The Gates of Horn and Ivory

Summary

There is a secret world, beings living lives parallel to our's but darker. They live in the extremes of summer and winter and night and day. They watch, they hear, they crave. And for the last thousand years, they have been contained. But forces within and without have begun a revolution to resurrect the Old Ways...

Kyungsoo and Jongin are an average, if frustrated, married couple. They have their problems, but they've never questioned their loyalty to each other. But when Kyungsoo brings them into the wild in an attempt to reconnect, everything changes. Jongin is spirited away by a being from beyond our realm and Kyungsoo enlists the help of the mysterious(ly clumsy) Lord of Winter to get his husband back. Little does Kyungsoo realize, he's been drawn into a dangerous world of politics and magic... and there is no guarantee that he'll ever get out.

New Chapters post every Monday.
Chapter 1

Jongin stripped down out of his sweaty clothes and turned the shower as hot as it would go. Another uselessly long audition and for what? The director of the troupe had all but told him not to be expecting a call back. He glanced at his phone and sighed. There are places he could call to make a bit of money, but he'd promised Kyungsoo after college and especially after they got married that he wouldn't dance there anymore...

"Shit," he curses under his breath. Kyungsoo... he'd promised his husband, bragged about how well the auditions had been going. As supportive as his husband could be, there was little doubt in Jongin's mind that lately the older man was getting... frustrated by Jongin's strings of unemployment, almost as frustrated as Jongin was with himself. He wanted to share that burden of providing for their life but Jongin never found himself in the right place. The bathroom began to steam up and Jongin managed to tear himself away from his thoughts long enough to jump in, already starting to play through possible conversations in his head. How was going to explain this to Kyungsoo?

Kyungsoo had been done with this day from the moment he opened his eyes that morning. And although it was a particularly bad day, at his job it was starting to be like this...every day. His back ached from the chair he sat in all day, making calls and sifting through paperwork that made his fingers crack from dryness. His coworkers avoided him most days because his eyes at a certain angle gave off the impression that he was angry whenever he looked up at someone over his monitor. The hours between two and four were always the worst, staring up at the hands of the clock that seemed to mock him; the steady and barely audible ticking inexplicably like tapping to his ears.

When he would finally escape –usually his car would be the last to leave the parking lot--the sun would be down and his stomach would be screaming for something substantial for dinner. He had leftovers in the fridge at home from a dinner date with Jongin over the weekend, and his mouth watered just thinking about it. He would have to quickly eat, go over more client paperwork, shower, and go to bed. Such was life.

His keys clinked noisily together as he opened the door to their shared home, slamming the door behind him and dropping his briefcase by the door along with his keys. “Jongin? Are you home?”

Jongin nearly tripped to wash the shampoo out of his hair when he heard the slamming door and it dripped into his eyes, stinging miserably. He congratulated himself on smoothly slipping out of the shower itself. Grace, like a proper dancer, he supposes. He grabbed one of the bath sheets (huge, unnecessarily huge, but Kyungsoo ached for them when they were putting together their wedding registry) and wrapped it around himself more like a protective blanket than anything. He pulled the sheet close around his body. He is absolute confidence when he's on stage, but the thought of having to tell his husband about his failure takes him back years.

He's like a small child when he pads from the bathroom towards Kyungsoo, nervous to see what mood the older man is in, but instead found his heart lifting when he sees his husband - still the most delightfully beautiful thing he's ever laid eyes on. His eyes still sting from the shampoo but having Kyungsoo home, it will be better...

"Hyung," he said with a brightness that shouldn't match the situation, but he instantly knows it is a
He didn’t know what look he had on his face as his head snapped back more quickly than he would’ve liked, but he knew his eyes were large as he took in the sight, his eyes tracing quick paths up and down Jongin’s body.

“Yeah, I danced for them. I really did.” He pressed his lips together and tried not to sound too disappointed in himself. He swallowed and spit it out in one breathless run, "My waist though, I... struggled to do the lifts and - Kyungsoo, I don’t think they’re going to call back."

He half pushes past Kyungsoo's gaze and started digging through the refrigerator for the leftovers, eyeing what's left before putting all of it on a plate for Kyungsoo and popping it in the microwave. He let the sound of his preparation fill the void, the pit in his stomach. He should apologize, he thought as the precariously balanced sheet falls gracelessly past his shoulder. He shouldn't be putting Kyungsoo through this, he thought and his skin is prickled with goosebumps.

Kyungsoo sighed, disappointment filling his veins. “Oh.” His voice didn’t waiver. “I’m sorry to hear that.” He let Jongin brush past him, and he stares at his back, wondering what he’s going to do. After a few moments of silence, he came up behind the other man, hands placed gently on the offending area of Jongin’s body, his troublesome waist. With a gentle press of his fingers, carefully so he doesn’t aggravate it, he leaned forward to place a kiss on the back of Jongin’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. I know you’ll find the right audience who will appreciate your dancing one day.”

What they needed was a break. Sort things out. Thankfully, an opportunity had presented itself at work.

He had put in a couple bucks on a raffle his company had for the holidays, for a trip to a timeshare lodge. Amazingly, he had won. Even if they couldn’t afford much, he figured they could relax for a week in the woods a few hours away for a while. Besides, when was the next time he was going to be able to afford a break?
“I have a surprise for you,” Kyungsoo murmured against Jongin’s still slightly damp flesh. He was going to have it be a reward for Jongin getting his dream job, but whatever.

Jongin melts under even the most innocent touch from Kyungsoo, leaning back to feel more of his husband's body against his. He's always been the more sexual of the couple, something that took some balancing early in their relationship, but now - with all the stress and the work and the separation - it didn't take much to get Jongin terribly excited.

He smiled, but only just. It doesn't seem fair in a way for Kyungsoo, the one who takes care of him and always, to be the only surprising him with anything. "For me? What did I do to deserve that?"

The microwave beeped, harsh and loud, and Kyungsoo shifted against Jongin’s back, the silence yawning in the kitchen even after the beeping stops. He doesn’t answer as he moves away from Jongin. Instead, he drags a hand down the other man’s lower back and causes the sheet fall off of his shoulder that much more. When he spoke, his words were clear yet clinical. “Won a retreat raffle at work. Time at a timeshare lodge. I figure we could use it to relax before we really hunkered down and got serious with our lives.”

He moved back to the entryway and picked up his briefcase and walked toward the door to his small office. “I'll put in the time off and we can just go anytime in the next few weeks.” He didn’t mean to seem awkward, but he needed to put in the work now so he could have a little bit of a cushion for when he took this break. He tried to smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Love you.” Jongin doesn't respond, fights the reflex to say it back immediately, though it's painfully true despite everything that has happened between them lately. It's too cold, Jongin thinks, and pulls the towel back into place, feeling a bit silly and childish in his nakedness compared to his always carefully constructed husband. Serious with their lives, as if Jongin wasn't trying his damnedest to help, to find something (anything!) to help them find something like stability. He watched Kyungsoo walk out, back to work already. The microwave begins to beep again, annoyed at their negligence, and he shuffled to pull out Kyungsoo's dinner. The smell of the food has his stomach grumbling.

It's not that he isn't allowed in Kyungsoo's office, it's more than he has always allowed Kyungsoo that private place to get his own things done. So it feels strange to cross the threshold, like he's walking into another part of Kyungsoo that he never really understood. "You have to eat," Jongin said simply, and placed the food right in the center of the desk, cutting off Kyungsoo from his paperwork beneath.

Kyungsoo inhaled deeply through his nose as his routine was disturbed. He knew he has that look on his own face. He thought he heard someone in his office say ‘resting bitch face’ once. The one that sent his boss’ secretary away with a general dislike and avoidance of him. But he didn’t care; she gossiped too much about things she didn’t understand.

But he couldn't seem to shake said look as he glanced up at Jongin, pulling a couple pieces of paper out from underneath the plate, hoping condensation doesn’t stick to them and make them messy. “I have to scan some of these, Jongin.” He places them off to the side on an even bigger pile of papers.
“But thank you. I don’t know when I’ll be done though.”

Jongin felt that sickness boil up in his stomach, the same feeling of inadequacy that he's been battling for the last several weeks, months if he's being honest. He doesn't even stop to consider his words when he speaks, it's all too much - "You just got home, you haven't eaten a thing. And you don't know when you'll be done? Did you even want to talk to me a little bit before you run back to your work?" His voice started soft enough and grew in volume even though he'd prefer to stay quiet, to sound reasonable and put together.

Kyungsoo blinked, only slightly startled by Jongin’s outburst. It happened every so often, the exchange of giving and receiving attention and care still quite foreign to him in regards to another person’s feelings. Most of his life he had exhausted his youth on taking care of others…a chronically ill mother, and a spoiled older brother. Of course he loved Jongin, he just didn’t want to seem clingy. He didn’t feel like he deserved it from this wonderful man that could have had anyone else, but Jongin saw something in him, in his lonely, studious existence.

The thought made his stomach flutter nervously. He had to be careful.

“Then,” he started softly, his lips pursing together for a moment to collect his thoughts before turning slowly to face him. “What do you want to talk about?”

Jongin's exhausted already and his reply is a trembling sigh, "Anything." His hands make fists in the soft towel as he walks around Kyungsoo's desk and kneels before his husband, turning the swiveling chair to face him and laying his head gently onto Kyungsoo's lap. His hair is still wet and for a moment he's concerned about getting Kyungsoo's pants wet, but then decides he doesn't care, curling himself deeper against the older man. He knew he was being dramatic. He didn't care.

"Tell me what you're working on. Tell me what you dreamt about last night," he begged, met with another moment of silence from Kyungsoo. He gasped against Kyungsoo's thigh, "I really wanted this job, hyung."

Kyungsoo’s features soften, feeling guilty for his macroaggressions earlier. He drags his fingers through Jongin’s still-damp hair, massaging his scalp and tracing his fingers down his nape, over is cheek. He liked to touch him; touch was a language he spoke better than words. But he tried anyway.

“I know you did. I know you work hard. But with your waist, and…” his voice faltered, “…we can’t afford the doctor visits anymore. Not like we used to.”
He hated that he couldn’t take care of Jongin like he wanted to. Absolutely hated it. Costs for everything were too high, and he had already sacrificed so much. The debt just kept mounting with no signs of stopping, even with his seemingly well-paying job. He wished he could’ve followed his own dream path as well. Singing. But he clamped down on that desire when societal expectations and financial obligations made it impossible to even try. But he saw a determination within Jongin, and he believed that he could make it at the very least. But time was against them.

“And my dreams? I wish everything for you, you know that right? I wish for you to be happy and able to dance without pain. I wish for you to dance without a care who is watching. And I wish for you to be able to dance for audiences that would be so impressed and captivated by you that they want to keep you for their own.”

He knew he sounded cheesy, but it was the only thing he knew to do. “I love you,” he said, tracing the shell of Jongin’s ear. “I truly, truly do.”

Jongin failed to suppress the childish giggle that escapes his lips, Kyungsoo's fingers tickling and teasing his skin. "Say it again. Tell me you love me again,” he managed, nuzzling into his husband, and when Kyungsoo quietly complies, Jongin nearly melts for him. He hates that it's this easy, wants to be able to hold a grudge, to be as cool and cold, but he can't. Not with Kyungsoo who knows him inside and out. "Nothing could ever keep me away from you, you know that..." Jongin replied to Kyungsoo's continued confession, pressing plush lips to Kyungsoo's thigh. He hums at the back of his throat and releases the towel to fall down around him.

That's when he hears it. A subtle laugh, more devious than anything that could have come from Kyungsoo and filtered, as though heard through glass. He jerked away from Kyungsoo's touch and his nakedness feels like a vulnerability again, instead of a warm surrender. "Did - did you hear that?"

"Someone... I don't know, it was like someone was here, in the room with us. Watching us,” Jongin whispered because it seems right to whisper. He doesn't mention the cold wind that seems to surround him now, chilling his skin and making him wish to be wrapped up in Kyungsoo's warm arms. He's just spooked, sensitive from their almost-fight, he tells himself.

"You're right, it's probably nothing. Just neighbors," he continued, trying to shake it off with the same cool rationality as his husband though his voice is still soft, his throat dry. Jongin reached down for his covering but struggled to get it back over his shoulders, giving up and curling back against Kyungsoo. "It will be nice to get away soon."
Kyungsoo leaned in, the angle making his feet to pull up like a kid in an oversized chair, and pulls the towel back up Jongin’s shoulders and higher, tousling his hair with it. He chuckled lightly before encircling his arms around his husband. “Definitely.”

The next morning, Kyungsoo woke up late, and couldn't find his keys for at least fifteen minutes. At the end of his rope, he spots them on the coat hook, which unnerves him, because he distinctly remembers that he threw them on the floor when he got home.

He assumes Jongin hung them up there, and rushes to work. To him, the vacation they both deserve can’t come fast enough.

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The week following the incident (as Jongin has taking to referring to it, that moment of intense intimacy and yet...) moved slow like molasses. Jongin tried to forget the incident, but it preyed on his mind and with Kyungsoo working endless overtime to cover for the days that they will be gone, he's left alone more often than not. He scrubbed their kitchen until his nail beds were dry and cracked and tried baking them a homemade pizza, which came out doughy. Kyungsoo, exhausted after work, ate three pieces in the space of a breath and collapsed into bed. Jongin wanted to kiss him better, but the thought of waking him was painful. Jongin spent his nights researching the wooded area they would be visiting and the adjoining national park, looking for paths they can explore and learning about the creatures that live there. His heart grew and grew for his husband. He packed warm clothes for each of them with reverence.

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Two nights before they are meant to leave, with Kyungsoo already safely in bed, Jongin strips to pair of stretch thermals and dances in front of of their full length mirror. His waist teases him with little hints of pain and he pushes them through, stretching to poses he hasn't achieved in months. He pulls old choreographies from his history and smiles to himself as his feet find all the right places. They were foolish not to hire him. Kyungsoo was right. Kyungsoo is always right. Where is his audience? Where is the audience that understands and wouldn't dare take their eyes from him? It's only then, covered in sweat and meeting his own eyes in the mirror, that he feels eyes baring into his back and a cold shiver rushes down his spine. He knows without knowing that these are not his husband's eyes. He sits perfectly still, horrified and intrigued in equal measure. Cold arms seem to wrap around his middle and he's embarrassed to find his body responding, his nipples hard. Kyungsoo's been working so much. His skin catches fire just thinking about it. The feeling is gone as quickly as it comes and Jongin is left more desperate than ever. He slips to their bedroom and watches Kyungsoo breathe for a moment, longing for that small body on his.
Chapter 2

The drive to the cabin is mostly uneventful. Kyungsoo sang along with the radio a few times and Jongin was, as always, hypnotized by him. The city faded into nothing in the rear view mirror and they are surrounded by mountains and trees for miles. The radio turned to static and they sat in relative silence. Jongin remembers the fire that Kyungsoo's breathing alone can inspire in him and he teased little touches on his husband's thighs and shoulder, hoping to warm Kyungsoo to the idea. They arrive after a few hours and the keys to the cabin are retrieved from a thick woman with a comfortable smile. She pushed them towards a pile of firewood and they took what they hope is enough for one night. She laughed at them, so they took a little more.

"It gets cold out here," she repeated, heading back into her own office. Jongin bit his lip and grinned hopefully towards Kyungsoo, "I'm not worried. I have something to keep me warm."

Kyungsoo looked up at Jongin, his lips pulled into that heart shape of a smile. It's been too long since he’s been able to lavish attention on Jongin. Too long since he’s seen him squirm under his fingertips. He wants to wake up with their legs tangled together, dropping kisses on his eyelids, petting his neck and hair.

Those thoughts stir gently in his mind as he opens the door to the cabin, but then flee entirely as he finds out very quickly that the cabin is near the same temperature as outside. He cursed lightly under his breath as he scrambled to find the light, and it flicks on from the wall switch.

It's cozy despite its size, but there is a modern kitchen, and a very large front room with a hall that goes back to the bedroom and a single bathroom. Both rooms share the fireplace, and the power works. That’s all Kyungsoo could ask for, and he sighed with relief.

"I'll get the fire going ok?" He set his own firewood down near the door and he takes Jongin’s armful. "Can't do much of anything until we can actually move our arms."

Jongin agreed quickly and busied himself with the luggage, pulling their two suitcases down the hall to the bedroom. The bed is huge, but upon further investigation, is quite springy and it squeaks loudly when he tries to sit down on the edge. It reminds him of the sad little double bed they shared in college and he smiles mischievously at the memory of their constant twisting and turning to make that tiny bed work for them. He found a few extra blankets in the closet and pulled them down, already starting to feel the cold mountain air sneak through the layers of his clothes, chilling him. He reached into the front pocket and tossed a brand new bottle of lube onto the nightstand with a satisfied grin. Pleased with his preparations, he headed back into the living room and watched from the hallway as Kyungsoo arranged the firewood with delicate hands. Kyungsoo's industriousness, his quiet concentration, was always so attractive in contrast to the manic noise of the artists he had surrounded himself with before they'd met.

"Do you actually know to start a fire?" Jongin asked nervously, blowing on his hands as he crosses the room to kneel beside the other man.

“Yes,” He said with a definitive tone. Kyungsoo’s lips drew thin as his cheeks puffed out, and he adjusted his glasses as he knelt down to look into the fireplace. The soot made everything hard to distinguish, and it hadn’t been cleaned out by the last patrons. He humphed slightly, remembering where he placed his hands, now covered in soot. “…No,” he tried again, with the same confident tone. He sighed, pulling himself upright. “I don’t even think I have a lighter.”

He was good at a few things. Holding down a steady, monotonous job? Good at it. Singing? He
thought he was alright. Practical application of basic survival instincts? Now that was iffy for a city boy, and he usually balked at traveling anywhere that you couldn’t spot at least a 20-story building on the horizon. “Do… do we need to clean all this out first or…? I mean, I don’t want the ashes catching fire. Do ashes catch on fire?”

"I think you're supposed to keep a little bit of it there," Jongin replied, hesitantly, shuffling awkwardly closer to his husband for warmth. When he was very small, before they had moved to the big city, his family had lived in a smaller house in the suburbs with no floor heating and had managed with a fireplace. He was so small though, barely in elementary school, and the memories of his father building a fire seemed more like magic than anything of practical use. "Are we going to freeze to death?"

Jongin nervously fiddled with an iron tool that sat beside the unused fireplace and felt his heart sink. This trip couldn't be ruined this fast, they just got here! He needed this, needed this time with his husband. He wasn't about to let them fail and rush down the mountain and back home. The only thing back that way was more work for Kyungsoo and a lonely office. He rolled forward on his toes and pressed a little kiss on Kyungsoo's temple, "I'm going to search the kitchen for matches. I think you're supposed to open the chimney and make a little nest, like for birds, with the small pieces."

Kyungsoo smiled at the kiss, then went back to searching. He fumbled around, feeling along the bricks for something that resembled a switch or a pulley and…there! He tugged on it, and something gave, a groan above his head as the grate swung open.

He looked at the logs around him. Hm. He pulled on one of the more uneven logs, ripping long strands off of it. Then he broke it into smaller ones. “Nest, nest,” he mumbled. He usually talked to himself when he was thinking out loud. He put the small pieces in the middle, making a little teepee. Satisfied, he leaned back, putting two of the logs on top but not enough to squish the smaller ones. On the way in, he saw an old newspaper, and he got up to grab it. It was at least two months old. He ripped the bottom off and put it into the fireplace too. He figured they would need all the help they could get. “Did we need anything else?” he managed, voice choppy through his chattering teeth.

Whoever had failed to clear the fireplace hadn't made such a careless error with the kitchen. The counters were scrubbed clean and Jongin immediately began sorting through drawers to find something that they could use to light a fire. He pressed his lips together in frustration at empty drawer after empty drawer. He glanced up through the open kitchen into the living room at Kyungsoo and inwardly cooed at the concentrated expression, the furrowed brow as his husband tried to get their fireplace in working condition. 'Not that it will do any good', he thought, turning back to his work. Another drawer of silverware, a drawer containing nothing but an extra set of keys. His search became more frantic and he started opening and closing the upper cabinets as well. He was just about to turn back to let Kyungsoo know of his absolute failure when he noticed a long box on the counter. A box that he knows in his heart wasn't there a moment ago. He was so cold.

But it's matches. Long, thin matches. The box is old-fashioned and brittle and he sniffed for a second at it, concerned that the starters inside won't even work. But he picks it up nonetheless and walks silently back to Kyungsoo.

The other man turned, almost banging his head on the mantle as he stood and met Jongin as he approached, hugging his middle and kissing him on the lips. “Yay! Finally we can warm up in here.” He took the box, eyeing it for a moment before opening it wider to take a match out. “These look old. Is this an Alphonse Mucha painting printed on it? Hm.”

The first one struck breaks in his fingers. “Shoot.” He pulls the next, gently this time, and strikes it against the bricks with an arrested motion to make sure it doesn’t crumble. To his delight, it ignites,
and he ignited the newspaper at the bottom, moving the pieces so it all catches. Pretty soon, the fire grows sizable and he pulled away. “Yes! Whew. Better keep these somewhere safe.” He turned to Jongin, a smile on his face.

Jongin carefully assisted Kyungsoo in finding and placing exactly the right pieces onto their growing fire until the heat was spilling out onto them and they were no longer frightened that it would just die on them. He felt instantly thawed, the true chill of their little piece of heaven finally obvious now that warmth was available. A tickle at the back of Jongin's mind reminded him of the unusual matches and their mysterious origin but he glanced at Kyungsoo's face, warm and glowing in the firelight, and he decides to let it go.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, taking one of Kyungsoo's soot-stained hands in his own and bringing it to his lips, leaving a smudge on his own skin.

Kyungsoo can’t help it, he blushes. “Oh stop,” he hoped it wasn’t too obvious in the light. But then he failed at muffling a giggle, because now it looks like Kai has a faint but crooked soot mustache. He rubbed with his hand before he remembers himself, dragging Jongin down the hall to the bathroom to wash them both off.

Once they’re clean he’s on him, capturing his lips in the dim light of the bathroom (all but one bulb is out on the light.) and tugging insistently on Jongin’s jacket. “I've been waiting for this, you know. It was killing me but I waited. I want you so badly, Jongin.” He slipped a hand under Jongin's sweater just to feel the skin there, rub it with his fingers. The bathroom was still so cold and it contrasted darkly with the heat from Kyungsoo's fingers. Jongin's mind drifted to the memory of icy hands around his waist and it's all trembling desire from there. Why shouldn’t he have the thing he wants most? Kyungsoo's cheeks are pink from the cold and it's the single most delicious thing that Jongin has seen in weeks. He crashed their lips together, a dominance in him that is unusual to say the least, and he's nearly embarrassed by the need that’s grown and vibrates through him. It been ages since he's felt this body against his and the heat from Kyungsoo is a strange lifeline in this frigid place. Kyungsoo is usually the one that dictates how much and when they are able to touch, little things and teases until Jongin is nearly begging for it. But today, he thought, he didn't want to wait. It occurred to him for the first time in too long how small Kyungsoo truly is. He pulled back, breathless and stared, hungry, into his husband's eyes, "Say it again. Say that you need me like this."

He didn't give Kyungsoo time to respond. He wrapped his arms around his husband and lifted him until Kyungsoo's legs naturally though hesitantly fold around his waist. There is pain, but it's good in a way and Jongin works through it, pressing kisses onto Kyungsoo's neck. He carries him, more roughly than he should, to the bedroom and collapses them into the sheets, more kisses and his hands start to pick at the hem of Kyungsoo's shirt, "Say it again."

"Jonginie," Kyungsoo managed, though his voice is deeper and scratchier than he thought. His body was nearly vibrating from the shock and delight at this new switch in his husband, the feeling of being so terribly wanted and possessed. It was different. It was thrilling. He threw his head back into the mattress and followed Jongin's searching mouth with eager undulations and satisfied whispers of encouragement.

Jongin slowly began to slip Kyungsoo's jeans down around his slim hips, unbuttoning just the top, and latched his mouth on Kyungsoo's hip bones. He uses teeth until it almost hurts, leaving little marks and kissing them gently better. Jongin doesn't know what comes over him in the moment - the taste of his husband, the way he giggles and mews for more - but Jongin finds himself blushing hotly. "Wanna be inside you," he groaned into Kyungsoo's skin.
“Yes please,” Kyungsoo arched his back, blinking at the bedside table and noticing the lube already there. He gave a huffing laugh, lips curling up. “Of all the stuff to unpack you still got the lube out first huh?” he said lightly. He fumbled with his shirt, but it’s still really cold, and he only manages to get out of his flannel overshirt and leaves on his long undershirt. He tried shimmying his hips down to release his erection, but Jongin holds his hips fast, and he whines a little up at him. “C’mom Jongin, it’s cold, ah!”

_Breath made swirls along the glass of the small window, frost climbing up in filigree patterns as bright eyes stared inside and took in the sight. A flittering noise like cicada wings beat against the glass, loud and almost distracting. But the window was dark if anyone looked up at it, the frost creeping higher as the fire warmed the interior of the cabin, soon blocking the windows entirely with swirling patterns and foggy droplets of ice and snow. They were being watched._

But Jongin could see only Kyungsoo. Elegantly and willfully trapped beneath him, the smaller man had Jongin utterly hypnotized. He leaned in and pressed his lips to the head of Kyungsoo's cock, grinning at its happy twitch, still restrained by Kyungsoo's underwear. Jongin's tongue was kitten quick as he flicked his tongue over the sensitive underside, tugging Kyungsoo's pants down inch by inch. Pay attention to me, he wanted to scream every time Kyungsoo glances away, pay attention to only me. He instead resists and continues mouthing hungrily on the other man's trapped erection. Winter winds to his back, tendrils and fingers of ice stir him up further, a guiding hand down this strange and delightful new rabbit hole of sensation.

Kyungsoo was shocked that he hadn't ripped the seams on the sides of his jeans yet. Kyungsoo pulls hard against the fabric to try and spread his legs wider, the fabric groaning in response. His eyes close, mouth open as he starts to pant at Jongin’s teasing. “Stop torturing me like this, Jonginie,” he begged, all humor gone from his voice as he gives in to the sensations bombarding his flesh. He couldn’t feel his toes at this point, despite the warmth from the fireplace his socked feet felt ridiculously cold. He wanted to pull his legs up to get warm but he couldn’t. “Jongin please…”

Jongin breathed in heavily and complied. His own erection strained at the sound of Kyungsoo's begging and he felt filthy. He folded back the fabric of Kyungsoo's underwear and looked up with what he hoped was a seductive glance as he wraps his lips around the fiercely pink head of his husband's cock. He growled at the back of his throat, vibrating around the other man, satisfied with both his skill in this arena and the noises he pulls from his willing captive. The biting winter air seemed to tug at his clothes and he swallowed Kyungsoo whole, letting his husband hit the back of his throat.

Kyungsoo managed to lift himself up slightly, his stomach muscles pulled tight as his fingers try to find Jongin’s shirt, but he can only tug slightly as he lets out a breathless shout at being deepthroated. He looked down, peeking at the look on Jongin's face, and his cock throbs, his hips canting instinctively of their own accord. “God you look beautiful Jongin!” He tried focusing, but his head kept rolling backwards as he tried to control himself. He’d never been too good at dirty talk, usually getting embarrassed by his own words before he could make it sexy. But he tries this time, licking his lips as he stares up at the ceiling briefly before looking back down again, running his fingers through Jongin’s hair. “Your mouth is so hot, Jongin, I want you to make me come. It’s been so long since we’ve done this. I want you to fuck me into the mattress…” he trailed off, embarrassment making is face flush as he realized he was closer to coming than he thought. “I-I’m gonna come…Jongin…”

Jongin took hold of Kyungsoo and lifted him off the bed, hard and deeper into his throat, and swallows around him. His eyes are tilted upwards and he took in the entire scene with guilty, filthy relish. Kyungsoo vibrates around him, legs shaking, and Jongin sucks him dry. He's messy about it and continues slurping and teasing with his tongue until Kyungsoo's desperate noises go from pleasurable to nearly painful from the over-stimulation. Jongin let him down easily and slowly
Kyungsoo's cock slips from his mouth, a loud, overly dramatic pop as he releases the head. Kyungsoo's breathless, useless as he collapses back into the sheets, and it is simply the most erotic thing Jongin has ever seen.

"Fuck you into the mattress?" Jongin repeated with a smirk and a flourish. He sat back on his knees and removed his shirt quickly. It was still so cold, even with the heat from the fireplace beginning to break the chill. He almost doesn't want to undress Kyungsoo and expose him to this. So he doesn't. Kyungsoo's body is light and pliant to his touch as he reaches down and with some effort flips his husband onto his stomach, tugging his pants down a little more to reveal his round bottom. Jongin pushes Kyungsoo's cheeks apart and pressed a kiss to his hole.

Kyungsoo moans at the overstimulation, hardly noticing that he was now on his front as he feels Jongin behind him. He whines again, noticing that his legs are still trapped as he tries to get leverage. He grins despite himself, feeling coy at the fact that what he has said has come true. “More,” he managed, wiggling his butt in the cold air, goosebumps covering his hips and asscheeks. Despite the cold, he snakes his arms out to the side, and grips the quilt comforter in an effort to get more leverage as he arches his back.

Jongin sucked decadently at the skin around Kyungsoo's hole, his nails unconsciously digging into the other man's skin to keep him close. He couldn't bear the thought of having this body even the slightest inch further away from him. He felt ravenous and out of place, but in a terribly satisfying way. The more Kyungsoo squirmed, the more he begged, the hotter it became between them. “Give me the lube,” he instructed, spitting between Kyungsoo's cheeks and teasingly pressing a finger against the puckered entrance. He doesn't push inside, just lets the other man move against it, physically asking for more.

Kyungsoo loses all the leverage he has as he collapsed back down on the bed, moaning at the touch on his hole. He blearily tried to focus on the bottle on the bedside table, reaching out and knocking it over onto his arm and grabbing it against the bed before it has a chance to fall to the floor. That was close.

“Hurry up Jongin," he breathed, but his voice held no weight of a threat, no intimidation behind it. “Fill me up.” As he placed the lube on the bed by his hip, he reached behind him to cup his own ass, opening himself wider to Jongin’s eyes.

Jongin swallowed audibly, choking on his own arousal. He struggled to unbutton his own jeans and, jumping up from the bed, shimmied out of them as quickly as he could manage. "You look so good like this, Kyungsoo," he mouthed into the small of his husband's back, climbing on top of him quickly and pressing his erection against the curve of Kyungsoo's ass. He fumbled with the lube, not used to playing this role, and squirts an unnatural amount between the other man's cheeks, taking slow fingers and pressing one, then two inside. He fucked Kyungsoo like this for a moment, pressing his fingers forward to find that one place that will make his husband squeal. He wrapped an arm around Kyungsoo's middle to help hold him up and slowly slipped in a third fingers, spreading him open. "I'm going to use you up," he said, his voice rough and deeper thanusual, "I'm going to make you come again for me."

Kyungsoo can’t do more other than arch his back into Jongin’s touch, biting his lip as the feeling of fullness sends shockwaves of pleasure through his lower body. He gave an undignified squeak as Jongin brushes against his prostate, trailing off into a needy moan. “God, you better,” he managed to get out, hands fistng into the comforter so hard he’s shocked that he hasn’t ripped the quilting in two.

His enthusiasm turns quickly into desperation as he fucks himself back onto Jongin’s fingers but has no friction on his cock being supported like this. His moans soon turn into incoherent babbling,
thrusting against nothing, his hips moving on instinct as he tries to find his end. “Jongin-mm. Please. Ah-ah…fuck me, please. Please!”

Jongin felt near out of his body as he shoves his fingers deeper and harder into Kyungsoo, relishing and aching to the core at the sounds coming out of the smaller man. He pulled out slowly after a moment and presses his face against the stretched and ready hole, teasing the twitching sides with his tongue. He wasn't sure how the lube finds its way back into his hand, but he doesn't complain, squirting a heavy amount into this palm and coating his erection. He pushed just the head against Kyungsoo's hole and hunched over him, letting Kyungsoo's slow rocking back and forth ease him inside. The pressure, the tightness has him shivering as he got used to the feeling. He wants to push hard and fast but he knows he won't last long if he doesn't slow it down.

"Hyung," Jongin whispered, biting into Kyungsoo's back and licking the soft flesh better, "hyung, you feel so good for me." He rocked his hips a little faster and even in the cold, he felt himself begin to sweat. He nearly comes right then when Kyungsoo nodded his consent and he fucks down into the other man at a delightfully deep angle. He grinds his teeth and lets his mind go numb, willing himself to hold it together as he bottoms out inside of his husband. Kyungsoo's body clenched around him and Jongin is breathless, "I want to come inside you, let me come inside you."

“Please,” Kyungsoo moans softly, wound so tight he thought he might shake apart. He knew there were tears trailing down his cheeks and they felt like pinpricks of ice on his skin. Kyungsoo's mouth was open, plush, bitten lips parting in a silent scream as he’s filled. His forearms shake as he struggles to support himself even if it is only a few inches above the bed. But he still begged for more, drool seeping out of the corner of his lips and licking it away, eyes half lidded as lights begin to dance across his vision at his inevitable orgasm. Usually they’re white, but he finds pinks, blues and greens swirling around his head, and he inhaled the colors like smoke. He feels floaty as his hips stutter, feeling disconnected from his body as bliss drives him higher. He’s close… so close…. “Jongin-ah…”

The sound of his name on Kyungsoo's lips ripped into Jongin and tickled that knot at the base of his stomach. He was so close and his lover was so tight and something ... darker was inside of him now that hurt and felt amazing at the same time. Why shouldn't he...?

Jongin was completely sheathed and takes to short, desperate pumps into Kyungsoo. He reached for his husband's renewed erection and jerked him dangerously fast. His resolve to push his lover to the edge a second time faltered with every whimper. He wanted to finish, needed to finish. He squeezed around Kyungsoo, "I'm... come with me, come with me, come with me."

He hadn't had an orgasm like this in years, shockingly intense and he squeezed his eyes closed to keep from collapsing on top of Kyungsoo. Jongin could swear he heard someone whispering to him, but the words themselves are muffled, spoken through a thick mental fog.

Kyungsoo made small, embarrassing noises as his eyes nearly roll back into his head at the force of his orgasm. It felt like a bomb going off underneath his skin, an intense pull and pulsing hot. Most of his seed coated his stomach, dripping down to the comforter below. He collapsed in a heap, shaking and uncaring at the mess. He shifted to keep Jongin deep and buried, loving the feel of Jongin still inside him, full and complete.

His mind was still buzzing with the afterglow of his orgasm when Jongin’s softening cock slips out of him, but he can’t manage to sit up. Instead he pulled the dirtied spot out from underneath him, turning to face Jongin and giving him a kiss, deep and punctuated by his small moans.

His head was still clearing but he managed to speak, his eyes half closed as he looks up at him, now warm and sated. “God that was... amazing Jonginie. Thank you.”
Jongin felt his face flush, a little embarrassed at his aggressiveness now that the moment is over, but returned Kyungsoo's kisses with delight. He placed little pecks around Kyungsoo's face, kissing away what remains of his tears and covering his cheeks with affection. "I love you," he said and meant it desperately, repeating it between little kisses, like a refrain as he moved down Kyungsoo's neck. "Thank you for bringing us here." He must look ridiculous, he thought, with this pleased expression on his face, but didn't care. "Let's get in the shower. Especially you."
Chapter 3

Jongin started to pull away, nearly tripping on his pants where they sat bunched around his ankles. He kicked them off with a sudden childish delight and motioned for Kyungsoo to take his hand. He let Kyungsoo stand on his own and then took to peeling away what remained of his husband's clothes, holding him up and softly admiring all the little places where Kyungsoo appeared thoroughly used.

“-Mm love you too,” Kyungsoo managed, letting himself be led, but the bare bathroom stocked only with towels reminded them that they needed their own soap. “Warm the water, ok Jongin? I'll go get the soap.” He begrudgingly left the warmth of Jongin’s body to stumble out to his bags in the bedroom. He found the bag halfway unzipped, the bag his toiletries and shower bottles were in sticking out of the corner of the travel bag. He tilted his head, wondering… but then he remembered, Kai got the lube out of one of them, of course. That must be it. He grabbed his lathering soap, figuring they could take a more thorough bath in the morning.

As his mind cleared, Kyungsoo tried not to think about it; the weird happenings that seemed to be following them wherever they go. The feeling he couldn't shake of being watched. His mind filled with logical explanations for slightly moved possessions, strange smells, and laughter like chimes. His brow furrowed as he returned to Jongin, bottle in hand, and he tried to let his worries go, hiding his turning mind behind a small smile on his face even as his own breath still carries a hint of a flowery sweetness that isn't from the bottle.

Jongin was still shivering when Kyungsoo returned, the water pouring out of the showerhead biting with cold even as he adjusted the knobs again and again. He started to fear that the place didn't even have hot water when he finally began to feel a little bit of warmth and it was a godsend. He'd never been so happy at the thought of climbing into a hot shower. He grinned and motioned for Kyungsoo to hop in, reaching out for his husband's hand. He thought for a moment that he would be happy to stare at his gorgeous companion forever, when he felt a tickle at the edge of his vision and his eyes were drawn to an empty space just over Kyungsoo's shoulder. If asked, he could have sworn that he tasted greenery on the wind, but immediately distanced himself from the idea. They were out in the woods after all and perhaps it was the taste of exploration and he's just so used to the pollution of the city that it shocked him.

He tried to nonchalantly turn his gaze back to Kyungsoo's face and paused for a moment when he sees his husband's smile falter almost imperceptibly, "You... you okay? What are you thinking about?"

Kyungsoo blinked as his eyes meet Jongin’s, unconsciously rubbing his shoulder then bringing his hand down to rest on his belly. “Hm? Oh it... ached to lean down for a second to get the bottle is all.” He tapped his own ass with two fingers and a grin, and put the bottle on the ledge so it could be easily reached. He joined Jongin in the shower and flinched slightly as his body quickly adjusted to the temperature. The cold in his fingers and toes thawed, and he sighed, running his fingers along Jongin’s warm slick skin. His body finally was able to relax as his muscles released some of the tension built up from the past couple weeks of intense work and neglect of his husband. “I can’t wait to share this time with you, Jongin,” He looked up at him through the wet strands of hair falling in his face. “I'm so happy right now. Happy to just be with you.”

As Kyungsoo gathered soap into his hands and lathers it up, the snow falls harder outside. They bathed each other innocently enough, Jongin keeping Kyungsoo close enough to steal a kiss or six between rinses. Planting one last kiss on Kyungsoo's forehead, Jongin laughed and grabbed a towel,
"I'll take care of the bed. You take your time. I'll see if I can get us something to eat fixed up too."

He exited the bathroom, hopping from foot to foot to keep warm and dressed as quickly as possible. His skin was still a little wet and his already always tight jeans were difficult to dance into place. He gathered up the soiled quilt, pleased at the mess because it was he alone who pulled all that delight and desire from his husband, and started exploring the rest of the house in search of place to do their laundry. He was starting to think he'd have to wash it in the sink when... something outside caught his eye. Jongin's mouth went dry and he felt the same shivering fingers down his back.

He dropped the quilt in a pathetic pile near the door and grabbed his coat, forcing his boots on with so much impatience that he nearly put them on the wrong foot. The shower was still going when he pulled the door open and stepped out into the cold. He glanced back and forth, scanning the treeline and grumped to himself. *What was it?* He started to turn back and head inside when his foot hit something soft but substantial. He looked down and saw that he had completely trampled a mushroom, huge and red and not like anything he had ever seen. But it's not just one...

Looking from side to side, he noticed then that the mushrooms seemed to encircle the house, a similar red fungus poking up through the snow every two or three feet. He pulled the door shut and began to follow the line of mushrooms around to the back of the house.

Kyungsoo blinks as he hears the faint noise of the outside door closing. “Jongin?” When he didn't immediately hear an answer, he shut the water off, reaching for one of the towels and trying his best to dry himself. He tried to call out again as he entered the bedroom with the towel wrapped around his waist, calling Jongin's name once more as he spots the comforter missing from the bed. He relaxed slightly, knowing that his husband would’ve gone to go find the washer. He put on his clothes, toweling his hair dry as best as he could. Heading out towards the main room, Kyungsoo noticed the comforter by the door and his brow furrowed in confusion.

As he walked closer to the door, he noticed Jongin’s jacket and boots were gone. He opened the door and a blast of cold air hit him in the face, along with a familiar scent. It reminded him of lavender and honey. Warm beds. Lazy Sundays.

He felt his eyelids getting heavy. He heard small voices on the wind as he struggled to maintain lucidity, shaking his head to try and clear it as he falls to his knees.

“-line of protection is broken.”

“Sleep.”

“Dream.”

“Jongin…” he tried again, faintly. The last thing he noticed before he was finally compelled to close his eyes was the crushed red mushroom outside of the door. His head hit the soiled comforter, and he slipped into unconsciousness as the door slid closed a few inches from his nose.

+  

The sound his boots made on the snow delighted him every time he took a step. His form on this plane used to displease him until he got into fashion. Nowadays his angular features coupled with a smart coat and flattering outfit usually took the breath away from anyone he met.

Which is what he had planned for this evening. Once he saw Jongin's figure, illuminated underneath the light outside the cabin, he couldn’t help himself.

“Gods, look at you. Far too pretty to be human.”
Jongin jumped in his own skin, ripping his eyes away from the trail of mushrooms he'd been following around the cabin. His surprise shocked his legs out from under him, clumsy in the snow, and he fell down in a sad lump on the cold ground. From here, looking up the newcomer, Jongin felt a sick familiarity in the pit of his stomach. "You..." he started to say, before realizing how weird he must seem, outside in this terrible weather hunting mushrooms and he found himself mumbling, rambling instead. "You... need something? I didn't know anyone else lived up here. Are you visiting, are you....?

The snowflakes stuck in the stranger’s hair a moment before blowing away. The cold didn’t bother him, and as he stared down at Jongin, collapsed before him, his grin grew wider. He moved forward to offer his hand to pick him up. “Whoa, sorry about that. Didn’t mean to startle you.” The golden clasps on his long coat clinked together as he moved, the black fabric shimmering with a dark plum undertone in the dim light. The soft shifting of his clothes allowed him the movement to pick Jongin off the ground and back onto his feet. “I’ll only take a few minutes of your time. Just saw the light on, thought I’d come over to say hi.”

He didn’t let go of Jongin’s hand as he stood, and instead gripped it tight and shook it, as was customary to humans. He felt proud of himself for remembering that tidbit of information on their culture. His eyes flashed with a sparkle behind them as he grinned wider, marveling at the human before him. “I’m Jongdae.”

"Jong-dae," Jongin whispered back, enunciating the syllables with careful precision as his thumb unconsciously stroked against the back of the new arrival’s hand. He must have fallen harder than he thought, because the man in front of him was hypnotizing to the point that Jongin felt slow, like his thoughts were moving through thick molasses before reaching his brain. "Uhhh, my name is ... I'm Jongin. I'm here on vacation... with my ... my husband is inside.”

At the thought of Kyungsoo inside, still washing up from their encounter, Jongin felt his brain fog begin to dissipate and he slowly, reluctantly pulled his hand away. Jongdae's hands were as cold as the wilderness around them, but it felt good to have that touch. Jongin swallowed harshly, instantly filled with guilt for thinking such a thing. "So, um, hi? I didn't see any other cabins up this way. I had no idea that we would have neighbors."

Jongdae blinked. “Jongin huh? Pretty name…” he trailed off, faltering in the conversation. Jongdae was impressed. Never in a million years did he think a human could resist his pull. Usually they’d be begging him to take them away at this point. But this one… this one had a heavy anchor. Also it was clear that this one could not see him for what he truly was. Not yet anyways. …Unless…

He glanced to the cabin, feeling the presence of the human’s husband inside. Well then.

Jongdae’s head tilted and he looked behind himself. “Neighbors. Right. You do have neighbors. The closest neighboring cabin is ten minutes on foot behind me. I just happened to be out for a walk on this fine evening.”

It was then he turned back to Jongin, eyes dilating as he tried again with another mental push.

*Waiting for you, pretty Jongin.* He reached into his coat and pulled out a thermos. No logo or markings adorned the sides, but a small purple flower held the clasp closed on the lid.

“I figured a hot drink would be good for you on this night-”

*Drink me.*

“-Even though it’s temporary-“
Stay with me.

"-Welcome to the neighborhood."

He held out the thermos to Jongin, that ever present grin on his face as he offered the gift to him.

Jongin found himself taking the thermos before he think to say no, "I... uh, what is it?" He held the thermos in his hands with a reverence that sprung from somewhere deep in the back of his mind. He lifted the drink to his nose and sniffed, finding himself swimming in a strange honey-sweet liquor that brought back memories of childhood, of college parties, of dancing before men and women who couldn't get enough they screamed and cooed so loudly at him, of kissing Kyungsoo for the first time... Kyungsoo...

A gust of wind sent shivers down his back and the thermos felt so warm. He felt the vapors lifting from the liquid and hitting his face. Drink me, it seemed to scream from the depths, and Jongin did, lifting the cup to his lips and just barely tasting the steaming liquid. It burnt his lips and he jerked it away, "It's... good, I... guess. Thank you. That was very thoughtful of you to... drop by like this. I..." Jongin's legs felt weak again and he shifted to lean against the cabin. "I should check on my... husband."

The snow stopped falling. It was like a puzzle piece had slipped into place. Marvelous.

"You could," Jongdae’s voice was calm, sugary sweet as he moved closer to Jongin’s body, crowding in close into his personal space but not touching him. He was so close to succeeding. “Or, you could come with me.”

You belong to me.

Flashes of nectar-filled cups shaped like flowers and chiming laughter from smiling faces fill his vision.

Gasps of pleasure are pulled from him under a wisteria canopy, the dew warm beneath his back.

Malleable iridescent extremities pull themselves out of the parted skin of his shoulderblades as he arches his back.

I have given you so much. I’m here to make you mine.

Jongdae was straining a bit now, his façade starting to crumble as he concentrated all of his energy into the Glamour. His eyes brightened. His ears distended slightly on the top into points. “I can make all your wishes come true for you. I can give you what he cannot.”

He leaned in closer, his breath ghosting on Jongin’s collarbone before looking down towards Jongin’s waist. “No pain, a captive audience…and eternity. All for you, my dear,” he murmured, his fingertips brushing against Jongin’s cheek, his nailbeds turning a dark purple. “All you have to do, is say yes.”

Jongin tried to move out of Jongdae's reach but his feet are heavy like lead, his every atom is a boiling stellar core. A knot formed in the depths of his stomach, churning like sickness and tightening like orgasm all in one terrible bundle. Jongdae was so warm and the world was so cold. And it wasn't just the snow that Jongin thinks of now, his every memory now filtered through honey-nectar. There are all the times that Kyungsoo, the one person who should have supported him, just wasn't there, so busy he was with work and money and more work. There was the look on Kyungsoo's face when, all those years ago, Jongin told his maybe-sort-of-kind college boyfriend how he made money and that he loved it. He stopped dancing at clubs for Kyungsoo when the then new boyfriend
had frowned in disapproval. He stopped taking off his clothes for Kyungsoo. He had stopped so many things, had pushed himself to be a real dancer, all for... for who exactly? The name was at the tip of his tongue but he couldn't find it. Jongdae's fingers continued their careful tracing of his exposed neck and collarbone.

Jongin swallowed back the intense arousal that bubbled under his skin, only just now realizing how much larger he is than Jongdae. He could make this little creature stop, but he didn't want to. He didn't want to. He didn't want to. He wanted, despite reason, to say...

"Yes," Jongin whispered, his tongue flicking out to wet his lips.

Elation spread across Jongdae’s face. It was only then he touched Jongin fully, pulling him forward by his waist, watching as the human’s upper body arched backwards at his touch. His smaller form radiated power, making him a bigger presence than what he really appeared to be.

The world slowed. No longer needing it, the air shifted, and his glamour faded away, leaving his trueform in all its glory under the moonlight. His wings unraveled like silk cloth into reality, scales shimmering with sparkling dust as they arched up and over them. Jongdae’s clothes seemed to melt away, transforming from the buttoned up coat into the clasped cloak he always wore. Gold filigree decorated across indigo chitin armor mixed with black and aqua straps artfully tying it all together.

Now working with permission, his face was that of deep concentration as he focused on Jongin’s body. He inhaled the breath from the human’s lips, making it so the air stopped being harsh on his lungs and the numbness from being cold disappeared from Jongin’s extremities immediately. Tendrils of ice crawled up Jongin’s spine in that oh so familiar way, but there was no discomfort, no pain, just the sensation that was pleasant like a sip of ice water after a hard run. The tendrils reached deeper. Pulled at the places that troubled Jongin the most and healed them easily. His waist, his hip. One even slid up the side of his face and perfected his vision, fixing scars on his cheeks he received as a child.

Jongdae kept him suspended as his magic did his work, fulfilling his first promise of no pain to Jongin. He would have to prepare him for the Chrysalis ritual, and he would give him eternity. Then he knew, this creature would have his audience in his own realm, the realm of the Fae, where he truly belonged.

Jongdae laughed unabashedly with joy, the sound ringing high in the air as magic spun outward from the area.

+ Kyungsoo’s eyes shot open. That laugh. He recognized it. It pulled him awake and he took a small strained breath through his nose. It took him a moment to realize he couldn’t move. His body wouldn’t respond to his will, his fingers still curled into the carpet where he fell as his eyes focused. He noticed a speck of dust just to the left of his vision that hadn’t moved even with his desperate breaths puffing against the door. To him, time had stopped. Impossible, but… Jongin.

His eyes shut tight and he willed with all of his might at his hand for it to move, feeling like he was stuck in dry ice. But thankfully it did move, and he pressed his hand against the door, willing the rest of his body to respond. He managed to get his other hand out from underneath him, and he desperately clawed at the door, managing to slide it open and peek around the side to see the scene before him.
He tried to scream Jongin’s name, but his voice wouldn’t leave his chest. The man hovering over his husband’s suspended body noticed him, and he grinned down at Kyungsoo’s prone form. He knew him. He knew this creature. And yet, some part of Kyungsoo knew he had never met him before.

Jongdae gripped Jongin’s shoulder and buried his lower face into it just to see the human’s reaction. Predictably the human got angry, words barely heard on his lips but refusing to come out.

How dare you.

He’s my husband!

“Not anymore,” Chen replied, voice clear as day. The young man looked shocked. “He belongs to me now, he’s made his choice. And it is his choice to not be here with you any longer.”

Kyungsoo couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Tears tried to force their way to his eyes but they wouldn’t come. His body was still unresponsive. He couldn’t get to him. Couldn’t save him.

There were still sticks of kindling next to the door near his head. Kyungsoo managed to grip one of the pointier ones, and without a second thought, threw it as best he could at the intruder.

It didn’t get very far. Rather, it burst into a couple smaller pieces, and they all pointed back at Kyungsoo.

“Foolish,” Jongdae managed to say, his finger twitching like he was about to send them all back into Kyungsoo’s eyes, but something… or someone distracted him and they fell to the ground.

Someone else was coming.
Chapter 4

It had been a generation or three since the Lord of Winter had been to the human realm. It was this fact that comforted Kris when, upon setting his feet into the snow for the first time in an age, he slipped and fell straight back onto his ass, distracting both Jongdae from his ritual and Kyungsoo from his desperate attempt at retrieving his husband. Everything hurt but nothing more so than his dignity. Jongdae’s frustrated face at seeing Kris arrive told the older fae all he needed to know about how welcome or not his appearance was.

"I don't suppose you have a permit for this," Kris joked at first, immediately backing off when Jongdae's brows came together aggressively. Kris glanced up at the captive human, writhing silently in the grip of a magical orgy, his body slowly transforming into something altogether more perfect. He was beautiful, Kris admitted with a shrug towards Jongdae. Too bad this sort of action was expressly forbidden in their day and age. Kris stood and shook the snow off his cloak, "Jongdae... you know what will become of us if Junmyeon were to find out what you're doing here. You know I don't always agree with my -"

“He won’t find out until I’m done,” Jongdae interrupted, voice was nearly hissing. “The work which, by the way, needs to be completed in my hold. I was merely prepping him for transport to our home.” He looked down at Jongin’s body, the magic now cocooning him inside a barrier that will help guide him undetected into his realm. The nectar Jongdae had given him was just a sample, enough for desire to bloom in the human's heart. A burning need to consume more will soon overtake the man’s senses and mind and he will hunger for it and anything that produces it, which only happens to be Jongdae. He will have to be fed orally to change him fully, along with other… actions Jongdae needed to be present for.

Kris was about to begin scolding the younger creature when he caught a whiff of fear, of curiosity on the wind. Another human? Edged as it was with fight and an urge above all else to protect, it was intoxicating. He turned gently towards the smell and caught sight of Kyungsoo through the door and his mouth went dry. He felt Jongdae return to his work but couldn't bring himself to turn back. He took the careful steps towards the entrance to the cabin and knelt in front of this new creature, pushing away the debris and leaning into study this new, most beautiful face.

"Tell me your name," he said, pushing gently in the human's mind. It had been too long since he had felt a human like this one. The ages began to catch up with him and he felt lost, "I would so like to know your name."

With Kris’s attention diverted and not knowing how long he could keep the larger fae from interfering, Jongdae tore the fabric of reality behind him, sliding his hands underneath Jongin’s body and carrying him through the portal. “We'll talk when I get him settled, Kris.” He spared a glance back at him. “If you’re not too busy, of course.” Kris cursed under his breath and moved to block the human before him from uselessly chasing after the already closing portal.

Kyungsoo panicked as he saw Jongin’s prone form disappear into thin air with a flash. He didn’t even know if he made a noise as it happened, but now the tears started to fall, the spell that held him in time breaking as they disappeared. He stared past the man crowding his vision as he shook his head up at him, eyes wide and pleading. He then felt the man’s presence invade his mind, reading his thoughts and invading his memories like an open book. He laid there, hands clenched into fists as he considered his options.

Finally, with a small voice that did not match the fire in his eyes, he replied, “Kyungsoo.”
Kris rolled the name over and over in his mind - so human, so rounded, so unique to this one creature in front of him - and reached out to touch this new curiosity. He let his hand hover close to Kyungsoo's cheek, feeling heat radiating off him, probing deeper to see what he could find. It was only then, so close and strangely intimate, that he noticed how much larger he was than the human before him. He jerked his hand back, "I don't mean to frighten you, if I do. He was your's? The human that my brother took?"

Looking down between their bodies, Kris studied Kyungsoo's small hands and the silver band that tied around his finger. What had Jongdae gotten them into? For if there is one thing that the Fae must respect, one thing that connected them to the most ancient places and times and histories, it was their belief in the magic and necessity of The Contract. Even human contracts, flimsy and broken as they often were, held some weight and should be upheld at all costs. What had happened between these two that Jongdae felt he could cut in half such a bond? Kris gazed back up at Kyungsoo, willing their eyes to meet, "He was your partner?"

Kyungsoo noticed he was shaking as his body moved without his command, forced to stare into this man’s eyes. As the secrets of his mind were open to this creature, he tried to shrink away from him as Kris's fingers drifted closer, but thankfully he pulled back just in time.

“He is my husband,” Kyungsoo corrected him desperately, anger now boiling just below his skin at the audacity of these… these things that think they could just take whatever they want…. “And that… that other guy said Jongin didn’t… didn’t want to stay with me. I won’t believe it until I hear it from his own lips. But I’ve… felt him before. At our home. Like he had been following us.”

A sickening thought occurred to Kyungsoo. If they had been followed by him, then he knew the exact moment to strike to take Jongin. He needed to follow them. He needed to understand. Yes, he and Jongin had their share of difficulties, but not any moreso than anyone else, he thought. It was just something that was part of married life.

This man in front of him though, intimidated him in more ways than one, but also… didn’t? And he wasn’t sure how someone who looked like he lived in a castle made of ice managed to slip on some the first time he saw him. “Who are you?”

Kris settled back on his heels, trying to get comfortable in this form, unused to the more insistent gravity of this realm and giving Kyungsoo room to breathe. He did his best to sound mysterious, "We're not from your world, I think you already know. I am known in my realm as the Lord of Winter. I reside and maintain one of the great seasonal kingdoms on behalf of our king, Junmyeon of the Summer Court. I've been known by many names over the years. It's complicated and you're already taking in so much. You can call me... Kris." Kyungsoo's eyes continued to study him as though expecting more, "And I'm going to help you."

Kris snapped his mouth shut, unsure of why he had offered at all. This wasn't his fight, this wasn't his wrong to fix and yet, there was something too intriguing about this little human and his will to fight. Kris swallowed harshly and waved a hand towards Kyungsoo, filling the area about them with a muted warmth, "I suppose we can start by making sure you don't freeze to death. And then you can tell me about your husband and what you saw."

Kyungsoo’s eyes narrowed suspiciously even as the air became better to breathe. He rubbed his arms, feeling coming back into them as he managed to stand. “Thank you,” he managed, rubbing his sleeve across his cheek in an effort to clean himself up.

He had no reason to trust Kris. But he had to, if he was to go after Jongin. But this man also confused him immensely. Kris? Lord of Winter? So was he like… Santa Claus? He sure as hell didn’t look like any rendition of Santa he knew. But then again his knowledge of tales originating
from Europe were limited at best. Perhaps he should’ve paid more attention in his studies. Or read more.

But first things first. “I…we…” Kyungsoo blushed as he recalled the evening's more… exuberant activity. “Jongin went outside to find a washer. I waited, but after a while I went after him, but couldn’t, because the air was so sweet it made me pass out. I woke up after hearing that man’s laugh, saw them…together…and then you showed up, and now we’re here. Can we go after them? Where are they going? Why did he take him?”

He knew he was asking too many questions, but he was completely in the dark, and he wanted to find them. Find them, and bring Jongin home.

"Did... something happen between the two of you?" Kris prompted, pulling back his magic so as not to force a confession. He wanted and needed this human to be comfortable around him and couldn't necessarily explain why. "Jongdae is a little prince, of a smaller kingdom but with some power nonetheless. He would have taken your... husband to that realm to begin his transformation into one of us, into an immortal, a fae. But, Kyungsoo?" Kris's tongue felt heavy wrapped around that name and he hesitated. The explanation of their culture, his people, it could take hours, weeks, years, eternities but there was one thing that could not wait and it could change everything about this man and his relationship. Kris nodded to himself to continue, understanding the necessity of this next fact.

"Jongdae couldn't have taken him if he hadn't asked for it, if he hadn't said yes. I can...I can take you to him, maybe... if the seasons are right and you're willing to travel across realms. But you need to understand that Jongdae only can take what is offered. And Jongdae keeps his possessions with a vicious intensity."

“That… that can’t be,” Kyungsoo said softly, his voice turning small. Tears welled up unfettered again from his eyes, but he made no move to wipe them away as they cascaded down his cheeks. “Surely he tricked him, made Jongin go with him… we were...are just your typical married couple, with money troubles, but we loved… love each other,” his voice trailed off. Why was it starting to be so hard to speak about him? He brought a hand to his throat, wondering why his voice didn’t match his thoughts.

He tried to calm his breathing as he looked wide-eyed up at Kris, gripping his hand in the strange soft material that cascaded off of him. “You… you said you would help me. Please. I want to go with you. I just want to know why. Then…” He looked away. “Then you can do away with me as you please.”

He figured if he was as insignificant as he felt in this moment, it wouldn’t hurt them to spare a blink of their existence helping him.

“Please.”

Kris found himself breathless, "You want to come with me? You think I'd throw you away?"

Memories rushed back to him of a time before Junmyeon's great victory, before the ban on their kind visiting and associating with the humans that lived far beneath them. There was a boy, a beautiful boy, who begged like this and wanted nothing more than to follow Kris across time and space, realms beyond imagining passing beneath their feet. Kyungsoo felt small in his presence and utterly breakable, and yet... for someone he loved, this human would do all that and more.

"You want to come with me?" he repeated, "You don't know me and you know nothing of what is to come. You'll hurt so much." Kris leaned in and brought their faces closer together, "If I may..." He reached up and cupped Kyungsoo's face in one of his oversized hands, wiping tears away and feeling his own heart skip beats. There was something so ... magical about this boy and it was
becoming increasingly obvious that Kyungsoo knew nothing of it.

Pulling away, he looked down at the soft wetness of Kyungsoo's tears against his skin. It would be enough. He hadn't transported an unaltered being across the realms in many years, but he figured it couldn't be too difficult to remember the procedures. "There are rules in the fae realms, for we do not live like humans. No matter how hungry you get, no matter how thirsty, you should never take a bite, not a single sip of anything offered to you in the realms. Do you understand that, Kyungsoo? If you ever want to get back..."

Kyungsoo tried not to think of how warm Kris’ large hands were on his cheek. How the angles of his face gave him such a harsh look but his voice was gentle.

He tried.

“I understand,” Kyungsoo’s voice was determined, but it shook. Kris was right. He had no idea what to expect. And what if those feelings to accept something overcame him? Would he be doomed to wander this other world forever with no way to return home? Even worse, if Jongin didn’t want to go back with him...

Well. He just needed to make sure Jongin came back with him. The alternative was almost too much to imagine.

If that happened...

“I’m ready,” he breathed, and clenched his eyes shut as his shoulders tensed.

Kris tugged them both to standing, nervously supporting Kyungsoo's exhausted weight against him. "I'm sorry for the ... intimacy," he said, though he wasn't sorry at all, the feeling of this man against him absolutely delicious, "it is necessary to ensure that we both make the trip in one piece." He pressed Kyungsoo's face against his chest and allowed himself one indulgent breath of Kyungsoo's scent, "Don't look around too much. There are things between the realms that don't like to be seen and might punish you for it."

Feeling Kyungsoo's tired consent, Kris allowed Kyungsoo's drying tears to form a temporary bond between the two of them. It should be enough to make the journey painless. Rusty but determined, he tore back the curtain that existed between their worlds and lifted the small man just enough so he could carry him though. Now out of the human world, his magics were much more powerful and Kyungsoo was near weightless. He pushed him through the dark, star struck veil of the interdimensions, fighting any urge to linger, to keep Kyungsoo against him longer, until he could see and feel the snowy world of the Winter Court. He would take Kyungsoo home first, he thought, he would show him just a taste of the fae and let him decide from there.

Kyungsoo had wanted to look. But fear kept his eyes shut tight even as he felt things brush past him and Kris as they traveled. He had a moment of panic when he realized he was actually doing this, trusting this… fairy to help him to find Jongin. He wondered quietly if there was some catch to it.

Jongin. He had to think of Jongin.

It felt like an eternity, passing between worlds, and Kyungsoo felt heavy. Like his body wasn’t supposed to make this trip. He didn’t belong. He felt many eyes upon him, daring him to peek so they could steal him away from his current protector. He gripped Kris’ sleeve tighter, letting his scent of freshly fallen snow on a still morning fill his head instead.

Kris pushed through one last silken sheet of time and space and landed them comfortably in the receiving room of his snow castle. "Home sweet home," he whispered, perhaps too friendly, into Kyungsoo's ear before releasing the small human and allowing him to look around.
Once his feet were on solid ground, he dared to open his eyes. Kyungsoo was still disoriented yet determination forced him to plant his feet down to steady himself as he looked around. He didn’t know what he was expecting, but it wasn’t this.

Part of the walls were the color and texture of bark and small branches, all covered with filigree dusted snow and the white points of ice trapping portions of the tree inside. But he could see it move and pulse with life beneath, as if it was unaffected by the cold. The floor was transparent, but cracks in the thick ice underneath their feet captured light in such a way that it was nearly prismatic. Arches of ice so clear it was blue towered over their heads in traditional arches he’d seen on old churches.

His eyes went wide as he took it all in. He stared around in awe and he noticed that it still didn’t hurt to draw breath even though his breath puffed out in front of him. He also noticed, quite unfortunately, that he was also only dressed in a long sleeved black shirt, sleeping pants, and socks as he had left everything else back in the cabin. He was starting to think that maybe he hadn’t thought this whole ‘rescue mission’ all the way through. As the wonder and joy faded from his face, he turned back to Kris, desperation clouding his features.

“So when can I start my search?”

Kris watched Kyungsoo take in his kingdom and his entire heart felt near to bursting when it became clear that the small human was impressed, was magicked by the place. He’d forgotten over the years just how powerful the lure of a beautiful human could be to one of their kind. Kyungsoo’s brusque return to reality startled him and he drew close again, snapping to call a dragon spite - a small lizard with blue dragonfly wings - to his side as an assistant, "You'll need proper attire first before we go after anything." The creature seemed to understand and darted off with purpose. Kris imagined draping Kyungsoo in frosted golds and simmering silvers and his mouth went dry.

Kyungsoo couldn’t help it; he stared, eyes wide again. Taking the creature in, processing that it existed, then making a strange noise he hoped Kris wouldn’t notice.

"You have to understand, now that you're here, that we live in a very... political world. It wouldn't do to just rush, hot headed, into Jongdae's domains and demand Jongin's return. We'll need to go higher than that. We'll have to travel much further," Kris explained, placing a hand on Kyungsoo’s lower back and guiding him through one of the most prominent arches. It took some control not to bring Kyungsoo straight to his own bedchambers, and he took them on a sharp right towards the guest rooms. "You should rest here for a short time, get acclimated. I'll make the appropriate arrangements for your travel and for ... audiences that may be necessary, should Jongin have accepted Jongdae's contract."

“O-oh. Okay,” Kyungsoo managed. He bit his lips closed as he was led, feeling Kris’ large hand on his back. He started only slightly but then allowed himself to be guided, finally glancing up at him. “I never would have guessed actually. Fairy politics? Fairies…. have politics?” He was starting to understand, but barely. So they had rules. So he needed to make sure he didn’t imbibe or eat anything. What had he gotten himself into? What else was there to know?

He decided to cull his questions for the time being. Kyungsoo sniffled, his nose still stuffy from crying earlier. He cleared his throat as they reached the guest room, spacious and well-furnished, one plush bed in the back of a nook that looked like it was set back into part of the bark-like wall. Quilts, pillows and throws covered it, all with a similar winter motif, although some on top had different designs on them that reminded him of summer.

He just now realized how tired he was. He wanted to cocoon himself in all of those blankets and sleep for days.
He turned fully towards Kris, looking up at him, his face actually a bit brighter now despite being exhausted. "Kris, with everything that’s happened, I never got the chance to thank you."

"It’s ... nothing," Kris replied, though it was very much something indeed to pull an unclaimed human across realms, to promise audiences with the highest in the fae kingdoms, to plan and execute an escape for one that had already begun the slow transformation into something immortal. His tongue went a bit heavy and he pulled away, headed towards the door so not to impose on the human any longer than necessary. It was obvious that Kyungsoo was exhausted from his ordeal, "There is something in it for me as well. There is so much you will need to learn about our world, Kyungsoo. And you... you interest me."

Kris left the room rather abruptly, feeling a bit rude but also nervous that he had already said too much, pushed too far. He had no intention of changing Kyungsoo, of keeping him. But it wouldn't hurt, he thought, to play a little if Kyungsoo would let him. He hadn't touched an... interesting human in a very long time.

Kyungsoo watched him leave, stunned into silence. He stared at the slightly ajar door as he took in the words Kris left him with.

‘You interest me.’

He couldn’t help it; he blushed, feeling a pleasant ripple travel down his back. He stepped over to the door and closed it the rest of the way, gripping the handle and let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. But he shook his head, reminding himself why he was here.

Jongin.

Kyungsoo wanted to explore, to learn, but all of that and more needed to wait. His eyelids drooped as he trudged back over to the bed, taking care with the very heavy bedding as he pulled it back and arranged the pillows that were so inviting and somehow warm. He eyed the sun stitched into some of the pillows before climbing in, sighing at how soft it is. The pull to drift off was so great, but he managed one last action before doing so. He kicked his pajama pants off and managed to toss them to the end of the bed. He then curled up under the covers, falling into a dreamless but fulfilling sleep.
Chapter 5

Vines heaved under Jongdae’s command, parting to allow him inside his own room of his family’s hold. Far from prying eyes and nosy siblings, snow mutely fell on the stone for a moment and an arctic fox peeked in at him before the vines closed behind him.

“Welcome to your new home, my beautiful Jongin.”

Jongdae gently laid his catch propped up on his bed, a large sprawling thing taking up a good portion of the very large room. He conjured a full jug of nectar with saucers on the bedside table, which seemed to be actively sprouting snowdrop blooms and witchhazel. He plucked a snowdrop and crushed it, dropping it in the pitcher and taking a deep breath to calm himself. His ritual to turn this human was going to take a lot of energy on his part, but he was ready to give it.

Jongdae considered the room around him. Satisfied with its security, he came back over to Jongin, pulling apart the covering that hid his presence and watching it dissolve with a touch of his hands. He then leaned down, giving Jongin a deep kiss that tasted like the nectar. He leaned in closer and tasted his neck.

Finally. After all of these years, this human he had found was his at last.

Jongin hissed back into consciousness, lifting himself up against Jongdae’s mouth as though brought back from the edge of death into resurrection. It was a strange lifeline. Something searingly cold inside of him ached for more contact, more heat and another taste of that unknowable substance that only came from this creature in front of him. He couldn’t see behind him anymore, the past was foggy. There was nothing except the feeling of Jongdae on his skin and the remains of the warm, protective cocoon that had transported him to this place. His throat was so unimaginably dry but he managed just croak out, "More."

He turned his head and captured Jongdae's ear lobe between his teeth, sucking at the salty sweet skin and relishing the little noises of approval he was able to coax from Jongdae. Nothing was like Jongdae, nothing, said the flavor of this perfect skin. He’d never loved like Jongdae. Or maybe - Jongin hesitated for a moment, a strobe light blinking through the fog of his memory then disappearing as quickly as it appeared. He didn't think to search for it. Jongdae's hands were on him and they required so much attention.

Leaving the warmth of his enclosure was difficult, but Jongin forced himself to sit up out of it, looking for new angles and new experiences and new places to touch and be touched. Jongdae allowed him a bit of room to adjust and Jongin took in his surroundings for only a moment before snaking his hands back onto Jongdae's body, pulling the creature towards him and biting playfully but resolutely into the tender skin of Jongdae's shoulder. Nibbling and tasting and licking, he was just about to lose himself into the experience when he noticed the pitcher on the bedside table. An erotic, floral scent with a splash of honey filled his nose and he realized how hungry he was. He pulled away from Jongdae, shaking a bit when he looked at his new lover, "More?"

Not waiting for an answer, he lunged for the pitcher like some untrained puppy, desperate and thirsty.

“Now, now, my dear,” Jongdae slid away from Jongin's grasp and stood over his captive lover. He pinned Jongin’s hands easily despite his flailing and managed to pour some of the nectar into one of the saucers. “You must pace yourself. This nectar is merely a precursor. But soon…” Jongdae’s voice took on a breathy tone, smile stretching across his lips, “You’ll need to feed from me directly.”
As Jongdae brought the saucer down to Jongin’s lips, he released his hands, allowing him to sit up more to grab the vessel and drink his fill. Jongdae then licked his lips, ready with the pitcher when he begged for more. He ran his fingers through Jongin’s hair fondly, delighted by his eagerness. “You’ll need a new name pretty soon…”

Jongin gulped helplessly at the fragrant nectar, swallowing mouthful after mouthful without a breath and licking his lips where it poured over from his enthusiasm. One cup done, he lifted his empty vessel to Jongdae, knowing that Jongdae would understand. Jongdae's promise of any even more pure source for this magical substance didn't go unnoticed and Jongin took a moment to lay his eyes across Jongdae's exposed neck, wondering how it was possible to be more satisfied. He's never felt so hungry in his life and yet so completely full. Jongdae's touch was even more fulfilling, and he grinned beneath this creature's gentle but insistent hands.

"A new name? What's wrong with my name?" Jongin asked.

Jongdae smiled as he filled the vessel to brimming again, petting his hand over Jongin’s cheek as he drank. He slipped a finger over his chin where excess dripped down, wiping it away. “Absolutely nothing of course. I myself have many names. But…” He brushed his hand lower, hooking on the edge of Jongin’s clothes as magic sparked over his finger, causing the cloth dissolve. “…Names mean power. Control. They embody who you really are.”

He chased the trail of now exposed chest, pressing his palm slightly into Jongin’s navel even as his hand reached ever lower. His touch was teasing, but now also cradled the growing distention of Jongin’s belly, rubbing gently with his fingertips inches below his belly button. “I know you had a name you liked. Revealed in, even. But you buried it to try to find happiness in another dead end.”

Jongin moaned a little at the simultaneous discomfort and pleasure of Jongdae's hands against his belly. He felt near full to bursting, but still ached for more. He relaxed under Jongdae's probing hands and let himself over to it, the burn in his belly shifting lower until he felt himself nearly half-hard. He knew he was blushing but didn't know how to stop it. "How do you know any of that?" Jongin whispered, in awe and fear of what else Jongdae knew of his innermost thoughts and feelings.

"Kai," he continued, enunciating both syllables carefully, "When I danced before... that is what they called me on stage. It was... nice to hear them call for me. They wanted me."

Jongdae carefully removed the vessel from Jongin’s trembling hands to the table, marveling at the lines of his body so receptive to him and his magic. “Truthfully, I have been watching you. For a very, very long time...”

He celebrated his good fortune, finding a human such as this. A sun kissed rarity he stumbled onto by chance. He had thought about doing it the old way when Jongin was younger, replacing him with a changeling doll for his mother to find in the morning. But every copy he made failed to compare, and would be easily traced back to him. So he decided to wait. He waited until the boy became a young man, full of life and promise, and Jongdae was ready to sweep him away when Kyungsoo had come into the picture. He had worried that he was a good enough tether to keep him from pulling Jongin into his world. Again, he decided to wait, sprinkling in his presence as innocuous sounds and object movement, hoping it would deter the other from pursuing him further. But his dull partner was so attached to explanations and reasoning and the odd happenings did not deter him. When they married, Jongdae found that Jongin’s bright glow was fading, his body tearing itself to pieces as the months and years passed, settling into his life as a human despite the weak bond.
Jongdae found it unacceptable that he was blinking and this human’s life was going by so fast. He quietly manipulated behind the scenes, culminating with him meeting Jongin at the cabin in the woods. He knew he’d be hurled into the Void if anyone ever found out the lengths he went to make all of these events happen. But if anything he was clever, covering his tracks and keeping his plans to himself. He would have to answer for taking a human and changing him into an immortal eventually, but that would be after the claiming ceremony. And fairies loved the rituals of a claiming ceremony.

In his dealings, it was better to beg for forgiveness than to ask for permission. And they will be thankful that he decided to share.

His smile had an edge of mischief to it as he looked down at Jongin. “…But that’s not important. What’s important is you. Your name. Kai. It’s wonderful.” As Jongin’s clothes finally all disintegrated off of his form, Jongdae caught the spark on his other hand, and his own armor started to fall off into nothingness as he leaned over him, his wings arching over them. “When I fulfill my promise to you, everyone will want you. You will be a creature of grace and beauty, of envious talent and awe…my beautiful Kai.”

"Everyone," Jongin whispered with reverence. He reached for Jongdae's wings and stroked them nervously, enjoying the feeling of security and warmth they seemed to wrap around him. "And you'll be there ... to protect me." The closer Jongdae came to him, the more Jongin felt his body respond. Rock hard, he could feel his very blood pumping through his veins and he struggled not to pull Jongdae to him immediately, to allow himself to be consumed in all this fiery intensity from his new lover. He jutted his hips forward enough for his aching tip to run against Jongdae's body. He shuddered at the contact and scraped his fingernails against Jongdae's wings.

Jongin was seconds from begging for more kisses, more nectar, more anything to fill him up when a burst of ever colder air entered their room, doors swinging open. Jongin recognized him but only just, like something from a dream. There were no details to the memory, more a feeling, a hint of a shape and voice from a time before Jongdae's wings and this bed and this endless buffet of comforts.

"Oh, Jongdae," the taller man from before, "this is moving much too fast, don't you think?" Kris shook his head, unconcerned with breaking up this intimate moment.

The magic that had been swirling around Jongdae to remove his clothes shuddered with flickering brightness before shooting back up his form, covering him back up again. He swore under his breath with a sound that sounded more like a growl than actual words, pulling himself back up and away from Jongin’s form.

“I swear, out of every creature that exists in this realm your timing has got to be the worst....My Lord,” he added, voice strained as he stood to put himself between Jongin and the Lord of Winter. Nevertheless he bowed his head, but defiantly kept his wings up in a meager attempt to hide Jongin’s form from Kris’ eyes.

“I didn’t expect to see you so….soon. I thought you were kidding about the ‘wanting to talk to me’ part. You know how delicate this timeframe is.”

"I absolutely know," Kris said with a slight lift in his voice as he sidestepped to get a good look at Jongdae's human pet, "That's why I hurried over here as fast as I could." He conveniently left out the bit about whisking the pet's lover across worlds.

