's reaction. "I'm thinking about how you murdered a ship full of people and then sunk it to save Bambam."

Jackson knew he should have stopped Jinyoung from talking to Jaebeom. He sighed. It wasn't like it wasn't the truth though. That happened. Jackson had killed sixteen people, though the sinking of the ship was honestly more of an accident.

"Ah," he said, sitting next to Jaebeom. "That."

"You really did it?" Jaebeom seemed surprised.

Jackson shrugged, not entirely comfortable talking about people he'd murdered. "Yeah. Though about half of those deaths and the sinking of the ship was an accident."

Jaebeom blinked. "How do you accidentally murder eight people and sink an entire ship?"

"When the morons who own the ship keep their lamp oil supply next to the fucking stove." Jackson replied. It wasn't true, but Jackson would never tell the truth. It wasn't his story to tell.

Would never tell that the only reason he even knew Bambam was on the ship because Bambam
had been the one to throw lantern oil on the crew and around the cabin. That he'd been planning to burn the entire ship to the bottom of the ocean with him still in it. That he'd been making so much noise, fighting so hard, Jackson had been able to overhear the captain calling to others inside the cabin to just kill the kid. That he was becoming a nuisance and was better off dead.

Jackson couldn't just leave. Admittedly, he'd thought Bambam was far younger than he really was—not that a teenager deserved to die any more than a ten year old—but Jackson never would have forgiven himself for just sailing away and letting a child die.

So he'd left Jinyoung in charge of the Ahgase even though he barely knew what to do with it and swam over to the retreating ship, climbing up the netting and sneaking on board.

The desperation in his eyes when Bambam saw Jackson step into the cabin was a bit haunting, but there was also determination. He was going to take that ship down, he was going to make the people who mistreated him pay for what they'd done.

And in that moment Jackson felt like he knew the kid. He saw the fire in his eyes, the conviction regardless of personal safety. He knew what it felt like to be that kid and decided that this boy deserved to live. That the world needed more people like him and that no one should die without getting to experience freedom first.

He'd killed half the crew, just getting over to Bambam and creating an escape route. Once there was no one left alive between them and the door it was easy enough to use the still lit stove and one of the maps rolled up on the table to set the ship on fire. The crew were unfortunate casualties of that and, at the time, Jackson regretted it, but after hearing all about what they'd done to Bambam through the years he felt less guilty about it.

The echoes of their screams still woke him up at night sometimes though.

"Are you going to be sick?" Jaebeom asked worriedly, making Jackson wonder what kind of expression he'd been making.

Jackson shook his head. "No, it's just…not a pleasant memory." He said.

"Good," Jaebeom said quietly.

"Good?" Jackson questioned, wondering why exactly Jackson being haunted by his past was a good thing.

"Jinyoung mentioned that you had some… obsession that he was worried might get you killed. I was afraid slaughtering foreign crews might have been an obsession of yours," he admitted sheepishly.

"You… You think I'm capable of that?" Jackson admittedly didn't care what a lot of people thought about him, which was why he was surprised to realize that Jaebeom's words actually stung a bit.

Jaebeom seemed to realize he'd offended Jackson and shook his head, frowning. "No, which was why I'm having such a hard time coming to terms with the fact that you actually did it."

"I did it to save Bambam," Jackson said quietly. "And I would do it all over again if I had to to save him again." He looked at Jaebeom. "I'd do it for you too," he said, only realizing then that it was true. He didn't even know Jaebeom all that well, and he had no idea if Jaebeom would even be with them in another week, but that strange protectiveness that Jackson had felt for this man hadn't gone away, if anything it had increased.
If Jaebeom chose to leave them once they reached Taiwan then Jackson wouldn't argue. But he was going to make damn sure nothing hurt Jaebeom as long as he was on Jackson's ship.

Jaebeom's eyes widened and his jaw slipped open a little. He looked frankly astonished and Jackson wondered if it was because Jackson said he'd commit murder for Jaebeom or if it was the first time someone had told Jaebeom that he was worth protecting.

Desperate to change the subject, Jackson moved on to what Jaebeom really wanted to know. "Ching Shih," he said, feeling the weight of her name settle in his stomach like lead.

Jaebeom's expression shifted into a confused frown. "What?"

"The obsession that Jinyoung worried will get me killed," Jackson explained. "Her name is Ching Shih."

"A woman?" Jaebeom asked, still frowning.

Jackson scoffed. "A monster," he corrected. He wondered how much of his story to give away before just deciding to tell Jaebeom everything. It wasn't like his past was a secret, there were sailors in every port around Asia who knew Jackson's story.

"When I was ten my family and I were shopping in a market in Hong Kong," Jackson began. "I was something of a fencing prodigy back then and I was looking to get a new sword for competition. Ching Shih was there and saw me testing them out, saw me spar with my brother. She thought I had potential, that someone of my talent would be worth a great deal when I grew up, a general in her army or some crap like that."

God Jackson hated talking about this.

"She asked my parents if she could buy me."

"Buy you?" Jaebeom asked, sounding horrified.

Jackson nodded. "The village that I lived in was a supplier to Ching Shih, though I didn't find that out until many years later. She was well known for slaughtering entire towns and burning them to the ground if they crossed her, but she was also known for taking good care of and protecting the ones that aided her with supplies. She kept them safe from the government and from other pirate crews. She had thought my parents wouldn't say no to her; she felt they couldn't say no because of what that might mean for the whole town if they displeased her."

"They said no, didn't they?" Jaebeom guessed.

Jackson nodded, feeling like it was somehow harder to breathe just thinking about what happened next. "They did. And then the next thing I knew Ching Shih had her sword through my father's chest and he was falling to the ground, blood spilling down his chin and soaking his clothing. My mother was next, and then my older brother. Within about twenty seconds my entire family was dead. And it was my fault."

His hands were clenched tightly so Jaebeom wouldn't see them shake. Jackson didn't even know why they did that, even after all these years. Out of anger? Or the helplessness and absolute terror he felt on that day as he watched everything he loved die around him.

"I tried to fight back, I apparently even pretty seriously injured two of Ching Shih's men—I don't remember much about what happened after my family died. But I was a kid, she had too many soldiers and no one in my town was willing to risk Ching Shih's wrath by interfering." He looked
down, making a conscious effort to uncurl his fingers.

"I was taken; kidnapped and kept on Ching Shih's personal ship for four and a half years as they tried to break me, tried to get me to be loyal to her. She told me all kinds of things that to this day I don't know if they were true. She told me that she burned my village to the ground for my disobedience. That she killed every child she saw that looked my age simply because I made her so angry."

Jaebeom was quiet, as most people were after hearing Jackson's story. It was a lot to take in all at once. Jackson had lived it and he still found it hard to take in.

"It sounds like you take after your parents." Jaebeom smiled at him, but it was sad and Jackson could see the sorrow in the other man's eyes.

Jackson looked at him, genuinely taken aback by his words. "What?" He asked quietly. "Why would you say that?"

Jaebeom smile slipped and he looked a bit hesitant instead "I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have said that. It's just... you're brave, just like your parents. You do what's right, no matter the cost to you, just like your parents. You didn't let her break you, no matter what the cost. You didn't let Bambam suffer or be killed, even if it meant going up an entire ship by yourself." His smile returned a little. "I thought that it was like your parents standing up to Ching Shih, not giving you up even though she essentially controlled them and the entire town. I just...thought that they'd be proud of you if they could see you now."

How... How could this absolute stranger say something like that? No one had ever said that to Jackson before. People were filled with pity or sadness for Jackson's loss or disgust over Jackson's actions since, or disappointment over his single-minded need for revenge, but no one had ever told him that they thought his parents were proud of him.

No one could. Everyone who knew Jackson's parents were in Hong Kong and Jackson hadn't once gone back, even after he'd run away and was free. Partly because he was too afraid to go back and find everything destroyed, just like Ching Shih had told him. Being the reason his family was dead was bad enough, Jackson didn't think he could live with being the reason his entire village had died. He also swore that he wouldn't go home until Ching Shih was dead. He couldn't face his family if the monster who'd killed them was still alive. He wanted to wait so that he could ask for his parents forgiveness for everything that he'd done and would still have to do to get to Ching Shih.

But there was Jaebeom, someone who'd never met Jackson's family and who'd only known Jackson himself for not even a week, telling Jackson that his parents would be proud of him.

And there was Jackson, his throat tightening as he blinked back tears he refused to shed because oh god did he wish that were true. He'd done things he wasn't proud of, so he was pretty certain his parents wouldn't be either. But it was a nice thought. It was such a nice thought and Jackson would hold the sentiment close to his heart because that was really all he wanted. He wanted to be someone they'd be proud of.

He exhaled slowly, feeling physically and emotionally exhausted just from reliving the memory. "I'm looking for her. I'm looking for Ching Shih; and when I find her, I will kill her." He said, pretty sure that wasn't an appropriate follow up comment, but he needed to change the subject because talking about what his parents would think of him today hurt. He thought it best to go back to reminding Jaebeom that no matter what he thought, no matter how noble or brave he seemed to think Jackson was, Jackson's real intention here was so kill someone.
"That...doesn't seem so unreasonable," Jaebeom remarked quietly, unknowingly showing his inexperience and naivete once again.

Ching Shih wasn't just a woman. Wasn't just a pirate. She was an empress with nation's worth of soldiers at her command. All the militaries in Asia, and even some from Europe, had tried to take her down without success. This woman owned an entire continent.

"It's not quite that simple," Jackson said, wondering how to best describe how powerful Ching Shih was to someone who had no understanding of just how much power there was to hold in the world. Jaebeom didn't even know how big the world was, never mind the complex struggles for power, money and resources.

Jackson was actually a bit jealous. To be that naive was to be free. Free of the slightly overwhelming enormity of it all that Jackson often felt when thinking about what he was trying to do.

But being unaware got people killed. As much as he hated being told that he was so bitter, so jaded about the world, that was how it worked. Everything boiled down to resources, money and power because those who controlled resources and money controlled the people. If you controlled people, you had power. And if you didn't understand that then you had already failed.

"Ching Shih owns more ships than the militaries of half the Asian countries combined. Has more sailors than the population of Korea."

He saw Jaebeom's eyes widen.

"Everyone else thinks that I'm being a fool. That chasing a single person around Asia is impossible, a fool's errand, nevermind trying to take of the life of someone who has as much power as Ching Shih does." He smiled. "Jinyoung told me I'd have better luck chasing the horizon."

He turned to look out over that very horizon, feeling oddly reinvigorated in his mission to hunt down Ching Shih. As much as he hated talking about her, hated giving other people reasons to pity him, there really was no better way to remind himself of why he was doing this. Regardless of the fact that people wrote him off as an idiot. Regardless of the fact that his own crew only humoured him about it. He would stop at nothing until he found this woman. And when he found her, he would kill her.

"My mother once told me that a world of infinite possibilities lies beyond the horizon." Jaebeom said out of nowhere several minutes later.

Jackson turned to look at Jaebeom, a perplexed frown on his face. What was it with this man and catching Jackson completely off guard with his words?

Jaebeom turned to look at him. "It was part of the reason why I chose to go to Incheon to look for a ship instead of just moving to another part of Korea. I wanted to go beyond the horizon and see some of those possibilities for myself."

Jackson just continued to stare at him.

Jaebeom turned back to the sea. "I'm just saying, maybe there's a possibility out there where you find Ching Shih, where you get your revenge and your happily ever after."

For the second time in their conversation Jackson found himself praying to whatever deity was listening that Jaebeom was right.
Jaebeom smiled softly to himself. "Maybe chasing the horizon isn't as stupid as Jinyoung thinks it is."

Chapter End Notes

Now you know about three of the members and how they ended up on the Ahgase. I know. Angsty. But that's just how this one goes.

Next up, Taiwan!

Also I've yet to finish the next three consecutive chapters so if there isn't a Thursday update its just because I'm not done yet. It should be up by Sunday though.
Chapter 8

"Jaebeom?"

Jaebeom looked up from the book he was reading at the table inside the cabin. Jinyoung had a shelf full of them downstairs and Jaebeom was enjoying having leisure time to just sit and read. He didn't really get a lot of downtime back home, and even when he did he wouldn't have been allowed to read fiction, so the books Jinyoung had recommended to him all sounded fascinating.

"Hmm?" He replied, seeing Jackson leaning against the doorframe.

"We're approaching land now. I thought you might want to take a look."

"I do," Jaebeom said, setting his book down and following Jackson out onto the deck.

He had expected them to be closer, but Jackson had to point to a blur in the distance before Jaebeom even saw it. It was overcast and a bit hazy so Jaebeom couldn't really make out anything about the island other than the fact that it was green and seemed to be fairly mountainous.

“It’s a fascinating country,” Jackson said, leaning against the railing. “Originally there wasn't much of anything there but in the last hundred years or so it has come a very long way. In the last century its had Dutch and Spanish colonies living there. Though they’ve both been forced out now you can still see their influence in some places. Currently China has taken over rule of the island, but it doesn't seem like they worry themselves about it too much. That's why pirates prefer it to mainland China, less military and patrolling which makes it safer for illegal trades.”

"Dutch? Spanish?" Jaebeom questioned, the unfamiliar words foreign on his tongue.

“Oh, Europeans. People from the Netherlands and Spain.”

Jaebeom admittedly knew next to nothing about Europe, but he knew it was far. “Why would they come here?” He wondered. It must have taken months aboard a ship to travel to Taiwan from Europe. What on Earth would possess people to want to spend months on a ship? Especially if Taiwan was such an unknown place.

Jackson shrugged, “To gain more power. Taiwan was relatively primitive by all accounts and their people were easy to concur so the Europeans could claim the land for themselves.”

Jaebeom shot him a flat look, wishing Jackson wasn’t always so negative about things.

Jackson laughed in response and continued with more optimistic options. “Okay, how about the excitement of the unknown, the curiosity to understand the world we live in?” His expression softened a little. “Isn’t that what brought you here? To go beyond the horizon and see the different worlds that exist out there?”

Jaebeom was surprised Jackson actually remembered that. He knew Jackson thought he was very naive, and he was starting to get a sense that Jackson wasn't entirely wrong to think either, but his current expression was genuine and sincere and Jaebeom was relieved that Jackson wasn't laughing at him for what he knew was probably a childish notion.
"We'll be making landfall soon," Jackson said without waiting for Jaebeom's answer. "You should go and pack your things."

Jaebeom looked at him, puzzled. "Pack?" Was Jackson kicking him out the moment they made landfall?

"Well, you're more than welcome to stay on board if you want, but the rest of us are going to a hotel. Where they have bathtubs. And actual beds. And privacy."

"Jackson, you had me at bathtub," Jaebeom said seriously as he started heading inside, Jackson's laughter following behind him.

He pulled his backpack out of his trunk along with the few articles of clothing he had before pausing. Should he bring everything? He probably should. There was a strong possibility that he'd never be on this ship again.

He looked up, his eyes moving between the other crew members who were currently packing their bags to see what they were bringing. Then he noticed Mark. The man was taking far more than the backpack the rest of them seemed to be filling. He was unloading what looked like half his things. "Are you packing?" He asked him.

Mark hummed in reply and kept putting things into his bag without looking up.

Jaebeom felt a bit uneasy. "Are you coming back?"

Mark looked up then, surprise showing on his face. "Oh, I guess you don't know," he said.

"Know what?"

"My family lives here. I'm packing so much because they're gifts. I have a big family so there is a lot of stuff."

"Your family?" Jaebeom asked, somehow surprised to hear that.

Mark sent him a knowing smile. "Not everyone on this ship is here because of drama you know. If you're looking for another traumatic past, you won't find one here. I had a very happy childhood and still have a very good relationship with my family."

“Oh thank god,” Jaebeom breathed with genuine relief. "I'm glad one person on this ship has a family that that are alive and that they actually get along with."

Mark looked at him curiously with eyes that seemed to see much more than they should. "Are you including yourself in that statistic?"

That was a conversation Jaebeom wasn't ready for.

He cleared his throat and went back to putting clothes in his bag. "Were you born here?" He asked instead, hoping Mark wouldn’t press the issue.

There was a pause where Jaebeom wasn't sure if he'd press the issue or not, but he accepted Jaebeom's attempt to change the conversation, for which Jaebeom was grateful. "No actually. I was born in Brazil. Though I’ve been on a ship my whole life. My dad is a part of the Chinese Navy. He was a liaison for other countries so I’ve spent my whole life moving around or on a ship."

Jaebeom turned back to him in surprise. "The navy?" He repeated. "How does he feel about his son
being a pirate?” The Navy was supposed to enforce the law, arrest pirates. He was surprised that Mark had no family drama considering Mark had become the very his father had spent his whole life fighting against.

Mark laughed. “At first? Wasn’t all that pleased,” he said with a smile. “I did try to go the legal route; I joined the navy originally,” he continued. “I knew I had to do something on the sea. I’ve been sailing my whole life and even though my dad retired to Taiwan—his place of birth—I knew staying in one place wasn’t for me.”

Jaebeom set down the clothes in his hands. This was the most he’d ever heard Mark say all at once, and certainly the most personal. “What happened?” He asked. “Why’d you leave?”

Mark’s expression darkened a little. “It’s far more corrupt than my dad lead me to believe. I thought that the military was created to help people, to protect them and to take care of them, but that’s not true. The commanding officers are only out for themselves and they allow atrocious things to happen because the who person who committed the sins had money.” He sighed. “I just couldn't stomach it. I couldn't follow my superiors orders when they told me to just shut up and look the other way. My dad said they aren't all like that, that there are good ones out there too, and I believe him, but the military life isn't for me So I left, sailed on my own for a while, but it’s not the same being by yourself out here. I missed being a part of a crew. I met Youngjae at a harbour in Indonesia over a year ago now. He seemed like a nice kid. And then I met Jackson. We just… clicked I guess. I haven't looked back since.”

Jaebeom wondered what it would be like to live life as freely as Mark seemed to. Not exactly aimless, but without tethers or roots to keep him tied down. Jaebeom was certain that that wasn't the life for him. He craved certainty and routine and as boring as that made him, the unknown was a frightening place. The last week alone had taught him that.

He looked down at his belongings. Probably all the more reason to bring everything then. He hadn't been at sea long, but certainty and routine were not words he'd use to describe the experience.

A part of him would miss it though, if he stayed in Taiwan. The thought surprised him even as he realized it was true. He wasn't sure he'd say with conviction that he enjoyed all his time on the Ahgase, the seasickness and the storm had been horrible. But he didn't try to deny the fact that the ocean was as beautiful as it was fierce.

He also didn't try to deny that Jackson and his crew had grown on him in a way that Jaebeom wasn't used to people doing. He had gotten very good at keeping people at a distance, for their protection as well as for his own. Perhaps it was because his father was no longer here to do anyone harm or perhaps it was because this group were special, but Jaebeom was absolutely certain that if he chose to stay in Taiwan, he'd miss them. Probably more than he even realized.

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They arrived at port safely about an hour later, Youngjae and Mark guiding them into an empty slip. There was an absolutely terrifying moment when Mark launched himself off the still moving ship onto the pier which didn't seem to worry anybody but Jaebeom, but Jaebeom was kind of getting used to that by now. From his vantage point on the pier, Mark grabbed the roped and made sure the ship was securely tied in place before helping Jackson set up the ramp for the rest of the crew to disembark.

And then Jaebeom was on land. Foreign land. A whole new country with new people and history and language and all kinds of things that Jaebeom had never experienced before. And while he was
feeling a sliver of fear because of all that unknown, it was really quite exciting at the same time.

Jaebeom just stood at the bottom of the pier, trying to wrap his mind around the fact that he was in another country. He had actually done it, he'd left Korea.

"You okay?" Jackson asked quietly, appearing at Jaebeom's elbow.

Jaebeom nodded. "Yeah, it just feels…kind of unreal to be honest. I don't think I've really processed that this isn't Korea."

Jackson chuckled. "I'll feel like that the first few times. But don't worry, you'll g—"

"Get used to it?" Jaebeom guessed, amused.

Jackson looked surprised for a moment before sending him a soft smile. "Right."

"Not sure I'll be doing this again though," Jaebeom said, wondering why he felt a bit heavier at the thought.

Jackson's smile slipped. "Right."

He was cut off from saying anything further by the maknaes tumbling down the ramp, Mark following close behind. Youngjae would be staying on the ship to ensure the repairs went smoothly and Jinyoung would be staying elsewhere on the island, though no one seemed to want to go into any more detail than that.

"See you in a week," Jackson told Mark. "Tell your parents I said hello."

Mark smiled with a humour that Jaebeom didn't understand. "I always do." He paused and turned to Jaebeom. "I don't know if you'll still be here when I get back at the end of the week," he began. "But I hope you are. It was nice meeting you and I hope I get the chance to get to know you better in the future," he said with a quiet seriousness that Jaebeom had come to expect from Mark.

He didn't wait for a response, just waving to the rest of the crew and heading off with all his luggage hanging carelessly from his shoulders.

The rest of them gathered and slowly began to walk into town, Jaebeom tuning out their conversations as he looked around, trying to memorize everything he was seeing. He was in another country and Jaebeom had frankly never been so excited in his life.

He could see what Jackson was talking about. The buildings that liked the main street were so unlike the ones Jaebeom had lived in or had seen as his made his way from Goyang City to Incheon. Square shaped two stories structures with small red bricks stacked on top of one another. It reminded Jaebeom of fences or foundations he'd seen back home but he'd never seen a while house built like that. They were very colourful to look at, especially since many of them had balconies on the second floor with brightly painted railings. The street itself was lined with stalls and banners and people milling around, vendors called out to them as they passed but Jaebeom didn't understand what they were saying. The rest of the crew ignored them too.

Another thing he noticed they were passing were hotels. He'd seen at least two since they left the pier. "Where are we going?" He asked Yugeyom, who was walking beside him.

Yugeyom sent him a strange look. "To a hotel."

Jaebeom just pointed to the sign for the hotel they were currently walking past.
"Oh," Yugyeom laughed. "Right; those are more set up for military, dignitary or merchant guests. We aren't exactly on any most wanted lists but we tend to avoid places where there could be military; it just makes it harder to relax. Plus Jackson knows the owner for this one and they give us free stuff sometimes. It's just off the main street so it's quieter too."

"Ah." It was weird considering where he'd started out, but he found himself forgetting more and more that these people were pirates. He didn't believe it when he'd wandered into their ship but he believed it even less now. They were chaotic certainly, but they seemed far too kind, too gentle, to be pirates.

The hotel they eventually arrived at was small and simply designed. The main foyer leading into some kind of lounge or restaurant, the check-in desk along one side next to down stairs.

Jackson greeted the woman behind the desk warmly and in no time keys were being passed over to Jackson even though Jaebeom hadn't seen any money exchanged. He thought of Yugyeom's words and decided not to question it as he followed Jackson up the stairs.

The first room belong to Yugyeom and Bambam, the two disappearing into the room without so much as a goodbye, the door closing behind them leaving Jaebeom and Jackson alone in the hallway.

"Most of us are ecstatic to be at port, to finally have a room to ourselves and some privacy for a change." Jackson said quietly as he looked at Jaebeom. "But those two have never slept alone their whole lives. Yugyeom is the only one of the two who'll actually admit that he's afraid to sleep alone, but I know Bammie gets just as anxious when he's left alone."

Jaebeom smiled, though it felt a bit sad. "Then I'm glad they have each other."

Jackson returned the smile. "Me too." He stopped next to the door beside the maknaes'. "This one is yours. I'm across the hall from you so let me know if you need anything, okay?"

Jaebeom nodded and took the key. "Thanks Jackson."

Without another word, Jaebeom let himself into his room, giving it a once over before closing the door behind him. The silence in the room suddenly seemed so stark. On the Ahagase there was no shortage of sounds: the waves, the sails, the things shifting around in cabinets, the crew; there was always something making noise.

Standing in his room, all alone for the first since he'd left Korea, it crossed his mind that while the silence was nice, he wasn't sure it brought him peace in the same way that it used to.

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Knock, knock.

Jackson looked up from the letter he was writing. He'd meant to send it while they were back in Korea because he hadn't checked in with Nayeon in far too long, but with the surprise of Hyunwoo retiring and then Jaebeom it had totally slipped his mind. Abandoning the letter, he stood and crossed to the door, wondering who it could be. His crew hadn't knocked years, preferring to just barge in whether or not Jackson wanted to see them or not.

"Jaebeom," he said when a smile after opening the door to find a somewhat nervous looking Jaebeom on the other side. "What can I do for you?"

"I… I was wondering if you could show me around the city a bit?" Jaebeom asked.
Jackson blinked. "It's raining," he said, stepping back a little so Jaebeom could see the small droplets trailing down his window. It had started not long after he'd settled into his room. It wasn't pouring, just a soft drizzle that covered everything in a light dew.

Jaebeom gave him a look that Jackson couldn't begin to decipher. "Jackson, I've been desperate to get out of Goyang City for over ten years. Do you think rain is going to stop me from going out there and exploring?"

There was an edge to his expression, to his words, that Jackson had never seen before. Not quite dangerous, but certainly far from the quiet, meek personality Jaebeom had shown this past week or so.

Jackson liked it.

He grinned. "Then what are we waiting for?"

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Jaebeom was in awe at all the things the vendors had for sale, about half of the items were from countries Jaebeom admitted he hadn't even heard of so there were so many things he'd never seen before. It was only Jackson's presence and his reputation around town that kept the storekeepers in check, kept them from overcharging wildly and outright lying about the products they had for sale.

Jaebeom came from a small town and, in Jackson experience, small towns looked out for one another. They knew each other. No one complained when the wealthy family had to pay a little more for fruit than most, or when the poor family with five kids got to pay a little less. That kindness didn't exist in the real world, especially not in port towns, where everyone was out to squeeze as much as they could out of everyone else; and if you weren't smart enough to know better, too bad for you.

It also helped that Jaebeom dressed the way he did. He dressed poor with clothing that didn't fit well and was made of cheap fabric. The shopkeepers didn't have time for you if you didn't have money and Jackson suspected they were only humoring Jaebeom and his questions because the weather meant there was no one else they could try to squeeze money from at the moment. They didn't really try to convince Jaebeom to buy anything because Jaebeom didn't look like he had any money to spend.

"I want to get my ear pierced," Jaebeom announced out of absolutely nowhere as the two were walking down the main street toward the sea after Jaebeom admitted that he'd never actually seen a beach before and Jackson thought that was surely some kind of sin.

"What?" Jackson asked surprised that piercings would be something that Jaebeom would consider. "Why?" He continued, genuinely curious.

Jaebeom just shrugged. "You all have piercings," he said instead of really answering.

He wasn't wrong. Jackson's whole crew, aside from Jinyoung, had at least one piercing. Most of them had several.

Jewelry in general was pretty common among pirates as privacy was hard to come across with larger crews. It was far easier to wear your wealth than to keep it in your bag where it could be stolen anytime.

Jackson himself didn't wear much jewelry. A stud through his left ear, which was customary among pirates as a single gold stud would pay for a funeral should anything happen to him at sea
and his body washed up on shore someplace. The only other jewelry Jackson wore was two pendants: one that he’d had custom made when he became captain of the Ahgase—a simple wooden pendant with the bird from his flag carved into it—the other was the Chinese character for Wang. Both served as reminders—one for what he was responsible for and the other for what he had lost—and he never took either of them off lest he forget his responsibility or his purpose.

He didn’t find any personal enjoyment in jewelry but he guessed that someone who seemed to have lived a simple life would find it appealing. He was quite curious why Jaebeom had chosen an earring though, to puncture a hole through himself, instead of just a ring or a necklace, but he had already learned that trying to get information out of Jaebeom that he didn’t want to give was a futile effort.

"Okay," Jackson said. If that was what Jaebeom wanted, who was Jackson to stop him? "But not there though. I know someone who I trust far more."

Jaebeom nodded, accepting Jackson’s judgement without a word as the two continued to the end of the street, the rock roadway eventually giving way to soft, damp sand. It had stopped raining a while ago, the air thick with humidity that ensured their damp shirts would probably never dry.

"It's huge," Jaebeom said, wonder in his tone as he looked up and down the vast expanse of sand. Jackson barely resisted the urge to laugh at the childlike wonder on Jaebeom’s face. "What do people do at the beach?"

