Philocalist

by writingblankspaces

Summary

Joonmyun loves pretty things and hates to see them in difficult situations. This is how his large harem was born.

Notes

This is inspired by Ohsh-it's artwork of Kai, as well as her short description of a Harem AU. This will be a multi-chaptered fic.
Saving Grace (Part 1)

It was hard not to stare at the young looking man walked around the market, buying things here or there. His skin was bright and pale, absent of any visual flaws as far as anyone could tell.

His voice was deep, especially when held in contrast to his sweet face. It reminded onlookers that he was in fact male. The companion that accompanied him would let out an indignant snort each time he spoke because he could tell the other was putting on a show.

Ever since they were children, Luhan always felt the need to express his masculinity. As they walked away from the last stall, Kris leaned closer and muttered in a voice only Luhan could hear.

“You know you don’t have to deepen your voice like that? It’s probably not good for your throat,” Luhan scoffed in response and tossed his long hair in the taller man’s face.

Their walk back to the house was uneventful, and Kris noticed that Luhan took his time. “You have an appointment in a bit, we should hurry,” Luhan nodded, and they moved quicker.

Chilhyun, the current master of the house, met them at the door and grabbed Luhan by the shoulder. “How many times have I told you to run your errands earlier? Your customer came earlier than their appointment, so prepare yourself and go to him. Stupid whore,” the man spat the last words and let Luhan go after pushing him towards the bathroom. Kris watched the scene in anger and gave Luhan a sympathetic glance when the man shot him one of annoyance.

“Kris, why did you allow him to go when you knew he needed to be here and ready?” Kris mumbled something about forgetting and Chilhyun sighed. “Dumb, just like your mother,” Kris avoided his gaze but the man did not strike him. He knew it was because the man had long since realized that Kris was much larger than him and could probably hurt him. He was no longer the small child the older man had slapped around, not that Chilhyun would ever admit it.

“I heard you were early, were you that eager to see me, Prince?” Joonmyun looked up from his book and grinned when Luhan sauntered into the room. The intoxicating smell of roses wafted through the cold air of the room and flooded Joonmyun’s senses filling him with anticipation.

Luhan’s soft hands touched his shoulders and smooth lips pressed against his cheek.

“Of course I did, you told me that you had a surprise for me the next time I visited,” Luhan’s grin spread and he lowered himself onto Joonmyun’s lap. The soft fabric brushed his arm as his hand smoothed down Luhan’s revealed thigh.

Kris stood in the corner of the room, silent as he watched Luhan giggle and whisper in Joonmyun’s ear, slowly slithering out his clothes until he was naked in the still fully clothed man’s lap. “From what I understand, it’s your birthday today,” Joonmyun hummed, and Luhan continued “and I thought I’d give you extra special service.” A slender hand gripped Joonmyun’s dick through his pants and stroked him.

Joonmyun mapped soft kisses onto Luhan’s pale skin as Luhan rocked back and forth in his lap, the thinner man quivering and moaning each time Joonmyun slid deeper into him. Every sound of
passion sounded more genuine than the last, Kris being able to tell from how the man gripped Joonmyun’s biceps and leaned his head back, the groans coming from deep in his throat.

When they finished and Luhan helped clean Joonmyun off, Kris escorted the man out the house and alerted Chilhyun. The man looked up from counting money and waved him off, apparently still angry with Luhan for making Joonmyun wait.

Kris retreated to Luhan’s room and stripped the sheets, taking them to the maid. Soojung took them quickly and disappeared down the hall, all in silence. Kris watched her leave then went to the bathing room where Luhan had just finished washing his body.

He’d been in the middle of washing his hair when Kris rolled up his sleeves and threaded his fingers through Luhan’s long hair, kneading deep into his scalp. He leaned back into the touch and his body visibly relaxed. “He loves you,” Kris sighed after Luhan had dunked his head to wash the soap out. Luhan nodded and held his hand out for the towel in Kris’ hands.

He patted his head then rose from the large bath and wrapped the same towel around his waist as he stepped out.

“I know.”

Kris hadn’t expected a response, so when the whispered answer came, he was surprised. Rather than the usual unbothered answer he was expecting, the words that crossed the man’s lips sounded full of knowledge and acceptance.

After that, they didn’t exchange further words and silently retreated to their individual rooms. They’d spoken about Joonmyun so much that at that point it would’ve been like beating a dead horse.

Kris’ mother had been one of the most famous courtesans in the city and despite all the popularity and attention, she always held Chilhyun’s father in high regards. It was too much to say that she loved him, but it was something akin to it. As a result, Kris was conceived and when she died in childbirth, his father was devastated and set to raise Kris as his own despite his wife’s wishes.

When Kris approached his seventh year, a young boy in his eighth year was left on the doorstep, and Chilhyun and Kris’ father took him in, unsure of what else to do. His wife insisted that he let her keep him as a servant and he did for a while. As a result, Luhan lived in the main house with Kris, and they grew close and became best friends.

Seeing as how Kris was physical proof of her husband’s infidelity, his father’s wife never failed to treat him like shit. When she saw that Luhan had gotten close to him, he began to receive the same treatment. Things got worse when Kris and Chilhyun’s father died suddenly and left his wife to run the courtesan house. Kris and Luhan had been in their 15th and 16th years, respectively, when things took a turn for the worse.

Instead of living in the main house, both boys were relegated to the entertainment quarters. At first, she only made them help clean and entertain the courtesans.

On the eve of Luhan’s 17th year, the woman sent Kris off on an errand under the pretense that he was allowed to buy Luhan a gift. The suggestion had come off as strange in his young mind, but so happy to be given money in order to treat his friend, he set off to find a present. In the meantime, the woman sold Luhan off to a man for the night and by the time Kris came back with a beautifully
wrapped anklet, the man was on his way out.

When Kris saw him, he suspected something and hurried to his and Luhan’s shared room. His heart slammed against his ribcage when he saw what he’d feared. Luhan was curled up, naked, amidst soiled sheets, his body racking in sobs. Kris cast everything aside and immediately ran over to Luhan, demanding that he tell him what’d happened. The older boy’s voice was thick was shame and terror as he recounted what the man had done to him.

“He told me he paid for me before he,” Luhan paused and swallowed the lump in his throat. Kris shook his head, silently telling him that he didn’t need to finish. That was the first time that Kris and Luhan slept in the same bed since their childhood.

The next morning Kris dragged Luhan to the large bathroom and proceeded to scrub him clean, removing traces of the previous night from his skin. Once he was cleaned and dressed, Kris held him arms’ length from his body and gave him a soft smile. Unlike himself, he pulled the older man into a tight hug.

“Happy Birthday Lu.”

He apologized to him too, but that part didn’t happen out loud.

After that night, the Madam as she preferred to be called, continued to sell Luhan to interested customers. His next few clients ended up being women, so things weren’t as traumatizing as they’d been the first time.

Even after all that, Luhan never once complained.

At the end of each day, he’d allow Kris to help him bathe then they’d get in their separate beds. Sometimes he’d turn over and see Luhan sleeping, exhausted from the day. Other times he’d happen to catch the man curled up in his bed, his body shaking as he silently wept. It broke his heart, but he never felt like it was his place to comfort him.

When they were in their 19th and 20th years, Kris knew that what he felt for the shorter man was deeper than friendship. More than anything he wanted to take his place when the rougher customers came in, knowing that he’d probably have to help Luhan walk to the bathroom and patch up cuts or rub balm on the bruises left on his pale skin.

Besides the injuries, what hurt him the most was how Luhan seemed to accept his fate. The Madame was always privy to remind Luhan that since she’d taken care of him for eight years before him taking his first customer, he owed her an exuberant amount of money.

Sometimes Kris wondered if her hate transferred to Luhan because once Luhan’s popularity increased and attracted customers, she insisted on accepting clients that were notoriously banned from other courtesan houses due to their excessive roughness. What was worse was that she always made sure Luhan was the one to entertain them.

Once they were both in their early twenties, Kris suggested that they run away. He’d never forget the dead look in Luhan’s eyes when he tiredly reminded Kris that they had no place to go. He also mentioned that they were provided housing, clean clothes and food for cheap and that it couldn’t
Joonmyun showed up not long after Kris’ first suggestion of running away. When he walked into the house, the other courtesans started to talk amongst themselves, immediately recognizing him as Prince Joonmyun. Since neither Kris nor Luhan knew much of the world outside of the house, they didn’t know anything about him. A quick conversation with one of the nicer courtesans, Sunkyu, filled them in and they too found themselves staring at Joonmyun.

What business did a prince, no matter how illegitimate, have in a glorified brothel?

If the rumors were true then that man had no problem obtaining willing women or men, so why did he feel the need to pay for one (or some)?

The Madame seemed to appear out of nowhere and took hold of the man’s shoulder, gently guiding him towards her favorites of the moment: Taemin and Jiyeon. Considering that the two were the top earners in the house—second only to Luhan—she could get away with charging an obscene amount of money.

“Actually, I’m more interested in him,” all eyes in the room turned and followed where Joonmyun’s finger pointed and they all stopped on Luhan. The Madame made an indignant snort and waved the man over, examining him carefully. The past few days had been unfortunate, so green and purple bruises littered his body, boasting the gruesome sight of recovery. “Are you sure Prince Joonmyun? Taemin is just as gorgeous as Luhan and is a bit more,” she searched for a more appropriate word “fitting for one of your standing.”

Joonmyun grinned at the Madame and spoke in a voice that would’ve made even the most steadfast and confident of men quake in their boots “I meant what I said, Madame.” The woman gave Luhan one last look over before she ushered Joonmyun to Luhan’s bedroom and Luhan followed closely after them.

As was now customary, Kris eventually took his place in the corner of the room. After he’d had enough of people mistreating Luhan, he made it his job to supervise Luhan’s clients and when they got too rough, he’d intervene. The Madame hadn’t liked it, but for some reason she allowed it to continue. Maybe she knew that if she continued to allow the clients to abuse Luhan, she would see a massive profit lost when Luhan couldn't take clients.

Unlike most of Luhan’s appointments, this one didn’t immediately start with the customer demanding what they expected of him. Instead, Joonmyun sat down on the bed and allowed Luhan to serve him some tea.

That was new. Maybe the Madame had directed Luhan to provide such a courtesy because Joonmyun was a prince?

“So what brings you here Prince Joonmyun?” Luhan asked, slowly pouring the man some tea. Instead of watching to alert Luhan that he’d poured enough, Joonmyun stared only at Luhan’s face. As a result, the tea spilled, and Luhan stuttered out several apologies, immediately rushing to get some rags to wipe up the mess.

The apologies continued when he came back, and Kris watched as Joonmyun assured him that it was okay. When things were cleaned up, and Luhan calmed down somewhat, an embarrassed flush
still on his face, Joonmyun started to ask Luhan questions.

He answered them reluctantly, and as time passed, Kris wondered if the prince had come just for conversation. The man made no effort to touch Luhan the whole time he was in the room. Kris could tell that Luhan was equally as confused by the situation but as was typical of Luhan, he simply played along.

After some time, Joonmyun left and thanked Luhan for the conversation. Following the prince's departure, the Madame came into Luhan’s room and gave him a hard once-over. “Prince Joonmyun said he enjoyed your company and to make him a permanent client. I don’t know what you did to him but good job.” She spared Kris a grimace and spun on her heels, heading out the door.

“I don’t know what just happened, but I feel somewhat relieved.” Kris agreed silently, and they both walked back to the parlor. Luhan had been barely able to sit down before those who weren’t occupied with a client swarmed him. They all wanted to know what it’d been like and even the Madame lingered in the background, listening carefully.

Luhan kept things vague, and everyone lamented over how they wished Joonmyun had chosen them. They dispersed soon after, and business went back to how it was, Luhan not receiving any more customers for the rest of the day.

The only person Luhan told of what’d actually happened was their friend, Jongin. The kid had been dropped off on the doorstep much like Luhan but much younger, so they’d grown close over the years. Instead of waiting till the boy had at least reached maturity, the Madame made the boy take customers a few months before his 14th year. That fact alone still made both Kris and Luhan seethe with anger whenever they thought about it. Sometimes Luhan took customers for the boy, feeling bad that such a fate had fallen on a mere child. When this happened and they were caught, Luhan would be punished and Jongin would be beaten. Despite that, Luhan continued to do it until the boy reached his 16th year and assured the older man that he could handle his own clients.

The day the Madame died, and Chilhyun took over was the second time Kris asked Luhan to run away with him. Unlike his father, who'd run the house with good spirits and kind words, the son (and Kris’ half-brother) took after his cruel mother.

When Kris was brought to the main house to be raised as part of the family, Chilhyun hated him immediately. The boy would torture and tease him, purposefully get him in trouble with the Madame and cause general havoc, then blame it on him.

Once Luhan showed up, Kris stopped trying to make nice with Chilhyun and kept to Luhan. That seemed to make Chilhyun angrier, and he took to getting both the boys in trouble or making more work for Luhan to do since he’d been assigned as a servant.

Out of a strange sense of curiosity, Kris found his way into the main office, now Chilhyun’s, in the main house.

“What do you want?” Even though the man had been nothing but awful to both Luhan and Kris, Kris still gave him the benefit of the doubt. He’d just lost his mother, and anyone would be testy
the few days following the funeral.

Kris had given things some thought, and since his half-brother and the rest of the family didn’t welcome him, he didn’t have any reason to stay. Luhan, on the other hand, had become the most popular courtesan in the house, so it was only logical that he’d probably worked off what he owed to the family.

The man mustered up the courage and asked Chilhyun about it, though the look he received after made him regret it. “You want me to just let you and your little whore boyfriend go? I’d have no problem kicking your butt ass into the street but your friend? I can’t let him go. He makes far too much money and as of the notes my mother left behind, he still owes us a hefty sum. Unless you’re hiding conspicuous amounts of money, I doubt you’ll be able to buy his freedom.” Since Kris didn’t have anything to say to provide a rebuttal to that, he only hung his head low and retreated back to his and Luhan’s shared room.

Instead of telling Luhan of his woes, he took to talking to Jongin who was a fantastic listener. When he’d said his piece, Jongin sighed and looked out the window of the room. “What if Luhan doesn’t want to leave? It seems like that bastard is lying about the cost because I heard how much they charged for Luhan once and I nearly passed out. I’d never heard of an amount so high for a courtesan, no matter how popular,” Kris nodded and rose from his seat, thanking Jongin for lending him an ear.

One day a year or two after Chilhyun took over, Joonmyun showed up without an appointment. Kris only knew of his presence because Jinhee had seen him in the courtyard earlier and couldn’t keep secrets to herself. Many of the servants in the main house knew Kris and were fond of him, so he was able to sneak into the house and overhear the conversation between Chilhyun and Joonmyun.

“You’re giving me all this money for a simple whore and his companion?” Joonmyun sounded like he cleared his throat and the shifting of the furniture told Kris that there were movements. “I mean what I said Chilhyun. This is an amount I’m sure you’d be more than satisfied with, and while I understand that Luhan is quite popular, another will surely take his place.” Kris would’ve stayed and listened more but the head servant of the house, Kibum, caught sight of him and shooed him off.

“Why are you in here boy? What if Chilhyun catches you? Gods know what he’ll do to you. Remember that he takes after his mother, not your father,” Kris blushed in embarrassment and turned to leave. “I’ll have one of the maids tell you the outcome when it’s over,” Kris grinned and shot the older man a smile before he went back to the entertainment quarters.

When he went to tell Jongin the news, he found the boy’s room empty. His roommate, Taemin told Kris about Chilhyun selling him off as a personal servant to some woman earlier that day. Even though being a personal servant sounded better than what Jongin had been doing there, Kris felt unsettled and uneasy about it.

Even the Madame had managed to treat them partly like humans rather than livestock to be sold and auctioned off for use. This, was a new low, even for Chilhyun.

How Luhan found out about Jongin’s absence before he figured out about his impending departure was beyond Kris. When Kris was on his way to tell the older man about Jongin, he met him at the door with angry tears in his eyes. “How could he do this Kris? Jongin was still just a kid. What if that woman abuses him? He can’t run away because she owns him.” Instead of telling Luhan about
what was happening in the main house, he enveloped the shorter man into a hug and patted his head.

After a few minutes, Kris held Luhan away from him and cleared his throat. “Luhan, what do you think about Joonmyun? Like truthfully?” Luhan looked up with wet eyes and he shrugged. “Can we not talk about Joonmyun right now? I cannot think of a time more unfit to do that than this one,” he rambled, shooting Kris an angry look.

The fact that Luhan was so annoyed and angry spoke volumes about how much he cared for Jongin, but Kris ignored him and kept talking. “Look Luhan, I understand you’re upset, but Joonmyun is in the main house right now, trying to buy you away from Chilhyun. He loves you.” That made Luhan’s mouth hang open and he looked down in shock. “And you aren’t messing with me?” Kris shook his head and wrung his hands.

When would Luhan finally admit that he had feelings for Joonmyun?

As much as he wanted Luhan to have his freedom from this life, he also wanted to go with him if he ever left. It was the main reason why Kris hadn’t run away by himself. He didn’t want to leave without Luhan.

Before Kris could ask his original question again, Kibum walked in with a grin on his face.

“I have good news Kris. Chilhyun is allowing Joonmyun to purchase Luhan. Also, I’m not sure if you know, but he’s also including you in the transaction.” Now this left Kris speechless, and he stared in amazement at Kibum. His mind was still processing what’d just been said to him, so he’d hardly had the thought to look over at Luhan for his reaction.

In a matter of a few hours, Kris found himself moving on autopilot as he packed up what little belongings he had. Even after spending his entire life in the house, he was leaving with so little and leaving behind so much, including some of his dignity. He’d never care much for Chilhyun, but to be more or less sold to someone by his own brother was fucked up when he thought about it.

Still, despite it all, he and Luhan were finally leaving behind Chilhyun. Together.

If he had to pay with his dignity for this opportunity for the both of them, then he’d do it ten times over. As long as he was with his friend and the person he loved, it didn’t matter. He knew Joonmyun wasn’t buying them to as slaves or servants; rather he was simply purchasing their freedom. Over the years he’d gotten a good sense of Joonmyun character, and the man had proved to be trustworthy.

Following his first visit with Luhan, Kris asked around and gathered that Prince Joonmyun was unattached to any one. He’d notoriously turned down the women and men the King proposed that he marry. Joonmyun insisted that he’d rather pick his own lovers and future spouses. Weirdly enough, it seemed that the King favored Prince Joonmyun over the other, legitimate princes and it pissed off innumerable people. Since the King was the best that the country had ever seen, people kept their comments to themselves. Also since Prince Joonmyun was the King’s favorite, he was left to his own devices so as long as he didn’t cause any trouble.

Now it would seem that he and Luhan were being taken to Joonmyun’s home where they would live until they pleased or at least that was what Joonmyun had said on the ride there.
When they arrived, the man showed them around the home that made the main house look like a hovel. Kris and Luhan had never seen a home this big, so they took everything in slowly. The bathroom was almost the size of the entire entertainment quarters. Their rooms made the parlor seem small.

Everything was truly fit for royalty.

While Kris took Joonmyun’s permission to explore the large house, he heard an echo of Joonmyun’s conversation with Luhan.

“How do you feel about me, Luhan? I know it may seem sudden, me taking you and Kris from the courtesan house, but the fact is, I’ve been thinking about it for months. I’ve fallen in love with the both of you,” that made Kris stop.

Joonmyun was in love with him too? When had that happened?

The Prince’s visits after the initial one consisted of him talking and playing games with Luhan. At one point, Kris wasn’t sure exactly when Luhan and Joonmyun started having sex. That wasn’t to say that it happened all the time, but since he was kept busy helping other courtesans during some of Joonmyun’s visits, he was never really sure.

One thing was sure: Kris never felt jealous or on edge when he left Luhan unsupervised in Joonmyun’s care. He seemed to have an implicit trust in the Prince.

Sometimes he’d participate in the games or conversations with Luhan and Joonmyun, but most times not. Chilhyun always commented that his face would startle customers away, so Kris tried not to hinder Luhan’s appointments because he knew Chilhyun would find a sadistic way to punish the man as a result.

“I haven’t been true to myself Pri-Joonmyun. Kris has asked me numerous times of my feelings for you, and I’ve always avoided answering. I don’t mean to sound foolish, but I don’t know what loving someone entails, and I’d hate to be a disappointment. I do know that I hold something for you and I will also mention that whatever I feel towards you is also how I feel towards Kris. I’ve kept him close to me for years under the guise of a deep friendship, but unlike with you, I’ve never taken him to bed. He’s never pushed the issue either, so I’m wondering how you feel about this?”

There was a moment of silence and Kris kept walking, ending up near an indoor pool. In that room, the conversation was even louder.

“Let’s talk to him together, it’s nice to know that we stand in similar positions, though,” Joonmyun started. Kris hadn’t intended on being discovered during his eavesdropping, but when he tripped over a basket of towels, both men turned in the direction of the noise. When they saw Kris bending over to put the towels back, they both smiled at him.

“Did you happen to overhear us, Kris?” Joonmyun asked, the ever-present soft grin playing across his face. Usually, when people put him on the spot, Kris always tripped over his words, but this time, he managed to answer clearly.

“I don’t disagree to both of your ideas but I’m not sure how to react. I’ve been in love with Luhan since I was younger and I like you Joonmyun, like outside of you getting us away from Chilhyun.” Joonmyun clasped his hands together and his grin grew wider. “That’s fine, I don’t expect a love declaration in return. Also good, I don’t want you-” he looked at Luhan too, “either of you to feel
like you owe me something because of what I did. That wasn’t my intention. I just couldn’t bear to see Luhan and you suffer any longer. I would be lying however if I said my feelings didn’t play at least a small part. I care for the both of you and have since our first meeting. Please forgive me for my selfishness,” Joonmyun bowed his head and Luhan reached for his chin, shaking his head.

“In no way is it appropriate for a prince to bow to people like us but we understand,” Kris nodded in agreement and watched as Luhan tilted Joonmyun’s head up and leaned into a kiss. Initially, it felt like he was watching something intimate, much more so than the times Kris had watched the two have sex.

When they pulled apart, Luhan pulled Kris closer and gave him a similar kiss. The younger man froze in action, slightly parting his lips when he felt Luhan’s tongue press for entrance. Somehow his arms moved, and he wrapped them around Luhan’s shorter stature, holding him impossibly close.

Nothing could explain how he felt at that moment and honestly, he didn’t want to try. Instead, he wanted to live in the moment, attempting to burn the feeling of Luhan kissing him into his memory. The kiss ceased when Luhan broke away with a lazy smile on his face and let out a sigh “I should’ve done that when we were teenagers.”
Saving Grace (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

When Kris and Joonmyun leave for a trip, Luhan sets out on a mission. Also, Kris gets to experience something new.

Before any of them realized it, three months had passed and they’d all settled into a new routine. Instead of constantly dealing with customers, Luhan took up hobbies. Sometimes he’d go for a walk and wind up at the market where he’d eat lunch with Joonmyun and Kris, other times Luhan took to cleaning the house or making pictures with the paint and paper Joonmyun had procured for him.

If he was in the mood, then he would sit in the garden and paint the flowers, taking the time to capture the colors that were so vibrant that he needed to mix colors to even come close. The first pieces he completed were hanging in the large formal room, framed and boasting a signature of his name or at least that was what Joonmyun told him. In his opinion, it looked like scribbles since Joonmyun had helped him write it.

Following this, he finally broke down and took Joonmyun’s offer to study with a tutor and it wasn’t long before he could read simple books. The books that populated Joonmyun’s extensive library were far too advanced for him at first and the man took to bringing him more straightforward books. Sometimes they were children books, other times they were school books but it was always something Joonmyun knew he could read and would enjoy.

Unlike Luhan, Kris was educated alongside Chilhyun per their father’s request, so he knew all sorts of things that Luhan did not. His strength lay in numbers, and he took to helping Joonmyun oversee the financial books for his market frequently. According to Kris, Joonmyun wasn’t bad, but since he was more or less running the market by himself, all the work fell on him, and he frequently missed things due to tiredness.

Sometimes the men would spend hours going over books and Luhan would bring them tea and occasionally glance at the many sheets of paper and notebooks that littered the large table in the library.

“Spring is approaching, and that means it’s time for another trip. Some merchants in the East have alerted me of some shipments of silk, perfume, and spices. It'd be good if I could make it down there soon,” Luhan hummed from the couch where he had a book in his lap, scanning over the words he knew and silently pronouncing the ones he didn't.

“I’ve heard about the East. From what I remember I think my mother was from there,” both Kris and Joonmyun stopped what they were doing and looked up from their work. It was evident both men wanted him to continue, but Luhan fell back into silence, completely absorbed in his book.

Kris had tried asking Luhan about his past when they were children, but Luhan would always change the subject, determined not to talk about it. Now in the nearly twenty years that he’d known Luhan, that was the most information Luhan had ever said about his life before he ended up in with Kris.
The trip was planned sooner than they expected and Joonmyun invited both men to go with him. Kris agreed, and Luhan turned him down, not wanting to deal with the issues of traveling. He also made it clear that he didn’t mind watching the house while the other men were gone.

“Who better to watch the house than the person who usually cleans it? What, you’ll both be gone for a month or two? That’s fine. I’ll keep myself busy. Plus I’ll make sure I go the market each day and greet everyone. It’s not as if I’m a stranger,” the words hardly convinced either man but with the trip being unavoidable, they both relented.

Joonmyun did, however, hire a gardener before he left, telling Luhan that the man would visit twice a week until he came back. The story was believable enough to Kris, but he had a feeling Luhan would eventually figure out that the man was a guard hired to watch over him in their absence.

The day they left, Luhan woke up early to send them off and made sure he packed them ample amounts of non-perishable food and clothes that were suited to all temperatures. Walking to the market took more time than it usually did but none of the men minded, Luhan strolling between them and glancing around the empty market. The rest of their traveling party was waiting for them at the front entrance of the market and Luhan could see several men that he recognized from the courtesan house, but he said nothing. The people who recognized him did the same and avoided eye contact, going about their business.

“I guess I’ll see you in two months time then. Make sure you both return healthy,” with that, Luhan placed a kiss on Joonmyun’s lips then stood on the tips of his toes to give Kris the same. After he watched Kris and Joonmyun greet the other people and pack their things onto the horses and into the caravans. When everyone was saddled up and ready to go, Luhan gave one last wave and watched the men depart.

Instead of heading in the direction of his home, he started towards the courtesan house.

“What do you mean he came back?” Luhan demanded from Taemin, his heart slamming in his chest as the man repeated himself.

It'd been just as he'd hoped.

“He came back a few days ago. Apparently, the women grew tired of him, and after a few days of begging, Chilhyun took him back. He’s a sight…” Taemin trained off, a sad look on his face. When he didn’t continue, Luhan sighed and asked the younger man to sneak him into the house.

When he laid eyes on Jongin, his heart shattered. He was lying face-up, throwing a ball towards the ceiling then catching it with cupped palms. Taemin ushered Luhan into the room then shut the curtains on his way out, wanting to get back before Chilhyun was aware of his absence.

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The closer Luhan got to Jongin, the more he felt his lung tighten and his face get hot with anger and remorse. There were countless bruises that littered his tan skin, all of them ranging in colors from relatively fresh purple to dull yellow. To match those were the numerous cuts that littered his full lips, some open and lightly bleeding, as well as others that were in the various stages of healing.
Taemin hadn’t been kidding when he said Jongin looked a sight.

“Gods Jongin,” Jongin finally looked up, breaking out of what seemed to be a trance, a confused expression on his face.

Luhan knew that he probably looked different with his clothes of much better quality and the various pieces of jewelry Joonmyun had gifted him glittering in the light. He’d even cut some of his hair. It no longer trailed down his back and instead ended at his shoulders.

“You’re back?” Jongin stammered, sitting up though Luhan didn’t miss the wince as he did so. Jongin saw the worry flash on his face and let out a flat, bitter laugh. “Don’t worry about me Luhan. Things didn’t work out with my previous owner,” there was a look of spite that crossed Jongin’s eyes and peppered his statement, but Luhan knew it wasn’t directed at him. At least not specifically.

Before he even knew what he was saying, he was asking Jongin to come with him. Joonmyun and Kris were already familiar with how dear Luhan held Jongin, and despite trying to enjoy the luxuries that were now openly available to him, Luhan still worried and missed the boy.

“You don’t understand, Chilhyun just accepted me back. Running away would be like a slap in his face,” Jongin started. The unsure look on his face made Luhan want to scream, but he tried to remain calm and collected.

“He’ll be okay,” was all Luhan said as he searched for a bag and started to put Jongin’s few belongings inside of it. “You’ve been through enough. I cannot stand by and watch someone that I consider my brother and friend suffer any longer,” Jongin’s head turned and then Luhan saw deep scratches embedded into his cheek, no doubt made from an angry woman.

When the young man looked at Luhan’s face, he knew there was no way he could explain himself out of not going. He knew all too well that when Luhan put his mind to something, he didn’t let it go or give up.

It was easy to escort Jongin out and even the guards looked the other way when they recognized who both of them were. Just as Luhan had grown up with Jongin and Kris, he’d also managed to capture the hearts of the men who stood guard outside the courtesan house’s exit during the day. As a token of appreciation, Luhan sat a small bag of golden coins in front of each of them and grinned. Both of them glanced down and one of the men waved Luhan away with a smile on his face.

Just like that, they disappeared into the bustling crowd and only when they were quite a distance from the house did they slow down.

“It was beautiful and nice has its perks huh?” Luhan just smiled and they continued to walk in silence, Luhan only stopping at one of the food vendors to get something for Jongin. He’d noticed that besides being pretty beaten up, he also was much skinnier than he’d ever been at the house. He didn’t say it out loud but Jongin sighed as he took small bites of the sandwich that had been handed to him. “She stopped feeding me the last few weeks I was there. That’s when the beatings started,” Luhan’s eyes widened and he felt his stomach lurch.

Luhan escorted him into the large house, pulling Jongin along one of the halls so that he could
show him where he’d be sleeping. As he did so, he knew that he’d have to apologize later when Joonmyun came but as things currently stood, he felt like he’d made the right choice. Jongin had gone through enough and now that Luhan could, he was going to do everything in his power to help the boy.

After he settled Jongin in the room next to his and Kris’, he escorted him to the bathing room and told Jongin strip and go wash. He opened his mouth to complain but Luhan narrowed his eyes and Jongin swallowed the words, doing what he was told. It was like deja vu for the younger man since Luhan had virtually raised him.

Ten minutes had passed when Luhan came back with a towel and some clothes, probably from his closet. Jongin scoffed at the beautiful blue material, doubting that it would look good on him.

Once he was clean, Luhan pulled him over by a bench and took to rubbing a pleasant smelling salve on his skin, especially on his bruises. At first, it hurt but then whatever was in the salve started to settle in and left a tingling sensation on his skin. Luhan’s hands worked endlessly, rubbing and dabbing here and there, his methods thorough and careful.

“Why did you bring me here? Won’t your master get upset?” Luhan’s hands stopped moving and he stared at Jongin, a thoughtful look on his face. “Joonmyun is not my master. He does not own me. He’s my friend and my lover,” it was the first time he’d said the words out loud and his heart felt light. Jongin gave him a look of confusion and Luhan smiled, amused because he’d expected such a reaction. Instead of explaining it, he just let Jongin not understand and handed him the clothes.

“I’m going to go fix dinner, come out when you’re dressed,” Jongin nodded watched as Luhan dipped his hands in the bath and wiped them with a nearby cloth before walking out.

“One of her favorite things to do was to beat me with a cane. It hurt but after a while, I got used to it,” Luhan stopped mid-chew and he looked over at Jongin, the food suddenly lodged in his throat which prompted him to take a sip of water. The younger man continued, his voice monotone as he recounted the other things the woman put him through.

He sat and listened, his interest in his food waning as Jongin went further into detail.

The thing that distraught Luhan the most was the flat look in Jongin’s eyes as he spoke. It was like the boy no longer felt much emotion and if Luhan thought about it, being emotionally numb at his 18th year was saddening, but he’d lasted longer than others in his same situation. He still had a full life ahead of him and to have spent most of it in that courtesan house, Luhan knew it was hard to keep a positive outlook.

Luhan didn’t say anything when Jongin finished and instead leaned over and enveloped him in a hug, patting him on his back. The other man froze at first and felt stiff in his arms, but after a moment he relaxed. Before Jongin realized it, his eyes stung, and tears found their way down his cheeks.

After Luhan let go, Jongin took a deep inhale and wiped at his face. “I haven’t cried in so long. I didn’t think I could anymore,” Jongin sighed with a smile on his face. Tears continued to trickle down and he laughed, bowing his head in defeat. “I remember. You’d fallen and skinned your knee. You made a scene in the house and ran to me, leaving a trail of blood,” Luhan said as he watched the barrage of emotions pass on Jongin’s face.
Jongin looked up at Luhan as he tried to wipe his face clean again “you still remember that?”
Luhan nodded with a soft smile.

While Jongin still had a long ways to go of feeling things again, the thought of making progress made Luhan’s heart flutter. If he hadn’t been so stubborn when Kris first asked him to run away, he could’ve agreed and taken Jongin with them and spared him from having to grow up in the courtesan house like they had. Sadly what was done was done, so he couldn’t do anything but help Jongin allow himself to feel things again.

As someone who’d never stepped foot out of his hometown, everything Kris saw astonished him. It was incredible to think that just outside the borders of their country were people who looked different and spoke a tongue unlike the ones he’d ever heard.

During their travels, it became harder to understand why the dislike of Joonmyun floated through their kingdom. Besides being the son of a concubine, which wasn’t his fault, he was a man of good merit. He was a fantastic leader and had a giving heart which wasn't common in nobility.

One night while they were setting up their camp for the night and Joonmyun was helping some older men, Kris sat down with the map and looked over how far they had left to travel. Judging from the marks scrawled on the used paper, they were more than halfway there.

“We’ll be there in three days if the weather and our horses keep at their pace,” Joonmyun remarked from behind him. Kris looked up in surprise and nodded before folding up the map and putting it back in its place among their belongings. “How many other languages can you speak?” Kris asked when Joonmyun sat next to him and handed him a plate of roasted meat and bread that'd been prepared by one of the other men.

“Almost four, I’ve been slacking on my lessons with the Han language. The pronunciation is challenging, and the writing is even more taxing. I’ve got a good enough handle on it to conduct business, though,” Joonmyun replied around a mouthful of bread. Kris nodded and held back a laugh as the man carried on, food falling out his mouth in the process.

It had become one of Kris’ favorite things to observe the differences between Prince Joonmyun and Joonmyun when he found himself outside of his father’s influence and kingdom. He was much laxer and figuratively and literally let his hair down. Since he and Luhan moved in with the prince, the man’s hair had grown well past his ears and dusted the top of his shoulders. Instead of keeping it pulled back in a ponytail or cut it, he let it hang loose and Kris liked the way it blew in a strong gust of wind.

It made Joonmyun look majestic and every bit of royal that he was.

Over the past few years that Kris had known Joonmyun, he’d only found himself attracted to the man on a few occasions, all of which he could count on one hand. Now that he lived in such close quarters with him, he found that those instances were increasing far past the number of fingers he possessed. Mannerism he’d never noticed were now magnified, like how Joonmyun preferred sleeping sans any unnecessary clothing due to the heat, so the man slept in only thin linen pants. Most times than not, he forwent undergarments as well, so whether or not he was aroused in his sleep was on proud display. Another habit Joonmyun had was that when he fell into a deep sleep,
he’d eventually move around until he found something suitable to nestle his body against, which usually happened to be Kris’ body.

A few times Kris found himself asking why he hadn’t said anything yet, but the answer was always glaringly obvious: he liked it.

Both instances left him with an arousal he rarely had time to attend to, but he didn’t mind. He knew Joonmyun did neither thing on purpose.

“Kris, do you find me attractive?” Joonmyun asked one night as he settled down onto what constituted as his half of the bed in their tent. Kris looked up from the book he was reading and stared at Joonmyun, unsure of how to answer.

“Yes, very.” He answered curtly, looking away when Joonmyun locked eyes with him. Kris could already feel a few drops of sweat sliding down his back, highlighting how uneasy he felt since he disliked talking about his feelings.

He could still feel Joonmyun’s gaze on him, and he shifted in his seat.

“I’m sorry for putting you on spot Kris, I was just wondering. I know I can be clingy in my sleep and the last thing I’d ever want to do is make you uncomfortable,” Joonmyun looked away and lay down. “It’s fine Joonmyun, I don’t mind,” Kris replied, his voice breaking as he spoke. Instead of apologizing, Kris put down his book and he crawled over to where Joonmyun was, hovering over him as he placed a kiss on the man’s lips.

Kris had counted on catching the man by surprise. What he didn’t figure was that Joonmyun would hold him and prolong the kiss, his hands wandering up the back of his shirt. Having control of the situation hadn’t mattered to Kris, but now that Joonmyun encouraged him to continue, he felt his stomach flip and tie in knots.

Joonmyun shimmied out of his pants and lay naked underneath Kris while he stripped off the man’s clothes and left him in the same state of undress. “I-I haven’t done this be-before,” Kris stuttered, his arms shaking under his own weight.

“It’s fine, just calm down. I’ll help you,” Kris felt wave after wave of embarrassment as Joonmyun instructed him, feeling inadequate. He’d lived in a courtesan house for more than half his life, and he’d watched Luhan entertain over a hundred guests, so he should’ve picked something up at the very least. Since both the Madame and Chilhyun both considered Kris too intimidating to take customers, he’d never entertained a client.

The man seemed like he could sense this and he captured Kris’ face between his small hands as he spoke: “some things can only be learned through experience.” With that, he leaned up and kissed the tip of Kris’ nose with a lazy smile.

There was still a single lamp burning in the corner of the tent, so Kris saw each and everything that Joonmyun guided him to do and even some of the things he did on his own accord.

Kris ended up kneeling between Joonmyun’s legs looking down on him as the man worked three slick fingers into himself. He pressed a few kisses on the man’s neck, and when he received some low moans in response, he traveled down his chest. Kris managed to fumble with the vial of oil Joonmyun had previously used and slicked up his palm, moving to stroke the man as he worked himself open more. His eyes closed when Kris tightened his grip and stroked slow, Joonmyun
letting out another low moan.

It seemed that he was trying to be considerate since the other members of their group were sleeping. Kris leaned up to kiss Joonmyun again, and the man reached to stop his hand. “If you keep going, I’m going to come, and I want to do that with you inside of me,” he explained breathlessly. He moved his hand away and Joonmyun spread his legs a little more, pulling Kris firmly between.

The sound that came out Joonmyun’s mouth was hard to mask as Kris moved forward, pushing inside of him. It’d been a while since Joonmyun had had sex with anyone, so it took a moment or two to get comfortable when Kris’ hips were flush against his own. Kris, on the other hand, was fighting of lightheadedness, unused to how tight Joonmyun was around him.

He moved when Joonmyun gave him a signal and both of them reveled in the feeling. Joonmyun wrapped his legs around Kris’ waist and dug his fingernails into the man’s forearms, sighing each time he pushed forward. Kris took a clumsy hand and started to stroke Joonmyun back to hardness, managing to keep his slow pace.

One particularly firm thrust forward, and Joonmyun let out a strangled moan, his hand over his mouth, muffling the noise a little. Kris figured that he must’ve brushed against the spot Luhan had always whined about whenever he had particularly talented clients.

“You’re doing so good. Keep going just like that, Kris please,” he listened to Joonmyun’s whispered pants and ignored the feeling of Joonmyun’s nails sinking into his skin, completely focusing on the tight coil of pleasure in the pit of his stomach.

When Joonmyun finally came, he wrapped his legs around Kris’ waist tighter and pulled Kris flush against him again. The tightening of his body snatched Kris’ orgasm from him, and he came not long after, spilling inside of Joonmyun with a grunt. They lay there for a moment then Kris reluctantly withdrew from Joonmyun, not missing some of the stickiness that seeped out, coating Joonmyun’s thighs.

“I’m sorry Joonmyun, we just visited the past town’s bathhouse,” Kris mumbled, embarrassed because he’d been too caught up to pull out. Joonmyun shook his head and rolled to his side, reaching for some discarded clothes and his water flask. Just as quickly, he cleaned up the mess, even moving to wipe some specks off Kris’ stomach.

“It’s fine. I’m just glad nothing got on the bedding. That would’ve been unpleasant,” Kris nodded but continued to chew his bottom lip, looking like a berated kid. Joonmyun sat up and pulled him closer, resting his forehead against Kris’. “Don’t worry about it, plus I enjoyed it,” it took a moment but a smile crossed the taller man’s face, and he leaned closer to kiss Joonmyun again.

As Joonmyun slept, exhausted from his busy day and rather busy night, Kris got up early and watched the sunrise then helped some of the other men begin packing their things. If Joonmyun didn’t wake up in the next ten minutes, then he would’ve had to retrieve him, but the man joined them in packing up the camp not long after they’d started.

It was interesting how Kris had managed to have sex with Joonmyun before he’d done so with Luhan, but he didn’t regret it. In fact, he considered his night and the many that would follow on their trip, as learning and teaching experiences. That way, when Luhan was ready to invite Kris into his bed, then he’d be ready and confident.

Joonmyun made sure of it.
Even as they traveled back, both Kris and Joonmyun felt like they’d come back with more than the goods they’d received.

For two months, he lived in an alternate version of the life he'd always known. Jongin was able to do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted as well as not having to service anyone. In fact, the only person he had to take care of was himself.

He’d never had so much free time, so he usually found himself walking to the market that Luhan told him Joonmyun owned. Sometimes he’d help attract customers for a vendor named Luna or lounge around the middle of the market, watching the street performers and shoppers come and go. Other times he’d wade in the shallow end of the pool or lay out on the large pillows in the open area of the house that was surrounded by the garden, soaking up the warmth of the sun.

Never had he been so peaceful.

“Luhan?” a vaguely familiar voice called, waking Jongin from his nap. He sat up and looked around, immediately catching sight of Joonmyun and Kris carrying packages. When he sat up, the pillows rustled, and it caught the attention of both men.

“Jongin?” Kris was the first one to speak, confused as he walked closer and took a look at him. The younger man nodded and Joonmyun walked behind Kris, a friendly yet confused expression on his face.

Luhan was in the kitchen when he heard the two men talking to Jongin, so he walked out. Instead of greeting them, he launched into the explanation he’d been practicing since he’d taken Jongin back to the house.

When he was done, Joonmyun shrugged and sat down his load, walking up to Jongin who had stood up and held out his hand. “Well welcome to my home Jongin, I hope Luhan has made things comfortable?”

Joonmyun’s casual reaction floored everyone, and Jongin stood still, too stunned to do anything besides shake the man’s outstretched hand.
“So, how did things fare out?” Luhan asked as the four of them sat down to dinner. Instead of Joonmyun, it was Kris who spoke up, gushing about the sights he’d seen, food he’d eaten and people he’d met.

“You really missed out Lu,” the man shrugged and took a swig of wine before he grinned. “I’m sure I made the right choice.” Both Joonmyun and Kris turned to look at Jongin but the young man kept eating, his attention completely absorbed into his food.

Even after two months of eating as much as he could handle, each meal was still like a luxury to him. At the courtesan house, Jongin was used to eating food made the subpar ingredients that they were given, but at Joonmyun’s house, the ingredients Luhan prepared their meals with were always the freshest. Surely it was one of the perks of living amongst someone from the royal family.

They started to talk about other things and Joonmyun revealed that he’d brought back gifts for Luhan as well. When they were finished eating, he sat the parcel of books on the table and the older man leafed through them all, a smile on his face. Some of them were cooking directions from other lands written in their language and simple enough so he could follow along. The other books were adventure novels, written just as simply as the cooking ones.

Last but not least, Joonmyun pulled a package out of one of his bags and unfolded the cloth. A collection of golden bracelets were nestled against the cloth and they shined brightly when the light hit them. Luhan stared in awe, and Kris looked at them in confusion.

“When did you buy those?” Joonmyun grinned and he took the bigger ones and reached for Kris’ wrist before he slipped them on. “One of the men that traveled with us was in the process of making them and gave them to me on the first day of our trip. These are yours,” the stare that Kris lay on Joonmyun made the man laugh.

“Do those mean what I think they do Joonmyun?” Luhan asked, still staring at the jewelry that was left in the man’s palm. The promises and words of commitment that they boasted were almost intimidating.

“I would’ve had them for you both earlier, but since the jewelry maker had been busy, I had to wait. I hope the gesture isn’t too much,” Luhan watched as Joonmyun took his wrist and slipped the bangles on with ease. Jongin watched the scene with amusement and laughed when Luhan’s eyes bulged out and he stared at the bracelets. “I’ve spoken about my feelings towards you both, but I wanted make my intentions crystal clear. I love you both.” With that, Joonmyun kissed both Luhan and Kris then said something about being tired. He told everyone good night and retreated to his quarters, leaving behind Jongin with the stunned pair.

Instead of saying anything, he just walked to the kitchen and began washing the dishes. When he was halfway through, Luhan walked beside him and started to dry the wet plates and eating utensils in silence. Kris disappeared, probably to take a bath and by the time Jongin had bathed and was walking to his room, he saw Kris passed out and Luhan watching over him with an unreadable expression.

After the men had rested for a few days, Kris went back to attending to the market and running errands while Luhan helped. Joonmyun, who’d woken up with a fever the day after their trip, was
put on bed rest and Luhan tasked Jongin with taking care of him.

“So how old are you Jongin?” Joonmyun asked, taking in the bruises and cuts that were healing on the boy’s skin. Besides the blemishes, he was just as beautiful as Kris and Luhan and his skin glowed with a warm brown hue. His physique and face told Joonmyun that he wasn’t quite into his 20th year, but his eyes told a story of someone much older.

“I’m in my 18th year,” Jongin answered, giving Joonmyun a skittish look before he looked down at the ground. Something told Joonmyun that he intimidated the boy and while it was amusing at first, he didn’t want Jongin feel uncomfortable in what was now his home.

Despite Jongin only having to provide him with his meals, put cool water soaked cloths on his head and make sure he wasn’t in need of anything, he never left Joonmyun’s side. Instead he brought his books, or rather, Luhan’s books and sat on the collection of pillows that were piled in the corner. After a few hours of silence, Joonmyun started talking to combat the silence that filled the room, telling Jongin about the trip, the market and his family.

“I had to move out the palace when I was about your age because my father’s new wife insisted that she didn’t want her children raised around me. I think she thought I would do harm to them despite how many times I expressed to my father that I didn’t wish to inherit the kingdom,” Joonmyun explained, going through a story that he’d only told a few times. Luhan and Kris had heard a variation of it, but for some reason he’d left out how much the queen hated him.

At first she’d been indifferent to him, because he’d barely been in his 14th year and had always been on the smaller and less intimidating side. She only started to mistrust him after the birth of her second son, Joonki.

When the little boy was approaching his second year and Joonmyun his 16th, he just so happen to catch a glimpse of the little boy toddling near the deep bathing pool. Even though he’d ran, by the time he made it to the scene, the little boy was sputtering and sinking to the bottom. He dived in and retrieved the little boy, saving him before he’d swallowed too much water and when Nara, Joonki’s nurse wandered into the room, obviously looking for him, she Joonmyun sitting on the side of the pool with Joonki in his arms coughing as he patted him on the back. She quickly snatched him away and screamed, blaming the little boy’s incident on Joonmyun.

“You just want to be the only heir to the throne!” Palace guards came running and though Nara accused him of trying to kill his own brother, they didn’t arrest Joonmyun. In fact, even as Nara explained what she’d seen to the king, guards and the queen, only the queen believed her.

“Dear, Joonmyun wouldn’t cause harm to anything. Also you’re very familiar with his lack of interest to inheriting the throne. Why would he hurt Joonki? He’s been nothing but accepting to you and the boys,” The queen had simply narrowed her eyes and from then on out, she made Joonmyun’s life in the palace a living hell.

Eventually Joonmyun grew sick of the mistreatment and requested that he be moved into the estates that his mother reserved for him prior to her death.

Despite the king being in love with Mira, he could never elevate her status to more than a concubine. As a result, the seven years that Joonmyun’s mother was in his life, she made sure to warn him of the dangers he would face in the future: everything from people disrespecting him, refusing to acknowledge him as a legitimate heir, spreading rumors about his actions and even distrusting him.
Whenever Joonmyun would assure his mother that he would stop at nothing to care for her, she’d always give him the same sad smile. Coincidentally, it was the expression she wore as she lay dying. Her last words had been whispered into the top of his head as he kneeled next to her bed, weeping.

“I’m so sorry my baby.”

When Joonmyun’s sights settled back on Jongin, he saw tears in the boy’s eyes. Jongin tried his best to conceal them by turning his head and clearing his throat, but when he turned back towards the prince, he knew the man could see in the redness in his eyes.

“I had no idea,” Jongin sighed when he calmed himself. Joonmyun waved him off with a sigh and adjusted the cool cloth on his forehead. “It’s fine really. My mother loved me and my father loves me too. He has never forsaken me nor denied me. Even if he did, I have you all here with me,” at this Jongin’s eyes widened but he remained silent.

Joonmyun recovered the next day, but Jongin refused to leave his side until he was completely fine.

Luhan and Kris watched the scenes of Jongin following at Joonmyun’s heels, making sure he was okay and taken care of. Neither of them were sure what’d caused the change, but Luhan was almost certain it had to do with him asking Jongin to care for Joonmyun. Surely they’d gotten a chance to know each other and now Jongin trusted Joonmyun.

“He used to follow you around like that though he had a different look,” Kris commented as he lay in the garden with Luhan, running his fingers through the man’s considerably shorter hair. Luhan hummed in agreement and he leaned into the touch “he thinks of me like a brother. I can’t say he thinks of Joonmyun in the same light.”

Once again, everyone had to adjust to a new person around the house, though Jongin wasn’t much of a hassle or difference. The only change that Luhan noticed was that he had to cook more since Jongin had quite the appetite.

Jongin joined in on Luhan’s reading lessons and picked up things quicker, delighting Minho with his brilliance. He also found himself accompanying Luhan on his walks through the market, sometimes sitting to have lunch with the other men or wandering off on his own and making friends with the different vendors.

He loved children so when a fruit vendor, Luna, brought her triplets to the market, Jongin spent the day entertaining them. Amber, Donghae and Jonghyun jumped and squealed, yelling as he chased them behind their mother’s stall and back. It was a sight to see and Luhan felt entranced by it since he’d never seen that part of Jongin. Even though he looked so thin, he hoisted all three of the children up easily and crawled around with them on his back.

“Their lessons are canceled today, and I couldn’t leave them at home. I apologize for any distractions they may cause,” Luna rambled as soon as Joonmyun approached her stall. The man raised his hand and signaled for her to stop, then shrugged.

“They’re no problem Luna. In fact, it’s a joy to watch them play with Jongin,” Luna gave the man a look of a relief to glanced over at her children riding on the younger man’s back like a he was a
horse.

“Amber, Donghae, and Jonghyun, you’ll hurt him!” The triplets all giggled in response but made no moves to climb off Jongin’s back.

All the soft kisses and touches finally broke Luhan down, and he sat awake in bed one night, staring out the open window.

The past year had been the longest he’d gone without sex since he was in his 17\textsuperscript{th} year and it hadn’t affected him in the least. Unlike with his customers, he’d had ample time to build his relationship with Kris and Joonmyun, so what was the holdup?

Neither man had pestered him or even expressed that they wanted to be physical with him, so he’d been idle all of this time. He wasn’t naïve enough to assume that they had been completely abstaining since it was obvious that Kris and Joonmyun were having sex.

He figured it out the moment that they came back from their trip and things were no longer awkward between them. In fact, their relationship had taken on an ease that Luhan could only attribute to sex. Sometimes he caught the glances that they sent each other and it made him feel a weird sense of satisfaction.

Kris deserved someone who could love him and even though Joonmyun had the capabilities to love others at the same time, he never slacked in his affections towards anyone else. He still helped Jongin and catered to his cute adoration, he helped Luhan clean the house and spoke to the man whenever he took a visit to the market, showing him things and talking to him about various subjects.

Luhan loved talking with Joonmyun because the man always listened and responded. Before he’d gone to the courtesan house, he was a servant with his mother, who never bothered to teach him the language of the land. In fact, he’d stayed mostly silent until he was in his 6\textsuperscript{th} year. He’d only spoken in small phrases until he could piece together sentences and when he made an effort to communicate with his mother in the language, she simply looked at him with disgust and ignored him. When she finally dropped him off on the steps of the courtesan house, he could only speak words of the country and the words of his mother’s language were lost.

He’d been awake for a stretch of time when Kris’ bed linen rustled and he sat up, looking over at Luhan in the dim darkness.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Luhan shook his head and continued looking out the window. It was a full moon, so parts of their room were illuminated by its glow.

“What if I told you to make love to me right now,” Luhan sighed, looking at the man. He saw Kris’ eyebrows rise into his hairline and his eyes widen almost comically. “I mean it Yifan,” the name struck a nerve in Kris and he knew that Luhan was serious.

In their childhood, one of the few things that Luhan had told Kris was that his name reflected his mother’s native language. Kris had told him that he also had a name that did the same, but his father had also given him a name that was easier to pronounce amongst his wife and Chilhyun.

Now as Luhan used his other name, Kris didn’t question Luhan’s motives and got out his bed. He took the time to light a lamp then he sat on the edge of Luhan’s bed and pulled the covers off his body. In an instant, Luhan’s nightshirt was off and he was in Kris’ lap, kissing him with a fervor
that hadn’t ever been there before.

As Kris’ hands roamed his body, Luhan realized just how large they were. One of his palms cupped the cheeks of his ass and when he started to knead the flesh there, Luhan moaned and pressed his body closer to Kris.

While it seemed like Kris was calm and connected, his heart was racing and it was taking everything in his being to not shake. He’d been anticipating this for so long and now that it was happening, he was so nervous he could hear his heart slamming in his chest.

Kris moved back and kept his arms around Luhan’s waist as he took off his own nightshirt. His pants remained but with how the older man was grinding against him, his dick made an impressive outline. When Kris got back to touching Luhan with one of his hands wrapping around the man’s dick, Luhan made another moan. Kris growled when he couldn’t do what he wanted to, so he stood up and took Luhan with him, laying him on his back.

“What—” the words died on his lips as Kris shimmied out his pants then climbed over him, an unfamiliar look in his eyes. For once in his life Luhan didn’t know what to do, so he laid there and let what Kris was doing overtake him.

He spent long moments kissing him and looking him in the eyes before he trailed them down, stopping to flick his tongue and bite at Luhan’s nipples. It sent a sensation through the older man’s body and his thighs quivered when Kris’ thumbed the slit of his dick, collecting the pre-come before he gripped it and his mouth engulfed the head.

Kris was taking his time. This had been too long in the making and he was going to make this last.

Luhan’s immediate reaction was to reach for Kris’ head and grip handfuls of hair. Unlike Luhan, Kris didn’t cut off his hair and it was longer than he’d ever seen it. Usually when it started to grow past his neck, he’d cut it back to above his ears.

Despite it being one of the sloppiest things he’d ever experienced, Luhan’s toes curled and he moaned encouragements, yanking at the man’s hair from the root. When one of Kris’ hands moved and started to massage at his balls, the tightness in Luhan’s stomach came uncoiled and he didn’t get a chance to warn Kris before he came down his throat with a strained shout. The man handled it smoothly and swallowed before he wiped at his mouth.

“Turn over,” Luhan didn’t even bother questioning him and did as he was directed, too winded to do much else. It didn’t take long before Kris pulled at his waist and made him kneel on his knees with his back arched as his ass pointed in Kris’ face. He wasn’t prepared for the man to spread the cheeks of his ass then lean forward, tonguing at his puckered entrance. “Stop, that’s dirt—” again he was stopped in the middle of a word, though this time it was because Kris had pushed past the tight ring of muscle with his tongue.

He lost track of the patterns and movements Kris did but by the time he felt one of Kris’ fingers push inside of him, he felt boneless and the smack of his dick against his stomach boasted how turned on he had gotten from the unfamiliar sensation. His knees hadn’t stopped shaking and when Kris got up to three fingers with one of them stroking at his prostate, Luhan was pleading with him to get on with fucking him.

Once again, Kris made him turn over until they were face to face again. Luhan knew he probably looked a mess with his wet eyes lidded with lust and red lips from biting down on them. There were also wet smears of pre-come on his stomach from where his dick had been resting previously.
Kris held his hips and pushed inside of him slowly, Luhan’s mouth opening at the slow stretch. Even with the ample preparation, he was still tight and Kris had to concentrate on moving slowly.

In all the years that Luhan had known Kris, he was aware that the man was rather gifted but now that he was getting to experience it firsthand, he was more conscious of all of it. The younger man let Luhan get adjusted before he started to move. Luhan’s hands moved to Kris’ arms and his fingers found purchase in the skin when the man moved against that spot inside of him that made his back arch.

He realized what he was doing, so Kris kept aiming at that spot and Luhan whined, shivers traveling down his back when a hand gripped the man’s dick and started to stroke him. There was so many different stimulations that Luhan wasn’t sure what made him spill onto his chest and Kris’ fist, but he did know that the sensation hit him hard. With Luhan closing around him, Kris sped up and pressed deep inside of Luhan as he came, his own orgasm striking him just as hard.

They lay there for a moment with Kris catching his breath on top of Luhan and Luhan trying to ground himself and catch his own breath. His entire body was tingling and the warmth of Kris’ body made him sweat, the bedding sticking to his back.

“Gods,” Kris commented as he brushed his hair out his face then moved off the top of him.

“No gods were involved, only you.” Luhan met Kris’ eyes when he rolled over and they stared at each other in silence. The older of the two men reach over and caressed Kris’ cheek, leaning over to kiss his forehead.

“Next time be quieter,” Jongin grumbled the next morning at the dinner table. Joonmyun looked up from his food and grinned, already piecing together what’d happened. Luhan, not to be embarrassed by Jongin, stuck his tongue out then laughed. Kris, on the other hand, stared down into his food, red-faced.

After breakfast, Kris and Joonmyun made their daily trip the market, walking slowly so that Joonmyun to could greet people along the way.

“Was it everything you hoped for?” Joonmyun asked the question with a nonchalant air to it, but Kris immediately felt flustered at the vague mention. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, failing to think of an appropriate response until he finally settled on one.

“Yes, it was. More actually,” Joonmyun patted him on the back and grinned again, reaching down to squeeze his hand. “You knew he would only make a move when he was ready.”

On an exceptionally hot day, Jongin walked around the house in the lightest pants he could find and no shirt. The indoor pool looked appealing but he didn’t want to swim alone, so he went in search of Luhan. Eventually he found him near the middle of the house where the open area and garden was, preparing to sit down and read a book.

Jongin stood behind Luhan until the man turned around with a startled expression, dropping his book into the grass “is there something you needed Jongin?” Jongin grinned and cocked his head in the direction of the pool. “It’s hot, come swim with me,” Luhan gave it some thought before he looked up at the sun shining down brightly onto the pallet of pillows where he was going to sit.

He had a point. It was hot outside, and his skin would probably burn if he sat down as he'd planned, so he agreed.
Luhan was more than ten years older than Jongin, but he found himself wading and splashing in the water, feeling like he was in his teens. He didn’t care that Jongin dunked him under and messed up his hair or that he wouldn’t stop splashing water in his face.

When Joonmyun and Kris came home, they found the two others still in the pool, sitting on the steps and having what looked like a deep conversation.

“Whenever you’re ready, just tell him,” Luhan sighed as he kicked his feet in the water. Jongin chewed his plump bottom lip and gave Luhan a look of distress. “It can’t be that easy. You don’t think he’ll think I’m strange? He’s been nothing but kind to me. It’s even strange to me that I feel this way about him,” Jongin answered back, watching as droplets of water slid down the skin of his bare thigh.

Unlike Luhan or Kris who’d admitted that they were in love with Joonmyun, Jongin wasn’t sure what that felt like in the grand scheme of his emotions. He was definitely attracted to the man and unlike Luhan, who he looked up to as a brother, Joonmyun fell somewhere past familiar love and moved more into another area that was gray for him.

“You think sleeping with him would help you figure things out?” Jongin’s head snapped up at the suggestion, and he stared at Luhan.

“Will that work?” Luhan shrugged as he leaned back and glanced at the younger man. It was interesting to see Jongin process this since he’d never seen him do something of the manner. While Luhan himself hadn’t slept with Joonmyun since leaving the courtesan house and arriving at the man’s home, he wasn’t going to discourage Jongin from trying.

“You don’t feel pressured do you?” Jongin’s head shook so hard that water from his hair splattered onto Luhan’s face. He laughed as he wiped it away, moving to stand. “In that case, think about it and if you think you’d like to do that, then go for it. I have to start dinner before Kris and Joonmyun come home, so let’s dry off and put on clothes,” when he turned to get towels, he bumped into Kris and Joonmyun “I guess they’re already home then.”

Joonmyun handed Luhan his long shirt from the floor and he accepted before he slipped it on with a blush. It made no sense why he was flustered when the man had seen him naked before. Perhaps it was because the circumstances were different and much more intimate now that Luhan had agreed to be with Joonmyun. The bangles that jingled on his wrist were proof of that.

Jongin saw the men and his face also turned red, though he was more embarrassed by the chance that Joonmyun had heard their conversation. He didn’t want to make the man feel bad, but if he’d heard, then Jongin supposed that it was time to speak up. He’d thought about it long enough.

“Exactly how much, did you, um,” Jongin stumbled over his words and looked up from his feet after he’d pulled on his pants “h-hear?” Joonmyun walked closer the boy with a grin on his face and shrugged “all of it.”

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The younger man looked for Luhan and noticed that he’d left the room, probably going to the kitchen to prepare dinner. He saw it as his way out of dealing with the situation at hand, so he shuffled out the room, shooting Joonmyun an expression that could be described as a smile.

“He’s not good at talking about his feelings,” Kris sighed once Jongin was out of hearing range. Joonmyun nodded and he sat down his bag, sitting on one of the chairs out-looking the pool. “I know, he’s just so young,” Joonmyun groaned, reaching up to run his hand through his hair. “He
is an adult. He’s old enough to decide what he wants to do,” Kris answered, reaching down to comfort the man.

This issue was dropped later on because no one was willing to talk about it, much to Jongin and Joonmyun’s collective relief. It gave the both of them time to think about it and gauge the situation.

With everything that Jongin had told Luhan, it made him question why he hadn’t slept with Joonmyun yet and he found himself coming up with no reason. It wasn’t that he didn’t find the man attractive or that the man wasn’t good in bed because he definitely wasn’t.

When he wore down all his options, Luhan finally spoke to Kris about his dilemma.

“Just go for it,” Luhan rolled his eyes and let out an annoyed huff of breath in response. He’d been talking for nearly twenty minutes and Kris answered him with four words.

“What do you mean ‘just go for it’? I’m asking you, the person who I trust more than almost anyone else in the world and you’re giving me a simple answer?” Kris looked up from the book of numbers in front of him and gave Luhan a look of boredom.

That’s when Luhan got it. Maybe it was that simple. Instead of agonizing over it and questioning things and himself, he should just do it. There was very little possibility that he would regret it.

Luhan hurtled a thanks behind him and left the library, closing the doors behind him. On his way to Joonmyun’s quarters, he saw Jongin floating on his back in the pool again, lightly treading water every few second. The younger man caught sight of Luhan and waved before he went back to swimming.

Since it was Sunday, the market was closed, and Joonmyun was in his room, laid on some cushions strew about in the corner of his room with a book in his hand.

“”You need something, Luhan?” Luhan shut the doors of the man’s room behind him and stood in front of Joonmyun, a look of determination shining in his eyes.

“I’ve lived in this house with you for more than a years time and you have yet to ask why I haven’t spent time in your bed,” Joonmyun’s eyes widened and he put his book down, standing to his feet. “I just wanted to give you time. I don’t want any of you to feel obligated to sleep with me.”

“I’ve never felt obligated to be with you, even when you would come to the house,” Luhan explained with a small smile on his face.

It was true. Even though Joonmyun paid to spend time with Luhan, never once did he ever feel pressured or expected to have sex with him. Sometimes the only things they did were play cards, talk and drink tea, not that Chilhyun knew that. It was what they did now that Luhan lived with Joonmyun and he wanted it to change.

“You came to my room in the middle of the day to tell me about that?” Luhan shook his head and gripped the collar of Joonmyun’s shirt, pulling him into a kiss “no. I came to do this.”

At first the man flailed into the kiss, unsure of where to put his arms but once he settled down, he wrapped them around Luhan’s waist. The younger man was in control of the kiss but once Joonmyun’s tongue ran across his bottom lip and asked for entrance, he let the other man take over and their tongues twisted into a passionate kiss.
Joonmyun’s hands grasped at the edge of Luhan’s shirt and pulled away from the kiss, so he could take it off Luhan’s body. With the shirt cast aside, Joonmyun stepped away and examined the healing red marks that littered the man’s upper chest and smirked before Luhan stepped out his own pants.

“He’s so possessive,” Joonmyun remarked with a hint of humor in his voice. Luhan knew he was talking about Kris because he could see some of the same marks peeking from the wrinkled collar of Joonmyun’s shirt. “Very much so,” Luhan muttered as he pulled at Joonmyun’s clothes, taking the time to kiss the skin he revealed with the removal of each piece. Since the man had been relaxing at home, that meant there wasn’t much to remove and Luhan’s work was easy.

When he had the man on his back in the bed, Luhan toyed with his nipples and mouthed more marks onto the pale expanse of skin. Joonmyun’s eyes were half closed, his chest rising and falling rapidly as Luhan continued his work.

He ran his index finger up the side of Joonmyun’s dick and around the head, enjoying how the man’s hips would stutter and his eyelids would flutter as he let out loud exhales. Joonmyun’s hands were gripping the satin sheets of his bed, trying to remain quiet but when Luhan ran the flat of his tongue up the man’s cock, all reserved behavior went out the window.

Wet heat engulfed him not a few moments later and his hips rose off the bed, a breathy moan falling from his mouth. Luhan wasted no time holding the base of the man’s dick and sliding Joonmyun down his throat. He was familiar with the fact that the man liked things a certain way, so he made sure to make sloppy wet noises and stroke what wasn’t in his mouth.

Just as Joonmyun would be about to come, Luhan would slow his actions and reduce everything to slow licks and loose strokes. He did it over and over, Joonmyun getting to the point where his hands were buried in Luhan’s shorter hair, lightly pulling each time he was taken down the man’s throat.

It was amazing that he’d lasted as long as he did, especially when Luhan somehow found the oil he kept near his bed and teased at his entrance, slipping a finger inside when he was distracted from being denied another orgasm.

Joonmyun went over the edge when Luhan added another finger and crooked them towards his prostate, stroking it as he dug his tongue into the slit of the man’s cock.

“I’m c-co-coming,” the declaration was a little late since a spurt or two had already coated Luhan’s lips and cheek. He kept stroking him through it, milking him until the last drop dripped down the side. Luhan licked up what he could and let Joonmyun go, leaning back to grin at him, dirty face and all.

Luhan’s legs wrapped tightly around Joonmyun’s waist and pulled him closer, mouthing at Joonmyun’s bare shoulders while the man rolled his hips against Luhan’s.

“This feels so different,” Joonmyun sighed as he moved with a slow and steady pace. Luhan nodded and his nails pressed into the skin on Joonmyun’s back, making crescent shaped marks.

“It’s because we’re connected by more than just our bodies this time.” The statement felt strangely poetic as it left Luhan’s mouth but he felt that it fit the moment. Joonmyun seemed taken aback by
it too and looked up, his eyes meeting Luhan’s. Another deep thrust and the man’s mouth opened in a whimper as Joonmyun brushed past his prostate.

“You think he finally stopped denying himself?” Jongin asking, looking up from the paper he was scrawling drawings on. Kris gave the question some thought before he nodded with a smile on his face. “Yes, I saw him going towards Joonmyun’s quarters a bit earlier. He closed the windows and curtains too, so I would guess that that’s what’s happening.”

“He talked about it to me last night while we—” Jongin held up his hand and nodded. He knew what Kris was going to say, so he wanted the man to spare him the details. Sure he’d spent a large portion of his life sexually servicing people, but Luhan was like a brother to him. The man had pretty much raised him as his own, yet since Luhan looked younger than him he found it hard to consider Luhan anything like a father figure.

“And you really don’t have an issue with the nature of his relationship with Joonmyun? Like at all?” Kris shook his head immediately and sat back in his chair. “All three of us have an understanding. I love Luhan and Joonmyun. Joonmyun loves Luhan and I and Luhan loves the both of us. Whether the love takes different forms, we still get that it’s still love,” Jongin listened, trying to understand and liken their relationship to his own relationship and feelings towards Joonmyun. “Just remember it’s possible to love more than one person.”

The usually pale flesh of Luhan’s thighs was flushed red as Joonmyun gripped them, watching with heavy lidded eyes as Luhan rose and fell in his lap. When he grew tired, he stilled and put his hands on Joonmyun’s shoulders before he started to move his hips forwards and backward, grinding down on Joonmyun more pointedly.

It was ideal for the both of them because each time he moved, he hit his prostate repeatedly, making his dick pool pre-come on Joonmyun’s stomach.

“I’m going to come soon,” Luhan warned, not even bothering to expedite the process by using his hands. His entire body was overcome with a tingling sensation and he wanted it to last as long as possible.

The hands moved from his thighs to his neck as Joonmyun lightly pulled him down to kiss him. Almost immediately his tongue slipped inside of Luhan’s already open mouth, tracing along his teeth before their tongues tangled. In the process, their bodies were pressed together and Luhan’s dick slid through its own mess on Joonmyun’s stomach, providing just the friction he needed to come, adding more stickiness between them.

Joonmyun spilled inside of Luhan a while later then they stayed like that. Luhan on stop of Joonmyun as the man held him closer, not caring that come and sweat were gluing them together.

Before either of them said a word, Luhan leaned down and kissed him softly, the gesture absent of tongue. He pulled away with a smile and splayed out his hands on Joonmyun’s chest, toying with the man’s nipples.

“Thank you for waiting,” Luhan said as he climbed off of Joonmyun and stood up beside the bed, turning to grin at him. Joonmyun’s gaze was on Luhan’s face but it fell as he watched translucent liquid drip down the back of his thighs.
“We should go take a bath,” Joonmyun managed in a gruff voice, his eyes glued to Luhan’s hands as he gathered up some of the substance on his finger and placed some on his tongue. “Tastes different with the oil mixed in,” Luhan remarked with air of nonchalance. Joonmyun swallowed hard and got up, walking up to Luhan and kissing him. He sucked the man’s tongue into his mouth, tasting the mixture of himself and the oil that Luhan spoke of. When Joonmyun backed up Luhan stared at him with wide eyes before he grinned.

The next morning, Luhan served breakfast with another broad smile on his face. It was noticeably different than the one he usually wore because each time he’d look down into his food chuckling, Joonmyun would blush and look down in his food too.

“Good to know you got along so well,” Jongin commented around a full mouth of food. Luhan looked up with a shy smile, his expression promising a lengthy explanation later on. One that Kris, oddly, found himself wanting to hear. In fact, he felt the stirrings of arousal in his groin and rushed away from the table after the food on his plate was gone.

The realm of possibilities of what Luhan and Joonmyun had done the previous day were boundless. The problem was that Kris was very familiar with Joonmyun and Luhan’s intimate trysts, so there were many things to reference from and imagine.

It was enough to have him rushing to privacy to relieve himself of the erection that sprang from the mental pictures.
On the day Jongin made his 19th year, Kris and Joonmyun came home with a large dark colored jug.

“What’s that?” Jongin asked, examining the bottle when Kris sat it down. There was a grin on Kris’s face, and Luhan ran his finger along the strange characters, a similar look on his face.

“It’s rice wine from the Han country,” Joonmyun answered as he walked into the kitchen to retrieve four cups. “You’re old enough to drink alcohol, and I wanted it to be something good.”

Jongin examined the bottle again, pulling the cork from it and sniffing it. The light scent of the alcohol surprised Jongin since he was accustomed to the acrid and stiff scented alcohols native to their country.

The ornamentation of the bottle spoke about how expensive it must’ve been, and Jongin eyed it with curiosity. He’d only ever drunken the stuff that was given to him by customers who wished to drink with him or have him drink. If he was quite honest, the best appointments he’d had were ones where he was so drunk that they passed in a numb and hazy blur.

Once he’d stepped foot out the courtesan house, he hadn’t so much as seen a bottle of alcohol except on his visits to the market. Joonmyun didn’t seem like a drinker, and he was sure that Luhan and Kris did all their drinking outside the house.

“To the rather whirlwind of a year we’ve all had,” Joonmyun said once everyone had their small cups filled with the milky liquid. Jongin nodded and held out his glass to the bump with the others.

After that, they all downed the liquid in one swallow.

The alcohol didn’t burn like it usually did, and Jongin found that the taste was sweet and mellow on his tongue, unlike anything he’d ever tasted. He enjoyed it so much that he poured himself another glass then downed that one as well.

“Whoa slow down. You don’t want to hurt yourself,” Kris said, reaching over to pat Jongin on the back.

After his fifth glass, his body started to get warm, and he shook his leg, a tired smile on his face. He’d taken to staring at Joonmyun, watching as the man’s face turned a flushed red and he slurred his words. All of this happened halfway through the man’s third glass.

With Luhan and Kris on their fifth and sixth glass, respectively, neither of them showed signs of being drunk.

“Is der anythin you’d like to do tomorrow since the market was so busy today?” Joonmyun asked, holding Jongin’s stare. The younger man shrugged and drank the remnants of his sixth glass. “Not really, I just wish you’d all stop seeing me as a kid,” his tongue felt thick as he spoke, but he figured that everyone could understand him well enough. The room started to distort and turn, so Jongin folded his arms on the table and put his head inside of them.

“I think they’ve had enough,” Luhan announced, looking perfectly sober when Jongin peeked
through the crack between his arms. He watched Kris pick up the cork and stick it back into the bottle, moving, albeit a bit slower than usual, to put it away. Joonmyun was pouting in response to being cut off and Jongin started to giggle because Joonmyun looked funny as his lips protruded and his eyebrows furrowed. His usually bright cheeks were even redder than the last time Jongin had looked at him, and his eyes were droopy, nearly closed.

Joonmyun was very drunk.

And so was he.

Before he could succumb to sleep, Luhan stood him up and helped him to his room. Despite the amount of alcohol that sloshed around in his stomach, Jongin felt fine. Actually, he felt more than fine. His warm skin felt like heaven against the crisp bedding on his bed as Luhan assisted him in tugging off his pants and tucked him in. He was vaguely aware of the basin Luhan placed beside his bed before he blew out the lamp in Jongin’s room and left.

“How are you not hung over?” Luhan admonished when Jongin walked into the kitchen, his hair still damp from his bath. He shrugged and sat down at the table, nearly inhaling the food placed in front of him.

“To be young again.” Kris joined them at the table, and Luhan sat a plate down in front of him too. Unlike Jongin, he ate slow and chewed his food deliberately. While it didn’t seem like last night’s drinks had affected much, his complexion was noticeably paler, and he avoided the meat on his plate, only eating the bread and washing it down with water.

The longer he looked at the Kris, the more he noticed. For instance, there were bite marks that littered the man’s collar that were visible when his shirt dipped as he reached to refill his water.

Luhan must’ve gotten more aggressive after a few drinks.

When Joonmyun walked into the kitchen and sat down, he was in the same upbeat mood he always was, considering he’d been staggering drunk the night before.

“Jongin, I’m sorry if you’ve ever felt like I don’t treat you the same as Luhan and Kris.” The comment seemed random at first, but when Jongin tried to remember all that he’d said last night, he felt a bit of embarrassment and shame well up in the pit of his stomach.

Had he said too much last night?

What had he said last night?

Luhan saw the confusion written on Jongin’s face and leaned towards him with a sympathetic smile on his face “you went on a rant about how he treats you like a kid.”

Jongin’s eyes darted down to his plate, and they stayed there until Joonmyun cleared his throat. “You know that was never my intention. I just didn’t want you to feel pressured. Anything we talk about or do should be born out of your desire to do so.” Jongin looking up slowly and he attempted to read the expression that was on Joonmyun’s face but failed.

“If you’d like to talk Jongin, the door to my office and quarters are always open.” With that Joonmyun rose from the table and disappeared down the hall, going in the direction of his quarters. “It’s because of your age Jongin. Joonmyun understands your feelings already. You just need to go talk to him like an adult.” Luhan’s words sent a twinge of annoyance through Jongin’s body, but he
knew the man was right.

Joonmyun had been nothing but understanding since he’d acknowledged Jongin as a member of the household.

“You should just tell him how you feel,” Taemin sighed as stuffed a piece of meat off Jongin’s plate into his mouth.

The day that Jongin had picked to hang around the market turned out to be the shopping day for the courtesan house, and it seemed that Taemin was sent out to do the errand. When Jongin saw the shorter and thinner man, he ran towards him and knocked the air out of him with a tight hug.

“I can’t believe it but you’ve grown this much in less than a year’s time,” Taemin commented once he regained his breath and got a good look at his old friend.

Jongin hadn’t really noticed, but he supposed that Taemin was telling the truth since he was now peering over the man’s head instead of being eye-level with him.

“Prince Joonmyun must be treating you well.” The comment shouldn’t have stung more than it did but Jongin felt his throat tighten and his eyes welled up with tears.

“How are you? I mean really, are you okay?” The other man took on a pensive expression then he smiled and nodded. “Yes, I’m fine. There’s a customer that’s been coming to the house that pretty much demands all my attention. I think he’s captivated with me and may even do for me what Joonmyun did for Kris and Luhan.”

Taemin’s words eased some of the pain in Jongin’s chest, and he found it easier to breathe, knowing that one of his best friends wasn’t being mistreated now that he was gone.

Back when Jongin was in the house, if Luhan was busy with a client or out for any reason, Jongin would be given the customers who were on the rougher side. Many of the courtesans figured that it was because Jongin was closest to Luhan, so Chilhyun liked to punish him accordingly.

While they had never hurt Jongin too badly or even near what the woman who’d previously bought him did, it was still much worse than any of the other courtesans were subjected to.

“Does Chilhyun still come to talk to you and make you spend time with him?” Taemin shook his head and shrugged. “Nah, I think I’ve gotten too old for him. But I have noticed that he doesn’t like Scholar Choi’s frequent visits. I know if he weren’t so greedy for money, he’d probably ban the man from the house.” Jongin grinned and thought of Minho, thinking to himself that it was rather cute that Taemin still called the man by his title.

His thoughts led him to recalling how Joonmyun would watch with a proud smile on his face as Jongin learned whatever Minho was teaching him for the day. Taemin caught the look on his face and grinned.

“Surely you don’t have those lost eyes for Kris. They must be for Joonmyun.” Jongin choked on
the water he’d just sipped and glared at Taemin.

Was he that easy to read?

“I’ll tell him when I get ready.”

Taemin rolled his eyes and continued to pick food off Jongin’s plate until the entire thing was clean.

“Do they not feed you at the house anymore?” His question took on a tone of jest, but Taemin knew that Jongin was serious.

“Of course, though, since the best cook was taken away, Chilhyun had to hire someone. No one else wants to do it, and since a few wasted food in their attempts, he got annoyed. The food’s okay, but it’s not as good as Luhan’s.” They sat there for a few more moments then Joonmyun joined them while Kris continued walking around and conversing.

Almost immediately Taemin rose to his feet and bowed, an unreadable expression on his face as he avoided eye contact. Before Jongin could tell him to stop, Joonmyun beat him to it.

“That’s not necessary. Any friend of Jongin’s is a friend of mine, and I don’t allow my friends to bow to me. I am undeserving of such a gesture.” Taemin’s mouth hung slack as he listened to Joonmyun’s words and stood up straight, eventually settling back in his seat when Joonmyun sat down.

“Everything’s fine?” Joonmyun nodded at Jongin’s question then eyed the container of water on the table before he took a gulp. Taemin watched in further amazement because he knew that it was the same container that Jongin and himself had been drinking from.

Something was amazing, even humbling, about how Prince Joonmyun behaved like he wasn’t a son, however illegitimate, of the King.

“Forgive me for being so frank but Prince Joonmyun, how do you feel about my friend Jongin?” Jongin stared at Taemin, partly in shock, partly in anger and partly in amusement. It was nice to know that his friend was still the same person he’d been from when they were younger. Jongin had never been too good at expressing his emotions or feelings out loud, so Taemin used to be his voice at times.

Joonmyun grinned, and he laughed before he shrugged.

“Well I mean since he’s sitting right here, I guess there’s no better time than now,” Joonmyun turned and looked at Jongin “I admire how quick of a learner you are. Despite what you lack in age, you make up for in wisdom and compassion. I enjoy being in your presence and I think you add something different to the house that I didn’t realize was missing.” The other man listened, and Taemin jabbed him in the side every few seconds to make sure he was listening.

“I hope that answers your question, ah,” Joonmyun paused and scratched his head “I didn’t catch your name.” Taemin visibly blushed, and he bowed his head a little.

“Lee Taemin. I knew Jongin in the courtesan house.” Joonmyun nodded then he reached out his hand. The other man stared at it before he reached out slowly and shook it.

Once introductions had been passed and Jongin continued to sit in an embarrassed silence, Taemin said that he had to go and quickly picked up the food that was already bundled up for him. Joonmyun waved at him, and he waved back, hurrying in the direction of the house.
Jongin kept his gaze down as he ate his dinner and once he finished helping clean up, he disappeared to his room.

The whole situation made Joonmyun feel at odds because he wanted to talk to Jongin more but he didn’t want to push or force him to talk.

Jongin was aware that the man was worried, but he was still trying to process everything that Joonmyun had said in the market. If the man was that genuine in his feelings, even in front of Taemin, a stranger to him, then maybe it was time to speak for himself for once.

He didn’t have to wait long because a knock sounded on his door and he sprung to an upright position on his bed.

Surely it wasn’t Joonmyun. The man hardly ever visited them in their quarters, so it was shocking when Jongin opened the door to reveal a worried looking Joonmyun. The man was dressed in his usual nightclothes of some sheer pants and a long, open silk robe.

“Jongin I just wanted to talk to you before I went to bed, is that okay?” Jongin nodded and stepped aside, letting him into the room.

In the few months that Jongin had been there, Luhan had helped him to decorate, and now Joonmyun admired the young man’s taste in subtle décor. His bedding was a rich dark blue, and it matched the curtains draped over his open windows.

Jongin sat down on his bed and patted the spot next to him. The older man took the hint and sat down, making himself comfortable.

“I’m not a kid.”

“I know.”

“I want to be treated as such then.”

“I know.”

“You’re not taking advantage of me. I know what I want.”

“I kno—know that now.”

“Show me. Show me that you know.”

The room went silent for a moment, and Joonmyun’s face revealed that he was confused. How exactly did Jongin want him to show that?

Jongin reached forward and gripped Joonmyun’s chin before he leaned in and kissed him once. It was every bit as soft and as sensual as Jongin had been picturing. There was even a hint of longing in Joonmyun’s eyes when Jongin pulled away, and it did something for Jongin.

Just that suddenly, he was excited, and he went in for another kiss, gripping at Joonmyun’s hair to pull him closer. Joonmyun moaned when Jongin yanked harder, wordlessly prompting him to do it again.
If he hadn’t been so concentrated on the task at hand, he would’ve marveled at the difference between the person Joonmyun was in public, and the person Joonmyun was behind closed doors.

Joonmyun was the man underneath him, gripping the sheets as Jongin inched inside of him with a practiced slowness. Joonmyun was the man who wrapped his arms around Jongin’s neck and pressed their sweat-dampened bodies even closer.

Despite the walls being far from thin, Kris and Luhan’s room was next door, so Joonmyun tried his best to keep quiet. It was hard when Jongin did everything in his power to pull noise out of him. Whether it was the sharp thrusts that made him move further up the bed, slicking up his fist and taking to squeezing Joonmyun’s arousal or slowing things to an almost frustrating point. He did all of it with a smirk on his face and an air of confidence that Joonmyun had never witnessed from Jongin.

