never ever after

by peachpersona

Summary

In a world where books are dangerous portals to fictional realms, Aeri, a fairy in training, finds herself accidentally pulled into an unsealed book that hasn't been read in years.

To find her way home, Aeri has to navigate her way through the book, story by story. But getting out of the book is not as easy as getting in. Especially when stories in unsealed books are often unpredictable.

To make matters worse, the book in question is filled with darkness she cannot begin to comprehend and Aeri will soon learn that the fairy tales she's been led to believe as a child were all lies.

Happily ever after was never real.
Not for her, at least.

And definitely not with them.

【⚠️: dark themes 】

Notes

*never ever after* is my humble attempt at rewriting the known and lesser-known fairy tales from our childhoods. Except now they're dark, twisted, and have entwined themselves with the lives of our favourite boys.

So, here I am, writing this book with the courage that there are people out there who'd love to read a psycho-thriller bts retelling of their childhood fairy tales (as do I) and I hope everyone will genuinely enjoy it.

Though the concept of the stories is similar to the original versions, my retellings are only loosely based off them, despite drawing obvious inspiration from the tales themselves. Essentially, the plot and ideas behind the rewritten versions of these tales are entirely mine.

A fair warning that my retellings are NOT what you'd expect them to be, as I often strive to write stories that challenge one's creativity.

That being said, I worked **REALLY** hard on this project and would appreciate if you didn't plagiarise any part of it.

As always, proceed with caution and do not read what you don't think you can handle; emotionally or otherwise. Whatever you choose to do henceforth is done at your own risk.

Once again, this is a **dark** fairy tale retelling and things *will* get intense. Knowing this, do not plague the comments with negativity should you come across a scene you dislike even after understanding the numerous warnings written here.

Show your support by leaving kudos and commenting!
A fairy is a type of mythical being or legendary creature in European folklore, a form of spirit, often described as metaphysical, supernatural, or preternatural.

The label of fairy has at times applied only to specific magical creatures with human appearance and a small stature. At other times it has been used to describe any magical creature. Myths and stories about fairies do not have a single origin but are rather a collection of folk beliefs from disparate sources.

In this story, fairies are beings who live separately from humans and their world. The fairies do not have special magical powers or abilities. However, as they are magical beings themselves, they do have magic within them which sets them apart from their human counterparts.

Fairy godmother is a title given to a fairy who has attained the highest possible level of knowledge to care for their assigned subject. In short, they are the ones most qualified and knowledgeable to take charge of said subject.

Not all fairies are chosen to be fairy godmothers, and not all chosen fairies succeed.
Aeri sat by the windowsill, staring at the courtyard as throngs of fairies in small groups exited the academy, giggling amongst themselves and leaving behind shimmers of glitter and dust as they walked. Her pout shifted into a frown the longer she stared at them.

She should be with them, enjoying her time at the academy with her batchmates. Instead, she was stuck inside with no friends and nothing to do. All she ever wanted was to pass her training and be a successful fairy. What she wasn't expecting, however, was to be chosen for a different kind of training.

The academy selects a fairy every three years to undergo serious training as the next godmother and this year, the privilege was given to Aeri. To say she was surprised was an understatement. She wasn't particularly bad at fairy training in general, but she wasn't the best either. There were other fairies far better suited to be the godmother candidate. But alas, here she was, trapped for the holidays while everyone else went back home to their families.

"I do hope you're not sulking again, Aeri?"

Aeri whipped her head around and almost fell from her position perched on the windowsill had it not been for her dexterity in acrobatic pursuits. Somehow or other, she managed to save herself from embarrassment by landing nimbly on her feet.

"Not at all, Queen Mab," she said, gulping as she bowed in respect.

Queen Mab was the queen of the fairies and essentially the head of the academy. Being the candidate of choice for the position of fairy godmother meant that Aeri was under the queen's direct tutelage; as if the pressure to do well wasn't daunting enough.

Queen Mab raised her eyebrow, giving Aeri a knowing smile.

"You wish to join your peers in returning for the holidays?"

Aeri's frown deepened as she shuffled uncomfortably under the queen's gaze.

"It's not like that . . ." she said, a little hesitant.

"Do you not wish to train to be a fairy godmother?"

"I do!" Aeri exclaimed in a hurry. "I understand what an honour it must be to be chosen but I just . . . There are other fairies far better suited for this position. It seems like a waste of time training a mediocre fairy for a position of such importance."

Aeri paused for a fraction of a second, and in a voice so quiet, she said, "I don't think I would make a good fairy godmother . . ."

Queen Mab sighed, a smile on her face as she gestured for Aeri to follow her.

"My dear Aeri," she said, losing the formalities altogether. "Intelligence doesn't make a fairy godmother. Sure, there are fairies enrolled in the academy who have better test scores than you, but you should know by now that scores and grades don't make a fairy, let alone a fairy godmother."
There is so much more to you than even you realise, it seems."

Aeri glanced at the queen before turning away to mumble under her breath, "Are you going to start telling me I have hidden talents I'm unaware of that sets me apart from the others?"

"On the contrary, dear, it's neither hidden nor a talent per se."

Queen Mab stopped in front of a set of double doors and gestured towards it with a raised hand. Aeri followed her movement, gaze naturally landing on the engraved words on the plaque by the door.

"Why are we at the library?" she asked with a curious tilt of her head.

"Because this is what sets you apart from the other fairies," the queen said. "Your appreciation and understanding of the complexity and powers that books carry with them."

The look of surprise on Aeri's face was met by laughter from the queen.

"Oh, yes. I do know about your fascination with books. It's not the first time I've been informed of your attempts at sneaking into the restricted section here."

"I'm sorry . . . ?" Aeri said, uncertain if an apology was even wise at this point.

"No matter, Aeri. All is forgiven. As I've said before, your fascination with books is the reason I have chosen you to train as a fairy godmother. For years, I have searched for a fairy with the right capabilities of understanding the intricacies behind the delicate magic woven into books. But none are patient enough . . . Until you came along, that is. I figured that a fairy who already has such keen interest in books would be more than willing to learn a thing or two about the magical kind."

"Y-You mean the books in the restricted section?" Aeri asked, unable to keep the excitement from her voice.

Queen Mab nodded.

"There is much for you to learn, but perseverance, as I have noticed, is part of your nature. It should not be much of a problem for you. Unless, of course, you would rather spend the break with your friends?"

That was when the realisation hit her.

"You had me carry out mundane tasks and study mediocre subjects because you were waiting for the others to vacate the school for the holidays!" she gasped. It was no wonder fairy godmother training had been so boring. It was meant to be that way—a distraction to keep her preoccupied.

"The magic bound to books in the restricted section is dangerous. I could not have unwanted eyes wandering when I am teaching you," Queen Mab said, the soft smile still playing on her lips.

"Now, come," she said, unlocking the door with a wave of her hand. "We have much to learn and no time to waste."

Entering the library, Aeri couldn't help but feel the little bubble of excitement forming in the pit of her stomach. This was the first time she would ever be permitted in the restricted section and it was nothing short of adventurous for her.

"Tell me—what kind of magic do books possess?" Queen Mab asked as they approached the
locked doors towards the very end of the library.

"Books are gateways to magical realms. Portals to fictional worlds of their own creation."

"Very good," the queen said with a smile. "And say, if one were to find themselves trapped in a book, how do they free themselves?"

Aeri frowned. She did not know the answer to this question.

"Finish the story," Queen Mab said.

"Finish the story? But you can't read a book if you're part of it. How is that going to work?"

"You can't read it but you can live through it by playing a character in the story. It helps if you know how the story ends. That way you can restore the ending with the happily ever after it deserves."

Aeri caught the mischievous glint in the queen's eyes and a huff escaped her.

"That's what it is, isn't it? You want me to be the fairy godmother to books, not people."

"Technically, my dear, they're people too. The books are, after all, portals and the realms do exist. Taking care of them is a little tricky because every book here is a replica of a book in the human world and to the humans . . . Well, to them, the stories are just stories, aren't they?"

Queen Mab looked at her with an imploring gaze.

"You understand why this role is important, don't you? I need a fairy who truly understands the delicacy of the matter. I need you, Aeri. You're one of the most well-read fairies in the entire academy and you'd know any one of these stories at the back of your hand. And most importantly, you genuinely care for the books and for stories in general."

Aeri took a moment to survey the rows of books piled along the shelves. She savoured the quiet murmur of written words, the smell of knowledge, and the comfort of familiarity standing amongst them. Sure, she felt somewhat betrayed at not being a fairy godmother to the humans, but Queen Mab was right—the people living in the various realms were humans too. Albeit, with more knowledge of the existence of the other realms and the presence of magic in the world.

"But what if the stories have no happy endings?" she asked. "I can't make that up."

"You're right. You can't, and you won't. We don't interfere with stories that have no happy ending. In fact, we don't interfere with stories, period."

"I don't understand," Aeri said. "If we're not to interfere, what exactly are we supposed to do?"

Queen Mab kept her silence for a few seconds before peering closely at her.

"I take it this means you're up for the challenge?"

"I guess it won't hurt to try," she said, shrugging lightly and trying to look indifferent despite the grin that threatened to show itself.

"Good," the queen said. "Now, in regards to your question, let me ask you this—what is the difference between magic bound books, and books in the restricted section?"

To this, Aeri shrugged. She had no clue.
"Aren't all books bounded in magic? I don't think they're any different."

"That's where you're wrong, Aeri. Magic bound books are books that have been properly *sealed*. The books are still portals and they can be used as such, but only when a certain spell is recited to unseal it. Tell me, why is this important?"

"It prevents people from accidentally falling into the books when they're being opened. It also allows us to read the books without being transported elsewhere."

"That's correct. Now, what about the majority of the books in the restricted section?"

"They're unsealed," Aeri said with a gasp of realisation.

The queen nodded.

"Something went wrong in the process of their creation which leaves them unsealed. There are many factors contributing to a failed sealing process but your job, Aeri, is to study magic in its truest form and attempt to seal the books."

Aeri stared at the queen with her mouth slightly agape, trying to discern if she was pulling her leg or being completely serious. When the queen made no move to retract her statement, Aeri groaned.

"How am I supposed to do that? I'm not strong enough. You're basically telling me to stop myself from getting dragged into a portal while attempting to seal it."

"You'll get there, Aeri," Queen Mab said, an amused smile on her face. "But for starters, I need you to orientate yourself with the books we have on hand. Go through our inventory; check the titles against this list and try to remember as many of them as you can."

The queen handed her a clipboard and was about to take her leave when a sudden thought occurred to her.

"Ah, one other thing, Aeri. I must ask that you be *very* careful when dealing with the books in the restricted section. I'm trusting you to do a good job, but your safety will always take priority. Whatever you do, be careful *not* to open them. Unsealed books are very dangerous. The stories are unpredictable and the characters within them have minds of their own. Unsealed books tend to write themselves sometimes."

Hearing the seriousness in the queen's voice caused Aeri to pale in worry.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Books can . . . *write themselves*?"

"Only the unsealed ones," the queen said. "They're unpredictable because they haven't been read. No one knows what goes on in their fictional realms. Stories write themselves when no one's reading, Aeri. They have the ability to change. A book that hasn't been read in a long while is a dangerous book for a fairy to be trapped in."

Seeing the panicked look on the young fairy's face, the queen moved to pat her reassuringly.

"You'll be fine, Aeri. There's nothing to worry about. All you have to do is familiarise yourself with the titles and *don't* open the unsealed books."

Aeri was completely exhausted by the time the end of the week rolled around. She had been
checking books consecutively, memorising the placement of every book thus far, and felt as though she was lifelessly floating through her day.

The week had been relatively quiet but was now starting to get a little livelier; a sign that the other fairies were back from their week's break and ready to resume their studies the coming Monday. But even the muffled chatter coming from outside the library walls were not enough to keep Aeri's concentration at its peak.

In her state of lethargy, she failed to realise she had made her way to the part of the library that housed the unsealed books.

As had been the case for the last few days, Aeri worked mechanically—pulling books out, reading and memorising their titles, checking it against her list, noting their placement, and putting them back where they belonged.

She pulled the first book off the shelf, dusting down the front cover as she had done many times before, only to pout in confusion when she realised that the particular book in her hand was titled *(Fairy Tales)* inclusive of the parenthesis as though it was a working title soon to be confirmed. Thinking it odd, she backed a few paces to read the attached plaque by the shelf, surprised when she noted where she was.

Aeri exhaled in relief, thanking her lucky stars she had realised her mistake before flipping open the book to view its contents. But luck, as she had deemed, was not on her side.

The library doors swung open rather suddenly, a loud voice yelling through the expanse from the entrance.

"Aeri! Queen Mab told me to get you. She wants you to meet some new students and bring them around the academy before classes commence on Monday."

A pause and then the voice carried on, closer this time.

"Aeri? Where are you? Queen Mab says you're back here somewhere cataloguing the books . . ."

Startled at her friend's intrusive voice, Aeri accidentally let slip the book in her hands. It fell with a thud on the wooden floorboard, landing precariously on its spine before it opened flat on its back.

Aeri stared at it, mouth agape in horror. Before she could lunge forward and slam the book shut, however, she felt a strong pull akin to a suction in a void; hauling her towards the centre of the book. A cry of anguish left her lips as the last tug sent her straight into its pages, the book falling shut immediately afterwards.

"Aeri?" the petite girl from earlier peered past the shelves to where she thought her friend might be.

She frowned. She could have sworn she heard Aeri's voice not a moment ago. But all that was there for the eye to see was a fallen book. Seeing the gap amongst the shelved books, she reached forward and picked their fallen comrade off the floor.

She moved to slide it back into place on the shelf, unaware of the fate of her friend . . . stuck in the book until she exhausted the stories within.
Aeri felt as though she was free-falling through a never-ending tunnel with the winds continually rushing past her ears. She squeezed her eyes shut, aware of the manner in which her heart was thundering wildly in her chest. To say she was frightened was an understatement. She had no idea what to expect, let alone what to do.

Endless amounts of unanswered questions were running through her mind, but the most prominent of all was the one that worried her the most—where was she going to end up? She knew the only way to get back to the realm of the fairies was to go through the book cover to cover. She could only hope she was a good enough fairy to survive the ordeals that awaited her.

And ordeals they were. Because there was nothing scarier than being trapped in a book full of dark fairy tales where 'happily ever after' was a twisted concept she could not begin to comprehend.

The falling sensation stopped all too suddenly, eerie silence taking the place of the winds in her ears. Aeri pried her eyes open hesitantly and looked around her in confusion. A minute or two passed before she came to the startling realisation that she was floating . . . in the ocean.

She panicked, eyes going wide and hands clamouring to her throat. Logic dictated that she would be struggling for breath any second now, but when she retained the ability to breathe as she normally would on land, the thought silenced her panic and gave her pause.

No way.

Aeri gulped, hands falling away from her throat to settle by her sides as she clenched them into tight fists. She closed her eyes, composing herself before looking towards the lower half of her body . . . Only to see a shimmering blue tail in place of her legs.

She clamped her hands over her mouth to stifle the sob of fear that threatened to overwhelm her. She was a mermaid, and there was only one fairy tale she knew of that featured mermaids . . . one that didn't end so well depending on the tale's version.

She was willing to bet, however, that the version she was trapped in wasn't going to be good. After all, according to Queen Mab, these stories haven't been read in decades. Who knew how the story had shifted since the last time anyone had flipped through its pages?

Aeri tried moving, awkward at first but still finding it surprisingly easy. It didn't take long before she got the hang of navigating with the use of her tail—though she was agonisingly slow—and when that was settled, she found herself floundering.

What now?

Her thoughts were answered almost immediately when she found herself being torpedoed in a hug by lithe arms that circled them both a little closer to the surface of the ocean.

The mermaid gripped her tight in her embrace for another minute before pulling away, her face shrouded in worry.

"Oh, thank Poseidon you're okay, Aeri! When I saw you being swept away by the currents, I thought I lost you forever," she said.

"Wait . . . You know me?" Aeri asked, still surprised at the fact that the mermaid had called her by
"Know you? Aeri, it's me, Alana!"

Seeing the confused look on her face, the mermaid added, "I'm your sister. Don't you remember?"

When Aeri said nothing, Alana gasped, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Oh, no. My sweet poor child," she said in a cooing tone. "Your memories haven't returned? I told Father we should have waited until you got better before moving, but he never listens. Just look!"

She gestured irritably at Aeri's tail with a frown.

"You can't even swim properly yet!"

Aeri looked down at the awkward manner she was swishing her tail to stay afloat, her face flaming with sudden embarrassment.

"I lost my memories?" Aeri asked, trying to get Alana to tell her more.

"Yes," Alana said. "You were hit with the sea witch's spell because you were snooping near her waters when Father specifically told you not to. You've lost a whole chunk of your memories and honestly? It's not the best time to go around being clueless. We are in the middle of moving, after all."

"And why are we moving . . . ?"

Alana sighed.

"Let's start from the beginning where it matters, alright? And try to keep up. I don't want to be repeating myself."

Aeri nodded. Alana was right—she couldn't stay clueless forever. If anything, some kind of background information would at least help in her quest of getting this story over with.

"Humans have waged a war on Merfolk. We've tried to hold out for as long as we can but as the days go by, more and more of our kind are dying. The humans have even resorted to poisoning our waters in an attempt to eradicate us. Our Father—he's King Triton, by the way—finally decided to put Merfolk first. We're evacuating these waters; going someplace farther. Someplace safe," Alana said. "We were in the middle of our move when you got swept away by unexpectedly strong currents. You still haven't gotten the hang of swimming yet and well, that's how we ended up here."

Aeri furrowed her brows in concentration. This was not part of the story at all. She didn't recall there ever being any kind of war between the humans and the Merfolk. But wait—King Triton? The King Triton? If he was still part of the tale then that must mean a character far more definitive must be part of it as well.

"What of Ariel?" Aeri asked. "Where is she?"

As long as Ariel was still part of the narrative, Aeri had no problem understanding the direction and flow of the story. She'd know how to get to the end.

Contrary to what she had hoped, however, a sympathetic look crossed Alana's features as she gently cupped Aeri's cheek with her hand.
"Ariel's no longer with us, dear," she said in a soft voice. "She died. She's been dead for months now."

"W-What?" Aeri murmured, shaking her head. "No . . . No. She can't be dead. Not Ariel."

If Ariel was dead, how was the story supposed to end? What was she supposed to do? Queen Mab was right. The story had changed and in ways she could not perceive.

"What about the Prince? Prince Eric? Weren't they in love?" Aeri asked, still reeling from the discovery of Ariel's death.

Alana scoffed, rolling her eyes as she shook her head.

"The Prince? His people were the ones who killed Ariel," she said with malice in her voice. "That's how the war started in the first place."

"No . . ." Aeri mumbled, mouth falling open in disbelief.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Ariel was dead because of Prince Eric? That didn't sound right at all.

"I know it's difficult to swallow, but it's the truth, Aeri. You're not the only one who was surprised. All of us were under the impression the two were in love. As it turned out, Ariel was the fool. He played her, the stupid Prince. He married someone else and left our sister for dead. But Ariel had some fight left in her, as well as the fuel of vengeance coursing through her veins. She crept into his room that night and stabbed his heart—the only way to get back her tail. Losing the Prince's love was difficult enough. Having to die as a human would've been torturous for her. She didn't want that. She wanted to go back to us, to her family.

Unfortunately, she wasn't quick enough. The palace guards got to her before she could jump back into the ocean for her final transformation. She didn't stand a chance against them. The war started immediately after word got out that Ariel was a mermaid. The humans foolishly believed Ariel was a spy sent to infiltrate the palace. As if Merfolk would want anything to do with land dwellers. And, well, things just kept getting worse from then on."

"There's more?" Aeri asked.

"That's not the end of it if that's what you mean. Every day the humans' hatred for Merfolk increases. Just recently a new General has taken leadership of the sea fleet and I've heard rumours of how he's obliterated thousands of our best warriors. He embarks upon a vessel he calls The Death Voyager and he sails closer to our palace lines every day. Needless to say, Father is overwhelmed with anxiety. He's already lost one daughter, he cannot bear to lose anymore."

"So he's raised the white flag and moving the surviving Merfolk elsewhere," Aeri murmured, more to herself than to Alana.

"We need to save ourselves, Aeri. No help is coming for us and as the King, Father has to do what needs to be done even if it means putting aside his ego and running away. It's the only way to save what remains of our kind," Alana explained.

"This General . . . What's his name?"

"I don't know," Alana said,shrugging. "But hearsay from the warriors claims his name is General Park Jimin. He's ruthless and holds no mercy for our kind. Anyone who crosses his path . . ."
"Don't make it out alive?" Aeri asked.

"In not so many words. You'd do best to stay out of trouble from now on. These are his waters. He's known to sail these seas."

Loud rumbling from above caught Alana's attention as she shifted to look towards the sky. A worried expression crossed her features and she moved to grab hold of Aeri's upper arm.

"We don't have time to talk. There's a storm coming and I can't risk you getting swept away by the currents again. You're too weak and we're safer swimming in a group. We have to hurry and get back to Father and our sisters."

Alana wasted no time in dragging her along as she started swimming against the currents. Aeri could see the strain it took on her and with a storm brewing, it was only going to get worse. They had hardly been swimming for long when a looming silhouette in the distance caused Alana to stop abruptly.

"Alana? What's wrong?" Aeri asked as she peeked over her sister's shoulder.

"That's a ship," Alana said in hushed tones.

"Maybe it has a friendly crew," Aeri said, knowing full well how naive she sounded.

"No. The ship isn't anchored, Aeri. But they're not moving either."

"So then, what are they doing?"

"They're waiting."

"What for?"

Just as the question left Aeri's lips, a harpoon cut through the water's surface and sped its way in their direction. Alana, with her quick reflex, pushed her sister out of the way, the harpoon having missed them by a mere inch.

"For us, apparently," Alana said as more harpoons came flying into the water.

Alana grabbed hold of Aeri firmly by the shoulders and spun her to look directly in her eyes.

"Go," she said. "Swim as fast as you can following the South-East currents. Find our family, Aeri."

"I'm not leaving you!" Aeri yelled, horrified at the sudden turn of events.

"You have to. I'll buy you as much time as I can. But you have to go and you have to try your best to get back to Father."

"We can go together, Alana. You said so yourself that Father cannot bear to lose any more of his daughters."

Alana shook her head, giving her little sister a small kiss on the cheek.

"But I cannot bear to lose you in the hands of tyrants. Not when I can do something about it."

Those words being the last thing she said before she pushed Aeri away, smiling at her for the last time. Alana swam in the opposite direction, never once looking back as she attempted to get the attention of the sailors above.
Aeri couldn't explain the overwhelming sadness she was feeling as she watched Alana swim away. It was odd. This wasn't her life and Alana wasn't actually family . . . Yet why was her heart hurting the way it did? Why does her place in this realm feel so real?

Another harpoon piercing through the water's surface followed by the thunderous roar of the sky from above snapped her from her moment of distraction. She wiped the back of her hands against her falling tears only to realise they weren't tears at all, but pearls. So it was true—mermaids cried tears of pearls.

She didn't have time to dwell on the newfound information as she struggled to make her escape. Aeri was determined to ensure Alana's sacrifice would not be in vain. She pushed herself for as long and as fast as she could, her moment of focus inevitably being her downfall when she failed to notice how close she had swum to the ship's hull.

She was near the South-East currents now; she could just about make them out in the distance which only fuelled her effort to get to them. But just as she was closing the distance, she felt something snagging her tail, preventing her from going any further.

She turned in alarm to see that her tail had somehow been caught in a net the sailors had cast. She twisted her body, attempting to free herself but to no avail. The more she struggled, the more the net seemed to tighten around her, hurting the scales on her tail and consequently bruising them.

Aeri started to panic when she realised the net was being hauled to the surface. The sailors had taken notice of their catch and were bringing her up from the waters. She gritted her teeth, bracing herself for the pain she knew would come as she yanked her tail as hard as she could.

Pain shot through her very being, and she gasped, momentarily blinded by the sudden surge of torment she felt. Still, the net did not give way. She didn't want to believe it, but she knew there was no escaping this trap. She had lost. The sailors had caught her and she had inevitably failed Alana.

Aeri stared down at the darkness of the ocean as she watched the pearls descend to the seabed below. She felt utterly useless and pathetic. None of her efforts bore fruit and only resulted in her hurting herself. Yet, all she could do was cry.

The sounds of men cheering reached her ears and she realised that she was no longer in the ocean. She was hanging precariously above water by her tail, the entire world tilted as she flinched when she caught the predatory gazes of the men on deck.

Their violent natures and the triumphant cries that left their lips frightened her to no end. But nothing scared her more than the name she caught painted on the ship's starboard.

*The Death Voyager.*
Aeri was hauled on board the ship and dumped unceremoniously onto its deck. She watched with wary eyes as one of the men walked over to the net and produced a knife from his inner pocket. He grinned at her, showcasing his dirt ridden teeth when he caught a flicker of fear in her eyes.

"I'm not going to fillet you if you're that worried," he joked, earning a laugh from the crew.

"Normally," he added, crouching as he started cutting the ropes. "I would worry about our captives running off but seeing as how you don't have legs, to begin with . . . There's nothing to worry on that front, is there?"

Another round of laughter erupted from the men around him, causing Aeri to frown. She couldn't understand what was so funny. Why were they even laughing? They made her sick. She kept her focus on the man's movement as he sawed at the ropes. The second her tail was freed from its clutches, she pulled away, a sigh of immense relief leaving her. Having her tail tied up was almost as suffocating as choking.

She pulled her tail closer to her chest as she shuffled awkwardly away from the fast advancing men. They cooed at her, murmuring soft praises about how cute she was from the way she was behaving. What in the world did these people want with her? For a moment, Aeri wished they'd get her death over and done with if that was their purpose in kidnapping her. Perhaps it would even be a way for her to end the story and jump to the next one.

At this point, who knew what drove the stories and worse still, how many stories the volume contained. She couldn't imagine a life jumping from one story to the next, but alas, this was her fate —the price she had to pay for being careless.

"What is with all the noise?" a voice called out, the sound of which immediately silenced the crew as they looked over their shoulders with wide eyes. "I specifically said I did not want to be disturbed, and here I am, waking up to a ruckus on deck."

The man from earlier shuffled away from her and pushed past the crew to the approaching figure.

"G-General, I hope you had a good rest. We, uh, the crew and I caught something for you."

"Caught?" the voice repeated with a tinge of curiosity.

Aeri wasn't particularly curious as to the newcomer's presence. If her assumptions were correct, the person she was about to meet was the captain of the ship. The one Alana warned her about—General Park Jimin, a ruthless murderer of Merfolk.

She imagined him to be everything wicked she could think of . . . and was surprised when her expectations were shattered, for the man in question, as he stepped into her view, was devilishly handsome.

"My, my, my," he said, licking his lips as his gaze landed on her. "Look what the tides brought in, eh?"

The dominance he exuded frightened her, and though she would rather not, Aeri found herself lumbering backwards until her back hit the side of the ship. With nowhere else to go, she could only watch as the man crouched in front of her, his hands reaching forward to grip her face as he examined her closely.
"I have fought and killed many warriors of your kind, but this is the first time I've seen a mermaid. Lucky too, because the latest news I've heard tells me my job is done—there are no more Merfolk in our waters. You've all fled like the cowards you are... except you, it seems. Did you get separated from your family?"

Aeri gritted her teeth in anger as she glared at him. It was a waste to let such an evil man bear such attractive features. The way he gloated about killing Merfolk was atrocious. He was proud of what he had done. Acting as if Merfolk were pests he was deployed to rid the waters of.

Aeri nudged her head back, freeing herself from his hold and leaving his arm awkwardly frozen midair. He laughed, curling his fingers into a fist as he lowered his hand. He trailed a finger along the scales on her tail, seemingly mesmerised by the way they shimmered.

"Beautiful," he muttered under his breath.

The look in his eyes scared her and Aeri hugged her tail closer to her chest, wanting nothing more than to disappear within herself.

"Tell me, lovely, what's your name?" he asked, turning his attention back on her.

Aeri scowled at him.

"How can you call me such endearing pet names when you hate my kind and take pride in killing us?"

"Easy," he said, unperturbed by her brief show of anger. "Because you're going to be my pet, hence the pet names. I thought it was obvious enough."

"What?" Aeri asked, horrified at what she was hearing.

"Did you think I was going to kill you? Oh, no. I couldn't do such a terrible thing. I told you, didn't I? I've only ever seen the likes of mermen. This is the first time I've ever seen a mermaid and now that all of you are gone for good... Where's the harm in keeping you with me, huh? Besides, you're a sight for sore eyes."

He grabbed her face yet again, although this time, he was being much rougher than before. A dark look settled itself across his features and the mirth in his eyes from earlier dissipated completely.

"Now, are you going to tell me your name, or should I give you one myself? It doesn't make much of a difference to me. After all, isn't it a norm for owners to name their new pets?" he asked, his hand tightening its hold on her with each word uttered.

"Aeri," she managed to choke out. "My name—it's Aeri."

He stared at her for a second, grip loosening as he moved his hand to cup her cheek, his fingers pressed uncomfortably against her damp skin.

"Aeri," he whispered the name, liking the way it sounded to his ears. "A beautiful name for a beautiful creature."

Aeri pushed his hand away from her, vexed at the way he was casually touching her. Again, she hugged herself, an involuntary shiver running through her when cold winds started blowing across the ocean. Her state of apparent undress was not much of a help either; the only coverage coming in the form of a brassiere made of interwoven seaweed that clung to her chest in an almost provocative manner now that she was no longer in the waters.
"Take her to my cabin," he ordered.

He kept his gaze steady on her as one of his men began dragging her across the deck by the arm, not caring in the least how she struggled to keep her tail from getting ensnared in the ropes and lines along the way. She heard the distinct sound of wood creaking before she was tossed below deck. She tumbled down a number of steps and landed in a heap on the floor, wincing at the pain in her arms after a weak attempt at breaking her fall.

"I don't make a habit of introducing myself to my captives," the general said as he descended after her, his boots landing with heavy thuds on the wooden boards. "But since you're going to be staying with me for a while, I might as well."

The latch closed with a resounding thump, enveloping the room in momentary darkness and illuminated only by the flicker of lamps situated at intervals on the walls.

"My name is Park Jimin," he said, the smug arrogance seeping back into his demeanour. "I'm the captain of this ship, the renowned conqueror of the seas, killer of Merfolk, and inevitably, your new master."

Jimin revelled in the frightened look on her face. He laughed, the sound deceptively melodious for someone as vile as him.

"Did you really think I was joking when I said I wanted to keep you as my pet?"

"What do you intend to do with me?" Aeri asked despite being genuinely afraid of the answer he'd give her.

"Oh, no, lovely. I'm not going to do anything to you. Rather, it is you who will be doing something for me."

Jimin crouched to her level, twirling a strand of her hair around his finger, his gaze fixated on the soft tresses in his hold.

"You," he said, voice a breathy whisper. "Are going to make me rich."

"You're going to sell me?" Aeri asked. The extent of human greed never failed to astound her in the most atrocious of ways.

"Not a chance. You're my lifetime investment, not a onetime deal."

"I don't understand. If you're not going to sell me . . . how am I supposed to make you rich?"

Jimin grinned, hand trailing along the coarse scales on her tail.

"There's a rumour that's been going around among seafaring folk that if you catch a mermaid, you're in luck. Because mermaids don't cry tears . . ."

Aeri's eyes widened in panic at the insinuation behind his words. Her gaze zeroed in on his hand resting against her tail.

"No, no, don't," she pleaded, grabbing onto his wrist in an attempt to pull away from him. Anything to put some distance between them; to stop him from hurting her.