Jackson sobered a little, memories flooding him of his own time spent on the beach. As with most of his memories, sadness followed. "All kinds of stuff: playing in the sand, relaxing and enjoying the warmth of the sun, swimming."

"I don't know how to swim," Jaebeom said thoughtfully as he looked at the waves rolling into the shore.

Jackson stared at him. This man got on a ship, willingly surrounding himself with water, when he didn't know how to swim? No wonder he’d been so terrified of the storm. If he chose to join the crew, Jackson made a mental note to teach him to swim.

"Can we stay?" Jaebeom asked, his eyes on the sky above their heads that was starting to turn brilliant shades of red, gold and orange as the sun set, lighting the bottom of the clouds and the surface of the sea and making the horizon look like it was on fire. "Or did you want to go back?" Jaebeom asked, turning to look at Jackson.

Jackson didn't exactly want to stay. He had things he needed to do and people be needed to talk to, but he knew that his time with Jaebeom was probably coming to an end soon and, in that moment, taking advantage of what little time he had was Jackson priority. "We can stay," he said leading Jaebeom further into the beach before dropping onto the damp sand, Jaebeom sitting next him him a moment later.

It had been years since Jackson had just sat and watched a sunset. He saw them all the time from aboard the ship, but he couldn't remember ever just intentionally watching one.

Not since he was a kid.

His family lived close to the sea but not exactly right bedside it. A few times a year they'd make a special trip to the ocean. God, Jackson loved those days. He’d play for hours with his brother and father while his mom watched on from a giant blanket they’d brought from home. They'd pack food and have a picnic before cuddling up and watching the sun go down.
It was Jackson's favourite. Cuddled on his dad's lap or tucked under his mom's arm and just watching the sun go down, no worries, no stresses, just him and his family enjoying the absolute beauty the earth provided for free.

"My mother used to say that it was impossible to watch a sunset and not dream," Jackson said out of absolutely nowhere, not even knowing himself where the words had come from.

They were true; his mother had said that. One of the most vivid memories he had of her was being held tightly in her arms as he went on and on about all the larger than life things eight year old him had wanted from his life. He could still hear her response and see the look on her face as she replied, "My precious Jia Er, I cannot wait to see you do all those things and more."

If he was sitting next to any members of his crew Jackson knew they would be all over him. Jackson never spoke about his family, ever. The mere mention of his mother would set off a firestorm of questions Jackson knew they'd been gathering for years but knew better than to ask.

But Jaebeom didn't know him any better so he didn't ask a thing about Jackson's family. All he asked was, "What are you dreaming about today?"

Jackson was still trying to get used to Jaebeom's innate way of saying things that Jackson would have never expected him to say. He would never admit it, but it was one of his favourite things about Jaebeom. The way Jaebeom kept him on his toes, the way he couldn’t predict what he was going to do. It was remarkably refreshing.

The reply on the tip of Jackson's tongue was 'Ching Shih's head separated from her body' but that seemed like a far too vile to say out loud. And then his conscious kicked in and guilted him. Really? That's what your dreams consist of? Violence and murder and death?

But that else did he want? What else could he dream of? He wanted the person who slaughtered his family to pay. He wanted them to be able to rest in peace. He wanted to be at peace.

"I want to be happy," he said eventually. He did want to be happy. He didn't want to hurt all the time. Didn't want to feel the crushing weight of his family's deaths, of revenge, all the time. Didn't want to be thought of as the revenge driven maniac by people who didn't even know him, or by those who did.

He ignored the small voice in the deepest part of his heart that whispered, 'will killing Ching Shih really make you happy?'

He ignored it because he didn't know the answer.

Chapter End Notes

And we've arrived in Taiwan! Which did have Dutch and Spanish colonies in the 1600s (Dutch in the south near Tainan- which is where the crew are btw- and the Spanish near Taipei)

Now you know how Mark joined the crew. He was the second last to join and has been with them for 2-3 years now.

Up next, JB gets his ear pierced! (And you find out why he wanted to in the first
Also, I have a bonus scene (a conversation between Jaebeom and Bambam after the events of the last chapter) that I couldn't figure out how to work into this one, but I still really like it. I think I'll post it on Twitter so if you're interested you can find me @musicaniawrites to read it in the next few days.

PS: the sunset quote isn't mine, it was said by Bernard Williams
Jaebeom had no idea what he looked like but he knew he must look absolutely absurd. He felt absurd. He turned to Bambam. “I can’t wear this,” he pleaded.

Bambam had had the brilliant idea to give Jaebeom a ‘pirate makeover’ and Jaebeom had foolishly agreed because most of the pirates on the Ahgase just wore simple, loose clothing and he hadn't seen anything wrong with that. But Bambam had put him in a blue silk shirt that exposed him almost down to his navel and a pair of leather pants that were far too small on him but Bambam had insisted it was just how those pants were supposed to fit. He felt like an idiot and he was certain he looked like one too.

“Damn right you can’t,” Bambam agreed, making Jaebeom sigh in relief until Bambam bent and picked up a small container of what Jaebeom knew contained makeup. “Not without eyeliner you can’t.”

“No,” Jaebeom said flatly, already fed up with this game of dress-up.

Bambam ignored him. "And I'll fix your hair too so it looks less…" he waved a hand in Jaebeom's direction. "Like that."

"Bambam, stop," Jaebeom said firmly, a frown falling in Bambam's features. "This might be funny for you, but this is literally the most uncomfortable I've felt in my entire life."

Bambam deflated a little. "In not trying to make you uncomfortable; I'm trying to keep you safe."

Jaebeom frowned. "Safe from what?" He looked down at his outfit. "What could this possibly keep me safe from?"

"Being taken advantage of," Bambam said softly, bringing Jaebeom's attention back to him. "Look, I get that you grew up in a small town. I'm not trying to say that's bad or anything but the world out there, the people out there, operate in a very different way than you're used to. The way you dress makes you look like someone from a small town who doesn't know any better and that makes you an easy target. I just..." He looked like he was searching for words. "I thought if I at least made you look like an intimidating pirate that people might leave you alone. With your height, your shoulders and your face you could be so intimidating with the right clothing. No one would want to talk to you."

"I can't figure out if you're complimenting me or insulting me." Jaebeom said to try and cover his shock. Bambam. The kid who sold himself to pirates, who looked like a child, was trying to protect Jaebeom. Had actively thought about Jaebeom's safety and decided a plan—albeit a stupid one—to try and ensure Jaebeom's lack of worldly knowledge didn't bring him harm. As annoyed as he was, he was also kind of touched.
Bambam's expression softened. "I'm trying to protect you."

Jaebeom exhaled. "Okay, because I appreciate the thought and because God knows I'll need whatever advantage I can get, I'll give you another shot at this pirate makeover thing. But...can we find some kind of middle road?" Jaebeom pleaded. "This... This is too much."

Bambam sighed dramatically before nodding and turning back to his bed where he'd upended both his and Yugyeom's bags.

Bambam eventually settled on a black loose shirt that belonged to Yugyeom and only exposed two or three inches of his chest and a pair of pants that were tighter than anything Jaebeom had worn before, but not so tight that he felt uncomfortable. It felt foreign, but not really uncomfortable.

Once Bambam was satisfied, he allowed Jaebeom to slip back into his room to collect the most important thing Jaebeom owned: a single jade stud earring. It had belonged to his mother. After her death Jaebeom's father had made Jaebeom clean out her belongings so they could be donated to other families. Desperate for something of hers to remember her by, Jaebeom had pocketed one of the earrings. His mother didn't own anything else, a few dresses but what good were those to Jaebeom? Jaebeom suspected his father only allowed her to keep the earrings because they were a gift from his parents. Jaebeom didn't dare take both of them, his father would notice that they weren't in the box, but he thought that it was believable that one of them could have gone missing, that if he told his dad he searched all over but couldn't find it that his dad wouldn't question it.

And he hadn't.

He'd kept the earring sewn into the hem of his sleeve ever since, initially to keep his father from finding it but eventually he felt it somewhat comforted to feel the sphere with him. It reminded him of her.

He had noticed the piercings that the crew had but he hadn't really thought anything of them, but when he was walking down the street with Jaebeom he saw a display of jade earrings in one of the stalls. The words had flown out of his mouth before he'd really fully processed them, but the more he thought about it the more he kind of liked the idea. He liked the thought of showing it off to people, of being able to wear it with pride to honour his mother instead of having to hide it away like it was something wrong.

So he was going to go through with it. Im Jaebeom was going to get his ear pierced. The thought was so absurd to old Jaebeom that he smiled to himself, chuckling when he thought what his father's reaction would have been. It made him want to do it all the more.

He went downstairs to find Jackson waiting in the lounge, talking with the owner of the hotel. Jackson had some people he said he needed to talk to, but the shop he was taking Jaebeom to was right down the street so he was going to drop Jaebeom off on the way.

He smiled when he saw Jaebeom. "You ready?"

Jaebeom nodded.

"Not going to change your mind? It's going to hurt you know."

"Pain isn't something that scares me," Jaebeom said honestly. He was far from a thrill seeker or someone who enjoyed pain, but he'd experienced enough of it to know that there were far worse things than physical pain.

Jackson sent him a look of what Jaebeom could only describe as admiration before getting to his
feet. "Then let's go."

Jackson led him out of the hotel and down the side street behind the main road through town. "I'm taking you to Amber," he told Jaebeom. "She did most of the crews’ piercings. She has good quality jewelry and always makes sure to take good care of her tools."

Jaebeom relaxed a little. He'd been worried about that. The earlobe wasn't exactly a vital organs, but he didn't really want it to get infected either.

Jaebeom followed him to a small ground level store with large windows and well-maintained exterior.

"Amber!" Jackson exclaimed as he entered the shop, crossing to hug the woman working inside.

Amber seemed surprised to see Jackson, but welcomed the embrace happily with a few words in an language Jaebeom didn't understand. Amber had short, dark hair and wore men's clothing. The sleeves of her shirt was rolled up to reveal tattoos winding around her arms. Even from the doorway Jaebeom could see the silver and gold looped through both her ears and one of her eyebrows too.

"This is Jaebeom," Jackson said pulling back and waving Jaebeom further into the store. "He wants his ear pierced."

Amber turned to look at Jaebeom with a shrewd gaze that Jaebeom wasn't sure he liked. It wasn't bad, just...calculating perhaps and Jaebeom knew that he probably wouldn't measure up to whatever it was Amber was looking for. He actually felt something like relief for the pirate makeover Bambam had forced on him. He knew he didn't fit in with Jackson or his crew, not in attitude or personality or experience. But he hoped that with Bambam's advice he might at least look like someone who belonged next to Jackson.

Jackson turned to Jaebeom as Amber turned go get her tools out.

"If at any point you change your mind, just let her know. We won't think less of you or anything," Jackson said quietly.

Jaebeom almost laughed. It was sweet, and Jaebeom appreciated it, but he realized in that moment that Jackson seemed to think of him as a child.

"Jackson, I'm not a child. I want to do this. I won't back out just because the needle might look scary," he said with a chuckle.

Jackson smiled at him sheepishly. "Right, sorry. Good luck then. You know the way back to the hotel?"

"What part of 'not a child' did you not understand?" Jaebeom asked flatly even though he'd never admit that going out and around the city without one of the crew with him was a somewhat terrifying thought.

Jackson just laughed called out his goodbye to Amber before telling Jaebeom he'd see him back at the hotel later and then leaving the shop.

"Jaebeom, right?" Amber asked.

Jaebeom nodded.
"Come and sit then," she said nodding to a wood and leather chair in the middle of the shop.

Amber reached out and rubbed something on his earlobe the moment he sat down, the smell hitting his nose a second later. "Clove oil?" He asked.

Amber looked surprised. "Yes," she replied after a moment's looking a Jaebeom a bit differently than she had a moment ago.

Clove oil was a numbing agent. It would dull the pain of the needle piercing his ear. He used it sometimes to relieve pain from deep bruises or for oral pain. He had never considered that a piercer might use something like that as well.

She turned and picked up a tray from a nearby table, twisting and handing it to Jaebeom. It was covered with different size and colour hoop earrings "Pick the one you like."

Jaebeom shook his head. "I have one," he told her, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the simple jade stud.

"A woman's earring," Amber noted, though how she knew was beyond Jaebeom. "A lover perhaps?"

Jaebeom shook his head. "Someone who was important to me."

Amber picked up the earring and looked at it for a brief moment before handing it back. "You can't use this, sorry."

"Why?" Jaebeom asked, deflating a little. The only reason he'd thought of this was so that he could wear his mother's earring. While he was fine with the idea of getting a piercing for this, he wasn't so sure he wanted to go punching holes in himself for a meaningless piece of silver.

"Not right away at least," Amber corrected. "When I pierce your ear it will be swollen for a few days. The post on that earring isn't long enough to go through the swollen lobe. Plus it's easier to keep hoops clean. After six weeks you can change it to this one."

"Six weeks," Jaebeom echoed. That seemed like such a long time. But he wanted this. He dropped the earring back into his pocket and perused the selection on the tray in front of him for a few minutes before selecting a small simple silver hoop about the size of a pinky ring.

Amber took it from him and guided him back into a reclining position. "How does the lobe feel?" She asked, reaching out and pinching it.

Jaebeom felt it, but dully. "I think it's ready."

Amber nodded and picked up another tool before showing it to Jaebeom. It was a needle, a bit shorter than the the length of his pinky, thicker than traditional sewing needles, and it was hollow inside. "This goes through your ear," Amber began. She pointed to the hole at the non-pointy end. "The post of your earring goes in here and gets pulled through when I pull the needle out the other side. Once it's through, I close the earring and you're good to go."

Jaebeom nodded, feeling inexplicably nervous now that he was actually looking at the needle. The feeling surprised him. He'd given many people stitches with relative ease. Why the needle going through his own flesh made him squeamish but not when he was the one putting it through others was beyond him.

"Lie still."
Jaebeom did as he was told and let Amber arrange him how she wanted him. He gasped softly when he felt the needle pierce through his skin, though more out of surprise than actual pain; the clove oil was doing its job well. He watched Amber's face as she worked quickly, expression serious as she finished up her job in mere seconds, moving away with a satisfied look and returning a moment later with a mirror, handing it to Jaebeom. "Take a look."

Jaebeom tilted the mirror toward himself and paused at what he saw. He didn't look like himself anymore. And it wasn't just the earring or the now red skin that surrounded it. His complexion was darker, his skin tinted by the sun from being up on the open deck over the past week. His face was thinner too, the three days of not being able to eat, the diet change in general or his own decision to eat less out of some paranoia that they'd run out of food and starve to death showing in the new angles in his cheeks and jaw, making him look older. His hair was longer; it's had been in desperate need of a cut before he'd left home and now it was certainly longer than he'd probably ever had it before. Even the slivers of skin along his collarbone and chest that were exposed in the shirt Bambam had made him wear looked different.

He didn't have a chance to study his features all that often at home since his family hadn't owned a mirror, but he'd caught his reflection in the reflection of glass windows and in the mirrors at clients home enough to be familiar with what he looked like.

The Jaebeom that he had in his head didn't look like the one facing him in the mirror and for a moment that scared him. The unique things that made him Jaebeom were still there, his narrow eyes, the shape of his nose, the twin miles above his eye, but somehow they looked different on the face of the man in the mirror in front of him. It was an unsettling feeling, to look in a mirror and not recognize yourself.

But…that was why he left, wasn't it? Because he didn't like himself, the person he was or the one he knew he'd become. Maybe changing his outward appearance was the first step to changing him on the inside too. Maybe after enough time on the Ahgase he'd adopt some of the characteristics from the other boys. He'd love to be as strong as Jackson, or as brave as Bambam. As patient as Mark or as intelligent as Jinyoung. As kind as Yugyeom or as capable as Youngjae. He wanted to be all of those things and then some, something that was just Jaebeom's.

The fact that he was changing, even if it was only in physical ways, was enough for Jaebeom for the moment. It was enough that he was moving in the right direction. It was enough to give him hope that one day he'd be someone that he was proud of.

He turned to Amber with a smile on his face. "It looks perfect. Thank you so much," he said, handing over unfamiliar coins that the crew had given him earlier.

She returned the smile. "Take care of Jackson," she said as Jaebeom was standing up to leave. He turned and looked at her curiously. "He's been through a lot in his life so far," she explained carefully. "I'm assuming that you're a new crew member of his and I don't know how much you know about him, but he doesn't need anyone else to cause him more pain. He's a good person, despite everything he's been through. Just...take care of him, okay?"

In all honestly Jackson was the one taking care of him, but Jaebeom nodded in reply all the same. "I will," Jaebeom promised.

"Well if it isn't Jackson Wang."

Jackson smiled at the woman who was eyeing him carefully as he fully entered the brothel.
"Tzuyu," Jackson said with a nod.

"What do you want?" Tzuyu asked bluntly, leaning against the desk that was between the two of them.

"Your mother around?" Jackson asked. Tzuyu's mother was in charge of the brothel, one of the many that Ching Shi owned across Asia.

Despite working for Ching Shih, Huan Yen-Ling had no allegiances toward the woman and always gladly offered any information she had to Jackson in the hopes that it would help him kill her.

"My mother is dead," Tzuyu said quietly, looking Jackson straight in the eye as she said it.

Tzuyu was one of the strangest women Jackson had ever met and one of the few people he was genuinely a bit afraid of. She had an ability to hold her thoughts and emotions so close to her chest that no one, not even her mother, could figure out what she was thinking unless she chose to tell you. Jackson was almost envious of that. She was one of the most beautiful people that Jackson had ever seen—he knew that her mother received dozens of requests to add her to the roster of girls available—but she took no shit from anyone; Jackson had seen her use a meat cleaver to cut the fingers off a man who hadn't taken no for an answer.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Jackson said honestly, bowing his head.

Tzuyu nodded her thanks for the sentiment, but her expression did not change. "You want to know about Ching Shih," she said. "My mother said I should help you if you asked."

Jackson knew better than the think that meant anything. "And will you?" He asked.

"I would have, but Ching Shih does not own this brothel anymore."

"What?" Jackson asked, frankly astonished to hear that. Ching Shih only got so powerful because she owned business everywhere which served not only as a source of income, but as spies that fed her information. Jackson refused to believe that she'd give up any of those.

Tzuyu shrugged. "Happened about a month ago? Just before mom died. One of her generals came and said that they were no longer going to be funding this place and that we could either buy it from them or they were going to sell it and we'd be on our own."

Jackson found that news to be frankly a little…disturbing. Ching Shih was selling off assets? That…that was not like her. Ching Shih was a remarkably clever woman and made whatever choices she needed to in order to increase her power. Sure, one brothel was far from a great loss, but it was still troubling that she'd willingly give up even that.

"Thank you for the information," Jackson said. "And, again, I'm so sorry to hear about your mother. She was an incredible woman."

Tzuyu smiled at him, probably the first he'd ever seen from her. "Thank you Jackson. She always liked you."

"If there is anything I can do you help you out, let me know. Or tell Ye Eun and she'll pass it along."

Tzuyu's smile turned sly. "We could always use more patrons." She leaned forward even more. "Can I interest you in a girl?" She whispered conspiritorily.
Jaebeom rolled his eyes and laughed. "No, but thanks for the offer."

Tzuyu laughed, standing up straight again. "Take care of yourself Jackson. Don't be a stranger."

Jackson promised he would visit when he had the chance before bidding his goodbyes and leaving.

He frowned as he started the walk back to the hotel. Had Ching Shih really sold off the brothel or was Tzuyu just lying to him? Jackson had trusted her mother implicitly, but Tzuyu was a whole other story. She wasn't bad or malicious but her intentions and goals have never been clear to Jackson. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility that Ching Shih had paid her to lie to him.

But that didn't sit right with him. If Ching Shih did find out that they were feeding information to Jackson, wouldn't she use that to just give Jackson bad information? Telling him they no longer had ties didn't seem like the most obvious choice if getting rid of Jackson was a priority.

Of course, Ching Shih probably didn't take him very seriously for the same reason that no one else did. She probably thought he was wasting his time because even if he did manage to find her, there was no way he'd get close enough to kill her.

Deep down Jackson knew she was probably even right about that. Despite having a decade to plan his revenge, Jackson still had no answer for the armies that Ching Shih surrounded herself with.

No, that wasn't true. His plan was death. He would either kill her or he would die trying. A part of him died the day she killed his family, it seemed somehow fitting that she and her men take the rest of him too.

But that was a problem for another day. He still had to find her first. He was still heading to Thailand since that was the most recent and most reliable piece of information he had, but while they were on the island he figured it wouldn't hurt to ask around. Tzuyu's mother used to be the most reliable contact he had in Taiwan and while he genuinely mourned the loss of a great woman that he had been sincerely fond of, he also mourned the loss of his most direct connection to Ching Shih.

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Jackson had no idea what he was doing there. He told himself it was a whim but he also told himself he was an idiot for acting on it is he stepped into a store he hadn't been to in years, not since Mark had joined his crew. Call him a sentimental fool, but Jackson liked to give gifts to new members of his crew, a compass to be specific. It was a way to welcome them aboard but it also served as a symbolic reminder of hope. His crew had been through a lot to get where they were and, while he didn't yet know Jaebeom's story, he was sure it hadn't been easy. A compass served as a reminder that there was always a way out, always a new direction to head in, always something better waiting for you out there. He smiled to himself; a new possibility beyond the horizon waiting for you to find it.

He hadn't really thought about getting Jaebeom one, hadn't really thought about the possibility that Jaebeom would actually stay with them. It just seemed so unlikely given his initial reaction to discovering they were pirates, to the obvious unease he had about them and how difficult his first experience on the sea was. There didn't seem to be a chance that Jaebeom would change his mind about them so fast.

Jaebeom hadn't given any indication that he wouldn't be sailing out with them, but he'd left Incheon with the sole purpose of just getting away. He wasn't looking to become a pirate, wasn't looking for
a crew, he was just looking for an escape. Taiwan might just be the escape he was looking for and decide that he didn't need to go any further.

But there Jackson was anyway, even knowing that, eyes roaming over the faces of the compasses set up on the table in front of him for reasons even he admitted to not understanding. Wishful thinking, maybe. Or perhaps a parting gift.

He always tried to find a design to match each member, one that reminded Jackson of them was uniquely suited to them and only them. Youngjae's, for example, had a sun carved into it; Bambam's had a remarkably intricate snake made out of miniscule gemstones.

Jaebeom was harder to pin down Jackson realized as his eyes scanned over the compass' on display. True, Jackson hadn't known him that long, but Jaebeom himself was also just a quieter person. He didn't want to be the centre of attention and preferred to watch and to listen instead of speak or participate.

But Jackson could already see Jaebeom changing. He could see how the man was starting to stand up taller, starting to speak his mind, starting to stop shying away when someone entered the room, like he was trying to make himself invisible. He was starting to become the real Im Jaebeom and Jackson found that he really wanted Jaebeom to stick around so that Jackson could find out who that was.

His eyes lingered on a compass that had been stained with a tint so dark it almost looked black in the dimness of the store. Pressed into the wood was a mother of pearl inlay in the shape of a palm tree. Jackson wasn't sure why but it just…felt right. He picked it up and opened it, studying the intricate metal hands of the compass and the carefully written script of the cardinal directions within. It was beautiful, elegant.

"Will you be buying that one?" The seller asked after Jackson had been staring at it for several minutes.

No.

There's no point.

He won't stay.

Men like Jaebeom don't become pirates.

"Yes."

Chapter End Notes

Clove oil really is a natural local anesthetic. It contains something called eugenol which is a numbing agent. Clove oil has apparently been used for centuries, particularly for dental/oral pain.

Up next, Jaebeom makes a choice and you find out another backstory! (Not sure the next one will be ready for Sunday though, if I can't get it done, I'll try to get it finished up by next Thursday)

Also, this is going to be longer than I originally predicted. It's already at 50k words
and there are a few chapters that aren't close to being done yet. I'm thinking maybe closer to 70-75k now...
"Oh, you're still here!"

Jaebeom looked up from the book he was reading to see Youngjae in the entrance of the hotel.

Youngjae sent him a smile before crossing the lounge and dropping into the seat next to him. "I'm glad you didn't leave."

Jaebeom just stared at him, surprised. Youngjae's smile was genuine. He was pleased that Jaebeom was still there.

Which was strange in and of itself. Where exactly was Jaebeom supposed to go? It wasn't like he knew anyone here. He didn't even know where to start putting down new roots.

"What brings you up here?" Jaebeom asked, surprised to see Youngjae.

"Repairs are all finished. She's better than ever. I even took the liberty to do a few other repairs that Jackson would no doubt ignore until it was too late." Youngjae said with a sigh.

"Already?" Jaebeom asked, surprised.

Youngjae sent him a strange look. "It's been a week, hyung."

It… It had? Didn't they just get here two or three days ago?

But… That wasn't right either. Jaebeom had spent the day exploring with Jackson. He'd spent another day with Jackson and the maknaes at the beach. Jackson must have mentioned that Jaebeom didn't know how to swim because the kids wanted to teach him how, only to be thankfully dissuaded when they realized how cold the ocean still was. They then proceeded to just spend the day at the beach, the pirates teaching Jaebeom about a dozen games that he'd never heard of.

Jinyoung had made an appearance and had taken Jaebeom out for a day to explore the historical sites with him, which had been so fascinating.

Jaebeom had spent a day shopping with Bambam, which could not have been more different than the shopping trip he'd had with Jackson. Bambam manipulated vendors with such ease and skill that Jaebeom vowed to never make an enemy of the boy. Bambam had insisted on buying Jaebeom some pirate clothes to remember the day by and Jaebeom actually kind of liked them.

Yugyeom had taken him on a restaurant tour, making him try all the local foods that Jaebeom hadn't even heard of and showing Jaebeom the best places to eat.

He hadn't realized that a week had already passed. He also hadn't realized that he knew far more about the island than he thought he did. The crew had seen to that. Each of them, in their own way, had helped Jaebeom without him even realizing it. He knew where to shop, how to avoid being taken advantage of and how to turn the tables on the vendors if he was bold enough, where to eat and the names of things that he liked that he could order. He knew the history of the city and where all the important places were. He could start putting down roots. If he wanted to.
But that was the question, wasn't it. Did he want to?

His brain said yes. The island was beautiful and thanks to the crew he already knew far more about the city of Tainan than he did any other place outside Goyang City. As a doctor he knew that he wouldn't have too hard a time earning money. He'd wanted a new start and Taiwan should have been the perfect place for it.

But his heart said no. His heart told him not to leave these people who had been so kind to him. The cynical part of his brain tried to argue that Jaebeom wasn't really used to people being nice to him and that he shouldn't get so attached to the first group of people who showed him kindness without expecting anything in return, but his gut told him that wasn't true. That this crew was special. That he could sail to every country in Asia and not find a group of men like this one.

But that group of men were pirates. Were technically criminals, no matter how kind. Had stolen and hurt and killed. Jaebeom was a doctor. He lived his life by helping people, by giving and healing life. How could he willingly join a group of people who took it? Whose actions went against everything Jaebeom believed in.

But… At the very least he wanted to do something to thank them all before they left, thank them for not only taking him away but for helping him, for teaching him and for extending him kindness he was starting to understand was rare. He had no money though, and no real skill that would be useful to them at the moment.

No… That wasn’t entirely true…

"You should get a proper medical kit for the ship before you leave," Jaebeom said out of nowhere.

Youngjae looked at him curiously. "Yeah?" He asked.

Jaebeom just nodded.

Youngjae studied him for a few moments before pushing to his feet. "Then let's go get one."

"Wait, really?" Jaebeom asked, surprised Youngjae would agree, just like that.

Youngjae nodded with a smile. "I trust you. If you think we need one, than I'm not going to argue with you. But I have no idea what qualifies as a proper medical kit, so you're going to have to come with me."

Youngjae trusted him. Him. A stranger who refused to tell the others anything about himself. But Youngjae trusted him anyway.

Without another word he got to his feet and followed Youngjae to the market.

Youngjae led him to an apothecary who had bins of dried herbs that could be packaged in little bags. Jaebeom let his eyes roam over all the herbs, trying to decide which ones to get. The ones he would purchase wouldn’t necessarily be helpful to a group of pirates who probably didn’t know what to do with them. He decided to go with the basics: ginseng— good for basically everything but particularly useful for fevers or dry coughs. Ginger—another all-round herb but with a focus on stomach upsets and boosting immune systems. Garlic—antiviral, anti-fungal and antibacterial. Chamomile—an anti inflammatory when used as an oil or paste, but also very soothing and calming as a tea.