Jongin groaned, clawing his way towards the nightstand and taking his little cup in hand. Petulantly pouting at the empty vessel, he whined at Jongdae, "Can I have some more while you talk to him? I'm -"
"He's so far gone already," Kris interrupted, practically pushing Jongdae aside in his rush to get to Jongin, to look him over and to understand the appeal. The human's eyes were wide and childlike; his skin was rich and warm and Kris immediately could see why all this would appeal to Jongdae. His heart burned for Kyungsoo, who slept on the edge of their world (safe, Kris hoped), because he knew now how difficult it would be to convince Jongdae to release him. "How much have you... given him? This is not what I was expecting at all. Jongdae, what you're doing here, it's dangerous... for both of us and him."

Jongin leaned over his empty cup and gingerly licked at the edge, trying to taste another drop.

Kris clenched his jaw in frustration, "Junmyeon isn't a fool. This won't go unnoticed."

Jongdae visibly bristled. “Half a pitcher. …And a sip. That's all he has had.” The locks of his hair bent up like spikes in the back of his head and down his neck before he remembered himself, righting his current form back to normal with a tilt of his head. Kris was right. Junmeyon was strict with the laws of his realm; this violation was no different.

Never bring humans to the realm.

Even with all of his planning and precautions, he’d find out eventually. Jongdae’s wings snapped back to lay flat against his back as he was pushed, yet he still managed a smug grin. "Why Kris, I welcome the attention. But not until I’m done making him one of us, claiming him as we have done to humans in the distant past in front of the whole Court…as you yourself have done over a millennia ago."

Jongdae went around Kris to the nightstand, grabbing the now half-empty pitcher and pouring some more nectar into the vessel, accidentally splashing some sticky excess onto Jongin’s wrist in the process. “There’s no movement among the ranks, Kris. No sign of change or revelation. It’s boring. Status is everything in their sun-pissed castle to the north. And I intend to impress. It’s only right I take him. He wasn’t much attached to the human realm anyway. I bet by now his so called mate in the human world is being tried for his disappearance. He was a feisty one though, I’ll give him that."

He set the pitcher down again, coming up next to Kris and lowering his voice so that only he could hear him as he watched Jongin lick his wrist. “It’s not so bad. Comparatively, some of the lower animalistic castes are taking humans and eating them outright so they don’t get caught. They don’t even bother with the changeling part anymore."

Kris felt acid rise in his throat at the thought of what monstrous creatures lurked now in their realm. He thought of Junmyeon, their king in his sun tower, still and quiet and never truly moving. He thought of the times before, of parties in the moonlight and dancing humans that stumbled into the rings of light. He thought of the way Junmyeon used to smile at their decadent performances. He missed those days, he did. But what Jongdae was saying was treason now. Things had changed. He suppressed thoughts of "feisty" Kyungsoo and imaginings of what his wings would be like if Kris were to... back in the times before, maybe he would have... No, things had changed. And Kris was here with purpose. He cleared his throat, "Just because some of our kind of taken to darkness doesn't make what you are doing okay. You say 'mate'. Jongdae? Kyungsoo was his husband. They had a contract."

Kris perched himself on the edge of the bed and tried to catch Jongin's eyes over the rim of his glass. Jongin nervously complied, meeting Kris's expression though he continued licking hungrily at the empty vessel. "Jongin," Kris said softly, "Can I call you by your name?"

Jongin paused, glancing at Jongdae almost for permission, then nodded. Kris sighed - this human was already so submissive, so childlike. It would be hard to pull him out of Jongdae's grasp.
"Jongin," Kris continued, "Do you remember the name Kyungsoo?"

Jongin lowered his glass, his face scrunching up as he considered the question, but shook his head.

Kris drew in a long breath, "Do you remember being in love?"

"I - I, umm -" Jongin licked his lips. He seemed on the verge of answering when his expression changed suddenly and he turned to Jongdae, "Come back to bed?"

At once Jongdae’s voice changed, features softened as he smiled down at Jongin. “Of course, my dear. Once our guest has satisfied his curiosity of course,” He pointedly looked over at Kris, straightening his back and turning away from him, his features transforming once again from soft to dangerous that Jongin couldn’t see. “I have a promise to keep.”

He walked a few paces so that he put Kris between himself and Jongin, voice low once again. “Call it what you will. Defiance, treason, I don’t care. I will not yield. He is mine,” Jongdae nearly hissed out the last word, eyes wide and bright as he regarded Kris with a renewed conviction. “The little moth’s been mine for as long as he could walk. What they had was no contract if it crumbled like ash when I asserted my claim on him.

“I have no intention of hiding him away. I want Junmeyon to know. I want him to see,” his voice changed in an effort to mimic their King. “As he himself said, ‘We are the preservers of beauty and all that is sweet’ under his rule. That means Summer and Winter, the pretty… and the pretty monstrous. I am merely exercising his decree the way I see fit.”

Jongdae’s wings pattered against his back before folding again, gaze steely as he regarded the taller man. “He will ride me at the Gathering of the courts when I initiate a claiming ritual. He will be one of us by then.”

Kris stared harshly at Jongdae, breathing deeply, "You've been watching this boy, hunting him his entire life, haven't you? You're sick." Kris hated this feeling, this falling feeling inside of him. Because he did love Jongdae, there was a history between them and between all of the fae who lived in the cold, dark places lit only by the moon. They had been through so much together and to see this... to know that what they had done would soon shatter, "You'll bring back the war, you will. If you can remember what life was like before, if you can think of anyone but yourself for half a second..."

Kris stopped himself. He knew he being a hypocrite. He had supported Junmyeon through the War, but hadn't supported the ban on claiming mortals. He'd fought it, he'd taken one last human - one perfect specimen - to prove his point. He lobbied and pulled strings and argued with his best friend, if Junmyeon would ever consider having friends. But their new King was nothing if not stubborn and his rage was rare but well known, so eventually, brokenly, Kris had relented, allowed the ban to go into effect. He shouldn't be surprised that beings like Jongdae, darker Fae, would need this, would eventually break the rules.

He'd have to try another way.

Kris started to go, but stopped, turning back to Jongin and reaching out to brush some of his long hair from his eyes. "Kyungsoo, remember his name? He misses you very much. He loves you very much."

Jongin's face remained neutral at the words, breaking Kris's heart just a bit more for the soft mortal back in his palace. Jongin squirmed a bit and flung himself back on the bed, pushing away the blankets and exposing himself - long limbs and fire-branded skin and a soft inner glow from his
feedings. He was still half-hard and made an almost goofy grin of delight when he noticed that Kris noticed.

"He'll fight for you," Kris said, with renewed conviction, before standing and making his way back to the door. "We're done for today, Jongdae. But don't think this means I approve of, or will support, what you're doing here."

Jongdae’s face contorted into a confused look as he listened to Kris’ interaction with Jongin again, rolling the phrases over in his mind before responding. “He’ll fight for you? What? How do you…” Then shock passed over his features, realization hitting him. His wings buzzed dangerously on his back as his features greyed, eyeing Kris suspiciously.

“Did…did you bring him here??” He nearly shrieked, but he kept his voice low, not wanting to startle Jongin in his fragile state as he tried to hide his troubled reaction, but also his underlying giddiness concerning the whole situation. The absolute chaos it would bring to the courts. It was enough potential to fuel him for months.

He had done his preparations. He knew he had nothing to worry about concerning Kyungsoo. His will to take Jongin back without his name, even with his real name, was no match for Jongdae’s magic. Jongin wouldn’t be leaving unless Jongin himself wished to do so. “A fine example you make for us all, my Lord,” He bowed, petulant, but then mock concern drew over his features. “Why, Kris, are you going to leave him to rot in the Fens when the human can’t take him back? Are you mad?”

Kris stumbled on his answer, "I - I didn't...", before stumbling on his feet, nearly tripping as he passed Jongdae. He hadn't had time to plan this; Kyungsoo had been a shocking type of decision, a passionate one rather than something logical. Coming here had been an attempt to end things quickly, perhaps to even please Kyungsoo with his power and diplomatic speed. Now he was choking on his tongue.

"I am your Lord, your Keeper of Winter," he said simply, taking hold of the door's elaborate handle, "I do what I do to preserve the kingdom and Junmyeon's summer reign. I'm not convinced you had the same ideas in mind when you..." Kris waved towards Jongin, who grinned from ear to ear at the attention.

He couldn’t contain himself anymore. Jongdae’s laughter rang throughout the room, light and airy and filled to the brim with mirth of it all. He hadn’t felt this well in decades. He fell back onto the bed, leaning up against Jongin as he caught his breath. “You seem as keen as ever to the goings on of your own kingdom almost as much Junmeyon is to his own, my dear Kris. Don’t you see? We shouldn’t be ashamed or hidden away from the rest of the universe. We’re meant to unfurl throughout the cosmos, preserving beauty we find everywhere.”

He tilted Jongin’s face and kissed him deeply, rubbing the side of his ribs and no longer caring if Kris left or stayed. His armor fell away again, and this time completely, as he tangled himself up into Jongin’s willing body. “Let us continue, shall we my dear? I want you to taste me.”

Jongin moaned into Jongdae's mouth and let his hands search over his fairy lover's skin, clawing at him, needing him closer. He barely registered Kris's mumbling, the slamming of the door behind this hilariously clumsy, yet mysterious fairy king. All he wanted was to be one with Jongdae, to be both inside of him and filled with him all at once. He felt his blood boil up again and his thirst was as harsh as ever. "Jongdae, Jongdae, Jongdae," he repeated, a mantra to keep him steady as his mouth ghosted over every available bit of skin. He couldn't imagine, couldn't fathom a time in which his entire being wouldn't be devoted to the systematic worship of the man on top of him.
"Give me it," Jongin groaned into Jongdae's neck, nipping and biting on tender flesh, "I want it all. I want to be like you, be with you... forever."
Jongdae chuckled, the sound reverberating through the air around them as Jongdae flexed his power once again, vines growing rapidly to cover the doors and windows to secure them. “You will be, my dearest Kai. You will be.”

One last leaf grew over to block a sliver of light from the moon outside, leaving the only light the bioluminescence from the vines and flowering buds from the tree pulsing around the room, sealing them inside.
Kyungsoo dreamt of snow and a fleeing figure. His cheeks felt heavy from crying and he couldn’t keep up, tumbling over himself as he tried to stand, his limbs sticking to the tacky dirt and plants. It hurt to tread on the thick blades of grass underfoot, and after a moment, he switched to standing on the patches of snow on the ground. He found the ice didn’t numb his nerves in pain, rather, it acted like a pillow for his aching feet. It felt like he had run forever and was still no closer to catching up to the figure in the distance. With each step the snow was melting, giving him fewer places to step until he could follow no further, his calls going unanswered until he could no longer see the figure. He was left there, alone in the melting snow that was rushing out from under his feet when he woke, sitting straight up in the bed.

“Jongin!” His voice filled the quiet room, and he breathed, rubbing his eyes as he tried to wake up completely. He wrapped his arms around himself, the dream fading now that he was awake, and now he could barely remembered it. He sighed, letting his arms fall back down onto his legs and started to pull up the top blanket to cover his face.

That’s when he noticed the blanket was warm in his hands, and was a different color compared to the sheets and pillows around him. The blanket was a light aqua green with a deep purplish trim, and really fuzzy on the edge. Startled, he let it go, an iridescent sheen coming off on his fingertips. Then it fluttered.

Kyungsoo let out a panicked squeak, flailing out from under the heavy covers and landing on the floor on the opposite side of the bed. As he struggled to stand, the bed shifted as a lithe figure lifted itself up from under a few pillows and gazed over its shoulder back at him.

Kyungsoo had heard the term ‘cat-like’ before, but he didn’t think it was possible for a being to emulate the meaning of the words so completely. The man was very slim and tall, dark purple hair fading into a light green undertone on his neck that matched his wings. Filigree chains of something brighter than gold crossed his chest and arms and linked together a barely there outfit made of what looked like the oily interior of abalone shells. It seemed to fade in and out of existence at every turn he made, mixtures of gold and sea green fading into dark blue and purple at every crease.

Kyungsoo marveled for a moment before he remembered himself, pointing an accusatory finger at him. “Wh-what the fuck are you doing in my bed??”

To his astonishment, the fairy flopped back down, a small poof of dust similar to what coated Kyungsoo’s fingers floating into the air. He seemed to snuggle down into the bedding once again before answering him.

“Keeping you warm. You were shaking little ren ,” his muffled voice came from somewhere underneath one of the sun stitched pillows. “I thought I would keep you warm.”

“No! No thank you! Thank you! I mean,” he wanted to continue, but the thought he heard the door handle jiggle.

Kris tried to slip into the room quietly, hoping the Kyungsoo was still sleeping, but instead found himself fighting a warm smile. While the nervous look on Kyungsoo’s face should have concerned him, he couldn't help but feel a special, familial heat at seeing his Tao wrapped up in the sheets right next to his Kyungsoo... his... no, just Kyungsoo. Not his, not ever. He swallowed back his worries and closed to the door securely behind him, "Kyungsoo, I see you've met Tao."
He approached the bed and slipped a hand underneath the covers to slide down Tao's long back. He knew his fingers would be icy cold against Tao's always radiantly hot skin, but it thrilled him in a way to make Tao squirm like he did. Their relationship had cooled so much in the many many years since Tao had been changed, cooled so much from a time when they could hardly keep their hands off each other. But Kris still felt so much love for this little creature and his delightfully extravagant and flamboyant ways. He even found himself fond of the way Tao whined for attention now when he grew tired of the greater fairy realm and came home to Kris.

Noticing how wide Kyungsoo's eyes still were, from fear or discomfort Kris wasn't sure, Kris coughed, "I'm so sorry. I should have told you he was here. I should have told you but I just wanted you to rest. I didn't want to disturb you."

Kyungsoo breathed out a sigh of relief. "No, I'm... I'm fine I just... he startled me is all." He ran a hand through his hair. It still smelled like the shampoo from the cabin. His stomach growled, and he tensed up again, realizing that he couldn't ask for any food. He placed a hand on his stomach as his face fell. "I did sleep very well though. Thank you."

Now that he was well rested, maybe now he could find a way to pull himself together to get Jongin back, and also learn the rules of the realm without trapping himself here forever. He leaned back up over the edge of the bed, grabbing his pants and putting them on, awkwardly, behind the bed while they were concerned with each other.

Tao purred, impossibly long body arching at Kris' touch. He moved like liquid glass, slow to rise, every move of his body graceful like a moving piece of art. Only his wings betrayed him, fluttering open and closed as if the action was out of his control as he finally stood next to Kris, leaning his head on his shoulder. "He's so pretty, my Lord. Are you planning on claiming him at the courts gathering on the new moon? I thought such a thing was forbidden nowadays..."

Kris jerked his gaze between the two of them, worried that Kyungsoo would frighten at the mention of the claiming ceremony. He pushed a kiss onto Tao's temple, "You'd be right, though lovely he is. There is no more claiming, you're the last of your kind." Kris lowered himself nervously and sat at edge of the bed, "Kyungsoo is here for another purpose entirely."

He patted the bed next to him, inviting Kyungsoo to join him. He wasn't sure how Kyungsoo would take the news, but something about this guest of his made it difficult to lie or to keep anything from him. For all his attempts to keep his facial expressions neutral, Kyungsoo was soft in ways the Kris wasn't sure the human understood. Like Tao had centuries before but with a more solemn edge that couldn't be ignored, he filled Kris with very human emotions, very desperate needs. He made people (and fae alike) want to protect him, to hold him close, to keep his soul free from any pain. And Kris felt certain he was about to deliver quite a blow.

"Kyungsoo," he said, loving and loathing how smooth the name sounded on his tongue, "I found Jongdae on my journey today, the fae prince who took your husband, and we talked. I think... I think it may be more difficult than I previously imagined to get your Jongin back. There are rules here... rituals that have been going on for ages and which are... dangerously binding."

Kyungsoo moved around to the other side of the bed where Kris was sitting, and tentatively sat down next to him as he spoke, Tao moving with a gentle smile to give him room. "I wish to know all of the rules that could help me here," he looked up at Kris, stared at the frost clinging to the tips of his hair. "Also the rules that could help me get an advantage over said bindings. I can't just leave him here," his tone took on a desperate edge again. "You said you are the Lord of Winter, couldn't you order him to give me my husband back?"

Kris pressed his lips together and tried to find the kindest way to say everything. He extended his
hand and drew Tao close to them again, kissing lightly on his pet's stomach. "It's not as simple as all that, lords and kings, Kyungsoo. Tao, he used to be a human as well. He was... not unlike your Jongin. The way he moved, certain... talents he possessed," Kris gazed up at Tao, memories of their initial encounter flooding back into him. Things were different now, but things were also the same. Tao was still beautiful.

"And I saw those things, as one of our lesser princes has seen Jongin," Kris continued, "He accepted my offer and I brought him home. Jongin... has also accepted an offer. And contracts here, as I said, are quite binding."

Kyungsoo watched them, watched how Tao interacted with Kris, sharing a warm moment and a smile that he felt like he was intruding upon with his presence. Tao turned, gaze soft and kind even as he stroked Kris' cheek with the back of his hand, his movements reminding him of Jongin when he danced for unruly bar crowds. He looked away from the affectionate display. It unsettled him. His mind made the connection and his face contorted into an expression of disbelief. "I'm… I can't just…" Kyungsoo gripped the hem of his shirt, twisting it into his hands. "I can't believe it," he managed, his eyes puffy and threatening to fill with tears. "I won't. I want to hear it from his own lips. Why he would choose… this over me. I love him. He loves me."

Tao motioned with a hand towards Kyungsoo. "Has he imbibed the nectar that flows freely from the flowers of this realm? Has he tasted fae…fluids?" Tao asked, trying to be helpful. "I can tell you what the conversion feels like…"

Kris breathed in deeply, enjoying Tao's always gentle touch, soothing now in the heat of this tense moment and shook his head, "We're not changing him, Tao. Kyungsoo is to remain human. Do not serve him anything of the realm. He is not mine nor yours to have." He felt cruel and short; it had been years since he'd given Tao a command so direct and final. Tao had long since grown out of the need for a possessive sponsor into the realm, but the way Tao eased against him, Kris wondered if Tao actually rather enjoyed not having to think too much, having Kris make his decisions for him. Kyungsoo, on the other hand and oh Kris knew it to his bones, would never want that. That life seemed altogether wrong for such a creature.

Tao swayed like he was shrugging his shoulders, but his smile never left his face. "As you say, my Lord. We cannot offer. But what to do if the little ren decides to just… take?"

"I'll keep pushing with all my efforts," Kris said in acknowledgment of Kyungsoo's worries and pointedly ignoring Tao's suggestion, "But I fear that we will require... higher powers to break the quick changes that are happening now, if they can be stopped at all."

Kyungsoo finally stood, the feeling of intrusion overwhelming his senses more than ever at Kris' declaration and Tao's riddle-like speech. He walked to the open window, snow falling on the ledge softly but never inside. He stuck his hand out, biting cold seeping into his skin the moment he passed the window frame, and he quickly pulled his hand back inside. "So I'm guessing I can't leave to explore either," he said, facing away from them.

Kris jolted up, gently moving Tao aside as he tried to approach Kyungsoo, stumbling on his words yet again. Would Kyungsoo always make him struggle to speak like this? Would it wear off once Kris was more used to being in the presence of tender humans yet again? "This castle is yours," he said quickly, coming up beside Kyungsoo and pulling the window closed, "Every room, every level." He nodded towards Tao, "Tao will show you around and let you get used to the place. The winter is cold, always, for humans were not made for this realm. It is part of why the change is necessary when we desire a human to stay with us. But..."

He paused and looked over Kyungsoo, hoping for anything like a smile or a sigh of at least
contentment, perhaps a little hint that maybe staying here wouldn't be terrible. "I'll see what I can do about bringing you to other parts of the realm, warmer places so you can see my world. But until then I have appointments that need to be made, bureaucracy to attend to. You are not a typical guest. And I want you to see him. I want you to see Jongin. I'll do... everything."

Tao tittered in amusement at his Lord's reaction to the human. He hadn’t seen him this flustered in decades...Not since Chanyeol nearly lit Kris’ hair on fire at a summer festival all those years ago. He waved a hand into the air before tapping his cheek, slightly exasperated. “Or just... give him reign of the entire castle. That works too.” Tao’s assessment of Kyungsoo brought him to the conclusion that he seemed to be emotional, but he believed in what he could see and was very level headed concerning his situation. It surprised him, really. Most would be freaked out completely by now. By the realm, by the wings, by their behavior. Kyungsoo didn’t know the rules of the realm, but once he did, Tao knew he’d probably make an incredible addition to Kris’ castle, regardless if he kept the human or not.

Kyungsoo’s reaction however was more confused than ever, blinking up at Kris like he had just grown an extra head. “O-oh. Alright. Thank you.” He tried to smile, knowing that this was a great opportunity to learn more. He turned towards Tao, noticing that his face was laced with concentration, then back up at Kris. “I don’t suppose you have a library? I wish to... research your culture a bit before doing anything too drastic. See what my options are.”

Tao smiled, sweet as ever. “I can take you to look, my dear,” he nodded towards Kris. “I have no qualms about sharing knowledge. I used to be human like you, and I’m still learning what rules apply to me here.”

Kris met Tao's expression and bit his lip. There was no hiding from someone who had lived with and loved him for so long. Tao was obviously, painfully aware of Kris's internal dilemma surrounding Kyungsoo. Of course, Kyungsoo was pretty, an aesthetic addition to the castle that would contrast beautifully with Tao's longer, feline looks, but there was also a stubbornness there that had always been attractive to Kris. He'd seen it in Tao. His best friend, the King of all realms himself, also had it. It was powerful, it was alluring. Kris blushed and hated himself for it.

"I know I can trust you," Kris replied, pressing his meaning against Tao's mind. Tao would be gentle with Kyungsoo, sure. But Kris needed Tao to be gentle with him as well. Tao had had his time at the court; he knew, at the end of the day, how complicated the situation of a new human in the realm could be.

"Aaaa," Kris started, steadying himself as he detached his thoughts from Tao's and trying desperately to sound as regal as his title should suggest and failing by all estimations, "Library... I definitely have a library and Tao will absolutely show it to you. Like I said before, anything in this castle is yours. I want you to feel safe here. There aren't many safe places once we manage to get you to your husband. Relax here and..." Kris's skin was worried so hot from embarrassment and concern that he thought he might melt through his icy castle's floor, "If you would join me later, when you're needing a break from your research, I'd like... I'd like to..."

His mind went blank. He'd romanced an already enchanted and eager Tao with the magic of his ice gardens and he felt filthy and thieving for even thinking of recycling that brilliant night for Kyungsoo's benefit.

Kyungsoo would say that it was his weakness that he was usually clueless when it came to gauging other people’s discomfort level or interest. Mostly because Jongin was the only person in his life that had such genuine reactions to him. Trying to discern either was particularly hard for him. His more reserved personality, and habit of looking around or avoiding eye contact compounded this problem.
But now it was hard not to focus on the world around him and the people in it. So when Kris tripped over his words he stared up at him intently, wondering if he had caused his flustered face and less than kingly blundering. It was almost… cute.

“Are… are you alright Kris? Did I say something wrong?”

Tao looked like he was going to lose his composure, smiling a little too much and trying to hide it behind a delicate sleeve.

"Oh heavens no, never," Kris managed to choke out, glancing at Tao for help that would never come before turning back to Kyungsoo and meeting those big, beautiful eyes. "I wanted to... do something for you. To help you relax and feel at home here. What do you do in your world? When you want to have fun?"

Kris tried to imagine Kyungsoo at home, with Jongin or without, tried to see him playing sport with the other humans, shopping at the market, or watching the single sun of the human world set behind their horizon. None of it seemed real, none of it seemed fitting. Their world and its activities seemed too mundane for a soul that Kris was beginning to believe was extraordinary.

The inquisitive look on Kyungsoo's face fell, and he averted his eyes. Fun. That was something he had less time for in his life when he was earning money just to live. The most fun he usually got was from Jongin’s presence and their… nocturnal activities because most things cost money, and the time to even do anything was scarce with his job consuming his life. Kyungsoo’s face flamed, knowing that sex probably wasn’t what Kris had in mind, but it managed to come to the forefront in his mind anyway.

He managed to regain his composure before answering. “Humans are more concerned with earning money to live nowadays than having fun. The… trip Jongin and I had taken to the little cabin in the woods was to be our vacation from it all…to have fun…at least for a little while.” He thought about other things that he did for fun. He read books, looked at stupid videos on the internet, he sang along to songs and… that was mostly it. It was painful to admit that maybe he truly was mundane. Maybe that was the reason that he and Jongin had started to drift apart. “But I do appreciate your offer. You’ve already done more than I thought anyone ever would, especially someone in your position,” he added quickly.

Tao’s eyebrows shot up, surprised. “My, my. From the sound of it, it seems like all manner of magic is gone from your world.”

Kyungsoo shrugged his shoulders. “Besides the unexplainable instances that happened to Jongin and I over these past couple years, you’d be right.”

Kris felt his heart sink ever deeper, remembering a time, too long ago now he realized, when humans understood what magical creatures they truly were. They would give parties to last all night, wait and pray that one of his kind would arrive to make their evening sparkle. They crafted monuments to celebrate gods incarnate who walked among them and wove poetry into the dancing steps of a beautiful boy in a garden of starlight. Perhaps he was romantic about humans and their world, but he remembered something so different from what Kyungsoo described. A world where they knew that things lived in the dark and celebrated it. A time when they looked up at the sky and saw myths... an idea sprang into Kris's mind and he smiled.

"Perhaps," Kris answered, "or maybe you have simply forgotten how to recognize it for what it is, magic."

Kris took Tao's hand gently in his and began to pull his pet from the room, needing desperately a
moment alone with him, "Please, Kyungsoo, we'll excuse you. You'll find everything you need here - clothing in the armoire, it should be tailored to fit you once you open it. I'll have water brought to you for washing. And Tao will be right out here to show you to the library when you're ready. And... and, if you would have it, I'd very much like you to join me tonight. Tao will show you to my study, if you accept." He looked back to Kyungsoo with anticipation. He didn't want to contemplate the idea that Kyungsoo might not want to see him...

Kyungsoo watched as Kris led Tao out of the room, shooting a brief inquisitive look at the door of the plain-looking armoire, inquisitive. "Th-thank you…” He didn’t know what the look on Kris’ face meant, but he smiled just slightly, appreciative, and felt a bit more at home now that he knew a bath was possible. And also thankful that acquiring new, weather-appropriate clothes was possible as well. He was afraid to even ask for that.

The door was left ajar as they left, and he heard murmuring and shifting clothing, but he decided to ignore it for a peek into the armoire. It looked small, sticking out a foot from the wall and barely his arm’s length wide. As he touched the handle, he felt a small shock, the wood lightening in color as it opened. The smell of something akin to mothballs and recently cut wood hit him, revealing a larger space inside, lined wall to wall with clothes in a variety of colors and types…all seemingly to be in his size and pristinely tailored. It looked full to bursting, some sleeves even shifting towards him from the pressure released from the doors pressing on them, and Kyungsoo gave out a startled gasp. His mind immediately tried to logic the space, moving the door to inspect the sides but finding nothing that could explain what he was seeing.

If he was being honest with himself, he was unnerved by it.

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Tao looked at Kris with a tilted head, wings fluttering behind himself as he looked into his King’s eyes as he was led out of the room. “You’re so smitten, my Lord, but you seem afraid. Am I missing something here?”

Kris came close to Tao once they had cleared from the room and rested his head on the other’s shoulder, turning only slightly to kiss gently at Tao's neck. Tao didn't even taste human anymore, it had been so long. Tao was an extreme example though - he was more himself than he had ever been as a human, and Kris was proud of that. He groaned, feeling selfish and confused, and Tao's always pointed analysis of him didn't help.

"He's just so .... cute," Kris whined, feeling hundreds of years younger than he was, "But it's not just that, it's something else about him. Like if I only had some magic to wipe away his worries, he would shine for me. But - "

Kris stopped himself. He shouldn't burden Tao with his worries, it was cold and selfish and horrible, but he needed Tao right now.

"You're right. I am scared. He's married, Taozi. To another human, that Jongdae took by coercion into our world. Jongdae would bring down our entire world to have this one being. He would destroy a peace that I fought for, that Junmyeon maintains for us. I bled for this peace and I lost people. What does it say about me, that I would even consider taking Kyungsoo into my -?"

Tao made a sympathetic noise and just held him, all too familiar with all the places that made Kris melt under his touches of comfort. “You shouldn’t feel shame for wanting him. He’s beautiful. No doubt about that. However he’s pretty focused on his goal, and considering the situation…” Tao trailed off. It was hard to tell what could happen. The gathering was in a few weeks. Maybe they had time to think of something. Anything. Because sooner or later, Junmeyon was going to find out.
It could be by his loyal servants that resided in Kris’ domain, up to the very wreath that Jongdae will lay at his feet at the gathering to indicate the claim.

He always found out.

To Tao, The Lord of Summer and now King of all the Realms was just someone he’d met once. He had danced for him before being claimed by Kris in front of the entire court many years ago. It was to convey that his transformation from his and Kris’ chrysalis ritual was complete, making him one of them. Even so, Junmyeon had stopped them, asked Tao personally if this was what he really wanted. He recalled that he had seemed…sad at the time. By confirming that it was what he wanted, The Lord of Summer waved one tired hand for them to continue. The King’s solemn features were drowned out by his and Kris’ pleasure as they consummated the claim. After they were done, Junmyeon had made his decree that it would never happen again. Kris had protested, citing traditions and the old ways that would be lost. But the King would not be swayed, and refused any more claiming wreaths, irritating most of the lower castes of fae under Kris’ domain who had wanted to claim humans of their own that day and beyond.

He swallowed and licked his lips before speaking, his voice trembling a bit. “Have you… have you considered telling Junmeyon the truth?”

"You know I don't like to burden him," Kris said softly, though he knew Tao was right, "Junmyeon - my King has been through so much and I thought I could fix this. I thought I could save him myself." Kris felt a bit of a cramp in his belly, recognizing that what he had wanted wasn't to save Jongin, but to be a hero for Kyungsoo, whatever prize that could have brought to him. And, at the end of the day, he didn't want Jongdae to hurt either. It was a confusing feeling, the need to protect Jongdae who put himself in all these situations by his own free will, but Jongdae was still his to care for and to rule over. And Junmyeon's wrath - the raging heat of all the stars in their galaxy - was not something he ever wanted to witness again.

"I'm scared, Taozi," he continued, "I'm scared and I don't very much like that feeling."

Kris nodded, mostly to himself and pulled out of Tao's gentle and pointed touch, "You're right however. Junmyeon... even if Jongdae claims not to respect his Grace's decree... he will be able to help me. I will go to him in the morning. I'll tell him. He'll know what to do. But tonight," Kris blushed furiously and avoided meeting Tao's eyes, "Please? Bring him to me?"

He turned to the wall and pressed his forehead against the cool walls of his castle, "I won't touch him. He's not mine to touch. But, it's been so long and I just want to be near him. I want to show him our world and see him seeing our world. Does that make any sense?"

Tao’s slightly surprised face turned into one full of adoration and love. “Yes. I understand. It may seem like such a simple thing, but I know it’s something you miss experiencing,” Tao shrugged, pulling his sleeves over his hands. “Junmyeon is your friend. He will understand, surely. You’ve been nothing but loyal to him.”

In all honesty, Tao had overheard more than a few instances of the lower castes ignoring the rigid rules enforced by their Lord, but they seemed to have spiked in the last few decades or so. ‘Sunspot’, they kept calling Kris, a blacker mark on their history than the ones residing inside their own hearts. Of course Tao would inform him, and the murmurs grew quiet around him from then on. The growing dissonance in their realm even went as high as their own castes, such as in Jongdae’s case. The fae were tired of the lack of... amusement humans brought to their existences. Tired of obeying, celebrations and parties became as fake as the masks they wore to attend them. Younger fae like Jongdae were not as familiar with how things were back then; how the mysteries died, how other practices were decreed to be too dangerous, or faded from memory. Growing up with rules that
contradicted instinctual behavior, it was no wonder that their understanding of humans and their own rules had all but evaporated.

“I’ll be sure to bring him to you once he’s ready, my Lord.” Tao said, coaxing up Kris with gentle touches. “How long do you need?”

Kris smiled and almost giggled as Tao's knowledgeable fingers drifted over sensitive places and tickled him. "A few hours at most," Kris said, "Whenever he's done looking over the library. That collection isn't used nearly enough. But -" Kris turned around, his back against the wall, quite enjoying the feeling of being boxed in by Tao, "Taozi? You like it here? I gave you a good home?" He knew the answer, but it felt good sometimes to hear it anyway. For all their attraction to each other, he and Tao were so different and yet they worked. Their relationship had been envied in the early days of their courtship for it's simplicity and eagerness.

Kris caught himself reminiscing and chuckled before Tao could answer, "I'm horrible. Fishing for your compliments and your affection like this..." Kris slipped from Tao's reach and tapped intently on what appeared to be a small stone statue in their hallway. A thin film of ice slid over it and as it melted, almost instantly, so too did the stone melt away, revealing a small, gnome-like creature who gazed up at Kris as though he were waking from a very good nap. He grumped at his master and stomped a tiny foot.

"Our human guest will need water for bathing and bring him some of my personal perfume stock. Allow him to use whatever he likes best," Kris said, feeling productive and lordly, even as his servant glared at him with tiny black eyes for disturbing his slumber, "And when you're done, I need make contact with the Wind Master. I want a place at The Sun King's breakfast table. Tomorrow."

Tao silently watched as Kris worked his magic over the statue. Once the creature had given his bow to take his leave, he disappeared into a puff of black smoke, off to do his Master's bidding. “I will never grow tired of it, this life with you. I would pick being here with you every time, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything,” Tao replied, once they were alone again. He walked slowly back up to Kris, inhaling his scent one more time before giving him a deep kiss, very much unlike his chaste or hovering butterfly kisses he usually gave. It spoke volumes of their relationship, how it would crest and recede like waves as the seasons would pass. How time spent away from each other was not a crisis but more of a pause. To fall over one another again constantly as time marched on, so too would their love for each other. It would never disappear.

He broke the kiss after a few moments, running the back of his hand down Kris’ cheek. “Run along now. I’ll take care of him for you.” A genuine smile lit up his lips. “Whatever is important to you, is doubly important to me. I’ll see you at that time.”

Kris reached up and touched his own lips, enjoying the way they tingled from the interaction of their magics, "My study? If you would bring him, when his eyes become too tired from all those words... when he might need me..." He nodded, though feeling quite foolish at his own phrasing. With that, the Lord of Winter turned and walked briskly towards his study at the top of the castle's west tower. Unlike many others of his kind, he preferred the tactile feeling of moving through air and space by a more manual means. He rarely, if ever, extended his wings unless traveling through realms or across vast distances. It was something he retained from a time when most of his energy was spent entertaining in the human realm, dancing in valleys and building little shelters for his kind in the moss of trees. It was a good time and the simplicity of a good walk seemed to bring it back somehow...

Once arriving in his study, a rounded room centered around a vast desk, always covered with papers, Kris began his work. If Jongdae wouldn't the release the Kyungsoo's husband, and if it came to it that Junmyeon was unable or unwilling to help, Kris knew he would need some kind of release,
some kind of long forgotten magic that could reverse the incredible transformation that was taking Jongin's body even as they spoke. He imagined Jongin tangled in Jongdae's arms and felt sick at his own imagination and his own strange jealousy. Humans are warm and it was always so cold in the lands of Winter.

He pulled from his shelves any book regarding the chrysalis ritual, which unfortunately did not amount to much. Publication regarding even theory crafting of the ritual was scarce these days and the older texts were starting to show their age... pages crinkling and some written in ciphers for which there were no keys remaining. He heaved a heavy sigh and collapsed into his chair, opening the first book and began to read.
Chapter 7

Tao gently rapped his knuckles against the door and peeked back inside Kyungsoo’s room, and was greeted by a curious sight. Kyungsoo was opening the door of the armoire, then closing it, testing the clothes that came out of it, seemingly curious as to why they disappeared then reappeared back in the armoire. He had a fuzzy hat on his head, as if testing another unknown hypothesis, and he huffed when all of the items of clothing that he had laid out on his bed disappeared, sucked back into the armoire since he wasn’t using them. He seemed to be testing if he could trick it. He opened it again, seeing them neatly hung back on their hooks. The little gnome creature seemed to be huffing at Kyungsoo that his bath was ready in the adjoining bathroom, stomping its feet as best it could on the fluffy comforter.

Kyungsoo seemed to ignore its fussing. “One more, little guy. What if you touched the door? Would all the clothes change into your size?”

Tao coughed into his sleeve, and they both turned to look at him. The gnome huffed a sigh of relief, jumping off the bed to the floor and bowing up at Tao, running off to another task. He nodded down at it, then turned his attention back to Kyungsoo. “Your bath is prepared if you'll have it. The library awaits once you’re finished.”

Kyungsoo felt a little embarrassed at his curiosity, momentarily forgetting his situation. “Right. I’m… Thank you. I’m sorry. I got caught up in how your…” his eyes dragged back up and down the armoire. “…furniture works.”

Tao smiled. “No, no. It’s quite alright. It’s quite endearing, actually. Your inquisitiveness is so refreshing. It’s been ages since a human has actually been here, so…” Tao stopped himself, calming down. “There will be plenty of more opportunities, I assure you.” He bowed his head, his hand gesturing to the door. “Please.”

Kyungsoo nodded, following Tao into the bathroom, but he paused, seeming to remember something, and took off the hat and put it on the bed. At once it disappeared, the door to the armoire clicking shut.

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Hours later, Tao knocked on Kris’ study door. “My Lord, can I come in?”

Kris jolted nervously from his chair and began tidying his desk in some desperate attempt to appear put together and refined enough for his title. "Yes yes yes, of course! Please come in," he hurried to respond, though the magical, blue-tinted dust kicked up from his sudden movements made his eyes water and his nose twitched, ready to sneeze. He cursed himself for not being more careful with his alchemy supplies when he was younger. He’d found so many little treasures - alchemical dusts, ancient charms - hidden in every crack and crevice as he had researched through the afternoon.

Giving up more quickly than he liked, he scurried around his desk and opened the door wider, gesturing for his guests to enter, trying not to look too eager as he glanced around Tao to see if indeed Kyungsoo had accepted his offer, "I was just finishing up. The library, did he... did you like it?"

Tao stood alone, his hands clasped together at his hips. He bowed his head low in greeting. “My Lord, I informed Kyungsoo of your offer, and he did accept it before we reached the library. However he was so enamored by your books that he insisted on staying. Time merely got away from
him, and I wish to show you to him… if that’s alright. I figure, he wouldn’t want to be disturbed in
his current state… unless it was by you.”

Tao’s lips had curled up into a knowing little smile, indicating that it was something sweet, rather
than something ominous or insidious. “Come. See for yourself,” he said, reaching for Kris’ hand and
gently tugged him along. Tao’s other hand reaching up and pressing his index finger to his own lips.

Squeezing Tao’s hand to extract as much support as he could, Kris fought to keep his heart from
dropping to the soles of his feet in disappointment and anxiety. His library was a carefully curated
expression of himself - ancient lore, alien astrologies and histories of their people, including as much
as he could obtain about Junmyeon’s great conquering and his own strange place as a warrior in that
total encounter. Kris felt embarrassed now at his own unique brand of self-interest and wondered
how deeply Kyungsoo had dug through the collection.

"Taozi," he mumbled, allowing himself to be pulled towards the door of their library. He stopped
Tao short of opening the door and pressed his lips together, "Is he happy?"

Sensing his distress, Tao lifted his hand to brush Kris’ hair away from his forehead, then leaned up to
place a kiss there. He gave him a warm, reassuring smile, squeezing his hand gently. “Come,” he
replied softly, placing his other hand on the door. His own magic flowed from his fingers, a silencing
charm muting the hinges of the large door as it opened.

Since there was less light coming from the windows, there were fireflies everywhere, their light
warm and inviting in the still crisp air. As they got closer to the sitting area, a magicked orb in the
center flickered dimly with blue flames that radiated heat, its signature clearly Tao’s handiwork. And
on one of the more plush armchairs sat Kyungsoo, asleep. Draped in black furs and a deep maroon
outfit that he picked himself, surrounded by books and sleepy sprite dragons that were curled up on
his legs, hips, even head. His face was peaceful, his breathing even, an indication that he had still
been tired despite an immense curiosity and desire to explore. Several pixies had started to pull the
multitude of books away from his sleeping form to put them away, but as Kris and Tao approached,
they scattered, the sound of their fluttering wings spreading out to the corners of the room.

Kris halted in place, letting the pixies settle in their corners and the bookshelf crevices. He was
frightened that their beating wings would wake the sleeping human, but Kyungsoo only stirred
slightly, his sleepy hum somehow making him ever more endearing. His shift disturbed one of the
tiny dragons, who sat up, quite grumpy at being snatched from his dreams, and stretched his long
body like a cat before curling again in a tiny ball and falling back into his sleep. Kris felt his entire
body smile.

He turned back to look at Tao for only a moment, pressing into his lover's mind all the thanks in all
the realms for bringing him here. In just a few quiet, calculated steps of his long legs, Kris came close
to Kyungsoo and continued the pixies' tidying. Beside Kyungsoo's arm was a book on court ritual.
Kungsoo had spread his interest far. It was no wonder
that he was exhausted. He stacked the books gently on a side table and considered how uniquely
lovely this was. Humans were so scared of magic, but this one... he seemed made for it.

Kris leaned over his exhausted guest and pulled one of the larger furs more tightly around him - the
winter realms did become so cold at night. He extended a hand and brushed Kyungsoo's hair away
from his face and gently allowed himself to linger near Kyungsoo's temple. "Thank you for trusting
me," he whispered into Kyungsoo's dream world.

Kyungsoo smiled and nuzzled deeper into the chair, his dreams peaceful. The dragon near his head
even started purring. Tao marveled at Kris’ enjoyment. He fell in love with him all over again at his
appreciation for simpler things, what magic was and needed to be again.
Tao’s face twitched as he remembered the letter in his pocket. He had received it back before he rapped on Kris’ door. And it was longer than a mere acceptance of Kris’ presence at the King’s breakfast in the morning. Apparently with Kris attending, Junmyeon was taking the opportunity to address the rising problem of illegal dark magic usage, and how the remains of three more humans were found near the border of their world, drained of all essence. There were even rumblings of a planned coup that needed to be put to rest. Tao tapped his ear at Kris then turned, his wings allowing him to exit the room softly, feet barely touching the ground. He figured Kris needed to enjoy this small moment first before he delivered the news.

Kris nodded to acknowledge Tao, but could hardly keep his eyes off Kyungsoo's sleeping form. Knowing that Kyungsoo felt safe enough to sleep here, to be wrapped up in the softly humming magic of his dragons, seemed to overwhelm him, clouding his thoughts with fantasies of this human as part of his family, singing his sprites to sleep or visions of what Kyungsoo's wings would be like. He took a deep breath and pushed it out forcefully, a dramatic sigh - now was not the time, if a time there ever would be.

Again, he brushed a stubborn lock of hair from Kyungsoo's face, leaning over him and allowing himself the indulgence of smelling Kyungsoo's delicate, mortal scent. "I'll find him for you," Kris whispered aloud, too close to Kyungsoo for his own good now, "I'll find him. Trust me and I'll give you the world." He summoned up a bit of the old magic and pressed a kiss against Kyungsoo's temple, "Dream of him. Dream of the one you love the most."

Kris smiled to himself, mostly pleased with his restraint and followed Tao from the library. He softly closed the door behind him, though he lingered just before its quiet click into place, wanting just a moment more to know everything was safe.

Tao waited patiently at the end of the hall for Kris, his form still even as he held the small opened scroll. The wax on top was that of the Wind Master, a delicate pearl filigree covering the deep orange of the Summer Court seal underneath, signifying its urgency.

As Kris approached him, he handed him the letter. “Forgive my impertinence My Lord, but the moment I saw this seal I knew you’d need to see it immediately. However with the human… I waited until after to inform you,” he bowed his head.

Kris frowned at the scroll. He hadn't received something so critical from Junmyeon's court in the many years since the War. Junmyeon was generally well-respected, though not always well-liked, and the peace had remained for all the years of his reign. "You know best, Tao," he conceded, scared to admit aloud how much he had enjoyed that silent, easy moment with Kyungsoo. Tao knew anyway; there was no need to be so direct.

He picked at the wax seal as he read, a new nervousness rising in his belly, "Well... it seems we'll have more than seed bread and sausage on the menu tomorrow morning." He tried to laugh at his own lame joke, but it fell flat. He turned to Tao, "You read this, didn't you? I-"

Kris settled himself with another deep breath, one of too many these last days, and reached into his past for the spirit and role of a General. "Taozi," he started again, his voice deeper and stronger than before, "you always have an ear to the rest of the kingdom. I need to you to brief me tonight on everything you've heard. Anything that might be relevant to this... this revolution brewing right beneath my feet."

Tao shivered at the change in Kris’ demeanor. Tao himself had only glimpsed him like this a few times long ago when he was still human, and it still made him tremble each time. He was usually so disarming and sweet compared to most in the realm it was hard to remember that he was also a smart and calculating leader. He was prepared to do anything for his realm; give everything up for his
Tao bowed his head. “I shall do my best. You know I tell you the smaller things as they happen. More immediate problems, easily fixable problems. But this, My Lord,” he hesitated, licking his lips. “It probably spreads further than we think. I'm lucky just to have heard the whispers. They are being much more careful, much more discreet. The magic they’re using. They want the void between our worlds and others to bleed.”

"Then Jongdae..." Kris said, taking the line of thought from Tao, "Then someone with connections, someone with access to higher ups like Jongdae, he could very be just the beginning of our problems. This movement, this... revolution, doesn't need a public figure head, a public martyr to the cause. And Jongdae is no ordinary fae, he never has been." Kris nodded his head down the hall and led Tao towards his own bed chambers, where they could talk in what little guaranteed privacy they could manage. "If Jongdae is able to take Jongin, in front of everyone, in defiance of the King in his own court room - even if he's not as involved as I'm starting to think he may be... I can imagine that there will be blood."

Kris pulled Tao into his bedroom once they arrived, a room a world away from the blue ice palace the surrounded them. Rich, chocolate browns and glittering gold gave the impression of a woodland retreat, a flavor of the Earth that Kris had always found refreshing. Coming up through the thick icy stone of the floor, encouraged by some unseen magic, were green tendrils of grasses and wormwort. "We'll start from the beginning then. You tell me everything you've heard, every breath of a rumor, anything that might be relevant." Kris sat on the edge of his bed and unbuttoned a bit of his robes. It was going to be a long night; he needed to be comfortable.

Kyungsoo’s tiny boots swung in the thin layer of falling snow at his feet as he studied his large history book on the park bench. The test he was studying for was very important, and he couldn’t afford to play with the other children around him for fear of failing. He would peek up every once in a while, smiling at Jongin, whose face was actually in focus. Looking at him enjoying himself, playing in the snow, made his heart warm and fuzzy.

“C’mon Soo! Come play with me!” He said over and over, increasingly urgent.

“Mn-mm. I gotta study, Jongin. You know how important this test is. I don’t want to fail.” Kyungsoo buried his nose further into the book, which for some odd reason, he just realized he couldn’t read because the pages were blank.

Jongin pouted, stomping his foot, breath puffing out in irritation. “Fine! I’ll play with someone else!” And he did just that, grabbing the hand of another boy nearby who had no face and pulled him towards the jungle gym. The boy stumbled a bit but soon he was keeping pace with him, and they ran together.

Kyungsoo watched them go, about to change his mind, but at that moment, he felt like he was being watched. He turned his head, looking at the tree line behind him, seeing a tall figure in the trees. He couldn’t see their face either, his robes almost making the stranger look like he was blending into the branches weighted down with snow. It said something to him, but he couldn’t hear very well.

“I… what? Did you say something?” Kyungsoo shuffled to put the book down and stood to walk towards the figure, but as he did, it moved into one of the larger trees behind it, seeming to fade into the bark, and disappeared.

Disappointed, he turned back to the playground only to see it empty. He scanned for Jongin, but the
snow was starting to fall harder. He couldn’t see anyone in the playground anymore. A few moments more and he couldn’t see anything but white.

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Kyungsoo’s eyes opened, face neutral. He wasn’t tired anymore. The dream, instead, made him feel sad. He shifted in the armchair, well rested and with the feeling in his bones like it was Christmas morning. Light filtered in through the windows outside but the sky was grey, the sun nowhere in sight and a light flurry coming down.

One of the dragons rolled off his head as he got up, and he put his shoes on and pulled the fur tightly around himself and off the chair, waking the others. Their snuffling at being disturbed didn’t deter Kyungsoo from walking towards the balcony doors. He stared at the lock for a moment, then pushed at a lever and they swung open. The cold air hit him but it was tolerable, the air surprisingly still despite the falling snow. His feet crunched over the untouched carpet of white, seeming to echo in his ears as he walked towards the railing. Kyungsoo gasped at the sight before him; a sprawling valley between mountains and a dense forest spread a good distance below him. It was breathtaking.

He sighed and his breath came out of him, thick and swirling into the cold air. He paused, hearing more footsteps. They were coming from below him, echoing through the valley and reaching his ears easily. He noticed an odd line on the ground coming down from the mountains into the valley, a small figure walking slowly through the snow. He had missed the figure before because they had passed behind a couple of trees. Kyungsoo tilted his head, watching the way they moved, then he realized that there was grass and flowers growing under their feet. But as they moved forward, the greenery died, leaving the strange black trail behind it.

Seeming to sense that they were being watched, the figure stopped, and turned in the direction of Kyungsoo.

The man took a few delicate steps closer to the great ice palace and words suddenly seemed to float upon the wind, spiraling up and up and higher until they nearly reached Kyungsoo but only managed to be audible as soft mumbling. The figure stood, as transfixed with Kyungsoo as Kyungsoo was with him. The space beneath his feet sprung to life over and over, greenery giving way to shocks of red and orange flowers than died with the same alarming speed. Had time stopped? Had Kyungsoo wandered into some illusion; was he still dreaming? Nothing seemed to move except the desperate vines and ferns that surrounded this most mysterious stranger, vines and ferns that grew as fast as their souls could carry them, seeming to claw at their master’s clothes, begging to stay alive for a moment more. But in the end, everything fell. And the space around him was black and lifeless until the cycle started again.

"Did you sleep well?" a raspy, deep voice asked from within the library, startling Kyungsoo from his thoughts.

Kris had stopped in the doorway, watching Kyungsoo take in his kingdom and thinking (not without guilt) of how beautiful the human's dark features fit against the shocking white of the snowy vision that surrounded them. He stepped out into the cold to stand next to Kyungsoo. Dressed in his traditional military garb, Kris felt less nervous about approaching his guest, as though the medals that adorned his shoulders, the carefully contained iron sword on his hip and the crisp lines of his tailored black cloak gave him courage against more than just the enemies of the monarchy.

Kyungsoo wasn’t sure what shocked him more. The mysterious stranger below, or seeing Kris look completely different than the way he had seen him dress these past couple of days.

“Oh. I uh…” Kyungsoo’s breath stuttered out of his mouth as he turned, looking at Kris up and
down quickly, “I did, thank you. I’ve never felt so well rested. Well. Besides yesterday. But it was different somehow....” Kyungsoo smiled, shaking the snowflakes sticking stubbornly in his hair out of his eyes.

He turned back around, trying to see if the stranger still was below, but he had moved on, heading for the line of trees on the other side of the valley. Kyungsoo pulled the furs tighter around his body and gestured below him. “Who is that?”

Kris's pleased grin at Kyungsoo's confessed comfort disappeared completely when he looked out over the snowy plain and saw the figure disappear into the woods. He wasn't angry, instead his face seemed to take on a sort of distance, a sadness. "That person is... someone who must be protected. You should never tell anyone you saw him, is that clear?"

Kyungsoo blinked the snow out of his eyes, turning towards Kris then back to the tree line where the figure disappeared. “Oh. Okay.” The snow covered the inky blackness of dead foliage quickly, and soon, there was no indication that he had been there at all.

Kris unclenched the fist he didn't know he had made and turned to Kyungsoo, forcing a smile, "I'm sorry if I was short with you now. He was... he was a person very dear to my Lord Junmyeon, King of the Fae Realms." Kris stopped himself, feeling already that he had revealed too much. He turned away and leaned against the balcony's ornate ice balustrade, trying to change the subject. "You know of Junmyeon? In your research, you will have seen his name many times, I hope. He is a good king, but the world has not always been good to him."

Kyungsoo turned his full attention back to Kris, nodding as he recalled the book he started reading yesterday. “From what I’ve read so far, he seems more like a sentry than a leader," At the look on Kris’ face, he quickly added, “But then again I’ve only been here the equivalent of two seconds in your long existences so I...may just need to read up more...” he held up his hands in defense. “A thousand years is a long time to reign. Has he... well. Things were obviously much more... how you say... wild back then.”

He cringed. He did recognize more of their rituals from fairy tales. Stolen babies and tricked humans along with curses told from the fae side of history seemed untamed, prone to darker aspects that he just didn’t perceive.

He couldn't picture Kris stealing a firstborn, that's for sure.

Kris waited for Kyungsoo to finish to his stumbling speech before letting a toothy smile spread across his face. He laughed deep in his belly and though he knew it was confusing for Kyungsoo (as was everything about this place), he couldn't help himself. "No, no, little one," he explained, "You're not wrong. Sentry... yes, more like our advocate, our protector than a proper king as you would see it down on the Earth, lording over his kingdom with law and war. Our Junmyeon, our guardian and... the best friend I have ever had." Kris nodded mostly to himself as a way of staving off a rapidly approaching trip down memory lane. He and Junmyeon had been so close, like lovers without the romance, their souls as one when they took to the battlefield against a common enemy. There had been those who pushed for Kris, not Junmyeon, to take the throne once the dark forces had been destroyed, the wild ones tamed. But it had always been for Junmyeon, the one who Kris had thought at the time could rule without selfishness, could love all their people with the same true heart...

Turning back to Kyungsoo, Kris wondered how someone so new to their realm could possibly have come to understand how single-minded, cold and distant Junmyeon had become over the centuries, as more and more sorrow weighed on his spirit.

"No, Kyungsso, I think you're very perceptive to have seen that so quickly. The history books can
only say so much. There is a lot of reading one must do... between the lines," Kris continued, reaching between them to brush a bit of snow from Kyungsoo's dark hair, "You would be... if ... you seem quite suited for the realm."

Kyungsoo didn’t know how to process that, staring up at Kris with wide eyes. He tried to smile through a sudden wave of inadequacy, not sure how to take the compliment as he felt tears tickle the back of his eyes, unprovoked. He had to admit that being here made him feel a bit more inquisitive, even delightfully childlike in his desire to see how things worked and to explore, but it also made him feel like he was just the equivalent of a badly prepared tourist. At worst, he wasn’t sure if he belonged anywhere now.

“I’m... I’m not...” he started, voice shaking, but didn’t get to finish, a tear rolling down his face and freezing on his cheek immediately, and he flinched as the cold suddenly became a little bit unbearable.

Kris took a sudden step closer, the space between them becoming almost impossibly small. He lifted a careful hand and cupped Kyungsoo's cheek, wiping away the frozen tear with his thumb, and keeping Kyungsoo's gaze locked with his. "You are," he insisted, his voice more quiet as though a bit afraid of who might hear, but strong nonetheless, "But you don't know it yet, do you? That you're magical in your humanness, that you're ..."

Kris's voice drifted away for a moment as he studied Kyungsoo's face, his eyes flicking down to the human's full lips, a bit colorless from the cold. A more ancient darkness scurried about inside of him for just a second but enough to frighten him. If Kris wanted, if he desired it, he could magick this man, kiss him senseless and hold him the way Jongdae took his victim, press desire for only the Lord of Winter into Kyungsoo's heart. He could -

Kris let his hand fall away from Kyungsoo's face and took a step back and towards the door, nearly stumbling on a bit of particularly clear ice, "You're beautiful, Kyungsoo. And that's why I believe... why I know you'll be able to break Jongdae's hold on your Jongin. That's ..." The name 'Jongin' hung in the air for a moment between them and Kris felt like a fool for letting himself get too close.

"I'm going to the central palace today. I was on my way to leaving when I thought to check on you. I'm going to see the king and I will plead your case to him. I'm going to do my part to make sure that you have what you deserve. Jongdae won't be allowed to take that from you."

For a brief moment, Kyungsoo felt like he couldn’t breathe as Kris’ presence invaded his space, his vision going dark around the edges like he was about to faint. The energy around Kris changed slightly, and he was surprised that he could sense it. It didn’t exactly make him feel threatened, but it also didn’t make him feel safe, just an oddness pressing in on his senses. But then, as quick as it had come, it was gone, leaving Kyungsoo wondering if he had just imagined the feeling. But at Jongin’s name, it was like ice breaking, grounding him, making him remember his focus, his single, solitary goal. This was all for Jongin, and it always would be.

Kyungsoo nervously wrung his hands, his fingers finding his wedding band and stroking it. “Thank you, Kris.” He had meant to say more, maybe mentioning how much he owed him, or how good he looked in his uniform, anything, but small talk evaded him, eyes averted. “Good luck then.”

Kris stopped in the doorway, letting the sound of his name on Kyungsoo's tongue calm him. It wasn't his True name (oh no, True names held too much power), but it was the name that he had known and kept and that his lovers had called him for centuries. If he closed his eyes now, he could imagine it - Kyungsoo calling him by his True name, Kris rushing back to him, laying with him through the morning and walking with him when the snowflakes finished their falling and not bother with Junmyeon's boring and bureaucratic breakfast. In another life, maybe, Kris told himself and nodded.
"Tao will be here," Kris said aloud, "If you need anything at all, he is a good man and you should trust him. Perhaps you should trust him even more than you seem to trust me." Kris thought on this for a moment before pushing the thought away, "And the spritelings... the little dragons, they seem to have taken a liking to you and they don't like much of anyone so quickly. They are powerful beings, despite appearances. You will be safe here until I return."

Kris started to leave again before pausing once more, turning again to see Kyungsoo's face, "Don't... don't leave the castle. You're not a prisoner here, you are our guest. But there are things in the wilds that surround us that don't like to be disturbed."

Kyungsoo looked down to the dragon sprites back where Kris was standing, their approving high grunts and smiling fanged faces as Kris gave them each a small scratch under their chins. Again, the feeling of intrusion clouded his chest, but it was fleeting, replaced by unease as Kris mentioned leaving.

“I won’t,” he said definitively. He even looked back out to the valley below, the landscape seeming to yawn up at him, vast and dangerous and cold. Lights peeked around trees before vanishing, and even from here, he could see shadows stalking high on the peaks, quick and dangerous looking. “It’s not like I’d know where to go.”

"If anyone could, I believe you would find your way," Kris answered with certainty. He patted one of the smaller dragons gently and tried to appear nonchalant and dignified as he continued, "If you would like, if you would allow me... when I return, I could show it to you. My fiefdom?"

A rough knock at the door shattered Kris's attempts to remain cool and reserve. One of his stone gnomes peaked inside, his face scrunched and old as the castle that surrounded them. "My lord," it said, words formed of barely comprehensible gruffness which had taken Kris many years to decipher, "The time. We have made your lizard ready." The little gnome made a spitting sound at the mention of Kris's dragonflight, though his ancient stone body produced nothing but a metaphorical venom.

Kris adjusted his cloak around him and turned back to Kyungsoo for only a moment, "I'll be home soon."

He startled himself at the intimacy of it, pressing his lips together in an expression he hoped was regal and strong. He coughed and forced his voice a bit deeper, "I hope to return with good news for you. And I... umm, hope that you will accept my invitation for... a... a more formal tour."

"My lord?" the gnome huffed again, not wanting to offend but definitely annoyed.

"Kyungsoo?" Kris asked, even as his little dragons started to push him from the room, their horns pricking at his shins even though the thick material of his uniform.

Kyungsoo balked, remembering now that he had accepted an offer from Kris the day before via Tao about being introduced to his kingdom, but he had fallen asleep. He came back into the library, following them to give Kris his answer. “Yes,” he said, maybe a bit too enthusiastic. “I...I would appreciate it, Kris. Thank you.”

Kris smiled with his entire face, his cheeks turning pink even as the little stone gnome tugged at his master's hand, pulling him towards the door. "Tonight then," Kris said, needing to confirm again. The door shut behind him before he could hear anymore of Kyungsoo's response and he was simultaneously frustrated and relieved to have had his servants' attention. He would never have been able to pull himself away.
But for now, he pulled his hand from the gnome's grasp and adjusted his collar. He needed to be stronger, to be a general. Junmyeon would accept nothing less and failure... he didn't want to think about what failure would mean for Kyungsoo.

Even with the playful chirping of the dragons at his shins begging for attention to play, Kyungsoo stared at the closed door with a hand over his chest, the gravity of his situation making it hard for him to breathe as reality crashed into him. He was too cold. He wanted Jongin back.

He jumped as the little sprites closed the door to the balcony, the air still freezing but now somehow tolerable. Tears formed in his eyes as loneliness settled into his heart despite the activity around him. Kyungsoo backed up into the chair and sat down, seeming to ignore the books he had yet to read. The tiny dragons settled around his shaking form, but he drew the large fur around himself tightly like it could protect him from the sense of loss he had for the world, and he started to cry.
Chapter 8

Jongin was warm. Was there anything else in the world, he thought, except to be warm and safe like this forever, as his new lover had promised? He yawned, waking from his deep, dreamless sleep and stretched his long body. He was naked and hungry, his belly rumbling, but it all seemed so inconsequential. He needed not food nor clothing; only one thing was on his mind.

"Jongdae," he whispered, rolling over in bed and burying his face in the pillows, breathing deeply to know his lover's scent again. The night before had been long, near endless and gorgeously so. Jongin had become convinced sometime in the night that he had never known a pleasure like the one of being used by Jongdae. Sex and kisses and endless drink that warmed him from the inside. Sex and kisses and endless drink until Jongin's body couldn't do it anymore and he's fallen deep into sleep.

"Jongdae," he whispered again and smiled. He repeated the name over and over again, magical on his tongue. He pushed his face deeper into the pillow - the smell of the first grass after a long winter, the sound of bells, whispers from another world through glass and ice, Kyungsoo's office and microwaved leftovers and -

Jongin gasped, pulling himself out of the pillows and felt his heart grow heavy with a memory he couldn't place. His thoughts seemed to grow more foggy and diluted the harder he tried to grasp at them, "Kyungsoo?"

At the other side of the expansive bedroom, Jongdae had been checking and double checking his wards. It had bothered him that Kris was so easily able to break them and compromise his hold. He just wasn’t as strong in his power compared to others of his caste, despite being a prince. He had known long ago that the only way to make up for it was with his cunning and cleverness. It was just a matter of time before it was breached again, so he knew he had to work quickly.

He stood naked at the partially open window, silhouetted against the gray skyline and staring out at the morning sun that hung low in the distance. His jaw clenched and his face looked severe as he glared out at it, the light and heat that made it so radiant in the summer lands not quite reaching far over the tree line. The clouds above hung low and heavy with potential snow, covering the top half of the sun and making it look like a judgmental cyclops.

At Jongin’s voice, Jongdae’s demeanor changed immediately, his body falling into simple graceful movements as he turned to acknowledge the turned human, a simple smile on his face. His wings fluttered open, the veins in his wings silhouetted through the dim light. “I’m here, my beautiful Kai…” He stepped gently over to Jongin’s side on the bed, running a hand down his neck and curling around his back to check for any signs of growth or change. He then dragged his hand over and around his body onto Jongin’s belly to pet and rub at him there. “Did you sleep well?”

Jongin curled in as close as he could manage, needing to feel warm skin against his, "Jongdae? Jongdae, do you know what happened to him? To Kyungsoo and his office? There was ... food... and there were matches, I was supposed to get matches."

Jongin felt in his soul that he wasn't making any sense but little glimpses kept floating to the top of his mind and he thought he could trust Jongdae. His thoughts cooled for only a moment as his lover continued slow, tender circles against his belly, feeling like a spoiled child. "Was it all a dream?"

Jongin glanced down at his hand to see for himself and saw instead that there was indeed a faint tan line on his left hand where a ring would have been. But there was something else as well - his skin seemed more ... smooth? As though age and work had never touched them, as though all traces of
stress and injury had been erased. His back ached despite the softness of the bed they lay in. And he was so very hungry. He sat up, moving away from Jongdae even though it pained him to be without the other's touch. "What's going on, Jongdae? I'm... something's happening to me."

Jongdae knew this would happen. Once the frenzied haze of his choice cleared from his mind, his old life would filter through the changes he was currently undergoing to become a creature of the faery world. He gave Jongin a reassuring smile, leaning over next to him but being careful not to crowd him too much. “Well this certainly isn’t a dream,” he gestured around him. “You chose to be here. With me.” He sighed, eyes unfocused as he made the vines around them distend slightly and grow in size, an extra thick branch blooming at the end. A fruit like a peach rapidly grew out of the bark, heavy with nectar. He reached up and plucked it off easily, offering the baseball-sized fruit to Jongin. “I’m merely giving you what you want.”

Jongin sat still for what felt like an age before taking hold of the fruit and furiously biting into its tender flesh. Nectar stickied his hands and the juice covered his plump lips, making them shiny. "This is good," he said after another moment, his belly still grumbling, a growing boy. "This is good, the food and the bed and you, but... Jongdae? There was good before this, too, I think."

Jongin felt certain that he's going to cry and a flash of lighting through the fog in his brain shows him a stranger, they have a name but it doesn't matter, and they ask him about his waist. They adjust his positioning and Jongin, in his vision but also then and there in his reality, jerks away at the pain. He looked to Jongdae and leaned in for a quick kiss, trying to erase his embarrassment at having moved away so suddenly. Their lips meet for only a second and Jongin's stomach roars for more food, more drink, more anything.

"I don't know what to believe anymore," Jongin continued, comforted by the gentle way Jongdae listens to him, lets him finish everything. "I see these things and some of them are... good, but others hurt. And it's all blended and messed up. I'll see a face but the name isn't right. Everything is Kyungsoo but I can't see his face. And..." Jongin buried his face in Jongdae's neck, "At the end, of every memory, there's you. Have I always been yours?"

Jongdae’s face softened as he allowed himself to hold Jongin, gently, carefully pressing his mind into Jongin’s thoughts. They’re chaotic and confused, and he gives them order.

Jongdae as a sprite, invisible to humans and Jongin himself, staring, entranced by him. Calming Jongin as a baby, retrieving his binkie that fell down to his feet while his mother wasn’t looking.

Jongdae, frustrated, as he looks from one changeling mask to the other, then down at Jongin’s sleeping face when he was only four years old. He’d smashed them in frustration on the floor near his bed, his mom finding the remnants the following morning and assuming the drywall on the ceiling needed replacement.

A gang of bullies try to take Jongin’s dancing shoes in the middle school cafeteria while Jongin cowers against a wall with no teachers in sight. Jongdae emanates a high ringing noise of anger that Jongin seems to hear as he makes one of the other bullies slip on old mac and cheese on the floor that wasn’t there before. The bully jerks, accidentally punching the leader and starting a fight between themselves, allowing Jongin to slip away while a teacher catches them.

Jongdae, in his human form, walking closer to a sweaty and happy Jongin following a performance in a bar with its neon lights and pool tables, but a smaller man holds up a towel for Jongin to take, a fake grin on his face as he takes in his surroundings and offers to take Jongin home. Jongin smiles at him, hugs him, but the smile falters as the smaller man whispers something into his ear. Jongdae stares at his face, not sure what he himself looks like in this moment anymore. He slips back into the cheering crowd while Jongin seems to scan over the faces in the bar, looking for him.
More memories flash by, all instances of when Jongdae had intervened in Jongin’s life, every chiming laugh, every moved object and feeling and sensual cold touch and finally…

"I’m here to make you mine."

Jongdae gently pulled them both out of their shared memories, looking down at Jongin with a gentle but worried smile spreading out on his lips, “Yes. You have always been mine, my dearest Kai.” He gave a quick glance over to Jongin’s wedding ring as it sat on the bedside table next to the pitcher of nectar, entangled in a small springy branch growing from the side, and beginning to tarnish. If he wanted, Jongin could take it back at any time. “I wanted you to live your life, figuring you would be happier following your dreams as a human. But then you started to fade and, well…” He seemed to shudder inward, his wings fluttering closer to his body, his smaller frame becoming more apparent as he bowed his head against Jongin’s larger body. “I just couldn’t lose you.”

It was the truth.

Jongin shifted to allow Jongdae to settle more deeply into his arms, the vulnerability that his lover displayed seeming almost... human? He kissed the top of Jongdae’s head and allowed himself a moment to luxuriate in the smell of the sprite’s hair. It was a smell that, now with all the cards on the table, was hauntingly familiar. Jongin hugged Jongdae close and used the moment to examine his wings - their color and shape, the way they mirrored Jongdae’s deeper emotions, the strength of the tendons that connected them to his lover’s shoulders, giving Jongdae’s body a solidness that seemed out of place in their fairy tale.

"You did all that for me?” Jongin whispered. He could very literally feel Jongdae’s affection for him pulsating and surrounding him. His mind was full of strange occurrences, little lucks that he had written off as serendipitous... and it all seemed to make sense now. On the day of his wedding (he was married, he had been married, he was certain of this now), the ring had gone missing, only to be found in his coat pocket moments before the scheduled arrival of his groom. He took in another deep breath of Jongdae's unique scent and wondered.

"You loved me before I even loved myself,” Jongin said, "You knew I was Kai before I did, didn't you?"

The pieces started sliding into place and Jongin was both terrified and alive.

Jongdae shuddered deeper into Jongin’s arms, pressing a hand to his chest and feeling his heart beat underneath his fingertips. His own heart swelled, a torrent of emotion that he had once quelled with determination making itself known. “Yes, yes. You’re mine,” he said definitively, tilting his head to give Jongin a little kiss underneath his chin. “You shine brighter than the stars to me. Your very existence...I couldn’t let you just fade away. I couldn’t allow that to happen. My gift for you…” he ran his other hand down Jongin’s back to his front, “…my love, is to become like me.”

Jongin swallowed hard, Jongdae's touch igniting another spasm of nervous pain in his back, pulling him out of their warm embrace. He took another hesitant bite from the previously proffered fruit and hoped that quieting his growling stomach would help gain clarity to the entire situation. He felt like his very consciousness was swimming through Jello - he could see the outline of the situation, but the details were fuzzy and even though he felt that Jongdae was honest and true about loving him, loving him beyond understanding and through time and space and the entire history of his life, he wasn't sure that the sprite was telling him everything. After all, there was still this aching feeling in his heart that someone was missing. This... Kyungsoo, whose face was still obscured and whose place in this puzzle wasn't easy to understand. He continued to eat, feeling better as the nectar washed over him again.
"The man who came earlier? He called me by my name, but I've never seen him before. Jongdae, you knew him?"

Jongdae hesitated but nodded, leaning over and pulling himself up towards the table and pour another overflowing saucer of nectar. "Yes. He is my… our… Lord of Winter. But he’s more like an annoying older brother." That’s right. He’d have to move them both to another location very soon. The chrysalis ritual was incomplete. It would stay incomplete until Jongin’s flesh birthed his wings which would take at least another three days from feeding him. But he knew he had to move quickly to hide Jongin again from those who would take him away. He had another hollow that nobody knew about, nearer to the border where the ice melted and gave way to foggy groves, lush thickets and taller trees.

But then again… with Jongin asking questions…

“But you needn’t concern yourself with anything like that right now, Kai. Eat.” He took the saucer and leaned back over towards Jongin, lifting it up for him. “Drink.”

Jongin took the saucer from Jongdae's solid hands and nodded his thanks. For every moment that was wrong, there were a dozen other moments that felt right. Considering all he had learned, he held the rest of his questions close, not wanting to hurt Jongdae, never wanting that. He didn't doubt that the faery loved him, but there was more there, something he didn't understand. He took a gulping drink of nectar and felt the ache in his back dull to a careful simmer.

Another time...

+  

Kris allowed Junmyeon's stable masters to take his dragon's reigns, hopping off his ride with confidence and giving his scaled friend a warm pat on its sensitive chin. His dragon cooed at him and he assured her that she had been a very good girl. For all their intelligence and great power, dragons were simple creatures, much like humans, who craved affection and reassurance. He smiled for her and watched with amusement as the stable masters attempted to bring her in. She tugged fiercely and sent one of them flying backwards with only his wings to save him from crashing into the marble exterior walls of Junmyeon's palace. Pleased with herself, his dragon walked calmly and without escort into the stables and found herself a warm patch to nap in.

Knowing that he would hear it from some administrative official or another for his flight's poor behavior, Kris quickly adjusted his coat and took a deep breath of the fresh summer air that surrounded his King's palace. He was already feeling a bit overdressed as the sun beat down on him, but he needed to give the impression of a strong Lord of Winter, a faithful general to his King. Mumbling encouragement to himself, he strode into the palace, boots clicking on the hard floor and making heads turn.

He entered the King’s dining hall with nostalgia coating his every thought. The dining hall had once been their central command, a war room, and the table where they now dined, had once been covered with maps and little figures that Junmyeon had painstakingly moved every morning to illustrate troop movements and possible deployments. It had been redecorated, life had returned to the room and protective shields about the windows had been replaced by warm and expensive tapestries, but it didn’t keep Kris from thinking hard on what had been.

Junmyeon, as always, sat the end of the table, as gloriously beautiful as he had ever been, dressed in all the fineness of his station. There were others, but Kris paid them no mind. He was singular in his goal and in his affection, striding across the room, ignoring comments about his rudeness and lack of attention to the other nobles and administrators who had gathered that morning and knelt before
Junmyeon, going down on his knee as he had many years ago when he had first pledged himself to the King's service. It was a level of respect that was deemed unnecessary at court, a thing that few fae of his standing did when meeting their king, but Kris insisted on maintaining this unmistakable show of support.

"Your Grace," he greeted his friend, glancing up and giving the King an awkward and painfully unskilled wink.

Junmyeon’s eyes were unfocused, sensing each presence in the room as their life force danced in his vision. It was something he hadn’t quite gotten used to since taking his place as King; the abilities he had reluctantly acquired through rituals back then much too invasive for his tastes. He took his responsibilities very seriously, even though he did miss the simple flow of rivers and streams in the lands he used to call home, but he never regretted the struggle it took him and others to get where he was now.

When one fae in particular entered the room, oh it was like a pleasant chill in his bones, his eyes focusing, brightening as he came closer. The cold rolled off of his form in waves that were almost tangible; a walking representation of winter frost almost out of place in his court of full blooms and bright colors. Junmyeon himself was dressed in a simple shade of blue, accented with white and a pearlescent green that complemented the orange glow radiating from the sun through the windows. His crown was a simple one for the occasion, one of many. Silver filigree danced around ivy that moved and shifted, the leaves peeking out from his hair only to burrow back into the strands as people approached.

“Yifan,” Junmyeon stated simply with a small smile that grew at the other man’s charm. He rose from his chair, lifting his hand with his palm face down and fingers curling in, an indication for him to come closer and take it. He felt rather than saw eyes upon him from some of the guests closest to him, and he paid them no mind as his favorite and most trusted friend approached him. “Your visits are too few as of late in these trying times.”

Kris's smile spread across his face, showing too much teeth. The sound of his true name on the lips of someone he loved was still one of the most beautiful feelings and Junmyeon... maybe Tao in the depths of passion... only they ever seemed to use it. Would Kyungsoo, one day? He forced himself back into the present and banished the intoxicating thought.

He took Junmyeon’s proffered hand and pressed his lips to the younger fae's warm skin, "You know you only ever need to call. For you, I would and I have crossed many realms." Kris stood and pulled Junmyeon into a long overdue hug, ignoring the shocked gasp from one of the newest administrators, someone without a name as far as Kris knew and one who hadn't know the closeness of the warriors of yesteryear.

Pulling himself away and nodding confidently to the other attendees, Kris took the seat to Junmyeon's left, loudly pulling his chair closer to the table and looking over the fine display of rich meats and cheeses that were placed before them. Crown jewels of pastry cakes dotted the table, as did great pitchers of honey wine and draping bunches of grapes and white berries. Kris ignored the reluctance of the others to eat too much and began to pile his plate full, casting a concerned look at Junmyeon's empty place setting. He grabbed a piece of honey bread, an old favorite of his best friend, and unceremoniously tossed the slice onto Junmyeon's plate and motioned for Junmyeon to eat.