Jimin's grin transitioned into one of pure malice upon seeing her useless struggles.

"Don't--!" Aeri managed one last time before she found her cry stuck in her throat when Jimin...
ripped the scales from her tail.

The pain she felt was blinding; her head swimming at the sudden torment. She could feel her eyes starting to water at the sting in her tail. She whimpered, caressing the bleeding wound left in the wake of his violence.

As the first of her tears fell, she could just about distinguish what sounded like tiny pebbles falling onto panelled wood. Jimin plucked one of the fallen pearls off the floor, bringing it up against the light to examine it closely.

In a distracted voice, he said, "Mermaids don't cry tears, they cry pearls."

He turned towards her with a fake pout of sympathy.

"Did that hurt, lovely? I'm so sorry. But look at this wonderful gift you have given me. Isn't it just magnificent?"

"Please," Aeri said, more pearls clattering to the floor where she sat. "Please, let me go back to my family. They're still out there. They need me."

She didn't know how this twisted version of *The Little Mermaid* ended, but if she had to take a wild guess, she figured it had to do with her family. Whatever the cost, she had to get back to them. There was no way she could achieve any form of ending with the likes of Park Jimin. It had barely been a day since their meeting and already he was ripping out her scales and torturing her for riches.

Jimin stared at her, the smug smile from earlier vanishing as he exhaled and proceeded to sit in front of her.

"Do you have any idea why I came out here when I wasn't given any orders to?"

Aeri shook her head.

"Because I heard that King Triton had raised the white flag in surrender and was fleeing for his life and the lives of any other surviving Merfolk," Jimin spat. "It disgusted me. No one runs from Park Jimin. No one."

"You . . . You came out here to try and intercede the fleeing party . . . You wanted to—" Aeri pressed her hand against her mouth in realisation of just how horrible the general was.

"That's right, lovely. I wanted to kill them all. Your family included if they're part of the fleeing party. Everyone knows of my thirst for Merfolk blood. If I can kill countless of King Triton's warriors, how do you think normal Merfolk will fare?"

Jimin placed a finger under her chin and tilted her head to look her in the eyes.

"But I'm willing to make a compromise for you," he said. "If you choose to stay with me, I will turn this ship around and head back to shore. I'll let them go and I'll spare their lives. I won't go after them as long as you keep crying when I want you to and provide me with the riches I desire."

"And if I refuse?" Aeri asked.

"You're free to leave. But know this—once you do, I'll go after whatever remains of King Triton's people and kill them all. I'll stain the sea red with their blood. And then," Jimin smiled. "And then I'll come for you, wherever you are."
Aeri sat there motionless as she cradled her injured tail close to her chest. Her tears had long stopped by now, shimmering pearls scattered all around her. She wanted her freedom very much. To leave this ship and the wretched man keeping her captive.

But despite her current change in species, she was a fairy nonetheless, and fairies had hearts filled with the pureness of good. She could not let Jimin kill the Merfolk even if her choice would result in her suffering.

"Okay," she whispered, looking away from him. She didn't want to see the victorious smile on his face knowing she had given up hope. "I'll stay with you."

"Of course, you will, my pet," Jimin said.

He stood, looking down at her with a gleam of possessiveness in his gaze before saying, "I'll go inform the crew of the change in route. In the meantime, be good for me and pick up the pearls, would you?"

And with that, he was gone.
Aeri sat on the tiled floor of her prison, pushing herself to reach the sink as she struggled to fill the cup with water. Once it was full, she turned, splashing her tail with the cooling substance as a quiet sigh escaped her. But just as quickly as the soothing effect had come to her, it was just as easily gone.

"No . . ." she frowned, filling the cup with water once more.

The past week had been absolute hell. Upon docking at the royal port, Jimin had shrouded her with a thick blanket, disembarking the ship with her thrown over his shoulder. He didn't give a damn if he was hurting her or if he was being particularly rough. The only thing he had to say to her was a stern threat—warning her not to cry because he didn't want a trail of pearls leading up to his estate.

The journey henceforth was long and arduous, especially since she could not see where they were going. The sound of horses neighing and the creak of wheels against gravelled roads was the only indication she had that they were in a carriage.

Before long, she was once again roughly handled by the general, leading her to believe that they had arrived at their destination. Aeri saw nothing of the house she was taken to, except of course, for the white-tiled room Jimin had thrown her in from the moment they arrived.

The room was vast, ironically bare save for the one source of water—the sink—and a barred window.

"Figured you didn't need a bed, lovely," Jimin said after dumping her on the ground. "At least you've got a window to look out of. Oh, and before I forget."

He left the room and came back immediately after with a basket. Tossing it on the floor next to her, he said, "For your tears. I'll be back when you've filled it. Until then, you're staying here."

Aeri hadn't a clue what it meant to be a mermaid. But she was fairly certain the stiffening of her tail and the flaking of her scales wasn't it. A week had gone by quickly, and the basket was overflowing with pearls, the pain from her tail being the cause of such progress as Jimin would call it.

Aeri found solace from the pain in the form of water. But the state of her tail had degraded so fast, any water she tossed on it had quickly evaporated. She didn't know what was happening, but it felt almost as though she was starved for water. After all, she was a mermaid and she wasn't meant to be on land for long periods of time.

Arms hurting from having to support herself on the edge of the sink, Aeri finally let go, sliding down onto the floor amidst the numerous pearls scattered around her. She focused on her breathing—something that was getting increasingly difficult to do—as she stared blankly at the ceiling.

In her state of lethargy, she heard the click of the door opening, followed by the sounds of pearls being crushed. A low chuckle reached her ears and she looked to the side to see a very pleased looking Park Jimin.

"I see you've been busy," he said, his eyes gleaming over the mass of pearls everywhere.
Aeri wanted to yell at him. Call him foul names in every language she could muster, but the only thing she could manage at this point was a low grunt. She turned to face the window, eyes falling shut as she basked in the warmth of the light streaming in from outside.

"What's wrong with you?" Jimin asked as he ventured further into the room to check on her.

"Just take your pearls and leave me alone," Aeri said.

For some reason, a part of her knew this was the end. She was dying and perhaps stories like this only ended that way—in death. Maybe that's how she'd progress to the next story until she made it out of the book. And if she really was dying, she wanted to be alone. She didn't want to be anywhere near her captor and she certainly didn't want the last thing she saw to be his stupid smug smile.

"Oh, don't fret. I am going to take the pearls you've so generously provided me with, but I'm not leaving until you tell me why you look like you're dying," Jimin said, finally noticing the drying scales on her tail and the way the shimmer that was there once before was now gone completely.

"Take a guess," Aeri said.

"Wait... Don't tell me... You really are dying, aren't you? But why? You've got your water right there."

"For someone who hates Merfolk, you really don't know anything about them, do you?" Aeri scoffed. "We live in water. You're drying me out by leaving me here like this."

"You have to be in water," Jimin said in realisation, silently cursing himself for his stupidity.

"At least you've learned something. Now leave me alone. I don't want to die with you here."

"You're not dying. You can't die," he insisted, brows furrowing.

"I have given you what you wanted. There are enough pearls in this room to last you your entire lifetime and more. What else do you want from me?"

"What did I tell you?" he said, unprecedented anger seeping into his tone. "If you leave me, I will go after everyone in King Triton's domain and kill them all. Is that what you want?"

"I am not leaving you. I am dying."

"And how is that any different?" Jimin shot back. "If you don't want me to kill the people you love, you will not die on me. Not now."

Aeri stared at him from where she laid on the ground, eyes a glossy sheen and breathing shallow. She shook her head, turning away. She didn't understand him at all. He was making the situation seem as though she wanted to die.

He was the one who captured her. He was the one who threatened her and forced her to slave away for him. He was the one who put her in a barren room. He was the one who left her there for a week without checking on her. How was any of it her fault? If anything, he was the one to blame.

"Say something," Jimin said in urgency, shaking her until she pried her eyes open.

"What do you want?" she asked, agitated. She was in pain and yet he would not leave her alone. "Do you want more pearls? Is that it?"
"I don't care about the stupid pearls," he hissed. "How much time do you have left?"

"I don't know," Aeri shrugged.

Her calm demeanour frustrated him and he resorted to grabbing her around the shoulders and yanking her into a seating position.

"How can you not know?" he asked through gritted teeth. "You are dying. Don't you care?"

"No," Aeri responded, and to a certain extent, it was true. "Dying is better than having to stay here with you."

Jimin let his hands fall away from her, expression going blank as he scrutinised her through narrowed eyes.

"Fine," he said, standing and looking down at her. "Be that way."

He left, slamming the door shut behind him and for once, silence enveloped the room again. Silence, and the sound of pearls clattering across tiled floors.

Aeri had somehow managed to fall asleep amidst the pain and was convinced she would never awake from her slumber again. But she was sorely mistaken when the soft sounds of splashing water roused her from her state of unconsciousness.

Her eyes snapped open, finding herself staring at an unfamiliar ceiling and realising just then that the pain that once bounded her lower half in its hold was dissipating by the minute.

She looked down at herself, eyes going wide upon the realisation that she was in a bathtub, her tail fully submerged in water. She wasn't dead. She was still stuck in *The Little Mermaid* and she was, evidently, still a mermaid.

"Did you have a nice dream?"

Aeri startled, turning swiftly to the side to see Jimin lounging casually in an armchair that had been set up next to the bathtub.

"What—no thank you for your saviour? Not an ounce of gratitude for the man who saved your life?" he asked with an expectant raise of his eyebrow.

"I don't recall asking you to do such a thing," Aeri said.

Though a part of her was glad she wasn't dead, she couldn't help feeling disappointed at reawakening in the same realm. She couldn't push aside her earlier assumption that death may be the only way to end the story. But now she would never know the answer to her nagging curiosity.

"Honestly," Jimin said. "What *does* Prince Eric find so alluring about your kind? His fascination never fails to astound me. He used to babble nonstop about his beloved Ariel, I was almost inclined to think mermaids were reincarnations of the sea goddess herself with the way he spoke of her. Yet here you are, a mermaid who does absolutely nothing but frustrate me."

His words caught her off guard and she jerked upright, sending waves of water over the side of the tub.

"You know Prince Eric? And Ariel?" she asked, her eyes going wide. This might be it—her chance
at finding the end to the rewritten story.

"Who doesn't know them? They've been the talk of the kingdom since their whole Romeo and Juliet act. But if you must know . . . The idiot of a prince is my cousin."

"You're related to royalty?" Aeri asked, incredulous. She didn't think for one second the monarch would act in any way he did.

"As it so happens, yes. Is it so surprising? I mean, who did you think talked the prince out of marrying Ariel? He was so enamoured by her, he'd marry her the first chance he gets. It's a good thing he takes my counsel to heart."

Aeri gasped. She always thought Eric and Ariel were much too in love with each other not to get married and she was right. Eric really did want to marry her sister. But Jimin got in the way of that. He ruined the story's happily ever after . . . He ruined everything.

"Why would you do such a thing? How could you? They were happy."

"I'm not about to welcome a mermaid into my family. If she had married Eric, that's what we'll be —family. I can't imagine anything worse than being related to a mermaid."

"You knew what she was?" Aeri asked. She was under the impression that no one knew Ariel was a mermaid until after she had killed the prince.

Eric tells me everything. Including the alarming fact that he was about to marry a mermaid. I, of course, had to make him see sense in the error of his ways."

"They were happy together. They loved each other!" Aeri refuted.

"Why does that matter? Their happiness or their apparent love for each other is not my concern," Jimin scowled.

"You are a fool! Of course, it matters. If a mermaid marries someone who loves her more than anything in the world, she exchanges her soul for a human one. Ariel would've been a human if you had just given her a chance!"

"My," Jimin chuckled, pushing himself off the chair to lean over her in the tub. "You're rather passionate about this, aren't you? Don't tell me . . . You're looking for your own prince charming?"

"They don't exist," Aeri said, voice dripping with venom. "And even if they did, I would never marry the likes of a human. You hate Merfolk but we have never done anything to harm or hurt your kind. But you . . . Humans are the worse."

It took Aeri a moment to realise she was crying. It hadn't occurred to her until just then how easily she had slipped into her role as a mermaid in this tale. Her words rang true—she felt strongly about the unfair ways Merfolk were being treated when all they've ever done was naively search for true love amongst those on land. At the end of the day, Merfolk had everything to lose and the humans had none. Yet they were the ones being hunted and treated like monsters.

Jimin huffed, gathering up the pearls in the palm of his hand.

"Stop crying," he said. "I have enough pearls as it is and god knows what a difficult time I had trying to collect everything from the other room."

"Then let me go," Aeri said. "If you have enough pearls, let me go. There is nothing more I have to
"Seems unfair, don't you think? You have nothing to offer me, yet I am obligated to grant you your freedom? I don't think so, lovely."

"The pearls in exchange for my freedom. I have given you more than enough," she said, exasperated.

"No . . . Rather, the pearls were in exchange for the lives of your kin. You'd have to give me something else if you want your freedom. But seeing as how you have nothing to give . . . It seems you'll be staying here, after all," Jimin said.

Aeri's face was blotched and her eyes were bloodshot from all the crying she had done. Even now as she glared at Jimin, she was aware of the pearls falling into the water around her. She hated how she couldn't seem to control her emotions. Crying like this in front of him made her seem weak in his gaze and she hated it beyond belief.

Jemin reached forward, grabbing her face in his hand as he gave it a light squeeze.

"What did I tell you about crying?"

She pushed his hand away, wiping her cheeks with her palms as she tried to stop herself. Her stupid tears were a waste on someone like him.

"If you want your freedom so badly . . . " Jimin said, trailing off as he seemed to consider a notion that had appeared in his mind. "I'll make you another deal. Only because you've been good the past week. You've easily made me the richest man in the kingdom besides the king himself."

"What else do you want?" Aeri asked, her tone bitter but laced with a small inkling of hope.

"From you? Nothing," Jimin said, shrugging. "I just need you to continue being good for the next few days. No more crying, no more pearls. I'll be moving you to a more . . . secure setting and I want you to stay put and be good. Do that for me and you'll have your freedom."

"That's all?" Aeri asked. It seemed too good to be true.

"That's all," Jimin repeated. "You said so yourself. You have nothing more to offer me. Do me this one favour, and you'll have your wish."

Aeri pondered over his offer but could not find any reason not to agree. If all he wanted was for her to stop crying, she didn't see any reason not to accept his deal. After all, there didn't seem to be anything in it for him and she didn't have much to lose. She had given him all the pearls he could ever want and it's only been a week. Perhaps, that was all he ever desired from her.

"Is that a yes?" Jimin enquired after a moment's silence.

Aeri locked eyes with him and nodded in agreement. Oh, if only she knew then that Park Jimin never did anything unless it benefited him in some way.
"Your definition of a 'secure setting' is a cage?" Aeri asked as she pressed her palm flat against the glass surface of the tank Jimin had put her in.

"A cage keeps things in, so yes, that does fit the intention I had in mind," Jimin said, standing before her on the opposite side of the glass. "You can't deny this is an upgrade from the tub you were in. I mean, look, you can submerge yourself entirely if you want to. Isn't that just wonderful?"

"I guess."

She chewed on her bottom lip, unable to stop the fear from creeping into her heart as she tapped on the glass surface with a finger. Something didn't feel right about the whole situation.

Aeri pressed her face as close to the glass as possible, peering to get a glimpse of the stand on which the tank was supported. She frowned when she realised that it had wheels for easy movement . . . Why would anyone need to push the tank anywhere? It didn't make much sense to her. She glanced up, noticing for the first time that the top of the tank was secured by a padlock of which she was certain only Jimin had the key to.

The precautions to keep her 'secure' seemed unnecessary. She was a mermaid with a tail. It wasn't as though she was capable of going anywhere without help. She was on land, and she had no way of escaping anywhere. Not with a tail at least.

"Jemin?" she called to him as she swam to the other end of the tank.

He was seated behind a desk reading some documents. He hummed in acknowledgement but did not look up from his work.

"What is it?" he asked when she failed to say anything more.

"This tank you've put me in . . . What is it for?"

Jemin sighed, putting down the documents and clasping his hands together on the desk as he leaned back in his chair to observe her.

"To keep you secure as I've said many times before."

"What's it really for?" she pressed. She wanted to know the truth. She couldn't shake the feeling that he was lying to her. And if he wasn't, it sure felt like it. In any case, she was positive he was hiding something from her.

"You're my pet," he said. "And pets are kept in cages. That tank is your cage. Okay?"

"You're not lying to me, are you? You will grant me my freedom?"

"Listen, we made a deal, didn't we? As long as you're being good and you're keeping silent, you'll gain your freedom. And right now, you're not exactly keeping silent."

Seeing how Aeri was about to say something else, Jimin stood, grabbing the throw-over from the back of his chair and walking over to her.

"No more questions," he said in a stern voice as he draped the cloth over the tank, effectively shrouding her in complete darkness.
"Wait, Jimin!" she called out to him, her breathing heavy as she pressed her hands against the glass. She couldn't see him anymore but she could tell he had stopped, the tips of his shoes barely visible from the small crack between the cloth and the glass barrier.

"We didn't set a time period. For the deal," she said. "How long? How long will you keep me in this tank until I'm free to go?"

It was quiet for a while as though he was considering her question before he said, "Two days. Stay there for two days. Be good, stay quiet and don't cry."

Two days. She had to endure for another two days and she'd be free. If she could survive a whole week without water, she'd be fine with two days in a tank full of it.

Or so she thought.

The enshrouding darkness and the feel of water enveloping her were enough to lull her, ironically, into a comfortable moment of uninterrupted rest. She awoke a few hours later when she heard the burble of water being poured into the tank.

She pried her eyes open, bright lights obscuring her sight, resulting in her momentary loss of vision before she was able to focus. Once she did, however, she started to panic.

Jimin had lifted the lid off the tank and was filling what space remained within with water.

"You're awake," he said. "Finally."

Aeri pushed herself from the bottom of the tank, gasping when she broke through the surface of the water.

"Jimin, what are you doing?" she asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" he countered as he reached for another bucket of water before emptying it into the tank.

The tank was completely full by now, water splashing over the edge and spilling onto the floor below.

"You can't do this. You can't fill the tank with this much water," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because you can't hear me talking underwater. If you close the lid, I'll be completely submerged."

"Exactly," Jimin said, grinning. "As I've said—I need you to be quiet. And that means no talking."

He grabbed her shoulder and pushed her back into the tank.

"Bye," he said, slamming the lid shut and securing the padlock.

He knocked on the glass with his knuckles in an attempt to gain her attention. When she turned towards him, he gave her a fake pout, using his hands to imitate someone rubbing their eyes after crying. He winked at her before stalking off, the throw-over once again engulfing her in darkness.
Aeri couldn't stop herself from worrying. There was something off with the way Jimin was acting. He seemed far too cheerful. She knew it was too good to be true when he said she'd gain her freedom in two days. Just what was he up to?

As it turned out, it wasn't long before she'd get the answers to her questions.

The first moment Aeri realised she wasn't alone in the room was when she heard the faint sounds of what she assumed to be chairs scraping against wood. She pressed her ear against the glass, trying to make out any other sounds when she heard what she could only guess were muffled conversations.

There was more than one person with her in the room. She pushed away from the front of the tank, choosing to stay pressed to the back. All too suddenly, the throw-over was pulled free, bright lights once again penetrating her gaze. But unlike the sunlight from before, this light was artificial and aimed directly at her.

Aeri brought an arm out in front of her to shield herself from the intrusive glare. She couldn't hear what was going on, but she could just about make out the general setting of the room.

There were chairs lined up in two rows in front of the tank; all of which were occupied. The men seated before her had numbered paddles in their hands as they whispered amongst themselves and pointed at her. Curiosity got the better of her, and Aeri swam closer to the front of the tank.

She placed her palm flat against the glass and squinted at the faces looking back at her. A slight movement from the corner of her eye caught her attention and she turned, noticing for the first time the podium pushed to the side of the room, with Jimin standing behind it.

He avoided her gaze as he gestured towards the tank with his hand, all the while speaking to the men gathered in the room. After a few minutes, several men started lifting their arms, as Jimin noted down the numbers on their paddles.

And then it struck her—this was a private auction. Jimin was auctioning her to the highest bidder.

Aeri felt an overwhelming rush of anger towards him, followed shortly after by embarrassment at her own stupidity. How naive was she to think that Jimin would stick to his word? She should have seen it coming. After all, this was the man who forced her to cry for his own benefit. As if he would grant her the freedom she so desired.

Frustrated yet unable to do anything, Aeri started swimming in circles around the large tank, an action equivalent to pacing. She was agitated and the confined space was doing nothing to help.

It was no wonder Jimin filled her tank to the brim with water just this morning. He didn't want her yelling and making a mess of the auction he had prepared . . . because if it was an option, she'd be yelling her head off right about now.

Aeri had no idea how long the auction lasted, but she had never felt more relieved than when the men started leaving the room until all that was left was Jimin and one other. They remained for a while, talking amongst themselves before Jimin looked over at her with a frown on his face. He seemed to be considering something the man had said, presumably about her, and after a second, he nodded.

Jimin didn't look back at her again when he left the room, closing the door and leaving her alone with the man.

Confused at the sudden turn of events, Aeri swam closer to where the man was standing. He gave
her a friendly smile, shoving his hands into the pockets of his pants as he made his way towards the tank. He stopped directly in front of her, the smile still on his face.

"Hi, there," he said, his voice muffled through the glass. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Aeri frowned. She glanced at the lid above her and back at the man. She shook her head and pointed at her ears, signalling that she could not hear him well. A brief look of surprise crossed his features before he started fumbling for something in his pocket. He took out a key and unlocked the padlock, pushing open the lid when he was done.

Aeri swam to the surface, resting her arms against the side of the tank as she looked down at him.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"You're rather straightforward, aren't you?" the man laughed.

"Who are you?" Aeri repeated, not in the mood for joviality.

"No one important enough to warrant an introduction."

"Then what are you doing here if you're not important? And why do you have the key to the tank?"

"I have the key because you no longer belong to General Park," the man said. Aeri was pissed; realising he had the audacity to allow hints of pity to seep into his gaze as he looked at her.

"He sold me? To you?"

"Not to me, no. I'm here on behalf of someone else," the man explained.

"Who is this person? Why isn't he here himself?"

"My, you sure do have a lot of questions, don't you?"

"I have the right to know," Aeri retorted.

"You're property. You don't have a right to anything," the man said, voice cold despite the warm smile on his face. "But since you'll find out eventually . . . I'm here on behalf of the crown. The king sent me to acquire the rumoured mermaid General Park had caught on his last voyage."

"The king?" Aeri murmured to herself.

Turning to the man, she asked, "What does he want with me?"

"That, I do not know. But you can ask him yourself when I come back for you tomorrow."

The door to the room creaked open just then, a disgruntled Jimin stepping foot within.

"Time's up," he said.

"Right, of course. Thank you for this. I will be back tomorrow at noon with your payment as agreed," the man said.

He tipped his hat in Aeri's direction before turning and making his way out, clapping Jimin firmly on the shoulder as he passed him. The silence that followed the man's departure was deafening.

It was, of course, Aeri who broke the silence first.
"You lied to me," she said.

"I did no such thing," Jimin argued.

"You said I'd get my freedom in two days. But you sold me to the king!"

"You are getting your freedom, aren't you? Freedom from me. That doesn't necessarily mean you're going back to the ocean. Next time, learn to clarify," he said.

"You told me you weren't going to sell me. So why did you?" Aeri asked, the first of her pearls falling to the bottom of the tank.

"I didn't exactly have a choice once word reached the king about the lucky catch of the day—a mermaid. You should know by now I'm driven by my greed and that includes my greed for life. I'm not going to cut it short and get myself beheaded by refusing the king. But that isn't going to stop me from making the most out of the situation," he said. "I set up an auction knowing full well the king would bid as much as it takes to get his hands on you. And as predicted, I'm right."

"How could you do this to me? All I wanted was to get back to my family. I did everything you wanted," she said, no longer caring about looking weak in front of him.

Her desperation to end the story and leave the realm was at its peak and if she couldn't go back to the ocean . . . go back to her family, how was she supposed to get to the ending?

"Sorry, lovely," Jimin shrugged, looking anything but sorry for her. "You're really not my concern anymore."

"You should have let me died back then. What did you even keep me alive for?"

Jemin raised his eyebrows at her as if to ask—why do you think?

Aeri gasped, the realisation hitting her hard.

"You . . . You were keeping me alive because of the auction. Because by then you'd already heard of the king's interest."

"Clever girl," Jimin said. "And don't worry about it too much. You probably won't live long at the palace anyway. I mean . . . How do you think the king is going to treat the creature that's of the species responsible for killing his beloved son? Not too good, I reckon."

He reached forward and caught a pearl in the palm of his hand as it fell past her eyes.

"Good luck, Aeri," he said. "Perhaps we'll see each other again in another lifetime."
Jimin paced the length of his study with his hands clasped behind his back. It had been a week since Aeri was taken away to the palace and other than the king's letter of thanks, he had received no word whatsoever pertaining to her condition.

He didn't want to admit it, but there was no denying the truth—he was worried and he did not know why. The feeling was foreign to him, having never cared once in his life for anyone or anything other than himself, but the feeling was there nonetheless and it made him uncomfortable. It felt as though Aeri's disappearance had left a huge hole in his chest and for once, he chastised himself for giving in to his greed.

He stopped pacing, chewing on the inside of his cheek in agitation as he stared at the bowl of pearls placed on his desk. He had every intention to sell them as was his purpose in acquiring them, to begin with, but when the merchant arrived for an assessment of the goods, he found himself lashing out on the man and yelling at him to leave.

It was then Jimin came to the startling realisation that he did not wish to part with the pearls—the only thing remaining in the house that belonged to Aeri. Hell, it didn't just belong to her, it was her. Or a part of her, at least, seeing as how they were formed by her tears. Tears she cried for him, because of him.

When had he gotten so attached to her brief presence in his life? It didn't make much sense to him but he could not push aside the growing uneasiness in his chest. For some reason or other, he had started to think of Aeri as his. She was his pet, after all, wasn't she?

He was getting used to the idea of having ownership of the last known mermaid in the kingdom . . . until the king decided to interfere. Jimin gritted his teeth in annoyance. Sudden overwhelming malice started forming within him when he thought of the king. The man had everything he could ever wish for and yet here he was, still wanting more.

The longer Jimin remained stagnant, the more agitated he became. He resumed his pacing, his mind too preoccupied to come up with any good plans to get Aeri back. It was not as though he could storm the fortified palace out of nowhere and assume he'd be welcomed with open arms.

Jimin was so distracted, he failed to notice the knock coming from the study's door followed by his butler's entrance into the room.

"Sir?"

"Not now!" Jimin yelled, waving his hand over his shoulder in a dismissive manner, not even bothering to look at him.

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but I'm afraid I'm here on urgent matters. A letter has arrived for you from the king."

Jimin paused, the frown on his face relaxing into one of surprise. He turned to face his butler, seeing the white envelope carefully placed on the silver tray in his gloved hands. He recognised the official seal almost immediately, rushing forward to grab the envelope and ripping into its contents.

He tossed the envelope aside, unfolding the letter within and scanning the carefully calligraphed words. A moment passed before he started laughing, much to his butler's surprise.
"This is wonderful! Now I have a good reason to go to the palace," he said with mirth.

"Sir?"

"Get the tailor here. I need a new suit made."

"What occasion should I say it's for, sir?" his butler asked.

"The kingdom's annual ball," Jimin said, a glint in his eye.

As it turns out, the saying was true—you never know what you have, until you lose it. And Jimin was sure as hell going to get back what he had so stupidly lost.

His mermaid.

Jimin adjusted his cufflinks as he stood to the side of the grand ballroom. His eyes were surprisingly lacklustre as he looked over the various guests milling about and dancing to their heart's content. He could feel the stares focused on him and the murmured whispers coming from the ladies behind their foldable fans.

He admitted—he was acting a little odd. For one thing, he had a stern expression on his face without an ounce of friendliness reflected anywhere. For another, he was barely paying any attention to those around him, especially the beautiful ladies who would willingly throw themselves at him if he so desired any of their company.

Jimin was always the playboy at every event the palace hosted. He took it as an opportunity to mingle—to expand his business connections with the men present and to have some fun with the ladies. For him to be as he was now, aloof and bored, was extremely out of the norm.

Despite his apparent calm facade, he was jittery with unease. He did not wish to stay there uselessly blending into the crowd. He wanted to scour the palace for his mermaid but he knew he had to show his face for an hour or two at the very least. Disappearing when the ball was only just beginning was bad form on his part. Not to mention how he'd no doubt raise suspicions.

And so, he stayed, much to his dislike. He stayed for two whole dances, not paying any attention to his partners; his mind too preoccupied coming up with possible places the king could've imprisoned Aeri. She was a mermaid who needed water to survive which on its own, greatly limited the number of possibilities. That thought aside, who's to say the king even had any intention of keeping Aeri alive? What if his assumptions were right and the king wanted to take his anger out on Aeri for the loss of his only son?

The king could be torturing her. Depriving her of the water she needed to live just as he had unintentionally done the first time. The thought unsettled him as he tried to ignore the fact that Aeri had been in the palace longer than a week now and she could very much be dead for all he knew.

His troubled reasoning only served as his motivation to hurry along out of there as he hastily bowed to his partner when the song came to an end. Jimin ignored her attempts at mild conversation as he stumbled out into the hallway, glancing both ways before choosing one over the other. He didn't know where to look but his gut feeling guided him towards the dungeon where the king often imprisoned those who had personally wronged him.

The dungeon was a disgusting and dingy place, and disgusting was an understatement. The walls were slick with condensation and the torches lining the area barely provided the light they were
supposed to. A heavy and unbearable stench hung in the air and Jimin was certain it had to do with decaying bodies left to rot somewhere in the hellhole.

Grimacing, he grabbed onto the nearest torch and unhooked it from its holder. He walked along the barred cells, casting the light within in hopes of chance upon the mermaid he longed for. Every cell he passed was either empty or was home to a peasant or two. He couldn't find Aeri anywhere and it was starting to worry him in ways he could not fathom.

He was about to lose all hope when he heard the distinct sound of splashing water. His eyes widened and he hastened towards its source—the very last cell in the darkest corner of the place.

Jimin guided the light of the torch within and felt his breath hitch in his throat. He wanted very much to find Aeri, but he did not, for one second, wanted to find her like this. He fumbled with the cellar door, surprised when it opened without much problem. They were lax in their security because she was a mermaid. Even if they had locked her in, she couldn't have gone anywhere. Not without legs, at least.

Jimin entered the cell with hesitant steps. He placed the torch precariously on the ground by his feet, thankful it stayed lit. He found himself shaking as he reached out to cup Aeri's alarmingly cold cheeks in his hand. If he thought for even one second that the state she was in looked bad before, it was even worse up close.

She was partially submerged in a tank filled with water; of which had turned a gory red from the dilution of spilt blood. She was unconscious, her hands bound by thick lengths of rope secured to the opposite wall—the only thing keeping her from falling into the tank. Her face was a mess of darkening bruises, accompanied by dirt and dried blood dripping from the corner of her mouth and nose. Her arms were decorated by numerous cuts running both ways; some were still fresh while others were starting to scab over.

Jimin felt his breathing still upon seeing her left in such a condition. What in the world did they do to her?

Aeri stirred from her state of unconsciousness, her eyes prying open slowly, only for her to jerk back in alarm when her gaze landed on Jimin's form. The sound of the creaking bolt, to which the ropes were attached, bounced off the walls and echoed down into the distant darkness.