After that he picked out a few that he imagined would be good for injuries pirates were more likely to sustain: comfrey leaf—a curious herb that promoted not only would healing, but bone healing as
well. Arnica—greatly relieved pain from bruises or sore muscles. Astragalus—good for helping an infected wound drain. Yarrow—another incredible jack-of-all-trades that helped with symptoms of the flu, but it’s true value was in the fact that it was antibacterial and helped to stop bleeding in wounds. He wasn’t sure if Mark knew that though. Maybe he’d write a letter to be added to the herbs.

They stopped in at another medical supply store so they could get other supplies: more bandages because Youngjae couldn’t remember if they had any, and a few other supplies for wound care because that was really Jaebeom’s most pressing concern when he thought about them not having a doctor on board. It sounded like no matter where they went in Asia a port was always a day or two away, meaning that illnesses or infections weren’t *that* pressing a concern as long as they took it seriously. But if they were ambushed? If they were forced into—or chose—combat and were injured seriously? Time was of the essence and there was no chance they’d survive long enough to make it to a port if one of them was bleeding heavily. Again, he hoped that Mark knew what to do with the things he picked out.

“You’re not coming with us, are you?” Youngjae asked sadly as they left the second store, Jaebeom carrying a wooden box with everything that they’d bought.

Jaebeom just shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet.”

Youngjae laughed. “You’re cutting it awfully close hyung.”

“Sorry,” Jaebeom said.

Youngjae just waved off the apology. “Don’t be. I’m taking it as a compliment that you’re actually considering joining us considering you looked like you wanted to jump out the window when you first realized we were pirates.”

Jaebeom elbowed him. “Shut up.”

Youngjae chuckled once more, rubbing his ribs where Jaebeom’s elbow made contact. “Just make the choice that’s best for you, hyung.”

That was the problem. Jaebeom hadn’t even realized how badly he’d been controlled by his father until this moment. He didn’t know what was best for him. How was he supposed to make that choice when he’d never been allowed to choose before? A part of him thought this should be easier. He should know what was best for him, shouldn’t he? He hadn’t expected to be faced with this choice when he left home and he certainly hadn’t expected it to be so hard. If someone had told old Jaebeom that he’d be so torn up over a group of pirate he would have laughed in their faces.

But here he was.

"Oh, it’s Jinyoung," Youngjae said a soft smile on his face as he looked into the crowd.

Jaebeom turned and scanned the bodies milling around, but failed to see the quartermaster.

"There," Youngjae said, pointing to someone a few stores away after noticing Jaebeom didn’t know what he was talking about.

Jaebeom relaxed why he hadn’t noticed Jinyoung; he was holding a child. A little girl, no more than three, sat in his arms, her hands cupping his face as he looked down at her in pure adoration.

Jaebeom turned up Youngjae in confusion. "He… He has a kid?"
Youngjae chucked and reached out to take the box from Jaebeom. "You should go talk to him. I'll take this back to the ship for you." He said before disappearing into the crowd.

Jaebeom watched as two more kids ran out of a shop over to Jinyoung, a boy and a girl, each carrying small pastries in their hands. They were older than the child in Jinyoung’s arms, maybe seven or eight. They probably ruled out the kids being Jinyoung’s though since he hadn't been a pirate long enough to have an eight year old.

The look Jinyoung gave them though was so warm, so loving, that Jaebeom almost believed they were really his kids. He watched as Jinyoung reached and gently stroked the hair of the little boy before taking the girl’s hand and starting to walk down the market once more, toward Jaebeom.

He caught Jaebeom's eye as he approached and his feet slowed as a look of surprise crossed his face. "Jaebeom," he said.

Jaebeom waved at him, and then smiled at the children. "Cute kids."

"They're not mine, in case you were wondering." He looked proud though.

"It did cross my mind," Jaebeom confessed. "If they're not yours, whose are they?"

Jinyoung grinned slyly. "They're Jackson's."

"They're..." Jaebeom had a hard time stringing words together. "Whose?"

Jinyoung laughed, obviously enjoying Jaebeom's reaction, which was no doubt his point. "Come with me; I want to show you something."

Jaebeom curiously trailed behind Jinyoung, exchanging small smiles with the boy, who kept looking back at him every now and then. He tried asking where they were going but Jinyoung insisted they wait until they got there.

There turned out to be an inconspicuous house away from the bustle of the harbour and markets. "Where are we?" Jaebeom asked, following Jinyoung and the kids through the front gates, making sure to close them behind him.

"The orphanage Jackson owns," Jinyoung replied, a warm look on his face as he turned back to Jaebeom before opening the front door.

The sound of children talking hit Jaebeom’s ears as he followed Jinyoung into the foyer. "Jackson...owns an orphanage?"

"Technically, he owns three," Jinyoung said before making his way through the house with ease until they were in the kitchen. He spoke another language to a woman who had a toddler perched on the countertop and was carefully cleaning what looked like jam off his face.

She looked up at him with an affection that only came from familiarity and said something back. It seemed like Jinyoung either spent a lot of time here, or he and this woman had known each other for a long time.

Jinyoung said something else and Jaebeom was able to pick out his name, bowing when the woman turned in his direction with a smile.

"This is Ye Eun," Jinyoung said, switching back to Korean. "She runs the orphanage, takes care of all the kids, educates them and helps adopt them out if possible. The place would crumble without
her," he finished, his eyes moving back to the woman who had gone back to cleaning the child in front of her.

Jaebeom smiled to himself. It didn’t seem to just be the kids that Jinyoung adored in this place.

Jinyoung pulled his eyes back to Jaebeom. “Come, I’ll take you to meet the kids.”

Jaebeom wanted to say no, he was terrible with kids and the younger they were the more likely they were to just spontaneously burst into tears in front of him, but he said nothing as he followed Jinyoung down the hall and into what looked like a playroom where about a dozen kids were. There was a bigger age gap than Jaebeom was expecting. A teenager was sat at a table with a few kids who might have been around ten or eleven, working on what looked like reading or writing. There were three toddlers playing with blocks on the floor and a few other kids of various in-between ages playing in their own spaces around the room.

Jinyoung made sure to introduce Jaebeom to each one, telling Jaebeom a little bit about all of them as he did. He knew so much about the kids Jaebeom wondered how much time the crew spent in Taiwan. If he chose to stay, maybe he’d get to see them all again after all.

Ye Eun appeared with a tray of tea, which Jinyoung accepted with a grateful smile before beckoning Jaebeom to follow him out into the backyard where a small table had been set up.

"How did Jackson go about owning three orphanages?" Jaebeom asked after they got seated and Jinyoung handed him one of the teacups.

"It started in Korea, with Yugyeom." Jinyoung said.

"Yugyeom was in an orphanage?" Jaebeom asked, surprised.

Jinyoung shook his head. "No, but he should have been. Yugyeom's parents were killed by an illness that spread through his hometown. Yugyeom and his older brother were sent to Seoul to live with an aunt but they couldn't find her. She didn't live at the address they were given and no one seemed to know who she was. So they were homeless. They were resourceful kids, but they were still just kids, and they had no one."

Jaebeom's heart broke. Yugyeom might enjoy teasing his hyungs, but Jaebeom always thought that he was such a pure soul, kind and genuinely good at heart. Trying to imagine him alone on the streets of Seoul as a child was painful.

"They were doing okay, his brother found them a place to sleep and they both did odd jobs to get food. But then Yugyeom got sick. His brother wasn't able to get enough for both of them on his own and had resorted to stealing to get food and medicine for him." Jinyoung paused, looking like the memory still affected him even after all these years. "One day his brother just didn't come back. Yugyeom swears his brother was probably just arrested for theft. No one mentions it out loud but we all know there is also a high possibility that if he was caught he was simply killed. Whatever his fate, Yugyeom was left alone and when Bambam found him he was unconscious."

The doctor in Jaebeom came rushing to the surface. He wanted to ask so many questions about what Yugyeom had had, since some sicknesses can cause organ damage that would affect him later in life if left to such a severe state, but he bit his tongue and let Jinyoung continue with the story.

"Bambam insisted that we help him, and it wasn't like any of us were going to say no and let the kid die," Jinyoung said. "While we were waiting for him to regain consciousness one of the nurses told us about how the sickness was going through the homeless population of Seoul, and how the
kids seemed to be the most at risk. That was how we found out about how many kids were left on their own to survive.” He looked like it still affected him to this day. “There were almost thirty kids—Jaebeom—I’m talking about actual kids, not even teenagers—the youngest was just an infant being taken care of by her ten year old sister. And that was just the ones who survived. I have no idea how many kids had already died. We couldn’t just leave them out there. It was October and starting to get cold. Most of them would have died during the winter if left on their own.”

That was horrific. As a doctor treating children had always been the hardest, especially the younger ones who didn’t understand what was happening to them or that Jaebeom was just trying to help. Trying to imagine so many kids being utterly helpless and going through it all alone was a frankly sickening thought.

“Jackson decided on the spot that he was going to do something about it,” Jinyoung continued, a sad smile on his face. He looked up at Jaebeom. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Jackson isn’t really one to think things through all that well. Once he gets an idea in his head he just jumps in with both feet. Most of the time it’s up to me to dissuade him from getting himself killed, but this was by far one of the best spontaneous decisions he’s ever made. We spent almost three months in Korea, our longest time in one place since I joined Jackson’s crew. He always says that nothing is more important to him than chasing Ching Shih, but that isn’t true. This certainly was. At first Jackson was looking at real estate in Seoul but after a few weeks we all talked it over and decided it wasn’t worth it. The costs were too high and Seoul isn’t next to the ocean which would make check-ins a challenge. So Jackson rented some carriages and brought all the kids down to Busan.”

“What about Yugyeom?” Jackson interrupted.

“He was better by that point. He’d started to recover within a few days of us getting him to the doctor. He and Bambam had spent a significant amount of time trying to find his older brother but weren’t successful. To this day we still don’t know where he is. He and Bambam had bonded so strongly even in that short amount of time that we didn’t feel comfortable just leaving Yugyeom all alone in Seoul when we left, not to mention that he was only fifteen. So we asked him if he wanted to come with us, and he did. The orphanage was eventually established in Busan, but Yugyeom chose not to stay there; he asked if he could come with us and that was that.”

“How did this one come about?” Jaebeom asked, nodding to the building behind him.

Jinyoung eyed the building. “Jackson wanted to set up more, set up dozens, to help kids across all of Asia. While his intentions were nothing but good, the reality is that the funds needed to support these places aren’t small. We had to pick locations that were worth the investment. We ended up choosing our home countries since we were more likely to stop there more frequently and stay there longer than other countries. So we have the original one in Busan that we also use as our main base of sorts, where our family members can send letters to us and everything. We have this one and another one in Thailand, which is where Bambam was born. Fifty kids, give or take a few, are able to live happily and have high chances of having successful futures because of Jackson and his kindness.”

Jackson was amazing.

“Why did you bring me here?” Jaebeom asked quietly. “Why tell me all of this?”

“Because we might never see you again,” Jinyoung said simply. “I know that you don’t think very much of pirates and, frankly, you shouldn’t; a lot of them are horrible people. But we aren’t, Jackson isn’t. Jackson is crap at noticing good qualities in himself—I honestly don’t even think he sees them—but he’s a good person. I just wanted to make sure that you knew that if there was some slim chance you were actually considering joining us and becoming a pirate that you literally
could not have picked a better man as your captain.”

Jinyoung really cared about Jackson. It was… It was frankly an incredible thing to see. Jaebeom wasn’t sure that he’d ever had anyone care about him that much, except maybe his mother. And Jinyoung hadn’t even liked Jackson a few years ago. What kind of person was Jackson to inspire that kind of loyalty, that kind of love, from an absolute stranger after just a few years?

Jaebeom realized something else in that moment. Jinyoung wasn't just supporting Jackson, wasn't making sure Jaebeom knew he was a good person—which he didn't need to do in the first place. Jaebeom already knew that. Despite Jackson trying to paint himself as a revenge driven man Jaebeom saw the kindness in him, had been the recipient of it so many times over the last two weeks.

What Jinyoung was really doing was trying to get Jaebeom to join their crew. By giving Jaebeom reasons to trust Jackson, Jinyoung was giving him reasons to stay. He thought about Youngjae's look of pleased surprise when he saw Jaebeom sitting in the hotel, about how he trusted Jaebeom's words so implicitly and without question. He thought about Bambam trying to give him a pirate makeover, to help him look the part and to protect him from being taken advantage of. Hell, even Mark had told Jaebeom that he hoped he'd still be there at the end of the week.

Jackson's crew wanted Jaebeom to stay with them. Jaebeom. An absolute novice when it came to sailing and who hadn't offered anything of use to them over his short tenure on the Ahgase so far. And still they wanted him to stay.

And that was even more of a shock than finding out Jackson owned three orphanages. That at least made sense knowing what little he did of Jackson so far. But Jaebeom wasn't used to people wanting him. The people in Goyang City were happy to have him there, but that was because of his medical knowledge. He was of use to them and so they appreciated him.

Jackson and his crew knew nothing of Jaebeom's talents or skills. And still they wanted him to stay with them. Seemingly just because they enjoyed his company.

Jaebeom was able to admit that he didn't want to leave these people either. He liked them, all of them, and wanted to get to know them better. He saw how they interacted with one another, with teasing and jokes, yes, but with an obvious underlying thread of affection and love. Jackson hadn't been lying back on the pier on Incheon. This crew was a family, one that Jaebeom found himself wondering if he could be a part of on more than one occasion.

But being a part of that family meant being a pirate. And no matter how noble, how kind their captain was, that was a line that Jaebeom didn't know if he could cross.

⚓

Jackson looked at the compass in his hands.

Jaebeom wasn't at the hotel when he'd returned. The kids didn't seem to know where he'd gone either. There was a heavy feeling in Jackson's chest, one that grew heavier with every person who walked into the hotel that wasn't Jaebeom.

He wouldn't just…leave, right? He'd say goodbye to them all… Wouldn't he?

“He’ll be back,” Bambam said confidently. “He wouldn’t leave without telling us. He’s not like that.”

“Technically, we don’t really know what he’s like. We’ve known him like two weeks,” Yugyeom
pointed out, earning himself a glare from Bambam.

Jackson smiled. He appreciated Bambam trying to make him feel better but was somewhat disconcerted that his unease over this was so obvious. “It’s okay Bam. I’d like to say goodbye but as long as he’s okay and he’s doing what’s best for him then it’s fine.”

Bambam scoffed. “You can lie to yourself all you want Jack, you can’t lie to me. You’ll miss him if he chooses to stay in Taiwan.”

Jackson hated when Bambam was right.

It was true.

And wasn’t that strange? Jackson was frankly baffled by how much this mattered to him. He’d picked up strays before and most of them had been lovely people who Jackson wished well and absently wondered about from time to time, but it didn’t really affect him personally when they parted ways at the next port. It was their life and if they didn’t want Jackson in it then it was really no skin off his back. But it genuinely upset him to think that he might never see Jaebeom again.

Maybe it was just because Jaebeom was so clueless as to how the world worked. Without someone to help him Jackson was certain Jaebeom would be hurt and Jaebeom didn't deserve that.

He was saved having to respond to Bambam by Mark arriving, his eyes roaming the room as he sat down next to Bambam. "Jaebeom's gone?" He asked, his expression surprised.

"We're not sure," Bambam replied. "No one seems to know where he is and we can't go looking because I we have to be here to console Jackson."

"Shut up," Jackson said, kicking him hard in the shin from under the table.

"Ow," Bambam scowled, pulling up his leg and rubbing the point of impact. "That'll bruise you asshole. I'm trying the be your emotional support here!"

Jackson chuckled. "I don't need emotional support Bammie. I'll admit I want him to stay, but I'll be able to go on with my life should he choose to make a new one for himself in Taiwan."

Mark picked up the compass that was on the table in front of Jackson. "You bought him a compass?" He asked, brushing his thumb across the palm tree.

Jackson had no idea why he felt almost embarrassed by the question, but he did. The gift was significant for him which he supposed meant that he thought Jaebeom was important. "I mean, it's kind of a tradition," he said, trying to defend himself. "Though it seems like I shouldn't have bothered."

Arms wrapped around him tightly. "Don't cry Jackson-hyung," Yugyeom said gently, own hand coming up to pet Jackson's hair.

"Oh for the love of—" Jackson resisted the urge to throttle the youngest members of his crew. "I'm not going to cry."

"I have to say, I personally don't really care one way or the other what his choice is, but I do hope for your sake that he comes with us," Bambam said, his tone oddly serious all of a sudden.

"Me too," Mark replied in that same serious tone.
"Why?" Jackson asked as he untangled himself from Yugyeom, shoving the youngest back into his seat.

"Because you let your walls down for him," Bambam said simply. "You seem to let him take care of you in a way that you've never let any of us. Which is weird because honestly he is the one who seems to need taking care of."

"I admit that I'm personally curious about him," Mark added. "But aside from my own curiosity, I agree that he seems to be good for you. He…softens you."

Little did Bambam and Mark know those were some of the things about Jaebeom that scared Jackson the most. He liked Jaebeom's refreshing attitude and how the way he saw the world so differently than anyone else Jackson knew. He liked the way Jaebeom always came up with questions and comments that surprised him and made him think.

He just didn't like what they made him think about. Didn't like how Jaebeom kept making him question himself. How Jaebeom made him consider things he'd rather not. He'd gotten this far by gritting his teeth and using a single-minded focus to push through, to keep on pushing. Jaebeom’s way of thinking threatened to make him stumble.

He wasn't sure he liked being called soft either. Being soft meant you could easily be taken advantage of or easily hurt. It was not a good quality for a pirate captain to have and certainly not one who had adopted the life mission that Jackson had. Or for someone who, in Jackson’s opinion, had already been hurt enough for a thousand lifetimes.

"Why does Jackson look like he wants to punch someone?"

Jackson looked up to see Jinyoung entering the lounge.

"Because we reminded him that he has feelings," Bambam replied.

Jackson sighed heavily.

"Jaebeom seems to have gone missing. Jackson’s moping," Mark supplied, answering Jinyoung's question and earning himself a glare from Jackson.

"No he hasn't, Jaebeom's on the beach. I ran into him in the market earlier this afternoon and took him up to Ye Eun's to meet the kids. He said he had some things he needed to think about on the way back so I dropped him off at the beach on my way back here."

There was a lot to unpack there. Why Jinyoung would take Jaebeom to Ye Eun's was beyond Jackson. Jaebeom didn't seem like someone who would be interested in kids nor was it a particularly exciting or fancy place. Jackson had stopped by when they'd first arrived on the island to make sure everything was running okay and that she had everything she needed for the kids. He didn't tend to stay too long though, didn't really think he was a good role model for the kids.

"Does Jaebeom know how to get back to the hotel?" Jackson asked, pushing all the other questions in the back of his mind.

Jinyoung shrugged slowly. "That's his problem, isn't it? If he's going to move here he's going to have to start figuring things out for himself."

Jinyoung wasn't wrong. With Mark back, they were leaving as soon as they checked in with Youngjae to see how the ship repairs were going. They would be leaving as soon as tomorrow. And then Jaebeom would be on his own in Taiwan and would have to figure things out for himself.
Jinyoung was looking at him, an unspoken challenge in his. *Your move Wang. Leave Jaebeom to his own devices or go convince him to come with us.*

"I should have left your ass in Busan all those years ago," Jackson muttered, getting to his feet, snatching the compass from Mark's fingers and heading toward the beach.

It wasn't hard to find Jaebeom considering he was one of about a dozen people on the beach. He was sprawled in the sand, eyes looking out over the water. He didn't turn when Jackson sat down next to him.

"I really like the beach," Jaebeom said simply. "The ocean looks far more peaceful when you aren't on it."

The ocean hadn't exactly been kind to Jaebeom and Jackson didn't blame him for thinking that. If Jackson had gone through the week on the sea that Jaebeom had he probably wouldn't be looking to get back on it either.

That was probably his answer then, wasn't it?

Jackson swallowed. "Taiwan will be a good place for you," he said, genuinely meaning it. Some of the merchants aside, the people outside of the port were genuinely kind people and the island was fairly quiet given that it wasn't as well developed yet as many of the other ports in Asia. He thought that Jaebeom would like it here. "I'll see if Mark can send a letter to his parents before we leave to ask if you can contact them if there is anything you need as you start to settle down here." At least it was *something*, some line of communication that Jackson could use in the future to check up on Jaebeom, just to make sure he was okay.

Jaebeom didn't reply, just kept watching the horizon.

"Taiwan isn't Thailand," Jaebeom said eventually, pulling Jackson from his thoughts.

"What?"

"Back in Incheon you said that I could sail with you until you reached Thailand." Jaebeom finally turned from the sea to look over at him. "We're not in Thailand yet."

Jackson felt the smile creep across his face. He loved a good technicality. Jinyoung was really good at using them against him; it was about time one worked in his favour. "You're right. We're not. And I'm nothing if not a man of my word."

Jaebeom smiled back. "Thank you Jackson."

"You are always more than welcome on my ship, Jaebeom." Jackson replied simply. "Even if she may be broken," he conceded a moment later.

Jaebeom laughed. "The Ahgase is good to go again. Youngjae came up this morning and told me," he added in response to the puzzled look Jackson send him.

"Then what are we sitting around here for? We should go pack."

Jaebeom nodded, but turned back to the sea. "It’s nothing against Taiwan though. Tainan is beautiful."

"You’ll like Thailand too I think. In all honesty all of Asia is beautiful, though perhaps in different ways. We’ll find the right fit for you somewhere," Jackson promised at the same time he wondered
if the right fit for Jaebeom could ever be on his ship as a member of his crew.

The two of them got to their feet, Jaebeom surprising Jackson by taking the lead and heading up the beach first, something Jackson didn’t think he would have done even a week ago. Jackson followed, feeling the weight of the compass in his pocket. Jaebeom wasn’t ready for that yet, and that was fine. Jackson was just content with the fact that he didn’t have to say goodbye yet.

Chapter End Notes

This will be long. Sorry.
I first want to clarify that Yugyeom's backstory has NOTHING to do with the current coronavirus outbreak that is affecting thousands in China right now. I started writing this fic back in August/Sept and was in no way influenced by what is happening now. I completely understand that situation is incredibly serious. The updates that I've read today are reporting that over 300 people have died and about 15,000 people are sick (though I've heard reports that it could be much higher than that) and is affecting people in about 30 countries. I just... I want to make it clear that I'm not using something that has killed people for entertainment. It was just a tragic coincidence.

Also based on my quick research the herbs that Jaebeom picks really are supposed to help with the ailments that I listed (though I should mention the scientific proof behind them is iffy at best). Chinese medicine sounds fascinating and incredibly complex and there isn’t really one thing that people take but they prescribe a mixture of herbs that are uniquely tailored to whatever is ailing their patients. They kind of split the symptoms into 'hot' and 'cold' and they are tied to the energy of the person (kind of like yin and yang but that's really oversimplifying it). I feel like I barely scratched the surface with my research so if I got anything wrong, please let me know.

Next up: the crew tries to turn Jaebeom into a pirate

And on a totally unrelated note, my JB sweater arrived on Friday. I LOVE IT SO MUCH. You did good, JB
"No, too high. You're leaving yourself too open." Mark said, taking his sword and carefully poking Jaebeom under the ribs. "Here."

"Here too," Bambam said from behind him, making Jaebeom jump from a surprise poke to the other side of his ribs.

Jaebeom turned and sent Bambam a glare before turning back to Mark. "I get it, I can't hold a sword. Can we move onto something else now?"

Since Jaebeom decided to continue sailing on the Ahgase the others decided that he needed some training. If he was going to be a temporary crew member he needed to have at least basic skills to protect himself from other pirates as they sailed into more unfriendly waters. Jaebeom would only put them in more danger if he allowed himself to be dead weight.

Turns out, he sucked at weaponry. At least, he was awful with swords but he honestly didn't see himself being any better at knives or guns.

The sword felt so clunky and awkward and heavy. The grip felt wrong and hurt his hand and the damn thing just didn't seem to do what Jaebeom wanted it to. He didn't consider himself to be weak exactly—he did a lot of carrying patients and helping them around—but his arm started to hurt not even an hour into his first lesson.

Now here he was on day two and it seemed like he was getting worse instead of better. And they hadn't even really done anything yet.

"No, this is important," Mark insisted. "I get that it's frustrating, but it's not like you're going to master swordsmanship in an hour. I'm not even going to introduce attacks for a while yet. Holding your sword properly is what you need to do to defend, to cover all your vulnerable spots and, keep yourself alive till one of us can get you you and help you with the offence."

That…made a lot of sense, and Jaebeom appreciated that Mark had obviously put some thought into the whole teaching thing, but it was also a bit depressing. It sounded like this was something that was going to take down time. "How long did it take you to learn?" He wasn't sure how long he'd be with them, but if he wasn't even able to hold a sword right, it wasn't looking good for him to be able to build any kind of competence quickly.

Mark shrugged. "Years I guess? I never had any formal training, more goofing off with my dad on deck. Eventually all that okay sparring turned into genuine ability."

Jaebeom sighed. Years. Great.

"Mark's not even the best one on the ship," Bambam said. "If you want to see real swordsmanship, Jackson outclasses every single one of us by miles."

"He does?" Jaebeom asked, surprised.

Mark nodded. "He was an elite fencer before he became a pirate; at least that's what Jinyoung told us he said. Having seen him fight, we tend to believe it."
Bambam nodded as well, a serious look on his face. "He's more of a defensive fighter these days, but if someone makes him angry? If he feels threatened? We basically just step back and try not to get in the way. It's like art watching him. His skill with the blade is beyond words."

"Stop making it sound so poetic," Mark scolded. "People die when Jackson fights like that."

Bambam sobered and nodded. "You're right. Sorry."

Jaebeom tried to imagine what that would even look like, a Jackson who was so intent on taking human life. Despite the fact that he'd rarely seen Jackson without the sword tied to his hips, he couldn't imagine him actually using it.

He still had a hard time accepting that Jackson had killed Bambam's old crew, even though Jackson himself had admitted to it. It just seemed so far from the Jackson that Jaebeom knew.

He wondered why Jackson wasn't there helping him learn if he had been trained as a fencer. He'd been watching. Jaebeom had seen him through the open door as he sat at the table eating his breakfast after he woke up mid morning the day before. He said nothing, neither criticism nor praise, but his attention had definitely been on Jaebeom.

Jaebeom looked down at the sword in his hand and wondered if there was a point in him learning. It had taken Mark years to learn. Jackson as well. It seemed a bit hopeless. He felt bad for wasting their time like this, though it also wasn't like any of them had anything better to do. Jaebeom rarely found himself bored aboard the Ahgase, but being in the middle of the ocean certainly limited the number of things they could do.

"I'm not trying to discourage you," Mark said quietly. "I'm just trying to be honest. This isn't something you can learn in a day, a week or even a month. And even then it's hard to say how useful the training will be. Every opponent you go up against will have their own unique fighting style and set of morals."

"Morals?" Jaebeom questioned, wondering what morals had to do with sword fighting.

"I once saw a guy smash someone in the face with a lit lantern in the middle of a fight." Bambam said with a grimace.

Jaebeom's jaw dropped open. The damage a lit oil lamp could do to a human face was gruesome.

Bambam shrugged. "When you're fighting for your life you do anything to keep yourself alive. Sometimes it's about who is willing to play dirtier in order to win."

Jaebeom supposed he had a point, but still…

"That's why I'm prioritizing defence," Mark said. "Ultimately what it comes down to is keeping yourself alive and, yes, being able to take out an opponent is a part of keeping yourself alive, but the most important part of swordfighting is not giving your opponent the chance to kill to before you kill them."

Jaebeom mulled over Mark's words. Truthfully he hadn't thought very deeply into swordplay at all. He probably hadn't taken it as seriously as he should have been either. He'd been expecting some kind of crash course and had been mentally cursing Mark for the last few hours when Mark was only trying to keep him alive.

Jaebeom had watched various members spar across the deck with one another when they were bored and only now realized how easy they made it look. They were so used to the motions that
they were able to tease and mock each other and carry on full conversation while blocking and attacking with ease. Sure, it was just for fun, but they must have a good amount of skill to be able to pull that off.