With each loud moan, whimper or curse he got from Joonmyun, he gained more confidence and got bolder with his actions. His kisses had more bite, and his thrusts were quicker and harder.

The loud whines that filtered through the walls served as an indication that Jongin had finally opened his mouth or that Joonmyun had finally pulled the confession from him.

“They’re really going at it,” Kris whistled, settling into Luhan’s bed. He smelled of incense and Luhan couldn't help himself as he buried his face in the man’s neck, taking a deeper whiff. “You smell good,” Kris grinned at the tickle Luhan’s lips gave then leaned away.

“We’re not having sex while Jongin is intent on making Joonmyun scream.” Luhan laughed, and he brushed his hair out his face. The gesture made the large tunic he was wearing ride up his thighs, and he caught how Kris’s eyes darted to the revealed skin.

“You sure?” He hiked up the shirt further until it barely covered the curve of his ass. Kris’s eyes lingered for a few beats longer before he looked out the window and swallowed hard. “I’m sure.”

Luhan rolled his eyes then gave him a look of annoyance before he turned over and blew out the only lit lamp in the room.

“Fine.” Even though it was dark, Luhan could feel Kris plant kisses down the back of his neck before he patted him on the shoulder.

“Nice try. I’m an expert at resisting you if you haven't noticed.”

His second orgasm of the night hit him when Jongin gripped his long strands and pulled as he pressed his hips to flush against Joonmyun’s ass. He let out an exhausted moan as his knees shook and Jongin let out a breathless laughter, pulling out of Joonmyun slowly. Remnants of his previous orgasm trailed out slowly, and Joonmyun’s body relaxed on the sheets as he caught his breath.

“Once you’re ready I want you to fuck me.” Joonmyun leaned up from his head in the pillow and stared at Jongin, incredulous that he still had the energy to keep going. Jongin caught sight of the older man’s tired expression and leaned forward, lifting up his chin as he placed another gentle kiss on his lips. “Can’t get tired so quickly on me Joonmyun. I have so many plans for us.”
His nerves left him the moment he felt at ease with Joonmyun and now that he was comfortable, the lewd comments flowed from his lips.

Jongin must’ve caught Joonmyun on a, particularly good day because the man seemed to pull energy from thin air. While he’d been getting his bearings together, Jongin had leaned back with his legs sprawled open as he prepared himself. The sight alone had been enough to cause a stir of arousal in the pit of Joonmyun’s stomach.

He’d kept it going, bringing himself to the brink of climax before he stopped and removed his hand. Jongin wiped the residual oil on the sheets and lay on his back with his hands folded behind his head. His legs were wide open, and Joonmyun kneeled between them before stroking the heated skin of Jongin’s inner thighs.

Despite his relaxed demeanor, his dick twitched with interest and Jongin had to fight off a shiver. When Joonmyun reached and pulled Jongin’s hips up, the man looked at him in curiosity. That interest turned to confusion as his heels were lifted off the bed and his legs were pinned underneath Joonmyun’s arms. With a simple push forward, he slipped inside of Jongin and the man’s eyes went wide. From the angle that his hips were, Joonmyun rocked against his prostate in record time.

Now the arms that were so tauntingly folded behind his head had now unfolded, and his dick started to pool clear liquid onto his stomach. His entire body was racked with heat, and despite Joonmyun’s thrusts being short, deep and slow, Jongin’s heart slammed into his chest.

“I don’t hear you talking anymore Jongin,” Joonmyun mentioned, already knowing that his precision had thrown the younger man off. In fact, if the reddening of Jongin’s dick was an indicator, then he was going to come very soon. “Stroke yourself slow for me.” Jongin narrowed his eyes and muttered something but did as Joonmyun requested.

Whenever his strokes got too quick, Joonmyun would pause inside of him, just shy of his prostate and look at him until he adjusted his speed. Never once did Joonmyun allow Jongin to lower his hips and his lower back started to ache as a result.

All of that was secondary though when Jongin finally came, spilling on his own stomach and chest. The liquid seeped through his fingers, and when he moved to stop stroking, Joonmyun looked at him.

“You tired already?” Jongin’s chest rose and fell quickly as he glared at Joonmyun. “Feeding my words back to me?” This time, it was Joonmyun’s turn to smirk, and he sped up his pace, keeping a firm grip on Jongin’s hips. Within a few thrusts, he came and finally let go Jongin, allowing him to lie flat on his back.

Jongin lay still for a few moments then he turned on his side and looked at Joonmyun.

“I’m better at physically expressing my feelings.”

“I know.”

A sense of déjà vu passed over Joonmyun, and he let out a laugh.

“Are all our conversations going to be you telling me things that I’m already aware of?” Jongin leaned up and joined in the laughter before he shrugged.
Neither Luhan nor Kris was surprised when Joonmyun came to breakfast from the direction of Jongin’s room rather than his own. Luhan leered at Jongin when he walked in a few moments later.

“Fun night?” Jongin grinned around a mouthful of food but didn’t answer. Joonmyun nodded and yawned before he took a bite of some bread.

“I’m glad you finally opened his mouth,” Kris commented, spooning some food into his mouth.

“He did more than that judging from the noises last night.” Luhan’s quip made Kris choke on that same mouthful of food, and he hurriedly guzzled some water. Jongin snorted and kept eating, reaching over to pat the taller man on the back.

Kris and Joonmyun left for the market a while later, and after Luhan had cleaned the kitchen following breakfast, he wandered around the house until he found Jongin in the library.

With his face buried in a book, he didn’t even notice Luhan’s presence until the man sat down next to him.

“Are you satisfied?” Jongin looked up with a startled expression, and he attempted to process what Luhan’s question was about.

For the second time that day, Jongin contemplated the answer then answered without hesitation.

“Yes.”
His mother was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. She moved with grace and passion in everything she did. When she cleaned the house, she bounced on the balls of her feet and sang husky-voiced dance songs. While Jongdae hadn’t had known, his mother was one of the most well-known dancers in their country, many recognizing her from a single glance.

Looking back on it, he’d always wondered why people called out to his mother when they’d go to public places. More often than not, she’d respond to the greetings with a bright smile then she’d lead her children onward.

When his sister, Yuri, made her 10th year, their mother taught his sister how to dance. Jongdae had been five at the time, so he’d only tried to imitate his mother and sister’s moves because it’d looked interesting.

At first, he could barely manage the footwork and he would fall over, but then he would just scramble back to his feet and start again, concentrating hard on the instructions his mother was giving to his sister. When Jongdae approached his 10th year, he thought his mother would bestow the same gift upon him, but instead, she encouraged him to study more and forget about dancing.

As a child, he’d thought nothing of it and tried to follow her advice, but when his sister and mother would practice, he’d sneak and watch. Afterward, he’d attempt the steps again and again until he perfected them and even surpassed his sister.

Once when the women of the house were off on errands, he went into his mother’s trunk and retrieved her sash with flattened pieces of metal on it. He tied it to his thin waist then practiced to the songs his mother would hum or sing on occasions.

Lost in his actions, he didn’t hear his mother and sister approach and he was caught, winding his hips to a slow beat that no one else could hear but himself. His sister rolled her eyes but his mother looked at him with something akin to disgust in her eyes. “Take that off and go study,” she’d spat the words so calmly and quietly that it scared the wits out of the little boy. He snatched off the fabric and threw it on the ground before he fled to his room.

Unlike the other times in his life where his mother would come to his room hours later to apologize for being too stern with him, she didn’t this time. Instead, he sat in his room for hours, staring at his lesson books, tears welling up in his eyes.

A few years passed and with them took their mother. In a sudden decline, she got sick, withered away and passed soon after. His sister was in her 18th year and he was in his 13th. Once they’d buried her, his sister made considerable efforts to find a husband wealthy enough to take care of her and Jongdae. Within a year, she succeeded and married a rich palace scholar.

For the first year or two, things were fine and Jongdae had no problem with the man. He was wealthy, he treated his sister kindly and gave him everything he needed. The man also didn’t force him to study and calmed his angry wife when Jongdae told her that he wasn’t pursuing a higher education.

“I want to dance,” was all that he’d said and he saw his sister’s eyes widen before she opened up her mouth to scream at him. He’d ended up sleeping outside for a few days after that, waiting for
his sister’s anger to breeze over. When he came back, he overheard a conversation, and it made his stomach turn.

“He doesn’t understand the sacrifices our mother had to make in order to educate him. His father left when I was five and she was pregnant with him. I remember her swearing to me, even from little that the only man that would be in her life after him was going to be Jongdae. She made me promise that I would help raise and educate him to make something more out of himself. I feel like I’ve failed her Kyuhyun.” Jongdae watched as Kyuhyun put a comforting hand on her shoulder and kissed her forehead. “It’s like he’s ungrateful. Our mother was the best dancer in the country at one point and she gave it all up to raise us. I’ll be damned if he goes to chase behind her fame. You know he’s always done this too. He used to love watching us dance and even before he could really understand, he’d mimic our mother’s dancing,” Jongdae felt the anger stir inside him and instead of going to confront his sister, he just left.

After debating with himself a few months previous to him telling his sister about his decision, he wondered if it was time he stopped living with his sister and her husband. It was time for Yuri to start thinking about kids of her own, he could tell from how eager Kyuhyun was whenever Jongdae casually talked about future nephews and nieces. It was all just a coincidence that everything had fallen into place so quickly.

He was fine with the things he’d packed when he initially left so there was no need to go back, but Jongdae made sure to write a short note, then slide it underneath the door so his sister wouldn’t worry too much. Kyuhyun would probably find it and give it to Yuri for him.

Either way, his sister was right.

He wanted to follow in the abandoned footsteps of their mother. Very few male dancers were well known, so it would be difficult to get to his mother’s level of fame, but he wanted to try.

Jongdae ran out of food and money after a fortnight and took to dancing in the streets for change, hoping he’d have enough to buy a meal. Most times than not, he made a little extra which he’d save for the occasional beggar he came across.

It didn’t take long until he caught the attention of a man who was apart of a band. One day in his usual performance place, the man’s band set up and they played for him, his body picking up the rhythm easily.

His audience was much bigger than he’d ever seen it and there were even bystanders that caught his eye. They looked more extravagantly dressed than the other townspeople, so it made sense that they stood out. He usually ignored onlookers, but for some reason, Jongdae absolutely couldn’t ignore this one and he danced in one area so he could hear their words more clearly. “He moves a bit like Bo Ah, he resembles her too,” though his heart beat skipped at the mention of his mother’s name, he kept dancing and flashed the growing crowd a bright smile, one he’d also been told looked like his mother’s.

The song came to a close and he thanked the band then went to collect his bag with the money from the crowd. Just as he grabbed the bag, a bigger hand grabbed his arm and he shrank back on instinct. “You do look like a spitting image of her. I’ll be damned! You look a bit rough and hungry boy, would you like to dance in the palace?” Jongdae looked at the man in question and shrugged, identifying him as the man from the crowd.

“This money is enough to live and eat off of for at least a week. The offer sounds tempting though,
why?” He gave Jongdae a greasy smile and rubbed his hands together. “The king is looking for some new entertainment and I think you’re just what he wants. You’d get as many hot meals as you’d like, all the fancy clothes you can handle and everything else, all you have to do is dance.” The stress on the last word made Jongdae feel uneasy but why not? It would get him out his sister’s hair and she wouldn’t be able to force him to go to school.

He hated school.

“You know what? You have a deal um Mr” Jongdae stopped and the man grinned again “Woohyun.” He gripped Jongdae’s hand and shook it, then asked him to follow him.

The crowd had since broken up and everyone went about their way. Even the band was packing up their instruments.

Before he followed the Woohyun man, Jongdae walked over to the leader of the band and gave him the money he’d collected. “It looks I won’t needing it so here you go sir. Thank you for playing for me.” The man stared at the bag, never having seen that much money in his life. He took it slowly and thanked Jongdae profusely before he went back towards the other members and split the money.

Jongdae took one last look in the direction of his sister’s house before he followed behind Woohyun, the bag with his belongings clung tightly in his hand.

The walk to the palace was surprisingly short and he looked up as the man signaled for the gates to open and let them in. It was a good thing this Woohyun seemed to be pretty legit because Jongdae had a few questions, all of which he was planning to ask the man once they stopped walking.

“How do you know the king will like me? What if he just thinks I’m a scrawny kid?” he asked as soon as they were settled inside some sort of waiting room. The man tilted his head and grinned down at Jongdae. “I just know it kid. When a covered woman comes in here, allow her to check you thoroughly. After she and her people check and clean you, then you can have one of those hot meals I promised.” Jongdae nodded and sat in silence, holding his bag in his lap.

The palace was nothing short of lavish and it made the two homes he’d known all his life more than pale in comparison. There was gold, purple and green adornments decorating each and every surface that he could see. He also faintly heard the tinkling of metal, which he assumed to be clothing like that which his mother had worn all those years ago.

Somewhere deep inside of him, he hoped that he too would get a chance to be adorned with gold, silver, and silk to dance for a larger crowd of people. Just the thought that he was already climbing towards his goal stirred an excitement that was usually only there when he danced.

“This is the boy?” Just as Woohyun had said, a woman with loosely covered hair walked into the room and motioned for Jongdae to walk towards her. He stood still as she examined him, her hands squeezing and eyes squinting as she looked at him closely. “How old are you?” Jongdae was so distracted because she’d moved down to check his thighs and the state of his feet. “16,” the woman stopped her examination and nodded. “Parents or family?”, “my mother is deceased and I have an older sister, she’s married,” another nod and click of her tongue.

When she was satisfied she looked at Woohyun and brought her hands together, bowing shallowly as she smiled. “He’s perfect, where did you find such a gorgeous and talented boy?” At that point, Jongdae tuned out and he turned his head when he heard the tingling of metal again. Standing in
the doorway was one of the most gorgeous men he’d ever seen as well as women who were equally as beautiful surrounding him. When he met the man’s eyes, he moved to hide against the wall, though this made the ornaments on his clothing jingle and alert the woman and Woohyun.

“Jaejoong, come into the room and greet Woohyun. Sumi, Juhyun and Jina, you too.” All of the people she mentioned stumbled into the room and bowed towards Woohyun, the man shooting Jaejoong a particularly greasy smile in return. He gave the girls similar expressions then took his leave, waving his hand behind him as he walked out.

“Woohyun tells me that your name is Jongdae?” Jongdae nodded and the lady made a sound of affirmation before she told the girls to show him to their bathing room. Jaejoong seemed to follow behind them, listening intently to what the woman was telling him, a serious expression on her rather youthful face.

The girls wasted no times stripping him, not even bother to ask as they pulled the cheap cloth off his body and stepped out their own. Seconds later they pulled him into the steamy water, taking turns scrubbing his scalp and rinsing the suds from his brunette hair. “So is that lady in charge of us?” the girls that were grooming him stopped and they shared a short laugh. “Bada is like our mother. She also comes up with the dances that we perform.”

Bada.

So the woman was named after the ancient word for sea. When Jongdae pondered how peaceful yet menacing she seemed, he figured that the name fit her.

“You really do look like a dancer. I heard the man say that you reminded him of someone,” a husky voice cut through the girls’ chatter and Jongdae looked up to see the man from earlier wading into the bathing pool. From what he could see of him, the man’s upper body was covered with tattoos, his shoulders were broad and his waist was small. Out of all the men Jongdae had ever seen, that man, Jaejoong, was one of the prettiest. His hair was a unique shade of light brown, almost the same as the foreigners from the west. “Is your mother’s name BoA?” Jongdae snapped out his admiration to just stare blankly at him. “How do you know my mother’s name?” Jaejoong let out an amused laugh and he moved closer, shooting a look at the girls before they moved to get out the bath.

Jongdae was sort of glad that they were gone but he noticed how quiet the room was now following their absence. In such a big room, the soft trickling of water gave off a rather lonely feeling in the silence.

It was a little awkward to continue his bath because Jaejoong stared at him the whole time. The only time he looked away was when he washed his hair and even then Jaejoong did so quickly. “Is this customary for new dancers? Do you also stare at them too? If I was anyone else I’d be uncomfortable but my mother raised me to love my body. Am I attractive to you or something?” Jaejoong widened his eyes and this time Jongdae laughed.

While he hadn’t been the smartest in school, teachers always commented on how smart and sharp-witted he was. He was also incredibly perceptive and he figured he’d gotten his heightened self-awareness from his mother.

That was why he knew that Jaejoong probably did have an interest in him. He hadn’t stopped looking at him since he first caught sight of him and it entertained Jongdae. To have the full
attention of such a handsome man was rather nice but he wanted to scope him out first.

It took a moment for Jaejoong to realize Jongdae was messing with him but once he did, he cracked a smile. “You are rather attractive and I heard Bada say that you were in your 16th year? That makes me older by a year then. It’s nice to have another guy around, especially someone like yourself.” His choice of words peaked Jongdae’s curiosity and he waded closer to Jaejoong. “That reminds me, you never told me how or why you knew my mother’s name. Do you know about her dancing too?”

The older man tilted his head in confusion then it clicked “you don’t know why already?” Jongdae shook his head and Jaejoong grabbed his wrist, leading them both out the pool. Instead of jerking away like he would’ve normally done, he patiently followed the man until he sat down at what looked like a vanity. Carefully he applied scented lotion, rose, to his skin and combed through his wet hair. Jongdae followed suit though he chose the more subtle vanilla scented lotion. When he caught sight of his own face, he realized that he had really grown to look like his mother.

He’d always figured that his sister took after their father in looks and he after their mother, which is why his mother was so adamant about him excelling in school. “You’re a man, you can’t get by on a pretty face and light feet,” the words had always struck him as odd but the older he got, the more he realized that that wasn’t true.

Here he was in the palace of their country’s king, enlisted as an entertainer and he’d only gotten there out of luck, his looks and his dancing or rather his ‘light feet.’

Jina, Juhyun, and Sumi sat neat stacks of clothes in their laps when they were done grooming themselves. They left soon after in a fit of giggles when Jaejoong reached over and fixed Jongdae’s hair, claiming that it looked unsightly. Even if there was a mirror in front of the both of them and he knew that to be untrue, Jongdae leaned into it. “They won’t spread rumors will they?” Jaejoong shrugged and rose to start getting dressed. “Probably, though it’ll only be the concubines and palace maids that know.”

After they’d gotten dressed and Jongdae silently fawned over the gorgeous green fabric of his clothes, Jaejoong took to showing them their quarters. Even though it was to share for the two of them, Jongdae had never seen a room that large before. Even with Kyuhyun’s wealth, the biggest room in his house paled to this one room within the palace.

“There’s only one bed but it’s big enough to share if you don’t mind. If you do, we can tell Bada and she’ll arrange something for you. The bathroom we just came from is the entertainers’ private bath, so that’s ours to use at any time. Down the hall is the female entertainers quarter, which we are only allowed to visit during the day and,” Jaejoong paused because he’d heard something and as he moved closer to Jongdae, he realized it was the man’s stomach. Jongdae avoided Jaejoong’s smirk and he continued on “the kitchen is this way, I’ll show you now.” Jongdae thanked him quietly and they walked down another winding hall, the smell of food getting stronger and heavier as they approached.

Jaejoong walked in first and greeted everyone, who welcomed him with bright smiles and various greetings. Some glanced at Jongdae and others ignored him, continuing with their jobs until the other man cleared his throat and introduced him.

“This is Jongdae, he’s a new dancer.” One of the older cooks wiped flour on her apron and came closer, studying Jongdae’s face before her eyes welled up and she hugged him. The surprise of the embrace jolted Jongdae from his place and he nearly fell over. When she pulled away, she stepped
back and looked at him again, a sad smile on her face.

“You’re her child, there’s no doubt about it. You have her eyes,” Jongdae looked at the old woman in confusion and he remembered that Jaejoong had yet to tell him what he and everyone else seemed to know about his mother. He went to mention that but stopped when Jaejoong shook his head and guided Jongdae away from the woman. “I’ll tell you while you eat, I promise,” the earnest look in his eyes deterred Jongdae and he nodded, accepting the food that was handed to him a few seconds later.

The older man found them somewhere secluded to eat and once they were settled, he took a breath “your mother was one of the best dancers in this country,” Jongdae nodded. “She used to dance in the palace all the time, but she refused to be made a palace entertainer because she wanted to travel and have freedom. It made the king upset but he allowed her such a luxury. There’s a rumor that she was the first and only woman the king loved. When she became pregnant with your sister, whose father was a rich diplomat from another country, the king went into a rage and arranged for his discreet assassination. Your mother didn’t know of his death at first but when she went to tell him the news, she found his family in mourning and decided against telling them. From there, she had your sister then continued to dance in order to make a living. There was another rumor that she fell in love with an artesian a few years after your sister’s birth and they eloped. That’s where you came in,” Jaejoong stopped for a break and shoved a piece of bread into his mouth. Jongdae, on the other hand, looked down at his food, now uninterested in it.

His mother had gone through all of this and he, nor his sister, were aware. She’d been a peculiar woman but now he was finding out that she had her reasons. It also was a shock to find out that they didn’t share the same father as he’d initially thought.

“Sorry, so anyway your mom got pregnant with you and once again the king was furious. Since the artesian was from a country that our country had just signed a peace treaty with, the king paid the man and told him to disappear from your mother’s side. He complied and ran off, which left Boa to raise you and your sister alone. The king helped as much as he could, but your mother always resisted his extensive help. He wanted to take you and sister in and educate you both with his own children but the queen hated your mother and did everything in her power to keep him from her and you all,” Jongdae’s stomach demanded that he continue to eat despite the fact that all the food tasted like warm spicy mush in his mouth.

“Is that all?” Jongdae rasped out once he finished most of his food. Jaejoong nodded and he eyed the bread on Jongdae’s plate. Jongdae picked it up and sat it on Jaejoong’s plate, then sat with his back against the wall. “So all these years I thought my father had run away because he was unreliable. My mother raised me on that belief. It was why she distrusted men after. All of this is because the king loved my mother…” Jongdae trailed off and he stared at the wall in front of him.

It was a lot to take in.

After Jaejoong finished off Jongdae’s piece of bread, he gave the man a pat on the shoulder. “I also think that’s the reason why they brought you here. Woohyun said you dance and look just like your mother. Where is she by the way? Also exactly how did you end up here?” Jongdae swallowed the lump in his throat and he sighed “she’s dead. My sister married early in order to support the both of us. Recently she expressed that she wanted me to follow through with our mother’s wish for me to pursue higher education and I told her I wanted to be a dancer like mom. She blew up at me and I left and started dancing in the center of town to make money for meals.” Jaejoong smacked on the meat in his mouth loudly and it echoed n the empty hallway, making Jongdae want to hit him in the mouth.
The ghost of his appetite made him feel jealous towards how quickly Jaejoong could eat after telling Jongdae that what he’d known or figured out about his mother were all false.

From that point on, Jaejoong and Jongdae became best friends, then eventual on-off lovers. Jongdae learned that Jaejoong was as indifferent as himself when it came to the sex of the person he shared a bed with.

For the first few months, they slept on the large bed together, each man sleeping on the opposite edges. As time winded on, they got closer and closer, until Jongdae woke up one day enclosed in a sleeping Jaejoong’s embrace. After that, they paid no mind to where they fell asleep and always ended up tangled in each other’s limbs. While neither of them mentioned their growing fondness for each other, their relationship progressed to the point where they were suddenly sharing quick kisses or trying to be quiet as they gave each other mutual handjobs in the bathroom.

The first time Jongdae performed for the king, a few months after making his 17th year, he found himself struck with an emotion he’d never felt before, nervousness.

His stomach tangled in knots and his hands shook as he went over the choreography once more before he was called. Bada had warned him that he’d be the banquet’s entertainment so he better do his best. He had had that intention but when he caught a glimpse of the magnitude of the crowd, he started to rethink his mindset.

What sense did it make that the king wanted his first time seeing Jongdae’s dancing to be in front of so many people? Did he have that much faith in him all because of his mother?

Performance time came before Jongdae could stress any further and he walked into the center of the dance floor, right in front of the king and bowed. The metal on his clothes clinked as he got into position and when the band started to play, his body moved on autopilot. The only thing that kept him from zoning out was the steady slap of his feet onto the marble floor and the tinkling of the metal. The song ended too soon and his body came to stop, signaling that he was done.

He looked up at the king and saw that the man was near tears, looking at him with such adoration yet with a faraway look like he wasn’t looking at Jongdae at all. Jongdae knew the royal only saw his mother and at this point, he didn’t care. Any dancer would be glad to perform in front of a crowd of this importance, so he would count his blessings.

“That was wonderful. Spitting image of your mother you are,” Jongdae kept his head bowed and his eyes lowered as the man spoke to him, muttering an embarrassed but respectful thanks. “I look forward to seeing your other dance of the night. Feel free to mingle with the crowd.” Jongdae nodded and bowed again, sliding back where Jaejoong and Sumi were waiting for him.

“Okay, that was incredible…” Sumi sighed holding her cheeks. She was up to perform after him, so she adjusted her clothes and took a deep breath. “Good luck Mi, you’ll be just as wonderful.” She pressed her lips into a tight smile and shook her limbs a little. “Thank you, I hope I’ll have at least half the grace you have in your big toe,” they all shared a laugh and then Sumi went to perform. Jaejoong patted Jongdae on the back with a smile. “You really did amazing and to be able to perform at such an event really shows the king’s favor.”

It was bound to happen, but Jongdae was hard set on separating himself from his mother’s shadow. He was a great dancer in his own rights despite his stark resemblance to her.
Thoughts like that tossed around in his head and Jongdae ran smack into a small statured man. He fell to the floor and the metal on his clothes shook, though they were close to the band so not many paid attention. The last thing he’d want to do is take attention off Sumi’s performance, which he’d seen her and Bada prepare in the previous months.

“Are you okay?” Jongdae took the outstretched hand and got to his feet. “I’m sorry sir, I wasn’t watching where I was going.” Jaejoong had taught him a thing or two about the importance of manners in the palace, so he thought he’d at least use his knowledge. The man began to reply but then he recognized that he was the person who’d just finish dancing, so a smile overtook his face. “Your dance was fantastic. In all the events I’ve been to, I’ve never seen you before.” Jongdae explained briefly that he was new and the man nodded. “And you said your name was Jongdae?” The younger of the two men nodded and the other man laughed. “I never introduced myself, I’m Kim Joonmyun.”

They exchanged handshakes then Jongdae saw Jaejoong motioning for him to come to him, so he told the man he had to leave, and the man gave him a small wave. “It was nice to meet you Jongdae. I look forward to your next dance.”

When he reached Jaejoong, he pulled him behind a pillar and spoke in hushed tones startling Jongdae. “Do you know who that is?” Jongdae shook his head, he didn’t. “That’s the illegitimate son of the king, Prince Kim Joonmyun.” Jongdae peeked from behind the pillar and stared at Joonmyun, deciding quickly that he didn’t get any strange or weird vibe that he would’ve expected. It wasn’t every day that an illegitimate prince could enjoy himself at an important event and smile in the face of important guests.

“The king favored Prince Joonmyun’s mother very much, so he had it written so that Joonmyun could be a legitimate son of the queen, though he has no chance of inheriting the throne or title. The advisors all agreed with that stipulation and allowed Joonmyun to carry on as he pleases. From what I’ve heard, he’s treated differently than the other princes because he cannot obtain the throne. Also, he apparently lives with three men, two former prostitutes and a brothel worker who live as his lovers.” The information was a lot to take in but Jongdae knew he had good judgment of character and Joonmyun seemed kind.

“He’s pretty nice, handsome too,” Jongdae sighed, leaning against the pillar as he stared at Joonmyun from afar. The man was talking to what looked like dignitaries, and they were all receiving him positively.

Sumi finished her dance and the crowd gave her applause, though Jongdae felt a gaze burning into him. When he turned to see where it came from, he noticed that in the process of turning his attention to Sumi bowing, Joonmyun had caught sight of him and was now staring at him with an unreadable look on his face. Jongdae also noticed that the king had been looking around calmly, searching for something and when Jongdae stepped from behind the pillar, the king’s eyes settled on him too.

Even though Jaejoong’s breathtaking performance, complete with fans which Jongdae hadn’t seen him practice with, the king and the illegitimate prince never looked away from him. Bada seemed to notice and while he was talking to some of the female dancers who were to perform with him in a little while, he saw her shoot Joonmyun a dirty look. It hardly seemed to deter him and when he caught Jongdae’s gaze, he gave him a wide smile that made his heart hurt.
After the banquet was over, Jongdae was called to the king’s quarters, and Bada escorted him, a grin on her face.

“What do you think he wants to talk to me about?” She shrugged and adjusted her scarf and clothes. “He probably wants to congratulate you on your performances. I could tell he really enjoyed himself.” That made sense to Jongdae so he nodded, smoothing the wrinkles out of his own clothes.

Even though he’d already made his first impression with his performance, he still wanted to make a solid second one.

He and Bada had barely approached the entrance before the king’s thundering voice instructed Jongdae to come in. Bada urged him forward and stayed back in the shadows, reminding him to mind his manners before she disappeared down the hall.

If Jongdae had thought his and Jaejoong’s quarters were fantastic, the king’s personal room was no comparison. The grandeur and over-the-top details stunned Jongdae into silence and he walked quietly into the room, bowing when the king came into the view.

“You wished to see me, your highness?” The king grinned and nodded, motioning for Jongdae to come closer. A few steps and Jongdae was a breath’s distance away from the king, the man examining him intently. When large hands moved to reach for his wrist, he gently startled but didn’t pull away.

“This birthmark. It looks just like hers.” Jongdae nodded in silence.

There were very few times in Jongdae’s life when he was intimidated into silence by the mere presence of someone. Now as the king sat and studied the mark, here Jongdae was at a lost for words and thoughts. He couldn’t even get a word to cross his lips despite that he’d had questions in mind. It was as if none of them wanted to come out.

“Tell me Jongdae, is she alive? Your mother I mean,” He debated lying but knew he wouldn’t be able to and after all why would he? Sure the king had caused his mother an enormous amount of grief, all in the name of love, but Jongdae felt like he owed this man the truth.

“She’s dead sir. She fell ill in my 11th year and passed on my 13th.” Again more details and questions wanted to spill from his mouth, but alas, there was nothing. He couldn’t do it and he hated himself for it.

The royal got a pained look on his face and he let of Jongdae’s wrist, sitting back in his seat. “She didn’t suffer did she?” His voice cracked with sadness and Jongdae watched as the powerful man descended into body-wracking sobs. “No,” Jongdae’s answer was weak but the king heard him and took a shaky breath. “Thank you so much for coming here, if you want anything, I’ll be happy to provide it,” more questionable words.

Even as he watched the leader of the country come unraveled in front of him, Jongdae remained impassive and silent. It wasn’t his place as a dancer and former peasant to comfort him, yet there was also something inside him that burned with pleasure. His father’s departure wasn’t of his own doing and his sister’s father was killed, it was this man’s fault that their mother had had to work so hard and forsake her dreams in order to raise them. Alone.

Jongdae might not have had the closest and loving relationship with his mother, but she was still his mother and he loved her for that reason and that reason alone. It wasn’t her fault that the two men in her life had gone missing and the only other one that had been there caused both of their
disappearances. Now at the age of 17, he finally understood his mother and it made the inside of his chest feel hollow.

At the same time, it also hardened Jongdae’s resolve. He was going to achieve his dream no matter what and he wouldn’t allow anyone to stand in his way. He didn’t want to wind up an old bitter man because he hadn’t turned his back on his dreams. He was going to be a dancer who was known by every man, woman, and child in this country.

He wanted to exceed even his mother’s fame and escape from her shadow. He didn’t want to be known as Kwon Boa’s talented son. He wanted to be Kwon Jongdae, the man who moved like there was wind beneath his feet.

When the king composed himself, he thanked Jongdae again and reiterated that he would do anything he asked. He also mentioned that it would be nice if he didn’t mention the king’s display of emotion. He had an image to maintain after all.

After his encounter with the king, Jongdae walked back to his room, and Jaejoong attacked him at the door. He’d asked five questions before Jongdae managed even to sit on their bed and start changing into his sleep clothes.

“I think he just wanted to confirm that I was who everyone thought I was. Also, he asked about my mother and I told him she was dead,” there was a waver in his voice and Jaejoong sat down next to him, putting his hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “It’s just that after what you told me, I can’t get it out of my head that he’s the reason that my mother worked so hard and why she was so adamant about me not dancing. I feel like I’ve had the wrong idea about her all this time.”

For the first time since Jongdae was barely eleven years old, he cried. In between the hot and stuffy feeling that overcame his entire body, he felt Jaejoong pull him close to his chest and run his hands through his hair.

After that night, they never talked about Jongdae crying ever again. In fact, Jongdae liked to pretend it hadn’t happened at all. Emotions were a hassle he refused to deal with until he'd reached his goal actively.

It wasn’t the healthiest way to go about things, but it had to be done. Or at least Jongdae thought about it that way.

Jongdae had been in the palace nearly a year when Bada came into his room early one afternoon, waking him and Jaejoong up from a nap. “You both have been requested for Prince Joonmyun’s birthday celebration. He has specified that Jongdae is to chose the dance. The event is a week from now so be prepared.” Jongdae could tell even in his sleep-glazed eyes that Bada was displeased with having to deliver such news.

He was now familiar with the fact that Bada hated Prince Joonmyun because he was her nephew. Her sister, a past concubine of the king, had died in childbirth. While she’d never outwardly said or done anything to express her dislike of the man, it was well known and Jaejoong had filled Jongdae in on the details a few months after his arrival. It had been hard to imagine that such a sweet woman had a cold side but after recalling how she’d treated Joonmyun at the banquet earlier
and her continuously nasty disposition towards him, it was evident now.

Jaejoong practiced with Jongdae tirelessly, both of them going to sleep with aching limbs each night. The party had approached before they knew it and by then, Jongdae decided that the choreography was perfected and that they were ready. His first impression of the Prince was still fresh in his mind, so he wanted to do his utmost best to impress the older man further.

The day before the party Jaejoong and Jongdae received a large parcel from Joonmyun and they both stared at it curiously. “He controls a market as well as oversees a traveling caravan. It seems he’s procured the finest silk from India and requested that your performance garments be made from it. This is the finished product.” Bada spat, turning on the balls of her feet after she’d finished her explanation.

The sound of music reached them before they even approached the house and Jongdae found himself wondering just what kind of person Prince Joonmyun really was. Just going by what he was seeing now, the man seemed to be a bit of a partier. Jaejoong got a broad smile on his face the closer they got and he squeezed Jongdae’s hand tightly, expressing his excitement and nervousness through the touch.

When they stepped through the door, Prince Joonmyun greeted them and guided them to where they’d perform. He commented on how nice they looked in the outfits and how glad he was that everything fit. Jongdae watched as Jaejoong blushed and he felt a little stir of jealousy. He knew Joonmyun’s compliments were directed towards the both of them, but that didn’t help quell the niggling feeling.

It disappeared when they got into position and the crowd of people gathered around and quieted down, excited to see the performance. Immediately the music began to play and the boys flowed through the movements, Jongdae and Jaejoong’s hips moving in unison to the pounding of the drums. Because they’d practiced so much, their bodies moved with ease and familiarity, the ornaments on their clothing jingling at the precise times.

Jongdae’s heart slammed in his chest and unlike his usual performance state of mind, he was aware of everything that was happening. His feet molded into the tile of the floor, ensuring that he wouldn’t slip in his spin and jump. Amazingly he was also aware of Joonmyun’s look of amazement as he danced in front of him and ruffled his hair, drawing a hoot from the crowd.

The song rose to its climax and when Jongdae moved to pull Jaejoong close to his body, as the dance called for, he saw a fleeting look of jealousy caress the prince’s face before it went back to one of wonderment. For the end of the song, he danced behind Jaejoong and pulled his neck back, baring the pale expanse of skin to the audience. Both of them stood still for a moment, then the claps, whistles, and hoots started.

The younger man released Jaejoong’s neck and bowed, Jaejoong following after. Once they’d caught their breath, Joonmyun encouraged them to stay and enjoy the rest of the party before they went back to the palace. Jaejoong was more than happy to oblige and he dragged Jongdae into the belly of the party. Before long Jongdae had a cup of wine in his hand and he’d managed to eat some fruit, particularly hungry after his dance. Somewhere along the way, he’d lost Jaejoong and found himself face to face with the prince.

“That dance was even grander than the one I saw at the palace banquet. I could tell you
choseographed it because of the raw passion,” Jongdae shied away from the compliment and shrugged, then took a sip of his wine. From there, they launched into a conversation about dancing and some way or another, Joonmyun got him to talk about himself.

By the time Jongdae saw Jaejoong again, the man was very drunk, and he was in someone's grasp, the man holding him close as they danced to the music the band was playing. The inkling of jealousy that he’d felt earlier was absent, and Jongdae began to question his true feelings for Jaejoong.

There was no doubt in his mind that he was with the man primarily because of convenience. That was not to say that he didn’t feel something for Jaejoong, but rather that the feeling was sexual yet platonic. They were sex-friends, as he’d heard Jina so eloquently refer to them once. The more he thought about it, the more accurate the term became.

“Jongdae?” Joonmyun’s soft voice made him turn his gaze from Jaejoong and he looked back to the prince. “Besides wanting to see you dance, I invited you here because I wanted to ask you something,” Jongdae nodded and settled into the seat he was in. “I’ve been thinking about you nonstop since the banquet and I was wondering if you’d be interested in being my husband. I know it’s sudden, rather impulsive and unbecoming of a prince but I admire you so much. Your dancing is excellent, but I find your personality and determination captivating.” Jongdae sat back in shock and he continued to stare Joonmyun, unsure of how to respond to such a request.

“You don’t have to respond to me right now, but I just wanted you to know. I’m not sure what your relationship with Jaejoong is, but please don’t think I’ve trying to intervene or ruin it,” Jongdae examined Joonmyun’s face and saw how the man’s cheeks were pink, from embarrassment most likely since he hadn’t seen the prince drink anything other than water.

Now Jongdae was faced with a dilemma that he’d never expected. Here was a man who’d apparently fallen in love with him asking for his hand in marriage. Sure he knew plenty about the prince from what he’d learned over the past year, but that was only secondary information. Suffice to say he didn’t really know Prince Joonmyun, just about him. His body made sure he knew it was against whatever thoughts in his mind because his heart pounded when he looked at Joonmyun.

This was against everything he’d decided for himself. He still desired to be a famous and well-known dancer, yet here was a man who was offering him a life in the lap of luxury. Sure he’d have to share him with Kris and Luhan, Joonmyun’s other husbands, as well as Jongin, Joonmyun's additional lover, but he’d known about that before. They seemed very into each other, yet both seemed affectionate towards Joonmyun also. He’d seen it firsthand shortly after his performance.

Suddenly things had come down to what he’d always feared they would: dancing or love?
Joonmyun’s question echoed in his mind for the next two weeks, disturbing his regular sleep pattern. When he nearly passed out face-first into his breakfast, Jaejoong demanded that he tell him what was plaguing him.

“Something’s been up with you since Joonmyun’s party, and I’ve let you go on this long, but now you need to get if off your chest,” Jongdae blinked once slowly and shook his head, then took a sip of the water in his cup.

Perhaps it was the lack of sleep, but Jongdae’s usual filter was absent “Prince Joonmyun has asked for my hand in marriage.” All the women at the table gasped, and even Jaejoong choked on his water, clearly not expecting an answer like that. “Prince Joonmyun did what?” The voice boomed in the dining hall, and all the dancers looked to see a furious Bada standing at the foot of their table.

“Jongdae did you give him an answer and now, think carefully boy,” she warned, walking closer to Jongdae. She gripped his shoulder and despite the sleepy haze he’d been living through, the pain was very sharp and visceral. His eyes widened, and he wrenched himself from her grip. “I told him I would give the decision some thought. Last I checked, I was permitted by the king to do what I please,” Bada narrowed her eyes and her thin lips curled into a sharp scowl. She retracted her arm and stormed out the hall, the long fabric of her skirt sweeping behind her.

Now everyone looked at Jongdae with scandalized expressions, the women already whispering among themselves. Jongdae knew that the whole palace would know of this situation before dinner was served. Even Jaejoong didn’t say anything, at a lost for words at Jongdae’s behavior.

Instead of finishing his breakfast, he gave his plate one last look and left the dining hall.

At first, all Jongdae could see was red.

How dare that woman lay her hands on him. He’d done his part as a palace dancer and performed whenever he was asked for, always followed Bada’s precise directions down to the most minute detail. Outside of dancing and his affairs of the palace, she had no authority over him.

Jongdae hadn’t realized he was storming towards the king’s chamber until he was at the door, awaiting entry. The guard that stood watch looked surprised but alerted the king of his presence and ushered him in.

“What pleasure do I owe this visit Jongdae? I hope you are rested from your performance at Prince Joonmyun’s home. I heard it was marvelous and honestly I expected nothing less from you. In f-” the man stopped when he saw the look of anger on the young man’s face, and he rose from his seat, walking over to Jongdae. “What angers you like so boy?” He reached out and patted Jongdae on the head, a gesture that spoke volumes of how highly he viewed Jongdae.

Telling the king of his minor problems probably hadn’t been the best option, but it was too late, seeing as how the words poured from his lips. The king listened to every word then he sighed, telling Jongdae to take a seat as he motioned for one of his servants to bring a chair.

“So Prince Joonmyun asked for your hand in marriage?” Jongdae nodded and the king chuckled, shaking his head. “That boy always did have a big heart. How he intends to balance four husbands will be a feat I’d like to see, but have you come to a decision?” Jongdae looked down at his hands
that were balled up in his lap and said that he hadn’t. “No need to rush, Joonmyun is a very patient. He’s been that way since childhood. Whenever you’re ready, if you are interested, he’ll welcome you with open arms.” Jongdae processed that and nodded again, standing from his seat and bowing to the king.

“I apologize for storming in here like a child, but thank you for listening to my lowly problems your highness.” The king waved Jongdae’s statement off “nonsense. I told you that if you needed anything that you could come to me at any time.”

After leaving the king’s quarters, he retreated to the bath and scrubbed himself until his skin boasted a bright red tint.

Why had he automatically gone to the king? Last time he’d checked with himself, he felt quite a bit of malice towards the man for his needless involvement in his mother’s life. Now here he was going to him as if he were someone he deeply trusted.

He kept questioning himself, and he knew nothing good could come from it. He just hoped that whenever he made his decision, that it was one that’d make him happy.

After a night’s sleep, he untangled himself from Jaejoong’s sleepy embrace and started to move around the room, arranging things so he could pack them.

He’d made up his mind.

When he pulled the bag he’d come with from the drawer that held his gifted clothing and belongings, Jaejoong woke up and stared at him. He watched Jongdae pack in silence at first, managing to fit everything into his bag.

Jongdae hadn’t noticed at first, but when a warm hand gripped his wrist, he finally looked up. “You’ve made up your mind?”

The question was rhetorical for both the men knew the answer well enough for it not to be spoken.

“Are you sure?” Again, another question they both knew the answer to. When Jongdae made efforts to do something, it was always in sureness and after considerable thought. Jaejoong had gotten to know him well over the past year and somewhere in his heart, it hurt to acknowledge that he was leaving him behind.

Jongdae just nodded and that sufficed as his answer to both questions. He pulled Jaejoong’s arm, and the man moved closer. The younger man took a deep breath and he kissed Jaejoong’s forehead, then he stepped back and hefted his bag.

“I’ll miss you, but I know you’ll be happy, so I will let you go.”

The words were simple, and Jaejoong spoke them with such a firm and steady voice that it made Jongdae’s throat tighten and his eyes sting.

Damn, he’d sworn that he wouldn’t cry anymore.

“I’ll miss you too,” were the last words that left his mouth as he walked from their bedroom and down the long hall. From there he asked for a guard to bring him to Prince Joonmyun’s home.
He knew that Bada would raise all hell when she found out he’d left but Jongdae’s resolve was hardened. This was what he wanted to do. He’d had fun dancing and impressing the thousands who laid eyes on him, and now he was moving on to something else.

Maybe his dream hadn’t only been about dancing. Maybe it was about falling in love and being loved too.

It was nearly noon when he arrived at Joonmyun’s home, thanking the guard and tipping him with the money he’d saved over the year. He didn’t really need nor want it, so he figured that the man would do something more with it.

Jongdae might’ve been foolish as he was only in his 19th year, but suddenly his bag felt lighter and his hand heavy as it knocked on the door. Joonmyun’s voice came from behind it, and soon it opened to reveal the man, who seemed surprised to see Jongdae.

“Ah, Jongdae! What a surprise, have you come to visit?” Jongdae shook his head and sat his bag down. “Yes. My answer is yes to your proposal. I’ll marry you.” Joonmyun’s facial expression morphed quickly and he stepped forward, enveloping the thinner man in a hug. “You mean that? I’m so happy.” Judging from the high pitch of his voice, Jongdae swore that Joonmyun was crying. When they pulled away, he saw dampness on the man’s cheeks and felt his heart swell.

The look of utter relief and happiness as Joonmyun grasped both of Jongdae’s hands was something he’d never seen before. It was then and there that Jongdae decided that he’d made the right choice. He wouldn’t second-guess himself any longer.

Instead, he squeezed Joonmyun’s hands and gave him a smile. For the second time that day, Jongdae found his eyes welling up with tears and one of his mother’s favorite sayings echoed in his head.

Sometimes one goodbye leads to another, better hello.

It only took a matter of two days before things were finalized and Jongdae traded his surname for Joonmyun’s.

“Kim Jongdae has a nice ring to it,” Joonmyun beamed, a wooden box in his hand. Jongdae waded to the edge of the pool and rested his upper body at Joonmyun’s feet. “It does, what’s in the box?” He wiped his hands dry on the cloth nearby and hoisted himself out the water.

Joonmyun’s eyes drifted past the water droplets that skated down Jongdae’s toned abdomen and he saw that the man had decided to forgo clothes for his swim. Instead of drying the rest of his body, Jongdae pressed his wet body against Joonmyun and took the box from his hand.

When he opened it, his eyes widened in surprise. Inside was a pair of thin gold bracelets, appearing to be shaped by hand. He wasn’t a jewelry enthusiast but Jongdae could tell that the gesture was an expensive one and fully expressed the things Joonmyun couldn’t get himself to say.

It was known that it was customary for a new husband to present his spouse with a gold bracelet, which they were to wear for the first year of their marriage. In the case of women wedding each other, the gifts were rings instead.

Joonmyun took the bracelets out their box and reached for Jongdae’s arm, holding it straight as he
slid one onto the man’s wrist, then the other onto his own wrist. For that moment and that moment alone, it felt like it was only the two of them in the entire world. The younger man examined the gift and decided that suited him before he leaned forward and kissed his husband. “Thank you,” a pink blush covered Joonmyun’s face, and Jongdae let out a chuckle.

Despite the fact that Joonmyun had seen Jongdae’s naked body (though they hadn’t shared a bed yet), he still managed to get flustered by the small things. Jongdae loved it because things like this were constant proof that he’d made the right choice and that Joonmyun was enough.

“Husband, you have yet to bed me and I’m getting rather impatient.” Jongdae was trying his hand at being coy, but even as he said the words, he almost cringed. It was so unlike him, and he could tell Joonmyun knew it wasn’t him either. The confused look that sat on Joonmyun’s face said all he needed to know and Jongdae sighed.

He’d been himself this long in life, so there was no reason to change things up now.

“I wanted to give you time to get adjusted to life here with me, Luhan, Jongin, and Kris. I didn’t want to rush things,” Joonmyun’s response brought a smirk to Jongdae’s face, and he pressed himself against Joonmyun again. “I understand your intentions and I’m telling you I’m ready. Please don’t make me wait anymore.” This was more like him and Jongdae felt Joonmyun shiver against him.

Shivering and meekness aside, Joonmyun made up for it in bed or at least what Jongdae could tell so far. He’d come embarrassingly quickly when the man took him into his mouth and now here he was, moaning and wreathing underneath Joonmyun’s touch like he was a virgin.

His back was sticking to the sheets, and suddenly he regretted not drying off after his swim because now he was not only damp with water but also sweat and speckles of dried come from his first orgasm. Joonmyun didn’t let up his touches and bites either, each one of them landing on a random place on Jongdae’s body.

As much as Jongdae loved being pampered and catered to, he grabbed Joonmyun’s arm and pulled the man down for a kiss. Somewhere in between the third and fourth one, he switched their positions and got on top of Joonmyun, straddling him.

The man seemed surprised at the turn of events and stared up at Jongdae, his facial expression one of questioning. Jongdae just smirked in response and began ridding Joonmyun of his clothes, all while still on top of him. When he was just as naked as Jongdae, the younger man went to work of returning the tirade of kisses and bites, as well as a blowjob that had Joonmyun’s hips rising, then shaking when he spilled into Jongdae’s mouth.

“You’re so beautiful,” Joonmyun sighed, his fingertips sinking into Jongdae’s soft skin as his other hand stroked his length slowly. He was hovering over Jongdae, and despite his comfort and familiarity with Joonmyun, he found himself nervous. He’d only fooled around with a few girls when he was kicked out from his sister’s home and Jaejoong, so being subtly dominated and worshiped to the degree that Joonmyun was doing was almost entirely foreign.

Each hitch of his breath as Joonmyun prepared him was met with soft kisses to his neck and
reassuring breaths. He was taking his time, and Jongdae thought it was rather amusing, yet also endearing.

The onslaught of emotions Jongdae felt when Joonmyun pushed forward inside of him and sat flush against his skin was akin to nothing he’d ever felt. He and Jaejoong had had sex before, but it wasn’t like this. Each one of Joonmyun’s movements was deliberate and catered completely to Jongdae.

“You’re so corny and a hopeless romantic,” trust Jongdae to interrupt a perfect moment with his comments. Joonmyun merely grinned and moved forward again, his hips moving at a slow pace. Even if he’d never admit it, Jongdae loved being treated like this.

Joonmyun was still stroking him when a biting comment got caught in his throat and Jongdae spilled over the man’s fist. The older man seemed to know what he’d done, so as a sort of punishment, he kept stroking Jongdae through his sensitivity and moving towards his own release.

When he finally let go, Jongdae wrapped his legs around the man’s waist and pulled him closer, gripping his hands. He wanted to ensure that the man would cease his assault on dick. In the end, he did do so, and Joonmyun came with a groan and his face in Jongdae’s chest.

“You’re really something,” Joonmyun sighed after they’d bathed in his private bath and settled back into bed. The younger man smiled and wrapped his arms around Joonmyun’s neck before he kissed him. “You asked for me,” Joonmyun seemed to give the answer some thought and his hand trailed to Jongdae’s wrist where the bangle was “you’re right.”

Unlike how Jongdae had pictured it, eating breakfast with the other four men wasn’t weird or awkward at all. In fact, Luhan asked him plenty of questions, much to Joonmyun’s dismay. Kris and Jongin attempted to stop them from gushing about the master of the house or at least, to wait until he wasn’t present, but they ignored them and continued.

“He’s so thoughtful. I’ve never really had that before,” Luhan sighed, leaning on his elbows as Jongdae told him about their exploits after breakfast. When he got to the part about how Joonmyun had insisted that he finish onto his face, the older man rose from the table and muttered something about having work to do.

All four of the men watched him go then Kris turned and glared at them as if to say ‘look what you’ve done.’ Jongdae chewed on his bottom lip and furrowed his eyebrows wondering if he’d said too much, but Luhan reassured him that Joonmyun was just embarrassed more than anything. He also added that the man got a kick out of it deep down and Jongdae chose to believe him.

After all, Luhan hadn’t lied to him yet, and the man seemed rather trustworthy.

Now Kris and Jongin? That was a whole another thing.
The clinking of jewelry filled the office, signaling that Minseok and Yixing were moving around, most likely cleaning or browsing the literature. Luhan, being the fastidious housekeeper he was, went to go check.

“Don’t you think you two are overdressed for cleaning? I doubt there’s a reason for all of the jewelry and,” Luhan gestured towards their clothes “nearly formal outfits. I swear you two are just show-offs.” Minseok rolled his heavily kohled eyes and continued reading the book in his lap.

Luhan’s little rant was the same old thing he spewed just about every other day. While the other men that lived in the house preferred to live comfortably, Yixing and Minseok both chose to live rather extravagantly.

Yixing and Minseok had been found on the street. They’d run away from home at 15 and 13 when their mother remarried an abusive drunk following the death of their father. They spent three years wandering the streets, scrounging for food and doing odd jobs to make money or find shelter. Even before their poverty stricken adolescent years, they hadn’t lived the most lavish of lifestyles though their parents had kept them fed and with decent clothes on their back.

Growing up, whenever Minseok’s mother would travel to the market for work or for groceries, he’d beg to come with her. He was always amazed by the rich merchants that wandered around the market browsing the more expensive and high-quality goods, dressed brightly in soft silk and bright shiny jewelry. He vowed that one day he would live the same life and provide it for his brother and mother as well.

Joonmyun found them when Minseok made his 19th year and Yixing his 17th. After years of living on the streets, one could imagine how wary they were of the man’s offer. For the protection of his brother, as well as himself, he’d turned Joonmyun down at first. Seeing as how Joonmyun was persistent but patient, he accepted Minseok’s answer and went about his day. When Yixing thought Joonmyun was out of earshot, he’d whined about being hungry. Minseok had started to respond but then Joonmyun offered to buy them some food. Yixing nearly salivated over himself in the process of agreeing and pulled Minseok along, much taller, though a bit thinner than his older brother. “He promised to buy us food hyung. I don’t know what he wants, but it’s worth a listen right?” Minseok had narrowed his eyes in annoyance but allowed himself to be lead.

The older man let Yixing pick which stall he wanted to eat from and bought him and Minseok all the food they could eat. As Yixing shoveled the food into his mouth, Minseok ate slowly and listened to Joonmyun. From what the man was telling him, quite a few other men lived with him. For virtually nothing in return, Joonmyun was suggesting that if Minseok and Yixing came with him, they’d be clothed, fed and taken care of.

It all had sounded like a ploy at that moment, but for some reason or another, Minseok had agreed.

If there was one decision Minseok never found himself regretting down the line, it was going with Joonmyun. Not only did he manage to do well for his brother as well as himself, but a few months after living with Joonmyun, the man located their mother and made sure she was cared for. He also found out that their mother’s husband had died of some unknown disease a few years earlier due to his drinking habits no doubt.
Though Minseok didn’t have a desire to see their mother, he was glad she was fine. Being the passive but kind-hearted person he was, Yixing made trips to see her and often spoke with her about random things. He also made a habit of bringing her tea that Minseok handpicked on his trips to the marketplace. She always drank it with a small smile on her face, as if happy that she could at least drink something her oldest son personally chose.

Somewhere in the depths of his mind, Minseok knew he held some resentment towards their mother for choosing her second husband over her children. When she told them she was getting married again, and they met the man, they protested. Yixing had cried from the moment the man walked into their home until the time he’d left.

That had been the first strike.

After the inevitable marriage, the man had come home from the fields one night, reeking of boozing and beat their mother in front of them as she attempted to rock a cranky Yixing to sleep. Minseok had watched from underneath his bed as the man climbed on top of his mother and struck her repeatedly, the woman letting out squeaky protests. While the scene continued to unfold, he’d thought quickly and pulled Yixing underneath the bed with him. After the man had finished with their mother, he’d searched the house angrily looking for them and eventually passed out in a drunken stupor.

Sadly that’d been one of the few times they’d been able to hide from the man and his wrath. They had been 8 and 6. Minseok had finally had enough and a few days after he turned 15, he packed his and Yixing things and left in the middle of the night after their step-father was dead asleep. As a common courtesy for their mother, he’d left a very simple note and woke his brother before departing from the house and never looking back.

Even to this day, Minseok never regretted his decision.

Their mother wasn’t a bad one, but she had made some shitty decisions, and Minseok wasn’t sure if he had the heart to forgive her completely.

Minseok put down his book and leaned against the chaise chair, staring at Yixing pouring through the book in front of him. Though Minseok doubted he could remember their father, he always found himself noting that Yixing looked exactly like him before he’d been struck with some sickness. As for Minseok, whenever he passed a mirror he duly noted that he took more after their mother in her years before marrying their step-father.

When they’d first arrived at Joonmyun’s house, there had only been four guys here. A young, gorgeous man by the name of Luhan, a tall and handsome guy named Kris, a tanned young man a little older than Yixing named Jongin and a guy who hated to wear clothes named Jongdae. They’d all welcomed Minseok and Yixing like family.

Within a few weeks, they settled into the ways of the household and everything ran surprisingly smoothly. Despite not being able to sleep comfortably due to the sudden change in comfort, Minseok was happy to watch Yixing sleep peacefully. It’d been awhile since he’s seen his brother sleep a whole night through, untormented by the nightmares that’d been plaguing him since before they’d run away from home. Though Yixing never told him, Minseok knew the dreams were about their stepfather.
After the first two months had passed, Minseok made up his mind to do something drastic. As promised, besides friendly conversation, Joonmyun didn’t expect anything from him nor Yixing.

One night he slipped quietly from his and Yixing’s room and walked to Joonmyun, clothed in nothing but a relatively sheer robe. He silently prayed no one would see him and looked at nothing but the ground the entire way there, only stopping when he stood in front the threshold of the door.

Minseok paused there for a few moments, debating if this was something he wanted to go through with. Before he managed to make up his mind solidly, Joonmyun must’ve caught sight of him and beckoned him in. “Is there something you need Minseok?” His head shot up, and he nodded as he walked further into the room, dropping his robe in the process. “I want to repay you for all you’ve done for me. And my brother.” Joonmyun stared at Minseok in confusion, then everything clicked.

Joonmyun’s eyes widened and rose from his bed, approaching Minseok slowly. He bent down and picked up the younger man’s clothes, draping them over his body. “I can’t allow you to do this. You don’t owe me anything Minseok. You nor your brother. I did this out the kindness of my heart, and I expect nothing of the sorts.” Minseok stood still for a moment, and his gaze fell back to the ground. He gripped the clothes tighter to his body, suddenly ashamed.

He couldn’t even do this for himself and his brother.

Joonmyun cupped his chin and moved his head upwards, forcing him to make eye contact with him. “You are gorgeous Minseok, but I don’t intend to take advantage of you. Particularly in this way. If you ever come to want to have that sort of relationship with me out of love, then that’s fine, but not an obligation. Do you understand me?” The younger man nodded and grasped his clothes tight. Joonmyun let go of his face, and Minseok looked down in shame. “I’m so sorry,” Minseok whispered as Joonmyun gathered him into a hug, rubbing soothing circles on his back. “It’s fine Minseok. I’ll walk you back to your room.”

The next morning, Minseok couldn’t look anyone in the face, including his brother. After he finished his breakfast and completed his chores with Kris, he retreated into the library.

Since arriving at the house, Minseok found that it was his safe-haven because his mother had been a school teacher, she taught him to read early in life. It quickly became one of his favorite past times and had remained so. The stories she used to tell him of wealthy women and men added further fuel to his dreams.

Minseok let out a long and disheartened sigh before he got up, the silver bracelets on his arm jingling from the process.

“Is Joonmyun home Yixing?” Without looking up from his book, he nodded. “Yeah, he’s talking to Jongdae while he swims around or something.” Luhan, who was on his knees dusting the bottom shelves of books, agreed with a hum.

Just as the two others said, Joonmyun was seated beside the pool with a journal in his lap. Despite scanning over the information, Minseok knew he was listening thoroughly to what Jongdae was babbling about. “Joonmyun?” The man looked up and directed his attention over to him. “Yes, Minseok?”, “I was wondering if you had any free time today? Would you like to accompany me to the market?” Joonmyun grinned and agreed, sitting the book beside him. “Yes, I would love to. It has been quite a bit since I did so huh?” Minseok grinned and nodded, about to walk out. “I see you’re wearing the clothes I sent ahead of me. It looks just as lovely as I thought it would.” This time, a blush rose to his face, and his grin widened.
The first time Minseok actually spent the night with Joonmyun, it’d been an accident.

He’d come to talk to the man about some details regarding Yixing’s desires to pursue school. His brother had been curious about furthering his education and was still too shy to ask Joonmyun directly. It’d been almost four months since their arrival and Minseok took it upon himself to approach Joonmyun one night in the library.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about,” Minseok paused for a second, waiting for Joonmyun to look up from his book. When he did, Minseok continued “Yixing’s been thinking about furthering his education. Would arranging for a tutor be okay?” The other man’s eyes lit up, and he nodded quickly. “That sounds wonderful actually. Would you be interested in that too? I noticed that you read quite a bit,” Minseok declined quickly, insisting that he just wanted a tutor for his brother. Joonmyun agreed again, and Minseok thanked him and started to leave, but the book in Joonmyun’s hand caught his eye.

It was one his favorites, and he’d read the book at least five times through in the past months. The tale told of endless seas and stretched out land with foreign people and food, all fictional, but Minseok loves it anyway. “I noticed this book looked quite a bit worn out and it was sticking out the shelf, so I took it off the shelf to see what it was about. Once I read the first few pages, it reminded me how much I love this author,” “me too.” Minseok answered, standing in the doorway awkwardly. “Have you read their other books too? I swear Shim Changmin has the wildest imagination.” Minseok agreed, opening his mouth and going on a tangent about Changmin’s past works, the one’s he’d read when his mother would work in the market.

Since they were right next to a book stall, Minseok could always read the newest books when they came out, as long as he returned them in good shape. He’d fallen behind in the books once he’d become old enough to go to school and couldn’t accompany his mother anymore. When Joonmyun had shown them the library, Minseok had spent an entire month just reading whatever looked interesting to him. It had been an excellent way to pass the time and relieve some of the anxiety that’d built up inside of him.

Minseok realized he was babbling and apologized, widening his already large eyes when Joonmyun told him to continue as he rose from his seat “continue your story as we walk to my room. I’m almost ready to turn in for the night, but I want to hear more of your story.” Minseok blushed and trailed alongside Joonmyun, telling his story in a muted voice so as not to disturb anyone that might be lingering around the house, rather than in their sleeping quarters.

Much like he always did, Minseok made himself comfortable and didn’t realize that he’d shrugged off his robe, leaving him in a long linen shirt. “I actually got a chance to read some of Author Shim’s more recent work, which has been surprisingly sexual. He used to have a vagueness about him, but his most recent works are a bit more explicit. Sometimes I find myself blushing as I turn the pages.” Joonmyun agreed and told a small anecdote, making Minseok’s cheeks turn pink. “There’s just something about the way he writes the raw passion, it stirs something deep inside, and I can’t put my finger on it. Of course, it’s arousing, but it’s deeper than that. It’s like Shim’s words speak to your very soul and make it simmer with a desire for a love like the ones in his stories.” As Joonmyun was talking, Minseok stared at his lips, the urge to lean forward getting stronger every moment.

Joonmyun had been in the middle of his sentence when Minseok leaned forward and planted a kiss on his lips, his eyes akin to a curious deer. Minseok moved to lean back, but Joonmyun caught the middle of his shirt and pulled him forward, connecting them in a kiss that would’ve put Author
Shim’s to shame.

Somehow Minseok ended up on his back, looking up at Joonmyun as he planted kisses on his neck and rolled his hips forward, reaching deep inside of him. It’d been uncomfortable at first, but Joonmyun had gone slow and taken his time, for which Minseok was thankful. After that moment, the pleasure outweighed the discomfort.

Changmin’s words hardly held a candle to the feeling Minseok felt when Joonmyun was thrusting against him and stroking him in the same rhythm. Rather than just making so-called ‘noises of passion’ Minseok just heard squeaks and deep moans, all coming from his own mouth. He came before Joonmyun, barely able to find the words to warn the man before he did so. His body thrummed with an undercurrent of pleasure as Joonmyun sped up and raced towards his orgasm. Minseok held onto Joonmyun, and when the man spilled inside of him, he shivered.

“That was nothing like in the books.” Minseok sighed after he and Joonmyun had cleaned up and were drifted off to sleep. “I agree. No words on a page could ever compare.” Joonmyun replied back, running a hand through Minseok’s thick hair.
Yixing knew precisely when Minseok fell in love with Joonmyun and at first, pretended like he hadn’t noticed. Whether it was averting his eyes when they’d bathe, and his brother’s body would be covered with marks of passion or the way his brother got a look in his eyes when he’d talk about the man, he ignored it.

He didn’t want to admit to himself that he shared romantic feelings with the same man as his brother. Everything about it just felt wrong.

When Minseok slept with Joonmyun for the first time, Yixing didn’t talk to him for days and spent most of his time in the library, even to sleep and eat his meals. Since he wasn’t the talkative type, no one knew why Yixing was upset. He was aware that his brother had enlisted help when Luhan kept finding reasons to linger around the library, always in possession of one of Yixing’s favorite snacks or desserts. Jongdae relentlessly tried to chat with him, conveniently always following close behind him when he’d take a bath. Even Kris and Jongin tried their hands at it, Kris discreetly inviting Yixing to go with him into town sans Joonmyun or Jongin coaxing him to float with him in the pool or lounge out in the garden with him.

Yixing had been content with keeping the secret to himself until Luhan delivered the message that Joonmyun wanted him to come to his room. Since arriving at Joonmyun’s house, he hadn’t gotten such an invitation, and at first, he chalked it up to Joonmyun’s interest only being in his brother. He’d later learned that it was because of his young age, but that hadn’t been his first thought because he’d long since considered himself an adult.

The walk to Joonmyun’s quarters was short and not nearly enough time to mentally prepare himself, but Yixing walked in the doorway and waited until the man waved him.

“You wanted to see me Joonmyun?” The man nodded from his seat on his bed, patting the space next to him. Just as Yixing had cased Joonmyun during his first month in the house, the man was very blatant and straightforward.

“Oh anything upsetting you Yixing? I’ve noticed your absence at the dinner table, and your brother mentions how you haven’t spoken a word to him in almost a week. Are you unhappy or is something unsatisfying?” While Yixing had expected the straightforwardness, he hadn’t formulated a response, so he just stared blankly at the older man. Joonmyun waited for a response, and after five minutes he sighed.

“Is it because of me being intimate with your brother as well as the other men in the house?” Yixing’s eyes widened, and he cocked back his head, staring at Joonmyun with a now incredulous expression on his face. “How can you just ask that?” He stammered, worrying the cotton of his pants with his hands. “Well that’s the only reason I can think for why you’d avoid your brother,” Joonmyun sighed, leaning back on his hands as he regarded Yixing. The younger man’s blush on his face told of several things, one of them being that Joonmyun had been spot on with his guess.

Yixing was the youngest man that’d ever set foot in his house, and while he’d initially only offered him and his older brother a place to live because Minseok was beautiful and because he saw so much of himself in Yixing, now things had changed.
Well, not all things.

Minseok was still beautiful, if not even more so now that he ate his fill daily and took extra care of his hair and skin, but Yixing had become an even brighter man right in front his eyes. He’d denied the fact he had grown founder of him with how he was rarely ever alone in the library and how instead of just Kris accompanying him to run errands in the city, Yixing accompanied them also. Sometimes it seemed like Yixing was Joonmyun’s shadow and the older man had to admit that he loved it.

Now the thin man sat beside him, looking as nervous as Joonmyun had ever seen him. “Why would you say that? I-I don’t have an issue. What Minseok does is his business,” even as the words crossed Yixing’s lips, both of them knew it was a lie.

“Tell me Yixing, do you also have feelings for me?” Now Joonmyun’s bluntness felt like a punch in the gut and Yixing visibly deflated, the air figuratively knocked out him. The blush on Yixing’s face got darker, and even his ears turned a bright red.

He was most certainly caught now.

When Yixing tried to defend himself and deny the accusations, his tongue failed him, and he wished he could crawl into a hole. The look on Joonmyun’s face told him that his struggle to speak was indication enough of the answer. He prayed to whatever God was listening that the man wouldn’t think his feelings were in response to Joonmyun’s affection towards his brother.

Instead of initially responding to Yixing’s feelings with words, Joonmyun reached over and ruffled Yixing’s hair before he gave him a bright smile. “I figured it, but tell you what, makeup with your brother first. He’s been in a mood all week. If you still have feelings for me in two months, then we can talk about it.”

For the first time since he’d spoken and unintentionally revealed his feelings, Yixing looked up from his lap and stared at Joonmyun in confusion. He’d loved him for nearly two years, and now Joonmyun asked him to wait two more months until he saw a result of his feelings? He could do that.

His apology to Minseok went just as awkwardly as Yixing had predicted because he could only supply a vague but meaningful one. He still wasn’t sure if he wanted to tell Minseok about his feelings yet, but he was ready to resume his relationship with his brother. Books had only provided so much amusement and entertainment before he missed the way his brother would drone on about his day.

“I’m just glad you’re not mad anymore. I like talking to Luhan and Kris, but they’re usually pretty caught up in each other, so the conversation is hardly ever interesting. Jongdae is okay too when he has on some clothes anyway.” Yixing nodded and lay in his bed, a place he hadn’t slept in almost a week, and found himself drifting off to sleep immediately.

It seemed like Yixing had only blinked once or twice and the two months had passed. Now here he was, sitting in the same position he’d been two months previous, except now more nerves were fluttering in his stomach.

“Did your feelings change at all Yixing?” The younger man shook his head and fought the blush
that threatened to rise to his face.

The weather was moving into the monsoon season, so the curtains on the open windows whipped in the breeze, filling the silence that filled the room.

The only even that’d stood out to Yixing in the past two months was the coming and going of his 19th birthday, which was celebrated with a much bigger crowd than he was used to. Luhan and Jongin made a cake, Jongdae and Minseok decorated the kitchen, and Kris helped Joonmyun lug in two large bags of books, all of which Yixing had been in pursuit of for quite some time.

It’d been nothing short of enjoyable but Yixing knew he would get his real gift later. At present, Yixing was less confident but no less excited now that the time had come.

Joonmyun regarded him with him a smile before he leaned over and took Yixing’s face between his hands. The kiss that landed on Yixing’s expecting lips was warmer and softer than he’d imagined but he didn’t mind.

“You know, I know you like him Yixing.” Minseok sighed, sitting up in his bed. Yixing bolted up, and he stared across the pitch-black room.

He’d been so careful.

The silence stretched through the room and then Yixing heard sheets shuffle before he felt his bed dip and he saw Minseok looking down at him. “I don’t really mind honestly, it’s not like we’re together,” Yixing’s eyes widened, and he found himself examining his brother’s features in the moonlight that filtered into their room. There was no smirk or crinkle around his eyes indicating that he was joking, so Yixing could only take his elder brother’s words as serious.

“Is that why you didn’t talk to me after I slept with him a while ago? Because you were angry?” Yixing didn’t answer and looked away, knowing that his brother knew him better than he knew himself sometimes. A hand patted his head, and he turned back, seeing the soft smile on Minseok’s face. “It’s fine with me really. I’m just glad you didn’t decide to pursue your feelings until you were of age”, “but don’t you feel wrong? We’re brothers, and it’s strange to love the same person”, “not particularly. I haven’t really given it much thought but how you love Joonmyun is separate from how I do. Don’t overthink it, Xiao Xing.”

“And he said he didn’t mind?” Joonmyun asked when he looked up from his books. Yixing nodded excitedly and draped his upper body around the man’s shoulders. He sat down his glasses and pecked Yixing on the cheek before he went back to work.

“You can do that later, it’s getting late,” Yixing reached and closed the book, which made the older man chuckle. As the youngest in the house, he was also by far the most persistent and unrelenting.

All persistence and measured playfulness aside, Yixing wanted to get Joonmyun into bed. He hoped that the sooner they got there, the sooner his nerves would be quelled. No amount of advice that Kris had given him seemed to settle his mind.

Yixing knew what he planned to do and how, but his only dilemma was executing everything. He’d gone through so much to prove to others how grown up he was, but now as he sat on Joonmyun’s bed, twiddling his thumbs and looking out at the night sky, he never felt more like a kid.
“You were in such a hurry to get here and now you’re so quiet, is there something wrong?” Joonmyun asked, now changed into his nightclothes. Yixing swallowed hard, and he shrugged, not looking at Joonmyun. “Hey,” soft hands grasped Yixing’s rough ones “we don’t have to do this if you’re not completely comfortable with this.” The soft tone in Joonmyun’s voice made Yixing finally look at him, a blush of uncertainty pink on his cheeks. “No, I want to. I’m just inexperienced, and I don’t want to disappoint you,”, “nothing you could do would disappoint me Yixing.”

Luhan must’ve gone through the house and lit the candles before they’d come in because when Yixing found himself on his back underneath Joonmyun, he noticed how the man was illuminated in a soft glow. At first, it looked like the light was coming from the full moon, but when he looked out the corner of his eye, he happened to see a few flickers of flames.

The kisses were soft at first, almost as if Joonmyun was guiding him through the process. He wasn’t overly dominant, but rather he led it then let Yixing take the reins when he was accustomed to it. Being the quick learner that he was, he got it, and soon his tongue glided along the back of the older man’s teeth.

Yixing had gotten so absorbed in kissing Joonmyun that he didn’t realize Joonmyun was touching him until a hand slipped and grazed the flat plane of his stomach. The touch sent shivers down his spine and while Joonmyun was teasing him and dipping his finger into his belly button, he knew where Joonmyun’s true destination and what his intent was. He broke their kiss and moaned, looking at Joonmyun with hooded eyes.

He’d been waiting for this moment for a long time, so that simple touch made him hard. The chuckle Joonmyun let out when he realized it made Yixing hesitate with his actions and he tilted his head in confusion. “Ah, the virility of youth. Everything is almost instantaneous,” just like that, the blush was back.

“I’m sorry, I-” Joonmyun stopped him and shook his head “don’t apologize. There’s nothing bad about it.” Yixing gave a nod and then rolled them over, changing their position. Now he was on top of Joonmyun, looking down at the pink-lipped man. All of his reading and researching, or rather asking around, was about to come into action and his heart thudded in his chest.

Joonmyun’s hips shook as Yixing toyed with the head of his dick, the man completely undressed underneath him. He’d already taken experimental licks and tried out four or five methods of stroking Joonmyun before he gauged the ones Joonmyun liked the most.

Everything was methodical in a sense, but Yixing was having fun. His nerves had eased up once Joonmyun started to moan, which he’d heard that the man did that a lot. Now that he’d almost made the man come twice with his mouth, he reached for the oil and slicked up his fingers.

The slide of the fabric against his dick made him want to stroke himself, but Yixing wanted this night to be about Joonmyun. He’d waited long enough to be with the man he loved, and now nothing could distract him from reducing Joonmyun to a quaking, moaning, and sweaty mess.

On unsteady legs and with rosy cheeks, Joonmyun urged Yixing on his back. From there he slicked up his own hand and gave the man a few strokes before he planted his feet and lowered himself
down. The drag stung at first, considering Yixing’s fingers paled in comparison to his dick.

Joonmyun watched as the different emotions took over Yixing’s face, the first one being wonderment, the second and predominant one being pleasure.

Since Yixing hadn’t let him do anything the whole time, this was the first time Joonmyun was actually do something.

He draped his arms around the man’s shoulders, and they met gazes, a smile on Joonmyun’s face and a glazed expression on Yixing’s. Once he’d gotten used to their position, Joonmyun raised himself up, only to move back down and draw a surprised yelp from Yixing.

Everything was new to him and almost gave Joonmyun a delight to know he’d been the first to show Yixing such a thing. After all, Joonmyun always admired how much information the younger man knew and how helpful he was with the financial dealings of the market. Sometimes he even caught Joonmyun’s mistakes and righted them without saying a word, only scolding the man when they were in private.

Now as Joonmyun adjusted his pace and Yixing’s fingers were embedded in the flesh around his hips, he felt like the tables had turned, even temporarily. It was Joonmyun who was now the teacher and Yixing who was being exposed to something new and learning as the minutes passed them.

Already he was close to coming, but he wanted Yixing to come first. That, of course, was forgotten when Yixing finally broke from his daze and reached between them to stroke him in time to his drops down, crooking his wrist exactly how Joonmyun liked it. No amount of turnoffs Joonmyun tried to picture could stave off the orgasm that’d been building since early, and he exhaled loudly as he shot white on his own chest and Yixing’s.

When he leaned forward and buried his face in Yixing’s neck, the man took the initiative and started to thrust, spilling inside of him a few moments later with a moan that sounded like music to Joonmyun’s ears. He wrapped his around Yixing’s shoulders more tightly and held him closer while he came down from his orgasm, his chest heaving, and his face pink.

“Not bad for your first time,” Joonmyun sighed after they’d settled underneath the sheets. Yixing blushed again and shrugged, unsure of how else to respond. He didn’t want to be childish and gush about it, saying something corny like it was everything he’d hoped it would be, so he just shot the man a smile.

Joonmyun smiled back, and he moved to kiss Yixing on the forehead, but something hit his thigh when he moved, and he looked underneath the cover. “It’s been barely five minutes,” Joonmyun sighed, shaking his head “to be young again.”

“You’re not that old.” Yixing laughed, patting the man on the back. Joonmyun gave him a flat look, and he let out a spiritless laugh. “I’m not young either.”

The next morning when it was time for breakfast, Luhan made his way to Joonmyun’s room to alert him. Instead of a sleeping Joonmyun, he was met with Yixing’s back flush against the wall as Joonmyun took him down his throat.

“Good to see you two get along well. Breakfast is ready,” Yixing gave a dismissive nod and Luhan
left the room, ready to tell Kris and Jongdae what he’d seen. By the time the two men made it to
the kitchen, Joonmyun and Yixing had finished, so they were there too.

Initially, they ate in a comfortable silence, then Minseok took a sip of his water and looked towards
Joonmyun. The man was shuffling in his seat, and he saw his brother sending him worried glances,
though he wouldn’t say anything in front of everyone else.

Yixing was a private person and always had been since they were children, so Minseok was fully
prepared to respect that. He wasn’t, however, going to pass up the opportunity to poke fun at him
since he was yawning over his breakfast. “Yixing,” the younger man looked up “had a late night?”
Snickering echoed in the room, and Yixing glared at his brother, fighting a losing battle against
blushing all the while.
Family Ties

In the matter of a few short years, Joonmyun’s home had gone from just himself to including six other men, all of which meant something to him.

When Kris wasn’t traveling with him and brokering business deals with an expertise that Joonmyun had rarely seen, Luhan was maintaining the peace in the house. Jongdae was attempting to teach Jongin how to dance; Yixing was taking quick steps to be a young scholar and Minseok was reading his way through Joonmyun’s personal library.

The men got along well, or at least they did in Joonmyun’s presence. In his absence, Luhan would tell him about how Jongin and Jongdae liked to lay out in the garden and soak up the sun, carrying on as if they’d known each other all their lives. Kris, Yixing, and Minseok traded intellect and had conversations that Luhan admitted to having trouble following.

They rotated chores to best of their abilities with the exception of keeping people like Kris and Jongin out the kitchen since both of them were useless at cooking.

“What are you thinking about?” Jongdae asked, tracing the smooth expanse of skin on Joonmyun’s bare chest. Joonmyun’s turned from the ceiling and looked at the man lying next to him with a smile.

“Just that you all get along so well like the Gods have smiled on me despite it all,” Jongdae nodded in silence and lay back. Joonmyun was right, they did get along considering that they were all technically Joonmyun’s husbands. Each of them wore the customary golden bracelets and Joonmyun wore six of his own, never leaving the house without them.

Even as he lay in bed next to Jongdae, completely bare, the golden bangles were still on his wrist.

One day, a nervous messenger rode into Joonmyun’s front yard and disembarked from his horse. As expected, Kris met him before he approached the entrance and inquired about his presence.

The young boy, barely in his fifteenth year, shook as he requested to see Joonmyun directly, refusing to look Kris in the eye. When Joonmyun happened to walk into the front room, he saw the scene and rushed out, greeting the boy with a warm smile.

While Kris hadn’t, Joonmyun immediately recognized the boy’s uniform decorated with his father’s personal yellow emblem. He had to be a messenger directly sent by the King.

“What Prince Joo-Joonmyun?” Joonmyun nodded and the boy unrolled his message, reading it in a steady voice “Prince Joonmyun, you have been invited to the official coronation of Prince Joonki. The King welcomes you and your husbands as well. The festivities will begin tomorrow.” Joonmyun formally accepted the invitation and turned back to Kris when the young man got back on his horse.

“You scared him. Too bad he doesn’t know how sweet you are.” The words were filled with humor as he poked Kris in the stomach. Kris’s stiff expression fell from his face and he grinned.

For most of his life, he’d been told he was scary and intimidating but never in the way Joonmyun
frequently teased him about. There was no hint of the insult that usually followed the words and Kris didn’t stop himself as he reached for Joonmyun’s arm and drew the shorter man close, then leaned down to kiss him.

Joonmyun’s face was painted in confusion, but he grinned again and held onto Kris, enjoying the gesture. Kris rarely liked displaying his feelings in public, so Joonmyun took immense joy in the occasion.

Neither man mentioned the invitation until dinner when everyone was seated together, and a quiet chatter filled the room.

“We’ve been invited to the palace to witness the official crowning of Prince Joonki.” Just like that, Joonmyun went back to spooning food into his mouth. As he ate, the conversation had stopped, and everyone was staring at Joonmyun, unsure.

It went unsaid that many in the kingdom disapproved of how Joonmyun behaved despite him being, in all technicality, illegitimate. As a result, people would most definitely talk when he showed up to the coronation with his husbands.

None of them were strangers to rumors, besides Yixing and Minseok, so that bit didn’t faze them. What did faze them, however, was the blatant disrespect some regarded Joonmyun with as well as how some outwardly showed their disapproval of him.

Of them.

The rest of dinner went by quietly, and once everyone’s plates were cleaned off the table, Jongdae spoke up.

“So it’s understood that we’re going then?” Joonmyun shrugged, and he sat back in his chair, meeting the various pairs of eyes that rested on him.

“Only if you want to. You all know me well enough to know that I won’t force you to do anything. It would be nice for my father to meet the people whom I love and have decided to spend my life with.” Joonmyun spoke the words easily and with no reservation.

The flat tone Joonmyun spoke with when he was serious never failed to affect the mood of the room. It was one reason why there was a consensus between the six men that Joonmyun deserved to sit on the throne as Prince and the future ruler of the country.

No land would ever know a more benevolent leader, but Joonmyun didn’t want it, and they all had accepted that.

But now as the silent question posed itself, Luhan examined each person before he spoke carefully.

“I can’t wait to see the inside of the palace.” In a strange way, the words went for everyone, including Jongdae who was overly familiar with the palace and its inhabitants.

It was decided then. They would go to the palace.

Joonmyun knew this, and he smiled so hard, everyone was sure his cheeks ached.

“You’ll get to meet the rest of my family. I’ve looked forward to this for a while.”
Nerves ran on an all-time high as Luhan put on clothes that were befitting of a Prince’s husband. Joonmyun had had them delivered earlier that morning, so Luhan had already fawned over the quality of everything. With his long soft blue tunic and pants made of a fine, thin material he couldn’t identify and the gold jewelry that complimented his gold bangle, he found himself breathtaking.

When everyone else trailed out their own rooms, he noted that they too looked just as regal. Kris’s tunic was a stark white color, complimenting the tan he’d cultivated over the last few weeks at the market. Jongin’s boasted a bright peach color that brought out his naturally tanned skin. Jongdae’s was an arrogant blue, matching his flashy personality. Yixing’s and Minseok’s tunics were similarly designed, Yixing’s gray and Minseok’s a dark green. All of them wore their gold bangles, as well as different ornate necklaces, rings, and anklets.

Joonmyun stepped out his room a few moments after they’d all gathered near the entrance and stopped in his tracks when he saw all of them.

“You all look fantastic,” Joonmyun sighed, his eyes appraising each and every one of them from head to toe. Jongdae had been kind enough to help those who wanted to do something different with their hair as well as anything else. As a palace dancer, he’d been in charge of his own costuming, having been trained personally by Bada on how to visually prepare for a performance.

Against Minseok’s initial wishes, he held the man down and applied a small amount of dark kohl around his eyes, making him look almost dangerous. It was something that made Joonmyun’s heart startle in his chest.

His calm façade nearly cracked when he saw that Jongin had also outlined his eyes in the makeup, adding something he couldn’t put his finger on. Either way, his mouth went dry, admiring all the beautiful men standing in front of him.