"Aeri, it's me," he whispered, leaning closer so she'd see who he was. He didn't need guards storming the place just yet. Not when he'd barely started freeing her from her restraints.

A breathy chuckle escaped her, one that soon transitioned into a full-blown coughing fit, fresh blood dribbling past her lips and down her chin. She blinked several times, laboured breathing filling the space between them. She felt sick to her gut seeing Park Jimin in front of her clad in his expensive-looking gold-trimmed suit. She felt pure disgust at the sight.

"Why is it that I always see you whenever I'm about to die?" she asked.

Jimin frowned, moving towards her and attempting to undo the ropes around her hands.

"You're not going to die. I'm here to save you."

Aeri scoffed, tugging her hands away from him as best she could, considering how taut the ropes were.

"No, you're not," she said with slight difficulty. "You're going to leave and you're going to let me die."
"No," Jimin said, ignoring her as he successfully freed her from the ropes keeping her captive.

He grabbed hold of her before she could slither down into the water; struggling under her weight for a second just as he hauled her over the edge and into his arms. He cradled her close to his chest, gritting his teeth when he noticed how horrendously butchered her tail was. The shimmer was no longer there and neither were half her scales . . . The tail's entirety was coated in a mixture of dirt and grime; alternating stab wounds and lacerations decorating its surface.

Seeing the look of horror and what she assumed to be regret on Jimin's face, Aeri sighed, allowing her wall of defence to crumble around her.

"Not as pretty anymore, huh?" she whispered, giving him a sad smile when he turned to look at her.

"It's okay," she continued. "You can let me go. You have to. There's nothing else you can do."

"I said no. You're not going anywhere. I'm going to save you."

Ignoring her weak protests, Jimin carried her out the cell and down the dungeon corridor. At the foot of the stairs leading up to the palace hallways, he paused, placing her on the first step before shrugging off his jacket.

"Cover yourself with this," he instructed.

Aeri gave him a frown of disapproval but did as she was told. Jimin carried her in his arms again, the jacket effectively shielding her from any form of prying eyes, though her tail was still very much visible. He hurried down the hallway opposite of the grand ballroom, afraid he might run into someone he knew. He could feel his heart racing in his chest, urging him on with each step closer to the servant's entrance at the back of the palace.

And all too soon he felt the rush of fresh air against his face, allowing himself a moment to exhale in relief. He scoured the area before him, consoled upon the realisation that his carriage driver had parked exactly where he had instructed him to.

"Let's go," he said to Aeri who was peeking over the edge of his jacket to look at him.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Home," was all he said before he made haste towards his carriage.

The driver jumped off his seat when he took notice of Jimin's approaching form. He pulled open the passenger door, waiting for his master to step inside before the curtains were drawn and the door was closed. The driver wasted no time in hopping back into the front seat and urging the horses along the dirt road.

Inside the carriage, Jimin refused to let go of the mermaid, keeping her secure in his arms as he pushed a fraction of the curtain aside to allow her a view of the outside. Aeri leaned against Jimin's broad chest, eyes cloudy as she watched the trees rush by at the fast pace the driver was going.

She felt immense confusion regarding the sudden situation she found herself in. She couldn't silence the rush of questions storming her mind, but the most prominent of all was the reason behind Jimin's rescue mission.

Why was he so determined to save her?
Aeri's mental affliction stilled when the carriage turned from the dirt road and onto a gravelled one, the trees thinning out until they disappeared completely. There, in front of her, with the moonlight glistening against its surface, was the ocean. She pushed herself into a more upright position, her hand pressed against Jimin's chest to steady herself as she stared in awe at the waters before her.

She wondered for a brief second if this was what Jimin meant when he said they were going home. Had he finally decided to keep to his promise and set her free?

When a fork in the road loomed upon them, however, the driver took a right turn; the one that drove them away from the ocean as rows of trees started blocking her view yet again. She craned her neck to get a last glimpse but to no avail.

Mildly frustrated, she turned to look at Jimin, saying, "The ocean is that way."

"I know," he said, eyes focused on hers as he resisted the urge to run his hands through her hair.

"Why aren't we going that way?"

"Because I already told you—we're going home. And home isn't that way."

"The ocean is my home," Aeri refuted.

"Not anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"When I said we're going home, I meant my home, not yours. You don't belong to the ocean anymore."

"Of course, I do . . ." Aeri said, her palms turning clammy all too suddenly. "I'm a mermaid."

"You don't belong to the ocean," Jimin repeated with a shake of his head. "You belong to me."
Two days after Jimin's rescue mission, Aeri still wasn't showing any signs of improvement. The lines between her relationship with Jimin had somewhat blurred. She no longer had the energy to argue with him because she came to the realisation that he would ignore her pleads and words unless they aligned with what he wanted to hear her say.

She didn't feel much of anything when it came to him—no anger, no frustration, nothing except the ever-present lethargy clinging to her entire being. All she wanted to do was go back to the ocean and sleep for eternity. She was tired of dealing with humans and she was ready for it to be over.

As it were, Aeri was back in the bathtub, watching a desperate and panicky Jimin with bleary eyes as he started emptying a vial of liquid into the water.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he carefully tried his best to mix the liquid thoroughly.

"It's medicine. It's supposed to help you... Why isn't it helping you!" Jimin yelled in agitation, causing Aeri to flinch at the sudden intensity in his tone.

She stared at him for a few seconds before sighing.

"Are you stupid?" she asked, leaning back against the edge of the tub and closing her eyes.

"What?"

Jimin moved closer to her, grabbing her face in his hands and turning her in his direction.

"Open your eyes," he ordered. "Look at me. What are you saying?"

"That's medicine for humans. It's not going to work on me. I'm a mermaid, Jimin. No matter how much you want it to work, it's not going to."

"Then tell me what to do. What do I have to do to get you better?"

"Let me go," Aeri said. "Release me back into the ocean and leave me."

"If I do that... Will you get better?"

Aeri exhaled in exasperation.

"I'm not getting better, Jimin! What don't you understand? I'm dying. And I want to go back to the ocean. Let me die where I belong. I don't want to die here."

She pushed his hands away from her face, once again agitated by his insistence that she get better. As if it were that easy after the gruelling torture she'd been made to go through. She couldn't even move her tail anymore, her entire lower half numbed with pain.

"Stop saying that!" Jimin shouted, standing in a huff and raking his hand frustratedly through his hair. "Stop saying you're going to die. You're not! I won't let you die."

Aeri stared at his pacing form, following him tiredly with her gaze.

"You're delusional," she said. "Do whatever you want, Jimin. It's not going to work."
Jimin gritted his teeth in frustration, his hands clenched into tight fists by his side as he narrowed his eyes at her.

"Don't challenge me, Aeri," he warned. "I will find a way to keep you by my side forever."

"What is the point of doing that?" Aeri asked, troubled by the fact that he would not leave her alone. "What is the point of trying to keep me alive when I didn't ask you to? What part of ‘I want to die’ don't you get, Jimin?"

"This wasn't supposed to happen," he said. "You weren't supposed to end up like this."

A humourless laugh escaped Aeri's lips with much difficulty.

"What are you talking about, Jimin . . . You knew what would happen the moment the king's representative came for me. You knew what mermaid-hating humans would do to a mermaid. Especially one engulfed by anger for the death of his son. You told me yourself what would happen to me the day before I was shipped off like property."

The conflicting emotions within him were raging upon the realisation of the truth behind Aeri's words. He looked at her with his eyes rimmed red with unshed tears. He shook his head lightly, still in apparent denial of the whole situation. He didn't want to admit it was all his doing. That he was somehow partly responsible for what had befallen her.

"Face it, Jimin. You're only doing this to assuage your guilt," Aeri continued before sighing. "But I'm telling you—it's okay. I'm fine with dying. It's much better than having to endure this torment for any longer."

A blank look crossed Jimin's features. He wiped the tears off his cheeks with the back of his hands before composing himself as best he could.

"You might be fine with dying, but I'm not okay with it. I'm still your master, and I have the last say for as long as you stay under my care. And you're right. I do want to assuage my guilt because it is my fault this happened to you. But you dying isn't going to do anything to help me. I'll keep you alive myself if I have to and I'll spend a lifetime making it up to you."

Jimin stormed out of the bathroom before Aeri could say anything in response to his absurd claim. He slammed open the door to his office and grabbed a drawstring pouch from one of his drawers. He started filling it with several handfuls of pearls, the aggression in his manner sending some of them clattering to the floor. He yelled for his butler, ordering him to ready his horse.

"I'm going to town," he said. "If anyone calls for me, tell them I am unwell and not entertaining guests. And whatever you do, do not go into the master bathroom on the third floor."

"Of course, sir," his butler said, bowing. "The stable hand will bring your horse up front when it's harnessed and ready."

"Hurry," Jimin urged. "There's no time to lose."

The lower town was a mess of fishermen coming in from the wharves, merchants yelling out their latest trades, and various other people coming from anywhere and everywhere. Jimin kept the drawstring pouch securely in the inner pocket of his coat, paranoia clinging to him as he walked on high alert. The area was known for opportunistic pickpockets and he was not in the mood to be anyone's victim. Not when he was racing for time as he were.
Jimin had no care in the world as he nudged past individuals coming his way and elbowed others who were unfortunate enough to stumble into his path. His eyes were fixed to the wooden sign belonging to his end destination, making a beeline for it like a madman.

Oh, what had his precious mermaid done to have him so infatuated like this?

Jimin pushed open the door of the apothecary, startling the chemist inside with the ruckus he was causing.

"General Park," he gasped in surprise, putting down his tools. "Back so soon?"

"It doesn't work," Jimin practically growled. "Whatever you gave me. It's not working. She's still sick and she's going to die. You have to give me something else. Something stronger."

The chemist hesitated, seeing the hysterical state Jimin was in. With caution, he said, "I'm sorry to hear that, but perhaps, if you would permit me to see the condition she's in, I might be able to prescribe her something appropriate for her illness."

A horrible frown overtook Jimin's features at the chemist's suggestion.

"No," he scowled. "I'm not stupid. You'll take her away from me. Look, I already told you—she has bruises and cuts. Just give me something for that."

The chemist sighed.

"I did give you that, General Park. The vial of medication is meant to treat pain from such wounds but cuts should be treated differently. It should be properly cleaned and—"

"There has to be something else you can do for me. Please, I'm begging you. Here, look," Jimin fumbled for the drawstring pouch and retrieved from its contents several pearls. "I assure you, I have the means to pay whatever price you ask of me. I just . . . She cannot die. You have to help me."

"Payment has never been an issue, General Park. I'm afraid there's nothing else I can do for you unless you're willing to let me see to the patient myself. Hearing your description of her afflictions is not enough. I have to be able to assess the extent of her injuries in order to properly diagnose and prescribe the right medication for her."

Jimin stared at the chemist as though contemplating his words before he exhaled. His shoulders slumped either in defeat or acceptance, none could tell. He replaced the pearls in the pouch and shook his head.

"Forget it," he muttered. "You are hopeless."

He ignored the chemist's calls for him to reconsider his actions and pushed himself into the busy streets outside. His insides were in turmoil and in his state of distraction, he failed to realise where his feet were taking him—to the wharf by the ocean.

He sat on the pier, legs hanging over its side as he watched the glistening waters below.

The ocean.

Aeri's home.

Aeri.
He felt his stomach churn and his heart wrench at the thought of her dying in the bathtub in his estate. Was he really so selfish he’d rather she die in his arms than in the ocean where she truly belonged? But it didn't matter, did it? Either way, she was dying and she was right—there was nothing he could do about it. And if that was the truth, he’d rather she stay with him until she had to leave.

The distinct sound of someone clearing their throat alerted Jimin to the presence of someone else within his vicinity. He looked over his shoulder, annoyed at being disturbed in his moment of solitude, only to find himself staring at an unknown individual. The person in question was wearing a dark cloak, the hood of which was pulled over his head, effectively hiding his face and subsequently, his identity.

Having no interest in whatever the man had to say, Jimin was about to face forwards again when he was abruptly halted.

"General Park?" the man said, causing Jimin to frown.

"How do you know who I am?" he asked.

"Everyone knows who you are. Especially around these parts. The legendary mermaid slayer, General Park Jimin," the stranger said.

Though his words were a compliment, his tone was sardonic, as though he did not believe Jimin deserved the title he was given.

"Identify yourself," Jimin said, suddenly on the defensive. There was something odd about the stranger that made him uncomfortable.

"I am but a humble merchant from across the seas come to do business with you, General Park."

"What do you mean? What business would you have with me?"

"I overheard your little . . . predicament at the apothecary and I have come to offer you a solution," the stranger said.

Jimin scoffed.

"Save it, charlatan. If the chemist, with all his worldly knowledge, cannot help me, I'd be a fool to listen to you."

"That may be so, but have you perhaps considered other alternatives of help?"

When Jimin said nothing except to frown at him in irritation, the stranger continued, "I have seen the pearls you offered as payment. They are not normal pearls, are they?"

"Mind your own business," Jimin spat. "What are you now—a jeweller? What would you know about pearls or the like?"

"I don't know anything about the treasures of the world, nor do I know anything concerning the medicine man at the apothecary and what he deals in. But what I do know, General Park, is that those pearls you carry . . . I am certain they are, in fact, mermaid tears."

"What? How did you—?"

"As I've said," the man interrupted. "I am a humble merchant who happens to hear a thing or two
during his travels."

Still largely suspicious of the man, Jimin repeated his earlier question.

"What business do you have with me?"

"I want to trade," the man said.

"What could I possibly want from you that my riches cannot buy for myself?" Jimin asked.

"Have you ever considered, perhaps, that the chemist's medicine does not work on your lass because she's not human?"

Jimin's eyes widened, suddenly recalling how Aeri had told him the exact same thing, had his panicked mind decided to listen.

"You have something for me that will work for mermaids?" he asked, standing abruptly to grab the man by the front of his cloak.

"No, nothing of the sort. Mermaids don't have medicine. They accept death when it comes and become one with the ocean," the man said as Jimin released his hold on him with an agitated huff.

"What I do have, however--" the man continued, pulling a stoppered vial from his satchel and holding it out for Jimin to see. "--is this."

"What's that?"

"It's a potion that turns mermaids into humans. Now, if your lass becomes human . . ."

"The chemist's medicine will work on her!" Jimin concluded in realisation.

"That's right."

"What do you want for it?" Jimin asked, suddenly determined to get his hands on the potion no matter the cost. "I'll give you my weight in riches if that's your price."

"Oh, no. Nothing that drastic. I intend to make a trade, not a sale. All I ask in exchange for this vial is one of your pearls. A mermaid's tear is rare and difficult to come by. And with no mermaids left is these waters . . . It becomes so much more of a rarity than it already is."

Jimin scrambled for the pouch as he undid the strings and retrieved a pearl as requested, dropping it onto the man's waiting palm. The latter examined the pearl closely, and when satisfied, handed Jimin the vial as promised.

"A word of advice," the man said, stopping Jimin from making a dash home. "Make certain of your feelings for the lass. Once she drinks the potion, she is lost to the Merfolk forever. There are only two options for her when the potion takes effect—marriage to a human who loves her more than anything, or death."

J Jimin glanced at the vial in his hand, gripping onto it for a fraction before tucking it away safely.

"Don't worry," he said. "My love for her is far greater than death itself."
Jimin barely waited for his horse to come to a stop before he jumped off the steed. He ignored the waiting stable hand as the latter struggled to run after the horse, grappling for the reins left hanging by the animal’s side.

Jimin bounded up the steps leading to the front door of his estate, startling his butler who had been patiently awaiting his arrival.

"Sir–"

Jimin ignored him, making straight for the bathroom where he had kept Aeri waiting; for far too long in his opinion. He slammed the door open, stumbling inside when he realised Aeri hadn't budged an inch since he left. Her eyes were closed, cheek leaning against the rim of the tub; looking every bit as though she were asleep. But Jimin knew better.

He rushed to her side, falling onto his knees as he carefully tilted her head in his direction, patting her clammy cheek in an attempt to rouse her.

"Aeri," he whispered. His palpitating heart causing his voice to waver. "It's me, Aeri. I'm back. Please, open your eyes. You have to wake up. You won't believe what I got."

He retrieved the vial and showed it to her despite her state of unconsciousness.

"Look. The merchant said this will make you better. Can you believe all he wanted in exchange for this was one of your tears?" he continued talking to her as though she were listening to him.

When she failed to say anything in return, he placed the vial carefully in the pocket of his tunic and moved to secure his hands under her arms. He lifted her from the tub, cradling her to his chest as he seated her on his lap on the floor. He caressed her face gently, ignoring the blood pooling around her tail and the way she remained completely unresponsive. He sat there—rocking her back and forth as he hummed a tune he was familiar with. A tune he recalled his mother humming to him as a child to soothe him on nights he'd startle awake drenched in perspiration after one of his many nightmares.

A nightmare. That was exactly what this was. One where Aeri was dead and he had everything to do with it. He would never admit it, but she was right in her assumption that he was trying his utmost to keep her alive in an attempt to assuage his guilt. There was no mistaking the fact that it was his fault she was dying. He was the one who stole her from her home. He was the one who took her back to land and he was the one who willingly gave her up to the king.

But beneath all that, there was some other meaning behind his actions. He couldn't quite place a word or formulate an explanation for his intense need to keep her by his side, but perhaps his bold declaration to the merchant wasn't all a lie. Perhaps he really was in love with her.

In all his years of knowing his cousin, Prince Eric, and understanding the reason behind the choices he made throughout his life, he never once understood the man's love for Ariel. But now? Now, with a mermaid of his own, Jimin was finally beginning to understand. Prince Eric wasn't crazy or blinded by his affections, after all.

Jimin was the blind one. He was blinded by his hatred for the species not to see how wonderful they truly are. And now . . . His gaze fell onto Aeri's tail as he winced upon seeing the watered-down puddle of blood surrounding them.
He gulped, choosing to ignore the guilt overwhelming him once more as he moved to retrieve the vial from his tunic, staring distractedly at the liquid within.

He sent her away to the tyrannical king and now he was going to forcefully ruin the one defining factor that sets her apart from his own species—he was going to take away her identity as a mermaid just to satiate his own selfish greed.

A sardonic chuckle left him.

At the end of the day, he was always going to be the same greedy human he always was. But for once, this was a decision that pained him. He knew if Aeri found out she was no longer a mermaid but a human—a species she claimed to loathe—and the reason for the change was Jimin himself, there was no doubt she'd hate him for all she was worth.

But he loved her. And his love would be enough to keep them both from falling under. It was enough to keep them both afloat, whether Aeri felt the same way about him or otherwise.

Jemin tapped her cheek once more.

"Aeri? Wake up," he said. "You have to take this new medicine I got you. It'll work for real this time and everything will be okay. Come on."

He hesitated when Aeri remained unresponsive. Was it normal for mermaids to be unconscious for this long? He frowned, cursing his lack of knowledge on the species. Again, Aeri was right. For someone who loathed Merfolk, he really was excruciatingly clueless.

Jemin clenched his jaw. If this kept up, he was certain Aeri would die, and she was the one mermaid he did not want dying on him. He glanced at the vial, knowing he'd have to do whatever it takes to get her to down the liquid. He'd come this far and her state of unconsciousness was not going to stop him.

He released the stopper, crinkling his nose at the smell that wafted from within the vial. He cringed, having to take a deep breath before he put his thoughts aside and decided to just go for it. He tilted the contents into his mouth, dropping the vial with a clatter immediately after as he cupped Aeri's face and kissed her, effectively depositing the liquid down her throat. He pried away from her, brows drawn low in worry as he watched her—praying for some form of a reaction.

Seconds became minutes yet Aeri remained unresponsive. Jimin didn't want to believe it but even he had to admit it was a bit far fetched to assume something a merchant had given him would work. He was grasping at straws, but with Aeri, he'd take any chance offered even if it meant a very slim chance at success.

He pulled her into a hug, his arms strong around her as he closed his eyes.

This was it.

This was the end and he couldn't even fulfil her final request of dying in the ocean. He really was a cruel man and it was only starting to be clear to him at that very moment.

Jemin was stroking the back of her head, ready to say goodbye when he felt her flinch in his hold. Confused, he released her from his hold and observed her at arm's length. There it was! Another flinch. And this time, he was sure of it.

"Aeri?" he whispered, shaking her lightly by the shoulders. She awoke with a gasp, her eyes wild as they scoured the room before landing on him.
"You," she said, voice hoarse as she grabbed the front of his tunic. "What did you do?"

"Aeri! You're okay!" Jimin exclaimed, unable to stop his excitement. "How are you feeling? Does it still hurt? Is the--"

"What did you do!" Aeri yelled, interrupting him as her face screwed up in pain, her breaths coming out in short bursts.

"A-Aeri?" Jimin stuttered, panicked at seeing her in such a state.

"What did you do?" she was full-on crying now, pearls scattering the floor around them as her grip on his tunic fell slack.

Jimin pulled her into his arms again, carrying her down the hall all the way to his room where he placed her precariously on the bed. She was groaning in pain, squirming in discomfort with beads of perspiration dotting her hairline. He didn't know what to do and her mumbled words were of no help; most sounding incoherent and indistinguishable.

He grabbed a face towel, dousing it with water before dabbing her face with it. Aeri sighed at the cooling sensation, leaning in towards his hand as he continued his careful ministrations. Before long, she calmed down enough to fall back into a state of agitated slumber. Her hands were fisting the material of the bedsheet and her eyebrows were furrowed, soft whimpers of pain leaving her lips.

Jimin felt bad for her, the guilt in his being blossoming further. He lifted the duvet, sliding her beneath the covers as carefully as he could, not wanting to make drastic movements for fear he would awaken her.

He kept a vigilant watch over her the entire night, alternating between sitting on the armchair by her side of the bed or lying next to her. Somewhere along the line as he laid next to her, he felt his heavy eyelids drooping, the day's events finally catching up to him. He fought the need to sleep as best he could but he was a mere mortal and before long, he succumbed to the lethargy engulfing him.

Jimin startled awake the next morning from the sound of something heavy falling with a thud on the bedroom floor. His eyes snapped open, immediately zeroing in on the empty spot next to him on the bed and knowing exactly what it was that had woken him.

He jumped off the bed, rounding the corner and though he had expected to see Aeri sprawled on the floor, what he was not expecting, however, was to see her with legs. The potion had worked.

"A-Aeri, your tail . . ." he murmured in a slight daze as he approached her.

She snapped her head in his direction, her eyes narrowed in a harsh glare, mouth curled into a vicious snarl.

"You did this to me!" she yelled, stumbling forward when she attempted to lunge at him. "You selfish, self-centred bastard!"

Jimin caught her flailing arms with ease, simultaneously throwing a blanket over her bare lower half and keeping her in his embrace despite her protests.

"Why would you do this to me?" she asked, her attacks slowing as sobs wracked her entire being.
She looked up at Jimin, the latter noticing for the first time how her tears were nothing more than tears. She truly wasn't a mermaid anymore. She had actual tears to shed now and most disconcerting of all, she was crying because of him.

"Why?" she asked again, her voice cracking. "You know I don't want to be human. Why would you condemn me to such a life? What could possibly have convinced you to do this to me?"

"It's because I love you," Jimin admitted. "And if being human is the only way for me to keep you by my side, then it's a choice I am willing to make."

"It's a choice you're making for me. It's not my choice."

"No," he said, disagreeing. "It's a choice I made for us."

Aeri shook her head, pushing herself away from Jimin as she struggled to put some much-needed distance between them. She loathed his touch more than his delusional justification for what he had done.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I don't love you. And that means I'll die soon. That's what happened to Ariel. She was dying because it was a one-sided love. I'll rid myself of you."

A look of pity crossed Jimin's features as he looked at her.

"That's not it, Aeri," he whispered the words, trying his best to relay the truth in as careful a manner as possible.

"What? Of course, it is."

"It doesn't matter what your feelings are for me. All that matters is that I love you. And believe me, Aeri, I do."

The shock of his words rendered her immobile as he moved closer to her yet again, taking her hands in his as he rubbed soothing circles on her skin with his thumbs.

"No . . ." she said, her tone almost pleading at this point. "You're lying. Tell me you're lying."

"I'm not. It's the truth, Aeri. The Merfolk's feelings have never been a part of this. They're putting their lives on the line by coming on land to find true love. The risk comes from a lack of reciprocation. If the chosen human doesn't love them back, they'll die. It's never been about the Merfolk."

"That can't be right. It can't be."

Although denial still lingered within her, Aeri knew somehow or other, that Jimin was telling the truth. She had been so distracted since her sudden arrival in *The Little Mermaid*, she failed to see the evidence in Ariel's demise. The mermaid knew she would die from the very moment the prince professed his love to another. And to save herself from death's embrace, she had willingly thrown herself further into danger by attempting to steal the prince's life in exchange for hers.

Unfortunately, death caught up to them both.

"You're not going to die, my lovely," Jimin said, his voice interrupting her descent into dread. "I promised you, didn't I? I'd find a way to keep you here with me. And I have. I know you're not happy right now, and it's selfish of me to feel this much happiness when you're so miserable. But it's okay, we have all the time in the world to get to know each other properly and in time, I'm sure
you'll learn to love me too. But for now . . ."

Jimin pulled her closer to him, placing a lingering kiss on the corner of her mouth before sighing.

"For now, this is enough."
Aeri laid on her side of the bed, staring blankly at the open window across from her. She could hear the waves crashing against the rocks and feel the soft sea breeze wafting in as it fluttered the curtains. It was cruel how Jimin had sold his estate and moved them to a smaller house situated next to the ocean. He wanted to make her feel better by bringing her closer to the ocean she loved so much. But as a human, the ocean only served as a reminder of all she had lost and all Jimin had taken from her.

Soft groaning came from behind her followed by the bed creaking under Jimin's weight as he shifted to wrap an arm around her waist. He pulled her closer to him, her back now pressed firmly against his chest as she felt him nuzzling into the crook of her neck. Aeri glanced at his hand, the wedding band encircling his ring finger another indication of how her life had fallen downhill.

She thought for certain he must be bluffing when he claimed that only the lover's affections mattered once a mermaid had been given legs. But Jimin was telling the truth and he wasted no time in proving it to her when he arranged for their wedding to take place as soon as possible.

Aeri was a hysterical mess when it dawned on her that Jimin hadn't been lying. She couldn't accept the truth. She couldn't accept that she was positively no longer a mermaid. And not for the lack of trying too. She had lost count of the number of times she threw herself into the ocean, taking big lungfuls of water hoping she'd be able to breathe, only to result in nearly drowning several times over.

Exasperated, Jimin resorted to keeping her locked in the master bedroom and barring all the windows so she wouldn't be able to try something that foolish again.

Four months had gone by since then and Aeri had somewhat accepted her fate. As much as she hated it, this was her life now. She had no way of reaching the end of the story and she did not know how to either. She was starting to wonder if there even was an end to all this but she knew there had to be.

She no longer relied upon a baseless tactic, choosing instead to go wherever the winds of fate decide to take her. She could only hope she had enough patience to endure Jimin's suffocating love until she got to where she needed to be.

The man in question stirred from his sleep just then, automatically shifting Aeri to have her lie flat on her back as he hovered over her with his eyes barely opened. Even so, he was still able to leave sloppy kisses from her collarbone all the way up her neck until he collapsed on top of her.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked, lips nibbling her ear playfully.

Aeri gave him a noncommittal shrug in response to his question before attempting to push him off her.

"Jimin, get up."

He hummed in response but did not move.

"Jimin," she said again, scouring her brain for an excuse. "I need to take a shower. Get up."
Jimin sat up then, grinning at her.

"Let's go bathe together," he suggested, taking her hand and leading her to the bathroom.

The protest died on Aeri's lips. She knew by now that Jimin got whatever he wanted. There was no room for any form of argument or disagreement. He made it a point early on in their relationship to give her everything that she could ever want—his manner of making up to all the hurt he had caused her. And as a result, his love transformed into something smothering in nature.

He rarely left her alone and if there was something she wanted to do, he'd make certain they'd do it together. If there's anything she desired, she needed only to say the word and he'd willingly go to the ends of the earth to fulfil her wish.

Gone was the version of Jimin she had first met when she was hauled onto the deck of his ship. He was no longer cold and ruthless, choosing instead to be the overwhelmingly adoring husband he was now. Aeri probably would have found it endearing, if not for the fact that she did not share in his affections at all.

They sat in the bathtub together, Jimin behind her as he lathered shampoo into her hair, gently massaging her scalp in the process. As usual, he filled the empty void with cheerful chatter, telling her one of his many adventures on sea with his crew, extra careful not to accidentally mention his killings of Merfolk lest he upset her.

In the middle of one of his stories, Aeri plucked up the courage to interrupt him mid-sentence.

"Are you happy?" she blurted.

"What?"

"Are you happy?" she reiterated.

"Happy with what?" Jimin asked, confused at the unexpected question.

"Life in general," she said before quickly amending her words. "Your life, as it is right now."

"Of course," Jimin responded without hesitation. "And you're the reason for my happiness."

The confession left a deafening silence in its wake as Aeri frowned, gaze lowered to stare aimlessly at the bubbles of foam floating on the water's surface.

"Why do you ask?" he questioned when she remained quiet for far too long.

"No reason," she mumbled, grabbing the bar of soap in an attempt to distract herself.

"Aren't you happy, Aeri?"

"I guess," she mumbled.

No, she wanted to scream. *I'm miserable, Park Jimin! And just as how I've made you happy, you have made me miserable!*

Aeri turned the soap bar in her hands, eyeing the mint green colour with clear disinterest until she noticed something forming on its surface. Her eyes widened when she made out the two words staring back at her, carved right into the soap itself—*The End*.

The end?
Wait . . . Had she reached the supposed end of *The Little Mermaid*? But what triggered it? She didn't do anything of significance. All she did was ask Jimin if he was happy and he—

Aeri paused, stopping her own inner investigative thoughts.

That was it—*she asked Jimin if he was happy and he said yes*. Fairy tales always ended on a good note; a happy-ever-after. But happiness wasn't always limited to the heroes in the story. What if the endings relied on the happiness of the *villains*? It would certainly explain the story's abrupt end.

Aeri turned to face Jimin, curiosity urging her to ask if he too could see the words carved onto the bar of soap. But as she did so, the corners of her vision started darkening, the mass of black mist crowding her narrowing sight until she was lost to it completely.

Nothing happened for the next few minutes—no sounds, no movement, no light, nothing. And then all too suddenly, she was falling just like the first time.

*Loading next scene... Please standby.*
Aeri jolted awake to find herself on a very uncomfortable bed. She groaned, sitting up and massaging her stiff neck. She looked up at the ceiling—which was alarmingly low—and down at the floor which was covered in hay. She paused in her assessment of the room.

Hay?

Why in the world was the floor covered in hay?

A closer inspection of her surroundings confirmed she was not, in fact, in a room, but rather in a house. To be more specific, she was in a cottage, and a really small one at that. Next to the bed was a fireplace, on which was hung a kettle alongside a pot. Beyond that was a small table Aeri assumed was meant to be the dining area and adjacent to it was a small stove.

So . . . She had stumbled upon her ending with Jimin, fell through the pages and into another fairy tale, and woken up in a new realm in a house covered in hay. Just where was she, exactly? And what story was this supposed to be?

Loud knocking startled her out of her thoughts, yanking her back to reality as she fumbled out of bed and rushed towards the source. She pulled open the door, her gaze meeting that of a young girl's.

"Oh, Aeri! Are you feeling much better now?" she asked, pushing past her and into the house.

"I . . . guess?" Aeri mumbled, following the girl as she stopped by the table to empty her basket of its contents—a glass bottle of warm milk and a loaf of freshly baked bread.