"If you want to keep sailing with us, this is something you have to know," Mark said bluntly.

Jaebeom took a deep breath and raised his sword, trying to keep in mind all the things Mark had told him. "Again."

Mark smiled at him, his canines on full display in a fierce grin that Jaebeom wasn't sure how he felt about being on the receiving end of. "Good answer."

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Jackson sighed as he sat himself down on top of the cabin, relishing in the stillness and peacefulness of the night around him. He had his sword in one hand and a polishing rag in the other. He vividly remembered when he was given this sword. Gifted, the original owner had said.

It had belonged to Ching Shih, her personal weapon. It still had his father's blood on it when she gave it to him.

He remembered the look on her face as she tossed it on the floor in front of him. An amused grin.

"You were shopping for a new sword, right? Take mine; I look forward to seeing you use it one day."

And she would see him use it. He'd use it to kill her. It was the only reason he'd held onto it after all these years. He hated taking care of it, every time he polished it, every time he carefully sharpened it he was reminded of how he got it. But caring for weapons was a habit that had been engrained into him long before he became a pirate. And a pirate who neglected their sword was as good as dead. He needed to ensure it was well cared for if he ever wanted to fulfil the dream of using it on it's true owner.

A body dropped onto the rooftop with a thud. Mark. None of the other members came up here unless they had to.

“How’s he doing?” Jackson asked as Mark settled at his side.

“Yugyeom could kill him in under a minute,” Mark replied, knowing what Jackson was talking about without needing to be asked directly.

Jackson winced. “That bad?” Yugyeom wasn't exactly bad with a sword, the boy could usually hold his own in a fight, but he was definitely the weakest among the crew.

"I think the potential is there though. His reflexes are pretty good, but it's going to take him a lot of time. For him it’s more than just the new movements, it’s about changing his thought patterns."

"He doesn't want to hurt people," Jackson guessed.

"That's a part of it, sure. But he doesn't know how to think defensively either. He leaves himself too open."

Jackson hummed. That wasn't uncommon for beginners. There was a lot that went on when learning to fight with a sword. It was hard, made even harder when you kept reminding yourself that any mistakes you made could get you killed. The first instinct was always attack, kill before being killed. It took a long time before a fighter got in the habit of thinking defensively, only after
offence became second nature.

"Why don't you work with him tomorrow?" Mark suggested. "You're the only one of us who has any formal training so you might have some insights of what helped you when you were first starting out. Not to mention you're his favourite."

Jackson shot him a look, but didn't deny the remark. "I'll pass." Jackson had taught Jinyoung for a few months until Jinyoung was capable but had made Jinyoung teach everyone else after that.

Jackson teaching dueling. It brought back too many memories of when he was learning back when he was a kid. Reminded him of goofing off with his brother, things his father would say to encourage him when he needed it and things his mother would say to comfort him when he wanted to give up. It wasn't something that he wanted to put himself through again and again so he asked others to do it for him. A part of him felt guilty for it. He knew that his skill with the blade was far superior to any of the others and he was sure that he could offer a different perspective than the others, but for his own sanity he just couldn't do it.

The others were trained well regardless of his involvement. Jinyoung might not have been the kindest teacher, but his honesty and his high standards meant that the kids learned fast and were aware of their limits and how to stay within them in order to be successful even when they had a very limited skillset. Mark had far more patience and a more comprehensive approach to dueling that, while slower, gave them a broader skill set that they were confident in in the end. They might have been better had Jackson been the one training them, but at the end of the day his crew knew how to handle their weapons, and that was all Jackson cared about.

"You know what's out there, right?" Mark said several moments later after it was clear that Jackson wasn't going to say anything else regarding Jaebeom or his sword training.

"What?" Jackson said, his eyes looking out over the water around them.

Mark pointed to the left. "We're passing Hong Kong."

Jackson exhaled sharply and looked the other way. Of course he knew it was out there. He hadn't looked at a map since they'd left Taiwan but he'd been sailing long enough to know how many days they needed to get to his home country.

"We could make a stop," Mark said, his voice soft.

Jackson knew they could. He knew if he said he wanted to go home that the crew would throw open the all their sails and ensure they got there as fast as they could. He knew all of that. But he didn't want to go home.

"Not yet," Jackson told him, eyes glued onto something on the horizon. "Not until—"

"You kill Ching Shih," Mark interrupted wearily. "I know. We've already had this conversation. I just wanted to remind you that the only thing that is keeping you from going home is your own rules."

No, Jackson wanted to argue. What was keeping Jackson from going home was fear. Fear of what he might find when he got there. Fear about what he wouldn't find. Fear of the memories that would threaten to drown him, good and bad.

He wanted to go home. Wanted to be surrounded by the places and people that brought him so much comfort and joy as a kid, but he knew it wouldn't be the same. He knew that everything he once loved would be tainted and he wasn't sure if that would really be home for him anymore.
"I know," he said quietly.

"Have you ever thought about what you're going to do with your life after you kill Ching Shih?"

Jackson blinked and briefly looked over at Mark in surprise. None of the crew genuinely believed Jackson could kill Ching Shih, so the question caught Jackson off guard. In truth, he hadn't. The idea of finding Ching Shih alone seemed so impossible, never mind the idea that he'd live through the ordeal if he did. The thought of having a life after killing Ching Shih hadn't really occurred to him because, in truth, he didn't think he'd have one.

"You need to have hope for the future Jackson," Mark said quietly. "You can't live your whole life for revenge. I'm surprised that you've made it this long."

Jackson looked away, his eyes finding the spot on the horizon, one that had grown larger. *Sure I can*, he wanted to say, but even he knew that was childish. But it had kept him going this far, hadn't it? Didn't that count for something?

"I just want you to find a reason to live. Something to look forward to beyond this revenge. Something to— Jackson," Mark said urgently, interrupting himself as he pointed to the shape that Jackson had been staring at. One that was now becoming much clearer.

"I see it," Jackson murmured.

Mark leapt to his feet, jumped off the roof and hurried to the support post of the steering wheel, pulling off the spyglass they had hanging there.

"Anyone we know?" Jackson asked after Mark had studied the ship that had been steadily increasing in size on the horizon for the last ten minutes or so. Jackson was glad it was a clear night and that there was still enough moon to make out the horizon. The new moon was Jackson's least favourite time at sea. It was hard to see ships approaching which reduced the time they had to react.

"Red flag," Mark said, his voice dark as he collapsed the spyglass and looked up at Jackson for direction.

Red flag only meant one thing on Asian waters, meant one person: Ching Shih.

"Is it her?" Jackson asked, sliding his cutlass back into its sheath. While she was the head of the army that had been dubbed the Red Flag Fleet, she had tens of thousands of ships that sailed under her, all of whom flew the same flag as she did. The odds of the ship actually being hers were next to nothing, but Jackson still had to ask.

Mark shook his head. "Ship's too small."

Jackson sighed, picking up the cutlass and getting to his feet. It was probably better that it wasn't her. While Jackson wanted to kill her, combat on the open sea wasn't where he wanted to do it. The Aghase was far too small to go up against a ship that size and Jackson didn't want to put his crew at risk like that.

"Better wake up the boys," he said, jumping down next to Mark. "And pray that Jaebeom has learned enough to keep him alive."

Chapter End Notes
Hi... Sorry it's been three weeks since my last update. I was really struggling to write for the past few weeks (this fic in particular) and I know you're going to tell me not to push myself because you're amazingly kind people like that. I'm not. I'm writing this because I want to, not because I feel like I have to.

Good news is that while I was avoiding this fic I started another one for my Title Track series (a Japanese release this time), so you can look forward to getting that in the hopefully not too distant future.

Thank you for your patience. (And don't worry, the next chapter is like 90% finished so I won't leave you with this cliffhanger for another three weeks)
Chapter Notes

WARNING: this chapter contains mentions of blood, injuries and minor surgical procedures. If that's not your thing, please feel free to skip this chapter. Though maybe read the end notes (I'll summarize for you)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Jaebeom!"

Jaebeom startled awake, his heart racing at the urgency of the words and the hands pressing against his chest, shaking him quickly.

"What's wrong?" He asked as he sat up, recognizing the voice and the worried face as Youngjae's.

"Enemy ship approaching. We're not sure what they want or how the situation will turn out, so wake up and be alert."

Jaebeom started at him in horror. When would the ocean stop trying to kill him?

"We... I...", Jaebeom stuttered, fear robbing him of his ability to speak.

"You stay under the deck. You can't fight and it'll be the safest place for you." He made sure to look Jaebeom in the eye. "Do not move from down here until own of use come and tell you it's safe"

Jaebeom swallowed. "And if you never come?" He whispered.

Youngjae was silent for a moment before pushing a sword into Jaebeom's hands. "Then you fight like your life depends on it. Because it will."

Jaebeom took the sword with trembling hands and watched as Youngjae sprinted back up the stairs. He could hear voices from above, but they were far too muted to make out who was speaking, nevermind what they were saying.

Jaebeom was relieved that he was being told to stay under the deck, but as the minutes creeped by, Jaebeom had nothing to do but let his mind wander to all the worst possible scenarios which ended with him dead in all kinds of horrible ways.

He knew he couldn't be on the deck with the rest of the crew. He'd had all of two days of sword training and if put in any actual combat would probably be dead before he managed to get a good grip on his weapon. He knew he was safer where he was, but the silence and the waiting and the not knowing was terrifying.

His mind kept going over what had happened to Bambam. What had happened to Jackson. How if anything happened the crew, Jaebeom could find himself prisoner on someone else's ship for years, especially if they somehow figured out he was a doctor, that he had value. He'd spent so many years trying to escape his father that the thought he could be held captive by new monsters was unfathomable.
He may not have any ability to protect himself with a sword, but he was far from defenseless.

He turned and opened his trunk as quietly as he could, until he pulled the inconspicuous white envelope out of the pocket of one of his pants. Hemlock. Only a few seeds, but more than enough to kill an adult. He didn't even know why he bought it back in Taiwan. Perhaps desperate to have something that he could defend himself with after spending two weeks learning how terrible human beings could be. Their stories had only made Jaebeom realize how defenseless he really was and herbs were the only weapon he really understood.

Shaking out a few seeds Jaebeom slid them through the stitches of his sleeve, the same place where he used to keep his mother's earring. He was somewhat disturbed to find that it gave him a similar kind of comfort, but when he heard sounds climbing up the side of the ship, realizing a moment later that they were being boarded, that he was glad he had something.

He sat and waited, every muscle tense as he heard his crew clash with the invaders, swords clanging and voices shouting unintelligible things.

Jaebeom's heart stopped when he heard an anguished cry in a voice he recognized. Bambam. He'd heard sounds like that before. That wasn't a grunt or effort or victory. That was an expression of pain.

Bambam was hurt.

He hurried up the stairs, eying the sword in his hands before just tossing it aside. It was next to useless in his hands anyways.

He pushed open the door and took a second to scan through the dozen or so foreign bodies and the absolute chaos on the deck to find Bambam. He was leaning against the mast, one hand wrapped around himself to cover a red stain on his abdomen, his other hand desperately fighting off the enemy that was still trying to kill him

Carefully running around Mark and his opponent, Jaebeom used his size to his advantage and took Bambam's opponent by surprised pushing him as hard as he could until the guy hit the railing and flipped overboard.

Dodging a vicious swing of Jackson's blade, Jaebeom took the two steps back to Bambam, picking him up roughly, ignoring the boy's pained noises. He turned and hightailed it back into the cabin, making the snap decision that despite being darker, it was safer to bring Bambam downstairs where there was a smaller risk of him being interrupted mid procedure.

He set Bambam on the table and moved quickly to get a lantern.

"Hyung," Bambam whimpered. "I don't want to die."

"You won't." Jaebeom said firmly, lighting the lantern and carrying it back to the table where Bambam lay, his shirt more red than white at this point.

Jaebeom swore internally and dashed back upstairs, grabbing the wooden box of medical supplies and returning to Bambam, who was weakly pressing against his side, fingers stained with blood.

He took one of the bandages and rolled it up. "This will hurt. Bite on this when the pain gets too bad."

Bambam opened his mouth and allowed Jaebeom to insert it between his teeth.
Without wasting any more time, he took a knife and cut a slit in Bambam's shirt, using his hands to tear it off the rest of the way. It was a testament to how badly Bambam was injured that he didn't make a comment about Jaebeom destroying his clothes.

Footsteps tumbled down the stairs as Jaebeom knelt on the bench, leaning closer for a better look at the injury. "Is he okay? Oh my god, oh my god, there is so much blood. Oh my god."

Jaebeom heard the hysteria in their youngest’s voice and he swore softly. Jaebeom did not need Bambam panicking. The more he panicked the faster his heart would beat, and the faster his heart best the faster he'd lose blood. And he was already losing far more than Jaebeom was comfortable with given that he only had access to the bare minimum medical supplies and equipment.

"Yugyeom," he snapped, using a tone he'd never come close to using on the younger before. "If you're down here you are going to shut your mouth, say nothing, and do whatever I ask. Can you do that? Because if you can't then get the hell off this deck."

He only caught a brief glance at the utter shock on Yugyeom's face before turning back to Bambam. He grabbed a bottle of rum and poured it on the wound, ignoring Bambam's absolute howl of pain. He knew from experience how much that hurt, but there was nothing Jaebeom could do. He needed to clean the blood off so he could see the extent of the damage and the rum would also act as something of a disinfectant.

He held the lantern closer and leaned in to get a better idea of what he was working with. The slice was larger than Jaebeom had thought, just over the width of his palm and went on an angle from the bottom of the boy’s rib cage toward his navel. It was sliced cleanly and was deeper than Jaebeom would have liked but the current conditions made it virtually impossible for him to do any in depth surgery. He didn't have the right tools or lighting of any of his books that he'd need to ensure he was properly caring for whatever damaged organs Bambam might have had. If he tried with the materials he had available it was very likely he'd either cause further damage or contaminate the injury with god only knew what kinds of bacteria which would very likely end up killing Bambam anyway. Jaebeom would have to just stitch him closed and hope for the best.

He set down the lantern and grabbed the tools he’d need next from the medical kit, thanking the heavens for at least having the decency to hold off Bambam’s injury until after Jaebeom had been able to properly medically stock this ship. The first thing he grabbed was the thread: silk and treated with wax to ensure it slid through the skin smoothly and easily, scissors with flattened tips that would help him control the needle—it was sharp as all hell and rather small and he didn’t handle unless he had to lest he stab himself or drop it and contaminate it with bacteria. The needles used for sutures were not like the ones used in sewing: small and curved, it could probably wrap about halfway around his finger.

He used the scissors to pick up the needle, his hand steady was he held them up to the light to see the eye better to thread it properly.

"Hold the light for me," he ordered Yugyeom as he moved to stitch the incision closed.

Yugyeom did as ordered, holding the lantern above his friend.

Jaebeom hesitated before adding softly, "You might want to close your eyes too; this won't be pretty."

He didn't know if Yugeyom listened to that piece of advice or not, but he didn’t turn around to find out.
"Bambam, I'm going to stitch you closed now. It will hurt and I'm sorry about that, but I have to stop the blood flow and the is the easiest way."

Bambam pulled the cloth out of his mouth, grabbed the rum that Jaebeom had left on the table beside him and took several swallows. "Go ahead," he said, shoving the bandage back between teeth and bracing himself.

Jaebeom didn't wait another moment, sliding the needle through Bambam's skin quickly and with a familiarity that surprised Jaebeom. He hadn't had to sew sutures in years, and it he'd never done it for a wound this severe, but it looked like all the practice his father had him do on pillows was actually worth something. A few times his father had asked the butcher to let Jaebeom practice on some of the pigs before they were cut up which, at twelve, had horrified him, but he was loath to admit that it actually helped when faced with real skin. His father might have been a horrible human being, but apparently he was a decent teacher.

Shallow stitches, too deep could risk interfering with tendon or muscle. His father's voice can unbidden into Jaebeom's head. But not too shallow that the skin will tear and the stitches will come out. Not too far apart or they will pull at the skin too much and cause irritation. But not too close together or the wound won't drain properly.

It might have been the first time Jaebeom welcomed the sound of his father’s voice. He clung to it, pretending that he was sewing nothing more significant than a pillow and pretending like it wasn't Bambam's abdomen that he was lining with neat, clean individual little knots of thread, wiping it with a cloth before every new stitch—and the occasional splash of rum—so that he could see it clearly to ensure proper spacing and depth of his stitches.

He set the needle aside and grabbed the light from Yugyeom, seeing that the boy had indeed closed his eyes as Jaebeom cautioned. He inspected them closely, ensuring none were pulling too hard, that the skin was meeting properly and that none of them needed to be redone. They looked near perfect and Jaebeom was honestly a little impressed with himself and his work given the shitty conditions that he’d been made to work in.

"You’re closed Bambam," Jaebeom said, setting the light down and turning to the boy.

Bambam had his face screwed up tightly and his eyes closed and he only moaned weakly in response. Jaebeom’s heart went out to the kid; he must be in agony.

Jaebeom turned and grabbed the bandages and the Yarrow. "I need water Yugyeom."

The boy set down the lantern and ran upstairs without another word.

"You did well, Bambam," Jaebeom said as he prepared the bandages. "I knew that had to be painful."

Bambam didn't answer as Yugyeom appeared with a cup of water. Jaebeom used only a few drops to make a paste out of the dried and chopped Yarrow, smearing it across the entire wound. It would help with blood clotting to stop the bleeding and was anti-bacterial which would prevent infection. He took one of the bandages that he’d folded into a square which he placed on top of the wound before having Yugyeom hold Bambam up slightly so Jaebeom could wrap more bandages around his torso a few times, tying the ends securely.

"You’re done Bambam," Jaebeom said gently.

"I hate you," Bambam said weakly through gritted teeth, his eyes still closed and his skin pale even.
in the candlelight. “Never speak to me again.”

Jaebeom wanted to smile at the kid’s snark, but the sheen of sweat that covered the boy’s brow was a bit concerning. Jaebeom hoped it was just in response to the pain but it was something that he’d need to keep a close eye on.

It was only then, after his job was finished, that he realized that someone had joined them under the deck. Jackson was leaning in the shadows against the wall at the base of the stairs, his eyes intense as he stared at Jaebeom.

He was absolutely covered in blood.

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Bambam’s cry was the sound that ended up sentencing everyone on Jackson’s ship to death. He usually didn’t try to kill; already having taken more than his share of human life, Jackson always tried to wound, to disarm, to disembark or to distract anyone who he fought with. It was a general rule for his crew too; life was precious and even if they were trying to take yours it didn’t mean you had to return the favor. Everyone had something they were fighting for and not all of them were evil and deserved to die.

But his crew was the line that Jackson would cross over and over again. He would kill hundreds if he had to to ensure the safety of his men. Clenching his jaw, Jackson gripped his sword more tightly and changed tactics, no longer trying to defend himself but inflict as much damage to as many people as he could. Jackson didn’t count the bodies, didn’t want to know, his attention solely on not putting his crew in harm’s way as he single handedly eliminated all threats to his people. He heard a splash and hoped they had chosen to flee.

When no one else approached him, Jackson paused and did a headcount of those of his crew still standing. Three? His heart skipped; that was a significantly lower number than they’d started with.

Jinyoung stepped forward, stepping over a body that lay across the deck. “Jaebeom took Bambam below deck. Yugyeom went with them,” he explained carefully.

Jackson exhaled before turning and evaluating what the other ship was doing, how they were responding to the loss of their crew. The captain was just standing there, staring.

Jackson crossed to the railing opposite him. “Send more if you want, they’ll die too,” he warned, barely recognizing the growl in his voice.

There was a moment of what seemed to be hesitation. “I was not expecting you to slaughter half my crew,” he said calmly, clearly having had no attachment to the men that now lay slain on the deck of Jackson’s ship. “That is not the reputation that proceeds you Captain Wang.”

Jackson knew that his crew had a reputation of being weak, but he was equally glad that he was capable of proving them wrong. His men weren’t weak, they were just kind. While he was proud of their kindness, weakness was a dangerous thing to be seen as on the seas; it made you an easy target.

"Just because I don’t kill people does not mean that I can’t," Jackson replied. “Your men hurt one of mine. That calls for a different set of rules. My crew are not expendable, unlike yours seem to be.” He noticed the uneasy shuffling of some of the men gathered on the deck of the opposite ship. “Your move, Captain,” Jackson said. "I don't want to fight with you, but I will if you make me."

This is where it could get dicey. Usually pirates didn't fight ship-to-ship given that the main reason
for attacking another vessel was to either gain access to the wealth they were carrying or because they wanted the ship itself.

But now that Jackson had made it clear he wasn't surrenderring his ship or his goods, there was nothing stopping the other captain from blowing holes in his ship, sending it and all Jackson's crew to the bottom of the ocean.

Bambam was their gunner and given that he was injured that left them at yet another tactical disadvantage. Still, at this distance Mark and Youngjae would surely be able to get a few hits in which the other captain was no doubt considering before making his choice. He'd already lost half his crew. Was he willing to risk losing his ship too?

"We withdraw," he said eventually, Jackson breathing a silent sigh of relief. He stood where he was long enough to ensure that the other ship was indeed retreating before turning his back on them.

He wanted to ask about Ching Shih, but now wasn't the time or the place. Jackson had gotten what he wanted, a withdrawal, he wasn't going to do anything to reengage the captain's attention.

His heart sunk at the bodies that littered the deck and the blood that stained the planks. He had done that. He had taken all those lives. "Please get them off my ship," Jackson murmured to Jinyoung before heading down under the deck, praying for some good news about Bambam.

His footsteps faltered in surprise when he got into the living quarters and found Jaebeom working with medical tools Jackson didn't even know they had on board with ease as he focussed on closing an alarming looking gash across Bambam's stomach.

Watching Jaebeom work was extraordinary. Jackson had never seen this side of Jaebeom before. The Jaebeom he knew was hesitant and slightly nervous, was aware of all he was lacking and always seemed a bit meek and unsure. But as Jackson watched him move with skill and precision Jackson realized that Jaebeom was none of those things; he'd just never seen Jaebeom in his element before. This was what Jaebeom was good at, where he was confident and self-assured in a way Jackson had never seen before.

His movements were sharp and precise and so quick Jackson barely caught half of what he did. His fingers worked scissors, thread and needle fluidly in between mopping up blood as he worked to stitch Bambam together again. Just by looking at him Jackson had every confidence that if Bambam could be saved, Jaebeom would save him.

Jaebeom looked worried however as the final wrappings were tied, but he quickly hid his expression when he realized Jackson was there, his jaw dropping as he took in Jackson's state.

"Will he be alright?" Yugyeom asked, pulling Jaebeom's attention to him instead.

Jaebeom looked conflicted, before eventually giving a small nod. "I think he has a good chance." He turned to Jackson. "Are you okay?" He questioned clearly concerned as his eyes took in Jackson’s clothes.

"Fine," Jackson replied quietly. "The blood isn’t mine."

Jaebeom’s expression shifted into something dark that Jackson couldn't name but didn’t like before he turned back to Bambam. "We should get him off the table. He needs to rest.” He glanced at the hammocks swaying slightly with the movement of the ship. “But not in a hammock.”

“I’ll set up the bed in the captain’s quarters,” Jackson said before heading up the stairs without
waiting for a response. It didn’t take long to move everything off the bed and onto the floor. He was putting clean bedding on when Jaebeom appeared at the top of the stairs, carefully carrying Bambam in his arms. Without his shirt on and compared to Jaebeom’s breadth Bambam looked so small. Jackson’s chest tightened but he pushed it aside as he helped Jaebeom settle the boy onto the bed, trying not to notice the clamminess of his skin or how the bandage Jaebeom had just tied was already slightly stained with red.

“He shouldn’t be alone,” Jaebeom said. “Not until I know he’s okay.”

“I’ll stay with him,” Yugyeom said in a tone that made it clear that neither of them should argue with him.

They didn’t. Jaebeom retreated but stood just outside the door, a frown on his face as he looked like he wasn’t quite sure what to do with himself.

"Come," Jackson said softly. "I'll help you clean yourself up."

Jaebeom looked down, seemingly surprised to find his clothes soaked in blood, his skin stained as well.

He looked back up at Jackson for a moment before nodding. "Okay."

They stepped out onto the deck and Jaebeom stopped in his tracks, probably horrified at the sight in front of him. Jackson braced himself for the hatred, the disgust, that Jaebeom was no doubt about to send his way.

"Are any of them still alive?" Jaebeom asked quietly.

Jackson didn't know. Didn't bother to check.

"One," Jinyoung said, pointing to a sailor next to the steering wheel.

Jaebeom crossed and immediately knelt next to him, seemingly uncaring as blood soaked threw the knees of his pants, his hands methodically moving the soldier to investigate his wounds before placing his fingers on the man's neck, his expression serious. He pulled away a moment later and shook his head. "Too much blood loss. Pulse is too faint. I can't help him."

He got to his feet and walked back to Jackson, his expression carefully blank.

He led Jaebeom around to the walkway behind the cabin, picking up the bucket hanging on the wall along the way. The bucket had a long rope attached to it so the crew could throw it overboard and collect seawater if they needed to wash off a little. Once Jaebeom was seated Jackson tossed the bucket into the sea, pulling it up a moment later and sitting beside Jaebeom.

"So you're a doctor," Jackson asked, gently taking one of Jaebeom's hands and dipping it in the water, using his own bloodstained fingers to carefully wipe off any blood that had started drying on Jaebeom's. His own hands didn't matter. His hands took life. Jaebeom's gave it back. His should be the priority.

He didn't phrase his words as a question because Jackson already knew the answer. There was no way a person could have done what Jaebeom had with the speed and composure that Jackson had witnessed if they weren't trained.

Jaebeom nodded. "Yeah," he agreed.
It was strange, Jackson thought as he pulled the hand out and inspected it, satisfied that it was clean for now and taking Jaebeom's other hand for the same treatment. Doctors were very highly respected. It was something Jackson had seen in every country he'd been to. Health was the most important thing and people who could heal you when sick or injured were usually revered, rich, or both. Why Jaebeom would be so desperate to run away from that life was puzzling.

"Thank you for saving him," Jackson said quietly, squeezing Jaebeom's fingers before releasing his hand and dumping the bloody water in the bucket, tossing the bucket overboard once again to refill it with clean water.

"Don't thank me yet," Jaebeom murmured.

Jackson felt sick. "You told Yugyeom that he'd make it." He wondered if his tone sounded accusatory to Jaebeom as it did to his own ears.

"I think he'll be okay. I hope he'll be okay," Jaebeom corrected. "But the fact still remains that the bottom of a ship is not a safe or easy place to do surgery. I did my best but I don't know if it will be enough. I don't know yet if he has serious internal bleeding. Or if he'll get an infection. He won't die right now, but I can't guarantee you anything for the long-term."

Jaebeom's expression was strained and his eyes were anxious as he looked up at Jackson. "I don't know if I did enough."

Jackson swallowed thickly. One of them dying was always a possibility and Jackson had always understood that. But why now? Why Bambam? Not that any of the others would be easier to lose, but Bambam was different. Bambam was like a brother to him. Jackson had no idea how he was going to survive losing another brother.

"You did do enough," he said quietly conscious of the fact that Bambam was just on the other side of the wall and could possibly hear them. "You did more than enough. Even if it wasn't enough to save his life." He looked at Jaebeom seriously. "Would he still be alive right now if you hadn't been here? If he'd fallen to the floor of the deck and we'd been on our own?"

Jaebeom looked pained. "I don't know, do any of you have any healing knowledge?"

"Not to any real degree, no," Jackson replied. Mark was usually the one they went to if they got hurt, but after seeing Jaebeom work earlier Jackson realized how helpless they really were in the face of an actual life-threatening injury. He hadn't realized how lucky they'd been up till now.

"Then it's possible he might not be," Jaebeom conceded. "At the very least he likely wouldn't be conscious."

"Then you gave us something almost as valuable as his life. You gave us time. Time to say goodbye. Time to—" Jackson's throat closed up so tightly that he needed to clear his throat and try again. "Time to get him home to his mom." His voice broke and tears slipped from his eyes.

Jaebeom stood and carefully pulled Jackson into his arms.