Junmyeon blinked before closing his eyes, allowing himself a small smile for his friends’ thoughtfulness, that he remembered even the simplest thing about what he liked. But before he reached for it, he needed to begin the breakfast proper. He opened his eyes, a flash of blue behind
them as a small charm glowed in the hollow of his throat, making his voice to seem like it was next to the people in the hall, regardless of where they stood. “Now that all of our guests are here, we are ready to convene.”

In the short shuffle that followed, attendants left their administrators, bowing to their higher lords and ladies as they left, leaving the room with barely more than a dozen attending representatives for the breakfast. Once the main doors to the hall closed and everyone seated, Junmyeon’s face turned serious. “Apologies for the secrecy, and of course, for the extremely short notice that this meeting has been called. Some of you are even here because your Lords and Ladies couldn’t make it. But they trust you, so it will be your duty to relay what I am about to tell you.”

The little fairy on Kris’ left had goosebumps along her arm in such close proximity to Kris. She was the representative from Lady Jessica’s Spring Court, Joy. She looked out of place in a meeting such as this, and was clearly expecting just breakfast. She wore a long, flowing silk dress with accents of butterflies and tulips tinted pink and sky blue. The tips of her hair were green like ivy and dotted with flower blooms. Joy was but a mere four centuries old, but her lips were drawn into a thin line of loyal determination as she intensely regarded her King.

Across from her sat Amber, eyes the same color as her namesake and glowed with an unnatural fire within, centuries older than the young representative of spring. Amber had fought in the last three centuries of the Great War, and even after, protected her Lady Victoria’s Autumn Court from an elemental slag invasion. The scarring upon her neck and arms were a grim reminder of those long and intense battles, and even now she was partially armored in dragon scale, large sword slung unceremoniously over the back of her chair.

The rest of the seats were occupied by various representatives of the races occupying the world, from elves and dwarves, to pixies and nymphs. “What about your advisor, my King?” asked the elven Ambassador from the other end of the table. The chair and placing to Junmyeon’s right stood empty.

Junmyeon’s face cracked a small, knowing smile, as if he expected the question. “He has been under the weather recently,” the lie easily rolling off his tongue, but Kris knew better. “He will rejoin us once he feels better of course,” He was still smiling gently, but his tone indicated that it was the end of that particular query.

He eyed Kris momentarily, regarding him before speaking to the rest of the table, voice growing solemn. “This gathering is about the rumors of unrest and increased usage of the illegal dark magicks. Many of you have brought to my attention the increased dissent among your lower castes. I have trusted you with your own brand of justice the way you deemed fit. However this rebellious behavior seems to have infected our own ranks, and breeds talk of revolution.

“Normally I would encourage this type of behavior, but we reigned ourselves in for a reason. We overthrew our old king a millennium ago for a reason. Made rules so that…” he paused, swallowing, the words straining in his throat as his voice softened, eyes seeing a past that only seemed to cause him pain. “…So that others would not suffer or get hurt. And yet, it still is happening under our very noses.”

Junmyeon paused, regarding everyone at the table, reading their auras, their faces. While some nodded in agreement, others looked downright indignant at his words, their irritated expressions clearly indicating that they had very strong opinions that they were reluctant to voice.

“The table is open to discussion,” he concluded, grasping his goblet and lifting it to his lips, an indication that the floor was open. “Civility is appreciated.”

Joy sniffed pointedly, sending a sideways glance at Kris before she began, "My King, the Lady
Jessica wishes to report that we have seen a tremendous increase in the number of inter-dimensional portals at the border between our lands and the Winter Kingdom. We have long awarded our Winter Lord with... non-action, as we know he has been tasked with care of many darker breeds. But we can no longer ignore the possibility that illicit materials and even illicit guests may be making their way into the Spring Kingdom through these portals, and possibly into the Autumn Kingdom as well."

Kris took a generous bite from a thick slice of spice cake and indicated for Joy to continue, an impassive expression concealing his concerns about the Spring Lady's complaints. The younger fae sat up straighter in her chair and turned away from Kris, staring straight at Amber for support while she continued her report.

"Unfortunately, it seems that the Ever-Changing Forest, the buffer between our two kingdoms, is no longer being kept under control. We have noticed a distinct lack of royal troops patrolling the area and knowing, as we all do, that forest has long been a hold for dark energies and magicks, we of the Spring Kingdom insist that patrols resume. My lady would like to inquire of our Lord of Winter as to why he has been eschewing troops preciously assigned to the areas surrounding the forest."

Kris shrugged, setting down his cake and brushing crumbs from cheek, "I would like to inquire of our Lady of the Spring if she's still mad at me about stealing her Ice Queen title and making it look so damn good."

Amber suppressed a snorting laugh while Joy blushed and sat up even straighter, trying to make the most of her height.

"I don't mean to push aside your concerns, little one," Kris continued, "but it sounds like Jessica sent you here to blame me for a few things instead of looking for real answers."

Joy gave a near inaudible huff of protest, face contorting into a look of disbelief, but her voice did not waver. "We do our part, Lord Winter. It is just requested that a solution be brought forward jointly because…" she hesitated, idly pulling at one of the fringes of her dress, "…trust in others is rather hard to come by nowadays."

"She is correct," Amber spoke up, leaning forward on the table and motioning to Joy with the hunk of bread she had been eating. "However I feel like you and yours would rather not get your precious silks dirty nowadays. While talk is favored, it's usually ineffective unless there is some iron behind it." She patted the side of her chair for emphasis, her sword giving off a dull rattle at each impact. "I feel like the Spring Court lacks that desire in favor of their parties and debates."

Joy couldn't seem to help it; she sneered, the blooms in her hair closing tightly. "And what would the Autumn Court know about our debates?"

Amber’s eyebrows shot up in mock contemplation while she pursed her lips. "I know the last two the Spring Court held have ended in scuffles where iron was drawn but apparently that's nobody's business."

The smaller fae’s wings materialized and fluttered violently against the back of her chair, pointing at Amber’s face. "You can’t just bathe yourself in the blood of your enemies and expect people not to think it’s barbaric!"

"I dunno…” Amber contemplated, rubbing her chin with her free hand. "That would be assuming that we care what others think. Plus the Kappas think it’s good for morale…"

Junmyeon waved his hand, barely lifting it from his armrest. “Ladies…please.” The two immediately
settled back into their chairs at Junmyeon’s voice, Joy visibly upset while Amber’s jaw barely moved as she chewed minutely. He knew tempers would be high at this gathering, such was the nature of most urgent meetings that were called. He regarded them, knew their Kingdoms, their leaders, what they were known for.

Junmyeon knew Joy could be trusted. She was much too naïve for tricks yet, but it wasn’t her that Junmyeon was worried about. Jessica had a tendency to spy often and repeatedly, in any way she deemed necessary. Which meant that this poor girl in just a matter of hours was going to be subjected to Jessica’s spells and concoctions to get her memories extracted. It was one of the many crude ways the Spring Court handled business as usual, for all the beauty and class they boasted about and prided themselves in, not many knew what went on in the crystal halls of eternal morn. In addition to the Spring Court’s many trade agreements and overabundance of wealth, a manipulative shadow loomed over the Kingdom, the source of which was still unknown. He wondered why the help the Spring Court apparently so desperately needed wasn’t an issue until now.

On the other hand, he had the smaller nomadic Autumn Court. They kept to themselves, able to deal with most threats and dealt with their own problems…most of the time with violence. They and the races that lived within Lady Victoria’s lands fought constantly, but they seemed to enjoy it. They moved from one side of their lands to the other; closer to the Summer Court when it got cold during the winter, then they would spend all their time moving back out to the border of Kris’ domain to escape the heat emanating from Junmyeon’s lands in summer. The leaders in the land of perpetual twilight had a bad habit of not reporting findings or events and they clung to the Old Ways the hardest. It also happened to be where the three most recent human remains were found. He wouldn’t put it past them to be practicing the forbidden magicks and being unconcerned with breaking the rules for their own benefit, but showed no outward signs of doing so. Being accusatory would just lead to trouble.

He went over this information mentally in a matter of moments, and Junmyeon breathed slowly, finally allowing himself to reach for the pastry still lying haphazard near the edge of his plate. He took a single bite out of it, his eyes falling on Kris, and the same thoughtful look came into his eyes as he chewed.

His friend. A family tree so prestigious it probably couldn’t all fit on the back wall of the throne room. A large family, while spread out to every corner of his kingdom, still managed to be led by the best man for the job. He trusted him completely, Junmyeon had entrusted him with his own life many times in the past, during the Great War and beyond. Defiance was the last thing he expected from him.

He swallowed. “Joy my dear, I’m sure Yifan has an explanation for his troop redistribution not meeting the Spring Court’s impeccable standards of security. Surely these illicit happenings are being investigated by your own lands?”

Joy shifted in her seat, adjusting her silks. Unlike Jessica, she wasn't yet an expert at hiding her feelings and her fears. Kris, for one, was thankful for this - it was unnerved him a bit how Jessica was able to be solidly emotionless, while simultaneously reading everyone around her like a book, including both he and Junmyeon. The Ice Queen, as she had been known in the days before Kris became the guardian of snow, didn't play with her food, but she did like to tease it. Kris and Junmyeon both were forever grateful that Jessica was on their side.

"We aren't ready to make a full report yet," Joy conceded and Kris smirked.

"Ahh," Kris glanced at Amber with a knowing look, "It seems that our littlest princess has been sent to provide speculation rather than intelligence. I am sorry for you, Joy, but your Lady has done you a
disservice." He quickly stood and began moving trays of food around the table, pointedly and aggressively placing the remaining honey cake in front of Junmyeon's table setting. When a large enough space had been cleared, he gave a nervous smile to the server standing just behind Junmyeon, "If you'll allow it." The head of table service rolled his eyes, which Kris took to be a begrudging permission. Picking up a small goblet of water, he poured the crystal clear liquid across the table, slamming a hand down beside it to freeze it in place. As he lifted his hand away from the table, a forest of ice trees followed its path, growing tall and strong.

"Perhaps it's time that I show you what I know of the Ever-Changed," Kris started.
"You mean, what your Tao knows of the Ever-Changing," Amber said with a coldness to her voice.

"Of course," Kris admitted, "But I trust Tao with my life and yours four times over."

Amber's expression was pensive and Kris didn't blame her for her coolness towards the very idea of Tao. Amber had been denied her precious one, a skinny creature named Eric who she had plucked near death from a human battlefield. Kris remembered him, so small and too sweet to have fought in wars like the ancient humans did. Amber had adored him immediately and dressed him in armor so delicate that it was useful only for show. Eric had been denied the Chrysalis ritual, having been scheduled to be presented shortly after Junmyeon judged Tao to be their final transformation. Eric, unable to go home, belly full of fae food and drink, had lingered in their world, his mind going slowly... piece by piece... in the many long years. Amber simply didn't have the magic in her to keep him tied to this world and rejected anyone who would touch him, even to help. They said that Eric was near mad at this point, roaming the various Autumn encampments with a laugh that was just a little too loud and full of stories of ghosts and creatures just beyond the warm glow of the fire. Tao was a bit of a sore spot for her and understandably.

Junmyeon’s brow furrowed only slightly as he noted Amber’s demeanor. His lips drew into a thin line, but he had to keep up appearances. He knew exactly why Amber was upset. She didn’t even have to look at him. He didn’t want others to know why he had forbidden that particular practice and many others. He strongly believed that their world was stronger for it, an exemplary model a far cry from his own carefree days before the war. But he knew that bringing order to chaos was much like tying twine over a writhing ball of snakes. Eventually, things were going to be out of his control again. And like a pendulum swinging back, chaos may very well return worse than before and this time, the chain just might break.

He did however blink once again at Kris’ less than graceful attempt to get him to eat. He fought his lip curling up in amusement. “Please continue, Yifan,” he motioned for the fae scurrying around the table refilling drinks and bringing fresh pastries and meats to leave, their heads bowing low as they delivered their last fresh orders. The last thing he needed was a distraction.

Kris nodded to his King and indicated the frozen forest before them, "This, my dears, is a fairly good representation of the Ever-Changing, if I do say so myself. Now, Joy, what do you see? Between the trees?"

Joy bit her lip, scrunching her face and leaning in to survey Kris’s little art project. "You have too much confidence in your artistic ability, my Winter Lord, I think. There is nothing."

Kris sighed and drew his fingers across the cold surface of his ice sculpture, pushing the trees aside to reveal the image of a most ancient structure, a castle. It was run down, the stones themselves looking as though they had been melted into place and left to grow anew with green and silver boughs. If one wasn't looking straight at it, it seemed, even in its icy form, to fade into the shadow. "There is a reason why we left the Ever-Changing as it was when the war ended. Where other places were conquered and set with lords and ladies and other caretakers, the forest was left to its first rulers - darkness and magic. Do you know why, Joy?"

"There's no reason to attack her," Amber said with a quiet protectiveness in her voice, "She's too young to remember the black castles. She didn't ride into battle with us."

Kris yielded with a stunted bow in Amber's direction before turning back to Joy, "In the forest between our lands, there were already little lords and ladies, little princes that served themselves
through darker magics. We weren't willing to fall that far, to subdue them with blood magic or worse, and when treaties were signed, we allowed them their space. They would keep the minor dark fae in check and we would allow them... a certain amount of privacy. You know their names - Jongdae, Boa, Taeyeon. Playful sprites they were once, when they were allowed their fill of human blood and sex. But times have changed. And that's part of the reason why I am here."

"Chen?!" Joy exclaimed, half laughing, "You're going to claim, here? Before your King? That all these troubles can be blamed on a ... bogey man of sorts from the history books? As though Chen even leaves his family castle, as though he would dare."

Amber shifted in her seat, "We don't call him that anymore. We don't give him that power anymore."

Kris nodded, "My Ladies, my King... I bring suspicions that it is Jongdae indeed who is encouraging this dark rebellion. I have... information."

The women looked doubtful, while Junmyeon’s face turned thoughtful. His eyes unfocused for a brief moment as he tried to mentally analyze Prince Chen...Jongdae...with the same practiced scrutiny as he had with the others. But he couldn’t. He just didn’t know many of those that still lurked within the Ever-Changing. Kris kept up the dialogue with them almost exclusively. Mostly because he trusted Kris to enact those laws himself and to punish if the need arose.

His eyes tracked back over to Kris from his diagram, expression remaining neutral. He knew of their wilder nature; most were on the side of the former king. Life was good for them back then, able to sate their needs and desires with little to no interference from the outside. But then he had changed the rules, and the forest grew even darker and more hostile to outsiders. He knew it was never a good sign. He punished those who were caught, but he had begun to figure out that their tricks and evasiveness had just evolved into not getting caught rather than being deterred to stop.

"Jongdae is a little prince, as you say. Encouraging, but not leading? How curious. I trust this information you’re about to disclose to us will shed some light on this situation then."

The other side of the table had grown quiet, the dryads, nymphs, and pixies in particular were starting to look downright uncomfortable.

Kris's mouth went dry and he nodded, forcing himself to continue despite the increasing hostile environment, "It's not just rumors, your Grace, that the dark fae have been bringing humans to our realm. For feeding, for... passion, for whatever reason, there are humans here, in the realm of the Fae. In your kingdom. I know this because I witnessed it myself, my lords and ladies. I saw Jongdae take a human through the dimensions, carry the creature through the portal himself. He's not even sending minions to do it."

A rustle of activity in the lesser fae sprung up behind him, but Kris's eyes remained locked on Junmyeon.

"And you know this? How? You saw it?" Amber prodded, curling her fingers around the hilt of her sword and eyeing a particularly sharp-toothed dryad with vicious thorns in her hair.

"I had received word that Jongdae had crossed over," Kris explained simply, thinking it best to remain as straightforward as possible, while protecting his sources. He didn't need the lesser fae coming for Tao. "I wanted to see what he was up to myself. There is no law in our kingdoms against crossing realms, but... given Jongdae's history, it can never hurt to be careful."

Joy's voice was rough and afraid when she began her questioning. "You didn't call guards? You didn't send a Kingsguard to investigate? You just went yourself? This would seem a bit suspicious."
"Hardly," Kris said but without his typically joking confidence, trying to keep his eyes on Junmyeon to gauge his King's reaction, "Jongdae and I have a history. I wanted to talk to him myself and -"

"History?" Joy asked, becoming more excitedly frustrated by Kris's revelation, her youth in politics showing, "History with a dark prince? What are you confessing, Yifan?" She spoke his True Name with a sneer, like she was weaseling some information from him that would make her queen so very happy. A dark blue Kappa with large fish-like eyes repeated Kris's name and chuckled, a harsh gurgling noise.

A frosted blue of fury came over Kris's eyes at the sound of his name on her lips, "You have no right. You who have never raised a sword will never speak my Name again. You who has never known battle will not judge those who made sacrifices so that you could live in your eternal Spring and dance forever in silks. So yes, Jongdae and I have history. That is no confession, nothing new to those that have been paying attention."

"Enough," Junmyeon was unmoving as he said the words, somehow echoing throughout the hall with him barely moving his lips. A slight rumble followed, voices becoming hushed and backs straightening. Even Joy gasped, unable to help herself as he flexed his presence as King.

The reaction was all he needed. As he observed from the assemblage before him, it was clear more of his guests knew what was transpiring than they let on. They reported incidents, but he knew it wasn’t something that could be followed up promptly due to strained public relations as of late. Most fae didn’t like outing their brothers and sisters despite being an over encompassing law unless they were blatantly obvious and sloppy.

Fae didn’t need to steal humans to survive. They wanted them for their earthly desire, their potential for amusement. It had never been an automatic death sentence if fae didn’t feed on humans. Sustenance of all types was bountiful in most places; he had personally made sure of that. And it wasn’t like travel to the earthen realm was forbidden. Fae routinely went to earth to feed on humans if they craved a more visceral type of sustenance, as distasteful as he himself found it to be. The law simply stated that humans couldn’t be turned, couldn’t be brought into the realm.

Turned fae were a representation of the original fae’s power. The more beautiful the human, the more enchanting the fae became, acquiring some of the traits of their lover. Magic, talents, aura…and of course, power. The Chrysalis ritual was more than just a declaration of belonging to the courts, it was under witness an exchange of those said traits. Millennia ago it was done privately, kept within families, but some fae needed the extra help from the King or Queen at the time because their own magic wasn’t potent enough for the binding. The request was presented as such, with the fairy placing an offer at the King or Queen’s feet. But as time had gone on, all fae decided to be very public with their ritual, whether they needed the help or not. Kris had not needed the help, but at that time, he was making a very public statement.

Junmyeon felt like he should think carefully before he enacted any ruling on the matter. “There have been many that have wanted me to rescind the ban on bringing humans to our realm, on claiming them and making them one of us.” He turned and glanced at Amber, who gave him a solemn yet hopeful look. “Yet that does not excuse those who have been defiant since then, especially when some maim for sport, and talk of an uprising where they think I can’t hear.” Junmyeon turned to regard Kris again, a softness in his eyes despite his voice being authoritative. “I know you wished to consult me before passing judgment but… but leaving him gives the impression that it’s not a serious transgression.” He faltered, trying to find the right words, his brow furrowing. “This is no different.”

“Well, let’s get to ripping off his wings then,” A Dwarf stated boldly, pounding his fists together. A small ruckus erupted from the patrons at the comment.
“And anger the oldest bloodline of the Ever-Changing? Ha! I’d like to see you try,” The dryad’s hair vines shifted with an angry hiss, thorns protruding prominently.

“Lord Kris saw this and did nothing? How can we let this stand?”

“Jongdae’s the youngest of their clan. What can he possibly do by himself?”

“I wonder what the little Prince’s catch look like? Probably a scrawny pale thing like himself no doubt…”

Words, along with the energy surge within the room and high emotions made Junmyeon flinch as his senses were overwhelmed. His fist clenched against the cloth of the table as his temper simmered, heat radiating outward and causing a bit of Kris’ sculpture to melt.

Kris took a deep breath, setting his hand on the table and concentrating to slowly rebuild his sculpture. He could hear Tao's words in his head - to be truthful to Junmyeon, to put faith in the person who had always been his greatest friend and most powerful supporter - but he knew that the next step was dangerous and that his words must be chosen carefully.

"My King, there is more," he started simply, looking straight and only at Junmyeon, though he could feel the entire audience's gaze baring his back raw. "The human that Jongdae took into his possession - this Jongin - he had a contract. A mate. Jongdae isn't simply breaking your law; he is breaking the Greatest of laws. I ... met Jongin's mate while I was trying to fix the situation."

Amber coughed, nervous and unsure, and Kris could feel Joy's interest pique. He closed his eyes and thought of the look on Kyungsoo's face when he watched Jongin disappear across realms and Kris steeled himself. If this went well, he could keep that look from ever happening again, he could protect Kyungsoo from all the hurt that would follow if Jongin's transformation was completed.

"The mate... his name is Kyungsoo. His Jongin means everything to him and he... he asked me for my help in retrieving his husband," Kris continued, his voice raising in volume and his words coming faster and faster as he tried to explain. "I've been doing research. My father, as you all know, was a great alchemical genius and a powerful worker of magic in the time before the founding of our realms and his library is central to my theory. I believe that Kyungsoo is the key to saving Jongin from his transformation. I see so much magic in him, the most beautiful magic, and I think, if I could have your Grace's permission, your magic, to bring Jongin away from Jongdae... I think he could be saved and your order restored."

"You sound very familiar with this... Kyungsoo," Joy said, her voice dripping with curiosity and a splash of arrogance. Kris swallowed hard - she was going to be a problem.

Kris turned back to Junmyeon, his lips barely moving as he pressed his hopes and fears against Junmyeon, trying to make his friend understand, "There is magic in him. I want... I need to help him."

Junmyeon waited for the other side of the table to grow quiet before he responded. He smiled, his eyes gentle at the other man’s thoughtfulness, but otherwise hiding his annoyance at how many rules Jongdae managed to break all at once in such a small amount of time. Junmyeon found it hard to believe that he had been planning all of this for months, or even years. Regardless, the little trickster had been busy.

“I admire your honor, Kris, as always. His severing of a mortal binding contract is a serious transgression indeed. On top of being suspect in this so called movement, and bringing a human to the realm.” He gestured to the surrounding administrators. “But everyone here knows the rules. If the
human said yes, it is very difficult to break the spells to return the human as a mortal to his mate. The rituals are complex and worse for the human, as you know, and with the withdrawal…” He sighed. “Time is not on our side.”

“The human will go mad if it stays here…,” came a voice from a group of pixies, huddled together to mask their leader.

Amber shot a dirty look down the table, but was unable to pinpoint the speaker.

Junmyeon breathed in slowly through his nose, as if pondering the situation for a moment. Finally, even though the murmurs on the other side of the table had begun to grow again, Junmyeon considered how effective a royal summons would be.

Junmyeon rubbed two of his fingertips together. “How did you say you met this…Kyungsoo again?

"In following Jongdae," Kris explained, his mind whirring as he tried to construct his sentences carefully. "The little prince took his prisoner right in front of his mate. There was no hiding what happened. I ... saw him, Kyungsoo, and I comforted him. I told him our king would not stand for this and I... offered him my help as the lord of winter lands."

Kris felt the words catch in his throat and suddenly felt very naked in front of all the visitors. Amber's eyes, careful and intelligent, judged him. Joy's long fingernails tapped like a steady metronome against the table. He was sure he could feel the breath of every fae dignitary in the hall.

"Junmyeon, my king, I ... he accepted my help. And I will do what is necessary and I know he will do the same, to make sure that Jongin is freed. Whatever trials may come. He is strong, your grace. And I will be there to. -"

"Yifan," Amber said with a steady voice, using his name with emphasis, "where is this... human now?"

Kris closed his eyes for a long moment before looking deeply towards his best friend, his king, the one he had given so much for and felt his heart begin to sink, "Junmyeon, he... accepted my help. I couldn't just leave him there."

The room seemed to drain of all breath and the air became very hot. The frost that rolled off of Kris’ shoulders were now very visible as the cold reacted strongly to the change in temperature. Time seemed to slow to a crawl even as eyes widened and jaws dropped in disbelief as they realized the implication of his words.

Junmyeon’s face fell, a pressing feeling of betrayal suffocating the air. He felt powerless, fixated on the fact that if his best friend was also incapable of following the simplest of his rules, he might as well have been a…

“Traitor!” Joy’s ringing voice broke through the air, many other races joining in the angry chant as the room exploded into activity. But for every call for punishment, an echoing of another word hung in the air.

“Mercy.” Amber’s voice was lower, yet confident as she leveled a calm gaze at Junmyeon, hand on the table balled into a fist. The races that resided mostly in Kris’ lands echoed her call, over the increasing din of dissent echoing throughout the hall.

"I haven't touched him," Kris said with eyes locked on Junmyeon, forcing himself to block out the noise that seemed to collapse onto him from all sides, "I wouldn't touch him. Junmyeon, you know I wouldn't lie about this."
But it occurred to Kris in moment, that he had lied. He had walked into his best friend's home, the castle he had helped to secure for him, knelt before a man he had called friend and lover in equal measure... and all the while knowing that Kyungsoo was safe and warm and under his own protection. The remaining, nearly melted pieces of his ice forest shattered and fell to the table in a glittering mess.

Kris moved from his seat and knelt again beside his king, reaching for Junmyeon's hand and coming up empty. "Junmyeon... Suho," Kris whispered, using a more ancient name for the fae king, "You know I wouldn't do this if I thought... everything I have ever done, has been for safety and well-being of our kingdom. I would never... hurt you. But this human, he could do it. He could stop Jongdae and restore your peace. With my help and your's..."

Kris choked on his own words, "I trust his love is strong enough."

Some of the other fae were snickering at Kris’ admission. In their mind, it seemed to justify their own reasons for breaking Junmyeon’s laws. Their own reasons were based on greed, and were hardly ever noble. The rest were offended that Kris would so easily betray his King, despite the cause being noble. The meeting was breaking down quickly, and Amber drew her iron and stood, guards drawing closer to the table. Some asked for escort to leave, others proclaimed their dissatisfaction with how the meeting got them absolutely nowhere.

Junmeyon’s pause of disbelief as he stared at Kris with his lips parted was too long, and his resolve showed cracks. “You… didn’t really. Did you?” He studied the other man’s reaction, then his back straightened, hand balled into a fist as he struggled to keep his face neutral at Kris calling him by his other name. “You disappoint me, my friend,” his voice was barely audible over the din, still in disbelief, like he couldn’t believe that this was happening. The fact that the Lord of Winter, and a member of the ancient family of the Ever-Changing had shamelessly admitted to breaking his ruling…it was enough for an upheaval in the courts that would echo throughout the entirety of the kingdom.

But Kris was the only one that really knew why he passed the law in the first place.

Junmyeon felt anger starting to rise in his chest. He stood and heads bowed automatically as the guards on either side of him moved to allow him room, but they kept a tight grip on their iron weapons at Kris’s close proximity to their king.

“You defy me, Yifan.” His tone was clipped, harsh, barely being able to look at his friend as he raised a hand underneath Kris’ chin, forcing him to look at him as his voice lowered. “You defy me and you will be punished.” He let go of Kris, voice now heard throughout the hall. “I banish you from the summer lands,” gasps rang throughout the hall. “From any and all court functions and festivals. However, seeing as you still have a job to do, you will remain in your position as Lord of Winter, confined to your castle.”

Joy looked smug, and others looked to be satisfied with this punishment, nodding to one another. Amber however, looked downright mortified. She eyed the now two empty plate settings next to Junmyeon’s, an uneasiness creeping into her face.

“Get him up,” Junmyeon commanded, and the guards grabbed Kris from behind, getting him to his feet and away from him. “Know this, Kris. If you defy me again, if you so much as touch the human, charm or turn him in any way…I’ll take your wings myself.” The words were harsh, but as Junmyeon turned away from him and the others in the hall, anguish crossed his features, voice wavering as he fell heavily back into his seat. “Get him out of my sight.”

Kris didn't try to struggle, letting Junmyeon's guards drag him away. He wasn't sure that he had ever
felt quite as empty as he felt in this moment. Though he knew the room was abuzz with activity, though he could hear the tone of Amber's voice shaking as she tried to take back control of the room, his entire being was focused on the faery king in his chair, the expression on his face. Kris remembered that face from... before. It was heartbreak and confusion and anger. Kris knew in his heart that what he had done today was right; he did not regret bringing Kyungsoo to their world nor his honesty with Junmyeon.

But it felt ... wrong to be the one hurting Junmyeon, when, not all that many years ago, he had pledged his sword and his soul to protect and to love his king.

The guards seemed almost nervous when they finally released him, hurrying back inside without saying a word to the Lord of Winter. He still had some power, Kris thought to himself. Fear was power - a fragile one, but it might be enough to allow him to continue his investigation. His wings burned on his back, aching for release.

A familiar purr awoke him from his thoughts - his dragonflight. For a beast of her size, she was surprisingly dainty and agile with her claws. She tugged at her master's jacket nervously, seeming to understand that everything was not well. Kris reached for her, wanting to feel her reassuring warmth beneath his hands, but she was suddenly tugged away. His dragon hissed, a bit of smoke escaping from her nostrils.

"Ahh Kris, you are a brave one still," an old friend said with a voice that never aged, "But foolish."

Kris looked up at the Windmaster, Sehun's youthful face and awkward smile still welcoming even as he insulted the leader of the Winter Kingdom.

"I like foolish men," Sehun continued, handing over the reigns of the dragon to Kris with speed.

Kris took the offered reigns but made no move to mount his beast, "Sehun, it's best if we don't -"

"You're right. I shouldn't allow you to take her. She's powerful and right now, you're a traitor," Sehun said with certainty, "But I will not forget all that you have done for me and for my king. Junmyeon doesn't forget; he just..."

"I know," Kris agreed. He clenched his fist around the reigns and forced himself to remain silent. He had already said too much that.

"Do you?" Sehun asked. Sometimes the kid was more insightful than Kris (or anyone else for that matter) gave him credit for. "Whatever you think has happened here today, understand that I am giving you the reigns to your dragon knowing that my king, the one I love the most, wouldn't want this. Understand that I have been summoned to the throne room and I am delaying his Grace's announcement. And understand that my summoning..." Sehun's sweet, hummingbird wings flapped aggressively behind him, his nervousness and anticipation showing. "My summoning could mean that this is the last time you can expect my help."

Kris nodded solemnly and stood to mount his dragon, "You're good to him, Sehun. One day he'll see that." He knew at once, Sehun's lips parting, that he had said too much, touched something too deep.

Kris watched as the Windmaster ended their conversation with an abrupt about face, never even saying good-bye, as he moved back into the palace. Kris's dragonflight shifted nervously beneath him, ready to take to the sky. But Kris lingered a moment longer - enjoying, while he could, a few more rays of the summer sun.

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Sehun flit into the room, his light gray robes moving in an unseen wind that gently moved around him. He was quiet as a whisper as he moved, feet barely touching the polished marble beneath his bare feet. The guards regarded him before allowing him to move closer to the now muted chaos that remained of the early secret meeting.

“Reconvene!” Amber was repeating. Those around the table were slow to comply. At least her iron was sheathed again, but she still held the scabbard at her side. Joy was making herself look as small as possible, drinking her mead hastily and not making eye contact with anyone around her. Junmyeon had his face in his hand, eyes hidden, leaning on the arm of the chair. His other hand scratched at the wood, nearly digging pieces out of it.

The guards around Junmyeon were backing off as Sehun got closer, and he kneeled at the arm of his chair. Sehun’s wings fidgeted over each other uncomfortably before resting on his back, their size small enough not to be in the way in such close proximity to the others around his King.

Before everyone got settled fully, Junmyeon whispered into Sehun’s ear, pressing his mission into his mind. It startled Sehun, so much so that he gave a slight gasp at the fact that he skipped his formalities, the acknowledgment of his presence. He faltered as he bowed his head, the intimacy and closeness making him shudder.

Junmyeon’s presence was so heavy with despair, but Sehun understood. He caught little flashes of the events leading up to Kris’ ejection from the dining hall. He desperately wanted to take his king from this meeting, take him to his chambers, and…

“Find him, Sehun. Bring Jongdae to me,” his voice was soft and barely audible, but Sehun heard him quite clearly in his head. “And his prey too, if he hasn’t hidden him yet…..”

Sehun’s head bowed, his lips drawing into a thin line. “At once, your grace.” He stood, wings pattering on his back nervously. Four of the guards followed, to accompany him into the Ever-Changing, both as a guard squad, and to escort Jongdae and his turned human back.

As he left, Junmyeon’s voice rang out through the hall, authoritative and cold. “If you think I was merciful to our dear Lord Winter, and you or anyone else think he has an excuse to break my rules without any qualms, think again. I reiterate that I will not tolerate deviation from my decrees. Do not think that my mercy is a weakness on my part.” Junmyeon paused for a moment. “If this movement stems from resurrecting dark magic, quell it. Bring me the wings of traitors.”

It was a few hours later when Sehun returned. The meeting had ended with a more respectable agreement, even if most still had their doubts and many were not pleased. The guards bowed while Sehun approached Junmyeon’s true throne at the base of their Mother Tree.

The towering tree swayed like it was breathing, the leaves above their heads shining like multicolored gems in the light of the midday sky. As usual, Junmyeon was surrounded by a small group of lobbyists and attendants, all trying to garner favor with their King and enhance their affairs.

“What is he?” Junmyeon’s words washed over Sehun, the air becoming a little hot as he tried to remain calm.
Sehun hesitated, still whispering. “…He’s gone, your grace. His hold is empty. No sign of him or his prey.” He reached into his robes, pulling out a small parcel filled with charms that woodenly clinked together. Purple sparks of old magick were still skittering across the runes as he opened the bag to show Junmyeon. “Took this long just to disarm these to get inside. He also set up charms to mask where he went.”

The Tree made a strained sound, groaning as its roots shifted, Junmyeon’s anger affecting it. He felt like a fool. Jongdae was clever, a chaotic wildcard with ancient knowledge and years of nothing but practice. Always one step ahead. He had missed the opportunity to quell this incident quietly. Junmyeon cleared his throat, his resolve strong. “Spread my decree.”

Sehun closed his eyes, remembering what Junmyeon shared with him earlier. “At once, your grace.”
Chapter 10

Kris circled the Winter Palace three times before allowing his dragonflight to land on the upper terrace, his mind racing and his stomach churning. He’d had time to process what had happened, but it still didn’t feel real. And it wasn’t over - he still had to tell Kyungsoo. He hesitated in dismounting and his dragon turned her head to smile at him in her strange reptilian way. It should have been comforting, but instead it made his wings ache all over again and he felt sorry for her. There was no telling what would happen next and he feared for everything that lived in his winter world.

Finally pulling himself together, Kris leapt down from his flight and took the deepest breath of wild air he could manage. One of his stone gnomes rushed from inside the palace and jumped up to grab at the reigns, while a second ignored his duties in favor of wrapping his small arms around one of Kris's legs in a tight hug. "I suppose news travels fast through the earth," Kris chuckled, patting the creature's head with false confidence, "You have nothing to be afraid of."

His stone servant grunted an appreciative recognition of the words, but stayed close to his master even as Kris started inside. He made quickly for the library, the last place he had seen Kyungsoo. The memory of those last words was still ringing in his head, making him feel both guilty at the news he had to deliver and giddy at the thought of being near Kyungsoo again. His boots, polished and precise, clicked an intimidating warning as he walked through the halls.

He arrived at the library before he knew better and paused at the entrance to catch his breath. He laid a hand on the door, nervously pushing his palm against the great carved wood, and pushed, trying to feel for the the human's presence. 'Kyungsoo', he thought, closing his eyes and pressing his lips together, 'Kyungsoo'.

Once again, there were books strewn around, used and bookmarked with other pieces of loose parchment that contained handwritten notes for Kyungsoo to go back and reference later on one of the main tables in the sitting area. But the candle lights were low, and ink trailed off halfway down one of the pages, an indication of when he had gotten up and wandered to another corner of the sprawling library.

Kyungsoo was leaning against the cold glass of one of the many windows, drawing little shapes of animals into the condensation he blew onto the glass. A giraffe. A butterfly. A puppy. Crude shapes, but still easily identifiable, along with ‘Jongin’ bigger and closer to him near the corner of the pane. He stared at the characters that made up his husband’s name, an unidentifiable pain rising in his gut, and he felt like crying again. He couldn’t focus and the waiting was near torturous, his anxiety spurring him into inaction. He barely noticed that his wedding band, once polished and bright, was now a dull copper color with green around the edges as his fingers fidgeted over the simple designs.

His reminisces, however, were cut short, hearing his name being called. He turned, leaning up from the bookshelf and expecting someone to be there at the end of the aisle, but there was nobody there. Again, he heard his name, but it was clearer this time, and he instinctively brought his hands around his ears, startled. “W-what…” he spoke aloud.

The sound of Kyungsoo's voice pulled at Kris's middle and the faery lord smiled, mostly to himself, but pressed the warm feeling through space towards his human guest. He never wanted Kyungsoo to be afraid but it amused him a bit to see how Kyungsoo reacted to the new world around him. He was so calm, Kris thought, he was always so calm as if he had always belonged to their world, had always belonged here in this palace, in this library...

Kris let his palm fall away from the door, breaking the connection and nodded to himself before
turning the golden handle and pushing open the heavy door into the library, "Kyungsoo? I hope I'm not disturbing anything." It hurt to hear how much less confident his voice was when it moved through their real world, how heavy with the history of what had happened in Junmyeon's summer palace. He swallowed and hoped that Kyungsoo couldn't hear the difference as he stepped over the threshold and into a room he now longer thought of as his own.

Kyungsoo involuntarily relaxed as he felt a calmness wash over him, mentally and physically. He had felt this type of…connection only once before, when he had first met Kris. It was invasive, but this time, not unpleasant, just a feeling that his senses were hijacked for a short moment in time. When the warmth disappeared he immediately missed it, noticing that his muscles were actually really tense with worry. He took a deep breath, pushed off the window sill and started walking back to the front of the library, leaving his doodles on the glass behind.

It was then that he noticed that he was still wearing what he had picked out yesterday; the maroon outfit with the oversized fur…now still slightly damp and the strands sticking together with shed tears. He moved the area behind him a bit to hide the spot. He figured he'd take another bath tonight, declining Tao's earlier offer in the day to go down to the rock pools below the castle. He had wanted to get more research done, but he hadn’t done much more; a sinking feeling in his heart keeping him from getting any real work done.

He rounded the corner and looked into the sitting area, not knowing that Kris was still coming in from the door behind him. “Kris?”

Kris narrowly avoided stepping on several of the small sprites that ran to great to him, tip toeing over them to get closer to Kyungsoo. "I'm -" his voice cracked and he tried to laugh it off, "I'm home."

He ran his eyes over Kyungsoo, taking in the human and worrying a bit at his disheveled appearance. Had he been in the library all day? Kris started to ask but stopped himself, not wanting to add to his guest's concerns. Suddenly feeling very hot and obvious, he reached up and unbuttoned his military vest at the neck, two, then three buttons until the cool of the winter wind allowed him to breath more steadily. "Was your day productive? I know the library can be a bit... overwhelming and not terribly organized, but I hope you continue to find it to your liking?"

One of Kris's sprites scurried up his leg, digging claws into Kris's wool pants until Kris reached down and brought the creature up to his neck. It curled around him, its tiny tongue flicking out to thank its master for the lift. Dragons of all sizes, Kris was reminded, were such intuitive creatures. They knew what comfort you needed before you realized it yourself.

Kyungsoo turned, finally locating Kris as the room came alive with activity again, sprite claws clattering over shelves and book piles as they rushed to greet him. He couldn't help it; his lip curled up at seeing the tiny dragons greet their master in this way. He had entertained the little ones throughout the day, and they checked on him periodically...especially when his mood fell.

Kyungsoo rubbed his arm nervously at the question, the smile fading from his face. His hand fell down his arm to fiddle with his ring again. "Productive? Mmn...not really. My... I'm...." he struggled to find the words to describe his mood. After Kris had left, he'd broken down. Badly. He was trying to stay strong, to have faith in Kris and his world, but inexplicably, doubt crept into his overactive mind, occupying his thoughts of disaster rather than hope for a solution. He hoped the feeling was temporary.

The sprite curled around Kris's neck nudged him gently on the chin, as through encouraging him forward. Kris tried to ignore its insistence, but found himself taking a few steps closer to Kyungsoo and wishing he had better news to break to the young human. "I'm sorry to hear that," and he was.

He didn't like the idea of Kyungsoo sitting in the library alone - thinking too much was a death
sentence to both fae and human alike, he had found over the years. "Tao... Tao didn't come to keep you company?"

Kris glanced down at Kyungsoo's hands, nervous and fidgeting around the slowly turning ring. He could barely help himself, "Even if he had, if Tao had some to fetch you, would you have to have accepted his offer?"

Kris closed the distance between them and nervously took Kyungsoo's hand in his own to study the wedding ring and its curious transformation. Kyungsoo's hand was so small in his own, strangely oversized ones. He was suddenly overcome with how delicate this human was and he worried that his heartbeat, in all its nervous irregularity, could be heard aloud. He concentrated on the ring instead, taking in its variations in color and texture, and noting them in his mind. At this point, he considered, any information was good information. If he and Kyungsoo were to solve this mystery alone, to pull Jongin back from the brink of transformation, he would need to consider every option, every detail.

"He did earlier," Kyungsoo struggled to form words as he stared at Kris' hands on his own. "I just... wanted to see if I could get some work done. I still love it in here, I just wish there was more I could do. The books about elemental spells is quickly becoming my favorite though." Tao had asked, had been concerned for him when he had found him earlier, curled up in the armchair with the sprites licking away his tears. He had tried to occupy his mind with positivity, even showcasing his own magic and pulling a few more books off the shelf for Kyungsoo to look at and possibly study. He found himself doubting it all internally. The spells looked cool, but humans didn't use magic, his doubt keeping him from even trying.

He swallowed, watching Kris judge the tarnished splotches on his ring. Color tinted high on his cheeks in embarrassment at the lack of space between them, making him lean back a little. "I... its been steadily getting worse since this morning but...I don’t know what to do about it," he tried, referencing the ring.

Kris felt Kyungsoo pull away and his heart fell involuntarily. He knew that he shouldn't get attached, shouldn't expect anything from the human, but he did in a way and he was foolish for it. He glanced at the ring one more time, taking special note of the color, and dropped Kyungsoo's hand, letting it fall between them, "We need to find your husband. We need to find your husband and quickly."

He tried to turn away, to hide the concern etched in lines across his forehead, but the little sprite around his neck tugged wordlessly on his ear. Dragons, he thought again, are too clever, too intuitive for their own good.

"Kyungsoo," Kris said, making it a structured point to say his name with no glamour, no magic, "Kyungsoo, I need to talk to you. I mean, we're talking now, but I need to ..." Kris glanced around the library. The soft snores of dragon sprites and the rustle of pages filled the room. They were alone, but, with all that had happened this morning, Kris couldn't be too sure. "I need to talk to you without any possibility of interruption. I asked you earlier to let me ... show you the kingdom. If you would grant me that permission?"

Kyungsoo’s heart leapt, opened his mouth to respond that yes, they needed to find Jongin quickly, and that he was ready to help in any way. However when Kris quickly followed up with his request from earlier in the day, his voice faltered, his head tilting curiously at the Winter Lord’s hasty tone of voice. He didn’t want to appear rude, but he was anxious to find out if any progress had been made with the meeting Kris attended earlier in the day.

His brow furrowed, eyes taking in Kris’ stance, his looks about the room. “O-of course you can, but…Kris, how did your inquiry with your friend go?” The words tumbled from his lips, wanting to
get them out as quickly as possible. “Would he be able to help us? Help me find my husband?”

Kris remained silent for a moment and then picked up the sprite around his neck and helped it down onto one of the couches, then begin with a nervous speed to unbutton his overshirt as quickly as possible. "I know I'm asking a lot, Kyungsoo, but if you would trust me, just one more time. I will tell you everything I know, but I have to be sure." Kris glanced around the room one more time, feeling sick to his stomach at having to hide in his own castle.

His overshirt fell from his shoulders, the medals attached to it clanking together as it hit the floor. He stood now in a form-fitting black shirt, the back curved to expose his shoulder blades. For someone as tall and lanky as Kris appeared, his back was etched with muscle... and scars. Kris reached back and massaged his shoulders for a moment, taking deep breathes, before looking at Kyungsoo, deep in the human's eyes, "I'm going to need you to trust me."

Kris closed his eyes and muttered something that sounded almost like a prayer but in a language long forgotten. He face winced in pain for a moment and then the sound echoed through the room, the sound of bones shifting and flesh tearing. For a second the room seemed filled with fire and then Kris's wings broke loose - deep red with a few exposed golden spikes dotting the edges. They were segmented, almost reptilian and seemed to be made of leather, so different from the pictures of the fae that make it into the human storybooks. But there was no mistaking them: dragon wings.

Kris fell to the floor under their weight for a moment before pushing himself back up and stretching them, extending his wings and drawing them close again, as if to test their span and ability. He grunted, annoyed at some spasm, and shook his entire body, including the wings. A few books on the nightstand went flying and the sprites all began, from all corners of the library, to creep towards him, cooing something, obviously impressed or excited by their master's appearance.

Kyungsoo was stunned into silence, staring, eyes wide as the tendons grew and shifted over one another, knitting into Kris' impressive wings. The colors were a shock to him; he expected to see cool colors, maybe even more delicate like Tao's, or see-through wings like a dragonfly. But these… these screamed of strength and power.

He felt pressure on his knee, then his waist, and suddenly one of the sprites was on his shoulder, nuzzling hard at his neck, seeming to break him out of his daze as its tiny wings and tail spread in excitement. Kyungsoo brought a hand up to pet it, but it jumped off like an excited cat, almost ripping the threads of his shirt out.

He wanted to smile, to be giddy like the dragons were, but all his eyes did was get wider and wider with wonder... along with his mouth. He stared up at Kris, more than a little intimidated. “Wow…” he managed to breathe, finding himself looking right at Kris, as to not seem rude by staring at his wings.

Kris tried to smile back, filled with unnatural pride at Kyungsoo's expression, but another small spasm rocked through him and he found himself grimacing instead, "I'm sorry. I haven't... I haven't used them since the war." He gritted his teeth together and slowly folded them neatly against his back, the memory of flying, of speeding through the sky with Junmyeon at his side, rushing back to him. "I thought I might never use them again after... - but I can't be sure. My castle has always been a safe place for all manner of misfits and creatures the rest of our realm would never want to see. But I can't be sure of how long it will remain that way."

Keeping his wings as close to him as possible, Kris came close to Kyungsoo again, "There have been some developments. I don't want to frighten you, but I need to know that we aren't being... overheard. Do you understand?" Kris hesitated, struggling to find words, and instead extended his hand for Kyungsoo to take - he pushed through in the smoother language of images and feelings all
his nervousness, his worries, his need - as silly as it was - to protect Kyungsoo and to make him happy. "Do you understand?"

Kyungsoo’s eyes unfocused as he felt it again, the strange feelings pressing against him. He turned them over in his mind, finding that they said more than words ever could, and at once he knew something was wrong. Kris’ stance, his projected feelings. They spoke of a story he had yet to tell. He didn’t understand yet how he felt this way, or how he managed to know this or how it worked. And at the tail end of it, was the feeling that he was still safe, still important. Kyungsoo’s brow furrowed, hesitating, but he nodded, sliding his smaller hand into Kris’. “Yes,” he breathed, eyes falling from Kris’ eyes to stare at their hands intertwined together. “I understand.”

The sprites that surrounded them seemed to hum in approval at Kyungsoo’s words, but Kris couldn't find it in himself to be happy at the human's understanding. He only felt relief. Kris nodded, mostly to himself, and took firmer hold of Kyungsoo's hand, pulling him towards the balcony. He threw open the doors, letting snow and the cold of his kingdom rush inside. He walked them to the edge of the balcony, overlooking the greater clearing and pulled Kyungsoo closer than he would have ever dared before, letting their bodies press flush to each other. Kyungsoo's smallness, his fragileness became terrifyingly real.

Kris's voice was a whisper, "Hold onto me. Don't let go."

He extended his wings, ignoring their soreness, their disuse and wrapped an arm completely around Kyungsoo's middle, holding the human in place. He stretched his wings a few times, intimating the feeling of flight. The cold gathering beneath his wings seemed impossibly welcome; the instinctual nature of the fae is to fly and he hadn't done so in ages. Once the feeling seemed natural, he lifted them slowly from the balcony and hovered a few feet above the stone floor. His wings adjusted quickly, the muscles across his back and chest working overtime to compensate for the added weight. Some of the smallest and youngest of the sprites ran out and tried to fly alongside them.

Kris tightened his grip on Kyungsoo's waist, "Do you trust this?"

Kyungsoo almost balked at how close they now were, shuddering at the cold…and the height…and suddenly he wasn’t so sure. He felt his heart hammering in his chest as he tried to not look below, knowing his feet were dangling in the air now and instead focusing on Kris’ face. He felt like he had a vice grip on the other man’s hand, but he was pretty secure like this, with Kris’ arm around him. His face tinged pink at his close proximity to Kris despite the cool air near freezing against his skin.

He squeezed his eyes tight for a moment, determined not to be scared. It took him a moment to clear his head, the noise of doubt fading from his mind and now only hearing the beat of Kris’ wings, the chirps of the tiny spritelings. The air itself was very calm, a fresh snowfall having covered the landscape earlier that afternoon. The sky was a clear, deep navy with gray and purple only on the edges of the horizon.

On the edge of his mind, he also realized that this was important. He would get the answers to his questions. He would find out about how he could help and find Jongin. He found strength in this, his voice calmer than he expected when he gave Kris his reply. “Yes.”

Kris pressed their cheeks together and whispered into Kyungsoo's ear, "Don't let go."

In a rush of wind and furiously beating wings, he launched them from the balcony, headed down towards the ice, allowing the gravity of the stars themselves to help him gather speed. Freezing air swirled around them. If it were possible for even less space to exist between them, Kris would have willed it, holding the human as close as he could with a strength that he prayed wasn't uncomfortable for his guest. Curling up at the last minute to avoid hitting the icy snow below them, Kris raced
across the landscape of his kingdom, headed for the forest and the mountains beyond. In the distance, a tremendous roar echoed through their clearing and Kris smiled. His dragonflight, her triumphant call only for him.

Kris darted between the trees with more dexterity than should have been possible for a 1000-year flightless creature. He was probably too proud of this and had to fight the urge to curve more elaborate and showy tricks through the thickness of the growth. His path was far from straight, designed to move through his forests in a way that would disorient all except those who knew them best. When he finally figured that enough space had passed between him and the castle, where onlookers might have tracked his movements, he turned skyward and burst through the trees. They had arrived at the base of a great mountain, towering so high that its summit was impossible to see from even this height. He hovered there, catching his breath and looking out across the snow.

He glanced down at Kyungsoo, to check on the human, but he found it impossible to form words. He gasped for air, his chest heaving with the exertion of flight. Instead, he squeezed Kyungsoo's hand - they were safe.

Kyungsoo squeaked when it felt like he was falling, the breath whooshing out of him when he felt pressure like they were climbing. It felt like a roller coaster, and he squeezed his eyes shut, fighting the reaction to lift his legs up until he felt Kris even out, hearing the roar of something in the distance. He slowly blinked his eyes open when he felt Kris pause in the air, the mountain before them.

"Whoa..." he huffed, his gasps of breath from a mixture of fear and exhilaration as he turned his head to look. He was shaking slightly, miles and miles of crags and valleys stretching out in either direction, and probably thousands of feet above them towered the mountain. He hadn't seen anything like it. Except for maybe in books about Mt. Everest. But nothing compared to the sheer scale, and the angle he was looking at it. There were also lights along some of the crags, twinkling like stars or crystals. It wasn't lifeless rock. Trees swayed at odd angles, and figures could be seen against the stark white of the snow. Things still moved and lived in the dark.

"It's beautiful," he managed, and yet, he clung to Kris that much more.

Kris tried to steady his breathing, certain that Kyungsoo could hear his heart pounding against his chest from both the stress of the flight, pride in the beauty of his kingdom and Kyungsoo's body pressed so tightly against his. He slowly began ascending, floating higher and higher above the forest below. "You like it? This is... this is my ancestral home. Before the coup, before the war, before everything... this is where my family and the people of the winterlands - this is where we were born."

He moved more slowly now, allowing Kyungsoo to take in the more ancient and wild lands that surrounded them. Snaking between a few of the smaller peaks, he took time to point out little wonders that surrounded them - "My stone guardians, if you look down a bit, that is their little city. The arcane magicians who brought them to life lived and died there from times before humans were ever crawling from the ooze". "That tree there, I saw my lord Junmyeon, King of all the World, right there for the first time." "They say that over in the distance, the red glow, is the volcano from which the great dragons emerged at the beginning of our time. I say that's ridiculous."

Kris paused as he approached a large valley in the mountains, silver leafed trees densely shielding the ground except precisely in the middle. He had been babbling, talking to fill the space, to ease himself as much as Kyungsoo and now they had arrived. Kris felt cold for the first time in as long as he could remember. He lowered them both slowly and landed on top of one of the lesser hills overlooking the valley. From the center, a little column of smoke emerged and Kris wished he had thought to bring Kyungsoo more furs.

Their feet touched the unblemished snow and Kris loosened his grip on Kyungsoo's waist, but didn't
retreat. He let the moment linger, longer than he should have, sharing space with the one he had promised to never touch.

Kris was talking of ancient structures, of forests older than humans or their history. It was kind of shocking to Kyungsoo, whose worldview was, up until very recently, the inside of a cubicle. He was thankful that his fur hadn’t left his shoulders on the flight here, because the cold was near biting under the clear sky. He breathed, loving the fact that the air still didn’t hurt to breathe, the moon barely a sliver in the sky. It hung low near the horizon, but the entire body of it was discernible in the navy sky, with the sea of stars behind it, looking like it was being cradled by the swirl of the Milky Way.

Instantly Kyungsoo was reminded of several songs, inspiration inexplicably blooming inside of him as he stared up at the universe above him. It was only in that instant that he noticed that Kris was still holding him, and he loosened his own grip, making a small noise of confusion, wondering why he hadn’t let go.

“Um…Kris? Everything….ok?”

Kris didn’t move, letting Kyungsoo remove himself from their shared space, the heat of the human’s hand still lingering in his. "We have so much to talk about. And... and I have to tell you something that I’ve keep secret and safe for a very, very long time." He took a seat on an exposed rock, jutting out from the snow and indicated for Kyungsoo to sit near him. He allowed the human to make himself as comfortable as he could, then extended his wing to wrap around Kyungsoo, not touching the human but shielding him from the winter winds.

"You read a little about the war, didn't you?" Kris began, glancing over at Kyungsoo, sure that the human would wonder what in the world any of this had to do with his husband. Kris turned back to the valley and concentrated on the silver leavers, the hint of a fire somewhere deep in the wood.
"Times were different then, Kyungsoo. It would not have been safe for us to even be in these mountains. The dark ones, fae with a taste for human flesh... fae with a taste for fae flesh, they were everywhere, it felt like, back then. Blood magic, even your ancestors knew it was dangerous. We were becoming the villains in all your fairy tales.

"In the days before the King, they would take humans, use their bodies for pleasure, transform them, rip them from their chrysalis - malformed and broken - and bleed them for the most powerful energies. Kyungsoo, it was not a time we like to remember. And Junmyeon, our King, he led our revolution against the blind king of the summer lands who could not see what was happening because my Junmyeon could not stand to watch the suffering. We fought because he does care. Understand?"

Kyungsoo huddled underneathe the fur, staring up at Kris as he told his story. He became a little nervous at the telling of the past before the war, how the fae treated humans. Panic settled in his gut, hands gripping the cloth of his pants tightly. Rage boiled within him at the thought of Jongin being treated like that. “Yes but… the one who took my husband. What will he do to him?"

Kris kept his eyes straightforward, hoping it would keep the sorrow in his eyes hidden from his guest, "We all made mistakes, Kyungsoo. At the end. When the fighting stopped and the fires were put out, we were left with holes, bands of fae that we couldn’t control. But Jongdae could, because, back then, his house knew how to turn humans on their own, had the power to make more of their kind and his subjects loved him for it. And so we trusted him and we let him go and we made him a dark prince of a dark place."

Kris choked on his own words and felt guilt sweep over him, "He was my burden and I failed. For that last thousands years, I gave him space and now he has... your Jongin." The silver leaves in the
valley below rustled with a gust of icy wind. Kris instinctively wrapped his wing more tightly around Kyungsoo. "I was supposed to watch him. I was supposed to make sure this never happened again."

Kris sniffed back his pitiable explanations and tried to get back on track, speaking quickly before Kyungsoo could stop him, "You see, when it was over, I threw a party in your realm and I know this sounds ... irrelevant. But I threw a party to last for an age, one even the humans couldn't ignore. Junmyeon was never one for parties - he was... a private sort of person. But he came. He came right at the twilight of the new millennium. I don't remember ever being so happy as when I saw him smile that night.

"He ate and drank like the rest of us, but... he wasn't a reveler. So, he took a walk. And he heard something through the forest - a song. And I can tell you, Kyungsoo, there is nothing more singularly seductive to a fae than a beautiful boy with a beautiful voice. Baekhyun was his name and he was a... a farmer of some kind, I imagine. He sang while he worked. And I had never seen Junmyeon more in love. But... something went wrong. The transformation couldn't be completed and in the end, it couldn't be helped. The boy was broken and Junmyeon was devastated. Junmyeon outlawed the taking of humans that very day and he charged me, his general, to -" Kris paused, his stomach churning with words he had been desperate to say for years. Now they seemed to be not enough.

"I built his lover, half turned, a hidden world in a valley of silver and I promised to protect him, so that none would know of Junmyeon's weakness. I ... I let him make the law that would change our world forever."

A single tear fell down Kris's cheek, freezing to his skin, "It is my failings that have brought you here today. It is my fault that we are here."

Kris turned to Kyungsoo and spoke breathlessly, "I went to my knees in front of my king and I told him what happened. I told him that I had failed to control Jongdae. I told him about you - that I had broken the law that I helped to create by bringing you here. And for my failures, I have been banished. We cannot anticipate help from the Summer Palace. Junmyeon will not help us. We are alone."

All of Kyungsoo’s desperation broke under the revelation. His throat dried up as it hit him that not even the seemingly most powerful person in this world could help him. Kris was his only help now, a banished Lord of Winter, and was now possibly an enemy of his friend. His heart felt for Kris, realizing that he had risked so much to help him.

“I’m... I’m sorry that this situation has caused you so much pain,” Kyungsoo tried, standing up and standing in front of Kris. He then realized that he was not that much taller than him, even with Kris sitting down. “I didn’t mean for you to be hurt in this way. I just...” desperation clawed in his voice again, but he blinked back the tears that threatened to spill from his eyes as despair tied his stomach in knots. “I’m desperate to save my husband, and every second I feel like he’s moving further away from me. I’m ready to do what is necessary to save him. I love him.” He flinched against a particularly cold gust of wind against his face. “And I’m not going home without him.”
Kris held back the strong pull inside of him that wanted to tell Kyungsoo never to go home, to never even speak of such a thing again. His eyes misted with frustrations and disappointment in himself. He watched Kyungsoo stand in front of him, pulsating with strength and it made every fiber of Kris's being desire him all the more. He pushed his instincts deeper down and refused them.

"I always knew you would," Kris whispered, his voice riding on the wind, "You think you aren't special, that humans and the world you live in isn't magical, not like we are anyway. But you're wrong. Humans can do incredible things. Their will is strong. You can save your husband, I believe that."

He swallowed back his fear and crawled up his knees, kneeling before Kyungsoo and again, taking the human's hands in his and holding tight. His wings circled around him, creating an intimate space, warmed by their breath. "Junmyeon will not have me anymore because he doesn't understand it. He doesn't know what I see in you. If you would, Kyungsoo, if you would have me, I will fight for you and for the one you love. All my knowledge, my connections, my magic... it belongs to you now."

Kyungsoo blinked in shock. The fact that Kris would do this for him, that he still believed in his own goal of finding Jongin, it made his heart swell unexpectedly with affection. This powerful being was on his knees and humbly so, yet his voice still shook.

Kyungsoo’s face softened, unsure of what to say. He knew he usually mucked things up while talking, so this time, he decided to let his actions speak for him. He let go of Kris’s hands but moved closer, bringing his arms up to encircle the fae's neck, trailing down his back in what Kyungsoo hoped was a comforting hug. It pressed Kris’s head against his lower chest, and after a moment he brought one hand up to card through Kris's hair. Kyungsoo watched as the strands shimmered and flowed easily through his fingertips, a single tear of gratefulness managing to fall out of the corner of his eye onto the top of the other man’s head.

Kris stiffened for a moment, unsure of how to respond in the intensity of the moment. There was no denying that he had wanted this (and too much more) from the moment he'd seen the human, but he had resigned himself to the fact that intimacy with this creature, of any kind - sexual or platonic, was close to impossible. He had felt and understood the necessity of Kyungsoo's affection for his husband. He had just pledged his very existence to the service of that affection. To touch him at all, even with all their clothes on, always felt like something out of a dream. But this... his wings, tense from years of neglect and pulsing with blood from their recent exertion, shivered with sensitivity and ached.

He could hear Kyungsoo's heart beating in his chest and relaxed into the sound of it, his body melting against Kyungsoo's. Kris didn't allow himself to return the hug. He might never had let go. Instead, he buried his head against the human and listened and felt everything. He closed his eyes and let Kyungsoo direct - the feeling of the other man's fingers gliding through his hair bring back gentle and warm joy like childhood. He smiled into Kyungsoo's chest.

The silence yawned between them. It was strangely comfortable, the only sound their shifting and the wind outside the warmth of Kris’ wings. The world was so cold, and Kris was so warm. Kyungsoo felt the urge to sing to him, to comfort him even as his own breath shook. He only had a few ideas on what to do when it came time to rescue Jongin. He wasn’t sure how effective they would be, but they were worth a shot. And any help Kris provided would of course be more than welcome. However there was still a lingering feeling in the back of his mind that Kyungsoo didn’t deserve any of it; Kris's help or his magic. It ate at him, his stomach twisting into knots as uncertainty
flowed in his veins.

To distract himself and Kris from the doubt that was causing his shaking, he cradled Kris closer, leaning down to place a kiss on the top of the winter prince's head. “Thank you,” he murmured, barely audible over the wind picking up again, now ringing like crystal in his ears. Even louder still were those sounds in the distance, deeper in tone. The melodic sounds made him look up, seeing green and purple auroras in the sky through the space between Kris’s folded wings. Kyungsoo gave a little gasp of shock as he stared.

Kris took a breath so deep he felt it in his toes, trying to take in all the perfectness of Kyungsoo and keep it close. As much as he tried to keep himself composed and easy, he imagined now how similar this, this closeness, was to the way Kyungsoo would hold his Jongin. Would he kiss Jongin so gently? Would he whisper with such sincerity? Kris swallowed it all back down. It was his instinct to want to possess such a thing, not his desire. And it is our choices, Kris reminded himself, not our instincts that make us who we are.

He pulled back, out of Kyungsoo's arms and extended his wings, following Kyungsoo's gaze to the blossoming colors above. "You know... before today, I had thought of taking you here just to see the lights. To show you my homeland. To show you what we share. They are the same lights you have back home, in your world. We share them and the entire universe."

Kris stood, still feeling the echo of Kyungsoo's hands upon him. "Our worlds are so linked, it should be frightening." He laughed as though it were some sort of ironic truth only he had stumbled upon. "But we deserve each other - fae and human. It is a shame, in many ways, that some fae took advantage and left us in this situation. Both worlds, both ... species, are better when we can work together."

Kyungsoo blinked, the colors nearly hypnotic as they swirled over his head. He felt like he could fall into the sky, and when Kris talked, the words seemed like they came through a padded cloth over his ears. He shook his head slightly, clearing his mind, trying to process what Kris had just said. It took him an embarrassingly long moment to do so, and then he felt guilty for letting himself be easily distracted like that. He found that here, his usually grounded and cynical mind was starting to float a bit. He wondered what it meant.

Unsure of what to say, Kyungsoo blew his warm breath into his fingers, taking in the valley below. When he finally spoke, his voice was almost normal, the shaking having subsided from earlier. What was Kris talking about again? Oh right. Together. Working together. “I...I hope that can be true for everyone someday. This...this will be our first step together. But it’s already been dangerous for you, Kris,” Kyungsoo turned to look up at him. “I can’t be sure that I’ll follow any rules either.”

In his digging, he’d come up with everything from specially forged iron to demanding a boon directly from the King. Most were easily offensive to the cultures of fae. Combinations were worthy of getting turned into an animal at best…and sand or dust and even cursed objects or spirits cast back to earth for the worst of the worst offenses. It frightened Kyungsoo, looking over record lists of fates that befell many humans in the past, stuck haphazardly in between the pages of crumbling, unreadable books.

But Jongin was worth the risk. Kyungsoo's stomach flared in pain as he thought of him. “Jongin...is worth it,” he said aloud, as though reassuring himself.

Kris nodded in response, filled with both pride at Kyungsoo's strength and jealousy-tinted loneliness. He glanced over Kyungsoo's shoulder and into the valley, its center still gently glowing with fire. Things were going to be hard, he knew this, and Kyungsoo's flippancy about the Rules made him...
nervous. He looked back to meet Kyungsoo's eyes, "I respect your quest, your love for him, but ... promise me that you won't eat of a faery table. The Rules - they ... break people who don't follow them. I will help you - you tell me where to go, I will get you tools to make the journey - but... Kyungsoo? No matter how hungry you are or how tempting it looks, promise me only this."

Kris's mind flitted back to the books hiding in his family's study, ancient magics and forbidden ones. Things much scarier than even the oldest books in the library. "Please come to me, if it gets too much. I will find a way."

There it was again. That rule about food. Kyungsoo's stomach roared at the mere mention of it, and he fought off a pained look as he pressed a hand against his midsection. It seems like every time he thought of eating, or if he thought of Jongin, he would hurt, almost as if those two things reminded him he was still human, and painfully so. It reminded him of the knife-like pain that pressed into the little mermaids’ feet every time she took a step as a human in the original fairy tale.

Kyungsoo would have to be stronger than that.

Kris looked once more toward the cursed valley of silver trees and extended his hand once again, "We need to get back before too many others realize I'm gone. I... and T- Tao will be ... worried about you, about us being out in this cold."

Kyungsoo nodded, eyes passing one last time over the vale, the leaves, the sky. The pain faded, but the cold remained, seemingly lodged in his bones as he turned towards Kris, eyes downcast. "Alright."

He still dreamed about the king of the fairies sometimes - the way he smiled, the way he laughed, the way his magic tasted. He felt Junmyeon's arms around him and the softness of the faery's lips against his neck. He felt safe wrapped in Junmyeon's wings. His body reacted, skin impossibly hot and his long ignored cock erect...

Baekhyun awoke from just such a dream and rolled his eyes, burning with embarrassment at his own weakness. It didn't matter the years that passed, or how much he wanted to forget. It was as though the Fae King had split him open and in the hole that remained, left a shimmering memory of magic that refused to be forgotten. It left a filthy taste in the human's mouth and he spit into the dirt, desperate to rid himself from it. Around him, the shocking green of the life he'd summoned while sleeping began to turn a sickening brown, then black, then withered back down into the nearly frozen soil.

Standing and making his way to the door, Baekhyun felt a little tug at the edge of his consciousness. Something had woken him from his dream, but he couldn't be sure what it was. His little glen in the middle of the vast tundra rarely received visitors and the creatures of the forest knew better than to trouble him while he was sleeping, lest his powers - ah, but it was gauche to speak of such a thing. He grabbed a fur hanging from the hook by the door and stepped out, his bare feet protected from the snowy floor by ever spawning grasses and flowers that hugged to his flesh and kept him warm. He scanned the woods surrounding his hut first, but not even the deer had come to visit him today - the snow was immaculate and fresh. He drew in a deep breath and turned his gaze upwards.
Just in time, he witnessed the spread of draconic wings, silhouetted against the brightness of the eternal winter sky. Baekhyun scowled and started to turn back into his hut, muttering about the ways of the fae, their need to control, to witness what would never be theirs. But then it came over him, a strange fondness at the back of his heart. The Winter Lord was not alone. And his companion... was not of this world.

"Very interesting," he whispered to himself, the flowers around his feet bursting into radiant reds and purples at their master's curiosity. He pondered this information, imagining Junmyeon's broken face when all was revealed. Baekhyun smiled, "Very interesting indeed."

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Jongin bit into his thumb, gnawing at the skin until it bled, anything to keep from scratching. His back felt like it was crawling, as though beneath the flesh lived thousands of tiny beetles, ready to chew their way through him and burst out. The wet air that permeated he and Jongdae's new hideaway didn't seem to help the situation. When they first arrived, he had only felt constantly moist, in need of a good shower. Now though, he existed in a strange in-between space, constantly naked but feeling like he was cloaked in a layer of sweat and aching. Constantly exhausted but always ready if more food or drink or sex were offered to him.

And when the itching had started... it had been vicious and grew worse and worse by the day. Jongdae had soothed him with kisses and sweet words, encouraging him not to itch, but the need continued to grow. He threw himself back into the sheets of their filthy, sex-stained bed and screamed into the pillows. His fingers were claws, digging into the soft feather pillows. His blood painted little dots and stripes across the white, evidence of his obsession.

It was starting. Jongdae was elated, incredibly happy that his efforts were finally being rewarded, even if it meant severe discomfort for Jongin. But it would soon pass, a temporary necessity for what was about to happen. He quickly gathered what he needed and rushed back over to Jongin to comfort him.

“Jongin... Kai...,” he said as gently as possible, “I’m going to help you, but you have to trust me.” He placed a small bowl filled with a strangely thick concoction on the corner of the bed. He wiped at the hair sticking to Jongin's forehead, the only warm light a few glowing buds on the vines around them sagging in the marshy air. He huffed, noticing the blood stains again, and waving his hand forcefully to be rid of them, along with cleaning the sheets for the third time today. It wasn’t going to matter in a short while. “Turn over onto your stomach. I need to see how your muscles are faring.”

A low growl built up in Jongin's throat, full of irritation and pain. He slammed a fist against the headboard in frustration but consented. Jongdae had proven to be the only relief from all of this. Even now, Jongdae's voice alone, sweetly singing in its tone, seemed to work like a salve against the endless waves of inflammation and fever rushing over his skin.

He laid back, exposing his body to Jongdae and watching carefully how the faery's eyes drifted over him. There had been so many changes, Jongin was starting to lose track. Most obviously, his skin had taken on a newly golden hue to it. He'd always been darker than many of his friends, a pleasantly warm tan even in the dead of winter that women found irresistible and men envied. But now it almost seemed to glow, his skin humming in time with the very breath of the tree that encircled and protected them. Jongin was more than pleased with this particular change, but scowled, bringing his eyebrows together in childish annoyance, when he observed how many red splotches of
inflammation and stress now dotted his body.

"Make it stop," he whined at Jongdae, wrapping his fingers around one of his lover's wrists.

Jongdae reached over to steady the bowl on the bed before pulling away to release his hand from Jongin's grasp. "Of course, my beautiful Kai. This has been going on for far too long." Truthfully he had to make sure that the chrysalis ritual was proceeding correctly, causing more time that Jongin had to suffer through. Regrettably, but necessary. He pulled the sheets back, exposing Jongin fully, and taking note of all the irritation spots and inflammation that specifically concentrated around his shoulder blades. He even pushed Jongin's hair away from his face, noting more changes, how the strands of hair were like silk, the slight distension of his ears, and the brightening color in his eyes.

Dipping his fingertips into the bowl, Jongdae leaned over Jongin, gently pressing at the cracked pattern along the shoulders and neck, then down his back that looked fit to burst. Using both hands, Jongdae started circling the edge of the discoloration then coming inwards onto the shoulder blades, letting the magic in the salve seep into his skin. He cooed at Jongin, making comforting noises as the skin became hydrated, but the strain was still there, pushing out.

Jongin tensed at first, then relaxed under Jongdae's careful applications. It hurt when Jongdae's fingers drifted over the most distended and stressed sections, but it was a weirdly pleasant hurt that echoed of something sexual. Not that much in their relationship wasn't... sexual... Jongin couldn't ever remember quite so satisfied or so permitted to explore and enjoy his body. Not in a long time.

With the human's every breath, the stressed flesh on his back seemed to heave on its own, pushing and pressing against limits of the muscles that made up the dancer's body. Jongdae's fingers massaged away some of irritation, but not all of it. The itching was gone now (for which Jongin was near tearful with thanks), but it was replaced instead by a constant stretch that became more and more extreme by the second. Jongin rubbed his eyes, the smell of the salve or the pollen in the air or the magic literally coating everything now making his head feel groggy. A thick wind seemed to surround him, his hearing, eyesight, even sense of smell at once dulling to almost nothing before exploding in rapid bursts of over-stimulation. He felt like he could taste the salve on the air. "Jongdae," Jongin whispered, fear rising in his belly, "Is it happening? Am I... going to be like you?"

Jongdae quivered with excitement as he felt the flesh crease and move beneath his fingertips. He wondered what his wings would be like. Would they aggressively tear themselves out from his flesh, or would they blossom slowly, filling with blood and pulling the flesh open until they were fully extended?

There was only one way to find out.

He couldn't even hold back the excitement in his voice as he replied to Jongin. "Yes. Yes, my dear. Your true self is about to be complete." His voice wavered, pushing down a little on Jongin's back as he tested the give of the muscles beneath the skin. Noticing that Jongin seemed nervous, he dipped his hands in the salve again and started running his hands down the other man's spine in a soothing gesture. "I need you to imagine what you love doing the most, Kai. You’re dancing. Picture doing it, filter it through your mind. Push through this haze of discomfort and let yourself become what you truly wish to be."

Jongin groaned and buried his face in the pillows, wanting to scream, wanting to claw away the offending flesh himself. But he did as Jongdae instructed and tried to remember what it was like to dance...

His mind drifted almost immediately to the last time he had danced for men, for women, for money. It was so late or early, depending on how you liked to imagine the slow drift of nighttime. He was
covered in sweat and he'd been assigned a place close to one of the larger and more obnoxious speakers, cheap and with a horrible whine when the music got too loud. He rolled his hips in time with the music, grinding against the floor in nothing more than a mesh crop top and tiny, black briefs. It was so late, most of his costume was being hoarded by filthy fans who wanted to take a piece of him home. One of his regulars gestured to him, an extended index finger come hithering. Jongin crawled across the stage, his ass in the air, and opened his mouth to receive long fingers down his throat. He shouldn't have. It was too intimate, too dangerous. But he'd promised that tonight would be the last and he needed this, he did.

He felt loving eyes upon him from all directions, but one set more disappointed and nervous than the others. He couldn't identify the source. Another... Jongdae, he was sure now. Beaming with radiant joy at Jongin's happiness on stage.

Yes, Jongin wanted to scream, yes, look at me. Look only at me.

Fingers pushed too hard down his throat and he started to choke. A hundred dollar bill pressed against his abs and it felt like it was burning. Yes, he thought again, look only at me. I only wanted to dance.

Gasping for air around imaginary fingers, burning under the gaze of imaginary patrons, Jongin curled up on himself, constricting and tightening at every joint until he felt so small. I... only wanted to dance, he whispered or thought or imagined, nothing was certain anymore. His skin was a desert in a rain storm, so dry and tight, but soaked with sweat and the melting salve and the slow massage of Jongdae's hands all over him. It was all too much, he thought, it couldn't get any worse. But then, he imagined his bones collapsing under the weight of the world and he might have screamed. Through his impossibly taut skin, he imagined bones breaking through, sharp and vicious, having always ached for release. There was no blood - how was that possible, there should be so much blood?

Jongin's visions, the fever dream, started to break apart and through the crowd he saw him - small but a presence that seemed to eat right through Jongin's entire being. Impossibly full lips that Jongin almost remembered kissing. His eyes were big and they only saw Jongin. Jongin thought to reach out for him, to pull him close and beg him for comfort, but just as Jongin managed to extended his aching arms, reaching out into nothingness for a stranger in the mist, the pressure eased with a dramatic explosion of relief and color.

Jongin collapsed back into his pillows, unsure if he had ever left, unsure of what was real.

The very air was changing. The Chrysalis ritual was taking, and Jongdae’s own powers heaved out of his form just to protect and shield Jongin’s transformation from the world outside his home. As his creator, it was instinctive for Jongdae to protect him. Vines grew exponentially, wrapping around Jongin’s tightly wound form like a nest as the visions and dreams kept him occupied. Jongdae's wards started to glow as his lips chanted words he had only seen in books. Jongin’s body was protecting itself, the shimmering shell of the cocoon taking form on his skin. The salve Jongdae used helped relieve the pressure it put on his form, the backside distending as it prepared the space for his wings. Nevertheless, he stared down at the glowing egg-like shape, his eyes dilating as he knew this was the part where most of his kin stopped, violently ripping out the malleable form inside and drinking the contents for power.