Joonmyun wasn’t one who’d ever desired to show off, but as they all prepared to depart, his stomach filled with butterflies. He wanted to show his father just how happy he was and had been.

Their arrival, contrary to Joonmyun’s initial thoughts, was warmly welcomed. Several servants appeared, offering to guide them to the throne room. Joonmyun turned them down and lead all the men with him down the winding halls. Jongdae followed closely on his heels, nearly beside him because his memory of the palace was still fresh. After passing a few scandalized servants and slaves, they arrived at their destination.

A servant opened the doors, and another announced their arrival, all of which caused a commotion. The minute Queen Yoobin laid her sights on Joonmyun, the woman’s eye twitched subtly. She had always been talented at keeping her emotions composed, an attribute that made her an admirable Queen.

“You Highness, Prince Joonmyun and his harem have arrived,” Jongdae made a face at the title but said nothing. Joonmyun saw the reaction and reached back to squeeze his hand before he proceeded into the already bustling room. There were countless dignitaries, some of which Joonmyun recognized and some that he didn’t.

As was customary, Joonmyun partially bowed to the dignitaries, then bowed deeply in front of his father and the queen. Jongdae had already instructed everyone what was appropriate and they did so smoothly, doing a bit more than Joonmyun himself. When they approached the King, they
waited for Joonmyun to introduce them formally.

“Father, it is a blessing to see you thriving and lively. Surely my prayers have been answered.” The King, who Joonmyun resembled greatly, nodded and waved his hands at the men behind Joonmyun. The Prince stood up straight and introduced them one by one, saving Jongdae for last. When the man went to kneel, the King stopped him.

“There’s no need for you to kneel to me Jongdae. Tell me, are you satisfied?” Jongdae blushed and nodded, looking over at Joonmyun who’s face held a neutral expression. The other man had known Joonmyun long enough to know that the man was confused but refused to show it in such a setting. He’d have to tell Joonmyun about their strange relationship in the future.

Yoobin looked at Jongdae with thinly veiled disgust and Joonmyun balled up his fist in the fabric of his tunic. He wouldn’t say a word, but he disliked the woman with just as much zeal. As far as things were concerned, he would never be in the position to adequately express it.

“Welcome, Joonmyun. It has been ages since I’ve last seen you. You have aged well, thank the gods.” To any onlooker, her voice sounded genuine but Joonmyun knew better. Her statement was colder than the frigid winds of the northern lands.

Joonmyun bowed thankfully, and the others did the same, somehow all picking up on the tense atmosphere between the two.

Seated next to Yoobin was her second son, Joonki. Joonmyun noted that the young man’s eyes had been on him the moment he’d walked in and now that it was time to greet him, he looked anywhere but directly at Joonmyun.

“Crown Prince Joonki,” Joonmyun bowed, and the young man struggled to keep his face impassive. Already in his 24th year, his looks had grown to favor his mother, and he possessed her light brown hair and dark eyes with the cheeks and skin tone of Joonmyun and the King.

It’d been several years since Joonmyun had last seen him, so he noted just how much the boy had grown. It was truly a relief to the older man that he’d grown stronger than his other older brother, who had been closer to Joonmyun’s age. Unfortunately, Joonhyung died young after a bout of sickness, which left Joonki, who’d been in his third year, to eventually inherit the throne.

“There’s no need for you to bow to me, brother.” The words came as a surprise and Joonmyun watched in shock as Joonki stood up from his seat and descended the stairs, stopping to embrace Joonmyun. The entire court went quiet and everyone watched the exchange, some people even gasping when Joonki kissed his cheek and held Joonmyun’s hand affectionately. “Your presence has been greatly missed.” Yoobin’s eyes narrowed and her lips pursed but she stayed silent.

The six men looked upon the scene with confusion, and when Joonki caught a glimpse of them, he introduced himself.

“It’s so nice to meet the husbands of my brother. Please make yourselves comfortable for the festivities.” Everyone made some effort to nod awkwardly before Joonki ascended back to his seat.

The young prince noticed the atmosphere in the room and cleared his throat, his eyes narrowing. As quickly as things had quieted, they became noisy again.

Joonmyun took the liberty to guide everyone to the seating that was set up for him. Complete with plush pillows, a few low tables and some servants with fans and platters of food off to the side, it was a sight to see.
They’d barely settled before they were offered food and wine, their cups and plates immediately filling.

Joonmyun made a choice to sit in the middle of everyone, making sure each of them was comfortable and were enjoying the refreshments. He was just about to ask Jongdae a question when Jongin tapped his thigh and pointed at a boy across the room.

“Is that boy a pet?” Joonmyun set his gaze on the man in question and took in his extravagant jewelry and expensive clothing before concluding that he was. He’d heard briefly about Choi Siwon’s pet, Zitao, who garnered plenty of attention and was talked about frequently, even amongst people in his market.

The sparkle of the ruby earring dangling from his pierced ear spoke volumes of how valuable Zitao was to the Choi household but Joonmyun could see a deep unrest in the young man’s dark eyes.

With skin blessed by the sun and hair as dark as night, the jewel stood out even more. As Joonmyun’s eyes raked over his body, his eyes settled on the crest of the Choi family tattooed in dark ink on the otherwise flawless skin of Zitao’s forearm.

“To be able to cast my eyes on the Prince Joonmyun. I haven’t seen you in a formal setting in years,” Joonmyun’s gaze was torn from Zitao and he looked up, taking in the presence of a dignitary’s daughter, Choi Jinri. Before he’d made his preference and choices known, she’d been his betrothed.

“It’s good to know you are still as beautiful as the last time I saw you,” Joonmyun rose to his feet and kissed her hand, making a blush rise to her cheeks. Having been engaged to him since she’d reached her sixth year, she’d been raised to be partial to Joonmyun, something that hadn’t yet departed.

The man saw her eyes land on the men who sat around him and unbefitting of someone her station, she waved her personal servant over then plopped down next to him. Her dress fanned around her fittingly, and she snagged food from his plate.

“Are these the husbands you turned me away for?” Joonmyun chuckled and set on introducing Jinri to them.

Luhan, Kris, Jongin, Yixing and Minseok all sat quietly and waved at Jinri. Jongdae regarded her with a wary look and Luhan pinched him, muttering something about her being too close. Joonmyun didn’t hear the exchange and carried on a light conversation with Jinri, seamlessly drawing all of them into the conversation.

“The rumors were right then; they are all handsome… I’ve meant to pay you a visit and formally meet everyone, but my father has his reservations…” Jinri trailed off, and her eyes drifted over to the man. Counselor Choi Jinwoo currently sat not far from the King, laughing at the entertainment that played out in the center of the room.

The man had always kept Jinri under tight supervision, especially during her stint as a potential bride of his. He’d despised how close and easily she got along with Joonmyun, fearing that the boy would rob her of her chastity. Joonmyun never forgot the look on Jinwoo’s face when his taste became common knowledge and he officially ended his engagement to Jinri, an indescribable look of disgust and joy.

“Have you gathered any suitors?” Jinri’s thin eyebrow arched lightly, then she grinned. “If I tell you, you can’t steal them from me,” Joonmyun smirked in response and Jongin let out a choked
“Well, there’s Kang Younghyun from the South. He’s very handsome, I’ve also heard he’s an astounding lover. You can call him contender number one. There’s also Min Yoongi, a small but gorgeous man from the North. His skin is so pale that it’s stunning. Apparently, he spent his childhood and adolescent indoors because he was sickly. He made a full recovery after a certain point and hasn’t been sick since. Some say he’s sold his soul to some witch doctors, but I don’t believe it.” Joonmyun listened while he took a sip of his wine. His cheeks reddened but it was customary to at least drain a cup of wine in the presence of so many people, so he powered through.

A servant appeared from behind Joonmyun and moved to refill his cup but Luhan put his hand over it. Several people saw the action, but all of them were too scandalized to say anything. The servant blushed and moved away, coming back a few moments later with a pitcher of water.

“Did I do something wrong?” Luhan asked in a whisper once the servant disappeared. Joonmyun shook his head and assured him that he hadn’t then explained that people weren’t used to anyone doing such things for anyone of the royal family, even himself.

Jinri turned her attention from Joonmyun and focused on the men to her right, quickly recalling that their names were Jongin, Yixing, and Minseok.

“It’s a bit awkward, isn’t it? My closeness with Joonmyun is merely born out of friendship. I’m not sure if I would’ve loved him more than a good friend or older brother even if we’d gotten married,” Minseok examined her face as she spoke and when he figured that she was telling the truth, he relaxed. He’d been on edge since she’d sat next to Joonmyun and engaged him in conversation.

Yixing had been silently and physically trying to calm him down, but he’d brushed off his brother’s actions, merely keeping a keen eye on her.

“That’s comforting to know despite a lady like yourself owing us no explanation,” Jongin spoke before Minseok, Jinri turning to him. The woman made a face at his words and shook her head, some of the small ornaments holding her hair out her face threatening to come displaced.

“I beg to differ Jongin. Your marriage to Prince Joonmyun has technically elevated all of you to a status higher than mine. Therefore, I beg that none of you ever feel obligated to speak to me or answer my questions. I’m just curious about the people who have so thoroughly captured Joonmyun’s heart,” their eyes widened and they found themselves looking at each other, trying to piece together what she’d just told them.

A former palace dancer, three former courtesans—if they were also counting Kris—and two runaways were higher level than someone like Jinri?

“I never cared much for positions; you know that better than anyone Jinri. Please be mindful of your words towards my family,” Joonmyun’s voice caught all of the men’s attention as well as Jinri’s and she nodded.

The way she looked down at her bare fingers was reminiscent of a little kid being scolded by their older sibling and Minseok held back a smile.

The more he looked at her, the cuter he thought she was.
For the rest of the ceremony and celebration, Joonmyun reacquainted himself with the people in the court. He also was pulled aside by Joonki and lightly scolded for not visiting more often.

Even after the accident that’d nearly cost Joonki his life several years previous, the boy adored his brother. It warmed Joonmyun’s heart to know that the boy hadn’t allowed his mother to tarnish the high esteem Joonki had grown to hold him in.

“How does it feel to be the official Prince of our great country?” Joonmyun asked, moving to pour Joonki a cup of wine. It was customary in formal proceedings that he do so and the boy smiled the whole time, a look of undulated admiration in his large eyes.

After he had drained it, he leaned forward in his throne and grasped ahold of Joonmyun’s hands.

“Please visit me often. I’m rarely ever allowed outside of the palace, and it gets to be boring. I understand why you had no interest in the throne.” Joonmyun nodded and bowed to Joonki before he turned and went back to his seat.

As the occupants of the festivities dwindled down, Joonmyun also prepared to leave, but as everyone rose to their feet and stretched their limbs, a servant came up to them.

“The King has insisted that you all stay for the night. He requested that we prepare the Prince’s old quarters for you all.” Joonmyun cast a single questioning glance toward his father, and the old man shrugged with a boyish grin on his wrinkled face.

Joonmyun looked around at the six men that stood around him and they all gave him varying signs of approval. The man didn’t move until Luhan nodded another time, signaling for him to accept the invitation. It seemed that all six of the men were intent on getting him to interact with a family he’d separated himself from a long time ago. He wasn’t sure why, but he was confident that they had their intentions.

Perhaps he’d ask them once they were back at home.

Luhan reclined back on the bed with a moan and fisted the soft sheets, enjoying the way they felt on his partially bare skin. Kris watched him from the chair in the corner of the room with a smile on his face, watching as he sprawled out on the bed.

While there were enough rooms for everyone to have their own rooms, several other guests were staying in the palace as well, so the number of available rooms was cut down drastically. Joonmyun had always been simple and required little, so at his personal request when his thirteenth year approached, he minimized his own quarters from eight rooms to four. He had insisted that the rooms be used for other things and after much argument Joonmyun had been obliged.

Now with two men to a room and Joonmyun in a room by himself, his quaint quarters have been entirely filled. Luhan roomed with Kris, Jongin roomed with Jongdae and Yixing and Minseok roomed together. Joonmyun had been tempted to sneak in the room with Jongin and Jongdae, but he knew that between the two men, the three of them together would’ve been…disruptive.

To say the least.

“How does it feel to be in the palace again?” Jongin asked as his hands trailed through Jongdae’s growing hair.
Since he’d gotten to Joonmyun’s home, he’d allowed it grow far past his usual shoulder length. Thicker and darker than Jongin’s hair, it was something that always interested him when Jongdae was within reach.

“Strange. When the dancers performed, they were missing someone,” Jongin stopped his actions and leaned up, a questioning look on his face.

Back at the house, Jongin spent quite a bit of time with Jongdae, talking to him and asking him about the palace. In those times, Jongdae told him about his mother, his life and even his relationship with his best friend, Jaejoong.

“Now that I think about it, the guy you described, Jaejoong? He wasn’t there was he?” Jongdae shook his head and stared up at the ceiling. His heart strummed in his chest, his mind racing to think about all the reasons why Jaejoong hadn’t danced at such an important event.

Maybe he was sick? Perhaps he’d been kicked out? Or maybe he’d just left his position?

Jongin was about supply possible reasons, probably guessing the things Jongdae had when a knock sounded on the door. Jongdae sat up and looked at Jongin before he told the person to come in. The knock had sounded like that of a servant, but when the door opened, the person they’d been speaking of walked in, dressed in clothes unbefitting of a mere dancer.

That observation alone peaked Jongdae’s interest.

“And here I was under the impression that you’d be in here with Prince Joonmyun. Who’s this?” Just like Jaejoong to skip the formalities and talk to Jongdae like they hadn’t been away from each other for a few years.

“This is Jongin, one of Joonmyun’s husbands.” Jaejoong nodded and grinned before he closed the door behind him. As if it were his quarters, he strolled to the bed and sat down.

Now that he was closer, Jongdae took in the glittering jewels that decorated his slim wrist and fingers, as well as his neck and ears.

“I didn’t see you in the performance earlier,” the statement took on the weight of a question, yet both men remained cool and collected. The atmosphere in the room became tense, and Jongin felt the need to leave yet he felt like he couldn’t pull himself away. He’d never seen Jongdae be so straightforward yet guarded around someone.

“Ah yes, that’s no longer my position in this house. I’m part of the Prince’s harem these days. Much less taxing since I injured my ankle nearly a year ago,” Jongdae searched Jaejoong’s face for proof, and when he found no hint of a lie, he nodded.

“So the young prince likes older pretty boys then?” Jaejoong let out a tinkling laugh, throwing his head back. On anyone else, it would’ve looked faked but on him the gesture was fitting. When he finished and wiped the tear that threatened to smudge the thick kohl around his sharp eyes, he set his sights on Jongin and gave him another once over before he looked away.

“The prince’s taste are only known by him, but you could say that. Speak of the devil, it’s approaching the time I’m supposed to be back. It was nice seeing you Jongdae, I’m glad you’re finally happy. That was something I never could give you,” Jongdae opened his mouth to reply but Jaejoong shook his head and got up, waving before he walked out the room.

“That was weird,” Jongdae got up and blew out the lights in the room before he settled back in bed with an answer.
“Honestly? Jaejoong’s always been like that. He came to make sure I was happy and even if we didn’t explicitly talk about it, he must’ve found the answer he was looking for.” In the darkness of the room, Jongin nodded and turned onto his side, staring at Jongdae while the man cast his eyes towards the window.

Breakfast went smoothly despite any concerns Joonmyun may have had and before he could overthink the situation like he’d done the previous night, it was time for them to go home.

“I’ll only let you leave if you promise to visit me,” the look that glimmered in the young man’s eyes made Joonmyun step back, but he gave him a polite nod before he climbed onto his horse.

In the time that Joonmyun had been in the palace, Joonki had mentioned him coming to visit more than three times. It was almost startling how much the boy missed him.

Or perhaps, what was truly startling was wondering if Joonki only wanted him back in the palace so his mother could have her hands on him.

“Why didn’t the King come send you off?” Yixing asked as they traveled off the palace grounds. Luhan glared at him with his lips pressed into a thin line, showing obvious displeasure. Through his vague conversations with Jongin about what he knew about Joonmyun’s family, Luhan figured that Joonmyun probably didn’t want to talk about it. Seeing his relationship with his father, Yoobin, and Joonki, Luhan knew things were much deeper than they appeared.

Joonmyun waved off Luhan’s reaction, having seen it out the corner of his eye.

“They said he was busy, but I think he didn’t want to see me leave again,” after Joonmyun had spoken there was a long stretch of silence as the words settled in.

The chatter only started back up when Jongin started talking about the palace food, making everyone laugh.
A few weeks after Joonmyun’s visit to the palace, he received another invitation while he and Kris were attending to business in the market.

“Are you Prince Joonmyun’s husband?” a young man who looked barely older than his twelfth year stammered, looking up at his Kris. Kris worked to school his expression into one of neutrality, but the boy still looked up at him terrified, so he just nodded and accepted the document the boy presented to him.

After a brief look, Kris noted that it was an invitation to a gathering held by a Choi Siwon. He knew of the name briefly so instead of accepting the invitation, he caught Joonmyun’s attention and waved him over.

“Choi Siwon?” Kris nodded, and Joonmyun’s face displayed a pained look. Joonmyun asked the messenger to give them a few moments and he pulled Kris to the side, explaining his dislike of Choi Siwon.

“He’s one of the most corrupt politicians in this city,” Kris’ eyes widened and he nodded, glancing over at the boy who hurriedly looked away when they locked eyes. “I suppose that since he noted my appearance at Joonki’s coronation, he’s attempting to win me over and possibly bring me over to his side. He tried in the past but since I wasn’t interested in politics nor other things, it was hard for him to find the reason to request my company.” Kris nodded and Joonmyun took a deep breath before he walked back towards the boy and accepted the invitation.

Once the boy was gone and Joonmyun found Kris seated at a table near the food vendors, he sat next to him.

“That’s not the only reason why you accepted right? You have an ulterior motive,” Joonmyun shot Kris a half smile and shrugged.

“Maybe.”

Tao felt a prickling on the back of his neck but chose to ignore it as he fed Siwon a bit of fruit with his fingers. He was used to the adoring and lust-filled stares that seemed to follow him whenever his master entertained guests, or he accompanied him somewhere.

“Prince Joonmyun stares at you like he wants you. You should go serve him and allow him to taste what he cannot have,” Siwon whispered, his breath tickling the outer shell of Tao’s ear. The younger man nodded at the soft request and wiped his hands before he sauntered over to Joonmyun and sat across from him at the low table, grinning as he poured the man a fresh cup of wine.

While their land was plentiful in servants and courtesans, there were also those who performed both jobs yet were neither of the two titles. Instead, they were referred to as pets and were spoiled as bad as their owner’s wealth would allow.

Only noble families could afford them since they were so prized and carefully trained, so it made
perfect sense for someone like Choi Siwon to possess one.

The Choi’s loved to display their wealth at any given moment. It explained why Tao was not only gorgeously maintained but that he was also adored in some of the gaudiest and expensive jewels Joonmyun had ever seen outside the palace. Even though he was a prince, he and his father cared little for obnoxious displays of wealth. Neither of them wore many pieces of jewelry unless they were required to dress up in the face of foreign leaders or visitors.

“Prince, would you like me to feed you as well?” Joonmyun broke out his stupor and he declined, a blush rising to his full cheeks. He’d simply come to honor Siwon’s invitation and turn down any business prospects the man might try to offer him, not be served by Siwon’s favorite pet.

In fact, Joonmyun hated the idea of slavery in any form and Tao’s situation as a kept pet put him at unease.

Joonmyun had, from a young age, believed that no one should be trained for sexual pleasure against his or her will. If they chose the life of a courtesan then that was fine, but for pets, they were simply children who were purchased from orphanages and trained in the art of sexual servitude until they were sold.

Most seemed perfectly fine with their arrangement since they hardly had to work, were provided with food, a home, and a job, but some pets hated the fate they’d been dealt.

Joonmyun was in the process of trying to decide which case Tao was, but the man kept attempting to enchant him with flowery words, polite service, and sultry smiles. At a certain point, Joonmyun reached across the table and drew Tao’s hand into his own.

“As you happy here Zitao?” The questions knocked the sensual leer off Tao’s face, and he stared at Joonmyun with wide eyes. When he opened his mouth, he found that he couldn’t put his feelings into words.

Was he really happy?

He’d been serving in the Choi household since he was in his thirteenth year and now at the threshold of his nineteenth year, he found himself questioning his entire life from the Prince’s simple question.

Tao figured that he minded serving neither Siwon nor the others in his household, but he didn’t specifically like it either. He had only grown accustomed to the way that things were. Not many people could say they enjoyed luxury food, clothes, and housing for very little effort.

Was he really happy?

The younger man snatched his hand from the Prince and stared at him as if he’d told him something foul. Joonmyun gave him an apologetic look before he drew his hands back into his lap.

“If I have disturbed you in any way, forgive me Zitao. I just wanted to know. Your eyes hold a sadness that other’s can’t see.”

That night, as Tao lay next to a snoring Siwon, the Prince’s question echoed in his mind once again. Perhaps it had been brought on by the several rounds of unfulfilling sex, not that that was
anything new when it came to Siwon. The women and other men in the household were better lays, but it had unfortunately been the night that Tao was to sleep in Siwon’s chambers.

Tao mulled over the question for weeks before he finally came to the conclusion that he wasn’t happy. He was simply stagnant and emptily satisfied.

His happiness was superficial and hollow.

No matter how many times the members of the household bedded him, none of them loved him. Somewhere deep in the recesses of his mind, he always knew it, but he’d never bothered to think about it.

He was simply an object that was shown off in public and at parties, broadcasting the prosperity of the Choi household.

Tao was more than aware of the price he’d been purchased for since Siwon liked to repeat the amount as he took him from behind with a grip on his hair. He was never sure if Siwon did so to belittle him and remind him of his place or to praise him for being worth the sum. Either way, he made him count down the moments until the man finished and left him alone so he could go back to his own quarters.

A new moon hung in the sky when Tao happened to come across Prince Joonmyun, the man monitoring the various merchants in the market packing up their things after a workday. He’d been on his daily night walk and was surprised when the Prince greeted him with such warmth as if he hadn’t acted disrespectfully the last time they’d met.

“Pr-Prince Joonmyun,” Tao stammered, bowing his head and casting his eyes down. He should’ve done the same thing at the party, but he’d been so stubborn and comfortable in the presence of his home that he’d allowed himself to act as if he lacked proper training.

Joonmyun took ahold of his chin and tilted it upwards, a small smile on his face.

“No need for the title. Please just call me Joonmyun,” Tao nodded and chewed on his lip before he spilled all of his feelings to the man, the words seeming to pour from his mouth and land at Joonmyun’s feet. When he finally paused to take a breath, Joonmyun regarded him with a sympathetic look.

His heart stuttered in his chest because he hadn’t expected the man to react with apathy or pity.

“Ne-never mind!” Tao added, turning to walk away. Joonmyun caught his arm and pulled him back gently.

“Don’t misunderstand. I don’t pity you, but I do feel bad for you,” Tao’s eyes narrowed, and he turned his head.

“Prince Joonmyun, that is the definition of pity. If you were aware, pets are educated. I am not dumb,” Joonmyun’s mouth broke into a smile, and he let out a good-natured laugh.

“I know that, and I’m very aware of how pets are trained. I am not a prince of this country just in name.” Tao’s cheeks burned with shame, and he averted his eyes back to the ground. Once again, he’d been too sharp with his tongue.
It reminded him briefly of the punishments he’d had to endure when he was being trained due to his mouth, which had always moved quicker than his mind.

“I know you don’t know me that well, but if you’re truly unhappy, then I’d be willing to help.”

How, Tao found himself wanting to ask but he found himself saying something else in its place.

“The Choi’s will not give me up. You’ll have to kill Siwon before he lets me go.” Sure the words were dramatic, even for Tao, but he knew they were true. He was all too aware that he was one of the man’s most prized possessions.

Joonmyun’s face twisted into a thoughtful expression then he sighed. Tao could see that the man knew he was right.

“I can’t help outright, but I promise,” Joonmyun put a comforting hand on Tao’s shoulder before he gave it a squeeze “I will help you.”

Despite not being the crown prince, Joonmyun did as promised and helped in any way he could.

A few days after their meeting in the market, Siwon was called off to do business in a far off land, courtesy of the King. The man was more than happy to oblige the ruler of their country because it meant more prestige and money for the Choi family, so Siwon left without much preamble.

Choi Sooyoung, the lady of the house and Siwon’s wife, wasn’t sad to see Siwon leave either. His absence meant she could outwardly entertain her lover, Taeil. A small statured man with sharp features that differed greatly from those of her husband, he was well known in the house and in public.

He was the illegitimate son of a family of scholars, so in some way or another, he took pride in being such a prominent woman’s object of affection. He’d especially gotten cocky when Sooyoung gave birth to a child who lacked the any of the features notable to the Choi lineage.

Choi Seulgi was a child that particularly favored her mother in looks. Tao had also spent time examining the child, noting how some of her more subtle features resembled Taeil. Of course, no one in the house mentioned that and Siwon loved the little girl as if she was of his blood. If Tao really thought about, there wasn’t any reason for Siwon not to because Sooyoung had already given birth to a son, a heir, several years previously—two years prior to Tao’s arrival—so there was no initial threat to the family’s wealth.

In Siwon’s absence and the increased presence of Taeil in the household, he found that he wasn’t particularly needed, so was allowed outstanding amounts of free time.

As a result, he spent much of his time in the market, speaking with Joonmyun and getting to know the man on a friendly level. As a pet, he was permitted to his own devices, including having friends outside the household.

“Tell me Joonmyun, was sending Master Siwon abroad your doing?” Joonmyun got a cheeky look on his face and shrugged.

“The orders were not mine but my father’s. You’d have to ask the King.” Tao could read between the lines quite well and nodded softly. It was common knowledge that Joonmyun was highly
favored by the King despite the fact that the Prince didn’t want to succeed the throne.

It was one the reasons why Joonmyun, though not a king, was allowed to take as many spouses as he pleased. The Prince’s taste was well known in the kingdom, and many were glad that he didn’t desire to rule because they thought he would have trouble procuring an heir.

Tao prided himself on being caught up with court gossip because it kept him entertained and rumors about Joonmyun were the most interesting. Joonmyun cared none for pandering to the public and carried on as he wished, so people talked about him frequently. None of the rumors, however, were ever malicious since the Prince was well liked by the common people and nobles alike.

“How do you intend to help me?” Tao asked out of the blue while he and Joonmyun ate lunch in the market, joined by two of the Prince’s husbands, Luhan and Jongin.

As the lunch was not his first time meeting either men he found that he didn’t feel as self-conscious as the first time when he’d taken in just how gorgeous each of them were. Luhan was all milky skin, soft eyes, and delicate features while Jongin was nearly as tanned as himself with broader features and sleepy brown eyes, no less handsome than Luhan.

“I wasn’t going to tell you because I didn’t want to trouble you, but Choi Siwon was embroiled in a few scandals prior to his trip abroad. He has used his money and influence to keep things quiet but a few have come forward, insistent that he be punished. It has gotten so bad that even my father has taken notice.” Tao’s eyes widened and his mouth hung slack. He wasn’t really surprised that Siwon was conducting shady business, but he was surprised that Joonmyun had taken notice and was probably going to use it against Siwon.

Now how? He didn’t know yet, but he was sure he’d figure it out soon.

“You’re going to pull diplomatic strings aren’t you?” Luhan asked, popping a grape into his mouth. Tao watched him, transfixed as his pretty pink lips grinned at the sweet taste that must’ve flooded his mouth. He didn’t know where Joonmyun had gotten Luhan from but Tao guessed from his beauty that he’d either been a prized courtesan or a pet like himself.

Joonmyun didn’t answer and instead took a long gulp of the chilled wine in his cup.

As Joonmyun’s husband predicted, when Siwon did come back from his trip several months later, a few guards showed up to their residence.

The ordeal was everything but quiet since the men turned up in the middle of the night, waking Tao from a sex-induced sleep. It seemed that Siwon had abstained for the most part during his trip, so he’d immediately summoned Tao after he got settled in.

There had been a knock on the door then they opened to revealed five men in uniform, boasting the golden color and crest of the royal family.

“What’s the meaning of this? Why have you barged into my residence and disrupted my servants and family?” Siwon demanded, standing beside the bed in his nightclothes and a thin robe. Tao was awoken by the noise and stirred away. When he saw the palace guards, he moved to cover himself, not missing one of the leers that were directed his way from one of them.
“Choi Siwon you are, by high degree, charged with tax evasion. Please come with us.” Even though the statement was worded like a request, Tao knew that it wasn’t one.

They didn’t even allow Siwon to get dressed before two men stepped forward to apprehend him. Siwon’s pride kept him still, and he was grabbed before the men pulled him after the one man who’d spoken.

The entire household, as well as some of the surrounding ones, stood outside and watched as Siwon was marched toward the palace with his hands secured behind his back in his sleep clothes.

Tao wasn’t sure what happened after that until the next morning when a messenger was sent to tell Sooyoung about what had gone down.

“He’s being jailed…” She said to no one in particular, her voice small and her face pale. A servant, Seungwan, stood next to her to ensure she could support the woman if she collapsed.

After Sooyoung had been put back to bed, Tao excused himself and went to walk around the market, looking for Joonmyun.

As soon as the man in question saw him, he smiled.

“You did this. All of this. For me?”

“This country could use more straightforward and humble people. Greedy politicians have caused entire reigns to crumble, and I won’t let that happen under my father’s rule,” was all Joonmyun said.

They talked for a bit more and then Joonmyun walked Tao back to his home, letting himself in with the man. The reaction to his presence was mixed with apprehension as well as confusion. Sooyoung hurried out her room, Seulgi on her hip as the little girl asked where her father was.

“Pr-pr-Prince Joonmyun, what blessing has ensued for you to visit our home?” Her usual confident manner of speaking was reduced to something that sounded frazzled, and Tao felt sorry for her.

She’d only ever done her duties as someone who’d been wed into a wealthy and powerful family. Now there she was, standing in the shambles that her husband had left in the wake of his corruption.

“Nothing will happen to her. I’ll make sure the family is provided for until Choi gets out of prison. My conscious wouldn’t let me rest if I left children and women destitute,” Tao nodded, and Joonmyun moved closer to Sooyoung.

“Your husband’s tax fraud reaches beyond what we could probably recover, but as part of the payment, I request that this pet be relinquished. I understand he’s very expensive?” Sooyoung chewed on her bottom lip and looked at Tao, a sad look on her face.

“Pri-prince, he’s like family. I’ve more-or-less raised him from early maturity to now. Tao,” Tao turned his attention to Sooyoung “would you mind going with the Prince? Siwon needs to pay his debts and unfortunately he probably used the extra money to pay for you. I’m so sorry dear.” The woman’s words held a heavy sadness and Tao made a show of giving her a sad nod, then turning to pack the small amount of trinkets and jewelry he’d collected over the years in his room.

As a common courtesy for the situation that Sooyoung and the Choi household were in, he left
behind the bulk of his jewelry behind, taking only the ruby earring he’d been wearing when he first met Joonmyun and gold anklet.

“I’m so sorry Tao,” Sooyoung sighed, attempting to calm a crying Seulgi now that the little girl had figured out that her dad wouldn’t be coming back for a while. Tao nodded and took one last look before he left with Joonmyun.

“He really did it,” One man whistled, sitting up from his lounging position in the garden. Jongin and Yixing looked up as well, watching as Zitao strode next to Joonmyun, into the house.

Tao happened to catch sight of them and his eyes widened when he took in the men that he hadn’t seen in the market.

During the coronation, he’d been preoccupied with entertaining Siwon as well as the men and women Siwon desired to entice into doing business with him. He hadn’t had the chance to really look at all of Joonmyun’s husbands, but now as they walked into the open living area, all six of the men stood in front of him.

“I knew it,” Kris muttered, the words automatically making all seven pairs of eyes in the room land on him. Tao wasn’t sure what he meant, but he’d hoped that the tall man meant well. He gave off a rather intimidating aura, and as someone who’d always been particularly sensitive to things of that nature, Tao shied away.

Joonmyun raised an eyebrow then he cleared his throat, making moves to introduce Zitao to all the men in the room formally.

Luhan, Kris, and Jongin all were familiar with him, but Tao found himself shaking hands and fighting off a blush as he shook hands with the tall, lithe Yixing, the athletic, sun-kissed Jongdae, and the cute man with full cheeks Minseok.

Once introductions were out the way, Joonmyun personally gave Tao a tour of the house, showing him the large bathroom, the kitchen, pool, garden, library, where his personal quarters were and where Tao would be sleeping.

Judging from the knowing stares that all the men had given them as Joonmyun started his tour, Tao began to think about some things. For one thing, Joonmyun had been so determined to help him, and while he’d said it was because he wanted Tao to be happy, Tao found himself wondering why.

Instead of keeping his mouth shut, he decided to ask, and when Joonmyun froze, Tao wished he could shove the inquiry back into his mouth.

“I’ve already told you that I don’t like slavery nor most forms of servitude, but also because I admire your beauty,” Tao blinked in surprise and the six men he’d just seen flashed in his mind.

Beauty? Compared to the likes of Luhan or Jongdae or Jongin?

“I see the doubt in your eyes but trust me when I say you’re gorgeous. I hope this isn’t too forward but since you asked, the first moment I laid eyes on you, I wanted you to be happy. Whether you find your happiness elsewhere or with me doesn’t matter.” It really did seem that Joonmyun was full of surprises and Tao could tell his words were heavy and held unspoken offers.

Joonmyun was a passionate man when it came to his desires and judging from the man’s words;
Tao was the object of one of them.

“I’m unsure of how to respond,” Tao started, and Joonmyun mouth started to open.

“You don’t have to answer or respond now. Also, you have no obligation to me, I only want to see you happy,” and Tao understood that well enough, but with the way his chest tightened each time he saw Joonmyun, he knew he already had his answer.

“I want to respond now,” Tao said in one breath, his tone stern and Joonmyun went quiet. “I’ve never felt the way I feel about you with anyone else. Even when I would go for my walks, I would hope you were in the market because I looked forward to seeing and talking with you. You remind me that I’m a person, as foolish as that sounds. You make me feel warm,” Tao stopped to blush and swallowed, realizing that his eyes were watering.

Since when had he ever been so quickly overwhelmed by his own emotions? It wasn’t really the time to be caught up in the details, but then Joonmyun’s hand reached forward and wipe at the one tear that had fallen. Tao felt off since he could feel the smile that’d made its way to his lips, yet there were more tears threatening to fall and Joonmyun’s touch only made it worse.

“Is this what they would talk about? Love? Perhaps I’ve loved you for a while Prince Joonmyun,” Tao said, his voice rough with more unshed tears as he laughed. Instead of replying, Joonmyun simply continued to wipe his tears as they fell and when Tao sniffled, telling the man that he was all dried out, he wrapped his arms around him.

There was a bit of a height difference, but Tao bent his knees a little, shrinking the space between them.

“You can stay here as long as you want,” with me, were Joonmyun’s unspoken words but Tao heard them and replied directly to them.

“I’ll stay as long as you’re here.”
Friends in High Places (Part 2)

It only took a few weeks for Tao to get accustomed to living with everyone since he was used to helping others. He was also pretty good at doing chores as well, so he was frequently sought after. Luhan loved having him in the kitchen, Jongdae and Jongin loved pulling him outdoors to lie in the sun and Yixing, Minseok, and Kris frequently inquired his experience with business as well as literature.

When he wasn’t in the presence of the other men, Tao liked to spend his free time with Joonmyun, learning everything he could about the man. There was something interesting about how he could split his attention so that all the other men in the house didn’t feel lonely or ignored. Some required more attention than others and Tao knew he’d already made himself one of them.

He was also very aware of how pushy he could be and Joonmyun seemed to take a sort of pleasure in it. Tao was pleasant and agreeable with the others, but when it came to Joonmyun, he acted like a spoiled brat.

Sometimes he’d lounge on one of the couches in the library as Joonmyun worked with Yixing and Kris, other times he’d insist that he help the man bathe after a particularly exhausting day.

It was how he'd managed to find his way in the man’s bed as well.

“How do I get him to allow me into his bed?” Jongin stopped chewing the bread in his mouth, and he grinned, the food sticking out in a humorous manner. Jongdae snatched it out and put it on Jongin’s plate, scrunching his face in disgust.

“Just put yourself there,” Jongdae deadpanned, his voice flat as he stared at Tao with an even expression. “You look like you’re more than able to seduce him and believe me when I say Joonmyun is easily enticed,” Jongin chuckled then nodded in agreement.

“Jongdae’s right. Since you seem anxious and your feelings are genuine, go for it. I can almost guarantee he won’t turn you down,” after his words, Jongin let out a crisp burp, and Jongdae threw a piece of bread from his plate at the other man’s head.

“You’re so gross,” Jongin stuck his tongue out, and his eyes narrowed, a smirk on his face.

“That’s not what you were saying when I blew you in the baths.” Jongdae’s face turned pink, and he abruptly stood up, causing Minseok and Kris to stare at them from across the room. Tao laughed at their antics then devised a plan for later, taking their suggestions into consideration.

Joonmyun knew how he felt since he’d made that clear when he stepped into the house. The only thing that was holding them up was Joonmyun, and Tao was determined to fix it.

When Joonmyun came home from the market, arriving alone since Kris had had business to take care of at the house. As a result of having to do everything himself, he was tired, and Tao found himself nervously watching Joonmyun eat his dinner, the man looking lethargic at best.
How was he going to seduce him if Joonmyun could barely stay awake for dinner?

Joonmyun finished his food and excused himself for the night, disappearing down the hall that led to his room. Tao waited for a few moments then put up his plate, everyone giving him some form of good luck signs. He swore that Jongdae even mouthed something along the lines of ‘just go for it.’

Luhan must’ve already made his rounds and lit the several candles that were in Joonmyun’s room because everything smelled heavily of vanilla. It was the same scent that lingered on Joonmyun’s clothes and his skin as well.

When Tao let himself into Joonmyun’s room, he heard the movement of water from the man's private bathroom, and he walked inside, shedding clothing as he stepped further into the warm room.

Sitting alone with his back against the wall, Joonmyun was soaking with several light colored flowers floating on the surface of the water. A few scented candles burned in the room as well and he saw that Joonmyun’s eyes were closed.

Completely undressed sans his gold anklet, he stepped down into the water, taking a second to enjoy the warm water that he then realized was infused with something else, probably a fragrant oil of some type.

“Long day?” Joonmyun’s eyes opened, and Tao grinned at his lack of surprise.

“It was. I forgot how exhausting things are without Yixing and Kris’ help,” Tao nodded and reached for the soap, motioning for Joonmyun to lean into him so he could wash the man’s hair.

Joonmyun shot Tao a wistful expression then he did so. As soon as Tao’s fingers buried and scratched lightly at his scalp, he let out an unintentional moan. By the time his hair was thoroughly soaped, he was totally leaned into Tao’s body, probably completely aware of the man’s arousal.

Instead, he dunked his head under the water and rinsed the soap, wiping his face with a sigh.

“Do you like it here Tao?” Tao hummed, and he kept his eyes on Joonmyun. Even with his long hair plastered to his head and his skin flushed from the warmth of the water, he still made Tao’s heart jump in his chest.

“Yes.”

There they were, yet again, with unspoken words between them. Now the air hung thick with sexual tension, most of it rolling off Tao as he watched Joonmyun climb out the bath and dry off, gathering his hair up into a damp bun.

He followed suit and climb out, wiping himself, then he watched as Joonmyun slathered himself with vanilla scented lotion. He’d only covered one arm when Tao sat behind him and took over, massaging the lotion into his warm skin.

Tao could tell that his massage was relaxing to Joonmyun, but for him, the massage was one of the most sensual things he’d ever done to another person short of sex.

“I’m glad. Luhan speaks highly of your help around the house. Jongdae and Jongin love dragging you into being lazy, and even Kris, Yixing, and Minseok talk about you as well. You fit in like a missing puzzle piece,” Tao’s hands paused as he processed Joonmyun’s words and he gave the
man’s shoulder a squeeze.

“There’s just one thing, I’m missing.” Joonmyun turned around, probably to question him face to face but Tao leaned in and kissed him instead. When he pulled away from the man’s lips, he stayed a breath’s distance away and whispered a low “You.”

Joonmyun’s tired hands trailed over Tao’s warm skin, mapping out the smooth surfaces. When he got Tao’s tattoo, his hand lingered, tracing the lines before they moved on. The entire time, Tao stayed close, his body shuddering as chills ran down his back.

In the dim light of the room, Joonmyun’s skin shone with a dull brightness that made Tao swallow hard, taking the time to really admire the man’s body. He’d silently wished that they’d done this in the light of daytime so he could have seen everything correctly, but since night had fallen, he would have to wait for another time.

His hand caressed down Joonmyun’s chest, feeling the softly defined muscle on the man’s stomach as the man kissed his lips, then his neck.

When Joonmyun’s hand finally drifted to Tao’s dick, he pulled back from the kiss with an amused look on his face.

“You’re anxious?” There was a playful tone to his voice and Tao found himself blushing, furiously shaking his head to say that he wasn’t.

The sparse lighting and proximity of their bodies made it impossible to hide that he was hard as a rock and that the tip of his dick shone with pre-come. He let out a strangled moan when Joonmyun gripped it, giving it a soft squeeze.

Joonmyun licked his lips and grinned before he started to sink to his knees, but Tao stopped him with great difficulty. As much as he wanted to feel the heat of the man’s mouth on his dick, he was supposed to be the one pampering Joonmyun tonight, not the other way around. With a firm grip on Joonmyun’s forearm, Tao shook his head and instead took the same route, sinking down in front of Joonmyun.

Just like he’d been trained, he took his time and maintained eye contact as he ran the flat of his tongue up the shaft. When he reached the tip, he suckled at the head and fondled Joonmyun’s balls. Hands moved to tangle in his thick hair and pulled at the roots the moment Tao took Joonmyun down his throat. With his hands gripped on the man’s thighs, his fingers dug into Joonmyun’s pleasantly soft ass.

Joonmyun’s moans reverberated through his body, and Tao could feel him swaying above him, his knees buckling under the onslaught of Tao’s tightening throat.

When his nose lay sufficiently pressed against the soft base of curls surrounding Joonmyun’s dick, the man hunched over a bit and mumbled about coming.

Tao watched as Joonmyun fell apart, each burst of his orgasm draining down Tao’s throat as his heavy-lidded eyes stared back at him. As he allowed Joonmyun to fall from his mouth, the man stepped back and leaned against the nearby wall, catching his breath.

The taste of Joonmyun’s release still lingered on his tongue as the man pulled him in for another kiss, this one just as sweet as Joonmyun’s tongue tangled with his.
Tao gripped Joonmyun’s thighs tightly as he rose and lowered himself onto Joonmyun’s lap with a vigor he’d never done before. The man had one of his hands wrapped around Tao’s dick while the other was raking up his chest, pinching at his nipples.

“So you came in here to seduce me?” Joonmyun’s voice was surprisingly even considering how furiously Tao was riding him. Tao nodded his head and his mouth opened in a moan as Joonmyun twisted at the sensitive nubs while his dick rocked against Tao's prostate.

“Ye-yes. Jongdae and Jongin ga-gave me the idea. I’ve be-been wanting to g-get closer to yo-you,” Tao’s hips slowed to a grind, and he leaned forward, his hands planted on Joonmyun’s chest. One of Joonmyun hands moved from Tao’s chest to his ass, gripping the flesh there as Tao continued to rock forward.

Most of the moans that filled the quiet room were from Tao and as they rang in his own ears, he noticed that there was a lack of falseness and force that usually had usually accompanied the act of being fucked or fucking someone.

Now all of the sounds that left his mouth were genuine and with Joonmyun paying such close attention to his pleasure, everything felt that much better and much more sensitive than before.

“How do you feel?” Things had slowed down, and Tao could tell Joonmyun was restraining himself from coming at that particular moment, the man's voice sounding winded. Each word came out as a sigh, and Joonmyun’s grip was tighter than it’d been previously.

“So so so good, please,” Tao wasn’t sure what he was begging for but the further he leaned, the more Joonmyun took over in the means of thrusting. Their faces were so close that Tao could see the slight dampness that was forming at Joonmyun’s hairline and the redness of his flushed cheeks.

His orgasm wracked through him quickly enough, and he had to close his eyes, forcing himself to breathe through his nose as he spilled between them, making a mess of Joonmyun’s stomach as well as his own.

Joonmyun didn’t slow his pace and kept going. His hips were pressed flush against Tao’s ass when he came with a tired moan.

As they both came down, Tao rested his forehead on Joonmyun's with a smile on his face. Joonmyun tipped his head and planted a soft kiss on Tao’s lips before his head hit the pillow.

“Are you happy?” Unlike the first time Joonmyun had asked him that question, the answer bubbled up from his chest and out his mouth, instantaneous.

“Yes. Yes, I finally am.”

Since Tao decided to sit next to Minseok at breakfast, he watched in great entertainment as Jongdae and Jongin fought to sit next to him so that they could pester him about the night before.

After an intense five-minute battle, Jongdae came out the victor and claimed his seat next to Tao with a shit-eating grin on his face. Jongin had to sit across the table, blatantly expressing his discontent throughout breakfast with sour faces and small pieces of food thrown in Jongdae’s direction.
As it happened, Joonmyun had an early morning business to attend to, so he was absent from the table. Tao found out that quickly that that meant instead of the questions about the previous night being whispered or wondered about silently, most of the men just blatantly asked.

“He was tired last night,” Kris started, triggering the start of the conversation.

“Not too tired not to fu—” Jongin stopped, and his knee hit the table, signaling that someone (probably Kris) had kicked him. Despite not finishing his sentence, his meaning was well understood, and everyone at the table laughed, excluding Kris.

“Did you come onto him or did he come onto you?” Minseok’s face was set in a serious expression as the words left his mouth, but after being around the man for a period of time, Tao knew he was just as curious as the others.

“I came onto him, but he was just as anxious to return my excitement,” Tao answered, choosing his words carefully.

In the past months, he’d developed a good sense of the kind of person each man in the house was and what their reaction was to certain topics, especially sex.

While Luhan, Jongdae, and Jongin were very blasé about everything while Kris, Minseok, and Yixing preferred to keep things either to themselves or shared very few details.

When Tao turned to look at Jongdae, he could see that the man wanted to ask him more but was restraining himself for some reason.

“Was it enjoyable?” Yixing didn’t talk much and honestly it was the first time that he’d ever directly addressed Tao, so it caught him by surprise.

“Yes,” Tao took a deep breath and sip of water before he continued “since my eighth year, I’ve been trained to please and obey. Last night was the first time that I came first. Joonmyun is so attentive, and I’ve never felt that way before.” The excited looks that had painted everyone’s faces previously changed into more thoughtful ones.

He could feel his throat tighten at the wave of emotion that suddenly hit him but he managed not cry.

What was it about being around all these men and Joonmyun that made it so easy to cry?

“So I’m familiar with the generalities of pets, but how exactly did you end up with Choi Siwon?” Tao looked up from the book he was reading and blinked, once again surprised that Yixing was talking to him.

No one, not even Joonmyun, had inquired about his life as a pet since he’d been living in the house. Maybe they thought it was traumatizing or that he didn’t want to talk about it, but in all actuality, he’d already put it behind him.

“What exactly do you want to know?” Tao schooled his expression and tone to sound neutral despite being excited that Yixing was interested in him. Instead of the lethargic and bored expression that usually graced his sharp features, his eyes were wide, and he leaned close to Tao, signaling that he wanted the man to tell him everything.

“My parents came to this country as merchants, traveling with several others. From what I
remember, thieves attacked our entire group, and they killed several people, including my parents. For some reason or another, two other kids and I were left alive. We traveled, just the three of us until we reached the nearest town. From there, we begged on the streets for food and money and were forced to learn the language. After a few months, the oldest, Song Qian, decided that it would be better for us to go to an orphanage. From there, we were able to receive at least two hot meals and a place to sleep, but they worked us like slaves. We were rented out to clean homes, help on farms and take care of other children,” Tao could feel himself zoning out as he thought back on his brief childhood and the fleeting memory of his parents.

“When I reached my ninth year, these men came by the orphanages and spoke with the people in charge. From there, they picked a handful of children, slid money on the Mistress’ desk then left with them. Song Qian and I were in the group chosen, and the people took us to this nice home. Neither of us had ever seen something decorated with such grandeur, so we were dumbstruck for a while. Our grasp of the language was pretty good at that point, so when the women who’d taken us explained what she intended, we understood, and both agreed to it.”

“So she explained to you what she wanted to train you for? Were you given a choice?” Yixing asked with a peculiar look on his face. Tao nodded and continued his story.

“She told us we could be trained to be the sexual companions of wealthy people or we could leave. All of the children chose the former option since we knew that if we were ever picked, we would be provided at least until we were well into adulthood. For most of the kids there, that was enough,” Tao saw Yixing nod, then the other man crossed his leg, his gaze still rested on him.

“They cleaned us up then inquired about our knowledge of chores as well as pleasing others. Some were more familiar than others, especially Song Qian and I, who’d spent nearly our entire stay at the orphanage working. I’m not sure if you want an extensive description, but from there, they started to train us in the various methods of pleasing our potential future masters and mistresses. They had instructors who were our age, and they taught us the physical things. The older people taught us, the more nuanced things like being obedient, cooking, entertaining and serving people.” Tao had to stifle back laughter when he thought about how he’d burned his hand attempting to cook alongside Qian.

Because they had been forbidden to do anything that could potentially lead to injury and scars, Qian knew Tao would be punished if it were found out that he was in the kitchen unattended. Instead of alerting anyone, she snuck him to the bathroom and covered his hand in salve, then wrapped it up, telling him to avoid the teachers. The only other person who’d figured out what he’d done was his roommate, Zhou Mi. Tall and gangly with a pretty face, he treated Tao much like a younger sibling and helped him keep his secret until his burn healed.

“By the time I reached my twelfth year, I was taken to a banquet and shown off to potential customers. I wasn’t purchased until my third banquet, which was when I caught Choi Siwon’s eye and he wasted no time in showing his interest. Interestingly enough, he immediately paid for me, and I left with him. I didn’t even get to say goodbye to my friends.” A fleeting look of pity had flashed across Yixing before his usual facial expression returned.

“After that, I grew up and lived in Choi Siwon’s home. I served him, his wife and several others in the household for over six years. At first, Sooyoung, the lady of the house, expressed disgust at Siwon’s waste of money. Since I was still considered young and I was still gangly, she saw me as an eyesore. It wasn’t until I reached my sixteenth year that she stopped being so harsh and finally accepted me, even allowing me to attend to her. Siwon, on the other hand, loved my youth. Even as I grew older, he continued to admire my looks. The rumor I heard the most frequently during my training, was that most pets were cast aside once they passed puberty, but Siwon and those in his
house, valued me more as I grew older. Um, you know the rest of the story,” Yixing gave Tao a thoughtful nod then he rose to his feet.

“Thank you for sharing your story with me. I’m glad you’ve found your way to us,” with that Yixing smiled in Tao’s direction and left the room. As he watched Yixing leave, he felt something strange overcome him.

It was the first time he’d told anyone his life story, and even though he was on the cusp of his 20th year, the story felt like it was much longer than just twenty years.

He’d always felt much older than he was, but when he laughed along with Jongin, Luhan, and Jongdae or talked with Minseok, Yixing or Kris, he felt younger somehow.
“Father, Baekhyun will be furious when he hears this.” Baekhyun heard Seungbaek sigh and the shuffling of documents followed soon after.

“Seungbaek, we both know that this is something we have to do. For the sake of the kingdom,” Baekhyun could picture his father’s aged face set in a stern expression as he heard the words spoken.

“I understand the importance of the country, but to send off your own son to a foreign land? As a treaty marriage and to a man who’s the son of a concubine nonetheless?” Baekhyun felt his heart skip in his chest at his older brother fighting for his happiness, but a sinking feeling had already started to settle in his stomach.

His father had made up his mind. Seungbaek tried to argue further, but Baekhyun turned his back to the cracked door and walked down the hall, towards his chambers.

Jinki had been seated at Baekhyun’s desk in his personal study, reading, when Baekhyun wrenched the door open and stormed into his bedroom. The man jumped to his feet to follow after the prince but was promptly met with a slammed door to the face.

Baekhyun threw his glass at Jinki’s head, and the man narrowly missed being hit by the object as the glass shattered by his head and fell to the ground. Droplets of wine dripped down the wall, and he stared at the younger man with an incredulous expression.

“You’re acting like a brat Prince Baekhyun. Think about what this alliance means for the kingdom. We’ll be able to fight off the rebels in the north and—” Baekhyun scoffed, and he slid back in his chair at the desk, causing a groaning noise to echo through his chambers.

“Jinki don’t pretend like I care about this country nor the people in it. That’s for my father and Seungbaek to do. What I’m more concerned about is the fact that those two want to marry me off to the son of a concubine. Am I of that little value?” Jinki moved aside as servants rushed into the room and cleaned up Baekhyun’s mess, the two women diligently avoiding eye contact with either of them.

Jinki let out a heavy sigh, struggling to keep his voice level as he spoke “Prince Baekhyun, you should be mindful of what you say. Prince Joonmyun may be the son of a concubine, but his father is still a king. You were not betrothed to Crown Prince Joonki because he already has several wives and holds no interest in men.” Baekhyun opened his mouth to interrupt again, but Jinki held up his finger, signaling for Baekhyun to hold his tongue, “even ones as, pretty, as yourself. You’re lucky
Prince Joonmyun agreed to marry you for the sake of our country because from what I understand, he has quite the harem. I don’t imagine he knows the trouble he’s inviting into his home.”

Baekhyun fumed at Jinki’s words and stood up from his seat, walking until he was nose-to-nose with Jinki.

“What do you dare call the prince of your country trouble? I could have you executed for such a slight of tongue,” Jinki grinned at the words and leaned closer, pressing their faces even closer together as he narrowed his eyes.

“We both know you wouldn’t do something of that magnitude Prince.” Baekhyun wrenched himself back as if he’d been struck and he took to angrily pacing around the room.

Jinki was right. No other man could serve him with the precision that Jinki did. They both were all too aware of that.

It was one of the main reasons why Jinki was one of the few people in the kingdom who could get away with speaking back to the short-tempered prince.

“How long until I have to leave?”

“A month.”

“And you’ll go with me?” There was something in Baekhyun’s voice that made Jinki’s eyebrow quirk. Baekhyun wanted him to come with him.

“I will until you are settled in. Once you have consummated the marriage and no longer agitate the prince’s other husbands, then I will take my leave. As you know, I’ve been caring for you since you were born and it’s about time I take my leave.” Baekhyun glared at him and pressed his lips into a tight, straight line.

Jinki was the closest thing Baekhyun had ever had to a friend and he wasn’t looking forward to having to live without him.

Whether he wanted to admit it or not.

“You will go Baekhyun. I will speak on this with you no further. As a prince, you are to do whatever you can for your country and this marriage is well within your abilities.” The words echoed through the throne room, and Baekhyun cast his eyes to the ground, his hands balled up into tight fists.

There was no further room for argument. Whether he liked it or not, he was going to be sent as a sacrificial lamb for the sake of his country.

With lips pursed tightly and tension weighing down his body, Baekhyun walked out the room with a silent flourish.

When reached his quarters, he allowed Jinki to trail in after him, then shut and locked the door. The minute the metal clinked, his body sagged against the wooden door, and wetness streamed down his face.

At first, Jinki stood in the corner, unaware that Baekhyun was crying, but once he heard the soft hitches of his breath, he moved towards the younger man. No further words were exchanged as Jinki pulled Baekhyun into his chest and held him close, even moving his hand to smooth down his
While it was far from the most intimate of things they’d done together, something about that particular moment stirred something in Baekhyun’s heart, and he started to sob louder, leaning all of his weight into Jinki.

“What if he hates me?” The man’s words came out as a whisper and Jinki’s eyes widened before he tried to formulate a response because he knew he needed to choose his words carefully.

If he said the wrong thing, Baekhyun would waste no time twisting his words and using them as a justification to run away or put up more of a fight against the marriage and their country needed Joonmyun’s kingdom’s help.

“He won’t, Prince Baekhyun. I’ve heard Prince Joonmyun is kindhearted and well-liked despite being the son of a concubine.” Baekhyun listened to Jinki’s careful words and sniffled, leaning up with a quick clear of his throat. He moved away from Jinki and walked further into his room, immediately stripping off his clothes and climbing into bed.

Out of concern, as well as caution, Jinki slept in the chair next to Baekhyun’s bed, periodically checking on the man throughout the night.

For the month leading up to his departure, Baekhyun barely spoke and ate even less. In fact, he ignored all of his duties and stayed within his rooms, taking his meals in his study and only allowing Jinki and one other servant to assist him from day to day.

“You need to eat more. If Prince Joonmyun is dissatisfied with you and sends you back, then the treaty will be off,” Jinki warned as he pushed a tray of food towards Baekhyun. The younger man eyed it then took the fruit and glass of water off it, pushing it back towards Jinki.

“Why do I give a fuck what he thinks of me? I’ll just be another man in his harem,” Baekhyun said as he looked up at Jinki with one of the most hopeless expressions the man had ever seen.

At that point, Baekhyun stopped arguing. He didn’t even have any scathing remarks or threats for Jinki, just silence, and solemn looks.

The night before they were scheduled to leave, Baekhyun ordered Jinki to accompany him to sleep. The request came as a shock to his attendant and the man walked into his sleeping chambers with a confused expression on his face.

“What, do you have a problem following orders now?” Jinki’s brow furrowed and he sent more questioning glances towards Baekhyun before he seemed to understand that Baekhyun was entirely serious.

Once Jinki was settled underneath the heavy blankets and sheets, Baekhyun turned on his side and stared at Jinki’s face, mentally tracing the slopes and dips of the man’s face.

“What if he hates me?” Baekhyun hated how broken and tired his voice sounded, even in his own ears, but he couldn’t help it.

Jinki blinked and took a deep inhale of breath as he tried to calm his pulse. In the month since they’d found out about the marriage, he’d been debating if he should find a way to get Baekhyun
out of it but he kept coming up short for options and answers. It had frustrated him to the point where he was just as tired and resigned to the idea as Baekhyun.

The fact that the prince had asked the same question he did a month ago, solidified the reality for the both of them.

“How were your travels?” Crowned Prince Joonki asked, sitting on the throne next to his father’s. The man had fallen ill a few days previous to their arrival, so the prince was left in charge of handling the situation.

Or at least that’s what they were told upon their arrival in the palace.

“They were fine,” Baekhyun answered, bowing his head slightly as the others from his travel party kneeled. Joonki motioned for them to rise and Jinki moved closer to Baekhyun, examining the throne room.

So far, neither of them had seen a man that matched Joonmyun's description and Baekhyun was starting to feel nervous.

“Be at ease Prince Baekhyun. Your husband is on his way. He lives outside the palace, and it takes a bit of time to get from there to here. From what I’ve been told he’s due at any second,” Baekhyun nodded and looked around before he sent some of the servants that were sent with him with the gifts his parents packed.

“For you Prince Joonki. I heard you are a fan of my kingdom’s jewels and candy?” The prince grinned and motioned for his servants to receive the packages.

It was usually protocol for servants to open gifts and showcase them to the royal family, but Joonki stood from his throne and opened them himself, a childlike look on his face. The servant that was holding the box seemed unfazed, so Baekhyun assumed that perhaps the process was different in their kingdom.

“A million thanks,” Joonki replied before he shoved a piece of amber-colored candy into his mouth and moaned. None of the court attendants blinked an eye and Baekhyun had to restrain himself from laughing.

From what Jinki had told him, he knew that Prince Joonki was young—not much younger than himself—yet the prince conducted himself like a child.

“Prince Baekhyun, forgive my brother for his display. His personality is very childlike compared to his adult appearance,” a voice said, causing Baekhyun, Jinki and his servants to turn.

It was Joonmyun. Judging from his soft brown hair to his high cheekbones and slim build, it couldn’t be anyone other than his husband.

Baekhyun was quick to bow his head, and Joonmyun looked at him before he walked up to him and shook his hand.

“Despite the circumstances of our meeting, I hope we can be friendly with each other,” Baekhyun nodded slowly, and he willed the knots in his stomach to loosen.

The weeks he’d spent dreading their meeting felt useless with how the man was smiling and carrying on.
When Baekhyun looked back up to make eye contact with Joonmyun, the seven men that walked behind him caught his attention. From the various degrees and types of beauty that each of the men possessed, Baekhyun assumed that they were Joonmyun's infamous harem.

“You must be Jinki,” Joonmyun reached out his hand, offering a handshake. Jinki stared at it, unused to any member of the royal family offering to touch a servant in a way that wasn't perfunctory. Baekhyun watched the exchange and poked the older man in the back, urging him to accept the greeting.

“Well now that you’re all acquainted, let us eat dinner. I’m sure you’re in the mood for a good meal after traveling,” Prince Joonki suggested, his mouth now free of candy. He stepped down from his throne and walked through the gathering of people while servants hurried behind him.

After everyone had finished eating, Baekhyun found that he’d been too shy to approach or talk to Joonmyun the entire time. When everyone trailed into the adjacent room for which Jinki told him was for entertaining, he followed as well.

While things weren’t entirely different from home, there were major differences, and in them, Baekhyun found discomfort and unease. He knew Jinki could tell because the man would make efforts to ease his nerves by speaking aimlessly about things that didn’t matter anymore.

It worked for a while until they were seated and Baekhyun’s spot was right next to Joonmyun—nearly in his lap—and Jinki’s seat was far away from him due to Joonmyun’s extensive entourage.

“You looked uneasy at dinner Prince Baekhyun, is there something wrong?” Baekhyun shook his head, and a light blush rose to his face when he actually realized just how close Joonmyun was to him. To preserve some of his personal space, he tried to scoot over, but his knees nearly collided with the tallest and scariest looking man of Joonmyun’s harem.

His heart nearly leaped out his chest, but the man just smiled and scooted over, giving him some space.

While the palace dancers were doing some elaborate routine, Baekhyun stared down at his wrist where the gold bangle hung on his wrist. Apparently as was the custom of Joonmyun’s kingdom, when a man wed another man, instead of rings, they exchanged bracelets and when he looked at Joonmyun’s wrists, he saw that they were both decorated with several bangles. There had to be at least one for every member of his harem as well as for Baekhyun himself.

The thought was grounding.

Joonmyun didn’t quite enjoy the entertainment because his gaze kept wandering over to and settling on Baekhyun.

Unlike any of the other men he’d married, this was a political marriage and judging by how cold and awkward Baekhyun was with everything; it seemed that it was going to stay that way.

Several months ago, Joonki had come to Joonmyun with an urgent request and being the giving
person that Joonmyun was; he’d listened to it.

“We need them. If we help them with the rebels and you marry their son, it will cement our alliance when or if war comes upon us,” Joonmyun shifted in his seat and took a deep breath as he looked at the grave expression on Joonki’s face.

“Did father send you to ask me?” The question was rhetorical because both men knew the answer. As a result, Joonki went quiet, and he stared at the large wall of books behind Joonmyun.

“Will you do it Joonmyun? As you know, I would if it was possible,” Joonki stammered, chewing on his lower lip. He was aware that the younger man wasn’t telling a lie because, as far as he knew, Joonki’s wives wouldn’t take kindly to him adding a man to his harem since most of them shared the same rigid traditional beliefs as Yoobin.

“I’ll need to talk to the rest of my family, and then I will get back to you,” Joonmyun finally replied, reaching to massage his temples.

Tao had only been in the house for a few months and to add another person? Surely there’d be some opposition to adding another to the household.

Except that there wasn’t.

When Joonmyun asked everyone what they thought, they all agreed that he should do as his father requested.

“It’s for the sake of the country. You should do it,” Luhan sighed as he moved around the kitchen, watching over Tao as the man struggled to chop vegetables. With a swift move, he took the knife out the younger man’s hand and finished the job.

“So none of you have a problem with this?” All seven men shook their heads. “I feel the need to make sure you all know that Prince Baekhyun is known to be temperamental and spoiled. Even more so than Tao,” at the mention of his name Tao stuck out his tongue with a laugh.

Kris shrugged and leaned back, stretching as he yawned.

So that was it. They were all for Joonmyun making such a big move, and it was shocking since the seven men rarely ever agreed on anything.

“You sure you don’t mind this?” Joonmyun asked, his pleasure muted as the subject at hand weighed on him. Luhan ceased his movement in the man’s lap and shook his hair out his face, a frustrated look on his face.

“I’m sure Joonmyun. We’ll deal with the boy when he’s here. Right now you’re with me so your mind should be on me.” Joonmyun shot him an apologetic look and tightened his grip on the man’s hips.

Luhan must’ve sensed his attention drifting again because when he lowered his hips again, he grabbed Joonmyun’s ponytail and pulled hard, wrenching his head back. It made his eyes snap open wide, and he hissed in pain before Luhan put his hand over his mouth and made him lay on
his back.

From there, Luhan rode him with such an intensity that he momentarily forgot about Baekhyun and let himself be overwhelmed with how Luhan was swiveling his hips. After a certain point, he only focused on breathing out his nose because Luhan’s hand was still clamped over his mouth.

When he came, Luhan’s hand was still over his mouth, and he silently succumbed to his orgasm, fucking up into Luhan’s body.

“Make sure you tell Prince Joonki that you’ll do it,” Luhan sighed a few moments later. Joonmyun gave him a weak nod then frowned when Luhan climbed out his lap, immediately missing the warmth of the other man’s body.

Baekhyun stared at the bed and then down at the sheer pants and shirt Jinki had given him as he mentioned something about the garments being mandatory for a wedding night.

“I wish I could offer more pieces of advice, but I only have one. Relax. Joonmyun seems like a sweet man, and I don’t think he’ll hurt you.” Baekhyun stared at Jinki with a look of disbelief before he schooled it to a more impassive one.

He was nervous, and it made perfect sense because not only was he a virgin but also he’d never kissed anyone. Anything that Joonmyun had in store for him would be new, uncharted territory.

Jinki escorted him to Joonmyun’s room, and since the circumstances were peculiar, the man was also picked to be Baekhyun’s witness to the consummation of the marriage as well, which was customary of Baekhyun’s kingdom.

As much as Baekhyun didn’t favor a man who’d been his lifetime companion witnessing the taking of his virginity, it was custom, and he wanted to hold on to whatever he could from home.

After all, it was the only thing he had left now that he was Joonmyun’s husband.

When the doors opened, and Jinki announced Baekhyun’s arrival, Joonmyun stood up, standing beside the bed in a similar outfit. There was also incense burning in the room that was lit purely by several hundred candles.

Had the situation been any different, Baekhyun would’ve thought it to be rather romantic. As things stood, he was nervous and couldn’t take his eyes off Joonmyun.

“As you know, my presence is required per wedding traditions in our kingdom. I hope that you understand Prince,” Jinki spoke, his voice tight as he shot one final look at Baekhyun. Joonmyun nodded that he did and Jinki sat in the provided chair, crossing one leg over the other.

Baekhyun watched as Joonmyun stepped out his slippers and climbed into bed. He waited for a beat or two then did the same, adjusting his clothes when he was under the covers.

Despite it only being the two of them, the bed was large, and it seemed like Joonmyun was miles away, which made Baekhyun feel worse.
“I understand your reservation Prince Baekhyun,” Joonmyun started, scooting closer to him. Baekhyun froze in place but allowed Joonmyun to reach for his hands, kissing the top of them. “If you’d allow me, I’d like to make love to you. Perhaps in the future, you may return the sentiment, but for tonight let me pamper you. Just because this is the consummation of a political marriage doesn’t mean I won't do my best to please you.”

The phrasing caught Baekhyun off guard, and he stared at Joonmyun with wide eyes before he nodded.

Everything started out slow, and Baekhyun could only think about how his heart was beating in his throat and how Jinki was watching Joonmyun like a hawk.

Joonmyun pulled back the covers and moved closer, partly hovering over the younger man. From there he gathered Baekhyun’s lips in a kiss, pressing their mouths together with a softness that surprised Baekhyun.

He kept kissing Baekhyun until he sensed that he wasn’t as tense. From there, the kisses got a bit more insistent until Joonmyun had his tongue darting into Baekhyun’s mouth and he was lightly biting his bottom lip. His hands wandered around his new husband’s body, trying to get acquainted with each dip, muscle and subtle curve.

The less Baekhyun concentrated on how nervous he was and how close Jinki was, the more he let go and allowed himself to enjoy what Joonmyun was doing to him.

Joonmyun had dragged the kisses down Baekhyun’s face, kissing his neck and tracing shapes on the man’s full thighs through the slits in his pants with his fingers. Baekhyun was getting aroused, and Joonmyun would’ve grinned if he hadn’t been so preoccupied with his actions.

The soft ahhs and ohhs started when Joonmyun finally coaxed Baekhyun to slide off his pants, and he started to kiss and bite the pale flesh at the top of his thighs. Just the feeling of Joonmyun’s warm breath near his dick made Baekhyun antsy.

“How’s it going?” Baekhyun stared down at him and said yes before he spread his legs, crying out when Joonmyun ran his tongue up the underside of his cock. Almost immediately his legs shook and threatened to tighten around Joonmyun’s body, nearly stopping him from taking Baekhyun deeper into his mouth.

Baekhyun wasn’t sure what to do with his hands, so he balled up the sheets in his fists, and his hips rose from the bed as he let out another cry.

Joonmyun handled him with expertise, and by the time Joonmyun let Baekhyun’s length fall from his mouth, his thighs were shaking and the sheer shirt that still covered his torso was stuck to his skin with sweat.

The tight coil of pleasure in the pit of Baekhyun’s stomach started to become unbearable as he watched Joonmyun take off his clothes.

Joonmyun paused as Baekhyun’s breath hitched in his throat, and an unsure expression crossed his face when Joonmyun added a second finger inside of him.
“You okay?” Baekhyun nodded and motioned for Joonmyun to continue, his breath coming out shakily.

Jinki cleared his throat from the corner of the room, and Baekhyun’s attention landed on him for a brief moment. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he noted that he’d forgotten about the man’s presence but at that moment, he couldn’t bring himself to care.

The first press inside made Baekhyun tense up, but Joonmyun urged him to relax. When he did, the man slid deeper inside of him.

Tightness enclosed around Joonmyun as his hips pressed flush against Baekhyun’s, making it hard to think about anything besides going slow and not coming right away. The younger man made those two things hard from him when high pitched whines left his mouth, and he bit his bottom lip, Joonmyun all too aware of how hard Baekhyun’s dick was between them.

“Good?” Again Baekhyun couldn’t really talk and only anxiously nodded his head, wanting Joonmyun to keep moving. He’d barely adjusted to the feeling of being full, yet he found himself wanting the man to push into him more, faster even.

He was sure he could handle it. He wanted it.

Baekhyun didn’t express his thoughts out loud, but he felt like Joonmyun had figured it out when he gripped both of his thighs with tight grips then moved faster.

Pleasure overwhelmed him, and he could only grip Joonmyun’s back, holding on as he felt the man graze the spot inside of him. The same spot that’d sent shivers through his body earlier now made waves of heat roll through his body and settle in his stomach.

He was so close to coming and with the desperate way that Joonmyun was moving his hips, so was he.

It was just enough for the both of them.

At least it was until Joonmyun reached between their bodies and used Baekhyun’s pre-come to stroke his leaking arousal, coaxing hiccups and more cries from Baekhyun as he was brought closer and closer to the edge.

When the feeling hit him, he couldn’t form words, only whining as his back bowing off the bed and he spilled across Joonmyun’s fist and closed his legs tightly around the man’s body.

He supposed that his orgasm started a chain-reaction because Joonmyun came a few moments after him, leaning on his shoulder as he spilled inside him.

The room was silent for a while, and when Joonmyun leaned up and pulled away from Baekhyun, the younger man immediately felt empty. He also felt remnants of the man’s release trail between his legs and onto the white sheets.

Once the haze in his mind blew over, he turned to his side, ignoring the foreign twinge in his lower back and looked over at Joonmyun.

“Thank you,” Joonmyun’s eyes widened and a look of confusion crossed his face. “This could’ve
been an unpleasant experience but it wasn’t, and for that, I say thank you, husband.”
Baekhyun was so absorbed in being thankful that he was taken aback when the man smiled.
“Thank you for accepting me.” That made Baekhyun sit up, and he stared at Joonmyun in confusion.
“I should be saying that line. You’re the one who accepted me.”
The exchange made Jinki rise from his seat, and he yawned before bidding both Baekhyun and Joonmyun a good night, blowing out the candles and leaving for his own chamber.
When the door closed behind him, Joonmyun slipped from the bed and disappeared into a room—bathroom, probably—and came back with a damp cloth.
“It’s uncomfortable right?” Baekhyun didn’t understand what Joonmyun was talking about until the man pointed to the sticky mess that was drying between his thighs and on his chest.
Oh.
With a blush and small smile from Joonmyun, Baekhyun accepted the cloth and wiped up the residuals that had decorated his body then he handed it to Joonmyun, who did the same.
“If you’d like, we can take a bath. The palace servants had prepared hot water before they were dismissed,” Baekhyun debated it and decided against it. He was exhausted, and he could feel sleep making his eyelids heavy.
It was a funny thing too because, Baekhyun rarely every slept around people he didn’t trust but after everything that’d just happened, he fell asleep with ease.
Joonmyun watched Baekhyun for a while before he drifted off to sleep himself, facing the sleeping face of his new husband.

“Was last night to your liking?” Joonki asked when Joonmyun and Baekhyun made their way to the dining hall in the morning. The younger man looked down at his plate with a flush and Joonmyun cleared his throat, giving his brother a curt nod.
Neither of the men missed the pointed look Joonki gave Jinki. A look, which Jinki nodded at, then directed his gaze to the floor, purposefully avoiding Baekhyun’s curious eyes.
Joonmyun watched the interesting exchange between Baekhyun and his personal servant, noticing that it wasn’t quite the typical servant and master relationship he was used to seeing and personally hated.
Instead of there being a definite presence of superiority from Baekhyun, which Joonmyun had to admit, he expected, there was just a strange feeling of equality and shared sentiment that was only between the two men.
“That look you gave Prince Joonki at breakfast, what was the meaning behind that?” Jinki looked up from the bag he was packing and shrugged.
“You were familiar with the duty I had to fulfill on your wedding night, were you not, prince?” Baekhyun stared at him and repressed the blush that started at his neck.
The man that was his only childhood friend had, out of obligation, had to watch and listen to him lose his virginity. It'd only happened a few hours ago and was part of his ‘princely duties, but that didn’t make the fact any less mortifying. As a matter of fact, he was still working to deal with it, along with the confusing feelings he felt towards Joonmyun.

“As is custom, I was expected to bring your sheets for examination by Joonki and a few servants. He gave me that look because he was affirming that he had, in fact, seen the sheets and confirmed the consummation. There’s nothing more and nothing less.” The whole time he spoke, he never once stopped packing.

“Welcome to your new home,” Joonmyun announced, Baekhyun taking his time to examine everything that he could see. Despite it being infinitely smaller than any castle that Baekhyun had ever been to, the house was still large, and he could easily see how more than seven people lived there.

The one thing that did stick out in the house, however, was the absence of servants. Considering how many people lived there, how did all of the work get done?

“Excuse, Prince Joonmyun, but where are the servants?” Once again, Jinki read his mind and Baekhyun looked at Joonmyun, one of his eyebrows raised.

“I don’t believe in servants. Besides the people who pick up and wash the dirty clothes, everyone in the house helps with the upkeep,” with those words, the nerves that’d intimidated Baekhyun the night before were back, and he grimaced, unable to picture himself doing chores.

Joonmyun saw his reaction and laughed before he beckoned for Baekhyun to follow him through the house, showing him room by room. When they reached the room that Baekhyun—and Jinki—would be sleeping, Joonmyun showed them inside and assured the younger man that he would be taught how to do things accordingly.

“As you’ve seen, my room is not too far away and feel free to come visit to speak to me. If the door is closed, please knock,” Baekhyun nodded, and Joonmyun took his leave, heading towards his quarters.

“This room is actually larger than your room back home.” Jinki’s words reverberated in the chamber and Baekhyun sat down on the bed, looking down at the luggage Jinki had dropped by the doorway.

Besides Jinki’s temporary presence, everything in the bags was what was left of his previous life: clothes that suited the perpetually warm climate, some jewelry, a few trinkets from his room and a hand-sewn stuffed toy that his mother had given to him in his 6th year.

He took his time unpacking each bag, dismissing Jinki’s help whenever it was quietly offered because Baekhyun felt like this was something he had to do himself. To anyone else, it was just getting situated in his new room, but to him, it was so much more than that.

It was him putting small pieces of everything he’d known into the puzzle he now called his present and future.

“So your name is Yixing?” The man nodded and Baekhyun peeked over his shoulder, catching a glimpse of what was inside the book. Simply glancing over the first few lines made Baekhyun
bored and he wandered around the library, touching countless spines of books that boasted names he couldn’t read.

As a child, he’d been urged to learn foreign languages, but once it was found that he held no talent it, he was left alone. At that time he’d been frustrated, seeing it as another way he was inferior to Seungbaek.

Seungbaek.

The pinnacle of perfect, the apple in both his parents’ eyes.

Not only did Seungbaek excel in school but he also was a good leader, picked up languages easily and showed immense promise in combat and maneuvers of war. Of course, Baekhyun was the polar opposite of him, much to his parents’ disappointment and they’d never had a problem showing it.

As a result, Baekhyun began to act like a spoiled brat and hadn’t looked back since.

At some point, his parents started to feel bad, and to appease Baekhyun and keep him out of trouble, and they gave him everything he whined about.

Just thinking about how messed up he’d left everything back at home, he wondered if his parents would miss him or if they’d be glad they got rid of a nuisance like him. After all, Seungbaek had married the girl they wanted and already had a son, so they had their crowned prince and a healthy and eligible heir to the throne.

There was no logical reason why they’d miss the second son they’d married off to a royal concubine’s son for a political marriage.

The thought of it all depressed him and instead of continuing to look at the books, he simply slipped out the room and trailed back to his room where he lay in his bed and stared at the wall.

As Baekhyun sat down to eat dinner with eight other men, he wondered exactly how his life could go from there.

“So how was your wedding night?” A man Baekhyun vaguely recognized asked, making his mouth go dry, and his face erupted in flames. Just as quickly as the words left the man’s mouth, the big scary man, Kris, Baekhyun had learned, told the other man to shut up.

Jinki sat next to him, uncomfortable since he hadn't shared a meal at the same table as Baekhyun since the man was merely a child. As was Joonmyun’s rules, Jinki was treated as just another man, not a servant.

That of course, didn’t stop the man from jumping up when Luhan asked if anyone wanted to help him pass out the dessert.

“How come we didn’t eat dessert the night I came?” Tao asked, a pout on his lips as he stared at Baekhyun from across the table. Some laughed at Tao and others shifted in discomfort, one being Yixing from the library and the man he said was his brother, Minseok.

“Have you settled in Baekhyun?” Joonmyun’s question cut through the chatter at the table, and Baekhyun looked at the man seated at the head of the table with a blank expression.
“Yes, thank you for asking Joonmyun,” he hadn’t meant for his voice to sound so cold yet that was how it came out. The chatter died instantly, and several pairs of eyes lay on him, including Jinki’s.

Joonmyun seemed unfazed by the coldness and smiled before he dug into his cake, a bigger smile when he leaned over to tell the oldest among them, Luhan, something, presumedly about the cake.

The other men lost interest in him soon after and went back to their conversations, Baekhyun taking the time out the spotlight to also taste his cake.

Of course, it was delicious, and he nearly wanted to tell Jinki that, but one man (Jongin?) stared at him with an unreadable expression. As a result, he shut his mouth and just ate the dessert in silence.

When dinner and dessert were finished, Joonmyun excused himself to bed, mentioning something about being at the market early in the morning.

Oh right, Jinki had told that Joonmyun ran a thriving market and that Kris and Yixing assisted him.

Following dinner where Jinki and Luhan taught Baekhyun how to effectively clean dishes, which he hadn’t totally hated, he found his way to the large bathing room.

Out of the few things in the house that impressed him, the bathroom was the most stunning thing. Entirely made of expensive marble, there was hot water in the pool that stretched across the whole room and a bench lined with several scented lotions and perfumes as well as the scented soaps around the edge of the pool.

At first, he thought he was alone, but after stepping a foot inside the warm water, a head broke the surface of the water with a gasp. It scared Baekhyun, and he nearly slipped, barely catching himself on the edge.

“Sorry,” except that the man’s tone hinted that he wasn’t by any means. Baekhyun nodded and tried to go on with his bath, but his gaze kept wandering over to the man. When he pulled his hair back, Baekhyun finally recognized him as the man who’d asked about his wedding night.

“Do you not like me?” Baekhyun finally stammered, having been caught staring. The man glared at him and finished washing before he waded over to where Baekhyun was.

“I don’t know you,” he stopped for a moment, and Baekhyun swallowed, feeling sweat gather on the back of his neck underneath his ponytail. For some reason or another, this man made him more nervous than Kris. “I will say that my first impression wasn’t great and you haven’t done anything to make it better.”

A million thoughts ran through Baekhyun’s mind, but one remained well thought out.

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m not here for you right?” The other man narrowed his eyes then let out a laugh that startled Baekhyun.

“So you do have some bite to you. I like that,” the man replied as he got out the water and walked to the benches.

Silence filled the room for a while until the man spoke again, humor in his words.

“My name is Jongdae by the way.” Baekhyun did his best to give the man a blank look, but he was
The following day, Joonmyun asked Baekhyun to his room after dinner, and he went, his stomach twisting and turning with each step.

“Baekhyun,” Joonmyun hadn’t even given him the chance to knock and he felt strange as he pushed open the doors. During his tour, Joonmyun had merely pointed towards his bedroom, not bothering to show Baekhyun what it looked like inside.

Now that he had a chance, he looked around and noted that the rooms were much nicer than the one they’d stayed in in the palace. Everything was decorated much softer, more inviting with the open doors, billowing lace drapes, silk sheets, and large pillows.

Joonmyun was seated at a desk in the middle of the room, looking at books. He rose from his chair and pointed towards a couch, gesturing that he wanted Baekhyun to sit down.

Once he was seated, Joonmyun joined him and took a deep breath.

“I can’t even begin to understand how you must feel surrounded by everyone else, including myself but I’d like you to tell me.” Baekhyun looked at the man curiously and waited for him to explain further, but he didn’t.

His feelings?

Besides his growing resentment of his parents and older brother?

Besides the fact that Jinki would be going home in a few weeks time, leaving him all by himself in a house full of strangers?

Besides the fact that he’d only spoken to his husband directly and intimately the night of their wedding and their wedding night?

“Confused,” was the only word he could muster, trying to condense all his feelings into short phrases but failing miserably.

“There’s more,” Joonmyun urged, never taking his eyes off Baekhyun.

“Angry. Alone. Confused. What else would you like me to say Joonmyun? I went from having an entire household of servants at my beck and call to having to learn how to do things or relying on other people to do them. I’ve also gone from never dealing with anyone to having a husband as well as seven other men who share the same husband. Tell me how I’m supposed to feel?” Joonmyun didn’t even so much as flinch when Baekhyun raised his voice and instead sat back further on the couch, a pleased look on his face.

“Thank you for opening up to me,” really Baekhyun just wanted to hit Joonmyun in the face, but he knew that his blows were weak at best so that probably wouldn’t be the best idea. Instead, he just felt anger build up all the way to the top of his head, and he clamped his mouth shut.

Joonmyun’s entire stoic demeanor was everything that annoyed Baekhyun wrapped all into one. He was too nice, and if there was one thing Baekhyun learned when navigating through real and false friends, there was always something wrong with people who were too nice.
The whole time they spoke, Joonmyun felt pinches of awkwardness threatened to overwhelm them. It was strange talking to a man who he'd only slept with out of obligation, but then again, there was another reason as well.

The anger that Baekhyun looked at him with scared him a bit and he wanted to tread carefully so as not to offend or set off the man, but as he’d been warned, Baekhyun was a loose cannon, and it certainly showed.