God Jackson hated crying. He'd cried for like a week straight after his parents were killed and then hadn't cried since. He told himself crying was stupid and useless and because it didn't actually solve anything it was a utter waste of time.

"I'm sorry Jackson-ah," Jaebeom said softly, his voice almost as warm as his embrace.

Fuck it.
Jackson was exhausted. He'd taken too many lives today and Bambam might be losing his. Jackson couldn't fix any of that no matter how hard he tried so it wasn't like crying was going to make anything worse.

He leaned into Jaebeom's shoulder, accepted the comfort and security that Jaebeom was offering, and let himself cry.

Chapter End Notes

For those of who you skipped: Bambam was injured in the attack on the Ahgase (a deep wound on his stomach) and Jaebeom stitched him closed. They now know he's a doctor and Bambam's fate is hopeful but uncertain. After hearing Bambam get hurt Jackson killed all the enemies on board, Jaebeom saw the aftermath.

Sorry Bam, but you all probably knew this (or something like this) was coming. It is a pirate fic after all. You'll find out his fate in the next chapter.

Suture needles really do look like that if you've never had any. They're small and curved to make it easier to go through skin. I did not know that before writing this fic.

Also I think I may switch to once a week update. I don't have time on weeknights to posts consistently. So Sunday will be update day moving forward.
Chapter 13

Jaebeom's back was killing him and it was entirely Bambam's fault.

A few days had passed and Jaebeom was now almost certain Bambam would be just fine. His wound was healing well. It had some discharge that Jaebeom was keeping his eye on, but there was no serious discoloration of the surrounding skin or veins that would indicate blood poisoning. Jaebeom hadn't been able to find any signs of internal bleeding either. He still had a low-grade fever but he suspected that was from Bambam's body fighting off a minor infection. As long as it didn't spike, Jaebeom wasn't too concerned about it, though the longer it lasted the more concerning it would become.

Bambam had been remarkably lucky.

The most pressing issue for Jaebeom at the moment was his own back. He'd spent the last five nights sleeping on the floor of the captain's quarters next to Bambam, making sure he was okay and helping him if he needed anything in the night. The floor probably did a number on his spine alone but carrying Bambam around Bangkok for over an hour now was really not helping.

Bangkok wasn't located right next to the coast and even though they'd taken a ferry up the Chao Phraya River into the heart of Bangkok, Bambam still wasn't strong enough to walk the hour or so from the docks to where Bambam's family lived.

Jaebeom had been voted the lucky one to carry him due to his broad shoulders and the fact that the others were too afraid to touch Bambam in case they hurt him. At first Jaebeom had thought it'd be easy since Bambam weighed next to nothing. But half an hour in and Jaebeom was about ready to drop him on the side of the road, injury or no injury.

Until someone shouted Bambam's name and Jaebeom whirled around, his hands tightening on Bambam's thighs in case he needed to run away or something.

It took a moment of scanning the crowd until they all noticed the man running down the street toward them.

Jaebeom winced as Bambam started shouting at them, reaching his arms out as he waved.

"Bambam's brother," Mark said from next to Jaebeom. "I'm not sure which one though."

"It's Bank," Jackson said from Jaebeom's other side, smiling warmly as Bambam's brother stopped in front of him, his joy at seeing his little brother obvious as the two spoke rapidly in Thai with one another.

His brother's joy lasted until his attention turned to Jaebeom and no doubt questions about why Bambam was getting a free ride around the city. Jaebeom could see his expression drop, worry replacing the happiness that had lit up his face a moment ago. Jaebeom heard his own name from Bambam's lips as Bank turned his gaze to meet Jaebeom's.

"Thank you," he said, surprising Jaebeom by speaking rough Korean as he bowed down low in thanks.
Bambam squeezed Jaebeom a little tighter and said quietly in his ear, "Yeah, thank you hyung. I don't think I've thanked you yet."

Jaebeom smiled. "It's not something you need to thank me for. I'm glad I was there." He paused. "Just don't let it happen again you little shit."

Bambam laughed and agreed.

Bank straightened and said something to his brother.

"He's asking if you want him to carry me." Bambam translated.

"Oh, god, yes," Jaebeom replied immediately, making the others around him chuckle.

It didn't take long for Bambam to get transferred onto his brothers back, Jaebeom double-checking to make sure that his wound wasn't compromised before they were off once again towards Bambam's home.

Jaebeom kept glancing over at Bambam, initially just to make sure he was comfortable and not in pain, but later just because it was really sweet to see Bambam with his brother. Every so often Bambam would snuggle closer, resting his cheek against his brother's as they chatted with one another.

Jaebeom didn't have any siblings. He used to be happy about it because he didn't want anyone else to be exposed to the unique horror that was his father, but watching the two brothers just talk and interact with one another, and reflecting on the stories he'd heard from the other crew members about their love and affection for their siblings, Jaebeom was starting to realize that by being an only child he'd really missed out on an incredibly special bond.

They arrived at Bambam's house shortly after that, Bank setting Bambam down in the entryway before going further inside to find their mother.

"This is where you grew up?" Jaebeom asked, looking around at the house. It was cozy and nicely made up, but quite small. Jaebeom couldn't picture five people living in a house this size.

A woman's voice came from down the hall, making Bambam flinch and his face light up all at the same time. Before a small woman came charging down the hall.

There was no doubt this woman was Bambam's mother. Bambam didn't directly inherit any of his mom's features, except perhaps her eyes, but the resemblance between the two was unmissable. She was a tiny woman, barely even coming up to Bambam's shoulders, just a bit on the plump side, but she exuded warmth as she came down the hallway, her eyes only on her son.

Bank trailed behind her and caught her shoulder with a few murmured words before she could grab Bambam and hug him around the waist, which would have no doubt been excruciating for Bambam.

It was awful watching the sunny, joyous smile slide from her face, stark worry and fear replacing it and she cupped Bambam's face with tears in her eyes as they roamed over him, probably looking for injuries. Bambam answered her and lightly pressed a hand over the bandages covering his wound.

Instantly they were being ushered inside the house into a small living room that wasn't really big enough for all seven of the crew, plus Bambam's mom and brother, but they all seemed to spread out enough to make it work.
Once Bambam was settled, Bambam's mom turned to Jackson, her expression stern as it looked like she was scolding him, ignoring Bambam's whines as he tried to pull her away.

Jackson merely ducked his head, accepting whatever she said without question—though Jaebeom wondered how much of it Jackson actually understood. She finished off her lecture by pulling Jackson in for a hug too, holding him almost as close as she had Bambam when she figured out a safe place to put her arms.

Jackson smiled a little and dropped his face into her shoulder briefly before pulling away.

Bambam's mother insisted on seeing Bambam's wound, making him roll his eyes but he obliged without question. Her expression was pained as her fingers ghosted along the skin beside the neat row of stitches that Jaebeom would remove in a few days.

Once again Jaebeom heard his name mentioned, Bambam pointing to him a moment later when his mom looked around at the crew. His eyes widened as she made her way over to the corner he had hidden himself in before wrapping her arms tightly around his waist.

Jaebeom stiffened a little in surprise and awkwardly placed his arms around her shoulders, patting her back a little as he looked around at the crew who were all looking on with varying degrees of fondness and amusement.

It only got more chaotic as evening progressed and the rest of Bambam's family arrived. His sister Baby came home with their second oldest brother Bank, followed soon after by their oldest brother Beer, his wife and their newborn son Gent. They had apparently decided that Jaebeom was some kind of hero and, while Jaebeom usually enjoyed seeing the appreciation on family members' faces, he was frankly completely overwhelmed by the attention.

He was also overwhelmed by the sheer number of people they managed to squeeze into the house. It was not big but somehow they managed to squeeze in twelve adults and a baby. And all of the Bhuwakul siblings were every bit as outgoing and boisterous as Bambam. They were constantly being scolded by their mother—and Beer's wife—when all their laughter and noise woke the baby resting on Bambam's lap.

Still, it was kind of nice. The last few days on the ship hadn’t been great. They were all worried about Bambam and Jaebeom was also worried about Jackson, about the haunted look he’d had in his eyes that night and the toll that all the lives he’d had to take would take on him. Even surrounded by all the laughter in and love in the Bhuwakul house Jackson still seemed subdued. He’d join in when spoken to, but when he wasn’t being pulled into the conversation he just sat back, watching everyone with what Jaebeom could only describe as a bittersweet expression on his face.

Jaebeom was almost more worried about Jackson than he was about Bambam. Bambam had surprised Jaebeom by being the perfect patient, following all of Jaebeom’s rules and doing exactly what he was told. Bambam would be just fine.

But Jackson? Jaebeom wasn’t sure he could fix what was wrong with Jackson. But if Jackson let him, he was going to try.

⚓

Jackson had such mixed feelings about Thailand. On the surface, he loved it. The island was beautiful, the food was amazing and Bambam's family were there.
Bambam's mom, had apparently decided that mothering four children all by herself wasn't enough because once she found out that Jackson's crew essentially didn't have parents she decided to adopt five more. Jackson loved her for that. Loved her for embracing a ragtag group of pirates with such openness and genuine love.

It was so nice to see the younger members of his crew just flourish under her maternal affections, making Jackson realize how much they missed out not having their own any longer. Even Jinyoung adored Mama Bhuwakul, helping her in any way he could and even getting her things from abroad to spoil her with, happily accepting home-cooked meals and hugs in return. Jinyoung might be a sarcastic shit ninety percent of time, but he had so much love to give and nothing made him happier than taking care of the people that were important to him.

But at the same time as Jackson loved it, he wished she didn't have to. Watching Yugyeom blush like a little kid and hide his face in her shoulder, her running her fingers fondly through his hair, only reminded Jackson that Yugyeom hadn't had the childhood he should have. Reminded him that he didn't have the childhood he should have.

He was more grateful for Kochakorn Bhuwakul than he could express: grateful that she had opened her home and her heart so fully to Jackson and his crew. But being around her made him ache because of how much he missed his own mother and a part of him felt like he was betraying his mom by accepting all the love and comfort that Mama Bhuwakul offered so freely.

Jaebeom appeared to be her new favourite among the crew. Maybe because he saved her son, or perhaps because he was new and she wanted him to feel comfortable, but she doted on Jaebeom from the moment Bambam had explained who he was and how he had saved Bambam's life.

Jaebeom looked like he didn't quite know what to do with all the attention, something Jackson could definitely sympathize with. It was hard to go from receiving nothing but anger and harsh words to genuine kindness and love. It was good for him though, Jackson thought. He had a feeling that Jaebeom had gone a long time without receiving love.

⚓

Jackson couldn't sleep. Which was frustrating because he’d already gone for days on very little sleep, too worried about Bambam to be able to settle into sleep for long without jolting awake, either from a nightmare or just out of worry and the need to see him, to see the boy’s chest rising and falling as proof that he was still alive.

So now that Jaebeom no longer looked at Bambam with a worried frown, now that Bambam was home and was eating good nutritious foods and being absolutely spoiled by his family members Jackson should be able to sleep.

Youngjae snored loudly from next to him, Yugyeom echoing it a moment later with one of his own which made Jackson chuckle quietly. There was a reason Jackson usually slept during the day instead of at night. There was a reason Jackson always got a room for himself when they were on land. Four out of the seven members of his crew snored. Bambam often talked in his sleep and Youngjae even sang in his sleep sometimes. He loved them all dearly, but they were almost as loud when they were asleep as they were awake. Of course he could never complain about it because every time he tired they loved to point out that he snored louder than the rest of them put together.

Thailand was the one place where they didn’t stay at a hotel, partly because Bambam’s mom
wouldn’t allow it, but also because the crew themselves felt like this place was home and wouldn’t agree to it anyway. The problem with that was that the house was tiny. The same house Bambam had grown up in when his family had no money. Only two bedrooms, one where Bambam’s mom and his sister used to sleep, and the other where Bambam and his two brothers had slept. Now that they were all older and much more financially stable, Bambam’s older brothers had moved out and Baby had moved into the boys’ room. The house was fine for two people, but nine? Nine was too many.

Baby was back to sleeping on the floor of her mom’s room, Bambam was currently sleeping in her bed with Jaebeom and Mark on the floor of her room, Jinyoung, Youngjae, Yugyeom and Jackson were left to find space for themselves in the living room. They all loved it, and Jackson admitted that he loved it too, but they frankly had more personal space on the Ahgase.

Sighing, Jackson accepted that sleep was not going to happen for him tonight. He kicked off his half of the blanket he was sharing with Youngjae and got to his feet, tiptoeing over the sleeping bodies and out into the front yard. The family had a small stone courtyard, covered with plants of all different sizes—herbs that Kochakorn used in her restaurant and which filled the air with a unique blend of scents that Jackson associated with Thailand now. Surrounding the garden was a short stone fence, wide enough for Jackson to comfortably sit on. Which was exactly what he did, laying down on his back and looking up at the stars shining down on them.

Hydra was now visible, an indication that spring was fully upon them now. The long collection of stars formed a serpentine like figure across the sky, the largest of all the constellations. He’d hated it as a kid because it made no sense, just a line of various stars that people decided hundreds of years ago should be connected. His dad had to point them out for Jackson what must have been hundreds of times and even now Jackson still wasn’t sure he was looking at the right ones.

He still hated it now, but for very different reasons. When he was aboard Ching Shih’s ship Jackson was taken to dozens of different countries, most of which he’d never been to since. One of them was where Jackson met an astronomer who told him all kinds of stories, ones that his father hadn’t known. The hydra was said to be a mythical creature from Ancient Greece, one that was impossible to destroy because if you tried to cut off it’s head, two more grew back in its place. It reminded him of Ching Shih who was so protected and so hard to track down that it felt like Jackson was doing just that. He’d spend weeks tracking a credible lead only to get there and be faced with two more, all of which sent him in different directions. It was as frustrating it probably was for Hercules to face off against the legendary beast.

But the hydra was eventually overcome, and Jackson would eventually overcome this too. He’d eventually cut through all the heads to be able to find the heart and kill it.

"You still don't sleep I see."

Jackson felt a smile on his lips as he sat up, turning to see Bambam's mom stepping out of the house and walking over to where he was.

Jackson was fluent in basic Thai. There really wasn't much to do on a ship so after they'd taken in Bambam learning Thai seemed like a good idea. He was no expert, but he knew enough to communicate with Bambam's family and the locals while they were there.

He turned and looked to the east, surprised to find a sliver of light on the horizon. Bambam’s mother always got up early to go and collect fresh ingredients that she would then go and prepare for the restaurant for the day. Jackson hadn’t realized he’d been sitting there for so long. Or perhaps he hadn’t realized how long he’d lain awake for.
“Couldn’t take the snoring anymore,” Jackson said with a laugh.

A big smile spread across Kochakorn’s face. “I’ve missed having so much life in the house. It’s been so quiet since the boys moved out.”

“Well quiet is certainly not something you’ll ever get with us around,” Jackson said wryly.

Kochakorn chuckled. “I love it. You boys don’t come here often enough.”

That was unfortunately true. Thailand was beautiful, but it wasn’t exactly easy to get to or close to any of the places where Ching Shih—and therefore the crew—usually frequented. And that was Jackson’s fault. His smile slipped. “I’m sorry about that.”

Kochakorn sighed and shook her head, climbing up onto the fence to sit beside Jackson. "You look older," she said after a moment of studying him closely. Maybe too closely.

Jackson sent her a weak smile. "That's how time works," he replied.

She didn't smile back. "I'm talking about here," she said, reaching out and brushing her thumb beside his eye. "And perhaps here." She laid her hand on his chest, right over his heart. She looked conflicted for a moment before asking, “I hear you’re still looking for Ching Shih.”

“I am.” Jackson replied, waiting for the impending lecture about how he needed to move on with his life.

“Be careful,” she pleaded softly. “From what I’ve heard about her, it’s dangerous. And I can see how looking for her has changed you from the Jackson I first met all those years ago. I just… I know you won’t listen if I tell you to stop. So I won’t even try. I just want you to be more careful. I want all of you to be more careful.”

"Don't worry," Jackson said with a smile. "I'll do better at taking care of Bambam."

Kochakorn hummed. "I know you will, and I appreciate that." She looked at him seriously. "But I'm worried about who will take care of you."

Chapter End Notes

Honestly it's like you people don't even know me at all. You seriously thought that I'd KILL BAMBAM?! I am wounded! Sorry that this is a bit of a filler chapter, but the angst is coming in another chapter or two so I wanted to give you a bit of a pause to catch your breath after last chapter and before that comes your way. Hope you liked it and that you all have a fabulous week. See you next Sunday!

PS: belated congrats to Bambam's brother Beer and his wife on the birth of their son! He's adorable and the idea of Uncle Bambam is hilarious to me so I included him in this fic.
"You're healing well," Jaebeom announced, deciding to leave the bandages off for a little and let the wound breathe a little.

"Well, I have a really great doctor," Bambam said with a cheeky little grin.

Jaebeom felt himself smile back, ruffling the boy's hair as he got to his feet again. "You have really great luck is what you have," Jaebeom corrected fondly. "And you've also decimated my herb stock," he said sadly, looking at the now empty paper envelope that he'd brought with him that used to be filled with yarrow. He usually switched to aloe gel after a day or two with wounds, as a way to stimulate new skin growth, but Bambam's wound had been far more serious and had been showing signs of a minor infection and Jaebeom hadn't been willing to take the risk of removing the antibacterial paste.

"Sorry hyung," Bambam asked, pulling Jaebeom's attention back to him.

"Do you have an apothecary somewhere around here?" Jaebeom asked, moving to clean up all the stuff he had spread out over the floor next to the couch where Bambam had decided to lay for the day.

"There used to be one around the corner but I'm not sure if it's still there. You'll probably have to wait for my sister to come home and ask her," Bambam said. "Or you could go ask Beer; he works close by too."

Baby worked at the orphanage Jackson had set up in Thailand, along with one of Bambam's childhood friend Lalisa. She wouldn't be back anytime soon.

Beer had seemed nice. Helpful and attentive to the needs of his brother, wife, son and mother all at the same time. Jaebeom had a feeling that being the oldest son gave him an element of responsibility that the others didn't have; a paternal replacement of sorts. Even though he'd known the man all of three days, Jaebeom was certain that the oldest Bhuwakul brother would make an amazing father to his son Gent.

"Where does he work?" Jaebeom asked, packing up the supplies he'd been using and collecting the soiled gauze for disposal.

"At a woodworking shop just down the street," Bambam replied. "Like, ten houses away from us."

Jaebeom considered it. Going out alone was not an ideal situation, but it was really starting to seem like a childish fear. Jackson had sailed around the world, all by himself at fifteen. Jinyoung had willingly left home and fifteen as well. Hall, Bambam had tried to set out as a pirate at eleven for fucks sake. And Jaebeom was scared to walk down the street by himself?

No. He'd had enough of being afraid. He’d lived through ocean storms and survived an enemy attack. He could go shopping on his own for god’s sake.

“I’ll do that then,” he replied to Bambam, finishing putting all his things away before heading into Baby’s room where he was keeping his things. Bambam had given him a large sack of money a few days ago, payment for saving his life he'd said. Jaebeom had tried to refuse it, he had initially,
but the money had appeared in his bed later that night. He’d given it back, he did need payment—Bambam being alive was enough—but the sack kept appearing in his belongings until Jaebeom decided to just keep it.

Jaebeom frowned when he reached into the bottom of his bag and his fingers felt something far softer than anything he owned. He pulled out his clothes and his eyes landed on the clothing that Bambam had bought him in Taiwan what felt like months ago. He hadn't packed his own bag when they arrived in Thailand—Youngjae had helped him out since he was packing the herbs and medical supplies he'd need—and he hadn't made it to the bottom of his bag to realize they were in there.

He pulled them out as well as the money, the shirt soft and silky between his fingers as the leather of the pants supple and smooth. He'd never worn clothing made from either fabric before.

He'd truthfully never thought he'd actually wear them, but the warnings the crew had given him back in Taiwan were ringing in his ears. *You look like you can be easily taken advantage of.* He wasn't as naive as he had been back in Taiwan, but he was still in a new country that he didn't understand. Why wouldn't he use every available advantage to protect himself?

Without another thought, Jaebeom stripped out of his clothing and put on the new ones, surprised to find that they actually felt pretty good. He felt different in them and it wasn't the horrible discomfort he'd felt back in Taiwan when Bambam tried to dress him up. He felt more confident, strangely enough. Like somehow the clothes served as an armor of sorts. Clothing had never been something he thought twice about, functions merely for modesty and societal norms. But as he slid his hands over the smooth fabric over his thighs he wondered if that wasn't entirely true.

Without another thought, Jaebeom poured a couple of coins into this hand before putting the rest and his clothes back into his backpack and then stepping out of the room.

"Hey, looking good," Bambam said, a grin taking over his face as he looked at Jaebeom.

Jaebeom rolled his eyes. "To not get taken advantage of, right?"

Bambam's eyes softened and he nodded. "You've got this. You're a badass pirate now. You lived through a raid and everything."

"By hiding under the deck."

"No way," Bambam argued. "You should have seen yourself, running through the chaos, pushing your enemy right off the ship, like some kind of wild bull." His grin widened and he batted his eyelashes. "You're my hero."

Jaebeom snorted and crossed to the couch. "You'll be okay here on your own until Yugyeom and Youngjae get back?" He asked as he reached out towards Bambam's forehead, an action that seemed to have become a habit for him over the past week since the boy's injury. Bambam was used to it at this point too, actually leaning forwards into Jaebeom's touch in a way that reminded Jaebeom of a puppy.

"Better," Jaebeom replied, pulling his hand back. The crew had dispersed for the day, Bambam insisting that they go out and have some fun after being so worried about him for the past week. Jackson went out to find his informants, Youngjae and Yugeyom went out for massages and he didn't have a clue where Jinyoung and Mark wandered off to. Jaebeom wanted to go and explore Thailand as well, but he didn't want Bambam to be left alone, partly because he was a very social human being and enjoyed being in the company of others, but also because when Bambam was
bored he got reckless and Jaebeom wasn't about to let him undo all of Jaebeom's hard work.

"I'll be fine," Bambam answered. "I'll just take a nap. Could you open the window for me though?"

Jaebeom unlatched the window letting the warm spring air into the living room where it washed over Bambam as he laid on the couch.

"I'll be back soon. Don't move on your own yet unless it's an emergency."

"I know," Bambam said sleepily, his eyes falling shut.

"And for the record, a snack is *not* an emergency," Jaebeom clarified.

Bambam's lips twitched, but he didn't answer.

It was hot and humid in Thailand, tropical in a way that Jaebeom had never seen before but one that he absolutely adored. The silk shirt was loose and the fabric breathable and kept him cool, especially when the wind blew.

Beer’s woodworking studio wasn’t hard to miss and Jaebeom stepped into the store, the gentle hiss of sanding filling the air as Jaebeom’s eyes adjusted to the dim interior of the store. Beer was just inside, using sandpaper to smooth that looked like a stool on the table in front of him. He looked up and smiled when he noticed Jaebeom, dropping what he was working with and coming around the desk, saying hello in Korean. Jaebeom had learned that hello and thank you were about the extent of Beer’s Korean, which was fine because that was about the extent of Jaebeom’s newly acquired Thai.

Jaebeom stared at him for a moment, not really knowing how to ask for what he needed. “I need to find an apothecary to get more herbs for Bambam,” he said even though he knew it was useless and Beer wouldn’t understand anything other than his brother’s name.

Beer looked at him in worried confusion.

Jaebeom looked around, his gaze falling on a bouquet of flowers that had been set on Beer’s workstation. He crossed and plucked off a leaf from one of the flowers. “For Bambam,” he tried again.

Beer’s expression cleared and he nodded, turning and calling something to his co-worker who nodded and waved him out of the store, Jaebeom following close behind. They didn’t talk much, there wasn’t much of a point given that they shared two phrases between their combined languages. Luckily it was a short walk and Jaebeom heard the market long before he saw it: vendors calling out to shoppers, arguments between people, children complaining to their parents and just the general murmur of conversation that came with having so many people in the same space together. The market was huge, easily double the size of the one back in Taiwan and far busier. Jinyoung had told him that Bangkok was the main city in Thailand and that it served as the mid-way point between Easter and Western Asia. Jaebeom believed it looking at the amount of people milling around.

The apothecary was about halfway in, Beer making sure it was where Jaebeom needed to go before pointing back they way they came and saying something in Thai that Jaebeom assumed was ‘I need to go back to work now,’ so Jaebeom nodded and gestured for him to return, determined to do this one his own. He looked into the stall set up with bins filled with herbs and took a deep breath. *Here goes nothing.*
Jackson pulled the thick cord outside a large weight iron gate in front of a massive house in northern Bangkok, the clanging of a bell echoing from the other side before the sound of quick, light footsteps crossing the stone courtyard followed.

"Sorn," Jackson said, a soft smile for the young girl that stopped in front of the gate.

"Jackson," Sorn said with a big smile of her own. "It's been a long time." She opened the gate and pulled it open to allow Jackson entrance to the elegant courtyard, the lavish gardens and well trimmed bushes coming more into view.

"Too long," he agreed, looking up at the beautifully kept mansion in front of him. "Is the Young Master home?"

Sorn snorted gracelessly as she led him up the sweeping stone steps to the main door. "Don't let him hear you calling him that."

Jackson grinned. "Wouldn't dream of it."

The inside of the house was even more beautiful than the outside, all polished wood and antiques lining the walls. It wasn't overly done, not ostentatious or distasteful, but every room clearly showed how wealthy its owners were.

Sorn led him to a small sitting room. "Wait here, I'll go get him."

Jackson thanked her before taking a seat on a soft sofa in front of a fireplace. As beautiful as the house was, Jackson never really felt comfortable in it. His family hadn't been poor, but they had been far from rich. Most of his funds from pirating went to supporting the orphanages, leaving him with not all that much at the end of the day. To have so much money that you'd spent it on such frivolous things as chairs seemed so incomprehensible to Jackson. Surely a chair didn't need to have a gold trim and rubies embedded into the back in order to support someone's weight.

The door opened once more and Jackson smiled at the man who walked in. "Long time no see Nichkhun Buck Horvejkul."

"Jackson," the man said, crossing the room and immediately embracing Jackson warmly. Jackson allowed the hug, because he knew Nichkhun thought of him as something of a younger brother.

Jackson had met Nichkhun back in Vietnam almost six years ago. Nichkhun was the reason Jackson was able to escape Ching Shih. Yes, the storm has displaced them and weakened the crew enough for Jackson to slip through their fingers, but he never would have made it out of Vietnam without Nichkhun. Ching Shih had far too many informants and contacts who worked in the ports and Jackson surely would have been caught if he'd tried to take a merchant or passenger vessel. But not even Ching Shih's pirates would dare to raid the ship belonging to the young Thai Prince.

Not that Nichkhun was actually a prince, but his family was more than wealthy enough that he could be one. His family was known around Asia and Jackson would forever be grateful that Nichkhun had happened to be in Vietnam that day and that he’d been willing to take Jackson aboard—something that no other ship at the time would have done, unwilling to risk upsetting Ching Shih.

Having the Red Flag Fleet as your enemy was essentially a death sentence. Jackson had only survived this long because, even after all these years, Ching Shih didn’t want him dead. She still had illusions of him joining her. She didn't take him any more seriously than most people did.
regarding his mission to kill her.

Jackson had sailed with Nichkhun for several days before parting ways in Singapore, where Nichkhun had eventually stolen the Ahgase from and set out on his own. Nichkhun had been adamant before they parted that if Jackson ever needed anything, he was to go to Thailand and just ask for it. He gave Jackson a good deal of money before he left too—not enough to buy a ship, but enough for food and clothing and repairs that the Ahgase needed back in her early days. Nichkhun was the reason Jackson was where he was today, and for that Jackson would always be grateful.

"Come, it's almost lunchtime. You're staying, of course," Nichkhun said with a wide smile, leaving Jackson with no other option but to smile back and nod.

Nichkhun was always like this, to everyone. He always joked that his father was glad his older brother was nothing like Nichkhun because the family fortune would be squandered within a year of becoming head of the household. Jackson wasn't sure that giving it to people in need counted as squandering, but he figured it wasn't his place to comment.