But this was not to be Jongin’s fate. He would complete it... with Jongdae’s guidance and help. Minutes turned into hours, into days. Jongdae’s very spirit was strained, yet he maintained his barriers with no rest, his only sustenance from his vines growing tulip cups filled with nectar.

On the third day Jongin’s form moved, the shell cracking a bit and his arm pushing through, covered in a thin, mucous-like film. By this point, most of Jongdae’s vines had overtaken the room, but the
bed was relatively clear, and he helped Jongin slide out of the chrysalis, bit by bit. He breathed, steeling himself as he gently turned Jongin’s body, delighted as he noticed the pulses of new flesh, small now, but steadily filling with blood.

“Come back to me, Kai.” He said his name continuously, like a mantra, the power in the sound of his name now like vibrations in the air he knew Jongin could sense and see. His own wings stretched out, their dragon fly patterning very different from that of Jongin’s, his strength returning. “Kai. You’re with me now, Kai, my love.”

Jongin’s sense of time and space were confused and difficult to describe. He tried to open his eyes, but around him, the colors of the room were too bright, greens so vivid they seemed to burn deep into his brain. Even the touch of the bed sheets around him was difficult to take all at once. The sheets were both incredibly soft but also so... detailed? It was as if he could feel every thread that made up their blankets. The only thing that soothed him was Jongdae's hand in his and the sound of the faery's voice, calling him back to a reality he had started to believe could not exist.

"Jongdae," he said, jolting a little at the sound of his own voice, which now took on a bell-like quality, a sing-song tonality that he had previously associated only with his new fae lover. "Jongdae," he said again with renewed interest, "It's done, isn't it? I'm like...you..."

He curled towards Jongdae, wanting to feel more of the faery's skin. He felt delicate and vulnerable and Jongdae's presence seemed to ease that, as though he were a cub seeking its mother. Instead of itching and swollen, he was quite... liberated, in a way. His skin felt pleasantly warm and he wanted to keep it that way. It wasn't unlike the feeling of being snug underneath a warm blanket, curled up in bed on a freezing winter morning. He opened his eyes only for a moment to find Jongdae's face and gasped. His faery lover had been transformed in his eyes. Jongdae had always been handsome, but now, with every detail of his face, his body, his magical auras burning into Jongin's vision, he was a god. His skin was impossibly unblemished, his hair taking on golden hues at the ends. His eyes were not just deep brown anymore, but were richer and warmer, so comforting, and they took from Jongin all the shame he had ever felt for anything in his life.

Jongin's eyes flicked down to Jongdae's lips, the feline curl of a smile. He wanted to kiss those lips forever. So he did - pushing their mouths together with an intensity that seemed, at first, to shock his lover. But Jongin was so hungry and Jongdae had always provided.

Jongdae had to admit...this was probably the most beautiful thing he'd ever done. It was art and creation rolled into one. In his mind and body, he felt rejuvenated, elated, filled with pride as he held Jongin...no...Kai’s newly formed fae body. With every kiss he felt Kai’s mind and mood like a heartbeat in his ears, and he as well was giving him knowledge that every fairy knew. Instinctive habits, magic, even laws and rules he felt flowing into him, like an extension of his very being was in Kai now. It had been a thousand years since anyone had done this. A practice banned, kept out of their culture and for what?

Jongdae didn’t have time to dwell on that thought. Even as his arms wrapped around Kai protectively, his mind permeated with joy, he felt the base of Kai's wings to make sure they were blooming normally. He was in such a state of bliss that even the tulip cups of nectar were running over and flowing up and out of the sides.

“Kai…” he managed between kisses. “Your wings. Do you want to see?”

Jongin...no, Kai's heart leapt and he peppered more kisses onto Jongdae's cheeks and chin and lips. His wings - yes, of course. He remembered how beautiful Jongdae's had been, how strong they had been to transport both of them across yellow grasslands and dark, black swamps in their quest for safety. He nodded, but didn't say a word, nervously reaching behind him to feel the base of the new
limbs protruding from his shoulder blades. Concentrating, he tried to keep these new extensions of him in his mind and attempted to extend his wings, wanting to see their color and shape. Instead, he was met with a dull roar of pain, like a pulled muscle. He looked to Jongdae again - was this normal? Did all the fae, when their wings first emerge, feel this tightness in their wings?

He tried to stand and found himself wobbly, his legs almost jelly from the unknown time inside of his transforming cocoon. But after a moment, he was able to stand comfortably and hobbled, little unsure steps, over to a body-length mirror, its gilded frame overgrown with roots and ivy. He stood for a moment, admiring his new eyes, his shockingly dark hair, the way his skin danced with a golden sheen in the light and smiled. Then he turned and forced himself again to endure the pain of extending his new wings and the smile dropped from his lips.

"Jongdae," he said with a trembling voice, "What's wrong with them? They're... small and... Jongdae, these are..."

His wings were smaller in size than Jongdae's and splotched with brown and pale cream. Shaking, nervous and angry without really knowing why, he extended his wings against the soreness as wide as they would go. They weren't bird wings or the colorful wings of a butterfly. They weren't the latticed beauty of a dragonfly's wings. Jongin knew these wings and his nostrils flared at the revelation. His wings were that of a pest, the soft brown wings of a moth.

Sensing his distress, Jongdae came up behind him, face laced with concern, fingers again dripping with the healing salve. Even his vines coiled in response to Kai’s mood before straightening again. His fingers gently massaged into Kai’s shoulder blades, relieving the hurt and discomfort he was experiencing. “It’s all right, my dear. You are barely a fledgling, of course they are small. Give them a bit. They’ll grow and change, just like you.” He blinked at their color. He knew every rebirth was different. Wings were an extension of the creator mingled with the desires of the turned. As a fae prince steeped in old blood and the darkness of the ever-changing, so too would his creations carry traits of winter and night. He slipped a hand over Kai’s stomach and up his chest, seeing the contrast between their skin in the mirror. A human loved by the sun and a fae of winter made quite the contrast indeed.

“Shh.” Jongdae looked around, thinking of how he could distract Kai, rubbing his thumb reassuringly over his hip. “I shouldn’t keep you in here. You need to see the world, feel the fresh air on your skin.” He blew between his fingers over Kai’s shoulder, hearing his wooden warding beads clink together dully in response. The patches of walls not covered in Jongdae’s vines were covered with runes scratched into the wood that flashed purple as he tested them, bathing them in the dull glow. Magic vibrated around them. There was no one around. They were safe.

Kai let Jongdae speak but turned back to the mirror with a frown towards his wings. Their size, his fae master had said, would be remedied with time. But he hadn't said anything about their color nor the fact that Kai looked more ready to pick at an unused coat in the back of a closet than to traverse the planes of existence on wings made of starlight and moonpower. His emotions were hard to conceal and he struggled to accept Jongdae's arms around him. Even as his skin sang for the pleasure of being touched by his maker, something inside of him pricked with regret.

"Outside," Kai said, nodding carefully and considering how long it had been since he'd seen the sun, "I think that would be good for me, yes.” Jongdae's many hideaways had been beautiful and thrumming with magic, but he hadn't seen much of the faery realm beyond them and he was curious. He lifted his hand and curled his fingers through Jongdae's, realizing only now how delicate of a creature his master truly was. Perhaps it was the transformation that Jongin had endured, but Jongdae seemed... smaller now. Intrusive thoughts blazed at the back of his mind and he imagined how it easy it would be to bend his master in half and drink from him without end, slurping up all the magic
inside of him. Jongin's face burned and he clung more tightly to Jongdae's hand. "Yes, outside."

He saw the greed in Kai’s eyes, clear as day, felt the turmoil in the grip of his hand. His own smile was mischievous and reassuring as he recognized the emotions in his child. “The pleasure is a given, Kai. You’re more like me than you know.”

Jongdae led him down the small tunnel to the front of their hideaway, the vines pulling aside to reveal the entrance, what looked like the tapered interior of a hollow tree root. They were inside an ancient oak, roomy and large. The bark at the end split seamlessly with the grain and pulled back, the cold air hitting them first, but it barely bothered them. The crisp air contrasted with the sun above, bright and inviting. They were closer to the summer lands, on the outskirts of the Ever-Changing near The Fens. Snow-capped mountains towered above them barely a few miles away, an early morning fog rolling down in patches towards them. At their feet, a creek that flowed with fresh water. Peat moss patches gave at their weight, feeling like pillows to the touch. Around them, a few trees curled upwards, giving little patches of shadow, others grew heavy near the ground, ideal for climbing. A few willow trees drooped across the water, their bluish tinted vines dragging in the flow of the stream, their flowers in full bloom.

Not minding his nakedness, Jongdae breathed deeply, his wings stretching out to touch what sunlight he could reach. He felt the urge to commune, to sing, to curl up on the bank and sleep. But all of his wants and desires were overshadowed with the need to care for Kai, and he glanced dreamily up at him to check on his mood.

So many of Kai’s worries seemed to have faded almost immediately as the sun's rays, diffused by the surrounding greenery, struck his face and ignited the golden hues in his skin. He hadn't felt so much like "Kai” in a long time. Overwhelmed with senses now a dozen times stronger than they had been prior to his transformation, Kai was sure that he could now taste the sunlight, smell its warmth on the air around them. He felt his entire body relax, for a bare moment forgetting his frustrations and letting himself take in the impossible scenes in front of him.

"Jongdae, is it always like this?" he said, tempted in his very soul to both climb vicious mountains of snow but also to bathe in summer pools, "Your world, caught between the seasons..." Even as he said it, he knew in some deeper part of himself that this was true. "My world... our world..." he whispered and his grip on Jongdae's hand tightened again. Jongdae had given him ... this world...

Kai took a couple steps forward, dragging his lover behind him and dipped a toe into the crystal clear water. Its chill was shocking but refreshing and when Kai turned back to Jongdae, he was smiling like the sun above.

Seeing Kai smile made Jongdae smile in return, his wings pattering against his back as he took in how radiant he looked. He nearly blushed, eyes widening as the sun’s rays nearly made Kai glow, even down to the strands of his black hair shimmering gold in the sunlight.

Jongdae couldn’t help it. Elated, he laughed, the sound like a bell echoing through the fen and away towards the base of the mountain. “It is your world too now, Kai. There are many places even more beautiful than here. The crystal forests in the lands of spring, the dunes of the autumn lands in twilight, warm and inviting. The winter lights in the sky of my home…Not to mention the parties we have.” He came in closer towards Kai, running fingers through his hair. “I’m going to show you all of them, as well as give you your audience. The one you’ve been waiting for.”

Kai sighed in pure comfort, closing his eyes and allowing himself to drown in the gentle touch of his maker. Jongdae's every touch relieved more and more of his concerns and left him feeling blissful and airy. He worried for a second that Jongdae was magicking him, but in his new state, the magic around them had taken on a new, floral taste in the back of his throat and Jongdae's touch... it wasn't
like that. Jongdae was simply... Jongdae in this moment and what he felt he knew was more base than all that.

He opened his eyes to find his maker studying him with warm, brown eyes and it made Jongin... Kai aware of how naked and exposed he remained. There was no shame in this place and Jongdae wasn't exactly being modest himself, a fact that Kai appreciated with a quick glance downwards. He reached up and took Jongdae's hand in his again, placing it delicately against his own cheek, "If you take me, I'll go anywhere..."

He turned to nuzzle against Jongdae's hand, trying and failing to be romantic as the moment was interrupted by the grumbling of his belly. Kai felt his face ignite in a fierce blush yet again and his brain filled with thoughts of taking Jongdae here and now and swallowing him up. But this time, instead of suppressing the feeling, Kai let it overtake him. He tugged on Jongdae's hand and lowered them both into soft, mossy bed that surrounded them, "But for now, can we ... in the sun? Feed me?"

Jongdae’s wings pulled up and folded against his back as he opened his mouth to answer. “Of cou... mmm...” Kai’s lips were on him then, his body reacting to his eagerness. He somehow managed to find the strength to pull Kai closer even as his head danced with pleasure. He was in his element, drawing strength from the water and trees. The combined energy of their bodies making the moss grow underneath them, cradling them even more.

“I... can show you...” He managed between kisses, a slight grin still on his lips. “How to conjure your own nectar from flowers...but...clearly, you want to conjure it out of me first...”

Kai smiled at the thought, at the knowledge that magic enough now coursed through his own veins to provide the thick nectar that had previously sustained him. But right now, at this moment, with the sun baking down into his back and giving his new wings much needed nutriment, he pushed a couple of fingers past Jongdae's teeth and into his mouth, shushing him with a smirk. He used the leverage of his fingers in his maker's throat to turn Jongdae's head, exposing the fae's neck and Jongin latched on, a vampire for the pure energy that seemed to radiate from Jongdae's skin. He sucked a fierce red mark onto pale flesh and felt powerful. He bit tenderly at first into his maker's skin, then a bit harder, feeling so alive when Jongdae arched underneath him. He wasn't sure if it was blood or sweat that teased his tongue, but he knew, instinctively, that he needed more... he needed to something... else from his maker.

Pulling his fingers from Jongdae's wet mouth, he smeared saliva over his maker's kitten curl lips. The wet shine of them had Kai panting. The forest around them seemed more alive than ever, as though it too were hungry and desperate to possess more of Jongdae. The growl of Kai's belly was obvious and he was still breathing heavily. He walked his fingers slowly down Jongdae's torso, stopping short of his true destination play with a curl of dark pubic hair. He looked up to Jongdae for permission, his eyes big, suddenly nervous of being too dominant with a creature who had, up until this moment, directed his every move.

The bite had stung. So much so that Jongdae even teared up a bit, thinking his flesh was going to tear. But his smile remained, a little manic at how eager Kai was. It pleased him greatly to see his child, growing in power and beauty, to take what he wanted as he himself had. He licked his lips as he drew his legs up, pushing Kai's hand down lower. “Don’t tell me you’re nervous,” he lilited. Despite it, he ran his other hand down Kai’s side in a caressing, calming manner, eyes half lidded. “You have nothing to fear. You won’t hurt me.” To reiterate, his hand directing him slid over Kai’s fingers as he pulled away, sparking with a little of his magic, coating his fingers in the silky nectar.

Kai paused, watching Jongdae's fingers and his mix together in the liquid. A drip of the precious nectar slid off the side of Jongde's stomach, leaving a long wet path. Kai swallowed - he wanted it,
wanted every last drop, wanted to be greedy and have it all. But he restrained himself for the moment, knowing that there was much more to come, if he could solve the riddle of Jongdae. You won't hurt me, Jongdae's voice rang in his ears - but ... what if Jongin did want to hurt him? Just a little. Mark that perfect skin with small kisses that turn into bruises, stretch him open until it almost hurts there is so much of Kai inside. Kai was as hard as he had ever been and with a crooked smile, he let his fingers wander.

Sliding down Jongdae's body, letting his master's legs keep him close, Kai gathered up as much of nectar as he could with his tongue before capturing the pink head of Jongdae's cock in his mouth. His fingers went further, first leaving wet stains of nectar on Jongdae's inner thighs, then down down down to circle his master's entrance. Kai pressed against Jongdae's hole, but didn't push inside, not yet. He concentrated on the thick cock in his mouth, teasing the slit with his tongue.

Jongdae’s cockiness evaporated almost immediately when Kai’s lips encircled around him, his hips bucking up as his breath shortened into tiny gasps. His wings fluttered with a dull patter on his back underneath him, giving a slight indication that he felt trapped. “K-kai…! Ah!” His body responded to the stimulation, precome flowing from him and down Kai's throat. He squirmed, wanting to coax his fingers in his hole. “C-come on…” he tried reaching a hand down to encourage him faster.

Kai hummed with a sneaking satisfaction at Jongdae's begging, swallowing around the other's cock in an attempt to create so much of it. He loved how loud Jongdae was, how expressive and he wanted it - he wanted it loud and messy and for all of nature itself to know how much he wanted this creature. He pushed again against Jongdae's hole, swallowing down his master's entire cock as he entered him. Just one finger, but Kai felt himself twitch at the tightness around him. The nectar, sticky and everywhere now, seemed to work as well as a lubricant as anything. He buried his face in Jongdae's curled pubic hair, the back of the fae's cock pressing against the back of his throat, and pushed in a second finger and third - too quickly, Kai thought, but Jongdae didn't protest, only moaned for it, sending Kai’s imagination and desire wild. Jongdae's body was small and the stretch was delightfully impossible as Kai slipped his smallest finger inside as well, then pressed his thumb against the rim of muscle and looked up at Jongdae.

With a long lick from base to tip, Kai pulled his mouth from Jongdae's cock, pausing just for a minute to claim more of the magic-rich fluid that now seemed to pour from the head. He teased Jongdae's hole, flicking this thumb at the entrance and watching the creature's eyes as he pushed one more time. "Scream for me," Jongin whispered to his lover, the better part of his hand, always too big and clumsy, now disappearing inside the fae.

It took him a moment to realize he was laughing. “K-kai…” He hadn’t felt this full in a long time. Especially with someone as eager a partner as he himself was. But this was different. To possess and be possessed… it was maddening, satisfactory to his fae nature in a way he couldn’t describe. Jongdae didn’t scream so much as he sang, his entire body stretched taut then shuddering as he came in an embarrassingly short amount of time. The pleasure buzzed warmly in his insides and he moaned as his cock pulsed out more cum than usual, Kai’s mouth milking him dry. His pleasure finally tapered off, but it was like a drug now; he wanted it to last. He suspected that this was a result of their bond, the ecstasy tangibly sparking in the air.

He felt Kai shift, and he shot up, as best as he could, and gripped his wrist. “More,” he demand.

The sudden shift in power took Kai by pleasant surprise. To be on top of his smaller master, to be stretching him to breaking and forcing a violent orgasm, to be taken by the hand and forced to pleasure his Jongdae more and harder and deeper… it was everything that Jongin had never known himself to want. The push and pull, the constant switch and the way it left him painfully hard was almost unbelievable.
Kai bit his bottom lip roughly, pulled his fingers more tightly together to make a smaller, slimmer shape and let Jongdae push him further. His hand was more than half buried in Jongdae already and he couldn't help but wonder if Jongdae, as small as the fae was, could even take more. But slowly, slowly, Jongdae accepted him and Kai knew he had never seen anything more erotic. Jongdae's hand was biting around his wrist, guiding him, letting him know how much to give and when to back off. At this point, with only the widest part of his fist left, Kai let go of his desire for control and allowed Jongdae to dictate. "Hyung," he called Jongdae without realizing it, "You feel so good for me."

Jongdae’s eyes narrowed slightly and his grip faltered at the foreign name he had heard before. It was what Jongin, when he was still human, called his little partner. He didn’t know how to react to it, so he decided to ignore it, his smile lighting up his face as he bit his lip, looking demure and mischievous. “I want you inside me,” Jongdae’s voice managed to growl out. He licked his lips as he eyed Kai’s weeping cock. He wasn’t quite sure of the rules this far concerning how many memories stayed with him, how much of himself was in Kai now. He knew their bond was strong, and would be even stronger as soon as it was presented to Junmyeon’s eyes, whether he liked it or not.

Their lovemaking was starting to draw the attention of pixies and smaller fae of the ever-changing. At this point he didn’t care if an orgy broke out around him, his focus remained solely on Kai and his needs.

Kai smiled, oblivious to Jongdae's moment of displeasure, so wrapped up in Jongdae's body. His new fae eyes made the smaller creature in front of him that much more perfect and desirable. Jongin pumped a few times more, quick motions that forced his hand only slightly deeper inside of his partner but it was more than enough, creating a more intense stretch. His body ached for Jongdae and watching his lover, his master, his creator tremble on the edge of orgasm after orgasm was beautiful.

Nodding at Jongdae’s words and, at this point, willing to move mountains if it would mean more getting to touch more of the fae, Kai slowly pulled his fist from deep inside his lover - slowly, slowly, lingering where the shapes of his fingers and knuckles stretched the rim. He hummed with desire at the way Jongdae’s entrance puckered around him. This was a body made to be full and Kai was happy to do it.

Wiping his filthy hands in the grass around him, Kai climbed on top of Jongdae again, capturing his mouth with kisses. Their bodies slid together with ease and Kai could feel his wings flutter excitedly against his back, as he slid inside of Jongdae's waiting body, so little resistance after being so full.

Jongdae’s wings thrummed against the ground as he tried to push Kai deeper inside. His mouth opened in a silent moan as he clung to Kai’s shoulders, eyes fluttering closed as the feeling of fullness settled in his abdomen. He instinctively started rolling his hips, not waiting for Kai to set a pace as he gave his elvish ear a lick, his fingers dancing down Kai’s neck and lower to tickle at the base of his wings.

He could hear the scatter of breaths around them, but no words reached his ears. Jongdae cast a quick glance above him over Kai’s shoulder, noticing that the pixies were staring. And not in a way that would indicate that they were offended, rather, they seemed to be entranced, focused on his fledgling’s new wings.

Kai, on the other hand, could hardly be bothered with them. He felt their presence all around him and imagined them much like spectators at the clubs he used to dance in. He could sense the very forest blooming for them, but it was the feeling of Jongdae's hands anywhere near his wings that was nearly unbearable. They were still so new and sensitive. Jongin's thrusts became more excitedly off kilter and his face flushed red with embarrassment. "I'm not sure I'll last very long if you keep doing that," he said, trying to ease his hips back into a more steady rhythm. It took him a moment to realize
that Jongdae was never going to let that happen.

It didn't matter that Kai was on top - it was Jongdae who had taken control. With his creator's hips rolling up against him, Kai had to bite his lip and swallow down his breath to slow down his rapidly approaching orgasm. Jongdae's small hands running over his wings now - it made it feel like the first time. He felt like a teenager, rediscovering sex as something new and unknown. He cursed under his breath, heat growing in his belly and sucked in harshly, "Shit shit shitshitshit."

He burrowed his face into Jongdae's neck to hide his shame and shuddered violently as he came, his wings frantic. He wanted to beg Jongdae to stop, to please not touch them. It felt so good, but it was almost... too good. His wings were more sensitive now even than his spent cock, still hard and buried inside his lover.

Jongdae's own eyes rolled back into his head as he felt Kai's release inside of him. He smirked, finally showing mercy, and trailed his hands back around Kai's neck to his cheeks to pull him into another searing kiss. His own hands were now covered in a light, iridescent sheen from the dust on Kai's wings. Lines of it smeared over Kai's jaw, neck, and chest, the rest floating in the air around them from both of them furiously beating their wings.

Jongdae squeezed his internal muscles just so, shifting to tease as he gazed up at Kai, taking one of his hands and kissing his wrist. "You love these eyes upon you my dear? They want to watch instead of join in. This is the first time I've ever seen this happen..."

The forest was thrumming around them. Even dryads were staring down from a few of the trees, biting their lips, chests heaving, unable to look away.

"They want to see you," Jongdae breathed in Kai's ear, "the first turned fae in a millennia."

Kai's first reaction was to hide again, to crawl as deeply inside of Jongdae as he could and be still there. There was so much human shame still left in him - he had finished too quickly and his wings weren't the brilliant colored things of butterfly dreams. He battled his upbringing of humility and the way others had always made him feel lesser for his choice of work. He was dirty and filthy and...

But Jongdae's hands on his body kept him upright and instead of pushing worries and frustrations into Kai and expecting his lover to fix them, Jongdae was... loving him. Kai pulled back a bit at the suddenness of this revelation, leaning back on his knees and half-standing over his wrecked and delighted lover. Kai wasn't sure he'd ever had sex without some strange guilt attached to it. And now Jongdae was anything but ashamed - he wanted to show him off.

Kai finally tore his gaze from the beautiful fae in front of him and looked around, taking in the crowd of smaller fae that had come to see him. Dozens of them nervously approached on foot through the tall grass and mossy forest floor. Another group sat high above in the trees, eager for the best view. A single pixie with shining silver wings descended from the tallest of the trees and landed with some confidence on Kai's shoulder, leaning in to place a tiny kiss on his cheek before giggling and fluttering away. Kai felt his cheeks burn yet again, but this time, it was not shame. It was radiant, unapologetic joy.

Jongdae made a low growl in his throat, a curt warning to the other beings around them that he didn’t want to be interrupted, and would punish anyone who did so. His cock was still hard and there was more fun to be had.

"Now then..." he reached up and turned Kai's head towards him, his lips curling to match his loving gaze. "Ravish me again."
Chapter 12

Kyungsoo had lost track of time.

He knew time had passed. He knew he had occupied space. But even after his and Kris’s visit to the snowy vale with the silver trees, he felt more alone than ever before.

The following day, Kris was busy with delegations and meetings, and several visits from unknown beings. Most were angry. He kept out of sight from them. Kyungsoo now noticed when Kris was comforted by Tao somewhere out of the corner of his eyes, and his throat burned with misplaced jealousy. He busied himself with his research, but even that, he felt, wasn’t stimulating his mind right; a few times he had snapped out of daydreams that were starting to last all afternoon. Kyungsoo was now picking books that piqued his curiosity, rather than researching the needed rituals. An old novel detailing a tale of forbidden love (at the time) between a fae of spring, born of royalty, and a fae of winter who was a winter palace bodyguard. Before he knew it, he had read the entire thing. He was in near disbelief when he found the book next to it was on human behaviors circa 1400. He had started to read it as well, but Tao had fussed over him and finally tore him away from the library to drag him down to the bathing pools below the castle.

“I’m not asking this time, little ren,” he huffed. “Your mind needs rest.” Kyungsoo could barely form a reply. Tao managed to get his clothes off before he placed Kyungsoo in one of the pools. The hot water shocked Kyungsoo’s senses, bringing him back to himself. The whimsy of his curiosity fled, and hopelessness settled back into his bones as he slumped down into the water. His worry about finding Jongin came back into the forefront of his mind. Somehow, he felt like he had been floating and was dragged by the neck back to reality.

“What happened…?” he managed after a moment, rubbing his eyes as his body felt heavy again.

“You were starting to drift.” Tao’s voice sounded serious. “If you think too much on something for too long, or you stay in one place without resting your mind, you will start to fade. In the past, humans have transformed into clouds this way. Some eventually, faded away completely. I’m sorry I did it the way I did.”

“So my research was making me go crazy?”

“Staying in the library was making you go crazy. It might not seem like a big deal in human terms, but here, in this world, it’s deadly. It’s why I leave the palace and go elsewhere for weeks or even months on end. It’s why we travel for parties or festivals. It’s why Kris’s…punishment... is so severe.”

Kyungsoo started, pausing in his blowing of bubbles on the surface of the pool. He hadn’t thought about it that way. He stared as Tao knelt down to touch a mushroom near the water’s edge. It lit up, starting a chain reaction as the other plants in turn reacted to the magic, the space filling quickly with life and energy. The air was cool but not unbearably so, a slight mist from the water settled in the air above them. Mushrooms taller than his apartment building wound around roots and rock pillars in the cavernous space. A low din of firefly wings and pixie bells filled the air, the glow from the pools making the space a muted aqua color.

Tao walked the edge of the pool, motioning to a nearby pixie. “Inform Lord Kris that we’re down here, please. He might worry if he finds the library unoccupied.”

The pixie nodded, and flew off.
Kris had been barely picking at a plate of stone fruit, drizzled with cinnamon syrups, when the pixie arrived at his desk. Her gentle rush of glittering dust and friendly smile was a welcome relief from the stress of the last few days. The winter lands had received more visitors now than it had in years. Kris felt his stomach turn with hunger and he stabbed his fork into the soft flesh, sighing. Though it was his favorite, he could hardly bring himself to eat. He held up the fork and offered it to the nervous pixie. She started to take a taste, then stopped herself, poured out that Kyungsoo was in the pools, then grabbed the fruit and flew away with speed. Kris felt his stress lift slightly and he smiled.

The lord of winter closed his book and followed the winding stairs down in the pools below the palace. He tried to stay quiet, though he knew too well that it wasn't polite to snoop. But it had been some time since he had knelt in the snow, Kyungsoo's arms around him, and they hadn't spoken about any of it. It burned into Kris's mind late at night and as much as he wanted to beg Tao to ask the dreaded questions, to discover for Kris what Kyungsoo's feelings truly were, he had stopped himself, sticking to the point of the matter and researching cures for Jongin's condition in his every spare moment. The swirling heat of the pools came up the stone steps and Kris hesitated, listening to Tao as his child cooed over Kyungsoo.

Tao waded back to the side, his wings twitching off excess moisture as he got out of the water. "I'll find you some new clothes. Wait right here for me, ok?" He went off in the opposite direction of Kris, some of the pixies trailing after him, leaving Kyungsoo alone in the pool.

Kyungsoo nodded, massaging his scalp as he tried to focus again. He didn't like this. His emotions were on a roller coaster, and this recent jolt to his senses was yet another thing wearing him down. He didn't like that his whole situation, hell, the very world was messing with his head, that there was nothing to alleviate it.

But the pool was doing wonders for his muscles. The hot water seeped into his bones, reminding him of hot springs back home. He checked to see that Tao left over his shoulder, slowly standing as he noticed a sharp breeze coming from one of the rocky tunnels behind his head. A pixie flew in, whizzing by him and paying him no mind, and he waited before peeking out of it, noticing the snowy forest floor outside.

Jongin was out there. Somewhere.

Kris, from his hiding place, felt the entire mood of the room change once Tao's footsteps had drifted away. Tao has always been, for Kris at least, a comforting presence that pulled him from his worries. He was happy, in a way, to feel on the air that Tao seemed to have taken up that mantle for Kyungsoo as well, but it also hurt to be reminded of Kyungsoo's longing for his partner. He took a deep breath of the healing thermal air and straightened his clothes, the looser black robes that he preferred while he was at home. He planted his feet and called out Kyungsoo's name, not wanting to surprise him, before curling around the corner and into the bathing chambers below.

He kept his eyes low to give the human some sort of modesty and kept away from the edge of the pool, though normally he would have taken every chance to warm up in its revitalizing waters. He followed Kyungsoo's gaze outside and into the snow and smiled for the memories, "When things were better, it was a little game our visitors would play. To bathe in the warm waters, then rush out, naked as the day, into the snow, only to rush back in again and..." He stopped short, failing to mention that, in those days, it would have been customary to do so primarily for your newest human lover, the shocks of hot and cold sometimes helpful in easing the pain and itch of the transforming rituals.

Kyungsoo startled only slightly, and he turned to reply, but paused as he noticed the distance between them. He eyed the edge of the pool and how far Kris was hanging back. He figured it was
Kris smiled to hear it. He knew the Winter Palace wasn't the always the most welcoming of places, in terms of climate at least, and had always worked to make room in every corner for more blankets, more robes, more little creatures of rock and light bringing you hot drinks. But it was never really enough for some as blizzard after blizzard blanketed the outside with fresh layers of fluffy snow and slick ice every night. Kris tried to give an air of calm pleasure as he followed Kyungsoo's lead and came towards the edge of the pool, kneeling by the water's edge and dipping his hand into its healing water.

"When we captured this place," Kris started, paying too much attention to his hand circling in the water so as not to stare at Kyungsoo's gorgeously flushed face, "we didn't even know these pools existed. The nobility back then, they didn't always like to share. Junmyeon and I thought we were going to freeze, perhaps our very souls would give into the ice. We were searching the palace for weapons or communication tools, maybe even just food stores, and we found... this."

Kris paused and caught Kyungsoo's eye, cracking another little smile and flicking a bit of the hot water towards the human, "That bastard pushed me in, armor and all."
Lord. The work will be there when you are ready to return to it."

Kyungsoo turned to see the motions of Tao's hands, his eyes drifting upwards to Kris' face. "So you will be joining us?" His voice sounded hopeful, friendly.

Kris's breath hitched in his throat, but he let Tao do the hardest work and tug loose his robe. It fell to the ground, leaving him only the thin pants he liked to wear underneath to fend off the cold. He might as well have been naked and a hot blush ran up this entire body. "I... if - if you don't mind the company," he answered, trying and failing to sound collected. It was hard though, hearing the warmth of Kyungsoo's voice. It was a different thing to hear Kyungsoo speak without a bit of melancholy dripping from his words. For a moment, Kris let himself imagine that perhaps Kyungsoo... truly enjoyed it here, in this palace of eternal winter? That for just a blink, his comfort in Kris's home had momentarily eased the human's mind and let him think of anything other than his missing husband.

Kris eyed Tao for help, turning his back in modesty and slid out of his bottoms before making his way into the warm pool. It had been too long, the fae thought to himself once the water began to work its special magic on his tight muscles. Tension he hadn't known he was holding began to fall away.

Kyungsoo though was oblivious to Kris' hesitation and discomfort. He shrugged, running one of his hands down his own arm and massaging more of the water into his muscles. "Well, why would I? It's your palace," he bit his lip, worrying it slightly. "I know it's not a vacation, and I seem to be in a panicked state at every moment but, I am ever grateful for everything you and Tao have done for me." He watched as Tao seemed to have a lingering hand over Kris's shoulder as he stepped into the bath, like he was trying to reassure him. Kyungsoo blinked.

But Tao was immediate on the uptake, his mouth drawn into an amused thin line to keep from snickering at Kris and his demeanor. "You'd think with it right here he'd use it more often." He stood himself, his wings shimmering out of existence as he took off his robe to join them, stepping into the water smoothly between them. Tao maintained a small distance between his and Kris's hips, cognizant of wanting to give the atmosphere a more relaxed feel. "But the last thing I need is a drifting winter lord. You were easy to guide, Kyungsoo. But Kris would be a bit... unwieldy to say the least."

"But," he interjected again, the motion of his hand gesturing to the rest of the open space while the other trailed comfortingly against the back of Kris's hip. "I've put up a few silencing charms, so this provides quite a bit of privacy if you wish to talk about...certain plans that are going to be made." He turned his head away from Kyungsoo to look at him and his expression softened, trying to coax Kris to converse.

Kris nodded slowly, leaning back in the water to wet his hair and cut the deep chill that had settled over him, having been locked up in offices all morning. While the fae couldn't die of the cold and technically couldn't even get sick from it, he still felt that the darkness that a world full of ice seemed to bring could weasel its way into any creature's spirit and turn them lonely. Kris let the warm water drip down from his hair to his shoulders and knew it would do him good. Between the healing water, Kyungsoo's comfort and Tao's easy hands, Kris felt himself coming back together.

He looked to Tao and to Kyungsoo in term, "Of course, you'll be happy to learn that I've finally been able to secure you and Tao both passage to the Firelands. Once there... well, I wouldn't call him a supporter, but... there is a neutral party to all this that I believe can be of assistance. He and I were good friends once too and he isn't as burdened with leadership as others. He owes nothing to anyone and feels mostly the same about us, only doing what is right for the sake of doing what is right.
When he hears your story, Kyungsoo, I think he will be moved."

Kyungsoo sat up in the water a little straighter, his eyes becoming wider as curiosity bloomed inside of him once again, albeit a bit cautious. "I...we will be going this time?" he gave a glance to Kris, then to Tao, who smiled and nodded at him. "I'm guessing... this is it, then. It's time?"

Tao nodded. "The Summer Solstice Festival has already begun, but the day reserved for offers and requests is still a few days away. The Fire Lord would be the best one to consult about the tradition, how you can act, and he can provide you with disguises, extra information, even weapons you may need. Since it's close to the Summer Lands, we will most likely take one of Kris's dragons to get there.

Kyungsoo looked elated, but he paused, remembering himself as he slowly looked back at Kris again. "What about you? You're banished from the very place we're going to. Will you not be there?" He was starting to realize that if Kris couldn't go with them, once he got Jongin back, he'd probably never see Kris again.

Kris let their eyes meet for a moment and considered pressing his mind against Kyungsoo's, letting the human see how much he wanted to be there and how desperately his soul wanted to be beside Kyungsoo at their moment of victory. Instead, he broke away and stared at the water. He swirled his fingers in the warm pool and continued, "While the Fire Lord would be pleased to see me, no doubt, I cannot be so sure about all the fae that feast with him. In his neutrality, the Fire Lord has, over the years, attracted an interesting group of people, some of whom want more then anything to be allowed back into the good graces of our King, others who would see him destroyed. I feel like it would be more dangerous for you to be seen with me, than for you to travel there yourself. He'll know what to do, how to get us inside the palace.

"I'll be close though with dragons and what allies we have left beside me," he said with slightly more vigor, feeling a bit like a general again, "Few know the forests that circle the Summer Lands as I do and if there is trouble, I will find a way to be with you."

Kyungsoo smiled, hope pushing his doubt and fear away. He could do this. "Whatever happens," he swallowed, licking his lips as he looked between them, "Thank you so much for helping me get Jongin back. Both of you."

Tao beamed, casting a quick glance at Kris again as he rubbed more of the water into his neck. "You are very welcome, Kyungsoo. I recommend resting after we're done here. We have a busy day tomorrow."

Kyungsoo was nearly shaking with excitement. He knew in the back of his mind not to become too jovial; if the results were not what he was expecting, the fall would be even harder to cope with. But he stood to let positivity seep into his mind, if only for a little while. "Ah, but... do you mind if I...grab my notes first? I made several over the course of my stay here..." He turned, standing out of the water slightly as he checked to see where his clothes Tao put down were.

Kris swallowed a hard gasp as Kyungsoo's body lifted out of the water, strong despite its small stature and dripping wet, slightly pink from the hot water. He thought for a second to just bury his face in Tao's shoulder, to curl against someone safe. But, not wanting to give a difficult impression in an otherwise happy moment, he instead reached up and took Tao's hand at his neck and squeezed gently. Another swirl of darkness reached up inside him, his most base instincts recognizing the strength in Kyungsoo's arms and back and showing him fantasies of a Kyungsoo transformed and laid out bare to Kris's desires. He held on more tightly to Tao's hand.

"Anything here is yours," Kris said with false confidence, "Whatever you feel you would or could
want on your trip, please... take it. Your notes, a book or two... I can have some of the little ones help you to pack it up, if you like. The Fire Lord keeps a stocked library himself, so you might find that you're more interested in his... slightly esoteric collection. Oh and some clothes too, of course - the dragons fly high, you'll want something heavy for the journey."

Kyungsoo might not have noticed Kris's difficulty to control his instincts, but Tao sure did, his fingers squeezing Kris's hand and even nearly looking exasperated as he looked at Kris again, hiding his expression from Kyungsoo.

Kyungsoo didn't even notice the exchange, suddenly filled with a sense of urgency to begin implementing the plan. The sooner he rested, the sooner they could begin. He seemed rejuvenated, his earlier disorientation seeming to have disappeared completely. The cool air hit his skin as he went over to the pile of clothes to find what Tao had brought him. "Is this mine?" he asked over his shoulder.

Tao stood halfway out of the pool to look, pointing. "The cloth that looks like moonbeams is for you to dry yourself, and you only need a bit. The rest under it, yes, is yours."

Kyungsoo felt the material, shocked to find that it was warm, and somehow made Kyungsoo think of a purring kitten. he lifted the corner and a portion separated from it, the cloth seeming to move and shift on its own as it fluttered down around his body instantaneously like a robe. It was slightly transparent, but incredibly warm, and he felt safe and relaxed as he unconsciously hugged himself. "W-wow...this is..."

Tao beamed. "Freshly woven moon moth silk. Isn't it delightful?"

Kyungsoo breathed, feeling the water droplets and wetness disappear from his skin almost immediately. "I don't think I'll ever stop being amazed by this world."

Kris couldn't keep from smiling. Kyungsoo looked beautiful - not that Kris ever found him to be anything else - but now exceptionally beautiful dressed in the fae clothes. He had fought back his deepest dreams so long and here, standing in front of him, was a vision of what he wanted most. Imagine Kyungsoo stepping casually down the stairs, dressed in moonlight, to the breakfast table every morning. Or, the darker side of Kris's mind cried out, imagine slowly stripping these purer-than-silk robes from his sweetly tanned skin every night as Kyungsoo climbed into bed. Kris licked his lips absently and let himself sink a bit deeper into the water to hide his expression. Tao was a terrible (and wonderful) person.

"Wait until you see the Fire Lord's displays, sit at his table," Kris said, lowering his voice in an attempt to sound unaffected though it felt good to brag about his world and encourage the human's curiosity. "He's been throwing his party every minute of every day since the war was won. And he's too happy to share."

Kyungsoo gathered up his clothes, turning to give a grateful smile to his hosts. "Thank you. I'm going to get a headstart on my rest then. After I grab my materials." He turned, heading up the stairs nearly two at a time.

Tao smiled throughout, even waving his fingers slightly in farewell. When Kyungsoo's footsteps faded out of earshot, the smile turned on Kris, but now filled with disbelief at his Lord, face still halfway under the water. "I thank the Gods every day that the human is oblivious to your pining."

The already warm water could have boiled with the heat of Kris's blush at hearing the words and he thought only to rush back to his office and hide behind a world of maps and plans. "He doesn't know?" Kris asked, mostly astonished but also ... grateful? He closed the small distance between
them and wrapped an arm around Tao's middle, tugging his long ago lover close to him. Everything in him craved contact and he was almost sure that Tao wouldn't ever pull away from him in a time of need.

"Tell me that I'm an idiot for even thinking of it," he said, pushing a kiss to Tao's chest.

"Never," Tao shifted his legs so that he could lower himself back down into the water, his hands touching Kris everywhere in a loving embrace. He had perfected his touch when it came to comforting his Lord. A slide of his hand down his arm; coaxing Kris to hold him more thoroughly as his own legs spread. "You can cut Kyungsoo's focus with a knife. It's tangible. His Jongin is his one, solitary goal." His face fell, staring at the droplets of water on Kris' chin and nose. "However I worry that his drive to save his husband will become his new madness if he stays here for much longer, as much as you want him to do so. His journey must continue if he is to have a chance at rescuing him."

Kris's hands wandered Tao's familiar body, clinging to one of the few things he recognized these days. Tao wasn't wrong. Everything he said was out of love and experience and perhaps even a bit of Tao's own developing affection for Kyungsoo. Kris understood all this well enough, understood and recognized Tao. But it was the ten or eleven other feelings that swirled inside of him now that gave him pain. "I just... I like him," Kris said and knew instantly that while these words were insufficient, they were also the most true. "I like him a lot."

One of Kris's big hands curved over Tao's ass, lifting him up and encouraging the generous spread of his legs. They'd made love in these pools before and Kris had covered every inch of Tao's body with kisses. He had pressed his Tao against the smooth rocks and felt his creation from the inside out. It wasn't like that now... their love wasn't like that now. But he desperately needed the comfort of Tao's skin against his. It was the only thing Kris could imagine now to be reassuring.

"Kyungsoo," Kris whispered into Tao's chest, using just a bit of teeth to mark where he had already kissed his child, "I need you to take him away from me. I won't be the cause of his pain. I won't ... I can't let him go wild and mad the way Baekhyun - Please. Take him to Chanyeol. I'll find a way to be with you both soon. Kyungsoo..."

"I'll keep him safe," Tao whispered, turning his head and pressing a gentle kiss to Kris' temple, then to his cheek. He was content to stay like this, sharing intimate warmth and comfort with his maker for as long as he needed. "When we leave early tomorrow morning, will you at least see us off? I bet Kyungsoo would appreciate the gesture."

Kris lifted his eyes and smiled at Tao. Of course, he would be there but it felt more right somehow to have Tao say it, to have Tao confirm the need for his presence. He nodded carefully, "I'll be there. And I'll be sending my own dragonflight with you as well. I'll follow behind on one of the smaller drakes when I finish up here." Saying these things, helping to plan the moment eased his nervous spirit. He reached up and moved a lock of wet hair away from Tao's face, "I never thought I'd ever again have to creep and sneak from my own home but, I assure you. I will be at the festival even if it... or Junmyeon... kills me."

The words were strong but beneath them, the thought of it pierced Kris's heart and he wanted to cry out for his old friend, the king who had become so lost and so lonely. He pulled Tao even closer and squeezed him tight, "For Kyungsoo and - for Junmyeon. I will be there."

He looked up to see a couple of the pixies hovering at the water's edge, laying out robes for both of them. He bowed slightly to them, acknowledging the soft care they had always given the lord of their castle. He looked to Tao, "Come to bed with me? And tomorrow, we'll... things will really begin."

Tao's face softened and he smiled, leaning down to give him a kiss that ignited on his lips, his breath
humming low in his throat. His love for Kris surging out of his pores as his hips moved closer to pull their skin flush against each other. They would be lucky if they made it out of the pools. "For my Lord, my Master, always."

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The following morning, Kyungsoo woke to Tao's voice, the flutter of his wings seemingly brighter than the white snowfall outside. The movement of the stone golems around him packing his things into a light, narrow chest woke him completely. The armoire once again opened at his touch, bursting at the hinges with a vibrant selection of clothes for him to choose from. Tao and a few pixies helped him dress, the clothes turning different colors and thickness for warmth with just a shimmer of his own magic.

When they were ready, they made their way to one of the many towers of the keep. The upper levels were sprawling terraces connected by bridges and stairs, an area he somehow knew was for departing flying mounts and beasts. The air was surprisingly calm, the snow not even accumulating on the stone under their feet. Once they were closer to where Tao was taking him, he heard a bellow that rattled his chest.

"What was that?" Kyungsoo started, trying to peek around Tao's tall shoulder.

Tao chuckled as they walked closer. "You'll see."

Kyungsoo didn't have to wait long. He could barely be stirred by the chirps of the spritelings that greeted him first, climbing on his arms and shoulders trying to nudge him forward. He was entranced by the sight before him of a very large, very impressive dragon. Unlike the spritelings who had texture reminiscent of snakeskin, the fully grown dragon's scales looked like living ice shards, shimmering from white to blue. Thorns and barbs flexed and retracted as it moved and breathed, and it eyed Kyungsoo with one large grey eye, snuffling loudly.

Kris stepped out from behind his dragon, clothed in navy wool from head to toe, little golden buttons on his coat giving an air of aristocracy to his work clothes. His hands were protected by thick gloves and he moved over the scales with a recognizable deftness, checking for debris or any tick from the giant lizard that would indicate pain or other problems. He laughed sincerely at his dragon's uncertainty as Kyungsoo came closer. Kris whispered gently to her, "That's my good girl. Take a good look because I'll need you to keep both eyes on him as often as you can."

Another pointed sniff and a careful nudge at Kris's chin and he knew that his dragon understood the preciousness of her cargo. He patted her again in thanks and turned, nodding a greeting for Tao before looking to Kyungsoo. "What do you think of her?" he asked with pride in his voice. His dragons weren't pets - they were gorgeously willing beasts of ancient times that had chosen to serve the Winter Lord and the palace in the north. As they promised to provide transport and to become weapons in times of war, the dragon-winged Lord had promised to keep them safe and care for them. They were some of his greatest friends and he wanted desperately for Kyungsoo to love them.

Kyungsoo's eyes were wide in awe, and he almost felt like he wanted to cry. He watched as her neck shook with each sound she made, noticed the powerful five inch talons on her toes, carefully manicured. She shifted, adjusting as Tao handed off the light cargo for the stone golems to load on her side packs. Her eyes screamed intelligence as she looked him over, and Kyungsoo found it difficult to find his voice, an excited lump in his chest as he smiled. "She's beautiful."

Her majesty was a bit ruined however, when one of the spritelings started chatting to her in earnest, jumping up and down from the floor to be level with her chin. She turned her attention downward momentarily to listen to the young one, and her breath huffed, knocking the spriteling back and it
rolled before it sprung back up again. A chuffing noise sounded like a chuckle from deep within her throat, the spriteling continuing to chat with her before climbing onto Kyungsoo's shoulder. Then Kyungsoo realized he had her full attention. He cautiously held out his hand like he had with the spritelings before, the chirps of the smaller dragons encouraging but at the same time he was not keen on losing any fingers.

The dragon seemed to consider his action before bringing her head down to be pet, Kyungsoo nearly shaking as he felt the smoother scales of her head. "W-wow."

An almost stupidly large smile spread across Kris's face as his dragon and Kyungsoo shared a small moment. At his back, his wings tingled for release, for a chance to fly again beside his dragonflight. He laid a thankful hand on her neck, "They are amazing creatures. I've always thought that they knew our souls and our intentions better than we knew ourselves. It says a lot that she trusts you so quickly."

Kris scanned the area, watching Tao direct golems, little spritelings rush in circles around their larger counterparts, pixies avoiding work by packing and repacking little baskets of fruit and cheese for the journey. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, but he knew he had to be vigilant. For every minute of happiness, he knew there could be as many spies waiting in the wings for him. He stepped closer to Kyungsoo, allowing only a small amount of breathing room between them, and, in a spurring moment of courage, placed his hand on top of Kyungsoo's, "It is a dangerous journey that you're about to make. If ever you're frightened or unsure, look to her. Her flight is true. If you can trust anyone, you can trust her."

Kyungsoo nodded, smiling at the touch but then his face fell, knowing that this was more than likely the last time he'd get to see Kris. He turned to look up at him, giving him a reassuring look. "Thank you Kris. Thank you for everything. I appreciate everything you and yours have done for me. I know I will succeed, knowing you believed in me."

Tao looked over, appreciating the touching moment as he shooed the pixies away as he loaded the last few things securely for the journey. The other fae were making room, moving away as they prepared for their departure, their tasks finished. Kyungsoo giggled as a pixie blew into his ear and he patted the small golem that helped him when he first arrived, the small creature clinging to his leg in a hug.

Kyungsoo almost cried, but the tears didn't fall. "I'll miss you. All of you."

Kris gave a half-hearted smile at the golem and nudged him away, "Come now, let our boy go." It came out so much softer than he intended and he realized with a heaviness on his soul that he had been reassuring himself as much as his little elemental. Kris gave everything not to look at the expression on Kyungsoo's face. It would only make it harder. "They will miss you terribly, I'm sure. They get so attached. The golems, I mean..."

Turning back to his dragon, he encouraged her to kneel, allowing Kyungsoo better access to the warm leather saddle that went across her back. Kris, thinking only of Tao's words from the night before and the terrifying possibility of madness setting down on Kyungsoo's mind, slipped behind the human and placed surprisingly steady hands on his hips, helping the smaller being to make the climb onto the beast.

Kyungsoo managed to settle on without much difficulty, noting the room and access he had to multiple compartments, all embellished with runes and designs so intricate he felt like he was looking at an illustration. The dragon shifted, and it reminded him of how real it all actually was.

Tao slid back around over to Kris, his wings held up high as he leaned up to him for a quick kiss, his
words quiet under his breath. "I'll set the glamour as soon as we're airborne. Nobody will be able to
tell unless they get close, and she will keep us safe."

Kris pressed his lips together and nodded. Tao's magic and the strength and speed of his dragon
would, together, mean safety - or at least as much safety as was possible when the world had turned
against you. He looked back at up Kyungssoo, glad that the human was too busy looking over their
supplies to notice Kris's always anxious longing. Kyungssoo had never lost his curiosity nor his hope
and that was beautiful. Kris took a few steps back, making room for his dragon's lift, "Goodbye
then." His voice cracked, but he didn't cry. He refused to cry in front of either of them.

Kris watched the dragon take off into the air, watched as Tao worked to steady the beast and its
human passenger, watched the swirling of the snow around them, dragon wings beating the icy wind
into submission. He watched until it hurt to stare up at them and with as much dignity as he could
manage, Kris walked quickly back into his castle, taking stairs two and three at a time to the highest
tower overlooking the great waste of the winter kingdom. Behind him, golems and sprite-lings
followed nervously, avoiding his feet. Finally stepping onto the empty landing, Kris let himself fall to
his knees, breathless. One of the braver creatures curled to his shoulder and Kris leaned into it, "I
loved him from the moment I saw him, didn't you know?"

The miniature dragon purred - they had all known.

Kris swallowed, "Did he?"

The dragon whistled softly and a few of the others joined in their small symphony of uncertainty. It
wriggled into Kris's entire being until the faery lord fell forward, his forehead to the great, cold stone
of the palace and he screamed. He screamed until his voice broke and the wool shirt at his back
stretched and ripped with the pressure of his great wings exploding from within. The little ones
cooed and sang, their dragon lord's dual power and vulnerability on display for all and none to see.

Kris's wings closed around him, tucking the winter lord into a scaled cocoon, "I loved him from the
moment I saw him."
Sehun stepped through the throngs of revelers now crowding the palace grounds. Most were drunk and in the midst of the pre-festival celebration, music and laughter all around him. When he approached the throne room, the din of activity encompassing the space clashed greatly with Junmyeon's mood. He was still, eyes distant as fae around him prepared the base of the Mother tree for three more thrones, coaxing the roots slowly into the needed shapes with magic and salves. Sehun noted how everyone knew better than to suggest only three considering the situation. The only movement that came from him was the slight blinking of his eyes and small nods at his advisors' words.

Sehun approached slowly, feet barely touching the ground as his wings fluttered against his back. His King finally acknowledged his presence, cutting off a second advisor's string of suggestions for the altar setup with a wave of his hand. It was like this every year and had been this way for decades. "Just pick something," Junmyeon murmured, turning his head. They bowed deep at his change of focus, and Sehun knelt at his side, expecting words in his ear. Instead Junmyeon pressed his inquiries into his head, his simmering frustration apparent in their mental link.

'Any developments about Jongdae's whereabouts?' Junmyeon's words came into his mind, strong and sudden. Sehun jerked slightly, his wings fluttering instinctively but shaking his head. In response, Junmyeon linked their fingers together to strengthen the connection. They were now practically cheek to cheek, their movements muted as they had their mental conversation.

'Your grace, there is none. There are rumors that he showcased his human's changes in the open, however not even one fae has come forward to give the location.' Sehun flinched as Junmyeon's connection wavered, the king's breath hot on his neck. More than Junmyeon's words flowed into Sehun's head; his insecurity at his own strength as a king and fear of possible chaos at festivities tomorrow crept into his thoughts. 'I fear that interception will no longer work at this point. If he puts his wreath at my feet, others will demand to follow. Others may even grow violent if their dark prince is denied. I fear I may not be strong enough to calm them.'

'Nonsense. You are King.' It was Sehun's turn to be strong, to let Junmyeon know that others stood beside him. 'Your loyal followers, your steadfast guard, they will protect you. But… did you wish to prepare regardless?'

Junmyeon didn't respond, his connection weakening as he closed his eyes, contemplating what may come tomorrow. With their mental conversation fading, Sehun decided it was now time to inform his King of what he was sent here to say in the first place. "Jessica's entourage has arrived. Victoria and her clan should be here by sundown." Somehow, his words sounded louder than normal.
Junmyeon let Sehun go, and he watched him stand. "Show them to the western quarters. Have my guard double their patrol, and the alchemists double check their wards. We cannot afford any issues tonight."

Sehun closed his eyes but bowed deeply, knowing that they were doing all they could. His voice sounded sad when he responded. "Yes, your Grace."

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Once he and Kyungsoo were out of sight of the winter palace, Tao's glamour bloomed around them. He pulled Kyungsoo's hood lower as his own purple hair faded into a soft blonde hue, his wings fading out of sight. The blue color of the dragon's scales turned the color of wine, and Kyungsoo noticed a mask covering the lower portion of his own face. It was a clever disguise, noting how different they looked.

The wind rushed by his face, the sky clear and crisp. Other riders passed them by, as did islands of floating earth with trees upon them and waterfalls cascading to the earth below. His hands gripped the leather cording as he tried to lean over to see below and around them before being guided back into his seat by Tao's gentle yet firm hands. "You can't really see anything from this height," he said softly.

After a while, Kyungsoo meant to pull out his books to study them, but found himself sleepy, the steady beating of the dragon's wings and Tao's gentle lullaby hums making his eyelids heavy.

Kyungsoo couldn't even tell if he was dreaming. The clouds rushed by so quickly, their mount gaining speed as she turned downwards. He tried to breathe, noticing the worn white pillars that they had to dodge through seemed to crumble around them. Still their dragon rushed forward, a pavilion of marble and trees sprawled before them, and a towering castle in front of them.

Kyungsoo tried to yell for her to stop, for her to pull away, but he also wanted to go forward. Soon, he found that it was his own strength pushing them on rather than Kris's great dragon, determination boiling underneath his skin.

There, he saw a figure at the top of marble steps, a crown made of silver and robes the color of dawn. Kyungsoo couldn't see his face; the light was too bright. But all he felt were his hands being brought forward to wind tightly around the stranger's neck, and he started to squeeze...
"Kyungsoo. We're almost there...wake up."

His waking felt more peaceful than his actual dream, inhaling not the icy chill of winter, but warm, fragrant air that reminded him of the start of summer break in high school. What unnerved him however, was when he looked into the distance ahead, he noticed they were rapidly approaching the very same castle from his dream. "T-tao... are we...going there?"

Tao followed his eyes to where Kyungsoo was looking. "No. That is the summer palace. That is not our destination...not yet. Our goal lies just beyond it."

Kyungsoo couldn't hide his sigh of relief, but he stared down at it anyway as it passed them on their left, noticing, even from their great height, activity and small figures mingling in groups. The air was much more dense with travelers at this stage, so Tao said something in a strange tongue to their dragonflight, and she gave a low growl in response. She flew lower.

They passed the castle without incident, and came upon more thick trees as the dragon slowed her flight. She started to circle, a small cluster of ancient looking stones protruding from the earth near a cliff. The lines of runes on the stones lit up once they came in to land, the light spreading down onto the forest floor, the trees actually parting for her to descend a bit more easily.

If Kyungsoo had felt confidence swell in him as they passed by the palace, some of it began to fade as their true destination was made clearer. He and Tao were not the only visitors to this clearing, though their presence had been hidden until Kris's dragon landed lightly on the forest floor. The runes around them hummed with a red energy and the illusion of lush, empty forest faded away. Instead, the pair of travelers found themselves surrounded by small parties of chattering elves, fae and creatures Kyungsoo had never seen nor imagined. They all milled about the entrance to a cave, carved into the side of the stone outcropping. Heat radiated from beneath. No one seemed to pay them any attention at all. They spoke fluidly and even Kyungsoo, with as little experience as he had around the fae, could tell that more than a few of them were drunk. The names of Kris and Junmyeon floated about but they seemed to be more the butt of colorful (and sometimes sexual) jokes than the subject of serious intellectual discussion.

"You seem lost," a small flame imp teased, looking very much like a little devil with horns and a wide smile, skin red and crackled. He should have looked terrifying, but his miniature size and his seeming inability to keep still made him almost... adorable. He hopped from foot and foot and raised his voice at Kyungsoo and Tao, "Tell us your business with the master or we'll burn your kneecaps off." The imp laughed at himself and lunged at the dragon's knees, wrapping his arms around the greater beast. Kris's dragon huffed and looked to Kyungsoo with a pleading expression. Make the little thing stop.

The commotion the little imp caused seemed to grab the attention of a few more fae and they turned
around to face them. Their chatter became inquisitive, prompting Tao to hold Kyungsoo that much closer to him. "Our business is for your master," Tao spoke with a firm tone. "Not you, little one."

A troll a few paces from them tilted its head and squinting his eyes, bumping the elbow of the even larger troll next to him, trying to get his attention. However his drinking partner seemed to be snoozing, empty wine glasses littering around its limp form as his breath snuffled around his large protruding tusks. The first troll raised a large finger and pointed at Kyungsoo. "Human," it muttered.

Before Kyungsoo could even move from Tao's embrace to relieve their dragon of her pesky annoyance, one of the more disheveled but humanoid fae walked over, large wine cup in one hand, and grasped the imp's ear with the other, dragging it away. "You've got a lot of will, coming here with this earth child, halfae."

Tao chose to ignore the insult, despite being turned and completely belonging to the realm, many fae around him clung to old prejudices. "I am merely here to see your master, Heechul." His tone stood firm. He would not be bullied by those who couldn't deal with progress now that they had lost the war.

The older fae laughed half-heartedly, tossing the imp into a dryad's lap. Heechul then used his free hand to pull up his robe back onto his shoulder as he leaned in close. "Is he expecting you?"

Neither Tao nor Kyungsoo had time to answer, as a stunned silence began to pass over the clearing. Even the most inebriated of the revelers seemed to fall to into a stupor. There was a crackling in the air, almost like electricity but deeper and hot. From the entrance of the cave, a woman appeared, dressed in layer after layer of nearly transparent red fabric. It covered her by obscuring her body as if through glass, as though Kyungsoo were seeing her through a shower curtain or a fogged window. The tips of her hair sparked with flames as she moved towards them. From the dryad's lap, the imp hopped up and laughed hideously at Heechul, climbing up the woman's body with ease and sitting comfortably on her shoulder, not unlike the way the smallest dragons always tried to rest their bodies on Kris. The imp stuck his tongue out at Heechul and burst into another fit of giggles.

She came close to the dragon and extended a hand to Kyungsoo, "My brother has been expecting you."

Heechul seemed to shift back at this, obviously curious at the woman's comment. But the imp struck first, "Does mistress think the Heechul needs all his toes? We'll roast them for snacks. Make him sorry for holding up the master's guests."

Heechul could barely stifle the growl in his throat as he swayed backwards, inclining his head into a
bow as he backed off. Kyungsoo however, was staring in awe. The woman's presence was nearly blinding, and he looked away, unable to meet her gaze as he trembled slightly from the heat. While Kris had been sharp and inquisitive, she simmered and judged as her eyes passed over him.

Tao placed a reassuring hand on Kyungsoo's shoulder. "Thank you my lady. We haven't much time."

The woman withdrew her empty hand slowly and took a step back, seeming only then to realize what a state Kyungsoo was in. She focused her eyes on Tao's hands and the way they kept Kyungsoo close to him. "Hmm, and we both thought Yifan would have made you his by now. Interesting." She turned and began walking back towards the cave entrance, "Come down from your beast. No one will touch you." Her imp giggled and laughed and made a rude hand gesture towards Heechul as they departed.

Halfway to the entrance, she paused and looked back with more gentleness in her eyes. "Yura," she said suddenly, "You can call me Yura." She seemed satisfied with this information for a moment, nodding simply, but then continued, her words in direct contrast to her soft face, "I love my brother very much and he once loved Yifan so deeply that he gave much of his sanity for the general. We will help you as we can, but if this is some Summer Palace trick to take our Firelands back into Junmyeon's domain, I will kill you both myself." ("She'll rip your throats out!" her imp sang behind her.)

She smiled and indicated that they should follow.

Tao shifted, dismounting. His wings faded back into reality, a few impressed whistles coming from the crowd as his glamour fell away. "No tricks, my Lady. Merely a plea for help."

Even though they were welcome, her words didn't put Kyungsoo at ease, hurriedly emptying his packs of their contents to carry in his arms. The dragon shifted, seeming to go lower just to help him get off when Tao helped him, lending him a hand as he slid off the saddle. His feet touched the ground and he placed a grateful hand on her flank. "Thank you. Um... Try not to eat anyone."

Her low, growling chuckle did nothing to reassure him.

Tao and Kyungsoo followed her into the mouth of the cave, the sprawls of well-leveled dirt giving way to hard and unforgiving obsidian that shimmered purple and red by guiding fairy lights. Ahead, she was conjuring light as they went, the small fiery orbs hovering in the air and guiding them down the correct path. As the murmurs from the revelry outside faded, they passed fewer drunken individuals and other tunnels of obsidian that echoed of laughter and more celebrations. They
branched off in winding angles and looked like they could very easily get someone lost. Kyungsoo felt Tao's hand on his shoulder grip him tightly as he had the sudden urge to follow a blue floating sphere at the end of one of the quieter tunnels.

"The wisps don't know their own strength of persuasion, especially on humans." Tao explained. "We must keep following her path. For your Jongin."

Kyungsoo had broken out into a cold sweat when the light disappeared around a corner. The only thing keeping him from sprinting after it were Tao's grip and the mention of his husband. Eventually the pull faded, and he panted as his body relaxed again, like he had been holding his breath in deep water. He rubbed at his temple, trying to shake the confusion out of his head. "I don't like this place. Hopefully this...Fire Lord has something to block these intrusive magics that you all seem to have."

Tao hesitated to answer, guiding him back into Yura's lighted tunnel. "We'll see."

Kyungsoo's hands clasped together around the leather strap of his knapsack to fidget with his wedding ring. He had cleaned it as best he could, but the edges remained greenish, worrying him immensely. He tried to relax as the small group continued their slow descent into the earth.

The dark and dangerous aura of the place was occasionally punctuated by the Yura's out of place giggles in response to her imp's sickly threats. Slowly slowly they lowered into the earth and, just as the newcomers were about to disturb the silence to ask how much longer, the world seemed to open up and they entered a cavern many sizes larger than seemed possible. From the surface, it would have been impossible to guess that beneath the soil lay the throne room of a forgotten king.

Massive tables covered with treats and flavors from all over the human and faery worlds lined the length of the room with guests of all kinds looking fat and pleased with the offerings. Kyungsoo immediately recognized the boiling red kimchi stew in its black earthenware bowls. Other offerings were as varied as thick cheeseburgers with all the fixings or massive helpings of pasta in rich cream sauce. Simpler fae fare filled in the gaps between dishes - Kris's beloved stone fruit in syrup, fresh baked herb breads and dipping sauces that seemed inedible, as though made of melted silver. ("Take a bite and refuse to die! Silver makes the kneecaps strong!" Yura's imp sang when he saw Kyungsoo's expression.)

At the front of the room on a raised dais, another huge offering of food and drink lay before a fae that anyone would have recognized as the Fire Lord of legend. His hair, like Yura's, sparked at the edges with small flames as a male fae with extraordinary obsidian wings leaned in for a kiss. Yura cleared her throat gently and ascended the steps, indicating that the newcomers should remain on the floor level. Coming up beside her brother, she laid a gentle hand on his shoulder and the Fire Lord's happy expression faded immediately. His face took on a far away look as the siblings joined together mentally and exchanged words. After a moment, the Fire Lord turned in his seat, pushing his suitor
away. "Has the human taken a meal, Taozi?"

The commotion and revelry around them lowered slightly but didn't stop even at the direct question their host presented. Kyungsoo was beginning to sweat at the temperature in the cavern, exacerbated by the books and belongings he was carrying and the weight of his heavy winter clothes. None of the fae looked as though the heat bothered them. Tao bowed in a flourish, ready to answer, but Kyungsoo felt a stab of annoyance as to why he himself wasn't being asked the question. "No," he interrupted Tao, whose eyes widened. "I have not."

Now the din of the room turned to whispers as they noticed that the human spoke, chuckles and conversation turning into sneers and jests. Tao was swift on the uptake, hiding his shocked expression behind an even deeper bow. "Forgive me, my Lord Chanyeol. The ride here was quite long, and the human hasn't been taught many of our...traditions. He hasn't partaken of anything from a fae table."

Kyungsoo looked up at the figure on the throne, ready to defend himself, when he was hit in the side of the face with a small frosting-topped confection. The suddenness of the incident made him drop his books. A group of pixies and imps off to his right were laughing that the one who threw it had missed.

Kyungsoo was in shock as he touched his face, inhaling the sweetness of the dessert splattered on his cheek and fingers. His stomach roared to life, demanding that he put his finger in his mouth to have a taste. At once Tao was on him, grabbing his hand and holding it in place as he used the corner of his own robe to wipe the mess away, glaring into the crowd.

Kyungsoo was about to cry, the pain in his stomach coupled with the overwhelming situation made him feel like he was close to going mad. He hid his face in his hands even as Tao's arms encircled him, trying to comfort him.

The imp at Yura's shoulder fell to the table and careened with laughter, knocking over tea cups and small dishes. Neither of the fire siblings seemed to notice or care, even when the little thing began to tug at Yura's dress. They were both staring with intensity at Kyungsoo. Yura placed her hand once again on Chanyeol's and they shared a private conversation in the backs of their minds. Finally, Chanyeol nodded to a few of his guards at the edges of the room and they came forward with dramatic speed, separating Tao from Kyungsoo with force. Chanyeol stood and spoke directly at his new guest, "You know, human thing, you're not in Yifan's realm anymore. His magic cannot save you, though I'm sure, while you had his attention, he made you feel like everything, like you held the universe in your hands. Did you even know how much he was sustaining you and shielding you until just now? In your world, a human would dead in a few days without drink or food and yet, you stand here, in a room filled with every taste and texture available, and you cannot even take a bite."
Yura wrapped an arm around her brother's middle, "Yifan must care for him very much or -"

"You can already tell. He's absolutely to the general's taste," Chanyeol finished before his sister could continue. His eyes never left Kyungsoo, "This human thinks he's ready to go into Junmyeon's summerlands and take on the king himself. But look! He can barely resist a bit of cream. Look how he breaks for it." Chanyeol spat the last sentence and from him came a great heat, as though this Fire Lord had himself been transformed into pure flame. Yura guided him back to his chair and knelt beside him, whispering to him until the heat dissipated. The food at the table in front of them was scorched black, though the table itself, the fine table cloth and plates remained new and untouched.

"Tell us both your name," Yura instructed Kyungsoo, turning to glare at the visitors.

Tao protested, his wings pattering frantically as he was held away from him. But even those sounds were muted to Kyungsoo as he tried desperately to control himself. The Fire Lord called attention to the food around him, and Kyungsoo nearly collapsed at the pain, resisting the urge to eat even as the crowd around him beckoned to empty seats to try and get him to consume the feast before him. Kris's warning filtered faintly through his mind.

'... promise me that you won't eat of a faery table. The Rules - they ... break people who don't follow them...'

In one last feeble attempt to resist, he purposely fell to his knees, busying himself with picking up his scattered belongings. Laughter erupted around him and this time, from more than just the playful imps. His hands shook, the pressure of everyone's eyes upon him weighing him down even as silent tears streamed down his cheeks. His tears burned furiously, and he wiped them away quickly before standing.

"Kyungsoo," he managed, voice loud in his ears. "Do Kyungsoo."

Silence fell over the room once again, only Yura's little imp continuing to laugh. Chanyeol raised a hand but didn't strike the creature as some feared, instead laying his hand gently on its small head and almost petting the thing as though it were a cat. "Garfløege," he said with a voice that was now straight and cool towards the imp, "Ensure that our guests will have a comfortable place to sleep tonight. We have much work to do." The imp grumbled but jumped down from the table and began its waddle deeper into the caverns.

After a second, it paused and turned around, almost sheepish, "The Mistress gave us a faery name when she summoned us. We would like very much if the Master used it."

From the shoulders of other guests, small demonic looking pets laughed or it would seem like
laughing if it weren't so horrifying. A small amorphous blob attached to a tall troll with mean tusks shook a set of newly formed tentacles at Garfloege and emitted deep glottal gasps that sounded like a reprimand. Garfloege's entire body blushed and the imp began again to slowly retreat into the cave.

"Taeyong!" Chanyeol called after the creature with a new name, making every attempt to stand again though it obviously caused him great pain, "Don't forget an extra set of bedding for the human. We don't want him to freeze once the fires are out."

Taeyong - the fae-named imp - brightened immediately and instead of his slow shuffling walk, he now bounced and hopped away, whistling some secret, gleeful tune. Chanyeol smiled for the creature, but his eyes betrayed the struggle of his movement. Yura's arm was around his middle as they walked around the great table and down the few stairs of the upper dais. They came close to Kyungsoo as a pair, but it was Chanyeol who reached out to the human and touched his cheek. A warming sensation spread over the small area where their bodies touched. He pulled back quickly once his small spell was complete, so as not to alarm the human.

Kyungsoo barely comprehended the conversation in front of him, eyeing Chanyeol's movements before averting his eyes downward again. Only when Chanyeol got closer and touched him did he look up at the Fire Lord again, fear still in his eyes, flinching at his touch. He was afraid of getting burned. But when the sensation didn't come, he cautiously brought a hand to touch his face, finding that the rest of the mess had been cleaned away. He was still shaken from his loss of composure, so when he opened his mouth to thank Chanyeol, nothing came out.

On the other hand, Tao was trying very hard to contain his annoyance at being restrained. He had promised to keep Kyungsoo safe for Kris, and so far he thought he was doing a pretty poor job of it if he could be overtaken this easily. The atmosphere was still hostile, eyes staring and curious onlookers sniffing and baring their broken teeth.

Chanyeol glanced at Tao, seeing how Kyungsoo's guardian struggled and tried to calm him with a nod. "I won't hurt your ward, Taozi," the Fire Lord promised. His voice was already losing some of the stress that had been evident when the two of them first arrived. Chanyeol waved to his guards to release Tao, though Yura shoot her brother a worried glare at this, obviously displeased with Chanyeol's decision.

The Fire Lord looked to his guards again, "Inform the guests that the kitchen is closed. My friends here and I have much work to do and not much time." As soon as the words had left his mouth, the many creatures and faeries lining the room began to rise from their seats, leaving plates of half-eaten food. They filed out in a grumbling but effective queue, Chanyeol bowing slightly to some of the more intense guests. A large bull of a creature with wide horns and a slobbering snout huffed as he passed the group, looking Kyungsoo up and down and licking his lips. Chanyeol cleared his throat and the beast continued on his way.

Once the majority of their visitors were gone and the room almost crackled with silence, Chanyeol began his slow, assisted climb back to his chair on the dais. "Now tell me. What do you know of the
Kyungsoo only relaxed when Tao’s hand was once again resting on his shoulder. Every time his head turned, Tao was there to gently nudge Kyungsoo back to focus. He need to be looking up at Chanyeol, and not at the food that was being cleaned up around them.

"Well, My Lord," Kyungsoo started, voice now carrying further in the open space. "It's...the start of the summer solstice, when the King's power is at its peak, and when fae present their...their trophies, sir." He fumbled with one of the books, opening it to check a specific page. "Either trophies from wild hunts or humans. But since humans aren't allowed to be taken anymore, there will only be one. My husband. Because...because the faery who took him doesn't care for the rules." He hand clasped a little harder into the leather of the book.

Chanyeol hummed along with Kyungsoo's words, nodding to indicate that the human had indeed done his research. "In times long before Junmyeon became the king in the summerlands, the Summer Solstice was one of the most highly venerated days of the year. A religious festival, as it was one of the few ways that the fae were able to increase their numbers. Our natural reproduction is slow, so it was that taking humans - always willing - became the center of our universe. The unruly ones were consumed before they made it to the festival."

Yura swallowed hard and licked her lips, "It's been a long time since any living fae has experienced the taste of human flesh." She looked pointedly to Kyungsoo, then back to Chanyeol, "How do we know that the little prince hasn't just ripped the human open and bathed in his blood?"

Chanyeol thought on this a moment before speaking, "After the transformation of humans was banned, after... Junmyeon's incident... well, the festival is little more than an excuse now for the wealthy and powerful to get together and stroke each other's egos in the presence of the king. Jongdae has never been a fan of this ... change in custom. If anything, he would at least bring the body to be shared and passed around. Yifan seemed sure the last time we talked that the mate was whole."

Kyungsoo was desperately trying to not let Chanyeol's words affect his composure. "Passed around" was something he had heard in terms of his husband before in the human realm, until he had put a stop to it. "Ripped open" and "whole" made his heart beat that much faster in fear for Jongin, despite reassurances.

Kyungsoo's tongue felt thick and heavy in his mouth as he continued. "Of course, I am going to have to challenge Jongdae's claim." He raised his hand to show him his wedding band, which was now a sickening rust color clotted over the gold. "I still have this, and of course, any other ideas you're willing to give me. My Lord."
Chanyeol watched Kyungsoo finish his explanation, his face impassive and unimpressed with the revelation of Kyungsoo's wedding ring. "Did Yifan tell you anything about me before he threw you to the wolves? Did Tao? Did any of them tell you why I'm here in the depths of the Earth while all the other generals and warriors of our great war dine in the luxury of palaces and rule our kingdom? Why I serve the broken while Junmyeon and Yifan and Jessica and Victoria... why they live on the surface and greet the sun every morning? Get to play their little political games and feel important?"

"The Fire Lord brushed his sister's hands away from his body as he stood, his voice growing in volume and strength as he told his story, the table in front of him smoking with smoldering flame where he touched it. "It's because I trusted in love far too much. I thought my friendships with Yifan and with Junmyeon could never be broken and that they would never lead me astray. I loved our leaders with everything in me, thought them to be perfect in every way. And then they learned of the fire in my belly and they used it ... used me to torch the Summer Palace of old to dust. From inside of me, hell rained down upon the old king and his followers and from inside of me came the deaths of thousands."

Yura's lips formed a straight line and though she spoke to the human, her eyes remained focused on Tao, "Little Kyungsoo, what my brother means is this... love is powerful, but it is fragile and you have put a lot of trust in this plan of Yifan's. You do not know the fae like we know them. There are betrayers at every turn and you have to be prepared to lose everything. As we have."

"The fae in my care would love to see Junmyeon brought low again," Chanyeol admitted, his knees giving out. The Fire Lord fell back in his chair, "He would be a good king if he learned a bit of humbleness again. None of us here want to see another war. And my sister and I feel that should Jongdae succeed in presenting your husband with a new set of wings... war will be inevitable."

"We have ways into the palace," Yura explained, "Spells and magical items that can conceal your identity."