All across the board, Joonmyun realized.

He was familiar with how Baekhyun had been treated back in his kingdom, being spoiled and isolated sans for Jinki, a man who’d been his servant since he was an infant.

Joonmyun didn’t like to judge the customs of other kingdoms unjustly, but he hated the way that kids like Baekhyun were treated if they didn’t ‘measure up’ to their older male siblings. He also hated the way most people just became complacent with their life, much like Baekhyun had before being married off to him.

“Have the others in the house been nice to you?” The question felt strange and parental given the circumstances, but Joonmyun had to admit that the situation warranted it.

While the other men had been oddly accepting of everything, Joonmyun had noticed the slight change in atmosphere in the house, especially with Jongdae. The man seemed to grow colder and more distant the closer it got to Baekhyun’s arrival.

When Baekhyun finally came to the house, Jongdae was the only one who’d openly shown his displeasure, and it worried Joonmyun, considering that he wanted the arrangement to work out.

Meeting Baekhyun had changed Joonmyun’s initial thoughts about him but actually talking to him—and sleeping with him—also cleared up further misconceptions.

“Well this guy, Jongdae, I think it was. He’s very intimidating, even more so than Kris.” Joonmyun thought the statement over and had to restrain himself from laughing because Kris was the least intimidating out of all the men in the house. He knew that Baekhyun was probably deterred because of Kris’ height and neutral facial expression, which is what made a lot of people wary of him.

Hearing the bit about Jongdae wasn’t surprising, but he couldn’t say he was happy to hear it, and he knew he’d have to talk to the man in the next coming days.

Baekhyun left Joonmyun’s room in the middle of the night, and when he got back to his room, Jinki was waiting up for him with his back propped up against a wall and a book in his hand.

“Husbandly duties to attend?” Baekhyun found that he was so drained he couldn’t even bring himself to laugh at the obvious jab Jinki had made. Instead, he shook his head no and pulled back the linen on his bed, slipping underneath them and staring at the wall.

The combination of feelings that welled up inside of him was confusing, and he didn’t want to think about it further because it only dragged him deeper inside of himself.

During their entire conversation, Joonmyun had listened with a concerned expression excluding the
part where he’d mentioned the confrontation with Jongdae. That had been the only moment where he was sure he’d struck a cord with him, and he feared that Joonmyun would go and talk to Jongdae and make the man dislike him more.

Not that he cared because the only person who needed to like him was Joonmyun.

Except that he did care. He cared a lot, and he couldn’t figure out why.
Fragile Alliances (Part 2)

“I didn’t intimidate him. I was just joking Joonmyun,” Jongdae sighed, sprawling his body across Joonmyun’s bed as he stared up at the ceiling.

Out of concern for Baekhyun getting properly acquainted, he’d called Jongdae to his bedroom the following night to ask what he thought of Baekhyun so far. Joonmyun wanted to get to the root of the problem before things got out of hand because he loved Jongdae and wanted him to come to accept Baekhyun. Eventually.

“But you understand the situation, do you not?” Jongdae made a confirming noise “then you’ll understand that that's why I would like you not to do that anymore.” Joonmyun sat by Jongdae’s head and leaned down to kiss him. Even with the awkward angle, Jongdae took hold of his face and kissed him harder.

“I do not mind sharing you Joonmyun, but you have to admit that the entire situation is strange. And him coming with his personal servant, especially with how you feel about servants?” Joonmyun nodded and pressed his lips together in thought, trying to come up with a solid explanation, because Jongdae saw straight through him when he lied.

“The servant, Jinki, has been taking care of him since he was a child. That man is his only connection to his old life now and we need to give him time to adjust to life our way. Jinki also shared with me that Baekhyun no longer orders him, so perhaps he’s changing for the best. Let’s also not forget that the man will leave in a fortnight.” This time Jongdae’s eyes widened in shock and he sat up, his face close to Joonmyun's again.

“Does he know that?” Joonmyun nodded that he did. “Wow, he's already kind of to himself. Once that man leaves he'll never talk to any of us and probably stay in his room,” Joonmyun grimaced at the thought of Baekhyun shutting away himself but resolved that he would try everything in his power to prevent that.

When they’d finished talking about Baekhyun, Jongdae yawned and slipped off his shirt, leaving him in a thin pair of undergarments.

“Are you going to punish me for being mean?” Jongdae’s voice held a note of humor as he spoke and he moved to pull the covers back then slipped out his underwear. Joonmyun’s mouth went dry, and he shut the door to his bedroom, approaching the bed with a grin on his face.

The day that Jinki left was a quiet one for everyone in the house, including Joonmyun who’d grown to know just how important the man was to Baekhyun.

“I don’t want you to leave, but I’m no longer in charge of you,” Baekhyun sighed, his voice low and his arms crossed in front of him. He was fidgeting as he spoke and he knew Jinki noticed but didn’t say anything. Instead, for one of the first times in Baekhyun’s life, Jinki embraced him.

It seemed to last for ages until the man let go then he grabbed his bags and looked at the small carriage that was waiting for him.

“You know your parents didn’t have to send such a thing for me,” Baekhyun shook his head and followed Jinki as he walked further out towards it.
“I wrote them and insisted that they did. We can’t have you getting sick or harassed on your way back,” Jinki opened his mouth to protest, but he seemed to think of it and sighed again, taking one last look at Baekhyun.

“I guess this is goodbye then Prince Baekhyun?” Baekhyun shook his head again, except this time there were unshed tears in his eyes. “And you will write me, correct? Let me know if anything changes or if you become with child or something,” even as the joke slipped out, Jinki’s face remained strained, and Baekhyun did his best to laugh as tears slipped down his cheeks.

“I’ll miss you.”

“I know, but you’re married now. You no longer need me. You have others to rely on now, and you don’t have to be so closed off all the time. They’re all willing to help you but you have to open your mouth and make an effort.” Baekhyun couldn’t look Jinki in the eyes as the man spoke because he knew it was the truth.

In the past month, he’d stayed to himself and now his sole companion was leaving.

It hurt like hell to stand still and watch as the carriage rolled away, kicking up dust and sand from the road but Baekhyun did it anyway. He stood there till he couldn’t see the back of Jinki’s head through the small window.

When he finally walked back into the house, no one said a word to him and everyone kind of avoided him, giving him space. Even Joonmyun simply waved at him when he got home from the market.

Dinner, like everything else that day, was quiet and before Baekhyun could blink, he was sitting back in his room, though this time he was alone. Jinki’s bed was stripped bare, and the linens lay folded up on top.

The finality of it all hung heavy in his chest, but he finally willed himself to sleep, having exhausted himself with crying.

With Jinki gone, there was no excuse for him to act like a spoiled child anymore. He was a grown man and married at that, so he should act like some semblance of it. It was far past the time but was better late than never.

Baekhyun’s first course of action was attempting to get to know the other men in the house. Besides Luhan who happily taught him how to do chores and Yixing who sometimes spoke to him when he wandered into the library, he didn’t know much about the other five men in the house besides their names.

He wanted to start with someone more approachable, settling on Minseok whom he thought looked much like a child.

Two days after Jinki left, Baekhyun decided that he would try and talk to Minseok, who always was present in the kitchen during the morning and afternoons, brewing coffee and tea.

He waited until the afternoon and quietly approached the man, walking behind him and watching as he expertly poured hot water over what looked like dirt on paper.
A strong and fragrant smell filled the room, and Baekhyun took a deep inhale, enjoying the scent. His action, however, alerted Minseok of his presence and the man turned around, eyeing him with a friendly wariness.

“Is there anything I can help you with Baekhyun?” It was a bit jarring not to be addressed as Prince, but Baekhyun swallowed and nodded, pointing towards the coffee.

“Not really. I was just wondering if I could have a cup of coffee? We didn’t drink it often at home, and I’ve never seen it prepared. I just thought it was interesting was all,” Minseok’s expression relaxed a little, and his smile softened.

He moved to pull out an extra cup from the cabinet then continued pouring the hot water, filling up the glass pitcher underneath his strange contraption.

“Joonmyun brought this for me on one of his merchant trips. It’s always been a fascination of mine even back when it was just my brother and me,” Baekhyun’s eyes widened and he decided to push his luck.

“Brother? Where is he now?” Minseok grinned and nodded his head towards the library.

“He’s here? Is he also with Joonmyun?” Another nod.

Minseok sat a steaming cup of the dark liquid in front of Baekhyun, and he eyed it, his nose scrunched. At first, the other man looked at him in confusion then he rose from his seat and came back with milk and sugar.

“Sorry, I usually drink it black. You taste the flavor better,” Baekhyun nodded and went to work, putting a handful of sugar and enough cream to nearly overflow the cup. When he finally took a sip, he grinned and downed the rest, feeling the warmth travel down his throat and wake him up despite the day being nearly over.

Rather than reapproach the fact that Minseok and his brother were with the same man, Baekhyun chose to move on from it and continue to talk to the man about coffee. He could tell that that was a sure way of getting on the man’s good side and he had to admit that hearing Minseok talk was calming.

After Minseok, Baekhyun worked his way to Jongin, who he quickly realized loved to sleep and made it nearly impossible to catch him awake during the day. Then there was Yixing, who barely spoke at all and made Baekhyun do most of the talking, not that he minded too much.

Kris and Luhan were surprisingly easy to talk to considering that the men were the two oldest of the others. Kris, Baekhyun learned, wasn’t intimidating at all and was in fact just very tall and intense looking.

Unlike the others, who only told him tidbits of how they’d met Joonmyun, Luhan told him the entire story, including how he’d brought in Jongin as well.

Baekhyun saved Tao and Jongdae for last because next to Kris, the two were the only other people he tended to stay away from. Much like Kris, Tao only looked intimidating and was pretty sweet. Jongdae, on the other hand, wasn’t nearly as easy to deal with as the other two.

It’d taken him almost two weeks to build up the confidence to speak to Jongdae alone, and when
the perfect moment came, he almost talked himself out of doing it.

Jongdae had been sitting alone in the garden, lying out in the sun when Baekhyun sat on the platform next to him. At first, Jongdae had just ignored him and continued to sunbathe, but after a few long moments, he sat up with an annoyed expression on his face.

“Do you need something Prince Baekhyun?” Jongdae’s way of addressing him stung a little, showing that he saw the apparent distance between him and Baekhyun. “Don’t think that just because you’ve been warming up to the others in the house and Joonmyun, means that I’ll follow along in suit.”

Any conversation starter Baekhyun had formulated previously to approaching the man went out the figurative window, and he scrambled to think of something else.

If there was one thing he had left, it was his determination to adjust and adapt, and he wasn’t just going to let his goals go because of Jongdae.

“I’ve seen you dance,” Jongdae looked at him with a raised eyebrow and pensive look on his face, suddenly interested. Baekhyun felt his heart flutter, and he forced himself to continue, “why don’t you dance anymore?”

More expressions crossed Jongdae’s face, Baekhyun catching glimpses of amusement and annoyance as well as interest.

“Why?” He asked after a pregnant pause.

The question hung in the tense atmosphere, and Baekhyun took a deep breath. He wasn’t backing down.

“I just wanted to know. You all performed for my family once when we came to visit this kingdom when I was younger. I’ve always appreciated the grace and beauty that dancers move with. My mother was fond of dancing and taught children how to dance before she married my father,” Jongdae’s tense jaw went slack as he listened.

When Baekhyun finished talking, he looked at Jongdae expectantly, waiting for him to answer his question since he’d shared so much.

“I danced in defiance of my mother and sister’s wishes. I was chosen as a palace dancer like my mother was when she was younger and I served there for nearly a year and a half. Joonmyun watched me dance at an event and he enjoyed it so much, he requested for me to dance at his birthday party. Once I danced for him, he asked for my hand in marriage and I agreed,” Baekhyun listened but found that he was confused.

Why would Jongdae give up such a big aspiration for the sake of love of a man he barely knew?

“So you just gave up? On dancing?” Jongdae leaned on his forearms and stared at the sky before his eyes settled back on Baekhyun.

“Yeah I guess. It was the best decision I’ve in my life. I couldn’t have grown old in the palace. It just wasn’t the place for me,” Jongdae took a pause and grinned then continued, “being here with Joonmyun and everyone else is my place.”

The sureness that lay in Jongdae’s statement shook Baekhyun to his core, and the man didn’t seem to notice as he, apparently done with the conversation, turned on his side and closed his eyes.
To jump so headfirst into a plan like marriage sounded foolish and yet here Jongdae was, looking as content as humanly possible.

“Hopefully you can learn to love Joonmyun as time goes by as well. I think,” Jongdae chuckled, “I realized I could love him when he asked me to marry him and more or less told me he would wait for me.”

“Why does this seem like you’re spying on him? It’s unsettling,” Luhan commented as he walked past Joonmyun watching Baekhyun talk to Jongdae.

Instead of taking the time to explain that he’d been worried about the two, he just kept looking and listening to the bits of the conversation he could catch.

“Do you think they’ll get along now?” Luhan paused a moment and watched the conversation as well, noting how Jongdae didn’t look at Baekhyun with hostility anymore, just mild amusement.

“If that’s what you’d call him trying to get on Jongdae’s good side and not quite succeeding. Jongdae isn’t wary of him anymore, though,” Joonmyun smiled and stopped eavesdropping, satisfied. He felt like he could, at the very least, leave Baekhyun in the care of Luhan and Minseok while he and Kris went on another merchant trip.

Much shorter than the ones he usually took, the merchants they were buying and trading with agreed to meet them halfway. Instead of having to make a two-month trip, it would only take three weeks.

He’d been pushing things off because he didn’t want to leave Baekhyun alone with everyone after such a short period but nearly four months had passed, and Baekhyun was a grown man. Joonmyun had to give him a chance to socialize with the others further without his help.

Baekhyun watched at Joonmyun carried some bags and supplies then loaded it all up into saddlebags.

“How long will you be gone?” Baekhyun asked, stroking Joonmyun’s horse’s mane. The animal nuzzled into the touch, and Joonmyun smiled before patting Baekhyun on the shoulder.

“We’ll be back in three weeks,” Joonmyun’s answer was met with a soft nod. Baekhyun could tell the man was searching for a sign that he was nervous but he wasn’t about to give Joonmyun a reason to worry further.

“I suppose I’ll see you in a while then?” Joonmyun seemed pleasantly surprised but didn’t say anything. Instead, he finished packing and called everyone else out the house.

One by one, Joonmyun said goodbye to each man with a kiss. Baekhyun positioned himself at the end of the line, and when Joonmyun reached him, the man leaned forward and lightly pecked him on the lips, moving back with a smile.

It was so much like the kiss they’d shared during their wedding night that Baekhyun saw a flashback of then and lowered his head with a blush.

Baekhyun managed to look up in time to see Kris gather Luhan in a sweeping kiss before he followed Joonmyun and mounted his horse. He didn’t even think to ask before Jongin leaned over
to him with a knowing look on his face.

“Despite all of us being with Joonmyun, Luhan and Kris are together as well.”

At some point, it seemed like Baekhyun learned something new about the people in Joonmyun’s house every day.

Unlike when he’d first arrived, Baekhyun didn’t stay cooped up in his bedroom. Instead, he spent most of his time not doing chores, wandering around the house and sometimes going to the market with Minseok, Luhan, and Jongin.

Jongin had introduced him to a fruit vendor and mother of triplets, Luna, when they’d first arrived. At first, the three children had crowded around Jongin but when Jongin introduced Baekhyun to them, one of the little boys (out of two boys and one girl), kept staring at him.

Eventually, Donghae spoke to Baekhyun with a toothy grin.

"Mister, you’re as pretty as a princess,” a small voice whispered, pulling on the edge of his tunic as he sat down.

Baekhyun accepted the compliment with a laugh and patted Donghae on the head before the little boy joined his brother Jonghyun and his sister, Amber. He watched as the boy told his siblings about his findings then once again the children surrounded him.

“He’s right, you do look pretty like a princess,” Amber agreed, putting her hands on her hips as she examined Baekhyun closer.

Luna heard the ruckus and came from behind her stall, leaving Jongin in charge as she attempted to corral her children.

“Alright you three, leave Baekhyun alone. I’m sure he doesn’t like you all saying he looks like a princess!” Baekhyun shook his head and told the children that he didn’t mind it, which made Donghae and Jonghyun poke their tongues out at their mother.

“See mom, he doesn’t care! We weren’t bein mean!” Jonghyun protested as he still accepted the parcel of lunch his mother handed him.

Conceited or not, the encounter with the children put Baekhyun in a good mood, and he had been particularly chatty at dinner.

Jongdae even cracked a smile at his retelling of the story, and it made Baekhyun feel like things were finally looking up for him. With Jongdae at least, which meant a lot considering how much Jongdae seemed to dislike him when he’d first arrived.

After that night, the other men started to warm up to him and even invited him to do things with them.

Jongin offered to teach Baekhyun how to swim, which he did surprisingly quickly considering how bad Baekhyun was at it. He also appreciated how much patience the younger man had with him
and his flailing around and splashing.

By the end of the second week, he could swim in the deeper section of the pool with his arms and legs working together, rather than him moving them independently and repeatedly sinking.

In the week leading up to Joonmyun’s return, Yixing invited him to school with him, and he spent a good portion of the week waking up early, eating a light breakfast then walking to the nearby university with Yixing.

He’d known Yixing was smart, but when he got to see the man in action, pouring through countless books of complex numbers, literature and even things in other languages, he was nothing short of amazed.

Most times than not, he listened to the teachers and tried to piece together what they were talking about but came up blank each time. He’d personally stopped caring about school once he realized he’d never be smarter than Seungbaek. As he sat, staring at Yixing jotting down notes, he felt a wave of regret wash over him.

Out of all the classes, he attended with Yixing, he enjoyed hearing about the classics the most because the stories were always interesting and he didn’t have to think too much. In fact, sometimes after class, Baekhyun would find himself asking Yixing further questions and even talking to him about it at home.

“You think he’s been okay these past few weeks?” Joonmyun asked as Kris’ large hands massaged at the sore muscles in his back. Kris hummed and dug his palms into Joonmyun’s lower back, making the man moan.

“He’s been trying. I think he’ll be okay. He seems to understand that things are up to him and only him now.” Joonmyun nodded and buried his face into the nearest pillow when Kris found a kink and began to focus on it.

He was so spent after the massage that he would’ve fallen asleep if not for his arousal aching as he laid on his stomach. He was also aware of how hard Kris was as well, probably from the moans he’d made earlier.

Joonmyun hadn’t planned on making love to Kris, but as things always happened with Kris, it was spontaneous and always worth it.

Instead of being relieved when Joonmyun and Kris trudged through the front yard, then through the door, Baekhyun felt almost disappointed.

It was nice to see Joonmyun and Kris, but at the same time, he worried that their presence would undermine all the progress he’d made with everyone else. Despite that, he still greeted Joonmyun with a genuine smile and even initiated a hug, catching the man by surprise.

“You got a tan,” Baekhyun mentioned as he let Joonmyun go, his eyes drifting over the man’s exposed collar and arms, as well as his face. Joonmyun moved to the nearest mirror and glanced at his reflection, laughing. “You too,” Kris nodded and looked at his arms, really noticing the change in his skin under the bright light.

“You’d be surprised how different the weather is further down south.”
“Perhaps one day we can all go,” again Baekhyun took Joonmyun by surprise and Joonmyun could only nod along, making a silent promise that they would go.

“You know, you coming with me to school wasn’t just for when Joonmyun was gone right?” Baekhyun looked up from his book with wide eyes, surprised that Yixing had initiated a conversation with him.

He nearly dropped his book when the younger man walked into his room and sat down on the opposite bed, intending to prolong the conversation.

“My brother told me he talked to you?” Baekhyun nodded and sat down the book “well he said you didn’t ask, but I’m sure you want to know how or why we love the same man.” The truth was, Baekhyun was curious but he’d been smart enough not to ask because he didn’t want to seem nosy or prying, especially when he’d been trying to get on everyone’s good side.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” Baekhyun’s words trailed off, and Yixing shifted, scratching the back of his neck before he said that he knew that.

“I really don’t mind. I feel,” Yixing stopped and searched for the right words “close to you. I like the other men who live here, but you’re different. Like I can connect to you,” Yixing words struck a cord with Baekhyun, and he sat in silence, listening as the other man explained to him, in his own words, the difference between his love for Joonmyun and Minseok’s love for Joonmyun.

When he finished, there was a silence, and Yixing laughed, breaking it.

“That feels strange to get off my chest since I’ve never actually explained it to anyone. I’m sure there are men in the house who don’t understand why both Minseok and I are with Joonmyun.” Baekhyun, on the other hand, was trying to process what Yixing had just told him.

“Thank you,” was what he settled on and Yixing looked taken aback. “For confiding in me and talking to me. I feel like I’ve gotten used to this place but trying to be everyone’s friend is exhausting. I never had to socialize this much at home. Or ever actually,” Baekhyun found that as he spoke, he started smiling and he found that he too felt lighter.

It was nice having someone to talk to.

A few days following Joonmyun and Kris’ return, Baekhyun received a letter from home. Yixing had brought it to his room and lingered in the doorway until he’d finished scanning the contents, a weary smile on his face.

Jinki had promised to write, and as always, the man was true to his word and took the time to write Baekhyun a lengthy letter, detailing everything that was happening back in the castle, as well as tidbits about Jinki’s life that Baekhyun had never known.

For one, the letter spoke about his brother expecting another baby with his wife, as well as his first child with his concubine. Jinki had written that he hoped for the sake of either of the children, that Seungbaek’s wife would birth a boy and that his concubine would birth a daughter. Baekhyun found himself agreeing, not wishing for political strife to follow his brother and his children. Plus he also hoped that his brother received a daughter because the man frequently spoke of wanting a daughter.
Just because he resented having to grow up in his brother’s shadow didn’t mean that he wished ill on his nieces and nephews. Baekhyun only hoped that they’d never have to deal with what he did growing up.

In the same vine of news, Jinki also mentioned that his wife was pregnant with their first child. The man only wrote about it briefly then moved back to describing what was happening in the palace.

Baekhyun also found out that his father had briefly been ill and bedridden but had recovered thanks to the doctor Joonmyun’s father sent over. The man’s medicines and teas had apparently restored his father’s health to what it’d been when he was younger. It was incredible and everyone in the kingdom was still speaking about it.

The last bit of the letter explained about how quiet the palace was now in Baekhyun’s absence and how the queen had insisted that Baekhyun’s room go untouched sans for dusting and cleaning.

Instead of making him homesick, it only served to make him relieved that his mother missed him to such an extent. While she’d always been a woman of very few words, she’d always made sure to provide and care for him in any way she could.

For some reason, Baekhyun found himself detailing the contents of the letter to Yixing and the man listened, a small smile on his face.

“Baekhyun, may I ask a question?” Baekhyun nodded and kept the letter unfolded, in his lap, “do you want children?” Like most of the questions Yixing asked him, it wasn’t expected, and Baekhyun had to take a moment to answer.

Did he want kids?

He’d never really thought about it and now that he was in the marital situation that he was, the possibilities of having children was nonexistent.

“I never thought about it because I knew my brother was going to inherit the throne. I don’t dislike children,” Baekhyun sighed, feeling like the question hadn’t been answered. The other man seemed to notice too and told Baekhyun not to give it too much thought.

“If you’d really wanted children, you’ve would’ve thought about it before now,” Baekhyun, for the sake of easing his mind, agreed.

When Yixing left the room, Baekhyun took the last piece of paper out the envelope and looked at it, wanting to read it in private because it had his name at the top in Jinki’s neat handwriting:

As promised I have written to you but have you also heeded your promise to me as well? Have you been talking to the others and trying to foster a relationship with your husband? Nothing is worse than a loveless marriage and it’s been proven that you can learn to love someone in time. I have no doubts that you’ll eventually love Joonmyun considering how respectful and kind he is, but I hope that you start on that now. Please write me back once you receive this, I look forward to your correspondence.

Lee Jinki

Baekhyun felt his throat tighten as he read over the letter again, hearing Jinki’s soft voice echo in his head. It was the same voice that had been warning and advising him since he could remember.

Now instead of Jinki asking him not to waste food or to speak formally to his father and Seungbaek, Jinki was asking him to love his husband or at least to try. The least he could do was actually try.
He just had to figure out where to start.

Upon Yixing’s suggestion, Baekhyun tried to get closer and learn more about Joonmyun through observing and speaking to him.

Whenever he saw the man doing something in the study, he’d let himself in and wander around, looking at what Joonmyun was reading or doing. Sometimes he would notice him, other times he wouldn’t, not that Baekhyun minded.

Over the course of a week, he learned that Joonmyun was a fan of classic stories like himself, in addition to incomprehensible philosophical writings. When Baekhyun was confident enough to carry a conversation about his favorite Greek myths, complete with notes from Yixing’s class, he strolled into the library with a tray of hot tea that Minseok had prepared for them.

“Thirsty?” Joonmyun raised his head from his book and nodded, reaching to take the cup off the tray with caution. Baekhyun let him get a few sips before he sat down on the couch across from Joonmyun’s desk and asked him about the book he was reading, even though he already knew everything about it.

While Baekhyun listened to Joonmyun tell him, he took the time to examine the man’s face and his actions, noting how he smiled whenever he said the main character’s name or got a faraway look when he explained his favorite parts of the book.

He hadn’t noticed that the man was done speaking until he gave Baekhyun that soft smile, signaling that he’d just asked him a question.

“I’m sorry, can you repeat that? My mind wandered,” Baekhyun sputtered, a blush creeping up his neck as he trailed his eyes to the shelf just behind Joonmyun’s head. He silently hoped that Joonmyun hadn’t noticed that he was the reason why Baekhyun had been so distracted.

But, as things always happened in life for him, Joonmyun did notice, and he closed the book, sitting it on his desk.

“Is something the matter Baekhyun? Tell me the real reason you came and asked me about a book you couldn’t care less about?” now Baekhyun’s entire face erupted in a flush and he wasn’t sure how to answer Joonmyun’s question, so he just looked down at his feet, avoiding Joonmyun’s eyes.

“I’d just like to learn more about you. We are married after all,” Baekhyun finally looked up when Joonmyun got up from his seat and knelt in front of Baekhyun, grasping his hands from his lap.

“Then ask. You don’t have to pretend to be interested in what I’m doing. Tell me, Yixing’s been telling me about how you’ve been accompanying him to school lately, is that some you’d like to do?” Baekhyun thought about it and shook his head with a smile.

“I’m not very smart, and it’d be a waste of money. I’m only interested in stories anyway,” Joonmyun smiled as well and got up, pulling Baekhyun to his feet.

The man looked him in his eyes and squeezed his hands before letting them go, “I’m so glad you’re starting to relax around everyone—around here—around me.” The moment was almost too romantic, and Baekhyun took a step back, unprepared for such a gesture.

Instead of letting him back away, Joonmyun wrapped an arm around the man’s waist, effectively
stopping him from getting any further away.

That too surprised him, and he stood completely still, their faces a breath’s width apart. Suddenly breathing seemed too much, and his heart skipped wildly in his chest, and he centered all of his thoughts and senses on that one moment.

Joonmyun was about to kiss him.

He was nervous because this was the first time Joonmyun was kissing him out of pure leisure and spontaneity.

When their lips touched, something was different. Different than the kiss they’d shared on Joonmyun’s departure for his trip. Different from the kiss(es) they’d shared on their wedding night.

There was a sense of urgency and relief as Joonmyun’s lips moved against his, the kiss lasting much longer than Baekhyun had thought it would. The moment Joonmyun let him go, he kept staring at him and Joonmyun cast his glance to the side, a light blush coloring his face.

“I’m sorry, I should’ve asked before I did that,” Joonmyun rambled, scratching the back of his neck in embarrassment.

The reaction, in Baekhyun’s opinion, was unwarranted because he felt like he’d silently consented. Hell, even his facial expression had probably screamed ‘kiss me.’

Instead of berating Joonmyun, which admittedly was Baekhyun’s first reaction, he decided to simply reassure him.

It wouldn’t kill him to be nice to Joonmyun with all things considered.

“No, I liked it,” Joonmyun’s head snapped up and his eyes searched Baekhyun’s face for an indication that he was lying. He must’ve failed to find one because his sheepish expression was replaced with one of thankfulness.

“Then can I do it again?”

Perhaps Baekhyun was more than nice to Joonmyun because he said yes and the man immediately moved back towards him, holding Baekhyun even tighter as he kissed him.

This time when Joonmyun let him go, they both took deep breaths and Baekhyun tried to will away the peaking interest that arose below his waist.

Instead of giving Joonmyun another opportunity to kiss him, Baekhyun excused himself from the room and hurried to his own, his face burning hot the whole walk there. He was pretty sure he’d nearly bumped into either Yixing or Jongdae, but whoever it was didn’t stop to try to talk to him.

As soon as he was inside his room, he shut the door and sat down on his bed, still feeling the twinges of arousal flit through his body from the contact.

He wasn’t sure if he was pathetic or desperate, but either way, his arousal wouldn’t wane despite all of the unpleasant images he conjured in his head. Instead, he could still feel how closely Joonmyun had held him and how warm the man’s mouth had been against his own, his lips still tingling.
Baekhyun had to eventually resort to relieving himself, undressing completely and sitting on his bed with his legs cocked apart. Convenient to everything, the only mirror in his room was propped up against the wall in front of his bed.

He could see how he reacted to his own actions, noticing how his brow furrowed whenever he tightened his grip, especially around the head of his dick. His heels dug into the soft bedding as he fondled his balls, his oil slicked hands squeezing and making him draw his lower lip between his teeth to stifle the sounds.

Noise of the slick slide echoed in the otherwise quiet room, each wet sound accompanied with Baekhyun’s uneven breathing.

When he’d started, he’d pictured general things like what would be happening if he hadn’t run away, then as he got closer to coming, he recalled the wedding night.

Between remembering Joonmyun’s stinging bites on his inner thighs to the way, the man’s throat had felt when he swallowed Baekhyun’s entire length to the absolute fullness he’d felt when Joonmyun finally fucked him.

The vivid recall of that night is what finally brought him to the edge, and he came in his fist, Joonmyun’s name on his lips all the while.

Once his arousal was sated and the fog in his mind cleared, he sat up and looked at his disheveled reflection in the mirror, feeling the shame creep over him.

He could barely look Joonmyun in the eye while they ate dinner, Baekhyun choosing to, instead, spark a conversation with Yixing. He felt guilty, especially when he could feel the man’s gaze burning into him from the head of the table.

With dinner finished and everyone but Yixing and Baekhyun heading back to their rooms, Baekhyun decided to tell Yixing of his triumph with Joonmyun.

“So he kissed you?” Baekhyun nodded and dried off the last dish, putting it in its proper place. “Then you got turned on and ran away?” Again he nodded. Yixing’s deadpan explanation of it simplified the situation and made Baekhyun feel silly, but he knew the validity of his emotions.

They’d never steered him wrong once.

Well, except for the time when he’d once feared Joonmyun wouldn’t like him.

It was almost funny how far he'd come since then.

“Are you going to initiate anything else?” Baekhyun eyed a fruit left on the counter before he shrugged and paced the length of the kitchen.

“What if he wants to have sex?” When the words left Baekhyun’s mouth, he felt dumb, knowing quite well that he wasn’t averse to sleeping with Joonmyun again. He was, however, nervous because he felt like a virgin again.

Yixing seemed to notice that his words were superficial and he pursed his lips, an incredulous expression on his face. Baekhyun looked at him and sighed before he leaned against the counter, coming back to the conclusion he’d been avoiding since he’d hatched his plan to get closer to Joonmyun.
Things were only going to move forward if he initiated it.

That was the bottom line, and Yixing looked almost relieved when he realized he didn’t have to tell Baekhyun that.

“Baekhyun,” Joonmyun said, looking up from some paper spread in front of him on his bed, “are you alright?” There was a subtle urgency to his voice that Baekhyun picked up on, but he didn’t worry too much about it.

He also knew that Joonmyun was asking, in so many words, why he’d run off after they’d kissed in the library.

Rather than answering, he walked further into the room and shut the door behind him. Joonmyun watched him with steady eyes as he approached the bed and gathered all the spread out paper before tucking it in a neat pile and sitting it on the stand beside his bed.

“I’m sorry about earlier—for running off like that,” Baekhyun started, fiddling his fingers as he spoke. Joonmyun could tell he was nervous, just like he’d been in the library but this time he didn’t make any moves to comfort him.

Maybe, Joonmyun thought silently, Baekhyun was on the verge of really opening up to him.

He’d learned over the few months he’d known Baekhyun that whenever he wanted to speak about something of great importance, he’d look down or avoid eye contact. It was very unlike someone who’d been raised as a prince, but Joonmyun recognized it as an act of defiance. It wasn’t that the man had low self-esteem but that he shied away from making big decisions or making flashy statements.

Upon their first meeting, he’d felt like Baekhyun was pretending, like a kid that wanted to be like their older sibling. While Baekhyun hadn’t spoken much about his older brother, Joonmyun was all too aware of Seungbaek’s fame, which preceded him, even in kingdoms far from his own.

Joonmyun couldn’t even begin to comprehend what it’d been like growing up in the other man’s shadow, but he could begin to wrap his mind around the reason that Baekhyun was the person he was.

―After our kiss, I was," Baekhyun stopped and looked outside of Joonmyun’s open window, studying the rustling curtains, “aroused. That’s why I’d run out so quickly.” Baekhyun spoke quickly, and Joonmyun had to give his statement a few moments thought before he understood it.

Baekhyun had been turned on? From a kiss?

He didn’t blame him, though. If he hadn’t been so confused by Baekhyun’s abrupt departure after their kiss, he probably would’ve been in the same position too.

“But I’m not going to run away this time,” Baekhyun sighed, finally approaching Joonmyun. Wordlessly, Joonmyun took that as a signal to move to the middle of his bed and Baekhyun climbed in then hovered over Joonmyun, “it’s taken all my nerve to do this.”

Joonmyun stared at Baekhyun and nodded because he did understand. He understood it well.

“You know, when I ran back to my room, I,” again there was hesitation in his voice, “I thought about you while I…” his cheeks turned pink but he kept his gaze locked on Joonmyun.
The whole manner in which everything was happening was shocking and differed greatly from the image Joonmyun had built of Baekhyun in the past few months.

Either way, it was arousing for Joonmyun, and he wondered what Baekhyun would do in the next following moments.

Unlike the sense of duty that shrouded their wedding night, the moment when Baekhyun spread his legs and let Joonmyun settle between them, he never broke eye contact with him.

In fact, the whole time he held onto Joonmyun’s shoulders, he forced himself to look at the man’s face and take in everything. How Joonmyun’s eyes blinked when he first slipped inside of him, how he swallowed hard when Baekhyun rolled his hips against Joonmyun’s thrusts and how he moaned quietly whenever Baekhyun tightened around him.

Those were all things he hadn’t noticed the first time, and now he couldn’t help but see them.

“Are you okay?” Joonmyun asked for the third time since they’d started and Baekhyun nodded, pressing his nails harder into Joonmyun’s skin when the man brushed past the spot inside of him that made him see stars.

No matter how wrapped up Joonmyun seemed to be in moving his hips against Baekhyun’s, he noticed when Baekhyun would hold onto him tighter and dig his nails into his skin, so he’d do whatever he’d previously done again.

And again and again.

At first, Baekhyun started to breathe heavier then he began to moan, his body reacting as Joonmyun focused on angling his thrusts to pull further sounds and reactions out of the man. When he reached in between their bodies to stroke Baekhyun’s leaking arousal, the man reluctantly stopped him and leaned up.

“Can I?” Joonmyun stopped mid-thrust, his breath heavy as he tried to figure out what Baekhyun was asking for.

The other man noticed his confusion and Baekhyun brushed his hair out his face and sighed before he spoke again “I want to get—get on top.” The words were much clearer, and Joonmyun masked his look of shock before he nodded.

He was partially relieved because it gave him a chance to recoup his stamina and stave off his orgasm for a little bit longer. He did, however, know that once Baekhyun started to ride him, the urge would return with a vengeance.

His prediction proved to be somewhere near the truth because as Baekhyun slowly inched down into his lap, a look of concentration on his face, Joonmyun had to dig his nails into his own palm as a distraction.

When Baekhyun’s soft thighs were spread on either side of his, he did his best to sit still and let Baekhyun move, not even bothering to care that he was moaning loud enough to shock Baekhyun.

The intense direct eye contact that Baekhyun managed to maintain made everything hotter. It was like the other man was watching him, studying him and committing his reactions to memory.
“This is so much more exhausting than I thought,” just like Joonmyun’s previous words, Baekhyun had been breathless, and his grip on Joonmyun’s shoulders was tight as he moved slow and deliberate. Joonmyun also took the time to start stroking Baekhyun’s dick, squeezing the tip each time Baekhyun sat flush against him.

Despite the fact that Baekhyun was nervous and saw his movements as experimental at best, Joonmyun was having a hard time staving off his orgasm as well as keeping up with stroking Baekhyun. Eventually, he simply disregarded Baekhyun’s slow pace and stroked him quickly, surprising Baekhyun.

In response, Baekhyun leaned forward, his palms spread out on Joonmyun’s chest as he continued to move. Joonmyun knew that that was a sure sign that he was close to coming.

“Is this good?” Joonmyun could only nod, and the unconfident look Baekhyun had had in his eyes faded when Joonmyun gripped his thighs, mentioning that he was about to come. “You can if you want to. I’m about to too,” Baekhyun answered back, his voice airy.

Joonmyun did so almost immediately as Baekhyun followed soon after, rope after rope of white painting Joonmyun’s chest.

When Baekhyun recovered, he leaned off of Joonmyun’s chest and unceremoniously climbed from on top of him.

“You were so noisy this time,” Baekhyun commented when Joonmyun sat up. He chuckled and looked over at Baekhyun, admiring the light flush and sheen of sweat on his pale skin. His hair was a disheveled mess, and there were red splotches all over his body, all places where Joonmyun had been holding him tightly throughout their time together.

“Did you enjoy it?” Baekhyun nodded, and when he realized he was completely naked, he tugged the sheets to cover his body. Joonmyun watched him and willed himself to rise from the bed to retrieve a towel to clean up with it.

So unlike the first time, when Joonmyun handed Baekhyun the warm towel, he made quick work of cleaning himself under the covers then folded it up and sat it on the small table beside the bed.

“Thank you,” Baekhyun whispered, watching as Joonmyun blew out the few candles that still burned.

“No, thank you for trusting me.” Joonmyun’s answer caught the man off guard, and Baekhyun felt his heart flutter at the implications of the words.

Joonmyun wasn’t simply thanking him for just his trust, but he was also thankful to Baekhyun for trusting him enough to give him his body.

Now that there were no obligations tied to their sexual relations, Joonmyun could’ve easily just turned him down and put him out his room.

But he didn’t.

And for that Baekhyun—though he didn’t say it—was thankful. It meant that Joonmyun had truly accepted him.

“You were quiet this morning. Did last night not go well?” Yixing asked when he found Baekhyun
lounging in the library, obviously not reading the book in his hand.

Baekhyun chided himself for getting flustered so easily and stared at Yixing before he answered his friend.

“Joonmyun’s so understanding,” Baekhyun started, unsure of where to go with his statement because, since the previous night, he’d been deep in his thoughts. “He’s everything a prince should be, and I find myself feeling inadequate when I’m in his presence yet, he still likes me?” Yixing could tell Baekhyun was struggling to get through his words, but he stayed silent, wanting to let the man continue.

Baekhyun did continue, stammering through his words for a few moments until he stopped short and just stared at the ground with a sigh.

Initially, Yixing thought he was sad or upset, but when he leaned down to get a good look at Baekhyun’s expression, he saw that he was smiling.

“Do you perhaps have a crush on him?” Yixing asked, a smile forming on his face. Baekhyun’s first reaction was to vehemently deny the accusation, but after that, he gave the idea some thought.

While developing a crush on one’s husband or wife post marriage seemed backward in some sense, in another, especially in the same instance where marriages like Baekhyun and Joonmyun’s existed, it wasn’t uncommon.

Despite that, Baekhyun felt like his feelings were a little childish. Joonmyun already expressed interest in knowing him better, so it was expected that that’d charm him. Joonmyun’s willingness to learn his body and the things he enjoyed inside and outside the bedroom, were appealing things as well.

“I wouldn’t call it a crush because we’re adults,” Baekhyun eventually answered, making Yixing smile wider because he knew he was right.

Baekhyun ignored his friend’s glee at the realization and looked down at the lone gold bracelet on his arm before he picked up his book and tried to read.
Chanyeol put one foot in front of the other, carefully walking on the thin rope with bated breath until he got into the groove of things and walked completely across.

“You’ve improved,” Jungsoo called up to the young man, a smile on his face. Chanyeol returned the smile, albeit a bit pained as he carefully stepped on the opposing platform.

Instead of climbing down, Chanyeol sat on the edge and dangled his legs off the ledge as he stared in the direction that he’d come from.

Sure, he was proud of himself. It was something else to add to his long list of accomplishments and abilities he’d cultivated over the years. He could juggle anything, bend his body in impossible positions for acrobatics and now tightrope walk.

He was every Ring Master’s dream, which was purely by accident. He didn’t want to be a Ring Master, or at least he didn’t think that he wanted to be.

“Come on down from there. Dinner is ready, and we need to start prepping for the tonight’s show.” Chanyeol let out a sigh then started to climb down the ladder, skipping the last two rungs to jump to the ground.

“You’re getting good at that. Keep it up, and Jungsoo will overwork you,” Wonshik commented when Chanyeol walked into the dining tent. He shook his head, declining the idea before he grabbed his plate from Hyosung with a smile.

“I’m not at that level yet. I don’t think I’ll ever get there honestly, I just barely mastered walking the rope,” Chanyeol admitted around a mouthful of stew. The other man seemed to contemplate the fact and nodded before he went back to his food.

Besides the fact that he wasn’t nearly trained enough to take on the trapeze, doing tricks on the rope required an amount of bravery and confidence that Chanyeol just didn’t have.

Like she was reading his mind, Cheng Xiao squeezed beside Chanyeol on the bench and plucked a piece of meat from his bowl “considering how quickly you tiptoe across the rope, I doubt you’ll be doing tricks anytime soon.”

Despite her young age, Cheng Xiao was one of the most talented people among them. Not only could she perform tricks on the trapeze but she could also do acrobatic and aerial stunts as well. Since reaching her 14th year, she’d become the main act in their shows.

Chanyeol took her words as an observation and simply moved his bowl away, a smile on his face. Nothing she could ever say could bother him because he thought of her as a little—annoying—sister.
“Well no need to worry about Yeolie taking your adoring fans Sungso, he’s not there yet. I don’t think he’ll be able to do more than hold the safety net for a while,” Chanyeol grimaced at the sound of Jungsoo’s voice and when the man sat a heavy hand on his shoulder, he looked down into his food.

Truth be told, there was no one he hated more than Jungsoo and he despised when the man touched him, but for the sake of his livelihood, he kept his tongue and reactions reigned in.

Things were blurry now that Chanyeol was older, but he could still remember the look on his mother’s face when he was taken from her. He’d barely been in his 5th year.

When he asked Jungsoo what’d happened to his mother in his 8th year, the man had lied and said that he’d been sold. No one told him until his 10th year that he’d been forcibly taken as part of a jaded agreement.

His father had been a gambler and had mistakenly raised bets with the wrong crowd because, after the game, Jungsoo and some others performers followed Chanyeol’s father home and demanded repayment. After knocking him unconscious, they rushed into the house and looked around, deeming everything inside not worth taking.

Except for Chanyeol.

Youngwoon told him that when Jungsoo laid eyes on him, he demanded that Chanyeol’s mother hand him over and only after personally breaking her arms did he pry the screaming little boy from her.

No matter how much he thought about it, he never could understand why the man had seen him as an appropriate payment. He’d been just a child, and there had been nothing extraordinary about him.

Even as he was nearing his 27th year, he couldn’t do anything that would warrant him a place in the show. For the past 17 years, he’d just been helping set up for performances, clean up after and help with odd jobs around the camp.

As Youngwoon, Jungsoo’s lover, once wrote in an attempt to comfort him when he contemplated running away that not everyone had the talent to entertain and that maybe his talents lay elsewhere. While others had told him similar things, Chanyeol felt the words really stick with him because they came from Youngwoon.

The man couldn’t speak and could be just as terrifying as Jungsoo, but for some reason, he liked Chanyeol and knew whenever he was feeling at odds. It also didn’t help that when he was little, Youngwoon took care of him like the parents he’d lost.

He’d taught him to read, made sure he had enough food, clean clothes and even kept him company at times. When he grew older, Jungsoo insisted that Youngwoon let him fend for himself, so when he was in his 13th year, he moved into another sleeping area and got to know Cheng Xiao and her family, all of them acrobats and contortionists.

“You’re not thinking about running away again are you?” Si Cheng, Cheng Xiao’s older brother, asked as Chanyeol helped him arrange seats in the main tent. When Chanyeol didn’t answer him, the younger man stopped what he was doing and stepped into a chair, grabbing Chanyeol by the
Chanyeol looked at the ground before he shrugged. In those few seconds he heard footsteps approaching the tent, so he picked up Si Cheng and sat him on the ground before he dusted off the chair and continued to arrange them. He knew if Jungsoo caught the boy standing on the chair, he would punish him severely and Chanyeol wanted to avoid that.

He knew that Jungsoo’s punishments very rarely suited the initial actions.

Jungsoo had never punished him personally, probably due to Youngwoon’s influence, but he’d heard that the man could be unusually cruel; withholding food, forcing others to ostracize people in fear of facing the same punishment and even refusing to pay them what little he already paid the other performers.

Just as Chanyeol thought, Jungsoo strolled into the tent a few moments later and spared them a glance before disappearing behind a thick red curtain.

“We’ve been through this before Chanyeol, life is dangerous outside of the camp. You know things will be hard right?” Instead of paying attention to Si Cheng’s words, Chanyeol gnawed on his bottom lip and finished positioning the chairs with his eyes set on the ground.

“Why do you want to go the circus so badly?” Tao whined, turning to his side as the sun beat down onto his skin. Jongin sat up and looked at him with an incredulous look.

“Back when I was in the courtesan house people used to talk about the circus and all of the performances. I’ve never been to one, and since there’s one in town, I want to see it with my own eyes. People jumping and flipping, taming animals and swallowing swords, I bet it’s great.”

“Did you ask Joonmyun?” Tao asked, ignoring Jongin’s spirited explanation.

He’d gone to a circus once, accompanying Sooyoung and some her friends, and hated it. The whole thing smelled like animals from miles away, and the stunts were so unbelievable to they gave Tao a heart attack just watching the performers.

“He admitted that he didn’t particularly like them but that he wouldn’t mind taking me to see one.” That caught Tao’s interest.

“Did he say why he didn’t like them?” Jongin shrugged then shook his head.

Even though Tao was technically the youngest in the house, Jongin was the one that acted the part. With the adventures, he insisted on dragging Tao or one of the others, usually Jongdae, onto, it was like he had unlimited amounts of energy.

The fact that he wanted to see the circus wasn’t surprising and was rather fitting.

“He didn’t, but I’m excited to go. It’s nice that Joonmyun’s willing to take some of his time for us to go.”

“Wow, today’s performance is packed. Chanyeol, remind me to tell Jinho what a great job he did posting flyers around town.” Chanyeol nodded at Jungsoo’s words and surveyed the crowd, agreeing that there were, in fact, a lot of people. There were very few empty seats and considering
that he was the one that set up the seats, he knew just how many were in the tent.

Just before they closed the doors, having just about sold out every seat, two men walked in and sat near the front.

They’d caught Chanyeol’s eye because of the surprising amount of golden bracelets the shorter man wore on his wrists.

“He’s wearing so much jewelry wow,” Chanyeol signed, squinting so that he could get a good look at the man’s features.

“In this area, people wear simple jewelry to symbolize marriages. If I’m not mistaken, that means he probably has a harem. He’s probably a rich man with too much time,” Wonshik described, eyeing the man as well. Chanyeol nodded, and he pointed at the taller man with a gold bangle on.

“So that must be a member of his harem then?” Wonshik nodded, craning his neck to get a good look at the man’s face.

“He must like the pretty ones.” Chanyeol agreed as he did the same, getting a glimpse of the man’s tanned skin, plump lips, and ink black hair that hung down his back even in a ponytail.

He was tempted to continue looking at the interesting couple until Wonshik reminded him that they had jobs to do while the show was going on. Regrettably Chanyeol left his watching spot and went to do his job, wondering if he’d see the two men again.

“When she did those three flips on that thin string, I swear my heart stopped!” Jongin exclaimed, his eyes wide as he recounted his favorite parts of the show back to Joonmyun. The man listened with a smile, happy that Jongin had enjoyed himself.

“That was quite impressive, especially since she barely looked older than her 16th year,” Joonmyun added making Jongin agree with an enthusiastic head nod.

“Do you think we can talk to the performers? The guy that swallowed the swords was so cool.” Joonmyun shrugged and watched looked around at the crowd that’d gathered outside the tent. When he peeked his head into the tent, no one was inside.

He looked around before he walked around the tent, pulling Jongin behind him.

“Are you sure we’re allowed to walk around like this?” The inflection in his voice told Joonmyun that he wasn’t really concerned and was completely down with snooping with him.

Eventually, they stumbled upon tents smaller than the performance one and saw the various performers walking around, winding down from the show.

“Excuse me, do you happen to know where the man that swallows the swords is?” The bearded woman stared at them for a moment, then smiled, winking at Jongin before she pointed further back.

They followed her directions and ended up near the end of the camp, by the tent with name ‘Shindong’ on it. Joonmyun didn’t want to just walk in, and when Jongin tried, he grabbed his arm, shaking his head.

Out of politeness, he knocked the flaps and waited. Soon enough the man they’d been looking for
walked out, still dressed in his performance clothes.

“Can I help you, two gentlemen?” His voice was a lot deeper than either of them had expected, and with the man standing several lengths taller than the both of them, they backed up in surprise.

Joonmyun cleared his throat and smiled, making quick work of introducing himself and Jongin.

“We enjoyed the show and thought you were amazing. My husband wanted to tell you himself, but he’s a bit shy.” Shindong eyed Jongin and grinned, reaching to shake his hand.

“Well thank you. It’s rare that people want to meet us after the show,” Shindong spoke, visibly flustered. He really did seem to be glad to meet someone who appreciated his art.

Jongin was about to talk to him when a sickly sweet voice stopped him, “may I ask why there are customers in this area? Your presence is prohibited.” Shindong’s eyes widened in fear and when the men turned around, they were met face to face with the Ring Master, Leeteuk.

“I apologize, my husband just wanted to meet one of your performers. He was just telling us to leave,” Joonmyun stuttered, grabbing Jongin’s arm.

The vibe he got from the man was creepy and made him uneasy. For his and Jongin’s sake, he wanted to get as far away as he could. If there was one thing he’d learned over his lifetime, it was always to trust his instincts.

“Ah, thank you Shindong. I’ll escort you, gentleman, back to the front,” Leeteuk suggested, eyeing them both as he held his hand out, urging them to follow him. Before they left, they gave Shindong one last wave.

After they’d been shown to the front of the performance tent, Jongin shivered with a frown.

“I’ve seen some creeps in my day, but that man was pretty bad.” Joonmyun agreed, and he suggested that they leave. After dealing with Leeteuk, Jongin agreed, and they both left, walking back to their house.

Joonmyun had insisted that they walk to order to better enjoy the changing seasons now that Spring was upon them. Jongin had agreed then, but as they trudged back, he regretted not taking a horse.

“How was the circus?” Baekhyun asked when Jongin sunk into the warm waters of the bath. The man was already inside and had offered to wash Jongin’s back for him.

“It was fantastic except for the Ring Master was terrifying,” Jongin sighed, closing his eyes as Baekhyun’s fingers massaged at his scalp.

“Really? The last circus I went to back in my country was so nice, and the Ring Master was so nice. Maybe you ran into one of the scarier circuses?” Jongin’s eyebrow quirked, and he turned his head.

“What do you mean scarier circuses? All circuses aren’t good?” Baekhyun shook his head and grimaced, thinking back on all the stories he heard from the servants about circuses.

“I heard a story about some circus people stealing children. Luckily, in my country laws regulated circuses and if they didn’t meet the standards, then they weren’t allowed to perform. Are things not the same here?” Jongin said that they weren’t and Baekhyun’s expression turned into one of
“Well, I suppose the government can’t oversee everything when the country’s so big right? I’m sure those stories aren’t true,” except for Jongin continued to think about it, even after he’d finished his bath and was laying down to go to bed.

With how scary the Ring Master was, he could definitely see the man stealing children and doing other sinister actions.

The thoughts nearly kept him up, and when he finally did fall asleep, he dreamed of terrifying things that somehow all included the Ring Master and his stiff expressions.

After Jongin finished breakfast and helped Minseok and Baekhyun clean up, he left for the market, or at least that’s what he told everyone.

When he’d made it past the gate of the house, he hurried through the market, ducking places where he assumed Joonmyun, Kris or Yixing would. Once he’d got through the market, he walked back to the area where the large tent and surrounding tents were still set up.

The flyer had said they would be in town for a week, so while Jongin had had plenty of time to go investigate things; he wanted to go as soon as possible.

He’d barely been wandered around the tents for more than a few moments when a large hand grabbed him and yanked him into a nearby tent.

“I’m sorry but what are you doing back here? If Jungsoo catches you again, I’m not sure he’ll be as forgiving,” a tall man asked, the alarm very apparent in his voice. Jongin had never seen him before, but it seemed the man had seen him before.

“Who are you?” That was the first question Jongin asked and honestly it was probably rude of him, but the man was still holding his hand. He wasn’t quite uncomfortable, but he was confused.

“I’m sorry,” the man apologized again, removing his hand “my name is Chanyeol. I work here. I saw you at yesterday’s show, and I saw when Jungsoo—I mean Leeteuk, caught you walking around here. Why are you back? There isn’t another show for several hours.” Chanyeol spoke quickly, and Jongin had a hard time completely understanding him because of his strange accent.

While he was debating Chanyeol’s origins, the man got a frightened look on his face and pushed Jongin towards a storage trunk, telling him to crouch beside it. Reluctantly he did so and before Jongin could ask why the flap of the tent opened the Ring Leader man eyed the inside of the tent before he looked at Chanyeol.

“Someone said they saw that pretty boy from last night wandering around camp. Have you seen him?” Chanyeol shook his head and told the man that he hadn’t. Leeteuk, or Jungsoo, or whatever, looked at Chanyeol once more before walking back out the tent.

When the footsteps were far enough away, Jongin stood up, and he looked at Chanyeol.

“I’ve been here for less than ten minutes. How could someone have seen me?” Chanyeol looked at
him with a mildly irritated expression.

“Everyone around here knows each other. You stand out like a sore thumb with that long hair and expensive silk,” Chanyeol looked at him, speaking like it was obvious. When Jongin looked down at his clothes, he thought he’d dressed down compared to what he usually wore around the house.

“Well, I’m sorry. I just came to ask some questions. Maybe you can answer them for me?” Chanyeol peeked his head out the tent and looked around before he groaned.

“Look sure, I’ll answer your questions. Let’s just get out of here before Jungsso catches you or me with you. I bet I won’t see a good meal for a week,” Jongin’s eyes widened, and he gave a solemn nod before Chanyeol dragged him behind some tents.

If Jongin had to take a guess, Jungsso kept a tight shift around the circus performers and workers and it suddenly made everything Baekhyun had told him last night seem possible.

So without even asking, he was getting pieces of his answer.

Before he realized it, he was standing near the food stalls in the market and in disbelief that he’d let Chanyeol drag him so far. When he let him go, Jongin rubbed his wrist, looking at how Chanyeol made his bangle press into his skin.

“You didn’t have to pull me,” Jongin started but stopped when Joonmyun caught sight of him and started to approach the both of them.

“Is that man your owner?” Chanyeol asked, eyeing Joonmyun, as he got closer.

“My husband,” Jongin replied shortly, looking for a way to avoid the man yet seeing none. They were stuck, and he’d have to explain why he’d gone back to the circus grounds to ask questions.

He knew Joonmyun wouldn’t like it and the thought of making the man upset didn’t sit well with him.

“Jongin?” Jongin turned his body and faced Joonmyun with a smile and soft nod, a complete change from his previous expression.

“Did you make a new friend?” Joonmyun asked, looking up at Chanyeol. Jongin nodded then shrugged.

“His name is Chanyeol, I met him in the market.” It was a little white line, but if it saved Joonmyun from being upset at him, so be it. Joonmyun’s eyes widened, and he gave a slow nod before one of the vendors called his name.

Jongin encouraged him to see what it was about and Joonmyun reluctantly said goodbye, giving Chanyeol another once over before he left. When he walked away, Jongin gave a sigh of relief and asked Chanyeol to sit down at one of the nearby tables.

“So you were nervous because he told you to stay away from the camp? I don’t blame him honestly. Jungsso is terrifying. He’s scary when you don’t know him and terrifying when you do,” Chanyeol explained, a detached look on his face.
“Well after what you’ve told me about him, I can believe it. What I can’t believe, is how he took you away from your parents all those years ago…” While Jongin couldn’t identify with having a cohesive or loving family from the beginning, Luhan, Kris and everyone at the brothel had been his family, and now the men at the house (also including Luhan and Kris) and Joonmyun were his family.

He couldn’t even imagine being taken away from them.

“Do you know where you’re from?” Their conversation had moved to something different because Jongin could sense that Chanyeol wasn’t one to talk about himself. Jongin wasn’t really a person that did it either, but considering the circumstances, he made an exception.

“I think my mother was from the south. When I was in my third year, my mother dropped me off on the step of the courtesan house we passed on the way here.” Chanyeol’s eyes scanned the buildings, his eyes lingering on the gated entrance in the distance.

“How did you get away?” His heart began to race out of nowhere, and Chanyeol leaned in, curious. From what he knew about courtesan houses, they were simply elevated brothels and people couldn’t run away.

“Luhan, one of the men who basically raised me, was also in the house and after a few years of entertaining Joonmyun, my husband, the man bought Luhan and his friend Kris’ freedom. Soon after they married, while Joonmyun was on a merchant trip with Kris, Luhan came and took me from the house and brought me to Joonmyun’s house.”

“Wait, so as you’ve mentioned, these two other men are also married to Joonmyun?” Jongin nodded.

He had to admit that it sounded strange being put into words.

“I wasn’t in the house when Luhan and Kris left with Joonmyun because an older woman had purchased me for a pet. It didn’t last long because I think she found me too old and disobedient. When she grew tired of me, she dumped me back at the house and Luhan found me like that, starving and beat up,” Jongin paused and he blinked, willing the image of his own bruised and swollen face from his mind.

Chanyeol listened with his large eyes wide open, leaning in like he was enthralled by Jongin’s story.

“Once I was at Joonmyun’s house, Luhan explained everything that’d happened to him and nursed me back to health and we lived like that. Just the two us until Joonmyun and Kris came back. Being the person that Joonmyun was, he accepted me with no problem, though since there was quite the age difference, he was reluctant to accept me as a lover.” At one point Chanyeol wanted Jongin to go more in depth, but then at another, he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear about a stranger’s sex life.

No matter how pretty that stranger was.

Much to Chanyeol’s relief and disappointment, Jongin wrapped up his story with a weary smile, looking over in Joonmyun’s direction.

“So there are eight men in Joonmyun’s house then? Is he married to all of them?”

Jongin tilted his head in thought, counting on his fingers as he presumably went through information in his mind.
“Most. Recently there was a prince that came to live with us through an arranged marriage, now that was interesting. He’s pleasant these days, though.”

It was funny that Jongin had sought him out to ask questions about his life when Chanyeol was happier, sitting there and listening to him talk about his life.

“Wow, that’s better than any story I’ve ever heard actually. If I remember correctly, did you say that Joonmyun is technically a prince?”

“Yes, he’s the eldest son of the King. Due to his lack of interest in the crown, he passed the inheritance down to his younger brother Crown Prince Joonki,” Jongin was about to continue then he thought about something, “I’ve been talking for a while. Too much right?” Chanyeol shook his head no.

They had talked for a few more hours before Chanyeol glanced up at the lowering sun, realizing that he needed to hurry back to the camp to set up for the night’s show.

“I bet you probably have to go back now, but tell you what, if you ever want to talk or hang out, I’ll come to the market with Joonmyun in the morning and wait for you. I might even bring a friend.” Chanyeol’s interest peaked, and he gave an enthusiastic nod before he said goodbye and took off in the direction of the camp.

When he made it back, the only people who commented on his absence were Si Cheng…and Youngwoon.

‘Where have you been? I’ve been looking for you all day!’ The man scribbled quickly on his writing pad. The pencil squeaked against the surface, and Chanyeol cringed, but he avoided the man’s eyes.

“I went into town to pass out more flyers. I wanted things to be as packed as they were yesterday,” he lied, looking at the ground. Chanyeol could feel the man’s eyes burn into him and he probably saw through the lie, but ignored it with a huff.

‘Well help me sew this. It would’ve been better if you’d told me, then I wouldn’t have wasted time looking for you.’ Chanyeol’s eyes scanned over the words, and he nodded again, apologizing.

Two days had passed before Chanyeol made his way back to the market, afraid that Jungsoo would catch him trying to leave like he had the previous two days.

The first time he’d caught he, he’d kindly suggested that Chanyeol help tend to the animals if he had free time to wander. He’d almost had the mind to argue back, but he thought better of it because he could sense Jungsoo was in a foul mood. His ‘smile’ was sharper than usual, and his posture was bone straight, hinting that he was tensed.

Youngwoon had warned him the previous night that the man was displeased with the amount of guests that’d turned out at the show that night. It seemed that he was still upset about it when he encountered Chanyeol near the entrance of the camp.

They’d taken a break from shows the next day, and since everyone in the camp was idle, it meant that if he wasn’t helping Si Cheng and Cheng Xiao with chores, then he was keeping Youngwoon company.
There hadn’t been a moment he could use to sneak away.

‘You’re full of energy today.’ Youngwoon wrote, frowning as he eyed Chanyeol jiggling his leg as he replaced missing beading off of Cheng Xiao’s costume.

“I’m just in a good mood, I guess.” He tried to make himself sound nonchalant but the look Youngwoon gave him showed that he didn’t quite buy it. Thankfully, he let it go, and they continued to work in silence.

When lunch came, Youngwoon urged him to eat but he declined, telling him to go ahead. It took some time, but eventually the man listened and gave him one last look before he left the tent.

Chanyeol waited a few beats before he also exited the tent and walked around the back of the camp, determined to leave. With the path clear, he sped up his stroll and was nearly out the camp when someone called out him.

Cheng Xiao.

Just when he needed for the girl to be quiet, she wasn’t and screamed at him from the top her lungs.

“Where are you going you going? Lunch is here, you idiot!” The few stragglers that were headed into the lunch tent stopped to stare, and Chanyeol gave Cheng Xiao a pained nod.

It seemed like everyone was conspiring to keep him from going to hang out with Jongin.

The day before they were supposed to leave, Jungsoo permitted everyone to go into the town and browse the shops and market. Chanyeol didn’t need to be told twice, and as soon as the words had cross Jungsoo’s mouth, he was gone.

The sun was high in the sky when Chanyeol finally made it, his chest heaving because he’d ran the whole way. As he caught his breath, he questioned why he was so excited to see Jongin.

Of course, the first fast that greeted him wasn’t Jongin but was Joonmyun, the man’s husband.

“Long time no see,” Chanyeol nodded nervously and cast his glance to the ground. Since Jongin had told him that the man was technically a prince, every time he was in Joonmyun’s presence, he couldn’t help but feel inferior and unworthy. “If you’re looking for Jongin, he stayed home today. Since you hadn’t come in two days, he assumed you were either held up or weren’t interested in spending time with him.”

Inside Chanyeol berated himself, saying that he could’ve worked harder to get away, but his better judgment spoke up as well, mentioning that if he was caught or found out, Jungsoo would’ve done something horrible to him.

“Ah, it was the—ah first thing,” Chanyeol mumbled, picking at the calluses on his hand. Joonmyun noticed and reached to stop him, Chanyeol nearly gasping when he felt how soft the man’s hands were in contrast.

“You don’t want them to bleed right? If you’d like, I can have Kris escort you back to the house.
Judging from the posters, you’re all leaving soon right?” Chanyeol nodded again, to both things. When he finally looked up, Chanyeol saw how bright the man’s smile and his heart nearly skipped a beat.

In a flash of movement, a tall—taller than him—man appeared next to him and gruffly introduced himself, telling Chanyeol to follow him. Before he did, he took one last look at Joonmyun and followed Kris.

It seemed like he couldn’t open his eyes wide enough to see everything because there truly was a lot to see.

From the intricate marble that decorated various surfaces of the front room to the open area in the middle, where three—gorgeous—men lay, having a conversation.

“A-are you also one of Joonmyun’s husbands?” The man who’d guided him, Kris, had a different look from Jongin, and even more different from the men he could see milling around the house.

Kris laughed, and he scratched his head “I don’t look it right? I am, though.”

Wow.

Joonmyun really was a man of variety.

“Chanyeol!” A familiar face rose from the pile of bodies and Chanyeol smiled, happy to see Jongin.

Two men, who were scantily clad, leaned up and stared at him as Jongin walked towards him, just as undressed. It seemed that they had all been lying out in the open portion of the house, sitting in the sun. As a result, Jongin’s bare upper body glistened with sweat and the men were equally as shiny, one pale and the other tanner than Jongin.

“So I was right then? You couldn’t get away right?” Chanyeol confirmed and launched into an explanation that was immediately followed by an apology. Besides the people in the camp, he’d never really made outside friends, so he wanted to at least leave with things settled between them.

He was in the middle of his explanation when Jongin ushered him into a kitchen and told him to sit down at a large table as he prepared something to drink.

“So Jungsoo caught you once, and then Cheng Xiao caught you? Sounds tough,” Chanyeol gave a sigh in response.

“Jungsoo gave us a free day off, and I left camp as soon as he finished speaking. I was kind of sad when I didn’t see you at the market. Joonmyun got Kris to bring me here to visit you instead.”

“Well, I’m glad you came. You can meet the others in the house.” Jongin spoke with a smile and sat down a cup of cold water in front of him. He accepted it and drank it in two swallows, hot from his walk over to the house.

He had no idea how any of the people in this area of the country could stand the heat, but he was barely managing.

Okay, well he could sort of understand judging by the way Jongin and the other men were dressed. He could’ve also sworn he saw a pool when he first walked into the house.
“The two men you saw earlier were Jongdae and Tao. The man who took you here was Kris. The others are out, but they should come in soon. How long are you able to stay?” Chanyeol thought about it and looked at the sun.

“Probably until the moon is high in the sky. So I have quite a bit of time. As long as I’m back before tomorrow morning when we leave.” There was a shade of reluctance to his voice that he hadn’t intended but he could tell that Jongin picked up on it. The soft smile that the man gave him was a striking indicator.

He didn’t say anything and simply took to Chanyeol on a tour of a house.

Why he did it, Chanyeol wasn’t sure, but he wasn’t complaining. Since there were fans all over the house, he was glad to be inside rather than in the scorching heat of the sun.

“Have you seen Chanyeol Si Cheng? Since I granted everyone a free day, he’s disappeared into thin air?” Jungsoo asked, leaning in and encroaching on the boy’s person space. With his eyes to the ground and sincerity in his voice, he shook his head and said that he didn’t.

Jungsoo narrowed his eyes and dismissed him, traveling around the camp and going from tent to tent, inquiring about Chanyeol.

Perhaps the poor fool had finally run away?

Sungmin had mentioned that he saw Chanyeol in the market earlier in the day, but that hadn’t explained where he’d gotten to now as the sun was setting. While it was true Jungsoo hadn’t specified a curfew, he’d expected everyone in the camp at nightfall and Chanyeol was nowhere to be found.

Well, there was no way he would or even could run away. Chanyeol wasn’t smart or clever enough to survive on his own, and without him, he’d end up a beggar in the streets. Or dead.

That was what he deserved after being so ungrateful if he’d run away.

“And I thought the food at the market was good. Was Luhan a chef before he married Joonmyun?” Luhan let out a noisy snort, and the entire table erupted into laughter.

“Not too far from it. Would you be surprised if I told you he used to cook for everyone in the courtesan house?” Jongin asked, still grinning after he’d finished laughing. Chanyeol shook his head and lept back in his chair, patting his stomach.

In the back of his mind, something urged him to leave.

He didn’t belong in such a happy and bright environment with people like Jongin, Joonmyun, and his husbands. He was far more suited for the people that populated the camp.

He deserved it.

Once dinner was over and the different men headed to their rooms or the bathroom, Jongin walked with Chanyeol in front of the house.

“Thank you. Today was the most fun I’ve had,” Chanyeol paused to think about it “in a while.”
“You don’t have to leave,” Jongin murmured, reaching for Chanyeol’s arm. His eyes shone with sincerity and Chanyeol felt something overcome him, making his throat feel tight.

He knew what Jongin was proposing, but because of who he was and how he’d lived so far, he needed to hear him say it. Say it with his mouth and words rather than just trying to silently get the point across.

“I—I already asked Joonmyun, and he said you could stay. You don’t have to go back there Chanyeol, back to Jungsoo I mean. You can stay here with us in this house. It doesn’t matter that you don’t love Joonmyun or even know him,” Jongin rambled on before Chanyeol stopped him with a tight hug.

Since the sun had set, the temperature had dropped, and Jongin had put on a shirt before they’d eaten dinner. As the soft threads of the cloth pressed into the thin, cheap material of his shirt and Jongin’s soft aroma reached his nose, it reminded them how they were different.

How he was simply a grunt worker of a circus and Jongin was the husband of a prince.

“I couldn’t Jongin. It’d be strange right? Just living with you all,” Chanyeol explained, still pressed against Jongin’s chest.

“No. It won’t be. It won’t be any different than how the rest of us came to this house. Baekhyun, the one you met tonight, was an arranged marriage. He didn’t come here of his own accord, and he has found his place among us. You can too,” Jongin’s mumbled in a muffled voice.

While Chanyeol thought about his words, he realized that Jongin had a point. Maybe he wouldn’t stick out so badly among the rest of the men in the house.

Perhaps he deserved more than he’d ever allowed himself to have.

“Then, yes.”

After insisting that Jongin stay back at the house and wait for him to collect the few things he owned and cared to keep, Chanyeol walked back to camp and searched the tent he shared with Cheng Xiao and Si Cheng’s family.

Eventually, he pulled out his trunk and looked inside, digging passed clothes, a brush and comb, some soap and other random things, he came upon a necklace. It was the only thing he’d had that reminded him of the short life he’d had with his family.

If he was honestly, after Jongin’s suggestion, he should’ve just stayed because coming back meant he risked getting caught by Jungsoo. But he couldn’t leave the necklace.

When it was tucked away in his pocket, Si Cheng and his sister walked into the tent, and their eyes widened at the scene. Chanyeol couldn’t help but laugh because he looked the poster child of someone preparing to run away.

“You’re finally doing it,” Si Cheng sighed, pulling the flap closed behind Cheng Xiao, who was quiet. She just stared at him with wide eyes, watching his every move as he stuffed some clothes in a bag as an afterthought.

As Chanyeol hugged Cheng Xiao, then kissed the top of her head, she blinked, and her face changed into one of confusion, “are you leaving?”
Chanyeol nodded, and he looked away, not wanting to see the girl cry. Since he’d been there, with her family, for nearly 15 years—nearly all her life—he imagined it was like watching her brother leave.

“Be safe.” The firmness of her words surprised him, and Chanyeol turned back and gathered her into a hug.

“I will,” he whispered in the top of her head. Just as he let go, they heard a commotion outside then Jungsoo’s voice.

“If the big ingrate ran away, let him. I’d like to see him provide from himself when he has nothing in his head.” The words cut him, but they also hardened his resolve. He was getting the hell out of there.

“Before I go, tell Youngwoon I said thank you and that I’m sorry.” Si Cheng nodded and urged him to crouch behind the stacks of bedding because Jungsoo was coming towards their tent.

Just as the boy had predicted, Jungsoo barged into their tent without any warning and looked around, “boy have you seen Chanyeol?” As he asked the question, he also looked at Cheng Xiao, meaning that he expected an answer from either of them.

“I saw him helping Sungmin and Siwon loaded up the carriages,” Si Cheng lied, keeping his face straight. Cheng Xiao nodded in agreement and even lead Jungsoo out the tent pointing in a direction.

The man seemed to believe them and parted from their general area.

As quietly as he’d ever moved in his life, Chanyeol rose from his hiding place and grabbed the bag, then slipped out the entrance of the tent. Si Cheng and Cheng Xiao watched him leave; returning to their tent once the man was out of sight.

With each step he took away from the camp, his weight on his chest became lighter and lighter until he felt like he was breathing the crisp night air through new lungs.

He was free. Or rather, he’d taken steps to be free. He’d finally done it.

It took him some time to get back to Jongin’s home, but when he did, the man was waiting for him and enveloped him in a tight hug.

“I was almost afraid you’d changed your mind. Come in,” Jongin sighed as he pulled Chanyeol in the house, looking around them before he shut and locked the door.

Joonmyun was waiting by the kitchen table when they came inside, his presence only made known by the two candles on the table and his shadow

“Did everything go okay? Are you okay?” He spoke, immediately walking towards Chanyeol and examining him in the dim light. When he saw that the man didn’t have any scratches or bruises, he smiled and stepped back.

“I’m fine. Jungsoo didn’t know I’d left. I wonder if he’ll just let me go like that.”

There was a small, minute part of him that hoped that the man had some attachment to him but the rest of him truly hoped that he would let him go.
Nothing had ever been that easy for Chanyeol though.

The moon was high in the sky, and Chanyeol had settled down to sleep, bathed and clothed in something borrowed from Kris (the only person near his height) when a knock came at the front door.

Yixing, who suffered bouts of restlessness, was up walking and opened the door in confusion.

The man looked to be well over his 40th year, and he launched into his request as soon as the door opened “excuse me, you haven’t seen a tall man in his 27th year with large ears around have you? I’m from the circus, and we’re missing a member.”

Yixing gave the question a thoughtful silence before he shook his head and put on a face of mock regret “I’m sorry, I haven’t.”

The man seemed to believe him and gave him a sharp nod before he thanked him and turned away.

“Who was that Xing?” Joonmyun asked suddenly, taking Yixing by surprise because he’d failed to hear the man walk into the room.

“Someone was looking for Chanyeol. He looked frightening,” Joonmyun’s tired eyes widened, and he pushed a curtain aside, getting a good look at the retreating man.

“That was the Ring Master from the show Jongin, and I went to a few days ago.”

“He came for you last night,” Joonmyun sighed, making immediate silence sweep down the table. All other conversations came to a close, and everyone listened with interest—sans Yixing—waiting for the man to continue.

When he didn’t eyes trailed across the table, most of them landing on Chanyeol, since he was the only person anyone could be looking for.

“We told him that we hadn’t seen you. I also went and checked, and they’re gone,” Yixing explained, his face set with a serious expression.

Something like a cross between disappointment and relief turned into the pit of Chanyeol’s stomach. His expression must’ve shown that because Jongin reached for his hand and squeezed it, a smile on his face.

“He’s gone.”

“Yeah,” Chanyeol sighed, feeling the knot in his stomach slowly unravel in relief.

He was gone.
Balancing Act (Part 2)

Chanyeol’s mouth went dry as he watched Baekhyun slowly lather soap onto his back, reaching what he could from over his shoulder. He could see every spot he’d failed cover, but he couldn’t bring himself to help.

In the three months, he’d been in Joonmyun’s house, Baekhyun was the one person he could never bring himself to approach. Baekhyun never made any moves to interact with him either, not that it seemed like it bothered him.

Whenever Chanyeol was alone in a room with Baekhyun, he’d either leave or awkwardly avoid any contact because he didn’t want to make a fool of himself.

All of the other men in the house were handsome and beautiful in some way, but when it came to Baekhyun, Chanyeol couldn’t even begin to pin a description on him.

Baekhyun probably wasn’t aware, but Chanyeol had been watching him since he’d first gotten into the house. It’d started out of curiosity and coincidence then at some point, it became purposeful. Each time he caught Baekhyun’s eyes Chanyeol would feel his throat tighten, and the saliva in his mouth would thicken with nervousness.

“Is there a way to approach him?” Chanyeol found himself asking Jongin one night. The man had been trying to convince him to grow his hair out and so far, the tresses were to his shoulders. Because he’d always kept it short to combat dirt and lice, it was foreign, and Jongin had to teach him how to take care of it. Instead of just scrubbing with body soap, there was a thinner, more water-like soap that Jongin massaged into his scalp.

“Honestly, I don’t know. Most of the others in the house waited until Baekhyun approached them to talk. The only exception was Yixing because he’s nice in spite of being so quiet and to himself,” Jongin explained off the top of his head, mentally going through the different personalities of the other men in the house. “You wouldn’t happen to have a crush on Baekhyun would you?”

Chanyeol went quiet, and Jongin smiled as he ran a comb through the man’s wet hair.

“I’ll take the silence as a yes. Sorry to say, but you’ll have to find your own way to get close to him. He’s not easy,” Chanyeol let out a sigh, disappointed that Jongin had been of no help.

There was something that he was sure Jongin could help him with, though.

“Jongin, would it be weird if I—I pursued Baekhyun? Everyone in this house, except for me, are all Joonmyun’s husbands…” Jongin’s mouth spread into a smile, and he shook his head.

“Have you ever seen Kris and Luhan,” Chanyeol’s eyes widened, and he nodded softly, thinking about all the times the men looked oddly intimate with each other. “But yeah, I mean all of us love Joonmyun, and some of us love each other. One of his promises was that we were also free to love whoever we wanted to, whether it be someone outside the house or inside of it because we aren’t prisoners.”

That sounded fair.

“So I don’t have to warn or let Joonmyun know first?” Jongin’s expression got a bit more serious, and he frowned.
“We’re not his property, Chanyeol. Baekhyun is his own person, so you should approach him first.” Chanyeol looked down as embarrassment burned in his face, too ashamed to look Jongin in the face.

He really had a habit of saying the wrong things as of late.

He needed to talk less.

A warm hand landed on his shoulder, and Jongin gave him a soft smile “it’s okay Chanyeol. It’s just that after all these years of being with Joonmyun I have to realize not everyone’s going to understand our relationships. I’m sorry.”

Chanyeol could understand where Jongin was coming from, so he accepted the apology with a small smile.

It was true. Three months was nowhere near enough time to understand how the things in Joonmyun’s home really worked, but he was coming along. As far as he could tell, Joonmyun didn’t foster favorites and loved all the men in the house equally. The man was even friendly and kind to him, despite Chanyeol not contributing to the household in a romantic manner.

With his back against the wall and his eyes set on the curtains that blew in the light breeze, he failed to hear Baekhyun walk into his room. He didn’t notice him until Baekhyun cleared his throat and their eyes met, making Chanyeol bang his head on the wall in surprise.

Eyes wide and mouth slightly open, Chanyeol just stared at Baekhyun in a stunned silence.

“If you like me, you should just say something. Inquiring about me around the house wasn’t the best move,” Baekhyun sighed with his arms crossed in front his chest. Chanyeol couldn’t make out his expression, but he could tell by the man’s voice that he sounded amused.

Well, at least Baekhyun didn’t hate him.

Silence stretched between them and Chanyeol’s mind moved through the possible people that could’ve told Baekhyun about his questions but came up blank.

“No one told me by the way. Your voice…carries.” Baekhyun added, breaking the silence again. At that point, Chanyeol had fixed his mouth and was looking at Baekhyun, trying to convince himself that everything was an illusion. After all, Jongin had said that he needed to be the one to approach Baekhyun but as it happened, things went backward, and now Baekhyun had come to him.

“I’m sorry,” Chanyeol mumbled, unsure of what else to say. He was really at a loss for words.

“Don’t be. You didn’t say anything unkind or wrong, just, if you want to get to know me, talk to me. I don’t bite,” Chanyeol cracked a smile at the light joke and shook his head.

“That’s not what I heard,” Chanyeol’s heart nearly skipped a beat when he heard Baekhyun laugh. The sound was airy and light, like music to his ears.

“Funny. As much as I’d like to sit here and joke with you all night, I need to get to sleep. I have some errands to run tomorrow. You’re welcome to accompany me if you’d like.” The younger man wasted no time and agreed, promising he’d be ready to go on time.
Contrary to what Chanyeol had originally expected, Baekhyun was punctual, and by the time the man was ready to go, Chanyeol was trailing after him still rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

From what he gathered in the one-sided conversation that Baekhyun was having with him, Luhan wanted to prepare a special dinner for Kris’ birthday, and the ingredients that he needed were sold at a specialty store on the other side of town.

Luhan hadn’t been able to go himself because he’d been busy preparing other things and with how secretive the man had been the last few days, neither Chanyeol nor Baekhyun bothered to pester the man further.

As a result, they ended up with a list of vegetables and spices they’d never heard of and accompanying pictures for the more obscure things.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you up this early before,” Baekhyun commented after they’d walked in silence for a while. Chanyeol had been more than content to simply walk behind Baekhyun, yawning and urging away the tinges of sleep that snatched at him.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been outside of the general area of the market and the house. I want to see this city a bit more and accompanying you doesn’t seem all that bad either.” When Baekhyun’s eyes widened, and he looked away, Chanyeol nearly choked because he was certain that he’d succeeded in making the man blush.

“Ah, see? I told you I’m not that bad. I can be fun like the kids,” Baekhyun was barely older than Chanyeol—even if he looked quite the opposite—so the statement made Chanyeol break out into a chortling laugh that echoed through the partially empty streets.

The rest of the city’s inhabitants were starting to bustle around, and Chanyeol tried to take everything in while he listened to Baekhyun speak, savoring every grin that directed at him.

“According to the directions I have, we should almost be there. Luhan was very thorough. As always,” Chanyeol nodded once he took a glance at the map the man had drawn for them earlier that morning. He’d not only included streets, but also shop buildings and even people. If not for the intricate detailing, it would’ve been childish.

Besides the few stares they got, which Chanyeol was growing accustomed to, they reached the store and easily obtained everything on their list.

“This bag is heavy,” Baekhyun whined, Chanyeol barely picking up on the man’s complaints. Instead of asking, he simply took the bag from his hands and kept walking, not bothered by the added weight.

After being with the circus and being treated as a little more than a pack-mule most times, he was used to carrying heavy things. The groceries were nothing to him.

At first, Baekhyun huffed and glared at him, but after walking through a few streets, a look of relief crossed his face. He didn’t want to say anything but Chanyeol could see the red markings that were in Baekhyun’s palm, showing just how soft and sensitive the skin on his hands was.

Baekhyun was about to open his mouth—to complain or berate Chanyeol, he didn’t know—but the other man stopped him short.

“I don’t mind carrying this stuff. After sitting around the house, I feel like I’ve gotten lazy,”
Chanyeol murmured, watching Baekhyun’s expression flicker between general annoyance and entertainment. Either way, he’d managed to stop the man from fussing at him, so the rest of their trip back to the house was relatively pleasant.

As they walked through the market, Chanyeol couldn’t stop himself from grinning because since he’d taken to carrying Baekhyun’s load as well, the man slowed his stride and walked beside him. He wondered if they looked like a couple to a random passerby.

“Wow, you really came back in one piece. Maybe Baekhyun likes you after all,” Jongin whistled as soon as they walked into the house. Baekhyun’s face turned scarlet, and he shot Jongin a sour look before he rushed into the kitchen with Chanyeol right on his heels.

Considering that the open portion of the house was near the kitchen, it was impossible that Luhan hadn’t heard what Jongin said. When they walked into the kitchen, the older man’s face betrayed nothing, and he thanked them with a pleasant smile before he asked how their trip was.

Baekhyun was too flustered to talk because he was still huffing in Jongin’s direction, so Chanyeol did his best-describing things. The area still wasn’t the most familiar to him but he was learning quickly, and their trip had definitely helped him learn places he hadn’t been aware of.

“Well I’m glad things went so well,” Luhan shot a pointed look at Baekhyun, and the man avoided his eyes.

