The Allure of Magnolia

by sugasneckpillow

Summary

To survive on the royal grounds, there are two unspoken rules: trust no one, love no one.

(updates weekly)
(I'll try to update weekly)
(has failed to update weekly)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Jihoon closes his eyes and claps his hands twice with a soft murmur. Putting his palms down flat, he touches his forehead to the floor three times. Then he stands up, accompanied by his best friend and family servant Bae Jinyoung, and walks gracefully out of the shrine.

“What did you wish for?” Jinyoung asks, curiosity lighting up his dark eyes.

“It’s a secret,” Jihoon says with a fond smile as he turns Jinyoung’s way. He can see the way Jinyoung slumps in disappointment at his answer.

“You always say that,” the younger grumbles, jutting out his lower lip. “You could’ve just humoured me with a simple answer.”

“What do you want to hear, then?” Jihoon says with a small laugh. The younger boy is always so persistent in these things.

“I don’t know, maybe something like ‘oh, I wished for true love, what about you?’” Jinyoung blinks with mock innocence, a cheeky smile spreading on his lips as he nudges at Jihoon.

“What?” Jihoon says in mild surprise, raising a brow. “That’s your wish, not mine.”

“It’s not,” sputters Jinyoung, nearly tripping over his own feet. Jihoon steadies him by grabbing onto his arm. The sudden strong grip causes Jinyoung to yelp in pain.

“Watch it!” The younger boy whines, flinging Jihoon off him. “And that’s not my wish, I was just demonstrating—”

“Who is it?” Jihoon cuts him off, smiling slyly at his younger friend. “Now that I think of it, it’s perfectly natural for you to have a romantic interest at your age. If you already have someone in mind, and it’s someone we approve of, I’ll tell Father to help you arrange something.” This he says with a glint of mischief in his eye, enjoying the embarrassment that couldn’t be shown more obviously in Jinyoung’s expression.

Fifteen to sixteen years old are the golden ages for marriage, and the majority of Jihoon’s classmates have already found or been introduced to their other half. Jinyoung is already at the ripe age of fifteen, it’s probably about time he got married too.

“I’m not planning to marry just yet,” Jinyoung says, his eyes dropping to the floor as he flushes deeply. “Don’t tell Master anything.”

“Alright, alright. I was just teasing.” Jihoon’s tone softens, and he puts a gentle hand on Jinyoung’s shoulder. “In all seriousness, I hope you find your loved one soon, if you haven’t already.”

Jinyoung is very popular among their classmates, so Jihoon doesn’t have to worry about Jinyoung not being able to find someone who’d love him. First, his appearance is near perfect. His face is small and delicate, with facial features that are nearly sculpted into perfection. He is slightly taller than Jihoon, and his appearance is an exquisite clash of masculinity and femininity—he is a sight that would make any man or woman jealous.
Then there’s his kind personality. Jinyoung has been by his side for many years, and he wouldn’t so much dare to lay a finger on a bug. He’s thoughtful, smart and confident. Jihoon can’t be more proud of having such a good friend by his side.

“Why don’t you tell yourself that?” Jinyoung says, shaking his head. “You’re turning eighteen soon, and you still haven’t found yourself a partner. Time is precious; you shouldn’t let your age wear you down before you find the right person.”

Jihoon only hums in response, not exactly enthusiastic about this topic. His father had reminded him subtly about this a few times too, but he’s never forced Jihoon into anything. Jihoon knows his parents never would set him up with random people, and he’s glad he’s not one of the matchmakers’ victims.

He’s only come across with the theme of romance through books. Piles and piles of books, stored in his father’s shelves. He can't say he’s afraid of such feelings; after all, these are things that he is not familiar with, having the lack of personal experience in his past years. But he has developed somewhat of a strong and stubborn personality after reading through years and years of historical scripts, witnessing through words the decaying of glory in every successful person due to the betrayal of a loved one.

He is what he is now after reading through hundreds and hundreds of solid proof that, though love could empower, it could also destroy.

Of course, Jihoon only holds this opinion strictly to himself. He knows that a good marriage brings honour and benefits to both families. Perhaps this is exactly what Bae Jinyoung needs; a gentle, loyal and caring wife with a respectable family background.

“Jihoon, look.” Jinyoung points at the road in front of them. “The magnolias are in full bloom.”

He’s right. The trees are no longer in the pitiful withered state they had been the last time he and Jinyoung had visited in the winter. Flowers sprout from the branches, spreading their petals of wings and painting the road with a sea of white.

A gust of wind blows and the scent of magnolia fills the air, soft and elegant. The two young scholars raise their heads to look at the glorious sight of blooming magnolia trees swaying in the wind, a sight so strikingly gorgeous that they both purse their lips and watch in silence.

The air caresses Jihoon’s face, and he lets his eyes fall shut as he inhales, spreading his arms. Spring has come. The pure coloured magnolia blossoms dance in the wind, marking a time of peace and fulfilment.

Jihoon has never seen flowers blooming so beautifully, so innocently superior. The sight is magnificent and calming to the soul.

“Breathtaking, aren’t they?”

The sudden intrusion in his little bubble of enjoyment causes Jihoon to reluctantly tear his eyes from the flowers and turn towards the foreign voice.

The voice, a low but elegant rumble, belongs to a young man with sharp handsome features. His eyes are full of youthful spirit, but his smile tells something more. His dimple caves in slightly on the side of his face, and his skin is pale and smooth ivory. He holds his head high under the pompous pink and white blossoms, arrogance draping over him like the blackness of his robe.

Their eyes meet for a second, and Jihoon feels his breath catch when he meets the stranger’s
unreadable gaze. There’s just something so mysterious about the man that makes Jihoon wants to analyse him thoroughly like he would a book.

It’s Jihoon who turns his face away first, shaking off the unfamiliar but intensely heart gripping feeling as he stares at the road in front of him. “Let’s go. We shouldn’t let our parents worry.”

He takes hold of Jinyoung’s wrist and walks past the man they have just encountered with a steady pace.

“The Selection Day is a week from now.” Jihoon hears the man speak again unexpectedly. Now that he isn’t looking at his face, he is able to focus on his voice. It is an attractively deep and soulful sound that he would perhaps appreciate if not for the current situation. “A lot will be rewarded to the chosen one.”

Before Jihoon can reply, Jinyoung turns around with a frown.

“Is he talking to us?” He whispers to Jihoon, who freezes in place.

The Selection Day.

With the princes’ coming of age, the Emperor and other members of the royal family are ready to pick several concubines fit for acquainting the young princes, helping them lay down a clear path for future inheritance of the throne. A selection will be carried out among sons and daughters of palace officials, famous nobles, and the royal families’ distant relatives. This is the first Selection Day for the young princes, and it is also the first time that only two girls will be entering the palace. One for the Crown Prince, one for the Second Prince.

Jihoon is well aware of this important event. In fact, he has been thinking of joining the selection for a while now.

As for how this man knows of his intentions… he's absolutely clueless.

Jihoon turns back to look at the man, who returns his stare with a meaningful curve of the lips.

“Someone seems to need the reward.”

Without saying anything more, the handsome man leaves with soft steps, an aura of elegance trailing after his gliding silk robe.

The two young scholars stand dazed for a moment, until Jinyoung starts to turn towards Jihoon to show a mixture of suspicion and shock. “Who was that?” He says under his breath. “He seems to know that we are in need of money.”

Jihoon doesn’t reply. He only stares at where the man used to stand, licking his dry, chapped lips in a daze.

He has decided.

Jihoon looks back at the shrine. “That’s right,” He says softly to himself, eyes clouded with deep thought. The sight of his bedridden mother and rapidly aging father floats into his head. The man’s appearance might have been a reminder that was sent by the Buddha himself, that his wish was just a step away from being granted.

(I hope I can be the pillar of hope for my family.)
“Don’t you want to pass?” Jihoon's aunt's face twists in displeasure as she grabs his chin mercilessly and holds it up. “If you do, then listen carefully. Hold your chin up high and stand up straight. Don’t let them have any chance to look down on you.”

“Smile gracefully, no matter what they say. They can throw you insults, they can trample on your pride. But the moment you show that you are affected by their nasty words, it's over for you.”

Jihoon forces another of those practiced smiles and looks at the mirror to make sure he doesn’t seem too stiff.

“You’re too unnatural.” His aunt shakes her head in disapproval and lets go of his chin. She slowly paces in front of him with a book (“The Ethics of a True Maiden”, the cover said, and Jihoon can only frown at the ironic name of the book) in hand.

“If they ask you where you come from, what do you say?”

“The Park family. My father is a scholar and he works in the Advisory Committee-”

“Are you out of your mind?” His aunt throws the book down on the floor exasperatedly, and Jihoon flinches from her shrill reprimanding. “One does not start off their introduction by telling everybody that they are a scholar's child!”

“Why?” Jihoon asks, but instantly regrets it when he sees the fire in his aunt’s eyes.

“Why?” His aunt repeats with a sneer, as if he should’ve known the answer to that question. “What use is a scholar in a country known for its military strength? Our High General himself is the emperor!”

Jihoon resists the urge to retort. What use is a strong army if the ruler does not have the wit to guide the country through its troubles? But he knows that arguing is no use, especially in front of his aunt that is bound in traditional thoughts. He remembers the many times he had been lectured by his aunt in his childhood before he entered the Imperial Institution. She had opposed to sending him to the Imperial Institution to become a scholar, and had suggested that he train in the Military Institution instead, ‘for the sake of the family name’.

After rehearsing his expressions and reciting the ideal answers over and over again, his aunt finally takes her leave.

When Jihoon looks at his practiced smile in the mirror, he wonders if the princes really want to marry people like him, with a fake perfect image put right in front of them.

But it doesn’t matter, it's really none of his business. Plus the ritual has been carried out for hundreds of years, and this problem has already been so deeply rooted that Jihoon is in no place to comment on it.

The next morning when he arrives at the palace. Jinyoung holds his hand out to Jihoon and carefully helps him down the sedan chair, mostly proud but also worried. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’m sure I want Mother to be healed,” Jihoon says, and it’s hardly a direct reply to the question. Jinyoung only sighs and reaches up to brush Jihoon's hair that was tousled during the long ride. His long, slender fingers smooth down the wrinkles on his light velvet robe.

Jinyoung steps back and crosses his arms with an approving nod, smiling as if he is a proud father and Jihoon is his son that is about to take an important exam that he is sure to ace. “Just look at
you, how would the Princes be able to resist?” he teases him lightly.

For the first time, Jihoon finds himself able to laugh. It’s a soft and melodious sound, like a young lover’s serenade. “Thank you, Jinyoung.” He nods at his friend before he takes a step past the enormous palace wooden doors and into the palace grounds.

He goes to line up along with the other candidates and notices that there are mostly females, each dressed up in flamboyant bright coloured clothing in contrast to Jihoon’s pale purple. With that amount of powder on their faces, they could easily be mistaken as local Fools. Their lipstick is red and sharp to the eye, but their visuals can hardly bear the burden of a heavy makeover. Jihoon holds back the urge to shake his head. As a male himself, he can hardly understand the reason females think they could appeal to the princes with such a ridiculous appearance.

Certainly, there are some in line that catch his attention with their undeniably pleasing features. In Jihoon’s opinion, there is no need for them to be so heavily dressed or made over. Their natural looks would probably earn them a bigger chance to sit beside the princes.

However, there’s no doubt that Bae Jinyoung’s looks were above everybody else’s in the line. If Jinyoung had lined up with him, it would cause more of a stir than he did alone.

He can feel the stares and mutters and bare scrutiny and judgement, all coming from different cliques in the line.

This is what he got himself into, and what he will be getting if he grasps the chance to be the Prince’s first wife- no, concubine. Though it doesn’t matter to him, does it? All he needs is the money for his mother’s treatment and his family’s happiness.

Bae Jinyoung had offered to be in his place to go to the palace, but he did not hesitate to reject Jinyoung. Surely, the ordinary lot would yearn for a palace life; many, in fact, come to the selection bearing the dreams of supreme luxury. However, just how many of them are able to realize the plenty of harsh truths behind the glory?

As scholars, Jinyoung and Jihoon had studied the structures of the palace and the governing body, and from this they understood the great value of the Emperor’s or Prince’s favour of individuals under the system. This is no exception for concubines. If you are loved by the Emperor, you could do whatever you want. You owned the world if the Emperor treasured you.

If you aren’t favoured, it’s an entirely different story. You’ll be bullied, thrown to isolation, while being trapped in a relationship that doesn’t exist. Many concubines eventually die of misery or despair.

Jihoon shudders. It’s too cruel, but he has to face this. There is no going back at this point, since his family has already submitted a painting for him to the palace for the first round of candidate filtering.

A small eunuch walks up to the front of a line, a scroll spread in between his two hands. His solemn voice causes Jihoon to stand up straighter and be on guard. “Next, Park Ji Hoon.” Jihoon’s heart sinks and he doesn't pay attention to the other names called. Though he knows he will be going in with three other candidates, he can't help but feel uncomfortable with having to face the royal family and being paid special attention to.

He trails slowly after the three females in front of him towards another door, which the eunuch who called out their names pushes open for them to enter. They are led to the front of the doors which open to the royalty’s courtroom. Park Jihoon follows suit as the females lower their heads
and gazes, a gesture of humility and respect for the royal family. The females kneel on two knees with their hands on the left side of their waist, while Jihoon does the same, except he holds his hands out with his right hand overlapping the left, draped over by his velvet sleeves.

A guard calls on the first female, and she replies several of his questions with a high pitched voice. Jihoon can sense the blazing eyes of the royal family on all of them, and perhaps even especially him. He doesn’t know if he sensed wrong, but it wouldn’t be surprising, since he is one of the few males in the candidate list.

Jihoon patiently waits for his turn, albeit uncomfortably due to the scrutiny of the royal family. Finally, the guard calls his name, and Jihoon bows forward, still kneeling.

“Blessings to Your Highness. I am Park Jihoon, son of Park Ryu.”

Jihoon waits patiently as the guard walks over to the Emperor to receive his scroll of questions. The guard returns to his place with the scroll and clears his throat. “Have you taken on your father’s footsteps to become a scholar?”

Jihoon tenses. He hadn’t expected the royal family to know his background already, but he supposes that it’s necessary for them to have this knowledge if they wanted to filter out unsuitable candidates.

But four hundred and thirty six candidates, and the royal family still has the time to check through every one of them?

He takes in a deep breath before he answers, easing out his suspicions. *This is not the time to be hesitant about anything, Park Jihoon,* he tells himself.

“Your Majesty, I am currently studying in the Imperial Institution of Arts and Literature.”

There’s a little pause and Jihoon wonders if he’s said something wrong. The guard does not proceed with the other questions like he did with the other girls, and instead turns to the royal family with a bow.

“What have you learnt?”

Jihoon jolts a little at the voice, and he can see from the corner of his eye that the others are stirring. No one was expecting a member of the royal family to speak up.

Since he’s not allowed to raise his head, he does not know clearly who the origin of the voice is, but with the youthful voice he knows it is either the Crown Prince or the Second Prince. The voice is bold and sharp, but pleasant to the ears. He can’t help but feel like he’s heard it somewhere before.

“Your Majesty, I can play the guzheng and compose music. Since young, I have been taught by my father the art of ink painting and calligraphy. I have also studied through and memorized the Book of Morals, Military, and Arts.”

“My dear,” he hears the Empress speak. “Raise your head a little.”

Jihoon keeps his eyes on the floor and raises his head enough for the royal family to have a look at his face. Even the candidates next to him cannot suppress the urge to turn their heads slightly to gaze upon the face that belonged to someone who has raised the Empress’ interest.

Jihoon isn’t a person who would take extreme care with his appearance; he was a man, and just
like any other, he never put any moisturising ointment on his skin, never used any expensive oils for nourishment, never drank any of the medicine that would heighten his beauty. He was a special one, however, and was gifted with glowing, smooth and pale skin since birth. He rarely ate highly priced, strong tasting food, not because he wanted to keep his skin and appearance healthy, but because he was used to spending and consuming little. Half of it was for his family, half of it was only due to his own liking. Nonetheless, that helped improve his overall skin health. Not only were his facial features near perfection, his posture, his manners and behaviour were all extremely well performed.

Jihoon feels instantly uncomfortable under the scrutiny of many. The back of his neck prickled from the gazes of the royal family and the jealous looks of the other maidens.

“Alright, next.” The main guard calls out after receiving a signal. Jihoon stands up, knees and legs numb from kneeling so long, and bows towards the royal family with the other candidates. Afterwards, they follow the guard and leave through another gate.

Once the door is shut behind him, Jihoon breaths a real sigh of relief.

He’s alive.

Jihoon pats his left chest, weary from the most nerve wracking twenty minutes of his life. His heartbeat does not slow down one bit, and he finds himself nearly breathless from the ordeal. Honestly, it felt like a near death experience more than a happy meeting before a possible marriage.

“You okay?”

The response was sudden and unexpected. He wasn’t aware that anyone else was here and he turns his head quickly, his heart skipping a beat.

“Who are you?” Jihoon stares, taking a few steps back. The man was so silent. He's been so cautious all this time, but somehow he hadn't managed to notice the stranger's appearance. It was clear that the man had the ability to hide his presence. Jihoon assumes that he is not an ordinary person.

“Why don’t you tell me first?” The man’s voice is rather thick, and it's a voice so unique that Jihoon believes that he will remember it for a long time. He seemed to be around Jihoon’s age, perhaps even a little older. Jihoon can’t help but notice that his face is extremely well sculpted. His eyes sparkle with curiosity, and his brows are still raised slightly as he waits for an answer. He really is charismatic. Even Jihoon has to admit that he is captivated by the aura around him and his good looks.

“I’m Park Jihoon.” Somehow, he does not doubt the other man’s intentions, and carelessly tells him his name.

“I’m Ong Seongwoo.” The man smiles and reaches out a hand. Seeing this, Jihoon doesn’t reject him and shakes his hand. His instincts tell him that Seongwoo is a sincere and trustable man, and since he doesn’t mind making a friend or two at the moment, he silently recites the name a few times in his head so he will remember it.

“Here for the selection?” Seongwoo asks. He doesn't wait for Jihoon to answer and laughs. It was a hearty laugh, somewhat a relief for Jihoon who has just stepped out from a place full of unpleasant hypocrisy and jealousy. “Sorry, I shouldn't have asked. Judging from your expression, I bet you just came out from the interrogation.”
Seongwoo’s casual gestures help Jihoon relax, and his hand drops back to his side since he no longer feels the need to massage his neck. His shoulders are no longer tensed, and his heart starts pounding normally again. He smiles back, feeling grateful for Seongwoo’s friendliness even though they are actually strangers. “It felt like an eternity.”

“Surely, surely,” Seongwoo nods empathetically.

“And you?”

“My? I’m here to judge everyone’s makeup.”

The light tone of his voice causes Jihoon to laugh softly. “How did it go?”

“I'm not disappointed.” Seongwoo’s smile reaches his eyes and Jihoon can't help but do the same. It is rare to see anyone as sincere as Seongwoo nowadays, especially people at this age. Everyone is trying to climb up the social ladder and build connections that are beneficial to themselves, so their smiles are rehearsed and plastered on their faces for people to look at, but none of the joy comes from the heart.

“But also…” Jihoon raises a brow as Seongwoo’s smile falters a bit. “I'm here to see who my best friend is potentially going to marry.”

“Oh.” Jihoon sees a flash of something that seemed like sorrow, but it vanishes almost as quickly as it appeared. He contemplates the meaning of his expression and his words, and can only draw one conclusion. “Perhaps you like her?”

Right after asking, he finds that he has asked an extremely intrusive question, not to mention that it was only an empty assumption. It's not like him to care so much, and Seongwoo’s love life and interest certainly has nothing to do with him, even if that was what his look of sadness was all about. Jihoon feels guilty for his inappropriate behaviour and dips his head slightly in apology. “Pardon me, it's none of my business.”

Seongwoo waves off his apology. “No, it's all good. I do like her. But it's not right for me to have those feelings for her from today onwards.” Jihoon nearly breathes a sigh of relief when he sees that Seongwoo is less than bothered by his sudden assumption even as a stranger, and Jihoon genuinely admires and respects Seongwoo for being so nice and easy going despite Jihoon’s inadequate manners.

He decides not to pursue any further and just gives Seongwoo a look to show encouragement. “I wish you the very best with your friend.” He bows toward him. “I will now take my leave. It has been a pleasure to talk to you.”

Before leaving, Jihoon hesitates a little and says with a smile, “If fate allows, I hope we meet again.”

“Same to you.” Seongwoo flashes him a knowing smile and bows to him. “Take care on your way back.”

Jihoon nods and walks thoughtfully towards the main exit. What a shame it would be, for a well qualified man like Seongwoo to lose his love to a prince that may not even spare her a second glance. Jihoon shakes his head, and fears the same for himself.

That is, if he gets to be chosen.

He walks out further and sees Jinyoung in the distance, waving to him excitedly and jumping up
and down. Looking at the younger, Jihoon smiles. For a child like Jinyoung, he has yet to spend
time talking about love, worrying over love, and spending time with his loved one.

The palace is no place for delicate people, especially not Bae Jinyoung, whom Jihoon takes care of
like a blood related brother. He is instantly relieved that he did not agree to Jinyoung substituting
him to enter the palace.

“How was it?” Jinyoung asks, grabbing his hands as soon as he walks over. Jihoon’s palms are
sweaty, and Jinyoung, noticing this, takes out a napkin for Jihoon. Jihoon thanks him and shrugs.

Jinyoung frowns at his passive response. “Well, how do you feel about it?”

Jihoon sighs. “Not good,” he mutters intelligently.

Jinyoung looks at him sympathetically and holds his hand out to help Jihoon up the sedan chair.
“Well, it's over now. All we have to do is wait for the results next week.”

Chapter End Notes

I have high hopes for this fic. It's supposed to be set in a fictional world but it's
inspired by Chinese, Korean and Japanese monarchial systems and practices. So not
exactly everything is historically correct. Hope you enjoyed it! Leave commentsssssssss
(:
A man sits in the back of the main room, a worn out threaded book neatly folded on his lap. The incense is burnt halfway down, soft aromatic smoke rising up the air accompanied by the gentle chants of poetry. The room is made of dark wood, and shelves cover all walls in the place.

The doors bangs open suddenly and the peace within the room is instantly disrupted. Rushing in to greet the master of the house is no other than the young master’s servant and childhood friend Bae Jinyoung.

The master opens his eyes and frowns disapprovingly towards Jinyoung, who gulps hard and apologizes immediately. But the news is urgent, he explains, and he had to rush over to deliver it. The master only raises a brow in response, his handsome features showing through the defined lines and planes on his face despite his old age. But of course, he must at least be this good looking to have a child with that pretty a face. Jihoon isn't known for being one of the best looking ones in school for nothing.

“Sir, the messenger is outside.” Jinyoung tells Park Ryu quietly. They are both aware of the news that the messenger brings to them, so Jinyoung says and does the bare minimum to avoid triggering the master’s temper. Not even one look at the master's face could let Jinyoung tell what he is thinking.

Jihoon’s father has the face of a scholar: one that is gentle, but stern, and most of all, remains emotionless at most times. Just one look and anyone can tell he is well educated and informed of the happenings in society.

Park Ryu’s brows crease at the report of the messenger’s arrival. “To deliver news about my son, I suppose?”

Jinyoung nods, suppressing a sigh. Being selected as one of the princes’ concubines could be good news to many, but to Jihoon’s parents who knew more than the language of riches and prestige, it could rather mean a sad and worrying farewell to their only son. Perhaps if Jihoon isn’t chosen, it would mean a greater blessing to the scholar family.

“Call Jihoon on your way. I will meet you in front of the house gate.”

Jinyoung nods and walks out briskly to knock on Jihoon’s door. “Jihoon! The messenger has arrived! ” Within one split second the door is already opened to reveal a dazed Jihoon, obviously not ready to receive the news from the palace.

“Okay, let's hurry. It's not polite to have people waiting.” They walk with hurried footsteps to the front gate as Park Ryu has instructed, and finds the palace messenger impatiently waiting for their arrival. At the sight of Jihoon, the messenger’s assistant walks up and opens a golden box with two silky scrolls of the same colour. The messenger takes the right one and the three men kneel down as the messenger stretches out the golden scroll.

“As listed in the Imperial Edict, Park Jihoon, son of Park Ryu, shall become the Crown Prince’s first chosen concubine. He shall prepare immediately for the entrance into the palace for proper etiquette training by tomorrow morning.”
Ryu, Jihoon and Jinyoung bow in respect to the Imperial Edict, and the messenger rolls up the scroll and puts it back into the box.

Jinyoung smiles and gestures towards the messenger politely. “Please take care on your way, sir.” Jihoon helps his father to his feet and they nod their heads towards the messenger, who returns their greeting and walks down the street of the village.

“Congratulations.” Jinyoung says quietly to Jihoon so that his father does not hear. Peering at his friend’s face, Jinyoung purses his lips when he sees Jihoon turn blank again. He doesn't look happy, which is not quite surprising. Jinyoung wishes Jihoon could see the positive side to this. After all, Jihoon had just been chosen out of hundreds of male and female candidates to become not the Second Prince’s, but the Crown Prince’s first concubine. It was a huge honour to the family and even the village to have a person of their own join the royal family.

“Congratulations,” Jihoon’s father echoes after Jinyoung, and Jinyoung jumps, immediately shrinking behind the young master. Jihoon’s eyes widen as he turns towards his father.

“I know I've been against you enrolling to become one of the candidates.” Jihoon stays silent and waits for his father’s reprimanding, but to his surprise, it doesn't come. “But it’s an undeniable honour to the family that you become the Crown Prince’s concubine. His first, even.” It's been a while since Jihoon has seen a genuine smile on his father’s face. At this moment, when he finally witnesses it, he also notices how much his father had aged. Crow feet form at the ends of his eyes, and the wrinkles dip in as his thin lips curve up.

“Thank you, Father. I won’t disappoint you.” Jihoon murmurs after a short buffer, blinking as he’s snapped out of his daze. He still can't seem to process the fact that he’s about to enter the palace. It meant that he could pay his mother’s medical fees, support his father’s further studies, and earn a steadily huge amount for his family.

“Come, child. Let’s go visit your mother.” Park Ryu says as he turns on his heels. Jihoon and Jinyoung trail after him in silence, a mixture of conflicted emotions.

They stop at the back of the courtyard, in front of two plain large wooden doors. Jinyoung knocks for the two masters and notifies Jihoon’s mother of their visit.

“I heard a messenger was over, dear.” She looks at the three of them for confirmation, and Jinyoung nods eagerly in response. Jihoon’s mother sighs and beckons Jihoon forward till he sits down next to her on the bed. She brushes the loose strands of hair from his face and places her hand against his cheek, looking into his eyes fondly. “Are you entering the palace?”
Jihoon nods.

“Of course they would want to accept my smart, beautiful son into the family. Don’t you think so, Ryu?” Jihoon’s mother turns to Park Ryu with a gentle smile.

Park Ryu closes his eyes and nods, pride shining through his eyes. Jihoon is moved by his parents’ encouragement and his heart clenches even more. After tomorrow, he doesn’t know if he even has the chance to visit his family any more. Perhaps the Crown Prince would shut him in his own palace hall, forbidding him to have any contact with the outside world. Perhaps the Crown Prince wouldn’t even look at him in the eye, since most of these selections are made by his mother, the Empress. He would have to spend his days in solitude, in a desolate area of the palace.

“Jihoon.” His mother’s voice snaps him out of his thoughts. “I’m sorry.”

Jihoon looks at his mother’s eyes, and sees a tear trickle down her face. He leans down into her embrace and pats her arm in comfort. “Don’t be. I’ll be fine, mother.”

“I’ll be just fine.”

Jinyoung and Jihoon leave and head towards Jihoon’s room afterwards in solemn silence. Surely, in other families they would be throwing celebratory parties and inviting all the village people over for dinner. For a small palace official, a scholar no less, to have his son be chosen to be the Crown Prince’s concubine, it was not what anyone would have expected, and is also something that’s meant to be celebrated.

Park Ryu, however, does not seem to have any thoughts of celebration. And Jihoon doesn’t mind. After all, the only thing worth thanking Buddha for is the money that comes in a package with this marriage. He can’t guarantee his days spent in the palace wouldn't be a total torture to him.

“I’ll serve you at the palace,” Jinyoung suddenly says. Jihoon turns and sees Jinyoung staring firmly at him. “I’ll enter the palace with you. I know I’m allowed to.”

“No, you can’t,” Jihoon rejects immediately as he processes what his young friend is proposing, startled. “You’re too young. The palace is not a place for people like you.” He sighs before he says, "And once you enter the palace, you don’t have a chance to marry in these few years.”

Jinyoung shakes his head quickly without hesitation. “That doesn’t matter to me.” His lips break into a grin. “If anyone treats you badly at the palace, I will beat his ass up.”

Jihoon takes in a deep breath and stares at Jinyoung for a few second. Jinyoung has grown into a fine, courageous man. Jihoon's shoulders shake, breaking out in chuckles. “Who taught you such vulgar language?”

As a person who has seen Jinyoung as a younger brother for so many years, he feels obligated to make Jinyoung stay out of his cruel palace life. At the same time, he would feel much more comfortable entering the palace with his best friend. He's almost torn between the two choices. Bring him or not?

Jihoon looks at Jinyoung for the answer and he isn't disappointed. It's obvious that his friend’s already decided, anyway. He sighs.

“If we’re entering the palace, you have to constantly watch your language, okay?” he finally says, the little inner conflict within him dying down.

Jinyoung’s smile spreads wider, knowing that he’s gained his young master’s approval for entering
the palace. He understands his master’s concerns, since Jihoon has obviously figured out that he had someone in mind for marriage. However, between romance and brotherhood or friendship, the answer is clear. He will always put anything on the line to protect Jihoon.

“We will have to prepare to enter the palace tomorrow. Come over and help me pack.” Jihoon says. The atmosphere warms as the two brothers, though not blood related, bond even more strongly over their mutual understanding for each other.

The night passes as quickly as the day comes.

Soon Jihoon finds himself saying his last goodbyes to his parents, wiping shed tears of his mother, and carefully being hoisted up the red coloured carriage by palace guards. He again finds himself being carried down the familiar road towards the palace like last time, only that his identity has changed drastically from peasant to... something near royalty.

The route is actually comparatively much longer, he realizes, as he brushes the curtain beads and look out to find the palace servants carrying him somewhere on the royal grounds. Jinyoung notices him looking and tells him, “We’re heading right away to the palace hall you’re staying.” Jihoon nods and lets the curtain beads swing back in place as he closes his eyes and waits till the carriage stops.

Not long after, he hears someone say, “Here we are, young master.” The palace servants help him down to the ground. Jihoon sways a little bit to adjust to standing on firm ground, and looks up. “Palace of Everlasting Purity” is boldly carved at the wooden plate on top of the huge doors. As much as the name fits him at this prime age of seventeen, purity is rarely everlasting, especially in a place that is filled with both open strife and veiled struggle within the circle of nobility. He looks at the ironic name and snorts. What humour the Crown Prince must have to assign him to this palace. Either that, or he has sincere hopes that he would stay pure, forever. Jihoon is not sure if he liked the idea of the Crown Prince wanting him stay a certain way.

Jinyoung holds his arm and guides him into the palace along with several other guards. They are immediately greeted by an old woman, two young females and a group of guards within the doors at the yard. Jihoon takes the time to scan over the faces. These are probably the people that are assigned to him for the rest of his palace life.

Jihoon eyes them carefully as the people lower their eyes and welcome him on their knees. Having read into historical scripts, he knows very well that the downfall of many successful people roots from betrayal by the most trusted servants. Meeting this group of people makes him wary of his actions, knowing full well that he must make every move carefully from now on.

“Please take care of me from now on,” he says simply, and they bow quickly in synchronisation. He swiftly steps into the main room and takes a look at his surroundings.

The room is cleaned to perfection, and he catches the sight of incense burning across the room. The servants have prepared a special incense for him; not only does the room look expensive, it smells expensive. The aroma does not attack the senses but slowly waft in and relaxes his whole body. The room furniture is made of special wood, all new and with not a hint of the usual unpleasant moist smell that Jihoon would have to bear with in spring and early summer.

Jihoon has to acknowledge that palace is calming and nourishing to the soul, perfect for his body that can only be described as femininely delicate. Though the room looks clean and plain, there is also a sort of elegance to it. Of course, this has truly exceeded Jihoon’s expectations.

However, it is lacking something.
“Is it to your liking, young master?” One of the two female servants ask. He had been too focused on looking around that he didn’t notice the servants trailing him into the room.

“Yes,” Jihoon says slowly. “I’d say so.”

The girl notices him hesitating and she beams at him. “If you would like to request anything, please do so! You are the Crown Prince’s most treasured concubine. Everyone here would be happy to make you even more comfortable in your stay.”

“Oh?” Jihoon stops himself from laughing out loud. Most treasured? He’s the only concubine.

“Well, please bring me a bookshelf if possible. It doesn’t have to be made out of anything special, I just need somewhere to put my materials.”

The two girls look at each other in surprise and one of them immediately replies “of course” enthusiastically.

“Your names…?” Jihoon asks as he glances over to the group of servants.

The old woman steps forward and bows her head. “Pardon us, we didn’t have the chance to introduce ourselves just now. I was a nanny who accompanied the Empress in her younger years. I’m now assigned here to look after your servants and you, young master. Please call me Nanny Zhou.”

“These two girls have trained for two years in the palace,” she says as the girls step forward and curtsy at him. They are a bit older than him, but look greatly dependable. “They are Fei and Jia.” Nanny Zhou gestures at the guards and a man dressed in a blue robe as they kneel down in front of him. “These are the guards that are under Eunuch Xi.”

“We are pleased to serve you, young master,” they say, again in perfect unison.

Jihoon nods in approval and Jinyoung places a comforting hand on his arm. Hopefully they are just as loyal as they claim to be.

The guards and the eunuch is quickly dismissed, leaving only the two female servants and the nanny in the room along with Bae Jinyoung and Park Jihoon.

“Now, young master.” The nanny says as she shuts the doors. “When you first enter the palace, the most important thing you should know is the etiquette. One wrong move and you could end up abandoned or worse, in the dungeons.”

Jihoon feels a wave of apprehension wash over him as Fei pass over a thickly rolled up scroll to the nanny.

Two hours would've gone by quicker if Jihoon wasn't forced to sit on his chair and listen to the nanny speak on nonstop. It was mainly verbal teachings, about how he should address the Crown Prince, the Emperor, the Empress, how he should treat his servants, even those as close to him as Bae Jinyoung. He’s taught the different levels of concubines, how they would be put in different status depending on the princes’ favour.

Jihoon found it hard to adjust to the life in the palace already, especially after the rules of the place had been explained so clearly to him. The hierarchy in the palace was so disturbingly obvious and strict.

“I know how you feel,” Jinyoung comforts him, even though Jihoon hasn’t said anything. This was one of the great things about having a best friend beside him. Their hearts were connected, and
Jihoon needed to say little to convey his feelings. “But at least,” he tries. “You’ll get to see the Crown Prince himself tonight?”

Jihoon’s heart sinks further at the mentioning of his supposed husband. He hardly knows what he looks like or what his personality is like. Jinyoung sees his friend turn pale and realizes that perhaps he’s said something wrong. Jihoon doesn’t look the least bit eager to meet the Crown Prince after all.

“Why don’t go take a walk at the Four Seasons Garden? I heard that it’s named so because of the variety of seasonal flowers that open the whole year. You’ve seen it in the books, haven’t you? It’s also called the Immortal Garden because the flowers never die.”

Jihoon manages a smile when he hears Jinyoung chatter about the garden he’s always been wanting to see. “That’s an inaccurate statement, Jinyoung.” He stands up and lets his friend help him put on a coat.

“The flowers die, but the wilted ones are always cleared and replaced quickly before anyone sees them.”

They head towards the garden alone and the sight is truly amazing. Flowers of every bright elegant colour you can ever imagine decorated the areas of land the small bridge connects to. Under the bridge is green water with lotus flowers floating gracefully across, its dewdrops reflecting the radiance of the sun.

The most beautiful part of the garden that has caught Jihoon’s eye is the blooming magnolia tree located at the other side of the bridge. Though the flowers that are below it fight for attention with their gorgeous bright colours, none of them can compare to the sheer arrogance of the tree that stands tall and firm. The magnolias are pale coloured, and they stand out in the midst of all the bright yellow, red, pink and purple.

“Wait here,” he tells Bae Jinyoung, as he starts to move across the bridge and towards the tree. It reminds him of the view outside the shrine. And reminds him of a particular someone he had met outside the shrine.

“Breathtaking, isn’t it?”

Jihoon’s gaze shifts from the magnolias to the person standing beside it. He had been too busy looking at the flowers that he hadn’t noticed anyone appearing near him.

Speak of the devil! Jihoon narrows his eyes at the man and processes the sparkly clear eyes, as well as the dark brown silky hair. He takes in the pale glistening skin and the cherry red lips, and the sharp jaw and high cheekbones. The man’s black robe sways in the wind, golden markings attacking his eye as it reflects the sunlight.

The aura of arrogance, elegance and royalty. They’ve met again. He’s the man Jihoon had met a week ago, ironically also under blooming magnolia trees.

Jihoon knows immediately from his two hours of training that a man who wears this kind of robe with delicate golden markings is a man with status. The gold threads trace his sleeve and the lines of his figure, carefully sewn to form flowers. As Jihoon peers closer, he realizes they are magnolias.

Jihoon bows. “Please pardon me. I don’t know how to address you, sir.”

He hears a soft, deep chuckle. “But you know you should bow to greet me?”
“I spent two hours learning etiquette in my palace just now. The nanny would be disappointed if she realized I couldn’t put my training to use. And no doubt,” he says, pointing a hesitant figure at his robe, "your status is higher than mine."

He hears the man laugh again. He sounds pleased. “You have great humour for a scholar.”

Jihoon ignores his comment. “You could tell me who you are so I can address you properly.”

“Is that your way of showing that you’re interested in knowing who I am?”