Kyungsoo felt Tao shift under Yura's gaze, felt Tao's hand tighten on his shoulder and could have sworn he was shaking. He wanted to turn to him, ask him if he was alright, but once again Tao turned his head forward, and the fae stayed silent.

Kyungsoo was also trying to comprehend the magnitude of the situation concerning his husband. An inevitable war? What the hell had he gotten himself into. "I'm...I'm sorry um..." he flipped through the pages of his book, his confidence evaporating. He knelt down to grab one of the bigger history books. "If Jongin is made like you, there will be a war? But..." He skimmed his notes tucked into the pages. "I thought that they needed permission...from the King or Queen to turn them. Acknowledgment. From both the fae and the human."

"They did," Tao finally spoke. "But Jongdae's kind, his blood is strong enough to do it on his own. The presentation is a formality adopted for those that weren't strong enough and those whose magic was thin in their blood, so they would receive their blessing from the King or Queen. Eventually all fae did it. The rituals were all people talked about. They did it for the attention and eyes of the whole
Court. Jongdae is doing it because it will cause chaos and dissent."

Kyungsoo felt panic bubble in his gut, but he didn't know why. "So he...he could've...already..."

Chanyeol's lips parted to speak, his eyes turning to sympathy as he realized the power of his words on Kyungsoo, but it was Yura who interrupted and spoke first, "If your husband has consented to the transformation, given his love to that little brat, then there would be no magical reason why Jongdae, as a dark prince, could not complete the work of the Chrysalis Ritual himself. You're correct. You may arrive at the palace to find that Jongin already has a pretty set of wings."

The Fire Lord continued his sister's explanation before Kyungsoo had time to make any sort of response, "But there are ways to reverse the ritual. Stay its progress."

Yura scoffed and took a step away from her brother. She pressed her palm to her forehead and sighed, "We are speaking realistically, brother. We have little time for theories and ghost stories. No one even really knows what happened to the farmer boy and -"

"There are rumors," Chanyeol continued, his eyes shooting between Tao and Kyungsoo, "At the very least, rumors exist. Baekhyun - have you heard this name? Has Yifan told you of the relationship between our king and this human boy? There are whispers at the fringes of our world that he has reversed his transformation. You should see him. He is no friend of the Summer Palace."

Kyungsoo remembered. The boy he had seen wandering in the snowy valley outside Kris's palace. The one that seemed to radiate energy that gave life and took it away with a single step. But Kyungsoo was doubtful they even had the ability to locate him on such short notice. He could be anywhere.

"We don't have the time," he said after a pause. "We- I mean, I need to make do with what I have at my disposal here and now."

"What do you think the best way would be into the palace?" Tao asked, genuinely curious. "Tensions and rumors are high and anything can set off an incident with everyone gathered in such close quarters."

Chanyeol seemed disappointed to hear Kyungsoo's answer and even more so when Tao continued on without pushing the human to investigate his options further. He took a deep, restorative breath. "The Windmaster and I were great friends once, many years before all this. While his devotion to the King is intense... and goes beyond simple loyalty to the crown, I have managed to get some information out of him over the years. His sense of right and wrong is still good. There are ways into the palace that refuse detection."
"And you'll want to disguise yourselves of course," Yura continued, "Taozi, you could make the argument that your presence is natural but no human without a conqueror would ever be admitted. But there are spells that can hide the scent of a man." She sniffed the air cautiously and wet her lips, "You, Do Kyungsoo, won't take much. You already have the smell of magic on you. How close exactly did you let our Yifan get?"

Chanyeol tugged at his sister's dress, asking her silently not to tease the boy, "One of our little demons will scrub you clean, remove all trace of the human world from your skin. It doesn't hurt much."

Kyungsoo's incredulous expression tried to mask his nervousness, and he stuttered a few syllables before Tao came to his rescue. "It's very easy for us to tell if you're human because you have a distinct smell."

"But I've bathed several times while here..."

"Indeed. But this will be more thorough, along with spells that will mask your human scent." He straightened the fur on Kyungsoo's shoulder. "Very temporary, we assure you."

Kyungsoo felt braver as he nodded. "There's... one more thing I wish to ask of you, if you please." He stole a nervous look up at Chanyeol and Yura, looking to each in turn. "Fae have a particularly nasty habit of invading people's minds. Is there something... anything, to help me with resisting their pull or influence? It's exhausting being on guard all the time."

"There are ways," Chanyeol started and his sister's hand went quickly to his shoulder, as though to stop him. Chanyeol petted her hand gently, acknowledging her worries, but continued, "The reason why the fae are able to peer into the minds of mortals and beasts is simple. Their thoughts are very very loud. A human too could be trained or even gifted with the ability to understand such frequencies. In order to quiet those thoughts, to dilute their broadcast, one should build a wall. And we could build your wall from memories - the strongest type of thought." Yura poked Chanyeol again and he added quickly, "And the most important. There is a danger to using memory for these sorts of things. Our relationships, our information, all that we store in the grey matter... that is who makes us who we are."

"Your wall, if made from fond memories of someone close, will deflect generally those in the area who might pick up a wayward thought. However, your wall will begin to crumble with repeated direct attacks," Yura spoke in a clinical way, "And should you lose a brick or two, those memories, little bits and pieces of that person, will disappear. Lost to you forever. Your entire recollection of that person will be gone once someone breaks through and... if war is to come, they will break through."
Chanyeol nodded, "We are willing to help you build the wall, to construct the pieces. But you must choose the person. The mother is always a good choice. Memories of one's mother are often strong."

"Or Yifan," Yura said with more of a laugh to her voice, "It would be very convenient for you to forget him quickly once you have your husband back in your arms."

Kyungsoo hesitated. So much so that Tao actually looked down at him questioningly, making sure he was alright. The price was too steep. He couldn't possibly relinquish memories of his mother. On the other hand, he didn't want to forget Kris's kindness in helping him get his husband back.

"If you wish," Tao said softly, "I volunteer to be part of those memories along with Kris."

"Will...will that be enough?" Kyungsoo wondered out loud. He thought of his mother, all the times he sang to her while she was sick, when his older brother stormed out angrily at their money issues and how he comforted her.

He remembered Kris's smile, his endearing clumsiness. Tao's gentle eyes and helpful knowledge. He wanted to fall apart.

"Kyungsoo..." Tao's voice broke through his thoughts.

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking," he replied offhandedly a little too quickly.

"We know. You're thinking very loudly."

Yura grinned and leaned forward to drape over her brother's shoulders, "It's a little bit funny, how oblivious humans can be to the most plain and simple of facts. Do Kyungsoo - strong of will but so ignorant, almost willfully so, about the hearts and minds of others. He has been with Yifan all this time and yet -"

"That's enough," Chanyeol said, his face turning as though he had smelled something sour, "It is not our place to decide for you, Kyungsoo. You alone know what is right and what you are willing to sacrifice in order to retrieve your husband. I will respect whatever choice you make."

The Fire Lord began to rise from his seat, taking slow and deliberate steps towards a small door towards the back of the room. He indicated that Kyungsoo should follow him, putting up a hand to stop both Tao and Yura as they started to come towards him as well. "I will conduct the spell myself. Yura, see to it that your imps are ready to help him once we are finished. Taozi," Chanyeol paused, looking back to his fae guest and shrugged, "Do ... something. I want the human to make the
decision for himself and himself alone. No one else."

Tao flinched, but bowed anyway, taking the knapsack and books from Kyungsoo, who reluctantly gave them up.

"I don't know what to do, Tao," Kyungsoo's voice edged on desperation, quietly murmuring up to Tao in hopes that Chanyeol and Yura couldn't hear. "I don't want to forget yours and Kris's kindness, but Jongin..."

Tao gave him a reassuring smile. "Kris and I will always know how grateful you are. We will remember, even if you do not. Remember, it's up to you which person you pick. They merely suggested those which would be the strongest." He pushed lightly on Kyungsoo's shoulders, turning him in the direction to follow Chanyeol. "Go on."

Kyungsoo barely had time to contemplate on what he was going to do. Yura swayed with her usual grin on her face as he walked by her, looking up at Chanyeol and the open door. He hesitated before walking through.

Chanyeol actually seemed sorry to close the door behind Kyungsoo, giving the lock a turn to ensure that they would have privacy. He knew that it frightened the young human to be alone with him and he tried to set Kyungsoo's mind at ease. He placed a careful hand on the Kyungsoo's lower back and guided him to a simple wooden table and chair in the center of an equally plain room. There was no decoration on the walls nor any other furniture. Chanyeol encouraged Kyungsoo to sit, then took his time to find his own seat, hobbling with one hand on the table to steady himself. As soon as he managed to sit, a ring of red runes began to glow softly around the edge of the table.

"I know that being away from Yifan's boy makes you nervous," Chanyeol said slowly, "But... given my own experience with the Lords of Winter and Summer both, I do not want their needs to outweigh your own. The decision to do this or to not, the decision to tear your own memories apart, they should be your decisions alone." The Fire Lord paused to let his words sink in, then continued, "You love this Jongin still? Even knowing that he may have have chosen this life over the life you had with him? You're stronger than most. Your decision will be the right one."

Kyungsoo took in a deep breath. "I do. Jongin is my life. We have our disagreements every once in a while, but nothing we can't overcome. That's normal. Normal for humans. Together, I know we are stronger for it. I have no doubt in my mind that he loves me, and will come home with me. He couldn't... couldn't possibly leave me alone..."

His voice shook, doubt creeping in the corner of his mind. He understood the appeal. In his research and also in his interactions with Tao. Immortality and youth, magic and power, no seemingly obvious monetary system, clean air, beautiful scenery, and no overcrowding. Jongin would fall for this world in a heartbeat. But he blinked the tears out of his eyes, determination settling in his features even as his lip quivered. "The immediate choice is Kris," Kyungsoo sat across from Chanyeol, eyeing the runes as they lit up on the table. "To...forget. If it's strong enough. If not, then..."
He was still nervous, still wishing to put as much space as he dared between him and Chanyeol. But now that Kyungsoo was closer, he took in Chanyeol's arrested movements, the hobble in his step. His eyes traveled obviously over the fae lord, wondering what happened that he was now in this state.

Kyungsoo cleared his throat, trying to focus. "If there is no one else...I-I can..." He hesitated again, shaking his head. He didn't know if he could do this.

Chanyeol followed Kyungsoo's eyes as they first surveyed his table, then Chanyeol's broken body. The curiosity in this creature was appealing and Chanyeol understood why so many went out of their way to protect him. "I loved him once - Yifan... Kris...," Chanyeol said softly, starting to place his hand on Kyungsoo's then thinking better of it and changing course to trace a burning rune, "He and Junmyeon both. They were the twin suns in my universe and I gave them my entire heart and all my loyalty. And when the war was at its hardest, I burned alive more of their enemies than any soldier could possibly have gutted. I murdered my own kin, others from my village, when they would not lay down their arms and accept Junmyeon's rule. At the time, with humans being torn apart and non-fae beings sacrificed for the former King's pleasure... it seemed that the war was the right thing. They praised me for my strength, but it cut deep, the things I had to do and the amount of magic I pushed through my own body to make it happen. Understand that my sister says what she says because she has seen what a powerful fae's love can do to a person.

"The love of a faery like our Yifan can be all consuming and difficult to be rid of. My sister's suggestion that you simply wipe him away before you get too close was cold, she can be that way sometimes. But she is not wrong. We can use your experience in our world to build something temporary, good enough for you to get your husband back and leave this place before it's too late."

As Kyungsoo listened to his story, it painted a picture of violence he never expected to come from this world. Along with talk of war and revolution, the murmurs of the fae this forgotten lord seemed to care for, he knew that they and the world were dangerous even if it wasn't at first overtly obvious. It just settled the determination harder in his chest. He would rescue Jongin, and they could go home.

"I thank you for your...patience with me. I just..." His thoughts once again drifted to his mother, the memories flashing through his mind. "It may seem cruel. But I can't risk losing memories of my mother. The experiences in my life, my very being, hell, what Jongin fell in love with in the first place is most likely tied to my experiences caring and loving her. I'd rather take the memories of my host here than risk losing that."

Chanyeol almost smiled at this before catching himself and pulling his face back to something more neutral, "As I said, your decision will always be the right one. I did not make my suggestion to force you into heartbreak. The mother is always a strong source for those with happy childhoods. But for something temporary, we will make this work."
The runes around the edge of the table began to burn a little brighter and heat rose from them. Chanyeol placed his hands over two of them. One was shaped like a rectangle, its top and bottom collapsed. The other was a straight line, split in the middle by a diamond shape. Chanyeol closed his eyes and pushed against them. A sizzling sound came up from the table and a burning smell filled the room. When he lifted his hands, his eyes still pressed closed, the symbols had burned into his flesh and were no longer visible on the table. Chanyeol blinked away tears as he opened his eyes again and extended his hands to Kyungsoo, indicting each rune in turn, "The stone and the year; we will build your wall together. Take my hands and think of him. What was your first impression of our Winter Lord?"

Kyungsoo put his hands up, ready to take Chanyeol's. He thought quickly of the first time they met, when Kris appeared to him at the cabin in the woods. "Clumsy." He remembered how Kris had read his mind, invaded his space. "A bit intrusive." Then at the end of the first night he was there, the words Kris had said when he first hurried out of the guest room.

'You interest me.'


The Fire Lord chuckled, "Sounds like our Yifan."

He took Kyungsoo's hands in his own and pressed their palms together before Kyungsoo could protest. Again, a sizzling sound and the runes began their slow transfer from Chanyeol onto Kyungsoo. The fae lifted his voice so as to be heard over the sound of their mutually burning flesh, "And how you feel for him now? Has it changed? Has he? Put it all into the spell. The deeper you go, the stronger we craft your protection."

Chanyeol hissed through the pain of it all and used their physical connection to push as much comfort as he could into Kyungsoo, trying to ease the sting of pure fire energy against the human's hands. The room around them seemed to darken as the remaining runes on the table began to flicker out, all other sources of illumination vanishing. Soon the only light in the room was the heated red glow that escaped between their hands.

It hurt.

Kyungsoo hadn't expected it to hurt this much. He could barely vocalize over the searing of his flesh, the pain making his arms shake as he tried to keep from panicking. More time passed as he desperately tried to think past the pain, to try and speak what he thought of him now.
He saw Kris with his dragons, the way they curled up to him. His wings that had shielded him from the cold. His own kiss to the top of Kris's head the night he was banished. "Strong. Caring," he managed, the burning sensation traveling further up his arms. More memories filtered through, from the bathing pools when Kris was acting strange, to the morning when Kris loomed over him and his vision went dark around the edges. He couldn't tell if it was the memories or his own vision that was fading, his head airy as he felt like he would pass out.

Chanyeol grasped at Kyungsoo's hands, holding him tighter to prevent the human from pulling away. Though Kyungsoo was mentally strong enough to resist, Chanyeol was also aware of the frail nature of the human body and its deep need to protect itself from harm. One moment of hesitation in Kyungsoo and his hands would fly away from the pain. He tightened his grip yet again and focused. This would be the hardest part and his heart craved his sister's presence. She would have no hesitation in breaking down memories into nothing but dust and rebuilding them. She knew how to distance herself from the dangers of emotions. She knew how to break hearts while holding back her own tears.

"And if I told you that Yifan was falling in love with you? That I could hear it in his words when he contacted me? That I can smell it on your skin?" Chanyeol spat out these vicious truths as quickly as his tongue would allow, his eyes baring into Kyungsoo. "Does that change your understanding of your time together? If I speak it plainly like this -" Still pressing their hands together, Chanyeol lifted and then slammed their hands against the stone table, trying to keep Kyungsoo from fading away, "Listen to me. You will stay awake and you will endure this. You want your husband back, you will endure. We're close."

Kyungsoo cried out then, his breathing coming faster as the pain kept him grounded. He made a noise of distress through his nose as he whimpered. It was then when Chanyeol told him what he had known all along, that he kept to himself because he didn't want to believe it. He couldn't possibly return Kris's affections. He was married, he had Jongin. He was here to rescue his husband. Kris was temporary.

"It...changes nothing!" he nearly yelled, nearing desperation in an unconscious effort to pull away from the pain. "I am grateful for all that he's given me. But this is all for Jongin!" He screamed as the pain became worse.

Chanyeol hummed, disbelieving, and let Kyungsoo's waves of emotions flow in and out of him, pushing the strongest of them into the spell with precision. It only took a moment longer, waves of heat radiating between them, and Chanyeol began to chant in the ancestral language of his people. The words hung in the air, each syllable joining with the others and with the tone of Kyungsoo's screams and denials until an impossibly loud roar filled the room. Layer after layer of sound…
Then... it was silent. It was cold and it was dark.

"Your Jongin must be something unbelievable. A creature beyond imagining," Chanyeol whispered, his voice an avalanche of sound in the deadening silence of the room, "He must be truly remarkable for a mere human to take so much, knowing that it may all be for nothing."

Chanyeol let go of Kyungsoo's hands and let them drop to the table. Except for the soft pink outline of the 'stone' and 'year' runes on Kyungsoo's palms, there was no physical evidence of the spellwork and the pain that Kyungsoo had felt only moments ago. Light slowly returned to the room, the rest of the runes on the table waking up again.

Kyungsoo laid against the table, arms unresponsive for a moment as he breathed, his head feeling heavy. His eyes showcased his exhaustion, the bottom lids ringed slightly in red from tears that evaporated from the heat. "It's not for nothing," Kyungsoo's voice was hoarse as he tested his hands, feeling the sharp, burning pull of his skin still sensitive from the ordeal. "And he is."

Despite the ritual, his head felt clear and grounded once again. He flinched at the pain that shot up his arms and neck as he sat up.

Chanyeol stood and leaned across the table, ruffling Kyungsoo's hair and smiling broadly for the first time since the visitors had arrived at his retreat. It was goofy and full of bright white teeth and he looked almost childlike in his glee. He was proud of Kyungsoo and wanted the human to feel it. He started to walk around the table, his usual struggling steps. When he reached Kyungsoo, he offered him a hand, "We are done here and you have proven yourself more than exceptional."

The door handle jiggled and through the door, the two of them heard Yura fussing with the lock, calling her brother a few colorful names in between pleas for him to open the door and to let her help. Kyungsoo's screams must have been terrifying to hear from the outside. Chanyeol opened the lock with a flick of his wrist and allowed his sister to rush forward in a flurry of hands and kisses, her nervous expression unusual considering how strong and stoic she had seemed before. Chanyeol cooled her outbursts with another smile and assurances that all was well.

"Then you've done it?" Yura asked, kneeling beside the table and placing a hand on Kyungsoo's knee, "Perhaps I was wrong to doubt the viability of your quest."

Kyungsoo didn't respond, his hands still refusing to close. He shifted slightly at Tao coming in behind Yura and rushing to his side. He made it to his feet with his support, the sound of wind rushing in his ears as he stared up at Tao, who was looking at him like he was relieved. But Tao's smile was sad as he gently took Kyungsoo's hands to look upon the runes on his skin, his face
After a long moment of staring Tao congratulated him softly. But despite reassurances, Kyungsoo felt a wide void settle deep into his heart.
Chapter 14

The Winter Palace felt lonelier and colder than usual. Despite the near constant fellowship of his smaller dragons and the clinging of his rock elementals, Kris couldn't shake the persistent feeling of sorrow that had gripped him from the moment Tao had taken Kyungsoo away. Their warm presence - Tao's careful reassurance, Kyungsoo's beautiful naivete - had been replaced almost instantly by the sneaking glances of spies. They thought themselves hidden, but with sharp senses and the help of his stone and lizard companions, Kris had managed to sniff them out one by one. He let them stay, let them believe that he had bought into their ruse, and let them report back in their near hourly (intercepted) messages to the Summer King that the Lord of Winter remained at home, locked away in his palace of ice.

In secret, Kris had begun his own set of preparations, aware that his time was short if he was going to make it to the Summerlands and into the festival grounds before Junmyeon was alerted of his absence. He packed nothing, instead dressing simply but in layers, and instructed his most intelligent golems to burn the library to dust if there came word that he had been captured or killed. The smallest of them stuck his bottom lip out and started to cry and Kris kissed his tears away, feeling particularly connected his creatures now that their time together was perhaps coming to an end.

Throwing his cloak around his shoulders, Kris descended the stairs to the only exit he knew wasn't being guarded. He had checked and rechecked the little traps the spies had left around the palace, had stationed a drake - small and swift - to wait for him just beyond the treeline. He made one final, quick turn and slipped into the thermal baths, memories of that night with Tao and Kyungsoo flooding back to him. He'd thought... maybe... he should have said something then, perhaps confessed that his intentions were not entirely noble, that somewhere in his darker person he imagined that Kyungsoo would abandon his husband as Jongin had abandoned him and ask to stay in Kris's winter land forever. He'd thought that -

"Oh, you must be thinking of something very important indeed," came a familiar, silky voice as Kris stumbled towards the hidden palace exit, "Your face is all scrunched up and stupid."

Kris didn't have to turn around to know who it was, "Baekhyun... I really don't have time -"

"Make time then," the dark haired creature said as he rose from the warm water, naked and shining. Kris couldn't help but scan his eyes over Baekhyun's body. He was as beautiful as ever and Junmyeon's eternal desire for the boy was still justified. The scent of the air was that of a human, but sweeter somehow and it unnerved Kris deeply. He tried to focus, to peer into Baekhyun's mind as he might have done a thousand years before, but something stopped him. Baekhyun gave him a tired look, "Please don't tell me you're trying some fae trick on me? You think after all these years, I'd leave myself open to another one of your race's tricks?"

Kris knew he should be surprised, but somehow, he was not. Baekhyun had always been something of a mystery and in the years and years that Kris had been assigned to keep silent watch over the boy, the riddle of what drove Baekhyun had only intensified. Kris pulled back without a word and watched Baekhyun exit the pool with swaying hips, picking up a discarded robe and draping it around himself. Like Kyungsoo, Baekhyun retained enough of his human aura to make the action richly sensual - a mortal creature (or was he?) wrapped in moonlight. Kris glanced at the exit and wondered if Baekhyun actually had any power to stop him, should the fae simply walk out of this unannounced meeting.

Baekhyun clicked his tongue, "You think you are so clever, hiding from all these courtly visitors and their machinations, but you missed one! I had to kill a lingering troll just outside the thermal entrance,
waiting for you. Blood. Everywhere!" Baekhyun spoke of murder so easily and dismissively that Kris took another step back. Baekhyun noticed and laughed a little, taking a seat on one of the larger rocks and reclining in a way that made his body appear even more lithe and seductive. Baekhyun waited for Kris to speak but was disappointed. "Your troll guest was wearing Sehun's crest, so it felt particularly good to be rid of him, but I had to wonder... what would make Sehun's men come for the Lord of Winter? Hmmm..." He made a show of thinking over the facts before indicating with wide eyes and an open palm that Kris should fill in the blanks.

"Your lover banished me from the Summer Palace," Kris said in a flat tone. If Baekhyun wasn't going to let him leave without information, Kris was willing to give him the bare minimum.

Baekhyun's face went dark when Kris mentioned Junmyeon, his hand clutching at the moonlit fabric of his robe in anger, but he didn't correct Kris's assessment of their relationship, "But you're leaving now? On your way to the Summer Palace?" Baekhyun's eyes narrowed and the corners of his mouth turned up like he might smile, "Are you going to kill him?"

"Never," Kris replied simply and Baekhyun seemed at once disappointed and relieved. Kris seized on it, "You wouldn't want me to do it anyway. You think you are rid of him, but you don't want him dead and you never have. Love doesn't disappear like that."

Baekhyun rolled his eyes and started to speak but Kris interrupted him, "Why are you here, Baekhyun?"

It was a simple question but, like anything with Baekhyun, it refused a simple answer. Baekhyun adjusted his position, letting the robe fall from his skin in particular places, spreading his legs just enough. Baekhyun, Kris knew, was very aware of how delicious he appeared to fae, with skin that smelled almost human but tinged with magic and something stranger. There had been a time when Kris had even been a bit jealous of Junmyeon's possession of such a creature, one that was clever and sharp and beautiful like stars, but now... now Baekhyun seemed excessive in Kris's mind when compared to the softness of Kyungsoo, miles and miles away.

Baekhyun's face dropped when he saw Kris's disaffected, flat expression, "I... I want to know what is happening and it's only right that I should know after all your people have done to me. I saw you that night in the Hinterlands. You came to me, to my home, with a human boy in your arms. Now you tell me that Junmyeon has banished his best friend and greatest general. There are whispers everywhere, Kris, and dark ones at that. I need to know what is happening."

"Then come with me," Kris offered before he could stop himself, "Come to the Summer Palace and see him for yourself. Tell him what you've heard and just... be there for him." Kris hesitated when he saw how wide Baekhyun's eyes had become at the suggestion. Kris knew that what he had just suggested was impossible, could make all the work he and Kyungsoo had done to save Jongin moot and cold once Junmyeon was confronted with the evidence of his own failed lover and child. But he also, despite all that had happened, felt for the creature in front of him. He'd been there to see Baekhyun and Junmyeon dance together, he'd watched them kiss in the smiling moonlight and he knew that, for Junmyeon at least, it had been real.

And everything in his most base existence, that part of him that was deeply and undeniably fae, believed in love - pure and simple.

"You're an idiot, my lord," Baekhyun said with a sarcastic laugh underneath his words. "You think we'll see each other again and all of this will be fixed? You think you can undo all the pain and suffering of an entire world of hungry, desperate fae by playing matchmaker? And on top of it all, you lay claim to your own human. A joke... an idiot."
"Kyungsoo and I aren't like that," Kris explained in a hurry, his heart hurting as he said it, "Kyungsoo has a different purpose here."

Baekhyun sniffed, "Kyungsoo." He said the name a few times, seeming to roll the taste of the new word over his tongue. It frightened Kris. Baekhyun, for all that Kris knew of him and the years he had kept watch, was consistently showing himself to be more dangerous and more upended than Kris would have thought possible. He thought of the troll spy and the red of its blood on the snow just outside. How had Baekhyun done it - a knife, an arrow through the heart, with his own bare hands? Kris pulled his cloak tighter around him and took yet another step back.

"If that's all, Baekhyun... I need to be going. The Summer Festival will be starting soon and it is a long flight."

Kris turned on Baekhyun, felt the creature’s eye gore holes in his back and walked toward the hidden exit. He was about to step through into the cold of his eternal winter when Baekhyun spoke again, "Does he ask you about me? Does he ever say my name?"

Kris didn't look back, focusing on the distance between the palace and the treeline and the further distance he had to cover to be near Kyungsoo again, "He doesn't have to. Everything he says and everything he does is about you in the end."

In something like a response, Baekhyun hopped up from his seat, throwing away the soft robe that gave him even the smallest bit of modesty and brushed past Kris into the freezing weather outside. Standing in the snow, pink and exposed, Baekhyun laughed again at Kris's surprise, walking backwards into the snow, "Take care, my lord, and have a safe flight. Be mindful of the darkness and protect him from it, save him for me. I'm the only one in this entire universe with the right to destroy him." Baekhyun disappeared from view, blending into the white wind.

Kris didn't let himself ponder this anymore. His flight was long and he would have time to dissect Baekhyun's words in a hundred ways. Memories of the meeting at the high table and the rumors of dark fae swirled in his mind. The new mystery of Baekhyun, remade as something inhuman and singular, made him tremble. He pushed through his worries and the snow at once, staring straight ahead, refusing to look for the corpse of the alleged spy. He made it to the treeline and heaved a sigh of relief.

Glancing back at the Winter Palace, Kris felt a tug in his heart, a fondness for the place and for the creatures inside it - his dragons, his golems. They would ensure the safety of his home or die trying and Kris had to wonder, after this visit with Baekhyun, whether death was more of a possibility than he had ever imagined. He swallowed and pushed deeper into the forest, towards the clearing where he had left his drake. He heard her playing and smiled, rushing forward more quickly, only to stop, breathless, when he saw her.

The clearing earlier had been nothing but snow and dirt and sticks. Now, it seemed to have exploded with life - flowers and grasses and vines that seemed to be sentient as they curled around his drake's feet. She was not afraid, not at all. Instead, she was playing a sort of tug-of-war with one of the greater vines, pulling away her feet and huffing out a laugh when the vine snapped, only to rebuild itself a moment later.

Kris approached his drake and laid a hand on his great shoulder. She lifted her foot to show him the game and he complied, giving the vine a pull. He could feel her joy in it, exploding from her and into his consciousness. "What happened here, girl?"

But this drake was not his great dragonkin and her responses were stunted and unclear. She was just happy to have made a new friend. He didn't have time to inquire more deeply. Another mystery to
He climb into the leather saddle he had fitted for her and urged her to leave the warmth of the overgrowth and take to the sky. Kris was so focused, so desperate to begin the long journey, he didn't notice the bright flowers and the strong vines shudder and die in near instant decomposition as his drake crested the tops of the trees and turned to the south.

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Kyungsoo woke to Tao already dressed and finishing off a nectar-filled bun, his breakfast from one of the saddle packs off the side of their dragon. Even just this glance made him shudder in pain and hunger, and he turned away as Tao cleaned his hands, getting up from his bed to check on him.

The bed dipped as Tao sat on the edge and leaned over him, pulling back the heavy blankets to look at Kyungsoo’s face. His eyes were still puffy and he looked drawn and heavy. He rubbed at the human’s temples and pushed away the hair that had fallen into Kyungsoo’s eyes, ashamed that he couldn't offer his special tea to heal his nerves and calm his worry. He felt his cheeks and found him warm. "How are you feeling?"

Kyungsoo didn't have the energy to complain. No dream came to him last night. Nothing to guide him or give him insight or comfort. It felt like the end. He blinked slowly as he opened his mouth. "I'm ready to see Jongin again."

Tao smiled softly, helping him sit up, mindful of Kyungsoo’s sensitive hands. "And you will soon, my dear little ren." He inspected the skin of Kyungsoo’s palms, noticing the burns now faded into scarring. He tested Kyungsoo’s mobility for a good few minutes, massaging the knuckles and making sure the skin didn't hurt him too much when he expressed his natural range of motion. After he saw Kyungsoo manage a fist and grip without too much of a grimace, he helped him out of bed to get him dressed.

Tao dressed him simply but the clothes were still elegant, a loose deep navy tunic with a high collar and matching pants and comfortable shoes. "You're going to be inundated with magic and charms from Chanyeol. You need to be ready for anything," he explained. "I also have a charm that I have made special for this occasion. Some of my best work if I do say so myself. But know that I now must declare that I want nothing from you in return, not your thanks nor your words. This is merely a token to you, not a gift. To a human, from a former human."

Kyungsoo looked up at him questioningly, noting the words were riddle-like but important. He didn't want to have Tao create an unwanted bond or favor to Kyungsoo. He appreciated the gesture, nodding as though he understood.

At the human’s silence, Tao’s hands wrapped around Kyungsoo’s wrist, leaving a clasped chain with a seashell hanging from one of the links. It was simple to match his clothes, but the charm was heavy, a strong enchantment on it.

"There will be wine and food of all types around you at the festival. This charm will keep you from wanting any of it."

Kyungsoo managed a smile, replying. "My thoughts are only of Jongin. And home."

"Of course." Tao took a deep breath, ecstatic that it worked. "Come. We must greet our host, and
then we're off to the palace."

Tao moved the beads that covered the carved-out door to their small room, and they walked out together.

In the main room, the party had resumed, though not to the level it had been when Tao and Kyungsoo had arrived. A good number of Chanyeol's followers lounged comfortably, picking at simpler food - bread and honey, stonefruit, little salads made of edible flowers and strips of bacon, crispy and fresh. They spoke quietly and only a few looked up to inquire about Kyungsoo. The mood was decidedly calmer and more welcoming.

Yura's little demon imp rushed up to Kyungsoo and tugged at his tunic in a way that was playful and easy, such a difference from before, "The Mistress wants to see it, it's been sleeping so long."

Taeyong pulled and pulled them to a slightly more secluded part of the room, where a small but eager fire kept Chanyeol and Yura warm. Chanyeol, looking small and in much the same physical state as Kyungsoo, was sprawled on the rug in front of the fire, humming softly as his sister rubbed his bare back. The fire lord was shockingly muscular beneath his clothes, his history as a warrior for Junmyeon's great army evident. Occasionally, Yura dipped her long fingers into a cup of salve and applied it to sections of her brother's skin that seemed bursting with fire. As Kyungsoo and Tao approached with her imp, she quickly wiped her hands on a cloth and stood to greet them.

"The ritual has taken a lot out of my brother," she explained simply, no need to indicate his exhausted body, "Were your dreams as dark as his, Do Kyungsoo?"

Kyungsoo couldn't help but stare at the lines crackling along Chanyeol's skin. He looked like a muted eruption that was begging for release, the irregular cracks in his skin the color of bright lava trapped underneath. He only stopped when Tao brushed against him slightly in his bow, an indication that he should do the same. He followed Tao's lead, his own bow straighter and without the flourish that Tao possessed.

Kyungsoo fidgeted with the end of his shirt, looking up at Yura to answer her. "No, My lady. I uh... I didn't dream at all last night actually."

Whether Yura was glad to hear it or disappointed that Kyungsoo hadn't shared her brother's fate, her face gave nothing away. She nodded, "For the best," and turned back to her brother's limp body, kneeling next to him and going back to her work. Her fingers traced every crack and crevice with skill. It was obvious that this was far from the first time that Yura had been made to heal such wounds.

Chanyeol groaned, rolled over and tried to sit up, his skin appearing thinner where it stretched. In the center of his chest, a powerful golden glow came from inside of him, a heart pumping pure fire through his veins. "Don't be so cold, Yura," Chanyeol scolded playfully, a weary smile on his face when he saw Kyungsoo, "He's been through enough and is here to ask us to put him through even more."

Taeyong, the little imp dancing around the assembled group with excitement, nearly burst when he heard the news, "Yes yes, we're gonna scrub him and baste him and put him in a stew! All clean for Mistress's eats!"

"Oh no, this one is not for eating," Yura said, petting the creature as it came towards her.

Once feeling a little bit more comfortable around them, it evaporated at the imp's comment, Kyungsoo fidgeting with his sleeve in his awkward stance.
Tao looked down at him and was about to rescue him once again when Kyungsoo finally spoke up. "I thank you for your hospitality," Kyungsoo said, bowing once more. "I'm just anxious about the festival today. Um..." he looked at Yura, then the imp, then finally back at Chanyeol. "I'm guessing this cleansing ritual you mentioned is our next step."

Tao hid a smile. He was proud of Kyungsoo's initiative, proud to see the boy was learning. And with his husband's rescue now so close, Kyungsoo was, despite his drained and tired outward appearance, ready to face his challenges head on.

Chanyeol hissed again as he tried to sit up straighter, Yura rushing to hold him steady. She let her brother lean against her for support as he tried to explain the process to Kyungsoo, "Humans have such a distinct scent. It is obvious to both Yura and myself that your... closeness to our Yifan has covered some of that, that he was doing his best to prevent your detection, but at the festival, that small shield will be of little use."

"Every fae in the realm with enough social clout will be in attendance," Yura said, taking over, "They will be hungry and excited. The history of the event is not lost and many of them would be pleased beyond reckoning to find an unclaimed human ready for the taking. Senses will be on high alert. It is best that we remove as much of your human aura as possible."

A chill seemed to come over Chanyeol and his teeth chattered together as he spoke, "Yura will perform your cleansing with the help of her imps, if you will allow it. I... I cannot." His lips quivered despite the warmth of the room around him and he curled into his sister's arms.

Kyungsoo looked up at Yura again and his gaze lingered, nodding. "I understand."

He felt a quick pull from Tao on his arm, and he looked up at him curiously. "Sorry I just..." He seemed to stutter. "Once the ritual is underway I cannot touch you. The magic will hold better that way." He gave Kyungsoo a small smile. "I cannot go in the palace the way you will be going. But don't worry." He seemed to lean down, checking to make sure his charm was on Kyungsoo's wrist properly, running his fingers through his hair one last time. "I will be there with you. As will Kris."

Kyungsoo's breath came out of him in a long sigh. "I see. Okay." He didn't protest when Tao held his hand for a moment more. "Thank you Tao."

"Then we go deeper still," Yura said, pulling a blanket up over her brother's shivering body and helping him to lay down completely before the fire. She dusted off her dress as she stood and extended her hand to point the way. They would have to descend further into Chanyeol's kingdom, closer and closer to whatever eternal fire fueled this place. Yura didn't wait for Kyungsoo and instead, with a quick glance backwards to insure that Chanyeol was comfortable and resting, she walked down a dark hallway and towards the eerie set of stairs that would take them away.

Before Kyungsoo could gather the mind to follow her, Chanyeol reached out for him, his bones grinding as he forced himself up quickly to grab at Kyungsoo's hand. "You should listen to me, just one more time," he said, his face deathly and serious, "Yura can be cold but she would see you succeed, just as much as I would. There are many things to fear in the deep places of the earth, in the darkness, but my sister is not one of them. What you are about to do is dangerous, but essential for your safety once you leave my care."

Kyungsoo was unnerved at is words but he nodded, glancing one last time over at Tao, who smiled sadly, the fae's hand clasped on the inside of his simple tunic as he straightened his back. He thought about how powerful this spell could be; if it was anything like the one Chanyeol did to guard his mind, he was apprehensive to the thought of undergoing another just like it. He felt like bolting, his
body disbelieving in his situation. But he steadied his breathing, his mind gaining control.

Jongin. He was so close.

"I'll follow whatever instructions given. It's all for my husband."

Chanyeol tried to smile, but even that small amount of movement seemed to be impossible for the delicate fae. "I can't promise it won't hurt, but whatever happens, I know it will be the right thing," the fire lord whispered before his body could be wracked with another heavy round on shivers. He pulled his blanket closer around him and fell back against the rug, his long frame trembling. The fire burning into the hearth seemed to jump to life and if one looked too closely, there seemed to be the smallest of dancers living inside the flames, all too desperate to share their heat with Chanyeol.

From just beyond Kyungsoo's vision, Yura called for her charge, "Do Kyungsoo! We must hurry! If you're not in the palace grounds by the time the sun rises for her longest day..."

She let the warning hang, wanting Kyungsoo to fill in the blanks for himself. She knew nothing she said would be as monstrous as what an aching mind like Kyungsoo's could conjure up. All the same, she knew that security would tighten and tighten as the moment of the opening celebration neared. Despite the skill both she and Chanyeol were exerting on the human, it was best to avoid the worst of it.

Kyungsoo jumped at her voice, bowing once more to Chanyeol and Tao in turn as he stood up. He followed her at an urgent pace, as she had started to walk without him. The warmth of the room they left evaporated, replaced by an empty coolness that came up from the depths of the tunnel. Again she was leading him down, further and further away from any sounds of revelry. In fact, the air was filling with wicked noises almost like laughter that made him want to look around and find the source. But he knew how strong the pull could be from his lesson the first time, so he kept his head down, following the swish of Yura's long skirts in front of his feet.

Yura peered back at Kyungsoo over her shoulder and giggled softly, "You're right not to look, little one. Taozi taught you well." In a strange moment of empathy for the human, she paused and let him come up beside her. She did not reach for his hand nor attempt to touch him, but she felt that perhaps having a familiar presence alongside him might ease his stress.

"When we retreated here, my broken brother and I, we heard the creatures of the deep too," she offered as explanation, "Whatever ancient being carved out this place must have dug too deep. Even my imps do not often stray from the path when we come down to work our magic. But, if it helps, know that whatever it is that watches us so curiously, in a thousand years, it has never ventured into the light to make contact."

Yura's favorite imp ran up behind them and jumped up on her shoulder, "It wouldn't like little humans anyway. It has more sophisticated tastes, it does. Nothing left in this world at all that is tasty to it, all gone, all killed." Taeyong nodded resolutely as though this was supposed to be comforting information.

Kyungsoo appreciated the move from Yura, but he was still intimidated by her presence. His fingers were gripping his wedding ring a little too tightly as fear gripped his heart. He was surprised when his voice shook as he desperately made conversation in order to calm his nerves.

"Sounds like a balrog. Like..." When her face remained impassive and confused, he looked down again. "It's a monster from stories I read."

As he worried his ring, he realized that it was the only thing left that he had come with into this
world originally. Everything else he had left. In various places, with each of his hosts. A completely
different sense of oddness started to press in on him the further they walked, and his ears popped
several times. The sound around them were starting to converge into denser noise, almost like static,
and he desperately tried to control his breathing as he realized mid-step and two minutes into their
walk that he was becoming very, very claustrophobic. He didn't understand why this was hitting him
now, but he felt warmth ahead and looked up to see why the temperature changed so suddenly.

They had come upon a great opening in the earth, a cavern that extended up and up into a dome that
must have been several stories in height. Beneath them in a vast lake was bubbling magma and fire.
Creatures the size of whales swam beneath the surface; elemental golems, many times the size of
Kris's small stone minions, worked diligently at the surface, pacing back and forth to achieve some
unknown end. A stone bridge, all that remained of the rocky floor of this dome, led across the lake to
a central plateau with a boiling bath of water at its middle. From an unknown hole in the high ceiling
came a drip drip drip of fresh water, feeding the endless toil of the bath, never letting it disappear
completely into steam. Yura allowed Kyungsoo to look over their new surrounding for a moment,
before stepping forward and towards the bridge.

"I suggest that you not look down, if you can help it. Long way," she instructed and began to pass
over the bridge with dainty steps. Her imp followed behind her, getting close to the edge and
pretending to fall off, cracking himself up with roaring laughter.

The half-smile Kyungsoo had on his face was in some ways agreeing with the imp. It was disbelief
and denial all in one. It was boiling down here. The air that hit his face, coming from below him in
steamy columns, almost made him lose his balance as he tried to follow Yura with some degree of
dignity. Sweat poured down his forehead almost instantly. His vision wobbled as he saw the
distortion from invisible heat rising like it did from hot cars in the dead of summer back home.

Home.

Even as his breathing labored and his mouth became dry, he would give anything to be home in a
heatwave. Hear the shuddering cicadas screaming into the air as he struggled to breathe, but seeing
Jongin laughing at him under the canopy of trees that kept them cool in the shade. The sun hitting his
skin and making patterns all over his body, light reflecting off his hair. He would spill a little
lemonade into a cup full of ice and drink it with a kiss from his husband as a chaser...

Kyungsoo's eyes flew open.

"Get up get up get UP!" The imp was screaming in his face, laughing hystERICALLY. Kyungsoo was
horizontal, face burning on the unforgiving slab of obsidian mid-way across the bridge. Yura had just
turned around to acknowledge his tumble.

Yura's face remained placid, though her voice trembled slightly as she spoke, "We must complete the
cleansing as soon as possible and get him out of here. Taeyong, get him away from the edge."

She walked to Kyungsoo's side slowly and carefully, aware that if she should panic, the fear would
spread quickly to her demon and eventually into the human that she had promised her brother to
protect during their time in the underground. Her imp pulled almost uselessly at Kyungsoo's tunic,
but it was enough to satisfy her that the human wasn't about to tumble to his death in the ocean of fire
below. She placed a hand on Kyungsoo's back and rubbed him gently, the way she might ease her
brother's suffering, "This place is dense with magic and very old magic at that."

The intimacy of the moment, of Yura comforting this virtual stranger, was nice and it confused her.
Yura had always been alone except for her imps and her brother, the only things she loved in all the
world. But she now, right here, felt a certain responsibility towards Kyungsoo and let her fingers
glide through his hair, as she had seen Tao do a dozen times, "You're strong, Do Kyungsoo. Only a few more steps."

Kyungsoo struggled to his feet, refusing a hand from both Yura and Taeyong. Secretly, he was tired of being weak, his humanity consistently a great disadvantage. But his determination burned hotter in his own veins, and he managed to make it to the other side of the bridge and collapse to his knees against the side of the pool. He was shaking, eyes wide as he looked back up at Yura to try and coax the next step out of her.

By now the attention of the fiery elementals were drawn towards the three of them in the middle at the pool, some even curiously coming closer.

Yura tried not to let her nervousness at the elementals' approach pass into Kyungsoo, though she eyed them warily. They should have not noticed yet; they should not have already felt her presence. It had to be Kyungsoo, still reeking of the human world. Beneath the ocean of magma, the great whale beasts began to sing what Yura had always thought was a gentle song. Now their music seemed only to encourage the elemental creatures and it felt much more sinister. She had to act quickly.

"Into the water with you," she instructed clearly, wrapping her around arms around Kyungsoo's middle and trying to coax the exhausted human inside. Normally when working magic at the pool, she would temper herself or the object of her spell, letting them grow used to the riotous temperature of the water by splashing them gently or cleaning them first with soft towels soaked in the healing water. They did not have that sort of time.

Taeyong leapt from the side of the pool and swan-dived into the boiling water, "It won't hurt the runt once it loses its skin!"

Yura couldn't let her imp frighten Kyungsoo out of his decision. She offered herself to the burning water, stepping inside the endless pool and letting it eat away at her gorgeous dress. Her bare, exposed skin was viciously red, but it didn't hurt so much as pinch everywhere. She extended a hand to Kyungsoo, "Come. Quickly now."

Kyungsoo was much less graceful than Yura, swallowing hard as he brought his legs underneath him to stick his feet in first. The soles of his feet were fine for a moment, until he went deeper, the top of his feet feeling like they were burning profusely. He recoiled instinctively, pulling them out of the pool, despair clouding his features. How was he supposed to do this?

He was convinced. This was the equivalent of hell. The pain, the sacrifices he had to make....all for Jongin. Instead of strengthening it, his resolve crumbled slightly, surprising him, until he felt a greater heat come up behind him. He turned, noticing a pillar of flame first, then eyes as an elemental rumbled closer, seemingly fixated on him in curiosity.

It was too hot. He was going to be cooked to death, he was sure. There was nowhere for him to go, the elemental was between him and the bridge to the exit.

Nowhere to go but forward.

He cried out as he stepped in, following very quickly with his other leg. His clothes stayed as a small shield for a moment before disappearing as he walked forward into the deeper water, the feeling like he was being stabbed encompassing every inch of his skin. When he brought his hands into the water, they felt nothing for a good long while, and he suspected that it was because of their former searing with Chanyeol that the pain wasn't as great. His clothes disappeared completely, and he turned to look back through tears at the elemental, and it was now looking back and forth trying to
find him. Its bright white eyes blinked before it turned back towards the lava stream, as if it had never sensed Kyungsoo at all.

Yura shushed Kyungsoo coolly, reaching out for him and bringing the human close to her. The stress of the moment, the heat and pain, would keep the otherwise reticent human from fighting her. She held him next to her body, letting their energies mix in the hot soup of the lower caverns. She hadn't intended to get into the pool. She had simply meant to instruct the boy, to have her imp wash him thoroughly. Her own magic and surface level protective wards were disappearing with every second, only the deepest of spells remaining unaffected.

She swallowed back her fears for herself and slowly began to ritual cleaning, gathering up boiling water in her hands and pressing it in Kyungsoo's skin. She washed his face most gently, telling him how well he was doing, even as the heat raised searing red splotches to the boy's skin. Taeyong, at least, was having fun - jumping in and out of the pool and cannonballing back in again.

"Does it still hurt?" she knew it did, but she needed the boy to talk, to stay conscious and aware of the power and energies running through and around his body, "You have to tell me, Kyungsoo."

Kyungsoo wasn't sure at first. He shut his eyes tight. His tears had stopped flowing; every time he cried, they would shoot back up into his eyes as unbearable steam. His whole body was numb from pain that at times felt like knives and at other moments felt like nothing at all. Even behind his eyelids he could see the heat seeping in as dark red stains against them, creeping into every crevice of his body with Yura's guiding hands. His entire body was shaking, nearly rocking as her hands moved over his head, feeling the heat in every pore and hair follicle as she worked the cleansing magic deep into his skin.

Every nerve in his body was asking for the pain to stop. Evey conscious thought had gone from concern for his husband and his own safety on this mission to arresting fear. He could barely breathe, even though all of his effort was going in to keep himself from suffocating. His chest heaved, and he found Yura's wrist to grip and steady himself. Only after a moment did he realize his mistake, and he let go quickly, lowering his head in apology.

He had yet to answer Yura's question. "No," he lied softly.

At first, Yura was shocked by Kyungsoo's reaction, not expecting him to reach for her willingly in moments of need and hurt, but then she relaxed. It was... nice in a way, to know that she was needed by more than her brother and a few demon spawn and she felt sorry to have been so harsh with him earlier. The faery witch let her teeth show in forced smile, though she hardly believed the human when he denied the pain of the ritual, and continued pressing her hands, hot and wet, against his skin. She cupped his round cheeks and smoothed away years of life in worlds far away. She moved as quickly as she dared, glancing over Kyungsoo's shoulder to check to intruding elementals, knowing that she couldn't miss a single spot. She tried to be clever and discreet about it, but her human charge was on such high alert, she was more than aware that he would notice any nervous step.

She nodded to her imp, "Time to go to work," and with a giggle, little Taeyong dove back into the boiling water to begin the systematic washing of more... intimate places. The little imp didn't linger long, moving up and down Kyungsoo's legs with speed.

Kyungsoo shifted, startled but no touch lingered long enough for him to get embarrassed. He felt his foot get lifted and he accidentally lifted his other reflexively, which the imp took advantage of as he fell back into the water.

The sensation of drowning permeated his lungs momentarily as his mouth also filled with heat,
everywhere finally being reached by the cleansing water. His vision flickered in and out with the complete submersion. He was suddenly pulled upright again by Yura, being led from the water even as his brain tried to shake off the disorientation.

Yura was slow to get out of the water, even as she pushed Kyungsoo along, eager to get him out of the depths and safely back in areas of the great mountain that were more permanently in her brother's control. She could feel, though she refused to vocalize it, her own deeply layered power slipping away as the purifying water beaded off her skin. Taeyong must have noticed as well, for he looked back to his mistress and in his eyes for only a second was confusion and concern. She swallowed back her fear and climbed from the pool, wrapping an arm around Kyungsoo and walking them both as quickly as she could from the cavern. Behind her, the scream of the deep whales cried out.

They needed to get to the surface. Both of them were naked and powerless and needed to be set right. In a place like this, an unclaimed and unmagicked creature could disappear and few would ever know what happened to them. She kept her eyes straight forward.

The long path back to Chanyeol's true domain seemed half the length going up as it had been going down. Yura was nearly out of breath when she finally came into sight of Tao and Chanyeol, her brother lounging just as she had left him. Using as much of her strength as she could to hold up Kyungsoo, she called for Tao, "Take him," and fell to her knees at the human's feet.

Chanyeol shifted slightly. Guards came forward, laying great swathes of fabric over Yura and Kyungsoo both, Tao's face contorted into worry and his wings flexing nervously as he waited, wanting to do just that, to take Kyungsoo and make him well. Tao fidgeted, glancing over to where they had emerged, the sound of screeching metal drifting up from the tunnel as a heavy grate slid back into place to close it.

The air was too cold now. Kyungsoo tried to blink the lights out of his vision. He had little success. The irritating flecks had settled into the corner of his eyes as his body tried to recover from the ordeal. His whole body was tingling like the muscles were asleep, thousands of ants crawling just below the surface of his skin. The tips of his fingers and toes grew cold immediately and he couldn't feel his hands. His breathing was coming in short, panting gasps, eyes barely able to focus. He felt like he had just been stripped of a little bit of himself. It was nagging him, the feeling akin to constantly having forgotten something important.

Tao watched as the cloth wrapped around them both, drying them thoroughly. It was only when the last bit of the water was gone from Kyungsoo's body that Tao rushed forward, taking care that he didn't touch Kyungsoo’s skin or hair. To be doubly sure, he raised a bit of the fabric over Kyungsoo's face and hugged him, his own sleeves low to cover his own hands. He inhaled, finding no trace of Kyungsoo’s human scent. The cleansing ritual had worked.

Tao turned to acknowledge Yura as she was escorted to her feet, a few more imps bringing her a variety of protective charms to choose from, everything from jewels to chains and even crudely hand drawn paper wards. "Thank you, my Lady."

Yura looked back to Tao and had enough strength to nod, a small smile across her lips, before she lost her footing and fell to the ground again. She vomited what looked to be nothing but hot water and the little imps rushed in circles, panicked, clearing it up and trying to move her away. Two of the smallest creatures were busy trying to clasp strands of jewels around her ankles. Slowly, slowly, she was guided into her nervous brother's waiting arms. Unlike Tao, Chanyeol made no move to avoid his sister's touch, instead, kissing her hair and holding her close.

Taeyong broke away from the scene, leaving the care of his mistress and master to a growing group of little demons eager to show their loyalty. With his typical hop-skip walk, he approached
Kyungsoo and Tao, bowing slightly when he came close, "All they can do, the master has done and this mistress is finished. There is nothing else for the human thing in the Firelands."

His words were not threatening, but they had an air of finality about them. No one could question that the little demon had a great love and a deep faithfulness to the Lord and Lady of Fire.

Tao blinked in surprise, letting Kyungsoo lean against his chest as he regarded Taeyong. "I'm...begging your pardon but... Kris is ever grateful of course, but... a weapon for him? A disguise?" His eyes drifted back to Yura and Chanyeol, completely engrossed in one another. "If you don't wish to divulge anything more in regards to those things I would understand My Lord, My Lady. But we... Kyungsoo needs...the location of the secret entrance to the palace. I don't know where it's hidden."

Taeyong's eyes narrowed and he attempted to step between Tao and the siblings, though his small stature made the move nearly useless, "Does it not see what pain the human thing caused to my mistress? She tries to help, she does, and now her insides are all empty. Then it asks for more!"

The imp looked back to Chanyeol and Yura. Color had started to return to Yura's cheeks, due to the fire in the hearth blazing and her similarly weak brother's constant attention. The other creatures attending them had begun to offer plates of sweets, hoping that a bit of food would restore Yura's physical strength at least. She didn't refuse but she did not take any of the refreshment either, burying her head in Chanyeol's chest and shivering.

"The human will be human, no matter how it stinks," Taeyong lectured, pointing an accusatory finger at Kyungsoo, "We washed it ourselves and we see the truth of its weakness. What happens to the mistress if Do Kyungsoo fails? What happens? It doesn't know."

Yura's voice was ragged yet soft when she finally spoke, "He... won't fail. He can't."

Chanyeol seemed the most surprised to hear her words, "Yura, you need to rest. We need to rest."

Kyungsoo's focus came back momentarily as he felt Tao tense up and grip him tighter, concern lacing the fae's features. Kyungsoo lifted his head as best he could, regarding the imp with tired, sad eyes. "They've given me more than I deserve, Tao. Let's just go. I don't want to trouble them anymore."

Tao looked down at the human, confused as he opened his mouth to protest. "Kyungsoo, we-"

Kyungsoo cut him off, gripping the collar of Tao's outer robe. The feeling like he was forgetting something important intensified, his eyes wide as he spoke faster. "No, it is fine. We have to go. All I have left to offer them is my gratitude for what they've done. I need to find Jongin. We need to go home. I have work in the morning. Someone needs to feed the fish in Jay's office."

Tao's eyes widened as he realized what was happening. Delirium was setting in the human's mind, rapidly exacerbated by the cleansing ritual that stripped off any excess magic...including Kris's muted protection charms. He lifted Kyungsoo's wrist to check the bracelet, noticing that despite the cleansing, the charm was still whole, albeit muted somewhat. He should have waited to give it to him. He'd have to fix it now.

Guards parted to make way for Tao as he hefted up Kyungsoo's body to walk him back to the room to retrieve their belongings. "Focus, Kyungsoo. Please. We're nearly out of time."

They heard Yura's strain before they heard her voice, "Do Kyungsoo! Do Kyungsoo, listen to me!" The imps that surrounded the Lady of Fire tugged at her arms, even has Yura used what little
strength remained to get closer to the human she had given so much to protect. "The forest grove, where Junmyeon struck down the old king..." Tao's eyes flickered with realization, and Yura continued. "That King had been trying to escape using a hidden passage." Yura choked on her own words and almost gagged again, her body revolting as it sought magic and found none, "The passage is concealed but only superficially. There is no magic there. The Wind Master uses it to allow his spies into the palace undetected."

Chanyeol struggled up himself and helped his sister to stand more completely, each of them straining, "Take the path, but avoid the Wind Master at all costs. If it comes to it, Sehun will always choose his King. Our names will get you far with many at the palace. Say always that you are an emissary of the Firelands. But Sehun... he will not care if for even a second he thinks you have come for his Junmyeon."

Taeyong glared again at Tao and Kyungsoo and hurried to attend his master and his mistress, raising his little hands and soothing them with a soft green magic that had the siblings slowly slowly curling back down into their warm embrace before the fire. The other imps went to work, covering the two of them with blankets and brushing their hair back from their face to apply cool compresses to their brows. Taeyong, pleased with the Lord and Lady's soft slumber, turned back to the retreating guests, shooing them away with a long string of admonitions, "The mistress told you what it wants to know. The master makes you safe. Take whatever it wants from the armory and go go go. Find the half breed if it dares, but human things are always scared. They told you to find him and you didn't listen."

Kyungsoo was still confused, but Tao narrowed his eyes in realization. His lips drew into a thin line, resisting the urge to respond. "Come." Tao glanced one last time towards Chanyeol and Yura, leaving the great hall with speed.

Tao placed Kyungsoo on the bed of the guest room, while Tao hurriedly packed up their remaining effects back into their original knapsacks, setting them by the door. All that was left was one small ornate box. It fit in Tao's palm, and he walked over to Kyungsoo and held it in front of him on his sleeve.

Kyungsoo sat up slowly, the cloth that still clung to him now sliding down his body as he attempted to regain his composure. To his surprise, Tao slid the box into his hands. "What... what is this?"

Tao nodded towards it. "Your disguise. You heard the Lord. You're going to pretend to be an emissary of the Firelands. Open it. It will provide you with the necessary outfit."

Kyungsoo blinked at it's size. It looked no bigger than a jewelry box his mother would keep earrings in. But he did as he was told, a corner of fabric peeking up as he lifted the lid. He pulled, and pulled, and pulled until finally every piece came out, the colors dark red and black mixed with fiery orange and yellow gems as trim. There were even pants and a long dress shirt. Kyungsoo struggled to pull the shoes out, but they were in his size, and had the same matching designs in black and red.

Kyungsoo laughed. This was absurd.

"It's not absurd," Tao said once the thought had passed. Kyungsoo eyed him suspiciously.

"I thought you couldn't read my thoughts anymore."

Tao gave a sly grin. "You're right. I can't. But that doesn't mean I can't intuitively know what you're thinking. I'm insightful like that. Now get dressed."
It didn't take long for them to leave, their one stop to the armory to only grab a small dagger to make him look more 'official', Tao had said. Once outside, Kyungsoo seemed to regain his sense of self, his breathing evening out. Nobody paid them any mind, the crowd a lot thinner than it had been yesterday. Even Heechul, laughing heartily at a troll that seemed to have lost a drinking contest with a nereid didn't acknowledge them as they left.

They found their dragon over the ridge, napping in the shade of the trees. Tao pressed his glamour to the dragon and himself once again, his outfit matching Kyungsoo's for the moment as the dragon's scales turned red. Tao's words were soft as they loaded up the packs quickly and took flight, the dragon flying low right above the trees. They circled closer towards the palace before dropping lower and out of sight.

Kyungsoo was nervous, gripping the hilt of the secured dagger underneath his robe. "Do you know where the...place where the old king died?"

"Every fae knows the place," Tao responded, the dragons flight slowing to glide into a gash on the side of a hill. The tops of the towers of the palace shimmered in the distance, and below it was a marker, old pillars collapsed against trees and moss-covered stone in a small overgrown thicket. Fireflies shimmered in and out over the dirt where nothing seemed to grow, and the forest was still around them. "Nobody comes here because they don't want to be reminded of the past," Tao said solemnly. He looked down at Kyungsoo and gripped the charm that remained wrapped around the human's wrist, concentrating. After a moment the shell seemed to brighten, the strength of the spell restored. "We must find the entrance to Sehun's tunnel. Quickly."

They both slid off their mount, just as a muted roar of cheers seemed to emanate from the palace. The dragon chuffed at the noise, her nostrils flaring as she sniffed around, then finally pawing at the ground away from the center of the clearing.

Kyungsoo looked where she was scratching, at an area where a downed tree and a worn pillar leaned against one another. Noticing long uninterrupted marks on the stones, Kyungsoo kicked the dirt away, a small sun etched into the ground.

"Is this it?" Kyungsoo wondered aloud, as another, louder bout of cheering came again. He ran his fingers over the sun, a click coming from the center as the stone for the middle popped up. He turned to regard the dragon, and her intelligent eyes blinked at him slowly. He pressed it down, and the stones fell away, rocks and dirt parting to reveal an open trapdoor with a staircase.

Kyungsoo almost cried with joy, thanking her profusely. She butted his chest in response, and he pet her head and long horns in thanks.

"You can do this, Kyungsoo," Tao came up behind him, checking to make sure there really weren't any magical traps as his hands felt along the edges of the tunnel. He slipped something into Kyungsoo's pocket. "Take this to light your way. Crush it once you exit from the tunnel. We will be with you soon."

Kyungsoo nodded, his eyes thankful as he gripped Tao's sleeve one last time. Tao shooed him away, and he stared down the tunnel as the trap door closed behind him.
Jongin peered out of his window and audibly gasped. The Summer Palace had finally come into view. He reached behind him and held Jongdae's hand tightly, knowing that their small journey would soon be over and his future would be secured.

After discovering that Jongin's wings were still just a bit too weak to fly, they had chosen to travel by carriage. In part, Jongin had begged for it because it seemed romantic, but also because he wanted desperately to see more of the countryside, to take in more of the realm that would be his own. Jongdae, as usual, was unable to deny his favorite anything and they had left their hideaway quickly, in a time determined to make them fashionably late and to prevent any nosy courtiers from seeing them too early and alerting the king of Jongdae's intentions. Their carriage was moved along by nothing by magic and it made for a cozy ride that included gorgeous vistas and plenty of opportunities for Jongin to feed and grow stronger.

Now Jongin's eyes were as big as saucers as he took in the Summer Palace. The weather outside had already shifted to a comfortable heat and Jongin had stripped down accordingly, happy to display his new and improved body. He'd chosen a costume of thin, golden chains that stretched across his chest and full stomach more as decoration that true clothing. They held up, but only just, a flowing muslin fabric that allowed the outline of his lower body to be visible, but not the details. His wings, during his dance, would be on full display, despite the fact that they had yet to develop any color. Jongin tried not to worry about it, selecting the simple costume because it was even more plain than his wings, but it was something always at the back of his mind.

His voice was hoarse when he spoke, "How much longer?"

Jongdae leaned over to kiss Jongin's shoulder gently, his hands tracing his arm down to his fingers. His light armor shifted, the muted colors of aqua mixed with copper and black guaranteeing that people would focus on his Kai instead of him. "Almost there, my love. Your audience is waiting for you." He was maintaining a glamour so strong, trying to mask their presence. He knew that everyone would be checked before they entered. But it would be by simpler fae with simple minds. A dark prince's gaze would be no match against those whose only purpose is to serve.

The carriage slowed, then stopped completely. Jongdae stole a glance outside to see the guards checking the carriages in front of them, one on either side. Once they could confirm who the occupants were, they let them go forward.

They started, then stopped once again. "My dearest Kai," Jongdae lowered his hand down to entwine his and his fledgling’s fingers together, magic thrumming between them. "Greet him as you would a new friend. Be sure to look him in the eyes."

Jongin felt his face flush, but he did as he was instructed, opening their window just enough for the guard to begin his inspection. Tall and gruff, the faery guard first studied Jongin, then glanced over his shoulder at Jongdae. "On your way into the festival?"

"Uhh, of course!" Jongin answered, making it a point to smile and speak directly at the guard, "It's been so long since we were able to visit the palace. It's good to see the palace guard are still working hard for our protection."

At first, the guard seemed confused, concentrating on Jongin's face with blank eyes and Jongin was sure that they were about to be caught. He wasn't sure exactly what he was afraid of, what he thought the guards of the palace might do to him, but he knew that if they didn't make it into the
palace, if he didn't dance for the King, that his hopes of being able to stay in the faery world would be gone.

"It's... so beautiful here," Jongin continued, trying to be as warm and welcoming as Jongdae needed him to be, "I'm sure the king has scheduled great entertainment to welcome in the season."

While Jongin distracted the first guard, Jongdae caught eyes with the second on his side, his magic making the guard's eyes go unfocused as he stared at him. The guard's hands gripped his spear tighter as he tried to fight off the magic Jongdae was exerting, but one last push was all he needed, and the guard went lax, returning to his inspection of the outside. He wouldn't remember seeing them unless someone dug the memory out of his head by force.

Jongdae turned his attention back to the guard on Jongin's side. "The King only deserves the best, of course. We have you," He pressed a kiss into his neck. "Say goodbye my dear."

The guard's confused movements went lax as he locked eyes with Jongdae, and the guard awkwardly bowed. "Two emissaries from the King's Riverlands," He stuttered out. "Welcome."

Jongdae was all smiles as the guards waved them forward, and they proceeded past the gates into the castle grounds proper. Once they were in the gardens area, Jongdae's breathing sounded strained for a few seconds as he tried to recover from the amount of effort it was taking to conceal them.

"You did well, Kai."

Jongin, struggling to understand how they had moved past the guards so easily, looked back through the window. The first guard noticed him and waved, friendly but with hesitation, as if he was also a bit unsure of how the carriage had gotten past them. Jongin swung back into the carriage, not wanting him to second guess his decision. The carriage moved into the city complex and they began the slow trek down the main road up to the palace entrance. Soon they would disembark from their ride, but for now, Jongin watched in complete fascination as they passed fae and magical creatures of all kinds. Huge displays of magical decoration, booths of fresh food and flowers and costumes that literally glittered with thousands of jewels lit up Jongin's imagination.

"Riverlands?" Jongin whispered, leaning in to kiss Jongdae's temple, hoping to ease his maker's breathing, "Is that what we are for the time being? Will you be able to keep it up?" Jongin's new wings fluttered with nervous apprehension behind him and he had to concentrate to keep them still. He often felt like his wings were giving him away, showing his emotions even when he wished he could hide them.

Jongdae chuckled, confidence sliding back into place as he regained control of his magic. "The Riverlands are where the King is from. It constitutes the right amount of respect and privacy."

Jongdae turned to face Jongin, looking into his eyes. No magic or glamour swayed in their depths to influence him. The prince merely leaned forward, waiting for Jongin to kiss him. When he did, they savored it, deepening it as their feelings blossomed together. Before they could forget themselves in each other, Jongdae broke the kiss, voice low. "Spells and glamour on top of one another are difficult to control. But with you by my side... we can do anything."

His hands pressed at the base of Jongin's worrying wings, petting them gently on the skin of the shoulder blade junction to soothe him. "It's only for a little bit longer. Can't spoil the surprise of you being the main attraction for the ceremony, can we?"

Jongin giggled under his breath, always feeling like a curious child under Jongdae's careful touches, "I guess not..." He quickly pushed a tiny kiss onto the corner of Jongdae's kitten lips and turned to gaze in wonder out of the window again, letting Jongdae's hands tickle and massage his still aching...
back. He felt, for the first time in a long while, that his life was finally headed down the path of adventure and passion that he had always imagined. And it was all thanks to Jongdae, even if a hint of darkness seemed to linger in the back of Jongin's mind, something almost forgotten but still --

The carriage pulled into a simple stable area and parked in a private stall. Around them, other noble fae were disembarking and securing care for their belongings and animals. Other carriages around them had been brought into the palace complex led by horses, others by giant, almost prehistoric-looking birds that reminded Jongin of cassowaries he had seen in the zoo back in his old life, but these were even more brightly and uniquely colored. The door to their carriage opened by magic to allow Jongin and Jongdae to exit comfortably, but Jongin hesitated. Before he could step out into this new world, he looked back to Jongdae and smiled, "I love you."

Jongdae blinked in awe at Jongin. It was like his heart had skipped several beats and he found it surprising that his glamour managed to stay in place. Something shook in the core of his being, that reminded him that stripped down to his feelings, he truly loved his Kai back. It was intoxicating and reminded him of the first time he had seen him. When he fell in love with his soul and knew his own was meant to be entwined with his. It was elating.

Jongdae smiled brightly, a bit of himself showing through his face. "I... love you too." It didn't feel like enough. "With my whole heart." Still not enough. Emotion swelled in his chest. He’d dreamt of this moment hundreds of times, to be wanted by another. It was everything he had hoped for and more.

Jongdae’s smile did not fade even as the moment passed. He held Jongin's hand to help him exit, the sun bright and the bustle of activity around them invigorating. Nobody paid them any mind. "We have time to enjoy a few of the festivities before we head inside. A snack or two from the stalls here never fails to impress."
Chapter 15

Kyungsoo traversed the tunnel that had twists and turns but thankfully no branching paths. It did unsettle him when he heard scurrying and scratching through the dirt and stone walls, its source unknown. Kyungsoo felt in his pocket, taking out a small glass orb that glowed at the touch of his fingertips which Tao slipped into his pocket. He held it to his chest in silent thanks, and it glowed ever brighter.

It was a long walk. Vines had grown across from one side of the tunnel to the other, impeding him and forcing him to crawl under or climb over at various intervals.

But finally a worn wooden door appeared at the end, light actually seeping through the cracks in the wood. He carefully pressed on it, and it creaked open, revealing a more ornate, polished wood surface. He was inside a tall dresser. He quietly clutched the orb in his hand and with little effort it disintegrated into dust, the magic quietly poofing out of existence. Slowly, he opened the door, peeking out which revealed an empty guest room. The bed was unmade, gems and jewels laid out and clothes from a large trunk strewn about like the current occupant had a hard time deciding what to wear for the day.

This was his chance. Kyungsoo quickly closed both doors and made his way to the door to exit. Again, he peeked out when he opened it, but found a bustle of activity on the other side in a long hall. Fae chatted and gossiped and laughed to one another as they walked, their ornate outfits beautiful and flowing. Guards paced the long hall and had stations on either end. Kyungsoo knew then that this must be a guest living quarters. He steadied his breathing, making sure his hood was low and stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind him.

He tried following one fae but she was entranced by the flowers outside of an awning, coaxing them to grow as she hummed at them. He switched his focus, following a group of exceedingly tall elves out of the hall, turning into a courtyard with tall white marble pillars and even more flowers in full bloom. Water flowed out of the tallest vine covered walls, pixies taking turns to direct the flow to try and splash at passerby below. Music was playing, fae were dancing, and across the gardens, he could see the stairs up to an archway. The entrance of the main great hall of the palace. The structure looked to be part marble, part tree, like how Kris's castle was back in the Winter Lands. But the tree wasn't encapsulated in ice here. It moved and swayed in the breeze, releasing pink petals down onto the patrons below.

He knew he was being quite obvious as he stared, but he was in awe, taking in the beauty of the people and the sight before him.

Kyungsoo's eyes were so busy, his heart racing with excitement and apprehension, that he failed to notice that he was not the only one staring. From a lonely table in a crowded bar of the central courtyard, Kris had caught sight of Kyungsoo despite the human's disguise. The Winter Lord sniffed the air, tried to taste it on his tongue. Kyungsoo's unique scent was gone, but there was no mistaking the curve of his lips, nor the comfortable softness of his round cheeks. Even scrubbed clean of his human aura and dressed like an old world fae, Kyungsoo still was a bright light in Kris's vision.

The Lord of Winter ached for him.

Throwing back the rest of his drink, Kris nodded his thanks to the barkeep and took to the shadows along the main route up and into the palace. He kept several feet behind Kyungsoo, not wanting to alarm his former guest, but also not wanting to raise suspicions. He had chosen to forgo a glamour and instead disguise himself with plainer robes and a hood that covered much of his face until he
wished to be seen. Rather than change his appearance, he simply tried to blend in, pushing away attention with just a tap to the consciousness of those who looked his way.

He reached out carefully with his mind towards Kyungsoo, trying to touch him gently as he had back in the library and let Kyungsoo know that they were together, safe for the time being.

\textit{Kyungsoo - I'm here. We're going to get your husband back. I'm here, Kyun-}

Kris stopped suddenly in his tracks, his mouth going to dry. He couldn't... he couldn't reach Kyungsoo. His words simply bounced back into his own head. Something was different about Kyungsoo, something that Kris had not expected. A wall... He watched as Kyungsoo began to disappear into the crowd, but his feet remained planted and stiff.

Kyungsoo blinked, a muted tickle at the back of his head. He wondered if that was the protective wall in his mind at work, keeping intrusions out, but it also meant that someone was attempting to do so. He continued walking as best he could without wanting to raise suspicion that he knew that the attempt occurred, wanting to move quickly away from the source if they suspected him as being different.

Suddenly another fae leaned over a nearby bar, asking if he wanted a drink. Kyungsoo eyed the frothy concoctions laid out for patrons to take, and lifted his hand in an attempt to turn down the offer politely. He froze, however, when he heard laughter erupt from his right, seeing a large gathering of fae pressed around one of the longer roots of the tree, surrounded by pillows and hookah. There, in the middle of the small throng of fae was Tao, two female fae leaning against him as he waved to the bartender behind him. "Three more over here please!" Tao winked, but his eyes went lower, focusing straight at Kyungsoo before turning his attention back to the girls. He had a completely different outfit on than when Kyungsoo saw him last, hair flaming red and a few chains connecting his lip to his ear.

He was impressively distracting, that was for sure. It seemed to work, the bartender changing focus as Kyungsoo managed to slip away quietly.

From a distance, Kris watched - hoping - as Kyungsoo turned. Maybe the human had felt him, maybe despite whatever had happened deep down in Chanyeol's caves, something still connected them together. He forced himself forward, only to follow Kyungsoo's gaze to his always lavish child. Tao's dress reminded Kris very distinctly of their early times together. Unlike Kris, Tao had a strange love of this sort of engagement, but mostly (Kris thought) Tao seemed to enjoy draping himself in jewels and finding a group of people to admire it. Kris had accompanied him to enough events to know that Tao's smile was never brighter than when he had a group of fae enraptured in another of his sweet songs or fashion experiments.

Kris made his way to Tao, just as Kyungsoo disappeared from view and placed a steady hand on his child's back. He used his magic to turn the female faes' attention from him, hoping that their striking surroundings would be enough to keep their attention. He didn't want to have to use a deeper magic. If they looked at him now, they would see a man with nondescript features, but if they forced their gaze, it was possible that they might recognize him. A risk that Kris needed to take...

"Taozi," Kris whispered, pressing his body against Tao from behind in a way that hid him more completely, but also allowed him to blend even more into the crowd, so many of the fae eager and overly sexed in their greetings, "You made it. Have you seen the little prince?"

Tao's smile never faltered as he gestured and conversed casually with the other fae around him. Once a break was to be had in one of his stories, his eyes unfocused, directing the whisper of a mental response towards Kris.
'None my Lord... there's so much magic mingling together in the air...more defensive than usual at a gathering this size. Too many people wanting to hide their intentions. Jongdae is most likely one of them.'

Yes, Kris could feel it too. The entire place was nearly thrumming with energy, half of it warm, sexual and excited for the day ahead. The other half was distinctly more defensive, as Tao had said. There was a metallic hint to the air, as though many fae had drawn psychic armor around themselves. Kris laughed along with Tao's little stories to keep the mood light, but his senses remained on highest alert. Although they had time still before the festival reached its peak, it would be best to stop Jongdae before he had the chance to begin, rather than let the little prince make the public show of defiance they all suspected would come. On his way into the Summer Lands, Kris had directed his dragon down many of the hidden roads coming out of the great forests and there had been no sign of travel. Jongdae was hiding himself (and his new lover) very well.

Kris buried his face in Tao's neck and nibbled playfully, continuing their conversation mentally, "And Kyungsoo - he was there but he couldn't... I couldn't reach him. He didn't even realize I was there. What did Chanyeol do, or was it that sister witch of his?"

The physical contact between them made Tao's heart flutter, wanting desperately to turn around and hold his maker. But he kept up his charade, talking then asking a question of the group to direct attention away from himself and start a conversation while he conversed mentally with Kris.

His words were easier to hear in Kris's head. 'Chanyeol made him a mental barrier....out of memories of you.' He sent him small flashes of Kyungsoo's worn face, burned skin and red eyes filled with unshed tears. He showed him the symbols upon Kyungsoo's palms. 'He refused to have his memories taken of his Mother.'

When another outburst of laughter made the rounds of their circle, Tao made light of it by pulling a hookah out of one of the girls hands to smoke from it, an indication that someone else could continue the conversation. A gnome seized the opportunity, telling of how their warriors made a great trip to earth where they slayed a den of boars and were presenting them today for the feast. Impressed 'ooh's and compliments came from all around them, and Tao took the moment to reconnect with Kris again. 'The fire witch cleansed him herself in the earth below, but afterwards they were both too weak to continue their hospitality. We had to leave. Thankfully, Yura's imp managed to disclose the secret entrance for Kyungsoo.'