Chanyeol’s crush on Baekhyun was common knowledge of everyone in the house, so the fact that even Luhan was lightly poking fun at Baekhyun was interesting to watch.

Sure he was embarrassed to be called out like Jongin had, but he was so happy he could feel the fluttering of nerves and excitement in the pit of his stomach. The errand was the most time he’d ever spent with Baekhyun alone and judging by how things had gone, he hoped it wouldn’t be the last time.

Kris’ birthday dinner kept Chanyeol preoccupied as he helped Luhan arrange things around the house and sweep the floor and wipe down the large table where everyone usually ate dinner.

When Kris came home, everyone crowded around the door and gave either their verbal congratulations or actual gifts. The man’s obvious surprise made everything even better as Luhan led him to the table that was set with food Chanyeol had never seen before. It didn’t faze him much because all of it smelled and looked delicious and he’d eaten far less appetizing looking things in the past.

“I can’t believe you prepared all of this,” Kris sighed as he looked over the table. All the other men, including Joonmyun, eyed the food, all of them sporting various degrees of interest. The expression that struck Chanyeol the most was Tao’s. If he wasn’t mistaking, the younger man’s eyes were filled with unshed tears, which he made quick work of wiping away and smiling.

Chanyeol’s eyes kept drifting to Tao as dinner passed with the usual chatter, catching expressions that seemed like he was far away, yet still physically there at the table and nodding to questions that were asked of him.

Following dinner and a special cake that Minseok and Luhan spent the latter part of the afternoon
making, Chanyeol headed to his room. On his way there, he passed Tao’s darkened room and saw the man sitting in a chair, staring out the open window with a weird look on his face.

“Does Luhan’s food remind you of something?” Chanyeol could tell his abrupt question scared Tao because the man nearly fell out his chair and stared at Chanyeol with wide eyes. When he calmed down and realized it was only Chanyeol, Tao relaxed with a sad sigh.

“My mother,” Tao started then stopped, blinking back tears. “I haven’t thought about her since I was in my tenth year.” The words came out so quiet and broken that Chanyeol felt his heart clench in his chest. He stood there a few minutes, trying to decide if it was better to leave Tao alone or embrace him in some way and had decided with the latter when the man spoke again.

“Thank you for asking. I didn’t realize I’d been so obvious,” Chanyeol shook his head and assured him that he hadn’t been.

“I’m just nosy, and I can be observant at times.” Tao nodded his head at that and smiled, getting up to get into bed.

“I’m really fine. Again, thank you,” with that Chanyeol nodded and turned to walk out the room.

“If you ever need someone to talk to, I’m here. I know you may not know me as well as the others, but my ears,” Chanyeol stopped to tug at them, “are always open.”

Chanyeol’s foot slipped on the floor, and he fell into the wall, nearly missing a stand that held a glass vase full of flowers.

Jongdae regarded him for a second before he started laughing and helped the man up, shaking his head.

“It’s like you have two left feet.”

Against his better judgment, Chanyeol agreed to let Jongdae teach him how to dance because he had nothing better to do. Since he wasn’t necessarily fond of cooking, cleaning, reading or studying, he found himself doing odd things around the house to keep busy.

He’d first taken to helping Luhan maintain a garden, but when the heat kicked up and it became hard to keep things hydrated and alive, Chanyeol’s interest moved elsewhere.

One day he saw two men with instruments playing a song as Jongdae danced in the main room, his feet sweeping the floor as he moved sharp and precise. It was something interesting to watch, and since he’d heard that Jongdae had been something called a palace dancer, he’d developed an interest to see him dance.

When he finally did, the man caught him peeping and asked if he wanted to learn. Whether out of surprise from being caught or genuine interest—Chanyeol wasn’t sure which one—he agreed.

Within a few moments, there he was trying to move his body the way Jongdae was telling him to and failing miserably. He couldn’t see himself because there weren’t mirrors, but if the audience that had gathered was any hint, he was something to watch.

“Maybe dancing just isn’t your thing?” Jongdae sighed after several attempts of trying to instruct Chanyeol. In the process of several hours time, Chanyeol had stepped on Jongdae’s feet three times, fallen over twice, tripped over his own feet five times and crashed into the wall once.
If he’d kept going, he might’ve ended up hurting not only himself but also someone else.

After nearly falling onto a nearby table, Chanyeol admitted defeat and sat on the floor, refusing to get back up.

“That was fun, but I’ve had enough.” Jongdae looked at him and accepted Chanyeol’s surrender before the man set his eyes on Jongin and pulled him up.

“I’ll teach you to dance instead.” The look on Jongdae’s face was absolute and judging by the way Jongin willingly got up and began to follow Jongdae’s instructions. The men playing music had long taken a break, but after what seemed like only a few moments, Jongdae asked them to start.

Jongdae counted out numbers, and Chanyeol watched as Jongin moved through the moves Jongdae taught him with ease. It nearly made Chanyeol jealous, and he got up, wandering to the kitchen to see if he could help Luhan with dinner—or sneak a taste of it—because he’d worked up an appetite.

The older man seemed to detect his present immediately, and when Chanyeol went to dip his hand into the pot that was cooling on the counter, Luhan gave him a look that made him shrink back.

“Dinner will be ready in a few moments, get out my kitchen Chanyeol,” Luhan spoke slowly, a smile on his face.

A grimace crossed Chanyeol’s face as he felt a chill go down his back.

If he’d learned anything in his time in Joonmyun’s home, it was better and safer not to cross Luhan.

After retreating from the kitchen, Chanyeol wandered towards the indoor pool, eyeing Baekhyun as he swam neat lines back and forth. When he came up for air, Chanyeol was still staring at Baekhyun, and he had to force himself to look away.

“So maybe Chanyeol didn’t try that hard.” Chanyeol shook his head and tried to ignore the drops of water that dripped down the man’s pale, surprisingly toned torso.

When he finally tore his eyes from Baekhyun’s body, he realized that Baekhyun was still looking at him, mildly annoyed.

“I don’t need anything. I was just bored,” Chanyeol finally answered, somehow convincing himself to turn around and walk out the room. In the reflection of one of the mirrors in the room, he saw Baekhyun’s mouth form into a pout as he left and felt his heart skip.

So he hadn’t been as annoyed as he’d let on.

Soft footsteps echoed down the hall, and when Chanyeol turned towards his doorway, he saw Baekhyun leaning on the wall.

“You know, other people usually knock,” Chanyeol sighed, a smirk on his face as Baekhyun rolled his eyes and stepped inside, shutting the door behind him.

“Joonmyun is my husband. You are aware of that correct?” His tone was serious, and Chanyeol sat
up straighter, feeling a shiver run down his back. There was something about his aura that made Chanyeol feel like he should avoid his eyes as well, so he did, feeling a little intimidate.

And aroused.

“If you are aware, why do you continue to fawn after me? I understand you’re infatuated with me, but you never push any further. If you’d just make a move, perhaps I would respond to you the way you want me to,” Baekhyun sighs, sitting next to Chanyeol on his bed.

Chanyeol’s heart threatened to jump out his chest, and his body grew hot when Baekhyun touched his hand, entwining their fingers together in a gesture that’s almost too intimate for Chanyeol.

No matter how hard he tried, Chanyeol couldn’t formulate a verbal response, so he kept his mouth shut and trained his eyes on Baekhyun’s face.

Before he’d come in, time had been moving so quickly, and the sun was on its way to setting, but now that Baekhyun was so close, time moved slower, and the soft kiss of light illuminated his face.

Everything was too perfect, and Chanyeol kept blinking, trying to ground himself in the moment as Baekhyun puckered his lips and leaned in, effectively kissing him. When he pulled away, Chanyeol was left with a foreign feeling, and he could barely believe it until his hands moved independent of his mind, snaking around Baekhyun’s shoulders and holding him a breath’s distance away.

He hadn’t imagined that Baekhyun would be this close to him so soon and now that he was, Chanyeol wasn’t about to let the moment slip through his fingers so quickly.

“What does this mean?” Chanyeol asked, amazed that he hadn’t stumbled over his words as his heartbeat echoed in his eardrums.

Baekhyun moved Chanyeol’s larger, rougher hands to his cheeks and leaned so close that his lips were almost against Chanyeol’s “it means that I give you permission.”

“Permission for what?” There were so many answers to that question yet Chanyeol found that he was hungry for just one answer and his stomach twisted in knots, anticipating Baekhyun’s answer.

“Anything,” Baekhyun started, eyeing the window before he finished his statement “everything.” With that, he pressed his lips against Chanyeol again, and Chanyeol nearly sighed from the feeling.

Morning came quickly, and for the first time since Chanyeol left the circus, he woke up to the warmth of another body. The sunlight peeked through curtains and when Chanyeol fully took in the fact that Baekhyun was curled up against him, memories of last night came flooding back to him.

Following Baekhyun’s answer to his question, they’d spent the nights with their mouths connected, and their hands wandered the expanse of each other’s bodies.

Chanyeol wasn’t a virgin by any means, but he swore that the previous night had been the most intimate thing he’d done with anyone in a long time. It made him feel warm inside.

Like he was a virgin again.

The same tingle that had accompanied his first kiss in his 13th year now engulfed his whole body, and as Chanyeol shook Baekhyun awake and went to prepare for the day, he had a bounce to his
As for Baekhyun, the man was by no means a morning person, but he also got up, and when he finally opened his eyes and looked at Chanyeol, he smiled and stretched.

“The gossip,” Baekhyun yawned, eyeing the cracked door of Chanyeol’s room.

They both were aware the word traveled quickly and quite easily in the house. It wasn’t necessarily that anyone was a gossip, but that there were several nosey individuals, one of them being the secondary head of the house, Luhan.

Nothing went on in the house without Luhan’s knowledge, and Chanyeol knew that if anyone knew that Baekhyun had spent the night in his room, it was Luhan.

Of course, Chanyeol was right because when they traile into the kitchen, the older man’s eyes fell on them immediately.

“Sleep well?” The statement was loaded.

Baekhyun cleared his throat and nodded then he glanced at Chanyeol, who did the same.

“Good. It’s about time.” To a bystander, the conversation was casual and sounded as if Baekhyun’s occasional bouts of insomnia had reoccurred and he’d finally found a night’s rest.

It wasn’t completely untrue considering that Chanyeol knew that Baekhyun had been having trouble sleeping as of lately and perhaps he’d found comfort in being with him. Either way, Luhan didn’t address the issue further, and all three of the men carried on about their day.

Or at least they tried to until Jongdae picked up the sense that something was different and refused to let the issue rest until he got an answer.

“Something happened between you two,” Chanyeol’s eyes widened, and he nearly dropped the books he was helping Minseok reshelve. When Jongdae saw his reaction, the corners of his mouth upturned into a mischievous smirk “so I’m right, then.”

Despite meeting the question with silence, Jongdae simply strolled out the library, still smirking.

Just as Chanyeol expected, Baekhyun kept his head up amongst all the rumors, and while no one openly confronted Baekhyun, he caught the brunt of all the knowing smiles, playful jabs, and eyebrow twitches.

Even from Joonmyun.

Out of everyone, Jongin’s teasing was the least discreet.

“So, Baekhyun slept in your room last night,” Jongin sighed when he conveniently bumped into Chanyeol earlier in the day. He’d been helping Minseok scrub the floors and wash the dishes from breakfast, so when Jongin approached him, he knew it was coming.

“We were talking, and he ended up falling asleep,” Chanyeol grumbled, concentrating on a
particular spot on the floor. He’d been saying the same thing all day, and he was starting to get
aggravated at himself. Despite everyone’s reactions to him and Baekhyun, he was still excited, and
he wanted nothing more than to find Baekhyun and finish what they’d started last night.

He was only being defensive about what’d happened because Baekhyun seemed to be.

“Tell me, are you ashamed of liking someone like me?” As the words left his mouth, Chanyeol
could tell that it wasn’t true. Baekhyun’s face went through several reactions in only a few short
moments before he chewed on his bottom lip and shook his head.

“When I first got here, I wasn’t necessarily the most liked and just about everyone was weary of
me. I’ve never had such confusing feelings for someone, not even when I first married Joonmyun,”
Chanyeol went to talk, but Baekhyun reached for both of his hands and looked at him. Under the
gaze, Chanyeol forgot what he was going to say, and he watched as Baekhyun swallowed hard. “I
was always raised as a private person and being in Joonmyun’s home has taught me a great deal
about being with other people and caring for them. Back in my kingdom, there was someone
whose job was to look after me and care for me. I never had to care for others or be concerned with
their feelings or thoughts. Here I’m on my own, sort of. I have feelings for you, and I have no idea
how even to begin expressing it.”

“Then express it the way you think you should,” Chanyeol sighed, running his hands through
Baekhyun’s hair. The man leaned into the touch and gave Chanyeol a weak smile.

“I’m trying Chanyeol.” And Chanyeol could tell that Baekhyun was as he squeezed his hands and
leaned closer to him.

Following the previous night, Baekhyun slept in Chanyeol’s bed again, his head pillowed on the
taller man’s chest as he snored lightly.

No matter how long it took Baekhyun to love him comfortably, Chanyeol would be willing to wait.

It got to the point where Baekhyun no longer slept in his own room, so after two months,
Baekhyun moved his things into the other side of Chanyeol’s room. To his surprise, there wasn’t
much, just clothes, a few trinkets, jewelry and a well-worn stuffed dog toy.

“What’s this?” Chanyeol asked when he saw Baekhyun gently place the toy onto the other bed in
the room. Baekhyun smiled, and he looked at it with fondness, reaching to rearrange it.

“It was the first gift my mother ever gave me. It was one of the few instances where she wasn’t
cold.”

In the years that Chanyeol had been alive, he’d come to learn that sometimes it was nice that he
hadn’t known his parents because so many people had terrible ones, including people like
Baekhyun who were born into royal families.

It was nothing Chanyeol could comfort him about, so he stood by and gave an awkward nod before
he left Baekhyun to finish arranging his things.

Sometimes people needed time alone, and Chanyeol was learning to observe such subtleties of life.
What wasn’t subtle, however, was when Baekhyun approached Chanyeol a few weeks after he’d moved into his room.

With Baekhyun’s biting at the juncture where his shoulder met his neck with promises of bruises along his collar, one of Baekhyun’s soft hands drifted beneath Chanyeol’s pants and took a few experimental strokes.

“Ah Baek—Baekhyun,” really Chanyeol wasn’t complaining, but he was so surprised that it was the first thing that came out his mouth and he flushed in embarrassment. Baekhyun, of course, picked up on the embarrassment and stopped, leaning up to look at Chanyeol.

“What is something wrong? Did I grab you too hard?”

They hadn’t talked about their past sexual experiences, but Chanyeol figured he had more experience considering that he’d heard about how Joonmyun had taken Baekhyun’s virginity on their wedding night. It hadn’t fazed him much, especially considering that Joonmyun didn’t mind Chanyeol dating and sleeping with Baekhyun while the man was technically married to him.

If someone asked Chanyeol if he understood the relationship dynamics that existed within Joonmyun’s home, he might answer that he only understood half of it. It was enough that he didn’t feel weird or awkward about his feelings towards Baekhyun or feel much jealousy when he saw Baekhyun and Joonmyun together.

He blamed it partially on just being happy that Baekhyun liked him, but another part of him knew better. Perhaps he really did understand how things worked in Joonmyun’s home and was okay with it. After all, why wouldn’t he be? He was the one who’d come into Joonmyun’s house.

Oftentimes, Chanyeol wondered if he was too passive, but then something would happen to remind him that his passiveness was a gift. It’d helped him stay alive 27 years, so it wasn’t like was something he needed to change.

Baekhyun let out a moan when Chanyeol placed a kiss on his stomach and pulled his pants down. He hadn’t worn underwear, so once those were gone, Baekhyun was completely naked and spread out on Chanyeol’s bed.

He’d imagined it in his dreams, yet he’d never dared to think it would come true, yet things had moved quicker than he’d expected. In half a year’s time, he’d gone from a bumbling idiot—which he’d always considered himself to be—to someone a little more sure about what they wanted.

And he knew he wanted Baekhyun.

Which was precisely why he took his time placing kisses and light bites down Baekhyun’s torso, admiring the pale expanse of unmarked skin.

The older man squirmed under the careful ministrations, his breath getting shaky as Chanyeol got closer to his cock. When he purposefully skipped it in favor of Baekhyun’s thighs, the man let out a frustrated grunt but didn’t make any moves to direct Chanyeol. Instead, he laid there and let Chanyeol mark his skin with bites that would turn into bruises later.

By the time Chanyeol decided to pay attention to Baekhyun’s cock, it was curved towards his stomach, and the tip was bright pink and shiny with pre-come, begging for stimulation.
He started with the tip, making eye contact with Baekhyun as he engulfed the head and swirled his tongue, making Baekhyun’s hips shake, and his mouth open in a quiet moan.

To busy his hands, Chanyeol gripped Baekhyun’s thighs and held them open, trying to keep Baekhyun still so he could take more of him down his throat.

Without warning, Baekhyun came with a cry down Chanyeol’s throat, and he swallowed it, laving his tongue across the tip as Baekhyun inched away from sensitivity.

“I—I’m sorry,” Baekhyun breathed as his face turned scarlet. Chanyeol only shook his head and licked his lips, smiling.

“Sweet.” That made Baekhyun blush traveled down to his neck and chest, and he leaned up to shove Chanyeol’s chest lightly.

Perhaps Joonmyun had never talked to Baekhyun like that. The thought of exposing the man to something new ignited a flame in the pit of Chanyeol’s stomach, and he climbed back over Baekhyun. With the bottle of oil in his hand, he kneeled between the man’s thighs and poured some of the bottle’s contents onto his fingers.

He sat back on his heels and used his clean hand to spread Baekhyun’s thighs, then he circled a finger around his entrance, pressing lightly until the other man’s body relaxed and let him in. Baekhyun, still recovering from his orgasm, hiccupped on his breath and moaned when Chanyeol eased another finger inside of him.

So worried that he was going to come as soon as he got inside of Baekhyun, Chanyeol had an inner pep talk with himself and his dick. There was no way he was going to let something he’d been thinking about for months end in a few moments just because of his overexcitement.

Too bad Chanyeol’s body never listened to him much anyway, and after a dozen or so thrusts inside of Baekhyun, he came with a shiver and curse. Embarrassment flooded his body, and before he could apologize, Baekhyun leaned up and kissed him with a grin on his face.

“We have all night right?” The statement made Chanyeol’s dick twitch in interest, and he felt the renewed feeling of arousal twist through him.

With their bare chests pressed together and Chanyeol’s back against the wall, Baekhyun moved hips back and forwards, effectively making Chanyeol hit his prostate with every other movement.

It would’ve been more practical for Chanyeol to put his hands on Baekhyun’s waist but when the man tightened around him, he gripped the flesh of his ass with both his hands.

The tighter he held on, the faster Baekhyun ground down onto him, so before long they were both panting, and Baekhyun’s arms were around wrapped around his neck.

“Please—plea—please,” Baekhyun begged, shivering each time his dick pressed against Chanyeol’s stomach and rubbed against the man’s skin.

By the time Chanyeol reached between them to stroke Baekhyun, his words had collapsed in breathless, ragged moans and he’d buried his face in the crook of Chanyeol’s shoulder.
With a few tight strokes, Baekhyun came between them, and Chanyeol held back a moan as Baekhyun tightened around him, still moving as he rode out his orgasm. The last stutter of hips dragged out Chanyeol’s orgasm and moved his hands from Baekhyun’s ass to his waist. He held him closer, releasing deep inside of him.

They sat there, in the same position, for several moments until Baekhyun complained about his knees. Chanyeol helped him climb out of his lap and reached beside the bed, handing Baekhyun his pants to clean up with. It was obvious that neither of them had the energy to walk to the bathroom to clean off properly, so that was their next best thing.

As Chanyeol had come to expect, Baekhyun slept in his bed, fitted against him as their skin touched. The night was unusually breezy, and Chanyeol more than welcomed the extra warmth that came with Baekhyun being so close.

Even worse than the first night Baekhyun spent the night in Chanyeol’s room, the morning following his and Baekhyun’s first time, the whole house gave them knowing smiles.

“I always wonder why the walls are so thin in such a large house,” Jongdae wondered out loud, all eyes immediately falling on Baekhyun and Chanyeol. While Chanyeol didn’t care and couldn’t stop himself from smiling in response, Baekhyun turned the color of the ripe tomatoes on his plate.

Joonmyun smiled and he sat down his glass of water “well it’s for the hot weather. Better for the breeze to travel.” The rest of the table nodded in mock understanding and the usual side conversations started up, all the other men recognizing Joonmyun’s subtle request to leave the couple alone.

Following breakfast, Chanyeol saw Joonmyun in the library and decided to thank him for earlier.

“Hey, Joon—Joonmyun, thank you,” when Joonmyun looked at him in confusion, Chanyeol tried to explain himself better “thank you for the thing at breakfast. I don’t really pay much attention, but Baekhyun gets really flustered.” As soon as he said it, he wanted to smack himself.

Of course, Joonmyun was familiar with Baekhyun’s mannerisms. He’d been married to the man for nearly two years.

Instead of correcting Chanyeol, Joonmyun merely shrugged and mentioned that it wasn’t a problem.

“Sometimes the boys can be nosey, especially Jongdae and Luhan. I let them have their fun long enough,” Joonmyun added, a grin on his face. Despite the fact that man was quite a bit older than him, his cheeks shined with a youthfulness that Chanyeol found himself envious of.

The man was the very picture of composure most times than not and in all of the months that Chanyeol had lived in the house, he’d only seen the man upset once or twice.

Chanyeol was going to leave their conversation at that, but something stopped him, and he turned back around.

“And you’re sure my relationship with Baekhyun doesn’t bother you?” Joonmyun sat down his book at the question, and he shot Chanyeol another smile.

“If it did, I would’ve let you know Chanyeol. I like to think that I’m a man that speaks his mind, especially within the comfort of my own home.” Well, when he put it like that, it was hard to say
anything else, so Chanyeol agreed and left the library.

“You’re a lot more affectionate than I pegged you for,” Jongdae commented, eyeing Chanyeol and Baekhyun as they lay in the garden, enjoying the first day of sunshine in a while.

Due to the unusually heavy monsoon season, the sun hadn’t been out in two weeks. As a result, Joonmyun and Kris had been home since the second day of rain, and they only left to run small errands for the stall owners.

The weather made everyone laze around and slack on their chores, even Luhan, who rarely slacked on anything.

Chanyeol could tell, however, that the one thing no one slacked off on. He could see the hickeys that Kris made no effort to cover or how much slower Joonmyun walked after a night with Yixing or Jongin. It was even more apparent with how Baekhyun took on habits like Jongdae and refused to put on more than sheer pants or a long shirt that swept the top of his thighs whenever he decided to lounge around.

The other men took notice of Baekhyun’s change in demeanor and state of dress, but no one commented on it. In fact, people who were fond of wandering around the house in various states of undress—namely Tao and Jongdae—got humor out of it.

“Finally letting loose a little more?” Tao asked, eyeing Baekhyun’s pants and shirt which both were too big for his frame. Chanyeol’s eyes had widened when he first saw Baekhyun in the outfit, feeling a wave of pride and arousal as he recognized his own clothes on the man’s smaller body.

Whenever Baekhyun stretched or moved his upper body, the shirt slipped and exposed his shoulder. He didn’t bother to fix it and both Tao and Chanyeol—for different reasons—stared.

“Both of you act like you’ve never seen me naked,” Tao snorted at the statement, but Chanyeol just grinned, wiggling his eyebrows in the way Baekhyun hated. As a response, Baekhyun pinched his arm and rolled over, looking up at the clear sky.

Despite the stinging sensation that lingered, Chanyeol grinned and rolled over, on top of Baekhyun. He could see Tao watching from the corner of the pallet, his face twisted in disbelief and amusement.

Baekhyun sputtered and protested for several moments before he gave up and lay, resigned to have Chanyeol on top of him. Or at least, that’s what it seemed like to Chanyeol when he climbed off the man and saw him smiling up at him.

It was something he could get used to.
When Joonmyun first ushered the wide-eyed man into the house, Jongin stopped dead in his tracks and stared, appreciating his beauty from afar.

From his dark kohl-colored hair and his plump heart shaped lips to his short stature, Jongin couldn’t get enough.

There was a thin layer of dirty that covered his skin, and there was a frightened expression weighing on his small face, but Jongin wasn’t deterred. His heart still thumped excitedly in his chest.

Perhaps love, at first sight, was a real thing?

“I can trust that you’ll show him to his quarters and take care of him?” Luhan nodded and shot Kyungsoo a soft smile.

Kyungsoo immediately shrunk back from the warm expression, unused to such gestures. Accustomed to the reaction, Luhan reached out a hand. “I’m Luhan, the oldest in the house. Your name is Kyungsoo right?” Instead of answering, Kyungsoo looked at Luhan then back at Joonmyun for permission.

At first, the two men stared at him in confusion, then Joonmyun’s eyes widened in understanding.

“There’s no need for that anymore Kyungsoo. You’re no longer property. You can make your own decisions and follow your own will.” The words seemed to take a bit of time to trickling into the man’s head, but once he processed them, he shook Luhan’s hand. When he let go, he marveled at how soft Luhan’s hands were compared to his own.

“Please show him to the bathroom and give him anything he wants Lu.” Again, Luhan nodded and led Kyungsoo off. As he walked, he took one last look at Joonmyun, who waved at him, before Luhan pulled him around a corner and down a long hall.

The bathroom alone could’ve fit his old master’s house thrice times over. All his life he’d figured that his owner was one of the richest men in the city, but after he’d gotten a good look at Joonmyun, his whole impression had changed.

Even as he’d been ushered through a small section of the man’s house, his impression kept changing and evolving to figure out what kind of person Joonmyun was.

What was his reason for buying him out of bondage?

Once inside the large bath, all of his thoughts washed away with the dirt on his body.

As punishment for dropping a plate at his previous home, he’d been forbidden from taking a hot bath. He could only imagine how badly he smelled and the thought was mortifying as he sunk deeper into the water. The longer he stayed under, the more he wished he could dissolve away.
Pity. Was that why Joonmyun had bought him? If it was, Kyungsoo didn’t care.

Since Joonmyun had appeared so genuine and determined to have Kyungsoo go with him, Kyungsoo was glad to have taken the chance. Nothing could be worse than being dirty, underfed, beaten and sleeping on the floor.

After all, it was all he knew.

From across the bath, Jongin sat on the edge of the large tub, washing his feet and watching Kyungsoo with an acute amount of interest. Now that his hair and skin were clean, he was even more attractive than Jongin had initially given him credit for.

While his shoulders weren’t the broadest, his body was surprisingly lean and sculpted with a softness that Jongin admired. Somewhere in between trying to look busy and looking at Kyungsoo, he caught sight of the scars and bruises.

From beatings.

Jongin was all too familiar with the marks and judging from their yellowish tinge, they weren’t fresh. In fact, they were almost healed.

So he hadn’t been beaten recently.

That thought alone brought a wave of relief through Jongin’s body.

Even if he didn’t know too much about Kyungsoo and hadn’t even introduced himself yet, he was happy that such a gentle looking person was now safe from such treatment. Someone that looked like Kyungsoo deserved to be dressed in the finest anyone had to offer, and without being aware of Kyungsoo’s previous situation, Jongin despised whoever had marked his body.

When Kyungsoo finished with his bath and rose from the water, he felt a gaze on him. Instead of turning around to see, Kyungsoo ignored it and wrapped himself in the cloth Luhan left for him to dry with. Not far from it, there were a few lotions and perfumes laid out for him to choose from.

He didn’t bother to smell any of them and stuck his hand in the nearest jar, scooping some.

Lotion was an unheard luxury in his previous household, usually only used by the lady of the house when his master had a particularly bountiful crop. As a result, Kyungsoo took his time admiring the substance before he set to rubbing it into his skin.

It was only when he’d finished covering his legs and back that he realized he’d taken too much. With only his arms left, there was no way he could use all that he’d taken.

Flustered by something so simple, he’d failed to hear the wet footsteps approaching him.

“Here, let me have some. It happens sometimes,” a tall, tanned man sighed, reaching out his hand. Kyungsoo opened his palm and wiped the remaining lotion into the man’s hand. “Hi, I’m Jongin by the way. Do you live here now?” Kyungsoo nodded and watched as the man expertly rubbed the lotion all over his body in a record amount of time.

“Yes, I’m Kyungsoo.” Jongin grinned, and Kyungsoo’s eyes widened a little bit.
The man standing over him was particularly handsome.

So it seemed that Joonmyun was no doubt a collector of pretty men. That made Kyungsoo wonder. Just where did he fit in here?

It had taken almost two weeks before Kyungsoo got comfortable with navigating the house and getting along with the others. The tanned man, whose name Kyungsoo learned to be Jongin, was especially nice to him.

Over his first two days, he tried to get used to three full meals a day plus any extra food he could want. His first day had almost been too much, and he’d gotten sick, his stomach not used to such rich and decadent food.

By a week in, his stomach had grown accustomed, and he’d come to anticipate his meals, especially when Luhan seemed particularly excited about what he’d cooked for the night.

Besides food, another thing Kyungsoo came to terms with or rather, was trying to come to terms with, was the fact that all the men that lived in the house were Joonmyun’s lovers, sort of.

It took him nearly a month, but he eventually gathered the courage to ask Luhan, and the man told him about how the house ran in regards to everything. They all had to help out with chores since there were no servants because Joonmyun had an aversion to servitude. The only thing they didn’t have to do was clean their clothes, as there was someone who was offered to do such a job in exchange for a stall at the market.

Everything else, fell on Luhan, Kris or Minseok to delegate.

“Most of us are his husbands,” Luhan explained, showing Kyungsoo his gold bracelet. Unlike some of the other men, Kyungsoo had been raised in the city and was familiar with the marriage customs. Without Luhan’s explanation, he’d already figured out who was married to Joonmyun and who wasn’t by their lack of gold bracelets.

What he did want to know was how things worked with so many men and only one Joonmyun.

Luhan continued his explanation, and soon enough, Kyungsoo had answers to his many questions.

“Whenever anyone feels so inclined, they simply talk to Joonmyun or sleep in his chambers. Sometimes more than one person goes in as well. It just depends. Easy to understand right?” Kyungsoo nodded, and his mind started to race, wondering if he needed to sleep with Joonmyun as well.

As a display of gratitude perhaps?

The expression on his face must’ve given his thoughts away because Luhan took hold of his shoulder and leaned closer, a grave look on his pretty face “don’t think that you’re obligated to sleep with him because of whatever situation he got you out of. Joonmyun is a sweet and understanding man. I can promise you he expects nothing in return.”

“So if I choose never to, I won’t be cast off into the streets?” Luhan let out a laugh and shook his head. The action made the ribbon around a large section of his hair come undone, and it fanned out onto his shoulders. Instead of fixing it, the man just tucked it behind his ear.
“Absolutely not, if you choose that then I’m sure Joonmyun will let you stay here. He’s not a person whose kindness comes with stipulations.”

Following his conversation with Luhan, Kyungsoo went to bed with a lot on his mind. At one point, there was such a strong sense of obligation to pay Joonmyun back, but at another, Luhan’s words kept coming back to him.

He didn’t have to have sex with Joonmyun. That much he knew.

What he was struggling with were the ‘ifs.’ Besides the few times his previous owner ordered him to please him, he had no idea how actually to please someone. 

If he was honest, Joonmyun was attractive, so sharing his bed would be nothing hard. What worried Kyungsoo was if he’d be able to deliver.

Judging by the different physiques he’d seen in the bath, there was no way he could compete with them just physically, much less on any other level.

The topic stayed on his mind for a while, but in the meantime, he started to build an understanding of the other men in the house and their relationships concerning each other and Joonmyun.

Out of all of the couplings that were obvious, Kris and Luhan’s were the most obvious. They made no efforts to hide their intimate moments, whether it be Kris coming home from the market and greeting Luhan with a kiss or Luhan refusing to let Kris work in peace when he was in a particular mood.

Once, Kyungsoo had accidentally walked in on them in the midst of what he assumed to be the two having sex in the library. He’d been so flustered that he forgot to get the book he’d come in search for and simply walked out the room, closing the door behind him. Jongin had been walking by when’d first walked out, so the man saw his blush and grinned.

“Caught Kris and Luhan? Been there,” Jongin sighed, patting Kyungsoo on the shoulder “Luhan doesn’t care, and since Luhan distracts him so much, Kris doesn’t care either.”

The next couple he came across was Baekhyun and Chanyeol.

With particular questions, Kyungsoo realized he could get Jongin to tell him anything, so he soon learned that Baekhyun had come into the house as an arranged marriage and that Chanyeol had run away from a traveling circus.

He’d never seen a prince, but whenever Kyungsoo found himself looking at Baekhyun, he figured that the man looked like what he’d always pictured a prince be. With his soft features, purposeful stride, and a face always set in a serious expression, there was something regal about Baekhyun.

Chanyeol was the literal opposite of that and Kyungsoo couldn’t help but take notice of how Baekhyun’s expressions were more amused and at ease when the taller man was around. It was almost like he was an entirely different person when his eyes watered as he laughed at one of Chanyeol’s jokes.
As for the interactions of the other men with Joonmyun, Kyungsoo was still piecing together his thoughts about the complicated dynamic the men maintained.

Kris and Luhan both seemed to love Joonmyun and whenever the man was in the same space as the other two, they pulled reactions from the man in their own ways. Whenever Luhan spoke to Joonmyun, the man would stop whatever he was doing and listen, his face showing that he was hanging onto every one of his words. In regards to Kris, Joonmyun seemed to have a level of respect that was nearly unrivaled. Kyungsoo soon realized that Joonmyun not only thought of Kris as a lover but also as a viable business partner as well.

Whenever Joonmyun was in the same room as Jongdae, Kyungsoo could feel the tension, and usually, he couldn’t bring himself to walk away. More than once he’d found himself witness to the spark of attraction that surged through Jongdae and Joonmyun’s relationship. Sometimes Jongdae danced for Joonmyun, his eyes never leaving the man as he danced literal circles around him and placed soft touches on Joonmyun’s shoulders, arms, knees as he passed by.

“Want me to teach you?” Jongdae had asked him once, eyeing him as he sat in the corner of the room. There was a lurch in his stomach, and he nearly said yes but decided against it. Chastised for his clumsiness as a child, Kyungsoo knew there was no way he’d have enough grace to do anything even remotely similar to Jongdae.

Yixing was a quiet man, unlike Minseok, who Kyungsoo had learned was his older brother. They were as different in personality as they were in physical appearance. When Yixing was with Joonmyun, they were either sitting in a comfortable silence or talking about philosophical things that made Kyungsoo’s headache. Minseok was a bit different in that he loved talking to Joonmyun about books. Sometimes Kyungsoo had read the book being discussed, but most times not because whenever Minseok wasn’t brewing some tea or coffee, he was in the library, plucking four or five books off the shelf to read.

Besides Jongin, Kyungsoo took a sort of a quiet comfort in Minseok’s presence whenever the man sat across from him and read a book, regarding him with a soft smile every time Kyungsoo looked up at him. They’d never really had an actual conversation, but whenever Kyungsoo saw Minseok in the library, he’d sit by him and read or vice versa.

Kyungsoo tried to avoid Tao whenever he could because the man brought noise wherever he went. The same principle went towards how Tao interacted with Joonmyun as well. Not only did Tao talk like he was trying to carry on a conversation in the middle of a busy market, but like Chanyeol, he also made big gestures.

It wasn’t that Kyungsoo disliked Tao he just disliked excesses of noise. It also didn’t help that Tao was very friendly and had a habit of touching whomever he was talking to at any specific moment. Joonmyun never seemed to mind and thoroughly seemed to enjoy Tao’s antics like everyone else, sans for perhaps Kris, who hated when Tao would accidentally knock something over and break it in his excitement.

The interactions between Chanyeol and Joonmyun were probably Kyungsoo’s favorite because it was always interesting. No matter what subject they talked about, Chanyeol would say something that would confuse Joonmyun, and once the man tried to ask questions to clear up his misunderstanding, Chanyeol’s answers would confuse him further. Kyungsoo wasn’t sure if the man did it on purpose, but he enjoyed watching Joonmyun laugh as Chanyeol’s explanations got more frantic and he tried to make Joonmyun understand through jokes. Sometimes Baekhyun would be with them and would take the time to explain things to Joonmyun, but most times it was just the two men, having conversations that resembled guessing games.
The last conversation Kyungsoo had heard, Chanyeol was trying to explain how to set up a large tent and even with his vivid descriptions, it was still hard to understand exactly how it was done.

When he was talking and flailing his arms, it was then that Kyungsoo saw a golden bracelet that hadn’t been there when he’d first arrived. Knowing how Chanyeol wasn’t a person into the luxury of jewelry, Kyungsoo figured that it was for the same reason the other men in the house wore matching golden bracelets.

He got a definite answer when he saw Chanyeol lean over and kiss Joonmyun on the cheek then blush as he continued with his explanation that Kyungsoo knew Joonmyun probably still didn’t understand.

It made him start to wonder if he would eventually agree to marry Joonmyun as well.

“You know you talk in your sleep Kyungsoo?” Jongin asked as they washed the dishes from breakfast one morning.

Since his first night, Jongin had insisted on sharing a room with him. While Kyungsoo had guessed that Jongin might have feelings for him, he entertained the chance that Jongin was just trying to be friendly and welcome him.

A small part of him was glad because he’d been apprehensive about sleeping in the large house in a room by himself. There was a sort of comfort that someone, namely Jongin, was just a few feet away.

But with sharing a room came the dilemma he was facing now because he apparently talked in his sleep.

Kyungsoo stared at the older man, mortified, “so you heard?” Jongin nodded and rinsed the last plate before handing it Kyungsoo to dry.

“Luhan told you that Joonmyun doesn’t expect anything from you right,” Kyungsoo nodded “then you seem like the type that’s not easily discouraged.” Jongin regarded Kyungsoo a few more seconds, and he laughed because his facial expression didn’t change. “Well, Joonmyun isn’t a hard man to please. I know that’s not encouraging coming from a former courtesan, but I promise I mean it.”

Kyungsoo restrained himself from reaction because he hadn’t known that, but judging from how Jongin’s face kind of dropped, he wish he had reacted.

Jongin seemed to think he hid his disappointment well and he cleared his throat before he continued, “Joonmyun is nothing like the patrons of the courtesan house though.” There was silence again, and Jongin got a faraway look on his face.

Kyungsoo had heard about places like that, and he realized that he felt sorry for Jongin. He wanted to embrace him or say something comforting, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it as the man stared into the garden.

“Sorry about that, I was just thinking about how I spent most of my life in that place. My mother dropped me off on the doorstep shortly after I was born.” Kyungsoo swallowed heavily at the thought of having to grow up in such a place, and he threw precaution to the wind as he sat down his towel and wrapped his arms around Jongin.
“I can’t say I understand, but I’m glad you’re here now. There are people who love you and you won’t be left anywhere anymore,” the touching words came as a surprise to Kyungsoo because he’d never pegged himself as the comforting type. Something about Jongin made him want to protect him even if he had a head and half and two years on him.

“So friendly so soon?” Chanyeol called, walking into the kitchen and retrieving an apple from the counter.

“Shut up. We just finished eating, how are you hungry?” Chanyeol laughed off Jongin’s words and bit into the fruit, the crunch resounding through the room.

“Don’t let me interrupt you two lovebirds. By the way, Luhan said that you should have a talk with him. He said you’d know which one.” Chanyeol had thrown over his shoulder before he walked out.

After they had put away all the dishes, Jongin sat Kyungsoo down on his bed and faced him. “It’s nothing really. Luhan just wants me to answer any questions about Joonmyun that you might have. I know you’re nervous or unsure, but I promise if you do what comes natural, everything will go fine. The only thing is, Joonmyun loves kissing, so if you need tips, speak up right now.”

“Please teach me everything,” Kyungsoo asked, his lips set in a serious expression. After their conversation in the kitchen, Kyungsoo felt like he could trust Jongin.

If someone had told Jongin that he’d get the chance to teach Kyungsoo how to kiss, he would’ve scoffed and continued with his business. Now that the soft lips he’d been thinking about since the man had walked through the door were on him, he could barely think straight.

He’d suggested that they start off slow with closed mouth kisses. Somehow in the jumble of his head, he’d moved Kyungsoo’s hands to his neck and placed his palms on either side of his cheeks.

When they broke away for breath, the redness of Kyungsoo’s lips and the flush on his face almost made Jongin want to jump him right then and there, but he knew he couldn’t. Kyungsoo had only asked him to teach him how to kiss.

Nothing else.

After the break, which Jongin needed to regain his cool, they moved onto open mouth kisses.

The first time he took his tongue and licked the back of Kyungsoo’s teeth, the younger man had moaned into Jongin's mouth, and the sound had gone straight to his dick. Kyungsoo’s tongue started off reluctantly slipping into his mouth, but once Jongin challenged him, he learned of Kyungsoo’s competitive streak. Their tongues ended up tangling together and right before they broke apart, Kyungsoo was in his lap with his hands balled up in Jongin’s hair.

Gathering up what was left of his dignity like he wasn’t sporting an erection, Jongin cleared his throat, “and that’s the pretty quick lesson to kissing. I hope you learned a lot.” Kyungsoo nodded silently and slipped off Jongin’s lap, settling in his seat across from him.

The setting sun accentuated the pink tinge that decorated his cheeks, and Jongin found himself staring at Kyungsoo again. After a bit, he noticed that Kyungsoo was staring back at him and Jongin rose from the bed, shielding his arousal with his hands.

“I’m going to the bathroom, but you’re a good student. Keep up the good work.” Kyungsoo smiled
and moved to his bed.

Now Kyungsoo was confident that Jongin had a thing for him and if the budding hard-on he also had was any indication, then he was wildly attracted to Jongin too.

The thought spurred bursts of curiosity and mild terror inside of him.

Joonmyun invited Kyungsoo into his quarters a few nights after his kissing lesson with Jongin.

Decorated in even more ornate pillows, clothes, and rugs than the rest of the house, Joonmyun’s bedroom was gorgeous. No matter where Kyungsoo sat, walked or touched, everything was incredibly soft.

“Have you been enjoying your living arrangements? Luhan tells me that you and Jongin are close.” Kyungsoo nodded and shifted on the bed. Nothing made him feel uncomfortable, but the oil that Jongin had slipped into his pocket before he came into the room was burning in his pocket.

His nerves were also getting the best of him.

Set on keeping himself still, he missed Joonmyun’s question and had to apologize “I’m sorry Mas-Joonmyun, what did you say?” A smile crossed Joonmyun's face, and he put his hand on Kyungsoo’s shoulder.

“There’s nothing to be nervous about Kyungsoo. I just wanted to talk to you. You don’t have to do anything, especially something you’re not comfortable with.” Kyungsoo nodded and started absentmindedly picking at his fingers. “If everything is fine, then you can go. Unless there’s something else, you want to ask me?” Kyungsoo looked up at Joonmyun and nodded, biting the corner of his lip.

“Um, would you mind if I slept here?” The older man’s eyes widened, and he gave Kyungsoo a small smile.

“Sure.”

If Kyungsoo thought his bed was luxurious, then Joonmyun’s was heavenly. The soft cotton sheets felt cool on his feet and arms as he lay down; Kyungsoo also reveled in the feeling of the down pillows cradling his head. It was funny to him how the luxuries like a nice bed made him appreciate his significant change in luck. Just a month ago he had been lying on a pallet made of straw and dirt.

Surely someone up in heaven favored him.

Kyungsoo didn’t notice that he’d fallen asleep until Joonmyun gently shook him awake in the morning, alerting him that it was time to eat breakfast. Joonmyun had taken his breakfast earlier and was now on his way to oversee the sellers who occupied the stalls in his market.

“Judging from your face and body, I can tell you slept well,” Luhan commented as soon as he walked in the kitchen. Kyungsoo nodded and stretched, sighing before he sat down.
It was the best sleep he’d had in his life.

“So, did you?” Kyungsoo had been waiting for Jongin to ask because the man’s eyes had been on him since he’d walked in the kitchen.

Everyone at the table turned their attention to him and waited for his answer. Usually, he would’ve shrunk away from the attention, but he smiled and shrugged, finding a burst of confidence, “he didn’t expect me to do anything. He just wanted to know if everything was okay. It was funny because I was nervous, but I wanted to stay with him. I can’t explain it.” Jongdae nodded and laughed. “Yeah, Joonmyun gives off that vibe. He’s so pleasant to sleep with. Always a giver.” Kris choked on his water, and the rest of the table broke into laughter.

“We really shouldn’t talk about Joonmyun like that when he’s not present. Especially during breakfast.” No one paid him any mind, and everyone continued to chat and laugh quietly amongst themselves.

As if it were a coincidence, it was Kyungsoo’s turn to tidy up Joonmyun’s room and make the man’s bed. He took his time to arrange it the way Luhan had meticulously shown him a few days previous.

Though Joonmyun probably wouldn’t have known the difference, Luhan still liked to make sure everything was just so.

In his short time in the house, Kyungsso had learned that the man was a bit of a perfectionist, especially when it came to Joonmyun.

He’d just finished making the bed when he passed the gardens and saw Jongin lying on some pillows, napping in the sun. With his long eyelashes, long, ruffled brown hair and richly tanned skin, he looked gorgeous illuminated by the sunlight.

So much so, that Kyungsoo took a moment to admire him before he continued into the main room.

Following Joonmyun purchasing him from his previous master, on the ride to Joonmyun’s home, the man had asked him questions about the things he liked to do. It’d been strange to answer because he rarely ever had free time as the only slave in a household of two.

Apparently, Joonmyun had remembered about him knowing how to read, and the man had shown him the extensive library, which is where he’d met a young man who was studying. Through the short conversation the man had with Joonmyun, Kyungsso had learned his name was Yixing and that he was currently a student.

“You like to read?” Kyungsoo nodded, itching to run his hands along the spines of the countless books lining the large shelves. Yixing could tell and when Joonmyun had disappeared, probably to run an errand, Yixing showed him the arrangement of the books.

The master’s son had taught him to read when he was learning from a tutor in his early childhood and continued to give him books until he got married. Once he left, Kyungsso was forbidden from
reading, and every time the master caught his eyes scanning something, he received a lashing.

He’d been terrified of forgetting how to read, so most times than not, he risked getting hit to read a few lines of something the man or his wife left sitting out.

Books and reading were what had probably gotten him through most of his life. Books were his personal escape from the bondage he suffered, telling of places he’d never gone or of people he’d never known.

They had a special place in his heart, and as he sat down with more books than he’d seen in 26 years of life, he felt at peace.

Before he knew it, two months passed.

He and Jongin were inseparable at times, Jongin usually curled up around him napping while he read a book. It became common knowledge that the two were a couple of the sort.

Unlike the other pairs in the house, Kyungsoo and Jongin thrived together in silence. Whenever Jongdae would take a walk through the house, he’d find the two in the garden, Jongin casually spread out on the cushions while Kyungsoo absentmindedly ran his hands through his hair.

Occasionally he would join them, causing Jongin to squirm and agitate Kyungsoo, complaining that Jongdae’s added body heat was too much. Instead of ever feeling like he was intruding, Jongdae would laugh and lay on Jongin more, their damp skin sticking together in the process. Considering Jongdae seldom wore more than pants—or shirts for that matter—the accusations of him causing Jongin to overheat were unlikely.

Somehow it always ended up that Jongin would let Jongdae lean on him and then he'd sing them a song. Kyungsoo sometimes joining him when he knew the words.

The first time it happened, Jongin sat up and made Jongdae fall off him. Kyungsoo, who was singing with his eyes closed didn’t notice and kept going. When he noticed that Jongdae’s voice wasn’t mingling with his own anymore, he opened his eyes and saw both Jongdae and Jongin staring at him.

“What?”

“Just didn’t know you could sing…” Jongin trailed off, his eyes set on Kyungsoo like he was seeing him for the first time. To Kyungsoo, it was both endearing and unsettling, considering Jongin had seen him every day for more than two months.

“My mother used to sing to me, and she used to teach me songs she knew from her childhood. I never thought I was any good to tell you the truth,” Jongdae let out a dry chuckle, and he sat up as well.

“You’re almost as good as me, and I spent quite some time around palace entertainers.” A small smile crossed Kyungsoo’s lips at the compliment, and Jongin nodded.

“I honestly don’t know much about singing, but you really do sound great.” The compliment from Jongin made his heart skip in his chest, and he cleared his throat as a blush rose to his cheeks.

From that day on, whenever Kyungsoo sang, Jongdae would join in and sometimes they’d even rope Luhan into singing with them.
After a while longer, Kyungsoo felt himself slip into the practice of being at ease around the other men. They all loved to hear him sing, especially Joonmyun and Jongin. Whoever enjoyed it more, Kyungsoo couldn’t tell.

It didn’t really matter because, besides reading, singing became something Kyungsoo realized he loved to do and he took to doing it more often.

After spending the night—or rather sleeping—in Joonmyun’s room, Kyungsoo’s anxiety to be with Joonmyun lessened and his feeling of obligation did as well.

Unlike the other who could sing, Joonmyun wasn’t as open to singing in front of everyone despite knowing that he wasn’t terrible. It took him coming upon Kyungsoo singing along to music played by a street musician in the market for him to open up, at least to Kyungsoo, and eventually, he asked Kyungsoo to sing for him.

“Do you have any song requests?” Kyungsoo asked as soon as he’d settled in the middle of Joonmyun’s room. The man seated in a chair near a pallet of pillows shook his head and said that he didn’t.

“Well then, what about mood? Happy and upbeat? Sad and slow? Something in between?”

“Sing anything you’d like. I just love hearing your voice,” as Joonmyun spoke, his voice deepened, and Kyungsoo felt a shiver travel down his back.

Joonmyun hadn’t made any effort to even so much as approach him in anything besides a friendly manner, so his reaction to Joonmyun’s statement was unexpected. It was the first time he’d ever felt his interest peaked at Joonmyun in such a way.

Joonmyun spent a large deal of his time at work, so when he announced at dinner—three months since Kyungsoo's arrival—that he needed to embark on a trip to oversee urgent business about the market, the news was met with moderate acceptance. The only person who was confused by the whole ordeal was Kyungsoo.

"So do you go on trips like these often?" He asked later when Joonmyun called him to his room. Joonmyun nodded and patted the space next to him.

"Sometimes there are shipments of goods I have to pick up and oversee personally. I don't mind it though because then I get to see different places and experience other cultures. It's quite enriching," Kyungsoo accepted the invitation and sat down, nodding as Joonmyun's explanation stretched on, going into great detail.

Any of the men might've been bored by Joonmyun's long-windedness but Kyungsoo found the man fascinating, and Joonmyun was aware. It was why he allowed himself to go on and on until he ran out of things to describe. By that point though, it was already pretty late at night, and Kyungsoo yawned quietly.

"If I'm keeping you from sleep, I'll let you go. I just wanted to explain things to you because I knew you weren't quite sure what I did," Kyungsoo started to get up, but then Joonmyun reached for Kyungsoo's hand.
"I wanted to spend the night with you because I wanted to get to know you better, our last meeting was a bit hasty," Kyungsoo blushed a bit and remembered how he'd spent his last visit to Joonmyun's in the man's lap, his lips attached to Joonmyun's.

It had been obvious that he'd taken Jongin's kissing 'lessons' to heart. Kyungsoo was, after all, a good student.

He should've let Joonmyun sleep because the man was leaving in the morning for his trip, but he couldn't help himself as he upped the intensity of their kisses. Finding himself in Joonmyun’s lap again, he could feel the familiar press of the man’s arousal on his ass and figured that then was the perfect time to sleep with the man finally.

When he reached down and gripped Joonmyun through his pants, the man groaned into his mouth and pulled from the kiss, an unsure look on his face.

“I’m doing this because I want to,” Kyungsoo sighed, his hand never moving from Joonmyun’s crotch.

“As long as you’re sure because I don’t have any intention of using you,” Joonmyun warned, his eyes still scanning Kyungsoo’s face, looking for any sign of hesitation.

To express his steadfastness, Kyungsoo leaned forward and kissed Joonmyun again, this time slipping his tongue into Joonmyun’s mouth as he cradled his jawline.

Jongin had taught him plenty of ways to kiss, but when Joonmyun put his mouth on other parts of Kyungsoo’s body, he found himself overwhelmed at the possibilities.

Completely stripped of his clothes and laying on the soft sheets, Joonmyun’s warm mouth was on Kyungsoo’s chest, then his stomach and thighs. He could tell that Joonmyun skipping over his cock was purposeful, but I didn’t make him any less impatient.

Between the kisses, licks and soft bites, he couldn’t help it as he squirmed. It got the point where Joonmyun looked up from his ministrations and grinned, moving a hand to hold Kyungsoo’s hip to still him.

“If it’s too much, let me know,” Kyungsoo pressed his lips into a tight line and nodded, already feeling his cheeks burning. They burned brighter when he realized that his legs were spread open and his entire body was on display for the other man.

That was the least of his worries when Joonmyun crawled over him and devoured his mouth again, leaving them hot and tingling. The other man had made it clear that one of his favorite parts of Kyungsoo’s body were his lips without ever speaking it out loud. Kyungsoo just knew because Joonmyun took his time kissing and nipping at his lips whenever they kissed.

With each kiss, Joonmyun’s arousal grew more insisted, and Kyungsoo reached up, untying the belt on Joonmyun’s pants. The garment came off without resistance and left him bare from the waist down.

The relationship he’d had with Jongin for the past few months hadn’t progressed past a shared
mutual touch and kisses, which he suspected was because Jongin didn’t want to overstep his boundaries or confuse him. In all actuality, it gave him the worst case of pent up tension he’d ever experienced in his life.

“I see you came prepared?” Joonmyun asked, his voice huskier than usual as he held up the small vial of oil. Even in the waning light, Kyungsoo could see that he was breathing heavier and knew that once again, someone was taking this slow, for his sake. He appreciated it, but with own arousal demanding attention, he wanted things to move a little quicker.

He wasn’t fragile.

With oiled hands, Joonmyun started off stroking him slow, and when he let out an impatient whine, he finally began to prepare him.

It was everything Jongin had described and yet more as well. Unlike the discomfort and unease he’d associated with intimacy of that level, there was just a pleasant thrum of arousal which spiked when Joonmyun found that spot inside him.

Once again, he was squirming, but instead of moving away from Joonmyun, he only tried to get closer and get the man’s fingers deeper inside of him. His back bowed off the bed when Joonmyun pressed the spot again, and he briefly saw the man smile.

“Good?” What else could he do but nod furiously? It felt better than good. Even after reading all the books he had, he still couldn’t come up with a better word for his feelings because it was beyond him.

When Joonmyun removed his fingers, Kyungsoo nearly reached to grab his wrist, preventing him from moving because he didn’t want the feeling to end. Instead, he found a pitiful sounding moan escaped from his lips, and Kyungsoo felt his body grow hotter.

From embarrassment or arousal, he wasn’t sure.

Joonmyun’s fingers were nothing compared to his dick and Kyungsoo came to realize that the moment the man’s hips pressed flushed against own.

He felt so full, and as he held onto Joonmyun’s shoulders, wrapping his legs around the man’s waist on instinct, he begged for more. The pleas weren’t loud because he didn’t want to risk anyone hearing them, but they were loud enough for Joonmyun to hear. The man responded to him with moans of his own and compliments about how he felt and how he was so happy to be with Kyungsoo.

Despite being in the heat of the moment, Kyungsoo knew Joonmyun meant every word that came out his mouth.

Kyungsoo couldn’t bring himself to care that the noises he was making got louder or that his nails were leaving crescent shaped marks on Joonmyun’s shoulders. He could only focus on the pleasure the overwhelming all of his senses and the warmth of Joonmyun’s body moving against and on top of him.

Besides the slide against Joonmyun’s stomach, there wasn’t much stimulation on his dick, but he could still feel the tight feeling in the pit of his stomach, threatening to uncoil at any moment.
His mind barely processed that he was coming until Joonmyun muttered into his ear and kissed his temple, his hips still moving until they stuttered and he came as well. As soon as he could make sense of his body, Kyungsoo gripped Joonmyun’s arm and pulled him down, kissing him hard.

“When you do stuff like this, it makes me even more reluctant to leave,” Joonmyun sighed, climbed off Kyungsoo and lying next to him. Kyungsoo grinned and rolled to his side, ignoring the twinge in his back as he stared at Joonmyun.

With his cheeks still flushed and his body covered with a sheen of sweat, Kyungsoo wondered if he looked just as spent and satisfied as the other man did because he certainly felt every bit of it.

The next morning Kyungsoo woke up with a slight soreness over his entire body, much different than when his past owner had taken him. Joonmyun had shown him exactly how he'd appreciated him, enjoyed his company and how much he would miss it on his trip.

"What time do you leave?" Kyungsoo asked when he saw that Joonmyun was awake. He gave him a sleepy smile and leaned up, pecking Kyungsoo on the lips.

"In a little bit. Why? Will you miss me?" Kyungsoo returned the smile and shrugged. When Joonmyun poked his lip out in a pout, Kyungsoo laughed.

"Of course. You've become someone quite important to me."
Sun and Silk (Part 2)

Following Kyungsoo’s night with Joonmyun where it became popular news that they’d slept together, Jongin began to get distant.

He allowed it to drag on for nearly a month before he finally confronted Jongin about it, aggravated that his closest friend and companion in the house was avoiding him.

“I still like you,” were his opening words considering that Kyungsoo had never been one to talk around a subject, preferring instead to get straight to the point. He’d managed to catch Jongin swimming in the pool with some of the others in the house, so he knew Jongin wouldn’t run away this time.

He’d had his head dunked underneath the water by Chanyeol, so Kyungsoo’s words sounded muffled, and he tilted his head, trying to get the water out his ears. Judging from Kyungsoo’s expression, he knew whatever the man said had been important.

“Did you hear me?” Jongin shook his head. Kyungsoo’s brow furrowed, and he took a breath, his arms crossed on his chest as he repeated his statement.

When the words finally registered, Jongin realized how serious Kyungsoo was, and he climbed out of the pool, reaching for a towel and motioned for Kyungsoo to follow him. As he did so, he felt glad that he declined Jongdae’s suggestion to swim naked.

He was also glad that their usual spot in the garden was unoccupied, so they settled down on the pallet.

“You’ve been avoiding me.” Kyungsoo could see Jongin swallowed hard as he gave a slow nod.

“Yeah,” the words were loaded with unease, and he shifted in his seat, already feeling bad for the past month.

“Why?” And he did want to know a reason because he valued Jongin’s company and his general presence. Besides Luhan, Jongin had been one of the first people to talk to him upon his arrival in the house.

“Just being stupid I guess,” that was the truth as well. Jongin knew the nature of Joonmyun’s relationships with the others in the house, including himself. The man meant different things to them, so he respected that Kyungsoo would eventually build and establish some type of relationship with Joonmyun.

A silence fell between them, and Kyungsoo spent the time studying Jongin’s face, his eyes falling on Jongin’s lips because he kept licking them every few seconds, a habit Kyungsoo noticed he did whenever he was nervous.

“I guess you don’t need any more lessons huh?” Jongin spoke the words with a smirk, and he wiggled his eyebrows until Kyungsoo smiled.

Jongdae and Luhan, who were standing in the kitchen for no other reason than to eavesdrop, shared a look of disbelief as they watched Kyungsoo and Jongin carry on a conversation like things were back to normal.
“Just like that, they’re friends again. You boys are something,” Jongdae turned his look of disbelief on Luhan as the man spoke.

“Boys?”

For the sake of getting out the house, Kyungsoo accompanied Kris and Yixing to the market and walked around, talking to the few vendors who weren’t too busy. When lunchtime was followed by the rush hour, and he grew bored, he started walking beyond the market and wandered into the main street of the town where all the shops were.

“It’d be a shame if you got lost,” a voice whispered in his ear. Immediately, he turned on his heels and came face-to-face—or rather face-to-chest considering their height difference—with Jongin.

“Don’t scare me like that,” Kyungsoo huffed as he hit Jongin on the arm and he continued his walk, realizing that Jongin was following him. “Are you following me now?”

Jongin seemed to give it thought, and then he shrugged, pulling Kyungsoo into a shop whom's name he didn’t even get a chance to read.

When his eyes adjusted to the dimness, his eyes widened, and his mouth opened.

“I knew you’d be interested in this shop. I grew up around here and this shop used to be a favorite of a friend of mine when we were kids,” images of Taemin came to mind, and Jongin thought about all the times Luhan had threatened them for sneaking out. The old man the used to own the store let them look at the books and gave them sweets that his wife had made.

“You’ve grown into a handsome young man.” A few moments after speaking, a young woman emerged from the back, a large smile on her face. “Considering the confusion on your face, I’m the granddaughter of the man that used to own this place. When you and your friend used to come, I was a little kid, and I would always see you. I almost thought you’d never come back because it’s been a while.”

Jongin tried to search his memories but came up blank and shrugged, an apologetic look on his face.

“Honestly I wouldn’t expect you to remember me since the only ever talked to your friend. You used to be more interested looking at the books and talking to my grandfather,” the woman sighed. Kyungsoo had so distracted by the fact that almost every surface of the shop was covered in books, that he didn’t even notice the woman that had been talking to Jongin was no holding her hand out to him.

“Are you one of Joonmyun’s husbands?” Kyungsoo stared at her for a few moments before he gave a soft nod despite it not being the truth. He didn’t know this woman, and besides the guys in Joonmyun’s house, he’d never been too great or enthusiastic about strangers.

Instead of shaking her hand as it seemed she was expecting, Kyungsoo just nodded in her direction with a soft smile, and she retracted her hand, returning the gesture. She seemed to understand Kyungsoo’s reluctance.

“Well, I’ll let you both browse in peace. Let me know if there’s something you want, though since you’re a friend of Jongin, you can have a few books on the house,” Kyungsoo gave her another nod and began to wander down the shelves piled high with books while Jongin followed closely behind him.
“For some reason, I never thought you’d be allowed to wander out the courtesan house, but I have to remember that not all of us grew up the way I did.” Jongin knew that Kyungsoo intended for the statement to be him lightheartedly stating what he knew, but the words made his heart ache.

After all, Kyungsoo was right. While all the others had come from different walks of life, none of them had been born into a life of forced servitude. Even though Jongin had grown up and was only supposed to leave the house when he had permission, he still snuck out and goofed around. The only punishment he ever had to face for disobeying was probably Luhan smacking him, and Taemin with a wooden spoon, which was nowhere near what Kyungsoo would’ve risked had he disobeyed anything demanded at or of him.

What made things better was that he wasn’t in that situation anymore. Instead, Kyungsoo was here with him and Joonmyun and everyone else in the house. Kyungsoo reminded him of that each time they shared a kiss or spent time in each other’s company.

They looked for what seemed like ages until Kyungsoo came across some dusty books that looked like they’d been in the shop for decades.

“I want these,” Taeyeon eyed the books, and she dusted off the covers, giving them a closer inspection before she handed them back to Kyungsoo.

“Fine with me. Enjoy them! Greet Prince Joonmyun for me when he returns from his trip.”

Following their trip to the bookstore, Kyungsoo grew curious of Jongin’s childhood and took to asking Luhan and Kris indiscriminate questions about random things then he would piece together what he could. From there, he would question Jongin and would fill in the blanks that were left.

When he figured he’d had enough, he caught Jongin in the bath alone and waded over to him, sitting one of the steps within the large pool. Within verbally asking, Jongin scooted closer to him and allowed the man to massage soap into his newly shortened hair.

“What is your friend Taemin doing?” The whole point of this quest to know more about Jongin was because of his growing romantic interest in him. In spite of the horrible situations Jongin had been put through while he lived in the courtesan house, he managed to always have a positive outlook on things, and it was attractive.

“I think he lives with a scholar now? I believe Minho bought his freedom from the house and now they’re married? I’m not sure though,” Jongin sighed as he leaned further into the touches. Before long Jongin’s head was in Kyungsoo’s lap, and after clearing his hands of soap, he traced Jongin’s nose then his lips.

“Well, that’s nice that things turned out well for the both of you.” Jongin hummed in response, and before he opened his eyes, Kyungsoo leaned down and kissed him.

“As much as I love you washing my hair, if you want to start something, we need to get out the bath,” Jongin mumbled reluctantly. It was obvious he didn’t want to stop anything and would’ve indulged Kyungsoo without a second thought if they hadn’t been in such an open space.

Kyungsoo watched as Jongin washed the soap out his hair and off his body in record time, barely letting him dry himself off when Jongin climbed out the water. Luhan would probably fuss seeing the wet footprints on the floor, but Jongin didn’t seem to care as he pulled Kyungsoo into their
shared bedroom and shut the door.

Someone had already drawn the curtains, so when Jongin laid Kyungsoo down on his back and climbed over him with a grin, there were no further distractions.

Jongin’s body and hair were still damp, but Kyungsoo didn’t care as the older man kissed him with such fervor that it nearly took his breath away.

“It feels like you’re trying to eat me,” Kyungsoo laughed, breathless when Jongin finally pulled away and tugged at the towel on his waist.

“Perhaps. Is that what you want me to do?” Things were running like something out of one of Minseok’s romance novels, but Kyungsoo didn’t care. The warm feeling of Jongin on top of him was nearly intoxicating.

“Yes,” Jongin’s earlier grin turned to something more sinister, and Kyungsoo let out an amused sound when his towel was pulled away. Jongin wasted no time touching every inch of him, his hands gripping and squeezing things Kyungsoo hadn’t realized were there.

Since moving into Joonmyun’s house and becoming accustomed to the food, he never really missed a meal, and it was clearly seen in what used to be sharp lines and hardness were now a bit rounded and soft. And it was just that softness that Jongin was admiring as he lightly bit the flesh on Kyungsoo’s thighs, murmuring about how soft he was.

It should’ve been embarrassing considering how toned and sculpted Jongin’s body was, but instead, there was just a strange feeling of pride and lust that mingled within him.

Unlike Joonmyun, Jongin’s touches weren’t gentle. He wasn’t rough either, but each press of his fingertips into Kyungsoo’s skin was purposeful like he had a plan that he’d been over several times.

When his hands finally landed on Kyungsoo’s cock, he pushed his hips into it and let out a breathy “Jongin.”

That day Kyungsoo learned that no one was more easily started than Jongin and that the kiss he’d given the man in the bathroom had been like lighting dry firewood. Jongin caught on fire much quicker than he anticipated but he was ready.

Ready for the fingers that previously been inside of him, stretching him, to wrap around his dick that was already leaking onto his stomach.

Ready for when Jongin moved forward and pressed flush against him, an indescribable look on his face as Kyungsoo wrapped his legs around his waist and silently goaded Jongin to go faster.

The pillows that were on Jongin’s bed ended up on the floor and by the time that Jongin encouraged Kyungsoo to climb onto him and ride him for all his was worth so were the sheets.

He started off slow because it wasn’t something he was confident in but after a few moments, Jongin gripped his waist and teased his arousal, whispering about how pretty it was and how cute his thighs were with the light red bite marks on his pale skin.

The muscles in his legs protested after a while and held onto Jongin’s shoulders, using them for more leverage.
“You’ve been so quiet. Is it because you don’t want to wake anyone?” Kyungsoo didn’t answer and instead bit his lower lip, stifling his moans as Jongin squeezed his ass and stroked him in tune with Kyungsoo’s movements.

Just as he was about to come, Jongin stopped stroking him and asked him to get back on his back. Kyungsoo nearly cried in frustration, but he climbed out of Jongin’s lap and lay down, unsure of where things were going to go at that moment.

His question died on his lips as Jongin settled between his thighs again and pushed back inside of him. After a few thrusts, Jongin started stroking him again, the pace noticeably slower than before.

“I want to see your face when you come.” Out of all the things Jongin had said and done to him during this whole thing, that statement was the thing that made him blush and look away. He nearly laughed at the irony, but when Jongin brushed past the spot inside of him, he choked on a laugh.

When Kyungsoo finally did come, he forced himself to keep his eyes open and watched as Jongin shut his eyes, bit his bottom lip and gripped Kyungsoo’s thighs tighter.

A few thrusts later, Jongin came with a moan that made a shiver travel up Kyungsoo’s damp, sweaty back. Unwillingly, he felt his body react, and his cock twitched between them, making Jongin grin.

“Good, I almost thought I’d have to warn you that this wasn’t going to be a quick encounter.” With a wide grin on his lips and the light sheen of sweat dusting Jongin’s forehead, Kyungsoo squinted to read Jongin's expression in the dim light from the single candle burning a few feet away.

That only lasted for a few moments before a strong gust of wind blew it out, and darkness engulfed the room. It didn’t matter though because as Jongin started to kiss and touch him again, he realized that he didn’t need to see.

Jongin guided his hands where he wanted them, and Kyungsoo couldn’t complain as the directions lead to nothing but pleasure for the both of them.

“Jongin, don’t you have something important to do?” Kyungsoo asked as Jongin balanced his chin on Kyungsoo’s shoulder. It was their turn to cook dinner, but since Kyungsoo was the better cook out of the two of them, it meant that once Jongin did all he could, he then took to bothering Kyungsoo who was doing the rest of the work.

Following the previous night, Jongin’s touches got a bit braver and bolder despite them being in the kitchen. Kyungsoo was, however, starting to realize that Jongin had no problem displaying his physical affection in front of others.

“If your hand slips any lower, I’m going to burn dinner, and then Luhan will yell at the both of us,” Jongin buried his face deeper into Kyungsoo’s shoulder and neck and placed open mouthed kisses on the skin his lips grazed. When Jongin finally let him go, Kyungsoo removed the large pot from heat and turned around, grinning at him.

Leaving Jongin leaning on one of the counters in the kitchen, Kyungsoo wandered to the nearest mirror and moved his the collar of his shirt, examining the blossoming red marks that littered his neck and upper (and lower) body.
Joonmyun was due back in a few days, and Kyungsoo wondered what the man would think of the marks that littered his body. As he’d said in the letters written in the past month, Joonmyun had promised that Kyungsoo would be the first person he spent time with after he returned.

“If you like them, I can give you more,” Jongin chuckled as he walked past Kyungsoo. Out of habit, Kyungsoo yelped and pulled his collar back into place. Despite knowing it was Jongin, his heart slammed in his chest, and he struggled to catch his breath.

So some instincts died hard.

In the few moments that it took for everything to happen, he saw Jongin’s smile replaced with a look akin to fear, then understanding. Immediately he apologized and reached for Kyungsoo’s hands, making direct eye contact with him as he spoke in a lower voice.

“Breathe Soo. Breathe.” As he did what Jongin directed, the tightness in his chest lessened, and his heart slowed. Jongin stayed with him, never letting go of his hands until he led Kyungsoo to the nearest seat.

“Are you okay? I didn’t mean to startle you. I’ll be more mindful,” his words were still slow and careful, and Kyungsoo found himself feeling dumb. It’d been a while since he’d been startled like that and he thought he’d overcome it.

While Jongin looked the picture of calm and level headed, his eyes told of his worry for him, and Kyungsoo felt a wave of shame crash down on him.

“I’m so sor—” Jongin held up his hand and shook his head, a frown on his face.

“No. You don’t ever have to apologize for something like that,” Jongin spoke, reaching for Kyungsoo’s hands again. Like Luhan had taught him all those years ago, he stroked Kyungsoo’s thumb.

When Taemin was brought to the courtesan house, he’d reacted much like Kyungsoo whenever someone snuck up on him, raised their voice or moved quickly in his direction. At first, Jongin had thought he was strange and refused to play or socialize with him because he didn’t want to scare the boy further, but Luhan sat him down one night and explained that that wasn’t the right reaction.

Since Taemin, at that time, was the only other person near Jongin’s age, it was obvious Luhan wanted them to be friends so he could have peers. Being nearly in his eighth year and having never really interacted with other children outside of the kids who’d hang around the town and market, Jongin himself was overjoyed when Taemin showed up.

He wasn’t much of a talker, but that didn’t deter him at first, and he relentlessly pursued trying to befriend the much frailer boy. When the boy snapped at him one day and demanded that Jongin leave him alone, he stopped and would instead watch Taemin from afar. One day, when they were mopping the floor in the tearoom and Taemin made the mistake of knocking down what Jongin knew to be an expensive vase, he stared at it with a terrified expression.

Jongin didn’t even get a chance to react before the Madame and Luhan came into the room a few moments later. The woman’s eyes immediately fell on the mess, and she seemed to sense the fear radiating off Taemin, so she got in his face and screamed at him. When he burst into tears, she reached out and took a firm hold of shoulder before she tossed him against the wall, continued to
After she had finished, she told Jongin to clean up the mess and left the room, shooting one last scathing glance at Taemin, who was sobbing and holding his shoulder.

Jongin’s first instinct had been to leave Taemin alone and do as he was told, but something kept drawing him to the boy. Instead of completely neglecting his order, he quickly cleaned up the shards of the vase and discarded them, then rushed over to Taemin. He tried to help him up, but when he reached for Taemin’s free hand, the boy shrank further into the corner.

“Don’t reach for him so suddenly.” Jongin immediately recognized Luhan’s voice and moved aside, watching as the man lowered his voice and made eye contact with Taemin before he reached out his hand to help the boy up. Unlike what Jongin expected, Taemin didn’t run away from Luhan and instead took the hand, getting up slowly and wiping at his eyes.

“Can you finish the rest of the room by yourself?” Still, in disbelief that the Madame had thrown Taemin around like a doll, Jongin found himself nodding, and he watched as Luhan picked Taemin up and carried him like a small child.

When night fell, and Taemin had fallen asleep, before Jongin went to bed, Luhan pulled him to the side and explained how he should approach Taemin. The boy hadn’t told him anything, but Luhan figured out what he could and worked from there with the help of some of the courtesans.

Following that incident, Taemin didn’t talk for nearly a years’ time. It hadn’t fazed the Madame since they were still far too young to take clients, but Jongin—along with Luhan—eventually coaxed words out the boy one by one.

“The Madame reminds me of my mother,” Taemin spoke the words offhandedly and went back to helping peel the boiled potatoes Luhan had sat in front of him a few minutes earlier. Jongin stopped placing the pieces of dough in the oven to stare at Luhan then at Taemin.

Seeing how it was the first full sentence he’d spoken in a while, it’d come as a shock to the both of them.

“I’m sorry if I seem strange. I just startle easily. Please be patient with me,” that made Luhan stop stirring and now both him and Jongin were staring at Taemin. Despite the weight of his words, Taemin’s face was impassive, and his fingers worked quickly to finish peeling.

Luhan’s eyebrows rose, and he glanced at Jongin before he softly chuckled “we don’t think you’re strange Taemin. In fact, we should be asking you to have patience with us.”

To a kid, not mentioning the fact that Taemin was speaking when he’d been silent for so long was dumb, but Jongin trusted that Luhan knew better. After all, he trusted the man’s judgment over everything and anyone else in the house since he’d raised him.

“Thank you,” Kyungsoo whispered once his heart rate had slowed down. Jongin nodded, and he leaned over, engulfing the other man in a soft hug. When he pulled away, he kissed Kyungsoo’s forehead and stood up.

“No problem, I understand.” When Kyungsoo looked at the expression on Jongin’s face, he could see that he did and it gave him a strange sense of ease. As a warm feeling washed over him, Kyungsoo smiled and also stood up.
“So, does Luhan want us to do anything special or particular for Joonmyun?” Jongin thought about it, and he shrugged. Luhan hadn’t said anything specific to him.

“Yes actually. I hadn’t gotten to you two because you were preoccupied last night, but we’re cooking his favorite curry and Minseok’s going to attempt to bake a cake. The day of his arrival, I need you two to head across town to pick up some spices for me. I just ran out of curry powder,” Luhan sighed as he stopped in front of them, his arms full of fresh laundry that’d been delivered to the house.

While it was beyond Kyungsoo how the man knew which clothes were for whom, Luhan kept talking as he ducked down the hall, into various rooms. Tao followed closely behind him, heading to the bathroom to put up clean towels.

“We all have to help cook tomorrow, so don’t go running off,” Tao’s statement was pointed at Jongin since Jongin was known to disappear when he was needed around the house. It’d happen two times too many, and now Luhan kept a sharp eye on him.

“Will do,” Jongin replied with a wink. Tao shot him a glare and disappeared into the bathroom.

As promised, Jongin was in the kitchen with the other nine men, preparing the elaborate dinner that Luhan had planned. They had no idea when Joonmyun would be in, but Luhan sent Jongin and Kyungsoo on another errand following their trip to get curry powder.

“How could you forget that we needed rice?” Kris asked, scratching his head as he stared into the empty pot where they usually stored the rice. Luhan huffed in frustration and shrugged before he made eye contact with Kyungsoo and Jongin, pointing towards the market.

Without further words, they slipped on their shoes again and headed outside.

“So did you have anything planned for Joonmyun coming back? You seemed close before he left,” Kyungsoo looked around and beckoned Jongin to lean lower.

“I want to give him a massage. I’ve been told I’m pretty good at it.” His previous master’s wife suffered from an ailment where her body ached following a childhood accident that nearly left her paralyzed, so he’d learned to give decent massages whenever the mistress demanded it.

Jongin could see the far away look on Kyungsoo’s face, so he cleared his throat “you’ll have to show me one day.” Kyungsoo’s eyes fell on him immediately, and he managed a smile as they approached the stall that sold rice.

In Joonmyun’s absence, Kris and Yixing had been overseeing the market, and since they were at home, the market was closing earlier than usual.

When Yoona saw them approach, she grinned and walked from behind the stall.

“Did you come pick up the rice Luhan reserved?” Jongin nodded, and she hurried to pull the large sack from the side of the stall. Despite the bag probably being heavy, she hefted it up and put it in Jongin’s waiting arms.

Kyungsoo reached in his pocket to give her money, and she refused it, choosing to wipe her hands on her apron.

“Joonmyun has done so much for my family and I. There’s no way I could take his money,”
Jongin thanked her and shifted the large bag in arms. The woman watched him and shook her head, telling them to welcome Joonmyun back when he arrived back in town.

As they walked back to the house, Kyungsoo glanced around as the few homes and empty stalls they passed.

“Joonmyun’s a good man, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he is,” Jongin answered back, almost immediately.

In the past few months that Kyungsoo had spent in the house and with Joonmyun, he realized just how big the man’s heart was.

It made him oddly thankful that such a man had an interest in him because he’d never seen himself like he was now: completely free to do whatever he wanted to do, whenever he wanted to do it.

As he’d thought so many times since arriving, Kyungsoo was sure some deity favored him for such the opportunity to be loved and appreciated to the extent that he was within Joonmyun’s home. He hadn’t expected anything like that since the death of his mother.

In fact, following her death, he’d spent most of his time wondering when he’d follow her and thinking that death was the only way to free him from something he’d been born into.

Now there he was, on his way back to one of the largest homes he’d ever seen and to people who had their own thoughts and passions that weren’t held back by anything.

He really couldn’t ask for more.

Luhan snatched the bag of rice from Jongin once they walked in the door and poured a bit into a pot to cook, muttering something about Joonmyun being home by nightfall.

Kyungsoo wasn’t sure how the man knew, but he didn’t question it and instead took to sweeping the dining area to stay out of Luhan’s way. According to Jongdae, Jongin, and Minseok, it was the best thing he could do because Luhan always got a bit frantic when Joonmyun came home from a trip.

Sure enough, by the time the sunset, Joonmyun walked through the door, lugging several bags. Kris and Chanyeol rushed to help him, and once he was in the house, he walked over to one of the chairs in the living room and sat down with a loud sigh.

The other men were far more experienced with Joonmyun following his trips, so Kyungsoo stood back and watched from the kitchen, pretending to be washing his hands.

After he had relaxed for a bit, he headed to the dining area and sat at the head of the table. Immediately, Luhan began to serve the food, ordering Yixing, Tao and Jongin to sit the food on various parts of the table and fill glasses with water and wine.

“You didn’t have to go through the trouble to make something elaborate,” Joonmyun commented when he saw the food being spread on the table. Despite his words, everyone could see how excited he was to eat, so all the other men grinned or played off their laughter.

One of Kyungsoo’s favorite things about Joonmyun was that he was usually transparent with his feelings and it made it easy to trust him.
Throughout dinner, Joonmyun didn’t speak much about his trip and instead asked about the market and about what everyone did in his absence. When he’d finished his second piece of cake, he excused himself from the table and told everyone good night before heading to his bedroom.

“You think there’s a reason that he didn’t talk about his trip?” Jongdae wondered out loud as he wiped down the table. Luhan shrugged and eyed the empty pot, noting in the back of his mind that everyone had enjoyed the curry and that he should make it again in the future.

“Joonmyun has his reasons,” was all he replied back.

Since it wasn’t their turn to clean the kitchen, following dinner, Kyungsoo and Jongin took quick baths and headed to Joonmyun’s room. It was obvious that the man was worn down from his trip, especially when one considered that he was approaching his 40th year.

That, however, didn’t mean that he wouldn’t welcome company. If any of the men wandered into his room, he would do his best to keep them company, knowing that they missed him.

The visit happened sooner than he thought when he heard a voice say, “how were your travels? We missed you here.” A small smile crept across Joonmyun’s face because he immediately figured out whom the voice belonged to.

When he turned around to greet Jongin, he was surprised to find Kyungsoo standing at the opposite side of the doorway across from Jongin.

So Luhan had been right, the two were together. In the few letters he’d gotten from the man whom he’d made the head of the house in his absence, Joonmyun knew that Jongin and Kyungsoo were a couple. Judging by the way Kyungsoo glanced between him and Jongin, their bond had deepened in his absence.

Jongin sure worked quickly when his interest was involved.

Joonmyun stood up from his desk and waved the both of them inside his room before walking over and embracing both of them.

“It was great, but traveling always makes me feel weary. My body feels heavy,” Joonmyun admitted, stepping back and admiring the pink flush that appeared on Kyungsoo’s cheeks from the contact.

“Well, you’re in luck. We’ve come to give you a massage. It was Kyungsoo’s idea.” At Jongin’s statement, Kyungsoo’s face flushed deeper, and he nodded, looking down at the ground.

He had no idea why he was suddenly so shy, but the weight of Joonmyun’s gaze made his stomach toss in excitement.

“That would be lovely actually,” As Joonmyun spoke, he saw Jongin poke Kyungsoo in the side, and Kyungsoo murmured for Joonmyun to take off his shirt and lay on the bed. Amused by the situation, Joonmyun followed the directions with a smile on his face.

The bed dipped on both sides of him, and two pairs of warm hands were on his body, rubbing at the various kinks he’d accumulated during his travels. If Jongin’s hand hadn’t been working out a particularly difficult knot in Joonmyun’s shoulder, he would’ve fallen asleep.

The hands that had been in the middle of his back drifted downward and moved to his lower back,
rousing a burning feeling in his stomach.

So that was the true intentions behind the massage.

An ambush.

Joonmyun chuckled into the pillow he was resting his head on and allowed them to continue, lifting his hips when another pair of hands—Jongin’s probably—patted his leg to slip his pants off.

Each man worked on one of Joonmyun’s legs, looking up at each other when they’d worked down to his ankles. The soft moans he’d been emitting paused and Joonmyun turned around, glancing at Jongin and Kyungsoo. When they looked back at him with expressions tinged with varying degrees of lust, he took a deep breath.

“Sit up,” the demand was soft, but Joonmyun followed it anyway, noticing then, that both Jongin and Kyungsoo were completely naked, like him.

Exactly when had they'd taken off their clothes?

“Scoot back and spread your legs.” The voice was different from the first command, but the tone was the same and Joonmyun complied, his cock twitching as his interest was further peaked.

His moaning picked back up when Kyungsoo settled between his legs and deftly massaged his inner thighs, concentrating on the knots he found in the flesh.

It amazed Kyungsoo how Joonmyun smiled and carried on like didn’t have many cares in the world, yet following his trip, his body was riddled with areas of stress. Hearing the man let out relaxed moans as he touched him made him grin as he put more pressure on the areas of tension he found. His grin only deepened when he saw how aroused Joonmyun was getting from their massage.