Jihoon sees a spark of mischief in the man’s eyes and frowns, taking a step backward. “I suppose it’s none of my business.” He turns on his heels to leave, but he is stopped by a cold grasp on his wrist. With this gentle but forceful pull, he nearly loses his balance, and is only kept from falling because of the hard grip on his arm. He turns around, eyes unable to mask the irritation within him, and finds the man leaning dangerously close towards him, face only inches apart.

Jihoon swallows and all other feelings disintegrate into nothingness as he feels the intense gaze catch his, the tall body leaning over his frail one rather easily.

“But it is.” The man murmurs with a smile that speaks with a deeper meaning. “You are my brother's wife, no?”

Without any warning, the man lets go. Jihoon, too shocked to react, finds himself falling backwards onto the thick layer of flowers underneath the magnolia tree. The man makes no move to help him up and stands back with his signature smile, enjoying the sight of Jihoon sprawled on the flower-scattered ground in a daze.

A few seconds is all it takes for Jihoon to blink a few times and help himself up. He brushes the petals off himself and presses down the urge to lash at the man with his sharp tongue.

“Your Highness,” he bows again and says, barely holding back on clenching is teeth.

“I didn’t tell you my identity for you to call me that.” The man’s smile only spreads wider and for some reason it irks Jihoon even more. “Do you know my name?”

Jihoon recalls that he has read it somewhere during his studies. “Yes, sir.” Lai Guanlin. Guan, with the meaning of crown. Lin, the character structured as a forest under the rain. Other citizens would perhaps lack this knowledge, since the Second Prince rarely attended public events and showed himself. But Jihoon has memorized the present monarchy’s structure thoroughly enough in his studies.

“I doubt it,” the man smirks. “Say it to prove it.”

“I can’t possibly dare to address Your Highness like that. It is too disrespectful to say the name of any member of the royal family out loud.” Jihoon refuses to give in to the Second Prince’s teasing.

The Second Prince, however, is just as unyielding. He towers over Jihoon, and in a tone of mock sadness, he says, “I’m quite disappointed that you don’t know the name of your brother-in-law.”

Lacking the energy to debate any further, Jihoon sighs. “So be it.” With a pause, he adds, “Your Highness.”

He is about to think of a reason to excuse himself from this meaningless conversation, but his thoughts get interrupted immediately when the Second Prince suddenly calls out his name.
“Park Jihoon.”

At the mention of his full name, Jihoon’s head snaps up, and he is met again with the fiery eyes of a dragon. The competitiveness stirs in Jihoon, and he looks at him with equal fighting spirit. Witnessing such confidence, the Second Prince’s shoulders seem to relax along with his gaze. It is replaced with something that is much more distant, and Jihoon thinks he catches a glimpse of an unspoken plea.

“I helped your family,” the Second Prince says, eyes burning into his very own. “Now you must help my brother.”

Chapter End Notes

Regarding the random facts corner if you don’t like it you can just ignore it. Just hoping it’ll clear up some of the confusion.
Jihoon ponders deeply on the Second Prince’s words on his way back to his own palace.

The Crown Prince had everything; that’s what he heard from the village rumours and gossips. To the people, he was a person with both the wit and the strength, and that was what made him an outstanding military general. His tactics were incomparable, and his fighting skills just as formidable. Jihoon can recall the famous incident quite a while ago where the Crown Prince had single handedly defeated a group of twenty armed and trained assassins when he was ambushed in the woods. He is no doubt the pride of the royal family, the pride of the country, and the pride of the era.

Seeing Jihoon deep in thought, Jinyoung finally speaks up. “Is something wrong?”

Jihoon raises his head and stops, brows furrowing. Is something wrong? This is the question he would like to direct to the Second Prince instead. Then, realising that his friend had been staring at him rather worriedly, he shakes his head. “I’m just thinking. Jinyoung, do you know anything about the Second Prince?”

The Second Prince is a total mystery when compared to the Crown Prince.

Though his father is a palace official, he is nothing but a lowly scholar to the eyes of every other official on the court. This was mainly the reason Jihoon lived among the peasants instead, and perhaps this could be seen as luck, since he had the privilege of hearing the everyday gossips of the commoners when they chatted away on the streets. Little of these gossips revolved around the Second Prince, Lai Guanlin. In fact, there were none that he could remember. His existence itself was a mystery; people rarely talked about him and the books said barely said anything about him, only some dry and solid facts.

“Well,” Jinyoung sinks into deep thought. “I only know as much about him as you do. He became the Head of the Advisory Committee two years ago at the age of seventeen. I heard that he is the Emperor’s personal political advisor. That says a lot about his intelligence, I suppose.” Jihoon’s father also belongs to the the advisory body the Second Prince is in charge of. The Advisory Committee is full of appointed scholars who advise the Emperor on a variety of social and political affairs. Officials belonging to the committee are often isolated and looked down upon by other officials, since their support to weak peasants only means bad news to the rich families many officials are born into. Though the Emperor has a rather strong sense of justice, he is still a military man, and this explains his light dependence on the Advisory Committee. It makes Jihoon wonder how the Emperor looks at his second son, having put him in charge of the weakest department of the governing body while his oldest son holds the greatest honour of being the pillar of the country’s military strength.

Now that he thinks about it, he can’t help but sympathise with Lai Guanlin. His mother is not the Empress, but the Emperor’s favourite consort of the past, Lai Qing Xia. Lai Guanlin has inherited her surname instead of the royal family's, and for some unknown reason, the royal family accepted it without any argument. Lai Qing Xia died of sickness two years ago, and Lai Guanlin became the Head of the Advisory Committee right afterwards. It was as if the Emperor gave the Second Prince the position to pay for the loss of his blood related mother- a position that was anything but flattering.

Jihoon slowly grows to become more curious about the strange man. His background can only be described as plain among the magnificence of royalty. What kind of person is this Second Prince?
Why would he request Jihoon to help the Crown Prince? What was the relation between the Second Prince and the Crown Prince?

The more he thinks about it, the blurrier his thoughts get.

It seems that he had underestimated the depth of the lurking secrets under such fame and glory.

“Jihoon, I think you need a rest,” Jinyoung says, eyeing him carefully. Jihoon becomes aware of Jinyoung’s growing anxiety at his tendency of spacing out and just looks at him reassuringly, his peach coloured plump lips curving up.

Perhaps a rest is not that bad, since he has to meet the Crown Prince tonight. “You’re right. Let’s head back quickly, before the sky gets dark.”

They arrive at the Palace of Everlasting Purity by dawn, and find that supper is already prepared, steam rising from the fresh hot dishes. Supper is served on a large round table that would fit four or five people, with a variety of the best tasting dishes in the palace. Though the meal is enough to fill three or four people’s bellies, Jihoon finds himself sitting at the table alone, staring awkwardly at the table filled with food that he cannot possibly imagine to afford before his life in the palace.

“Jinyoung…” He opens his mouth, about to invite his friend over to the table to share the food with him, only to see him shaking his head. Jihoon stops himself and can only look helplessly at the table. This was just another of the many reminders that they were in the palace, and all of them had to adhere strictly to the rules. Servants are servants; they must not eat at the same table as their masters.

These rules don’t only apply to the palace, they apply to home as well, but Jihoon hasn’t been served by people other than Jinyoung for so long. The Park family never viewed Jinyoung as a servant but rather took him under their shelter like he was part of the family. They would even enjoy a meal on the same table, with no clear separation between master and servant. This was because Bae Jinyoung’s family and the Park family go a long way back.

Actually, up till five years ago, they had employed some servants to take care of the house like any other families would. However, after Jihoon’s mother fell sick, his father told him that they would have to save up money for the medicine that were of exorbitant prices. All servants were sent back to their homes, and the money that would have been used to employ were spent on medication that could only stop the disease from spreading to the rest of her body. The most effective medication for this disease that could actually cure it, as Jihoon was told by his father, had to be tailored to the patient’s needs. Only those famous, highly qualified doctors were able to handpick the right herbs for the right patient after checking on them themselves. Unfortunately, these kind of doctors would have to be invited with an even higher price. Jihoon’s father, being only a small palace official, could not instantly draw out that much money from his pockets. They have been living simply since then, and never spent a coin on unnecessary things, not to mention materialistic pleasures.

Now, as Jihoon eyes every dish on the table carefully, his heart throbs at the thought of indulging in such luxury while his family is still struggling to pay for his mother’s medication. “Fei?” He calls, and the girl steps forward, bowing her head towards him.

“Yes, Master?”

“When will I receive the… payment?” Jihoon isn’t sure what to call the money the palace was going to pay him for becoming a consort in the palace.

“Usually the money will be delivered by the end of the month, but I heard something from Nanny
Zhou.” He catches a glimpse of joy in her eyes. “I think you will be delighted by this news, Master. The Crown Prince himself offered to have the reward delivered by tomorrow, directly to your family.”

Jihoon’s eyes widen. The Crown Prince himself? This person, whom he hasn’t even met once before, ordered for the money be delivered early, and not to him, but his family? The normal routine was that the department organizing the palace’s financial matters would deliver the money directly to the consort instead of the family in a fixed time. Usually, the normal routine was not to be disrupted, especially since this was involving the country’s assets.

“Master, please eat before your food gets cold,” Fei reminds him gently.

Jihoon picks up his chopsticks and looks at Jinyoung again. Ignoring his friend’s look of disapproval, he says, “Come eat with me, Jinyoung. Fei, Jia, you too. I can’t possibly finish this on my own.”

The two palace maids look at each other, speechless and surprised. Jinyoung raises a brow and doesn’t move from his place. “We can’t do that, Ji-Master,” he says. Though Jinyoung isn’t happy with the strict rules either, he doesn’t want to seem like he’s disrespecting Jihoon, and doesn’t want destroy Jihoon’s image by allowing there to be rumours about him not respecting the rules in the palace.

“I’m afraid I have to agree with him,” Jia says, the shock still evident in her voice. She hasn’t ever seen anyone in the palace invite servants to the table before. “We have our own meal waiting for us in the kitchen. We can eat there, we’re used to it.”

Jihoon sighs. “Perhaps just this one night? For all of us to get to know each other and become closer, since we’re going to be sticking together for almost the rest of our lives.” Jihoon’s purpose of doing this was not to deliberately disrespect palace rules; he had his own reasons for requesting something so ridiculous. First, it was to test the servants’ loyalty and sincerity, to see how they would treat him even after he ‘lowered his status’ to offer them a meal together at the table.

Secondly, it was to make them relax: if they were under anyone else’s orders to test his waters, he would be able to recognize right away from their reactions.

“Master.” The two girls seem genuinely grateful for his idea. “Thank you for your invitation, but please forgive us. The palace rules are strict, and if anyone sees-”

“No one will see us,” Jihoon says, waving his hand at them. “Prepare a few more utensils, you all will eat with me tonight,” he says in a soft but commanding tone. The maids seemed normal in their reactions; he hasn’t noticed anything suspicious. If that’s the case, he will still invite them to the table, just so the food won’t go to waste.

“No one will see?”

Jihoon freezes in his actions, and the temperature in the room drops a few degrees. He sees a flash of horror across the girls’ faces before they curtsy at the door. He dreads the next few words they say, and he can nearly feel cold sweat form at the heart of his palms when he hears the voice.

“Your Highness.” They say, and Jinyoung quickly follows suit.

Jihoon’s hands drop to his sides, fingers curling at the servants’ addressing of the unexpected visitor. Within a few seconds, he also stands up, jumbled thoughts running through his head so quickly that he can hardly think rationally. “Your Highness,” he repeats, lowering his head at the door without a glance at the person.
“Sit, sit. No need to be so uptight. No one will see us,” the voice says, almost ironically. His sardonic tone causes Jihoon to shiver. When the man repeated Jihoon’s words, he had intentionally emphasised them, showing that he had been present and aware of what just happened.

“Forgive me, Your Highness,” Jihoon keeps himself composed, though in reality, his insides are twisting all together in a knot. He walked out from his chair and lowered himself to the floor, afraid to raise his head. “Please punish me as you wish.”

“Why should I?” The person’s voice is husky and gruff, though through the toughness there is almost an elegance to it. The voice sounds much closer now, and Jihoon can see a tint of gold flash before his eyes before it becomes static right before him. The gold turns out to be a reflection of the light on the golden patterns sewn on the magenta robe. Jihoon’s heart sinks even more at the sight, and he balls his fists to keep himself from trembling.

The voice commands, “Go prepare another set of utensils. I will be eating here tonight.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Fei’s and Jia’s footsteps trail away hurriedly.

A heavy silence settles over the room after the two girls leave. Jihoon’s heart pounds strongly, one beat after another, like a drum that is announcing the coming wrath he is going to experience from the man before him.

“Stand.”

The voice, though gently delivered, hides a trace of coldness in it. Realising this, Jihoon holds his breath as he does as he is ordered. The full image of the magenta robe unfolds before him. Two golden dragons are located in the centre of the robe, the head chasing the tail of the other, forming a golden circle. It is a simple pattern, but Jihoon’s heart almost stops beating when he is reminded of the identity of the man before him.

“Raise your head, Consort Park.”

Every second that passes are marked by the rapid thumping of Jihoon's heart. His shoulders become a hundred times heavier, and his neck stiffens when he obeys the man’s words.

He can finally see the person who is so vividly described in the scripts at the Imperial Institutions’ library and his father’s books. Jihoon’s eyes capture the handsome face of a mature youth. The strong masculinity is sculpted right into his features; he has thick, arched brows that firmly framed his face, a sharp and defined jaw, high cheekbones, broad shoulders and skin that was several shades darker than Jihoon’s.

Jihoon knows he cannot stare, but as he sees the flickering candles in the room reflected in the man’s brown, bottomless pupils, he feels slightly awe-struck by the unspoken words behind the two pits of darkness.

The man moves swiftly and sits at the opposite of the table where Jihoon had been present. “Must I give you an order for every movement you make?” He doesn’t reveal any emotions when he speaks, but Jihoon can’t help but feel that what he said was an obvious accusation. “Sit. And eat.”

Fei and Jia had already returned with extra utensils earlier in the blink of an eye. The man does not budge an inch even after the utensils are placed before him, and Jihoon takes it as a hint of what he has to do. Nanny Zhou probably did not expect the man’s early appearance during dinner - in fact, no one did- and hence did not teach him thoroughly the manners of eating with him. Jihoon can only thank a chapter he had read in one of those books of ethics that he earlier deemed unnecessary.
to include; it marked down the table manners required of a consort if she or he were to eat with the Emperor.

Jihoon moves his chopsticks and picks up a small plate, carefully picking up a section of the fish without the bones. He checks it thoroughly, and tries an extremely small portion of the section himself, nibbling through it quickly to see if there is anything wrong with the dish. After confirming that the dish is safe to eat, and that there were no bones in the meat, he puts the meat onto the other man’s plate.

“Please enjoy, Your Highness.”

The man before him is the Crown Prince indeed. His aura, his appearance and his accoutrement screamed out his identity, and naturally forces Jihoon into submission.

The Crown Prince catches Jihoon looking at him and holds his stare with his very own. Jihoon’s breath catches at the moment. Perhaps he had done something wrong. Perhaps the Prince was angry. Jihoon cannot guess what the prince was thinking, and this makes him grow more and more anxious.

“You don’t have to taste it yourself,” the Crown Prince says. His eyes seem to soften a little as he speaks, but Jihoon does not dare let his guard down. “The poison reveals itself on the utensils.”

“Yes,” Jihoon responds, throat still dry from the shock. “But not only poison can harm the body.” How could he not know that the silver would change colour when it met poison? He only tasted it to make sure nothing else was wrong with the dish. Maybe this action itself was disrespectful.

“What if you end up hurting yourself?”

Jihoon blinks a few times at the question, unsure of how to respond. The Crown Prince phrases this question as if he is not just asking about the food and the harm it may cause to Jihoon, but something of a much bigger context. Picking his words carefully, Jihoon replies, “It’s better for me to be hurt instead of you, Your Highness.”

The Crown Prince looks at him, a brow raised thoughtfully. “I see,” he says. He picks up his chopsticks and starts eating. Seeing this, Jihoon finally lets out the breath he didn’t realize he was holding, and starts carefully tasting the dishes.

It is the first night he spends at the palace, and he has already met two of the most important people on the royal grounds. With a heavy heart, Jihoon finishes his meal under the awkward atmosphere, eating much less than he usually would due to the stress.

The Crown Prince is a bigger eater. It was no surprise, as the Crown Prince was a warrior. He had to eat a lot more to become stronger and more muscular. Throughout the meal, Jihoon no longer tastes the dishes himself, but takes time to pick the food and place it in the Crown Prince’s dish. This was an affectionate gesture, and if not for the cold atmosphere and the harsh truth that they had no feelings for each other, the scene would seem quite romantic.

When they finish the meal, they move to the living room of the palace and sit while they are served with various types of plated desserts. Jihoon cannot deny that palace food is very well made. Though he only ate little for dinner, it was overall a delightful tasting experience. In other days, perhaps, he will ask the girls to take some of the food to his family to try.

Thinking about his family, Jihoon quickly recalls Fei’s words about the Crown Prince sending the money to his family early. “Your Highness.” He gets up from his chair and kneels in front of the
Crown Prince. “I thank you on behalf of my family for the special arrangements in delivering the reward.”

“It’s not much,” the Crown Prince says, not a trace of emotion in his voice. “I know about your mother’s condition. You are in urgent need of the money.”

Jihoon jerks when he hears the Crown Prince point out his family’s situation so directly. He lowers his head again, realising that of course the Crown Prince knew about his family. He is an important consort, the first companion of the Crown Prince who is going to become the leader of the country in the future. The royal family needed someone adequate to become his concubine. Naturally, they would have to look thoroughly into Jihoon’s background for confirmation.

“You’ll have to stop lowering your head in front of me. Know that you’re of a high status as well. You’re going to become the Empress of the country when I take the throne.”

Jihoon raises his head in surprise and returns to his chair. He did not expect the Prince to say something like this so directly. “I understand.” he says softly in response. It’s the first time he smiles after the Crown Prince arrived, and his eyes brighten with his expression, lighting up his face and making him look even more beautiful in the dimly lit room. The Crown Prince says nothing after this and only takes a sip of tea with a meaningful look on his face. The atmosphere starts to become less stiff, and the room starts to have its normal liveliness again when the two seem to have adjusted to each other’s presence as the night goes on.

They stay silent for a long while, both deep in thought for different reasons. The servants in the room, including Jinyoung, stand awkwardly in the corner. They are only accompanied by the gentle sounds of the crickets at night and the gentle whispers of spring breeze, while the melting candle wax trickle down slowly as time passes.

“I want to have a moment with Consort Park,” the Crown Prince suddenly says, breaking the silence. Jinyoung’s face reddens as he hears this, and even the girls suppress a knowing smile when they lower their heads. It’s already very late in the night, and the Crown Prince is requesting them to leave the two of them alone at this strange hour. Jihoon purses his lips as he observes the servants walking out of the room with weird expressions on their faces. He’s not that slow; there’s no way he doesn’t know what his servants are thinking.

Jihoon, of course, has his own suspicions about the Prince’s intentions. However, judging from the disinterested expression on the Crown Prince’s face even when the servants have left, he doubts the servants have guessed the intention of the prince correctly.

The doors are shut behind the servants, and the room instantly becomes quieter without the sound of the crickets and the wind.

“Let’s have a talk,” the Crown Prince says, staring directly at him. His dark eyes then narrow at the door. “We will drop the formalities to make this all easier. My guards are already stationed at different areas surrounding this palace to ensure that no one hears us.”

Jihoon’s eyes follow the prince’s towards the doors. By guards, he probably did not mean the palace guards. The Crown Prince had another set of personal guards under his control. His father had hinted to him about this during his teachings, and Jihoon was smart enough to notice. These ‘guards’ worked in secret, dressed in all black with their faces covered. They left no traces and each of them were trained since young to be merciless and powerful. His father told him that just one ‘guard’ was enough to annihilate a group of well trained soldiers.

Knowing that the Crown Prince had stationed special guards around the palace, Jihoon guesses
immediately that the content they are going to discuss is of top secret.

“As you know, I am Kang Daniel. Feel free to call me Daniel when we talk in secret.” He holds out his hand, as if greeting a business partner. Jihoon raises a brow and shakes it, expectant of the words that the prince is about to speak. The Crown Prince held a small smile on his lips as he introduced himself, much friendlier than he seemed earlier, though continuing to hold his composure fit for his identity. “You don’t have to introduce yourself, Park Jihoon. I know you. Let’s skip this nonsense.”

Jihoon immediately finds that Daniel is very straightforward for someone of this high a status. He doesn’t hold back when he speaks, and his words directly hit the target. “You are smart, so you should know by now that what I’m going to say to you should be kept within this room. Your friend, Bae Jinyoung, is an exception. I believe he can help you in your mission. And if you two don’t know how to stop your mouths from running…” He trails off, an air of hostility spreading into the room like an unspoken death threat.

“I will make sure nothing you say gets out of this room… Daniel.”

The expression on Kang Daniel’s face turns into something more pleasant, though without any openly visible emotion. “That’s the right attitude.”
The gentle candlelight flickers.

“Our country may seem to be at peace, but as a scholar, you should know the underlying threats we are facing,” the Crown Prince says and takes a sip of his tea.

Jihoon’s eyelashes flutter as he lowers his eyes in thought. “The largest external threat right now appears to be the Red Cloak tribe at the Western border.”

Just a decade ago, their neighbour kingdom of the West, the Hak Kingdom, was split into pieces in a revolutionary movement. The ruler of the kingdom, King Hak Jin, was assassinated in the process. Three out of his seven sons lived, and they made their very own kingdoms out of the scattered remains of their homeland located at the Western border. In the past few years, there has been continuous unrest at the Western border due to power struggles of the three brothers. Hak Li, one of the three brothers, owned the land nearest to Tian He Kingdom, which is currently under the Kang family’s rule. The Kangs would have been more than glad to turn a blind eye to the conflicts of another kingdom, but Hak Li’s aggression has somehow slowly extended into Tian He’s territory, causing the death of many Tian He’s people living near the border. This movement triggered the royal family’s anger, and the relationship has been tense between the Western Hak bloc and the Kingdom of Tian He ever since then. However, up till now, the royal family can only swallow their anger due to the formidable strength of Red Cloak tribe.

The Red Cloak tribe made up most of the Western Hak bloc’s population. The name of the tribe was derived from the costumes they are often spotted in when engaging in strange religious rituals, which have been carried out for centuries as a tribe tradition. Outsiders like to call it witchcraft, and though Jihoon has always been greatly suspicious of the existence of supernatural powers, he has to admit that their skills and practices are quite extraordinary. The Red Cloak Army is the centre of power in the Western Hak bloc. Their tricks of ‘witchcraft’ have made their army almost undefeatable in every war between the Hak brothers. Even Tian He, a kingdom known for its remarkable military strength, does not dare openly lay a finger on the Western Hak bloc because of the Red Cloak Army.

Kang Daniel speaks up, disturbing Jihoon’s desperate recalling of the historical scripts he’s read in the Imperial Institution’s library. “The Red Cloak tribe has always been a threat that we haven’t been able to remove. All we’ve done these few years is pray for them to stay at the borders.” His voice is bitter, and shows a rare trace of emotion that can easily be interpreted as anger. “Thousands of lives are threatened at the border, but if we tell the people to move inwards to avoid being involved in the power struggle, I’m afraid that it will only encourage Hak Li’s aggression. By the time the people have moved, his area of control will be spreading further into the Tian He territory. And we cannot let that happen.”

Jihoon blinks, digesting Kang Daniel’s analysis of the most popular solution of the incident proposed on court. He remembers his father returning home from several meetings regarding this issue with a weary expression on his face. His father had commented that the court officials proposed such inadequate ideas that he wondered if they had ever been educated before. “May I ask why we are discussing this issue?” It’s not like Jihoon didn’t want to talk about politics, but as the Crown Prince’s consort, he was in no place to comment on the issue.

The bitterness on Kang Daniel’s face dissolves into something rather vague and unreadable. “Why didn’t you take the exam to enter a palace as an official?”
Jihoon nearly breathes out a cold laugh at the question. “I did. I wasn’t chosen.” After studying at the Imperial Institution, he and Bae Jinyoung followed the other students and took the Royal National Exam. Jinyoung was granted a place, but Jihoon was unlucky enough to somehow vanish from the scoreboard. After rounds and rounds of questioning of the people of the Institution and failing to get an answer, he took the hint that someone may have pulled some strings behind this. Jihoon is an intelligent student and has always been in the top of his class, followed by Bae Jinyoung. If it wasn’t on purpose, how would he be eliminated while the other richer yet less adequate students are able to make the list?

Kang Daniel doesn’t seem to be surprised by the answer, and Jihoon raises a brow at his unwavering attitude. “Do you know why?” Kang Daniel asks an unexpected question, catching Jihoon off guard.

“Why?” Jihoon repeats, startled.

“You were deliberately left out of the list.” Jihoon stills, unable to process the sudden information. Seeing this, Kang Daniel adds, “We planned it beforehand.”

Jihoon stays in utter disbelief. "But why?" He's only the son of a scholar, and he's not even of noble blood. What had he done to deserve such special attention from the royal family?

Jihoon's conflicted expression is captured in Kang Daniel’s eye and his lips quirk up a little, forming somewhat of a smile. “Rest assured, it’s not because you’re incapable, but rather quite the opposite.”

Jihoon’s face is full of questions, and Kang Daniel proceeds with an explanation. “Simply put, your intelligence would go to waste if you became a palace official. In the courts, those with power and wealth would rise to the top, and those who aren’t will only be regarded with little care. Guanlin read your scripts himself and showed them to me. I have to admit, I was very impressed.”

At the mention of the Second Prince, Jihoon heart skips a beat. Lai Guanlin had read his exam scripts? He had heard that in several occasions, the royal family would check if the scripts were marked fairly themselves, since the officials doing well in the exam would then be admitted into the palace and would play a part in the courts. He had never expected the Second Prince to be the one checking the papers, but now that he thinks about it, it made sense, because Lai Guanlin’s level of intelligence is even respected by the Emperor himself.

“What made you impressed?” Jihoon gives up on trying to be careful in his language, seeing that Kang Daniel has even allowed him to address him with his name.

“Your answer to the final question.”

Jihoon doesn’t have to think hard before he recalls the question, since the question was addressing one of the most popular current affairs of the kingdom: border conflicts.

"You remember, don't you?" Kang Daniel strums his fingers on the table. "It's such a simple answer, such a traditional idea. But for some reason, you're the only one who thought of it."

"Am I?" Jihoon exhales slowly. "It's not the most innovative idea though, is it?"

"No," Kang Daniel shakes his head. "That's why I can't understand why the officials couldn't even think of this at all. But we want your help."

With what?
Jihoon's unspoken question hangs in the air, and Kang Daniel knows just what he's about to ask. "We want you to be part of the plan."

"You don't mean you're going to send me over, do you?" Jihoon says, the idea suddenly occuring to him. He shifts on his seat, anger rising in his throat.

To Jihoon's absolute despair, Kang Daniel keeps quiet and takes another sip out of his tea.

“I see what you’re trying to do now,” Jihoon says slowly. How had he not thought of this before? The Crown Prince had another objective of making him his consort in the first place. “You’re utilising me to my fullest, aren’t you?” His respect to this man has almost completely vanished, a hard coldness in his voice replacing the meek, humble tone from before. “By taking me into the palace, you get to own me as your personal advisor on political issues without raising any suspicion. You get to secure your place on the throne, and you will be able to fight against Hak Li.” Inhaling sharply, he adds, “You now also have a pretty looking chess piece by your side, ready to be thrown into the burning furnace at the Western border.

Kang Daniel does not react at his sudden change of attitude, but instead, his lips curve up even more, indicating that he is pleased at Jihoon’s quick grasp of the situation. “You are indeed very smart,” is all he says before he takes another sip of his tea, appearing calm and collected, not a trace of shame or guilt showing through. “But let me add to your statement.”

He elegantly places the delicately designed cup on the plate, a gentle ‘clink’ rising in the middle of the stiff tension in the room. “You will be rescued by me after you complete your job. By the time my father dies and the throne becomes mine, you will sit beside me as the Empress, and you will enjoy all the wealth you can possibly imagine. Your mother will be healed, your father will earn a stable position among the palace officials. In other words, it’s a win win situation.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jihoon scoffs, fingers curling into fists on his lap. “We will only both benefit from this if it turns out to be the ideal situation. The world changes every day. Not everything is under our control. You can’t expect to have a full grasp of the situation.” He smiles, a sight that is almost threatening to Kang Daniel’s eyes. The flickering candle shadows dance on his face, and the unpleasantly cold expression surfaces without restraint on his beautiful features. “I can only laugh if you really believe that a lowly scholar’s answer on an exam paper can be the perfect solution in real life.”

Kang Daniel finally stops smiling, but Jihoon does not regret one word he’s spoken. If the Crown Prince is making it obvious to him that Jihoon will likely become a sacrificial lamb for the royal family, he certainly will not sit still and let his own fate be controlled. “You cannot force me into this plan."

Jihoon throws a glance at the door. "Your people stationed outside seem to be perfectly capable of killing me and wiping away all evidence of my existence on this world, but what they are not capable of is shutting the mouths of your people.” If he dies, his father will have his own suspicions and investigate into the issue. If they manage to seal his father’s mouth shut by killing him as well, the villagers will know. They will question the royal family’s intentions in killing one of the kindest palace officials they’ve ever met, as well as his son who has just become the Crown Prince’s concubine. The rumours will run from one village to another, and will raise at least one speck of doubt in the people’s hearts.

As rulers, the Kangs’ biggest enemy would be the peasants’ distrust towards them.

It would be too rash for Kang Daniel to kill him right here, right now.
Kang Daniel narrows his eyes at him for a while, and Jihoon returns his gaze with one just as icy. He should not and will not back down. Kang Daniel is a tiger, and Jihoon is the prey. If he is not careful, he will easily and quickly be devoured, and there will be no trace of him left after the meal.

After a while, Kang Daniel lets out a chuckle. Jihoon freezes as he notices the change in Kang Daniel’s actions again. The chuckle is a hearty chuckle, one that sounds like it is coming from a sincere man. His facial features have visibly softened, and a seemingly genuine smile makes its way on his lips. It’s a smile that reaches his eyes, a smile that would warm the hearts of the people. A smile that belongs to a real ruler, one that cares for its people and puts their people as the priority.

Kang Daniel waves casually and even changes his sitting posture to a more comfortable one, plopping his elbow on the table next to him and resting his chin on his hand. “You’re just like how he described you,” Kang Daniel says playfully, and even his voice becomes softer and more gentle, as if he is cooing a young child. “Don’t be angry, I was just teasing you.”

Jihoon doesn’t know what to say. Was what he had just seen of the Crown Prince just a facade to scare him? “I…” he trails off, unable to find the right words to respond. Kang Daniel laughs, a friendly sound that startles Jihoon again.

“I had to see what kind of person you were for myself. Guanlin said that in desperate times, people tend to show their true sides more. I suppose that’s what you just did,” Kang Daniel says, raising a brow.

Jihoon frowns, silently cursing Guanlin. Was this his idea? If so, he will surely be doubling up in laughter in his own palace when he hears from the Crown Prince’s mouth about his reaction towards the act. “Then, what you said just now…” Jihoon purses his lips.

“That was not all true. I will be making use of you, but I am not so heartless as to make you a sacrificial chess piece.” Kang Daniel gives him a comforting smile. “Just be yourself. The part about you being my personal advisor is right, though. I really hope to come to you for advice on matters regarding the Western border and perhaps some other issues.”

“Yes, but…” Jihoon’s head hurts from Kang Daniel’s act. It’s already late into the night, and to realize that the arguments they’ve been throwing around earlier was only a test from the almighty Kang Daniel was a big blow to the mind, though it did help him relax a lot more. This Kang Daniel matches the Kang Daniel he has met through the books and through people’s gossips. Kind, caring, masculine, charming. “Why this much hassle for a personal advisor?”

Kang Daniel’s expression dims, “The Red Cloak Army has infiltrated the palace. Several of the palace officials are now revealed to be spies from the army, but we haven’t made any movement yet. The Selection day is only a disguise for our steady planning for a future battle. If we don’t fight this battle, I’m afraid Tian He will never be at peace.”

He turns to look Jihoon in the eye. “Frankly speaking, my life is at risk for many reasons that I cannot reveal yet, and if I die, Tian He will have no future. I need your help to throw out tactics that are different from the expectations of the spies while you remain hidden under my wing. I have more right to protect you as a husband than as a person above you receiving your advice.”

Jihoon is suddenly moved by the Prince’s words. This one position beside the Prince has been allocated to none other than Jihoon, showing how much the Prince values his intelligence and respects his ideas. If what he says is true, then Jihoon indeed benefits a lot from this work, and will even be able to make use of his previous studies and not let it go to waste.
“Repeat your answer on the question, Jihoon,” Kang Daniel says.

Jihoon breathes a sigh that is mostly of relief. Now that he knows that what he wrote isn’t going to be used against him, he feels a hundred times lighter. “A seduction tactic, that's what I wrote.”

Kang Daniel nods. “Ideally, if you were the one we sneaked over to the border lands, and you're able to successfully seduce Hak Li, he would no doubt immediately take you in. We all know of his preference for pretty males.” With this, Kang Daniel throws a raised brow at Jihoon.

Jihoon flushes gently in embarrassment.

"I'd demand to have you back, of course. But knowing his stubborn personality, it's not likely that he'd let you go. That doesn't matter, because I'd willingly send you over to Hak Li to show my sincerity for peace between our two kingdoms. It's a poor attempt at temporarily releasing border tensions."

"And the moment I enter the enemy's camp, I can become a spy for you. I can deliver you the necessary information to defeat the Red Cloak Army, and you can come save me.” Jihoon continues for the Crown Prince, and sighs. “This is what I thought you wanted me to do, but now that I think about it, there are too many holes in the plan. I have been fooled thoroughly, Your Highness.”

Kang Daniel laughs. “That’s right. If I give you up to Hak Li, it won’t do us any good. They will just think Tian He is too weak to fight, and the people won’t have a good image of the royal family either. How will a man who cannot protect his wife protect his country?”

“I was stupid,” Jihoon’s face falls.

“Yes, you were.” Kang Daniel murmurs in the midst of his soft laughter.

Jihoon looks at him helplessly. “Just leave me alone. I was scared.”

“I know,” Kang Daniel says, he eyes softening when he hears this. “But you don’t have to be now. I will protect you as your husband.”

Hearing this, Jihoon’s ears redden a little, his heart starting to thump in an unsteadily rapid rhythm. He’s foreign to this feeling, but warmth washes over him as he realizes that Kang Daniel has made a promise to him as a husband.

As a husband, Jihoon repeats in his heart. He nibbles on his lips, pondering on the title.

“It’s very late now. You have to rest.” Kang Daniel stands up and stretches a little, limbs stiff from the long chat on the chairs. “I will come see you when there are matters to be discussed. Meanwhile, just enjoy yourself, and tell your servants if you need anything. They will have it delivered as soon as possible.”

With a swift movement, the Crown Prince opens the doors and steps out into the darkness, leaving Jihoon in a daze. The servants hurry into the room and look at each other cluelessly when Jihoon doesn’t budge from his seat.

Only when Jinyoung calls out Jihoon’s name does Jihoon get up and walk near his bed to wash up, but not before tripping on his own feet and falling back clumsily.

Kang Daniel walks out into the dark and turns back to gaze at the dimly lit palace household before
“Kang Daniel, a true gentleman,” a voice snickers from behind him, and Kang Daniel doesn’t have to turn around to know who it is. He’s all too familiar with this voice, the voice that he has been adapted to before even learning how to walk. His expression brightens when he hears the voice, and a charming smile spreads slowly on his lips.

“Thank you for helping out tonight,” Kang Daniel says with a grateful tone. "By the way, I never thought there would be a day I’d hear you complimenting me on matters other than fighting.”

“What do you mean? I always compliment you on other things...” A tall, slim figure reveals itself from the shadows. The lower half of his face is covered with black silk, and his whole outfit blends in with the night. “How is your wife faring?” He says, in an almost nonchalant tone. Kang Daniel, however, notices the hint of pain in his voice, and spins immediately to the figure’s direction.

“He’s not my…” Kang Daniel trails off, unable to say any more. He, indeed, had called Park Jihoon his wife, and he has even made him his wife under the kingdom’s laws. Or, to put it more accurately, his consort. “He’s faring well.”

“You must be glad.” The voice turns cold, a stark contrast from the playful, teasing tone earlier. “He’s handpicked by you and your family after all.”

“Look, Seongwoo…” Kang Daniel moves forward, lowering his voice so they will not be heard. “Let’s go back to my room and talk, okay?” He captures the other man’s eyes with his own, and marvels at the beautiful starry pits that are the only part of the man’s facial features not covered by the silk. This is a sight that he has bathed in as a blessing for these two years, but from now on, he no longer is in the position to give and receive such affection. Kang Daniel holds his gaze like he usually would and conveys his gentle plea with his eyes, moving in closer to the figure until their noses almost touch. The other man’s eyelids flutter as he feels Kang Daniel’s breath against his face, the warm air gently brushing over his lips.

“No,” Seongwoo says shakily, taking a few startled steps backward as if he had just woken up from a dream. “I… I have to go. I’ll take the Imperial Guards back to the base... Your Highness.” Without another sound, he jumps up to the nearest tree, action swift and clean like a cat’s, and vanishes into the dark night.

Kang Daniel’s fingers twitch. He raises his head and sees the full moon in the sky, a sign that often symbolises harmony, serenity and a fulfilling life. Kang Daniel’s finger curl into fists so tightly that his knuckles turn white. The sight is so beautiful that he feels like it is mocking him for this ugly feeling in his heart. Mocking him for owning everything in the world but the man he loves.

The I-swear-the-names-I-made-up-weren't-so-weird-in-chinese corner:

Tian He Kingdom: 天和國

West Hak: 西客國

Red Cloak Tribe: 紅袍族
A Gift

It’s been a week since the Crown Prince came to see him in secret. Apparently, only Jin young, Fei and Jia knew about the surprise visit that night, and Jihoon had realised accidentally through Nanny Zhou that he was not supposed to see the Crown Prince before the actual day of the New Year’s Feast. It wasn’t a strict rule, it was just part of the tradition to keep them clean before the consort could meet the royal family.