While Tao and Kris conversed, Kyungsoo had made his way up the stairs to the arched entryways to the throne room. The large open area inside was lit up by sunlight and flowers and floating gems that bounced light from outside onto the floor for more light in a myriad of different colors. The way the light seeped in from the ceiling where roots and branches alike from the great tree grew through was spectacular as well. He leaned against one of the pillars at the entrance, squinting as he noticed an elevated altar at the far end with four thrones at the base of the tree just on the other side of it.

A guard lowered his spear in front of his face when he wanted to go further. "You can't go in yet, fireling. Wait for the bells like everyone else."

Kyungsoo bowed his head. "O-of course. Apologies." He turned and stood at the top of the stairs, looking down into the courtyard. It was so sprawling he could barely see the other end where he had come from. He decided to go back closer to where Tao was sitting, his location easy to spot. He started down the stairs, accidentally bumping into someone on the way down. He apologized again, hurrying in his steps and not bothering to look at the couple engrossed in one another, the two of them wearing similarly green outfits.

Kris's arms tightened around Tao's middle, a hard ball of fear caught in his throat, "He... locked me
out?" The idea seemed impossible. He had been sure that he and Kyungsoo's relationship had been growing stronger, though he knew and promised himself that he would never expect it to move much further. But he liked having the human around, wanted to be able to feel his soft presence, even if the sort of intimacy that Kris craved would always be denied. He resigned himself to that sort of bittersweet, unrequited love. But he also had never imagined being unable to even see Kyungsoo's heart and mind.

He nuzzled under Tao's chin and kissed him over and over again, a little line of affection down Tao's sharp jawline. He wanted to be close to someone now, but, for the first time, Tao was not enough. He let go of his child and took a few steps back, "I'll make my way to the palace separately from you. We don't want too many to see us together. I can't hold my magic for-

Kris caught sight of Kyungsoo coming down the stairs, descending into the courtyard. His chest felt heavy with regret and he remembered the soft cooing of his dragons - 'why did you not say something when you had the chance'. He watched Kyungsoo intensely, not wanting to send out a thought lest he tamper with the wall.

Kyungsoo blinked as he saw Tao arch his neck as he received affection from a fae behind him. He stared, noticing the figure was larger than most around him, and he inhaled in realization as he saw one large hand he'd recognize anywhere.

It was Kris.

He tried to calm himself, plopping down on pillow close to them but not obviously so. Pretending to be just another someone with whom anyone could strike up a conversation.

Kris started towards the human, but something inside told him to stop. Unlike Kris who was capable of weaseling himself from a difficult situation using his status and his history as a war hero, Kyungsoo... well, if the truth were discovered about Kyungsoo and his unclaimed human soul, there would be consequences. Kris was better off staying far enough away from Kyungsoo so that they appeared to be strangers. It stung, but Kris knew that it was the right way to handle the situation. He pushed his feet hard into the soles of his shoes and turned back to Tao, letting himself fall into the smooth and luxurious world of aristocratic gossip and heavy tobacco, sneaking glances towards Kyungsoo until their eyes met across the crowded stalls. He fought back the instinct to call to Kyungsoo.

Instead, Kris simply smiled and hoped that Kyungsoo understand. You are not alone, I am still here for you, I will still do what has to be done for your Jongin.

He was close to losing himself in Kyungsoo's deep brown eyes when the bells began to ring, signifying the beginning of the courtier-exclusive festivities in the heart of the palace. In the days before Junmyeon, it was only when these silver bells rang over the kingdom that an average citizen could even visit the palace complex. Now it was more ceremonial, but the prejudice of the event continued. Only the richest and most well-titled of the fae began to ride and make their way into the Junmyeon's kingly hall.

Kyungsoo's relief of seeing Kris and having him smile reassuringly in return was cut short as the bells began to sound. Muted panic settled into his features as groups rose from their tables and various perches to fly, float, or walk towards the arches and into the grand throne room. He tried to keep a good idea as to where Kris was, just so he didn't feel alone. Tao had to stay, exclaiming loudly that he still didn't have the clout of his Lord of Winter, his maker. Other fae who stayed behind cooed in sympathy at his plight. Another grizzled looking troll exclaimed that maybe the King shouldn't've gotten himself banished. Kyungsoo didn't hear the rest of the argument at his back, reaching the bottom of the stairs.
As they moved to climb the steps, a few fae stayed behind. Kyungsoo hoped he wouldn't be stopped, but his worry in that regard passed quickly, as guards ushered him in with a nod to the fire emblem on his robe. Kyungsoo moved forward with the excited throng of attendees, getting particularly close to the left side of the altar. He kept his head low but curiosity kept him peeking up at the activity around him.

It was also at that moment, distracted as he was, that he should probably start looking for Jongin. He knew he would be presented, but the thrones and altar were empty, so there was probably some ceremony that needed to happen first. He looked around slowly, faces blurring in his vision. He noticed that his eyes were being redirected away from several faces, unfocusing like they did whenever he looked at a bright blue light on a dark night. It put him on alert, his hand gripping the pommel of his dagger tightly under his robes. He didn't feel safe.

Kris kept his eyes trained on Kyungsoo until the human disappeared inside the palace. He had no desire to lose him again. They were so close to their goal, it wouldn't do for Kris to mess it up now. He reached back and grasped Tao's hand one last time, pulling out comfort and warmth and deeply wishing that court etiquette would have changed more in the years since Junmyeon's coronation. Pulling away, he began to follow the crowd up towards the inner courtyard, letting himself fade away into the masses. Through Kris was not a master of disguise or subterfuge, he had through he was doing a good job of disappearing when a lithe arm flew around his shoulders.

"Ahh, a Lord of Winter appears," a smooth, soft voice whispered, "This is not much a look for you, Kris. So simple. And surely you must have know that I would recognize you anywhere."

Jessica - the Lady of Spring - was, as always, a picture of elegance itself. Her milky skin was nearly translucent, appearing completely unblemished until one began to look closer. Upon inspection, swirls and spirals of brilliant white protective spells and glamours danced across her skin. It gave the impression that the Lady was moving in and out of existence, as though you were in a dream and were only seeing her as an illusion in your mind's eye. It was absolutely intoxicating, even to Kris, who should have known better. Her deep black dress contrasted with her white skin and again with the soft pastel clothing of the rest of the Spring delegation. It had been years since the seasonal kingdoms had been redistributed into the care of Junmyeon's most trusted generals, but Jessica was never going to let anyone forget it that she had been snubbed in her bid for the frozen south. That she felt deeply disrespected to have had her wishes ignored and the ancient castle in the winter wastes given to Kris instead. She wore her mourning and her fury on her sleeve.

"I'm not here to make a fashion statement, my Lady," Kris answered, holding his tongue to keep the frustration at this interruption from dripping in his words.

"A good point," Jessica exclaimed, as though she hadn't been eager to bring the topic to the surface, "Why would a banished courtier appear at the Great Festival? What purpose would he have? What permission would he have obtained to be in the Summerlands at all?"

Kris's eyes narrowed. He had to be careful. Jessica was well known to employ more spies and little listening charms than any of the other generals or court favorites. Truth was essential, for she would catch him in a lie before he had even finished speaking. "I am here for the protection of the King. I promised to be by his side all those years ago, and I will maintain that promise."

It was the truth in part. Kris couldn't deny that part of him worried that Jongdae's machinations would end, not with Jongdae in chains but with Junmyeon's reputation in ruins. His heart pumped furiously - he should be inside now looking for the dark prince and his captive, not outside playing political footsie with Jessica.

"You believe the King is in danger then? You have knowledge of a plot against him?" Jessica asked,
twisting his words to dig deeper, "Curious that you wouldn't have brought that knowledge to the City Guard and the Windmaster, if you knew it were true. I heard you made quite a show at the last general council meeting - perhaps they didn't want to hear more of your conspiracy theories."

Kris shrugged, "Perhaps you should have made the trip to the capital yourself, if you wish to have known more about the goings-on at court."

Jessica didn't respond immediately, unhappy at Kris's short answer. Kris had made it a point for the years that he had known her to give only the information necessary to satisfy Jessica's immediate question. Anything more and you were giving her the upper hand. Unlike Kris, Jessica had been raised to know her way around the political arena and her skill in manipulation and intelligence were second to none. She too had been key to Junmyeon's victory over the old king, though her battles were in the courtroom, not on the battlefield. She had been the one to bring the old families to heel. While Kris felt unnerved in her presence, he had no reason to doubt her loyalty to the crown... not yet.

"I'm not going to tell them on you, if that is what you think," Jessica said, changing the subject. "I can understand the need for stealth. I simply wish to remain informed. I don't like being lied to." Her final words were cold and hard and Kris felt him in his soul. She had pressed them harshly into his mind. She wanted him to remember.

Kris bowed slightly and stepped towards the entrance of the palace, where the line to enter the central hall was being to thin. They would soon be closing the door, allowing the ceremony to begin. "Then we will both be wanting a good view of the festivities. If you will excuse me, my Lady."

Jessica laughed and it was as clear as the bells which called the fae aristocracy home, "For now."

Steadying his confidence with a renewed casting of his fading spell, he moved aside, allowing Jessica to sweep by him a flurry of black lace, her attendants rushing behind her. Kris waited for them to safely enter before slipping past the guards in the shadow of their skirts, the guards too busy watching Jessica's welcoming curves to worry much about a nondescript noble fae, bladeless and faceless.

The anticipation for the ceremony was bringing the energy in the room to a head. Laughter and conversations died down as a fae voice sounded throughout the throne room, echoing off the crystals that hung high above their heads.

"Jessica, Lady of Spring." The crowd parted as Jessica made her way to the front with her small entourage, attracting all attention towards her as she began to climb the few stairs to the front. Kyungsoo stared in awe, having a front row view of the ceremony as it commenced, watching as her group broke off and bowed to her. With a wave of her hand, she conjured two branches that bloomed cherry blossoms at the ends, placing one as an offering at the base of the stone altar. She then moved to the leftmost throne, touching the remaining branch to it. It absorbed the branch, blooming with magic from the mother tree in color and crystallized formations to create the shape of her seat. She sat down comfortably, crossing her legs and waiting for the others.

The announcements continued. "Victoria, Lady of Autumn." Victoria came from the side with her elegant dragon skin dress, a bound sword at her side and deceptively thin armor lacing her shoulders and hands. Amber was right behind her in ceremonial dress and armor, lifting the trailing tails of orange and red leaves woven together to make her elaborate shawl. Victoria did the same thing at the altar with flat green branches, dusty with sand. When they were offered, the Autumn throne, far to the right, creaked with magic. Its initially smooth surface burst into blooming desert flowers and thin, prodding cactus spines, fiery red with dull green and brown flourishes. She sat, the spines along the arms flattening to allow her comfort.
There was a moment of silence, an indication that Kris's introduction was meant to be in that poignant pause. It didn't last long however, as guards came in from the back to line the way to the throne for Junmyeon. The voice of the announcer was loud and invigorating, "King Junmyeon of the Riverlands, Lord of Summer!" The crowd, who so far had had muted and respectful reactions to the women's entrances, cheered louder for their King. He was dressed simply, in a formal black military uniform accented with silver and green. A shining silver crown rested on top of his thick hair, curling into verdant vines at the front. The green made his deep brown eyes sparkle and throughout the crowd were whispers of how regal, how kingly was his beauty. His face was solemn as he came forward to lay his branch from the mother tree at the base of the altar, the central throne bursting into blooms of sky blue and yellow. He turned to sit, raising a hand to end the cheering.

Even Kris, who entered the hall and kept safely to the back of the room, was moved to silence by the ceremony. Though Junmyeon's physical body had changed very little in the eyes of someone like Kyungsoo, Kris could see his king and his best friend's many transformations clearly. Memories of their years and years together during the planning and slow turn of the revolution were hard to push away and Kris found himself wanting to do nothing more than steal his old Junmyeon away from this place and kiss away the sadness in his eyes.

All those years ago, Kris had promised the elders of the Riverlands that he would serve as Junmyeon's first general and would protect him from all harm. He felt deeply that he was letting them all down.

Swallowing his conflicted emotions, Kris went back to business, scanning the crowd and quickly locating Kyungsoo. Trying not to attract attention, Kris began to swim through the crowd, slipping between friends and foe alike and trying to keep up his faded, hidden appearance to be as strong as possible. He wanted to be near enough to Kyungsoo that the human could be safe, but far enough that they did not appear together.

The press of the fae around Kyungsoo made it difficult to look around now since everyone was focused on their King. Kyungsoo pretended to be one of them, trying not to reveal his face to the guards in front of him as he stared up at Junmyeon. So this was the man who had banished Kris. This was the man who refused to help them. He watched the king's movements as Junmyeon gave a short speech about the gathering, the solstice, their mother tree. Junmyeon looked...incredibly sad.

"...We have a variety of offerings this year." Cheers punctuated the crowd again as movement happened behind him. Junmyeon seemed to smile slightly. "Let the feast begin."

The press of the fae around Kyungsoo subsided, food appearing at tables lining the sides of the room as fae around him moved to partake. Decorative bowls and baskets instantly became full to bursting with a variety of fruit and cheeses. Wine filled every cup to the brim, conversations breaking out around him. At the back, the gnome party of hunters were riling up the crowd, carrying in the comically large boar cooked to perfection and covered with every vegetable imaginable. Kyungsoo was pleased that he didn't feel the pull of hunger at all; Tao's charm was thankfully holding strong.

The King and the Ladies each had an attendant; the king's was a taller, thin man with sparrow wings pouring his own personal goblet. The only thing that seemed off about him however, was the fact that his wings were constantly folding over one another, as if he were nervous.

Kyungsoo was seriously considering grabbing a goblet to not seem out of place, when he spotted Kris again behind him. He breathed a sigh of relief, some of the nervousness leaving his face.

While the majority of revelers went to work on the tremendous, almost ludicrous amount of food on display, the Lord and Ladies of the Seasons were presented with a variety of specialties from across the kingdoms. Kris was proud enough that, despite his own banished state, a few of the small winter
villages had still made the trip, leaving the unique crinkled citruses of the Winter Lands at the feet of their King. Spring berries and Autumn gourds, as well as fish and sea vegetables from Junmyeon's home in the Riverlands, began to carpet the floor in front of Junmyeon and the others, attendants failing to keep up with the sheer volume of offerings as they tried to clear them away.

Kris watched every offering carefully, stealing glances to Kyungsoo when he could. In the past, this early time of the festival would also have meant the presentation of new fae, welcoming them with the King's magic into their world. If Jongdae was going to make a show of Jongin's new form, it would be soon, while the majority of the room was still sober enough to understand what was happening and, Kris began to fear, to offer their support to the dark prince.

Fae feasted all around Kyungsoo. Some fae even conjured drums and string instruments to encourage dancing. While the air thrummed with conversation and bell-like laughter, Kyungsoo felt a tightness in his chest as he looked around for Jongin. Someone brushed past him and he looked towards the fae this time, a sense of deja vu overcoming him. His brow furrowed in curiosity as he watched them move towards the altar. While most left their offers at the stone base, these fae continued to walk forward to regard the King.

Jongdae smiled as he made his way forward with a magicked guard, parting the sea of fae with ease. He held tightly to Jongin’s hand to make sure he didn't wander. This was it.

Junmyeon bit down into an offered fruit from Sehun, senses tingling with the energy in the air that was a bit more charged than normal. Not just one or two things felt odd. Everything was off. Nothing felt safe, and his bleeding uncertainties were making Sehun visibly nervous.

So when a guard brought two fae forward through the ankle deep abundance of offerings and he turned to regard him, his face fell. The smaller of the two advanced on the king until they were practically sharing breath - "Your grace, we have the Riverlands emissary..."

"-Who wish to congratulate you on your wondrous victory at The Ford like they have... every year...for a thousand years." Jongdae's voice hissed out as if bored through the glamour, willing the guard to walk away. "Parroting your only achievement has got to wear thin after awhile, hm?"

Junmyeon's face was downcast for merely a moment, waving an arm to make sure Sehun moved away from him. His eyes blinked slowly as his lips tasted the dark magic and glamour that hung thick in the air, his gaze turning hard and steady as he regarded the fae in front of him. "You're getting better at controlling your spells."

The sound of glass shattering pierced through the air. The attendants conversations turned to curious murmurs, turning to see their king with his hand raised as if he had struck the figure in front of him. "...Flimsy as they are."

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The mask of another person cracked, Jongdae's true form visible underneath, the rest of the glamour falling away in shards to crash to the floor and revealing himself to the fae before them. Jongdae straightened his back, letting the insult roll off of him as his lip curled up to smile at his king.

Exclamations of surprise and gasps filtered up through the crowd, and Kyungsoo turned to see the fae that stole his husband, his features clear as day. When the guards moved forward to protect their king, Jongdae turned and held up a hand, all of their bodies suddenly rigid with a paralyzing spell.

"No no no, we can't have that now." Jongdae tittered as he forced a leg between Junmyeon's own and rested one knee on Junmyeon's thigh. A few of the gourds at their feet convulsed as vines burst from beneath the skin to wrap around Junmyeon's wrists, securing him to the throne to keep the king still. Jongdae leaned down to whisper in Junmyeon's ear. "You're going to enjoy this, I promise."
Nobody could move forward for fear of bringing harm to the King. Some fae were beginning to flee, suspecting a coup, while others demanded that Jongdae have a chance to speak. Panicked noises and shouts for Jongdae to release the King peaked when Jongdae revealed the wreath in his hands. Victoria stood, demanding that he cease his behavior immediately, she and Amber drawing their iron. Jessica was smiling, amused, still lounging comfortably as her entourage begged her to leave. Time seemed to slow as the figure behind Jongdae now came into everybody's focus as the dark prince dropped his glamour completely...along with the wreath at his King's feet.

Jongin felt the entire room's eyes upon him, thick and heavy, and at first, it was hard to keep moving forward. He had ached for this for years, but having it again, this moment to perform when no one in the more "civilized" world of professional dance had given him the chance, filled him with doubt. He wanted this, wanted Jongdae and the promise of a life eternal in the wilderness. Of that, he was certain. But was he worthy? Would he be enough?

The king's eyes were upon him and Jongin blushed. His loose, barely-there costume did little to hide the pink rising in his skin. Jongin kept his eyes forward, as he and Jongdae had discussed a hundred times over, meeting the king of all the fae with as much intensity as he could. "My lord," he whispered, but in the silence of the great chamber, it was like a scream. When no one moved to stop him, Jongin's soul swelled and his confidence grew.

"My lord," Jongin said again, clearing his throat, "Please accept my Jongdae's offering." Before Junmyeon could respond, Jongin terrified that the King might find a way to stop him before the display could be complete, the former human pushed back the thin shawl he had been wearing around his shoulders and revealed his wings, stretching them as far as they would go, showing the world what Jongdae had done.

The gasps in the room were tame compared to what Kyungsoo's heart was doing. It almost leapt out of his throat as his wide eyes focused on his husband. He almost screamed in elation, but the sound was tinged with panic at Jongin’s drastic change in appearance, and he clenched his teeth down in time to merely utter a small peep of surprise. Kyungsoo's thoughts were racing. He had found him. Jongin. They...they could finally go home.

While most of the murmurs around him were inquisitive and appreciative, Kyungsoo struggled to comprehend the creature Jongin had become. His appearance had changed dramatically. He was beautiful, but that seemed too simple a word for how he looked. Jongin's body language and movements were hypnotic, and he showed no signs of pain. It seemed that every movement he made was picturesque and striking, like he was living art.

Which brought him to his wings. They were staring at him.

The 'eyes' on them were ringed in white along with subtle tinges of pink mixed into the brown coloring. They twitched with life like they belonged on him, tufts of the finest light brown hair peeking over from where they grew at the base of his shoulderblades. Overall, they were surprisingly plain despite how radiant his presence seemed to be.

Kyungsoo was struggling. Should he do something now? He gripped his dagger underneath his robe tightly. However the shocks that the guards were receiving deterred him immensely, worry crossing his features even as the fae around him were chattering appreciatively.

"Let him dance for us!" A voice cried from the crowd. The mood of the crowd had calmed considerably, and echoes of agreement started to follow the statement. Kyungsoo shivered with hesitation and sudden fear, unsure of what his next step would be.

Junmyeon was shaking with restrained anger, looking up at Jongdae and his smile that told him he
didn't have a choice. Jongdae had presented a changed fae, broken all the rules. Now he was a rockstar, challenging the traditions that the crowd seemed to echo with enthusiasm.

His hand, though bound, managed to turn slowly upwards, palm open. The crowd cheered. "You'll pay for this," Junmyeon managed to say between grit teeth.

"We always do my King," Jongdae backed off of him, the restraints disappearing as drums started to fill the air.

The room echoed with chants for Jongin's dance, for a better view at his blossoming wings. Even Kris, his heart near collapsing with sorrow for Kyungsoo as he watched, felt that instinctual urge within him, the desire to see, for the first time in ages, a new and freshly born fae. He understood now why Jongdae had fallen for this human - Jongin was gorgeous and singular. Different than Kyungsoo, but in a way that also made his earthly husband shine more radiantly. His skin sparkled with darker magick and his eyes were bright. Kris licked his lips and forced his eyes to the ground. He had to get to Kyungsoo before his human charge made a mistake. He began to push through the crowd, all of them too busy staring straight into Jongin's soul to notice.

Jongin bathed in their attentions, lifting his arms so that his wings extended. He stood still for a moment longer, letting each fae study him before looking to his master one more time. And smiled. This... this is what he had been waiting for. The drums seemed to grow that much louder.

His feet took Jongin the rest of the way, already knowing the steps to every performance he had ever done back in the human world. Blending the careful, graceful arm movements of his years in ballet with the rolling sexuality of his time in the clubs, Jongin crafted something entirely new, soaking in the warm sighs from the audience. The heat of the drums pushed him forward and soon he could see nothing but their eyes upon him.

Even as the crowd marveled and impressed sounds filled the air around him, Kyungsoo trembled with the urge to charge the elevated altar. He felt like he was close to cracking the handle of his dagger; he was gripping it too hard. Even as he watched Jongin dance, even as he knew this was what Jongin wanted, he tried to hold on to the sliver of hope that when he revealed himself, Jongin would come home with him.

His stomach seized up when he felt someone nudge him from behind, relaxing only when he saw that Kris had slid up behind him. He had no idea what his own face looked like. He figured it was probably a mixture of elated terror.

"For the Old Ways!!" A dwarf to their left shouted, and more in the audience joined in their cheers, drinking and cheering Jongin on. Meanwhile, the fae on the thrones behind Jongin's dancing form looked less than pleased.

Kris, not wanting to draw attention, placed a careful hand on Kyungsoo's back. He needed his human... guest? Friend? He needed Kyungsoo to know that he was there. Jongin's dancing had the entire crowd hypnotized, his new wings were fluttering under the attention. Kris started to move forward, to put an end to it himself when Victoria shouted from her throne, interrupting the music and bringing Jongin to a screeching halt. His face was red, not from embarrassment, but it seemed, from pleasure.

"Enough of this," Victoria exploded, Amber coming up behind her, knuckles white as she gripped her iron sword. Even Victoria's eyes were wide; she too was fighting the deep, primeval urge to lend her magic into this new creature and help Jongin to be reborn anew. "We've seen what the Dark Prince has to offer, what illegal abomination he has brought before his King. We need no more time to make our decision."
Amber nodded at her Queen's words and took another step forward, as though she only needed the word to strike down Jongdae where he stood. Victoria continued, "The decision must be made. Magic must be given or take away. Those who oppose the creature, step forward and make your case to the King of Kings."

Something dark ran through the crowd then, the murmurs quiet and reserved, as if most were disappointed that Jongin was forced to stop dancing. Kyungsoo swallowed at the change in the atmosphere around him, trying to will his body to move forward.

Jongdae interrupted with a sneer, turning to Victoria and drawing his own blade as he moved to protect Jongin. "Not necessary, my Queen. Nobody here would dare challenge my claim to this beauty." Jongdae pulled Jongin close, his hand gripping his hip possessively.

At the sight of Jongdae's arm on Jongin, something snapped inside Kyungsoo's mind, enraging him and compelling him to move forward away from Kris's reassuring presence. "Stop," Kyungsoo managed to speak over the growing volume of their arguing voices. He pushed a few fae out of the way, gaining confidence in his movements. "Stop!" He nearly tripped trying to climb up to the altar, managing to fling away his cloak, revealing himself to everyone.

The court's collective gasps of alarm and curiosity at the human making itself known excited them. Even now, their chatter and gossip made a noticeable din that filled the court grounds.

Now Junmyeon stood, anger on his face as his presence alone made the fae around him bow their heads. "What is the meaning of this?"

Kyungsoo was trembling. He heard, rather than saw the fae around him trying to smell him, take in his scent, perturbed that he had none. He drew his dagger, holding it in front of him, despite his nervousness making it feel like it was made out of lead. "I'm...I'm here to reclaim my husband!" He pointed the dagger at Jongdae. "You stole him from me."

Before anyone else, including Jongdae, could respond to the accusation, Jongin turned in Jongdae's arms, guarding his faery lover with his own body. His eyes narrowed. His breathing was still heavy from the exertion of dancing and power of the drums and his wings fluttered again, extending out to their full width as though to cover Jongdae from his attacker. His strong chest heaved. The entire world seemed to sit still for a moment. The crowd's whispers had simmered down as everyone shushed their neighbor. They, each and every one, wanted to hear for themselves the human's words.

"You will not touch him," Jongin answered Kyungsoo's threat, his voice almost growling. He bared his teeth like an animal and before he could help himself, took quick, decisive strides forward and took the dagger's blade in his own hand, letting the iron cut and burn into his newly transformed skin. He pulled it from Kyungsoo's grasp and threw it, useless, to the ground. It was lost among the offerings.

Jongin studied the intruder's face for a moment and his head felt light, as though he might faint, but the pain in his hand righted him quickly, "It is you, then. Kyungsoo. Why did you come here? How could you come here?"

Kyungsoo was so shocked at Jongin's fingers on the blade that he let go reflexively, the smell of magically burning flesh momentarily filling his nostrils. The rest of the room fell away in Kyungsoo's peripheral as he instinctively reached out to his husband, the glint on his wedding ring absent.

But at Jongin's advancement, he leaned back, taking in his husband's aggressive stance before finding his voice, disbelief clouding his features and drawing his brows together. "J-jongin...I'm here to take you home." He stared at his alluring features, acutely aware that this wasn't necessarily a veil
over his human form. Jongin had somehow changed completely. He blinked and stared at Jongin still more intensely, as if to make sure that it really was him underneath the pointed ears, glowing skin, and see-through silks.

Junmyeon turned his eyes to Jongdae, but the dark prince paid him no mind, a small grin on his face as his fledgling confronted his last remaining connection to the human world.

"Let's just go home," Kyungsoo's voice edged on desperation, the weariness of his recent ordeals making his eyes look drawn and his skin pale. It was a stark contrast to Jongin's fuller, well-fed and sexually pleasing visage. His eyes blinked up, wide and silently begging. "Please."

Jongin took a step back, his ears foggy with the sound of Kyungsoo's exhausted begging and the blood pumping through his body. He needed space between them. He used it to study Kyungsoo from top to bottom, memories flooding back to him. The kisses he had pressed to Kyungsoo's temple, trying to get his husband to come away from his desk and enjoy a real dinner. The tired look in Kyungsoo's eye when they talked about money or work. The weight of Kyungsoo's hand on his arm when, too many years ago, his fiance had begged him with similarly pleading eyes to stop dancing and work somewhere "safer". He knew there were good things too, moments where he had loved Kyungsoo unbelievably and with a pure heart, but ... he couldn't bring them to mind. Something dark had shaded over that part of his mind.

Jongin looked over his shoulder at Jongdae, catching his new lover's eye and wondering.

From the thrones, Jessica snapped her fingers, Joy rushing to her side as the room's attention turned to her. Instead, the faery queen simply waved her away, "Junmyeon, my King, what are we to make of this? Two humans then? At least we know that our Kris, King of Winter, wasn't lying to you."
She smiled innocently enough but she was well aware the sparks that her words would send through the room. "Does our newest fae have an answer for his ... partner?"

The pressure in Jongin's ears seemed to pop away as Jessica finished her sentence with an emphatic click of the tongue. He ripped his gaze from Jongdae and looked back to Kyungsoo, "I... I can't go back. I'm already home. This... this is my home now."
Chapter 16

The air rushed out of Kyungsoo’s lungs and he felt light, on the verge of passing out. In that first moment of processing Jongin's words, Kyungsoo felt the rest of the room's occupants go still. The pressure of their gazes and their curious mental prodding to see what he was thinking crashed harshly into the back of his skull, threatening the integrity of the wall of protection in his mind.

He wanted to voice his denial, that Jongin couldn't possibly mean that, but his emotions quickly passed to anger. Anger at himself for knowing, all this time, that this was probably going to be the outcome, and yet he refused to see it. Anger at Jongin for answering so easily, denying everything that they had shared was somehow meaningless in the face of what was offered to him here.

His brow drew together only slightly in response, willing the tears not to fall. He had to be careful. He had to be strong. The pressure in his head was becoming greater as the seconds ticked by.

"No, you... we're human, Jongin. We don't belong here." He licked his lips, trying to move closer to Jongin, trying to recall his strategy even as his emotions threatened to make him lose his composure. "I'll work harder. For both of us. I'll make it work somehow. Just--"

Jongdae's voice cut through the silence of the hall. "He most certainly is not human," his voice sounded offended. "Not anymore. He's one of us now."

The murmurs started again, the crowd seemingly unable to contain themselves.

"He's a halfae now."

"Can't you see? The deed is done."

"The little prince still broke the king's laws..."

"Hell with the law! If the Prince can do it, why can't we?!!"

"SILENCE! This has gone on for long enough," Junmyeon's voice echoed throughout the hall, ringing off the crystal formations and making the great tree above them shudder. "Return the human to his mortal form immediately or I will, Jongdae."

Kyungsoo's heart leapt with hope momentarily, but then Jongdae started laughing.

"We both know no fae has the power to do that, your majesty." He looked pointedly at him, a sinister grin curling his lips up into a knowing smile, the glint of the sun bright on the edge of his blade. "Not even you."

"That's not true!" came a cry from within the crowd. The gathered fae, most of them either still with shell-shock or vibrating with anger, parted and Kris came forward. He threw away his magic, letting Junmyeon and the rest of the audience see him fully now. There were a few gasps and one of the younger, more ambitious guards, threw himself in the way, determined to keep the exiled Lord of Winter from approaching the dais. Kris swallowed hard and continued, "My lord, my king, you know that isn't true. The human's... Jongin, his decision counts for everything. If he wished to maintain his connection to the human realm, his transformation could be slowed. You've seen this happen, you've seen this strange magic before. With our help -"

Amber's grip on her sword went slack and the iron clattered to the ground, interrupting Kris. Victoria's face was ghostly white, as though she might be sick. Kris felt for the ladies of Autumn - he
knew that what he had just said must have cut Amber deeply, to know that there might have been a way to save her own lover from an eternity of suffering and loneliness. Feeling his bravery leach from his body, Kris fell to one knee, bowing before the dais, "My lord and ladies, we must stay strong. What has happened here today is wrong."

Jongin glanced between all the players - the King, his husband, his lover, the audience. His tongue was dry when he turned back to Junmyeon, addressing him directly even though it frightened him to his core, "I have - Faery King, I have made my decision. I just need your help. My Jongdae needs your help."

"Junmyeon," Kris said simply, not able to look at Kyungsoo lest he burn with the shame of being too late, "Junmyeon, you alone make the law."

Junmyeon closed his eyes at Kris revealing himself to the court. His face remained placid, but he hesitated before speaking. Several fae mistook the pause for weakness, and the murmurs began anew, their confidence wavering in his abilities as king. "The humans shall be returned to their world. I have made this law so that none shall suffer the fate of ones before them." His face set like stone, but his eyes told the story of his experience with the same ordeal. "I fail to see how you think this newborn would change my mind."

"You have an obligation to protect your kin, do you not?" Jongdae pointed to Jongin’s form. “He is one of us now. You must acknowledge him. He is here and now, a true fae. I-"

Kyungsoo found his voice again, coming up behind Jongdae. "You took him! Hypnotized or brainwashed him, I don't know! You tricked him!"

Jongdae's face showed his displeasure at being interrupted, his eyes slitting slightly and the hairs on his neck standing into small spikes as his form wavered."-I created him, he is whole. He doesn't wish to return to a world that hurts him and others like him." He pounded on his own chest. "Moreover, this is what we need. I doubt a few failed attempts should be a deterrent at all."

Amber snarled, lunging at Jongdae with her sword pointed at his chest. But he caught the attack easily, his sword sliding down and catching the hilt and pulling it away from her as he shoved her away. "By the Gods if anyone else has any other interruptions, you better do it now before I lose my patience."

His off the cuff comment, however, started an immediate chain reaction.

Junmyeon went to speak, angry and berating, when one of the floating crystals above Victoria shattered into a million pieces. Kyungsoo fell to his knees, pieces of the crystal raining down on him and the others, scattering them. With the distraction came a yell, deep and guttural as a troll lept up from the crowd, barreling over one of the guards with a heavy-looking javelin, the sides covered in purple wisps of magic and the tip, a nearly-transparent sharpened crystal. Before the guards could react, the troll's strong arm heaved it at the King, aiming for his chest.

Kris's eyes went wide and every fiber of his begin seemed to scream. He heard his own voice, calling for Junmyeon, screaming for him to move, but it sounded far away, like this scene couldn't possibly be happening right in front of them, and Junmyeon too seemed too shocked to fully react to the situation. Blood buzzed in his ears and clouded his senses as he pushed himself up from his kneeling position and toward the king. His dragon wings burst from his back, ripping his simple disguise in their release. Kris couldn't think, could barely breathe, as he threw himself between Junmyeon and the approaching spear. He folded his wings, creating a leather hide shield in the seconds they had left.
The force of the javelin into his back sent shockwaves of pain through his body and tears stung at the corners of Kris's vision. Though the weapon fell to the floor, unable to fully pierce the thick, dragon flesh of his wings, Kris knew he was bleeding. He felt the heat of blood dripping down his back. He lifted his hands and cupped Junmyeon's small face, as though checking to be sure his king was safe, "I told you to move."

Kris quickly reached up and adjusted the silver crown on Junmyeon's head, making sure it was secure, before turning back to the would-be assassin with fury in his eyes.

The guards had sprung into action, grabbing the troll as his jaw shook with the words of revolution falling from his mouth. "For the Dark Ones! For our freedom!"

Magic was visibly crackling through the air as disguises burst, revealing many of those in attendance to be denizens of the Firelands or those that aligned themselves with the families of the Ever-Changing. The air was chaotic and hostile. Fae began fighting one another, screams ringing through the air as noble fae attempted to escape.

Kyungsoo panicked. He fell towards Jongin, ignoring the cuts and pieces of shattered crystal embedded in his arm. "Come on, Jongin! We gotta go!"

Jongin's breath caught in his throat as Kyungsoo's hand reached for his and, for the first time in what felt like centuries, they touched. Kyungsoo's hand felt cold and clammy and very real when the pair's fingers slipped together and the full weight of his own transformation slammed onto Jongin like boulders. He pulled away, taking his heat with him.

"No, we don't have to go anywhere," Jongin said. His voice was so soft that it was almost lost in the exploding battle around them, "Kyungsoo, I'm staying here. I have to find my master. You wouldn't understand." His voice grew and grew in volume until he was almost screaming, "You came all this way as though it proves anything. You had years of chances and you fucked up. I'm not going with you."

There were tears in his eyes, but Jongin couldn't stop himself even though he knew this wasn't the time or place, swords and iron spears clashing around them, blood spilling to the floor. "You fucked up," he finished, swallowing back his anger and speaking clearly. He gritted his teeth and turned to look for Jongdae, eyes darting to find both his master and an exit as quickly as possible.

A moment later hands appeared around Jongin’s midsection, Jongdae's face appearing over his shoulder to regard Kyungsoo's shocked face with a smirk. "Come, my dear. How unfortunate that this drivel thinks that they are fighting for me and my kin."

Kyungsoo had been stunned into silence at Jongin's staunch refusal to come with him. His hand was still up, still reaching for his husband when his wedding ring contracted around his knuckle and shattered. He didn't even have time to respond, both of the fae in front of him faded into invisible wisps as he screamed from the pieces of the ring embedding into the skin of his hand. Blood was now dripping down his arm, and every nerve screamed at him to run. So he did, running to the exit like others were, running to save himself from the last thing Jongin said to him even as it rang clear in his head.

'You fucked up'.

He didn't even know where he was going. Tears clouded his vision as he flew by voices that called out to him, following others as they managed to run out of the castle and into the town proper. While the fae scattered around him, leaving him staring at the ground as he tried to get his bearings.
Using the stampeding nobles as a distraction, the rebel fae fighters made their move toward the raised dais. From within his cloak, Kris pulled a small iron dagger, but looking at the aggressive group in front of him, he already knew it wouldn't be enough. He gripped his only weapon hard and called for Amber, the female fae still furiously clenching her jaw, "My lady, we have to get them out of here." Amber nodded and lifted her blade again, taking a strong stance as a rush of trolls aimed their fury at her.

Victoria, never one to sit out a battle when her loved ones were in danger, also took Kris's direction as though the war had never ended. She quickly began forming a balls of loose electrical energy in the palms of her hands. They were bright stars, hot and white, and she wiggled her fingers in anticipation, ready to throw them into the fray should any of the attackers come too close. Kris smiled despite himself - it was terrifying and wrong, but it felt good in a way to be back in the heat of a battle. To be back in a situation where the good guys and the bad were clear and distinct.

Confident that the Autumn Court could handle their side, Kris turn towards the Spring Throne. Joy, her face blanched white, stood still and icy in front of the throne, Jessica's crown balanced lightly on the seat. Joy had no weapon and her face was innocent, having never seen anything like this before. But she looked strong and Kris felt a strange and renewed affection for the one that would have had him thrown from the council.

Kris took a step back and stood alongside his king, glancing sideways as Junmyeon took in the scene, "Your generals stand ready." He nodded to his king, letting go of all the terrible things that had passed between them recently, and stabbed down into a vicious kelpie as it lunged for the king, its webbed feet leaving watery footprints across the floor.

Junmyeon's face was arrested, like he had forgotten how to express concern or fear. However at Kris's voice, it brought back memories. Memories of fighting, of winning, of excitement and camaraderie. He looked at his friend, saw the hope in his eyes like nothing had changed in a thousand years. Oh, how he missed it so.

His eyebrows drew together, concentrating. The scattered offers shuddered at Junmyeon's feet, the moisture within them being drawn forth. He stared at the line of traitorous fae that wished for nothing more than his death. "I'll spare you if you yield now," he stated softly.

The growls of laughter that greeted his comment was all the confirmation he needed. Junmyeon's presence began to fill the space as he flexed abilities he hadn't used in a thousand years.

One of the goblins closer to Junmyeon had its tongue lolling out of its head as it laughed. Junmyeon made eye contact with it, and suddenly it started to cough, the flesh of it's tongue shriveling up as the moisture was drawn out of it. As it choked on the piece of dead flesh now stuck in its mouth, Junmyeon called to his left. "Amber!"

Amber had just pulled her sword out of the fleshy side of a red kappa, the monster still snapping its jaws at her face even as blood gurgled out of its throat and fell to the ground. She turned, and in a swiftly deft movement she pulled a short iron blade from a hidden holster, tossing it up to Junmyeon who caught it easily.

He looked at the blade in his hands, felt his original powers stir underneath the thick magic of his kingly position. He knew he was rusty. He turned to the line of attackers and his eyes were alight with his innate abilities. "You forget who I am. You forget why I am King."

Kris's heart swelled and he couldn't stop smiling, watching Junmyeon reconnect with the powers that had made him both loved and feared throughout the Riverlands. The promise that Kris had made to
the elders of that far off place echoed in his ears and he extended his dragon wings to their full length. He took a leap from the dais and into the fray, using the strength of his wings and the sharpness of his dagger to slice a line through an incoming group of rebels. He separated the putrid green arm of a goblin from her body and flung a thin elf across the room, his features instantly familiar from Kris's many visits to the Firelands. It stung and Kris's brain began to swim with questions.

Who were these people? He pushed back a fae with evil red eyes. Where was Jongdae? Another group of kelpie, small but vicious came running towards him. Where was Kyungsoo?! One of the kelpie latched onto Kris's leg, digging its long claws through cloth and then flesh. There were so many and it was almost impossible to tell who was with them. The group pushing at the exits were frenzied, trying to force their way out. Where was Kyungsoo, Kris worried again, trying to rip the kelpie away from him before he could be attacked by another two or three.

Almost instantly Junmyeon fell into the heat of the battle, his feet falling into step with the fighting around him. His wings ached for release, but he quelled that desire, even as their high ground advantage on the dais started to fade. Most of the noble fae had now escaped, and those that had been torturing the fleeing guests were now turning their attentions to the remaining party at the thrones. The guards were valiant in their efforts in escorting the majority of the noble fae away.

Junmyeon regarded the fae around him. Kris was strong. Joy's cantrips were aiding them but she was still vulnerable. And even Victoria and Amber were beginning to tire. They had to hold on.

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Kyungsoo collapsed under a low tree, breathing heavily as he tried to stay out of the way. Guards paid him no mind as they yelled for reinforcements to return to the king's defense at the palace. However some fae were finding his blood, and they drew it from the ground in droplets, some even collecting it in vials and looking for the source.

A small group of creatures, some beautiful and others horrifying, surrounded Kyungsoo, unable to ignore this gift even as the world seemed to fall apart around them. One being with skin so pale that it was nearly translucent approached Kyungsoo with a hungry smile, lips wet with spit. It lifted a set of webbed fingers and reached for the human.

"You'll leave the boy alone, you will," came a new voice and the approaching figure laid a hand on Kyungsoo's attacker. The creature's flesh began to crinkle and burn and it pulled away.

"Issa found it first," it explained with a growl and went back to work, pulling a curved knife from its pouch, like one used to gut a fish, "I'll bleed it myself."

The new arrival sighed dramatically, as if this was starting to be a bit too much work and suddenly slammed his fist into the side of the creature's head. A bright flash of light accompanied a hideous crack as the creature's skull was split and it fell to the ground, dead. Its blood spilled onto the road and there it dripped, a hint of sparkling light to its dark red color.

The figure knelt in front of Kyungsoo and waited until Kyungsoo had the courage to look up at him, "You can't trust anyone these days." He laughed and threw a little handkerchief he plucked from his pocket over the worst of the creature's head injuries, "That one would have bathed in your blood for a week, probably taken your handsome face and whored it all over the city."

At the death of the creature the other fae scattered, leaving them alone in the chaos once more. Kyungsoo was shaking, staring at his rescuer with only a bit of relief. He had felt the impact of the killing blow in his chest. This being in front of him was powerful, but completely different from the
fae around them. When he looked into his eyes, Kyungsoo felt the pull of deja-vu, strong and
sudden. When a throng of bright purple plumeria started sprouting from the blood on the ground
around him, he blinked with realization. "You...You're..."

The smile that spread across the stranger's face was almost terrifying, "Did he tell you about me
then? Did Kris mention my stunning good looks or did he pretend to have never noticed?" There
was no doubt in Kyungsoo's mind that this was Baekhyun, the one Kris had mentioned and
Chanyeol had begged him to find.

And he was beautiful with black hair that shined and gorgeously unblemished skin. He was wrapped
in a light green cloak but it was still obvious how slim his body was underneath. He was strong, but
also appeared to have missed more than a few meals. It was an attractive shape but unsettling, much
like the slightly off-kilter look in his eyes. His words were calculated but underneath them was magic
and fury and ... curiosity? Baekhyun leaned into Kyungsoo and took a deep breath, smelling him,
and a great spring of shade loving hosta grew up around them, dying suddenly as Baekhyun leaned
back into his own personal space. Baekhyun didn't ask for permission and reached for Kyungsoo's
injured hand. His face went terribly serious and his lips formed a straight line, "What is going on in
there? What has he done? Junmyeon, that idiot -"

Kyungsoo didn't reply for a moment, looking down at his hand with Baekhyun. Blood was starting
to dry in rivulets on his arm and a dozen sharp crystal shards were still embedded in his skin. A few
shattered pieces of the ring still clung to the shredded skin of his finger. Kyungsoo took a sharp
breath as he remembered Jongin's words again, the past ten minutes tumbling out of his mouth as the
pain of the wounds seemed to grow as he looked at it.

"I...I don't..." Tears welled up in his eyes renewed. "My husband..." Even as he said the words,
something stirred hollow in the meaning behind it. It scared him. How could he feel it so acutely?
"He wouldn't... he didn't want to come home with me..." The loss of love in his heart echoed and his
breathing came in shallow gasps as the emptiness inside of him made him panic. "I...the king wanted
us to go home but...there's fighting inside...I can't...I lost him. I lost Jongin."

Baekhyun's face went slack, his lips parting as he took in Kyungsoo's story. As he listened, he held
Kyungsoo's injured hand lightly, reaching down to pluck a piece of aloe that grew up around his feet
and coolly applying the sticky insides to the human's small but stinging injuries. "He wanted you to
go home? They've come to kill the king..." Baekhyun repeated, almost in disbelief as Kyungsoo
descended into another round of sobs.

Baekhyun dropped Kyungsoo's hand and leaned in, too close and pressed little kisses down
Kyungsoo's wet cheeks, "The human heart is too fragile. Even now, I feel it and I've cut myself in
half a thousand times to make it go away. Harden yourself now before it's too late and never -"

A blast of electric energy and the explosion that followed rocked the upper city and Baekhyun jolted
back, visibly shaken. His carefully constructed indifference fell away and for only a second,
Kyungsoo could see the real fear and pain on Baekhyun's face. Just as quickly, he composed himself
and took several pointed breathes. The plants that had grown up around him as he and Kyungsoo
had talked faded down into a carpet of rot. Baekhyun tore his eyes away from the palace just long
even to pet Kyungsoo's head, "Stay here. Don't bleed anymore."

Exhausted and weak, Kyungsoo exhaled a shuddering breath and leaned back against the tree,
watching Baekhyun walk calmly away from him even as the air was still laced with panic. His
cheeks tingled where Baekhyun kissed him, and his heart pounded in his chest, loud and
uncomfortable. All he knew was that he couldn't stay here, no matter what Baekhyun had said, this
stranger.
He thought he heard his name being called, but he didn't care. Nothing mattered. Not anymore. Despair clouded over everything in his mind. He needed to leave. He needed to get away. Or find the nearest cliff so that he could at least throw himself off of it. Tears still fell from his eyes, nearly blinding as he shifted off the tree, forcing himself to stand and walk away from the palace. He avoided the paths of the gardens, slipping out into a field of tall grass. He didn't even know where he was going. His hands and knees were filthy with blood and dirt and nothing echoing in his mind except for the words 'you fucked up' sticking in his brain like quicksand. He slipped into a line of trees and disappeared into the forest.

Moments later, Tao rushed out of the palace, his forehead bleeding and ushering several different fae out of the palace to safety. "Kyungsoo!" Blood splattered from his mouth where the jewelry had been ripped from his lip as he kept searching around him.

"Kyungsoo!"

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Junmyeon slit the throat of a wide eyed dwarf, face remorseless and calculating as the line of traitors closed in around them. The reinforcements of guards had clashed at the back end of the rebels, but the dais was still surrounded, and the fae there were beginning to tire. Joy was covered in blood, a large gash on her arm. Junmyeon and Kris were splattered with blood but not like the court of Autumn, who had lost several warriors but vowed to keep fighting.

"How in the hells did so many manage to get in without us realizing..." Junmyeon mused to himself as he stood at Kris' back.

Kris gritted his teeth and tried to kick back a charging elf from the dais, only to be sliced by the blade of a second attacker. Kris hadn't even seen him coming. Hissing back the pain in his right side, sure that the damage was severe, Kris used a powerful wing to knock the second elf from the dais as well. This one caught himself on the stairs and continued his assault without another thought. Kris hated to admit it and would never have spoken it out loud, but he was frightened.

"You should run," Kris begged to Junmyeon, pressing himself closer to his king, "They may not know of the other exits. If you can survive, the kingdom might still -" Kris took another violent shove from an attacker, the pain in his side erupting. There was so much blood down the side of his disguise. Too much blood. Kris pulled in another deep breath and felt his legs turn to jelly. He was on the floor before he could put out arms to stop himself.

This ... this was all too much.

For a moment, Kris tried, one last time, to reach out for Kyungsoo, to know that his guest was safe. There was nothing. Kris couldn't be sure if it was the magical wall that Chanyeol had built to protect Kyungsoo from himself or ... he didn't want to think of the other option. Kris had been a fool to bring him here. Another kelpie, this one furiously dry and cracking from lack of water, ran at Kris and the Winter Lord knew that, in its anger, this creature was going to kill him or die trying. Kris tried to stand back up.

The great doors of the hall flew open with a sharp bang and for a quiet second everyone, rebels and royalty alike, paused in their violence to look for the source. Kris's eyesight was starting to blur, but the green on green that blossomed through the hall was unmistakable.

"What in all the of the Nine Hells have you done to this place, Junmyeon?" Baekhyun's bothered voice rang through the hall and Kris would have smiled if he had had the strength. "What are you even paying these guards?"
Junmyeon had rushed over to Kris's side, stance defensive when he froze, recognizing that voice anywhere. It chilled him through to his core, compelling him to turn toward the human he still loved with all of his heart.

His face shone with a thousand emotions. "Baekhyun."

Baekhyun sighed, his voice seeming to grow louder and louder as he began to walk towards the dais, towards Kris and Junmyeon. "I thought I made it very clear that if anyone was going to bring you down, it would be me. If anyone was going to rip your heart from your chest, it would be me. And here you are, about to lose everything to a bunch of misfits and directionless fools?" He cut a line through the center of the rebel forces, lifting a hand to shoo the creatures out of the way. A few of the rebels looked frozen in place by the gall of the battle's newest player and yet others started to understand that he too was an enemy.

"Get him!" shouted a garbled voice from a nearby group of fighters and onto Baekhyun pounced three dwarfs with sharpened axes. Baekhyun simply rolled his eyes and with a flick of the wrist, they stopped dead in their tracks. A look of confusion was shared between them before a quick creeping of silver green and dusty blue vines grew up their bodies and squeezed. Baekhyun smiled towards Junmyeon and winked, the vines suddenly pulling impossibly tight and destroying the dwarves’ bodies. A spray of blood, a fine mist, coated the rebels nearest the victims. A light dusting of red covered the left side of Baekhyun's face.

The rebels gripped tightly to their weapons and a few of them tried to make a run for it. But it was too late and Baekhyun's vicious servants came up from the ground itself, clutching at their feet and preventing them from leaving. "In this life," Baekhyun whispered though it echoed through the minds of everyone in the entire palace complex, "In this life, we will be made to pay for our failures."

Vines grew in great waves from the floor and descended from the cracks in the ceiling, neverending extensions of the Great Tree itself. Some of the attackers tried to take down Baekhyun, trying to end the violent assault, but even as they approached, more vegetation appeared, taking hold of them and ripping their bodies in half. A gorgeous elf with flowing purple hair was throw into the ceiling, her body falling from a great height and crushing under its own weight as it slammed into the floor. Another struggled to breathe as vines pushed down his throat, tearing him apart from the inside. And there was Baekhyun in the middle of it, his hands trembling as he held them at his sides, palms up to direct his soldiers in their bloodletting.

The last of the rebels fell to their knees to beg the King's mercy, the screams of their friends and allies forming a terrifying symphony around them. Baekhyun shook his head and another string of vines, their greens and blues now coated in fierce, blood red, began to wrap around their waists, "You made your choice and I will not let you have him." Baekhyun's voice faltered and he took a dizzy step backwards, a bit of blood dripping from his nose, "I will not let you have him... my Junmyeon."

Baekhyun's eyes fluttered and he heaved as though he might be sick, clutching his stomach. "My Junmyeon," he said again, his voice quiet and singular, the great echo gone from the minds of all around him. He took half a step towards Junmyeon and Kris, reaching out his hand and collapsed. The horrible vines that had destroyed so many fell to the ground with their master, rotting and withered.

The few remaining rebels broke free of the twitching vegetation and tried to flee, easily being caught by the guards. The atmosphere settled slowly, but the viscera remained, the minds of everyone present troubled and curious. Fighting was one thing. The way Baekhyun was able to not only overpower but destroy made the remaining fae uncomfortable. Cautiously, iron was finally sheathed,
and they began removing the dead and tending to the wounded.

Sehun was helping support the injured Joy, her healing power flickering out of her fingers as the cuts on her face healed. Victoria stepped forward as the younger fae reached towards Kris, arresting the magic she was using. "Enough little one. The healers are here." She then turned her attention down to Kris, calling over her shoulder. "Here."

Sehun had turned to look at the roots of the mother tree, noticing that the vines Baekhyun had commanded had sprouted directly from the bark of the great tree. He touched the junction of the vines, the plant withering out of existence. He then looked at the thrones. It had taken hours for their alchemists to get the tree to sprout even vaguely malleable wood for the thrones. He turned his eyes to Junmyeon and wondered.

As the bustle continued, fae rushing to heal or to capture, Junmyeon felt like time had stopped, robotically making sure everyone was okay before turning his attention to the figure still lying on the floor. Guards had surrounded Baekhyun's body, curious murmurs as to who he was filtering to his ears. He raised his hand as he moved closer. "Away. "The guards parted immediately for their king. "Help the others. I'll take care of him."

The guards murmured their acknowledgement and left him. "My Baekhyun..." His fingers smeared through the blood on his cheek, moving to lift him up.

Baekhyun opened his eyes slowly, as though the lids were simply too heavy. It took him a moment to focus, to really see Junmyeon up close for the first time in years, and the fury returned his eyes instantly, even if his body was too exhausted to act on it. He lifted a shaky hand and a few pathetic vines traveled up Junmyeon's body, wrapping around his neck. They squeezed but it was not even a shadow of Baekhyun's attacks against the rebels. His hand fell back against his body and the vines relaxed, then sloughed off Junmyeon's shoulders as the rot took them. "Fuck your pretty face," Baekhyun managed before a violent cough choked him and he fainted against Junmyeon's chest.

Kris shooed away two nervous healers and hobbled to Junmyeon, placing a hand on his leader's back, "My King, we need to get him out of here. We should let the healers stabilize him and I can prepare a dragonflight back into the Winterlands, if you wish it." Kris looked out over the remaining royalty and visitors. They were all whispering quietly together and Kris didn't have to imagine that much of it had to do with this mysterious boy.

Despite the danger, Junmyeon shook his head. "Prepare if you wish, but I'm not letting him go until he's healed...even if he wants to kill me. I felt him pulling energy from the Mother Tree into himself." His voice shuddered with disbelief. "He saved us all somehow." After a moment he looked up at Kris. "You're still wounded. Let them finish healing you." His eyes softened. "And you saved me. Again. Thank you, Yifan."

"I made a promise, a long time ago, that I would protect you," Kris said, making no move to sit or to let himself be doctored by the nervous healers who stood by waiting. He patted Junmyeon's back once more and turned, letting the king have his moment with his long absent lover. Kris's eyes locked on Joy immediately as he observed the room and he crossed the distance between them with confident steps.

Joy, too drained from the ordeal to worry much for decorum, had planted herself in the Spring Court's throne, Jessica's abandoned crown in her lap. Her hands were shaking and she seemed incapable of tearing her eyes away from the bloody scene. Kris stood in front of her, letting her take her time acknowledging him. Her gaze lifted to the injury on his side. She reached for him delicately and he allowed her to push a bit of her healing energy into his body.
"You are one of many heroes today," Kris said, his voice growing stronger as the gash in his side began to close, "But I notice there is one member of our royal house who isn't here to celebrate our victory." He let it hang in the air a moment, "Joy? Where is your lady? Where is Jessica?"

A look crossed Joy's face that indicated that she was just as confused as everyone else. "I-I don't know. One moment I was standing next to her, the next, I had blinked, and she was gone."

She squeaked when Kris put a curled finger to her chin, turning her face to look at her more closely. A small radial star pattern dotted the skin of her temple, a signature of Jessica's complex mind magic.

"Sweet girl," Kris said simply, not wanting to alarm her, "You've done so much already today. You should return to your quarters and I will have a healer sent up to you and some food as well. Will you need an escort? Do you feel safe?"

Joy shook her head softly and stood on unsteady legs, "I'd like to be part of whatever investigation the king initiates on this... attack." She waited for Kris to nod in response before she began to make her way into deeper parts of the palace complex. Kris watched her go, then quickly instructed two guards just finished with their healing to follow her and to stand guard at her door. They hesitated only a moment, perhaps unsure if they were meant to be taking orders from the Winter Lord, but did as they were told.

Taking a deep breath, Kris closed his eyes and reached out, trying to get a better sense of the damage. He called for Tao, running deep through the alleys and causeways to find where his child had gone during the battle. Was he hurt? Was he safe? And... though Kris felt sick to ask, had he found Kyungsoo in the violence?

Kris found him easily, his aura a radiant beacon of muted panic, his thoughts jumbled and strong. Once Tao felt the pull of his creator however, he calmed, sending out a feeling of confirmation back to Kris that yes, he was safe, merely waiting in a small group for the guards to detain or control the remaining rebels in their area. However, at the end of the thoughts it tapered off into sadness, an indication that he hadn't found Kyungsoo.

"Yifan," Junmyeon's soft voice broke through Kris's connection with Tao. He held Baekhyun in his arms, two worried looking healers and four guards following closely behind him. Once he held the Winter Lord's focus, he continued, voice strong so that the others around them may hear. "By my decree, you are no longer banished. I reinstate your previously held responsibilities to the fullest order of your station... for saving my life." His head bowed, and those attending him did the same.

Kris managed a smile for his best friend, his king, even though worried tears threatened at the corners of his eyes. How had he let this happen? Kyungsoo could be anywhere, alone or worse, and Kris had no leads. He nodded, mostly to himself, and reached up to brush a bit of hair from Baekhyun's tired eyes, "My king, I know I should stay with you as your general. We still don't know what or who provoked this attack and..." Kris looked pointedly at Baekhyun, then back up Junmyeon, "There is so much to discuss. But I have to go. If I don't find him..."

Kris didn't finish his sentence, suddenly feeling very obvious with the eyes of all the court trained on him. He looked to Junmyeon and pushed his fears and worry to his king, giving Junmyeon the truth. He needed Junmyeon to understand that Kyungsoo wasn't just his charge anymore, wasn't just his guest. In the loneliness of his tower, surrounded by his dragons and elementals, Kris had come to understand that the depths of his feelings for Kyungsoo might be real and how stupid he had been to ignore them. And now with Jongin's truth also on the table, the hideous reality that Kyungsoo's husband had refused to return to the human realms, Kris knew he needed to be with Kyungsoo. Kyungsoo needed someone and Kris desperately wanted to be that person.
Once Junmyeon understood the insinuation of Kris's feelings, his brow furrowed, wanting to argue, but then he relaxed in realization, looking down at Baekhyun still in his arms. "Do what you must to... make the human comfortable. The loss of his husband might have pushed his sanity to its limits. I will revise this law and the rules that made it so controversial." He looked solemnly over at Amber, whose eyes were bright and focused on his words even as the healers wove the flesh of her arm back together. "We may not be able to save all who come here... But the ones we can, we need to at least try."

Kris was at once relieved and ever more nervous, the mystery of Kyungsoo's whereabouts tugging at him. He bowed low to his king, "I will return to you when my search is finished and together we will uncover this plot. We can repair this world. Your loyal generals look only to you." They were words mirrored from years ago, when Kris and the others stood with Junmyeon far from here, planning their attack. Kris made another quick bow to Victoria and Amber and rushed from the great hall, plucking a forgotten cloak from a chair and pulling the hood up to conceal his face. He disappeared into the gathering crowds outside the entrance before anyone could question him further.

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The protruding veins in Jongdae's neck was a clear indication that his magic was beginning to cause him visible strain. The constant concealment, hiding, and quick movements would normally be no problem for him and his kind, adapted to the dark forests like they were, but he still had Jongin with him. His child didn't have the knowledge of the ancient spells yet, let alone the talent to execute them properly. So instead, each time Jongdae asked for help, and Jongin gladly gave it. He knew he would have to make up for the amount of energy taken from his fledgeling.

Now they were safely back within the darkness of the Ever-Changing, the activity from recent events spreading and making the fae within shudder with excitement as they awaited the results of the coup. Jongdae took a rest at the edge of a grove, laying heavily against a moss-covered root of a large tree. They were not alone; other fae were bustling about and conversing around a smouldering offer pyre at the base of one of many altars used for special occasions such as today.

Jongin knelt beside his maker and smiled, taking Jongdae's face in his hands and pressing kiss after kiss to Jongdae's cheeks, the tip of his nose and the kitten corners of his lips. Most of Jongin's body and wings were still exposed and though he was obviously beginning to feel the weight of all the energy expelled in their escape, he couldn't stop touching and kissing his maker, "We did it! I'm... I'm one of you."

He lowered his voice as he looked around at the other fae gathered in the clearing, "One of you..." He took one of Jongdae's hands and stood up, facing the strangers and studying their careful attending of the ritual pyre. It seemed so physical compared to the more ethereal magic that he had been exposed to since his arrival in the fae realms and it called to him. It was a more ancient type of magic, like the sort that he read about in the myths back home, where people left offerings to their gods and heroes as a thanks for a life well-lived. He squeezed Jongdae's hand and pushed another jolt of his own energy and happiness into his maker. This felt so right.

A yaksha cradled in between the roots of a dark twisting oak spotted Jongdae and Jongin, moving a plate of berries towards them, it's expression friendly. "Come. Eat with us."

Other fae noticed them, starting to gather closer. "It's Prince Chen!"

"Young prince, how did the rebellion go? We did it in honor of your new fle-oof!" The small fairy got hit over the head by its twin companion.
Jongdae narrowed his eyes. "Wait. The rebellion was in my name?"

The small fairy's wings fluttered nervously. "Y-yes, we assumed you knew...making a childer and all."

Despite his exhaustion, Jongdae's visage twisted, the darker aspects of his aura manifesting on his body as rage boiled just beneath his skin. "You do realize you could've gotten both he and I killed, right? And now, they most likely think I'm an enemy. That I'm responsible. You're fools."

Jongin swallowed and held tighter to Jongdae's hand, trying to soothe him, "They can't know where we are though? Even if they did, you could just explain to them that there has been a misunderstanding. We went to the king in good faith!"

The yaksha, its expression going soft as it listened to Jongin confused questioning, shook its head, "You are have not been in this forest as many years as we have."

Frowning, Jongin looked from face to face around the clearing. Many of the gathered were becoming nervous, whispering to each other. Others were as angry as Jongdae and Jongin could see the heat rising in their faces. The King had seemed reasonable enough to Jongin, though he knew that he had much to learn about the history of this place. But in the end, the King had allowed him to be transformed and had accepted Jongin's wish to remain in the Ever-Changing. Surely... surely he could be made reasonable again?

Jongin slipped his fingers between Jongdae's locking their hands together. If he was to be the consort of the Ever-Changing's Prince, he would find a way to be of help. He gathered his courage, "You all trust your Prince, don't you? Trust that he will be strong for all of us? Perhaps we should find the source of the rebellion ourselves, clear our Jongdae's name and protect our home!"

Jongdae visibly calmed at Jongin’s touch but his eyes were still bright with fury. "Ones like this lot eagerly joined the so called rebellion. While doing something like you suggested is a good idea, my trust runs sour at the moment for such a plan to occur." He sniffed, kissing Jongin’s hand and regarding those around them once more. "You will keep my name out of your future endeavors in regard to what happened today," he managed to say between grit teeth, his temper still running hot. "We'll be lucky if the king doesn't decide to burn the whole forest to the ground."

Jongin flushed at the anger in Jongdae's voice. He knew his maker and lover was capable of such anger, but he hated to see it on Jongdae's face, wanting to soothe and kiss it away. Had he felt such tenderness for Kyungsoo? He couldn't be sure. He looked out over the gathered fae and other creatures of the forest. They were terrified of Jongdae. Jongin was a mix of confusing emotions - worried, turned on, afraid.

He knelt down and smoothed back Jongdae's hair, "They simply wished to fight in your name, to make you happy. Now that we're back from the capital, they will follow you again, right?" He turned to the others and they nodded quickly in agreement, calls of support for the Prince coming up from the back of the clearing. Jongin turned back to his maker and smiled, partly for Jongdae but also for himself. He loved being useful, wanted to be used. "Let me take you back to bed. We'll cool your head, let you rest."

The yaksha passed Jongin a goblet full to the brim of pink flower wine and Jongin drank deeply before lifting the cup towards Jongdae, and repeated softly, "Let me take you back to bed. We'll figure it out in the morning."

At Jongin’s soothing words, Jongdae sighed, the anger seeping out of his pores almost instantly. He found himself relaxing as he allowed him to press the goblet to his lips, drinking deeply of the sweet
wine. His voice was much calmer when he spoke again. "My dearest Kai. You know how to sway my heart, that's for sure." He looked at the fae around him, suddenly feeling a bit sheepish at his earlier outburst. His fingers traveled over Kai's waist in an attempt to gain some comfort. "Yes. Tomorrow, then."

Jongin smiled and pulled Jongdae in close to him, letting his maker curl into his neck. Jongdae was so visibly exhausted. Surely it was the work of any childer to care for their maker. Jongin took his time, curling his unruly and unpracticed wings around them so that Jongdae was shielded from the nervous staring of the many forest fae. He held them there in that space for a moment, letting Jongdae regain a bit of strength and composure, then guided the prince to his feet and led them towards a more private place, one of the smallest fae eager to show them towards a space that had been prepared for their arrival. Jongin helped lower Jongdae into the natural soft bedding of the forest floor and crawled down to meet him, laying over him and pecking sweet kisses over his body. He undressed Jongdae slowly, simply wanting him to be more comfortable. There was no urgency anymore. They had forever.

"Can I ask you something?" Jongin whispered, leaving his kisses on Jongdae's belly. "At the ceremony today, I ... didn't expect him to be there. Kyungsoo, I mean. I - I thought he would never have followed me. That it wasn't possible for him to - "

The muted sounds of revelry continued outside their small nest, fireflies lighting up the small space between them. Jongdae started to finally, truly relax under Jongin’s gentle touch, body going slack. He sighed at the question. "That would be the work of our dear Lord Winter. He seems to have been taken with your earthly partner, either that or the human begged to be brought here to find you. Regardless, I'm shocked that Kris agreed and actually followed through with bringing him here..." His hands found Jongin’s soft locks of hair. "Mmn... you never know what he's going to do next. But rest assured, my dearest Kai. I'd never let them have you."

"But you wouldn't hurt him, right? Kyungsoo?" Jongin asked, his fingers tickling down Jongdae's sides, trying to keep the conversation light and the feelings warm for as long as possible. The fury in Jongdae's eyes when they arrived in the grove still worried him. "I've made my choice and I want to be here with you, forever, but I just... we don't know what happened with him. You say this is the Winter Lord's fault. This Kris could have put a spell on him, could have told him lies that made him come for me." He paused and leaned into his master, resting his head on Jongdae's stomach, "Just promise me that you wouldn't ... do anything to Kyungsoo unless you absolutely had to. That you'll let him go back home in peace."

Jongdae's gaze softened, shifting so that he could cuddle closer to Jongin’s chest, embracing him, petting his wings reassuringly. "I assure you, wherever he is, I won't do anything to him unless I absolutely had to. The human's decision to go home is not up to me. It will be up to him whether or not he returns to his earthly realm." He hesitated before continuing. "On top of that, time flows differently between the realms. It could be a week from when I brought you here, or a hundred years. Kris would be the one to return him...and the payment for doing it properly could be steep."

"So he... can't go back? Not really?" Jongin's heart fell in his chest and his brow furrowed. He hadn't even considered that the magic of this place might keep him here, even if he hadn't immediately taken to the forest and to Jongdae's never ending attentions. He'd considered even less the possibility that his husband might be able to follow. Jongin pulled away from his master and tried to straighten his thoughts, "I don't want to be with him anymore. That I know. But I didn't want him to suffer. I know I've hurt him by making this choice, but I always thought... I always thought that, with time, he would be able to move on. How can that happen when I've condemned him to this? Jongdae?"

Jongin's eyes filled with tears and he felt his wings droop. "This was supposed to be a happy day."
Kyungsoo didn’t stop running, not when he heard the sounds of the forest in front of him, nor when he heard the calls for him to stop fade into the distance. He didn’t know for how long he ran. He ran until the forest was so thick and the fog so dense he couldn’t see the sun anymore. His breathing came in gasps that seemed to echo off the ancient trees, thorns ripping into his clothes and the pads of his fingers. All he knew was that he needed to get away from the palace. Nobody followed him.

He nearly tripped and fell into a clearing, unable to focus due to the tears in his eyes. His brain was a foggy mess of static. He replayed the scene in the throne room in his mind over and over, seeing only Jongin’s face. Calm, collected, indifferent. He couldn’t believe it. He couldn’t just…

’You fucked up.’

The words echoed in his skull without end. Kyungsoo felt abandoned, lonely, and scared. The emotions slammed into him as he realized with a start that he didn’t know where he was. He collapsed onto the ground, into a confusing layer of old garments and shoes...human in origin. He sniffed, wiping at his eyes, catching the scent of something sweet. Blinking away the tears, he noticed a table in the middle of the foggy clearing ahead of him. Even with his stuffy nose, the scent of food was intoxicating. He tried to focus, almost tripping a rusted breastplate as he stood, walking towards the table cautiously. The table was heavy with food and drink, laid out with polished silverware, a candelabra, expensive looking plates and goblets. He squinted, diaphragm jumping from a hiccup caught in his chest, wondering what the hell this table made up with prepared food was doing in the middle of the forest.

It was tempting, he had to admit. He stepped over some dusty, moth worn slippers that had once been teal in color, the matted fibers synthetic. His stomach reacted only slightly, thankfully muted by Tao’s charm. Nevertheless, his mouth watered as he stepped closer. He was so close to just giving in and…

But if he ate food, he’d be stuck here. With Jongin. With the monster that took his husband. With the king who refused to help him.

...And the Lord of Winter who failed him.

Something tugged at the back of his brain, rage momentarily overcoming his despair. It boiled up in his throat, past the hunger and the sadness, and he grabbed the back of the closest chair. It was surprisingly lightweight, despite looking like it was carved out of oak, and before he could stop himself, he slammed the chair into the table. Magic sparked out as the table splintered, food flying everywhere. All around him, the illusion began to disappear and shatter, revealing the hidden creature who had created it. The monster shrieked, turning in on itself, the food rotting into the ground as the splinters of the table rose up to snap back at him. It had splinters for teeth, and a long tongue that curled out from between the wood. It hissed angrily at Kyungsoo.

But Kyungsoo didn’t care. His face contorted into a scowl, eyes welling up with renewed, seemingly unending tears, and he picked up one of the rusted swords lying on the ground. ‘Fuck you!’ he spat, slamming it down with all his might onto the creature. The sword lodged into its massive body and the creature gurgled in pain, not expecting such a hard attack, two of its teeth breaking off. Kyungsoo fell back, shocking himself but now in a dangerous position.

The beast started to rear up, ready to strike back at him with renewed energy, when a booming voice filled the clearing.
"Enough!"

Time slowed, a force pressing around them as the splintered bits that used to be a table shuddered in confusion. It collapsed in on itself again, forming into a chest. Both Kyungsoo and the monster managed to pinpoint the source of the voice at the same time, seeing Kris standing at the border of the clearing. The mimic monster’s form shuddered in panic and its wood-like exterior started to clatter and creak, shifting again into a beautifully made up feather bed as if its illusions would protect it.

But Kris was having none of it. His eyes flashed, and Kyungsoo shielded his eyes from the bright light that followed. The monster made the most hideous noise that faded away as it froze in place, then disintegrated into dust.

Kyungsoo breathed, slow to take his arms down. When he finally did, his red-rimmed eyes bore into the fae’s own, anger seeming to seep from his pores like a poison.

“How did you find me?”

Kris said nothing, turning slightly as another figure lumbered up behind him, his loyal and great dragon's nose snuffling at the air.

Kyungsoo’s face fell. “Oh.”

Kris started to reach out for Kyungsoo, then stopped himself. He'd never felt anything like this coming from Kyungsoo - sadness, frustration, all those things he had known before but this was much different and the winter fae couldn't shake the feeling that he was truly to blame this time. "I didn't mean to steal away your privacy," Kris said, taking a step back to give Kyungsoo a bit more room, "I had to know you were safe. The attack happened to fast and... I looked for you in the crowd but... you had already gone."

Kris's dragon gave the Winter Lord a probing shove with its nose and pushed the fae back towards Kyungsoo. It huffed and took an awkward seat in the grass, spreading its wings as though it were stretching but the intent was more obvious. It didn't want to allow Kris any opportunity to run from this or back away. It knew best of all that this was far more frightening to the general than any battle against any number of enemies.

"Are you hurt?" Kris asked, breaking the heavy silence between them.

The question made Kyungsoo look down at his arm. Besides the few areas of cuts that still had crystal and worn gold in them, the stinging pain was muted compared to his sadness, and surprisingly it had stopped bleeding.

But instead of relaying this information to Kris, Kyungsoo pressed his cheek into his own shoulder, and a laugh ripped out of his throat, out of place and dumb sounding to his ears. Of course he was. In more ways than one. He looked up at the Winter Lord, the one being that he believed and trusted in, and the tears started anew, trailing their familiar paths down his cheeks. He wanted to scream, but all that came out of his throat was a hollow and husky, "Maybe."

Kris took a deep breath and crossed the distance between them with decisive steps, kneeling beside Kyungsoo. He cupped the human's cheek in his hand and lifted Kyungsoo's face so he could see him properly. Wiping away a tear with his thumb, Kris felt intensely that Kyungsoo was small, fragile, could break at any moment and it stung. "I should never have brought you here," Kris said, his own voice thick with regret, "I should have put an end to it at the beginning, struck the dark prince down where he stood. I just..."
Kris's mind rushed with images of war and blood and battle. He knew that what he was saying to Kyungsoo now was madness. Had he taken the first step all that time ago, murdered Jongdae in his own palace and taken Kyungsoo's human mate from the Ever-changing by force... Kris knew better than to think that the women of that cursed family would have allow such an act to go unpunished.

"Kyungsoo," Kris finally continued, feeling added guilt at the pleasure he still felt saying that name, "Kyungsoo, I am sorry." The words seemed woefully inadequate but there was almost nothing more to say. It was the truth.

Kyungsoo was shaking, the weight of the day catching up to his worn out senses. Kris's touch on his face didn't stop the tears, at once wanting to push him away and draw him closer, if just to anchor him for a moment more. His head hurt. Everything ached, and everything else seeped out as he sighed, a different kind of despair settling more firmly into his very soul.

He sniffled, voice small. "I- I don't know... where to go from here. I thought...I thought I would be home... home with-" he paused. "I... what do I do? Kris?"

Kris ran his free hand through Kyungsoo's hair, bringing it to rest on the human's other cheek. He held Kyungsoo's face in his hands, trying to keep him steady, to keep their eyes locked. He was almost afraid that Kyungsoo would fall apart if he didn't hold him up. "That's all right, no one expects that of you," Kris started, his eyes going soft, "You don't have to know what comes next. It wasn't you who caused these horrors to happen and you mustn't think you are responsible for solving them either."

The Winter Lord paused - it was another truth that none of this was Kyungsoo's fault, but Kris's heart was still heavy with guilt of his own, his tongue felt like lead in his mouth as words and feeling he had suppressed bubbled at the surface. He brushed away another tear with his thumb, Kyungsoo's skin cold but soft to his touch, "Let me take you back to the palace, to the Winterlands. The dragons are... fond of you and Tao as well and... I - I am ... I want to help you. In any way that I can. You'll have time there. As much time as you like to think, to... stay."

Somewhere deep in his mind, Kyungsoo knew he was being ridiculous. That this sadness that was currently overwhelming him and his emotions had to be palpable and heavy to those around him. That he was going to cling on to any empathy or touch he could get now that it was clear that he wasn't getting Jongin back. But when Kris said that he could stay, it was like having a home to go back to; that he wasn't completely helpless. His relief and emotions welled up anew in the form of his tears, remembering when he had said that Kris could do away with him as he pleased once their adventure was finished. He couldn't articulate his thanks clearly, his smaller body leaning forward to awkwardly rest on Kris's chest, his sobbing muffled into his robe.