“Sit with your back to me and spread your legs,” Kyungsoo spoke, trying to make his voice sound as level as it had before because now, he could feel his own arousal stirring between his legs. Joonmyun complied with a moan and Kyungsoo settled between his legs, deftly massaging his inner thighs, getting closer and closer, to the place where he craved attention.

Joonmyun leaned into Jongin’s chest and closed his eyes, sighing when Kyungsoo dug into his muscles, and Jongin lightly kneaded his shoulders. Jongin looked over Joonmyun’s head and immediately caught Kyungsoo’s grin. He wasted no time returning it before he nodded and Kyungsoo reached and took Joonmyun’s dick into his mouth, making the man’s eyes snap open.

The wet, hot heat enveloped him, and he weakly bucked his hips into it, still caught by surprise. Kyungsoo moved with a surprising efficiency and only gagged a few times, bobbing his head in earnest.

Each time he gagged, Kyungsoo would allow Joonmyun to fall from his mouth, then he would trail his tongue up the shaft, stopping to suckle at the head. While Kyungsoo’s worked below his waist, Jongin’s hands traveled from his shoulders to his nipples, circling and pinching them as he kissed Joonmyun’s neck.

Not wanting to upset the balance of attention on his body, he pushed his hips up slightly, and Kyungsoo held onto his thighs, taking him down his throat with vigor. The wet, sloppy sounds he made only served to turn Joonmyun on and soon he was letting out small gasps. He barely heard Jongin’s whispers of sordid fantasies and scenarios about the things he wanted to with or to
Joonmyun and Kyungsoo.

His body was on fire, and Jongin only served to strengthen the fire as his kisses turned to soft bites on Joonmyun’s shoulders and neck, leaving faint red marks. Joonmyun was so torn before he felt Jongin’s kisses trailing from his neck to his cheek then to his lips, but he didn’t want to tear his gaze from Kyungsoo finally managing to angle nearly his entire length down his throat.

Jongin’s kisses eventually traveled up to the corner of Joonmyun’s lips until he moved a hand from the man’s nipple to turn Joonmyun’s chin so he could kiss the man’s lips. When he slipped his tongue into the older man’s mouth, he swallowed all of Joonmyun’s moans, as the man got lost in the soft licks and nips into his mouth.

Joonmyun broke the kiss when the heat around his dick went missing, and he turned his head to see what Kyungsoo was doing. He regretted it though because he managed to catch Kyungsoo wrapping his tongue around the head then dip his tongue in the head, prodding at the slit. In combination with the hands that had settled back on his chest, Joonmyun didn’t even get the chance to warn Kyungsoo before his hips stuttered.

Kyungsoo was caught by surprise when a splash of come landed on his lips. Instead of recoiling like Joonmyun or Jongin might’ve expected he would, Kyungsoo just kept stroking Joonmyun through his orgasm. Eventually, his lips were covered with white and Jongin, and Joonmyun watched as he cleaned his lips, licking until they were clean. Despite having just come, Joonmyun could already feel another wave of arousal washing over him, and he bit his lower lip.

Kyungsoo kept the surprises coming as he crawled between Joonmyun’s legs and straddled him, pulling him away from Jongin as he drew him into an opened mouth kiss. Behind him, Jongin took in a deep inhale and Joonmyun could feel the heavy erection poking him in his back, as well as the one that pressed into his abdomen as Kyungsoo pressed closer.

When they broke apart, Kyungsoo smiled.

“Did you enjoy your massage Master Joonmyun?” When Joonmyun started to remind Kyungsoo against calling him master, Kyungsoo stopped him halfway.

“I know you don’t want me to call you master, but forgive me. I’m still adjusting, just please give me time,” Joonmyun nodded with a smile and leaned back into Jongin’s chest, sighing.

Kyungsoo watched the man lie against Jongin, and he felt his heart thud in his chest as they locked eyes. Despite Kyungsoo knowing that he and Jongin had already drained what little energy Joonmyun had, to begin with, he could see that Joonmyun wanted to continue.

“Would it be too much if I asked you both to sleep with me tonight? I promise I’ll make it up to you both in the morning. I just need some rest and some time to recover. You both really know how to welcome someone home.”

Since Kyungsoo and Jongin had expected as much, they agreed to Joonmyun’s request and lay down on either side of him. Joonmyun fell off to sleep first, snoring quietly as he lay on Jongin’s chest and tangled his legs with Kyungsoo’s. Jongin was next and eventually after finding a comfortable position, Kyungsoo followed, his face buried in the nave of Joonmyun’s neck.

When Kyungsoo opened his eyes the next morning and turned to see if Joonmyun and Jongin were awake, he found himself watching as Joonmyun fell apart in Jongin’s hands.
Like a mirror image of the previous night, Joonmyun’s face was red as he squeezed his eyes shut and his mouth opened in desperate pants. After watching for a few moments, Kyungsoo scooted closer to them, running a hand down Joonmyun’s cheeks. His eyes opened, and Kyungsoo could tell he was trying to focus on him as the soft touches tickled his face.

Even though Joonmyun was preoccupied with Jongin, the kisses he returned to Kyungsoo were still gentle and focused.

It was already no secret that Joonmyun was good at multitasking, but now that Kyungsoo saw it first hand, he found it admirable.

The others always talked about Joonmyun’s attention to details involving others, especially when it came to more intimate matters. Jongdae frequently joked that Joonmyun was the ultimate giver. The second night Kyungsoo had ever spent with Joonmyun, the man had only allowed himself to come once though he’d made Kyungsoo come at least three times. That had been an experience in itself, and now that Joonmyun was dividing his attention between Kyungsoo and Jongin, the quality wasn’t affected.

Kyungsoo slowly moved away from Joonmyun and lightly bit his bottom lip before he trailed his kisses down the man’s chest. A strained moan came out of his mouth when his tongue flicked one of his nipples. When Kyungsoo realized that it was a garbled version of his name, a wave of satisfaction went through him.

He may not be an expert at pleasing like Jongin who’d had other experiences before meeting Joonmyun, but he was holding his own.

Jongin started to move a bit faster, and he made eye contact with Kyungsoo, motioning with his head at the bottle of oil in front of Joonmyun. Kyungsoo leaned up from Joonmyun’s body and grabbed it, pouring a bit into his hand before he inched even closer. He reached for both Joonmyun’s and his dick before fisting them both slowly. Jongin had stopped whispering and moved to lick the shell of Joonmyun’s ear, sending chills down the Joonmyun’s body.

“Le—let me ride him,” Jongin had been so close to coming, but he complied with Kyungsoo’s request and slowed down before he pulled away from Joonmyun. The hand that had previously been stroking them was now holding Joonmyun’s dick steady as Kyungsoo slowly sunk onto him. He planted his hands on Joonmyun’s chest, biting his lip hard enough to draw blood at the drag.

There was just enough where they both felt the stretch but not enough to be uncomfortable for either of them, and Joonmyun showed him

When he was sitting flush against Joonmyun, he paused, and Joonmyun waited until Kyungsoo gave him a soft nod. Joonmyun moved his hips a bit, and it immediately drew a cross between a whine and sigh from Kyungsoo. Propped up on the pillows, Joonmyun took the hands on his chest and moved them to his shoulders.

Seated off to the side, Jongin touched himself with loose, languid strokes. Nothing was more enjoyable than seeing Joonmyun and Kyungsoo both lost in pleasure. Sure, he was beautiful, but when he glanced at the scene in front of him, he kept going over how pretty Joonmyun was and Kyungsoo looked. Kyungsoo was the most attractive when his skin was damp with sweat, eyes closed in concentration and lips red from biting on them. Joonmyun, on the other hand, with his sleep and sex-tousled hair, pink lips from Kyungsoo’s biting kisses and his gaze locked on Kyungsoo’s face was a sight to behold as well. The image of the men together could’ve made Jongin come quickly, but he held out because he had other plans.
Kyungsoo’s grip on Joonmyun’s shoulders tightened when his heavy erection slid against the other man’s chest, the friction setting Kyungsoo’s senses aflame. Joonmyun noticed and reached between them, returning the favor of slow, measured strokes. In response, a choked whine left Kyungsoo’s mouth.

After another shiver had run down his back, something came across Kyungsoo, and he opened his eyes, turning to face Jongin.

“Continue with what you’re doing,” Jongin chuckled, his hand moving a bit faster when Kyungsoo moaned again.

“Oh, Ma-Joo-Joonmyun, I’m coming,” Kyungsoo warned, his knees straining as he quickened his pace. The man grunted in response, Kyungsoo immediately sensing that he was close to coming as well.

He spilled over Joonmyun’s fist soon after and gave a pained moan when the man kept stroking, his grip made slick by his release. Despite the sensory overload, Kyungsoo kept moving his hips and smiled when Joonmyun’s thrusts quickened, and the hand that was on Kyungsoo’s hip gripped him tighter.

Joonmyun spilled inside of Kyungsoo as he rotated his hips and even as he rested his head on Kyungsoo’s chest, Kyungsoo felt Joonmyun’s orgasm continue. Instead of hurrying to move, he stayed in placed and held onto Joonmyun’s shoulders.

When he recovered and leaned his head off Kyungsoo’s chest, he kissed him and nodded towards Jongin “we should probably get him off right?” Kyungsoo nodded and climbed off Joonmyun’s lap. He watched as Joonmyun moved towards Jongin and as he reached to help him get off, Jongin slapped his hand away.

“With you mouth,” immediately Joonmyun’s already flushed face turned bright red, and he nodded.

Kyungsoo watched the abject fascination as Joonmyun engulfed the head of Jongin’s dick into his mouth then took him deeper down his throat with practiced ease. The entire time he kept his gaze on Jongin, and before Kyungsoo even realized, Jongin was coming.

Instead of being embarrassed for coming so quickly, Jongin smiled again and reached for Joonmyun’s face, pulling him closer. In what looked like a kiss, he licked the traces of his release from Joonmyun’s lips.

“Are you all decent?” Luhan asked as he stuck his head in the room. Despite asking, he didn’t wait for an answer and came in any way, opening the curtains to let the sun in. “Today is a holiday, so the market is closed am I correct?” Joonmyun mumbled a tired confirmation “well then, breakfast is ready after you all get dressed.” With that, Kyungsoo roused from his nap and glanced at Luhan, then at Jongin and Joonmyun.

“Awake? Breakfast is ready,” Joonmyun sighed, running his hand through Kyungsoo’s hair. He blinked a few times and sat up, stretching.

When Luhan was sure everyone was awake and in some process of making themselves presentable for breakfast, he left and closed the door behind him.
All eyes were on them as walked into the dining area until Luhan cleared his throat, shooting a pointed look around the table.

“I hope you had a restful night Joonmyun,” Jongdae commented with a smirk after Joonmyun was —somewhat—comfortably seated at the head of the table. As usual, the man fought the flush that rose to his cheeks and nodded. Jongin, on the other hand, shot Jongdae a grin that screamed the opposite of Joonmyun’s words.

Jongdae let out a humored scoff, which turned into a cough when Luhan glanced at him.

A quiet lull fell over the table, so the person who hated sparking conversations the most decided to step in.

“I regret not going on this excursion with you. I heard you traded with a place up north? It would be an excellent escape from the heat,” Kris sighed, turning to briefly glare at the sun that was already high in the sky despite the relative youth of the day.

Despite having grown up accustomed to the ever-present scorching heat that always followed the monsoon season, Kyungsoo found himself silently agreeing. He briefly remembered the one time the master’s son had traveled up north and talked nonstop about the pleasant weather.

“Perhaps one day we can take a trip there and enjoy ourselves?” At the words, most of the men at the table perked up at the suggestion, and Joonmyun launched into rudimentary plans, rambling about accommodations he could probably secure for the possible trip.

While wishful, as Joonmyun usually was, the plans sounded like fun and Kyungsoo was glad for the concentration to be off of him and Jongin. He knew it was a temporary fix considering Jongdae’s outright and Baekhyun’s low-key nosy natures, but he took a temporary solace in it anyway.

What he thought to be temporary ended up being more long-term because whatever questions the other men had about Kyungsoo and Jongin spending the night with Joonmyun, were replaced with questions about the perspective trip.

Kyungsoo must’ve looked overly relieved because during the conversation over dessert because he’d zoned on and Jongin reached over to squeeze his hand in his lap. With a nod and wide eyes, which asked silently ‘you okay?’

With a small smile and nod from Kyungsoo, Jongin turned his attention back to the conversation but kept Kyungsoo’s hand within his in Kyungsoo’s lap.
“Why do you keep dragging trash from the streets in here Youngjae?” Sehun flinched at the volume and stepped back, nearly bumping into the guy he’d befriended over the past year.

“Jaebum please be more understanding. He’s been a big help to Yugyeom and I for a while now. At least give him a try,” Youngjae asked, his facial expression hard as he maintained eye contact with who Sehun assumed to be their leader of some type.

What Youngjae had said was the truth. He’d been aiding the two younger men in finding materials and procuring food for the group for nearly two months. In return, they offered their companionship and hot meals, two things Sehun hadn’t had in a long time.

Jaebum narrowed his eyes and gave Sehun another once over before he sat back in his seat with a defeated sigh “fine. Explain to him the initiation. Once he completes them, I’ll think about it.” Youngjae’s entire face lit up, and he turned towards Sehun, immediately launching into the detailed process he needed to carry out.

Honestly, he could’ve told Sehun to do anything, and he would’ve tried it. He was tired of living on the streets and fending for himself. With Youngjae’s group at least he’d have a place to sleep and people he could call his friends.

He wouldn’t have to be alone anymore.

“So, do you understand what you have to do?” Sehun gave an absentminded nod, and Youngjae elbowed him, a worried look on his face “this is serious Sehun. If you don’t do it right, Jaebum won’t let you stay with us.”

“Yeah, I understand. I’ll start today,” Sehun muttered, running his hands through his hair as he and Youngjae walked outside the abandoned building and into the busy street.

All he needed to do was steal food from different stalls for five days and carve the marking Youngjae had drawn in the dirt for him into the stalls. It didn’t sound hard. In fact, Sehun had been stealing since his older sister had disappeared in his 10th year. He wasn’t as experienced with stealing in bulk, but he’d figure it out.

The first complaint Joonmyun received about someone stealing a significant amount of produce in the market was nearly unbelievable.

After all, how could someone make off with nearly 20 tomatoes without someone noticing?

None of his vendors had ever lied to him, so he took to sending Kris to patrol the market a bit heavier than usual and kept an eye out himself.

When the second, third and fourth complaint came, Joonmyun’s resolve to catch the thief hardened and he set out to catch them for himself.

“Yesterday, we had upwards of ten oranges and almost twenty apples unaccounted for. I don’t understand how I haven’t noticed anyone stealing that much stuff, but I’m positive that whoever is stealing things from the other stalls came to my stall too. Even the markings match to the others. You know I don’t complain much, but I have three children to feed and someone stealing from me doesn’t help me do that,” Luna huffed, twisting her hands in her apron. Joonmyun gave her an
understanding nod and suggested that he look over Luna’s stall for the rest of the day, ensuring the
tired woman that he would catch the culprit.

Following Luna’s departure, the customers trickled in, most of them noting how it was strange to
see Joonmyun behind a stall. He laughed it off and did his best to sell what fruit the woman had
left from the morning and lunch rush.

After Seokjin, a bakery owner, came and bought three sacks of assorted fruit, business was spotty.
When things slowed down, a tall young man caught Joonmyun’s eye.

He was discreetly dressed, and if not for his tall height and broad shoulders, he would’ve looked
over him. The man lingered at a few stalls across from Joonmyun before moving to the one right
next to Luna’s stall. Each time he approached a stall, he would carry on a casual conversation with
the stall owner before he picked a vegetable or fruit and examined them, seemingly trying to pick a
ripe one.

However, the more Joonmyun stared at and watched him, the more suspicious he became.

Those suspicions proved right when Joonmyun saw the man expertly slip nearly ten onions into
the bag that was resting on his hip. He moved to the other side of the stall, and while Yesung, one
of the stall owners was speaking with another customer, he did the same thing with nearly ten
potatoes. Before the man left, he looked around, and when he caught Joonmyun’s stares, he walked
towards the edge of the market and disappeared into the sparse crowd near the clothing vendors.

Now that Joonmyun knew what the thief looked like, he resolved to stay in the market until
nightfall to make sure that the thief was also the person defacing the stalls.

“You remember that tall, broad shouldered young man that was at your stall but didn’t buy
anything?” Both men nodded, and Yesung grinned.

“Yes, how could I? He was very handsome,” at the words, Ryeowook shot Yesung an incredulous
look and elbowed him in the stomach, dangerously near his crotch. Yesung hunched over and held
his stomach, a smile still on his face as he apologized “but you’re still the most handsome of
course. I have eyes don’t I?” Ryeowook rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to Joonmyun.

“What about him?”

“He took quite a bit of your products, but don’t worry. I’m planning to catch him tonight,” from
there Joonmyun explained how the man had been carving similar symbols in the stalls he’d stolen
from and he suggested that the couple pack up their things and head home.
“Good luck and be safe,” Ryeowook warned as he and Yesung hefted their bags and started in the direction of their home.

The sun was setting on the horizon when Joonmyun finally caught sight of a large shadow then saw the young man from earlier looking around.

Since the market was cleared and everyone had gone home, Joonmyun had covered the stall as was typical but managed to cut a few holes in the thick fabric so he could see out.

With his breath held, he watched as the man approached Yesung and Ryeowook’s stall, wasting no time before he pulled out a small knife and began to carve something into the wood.

Now Joonmyun was sure he had his thief and vandal.

As quickly and quietly as he’d ever moved, he moved from underneath the coverings and approached the man from behind. He must’ve been so engrossed in his task that he failed to hear footsteps and only realized he’d been caught when Joonmyun wrapped his arms around his arms and torso and he dropped his knife.

They struggled for a few moments, Sehun trying to get free and Joonmyun trying to keep him restricted. He hadn’t had a plan further than that for when he apprehended the thief, so as he fought to keep him in one place, Joonmyun could already see he wasn’t on the winning side regarding strength.

“Let me go!” With that Sehun managed to break free and with his heart pounding in his chest, he picked up his knife and held it at Joonmyun “leave me alone, I don’t want to hurt you.” Joonmyun put his hands up and backed away from Sehun, but he didn’t allow how terrified he was to surface on his face.

“I’m sorry. I just want you to stop stealing from the people in the market. It’s hurting them.” The young man seemed to listen but didn’t make any moves to lower his knife, his hands shaking as his eyes darted around, looking for an escape route.

He studied Joonmyun again before he turned on his heels and began to run. He didn’t get too far before he ran into something—or someone—and fell onto his shoulder and his knife grazed his leg.

Sehun didn’t have time to think about the flash of pain and blood that began to spot his pants because someone pulled him to his feet and held him by his collar.

In the blink of an eye, his arms were tied behind his back, and he was being pushed back towards the older man he’d pointed his knife at.

“You could’ve told me you were going to stake out for the thief. You can’t do everything alone, Joonmyun.” Even in the dim sunlight, Sehun could see that the man who’d stopped him and tied him up was huge. At almost a head taller than him and with a strength Sehun had never witnessed, he was forced down onto his knees at the feet of the man.

“I’ll be more careful next time,” the man, presumably named Joonmyun, replied, looking at the taller man that was still holding him down, with a weary smile. When Joonmyun looked at him, his eyes narrowed and crossed his arms.

“What’s your name?” Sehun refused to answer. “Okay, fine. If you don’t want to talk to me, then you can talk to the authorities,” the large hand on his shoulder squeezed where he’d fallen, and
Sehun cringed. In combination with the pain from his shoulder, he also felt the sting from the shallow wound on his leg.

Joonmyun must’ve seen him react because he walked closer and told the man, apparently named Kris, to let go of his shoulder. Knowing what was good for him, Sehun stayed kneeled and lowered his head, feeling ashamed for not being able to complete his task without getting caught. Now Jaebum would never let him join them, and he’d have to keep fending for himself.

Against his will, the tears in the wells of his eyes rolled down his cheek, and he shut his eyes shut. He was so useless.

When Sehun opened his eyes, Joonmyun was knelt in front of him, examining his shoulder and the cut on his leg. The look he’d had when he asked for Sehun’s name was gone, and instead, he was looking at him with concern.

“Please tell me your name,” Joonmyun sighed, looking him right in his eyes.

“Sehun,” it was all he could manage with his throat still tight from his tears and the pity he felt for himself.

“Why were you stealing Sehun? Are you hungry?” Sehun shook his head. He hadn’t been hungry since meeting Youngjae and Yugyeom.

“This was part of an initiation,” a pause, “they told me if I could steal from and scratch up five stalls, they’d give me a place to sleep and hot meals” another pause “ple—please don’t report me, they’ll throw me in prison,” Sehun stuttered, his eyes filling with tears again.

“We could have you put to death,” Kris muttered, bending down to make direct eye contact with Sehun. “Joonmyun is a royal family member,” despite the look of disapproval that Joonmyun was casting on Kris, he continued to glare at Sehun.

The information sunk in and Sehun looked up, looking at Joonmyun’s face. He had never seen anyone in the royal family up close before, but the knowledge that he’d just threatened one with a knife and attempted to run away made his heart sink to the pit of his stomach.

Perhaps Joonmyun was too kind or because Sehun’s story had touched something deep inside of him, but he reached behind Sehun and untied his hands. There was also the fact that he was also quite handsome, so that also swayed Joonmyun’s judgment a little.

“There’s no need for all of that Kris,” Kris immediately stopped talking, but kept a watchful eye on Sehun as he massaged his wrists “I have a deal for you.”

That’s how Sehun ended up at the door of the owners whose stall he’d stolen from. He had no problem apologizing and giving back the food thanks to Joonmyun’s proposition, but it was still awkward.

“Do it,” Joonmyun said, softly urging him to knock on the door. It only took a few seconds before the door opened to a rather tired looking man. Sehun recognized him as the man that was in the stall when he stole the vegetables, so he cleared his throat and stood up straight.

“Yesung’s eyes widened in shock as he listened and when Sehun finished Yesung turned to Joonmyun.
“Odd punishment for a thief,” Yesung commented, a small smile on his face as he turned to Sehun “apology accepted. I hope you’re done stealing now?” Sehun nodded, and Yesung patted his arm before accepting Sehun’s bag with the onions and potatoes in it.

“Have a good night,” Yesung nodded at Joonmyun words and waved before he shut his door.

“See that wasn’t too hard right?” Sehun shrugged, and they kept walking until they approached another house. Instead of knocking on the door, Joonmyun lightly tapped the glass window and waited before a light illuminated the window and the door opened to reveal the woman he’d stolen fruit from the previous day.

“Sorry to disturb you and the triplets, but here’s the fruit I didn’t sell,” Joonmyun handed her the bag he’d been carrying, then he tapped Sehun’s shoulder, “and I caught the thief. He’s here to apologize.” Sehun nodded and said his spiel, earning a grin from her.

“Well thank you for apologizing. I forgive you, just don’t steal anymore okay? Some of us rely on our profits to feed our families,” just as she mentioned families, three identical children gathered around their mother, eager to see who was at the door.

“Momma, who’s that man?” The biggest of the children asked, pointing at Sehun. Instead of saying that he was the thief, she simply explained that he was from the market.

The explanation seemed to satisfy them, and they wandered back into the house, not sparing Sehun or anyone else another glance.

“Well, we don’t want to keep you guys up. Have a good night Luna,” the woman nodded, and Joonmyun waved before he turned around and started walking in the direction of his home with Kris by his side and Sehun lagging a little behind them in silence.

When they arrived at the house and Sehun got a good look around, he found himself in awe and entirely convinced that Joonmyun was indeed part of the royal family. He’d had a brief doubt, but in his position, he didn't have the right to voice it, plus he had other things to worry about.

Just what kind of person was Joonmyun?

Unlike when Joonmyun welcomed Kyungsao into his home, he personally showed Sehun where the bathroom was and found him some clean clothes to change into. All throughout his bath, Joonmyun sat in the corner with his back turned to give Sehun privacy yet also keep an eye on him with occasional glances.

While Joonmyun liked to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, the boy was a proven thief. He had to be sure he could be trusted in the house. All of which Sehun was aware of, so he couldn’t and wouldn’t complain. He just washed and dried off, then changed into the clothes Joonmyun handed to him.

“He’s so skinny,” Luhan commented as he watched Sehun walk into the kitchen with Joonmyun. Almost out of earshot, Sehun heard another man ask ‘where Joonmyun had gotten him’ like he was an object.

Again, he was in no position to get angry, so he bore it all with an impassive look on his face.

“Do you run a homeless shelter or something?” Sehun finally managed to ask, eyeing the few men that were lingering in the kitchen. Joonmyun shook his head and rolled up his sleeves, showing Sehun his bracelets. Immediately everything clicked, and he looked at the men again, taking in the
fact that all of them were wearing a single bangle that complimented or matched the bangles on Joonmyun’s arm.

“So you’re married to them all?”

Joonmyun grinned and began to fix two plates of food, one for himself and one for Sehun “there are more men around here, but the answer to your question is yes.”

He sat the warm food in front of Sehun and encouraged him to eat, and while Sehun stared at the food that was tempting, Joonmyun took the seat right across from him.

“Eat Sehun.” Not having to tell him twice, Sehun began shoving the food in his mouth and moaning about the rich taste that flooded his mouth. The food he’d stolen went directly to Jaebum, so he’d only get a small portion for his labor.

Needless to say, he was starving.

“Did you see the new guy scarf down all that food?” A tall man—nearly as tall as Kris—asked out loud. Sehun heard him but didn’t pay it much mind as he shoveled more food into his mouth, not even tasting it at that point.

He was so used to being hungry that the thought of being full was euphoric in a sense.

“At least he didn’t throw up like Kyungsoo…” The person whom Sehun guessed was Kyungsoo glared at the man who’d said the statement.

Tao’s words earned him a swift kick to the side, effectively making the man roll off the pallet of pillows. Tao huffed and stood up, brushing grass and dirt from his pants and bare torso. When he moved towards Kyungsoo, Jongin and Jongdae both sat up and blocked his path, both with smiles on their face. Kyungsoo made a teasing face from behind them, and Tao stuck his tongue out, returning the childish gesture.

Joonmyun cleared the table, and as he looked around the house and into the garden, his eyes landed on Tao. He tried to catch the man’s attention but failed because he was lying in the curve of Jongdae’s back, his eyes closed. He ended up having to catch Jongdae’s attention instead, and the man nudged Tao awake, pointing at Joonmyun. Begrudgingly, Tao got up and walked to the edge of the kitchen.

“Tao, this is your new roommate Sehun. I want you to show him to his quarters,” Tao nodded and gave Sehun a once over, admiring how handsome the man was. He was a bit on the skinnier side, but something told him that he and Sehun would be friends.

As Sehun followed Tao through the house, he stayed quiet and stared at everything, including the bathroom, which he’d already seen.

Everything within the large house was interesting, and Sehun could hardly believe his luck had landed him there. Perhaps things in his life were finally looking up?

“That, over there, is your bed. If you have any questions, you can ask me. Also, don’t go into Minseok and Yixing’s room unless you have permission,” Tao explained, pointing to a closed door across the hall.
“So what’s it like living with this guy, um, Joonmyun? Are you all married to him? Is he like in charge of all of you?” Sehun asked after he’d arranged the sheets on his bed and sat on it. The question piqued Tao’s attention, and he pulled the curtains on the window, turning towards Sehun.

Whenever Joonmyun introduced new people into the house, it was inevitable that they would ask that question, assuming Joonmyun hadn’t explained things already. He just hadn’t expected to have to answer it on Sehun’s first day.

“I wouldn’t say he’s in charge of us, rather that we listen to him when he gives advice. We’re all married to him, and some of the others have relationships amongst themselves; others include Joonmyun in their relationships,” Tao paused and tried to find the words to continue.

The way things operated around the house worked for everyone, but whenever any of them tried to put it into words, it never panned out well.

“So do I have to marry him?” Sehun asked, interrupting Tao’s thought process. Instead of being upset, Tao laughed and hunched his shoulders into a shrug.

“If you want. It’s up to you.” Sehun reclined onto his bed and thought about the answer, going over everything that had happened to him so far.

“Would you teach me what he likes? I don’t want to make myself a problem.” The question came out quiet, and as Tao blew out the candles in the room and climbed into his bed, he replied with a hum.

“Sure. Whenever you’re ready, but I’m a bit tired tonight.”

After that, silence fell over the room, and Sehun kept shifting, trying to find a comfortable position in the bed. He hadn’t slept on anything so soft in his life, so it nearly bordered on uncomfortable.

The moon was high in the sky when Sehun finally just passed out, tired from the day.

A few days later, when they were getting ready for bed, Sehun reminded Tao about his promise. Tao’s eyes widened in recollection, and he nodded, asking Sehun to sit with him on his bed.

“Joonmyun probably hasn’t gotten the chance to talk to you, so I’ll just tell you,” Sehun nodded as he listened closely “you’re not obligated to do anything for Joonmyun or any one else in this house, especially when it comes to sexual matters. Besides helping with chores and being civil, there are no expectations. We are not Joonmyun concubines, and neither are you.”

Sehun chewed on his bottom lip as he gave the explanation some thought.

“Before anything starts, how old are you?” Sehun racked his brain and thought about it, raising fingers as he tried to count. When he realized that Tao was staring at him, he felt a wave of embarrassment hit him.

He probably looked like an idiot.

“Oh, I’m in my 19th almost 20th year, sorry. It’s just been some time since I even thought about my birthday. I kind of lost track,” a distant emotion bubbled up from the pit of Tao’s stomach, and he shook his head, dismissing Sehun’s apology.

“Not it’s okay, it’s not your fault. Trust me when I say, I’ve been there.” The bitter expression on Tao’s face changed to a happier one, and he seemed to focus on the task at hand.
Despite his initial reservations, Sehun eventually realized how things went on. For one, Joonmyun was happier than anyone he’d ever seen. Besides the days when the man would come home exhausted from running errands or doing business for his market, Sehun rarely ever saw him without a smile on his face. The same went for the men within the house as well.

He’d been in the house for nearly two weeks, yet whenever he found himself in a room with Luhan, the man’s eyes always seemed to be on him when he wasn’t looking.

Sehun knew for a fact that Joonmyun hadn’t told any of the other men—sans Kris—that he’d been caught stealing, so he could only guess that Kris had told Luhan privately. It would certainly explain why whenever Luhan smiled at him, the gesture never quite reached his eyes.

One day, after Sehun helped clean up after dinner and dealt with Luhan’s eyes glued on him as he was putting away the eating utensils, he finally decided he’d had enough.

“You know, I was only stealing because I was hungry,” the words caught Luhan by surprise, and he flinched. Sehun spoke to the other men in the house, even Kris, yet in the time he’d been there, he hadn’t directly spoken to Luhan since their initial introduction.

“Ah,” Luhan opened his mouth like he was going to speak again but decided against it. That made Sehun angrier.

“It’d be good if you would stop treating me like a thief. I know you’re always watching me like you’re afraid I’ll steal something again.” As soon as Sehun finished speaking, he felt his heart squeeze in his chest.

He wasn’t sure how old the man was, but as he widened his eyes and sported a regretful expression, Sehun almost felt bad for calling the man out.

“You know what? You’re right Sehun. You have my apologies,” Luhan commented after a pregnant pause. It was short, straight to the point and he could see that the man was genuinely sorry, but it felt like there was something more that Luhan wanted to say.

It was frustrating because Sehun knew that the man’s words weren’t as restricted with anyone else, yet when he was in Sehun’s presence, he had so much less to say.

Before he could repress it, Sehun leaned his head back with a groan and ran his hands through his hair, pulling at the strands lightly “you speak to me like I’m a stranger on the street when I’ve been living with you for nearly a month! I understand I didn’t come to this house in the best of terms, but please know that I did what I had to do to survive. Believe me when I say that after getting to know Joonmyun, I regret pointing a knife at him. I really do.”

Kris must’ve heard Sehun raise his voice because within a few seconds, he was in he kitchen and his gaze was set on Sehun. With his carefully blank eyes and eyebrows arched in questioning, Sehun shut his mouth and took a deep breath, attempting to calm his nerves.

When he finally looked at Luhan’s face, he saw the man’s eyes widen with unshed tears. The instant shift of mood in the room caught him off guard, and he stood in a confused silence until Luhan cleared his throat.

“Listen Sehun, I understand, but I have to ask that you give me time. When Kris told me he’d stopped you from almost hurting Joonmyun, I went to Joonmyun’s room that same night and told him to throw you out,” Luhan stopped for a moment to wipe at his eyes “I’ve been in love with
Now Sehun felt like utter shit, and he started to apologize, but Luhan stopped him.

“Please,” a short pause, “don’t apologize. You are right, and I shouldn’t treat you differently or coldly. As the second oldest person in the house after Joonmyun, I should’ve been a bit more mature about things, but I let my emotions sway me. I love all the men in this house in some way and wish for nothing but their happiness and safety. That’s why,” Luhan’s voice broke and cleared his throat, wiping at his face again.

Sehun’s stomach twisted, and he looked down at the ground, realizing that he hadn’t tried to see things from Luhan’s point of view. As the person who was essentially the head of the house after Joonmyun, of course hearing the situation that Kris had walked upon hadn’t been great.

“I’ll try my best though. Just give me some more time. All of the other boys aren’t aware of the situation, and we’ll keep it that way.” Luhan finally continued, putting a small smile on his face. With a nod and brief eye contact, Sehun left the kitchen and headed to his bedroom.

“They’re just weary. They don’t mean too much by it. After all, would you befriend a person that threatened to hurt your husband or wife?” Tao sighed, running his hands through Sehun’s hair. Despite the calming gesture, tears continued to drip down his cheeks.

It’d been so long since Sehun had cried so now that the gates were open, they were pouring and had been since he’d closed the door to the room and draped himself across Tao’s lap.

The older man had become a confidant, friend and lover of the sorts to Sehun. They hadn’t done anything sexual, but sometimes he found himself crawling into bed with Tao or engaging the man in lingering kisses that always teased at something more but never went much further.

Instead of talking more, Tao just wiped the tears from Sehun’s cheeks and placed a soft kiss on his lips.

“Just like everything, as he said, it will take time,” and Tao was right. Sehun would just have to wait.

Until then, Tao pulled Sehun tightly against his body, and they drifted off to sleep.

The first time they’d kissed, Sehun fumbled around, and Tao had to hold him in place. After the third time, Sehun caught on and held Tao by his neck, delving deeper into his mouth with his tongue.

Tao should’ve been amazed at how fast of a learner Sehun was, but his mind had drifted below his waist, and he placed his hands on his lap so Sehun wouldn’t see his arousal.

It’d been a little while since Tao had visited with Joonmyun and even longer since he and Jongdae had fooled around, so Sehun’s eager kisses affected him.

“Like that?” Sehun asked, a smirk on his face. It was obvious that he knew he was getting good, so Tao merely shrugged, and Sehun leaned back in, outdoing the previous kiss with another.

That was when Tao decided that he hated the cocky expression Sehun wore on his face in moments like that. He was far too handsome, and once he’d gained weight, he was perfect in Tao’s eyes.
During some of their kisses, he found himself squeezing Sehun’s thigh or wrapping his hands around the other man’s waist, eager to get him closer. Sehun welcomed it and leaned into the shape of Tao’s body, grabbing or touching at anything within reach.

Once when he’d reached for Tao’s hands and locked their fingers together, Tao could’ve sworn his heart would leap out his chest and up his throat. That was also the day that Sehun took it upon himself to touch Tao further.

Curious touches from Sehun and experienced ones from Tao eventually amounted to both of them coming on Sehun’s fist. Tao would’ve usually been embarrassed to come so quickly, but since Sehun came at nearly the same time, he found himself not minding.

“Wow,” was all Sehun said as he subtly wiped his hand on his pants. Tao answered with a nod and smile before he tucked himself back in his pants and stood up on unsteady legs.

It really had been a while for him, and despite the lazy mood that fell over the room, he pulled Sehun up, and they went to bathe.

A week after the confrontation with Luhan, Sehun found himself on the way to Joonmyun’s bedroom for a conversation.

The entire time he walked across the house, he wondered what exactly the man wanted to speak about.

Did Luhan or Kris tell him about the conversation in the kitchen? Was he going to ask Sehun how he was adjusting to life in the house?

Would he ask him how long he planned on staying in the house?

He knew better than even to ponder if Joonmyun was just inviting him into his bed due to multiple discussions he’d had with Tao.

The man didn’t expect anything from him, besides getting along with the other men in the house and doing his share of chores. So far, Sehun could say he was doing fine with both expectations. He helped out where he could, helped out around the market, partially out of boredom and partially out of penance for his previous thefts.

Just as he’d guessed, Joonmyun started their conversation by asking Sehun how he was enjoying things in the house.

“I haven’t had a steady place to live in a long time, so everything’s better than I could’ve ever expected for someone like me,” unintentionally his voice trailed off, and he looked at the floor. Joonmyun caught this and pressed his chin up with his hands.

“Don’t talk about yourself like you’re nothing. Everyone is something,” Joonmyun sighed, his face serious as he spoke, “and everyone deserves to have expectations for their lives.”

The man’s words of encouragement shouldn’t have struck him as deeply as they did, but there was Sehun, his eyes burning and ready to leak for the second time in one month.

Living in Joonmyun’s home had softened him and as he tried to will the tightness in his throat away, he couldn’t decide if he liked or hated it.

“Everything fine. I’m glad I share a room with Tao. He’s very friendly,” as Sehun spoke the words,
a flashback of the mutual handjobs from the night before flooded into his mind. It was already too late to stop himself from displaying his embarrassment, so instead, he looked at the floor again and cursed the heat he felt travel to his cheeks, neck, and ears.

As Sehun was learning, Joonmyun was quite perceptive, so he knew the man had caught his reaction after speaking.

“Well,” there was humor in Joonmyun’s voice “that’s good to hear. The other men speak pretty highly of you as well. Kris tells me that you run errands for the vendors in the market?” Sehun nodded with a smile.

“I love sitting around all day as much as the next man, but sometimes I need something to do. On rare days, I can even get Tao to come with me,” at that revelation of information, Joonmyun’s mouth opened in faux shock, and he sat back further in his chair.


Tao was, after all, hard to convince to do anything that wasn’t his assigned chores, sleeping, and lounging or playing around. When he’d managed to get the man to help carry some crates to a nearby food vendor, the other men made it a point to clap and stare in astonishment as Tao huffed behind him when they’d come home. The fact that Tao had even gotten his pants and sandals dirty was amazing.

Even Luhan had given him a genuine smile and a little extra cake at dinner.

“Well sounds like you’re fitting in. You look like you’ve had a long day, so I won’t keep you much longer. Have a good night.” There was relief in Joonmyun voice, and Sehun visibly saw the man relax as he smiled.

Before Sehun walked out the room, he wished Joonmyun a good night as well and took him by surprise by kissing him lightly on the lips. Joonmyun stuttered another good night before he stared at Sehun, dumbfounded.

That was how Sehun left him.

The good night kiss must’ve sparked interest in Joonmyun because whenever Sehun found himself talking to the older man, he was staring directly at his face, like he wasn’t even listening, just looking.

Tao happened to catch a glimpse one day, and he poked Sehun in the side with an impish grin on his face. If there was anything Tao was an expert on, it was in matters of attraction. He didn’t explicitly tell Sehun anything because he knew that if he did, he’d have to come to terms with his increased interest in Sehun.

After the first time their innocent kisses turned to something more passionate, then bypassed kissing all together in favor of getting each other off, Tao began to ask Sehun questions at night.

Sometimes they would lie in their beds and talk about things that’d happened in the day at the house or sort through the gossip Sehun had heard in the market, but one day Tao found himself asking about Sehun’s previous life.

He didn’t want to seem too prying, so he started off by telling Sehun the story of how he ended up with Joonmyun. Sehun had originally been half asleep, but as Tao spoke, he gradually woke up until he decided to get out his bed and sit on the edge of Tao’s.
“So you were one of those pets?”

“You know about them?” Tao asked as he too found himself sitting up.

“Yeah,” Sehun said with a nod, his eyes studying Tao in the small amount of light that poured in through the window. He’d never been one to want to know about other people’s business, but finding out more about Tao was fascinating.

When he’d been fending for himself, he would occasionally see the expensive and gorgeous humans following men and women closely in the market or into shops. They’d always been striking to him due to their expensive clothes and jewelry that was far gaudier than their owners, but as he listened to Tao’s story, he shivered, suddenly finding those memories creepy.

“One of the reasons why I admire and love Joonmyun so much is because he’s set in his beliefs and won’t let anyone change his mind. For instance, he hates servants. That’s why we have chores.” Sehun always wondered why someone who was supposed to be a prince didn’t have any servants in a house so large and with so many people.

“You’ve told me so much, I feel like I should tell you something,” Sehun mumbled more to himself than to Tao.

“If you want,” Tao shrugged, making the sheets shuffle around him.

Sehun had been keeping to himself for so long that it felt weird to tell Tao about his life.

“Where to start? I don’t remember my parents at all. The only person I do remember is my older sister Soohyun, or at least I think she was my biological sister. When I was in my 10th year, she disappeared and left behind some money. I looked for her for years until I gave up.” Sehun scooted closer to Tao as he spoke and Tao welcomed him with open arms “when I finally gave up, I fell in with a pack of kids around my age and a bit older. We separated after the town we were in figured out that we were stealing food and the authorities tried to hunt us down. I came with one kid from there, but he found a job with a traveling merchant. I wasn’t old enough to go with them, so I was left behind. When Joonmyun caught me, I was trying to get in with another group of people, and they wanted me to steal something from the market each day, but instead of a few things, it was much more.” The sigh he let out after he finished was loud, and he moved to get underneath Tao’s sheets.

“That’s it?”

“Yeah, you know the rest already.” Just as Sehun had thought, his life was relatively uneventful and to tell the entire story of it took him a short moment or two.


That was the cycle his life had taken, and as he listened to Tao’s heartbeat slow down, Sehun hoped that he’d never have to suffer through the cycle again.

“There’s been something that I’ve been wondering for a while,” Sehun wondered out loud. He was mostly talking to Tao, but he took no efforts to lower his voice, “how does one have sex with a man?” The question made Tao choke on his wine, and the entire table went quiet.

It was a rare night where Joonmyun and Kris were taking care of late business, so they ate without them.
Oddly, Tao was thankful for it that night.

The first one to break the silence was Jongdae because he burst into an obnoxious laughter that eventually spread across the table, sans for Sehun and Tao.

Despite their humor, Tao knew they would leave the explanation—and possible demonstration—to Tao since Sehun was his ‘best friend’ as Kris had called him earlier that day.

After dinner, Tao pulled Sehun to their room and shut the door behind them.

“This whole time we’ve been—you haven’t been?” He couldn’t even express complete thoughts as he tried to process how naïve or inexperienced Sehun was. At his 19th year, he knew all the ways to please both men and women to the utmost extent, yet Tao realized that not everyone was taught as he was.

“I’d meant to ask, but I didn’t know how to. I’m sorry it slipped out at dinner like that,” Sehun looked down, flustered, “I like what we do. I just want to know more.”

After the five minutes it took for Tao to digest what Sehun said, rather than put himself through having to put things into words, he decided it would be best to show him.

His eyes must’ve glazed over as he thought through how he would do things, because a few seconds later, Sehun was waving a hand in front of his face.

“Tao, are you okay? Do you not want to? If you don’t, I’d understand,” Tao blinked a few more times and shook his head.

“Instead of telling you, would me showing you be okay? I’m not sure I could put everything in words,” Sehun raised one of his eyebrows and scowled playfully at Tao.

“That’s what I suggested a moment ago. You really were gone,” Tao’s eyes widened, and he examined Sehun’s facial expression to confirm that he was telling the truth.

Judging from how relaxed he looked, Tao could tell that he was, so he took a deep breath “how about you start off and then I’ll lead from there?”

When Sehun shot him the infamous grin, Tao knew he’d have his work cut out for him.

Several dozen kisses and tentative touches later, Sehun was just like what Tao sometimes dreamed of, completely naked and lying on his back, looking up at him with an expression Tao hadn’t quite seen before.

He’d trailed his mouth up from Sehun’s heavy, leaking arousal back to his red, kiss-swollen lips. Not wanting him to get impatient, Tao’s hands took the place of his mouth, and he stroked Sehun slowly, making the man arch his back into the touches.

They’d always stopped shortly after something like this, but that night was different. Everything Sehun had done (or not done) told—screamed—at him to keep going, so he did.

Tao gently spread Sehun’s legs and reached up to retrieve the small bottle of oil by Sehun’s head, quickly making his fingers slick with the substance.

He took his time teasing around Sehun’s entrance at first, softly reminding him to relax, “do you trust me?” The question was simple, and it was soft, but Sehun gave him a hard nod because he did
trust the older man.

When he pushed a finger inside, Sehun’s thighs bowed on instinct, and his legs shook at the odd sensation. He did his best to relax, and in return, the first thrust of Tao’s index finger sent a jolt up through his body. Sehun’s heart sped up, and he moaned as he pushed down on Tao’s hand, anxious to feel the jolt once again.

Sehun didn’t have to wait too long because Tao took the hint and added another finger, then scissored them, pulling a hiss from Sehun. Another jolt.

“Just keep relaxing, you’re doing fine.” Tao noticed that Sehun had softened a bit and tightened his grip around his dick. In response, Sehun let out a choked moan and bucked into the touch.

It was an odd feeling being so torn between whether Sehun wanted to feel the jolt again or fucking into Tao’s fist, but Sehun figured he would try to do both. Either way, his toes were digging into the sheets, and his hands were gripping the pillow underneath his head.

By the time Tao had worked three fingers into him and had him so hard, he was leaking clear liquid onto Tao’s fist, Sehun pushed back on Tao’s fingers again “D-do-done yet? I’m rea-dy.” His mouth opened in a silent moan when Tao crooked his fingers and pressed into that spot one last time, Sehun’s entire body arching off the bed. When Tao stilled him again, he removed his fingers and Sehun grabbed his wrist, not wanting the feeling to end.

“I promise you’ll like this better than my fingers,” Tao promised, leaning down to kiss Sehun. He let go of Tao’s wrists and buried his hands in the man’s long hair, pulling when their tongues wrapped around each other.

“Please,” Sehun begged into Tao’s mouth.

In the four months that Tao had known Sehun, he’d seen an array of the man’s emotions and facial expressions. The whiny and surprisingly spoiled and needy Sehun he was seeing underneath him now, was something completely different. He almost wanted to drag it out, but when he gave Sehun’s dick a squeeze, he arched against him again, and tears welled up in his eyes as Sehun’s voice cracked.

He was so helpless and distressed, so Tao decided to give in.

Before he pushed inside Sehun, he told him to take a breath, which the man hurriedly did. He would’ve laughed when Sehun shot him a look of impatience, but he just moved forward and pressed inside. The tightness around him made him want to move faster, but for Sehun’s sake, he kept things slow and steady until he got used to it.

The desperate whines had stopped, and now Sehun was just holding onto Tao’s shoulders with a tight grip, loud huffs of air leaving his mouth with each forward thrust.

Tao knew he’d found the spot again when Sehun dug his nails into his shoulders and whimpered. The sound had caught him off guard, but it made him feel like he was doing something good.

He moved slow, but when he felt the tightness in the pit of his stomach, he started to stroke Sehun faster. Sehun had given up forming words and was just making sounds and moaning louder than before. Tao moved his hips faster, and when Sehun’s nails dug deeper into his skin, he figured that Sehun was close to coming.

Right before Sehun came, Tao brushed his prostate and sent shivers racking through Sehun’s body,
making his orgasm feel like his entire body was on fire. When he shot white onto his chest and Tao’s hand, Tao’s name was on his lips, as a moan of satisfaction.

The spent look on Sehun’s face plus the tightness closing around Tao’s dick made him follow soon after, coming harder than he had in a while.

For the moment, Tao rested his forehead on Sehun’s shoulder and kissed his collarbones. Sehun’s arms wrapped around Tao and held him close, not even caring that all of Tao’s weight was resting on top of him.

“How was that?” Tao murmured from the junction of Sehun’s shoulder.

Sehun ran a hand through his hair and chuckled a bit “different than I pictured, but it was nice.”

The next morning after they’d eaten breakfast, it was Sehun and Tao’s turn to clean the kitchen. They stood side by side, working efficiently in silence until Sehun dropped a fork. With a grimace at the dull pain that shot up his back, he bent down to picked it up.

He tried to hide it, but Tao saw him anyway and laughed, “that’s one of the few drawbacks.” Sehun nodded and stood up straight, rubbing his lower back with a smile.

He really didn’t mind. If it was a promise that he could feel that way every time, what was a minor twinge in his back?

After they’d finished, they moved to the garden and sprawled on the pillows. With Tao nestled firmly against Sehun, they both almost drifted off to sleep. Tao’s heavy eyelids drooped, and he pouted, wanting to continue running his hands through Sehun’s short brown hair, but he was too tired from the night before.

Tao finally did fall asleep, his fingers still deep in Sehun’s hair. Instead of moving his hand, Sehun left them there and moved closer, kissing the tip of Tao’s nose.

“I think I love you,” Tao mumbled, his eyes closed as he slept. The confession came as a surprise and Sehun’s eyes widened; however, he didn’t press. Instead, he softly smiled at him.

Love.

What a foreign concept. Perhaps the deep adoration and trust he’d developed for the man over the past few months were that.

Luhan leaned against the pillar in the living room, watching the scene between Tao and Sehun play out with Kris behind him, resting his chin atop his head.

“You think they fell in love that fast?” Kris wondered.

Luhan shrugged in response, “maybe, I mean only four or five months have passed. I guess you can’t put a time limit on love though.” Kris hummed in agreement.

“You know, I think I fell for you the moment I saw you, so who am I to judge?”
As the summer season came to a close and the nights started to get cooler, Sehun set out into the market for some warmer clothes.

While Joonmyun had offered to have Luhan or Minseok help him pick out clothes, Sehun decided that he would be fine by himself. After all, he’d never bought his own clothes and wanted to try it.

He came to regret that decision, however, when he realized he didn’t know anything about clothes. He only knew that he needed something that was wide enough for his shoulders and long enough for his legs.

That was it.

Most of the vendors in the market couldn’t help him because he knew nothing about measurements and he debated going back home to beg Minseok to go with him since Luhan wasn’t exactly one of his best friends.

The last stall he checked proved to be the same as the others and as he was about to walk away, he heard a voice, he could’ve sworn was Joonmyun’s, say “you really should’ve brought Minseok or Luhan.”

When Sehun turned around, he realized he was right and greeted the man with a smile. Sehun knew he needed to stop being so stubborn.

“Yeah,” was all he could say and Joonmyun returned the smile, though his was much brighter by comparison.

Since Sehun’s spontaneous kiss, each time they made eye contact, Joonmyun would look away with a light flush.

To think someone as inexperienced as himself could make Joonmyun blush humored Sehun. Despite the fact that the man balanced and maintained relationships with the other ten men in his house, Joonmyun was still so easily flustered.

“If you give me a few moments, I’ll tell Kris to take care of things in my stead. I can help you look,” the suggestion put a smile on Sehun’s face, and he agreed to wait. After thanking the stall owner—whom was noticeably less gruff when he realized that Sehun knew Joonmyun—Sehun wandered around to the jewelry and trinket stalls.

He was about to walk towards the hot food stalls when a particular booth caught his eye. Boasting the same bracelets all the men, sans for himself, wore in the house, the man beckoned him over.

“Are you one of Joonmyun’s additions?” The women asked, her eyes scanning Sehun’s body before grinning at him. Because Sehun wasn’t quite sure what to say, he gave her an uneasy nod and held out his arm when she asked.

Before could blink, she had him measured and was sliding a bracelet onto his wrist for size.

When it was in place, he glanced at it and admired the gold of the bracelet and the contrast against his skin. He’d never owned any jewelry in his life, so the lightness of the weight surprised him.

Gold had always seemed like it’d be heavier, considering all that it symbolized, but Sehun found it
to be light. When he touched the material, it was thin enough to bend, and he carefully slid it off his wrist, handing it back to the woman.

“Thank you, but we’re not married,” the woman nodded in understanding and apologized, sliding the bangle back into the ornate box where it’d come from. Sehun would’ve walked away from the stall, but the woman picked up a different bracelet and held it in front of her.

“Try this one instead.” Sehun held out his hand, and the woman handed him a golden bracelet utterly different from the bangles on her table. Just as gold as the previous piece, the band was thicker and looked like tight loops of gold wrapped loosely in an even thinner piece of gold.

It was the most beautiful piece of jewelry he’d ever seen that lacked the brilliance of gems.

Sehun slid it on to his opposite wrist and glanced at it before he reached to slip it back off. A hand stopped him, and when he glanced at the owner of the hand, he saw Joonmyun.

“You want that?” Sehun declined the offer hurriedly, insisting that there was no reason why he needed what he presumed to be an expensive bracelet. “It doesn’t matter Sehun. Do you want it?” Joonmyun looked serious as he spoke and Sehun couldn’t help as he nodded, chewing on his bottom lip as he stared at his wrist.

The woman greeted Joonmyun before he asked her how much and he paid without blinking, his cheeks nearly glowing when he smiled at Sehun’s reaction to the gift.

“You wouldn’t be trying to buy me, would you?” His words were offhanded, but Joonmyun knew he meant what he’d said. Sehun hadn’t even bothered to censor his language the way he did when they were at the house.

“Only if you’re looking to sell,” Joonmyun joked, earning a lighthearted laugh from Sehun. His eyes arched into a crescent shape and he covered his mouth, muffling the sounds.

Walking back to the house with Joonmyun was an experience Sehun thoroughly enjoyed as the man pointed to random things and told him stories, including puns and jokes that were purposefully outdated.

“Do your husbands know you’re a funny man?”

“Yes, most of them think my jokes are bad. I think I’m quite funny though,” Sehun looked at him with mock surprise, and Joonmyun bumped his leg with his bag lightly.

They strolled into the courtyard and were met with a few pairs of eyes, most of them humored to see Joonmyun come in with Sehun. It was much earlier than the time he normally came home from the market and Kris usually accompanied him.

Since the ordeal with Sehun, Kris had been much more insistent on making sure the man didn’t put himself in any situations that had the potential to be dangerous.

Baekhyun, who’d been roped into helping at a nearby school for the kids in the area by Chanyeol and Luna, was the first to comment on the unusual sight “you’re back early. Did the kid get in trouble again?”

The comment should’ve annoyed him, but Sehun had enjoyed his time with Joonmyun so there wasn’t much that could bring down his mood. Instead of responding, he shrugged and walked to
his and Tao’s room with his bag of new clothes.

As it turned out, Joonmyun was knowledgeable in various topics, one of them being fashion. He spent most of his time reassuring Sehun that he only knew what he’d observed in the market. The few times he saw any of his family members—a topic Sehun was genuinely interested about but wasn’t quite ready to pry—and what the men in the house wore, namely Minseok, Baekhyun, Luhan, and Tao.

Together, they picked out nearly six entire outfits, as well as some clothing the woman at the store called ‘house-wear,’ that he could either sleep in or walk around the house in. All of it was a foreign concept to him, so he’d just taken it and shown it to Joonmyun, who then nodded and told the clerk to add it to their pile.

While they browsed nearly four shops, Sehun found himself talking about anything and everything as Joonmyun listened. He even talked about his and Tao’s relationship, which was met with a warm reaction as Joonmyun was overjoyed that Sehun found a companion in the house.

It’d been surreal, yet it also gave him a glimpse into Joonmyun’s relationships with the men in the house. As Tao had reiterated on several occasions, Joonmyun was very flexible when it came to love and romantic feelings.

Part of Sehun wanted to attribute that to his upbringing now that he could match Joonmyun’s face to the rumors he’d heard over the past few years, considering that Joonmyun’s own mother had been the King’s favorite concubine. At the same time, he knew that while there were plenty of tales of royals falling in love with those lower-born than themselves, Sehun found himself baffled that Joonmyun didn’t follow the same obligation.

While his preferences were well known, logically speaking, it didn’t have to stop him, but from what Tao had also mentioned in passing, Joonmyun had no desire to rule the throne despite being the oldest male child of his father.

In all honesty, Sehun couldn’t see Joonmyun being stern yet benevolent king, which is what he’d always heard old men say the country needed.

Politics—something Sehun knew very little about—aside, Joonmyun was a fascinating man, and the more Sehun found out, the more he found himself becoming fond of him.

“These are nice,” Tao sighed, thumbing over the soft and silky fabrics of the new clothes laid out on Sehun’s bed. “Joonmyun bought all this for you?”

Sehun rolled his eyes “what, you think I stole it?” Tao shook his head with an apologetic grin. While Sehun wasn’t sensitive to comments from the other men, he always cared about what Tao had to say.

“No, I meant like, did you go shopping together? I heard Luhan has to drag him to shop with him, yet he went so easily with you,” Sehun thought about the explanation and decided that it made sense.

“That explains why the shop owners were surprised and confused when he showed up. One man even asked me if Luhan and Minseok were sick.” That made Tao smile.
If it wasn’t something to do with shopping for food or dealing with business in the market, Joonmyun wanted no part in other shopping. As a result, the miscellaneous shopping usually fell on Luhan or Minseok. Sometimes he might assist them, but Tao preferred lounging around to walking in the hot, often dry weather.

“You know, Joonmyun’s a really good listener,” Sehun sighed, folding up his new clothes the way Luhan had shown him when he’d first come into the house.

“Yeah, it’s one of his charms, you know besides be kindhearted and trusting. You wouldn’t be falling in love with Joonmyun would you?” Sehun had been in the middle of folding a sleeve when he lost the grip on his tunic, and it fell to the ground. Tao gave him a knowing smile, and Sehun quickly turned his face to hide the light blush.

“Love? Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve only known Joonmyun for almost a year. Love takes several years…” even as Sehun spoke the words, he didn’t believe them. The feeling that stirred up in the pit of his stomach each time the man smiled at him said otherwise.

Sehun didn’t say anything else and finished putting up his clothes before he walked out the room, in search for something else to do that didn’t require talking about feelings he may or may not have.

As he left, he felt Tao’s eyes burn into his back, and he knew the conversation wasn’t anywhere near being done.

They would definitely revisit it.

And they did revisit it, several weeks later when Sehun found himself blushing each time Joonmyun so much as referred to him by his name or smiled in his direction.

“You hold feelings for him, admit it.” The comment came in the middle of the night after they’d bathed and were preparing for bed. For a moment, it was quiet as Sehun tried to think of something to say.

When he came up blank, he just sighed.

“Sounds like a confession if I’ve ever heard one,” Tao chuckled, nudging Sehun softly.

Tao was right.

“Whatever happened to that reject?” Jaebum asked as he watched Youngjae help Jinyoung cook their spoils for the day. Youngjae glared at the older man from the corner of his eye and pouted, concentrating on the pot of boiling potatoes.

“He got caught by Joonmyun. Last I heard, the man took him in,” at Jinyoung’s explanation, Jaebum narrowed his eyes and kicked the nearest thing to him, a water pitcher.

The object smashed into the wall over Youngjae’s head and broke apart, raining clay shards near the doorway. The room fell into silence, and Youngjae stared harder into the pot, not wanting to make eye contact and further Jaebum’s anger.

“That filthy beggar is living the high life now,” he snarled, pacing the room and kicking up the
dust that covered almost every surface in the abandoned building where they were squatting. He kept muttering, but after a certain point, he was incomprehensible.

When Jaebum finally wandered out the room to take his frustration out elsewhere, Youngjae looked up at Jinyoung.

“So he’s definitely okay?” he was talking about Sehun.

“Your friend is okay. He’s definitely doing better than the seven of us.”

“Thieving within the market has started back up again, though this time, the culprit or culprits haven’t been identified or caught,” Joonmyun sighed, looking up from his books with a slightly pained look on his face.

“Well we know it wasn’t Sehun,” Yixing replied after he leaned over Joonmyun’s shoulder to double check the numbers. Kris cracked a smile but the leveling expression Joonmyun glanced at the both of them after cut the joke at its roots.

“Didn’t he say something about a band of kids that were like him that night we caught him?” Joonmyun thought about it and nodded, recalling what he’d mentioned about the reason why he’d been stealing so much food.

“They made him steal enough for everyone as an initiation. They would need to continue eating right?” The two other men agreed, and Joonmyun leaned further into his chair, trying to think of a solution.

“How about we call it a night? We can figure out the details later.” Despite the fact that Joonmyun wanted to solve the problem quickly, he agreed with Yixing because fatigue was starting to cloud his thoughts and the numbers in Kris’ neat writing were starting to blend together.

He rose from his seat and stretched, then walked over to the other men and kissed them each goodnight before retreating to his own room. Joonmyun found himself surprised when he saw Sehun standing outside his door, looking anxious in the dim light.

“Is something wrong Sehun?” For a silent moment, Sehun didn’t answer and wrung his hands together, looking down at the floor. The sight itself made something in Joonmyun’s stomach turn because he’d grown accustomed to the smiling and playful expression that was usually painted the younger man’s face.

“I—um—I overheard what you guys were talking about in the library, and you’re right. It’s Jaebum and his crew that’s stealing from the market, though they don’t usually steal jewelry and stuff, only food. I can’t imagine why they would have a need,” Sehun rambled, the words falling from his mouth like water.

He paused and looked up at Joonmyun, his eyes wide as the man guided him into his bedroom and sat him down on the nearest couch.

“So, tell me about this Jaebum then,” Joonmyun sighed, running a calming hand down Sehun’s face. Immediately, heat followed his hand, and Sehun’s cheek turned pink.

Joonmyun probably should’ve gone to sleep so he could deal with the increase of theft, was spent
talking to Sehun and getting to the root of the problem he hadn’t even thought of: People were stealing because they were hungry and had no means to buy the things they needed.

That needed to change.

“Are you suggesting that we set up something like an eatery but free of charge?”

“Yes, exactly. Our country is prosperous, and there’s no reason any of our citizens should be hungry,” Joonmyun explained, putting the finishing touches on a few letters he’d written to the food vendors of the market.

“This looks extensive. You’ll probably have to consult with Prince Joonki,” Yixing sighed, smoothing down the edges of the paper. The older man nodded and stood up, gathering the letters.

“Sehun brought that fact to my attention last night. I sent a messenger earlier this morning,” as he spoke a heavy knock sounded on the door, and Tao let them in.

“Is Prince Joonmyun in attendance?” Joonmyun shuffled towards the door and gave the man a slight bow before he accepted the response.

After a quick scan of the words, he grinned and rolled the paper back up, giving the messenger a nod “tell him I would love to accompany him to dinner. I would assume the rest of my family is welcomed as well?” The messenger gave a curt nod and bowed deeply before he retreated back out the open door.

“So I take it that Prince Joonki is willing to give you audience?” Baekhyun asked, having heard most of the details about their plan. With a soft nod and swift footsteps toward his bedroom, he announced that everyone should prepare themselves for a visit to the palace.

It was Chanyeol, Sehun and Kyungsoo’s first time going to the palace, so when Joonmyun caught a glimpse of Kyungsoo’s large eyes widening even further as Sehun shot Tao a panicked look, he reached to calm down the two men. Chanyeol, on the other hand, looked unfazed.

“Does going to the palace not make you feel nervous?” Kyungsoo asked when he noticed Chanyeol’s—noticeable—lack of reaction at the news. He shrugged and headed towards the kitchen, sitting at the table.

“Not really. I mean, I guess being around all those fancy royal people will be a change.” His words were accompanied another shrug and leaned his elbows on the table, staring at Baekhyun.

“Instead of staring at me, how about you go bathe, and then I can help you find clothes?” Instead of complaining or bartering, like he usually did with Luhan, Minseok or Yixing, Chanyeol got up with a huff and started toward the bathroom.

Sehun felt sick to his stomach as they walked through the long hallways, presumably to what Joonmyun called the throne room. Countless pairs of eyes followed them as the servants of the palace caught glimpses of them.

He’d been told that Joonmyun was a hot topic among the people of the palace and those of high birth, but to actually see how they lowered their gaze in respect to Joonmyun yet as soon as he walked passed them, they’d whisper, was startling.

In combination with the twisting of his stomach, he also felt tinges of anger. No matter how
controversial his family history was, Joonmyun was the last person that deserved to be disrespected. Especially after all the things he’d done for Sehun, for all the men that currently walked behind or beside him.

“It looks like he’s added more since the last time he came. Didn’t think he was the greedy type,” a cook whispered as Sehun trailed behind the rest of the group. For a moment he stopped and looked up, glaring at the older woman. She flinched and took a step further into the doorway where she was standing, shocked by Sehun’s reaction.

She, however, made no moves to apologize and instead, looked at the ground with a bashful expression.

For someone who was nearly Joonmyun’s age, he found himself even angrier that adults had nothing better to do than gossip.

“Try not to get so worked up about it. I’ve learned that if Joonmyun doesn’t let it bother him, then it’s better to follow his lead,” Tao murmured, keeping his voice low as he touched Sehun’s shoulder. The man had fallen back behind the group to retrieve him.

“He just,” Sehun paused for a breath, feeling his throat constrict with emotion “he’s done nothing but be kind to everyone,” Tao gave a nod of agreement and urged Sehun to walk away from the woman, who looked terrified at the close sight of Tao.

It was times like that that Sehun remembered that Tao looked threatening or dangerous to the average person. With his resting expression, perpetual dark circles, and generous height, he could understand why.

With one last look in the direction of the cook, Sehun and Tao jogged to catch up with the rest of the men. They were standing outside the throne room and just as they’d caught up, the doors swung open, and a voice announced their arrival.

As Luhan had carefully directed, Sehun bowed his head, paying respects to the royal family members.

To his surprise, Prince Joonki rose from his seat and walked over, gathering Joonmyun into his arms.

“You’re getting older. I see that hasn’t stopped you from acquiring more husbands though,” Joonki joked with a wide grin. Sehun could see that the actions weren’t that surprising to Joonmyun because the man accepted the light banter with a smile.

Joonki seemed like he wanted to carry on his conversation, but Joonmyun softly reminded him that he also needed to address the reason why he’d come.

“I’ve been informed that you’ve come with a request?” King Joonseok asked, his voice catching the attention of both his sons.

“Yes. It has come to my attention that the amount of thefts in the markets around the kingdom has gone up in the past few years. Not only does this hurt local business owners, but it also reflects badly on the kingdom.” The words sounded so much more eloquent and sophisticated when Joonmyun said it and Sehun found himself thoughtlessly nodding along.

Joonmyun then directed attention to him, “and I don’t want to take credit for this idea alone. My hus—friend Sehun helped me come to a solution. What if we work towards feeding the hungry? There can be a place much like a restaurant but free for those in need of hot meals.” Sehun
could’ve sworn his heart stopped beating when the King made eye contact with him and held it, nodding as his fingers stroked the ample amount of white hair on his chin.

“And you think this will curb the theft?” The man was speaking directly to Sehun at this point, and Sehun was too stunned to speak. Instead, he nodded and averted his gaze, settling on the King’s shoes. Joonmyun immediately saw his discomfort and tried to alleviate it, drawing the attention back to himself.

“You should use your voice boy. The King is addressing you,” Yoobin spoke, her tone indignant as she glanced at Sehun with narrowed eyes.

“Forgive him, he’s young, and a bit shy,” Joonmyun’s words came out even and tight, his face impassive as he spoke to the queen.

It was no secret that he wasn’t fond of Yoobin—nor was she fond of him—but Sehun had never seen an interaction so tense and formal, especially coming from Joonmyun who usually spoke gently and casually.

So preoccupied with examining the scene in front of him, Sehun failed to notice that everyone else sans him, Joonmyun and Joonki, had been ushered to a seat. When he finally did notice, he restrained himself from quickly walking out the middle of the floor, sitting behind someone taller than himself, like Kris or Chanyeol, and shrinking into himself.

“Enough.” The King sighed, waving his hand. Immediately, Joonmyun and the Queen stopped their strange form of bickering, and both got quiet. “I’ll grant you permission and also secure the payment for something like this. I look forward to hearing about the decrease of theft in the market.”

Sehun could hardly believe what he’d heard, so he tried harder to focus on exactly what Joonmyun said in response. For some reason, it sounded like nothing but business and money jargon, so he tuned out and allowed a court attendant to escort him to the seating by the other men.

As soon as he sat down, Tao reached for his hand and squeezed it, mouthing the words “you did it.”

“That was so much easier than I thought it’d be,” Sehun admitted, closing his eyes as Tao combed his long fingers through Sehun’s hair.

After Joonmyun ironed out further details with his father and others, they were invited to stay for dinner and spend the night. Despite Joonmyun’s discomfort of being in the palace again, he agreed for Kyungsoo, Sehun, Tao and Chanyeol’s sake since they’d never formally been inside.

During dinner, Joonki threw all formalities aside and did his best to get to know the men he didn’t recognize and re-familiarize himself with those he did.

Later on, as he was bathing with the rest of the men in the what had to be the biggest bathing room he’d ever seen, he heard Luhan speaking with a few of the other men. Apparently, despite the fact that Joonki only saw Joonmyun and everyone else every few years, he kept impressive tabs on his brother’s husbands and even their hobbies. For instance, for Minseok’s birthday the previous year before he’d arrived, Joonki had sent several sacks of exotic coffee that he’d acquired from various, far off places.

“Well, Joonmyun is a persuasive man, so I’m not surprised. You did well though. I would’ve
pissed where I stood if King Joonseok addressed me directly.” Tao’s words made Sehun smile because whether he wanted to admit it or not, he’d nearly done the same thing.

They’d all been offered separate rooms, but all the men decided to pair up like their arrangements at home. The only difference with the sleeping arrangements was that Jongdae chose to stay in Joonmyun’s quarters.

“It’s weird having people serve us like that,” Sehun mentioned after a few moments of silence. It earned a chuckle, and while Tao didn’t say anything, Sehun figured that the man was thinking about his previous life.

He’d talked about it with Sehun before, and whether he wanted to or not, Sehun recalled every detail he’d been told, including how Tao used to have servants at his beck and call.

“If this is too much, let me know, but do you miss it? Your life before I mean?”

“Not really. While I definitely wouldn’t mind having some help around the house to lessen our chores, I don’t miss anything else. Being my own person is something that can’t be compared to before,” Tao paused, and he looked down at Sehun with a smile “plus, I found you, so I definitely wouldn’t trade that.”

Following their departure from the palace the next morning, Sehun found himself unable to sit still once they got home.

With the final okay and promise to lend help and funds from Prince Joonki and King Joonseok, they had so many things they needed to happen, and Sehun wanted to get them done as soon as possible. The thought of how many people probably went without a proper meal for several days made his chest ache.

While those same feelings had been somewhat dangerous for him when he lived on the streets, now that he had a roof over his head and the means to help, they were his driving force.

“The palace was amazing. I’ve heard things about it from people, but I’ve never seen it with my own eyes,” Kyungsoo gushed, his cheeks flushing when Jongin leaned down and whispered something in his ear with a smirk. If Sehun knew Jongin like he assumed he did, then the man had probably said something crude. Jongdae seemed to think as much too because his smirk matched Jongin’s and he nudged him in the side.

“Next time you want to explore the royal gardens, be more discreet,” Jongdae spoke, his message coming clear across the dinner table.

The statement made Kyungsoo’s face turn bright red, and he looked down into his food while Jongin flinched, Kyungsoo obviously kicking him underneath the table.

Sehun could guess what’d happened, especially when Joonmyun’s usually impassive facial expression turned into something more flustered. He’d definitely been a part of what Jongdae had seen or heard or had witnessed, as well.

“That’s an enough you two,” Luhan chuckled, waving his hand. The topic came to an abrupt stop, though there were curious whispered inquiries about what’d happened in detail. Sehun, however, didn’t ask because Jongdae couldn’t hold water, much less something he’d seen. It’d probably
come out when they gathered together to drink.

When he looked at Tao, the man was trying hard to restrain a knowing grin. So, it seemed he’d be finding out about the situation much sooner than he’d initially thought.

“I’m going for a walk if anyone asks for me,” Sehun announced, standing up from his bed with a flourish and slipping on his sandals. Tao gave him a sleepy nod, and Sehun walked out, heading to the empty market.

Except that the market wasn’t as empty as he’d thought because the first thing he saw was someone crouching underneath a covered stall. They’d made the mistake of not completely covering themselves, so it was easy to spot them.

“Hey, um what are you doing?” Sehun asked, walking over and lifting the edge of the burlap covering. When it was up, it revealed a kid with a panicked expression on his face and an arm full of bread. He was breathing rapidly, and as he made eye contact with Sehun, he dropped the bread and started to tear up.

“I’m sorry for stealing from you guys, my sister and I were just so hungry,” the boy sobbed, his hands immediately going to rub at his eyes. The whole thing startled Sehun, and he stepped back, putting his hands up, trying to reassure the kid that he wasn’t going to do anything to him.

When the boy calmed down, Sehun crouched next to him and picked up the pieces of bread, dusting them off. They were probably still edible, especially when he considered all the things he’d eaten in the past that didn’t look anywhere near as appetizing.

“What’s your name? Also, where did you steal this from?”

“Jisung and from that building over there. If you aren’t with them, who are you?” Sehun looked in the direction that Jisung had pointed in and swallowed, immediately recognizing Jaebum’s den. Knowing how ruthless the older man could be, he knew there were people probably hunting the kid down.

“My name’s Sehun. I live in the house at the end of the road.” At first, the boy looked confused, then his eyes lit up in recognition.

“So you live with the Prince?” Sehun nodded and looked around again, confirming that they were still alone and that the boy hadn’t been spotted yet. Instead of doing what any sensible person might’ve done, Sehun crawled underneath the stall with the kid and pulled down the covering correctly.

“We have to give that bread back. They’re going to do bad things to you if they catch you,” Jisung started to snuffle in the darkness and Sehun reached, aiming to reach the kid’s shoulder “we need to be quiet. I’ll help you, but I need you to be quiet.”

As soon as Jisung stopped sniffling, Sehun heard footsteps and voices close to them. One voice he could recognize was Youngjae’s, and he reminded Jisung to be quiet before he crawled out with the bread. Quietly, he slipped away from the stall and walked in the direction of Youngjae and what looked like Jinyoung.

“What are you guys doing out here?” Sehun asked as nonchalantly as he could. His stomach flipped as Jinyoung gave him a once over then called Youngjae over.
“I could ask you the same Sehun,” Youngjae sighed, his eyes falling on the bread in Sehun’s hand. “Also, where’d you get that?”

Sehun shrugged “some kid shoved it in my hand and ran away. I was just out for a night walk to clear my head.” While Youngjae looked convinced, Jinyoung wasn’t as trustful.

“Is that kid worth going after? You think Jaebum will be satisfied if we just bring back the food?” Youngjae asked Jinyoung, nodding towards the bread in Sehun’s hand.

“I guess it should be fine,” Jinyoung mumbled, scratching his head. Youngjae took the bread from Sehun’s hands and thanked him.

“I think he learned his lesson. He looked terrified,” Sehun added for effect. Jinyoung gave a satisfied ‘hmph’ and started off in the direction of the abandoned building.

When he was out of earshot, Sehun cleared his throat.

“You know where the kid is don’t you?” Sehun nodded.

“You won’t turn him into Jaebum will you?” Youngjae shook his head and promised that he wouldn’t.

“I just want to warn him. Jaebum considers stealing from us punishable by death or by one hell of a beating,” as Youngjae spoke, he sounded tired.

It was something Sehun had noticed back when he was trying to get in with them. Most of the drastic things Jaebum called for, Youngjae hated doing. The younger man just seemed to do them out of necessity for survival.

When they lifted up the covering of the stall, Jisung was seated underneath it, pulling at the strands of his hair. He must’ve recognized Youngjae from when he’d stolen the bread because, within a few seconds, he was on his feet and hiding behind Sehun, his grip tight on Sehun’s waist.

“He’s here to get me!” Sehun unwound Jisung’s arms from his waist and crouched down, reassuring him that Youngjae only wanted to talk. Fat tears slipped down the boy's sallow cheeks, and he nodded, still keeping close to Sehun.

“Please don’t steal anything from us again okay? Jaebum is dangerous, and something really bad would’ve happened to you if someone else had caught you. If you’re hungry, just ask me okay?” Jisung nodded, and he let go of Sehun.

“If you tell me where you and sister are sleeping, I’ll bring you some food,” Sehun added. The little boy looked at the both of them for a long time then he grabbed Sehun’s hand, pulling him.

Youngjae watched them walk for a moment then jogged behind, following in silence.

After a few moments, they arrived at a small, partially charred house. What used to be the living room and other rooms were covered entirely in the black and gray dust. The section of the house where Jisung had lead them were the only rooms seemingly untouched by the dust, yet barely habitable.

In what looked like it used to be a bedroom, a little girl was sitting on a pile of blankets, tracing her fingers in the dust on the floor. She must’ve heard their footsteps because she looked up and stared at Sehun and Youngjae, then looked at her brother.
“Who are they?”

“They’re gonna get us some food,” at the mention of food, her eyes lit up, and she stood up, walking over to them. She examined them from head to toe and seemed to decide that they were good people.

“How much food are you misters gonna bring?”

“However much you want,” Sehun promised, kneeling down to get somewhat on her eye level. Youngjae watched and talked to Jisung, asking him how old they were and how long they’d been on their own.

“I’m in my eighth year, and she’s in her fifth. Our mother died two years ago in the house fire,” Youngjae’s eyes widened, and he looked around the house.

From what both he and Sehun could see, the room was probably the best in the house and that everything inside it was salvaged from the fire or hadn’t been damaged at all.

After talking with Jisung and his sister, Hana, for a little while longer, Sehun told them he would bring back food. With some unspoken agreement, Youngjae accompanied him back home.

On the way back, Sehun tried to make small talk but Youngjae seemed disinterested and tired, so he kept quiet.

When Sehun opened the door, Youngjae immediately began looking around, nearly tripping over a chair as he tried to look at everything. He was so stunned that Sehun couldn’t help but laugh.

“My reaction was like that my first time in here too,” Youngjae didn’t even look at Sehun as he spoke and kept glancing around, his jaw slack “but trust me when I say that the palace is even greater than this. Joonmyun’s taste seems rather simple when you really look at it.” That made Youngjae look, and he just shook his head, a tired smile crossing his features.

“You really struck gold Sehun. I’m glad you’re somewhere where you’re happy,” despite the fact that it’d been well over a year since they’d last talked, Youngjae hadn’t changed and was still genuinely kind.

Sehun guessed that some people really didn’t let their surroundings affect their personality, even someone who’d been through what Youngjae had.

After they’d spoken the first few times and Youngjae found out how Sehun had come to their area, he finally felt comfortable enough to tell Sehun his story, not that it was very long.

“I never did have parents you know or siblings. It’s just always been me, and for the first few years of my life, I stayed at an orphanage. I didn’t find out till later, but the place where I was, was selling kids to be those fancy pet slaves they have? It really scared me, especially since the ladies would always comment how pretty I was. The night before they came to recruit, I ran away. I was in my 10th year then. For a while, I wandered around the town and did small jobs here or there, made a little money to get food. I met Jaebum, Jinyoung, Yi Eun and Jackson when I was in my 12th year, and they invited me to join them. By the time I was my 17th year, there were seven of us, and we’d grown together like a family. Sure, Jaebum has anger issues and can get out of hand, but Jinyoung is always there to calm him down. Also, the kids make everything worth it.”
After that conversation, Sehun made it his business to learn about the others in their group, memorizing their names until he had them committed to memory. He’d always had a need to be useful, so whenever Youngjae or Jinyoung or Yi Eun asked him for help, he jumped at the chance. He’d even taken to living close by their home.

It helped to ease the aching loneliness that settled into his bones since his friend from his previous group left him to become a traveling merchant.

A little over two months went by before Jaebum decided to give Sehun a chance to be a true part of their group and Sehun nearly jumped at the opportunity to feel like he belonged somewhere again.

“You know, Jaebum really hates it that you managed to end up with such a nice life,” Youngjae sighed as Sehun took a large basket from the cabinet. He sat it on the counter and looked at Youngjae, his face twisted into a confused expression.

“Why?”

“Just because you live here,” Youngjae waved his hand around “in total luxury, and we live in—well where we live.” Sehun could understand the envy, but he also could picture Jaebum taking his emotions out on Youngjae the others.

“He doesn’t…hurt you? Does he?” that made the younger man’s eyes widen and screwed up his lips tight, looking elsewhere.

“He’s never hit me, no.” Sehun couldn’t tell if Youngjae was telling the truth or not, but he let it go. If Youngjae wanted him to leave the issue as it was, then he would too, out of respect for him.

Once the basket was filled with countless pieces of bread, fruit, cook meat from their meal earlier that night and a few baked treats they’d had left from Minseok’s sudden interest in sweets, Sehun hoisted the basket to leave.

“Where are you going with all that food?” The unexpected voice scared Sehun, and he nearly dropped the basket.

Dressed comfortably in what had to be one of Chanyeol’s shirts, Baekhyun leaned on the doorway with a lamp in his hand.

“While I was out on a walk, I met some hungry kids,” Sehun described. As he spoke, Baekhyun’s expression went from disbelief to slight understanding.

“Fair enough. Who is this?” He pointed to Youngjae and Sehun explained that he came along to help gather the food. Baekhyun regarded the both of them with one last look before he yawned and walked in the direction of the library.

Sehun took that as the moment to leave and readjusted his grip on the basket before he and Youngjae left the house.

It wasn’t till they were down the street that Youngjae inquired about who the man was.

“That’s Baekhyun. He’s one of Joonmyun’s husbands,” to explain further would’ve been pointless because Youngjae probably had no clue about much that went on inside the house.
When they made it back to Jisung and Hana’s home, they let themselves in and wandered to the room where Jisung first brought them.

The boy had joined his sister on the pallet of blankets and was talking to her when they walked in. Carefully, Sehun sat the basket down and told them to eat to their heart’s content.

Both of the children looked at Sehun like he’d said something in a foreign tongue until Youngjae repeated Sehun’s request. At Youngjae’s words, the children began to eat like it was their last chance.

Once they’d finished, leaving only a few pieces of bread and some fruits, Sehun took them out the basket and wrapped them in a cloth he’d put at the bottom of the basket.

“Thank you so much Sehun,” Jisung said, his sister echoing his words, though she also hiccupped, signaling just how full she was.

“No problem, just please don’t steal any more food,” Sehun sighed, patting both children on the head before he picked up the empty basket and handed them the wrapped up food. “I have to get home, my friends are probably worried about me.” Hana and Jisung both looked sad like they didn’t want him to leave, but Jisung stood up and escorted both Sehun and Youngjae out the house, thanking them profusely.

“It’s always sad to see such young kids on their own and hungry,” Youngjae admitted, stretching before he started off in the direction of his home. Sehun agreed, and he said goodbye before carrying the basket back.

When he got home, he was exhausted and put up the basket, then went to his room and climbed into his bed, immediately slipping off to sleep.

That night he dreamed of a world where he’d been able to join Youngjae and the others.

Baekhyun didn’t mention what he’d seen the night before, but Sehun wanted to make sure that there was no misunderstanding, especially when Luhan noticed the missing food while he prepared breakfast.

It happened to be Sehun’s turn to help Luhan, so the moment the older man noticed, Sehun immediately explained what’d happened the previous night. Luhan leaned against the counter and listened, his face carefully blank.

“That was nice of you,” Luhan spoke finally, turning to examine the food that was left. Apparently, some of the things Sehun had given away were supposed to be ingredients for their breakfast, so Luhan had to think of something new.

While Sehun didn’t regret helping the kids, he felt a weird twinge in his stomach because it seemed like he was once again making things inconvenient for Luhan.

So, instead of filling up the silence between them with small talk like he usually did, he just quietly did whatever task Luhan gave to him. Luckily, when they were about halfway through, Minseok and Yixing joined them in the kitchen and eased the tension in the air.

Within two months, Joonmyun and Sehun—with the help of both the men in the house and those
that worked at the market—got almost everything in place for their project, especially since the project was boasted as a royal decree.