"Breakfast," the girl explained before she reached forward and placed her palm flat against Aeri's forehead.

"What a relief, your fever's gone!" she said with a grin. "Still, you should take another day's rest before getting back to work."

"Work?" Aeri repeated.

She was starting to transform into the definition of stupid with each realm she landed in. Gathering information at the start was always the hardest especially since she seemed to already have a life wherever she landed. Was it even her life? Or someone else's she was assuming?

She resisted the urge to groan as a looming headache threatened to overcome her. Thinking too much about the hows and the whys were starting to drain her.

"At the mills . . . ?" the girl said with an odd smile on her face. "Did the fever erase some of your memories too?"

Though the question was posed with a joking lilt to her voice, it was clear the girl hadn't dismissed the possibility of memory loss completely. Especially not when the only response Aeri could manage was an awkward chuckle.

The girl continued by saying, "Anyway, don't worry about it. I'll tell Jae you're still recovering. He won't mind it too much, I'm sure."
She gave Aeri a cheeky grin followed by a wink before she said her goodbyes and left just as quickly as she had arrived.

How . . . odd.

Was the Aeri in this realm in some sort of relationship with this Jae person to elicit such a reaction from the young girl when his name was mentioned?

Thinking nothing more of it, Aeri’s focus was immediately snatched by the goods left on her dining table. She glanced at the bread and the milk, her stomach reciprocating by growling in want. Right —breakfast first, dealing with whatever else the story had in store for her second.

Aeri was sorely mistaken when she first assumed she'd step out of her little cottage and find herself in town. It wasn't a town. It was a village. She stood just outside her house, watching as a villager—seemingly hunched over with the weight of the world on his back—tugged on the ropes in his grip in an attempt to guide the goat trailing far behind him.

"Okay . . ." Aeri mumbled under her breath. "This is so weird."

She looked around her, noting almost immediately how . . . serene the entire village seemed to be. People were actually laughing and chatting as they bartered for goods, and children were playing merrily amongst themselves. There was even a fenced-off area to the side where chickens were left to graze.

Aeri continued her walk, one that had no end destination, until she came upon an oddity. As it were, the village happened to be situated between a river and a forest. Everywhere else in the village seemed serene, except for where the entrance to the forest stood. A rusty chain blocked anyone from venturing beyond, and nailed onto an adjacent tree was a sign with a hastily scrawled 'Keep Out!' in bold letters, enunciating the severity upon which they held the matter.

Aeri found herself transfixed with the curiosity of what lay ahead despite the nagging feeling that the darkness there was not something of the norm. She took one step forward and another and another; an unnatural force compelling her towards the present gloom. She reached out, fingers curled around the chain with the full intention of lifting it over her head when she was suddenly yanked back.

The sudden action snapped her out of her momentary trance. She felt hands grabbing her shoulders and spinning her around, her gaze abruptly meeting those of a taller individual.

"Aeri! What were you doing? You know better than to go anywhere near the Dark Forest!"

Aeri shrugged off the stranger's hands, taking a step away from him.

"Who are you? Stay away from me," she said, suddenly defensive.

The man seemed rather taken aback by her words, surprise fleeting across his features before he chuckled; though the action appeared to be taken more out of nervousness than amusement.

"Whoa, okay. Calm down. It's just me," he said before he fully registered her question. "Wait . . . You don't recognise me?"

When Aeri's gaze remained guarded with no hint of recognition anywhere to be seen, Jae exhaled, scratching the back of his head as though he had no idea what was to be done about the situation.
"Ha Eun told me you were acting weird this morning when she came to check on you. I didn't think it'd be this bad," he mumbled to himself before looking at her.

"The fever really did a number on you, didn't it?" he asked. He pointed at himself and said, "I'm Jae. Your beau. Remember?"

Aeri thought back to the morning when the girl—Ha Eun—mentioned someone named Jae and how she had given her a coy smile. It appears she was right after all. They really were in a relationship.

The man in question exhaled in relief upon seeing the relaxed expression on Aeri's face, mistaking it as her recollection of his identity.

"You remember now?" he asked, shaking his head.

"Ah . . . Yeah," Aeri lied. It was better than having to explain how a fever supposedly robbed her of her memories.

"Come on. Let's go. I thought Ha Eun said you'd be resting for another day. What are you doing out of bed?"

"It was stuffy at home. I just wanted, um, some fresh air."

Thankfully, Jae bought the excuse easily enough.

"Alright, but you know better than to get that fresh air anywhere near the Dark Forest, don't you? You nearly gave me a heart attack when I saw you walking towards it. Do you have a death wish or something?"

Aeri frowned, looking over her shoulder at the entrance to the forest as it became increasingly small with each step she took away from it.

"Stop looking at it, Aeri," Jae said from next to her, tugging on her arm to get her attention back on him.

"Why is the forest so bad? It's just a forest," she said. She knew she'd receive a hell of a scolding from him the moment the question left her lips but he was the only one readily available for her to ask and she really needed to know.

Jae stopped in his tracks, moving forward to stand in front of her as he scrutinised her closely.

"What kind of herbs did they give you? You're acting really weird, Aeri."

"It's just a question. You're the one acting weird," she said as a means to turn the tables and move the attention away from her.

"Aeri," he said her name seriously. "Everyone in the village knows to stay away from the Dark Forest. There's even a sign nailed to the tree as a reminder and you still insist on entering the forest? What is going on with you?"

"Nothing. I'm . . . fine. Just curious, that's all. Aren't you curious?"

"I'm not curious because I know what's in there. And as a matter of fact, so do you and the rest of the village as well. Aeri, you grew up here. You know why we should never go near the forest."

Aeri huffed, frustrated at how meandering Jae was being.
"I can't remember, okay? So if you don't want me going there again, just tell me the reason why I shouldn't."

Her sudden increase in tone attracted the immediate attention of those around them as they stopped their chatter and turned to see what all the commotion was about. Jae grabbed hold of her upper arm, dragging her away as he apologised to them, muttering excuses about how she hasn't been feeling too good lately.

Jae ignored her protests and her struggles as he manhandled her all the way back to her cottage whereupon he released her if only to cross his arms and send her a vicious glare.

"Do I need to take you back to the village elder to properly determine what in the world is wrong with you? Because that," he paused to point at the door, indicating the mess they had just escaped from. "That is not how you usually act."

Aeri exhaled, her hands on her hips as she tried to rein in her impatience with her 'beau'. The man was beyond aggravating. Or perhaps it was just her desperate need to know the story she had landed in that was causing her to act with such impatience.

"I'm sorry," she said, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I just can't seem to remember anything. Maybe it's a side effect of the fever or the herbs or something and I might have acted out in frustration. I'm sorry, truly."

She lowered her arm and realised that the anger in Jae's mannerism had subsided. He glanced over his shoulder as though he was wary of being overheard before taking a step closer to her. In a low voice, he said, "It's the wolf prince."

"What?" Aeri asked, confused.

"You wanted to know why the Dark Forest is dangerous? It's because the wolf prince lives there."

"The wolf prince?" she repeated, no fairy tale coming to mind at the vague development.

Jae nodded.

"He kills anyone who dares venture into the forest without his invitation. And because the village stands between the forest and the rapid river, we're basically trapped here. Try to cross the river and we'll drown. Go to the forest and we get killed. So we make do with what we can."

"Is that why everyone seems so forcefully happy?" Aeri asked.

"They try to keep the positivity. Though I'm not sure it's doing anyone any good. But hey, whatever works for them, right?"

"At least the wolf prince only kills people who venture into the forest," she said in an attempt to somewhat lift the sombre spirit.

"Not quite," Jae said.

"What do you mean?"

"Every few months, the wolf prince demands a sacrifice be given to him to keep the peace. To be precise, he asks for an untouched girl. The one time the village elder decided to stand his ground and refuse to comply with the demands, the wolf prince rampaged the village, killing almost half the folks here. Since then, well . . ."
Jae trailed off, leaving Aeri to make her own assumptions as to what the consequences meant for the villagers.

"That's the reason why we're together," he added. "In case you forgot."

"Huh?"

"You did forget, didn't you? I thought so."

"What are you talking about?"

"Two years ago, you were chosen to be the sacrifice. You panicked, started crying, and for some reason or other, told everyone who would listen that you and I shared a bed and you weren't pure anymore."

Aeri's mouth fell slack upon hearing his words.

"I did what?"

"Trust me, I was just as surprised as you were. That's pretty much how we started seeing each other for real."

"But I'm not— I mean, we haven't—" Aeri fumbled for words, causing Jae to laugh.

"You're still untouched as far as I know. And don't worry. The entire village thinks otherwise so you're safe from being sacrificed."

Silence fell over the two and in a quiet voice, Aeri asked, "What happens to them? The girls who were given away?"

"No one knows. Like I said—once you enter the Dark Forest, you don't ever leave."

An unsettling feeling descended on her as she chewed on her lower lip in discomfort. What was it about this story that made her so uneasy?

The sudden sounds of rushing footsteps, loud shouts and the clamour of a bell rang throughout the village, causing Aeri to look at Jae in panic.

"What's going on?" she asked.

He gestured for her to follow him as he took her hand in his and guided her outside. The villagers were all gathered in the empty space just outside the perimeter of the forest entrance, murmuring amongst themselves as they craned their necks to get a better look at what the commotion was about.

An old man, who Aeri assumed was the village elder, stood at the head of the group. He cleared his throat pointedly and a hush fell over the crowd. He said nothing except to raise what appeared to be a red cloak in his clenched fist for all to see. A unanimous gasp rippled throughout the villagers.

"The wolf prince has spoken," was all the village elder said before the crowd erupted in worried chatter.

Aeri looked at Jae who leaned in and whispered in her ear, "When the wolf prince is ready for another sacrifice to be made, he leaves a red hooded cloak by the entrance of the forest. It's what he wants the girls to wear when they enter the Dark Forest."
Aeri's gaze strayed to the cloak still clenched in the elder's hand, the gears in her mind starting to churn.

A wolf.

A forest.

A girl.

A red hooded cloak.

"Bloody hell," she whispered under her breath. "It's Red Riding Hood."
Aeri watched in horror as the men of the village grabbed a crying girl and dragged her towards the elder. It had barely been an hour after the reveal of the red cloak, and already a sacrifice had been chosen. The girl in question was a sobbing mess, tears streaking down her cheeks as she continued pleading and shaking her head even as the men hauled her forward without a care in the world.

It was inhumane the way they were treating her.

Standing next to Jae, Aeri found herself subconsciously gripping onto his arm as she watched the scene unfold before her.

"There has to be another way," she whispered, glancing at him briefly only to see him gazing at her fondly.

"What?" she asked, frowning.

"Nothing. It's just . . . you always say the same thing at every cloaking event."

"Cloaking? That's what this sick ritual is called?"

"Look," Jae said, nodding his head towards the front of the gathered group.

Aeri turned to face the scene taking place in front of her and scowled when she noticed the way the village elder was forcefully tying the cloak around the girl's shoulders despite her protests. But her efforts at escape were futile; the men holding her down on either side proving to be much too strong for her.

"I hate this," Aeri mumbled under her breath. She gritted her teeth, hands now clenched into tight fists by her sides.

Jae glanced at her but said nothing, choosing instead to turn a blind eye to the situation happening before them. This had been the way of the village for years and he was not about to interfere with it in any way. Not if it meant the guaranteed survival of the villagers.

"What if there are no more girls left to sacrifice to the wolf prince? What then?" Aeri asked, annoyed at Jae's lack of response.

"The village elder will know what to do. Until that time comes, it's not something we should worry about."

"This is exactly what you should be worrying about. Don't you see? You have to stop the wolf prince now before it's too late. He'll definitely kill everyone when he realises the village isn't sending him any more girls because there aren't any. His earlier rampage is all the indication of proof you need. Jae, come on, you have to help me out here."

Aeri was aware of the attention she was getting from those closest to them, some even turning to blatantly stare at her with irritation on their faces. It didn't take a genius to figure out that everyone was of the same mind as Jae when it came to the wolf prince's sick ritual.

She could tell he was angry by the way he was clenching his jaw. Avoiding the gaze of those around them, he reached forward and roughly grabbed her by the arm.
"Enough of this, Aeri," he hissed under his breath.

Aeri tried yanking her arm free from his hold but it only seemed to tighten in a silent warning. His eyes narrowed into slits as he stared at her.

 "%You can either stay quiet and watch the proceedings as expected of us, or I'm going to report you to the elder and you'll face dire consequences for your outright rebellion against village rules." 

 "%What?" Aeri asked. She could hardly believe what she was hearing. "%You'd actually report me for my supposed rebellion? Even though we're together? Aren't you suppose to be protecting me and giving me your support instead of throwing me under the bus?"

 A brief look of confusion crossed Jae's features at her words.

 "%The . . . bus? What are you talking about? I'm not throwing you under anything." 

 Aeri exhaled audibly in irritation. For a moment, it had completely failed to cross her mind the fact that she was in some backward era and clearly, judging from his confusion, buses did not exist back then.

 "%It's nothing, Jae. Forget about it," she muttered, his moment of distraction giving her the opportunity she needed to free herself from his hold.

 She crossed her arms, standing there with agitation radiating off her as she kept her eyes focused in front of her. She didn't want to continue watching the messed up ritual, but she figured it was better than being reported to the village elder. Who knows what would happen to her then?

 Aeri couldn't bring herself to concentrate as the ritual wore on, even when the elder started speaking to the gathered villagers. The only thing she could register in her mind was the look of absolute terror and fear on the poor girl's features as her eyes scanned those standing before her. She was trying so desperately to plead for pardon and mercy, yet none would glance her way, all eyes focused solely on the elder and his words.

 What kind of macabre realm had she fallen into?

 She was literally standing amongst selfish villagers who would rather easily sacrifice a girl to the wolf prince than attempt to fight and protect the village from future rituals. At one point, she thought herself to be just as selfish when Jae had told her of what she had done—feigning the lost of her virginity just to escape from the cloaking.

 But after seeing the ritual up close . . . She understood to a certain degree the reason behind her actions. The whole situation in itself was horrifying. And it was even worse when it was happening to you. Standing there, knowing exactly what was going to happen when you walk into the Dark Forest . . . Begging for help when no one would even spare a glance in your direction and after a moment, coming to the realisation no one would help because they were the ones who put you there in the first place.

 It was the absolute worse and she couldn't understand how everyone was okay with it. Their indifference was appalling.

 Aeri turned to her side, glancing at Jae who had his gaze fixed on the elder; his brows furrowed in concentration, listening intently to the nonsensical speech being delivered.

 She could not believe he would much rather sell her out to the elder than betray the village. If she could not trust the ones closest to her, she could not trust anyone at all.
Aeri turned just in time to see the elder forcing a rattan basket into the girl's arms. She was still sobbing, but Aeri could tell she had somewhat accepted her fate. Her movement had turned slack and she had willingly taken the basket without putting up much of a fight.

Aeri grimaced.

Despite the horrid turn the story had taken, this really was Red Riding Hood, after all, and the look had just been completed with the inclusion of the rattan basket and whatever the heck it contained.

Life had gone on as normally as it possibly could under the circumstances after Aeri's first experience with the cloaking ritual. Safe to say, she was hoping she'd never have to witness something like that again. But even she knew it was pointless to wish for such a thing, knowing it was only a matter of time before the wolf prince would demand another sacrifice.

In the short number of weeks since her arrival, Aeri had managed to gather a few more details about the supposed life she had there.

Ha Eun, the girl who visited her with bread and milk on the first day of her arrival, turned out to be Jae's younger sister. As it happened, the three had been friends since they were children and somehow ended up working at the mills together when they were of age. Though Aeri could barely withstand Jae's presence after the incident at the cloaking ritual, she absolutely loved Ha Eun.

The girl was a bundle of joy and was constantly chattering about the most random of things.

"What's your favourite flower, Aeri?" she asked as she lay with her back flat on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

"I don't have one."

"What?" Ha Eun whined, sitting up with disbelief on her face. "You have to have a favourite flower. If you don't have one, how will I know what flowers to give you on your wedding day?"

Aeri paused, turning to look over her shoulder at the girl.

"My wedding?" she repeated, unsure if she heard it right the first time.

"You are getting married, aren't you? To Jae?"

"Listen, Ha Eun . . . I don't think Jae and I are on good terms at the moment. Things haven't really been working out well and . . ." Aeri shrugged. "I don't know if getting married is the best answer. Not right now, at least."

"But you love each other," Ha Eun argued.

"We might have felt that way at some point in our lives, but recently . . ." she trailed off, getting lost in her thoughts for a brief moment before snapping back to the present. "Feelings are complicated. And right now, Jae and I have a lot of thinking to do. I know how much you like us being together, but if it's not going to work out, then . . ."

Ha Eun seemed disappointed but nodded nonetheless.

"It's okay. I understand," she said, pausing before a grin overtook her features. "If it does work out, I hope you get married soon. I can't wait for you to officially be a part of our family."
She hopped off the bed soon after making the bold statement.

"I have to go now but I'll see you tomorrow morning, Aeri," she said with a jovial smile on her face.

Aeri watched as Ha Eun skipped happily across the village square, staying by the window until the girl had disappeared from her sight.

A few hours later, Aeri was startled awake by the loud ringing of the village bell just as dawn was breaking. She pushed herself out of bed abruptly and rushed to the window, once again seeing throngs of sleepy villagers gathered in front of the forest entrance, the candles in their lamps flickering in the wind and casting eerie shadows on the ground.

Squinting, Aeri could just about discern the silhouette of the village elder and she knew the moment she had been dreading was here again—another cloaking ritual. Grabbing her own rugged cloak by the door, she hastily threw it over her shoulders as she rushed to the clearing where the masses were already waiting for the start of the ritual.

Aeri was appalled when she arrived to see the villagers yawning and looking every bit as disinterested as the next person. They were acting as though the sacrifice was an inconvenience. These people were preposterous! Do the lives of the girls they've sacrificed mean nothing to them?

With a scowl on her face, Aeri pushed her way to the front of the group, this time determined to do something to stop this act of monstrosity from going any further. The elder began his usual speech, droning on and on until at last, it was time for the actual cloaking to take place.

He gestured to his helpers to bring forth the sacrifice who had already been chosen, instantaneously causing a surge of dread to consume her when Aeri's eyes met those of the person they were dragging forward.

It was Ha Eun.

She was crying and pleading, the situation made worse because of her young age. Aeri scanned the faces of the crowd behind her, her gaze landing on Jae's as he watched on with the same indifference as everyone else. Gritting her teeth in agitation, Aeri elbowed past disgruntled villagers until she was standing right in front of him, her hands curled into fists by her sides as she glared at him.

"What are you doing?" she hissed at him.

"Watching the ritual," he responded, refusing to look at her.

"Are you crazy? That's your sister up there. They're going to sacrifice your little sister and you're just going to watch? What is wrong with you? Aren't you going to do anything to stop them?"

"Why should I? It's for the good of the village. She should be honoured she's been chosen. In fact, I'm disappointed and embarrassed that she's crying—"

Aeri slapped him before he could say anything more. With anger lacing her eyes, she said, "You're disappointed in her? I'm disappointed in you. To think how Ha Eun ever thought highly of an asshole like you is beyond me. If you're not going to do anything to stop this, I will."

Her words finally snapped him back to reality but for all the wrong reasons. His hand found its way to her arm, clamping tightly to stop her from going any further.
"What are you going to do? There's nothing you can do to stop this and you shouldn't be interfering in the first place."

"Oh, yeah?" Aeri said. She narrowed her eyes at him and leaned closer in a threatening manner. "Watch me."

With all the strength she could muster, she brought her heel down on his foot, the pain surprising him as he released her from his hold. She brought her arm back, punching him in the face before slipping into the crowd to escape his reaching arms.

The accidental commotion she caused had attracted the attention of the elder who had halted the ritual proceedings—much to Aeri's relief. She didn't have time to think about what she was doing as she broke through the crowd with nothing standing between the elder and herself.

"Aeri? What is going on? Are you still unwell, child?" he asked.

"A-Aeri?" Ha Eun hiccuped, lifting her head to look at her.

Aeri gave the girl a reassuring smile before turning back to the elder. She caught sight of the red cloak in his hand and a sudden thought occurred to her.

That's it.

That's the solution to her problem.

Using the element of surprise to her advantage, she reached forward and yanked the material from his grasp. It took a second before they realised what was going on and started giving chase. By then, Aeri had put a good amount of distance between them, but still, she pushed on; putting one foot in front of the other until the sounds of rushing footsteps and shouts of panic were nothing but a distant cry far behind her.

It was only then she permitted herself a moment to take a breather. She leaned forward, hands on her knees as she focused solely on her breathing. As the minutes ticked by, however, she realised she was no longer being pursued. She frowned, taking a look around her for the first time since she started running.

She came to the horrifying realisation that she was surrounded by trees—dense, dark, canopies of nature that stretched high above and blocked all source of light. The ground was covered in dirt and moss and not a sound was heard from anywhere around her. She knew then why none had dared to follow her . . .

She had run straight into the Dark Forest. They must have taken down the chain in preparation for the ritual and her moment of perturbation had led her here.

Looking around her in desperation, there was only one thing on her mind—leave before he kills you. But even before she could decide on a direction to take, a deep voice resonated around her like the growl of a beast, sending shivers of fear down her spine.

"My, my, my. What have we here? A little lamb, lost in my forest? How positively disastrous."

But it was too late.

The wolf prince had found her.
Aeri glanced around her in an attempt to pinpoint where the voice was coming from, yet she remained unsuccessful. It was almost as though it was surrounding her—coming from all directions—but how was that possible?

"Who are you?" she asked in hopes of encouraging the entity to show itself.

A deep chuckle resonated at the naïvety of her words.

"You dare step foot within my forest, my home, and you question me as to my identity? You villagers know well enough that entering my forest means certain death and yet here you are. Are you lost, little lamb? Did you come here for death's sweet embrace? Or did you come here for me?"

Aeri felt the unmistakable exhale of breath against the nape of her neck and her eyes widened in terror. She turned as swiftly as she could, accidentally slamming herself into the broad chest of the person standing directly behind her. She startled, backing away as quickly as she could, but not quick enough as he reached forward and grabbed her, preventing further movement of any kind.

"What frightens you so, my lamb?" the same guttural voice asked.

"Y-You . . ." Aeri found herself stuttering against her will in sheer fright. "You're a man."

"Indeed, I am," he said, his eyes glinting under the pale streaks of light, illuminating the intense yellow of his irises.

"Who are you?" Aeri asked.

"You know who I am," he said, inching ever closer to her.

"You're the wolf prince, aren't you?" she asked in a rush of confirmed speculation. "But you . . . You're a man, not a wolf. I don't understand."

The man hummed in acknowledgement, eyes falling shut as he trailed the tip of his nose against the length of her neck.

"I am both man and wolf," he murmured against the exposed skin on her neck, sending a flurry of goosebumps to rise on her arms.

"The wolf prince . . ." he repeated her name for him as he whispered the words right next to her ear. "Is that what they call me? Is that what you call me, my sweet?"

"I-- The villagers, they--" Aeri had to pause, cutting herself off every few words.

She could feel him sniffing her, taking in her scent as an unexplainable sense of euphoria seemed to engulf him whole. She could not seem to concentrate, not with the way he was holding her and caressing her and practically inhaling every bit of her skin he could.

Aeri squeezed her eyes shut, willing her mind to focus on the words she had to say and nothing else.

"A name," she managed to voice. "I'll call you something else if you have a name you'd rather go by."
"Namjoon," the wolf prince responded instantly.

He wanted to get the focus of the conversation off him and back on her as quickly as possible. He found her immensely interesting and captivating beyond belief, and he wanted to know more. He wanted to know everything.

He pulled away from her—though his grip remained strong around her waist, encasing her to him—and gazed at her with intense curiosity. Aeri noticed almost immediately the way his pupils had dilated to an impossible size.

"But the question is, my sweet lamb, who are you? Because by the spirits guarding this forest, you smell mouth-wateringly divine."

A low growl emitted from his throat, and as he licked his lips, Aeri was made aware of the fangs just visible amongst his upper teeth. An unsolicited whimper left her as the weight of her current situation fell heavy on her shoulders. She was trapped in the forest with the wolf prince known to kill any trespassers found on his land and he had just admitted that she smelt divine.

He was going to kill her and she had never been so scared in all her life.

"Please, don't kill me," she blurted before she could stop herself.

Namjoon raised his eyebrow upon hearing her words.

"Kill you? Why would I kill my sacrifice?" he asked, pausing when he noticed the surprised look on her face. "You are my sacrifice, aren't you? The villagers sent you here to appease me, did they not?"

"No, I--"

"You have my red cloak," he pointed out.

Aeri looked down at the cloak in her hand and cursed her stupidity for not tossing it aside earlier. But then again, perhaps if it wasn't for the cloak, she would've been dead the second he laid eyes on her. At least for now, she still had minutes to convince him to spare her life.

"But I'm not wearing it. I just . . . I just have it."

"You just happen to have my red cloak and wandered into my forest?" Namjoon repeated. "What are you playing at, my little lamb? Why are you here if you claim you are not my sacrifice?"

Aeri furrowed her brows, conflict evident in the way she hesitated.

"If I tell you the truth, will you spare my life?" she asked.

"It depends," Namjoon shrugged.

"On what?"

"If you survive."

Aeri stared at him, unable to properly process the meaning behind his words.

"Survive . . . what, exactly?" she asked.

Namjoon tilted his head.
"You really don't know anything, do you? Allow me to ask you something—what do you villagers think is the reason I asked for the girls?"

"To . . . kill them?" Aeri guessed.

"Just because they die, does not mean I killed them."

"If you didn't kill them, who did?"

"My dear, sweet, lamb," Namjoon chuckled, exposing his fangs once more as he grinned at her. "Do you see anyone else in this forest besides us right now?"

Aeri shook her head. There wasn't a living soul for as far as she could see. It was dead silent—no rustle of the leaves, no cries of the cicadas, nothing. They were easily the only two alive for all she knew.

"You are right. I am alone and I am lonely. I wasn't looking for sacrifices when I requested the company of the girls. That was a term the villagers used when the girls never returned."

"Then what are you looking for?" Aeri asked, sounding slightly breathless and gripped in fear when Namjoon pushed her against a tree; the bark digging into her back.

"There is one thing my ailment compels me to do and yet it is something I am unable to achieve alone," he continued, taking another step closer to her and practically pressing his entire being against her. "I am looking for a mate."

"W-What?"

The word was uttered in a mix of alarm and shock. She desperately wanted to put some distance between them but there was nowhere for her to turn to. She was caged in.

"Oh, you heard me, my lamb," Namjoon grinned.

"What--" Aeri stopped, having to swallow her nervous buildup of saliva. "What happened to the other girls?"

She wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer to the question but at the same time, curiosity was a dastardly thing.

"They didn't survive my mark. None of them was strong enough. But you . . ."

Namjoon closed his eyes, pressing his face close to hers as he exhaled in bliss; his breath hot against the shell of her ear. It was almost as though her scent was making him high and he couldn't seem to get enough of it.

"By the spirits, I pray you'll survive the marking," he said, voice coming out as a low growl akin to stark possessiveness.

Aeri's eyes widened, realising how serious he was about marking her. She didn't want to think what it entailed but she had a feeling it wouldn't be a good thing.

"I'm not your sacrifice," she said, aware of how meek and soft her voice had become. She was positively terrified and it was starting to show.

"At this point, my lamb, I really do not care," Namjoon mumbled against her skin, dragging his lips down the length of her neck.
He paused at her nape, licking at the exposed skin.

"Please, don't do this. I'm not your sacrifice. This is a mistake!" Aeri begged. But no matter how hard she struggled, Namjoon's strength kept her still in his vice-like hold.

He shushed her, his hands roaming up to settle on her upper arm. With a harsh tug, he yanked at the fabric, ripping it from the seams and leaving her entire shoulder bare. Aeri yelped in surprise, desperation clinging to her like a tightly wound rope. She had to stop him. She had to do something. Say something.

Anything.

Think. Think. Think.

"Y-You wanted to know who I am!" she said in a hurry. "You said you wanted to know who I am. I'll tell you. I'll tell you everything you want to know just please... Please, don't mark me."

Aeri could feel him grinning against her, his sharp teeth scratching the skin as his lips stretched into a full smile.

"You would have to tell me anyway if you survive the marking. I might as well mark you first and get this over and done with. What's the point of getting to know you if you're just going to die after you've been marked?"

At this point, Aeri could practically feel her blood pulsating through her veins in a rush of intense fear and she was certain he could feel it too. In a haze of panic and despair, her mind scanned through the various possibilities of ensuring her survival and somehow... she thought of Jae.

"W-Wait!" Aeri yelled, a stroke of genius hitting her just then.

Jae was the answer! Jae, who was willing to sacrifice his own sister in his selfish pursuit to stay alive. Jae, who backed her up when her selfish desires made her claim she was no longer a virgin. Jae, who said the wolf prince only ever asked for girls who were pure; girls who were untouched. She had lied—and convinced—a whole village of her state of apparent tarnishing before, why couldn't she lie to one man now?

She heard Namjoon sigh in impatience before pulling away slightly.

"What is it now, my lamb?"

"I am spoken for," she said, forcing herself to sound confident and sure of her declaration. "There is a man in the village and I— I am spoken for."

She felt him stiffen, the small distance between them getting marginally larger as he straightened to look her in the eyes. The yellow of his irises was brighter than she had remembered and his grip seemed to have tightened. She felt the distinct piercing of sharp nails into her delicate skin and she winced, letting loose a gasp of pain. Still, he said nothing, staring her down with an intensity that made her cower beneath his gaze.

At long last, he finally spoke. A voice so soft, it was almost lost amongst the silence of the surrounding earth.

"What did you say?"

Aeri faltered, words stuck in her throat as she stared at the rage swirling in Namjoon's eyes. She
didn't think he would be that encapsulated by anger. She figured the lie was as good an excuse as any for him to back off, but seeing him in this condition . . . Perhaps she should have thought twice about her actions.

"What did you say!" Namjoon yelled, snapping her out of her momentary state of inattention.

"I . . . T-The village—" she squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head before trying again.

"I am spoken for by another in the village!"

An animalistic snarl rumbled in the base of Namjoon's throat. His lips curled over his fangs, baring them with no care as he gripped her face and pulled her closer to him.

"You are lying," he said.

For a moment, the hope fizzled and died in Aeri's chest . . . until Namjoon continued by saying, "Tell me you are lying. Tell me there is no man waiting for you in the village."

He . . . believed her.

Aeri's expression relaxed for a fraction before she frowned. She did not think her lie would work as efficiently with him as it did with the others, and it came to her as a huge surprise how he did not question the authenticity of her words. With newfound bravery, she said, "He is real and he is waiting for me. You will not claim what belongs to another, would you?"

Namjoon blinked, her question having struck him somewhat dumb. He let his hand fall away from her face as he took a step back from her. They stared at each other—his a mask of nothingness, and hers still dappled with bits of scattered fear and apprehension.

"You are right," Namjoon admitted. "I will not claim what still belongs to another."

For the first time since she stepped foot in the Dark Forest, Aeri felt as though she could finally breathe again. But her moment of relief was short-lived. She watched in horror as Namjoon's eyes seemed to darken significantly, his breathing escalating as he kept his gaze locked on her.

"You are right . . ." he repeated. "But you will no longer belong to another if the one you belong to is no longer alive to claim you as his."

"N-Namjoon, wha—"

"If he dies . . . You are free for me to claim."

Aeri's gaze flickered over his shoulder to where she presumed the village was situated before glancing back at him.