Kris's great drake sniffed the air, her head arching up a few times as she shuffled closer to Kris's back, keeping low, letting them know that she was ready for them. Kris's entire heart felt caught in his throat, but he swallowed it back, trying not to focus on the pressure of Kyungsoo against his chest. It wasn't just physical; it was the weight of Kyungsoo's trust in him and the fear that he might be taking advantage. He wrapped his arms around the smaller being and held him tightly for only a moment, what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze, and without thinking, kissed the top of the human's head. "I'm sorry," he said again, and repeated it a dozen times into Kyungsoo's hair, "Let's go home."

It took effort to lift Kyungsoo, despite the human's small frame. He was nearly dead weight in Kris's arms as the Winter Lord picked him up, not letting Kyungsoo protest. There was more blood, Kris could see now, on Kyungsoo's arm than the human's unsure answers had suggested. He wanted to get Kyungsoo back. He carried Kyungsoo to his dragon. "Smart girl," Kris whispered to his ever
steady dragonflight as she crouched low to help Kris load her passengers. Kris watched Kyungsoo wobble in the saddle seat for a moment and mounted behind him, slipping his arms around Kyungsoo's middle and encouraging the human to lean back against him. "Sleep if you can. She'll get us there safely. We can talk then."

Kyungsoo barely had the agency to respond; he was exhausted. He felt the shift of the great dragonflight as she lifted into the air. Even as he felt like he would fall, Kris held him close, protecting him from stray branches and keeping him steady. Finally, they broke the canopy, and they were greeted by the still air and a moonrise, the warm colors of the sunset fading at their backs. Kyungsoo hadn't realized so much time had passed. But he didn't care. Kris's sleeve draped over him, the fluttering and warmth making him fade quickly into unconsciousness.

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Baekhyun hadn't been truly warm in years. While his vines, his plants, the fungi he pulled from deep in the earth, all worked hard to keep him from suffering too badly in the darkness of the Winterlands, warmth was not one of their features and Baekhyun had grown used to the constant cold. His body was better than that, stronger than that. But now waking, he felt none of the tundra's bite and his mind raced to recall the events in the throne room of the Great Tree.

His eyes opened slowly. The room around him was bright, almost glowing with magic, to the point that Baekhyun could taste it on the air. It sparked with life ... and restriction. Baekhyun started to sit up, but his muscles rebelled and dizziness corrupted his vision, leaving him functionally blind. The bed was soft and though the sheet placed over him was thin given the ambient heat of the room, it felt safe to be beneath it. He tried to sit up again and fell back after only a second. He reached into the heart of this place and tried to call up his vines, needing their help to sit up, but something... there was something blocking him. His heart began to race, to panic. A wild animal locked in a cage, he thought, and smiled darkly. What a trap Junmyeon had set for him, yet another trap.

"Are you watching me now?" he said into the nothingness, "Junmyeon?"

Junmyeon's heart still fluttered every time Baekhyun said his name. So much so that it gave him away as he breathed in a little too quickly, watching Baekhyun's head snap in his direction. He sat at the foot of the bed with a wall to his back, the illusion covering just beyond where his guards stood behind actual bars. Junmyeon had made all the charms himself, not wanting his guards to see or hear anything they weren't supposed to. As Baekhyun moved, the walls around them shimmered with complex, bright white runes, the same ones shimmering over Junmyeon's own skin with each movement.

Junmyeon's voice was calm when he finally spoke. "You have nothing to fear from me now, Baekhyun. Relax."

Baekhyun laughed, continuing to stare at the blankness of the ceiling. "Is that what you think? That I'm afraid of you? That I have ever been afraid of you?" He curled his hands into fists, trying to concentrate on the texture of the sheets against his skin. He needed his senses. He wouldn't be trapped again...

"I know you won't hurt me," Baekhyun said, his voice plain this time and to the point, "I've seen you fight before, Junmyeon. If you wanted me dead, you would have killed me by now. Or had your little puppy do it. Yifan would do anything to stay in his master's good graces, even if that means keeping watch on a forgotten toy for a few hundred years. I'm not afraid though, oh no no. Death might have been better."

His vision came back to him and slowly, Junmyeon came into focus at the end of the bed, the many
visions of him finally settling into one clear image. He was still perfect and Baekhyun's cheeks burned to even think it. He didn't want to be charmed by the faerie king; he didn't want to dream of his face. "You're going to keep me here in the city this time? Have you made a new cage for me? You can come visit me like a zoo animal. Come watch me while I dress."

Junmyeon's face was sad, seeing Baekhyun's face lined with hatred and his words still laced with sharp cynicism even after all this time. He thought separation and years would give him something, yet nothing had changed between them. "That is not my intention. However, it seems some have more to fear from you now. You are not a secret anymore."

Junmyeon turned as if he was distracted for a moment by something behind him. He seemed to listen to something before turning back to Baekhyun, concern overlaying his features. "You saved a lot of people today, including me. Including Kris and Victoria. There are murmurs about how you actually managed to do so. Theories, if you will."

Baekhyun sat up on his elbows, not daring to move much more lest the pain in his body return. He glanced in the direction of Junmyeon's gaze. His brow furrowed, nervous, "What sort of theories? What people are asking? You didn't... you can't have told them. You wouldn't." Baekhyun's chest buzzed, his heart beating so loud in his chest that he was sure that Junmyeon could hear it, "I want nothing from the Autumn Lady and if I wanted something of Kris, I would have taken it. And you... I had to see..." Baekhyun choked on his own words. A fit of coughs wracked through his body and he fell back in bed, covering his mouth. When Baekhyun looked down at his hand, there was a spatter of blood in his palm.

Baekhyun closed up again, hiding the blood in his hand, "Are they listening to us? Your guards? Victoria?" His eyes flicked between Junmyeon and what Baekhyun assumed was the true exit to his prison. The magic was intense and Baekhyun knew better than to think it would be easy for him to leave this place. He'd pushed himself too hard. He needed time to heal and now, this. He had to be careful.

At Baekhyun's distress, the wall rippled as Junmyeon pulled away from it to go closer to Baekhyun's side, the magic distorting and the runes dimming slightly.

"No," he said quickly. "They aren't. I...I just..." he reached towards Baekhyun instinctively, the pull to make sure Baekhyun was okay momentarily making him forget their positions. "What I meant was, how you were able to do what you did...with The Mother Tree." He paused, his lips thinning in concentration, his hand hovering near Baekhyun's cheek. "My... Windmaster Sehun found your vines growing out of the bark before they dissipated shortly after you fell unconscious."

Despite all of Baekhyun's strong talk of fearlessness, his eyes now told a different story. The sudden movement, Junmyeon's body so close, his eyes were wide and lips were parted in surprise. He was scared, but also ... hurt? "Your Sehun?" Baekhyun whispered, suspicious. He calmed himself with several deep breaths and smiled, though it looked far from genuine or easy. He leaned into Junmyeon's hand, letting the King touch his cheek. "She talks to me, the Mother. And all the other plantlife throughout the realms. It's your fault really or maybe it was your intention all along to turn me into this thing."

Baekhyun turned his head and pressed a kiss on Junmyeon's palm, "It is what you wanted. For this world to turn me into one of you? And when you put me out there, left me in the cold, I was alone. And that's when I started to hear them. They wanted to help me. They wanted to help me. They could sense I wasn't of this world. The magic of the woods was already hard at work on my blood, now it... gave me a weapon. A way to ... seek revenge, if that is what I wanted."

His tongue flicked out and tasted the skin of Junmyeon's hand. It might have been playful or even
sexual, had it not been for the dark twist in his eyes. "I suspect the Winterlands will come for that boy too. Yifan said his name with such love. Kyungsoo."

Junmyeon's brow furrowed, the information cycling through his mind, trying to pinpoint what was most important. He had almost stopped Kris from finding the boy. But he realized that Kris had that same look in his eyes, one he was looking at Baekhyun with in this very moment. Hopeful despite the danger, breathing elevated at the smallest touch from Baekhyun. "Yes. I left you. I know you hated me then. But do you still? Your powers are alien and you're not considered human anymore, let alone like fae. You're something else. But...I could have you...properly." He ran the hand from Baekhyun's cheek down to his stomach. "I want to be be better for you. I'm sure I can reverse your abnormal changes..."

Baekhyun tensed at Junmyeon's intimate touch, taking in several deep, hissing breaths, and in a flash of movement that had seemed impossible only seconds before, Baekhyun pushed all his strength into the fae king. He twisted Junmyeon's arm away from his stomach, hands now tight on the king's wrists and took control. The force of his movement sent them both tumbling to the floor, Baekhyun angling to force Junmyeon beneath him. There was a sickening crack as Junmyeon's head met the floor and Baekhyun panicked, grabbing at the other man's hair and lifting his face so that they were only inches apart. He straddled Junmyeon, pushing him down with too much strength for a man of Baekhyun's size and he spit into the king's face, "I will always be human. Always! You don't get to take that from me like you've taken everything else, you selfish prick! I am human at its highest form! Your kind always do this, always demanding that everything you want be your's. I belong to no man and no fae."

He curled his fingers in Junmyeon's hair and pulled the king's head back, exposing his long, white neck, "Do I hate you? What kind of question is that?"

Junmyeon saw stars cross his vision, Baekhyun's strength surprising him. The runes on the wall cracked when his head connected to the floor, the illusion shimmering to reveal four guards and Sehun behind a set of cross bars.

Sehun panicked. "Your grace!" The guards started to dissipate the runes to unlock the bars to reach him.

Blood seeped from the King's nose, voice commanding and firm. "Don't! Stay out!" Despite his compromised position, Junmyeon concentrated, the wall shimmering back into place, Sehun's worried face fading back behind the wall. He looked up at Baekhyun after a moment, not fighting back. "It was never my intention to take anything from you. I've told you this. I've told you every time. It's...in our nature to want." His eyes were sad again. "I thought you wanted me back."

Baekhyun growled low in this throat, too absorbed with the man beneath him to care about the guards, about runes, about Sehun. "I came here because I thought I was strong enough to stop this." He leaned into Junmyeon, biting and kissing equally at the king's neck, "How far do I have to push you? When does it end?" His nails bit sharply into Junmyeon's scalp at he clawed for more control over Junmyeon's body. His mind was racing - why had he come here? What was he doing now? Why couldn't he stop? He felt the tears fall down his cheeks before he could stop them. Hot and angry, he let himself bite hard on Junmyeon's neck, drawing blood, which he lapped up with gluttonous need. He felt himself slipping, losing his grip on the reality of his situation and the room around him was evanescent and spinning. Only the faery king was constant.

"What do I have to do to make you leave me?" Baekhyun sobbed, his face buried against Junmyeon, kissing better every vicious mark he left with his teeth. Through his open mind, his thoughts screaming, he recalled every cold night he had spent in the vast arctic expanses of the Hinterlands.
with his mind a thousand miles away. His endless dreams of Junmyeon's warm arms around him and the way Junmyeon had called him beautiful and the taste of him. "I can't keep this up! You lied to me, you trapped me here and I can't - I can't... I can't forget you. I want you out of my mind!"

Junmyeon laid there, taking every blow, every tear to his flesh, every kiss. He could have dismissed Baekhyun's nearly rabid anger, now or a millennia ago, explaining it away that it was just how fae were, leading unsuspecting humans to curious fates or deadly neverending tortures. But he couldn't. He cared about the man ripping his flesh out, who wanted nothing more than to crush his beating heart between his fingers to be rid of him, but his love would always remain. His whole being existed for Baekhyun.

Blood leaked from the corner of Junmyeon's mouth, pain blooming in his neck and head even as he attempted to sit up, to encircle Baekhyun's shoulders with his arms, reaching for him again. "I've tried to make this world better. I do not want others to...suffer as you have." His thumb managed to drag along Baekhyun's chin, looking up into his eyes as he attempted to smile through his pain. "I love you, Baekhyun. That will never change."

Baekhyun was shaking as their eyes met, his fingers like claws grasping to Junmyeon's chest. His mouth was covered in Junmyeon's blood and his teeth were stained red. Did the fae king still find him beautiful, he wondered? In the great wilderness, he had dreamed of this and lived it a thousand times. For just a moment, he thought, he'd let Junmyeon hold him and fill him with that affection which Baekhyun needed desperately. Then... then, when the king was unaware, he would finally end it forever. He'd have his revenge and no human would ever feel the loss he had felt on the night he'd learned that returning to his home in a world far away was simply not a possibility. He and he alone would be strong enough to kill the faery king.

He lifted his hands as if to strike. And fell forward, clutching Junmyeon to him, his strength and his will falling away.

"How?" he cried into Junmyeon's chest, "How can you say that like you mean it?" He let his arms fall down to his side, letting go of all resistance, "I can't do this anymore, Junmyeon. I'm so... I'm just so so so tired."

After a moment, Junmyeon found the strength to bring his arms around Baekhyun, his fingers making small circular motions in the small of his back. He willed the bigger stains of blood away, flinching as he neared his limits with his magic and strength. But he ignored it, sitting up to cradle Baekhyun in his arms more completely, lifting him up to carry him back into the bed.

There he hesitated, hovering over Baekhyun and considering closing the space between them to give him a kiss to his forehead. He breathed softly, his vision starting to fade in the corners of his eyes as he felt faint, the events of the day catching up to him. "Then rest now, Baekhyun." He managed to hobble back to sit at the foot of the bed, his back reconnecting with the shimmering wall. The walls lit up again, and he retraced some broken runes back on his bloody broken skin.

He turned slightly, brow furrowing as his resumed position put him in contact with Sehun again, the Windmaster begging for him to come out. "No. I'm staying with him." A pause. "As long as it takes for him to heal, that is all."

Baekhyun watched Junmyeon through his eyelashes, exhausted enough to fall apart but still so strung on his own anger, fear and the taste of blood magic in his mouth that he couldn't imagine actually sleeping. "Are you going to sleep like that then? Sitting up? You'll ruin your back." Baekhyun was only half joking, grinning to himself at the strange irony of worrying for the King's health after having ripped away at his throat. But he also hated the thought of Sehun, the eternal Windmaster and the most desperate of them all, being closer, being worried and (worst of all) talking
to Junmyeon all night. Spinning stories in his head. Being... sane and put together and perfect, as usual. Baekhyun knew that in the grand scheme of things, he was being a petty brat. He knew and he didn't much care.

"Will your Sehun let you lay down to rest and to heal yourself?" Baekhyun said, trying to turn his voice, already raspy from his outburst, into something more sensual and adjusted himself to make room for the faery king beside him in the bed. "I promise not to murder you in your sleep."

"I have no doubt that come morning you would try again," Junmyeon's face was blank, but not sad. "I would wake without breath because your hands would be around my throat...and I would deserve it."

He let the words hang in the air, turning again slightly. "A simple tonic will help us heal... and sleep." He reached within to conjure it, but a pained look crossed his features, a low grunt escaping his lips as he struggled to find the magical energy. He pushed through the pain, settling on conjuring merely two small saucers of the liquid. With them in hand, he managed to move once again towards Baekhyun. He sipped at one, the healing properties going to work on mending his body before handing the other to Baekhyun.

Sitting up, Baekhyun laughed and it was thick with phlegm and the remnants of tears, "You're probably right. About me. About yourself. Maybe we're getting somewhere." He took the saucer of healing tonic from Junmyeon and sniffed at it nervously, "Do you want to know something, Junmyeon? About me? Of course you do! You know I haven't had fae food to eat since ... well, you know. Just ... what I could grow myself. And blood. My own mostly."

His eyes drifted behind Junmyeon's shoulder at the wall that hid the guards and the Windmaster from him, "I'm not crazy, you know?" he said, speaking to whoever might be listening, "I've just been through a lot." He snorted, another laugh and this time a smile that was almost too genuine. Baekhyun knew none of this should be funny, but it tickled something inside him to talk like this, honestly and so much. So many words, he wasn't sure he'd used this many true words in years. He sipped the drink and the splashing fresh taste of fae food wrecked across his taste buds, memories of nighttime dancing... and other things one does at night. The taste of Junmyeon and the way he had smiled. Baekhyun threw the rest of the drink back in one quick shot and let his skin glow with it.

Junmyeon smiled a bit at Baekhyun's words, listening to him. He looked down at the empty saucer in his hand, reaching to take Baekhyun's. He frowned, some darker thought in his mind telling him that he could've put whatever he wanted in the liquid. A shot from his favorite decanter to make him lustful, a sleeping potion, even... He closed his eyes and shook his head, forcing the twisted thoughts out of his mind. He knew that he had moved beyond that aspect of himself. "I know you aren't crazy, and I know you have. And so now, we can rest." He pulled back the sheet, hesitating a moment as he looked down at Baekhyun. "That is, if you still want me to."

Baekhyun bit his lip, playfully coy, and made a show of patting the bed beside him. "Only if you trust me," he answered, "It's a test really. If you trust me not to kill you, then yes." Baekhyun lowered his voice and glanced over Junmyeon, up and down, hungry, "I want you in bed with me."

Baekhyun's confident act was shattered with only the slightest movement from the king to accept the invitation. "To sleep," he clarified with a nod that was as much for Junmyeon as it was for himself, "I'm not sure if I'm ready for anything but sleep."

Junmyeon tried to hide his eagerness underneath his amused sway of weight from one foot to the other. "Of course," he said softly, slowly climbing into the bed. He could feel the slight ripple of energy on the other side of his illusion, strong enough to know that Sehun was having a miniature panic attack. But he paid him no mind, his skin aching for contact and his wings instinctively
wanting to push through his skin to impress his almost-mate. He laid on his side, sighing, the tonic catching up to his senses. "Baekhyun," he reached for him, his fingers barely moving as he reached out to touch his hand.

Baekhyun pulled his hand away at first, keeping it close to his chest though he turned his body to face Junmyeon. He watched the fae's limbs relax and though Baekhyun knew intellectually that it was simply the healing tonic doing its job, it felt strangely comforting to see Junmyeon able to relax like that around him. He stretched his legs and curled his toes and tried to fight the warming effects of his own drink. "I'm not sure I remember how to do this," Baekhyun said with a joking air, even though it was frighteningly true. He turned his head and hid his face in the soft pillows before releasing his hand and letting their fingers interlock. Junmyeon's hands, especially compared to Baekhyun's - always too thin and delicate -, were strong and gave away that his story started far away from the manicured halls of the aristocracy, no matter what his title was today. Baekhyun, his heart still thoroughly given to the earth and its working, found this perhaps the most attractive thing about the fae king. He smiled into his pillow, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

Junmyeon's breathing evened out, eyes closing, reveling in the simple, neutral touch their hands made between them. He would have this, and it would be enough. He pushed to stay awake as long as possible, waiting for Baekhyun to follow suit.

It didn't take long for the tonic to wear down on Baekhyun's resolve, still mostly human and unable to resist the sweet call of sleep. His eyes were heavy when he finally lifted his gaze back to Junmyeon, "You know we could have had this. We could have been like this for a thousand years." Baekhyun's mind whirred, wanted to scream, make another scene, but he just smiled weakly and let his eyes close, "Why couldn't you just be honest with me?" He let the words hang, brushing his thumb against Junmyeon's palm, refusing to open his eyes until his dreams took him.

Junmyeon had been almost asleep when he heard Baekhyun speak, opening one eye, staring at his sleeping face. His desires had spoken louder than his words back then. He had been honest about desiring Baekhyun, about his love that made him strong, about giving him everything. But even after all of that, Baekhyun assumed that he could go home, and Junmyeon had failed to tell him that once he had eaten his offering his ties to the earthly realm would be broken.

The echo of Baekhyun's broken face screaming with anger and betrayal snapped him back to the present, staring at his soft eyelashes and the way his pulse fluttered in his neck.

Junmyeon had been honest about everything. Except about what had mattered to Baekhyun the most. That he was human.

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The winter winds whipped up from the snow-covered ground and Kris held onto his charge that much more tightly, leaning in to whisper in the human's ear, "Kyungsoo. Kyungsoo, wake up. We're nearly home."

His lips tingled where they brushed against Kyungsoo's ear and Kris grew instantly nervous at the intimacy, pulling back to what he was sure was a more reasonable position. He'd spent too much time thinking over their trip, the long night had not been good for his confidence, and he was careful and aware of how it might be too easy to take advantage of Kyungsoo while the human was recovering from their ordeal. His arm was still wrapped tight around Kyungsoo's middle though, keeping the human steady, as Kris tugged lightly on his dragon's reins. She hummed and began to descend. The Winter Palace came into view, stunning in the light of the setting sun. They had been traveling for so long. The trip from the capital was a hard, day-long flight and Kris had allowed Kyungsoo to sleep most of it off. It was a beautiful and welcome sight to see his home again. Kris
couldn't help but smile. "Kyungsoo, we're home," he repeated, as much for himself as for his companion.

It was harder to sleep in those last few hours, the air harder on Kyungsoo's lungs as they flew deeper into the cold winds that led them back to the winter palace. Kyungsoo inhaled through his nose and immediately regretted it, the stinging cold making him jolt slightly as he raised his sleeve to his mouth for warmth.

He coughed, the dried remnants of his tears flecking off his face before they started again, the sorrow that had wound itself deep into his bones not letting him have a moment's reprieve in his waking. His tears froze as they fell from his eyes, cascading down to the world below. Despite them, he felt a sort of relief as he saw the high towers and high walls of Kris's domain come into view atop the fresh white snow.

Kris watched Kyungsoo with concern, choosing not to mention the human's tearful expression, trying to give Kyungsoo as much privacy as was possible on the back of a great drake. He pressed his hand flat against Kyungsoo's belly and hoped that just his presence might be enough to give the human at least a moment of comfort.

The powerful beating of dragon wings called out the many creatures of the palace and soon the upper deck was positively vibrating with the rattle and cries of small earthen elementals, their tiny pebble hands lifted high to receive their lord back to the Winterlands. She was careful to avoid them, his dragon landing with surprisingly delicate feet given her size, but they were so numerous that many of them surrounded her armored legs within seconds. Kris smiled at them and hopped down before his dragon had a moment to kneel, his elementals cooing and clicking at him to welcome him back. One of the smallest ones seemed to cry, a whining sound from his little boulder body. Kris kept his smile bright as he turned back Kyungsoo. He extended his arms, nodding for Kyungsoo to fall forward into him. The little elemental reached out their arms too in an adorable imitation of their master; their friend had returned.

Kyungsoo looked down, the golem's happy faces stirring something behind the veil of his sorrow. He tried to smile, but it was strained, his cheeks freezing and his teeth chattering despite the heavier Firelands robe. He hid his arm, cradling it under the layers of fabric as to not alarm any of the golems present.

The great drake had shifted as low as she could go to make it easier for Kyungsoo to get off, so much so that she had even tilted when Kyungsoo hadn't come off right away. Kyungsoo did eventually fall forward, hesitant and bowing his head, even as the golems' chatter started to change into concern for Kyungsoo.

Kris kept a neutral but happy expression, not wanting to alarm, but his heart hurt to see Kyungsoo struggle. Trying not to think too much and failing miserably in that regard, he threw his arm around Kyungsoo's shoulders and guided his companion into the palace, where at least they would have protection from the cold. Unlike the summer city, there were no courtiers here to keep the palace constantly maintained. Kris's only visitors were the occasional tribesmen loyal to the king and their leaders. The stone halls of the Winter Palace were then mostly cold, as no fires nor magic had been used to keep them ready for fae. Kris ran his hand over the walls as they descended the spiraling stairs towards the living quarters, bright runes reacting to his touch immediately and illuminating their path. They would be slow to warm up the icy palace, but it was best to start sooner rather than later. Kris watched for ice on the steps, having more than one personal experience with the pain of such a vicious fall.

They reached the first landing on their way down only a moment later - Kris's office and rooms. The
Winter Lord paused and considered, but scolded himself mentally for even thinking. He started to continue down the stairs, taking Kyungsoo's hand with a careful softness, "You'll want to change into something warmer, I'm sure. It's seems that we have beaten Tao back and it will take some time before all the rooms are to a more comfortable temperature."

Kyungsoo really wasn't focusing on what Kris was saying, worried instead on making sure he didn't slip on the stairs. He let the robe fall off his left arm when they came to a landing, surprised when he saw that where Baekhyun had rubbed the aloe, the wounds had somewhat closed, but his fingers were still in pretty bad shape, and some crystal remained imbedded in his skin. "Kris, I really...just need a bath or...someone to take the rest of these out without it hurting too badly..."

He paused, hearing the familiar clacking of claws against the stone and turned towards the noise, the spritelings charging around the corner to greet their master like they usually did. While a few ran up to Kris, the ones charging playfully at Kyungsoo backpedaled and stopped, concerned cooing puffs sounding from their lips.

"Now now, be gentle," Kris whispered at spritelings, trying to be stern around his injured companion and failing as he always did with his little ones. He knelt down to their level and took one especially pretty one, scales all black with a red sheen, into his arms and lifted him towards Kyungsoo, hoping that it would lift the human's spirits. The tiny lizard stretched as far as it could from Kris's arms, reaching towards Kyungsoo's injury, sighing softly. Kris closed his eyes and thought for a moment before swallowing his fears and throwing open his own bedroom suite door. "I shouldn't have ... I'll get you comfortable here and I'll... I have a great pool for bathing."

He nodded and left it at that, extending a hand and inviting Kyungsoo into his own rooms. Where the guest rooms had been a strange blend of natural and luxurious, Kris's suite gave off instead the feeling of being thoroughly lived in. Books and papers were piled high on shelves that extended to the ceiling, as though the Winter Lord's library hadn't been content with staying in its own room. The first area they entered had two large chairs, plump with cushions and a small table between them covered in empty tea cups of every pastel and mismatched color. There were two doors, one leading towards Kris's bedroom and the other to a set of stairs that climbed tall into the great tower where he kept his office. Kris lingered in the doorway, "As I've said, everything I have is yours and it was thoughtless of me not to consider..." He took another deep breath and started towards his bedroom, "Let me tend to your wounds and we'll... talk. If you like."

Kyungsoo took Kris's hand with his good arm, but upon seeing Kris's lived-in living quarters, he softened in surprise. He found it interesting that it was lived in, even maybe a bit messy, and that intrigued Kyungsoo somewhat. The color scheme was also completely different from the rest of the castle, as if Kris himself was merely a visitor from another, earthier place.

Kyungsoo sniffed, trying to clear his nose as they walked into the room. "Okay." The concerned coos of the spritelings were echoing in his ears, and when he managed to sit down in one of the chairs, they surrounded him, rubbing against his legs and being very careful to only cling to the sides of the chair instead of on Kyungsoo's person. He looked up at the Winter Lord, eyes wet with unshed tears. "Kris, thank you," he managed to croak out.

Kris disappeared, blushing, into his bedrooms and retrieved a small pot filled with thick gel-like substance, not unlike the insides of Baekhyun's fresh aloe. He tried to be calm, but with Kyungsoo here... with him... now, it didn't feel real. He knelt in front of Kyungsoo, watching the human's eyes follow him, "You're welcome. Always." He held Kyungsoo's injured hand in both of his and push through as much of his magic as he could muster. Kris had never been one for healing, spending so much of his life in battle, taking life rather than prolonging it. But all fae had limited abilities and he knew the theory of it enough. He pressed his eyes closed and focused on the feeling of Kyungsoo all
"Let me in," he whispered, his magic twisting and turning as it worked its way into Kyungsoo's flesh, pushing free the remaining debris and slowing stitching him back together. Different from Chanyeol's raw fire magic, this was, like Kris, a bit funny and ticklish in its slow work. Kris didn't dare push too hard, but every moment was infused with his desire for Kyungsoo to be safe and whole. After a few moments of quiet meditation, Kris pulled back and revealed in the palm of his hand a few bits of crystal that had worked their way from inside Kyungsoo's torn flesh. Setting them aside, he began to apply a generous coating of the medicine, letting his hands smooth over Kyungsoo's. The youngest of the spritelings began to sing sweetly all around them.

"Kyungsoo," Kris said when he was finished, wiping the excess on his his robes, messy and nervous, "When I ... found you, were you... going to eat that creature's food? Did you - did you want it?"

Kyungsoo let out a sigh of relief as he inspected his healed arm. But Kris's question he paused, looking down at his right hand where Tao's bracelet was still wrapped around his wrist. He thought of the conflicted feelings in his heart at that moment, and even balked at himself for thinking some of the thoughts he had. He swallowed before answering. "The pull was strong. I'm not sure if it was me or if the creature was doing it, but I was hungry. I did want to eat. Thankfully Tao made me wear this before we parted ways." He lifted his other hand so Kris could inspect the charm for himself. His eyes darkened. "But of course, it was a trap set by the...whatever it was. So it was most likely because of its tricks. Why?"

"Let's just start by saying that we should always be thankful that Tao is twenty steps ahead of me nearly all the time," Kris said, studying but careful not to touch the charm lest it should damage Tao's delicate spell work. "In our world, for those with fae blood at least, our bodies are not subject the passing of time in the same way that your's would be. So the need for food or drink is delayed by hundreds, if not thousands of years. When we eat, it is because we ... care about the person who feeds us, trust them with parts of ourselves. When I told you before not to take any fae food, it is because your soul, your heart, your... body, could have been claimed and rightfully so. That creature, it would have taken you where even I could never follow." Kris felt another stinging blush crawl up his neck and into his cheeks, even his ears were burning. He hid his face, leaning forward until his forehead was laying against Kyungsoo's knee, "And I would... if you are ever ready, if you... desired it, I would have liked to be the one. I would have you at my table."

Without the constant drive of finding his husband to keep his focus, Kyungsoo's mind was a whirlwind of speculation. Could he go home? Why would he want to? All that was left for him there was a life without Jongin. His face fell. Another scenario he managed to conjure up was using Kris's offer to find Jongin, maybe convince him to go home again, but he knew that was most likely a foolish endeavor. And it wasn't exactly the best ego booster when your husband leaves you for a fae. It left him suspicious and sad, even as Kris’s was there before him, admitting his true feelings.

But... then again...

He reached down to place a hand on Kris's hair. Maybe he could stay here. Learn to love this fae, an opportunity to grow, taste the magic that teased and pulled, and--

'You fucked up.'

Kyungsoo jolted, pulling his hand away as the memory made him lose his focus, his over-analyzing mind making him dizzy. Tears came quickly again as his fingers tried to grab onto something to make it seem like he wasn't losing his mind. The spritelings chirped and cooed in concern when Kyungsoo didn't answer right away, licking his tears away like they had so many times before.
"Kris, I--" He hid his face in his hands, unsure of what to say or do. "I want to, but..." Guilt flooded him. His emotions seemingly out of control, every emotion overwhelming his senses. He was going mad.

Kris looked up at Kyungsoo and pulled back to allow more space between them, haunted by the ghost of Kyungsoo's fingers through his hair. He sat back on his heels and settled himself, pulling his strength from the battlefield and steeling his heart, "I didn't mean to force anything. I won't pretend to know what you're feeling right now. I simply wanted you to know. It didn't seem right to invite you back into my home after all this and never tell you the truth." Kris stood up and took a few more steps away. Images of Baekhyun's screaming, terrified face the night Kris had stripped him away from Junmyeon, away from the Summerlands, as he learned the truth about what Junmyeon's love had cost him... Kris couldn't push them from his mind when he continued, "I didn't want you to ever think that I would lie to you. I... exist by your will. I have from the moment I saw you. What you want, what you need... if I can give it to you, I will."

He cupped his hands together and swirl of icy blue danced around his fingers. When he separated his hands, he was holding a small round of soft, yellow cake, the size of his palm. Its top was shining with some sort of honey glaze and the smell of vanilla filled the room. Kris stared at his offering quietly, not meeting Kyungsoo's gaze. "I'm selfish. I'm... Junmyeon has always said 'awkward'. I cannot offer you riches except miles of ice and rock. I'm not... Jongin. But I do love you." Kris shocked himself at the words pouring from him and his hands began to shake with nerves, "I do love you, Do Kyungsoo."
A moment passed. Then another. Kyungsoo's eyes blinked slowly, trying to focus. He didn't know what was happening. The sadness that curled heavily around his heart warred with the odd feeling of relief that wanted to lift out of his chest. In human terms it felt too soon, but his mind in this world was having difficulty understanding the concept of time. It had felt like ages since someone admitted their feelings for him, let alone admitted to wanting him.

He had been confused when Jongin years ago had admitted to liking him, wondering what he saw in him when they dated, what made him stay when they married up until recently. But there was no confusion here. Elation bloomed suddenly in his chest, the fact that he might get to be safe, to be taken care of, just another emotion pushing its way to the forefront to be expressed. Like before with the monster in the woods, he felt the muted pull of the food in his gut, strong and sudden. The swirl of conflicting emotions also brought forth old conversations in his head, tears still falling from his eyes.

'And if I told you that Yifan was falling in love with you?'

'It...changes nothing!'

'You... you said you would help me. Please. I want to go with you.'

'I just want to know why. Then...Then you can do away with me as you please.'

'You interest me.'

'Kyungsoo, I am sorry.'

He wanted to just give in, but part of him was still resisting, brows turned downward and wide eyes red rimmed and tired. He looked down at Tao's bracelet, and made his decision.

Anything to stop the feeling like he was falling apart.

The spritelings started to get excited when Kyungsoo stood, then slowly moved forward to stand in front of Kris, chittering and jumping as Kyungsoo raised his hand to the bracelet, loosening the clasp. It fell with a heavy thunk on the floor, forgotten.

Kris's entire body was tense as wire and his mouth was dry. He wasn't even sure where he found the strength to keep his hands extended, his offering the only thing that kept their bodies apart. He wanted to reach out, to kiss Kyungsoo all the way to madness and undress him right there on the floor. It was primal and intoxicating and it truly had been too long since Kris had tasted a human on his lips. The sound of the bracelet crashing into the floor jolted him back to reality, "Do you need to hear it again? That I love you? That I want you? Do you... want to hear it?"

The effect was immediate. Kyungsoo's mouth started watering, eyes trailing back up to widen at the food presented for him. His nostrils flared, and his lips parted, and without any more hesitation, he plucked the confection from Kris's hands even as tears continued to fall. He felt a groan in his stomach, yearning, echoing throughout his mind and body within him and up past his lips as he swallowed the confection whole.
It felt like he hadn't eaten in an age.

The food went down his throat easily, but then thirst started to make its way up, along with a bubbling he couldn't quite place until it had drowned out everything in his mind...ecstasy. The feeling like a door slamming behind him while another opened up. Memories fading as his focus came back into the present, fixating on the being in front of him. Is this what Jongin felt? Was this all it took for him to leave?

He swallowed once more, licking his lips, a bit of crumbs still clinging to the corner of his mouth. "Yes," he finally spoke, voice shaking, staring up at Kris with a dreamy, yet disbelieving look at what he had just done. "As long as I can learn to love you back."

Kris nearly tumbled backwards as a great weight seemed lifted off his shoulders. He took Kyungsoo's face in his hands and smiled, genuinely smiled, "Whatever I have to do. I'd cross the stars to show how much - to prove that I -" Kris shook his head, words failing him. Instead, he simply pulled Kyungsoo against him, their bodies flush against each other, and kissed him deeply, the taste of honey and sugar on the human's lips. He felt his confidence return and lowered his hands to Kyungsoo's hips, squeezing gently before pulling back from the kiss, forcing himself to slow down. His mind whirred with memories of what it was like on Earth, what parties had been like in the ancient days when he had wooed Tao with a great roast beast and a mysterious chocolate drink from across the ocean, what the humans had eaten and enjoyed. The tips of his fingers sparked with magic as he lifted a hand towards Kyungsoo's mouth and he conjured a small cup, robin's egg blue, filled with golden nectar. "It will help you relax..."

Kyungsoo turned towards the cup, raising his hand to place it on Kris's own to direct it to his mouth. He drank, and each time he swallowed a wave of airy magic flowed through him, making his limbs go slack. Combined with the effect the food had on him he nearly fell into Kris, wanting more of...something. He couldn't identify what this hunger within him wanted. More food? Drink? If there was a feast laid out, he suspected that he would probably be able to finish it. Or...

"Kris, I...I'm...so hungry. What am I feeling...Why am I...?"

Kris hurried to support Kyungsoo, unable to stop smiling as the human's skin took on the warm glow of magic from within. "Time has passed slowly for you here. Your body is simply catching up and it craves sustenance. It's good. Let me..." He guided Kyungsoo towards his bedroom, a large unmade bed that seemed have been carved from a single slab of snowy white marble visible through the doorway. The Winter Lord tugged the heavy wooden door closed and pulled Kyungsoo in again for another kiss, this one short and sweet. Their lips still so close that Kris could feel Kyungsoo's breath, he whispered, "Tell me what would make you happy. What do you crave?" Kris's voice was low and thick with arousal. Watching Kyungsoo give in had awakened all his deeper senses and for a fae, such vulnerability was impossible to resist. He took Kyungsoo's hand in his and pressed it against the door, letting his blue magic slide against Kyungsoo's skin.

Kyungsoo's cheeks flushed in embarrassment, his breath panting as the magic lighting up the space between them tickled his stomach and waist. He thought he would have more control than this. He reached up, whispering as if anyone could be listening. "I... want you..." But even with his body giving into the flow of magic he was still terrible at expressing his wants and desires with words; the wants tumbling from his lips that he was afraid sounded like gibberish to his ears. "I want to curl up somewhere warm and sleep. I want to be full. I want everything that you can give me. Kris..." His voice bordered on desperation, clawing at Kris's robes for something fulfilling that he couldn't quite explain.

Kris blushed with thoughts much darker, of filling Kyungsoo with sweet nectar until he was pliant
and warm to the Winter Lord's touch, of wrapping him in delicate silks until his Kyungsoo (yes, his) was ready and his body was on the verge of bursting with new wings. But then, he thought, he would be no better than Jongdae, taking advantage while his human lover remained in the dark about what was truly happening to him. Kyungsoo didn't deserve that. So instead, Kris simply smiled, "We have time, all the time we need." And pushed another round of blue energy through their connected hands and threw open his bedroom door.

The room which had been dominated only by Kris's great marble bed was now crowded with golden bowls laden with every type of faery delicacy. Kris's favorite stonefruits were plump with juice, while cakes of every flavor dripped with honey. A plate of cold meats rested beside a glass pitcher that sparkled with golden drink. "It's been a long time since you've properly eaten," Kris said as he guided Kyungsoo into the room. He brought a hand to Kyungsoo's mouth and pushed his thumb past the human's full lips, "I will take very good care of you."

Kyungsoo sucked on Kris's thumb for a moment, overwhelmed with the sights and smells around him. He wanted everything, wanted it all, and was prepared to take without question. But even though the magic around and flowing through him was satisfying beyond words and his desires were about to be met, he struggled to keep from floating away at the pleasure Kris was giving him. He had to remember why he did this.

He knew Kris couldn't read his mind without breaking the carefully constructed wall within. Kyungsoo's analytical mind, though muted and hazy through pleasure, was now under control somewhat, without the overwhelming imbalance of trying to find an anchor. He was terrified to play this game, not even sure if it would be worth it in the end. So even as every touch sparked and his body sang when Kris brought food close, he had to remember what was important, and take advantage of anything that could help himself in the future. He couldn't let himself go. Not completely. Especially for Jongin. Not yet. Maybe with time, he could...

Kris pressed closer and all of those thoughts left his mind, eyes rolling back at the overwhelming pleasure of the food sliding down his throat as he swallowed a stonefruit, curious about its taste. Kris had mentioned that it was one of his favorites, but Kyungsoo's fuzzy mind just wanted...

"More."

Kris kissed away the fruit juice from the corner of Kyungsoo's mouth, unable to stop smiling as he led the human to the bed. He kissed Kyungsoo's neck, let nervous hands explore down his body, all the while whispering, "Is this okay? And this... is this what you want?" The expression on Kyungsoo's face told him that it all felt good, but somehow it made it better to hear it from Kyungsoo again and again. He had to be sure.

Climbing on the bed beside Kyungsoo, Kris gathered him up in his arms and took his time offering cake after cake and another slice of rich, milky cheese or salted wild meats. He untied the robes that Kyungsoo had taken from the Firelands and rubbed gentle circles on Kyungsoo's belly as the human took more and more food, until the amount seemed impossible for a single sitting. Yet Kris simply conjured more, just as his Kyungsoo commanded, following each course with another round of that golden nectar. Kris stole more than few cupfuls himself, needing the courage to keep pressing forward. Finally his magic nearly exhausted and his need desperate, he lay Kyungsoo out across the rumpled sheets, the shocking glow of his skin against the white almost hypnotic. He threw back his own robes, exposing his chest and stomach, and lowered himself down to tease first at Kyungsoo's nipples then to drag his tongue down and down to Kyungsoo's stomach.

Kyungsoo's legs parted easily to let Kris settle more comfortably between them. Any and all resistance had fallen away, Kris's change of focus from the food to his body lighting his senses on
fire. He writhed at the touches, arms above his head as his cock strained against his lower belly with near overwhelming arousal. His toes curled as Kris kissed along his sensitive stomach, round with the food he had eaten. "Kris..." he didn't even recognize his own voice, as it was clouded with a desperation he had never felt before.

Kris raised his eyes and locked with Kyungsoo, wanting desperately to push until they were one, until Kyungsoo could feel how much Kris wanted him, but he was still scared of Chanyeol's magic, of what price Chanyeol had forced the human to pay for a bit of mental silence. "You'll tell me if you want me to stop," he insisted, snaking his tongue out and flicking the tip across the warm skin of Kyungsoo's belly. The taste was indescribable after so long. The image of Kyungsoo now, stretched across his bed, exposed, nearly begging... it was almost too much. Not waiting for Kyungsoo to comply, he hooked his fingers around the top of the human's thin, linen undergarments and undressed him completely. He dove in and swallowed until his face was buried in thick black pubic hair, the head of Kyungsoo's cock pressing against the back of his throat. His tongue against the underside creating more pressure, he began to move, everything messy and wet in his enthusiasm. His hands were gentle on Kyungsoo's swollen stomach, Kris's own erection aching at the feel of his Kyungsoo so plump and ready.

Kyungsoo nearly screamed, arching his back into Kris's mouth on his straining erection. He brought one hand down to hold on to Kris's wrist while the other covered his own eyes, mouth open and panting in pleasure that threatened to overwhelm him, his pleasure rising sharply and he moaned unbidden with the ecstasy of it all.

"God you're so easy."

Kyungsoo nearly bit his lip when his moans trailed off into a whine, clamping his mouth down to keep from sounding so desperate. The thought nagged at him, muted in his senses but coming back into his mind to crash against the pleasure, and it only drove him higher, the pleasure eroding his will as he mindlessly begged for Kris to come closer as his legs shook.

Kris wrapped his hand around the shaft of Kyungsoo's cock, pulling back until his tongue swirled only around the sensitive head, dipping into the slit and under the every ridge. He could see his prize now and he lifted his eyes to watch Kyungsoo fall apart underneath him. Kyungsoo was so pretty when he begged, Kris's name on his lips. Kris squeezed lightly and moaned to feel Kyungsoo's trembling body. With a satisfying pop, he pulled his mouth away and jerked him faster. He said Kyungsoo's name a dozen times. There was nothing in Kris's entire world that wasn't this human in front of him. He wanted Kyungsoo to let go, to be his completely, and he told him that, his heart racing in his chest.

"Kyungsoo," he whispered, growling and voice strained from his enthusiastic work on his lover's body, "Let go for me. Let me show you how good it can be." A snake of blue magic weaved between Kris's fingers, wrapped around Kyungsoo's cock, and it hummed along with Kris's experienced movement.

The pleasure didn't taper off; it just got stronger. Kyungsoo was toeing the abyss, eyes barely open and his panting breaths loud in his ears. He wanted him closer. He wanted Kris to help him forget. "Kris...please..." The pleasure threatened to overwhelm him again, wanting to fall over the edge of no return.

But...

His humanity refused to be pushed out. Even as his cries of pleasure begged for Kris to continue, the corner of his eyes bloomed with tears. Something within him was saying no, despite his willingness and constant chorus of consent. Nevertheless the magic made his body ecstatic. It flowed around
them, entwining around their limbs, promising more pleasure, promising more of Kris' attention, promising him forever.

The tears threatened to spill down his cheeks, eyes wide as he opened his arms to try and find something to hold on to, the need suddenly more urgent than the pleasure ever could be. "Kris, please...hold me. Please."

Kris's eye grew wide and, leaving his magic to work Kyungsoo's body closer and closer to climax, he sat back and pulled Kyungsoo against him. His mouth was watering as it became more and more obvious that Kyungsoo wasn't going to last much longer. His magic pulsed with every breath and Kris knew that he too was going to be mess if he allowed it, his own erection pressing against his long underwear. He held their faces barely apart and smiled, kissing the corners of Kyungsoo's lips. "I'm here, I'm here," he repeated like a strange prayer. His strong hands held Kyungsoo in place. He didn't want his Kyungsoo to look away until he knew what had brought these tears. "Tell me to stop and we can stop," Kris said, even though he wanted no such thing, "This is for you. All of this is for you. Everything I am is for you now." He lowered his voice, turning Kyungsoo's face from him and nibbling on the human's ear, "Kyungsoo, I live to give you pleasure, to make you happy. I'm not going anywhere until you send me away."

Kyungsoo was crying. His arms encircled and clung to Kris, not even sure if the tears were happy or sad. His hips started thrusting against Kris's lower stomach, desperate for more substantial contact besides the magic. He wanted physicality; touch was important to him. But he couldn't articulate it correctly through his pants and gasps of pleasure.

Don't leave me alone.

Don't leave me alone like Jongin did.

Please.

One of Kris's strong hands wrapped around to the back of Kyungsoo's neck and squeezed, echoing the constant pressure of Kris's magic. He was so small against Kris's body and his mewing made him even more delicate and irresistible. The Winter Lord took Kyungsoo's ever renewed physical enthusiasm as permission, even though it left a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach to see tears streaking down the human's cheeks. "Kyungsoo," he said again, slipping his other hand between them, "I want you. I want you all over me." His fingers wrapped around Kyungsoo's cock and he moved faster, never taking his eyes away from Kyungsoo's face.

The bedroom around them seemed to evaporate for Kris as they sped towards that one moment. He didn't want to think about what would come, the battles that were now inevitable, the worries he felt for Kyungsoo... and for Jongin. If the world was about to fall apart, he wanted this the most. He wanted his name on Kyungsoo's lips, Kyungsoo's pleasure stained across his chest, Kyungsoo's body for him alone. "Come for me, Kyungsoo."

"Kris...please, I... Kris...!!" He managed to stutter out before time slowed for Kyungsoo, eyes barely open in overwhelming pleasure, mouth releasing fluttering moans as his back arched into Kris's touch. He reveled in the feel of his hands on his skin, driving his pleasure ever higher. He felt like he was about to erupt from the inside out, explode into a myriad of crystal and ice to become something stranger.

So this is what it felt like.

Kyungsoo didn't just feel like he had fallen into the abyss, the metaphorical ground underneath him had shattered. He fell, fell into Kris's arms, into his pleasure, into his eyes, obeying his words without
really knowing how.

Pleasure was pulled from him and he came hard, the best orgasm he had ever experienced in his life making him nearly bite his tongue. He made a splattering mess along Kris's chest and stomach, hips stuttering as his moans tapered high and then cut off, focusing on his breathing as he was let down gently, Kris's arms still around him, making him feel safe.

Even as his mouth licked into Kris's own, hands sliding down his shoulders to squeeze at the skin there, his thoughts had turned from his feeble goals to being all consumed with the fae in front of him. In a muted corner of his mind, he realized he belonged to Kris now.

What have I done...

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There were too many hairs in her brush.

Sitting at her cherrywood vanity, Joy studied each of them with a certain disdain as she pulled them slowly, one by one, from the thick bristles. She had always been proud of her thick black hair, something to brag about in the aesthetically obsessed and deeply feminine Spring court, and now... she slammed down the brush in frustration and held back a scream, biting down on her lower lip until the pain brought her back to her current situation. She hadn't been allowed to leave her stateroom since the attack, despite her attempts to help the fallen with her healing powers. The shock of the event had worn off and left her only to think and think. This room, this prison, in the Summerlands, was surely intended to keep her until the king could find use for her. And Jessica, her lady of eternal morning, had left her to it. Joy could hear the guards shuffling outside the door, talking about nothing as though the world wasn't falling apart. She picked up her brush and started again. If she was going to be made a prisoner after all she had done for the greater kingdom, she would, at least, refuse to look the part.

Meanwhile, outside in the throne room, Amber tried to resist the urge to throw a nagging healer over her shoulder that kept asking her to sit down and rest. "I'm fine," she mumbled through grit teeth. She had sustained worse in wars spanning decades and refused to be taken down in one tiny coup.

But the Autumn tribe had sustained heavy losses. Victoria, trying to maintain control over their situation, was running out of tears to use in her magic to heal, resorting to the spilled blood still surrounding them and other victims who were still lying on the cold stone around them. Nobody stopped her from using the old world blood magic. The dead fae weren't going to be needing it anymore.

"Drink this," Victoria brought over a small conjured vial to Amber, looking around the throne room. "It seems that our King has made a hasty disappearance for the time being."

Amber's face scrunched up as she eyed the pale pink concoction. "I don't need it."

Victoria tsked. "Then bring it to the little spring fae. Question her if you must. We need to find out more information about what transpired today, and we need every tidbit we can get." After a moment of staring at Amber's face, she added, "Gently. We mustn't clamp down on one of the only leads we have."

Amber harrumphed, taking the vial and making her way to the staterooms down the hall. When she reached the guards at the door, they let her pass, Amber not thinking twice as she pounded on the door and barged into Joy's room.
Joy nearly jumped out of her chair in surprise, her eyes going wide at the sudden intrusion, but she had had many lifetimes of training for this and forced her face back to a neutral expression. She continued brushing her hair as though nothing had happened, though her hand trembled. "Are you here to arrest me?" she said with more bravery than she felt, "It's funny that they would send you. I thought I'd at least be important enough to the King that he might come to see me himself." She locked eyes with Amber through the mirror, staring down the Autumn fae's reflection, "Is... is everyone okay?"

Amber paused, taking in the Spring fae's carefully constructed mask as she walked over to her, taking in the disheveled appearance of the room. "No, I'm not here to arrest you. The King has his own issues and has wisely removed himself from the situation." She sniffed. "Everyone that can be saved and treated are being well taken care of, the rest are dead. Current count is at least three dozen nobles dead, 27 guards, nearly 300 injured in some way, shape or form, at least 50 of those seriously, and we're still trying to count how many were actual guests and rebels as opposed to those glamoured husks and fakes we somehow did not detect." Amber paused, not mentioning the losses from her own court. "And... to add to the chaos, it seems that your Mistress is missing."

Joy set down her brush calmly and turned to face Amber, "You think I didn't notice? You think I had something to do with it?" Her mind rushed back to the throne room and the bodies and the blood and that feeling of... hopelessness. "I doubt I'll be able to ease your mind, but... I am here, not with my mistress. If Lady Jessica had something planned for us, I was not made aware and I was left here. She left me here." Her voice broke as she finished her sentence and tears pooled in her eyes. She did everything she could to keep them from falling, willing herself stronger. "I told Kris. I don't know where she is and I... don't know where to find her."

Her temple throbbed where, for years, the lady of Spring had tapped into Joy's magic with a single touch, reading her memories of meetings with the King and the council. She tried to massage the pain away, but it continued its horrible pulse. Joy gritted her teeth, "My lady was always secretive and she always played favorites, but I thought... if it came down to it, that I would be one of the chosen."

Amber's face almost contorted into something incredulous, knowing that besides Joy, there were dozens of fae just like her that Jessica had used over the centuries for council meetings. Sure, it seemed to be a great honor within their culture, but it didn't sit well with Amber and many others, noting that after years of serving loyally, many of the fae chosen were often never seen in court again after a certain period of time. And the ones that were seen barely remembered their time serving their mistress. "Chosen for what? Being her confidant?"

"To simply... be near her, I suppose," Joy said, her shoulders sinking. She had been ... at least co-workers with Amber for years and, despite the formality of their encounters, it should be that they were friends of a sort? Surely Amber would understand what it meant to be close to your leader, "Jessica is a hard person to understand. She is very private, even with those of us who are trusted to bring her word to the King's table. To be brought into her innermost circles, that is a great honor. She is not like your Victoria, who mingles with the everyman. Nor is she like our Winter Lord, who lives for his... creatures. She is still true fae royalty."

Joy paused, this time bringing both of her hands to her head. The pounding of blood and magic was getting worse and her knees had begun to tremble from the pain. She started to stand, but fell back in the chair. She squeezed her eyes shut, her tears finally falling. But the pain only increased until it was as if her mind was burning away, white hot heat that only she could feel, that only she could see. Before she could force the pain down again, she screamed.

"Joy? Joy!" Amber panicked, trying to figure out what was going on. She nearly dropped the vial
she was carrying, putting it down on the wood of the vanity. She lifted Joy's face to look at her, the younger fae's eyes rolling back into her head as the small tattoos of Jessica's residual mind magic lit up on the side of her face. They glowed white before peeling off her skin completely, and Amber stared as they dissipated into the air like ash.

"Hey!" Amber screamed to the guards in the hall, who jumped at her voice. "Get me the healers! Get me Victoria! NOW!" Amber picked up Joy easily, moving her to the bed, trying to make her comfortable. "Joy? Stay with me here."

Joy's eyes refused to focus but she reached out for Amber anyway, her mind hazy with fear. Their disagreements were forgotten if only Amber could protect her from... whatever this was. She grasped the older fae's hand in her's and squeezed. She needed some connection, any connection, as she watched imagines of the Spring Court dance before her mind's eye... then disappear.

It felt like hours, but it could only have been a few minutes before the pain subsided and Joy could focus again. Her knuckles were white where she held tightly onto Amber and she pulled away quickly, embarrassed at herself. She shooed away the healers that dashed into the room - she didn't want or need their help. "My lady left me here on purpose," she whispered so that only Amber could hear, nervously eyeing the guards and healers who stood around them. The guards were busy describing her fit to the healers but Joy was so anxious and afraid, it seemed impossible to trust such strangers. "She's... home. She went home, but... something is wrong. She is wrong? Something is wrong." She knew her words didn't make sense. She looked up at Amber imploringly, needing her to understand, "There is something wrong in the Land of Spring."

Amber balked at the way Joy was acting, turning her head to regard the healers for help even as Joy waved them off. Amber herself had never mastered any art besides war; her own knowledge and use of magic was limited and uncharacteristically low of a fae of her standing. She of course made up for it with her strength, determination, and loyalty, and she felt a need to protect Joy even though the force hurting her could not be seen.

"We...we'll have to look into it then," Fortunately Victoria came in at that moment, and Amber gave out a breath of relief.

"What happened?" Victoria asked, but her eyes were not on Joy or Amber, looking around for and locating the vial forgotten on the vanity. She picked it up, walking over to the bed.

"My lady, it's..."

"Shh." Amber stopped, straightening her back as Victoria concentrated, the vial becoming bigger as she manipulated the contents within. The healers bowed their heads as they offered their sprigs of herbs, which Victoria took without looking. She crushed and dropped in various ingredients, swirling the vial to agitate the mixture. The pink concoction turned a milky purple as the magic within changed. "Out. All of you."

The fae obeyed, the healers rushing out and the guards returning to the door. Victoria didn't move until the door had closed, and only the three fae remained.

Victoria breathed through her nose as she concentrated, removing a long, rough-looking pin from her hair. The stones decorating the black surface started to glow. "Amber, if you would be so kind...I'm sure Joy would appreciate the remedy to help her mind heal."

Amber looked down at Joy, remembering how she had panicked and the words she had spoken. "Yes, My Lady." She took the hair pin from her mistress, turning her own hand over, and with a steady hand, flicked the pin over the skin of her thumb to draw blood. With the blood gathered on
the tip of the needle-sharp hair pin, Victoria made sure to catch the droplets in the vial. Not wanting the rest to go to waste, Victoria pressed her fingers to gather the blood on the wound, coating the lip of the vial with blood before handing it to Joy. "Drink." The tone in her voice left little to argue with.

Joy recoiled at first - she was still far from comfortable taking orders from someone who wasn't her beloved Lady of Spring. The pain was mostly gone, but she could feel the same magic simmering just below the surface. The images of a broken Spring played back again and again in her mind. So, without complaint, she took the vial and threw it back like some vile acid, swallowing it fast before she could second guess herself, Amber or Victoria. It was a strange thing, tasting first of the pure metal of blood then softening to rich spices and sweet pumpkin and all the warmth of Autumn. Slowly slowly, Joy's mind settled and she felt her body relax away all the tension of the day. She felt suddenly as though she were wrapped safely in a warm blanket, far from here. She smiled at Amber and Victoria in turn, "Thank you."

She let herself bask in the warm glow for only a moment, laying back with parted lips as the comforts of the vial washed over her before looking back to them, "I know that Kris meant well, putting me here. But we have to do something. My Lady... she... did this, didn't she?"

Amber's eyebrows shot up at Joy's admission, but Victoria's face remained placid. "Perhaps. However we will not be looking into it right now, as you have suffered mentally enough for one day." The air shuddered, and she conjured a pitcher of the same lilac-colored drink she had made earlier. "I fear I would do more damage trying to extract anything from you for now, but the rest of this should protect you for the time being. Drink it if the pain returns."

Victoria's gown shifted, looking at Amber momentarily before returning her attention back to Joy. "Nothing discussed leaves this room. But for you, Joy, it also means that we must keep you under guard. I'm sorry."

"I will be under guard?" Joy said, her voice lifting uncomfortably, "Under whose orders? I sit here, abandoned by my people and trying to help, surrendering my limited knowledge and..." Joy sat up in bed, shifting slightly from dizziness, but did her best to keep her chin high. "I demand to see the King. You have no right to keep me here if it is my desire to leave. The Autumn Throne nor our Winter Lord have any power over me." She started strong but her voice faded slowly the more she spoke. It was true - as a representative of the Spring Court, she could not be held by a foreign seat without the express permission of the king. All the seasons were equal in Junmyeon's kingdom, but... was she truly one with the Lady of Spring anymore? If Jessica were a traitor, as Joy suspected in the depths of her sorrowful heart, would the new ways under their king be respected?

Amber's eyes narrowed. "You surmise that your Lady may have been a cause, then demand equal treatment? You're lucky to be alive. You have... or at least had, an obvious mental connection with Jessica. How can we trust that? What if she wants to reconnect it at any time to see what we're doing?"

Victoria nodded her head. "This may be true, but she also has the right to see the king. But it won't be today. We ALL need to rest, to regroup, to secure the castle. There is much to be done. And while I will summon him, try and get some rest little one. We are all going to be under guard tonight."

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Baekhyun slammed himself against the bars once again, spitting blood at the foot of the guard watching over him, "Where is he?" he shouted for what felt like the hundredth time, "Will your king reward you for a job well done if he comes back to his prize all bruised and bloody?" The fear had overtaken him as soon as he had awoken to find Junmyeon gone from his side, the bed cold and
strangers watching him with their curious eyes. He'd bit his tongue in the initial attempt to rip his way free of the prison and his teeth and lips were, once again, stained. There had been too much blood since he had arrived in the Summerlands and not nearly enough of it had been Junmyeon’s.

"You'll tell me where he is," Baekhyun demanded of the guard, who took a few steps back, out of Baekhyun's reach. "I will not be a prisoner of his ever again. He... he promised."

For the first time in a long time, Sehun wished he could hide his wings. They gave too much away, letting others know what he was feeling without a word. Glamours refused to cling to them; their twitching movements too frequent to be anything but a distraction, and magic made the feathers feel uncomfortably heavy. His wings shuffled over one another as Sehun came closer to Baekhyun's holding cell, the guards straightening into a salute.

Sehun approached the bars, standing a few feet away as the guards kept a close watch on Baekhyun and his movements. "King Junmyeon is busy with a summons. I hope you understand the need for him to be absent since this is, of course, after surviving an assassination attempt on his life." He paused, almost glaring at Baekhyun between the bars. "Besides yours, of course. He needs to respond and plan accordingly."

"You must not know very much about me, then, or perhaps you've forgotten." Baekhyun laughed, clenching the bars until his knuckles were white, encouraged in his actions by Sehun's frustrated expression, "If I had truly wanted him dead, he would be." A pale growth of tired grass sprung up at his feet, then faded and died within seconds. It wasn't much but it made Baekhyun smile at the Wind Master. Without Junmyeon, the young guards were struggling to maintain the blocks that had kept him from summoning his plants. It would take work, but... Baekhyun had time. Baekhyun smiled again, wider this time, showing his bloodied teeth, "He promised he wouldn't leave until I was well. And as you can see, I'm still very broken. He promised that he'd stay. Has he already grown tired of me?"

Sehun's lips drew into a thin line, patience running out with the creature before him. His impression of Baekhyun was little more than that of an over dramatic diva, stubborn and unwilling to see reason. He couldn't understand Junmyeon's fascination with the mad human. A fascination, he knew, stemmed from when the King suddenly and inexplicably fell in love with him over a millennia ago. The victorious warrior-king Sehun had hoped to woo had his attention stolen, then became depressed as the relationship between Junmyeon and Baekhyun fell apart in what was little more than an instant. The king was never the same way again, something Sehun felt deeply affected by.

His wings stretched out behind him slowly, an indication of his annoyance. "No, unfortunately. He has not." Sehun's face contorted into a look of incredulousness. "Besides, it's not like he's left the hold. He will be back soon."

The corner of Baekhyun's mouth twitched and his smile faded slowly, observing the other man with care. "Unfortunate," he repeated, rolling the word over his tongue as he took a few steps away from the bars and sat at the edge of the bed, "Yes yes, it is a bit unfortunate. He'll come back to me and you'll be out there... watching? Why?" Baekhyun clenched a fist into the blankets, held it for a second and released slowly, "Because you want him for himself? Am I in the way of some grand seduction, Sehun Wind Master? His Sehun, he calls you that. Did he capture you too with lies about freedom and eternity?"

The feathers at the base of Sehun's wings puffed up, the ends of the short fluffy feathers visible over his shoulders. He went to answer defensively, but he stopped himself, bowing his head as he audibly closed his mouth trying to keep himself calm. He had been of The Spring Court, young and naive at the end of the war and sent to the Summer palace to garner favor with the king for his family. He
was one face of many, the others in his position trickling out of the palace after centuries of disinterest from the king.

All but one.

Sehun had become the windmaster to be closer to Junmyeon. He had tried, on many occasions to comfort Junmyeon, in any way he knew how. But it all came back to Baekhyun. How he made him feel nothing but sorrow, regret, and guilt. It was infuriating.

Sehun licked his lips, realizing that it was taking him a long time to answer the question. "No," he answered calmly, but the back of his throat was scratchy and his voice came out sounding less than confident.

Baekhyun cocked an eyebrow, giving Sehun a quick once-over, "I know you want to protect him. That's your job and you think I'm dangerous or... something. You aren't a good liar. You don't understand what's so appealing about this crazy human from the hinterlands." Baekhyun drew his legs up against his chest and patted the bed beside him with a childlike grin, "Come sit with me and I'll show you what he likes. I'll show you all the parts of me that he can't resist even as the rest of my mind slowly drifts into madness."

Slowly, slowly little vine tendrils worked their way up the bars, thin and sickly, before reaching towards Sehun and curling in and out to beckon him closer.

The guards panicked, reinforcing their magic with their tired wards that glowed a bit brighter momentarily, the vines curling in on themselves before retreating down the bars once again.

Sehun was desperately trying to keep his face neutral, but the low hum of his small wings pattering against his back gave him away, his earlier confidence evaporating. He was scared of Baekhyun. Scared of the control he had over his king, scared of what he'd do once he was out of the holding cell.

He took another step back from the bars. "I'll have to pass on your offer. Unlike my King, your soul doesn't pull itself to mine. Our kind mate for life, but with humans it's different. When it works it works harmoniously, beautifully. If not...well..." Sehun's eyes were distant, swallowing as he remembered the fight from the previous night, with all of the blood, and Junmyeon's guilt-ridden face. "I've seen how you treat each other. You deny his gifts. He denies ever wronging you."

"Your kind mates for pleasure and to deny it is just another lie," Baekhyun said, stretching his body, curling his toes and wiggling his fingers, making his slight body take up as much room as possible. "I've seen your kind take human after human and turn them into monstrous things. I will not be one of them. Ask your Winter Lord - does he live still with his first mate? Or even his second? His third, his previous Taozi, runs circles around him in all the salons of the Summerlands."

Baekhyun paused, his face still tightened into a look of sullen disinterest, but his eyes were clouded now with sadness or memories, it was impossible to tell. "Junmyeon... my Suho... he... will grow tired of me eventually. Another thousand years from now. He will take a mate that he can be proud of, a fae like yourself perhaps who isn't so... difficult. I know this. I know I am difficult."

Baekhyun stood and walked back towards the bars, ignoring the guards who tried to threaten him back, "Sehun Wind Master, that will be the day to truly be frightened of me. If that day should come, it is my love that will topple empires and leave this world on its knees."

Sehun's eyes narrowed. So Baekhyun knew what he was doing. Perhaps he was being difficult on
purpose. An unseen wind started to tousle his hair, the draped greenery on the stone and wood support beams above them started swaying as Sehun's emotions bled out through his magic.

When he spoke, his voice was low and dangerous sounding, coming closer to the bars yet again. "You would see him ruined, yet you claim to love him. You haven't even given him the chance to fall out of love with you." He couldn't stop the words from tumbling out of his mouth, eyes blinded by muted rage as every word seemed to cut through the air like a razor. "You're supposed to sacrifice and work through your problems together. That's what love is. It is a choice. Both of you have lost something. But everyone else around you is set to lose everything."

Baekhyun's nostrils flared and he pressed his body against the bars, "I'd let this entire cursed world burn to ash before I let you or anyone take him away from me. You and Junmyeon talk to me about sacrifice - but what family have you lost? What world have you given up for him? My mother... I will never see her again. My father would have gone to look for me in the wilds and come back with nothing, not even a body to bring them comfort. My brother... even he has been dead 900 years or more. Talk to me about sacrifice. Do it! Ask me about my choice to come here and to love your King who binds his contracts in cakes and honey, leaving out the bit where even one bite keeps you his forever?! What choice is that? He... he made me... love him. He was... perfect."

Tears streamed down his cheeks, not sad but angry and hot and his voice cracked. Even his body felt like it was collapsing into itself, his shoulders falling in on themselves and he slowly collapsed to the floor of his cell. He reached out for Sehun, catching the fabric of the wind master's robes in his delicate fingers, "He bought my love at a high price. He gets to keep it."

Sehun looked down at Baekhyun, his empathy running low. Of course his own hardships and sacrifices were not on par with Baekhyun's own, but he didn't feel like they should be downplayed either. It wasn't a contest to see who would last the longest in each of their odd dedications to the King. "All I want is for my king to be happy. If you hurt him..." But Sehun knew he couldn't finish the threat. This creature before him had proven to be dangerous, killing with a power nobody currently understood. He backed away from the bars again, his robe coming out of Baekhyun's hands. "I'll find a way. I'll..."

"Sehun," came a voice behind him, and Sehun straightened, wings flapping ungracefully as he turned to see Junmyeon walking towards him, more guards in tow. His face was neutral, "Attend me, Sehun."

Sehun bowed low, pulling his wings close to his body. "Yes, your grace." He watched as the king's skin lit up as he took the protection of the wards into himself, the guards that had been struggling with the magic nearly collapsing with relief. The new guards took their place, carefully unlocking the door so Junmyeon could step inside, locking it once again with Junmyeon inside.

Sehun's eyes traced back over to Baekhyun, struggling to keep a neutral expression, knowing he was going to be cut off again, knowing that he would have to wait at a wall of his King's construction, seeing nothing, barely feeling his King's presence while inside the estranged pair tried to work out their differences...Or not.

Junmyeon's walls closed between them and Sehun, but Baekhyun couldn't bring himself to move from the floor, trembling with rage and sorrow. He shouldn't have let himself - he shouldn't waste time on creatures like that - he shouldn't allow himself... but he had and now he was exposed and emotionally exhausted. The years of loneliness had allowed him to forget what it was to interact with others and though he loathed admitting it, he felt weak and ill-prepared to deal with all that was happening around him.

"I'm... sorry," he whispered, shocking even himself as the words came out, soggy with tears and
phlegm. Now that Junmyeon was back with him, that irrationally both comforting and infuriating presence, he was struck with the fear that the king would simply leave again. Something deep inside, something he hated viciously, told him to apologize and beg. Anything to make sure that Junmyeon wouldn't walk away. He forced it down. "He... I don't think he likes me very much."

Junmyeon knelt down to Baekhyun's level in the corner, wiping his tears away. "Forgive me. I had business to attend to. I came back as soon as I was able. I'm here, Baekhyun. I'm here." He lifted Baekhyun's chin gently, looking into his eyes. "Are you feeling any better?"

Baekhyun's breath hitched in his throat. No, of course not. He wasn't better, he wasn't getting better and a swell of guilt washed over him. He shouldn't have been so upset and that ... that creature shouldn't have pushed him so hard. He let Junmyeon's touch soothe him, residual magics from the wards seeping into his skin. Before he knew what he was doing, he threw himself against Junmyeon, pushing their lips together and their teeth clashing. It was a shock of pain, but it also felt... warm. He pulled out of their awkward kiss more quickly than he would have liked, the corner of his mouth twitching, "I thought you had... left me here. In this cage."

"I would never..." Junmyeon paused, holding Baekhyun's middle more securely. "I'm sorry. I was hoping to be back before you woke up..." He caressed the side of Baekhyun's face, trying to calm him down. He moved them to sit on the bed, letting Baekhyun cling to him. His own eyes were heavy with worry, the meeting had to address the crisis, the deaths, the looming conflict that could turn into another war. He should be out there, be a strong beacon for his people, but he wanted to be in here, with Baekhyun, helping him to be better. "What do you need?"

Baekhyun shook his head, buried in Junmyeon's chest. He didn't know what he wanted or what would make it better. He'd emptied himself at Sehun, exposing himself and leaving all his hidden pieces vulnerable. And Sehun, that vicious thing, had given it back to him, leaving Baekhyun less sure than he liked to be about reality, about the veracity of his memories, about his feelings towards Junmyeon. It didn't feel good and Baekhyun was strangely thankful for his cage now - the wall between he and Sehun and the guards who had overheard them was his only protection now.

"When I was... when I was gone, it was a long time, wasn't it? Did you... was there anyone else?" Baekhyun finally asked. His voice was muffled as he hid in Junmyeon's robes, his hands creeping up the king's chest and holding strong.

"Anyone...what?" Suho blinked. "There were...there were a few who tried," Suho's voice was soft but steady. Courtesans, one night stands, even Sehun lowering himself onto his dick as he laid half awake when his depression was at it's worst. "But I couldn't give them the same attentions I wished to give you. They all tried to distract me, wanted to make me feel better."

Baekhyun bit sharply at his own lip, doing his best to hide his expression, his relief, until he could return his face and his voice to a more neutral tone. He looked up at Junmyeon then, his eyes a bit puffy, but the tears had thankfully stopped. He needed to dig deeper. Sehun's words had cut him more than he wanted to admit. "And... did you ever wish that I ... did you always want me to come back? You had to have known, Kris had to have told you, that in the wilderness I had ... lost myself. You knew that I was like this before I ... before the attack." Baekhyun's mind flashed the moments of darkest despair, when the endless winter of his home had started to pick at his resolve and edged him closer to suicide and what he imagined might be a sweeter release even than revenge. "You knew that I was... a bit mad?"

"I desperately wanted you to come back. But I knew... I knew you were ma--angry at me."

Junmyeon chose his words carefully. "Kris did....inform me of your condition. But...I also thought... you didn't want to come back." He lifted a hand to Baekhyun's lips, his thumb drawing down over
the skin there, but then noticing the blood still between his teeth. "Oh, Baekhyun..." his magic flowed between his fingers, seeping into Baekhyun's cheek to heal the cut gums.

Baekhyun pressed his eyes closed and let Junmyeon's magic heal him, at least physically, before pulling away and letting space stand between them, "Sehun cares about you." Baekhyun said the words clearly, even as they hurt. "He wants what is best for you. I... can't even say that. I can't promise that I won't... break again." He looked up at Junmyeon's face and watched the king carefully, "I want to believe that you're sorry for what you did to me. That you did all of it because you just... weren't thinking, not because you are the selfish prick I've always wished you were. If you were ... like that, it would have been easier. But I can't be sure that I won't hurt you again. I can't be sure that, if we decide that this is good for us still, I can't be sure that I won't just walk out again... one day. Just leave. Or worse."

Drawing in a deep breath, Baekhyun continued, "You should be with your people right now. You are their king and you have no idea what you're about to go up against, what darkness there is in the deep forests of your world. You have to know that this wasn't a one-time thing, this attempt at your life. You should... leave me here. You shouldn't have come back to me. Not while I'm still... dangerous. Sehun... is right about me. That I am dangerous."

There was a way to fix this, Junmyeon knew, his eyes closing momentarily as he thought about trying to claim Baekhyun again. To do it properly, to not waste any time, to cocoon him in wisteria and lilies away from the outside world after he had eaten his fill and was high on waves of pleasure. But he resisted those thoughts. Too many variables, too much guilt, not enough time.

He clasped Baekhyun's hand in his own, lowering himself to kneel in front of Baekhyun, kissing his palm gently. "The King's dangerous human lover." He looked up at him, tired eyes filled with watery tears. "My Baekhyun. I love you. And I will keep coming back even if you or my reign tries to kill me."

"Human," Baekhyun repeated, his body visibly relaxing and his voice much softer than before. He allowed Junmyeon to kiss his hand, to play gently with his fingers, and slowly he felt something rise up in his chest, bubbling and tickling until he couldn't help it anymore and he laughed. It wasn't hard or sarcastic or vicious. It was real and it felt ... easy. Around one of the bedposts, resistant to all the magic and the carefully constructed wards that would have denied him, a single long vine curled up and up until it burst with white flowers with deep purple stamens. Baekhyun leaned in and kissed Junmyeon's forehead, "Come to bed with me. Stay just a little while longer."

Junmyeon's eyes lit up, standing up a little too eagerly as he crawled back into the bed, Baekhyun moving back to make room for him between the sheets. His responsibilities, his people, the potential looming war...all fell to the back of his mind. He could have this, if only for a moment more. "I can do that."

"Wait," Baekhyun said suddenly, jerking back and throwing up a hand to Junmyeon's chest, keeping the distance between them. Soft vines shot out from their base on the headboard and curled at Junmyeon's shoulders, but didn't make an aggressive moves as they had before. They brushed against the King's skin and Baekhyun trembled as if the two lovers had already fallen into each other. "If I... tell you to stop, I need you to promise. I need to promise that you won't..." He curved his fingers, grabbing a handful of Junmyeon's clothing and slowly brought them closer together. Baekhyun wasn't a fool; he knew that many fae used this sort of opportunity to lull their prey or their current favorite into the slow transformation that would eventually strip them of their humanity and leave them changed forever. But he wanted it this time. He wanted to prove to himself and to the wind master and to all those who now paced the halls of the palace, talking of how to be rid of him or how the king was wrong to trust him... he wanted to prove to them all that he was capable. He
wasn’t a monster and he needed Junmyeon, most of all, to know that.

Junmyeon looked down at the vines on his skin, not harsh or pulling, more like they were feeling. They were small, curling over themselves in random patterns, mimicking Baekhyun's uncertainty. But he knew they could turn aggressive in an instant. Baekhyun was recovering, and the formation of the vines was an indication of his defenses being weakened. But instead of quelling Baekhyun's creations, the wards on his skin glowed a little bit brighter, the shimmering illusion covering the bars solidified to keep out eavesdroppers and unwanted interruptions.

He turned back to Baekhyun, his eyes bright, desperate with the desire to claim him, his instincts trying to break free from his self control. He took a deep breath, relaxing his shoulders to begin again, pushing his instincts down. His voice was deep and steady when he spoke again. "I promise I can do that."

Baekhyun lifted his hands to track the glowing wards that decorated Junmyeon's skin, letting the residual magic and power that flowed from the faery king funnel into him and direct him forward. The initial rush had Baekhyun's eyes roll back slightly and his entire body tingled as if Junmyeon had touched him everywhere all at once. His plants grew up around them stronger than they had been and made Baekhyun feel safe, his vines pressing and pulsing against Junmyeon and slowly, as he grew more confident, helping Baekhyun to undress the fae. "I dreamt about this," Baekhyun admitted, "I've been dreaming about this for a long time."

Junmyeon smiled slightly, letting Baekhyun lead, his touch gentle. He made sure to keep eye contact with him, letting him see his intentions, his touches light as if asking for permission. The rest of his robe fell away, tangled up in the vines, revealing himself to Baekhyun. He tried again, turning to straddle Baekhyun, but waiting before moving up his body. Junmyeon tangled their fingers together. "Is this ok?"