Jihoon leans back in his chair and stares down on the book spread on his lap. His fingers gently rub against his temple as he tries to focus on the words instead of zoning out.

“Master, a present has been delivered to you.”

Jihoon looks up from the book to see Eunuch Xi and his guards carrying in a large item a little taller than their height into the room. It is covered in creamy white fabric, delicately wrapped and treated with care. The men look troubled; the item was extremely heavy, yet they couldn’t move too much in order to avoid any damage to the object. Seeing the trickling sweat on their faces despite the cold weather, Jihoon tells them to stop and just place it where they are standing.

“Stay there and take a good rest. Fei, Jia, bring some wet towels.” Jihoon thanks them for their hard work and eyes the item curiously. “What is it?”

“It’s the bookshelf you wanted, Master.” Eunuch Xi gratefully receives the towel and dabs it on his forehead. “We requested to have it made a week ago.”

“But Jia said it was a present?” Jihoon’s expression softens, looking instantly pleased. He’s been wanting to stack his books in order for a while now, but he couldn’t do so because his bookshelf hadn’t arrived yet.

“Ah, yes. Because it is.” Eunuch Xi nods. “I heard from the department in charge of making your bookshelf that the Second Prince dropped by and gave them some special wood that he had bought from East Scarlett Kingdom. The Second Prince ordered them to make the bookshelf from scratch using the wood, and that’s why it took so long.”

Jihoon’s smile stiffens. “The Second Prince?”

“Yes, indeed.” Eunuch Xi bows his head. “Master, where would you like it to be placed?”

“Near the wall at that corner of the room. Thank you.” Jihoon blinks as the guards once again heave up the big object on their shoulders and move inwards. The Second Prince, Lai Guanlin. Ever since last week, Jihoon hasn’t caught a glimpse of the man’s shadow around. Perhaps it’s because it is currently nearing the Lunar New Year’s period. Everyone in the palace has their hands full preparing for the New Year’s celebration and feast, running to and fro to prepare accoutrements, money, decorations, food, gifts and invitations. Lai Guanlin and Kang Daniel are probably even busier, being the two main characters of this year’s celebration. Jihoon and the Second Prince’s consort are also the accompanying characters that must be present in this year’s big feast, to greet the royal family’s relatives and representatives of other kingdoms.

He quickly dismisses the unsettling feeling forming at the pit of his stomach due to the pressure from being the Crown Prince’s first consort, and looks at the unveiled object currently placed against the wall.

His jaw nearly drops. As expected from a bookshelf made from Scarlett wood! The bookshelf is of
gorgeous red shades, and its waxy surface is like a spotlight calling for attention. The design is minimalistic and elegant, just how Jihoon would like it. Though the shelf stands out in the room, it doesn’t seem to fancy and out of place. In fact, it blends in quite well with the peaceful atmosphere of the palace. Jihoon sighs, suddenly feeling dumb as he realizes that he may have just silently bonded with a bookshelf.

East Scarlett has its name derived from its special scarlett coloured trees grown on vast pieces of land in East Scarlett territory. The extreme conditions in the East region causes the trees to produce a sturdy protection layer containing red coloured pigment on its entire surface. The protection layer is effective against pests, birds, and especially extremely cold or hot temperature. After processing, the protection layer dissolves into the wood, and makes it a lot more stronger than other materials. It was perfect for storing precious items or objects that would face the risk of decay as time goes. Storing books on a Scarlett wood shelf would prevent bookworms and other insects from destroying the paper, and would store the books in perfect condition to prevent them from yellowing. As a nature wonderland, East Scarlett sets the processed wood to exorbitant prices in hopes to narrow down the market and conserve nature, but also earn profit while they’re at it.

“The Second Prince must have spent a fortune on the wood,” Fei says with a twinkle in her eye. “If the Second Prince is willing to spend so much on Master’s gift, I can only imagine the value of the presents Consort Lee must be receiving.”

“Consort Lee?” Jihoon looks up from the six boxes of books laying on the floor next to the table. “That is the Second Prince’s consort?”

“Yes,” says Jia. “She’s not staying too far away from this palace. Her palace is only a short walk from here.”

“I see.” He wonders if this person is also chosen by the royal family as part of the plan. Jihoon bends down to take hold of one of the heavy boxes. Fei, Jia and Jinyoung hurry to his aid, together promptly moving the six boxes next to the bookshelf for Jihoon's convenience. Jihoon picks up the books from the first box and starts carefully slipping them onto the wooden layers in order.

Jinyoung opens the second box and helps Jihoon with the stacking. “Scarlett wood, hm?” He whispers next to Jihoon so the others wouldn't hear.

“Don't look at me like that,” Jihoon deadpans as he catches a smirk on Jinyoung’s face. He bends down again to scoop up another batch of books, carefully smoothing out the edges before fitting them onto the wooden layers in order. “I'm just as confused about the meaning of this gift.” But he will accept it anyway. Bookshelves made of Scarlett wood is something he has always wanted but couldn't afford. Though he still isn't clear of Lai Guanlin’s intentions, there's no harm in accepting this gift… right?

Jinyoung frowns at Jihoon’s unnatural reaction. During the period of time Jihoon spent as a normal scholar in the village, he would often zone out at the most random of times. Now that he's entered the palace, his dazed expression comes even more often than before, and Jinyoung can't help but be a little concerned. It hasn't even been half a month and Jihoon is already out of it.

"I'm fine, Jinyoung. Don't worry.” Jihoon says, a smile spreading across his lips as he sees his friend scrunch up his face. “I just had a lot on my mind.” Up till now, Jihoon has kept his conversation with the Crown Prince a secret from everybody else, including Bae Jinyoung. Though Kang Daniel has expressed clearly that he can inform Jinyoung on the current situation and tell him about his duty, Jihoon has been greatly hesitant to do so. Not because Bae Jinyoung didn't have the ability to keep a secret, but because putting the burden of a country’s safety on a fifteen year old’s shoulders can cause endanger Jinyoung. If anything goes wrong, and the West Hak spies happen to
find out that Jihoon is part of the plan to eliminate the Red Cloak tribe, anyone related to him would…

He body tenses and his grip on the book tightens, pale hands trembling slightly. He has forgotten to consider the possible consequences of cooperating with the Prince to eliminate the Red Cloak tribe, not that he had a choice to agree or refuse the request in the first place. He feels his throat go dry and his breathing become unsteady, an unfamiliar fit of panic suddenly clawing at his chest.

“Jihoon,” he hears Jinyoung say, but the feeling does not go away. Jinyoung frowns and knocks him on the head, causing him to flinch. “Is it about the Crown Prince’s visit?”

Jinyoung isn’t as slow in understanding things as those that are of his age. He knows that no matter where the royal family travels within royal ground, they would usually be accompanied by a large group of his palace’s people, including the eunuchs, the servants, and even the guards. Last week when the Crown Prince visited Jihoon, he didn’t bring a single servant over, and didn’t even pass a word to notify Jihoon of his visit. Afterwards, the Crown Prince even requested to be alone with Jihoon. Whatever they talked about during that period of time, it had affected Jihoon greatly ever since.

Jihoon looks at Jinyoung and blinks a few times. “You already know the answer.” Without explaining any further, he goes back to arranging the books on the bookshelf. Jinyoung raises a brow when Jihoon puts the books in the wrong order and even upside down but fails to notice. Shaking his head, he sighs. He won’t force Jihoon to tell him what’s wrong, since he’ll tell him when the time is right.

“Let’s go have a walk, maybe.” Jinyoung suggests with a bright tone. When Jihoon looks at him blankly, Jinyoung gives him a big, toothy smile. “It’s a good day today.”

Indeed, the sun is shining and the temperature isn’t too cold or too hot. There are no spring showers today, which is rare. It’s the perfect day for a walk. Seeing Jinyoung’s childish side, Jihoon can’t help but succumb and agree to his request.

The sun rays are especially strong today. Fei and Jia quickly prepare a delicate paper umbrella for Jihoon as he gets ready to go out.

“Master, you have such nice skin,” Fei says gently, marvelling at the bumpless porcelain skin as she holds the umbrella out for Jihoon. They trail slowly out of the doors of Jihoon’s palace. “It’s even lighter than Jia’s.”

“His skin doesn’t turn dark even if he goes under the sun for a while,” says Jinyoung, beaming at Fei. “It’s in his genes. If I were a girl I’d be envious.”

“From what I recall,” Jihoon says with a raised brow, “You were the one bragging to me about your ‘dark, attractive skin’, no?”

Jinyoung’s smiles sheepishly and leans into Jihoon’s shoulder as he walks, right arm wrapping around Jihoon’s left. “Oh come on, I was just kidding.” Fei and Jia look fondly at the two boys. They’ve just met for a week, but through their daily interactions the two palace maids have come to appreciate their personalities and their easygoing attitude towards them. They are much older than Jihoon and Jinyoung, so now they care for them as if they are their younger brothers.

“Oh, I just remembered,” Jia says, and the others all turn to look at her. “Since we’re all out here, we should be quite near Consort Lee’s palace.”
“Consort Lee?” Jihoon purses his lips. “Am I supposed to pay her a visit as a greeting? I think Nanny Zhou said something about it a few days ago.”

“Well,” Jia says, frowning a little. “It’s up to you, Master. I don’t think there are any rules regarding proper greetings between consorts. Especially if you’re not the same prince’s consorts. Anyhow, if you want to, we can bring you there. It’s just…” Jia exchanges a conflicted look with Fei. “We heard from our friends that… Consort Lee is pretty hostile.”

“Hostile?” Jihoon suppresses a laugh. He can imagine a hostile woman with that guy. It’s quite the match. “We have nothing to do anyways. Come, let’s fetch some of our palace’s new desserts. I’ll bring it over as a greeting gift.” The Crown Prince had recently delivered some of the lotus cakes and sweet date soup that he had received from his close relatives. Jihoon’s heart warms as he thinks of the Prince’s thoughtfulness.

They quickly pack a generous amount of the lotus cakes into a box and the sweet soup into a warm container, wrapping it all up in a light velvet cloth. When they finish, Fei and Jia accompanies Jihoon and JinYoung to the Palace of Shattered Jade for a visit.

“What a name,” Jihoon murmurs to himself as he looks at the plate on the front of the doors of the palace.

“Who might you be?”

Jihoon and the others turn around to face a beautifully paired couple, the woman’s arm linking around the man’s as if he is her possession. Jihoon’s head tilts as he recognises the face of the man, one that he is too familiar with, but hasn’t seen since last week. He raises a brow as he scans the couple carefully, and his lips curve up to one side. The woman gives off an authoritative aura, eyes sharp and piercing like needles. Her skin is as pale as Jihoon’s, and just as smooth. Her black hair flows down her back, and her bright red lipstick is in stark contrast with the paleness of her face and the darkness of her hair. Just by witnessing her looks, Jihoon finds her devilishly prepossessing. Her long, orange golden robe further gives her the reason to be so gorgeous, and reaffirms her status as a highly regarded consort.

“Greetings to Your Highness and Consort Lee. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Consort Park, Park Jihoon.” He dips his head slightly, and JinYoung follows suit while his maids curtsy. He raises his head again after the greeting, recalling the Crown Prince’s reminder to not lower his head so frequently. “I’ve dropped by to deliver some gifts as a greeting, and was even hoping for a chat originally. But it seems I am only disturbing your meeting, so I will take my leave.” Fei steps out and hands over the perfectly wrapped food over to the maid on the right side of Consort Lee.

“Why, thank you. You’re too humble and kind,” Consort Lee says, slightly lowering her piercing gaze to curtsy and smile to Jihoon. “Guanlin and I have just gone out for a walk, and I was going to invite him to my palace for a chat too. If you want, you could join us.” Her mouth says so, but the unwillingness is written all over her face as she holds Jihoon’s calm gaze with her shrewd one, smile still stretched disgustingly wide on her face. Jihoon breaks the eye contact and looks almost mockingly at the Second Prince. She called him Guanlin, didn’t she? How intimate. Meanwhile, he and the Crown Prince still had to keep a distance before their official meeting at the New Year’s Dinner.

“No, I have things I have to attend to at the palace,” Jihoon says, having no intention to go head to head against the woman currently tugging the Second Prince closer to herself.

Before he can excuse himself, Guanlin speaks up. “I hope you liked your bookshelf.” His eyes twinkle at the mention of the gift he gave to Jihoon. “The materials weren’t so easy to get.”
“Bookshelf?” The woman says, a little more gently as she turns her affectionate gaze towards the Second Prince. “What bookshelf?” Jihoon resists the urge to roll his eyes, though he cannot stop the prickly feeling on his skin when he witnesses her change of attitude towards the Second Prince.

“You ask him.” The Second Prince doesn’t return her fond gestures or words, and only murmurs the response factually. “I heard from the department that it was delivered to your house this morning, Jihoon.”

Jihoon nearly flinches when the woman turns her glare back to him. She was either irritated at the intimate addressing of the name or the fact that the Second Prince had handpicked a gift for him. It didn’t matter which one it was. It just told Jihoon how much of an easily jealous woman she was, and frankly speaking, he would never have wanted anything to do with people like her. In his heart, Jihoon complains about Guanlin’s sudden mention of the gift and his name. Now that gives the woman another reason to misunderstand and dislike him. Not that he cared, but he would avoid any drama in the royal grounds if possible. Who knew what this woman would do to him when she had the chance?

“It was just a simple bookshelf to put my books in, Consort Lee,” he says. “Thank you for your generous gift, Your Highness.”

“You have books?” Consort Lee smirks and looks at him sideways, but in an extremely subtle way, so that in the Prince’s field of vision she would appear to be just normal. “Are you perhaps, a scholar?”

Jihoon just keeps his usual expression with a smile plastered on his face. “Yes, I am.”

“I didn't know the Crown Prince would choose a scholar for a consort.” Her smile, sarcastically sweet, spreads wider on her lips. "Such unique taste he has."

Jihoon freezes in his spot, mouth half opened in disbelief at her straightforward criticism towards him and even the Crown Prince.

Indeed, in a country known for its military strength, perhaps scholars were of little use and status. Yet, Jihoon hadn't suffered from such verbal humiliation till now, and it shocks him to the core that anyone would discriminate scholars so openly.

And of course, he'd expected the verbal attack to be directed only at him. By saying this, she might as well have challenged the Crown Prince in front of his half brother, Lai Guanlin. Jihoon’s eyes turn to the Second Prince and he sees him looking mildly displeased, a crease forming in the middle of his brows.

“A unique taste,” Jihoon repeats before she turns to leave, not letting her get away with her disrespect towards the Crown Prince. He may be a consort, but he is still the Crown Prince’s wife. Other than that, he and the Prince are people with dignity. “Perhaps this 'unique taste' is what it takes to save the country. Wit is often more valuable than brute strength.”

He is also surprised at the confidence in his voice when he raises his head to express the statement. The Second Prince eyes him carefully with an unreadable expression of his face, and Consort Lee brows knit together tightly.

“You're right, Jihoon.”

A rough, husky voice sounds out from behind, and Jihoon, recognizing the voice from a week ago, no longer has to fake the smile when he turns and bows towards the man who had just spoken.
“Your Highness.”

Consort Lee lets out a small gasp and curtsies, while the Second Prince just turns and nods towards the Crown Prince and says, “You’re here.”

“Yes, I am. I was taking a walk because it’s such a good day,” Kang Daniel says, a smile spreading across his lips as he walks over to Jihoon’s side. They turn and face each other as if in sync, a small grin spreading on Daniel’s face. Jihoon is a little awestruck at the sudden appearance of Kang Daniel as well as his intimacy in front of this many people. “How are you doing?”

“I’m doing fine, your Highness.” Jihoon smiles back and holds Daniel’s warm gaze with his own. “What a strange place for us to bump into each other.”

“Indeed,” Kang Daniel agrees, putting a hand over Jihoon’s hair to ruffle it dotingly. “I wasn’t expecting to see you, but I did kind of walk this path on purpose.” He puts his hand down and turns towards the other couple beside them. “Guanlin, I’ve been looking for you. I have important things to discuss with you.”

“You do?” Jihoon doesn’t know if it’s an illusion, but the Second Prince’s eyes immediately brighten up. “Let’s go now, then.” He gently pushes off Consort Lee’s grasp on his arm and smiles at her. “I’ll see you later.”

“Okay,” Consort Lee says reluctantly, retreating her hand and sighing.

Kang Daniel raises a brow at the Second Prince but then quickly turns his focus to Jihoon, who is calmly standing beside him. “I’ve been busy these few days, and I still will be, but I look forward to seeing you at the New Year’s Dinner.” He pats his shoulder gently.

Without waiting for a response, he gestures for the Second Prince to walk with him together towards the direction he had just come from. Jihoon blinks as he bids the two shadows farewell, seeing them slowly vanish in the distance. He then looks at Consort Park, who now has a dangerously unpleasant look on her face.

Is this what happens when you unmask a person? Jihoon shakes his head in a slight motion and bows. “Consort Lee, I must take my leave. I hope you enjoy the sweets.”

Consort Lee stops looking at the path before her and looks at Jihoon, not even bothering to smile anymore. “Please help yourself.” She orders the servants to push open the gates and step in arrogantly. Not long after, Jihoon feels the sharp gust of wind when the door shuts in his face.

“... She has issues,” Jia mutters under her breath, and Fei shakes her head at the sight of the shut doors.

Jinyoung looks at Jihoon, who stares at the closed doors and then up at the palace nameplate. “That second prince...” He trails off, seeking for an answer. Jihoon looks at him and nods, confirming that he is indeed the one they had met outside the shrine from before.

“Wow,” Jinyoung breaths. "So that's who he is."

“So what was it that you wanted to talk to me about?” Guanlin puts his hands behind him and strides slowly next to Kang Daniel, eyes wandering from one plant to another in the Garden of Four Seasons. It was here that he had met Consort Park again, and at the thought of the young scholar, Guanlin cannot help but smile at the memory. He found it interesting to tease the other, and enjoyed getting different reactions from the young scholar.
“I’ll be very honest with you, it was nothing too urgent, “ says Daniel, eyeing Guanlin’s smile suspiciously. He stops and narrows his eyes at Guanlin, turning to face him directly. Guanlin is a bit taller than him, but he has much less muscle mass than Daniel. They are, in fact, quite a strange combination. “I can’t tell by your expression if you actually enjoyed Consort Lee’s company. Earlier you looked like you couldn’t wait to get out of that place and now you’re smiling like an idiot.”

Guanlin laughs and bends down to pick up a fallen flower that is still in perfect shape on the ground. “I am many things, Kang Daniel, but I am not an idiot.” He takes the fragile item in his hands and raises it up to his face, eyeing the structures of the flower carefully. The flower seems to have just recently fallen from its plant at the peak of its beauty, and it’s a pity. Guanlin places the fallen flower gently into the soil. “Lee Hyejin… there are plenty of people like her around the palace. You’ve seen the Emperor’s consorts. They’re all the same.”

“You're right. Women who are strong and calculated, and hard to predict; these are the kinds of people I’ve seen the most in my entire life.” Daniel shakes his head. “Sadly, only people like her can survive under the harsh conditions in this palace.”

“You’re implying that Park Jihoon cannot?” Guanlin says, moving forward without waiting for Daniel. He stops next to plants that he finds interesting occasionally, and Daniel doesn’t comment on it because he’s used to it. “He’s much stronger than you think, and I pretty sure you already know.”

“There’s a question I’ve been wanting to ask.” Daniel says. He doesn’t have to lower his voice to talk to Guanlin, because their guards and servants and eunuchs are all outside the garden, waiting for them and blocking anyone who would possibly pay the garden a visit in the meantime. “You seem to pay a lot of attention to Consort Park. Is there any special reason?”

Guanlin stops in his steps, raising his head and turning his gaze from the plants to Kang Daniel. The two brothers never try to keep a secret from each other if the other asks about it, because they can easily see through the mask anyway, having known each other for so long. “Let’s say I owe him something,” he says simply, but doesn’t elaborate. Daniel also cooperates and doesn’t question any further.

“He’s a good person,” Daniel says, sighing. “My conscience has been punishing me for the entire week. It’s become hard to sleep at night knowing that I’m putting such a pure, young boy at risk.”

“Is that what you were going to talk to me about?” Guanlin says, his face dimming a little. “We’re not here to play the good guys. We’re here to eliminate the threats to the Kangs’ authority.”

“Of course not,” Daniel’s brow crease, and his chest grows heavy at Guanlin’s change of attitude. It’s sometimes hard for him to think that this youth in front of him had once been the constant beam of sunshine that had accompanied him in his growth. Daniel knows how much the big incident from two years ago had traumatized Guanlin. It had permanently wiped out any speck of remaining childish innocence from the poor young man, and left him only with the ever growing ambition to have revenge. “I know how much this mission must mean to you. I’m sorry for what happened two years ago. But please,” Daniel steps forward and grasps Guanlin’s shoulder firmly and squeezes. “Make your moves carefully and… humanely. I don’t want you to regret anything.”

Guanlin gives Daniel a distant look, as if there is just too much that is on his mind, and his soul has already wandered to somewhere foreign. Yet Guanlin is also so close, and so intensely aware of his surroundings. “Consort Park will do his job as he should,” Guanlin simply replies. “Putting him under your care is already his privilege. I wouldn't willingly wish this responsibility upon anybody, you know it.”
Daniel clenches his fist and nods slowly, reluctantly. “Actually, what I've been wanting to discuss with you about is our plans for the New Year's Celebration. The spotlight will no doubt be on us and our new consorts, so it's impossible for Consort Park to keep a low profile. You're in charge of the invitations, so I was going to discuss with you about who to invite.”

Guanlin’s head droops in thought. “Representatives from places including West Hak will be arriving as guests. We have to invite them as part of the tradition anyway, so there's no avoiding them. I've already contacted Hwang Minhyun for his aid just in case they pose an obvious threat to us during the celebration.”

“So that's why you visited East Scarlett?” Daniel smiles knowingly. “I did hear that you bought some very expensive wood and ordered for it to be made into a bookshelf as a present for Consort Park.”

“Yes,” Guanlin pulls a withered flower from a plant and places it onto the soil like he did with the one with perfect petals earlier. “I appreciate his love for books and knowledge.”

Daniel doesn't think that ‘appreciation' may be enough to justify the exorbitant amount of money spent on something that is so unnecessary. At least it is to Kang Daniel, who is a military man. Guanlin, however, seems to think the opposite, as he has always had an exquisite taste for art and literature. Perhaps this is how Consort Park and Guanlin had unknowingly bonded despite the little meetings they had.

“You should have just made him your consort,” Kang Daniel says teasingly, his smile curving up slightly more on the side. “From the way you treat and talk about him it's already as if he's yours, not mine.”

“He's not yours,” Guanlin says, returning him a weary smile. “But he's not mine either. And you know I cannot have him. At least not yet.”

“Not yet?” Kang Daniel raises a brow and mocks a look of anger, albeit lightheartedly. “Don't tell me you're planning to snatch him away from me right after all this is finished.”

Guanlin laughs. “I might do just that, Daniel, watch out.”
“Is that it?” The woman says calmly, her piercing gaze settling on the poor, trembling servant kneeling in front of her. “You're telling me that’s all you’ve got?”

“Yes, Mistress. I wouldn’t dare lie to you,” the servant girl sputters, cradling her swollen cheek with hints of tears in her eyes. Her wavering pupils are directed straight to the ground, not willing to meet the eyes of the female who had just slapped her. “I went there to check on his family myself, and it’s just as the informant described. That… That’s all.”

The woman breaths out a cold laugh. “Lies.” Raising her head, she calls out, “Suzy?”

A young girl rushes in and bows towards the woman. “Yes, Mistress?”

“Take her out and give her thirty. Hard, on the lips. If I don’t see blood, you won’t be eating these two days.”

“M-Mercy!” The servant girl’s eyes widen the moment she hears of her punishment, gasping and tearing up as she repeatedly bows her head to the floor. The young girl Suzy, as a palace maid of the consort’s, is too familiar with this kind of situation. However, she can only clench her fists, grind her teeth, and heave the servant girl in her arms like she has always done. “Forgive me, Mistress Lee! Please! I’m speaking the truth! I couldn't find anything else—”

“I would shut up if I were you,” Suzy says, not out of spite, but genuinely for the servant girl’s good. She doesn’t know if her mistress will impose a heavier punishment if the servant girl says anything wrong. With a heavy heart, Suzy clasps her hand over the girl’s mouth, and drags her out of the doors. The muffled wailing become softer and softer, until it dissolves into thin air when they vanish from sight.

“Do you suppose that was too light a punishment?” The woman’s bright red lips curl as she rests her chin on her hand after she props her elbow on the side of her chair. “She was clearly lying. Why else would she give me such limited information? What do you think, Min?”

“Your decision is always right, Mistress,” The other palace maid, named Min, says, barely moving her lips as she talks. Her eyes are kept on the floor, not wanting to meet that sharp look in her mistress’ eyes. “That girl won’t be able to talk for a while after thirty hits. She will surely reflect on her wrongdoing.”

“It's for her own good, no?” The woman looks out the door and narrows her eyes. “It’s what she deserves. Tell me, Min, about what you have found.”

“Yes, Mistress.” Min steps forward and hands over a sealed letter to the woman. “It may not be much, because the Park family seems to have thoroughly buried their complicated history for decades. The servant girl was right about the basic information, however. Park Ryu is Consort Park’s father, and he is one of the small officials in the Advisory Committee. Consort Park’s mother also comes from a scholar background, but it’s a more well known family. The Yoon family. The other information is written on the letter, please have a look yourself. The informant said it was top secret information and reminded to have the letter burnt after reading.”

The woman tears open the letter and skims over it, expression changing colourfully when she
continues through the message. Her smile spreads wider on her cheeks as she reads on, eyes sparkling with cruel excitement. “So that’s how it is,” she marvels, the piece of paper crumpling slowly in her trembling hands. “What a wonderful surprise, to think that I have found out even more than I expected to…”

Min eyes the half destroyed letter in her mistress’ hands and contemplates telling her friends at The Palace of Everlasting Purity about the incident today.

But no, on second thought, perhaps she should wait. After all, she cannot risk being chopped and tortured alive if she’s discovered.

As if on cue to remind her of the dreaded consequences, Suzy comes back with the servant girl, whose lips and its surrounding skin have swollen horribly, blood streaking down from the reddened areas to her neck.

Min looks at the girl’s half passed out state and shudders violently in the corner.

“The tailor has arrived,” says Fei, rushing in to greet Jihoon with a look of delight. “You must choose the materials and the design carefully, Master!”

“The tailor?” Jihoon frowns, looking up from his book on his study desk. “Why should I need a tailor?”

“The New Years’ Celebration, you dummy,” Jinyoung says, shaking his head as he pours the hot tea into Jihoon’s cup. “You’ll have to dress for the occasion. Nanny Zhou said that the tailor was going to visit to help you decide on your outfit, remember?”

“Oh,” Jihoon mutters intelligently, putting down the book he had been reading for the past few hours. It’s already long past noon, and he would be lying if he said that he hadn’t been nearly bored to death. In his current condition, he would almost welcome any company.

His crease deepens. No, he corrects himself silently. Anyone but the Second Prince and his consort.

The tailor comes in and Jihoon quickly stands, greeting him promptly. He doesn’t expect to see a man, but perhaps he has stereotyped the image of tailors too quickly. The tailor who comes in seems a little bit older than him, around Fei and Jia’s age, and is quite good looking. The only lacking thing about his appearance seems to be his height.

As if the tailor has caught onto his thoughts, he rolls his eyes. “Yes, I know, I’m short. I’ve been told that many times. I’m Ha Sungwoon, by the way. Very nice to meet you.”

“No…” Jihoon blinks a few times, wanting to deny the tailor’s suspicions but not knowing how to. “I mean, nice to meet you too. I’m-”

“Park Jihoon, Consort Park. Yes, yes, I know. Let’s skip that nonsense. For convenience’s sake I’ll be dropping the formalities. I’ll call you Jihoon, alright? You’re younger than me anyways. I’ll be seeing you a lot these few days to take measurements and ask for your opinions on the progress and the design of your costume, so just call me Sungwoon for now on. Or whatever makes you feel comfortable.” He narrows his eyes at Jihoon as he sets down the large box onto his study table. “Don’t you dare call me ‘Shortie’ though, that I won’t tolerate. Guanlin does it and he’s a real prick. Daniel’s too nice to say that but sometimes I feel like he has the urge to do it.”

“I…” Jihoon feels like he hasn’t had a chance to talk ever since the tailor has arrived. But he’s not
complaining, because the tailor seems like a pretty amusing person. Also, he thinks with small grin, anyone who has the guts to call the Second Prince a prick is definitely worth befriending. “Sungwoon. I’ll call you Sungwoon… if you don’t mind.” From the tailor’s outgoing and carefree attitude and the careless direct addressing of the princes, Jihoon can already tell that he is no simple person.

“Sure, that’s fine. Now please, get these books out of my sight, it’s hurting my head just looking at them.” Sungwoon’s crosses his arms, standing in front of his box that is at risk of falling at the edge of the study table. “Plus, I need to lay out the silk for you to see. These are absolute treasures, I tell you. I hand picked the newest silk with the trendiest seasonal colours, and I can’t wait to show you.”

Jihoon can’t help but crack a smile at the contagious bubbly attitude of the tailor. He and Jinyoung quickly stack the books and put them into the shelf, making way for Sungwoon to move his box inwards and lay out the clothing materials.

“Here, have a look.” Many pieces of silk with a variety of colours are layered and arranged carefully across the desk. Sungwoon invites Jihoon to touch them, and Jihoon runs his hand over the smooth layer, immediately acknowledging the value of the silk. It’s incredibly soft to the touch, and there are no traces of thread lines. The silk is like continuously flowing water, sparkling under the sunlight peeking through the palace windows.

“Impressed?” Sungwoon eyes the look of awe in his face and beams proudly. “That’s the quality of the silk from my company, Pearl Hill. And I’m saying, you,” he points a finger at Jihoon, “have the privilege of wearing a costume made out of this.”

Jihoon looks at the different colours and his hand stops on a silver layer of silk. It’s a lighter colour of silver, one that is closer to the white colour of the fabric next to it. The colour has somehow caught his eye, and he runs his hand over the simple coloured silk.

“You like that?” Sungwoon says, sounding clearly amused. “I can use it for your costume, if you want. You did strike me as someone who would prefer the less flamboyant colours.”

Jihoon carefully retracts his hand and eyes the other fabric. “It’s a personal preference,” he explains. “But is it too simple for a New Years’ celebration?”

“Oh, trust me, I can make anything work,” Sungwoon says, rolling his eyes and waving his hand to dismiss his worries. “Silver may not be the most flashy colour but it is a subtle sign of nobility. There’s gold, and then there’s silver, right?” He raises his brow and puts on a teasing smile. “Now that I think of it, Daniel ordered a golden robe. You two will look like a match made in heaven. Not that you aren’t yet,” Sungwoon says casually, proceeding to fold the other silk into the box he carried them in earlier.

Jihoon freezes at the mention of his relationship with the Crown Prince. They are hardly even acquaintances, and their interactions have all been strictly professional. Not to mention, if what the Crown Prince had briefed him on was true, their relationship was strictly for business.

“Guanlin though, that boy, seriously. Wearing black all day! Is there nothing else that is to his liking? I’m tired of making clothes for him,” Sungwoon groans, exasperated. “And his consort? That girl is a real bitch, if you haven’t seen for yourself already.”

Jihoon blinks, clearly taken aback at Sungwoon’s vulgar use of language. However, he can’t help but agree. “You’re making clothes for her too?”
“Honey, I make clothes for all the important young people around here. You, your beloved Crown Prince, the Second Prince and his consort, as well as several of the Emperor’s concubines.” Sungwoon wrinkles his nose. “Some of them are ungrateful little shits but the royal family pays me enough for my work, so I suppose it’s all good.”

Jihoon decides that he likes this chatty tailor quite a lot, and would like him to stay a while to be his company for this originally long, boring afternoon. “If you have time, would you like join me for a walk and chat for a while? You seem to be very well acquainted with the life in the palace.”

Sungwoon’s eyes light up and he returns his smile. “I do have some sewing work to do but that can wait. I’ve been curious enough about you anyway,” he says straightforwardly. Jihoon laughs out loud, enjoying his point-blank way of speaking. In this palace, people never talk without implications. There is veil after veil, and Jihoon is tired of unmasking people or figuring out the meanings behind words. Sungwoon is a definite relief for him at this point.

They head out of the palace with Sungwoon in the lead. Apparently, Sungwoon had already come to the palace countless of times to see his customers and custom make the clothes for them. Jihoon soon learnt that Pearl Hill was a high end company that made clothes only high ranked nobles or the royal family could afford. “But I can offer your family a special, special discount,” Sungwoon’s eyes sparkle with enthusiasm as he makes the offer. “Since you’re the only customer is willing to hear me talk.”

Jihoon shakes his head and sighs. He understands why his customers tend to dismiss Sungwoon so quickly. His mouth ran on and on, and there was no stopping him. He didn’t mind though, since he had nothing to do. And there were gossips around the palace that only Sungwoon knew and was willing to tell him about.

“Daniel, Guanlin and I are childhood friends. Along with some other people that you may or may not know.” He explains, almost skipping along the corridor in enthusiasm. “This is why I can address them so casually. To be very honest, I’m surprised that Daniel picked you as his concubine. You never struck me as the type he would like. I mean, you’re very pretty.”

“Me?” Jihoon’s hand unconsciously touches his face at the mention of his appearance. “Uh, thank you?” He says, trailing uncomfortably behind Sungwoon’s ecstatically bouncing figure.

“Okay, look, kid.” Sungwoon stops abruptly, and Jihoon halts immediately to avoid bumping into him. He spins to look at Jihoon with narrowed eyes, which is slightly comical because he is not even close to being intimidating with his height. “I’m glad he chose you because you seem like a nice guy. And you’re a scholar, no less, which is beneficial to him as a militarist. But if it were anyone else, I might really punch them in the face and tell them to wake up, because there’s no way Kang Daniel would fall in love with anyone other than…” he trails off and blinks, as if he is wondering whether or not he should go on.

Jihoon frowns, confused. “Other than?” He prompts Sungwoon to continue, slightly curious of the Crown Prince’s love life.

Sungwoon doesn’t have a chance to continue when someone from behind Jihoon clasps a hand on his shoulder. Jihoon spins and sees a familiar face belonging to someone he hasn’t seen in weeks. He raises a brow as his lips quirk in delight and mild surprise.

“Remember me?” The man says, a familiar charming smile gracing his features. “I really hope you do, because I remember you.”

“Yes, of course I do. Pleased to meet you again, Seongwoo.” Jihoon can’t forget the face that he
met right after his first meeting with the royal family on the day of the Selection. “I was hoping we
would meet again.”

“So did I. You’re a delightful company,” Seongwoo says, smiling. He’s wearing a bit differently
from the other day Jihoon met him. His plain clothing has been changed into the delicately
designed uniform of high ranked officials, with the strong accent of royal blue emphasising his
status.

“Seongwoo? What are you doing here?” Sungwoon says, looking a little guilty for god knows
what. “Aren’t you supposed to be at court?”

“Sungwoon, my friend.” He walks past Jihoon and easily slings an arm over the shorter one’s
shoulder, throwing a knowing look at the tailor. “Court meeting ended a while ago. You would
know if you actually went.”

Jihoon stares, in an awkward position himself. Sungwoon and Seongwoo seems to have been
acquainted well before this, and Jihoon is still unclear of Seongwoo’s true identity. But then,
something clicks, and he understands why he initially found the surname ‘Ong’ so familiar.

The Ong family was one of the four big families among nobles. How could Jihoon forget? General
Ong was the Crown Prince’s personal mentor in the military, and helped lead the royal army
before Kang Daniel became of age. Jihoon had read countless of books on his success and his
brave conquering of neighbouring kingdoms that were of threat one after another. The royal family
respected the Ong family, and they went a long way back. General Ong is likely to be Seongwoo’s
grandfather, as he is seventy and has already retired from his career. If that’s the case, then Ong
Seongwoo is the young talent that has recently made a breakthrough and became the youngest high
ranked official on court.

“I don’t need to go, Daniel already exempted me of my duties as a part time official,” whines
Sungwoon, struggling under Seongwoo’s grasp. He gives the young official a look of distaste. “I’m
more interested in my own company.”

“You shouldn’t be going around and calling the Crown Prince by his name,” Seongwoo says,
shaking his head. “Even Jihoon doesn’t have that privilege as his wife-” he stops, and turns to
Jihoon, who’s absolutely clueless of the situation. “Or do you?”

“I don’t…” he says hesitantly. The Crown Prince probably only allows him to call him by his
name in private.

“But you do, Seongwoo,” Sungwoon says, voice softening a tad bit. “As I was just saying-”

“Hey,” Seongwoo clamps his mouth shut and beams at Jihoon. “On this rare occasion, should we
go to the nearby gazebo for a chat and some tea?”

Jihoon, still mostly befuddled, soon finds himself following the two other men to a gazebo by the
lake. He had nearly forgotten that Jinyoung was beside him, since Jinyoung had become unusually
quiet, but he was thankful that Jinyoung could help him grab some tea and tea cups to serve the
other two guests.

Seongwoo sighs after he takes a sip. “That is wonderful. What type of tea is this?”

“Jinyoung’s special blend,” Jihoon says, smiling gratefully at his best friend, who stands
emotionless at the side. “He’s been making it for me since we were really young.”

“Is that so?” Seongwoo smiles at Jinyoung, who gives him a stiff one in return. “What does it
include?”

“Peasant ingredients,” deadpans Jinyoung.

Jihoon stiffens, and his eyes widen at his best friend, slightly apprehensive of the other two people’s reaction.

The air freezes for a moment.

Just as Jihoon is about to apologise for Jinyoung’s misbehaviour, Seongwoo starts laughing. Not long after, Sungwoon joins in, and the two soon double up in laughter, clutching their stomachs. Jihoon, seeing this, cracks a smile. Jinyoung’s lips also quirk up a little at their reaction.

Thanks to Jinyoung, the four people start conversing under a much more relaxing atmosphere.

“Such a meaningful boy you have by your side.” Much to Jihoon’s delight, Seongwoo doesn’t call Jinyoung Jihoon’s servant.