The food was always incredible at the Hirvejkul household, even better than at House Bhuwakul—not that he'd ever tell Cochakorn that—and the company even more so. Despite being a bit flighty, Jackson liked Nichkhun. He was genuine in a way that most wealthy people were not. He always had the most fascinating stories that Jackson loved to listen to. Nichkhun complained that his life was boring, but Jackson was always enthralled by how differently they lived their lives. He liked spending an afternoon surrounded by riches and just forgetting about his own life, just for a little while.

But, of course, it could only last so long before Jackson reality came creeping in and showing its ugly face. Jackson could play pretend all he wanted, could envision himself in Nichkhun's shoes as the Young Prince of Thailand with no worries or cares, but eventually the bubble would burst and he'd have to step back into his own life. Lunch had been wonderful and the two had spent hours talking and catching up before Jackson felt that itch creeping up under his skin. This life wasn't his and he wasn't someone who had the luxury of lounging around with his friends all day. He'd come here for a reason.

He cleared his throat after a brief lull in the conversation. "I was told that Ching Shih had come to Thailand. Do you know anything about her trip?"

Nichkhun didn't look offended at all, in fact he laughed. "I was wondering how long you were going to wait before bringing her up," he chuckled. "That was probably a record for you."

Nichkhun was by no means a sailor and his family didn't own any operations by the sea, but because of Jackson Nichkhun hired several men who worked at the port to be informants. Solely for the purpose of helping Jackson achieve his goal.

"Do you know what she was doing here?" Jackson asked. Thailand was uncharacteristically far for Ching Shih, who usually kept to central or Eastern Asia. She usually didn't come to Thailand personally unless she needed to.

"Ah, that I don't know," Nichkhun replies, his face falling a little. "But I do know that she was here just over a month ago, that she stayed for about two weeks and that she sailed north. I heard from the men at the docks that her crew said something about going to Ang Thong."

"Ang Thong...," Jackson echoed. He'd never even heard of it before. "What was she doing up there?" That was also uncharacteristic of Ching Shih. She was safe at sea among her generals and her firepower. She ventured on shore frequently, but Jackson has only even seen her visit port
towns or those close to the coast.

Jackson was deeply unsettled now. Too many things didn't fit her pattern. Selling off the brothel in Taiwan, sailing to Thailand, travelling so far away from her ship. Something was wrong and it worried Jackson.

"Don't know," Nichkhun said ruefully. "I don't have any contacts that far north.

"How far north is it?" Jackson asked.

"A few days up the Chao Phraya River."

"Is the region known for anything in particular?"

Nichkhun shrugged. "Rice?"

Jackson sent him a look. Ching Shih did not travel inland for days for rice.

Nichkhun chuckled. "It used to be an army outpost. Now it's known for its temples and its handcrafts, their wickerwork and doll-making are exquisite."

Army outpost… Ching Shih was constantly under attack from militaries from all over the world. Maybe she was looking for some kind of strategy? She wouldn't go to law enforcement though, given that she was a pirate.

It didn't sit well with Jackson, but at least it was something.

"Any idea where she headed after that?" Jackson asked.

Nichkhun seemed surprised. "You really don't know," he marvelled. "I was sure someone would have told you. Your contacts are losing their touch."

"Nichkhun" Jackson snapped, impatient.

"She retired," Nichkhun said. "That was the word going through the port."

Jackson just stared at him, hardly daring to breathe. Retired. Retired. It didn't seem possible. The most powerful pirate in Asia just retired? For what purpose?

“Why?”

Nichkhun shrugged. “Not sure. She’s old, perhaps the strain of keeping an army of that size together was too hard on her. Perhaps there was some dissent in the ranks, questions of whether or not she was still fit for the role.”

Jackson waved off that idea. She wasn’t that old, in her early fifties. Jackson was certain that her age had nothing to do with her cunning or her ability to maintain control of her pirates.

“I heard she was in a rough battle a few months ago,” Nichkhun continued. “Maybe she threw in the towel before it got her killed.”

That was honestly far more likely. While in Taiwan Jackson had heard about her defeat. The Portuguese settlement in Macau had gone up against her in the mouth of the river between Hong Kong and Macau. He’d heard she’d lost over a dozen ships. Perhaps there had been some kind of a mutiny after all… That was the third defeat she’d suffered in recent months.
But still. Just giving up? That wasn't like her, no matter how many ships or men it cost her. She didn't care about things like that.

It was only then that the implications of her retirement really sunk in. If she was retired then she wasn't at sea. If she wasn't at sea then Jackson had her. She was a sitting duck. Without a ship or an army at her back, Jackson could stop this wild goose chase and actually find her now. Could actually achieve the goal he'd been living for for over a decade.

He reached out a hand and grabbed Nichkhun's arm. "Please tell me you know where she is."

Nichkhun smiled. "She's in Macau."

⚓

Jackson was all but running through the streets of Bangkok, desperate to get back to his crew, back to his ship to set sail for Macau immediately.

He didn’t care that, if it was true, there was no need to rush. If she was retired then she wasn’t going anywhere. They could stay for a few more days. But Jackson couldn’t. He couldn’t just sit there, knowing exactly where she was and pretend like he was having a good time, pretend like he was enjoying himself. Not when the only thing he’d wanted was just sitting there, ripe for the taking.

Not that Jackson expected this to be easy. Even in retirement, Ching Shih was probably one of the richest women in Asia. She undoubtedly had protection to keep her safe from the government and from rival pirates who would love nothing more than to end her life as well. Just because she was stationary didn’t mean she was vulnerable.

Bambam would have to stay here. Jackson wouldn’t take the boy into a battle like that, not when he was barely up and walking.

He was rapidly making a list of things that he needed to do, envisioning what it would be like to see her again after all this time, to pierce her heart with his sword, when a voice that distracted him.

A familiar voice and one that he wouldn't expect to hear in the market. Jaebeom.

Jackson slowed before stopping altogether as he looked around at the crowded market, but saw no one he recognized. Had he heard wrong? He could have sworn…

"Thank you."

Jackson turned in the direction of the voice and realized why he hadn't seen Jaebeom right away. He was dressed like a pirate: leather pants that clung to his thighs loosely. His rich purple silk shirt hung off his broad shoulders and chest. He'd tied up a portion of his hair with a string to pull it back off his face. In all honesty Jackson might not have even recognized him if he wasn't blushing as he allowed a Thai woman, who was obviously flirting with him, to slip a flower behind his ear, a purple one that matched his shirt.

Jackson smiled as he took in what he was seeing. Jaebeom had come so far from the man Jackson had met back in Incheon. Here he was, by himself, dressed as a pirate and talking with people who spoke a language Jaebeom didn't understand. He was carrying a cloth bag which meant that he'd already been here a while, and that he'd been able to communicate his needs to get whatever it was he'd wanted. He'd grown.

And for some reason Jackson was proud of him for that. Which he realized was kind of stupid because all Jaebeom had done was go shopping, but still. Jackson was proud of him.
The woman stepped a bit closer, nearly standing on Jaebeom’s toes, and put her hand on his arm and said something that Jackson couldn’t hear and Jaebeom no doubt couldn’t understand. Chuckling at the profoundly uncomfortable look on Jaebeom’s face, Jackson decided to put him out of his misery and called out to him from across the market.

Jaebeom looked at him with relief and retreated with a bow from the flirty woman and making his way to where Jackson stood.

“Making friends?” Jackson asked, grinning as he nodded at the flower that was still in Jaebeom’s hair.

“Shut up,” Jaebeom said, still blushing as he shook off the flower. “Any good news?” He asked as the two fell into step on their way back to Bambam’s.

Jackson felt the smile spread across his face. “I know exactly where she is. By this time next week, she’ll be dead.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for not updating last week, it was an absolutely crazy week for me and I didn't have time to write.
I hope that everyone is doing well. I know that it's a scary time in the world right now so I hope that everyone is keeping themselves safe to ensure that they don't get sick.
Please keep yourself informed about the risk in your area and for god's sake wash your hands.

See you next week♡
Chapter 15

Jaebeom had never seen Jackson like this before. Ever since he'd come back from Nichyun he had this…edge to him that he hadn't before. This almost manic energy.

The crew had packed up their things from Bangkok and said goodbye to Bambam's mother and were back on the Ahgase before the day was over, much to the disappointment of some of the crew, Jaebeom included. He would have loved to spend a few more days getting to know Thailand and Bambam's family.

He hadn't even realized that he was supposed to have stayed in Thailand until the shoreline was disappearing behind them. That was the deal. That he'd stay with them until Thailand.

So what was he still doing on their ship?

The answer to that was obvious. He cared for the crew far too much to leave them now. Any misgivings he had about being a pirate were smashed to pieces by his desire to stay with them. He belonged with them; the longer he spent with them the more he genuinely believed that. For better or worse, Im Jaebeom was now a pirate.

He heard voices from the cabin behind him, Bambam and Jinyoung from what he could hear. They'd tried to get Bambam to stay in Thailand. He needed to heal and had no business being on the ship if they were headed toward battle, but Bambam was having none of it. With steely eyes he informed them that if they tried to leave without him he'd chase them down, wound be damned, even if it killed him. They were not going to Macau without him.

The longer he witnessed Jackson the more he understood why Bambam wanted to be close by. It was unnerving the calm and single-minded focus Jackson had adopted, perching himself stop the base of the bowsprit at the front of the ship and just staring into the horizon, as if he could see her even from this distance.

Jaebeom was surprised by the almost... anticipatory look on Jackson’s face. Killing in the past had brought him no joy, Jaebeom had seen that for himself. He’d seen the unsettled look on Jackson’s face as he spoke about killing Bambam’s old crew. He’d seen the self-loathing on his face after the attack on the Ahgase. He’d never seen Jackson look excited about killing someone. It was deeply unsettling even though Jaebeom entirely understood what it felt like to want the person who killed your family to be dead.

He turned when he heard the cabin door open next to him. “Has he really never found her before?” Jaebeom asked as Jinyoung walked up behind him.

Jinyoung looked over at him worriedly. “Ching Shih?”

Jaebeom nodded. It seemed impossible that Jackson had been able to find a single person in all of Asia, but this was Jackson and somehow Jaebeom didn’t put anything out of Jackson’s capabilities.

“He’s found her twice before actually,” Jinyoung replied.

“Twice?” Jaebeom asked, surprised.
Jinyoung nodded and sighed heavily. “Once four years ago I think? It was just Jackson, Bambam and I then. It was honestly a total coincidence. We were in Korea and we didn’t even know that she was in the same city as us until we were getting ready to leave and one of the dock workers told us. Missed her by mere hours.” His expression darkened. “I’ve never seen Jackson as angry as he was that day. His anger… It's frightening.”

He shifted, as if uncomfortable. “Bambam and I actually talked about leaving him because in that moment we realized how obsessed he really was, how he genuinely believed that he was going to chase this woman across the seas and kill her. A woman who owned more ships and more men than the military of most of the Asian countries. We wanted no part in that. We believe that what happened to Jackson was horrible, of course it was. But revenge against a woman like Ching Shih just isn’t possible. Entire armies have faced her and lost. Three kids didn’t have a chance. We didn’t want to die.”

That seemed reasonable, if not a little heartbreaking. “why did you choose to stay?”

“We just couldn’t leave him. There is so much more to Jackson than just his hatred, even if he doesn’t see it himself. There is so much kindness in him, so much love and selflessness and bravery, and Bambam and I decided that we were going to protect that, that we were going to protect Jackson, even if that meant protecting him from himself.”

Jaebeom was glad. Glad that Jackson had people to protect him, glad that they'd kept him alive so that Jaebeom could meet him.

"Can he do it?" Jaebeom asked. He knew what the crew thought and what Jackson himself had said, but he had never been clear on whether or not all those words were just an exaggeration. "Is there a chance that he can actually do it?"

The look on Jinyoung's face was shattering. "Jackson is remarkably skilled, there is no denying that. But one remarkable fighter can't go up against an army of remarkable fighters and win. There's no way."

Jaebeom felt sick in the face of the stark fear Jinyoung was allowing him to see.

“We talked him out of it once. The second time he found her was when she was holding a meeting on an Indonesian island that is uninhabited and pirates often use for military-free meet ups. By chance we caught word of it and were close enough to make it by the date, but seeing how many ships were there, how many soldiers were in attendance, we knew that we didn’t stand a chance. Not even Jackson could argue with that. We waited offshore, hoping to catch her ship as she left and follow her, but we had to leave or risk being attacked in the end."

"Are you going to try and talk him out of this too?" Jaebeom asked.

Jinyoung shook his head. "I doubt it'd work. We had the overwhelming visual evidence on our side last time. We're not going to get that again here I think."

"So how are we going to stop Jackson from getting himself killed?"

Jinyoung turned away from Jackson finally and looked at Jaebeom. "I don't know."

⚓

Jaebeom couldn't sleep that night. He found himself wishing for another storm, another raid, anything that would waylay them and give the crew precious time to come up with something to get Jackson to change his mind, or at least to boost his chances of success. Jaebeom was hoping for
the latter because he'd seen the look in Jackson's eyes and he'd stood in Jackson's shoes. He knew what it was like to lose everything and he knew how far Jackson would go to avenge it.

There was no discussing him from this. Even if it cost him his life, Jackson was going to at least try.

He rolled over and closed his eyes, trying to push away his thoughts. Jaebeom was afraid. He was afraid because despite the infinite possibilities that were supposed to lie beyond the horizon, he feared that the only possibility lying beyond the horizon they were currently sailing into was death.

"You… You're not really serious about this…right?" A quiet voice asked from behind him.

Jackson turned to find Youngjae standing at his elbow, a worried frown on his face.

Jackson sent him a smile and turned around to climb off the bowsprite. "I think you know me well enough by now to be able to answer that question," he answered quietly.

Youngjae looked angry. "Why? Why are you doing this? You know you can't win."

Jackson knew that. He knew his crew couldn't go up against an army. Sure, it wouldn't be the full Red Flag Fleet; Jackson knew that there were several generals who would have jumped ship the moment Ching Shih announced she was retiring. But there were enough that Jackson was confident would have stayed, men who served Ching Shih and not just the leader of the Fleet.

Jackson was already trying to figure out how to ditch his crew when they arrived in Macau. They didn't deserve to die because of Jackson's obsession. He was willing to risk his own life to achieve his revenge, but he had no intention of putting the others in harm's way. He wasn't sure he'd forgive himself if anything happened to them because of his choices.

"I have to try," Jackson said quietly. "I have to."

"Jackson, I know her. I know her armies," Youngjae said urgently, stepping closer. "Or did you forget that I too have sailed on her ships?"

Jackson looked at the younger man. There was no way Jackson ever could have forgotten that. Youngjae had a heartbreakingly similar story to his own, except where Jackson was taken directly by Ching Shih to serve her and sail on her ship, Youngjae was taken by one of her top generals. Youngjae had an incredibly beautiful singing voice and had been taken for entertainment, sailing as a prisoner on board one of the Red Flag Fleet and expected to sing and impress the high ranking officials on the ship until Jackson had shot it down, searching for information on Ching Shih.

Neither of them knew what happened to Youngjae's family. He had been kidnapped while he was walking outside near his house. They all assumed that his family was alive, but by the time Youngjae had been rescued and Jackson tried to return him home, his parents and older brother had moved. The neighbours said they were so heartbroken over losing Youngjae that they had up and moved.

Last year Jackson had hired someone to go around looking for news of them, Korea wasn't that big and it seemed far more reasonable to find them than for him to find Ching Shih. But they were entirely unknown and unremarkable people, leading a simple life according to Youngjae. Quiet and unassuming. It was hard to get information on people who didn't leave an impact on people for them to be remembered by. He hadn't told Youngjae he'd done this because he didn't want to get
his hopes up, but Jackson was fairly confident they'd get news of their whereabouts eventually; they just hadn't been tracked down yet.

"You know that I haven't," Jackson said in a low voice. "That I would never forget what happened to you." He turned so he was facing the boy head on. "But you know what else I can't forget? The sound my mother made when Ching Shih slid her sword through my father's heart. The sight of their lifeless eyes as they stared at me. The smell of their blood as it soaked into the stones around me."

Jackson was somewhat comforted by Youngjae, by the fact that he understood more than the others about what Jackson had gone through. Yet at the same time it frustrated Jackson because the boy had no idea what Jackson had gone through. Kidnapped and kept prisoner, sure. Being kept by the Red Flag Fleet, yes. But Youngjae couldn't begin to understand what it felt like to be the reason his family was dead. To have experienced the mental torment of having someone remind him of that fact every day. So, yes, Youngjae understood what who Ching Shih was and how her ships operated better than the others, but he didn't really understand how Jackson felt any more than anyone else among his crew.

And that changed everything.

He didn't want to kill Ching Shih for kidnapping him. He didn't want Ching Shih dead because she kept him prisoner for four years. He wanted her dead for taking everything from him: his family, his home and his future. For taking Jackson away from him. He couldn't even remember what it felt like to be the old Jackson, to be Jia Er. That version of him had died the same day as his family.

Youngjae looked at him warily. "You really are crazy," he breathed.

Jackson almost laughed. The crew joked about Jackson being insane all the time, and Jackson played along because he was pretty sure they were right. Youngjae, bless his kind heart, had always tried to defend him, to stand up for him, using his knowledge and experience with Ching Shih and her operation to support his words. Despite all the evidence stacked against it, Youngjae had never truly believed that Jackson was insane.

Until seemingly this moment.

Jackson admitted that a part of him hurt as he watched understanding sink into Youngjae's eyes. He didn't want to let down the only person who believed in him. He wanted to be the person Youngjae thought he was; he wanted to be rational and realistic.

But he couldn't let this go. Didn't know how to let this go. How was he supposed to give up the only thing that had kept him going? That gave him a reason to want to live after his family died and everything he'd ever known had been ripped away from him?

Of course he didn't want to die, but he didn't want to live in a world where Ching Shih lived in mansion paid for with the blood of innocent people like his family.

"I'm sorry," was all he could think to say as Youngjae turned and walked back toward the cabin.

Days passed in a blur of his crew trying to talk him out of it, of pleas to make at least some kind of plan and pleas to just abandon this altogether. A part of Jackson was surprised. He had never been secretive about this. Every member of his crew knew this was his mission and the majority of their
travels were centered on gathering information. Why this was a surprise to them now was frankly baffling for Jackson. He'd played along and rolled his eyes at their jokes but he'd never hidden his true objective, his only objective.

Five days after they left Thailand a faint outline of the islands that surrounded Macau came into view and Jackson felt his heart speed up. He felt more alive than he had in years. Like his whole life had been leading to this moment.

*I'm here Ching Shih. And I'm coming for you.*

Chapter End Notes

You finally know Youngjae's story And we're coming up to the end of this story. About 5 chapters left to go.

I hope you all continue to remain healthy and well and that your loved ones are well too. See you next week.
They arrived in Macau in the evening, Jackson leaping from the ship the moment he felt they were close enough, running down the docks to no doubt ask around for Ching Shih’s whereabouts.

The atmosphere on the ship was awful. The tension and fear were obvious among the crew and Jaebeom was nearly itching with it. Nothing any of them had said had been able to dissuade Jackson, but Jaebeom had a feeling none of them were surprised. Jackson was nothing if not determined and Jaebeom didn’t think anything would stop him now.

He came back before any of them were really ready to hear what he had to say and called everyone into the cabin to no doubt go over the plan. Jaebeom sat there, between Youngjae and Mark, terrified as he looked at the expression on Jackson’s face as he told everyone where she lived and how they were going to go about entering the house. Jaebeom barely heard Jackson say that he was to hang back, ready to help anyone who got injured.

Jaebeom noticed the off look on Jinyoung’s face seconds before he spoke up. "I'm not going."

"I'm sorry Jackson, but I'm not walking into a building where I know I'll get killed."

Jackson just stared at him. The others at the table fidgeted around him in unease.

"I put up with your revenge plot because I didn't have anywhere in particular that I wanted to go, but this is insane." Jinyoung took in the understandably blindsided expression on Jackson's face and his expression softened somewhat. "I understand that you want revenge for what she did to your family and I honestly believe you deserve it, what Ching Shih did to them and to you was atrocious. But we've all heard the stories of Ching Shih and her army. You've told us some yourself. She had eighty thousand men Jackson. If she's kept even a hundred—hell, I'd she kept even ten—of her most elite soldiers with her then the seven of us don't stand a chance." He leaned toward Jackson a little bit. "It's not that I don't think you don't deserve revenge for the loss of your families lives, it's just that I'm not willing to sacrifice mine to do it."

Jaebeom's heart sank as he took in the expressions of the other members. They looked relieved. He knew that the other crew thought Jackson's desire for revenge was a bit extreme, Jackson had told him that himself. But he hadn't expected them to allow Jackson to get so close and then just abandon him, especially when they knew how important Jackson's family had been to him.

Jackson swallowed, clearly trying to keep his expression neutral as he turned to the other crew members. "And you?"

There was a lot of shuffling and avoiding eye contact.

"Let's vote," Jinyoung suggested, standing up. "All in favor of not going after Ching Shih raise your hands.

Jaebeom watched as all five of the other members raised their hands, some looking uncomfortable, others determined, as they voted against their Captain.
Jackson, for his part, had steeled his expression and didn't let his face show his thoughts on the result of the vote.

"It's decided. We'll sail out tomorrow." Jinyoung said, not looking especially pleased by the outcome, but something closer to resigned instead.

Jackson nodded, hesitating for a moment before bringing his hands up to his neck, lifting the thin rope over his head, the one that held the medallion he'd had carved for the ship. The one that Jaebeom had never seen him once take off.

He approached Jinyoung and extended his hands as if to put it over Jinyoung's head.

Jinyoung looked somewhat panicked and took a step back. "What are you doing?"

Jackson paused, his eyes going to the crest on the medallion. "I'm resigning from my position as Captain and member of the Ahgase." He looked back to Jinyoung. "You're Captain now." He stepped forward and slipped the necklace over an obviously shell-shocked Jinyoung's head. "Take care of them please," he said quietly before turning and walking out onto the deck.

"Jackson, stop!" Jinyoung pleaded. "This is suicide."

The other members looked on in shock, Yugyeom even getting to his feet as if to stop Jackson but he ended up just watching in silence as Jackson disappeared down the ramp.

"How dare you," Jaebeom said quietly.

The others looked at him in confusion.

"What?" Bambam asked.

"How dare you let him get this close to his goal and then just throw him away like this," Jaebeom said, finally understanding that the crew had never really understood what killing Ching Shih had meant to Jackson. That a lot of it really didn't have anything to do with Ching Shih at all, but with Jackson.

They looked even more confused at that, one or two of them looking angry.

"I'm glad that you've lived lives where you have never had to watch the person you loved get murdered in front of you. I'm glad you've never had to hold them in your arms as they died. I'm glad you've never had to do that while watching the person who did it look utterly unaffected, as if they'd just killed nothing more significant than a flea, and then tell you that it was your fault they were dead." Jaebeom took a breath, trying to calm himself. "I'm glad you've never had to live through that; but I have. I know that you think he's obsessed and blinded by his desire for revenge, but I get it. I understand how he feels. Like somehow killing Ching Shih justifies the loss of his family. Like somehow the eradication of Ching Shih's existence will lift the weight he's been carrying since they died. Like if Ching Shih dies by his hand it will somehow make it less his fault that they died in the first place."

Jaebeom watched the uncertainty and concern cross their features as he made own his choice. He got to his feet and turned to follow Jackson.

"Where are you going?" Youngjae asked.

Jaebeom looked back at them. "I'm going with him. You made your choice, and I'm not saying it was wrong. If you're right, then this will certainly get us both killed. Not wanting to die is
obviously an entirely reasonable desire. But I won't let Jackson die alone. I won't let him die with no hope and no family," he said softly before turning and following Jackson off the ship.

Jaebeom owed Jackson his life. Sure, he might have found someone else to take him aboard, to take him away from Goyang City, but whoever he found wouldn't have been Jackson. Jackson had been patient with Jaebeom's incredible naivete when it came to the real world. He took care to ensure Jaebeom was comfortable and never made him feel like less of a member of the crew even though he truthfully didn't serve any purpose aboard their ship for most of the time he was on it. He helped Jaebeom navigate new cities, new countries and a world which was frankly more terrifying than Jaebeom had really been prepared for.

Sure, Jaebeom probably would have found another ship that would have taken him aboard, but Jaebeom was certain that he'd never have found another crew who would have taken him in the way Jackson’s did and made him feel like family. The first family Jaebeom had had since his mother died. He’d almost forgotten what it felt like to love and be loved by others and for reminding him of that alone, for making Jaebeom feel like he was worth something again, Jaebeom would ensure that should Jackson die tonight, he wouldn’t die alone.

"Can I ask who you lost?" A voice said from beside him as Jaebeom stepped off of the ramp, making Jaebeom jump.

Jackson was leaning in the shadows against a stack of crates on the pier studying him curiously.

Jaebeom swallowed. "I…” He'd never actually told anyone what had happened. He'd talked to plenty of people about his mother's death, but his father had told everyone that she’d died from a sudden allergic reaction. None of them really knew how she’d died and Jaebeom had never been strong enough to tell them the truth. “My mom…”

Jackson's expression softened as he stepped forward. "You don't have to tell me. I won't force you." He said, squeezing Jaebeom's arm. "I also won’t force you to come with me tonight. This fight is mine and the other members were right. Even if Ching Shih still has a fraction of her old force, we would be fools to go up against them with only two people."

Jaebeom shook his head. It wasn’t that he wanted to go, really. Despite Mark and Bambam’s training he knew he was still not even close to adequate with weapons. He knew he didn’t stand a chance against anyone who actually knew what they were doing and it wasn’t like he wanted to die, especially now that he felt like he was finally actually living.

But the thought of Jackson walking off to fight his demons all alone was something that Jaebeom just couldn’t stomach. He remembered how scared he’d been of his father. How much he had hated him but how powerless he felt in front of the man, even when Jaebeom physically grew taller and stronger than him. It was like no matter how strong his hatred was, no matter how strong his conviction was, whenever he was in front of his father he felt like that scared nine year old boy again, kneeling on the kitchen floor and clutching his mother as she died. He knew that Jackson was far stronger than Jaebeom would ever hope to be, but Jaebeom refused to let Jackson face that kind of monster by himself.

Jaebeom looked him dead in the eye. "Then let's go be fools."

Jackson studied him, trying to gauge how serious he was. Jaebeom was still naive and Jackson was
fairly certain that he didn’t really understand what exactly he was about to walk into. He should say no. He should tell Jaebeom to go back on the ship where he was safe. But there was a look on Jaebeom’s face that Jackson had never seen before.

Understanding.

Jackson had seen pity, had seen empathy, had seen sadness, but he’d never once seen understanding on the faces of people who knew his past. Had never once heard anyone articulate exactly why he felt like he needed to do this the way Jaebeom had just done to his crewmates mere moments ago. That was the reason Jackson wasn’t long gone. Jaebeom’s words had frozen him to the spot.

Rationally Jackson thought that was all the more reason why Jaebeom should stay. He’d clearly suffered enough in his life. Jackson had always known that something bad had happened to him, but he’d never expected it to be so close to his own story. Jackson hurt for him. No one should have to endure what the two of them had. Jackson should do whatever he could to prevent Jaebeom from experiencing any more hurt. And that included sending him back onto the Ahgase and dealing with his on his own.

But the truth was that Jackson was afraid. He’d been looking forward to this day for years, but now that it was here Jackson was nothing short of terrified to face the monster that had been haunting him for over a decade. He didn’t want to do that alone. He wanted to keep his crew safe, but he didn’t want to do this alone.

And Jaebeom understood. Jackson could see in his eyes that he understood how scared Jackson was. Or maybe Jackson just wanted to see that. Maybe he was just looking for someone to tell him it was okay. Okay to be angry? Okay to want revenge? Okay to be scared? Jackson had no idea.

“It’s dangerous,” Jackson said quietly.

“I know.”

“We’re going to die.”

“I know.”

“You should stay here.”

“I know,” Jaebeom said once more. “But I won’t.”

Jackson swallowed. How Jackson ever thought that the man in front of him wasn’t strong was beyond him. Jaebeom might be the strongest person Jackson had ever met.

“Thank you,” he whispered, giving in against his better judgement.

Jaebeom just smiled, a smile of understanding rather than joy, and the two of them set off toward the city.