"You can't," she said, shaking her head. "You can't kill him. Y-You don't even know who he is."

"It matters not. I will kill everyone in the village if it means I can make you mine," Namjoon spat.

In an unexpected turn of events, Aeri found herself clinging to his arm as she tried to stop him from going any further. The twisted rage in his eyes was proof enough for her that he will kill everyone in the village.

"Stop this!" she yelled. "Why does it even matter if I have someone waiting for me in the village? Why would you kill anyone for me? I don't even know you!"
Namjoon swivelled around to face her, brows furrowed low in anger.

"Because I've just realised the reason why of all the girls who've ventured beyond the village and into my forest, you're the only one whose scent entices me to no end."

He pulled her closer to him, his eyes blown wide with unspeakable emotion.

"Because you're the one I've been searching for. You're *my* mate. You're destined for me and there's nothing I wouldn't do to make you mine. Even if it means I have to kill an entire village to get you."
Aeri watched in horror as Namjoon took a step back, loosening his hold on her as he seemed to convulse where he stood. He hunched forward, curling in on himself as a growl ripped through his chest. All it took was a second for Aeri’s focus to shift; for her to blink her eyes, and in that brief second, Namjoon had vanished. He was nowhere to be seen. The man had disappeared and in his place, stood a wolf.

The majestic beast was larger in size than any wolf Aeri had ever seen; its eyes the same yellow as Namjoon's and its fur the metallic silver of his hair. Aeri had no doubt in her mind this was the very beast Namjoon claimed himself to be. *I am both man and wolf*—those were his own words and they were spoken in truth if anything she had witnessed the past few minutes was any proof to go by. The wolf, Namjoon, barred his teeth at her, rivulets of saliva dripping down the side of his mouth as he took steps closer to her. When he was as close as he was going to get, he nudged her, his wet nose pressed firmly against her abdomen just below her chest.

Fear had struck her immobile as she stood stock still, backed into the tree with her gaze fixed on the beast before her. Yet again, he nudged her, this time, a low growl rumbled in the base of his throat. If she ever thought his growls were menacing as a man, they were a million times scarier as a beast. Aeri could not comprehend what was asked of her, but when Namjoon shifted his attention and nudged her arm instead, it occurred to her that he wanted to be pet. He wanted her to touch him; to give her the opportunity to identify him as a wolf and to recognise his defining features. It was important to him that she’d be able to tell him apart from any other wolf she might come in contact with.

Namjoon knew he was the last of his kind in the Dark Forest, but that did not mean the place was not teeming with mediocre wolves, the kind that did not shift. Either way, it fed his pride to know his mate could recognise him in either form and he wanted that with her. He needed it. And so, once again, he nudged her almost irritably when she remained unmoving.

Thinking it best to comply lest he decided to rip her arm off, Aeri hesitantly lifted her hand and placed it on his head between his pointed ears. To her surprise, his fur was soft to the touch and fell easily through her parted fingers. She could not stop the gasp that escaped her, and Namjoon, having heard it loud and clear, nuzzled into the palm of her hand.

An odd bubble of comfort settled itself around the pair, Namjoon's earlier declaration of murder almost forgotten. He was so lost in the bliss that came with finding his mate after years of searching, he couldn't seem to think straight anymore. The only thing on his mind was the feeling of her fingers brushing through his fur and the desperation clinging to his wolf at the prospect of marking her.

*Mark her,* his wolf growled. *Do it now before she has the chance to run away. Do it before her companion comes looking for her. It doesn't matter if she's spoken for by another. She's our mate. She's ours, not some weak human male's!*

Namjoon faltered, arguing that no one from the village was stupid enough to enter the forest. They knew they were as good as dead if they did and the man who had claimed his mate was no different. Even so, Namjoon knew it was futile. The creeping darkness and discomfort in his heart...
would never let him be until the moment he was certain he had snapped the man's neck in half.

He could sense his wolf's impatience, but traditions—as old as they may be—defined who they were and Namjoon was not going against them even if she was his mate. He would not mark someone who belongs to another. Not until they were dead and gone.

In truth, the only reason Namjoon even bothered voicing his measly excuse was to use it as an attempt to stay in her presence for a few more minutes. He found comfort and solace in the envelopment of her scent around him and he knew the second he went ahead with his murder spree, the little bubble of repose would dissipate and he'd never find it again. Not anytime soon, at least, and even if it happened to still be there, it would never be the same.

And so, in the pursuit of his selfish desires, he stayed with her, ignoring his wolf for as long as he could until his sharp hearing picked up the sounds of twigs snapping somewhere just within the entrance of the forest.

Someone was here. Someone had entered his forest.

Namjoon turned his back to her, eyes focusing on the path leading to the village. Another movement rustled in the distance and he could no longer ignore it even if he wanted to. His wolf had been right all along—her lover must be looking for her.

Namjoon felt the first inkling of rage bubbling in the pit of his stomach just thinking of the human male taking his mate away. It angered him to no end and only served as a means to feed his sudden frenzy for bloodlust. And before he knew it, he was running; leaving her behind as he made a mad dash through the forest towards the village.

It was unavoidable. The only way he was ever going to mark her in good faith was if he killed her human companion. Besides, if the man himself had entered the Dark Forest looking for her on his own accord . . . Well, what was Namjoon to do except to greet him with open arms and barred teeth?

The sooner he killed the human male, the sooner he could get back to her and mark her as his. In not so many words—the murder spree was afoot.

Aeri startled when Namjoon snapped his head away from her touch, emitting a low growl as he seemed to snarl at the empty space behind him. She glanced at her hand, still hovering midair, and found herself unexpectedly missing the comfort of his fur between her fingers. The realisation caused her to frown.

She clenched her hand into a tight fist and lowered her arm to rest by her side. She had no idea what was going on, but she wasn't about to be further distracted by his false pretences of apparent tenderness. Not when he had been ghastly for the most part of the hour she had known him.

Namjoon took a step away from her and paused, looking back at her as though contemplating a serious decision in his mind. For a second, as she stared at him, she swore she saw the fierce and animalistic strength behind his gaze soften right before it vanished immediately after. If Aeri hadn't known any better, she would have guessed he was speaking words of careful apology just from the fragile manner he was looking at her.

But the assumption was soon lost when he turned on his heel, racing down the path and disappearing into the overgrown forest around them.
Aeri was left standing there in clear confusion, the red of his hooded cloak still in her grasp as she stared after him. It wasn't until the first scream had permeated the stillness in the air, did it occur to her what was going on and where Namjoon had run off to without warning.

He had gone to carry out his promise of murder.

As the realisation seeped into the crevices of her mind, Aeri found herself blindly chasing after him though a part of her already knew it was impossible to compete with the strength and speed that came with being a werewolf.

Her earlier concern of not knowing how to navigate herself in the direction of the village was forgotten soon after when the lone scream was accompanied by many more. Strangled cries and distant yelling became her North Star as she pushed past low hanging branches and overgrown roots to get to the villagers.

She was breathing hard, heart hammering wildly in her chest as she broke through the last of the forested area, only to find herself unable to control her emotions at the sight that awaited her. The faux serenity imbued by the desperate villagers in her short time there had long vanished. In its wake, was the remnants of a bloody fight.

The ground, for as far as Aeri could see, had absorbed the spilt blood, turning it a gory red hue. But the red was nothing compared to the piles upon piles of unmoving dead bodies scattered across the village—none of which were wholly intact; majority missing an arm or a leg, with the worse of the lot decapitated in the most gruesome of ways.

The piercing silence was too much to bear—the only definitive indicator that Namjoon had rampaged through the village, killing everyone in sight in less than a few minutes. He was ruthless and without mercy, carrying out his morbid promise to murder every villager in sight. A soft whimper and a croaked cough coming from her left alerted Aeri to the possibility of a survivor amidst the bodies.

She rushed to the source, falling to her knees and pushing aside discarded limbs until she found herself staring at Ha Eun.

"No . . ." Aeri said, fighting the urge to cry as she pulled the injured girl closer to her chest in a futile attempt to soothe her pain.

The fear on Ha Eun's face relaxed into immediate relief upon seeing Aeri alive and well. She thought for a horrifying second that it was the wolf come to finish what he started.

"A-Aeri," she said, her voice incredibly soft despite the eerie silence surrounding them. "I'm so happy to see you."

Aeri panicked, seeing the blood spluttering out of her mouth when she started speaking. She shushed the girl, begging her to stay silent if only to preserve her life longer. Ha Eun stubbornly shook her head, features set in a frown as she grasped for Aeri's hand.

"I'm dying. Let me speak, please," she said.

She paused, swallowing to clear her throat before continuing.

"I wanted to thank you for what you did. For trying to save my life. You did what no one else would do for me and I'm so happy you're safe."

"You're okay," Aeri said, trying her best to stop the bleeding she now knew stemmed from the
laceration across the front of her abdomen. "You'll be fine. Just hang in there, Ha Eun. I– I'll get some help. Someone will–"

Ha Eun shook her head once more, giving Aeri a sad smile as tears fell over her eyes and stained her cheeks. Her grip tightened on her hand.

"There's no one. E-Everyone is dead, Aeri. Please, just . . . Stay with me until I have to go. I don't want to die alone."

Aeri felt her throat constricting with emotion. She nodded, pulling Ha Eun into her embrace once more as she rocked them both back and forth in as comforting a manner as she could muster. She didn't know how long they stayed that way, but the next time Aeri tried rousing the child, she knew from the faraway look in her eyes that she was no more.

A strangled cry escaped her, no longer able to contain what little control she had over her emotions at this point. She snapped out of it, however, when she heard the crunch of feet on broken bones and the force of a tug pulling her away from the dead girl she held in her arms.

Aeri stood her ground, refusing to budge; refusing to look the killer in his eyes and having him see her in tears. She heard the distinct sound of a warning growl before she was yanked back once more, this time with enough force to send her falling on her back with a thud.

She found herself staring up at Namjoon in his wolf form, his silver fur barely visible under the red staining his coat. He barred his teeth at her, clearly unhappy at seeing her there and covered in the scent of the murdered villagers.

Aeri tried squirming away from under him but his paw pressing firmly on her shoulder in unspoken warning prevented her from moving unnecessarily. She could read the threat loud and clear—continue resisting him and he would dislocate her shoulder without hesitation.

Namjoon closed his eyes, allowing the convulsions to overtake his body before he was back in the comfort of his human form. He was aware of how his mate had stiffened considerably under him; knowing full well it was because of his state of undress. But being naked wasn't something that bothered him and he didn't feel the need or the want to cover himself. Especially not when he had her beneath him in all her vulnerability, staring up at him with wide eyes.

"My mate . . . What is your name?" he asked, pushing strands of her hair away from her face.

Aeri couldn't bring herself to say a word; too stunned and overwhelmed as she was. But Namjoon's patience was wearing thin and her measured response was annoying him far more than it normally would've.

"A name," he rasped.

"Aeri," she whispered, her tone laced in evident fear.

He hummed appreciatively at her apparent submission before he started tugging at the material of her clothes. His nose twitched at the disgusting scent of death clinging to her in thick folds. It was disgusting and he wanted her to be rid of it.

"You should not be here," he said.

"You killed them. All of them," Aeri said, prying her gaze away from him. She had never felt so much hatred for a person as she did at that moment.
Namjoon grabbed her chin and turned her to face him. He pointedly ignored her accusation, the hurt behind her words lost on him. There was only one thing he cared about. The one thing that spurred his frenzy for bloodlust. His eyes travelled to the nape of her exposed neck and a possessive growl escaped him.

"And now, you are free for me to mark," he snarled.

The beginning of a desperate protest was about to leave Aeri’s lips when Namjoon pressed his palm flat against her mouth, effectively silencing her. With his free hand, he pulled down the collar of her dress, exhaling in impatience at the sight of her bare skin.

He spared her a glance, yellow eyes darkened and pupils blown wide. Aeri shook her head, begging him not to carry on with it but he paid her no mind. He dipped his head into the crook of her neck, his sharp canines scraping against her skin before they pierced the surface, drawing blood.

Blinding pain erupted from where he had bitten her, a muffled scream escaping her as she thrashed under him in an attempt to push him away. Namjoon pressed his full body weight against her, keeping her still as he latched onto her with fervour.

He wanted this and he desperately needed it. He wasn't letting her go until he had completed marking her.

Aeri was starting to see white behind her eyelids from the intensity of the pain and it didn't take long before it became too much for her to bear. She was only too relieved to welcome the darkness that consumed her; numbing the moment of torment he had forcefully inflicted upon her.
The first thing that registered in Aeri's mind when she awoke, was the throbbing pain from somewhere near her shoulder. The second was the heavy and suffocating feeling coiling itself around her neck. And the third was the fact that she was no longer on the bloodied grounds of the village, nor was she anywhere in the forest.

She had no idea where she was.

Aeri pushed herself into a sitting position, looking around her with a mix of curiosity and slight apprehension. It occurred to her she was in a house of sorts but at the same time . . . it didn't quite look like one. In fact, it looked more like the inside of a cave that had been turned into as homely an environment as possible.

She frowned, looking down and realising she had been lying atop a bunch of fur blankets in front of the fireplace. Her moment of observation, however, was abruptly halted when she felt another pulse of pain surge through her body. She gasped, hands instinctively reaching towards the source in an attempt to ebb it. In the process, her fingers brushed against the rough and foreign object clinging to her neck.

Panicked, and with the pain momentarily forgotten, Aeri tugged helplessly at what she could only assume was a collar secured around her neck. She swivelled, hearing the distinct sounds of chains rattling. Trailing the length of the collar, her fingers immediately picked up on the chain attached to the back, the end of which was nailed to the stone wall of the cave.

Aeri was finding it increasingly difficult to breathe, unable to stop herself from spiralling into the depths of her state of panic. The collar was in no way tight around her neck, but her mind—drenched in anxiety as it was—made her believe she was suffocating as she started to claw at the material; unaware of the scratch marks she was indenting into her skin, leaving it ruptured with the red of blood. It was as she was desperately trying to free herself of her restraints did her captor return.

Seeing her state of panic, and alarmed at the way Aeri was hurting herself, Namjoon lunged forward, tackling her to the ground and yanking her hands away from her. Stunned into silence at the sudden attack, Aeri could only stare at Namjoon, soft hiccups leaving her parted lips as she kept her gaze steady on him.

Namjoon said nothing except to tilt her head up to inspect the damage she had done. A low growl bubbled in his throat, his eyes darkening in anger when he noted the bloody streaks running up and down the length of her neck.

"What did you do?" he finally asked.

"I couldn't breathe," Aeri whispered, tears falling past her eyes and rolling down her cheeks. "I still can't breathe."

"You can breathe just fine," Namjoon responded brusquely in a tone akin to admonishment.

He leaned forward, sniffing the broken skin before sighing. He could feel his heart physically clenching at the sight of his mate injured and crying. He didn't like it one bit and wanted to do anything in his power to placate the hurt she was feeling. His tongue darted past his lips, licking at the scratches, the bitter taste of his mate's blood coating the insides of his mouth.
She squirmed beneath him, weak hands pushing against his shoulders in an attempt to get him to stop. He pressed down on her to keep her still, a snarl of warning leaving him at her continued disobedience.

"N-Namjoon, it hurts," she whimpered as he continued fervently licking at her self-inflicted wounds.

What started as soft kitten licks, soon progressed to something of a rougher nature when he lost himself in his mission of getting her pain to stop. He was aware of the way she was struggling and whining, wanting to be let out from his hold, which only had the opposite effect on him. He kept her still, mind focused on his mission, as he licked her wounds for a duration unknown. Her pained whimpers soon gave way to soft sighs when the agony she felt started ebbing and numbing in response to the healing properties in his saliva.

Satisfied, at last, Namjoon pulled away, nose picking up almost instantaneously the way she was doused in his scent; something he could no doubt get used to. He inspected the scratch marks a second time, pleased at the way the angry red had started to fade and dull into something less ominous to look at.

A thought occurred to him just then, Namjoon proceeded to undo the cloak around her shoulder and push the material aside, ignoring the look of alarm Aeri was sending him. A frown graced his features as his thumb gently brushed over the swelling of the skin where he had bitten her. A sharp hiss left Aeri's lips, stinging her eyes and causing her head to swim with the sudden pain that erupted from his touch.

"It hurts?" Namjoon enquired.

Aeri nodded.

"Let me," he said, pushing her back down onto the blankets of fur as he resumed his earlier mission of numbing her pain.

This, however, was not like the meagre scratches on her neck. The bite mark hurt like hell and it hurt even more the minute Namjoon's tongue came in contact with it. Aeri was full-on sobbing at this point—begging, crying, whining—all in hopes of getting him to stop. Namjoon was doing a fine job of ignoring her, until he couldn't anymore, her cries of pain piercing into him.

He shifted, nudging the side of her face affectionately and rubbing his face against her cheek in a manner he hoped was soothing to her. With a quiet exhale, he said, "It's going to hurt more before it gets better. I need you to stay strong, okay?"

"No . . ." Aeri whined, shaking her head, not wanting to endure it anymore.

"It's for your own good."

Namjoon was about to continue where he had left off when her words, laced in the rawness of pain, stopped him.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I need to clean the wound, little lamb, or it's going to get infected. Now, hush."

Aeri shook her head again.

"N-No," she stammered, pushing against him again. "W-Why did you bite me? Why am I here?
Why am I . . . chained?"

Confused at her sudden barrage of questions, Namjoon sat himself up, tilting his head as he observed her closely. He could see the flames of defiance dancing in her eyes, though they were dimming by the second; no doubt because of the throbbing pain she was experiencing. Still, her eyes watered, lips quivering as she stared at him, awaiting his response. He reached forward and stroked her cheek, wiping away her tears deftly with the pad of his thumb.

"I already told you, little lamb, you are my mate. Biting you is how I lay claim to you; it's how I mark you as mine. As for the collar . . ."

A distracted look crossed his features as he eyed the material clasped securely around her neck. He traced its outline with the tips of his fingers, leaving featherlike touches on her skin and causing shudders to run through her. When he pried his gaze away to look at her, there was a tinge of sadness in his eyes. She couldn't tell if it was because he felt sorry for treating her in such a manner, or if it was because of what the collar represented—a story behind its existence she knew nothing about.

Forcing a smile to his face, Namjoon said, "Well, I can't have you running away from me, can I? After all, it took me years to finally find you, it would be stupid of me to make a careless mistake and have you gone in the next second."

He paused, the smile now vanishing as an eerie tone settled into his voice when he spoke next.

"Of course, even if you did somehow manage to escape, I would track you down to the ends of the earth to have you back in my arms again. If you must know only one thing about my kind, then know this—our sense of smell is the strongest of all our senses. It would be foolish of you to think you could ever outrun or outsmart me, little lamb."

Once again his eyes strayed to the collar around her neck and almost as though he were in a daze, he grabbed the chain connected to it and gave it a harsh tug. The sound reverberated throughout the cave, causing Aeri to flinch and attempt to shuffle away from him, though she could not get far.

"I doubt you'd be able to free yourself from these chains, anyway. So I guess I have nothing to worry about."

He let the chains fall from his grasp before turning to fix his gaze on her.

"Do you want to know something, my lamb?" he asked. "These chains . . . This collar? They're meant for me. If I can't free myself from them using brute force, there's no way you'd get anywhere with them."

Though his words were meant to snuff any hope she might harbour for escape, they sparked something else within her. Another emotion—curiosity. And before she could stop to think, she found herself asking him, "Why would you need to chain yourself to the wall?"

The corner of his lip tilted in a teasing smirk.

"My, you are curious aren't you, little lamb? Or are you just trying to distract me?"

Aeri shook her head, clueless as to the meaning behind his words. Namjoon, on the other hand, leaned forward, lips against her ear as he whispered, "You'll find out soon enough, my lamb. For now, let me finish what I started."

He dipped his head into the crook of her neck, nose trailing along her shoulder until he came upon
his bite mark; whereupon he started licking at the bruising skin. Anticipating Aeri's protests, he held her down with his arms, much harsher than he did before. He was not playing any games with her. He did not like the sight of the angry welts on her wound and if he did not do something about it—whether she liked it or not—he might risk having her taken from him by an infection he could not fight.

And so the night wore on, with Namjoon determinedly cleaning the mark he had inflicted on his mate, and with Aeri's quiet sobs and whimpers filling the cave alongside the crackle of the firewood.

Aeri had no idea how long had passed, but it felt like forever before Namjoon finally stopped; time a lost concept to her with her mind reeling in the pain the mark gave her. It was only a while later before the same numbing sensation from earlier claimed her, giving her a moment of respite as she found herself slowly relaxing.

She stayed stock still, embracing in the feeling of absolutely nothing—no itching, no burning pain, no throbbing, nothing—as she stared blankly at the cave's ceiling. She heard shuffling from somewhere behind her and knew it was Namjoon, back from his hunt. She was mortified when he first told her he'd have to catch their dinner, mumbling something about rabbits being in season.

Aeri assumed he was teasing her lack of knowledge concerning werewolves, but was sorely mistaken when he shifted into his wolf form and darted out into the forest without another word. Glancing over to look at him now, she noted almost immediately the blood coating the fur around his mouth, as well as the dead rabbits he had tossed by the wall.

She followed him with her gaze as he trotted over to her, his yellow eyes levelling her stare as he approached. He pushed her chest with the top of his lowered head, nudging her onto the blankets. The meaning behind his actions was obvious. He didn't want her moving about any time soon. He wanted her to rest and rest meant lying down.

Aeri complied, too tired to put up much of a fight. The fact that Namjoon was still in his wolf form might have also been a contributing factor to her sudden compliance. She didn't think being ripped apart limb from limb was something she desired anytime soon. If Namjoon had a temper as a man—an impatience to her disobedience—he'd be the same as a wolf, except perhaps a million times worse.

As she laid there, resuming her earlier position with her gaze fixed to the ceiling above, she was aware of the way Namjoon had curled up next to her after pushing himself forcefully into her embrace. He snuggled between her arm and body, eyes closed in the one-sided bliss he was feeling in their current situation.

It had barely been a day since he'd found her and already Namjoon knew he loved her. He was sure of it. He couldn't describe the feeling as anything other than love. Raw, unconditional, love. And it was all for her. His mate.

Thinking of it instilled within him the sudden desperate desire to complete the mating bond. But he knew doing it this early into their relationship, with Aeri still confused and unaccepting, would not bode well for either of them. For her sake, and inevitably for his as well, Namjoon silently prayed she'd come to accept their relationship and soon.

He was due for his rut not too long now and when the mating season comes around, there would be no stopping or controlling his urges. Especially not when his mate would be right there for his
apparent taking; tempting him with her delectable and intoxicating scent.
A week had gone by since the massacre at the village and Aeri was starting to look the worse for wear. Despite his constant pleadings, she refused to eat anything Namjoon had hunted and had inevitably dwindled to mere skin and bones. A deathlike pallor tainted her skin; eyes vacant and cheeks hollow, the absence of any weight to her frame causing her features to appear much sharper than they did, and not in a good way either.

Desperate to keep her whining stomach satiated and to give her some form of energy, Namjoon resorted to foraging for berries in the bushes lining the banks by the river. Aeri ate them without much coaxing, though she barely ate enough to fill her stomach.

Needless to say, Namjoon was overwhelmed with worry and by the time the end of the week rolled around, he was completely lost to the emotion. The reason for which was simple—there were no more berries left. The bushes upon which the berries grew were rare to begin with, their produce a mere handful at best, and he had picked the last of them. Winter was just around the corner and food, as it were, was becoming scarce. But that wasn't the only thing Namjoon had to worry about.

On top of his mate's fast-declining health and the lack of game, the coming winter also signified the start of his rut; due any time between the middle and the end of winter. The mating process in and of itself was usually rough and animalistic—arduous for anyone who wasn't a werewolf by nature—but with a mate as weak as Aeri was at the present moment, Namjoon feared he might end up killing her. During the mating season, his wolf instincts overpowered anything at all human about him and all he'd be able to think about was the need to impregnate his mate and further his bloodline.

All his life he'd been told that werewolves mated for life. That if he was lucky enough to find his mate and mark her as his own, they'd live an eternity together filled with love and compassion; the flames of their affection never dying. But Aeri wasn't of werewolf descent. She had no wolf within her and when he marked her, nothing changed. Sure, it changed for him—made his mundane life so much brighter and lighter; made him happier, even . . . but nothing changed for her. She didn't feel any differently about him either way.

She hated him before and she hated him still.

Namjoon knew he was running out of time. He had to get her back to her state of health before mid-winter or risk losing her forever. And at the rate things were going . . . He could only see one probable solution to the problem—he had to feed her forcefully. She hated him anyway, it wasn't as though he would be hurting their relationship with his decision. They were doomed from the very beginning and he figured if he could at least keep her alive, he'd have all eternity to seek her forgiveness and change her mind about him.

"My lamb . . ." Namjoon said, voice strained. "Please, you have to eat something."

As expected, Aeri ignored him, choosing instead to stare at the flickering flames in the fireplace behind him. Her expression remained blank, and if it were not for the slight twitch in the corner of her lips, Namjoon would never have guessed she was even listening to him. He sighed, patience wearing incredibly thin as he placed a hand on her cheek and shifted her to look his way. His palm felt hot against her cold skin, the stark difference in temperature alarming him in indescribable ways.

"Why won't you eat? Is nothing to your taste? I have tried my best to cook the food in a way that
you humans eat them . . . Yet you will not have even one bite."

He frowned, sadness lingering in his eyes when he caught sight of the remaining berries in the wooden bowl by her side. He picked the red fruit in his fingers, pushing it into her mouth and watching with slight relief as she slowly chewed on the morsel with little enthusiasm. He fed her two more of the berries before he stopped.

"This fruit is the only thing you will eat, but it will not keep your tummy full. You have to eat more. You have to eat the animals I have hunted for you."

Namjoon watched with apprehension as his words evoked a minuscule reaction out of her. Her gaze shifted from the fireplace to the far corner of the cave by the opening where he had placed the skinned corpses of the animals he had killed for food. It wasn't just rabbits anymore. The pile had grown to include the likes of deer, elk, and whatever wild birds he happened to cross paths with.

After the first day when he realised Aeri had no appetite for rabbit meat, he figured she must have wanted something else. He hunted every beast he could find before it dawned on him that their species did not matter—she just didn't want to eat. A part of him felt infuriated at her act of ungratefulness. Here he was, spending all his time and energy out hunting to make certain she had food to eat, yet she was being choosy and problematic.

But as time went by, his anger ebbed and dissolved entirely when it occurred to him that she was not acting out her supposed brattiness. Aeri simply did not want to eat and she wasn't even being picky about it. Anything he hunted, would never be eaten.

A small grimace left her before she looked away, interest no longer focused on the hunted, but rather on the hunter himself as he continued watching her closely.

Namjoon's hand curved around the back of her neck, pushing her towards him as he closed his eyes and leaned into her; resting the side of his face against hers.

"Little lamb, please," he pleaded with her once more, knowing this would be the last time. This was her last chance to eat the food of her own free will before he took matters into his own hands.

"I worry about you and it pains me to see you wasting away like this. You have to eat something. Just a small bite. A taste?" Namjoon tried.

"Let me go," Aeri said, the first words she'd spoken in a week.

Namjoon, taking every sign as one of progress, released her from his hold immediately, eyes expectant as he showed her his hands as proof of his words.

"N-No, Namjoon . . . You don't understand. That's not what I meant. I . . ." she gulped, licking her dry lips. "I want you to let me go. Let me leave this place. Please."

The soft look on Namjoon's face evened out to one of blatant annoyance when he finally
understood the meaning behind her request. He shook his head, teeth gritted as a means to keep his irritation at bay.

"No. That's out of the question. Why would you even ask me that?"

Aeri took a shuddering breath, the action causing Namjoon to wince when he noticed how something so mediocre was enough to shake her entire form. She was so fragile; becoming even more so with each second she insists on not eating. He feared she'd no longer have the energy for the simplest of tasks, or worse, when breathing itself seemed too much of an effort.

"Please, just let me go and live my life," Aeri whispered, eyes leaving his face and once again focusing on the flickering flames.

"No!" Namjoon yelled, his voice akin to a roar as it reverberated throughout the cave. She flinched, squeezing her eyes shut as she wrapped her arms around herself in fear.

Seeing this, Namjoon sighed. He raked a hand through his hair and focused on his breathing. His mate was too weak to deal with the fear he was inflicting on her by being a crude beast. He exhaled, opening his eyes as he shifted closer to her, pulling her into his embrace.

"I'm sorry, my lamb. I didn't mean to scare you. I just . . . You can't leave me. You're my mate. I marked you. You have to stay here with me now. You have to eat and be healthy. That's the only way we'll be able to breed and have a family of our own. You have to be healthy in order to carry our pups."

His words brought pause to her as she squirmed, pushing against his chest to put some distance between them. Her efforts bore no fruit, however, being in such a weak state as she was in comparison to Namjoon's strength. But Namjoon was aware of the light pressure he felt against him and obliged, pulling away just as she wanted, though he wasted no time in cupping her face in his warm hands.

"What's wrong, little lamb?" he asked when he noted the conflict and light sheen of tears in her eyes.

"I don't want children," she said, shaking her head.

Namjoon gave her a sympathetic smile as though she was confused and was not aware of what she was saying.

"Of course, you do. Of course, you want to carry our pups," he said, kissing the tip of her nose as he made certain to reiterate the proper term.

"No, I don't!" Aeri yelled, the effort it took causing her head to swim, and tiny dots to appear in her vision as she desperately blinked them away. "You only want me to be healthy so we can mate. You don't care about me at all. If you cared, you'd let me go."

And just like that, everything made sense to Namjoon—the real reason why she refused to eat, the reason she insisted only on eating the berries. For a moment, he assumed she was trying to starve herself, but if she did, she would not be eating at all. Yet, she never failed to eat the berries when he offered them to her.

The truth was, she was trying to weaken herself. She knew she'd never be strong enough to carry his pups if she forced herself not to eat; if she wasted herself away. And in her mind, if she could not give him what he wanted, he would loathe her and set her free. Oh, but how wrong she was. She underestimated the bond formed between mates. He loved her to eternity and back, if only
"I care about you," Namjoon said, pressing his forehead close to hers. "I care about you so much, my lamb. I worry about you, not the pups who have yet to arrive. I want them, of course, I do. I want to start a family with you because I love you. But if you continue to restrict your diet like this, not only will I lose the pups before I've had them, I'll lose you too. And I can't have that. I can't, little lamb. Without you, I'd have nothing."

He leaned away from her, wiping her tears with his thumbs.

"I would do anything to keep you alive."

The yellow of his eyes intensified as he stared at her.

"Anything."

Namjoon tried his best to ignore the whimpers coming from behind him as he mashed what remained of the berries into a soft paste and added it to the stew he was making. He figured it would give the concoction a sweeter taste—though he knew nothing about cooking whatsoever—something Aeri would be able to appreciate since she seemed to love the berries so much.

A gurgled cry reached his ears and he flinched, glancing over his shoulder at his mate for a brief second before turning away. He checked on the stew, giving it a good stir before covering the pot with a lid after having decided to let it simmer for a bit. He dried his hands on the dishcloth hanging above the hearth before he turned his full attention on his beloved.

Aeri was propped up in a sitting position with her back against the wall. The chain from the collar had been shortened, preventing her from moving her head too much. In fact, if she moved at all, the restraints around her neck would choke her. A gag was tied securely around her mouth, keeping her silent so the only sounds she could make were muffled whimpers and quiet sobs. Her hands and feet were no longer left unbounded, both securely tied with thick lengths of ropes that dug into her skin when she so much as squirmed; effectively preventing her from doing so lest she wanted to hurt herself.