“He is good company,” says Jihoon, smiling like a proud mother. “Jinyoung’s more like a friend than a servant to me, so I’m happy he accompanied me to the palace.”

Sungwoon nods. “How old are you two? And you’re Jinyoung, right? Since you’re a friend of Jihoon’s, come join us. No need to be so uptight about the rules.”

Jinyoung politely takes a seat beside Jihoon. “Thank you, sirs. I’m fifteen, and Jihoon is seventeen.”

“So young,” Sungwoon breaths, putting a hand over his chest, feeling attacked.

Seongwoo laughs and hits him gently on the arm. “You’re just old.” He turns to Jihoon with an approving glance. “You’re very smart and mature for your age.”

“Thank you,” Jihoon says, not knowing how he should react to the compliment. “So are you.” He blurts, without thinking.

Seongwoo smiles, not aware of his slip, but Sungwoon scoffs. “Smart and mature? You have to be kidding. He makes the worst jokes.”

“I don’t. They are top quality jokes,” Seongwoo defends himself firmly, crossing his arms.

“No...” Sungwoon puts a hand over his eyes and leans towards the left to put maximum distance between him and Seongwoo. “That’s not true,” he half whispers, just loud enough for Seongwoo to hear.

“What? I’m funny.”

“You’re only funny to Daniel, sweetheart. No one else.”

Somehow, the conversation has once again steered towards the royal family, and Jihoon finds that he cannot resist listing out his questions out of curiosity. “Are you two childhood friends of the Crown Prince and the Second Prince?”

“Yes,” Sungwoon says. “Me, Seongwoo, Daniel, Guanlin and Minhyun. You don’t know Minhyun yet, I suppose, but you’ll meet him soon. We met though the same mentor.”

“Mentor?” Jinyoung questions.

Jihoon never knew that General Ong had apprentices other than Kang Daniel. Perhaps it was because these details that were not relevant to the royal family would never be listed in the books. However, he’s surprised that Guanlin, a seemingly tame man, had once been trained in the military.

“Surprised?” Sungwoon says, raising a brow at Jihoon’s expression.

“I just… didn’t expect the Second Prince to be a military apprentice.” He chuckles. “Can’t quite imagine him wrestling with someone.”

“Oh, Guanlin doesn’t do hand to hand combat. None of that. He wouldn’t want so much a scratch on his delicate body,” Sungwoon says.

“That’s just you,” retorts Seongwoo. “Guanlin is not a hand to hand combat master, but he can fight. He is stronger than any ordinary man in the army, I suppose. But he prefers not to do any of the dirty work. You should see him with a sword or a bow and arrow, though. Every year we have this annual hunting camp, and who knows how many girls have swooned witnessing his skills.”

“Now that you mention it, the girls will be so jealous of Lee Hyejin,” Sungwoon laughs, shaking his head. “She will probably be accompanying him by his side at this year’s hunt.”

Jinyoung frowns at the mention of the Second Prince’s consort. “She has a horrible personality.”

“What, you’ve met already?” Seongwoo says, snorting. “I remember our first meeting with her. It was at the restaurant Guanlin frequents. Violetta Garden, remember?”

Sungwoon nods, groaning. “It was a reunion lunch and she completely ruined it. She was trying too hard to impress us, most likely because she knows of our statuses. Either that, or because we’re Guanlin’s friends. Even Guanlin looked frustrated. I feel sorry for him, if it weren’t for the Emperor’s wishes, I doubt he would have married her.”

“Is her family especially influential?” Jihoon asks. From what he heard and what he observed that time he met the couple, Guanlin doesn’t exactly seem to be fond of his consort. As much as Jihoon dislikes Guanlin, deep down he acknowledges that he is a decent and respectable person. However, the same cannot be said for his consort. Jihoon can’t help but feel a rather antagonistic vibe from the woman.

“Oh, yes. Not as influential as Seongwoo’s, but almost there. She’s from one of the four prestigious noble families, the Lee family. Since the Lee’s has always been upholding neutrality in political stances, this marriage is probably a way for the royal family to gain the Lee family’s support and secure their power.”

“Yes, and the problem at the borders… it’s quite troublesome. That’s why the royal family needs all the support they can have,” says Seongwoo, expression stiffening at the topic.

Jihoon is aware of the situation because of his studies and Kang Daniel’s briefing. He knows that it’s a touchy subject, and so he tries to change the topic. “You don’t really seem like you’d be an official, Sungwoon.”

Sungwoon waves and shakes his head, face full of disgust at the mention of the word ‘official’. “That’s because I’m not one. I respect people who offer what they can to the country. But I can’t, I’m not born for this kind of drama.”
“His parents are absolutely distressed because of him,” says Seongwoo. “He’s now a part time official even though he keeps denying it. He still offers quality advice to the Emperor through the princes, but he prefers his own career as a tailor over the so-called over dramatic palace life.”

“What? It's true,” Sungwoon shrugs. “In the palace people either openly attack or backstab each other. There's no in between, nor is there ever peace. It's bad for my skin to tolerate such stress.”

Jinyoung sighs and looks at Jihoon as he hears this. “It'll be so hard for Jihoon.”

“When he is alone, perhaps,” Seongwoo says, a conflicted smile making its way to his lips. “But don't you worry. The Crown Prince will never let a loved one be hurt, and as long as you stay by his side, you will be safe.”

Jihoon doesn't overlook the look of sympathy Sungwoon gives to Seongwoo at this particular moment. No, he can't miss the fact that Sungwoon had almost revealed an important figure of the Crown Prince’s love life, nor can he ignore Seongwoo’s weariness whenever he mentions the Crown Prince.

He briefly recalls the conversation he's had with Seongwoo outside the royal grounds on the Selection Day and inwardly sighs.

Jihoon believes he's had this half figured out, and a heavy weight settles on his chest. He doesn't know how the Crown Prince sees Ong Seongwoo, but one thing is for sure; Seongwoo likes the Crown Prince, and Jihoon has obstructed any development of a possible romantic relationship between the two.

What is luxury that comes with status, when you can't even be with the person you love?

Guanlin finds himself waking up the third time tonight, panting and drenched with sweat, heart strumming aggressively against his chest.

It's one of those nightmares again, and it's coming more frequent than ever.

He looks down at his blankets that are wrinkled and slightly damp under his sweaty grasp. Breathing a shaky sigh, he runs a hand through his damp brown hair, and swings his legs down the side of the bed. He puts on his shoes and stands up, legs slightly wobbly from the ordeal in his sleep, and puts an arm on the bedpost for support.

He crawls towards the wardrobe near the side of the room and fumbles for the hairpin, an object that often appears in his nightmares. He holds it up to the window and draws a sharp intake of breath as the gold sparkles under the moonlight. The hairpin’s design is intricate, clearly a maker’s masterpiece. The phoenix on top of the pin spreads its wings, showing off the two small rubies dangling off its tail. The rest of the pin are pure gold, needle sharp ends threateningly reflecting the light into Guanlin’s eyes, piercing through the very core of his soul.

Guanlin squeezes his eyes shut, an obvious act of regression to avoid the danger this pin seems to pose on his being. He trembles slightly and loosens his grasp on the hairpin, dropping it to the floor with a gentle clink.

He drops and kneels down in front of the pin, a pained expression crossing his face. This hairpin is the last reminder of his late mother. Ironically, it is also the weapon that ended his mother’s life this night, two years ago.

He glares at the hairpin with such torment, such hatred, such pain, such sadness. It’s right there in
front of him, and his vengeful spirit can't help but make him want to use this very pin to strike down his enemy, the culprit responsible for his mother’s death.

He makes a grab for the pin and clutches it with great strength in his hand, the sharp ends stinging through flesh and drawing blood. The red lines stream down his wrist and drips to his white sleeping robe, staining the purity with vengeful darkness. The red drops of blood are like flowers blooming on a white sheet of paper, beautiful but awful.

Guanlin only feels numbness in his hand when he drops it to his side, gripping the pin so tightly in his fist that the blood drips onto the floor, staining the red carpet. He drags his feet across the floor and heads out of his bedchambers, immediately greeted by nervous servants.

“I’m fine!” He growls under his breath, flinging off their concerned touches. “I just… need to clear my head.”

One of the head maids of the palace who is on duty hears the commotion and peeks in. When she makes light of the situation, she immediately walks in to stop the servants. It's not the first time the Second Prince would wander out in the middle of the night to clear his mind. It has been like this since the incident two years ago. She looks at the hairpin in his hand and the blood seeping through, heart clenching at the pitiful sight. She is again reminded that today is the day that the Prince’s mother was cruelly murdered in front of his eyes, and all she can do is provide her reassurance by leaving him be. She pulls the servants aside and quickly helps Guanlin fasten a robe over his sleeping gown, allowing him to leave the palace and take a walk outside.

Guanlin doesn't have the heart to thank her, but nods a little before sluggishly stepping out of the palace, a trail of blood following his steps. Subconsciously, he trots down the path towards the lake, eyes a little red with unshed tears stinging the corners of his eyes.

He stops when he sees his destination, and looks at the blood drenched hairpin in his hand. He holds it up carefully under the moonlight, putting it in his view on top of the murky waters reflecting the half moon.

Maybe he should end it, once and for all.

As he takes a dangerously close step to the edge of the lake, peering in a daze at the waters that stirred a little from the movement of the fish from below, he feels himself slowly being drawn into the darkness.

“What are you doing!”

A voice rings in his ears. It is familiar and soothing. The voice pulls him out of his trance and causes him to spin and look to confirm the identity of the voice’s owner.

Standing there with a look of panic and anger on his face is no other than his half brother’s consort, Park Jihoon.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry you had to tolerate such a passive, action-lacking chapter. I swear the next one will make up for it.
Pleaaaaaasssseee drop comments they mean a lot to me and motivate me to write faster
:) anyway I love every one of you, thank you for your support! You guys are the absolute sweetest.
If you have any things you're unclear about please do tell me!! I am more than happy to clarify.
The Calm Before the Storm

Jihoon lays on his bed, wide awake. He doesn’t know if it’s because he has drunk too much tea in the afternoon, but he just can’t seem to sleep. He twists and turns on his bed, squeezing his eyes shut.

A while later, he finds himself sitting up on his bed and leaning against the bedpost.

This won’t do.

He swings his feet down the side of the bed and walks to the window, peering out to the scenery. He is lucky to have been allocated to a palace near the garden, so he can let his eyes rest as he enjoys the wonderful scenery after spending a long time reading.

The moon is very bright tonight, Jihoon realizes. The natural light infiltrates his room, lighting up the dark furniture. His heart calms at the sight of peaceful nature. Sometimes, a place in silence is a place best for nourishing the soul.

He pulls a chair from his study to the window and sits on it, glancing out in a daze. He’s had a lot on his mind these two weeks, so he has been finding it hard to sleep immediately at night. Tonight seems to be a pretty bad night of insomnia for him, but the scenery is able to keep his mind at temporary peace.

He doesn’t count how long, but quite a while after, his eyelids droop as his heartbeat settles in his chest, the sound of crickets gently lulling him to sleep. His head eventually bumps the windowsill and causes him to spring back up.

Drowsily, he stands up from his chair and gets ready to head back to his bed to sleep, but he catches something in the corner of his eye.

A shadow seems to stretch across the garden, becoming shorter and shorter as it nears the lake. Jihoon’s weariness dissolves as his heartbeat picks up, thousands of suspicions running through his head.

He remembers the Crown Prince telling him about the Red Cloak tribe spies in the palace and grips tightly on the edge of the chair, swallowing slowly as he peers once again at the window.

The paranoia causes him to shudder and break into a cold sweat. He’s suddenly aware of the cold temperature, realising only now that he is not wearing anything but a simple thin layer of fabric that is his sleeping robe.

The shadow stops beside the lake, and Jihoon’s breathing halts with it momentarily. He rubs his eyes and gazes closely at the shadow, willing himself to focus.

Somehow, the figure seems quite familiar. It’s tall and slender, with its back facing Jihoon’s view. Jihoon narrows his eyes, clearing his vision.

Before he can process who the person is, he finds the figure moving incredibly close to the edge of the lake. Jihoon’s eyes widens as he grasps onto the windowsill, pushing himself closer to the window to confirm what he has just seen.

His hand flies to his mouth as he realizes that the person, likely a man, seems about ready to step into the lake.
Is the person trying to commit suicide?

The lake, he heard, is deep enough to drown people. There has been an incident or two where palace servants, unable to tolerate the stressful environment, would end their lives either at the lake or the well.

Whatever the person’s thoughts were, it’s incredibly dangerous to step this close to the edge.

Without thinking further, Jihoon hurriedly slips on his shoes and rushes out of his palace.

“Where are you going?” cries Jia, startled in the middle of her post. She watches in alarm as her master runs out to the dark in only his sleeping robe and poorly worn shoes, and quickly follows after him.

Jihoon runs in his top speed to the garden, feeling that the distance is suddenly too long. His heart pounds against his chest, worries of not being able to save the person suddenly floating into his mind.

Finally, he reaches the garden and sees the figure he’d seen from the window, still arching over the dark waters as if in a trance.

“What are you doing!”

The figure seems to freeze when he hears Jihoon’s voice.

Jihoon is suddenly a hundred times more apprehensive when the figure starts to turn slowly to his direction.

A familiar face reveals itself under the moonlight, beautifully defined features coming into view.

Yet, on this familiar face is an unfamiliar trace of vulnerability with unspoken sadness, regret and perhaps even anger.

Jihoon finds himself unable to speak as he meets the face he recognises and remembers so clearly.

It is the Second Prince, Lai Guanlin.

He freezes on his spot even when he finds the Second Prince slowly coming near him, mind going completely blank.

The Second Prince stops in front of him, his chest only inches apart from Jihoon’s lowered head.

Jihoon opens his mouth and tries to raise his head to speak, but before he can do so, he finds the Second Prince taking off his fur cloak and draping it over Jihoon’s slightly trembling body. The warmth engulfs him, and Jihoon almost immediately stops shivering.

Had he been shivering? He hasn’t even noticed. Subconsciously, he grips tightly onto the cloak and shrinks into the warmth.

Seeing this, the Second Prince bends over and whispers in his ear, “If you just wear that, you’ll get a cold.” Jihoon shivers and flinches a little from the warm breath.

There is no time for Jihoon to process anything else when the Second Prince steps backwards from him and heads back to the edge of the lake. He watches as the prince lowers himself and kneels at the side, dipping his hand and whatever he is holding into the water.
Jihoon holds tight onto the warm cloak over his body, then takes a few courageous steps closer to where the Second Prince stays. As he comes closer, he sees the water near the prince’s dipped hand turning red, rippling out slowly into the vast lake. His grasp on the robe tightens, realizing in shock that the prince’s hand must have been injured very badly.

He doesn’t know what he is thinking as he steps forward next to the prince and kneels down next to him, taking his wet hand out of the water, and runs his hand over the bloodied palm.

“Jia,” he calls.

The maid walks out from the dark hesitantly and bows her head towards the two young men. She had stood quietly in the dark, not wanting to disrupt this strange encounter between the two people of status. “Yes, Master?”

“Bring a basin of warm water and a clean bandage cloth, please.”

The female nods and runs out of the garden to the direction of the palace.

Jihoon examines the injured palm and the item laying on the grass next to it. It’s a delicate golden hairpin, with smouldered red spots on different areas. He assumes that this is the item that caused the wound on the Second Prince’s hand.

“What were you thinking?” he asks softly.

For the first time tonight, he raises his head and glances directly at the Second Prince. His heart drops a little when he sees the reddened corners of the prince’s eyes, and immediately retracts his hand. Had the Second Prince been crying?

The prince holds Jihoon’s gaze for a while and then turns towards the lake, a distant look crossing his features. Jihoon’s fingers curl, acknowledging that he might have crossed the line when he reached out to the prince. The atmosphere remains awkward and tense between the two before Jia comes again with a basin of hot water, a towel and a bandage wrap.

“Would you like me to do it, Your Highness?” Jia asks politely towards the Second Prince.

“I’ll do it myself, thank you,” the prince says. Jia doesn’t argue with him and bows her head again before taking her leave, resting assured that her Master will be safe with the Second Prince by her side.

Jihoon watches as the prince dips his hand into the hot water, not even flinching when the heat attacks his wound. He uses his other hand to clean the blood around the wound and when he’s finished, he dries his two hands with a towel. Ripping a piece of bandage cloth, he drapes the white fabric over his hand and holds an end with his teeth. He wraps it around his hand several times until it is fully secure.

Jihoon sees him struggling with the final step of his self-treatment, hand clumsily fumbling over the two ends of the fabric and attempting to close them with a knot.

“Let me,” Jihoon says, and the prince stops in his fumbling. Jihoon lets his ice cold fingers work their way through the knot, brushing over the hand of the prince’s that had just been warmed in hot water. His hand tingles a little from the touch, and he ignores the strange feeling bubbling in his chest as he helps the prince with the bandage.

When he finishes, he quickly withdraws his hands again.
“Don’t… seek for death like that,” Jihoon murmurs, eyes dropping to the bloodied item laying in the grass. He can feel the prince’s intense gaze burning into his soul, and he shivers once, uncomfortable under such scrutiny.

Another irritatingly awkward silence settles between them.

Usually, the sound of crickets and the rippling water would help calm Jihoon’s unsteady heartbeats, but tonight it seems to do the opposite to him. Every sound seems to encourage his heart to pick up a faster pace, pumping aggressively in his chest.

“I wasn’t trying to commit suicide,” the prince says finally, after what seemed like an eternity.

Jihoon’s head snaps up, and he meets the illuminated eyes of the prince. Perhaps it’s the moonlight, or the lake’s reflection, or the prince’s own special characteristic. Those eyes always seem to captivate his soul with a sharp twinkle.

“I was just going to get rid of this.” Jihoon follows the prince’s gaze to the object on the ground. It was the hairpin that had hurt the second prince earlier, somehow.

“You-” Jihoon exhales, letting out a breath he doesn’t know he had been holding. “Is that so?”

The prince doesn’t say anything further, and Jihoon realizes that he may have misunderstood the situation. Perhaps the prince was just trying to throw this hairpin into the lake, and he had mistaken the act for a suicide attempt. This is the Second Prince, who is he kidding? He probably is fully capable of stopping himself from sliding into the deep, dark waters.

Jihoon can’t help but feel embarrassed. He doesn’t know how to look straight at the Second Prince anymore, now that he had assumed wrongly out loud that he was going to commit suicide.

The Second Prince hoists himself up and holds out a hand for Jihoon. Jihoon takes it, still not willing to meet his eyes, and lifts himself from the ground.

“I can’t die yet,” the prince suddenly says, and the grip on Jihoon’s hand tightens, sending a shiver down his spine. “I have duties to fulfill before my end.”

To Jihoon’s relief, he finally lets go of his hand and fastens the cloak tightly over Jihoon’s shoulders. “Goodnight, Consort Park.”

That’s the last thing Jihoon hears before the footsteps pass him and vanish slowly behind him.

Jihoon glances at the golden pin on the floor. The Second Prince had wanted to get rid of it, but no matter how Jihoon sees it, the item doesn’t seem to be something that should be disposed this way.

He takes the pin and dips it into the basin of water, cleaning the red off the gold. He takes it out, dries it on the towel, and slips it into his sleeve.

“Tailor Ha sends his greetings,” Fei says as she brings in a delicately wrapped box. She hands the package over to Jihoon, who eyes the box and opens it to peer inside.

He takes out the robe from within and stands to hold it up for a full view. The girls gasp in wonder, and Jinyoung mutters a soft ‘wow’. Jihoon stares at the piece of clothing, lips curving up as he marvels at Sungwoon’s beautiful needlework.

“That is gorgeous,” Jia breaths, shaking her head. “I’ve heard a lot about Tailor Ha’s amazing
skills, but I’ve never had the privilege to witness it firsthand.”

“Alright, there’s no time to waste,” Fei claps her hands twice. “Let’s get started with the preparation. We have only a while left before the event starts,” Her eyes twinkle with anticipation. “I cannot wait to make you more beautiful than you already are, young Master.”

Jinyoung takes holds of Jihoon’s arm and pulls him over to the chair in front of the mirror. Pushing him down onto the seat, he grabs Jihoon’s face and turns it gently towards the mirror. “I heard Fei and Jia have exceptional skills in doing makeovers. They’ll turn you into a goddess.”

“Goddess?” Jihoon raises a brow. “I’m a man, Jinyoung.”

Jinyoung sticks his tongue out and stands aside for the girls to get their preparation work going. Jia combines in a basin some chopped herbs, leaves, aromatic oils and powder, and put the scrub onto Jihoon’s face, slowly rubbing in the essence and peeling the dead cells off his skin. Meanwhile, Fei combs his long hair back, smoothing the knots and rough edges. Subtle pain attacks Jihoon’s scalp and skin, which makes him slightly uncomfortable, but the girls said they will make it quick, so he isn't about to make any complaints.

Jinyoung cheekily takes a bottle of lotion and sits beside Jihoon. He then takes one of Jihoon’s hands and starts smoothing out the lotion on his skin, massaging his hands as he does so. Jihoon opens his eyes in the process of the scrub and muffles a laugh when he sees the catches sight of the unwavering attention his best friend is giving his hand.

“Don’t break off my fingers, I’ll break yours back,” Jihoon teases.

“As if I can do anything to the Crown Prince’s consort,” Jinyoung retorts, rolling his eyes. Their little banter brings laughter to the two girls.

Fei is almost finished with tying the hair at the upper scalp into a bun, securing it with a beautiful multi colored crystal pin. The rest of the hair drapes over Jihoon’s back, raven black and silky smooth. Jia washes off the face scrub with some water and dabs a warm towel against Jihoon’s face, proceeding with the addition of powder and colour onto his features.

“Your facial lines are really pretty,” Jia says, focused on patting the creamy white powder onto Jihoon’s face. “And your complexion is so fair. I was worried for a second that your skin would be lighter coloured than the powder Nanny Zhou brought.”

“What are your secrets? Tell us,” says Fei with a giggle. “None of us seem to be competition for you in looks.”

“He doesn’t do anything special to keep himself in good condition,” scoffs Jinyoung. “He’s born this way.”

“I really don’t do much,” says Jihoon, giving Jinyoung a look to show his mild disapproval, albeit with little seriousness. “But I eat clean. They always say ‘you are what you eat’. I suppose that’s the truth.”

His lips are blotted with a blend of orange and red colours that stand out but are modest in presentation. Jia dusts his face slightly pink, adding to Jihoon’s overall youthful look. When she is finished refining his makeup, she tells him to open his eyes and look at the mirror.

Jihoon sees a pair of eyes with sharpened lines staring back at him. His face and skin seems to give a rejuvenating glow. With the lipstick, pale complexion, as well as the hair draped over his shoulder, he looks absolutely dazzling with hints of both feminine and masculine charm.
He is mostly content with how he looks, though he would have preferred to keep a lower profile with lighter makeup.

That being said, the makeup isn’t overdone at all, and is even extremely fitting for the occasion of a glamorous New Years’ Celebration in the palace.

Jihoon stands and the girls help him remove the outer layer of his robe, replacing it with the magnificently designed piece custom made by Ha Sungwoon. Jihoon feels the silk, cool and soft against his skin, and admits that Sungwoon’s items are definitely worth their unbelievably high price.

The three servants step back and look at their young master, each of them gasping and sighing and murmuring small praises. The new robe is made from plain yet stunning silver silk, a wonderful complement to Jihoon’s pale and fair complexion. At the linings of his sleeve and neck are patterns of dark blue flowers on lighter blue bands, each and every bud differing from the rest. Gold leaf patterns attach subtly to the side of the robe and adds the desired air of nobility.

“Just how many people are you planning to strike down with your looks tonight?” Jinyoung smirks, shaking his head.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you earned the affection of all the females tonight.”


After a short while of pampering and ushering, Eunuch Xi steps into the palace and notifies that the carriage is ready.

“You’ll be surprised at how lively this event is,” says Eunuch Xi, the smile reaching till his eyes. “All the nobles from Tian He are arriving quickly, and even guests from other kingdoms are coming to congratulate the two princes on their wedding.”

Jihoon tenses as he hears this, climbing up the carriage slowly with Fei’s help. He sits, leaning forward as he plops his elbow on his crossed leg. The carriage’s pace starts to pick up, and so does his heartbeat.

The noises seem to get louder and louder, laughter and shouts surrounding the carriage.

“The nobles bring their entire families over,” Jia explains, watching Jihoon blink strangely at the window. “The children get together and play around as they wish around the palace. The Empress allows it because she loves children.”

Jihoon brushes the curtain beads and looks out. Sure enough, there are children in expensive robes running around, holding red lanterns and packets, singing and dancing and laughing as they prance in full glory of childhood innocence. Jihoon’s gaze warms and he smiles at the sight of the children enjoying themselves, quickly reminded of the days where he would do the same at traditional Chinese New Year festivals on the streets.

Only then does he realize how much he misses life outside the palace. The markets are always bustling with people, and he is always surrounded with pleasant noises from the warm chattering and greetings. During these kind of festivals, people gathered around to make, sell and buy festival food or toys. They would sing and dance, and the entertainment house performers would put on a free show for the people. He and Jinyoung would follow the others and stick up spring festival couplets and set off firecrackers.
“I miss it too. Our old lives.” Jinyoung puts a hand on his shoulder. Jihoon tears his gaze from the window and exchanges a knowing glance with his best friend, and sighs. Their lives as normal people have long left them.

“We’re here, Master,” Eunuch Xi announces from outside. Jihoon feels the carriage come to a stop and he looks out from the gaps of the curtain beads. They are stopping a rather great distance from the main place for the event, but he can see the noble families arriving in their very own special makeup and clothing, showing off their best assets to the people around them.

“Careful, Master.” The two maids hold out their hands to help Jihoon down the carriage, and Jinyoung follows quickly. He notices there is another similar looking carriage stopping behind theirs, and he turns his head to look at the person descending from it.

Jihoon’s smile tenses when he takes a good look at the person. It is no other than Consort Lee. She is beautiful, of course. Devilishly so. Her luscious red lips synchronise with her sharp red robe, accentuating her pale skin and the whiter flowers scattered in an orderly pattern over the clothing. There are gold brims on her robe, and the clothing hugs her voluptuous figure, emphasising her best features.

As she lands graciously on the floor, her head turns and her eyes meet Jihoon’s. Her black pupils sparkle viciously, and a smile spreads over her red lips like an unspoken threat.

*Click, clack. Click, clack.*

She walks towards him, the sound of her heels aggressively making their way into Jihoon’s ears. As she closes their distance, Jihoon finds himself curling his fingers, a feeling of coldness washing over him.

“Why, you look gorgeous, Consort Park.” Her white teeth shows as she talks with a smile plastered on her face, malicious intent seemingly only visible to Jihoon on her prepossessing features.

“Please, Consort Lee, you’re too kind.” Jihoon returns her a graceful, relaxed smile. “Shall we enter together?”
HAPPY CHINESE NEW YEAR! I regret not being able to publish this on Lunar New Year's Eve, it would have been the perfect new year's gift.

“I’m so excited to see the new additions to the royal family! I heard that the two concubines are extremely beautiful.”

“Let's be honest, we’re all looking forward to seeing Lee Hyejin.”

“That daughter of General Lee from the Four Generals? Good gracious. The royal family must be desperate for support from the four big nobles.”

“I would've thought that only someone of her status could be the Crown Prince's consort, but apparently some other boy got chosen instead.”

“Seriously? Who?”

“Not sure of his name. Do you know?”

“...No, not really.”

“So he's a nobody?”

Amidst of the noise and chaos, a masculine voice rises. “He's the son of Park Ryu. His name is Park Jihoon.”

The chattering group halts their conversation momentarily to turn and look at the man who had unexpectedly provided them an answer. When they meet the eyes of said person, it only takes a few seconds to process that familiar face, and they quickly dip their heads in respect.

“Good evening, Seongwoo.” They say, smiling widely.

Ong Seongwoo recognizes some of the people in this group. There is a deputy general’s son, a judge’s daughter, and a few others that he can only identify by their faces. Anyhow, he wasn't one to actively interact with such people. They gossip a lot, and spread rumours that could be more or less harmful to people's reputations. But they're not bad people. Just nosy.

“Seongwoo, do you know this… what's his name? Park…”

“Park Jihoon? We’ve recently met.” He makes his way to his seat. There are tables after tables and certain ones are already fully seated with guests. There is a reserved place for his family along with the three others that belong to the reputed “four big noble families”. The Ong and Lee family are seated on the right side of the hall, while the Kim and Jeon family are positioned on the left. Their tables are located closest to the royal family’s seats because of their stature. The other families’ tables are lined till the end of the gigantic hall in the order of status, leaving a wide aisle in the middle for people to walk around.
“What’s he like?”

Seongwoo is already seated at his table, though his family members seem to be taking a while. Perhaps they are around here somewhere, talking to some of their friends, relatives or colleagues. Which means these youths won’t be leaving his table anytime soon.

He sighs. “Consort Park is a nice man. A well-qualified man, if you're wondering.”

“What’s so special about his father-”

“Seongwoo!” Their conversation is disrupted by a happy yell. Seongwoo looks up to see a familiar looking man nearing his table, and his lips quirk up in joy and relief.

“Jaehwan, hey!” He holds his hand up and waves. The other people who had been pestering Seongwoo with questions quickly dismiss themselves, suddenly becoming self aware of their status when the treasured assets of two of the biggest noble families start waving to each other.

Seongwoo sees them walk towards the aisle again and sighs in relief. “You saved me, thanks.”


“Fine, fine,” groans Seongwoo. He eyes the group of chattering teens and droops, weary from just that bit of interaction. The group is not too far, so he can still catch hints of their conversation. They seem to be discussing something regarding Guanlin. Anyhow, it's none of his business.

Seongwoo turns his gaze back to Jaehwan. “Come sit.” He pats the seat beside his. “I don't want anyone approaching me randomly.”

Jaehwan sniggers and does as he requests. “Weren't you the one who walked up to them?”

“Yes, but only to stop them from saying anything weird about the prince’s consorts.”

“You mean the Crown Prince’s consort. Don't tell me you were actually worried for Lee Hyejin.” Jaehwan’s smirk cannot irritate Seongwoo more. They haven't been friends for extremely long, but Seongwoo had recently met him through a nobles’ gathering and had found him surprisingly easy to talk to. They've known each other for a few years, and that is enough for them to understand each other’s thoughts.

Seongwoo raises a brow. “Don’t tell me you have something against Lee Hyejin?”

Jaehwan huffs and scrunches up his nose. “I know an overly ambitious person when I see one. I’m not really that into those kinds of people.”

Seongwoo laughs. Sometimes his behaviour makes Seongwoo forget that Jaehwan is the son of one of the Four Generals and is of the four big noble bloodlines. Jaehwan is one of the youngest high ranked officials in the Department of Finance, meaning he is a scholar, not a fighter. They're of similar age, and that is one of the reasons why they click so well.

“She is very beautiful, though,” Jaehwan admits. “She'll no doubt be the star of the night again.”

“Oh?” Seongwoo smiles. “I think she finally has competition.”

Jaehwan looks at him, surprised, but keeps silent and drinks his tea thoughtfully.

When the chattering starts to quiet down a little, the two young nobles turn their eyes towards the
entrance along with every other person in the room. The seats are more or less filled, except for the
Lee and Ong families’. Seongwoo knows by now that his family will be accompanying the royal
family into the room, just as he had been notified by several servants.

So the only ones left are the Lee family and the consorts before the royal family arrives.

Meeting the anticipation of many is a young boy. He steps into the hall, face lightened up by a
cheerful but nervous smile. His skin is deathly pale and his lips seem to have been bitten red.
However nervous he may seem, none of the aura or essence of nobility seems to slip from his
grasp, and when he walks down the aisle with his family behind him, Seongwoo starts to find
himself mirroring the boy's smile.

“Who's that? I haven't seen him around,” he says to Jaehwan.

“Charismatic, isn't he? That's Lee Daehwi of the Lee family. He's fourteen years old.”

“Lee Hyejin’s brother?” Seongwoo frowns. The boy in front of them doesn’t seem to look too
much like his sister, but he is indeed just as striking as her.

“Well, half brother. He’s an angel compared to his Hyejin.” Jaehwan crosses his arms and leans
back in his chair. “He's the son of a concubine that died a few years ago. I heard that he’s led a
pretty horrible life after his mother’s death because of how much General Lee favours his other
daughter Hyejin over him.”

“Is that why he hasn't been allowed to attend any of our parties or gatherings?” Seongwoo notices
that some of the people, men and women alike, are deeply focused on gaping at -or even ogling-
the young boy. This is just how attractive his appearance, his aura, and his status is. Though he is
just the son of a concubine, no one can deny his position as a Lee family’s son.

“That, and his poor health. Do you see how pale he is? His weak body and immune system are
hereditary. Probably got it from his mother. I think General Lee is pretty pissed that Lee Daehwi
doesn’t have a body that can succeed his militarist career.” Jaehwan shakes his head and sighs,
swirling the liquid in his tea cup slowly as he makes gentle motions with his hand. “Perhaps the
Lee family is finally putting this boy into use, now that he’s turned fourteen.”

Seongwoo looks at the Lee Daehwi, who has made his way to the table next to Seongwoo’s along
with the other members of the Lee family. He and Jaehwan exchange brief greetings with the
people they have associated with from the Lee family. When their eyes land on Lee Daehwi, the
boy smiles back, a little bit embarrassed from the attention.

“Good to see you. I’m Ong Seongwoo,” introduces Seongwoo. Kim Jaehwan follows up with his
own introduction and Lee Daehwi shakes their hands.

Before the boy can introduce himself to the two men, the chattering dies down again, this time in
an even more dramatic fashion. People, young and old alike, turn their eyes once again towards the
entrance.

A young woman and a young man enter the palace hall, with several servants trailing by their
sides.

Jaehwan inhales sharply. “Is that…?”

Seongwoo opens his mouth and closes it, blinking a few times to check if he’s imagining things.
The two people seem to shine when they walk into the hall, catching the eyes of men and women.
Commotions start to arise when the people start to recognize the woman on the side.

“Lee Hyejin! Is she a goddess?!”

“As beautiful as ever, I tell you! Look at her red dress!”

“Yes, but... who’s that beside her?”

Seongwoo follows the gazes of many and looks at the man standing beside General Lee’s daughter. Even his heart skips a beat as he looks at him. Though Seongwoo knows this boy pretty well, both from the amount of research he’s done on him for Kang Daniel and his very own interactions with him, he can’t help but feel like... like his existence is out of this world.

That’s exactly what he looks like. Out of this world.

“I’m not kidding, I swear that boy descended from heaven. He looks ethereal,” breaths Jaehwan, his jaw dropping to the floor. “If that’s what you meant by competition for Lee Hyejin, then I’ll have to agree.”

Seongwoo hits him on the arm. “If you keep on staring like that, your fiance will whip you.”

Jaehwan glances over to the Kim family’s table and sees the mentioned girl glaring at him. Seeing this, he shrinks back in his seat. “Women sure are scary,” he mutters. “And I’m not the only one staring, anyway.”

He’s right. The young people around the room are practically gawking at the two concubines, completely forgetting that they are the royal family’s properties.

Ong Seongwoo cannot blame them. Lee Hyejin is dressed all in red, looking deadly sly and seductive, like a devil. Park Jihoon, on the other hand, looks like a perfect blend of maturity and innocence, a refreshing comparison to the woman beside him. He looks like an angel who had descended from heaven.

When Jihoon walks towards his seat that’s located right next to the Crown Prince’s, he seems to catch a glimpse of Seongwoo. He nods and smiles, producing a little wave as a subtle greeting. Seongwoo beams and gives him a thumbs up.

“You know him?” Jaehwan exclaims, eyes almost bulging out of his sockets. “Wait, are you friends?”

“You could say that.”

“My goodness. Introduce me,” Jaehwan pokes his arm and frowns. “I should never underestimate the Ong family’s connections.”

“I didn’t know him through my father’s connections,” Seongwoo swats his friend’s hand. “I met with him in the palace. He’s a good guy.”

“His family-”

“His father is Park Ryu. I don’t know if you’ve heard of him.”

“Park Ryu?” Jaehwan turns to look at Park Jihoon, sinking into deep thought as he cranes his neck. “Now that sounds familiar.”
Jihoon can hear whispers and murmurs as he passes through the rows of tables, all fully seated with people of status. He’s never attended such a big event before, and none of this chattering is helping with his nerves. He tries his very best to stay calm and composed, but the insides of his palms are sweaty.

He turns his head slightly and sees Lee Hyejin grinning at the corner of his eye. She’s radiating confidence, as if she’s done this a million times. Jihoon laughs to himself. She probably has, since she’s the prized daughter of the Lee family. He’s a total amateur in these kind of events compared to her.

As he approaches the individual seats that are located near the royal family’s, he sees Seongwoo, and nods with a smile while waving. Seongwoo gives him a thumbs up, helping Jihoon calm his nerves a little. Then he takes a deep breath and turns his head back to the front.

There are so many glistening seats before him, all gold in colour. The biggest one in the centre belongs to the Emperor, and the one on the right should seat the Empress. The Empress Dowager will sit on the left of the Emperor, and the two princes will take the seats on each side of the females of the royal family.

Then he stares at his own seat beside the Crown Prince. It's a prestigious place to be, alright. There he would face hundreds of nobles, and sit side by side with royalty.

“Aren’t you going to sit, Consort Park? Everyone's looking.” Lee Hyejin maintains a smile on her face and steps forward ahead of Jihoon.

He responds by ascending the steps to his seat, thankfully that is of a far distance from Lee Hyejin, and sits down.

People just won’t stop staring.

Fei and Jia must’ve seen him grip on his robes out of nervousness, because they each put a hand on his shoulders to comfort him. Jinyoung, who stands by his side, flashes him a warm smile to demonstrate his support.

“Do not worry, Master. These people like to gossip, so I reckon they’re asking around for your name and background because of your outstanding aura,” says Jia behind him. Jihoon exhales and relaxes his shoulders, recomposing himself for the starting of the feast.

“The Royal Family arrives!”

As soon as Jihoon hears a eunuch announce such news, he sees the entire hall of people rise from their chairs. He quickly follows suit and smooths out his robes as he stands.