While Joonmyun wasn’t entirely pleased with how much newfound attention he was getting due to his attachment to the royal family, he seemed to let it roll off his back. Even Sehun could tell that Joonmyun was getting more looks and whispers that he usually did now that he’d been put in the center of attention once again.

He knew he couldn’t do much about it, but Sehun tried his best to distract Joonmyun. Due to their non-stop work on the eatery, they spent most of their waking moments together, and Sehun even spent a few nights in Joonmyun’s room, passed out on the other side of the bed from exhaustion.

It wasn’t anywhere near romantic, but Sehun felt like he learned a lot more about Joonmyun in those weeks than he had in the past year of living in the house. He could also tell that the sentiment was the same because even when they weren’t working on the project, Joonmyun still sought him out for companionship or for a conversation.

The other men in the house took note, especially Tao, and the times when Sehun did sleep in their room, Tao would just smile at him and give him vague encouragements or tips. To someone who wasn’t privy to Tao’s ways, these things would’ve probably gone over their head. For Sehun, he understood them, and when he could recall them, he would execute them.

“You know, I heard Joonmyun really likes dandelion tea. You should give him some while you both work.”

Following Tao’s not-so-subtle suggestion, Minseok showed Sehun how to prepare the tea. When it was finished, Sehun carried a tray into the study and sat it down on a low table in front of the couches. Joonmyun looked up from the pile of papers with a pleasant smile on his face, recognizing the scent.

“How’d you know I wanted to drink some tea?” Sehun shrugged, and he sat down on the couch, leaving ample enough space for Joonmyun to sit next to him. When he did, however, Sehun felt his heart race.

“I can’t wait for everything to finally open tomorrow. I’ve been leaving most of the market business to Kris, and I feel bad,” Joonmyun sighed, leaning forward for his tea. All while trying to calm his nerves, Sehun nodded and managed to reassure Joonmyun that Kris could handle it since the man had been helping him for several years.

“I can’t thank you enough for all the help you’ve given me these past months. You’ve been instrumental in helping me do everything and figure out the in’s and out’s of all of this,” Joonmyun spoke after they’d fallen into silence while they drank.

“I can’t thank you enough for all the help you’ve given me these past months. You’ve been instrumental in helping me do everything and figure out the in’s and out’s of all of this,” Joonmyun spoke after they’d fallen into silence while they drank.

“Honestly, I should thank you because this is something I’ve always thought about, even when I lived on my own. It’s something that’s needed, so I can’t accept your thanks. I can, however, say that I appreciate that you value my words so much. I can’t read or do math well, so I’ve been feeling a little like dead weight,” Joonmyun shook his head.

“Absolutely not. I couldn’t have done this without you,” as Joonmyun spoke, his face hardened into a serious expression, “you mean everything to me and this project.”

That was a time where Sehun didn’t need any direction or hints. Instead, he got everything loud and
clear the first time.

Against the thoughts that warned him about his insecurities about how he felt about Joonmyun, Sehun leaned in and kissed him.

Soft, yet not as gentle as their first kiss, Sehun wanted to convey his feelings as clearly as he could without having to say them. From the way that Joonmyun’s hands immediately reached for his neck, cradling the back of his head, it was safe to say that Joonmyun understood and that Sehun wasn’t going to run away like their previous kiss.

The first kiss had been a question, and now several months later, the current kiss was the long-awaited answer.

As Joonmyun delved deeper into his mouth, Sehun could taste the traces of the cloying sweetness from the tea, and he leaned into it, enjoying the taste.

He wasn’t sure how long they kissed and stayed wrapped up in each other, but when they finally broke apart, Joonmyun was holding himself above Sehun and looking down on him with flushed cheeks as he caught his breath. Something was comforting about the warmth that accompanied such closeness and Sehun gripped Joonmyun’s wrist on a whim, not wanting him to pull away.

Tao always talked about how when there were feelings, there would be a spark or tingle, just something to let Sehun know exactly what his feelings were, but the kiss they’d just broken from was more like fireworks, and his lips felt like they were on fire.

“I—um—ah,” Joonmyun stuttered, trying to think of something to say as he still held himself over Sehun, already feeling the waves of lust chip away at his self-restraint.

“Wow,” that made Joonmyun’s flush travel further down his neck, and the man gave an embarrassed grin. Not wanting the man to prolong the awkward position, Sehun let go of his wrist, and Joonmyun sat back in his spot.

He wasn’t surprised when Sehun sat up and leaned forward, cupping his chin as he went in for another kiss, chasing the sparks that had lit him on fire.

Instead, he received something that felt more like simmers and unspoken promises, which honestly speaking, made him anticipate the next kiss as he moved away.

“How long have you…?” Joonmyun asked when Sehun sat back in his own spot.

Sehun, still dazed by the kiss, touched his lips and felt the actual heat that wasn’t only in his head. His face was also hot to touch, so he knew his cheeks probably mirrored Joonmyun’s. He was so lost in his thoughts that when Joonmyun repeated his question, Sehun jumped.

“The first kiss,” Sehun answered immediately, waiting a moment before adding a quiet “maybe even a little before.”

Now that the truth was out, it didn’t make Sehun feel any better. His body was still thrumming with warmth from where Joonmyun had touched him, and his heart was slamming in his ears. In fact, he’d barely heard the words he’d just spoken.

There was something more nerve-wracking about spilling his feelings to Joonmyun. The man was definitely wise, but when it came to the in-depth emotions of those around him, he proved to be a bit aloof.
Or at least that what it seemed like in Sehun’s case. Perhaps he could read the others easier because most of them were more upfront.

“And you’re not doing this purely out of obligation?” Joonmyun spoke slowly, making sure that Sehun hadn’t zoned out again and was listening to him.

“No. Absolutely not. You all made that very clear when I first came to the house,” Sehun huffed. Joonmyun’s expression softened, and a reluctant smile played across his lips.

There was certain reluctance in Joonmyun’s eyes, and it weighed on Sehun’s nerves, but he wouldn’t give up proving to the man how his feelings had grown rather than develop out of necessity.

He would make Joonmyun understand one way or another.

“That was some kiss he put on you,” Tao chuckled when Sehun walked into their room after his bath. If Sehun’s face hadn’t already been flushed from the heat of the water, he would’ve immediately given away that he was flustered, because Tao always knew how to get to him.

“Yo—you saw?” In hindsight, Sehun shouldn’t have been surprised because everyone seemed to know everything that went on in the house. It didn’t matter that rooms had doors and windows had curtains, there was someone always around to see something and more than likely they were going to share it.

In Sehun’s case, it seemed that Tao was the only person who’d witnessed Sehun’s bold step in making Joonmyun aware of his feelings.

Feelings he’d been pouring over for months.

Feelings that’d come to a boiling point as he worked tirelessly with the man on the eatery.

“I went to ask Joonmyun about something, but when I walked into the study, he was on top of you. Like the good person that I am, I walked back out and saved my question for later,” the playful grin that stretched across Tao’s face made Sehun want to crawl underneath his blanket in embarrassment.

“I kissed him first,” Sehun blurted out, turning his back to Tao as he slipped into bed. Despite the chilly breeze that traveled through the room, Sehun’s cheeks still burned red.

“Ah, so you did. Did the dandelion tea make you bold?” Tao didn’t let up.

“Nothing made me bold. I just decided I was tired of dancing around my feelings.” The words sounded right in his head, and as he spoke them, they sounded even better out loud.

Tao seemed to think so too, and he finally left the topic alone, sitting up in his bed “fair enough. Would you say I was jealous if I told you I’ve been feeling a bit neglected?”

Sehun sat up quickly and started to mumble a reassurance, but Tao stopped him, “no. There’s no reason to apologize. You’ve been preoccupied these last few months, and I understand. This project means a lot to you, and as for growing closer with Joonmyun, I’m happy. I have no problem sharing your affections if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Sehun opened his mouth then shut it again, realizing that Tao had covered anything he could’ve
He had been busy with the project and had gotten closer to Joonmyun, that all was true. Tao also seemed earnest about not minding that Sehun was balancing his feelings for both him and Joonmyun.

“Will this make it better?” Sehun asked, getting out his bed and walking over to climb into Tao’s. The other man was about to speak, but Sehun shut him up with a kiss that had Tao smiling into it.

Sehun’s eyes nearly rolled back as Tao lowered himself into his lap, holding onto his shoulders for balance. Tao’s eyes were heavily lidded as he moved his hips, making Sehun let out a groan he barely stifled.

If they weren’t quiet, they would hear the jokes and playful jabs at breakfast time.

Sehun should’ve been sleeping to prepare himself for the full day ahead of him, but after his first push inside of Tao’s body, he figured it could wait.

After all, it’d been a while for the both of them, and something about Tao made Sehun want to come back for more. Perhaps it was the way Tao silently let him know that he needed him and the way that Tao was afraid to verbally express the same sentiment.

“You feel so good inside me.” The words came out with a sigh, and all Sehun could do was kiss various parts of Tao’s face, enjoying the sensation as they moved together in the slow, deliberate pace that Tao set.

“If you keep talking like that, I’ll come,” Sehun gritted out, the grip he had on Tao’s hips tightening with his words. All of it got a grin out of Tao, and he ground down harder, drawing a gasp from Sehun.

“If that’s a challenge, then trust me when I say I can make you come quicker using more than just my words,” Tao shot back, biting his lower lip when Sehun immediately retaliated by reaching between them and gripping his leaking arousal.

The first squeeze made him still his actions and the second one made him dig his nails into Sehun’s shoulders. Sehun welcomed the pressure and stroked Tao, marveling at how smoothly his hand glided from the copious amount of pre-come.

It felt like his orgasm was snatched from his as Tao came without warning, covering his hand and both their stomachs with white as he fluttered around him. Milked of whatever was left of his orgasm, Sehun wiped his hand on the edge of the sheets and wrapped his arms around Tao’s waist, bringing him closer.

As their chests heaved and Tao looked down at him with a tired grin, he ran his hand through Sehun’s short hair.

They were both content to stay in that position, Sehun lying his head on Tao’s chest with his arms wrapped around him and Tao wrapping his arms around Sehun’s neck, but the unpleasant feeling of drying come made them break apart.

With a final pat on Sehun’s head and a smooth movement, Tao climbed off Sehun’s lap and stood next to the bed, stretching his legs. When he was satisfied, he reached for his robe and cracked the door, slipping out the room. In a matter of a few minutes, Tao came back with a damp cloth in
After they were both cleaned up, Tao climbed back into bed and kissed the tip of Sehun’s nose, settling against his chest before he drifted off to sleep.

“You’re in a good mood this morning,” Jongdae commented when he walked into the kitchen for breakfast.

Tao grinned at him “I am.” When he winked, Jongdae started laughing, muttering something about how obvious he was when he got laid.

Sehun and Joonmyun left the house earlier that morning, setting out to prepare everything for the first day of their long-awaited project, so the breakfast table was emptier than usual.

The previous night at dinner, Joonmyun asked everyone if they were willing to help with the first day and since everyone knew how important it was to Joonmyun—and Sehun—they all agreed.

After a quiet breakfast, everyone helped clean up and prepared to leave the house. As the first outing for everyone together that wasn’t the palace, it was interesting to observe the curious stares from market-goers.

The vendors knew most of them well enough, but the various shoppers whispered among themselves, wondering who were the attractive men and why they were walking as a group in the middle of the market.

“Those are the husbands of the man who owns the market,” Tao overhead Luna explain to a curious patron of her stall. The man seemed satisfied with the answer and bought a few apples.

If only everyone else was as open-minded as that him.

When Sehun looked up from the porridge he was spooning into a bowl, he was met with the smiling faces of the other men from the house. Out of all the faces, he noticed Tao’s first and he handed the bowl to Hana before he nudged Joonmyun, motioning towards everyone else.

“So how’s everything going?” Luhan asked, looking around the packed tables in the room. There were also a few helpers from the market that had volunteered their time, so they warmly greeted the other men as well.

“Fantastic. We’ve fed over fifty people, and there are few stranglers in the line, then I’ll turn things over to Sina,” Sehun nodded and motioned towards a young woman who was crouched at a table full of children, making them promise that they would come back whenever they were hungry.

“With Joonmyun’s primary concern being the market, Sina has offered to oversee things. I’ll come by every few days and help, but she’s assured me that she’ll get the help she needs to keep this going.” Minseok’s eyes widened, and he poked Joonmyun, making him explain things in more detail.

“This is really nice. Wondering where your next meal will come from isn’t a way for anyone to live,” Yixing commented, a small smile crossing his usually stoic face as well because he knew what that felt like.
“Come sit with us,” a little girl whispered, pulling at Sehun’s pant leg. When all the attention went to her, she shrunk behind Sehun’s leg, peeking with big eyes. An older boy that looked like he could be her brother rose from a nearby table and muttered something, his eyes narrowing as everyone’s gaze fell on him and his sister.

Sehun lightly pulled the little girl in front of him and crouched down “I’ll come sit with you in a moment. Just let me finish talking to my friends,” the little girl nodded and followed in the direction where her brother had gone.

“Do you know those kids?” Jongin asked, eyeing them as the little girl kept turning to look at Sehun.

“I met them a few nights ago, and I fed them. Seeing hungry children really gets to me because I know how that feels,” Baekhyun’s eyes sparked with recognition, and he nodded to himself. Sehun could tell he was probably putting the pieces together.

Just as Sehun went to sit down with the kids, Jaebum and his group walked in, visibly uncomfortable at the number of people that occupied the building.

“Why’d you drag us here?” Jaebum demanded, his eyes fierce as he looked at Youngjae. The younger man shrunk away from Jaebum and looked around, immediately making eye contact with Sehun. His eyes screamed for him to come over, but at the same time, he seemed to know that the moment Jaebum figured out that the food was attached to Sehun, there would be conflict.

Contrary to everything, Sehun walked over and greeted the group with a smile on his face. He knew Jaebum’s reaction would be much less than warm, but he didn’t expect for the man to grab him by the collar with a look akin to rage on his face.

“What the fuck? Is this some kind of charity thing now that you’re a disowned prince’s whore?” Immediately, Kris, Tao, and Joonmyun were on their feet and rushing over to the doorway.

The chatter that had peppered the entire building fell silent, and everyone watched the situation with varying degrees of fear and apprehension because almost all of them had had a run in with Jaebum or a member of his crew.

Youngjae looked terrified as he tried to coax Jaebum to let Sehun go, but it seemed like the man only gripped Sehun’s shirt tighter, making the material constrict his neck.

Initially, he’d been more surprised when Jaebum had first grabbed him, but by the time Kris wrenched him from Jaebum’s grip and the pressure on his neck immediately disappeared, he felt the heat from the friction of the fabric on his skin.

“If you’re going to cause a scene, please leave. Violence is not something that’s welcomed here,” Kris barked, making Jaebum take a step back in intimidation. After all, Kris stood much taller than the man, and he’d noticed the strength with which Kris had freed Sehun from his grip.

Sehun was still trying to process what’d just happened when Tao and Joonmyun both approached him and asked him if he was okay. The concern in their eyes made his heart flutter, and he wondered if such a reaction was appropriate considering what’d just happened.

“Kick them out,” Tao hissed at Kris once he was satisfied that Sehun was fine. Kris seemed satisfied with doing so until Sehun and Joonmyun simultaneously declined the suggestion.

“Le-let them stay,” Sehun pleaded, eyeing Youngjae and the two youngest of the group, Yugyeom and a kid they’d nicknamed Bambam. Both were barely in their 14th year, so their young bodies
showed that they hadn’t had a full meal in at least a few days.

It was a look Sehun knew well.

“Sehun, I’m so sorry,” Youngjae finally spoke, his body shaking as he turned his back on Jaebum and pushed the younger kids forward “we’ll leave. Please feed the kids though, they’ve done nothing but follow us around.”

Kris and Tao both looked convinced to do just that, but Joonmyun cleared his throat “that won’t be necessary. Please stand in line and get something to eat. If Sehun didn’t take offense, then we’ll move past this.”

Joonmyun’s voice came out calm and level-headed, but his usual relaxed way of standing was gone, and instead, he was somewhat tensed and uneasy and subtly standing in front of Sehun.

Conversation started to pick up slowly after Joonmyun spoke and Jaebum narrowed his eyes, his glare still set on Sehun.

“I would hate to be somewhere where all of us aren’t welcomed, but since the pity and charity have come from the disowned prince himself, I suppose I could accept,” as Jaebum spoke, his voice wavered. All of them—even Jaebum’s group—could tell that he was shaken by both the shifted power balance and Youngjae’s bold and defiant statement.

Instead of responding, Joonmyun took a deep breath and put a smile on his face, tapping Sehun’s shoulder “let’s prepare food for these boys. They must be starving.”

“You have some nerve coming in here and being rude. You’re lucky Joonmyun is so generous,” Tao spat in Jaebum’s direction, matching the man’s glare perfectly. He made no effort to keep his voice down, so Sehun heard him clearly as he walked away to help Joonmyun prepare the food.

Sehun watched from afar as Jaebum and kids choked down the food, going for seconds and thirds while the four other members ate slowly, savoring their food.

He tried to split his attention to the group of seven and the table of kids that had insisted that he sit with him. Hana was telling him something about the singed underneath her arm while she also ate an apple pastry, but he kept making eye contact with Youngjae.

When Jisung urged her not to talk with her mouth full, she gave him a cross look and finished chewing her food, her thin eyebrows furrowed.

“I’m trying to teach her manners, but it seems pointless,” Sehun felt so bad for the boy that all he could do was reach over and ruffle his unkempt hair. In nearly his 9th year, Jisung had spent a portion of it raising his sister, which he was sure was no easy feat.

The baker, Seokjin, peaked his head in the doorway and waved at Jisung, much to Sehun’s confusion. The boy tapped his sister on the shoulder, and they both stood up, carrying their dishes back to the counter.

“Where are you guys going? Do you know the baker?” Jisung nodded and smiled, looking down at his sister.

“We help him peel fruit and knead dough during the morning. He pays us a little and gives us free bread when he can. It’s our job,” Sehun nodded in understanding, and he watched as the kids left.
“I see you make friends with thieves too,” Jaebum snorted when Sehun walked past their table.

It took a moment for Sehun to make the correlation, but once he did, he grimaced and kept walking, sitting at the table with some of the men from the house. Luhan, Jongdae, and Jongin had apparently been drafted to wash the dishes while the others had helped served the last few people who wandered in.

“Take enough time to eat and enjoy your food, but please be mindful that we need to close our doors in a while to prepare for lunch. Please, and thank you!” Sina announced, her voice filling the room that was filled with buzzes of chatter.

“Today has been an eventful day,” Baekhyun mentioned, not-so-subtly motioning his head towards Jaebum’s table. Chanyeol nodded in agreement and shifted in his seat, making a face when one of Jaebum’s boys—Yugyeom—looked at him.

“That’s one way to describe it,” Sehun could hear the annoyance that tinged Tao’s voice as he spoke and his eyes wandered over to Jaebum’s table as well.

All of them had finished eating and were getting ready to leave when Joonmyun walked over to their table and thanked them for coming. The look on Jaebum’s face was priceless, and he opened up his mouth to say something, but this time Jinyoung spoke instead “thank you for allowing us to stay. I’m sorry about earlier.”

Jaebum’s forehead creased in annoyance, but he kept his lips screwed shut and led his group outside.
When Sehun got home from helping Sina serve and clean up after dinner, Joonmyun was seated in the study, poring over a long list over candlelight.

The rest of the house was quiet, everyone asleep except for the both of them.

“Aren’t you tired?” Sehun asked, his voice low as he walked in the dim room. Joonmyun looked up over the rim of his glasses and gave a small smile.

“How can I rest when there are things to do?” Sehun chuckled at the response and shrugged, “also I wanted to tell you how proud I am of you. What you’ve created is something I’ve been thinking about for years, but I just never had the help or time to carry it out.” The compliment made Sehun blush and he turned his head, holding his hands to his warm cheeks.

“Thanks,” was all Sehun could mutter. Joonmyun’s grin widened and he looked away from his notes, rising to his feet.

“I suppose you’re right though. I am tired and I have a whole day ahead of me for tomorrow.” Sehun nodded and turned to leave the library, but stopped and turned towards Joonmyun.

“Have a good night,” Joonmyun yawned, stretching his arms above his head. When he lowered his arms and closed his mouth, Sehun stepped forward and planted a soft peck on Joonmyun’s lips.

“Good Night, Joonmyun.”

Unlike the last time Sehun had kissed him, Joonmyun smiled into the kiss and reached for Sehun’s arm as the man tried to move away.

“You’re not going to run away from me this time, are you?” The words set a fire to Sehun’s face and his cheeks turned scarlet.

“I did-didn’t mean to run. It’s just an instinct,” Sehun murmured, avoiding Joonmyun’s eyes. It was obvious he wouldn’t get much more, word-wise, out of Sehun for the night, so Joonmyun released him and told him good night.

Only when Sehun settled his emotions did Joonmyun want him to come to him.

And that’s exactly what happened a few nights later.

Sehun had spent a portion of his day helping out with serving food, but the other portion was spent waiting at the house, treading a path into the hallway in front of Joonmyun’s bedroom.

“You should approach things calmly,” Tao had warned him when he told him of his plans for the night.

“Would it be too much to ask for help?” The suggestion made Tao choke on his spit and once he cleared his throat, he raised his eyebrows in question.

“What do you mean to ask for help? Surely you don’t want to ambush Joonmyun with the two of us?” When he heard it from Tao’s mouth, it sounded like a lot and he couldn’t help but feel flustered.
“We-Well when you put it like that, it does sound kind of…” Sehun trailed off, not being able to find the word that expressed what he’d just realized. After a few moments of silence as he thought about his request and the situation more, he sighed and spoke again “has Joonmyun even…”

Despite not finishing his sentence, Tao filled in the meaning himself and he shrugged “the best thing you can do is ask him? I still say that the both of us…is a lot. More than several handfuls even.” He ended the last statement with a chuckle and Sehun shook his head, waving off the innuendo.

That same night, Sehun walked into Joonmyun’s bed, freshly bathed and in his pajamas, fully ready to quite literally lay things out in front of Joonmyun.

“I need you to make love to me, right now,” Sehun announced in a rush, his words nearly slurring. Joonmyun, so surprised by Sehun’s sudden presence, sat down his book and looked up, mildly confused yet entertained.

“And what’s the hurry? Is there a time limit?” Joonmyun asked, his words deliberate and slow. Sehun paced in the room and shook his head, leaving a faint trail of vanilla and rose in his wake.

“I have feelings for you. Many many feelings and they’re nearly overwhelming at times. Surely you’ve noticed?” Joonmyun nodded.

He had.

He would’ve had to be dense not to pick up hints Sehun been dropped for the past few months. Since they’d shared their first kiss in the library, Joonmyun had been waiting for Sehun to straighten things in his own head.

While he wasn’t sure if Sehun would ever wish to have a physical relationship with him, he knew that there were definitely romantic feelings under the surface of each of their interactions.

Even Tao, who was usually so eager to tell the business of others, was tight-lipped when it came to Sehun. The only reason why everyone was aware of the nature of his relationship with Sehun was that the two showed little regard to displaying affection in the presence of others. Even Luhan and Kris made off-handed comments about the two, usually joking that they must’ve been something like them earlier in life.

“Come here,” Joonmyun’s words were soft like a request but there was a firmness that made Sehun make his way towards him without a second thought.

Ordinarily, Sehun’s mind would be in three other places, but when Joonmyunundressed him and lay him on his bed, his mind was there and there only.

His nerves, as well as any other expectation, went out the window when warm hands touched his bare skin and Joonmyun kissed every inch of his body. By the time he made his way back up to Sehun’s face, Sehun was rock hard and leaking onto his stomach.

Sehun wanted to talk but when Joonmyun took a hold of Sehun’s dick and trailed his tongue from the base to the head, all coherent thoughts disappeared from his mind.
He was just about to come when Joonmyun let him fall from his mouth, and he looked up at Sehun with a grin, “not yet.”

Sehun whined in impatience as he felt his orgasm slip from his grasp and he stared at Joonmyun, silently questioning what he was going to do next. After all, Sehun was naked and Joonmyun was still completely clothed.

Joonmyun met Sehun’s stare and he started to undress, not missing how Sehun’s eyes slowly roamed over his body with an appreciative glint.

The older man’s body was toned and lean where Sehun was mostly just skinny and broad, making for an interesting contrast when he climbed back into the bed and hovered over Sehun’s long limbs.

His hands reached in the sheets and pulled out a small vial of oil, eventually moving to settle between Sehun’s parted thighs.

Like it was his first time, Joonmyun took his time preparing Sehun with a finger at a time while he slowly stroked Sehun back to nearly the brink of coming.

Twice.

After the second time, Sehun started to move his hips and push his hips towards Joonmyun’s tight fist.

“Wanna come so bad,” Sehun mumbled, his back bowing off the bed when Joonmyun’s fingers crooked in the direction of his prostate. His forehead was covered in a thin sheen of sweat and Joonmyun refused to stop as he pressed into the spot again.

Joonmyun had expertly worked three fingers inside of Sehun and he hadn’t even noticed the stretch because the other man kept him so stimulated and distracted. While one hand worked him open, the other placed light touches all over his body, igniting fire wherever his fingers grazed.

When Joonmyun finally removed his fingers and reached for more oil, Sehun was on edge, not from nerves but rather from the fact that he was sure the moment Joonmyun was inside of him, he would come and pass out.

His entire body was tingling and hypersensitive to everything while he waited what seemed like an eternity. The faint breeze that worked its way through the room made goosebumps rise on his arms and the distant conversation—which sounded a lot like Kris and Luhan—from the gardens sounded much closer than it was.

Much to Sehun’s relief, he didn’t come immediately and managed to hold onto until Joonmyun reached between and thumbed the head of his dick. Just that small bit of stimulation was enough to have him coming over Joonmyun’s hand.

“Maybe I should’ve let you come earlier,” Joonmyun laughed, breathless because Sehun was closing impossibly tight around him and it was hard not come right then. Ordinarily, Sehun would’ve answered back with something that rivaled Tao’s snarkiness, but he could only moan Joonmyun’s name and clutch at the man’s shoulders, embedding his nails into the flesh as Joonmyun continued to move.
Despite trying hard not to finish too quickly, Joonmyun came not long after, letting out another chuckle after he caught his breath.

Instead of being disappointed as one might be from a such a brief session of love-making, Sehun found himself smiling as well. Everything was completely unexpected and spontaneous when it came to the both of them, so the situation was no different.

Sehun had told himself time and time again that he wouldn’t compare the two whenever he did get up enough confidence to accost Joonmyun, but as Joonmyun worked him towards his second orgasm—which wasn’t that far behind the first—of the night, he could tell that there was a difference.

While Tao was trained in all areas of pleasure, Sehun knew that whatever Joonmyun was doing to him that had his mind nearly blank, had been acquired through keen observation of him.

He wasn’t familiar with how things went in romantic relationships, but something told him that perhaps wondering about how Joonmyun was when he was intimate with the others wasn’t exactly the norm. Or at least how things were conducted outside of the house and the rather unconventional relationships within it.

There was a gentleness and careful observance to his reactions he barely managed to pick up on that made the experience all the more erotic. For instance, when Joonmyun moved, he’d look down and gauge Sehun’s reaction before he either repeated the motion or switched things up.

Whatever connections or comparison of similarities Sehun attempted to make between the two men and how they made love to him fell flat and he was okay with that.

It seemed like every time he turned around he was learning something new and it made him feel older and wiser than he’d ever felt.

Their attempt at a second round lasted much longer, much to Sehun and Joonmyun’s relief because they both had time to ride out the slow burn rather than immediately succumb to the flames.

Now that Joonmyun had seen him as intimately as possible, Sehun tried to tell himself that he should throw all reservations to the wind, but a blush still rose to his face as he sat in Joonmyun’s lap. With the man smiling up at him with a large smile on his face, it was nearly impossible for him not to feel flustered.

The warm, small hand on his waist gave an encouraging squeeze and despite the heat rising from his neck to his face, he nodded and moved again to find the right angle.

When Joonmyun was inside of him again, both of them sighed and Sehun started off slow with his hands planted on Joonmyun’s chest.

The sound of their skin meeting filled the room as Sehun sped up and he let out a choked whimper when Joonmyun moved one of his hands from his waist to his dick, stroking him in pace with his rhythm.

“You’re doing so well,” Joonmyun sighed, dragging his nails down the soft skin on Sehun’s hips and the swell of his lower back. The sensation and verbal encouragement made him incredibly harder and he started to ride Joonmyun in earnest.
How had Joonmyun figured that one of Sehun’s favorite things was being praised?

Following one particularly well-timed twist of Joonmyun’s wrist and the angle that he pushed back against Sehun’s thrust down had Sehun spilling white onto Joonmyun’s chest.

His orgasm had taken him by surprise that time and he rode out the aftershocks, making sure to grind down so that Joonmyun would press into his prostate and prolong the feeling. The man took it all with tightly clenched teeth and a tighter grip on Sehun’s waist.

After Sehun had finished coming and took a few quick breaths, Joonmyun supported his upper back and somehow managed to move the both of them so he could sit up. From there, Sehun held onto Joonmyun’s shoulders and whined as Joonmyun pushed up into him.

Just like before, his entire body was still hot and sensitive from his previous release, so everything drew the utmost reaction out of him.

Joonmyun finally came after several thrusts and he came inside of Sehun for the second time that night, his grip still tight on the younger man’s waist and hips.

“Wow,” Joonmyun sighed once the both of them had completely recovered from everything. Sehun huffed in agreement and he climbed off Joonmyun’s lap, apologizing because he thought he was probably on the heavier side, “If that bothered me, we wouldn’t have done that this way.”

For what had to be the fourth time, Sehun found heat rising to his face and he cleared his throat, “Well maybe instead of listening in, you should’ve done something more constructive with your time?” Luhan asked, turning attention from Sehun to himself.

While it probably didn’t mean much to Luhan, the simple gesture made Sehun feel somewhat grateful because it showed that Luhan was sort of warming up to him. Or at least, hated him a lot less than he had when he’d first arrived.
Both Tao and Joonmyun seemed to notice as well and Tao shot Sehun a smile while Joonmyun regarded Luhan with a thoughtful expression. From stray comments from Kris, Sehun and Luhan, himself, Joonmyun had gathered that Luhan wasn’t the biggest fan of Sehun from the beginning and that there wasn’t much he could do to change it.

Those who were aware of how things were, took silent notice and things moved on.

Between keeping busy with serving food to those in need, helping Joonmyun whenever he requested it and growing closer to the other men in the house, Sehun realized that he’d been in Joonmyun’s home for nearly two years and that the day he’d claimed as his birthday in his 10th year was approaching.

When he told Tao, the man had only nodded and continued to cut ingredients for dinner.

Foolishly, he’d thought that that was it and that the topic wouldn’t be mentioned again.

Tao, however, was surprisingly sentimental when it came to Sehun (and Joonmyun).

When the day actually came, everything started off as usual. First, he ate breakfast with everyone, thought that day Joonmyun was present as well. The market was opening later than the usual time, so he was able to eat at home.

After breakfast, Sehun wandered around the house, debating if he should go pester Sina—who’d so kindly reminded him that he didn’t need to come help serve food every day—or stay home and contemplate how things had gone for him in the last few years.

Even if you’d given him several lifetimes to contemplate where he might end up after 21 years of existing, Sehun never would’ve guessed he’d be living in a house with 11 other me with one of them being a prince. He also never would’ve figured that he’d also find a lover in not one, but two of the men (including the aforementioned prince) in the house.

Everything was so complicated, yet so simple, and the thought of it all had him staring blankly into the garden as the warm rays of the sun soaked into his skin.

“You know if you sit there and stare into the sun, your eyes will dry out,” Kyungsoo commented. When Sehun’s vision settled on him, he saw the man standing in the doorway of the garden, a book in his hand.

While the others had taken to learning to read and taking advantage of Joonmyun’s large library, Sehun found that he had no interest in learning. Books never held much of a purpose for him besides the times when he’d found one and used it as kindling on a cool night.

“Thank you for the advice,” Sehun replied, moving to sit up then stand on his feet. The tone of his words was flat, but Kyungsoo rolled his eyes and purposefully hit him with his shoulder as he sat in the place where Sehun had previously been sitting. When Sehun saw him sit down, he let out a false annoyed huff, “if you wanted to take my seat, you should’ve just said so.”

Rather than responding, Kyungsoo just gave Sehun a leveled stare and opened the book.

Instead of bothering Kyungsoo more, Sehun walked away, a small, amused smile on his face. There was something about the relationship and banter he had with Kyungsoo that made him feel
all the more like he belonged with Joonmyun and everyone else in the house.

“After dinner, would you mind coming to my room?” Joonmyun asked just before they sat down to dinner. As an instant reaction, Sehun nodded but while he sat down and ate his dinner, he started to mull over the request more and more until there were butterflies swarming in the pits of his stomach, which hindered his usually hearty appetite.

“Are you feeling well Sehun?” Kris asked, speaking up after he—and Luhan—noticed the younger man pushing food around his plate and eating small bites of the food. Minseok and Jongdae had prepared curry that night and Sehun had come to be known as the person who pursued seconds, thirds and fourths when curry was served.

“I’m fine,” Sehun answered, nearly hiccuping as 11 pairs of eyes settled on him. It did nothing but drive his nerves into the roof, and he excused himself from the table.

Usually, when Sehun got too far into his own head and too deep into his thoughts, Tao would be the one who was immediately at his side.

That day, however, was different.

After he’d cleaned his plate, he stepped back into the garden and sank down onto the palate of pillows, alone sans for the bird that sat on top of the roof, peering down at him.

Had Tao told Joonmyun about Sehun’s self-imposed birthday and the pseudo-anniversary of him being in the house? Or perhaps Joonmyun wanted to talk about something else?

But what?

No matter how much Sehun’s mind raced, searching for possibilities in every corner of his mind, he still was coming up blank, and it ate at his nerves.

From the garden, he could see when everyone still eating either their dinner or starting on their dessert. Instead of waiting until they finished, he got up and wandered past the dining room, heading straight to the bathroom.

A hot bath had recently become his favorite go-to whenever he had a lot to think about, so he stripped off his clothes in the bathroom and stepped into the sizeable pool-like tub, slowly sinking into the water until his head was underwater.

What if he was overthinking things and Joonmyun just wanted to have a casual conversation? They hadn’t had the chance to in a while and he found himself missing their simplistic chatter.

Perhaps Joonmyun missed it too?

By the time he finished bathing, and he went back to his—empty—room to get clothes, everyone was finished eating.

While the other men were lounging around the dining room or cleaning up the dishes, Joonmyun and Tao weren’t anywhere in sight.

That should’ve raised a warning for Sehun, but he never was very observant, so he just walked past
everyone and headed in the direction of Joonmyun’s room.

Before he walked in, he stopped and looked at the mirror that was propped against the wall and studied himself for a bit. In the time that he’d been in the house, he noticed that he’d filled out and looked healthier.

Not that he was conceited or anything, but he could see that despite the anxious butterflies in his stomach, he had a healthy glow, which was something he’d never had before.

He must’ve made noise because the door of Joonmyun’s room cracked opened and Tao peeked out, a massive grin on his face when he saw Sehun.

“What are you doing?” Sehun startled, and he turned away from the mirror, a light blush on his face.

“I was just, um, looking at a stain. Wh-what are you doing in there?” Sehun stammered. Tao gave him an amused looked and reached for his arm, pulling him into the bedroom.

Like he’d seen it so many times before, countless candles were lit around Joonmyun’s room, though it seemed like the man had closed the doors and windows. The other thing that was different was that Joonmyun was sitting in his bed and not at his desk.

Tao shut the bedroom door behind Sehun and made his way to the bed, sitting next to Joonmyun. Sehun regarded them for a few moments before Tao patted the spot on the other side of Joonmyun “come here.”

He walked over and sat in the spot, switching between staring at Joonmyun and Tao in confusion.

“I told him about your fantasy,” Tao spoke, his voice sing-songy.

Just like that, all the questions he’d been asking himself since dinner were answered and suddenly he felt rather dumb.

“And honestly, I wish you’d expressed your thoughts sooner,” as Joonmyun spoke Sehun’s stare settled on him, “and no. I don’t think the both of you would be too much. While I can’t promise I can match you and Tao’s bottomless enthusiasm, I can try my best.” Even in the dim lighting, Sehun could see that Joonmyun’s cheeks were red and that the man was flustered by his own words.

The only person who seemed almost unphased by the prospect of the situation was Tao.

“I know how much you both love to talk about your feelings, but I’ve been rather excited about this all day, and I even managed to keep it a secret from Sehun,” both Joonmyun and Sehun looked at the man, and Joonmyun gave a soft nod before he looked at Sehun.

Instead of being flustered any further, Sehun chuckled, and he looked at Tao, “do you want a reward for something so simple?” which earned him amused expressions from both Tao and Joonmyun.

“So should we star-”Joonmyun didn’t even get a chance to finish his statement before Tao leaned over and drew him into a kiss. Sehun watched in curiosity as Joonmyun seemed to fold into the kiss, allowing Tao to take the lead.

It sparked something deep inside of him that he’d never felt before.
While he couldn’t put his finger on what it was, he recognized the most prominent feeling among the rest of the hazy ones and that feeling was lust.

In an effect to respond to that, Sehun got off the bed and walked closer to Tao, silently moving to remove Tao’s pants, which came off after the man lift his hips in collaboration. He was naked underneath, and it made less work for Sehun as he leaned forward and planted hesitant kisses on Tao’s legs, going up from his calves to his upper thigh.

When he took ahold of Tao’s arousal, Sehun felt an encouraging hand move to his head and fingers threaded through his hair. It was only his second time attempting to pleasure Tao with his mouth, but he took it in stride.

Each kittenish lick made Tao moan into Joonmyun’s mouth, giving Sehun confidence and spurring him on.

He licked up the shaft and took the head into his mouth, making Tao’s grip on his hair tighten. Sehun figured that it was a sign to continue, so he tried to fit more into his mouth, gagging slightly when he attempted to take too much. When he tried again, he succeeded and was able to take Tao deeper down his throat.

That must’ve impressed Tao to a significant extent, because he broke his and Joonmyun’s kiss to watch Sehun, his eyes lidded in arousal. Joonmyun also glanced at him with hazy eyes and licked his pink, kiss-swollen lips as Sehun bobbed his head.

Soon—too soon in Sehun’s opinion—Tao pulled Sehun’s head up by his hair and Tao’s dick fell from Sehun’s mouth.

He reached to wipe the spit from his mouth before he looked up at the men staring at him.

Now that all eyes were on him, he wasn’t sure what to do with the attention, so he took off his clothes and climbed back on the bed with the other two men.

“Please lay back Joonmyun,” Sehun asked, eyeing the bulge between Joonmyun’s legs. He then decided he would do to Joonmyun what he’d just done to Tao.

Quite differently from Tao, Joonmyun squirmed under the licks and let out breathy sounds, throwing his head back when Sehun took him down his throat. Doing something that Tao had done to him a few weeks ago, he fondled Joonmyun’s balls, making the man let out a choked moan, and he reached down lightly to stop Sehun with a smile.

“I don’t want to come like this, but thank you.” Sehun found himself blushing, and he stopped, returning the smile.

After some maneuvering, Joonmyun got Sehun on his on his back, Sehun felt his heart speed up, anticipation making both his stomach twist in knots and his dick grow harder.

The man didn’t keep him waiting for too long before he started trailing kisses from Sehun’s neck, down to his chest, where he stopped to lick and thumb his nipples. The sensation sent jolts through Sehun’s body, and he arched into Joonmyun, seeking more.

The warmth on his chest and the slow hand that smoothed down his stomach and stroked him made his stomach flip. The buildup of his arousal was gradual, but it wasn’t long before his entire body was simmering for something, anything.
It also didn’t help that Tao watched everything silently, stroking himself with a smirk on his face.

“You look like you’re ready to come Sehun,” Tao observed, eyeing how red the tip of Sehun’s dick was. Instead of trying to challenge the claim like he usually did, he just nodded, and Joonmyun leaned down, taking Sehun into his mouth.

No sooner could Joonmyun bob a few times and get Sehun down his throat, Sehun was clutching handfuls of the bedsheets and coming. The older man’s eyes were wide in surprise when he leaned up and released Sehun’s dick, some of Sehun’s come was smeared on his lips. Instead of giving Joonmyun a chance to clean it off, Tao leaned over and licked it off his lips, then gave him a kiss.

As Sehun recovered from his orgasm, he watched in awe as Joonmyun opened his mouth, poked out his tongue and Tao took it into his mouth, sucking it.

Judging from just that scene alone, Sehun could tell that his first orgasm wouldn’t be his last for the night.

He was was right because eventually, he ended up bouncing in Joonmyun’s lap as the man somehow craned his neck to lick at Tao’s dick.

As Sehun had heard, Joonmyun was very much so a pleaser and aimed to satisfy everyone before himself. That’s why he’d asked Joonmyun to ride him first, much to the man’s excitement, because he was well aware of how fast Joonmyun had come last time.

A small part of him had come to regret it because his thighs were aching and he was getting tired, but he was also hard as a rock and leaking clear liquid onto Joonmyun’s stomach, not that the man noticed too much.

Tao must’ve noticed Sehun was about to come, so he moved away and turned angled Joonmyun’s head back towards Sehun, making sure he was when the other shot white across his chest.

From the stimulation and view of Sehun coming a second time, Joonmyun came for the first time that night, deep inside of Sehun.

After they’d both caught their breath and came down from their orgasms, Sehun climbed out Joonmyun’s lap. A few moments later, both men saw Tao crook his finger at Joonmyun, “come here.”

Sehun watched wordlessly as Joonmyun did as he was told.

Tao held onto Joonmyun’s hips and slammed them against his own. Once again, Sehun could only watch, amazed that Joonmyun took commands and treatment. When Tao muttered foreign words, Joonmyun nodded his head and moaned, seeming to take immense pleasure in them.

Absentmindedly, Sehun wondered what the words had meant and made not to ask Tao later.

With a handful of Joonmyun’s thick hair and an unrelenting pace that Sehun was unsure how Tao maintained, he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the dynamic.

Jongdae almost made subtle mentions that Joonmyun loved being on the receiving end, but now that he saw it personally as more unfamiliar words came from Tao’s mouth, he really could believe it.
With a few more words, Tao moved Joonmyun onto his back and continued his pace from there. That time, Joonmyun’s eyes were closed and he was biting his lower lip, a restrained moan reverbering from him after each smack of skin. Joonmyun’s fingers gripped Tao’s tattooed bicep, and his nails dug into tanned skin.

From what he gathered from the one-sided conversation that Tao had with Joonmyun, Tao had allowed Joonmyun to touch himself and he’d barely gotten started before his hand stilled and he came over his own fist, stray drops landing on Tao’s stomach as he hunched over Joonmyun. Tao came soon after, staring directly into Joonmyun’s eyes as he did so.

Everything Sehun had watched went straight to his dick.

Both Tao and Joonmyun were breathing heavily, but they had lazy grins on their faces. Sehun reached for his discarded clothes, finally wiping the remnants of Joonmyun’s orgasm from his thighs.

“You didn’t feel too left out, did you?” Joonmyun asked, giving Sehun a concerned look. Sehun shook his head and tried to express exactly how much he’d enjoyed watching, but came up blank.

Instead, he settled with an “I enjoyed it more than you’ll ever know,” which got a smile from Joonmyun and a leer from Tao.

After a few moments, Tao slipped from the bad and went in search of a few towels so they could at least wipe themselves before going to bed, but by the time he came back, he saw that Joonmyun and Sehun had settled to go to sleep.

Tao crawled back into the bed and sat the towels on the side, joining the two men in their pursuit of a suitable sleeping position for the three of them. When they settled on one, everyone quickly fell off to sleep.

Instead of being mortified that someone was going to say something about the three of them walking out of Joonmyun’s room together, Sehun found himself embracing it.

As he sat down for breakfast, he glanced at Jongdae, waiting for a lewd comment or two. When they didn’t come, he noticed that unlike how Luhan usually sat near the head of the table next to Kris, he was seated next to Jongdae with a pleasant smile on his face.

As he looked more closely, he noticed the slight look of discomfort on Jongdae’s face.

“Luhan’s probably pinching him beneath the table,” Tao chuckled when he saw the look of confusion on Sehun’s face as he looked in Jongdae’s direction.

Joonmyun sat down not long after them, and he too noticed Jongdae’s lack of input.

“Jongdae are you sick?” At first, Sehun thought Joonmyun was confused like him, but when the man finished his statement, there was a smirk on his face.

He knew exactly what was wrong with Jongdae and was taunting him for it.

The realization made him want to laugh, but he stifled it and started to eat his breakfast. He might’ve felt a bit bad for him, but there was an even larger part of him that knew that the man
deserved it.

When Sehun looked around the table, he saw that many of the others were eating their food with light chatter, shooting humored looks in Jongdae’s direction because they felt the same.

“I just don’t get why you like this stuff Minseok. It tastes like dirty water,” Sehun sighed, sitting down the cup of coffee Minseok had brewed for him.

Used to the reaction, Minseok grinned at him and poured some cream and sugar into the cup before he handed it back, “how about now?”

Sehun took a sip, and his eyes widened, “whoa, it’s good now. Why’d that change the taste so much?”

The question earned him a laugh and Minseok shrugged before he poured himself a cup and added a pinch of sugar.

“Drinking coffee and tea is like having a relationship. You have to find your own balance, you know?”

Minseok’s words probably weren’t meant to be poetic, but he found a deeper meaning in them regardless.

Just as Minseok was about to offer him another cup—which he would’ve gladly taken—Kyungsoo and Jongin trailed in the house, followed by two children.

“Aren’t those the kids from the kitchen?” Minseok asked, squinting to get a better look. Sehun, however, recognized them immediately and he stood up from the table, giving them worried looks when he caught sight of Jisung’s freshly bruised face, bleeding lip and nose.

“Jisung, who did that to your face?” Sehun asked, his stomach twisting in knots because he felt like he already knew the answer.

Jaebum.

“Jaebum,” Jisung answered, looking down at the floor as tears rolled down his swollen and reddened cheeks.

“He followed us home after we helped Jin at the bakery today,” Hana added, her voice quiet and small. While her face was still free of scratches or bruises, one of her knees was skint, and drops of blood were soaked into the hem of her dingy pink cotton dress.

“You mean that lowlife from before?” Tao asked as he walked into the kitchen. Sehun looked up from the children and nodded.

“I can’t believe he’d beat up children,” Sehun didn’t react to Minseok’s words because he could believe that Jaebum would stoop so low. It was one of the reasons why he was so feared by the people who knew enough about him.

When Luhan caught sight of the children, his eyes widened, and he kneeled down, examining each of them, “rather than talking about who did this, why don’t we get you both fixed up?”

Both of them nodded silently, and Luhan delegated tasks to everyone that was in the house. Tao
was sent to look for bandages, Kyungsoo went to retrieve some salve and Jongin got clean water while Sehun, Luhan, and Minseok worked to calm the kids down.

While Jisung and Hana looked calm or resigned to the state they were both in, when Sehun wrapped his arms around Jisung, the boy burst into tears.

“What if he would’ve killed us? Or done something to Hana? What kind of big brother am I?” Jisung mumbles through his tears.

Hana had been much calmer than Jisung, but once she saw her brother in tears, she also started to cry. She didn’t know Minseok nor Luhan, but when Luhan picked her up, and Minseok patted her back, it soothed her.

After they’d cleaned their cuts and scrapes and bandages them up, the kids fell asleep, cuddled up to either of Sehun’s sides.

“We need to do something about Jaebum. He’s dangerous,” Tao spoke lowly, not wanting to wake them.

“How old are these children Sehun?” Minseok asked, casting a glance at them.

“Jisung is in his 8th year, and Hana’s in her 5th year. Their mother was killed in a fire two years ago, and they’ve been living on their own since,” Sehun explained, taking great care not to move, so as not to wake the children.

“He’s been taking care of her by himself?” Sehun nodded at Luhan’s question, looking down at Jisung.

“They’re actually the youngest kids I know that are out there by themselves,” Sehun continued.

“What if we took them in?” A voice asked from the front door. When everyone turned, they saw Chanyeol and Baekhyun coming in.

Surprisingly, at least to Sehun, the suggestion came from Baekhyun.

“It’s not like any of us can have kids, anyway,” Chanyeol joked, walking over to the kids to look at them, “wait I’ve seen these kids before!”

Baekhyun rolled his eyes and smacked Chanyeol’s shoulder “but all jokes aside, Joonmyun wouldn’t be opposed.”

Luhan seemed to give it some thought before he agreed and looked back over at Sehun. When he met the other man’s gaze, Luhan nodded and turned back to others at the table.

The gesture made Sehun’s chest feel tight, and a smile tugged at his mouth, the feeling of Luhan’s acceptance nearly overwhelming.

With Joonmyun’s permission, the children stayed in the house for two days before Joonmyun gathered everyone together, a worried look on his face. Sehun knew without asking that he was going to ask them if the children could stay.

He also knew that no one would deny the request, so the whole meeting was merely a formality.
“How was everyone’s day today?” Joonmyun asked when everyone was seated.

There were a few murmured responses, and Luhan cleared his throat, a knowing looking on his face, “so this meeting. It’s about the children right? If you’re asking if they can stay, then I’m sure you already know the answer.”

Joonmyun’s eyes widened and nodded slowly, making eye contact with each and everyone man, probably to ensure that they agreed with Luhan’s words.

“Yes. We’ve discussed it with everyone, and the children seem to be really taken with Sehun, so as long as you agree, it will be fine,” Luhan continued.

Joonmyun and Kris had come from the market earlier than usual, so when they walked inside the front gate, the first thing they saw was Sehun, Jongdae, and Jongin playing with the children.

“Of course I would never say no to children, you all know me better than that,” Joonmyun spoke quietly, watching the children playing in the garden “and you’re certain they don’t have any other family? I don’t want to cause any issues or mishaps with this.”

“Unfortunately they’re too young to know much about their parent’s life before them, but from what Jisung has told me, their father disappeared one day, and their mother was raising them alone. Their house caught on fire, and their mother was killed, leaving them alone a few years ago. I don’t know how, but Jisung has managed to keep both him and sister alive for two years, by himself.”

Though Joonmyun was already convinced, the story touched his heart further, and he pressed his lips together before he walked outside.

Everyone watched in silence as he called the kids over and kneeled down to their level. He said something none of them could hear, but they could guess what it was when the kids answered with enthusiastic nods. When he was done speaking, Jisung and Hana ran back into the house and tugged on Sehun’s pants, grinning up at him.

“He said we can stay here!” Sehun nodded and bent down to hug both of the children.

“Yeah, he did, didn’t he?”

After initial introductions were out the way, Joonmyun pulled Sehun aside, and he inquired about the cuts and bruises that the children had. He’d meant to ask the day he came home, but the children had been asleep, and he hadn’t wanted to disturb them.

“Remember the man who caused a disruption at the kitchen on the first day?” Joonmyun nodded, his brow furrowing as he put the pieces together.

“Surely a grown man wouldn’t harm children, right?” The situation itself was nearly unbelievable, but Sehun knew he would be a fool to put anything past Jaebum, so he nodded.

“He must’ve still been angry at them for stealing their food,” from there Sehun described the situation in great detail, informing Joonmyun of how he’d come to know the children in the first place.

“You know, he probably hurt those kids because he figured they were close to you,” Joonmyun sighed, putting his palm over his chest, “but they should be safe with us now. As for Jaebum, I don’t even know where we could start with someone like that.”
“We’ll figure something out. In the meantime, thank you.” Sehun leaned in and gave Joonmyun a soft kiss.

Still caught off guard by Sehun’s spontaneous displays of affection, Joonmyun blinked a few times before he leaned into the kiss. When they pulled apart, he had a smile on his face, and his cheeks were a light pink.

“No need to thank me. I’ve always contemplated something like this.”

If Sehun thought the house was lively with the other eleven men, then adding two children increased things tenfold.

Within in two days, both Jisung and Hana learned everyone’s names and despite not being expected to, they insisted on helping out with all the chores around the house.

When Jisung wasn’t following Sehun around like a shadow, he was pestering Kris about the market, watching Luhan move around the house or lazing around with Tao. Hana, on the other hand, was fascinated with the kitchen, so whoever was in it fell victim to countless questions and big, watchful eyes as she watched meals and snacks being prepared.

One thing that surprised Sehun was the way Hana dealt with Joonmyun. Without even being prompted, she regarded the man with the same fascination as she did the cooking. Whenever he was home, she snuck into the library and watched him pour over books or converse with Kris and Yixing about business.

It wasn’t a surprise, however, that Joonmyun seemed to melt to the little girl’s whims. Whenever she grew bored of watching him in the evening, he’d offer to read her a story, which she never once turned down.

When Jisung thought they were alone or out of sight, Sehun would hear the boy scolding her for bothering someone as busy and important as Joonmyun, but the words seemed to go in one ear and out the other.

“He likes to read to me,” was usually what she retorted before she walked away in search of fun, which meant playing tricks on others with Jongdae. At some point, Sehun noticed that Jisung gave up and only said something when Hana did something he deemed particularly ridiculous.

For the first few nights, Jisung and Hana insisted on sleeping in Tao and Sehun’s room, but once they grew comfortable with the house and the others, they transitioned to an empty room down the hall from Sehun’s room.

“If you need me for any reason, please come find me,” Sehun mentioned on their first night in the new room. They nodded, and Sehun nodded before he added on “and if the door is closed, knock. That goes for any of the doors in the house.” Tao happened to pass by when Sehun made that statement, and he chuckled, making his way to their bedroom after putting the children to sleep.

“It’s been a while since we’ve had the room to ourselves,” Tao announced, running his hands through Sehun’s growing hair.

When Sehun walked into their room, instead of getting in his own bed, he made his way into Tao’s bed and settled against him, wrapping his arms around the other man.
“It has,” Sehun answered back, his eyes closing as Tao’s heartbeat lured him to sleep.

Sehun had intended to make up for lost time, but the fatigue that overtook him had other plans, and he spent the night, being held by Tao.

The next morning, Tao shook Sehun awake, letting him know that it was his and Yixing’s morning to prepare breakfast for everyone.

After a few complaints and stretches that were followed by pathetic whines because Sehun never was a morning person, he headed to the kitchen where Yixing was already moving around and pulling out ingredients.

“You’re up early,” Sehun hummed and washed his hands.

“Looking after children takes so much more energy than I thought,” Sehun admitted, giving a smile that told just how much energy it took to keep up with Hana and Jisung, “but I like it.”

“You’ve been doing a great job too.” Yixing meant his words, but he had to hold his amused chuckle when he saw Sehun blush and look away.

For Sehun’s sake, Yixing let the compliments stop there, and they finished cooking breakfast in a comfortable silence.

“So why is it that you chose us to pull around the market?” Tao asked, motioning towards himself and Minseok, who’d also been chosen for the ‘mission’ Hana had taken them on.

“You both like pretty stuff,” Hana mentioned briefly, never once letting go of either of their hands as she wandered through the market.

When they walked past Joonmyun and Kris, both men gave the little girl a thumbs up and smiles as she continued to pull toward the fabric and clothing stalls and shops.

“So what occasion do we owe this trip for?” Minseok asked, kneeling down when Hana stopped and stared in the window of a particular shop.

“My birthday is soon, and I want a pretty dress.” Both men grinned and nodded their heads, confirming that, yes, it was an occasion for a new dress. Also since Joonmyun and Kris seemed particularly privy to things, Tao could only assume that she’d already gotten Joonmyun’s permission and probably already had money in the small, woven pouch the older man had given her.

Hana, like her chosen chaperons, had quite the eye for fashion. She was as picky and loved things that gave off a particular shine like Minseok, and her taste was pricey, like Tao.

It was like watching a mini version of themselves flitting around the various shops, touching fabric, holding things up to her skin to find complementary shades and even giving potential fabrics twirl tests.

After four shops, she came to her decision and held two dresses in front of the two men, “the
“yellow or the pink?” The choice, however, was no issue and they both gave the same answer.

“The pink.” With a final nod, Hana brought the dress that looked to be her size up to the counter, and she waited for the clerk to look down.

“And you’re paying?” Hana nodded, digging into her pouch and pulling out far more money than anyone should’ve given someone her age. At first, the clerk seemed amused, but once he saw the money, his face became serious, and he gave Hana, then Minseok and Tao a better look, “aren’t you both husbands of Joonmyun? Who is this little girl?”

While it had been nearly three months since Jisung and Hana began living with everyone, it wasn’t quite common knowledge, so sometimes, when any of them were out with the kids, they got confused and strange looks. Some of them, like Luhan, Yixing or Minseok were more happy to provide a quick explanation, but others like Jongdae, Tao and Sehun weren’t as open to sharing their business.

“Her name is Hana, and she’s Joonmyun’s daughter,” Minseok explained, a small smile on his face as he took Hana’s money and placed it on the counter. The clerk’s eyes widened, and he sat still for a second, his mouth open as he gave the statement some thought.

“I thought Joonmyun’s preference was solely for men. Where did he obtain a child?” That time Tao stepped in and with an annoyed smile gritted out a simple and straightforward answer.

The clerk seemed to be a wise man, and he took Tao’s explanation without further questions, then took the money and bagged Hana’s dress, “you enjoy your dress then.”

Hana held the bag with her dress close to her chest as they walked back towards the house and only stopped when she saw her brother Jisung talking to some of his friends from their time on the street.

“Brother Jiji!” The nickname made Jisung cringe, but he turned around with a smile and looked down at his sister.

“What Hana?” Instead of answering, she took the dress out the bag and showed her brother, pointing out each and every detail she’d poured over the past hours. He nodded, even when it was obvious to both Tao and Minseok, that he didn’t understand a thing she was saying. When she was finished, he helped her put it back in the bag, “well that’s a pretty dress. I bet you can’t wait to show Joonmyun right?” Hana nodded vigorously, the strands of her hair scattering into slight disarray.

“Well, isn’t it some more street trash the prince managed to put in his house,” a voice taunted. When Hana, Jisung, Minseok, and Tao turned around, they came face to face with Jaebum and his usual crew sans a few others.

It also happened that Sehun happened to walk out the eatery, finished with helping to prep for an early dinner. While Sina had insisted she didn’t want him to come every single day, he still came and helped when she didn’t shoo him away.

“Get away from them,” Sehun called out, walking faster until he was between the children and Jaebum.

“Oh and what, I’m supposed to be afraid of you? I meant to say this before, but I’m sick of the hero complex you have. All you are is street trash that’s been elevated to the status of a royal whore.
Don’t think that that gives you a right to flaunt the things you have now. I mean, look at you, fancy pants, tunics, sandals, and you’re even letting your hair grow? You’ve truly changed,” Jaebum commented, giving Sehun a scathing once-over.

If Sehun had been the person he was more than a year ago, the insults might’ve brought tears to his eyes, but as he stood then, he was unaffected. Some of the accusations were true. He had gotten better, well-fitting clothing, actual shoes that he didn’t make himself or steal and was letting his hair grow, now that he could maintain it.

Despite all the things that were true on the surface, the sentiment and meaning behind those things were completely different from Jaebum’s accusations.

He didn’t flaunt anything, and he didn’t have a hero complex. Sehun genuinely wanted to help each and every person he possibly could now that he had the means and Sehun wasn’t about to let Jaebum’s negativity stop him.

Not now.

“Why does it matter?” Jaebum shot him a confused look and Sehun walked closer to him, “why does it matter that I’ve changed? You never planned to accept me, so why do you suddenly care now? Are you envious? What exactly is it that has you getting yourself involved in multiple parts of my life now?”

Jaebum opened his mouth to give a retort but came up blank like Sehun knew he would.

After all, what could he actually say? He hadn’t intended on accepting Sehun back when he was trying to fit in with him, and now that Sehun no longer needed that acceptance, he denounced how he’d bettered himself.

“Me? Jealous of you? And why would I be jealous of a pampered bed-warmer?” Sehun had to admit that comment struck him. Even more so than calling him Joonmyun’s whore, by calling him a bed-warmer was asserting that Joonmyun didn’t care for him which wasn’t true.

Sehun knew that.

Still, the insult hurt and he swallowed hard, forcing his facial expression to stay impassive. He wasn’t going to let Jaebum get to him.

“Insulting me won’t change the fact that you control those around you with terror and violence. Look at those around you. Do you think they actually like you?” He saw Jaebum swallow hard and subtly tug at the frayed hem of his tunic.

Now he’d hit the spot and he knew he had to keep going.

“You think targeting and hurting children makes you look strong? Honestly, it made you look like a coward because you’re nearly in your 25th year. How did it feel to beat up and push around children? Did it make you feel good?” Jaebum’s fists clenched tighter, and he began chewing on his bottom lip. Just a little bit more. “You know, Hana, the little girl who you pushed onto the ground? She’s barely in her 5th year. She’s old enough to be your own daughter, and you felt the need to hurt her. If it were up to the old me, I would’ve killed you myself, but since I’ve grown up in the past months, I’ve come to realize that even doing something like that wouldn’t be enough.”

Sehun would’ve continued but Hana tugged on his hand, and he sighed, instead choosing to give Jaebum a tired look.
“Look at those boys around you,” Joonmyun spoke up, walking through the crowd that’d gathered around the scene, “they’re watching your every move and when—and yes I do say when because those who rule by fear don’t rule long—one of them takes over, they’ll do the same. Even if you don’t get killed by someone you’ve slighted, you may fall on a hard time, and the kids will treat you like you’ve treated the others. Your own medicine is usually the most bitter.” Both Yugyeom and Bambam both stared at Joonmyun while Jaebum avoided looking directly at Sehun or Joonmyun.

They probably couldn’t begin to imagine a world where Jaebum wasn’t dictating everything they did outside of eating and sleeping, but there would probably come a time when Jaebum angered the wrong person.

“What do you know about me old man? Have you ju-just come to defend your whore?” When he stumbled on his words, they lost all venom, and he sucked his teeth, finally glaring in Sehun’s direction, “this was fun, but now people are needlessly preaching at me so let’s go. Also, there’s no way to prove I hurt those little thieves. After all, they’ve stolen, so why wouldn’t they also lie?” Sehun shook his head and watched as Jaebum, Yugyeom, and Bambam retreated, the crowd moving out their way.

When Sehun finally got a chance to look in Tao’s direction, he was trembling, and his bottom lip was bright red, telling how much he’d wanted to jump into the altercation, yet held himself back.

“He has to be an idiot,” Tao mumbled, “he just has to be because Joonmyun could truly have him executed with one request to his father.” Sehun’s eyebrows raised and he shook his head.

“No, Joonmyun would never stoop that low. Besides, if he tries to lay a hand on the kids again, I may have to actually fight or kill him,” and Sehun meant every word.

Later that night after Hana showed off her new dress, Jisung recounted Sehun and Joonmyun’s encounter with Jaebum in colored details, his eyes wide and his voice loud the entire time. Hana nodded and went along with her brother’s tall tale, seeming to agree that Sehun beat up Jaebum, all without laying a single finger on him.

Following dinner, Tao invited himself and Sehun to Joonmyun’s bedroom for a conversation, or at least that’s what he’d said.

The ‘conversation’ ended up being him praising Joonmyun and Sehun’s boldness repeatedly as they thanked him back for the things he did to them with his mouth and hands.
Epilogue: Loose Ends (Part 1)

Sehun watched in interest as Baekhyun brushed Hana’s hair and twisted it into intricate braids he recalled seeing on the women within the palace. When he was done, the little girl jumped from her seat and raced to the nearest mirror, admiring her reflection.

“You sure that isn’t too fancy? She’ll probably mess it up by the time we come home,” Jisung asked, coming up behind Sehun with two bags, presumably filled with the necessary supplies.

Instead of procuring them tutors like he’d done for some of the men in the house, Joonmyun had realized that the children needed to be around their peers and learn among them. With their permission, he enrolled them in a nearby school.

It was their first day, and Sehun knew neither of them had gotten too much sleep because he’d checked in on them a few times before going to sleep himself and each time they were whispering to each other from across the room.

“And you’re both sure that you want to go to school?” Luhan asked as he slowly kneeled down and smoothed out a wrinkle in Jisung’s shirt. Hana nodded with such enthusiasm, it made Jisung, who’d looked nervous since he’d woken up, smile.

“Yes. I like learning.” Jisung’s words were resolute, and Hana hummed in agreement, walking over to grab her bag from her brother.

In the five months they’d spent in the house, Hana and Jisung were the picture of health. Hana’s cheeks had filled out, as did Jisung’s. The young boy had even managed to grow a bit, and it seemed like he might grow as tall as Sehun or Kris if he kept up the same pace.

They became acquainted with everyone and even developed their own personal favorites. Hana preferred the company of Minseok, Baekhyun, Luhan, Yixing, Tao, Kyungsoo, and Joonmyun, while Jisung liked playing around with Kris, Jongdae, Chanyeol, and Jongin. They both, however, seemed to love battling for Sehun’s undivided attention.

When it was time for them to leave for school, Hana grabbed Joonmyun’s hand and pulled him with a sugary sweet “please-please-please walk us there.” Joonmyun might as well have been dough in her small hands because he wordlessly agreed and Kris took that to mean it’d be up to him to do the initial walkaround of the market as it opened.

With the kids gone, Sehun felt as if his day was significantly empty. He must’ve looked sad, because around lunchtime, Jongin convinced him to go visit a friend with him.

“So your friend from the courtesan house got married?” Jongin’s grin took up his whole face, and he went on and on about Taemin. Sehun’s heart felt full because not too many of them still had friends outside the house.

“I wasn’t surprised when he sent me the letter. I am surprised that Scholar Choi’s family allowed the marriage, given Taemin’s past. It’s nice to hear that outside of our house, more people are starting to marry for love.”

They continued their idle chat until they arrived at the address on the envelope Jongin had in his pocket. Jongin barely knocked before the doors of the large gate swung open, revealing a sizeable courtyard and equally impressive house behind it.
A thin, but delicate-featured man, whom Sehun assumed to be Taemin, collected Jongin in a hug and then stepped back, looking at him.

“This isn’t Joonmyun, but rather...Sehun?” Sehun glanced at Taemin with a questioning expression, as if to ask how Taemin knew who he was.

“We used to meet frequently, and I’d talk about the different people in the house to him. Sometimes I’d also point you all out if we saw anyone in the market. He loves to guess who is who.” Jongin’s wide grin returned, and he looked in Taemin’s direction before the two burst into laughter.

Once they’d collected themselves, Taemin led them deeper into the courtyard, then into the house. It wasn’t as large as theirs, but for what Jongin had said was a family of scholars, it was definitely extravagant. Dark wood and several servants either carrying out chores and tasks or waiting for an errand lined the hallway they walked up.

In the distance, Sehun heard a deep chuckle, and he started to walk a little quicker, eager to see the source of the sound.

He wasn’t disappointed when Taemin and a servant ushered him and Jongin into a room of five men drinking tea and playing some type of game.

“Is this the friend you speak so highly of son-in-law?” Taemin’s eyes widened, and he quickly introduced Jongin to each of the men, grinning when Jongin and Minho, Taemin’s husband, seem to immediately get along.

“We’ve met before Jongin, but I believe this is my first time formally meeting you,” Minho admitted.

Jongin had told Sehun many stories, including ones about how Luhan wasn’t the only courtesan that had returning visitors. Apparently, Minho visited Taemin with the same frequency that Joonmyun had visited Luhan and Kris.

Shortly after Jongin left the house, Minho started a job within the palace himself and saved up enough money to pay out Taemin’s debt to the house. It took nearly three years before Minho was able to convince his family to allow him to take Taemin as a husband.

“Brother-in-law talks plenty about you Jongin. We’ve heard nothing but fond, if not, mischievous things about you two growing up. Though I must admit, you look nothing like what I’d pictured from his retellings, but then again, you are a husband of Prince Joonmyun right? You both are,” Minho’s brother spoke, eyeing Sehun as well. During their visit, he found out the man’s name was Choi Minki.

Usually, when people spoke of how Joonmyun had more than one husband, it was usually with either a tinge of distaste and disgust or just pure confusion. Minki’s tone hinted at neither. In fact, he seemed somewhat impressed, or at least he did to Sehun.

“Well I have grown a lot since then, so I’m glad I’m a bit unrecognizable,” Jongin joked, subtly running nervous fingers through his hair.

Besides Minho and Minki, the older men at the table seemed reluctant to talk at first, and it made Sehun shift uncomfortably in his seat. Were they intimidated by them because they were involved with Joonmyun or because both he and Jongin came from dubious backgrounds?

Jongin sensed Sehun’s discomfort, and he spoke up, directly addressing the older men into a
conversation about the game they were playing. Within a few moments, the men warmed up, and
the atmosphere in the room became a lot lighter.

“So I hear some children have been adopted into the family. How is that going within the house?”
Minho’s father, Choi Minchul, finally asked. It was his first time really addressing Jongin and
Sehun directly.

“Well, they’re honestly a joy. Joonmyun loves them as if they were of his own blood,” Sehun
spoke, lowering his eyes as he spoke politely. That seemed to please Minchul, and he offered
Sehun a drink. At some point, servants had exchanged the teacups for smaller glasses, intended for
alcohol and switched the tea with several types of wine and other alcoholic drinks.

Several drinks and a flushed complexion for Sehun later, even Minho’s uncle and his grandfather
were asking curious questions that they wouldn’t have without the aid of alcohol.

“So are you accepted among those within the palace? Forgive me if the question is out of place,
it’s just something that many wonder.” The question wasn’t one that caught Jongin or Sehun by
surprise, but they were surprised by the fact that it was Minwoo, the patriarch of the Choi family,
that asked it.

Due to the man’s advanced age, he’d retired from his palace advisor position when Joonmyun left
the palace as a teenager and hadn’t seen the royal reaction of Joonmyun’s life choices after that.

As far as any of the men in the house were involved, they knew a favorite topic of conversation
were how someone as kind-hearted and lenient as Joonmyun could oversee and manage such a
large group of spouses. At times, Sehun wondered himself, but Joonmyun managed because he
treated them as people, which made ‘managing them’ a lot easier than people guessed, not that
either of them would explain that to any of the Choi men.

Jongin kept things simple, and his response seemed to satisfy the old man.

“It’s been awhile since I’ve had to explain things. It’s definitely not something that happens
frequently,” Jongin explained, stopping momentarily to yawn as they walked back home, “it’s fine
though. Taemin looks happy, and that’s more than I could’ve ever wished for.”

“I’m not completely sure what life was like for either of you, but I’m glad things are the way they
are now.” It’d sounded more thoughtful in Sehun’s head, but when Jongin nodded with a sheepish
smile on his face, Sehun realized that it’d been the right response.

It seemed like Jongin wanted to say more, but as they walked into the courtyard of their own home,
Hana nearly made Sehun fall to the ground when she ran into his knees.

“Where have you been? I’ve been waiting forever,” Hana drawled, tugging on Sehun’s hand. With
surprising strength, she dragged him into the dining room where dinner was being set at the table
by Jisung, Tao and Baekhyun.

“How was the visit with Taemin?” Luhan asked when he caught sight of them. Jongin followed the
older man back into the kitchen, presumably telling him about their trip while Sehun was escorted
to a seat at the dining table, right next to Hana.

“We learned about stories called myths. They kinda sound like fairy tales, so it was really fun. I
even met some new–” Hana continued on about her day, but when Tao leaned near Sehun to sit
down an empty plate in front him, the strong floral scent that came off the man distracted him.
Thankfully, the little girl didn’t seem to notice, and she spoke with dramatic arm movements, making the men who’d already gathered at the table laugh, especially Joonmyun.

Both kids went to sleep easily that night since neither of them had the energy left to fight it. When Sehun was sure they were fast asleep, he closed their bedroom door and headed to his own.

Waiting in the light of a single candle was Tao, wearing a chiffon robe and little else.

Instead of asking questions, Sehun closed the door behind him and shed his clothes as he walked further into the room.

Kyungsoo stared at the two gold bracelets dangling from his wrist, occasionally tinkling against each other each time he shook his hand. He still wasn’t used to wearing them, but he didn’t hate them either.

“They look beautiful on you.” The sudden sound of Jongin’s voice made Kyungsoo turn towards the doorway with a smile.

“Your flattery can only get you so far.”

Jongin smirked and leaned over Kyungsoo, placing a gentle kiss on his neck “it got me you. So I wouldn’t say I’m doing too badly.” His breath tickled Kyungsoo’s neck, and it made him chuckle.

“Fair enough,” was all Kyungsoo could muster as Jongin continue placing kisses down his neck.

“Don’t start something you’re not prepared to finish,” Jongdae hooted from the doorway, not even bothering to see either man’s reaction to his comment. Jongin, however, kept going until Kyungsoo poked him the stomach.

“We can finish later. Right now, we need to start our day.” Jongin jutted out his bottom lip and let out a whine, giving a look reminiscent of a sad puppy.

It was hard to resist, but Kyungsoo pulled himself away because there were things they both needed to take care of and none of it would get done if he let Jongin have his way.

Kneading the dough for dinner took more time and effort than Kyungsoo had anticipated, but since school was out for the day, Hana was more than happy to assist with her small hands.

“Are we expecting visitors today?” Jisung asked, sticking his head in the kitchen. Kyungsoo shrugged and Luhan, who he hadn’t even heard walk into the kitchen, furrowed his brows and removed his apron, walking out the kitchen.

At first, Kyungsoo was content to listen to the situation from the kitchen, but eventually, his curiosity got the best of him, and he wiped his hands, then took a peek around the wall with Hana in tow.

“We’ve come to see Baekhyun and Joonmyun. Are they available?”

“Joonmyun and Baekhyun are actually out at the moment, but if you’d wait, I can send someone to find Baekhyun. He didn’t tell us you all were visiting,” Luhan spoke, his voice level and polite, though Kyungsoo could tell that the man was annoyed.
One of the things that seemed to agitate Luhan the most was when people presented him with situations that he couldn’t prepare for ahead of time.

Despite the situation at hand being a precise example of that, Luhan handled it with the same precision as he did everything else. Kyungsoo and Hana watched as he flagged down Jisung and asked him to find Baekhyun at the market.

It was only a few moments before Jisung came back with Baekhyun and Chanyeol in tow. Baekhyun’s look of annoyance at having probably been rushed by the boy turned into one of surprise and confusion when he saw who was waiting for them.

“Time has been kind to you, and you look healthier than ever brother,” the ornamentally dressed man commented, holding open his arms. Baekhyun regarded him for a second before he slowly leaned into the embrace.

“Seungbaek, I can hardly say I expected your visit. Also, I see you brought Jinki as well.” Unlike Baekhyun’s slow reaction to his brother, he gave the man Kyungsoo assumed was Jinki, a tight hug with a smile on his face.

Even if Seungbaek wouldn’t have addressed Baekhyun as his brother, Kyungsoo could tell they were brothers due to their similarities in appearance. Both of the men had similar noses and lip shapes, as well as the fact that despite their advancing ages, still had strong, thick hairlines.

“We’re actually en route to a meeting with Prince Joonki and Jinki pointed out that this was the way to where you lived.” Seungbaek’s examination of the house and the few inhabitants that were there was subtle and quick, but it was definite.

Kyungsoo also caught the slight hitch in Seungbaek’s eyebrow when he noticed how close Chanyeol was standing next to Baekhyun.

“Is this your manservant?” Seungbaek asked, his gaze never leaving Chanyeol. Baekhyun’s face reddened, presumably with anger, and he opened his mouth to speak, but Luhan cut in.

“Joonmyun doesn’t like having servants. Most of the household chores are shared between all of us, besides washing clothes.” He spoke carefully and clearly, leaving no room for Seungbaek to make another offhand comment.

Another brief silence fell over the crowd of people before Minseok walked into the living room with a large tray of delicately stacked cups and a kettle of steaming liquid “how about we all sit down for a bit and enjoy some coffee? This is another exotic blend Joonmyun brought from his last trip.”

Seungbaek agreed with a nod, and the small crowd followed Minseok deeper into the living room, where everyone then took seats around the small table. The tension in the air was thick, so Kyungsoo thought twice about joining the group.

“Is that man Baekhyun’s brother?” Hana asked quietly, her eyes wide as she also watched the men drink coffee while they kept up a light conversation. Kyungsoo nodded and figured he’d seen enough, so he turned and headed back to the counter to continue preparations for dinner. Eventually, Hana followed him, and her hands went back to squishing—rather than kneading—the bread dough.

While they worked in silence, some of the conversation drifted into the kitchen.

“Where is Joonmyun? I had hoped to at least catch a glimpse of him before I went for the
meeting.”

“He oversees the market during days like this. He should actually be home for lunch in a bit though. You might be lucky to get your wish,” Kyungsoo heard Minseok answer, picturing the small smile on the man’s face as he spoke.

Not long after Minseok said those words, Kris and Joonmyun walked through the door, stopping when they noticed the gathering in the living room.

“Seungbaek, what a surprise! What do we owe such a visit?” Seungbaek stood at Joonmyun’s words, and he bowed slightly, Jinki standing as well, but not bowing. He was more than aware of Joonmyun’s intense dislike of the formality.

“Prince Joonmyun, I was just inquiring about you. Glad to see you’re doing well and in great health.” Joonmyun accepted his compliment and went through the expected formalities, complimenting Seungbaek as well.

“I’ve heard that your oldest son is an excellent swordsman. Surely he’ll be a suitable heir to the throne when the time comes.” Now that the bread was in the oven and the other foods were prepared to be put into the pot, Hana and Kyungsoo returned to their eavesdropping post.

Seungbaek’s mouth spread into the largest grin Kyungsoo had ever seen, and he looked down at the ground, almost as if he was both flustered and flattered that Joonmyun knew that much about his family.

“Yes, Baekho takes after my father and I. We are blessed.”

With everything that Kyungsoo knew about Baekhyun and his past, he could tell that Seungbaek’s statement was a sly attack at Baekhyun’s lack of talent in areas such as fighting or anything physical.

No wonder he disliked his brother. It also explained why he’d always hear about how Baekhyun had been closed off and reserved when he first arrived at the house.

Or rather, it explained the part that didn’t have to do with Baekhyun’s marriage to Joonmyun being arranged and initially against his wishes.

“Seungbaek, we must be getting to the palace soon. The time for our meeting approaches us,” Jinki announced after Joonmyun and Seungbaek traded all the necessary pleasantries.

Even though Kyungsoo could only see the back of Baekhyun’s head, he saw that the man’s shoulders relaxed at the news that Seungbaek had to leave. The other men gave off similar bodily reactions, except for Chanyeol, whose shoulders and posture remained tensed and straight.

“Well it was nice visiting with you all,” Seungbaek spoke as he rose to his feet, Jinki close behind him. Right as he was escorted into the courtyard and Kyungsoo and Hana moved to one of the large windows, they saw Seungbaek turn and look directly at Baekhyun, probably watching how Chanyeol held Baekhyun’s hand, “Baek, remember to stay faithful to your husband. A virtuous spouse is key, right?”

No one missed how Chanyeol squeezed Baekhyun’s hand tighter as he went to step forward.

Not even Seungbaek. In fact, the man just smirked and bowed shallowly at Joonmyun before he and Jinki mounted their horses.
When they were out of sight, Jisung stepped away from the group, his face bright red with anger, “why didn’t anyone say anything to him?”

Kris crouched down and put a hand on the little boy’s shoulder, a grim expression on his face, “sometimes we cannot react like we want to. Baekhyun’s marriage to Joonmyun was political, so it is better that Joonmyun, as well as Baekhyun, maintain a somewhat positive relationship with his family.”

Hana could hear Kris’ explanation and looked at Kyungsoo, her eyes full of questions as all the other men came back into the house. Before she could even ask them, Kyungsoo beat her to the punch.

“Baekhyun’s family needed help a few years ago, and Joonmyun’s family agreed to help. As repayment and a promise that they would be friends forever, Baekhyun and Joonmyun got married.”

“So why is Seungpak so mean?” Kyungsoo gave Hana’s question some thought before he shrugged.

“I wish I knew,” was what he settled on. The answer satisfied the little girl, and she walked back to the stove, dropping all the sliced vegetables into the pot of water. After she finished, Kyungsoo picked up the large pot and put it on the stove to boil.

“I heard Baekhyun’s brother showed up today,” Jongin mentioned, taking his time to scrub Kyungsoo’s back. The tension that rested in the other man’s muscles was obvious, becoming even more apparent when he mentioned the visit.

Even if he hadn’t been directly involved in the situation, it still made him feel uneasy because he’d never seen Baekhyun so uncomfortable and furious.

“No wonder Baekhyun was like what you all said he was. I would be uneasy if I had to live and grow up around someone like that as well.” Kyungsoo commented, letting out a loud sigh when Jongin started to dig his fingers into his back, trying to work out the kinks.

In between his relieved moans, Kyungsoo recounted the whole visit, not sparing any details. When Jongin was finished with his back, he started to massage soap into Kyungsoo’s hair and scalp.

After being at the house for almost three years, his hair had grown past his shoulders, which was something he wasn’t used to. Jongin loved running his fingers through it though, claiming that it was inky and thick, like Kyungsoo’s eyebrows, which he loved.

Kyungsoo always felt like he could say the same about Jongin’s hair, but he knew the man had been growing his hair since he was a child, whereas he’d only started growing it after he got to Joonmyun’s home.

His hair had never meant much to him, but as he covered his face while Jongin poured water to rinse it, he realized that it was just another thing that had come to mean a lot to him.

Something he couldn’t quite put in words, just like the bracelets that adorned both his and Jongin’s wrists.

Chanyeol held Baekhyun’s face in his large hands as he peppered it with soft kisses.
Since Seungbaek had left, Baekhyun hadn’t said a word and instead started to retreat into himself, walling himself off from anyone that tried to approach him.

The only person he even attempted to let in, was Chanyeol.

Joonmyun must’ve said something at some point of the night, and everyone stopped attempting to cheer him up, even Hana and Jisung, who just popped their heads into their room to say good night instead doing their usual routine where Hana gave everyone in a hug.

“I love you,” Chanyeol whispered, staring at Baekhyun until the man opened his eyes and started responding to his kisses weakly.

He was tired in all the ways he could be.

He’d never realized until he was away from Seungbaek that it took a lot of energy to deal with him and he just wasn’t used to it anymore.

The constant encouragement to keep up with the older man wasn’t there anymore, so his harsh words just came off as callous. He also knew that Baekhyun wouldn’t say anything against or at him because he knew that the alliance between their kingdoms was beneficial on both sides.

Since the alliance, Baekhyun’s kingdom had gotten stronger and was on nearly equal standing as Joonmyun’s. If he did anything that hurt the alliance, it could be detrimental to Joonmyun and the kingdom, which was now his home.

“I know. He’s just…” Baekhyun trailed off and swallowed hard, trying to will away the tears that were springing up in his eyes, “he knows exactly how to hurt me. He always has.”

Chanyeol could only nod in silent agreement and hold Baekhyun closer as his shoulders shook and tears flowed down his cheeks.

It went unspoken that everyone in the house should refrain from mentioning Seungbaek’s visit.

Also, there was a shift in how Tao, Jongin, and Jongdae thought of Baekhyun.

All the years that the men had known him, they all learned from that visit that they’d had distorted impressions of Baekhyun and of his reason he acted the way he did.

It wasn’t that Baekhyun was cold or closed-off, but rather that he’d grown up in a place where he always had to prove his worth and when he didn’t live up to certain expectations, he was married away for the sake of political gain. While Baekhyun had come to love Joonmyun—and Chanyeol—he’d been forced to leave his home where he’d been isolated and sheltered all his life.

In a way that made Tao sick to his stomach, he felt sorry for Baekhyun and had to repeatedly talk himself out of apologizing for the cold indifference he used to treat Baekhyun with when he first came.

It just didn’t feel right, and now that he knew Baekhyun, he was sure the man would hate being treated differently for any reason.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you think so hard. It’s almost scary,” Sehun whispered, poking Tao in the cheek.
He’d been so deep in thought, he hadn’t noticed that Sehun was seated so close to him that their thighs were pressed together, making him feel warm in the bright sun.

Breakfast has been a relatively quiet affair. Even Hana didn’t have much to say and only focused on eating the sweetened, creamy oats in the bowl in front of her.

