

## Chapter One: Once Upon a Dream (Jae)

It was hot. It was far hotter than it should have been on an October evening in Limen. The perfumy smell of flowers, the soft touch of healthy grass, and the distant sound of cicadas overwhelmed Jae's senses. And giggling. *Giggling?*

Waking a bit more, Jae slowly opened his eyes, only to shut them tightly when he was met with harsh sunlight. Even closed, the sun penetrated the skin and, as he saw red, he wondered just how long he'd been sleeping. And how he ended up in some field. Did he sleepwalk now? It was unsurprising; just one of a dozen other ailments. He braved opening his eyes once more. Going much slower this time, he was finally able to see a sliver of the bright blue sky past the blinding beams of sunlight. A sudden, high-pitched scream forced his eyes open the rest of the way and he sat up abruptly in the same motion, jade-colored eyes searching frantically for the source of the sound. Another shriek sounded and he whipped around to find a little girl running and laughing—laughing, not screaming—after a few floating bubbles. Still in a daze, he watched from his spot and waited for the orbs to pop and they just...didn't.

“Holy sh—”

Another shriek cut Jae off as the girl tripped over something amidst the thousands of yellow and white flowers dotting the field he'd found himself in. He scrambled to his feet so he could go help her but, before he could take a step, she began floating, lifted by what looked like hundreds

of dandelion seeds. He stared in awe, watching as she was carried away before the parting of water sounded on his right. He didn't register it much at first, figuring some sort of animal had simply broken the surface, but he realized he hadn't seen or heard any water at first. Doing a double-take, he stared at a body of water that hadn't been there before. It didn't concern him nearly as much as it just confused him and what was in the water was only a touch more interesting: another person, a woman with tan skin and wet, coily hair, submerged up to the crest of her nose. Jae made his way over, against the nagging feeling that repeatedly yelled *bad idea! Bad idea!*

"Uhm...hello? Do..do you know where I am?" he begins before gesturing vaguely, jabbing a thumb in the direction he thinks he came from. "I just woke up here and I'm...well, I'm lost. I think."

He raised a hand to tug anxiously at his earlobe and the woman in the water simply watched him curiously for a few moments, cat-like eyes narrowed in scrutiny.

"You're in the dream realm. Obviously," she answered, voice strangely melodic despite the slight rasp to it. "How can you be lost?"

"The dream—"

Jae cut himself off to look around the area, the movement causing his unruly hair to whip about. When some got stuck in his eye, he swept it out of the way to rest behind a slightly pointed ear before settling his gaze back on the odd woman.

"So I'm dreaming? This is a dream?" he asked for clarification, taking a careful seat on the springy grass so as not to lose his footing and tumble into the water that he now realized faded at the edges as if it existed only in the small space it needed to. "Well, who are you? I thought you only dreamed about people you've seen before and I've *never* seen you."

The woman opened her mouth before closing it once more, deciding that she didn't have to give many details. It wasn't her job, after all. She simply swam closer, deciding the boy to be non-hostile. He just seemed like a lost kid.

"Sure," she said, unconvincingly. "It's just a dream. Maybe you've seen me in passing? Anyway, I'm Destiny. It's nice to meet you..."

"I'm Hyunjae," he replied when she trailed off. He then gave his best attempt at a friendly smile, despite his unsatisfied confusion.

He extended his hand naturally for a shake and the woman eyed it warily before remembering that it was a gesture of goodwill in humans. She looked at his face, scanning for any ill will before deciding it wouldn't hurt. When she lifted her hand, dotted intermittently with blue scales, from the water, he went to shake it without looking but happened to glance down at the last second just as their hands met. The scales surprised him, but he learned not to react harshly to people's oddities since he has a few of his own. Besides, this was a dream, it wasn't so unheard of for someone to have scales. He follows the hand down the arm that has more scales and notices a large tail moving about in the water. His eyes widened a touch.

"A-are you a mermaid?" he asked, eyes returning to her face, and he noticed the small smile crossing her lips before she nodded once.

"Yeah, something like that," she replied, tail swishing a bit more in her amusement before she tilted her head, brows furrowing. "What are you though?"

Jae blinked in surprise at the question, giving his surroundings a brief glance as if maybe she was talking to someone else. With no one else around, not even the little kid from before, he then pointed at himself.