The Emperor enters with the Empress and the Empress Dowager. The Emperor wears a mix of red and gold, something that resembles what the Crown Prince had worn the night Jihoon had met him, only that this robe screams more king than prince. The Empress Dowager may be old, but her beauty from her youth doesn’t seem to fade one bit. The only thing that perhaps gives away a hint of her age is the weary smile, her dimly lit eyes and the wrinkles on her face that are desperately concealed by powder.

Standing right behind the Empress Dowager and the Emperor is the Empress. When she smiles, Jihoon is instantly reminded of Lai Guanlin. Yet, such a thought is startling to him, as he would expect to see the resemblance between her and Kang Daniel.

Behind them trail the two princes, one in gold and one in black. The colours are extremely fitting.
for the two of them. The gold wraps Kang Daniel in all his regal glory, the robe glinting under the light as he makes his way on the carpet. Lai Guanlin, though dressed in a black robe, is all the more elegant and dazzling, with golden patterns of dragons tracing his sleeves and his chest.

Accompanying the royal family down the aisle is a general and some of his soldiers. After scanning through the hall and seeing the empty seats at Seongwoo’s table, Jihoon guesses that the group is General Ong and his soldiers.

Following the royal family’s grand entrance is the entry of several people that are certainly not from Tian He Kingdom. They dress themselves in various kinds of celebratory clothing, each with styles of their representative kingdoms. Jihoon, having only spent little of his time in the palace, could not identify any of these foreign visitors, but he believes that they are representatives of their respective kingdoms.

As the crowd approaches the tables near Jihoon, he feels himself tensing up, his smile freezing on his face in the most unnatural manner. In contrast, he sees Lee Hyejin who is standing a short distance away from him, not one bit fazed from the approaching bunch.

Jihoon is the one who should be getting a grip.

The royal family ascends up to their respective seats, and Jihoon sees the Crown Prince heading his way, a warm smile breaking upon his lips as he catches sight of him. Jihoon smiles and is about to give Kang Daniel a proper greeting, but then he sees Lai Guanlin trailing behind him.

He is able to catch a glimpse of the Second Prince up close for a second, and truth be told, he is a sight for sore eyes. He would be lying if he said his heart didn’t skip a beat at the sight of this masculine beauty.

What really catches his attention, however, are Lai Guanlin’s tired eyes and the sullen expression on his face.

He makes eye contact with Lai Guanlin. It’s only for a second, but the world seems to stop around them.

Behind those bottomless pits of his pupils, Jihoon wonders, how many secrets could there be?

A second passes, and Guanlin has already left for his seat beside Lee Hyejin’s. Jihoon’s not sure if he had imagined it, but it seemed like for the first time in the night, no, the first time in the week, he had seen Lai Guanlin smile.

And Jihoon is somewhat glad he did, if he hadn’t imagined the smile.

After the Emperor and the Empress Dowager take their seats, the people in the hall start sitting down as well. Jihoon sees the foreign representatives each take a seat of their own near the royal family, also separated from the nobles as a sign of respect by the Kangs. It meant that they were to uphold their status as highly regarded people, even in a Tian He kingdom, which is foreign to them.

One of them in particular catches his eye. He wears all black, with a red cloak latching onto his shoulders. Jihoon catches a glimpse of the back of his cloak, and he sees the symbol of a soaring bird, most likely a phoenix.

He narrows his eyes. That phoenix and the cloak look strangely familiar.

“Family, friends, and guests from neighbouring kingdoms!” The Emperor’s voice booms across the hall, and everyone else drops dead silent as they wait for the Emperor’s speech. Jihoon stops in his
thoughts and focuses on the Emperor, who holds his cup in his hand. “We welcome you wholeheartedly to our New Year’s Eve Feast, and we hope you will enjoy yourselves and make yourselves home.”

“It is a joyous night, a night for us to throw away the past and welcome the new. We must put down our burden, our old grudges, and all that is unpleasant; we must look to the future, where we will be blessed with newfound peace, unity and strength.” The Emperor raises his cup, and the servants step forward to fill each table’s cups with wine. Jihoon watches as the coloured liquid flows into his cup, and takes hold of it like all others in the room. “Tonight, we also rejoice in and celebrate my sons’ marriage. It is a wonderful night indeed.”

“To the coming of a new year!” The Emperor says as he raises his cup in a toast. The hall echoes his words.

Jihoon doesn’t usually drink. He has an extremely low tolerance of alcohol, and he doesn’t even like the piercing smell and taste of liquor. But he forces the liquid down in one go, and exhales heavily as the burn travels from his throat to his stomach.

“Now let the feast begin!”

The food starts to be carried in by the servants to each of the tables. Jihoon can only stare in awe as the plates come in one by one. Whenever he feels like the table is about to explode from the number of plates it is holding, more comes to his table. In front of him are the most expensive, most delicious delicacies that he could never imagine eating in his life outside the palace.

“When will you be able to eat?” He asks Jia and Fei quietly, while looking at Jinyoung with a worried expression. This feast doesn’t look like it’ll be ending anytime soon, and even if Fei and Jia can hold it and are used to this kind of treatment, he doesn’t want a growing teen like Jinyoung to starve himself till the feast is over.

“Jihoon, I’ve already eaten,” Jinyoung says with a reassuring smile on his face. “Enjoy yourself.”

Jihoon feels extremely ashamed to be enjoying such luxury while his childhood friend, who has always been his equal, had to succumb to his position as a lowly servant. He feels guilty, having agreed to bring him into the palace, and as a servant no less. Bae Jinyoung deserved more. He deserved better.

“I want to excuse myself,” Jinyoung says, his eyes straying from Jihoon. Jihoon sees him almost spacing out as he looks at the tables seated with nobles. “I think I see someone I know.”

“Go ahead, Jinyoung.” Jihoon is quick to agree, but he's curious as to who it is that Jinyoung recognizes in this sea of important people. He follows his line of eyesight and his eyes rest on a pretty, pale skinned boy.

When Jinyoung leaves, Jihoon’s shoulders tense up again. Now he doesn't have his best friend beside him, and everyone around him are people that he isn't well acquainted with. There is still, thankfully, the Crown Prince, whom he's grown to respect and perhaps even like. Not romantically, no, but at least he's glad to have him as his husband.

Jihoon takes his chopsticks and picks up a piece of the meat served. It’s very nicely done, the skin of the beef seared perfectly, the juices glistening as he holds it up.

He's about to savour the taste of it when he holds it up to his mouth until one of his servants, either Fei or Jia, knock the chopsticks out from his grasp.
The chopsticks fly and clatter onto the floor next to him. It's a small commotion among the noise of many people, so no one notices.

Except the Crown Prince.

“What's wrong?” Jihoon immediately spins and ask the girl who slammed his chopsticks out of his grip, only to realize that it was Jia, and that she had turned white as a sheet of paper.

“Your- the chopsticks-” Fei stutters beside a speechless Jia, staring at the floor in utter horror. Jihoon follows their sight and catches a glimpse of the silver chopsticks on the floor-

It’s no longer silver.

The Crown Prince, noticing the fear and tension at the table beside him, leans over to pat Jihoon’s shoulder. When Jihoon is finally properly facing him, he is no longer pulling a face of reserved calmness. Instead, it is replaced with an expression of sheer terror, unmasked by such an unexpected and shocking moment.


“It’s… poison, your Highness!”

“Poison?” Kang Daniel’s eyes widen. He immediately stands up and picks up the scattered chopsticks, holding it up to eye it. A crease forms between his brows as he puts them back down on his table.

“Do not touch your food,” he whispers, before striding back to his seat.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Kang Daniel says, his voice echoing through the enormous hall. The guests freeze in the middle of their meal and conversations, anxiously looking towards Kang Daniel as he makes his announcement. “Please stop eating!”

Jihoon can only watch with clenched fists as he stares down on the table, the once palatable looking meat now seemingly a literal plate of threat in his face.

Murmurs spread across the room like a mountain fire, getting louder and louder with apprehension as the prince fails to follow up his command immediately with an explanation.

The Emperor looks unhappy with the disturbance in his meal, and turns towards his oldest son to seek for a reason behind his actions. “Is something the matter?”

Jihoon feels his head ache as he sees Kang Daniel step up to the Emperor’s table and whisper to him something that is unbeknownst to the public. The colour drains out of the Emperor's face and Jihoon can instantly tell that the Crown Prince had told him about his poisoned food.

The Emperor casts Jihoon a brief look, to which Jihoon lowers his head as a sign of respect, and also reluctant vulnerability.

Everyone, please check the contents of your food to see if there is any poison.” The Emperor says in his signature booming voice. Jihoon can sense the fear and panic run through the crowd, but he assumes that such commotion would be one that is much less disrupting than if they announced to everyone about already detecting poison in a consort’s food. “We have some very special guests over tonight, and we must protect them at all costs.” The Emperor's tone is heavy, and as Jihoon detects the sarcasm, he can feel an unspoken threat linger in his words. “And I mustn’t let anyone
fall victim to poison in their presence. It would certainly be very shameful to our kingdom and the Kang family’s name.”

“Right, Sir Jung Sewoon?”

The Emperor’s piercing cold gaze rests on the man in the red cloak who had caught his eye earlier. In spite of the commotion, Jihoon had noticed that this Sewoon man had been continuing with his meal, not one bit concerned about the situation. When he hears his name being brought up by none other than the Emperor himself, he calmly puts down his chopsticks and takes the napkin to dab lightly on his lips.

Then he stands from his seat and bows towards the Emperor. “You're absolutely right, your Majesty.”

“Then everyone, if you're clear of my orders, please check your food as we have told you. It's an important day and we do not tolerate such things as risks.”

Everyone starts checking their silver utensils, dipping them in every single dish. Jihoon looks at his blackened silver chopsticks and feels instantly nauseous. To think that if Fei and Jia weren’t here, he would have swallowed the food that contained poison…

Jihoon feels faint, his breaths causing his chest to rise up and down unsteadily. The ache is starting to pound even more strongly in his head, and it hurts so much that Jihoon has to plop an elbow on the table and support his head with the plopped arm.

“Are we going to be alright?” Guanlin hears Lee Hyejin say. To him or to herself, he doesn’t know. After all, he’s not even looking in her way.

His eyes land on the figure next to Daniel’s, who is currently looking at the table with a poorly masked mixture of disgust and fear. The figure stays frozen, his beautiful features filled with unspoken tension. Guanlin narrows his eyes as he sees the glistening drops forming on the side of the person’s face.

Something doesn’t seem right.

“Guanlin? Guanlin!”

He reluctantly turns towards his left and his eyes meet with that of a panic stricken woman. It’s Lee Hyejin, and her pale hand is covered over her mouth, a look of worry written all over her face.

“Yes, Hyejin?” Guanlin answers rather wearily.

“You weren’t answering,” His consort replies with a frown, though her shoulders visibly relax. “You haven’t eaten any of that, have you?”

“No.” He picks up his silver utensils for the woman to see. “And even if I did, I tested my food. It’s not poisoned.”

The woman sighs, perhaps in relief. For what reason, Guanlin wouldn’t know. And he wouldn’t care. Instead, he turns his focus back to the Park Jihoon.

Park Jihoon!

Something certainly isn’t right. The beads of sweat that had been forming on the side of his face
are now trickling slowly down his chin, and his skin is a sickly kind of pale. It is nothing close to
his usual complexion; Guanlin could see a hint of grey under that white skin, and it isn’t a good
sign in health at all. And his lips! They are turning colour. Under the lipstick, Guanlin could
clearly see those lips turning… blue.

Guanlin gets up from his chair, ignoring the surprised gasp by his side, and nearly storms over to
the Crown Prince’s consort. He stops and levels himself with Consort Park, and when he sees the
unfocused pupils, he can instantly tell that-

Park Jihoon had been poisoned.

“Lai Guanlin, why did you come here?”

Kang Daniel had called out his name, and Guanlin looks up with a face that has never been so
solemn and stricken.

“Your consort has been poisoned,” he says. His voice wavers a little as he takes Park Jihoon’s arm,
rolling up the sleeve to reveal a thin, dainty wrist. The pale skin is beautiful, almost transparent
and sparkling, and very different when compared to the skin that is up his neck, which is already
turning into grey.

“What do you mean, poisoned?” Kang Daniel sounds infinitely alarmed, standing up from his seat
again as he clenches his fists. “He hasn’t touched the food just yet!”

Guanlin puts two fingers over Jihoon’s pulse, feeling the wavering flickers of his heartbeat. His
skin prickles at the realisation that the poison is now quickly entering Park Jihoon’s system, slowly
affecting the rhythmic contraction of the heart.

“Look at me, Park Jihoon,” he orders, tone gruff and deprived of the softness that would usually be
present. “Listen to me.”

He sees the young man dazedly look back at him, although his mind seems to be somewhere else.
Guanlin almost curses. This is not the time for Park Jihoon to pass out. Not yet.

“You have to stay strong. Hang in there.” Guanlin says it with a firmness that he didn’t know he
had in him. However, when he sees Jihoon squeezing his eyes shut and snapping his eyes open
with great desperation to focus, he finds his lips quirking up on the side.

Kang Daniel has already told his servants to grab a doctor, and has notified the Emperor of the
situation. It seems that no other people in the hall has been harmed. Only Park Jihoon, the Crown
Prince’s consort, seems to have suffered some sort of damage. And from what, they’re still not
clear of.

The Emperor takes the chance to halt the activities of the night, anger almost overwhelming him as
he apologises for the unexpected events that had happened. “Consort Park has been poisoned,” he
follows after the apology with a dangerous glint in his eye. “Before we find out who has committed
such an unforgivable act right under my nose, we will not be letting anyone leave this room.”
It can’t be. It just can’t be.

Jinyoung looks at the boy he hasn’t seen for a year or so, heart thumping rapidly against his chest.

Why is he here?

“I want to excuse myself,” Jinyoung says, his eyes sweeping over the tables of nobles and finally landing on the boy he’d been dying to see ever since the last time they met. “I think I see someone I know.”

Thankfully, Jihoon doesn’t question further and grants his request. Jinyoung wouldn’t know how to explain to Jihoon how he knows someone who is currently sitting among the highly regarded nobles anyway.

Since he, himself, is not clear of why this boy, who had been dressed in rags and had been covered in blood when they first met, would now be sitting with one of the Four Generals.

Lee Daehwi.

He recognises the shy and nervous smile, the beautiful pale skin, the spark of vigor in his eyes. He recognises the modest behaviour, the elegant movements, and the outstanding pureness.

But he doesn’t recognize the air of nobility that clings to him like a piece of tight clothing. He’s wearing it, just like how he’s wearing the gorgeous velvet robe fitting for his status.

Jinyoung steps back into the shadows and descends from the stairs, arriving at the ground where the nobles sat. He quietly makes his way towards the table where the boy stays, eyes only focused on him.

“Bae Jinyoung!”

Jinyoung looks up, startled, and sees Seongwoo waving at him from the next table. Jinyoung hadn’t realised that Ong Seongwoo was sitting so near. He manages a polite smile, though his focus is on somewhere else.

The call of his name, however, attracts attention from someone.

And that certain someone turns around, a look of surprise and unease settling over his delicate features as soon as he discovers the identity of the person standing behind him.

“Is that you, Jinyoung?” It’s the silky voice that Jinyoung had missed hearing; the voice that had always managed to calm him in the midst of his struggles, the voice that would always both pull him to and destroy his senses.

He’s speechless upon meeting the boy up close. He’s wanted to see him for so long, wanted to meet up with him but did not know how.

“Who’s that, Daehwi?” Jinyoung hears a gruff voice question. In the corner of his eye, he catches sight of a big man whom he recognises as General Lee. His build is huge, unlike Daehwi’s, and his
eyes are just as piercing as his daughter’s.

“Father,” Daehwi says, lowering his head towards the general as he plasters a smile on his face, covering up the shock he’d expressed earlier. “He’s Consort Park’s close servant.”

Jinyoung feels something claw at his heart as he hears this, and swallows the urge to clarify that he is here not on behalf of Park Jihoon, but on his own will, as Lee Daehwi’s… close friend.

“So you’re acquainted with Consort Park?” The General raises a brow, a smile making way on his thick lips, clearly pleased about the news. “Well, his servant must have something to talk to you about. Go quickly and come back when you’re done.”

“Thank you, Father.” Lee Daehwi beams sweetly and rises from his chair, turning to Jinyoung and away from the general. The smile vanishes almost immediately the moment his face is out of the general’s sight, a look of impatience and disgust settling over his features.

“You wanted to talk?” Lee Daehwi lowers his voice as he reaches Jinyoung’s side. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

Jinyoung opens his mouth and shuts it again, his voice stuck in his throat. Without a word, he turns on his heels and walks towards a far isolated corner of the palace hall, his heart pounding uncontrollably in his chest. His mind is in a mess. He has so many questions, but he doesn’t know where to start.

As soon as they reach the corner, a place that is free of the guests’ attention, Lee Daehwi’s shoulders slump and he sighs, looking like he is nearly going to topple over. As a reflex, Jinyoung holds out his arms and steadies Daehwi, hands securely clasped over the younger boy’s shoulders.

“I hate him,” Jinyoung hears Daehwi say through clenched teeth. “I hate him so much.”

Jinyoung cannot see the expression on Daehwi’s face, but he’s glad that he can’t. Just feeling the loathing that seethes through is enough to make Jinyoung want to punch whoever it is that Daehwi is talking about in the face. A pure boy like Daehwi does not deserve to be overwhelmed with such negative emotion.

“Who?” Jinyoung asks, adrenaline coursing through his body as anger rushes to his head. “Who is it that you hate?”

The boy tenses in his arms, and Jinyoung delivers steady strokes to his back to calm him down.

“It doesn’t matter,” Daehwi says after a long pause, sighing. He pulls away from Jinyoung’s arms and looks firmly at him, a newfound spark of authority lighting up his dark eyes.

Jinyoung draws back, startled. He has hardly ever seen Daehwi this way.

“You need to leave Park Jihoon if you want to live,” Daehwi says, with none of the weakness Jinyoung had witnessed the first time they’d met.

“What do you mean?” Jinyoung says, frowning at Daehwi’s abnormal behaviour. “And you know I can’t just leave.”

“No, you can,” Daehwi growls. “You’re indebted to the Park family, yes. But you’re not indebted to the extent that you have to lay your life down for them. I’ll pay them whatever amount you request.”
Jinyoung inhales sharply. How did the young boy know about him owing to the Park family? He’d made sure to keep his background locked away from the eyes of the world.

“How did you know about my debt?” Jinyoung narrows his eyes. This isn’t the boy he used to know, and he knows clearly that it has something to do with his newly revealed identity. “And you can’t just tell me to leave without explaining anything, Lee Daehwi. You can’t just expect me to listen to you when you’re the one showing up so suddenly after going missing for a year in a royal family’s celebration, bearing the identity of one of the Four Generals’ son!”

Perhaps he’d spoken too harshly, because Daehwi almost buckles in his arms. Jinyoung is quick to hold him, but suspicion keeps him from delivering the usual warmth and comfort.

“Sorry,” Daehwi averts his gaze when he speaks up again. The strength seems to have wilted the moment he nearly collapsed in Jinyoung’s hold. “But you have to trust me.”

“Trust you?” Jinyoung sighs, knowing that he is fully vulnerable to Daehwi’s weak, exposed self. “I want to.” He gently ruffles the hair of the younger boy like he always did. “But what is going on?”

“You’ll know,” Daehwi leans into his touch, but not for very long. He stands up straight again and takes a few steps back, putting a painful distance between him and Jinyoung. “You’ll know very soon.”

As if on cue, Jinyoung hears the rough voice that belongs to the Crown Prince, telling everyone to halt their mealtime activities.

Jinyoung looks up in shock. A wave of apprehension washes over him and he quickly glances towards his Master, Park Jihoon.

“What is going on?” Jinyoung stutters in mild horror when he sees Jihoon looking pale as a sheet. “Answer me, Daehwi.”

Daehwi lets out a shaky breath as he stares at another corner of the room, eyes landing on a cloaked man who carries on in his meal as if nothing had happened.

“Border conflicts,” he murmurs.
half brother. “Let me,” he repeats.

Guanlin exhales slowly and hands Jihoon over to Daniel, who scoops the boy up into his embrace as he sits on the floor. Park Jihoon is only half conscious and doesn’t have the strength to resist. His head leans weakly against Daniel’s broad chest as he breathes unsteadily, his whole body trembling helplessly.

Lai Guanlin frowns at their intimacy, but says nothing about it.

“Go back to your seat, Lai Guanlin.”

Guanlin looks up, startled, and sees that it’s the Emperor who had commanded him to do so. His father, no, the Emperor, was narrowing his eyes at him. “Don’t give me any more trouble.”

“Yes, Father,” Guanlin lowers his head and says. He supports himself up and is about to leave the area when he sees his half brother and his consort from the corner of his eye; Daniel is holding Jihoon’s hand in his very own, bringing it his mouth occasionally to blow hot air on it in an attempt to warm his hand.

“Is anything the matter, your Highness?”

Guanlin snaps out of his trance and looks at the female servant who had just spoke to him. She looks familiar. Then he remembers that he’d met her that night, when he’d bumped into Park Jihoon. Her name is Jia, he recalls.

“No,” Guanlin says, turning away from the two people on the floor. “Doesn’t Consort Park have a family servant by his side? I don’t see him.”

“Jinyoung had excused himself before the meal, your Highness.” The girl he’d assumed was named Jia curtsies. “I could find him if you want.”

“It’s alright,” Guanlin holds up his hand to stop her. “He’s the one who came into the palace with Jihoon, right?”

“Yes, that’s right, your Highness,” the girl beside Jia says.

“When he comes back, tell him to stay put.” Guanlin looks at the nobles that were fretting at their seats. “This is a serious incident, and if anyone happens to find out that Jihoon’s family servant who had been by his side before the meal suddenly disappeared at such a peculiar time, who do you think would be the first suspect?”

The two female servants exchange shocked glances with each other, worry evident on their faces.

“But your Highness, Jinyoung’s only fifteen, and he’s Jihoon’s good friend. He would never do such a thing…”

“Anything’s possible,” Guanlin says, his tone turning icy cold. “I’m not accusing him. I’m saying if the real criminal were in this room right now, and if they were to know about this, they would be able to take full advantage of his suspicious absence.”

“Y-yes, your Highness,” They say, lowering their heads.

Without saying anything further, Guanlin treads back to his seat, eyeing the sea of nobles as he does so. So far, he has a few suspects in mind. Despite what he’d said earlier, his primary suspect is Jihoon’s family servant, Jinyoung. How could one leave at such a strange timing?
But then there’s another man, whom he fears may be the real culprit. Because if he is the person
who put in the poison, then there’s absolutely nothing Guanlin can do about it.

At least, not right now.

He stops in his tracks, his gaze placed on the cloaked figure. The man seems to feel his stare and
looks back up at him, lips forming into a thin line that is half a smile and half a grimace. The man
gives a calming vibe, which, to Guanlin, is more threatening than any kind of open violence.

The representative of West Hak, Jung Sewoon.

“Your Majesty!”

Guanlin abruptly shifts his gaze to the front of the royal family’s seats. A few soldiers have a short,
panicking eunuch in their hold.

“We found him sneaking in the back of the hall, so we captured him and searched through his
clothes. We found this.” One of the soldiers kneels and holds up a small pouch.

“Bring it here,” The Emperor commands the Head Eunuch beside him. The Head Eunuch nods and
heads down to take the pouch from the soldier, then opens it to present it to the Emperor.

Guanlin purses his lips.

The Emperor takes a look inside and slams his hand to the table. The hall quiets down almost
immediately, a deathly silence taking over the sea of people. The short eunuch stops struggling in
the soldiers’ hold, fear settling over his features as he looks at the Emperor.

At the same time, some doctors rush in, almost running to Consort Park’s side.

“Right on time,” the Emperor says, his angered voice echoing through the hall. “Take this to the
doctors and have it examined, along with the food and the alcohol on Consort Park’s table.”

“Your Majesty!” The short eunuch cries out, suddenly finding the will to struggle again. It’s not
hard for the soldiers to press him down again, but the short eunuch continues wailing. “That pouch
does not belong to me, I swear! I suddenly felt something slip into my clothes, and—”

“Silence!” The Emperor roars.

No one dares make a sound when the Emperor stands up from his seat. Guanlin turns his gaze
from the Emperor to the West Hak representative.

His breath catches when he sees the very, very slight curvature of the lips.

“Your Majesty.” One of the doctors kneel in front of the Emperor. “We need to examine further to
see if it matches, but so far we can confirm that the powder in the pouch is indeed poison.”

“Unforgivable.” The Emperor grunts.

By the time Guanlin turns his head back to Jung Sewoon, the man had already turned back to his
food and resumed his meal.

“What took you so long?” Lee Hyejin asks worriedly the moment he settles back at his seat.

“Nothing,” Guanlin replies. He turns and sees that she’s a little startled by the coldness in his
voice, so he takes her hand, flashing her a smile. “Did I worry you, Hyejin?” He asks, tone
softening.

The woman blinks a few times then shakes her head, her ears turning slightly red. “It’s… no…” she says, unable to form a comprehensible sentence.

Guanlin lets go of her hand almost immediately, once again turning his focus back to the West Hak representative.

He’s been staring, alright.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry for dropping this short chapter after so much anticipation
Please enjoy this while I finish my next chapter (IT WILL COME SOON, I PROMISE...)

...
A Surprise Visit

After the Emperor commanded that the eunuch who had been found guilty to be thrown into the dungeons, the night resumes its peace as if the poisoning had never happened. All was usual except the absence of a certain important figure of the night: Park Jihoon.

The doctors had determined that the poison was not fatal, which brought relief to all the members of the royal family. Though it was said that the poison would bring some side effects, the doctors had told them to rest assured, since after a week of rest and proper intake of medication, Consort Park will be up and well again.

Hearing this, Kang Daniel had no choice but to leave his consort in his bed chambers and attend the different celebratory events for the rest of the night in the role of the Crown Prince.

In the midst of one of the instrumental performances, the Emperor gestures to the Head Eunuch and whispers something into his ear. The Head Eunuch nods, then retreats to the back and heads towards the Second Prince’s seat.

“Your Highness,” The Head Eunuch says, voice lowered so that only Lai Guanlin would be able to hear his words. “The Emperor believes that there is something suspicious about the incident and wants you to investigate immediately, before the guests leave.”

Guanlin lets out a gentle laugh and shakes his head. “I would, even if he didn’t tell me to do so.” He turns towards the Emperor, who is currently talking to the Empress. “Always telling me to handle the dirty work.” Sighing, he tells the Head Eunuch to notify the Emperor that he will excuse himself immediately.

The Head Eunuch nods and returns to the Emperor’s side. When Guanlin raises from his seat, Lee Hyejin turns towards him curiously.

“Where are you going?” She says, frowning. “The performance just started.”

“I’ll be right back,” he says simply. He’s certain that his father has no intention of leaking out the details of his duty to anyone, not even his consort. Guanlin places a warm palm on her cheek in an attempt to distract her and convince her. It seems to be working perfectly, as she immediately blushes under his touch.

Then he leaves his seat and takes quick strides towards the back exit of the hall that connects to a small garden, a shortcut for the royal family to take back to their palaces. There, he bumps into someone he didn’t expect to meet.

“Seongwoo?” He calls out, frowning as he stares at the figure that had blended into the shadow of a tree.

“You’re always so sharp, Guanlin.” The figure slides out from the darkness, his half covered face illuminated by the dim moonlight and flickering lanterns around the palace. “Or have my skills deteriorated?”

“I don’t doubt your skills, Seongwoo,” Guanlin says, a small smile tugging on his lips. “I wouldn’t dare praise myself, either. So maybe it’s luck?”

“You’d definitely need both the luck and the skills to spot an Imperial Guard,” Seongwoo chuckles. “Not to mention its leader.”
“Certainly,” Guanlin surveys the man wrapped in all black. He’d kept his hair properly done, but he seemed to have changed off all of his robes, keeping none of the attire from the celebratory feast. “Did Daniel give an order?”

“Yes.” Seongwoo leans against the tree, tugging down the black veil to his chin so he can properly talk. “I suppose the Emperor sent you out for the same reason.”

“What happened tonight is indeed too curious.” Guanlin exhales slowly, recalling the peculiar poisoning incident. “I reckon the objective was to disrupt the feast temporarily and stir up a commotion. It certainly was not to kill Consort Park, to say the least.”

Seongwoo hums, sinking into his own train of thought. “We all have one particular suspect in mind, but here is not the best place for us to discuss it. Where are you heading?”

“Consort Park’s palace,” Guanlin says, his eyes shifting to the route towards his target location. “Perhaps there’s something he could tell us that would help with the investigation.”

“Are you sure you’re not there just to check on him?” Seongwoo teases with a mischievous glint in his eye. “From what I’ve heard, you seem to care about Jihoon quite a lot.”

Guanlin says nothing in response, a blank expression settling across his features.

“Got it, got it,” Seongwoo says, raising his hands. “Anyway, I won’t be coming with you, because I’ll be interrogating the poor sacrificial lamb in the dungeons.”

“The eunuch?” Guanlin lets out a small laugh. “I don’t think you will get much out of him, but you can try.”

“Stop underestimating your hyung, Guanlin,” Seongwoo frowns in mock annoyance, crossing his arms. “Through my spectacular observation skills, I’ve noticed that he’s one of the eunuchs attending to one of the other kingdoms’ representatives.”

“West Hak?”

“Not West Hak.” Seongwoo smirks. “And that's not even the best part. He’s one of the people in charge of tending to the East Scarlett representative.”

Guanlin recovers from his initial shock quickly and sighs, shaking his head. “What was Minhyun doing?”

“Exactly. Imagine how mad he would be if we told him that someone is trying to put the blame on him.”

“Don’t.” Guanlin can immediately visualise an outraged version of the perfectionist Hwang Minhyun, listing out rows and rows of people who might potentially harm him or his kingdom’s reputation and stalking through every one of their backgrounds like a maniac. “We’ll have a thousand more documents to read the next day.”

Seongwoo shudders at the thought.

“All jokes aside, we should get going and finish everything before the celebration ends.” Seongwoo stares at the moon and then back at the closed doors of the palace hall where sounds of laughter, chattering and music can still be heard. “Help me say hi to Jihoon, and tell him to take care.”
Guanlin raises a brow at the mention of Park Jihoon. “Sure, if he’s conscious. You’ve met?”

“Yes.” Seongwoo winks. “He’s pretty. And smart.” With a swift move, he swings up the branch of a tree and stares down at Guanlin.

“Be careful,” Guanlin says, concern evident in his voice. “It’s dangerous.” He isn’t just referring to the situation tonight, but to Seongwoo’s career as a whole. Imperial Guards had to lay down their lives for the Crown Prince, so they were always prepared to die. But Guanlin doesn’t want to lose anyone close to him again; he knows just how risky this mission is. If anything were to happen to Seongwoo, he would be heartbroken. And Daniel… he would tear himself apart knowing he’d exposed Seongwoo to any sort of harm.

“I know,” Seongwoo says, smiling at him warmly before pulling up his veil once again. “Trust your hyung, Guanlinie.” With that, he disappears back into the shadows without a sound.

Guanlin smiles at the sound of the familiar childhood nickname, then turns to leave when he can no longer detect Seongwoo’s presence.

Jihoon gasps as another coughing fit hits him, nearly knocking the breath out of him. He reaches for the pot beside his bed and wheezes into it aggressively, with one hand clutching the side of his stomach.

Seeing this, Jinyoung immediately runs to Jihoon’s side and starts rubbing smooth circles over his back. Fei and Jia stand next to the bed, brows knitted with heavy concern as they prepare some hot water and towels.

“Hang in there,” Jinyoung whispers to him, nearly breaking down at the sight of his best friend being thrown to such turmoil. “You’ll survive this, Jihoon.”

Jihoon wants to nod, wants to give his childhood friend the affirmation, but he feels too weak. He throws up once again into the pot. His stomach is empty because he’s never touched the food, and therefore the only thing he can regurgitate is stomach acid. His throat hurts, his head is throbbing painfully, and he can feel all the strength drained from his body.

Fei dabs a warm towel on his forehead and wipes away the beads of sweat, while Jia takes the pot from him to throw out the contents again. The excruciating pain engulfs him, torments him, and seems to be eating up his insides. Jihoon writhes on the bed with his sweat drenched gown, hands and feet icy cold when his body keeps heating up like an oven.

“Should we get the doctors again?” Jinyoung says, his voice hoarse and shaky. There’s only so much a fifteen year old can take when he sees his friend bearing such torture.

Jia puts a hand on his shoulder and ruffles his hair gently. “There’s nothing the doctors can do at this point. Jihoon’s body is at battle with the poison. All we can do is wait and tend to him like we’ve been doing.”

“You go rest, child,” Fei says, continuously changing the towels and pressing them against Jihoon’s feverish skin. “We can’t have you falling sick after your Master. Take care of yourself.”

Jinyoung shakes his head and holds Jihoon’s hand in his own. “I want to stay here till he’s okay.”

Fei and Jia exchange worried glances and sigh, knowing that there’s nothing they can say to change the younger boy’s mind.
After a while, Eunuch Xi enters the room and bows towards the half conscious Jihoon before heading towards Fei, Jia and Jinyoung. “The Second Prince wants to come in,” he whispers to them.

Jinyoung frowns. “At this time of the day?”

Eunuch Xi sighs. “I don’t know what the Second Prince is here for either. But should I let him in?”

“I’ll ask Jihoon,” Jia says, looking a little conflicted.

“Let him in,” Jihoon says, nearly choking on his words as he breathes heavily on his bed.

“Master!” Fei exclaims. They all turn to look anxiously at Jihoon, who seems to be a tad bit better after throwing up.

“Just do it,” he manages between coughs. Eunuch Xi immediately obeys, and takes no time to bring the Second Prince back into the bedchambers.

“Your Highness.” Fei and Jia curtsy while Jinyoung bows.

The Second Prince waves for them to get up and walks swiftly to Jihoon’s side. Jia carries in a chair, and the Prince shifts to sit on it, positioning himself near Jihoon’s writhing body.

Without another word, he slips his hand beneath the blanket and takes hold of Jihoon’s cold wrist, pulling it out to check the pulse. Feeling warm fingers wrap around his wrist, Jihoon’s eyes barely flutter open, exhaling unsteady breaths as he looks at the familiar face of the Second Prince.

Lai Guanlin lays two fingers onto the pulsing vein, drooping his eyes in focus as he feels the faint coursing of the blood. He places his other hand on Jihoon’s chest, as if to deliver some sort of comfort. Jihoon stares at the hand on his chest and let his eyes fall shut as he tries to tune out the pain.

Silence rings in the room as the servants watch quietly at the peaceful scene before them. Jihoon seems to have gotten slightly better, no longer puking, choking or coughing. His body occasionally wrenches in pain, but with the Second Prince’s hand on his chest, it seems to add a neutralising effect, helping Jihoon calm down every time he springs up gasping.

Lai Guanlin slips Jihoon’s wrist back into the blankets when he’s done, his eyes skimming over the frighteningly pale face. The youthful glow from earlier had been replaced with sickness and exhaustion, wearing down his original beauty. All his makeup had been wiped off, and now Guanlin can see clearly the unhealthily pale chapped lips.

“Did the doctors give him any painkillers?”

Jinyoung nods. “It doesn’t seem to take any effect though.”

Guanlin takes a long look at Jinyoung before opening his mouth to speak again. “You’re Jinyoung, correct?”

“Yes, your Highness,” Jinyoung replies as he bows his head, startled.

“Where had you been when your Master collapsed?”

“I—” Jinyoung’s fingers curl, a complicated look crossing his face. “I was talking to General Lee’s son.”
“Oh?” This seems to raise Lai Guanlin’s interest even more. “Whatever for?”

Jinyoung bites down on his lower lip, swallowing as he debates on whether or not to tell the Second Prince everything.

“I told… Jinyoung to,” Jihoon croaks in between coughs. Lai Guanlin turns back to him with a frown, eyeing the sick boy in bed. “He went… to find him… because I told him to.”

The Second Prince says nothing, his unreadable gaze meeting with the weak but determined look in the young consort’s eyes. No one can see whether he’s convinced or not.

“Since you’re here,” Jihoon says with a small, barely heard laugh. “Jia, please help me return the Second Prince’s cloak.”

“Yes, Master,” Jia says, then hurriedly leaves the room to fetch the item. Fei and Jinyoung exchange confused looks, but say nothing.

“You all are dismissed for now,” The Second Prince says to the servants. “Tell that girl to have the cloak delivered directly to my palace. I want to have a private talk with Consort Park.”

“But-” Jinyoung protests, looking at Jihoon worriedly. Fei puts a hand on him and gives him a warning glance, shaking her head. Jinyoung has no choice but to dip his head and retreat along with Fei and Eunuch Xi.

After the servants leave, Lai Guanlin’s eyes seem to soften as he turns towards Jihoon, the flickering candlelights dancing in the reflection in his eyes. “Are you alright?”

Jihoon opens his eyes slowly, his eyesight clearing bit by bit. The Princes crouches over him with a look of concern, and Jihoon finds himself smiling a little when he realizes that there’s someone from the royal family who actually cares for him.

“No, I’m not,” Jihoon breathes, his voice quiet but audible in the silence of the night. There’s no need for him to pretend in this situation. He’s already shown his weakest side to this man; it’ll do him no good to lie.

Lai Guanlin raises his hand, as if to reach for him, but then he almost immediately hesitates and retracts it. “I have something for you,” he says instead.

Jihoon sees the Prince pull out a small bottle from his sleeve. The bottle contains a small amount of transparent liquid, almost as if it’s water.

“It’s a painkiller from West Hak, and it may speed up your recovery,” Guanlin explains when he finds Jihoon looking at the bottle suspiciously.

“West Hak?” Jihoon’s eyes widen when he hears of the kingdom. “Why do you-”

“Medicine made with skills from the Red Cloak Tribe are expensive in this kingdom, but they exist.” Guanlin gets up from his chair and walks to Jihoon’s side, a hand slipping under his sweat drenched back and another put over his chest. With the Second Prince’s help, Jihoon sits up without much difficulty, and leans weakly on the bed frame.