"I didn't want to do this," Namjoon said, apologetic as he nuzzled into her neck, lightly kissing the mark on her shoulder. "But this is the only way I could think of to get you to eat. You cannot survive on water and berries alone. I'm doing this because I love you."

She wondered briefly what he meant when he claimed he was doing 'this' because he loved her. What exactly was he doing? It wasn't long afterwards when Aeri received the answer to her unasked question though she wished she didn't have to live through it.

Namjoon scooped a serving of stew into a wooden bowl, placing it by her feet as he moved to undo the gag on her mouth. He gripped her face roughly, fingers pressing painfully down on her cheeks until she unwillingly opened her mouth as he tilted her head back. Her eyes widened in a state of panic when she saw him lifting a spoonful of stew from her peripheral vision, blowing on it to cool its contents.

She struggled, having figured the intentions behind his actions, but he kept her in place easily enough; her efforts making absolutely no difference to her current situation. Just as she had expected, Namjoon proceeded to pour the spoonful of stew into her mouth once he had deemed it cool enough. He clamped her mouth shut immediately after, though he kept her head tilted back.
and locked in place.

There was nothing Aeri could do except to swallow the food, ashamed at her inability to resist. She wanted very much to gag and force the food out of her system, but she knew Namjoon would not slacken his hold on her even if she did. If she somehow managed to retch her food out, he'd keep her in the same position, completely unmoving, until she swallowed everything again. A disgusting notion, but the truth nonetheless.

She came to the begrudging conclusion that it was better to cooperate with him, obediently swallowing every spoonful of stew until the bowl was empty.

At last, Namjoon had won.
Namjoon could barely suppress his grin as he watched Aeri scoop the bit of food he had prepared for her and brought it to her mouth, carefully chewing before swallowing. He bit the inside of his cheek, resisting the urge to praise her for doing so well, knowing she'd hate it and end up throwing the bowl away. After several days of consecutive force-feeding, Aeri could bear the humiliation no longer, inevitably begging Namjoon to let her eat on her own.

He agreed, but only after he warned her that the minute she went back to her old ways, he'd start feeding her again and this time, he'd never trust her to eat on her own even if she grovelled and begged at his feet. The thought terrified her, halting all intentions of disobedience she might have.

Namjoon was pleased to see the colour return to her cheeks, a healthy glow resonated on her face after just a few days of proper food intake. She still had a bit of weight to put on, a little fat to soften her edges to his liking, but he knew she'll get there eventually; all it took was some time and routine eating habits.

He silently thanked the guardian spirits of the forest for gracing him with the inspiration to feed his mate, and for softening her heart to eat on her own. The days of force-feeding was as torturous to him as it was to her. He absolutely loathed treating her in such a disagreeable manner yet he steeled his heart and muted her cries. If he had caved any earlier, she'd never have taken him as seriously as she did now.

After she was done eating, she pushed the bowl towards him, her eyes downcast as she scooted closer to the wall and away from him. Seeing the bowl clean of its contents, Namjoon could not withhold himself from praising her any longer.

"You did so well, my lamb. I'm so proud of you," he said, noticing almost immediately the way she visibly cringed at his words, though it bothered him not.

He cleared their bowls, standing soon after and retrieving his hunting bow from where it hung above the fireplace. The action caught Aeri's attention and she lifted her head to look at him, gaze laced with curiosity.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

It wasn't as though she was particularly concerned, but Namjoon had been leaving the cave a lot lately and it was starting to worry her. For one, the days had been getting colder since winter set in and she didn't like the idea of being left alone while chained and helpless. She could hear the howling winds and the harsh air from inside the cave, knowing it'd be a lot worse outside. She didn't need him accidentally dying and leaving her there to fend for herself.

Namjoon chuckled upon seeing the terrified look on her face. He walked over to her, leaning down and giving her a chaste kiss on her lips before she could resist him.

"The harshest of winter will be upon us soon and I need to get as much food as I can scavenge for. It was my mistake for miscalculating the amount of food we would have needed," he laughed for a bit, cheeks indenting on both sides. "I'm too used to feeding myself alone, I sometimes forget I've found a mate to care for."

When Aeri failed to react to his words of affection, he continued by saying, "I don't know if there's even anything out there anymore but it's worth a try. Don't worry. I'll only be gone for a few hours..."
at most."

He gave her another dimpled grin before he was gone.

It was only when a 'few hours', as Namjoon had put it, transitioned into a full day and then a day and a half, did it occur to Aeri that her worse fears were being realised. Something must have happened to Namjoon in his apparent hunt for sustenance and now he was dead, leaving her all alone in this secluded cave; chained to the wall with nowhere to go.

Aeri was having trouble keeping her calm, her mind racing with ways in which his supposed death would result in her imminent one if she didn't find a way to free herself from the chains. But no matter how hard she tried, her restraints held fast and she remained tethered.

Night was beginning to fall, the embers in the fireplace dying out and leaving the cave in a state of semidarkness. Aeri stared at the dissipating flames, feeling a sense of kinship in the way her will to fight was also starting to die out.

A sudden growl coming from the cave's entrance startled her, alerting her to a pair of glowing yellow eyes staring at her through the darkness. She felt her heart picking up its pace, her eyes widening as she shuffled as far away from the advancing creature as her chains would allow. It was only when the low light from the dying fireplace fell upon the creature did she realise it wasn't a creature at all.

"N-Namjoon?" her hoarse whisper of his name piercing the silence surrounding them.

He said nothing, gaze focused solely on her; his yellow eyes flickering a fraction towards the area on her shoulder where he had marked her. There was something different about him . . . Something much more animalistic despite being in his human form. He lifted his head, seeming to sniff the air before his lips curled into a sardonic smirk.

"My mate," he said, voice rumbling low in the base of his throat.

He reached forward, grabbing Aeri and ripping the material of her dress in one harsh tug. She whimpered, trying to push him away in her sudden state of vulnerability, but he held onto her with firm hands, face immediately pressed against the mark on her shoulder. *His* mark.

She struggled listlessly in his hold, confused and frightened of his sudden behaviour. Her mind was a mess and she could feel herself descending into a haze of panic.

Until one word growled into her ear seemed to clear the fog and still her in the intense fear that crippled her. The one word she had been dreading since the moment she knew of Namjoon's motives in keeping her with him . . . and now the moment was here and there was nothing she could do to escape the actions that would soon follow.

"Rut."

Namjoon's rut lasted a full three days and already it was three days too many for Aeri. She never felt so tired in all her life, not even when she deprived herself of food. The man worked her for her worth from dawn till dusk and though he did most of the work—his intense need for dominance would rather she remain docile and receiving to his ministrations—she was always the one who ended up breathless and tired.

Namjoon was an entirely different person during the three days. It was almost as though he was
battling with two versions of himself and in a way, Aeri knew it to be the truth. There was Namjoon the wolf and then there was Namjoon the man.

The wolf was rough when pounding into her, unforgiving when she retaliated, and vulgar in his words. He would constantly bite over the mark on her shoulder, relishing in the way she whimpered as his grip left dark hues on her skin. He would tell her how beautiful she would look, filled with his seed and bloated with his pups; how he would drench her entirely in his semen to scent her as his for months to come. Promising that when the scent wore off, he would do it all over again.

The wolf loved bruising her skin, taking time just scrutinising the way he had tainted her as she lay beneath him, too weary to move. The bruises were battle scars in his eyes. Beautiful ones that illuminated her fragility yet announced her strength. She was weak compared to him; a mere human, yet she was able to take him like a true mate, an act which only amplified his love for her.

The wolf absolutely hated the clothes that kept her covered from his sight and his touch. He much preferred leaving her unclothed and in her 'natural state', as he called it, even going so far as to feed her clothes to the flames, relishing in the way the fabric burned to a crisp. Aeri thought for certain she would freeze to death with nothing to shield her from the harsh winter air but she soon realised that was far from happening. As a werewolf, Namjoon's body temperature ran higher than the average person's, and seeing as how he was always either in her or on her, freezing to death was a highly unlikely occurrence.

The first day of the rut had been the most taxing for her, having been unaccustomed to Namjoon's large size and the disconcerting fact that he was almost always in a state of arousal no matter the number of times he'd gone over the edge. As if dealing with his size wasn't already excruciating enough, Aeri had to experience something she'd never had cause to in her entire life—knotting. She thought for sure she'd explode with the way he swelled as he started pumping into her, filling her with the warmth of his release.

She squeezed her eyes shut, exhaling huffs of air through parted lips as her fingers left crescent marks on his skin; gripping onto him as intense pleasure coursed through her veins.

The knot lasted a full thirty minutes; easily the longest half an hour of her life. Her mind was a bleary haze, dulled by the intensity of what had transpired between them. But with her legs kept apart in an embarrassing manner, her knees pressed on either side of his hips, and having him firmly attached to her core, things just felt... right. Almost as though she was where she belonged—on her back with Namjoon pushed intrusively inside her.

She preened at the way he was constantly peppering kisses on her skin, praising her for her strength and the wonderful job she was doing as they waited for the knot to subside. He made her forget the pain of the stretch, wanting nothing more than to please him if only to keep hearing his words of praise.

Aeri wanted to hate him. She really did. After three days of nothing but rough sex, dirty talk, and breeding kinks, she really wanted to loathe him with all her might. But she came to the horrifying realisation that she couldn't.

Because as rough as Namjoon the wolf was, Namjoon the man was equally as soft and endearing. The minute his knot started to deflate and the mating session deemed over, a switch seemed to click in his mind and he'd start fussing over her. His touches were gentle, his words were comforting and his eyes held nothing but love and admiration as he gazed upon her.

He would spend hours just cleaning and grooming her, rubbing his head affectionately against her
as he continually murmured words of encouragement and adoration. The embarrassment she once felt at being left bare in his presence had long dissipated when she realised Namjoon only ever looked at her with affection in his eyes. He loved her, however she may look, and the intense love he felt for her devoured any form of self-consciousness she might have.

But the fondness in his gaze was often accompanied by hints of guilt when he'd brush over the numerous bruises and marks covering every inch of her body. The most heart-wrenching apologies would spill from his lips as tears dappled his eyes—crying at his inability to control the wolf within him when it came to mating.

On the morning of the fourth day, Aeri awoke to the familiar feeling of Namjoon nestling against her, their naked bodies sharing in the warmth that enshrouded them beneath the fur blankets. She felt him shift behind her, as he too rose from his slumber. He placed a soft kiss to her neck, his lips stretching into a smile when she subconsciously leaned back into him; by now already too familiar with his touches that her body had started craving them.

Despite the circumstances surrounding their relationship, and the nature in which they had consummated, Aeri had somehow found herself holding a degree of affection for him. It was confusing and she didn't particularly understand it; which led her to believe it must be the workings of the whole 'mate' agenda Namjoon had going on. Whatever it may be, there was no denying the one fact that Aeri found herself perfectly in a state of ease being held in his arms as they lay there; basking in the heavy scent of sex lingering in the air.

"Thank you," Namjoon murmured against her skin, pulling her closer to him.

She said nothing, though the slight tilt of her head in his direction was enough for him to discern her curiosity behind his word of thanks.

"My rut is over, little lamb," he explained in soft and endearing tones. "I have you to thank for being so wonderful to me. I love you very much, my sweet mate, you endured it so well for me."

A thought having just occurred to her, she hurried to ask, "Are you happy?"

Overwhelmed by her earlier desolation and followed soon after by the fogginess of unparalleled and sinfully pleasurable sex, she had completely forgotten about finding the end to the story. With Jimin in *The Little Mermaid*, she fell through to the next story when he found his happiness; no matter the circumstances that befell her in the process.

Aeri had a theory in mind and she could only hope it to be true. If Namjoon found his happiness, perhaps it would bring *Red Riding Hood* to a close. She waited with bated breath as he hummed in thought as to the answer to her unexpected question.

After a moment, he said, "Perhaps. Though I'm not too sure yet."

His answer brought a sigh of disappointment to her lips. She felt for certain he'd be satisfied and filled with joy after consummating with his mate for three whole days throughout the duration of his rut, but her assumptions had been wrong. It seems she'd be stuck in this story for far longer than she had anticipated.
Three days had gone by since the events of Namjoon's rut and still, he refused to get her anything new to wear. After destroying her clothes in the heat of the moment, he realised, man or wolf, he much preferred her naked. And so there she sat, surrounded by the fur blankets, entirely bare with only the metal clasp around her ankle that kept her chained to the wall—Namjoon's new innovation in exchange for the collar around her neck—and a thin canvas to cover herself with.

"Namjoon . . ." she whined, staring at him as he stoked the flames of the fire, his back to her and ignoring her completely.

He knew what she was going to say whenever she used that tone. It was the same thing she had been asking for the past few days. She wanted new clothes.

"No," he said, not even bothering to look at her.

She huffed audibly before lowering her voice.

"This is very indecent."

"You were born without any form of concealment," Namjoon pointed out. "How is this any different? Besides, it is just the two of us here. You have nothing to be shameful for."

"But I am."

Her words gave him pause as he looked over his shoulder at her, lips turned downwards in a frown.

"You feel ashamed at being left uncovered?" he asked.

Aeri had to stop herself from gaping at him in incredulity. She wondered how much of him was a wolf and how much was a man. There were times when the lines blurred just as it did now. How could he not perceive she'd feel some form of shame sitting around unclothed as she was?

"Yes," she admitted.

She watched as Namjoon seemed to ponder over his thoughts, chewing on his bottom lip in concentration before he sighed.

"Do I make you uncomfortable when I am as such?" he questioned, gesturing towards his own state of undress.

This time, Aeri remained quiet, choosing to nod her head instead. Namjoon exhaled, grabbing the battered cloak that hung by the fireplace as he ripped it horizontally down the middle. He wrapped one portion around his waist while he draped the other over Aeri's shoulders, to her immense gratitude.

He moved closer to her as he started his routine of rubbing and nuzzling his face against hers; something she learned he did in affection when he wanted to scent her, or as a show of vulnerability.

He pulled away from her, resting his forehead against hers as his eyes remained shut. Another sigh escaped him as his hands ran down the length of her arms to entwine their fingers together.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You are not of my kind. You don't share in some of my views, and sometimes
it slips my mind. I did not mean to make you uncomfortable or feel ashamed, little lamb."

He allowed some distance to come between them as he smiled at her, his thumb lightly drawing circles on her hands.

"I will get you something to wear if it pleases you. But it will take some time. I would have to head down to the village and it is quite far from where we are . . . Will you be alright on your own?"

Aeri gave him a shrug, gritting her teeth to stop herself from wincing when he mentioned the village he had annihilated just a few weeks back. Of course, he'd have to get the clothes from there. Where else would he go? As far as Aeri knew, the village was the only settlement within the forest for miles in all directions.

"You'll be fine," Namjoon said, responding to his own query as though to reassure himself. "I will leave some food for you, and the chains are long enough for you to roam the entirety of the cave."

Speaking of which, her eyes travelled to the clasp around her ankle. Despite everything that had transpired between them, Aeri was still very much a prisoner.

"You don't have to keep me chained," she mumbled. "I promise I won't go anywhere."

"I'm sorry, my lamb. But I cannot trust you just yet. In time, perhaps I will, but for now . . . It puts my heart at ease when I know for certain you cannot run away from me."

And that was that.

It wasn't until two and half days later did Namjoon reappeared. He was in his wolf form, the creature tottering excitably into the cave with a rucksack clamped between his jaws. He left it by the cave's entrance and immediately made his way towards Aeri.

She missed him and that was the truth. She wasn't certain if it was due to her apparent feelings for him, or if it was because she had been left alone to dwell in the cave and had succumbed to desperation in her times of loneliness. Either way, she wrapped her arms around the wolf's neck, embracing the warmth and feel of his fur against her skin as he rested his head on her shoulder.

"I missed you," she found herself saying aloud.

Namjoon mewled, snuggling closer to her as a means to say he missed her too. They stayed that way, locked in each other's embrace, for a few more minutes until Aeri felt Namjoon stiffen in her hold. She frowned, releasing him when he started squirming in unease.

She watched in confusion as he started walking in circles around her seated form, sniffing every inch of her body.

"Namjoon . . . You're scaring me. What is it?"
Aeri's voice broke him from his trance as he took steps away from her, preparing to shift back to his human form. The minute he did, however, he was onto her again, enveloping her in a bone-crushing hug as he alternated between peppering her neck with kisses and giving her kitten licks.

The sudden sensation tickled her, laughter falling from her lips before she righted herself enough to grip him firmly on the shoulders and pry him away from her; an action which earned a whine of protest from him.

"Namjoon! What are you doing? Do I really smell that different?" she asked, thinking perhaps this was his new way of scenting her.

Namjoon could barely contain his bubbling excitement when he spoke next.

"You do. You smell different. But different in a good way."

"What do you mean?" Aeri asked.

"You're pregnant, little lamb! You're carrying my pups!"

The smile on her face seemed frozen in place upon hearing his exclamation. She was . . . pregnant? It was inevitable, of course. She knew that. But she didn't think it would be this soon. She'd heard tales of werewolf pregnancies back in the realm of the fairies and none of them was anything near comforting.

However, her distress and worry were lost on Namjoon who, once again, wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into the warmth of his hug. And rather unexpectedly, just as she thought she'd be plunged into the depths of her own fear, Namjoon said the words that would end up being her saviour.

"I'm so happy," he murmured to himself, eyes brimming with unexpected tears. "I'm so happy I found you and I can't believe I'm going to be a father soon. I won't be alone anymore. I'll finally have a family of my own. Thank you so much, little lamb. Thank you. This is the best day of my life."

As Aeri stared at the fireplace from over his shoulder, she saw the curvature of the words—The End—starting to form on the surface of the log closest to her. It lasted a mere second before the flames sputtered and crackled, releasing a waft of darkened smoke that seemed to engulf the cave in its entirety.

Aeri closed her eyes, coughing into her clenched hand as the suffocating smoke invaded her lungs.

And just like that, she was falling again.
Aeri blinked her eyes open, bright lights immediately invading her vision. She squinted, aware of the rush of air whooshing past her and feeling as though she was . . . falling? She always felt as though she was falling whenever she jumped stories. It was supposed to be normal, yet why did something feel off?

It took her a second to get accustomed to the brightness surrounding her, and another second for it to dawn on her that unlike the previous times she'd jumped stories, this time, she was actually falling.

The intrusive light that had woken her from her state of unconsciousness was coming from the brightness of the sky itself. The realisation caused her to flail her arms in panic, the action somehow twisting her so she was now staring at the fast approaching ground instead.

It did nothing to soothe her nerves, if anything, it only caused her to panic more. The further she fell—the closer she got to the ground—the more her body seemed to spiral out of control until she no longer had the capacity to focus on anything; the world through her eyes had become a bundle of fast-paced blurriness.

Crippled by her sudden loss of sight and her state of disorientation, Aeri squeezed her eyes shut and decided to leave everything in the hands of fate. After all, it wasn't as though she could actually do anything in such a situation. There was absolutely nothing she could do even if she wanted to.

And that was when she felt it—a penetrating force stabbing itself into the flesh of her arm as the piercing pain caused her to gasp aloud, her eyes blinking open once more. She turned towards the source of her alarm, eyes growing wide at the sight that greeted her—an arrow, jutting precariously from her upper arm, the end of which had embedded itself snugly in her bleeding flesh.

She felt her mouth falling open as a forced inhalation of air entered her lungs, right before she let loose the most worrying of screams; the sound immediately lost to her vast surroundings. A part of her knew she was being immensely dramatic, but she couldn't help thinking this was her end. She was either going to die from blood loss or fall to her imminent demise. Either way, death was what awaited her.

Wait.

She paused, a frown taking the place of her earlier panicked expression as a tinge of logic seeped its way into her mind.

Wait, wait, wait.

Who the fuck just shot her with an arrow? Who in the living hell was trying to kill her when she was already falling to her death?

Honestly—what kind of a twisted story did she, quite literally, fall into now? What kind of person would attempt to shoot down someone who was already about to die?

Aeri’s thoughts bordering on frustration was interrupted by the foreign sounds of boisterous cheering and loud, almost boyish, voices. Though she was alarmed at the sudden interruption, she was more concerned by the one fact it brought along with it—if the voices could reach her ears, it could only mean she was getting increasingly closer to the ground.
Pushing aside any questions as to who those voices belonged to and the reason behind their cheering, Aeri brought her arms up to shield her face—ignoring the pain the movement caused her—and braced herself for impact. She thought for certain she had reached her end; that she would feel the crack of her fragile bones as they ruptured upon hitting the ground; or the warmth of spilt blood gushing out of her cracked skull . . . But all that greeted her rather unexpectedly was the softness of support beneath her form and the hush of whispered words.

"What is that?"

"I thought it was a bird but that doesn't quite look like a bird, does it?"

"Is it dead?"

"It must be . . . Look at the arrow! It's been struck!"

"I don't think it's dead. It's moving! It must still be alive!"

"Should we kill it?"

The last whispered comment sent Aeri into high alert as she ripped her arms from her face, ready to confront the person with the audacity to speak of her apparent murder so freely whilst still in her presence. She was ready to let it be known that she was still very much alive and she wasn't an 'it' but rather a person; not to mention how odd it was these individuals had no idea she wasn't a bird.

But the minute her arms fell away from her face and her gaze met those of the person standing directly over her, a collective gasp resounded from the group who were apparently surrounding her fallen form. Aeri looked around at the shocked expressions gazing down on her, realising almost immediately that her initial assumption of hearing 'boyish voices' were true.

They were boys, none more than the age of twelve if she had to guess; and they were each holding onto a section of the net she was sitting on. It didn't take her much to piece together the obvious conclusion to her current situation. She had been shot down by an arrow and the boys had somehow managed to catch her and ease her fall. In not so many words, they had saved her life.

Although . . . She wasn't entirely certain if she should be grateful. They did, after all, question aloud if she should be killed.

"Who are you?" she asked the boy closest to her.

Another collective gasp resounded.

"It speaks!" someone from behind her exclaimed, and another one said with a dreamy sigh, "Let's not kill it. It's so pretty. I haven't seen anything like this before. Please, let's not kill it!"

They lowered her carefully to the ground and much to her alarm, they started inching closer to her, each with a hint of curiosity in their eyes. Someone to her left accidentally touched the arrow and she hissed in pain, the boys immediately putting some much-needed distance between them. They looked at each other in clear apprehension, curiosity now turning to worry.

"It's injured," someone pointed out.

"We should help it. If we don't, it'll die . . . We know whose arrow that is. And all his arrows are dipped in poison."

"I don't want it to die!" the same childlike and dreamy voice from earlier whined. "I want to keep
it! Do something!"

The eldest of the lot, the boy Aeri had first locked eyes with upon waking, shook his head and silenced the others with a raised hand.

"You know we're not allowed to do anything without his permission. Besides, it's his arrow. He was the one who shot it," he paused, hesitating. "We should bring it to him. And then he can decide what to do with it."

"No . . . ! He's mean! He'll kill it. I don't want it to die. I want to keep it!"

The elder boy's eyes widened as he reached forward and pressed a palm against the mouth of the child.

"Hush, Kip!" he admonished. "If he hears you . . . You're as good as dead too. Stop your incessant whining and help me. We have to get it to him."

The child, Kip, gulped, sending Aeri a pitiful look before he pouted. It was clear he was not in agreement with the decision but knew better than to retaliate in any way.

"Come," the boy said, helping Aeri to her feet. "You'll have to walk. I'm assuming you can anyway. We're not strong enough to carry you."

Aeri took a moment to survey him, this boy of twelve who was almost of her height, perhaps even an inch taller than her, who held her arm with a fierce tenacity in his grip.

"What's your name?" she dared herself to ask.

Though the boy kept his gaze forward, leading her into a dense forest with the group of younger children following closely behind, he answered her nonetheless.

"They call me Chan."

He paused, glancing at her.

"Do you have a name?"

"Aeri," she said, deciding it best to keep it brief.

Though the boys were evidently curious as to her sudden arrival, there was no mistaking the hints of fear they held in their gazes. They were frightened of her and she didn't need any more reason to scare them away; especially not with her rambling and panic-induced tendencies.

Besides, this was her third story. If she knew anything by now, it was the fact that staying calm and figuring things out as she went was the best way to progress. Although she had to admit, it was easier said than done.

"What are you?" Chan asked after a moment's silence.

"What?"

"What are you?" he repeated.

"What do you mean?" Aeri asked.

She looked down at herself, noticing for the first time that she was decked out in a simple white
nightgown with sleeves to the edge of her wrists and skirts that fell just slightly above her knees. Everything was intact with her as far as she was concerned—all limbs accounted for. Yet what did Chan mean when he asked what she was? There didn't seem to be any abnormalities about her that she could tell. She looked just as any normal human would.

"You are a person, just like us. But you're different," he said. "You look different. You don't look like a boy."

"That's because I'm not a boy. I'm a girl."

"A what?"

"A girl," Aeri said, though the confusion on his face did not falter.

"What's a . . . girl?"

He appeared to be genuinely confused, without an inkling as to what she was talking about. How could he not know what a girl—?

Aeri stopped her train of thoughts, turning to look over her shoulder at the group of boys behind them.

A blank expression settled itself onto Aeri's face. She was starting to get an idea as to where she had landed herself in this time. The nightgown, the arrow, the confused little boys? There was only one story that came to mind.

"Chan," she called out to the boy next to her. "Where am I? What is this place?"

Chan barely glanced at her before saying, "Neverland."

Aeri bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from groaning. She was right after all and she's just had the opportunity to meet the Lost Boys. It was no wonder they called her an 'it'. They've probably never met a girl before.

The fleeting thought caused her to frown and take pause.

"You've never met a girl before?" Aeri asked, redirecting their conversation back to its initial topic of discussion.

Chan shook his head.

"If that's what you are, then no. We've never met one of you before."

How could they have not met a girl before? If she remembered the story correctly, then . . .

"What about Wendy Darling? I'm sure you must have met her."

"Wendy?" Chan repeated the foreign name accompanied by another shake of his head. "I've never met this Wendy person you speak of. Is that another girl? Is she your friend? Is she here too?"

When Aeri failed to respond, struck dumb by the vast difference in this version of the tale compared to the one she knew, Chan continued to fill the void of silence between them.

"How could you come to Neverland with another of your kind, yet remain unaware as to whether or not they've made it safely here? That's irresponsible."
Aeri ignored his words, too preoccupied with her own thoughts to care about his opinions on her supposed sense of failed responsibility. She raked her mind, trying to make some sense of the version of the story she had fallen into.

In the tale, as she knew it, Wendy Darling and her younger brothers came to Neverland because of Peter Pan's shadow. If both Wendy and her brothers never made it to Neverland, that meant Peter Pan's shadow never ventured beyond the land and never appeared in their bedroom. But that didn't seem right either because the shadow was known to constantly cause havoc and mischievousness, and was always running around doing something of the sort.

Aeri turned to Chan, having remembered his words from earlier when he announced to the Lost Boys that she had been shot with his arrow and they should be taking her to him. The person they were referring to had to be Peter Pan.

"What about Peter Pan? Surely you can tell me something about him, can't you?"

Chan glanced at her with a frown on his face.

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "First, Wendy. Now, Peter Pan? Who are these strange creatures you speak of?"

Aeri stared at him with wide eyes and shock renewed.

"You don't know Peter Pan? He doesn't exist in this Neverland?" she asked.

"There is only one Neverland and there definitely isn't a person by the name of Peter Pan here. If there was, I would know. Everyone knows everyone on this island," Chan said with confidence.

To some degree, Peter Pan's lack of existence in this realm would somehow explain why Wendy and her brothers never appeared in the first place. After all, he was the only reason they discovered Neverland and ended up visiting the island. If he wasn't here, they had no reason to be either.

But wasn't Peter Pan the leader of the Lost Boys? He was the one they'd primarily take their orders from. If Peter Pan did not exist in this version of the story, then who in the world were they taking her to? Whose hands were her fate resting on?

"Chan . . ." she said, her voice suddenly grave. "Where are you taking me?"

"To meet our leader," the boy responded. "He makes all the decisions on Neverland and he'll do the same with you. Whether you live or die, it's up to him. He has the final say in everything."

"This leader of yours . . . What do you call him? What's his name?" Aeri asked, somehow afraid of the answer.

She knew the stories she landed in were often botched and altered in the most ghastly of ways, but at least she'd somehow know what to expect with Peter Pan. But this guy . . . This unknown leader of the Lost Boys . . . She had no idea who he was and had no reference whatsoever as to what he might be like, which only further escalated her state of anxiousness; her earlier stance of staying calm now long forgotten.

Chan pushed aside a branch that had fallen into their path before stepping out into the clearing of what looked to be a campsite. He glanced back at her, urging her forward as he pointed towards a man sitting by the burnt remains of a bonfire, too engrossed in sharpening the blade of his dagger to notice their arrival. The man was significantly older than the Lost Boys and seemed to be closer to her age than theirs, which was odd because Peter Pan was very much a boy just like the rest of
"That's our leader," Chan said, his voice breaking through her thoughts. "His name is Jungkook."

At the mention of his name, the man, Jungkook, glanced up, his piercing gaze almost immediately seeking hers and holding her captive. He stared at her for a full minute before he shifted his gaze towards the wound inflicted by his arrow, her pristine white nightgown stained red with her blood.

And then, he smiled.
the boy who wouldn't grow up (part 18)

Aeri stared at Jungkook's face, unable to tear her gaze away from his alarmingly handsome features. Though she was absolutely certain they were about the same age, there was something unmistakably childlike and mischievous about him she couldn't quite place.

She was, at the present moment, seated on the floor of his treehouse, her hands pulled painfully tight behind her and tied securely around the support pole. Upon seeing her enter the camp for the first time and noticing the familiar arrow jutting from her wounded flesh, Jungkook was immediately overcome with unexplainable ecstasy.

He silenced the curious murmurs of the Lost Boys, brusquely ordering Chan to bring her to his treehouse as he gave instructions for the others to disperse until they were called for. Once alone in his abode, however, Aeri began to realise there was something disturbing about him she could not comprehend.

He spent the entire time sitting across from her just staring at her with the same entranced look on his face. His gaze would occasionally shift to the bleeding wound and a glimmer of pure excitement would reflect in his eyes just before he seemed to remember himself and snapped out of it.

He did not say a word and Aeri did not feel particularly inclined to start a conversation either, especially with the weird vibe she was getting from him. Still, she couldn't help but feel uncomfortable at the way he was staring at her. It felt almost as though he was waiting in anticipation for something he knew was bound to happen.

Jungkook was the first to break the silence, his voice velvety and soft, filled with the tinges of excitement reflected in his eyes.

"Chan tells me your name is Aeri. Is that right?" he asked, inching ever closer to her.

"And you're Jungkook," she responded, causing his eyes to light up once more upon hearing his name falling from her lips.

"That's right," he grinned. "I'm Jungkook. And I'm the king of Neverland."

"The . . . king?" Aeri repeated. It was the first time she'd heard of such a thing and though it intrigued her, she wasn't entirely sure if it was something she wanted to delve into.

Jungkook hummed in agreement, his hand reaching forwards as he twirled a strand of her hair absentmindedly before tucking it carefully behind her ear; the tips of his fingers lingering longer than necessary on her skin. She felt the way he traced the outline of her jaw as he permitted his hand to fall away from her face with a heavy exhale. It alarmed her, the way he was acting as though she were a precious artefact, too fragile to touch yet too beautiful and enthralling for him not to.

"I control everything in Neverland. Not just the Lost Boys. You see . . . Neverland is an island that runs deep with magic," he explained, watching her closely with an unreadable expression on his face.