The city felt different this late at night, and so different from Bangkok. Perhaps because it was a smaller city, more inland and further away from the ports, but the streets felt darker, emptier. Or perhaps because Jackson knew the only reason they were out this late was because he was going to kill someone.

Next to him, Jaebeom flinched whenever they crossed paths with another person, as if he thought strangers would see their intentions on his face and haul them off to prison. His unease made
Jackson settle a little, his own nerves steeling as he watched Jaebeom’s rattle.

“Relax,” Jackson told him when he nearly tripped over his own feet to walk more in the shadows. He reached out and took Jaebeom’s hand, sliding his fingers between Jaebeom’s and squeezing gently as he sent Jaebeom a soft smile. “I’m here.”

He watched as Jaebeom’s expression smoothed and his chest rise and fall with a deep breath. He squeezed back a moment and let Jackson pull him through the city, pulling his fingers free when they came across a gated house with the name ‘Shih Yang’ brazenly carved carefully into a wooden plaque hung next to the wrought iron gate. Ching Shih’s birth name. This woman was one of the most notorious pirates that had ever lived and she had no qualms whatsoever about hanging her name on the door.

Jackson reached out slowly and used the tips of his fingers to lightly trace over the letters. “It feels strange,” he admitted, turning his gaze to the large house beyond. “I’ve been looking for her for so long... It doesn’t quite feel real that she’s really here,” Jackson said, not taking his eyes off the house. “That I’ve finally found her.”

“Did you look for her for all those years just to look at her house?” Jaebeom asked a moment later when Jackson just continued to stare.

Jackson replied with a lethal grin. “Let’s go.”

The gate was locked, but it was easy enough to jump over after Jackson stole a few vegetable crates from a nearby property. The front door was a bit harder to get into, but eventually Jackson was able to pick the lock, admitting them into the dim interior of the foyer.

The house was…empty. It was dark and quiet and there was no indication that there was anyone else in the house at all. Only two pairs of boots sitting next to the door, a single hat hung on the coat rack.

Where were the armies? The dozens of strong warriors that were loyal to Ching Shih?

Jackson froze a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach, when a flickering light appeared from one of the rooms off the main hall. “Who’s there?”

Jackson drew his sword as a man came into view, a candle illuminating his face and his surprised expression when he took in Jackson’s appearance. “Jackson?” He raised the candle some more and Jackson could see more of his face. His skin had that weather-aged look that all the sailors got eventually and there were streaks of grey in his hair that hadn’t been there the last time Jackson saw him, but it was unquestionable who this was. “Cheung Po Tsai,” Jackson said, still holding his sword up, but loosening his grip slightly. Ching Shih went nowhere without his man. Her second-in-command and heir to the Red Flag Empire.

"It is you, right? Look at how much you're grown," he sounded disturbingly like a proud father as he looked down at Jackson. “I was wondering if you’d come. I assume you’ve heard about Ching Shih then?” Cheung Po Tsai asked, joining them in the foyer.

“What?” Jackson asked, feeling lost and confused. The look on Po Tsai’s face did not seem to indicate simply retirement. All the unease that he’d had and forgotten in the face of finally finding her came roaring back. All the pieces that didn’t add up suddenly fell like rocks, cracking the floor under his feet and Jackson was worried that everything was about to collapse from underneath him.

“I was hoping you’d come. Ching Shih did always have a soft spot for you.” Po Tsai said with a
sad smile. “She’s upstairs, first door on the right.” Po Tsai said, ducking back into the room he’d come from for a moment before returning with a second candle burning, which he handed to Jackson. “I’ll be down here if you need anything,” he said before retreating back the way he came.

Jaebeom waited until Po Tsai was out of earshot. “What the hell is happening? Where is everyone? Who was that?” He whispered.

Jackson looked over at him. “Ching Shih’s quartermaster.” He turned to look up the stairs. “I have no idea what’s going on either. But…may as well find out.”

Somehow this empty house felt more foreboding than the army that he had been expecting to find. He’d been mentally prepared for a fight, for blood and for death. But this? How was Jackson supposed to prepare himself when he had no idea what was going on? How was he supposed to keep Jaebeom safe when he didn’t know what would be waiting for them at the top of the stairs?

Steeled himself, Jackson led the way up the stairs, handing the candle to Jaebeom outside the room they’d been told Ching Shih was in so he could open the door and keep his sword at the ready. He opened the door quickly, his heart racing his his eyes darted around the room. It was fully lit, candles burning in glass-encased sconces along the walls, illuminating every corner of the small room with flickering golden light. There wasn’t much in it, a bed with two end tables, a wooden chair sitting next to the bed. Assured there weren’t any threats in the room, Jackson stepped inside in order to look more closely at the person lying in the bed and froze.

It was her. The woman that Jackson had been looking for for over half his life was lying right in front of him. But she was nothing like the woman Jackson had known. Ching Shih’s skin was thin and hung awkwardly over her bones, like she’d lost a great deal of weight quite rapidly and her skin hadn’t shrunk down fast enough. Her hair was patchy and almost completely white. Her eyes were open, but they were glassy and Jackson wondered if she was capable of seeing anything. Jackson wasn’t a doctor, but even he could see the truth so clearly etched along every bone that was now visible in her frail form.

He’d been looking for this woman for so many years so he could kill her.

But Ching Shih was already dying.

Jaebeom looked over at him, understanding and pain clear across his face. "Jackson… I'm so sorry," Jaebeom whispered.

Chapter End Notes

I almost forgot it was Sunday. I don't know what the covid-19 protocols are like where you live, but I've been on stay-at-home orders for three weeks now and I never have any idea what day it is anymore...

I hope you and all your loved ones are doing well and staying safe ♡

ps: the teaser for the new comeback is so bizarre. I love it. I'm so excited.
Jackson let out a sound like a Jaebeom had never heard before and prayed that he’d never heard again, one full of anger and sorrow and pain, as he drove the tip of his sword into the floor, a good inch of the tip embedding itself into wood next to his feet.

Jaebeom looked at him in shock as an emotionless mask settled over Jackson's features. "Let's go." Jackson said in a hollow voice.

"What?" Jaebeom asked in surprise. "Jackson, you've been waiting over ten years for this moment."

Jackson shook his head. "I've waited ten years to get revenge on the woman who killed my family." He swallowed visibly. "That... That isn't her. That is just an empty shell. Killing that would bring me no peace."

He turned and walked back into the hallway.

"Your sword," Jaebeom said, reaching over to pull it from the floorboard when Jackson's voice stopped him.

"The sword isn't mine. I've returned it to its owner. I've no need of it anymore," Jackson said without looking back before descending the stairs.

Jaebeom hesitated; just leaving after all this felt wrong to him. Jackson had given half of his life to this cause and leaving without doing what he'd dreamed of for so many years didn't sit well with Jaebeom.

But as he looked at Ching Shih again, watched her lips move to form words Jaebeom couldn't hear, he began to realize why Jackson had walked away. Jackson was wanted revenge, a life for the lives that were stolen. But the woman in the bed didn't have enough of his mind left to know what she'd done. Did it count as revenge if the other party didn't even realize what was happening or have an inkling of the reasons why?

Jackson taking Ching Shih's life as penance for his loss was somehow...not enough. Exchanging the life of a woman so close to death for the lives of his family seemed almost disrespectful the more Jaebeom thought about it. It wasn't that Ching Shih's life was worthless, but killing someone who was already more dead than alive would do nothing to banish the ghosts Jackson had been carrying with him since he was ten. As Jackson said, the woman in the bed was no longer the woman that Jackson had known. She was no longer capable of doing the things she once had and the odds of her even knowing who Jackson was, never mind what she'd done to him was non existent.

After so much loss, so much pain and so many years of his life spent solely for this moment,
Jackson was walking away with nothing but more pain.

Jaebeom hurt. Hurt for how much pain Jackson would probably be in right now. Out of habit, his fingers found the small sphere sewn into the hem of his shirt, finding the familiar shape of his mother's earring comforting.

It was only a moment later that he realized that his mother's earring was back in his trunk aboard the Ahgase. He didn’t carry it with him anymore, waiting a few more weeks till he could actually wear it. The object inside his sleeve was...hemlock. The seed he'd placed there the night the ship had been attacked and had entirely forgotten about in the chaos that happened after.

He looked back at Ching Shih, rolling the seed between his fingers. He hadn't been brave enough to slay his own demons but...he could slay Jackson's.

He turned and hurried from the room, meeting a puzzled looking Po Tsai at the bottom of the stairs. "Jackson, he—"

"I'm a doctor," Jaebeom interrupted. "Jackson asked me to come and look at Ching Shih," he lied. "I think you probably already know, but Ching Shih is never going to recover. She will continue to deteriorate before your eyes until she dies, likely within weeks." He extended the seed toward Po Tsai. "Give this to Ching Shih," Jaebeom said calmly. "It would be kinder to just end it for her now and save her the pain of drawing it out."

Even in the dim light of the candle Jaebeom saw Po Tsai pale, his eyes locked on the small seed in Jaebeom's palm, so small and yet capable of so much.

Jaebeom wasn't sure why he was doing this. Out of a Healers sense of duty? Because as a doctor he'd recommend the same thing to anyone who was in the same state as Ching Shih? Because Ching Shih had caused so much damage to someone very important to him? As some kind of compensation? He couldn't kill his father and this was somehow making up for it? Or perhaps just because Ching Shih had been a terrible person and Jaebeom just wanted her dead.

"Crush it to powder and mix it in Ching Shih's tea or water." He thought about the condition of the woman upstairs. "It isn't always the most painless death, but it's quick. And if I'm honest I think she's too far gone for her body to put up any kind of fight. Her heart will very likely simply stop beating once the poison reaches it."

Po Tsai looked at him, sadness etched in every line of his face, but he reached out and took the seed from Jaebeom's palm. "Thank you for coming." He said in a broken voice. "I'm glad she got to see Jackson before she died."

Jaebeom was too, but not for the same reason he believed Po Tsai was. He didn't give a shit about bringing Ching Shih peace at the end of her life, which was what he assumed Po Tsai was talking about. He was certain that Ching Shih hadn't had any idea that Jackson was even in the room with her.

He was glad that Jackson saw her in the end, and that he'd at least had the choice. That he'd looked Ching Shih in the eye and had chosen himself not to be the one that ended her life, no matter how brief it now was. He couldn't imagine how soul-crushing it would have been for Jackson if he'd just heard through word of mouth that Ching Shih had died. To know that he'd searched for a decade and was too late.

He was already too late it seemed, but Jaebeom hoped that Jackson could find some peace in the fact that he'd had the opportunity to do what he'd dreamed of for so long and had chosen not to.
That at least he could see with his own eyes what had become of the monster that had haunted him for so long.

Jaebeom said nothing more, handing the candle back to Po Tsai and fleeing the house to catch up to Jackson.

Jackson didn't say a single word to him as they walked back to the Ahgase and Jaebeom didn't try to make him. He didn't know what to say to comfort Jackson anyway. He was pretty sure nothing he could come up with would help.

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Jinyoung was sitting at the table inside the cabin when they returned, none of the other members were in sight. "Did you get your revenge?" Jinyoung asked from his place at the table, his tone weak as he eyed his former captain, the stark worry on his face obvious as Jaebeom assumed he looked for injuries.

Jaebeom winced at his words, but Jackson showed no reaction, showed no indication that he'd heard Jinyoung at all. Instead he crossed to the cupboard where they kept the liquor and pulled out a bottle before pausing and pulling out a second. He turned and headed toward the captain's quarters, ignoring when Jinyoung called his name worriedly as he passed him and closing the door quietly behind him.

Jinyoung turned to look at Jaebeom, getting to his feet. "What happened?" He asked worriedly. "Did you not find her?"

Jaebeom shook his head. "No, Ching Shih was there. It's just…she's already dying Jinyoung."

Jinyoung looked confused.

"She's sick." Jaebeom explained. "I'm admittedly not as good with illnesses as I am with wounds and I didn't examine her or anything, but it's not good. I would be surprised if she lasted another month. Jackson... He couldn't kill her."

Jinyoung's gaze slid to the closed door that Jackson had hidden himself behind. "So the monster that Jackson had dedicated his whole life to slaying turns out to be just a mere human after all." He mused sadly. He turned back to Jaebeom. "Let's give him some time."

Jaebeom nodded and followed Jinyoung down to the lower level, where all the other crew members were waiting, their head snapping toward the two as they descended. "Is Jackson okay?" Yugyeom asked, jumping to his feet.

Jaebeom hesitated, unsure how to answer. "Yes... And no," he answered honestly.

"Ching Shih's already dying." Jinyoung explained. "Some kind of illness."

Mark swore softly. "After all those years looking for revenge, something else dared to kill her before Jackson could. Ching Shih couldn't even give Jackson the courtesy to die by his hand."

No one had anything to say to that.

Jaebeom sat down across from Bambam and realized that the boy's eyes were red and puffy; he'd been crying.

"We didn't think he'd actually go," he said hoarsely as he looked pleadingly at Jaebeom. "We
thought…” he sniffled, Mark reaching over and tucking the small boy against him. "We hoped he'd give up if he had to go alone. Or at the very least that he'd at least stop and think, gather more information about what he was walking into. We just didn't want him to get killed," Bambam's voice trailed off to a whisper at the end.

Jaebeom shook his head. "You don't have to explain yourself. Your lives are more important than his revenge and you were right to refuse to go. I'm sorry. I was wrong to try and convince you to go with him."

"You were," Mark answered, making Jaebeom look down at the table. He'd been angry at the time and only now realized how he was essentially asking them to give up their lives for a fight that wasn't their own. That wasn't fair to them. He was still upset that they waited till Jackson got so close to be so blunt, but in all honesty the crew had been rather vocal about their opinions about this and Jackson should have already known. Shouldn't have put them in the position where they had to choose.

"But you also helped us understand why this was so important to Jackson, which was something Jackson had never done." Mark continued.

Jaebeom looked up at him, confused.

"We always thought Jackson was looking for revenge. It hadn't ever crossed my mind that what Jackson was really trying to find was peace." He looked heartbroken. "So I thank you for giving us insight of why this was so important for Jackson."

"But at the cost of his life?" Bambam asked angrily. "Peace is meaningless if he's dead."

Jaebeom didn't point out that Bambam had been willing to burn his old ship to the bottom of the sea with him still on it to find his own peace. "Jackson was ready to die for this years ago," Jaebeom said quietly. "He'd probably planned to die tonight all along if I'm being honest."

Bambam's face crumpled and he turned his face into Mark's shoulder.

They all looked on in sadness, but none of them could think of any words of comfort for Bambam. It was the truth and Jaebeom suspected that the rest of them already knew it.

"I also want to say that I'm sorry," Mark continued. "I'm sorry that you experienced anything like what Jackson has. And that if you ever feel like talking about it, I'm here to listen."

Jaebeom smiled, feeling a small flicker of warmth despite everything. He was lucky to have found this crew, and was even luckier that he was able to come back to it. "Perhaps another time," he said, surprising even himself by actually meaning it. Given the tragedies that this crew had gone through, perhaps Jaebeom could take strength from them and share his own. "Tonight we need to focus on Jackson."

"What do we do?" Youngjae asked, the how do we help him went unasked.

Jaebeom sighed, feeling somehow older, somehow heavier, than the last time he'd sat at that table barely an hour ago. He raised his eyes, looking at the underside of the captain's quarters. "Now we wait."

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Jackson sat down with his back against the door, setting one of the bottles down in front of him and opening the other, bringing it to his lips and downing as much as he could before the burn in
his throat was too strong and he pulled the bottle away, coughing slightly.

Ten years. He’d been searching, hunting, that monster for ten goddamn years. And when he finally found her it turned out she was already more dead than alive. He grabbed the spare bottle of alcohol and threw it violently across the room, watching with grim satisfaction as glass and rum rained down the wall before pooling on the floor. He looked at the bottle in his hand and took another sip before throwing that one too. As much as he would love to get piss drunk, he knew there was little point. It would only hurt like a bitch whenever he woke up from his stupor.

And the ache in his chest was already agonizing. He felt like he’d failed them. His parents and his brother. He’d made a promise so many years ago that he would avenge them. That he’d make sure that the person who’d carelessly taken their lives had paid for what she’d done.

He leaned his head back against the door behind him, feeling tears trail down his cheeks.

He wished he had done it anyway. Wished he had taken the sword he’d been given when he was ten and driven through Ching Shih’s heart.

Ching Shih’s barely beating heart.

A sob escaped him.

How was he supposed to kill that version of Ching Shih? A Ching Shih that was so withered Jackson could see her throat flutter with every weak heartbeat. How was Jackson supposed to kill a woman so weak and sick that she didn’t even know other people were in the room with her? Jackson had wanted revenge more than almost anything else in the world, but the one thing he wanted more than revenge was to be a person that his family would be proud of. Even through his decade blinded by revenge Jackson could see that there was no pride in killing a woman who was in a state like Ching Shih. His parents had taught him to support the weak, to help them and care for them the way he would want if he was ever in their place. He couldn’t overlook the fact that driving a sword through the heart of a woman who couldn’t defend herself was exactly what Ching Shih had done to his father. Yes, Jackson had wanted revenge, but not at the expense of his soul. Not if the price of getting that revenge turned him into the very person he’d hated for half his life.

But this? This emptiness? This was excruciating. It was like he was losing them all over again. He felt like his heart was being shredded to pieces. He didn’t know what to do now. His goal for a decade had been to kill the person who took everything from him, but Ching Shih didn’t have anything left to take. Which just left Jackson with nothing.

No family, no purpose. Just nothing. His entire life these past ten years, his family’s deaths, all of it had been for nothing.

He slid sideways onto the floor, curling up his knees and trying to keep his sobs quiet, trying to get enough air. He felt like he was suffocating, like he was drowning. He and his crew once sailed down a strait in northern Japan that was known for producing whirlpools. He’d watched as someone’s hat got caught in the current, circling round and round as it was being pulled downwards before it was lost under the water. That’s what he felt like. Every memory, every life he’d taken to achieve this goal, every promise that he’d broken bombarding him again and again and again. No matter how hard he tried to swim, they just kept pulling him deeper and deeper until eventually he was sucked under.

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It was still dark by the time Jackson resurfaced, feeling drained and empty. He had no idea what
time it was as he pushed himself to a seated position once more, but he didn’t care. Didn’t care about anything about the one thought that had gotten stuck in his head.

He wanted to leave. Jackson never wanted to see the ocean ever again. Never wanted to sail again. Never wanted to see anything that could remind him of the past decade of his life that had been wasted. He wanted to leave any and every trace of Jackson, of Captain Wang, behind and remind himself who Jia Er was. Wanted to try and be that boy that his parents loved again instead of the hardened, revenge-driven monster he’d become.

He’d resigned anyway. He wasn’t captain of the Ahgase anymore. Wasn’t a member of the crew. He didn’t have a right to be here anymore.

Using the back of his hand to wipe his eyes, Jackson pushed himself to his feet and walked out the door.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry. But, yes, that was only part one. Next week's chapter is bad too.

Also, since we've seen the last of Ching Shih, now seems as good a time as any to let you all know that Ching Shih was a real person, a real pirate. I was going to use a made up character, but I think that a lot of you know I have a fondness for learning new things and for forcing you to learn them too under the guise of fanfiction, so I used her instead. Her history is honestly sketchy and I've read different things in different places, but here is the jist: She was born in 1775 in Guangzhou China and eventually ended up as a prostitute where she met Cheng I (or Zheng Yi depending on what you read) who was already a fairly successful pirate. She married him and they ruled together until his death in 1807 and because of her incredible tact and intelligence, she took over the fleet and continued to rule. She was so powerful that the Chinese government eventually offered her a deal: they would grant her amnesty, wouldn't prosecute her and she could keep her wealth as long she retired, which she eventually did in 1810 after a few defeats. She retired to Macau where she lived with her husband, Po Tsai (who was her second in command and adopted son. Yes, she married her adopted son, history is weird). She died in 1844 at the age of 69. At the peak of her pirate career she was in charge of around 700,000 men. As bonus, if anyone saw the third Pirates of the Caribbean movie, she was the inspiration behind the pirate lord Mistress Ching (which is one translation for her name Ching Shih. Another is 'Widow of Ching' I don't know if one is more correct than the other)

Anyway, the TL;DR is that she was real, she was a badass and I will forever be angry that Blackbeard is considered the most infamous pirate when a whole Ching Shih existed.

I hope that everyone continues to be well and that those who are celebrating either Easter or Passover have absolutely wonderful holidays. Anyone not celebrating, I wish you an absolutely wonderful day anyway♡
Jaebeom couldn't sleep. He kept replaying images from earlier that night over and over again. Jackson's face when he saw Ching Shih. Jinyoung's face when Jackson resigned as Captain. The horrifying effects Ching Shih's illness was having on her. The empty look in Jackson's eyes when he realized he wouldn't be getting the revenge he'd sought for so many years.

He had a feeling he wasn't the only one still awake because the room was remarkably quiet considering the crew had no shortage of snorers.

He heard the door open upstairs and footsteps cross the cabin before the soft creak of the hinges on the door out to the deck was heard. Jaebeom sat up but hesitated to go any further. Jackson wanted to be alone. He'd come find them if he wanted company, right?

"Go to him," Jinyoung said, his voice making Jaebeom jump.

"What? Me?" Jaebeom whispered back. Surely Jinyoung, who had known Jackson longer than any of them would be a better choice to comfort him.

"You understand," Mark's voice said next. "We may have known him longer but, as you pointed out earlier tonight, we have no idea what it's like to live through what he has. You're the only one who has a chance of finding something to say that might offer him a shred of comfort as he grieves."

Jaebeom wasn't so sure about that. The killer of his mother was alive because Jaebeom was too big a coward to go through with the revenge he'd envisioned about a thousand times. Jackson had the desire and the conviction to avenge his family; it was simply fate, the kindness of Jackson's heart and the strength of his morals that prevented him from achieving his goal.

Still, he couldn't sleep anyway. He slipped out of bed and grabbed a thicker shirt for himself before realizing Jackson would probably be cold too. He set the shirt down and pulled the blankets off his bed instead before climbing up the stairs and heading out onto the deck.

Jackson was standing at the top of the ramp. Even in the dim light of the moon Jaebeom could see the tension he carried in every muscle of his body.

“Jackson?” He asked softly, afraid for reasons he didn’t quite understand.

“I shouldn’t be here,” Jackson answered, his voice even hoarser than usual and thick with tears. “I should go. I have no right to be on this ship anymore, not with all the things I’ve done.”

“The things you’ve done?” Jaebeom echoed in confusion.

Jackson’s breath hitched. “I dragged those boys all over Asia out of my desperation for revenge. I used them, put them in harms way, over and over again to get tools and weapons and information
that I needed in order to get...well, to get here. To get to Ching Shih. And it was all a waste. I even asked them to give up their lives for this. Under different circumstances they could have been killed tonight.” He let out a shuddering breath. “I should go.”

“A waste…” Jaebeom repeated. “What exactly was a waste, Jackson? Was it a waste when you rescued Youngjae from slavery aboard one of Ching Shih's ships?”

Jackson finally looked over at him, tear tracks glistening on his cheeks.

“Was it a waste to put your trust in Jinyoung, a rich kid who only intended to use you until he made it to another port and he could find another crew?” Jaebeom continued, wondering if Jackson could hear the anger in his voice. “Was it a waste to let me on board? To accept me into your crew even though I knew nothing about sailing, about the world? Was it a waste that, even though you were looking for revenge, you helped me find things that I’d been looking for my whole life?”

Jackson just stared at him, eyes wide. “I…”

“Because while you consider it to be a waste, those boys consider you to be family. You’re someone they look up to, someone they rely on and someone they love because on your quest for revenge, on your journeys across Asia looking for Ching Shih, you saved all of them, you saved me.” His voice cracked and Jaebeom swallowed, trying to get his emotions under control.

He couldn’t even tell if he was angry or devastated. Angry that Jackson thought he could just throw all of them away or devastated to find out that he meant nothing to Jackson. Angry that the man who had taught Jaebeom more about the world, more about himself, had apparently only done it as a means to an end. Or devastated that the man who Jaebeom looked up to, who was filled with such bravery, such kindness and so much love, who made Jaebeom wish he was half the man Jackson was, was only using Jaebeom to get what he wanted.

“No.” He said firmly, more to himself than to Jackson. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe what?” Jackson whispered.

“I don’t believe that the Jackson I know is capable of that.” Jaebeom replied. “The Jackson I know took me in when I had nothing, sat next to me while I vomited for days, had patience when explaining all the things I didn’t know to me, comforted me when I was scared, took the time to show me everything good in this world that I’d been missing, helped me figure out who I really am. I refuse to believe that that Jackson was only using me. I refuse to believe that you truly believe the men sleeping under our feet to simply be tools you used in your quest for revenge.”

Jaebeom looked at Jackson, trying to figure out why he felt that way. Trying to figure out what dark path his grief had led him down where he thought that he’d hurt his crew somehow. That his crew didn't care about him. Or worse, that he didn't care about them. Had he closed himself off so tightly after the death of his family that he couldn't see how much they mattered to him? He must know. He'd cried for Bambam when he'd been injured, stayed next to him for days until Jaebeom assured him that the boy would be okay. He loved his crew, whether he knew it or not.

His next words proved that. "I could have gotten them killed tonight," Jackson said, his voice trembling.

Jaebeom shook his head. "Jackson you are their captain not their king. Your word is not absolute. They go with you because they want to. And when they don't want to, they let you know. They proved tonight that they can stand up for themselves if they feel pushed far enough, if they have a problem with what you're asking of them."
"That was Jinyoung's doing."

Jaebeom wasn't so sure about that. He was confident Mark would have stepped up if Jinyoung hadn't. "Maybe so," he conceded nonetheless. "But isn't that his job? Didn't you pick him as your quartermaster as a counter balance? To ensure your choices were for the good of all the crew." He looked at Jackson, watched the frustration rise on his features as Jaebeom tried to figure out what was really bothering him. What he needed say to help get Jackson off the cliff he seemed to have put himself on.

"I've already caused the deaths of my family. I can't…," Jackson swallowed, his eyes shuttering any emotion. "You wouldn't understand."

Wouldn't understand?

"Yes I do," Jaebeom said in a low voice, hearing fabric rip between fists that he didn't remember making. "When I was nine years old I sat on my kitchen floor holding my mother as she choked to death, her lungs having failed after being poisoned by my father who just sat there, sipping his tea as if it was a cockroach dying on the floor in front of him instead of his wife. When she was dead and I asked him why he didn't help her he told me it was my fault. That he’d killed her because of me." Jaebeom reached up, frustrated, and wiped away tears from his eyes. "Don't tell me that I don't know what it's like to be consumed with the desire for revenge. Don't you dare tell me that I don't understand what it feels like to be consumed with hate, for the person who took someone you loved from you, but also at yourself because you know it was your fault."

Jackson stared at him, his expression pained. "I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"Don't be sorry," Jaebeom interrupted harshly. "I don't want you to be sorry. I want you to not give up. Don't let Ching Shih win. Don’t throw away everything good that you built for yourself because of her."

He let the material in his hands fall to the deck as he crossed to where Jackson stood. “You really don’t see it, do it?” He asked quietly as he reached out and carefully cupped Jackson’s tear-stained face between his palms. “You don’t see how much good you’ve done in this world, how much you’ve built not only for yourself, but for others.” He stepped closer, feeling the weight of Jackson’s gaze on his. “You saved Bambam’s life, gave his mother her son back. You save children all over the continent, making sure that they’re fed and protected and loved in the way that you were robbed of. You didn’t let your experience stop you from trying to make sure everyone else has what you couldn’t.”

Fresh tears spilled down Jackson’s cheeks.

“You’ve been blinded by your hate for so long that you can’t seem to see what’s right in front of you. Jackson, you have a family. One that loves you and looks out for you and puts up with all your bullshit because that’s what families do.” He leaned closer so he was almost nose to nose with Jackson. “Ching Shih took one familiy away from you. Don’t let her be the reason you lose this one too.”

Jackson let out a wet sob and Jaebeom pulled him in close, holding him tightly because he was genuinely afraid Jackson would just disappear if he let go. “I don’t know what hardships you think you’ve inflicted on those boys but I can guarantee you they don’t feel the same. You belong on this ship Jackson Wang because you belong with your family.”