“Here,” Guanlin says, handing over the bottle. “Their potions are rumoured to be extra effective.”

“Thank you.” Jihoon holds up his hand to take it but nearly spills it. Luckily, Guanlin hasn’t let go of the bottle yet, and he saves it from going to waste on the bed sheets.
Jihoon looks up at him apologetically and sighs. “You can put it aside. I’ll have Fei or Jia help me.”

“There’s no need for that.” Guanlin lowers himself and sits beside Jihoon, who shuffles over in surprise. “I’ll feed you.”

“You…” Jihoon looks at him strangely as an arm circles around his shoulders, pulling him closer over to Lai Guanlin. The position is a little too intimate for Jihoon’s comfort, but he doesn’t complain, letting himself sink into the other man’s chest. The fabric is cool against his feverish skin, providing temporary relief to Jihoon.

The Prince holds up the bottle to Jihoon’s lips, tilting it slightly till the liquid slides down into his mouth. Jihoon takes in the bitter liquid and wrinkles his nose at the taste, but swallows it anyway.

“Good.” Lai Guanlin says with a smile as he reaches for a warm towel on the table next to the bed, dabbing it slowly over Jihoon’s mouth. After he’s finished, he helps Jihoon lay back on the bed, gently placing the blankets over him.

“I’m sorry, your Highness,” Jihoon murmurs, looking at the sleeve of Guanlin’s arm that had been supporting his sweat drenched back all along. “I ruined your robe.”

“No worries about that,” Guanlin says as he takes his original seat next to Jihoon’s bed. “I can have it washed later.”

“But the celebratory feast…”

“I’m not heading back,” the Prince responds with a knowing glint in his eye. “There’s something strange about what happened tonight. I’m sure you’ve noticed it too.”

Jihoon’s breaths have calmed down a lot, and he feels that the pain has been numbed. The Red Cloak Tribe’s medicine certainly works wonders. Even Jihoon is impressed at their ‘sorcery’ or ‘witchcraft’ or whatever they call it.

“Yes, I’ve noticed,” Jihoon says, staring up at the ceiling as he recalls what he’s gone through. “Whoever it is deliberately put the poison into my food to alert me, but not after actually poisoning me with the wine.”

“It wasn’t the wine,” Lai Guanlin says, tone suddenly turning cold. “You were barely conscious when the doctors ran the test, but neither the wine nor the cup you used to drink it had poison.”

“Is that so?” Jihoon turns to Lai Guanlin, shocked at the revelation. “Then how?”

“A normal person wouldn’t be able to do it.” Lai Guanlin stares down at his hands. “But someone from the Red Cloak Tribe can.”

“But I’ve had no affiliations with the Tribe,” Jihoon frowns.

Lai Guanlin only stares back at him, again with that unreadable expression. Jihoon can’t tell what he’s thinking, but he perceives that as a trace of doubt.

“I really don’t,” Jihoon declares, a little uneasy at the Prince’s reaction.

After what seems like a century, Guanlin finally replies.

“But that you know of, Park Jihoon.”
Suspicion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jihoon stares back at the Second Prince, completely mystified. Lai Guanlin’s tone remains monotonous, but there’s a hint of unease on his handsome face. Sometimes this man makes him wonder what he is really thinking.

‘Are you accusing me?’ Jihoon asks carefully, eyeing the man with a searching gaze. ‘Of having a connection with the Red Cloaks?’

‘No,’ The Prince replies, a little startled at the assumption. ‘It’s just…’

Jihoon sits and waits patiently, enjoying the Prince’s panic and loss of words. It is at times like these when you really see the true nature of a person, and he’s glad that Lai Guanlin is more humane than he presents himself to be.

‘Then how am I related to them?’ Jihoon softly prompts him to answer, gazing at the prince’s averted eyes.

‘The poison went into your body’s system through direct contact,’ says the prince after recomposing himself. ‘Meaning a Red Cloak Tribe’s symbolic ornament had touched your skin and infected you.’

‘Symbolic ornament?’ Jihoon had heard of that from gossips.

‘An object that has been used for certain rituals carried out by the Red Cloak Tribe, usually sprinkled with unidentified potions and powder for religious cleansing but can be damaging to the human body,’ the prince explains, staring at the robe Sungwoon had designed for Jihoon that is now hanging on the side of the room. ‘I have only read about this in books, but the Red Cloak Tribe’s tricks aren’t called witchcraft without a reason.’

‘You mean those that could cause harm to a body after a spell is casted?’ Jihoon says with slight horror. He may not be a doctor or a professional in medicine, but he certainly knows that infections don’t work that way. At least, not for normal human beings. ‘I thought those were fictional exaggerations of the Red Cloak Tribe’s powers?’

Guanlin shakes his head. ‘The method may have been exaggerated, but people have actually died from exposure to the Red Cloak Tribe’s symbolic ornaments. The doctors that examined your body suspected this as well. What was in your food was cheap poison that can easily be bought in Tian He, and therefore its symptoms are well known. None of them match yours.’

‘My symptoms…’ It’s quite true. He'd felt a strange burning rash up his right arm, experienced vomiting and stomach pains and a throbbing headache, and some instances of frightening dizziness. This wasn't a combination that could usually be seen after the intake of normal poison. At least not those that were described in the cheaper books he'd bought in street shops.

‘The cure I brought you was effective, wasn’t it?’ Guanlin takes Jihoon’s chin in between his fingers, turning it gently towards him to look at him clearly.

Jihoon doesn't know if it's the medicine’s side effect, but he feels his face burning up as the prince places a warm but intense gaze on him. He starts to panic at the intimate distance, his heartbeat
picking up quickly as he feels cold fingers against his flushed face.

“Perhaps not. You're still sweating,” the prince speaks with a frown as he looks at the little beads dotting Jihoon’s forehead. To Jihoon’s surprise, the prince uses his sleeve to dab onto his forehead gently.

In this movement, Jihoon has the chance to glance at the Prince up close. He’s so regally beautiful that he seems unreal. His skin is almost as pale as Jihoon’s, and appears to be absolutely flawless. His defined lines of his jaw shifts as he talks, creating shadows and dips that emphasize his magnificent features. His plump lips are naturally pigmented, gracing them with a pretty reddish pink colour. They are a little dry though, and Jihoon has a sudden urge to touch them...

The prince withdraws his arm, snapping Jihoon out of his trance. Clearing his throat, Jihoon averts his eyes and drops it to his hands that lay limp on his legs.

“It must be the rash,” Jihoon explains in a hurry, trying to draw attention away from his reddening face. “I mean, my sweat. The skin around my rash is-

‘What rash?’ The prince raises his voice, standing abruptly and almost knocking down his chair in the process. “Show me.”

Jihoon is a little taken aback at the prince’s huge reaction to something he’d said so casually himself. He rolls up his right arm sleeve and extends it out to the prince, exposing the red part of his skin.

The prince visibly pales at the sight, eyes widening at the redness of the rash. He captures Jihoon’s wrist in a strong grasp, causing him to wince as the prince takes a closer look.

“That is not a simple rash, Jihoon,” The prince whispers, voice barely audible. Jihoon looks at his own arm in shock, panic creeping on to him when he sees the prince’s shaken state. To his horror, the rash had grown to a much larger patch, almost dyeing his lower arm red.

“It wasn’t like this earlier…” Jihoon bites his lip. The rash had just been a really small patch when he first noticed it. It burned, sure, but he was suffering from pain worse than that in his internal organs. Now that he finally notices the rash again, the burning sensation seems to be more obvious to him, but it feels more numbing than painful.

The prince wipes a finger over the red skin, seemingly unafraid of whatever the dire consequences would be after having direct contact with an infected patient. Then he presses downwards, which sends a jolt down Jihoon’s spine. A flash of red crosses his eyes and he yelps in pain before it settles. The prince uses his other hand to press onto his shoulder to keep him in place, while he keeps his finger pressed hard against the skin.

Something then slowly oozes out of the reddish part of his skin- a blackish kind of liquid, only a small single drop, rolls down the reddish surface, and the prince grabs a towel to wipe it off immediately.

Though Jihoon had no idea what that was, he was mortified at the idea of having it in his body earlier.

“That,” the prince says with narrowed eyes. “Was the poison.”

The rash seems to clear up a little, the skin around it lightening a few shades very quickly.

"That was very dangerous," the prince throws the dirtied towel to the ground. "The poison could
have traveled along your bloodstream to your head and ultimately damage your brain. It's good that you didn't move too much so that your blood flow did not speed up. I suppose I got some of the poison squeezed out but we will need the doctors to prescribe some medicine to help you get rid of the rest of it in your body.”

“How did that get into my skin?” Jihoon mumbles, feeling a little lightheaded, perhaps from the sudden removal of the poison that had been causing his body trouble all along.

“Through an item. A needle.” The prince looks unwell, sitting back into his chair as he supports his head with a hand, as if he is suffering from a headache himself. “We’ll have to conduct a thorough investigation on every one of your servants, or any of those that had gotten near you in the event-”

The prince stops, then looks up and meets Jihoon’s wavering pupils with his own.

“You didn’t carry anything sharp with you in your sleeve… did you?”

Jihoon thinks for a quick moment. He opens his mouth, but then quickly clamps it back shut.

He did. But how should he explain why he was carrying it around with him?

“I…” he fidgets with the blanket with his fingers, twisting the heated fabric in his very own sweaty hands. “I might have.”

The prince leans forward, prompting him to continue.

As much as Jihoon doesn’t want to say it, he has no choice, seeing that it may have been a potential murder weapon.

“It’s the hairpin you left near the lake that night.”

He doesn’t know how Lai Guanlin will react, and he's worried. About how the Second Prince will think of him after this.

The changes in Lai Guanlin’s expression would have been fascinating if not for the urgency of the current situation. Jihoon feels a wave of apprehension washing over him as the prince looks almost overwhelmed with emotions, the crease between his brows deepening as he fists clench and release repeatedly.

Jihoon might have angered the prince. And at this moment, he is afraid.

Jihoon has never been a person to be afraid of what other people might think. If he does what he thinks is right, he’ll believe in his judgement until someone tops his logic with their own. Truth be told, he’d been holding the prince’s discarded hairpin with him for a while now, just so he could return it in the right time. He’d gotten so accustomed to keeping the hairpin in his sleeve for the ‘right time’ that he even took it to the celebration dinner without noticing it. Then again, the ‘right time’ never came, and now he wonders how the prince may see him for keeping this hairpin that he’d seemingly detested so much.

He waits for the prince to respond verbally, but they just sit there in dead silence.

Maybe he should return the hairpin. Either return it, or dispose it in the lake as he wished.

Jihoon swings his legs down the side of his bed, huffing a little as he supports himself up while holding onto the bedpost. Then he leans his weight on the wall and moves sluggishly towards the robe Sungwoon had designed for him, using as much strength as he can to take the pin out of the
inner part of the right arm sleeve.

The golden hairpin shines when he takes it out and exposes it to the light. It’s a beautiful hairpin, one of the many reasons Jihoon can’t believe anyone would dispose it at a lake. The sheer material value of the pin and the memories it must hold for the Second Prince too…

Jihoon holds out the pin to the prince, who doesn’t even make any move to turn his way or take it from him.

“Here,” Jihoon tries, dragging himself two steps closer to the silent prince. “I’m sorry for keeping it.”

“Why did you keep it with you in the first place?”

The prince speaks up again, but he sounds cold, too cold. And even when Jihoon is just a few steps away from him, the prince feels extremely distant. This makes Jihoon feel quite miserable. He’d thought of the prince as a friend, or something close to that. At least, he was beginning to. But somehow, he had ruined it the moment they started.

“It seemed important to you in some way.” Jihoon shuts his eyes and lets out a shaky breath as he leans his weight against the wall again. “You were hesitating to throw it—”

“Stop making assumptions!”

Jihoon drops to the floor at the prince’s snarl, no longer having the strength to support himself as he stares up at the raging figure in front of him. The prince’s chest heaves up and down as he rises from his seat, his eyes lightened up with an angered flare.

“You don’t know what that pin means to me, so don’t act like you do,” the prince growls, and though his voice has calmed down relatively, Jihoon can hear the seething anger in it.

“You kept it, and that was a mistake, Park Jihoon.”

Jihoon’s eyes widen, his heart thudding against his chest heavily as he flinches from the sharp gaze.

It’s been a long time since he’d felt so vulnerable and open, and it scares him. This is when it hits him that Lai Guanlin is the Second Prince, a member of the royal family, a person with the Emperor’s blood running in him. He has the power and every right to cause him harm if he wants to. With just one command, everything can be taken away from Jihoon.

That, is their difference in status.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, swallowing down saliva to channel out his fright. “I’m sorry, Your Highness.”

“I thought you were smarter than this,” the prince continues, a cold smile spreading on his lips. There’s no warmth in his voice as he takes a step closer and kneels in front of Jihoon, snatching the pin from his hands. “I thought you were a scholar.”

The prince drops it like an insult, and the blow he delivers with that sentence hits Jihoon with a shocking force. Jihoon clenches up his fists, his blood boiling from the dignity of a scholar, the pride of being a scholar’s son, his mind racing from the regret of his actions. It’s one thing to know that people disliked scholars, but it’s another to hear the insult come directly from a prince’s mouth. The Second Prince’s mouth.
“I am a scholar, make no mistake,” Jihoon manages finally, huffing as he looks at Lai Guanlin straight in the eye. He may not be thinking clearly, but he knows it will not tolerate such humiliation to his inborn gift of wit. “I apologize about the hairpin. And I did get punished for it, did I not?”

Punished, by risking my very own life?

He rolls up his sleeve and holds it up, narrowing his eyes at the prince. “Now why don’t you tell me why you had a symbolic ornament in your keeping, Prince Lai Guanlin?”

Chapter End Notes

shoot me, I might be plot ready but I'm totally not detail ready, everything is going to start becoming VERY MESSY, get READY. Also, the fact that I'm updating shows that I'm going to be literal trash in the future coz I should be worrying over my uni applications and offers instead.
btw guys I can't update fics as quickly from now on because it's an important transition in life for me LOL. Thank you for reading loves.
Sad to say this is my temporary goodbye gift to you all before I depart for my exams (a.k.a. my death). I have a tendency to write when I'm stressed so who knows, maybe you will find me updating again soon. I hope you enjoy this relatively short chapter. Finally drawing the long New Years night to a close, sighhhhhhh

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Guanlin puts a hand on his forehead, looking extremely troubled when he walks rapidly out of the palace. His heart thuds heavily against his chest as he takes every step, the scene from earlier playing over and over again inside his head.

He takes a quick turn into the garden to head back to his palace and nearly bumps into someone on his way.

“Sorry,” he mutters under his breath. The person he’d just encountered catches his arm in a strong grip, causing Guanlin to turn around in mild annoyance. However, when Guanlin takes a closer look, he sees a familiar face smiling upon him.

“Minhyun?” Guanlin says, surprised. His brows unfold themselves as he stands and faces said person properly.

“It has been a while,” Minhyun says pleasantly, despite Guanlin’s self admitted horrid temper from earlier. He loosens his grip and places his hand on Guanlin’s shoulder, patting it a few times and eyeing the boy from head to toe. “You’ve grown taller again?”

“I’m still quite young so I’m still growing, unlike you,” Guanlin says teasingly, trying to ease the atmosphere although he knows that Minhyun probably didn’t miss his lack of composure just a while ago.

Minhyun raises a brow. “Oh? So I see you’re still just as disrespectful to us older ones. Sungwoon must be devastated.”

Guanlin chuckles. “He’s quite tired of hearing me call him short, I know. It’s my special way of demonstrating affection to all of you. Please don’t take it to heart.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve learnt not to very long ago,” Minhyun waves him off casually. Then he takes a step forward and leans towards Guanlin, whispering so only the two of them can hear, “Daniel wants to see us in his room.”

Guanlin tenses for a quick moment. At the mention of his half brother, he can’t help but think of his half brother’s consort, and the previous conversation between the two of them. He turns towards the direction of the Palace of Everlasting Purity, drawing out a long glance before he trails after Minhyun to Kang Daniel’s palace.

Jihoon rests on his bed, staring at the ceiling with tired eyes.
“Master, do you need anything?” he hears Fei say next to him in a worried voice.

Jihoon shakes his head. He feels a lot better now that he has taken the Second Prince’s medicine.

The Second Prince.

Just thinking of him makes Jihoon feel like he is drowning deeper and deeper into a sea of confusion. It’s not just confusion, actually. The fear and frustration of the unknown, and the lurking shadows of secrets in the royal grounds.

“Actually, Fei,” Jihoon murmurs just as the servant is about to head out. “Help me call Jinyoung.”

“Yes, Master.” Fei nods her head and immediately obliges, walking out of the palace with quick steps to find Jihoon’s family servant.

Jihoon sighs. Lai Guanlin has been dropping hints here and there about things that pique his curiosity. As a new addition to the complicated net of the royal family, Jihoon feels he must make clear of the things that the Second Prince had mentioned but had not explained.

“Why I have it in my keeping?” Guanlin repeats slowly.

“Yes,” Jihoon says, narrowing his eyes. “If I remember correctly, you were trying to dispose of this hairpin.”

Guanlin says nothing, so Jihoon continues.

“It's certainly suspicious that you were trying to get rid of this in the middle of the night. I already found it curious that you were disposing of something of such high material value by throwing it into the lake. Why didn't you sell it? Either it meant something to you, or you couldn't sell it easily in the markets. Of course, it could also be that you have too much money in your hands, and the profit earned by selling it would mean nothing to you. Which is, well, anything but surprising.”

“Either way,” Jihoon says, eyes flicking up to meet the darkish brown pits. “I respected your privacy and didn't look into it. I kept it for you and I was going to return it to you when I had the chance. After all, you left it by the lake instead of throwing it into the water.”

“What I find strange is how the pin didn't poison you when it even made you bleed that night, but it brought me such suffering just now.”

Guanlin purses his lips and places a palm in front of his face, a look of defeat crossing his features. Sighing, he lowers his head and kneels in front of Jihoon. He places a gentle hand on his shoulder, as if he hadn't been the one who made him collapse on the floor.

“Let me help you to the bed,” Guanlin says, not showing any intent of responding to Jihoon’s words. Jihoon eyes him carefully before letting the Second Prince swing his arm around his shoulder. He leans his weight slowly onto the taller man, who effortlessly supports him as they walk towards the bed.

“You must be tired. Have a rest-”

“Lai Guanlin!” Jihoon calls out to the prince, knowing he should at least admit to the fault in his part. He grasps tightly onto the Second Prince’s sleeve before he can turn around and leave, swallowing nervously after he calls out his full name. The Prince freezes at the mention of his name, brows creasing as he bends down to look at the frail boy on the bed.
“Yes, Jihoon?”

“I’m sorry for… keeping the hairpin. I don’t know what it means to you-”

“No,” Lai Guanlin shakes his head, holding the hand on his sleeve. Jihoon has always found his expression hard to read, so this is one of the rare moments that he can see Guanlin’s feelings on his face. The prince seems slightly apologetic, guilt written all over his handsome features. “Thank you for keeping it.”

Jihoon’s eyes widen, licking his dry and chapped lips. The Prince is gentle with him, as if he hadn’t been the one who had blown up on him earlier.

“It’s an item that my mother left behind,” Lai Guanlin speaks, eyelashes fluttering downwards to form a curtain over his beautiful eyes. “I wanted to throw it away because I was a coward and I couldn’t face the trauma of her dying before me.”

Jihoon keeps silent and listens carefully, unable to make out the emotions behind the prince’s calm, gentle voice.

“Regarding your questions earlier, Jihoon,” Guanlin places his hand over Jihoon’s chest gently, and Jihoon feels the warmth of his palm spread through his body. “About why I disposed of my hairpin like that. And why the poison entered your body and not mine.”

Jihoon swallows drily, anticipating the truth and the answer. For some reason, he can predict the burden and the weight of Lai Guanlin’s upcoming words, and he cannot help but feel somewhat suffocated as he waits for him to continue.

“That hairpin can be a deadly weapon, and you have witnessed it first hand,” Guanlin purses his lips, seemingly troubled by the memory of the previous events. Jihoon almost flinches when Guanlin raises a hand to brush at his hair, and it doesn’t go unnoticed in Guanlin’s eyes. The Prince retreats his hand and lets it fall by his side. “I didn’t want to see it ever again, but I didn’t want it to end up in the wrong person’s hands, either. I decided to throw it into the lake, so that I didn’t have to remember the horrible incident it has caused...”

Guanlin stops, drawing in almost rapid breaths as his chest rises and falls in an unsteady rhythm.

“You don’t have to go on if you don’t want to, your Highness,” Jihoon says softly, feeling a little uneasy when he takes in the rare sight of a wavering Lai Guanlin in front of him. The prince has always been like a wall of iron, an impenetrable being, and yet, here he was, looking like he was almost about to break down from the mentioning of a tragic incident that has probably impacted his life a great deal.

“This hairpin was the murder weapon that caused my mother’s death.”

“Yes...” Jihoon couldn’t resist the little gasp that came out of his throat.

“Yes, it is the embodiment of a memory that I want to forget.” Guanlin smiles coldly when he stares at the pin in his hand. “That’s why I lost my temper.”

"I really should apologize once again."

Guanlin dips his head down low, and Jihoon immediately plops himself up, grabbing the Prince’s sleeve to stop him. “No, please. It’s alright, your Highness!” He hurriedly stops the man from lowering himself in front of him, an action absolutely unfit for the prince’s status. If anyone else saw this, it would definitely stir up quite some commotion.
Jihoon personally thinks that the Second Prince is a wonder himself. At times he teases Jihoon like he’s an immature kid, and then he acts like the prince he is. Then he goes in full rage at Jihoon, but he softens quickly, even bowing and lowering himself in front of a consort, a peasant, to show his sincerity. Sometimes this causes Jihoon to wonder what kind of man he is, what kind of past he has, in order to sculpt this prince as he is today.

But if Jihoon said he wasn’t moved, he would be lying.

In front of him is a young man who is around his age, who has practically grown up in this harsh environment that Jihoon hasn't even the persistence to withstand up till now. The prince faced the death of his mother as a child, and had to bear the burden of it for so long. There was probably no one who could console him, except for himself, and his brother perhaps. The Crown Prince.

It must’ve hurt. That kind of loneliness. Though Jihoon hasn't experienced any of that, he remembers being in agony the moment he knows that his mother has caught a disease that could hardly be cured, and living in fear that his mother would leave him before he is ready.

"Please let me,” Guanlin says without looking up. He either doesn't notice Jihoon's panic or blatantly disregards it, and Jihoon wonders if he knows the weight of his actions. A prince shouldn't depreciate himself at all, much less in front of a concubine! “If I knew it was a symbolic ornament, I would have destroyed it. Burned it. Buried it.”

“You didn’t know?” Jihoon questions, blinking in confusion. He had thought that the prince knew, at least, about the details of his mother's death. If Jihoon were in his place, he would certainly have investigated deep enough into the incident if it ever involved his loved one. Then again, the prince was much younger and less mature to have thought thoroughly. Perhaps he had missed it accidentally. Nonetheless, it was a curiosity. How did the Prince suppose his mother died, then? That she was stabbed to death?

“I didn’t.” The prince speaks up, which snaps Jihoon out of his thoughts. "I will bring this to Daniel as soon as I can, so I will rid of it properly.” Much to Jihoon’s relief, Guanlin raises himself again from his bowing posture. “I might have to do a deeper investigation to find out why it affected you and... my mother. I’ll let you know when I’ve found something.”

“Alright, thank you.” Jihoon says, exhaling slowly as he lays back down. He feels drained from the ordeal, his heartbeat still pulsing rapidly in his chest from the intake of such overwhelming information.

He turns to his side and sees Guanlin open his mouth, as if he wants to say something. But before he can continue, Fei and Jia enter the room with rapid apologies, saying that the Crown Prince had sent another doctor to take a look at Jihoon’s condition.

“Well, I suppose that’s it for today,” The Second Prince says, a natural smile gracing his lips as if nothing has happened. His weary expression betrays his smile, but Jihoon finds himself respecting the prince for his attempt nonetheless.

Before he leaves, he drops another short comment with a gentle wave of his hand.

“Call me Lai Guanlin from now on. It sounds much better.”

“Jihoon?”

Jihoon jolts from his bed, awoken by his friend’s call.

“Oh, Jinyoung,” he says, clamping a hand over his chest. He had drifted off to sleep in that fraction
of a minute when Fei called on Jinyoung for him.

“I hope you’re okay,” Jinyoung murmurs, dabbing a napkin on his sweat drenched forehead with an anxious expression on his face.

“I am,” Jihoon says impatiently and takes his friend’s hand to stop him. “Please, I need you to look up something for me.”

“What is it?”

“The Red Cloak Tribe. Symbolic ornaments. The Second Prince’s mother. And also...” Jihoon covers his eyes with his palm, feeling a headache spread like a ripple in his head.

“My entire family history.”

Chapter End Notes

Firstly I want to thank you all for sticking to this fic, it's really long, really hard to read, there's many details to follow and remember AND I update really slowly. I'm so thankful for all of you. I don't know why yall are so incredibly nice and sweet but all I know is all of you truly are a gift from heaven for me. I love every single one of you! If you want to talk to me, tell me your twitter or kik and I'll message you. I hope you liked this. If any of you finds this confusing? TELL ME. I'll be more than happy to explain.
“How troublesome.”

Kang Daniel grunts and lowers himself onto the chair behind his wooden desk, a hand coming up to rub his left temple when he flips through the books impatiently.

“I’m afraid I cannot do much to help in this case,” Minhyun says with a sigh, placing a hand on the Crown Prince’s desk as his only way of showing support. “This incident occurred in your kingdom, and therefore you and your family will be expected to hold full responsibility for it. If I meddle in your affairs openly, I fear there may be rumours…”

“You’re right, and I thank you for your dedication, Minhyun,” Daniel looks at his friend gratefully and gives him a tired smile. “We’ll notify you if we need further help.”

Minhyun nods reassuringly. “We’ve known each other for so long. It’s only natural that I do what I can to assist you, especially when it’s your consort that has met such an unfortunate fate.”

Daniel directs his gaze to the man beside Minhyun, who has long frozen in place, seemingly caught in deep thought.

“Guanlin?”

The Second Prince snaps out of his trance and looks up. “Oh. Yes?”

“You’ve been out of it for a while,” Daniel reprimands with a tone of slight disapproval. “What’s with you?”

When Guanlin doesn’t say anything, Minhyun turns to Daniel and smiles. “It is a little late into the night. A lot of things happened, too. Maybe Guanlin’s just tired.”

“That aside,” Minhyun quickly speaks up before Daniel could pursue the topic any further. “You mentioned you had something to talk to Daniel, no? Would you two like some time alone?”

Guanlin’s expression dims immediately, and Daniel can already sense that something is not right.

“What is it?” Daniel directs his calm, unwavering gaze at his half brother. “Minhyun can leave if you’re uncomfortable.”

“No, that’s alright,” Guanlin murmurs, his eyes a cold, piercing glow. He carefully draws out something wrapped neatly in a cloth from his sleeve and holds it to the Crown Prince, his eyes sinister and focused.

“I would like to have this object investigated.”

Daniel eyes the man suspiciously before receiving the cloth, slowly unfolding the white sheet to reveal the item within it. The moment he catches a glimpse of what it is, his heartbeat picks up, and he feels a breath catch in his throat. Minhyun, who has already sought permission from Guanlin through a round of exchanged glances, steps forward to see the object that Daniel is holding. He, too, inhales sharply at the sight of the familiar looking item, startled at the fact that he is seeing it
again in this particular situation.

“Is this…?” mutters Minhyun, though he dares not fully voice his question.

“My mother’s hairpin,” Guanlin completes Minhyun’s sentence with a quiet voice.

“But why so suddenly?” Daniel recovers quickly from his initial shock, blinking upwards to look at his half brother. “You were very reluctant to let us so much as touch it when… when that happened.”

Lai Qing Xia’s incident had happened a few years ago, and up till now the cause of death had been ruled as death by penetration of the heart by a sharp object. The royal family knew what the murder weapon was, but the truth has been kept from the public to stop the arising of unwanted commotion. Guanlin had also refused to hand over his mother’s hairpin which would originally aid the investigation, mostly due to the fact that his mother had held the pin very dear to her heart when she lived, and it was the only thing he could keep to commemorate her.

“Does it have something to do with the incident tonight?” Minhyun, who had always been the one with sharp instincts, had carefully pieced it all together. Though he was a noble in East Scarlett and took no part in Tian He’s affairs, he was still the two princes’ well trusted friend and consultant on certain affairs. Hence, he was not kept in the dark about the details of Lai Qing Xia’s death.

“Yes,” Guanlin responds, clenching his fists on the side. “Somehow, this pin is involved in the poisoning.”

“Poisoning?” Daniel looks alarmed, but he can more or less guess the significance of the hairpin just by the looks of it and the impact it had on Lai Qing Xia.

“A symbolic ornament,” Minhyun bluntly concludes, his eyes flicking up to meet Guanlin’s though the other seems too weary to even meet his gaze.

“Is that what this is?” Daniel’s voice raises, his eyes flickering from the object to his half brother with a frown. “That’s dangerous!”

“I suppose,” Guanlin takes a few steps back to lean on the wall next to him, feeling drained from all the events of the night. His brow creases as he swallows in unease. “I don’t know much about its effect on people.”

“It has none,” Minhyun sounds a little panicked as he picks up the symbolic ornaments from the table with the napkin. “Not on people without a curse placed on them.”

“Curse?” Daniel mutters. “Those things don’t exist, do they?”

“Well, not when they use medicine and drugs in the name of sorcery and witchcraft,” Minhyun’s voice shakes when he holds the object for Guanlin to see. “My homeland, East Scarlett, is known for several things: our wood, our herbs, and our exotic creatures. We are experts of the environment and living things, and I can tell you straight away that nothing called ‘witchcraft’ can manipulate us in this way, even in the world of the Red Cloak Tribe.”

“Symbolic ornaments are just a fancy name for a well disguised, exquisitely made container for special poison that only takes effect when inserted into the bloodstream of a person without the suitable body defense against it.”

“Pardon?” Daniel raises a brow, slight confusion clouding his features. No matter how well educated he and Guanlin were, their kingdom lacked the knowledge on this specific area.
“We all have an inborn immune system that protects us against diseases,” Minhyun speaks slowly and patiently, looking at the two of them to make sure they could follow. “These symbolic ornaments contain a special type of poison that normal people have natural defense against, so it wouldn’t affect them. Unless, of course, a certain ‘curse’ were placed on them. Think of the curse as something that takes away one’s natural wall of defense against that specific poison.”

"And what would the curse be?" Daniel leans forward in his chair, intrigued. “Another kind of poison?"

“Up till now, no one knows,” Minhyun eyes Guanlin carefully. “There might be a way to find out.”

“And that is?"

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but Consort Park was a victim of such poison?”

The two of them turn to Guanlin, who stays silent with pursed lips.

“Then I suppose I’m right.” Minhyun takes out his hand to fold the napkin and hide the pin within it. “You should have the doctors investigate Consort Park’s body and background thoroughly.”

Guanlin tenses when he hears this, but continues staying silent. Daniel, on the other hand, stands abruptly with a look of displeasure. “He’s just gone through such torment, I believe—”

“Of course, it is entirely up to you whether or not to do so,” Minhyun cuts him off with a sinister gaze, his slated brown eyes narrowing as he delivers his advice. “After all, this is your kingdom, not mine. And I am saying this as your friend, not as a representative from East Scarlett.”

“It most certainly has to do with his background,” Daniel says slowly, drawing attention from the two men. “And his background is quite a mystery. It took us a while to dig through his family’s past.”

"He’s intelligent and sharp,” comments Guanlin as a trace of unease flashes in his dark eyes. “It’s only a matter of time before he finds out.”

“He has a secret that he doesn’t know himself,” the Crown Prince explains when he sees their good friend Hwang Minhyun standing in a daze. “And it is a weapon that we can use against West Hak when the time comes.”

“They made their move quicker than we thought they would,” the Second Prince turns on his heels and heads towards the door. “There’s no time to waste. We must go find Seongwoo.”

It’s been two weeks since the incident occured, and slowly Jihoon finds himself physically recovering from the poisoning. The nausea no longer hits him in the most unpredictable times, and he no longer feels sore from head to toe. The colour also starts to return to his face, and he is actually visibly healthier. And yet, he had slimmed down quite a lot from the traumatic experience.

“Jihoon, you need to eat properly,” Jinyoung eyes the table full of untouched food with a look of worry. “You have to give your body enough strength to heal.”

“I’m fine,” Jihoon pushes the full bowl of rice in front of him and puts a hand on his stomach. It’s been a while since he’s properly sit at a table to eat, and yet the food doesn’t seem appetizing to him at all. He doesn’t doubt the palace’s cooking, but none of what is presented before him seems appealing to him. He isn’t hungry, either.
You’ve been like this for what, four or five meals?” Jinyoung’s brows crease, his mouth forming a thin line of disapproval. “I’m going to the Crown Prince if you’re going to continue being like this.”

“Jinyoung…”

“Or you can tell Fei and Jia what it is that you want to eat,” Jinyoung continues. There is no way he wouldn’t worry, not when Jihoon hadn’t touched his food for several meals already. “

“There’s really no need,” Jihoon sighs.

Jinyoung takes a look at his master, who sits in front of the table in a slight daze. The poisoning has no doubt impacted his life more than they thought, and Jinyoung cannot help but feel his heart clench at the sight of his childhood friend being in such a miserable state.

“The royal family just knows to punish the culprit, and yet they don’t even send anyone to deliver a word of concern to the victim?” Jinyoung starts to direct his rage towards the royal family, and Jihoon can only watch with tired eyes, not even having the heart to stop him anymore. "Not to mention, that eunuch isn't even the real culprit. I can see it in his eyes. You're the victim, but they're keeping secrets from us."

"If they catch the real culprit, everything will be a big mess," Jihoon explains briefly. "Whoever dared pull such a trick in front of this large an audience and the Emperor, even, has to have a certain level of bravery. Or status. They know they wouldn't get punished for what they've done, and that the Emperor would put the eunuch in the dungeons to take up the blame instead."

"But still!"

"Let's leave it, Jinyoung."

Though he wishes Jinyoung would stop saying things that could pose a threat to his own life, he has to admit what Jinyoung has said is completely true. After the Second Prince’s curious visit late into the night, the Crown Prince didn’t even drop by to look at him or ask how he was doing. All he did was send a few more doctors to Jihoon’s palace and pester them to take good care of him, so he would recover quickly enough.

Jihoon lets out a cold chuckle and shakes his head. He remembers the night the Crown Prince had first met him, and told him about his duty as an advisor under the disguise of a consort. Perhaps that’s all he is: a chess piece, waiting to be used, and then to be disposed of.

It now seems foolish of him to even have had that slight hope in Lai Guanlin, who had been warm and cold to him on different occasions. Jihoon hasn’t heard a word from the prince after the incident, anyway. Though the other had apologized for his outburst, Jihoon cannot help but wonder how the royal family actually sees him.

What is he to them? A servant? A tool? For Lai Guanlin and Kang Daniel, it must be either of the two. They have been kind to him, but it was probably out of obligation. To earn his loyalty, perhaps.

“So what if you’re living in the palace? I’d much rather you be married to someone who is of lower status that can treat you the right way,” growls Jinyoung, disrupting his thoughts. “This extent of neglect is simply unforgivable.”

Jihoon manages to crack a small smile when he is reminded that at least he has Bae Jinyoung, who is willing to stick to his side even in this harsh environment.
“Well, well. I do deserve a good scolding, don’t I?”

A deep voice rumbles from the direction of the door, and the two of them turn to see a frantic Fei and a man clothed in dark blue robe.

Jihoon immediately stands up, and Jinyoung face pales a little when he extends a hand to support his master.

“Your Highness,” they say in unison, bowing their heads towards the person at the door. The man waves for them to stand back up, and they obey stiffly.

“Sit, Consort Park,” the Crown Prince approaches the dining table and sits on the opposite side. Jihoon freezes before he lowers himself onto his seat with Jinyoung’s help.

“How have you been?” he asks, and Jihoon cannot seem to hear any emotion in his voice. When he peers at the Crown Prince’s face, he finds that the other seems completely worn out, exhaustion weighing down on his lidded eyes. Though the Crown Prince is still as charming as he will ever be, he looks like he had aged a great deal ever since Jihoon had last saw him.

“Your Highness, if you haven’t eaten, I’ll tell Fei to fetch a set of utensils for you,” Jihoon averts his eyes as he speaks.

“There’s no need for that. And you haven’t answered my question,” Jihoon can feel the Crown Prince’s gaze burning into him again, like the very first time they met.

“Fei, serve tea,” Jihoon commands. When the girl rushes out to run the errand, Jihoon lets out his breath and looks at Jinyoung, who looks like he is trying hard to conceal the bit of fear from having insulted the royal family right in front of the Crown Prince’s face.

Jihoon tears his eyes away from the boy and quickly kneels in front of the prince, who stands immediately when he sees his gesture. “Jinyoung is just fifteen, he is young and innocent, please do not take his words to heart, and I beg that you forgive him for his reckless way of speaking.”

Jihoon feels himself nearly suffocating when he hears Jinyoung continue. He wants to stop the boy, but his mouth refuses to move, and his voice gets stuck in his throat.

“My master may only be a consort, but either way, he has devoted his life to the palace, and he should be cared for the way he deserves.”

If what Jinyoung had said earlier was disrespectful, his words and his behaviour just now was outright bizarre. No one, not even any of the high ranked officials, would dare speak to the Crown Prince like he just did. Jinyoung may be right if Jihoon and the Crown Prince were of the same
status, but in reality that isn't the case. The Crown Prince has no obligation to give Jihoon his attention, for Jihoon is the one who has been invited to be his consort. Being a consort is his privileged, it'd be greedy to request for more. At least, that's what he learnt from people on the royal grounds.

“Stand,” the Crown Prince finally says with a trace of irritation in his voice, and a shiver runs down Jihoon’s back.

When the two of them do not budge, the prince slams his hand on the table, which cause the two of them to jump slightly. The tea cups on the table knock over at the impact, liquid slowly seeping into the tablecloth, turning the dark red into magenta.