Baekhyun nodded almost imperceptibly, leaning back into the pillows and letting Junmyeon slowly move on top of him. His heart beat loudly in his chest as he tried to ignore the feeling of being trapped, dominated. He wasn’t, he reminded himself. He had given into this, he had wanted and asked for this. He flicked out his tongue to wet his lips before pushing himself forward to capture Junmyeon in a long kiss. His vines worked their way over Junmyeon's body, strapping across his strong chest and holding him softly but with intention. Although Baekhyun desperately wanted Junmyeon on top of him, all over him, inside and all around him, he wasn't sure he could give up all the control of this situation. He broke their kiss with gasp of breath that turned into a laugh that was half-meant to distract Junmyeon from his lover's nervousness, "You can keep that up while we...? The wall?"

Junmyeon blinked slowly. In truth it was taking part of his concentration away from focusing on Baekhyun, but he didn't want Baekhyun to be uncomfortable being watched, and he also didn't want to invite prying eyes of his guards or attendants. "I can." He leaned down to kiss Baekhyun again, but he hesitated, his hands stopping where he had been taking off Baekhyun's clothes. He could sense Baekhyun's nervousness in the air between their shared breaths. "Are you sure you're ok? I want to be sure of this." He himself wasn't even sure what this was. His instincts were clawing at him to do something, anything to showcase his claim on Baekhyun. Even the skin at his shoulders was shifting eagerly. It was becoming more difficult to control his wings from bursting forth. But he wanted to prove to Baekhyun, that he too could showcase his true intentions and not act on his instinctive desire.

"No, no I'm not sure," Baekhyun said with another nervous laugh, "But I... trust you not to make me regret this. I just want to let you love me and see where we go from there. I'm not sure of anything else." He took Junmyeon's hands in his and guided the king, pushing away his own thin clothing.
Exposed, the differences between them were becoming more stark. The years in the wilds had left Baekhyun much thinner and far weaker than Junmyeon. Although they had once been very similar in size, Baekhyun was now a small, slight thing with bones that pressed against his skin. Baekhyun had always been slim, but this was a far cry from the able muscle that Baekhyun had carried a thousand years before. The never-ending winter had taken its toll. Baekhyun watched Junmyeon see him and a blush traveled up his body. His vines curled against Junmyeon’s chest, paying their attentions to every battle-won scar.

Love.

Junmyeon's love, like every fae, was tied to his desire. His kind felt it the strongest while mating with a soul on the same wavelength, a soul that matched them perfectly. As was common, love at first sight meant something deeper to fae than it would to a human. Claiming humans to turn them into beings like them fulfilled this need. But it also meant that humans could already be matched to fae on a more spiritual level, hence their taking and claiming of them. But Junmyeon knew that if he worded it this way, Baekhyun would push him away. He did love Baekhyun, with all his heart, and had since he first heard him sing. But he himself was being denied that which was intrinsically a part of him, and it was tearing Junmyeon apart.

Junmyeon shuddered, dew appearing on the lips of the flowers around them, his magic seeping out, desperate for attention. "Baekhyun..." He took great care to not touch Baekhyun's stomach, running a hand down to Baekhyun's waist and down his thigh. He despaired at Baekhyun's gaunt form, resisting the urge to conjure food. He leaned down and put a kiss on Baekhyun's shoulder, his hand on Baekhyun's thigh traveling down and inward. "More?"

Baekhyun eyed the flowers, unsure of what to make of them, but wary. They were now dripping with evidence of Junmyeon's powerful magic, magic that was only being amplified by their place deep in the bowels of the royal palace and further by the erotic energy that leapt between them. Baekhyun's bottom lip trembled. It had been so long since anyone had touched him like this and, like Sehun had said, when compatible souls met like this... it was hard to say no. "Yes," he answered simply, pressing his lips together immediately afterward. He didn't know what other pathetic begging or unfortunately sappy truths would erupt from him if he kept talking.

Even as Junmyeon touched him, he felt himself exploring the king. It was a different sensation, his vines trailing over Junmyeon's body and relaying the power back into Baekhyun. He could feel how little Junmyeon had changed over the years. Every teasing touch over Junmyeon's body brought memories of trysts in the deep woods of his human world, of his first bites of Junmyeon's food and the way the flavors had exploded over his tongue. He caught Junmyeon's eyes, knowing that he must already look more than halfway to wrecked and desperate and nodded, "Yes. Please."

Junmyeon's eyes flashed pale blue, nearly rolling back into his head as he leaned down to kiss Baekhyun. His fingers closed around Baekhyun’s half hard member, the consenting words encouraging him further to explore his body. He had missed this... It felt like nothing had changed. Junmyeon finally worked up the courage to run his fingers through Baekhyun's hair, bringing their chests closer together as they kissed.

There was a muted ripping sound, a long and slender spine five inches long parting the skin on each of Junmyeon's shoulderblades. Two more followed underneath the first pair as they grew longer, a thin, blue membrane starting to knit the extremities together into existence along the base of the wings. The wings were transparent and delicate, a obvious contrast to Junmyeon’s strong physique with scales at the base that shimmered with different prismatic colors. Lower, his back parted to reveal two smaller wings, tinted the same blue, the edges starting to become dotted with a dark green color.
Baekhyun was near melting into Junmyeon, the fae's skin was so hot against his when the sound of Junmyeon's skin tearing open hit him hard. His breath became more hurried, even as Junmyeon kissed him that much deeper, and his chest pounded. Fear, but the hand on his cock and the body pressing down on top of him... everything felt so good. And Junmyeon... he'd promised... Baekhyun grasped at Junmyeon's hand in his hair and dug his fingernails into soft skin, pulling their lips apart, "Please." He was begging and he didn't know for what. He wanted more of whatever this was, the physicality of it all after a millennium of going without, of starving in the wild, but there was something more ancient that shook his core and scared him. "Please," he said again and bucked his hips into Junmyeon, fucking the king's tight fist.

Baekhyun's body was strung high on desire and his vines reacted almost without his instruction, tightening slowly at first across Junmyeon's chest and back and slowly creeping to the king's neck. "Please," he whispered one more time against Junmyeon's lips and the vines clenched, restricting Junmyeon's breathing even as Baekhyun stole another intense kiss.

Junmyeon's eyes shot open, unable to move, unable to make a sound. Baekhyun's lips kept moving on his, his hands tightening instinctively around Baekhyun's cock and pulling on Baekhyun's hair, trying to get his attention. His wings, that had been pulling themselves slowly out of his flesh as a display, spread apart, ripping the flesh of his back as the tiny translucent ends started to flap in distress. The rest of the wings fought to come out, instinctively trying to fly him away from the vines. Junmyeon's vision was darkening at the corners, the pressure hurting him, threatening to make him pass out.

Baekhyun pulled out of Junmyeon's warm kiss, and immediately panicked. His body seized up and he threw his hands against Junmyeon's chest, trying to push the king away from him, "You promised - you promised you wouldn't. Please please please, you'd said you'd stop!" His words became more terrified as Junmyeon's wings erupted fully from his back and a sadistic whisper in the back of Baekhyun's mind laughed at him - he had given Junmyeon a chance and this is how the king had repaid him. He'd fallen for Sehun's stories of love and bonded souls. This monster was going to use you and change you and make you his for the rest of time. He promised and his promises are nothing but air.

Baekhyun's fear took hold of him completely and his vines tightened again, Junmyeon's face coloring from lack of oxygen. As Junmyeon faded, so too did his magic begin to fall apart and Baekhyun's screaming mind, fueled by their encounter and now free to pull from the earth, called up stronger plants which held tightly to Junmyeon's legs and arms, pulling him back from Baekhyun. The thin human scrambled from beneath Junmyeon, curling against the headboard, frightened and shaking, "You promised you promised you promised!"

The runes on Junmyeon's skin flickered out of existence, his entire body going limp. His wings went lax against the mess of vines, the thin membrane getting crushed between still more that were starting to wrap around him. The last thing he saw was Baekhyun, curled up and afraid, cowering against the headboard. He was truly powerless if he couldn't get out of this. Maybe, he thought, this is what he deserved, and the world went dark.

Not like this.

The air shifted.

Sehun's eyes opened, the runes appearing on his own skin, and he reached through the crumbling illusion into the cell. Now able to sense the situation inside, the illusion shattered around him, revealing the predicament the king was in. His eyes narrowed, teeth setting into a scowl. "Let him go!"
The sound of Sehun's voice shattered Baekhyun’s reality and fury rose up in his heart. His plants pulsed around them all, lifting the king’s limp body into the air, stretching his body and bearing Junmyeon's stomach like some ancient sacrifice. With Junmyeon out of the way, Baekhyun could see Sehun clearly, the Wind Master pushing his way through into the cell. "Not you," Baekhyun said softly, the world seeming to move around him at an impossibly slow speed, "You will not have him. Not you, not anyone, until he has paid for what he has done." Baekhyun looked up at Junmyeon, the king’s face becoming purple and still, "He's beautiful, isn't he? Perfect like this, where he can’t hurt anyone else. Ever again. I'll keep him here, safe."

Baekhyun reached towards Junmyeon and brushed the back of his hand on Junmyeon's cheek, "Junmyeon, don't you want to stay here with me? Isn't this better? Since you can't control yourself?" As he spoke, his plants slowly loosened around the king's neck, echoing Baekhyun's movements with sweet caresses to Junmyeon's cheeks and neck.

When Sehun saw that the vines had loosened, but the king's body did not respond, he took a chance, a thin, nearly translucent fan appearing in his hand. The runes on his skin turned orange, and with a carefully even breath, he flicked his wrist, a swathe of compressed air hitting the base of the vines holding up Junmyeon. They were severed, and the king collapsed onto the floor.

Sehun turned his attention to Baekhyun, levelling the weapon at him as the panicked guards opened the door. "Your head comes off next if you don’t get away from him right now."

Baekhyun's face went slack, then his entire body seemed to melt back into the bed, his eyes far away as he studied Junmyeon's body on the floor. His vines shriveled, disappearing into the corners and rotting into the ceiling. Oily black stains seeped into the golden white of the prison's walls. The snap of energy that had coated the air immediately dissipated. "What have you done?" Baekhyun said, his lips hanging open in disbelief, his words a bit slurred, "Did you... is he... dead?"

Moving at little more than a crawl, his thin frame making his jolted movements frightening to watch, Baekhyun ignored Sehun's threat and came up beside Junmyeon, laying beside him and kissing his temple. "What has he done to you? You were always perfect. I told you I loved you and you promised you wouldn’t.... you promised...."

At Baekhyun's failure to comply, Sehun turned the fan open to its widest point, and with another timed breath, blew Baekhyun back against the far wall. There he kept him, alternating between the fan and the air from his lungs to keep Baekhyun pinned.

Sehun motioned to the guards as he made minute motions with the fan. "Get the king out of here. Now."

Baekhyun hung loose against the wall, not fighting it at first, until the guards wrapped their thick arms around Junmyeon's middle, lifting him up to take him from the room. "No no no no no NO!" he screamed, a great wall of thick tree back growing from the ground and blocking their retreat. "What are you doing to him? Where is he going? I told him they needed him, his people need him, but he wants to stay here... he wants to stay with me, don't make him go away. He promised he wouldn't go."

"Promises mean nothing if you choke them unconscious!" Sehun yelled, eyes bright. His wings were unseen as they hummed against his back furiously, raising his arm back. "I should kill you right..."

Junmyeon suddenly inhaled, eyes nearly bursting out of his skull. He coughed, wincing as he brought a hand to his neck. The guards voiced their concerns, one even grabbing his robes from the tangle of rotted foliage to cover him.
Junmyeon's wings flexed minutely, the edges tattered and the ends bent in the wrong position. He looked at the situation before him, trying to get his bearings. "Baekhyun?"

Baekhyun struggled once more against the wind that pressed him to the wall, "Junmyeon! Junmyeon, tell them! Tell them I didn't... I didn't mean to" His words disappeared into a wrenching sob that twisted the few remaining plants. Those that had avoided rotting into the walls outright seized and stretched as they tried to reach for the fae king. The bark wall shifted, a miserable crunching sound coming from it, as it tried to move closer to the guards and the king, but instead seemed to tear itself apart, falling away and revealing a way out for the guards. Baekhyun started again, his voice much more quiet, "Tell them that I love you."

Junmyeon turned to look at Sehun, who looked enraged. He nearly collapsed back, rubbing at his temple as he struggled to even out his breathing. "What... just happened?"

Sehun looked up at Baekhyun momentarily with a scowl on his face as he kept the wind pressed against him. "Let's find out. Your grace? Allow me to see."

The King's brow furrowed, staring up at Baekhyun, but allowing Sehun to move closer as the other man knelt down to place their temples together.

The last few moments Sehun could see, almost made him gasp, feeling his king's struggle to maintain control, feeling the love and reverence that Junmyeon had for the human. As such, his wings slid out instinctually, but at the tightening of the vines and the struggle to breathe, coupled with Baekhyun's voice as he repeatedly exclaimed 'you promised!' severed the connection. Sehun took a deep breath himself, shaking off the memories and standing back up, "He nearly killed you, your grace."

Junmyeon looked devastated. He thought what he was doing was working. "I...I do love you, Baekhyun. I want to help you."

Sehun shook his head. "You cannot risk yourself! Not now."

Junmyeon’s voice raised. "I can, I am king. Give me back the runes, Sehun." Junmyeon tried to pull the magical warding off of Sehun's skin, which he allowed. But before the transfer could be completed, Junmyeon jolted, sudden pain ripping through his back and neck.

Baekhyun's breath came in nervous hisses. He fumbled against the wind, feeling more out of control now than ever. "You're hurting him!" he screamed towards the guards or Sehun or anyone that would listen, "It didn't happen like that and you're hurting him!" One of the guards looked up to Baekhyun and shook his head in pity for the human's desperate cries and Baekhyun pushed harder for his own escape. He was not a thing to be pitied, not a thing to be looked down upon by the fae and their underlings. He pressed his teeth together and pushed again - nothing. His bounds remained tight.

He glared at Sehun, his heart burning, but he managed to keep his words steady, "You see what you want to see, Wind Master, and it will be you who hurts him in the end. I could have come sane and beautiful to your king's feet and you would have hated me. You twist what you see because you don't understand or you don't want to. It wasn't me that came for your king, it was the earth itself punishing him for his broken promises. That is why she saved me in the wilds, I know it. The Great Tree will make him better through me."

The humming of Sehun's wings ceased as they clamped down onto his back. He had had enough.

In a blink, Sehun was in front of Baekhyun, the air keeping him pinned giving him even less leeway now as his aura pressed in on him. "No. A human cannot make a fae better. You've proven that here
and now. You're a danger to him. That's all you've proven. He can't even take the runes of protection from me." He took another look down Baekhyun's body, raising an eyebrow. "And you say you could have come sane and beautiful? That I would've hated you? Perhaps." He leaned in close, hiding his smile in his sleeve. "But at least you would have been beautiful."

Before Baekhyun's plants could react, Sehun blinked away again, slicing the remainder of the tree out of the way of the door. "The King is in need of rest. Take him to his chambers." The guards nodded, supporting Junmyeon to the door, Sehun following them out behind them. "As attendant I will take on guarding this...guest of his."

Sehun touched the bars, the runes on the walls glowing strong once again, making the plants shudder and wither back down into the stone floor.

Baekhyun collapsed to the floor as the wind gave way, grunting from the hard landing. He looked up as his prison closed around him again and scrambled towards the bars. He called for Junmyeon, desperate for one last look, watching as the king's exhausted body disappeared from view in the arms of his trusted guards. Only then, did he turn to Sehun, his teeth pressed together and jaw aching from the pressure. His eyes were red and glassy with tears.

"You can't keep him from me forever," he said, his tone neutral even as rage boiled in his blood, "He will never love you. Another thousand years could pass and he will still never love you, not after this. I could have made him understand but not after he sees what is coming." Baekhyun pulled away from the bars and paced the small prison cell with vicious steps, "They would already have taken his life if it wasn't for me." He shook his head in mock disappointment, "He'll remember when the time comes, how happy he was to be here with me today. He won't let you keep me here. Not when I'm... so close."

Sehun said nothing, the smile gone from his face as he stared at Baekhyun. "We will see."

Chapter End Notes

WHEW!!! I hope you all enjoyed that extra long chapter from us. We wanted to extend a very warm thank you to everyone that has been reading our story and has been patient as we slowly continue to update. We know that we have been off schedule most weeks for several months and we continue to be amazed with the level of support that you have extended to us. This story is truly a labor of love with more than a year and a half of effort behind it. Your comments and kudos keep us going.
Jongin giggled and ran his finger through the thick whipped cream on top of the offered dessert, lifting the sweet to Jongdae's lips for his lover to taste. The chef smiled and bowed low, "For our only prince and his beloved consort! May they long protect the dark forest and those who live within its circle!" A roar of clapping and hurrahs filled the air and Jongin gave into it, pressing a kiss to Jongdae's curling lips. Once the tension had eased following their initial return, the citizens of the Ever-changing had taken it upon themselves to throw a party greater than Jongin had ever seen. They all seemed eager to greet Jongdae's new partner and to make their amends with the prince himself.

As the chef began to withdraw, another steward of the forest royals came forth. Jongin had never met this particular man, his ears pointed and his eyes milky white. He bowed low, "My prince, the winds tell that your ... sister is on her way. She has requested a seat at your table."

Jongin's face lit up, "You didn't tell me that you had a sister? Or any family? Perhaps... perhaps I didn't ask." Jongin laughed again, he found he was always laughing now that the ritual had taken place and he was safely at home. He blushed at his own mistake, "I guess we had ... other things to think about."

Jongdae paused in his petting of Kai's wings, sitting up a bit straighter in his chair and causing a few of the blankets and pillows around them to get shifted lower off of their bodies. They had made it safely back to his hold, his wards broken but his defenses back up. There would be no more surprising, unauthorised visits. The throngs of fae that came to his hold to support him had grown quite considerably in the past day.

"They're family to you too now, Kai." He smiled a bit. "However... it remains to see which one of my sisters will be coming to visit. Is it Hyoyeon? Boa? All of them? One of them?" His finger gathered a syrupy glaze off the corner of a tart and brought it over to Kai's mouth, teasing him with the irresistible food. "We shall be ready for them."

Jongin took Jongdae's fingers in his mouth and sucked on them generously. Even though he had completed his transformation, fae food was still an explosion over his tongue. Every flavor was more intense and deeper than he could have imagine. This syrup was almost like caramel but with a stronger flavor that felt like heat ... not spice, but the literal heat that had taken the sugars and transformed them into the this new delight. And underneath it all was Jongdae, always Jongdae. Jongin hummed and teased his tongue over Jongdae's fingertips.

Ready to abandon himself to another round of sweets and sex, Jongin was caught off guard by just how quickly the princesses of the dark forest arrived. The steward had failed to mention that he were expecting multiple visitors and the expression on their leader's face said that such an omission had been very much on purpose. They were petite women, two of them obviously fae of great power, while a third followed behind the foremost of them - a consort, Jongin recognized instantly.

The consort stepped forward, her thick black hair framing her face and giving her an otherworldly look, "My lady of the darkness, Taeyeon and Hyoyeon, the true slayer of Argos."
Hyoyeon didn't wait for the introductions to be finished, rushing forward with a smile and taking Jongdae's hand in hers, "Brother, you've done what none of us could." Her hair had started as a soft pink and slowly slowly, as her emotions played through her, shifted through many colors - a rich blue, a shocking gold, a delicate green. Each of them made her look that much more beautiful. Taeyeon, however, stayed still, watching from her place before their table with a troubled look.

Jongdae smiled at his sisters' greeting, before passing to Taeyeon's more severe look. "As always I welcome you to my humble abode." He motioned with his fingers for the kitchens to bring out more food, the fae nodding and scurrying away as fast as possible.

He then raised three more seats from the stone ground, his vines twining together to form the backs across from him. "Please. Make yourselves comfortable." he turned, brushing his fingers against Kai's lips without a thought. "May I present Kai, the newest addition to our family."

While Hyoyeon sat comfortably and went ahead observing Jongin with a friendly smile, Taeyeon made no move to sit and her consort hovered nervously between them, unsure of her place. "He's gorgeous," Taeyeon said simply, her expression not changing from her cautious judgment, "But I expected as much to be the case."

Jongin shifted in his seat. While she was complimenting him, the tone of it all seemed far less kind, as though she was just throwing out a few pleasantries in order to clear the subject of him from the air. "Thank you," he said, inserting himself into the conversation, "It's good to meet more of Jongdae's family." He smiled at Taeyeon first, the lady not returning his look. She stared strictly and specifically at Jongdae.

"We came as soon as heard the news," Hyoyeon offered, talking towards Jongin. "Our Miyoung was the last new fae in the family in many hundreds of years." She indicated the converted human who had entered the room with them and Miyoung bowed her head.

Taeyeon shook her head, "But there was more news out of the capital than just a rebellious prince and his new fuck toy, wasn't there?" Her eyes narrowed towards Jongdae and the harshness of her words was shocking. The fae that Jongin had come in contact with so far had always been dripping with politeness and an otherworldly regal quality to their speech. Taeyeon spoke clearly and straight to the point. "The entire capital is reeling, Jongdae. What have you started?"

Jongdae's jaw set, his expression turning severe like Taeyeon's. "Now, now, Tae. That's rude. And to answer your question, something interesting, I hope." He shrugged, gesturing to the seats. "Please. Sit. We can discuss this civilly I'm sure, yes?" He paused, taking in his sister's unchanged expression. "I had no idea there was a planned coup," he tried again, looking between them. "I merely wished to see if the king would flinch in the face of my defiance."

"You had no idea?" Taeyeon said with a sneer of disbelief, "You just happened to take it upon yourself to do the one thing that you knew would disappoint him, would anger him, right at the time that another group decided that Junmyeon must die?" She shook her head, but finally stepped forward and took a seat at the table. "And here I was, thinking that our little brother had finally risen to his rank and started to fight for us." She allowed her mate to wrap comforting arms around her, "Do you know then who it was that came for the king?"

Jongin frowned, "You... you wanted him to be a traitor? Jongdae and I just wanted to -"
"A traitor?" Taeyeon said with a laugh, "You're adorable. No no, I wanted him to be a champion."

Hyoyeon nodded in agreement, "It has been many years since our family and any of the dark ones have been allowed anything like freedom. When we heard the news, we were happy to have you, of course, Kai, but we thought... we thought that Jongdae had raised an army for us. That he had found a way to free us from under the King's thumb."

Jongdae ran a hand over Kai's shoulder to reassure him, thinking back to the encounter with the fae in the forest saying that they fought in his name. "The lot of those that wanted the takeover to succeed put us in danger. Junmyeon would have strung us up from the branches of his great tree had we stayed. While I want our freedom to be reinstated, I do not know who has done this." He hesitated, kissing the skin of Kai's shoulder. "I merely went into this to show that I could." He glared over to his sisters. "I'm not the defiant general you all thought me to be."

Jongin placed a hand on Jongdae's knee and squeezed gently, reassuringly, "Jongdae and I have put down that idea already. He wouldn't have done any of this except for me. We're not interested in being part of whoever's little coup."

"Your mate is a feisty one," Taeyeon said, staring straight at Jongdae, "He says a lot of things without understanding much. But I'm sure you'll educate him with time. Especially when the king comes to get him." She laughed again when Jongin's face lost its color, his eyes filling with worry, "Oh yes, did you think that once the ceremony was done that Junmyeon would leave you to your orgies and feasts? This law of his has been his greater achievement, if one can call it that. He rules on the back of this idea that he has civilized an old tribe of barbarians. He cannot and will not let the boy live if he can help it. Whether you wanted it, Jongdae, you have surely started another war."

Hyoyeon looked at Jongin more kindly than Taeyeon, "You won't know much about what we've been through, little one. Jongdae won't have told you what it was like during the great war."

"No," Jongdae said definitively, at once his visage steadfast and imposing, but his grip on Kai remained gentle and reassuring. "They will never take him from me." He turned to him, making sure Kai saw the resolve in his eyes as he kissed him. "You are mine, you are mine."

But even as he repeated his dedication to his turned lover, Jongdae's mind swam with renewed paranoia. He had never experienced the laments of the wars from the past, and was not looking forward to the possibility of having his throat slit while he slept. Junmyeon was dangerous. He needed to set the record straight, while also trying to figure out how to get himself out of the mess he seemingly triggered.

He shook his head, not wanting to accept his situation. "What would you have me do, sisters?"

Taeyeon opened her mouth to speak, but Hyoyeon silenced her, "Nothing, if that is what you want. We're not here to make our brother and his mate into martyrs. We aren't here to send you into battle, if that's not what you want."

"She speaks with so much softness," Taeyeon said with a sad shake of her head, "But she knows as well as I do that Junmyeon hunted the Old King for three weeks after the capital was captured. He
put his dogs on the hunt and Chanyeol, the Fire Warden, and his sister... the one who sleeps with the
dark - Hyoyeon knows well what happened there. Even Yifan, who I know you have been fond of
in the past, took up Junmyeon's banner once his little one was dead and had his dragons raze entire
villages of royal supporters."

Hyoyeon pressed her lips together, then nodded, "War is... hell."

"Yifan is... Kris?" Jongin said, working through the terrible and confusing information that he was
hearing, "And Kris is the one who has Kyungsoo?" He turned to Jongdae, his eyes begging for
clarity.

"We have to find out who their leader is," Taeyeon continued, "Together, we may be able to stop
him."

Jongdae rubbed soothing circles down Kai's thigh, as much of a reassurance to him as it was to
himself. He gave a half-hearted smile as his chef returned with more food to placate his sisters. "As
you say. How does the rest of the family take this situation? Do they want a peaceful resolution? Or
do they want blood as well?" He gave out a half hearted, nervous laugh. "As ridiculous as it sounds,
I'm close to dictating a letter explaining my situation, but I fear that may anger him further. Speaking
of, has anyone heard from him? has he addressed the crisis at all?"

The sisters hesitated, looking at each other as though daring the other to speak. But it was Taeyeon's
consort who answered Jongdae, "His mate has returned, they say. There were always rumors of him,
that Yifan had hidden him away. But... the king seems to have not only survived the coup but to
have gone into hiding with the boy who saved him. There are whispers all over the capital and into
the Firelands. That Baekhyun has... powers."

Taeyeon shifted, taking Miyoung's hand, "There are lots of stories. None of which we can confirm."

"Then we shouldn't rush into anything," Jongin said suddenly, "You don't know if he's planning
anything at all."

"It's only a matter of time, child," Taeyeon said with a shake of her head, "Junmyeon will be hunting
us down like flies and you're too weak to defend yourself. Jongdae, do you really want him to end
up like Yifan's babe? Ripped limb from limb on the capitol steps? No no, we've all discussed this
and, if the source of the dissent can be found, we will stand with them and defend the Ever-
changing. We will take back that which is ours and should never have fallen into the hands of
commoners."

Jongdae actually hesitated. He was on board with his sister's spiel, up until she said that they should
join with the rebels that planned the coup. He scoffed, rolling his eyes dramatically. "You want to
align yourself with the nonsensical rabble that failed in their attempt? That put me and my fledgling
in danger? I'd be all for going into it ourselves." At seeing the look on their faces, he quickly added,
"Of course my actions were rebellious in nature, and I'm not opposed to gaining our rights and
freedoms back..." His lips drew together as his focus turned back to Kai, his eyes sad. "I only ask
that we think carefully about our next move. I did not want to bring you into a world like this. A
world at war."
Hyoyeon laid a hand on her sister's knee to keep her from speaking before she began, "Did they fail in their attempt? Junmyeon may not be dead outright, but he has retreated and the identity of the man responsible for his disappearance is still a mystery to be solved. If that truly is his mate, a creature he had hidden from his subjects for his thousand-year reign... we may yet be able to remove him from his seat of power without having to spill even an ounce of blood ourselves. They... whoever they are... they have revealed to us Junmyeon's weakness."

Jongin looked to Jongdae, his forehead creased with concern, "What will we do if they come here, bring the war here?"

"We play the long game, as we always have," Taeyeon answered, "We find out who attacked the capital. We learn of their motives. We place ourselves in the best possible position to ascend with them or deny our involvement should Junmyeon rise victorious again. And most importantly," she looked to Jongin and smiled, "We protect our own."

Jongin felt a blush rise up in his cheeks at Taeyeon's attention and gave her a slight, jilted bow from his seat, "I would protect Jongdae with my life. He... gave me everything."

Scoffing, Jongdae ran a finger up Kai's neck to stroke at the skin there. "I say failed because if they had succeeded, we probably would be hearing about it by now. You know how our kind likes to brag." His brows furrowed. "Surely. Now his mate... that brings up an interesting twist. Does anyone know who...or what he is?"

Before either of the sisters had a chance to speak, Miyoung shivered, "A monster."

Taeyeon pressed her lips together and made no attempt to correct her mate for speaking out of turn. Hyoyeon looked at Miyoung sadly and nodded for her to continue.

"I was there," she said and her voice shook, "I had gone thinking I wouldn't be able to get into the ceremony. I just wanted to be there, to see everyone, to... show everyone that we weren't hermits. But the guards weren't as careful as they have been years before. They grow complacent as the years pass and pass without incident. And I saw the whole thing."

With a pointed look towards Jongdae, Taeyeon said again, "The whole thing."

Miyoung didn't ignore Taeyeon, but her movements and speech gave a strange effect, as though she was no longer sure how or when to stop with her story, "I had gone thinking I wouldn't be able to get into the ceremony. I just wanted to be there, to see everyone, to... show everyone that we weren't hermits. But the guards weren't as careful as they have been years before. They grow complacent as the years pass and pass without incident. And I saw the whole thing."

Hyoyeon stood and wrapped her around around Miyoung, closing her and guiding her away from the table to recover herself. Taeyeon's jaw was fiercely set when she spoke again to Jongdae, "She said that he used the power of the Great Tree itself to rip his enemies apart. Jongdae, I've been using dark and shadow magic my entire life and I've never heard of such a thing outside of storybooks and nightmares. A creature who uses our own world against us. If Junmyeon has that sort of weapon... what are we to do if not fight back?"

Jongdae's face set into a severe look, even the tips of his black hair turning white momentarily at the prospect of such a creature existing as a weapon. It changed everything. There was no hesitation in
his voice this time, his wings unfurling behind him as he stood. "Then we fight back. We have
survived every test, every attempt in the past that was meant to eradicate us. We fight back. For
ourselves, our ways, our kin."

Jongin swallowed and stood, squeezing Jongdae's hand before stepping towards Miyoung, "Did...
did you see what happened to the human that Kris brought to the ceremony? His name is Kyungsoo.
Was he... one of the ones you saw being... hurt?"

Miyoung opened her mouth to say something, but seemed to think better of it and shook her head,
burying her face back in Hyoyeon's neck. Jongin's face went pale and he looked back to Jongdae
like he might be sick.

Kai's former husband might have well been killed during the attack, but Jongdae didn't wish to say
so. Instead he moved forward to comfort his lover, brushing the tips of his ears before running his
hand reassuringly through his hair. "If you are concerned about your former lover, Kai, I can inform
our kin at the borders of our lands to look out for him, if you so wish. But that is all we can do right
now. Right now, we need to plan, summon our forces, and gather as much information as we can to
protect ourselves."

Jongin allowed his maker to soothe his worries, not wanting to make a scene in front of their newly
discovered family. But, for all that happened between them, he had never wanted Kyungsoo to die...
to even be in this place. Especially now that war and battle loomed over them like storm clouds. He
lifted his eyes toward Taeyeon, "Where do we start?"

"As we've said, we have to find the rebels and we have to find them before Junmyeon's forces do,"
Taeyeon began, standing up to join them, "We have to take advantage of Junmyeon's retreat and the
unrest in the capital. Right now, people are talking freely, unsure of what or who to trust."

Miyoung lifted her head, "And the Winter Lord... he's left the capital and returned home with the
King's blessing to do so. Only Victoria is left to guard the place, they say, and she is not as strong
alone as she would be with her great tribe."

"Victoria's alone? What of Jessica? Surely she would be there with her taking control of the
situation." Jongdae went back to his chair, tracing a rune onto the wood. It lit up in his signature
purple before burning out into a bright orange, and a figure flew in from the ceiling a few moments
later.

The figure landed hard, going to one knee immediately. He wore the colors of Sehun's windmaster
robes, but they were burned at the edges, covered in blood sigils, and had the outer sleeves tied at the
figure's waist. Like Sehun, the figure's wings were tiny sparrow wings, indicative of their speed
needed for relaying messages.

Jongdae nodded to the figure. "Henry, I need information. Accurate, discreet."
Henry straightened, but kept his head bowed. "Yes, My Lord. What do you need to know?"

"We will start with the condition of the King being the biggest thing. Also, How many of our kin supported the coup, along with why, at such a crucial moment, the leadership in the palace seems to be so fractured."

Taeyeon gave a satisfied hum as she watched Henry take note of his assignment and take back to the skies, "You are making the right decision, brother. This is what has to be done if we are to do more than just survive."

Jongdae paused, returning to Kai's side, holding the other man's hand in his before giving it a kiss. "Not anymore. We will no longer be fighting to just survive, sister. We will be fighting for our right to live."

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Kyungsoo's eyes were heavy, like he wanted to fall asleep at any moment. He was making the smallest content noises, warm and safe in Kris's arms as his fingers gripped at his chest lazily. He was full, finally satiated and the craving for something to fill him had passed. Even his tears had stalled for the moment, his cheeks tingling for some unknown reason.

But despite the blissful situation he found himself in, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing. That all of what was happening to him was well and good, except he felt like he had just experienced a brain freeze after eating too much ice cream. He surmised that there had to be a hole in his head. At least, that's what it felt like to him.

For the moment, he let his mind rest, too tired to inquire about it.

Kris pressed kisses into Kyungsoo's hair, keeping his human companion close to him. Though the Lord of Winter knew they would eventually need to get out of bed, clean themselves better and, worst of all, let the others know they had arrived safely, he desperately wanted this moment to last as long as it could. Forever, if Kyungsoo would let it. "You can sleep if you want," Kris whispered in between still more kisses. His voice cracked a little and he laughed. He conjured another cup of golden nectar for himself, stretching around Kyungsoo to grab it from the night table. He downed the warm drink with a lazy hum, "Sometimes fae food... the first time, can take a lot out of a human. My second child, he slept near three days after his first meal."

Second child? Kyungsoo hummed, inquiring in tone. "I feel like I could do just that." He blinked, his fingers curling into a fist against Kris's chest. Once Kris had pulled the cold air from his lungs it thankfully didn't hurt to breathe anymore, and he felt almost hot looking up at Kris. "How...how many others are there?" He wondered, if he was going to go through the same thing Jongin was going to go through.

Something pulled in his mind, that yes, he was going to be like him, answering his own mental question. Didn't you see Tao? How beautiful he was? Don't you want that? You can have anything
Kyungsoo squinted, then shook his head, trying to force out the intrusive thoughts.

Kris hesitated, running a hand through Kyungsoo's hair, unsure if he wanted to expose himself like this. But he composed himself quickly enough, aware of how much Kyungsoo had given him and yet the human knew very little about him when it came down to it. "I've... made three children in my life. Bingbing was the first and you'll meet her," he snorted back a laugh at the thought of his first creation meeting Kyungsoo, but continued anyway. He concentrated on Kyungsoo's hand curled at his chest, avoiding eye contact as he spilled out little pieces of his life story, "My second child was Yixing. And then Tao was my most recent, about a thousand years before I met you." Kris nodded, feeling very proud of himself, "Before Junmyeon's reign, there were many fae who made dozens of our kind, would adopt any human who paid them attention. But I always thought that my children were special, because they... found me somehow. Or... seemed to fall into my lap. Like the universe wanted us to meet." Kris felt his cheeks burn a bit and he glanced up at Kyungsoo to check on how the human had taken the information, "As if our souls were... destined, I suppose."

"Destined..." Kyungsoo repeated softly. His eyes left Kris's face, the whispers in his mind taking focus away from him. He didn't really believe in destiny. He nor Kris knew either existed until a few weeks ago. He was having a hard time loving himself, let alone his newfound master.

Kyungsoo was starting to hate the feeling of tears burning behind his eyes, only letting slivers of flattery dare to come to his mind. "You think we were destined too?"

Kris pulled Kyungsoo against him tightly and kissed the top of his head, taking in the smell of the human's hair and skin, "Yes." He said it so breathlessly, so certainly that he was almost embarrassed by his own enthusiasm. "Yes, Kyungsoo. I do think that. The first time I ever saw you, I knew that I wanted to make you happy. It didn't matter what it was that you wanted - the stars, the mountains, someone else's heart. If I could make it happen for you, I knew it was my soul's purpose to do that thing for you." Kris drifted his hands over Kyungsoo's body, tracing little circles on the human's stomach, "I might sound foolish, but let me. Let me tell you again how much I love having you here."

The doubt in his eyes was apparent, and he bowed his head, not meeting Kris's gaze even as a small whine escaped his lips as he arched into the pressure of Kris' hand on his stomach. Pleasure bloomed in his body at the slightest touch. The clashing emotions confused his senses. He thought he was getting better, but all he had done was trap himself. He didn't know how to process his situation anymore. At once he regretted and yet was elated that he was here with Kris, despite barely knowing anything about him.

His cheeks were tingling again, pressed up against Kris' shoulder and holding on to him tightly as a single tear fell from his eye. It felt solid and heavy, and somehow Kyungsoo felt relieved to be rid of it, and it landed with a soft plunk against Kris's skin before falling between them and getting lost in the sheets.
"Kris..." Kyungsoo managed tiredly, not able to respond to Kris’ declarations. "I think I really need that bath now."

Kris nodded, watching Kyungsoo carefully. "Yes, yes of course." He said it but didn't move, letting Kyungsoo stay tightly against him a moment longer. He bit his lips and swore at himself in his head, annoyed with himself for spilling out so many of his desires and dreams and forcing Kyungsoo back into himself again. "Yes," he said again, this time throwing back the warm blankets and taking Kyungsoo's hands in his to help the human out of bed.

The palace had warmed up significantly in the time since they arrived and the floor was only pleasantly cold beneath their feet as Kris led his newest lover from the comfortable bedroom towards his bathing area. It was similarly disheveled like the rest of Kris's personal quarter with a large pool in the center. Water bubbled up in the middle as though it were located over an active spring, but, through the clear water, it was obviously that the floor was solid. There was no obvious source of the water and the entire space seemed to sparkle with magic. There was more than enough room for the two of them plus several more and it was Kris who stepped into the pool first. He kept Kyungsoo's hand firmly and invited him into the pool.

'Don't fall asleep now, maybe you can ask him to fuck you again before you both fall asleep after this...'

Kyungsoo let Kris guide him into the pool, and the water was warm, his feet jerking slightly as his skin momentarily remembered how hot and scathing water could be. "Thank you..." he mumbled, never breaking contact with Kris' touch, as if he was afraid to let him go. He shivered uncharacteristically in the warm water.

'What a mess you are.'

"Kris, I..." Kyungsoo wondered if he should tell him about his doubts, about how unsure he was. He felt guilt again, his inner voices seemingly empowered by his uncertainty.

'Go on. Tell him how you're going even crazier than before he fucked you. You dumb needy whore.'

"I'm thirsty still...can I have some more to drink?"

'Ha. Nice save. That marble looks hard enough to take your forehead to it. What's going to crack first? the tub or your skull?"
Kris dipped low in the water, wetting his long body in the sparkling magic and letting it slowly return some of his arcane reserves back into his flesh and blood. His cock twitched to hear Kyungsoo already asking for more, a good sign that ... if Kyungsoo desired it... the transformation from human to fae would move smoothly and that his wings would develop to be strong. The desire for change was an essential ingredient in the most successful of rituals. He wanted desperately for Kyungsoo to want this.

Kris swallowed hard and forced back his more erotic thoughts, concentrating on cleaning Kyungsoo thoroughly. He grabbed a small ladle made of dark, nearly black wood from the side of the pool and used it to gather up water and wet his new lover's hair. "You want more?" he asked to be sure, "It will accelerate your body's changes if you drink too fast. Take your time, we have so much of it." Kris summoned up only a small thimble of the golden nectar and held it up to Kyungsoo's lips, "Just a taste should do. If you ... want more, after this, we can... we can go back to bed."

Kyungsoo stared at the thimble, eyes unfocused as water dripped off the ends of his hair. He looked up at Kris as he tipped it into his mouth and let it swirl over his tongue, savoring the taste, and then swallowed, licking at the edge of the thimble as his insides buzzed warmly.

'See now? Now he's being greedy.'

Without meaning to, his face contorted unhappily, his jaw clenching as he pushed back against the onslaught of negativity that was consuming his thoughts. 'Oh, shut up.' He passed it off by rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. He really was getting tired.

"Kyungsoo? Is... is everything alright?" Kris wrapped an arm around Kyungsoo's middle, dropping everything he held to pull the human closer to him. He lifted a hand to wipe away from the water from Kyungsoo's cheek and tried to guide their eyes to meet, "If something's wrong, you can tell me. You can tell me anything." A bit of panic set into his voice, "I can make more if you're still thirsty."

"N-no, It's...that's alright. I can wait." His eyes finally met Kris' own, and he hoped he didn't look too wrecked, or too off. "I am thirsty... but I can wait until after we're clean." He tried smiling, gripping onto Kris' arm around his waist.

'Don't get attached now.'

"I'm probably just falling asleep on my feet is all."

The Winter Lord nodded, giving Kyungsoo a lazy smile and trying not to pry. The transformation was deeply personal and the reaction to it changed from person to person. Where Tao had been overly eager and demanding in the most intoxicating way, others had had doubts and he didn't want Kyungsoo to think he was plowing through any concerns the human had. "Let's get you cleaned
up," he said softly and concentrated on moving the magic-infused water over Kyungsoo's skin. While it was possible to clean flesh in the most surface manner with magic alone, Kris had always felt that it was water which made one actually feel clean. He ran his strong hands over Kyungsoo's shoulders and chest, keeping his touches as innocent as he could muster. Already he felt his body being tempted and his shoulder blades itched where his wings hid beneath the flesh.

Despite Kris' attempts to keep his touches innocent, Kyungsoo was already half hard again beneath his swollen stomach in the water, each sweeping motion of his large hands over his sensitive skin making him dizzy. Without realizing he was doing it, he had begun to hump up against kris's thigh, biting at his swollen lips and trying not to moan for Kris to lean over him and fuck him into the tub from behind.

The voices were silent, seeing if he would actually do it.

...Fuck it.

Kyungsoo's hands gripped kris' arms hard, drawing them flush against each others' bodies, looking up at him with wide, pleading eyes. "Kris...I can't wait anymore...please...fuck me again?"

His mind was static as he tried to rationalize the want. Maybe with more attention, he'd feel better. Maybe the transformation would make him forget Jongin faster. Fuck pacing and restraint. His eyes went distant again. Maybe fucking in water would help. Maybe Kris could remove his head and find the pressure behind his eyes that threatened to come bursting out at any moment. Make it stop. Please.

Kris's tongue felt heavy in his mouth and his eyes must have been as wide as dinner plates at Kyungsoo's request. He could feel Kyungsoo's growing arousal against his leg and he knew that Kyungsoo must feel how hard he'd gotten in response. His hands were shaking as they went to Kyungsoo's hips, encouraging the human's desperate movements against him. "Yes, yes, okay, yes," he sputtered out, his wings screaming at his back for release. He kissed Kyungsoo hard, hoping that it would help him to concentrate on anything other than his own aching body. His grip on Kyungsoo's hips tightened.

"If that's what you want," Kris said, even though he knew it would be hard to stop after seeing that expression across the human's face, "Fuck, I want to give you everything you want." He kissed Kyungsoo again, pushing until Kyungsoo's mouth opened and he could taste his lover better, sucking hard on the other man's tongue. The water around them glittered, its otherworldly magic reacting to Kris's excitement and anticipation.

The renewed attention seemed to work, Kyungsoo keeping his eyes open as he stared at Kris while they kissed. The air around them got colder, icicles starting to form on the arched ceiling above them.
His nipples hardened in response, but the temperature change didn't make him shiver from the cold. It only seemed to excite him further.

Kyungsoo arched his back, letting Kris's hands fall down to his hips, his skin glistening as it came partially out of the water as he switched positions, turning to expose his back to him. He pulled his large hands to his stomach, somehow loving the feel of it most there. Even the most minute touch made his cock throb, hips grinding against him as he threw his head back in a wordless cry.

Kris's eyes flashed with magic as Kyungsoo offered himself up and his mind started to go hazy. He'd been holding himself back for so long, trying to give Kyungsoo only the smallest amount of what was necessary to begin a slow and controlled transformation and now... now he could feel how full Kyungsoo's round belly was, could feel his ass pressing against him and knowing how stretched and ready Kyungsoo already would be from their previous coupling. And Kyungsoo wanted it.

Kris curled his fingers against Kyungsoo's pliant skin, digging his nails into that full stomach and he couldn't help but moan. This body was fragile now but he'd change it soon and together they could do anything. He leaned into Kyungsoo, running his tongue over the shell of the human's ear, "I would ruin you if you let me."

Kris's voice in his ear made him shiver and keen, and Kyungsoo brought an arm up to wrap around the taller man's neck and pull him closer. He breathed in the scent of his hair, nuzzling into the crook of his neck.

'Hmm. Sounds about as empty as everything else he's said he would do. Better make him promise.'

'Well, you've already doomed yourself to being his. Might as well get fucked on the way there.'

Kyungsoo closed his eyes, voice breathy against Kris's neck. "You promise?"

Kris didn't have the confidence nor the sense to respond. His entire mind was flooded with energy and desire and there simply wasn't enough time in the entire universe to waste on words when Kyungsoo was begging like this. Kris's hands, so large on Kyungsoo's smaller frame, gripped onto Kyungsoo's hips and he lifted the willing human out of the water, bending him across the hard edge of the pool. Before Kyungsoo could say anything to stop him, Kris buried his face in Kyungsoo's ass, sucking hard on the tight muscle and probing inside of Kyungsoo with his tongue. He let go of all his inhibitions and let himself have fun, tasting and teasing and moaning into Kyungsoo's body. He slithered a finger alongside his tongue, pushing it inside of his lover quickly, not waiting to know if there was pain, wanting to stretch him wide open.

Kyungsoo inhaled sharply, not expecting Kris's reaction to go from being controlled to without inhibition in seconds. "Ah...! Kris, ah..." He panted, arching his back as he gripped the marble siding, water sloshing out of the pool at the sudden movement. His eyes were nearly rolling back as he felt Kris's fingers enter him, reaching one hand back to pull at the skin on his hip to arch his back and open his ass wider. Every touch was like a hot brand inside of him, his lips puffy and open as he repeated his name. "Kris..."
It was two, then three fingers, slowly stretching Kyungsoo open until Kris was satisfied with his work. He pushed his long fingers forward in a curving, coaxing motion, teasing Kyungsoo's prostate, wanting his lover on his way to ruin long before any penetration. It was hard to suppress that desire to see something so small and fragile bend to your will, ancient longing bubbling up in his chest. "Fuck, you taste so good," Kris started to say, but he was still buried in Kyungsoo and instead it was just a mumbled mess. The meaning, however, was obvious. Kris was not going to be able to stop himself, to control himself much longer. Another hot burst of magical energy rose up inside of him.

Kris finally separated himself from Kyungsoo, licking his lips and breathing heavily, climbing out of the pool himself and pulling Kyungsoo to him. The hard floor was painful on his knees but it was nothing compared to the raging energy inside of him that wanted Kyungsoo not just now, but for the rest of time. On his knees, he took powerful hold of Kyungsoo and with strong hands, placed Kyungsoo where he needed him. Kyungsoo's face was pressed against the floor, his ass in the air. Kris pressed the head of his cock against the human's entrance and took a deep, anxious breath, "Tell me to stop."

Kyungsoo's arms slipped out from beneath him before the excess water froze under his cheeks and hands. His cheeks were tingling again, matching the sensation of cold pressing harshly against his face. Kris's primal, tangible energy was pressing in all around him, hot and sweet and vibrant. It was familiar, this domination of his body that he loved, again finding himself wanting to give in to the pleasure completely. He bit his lip, weakly letting out a few panting moans into his arm as he looked back at Kris. His lower back arched lower as he tried to draw him into his hole, pushing back against him. It wasn't exactly what he'd hoped for, being fucked in the middle of the bathroom floor, but it would do for now.

A knot had formed in his chest in anticipation, bracing himself. "No."

The subtle pressure of Kyungsoo's body puckering around him was more than enough to push Kris forward, drawing up the soft and sickly sweet magical fluid to coat the shaft before letting himself move inside of his new lover. He leaned over Kyungsoo, kissing the human's long spine and clinging to his sides as he pushed forward in small but measured thrusts. It was something much more desperate than their first encounter and Kris knew that he wouldn't be able to hold himself out very long. Control was beyond him at this point and his breathing grew heavier with every moan that escaped Kyungsoo's lips. He kissed the base of Kyungsoo's neck, hips jutting forward, "I'll make you a new life, a happy life and I'll make you happy."

The slightly melted ice was beginning to feel like silk against the skin of Kyungsoo's stomach. As Kris leaned over him, his legs spread wider, accepting Kris easily inside of him, trembling at the sensation of being full. At his words, Kyungsoo smiled, wide and dumbly, his heart fluttering as he started to let go, drifting as he somehow glimpsed at that imagined life and what it would be like. Fire warm on his belly while cold winds howling at his back, but he did not shiver. Ice like needles in crystal clear rivers at his feet but he felt no pain. Blankets and books and tea while snowflakes covered his eyes and hair and spritelings nipped playfully at his heels. And Kris, there all the while, caring for him, loving him.
Kris was deep inside of him when he came to, the unfamiliar sensation of feeling complete making him squirm for more. The tears falling from his eyes were happy this time.

They had to be.

Kris turned Kyungsoo's face towards him with a soft touch to the human's cheek, letting him stare into Kyungsoo's eyes as he pushed himself further, knowing that he couldn't possibly last much longer. "Gods, you're so beautiful, you're the most beautiful -" he rambled before another tight coil of pleasure shivered through his body and he struggled to keep himself from collapsing on top of Kyungsoo and using him viciously. His orgasm was there, right on the edge already. He would have blushed at his lack of stamina if he'd able to concentrate on anything except the incredible feeling of his Kyungsoo wrapped around him.

"My... perfect Kyungsoo," Kris moaned as he buried himself completely inside his human lover and rolled his hips. He was desperate to slow himself down and failing. His legs nearly gave out as he came, biting hard into Kyungsoo's shoulder out of terrible need.

Kyungsoo gave a small peep of surprise when he felt Kris's release and the teeth in his shoulder. He whined, looking back at him, ready to demand that he finish him too, wanting more sex, more food, more attention.

He stopped, his jaw snapping shut. What was he doing? He caught himself slipping and giving in to the most primal of his wants and desires. But... that was ok right? His hole clenched harshly around Kris still inside of him. He still needed to cum...

"Kris," He moaned, bowing his head at the conflicting feelings as he brought his own hand down to jerk himself off, coming quickly as he collapsed back onto the floor, his arms finally giving out.

Kris pulled out and flipped Kyungsoo over on his back. His mouth hung open almost stupidly and he ran a hand down his lover's body, curling his fingers through Kyungsoo's until his hands too were a mess of come. "I would have - " Kris said, lifting the rapidly cooling come on his fingers to his mouth and tasting Kyungsoo with a hungry moan. Not wanting to overstimulate the man in front of him, he satisfied his hunger with a soft kiss to the swollen head of Kyungsoo's cock. "You look so pretty, my pretty boy," he said aimlessly, "My hungry boy... I didn't think you'd be so... ready for this. I worried, too much perhaps, that you wouldn't be willing to accept me and... here you are." Kris's cheeks blushed a pretty pink and he flicked his tongue over Kyungsoo's slit, delighted to watch the human twitch in the aftermath of their desire.

Kyungsoo's half-lidded eyes looked up, staring at the ceiling as his breathing evened out, taking stock of how he felt. His heart sang whenever Kris spoke, the words making him feel light and happy. The fading remnants of his orgasm was becoming sharp, overstimulation making him twist playfully out of Kris's grasp. He could feel himself becoming complacent, his body and mind turning into receptive, pleasurable goo.
There was a split within him, and he felt both at the same time; his receptiveness to Kris's will, and his human nature, horrified at what he was doing. Even as he stood, wobbly on his feet, there was a muted roar between his ears as he leaned down to give Kris a kiss. It ebbed and flowed like a tide, the roar fading into ticks like a clock as he hugged Kris close, embracing him as the ticking suddenly stopped.

He was smiling, but he was not happy.

He was a liar. He couldn't let go.

He whined as he bowed his head, his hair covering his eyes. "I want to sleep now..." was all he managed to say, swaying with the struggle to stay upright as his body demanded rest.

Kris held Kyungsoo carefully, providing support with large hands at the human's hips. Staring up at Kyungsoo like this was heavenly. But he knew there was darkness in Kyungsoo's thoughts - the way the human's eyes clouded, the way his words sometimes felt empty. But, the Winter Lord thought, given what Kyungsoo had been through with his husband, with the violence at the palace, with the changes even now beginning to take shape in the human's physical form... how could his thoughts be clear and light and free? These circumstances were simply too different from the way he had changed his other children for a comparison to be of use. Kris just smiled, hoping to give his lover some kind of comfort.

"Let me clean you up," Kris said, a request but one said with such strength that Kyungsoo would find it hard to say no. He pressed a soft kiss to Kyungsoo's belly before standing up himself and taking a white cloth from a nearby basket of supplies. He knelt to dip it first into the magically infused water, then carefully began wiping Kyungsoo down, massaging the human's tired skin. "Everything must be ... a little too much right now," Kris whispered, lowering his voice to help Kyungsoo relax, "But give it time."

Kyungsoo hummed under the attention, a somewhat dreamy look still on his face as he focused on Kris's hands traversing the skin of his stomach. He was indeed relaxing, so much so that it took him by surprise how easily his shoulders sagged as if commanded. Too much? Too much was an understatement. He had completely and irrevocably given himself to someone...a fae... he barely knew. His lips puckered as the realization hit him, finding guilt starting to seep back into the cracks of his mind through the warm buzz of pleasure overlaying his uncertainty. But his body was still very much receptive to the stimulation of his new master, feeling his tired body start to react again to his touches.

He needed a distraction.

He finally spoke, his voice soft as his cock twitched as Kris's hand passed lower over his stomach to
his upper thigh. His fingers curled into the skin of the taller man's shoulders as his back arched, trying to steady himself. "Kris...umn... can you... tell me more about your..." His awkward questioning seemed out of place and strange as he looked into his eyes. "I need to hear your voice. Can you keep talking? Tell me more about yourself...your lands....anything."

Kris smiled still brighter and tossed the wet cloth to the ground, taking Kyungsoo's hands in his and leading the sleepy human back towards the bedroom. "A bit of a bedtime story?" Kris asked with a lift in his voice. It was almost embarrassing how adorable he found Kyungsoo, how soft and easy to be around, how simple to fall in love with over and over and over.

He eased Kyungsoo into the bed and climbed in next to him, curling his large frame until he fit against Kyungsoo's chest, kissing him between sentences and drawing little circles on his belly. His voice was just above a whisper when he continued, "I'd almost forgotten how much the ritual can take out of a human in his first night. It has been a thousand years since I held a human in my arms, since I let them feel what you're feeling now. Taozi... I didn't have to seek him out, didn't have to seduce him with all my 'charms'. He came to me. He was smiling and laughing at me a bit, once he saw what he had summoned. And ... he helped me to heal wounds I didn't know I had."

Kyungsoo looked sleepily down at Kris, unsure of what his face looked like, his thoughts finally calm and quiet. He found himself fond of the cocoon of Kris's attention he found himself in, eyelids heavy as he listened to him talk. After a few moments, his brows furrowed as Kris talked about Tao, but no jealousy came into his mind at all. Instead, it brought up another worry. With everything that he'd read and studied about court rituals in the library, and the king's ban on what they were doing... What Jongdae had done to Jongin...

Kyungsoo shuddered, reaching for Kris's hands. "We're...not going to get in trouble, are we?"

Kris watched his fingers slip between Kyungsoo's and considered his answer for a moment. Kyungsoo hadn't seen Baekhyun's violent end to the rebellious attempt on Junmyeon's life and Kris knew he needed to be careful with his words, not wanting to upset his new lover just as he felt Kyungsoo beginning to truly relax for him. "Everything that happened during the festival... in the end, Junmyeon saw that he had been too strict, had judged many of us too harshly. What we have here between us is something special that only humans can share with a fae. And Junmyeon, my king, he had lost sight of that in his sadness."

The look on Junmyeon's face as he held his Baekhyun for the first time in centuries flashed in Kris's mind and he curled in closer, wanting to truly experience every moment that he had with Kyungsoo. "I've told you - Junmyeon is my best friend and my king until the end of our days. Once he has met you and understands how much you've come to mean to me, he will accept us. His magic will ease your transformation, help you to complete the ritual, if you would allow it. The magic of the Summer Palace is impossible for me to replicate alone."
Kyungsoo fell silent, tiredness still clinging to his bones, but more questions pushed through the haze of his desire to sleep. "The ritual..." he mumbled. That's right. The ritual to turn a human into a fae. Did...did that mean...

"But...was...was Jongin's ritual completed?" his stomach sank as he remembered Jongin's wings, spread out and looking down at him, beautiful, judgemental. His lips didn't even move in his mind's eye as he heard his voice again, his impeccable facial features contorted into a look of disgust.

'You fucked up'.

Maybe he had. He had just fucked up. Again. His breathing sped up as he inhaled through his nose, eyes wide at his sudden and inexplicable panic. "I could have still saved him?"

Kris jolted up and took Kyungsoo's face in his hands, kissing him deeply, trying to stop the hideous words from coming out. "You did the only thing you could, Kyungsoo," Kris said and his voice was deeply insistent, almost forceful, "You offered him your heart and if he no longer sees how precious that gift is, there was no changing his mind. Yes, Jongdae came to the summer palace to ease the ritual's final steps but a little prince like him, of old blood, he could have already had the magic in his own right to put Jongin far beyond the possibility of turning back." Kris kissed him again, this time placing soft lips on the tip of Kyungsoo's nose, then against the human's tired eyes, "Don't think for a moment that your love for him wasn't enough. Jongin's decision was and never will be your fault. He is his own person and we can't change that, even with all the magic in the four kingdoms."

Kris pulled back and watched Kyungsoo's face as his words began to sink in. "Kyungsoo?" Kris said, running his thumb over the other man's full lips, "You've always been enough. You are enough. Just as you are right now."

Kris's words made him happy. But his heart felt like it was being crushed in a torturous vice, his old life sporadically flashing behind his eyelids as Kris kissed his tears away. He held him until his shaking stopped, and his body relaxed as his breathing evened out again. Only his nails dug into the skin of his palms, tension making his head hurt.

After a moment, his voice croaked out of his throat. "I'm sorry. I...don't know what came over me." He felt embarrassed. Was this going to happen every time he thought of his ex-husband?

Kris tried to smile, but the concern on his face was too apparent. He had so many things he wanted to say to Kyungsoo, so many expressions of love and curiosity and physical need, but it all seemed to be doing nothing. For every happy moment, it seemed there were ten that drove Kyungsoo further back into his shell, "You don't have be to sorry. You've been through so much these last weeks here in our world. You're allowed to be upset and confused. I just... I want to know how I can help." Kris pulled the blankets up and over them. The least he could do is make sure that Kyungsoo was warm.
"When Tao gets back with news from the capital and Junmyeon's plans for dealing with the incursion... we'll have time then to worry," Kris said, "Until then, I'm here to listen to whatever you need to say or to leave you alone or to kiss you senseless. You just have to... tell me."

That final burst of stress took everything out of Kyungsoo had left. His limbs went slack, staring up at Kris with tired, pleading eyes. "Just...be with me, here. Now." He bowed his head against Kris' chest, curling his fingers into his waist. "Forever? Please. I know I might be annoying, but my walls are built high for a reason...besides this one." He motioned to the side of his head. "Please give me time to adjust, I guess." He let out a breathy sigh. "Can...can you tell me more about yourself?"

Kris sighed and tickled his fingers down to Kyungsoo's stomach, pitter-patting like raindrops across the human's skin, "Forever." He repeated Kyungsoo's words back to him emphatically, like a promise and settled in, positioning himself so that Kyungsoo could comfortably rest against him as he wooed the other man to sleep with stories of far off places, the hordes of dragons that had pledged themselves to him, and drunken nights with a Junmyeon that Kyungsoo could barely recognize. As he spoke, Kris formed little pictures out of frosty blue magic, showing Kyungsoo all the places he had run as a young man and the faces of those he had loved best. A little magicked dragon tore across their heavy blankets, raining fire down on a village of the Old King's supporters. A silly and playful illusion of Chanyeol, much younger and with long, wavy hair met his Kris's dragons for the first time, his eyes wide with fear but wanting to appear courageous. Kris showed Kyungsoo a far away memory of his mother, her soft expressions and the way she had raised him to be honest and to fight for what he wanted most. He emptied himself to Kyungsoo, sharing more and more and until he himself wasn't sure where else to go.

"I want all of this for you," Kris whispered after a moment, "When the ritual is complete, the Winter Palace and all its memories will be yours to explore until the end of time."

Kyungsoo finally smiled at the charming displays, listening intently even as his eyelids threatened to close with each passing moment. He turned and crooked his head against Kris's arm, pulling his legs up higher. "Thank you..." he murmured, his doubts quelled for the moment. Finally, he could not resist the pull of sleep any longer, and he went lax in Kris' arms as his breathing evened out into a light snore.

Kris stayed awake as long as his eyes would let him. While fae did not always need rest as humans did, the heavy weight of the magic he had been forced to use first at the battle only days ago and then in his work to change Kyungsoo had exhausted him. He whispered Kyungsoo's name again and again, kissing his hair and listening to his lover breathe until finally, he too slipped into deep dreams.

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Kyungsoo sat at the edge of the bed, blinking slowly. He was so warm. He was cold. His nerves tingled like live wire as he looked back down at Kris, sleeping peacefully. It took so much out of him to just detangle himself from those large arms, nearly shaking with the touch alone when he woke up. But he knew he couldn't stay.
He couldn't do this.

He couldn't shake the feeling that what he was doing was wrong. Not for himself, but for Jongin, for Kris. He hated himself for thinking that it could be different, that things could be better with someone else. To leave Jongin with his happiness, to leave it all behind, it clung to him like the scent of a home he no longer felt that he had.

He was bitter. He knew that now. And Kris didn't deserve that from him while he was like this.

His head felt heavy as he let out a small, unsure sob, the tears falling from his eyes like stone. Actually, they were stone, his cheeks tingling as he noticed their new shape. Teardrops, bright blue crystal formations that dripped heavily down his face to land on the floor with a delicate 'tink'. He picked one up and inspected it for a moment, before tossing it away angrily.

His mind was silent as he pulled something that looked like a sheet from the corner of the dresser, covering himself with it while he quietly opened the door to Kris' room. A little golem was waiting outside with the spritelings, and it covered its face, the tips of the rocks around its face turning bright purple. The spritelings started to chitter loudly before Kyungsoo shushed them, reminding them that Kris was still asleep.

A few stayed at Kris' door, but a few did follow him, interested as to where he was going. Kyungsoo managed to find his way back to his guest room, where he stayed when he had first arrived in this realm. He went up to the armoire, touching it gently. It shuddered slightly, the colors changing and opening to reveal its usual fare of clothing offers. However, since Kyungsoo was unsure of what he needed, a different myriad of clothes were displayed.

Again, he went for simplicity, drawn to the blue as more tears fell from his eyes. Loose blue pants and a white long blouse decorated with black filigree at the wide neck and cuffs, insulated boots with doe leather that felt nice and cushioning against his feet. A longer cloak with white fur at the neck fell at his feet, and he wrapped it around himself with a sigh. He smiled as the armoire cleaned up his mess, the clasp closing and returning to its original color. He left the sheet and a mess of blue crystal tears in the room.

He shooed the spritelings back up to Kris's room, but one stubbornly stayed at his side, the one with sleek black scales that tasted a solid crystal tear as it fell from his cheek and cooing softly with worry. "Go on. I can't take you," he tried, and the little thing, oh it looked at him with wide, knowing eyes. He even tried to pluck it off of his shoulder but its tiny mouth gripped his jaw, not harsh enough to be a bite but enough to let Kyungsoo know that he was not going to be removed. It broke Kyungsoo's heart, and he relented, and it curled up around his neck underneath the fur of his cloak.
More tears fell from Kyungsoo's eyes, but a small smile did appear on his lips as the spriteling licked at his jaw where it had bit him as if to apologise.

He didn't pause as he passed the thermal pools, taking the opening to the outside and he started walking. The cold nipped at his cheeks, fresh snow falling on the powder already accumulating around him. He walked forward without really seeing or even knowing where he was wanting to go. He would almost call the feeling a trance-like wanderlust, drawn to disappear in the wilds and away from everyone and everything that caused his emotions to go haywire.

He walked. He walked until the grey sky turned pink, no sense of time filtering into his mind. The baby dragon around his neck stretched every once in awhile, and he counted two instances of this before the ground seemed to stop in front of him. A sheer cliff dropped off at his feet, a piece of floating land being around twenty feet in front of him attached by a rickety bridge.

Kyungsoo leaned over the edge. He couldn't see the bottom. Odd. He took a deep breath, finding the air humid and still. He walked back to the thicker foliage away from the cliff, leaning against a boulder protruding from the ground. He removed his cloak, and the sleepy black spriteling fell from his shoulders onto it, curling up on the thick fur like a cat. It didn't judge Kyungsoo as his tears started falling from his eyes anew. He slid down to sit against the boulder, drawing his knees up as he cried, the pile of small crystals growing larger around his feet and waist.

Kyungsoo warred with himself for hours. At regular intervals he banged his head on the boulder behind him, but instead of finding the resistance of pain, the rock actually gave, the distinctive spider-like cracks radiating outward behind his head. Even with the attentiveness of the spriteling, it soon grew distracted, chasing a group of small pixies with butterfly wings into the brush behind the boulder.

He waited. It started to drizzle. Kyungsoo didn't move. As it rained his sadness grew, not really seeing anything as he eyes gazed at the cliff in front of him. He slowly stood, the dye from his soaked clothes running down his arms as he slowly got closer towards the edge. Tiny, dark blue crystalline protrusions poked out of the scars along his arm, but Kyungsoo hardly noticed the changes. More drops of water ran down his face, more crystal tears falling from his eyes as his despair grew. He shook his head at nothing in particular. The mounting dissent in his mind, the memories of sex and rejection and love and despair compounding on top of one another before he stepped over to the cliff...

And walked off of it.

A sweet, lilting laugh floated over the trees as Kyungsoo's foot came down on hard earth and the human stumbled, trying to steady himself. The black spriteling, finally growing sick of its pixie friends, rushed forward towards Kyungsoo and growled towards what appeared to be a floating island in the center of a great ravine. It was now revealed to be little more than an illusion. From
within its trees came floating down a woman dressed in radiant color, her thick brown hair floating out behind her as she landed gracefully beside Kyungsoo. "Did you truly want to die just then?" she said, her voice much happier and more graceful than was appropriate for the subject. "It would have been a long fall down down down to the bottom. You would have had much too long to regret your decision. It may have felt like hours before your head was smashed to pieces. And what would we do with you then? Our Yifan would be a wreck if another of his sweet boys was to meet a bloody end."

She took a deep breath and her voice took on a darker tone, "I have missed that look of despair on his face."

Kyungsoo fell back against the wall of the 'ravine', the empty space beneath him rippling back into reality. His feet got stuck in the mud of the steep, dirt filled ditch, losing his balance trying to get free. "Who are you?" he tried, his voice sounding panicked, even though he did seem to recall her from somewhere. Crystal tears still fell from his eyes as he scrambled against the dirt, his brow furrowing at her appearance. The rain was not falling on her like it was on him, her visage immaculate in an almost too perfect way. His lips curled up as he turned away from her, trying to shy away from her overwhelming, nearly smothering presence. "What do you want?"

"Who I am will be more clear in time, but for now, you can call me Jessica," she said, her voice returning to its normal pitch, sweetly accented and gentle despite the unsettling feeling that seemed to surround her. "What I want, to put it simply, is you." She genuinely smiled and while it should have been warm, instead it was ice cold and shivering down to the blood. "Oh, I can smell him on you. Half a creature of our world, transformed by a fae of extraordinary power and intense love... and yet, still so utterly human. Did you tell your Yifan that you were leaving him, running away? Does... he know you're here?" Her question was simple. She was not afraid to learn the answer, just didn't want to be surprised.

Jessica. The Lady of Spring. He had read about her, knew that she was at the palace for the solstice gathering. But he didn't recognize her from how she looked now; he never would have guessed it was her. His panicked movements stopped, but he was still on guard, mostly because of how her presence still felt oppressive and stifling, and the air started to smell like strawberries and roses. He shook his head, the movement seemingly without thought like before. "Kris?" Even the mention of his name made him blush. "I'm...he doesn't." His stomach tightened as he realized he had wanted to die just moments before, relieved but somewhat angry at the interruption of his isolation. "Why? Why would you want me at all? I just..."

You wanted to die. You begged him not to leave you, and you ended up leaving him instead. Contradictory. Hypocrite. Pathetic. You love him. Where are you going?

He grabbed at the sides of his head, the tears falling from his eyes growing larger. "I just want to be left alone for a while."
Jessica stepped towards him, bending down and picking up one of the crystalline tears from the ground. She twirled the blue crystal in her fingers for a second, holding it in her palm as though weighing it, before speaking, "You have no idea how truly alone you are. You, Kyungsoo, if you'll let me use your human name, are one of only a handful of your kind, spread throughout our world and yours. If you wanted to be alone, letting your faery lover take you to bed and plump you up with magic was exactly what you needed to do."

She tossed Kyungsoo's tear back at him with an amused expression, "I suspect that Yifan never really told you what it means to move between your human existence and into our life as fae. As the magic rushes into you, it collides with your sweet human heart and it takes so much energy from the fae who loves you to push past that barrier. If the barrier is not destroyed... if our magic cannot permeate your flesh at a deeper level, if you do not fully accept our gift, you become suspended, unable to go back to the way you were and your body desperately refusing to move forward. Doesn't sound very nice, does it?"

Kyungsoo's eyebrows drew together. Was she talking about him? She had to be. His body, the changes, they matched up with her words. Why would she go through the trouble to tell him this? He looked above them, the edge of the deep ditch too far above his head to reach. "And? It's happening to me?" He didn't care. He did care. "I can't go home, my hus...ex husband left me for another, and I can't bring myself to love anyone else so soon? So? Why do you even care?"

Jessica made an exaggerated expression, a single long finger to her chin as though she were contemplating her answer carefully, "Perhaps I'm just a generous soul who wants you to be safe from what Yifan would do to you, taking your humanity and binding you to him for all eternity." But after a moment of letting the words hang in the air, just long enough for Kyungsoo to consider their terrifying possibility, she laughed deep in her belly, "Or maybe I'm in need of soldiers for the war to come. You really have no idea what our world is even made of and Yifan thought to make you into one of us. Boys are so silly!"

She leaned over, leveling their faces and ran her cool hand over his cheek, "Sweet thing, sweet human thing, the power inside of you will rival their greatest warriors. Yifan, Chanyeol... even Junmyeon himself is nothing compared to the magic that blossoms inside of one still connected so intimately to the world of humans. Join with me, Kyungsoo. I will offer you stability, the chance to anchor yourself and perhaps, as time heals us all, for you to return to your home, your world."

At Jessica's hand on his cheek, after the coolness had passed, Kyungsoo fixated on her touch, inexplicably wanting more of it. His tears fell harder, unable to respond. He knew it now. He had messed up so badly that he was actually considering taking up her offer. The mere mention of Kris still made him blush and squirm, but Jessica's offer of stability made him hope for something he couldn't quite explain.

The scent of sickly sweetness was growing stronger, and he turned his head to look away from her. He felt pressure in his head that was steadily beginning to grow more and more from his intrusive thoughts that jumbled his mind and confused his senses. He pressed up against the dirt at his back in a lame attempt to shy away from it, swallowing down bile that threatened to come up his throat. He was shaking with the effort of controlling himself, the edges of his vision darkening like he was
about to pass out as his voice took on a desperate tone. "I'm sorry, I just... I don't know. I don't know anymore what I want. I don't know you or anyone else. I'm just a burden. I'm nothing special."

"You're special to me," she said, in a sing-song way that made it hard to disbelieve. She smiled again and waited for him to respond, her eyes growing darker when he didn't immediately agree. Her jaw clenched as though she were holding something back. "And you'll be so very special to my people, who need you to achieve the freedom they have deserved from the beginning. Junnyeon and his... warriors, they are not the right people to rule over a land as beautiful as this!"

She paused and considered her next words, "And imagine what your husband would think, to see you a hero. Someone he can depend on and look up to. Yifan thought he could lure your husband back with just pretty words, but great deeds? Think of that. Think of the... awe you could inspire in him, with my help and in helping me. If you still wanted him back, of course..."

Kyungsoo could taste the sweetness of the air on his tongue now. He nodded. He did want Jongin back desperately, even though he knew he shouldn't. Jongin had made it quite clear that he had no more interest in him, and was content with his new life as a fae and with his new lover. But... what if Jessica was right? What if he needed to be that much better? He remembered all the times he drove Jongin to recitals, to tryouts, to clubs. He remembered how he held his husband as he cried into his shoulder at the hospital with pain plaguing his body, knowing that despite his hard work, it could damage him permanently. In hindsight it didn't seem like enough. Of course.

The look on his face must have been alarming, smiling and forcing out a breathy laugh before returning to a slightly panicked nervousness as he flit between another promise of hope and his ever-present despair.

And Kris? Kyungsoo held his own face, his tears never ending even as he thought of Kris fucking him, an uncontrollable mad giggle escaping his lips at the fresh memory. The stupid crystals were piling at his feet, clinking together in the dirt at his erratic, uncertain movements. He nodded again, then shook his head. "I shouldn't have done that. He would have given me everything but he didn't know what to do to make me whole."

Jessica extended a hand towards Kyungsoo. Her fingers were long and delicate and sharp in their contrast to Kris's thick, powerful hands. "Come with me, Kyungsoo, and I will show you all the ways that you can be great. There is so much power in you now, power that Yifan... that Kris and his Winter creatures could never hope to unleash. I will teach you, if you let me. If you lend me your strength, you will have anything and everything your little, human heart could possibly desire."

Around them drew in storm clouds and a rush of warm air. Jessica's eyes faded from their cool black to a shocking grey and the accelerating wind took hold of her long hair, creating a halo of darkness around her pale face. "We should go now, before the Winter King learns of your disappearance. He has spies everywhere, always working to be sure that none of his children ever stray too far from their home."
Kyungsoo stared dumbly at Jessica's outstretched hand, his own falling off his face back down his sides. The doubtful voices in between his ears murmured incoherently, whispers of curiosity...and caution. But despite feeling lost, he slid his hand into Jessica's, a small, affirming "Ok," passing through his lips.

The swirling storm clouds seemed to collapse around them, pulling Kyungsoo up from the ground and pushing him against Jessica until she held him softly. Her thin arms felt shockingly solid and safe, even as cracks of lightning burst from within the clouds. The thick grey closed around them and they were suddenly far from the earth and the safety of solid ground. Was it time or space that stood still? It was impossible to tell, before the shrinking sphere of cloud and mist winked out of existence, taking Kyungsoo and Jessica with it.

From outside of Jessica's powerful storm, the dark spriteling watched, his eyes growing large as he took in the scene, memorizing its details and crying up into the sky for his lost friend.

Kyungsoo barely felt the swirl of the storm around him. When they settled into their new location, he didn't even get the chance to look around before a feeling of intense cold hit the side of his head. His mouth fell open but nothing came out, staring up at Jessica with wide, unseeing eyes as he felt her fingers dance over his temple. The whispers in his head faded completely, along with Kris' face in his mind as the wall of protection crumbled to nothingness.

But something else was being built up within him, the sensation making him feel off and unbalanced. The crystal tears still fell from his eyes even though no sobs wracked his body.

Slowly and slowly, she constructed new worlds in his mind, working her own seeds into his garden. Visions of battle, not bloody and horrible, but glowingly victorious and of Jongin, his eyes bright with admiration and desire for the new Kyungsoo, the warrior and the hero that would save them all. The Spring Court with its fantasy flowers and endless waterfalls appeared in his mind, so different from the harsh beauty of the Winterlands. "Welcome home," she whispered, "Welcome to your new life."

By making Jessica happy, he could become greater than himself, someone to be admired, revered, loved. Kyungsoo smiled, numb and placid, his eyes clearing and he stared up at Jessica like she had just given him peace. He knew what he had to do. As the scope and beauty of the spring court lay before him, the majesty of it all was merely an afterthought.

The crystal that fell from his eyes rang hollow as it hit the marble floor.
He couldn't wait.

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