He brought his hand to her line of sight and curled his fingers inward into a clenched fist; when he opened them, a ray of glittering light, in the form of a butterfly, floated from his hand, hovering over his palm for a few seconds before it disappeared as it burst into tiny blue sparks.
Aeri felt her mouth fall slack at the sight of the beautiful display of magic. Of course, magic wasn't something uncommon to her. After all, she was a fairy and it was something her kind dappled in the majority of their life. But to be able to conjure something like that so easily and without visible effort... Jungkook had to be very powerful.

"Magic..." he murmured, taking her chin between his fingers as he tilted her head back to face him. "...that runs through my very veins. I fuel the magic in Neverland. I am Neverland. Without me, the island would cease to exist and so would everything on it."

He inched closer to her, his eyes an abyss of darkness as he said, "Including you."

Aeri shuddered at the intensity behind his voice. She yanked her head back and away from his touch, an uncomfortable look on her face. Something about him unsettled her immensely.

Jungkook ignored her small act of defiance, choosing instead to continue his narrative unperturbed.

"I know everything that happens on the island. I know everyone. No one comes and goes without my permission and knowledge, and yet..." he tilted his head as he scrutinised her through narrowed eyes. "And yet, you managed to fall straight into Neverland seemingly out of nowhere and without my permission. You caused havoc and confusion amongst my Lost Boys and you opened their eyes to the existence of girls, something I took great pains to erase from their memories when they came here."

Aeri couldn't help the expression of shock that crossed her features upon hearing his words. She was right—Jungkook was a powerful being of magic. To be able to mess with one's memories was difficult enough on its own, but to do it to an entire group of people? That was a whole new level of power she could only imagine.

"I can't help but wonder exactly how you managed to do that. Or a more accurate statement of my curiosity—what are you?"

There was a hint of a challenge in his voice, almost as though he knew the answer to his question and was daring her to lie to him when he was asking her so blatantly.

"Mind you," he continued. "I have an idea of what you are but let's give your honesty a go, shall we? How about it?"

"I..." Aeri said, frowning as she chewed on her bottom lip in nervousness.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she finally said, much to Jungkook's dismay.

He sighed heavily as he shook his head.

"I do so wish you would have been a little more honest with me," he said, shrugging nonchalantly. "You and I both know you're not human."

Aeri lifted her gaze to stare at him, her efforts at keeping a straight face falling through when she realised there was no way she could lie to him. Not when he had magic on his side. Powerful magic too.

"I am of magic... You didn't think I would be able to feel the presence of magic in another?" he asked, a chuckle escaping him. "How foolish of you. Besides..."

His gaze flickered to the wound on her arm that had been left untreated though the arrow had long been painstakingly removed by force.
"If you were a normal human girl, you’d be dead by now."

Aeri followed his gaze and settled hers on the splotch of red on the sleeve of her nightgown. Chan's words from earlier resonated in her mind and she shifted to glance at Jungkook.

"The arrow was poisoned," she murmured, more to herself than to him, but seeking his confirmation just as much.

"With the most lethal of poisons," he said, the corner of his lips turning up a fraction. "To humans, at least. But . . . Not to you. Not to those of magic."

Aeri gritted her teeth, lips set in a grim line as she thought over his words. This was Neverland, an island filled with magic. Unlike the other realms, this one was different. She was a being of magic, just like Jungkook. If magic was a norm in Neverland . . . Did that mean she was herself here? That he was right and she was, in fact, still a fairy?

"Have you finally decided to tell me the truth?" Jungkook enquired as to her sudden silence.

She flickered her gaze in his direction but said nothing. She could be honest with him, but a part of her refused to let it slip that she was a fairy. After all, she couldn't seem to rid herself of the discomfort Jungkook's presence seemed to bring upon her. He felt almost . . . evil, if she had to put a name to the growing feeling in her chest.

Jungkook sighed, hands trailing up the length of her arm.

"No matter," he said, leaning closer to her, his lips now brushing against the shell of her ear despite her best efforts of scooting away from him.

"I already know what you are, my fairy," he said, and Aeri swore she could almost feel the malicious grin as the words left his mouth.

She debated refuting his bold statement but was halted in her consideration when she heard the distinct sound of fabric ripping just as Jungkook pulled away from her. Aeri looked down in horror at the stained cloth in his hand and down to where he had torn her sleeve apart.

"What are you—" she ventured to ask but stopped herself midsentence.

She watched in horror as Jungkook's eyes fluttered shut almost in a trance. He brought the torn fabric up to his face where he inhaled the scent of her spilt blood, a shudder running through her at having to witness the scene firsthand. He licked his lips, eyes falling open as they focused their gaze on her terrified form.

"You smell divine," he said, voice having gone unnaturally hoarse. "I do so love the scent of a maiden's blood."

He lowered his arm, tossing the torn fabric aside.

"Neverland used to be the home of fairies. Did you know that? It's what attracted me here in the first place. I wanted to see them for myself because I've heard countless rumours about their beauty. But when I got here, they were all gone. Disappeared.

I stupidly stayed thinking they'd come back one day. But of course, that never happened, and Neverland started to waste away. By then, I had been on the island for years and couldn't bring myself to leave so I decided to sustain it with my magic . . . But that meant I could never leave the island. We were weaved and tied by strings of magic—the island and I."
Jungkook paused in his moment of reminiscence, chuckling to himself.

"That's why they call it Neverland. Because you never get to leave."

There was a hint of scorn to his tone, almost as though he was angry at the island itself for his current state of affairs. It was unjustifiable in Aeri's eyes. He was the one who made the decision to stay for his own selfish reasons. No one forced his hand, yet he had the audacity to feel such hatred and bitter anger towards an inanimate place like Neverland.

"It was fine at first, but the longer I stayed, the lonelier I became."

The confusion in Aeri's mind concerning this version of *The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* started dissipating the more he spoke. Before she could stop herself, she said, "The Lost Boys."

"The Lost Boys," Jungkook repeated with a small nod.

"You brought them here to keep you company."

"But they tend to get boring after a certain age so I let them go. They can't stay around forever if they're going to get old and boring," he shrugged.

"That's why they're so young. They're not... lost, you stole them from their homes," Aeri gasped. "You kidnapped them. You erase their memories of the existence of girls because boys that young tend to miss their mothers the most. You're... You're horrible!"

Jungkook smiled broadly, "And you're really smart."

Aeri was appalled at how indifferent he was to the seriousness of what he had done; what he was still doing.

"If you faced loneliness the way I did, you'll understand my desperation to do anything just to stop myself from ever feeling that way again," he said.

He reached forward once more, hands now pressed firmly against her cheek as he swiped his thumb lightly across her skin.

"I never thought for one second that after all these years, I'd finally be able to see a fairy with my own two eyes," he mumbled in a daze. "And the rumours were right. Fairies are beautiful, aren't they?"

He seemed distracted for a second just before his nose crinkled, eyes falling once more to the bleeding gash on her arm. He frowned.

"I may like blood, but I don't fancy it when it's blood from my injured little fairy."

He shifted, hands falling away as he moved to cover the wound with his palm.

"Allow me to fix that for you," he said, a sharp sting erupting from his hand as he shushed her, whispering words of comfort to keep her from crying aloud.

"You're fine. You'll be fine. Just give it a moment to heal."

When he pulled his hand away, at last, nothing remained of the injury save for the light smattering of blood on her skin.

"A pity," Jungkook sighed to himself, his fingers running over the dried red spots.
Aeri stared at him in conflict, having half a mind to thank him for healing her with his magic, yet extremely disturbed by his fascination with blood. Unfortunately for her, the latter won and she found herself asking with a slight cringe, "What are you—a vampire?"

Her sudden question brought about a melodious laugh from Jungkook, whose eyes had crinkled in the corners from the unexpected enquiry.

"Not in the least, my fairy," he said. "Lucky for you, it seems, or I would have devoured you whole."

His laughter died down as his expression resumed its state of blankness.

"No," he continued. "I'm not a vampire. There are other beings out there in the world with a penchant for blood and not all of them are creatures of the night."

"And you're one of them?" Aeri asked, gulping at the sudden drop in temperature. Was it just a figment of her imagination, or had it actually gotten much colder within the confines of his treehouse?

"A safe assumption, my fairy," was all he said before he stood and left her, ending their first meeting in a drastically abrupt manner.
the boy who wouldn't grow up (part 19)

Jungkook was an enigma Aeri couldn't seem to understand. After their first meeting, he syphoned her off to stay in one of the unoccupied huts on the lower grounds by the main campsite. Though she loosely used the term 'stay', it was more of a prison to her than anything else. He restricted her from seeing anyone and kept her mostly isolated.

At least, he tried to.

Just as much as Jungkook was an enigma to her, she was an enigma to the Lost Boys who often wandered over to her hut to converse with her or just to keep her company. They were blatantly ignoring Jungkook's orders of staying away from her but they didn't seem to care, their curiosity far outweighed their fear of the man.

Of the Lost Boys, Chan and Kip were the ones who seemed to spend the majority of their time with her and she soon grew accustomed to their presence. Chan, the oldest of the Lost Boys at the age of twelve, often questioned her and demanded she tells him of tales unheard. Whatever it may be, he wanted to know. He was thirsty for knowledge, and the opportunity to learn more from her was something too precious to pass up.

Kip, on the other hand, had intentions less complicated. At six years of age, he barely had a care in the world; his only concern in life was that of pursuing things he thought of as beautiful, Aeri being one of them. In fact, he rather fancied Aeri to be the most beautiful sight he had ever beheld. Times spent with Kip were those lost in comfortable silence, the young boy content with merely staring at her. There wasn't a need to fill the space between them with words and she didn't mind it either. It was a nice change from the workings of Chan's boundless curiosity.

One evening, as Aeri sat by the barred windows of the hut staring up at the sky, she heard the sounds of muffled conversation and slight shuffling before she was greeted by both Chan and Kip. It was the first they've both been to visit her at the same time and she had to admit, it was a nice change to their mundane routine.

"This is new," she commented when they neared enough so she didn't have to raise her voice.

"Jungkook isn't in camp today so we didn't have to sneak around," Chan said. "We figured we could both visit you and spend more time here instead of taking turns."

"Are you sure it's safe? I don't want either of you getting into trouble," she asked, frowning.

Kip gave her his signature childlike grin and a thumbs up.

"It's fine!" he reassured her. "He usually doesn't come back until really late. So we have the whole day to have fun!"

Chan gave Kip a weary look that bordered on annoyance before he shifted his gaze back to her. His brows were furrowed and the hesitance on his face was as clear as day.

"I've been meaning to ask . . ." he said. "Jungkook's kept you here for days now and yet, you seem unbothered by it. Aren't you afraid of what he might do to you? I don't wish to frighten you, but Jungkook isn't one to keep prisoners without reason. He either kills them or uses them to his benefit. Although . . . it's usually the former of the two."

In truth, of course, she was afraid. Not only was Jungkook evidently a being with the ability to
wield powerful magic, but he also seemed a little off; something Aeri still hadn't been able to place. At the same time, however, *The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* was the third story she had landed in and she was starting to see a trend—the characters weren't entirely stable; just like how the stories themselves are constantly fluctuating and deviating from the original plot.

At this point, as sad as it may seem, she was starting to get used to the instabilities present in the characters. Even so, she couldn't deny the fear she felt towards him. The only reason she seemed relaxed was because Jungkook had not visited her once since the start of her isolation.

Aeri wasn't afraid of the situation, she was afraid of the person who placed her there in the first place. She was afraid of Jungkook himself.

Speaking of, she ventured to ask—and in doing so had effectively avoided the question posed to her initially.

"Do you have any idea why I'm here? Considering how Jungkook hasn't killed me yet, I'm guessing he must have a use for me if he's keeping me alive. You wouldn't happen to know anything about it, would you?"

Chan and Kip shared a look between them before the former shook his head just as the latter's innocence begged him to nod in honesty.

"One of you is obviously not telling the truth," Aeri said.

Chan scowled, smacking the back of Kip's head as he mumbled incoherently beneath his breath about how useless he was when it came to lying.

"Come on, guys," she pleaded, faking a pout as she aimed her sadness at the weaker link—Kip. "I thought we were friends."

As expected, Kip's eyes grew wide and he nodded his head enthusiastically.

"We are!" the boy affirmed before turning to Chan. "Let's just tell her."

Chan frowned at him.

"You do realise I'm doing this to protect you, right? I'm leaving soon which means if anything goes wrong, if he finds out you were being a tattletale, the whole lot of you are the ones who'd have to face his wrath."

"Wait," Aeri interrupted. "You're leaving? Where are you going?"

"Everyone leaves Neverland when they turn twelve. Jungkook takes us home," Chan explained.

She briefly recalled Jungkook saying something about the Lost Boys not being much fun once they started to age. A part of her assumed Jungkook would've placed the boy on a boat and leave him adrift on the ocean surrounding the island, but if he actually took them back home to their families, it would seem he did have something of a heart in his chest, after all.

"Are you looking forward to it?" she asked. "Going home and meeting your family?"

Chan shrugged, a conflicted look on his face.

"I don't remember my life before Neverland. Before Jungkook and the Lost Boys. Neverland is my home and the Lost Boys are my family. I would rather stay here if given the chance but Jungkook
makes no exceptions. Once a Lost Boy turns twelve, he has to leave."

"I can't wait to leave," Kip said. "I want to know what's it like outside of Neverland. An adventure! It seems fun. I'm jealous, Chan."

Chan scoffed, "You're naïve. You'll turn twelve soon enough and when it's time for you to leave, I guarantee you're going to feel just as regretful as I do now."

"I won't!" Kip protested, the angry frown on his face smoothing out when he was momentarily distracted by a passing butterfly.

Seeing its bright yellow wings and the easy manner it flew through the air, however, pushed the boy's focus back on track as he smiled widely, turning to face Aeri with brimming excitement. He was practically bouncing on his feet when he asked, "Aeri, Aeri! Are you a fairy?"

The unexpected and sudden question took Aeri by surprise, stupefying her for a fraction before she snapped out it if only to ask the reason behind his enquiry.

"That's what we heard, Chan and I," Kip said.

"What do you mean?" Aeri asked, to which a heavy sigh of defeat left Chan's lips.

"We overheard Jungkook mumbling to himself about how he finally found a fairy and something about being able to put his plans into motion. We haven't stumbled upon anyone except for you and we assumed he must've been referring to you when he was talking about fairies. We're guessing he's keeping you alive because he needs you for whatever plan he's talking about."

When Aeri failed to say anything to the sudden bomber of an explanation, Chan started laughing nervously.

"But that's all nonsense, of course. I mean, you couldn't possibly be a fairy, could you? Aren't fairies supposed to be really, really tiny with like, shimmering wings or something?"

Aeri frowned, offended that he would stereotype fairies in such a rude manner. She had half the mind to school him on the difference in fairy race and element but decided to let it go, albeit with much difficulty. After all, there was no way she'd be able to do any of that without giving away the fact that she was actually a fairy.

Besides, he wasn't deliberately trying to be offensive. It was clear he was only trying to deviate their assumptions and attempting to brush it off as the result of an overactive mind. Either way, it wasn't something to dwell on. Aeri had far more important matters to think of. For one thing, what exactly was this plan Jungkook spoke of and why in the world would he require a fairy to get it done?

The thought was a million times more disconcerting and weighed heavy in her mind as compared to everything else currently occupying the space between her ears. She was about to ask more of them when a rustling of leaves interrupted the trio.

"Chan! Kip!" a hurried whisper rang out from beyond the bushes. It was one of the other Lost Boys. "You best scurry along from there. The scouts saw Jungkook on his way back to the campsite."

"Thanks," Chan responded, urging Kip along as the latter waved cheerfully at Aeri before disappearing into the same undergrowth the voice came from.
Turning to Aeri, Chan said with a hint of sadness lacing his tone, "I'm afraid this will be the last time we'll be seeing each other."

"You're leaving already?" Aeri asked, her tone matching his; an overflow of sorrow erupting within her.

They've only known each other for a short period of time, but she couldn't deny the safety and comfort of companionship she found with him. He was like a younger brother to her and she would miss him when he was gone.

"In three days' time. But there will be preparations that need to get done and I doubt I'll be able to sneak away," Chan said.

After a moment's pause, he reached between the bars and grabbed hold of Aeri's hands. He gave her a smile.

"Thank you for teaching me new things and sharing your stories with me in patience. I'm happy I was able to meet you. Take care of yourself and if possible, stay away from Jungkook."

He glanced over his shoulder with caution before lowering his voice and saying, "The others are too young to be aware of this, but Jungkook is not what he claims to be. He is dangerous and I wouldn't put it past him to hurt others without a care. I know you're a good person which is exactly why Jungkook's keen interest in you is worrying. Please, you have to take care of yourself."

Aeri was genuinely taken aback by the warmth and concern coming from the boy's words. His eyes reflected a similar sincerity as he gave their clasped hands a light squeeze before releasing them from his hold. He gave Aeri a determined nod and was gone in the next second, following in Kip's footsteps as he, too, disappeared into the undergrowth.

Left alone in the hut once more, Aeri was able to take a moment to reflect on the day's events. Two factors remained prominent and distinct in her mind—the fact that Jungkook seemed to have a plan for her, a reason he was keeping her alive, and Chan's warning concerning the man himself. The two only seemed to confirm her growing fear and suspicion of him and it wasn't doing her any favours whatsoever.

"I do so wonder what has gotten my fairy so worked up she has such a horrid frown on her face and a faraway look in her eyes," a voice close to her said, startling her as she jumped back in shock.

She whirled around, meeting Jungkook's eyes as a light smirk played on the corners of his lips.

"J-Jungkook," she stuttered, her heart hammering wildly in her chest. How long had he been standing in the confines of the hut without her realising?

"Why do you look so surprised?" he asked, taking steps closer to her as she back away from him. He paused, head tilted slightly before he faced her again. "And is that fear I smell? What are you so afraid of? Don't tell me... Are you scared of me?"

Aeri felt her back hit the wall behind her and almost immediately, Jungkook was upon her, his arm snaking its way around her waist as he hoisted her body close to his. He grinned, basking in the scent of absolute fear shrouding her in multiple folds.

"Don't worry," he said, his voice anything but comforting to her ears. "I'm not going to hurt you."

He paused, features darkening significantly before he added as an afterthought, "Unless you decide to go against my words. In that case... I wouldn't have a choice, would I? After all, a king should
be obeyed and if his subjects retaliate in any way, the only acceptable response would be to put them back in their place."

"You are not a king," Aeri said. "And I am not your subject."

"I am a king and you are my subject," Jungkook responded, unfazed by her blatant defiance. "I am the leader of everyone on Neverland and as long as you are here, you have to do as I say."

"Then let me go back to where I came from."

"And where is that? Somewhere the fairies reside, I presume? Tell me—how do we get there? I would love to meet more of your kind. I have been waiting for years, after all. This would be a lovely reward for my patience, wouldn't it?"

Aeri frowned. She felt immensely uncomfortable being in such close proximity to him; not to mention the smooth and calm manner he responded to her. She squirmed, somehow able to free herself from his hold but only because he decided to loosen his grip from around her.

"What do you want?" she asked instead, choosing to ignore his jibe concerning the place she called home.

"Nothing," he shrugged. "I just came to get you. But you looked too cute all riled up and scared, I couldn't resist having a little fun with you. Don't be too mad at me."

He tapped her lightly on the nose before leaning in and grabbing her firmly around the wrist, tugging her towards the door.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, his strength gave her little say in her decision of going along with him or otherwise.

"A clearing further back, just south of the campsite."

"Why?" she asked, slightly horrified as she stared at his back.

He paused, turning to look at her from over his shoulder just as the same annoying smirk found its way to his face.

"Because that's where we're going to have some real fun."
the boy who wouldn't grow up (part 20)

Jungkook's grip on her wrist had shifted, his hand now entwined painfully tight with hers as he pulled her along. She tripped a few times, trying to keep up to his strides as he continued to yank her forward without once looking back at her. She winced, aware of the bloodied state her knees were in, the short nightgown seemingly contributing to the now broken skin; having done absolutely nothing to protect her from her numerous falls.

At one point in their journey deep into the forest, Aeri felt Jungkook tightening his grip on her hand. She flinched at the sudden pain from the strength behind his hold, eyes immediately dropping to the veins running up the length of his arm. It was then she realised the cuts on her knees had worsened, the blood streaking down her legs and onto her bare feet.

She didn't feel much pain anymore though, numbness having thankfully set in. She tore her gaze away from the mess and focused on the back of Jungkook's head. She noticed—from the brief moment when he had tilted his head and exposed his profile—the way he was clenching his jaw almost as horribly as his hold on her hand.

He kept his silence, but Aeri knew his agitation had everything to do with her spilt blood. He hadn't looked at her once, but she was fairly certain it did not escape him. After all, the man seemed to have a sick affinity for blood. And hers was either making him uncomfortable or distracting him a little too much.

The continued silence stretched on between them and after another tedious few minutes of trekking, the thick foliage surrounding them finally gave way to open ground. The sight would have been a beautiful one to behold, if not for the thick mass of malodour that clung to it; enough of which to seemingly block out any form of positivity that dared to venture forth. The place felt heavy and not in the literal sense of the word. There was something sinister about it, something dark . . . Something almost like death, if Aeri had to force a comparison.

She peeked out from behind Jungkook, eyes immediately focusing on the massive stone table in the middle of the field. She felt bile rising to the back of her throat, fear suffocating her as she struggled to loosen Jungkook's grip on her hand. She tried to ignore the panic bubbling in the depths of her mind, but she couldn't seem to quell it. Not when she was a hundred per cent certain the dark splotches staining the table's surface was dried blood.

She didn't want to think it, her denial protecting her from a false sense of obliviousness, but even she could not deny the true purpose behind the table's existence. She knew what it was used for, and it sickened her to no end.

Jungkook's sudden laughter filled the void between them. She expected the sound to be a stark contrast to the melancholic atmosphere shrouding them, but to her horror, it blended right in—almost as though he was the very definition of dense desolation himself. He looked over his shoulder at her, her efforts at trying to break free doing nothing whatsoever to aid her; his grip remaining firm.

"Gosh," he said, laughter dying out along with the fast diminishing light in his eyes. "You really are scared, aren't you?"

"What are we doing here?" she asked, easing up on her struggles when it dawned on her she was only wasting her efforts. There was no way she'd break free as long as he didn't want her to.
"To have fun," Jungkook repeated.

He watched as Aeri's face twisted with fright, her gaze flitting over to the stone table once more. He smirked, the corners of his lips curving upwards in unbarred amusement. He stepped in front of her, blocking her view as he leaned closer to her. He brought their entwined hands up to his lips where he placed a chaste kiss to her knuckles.

"What a smart little fairy you are," he commented. "You know what that is, don't you? I can see it in your eyes . . . The fear. The dread. The overwhelming terror."

Aeri gulped, resisting the urge to fall back and let her fright consume her whole. Jungkook was right—she was scared. Very scared, in fact. She was frightened of him, of the whole situation . . . She was frightened for herself. In that split second, everything seemed to make sense to her. The power he wielded; the strength; the fascination with blood . . .

Jungkook wasn't a person. He was a being of immense power . . . He was the embodiment of the old gods; back when death and sacrificial murder was a norm. But as traditions died, so did they, with none to keep them alive through selfless devotion and blood sacrifices. Yet here was Jungkook, alive and well.

"The fairies that were here . . ." she mumbled distractedly as her gaze found his.

"Ah," Jungkook nodded. "Don't worry. That wasn't me. Although I wished it was."

He grunted, eyes rolling shut as he imagined the sweet taste of fairy blood cascading down his throat. The equivalent to the numbing and pure taste of power and sustenance.

He sighed, eyes opening once more.

"I came here looking for them, sure, but they really were gone by the time I arrived. Too bad, right?" he shrugged. "But at least now I've got you. My precious little fairy. And the Lost Boys as well."

"You're going to kill me," Aeri said with sudden vehemence.

That was the purpose of the stone table. It was crafted specifically for the use of sacrificial rites. He brought her there to kill her and consume her blood for his own selfish survival. That was the reason he visited the island in the first place. Blood was crucial to the survival of the old gods, but fairy blood? Fairy blood held magic and power that would extend their life longer than that of any human's.

"Of course, not," Jungkook refuted with a scoff. "You're the first fairy I've had the privilege of meeting in decades. I have no idea how you ended up here, much less how long I'd have to wait before another one of you falls from the sky. Let's be real for one second—I'd be stupid to kill you, wouldn't I?"

"Then, what are we doing here?" Aeri asked again.

"Oh?" he grinned at her. "I thought you'd know by now. After all, weren't you gossiping about me with Chan? What did he say? Something about me needing you for my grand plan, isn't that right?"

Aeri's eyes widened and a gasp fell from her lips. Jungkook hummed in glee at her reaction, his smile widening.

"What? You didn't think I'd find out? I told you, didn't I? I know everything that happens on the
island. Including all your little rendezvous sessions with my Lost Boys."

"But, no matter," he continued, brushing it off. "We're here for another reason, not to dwell on things that have passed. So--! Let's get on with it, shall we?"

His rhetorical question was left hanging in the air, barely waiting for her to fumble for a response or to trip over a pathetic protest as he started pulling her arm; practically dragging her to the middle of the field where the stone table stood in all its ominous glory. The closer they got to the table, the stronger the stench of blood. Aeri involuntarily gagged, feeling her stomach churn as she fought the urge to puke.

Jungkook, as usual, paid her struggles no mind. He stopped in front of the table, yanking her forward as she stumbled into the spot next to him. He untangled their fingers, moving to grip her by the wrist as he shoved her arm roughly atop the table, pressing it against the stone carvings with enough force to unintentionally outline her delicate skin with the markings present.

He waved his hand across its surface, a light shimmer gracing the tips of his fingers just as a golden chalice appeared at the behest of his quiet murmurs beneath his breath. Aeri felt her heart quickening upon seeing it... Seeing the evident stains of blood coating the inside of the chalice. A soft, almost inaudible whimper escaped her. And though the sound would otherwise have been lost to their surroundings, it was something Jungkook picked up easily enough.

He stopped, turning towards her with a neutral expression on his face. This time, however, it was clear Aeri's attention was on anything except him as her eyes stayed focus on the chalice set before her. She was too afraid, too fearful of meeting eyes with the monster himself. Jungkook sighed, his free hand moving to grasp her firmly by the chin.

"I'm not going to kill you," he said. "I just want to have a small taste, that's all. A little something to keep me going for a while. Surely, you can spare me just a tiny bit of your blood, my beautiful fairy?"

Aeri snapped her gaze in his direction, lips parting in shock as she shook her head.

"N-No," she managed weakly.

"I know I asked, but I don't really care what your answer is."

A look of mock sympathy crossed Jungkook's features as he released her from his hold. He opened his clenched fist, a small dagger materialising on the palm of his hand as he secured his grip firmly onto its hilt. He wasted no time, pulling her hand to position it over the waiting chalice as he mumbled words in a language she did not understand. His grip was stern and ironlike as he brought the dagger to her skin. His chanting became more desperate and impatient; voice muttering incoherent phrases and getting progressively louder.

Aeri felt the distinct cut of the blade against her flesh, a gurgled cry of pain leaving her as her eyes watched in horror at the way her blood was filling the chalice. Her mind swam with the intense loss of the substance—this was Jungkook's definition of having a small taste? The chalice was almost at its three-quarter mark.

She felt her knees buckle and give way beneath her as she slumped in a heap on the floor by Jungkook's feet. She cradled her injured hand to her chest, trying in desperation to apply enough pressure to stop the bleeding. But the minute she pressed the open wound, she felt nausea hitting her, her vision starting to go hazy. She blinked her eyes, grip going slack as she distractedly leaned her head against Jungkook's leg.
The man glanced down at her, an arrogant smirk adorning his features at the sight of her unintentional state of passiveness. He glanced at the chalice, the wonderful smell of her blood intoxicating to him. He grabbed it, bringing it to his lips as he downed the sinful liquid within. He was lost to its gratifying taste, his free hand grabbing fistfuls of her hair as he roughly caressed the top of her head.

It had been years since he last had a taste of a fairy's magic-imbued blood and he had almost forgotten how wonderful it tasted—akin to ecstasy flowing through his veins. He could almost feel the way her magic was coiling itself around his own, empowering him in ways he could only imagine.

Yes, this was true power in its rawest form and he loved it.

He crouched, hands moving to the back of her head as he watched her glazed eyes and unfocused demeanour. His gaze shifted to her parted lips, aware of how his own was still very much coated with the taste of her sweet blood. He glanced at her bleeding hand, moving to carefully lift it to his face as he inhaled the scent of freshly drawn blood.

"I was mean, wasn't I?" he asked, keeping his eyes locked on hers as he started lapping at the blood; tongue greedy for another taste of her.

He swallowed every form of reaction he managed to elicit from her at their slightest contact—her winces of pain, her whimpers, the way her eyes seemed to waver in uncertainty and fear.

"But what can I say?" he asked, unperturbed as he finally pulled away from her hand, blood dripping down the side of his lips and down his chin. "I'm selfish. But you . . ."

He clasped his hand firmly over the wound.

"You are divine," he whispered the word just as the same electrifying pain erupted from her hand.

She gasped and tried to yank away from his grip, though he held onto her with unrelenting strength. It was only when the sharp pain subsided and the throbbing eased, did he slacken his hold. Aeri, having recognised the pain to be one of his healing touches, knew without confirmation that the wound would no longer be there.

And she was right.

Still, she didn't feel good about the entire situation, the familiar feeling of dread settling itself in the pits of her stomach as she tried to scoot away from him. But Jungkook was quick to note her intentions as he moved to forcefully push her down onto her back, his hands on either side of her face as he hovered over her with a curious glint in his eyes.

Aeri fought the urge to shudder at the sight that greeted her. Jungkook looked absolutely terrifying—the way his eyes held no hints of emotion save for a touch of unexplained exultation as he stared down at her with her blood coating his lips.

He leaned forward and on instinct, she pressed herself against the ground, ignoring the pain of sharp pebbles biting into her back as she wished the very ground itself would open up and swallow her whole.

"You know . . ." Jungkook murmured. "I've always wondered what it would be like to kiss a fairy. The only thing I've ever done with them is to drain them of their blood."

Jungkook barely gave her time to consider the meaning behind his words before he was on her, lips
pressed against hers as his hand moved to envelop her cheek in its warmth. The kiss lasted a minute, though it felt like an eternity to her as disgust reflected on her face.

Jungkook stared at her, eyes crinkling in sheer joy as his grin seemed to light up his entire face. He glanced at the blood on her lips. *Her* blood from *his* lips that had stained hers red from when they shared a kiss.

She looked so beautiful like that and he wondered for a brief second if he could get her to try it too. If he could get her to drink *his* blood instead. The thought enthralled him, sending tingles of excitement through his body.

How wonderful would that be? They could get drunk on the electrifying taste of magic and power. . . *together*.
Aeri groaned; her head felt heavy with an invisible weight, confusion causing a throbbing pain to resonate within her skull. Her vision behind closed lids remained dark even as she willed her mind to bring forth the scenes of her last memory.

Bit by agonising bit, the fragmented pieces of what had transpired started forming a scene in her mind. She distinctively remembered being in the field with Jungkook . . . She remembered the sacrificial stone table, the chalice, the blade he used to slice open her skin, and the blood—the last thought bringing on a reflex as she gagged involuntarily.

She remembered the maniacal glint in Jungkook's eyes as he downed her blood; the red coating his lips in a hue she now wished to forget. She remembered the flash of hunger that traced his features as he forced those very same lips onto her own in a one-sided kiss. Still, he seemed oddly satisfied when he pulled away, a dreamy look on his face; his eyes focused solely on her lips.