“Bae Jinyoung, right?” the prince’s cold voice reaches the younger’s ears, and the boy touches his forehead to the floor. “The Park family’s servant.”

“Yes, your Highness.”

“Help Jihoon up. He’s still recovering.”

Jinyoung obeys, straightening himself before grabbing hold of Jihoon’s arm. They slowly rise from their positions, but Jihoon’s eyes keep trained on the ground.

“How many times have I said not to lower your head in any occasion?” The Crown Prince’s voice is stable, and yet Jihoon can hear the anger in his voice.

“My fault entirely, your Highness,” he apologizes before he can stop himself.

He almost laughs out loud at his behaviour. Since when had he become someone with such little dignity, bowing and apologizing almost daily for things that are only considered as crimes on the royal grounds?

Jihoon knows he is being confined and oppressed by the ways of this place, but the terrifying part of this all, is that he naturally succumbs to it. Even his personality, he feels, is starting to alter accordingly. Before long, he thinks, he may be on his knees, begging to have just a little say in his life.

Some may comment that he is being over dramatic, but can one blame him, when all he has done in this place was bow his head and lower himself in front of almost everyone he sees?

A concubine! He should remember that he is just a concubine.

“The representatives from the other kingdoms are departing in a few days, and I am bringing you over to greet them properly, since you didn’t have the chance to last time.”

The Crown Prince holds his hand out and grabs Jihoon’s chin, forcing it upwards so Jihoon can meet his eyes. Jihoon can see fury, frustration, and perhaps a little bit of guilt in his eyes, which only makes him even more confused and fearful.

“You have slimmed down,” the Prince narrows his eyes and turns his face to the side, trailing a finger down his jaw. “A lot. Have you been eating properly?”

Jihoon can’t seem to reply, so the Prince turns to Jinyoung and waits for the answer.

“He doesn’t have an appetite these few days, your Highness.” Jinyoung’s voice is quiet, and he seems a lot more cautious now that he has said what he wanted. It shows that he knows he has
crossed the line and it was time to reign back, or else his life would be threatened. “He would eat some of the vegetables, but that’s all.”

The Prince shakes his head and lets go of his face. “As I thought. I have brought some sweets that the representatives from other kingdoms have gifted us. They are fresh and delicately made, which hopefully will appeal to your appetite.”

Fei arrives in time to settle the cups and the tea on the table, but the Prince stops her.

“Prepare a cloak for your master,” the Prince says. “We are heading over to greet the representatives.”

Jihoon feels his breath catch. “Even… the West Hak representative, your Highness?”

The Prince looks at him strangely. “Of course. Everyone is going to be there. Is there a problem?”

“No,” murmurs Jihoon after he swallows drily. “Not at all.”

Chapter End Notes

I love how I said ch12 was a goodbye and here I am updating because I'm the one without patience...
The Crown Prince did mention that everyone was going to be there, but Jihoon didn’t really expect it to be everyone. That is, the entire royal family, the four big generals, as well as all the kingdoms’ representatives. This meeting rounded up all the most important people that are currently present in Tian He.

They were gathered in front of the great hall, waiting for the Emperor to arrive before they enter. In the meantime, the Crown Prince heads to a corner to talk to the another country’s representative. The man, slender and handsome with a face that resembled a fox, is probably Hwang Minhyun, the representative of East Scarlett. Jihoon has heard from Seongwoo and Sungwoon that Minhyun was part of the group that trained with General Ong, and he supposes that is the reason they seem so well acquainted already.

Now that he is under the Crown Prince’s care, Jinyoung, Fei and Jia are temporarily dismissed. Because of this, Jihoon instantly feels awkward as he is left alone standing, while others are either passionately chatting about their work or country’s affairs.

“Good morning, Consort Park.”

Jihoon’s head snaps up, the unfamiliar voice pulling him out of his thoughts as he turns towards it. His heart skips a beat immediately when he meets the enchanting eyes of the other, subconsciously taking a step backwards from the vibrant golden colour of his irises, as if it would attack him somehow.

“Why, you look quite pale. I was hoping to see you in perfect condition today,” the youth says with a smile that makes Jihoon almost nervously swallow. “But I suppose the poison was a little too strong for you?”

Jihoon’s mind goes into a frenzy when he quickly recognizes this man as the West Hak Representative, Jeong Sewoon. He is as they described him: young, pleasant, calm, and an owner of a soothing voice that floats like silk, capturing and hypnotizing those within reach. Everything about him made Jihoon want to relax, to let down his guard, to simply enjoy and bathe in his presence.

This made Jihoon realize just how extremely dangerous this man before him could be.

“Are you alright?” Sewoon asks, looking genuinely concerned. Jihoon stays frozen on the ground, his breathing quickening when his instincts scream at him to leave, to run, before the calm faced predator swallows him whole.

“I’m fine,” Jihoon manages instead, forcing a practiced smile on his face and suppressing his inner turmoil. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. You must be Jeong Sewoon.”

“Indeed,” the man looked a little amused when he hears his name from Jihoon’s mouth, as if he didn’t know Jihoon had the courage to speak of it. “And I must say the same to you. I apologize for not having the chance to pay you a visit.” There’s a mysterious glint in his eye when he adds, “I could have given you some of our best medicine to cure you from the poison.”

“Not specific ones, I suppose?” Jihoon counters before he realizes exactly what kind of risk he is
taking. “Even the royal family’s doctors could not tell what kind of poison it was, and therefore had to be extremely careful with finding the herbs for my medicine.”

“Specific ones,” Sewoon does not hesitate with his response, and Jihoon jumps from the straightforward answer. Is that not directly admitting to the crime of poisoning him? If he knew the specific cure for the poison, it meant that he knew exactly what kind of poison it was. Yet, knowing this sharp witted representative, there is no way he would expose himself so quickly.

“Don’t you know, Consort Park? About West Hak’s so-called witchcraft?” Sewoon’s eyes give a little twinkle under the sunlight, sending a shiver down Jihoon’s spine. “We have many skills. One of them is the ability to tell the type of disease and poison just from a brief examination. If you had allowed me, I could have taken one good look at you and provided you with the right cure.”

He leans forward, as if he is about to tell Jihoon a little secret of his own. “I could do the exact same for your mother, you know.”

His mother?

Jihoon’s voice gets stuck in his throat, the sounds around him starting to fade away when panic, suspicion and fear grips his heart.

How does Jeong Sewoon know about his bedridden mother?

“How did you know?” He marvels at the steadiness of his voice, though he feels like he’s suffocating on the inside.

“Oh?” Sewoon raises a brow, as if he has said nothing important in particular. “Know what? I was just saying that I’d love to extend help to your parents if they needed it. After all, with old age comes weakness, both physically and mentally. West Hak is best known for its medical techniques, I’m sure I could help in one way or another.”

Jihoon’s breath catches, and his grip on the cloak around him tightens as he feels the air turn colder.

“Sometimes, Consort Park” Sewoon murmurs, filling the void created by Jihoon’s lack of response, “Sometimes those who are willing to help are the ones you should follow and listen, while those who request your help are the ones you should doubt and question.”

Jihoon narrows his eyes, exhaling slowly through his nose to calm his nerves.

“And what do you mean by that?”

“You should look closely at those around you and learn to differentiate between the allies and the enemies,” Sewoon’s voice flows gently into his ears, and Jihoon almost wants to listen to him, to understand him, to hear more of it. “Things are not always what they seem.”

Almost.

“At this point, Sir Jeong Sewoon,” Jihoon straightens himself and meets the other’s eyes with his own firm gaze. “I may not know who my enemies and allies are, but I am certain that someone who is proud and reckless enough to directly insert poison into my bloodstream is no friend of mine.”

Jihoon’s words seem to reach Sewoon slowly, and the man looks at him for a good while before the smile spreads wider on his lips.
“No, certainly not,” he speaks carefully. He turns to the direction of the hall and back to Jihoon, his grin appearing brighter than ever. “Well, I suppose it’s about time. Let’s talk again when we have the chance.”

“Of course,” Jihoon nods back when Sewoon dips his head, and he feels his shoulders relax immediately at his departure.

Speaking to another country’s representative was definitely a big task, as the peace of Tian He largely depended on the relations built between these kingdoms through active communication. It was definitely a more taxing and challenging mission to speak to Jeong Sewoon, a West Hak scholar that has been a well valued representative for around three years.

Jihoon knows, about how the other man has knocked out all other potential candidates for the representative seat with his quick wit and strong verbal communication skills. Jihoon has even read and heard about how he excelled in his studies on medicine especially. Because of that, Jihoon doesn’t doubt Sewoon’s words from earlier. The man could definitely create the right cure just from one close look at the patient, knowing his great potential as a doctor, scholar, and a Red Cloak Tribe member.

Yet, his knowledge about his mother mystified him, and his speech on allies and enemies seemed out of place. It sounded like Jeong Sewoon was trying to get him on the Red Cloak Tribe’s side. If that was his intention, why would he poison him in the first place? Perhaps the poison was a warning of some sort. Yet, there were just some missing pieces to the puzzle, and Jihoon cannot help but feel troubled by it.

Lost deep in thought, Jihoon almost stumbles when he feels a shadow approach him. Two strong arms reach out to catch him, preventing him from tripping and falling onto the hard ground. Jihoon peers up to see a pale, handsome face that he hasn’t seen for a while.

“Be careful,” the Second Prince warns, his hands placed gently on his shoulder. Jihoon blinks before he steps back, alarmed at the close proximity between them.

“Thank you, your Highness.” Jihoon feels uneasy under the piercing eyes of the Second Prince as he quickly averts his. Now that he doesn’t really know whom to trust on these deceptive glorious palace grounds, he cannot seem to figure out how to treat this person before him.

Lai Guanlin is perhaps one of the little people he would like to learn about and interact with in this place, along with Ong Seongwoo, Ha Sungwoon, and maybe the Crown Prince. However, with his status, like Kang Daniel, Jihoon can already feel the distance stretching between them, preventing them from approaching each other in a comfortable distance.

“What did he say to you?”

Jihoon frowns up at the Second Prince. “You mean Sir Jeong Sewoon, your Highness?”

The Second Prince seems quite impatient, looking at him silently to demand an answer.

“He asked me about my health,” Jihoon replies, his instinct telling him to hush about the details. “He said he was curious about my healing progress because I’ve been shut in for so long.”

The Second Prince looks slightly unconvinced, but Jihoon has no intentions of telling him anything else. After all, the other parts of their conversation do not seem to be of any importance. Not to the Princes or the kingdom, anyway.

“And how did you respond?”
Jihoon narrows his eyes a little, not being able to understand why the Second Prince was questioning more than he needs to.

“I said I was fine.”

“Is that all?” The Second Prince asks, his beautifully sculpted face approaching an inch nearer to his, as if to put pressure on him to speak the truth. Jihoon cannot seem to tear his eyes away from his proportional good looks, and he resists the urge to lunge at the other for distracting him so.

“That’s all,” he says instead, swallowing as he meets the boy’s eyes that match the black colour of his regal robe. “Is there a problem, your Highness?”

The Second Prince straightens up slowly, putting some distance between the two of them again, and Jihoon feels like he has instantly regained the ability to breathe properly.

“I told you to call me something else.”

Jihoon can catch a tinge of displeasure in the Second Prince’s eyes, but it disappears as quickly as it surfaced, so he isn’t sure if he has seen it right.

If by ‘something else’, the Second Prince meant ‘Lai Guanlin’, Jihoon would much rather they never had such a conversation that night. It blurred the boundaries between the two of them, the boundaries that Jihoon isn’t quite sure he should cross.

It has also occurred to him that his growing intimacy with the Second Prince was a danger to himself for many reasons, one of which was Consort Lee, who is currently glowering at him without restraint at a short distance, almost like she is burning a hole right through him.

“I’m not sure that’s appropriate in this occasion, your Highness,” Jihoon beams through his frustration and tries to ignore the woman’s heated glare. “You should go to Consort Lee, she is waiting for you.”

The Second Prince merely waves, quickly dismissing the mention of his concubine. “She will manage a moment without me. After all, she’s not only here as my wife, but also as General Lee’s prized daughter.”

Wife?

Jihoon couldn’t resist a cold chuckle, which draws the attention of the young prince.

He didn’t know that anyone in the palace would call concubines their wives. Perhaps the Second Prince is a special one… he had always seemed like a special one, after all. He had already realized this after that one night, when the prince had talked about his mother like they were not people of different worlds, like they were the ones that could depend on each other in the palace, like Jihoon was the only one the prince could trust.

“Are you alright?” The Second Prince reaches out his hand but stops, as if he just remembered something. Quickly withdrawing his hand, he ducks his head and glances at Jihoon, his eyes laced with what Jihoon would like to think as concern. “You look quite pale.”

“I’m fine,” Jihoon turns away, unwilling to let the Second Prince see his face.

“Jihoon?”

A hand comes up to touch his back, and Jihoon can smell the familiar masculine scent of the
Crown Prince’s before the man reaches his side.

“It’s about time to enter the hall,” The Crown Prince says, shooting a warning look at the Second Prince. “You should have Consort Lee accompany you now.”

A long silence drags on before the Second Prince answers, “Yes, I will.”

Jihoon watches as the Second Prince brushes past him and takes brisk steps towards his concubine, a feeling of discomfort starting to eat at him when he sees Consort Lee immediately grab onto the prince’s arm and flash a blinding, seductive smile at him. Consort Lee then turns, her expression becoming stone cold when she meets Jihoon’s eyes. It disappears in a second as she turns back to her prince, almost gliding joyfully by his side into the great hall.

“I didn’t visit you these few weeks because I have been spending quite some time looking into your case, and I agree with Jinyoung, I might have been wrong in not caring for you as I should have. I hope you will not be angry at me for this.”

Jihoon jolts and looks up at the Crown Prince, who looks like he’s aged a lot more up close. He can see a faraway desolate look behind the facade of an unbeatable warrior; perhaps, there is more to this man than he thinks.

“Certainly not, your Highness,” Jihoon murmurs, remembering Jinyoung’s act of disrespect and wanting to open his mouth to apologize again. He is stopped when the prince puts a finger to his lips, indicating him to be silent.

“Though Guanlin is usually relatively less occupied with such work, he has taken the initiative to investigate deeply into your case.” The Crown Prince meets his eyes with an unreadable expression.

He pauses before he says, “I don’t know why he cares so much about you.”

Jihoon blinks, cocking his head to the side. That was something he has spent little time to ponder on, but now that the prince mentions it, Jihoon realizes he can’t answer the question either.

“It’s not your fault,” the Crown Prince continues, facing forward once again. “But he really has gone to such lengths to help you. Even to the extent that he expresses his desire to visit you in your chambers again.”

The Prince stops in his tracks. “You know, Jihoon, there has been rumours about you and the Second Prince.”

“Someone saw the Second Prince enter your chambers that night you were poisoned.”

Jihoon’s freezes and his voice gets stuck in his throat. Rumours? Certainly, anyone would find it strange that the Second Prince was visiting his brother’s concubine. If there were to be rumours about his relationship with the Second Prince, then it would no doubt impact himself and the royal family to a great degree. How had he not thought of that earlier? He should have stopped the Second Prince when he could.

Now he understands why Consort Lee seems to direct all her hatred to him. Perhaps she has heard of the rumours as well.

Thinking clearly of the words he should use to prevent the Crown Prince from misunderstanding, Jihoon hardly manages to keep the worry and the panic from surfacing on his face.
“It is not your fault, and you don’t have to worry about hurting my feelings,” The Crown Prince takes his hand and pulls Jihoon closer to him before they continue walking, and they follow closely behind the officials that are in front of them. “I’ve seen you as no more than a good companion and a dependable advisor, and I do not require any feelings in particular in our relationship.”

They stop at the riser seating, standing to face the great audience when the Emperor treads slowly towards the throne.

“However,” Jihoon hears the Crown Prince whisper beside him in a barely audible voice. “Every person has a role in this palace, and it is our duty to stick to it, even if it is against our wishes.”

Jihoon can feel the weight of his words rest on his shoulders.

A pound of the drum rings in the air, and the Emperor settles on his throne with the Empress on his side.

“It’s good to see our friends getting along so well,” the Emperor’s deep voice booms throughout the hall. “I hope you all have found your stay in Tian He enjoyable.”

“It has been a pleasure,” Hwang Minhyun steps up from the row of representatives and bows. “Tian He’s hospitality has been marvelous, as always.”

The Emperor’s face brightens up, looking instantly pleased with Minhyun’s sweet words. “We are just as delighted to have you all here this year.”

He waves his golden embroidery sleeve and spreads his arms in a gesture of welcome. “Since all of us are present, I would like to extend a special invitation to you for a seasonal event before you depart.”

The Empress’s eyes curve into crescents, smiling warmly as she continues for the Emperor. “We will be having our Spring Hunt in a few days at the White Forest. Would our guests care to join?”

“Absolutely,” Minhyun replies without missing a beat. The others quickly agree, leaving only Jeong Sewoon standing calmly on the side without making a sound.

“And what is your wish, Sir Jeong?” The Empress questions. Jihoon can see the Emperor’s eyebrow twitch, and he can already sense the atmosphere in the room stiffen. “Would you choose to stay? Or are you in a hurry to leave?”

She throws out the sentence like she is throwing down the gauntlet, and Jihoon instantly realizes with shock that there is not one weak person in the royal family. The Empress may look mild, gentle and motherly, but she is not the Empress for nothing. God knows what she has done to her rivals to climb to this seat. People like her speak words that are either sweet like honey or sharp like needles, but they deliver another message behind them. These people have mastered the art of stabbing another without drawing blood; Jihoon now understands how brave one would have to be to even provoke them in any way.

That is how he knows that West Hak has really chosen someone worthy to be their representative. Courageous, sly, patient, and with an abnormally outstanding ability to conceal his emotions. Jeong Sewoon is the embodiment of all that.

“Of course, I would be absolutely thrilled to join,” he answers with a voice as calm and soothing as lake waters. “I was just thinking if the Crown Prince’s beloved consort would be in well enough condition to join.”
“Consort Park?” The Emperor frowns and looks at Jihoon, whose eyes widen the moment everyone’s attention is directed to him. He shoots an alarmed look at Jeong Sewoon, trying to figure out why the man had mentioned him out of the blue. Yet, the representative doesn’t seem to notice, or he deliberately acted like he didn’t notice. “Now that Sir Jeong has mentioned it, I might as well ask. How have you been?”

Jihoon trembles before he turns and bows towards the Emperor.

“I’m well,” is all he manages to say without allowing his voice to waver.

“My dear, I hope the doctors have provided you with what you needed these days,” The Empress says sadly, her face now filled with worry. “It is deeply regretful that such a thing happened on a New Year’s eve, especially.”

“Rest assured, we have handled the incident properly. As for Sir Jeong’s concern—” The Emperor looks at Jihoon with fixed eyes, “Do you think you can make it?”

Jihoon looks helplessly at the Crown Prince, who returns him with an apologetic gaze, because now is not the time for him to speak. Without any other choice, Jihoon has to make the decision on his own.

“I’d love to go,” The ends of Jihoon’s mouth curve up in a stiff manner, making him fear that it looks fake on him.

If he said he didn’t want to leave the palace grounds, it would be a big fat lie anyway. Though attending this hunting event would mean having the chance to interact with Jeong Sewoon, he thinks it’s a good price to pay for the temporary freedom he could enjoy.

“Then it’s settled,” The Empress claps her hand together, her face lighting up with an even brighter smile that Jihoon didn’t know was possible. “The date is set two days after. We will be spending a night in the forest too, and the hunting champion will be announced the next day. I’m sure it will be an amazing experience for you gentlemen.”

“Indeed, it’s an event that is famous even in neighbouring kingdoms,” Sewoon responds with a twinkle in his eye. “I am honoured to be able to join you.”

“I’m pleased to hear that,” the tension seems to ease out in the Emperor’s expression. “Well then, we have prepared some gifts that you can bring back to your kingdom after the hunting trip.”

On cue, the servants deliver a few wooden chests into the hands of the four generals. Each of the men hold onto the heavy box and open them slowly to reveal several exquisitely designed sets of weapons and hunting tools.

“This is as our little token of friendship,” General Ong’s resonant voice echoes in the hall as he steps forward to present the items. “As a symbol of peace between kingdoms. These are made of the best materials in Tian He. As you know, we are a country best known for our weaponry. These are the best hunting tools you will ever have the chance to wield.”

The other generals hand over the box to the servants by the representatives’ side,

Peace, they say. The smart ones in the hall would notice the irony of gifting the symbols of war and violence in the name of peace and harmony.

Chapter End Notes
panwink moments are rare in this story so far im sorry!!!! But things that are rare are things that are precious u know
I can update much more quickly because now I'm free :) ill try to update regularly in two or three days from now on but no promises
A Place to Belong

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jinyoung looks around carefully before taking out a pouch, its weight and the jingling within it obvious hints of the value of the information that the person before him holds.

The informant’s lips quirk up a little when he eyes the bag of coins, then takes out a letter from his back pocket to hand it over to Jinyoung.

“You youngsters nowadays have a lot of money to spare,” he rasps, grabbing at the heavy pouch immediately after giving the boy the letter. “Someone bought similar information from me a while ago.”

“Who?” A sharp glint flashes across Jinyoung’s eyes, and the informant knows he’s caught his attention. His smile spreads wider, a look of glee and greed on his face. Jinyoung narrows his eyes and fishes out two more pouches and a gold bracelet, one of the many treasures the Crown Prince has gifted to Jihoon.

“A girl in her twenties, dressed in plain pink silk, which, I assume, is servant clothing. She looks well pampered, however, so I believe she’s from the Palace.”

“The Palace?” Jinyoung’s eyes widen, and he struggles to keep himself composed. Jihoon had told him to get information for him, so he did, and not without strategy. He’d deliberately worn peasant clothing, mostly rags, and had taken the longer route through a poor village to meet up with the informant so he wouldn’t have his identity discovered. This servant girl didn’t seem to bother covering up her tracks, so he should dig out what he can from the informant before he returns.

“Well…” the informant eyes the money, and Jinyoung throws him one pouch. With another hand, he keeps the other bag of coins away from the man, and prompts him to answer with a raise of the brow.

“If you give me that,” the informant nods towards the gold bracelet, “I will even give you the information she wanted.”

“Is it possible that I have it now?” Jinyoung is impatient, as he had promised to get back early today. Jihoon had to prepare for one of the hunting trainings before the actual event, and he was to assist Jihoon by his side throughout the training. It’s going to start soon.

“Of course.” The informant takes out another envelope, this one obviously much thicker and crumpled. “And you know the rules.”

“I will burn it,” Jinyoung frowns and snatches the envelope. He tosses the pouch of coins and the bracelet over to the man, who happily takes it and scurries away. Slipping the envelopes into his sleeve, Jinyoung heads out of the dark valley and ducks his head while he blends into the crowd.

“A little help here, maybe?” a loud voice bellows.

Jihoon immediately snaps his head up from his books, startled. He stands and peers at the door towards the familiar voice, and a small irritated figure makes his big entrance with his usual noisy ramblings.
Jihoon smiles and shakes his head, sighing. “What brings you here today, Tailor Ha?”

“It’s Sungwoon, you brat,” the tailor grunts and moves in, the clothing materials so large and stacked so tall that Jihoon can barely see his face. “Now where are your people when I need them?”

Jihoon steps out from his desk and decides to help him himself, taking the upper step from the smaller man and striding to his desk to push away the books. Sungwoon breathes a sigh of relief when he settles his clothes on his study table, and Jihoon can’t help a little chuckle from escaping his mouth when he sees the tailor’s frazzled look.

“So… when’s the next banquet?” Jihoon jokes, eyeing the amazing variety of clothing. The light material is obviously picked for the Annual Hunting, and yet Sungwoon’s designs seem a little too over-the-top for the occasion.

Sungwoon narrows his eyes at him and decides not to respond to his teasing. “Now that I have your measurements, let’s not spend our valuable time indoors on these clothing. Let’s go.”

“Where to?”

“The Archery Range, of course.”

The Archery Range, located in the south of the royal grounds, is a large plain field with target boards placed in a distance. Just beside it is the stable, where he heard the most beautiful horses in Tian He were kept in. The Crown Prince had mentioned that he had a favourite, a beautiful white steed that was delivered as a gift from the last Emperor, and that he would let Jihoon have a try riding it.

Jihoon is not thrilled about the idea of hunting, or the idea of shooting at animals in general. It isn’t because he thinks it is cruel, but rather he doesn’t understand what kind of joy killing could bring to anybody.

His father was right when he said that Jihoon wasn’t made to be a military man from the start. "You lack the bloodlust and you have a fragile heart,” he remembers his father say. "You will never become a successful militarist.”

A snap of the fingers draws Jihoon’s attention immediately. He realizes that Sungwoon has been curiously staring at him for a while when he has been staring off in the distance.

“Welcome back,” Sungwoon rolls his eyes, having finally gained his attention. “Are you a newbie in hunting?”

“Yes,” Jihoon says, without trying to remind Sungwoon that all peasants have no direct access to the hunting grounds since they are owned by the royal family and the nobles. Only those who work for the nobles and the royal family are allowed to hunt. The merchants have to turn to the rich to get the meat and sell it in the villages. This is probably the reason red meat has become incredibly pricey nowadays.

“We won’t start with the horses then.” Sungwoon goes to one of the stands to pick up a bow and a bag of arrows. “You will have to know how to aim properly and I’ll try to guide you, but I’m probably not the best archery teacher out there.”

“Will I have a teacher? A trainer?” Jihoon is anxious about the Spring Hunt now. The last thing he wants is to embarrass himself in front of a bunch of nobles, royals, and foreign representatives.
“I suppose not, since they don’t really expect the concubines to join the hunt.” Sungwoon shrugged. “You’re male, so they’re going to let you have a go. That’s why I figured you’d want to try it out first. As for your teacher,” he nods at his right. “I think there are several suitable candidates for that.”

Jihoon turns to the direction Sungwoon is looking at and sees a whole lot of people heading towards them. In front of the crowd is a few he recognizes: the Crown Prince, the Second Prince, Ong Seongwoo and Hwang Minhyun.

As they arrive, Jihoon bows and Sungwoon remains standing, greeting them casually with a wave. It earns him a sigh from Hwang Minhyun, who shakes his head at the tailor’s lack of proper manners, and a chuckle from Kang Daniel.

As Sungwoon informs them of Jihoon’s lack of experience in hunting, none of them seem surprised. All of them, except Sungwoon, seem to be aware that peasants do not have access to hunting fields anyway.

“That’s why we have someone to teach you,” The Crown Prince smiles at Jihoon, who returns it quickly in relief. “Guanlin?”

“Yes?” The Second Prince had been occupied with the hunting tools, and he immediately turns to his half brother when he hears his name called.

“Him?” Jihoon asks, unable to conceal his disbelief.

Blinking in slight confusion, the Second Prince looks at the crowd and at Jihoon, then back at his half brother again. He seems to not have paid attention to the conversation earlier.

“You’ll be teaching Jihoon archery.”

The Second Prince straightens up and raises a brow at Jihoon, who doesn’t know how to respond at the moment.

“Well, that’s perfect isn’t it?” Sungwoon clasps his hands together with a grin. “Guanlin’s our best archer and hunter. If you listen carefully, I’m sure you’ll master the skill in no time.” He gives Jihoon a little pat on the back before prancing off to the stables. Minhyun lets out another little sigh and trails after him, leaving the princes and Seongwoo by Jihoon’s side.

“I have the guards stationed around the archery range so there will be no one to disturb us,” the Crown Prince speaks, looking quite relieved himself. He puts an arm around Seongwoo and pulls the man towards him. Jihoon doesn’t miss the faint red blush across Seongwoo’s cheeks at the motion. “Let’s think of this as a day off. Have fun, you two.”

With that, the Crown Prince half drags Ong Seongwoo towards the stables as well, their small bickering not going unheard in Jihoon’s ears. Jihoon watches them with a smile, silently appreciating the bond between the two men.

“No experience with archery, hm?”

Jihoon tears his eyes away from the couple and looks at the Second Prince, who gives him somewhat of a smirk. Jihoon narrows his eyes at the prince and says nothing as he walks towards the stand to take his own tools.

“You should get one that’s suitable for your size,” the Second Prince approaches him and bends over to grab a smaller bow on the rack. Jihoon swallows down his annoyance as he puts down the
big bow in his hands to reach for the Second Prince’s bow.

To his frustration, the Second Prince raises the bow up high, where Jihoon cannot touch without jumping. After a few attempts at grabbing the bow, Jihoon steps back and resists the urge to roll his eyes.

“Your Highness, please,” he sounds tired and irritated, but how can one blame him when the prince is waving the bow in front of him with a smug look on his face?

"Not your Highness,” the Second Prince wags his finger at Jihoon as if he is lecturing a child. “You call me something else, and I’ll give you your bow.”

Sometimes, Jihoon thinks the Second Prince has several personalities. The man in front of him right now has the heart of a six year old’s, definitely. He doesn’t know where the solemn, mature young man from a few days ago has gone.

“It’s not right for me to—”

“You heard Daniel, he’s stationed guards around the place. No one is near.” The Second Prince’s eyes sparkle with hints of anticipation.

Jihoon inwardly sighs.

“Guanlin.”

The word comes out so softly that the Second Prince has to take a step and lean forward, saying, “I can’t hear you.”

“Guanlin,” Jihoon repeats as he turns his head to the side, suddenly being self conscious when the Second Prince is leaning in so close. Hearing his name, the prince seems genuinely satisfied when he straightens up, giving Jihoon some space to breathe once again.

“How about this, when no one is around, this is what you shall call me.” Guanlin can clearly see the unspoken protest written all over Jihoon’s face, so he adds, “It’s an order.”

The young prince’s mood has clearly brightened up after he managed to get Jihoon to call him by his name. Jihoon takes the smaller bow from him and the young prince offers to carry the bag of arrows for him, and the both of them heads towards the markings where archers should stand to shoot at the targets.

There are several kinds of protective gear that Jihoon can use, but he doesn’t know how to choose. Lai Guanlin once again takes the initiative to help him pick the gear, strapping the arm guard and the chest guard on him quickly. Jihoon watches in mild confusion as the prince works on helping him with the straps. After he is done, Lai Guanlin pats his arm and gestures for him to watch.

The prince does not strap on any protective gear, and Jihoon is certain that is because the Second Prince is fully experienced with the sport. He catches a full view of his stunning side profile, which almost brings him into a daze. Lai Guanlin draws the bowstring till it touches his reddish lips, one of his eyes closed so that he could see the target clearly. His handsome features are relaxed and yet incredibly focused, and when Jihoon sees the prince’s beautiful archery form, he can finally understand why Sungwoon and Seongwoo had said that the girls would pounce on him in the Hunts.

The prince is incredibly attractive, and unbelievably talented.
The moment Lai Guanlin lets go of the bow string, the arrow flies and hits the bullseye. Jihoon looks at the target in amazement, not knowing how to respond or when he would even be able to reach that level of skill and precision.

As if reading his mind, Lai Guanlin says, “Practice makes perfect.”

The prince steps towards him and encourages him to try too. Jihoon tries to mimic his earlier form and hold the bow the right way. It wasn’t as easy as the prince made it look. The bow is already a size smaller, but it is still very heavy. Though Jihoon’s arms were not exactly frail, he could feel the bow’s weight working his arm muscles.

The Second Prince seems to get some amusement out of his struggle, his lips curving upwards in the most provoking manner. Before Jihoon could throw down his bow and give up on this training session completely, Lai Guanlin steps into his space and holds his arm that is carrying the bow, supporting the weight for him. He draws an arrow from the bag and hooks it slowly for Jihoon, making sure he can see how he does it.

The following movements cause a moment of panic for Jihoon. His arms close in around him, his tall figure looming from behind while he holds Jihoon’s hands to put them in the right places. Jihoon can feel the warm body press against his back, and the hot breath fanning over his right ear when he the man whispers instructions of how to shoot at the target. He isn’t listening, and he blames the prince for it. Nothing the prince is doing is allowing him to focus.

He can practically smell the prince now, and though he hasn’t noticed it before, he realizes there is a hint of the wonderful magnolia scent, a refreshing edge to the youthful masculinity. He smells good, Jihoon thinks, and he blushes slightly the moment he realizes how much attention he is paying to the man behind him.

“Shoot,” Guanlin murmurs, and Jihoon’s heart skips a beat. With a tremble, he lets go of the bow string, and before he knows it, the arrow has flown and reached the target.

Jihoon eyes the target in disbelief. Somehow, though he hasn’t been focusing on the target as he should, the arrow was able to hit somewhere near the middle. He turns to Lai Guanlin, who nods and beams at him.

That is possibly one of the brightest smiles he has ever seen Lai Guanlin give.

Of course, most of his success at aiming is probably due to Guanlin’s close guidance, but the prince doesn’t seem to mind and praises him for his good attempt.

For some reason, Jihoon’s heartbeat starts to pick up, but he chooses to ignore it and follows Guanlin’s instructions to try shooting a few more times.

Sometimes he misses, sometimes he hits the target at the edge, but every single time, the Second Prince cheers him on with a “you’re near”, encouraging him to keep trying and helping him improve his overall skills.

Whenever Guanlin approaches him and gives him advice or helps him with his bow, Jihoon seems to lose the ability to focus. Feeling a little dizzy from the attention of the prince, he sheepishly requests for a quick break.

The Second Prince heads to the stables and allows him to have some time on his own, which Jihoon is more than grateful for. He breathes out a long sigh and looks at the several figures in the distance, the squad of friends that have been together since young.
Perhaps he could belong here, somehow. Perhaps these people are truly kind, and would treat him as a friend.

And not a chess piece.

Jihoon feels nauseous the moment he is reminded of his duty and his role in the palace. Today has been fun, but how long can he enjoy this peace, this kind of equal treatment on the royal grounds?

“Jihoon!”

The young scholar turns towards the voice, and his eyes light up when he recognizes the familiar face.

“You’ve got it, Jinyoung? The information?”

The nervous and panicked expression on Jinyoung’s face, however, tells him that the news he has received is not something as nice as he would have wished for it to be.

“You cannot read it here,” Jinyoung takes out a crumpled piece of letter from his sleeve and stuffs it into Jihoon’s hand. “The royal family is near, right?”

“Just the Crown Prince and the Second Prince. Why?” Jihoon asks, searching for an answer on Jinyoung’s face when the boy fidgets and looks around anxiously to make sure no one is around.

“I think… The royal family cannot be trusted.”

Chapter End Notes

I have finally made a NEW TWITTER @encredame feel free to follow me and talk to me and ask me stuff thank you i love you all so so so much
“Did you scare Jihoon away?” is the first thing that comes out of Seongwoo’s mouth the moment Guanlin approaches the group that had been chattering excitedly about the hunt.

“You think that badly of me?” Guanlin raises a brow and walks towards the beautiful black horse led by one of the guards at the stable. It once belonged to his mother, who had loved riding more than anything else. Guanlin strokes the horse fondly and she nudges back in response. “He’s resting.”

“Well, it is pretty hot today,” Minhyun raises a hand to shield his eyes from the rays of the scorching sun. “It’s not even summer yet, and the temperature is already this high.”

“That’s good. It means the animals won’t be cooped up in their homes,” Sungwoon shrugs. “Higher chances to see the rarer ones.”

“Any goals this year?” Daniel leans on Seongwoo’s shoulder, an action that can only be seen when there is no one else around them. The other members of the group had long adjusted to their intimacy, and the duo’s recent distance after Daniel’s marriage felt foreign to them.

“A big boar?” Seongwoo suggests, clearly trying hard not to pay attention to the weight on his shoulders.

“That’s boring,” Sungwoon wags his finger at Seongwoo in disapproval. “Our goal should be the rarest ones in the forest, like the bharal or the argali.”

“Hey, I heard there are a new species of foxes nearby,” Minhyun snaps his fingers, a look of delight crossing his face. “I’m not big on hunting them down but I would love to see them. And draw them, maybe.”

Sungwoon snorts and earns himself a shove from Minhyun.

“You’ll have to be quicker than the others, then,” Guanlin says. With a grunt, he mounts himself on his horse. “Everyone wants to hunt the red foxes for their skin. They make great fur cloaks, I heard.”

“How cruel.” Minhyun sniffs before hopping onto Sungwoon’s horse. Sungwoon yelps and tries to force Minhyun off, but finds that his height is his biggest obstacle in this task. With a frustrated sigh, he pushes himself onwards and sits facing Minhyun’s back. Seongwoo snickers gently at the sight, then quick follows Daniel into the stables to find their horses.

“Are you going to give Jihoon a ride?” Sungwoon peers curiously at Guanlin. “That’s a two seater right there.”

“Oh?” Guanlin smiles mischievously. “Thanks for the suggestion. I just might invite him.”

“As if you didn’t intend to at first,” scoffs Sungwoon.

Minhyun rolls his eyes and snaps at the reins, which causes the horse to neigh and prance forward. Sungwoon curses and latches onto Minhyun like a koala, and before long, the two are off in the distance, bickering with each other regarding the smallest of things.

Guanlin turns his gaze towards the gazebo, where Jihoon had been resting in. He could see that his family servant, Bae Jinyoung, had finished talking to him, and they were ready to resume the
hunting training soon.

Today, Jihoon is wearing a refreshing pale blue robe with white linings. As usual, unlike any other consorts he has seen throughout his life, Jihoon does not wear any makeup. The boy does not need any makeup. He is beautiful just the way he is.

Guanlin finds that the consort’s most captivating feature is his eyes. Those ridiculously gorgeous double lidded eyes, with a natural winged line that seems to heighten his beauty to no end.

He remembers the first time he had met Park Jihoon, on the road to the shrine where magnolia blossoms bloomed in all its glory. His beauty had shocked him, and his laughter was like music to his ears. Everything about him seemed too perfect to be true.

It was an impactful first impression. Guanlin had started to doubt that he had found the right man for this important role against the kingdom’s greatest enemy.

Now he doubts himself again. There is something about this consort- no, something about Park Jihoon, something so special, that makes Guanlin want to protect him from cruelty of the world. Something that makes him keep Jihoon out of the front line of the harsh battle.