Before Jisung and Hana left for school, Hana walked into the library and reached for Baekhyun’s hand, giving it a hard squeeze. There were no words exchanged, but it was apparent the sentiment didn’t need any. Tao happened to catch the moment as he walked past the library to sit in the garden with Sehun.

With Joonmyun’s gentle suggestion, the heavy mood that had encompassed the house passed after three days.

When Baekhyun realized that everyone had decided to move on to other thoughts and concerns, he ran to Joonmyun’s room and covered the man’s face in kisses of relief and gratitude.

He knew it wasn’t only because of Joonmyun, but he still found himself wanting to thank the man anyway.

The gesture made Joonmyun’s cheeks, and neck flush pink, and he stuttered, clearly trying to question Baekhyun’s unusual display of affection.

Baekhyun just smiled and kissed Joonmyun once more before he shrugged “just because.” When he walked out, Joonmyun watched him go, still stunned.

“Jongdae!” Jisung screamed, tearing through the house as he searched for the man in question. Eventually, he found the man wrapping a cloth around his waist as he finished his bath and the enthusiastic litany of Jongdae’s name continued.

“What is it Jisung?” While some thought the enthusiasm of the children could get aggravating or annoying, Jongdae found that it made the house much more lively. Not that he would admit it out loud, the boundless amounts of energy Jisung and Hana provided made his heart feel light.

“Look look look!” Just as he handed Jongdae a piece of paper, Hana ran into the bathroom as well, panting as she caught her breath. It wasn’t too hard to figure out why she was so tired.

Jisung must’ve found the paper and ran the rest of the way home, leaving his sister to trail after him with her much shorter legs. To make matters worse, Jisung had grown quite a bit in the past two months, so now he was nearly looking Kyungsoo—one of the shorter men in the house—in the eyes, so his stride was even harder for Hana to keep up with.

Jongdae finally looked at the paper in his hand and read over the carefully printed words. The palace was looking for a well-qualified person to choreograph and teach dances to palace dancers in training.

Instead of recruiting women and men like they’d done when he was in the palace, now they were scouting younger people and teaching them to dance and entertain.

That must’ve made Bada’s blood boil if the woman still held her position within the palace and hadn’t decided to retire to a quiet, comfortable life.

“Are you gonna do it? Are you? Are you?” Hana must’ve caught her breath, because she was
suddenly pulling at Jongdae’s arm, making his body rock to the side. Jisung just looked at him with big eyes and a pout, as if silently doing the equivalent of what Hana was physically doing.

Jongdae’s mind flitted through the memories that he held of his time as a palace dancer, as well as his memories of his mother forbidding him to dance. While he did a great job attempting to teach some of the men in the house, as well as Hana and Jisung how to dance, he wasn’t sure if he would have the same energy for strangers.

So many times he’d told himself he was content in his current life, satisfied to limit his dancing to just that, but the older he got, the more his body ached to move. Jongdae had kept silent about this and tried to ease both his mind and body by swimming, going for walks and doing other things, but nothing was the same.

“I’ll think about it, and if I decide to do it, I’ll let you know.” The answer seemed to satisfy the kids, and they left Jongdae alone in the bathroom, holding the paper and looking at it deep in thought.

“You should do it,” Joonmyun mentioned casually when he saw Jongdae sitting by the side of the pool, watching Hana and Jisung splash and swim. When Jongdae looked up, Joonmyun had the paper in his hand with a soft smile on his face.

“The kids brought one to me too,” Joonmyun’s eyebrows rose, and he looked at Jisung.

“Has he learned to read that quickly?” Jongdae nodded, and a small smile spread across his lips. So deep into his own thoughts, he hadn’t thought about the fact that Jisung had read the paper by himself.

Besides being proud of Jisung’s accomplishment, Jongdae made a note of how easily Joonmyun had suggested that he take the job. Maybe there wasn’t as much to think about as he thought. Perhaps the decision was straightforward and he was just causing himself unnecessary stress.

The moment he walked into the room, Bada’s eyes met Jongdae’s. Despite the increase in wrinkles around them, she hadn’t changed much, and her gaze was as intimidating at Jongdae remembered.

“I knew you would show up as soon as the announcements were put around the city,” just like her eyes, her voice sent a chill down Jongdae’s back, but he didn’t let his stride falter.

“Good to see you are still in good health,” Jongdae spoke when he was standing right in front of her. After all, he wasn’t the same rebellious teenager she’d taken in all those years ago.

He was a grown—married—man, with his own thoughts, opinions, and desires. She didn’t have the power to shake him anymore.

“No need for you to show me what you can do. I already know that well,” Bada replied, gesturing her hand to where some other, very nervous, people waited. “If I weren’t such a kind woman, I would’ve told them all to leave once you came, but for the sake of fairness, you’ll have to show them something.”

With another wave of her hand, mid-tempo music began to play, and Jongdae listened for a moment before he let the music guide his body into fluid, concise movements.
His feet glided across the floor and not once did his sandals catch on the uneven edges of the floors or miss a beat each time one of the drummer’s hands hit the top of the drum.

All of the other applicants watched in amazement as Jongdae danced and he didn’t miss the look of automatic disappointment and rejection that passed on several faces as he glided past them.

A part of him felt guilty for taking an opportunity away from others, but just from the tone of Bada’s words, it was obvious she hadn’t intended on giving the job to anyone but him.

When Jongdae finished his dance, all the others clapped for him while a satisfied smirk spread across Bada’s face.

“You just can’t stay away from the palace can you?” Bada asked, patting Jongdae on the back. The gesture did not go unnoticed by everyone else in the room.

Jongdae chose not to respond to that and instead asked a question of his own, “why did you not just pass the position down to Jaejoong? He lives in the palace and would have had no problem.”

The question itself was empty because Jongdae knew exactly why she’d advertised the search. She had been looking for him and hiring another dance instructor was a sure way to pull him in.

A sick kind of favoritism.

She didn’t even bother answering him as she led him to the lavish lunch that’d been laid out.

Sitting at the table were plenty of familiar faces, including Jaejoong who was bouncing a giggling little girl in his lap.

Their eyes met the moment Jongdae sat down, and Jaejoong tickled the girl one last time before he placed her on the floor. She wasted no time running to the head of the table and climbing into Joonki’s lap.

Even though there was a smile on Jaejoong’s face, Jongdae saw a hint of sadness in his eyes. When they were roommates and lovers, Jaejoong always shared his desire to have children of his own.

While being a palace dancer had its perks, there were downsides as well. Jongdae didn’t learn till later that after his mother left to be a mother and wife, there was a rule that palace dancers could not marry while in service to the palace nor could they return once they left.

In Jaejoong’s case, he was now part of Joonki’s harem, so that meant he could never leave unless he was dismissed by Joonki himself. He was bound to the palace until his looks left him or at least that’s what Jongdae assumed.

Briefly, Jongdae’s gaze fell on the queen, and he lowered his eyes, knowing immediately that she recognized him as one of Joonmyun’s husbands. In that minute bit of time, her facial expression soured and she quickly averted her eyes, like Jongdae, was something not even worth looking at.

“Forgive the absence of the King, he had taken ill,” Joonki’s spoke up, a grim expression crossing his face. It seemed like he wished to say more, but under the critical gaze of his mother, he cleared his throat and sat back in his seat, holding his daughter closer to him.

No wonder Joonmyun had avoided the palace like the plague.

All of the new faces seated around the table kept Jongdae busy with questions about dancing, as
well as questions about his mother. It seemed that though he’d left the palace several years ago, people continued to talk and gossip about him.

“You’d think they would’ve become bored after all these years, yet…” Jaejoong trailed off, his eyes darting to the young girls next to them, who were gushing about Jongdae’s dance.

Jongdae wasn’t sure when the man made his way to Jongdae’s side of the table, but he welcomed his presence nonetheless. Being around someone familiar was nice.

“I don’t mind. The new dancers are excited, and it reminds me of when I first came to the palace,” despite it seeming like they were having a conversation between the two of them, Jongdae knew all too well that others were listening closely.

It was one of the things he hated about the palace.

Far too many people were willing to take words out of context in a quest to achieve favor from those in higher positions. While the king, Joongki and his wife, Soobin, didn’t participate in it, the other officials in the palace did.

“How about we go take a walk to the royal gardens? Things have changed quite a bit in the last ten years since you’ve seen them.” Jaejoong was giving him a reason to leave all the watchful eyes and listening ears, that much was obvious.

“I’d love to,” a few eyes watched them leave, but the one expression that Jongdae noticed the most was Joonki’s. While he seemed to make a note of them leaving, his eyebrow also raised in curiosity.

“Surely he knows that our romantic and physical relationship is over?” Jongdae asked once they were walking through the empty halls leading to the garden.

“Of course he does. No one would question your love for Joonmyun,” Jaejoong replied, a smirk on his face. When they reached the gardens, he led Jongdae to his favorite resting place within the labyrinth of flowers and fruit trees.

“You know, I never got the chance to ask you how you ended up in Joonki’s harem. From what Joonmyun has mentioned, the queen was probably furious when he made that choice,” Jongdae sighed, leaning back as the smell of red roses filled his nose.

In his absence, a pool and more roses decorated the indoor garden, as well as marble benches, tables, and sculptures.

“How should I start? From when you left or when Joonki asked me to be in his harem?” Jongdae made a face of mock-deliberation then leaned into the cushions of the bench, a grin on his face.

“Whichever you choose.”

Jaejoong returned the smile and leaned back like Jongdae, looking up at the high ceilings of the garden “when you left, I was a little hurt. Our romantic relationship was purely one of proximity, but it felt lonely to be the only man among the palace dancers again. I overcame it eventually and settled back into life without a companion. It was like that for a while,” Jaejoong stopped, and a small smile stretched across his lips.

“One day I was bored, so I went for a swim here in the garden. I know we’re not supposed to, but if you recall, I was never one to follow rules,” Jongdae gave a thoughtful nod, “while I was swimming, I failed to notice that Prince Joonki had approached and was watching me. I only
realized his presence when I climbed to get out, and he offered me his hand. In confusion, I
accepted it, and after I was out, he handed me something to dry off with. Without warning, he
started a conversation with me and spoke to me like I was a close friend. When he finished, he
apologized and asked that I keep our conversation a secret.”

Jongdae thought back on all the times he’d been in Joonki’s presence, and while Jaejoong’s story
might’ve seemed outlandish to someone who’d never met the man, to Jongdae, it was nothing out
the normal. Considering the way he always threw expectations and customs to the wind when he
greeted Joonmyun or handled gifts.

“After that, the Prince would wander into the gardens whenever I was sitting admiring the flowers
or swimming and spoke with me. I suppose that after some time, he developed a fondness for me. I
can’t blame him,” Jaejoong stopped and look at Jongdae, expecting an eye roll, but instead,
Jongdae’s lips quivered like he wanted to laugh.

Jaejoong couldn’t help but chuckle himself because the words sounded too self-absorbed, even
coming from someone like him, “It took nearly three months before he brought up the prospect of
me being in his harem. He was so nervous, I’ll never forget how much he stuttered and blushed.
You wouldn’t have thought this was a man that had fathered three children and was next in line to
be King.”

“He must take after Joonmyun in that. When it comes to the romantic, Joonmyun can put a
blushing school child to shame,” Jongdae grumbled, though his heart skipped in his chest as he
thought of all the times Joonmyun’s face had flushed pink in his presence.

When Jongdae looked at Jaejoong’s face, it seemed like the man was waiting for more details, but
Jongdae remained tight-lipped. It was one thing to have loose lips within the house, but outside of
it, the aspects of their private life with Joonmyun stayed with them.

“Still won’t leak even a little about what goes on in that house right? That’s a topic of wild gossip,
especially among the inner court,” Jaejoong went on to describe the wildest theories he’d heard
and the only indications Jongdae bothered to give were either quirks of his eyebrow or
disapproving glances.

They spent what seemed like hours in the garden, catching up and reminiscing about the past until
the sound of small feet slapping against the marble walkway in the garden interrupted them.

Within a few seconds, the little girl from earlier was standing in front of them, pouting at Jaejoong.
Immediately, Jaejoong leaned down ruffled the girl’s hair, “Eunjoo, why aren’t you with your
nurse?”

“I want you to read me a story. I don’t like Hadong’s stories.” When Eunjoo finished talking, she
stamped her foot and jutted out her lip further, looking at Jaejoong expectantly. Jongdae held back
his laughter when he realized that the little girl looked and acted very similarly to Joonki.

“I’ll let you attend to your other duties. It was nice catching up and now that I’ll be in the palace a
bit more, don’t hesitate to keep me company,” Jongdae sighed, rising from his seat and stretching
when he stood up straight.

When Jongdae came home, Joonmyun was waiting for him in the library, “so did you get the
position?” Jongdae nodded with a shy smile on his face and Joonmyun enveloped him in a hug, “I
knew you would. You’re so talented, and it should be seen by others.”
The whole time Joonmyun complimented him, Jongdae couldn’t bring himself to do anything more than blush.

“How about we go to bed? You can compliment me further,” Jongdae mustered, hooking his arms around Joonmyun. The man nodded in agreement and guided Jongdae towards his bedroom, a broad smile on his face.

“You’re really something, you know that Kim Jongdae?”

“Nothing you can’t handle right?” The moment of his bashfulness had passed, and he was back to his usual self, snarky and filled with sarcasm.

The grin on Joonmyun’s face only grew wider.

“I’ve received news that Shim Changmin is coming to a nearby bookstore to speak about his latest works,” Minseok nearly dropped the glass cup in his hands, and he turned swiftly on his heel to stare at Joonmyun.

“The Shim Changmin?” Joonmyun nodded and held up a flyer in his hand. One of the merchants he usually traveled with had given it to him.

It was their mutual love of the author that’d brought them closer and so it was something both men treasured.

Without explicitly discussing it, Minseok found himself walking hand-in-hand with Joonmyun toward the biggest bookstore in their city.

There were many more people gathered around the entrance than usual, but the woman recognized both Joonmyun and Minseok. She quickly waved them inside and pulled them behind the counter with her.

“Author Shim is late, but luckily several vendors from the market donated snacks, so everyone’s being civil. I hope he shows up soon though. I’ve been excited about this for weeks. I heard he’s quite handsome,” the woman leaned on the counter with a thoughtful expression on her face.

Joonmyun did his best to pay attention as Shera rambled on about the supposed attractiveness of Shim Changmin, but the warmth from Minseok’s fingers intertwined with his own was distracting.

Minseok, however, was preoccupied with Changmin’s newest release, his eyes already glazed over as he scanned the first few pages.

The only reason why he looked up was the moment Changmin walked into the bookstore, Joonmyun gave his hand a light squeeze.

Immediately, the people who were milling around rushed inside and everyone fought to get a good seat to see the author. Shera already had chairs behind the counter, so Minseok and Joonmyun had places to sit.

Despite being in the back, Changmin kept stealing glances at Minseok and talking in his general direction. It was quite obvious the man had an interest in him.

It became even more obvious when it seemed he walked up to Minseok to shake his hand, instead
of the other way around. His grip was firm, and the grin on his face appeared to surpass one of
general friendliness.

Minseok saw the brief flash of sadness in his eyes when he saw the lone golden bracelet on
Minseok’s wrist.

“The owner of this shop tells me you’re both big fans of mine. It’s an honor to meet you,” though
he was addressing both Joonmyun and Minseok, his eyes never leaving Minseok’s face.

Both men chose to ignore it, and Minseok started to gush about Changmin’s books, especially the
new one he’d briefly looked at before Changmin’s arrival. Joonmyun nodded along, imputing his
thoughts here and there.

“I’ll be straightforward with this. I’ve heard a great deal about Joonmyun and his home, and I’d
like to write a romance about it. I hadn’t anticipated that Minseok would be so beautiful, so excuse
me for staring,” now he was talking to Joonmyun, but he kept sparing Minseok fleeting glances.

“You’ll have to ask the others in the house, but I don’t really mind. As long as you’re respectful of
everyone’s privacy,” Joonmyun sighed, a thoughtful look on his face.

“May I have the chance to ask them tonight? I need to know soon so that I can let my husband
know. He manages most of my affairs,” Minseok’s eyes widened when he mentioned a husband.

“You’re married?” A soft look took over Changmin’s face, and he blushed, nodding.

“Yes, I’m asked that a lot. I’ve been married nearly as long as I’ve been writing professionally,”
Changmin tipped his head in the direction of a man who seemed to be carrying on the event in
Changmin’s stead with ease, “he knows I get distracted when I’m inspired.”

They talked for a bit more with Changmin before his husband, whose name they learned was
Yunho, whisked Changmin off.

“Sometimes you can be very unprofessional,” Yunho muttered after he shook both Minseok and
Joonmyun’s hands.

For some reason or another, when they finally got home with Yunho and Changmin in tow,
everyone was sitting down for a late dinner.

“I wish you would’ve let me know you’d planned to bring guests,” Luhan deadpanned as his eyes
raked over the additional company.

“It was a last minute decision, please forgive me.” Joonmyun’s words sounded so sincere that they
made Luhan smile a little.

“Fine. Hana and Jisung, please help Jongin make space at the table.” The kids immediately began
moving plates and dishes of food around while Jongin retrieved two sets of plates from the kitchen.

“I’m sorry to intrude on your family’s dinner. I told Changmin this idea of his was invasive, to say
the least.” Unlike Yunho, who really thought that they were inconveniencing everyone, Changmin
seemed unaffected.

In fact, he looked excited to finally see all the men he’d heard others talk about.
Of course, Changmin had grown up and lived his entire life under the rule of the Kim family, so he’d definitely heard the rumors and nasty stories people shared with one another about Joonmyun. Quite a few people painted him as an insatiable deviant, but Changmin knew better.

He’d heard far more positive things than negative about the man. He was aware that Joonmyun, despite his increasing age, held no desire to rule the kingdom and had left the duty to his younger brother Crown Prince Joonki.

Changmin also knew that Joonmyun had acquired several lovers—or rather husbands—since he’d entered his 30th year. Many people weren’t clear as to how Joonmyun got to know most of the men besides Luhan, Kris, Jongin, Tao and Baekhyun, but Changmin assumed that it wasn’t important because it wasn’t anyone’s business but Joonmyun’s own.

As everyone began to eat, Changmin tried to keep track of all the conversations that went on at the table, but just when he would hone in on one, then three others would start, including conversations that included the two children in the house. That was another thing the rumors on the street were never sure of. Where the two children had come from.

Changmin would be lying if he said he wasn’t curious, but he wouldn’t ask. It was rude, especially considering how nicely Joonmyun had allowed him and Yunho to eat dinner with his family. Changmin would try his damnedest not to overstep his boundaries as a visitor. After all, he was asking a lot of the Joonmyun and the other men, by asking to essentially transcribe pieces of Joonmyun’s very real life and mixed it with pieces of fiction for the eyes and pleasure of others.

The whole situation was toeing the very line of acceptability, as Yunho had mentioned to him ten times over when he’d first come upon the idea.

As dinner neared its end, Changmin realized he hadn’t actually asked the other men if they would agree to his presence in their home for two months.

When Joonmyun made eye contact with him, he realized as well, and he cleared his throat, which made all the other men cease speaking. Something about that made Changmin’s heart feel heavy as he attempted to imagine Joonmyun commanding the entire country with the same gentleness. The man had a natural talent for ruling—managing—large groups of people.

Joonmyun nodded in Changmin’s direction and with quick movements, he stood up and cleared his own throat, feeling the eyes of the men and the two children looking at him, “I’ve heard many things about Joonmyun and his home, as well as all of you. I would love nothing more than to create a story based very loosely off of the way things are here in this house. I would stay no longer than two months, any names and specific details would be changed or completely fabricated, and no one would know I’d even used you all as inspiration.” After he finished speaking, a silence fell over the room, and the men look at each other, then at Luhan, who seemed to be still thinking.

“Privacy is very important to us. You must be aware,” Luhan started, the tone of his voice sounded conflicted, “if you’re only using us as a reference, then I suppose that’s okay with me.” When he finished speaking, the other men agreed.

Changmin’s eyes lit up, and he expressed his gratitude in a jumble of words that most of the men failed to understand.

In all honesty, Changmin had expected them to say no, and he’d already mentally prepared himself. His request was a lot to think about, that much he knew.
Minseok watched Changmin move around the house, becoming acquainted with the layout before he began actually taking notes on their interactions. Wherever he went, he took a small notepad with him, jotting down details here or there.

As for Yunho, he stayed as well, admitting that he hated being at home alone and that the constant activity in the house comforted him. Through later conversations, Luhan and Minseok found out Yunho had grown up in a large orphanage, which also explained why Jisung and Hana had warmed up to him so quickly.

Within a few days, Changmin and Yunho had integrated themselves into the household, much to Joonmyun’s relief. Even without explicitly speaking about it Changmin never asked about the sexual aspects of their relationships with Joonmyun. The only exception to that was when Jongdae, Tao and Jongin came home from drinking with Taemin and Minho and they thought it would be funny to tell Changmin a few sordid details.

Contrasting greatly to what Jongdae and Tao had expected, Changmin had the nerve to blush at the things they told him. Even though they slurred many words and left out others, Changmin got the point and had a hard time meeting Joonmyun’s eyes the next morning.

Luckily for the trio, Joonmyun was particularly worried about getting to the market in time and didn’t give it much thought.

Whenever Minseok could, he found himself talking to Changmin, trying to get a glimpse into his mind and find out what went through his head when he was creating his stories. Whenever they were finished talking, Changmin always thought about how pretty Minseok looked when his eyes were wide with curiosity, much like the cat that Yunho had insisted on feeding near their home.

Time passed so quickly, that before Changmin and Yunho realized it, their stay neared its end. Changmin had gathered more than enough notes to last him at least the next four books, and with the consistent letters from the person who published his works, Changmin knew it was more than past time for him to go.

He would’ve started writing the book at Joonmyun’s home, considering that the man had more than enough supplies, but he found himself missing the quietness of his own home, and he longed to write in solitude.

“I may actually read this book,” Jongdae snorted as Changmin and Yunho packed up to leave. Tao’s eyebrow raised and he gave a dry laugh in response, “you can read?” Like he’d expected, the comment earned him a slap to the arm that made his skin sting afterward.

“It’s been a pleasure being with you all, and I wish you nothing but happiness. Thank you for everything, and I will make sure to send the first copies of the book to you all,” Minseok nodded with an excited look, and he waved as the men made their departure.

Jisung and Hana watched the men go as well and looked a bit sad, “Yunho made really yummy snacks,” Hanna sighed, a frown on her small face as the two men disappeared into the market.

Yixing took a deep breath and stepped through the threshold of the gate, immediately noticing
other young men that gave off the same nervous energy.

Despite there being a loud murmur of noise, most of it were men talking to themselves, trying to cram the last bit of information into their minds.

They were all there to take the Palace Entrance test to become a Government Scholar. Yixing had been studying for the test for nearly six years, and after finally feeling confident in his knowledge, he’d signed up to take it.

With the steady encouragement of Joonmyun, Minseok, and Baekhyun, he felt like he could take on anything or at least he did until he heard the sound of the bell, telling him that it was time.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed when he finally finished, but he handed his test to the stern looking proctor, then saw himself out quietly, not wanting to disturb anyone else.

Now that he was done, he wasn’t sure what to do, so he walked around town for a bit, stopping to eat some fresh bread from Seokjin’s bakery. It calmed the growling in his stomach but did nothing for his nerves. He knew that he’d be a mess until he received the results in the next two weeks.

Choi Minki eyed the large stack of tests handed to him and sighed, calling for Taemin to bring him something strong and hot to drink. He needed his mind to be sharp.

He was about halfway done when he reached Kim Yixing, a familiar name. He couldn’t recall where he’d heard it, but the name was definitely written the same as the King’s family, so the man had to have some prestige to him.

Looking over his test, Minki’s eyes widened and grinned, setting the paper down in a completely different pile than the others. Whoever Kim Yixing was, he was destined for a job as a Palace Scholar.

When Yixing received the news, via a posting on a board in the middle of the market, he was overjoyed. So much so, that he hurriedly asked Kris about Joonmyun’s whereabouts.

The moment he found him, he nearly tackled the man and spoke rapidly, telling him he’d gotten the highest score on the test.

“I’m so proud of you,” Joonmyun sighed, hugging Yixing tighter. The younger man grinned and leaned to press a kiss to Joonmyun’s lips. Though it was quick, it still made Joonmyun blush and the vendor that Joonmyun had been talking to drifted away, out of courtesy.

After celebrating at home with Luhan insisting on making his favorite cake for dinner, Yixing went to sleep with a smile on his face.

The next morning, he received a message from the palace, which he’d expected. What he didn’t expect, however, was for Choi Minki, the head palace scholar, to deliver the message.

“Is Kim Yixing home? I have an urgent message for him,” Choi Minki gruffed, looking a bit nervous as he glanced inside the house behind Yixing.

“Yes, you’re speaking to him,” his words somewhat hesitant due to who was standing in front of him.

“Oh, great. As you’re aware, you scored the highest score on the government exam. The king,
prince and fellow scholars have agreed that they wish for you to fill the vacant palace scholar position," the middle-aged man explained, reaching out to give Yixing a congratulatory handshake.

“I thought I would’ve suited the position of a government scholar rather than palace scholar. I thought you needed a recommendation for that position?” Minki nodded thoughtfully and crossed his arms in front of him.

“So you’ve done your research,” Yixing nodded slowly. He had, after all, been studying and preparing for several years, so he’d done plenty of research, “I must admit when I recognized your name on your test, I’d thought you were one of the King’s relatives, but I can see now that you’re one of Joonmyun’s husbands. I never would’ve thought one of you all would be so...studious.”

Yixing chose to ignore Choi Minki’s connotations and nodded again, pressing his lips together. In the back of his mind, he was relieved that Minseok wasn’t with him, because he knew his brother would’ve immediately reacted to the man’s statement.

“Well I’ve been preparing for some time, so being described as studious is very flattering,” Yixing bowed his head in faux-embarrassment, and the man smiled at him, obviously charmed.

“All that aside, please think about the position, and when you have an answer, please send a messenger to the palace. I hope that you’ll agree to the position because the palace needs young thinkers like yourself.” With that, he gave Yixing a shallow bow and turned to leave.

“So you’ve been selected to be a palace scholar? That’s quite the honor,” Minseok spoke, patting his brother on his shoulder.

It was a good offer, but from the stories he’d heard about the inner workings of the palace, he didn’t have an interest in being surrounded by false people aiming to get in good graces with the royals.

“What are you going to decide?” Yixing was still deciding exactly what to do, and with all things considered, the main reason he was hesitating was that he didn’t want to live in the palace. Joonmyun had purposefully distanced himself from the place for his own reasons, but each and every single one of his concerns and reasons were valid and worth thinking about.

For one, Joonmyun’s preference for me wasn’t taboo since same-sex couples frequently married within their kingdom, but under the judging eye of Queen Yubin, Yixing felt like she might go out of her way to make things miserable for him. Especially when he considered how close he was to Joonmyun.

For another, the thought of living away from Joonmyun, his brother and the others caused a small ache in his chest. He’d grown accustomed to being surrounded by the other men, and he had never lived without Minseok within arms’ reach, so the thought of being alone in the palace among strangers terrified him.

“I’m uncertain.” Joonmyun’s hands stopped massaging fragrant lotion onto Yixing’s shoulders, and he sat in front of him, his long hair fanning across his chest as his brow furrowed in thought.

“It would be a great experience for you, but I completely understand your qualms,” In the past few days, Joonmyun had spoken with Yixing about the offer, so he knew the reasons for Yixing’s hesitation in great detail, “but perhaps, if you have an issue with the living arrangements, maybe if you speak with my father and Joonki, they might make an exception. This house is not far from the palace so commuting would be a simple task.”
That was something Yixing hadn’t thought of, but the idea of taking an audience with both the king and Joonki made his stomach toss in uncertainty.

His stomach turned even more when his request was granted, and he walked through the halls, still decorated from a recent celebration.

Everything about the palace was foreign and unfamiliar despite the fact that Yixing had been inside several times since marrying Joonmyun.

As an encouragement, Joonmyun had gone with him and held his hand as they walked down the twisted pathways together. Joonmyun had dismissed the servant that offered to guide them and lead the way instead.

When they reached the throne room, Joonmyun greeted his family and took a step to the side, ushering Yixing to the front.

“Ah! You are the star student that Scholar Choi spoke so greatly of. We look forward to having your presence amongst us,” Joonki spoke, rising from his seat to meet Yixing at the steps.

“That’s actually what I wish to talk to you about Prince,” Yixing started, willing all the strength in his body to help him sound confident, “I wish to stay within my current living quarters. There is no need for the expense and extravagance of lodging within the palace.”

King Joonseok cleared his throat and shifted in his seat, causing everyone’s gaze to fall on him. Yixing lost his nerve and finally looked at the floor, barely managing to stop himself from shaking where he stood.

“I can understand your desire for privacy from the prying eyes of the court. I will respect your wishes, and you can commute from your home,” the King sighed, his tired gaze falling on all the court members that were present.

If there was anyone who was the center—and victim—of the gossiping court, it was the King himself.

With those words, Yixing looked up with a huge smile and his face and bowed shallowly, expressing his gratitude.

“It is the least I can do for someone within my family,” King Joonseok added, which stunned the entire room of people. It was so quiet, if one listened hard enough, they could hear Joonki’s daughter screaming in joy as she ran through the gardens, no doubt followed anxiously by her nurse.

“Thank you for your generosity,” Yixing managed, his face burning bright red as he struggled to avoid the heavy gazes of the court members.

This was the first time that King Joonseok recognized one of his eldest son’s many husbands, so everyone was rendered speechless, even Joonmyun.

Following the King’s shocking words, he invited Joonmyun and Yixing to dine with them for lunch, but Yixing respectfully declined, citing that he needed to prepare himself for the start of his job as a palace scholar. He conveniently left out the reason that he just didn’t feel comfortable being stared at so intently by the court members and servants.
“You were great,” Yixing ducked his head down in embarrassment at the praise, but he reached for Joonmyun’s hand and squeezed. Between the two, the simple gesture carried a lot of weight.

“I’m so nervous,” Yixing mumbled, finally looking up as they walked out the gates of the palace and made their way back towards the market and home. Joonmyun nodded, and he gave Yixing’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

“The palace has yet to see a more brilliant scholar.”

Changmin was kind enough to send copies of his book for everyone. Minseok hadn’t wasted any time ripping open the paper covering the book, as well as opening it up to read it.

Before mid-day, he was nearly finished, and his fingers gripped the edges of the book tightly, enthralled in the stories.

With whatever little information they’d all told Changmin and what he’d figured out himself, he made a story that both sounded close, yet utterly different when it came to the smaller, more personal details.

When Minseok reached the story that closely resembled his and Yixing’s story, he found himself blushing at the love scene between the main character, June, and the eldest of the two friends he’d helped, Minhyuk.

June’s palms were so warm that when he touched Minhyuk’s thighs, fine bumps rose on the smooth, milky surface.

“I’m so glad you want this as much as I do,” Minhyuk sighed, his breath hitching as June’s hands slipped further up his robes.

June only nodded and crawled over Minhyuk’s body, covering his mouth with his own.

When they broke apart, Minhyuk’s face was flushed pink, and his lips were bright red. The gaze June was looking at Minhyuk with made his stomach toss in anticipation. The older man settled between his thighs and Minhyuk spread them willingly, eager to get things moving in the direction his body wished it would.

His arousal ached with the need to be touched, and when June’s warm hand finally caressed him, Minhyuk shuddered in anticipation.

He was already so close to the edge and June had merely held and kissed him, Minhyuk could only imagine how his body would react when June was inside of him.

Minseok’s cheeks burned pink and closed the book, taking a few moments to mentally digest the scene he’d just read. Perhaps it was the personalized nature of the entire book or just that Minseok was always moved by Changmin’s intimate scenes.

Either way, the scene made him slow in his reading pace, and he had to stop for a cup of coffee before continuing.

Minhyuk didn’t have to wait much longer as June guided him onto his back and eased off his garments, taking extra care to stroke the warm skin he uncovered. It took all of Minhyuk’s willpower not to squirm when June’s mouth hovered just over his aching arousal.

The warmth traveled up Minseok’s and neck, rendering all of his visible skin pink with arousal.
“I’ve been waiting ages to taste you. Is it okay?” Minhyuk’s tongue couldn’t form words, so all he did was nod silently and watch with wide eyes as June took him into his mouth. The same warm hand that had touched him earlier, now rested on his hip as June suckled at the tip of his—

“What’cha reading?” Hana asked, standing on her tiptoes to lean over the back of the couch and rest her chin on Minseok’s shoulder. Out of surprise, he slammed the book shut and sat up suddenly, making Hana stumble and fall.

Quickly, he was on his feet, and he picked the little girl up from the floor, murmuring apologies. It was all unnecessary, however, because the girl was unaffected by fall.

After the initial shock of the fall, she was perfectly fine, but she that didn’t stop her from accepting Minseok’s guilty coddling.

“I’m so sorry Hana, please forgive me?” She pretended to give the words some thought, and she raised her eyebrows.

“Only if you promise to read me a bedtime story today,” Minseok hurriedly agreed, also adding that he would make her favorite hot chocolate to drink with her dessert.

With a mischievous grin on her face, she bolted out of the library, to the kitchen where she waited for Minseok to fulfill part of his promise.

Before he left the library as well, he sat the book on the highest shelf he could reach without a ladder. Now that both Jisung and Hana could read, he didn’t want to take any chances.
Jisung watched in wonder as Mina brushed her hair behind her ears as she laughed at something her friend Sejeong said.

It seemed like she got prettier every day, so whenever Jisung happened to catch sight of her, he couldn’t look away. She was nearly three years older than him, so he knew he’d never have a reason to approach her, but for now, he was content glancing at her from afar.

“Are you staring at Mina again?” a voice asked, making Jisung startle with a gasp. Donghyuk laughed at him and patted his back, sighing, “you really have it bad. She is pretty though.”

Jisung’s brain couldn’t form words at that moment, so he only nodded dumbly.

“You should go try to talk to her. I heard she’s really nice.” That got Jisung’s full attention and his heart started to race even at the thought.

“Th-the-there’s no way. She’s so much older, she probably thinks I’ve just a kid,” Donghyuk shrugged and stood up, intending to go back to the large game of kickball the boys in their class were playing.

“Well if you’re not going to talk to her, come play with us. Just staring at her is weird,” Jisung’s eyes widened and nodded slowly, getting up. Before he followed Donghyuk, he gave Mina one last glance and nearly tripped over his own feet when their eyes met.

“How do you talk to someone who’s older than you?” Jisung asked to no one in particular at the dinner table. All conversation stopped and everyone glanced at each other, no one sure how to really respond.

“Is there someone you want to talk to?” Joonmyun asked, breaking the silence. Jisung sat down the piece of bread he’d been tearing into tiny pieces and confirmed that he did.

He hadn’t intended to go into detail, especially in the middle of dinner, but before he knew it, the words spilled out his mouth until he was finished. The expressions of everyone ranged from surprised to confused to sympathetic. He wasn’t sure where to look, so he stared down at the remnants of his curry and bread.

“Well, it sounds like you have a crush on her,” Jongdae deadpanned, making Jisung’s head snap up from his plate. He opened his mouth to protest, but he knew it was no use. Jongdae was right.

“You should just talk to her. She may be older, but you might have things you both like?” Jongin added. Several men hummed in agreement and Jisung cradled his face in his hands.

“It sounds so easy when you say it like. What if she thinks I’m just a weird, little kid?”

Silence fell over the table again and Tao finally shrugged, “you won’t know until you try right? Look at Joonmyun. We’re all so handsome, especially me,” Tao paused when he was met with a few groans, “he probably was really nervous to talk to some of us, but look at him now.”
Jisung glanced in Joonmyun’s direction and the man gave a soft nod, shrugging as well, “it’s true. You should give it a try, just to see. You might be surprised what happens.”

That night, Jisung went to bed with the resolve to follow everyone’s advice and just try.

When it was time for recess and lunch, Jisung gripped the extra lunch Luhan had packed for him tightly and walked across the field, his determination echoing in each step.

The moment he stepped in front of Mina, his stomach lurched and he nearly turned and ran away, but she stopped talking with her friends and addressed him, stopping him dead in his tracks.

“Hey, you’re Kim Jisung right?” Jisung turned around slowly and nodded, already feeling heat rush to his face.

Mina was actually talking to him.

“Ye-ye-yeah,” the word ended in a weird high pitch and Jisung inwardly cringed, but Mina didn’t seem to notice, “I-um, brought an extra lunch. Are you hungry?”

There he’d did it!

Mina eyed him carefully and looked at the bag before she hummed a yes, “your lunches always look great, so I don’t mind. I forgot my lunch this morning and the school food isn’t good.”

When Jisung gave her the bag, she grinned and invited him to sit down with her on the benches, under some trees. As they walked across the field together, Jisung’s mind raced.

Did his hair look okay? Did he still smell like lotion? Was a piece of his breakfast still stuck in his teeth? What if he said something stupid? What if Mina hated the lunch?

All those questions halted to a stop when Mina took a seat on the bench and left just enough space for Jisung to sit next to her.

“So why did you share your lunch with me?” Mina asked, taking a bite out of the piece of bread that Jisung had helped Luhan make.

Jisung couldn’t think of any answer, so he just shrugged and looked down at his own bread “you looked hungry.”

That earned him a laugh and Mina grinned wide before she went back to eating the bread.

“Well did your mom buy this bread? It’s great,” the unintended compliment made him blush and he cleared his throat, “I-uhh-I made it with one of my dads.”

It was the first time Jisung had referred to anyone in the house as his father, but he found that it didn’t make much of a difference. Kris, Joonmyun, Luhan, and Minseok were like having what he imagined a dad would be like and the others were like having older brothers or very good friends that lived with him.

“Dads?” Mina asked, one of her eyebrows raising in question. Jisung shrugged again.

“Hard to explain, but my mom died. Now I just live with my sister, my brothers and my dads.” Mina looked like she wanted to ask more questions, but she let it go. She didn’t want to seem nosy.
Instead, Jisung asked Mina some questions, attempting to follow everyone’s advice.

By the end of lunchtime, he knew Mina’s favorite color (pink), her favorite food (bread), her favorite subject (history) and what she liked to do when school was out on the weekend (swim with her friends and take dancing lessons at the palace).

From that day on, Mina always found an excuse to talk with Jisung and the two became close friends, just as everyone had told Jisung in the house.

It’d been just that easy.

And now he felt stupid as he thought back on how many missed opportunities he’d had in the past.

The public bathhouse used to be one of Tao’s favorite places to go when he lived with Siwon and his family, so every once in a while, he found himself going there to reminisce.

It was why he was sitting next to an elderly man, completely naked, staring blankly at the empty wall ahead of him. When he’d asked Sehun to come with him, he’d been turned without a second thought.

Sehun hated strangers looking at his body.

“I see you still like coming here to be alone with your thoughts,” a familiar voice said, breaking Tao’s trance. He looked away from the wall and came face-to-face with Taeyong, someone who he’d met when he was a pet. The boy was also a pet and when Tao saw that his tight fitted silver necklace was still clamped around his neck, he knew he still was one.

“Long time no see,” Tao sighed, patting the seat next to him. The younger man nodded and he sat down next to Tao, leaning against the wall, “how have you been?”

“As well as I could be. Hyukjae had a party last night and my services were required. I came here to rest,” when Tao looked closer, he saw the darkened marks the covered Taeyong’s skin in various places, some even disappearing underneath his towel.

Looking at them made Tao’s heart ache for the Taeyong. The boy was barely in his 21st year and had been working for Hyukjae’s family since he was in his 10th year.

While Taeyong had not been trained with Tao, they met at a party that Siwon had held in honor of his second child being born. The younger man couldn’t have been in anything more than his 13th year and Tao recalled feeling the same twisted feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Hyukjae had paid a lot of money for Taeyong, considering that he’d been taken and trained from an extremely young age, so servants like him were rare and exclusive to the extremely wealthy.

“How have things been for you? I heard from Hyukjae that Siwon is getting out of prison soon, are you worried?” Tao’s eyes widened at the news and he shook his head.

“How everything has been fine, but I wasn’t aware of Siwon,” now instead of the hollow ache, his heart started to race and he looked around the bathhouse, scanning the faces. He wasn’t sure if Siwon would come after him, but he couldn’t be too careful, especially because he knew what the man was capable of.

Taeyong must’ve noticed the shift in his attitude, because his eyes widened and he shook his head, “I didn’t mean to make you nervous…” Tao waved his concern away and schooled his expression to a neutral one.
“I’m okay, I just didn’t expect to ever hear about him getting out of prison. I wonder if his father paid off the jailers.”

It was a fair assumption considering that there were men in prison who’d done much less than Choi Siwon, rotting as they remained locked up to atone for their mistakes.

If Taeyong hadn’t told him, Tao would’ve seen Siwon for himself as he walked home from the bath house.

Luckily, Tao caught sight of him first and hid behind a stall of cloth, taking his time to examine the man from afar.

His appearance hadn’t changed much besides the fact that he’d gotten much slimmer while in prison. If Tao hadn’t harbored a simmering hatred for the man, he would’ve admitted that he looked good.

Standing by his side were his wife, Sooyoung and his two children, Seulgi and Wonho.

In all of the years that he’d spent away, Seulgi was growing to look more and more like her mother, including her impressive height. Wonho, as usual, favored his father in looks and body build, though he was much more muscular due to the intensive training from the military.

When Tao tried to sneak past, he caught Seulgi’s eyes and the girl started to speak but decided against it and just waved instead.

She’d always been wise beyond her years, even from infancy.

Wonho looked up from the conversation and followed his sister’s gaze, his eyes also falling on Tao. There was a gap in their age, but Tao had played with him until Siwon had the boy sent away to train him in the military due to his penchant for sharp words. Following that, Tao saw the boy less and less as the years went by and so he was particularly surprised to see him now.

Much like Seulgi, instead of drawing attention to Tao, he only nodded and his gaze drifted back to his father’s conversation.

Despite not saying anything to any member of the Choi family, Tao’s heart raced as he threaded his way through the market carefully, making sure to avoid any potential contact with Siwon.

“You look like you saw a ghost. What’s wrong?” Sehun asked as soon as Tao stumbled into the house, nearly walking directly into Minseok. Tao just shook his head and continued towards his room, his mind still in a conflicted haze.

The moment he walked into the room and Sehun saw him, the man stood on his feet and walked over to him, grabbing his shoulders, “what’s wrong Tao?”

Unlike Minseok, who’d let him go, probably out of pity, Sehun wouldn’t let it go so easily.

Finally, the words came out and Tao told Sehun everything that Taeyong had told him, both in the bath house and when they’d eaten lunch together.

“So they released that bastard from prison. It probably was on a bribe, because if I remember right, Joonmyun said there were many charges against him. He should’ve been sitting in prison for the
rest of his life.” Tao only nodded and leaned further into Sehun’s body, sighing as the sound of the man’s heartbeat calmed his worries.

Siwon was a proud man, but he didn’t have enough audacity to do anything to Tao now that he was with Joonmyun. That much he was sure of and with the way, his thoughts were racing, he needed something else to focus on.

Anything.

Luckily, Sehun was an expert at reading his moods and knew exactly what to do to keep him distracted. Without even having to ask, Sehun started telling him stories of the things he had to do when he was living by himself.

“Once I had to eat a lizard,” Sehun trailed off, his fingers pausing as they threaded through Tao’s inky black hair. When Tao looked up, there was a far away look in Sehun’s eyes and he shivered before returning to his story.

One of the things that kept Tao from ever attempting to run away when he grew wary of having to please Siwon, was the fact that the man’s influence knew no bounds.

Even if he wasn’t there, he had metaphorical eyes and ears everywhere and even when Tao went to the bathhouse. He had to make sure he kept his conversations with people like Taeyong light and innocent.

Only when they were in the market, did they ever really talk about things that mattered.

Tao had almost forgotten how that felt since Joonmyun completely differed from Siwon.

Before, leaving the house and wandering around the town had been calming and relaxing to Tao, but now with the chance that he might run into Siwon, he preferred to stay indoors.

Even when Yixing or Jongdae invited him to go to the palace with them, he declined because he dreaded the slim chance that he may run into Siwon.

“I won’t let him do anything to you,” Sehun whispered in Tao’s hair as they lay underneath the stars, both of them embarrassingly full from dinner. Instead of protesting like he wanted to, Tao only nodded and pressed a kiss on Sehun’s exposed collar.

Whenever Tao was in Joonmyun’s presence, the man spoke softly and only expressed his support, despite never specifying why. It was something that he appreciated and for the first few weeks following Siwon’s release, he allowed it to continue.

After all, Tao had spent a large portion of his life being pampered and catered to. Why would he decline it now, when he needed it the most.

Finally, Joonmyun broke his selective silence and he mentioned Siwon directly.

“You are aware that he wouldn’t even think of causing any one of us harm, right? He may have money and influence, but I, and I’d hate to phrase it this way, have a lot more influence than he
does. The worst thing he can do is sputter empty insults, that’s all.” Tao’s heart began to race as his mind went through all the potential possibilities, landing on ones such as Siwon attempting to hurt Joonmyun for sending him to prison.

Each of those scenarios made Tao’s heart squeeze in his chest and he tried not to dwell on them, but Joonmyun could tell he was far away in recesses of his mind.

“Tao,” it was only after the fifth time that Joonmyun had called him, did his attention finally fall back on Joonmyun and the warm waters that surrounded their bodies.

Right. He’d come to Joonmyun’s room seeking comfort and the man had led him to a warm bath that boasted oil of Joonmyun’s signature vanilla scent.

While he’d been lost in his thoughts, Joonmyun had unraveled his hair from the ponytail he’d kept it in and massaged soap into his scalp. He’d been in the process of rinsing it when Joonmyun finally caught Tao’s attention again.

“No need to be lost in your thought alone. I am here to listen whenever you need it,” there was a gentle assertion that he would listen to anything Tao had to and he found that he couldn’t decline the offer.

Even if he’d already expressed his thoughts and fears to Sehun, it seemed as though the moment he voiced them, several more took their places.

Before Tao could second guess spilling his thoughts to Joonmyun, the words were flowing out his mouth like water from a broken dam. Now, he couldn’t stop them even if he wanted to.

“What if he wants to get his revenge? We were the reason he was jailed and he must be angry,” Tao sighed, feeling the weight of everything lift from his shoulders and his mind.

There had been so many ‘what ifs’ and now as he soaked in warm water with a man who loved and understood him without condition, they seemed to float like the rose petals in the bath water.

“Everything that I’ve told you still stands,” Joonmyun spoke, his words still soft. The words, just like his embrace, were warm.

Tao only vaguely realized that he was crying when he felt extra moisture hit his face, “I haven’t cried in...so long.” His voice was raspy and as he spoke into Joonmyun’s shoulder, it was muffled as well.

Joonmyun only held him tighter.

Sehun’s night had been lonely, but he knew that Joonmyun would know exactly how to calm Tao’s worries.

It’d been strange to wake up to a partially empty bed, but he took it as a sign that Joonmyun had done his best and now there was no reason for him to slack or put off his chores.

It was his turn to help Luhan cook breakfast and without Tao repeatedly luring him back into bed, he actually arrived in the kitchen on time and fully clothed.

“I’ll take it you slept alone,” Luhan commented, snorting when Sehun shot him a crossed look.
Baekhyun held Chanyeol tighter as he attempted to get up and start his day, intent on joining Kris and Joonmyun at the market.

Lately, he’d been feeling restless and he felt the need to do something with himself. One of his talents was that he was good with using his strength and body, so the previous night, he’d volunteered to help with some of the incoming shipment of foreign goods.

Weirdly enough, the thought of lifting heavy crates and containers made him excited and he’d even picked out a special outfit, one that’d been borrowed from Kris.

“Stay with me,” Baekhyun whined, squinting as the beginnings of the sunlight hit his eyes. With his flushed cheeks, small hands and puckered lips, Chanyeol was tempted to oblige him.

However, the thought of breaking a sweat was far too appealing and he unraveled Baekhyun’s hand from the fabric of his pants, “I’ll be back later Baek.”

Once he was dressed, he bent down and kissed Baekhyun’s forehead, then proceeded to the kitchen where he, Kris and Joonmyun ate the breakfast Kyungsoo and Minseok had specifically prepared the night before.

“You look excited,” Joonmyun mentioned after they’d finished. Chanyeol nodded and he shrugged, “it’s been too long since I’ve really done something, you know?”

Joonmyun nodded and in that rare occasion, he completely understood exactly what Chanyeol was talking about.

By the time the sun hung high in the sky, Chanyeol’s tunic was ringed with sweat and his arms and legs were tingling from the effort.

“I had no idea how much I missed just lifting and moving things,” Chanyeol sighed as Joonmyun handed him a cup of chilled fruit juice, compliments of Luna.

He didn’t miss the way Joonmyun’s eyes lingered on his throat, watching as his Adam's apple bobbed while he drank the juice.

Joonmyun’s attention made his stomach twist in arousal and he tried to reign it in, focused on finishing the task at hand.

The warm water relaxed his muscles and Chanyeol unconsciously sank deeper until only his head was above the water.

Joonmyun’s attention had flustered him and even now that he was alone, it was still on his mind.

Their romantic relationship had begun out of proximity and now that they were several years down the line, even now his feelings were changing and growing.

At first, he’d only had eyes for Baekhyun, but as he’d spent more and more time with Joonmyun, talking and laughing, he’d realized quite quickly that it was possible to love more than one person at once.
The first time Chanyeol and Joonmyun had shared a bed was like nothing Chanyeol had ever experienced before and even recalling the bits and pieces of it had Chanyeol wanting to dunk his entire head into the water.

He’d grown so accustomed to Baekhyun’s body, he’d been clumsy at first but after a bit of gentle guidance, Chanyeol had learned what Joonmyun liked.

As much as it flustered him to admit, he’d come apart under Joonmyun’s hands as much as the man had unraveled under his.

“If you sit in here any longer, you might catch a fever,” Baekhyun spoke, his words breaking Chanyeol out of his daze. When he turned his head, he saw Baekhyun stepping into the warm pool of water slowly.

He waded over to Chanyeol and immediately his hands were on the other man’s shoulders, kneading at the sore muscles there, “I thought you’d like some company.” There was a hint of playfulness that made Chanyeol’s body thrum with excitement, but when he even debated acting on it, his muscles protested.

Baekhyun saw the excitement both spark and die in Chanyeol’s eyes and he let out an entertained snort.

“We can do that when you’re not sore,” Baekhyun sighed, digging the pads of his fingers into Chanyeol’s lower back.

In response, Chanyeol let out a tired moan and leaned back into Baekhyun, nodding.

That was probably for the best.

Kris reached out and traced the soft lines of Luhan’s face, smiling when the other man’s face scrunched up and his head shook softly, trying to ward off the tickling feeling.

After three unsuccessful attempts, one of Luhan’s eyes cracked open and he squinted at Kris, “don’t you have something better to do?” His voice was scratchy and still dreamy like he wasn’t quite ready to get up.

Instead of answering, Kris leaned forward and kissed the top of his forehead, making Luhan’s mildly annoyed expression into one of satisfaction. When a smile spread across Luhan’s lips, Kris leaned down and kissed them, drawing the other man into a kiss that sweet and deep.

“That’s always nice to wake up to,” Luhan sighed when Kris pulled away, licking his lips. His eyes were both open now and he sat up, his cheeks flushed a light pink color.

“Everyday is like the first time,” Luhan nodded with a soft hum and shuffled until he was seated in Kris’s lap, his head rested on the man’s shoulder.

“You remember the first time?” Luhan’s voice had a peculiar tone to it and it made Kris lean back against the wall, looking up at the ceiling.

How could he ever forget?

When Kris’s silence stretched on, Luhan chuckled, “I’ll take that as a yes.”
The market was closed due to the national holiday that was King Joonseok’s birthday, so for once, Kris actually relaxed and let Luhan him back to sleep, despite that he was still sitting with his back against the wall and Luhan in his lap.

He couldn’t sleep too much because his body was unused to it, so when he woke up again, Luhan was gone and he heard a distant chattering, probably coming from the kitchen.

The one voice he could hear clearly was Hana, who was explaining something in such an animated voice that it carried down the hallway.

Kris slipped on light pants and a sleeveless tunic then walked towards the noise. The first one to greet him was Hana, as she ran into his leg. She was barely taller than his waist and he reached down, surprising her as he picked up.

She let out a squeal of delight and settled into him, not uttering a word of being too old to be held like she did when most of the other men—sans Joonmyun—attempted to pick her up. Usually, she started lecturing them with a huffy, “I’m almost in my 7th year!”

A look of mock jealousy crossed Luhan’s face and Hana hid her face in Kris’s shoulder.

While the girl was content to be held by Kris, she tapped his shoulder and he let her down, settling her gently onto her feet after a few moments.

“We should go do something today,” Jisung suggested, looked out into the garden as a soft breeze rustled some of the flowers.

The weather was perfect and since the market and everything else was closed, everyone was free, even Yixing.

“I’m already ahead of you. I’ve made our lunches and we’re going to have a picnic in the park,” Luhan sighed, leaning back against the counter with a bright smile on his face.

Jisung and Hana’s eyes grew wide and they let out cheers, jumping around the spacious living room and parts of the kitchen.

Kris watched as the excitement lingered in the two children, as well as the other men, as everyone ate their breakfast and did things to keep busy until it was time to leave for lunch.

He chose to pass his time reading the book that was supposedly based off their life with Joonmyun. He’d never been a person that enjoyed romance stories, but there’s something endearing about the similarities between everyone within Author Shim’s story and the men in the house.

Luhan was, again, cuddled against his chest and reading the book along with him.

When they got to the part that sounded suspiciously like their own story, Luhan would nudge him each time the details hit home.

“I didn’t tell him much, but he seems to have such a vivid, yet accurate imagination,” Luhan muttered, pressing his thumb on the page where the main character, June, met Lukei and Rukai in a courtesan house.
The moment Kris got to the part where Rukai had sex with Lukei was the first time, he read the pages with bated breath, feeling wave after wave of arousal hit him. With each accurate comparison, his arousal increased and at first Luhan didn’t notice, but when he finally did feel the press of Kris’s dick on his back, he turned and looked at him.

“It is eerily similar right? Me too.” Kris nodded silently and licked his dry lips, continuing where he left off.

Lukei let out soft groans as Rukai’s hips met his own, pressing them impossibly close together.

They moved against each other in a rhythmic fashion, their skin sliding from the sweat. Lukei’s mouth was open in a silent moans as Rukai grazed that spot inside of him, making his scramble for anything to hold onto to keep him from losing his mind.

This was a long time in the making and now that they were in the midst of it, neither of them could put it in words. They didn’t need to.

Lukei’s body shook as he came untouched between them and he held onto Rukai’s shoulders, the sensitivity bringing fresh tears to his eyes.

“Finally mine,” Rukai gasped, pressing impossibly closer to Lukei as he spilled his seed deep inside of him.

“He really has a way with words,” Kris whispered, clearing his throat to disguise his moan as Luhan pressed into him again, though this time it was much more purposeful.

Kris didn’t even try to stop the groan that slipped from his lips and Luhan craned his neck to grin at him. From even the awkward angle that they were at, Kris caught Luhan’s lips in a kiss and leaned into it, giving Luhan a brief taste of his arousal.

“Later,” Luhan whispered, right into Kris’s ear. The way he said it sent chills down Kris’s back, so the only thing he could do was nod silently.

Just after Kris had finished the last chapter of the book, he and Luhan got up from the couch and Kris tried awkwardly to shuffle away to their room, shielding his erection from anyone who might walk by and see him.

Though, honestly, the only person he hoped didn’t see him was Jongdae because the man didn’t know how to keep a secret if his life depended on it and he would never hear the end of it.

Kris was so distracted getting back to his bedroom, that he failed to notice that Luhan followed him. He only realized when the door closed behind him and small hands wrapped around his waist, rubbing at his stomach from over his shirt.

“I know I said later, but I can see you haven’t calmed down yet,” Luhan murmured, eyeing the unwavering tent in Kris’s thin pants, “how about I help you a bit?”

Kris’s mouth got dry and he watched as Luhan sank to his knees and pulled the top of his pants with him, immediately making him bare from the waist down.

They had to prepare to leave for the picnic soon, so Luhan didn’t tease him and draw it out like he usually did. Instead, Luhan gripped him and licked thick, fat stripes on the underside of his dick, pull strained groans from him.
When he finally engulfed the head of his cock, Kris’s knees threatened to buckle and Luhan looked up, amusement in his eyes. He let Kris fall from his mouth and pointed over to the bed, instructing Kris to sit down so he wouldn’t fall.

A blush rose to his face and Kris felt like an inexperienced young man all over again, but did as he was told. Luhan sank back down, kneeling between Kris’s spread thighs, a focused expression on his face.

Since he was already slick with spit, Luhan stroked him once with a tight fist, feeling the muscles in Kris’s thighs tighten from the sensation. The gesture also caused a bead of pre-come to well up at the tip, which Luhan leaned to clean off.

There was little preparation or warning for when Luhan took him deep into his throat, not even blinking the head of Kris’s dick his the back of his throat.

Large hands twisted into his hair and pulled lightly, making Luhan bob his head.

The wet, throaty sounds he made Kris chew on his bottom lip, debating if he wanted to push up into the wet heat or just let Luhan have complete control over him and his orgasm.

After a few, pleasure-filled minutes, Luhan made the choice for him and started to caress and lightly squeeze his balls, pushing—or rather—shoving him towards his impending release.

One last trip down Luhan’s throat had him yanking the man’s hair harder and spilling down his throat, with noise that was akin to a throaty whine. Luhan relaxed until Kris’s grip loosened and then pulled away, leaving a string of spit connecting them for a brief moment. He rose to his feet and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, leaning forward to give Kris a deep kiss.

Their tongues tangled briefly and Kris could taste the slight bitterness of his own release mixed with the taste of cinnamon that always lingered around Luhan.

“That should hold you over until later right?” Kris gave another silent nod and embraced Luhan, easily dwarfing the man because of their height differences.

The walk to the park was short, with Jisung and Hana running the entire way with huge smiles on their faces.

When they arrived, they realized that many families had the same idea as them, so the park was fairly crowded. Luckily, Luna had secured a decent sized space for her triplets to run and jump around in and was happy to share the ample space with the 12 men and two children.

Hana and Jisung immediately initiated a screeching game of hide-and-seek with the children, which brought a smile to everyone’s faces and a cringe to those surrounding them.

At one point in the game, Hana collapsed in Joonmyun’s lap and rested, panting dramatically as the triplets and Jisung looked on. As always, Joonmyun simply patted the little girl on the head and allowed her to use him as a resting mat.

She only got up because Tao kept using the edges of her long hair to tickle her nose, nearly inducing sneezes. The little girl glared at him and finally climbed out of Joonmyun’s lap, favoring instead to jump on Tao, making him fall back on the grass with a surprised laugh.

The triplets and Jisung caught sight of that and decided that instead of playing with each other, they
wanted to play with Tao as well, so soon, four small bodies and one medium-sized one also joined in the attack.

Sehun must’ve felt bad for Tao because at some point, he pulled Jisung off him and startled to tickle him, making the boy fall over in laughter, gasping.

Kris watched on with an entertained smile on his face, loving every second of watching the kids play and enjoy themselves.

It was nice to see children get the childhood that most of the other men weren’t afforded, especially him, Luhan and Jongin.

As Luhan used him as a makeshift pillow, Kris decided that if he could do everything again, he wouldn’t mind dealing with Chilhyun and his mother again, if it meant that he ended up with Luhan, Joonmyun and the others.

It was worth it.

Kyungsoo watched as Chanyeol attempted to play a stringed instrument he’d never seen before and unlike the other things that the tall man did clumsily, his fingers glided with a grace he hadn’t seen.

He’d nearly finished cleaning the floor by the time actual music came from the instrument, showing that besides physical labor, Chanyeol apparently excelled in playing music.

After a weeks time, Chanyeol could play songs on the strange instrument, though it seemed that he couldn’t read musical notes.

Chanyeol, never too aware of his surrounding, finally caught Kyungsoo staring at him and waved him over.

“Interesting right? Yixing got this as a gift from a foreign anniversary,” as Chanyeol spoke, Baekhyun walked out the library, laughing.

“It’s emissary,” Baekhyun corrected him, watching as Chanyeol looked at him in confusion, then shrugged.

“Anyway, Yixing doesn’t care much for music, so he gave it to me,” Chanyeol boasted, a bright smile on his face.

“You mean after you begged him for it for a week?” This time Chanyeol’s eyebrows furrowed and he turned his head, obviously embarrassed at being called out.

From the way that Baekhyun reached and kneaded his hand into the back of the man’s neck, an intimate gesture coming from Baekhyun, it was obvious none of his words were said out of spite.

“So, you’ve been watching me for a while. Do you want to try playing?” Kyungsoo shook his head quickly and took a step back.

As always, he had to fight his first instinct, which was to walk out the room and retreat to a place to be alone, and he cleared his throat, “no, actually I was wondering if you knew a song I grew up singing. It would be nice to hear and sing it again.” Chanyeol’s eyes got wide and leaned closer to
Kyungsoo, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

“Hum it for me and I can pick up the tune.” His response shocked Kyungsoo, but he did as Kyungsoo said and hummed what he could remember. Chanyeol moved his fingers on the instrument a bit and after a few moments, Chanyeol caught the rhythm and got the base melody down, “do you know the words? It would help me more if you sang.”

Kyungsoo’s heart sped up and he glanced at Baekhyun, wondering if the man would judge his singing harshly. When his expression proved to be an impassive one, Kyungsoo nodded and Chanyeol started playing the melody.

The words flowed from his lips like they’d been waiting to spill from them and soon enough, Chanyeol matched him and the end result sounded beautiful.

When they finished, Jongin walked into the room, yawning with a smile on his face. He’d probably been napping in the shade and the sound of the music had woken him up.

He’d told Kyungsoo many times how much he enjoyed hearing him sing, describing Kyungsoo’s voice ‘like honey.’

“I didn’t realize you could sing so well. You should be one of those singers that travel with musicians,” Baekhyun complimented, a soft smile on his face. Kyungsoo felt heat rise to his face and he forced out a shy ‘thanks.’

“You should sing for Joonmyun,” Jongin sighed, walking closer to Kyungsoo to lean some of his weight on the man as he rested his chin on top of Kyungsoo’s. It was equal parts endearing and annoying.

Kyungsoo always felt a bit uncomfortable when the focus was on him, but this time it didn’t feel too bad. So, instead of finding a reason to remove himself from the room, he stayed and enjoyed the compliments the others gave him.

Joonmyun woke up in his bed, in a cold sweat and a pit in his stomach.

From childhood, he’d been able to tell when something horrible happened before anyone told him, but he’d never actually admitted it aloud.

Jongdae, who was sound asleep next to stirred and sat up, a worried expression on his face tired face, “what’s wrong?” Joonmyun was silent for a few moments, trying to get his racing heart to slow down.

“I don’t know,” is what he finally said when he’d composed himself.

When breakfast time came, Jongdae didn’t mention it again, but while Joonmyun prepared to start his day, the strange feeling wouldn’t leave him.

Just as he was about to leave for the market, a messenger outfitted in a black rode into their front yard and dismounted their horse.

It was just as Joonmyun had feared.
Before the man spoke, Joonmyun took a deep breath and braced himself for the messenger.

“Prince Joonmyun, King Joonseok is dead. He passed in his sleep last night. Please come to the palace with me.” Joonmyun’s throat tightened and he nodded, willing himself not to cry.

His father had been struggling with his health for the past year and while it came as no surprise, there was still a hollow feeling in his chest. Out of those in the royal family besides Joonki, his father had loved him as much as his mother had, so it felt like being struck.

Joonmyun told the messenger to wait and he hurried into the house, rushing to his room to change into something that was more proper.

When Kris caught sight of the mourning robes, his soft expression hardened and without speaking, he knew he needed to alert the vendors that the market would be closed for the day.

It was customary that business pause to honor a royal birth or death.

While Kris rushed to get the news out to the vendors who were also starting their day, Joonmyun took the horse offered to him and the messenger walked alongside, telling him further details.

A place he’d spent so much of his life avoiding, now seemed to welcome him as he walked through the unusually quiet halls.

Even when the servants saw him, they didn’t bother gossiping and instead just greeted him as they were supposed to. It would’ve been nice had his heart and mind not been overcome with grief.

The moment he reached the hallway in front of the throne room, Joonki approached Joonmyun and without a word, slumped into his open arms, quiet sobs escaping from his mouth.

Joonmyun dismissed all the nearby servants and guided his weeping brother back to his own chambers, shoving his own emotions to the back of his mind. He needed to be strong for both of them because no one could see the future King breaking down in the public eye.

Even without Joonki’s participation, his coronation as King was set for two weeks after the official mourning period had passed.

In the meantime, Joonmyun and Yubin managed to work together to ensure a solid future for the kingdom while Joonki refused to leave his chambers. Every morning and night, Joonmyun had to deliver his brother’s food, or else the younger man would not eat.

At his own home, he had many arms to comfort him and he only allowed himself to grieve behind the walls of his home. Kris managed the market by himself while Joonmyun took care of things at the palace and his brother while Luhan managed to keep everyone from getting too worried about Joonmyun at the house.

Joonki finally emerged from his self-induced isolation, appearing in the grand meeting room, dressed in the appropriate mourning yet soon-to-be king clothing. There was a hardness to his expression that made Joonmyun’s heart twist and when Joonki sat at the head of the table, Joonmyun reached for his brother’s hand.

Thankfully, the younger man squeezed it and gave Joonmyun a subtle nod.
Their father’s funeral had been a somber event that had been attended by several dignitaries from the neighboring countries, including Baekhyun’s parents, Seungbaek and his wife. Without the silent approval of what he’d chosen to do in his life from his father, there were several hushed whispers about the 11 men and two children that followed Joonmyun into the church.

“They don’t even have decency at a funeral,” Baekhyun scoffed, narrowing his eyes at the offending princess from the same country as Yubin. The woman immediately stopped speaking when she saw the glare and looked at her lap in embarrassment, her veil tipping dangerously.

Jisung sat next to Jongdae with a somber look on his face and Hana sat in Luhan’s lap, looking around the filled church through her little, black lace veil. She’d probably never seen so many people of noble birth, so her eyes remained watchful and interested throughout the entire service.

Luhan and Kris sat on either side of Joonmyun, repeatedly looking at him to make sure he was okay.

His chest had been aching since hearing the news, but otherwise, he was holding himself together well. After all, he was nearly in his 50th year, so it was unbecoming of him to break down as Joonki had.

When it came time to bid his father the last farewell, he sat a small bouquet of purple tulips on his father’s chest and prayed a simple prayer that his father be reincarnated as a noble person once again.

At the last meeting to tie loose ends surrounding King Joonhyuk’s death, it was decided that Yubin would return and live out the rest of her life in the country of her birth. In any other instance, Joonmyun would’ve been overjoyed to see her leave, but watching her carriages leave the palace walls left him feeling empty.

Joonki stood at his side, along with his wife and children, a sad look in his eyes.

“Grandma is going far far away?” Joontae asked, pulling at his mother’s dress. The woman nodded and she whispered that they would visit in the summer. That seemed to please the little boy and he nodded, retreating back by his older sister, Joonhee.

While Joonki somewhat respected Joonmyun desire to not be within the palace and a part of the royal court, he kept finding reasons to drag Joonmyun inside. It seemed as though the one person he trusted the most, was Joonmyun.

All of his royal advisors hated it, but now that Joonki was king, his word was law and they had to abide by it or risk being ousted from their position.

“I just don’t understand why you need my help Joonki. You were the person who received nearly two decades of royal education. I left when I was young, so I only know a small part of what it takes to run a kingdom,” Joonmyun sighed, sitting right across from Joonki in the man’s private office.

Joonki sighed and gave his older brother a small smile, “I understand that Joonmyun, but it takes more than education to run a kingdom. You have what many don’t. A heart.”
The words caught him by surprise and he tried to deny it but knew the weight of the truth to the other man’s words.

Finally, he settled on a gentle way to let his brother know that he too had his own life, “I have a house to run as well, plus children and husbands to attend to. Surely, you understand that I can’t be here in the palace at all times.” Joonki’s eyes lit up and he leaned forward, a wide grin on his face.

Joonmyun could already tell what he was going to suggest and he decided to shut him down before the words crossed his lips.

“Before you suggest it, no I will not live in this palace again. I won’t subject the other members of my family to it as well.” Joonki’s eyebrows arched in challenge, but then he pressed his lips into a tight line, knowing better than to try to argue with Joonmyun.

“As you wish, but please don’t be a stranger. I hope that when I request your presence, you come,” Joonki spoke, his tone soft as he reached across the table for Joonmyun’s hand. It was a moment before Joonmyun obliged him and held them, squeezing in the way that was becoming quite frequent between the brothers.

It seems that the death of their father and the departure of Yubin had brought them closer than ever.

Later that afternoon, Yixing and Joonmyun walked home from the palace, mostly in silence, sans for the remaining vendors cleaning their stalls and packing up to go home in the market.

“Prin-King Joonki wants all of us to stay within the royal courts,” Yixing spoke, breaking the peaceful silence. Joonmyun pressed his lips together in a line and gave a curt nod.

“I spent a large part of my life getting away from that place. I’d rather not willingly walk into the belly of the beast.” Yixing could sympathize with Joonmyun’s frame of mind now that he’d worked among the court advisors and others.

They were highly judgemental and though they were well aware of how high he’d scored on the scholar test, some still thought that he was only there because of nepotism and the late king’s soft spot for his eldest son.

Even when he did his best and worked relentlessly, these people never changed their opinions about him. He could see it in their eyes when they ignored his proposals, discarded his research and outright pretended he wasn’t present at times. It was disheartening, but with the help and support of both Joonmyun, Minseok and surprisingly, the Choi family, work was bearable.

As they reached home, Yixing walked closer to Joonmyun until they bumped shoulders, “generally speaking. It has been quite some time since we shared a bed right?” The grin on Yixing’s face made Joonmyun feel hot despite the cool breeze that whipped through the empty stalls of the market and nearby houses.

Yixing was never one to outwardly seek him too often, but whenever he did, he always made things interesting.

This time was no different.
There was a coy quality to their flirting as they ate dinner, stealing glances at each other. Yixing kept looking down into his soup and the only people who noticed a difference were Minseok and Luhan, though neither said a thing.

Yixing then took it upon himself to bathe separately, taking time to wash and rub scented lotion into his skin. The dry arid season was coming and he should pay more attention to his skin, no matter how busy or tired work might make him.

When he was satisfied with how his body was adequately groomed, he dressed in some of his thinnest night clothes, making his way to Joonmyun’s room.

The doors were open and he closed them behind himself, taking in how the room was glowing lightly from earthy scented candles. There was noise coming from the bathroom and Joonmyun appeared a few moments later, dressed in a silk robe. His hair was still wet and the visible places of his skin shone with water, showcasing the places he hadn’t dried off yet.

The younger man could feel himself looking and watch Joonmyun, his body running hot as the man made his way further into the bedroom, a similar expression on his face.

One of Yixing’s attributes that Joonmyun loved, was his ability to concentrate and multi-task.

He first discovered it when he watched as Yixing study science and math simultaneously, while also eating a light lunch. It had been the most fascinating thing Joonmyun had seen in a long time, so he forgot whatever he’d been doing and he simply watched Yixing.

It was only after he’d finished both his lunch and studying that he’d finally noticed Joonmyun leaning against the wooden door frame in the library. When Joonmyun realized he’d been caught, he jolted and shuffled around the library, muttering to himself as Yixing watched him, amused.

Soon after, Joonmyun discovered that Yixing’s ability to multi-task carried over into the bedroom.

Now, as Yixing rolled his hips against Joonmyun’s watching the man’s eyelids flutter in pleasure, he spoke about his day, telling Joonmyun all the details about the ancient transcripts he’d overlooked and the stories he’d read. Joonmyun could do a few things at once, but the precise angle of Yixing’s thrusts were causing Joonmyun’s brain to short circuit and overheat.

He caught words here and there, especially when Yixing reached between them with a relatively loose fist and stroked him slow, coaxing him to full hardness as pre-come collected on the tip of his dick.

Yixing hadn’t even bothered to disrobe him, favoring instead of leaving the belt tied, yet allowing the soft fabric to drape then fall around his shoulders. By the time Yixing’s hips smacked against his own, his shoulders were bare and the cool breeze from the night cooled the sweat that was forming on Joonmyun’s body.

“More Xing,” Joonmyun hummed, gripping Yixing biceps.

Like usual, their romantic exchanges were quiet and filled with passion.

Joonmyun came first, spilling between them as Yixing’s fist tightened and his pace quickened. His thighs twitched from the aftershocks, but Yixing didn’t stop moving. He simply continued to move steadily, gritting his teeth at how tight Joonmyun was.
It took a few more strokes until he was ready to come. Joonmyun’s body shivered each time his prostate was grazed, but he didn’t mind as Yixing’s own orgasm snuck up and overtook him.

After a few more thrusts, Yixing let out a moan and he came with his hips pressed flush against Joonmyun’s skin. He bowed his head and kissed Joonmyun’s neck, breathing harshly as he tried to catch his breath.

With his nose so close to Joonmyun’s neck, Yixing could still smell the fragrance of Joonmyun’s vanilla lotion on his damp skin. There was also the clinging scent of sex that lingered on both of their bodies.

Yixing pulled away gently, not missing the soft moan Joonmyun let out as he moved next to him, reaching for a cloth to clean them with.

“Worth the wait?” Joonmyun asked quietly, sounding tired. Yixing nodded and he wrapped his arms around Joonmyun, taking the time to bury his face in the man’s neck again. The older man leaned closer into the embrace, enjoying the warmth and tickling feeling of Yixing placing kisses on his neck again.

Joonmyun was certain there would be red marks he needed to cover come the morning time, but for the moment, he let himself relax and enjoy being held.

Joonki proved to be a capable king and as time passed, he called Joonmyun to the palace less and less for questions and guidance and more for companionship.

When school let out for the harsh Summer months, Hana constantly begged to accompany Joonmyun to the palace, in favor to play with Princess Joonhee. Both girls enjoyed each others company and Joonmyun was never good at telling Hana no, so more times than not, Joonmyun spent his time having tea with Joonki, watching as their daughters ran around the royal gardens.

“She’s getting older and I’m worried about if she’ll adjust well. Now that she’s school-aged, the governess has insisted that she start to learn manners,” Joonki stopped to take a deep, tired breath, “and she hates it. She throws tea sandwiches and keeps burping at the table.” Joonmyun watched as Joonhee squatted down and showed Hana where snails were living, not caring that the frilly shorts underneath her dress were showing.

“I can definitely see that,” Joonmyun chuckled, watching as Hana picked up one of the snails and sat it in the palm of her hand. Joonhee leaned closer with a grin and pulled a piece of lettuce, probably from the palace’s vegetable garden, out of her pocket and sat it in front of the snail.

The creature munched on the food slowly, much to the delight of both the little girls.

“How is Joontae doing?” Joonmyun asked, finally asking a question that had lingered in his mind since he’d first arrived. Usually, Joontae was like Joonhee’s shadow, so when the little boy was nowhere to be found, Joonmyun found that he was curious.

“Honestly, he much prefers the company of his mother. With the news that one of the concubines is expecting a boy, I imagine that Soobin is anxious and he is very keen on her emotions. He hasn’t left her side in a week.” Joonki’s shoulders tensed up as he talked and Joonmyun instantly felt remorseful for bringing up something so stressful.

After all, having concubines was natural of both kings and princes, so the fact that Joonki’s concubine was providing yet another potential heir to the throne, was nothing shocking. It was,
however, interesting to hear how his wife was dealing with the news. Now that she was the Queen, the news of a concubine bearing a son shouldn’t make her anxious.

As long as Joontae was healthy, she had nothing to worry about.

Joonmyun tried not to linger on that fact and instead took to watching Hana again.

“There’s something I must discuss with you Joonmyun,” Joonki spoke, his voice level and quiet like he wanted to share something confidential with him, “as you know, Joontae is my sole heir. Gods permitting that Chungha has a healthy birth, that will provide another heir.” Joonmyun nodded silently, waiting for Joonki to continue.

The younger man looked around quickly, taking in their surrounding before he leaned forward again, his voice still low, “I would like to list Jisung in the family registry. As a potential heir.” Joonki tried not to flinch as Joonmyun leaned away swiftly, leveling Joonki with a look of both horror, shock and absolute disapproval.

“That child has been through enough. I’ve already expressed that I don’t wish to involve my children in royal affairs.” His voice was cold and his words were full of venom, even to his own ears. Joonki leaned back into his seat and gave Joonmyun a remorseful nod.

“Please, brother. I understand your wishes, but I implore you to think about it further. It could prove to be very good for the boy, as well as for the kingdom.” Joonmyun’s mind was shut down from any further suggestions, but the plea did not fall on completely deaf ears.

“Perhaps, Joonmyun, the idea would not be awful. I understand your feelings towards everything having to do with both the palace and royalty in general, but you must also think further than that,” Luhan murmured, speaking softly as he lay his head on Joonmyun’s chest, “when we are no longer around. Where does that leave both Jisung and Hana? We are essentially their parents and caretakers, so even though they will hopefully be adults when we pass on, they will still need insurance. It would be a relief to know that they will be taken care of.”

Luhan’s words softened Joonmyun’s hard and resolve in only a way Luhan could do.

“I understand your words, but I don’t want those kids to have to deal with the things I dealt with in that place. Later, we will discuss this together with Jisung and Hana’s opinions and thoughts. They are children, but they deserve a say in this.”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right. Now, I need you to calm down. Your heart is racing,” Luhan commented, looking up at him, his eyebrows knitted in concern.

The following night, dinner happened as it usually did, though Joonmyun was a little more quiet than usual.

When there was a lull in the conversations at the table, Joonmyun finally spoke up, catching everyone’s attention.

“There’s something important that we need to discuss,” Joonmyun glanced at Jisung and Hana as well, “all of us.”
Since dinner was finished, Jongdae and Minseok, the cleanup crew for the night, cleared the dishes quickly then came back to their seats.

“I spoke with Joonki today and he asked me if I would allow Jisung and Hana to be written into the family registry,” Joonmyun paused and gauged everyone’s reaction, taking in the looks of approval, as well as the looks of confusion. “It means that in the event that something happens to Joonki, myself, and Joonki’s heirs, then Jisung will be in line for the throne.”

The quiet murmurs that had swept over the table silenced and everyone stared at Joonmyun.

“The royal advisors will riot,” Yixing spoke up first, his eyes still widened in shock. He spoke the words slowly as he shook his head, “what is King Joonki thinking?”

“While this is shocking news, what do you think Jisung?” Now all eyes at the table turned and Joonmyun saw the paleness of the boy’s face.

“I—um, does that mean I have to be King one day?” Jisung stammered, the words barely coming out louder than a whisper.

“No, not necessarily. You will be one of the heirs to the throne, but you won’t be first, second or third in line. However, if something does happen to all of the heirs, then it is possible. How do you feel about that?” Luhan explained calmly, both for Jisung and for the other men at the table.

“So does that make me a princess?” Hana asked, her voice full excitement. Each time she spent time with Joonhee, the girl would tell her about the many things she had to do and learn as a princess. No matter how awful Joonhee made it sound, Hana thought it sounded fun.

“I believe it does,” Joonmyun sighed, giving Hana a soft smile. She rocked forward in her chair and stood up, dancing off to the side. Jisung rolled his eyes at her reaction and Joonmyun was relieved to see the color return to his face.

“So what do you think about that? Is this something that you want to agree to or do you want to decline?” Kris asked, turning the attention back to Jisung.

The boy swallowed hard and he nodded, “yes, it’s okay. I want to do it. It will be nice for Hana and me to be on the family registry.” Joonmyun’s heart skipped a beat in his chest, but he nodded and promised that he would make the arrangements with Joonki the following day.

“And you sure you’re okay with that?” Luhan asked, speaking over the quiet chatter that had picked up.

Jisung gave a nod and gave both Luhan and Joonmyun a genuine smile.

“It has already been decided, so there is no need for discussion,” Joonki sighed, glancing at all the royal advisors as they muttered their quiet protests. Yixing only smiled and looked down at his notes and the gilded book in front of him.

He slipped on the white gloves next to the book and opened it carefully, marveling at the names and handwriting of the head scholars of the past. When he reached the last page, he ran a finger over Joonmyun’s name and he carefully copied Kim Jisung and Kim Hana onto the page in fresh red ink.

Joonmyun and Joonki watched him with anticipation, knowing that once the writing dried, it would
be official and none of the advisors would dare say a word.

Now that Yubin was gone, Joonki was the head of the country and therefore his words and decrees were both the beginning and the end.

The law.

For good measure, Yixing pressed his covered finger to the red ink and grinned when the white glove came away clean.

It was done.

Joonmyun couldn’t help himself as he peeked around the corners of the library, watching as both Hana and Jisung stunned the royal tutors at their intelligence.

The governess did a brief overview of manners and Hana stunned Momo by passing with flying colors.

Even when Hana and Joonhee played, unbeknownst to the girls, Joonhee was teaching the younger girl the things she learned in her lessons. For example, their intimate tea parties were manner lessons.

Jisung, so Joonmyun was discovering, held a natural gift for leadership and he was well rounded when it came to his school subjects. Joonmyun had to admit, Jisung had the makings to be a perfect prince.

He decided he’d seen enough and started off on his way back to the market when a servant met him and told him that Joonki wanted to speak to him.

Without even thinking about it, Joonmyun made his way to their usual meeting in Joonki’s chambers and he sat down, pouring himself a glass of cooled water.

“Thank you so much, brother. Not only have you granted what I asked, but your children are also motivating my own. Joontae pays more attention to his lessons now that Jisung is there and Joonhee willingly goes when she knows that Hana will be present. I couldn’t have asked for more,” Joonki grasped Joonmyun’s hand between his own, a genuinely grateful smile on his face.

The toll of being king had aged him a bit, in the form of a few wrinkles around his lips, but besides that Joonki still looked youthful and healthy. It Joonmyun hadn’t known what the man’s personality was like previous to sitting on the throne, he wouldn’t have understood why people had been so anxious about what kind of ruler he would be.

While there were times where he mentioned that Joonmyun would’ve been better suited for the task, he did a fine job himself and Joonmyun felt proud.

When the lessons were finished, Joonmyun walked with Jisung and Hana back home, hearing all about what they’d learned.

In the last few months, Jisung had grown quite a bit and was nearly the same height as Joonmyun, in only his 12th year. Luhan predicted that the boy would grow to be around the same height as Kris and Chanyeol.
Hana was growing as well, though not as quickly as her brother. Joonmyun could tell it bothered her when Jisung used her head as an armrest or paid no attention to how one of his strides was nearly three of hers.

As they approached home, Joonmyun watched the kids walk faster, rushing inside to tell everyone about their day in the palace. All of the men listened closely, even Jongdae who was busy stirring the pot on the stove.

From afar, Joonmyun felt like it was the perfect picture of his family and he felt a warm fullness in his heart. In the last nearly thirty years of his life, he’d gotten everything he’d always wished for when he felt alone. The love and care of his father had gotten him where he was today and despite everything else, Joonmyun was thankful.

He was thankful for each and every opportunity he’d had, as well as for all his husbands, who all held places in his heart that he couldn’t begin to explain and the children who’d found their way inside as well.

Everything as was, was perfect and Joonmyun found he couldn’t ask for more than that.

Kris greeted Joonmyun at the door with a kiss while Hana and Jisung continued their story.

“You okay?” Joonmyun smiled and nodded up at the man, a bright smile on his face.

“Always.”

Chapter End Notes

This story is finally done, but I feel kind of sad you know? I've been working hard on this for 3-4 years and I teared up as I wrote the last part. Thank you to everyone who's been with me since the beginning and thank you to those who've joined along the ride.

Thank you to everyone who read and showed love to this fic. You guys really kept me inspired. If anyone has any further questions about this AU, please feel free to leave a message @writingblanksaces on tumblr <3

Works inspired by this one
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