She vaguely remembered him muttering words she could not comprehend beneath his breath as he caressed her cheek lightly with the tips of his fingers. She felt uncomfortable having to see the way his features softened the longer he stared at her, the dreamlike expression still etched firmly onto his features. She wasn't certain which offered her more distress—his unjustified boorish behaviour towards her, or his sudden lapse into something of gentle kindness.

Either way, his presence did not smoothen the discomfort churning within her. Instead, proving to worsen it to the point of nausea.

It wasn't until later when her struggles seemed to have snapped Jungkook out of his reverie did he realise the time he had spent just staring at her, getting lost in the beauty encapsulating her entire being. The fact, though alarming to Aeri, was an eyeopener to him. He realised for the first time in a long while, that there was someone besides the Lost Boys themselves whose presence he was able to tolerate. To sweeten the observation, the person was a fairy, and the thought became a lot more exhilarating just from that one simple fact.

"Let's go," Jungkook said rather suddenly as though inspiration had struck him.

He placed his hand over her eyes, and within seconds, her body seemed to relax, going limp as she lay beneath him with her consciousness lost at the touch of his magic.

That was where her recollection came to an abrupt halt. Another listless groan left her lips as she finally managed to pry her eyes open. Her surroundings appeared hazy, and it wasn't until after she had blinked several times did her vision cleared.

Looking around, she realised she had no idea where she was. The open field from which her memory recalled was nowhere in sight, leaving her to believe Jungkook had rendered her unconscious simply to get her here without having to deal with her struggles.

But where was here exactly?

Aeri looked around her in nervous curiosity, convinced Jungkook had deposited her in a cave; one that had an enormously high ceiling, with moonlight filtering in through an opening above. It cast eerie shadows upon the cave walls and even scarier reflections on the puddles of water scattered around the area. From a distance, Aeri could make out muffled sounds—the consistent dripping of water; the terrifying howl of wind passing through the caves; and . . . She frowned, straining to
listen carefully.

What was that sound? It came from somewhere further down. Somewhere deeper in the caves. She pondered over her contemplations for a minute or two before giving in to her curiosity. There was no way she was hearing the muffled voices of children this far out in the caves. As far as she was concerned, the Lost Boys spent the majority of their time on Neverland at Jungkook's campsite. And the Lost Boys were most definitely the only children on the island.

Well, at least they were according to the version of the story Aeri was familiar with. How far the difference went, she had no idea; which further fuelled her justification of seeking out the source of the distant voices.

She stood on careful feet, glancing down with another frown on her face when she noticed almost immediately the thick mass of rope that had been coiled securely around her ankle. What surprised her and increased her state of suspicion, however, wasn't the rope itself, but rather the destination of its end.

Where was she tethered to? Because unlike her initial assumption, the rope was not nailed to the wall or the floor of the cave. Instead, its length dragged all the way into the cave, disappearing past the bend where she was certain she'd heard the muted cries of young children.

She reached down, grabbing the rope with both hands as she began playing a lonely game of following the ribbon; precariously placing one foot in front of the other and venturing further into the depths of the cave.

The closer she got to the bend at the end of the cave, the louder the cries of sorrow. This time, Aeri was a hundred per cent positive she was hearing the wails of children. She feared for what her eyes would see just past the corner, but she had come too far to turn back now. She took a step forward. And another. And another.

And when she rounded the corner, at last, she felt her breath hitch at the sight before her. Her mouth falling open in shock as her hands went limp by her sides, the rope now lying forgotten on the ground by her feet. There, pushed against the farthest wall of the cave, were rows upon rows of cube-shaped cages, inside of which housed the very cause of the muffled cries—children. Actual living, breathing children.

All of them looked to be about four to six years of age, the majority with their cheeks stained with tears as they hiccuped and weakly rattled the bars of their cages. Aeri could hardly believe what she was seeing, much less comprehend the meaning behind her sudden discovery.

She couldn't stand looking at them any longer—feeling absolutely devastated at her inability to provide them with any form of help—and had to forcefully shift her gaze elsewhere. She closed her eyes, focusing on her breathing as she tried to numb the overwhelming shock washing over her.

Did Jungkook know about all of this? Whatever this is? She wasn't even sure if she wanted to know the deal behind the entrapped children. There was just something about seeing young children forcefully caged in such a manner that made her stomach churn with unease.

Aeri opened her eyes, her gaze immediately landing on the rope around her ankle. What was she thinking? Of course, Jungkook knew everything. He was the one who brought her here. He was the one responsible for the magic imbued rope keeping her captive. And he was definitely the one who kidnapped the children.

She traced the rope in question with her eyes and realised she never actually got to the end of it.
Her sudden distress upon seeing the children had rendered her immobile to her prior engagement which she now felt the urge to complete.

With newfound determination in her stride, Aeri steeled herself and picked up where she left off; forcing herself to tune out the incessant cries and pleas of the children whose cages she had to pass. A nagging feeling inside her remained stubbornly insistent—she absolutely had to find out what lied at the end of the rope. It was the only way to silence the increasingly annoying voice in the back of her mind either warning her of the possibility of incoming dangers or whispering its need to satisfy the raging curiosity.

Aeri soon found herself in another part of the cave, with only a small stream of light accommodating her vision as she squinted to try and make clear of what she was seeing. Similar to the scene from before, this part of the cave contained hundreds of stacked cages, though it was eerily quiet. It took Aeri a moment and a few hesitant steps forward to realise the cages were empty, their barred doors kept open to reveal nothing within them.

She exhaled, unaware that she had been holding her breath in fear. Thank goodness, for there were no more children kept in this part of the cave. From her peripheral vision, she caught a glimpse of the end of the rope, tied securely to the farthest cage at the very end of the row. She thought nothing of it as she made her way in its direction with full intentions of trying to free herself in some way.

She knelt, hands fumbling with the coarse material to no avail. Her intuitions were right. Jungkook had somehow enchanted the rope to keep her from running away. But in all honesty, what else was she expecting? She should have known he would've tried something like that if the brief glimpse of the craziness behind his gaze was anything to go by.

Aeri was about to fall back and leave when an arm shot out from within the darkness of the cage and clamped its hand firmly around her wrist. A blood-curdling scream left her lips at the sudden and unexpected assault, the sound bouncing off the walls of the cave in echoes as she tried desperately to yank her hand free. She heard shuffling from within the cage before a familiar face emerged from its depths and into the crack of light.

"Aeri, it's me," a voice croaked.

Aeri's eyes widened, her fear transitioning to surprise when she recognised the boy trapped inside the cage to which her rope was tethered to.

"Chan?" she whispered. The boy looked a mess—bruises lining the side of his face, cheeks hollow with dark circles under his eyes, and hints of blood coating his temples. How long had he been trapped there? What happened since the last time they saw each other?

"What are you doing here? Why are you in one of these cages? I mean, those children out there . . . What is this place? Wait, let me try get you out of there—"

"Aeri, stop," Chan said, grip tightening to emphasise his words. "Forget about me. You need to get out of here before Jungkook gets back."

"I . . ." her gaze drifted to the rope and a cloud of defeat descended upon her. "I can't. This rope . . . It's magic. I can't free myself."

Aeri turned an imploring gaze in his direction before continuing, "Chan, please. Tell me what happened to you. What is this place? Why are you here? What's going on?"
Chan released her from his hold as he retracted his arm and slumped against the side of the cage, head leaning between the bars as his eyes remained unfocused on the darkness surrounding him.

After a moment of brief silence, he said, "Remember when I told you we have to leave Neverland once we turn twelve?"

Aeri nodded her head, beginning to despise the uncomfortable feeling creeping up within her. She didn't like the conclusions her thoughts were jumping to although she had a strong feeling they'd be right.

"Apparently, leaving Neverland has a whole different meaning when it comes to Jungkook."

"Chan . . ." Aeri whispered, fear gripping her throat and causing her voice to soften. "What do you mean by that?"

"What he means," Jungkook interrupted as he stepped up from behind her.

She jolted in surprise, flinching when she felt his arms wrap around her torso, his chin now resting on her shoulder as he kissed the side of her neck.

"What he means . . ." he repeated, a little distracted this time. " . . . is that he'll be leaving in a more permanent sense of the word."

Ignoring her panicked squirming and the way she was repeatedly denying the insinuation of death behind his words, Jungkook reached forward and tilted her face to meet his; planting a firm kiss on her lips to shut her up.

When he pulled away, at last, he grinned almost childishly at her frozen expression.

"I'm so glad you managed to join us, my fairy. Since you're finally here, why don't you start by telling me what you think of this place—do you like it?"

Aeri turned a terrified gaze in Chan's direction and shook her head as a response to the question asked of her.

"J-Jungkook, you have to let Chan go. You can't lock him up like that. He's your friend, isn't he?" she implored. "A-And the children. You have to return them to their homes. It's not right what you're doing. You have to stop this."

"My friend?" Jungkook chortled sarcastically as he glared at the boy before spitting out his next words with venom lacing his tone. "Chan is no friend of mine if he warns you against me."

Jungkook waved his hand dismissively, the result of which caused Chan to lose his consciousness as his eyes rolled shut and he fell with a light thud onto the floor of the cage.

"And the children? Why should I return them when I've gone through such difficulty just to get them here in the first place? It's import and export, my fairy. Importing the new . . . And exporting the old."

"What do you mean?" Aeri asked, fearful of the confirmation he would give her.

"Oh, you know what I mean," Jungkook said, a malicious glint reflected in his eyes. "I'm thousands of years old, my dear. How do you think I remain looking this young?"

He raised an eyebrow at her when she remained muted to his question. He heaved an exhale, lifting
his hand and giving it a slight wave as the chalice materialised next to Chan's sleeping form. Aeri
watched in horror as Jungkook proceeded to mime a slicing motion in the air with his finger, a
similar cut appearing across Chan's neck as the boy started convulsing in his state of
unconsciousness before all was still.

The chalice, placed precariously by his now unmoving body, was in the perfect position to catch
every drop of the spilt blood. With another wave of his hand, the chalice disappeared and
reappeared once more. This time, in Jungkook's own hand, as he tilted its contents blissfully down
his throat with a satisfying hum of appreciation.

He tossed the chalice aside with an echoing clutter when he was done, wiping his bloodstained lips
with the back of his hand.

"Nothing like the fresh blood of children to keep you young forever," he said to her, not a hint of
remorse in his gaze after what he had done.

Frozen on the spot by a mix of fear and shock at the suddenness of what had transpired before her
very eyes, the only thing Aeri was capable of doing was giving voice to the one word that surfaced
in her mind as she stared at Jungkook's bloodied form.

"You . . ." she said. "You monster."
Aeri could not understand how or why it came to this—with her seated on the floor of the cave surrounded by the overwhelming smell of blood and the drained bodies of the captive children. She had cried and begged Jungkook to stop until she had no energy left, yet he ignored her, continuing with his rampage without signs of stopping. Not until he was satisfied and had his fill of blood at least.

Aeri noticed the way his eyes seemed to darken with each chalice of blood he downed; the way his grip on her seemed to tighten in its strength after the death of every child. It became obvious to her that the more sacrificial blood he drank, the stronger he became. And the stronger he became, the more difficult it was for her to escape his clutches.

She was trapped, and her nightmare was not ending any time soon.

Aeri gritted her teeth, eyes squeezed shut and hands pressed firmly against her ears as she tried to drown out the child's desperate pleas, aware by now that Jungkook was dragging his next victim in front of her. It had become a routine, a sick one, whereby he would make her watch as he drained the children's blood from their sliced necks and drink it in sustenance. He was trying to break her resolve and as shameful as it was to admit, he was doing a good job of it.

She couldn't do it anymore. Not after he had killed Chan without a second thought . . . Not after he had killed half the children in front of her following the murder of her friend.

The stench of iron was so overpowering, she was surprised she hadn't succumbed to her desperate need to empty her stomach of its contents. The things Jungkook was doing; the things he had done . . . It was vile, brutal and horrifying to a degree she could not comprehend. And yet, he continued as though it was something normal. For him, perhaps, but for her? It was immoral and anything but normal.

Despite pressing the heels of her hands firmly onto her ears, Aeri wasn't able to shut out the world entirely. She heard the child's gurgled cry, followed by the sound of the body hitting the ground and the clatter of the chalice soon after. She felt the thumping of Jungkook's footsteps making his way over to her just before she felt his stern grip on her arms, yanking her up to meet his strong gaze.

"Is the show not entertaining enough for you, my fairy, that you should feel compelled to hide like this?" he asked.

If Aeri thought him to look scary from afar, he was immensely frightening up close. The lower half of his face was stained red with blood; the liquid coating the front of his chest and all the way down the length of his arms. It was horrifying, and dare she admit, he was starting to reek of death itself.

"Please . . ." Aeri managed to force the words out. "Why are you doing this? I can't . . . I can't do this anymore, Jungkook. Please, stop."

"Why? I'm doing this for you," he chuckled, though the action did not reach his eyes.

"Doing this for . . . me? What are you talking about?"

"You should get used to this, dear. Do you see that?" he asked, making a sweeping motion towards the remaining children trapped behind bars. "They're for you. All of them. I'm making you watch
Aeri turned towards the children, eyes going wide and heart hammering in her chest as she dared herself to defy him, to shake her head in the negative.

"N-No," she said. "I . . . I don't want to kill them. I don't want to . . . To drink their blood."

The forced exhilaration on Jungkook's face morphed into a scowl as he wrapped his hand around her throat and gave it a warning squeeze, causing her to choke and erupt in fits of coughs. An action he conveniently ignored.

"Don't be fucking ungrateful," he snarled at her. "I went through the trouble of kidnapping all these children for you and you're telling me you're not even going to try?"

"I'm not like you," Aeri managed to gasp through the tightening grip around her throat.

The words struck him as offensive in some way and he didn't like it. The tone she used made him out to be—what was it she called him earlier?—a monster. And a monster was anything but what he thought himself to be. Jungkook released her from his hold, watching with unamused eyes as she seemed to curl into herself on the floor, breathing hard despite her attempts at calming herself.

"You're right," Jungkook admitted, nodding his head as he paced the short length in front of her. "You're not like me. In fact—"

He paused, turning to look at her with a ghost of a smirk playing on his lips.

"In fact, you're the exact opposite of me. How could I have conveniently forgotten that one important fact?" he continued, muttering to himself despite keeping his gaze fixed firmly on her. "You're a fairy; a being of good and pure magic. You don't get your power the same way I do. You just . . . have it."

He leaned forward, grabbing her chin harshly in his hand as he yanked her closer to him. She winced in obvious pain but forced her whimpers to silence.

"That's the reason you're so fucking weak. You need to get stronger. You need more magic, more power. You need to drink the blood made in sacrifice."

This, however, was a reaction Aeri could not suppress. She shook her head, lips turning down in a distinct frown and brows furrowed in desperation and fear.

"No, please," she sniffled, aware of how pathetic she sounded, yet uncaring of her view in his mind.

"Listen, my dear. You're just scared because you haven't done it before and you haven't tasted what true power is like. Once you've had your first taste of dark magic, trust me, you'll be begging me for more and that's when we can start having some fun. For now, though, I just need you to get over this hurdle of your first taste. Don't worry, my fairy, I'll help you."

Jungkook shoved her away from him, standing with his hands on his hips as he stared at her. He licked his lips, eyes straying to the numerous dead bodies surrounding them before shifting towards the rows upon rows of half-occupied cages lining the cave walls.

He crossed his arms over his chest, fingers tapping incessantly against his arm as he surveyed the numerous faces of his captives. They were all fast asleep—Jungkook's magic being the cause of their state of unconsciousness after their prolonged crying had driven him close to frustration—yet
the fear they felt prior to their forced unconsciousness still managed to reflect upon their faces.

Aeri watched as he stalked over to the closest occupied cage, pulling it open with enough force to leave the door hanging on its hinges. He grabbed the wrist of the child inside, not caring in the least as he started dragging her behind him before dumping her carelessly in front of the frightened fairy.

"Here," he said, nudging his head in the child's direction. "Your first try."

"S-She's a child, Jungkook. I can't kill her," Aeri insisted, inching away and putting more distance between them.

"You can't kill her?" he repeated, grabbing the girl by fistfuls of her hair as he yanked her up.

"Fine," he snarled. "Then I will."

Before Aeri could protest, he dragged his hand across the young girl's throat, slicing the skin in the process and drawing out the blood he so desired. He dropped her without care when he was done, crossing over her dead body as he brought the blood-filled chalice to meet Aeri's shocked gaze.

"Drink," he ordered, his eyes dark and unrelenting.

Aeri shook her head, whimpering as she struggled to drag herself away from him. Jungkook exhaled, trying his best to rein in his temper despite the unbearable urge to lash out on her. She was testing his patience at every turn and he was starting to lose what little grip he had on his already dwindling sanity at this point.

"I won't ask you again, Aeri. Drink," he repeated, easily closing the distance between them in two short strides.

When she refused yet again, a soft mumbled 'no' falling from her lips, Jungkook wasted no time in shoving her forcefully to the ground. His sudden and unexpected action took her by surprise, the blood inside the chalice spilling over the edge and onto her face. She gagged at the unbearable stench of iron penetrating her nostrils but she soon came to the realisation that it was the least of her worries when she locked eyes with an extremely furious Jungkook.

"Look at what you've done!" he yelled, eyes widened in horror at the precious red staining her face. He shifted his gaze to the chalice still in his grasp, aware of how the blood within barely reached the halfway mark.

"How much more ungrateful can you be!" he fumed.

Aeri could only stare at him as the threads of his composure started slipping. A part of her wanted very much to yell at him that the spilt blood was his fault. He was the one who pushed her to the ground in the first place and it had nothing to do with her. But she knew he would see it in any other way than the manner presented to him.

He would see her defence as defiance and use it against her in some way. In his eyes, she made him push her, and as a result, it was her fault the blood was spilt. Pressing her lips into a thin line, Aeri gritted her teeth as she glared at him. Never in her life did she harbour such intense hatred for an individual as she did for Jungkook at that very moment.

Jungkook, having caught onto the burning resistance in Aeri's gaze, wanted nothing more than to break her and crush what little strength she had left to stand up to him. He eyed what remained of the blood in the chalice, an eerie smirk finding its way to his face as he placed a careful hand on her
cheek.

She flinched when she felt his thumb rubbing across her skin . . . She felt him inch his fingers
down the length of her face before moving to squeeze her jaw. She knew what he was doing—what
he wanted her to do—and despite the pain, she kept her mouth shut. She was not giving into him
that easily.

"Aeri," Jungkook said her name in a deep grunt of clear annoyance, the threat lacing his tone
becoming obvious to her.

When it dawned on him that she was not, in fact, going to cooperate, he huffed, shaking his head at
her pathetic stunt. Did she really think she was any good against him? Did she think she had the
will, or even the power, to resist him? Who was she trying to kid?

Jungkook tightened his grip on her face, this time pushing his thumb forcefully between her lips to
pry her mouth open. To her horror, despite her attempts at biting down on his thumb, he seemed
entirely unfazed; his only focus was to keep her mouth open long enough to force the liquid down
her throat.

And that, he did.

Aeri gagged at the repugnant taste of iron flooding the insides of her mouth the second Jungkook
tipped the contents of the chalice past her lips. She forced herself to keep her throat stoppered,
refusing to swallow the blood despite the atrocious scent and taste clinging to her in thick masses.

Realising the intent behind her actions, Jungkook pulled his thumb free from her mouth before
clamping her jaw shut, pressing his palms firmly against the lower half of her face. Pure insanity
flashed in his eyes as he gazed down at her, his irises turning a horrid black and his face portraying
a mask without a hint of emotion.

"I will suffocate the living hell out of you unless you do as I ask, and swallow the blood," he said.

Unable to breathe and with panic inching closer to the edges of her consciousness, Aeri did the one
thing she said she would never do; she gave into him and downed the blood. The second she felt
the warm liquid slid down her throat, anguish crossed her features, signalling to her captor that he
had won.

Jungkook lifted his hands from her face, allowing her a moment to breathe as she hacked and
coughed at the repulsive taste of blood now sticking to her like glue. She hated it. She
absolutely loathed it. It felt as though she had blood engulfing her in its wake both internally and
externally and it sickened her.

Everywhere she looked, her eyes only saw red.

The floor.

The dead bodies.

Jungkook.

Her.

 Everywhere.

Everyone.
Everything was just *red with blood*.

And nothing creeped her out more than the sight of Jungkook leaning over her, his bloodstained lips curling into a proud smile as he wiped the bit of blood that had dribbled down her chin. She watched in horror as he brought his thumb up to his mouth and licked it clean of the blood from her face.

She felt bile rising up in her throat, forcing her to close her eyes, and willing herself to keep it down. Jungkook was still straddling her and keeping her immobile. She did not think puking her guts out now of all times would be a good idea. Being surrounded by blood was bad enough, but blood *and* puke? It was not ideal in the least.

When she opened her eyes, at last, she realised almost immediately that Jungkook was still staring at her as he had been for the last few minutes. The smile from earlier was gone, replaced by a trance-like expression.

Almost in a daze, she heard him murmuring to himself, "*Beautiful.*"

He leaned down further, this time, dragging his tongue across the side of her face and catching the spilt blood from earlier, savouring in its divine taste and aroma. He exhaled in satisfaction before moving to kiss her, his hands grabbing her face as he manoeuvred her to his liking.

When he pulled away, he couldn't stop himself from grinning at the mess they were in—both covered entirely in the sacrificial blood of the children he had kidnapped; the lingering taste of the blood they had consumed intermingling by the force of their shared kiss.

It was beautiful.

*She* was beautiful.

And this . . . This was the start of their beautiful relationship as Jungkook saw it.
Aeri felt sick. No—sick was an understatement. She felt absolutely horrible. She gritted her teeth when she felt her stomach churn, the familiar feeling of bile rising in the back of her throat causing her to wince. It had been days since her arrival at the caves, and Jungkook had yet to give up his initial pursuit. She'd had nothing but the sacrificial blood of young children forced down her throat for the entirety of her time trapped there.

Her determination to hold in her need to puke hardly held out after the second child was brought before her. This time, she couldn't care less; retching onto the floor next to her, much to Jungkook's disgust although it did nothing to deter him in his quest. It did, however, gave him cause to lift himself off her, dragging her to another part of the cave less contaminated by blood and vomit.

He was willing to overlook the first puking incident, but with each child killed, each chalice of blood forced past her lips, and each gag that transitioned into inevitable vomiting, Jungkook could no longer hide his increasing frustration. Though he refused to outwardly admit it, there was no denying the fairy's obvious ungratefulness towards his efforts at having her relish in the taste of pure power.

If she kept forcing out the blood before it settled, how was she to understand the power that was to be obtained from it? How was she to understand him?

Jungkook paced the floor in front of her in agitation, raking his hand through his hair repeatedly as he gnawed on his bottom lip. His attention shifted towards her, and though his anger was prominent, he couldn't stop his gaze from softening at the sight of her. She was sprawled flat on her back, eyes hollow as she stared blankly at the ceiling. Her clothes and exposed skin was a mess of collective bloodstains; some still fresh while others had turned a rusty shade of brown.

Her breathing was just as haggard as her appearance; reduced to nothing but mere skin and bones as would be the case if one were to go full days on a diet consisting only of blood. The last observation confused him the most. It went against his thinking and made him hesitate. Jungkook, a being of the old gods, was able to survive solely on the sacrificial blood of others. Sure, food was somewhat essential to his human form, but it wasn't exactly a necessity.

But seeing Aeri as she was now—struggling just to breathe and appearing as thin as paper, it dawned on him just how different they were. She was telling the truth after all. She wasn't like him. She couldn't be like him even if she tried—even if he desperately wanted her to—because they weren't the same. A being of pure magic such as herself could never in a million years survive on sacrificial blood alone. Blood was crucial to his survival, but it wasn't to hers at all.

Her power had nothing to do with blood and it didn't matter the number of children he sacrificed for her, she'd never feel the same rush coursing through her veins the way he did at the same prospect.

Even so, Jungkook was in a dilemma. He was in denial as to the state of affairs despite affirming the logic behind their current situation. He turned away from her, shifting his attention to the rows of empty cages . . . save for the one in the furthest corner. There was only one child remaining of the hundreds he had kidnapped.

He glanced back at his fairy and a split decision was made in the few seconds it took for her to lock eyes with him. He was going to give it one last try. A part of him somewhat knew the children's blood would do her no good. Still, he was determined to give it another go. Of course,
he'd have to get over the hurdle of her body's rejection to the liquid, but he figured that was something easily achieved with time. And time was a factor Jungkook definitely had a lot of.

Feeling rather sympathetic, Jungkook decided to spare Aeri the distress of having to see another child murdered in front of her. This time, he did not bother to drag the boy out of the cage, merely killing him where he lay. He brought the blood-filled chalice back to Aeri, who, upon seeing it, started whimpering and shaking her head, the blank expression on her face now replaced with genuine fear.

Jungkook kneeled next to her, carefully placing the chalice by his feet as he proceeded to shush her. He gently caressed her, pushing her hair back from her face as he placed a gentle kiss upon her forehead.

"It's okay," he whispered against the pallor of her skin. "You're okay, my fairy. Just one more, alright? One more and we're done. I promise."

"No . . ." Aeri whined, clamping her mouth shut and reeling from his touch.

"Come on, don't start being difficult now. This is the last one. No more blood after this, okay? I promise. But you have to make it count. You have to keep it in, alright? No matter what, don't let your stomach push it out of you. Can you do that for me?"

Jungkook watched in apprehension as her gaze shifted from his face to the chalice now in his hand before turning back towards him again.

"T-The last one?" she murmured, seeking confirmation of the fact.

He nodded, giving her an encouraging smile. Though Aeri would rather do anything than down another cup full of blood, she knew it was something Jungkook would not negotiate on. If he wanted her to drink it, the decision was final and she'd have to do it; whether she was forced to or otherwise.

In truth, she was tired. Being forced to drink blood and having your body reject it continuously would exhaust even the most physically fit, let alone someone like her. If drinking this last chalice meant he would finally, finally, permit her to rest, she'd take her chances.

"O-Okay," she managed to mumble, already regretting her decision when her words were met by Jungkook's dazzling smile.

"That's my beautiful fairy," he said, scooting closer to her.

Aeri couldn't help but wince and wrinkle her nose in disgust when the nauseatingly familiar scent of blood wafted from the chalice. She gritted her teeth, willing herself to get it over and done with just as Jungkook brought its rim to her lips.

Although she promised she'd try her best to do as he wanted, the minute she tasted the first hint of iron, she felt herself coming undone. Her resolve flew right out the window and it was as though her body was acting on pure impulse. She barely took a sip before she was pushing his hands away and turning her face from the chalice.

She gagged, having to press her hands down on her mouth to keep herself from vomiting once more. She didn't know what was worse at this point—the burning taste of bile rushing up the length of her throat, or the thick consistency of blood going down it. She could feel tears prickling her eyes as she turned to look at Jungkook, aware of the anger radiating off him in waves.
"I thought you said this was okay," he said, not bothering to hide the accusatory tone behind his voice, as though it was her fault her body could no longer withstand the sense of biliousness brought on by the mere hint of blood.

When Aeri failed to respond to his words, Jungkook heaved a heavy exhale. He frowned, eyes shifting between her weary form and the untouched blood lining the inside of the chalice. He clenched his jaw, a decision made; she absolutely had to finish the entire chalice.

"We made a promise, didn't we?" he asked, altering his tone to keep it even and no longer accusatory. "Finish this last full chalice, and you won't have to drink any more blood. But you have to keep it down, remember? No more vomiting. If you don't keep your end of the promise, you'll have to endure more—more children; more deaths; more blood. Is that what you want?"

Aeri's eyes widened, her hands dropping from her face as she shook her head vehemently. Just the thought of having to go through the torture all over again had her stomach churning . . . She reached forward, daring herself to place her hand on Jungkook's, much to his surprise.

In a soft voice, she pleaded for him to see the rationality behind her reason.

"I'm trying . . . You have to believe me. But I can't anymore," she murmured. "Please, Jungkook. I'll do anything. Just please don't make me drink it again."

Jungkook frowned, his agitation at her apparent ungratefulness clouding his judgements. He chewed on the inside of his cheek, eyes straying from her pleading face to the chalice still in his hand. He felt his breathing escalate, his grip around the chalice turning his knuckles a deathly white. When he looked at Aeri a second time, she noticed almost immediately the way his eyes had gone back to its state of pitch black, no hint of emotion or sympathy within its depths.

"You'll do anything?" he repeated, to which she nodded her head, inching closer to him as a sign of the seriousness behind her words.

"Good," Jungkook said, lips tilting in a malicious smile. "Then I want you to drink this blood. And if you can't, I'll make you."

Aeri reeled at the sudden ferocity in his tone. She tried moving away from him but was held back by the rough grip of his hand at the back of her head, his fingers entangling itself with fistfuls of her hair. He pulled her head back, forcing the edge of the chalice to her lips as he tilted the blood into her mouth. She spluttered and choked at the intrusive liquid, but a firm grip from Jungkook's hand was enough of a warning for her to mellow down.

She was aware of the warm tears streaking down her cheeks as her hands grappled to find purchase on Jungkook's arm. With each mouthful of blood forced down her throat, the urge to regurgitate grew ever stronger. She thought her torture would never end—that this forced torment would carry on for hours still—and was wholly surprised when the last of the blood was tipped into her mouth.

She heard the distinct sound of the chalice clattering to the floor as Jungkook grinned at her, the same hints of insanity still reflected in his eyes. He relished at the sight of her covered in the blood he spilt—her lips and chin stained with the red of sin. He drew his thumb across the hints of blood, bringing it up to his lips to lick it clean.

His tongue traced the length of his lips, his eyes locked on hers as he tilted his head; seemingly fascinated by the crystalline tears clouding her vision.

"Why are you crying, my fairy?" he asked, voice alarmingly guttural. "Did you not like the blood?"
I thought it was rather tasty if I do say so myself. But, of course, yours would taste so much better.”

When his words seemed to bring about a fresh slew of tears from her, his childish demeanour vanished, the grip on the back of her head yanking her closer to him as a whimper of protest left her lips.

"See? You're doing so well, aren't you? All you needed was a little push and a bit of rough encouragement and all causes of your need to puke is lost."

He paused, the meaning behind his words hitting home as a spiteful grin overtook his features.

"I've changed my mind. You're not done yet," he said.

Aeri shook her head, ignoring the pain erupting from her scalp at her actions, the word 'no' repeating on a loop as she begged and cried for him to stop. She couldn't take it anymore. She physically could not handle any more blood being forced down her throat.

"Jungkook, please! Please, don't do this. I'm not like you. I won't gain power and strength from drinking blood. Please, don't do this to me. I'm begging you!"

Ignoring her cries, Jungkook pulled her to her feet, shifting his grip from her hair to her arm as he started dragging her out the cave. She stumbled enough times to garner his irritation, causing him to stop in his strides, moving to throw her over his shoulder.

"J-Jungkook," Aeri hiccuped, grabbing onto the back of his shirt for support despite the awkward position she was in. "Where are we going?"

She heard him chuckle at her innocent question, though it sounded anything but heartfelt.

"The caves aren't the only place on Neverland with children," he said.

"No . . ." Aeri gasped, her fisted hands releasing the fabric of his shirt only for her to hit him repeatedly on the back in an attempt to stop him.

Her actions—as was everything else concerning Jungkook—proved to be futile as her desperation and fear only seemed to fuel his amusement of the current situation.

"That's right, my fairy," he mused. "We're going to pay the Lost Boys a visit."

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