"Me?" he asked incredulously. "I'm a human. What else would I be?"

A look of pity passed over Destiny's face before she glanced over her shoulder. Jae followed her gaze and saw a couple of others beckoning her from a rock in the suddenly larger lake.

"Either you're in denial, or you really don't know..." she murmured to no one, pulling him back to the conversation and successfully confusing him far more than he'd been before. His brows furrowed, and he opened his mouth to question, but she continued speaking.

"Poor, kid...I have to go, but," she offered a smile, "hopefully you find out the truth soon. You deserve it."

As she spoke, she swam backward and then offered a small wave before diving under the water, her iridescent blue tail flicking above the surface briefly before disappearing below the surface.

Even after the mermaid was gone, Jae sat at the edge of the water which seemed to slowly fade away as it was no longer needed. It was completely gone, replaced by a patch of flowering grass like the rest of the field, by the time he finally snapped out of his reverie.

*The truth? What did she mean by that?*

Shaking his head, Jae stood up from his seated position only for an incessant beeping to start in his ears. He let out a cry of surprise, turning in his place and looking around at the sky from where it seemed to be coming before he vanished from the strange dream world in a blink.

## Chapter Two: Away With The Fairies (Isa)

With next to no one having been around in her dream for hours, Isabella settled on playing with the Will 'O Wisp that always seemed to linger around her. The nine-year-old was lying on her stomach in the tall grass with her legs swinging idly above her, uncaring to any stains that might soil her clothes.

"What do you mean you have to go?" she questioned with a small pout, poking lightly at the light spirit hovering just inches from her nose. Its light flickered in what appeared to be annoyance at the contact and it floated back a little. She sighed when an echoed hum came from the creature.

"Alright, alright, I guess I'll see you la—" an echo-y voice cut her off in the distance.

"Hello?! Is anyone here?"

The little girl sat up on her hands and looked around, before turning to the Wisp with her mouth poised to ask if it heard the voice too, only it was long gone. She huffed and stood up, deciding to just find out for herself. She walked for a few minutes, the scenery around her seeming to move rather than her physical self, before spotting the figure of a man. Her curious expression shifted to a wide smile and she waved, both hands moving wildly above her head.

"Hi! I'm here!" she called out, beginning to jump up and down until the stranger spotted her, shock written clear on his face as she began running towards him in her excitement to see another person.

Considerably startled by the appearance of such a young girl, the man looked around in search of any sign of a parent or guardian. When he saw nothing, he settled back on the child who was now standing in front of him, wild hair, messy clothes, and all.

“Uhm...” he trailed off in uncertainty before clearing his throat and crouching to her level, offering a smile. “Hey, little one. What’s your name?”

Her smile never diminished, only getting a little smaller as the man knelt in front of her.

"I'm Isabella, but my granddad calls me Isa a lot," she responded while fiddling with the uneven drawstrings of her hoodie. She tilted her head to the side a bit. "Who are you?"

The man’s kind smile widened a bit, an effort to give himself a friendly air, but his mind was working on overdrive as he tried to figure out why the name Isabella stuck out to him so much. Nevertheless, he introduced himself.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you! I’m Nathan.” His voice was bright, chipper to disguise the lingering concern in his voice as familiarity tugged at the back of his mind now that he really looked at her face. To help in generating some answers, he began to question her a bit more.

“So...what are you doing here, Isa?”

A luminescent green butterfly fluttered past her head as the question was posed, stealing her attention for a brief moment as an awed noise escaped her lips. The man noticed it too, equally

in awe but more surprised than the younger. Isabella turned her attention back to the man and shrugged, drawing her shoulders up toward her ears as closely as possible.

"I just kind of come here sometimes. Actually, every time I go to sleep. It's my sleep world I guess," she semi-explained, the words running into each other as she made no effort to slow down.

"I've never seen you in my sleep world before though," she continued, suspicion clear in her voice. It immediately went away though and she gave a lighter shrug. "But maybe the sleep world is just super big like the Earth. It's hard to meet everybody, even though I really really really want to try that someday."

The explanation was a bit unreliable, but Nathan supposed that's just how children were.