He smiled to himself. “You managed to track down Ching Shih across all of Asia out of hatred; if you think they wouldn’t do the same for you out of love then you are sorely mistaken." Jackson's
body shook within Jaebeom's arms and Jaebeom impulsively pressed his lips against Jackson's temple, speaking softly. "The legacy of Captain Wang will not be defined by what was taken away from him, but by what he has found and by what he has given to others." Jackson let out another sob and clung to him even more tightly. "And I am so honoured that I know him."

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Jackson... hurt. His eyes hurt, his face hurt, his very soul hurt. He had no idea how he'd been standing there crying on Jaebeom but when he was finally finished he felt so exhausted; mentally, emotionally and physically. He hadn't known it was possible for a person to be that weary.

He loosened his arms from around Jaebeom's waist, his biceps ached from being tensed for so long. How hard had he been clinging to Jaebeom?

That was a bit embarrassing.

He wanted to stand up, to lift his head and take a step back, get a bit of space between them, both physical and emotional, but another part of him wanted to stay where he was, just for a minute longer. Jaebeom was comfortable, warm.

Safe.

Jaebeom felt safe to Jackson in a way that Jackson wasn't sure any other person had since his parents. He just... He understood Jackson in a way that no one else did. His reactions, how he just seemed to know the right things to say at the same time he forced Jackson to confront things he didn't want to think about. He'd always done that, but Jackson hadn't fully appreciated it until now.

"I'm tired," he said into the space between Jaebeom's shoulder and his neck.

Jaebeom's hand came up to squeeze the back of his neck comfortingly. "Let's go inside. You need to rest."

Jackson didn't move. He wasn't sure he was ready to see his crew yet. Not the worry he knew he'd find in their eyes or the questions they were going to ask him. He was too raw to answer any of them just yet.

"I'm not..." his words trailed off. "I'm not ready to face them just yet," he confessed in a small voice.

Jaebeom didn't judge, didn't push, didn't question, just took Jackson's hand and pulled him to the space behind the cabin, picking up the dropped blankets along the way and quickly making them a place to sit.

Jackson settled next to him, shoulder to shoulder, and couldn't ignore the parallel of their position to the first time Jaebeom had set sail with them. Only now it was Jaebeom taking care of him.

It was a weird feeling. The Jackson who had taken care of Jaebeom was an entirely other person than the person he felt like now. It was walking up from a dream. No, that wasn't quite right... He felt like he'd finally made it out of that whirlpool he was drowning in earlier, had been drowning in much longer than he'd realized. Now that he was free everything on him hurt after a decade of swimming, but there was a relief of sorts.

He was free. Ching Chih was the shackle that was keeping Jackson tied to his past, shackles that admittedly he himself had sealed. And which had finally come undone tonight.
The only problem now was after being shackled to Ching Shih and a version of himself that didn't exist anymore for over ten years, Jackson didn't know how to move forward. Didn't know who he was or what he wanted. Just felt...lost.

"I feel... I feel empty." Jackson confessed. For so many years he'd been chasing after Ching Shih. Knowing she was out there somewhere gave him purpose. Knowing that the Ching Shih he had known was already dead just left the world feeling empty. "Like there is nothing out there anymore."

"Nothing out there?" Jaebeom asked, a smile in his voice "Jackson Wang, everything is out there."

Jackson turned to look at him in surprise.

Jaebeom glanced at the sky, a shadow of a smile on his lips as his eyes scanning the darkness for something before raising his arm and pointing west. "Japan is that way."

Jackson was smiling now too as he took Jaebeom's arm and moved it to point in the opposite direction. "Japan is that way." He corrected gently.

"Japan is that way, where you can find the best sushi in all of Asia." Jaebeom continued, seemingly uncaring of his navigational inadequacies.

He moved his arm again. "And China is that way, where you can find pink dolphins and you see something you've never seen before every time you step foot there."

He looked down at Jackson, who could feel the fondness in his expression. "The whole world is out there," Jaebeom said softly. "This is just the front door."

Jackson relaxed against Jaebeom, resting his head comfortably on his shoulder. Yet another example of how wholly the tables had turned. It felt like years ago that Jackson had used those words to comfort Jaebeom. How ironic that Jaebeom would use them to comfort him. Even more ironic that it would actually work. "Thanks Jaebeom," he whispered.

"They were your words, not mine." Jaebeom replied.

"Not for that," Jackson said. "For everything. For coming with me tonight even though we were both certain we'd die. For trying to explain to the others what Ching Shih meant to me, trying to make them grasp the obsession I never helped them understand." He paused. "Thank you for coming up here and helping me see straight again," he said, hating how his voice sounded almost sounding shy.

But he was, he supposed. Jaebeom had just witnessed Jackson breaking. He'd been using revenge and hatred for the last ten years to hold himself together and he'd lost that tonight. Jaebeom had seen Jackson shatter into ten years worth of pieces.

And somehow started putting them back together again too. Helped him realize that he should have known better, should have been better. How many times had he himself called his crew his family, and yet deep down he realized he never really accepted it, never really allowed himself to feel it. He had spent the last decade being so desperate to be loved and yet so desperately avoiding it at the same time.

'You didn't let your experience stop you from trying to make sure everyone else has what you couldn’t.'

He’d never thought of it that way. Never thought of all the things he'd done as a way to providing
love and care and family to people. At the time he told himself he was doing it because he was trying to atone for all the things he'd done to get free, to get away, to get closer. But even now he wouldn't have changed any of his decisions. Even if he had nothing left to atone for—and Jackson wasn't sure here was there yet—as long as he helped even one innocent soul live a better life, he could be content with that.

He could be content here, on this ship with his crew, with his family. The thought filled him with a flicker of warmth. Even if they just sailed aimlessly across the world, that could be enough for Jackson. As long as he had them.

A vision of what could have been flashed before his eyes, his crew slaughtered and Jackson standing there, looking at the bodies and lifeless eyes of the boys he’d saved, the boys he’d raised. He could feel himself shudder. How could he have let himself become blind to things that actually mattered to him?

"Jackson?" Jaebeom asked, his voice sounding a million miles away as it pulled Jackson out of that nightmare, his arm falling across Jackson’s shoulder and pulling him in close, anchoring him. "Are you okay?"

Jackson almost laughed. "No," he admitted. He hadn't been okay in a long time. He didn't even really remember what okay felt like. He was good at pretending to be okay, was a master at faking it, but honestly wasn't sure how okay felt anymore. Sitting there with Jaebeom at the back of his ship, knowing his crew were safe and his obsession hasn't caused them any lasting harm was probably the closest to okay he'd felt in ages. Underneath the guilt, the grief and the shame was something that Jackson suspected might be contentment, might be peace, which is what Jackson realized he'd been looking for all this time.

"No," Jackson repeated. "But… I think that one day I will be."

Chapter End Notes

I rewrote parts of this chapter SO many times (and pieces of the next one too) because I wanted them to hit just right. Hopefully they did. I can't believe that there are only two chapters left in this fic... I know the Jackbeom isn't as prominent as it's been in most of my other fics, but the relationship I created for them in this world is so different than in any of the others. Hopefully it's still enjoyable.

I hope that you and your loved ones continue to be safe and healthy! Happy comeback week!
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jaebeom woke up first the following morning, still leaning back against the cabin with Jackson sleeping soundly tucked against his side.

He exhaled slowly and carefully pulled Jackson closer, overwhelmingly relieved to still have him there. The look in Jackson’s eyes the night before haunted him. Jaebeom didn’t know who that person was. That Jackson was a complete stranger to Jaebeom and that had scared him more than the possibility of going up against an entire army had. The thought that Jackson could have just up and left while he was sleeping and that he’d never see him again had plagued Jaebeom’s dreams.

He relaxed back against the cabin, ignoring the stiffness in his bones, and let Jackson sleep, enjoying the gentle breeze that came in off the sea that helped wake him up more fully. He wondered where the crew were since it must be at least mid-morning and he didn’t hear any signs of life on the Ahgase. Perhaps it had been a sleepless night for all of them.

He looked down at where Jackson was resting against his shoulder. He looked so much younger when he was asleep, so much smaller tucked under Jaebeom’s arm. It was truly unbelievable the things that Jackson had managed to do at such a young age. Of course, he only did all those things because of tragic circumstances, but Jaebeom was in awe of Jackson. If it’d been him in Jackson’s shoes? If he’d gone through everything that Jackson had had to endure? God, he’d have died years ago. He’d never have had even the thought of revenge never mind the ability to actually carry it out.

He wished he could read Jackson’s mind, wished he could really understand the cost all of these years, all this loss, that Jackson had had to pay. The look in his eyes the night before was pretty eye opening and Jaebeom now realized that the toll that Jackson had paid, that he was still paying, was far greater than any of them had known. He’d hid it so well. Hid the pain and the fear and the loss.

Jaebeom had experience with that. He knew what it felt like to hide what he was feeling so well that it became habit. He’d accepted all the condolences from his neighbours, agreed with all of them that it was such a tragedy, saw his father’s eyes well up when he spoke about his wife and just sat there, hanging his head and looking at his hands when all he wanted to do was scream at everyone who would listening that his father was a murderer and that it was his fault she was gone. That the only tragedy there was that she’d married a monster.

He closed his eyes and wondered if he was so different from Jackson. If he hid so much of himself from others because he was afraid of getting hurt. The boys on this ship had been so open with him about their own pain but it took Jaebeom a month and a life or death event to be open about his. Even then, he barely skated over his past.

Maybe he should take a look at himself before he went around giving out advice.

Still, he was grateful, for everyone on this ship. He felt like a completely different person than the one who had left Goyang City what felt like years ago. The men on his ship had helped him get there. They’d all coaxed and comforted and encouraged and sometimes dragged him kicking and screaming to get to where he was now, to get to who he was now.

A man who would walk into certain death.
He laughed to himself softly.

Was it weird that he was proud of that? That he’d apparently lost all sense of self preservation? He was proud of the fact that he found people that he was willing to take that risk for. **Jackson** was worth that risk for and, god, he was glad he’d gone. If he hadn’t? If Jackson had gone on his own and had to face Ching Shih alone? An image of another life swam behind his eyes, one where Jackson went alone and then just disappeared into the darkness after, not bothering to return to the Ahgase, but just walking off into the night like he’d tried to do the night before. Everyone on the ship would have assumed him dead and would have spent their whole lives mourning him.

He shuddered at just how close to reality that could have been.

But it wasn’t.

Jackson was still here. He was alive. He was safe. And Jaebeom would forever be grateful that he met Jinyoung on that pier in Incheon. Not only because of his own personal growth, but because that moment led him to last night, led him to being in a position to really help Jackson, maybe even save him. And he was grateful for that because a world without Jackson Wang in it would be a decidedly darker place to live.

"My butt hurts," a voice rasped into his shoulder, bringing a smile to Jaebeom's face.

"So does mine," Jaebeom agreed.

Neither of them moved.

"So, how are you feeling today?" Jaebeom asked eventually.

Jackson sighed deeply before replying, “I feel like a snake.”

Jaebeom blinked, completely unsure how to respond to that. He’d been expecting an emotion, a general update on the state of Jackson’s well-being perhaps, not a comparison to a reptile. “Uh, what?”

Jackson chuckled, stretching out his legs and leaning a little bit closer to Jaebeom. “I feel like a snake,” he repeated. “Like I just spent the last twelve hours wrestling off a set of skin, shedding a version of myself that no longer fit me.”

That… That was actually kind of a perfect way of describing it Jaebeom thought. Reptiles and arachnids’ skin didn’t grow with them, they had to completely remove a layer of themselves in order to grow but the process left them vulnerable and delicate until their new skin hardened. Jaebeom only knew that because the shedded skin carried nutrients that were used in some healing techniques. How Jackson knew about that was beyond Jaebeom, but it was something of a perfect analogy for Jackson’s situation. He’d gone through hell the last twelve hours, trying to shed the version of him that was so intimately connected to Ching Shih. And now here he was, a brand new Jackson, bigger and better than he was before but one that temporarily needed to be taken care of. One who needed to be helped and watched over until his skin could harden and he could take care of himself.

“You’re incredibly poetic in the mornings,” Jaebeom said eventually, making Jackson chuckle tiredly.

“Had weird dreams,” Jackson murmured.

Jaebeom wasn’t surprised in the slightest to hear that. He’d had weird dreams and he wasn’t even
the one who had his whole life turned upside down.

“Tell me some interesting facts about Macau,” Jaebeom asked, wanting to change the subject, wanting to try to go back to something that might resemble normal so that Jackson could get his feet underneath him again.

But Jackson shook his head. “I don’t know much about Macau. I don't come here if I can avoid it.”

“Really?” Jaebeom asked, finding that peculiar. Jackson had always given off the persona of someone who had travelled the world several times over and knew people in all the countries of the world. It was hard for Jaebeom to believe that he didn’t know anything about Macau when he seemed to know so much about everywhere else.

Jackson fidgeted, as if uncomfortable. “I… This was one of Ching Shih's favourite places. I'm not surprised she chose to come here to die.” he said. "She brought me here so many times when I was on her ship. It just… It has too many bad memories for me to want to come back here on my own.”

Something about that explanation sounded off to Jaebeom. Or maybe it was something about the pinched tone in Jackson’s voice as he said it. Jaebeom was sure Jackson hadn't lied; he believed Jackson had horrible memories of all the times Ching Shih had forced him to come here. But he suspected it wasn't the whole truth either.

“Have you given any thought into where you want to go next?” Jaebeom asked instead of pressing the issue. Jackson had opened up to him far more than Jaebeom had expected him to last night; Jaebeom didn’t feel like this one was an issue he needed to push.

Jackson sighed. “Nope. Maybe back to Korea…? I have some people doing some errands for me out of Busan that I guess I could check in on.”

He didn’t sound anything close to certain or excited about that prospect.

“How about someplace new? Somewhere to debut this new Jackson,” Jaebeom suggested. “Assuming of course there are places left in this world that you’ve never been to.”

“Never thought I’d see the day where Im Jaebeom would be the one to ask to go to a place he’d never been before,” Jackson mused.

Jaebeom smiled. “I’m just as surprised as you are.”

The both stiffened when they heard the familiar creak of the cabin’s hinges and footsteps come out onto the deck.

“Who do you think it is?” Jackson whispered.

Jaebeom suspected he knew, but he didn’t have time to answer before the person was rounding the corner and finding them.

“Jackson,” Jinyoung said in what sounded an awful lot like relief. “Can… Can we talk?”

Jackson tensed, Jaebeom tightening the arm he still had wrapped around Jackson’s shoulders in response.

Or perhaps in encouragement. It wasn’t like Jackson could avoid having this conversation with
Jinyoung. It was long overdue anyway. He nodded and got slowly to his feet before following Jinyoung into the cabin and then into the captain’s quarters, closing the door behind them for some privacy.

"I'm sorry," Jinyoung said, turning to face Jackson. "For what I did yesterday."

Jackson studied him for a moment before smiling a little. "No you're not."

Jinyoung looked surprised before his expression shifted. "You're right. I'm not. Nor should I be," he said, almost angry.

"I agree," Jackson said quietly.

"I'd willingly risk my life for you any day of the week, you know that, but asking us to go up against an entire army, to go face certain death without bothering to gather any kind of information about what we were going up against was unfair of you."

"I know."

"So, no, I'm not sorry, but I am angry. God Jackson, I swear I have never been this pissed at you before," he seethed, beginning to pace the small room.

Jackson felt small. "I know. I should never have asked you to come with me."

Jinyoung shook his head angrily. "No, that's not why I'm angry with you. You should be dead Jackson," Jinyoung said harshly. "It was only by some weird twist of fate that Ching Shih was alone and undefended. You should have been killed yesterday. We all thought you were walking to your death when you walked off this ship."

Jackson just nodded in agreement. "I would have walked to it willingly."

Jinyoung looked even more furious, his feet stilling. "That's why I'm angry! For fucks sake Jackson, you keep talking about how that woman took everything from you, but if that's true then what am I? What is this crew? The Ahgase? Are we worthless to you? Do we mean so little that you think you can just walk away from all of us like that?"

Jackson stared at him, stunned. That… That hadn't been at all what he thought Jinyoung was going to say to him. But as he thought about it, he couldn't see a reason why Jinyoung wouldn't feel that way. Jackson didn't tell people they were important to him. He barely admitted it to himself. He had hoped that his actions were enough, that they would tell his crew the things that he was too afraid to say, but it looked like he was wrong.

"That's not… That's not it at all Jinyoung." He swallowed, afraid to say it even now, but knowing he owed Jinyoung the truth. "You guys mean everything to me. But… I lost everything once. It's not that I don't consider you to be the most important thing in my life, but admitting that would mean opening myself up to losing everything again. And I know I'm not strong enough to go through that again. I can't lose you guys. And I'm sorry that I never told you that before. I'm sorry that you didn't know that I love you guys."

"What that really so hard to say? To admit?"

Jackson floundered for the words to describe why he'd done it. "I… I guess I didn't want you to know because…” God, he didn't want to say it. He knew how awful it would sound. "Because if I admitted to you, really admitted it to myself, how important you are to me, then I'd be giving you the power to hurt me," he said quietly.
Jinyoung's expression softened, just a little. "You're such an idiot Jackson Wang."

Jackson laughed sadly. "I know."

"No, I mean it. You are an idiot. All we ever wanted to do was take care of you. You've been through so much and you've given us so much and all everyone on this ship wants to do is help you, protect you and care about you. But you won't let us," Jinyoung's shoulders sagged a bit and Jackson's heart sank a little more at the heartbroken look on Jinyoung's face. "I know that there are things we can't save you from, whether it be storms or raids or your own memories, but all we ever wanted to do was help. In whatever way we could. But you've spent a decade not only fighting your own demons but also fighting us and I... I don't understand why you'd do that to yourself, why you'd hurt yourself like that. You..." Jinyoung sighed and ran a hand over his face, looking far wearier than Jackson had ever seen him.

He had done that. That was Jackson's fault. He'd tried so hard to keep all his pain away from his crew, to lock up all the horrors of his past so that it wouldn't hurt any of them. He thought that by keeping everything to himself that he was protecting them. But it seemed like that wasn't the right choice either. He didn't realize that by trying to protect his crew he was actually hurting them in an entirely unanticipated way. That they thought he didn't trust them, didn't care about them. And god that hurt far more than Jackson thought it would. That his crew thought that he could throw them away.

"Why didn't you ever tell us?" Jinyoung asked tiredly. "Why did you not tell us the real reason why you were looking for Ching Shih? That you were looking for atonement instead of revenge?"

Jackson thought about it for a moment before voicing the only reason he couldn't think of. "Because I preferred you thinking I was crazy over realizing just how weak I really am."

He wondered if Jinyoung would understand that, if he would be able to explain it properly if he didn't. How he could explain that he'd seen more men than he could count slaughtered for being weak aboard Ching Shih's ship. Weak for anything and everything: liquor, gossip, women, or just physical and mental weakness. It didn't matter. They all ended up the same: looking down the wrong end of her sword.

The only way Jackson has managed to keep himself alive was by hiding his weaknesses and pretending like they didn't exist. By making everyone around him think he was strong, was invincible. Even as a child his fencing teachers would tell him the same thing: if your opponent can figure out your weakness then you've already lost.

He'd gotten so used to hiding everything, so used to thinking everyone was an enemy, someone he had to protect himself from that he hadn't realized he was even doing it anymore. He hadn't realized that he was never hiding his past from his crew, he was hiding himself from them. Not to protect them, but to protect himself.

And that was why Jinyoung was so angry with him. Because he thought Jackson didn't trust them. Which was a horrifying thought because he'd lay down his life to protect any one of these men; he'd do it a thousand times over. It turned out that what they wanted was never Jackson's life, they just wanted him, all of him, even the parts he tried to keep hidden.

Maybe... especially those parts, he thought.

Jinyoung seemed surprised by Jackson's response. "Weak," he echoed quietly. "Jackson, do you know how many times I have thought of you as weak?"
Jackson shook his head, unsure he wanted to know the answer.

"Once. The day I met you," Jinyoung replied. "I thought you were desperate and pathetic and someone I could easily take advantage of."

Jackson laughed humourlessly. Not much had changed apparently.

"But everyday since you have proven me wrong," Jinyoung continued. "Jackson you have more strength in your little finger than most people have in their whole body. Strength of morals, of character, physical strength." He paused, the corner of his lips quirking up. "Maybe lacking some emotional strength though."

Jackson laughed weakly.

Jinyoung stepped closer to him. "Jackson, at fifteen you walked onto a ship with a full crew to rescue a kid you'd never met before. If that's not bravery, what is it?"

"Stupidity?" Jackson offered.

Jinyoung laughed. "Okay, definitely some of that too." He smiled. "Over and over again I've seen you do things willingly and without complaint that other men would run screaming from. Weak is not a word that I'd ever associate with you."

"I'm sorry," Jackson said honestly, only now realizing just how much he had to apologize for.

Jinyoung sighed again and shook his head. "I don't want you to be sorry Jackson. I just… I want to help you. And I want you to accept our help; I want you to ask for it. To know that we think the world of you, and that we think you deserve the world in return."

"Thank you," Jackson choked out.

Jinyoung smiled warmly. "I have something to return to you," Jinyoung said, reaching up taking the wooden pendant from around his neck before taking Jackson's hand and placing it in his palm. "This is yours,"

Jackson looked down at the small bird carved into the wood, so simple and yet something that carried so much meaning for Jackson. The Ahgase and it's crew were so much more than men on a boat. And carrying the pendant meant something far more significant. The one who wore the pendant was in charge of them, was expected to keep them safe and guide them well.

Jackson wasn't sure he was the right person to do that anymore. "I think you should keep it," he said, looking up at Jinyoung. "You'll make a good captain."

Jinyoung closed Jackson's fingers around the medallion before reaching up and cupping Jackson's face, looking at him with what Jackson thought might have been pride. "Jackson, I might not have believed in your goal and I certainly didn't believe in some of the choices you made in pursuit of it, but the one thing I have always believed in was you. That was true when I was fifteen and it is even more true today. You are my captain, the only one I want to sail for."

Jackson's throat was impossibly tight. "But… I…"

"Made a mistake? Made a few of them? Sure you did; so have I. That's called being human. It's my job as your quartermaster and your friend to tell you when I think you're wrong, as I've done in the past and as I'll continue to do for as long as you'll let me. And as your family I'll be here to help you fix any of those mistakes, as I know you'll be there to help me fix mine."
Jackson felt tears spill onto his cheeks, Jinyoung sending him such a warm look. "Don't cry Sseun-ah."

"I'm sorry," Jackson whispered. "I'm sorry that I—"

"Jackson, stop apologizing," Jinyoung interrupted. "I get it. You're sorry." He smiled. "You can say you're sorry by telling me everything that you thought you needed to protect me from for the last five years. You can say you're sorry by finally letting me in."

Jackson took a deep breath. God, where did he even start.

⚓

Jackson stepped out of the cabin what must have been hours later. He and Jinyoung talked about everything, conversations years overdue and Jackson felt like the two had become far closer because of it. He'd always thought of Jinyoung as the person who knew him best, and now that Jackson was starting to be honest with him, that was even more true.

Youngjae and Yugyeom were sparring across the deck, the legs hanging off of the roof indicated that Mark was likely observing them.

They stopped when they saw Jackson step out, looking over him with worried eyes.

"You okay, hyung?" Yugyeom asked, voice small.

Jackson tried for a smile. "I'm okay Gyeommie."

Youngjae didn't look like he believed him. "Jaebeom-hyung is around back, if you need him."

If you need him... Jackson wasn't sure what Youngjae meant by those words, but he found himself overthinking them even as his feet automatically began carrying him to where Jaebeom was.

Need him.

Something about those words rubbed Jackson the wrong way. He didn't need anyone.

No, he stopped himself, catching himself before he started to head down the path that had hurt Jinyoung and his crew so much.

That was old Jackson.

The Jackson who would have run headlong into his death because he was chasing after what he'd lost instead of embracing what he had.

This Jackson did need people. He desperately needed his crew, all of them, and when he turned the corner and saw Jaebeom sitting on the empty crates, a bucket of soapy laundry in front of him, and felt his nerves settle just from the sight of him he realized that Youngjae had been right. He did need Jaebeom. He needed someone who understood. He needed the calm strength Jaebeom exuded. He needed Jaebeom's innate way of always saying exactly what Jackson needed to hear, whether he wanted to hear it or not.

The man in question looked up to see Jackson standing there and after just looking at Jackson's expression, gave Jackson a warm smile and shuffled over to give him space to sit next to him. Jackson gratefully accepted the offer, dropping his head into his hands with a sigh once he was seated.
Jaebeom chuckled quietly, drying a hand off on his pants before bringing it up and gently rubbing Jackson's back. "Jinyoung give you a hard time?"

Jackson shook his head. "No," he said. "He was nice. Told me that he cared about me. That he didn't want me to go off and get myself killed. That he thinks I'm a good captain." Jackson's voice was thick as he tried to hold back years yet again. Fuck, he felt like he somehow cried a decades with of tears in the last twelve hours.


His words surprised a genuine laugh out of Jackson. Like all the tension and emotion had been filling this balloon for hours and Jaebeom's comment had just popped it, releasing all that tension and just making Jackson feel…better.

"How do you always do that?" He marvelled aloud.

Jaebeom sent him a confused look. "What?"

"Just…, make everything better. Jackson shook his head. "Nevermind."

Jaebeom eyed him curiously for another moment before shrugging and going back to the laundry.

Jackson exhaled slowly and leaned back against the cabin wall, still trying to process everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. He felt…better. He knew that he had allowed Ching Shih to consume him, but he hadn’t realized how trapped she had made him feel. How even though he was seeking revenge on her for keeping him prisoner, he had seemingly allowed her to hold him hostage for an extra five years. He felt free now, a sense of freedom that he hadn’t even felt when he’d first escaped all those years ago.

Last night the freedom had terrified him, without Ching Shih to tether him he had just felt lost at sea. But he wasn’t just floating aimlessly on the ocean as he’d felt yesterday; he never had been. He didn’t have shackles anymore, but he did have anchors. His crew were his anchors, keeping him safe and grounded when he needed them, but he was able to give himself more line, more space, if he needed that instead. That had always been true and he hated that it had taken him so long to break through his past and see it for himself.

Jaebeom began humming quietly as he worked and Jackson closed his eyes, soaking in the warmth of the man beside him and letting himself be soothed by his gentle voice. He tried to envision what was next for himself. What was next for Captain Jackson Wang? What did he want from his life?

He frowned when nothing came to him. His frown deepened when the more he tried to think of something, the heavier he felt. Something was still missing. Something was still holding him back. Jackson opened his eyes and looked out over the horizon. He suspected he knew the reason for the heaviness, knew the thing that was keeping him weighed down.

The reason Jackson had given Jaebeom earlier for not ever going to Macau had been bullshit. Sure, Ching Shih had brought him here all the time and he had bad memories of the place; that was all true, but it was also true for about a dozen other ports in Asia that Jackson visited all the time. The real reason he didn't like going to Macau was of how close it was to Hong Kong. Just a few miles and a handful of islands separated Macau from the place where he was born and, for Jackson, it was just…too close.

But if he wanted to move on, really separate himself from Ching Shih and his past and start a new chapter of his life after all this time, there was one thing he had to do. One thing that, with all his
crew around him, he might finally be strong enough to do.

"Hey Jaebeom?"

Jaebeom stopped humming, his hands stilling in the water as he looked over at Jackson. “Yeah?”

Jackson looked out over the water, his eyes on the islands dotting the horizon and whispered the words he didn't think he'd ever say. "I want to go home."

Chapter End Notes

I'm back!! Thank you for being patient (and those of you who left kind words for me on Twitter). I've been sick for the last few weeks (covid sucks, just in case you needed any more confirmation on that. I didn't have a cough or difficulty breathing, just this raging fever for days on end which made it hard to do anything other than sleep.) I'm all good now though! And have SO many more ideas for fics that I want to write (fever dreams can be very peculiar and yet also very inspirational). I thought of another chapter that I wanted to add to this fic, but as I'm actually writing it I don't know anymore. So the next chapter might be the last one, or there might be two more. Or just one really long one? I don't know. We'll all be surprised next week.

Till then, everyone PLEASE take good care of yourselves and I will be sure to do the same

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!