"A sleep world? You mean something like...dreamland?" Nathan asked for confirmation; in that moment, he figured that maybe this was just a really vivid dream. He had been stressed lately and the mind did strange things on stress. She shrugged in response, not particularly impressed with the new name. He let out a soft chuckle and continued speaking.

"Well, I've never seen you before either. So, I guess that makes us equal?"

"Oooh tooch-shay!" she replied with a grin, wagging her finger at him like how her dad usually did when she guessed one of his riddles. She frowned a little at the thought. She missed her dad's riddles. There wasn't much time to dwell, though, as Mr. Nathan spoke up again.



“So, Isa,” he started, moving to sit in the lush grass as crouching began to take a toll on his back. “What is it that you do here?”

“Um, anything I want, duh,” she replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. She sat down as well and drew her legs into a tight cross. “It’s the sleep world. You can do anything you want to do. One time I raced a cheetah, but she won in the end. I slid down a whole rainbow and met the leprechaun at the end. One time I just read my favorite books on a cloud the whole time. It was cold though—did you know clouds are cold up there? No wonder they’re so fluffy, those guys have on sweaters!”

The excited explanation of the clouds caused Nathan to laugh, lightly shaking his head at the child’s endearing words and he supplied a soft, “Ah, no wonder” before letting her continue.

“It’s not as fun as when I’m in the fairy land though...” she said, frowning a bit, “because there’s not enough people here in sleep world.”

“Fairy land?” he repeated, brows furrowing as yet another world was brought into the mix.

“So...there are a lot of people in fairy land then? What are they like?”

“The fairy land is the place where fairies are, obviously. They’re all kinds of people. Really tiny people, really big people. Pretty people and ugly people. Some of them are scary, but the elf king makes sure those scary guys don’t come near me, so I usually only meet the really nice people.”

The girl's little frown returned as she thought about all of the stories her grandfather would tell her about the fairies. She missed hearing his stories and she wanted to go home to hear them. Her brown eyes began to water and she did her best to hold in her tears because big kids didn't cry. Noticing the shift in demeanor, Nathan frowned as well, concerned etching across his features.

"Hey, hey what's wrong?"

Like clockwork, the girl's tears began to spill over but she tried her hardest to keep them in, her little hands going up to wipe at her eyes every time a fresh wave of tears came out.

"I-I, I mis- I miss my- I want-" She tried to get out her words but they were interrupted each time by stuttered breath, taken in an attempt to stop crying. Her mommy didn't like it when she cried, so she always tried her best not to. She gave up on speaking, chest and shoulders quaking with the effort to keep in her sobs. Instead, she turned her back to Nathan and buried her face in her knees, giving in to the uncontrollable crying.

The man was at a loss for what to do, his hands lifted and hovering as he debated patting her shoulder or hugging this child that he barely knew. Just as he was about to settle for a back pat, a loud, ethereal-sounding hum hit his ear and he let out a startled gasp before disappearing with a blink. The Will 'O Wisp hovered there for a moment before the hum echoed again and it moved a little closer to Isabella while still keeping its distance. It hummed a couple more times and the little girl shook her head rapidly.

“Go away!” she cried in a muffled voice, thinking it was just her and her new friend in the dream-like field. Another hum and she lifted her head enough for her teary eyes to peek over her knees, familiarity gleaming in them.

“W-Will?” she asked, eyeing the Will O’Wisp. She sniffled and kept watching the fairy as it continued humming, tone rising and falling as if saying words. After a few moments, she gave another sniff and nodded as her breath began to calm.

“Y-you’re right. Maybe he can help me get home.” She nodded a few times, a watery smile growing on her lips, and looked back to Nathan.

“Mr. Nathan, can you help me get...home...” she trailed off, realizing the man was gone.

Her face screwed up as she realized he had probably woken up and the Will O’ Wisp was playing a prank on her. Her lower lip quivered as she tried to hold back another onslaught of tears. She picked up a little stone and threw it with all her might at the mischievous fae, which only flickered before disappearing.

“You tricked me! I hate you!”

## Chapter Three: A Town Called Limen (Jae)

In his pitch-black bedroom, Jae sat up with a gasp. He slowly regained his situational awareness, realizing he was in his bedroom and not the wide-open field with fuzzy edges. Blindly feeling around for the alarm clock on his bedside table that continued its aggravating screeching, he concluded that it was definitely a dream.