His horse makes a gentle sound and paces forward a little, shaking Guanlin out of his trance. It was all that took to make Guanlin realize what he had been thinking just now.

Shocked, he tightens his grip on the reins. He is starting to lose sight of his original goal, just because he had grown to become close with this consort. The consort that isn’t even his. Kang Daniel’s consort.

“Guanlin?”

Daniel and Seongwoo come out from the stables, each leading their own horse.

“I thought you left with Minhyun and Sungwoon already,” Daniel says, frowning. “You don’t have to wait for us, you know.”

“Or maybe he was waiting for someone else,” Seongwoo smirks, wriggling his brows.

“Then let him continue with that,” Daniel leans into Seongwoo’s space and blows on his neck with affection, to which Seongwoo flinches in embarrassment. “Let’s go. Race you to the end of the track!”

“You lose every time,” Seongwoo snickers before lifting himself up onto the saddle.

“Not this time,” Daniel gives the other a toothy grin and leaps onto his pure white steed. He snaps the reins and mimics a battlecry before galloping off into the distance, with a laughing Seongwoo trailing effortlessly after him.

With those two gone, Guanlin is once again left alone beside the stables. He sighs and is about to slide off when he catches a glimpse of two figures approaching him.

“Your Hi- Guanlin.”

The prince smiles when he hears the young scholar’s voice calling out his name.

“You’re back.”

Jihoon and his family servant Bae Jinyoung walk slowly towards his horse, and he can see the
younger boy staring at his horse in awe. Jihoon, however, doesn’t look like he is paying attention to the sight before him. His eyes are unfocused and his face looks slightly pale.

Guanlin frowns. “Are you alright?”

The consort blinks and he holds his chin up to face the prince. Guanlin can see something in his eyes, a strong burning emotion, something that he hadn’t quite seen before.

Something is wrong, but he cannot figure out what. Guanlin can only assume the servant had told Jihoon something that really gave him a big shock. As much as Guanlin is interested in the news that had caused Jihoon to become like this, it is not like him to invade anyone’s privacy, so he has no intention of questioning the consort any further.

“Daniel rode off with Seongwoo. They’re somewhere along the track,” Guanlin nods towards the distance. “You can ride with me instead.”

“That wouldn’t be appropriate,” Jihoon softly murmurs. Guanlin dismisses his comment and pulls him up anyway, helping him settle onto his horse slowly. Jinyoung lends a hand and hoists his young master up, looking a little suspiciously towards Guanlin when he does so.

“He’ll be under my care,” Guanlin tells Jinyoung. The young servant takes the hint and takes a step back. It is slightly unsettling how the boy’s eyes doesn’t stray from him one bit, but Guanlin no longer pays attention to him and turns towards the young consort at his back.

“Hold on tight.”

He can sense the hesitation through the gentle touch of the young scholar, but when the horse starts to move, the thin arms start to circle firmly around him, and he can feel the warmth of the body pressing against him from behind.

Guanlin doesn’t suppress a smile as he urges his horse to go forward.

His black horse takes off elegantly in a cloud of sand and dust. Guanlin can hear a small cough from the younger, and he pats the horse to signal for it to slow down a little. The riding track is a wide sandy path that circles around the palace, leading to the big stables where battle horses are kept and back to the small royal stables next to the Archery Range.

Guanlin can understand why his mother loved riding. It made him feel free, and it seemed like there was nothing constraining him at the moment. He supposed that under the suffocating environment of the palace, riding was a sort of relief for his mother, who had found palace life a bubble of stress and loneliness.

“Guanlin?”

Guanlin keeps his eyes trained forward, but he raises a brow when he asks, “Yes?”

“What am I?”

Guanlin tenses on the horseback, and he is sure the scholar behind him feels it because he jerks away a little from Guanlin in response.

“I apologize if that came out as impolite-”

“You are a treasured asset of the royal family,” Guanlin cuts him off before the scholar could apologize for something he didn’t do wrong. “And why do you ask?”
“Your Highness.”

“I’m Guanlin.”

“Guanlin, would you tell me the truth if I asked you something?”

“Yes.”

The immediate reply not only shocked Jihoon, but also the prince himself. He doesn’t know why he promised this so quickly, but it doesn’t matter at the moment. He is curious as to why Jihoon is behaving like this so suddenly.

“Who am I?”

Guanlin jerks on the reins and the horse comes to a halt immediately, the huge motion causing Jihoon to lose his balance. In a split second, Guanlin reaches out to grab the boy to prevent him from falling, pulling him right into his space.

The two stop talking for a moment, their heartbeats stuttering in frantic, messy beats as they press closely together.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Guanlin finally manages.

Jihoon doesn’t budge from his place. Guanlin could not look at his face in his position, and therefore has no idea what the other is thinking.

“Then it doesn’t matter,” Jihoon whispers after what seemed like a century. “Let’s go.”

“Master, we’ve found the people as you had requested,” Fei curtsies and nods towards the door. Jia leads four young women into the room, all of whom look too terrified to walk properly.

“Good.” Jihoon clamps his book shut and stands, making sure to slam his book on the table to draw their attention. The women let out a little whimper before they are forced to kneel in front of Jihoon in one row.

“It’s been quite a while, hasn’t it?” Jihoon asks, staring straight into the eyes of the four women.

The women exchange fearful glances before putting their palms on the ground and vigorously touching their heads onto the floor again and again. “Forgive us, young Master, we were ordered to do it! It wasn’t our intention to hurt the Mistress! Please spare us our lives!”

“Hold on.” Jihoon places a finger to his lips. Fei and Jia takes the hint to clamp the girls’ mouth shut. Jinyoung pulls out a few cloths and hands it to the girls, who shove them in the women’s mouths to keep them from talking.

“Hear me out, and only speak when I tell you to.”

The women continue to struggle, which wears down Jihoon’s patience. He is tired of being pushed around in the palace, and he wants to get this over with. It is time for him to take charge and do something. If the royal family was going to place such great power in his hands, he might as well use it. After all, he had unknowingly sacrificed so much to wield this power.

“You can either follow my orders or we could lock you in a warehouse and starve you for days until you know what obedience means.”
The women immediately stop in their movements, panic written all over their faces when they bite down on the cloths with unshed tears.

“I will be asking you questions. Nod to indicate ‘yes’ and shake your head if it’s a ‘no’. Understood?”

The four women nod their heads continuously, their will to live and their fear of the Crown Prince’s consort making them obey without any hesitation.

“You four have been working under our roof a few years ago, correct?”

They nod.

“My mother was up and alive back then. She had no problems walking around, looking like an average healthy person. But someone commanded you to do something to her.”

One of them nod, while the other three dip their heads. Whether in guilt or shame or anything else, Jihoon does not care. Rage boils within him when he proceeds with the interrogation.

“Free one of them,” he commands Fei, and she immediately takes the cloth away from the mildest looking one.

“Who made you poison my mother?”

“We don’t know…” the women looks shaken, her hair falling messily on the sides of her face. “Someone sent us a letter with the names of our closest family members. It was to each and every one of us, and we were terrified…”

The other three mumbled incoherently in agreement as they nod with a pleading look in their eyes, as if to tell Jihoon that none of it was their fault.

Jihoon softens visibly towards the women, but his grip on the edge of the table tightens.

“But Master!” The women grabs onto Jihoon’s leg and is instantly stopped by Fei and Jia, who hoist her back into place with some difficulty. “I can tell you something! The letter definitely smelt of expensive incense and the paper was of thick expensive material.”

Jihoon bites down on his lip, apprehending the moment he unveils the truth that he had predicted.

“Jia,” he orders, and the maid takes a small tin container and places it before the woman’s face. The woman’s eyes light up, and she almost jumps from her place.

“This! The incense smelt exactly like this! I would never forget it, because it had such a strange herbal smell.”

The incense was a small gift from the Crown Prince to Jihoon. It was handmade by the palace craftsmen with the Crown Prince’s favourite herb collection that could reportedly calm one’s senses and soothe out their emotions.

It was an item exclusive to the prince, or at least the palace.

“What exactly were you told to do?” Jinyoung couldn’t resist the urge to press on, having had a close relationship with Jihoon’s mother as well. He eyes the women in disbelief, his face reddening from anger.

“We… we were told to put the powder that was included with the letter into Mistress’ food. The
letter guaranteed that Mistress wouldn’t meet death with the poison! So we—"

“So you went ahead and did it?” roared Jinyoung, his chest heaving up and down. “Jihoon’s father fired you, probably because he knew you were the culprits! You are lucky that we didn’t accuse you of the crime at that time! You would have been thrown into the dungeons and had your fingers chopped off!”

The women flinch and lower their heads, and the one without the cloth restraining her had tears welling up in her eyes.

“Jinyoung,” Jihoon calls softly before pulling his friend close to him. “I’m fine.”

Jinyoung bites the inside of his cheek to stop himself from lashing out at the women.

“Fei, Jia. Let the women go.” Jihoon turns away from them and presses his two palms onto his study table. “Make sure they don’t speak of today’s incidents.”

“Yes, Master,” the maids escort the women out quickly and close the door behind them.

When Jihoon is finally left alone with Jinyoung, he places a hand over his forehead, choking out a small sob.

“What am I to do?”

Jinyoung watches helplessly as his young master unfolds the crumpled piece of paper on the table and punches it with all the strength he has, the loud noise resounding through the room.

“Me meeting Lai Guanlin was never a coincidence.”

Jihoon crouches and buries himself in his sleeves, his body shaking against the hard wooden table.

“The royal family knew of my poor background. They made my mother sick so my family would need money. They deprived me of a job as an official so that I couldn’t earn an income. There was no way that my father alone could pay that much for my mother’s cure. Then…”

“Then they sent the Second Prince to meet you at the shrine,” Jinyoung gasps, coming to understand the entire plot. “To coax you into joining the selection. For the money.”

“But why?” Jinyoung cannot help but ask. It was all too meticulously planned to be a plot to recruit a mere peasant into the palace.

“Because,” Jihoon holds out the other envelope Jinyoung had brought to him earlier. “I am their only hope in defeating the Red Cloak Tribe.”
Stay Safe

“The carriage is ready, Master.”

“Alright, give us a moment, Eunuch Xi,” Jia calls out before she hurriedly fixes her master’s hair, wrapping a silver coloured hair tie around the neat bun.

“The Crown Prince’s carriage is heading over soon,” Eunuch Xi warns with a frown on his face. The guards standing beside him retreat from the palace and head out towards the carriage to check on the horses immediately.

The two maids exchange frantic glances before pulling a dazed Jihoon up from his chair and looking him all over to check if they had missed anything for his outfit. They have never seen their master in dark coloured clothing, for he had always preferred pale and pure colours over the bolder ones. However, because they’re heading to the forest for a messy sport - hunting, Sungwoon had pointed out that grey, black or brown would be more fitting.

Jihoon is draped in a black robe with silver lining, bronze coloured flowers scattered along the sides. As hunting required tighter clothing for higher convenience, the robe showed off his slender figure, especially at the area of the grey fabric around the stomach, where Jihoon’s thin waist was emphasized. Underneath, he wore black pants for better and more flexible movement.

“Okay, looks good.” Fei’s eyes dart towards the door. “Maybe we could add a little something-”

“There’s really no time,” Eunuch Xi sighs, exasperated. “Master isn't heading to a ball, ladies. He's going to the Spring Hunt.”

The two maids groan and seemed to want to protest, but they refrained from doing so because of time constraint. Sighing, they quickly make sure Jihoon's hair and robe is in place before they take their hands off him.

Jinyoung stands at the side with his arms crossed, a frown embedded across his forehead. There is obviously a lot on his mind, and Jihoon doesn’t know what he can say to comfort the other. Jinyoung has been in this state ever since they had found out about the royal family’s plot against Jihoon’s mother, and Jihoon himself has been troubled enough over the issue.

One of the guards rushes in quickly and kneels in front of Jihoon. “The Crown Prince has arrived,” he reports. Jihoon waves him out and waits till the guard has exited before he smooths out the creases of his robe.

“Before we know of their true intentions, we should stay alert around them,” his friend whispers as he shifts to Jihoon’s side, a hand coming up to clasp on his shoulder protectively. “You know that, right?”

Before Jihoon can reply, Fei, Jia and Eunuch Xi kneel down towards the door. Jihoon swallows and watches as the two figures clad in black step into his palace.

“You look good,” the Second Prince compliments. “Are you ready for the Hunt?”

“Yes, your Highness.”

Jihoon exits the palace and looks up at the sky. With a hand shielding the small amount of light entering his eyes, he sees grey rolling clouds, with only a few rare spots of sunlight lining them.
The sky seems to dim further whenever he takes a step.

He feels slightly apprehensive, but he doesn’t know why.

The unsettling feeling doesn’t go away even when he arrives at the carriage. Eunuch Xi helps him up and Jihoon soon finds himself seated in a large sized carriage with a small table in front of him, where the maids could serve him tea and snacks.

“Is it comfortable enough for you, Master?” Fei asks as she sits down beside Jia at the opposite side of him. Jinyoung settles beside Jihoon and puts the wooden basket filled with refreshments on the table.

“Yes, thank you.” The environment is as comfortable as it could get, but the feeling gripping at his chest is what’s disturbing him the most.

The carriages start to move. Jihoon brushes the beads of the curtain to reveal the view of the surrounding environment, and he can see that in front of him are the two carriages carrying the Crown Prince and the Second Prince. Behind them are a few other carriages, the one right behind him especially eye-catching in all its blood red coloured glory. He doesn’t have to ask to know that Consort Lee is staying in that carriage.

“It’s going to rain soon,” Jihoon observes. Jinyoung and the maids crane their necks to look at the sky.

“You don’t have to worry about getting wet, Master,” Jia reassures him. “Our carriages are very well made. They’re waterproof and damage proof.”

“Damage proof,” Jihoon murmurs thoughtfully, and lets the beads slide back in place. “How many soldiers are we bringing with us?”

“Most of the soldiers are escorting the Emperor and the Empress,” Fei explains. “They have three hundred with them, and we have a hundred.”

"Only four hundred on this trip in total?” Jinyoung frowns and sits up straight immediately. “Two princes, two consorts, and all the foreign representatives heading out together, and we only have one hundred escorting us?”

“Well…” Fei holds her chin, deep in thought. “Usually we would have seven hundred escorting the entire group, but the Emperor and the Empress are heading to the woods through a special route. They’ll be hiking up the hill to the temple and will be staying there for a night to pray for the safety of the citizens in Tian He. Afterwards, they will come and join us. That route requires less people because there is a bridge that can only support limited weight.”

“Yes, I suppose they decided three hundred was the right amount to bring. For us, though. I’m not quite sure…” Jia trails off and shrugs. “Why one hundred?”

“Because the princes are of age?” Fei suggests. “They’re old enough to fight, and I heard they have some mad skills.” Her eyes twinkle as she says this, earning her an annoyed sigh from Jia.

“That’s probably not it,” Jia turns to Jihoon.

“Maybe they need to keep the majority of the soldiers at the palace,” Jihoon says, only paying half the attention to the conversation as he leans his head sideways into the palm of his hand. “For something bigger.”
Jinyoung agrees. “To train them. Or to protect the Royal Palace from invasion.”

Fei and Jia are about to reply when the carriage jolts and comes to a halt, with horses neighing in panic outside their carriage. Jihoon immediately grasps firmly on the side handle to steady himself.

The refreshments, once neatly placed in the basket on the table, are spilled and scattered all over the floor and the boys’ robes. Hot tea seeps through the material and attacks Jihoon’s skin, causing him to wince and immediately kick away the teapot.

Fei and Jia scramble to help them up.

“Are you okay?” Fei mumbles shakily as she climbs into the space next to Jihoon’s. Jia pushes away the scattered pots and plates to keep the two boys from harm.

Clearly, none of them are composed in the situation. People are shouting outside, and Jihoon can hear the princes giving orders and commands to solve whatever issue they are facing.

There’s a shrill cry from behind and Jihoon recognizes it as Consort Lee’s voice. He grabs at the curtain beads and brush them open to have a look outside.

“Stay down!” A voice yells at him. Jihoon doesn't have any time to react when he feels something barely brush past his cheek, leaving a small burning sensation. Jihoon drops down from the window, heart thumping quickly in his chest, as he raises a hand to touch his fae.

He rubs his fingers together. It's wet. He's bleeding.

Someone had shot an arrow his way.

“Jihoon!” Jinyoung grabs at his friend’s sleeve and pulls him further into the safety of the carriage. “Do you want to die?” He exclaims in a mixture of fear and rage, his hair frazzled and his clothes in a mess.

“Sorry, I-”

A loud sound suddenly interrupts Jihoon, and the four people in the carriage all jump from their positions.

“A storm,” Jihoon swallows, his voice barely audible.

Thunder roars again. Lightning strikes across the sky. The huddled group in the carriage immediately find themselves surrounded with men’s shouts and women’s screams, mixed in the dry gurgling croaks of ravens and the pitter-patter of the rain.

Jia, who has been peering out the window, suddenly exhales deeply and reaches for the door. Fei and Jinyoung grip on her sleeve in panic.

“What are you doing? It’s dangerous out there!” Jinyoung yells in the midst of the chaos. “We should stay here, where it’s safe. You said it’s damage proof, right?”

“I don’t think this is the safest place to stay,” she struggles to sound firm, but there are traces of fear and uncertainty in her voice. “The horsemen are heading up the hill with the soldiers. I will go out and tell the princes that I’ll bring our carriage to safety.”

“Bring our carriage to safety?” Jihoon eyes her with a sharp glint in his eye. “You’re not saying that you’ll ride the horses leading the carriage? We are being ambushed, you will get shot.”
“Master-” protests Jia.

“Safety is a priority, even for you. I’m commanding you to stay. Don’t you dare go out.”

Everyone else in the carriage turns to Jihoon and sees the flame of determination in his eyes. They’ve never witnessed this side of Jihoon, who gave them firm orders like any other high ranked consort would to a maid or a servant. The looks of disbelief slowly turn into looks of adoration and respect. Park Jihoon, their Master, is acting like a true leader who cares for his subordinates even in this kind of urgent situation.

“ Consort Park? Are you in there?” A voice calls out to them from the outside. Fei brushes the curtain beads and looks out. It’s one of the soldiers escorting them to the hunting grounds.

“Yes, our Master is safe here.”

“His Highness, the Crown Prince, commands that I bring you all to safety,” the gruff voice speaks again.

Jinyoung and Jihoon exchange glances but stay silent in their places.

“Now?”

“Yes, Miss.”

Fei turns to Jihoon and raises a brow to see if he has anything he wishes to convey. Jihoon shakes his head.

“We should leave,” he tells Fei. “We will only be a bother if we stay. Are the princes leaving?”

Fei relays his question to the soldier and the soldier shakes his head. “The princes are going to lead the soldiers to find the archers that have ambushed us.”

“The princes themselves?” Jinyoung’s jaw drops. “It’s so dangerous.”

Jihoon pats Fei’s shoulder and tells her to stand aside so he could talk to the soldier himself. Peering out the window, he questions, “Have the princes left yet?”

“No, they’re right there.” The soldier points to the carriages in front of them.

“Bring me to them,” Jihoon says quietly to the soldier. The man looks alarmed, but he couldn’t find any reason to disobey Jihoon, who is of much higher rank than him. With a conflicted look, he guides Jihoon down the carriage and towards the princes.

As soon as the Second Prince sees him enter the carriage, he throws a dark glare towards the soldier accompanying him. The soldier can only bow his head apologetically, and Jihoon raises a hand to stop the soldier from explaining.

“I told him to bring me here.” Jihoon steps closer towards the princes so he wouldn’t be seen by the archers. “I wanted to help you with the defense.”

“Jihoon,” the Crown Prince sends him a warning look, which Jihoon ignores.

“Your Highnesses, Sir Hwang, please allow me to be your strategist for the time being,” Jihoon requests, and kneels down in front of them. Seeing this, the Second Prince bends his tall figure to pull him back up, but Jihoon refuses with a jerk of the arm and stays firmly in place.
He wants to show them that he isn’t as weak as they perceive him to be. They may have lured him into the palace through unjustified means, but these are the princes of the Tian He Kingdom. Jihoon will not witness the death of the two living hopes of his very own homeland.

“You shouldn’t be doing this,” the Crown Prince looks displeased, but before he can turn Jihoon down, Hwang Minhyun holds his hand out to him. Jihoon eyes his hand and looks up to see the foreign representative display a gentle, trusting smile.

“Well, stand up and tell us what you propose we should do.”

“Minhyun, he needs to be protected,” the Second Prince insists, his face darkening at his friend’s acceptance of Jihoon’s request.

“I don’t!” Jihoon retorts, and after a small moment, he adds hesitantly, “your Highness.”

“If a man says he doesn’t need to be protected, then he doesn’t.” Minhyun turns his attention towards Jihoon and helps him back up. “Our current plan is to send a small group of men up the hill. As they’re running, they become the bait to lure the archers out. Another group, to be led by the Second Prince Guanlin, will be stationed around here to shoot at the archers who have revealed themselves. Meanwhile, the rest will be led by the Crown Prince up the back of the hill to ambush the archers while their attention is on Prince Guanlin’s team.”

“Your first batch of men will be sacrificed, then,” Jihoon concludes, as if that was the main point of the plan.

“We have no other choice,” the Crown Prince argues, looking slightly impatient. “We’re running out of time. They might rush down and I have a feeling they may outnumber us.”

“Isn’t Sir Jeong here with us?” Jihoon raises a brow. “Let’s talk to him as well.”

“Jeong Sewoon?” the Second Prince frowns at him, clearly disapproving of Jihoon mentioning the West Hak representative. “I doubt he’ll be of help.”

“He doesn’t have a choice whether or not to help, no matter which side he is on. He’s under our surveillance,” Jihoon assures them. With a defeated sigh, the Crown Prince orders some soldiers to fetch Sewoon.

Not long after, the West Hak representative arrives, still in his usual calm and composed state despite all the mess happening around them.

“Is there anything I could help you gentlemen with?” Sewoon questions in the most polite manner, giving his attention to Jihoon especially.

“I don’t suppose you have any tools or potions that could set fire with you? Or any type of poison?” Jihoon asks straightforwardly. He can feel the princes tensing next to him immediately.

“Oh, I always stay prepared,” Surprisingly, Sewoon seems to have expected the ridiculous question. He draws out two tubes of liquids from his sleeve without any hurry.

“Here.” He hands the smallest tube over to Jihoon. “You can make fire with a drop of this. Just blow some hot air on it and whatever you put the liquid on will light up. As for the poison…” Sewoon gives him a mysterious smile and places the last tube on Jihoon’s left palm. “The smallest amount could rip up your internal organs. Sounds good?”

“Sounds good.”
The princes can only stare at them in awe, disbelief clouding their features as they watch the two carry out the conversation. Hwang Minhyun stays silent, seemingly deep in thought.

“We should split the men into at least ten groups,” Jihoon leans forward to speak gently. “Three teams will be stationed here, and they should compose of the best archers. They will be equipped with arrows coated with these,” Jihoon holds up the tubes, “and shoot at where the enemies are located. The fire arrows should be shot first to create panic within those ambushing us, and when they are running, the poison arrows will be used to bring down some of them. Meanwhile, the rest of the soldiers could run up the hill separately in small teams of five or less. There are many trees and bushes, so it could give us maximum coverage, and reduce our loss. The archers are likely to run down separately, so it will be easy to kill them up close while they try to escape.”

“Perfect,” Minhyun praises him, his lips curving upwards. “You’re talented, Consort Park.”

“Indeed,” Sewoon nods with a smile, though his eyes show little emotion. “What a gem.”

“I will lead the archers then,” the Second Prince offers. “I’ll take twenty six of our men whom I know to have a good aim and eyesight.”

“Minhyun and I will lead the small groups up the hill in the meantime.” The Crown Prince stands from his seat, and the others follow his action immediately. “Let’s settle this quick. The pre-hunting feast is starting very soon.”

“I’ll help with coating the arrows,” Jihoon speaks up before the Crown Prince can order him to get to a safe place. “I should do what I can to help you.”

“You’ve done more than enough,” the Crown Prince says, his expression finally softening. He lays a hand on Jihoon’s soldier and pats it twice before leaving the carriage. Minhyun quickly trails after him, and Sewoon is escorted back to the carriage he came in.

Jihoon finds that, once again, he is left alone with the Second Prince, Lai Guanlin.

“Your face,” the Second Prince’s tone is gentle, and sounds almost caring to Jihoon’s ears. Yet, Jihoon’s instinct tells him not to trust the man before him, after all that has happened between them. How is he to know which of the people he’s come across are actually sincere?

As Jihoon grows more and more self conscious of his own paranoia, the Second Prince suddenly shifts from his seat and moves towards him. Jihoon couldn’t even react when the tall man places a cold palm against his face and brushes a finger across the scratch, making his skin tingle a little. Jihoon flinches, and the prince immediately withdraws his hand.

“It hurts?” Lai Guanlin asks, his voice laced with what seemed like genuine concern. Jihoon opens his mouth but his voice refuses to come out. His heart starts to pound at an unsteadily rapid rhythm once again, and he swallows, It’s not the first time he’s become strangely nervous around this prince, and he’s starting to find it very distracting.

“It hurts?” Lai Guanlin repeats patiently, lowering his voice even though only the two of them are in the carriage.

“No…” Jihoon answers, almost at a complete loss of words. An awkward piece of silence settles between the two, and for a moment, Jihoon doesn’t know what to do.

The thunder disrupts the silence almost as soon as it started, and the two jump from their seats, once again aware of their surroundings. Some soldiers open the door and deliver the bags of arrows the princes had requested them to bring.
“We should get going,” Jihoon tells Guanlin, realizing that the other had been staring at him all this time when he was carefully arranging the bags. Guanlin nods, finally tearing his eyes away from him and taking all the bags with him.

The rain has finally stopped, but the sky remains dark. They head outside of the carriage and to the back, where they quickly cover the arrowheads with the liquid Jeong Sewoon had given them. Several soldiers come by to help, and they soon have the batch ready for shooting.

Before Guanlin leaves, he steps closer to Jihoon so only the other could hear him. Jihoon, shocked by the action, leans backwards a little, his eyes placed on anything but the person in front of him.

“Get into your carriage. We will handle everything here,” Guanlin tells him, his voice soft but with a tone of authority. “Let’s meet at the White Forest.”

When Jihoon gathers the courage to look up, he finds that there is a no-nonsense look in the prince’s eyes, and Jihoon knows better than to go against Lai Guanlin when he is so firm in his commands. Staring back into the prince’s dark brown eyes, full of care, determination and confidence, Jihoon finds his inner wall of defense starting to break down a little.

Before Jihoon can fall deeper into the trap, he blinks and steps back a few steps, feeling Lai Guanlin’s hand slide away from him.

Jihoon holds out his arms in a gesture of respect and bows his head towards the tall, black-clothed figure. Without looking up, he turns and returns to his carriage, where Fei, Jia and Jinyoung let out big sighs of relief and embrace him tightly, rejoicing over the fact that he has returned safely.

The carriage moves once again when they are settled down. On the bumpy, noisy route towards the White Forest, Jihoon finds himself unable to stop worrying.

Over what? He questions himself.

A pale skinned figure in a black and gold robe resurfaces in his mind. The stunning, heart stopping smile the person gives causes Jihoon’s hand to slip from the railing.

“Is everything okay?” Jihoon can barely hear Jinyoung ask.

Jihoon doesn’t reply. He brushes aside the curtain beads and sticks his head out of the window to turn and look at where he had left the princes and the soldiers.

“Stay safe,” Jihoon murmurs, watching the group turn smaller and smaller as the carriage trots away into the distance.
“This way.” A soldier leads the group through trees of different shapes and sizes to the enormous tent set up on the rare piece of flat land located in the middle of the woods.

The White Forest is a private forest owned and protected by the royal family. It is also one of the biggest forests in the entire Tian He Kingdom. Located on the top of a rocky hill, the forest is almost impossible to reach without enough physical support. Jihoon eyes the large number of nobles’ escorts with strong build and fierce expressions, inhaling deeply as he passes them and trying hard to ignore the stares thrown his way.

“This amount of people is enough to make an army,” breathes Jinyoung, shuffling closer to Jihoon and avoiding eye contact with the big men.

“It’s one of the reasons why the Spring Hunt is always the safest event of the year. No one would be dumb enough to attack us in front of this massive group of trained soldiers,” Jia says with little discomfort. Clearly she is more used to this kind of situation than the two young boys beside her.

“Safest in terms of external threats,” Fei corrects, meeting the glares of many with her vigilant gaze. “Otherwise, the Spring Hunt is a very dangerous activity.”

“The animals are big and rare, but they are wild,” Jia explains as they stop in front of the huge white tent. “We have another tent located mid hill with the best doctors in Tian He just to tend to those injured in the Hunt. Perhaps we will witness firsthand how aggressive these creatures are.”

The soldier escorting them uses a hand to lift up the flap at the entrance of the tent and gestures for them to enter.

As soon as Jihoon steps foot into the tent, the chattering in the surroundings almost immediately dies down. Jihoon is suddenly aware of his own foosteps and his stuttering heartbeat. He finds himself desperately scanning the crowd for a familiar face.

His gaze lands on a slim, elegant figure in the middle of a group of well dressed nobles. She blows gently on the cup of tea in her hands and sips from it as if Jihoon hasn't just disrupted the atmosphere in the room. Strangely enough, though she is the only familiar face among these hundreds of strangers, Jihoon has a feeling that he would much rather not meet her in this occasion.

Finally, she looks up from her tea and meets his eyes, throwing him a small smirk.

“You must be Consort Park,” someone suddenly says, interrupting the silence. Jihoon tears his eyes off the Second Prince's consort and turns towards the voice.

“Daehwi?” Jinyoung gasps as he addresses the petite boy in front of them.

“Hello, Jinyoung,” the pale young man responds to him with a smile. His long, feminine lashes flutter downwards, shielding his eyes from their view. “And greetings to you, Consort Park.”

Jihoon nods to him and glances towards Jinyoung, waiting for him to make his next move. This boy and Jinyoung seems to have some sort of history, and Jihoon knows better than to say anything about it.
Jinyoung acknowledges Jihoon’s sign and swallows hard as he takes a step backward.

“Perhaps I should introduce you two,” he says quietly, as if afraid that anyone else could overhear their conversation. He had a reason to fear it, for Jinyoung was a mere servant in the eyes of many, and no servant or peasant could converse with a noble like he used to with Daehwi.

The crowd starts turning back to their own conversations after they realize that the consort, who was a stranger to such an event, had a companion of such high status.

“I can see a lot of people who are disappointed that we didn’t make a fool of ourselves,” Jia snorts, rolling her eyes.

Fei lets out a disgusted sound. “They’re done watching the show, obviously.”

“Luckily we didn’t embarrass ourselves,” Jihoon trains his eyes on the fragile looking noble in front of him, who returns his attention with a radiant smile. “Thanks to our friend right here.”

“You’re right,” Jinyoung agrees, his eyes focused on the smaller figure before him.

“You’re right,” Jinyoung agrees, his eyes focused on the smaller figure before him.

“Please, sit at our table,” the boy called Daehwi speaks, his voice soft and light as a feather. “It would be an honour for us to have you.”

Jihoon looks at the direction to which Daehwi is pointing. There aren't many people sitting at the small round table, but with just a glance at their clothing and their headwear Jihoon could tell that they were no ordinary people.

Daehwi's servant, a lanky young girl who is too shy to look up from the ground, takes Daehwi's arm and helps him across the room to the table he was pointing at. Jihoon can feel Jinyoung tensing beside him, but he decides not to talk about it.

“Have a seat, Consort Park.” Daehwi puts a hand on the table for support when he lowers himself onto his chair. Jihoon frowns. The boy looks too weak, and it is as if he is burdened by some sort of illness.

“Allow me to introduce you to some of the friends I just met.” As Jihoon takes a seat, Daehwi gestures towards the two people at the table. One of them looks slightly familiar, and when Jihoon desperately tries to recall where he had seen him, he realizes that he was the one who had sat beside Ong Seongwoo on the night of the New Year’s Feast.

“I'm Kim Jaehwan,” the man he’s eyeing greets them with a wave of the hand, his cheeks puffing out when he smiles. “You were breathtaking at the feast, by the way.”

“And I am Park Woojin,” a very energetic young man chimes in, his snaggletooth showing along with his bright grin. “Unlike the two of them, I'm from a small noble family. So don't worry about the formalities.”

“Small,” scoffs Jaehwan, rolling his eyes. “Sure, so small that the Emperor is about to list your father as a candidate for the Fifth General's seat.”

“Well, excuse me,” retorts Woojin. “At least in the meantime I'm not the one bearing the surnames Lee, Ong, Jeon or Kim.”

“He's big,” Jaehwan tells Jihoon in a poor attempt at a whisper.

“Shut up, you visual shock,” Woojin sticks his tongue out at Jaehwan.
“Screeching parrot,” Jaehwan throws back, narrowing his eyes.

“Bloated ass!”

“Noisy goat!”

“Are you done?” Daehwi throws a fork at the middle of the table and it lands with a small clang, which is enough to silence the two that continue glaring daggers at each other.

“No, not really,” mutters Woojin, though he quickly sinks back down into his chair.

“Don't mind him, he's a kid,” Jaehwan beams at Jihoon, as if he hadn't been the one arguing with Woojin just now. Jihoon lets out a small laugh, a rare one that catches the attention of Jinyoung, Fei and Jia. The three exchange surprised glances with each other, but then they quickly relax, feeling comforted that their master is able to be his joyful self again.

“How old are you?” Woojin asks eagerly. “And your name? We only know you're the Crown Prince's consort.”

“I'm Park Jihoon,” Jihoon gives them a little wave, unable to contain the smile that he had hidden for quite a while.

“Oh wow, we have the same surname.” Woojin clucks his tongue and leans in towards Jihoon. “Let’s be friends.”

Jihoon raises his brow, smiling as he gives Woojin’s hand a rough shake.

“Anyway,” Daehwi swats Woojin away from the table, making sure everyone can hear him when he speaks. “Would you like to form a team with us, Jihoon? For the Hunt.”

“A team?” Jihoon hadn’t heard of the details of the Hunt before, so he had no idea how the game is to be played.

“Basically, we form teams of at most seven,” Jaehwan props his elbow on the table and rests his head against his palm. “Then we compete. Of course, the brave ones set off on their own.”

“Like, you know, the Princes,” Woojin cuts in quickly, earning him an irritated look from Jaehwan. “Of course, if they ever wish to join a group, the Princes have their own circle of friends.” Woojin pokes at the other man’s cheeks. “Jaehwan claims that he knows some of them. You can decide whether or not you’d like to believe that.”

“How dare you doubt me,” Jaehwan does a full dramatic display of a swoon, a look of disbelief on his face. “I am a member of the Kim family, you know. And Ong Seongwoo owes me a lot.”

“Enough,” sighs Daehwi. “It’s better to head into the woods as a group, so that if anyone gets injured, someone can provide backup or contact the doctors. Also, if you haven’t been told, the animals are quite… big.”

“And bloodthirsty,” Woojin helpfully adds with an innocent smile on his face.

“We have four people in total?” asks Jihoon, looking around to see if there is anyone else joining them. Everyone else seems to be minding their own business.

“Well, if we count the Crown Prince…” Jaehwan clasps his hands together in joy. “That will make the five of us. And that is more than enough.”
“The Crown Prince will be escorting you, right?” Woojin grasps Jihoon’s shoulder excitedly.

Jihoon opens his mouth to reject but hesitates when he sees the bright look of hope in Woojin and Jaehwan’s eyes. Jihoon doesn’t know how to tell them that the Crown Prince probably has another man he’d like to be with during the hunt, especially when Jihoon is his consort.

“Probably?” He manages to say in a soft voice before clamping his mouth shut again, sinking back into his chair.

“Good.” Jaehwan gives him a thumbs up, looking extremely pleased with the answer even though Jihoon hadn’t exactly confirmed that the Crown Prince would be coming with them. “What a wonderful day it is.”

“Yes,” Woojin agrees halfheartedly. “Meeting you made my day.”

“Hey!” Jaehwan frowns. “You better mean that.”

“Did you know each other before you came here?” questions Jinyoung suddenly, and the people sitting around the table pause in their conversation to look at him. Aware of the attention, Jinyoung takes a small step back beside Jihoon.

“And you are?” Jaehwan asks, his voice softening once he realizes that Jinyoung had shrunk back when they turned towards him.

“Pardon me, I’m-”

“Bae Jinyoung. He’s my friend. I wouldn’t have known Consort Park if not for him,” Daehwi offers, though he quickly averts his gaze.

Jaehwan replies with a small ‘oh’ and decides not to pursue any further. No one seems to want to point out that it was strange for the Lee family’s oldest son to be friends with a servant in a small household.

Jinyoung chews on his lower lip thoughtfully.

“Anyway,” Woojin snaps his fingers and disrupts the silence. “My mother knew Daehwi’s mother. They were the best of friends, I heard. I’ve known Daehwi for a while now. We arrived at the tent early, and so did this man.” Woojin points at Jaehwan, looking extremely unamused.

“I just wanted to talk to Daehwi,” Jaehwan tells Jihoon, pouting. “I didn’t know such a gentle person could have a barbarian as a friend.”

“Gentle?” Woojin exclaims incredulously, but he immediately shuts his mouth when he catches Daehwi staring. “Sorry,” he mutters, looking everywhere but in Daehwi’s direction.

“We naturally formed a group,” Daehwi continues helpfully, ignoring his sulking friend. “Since people here aren’t really friendly.”

The four of them glance around the room and Jihoon realizes that the statement is very true. In the far end of the tent he can spot Consort Lee, Daehwi’s half sister, in the midst of a crowd who seem to be trying too hard to please her. Jihoon exhaled deeply and turns back to his three new acquaintances, who seem to share his thoughts on socializing with others in the tent.

“I say we stay where we are and avoid trouble,” Woojin mumbles, shaking his head. “Ambitious rich people are the most troublesome to deal with, and they are all gathered in one place.”
“My half sister,” Daehwi’s voice drops lower as he leans forward. “She can do anything to get what she wants. Avoid contact with her if you can.”

“Believe me,” Jihoon purses his lips. “I try to.”

“Wait,” Jaehwan holds up a hand to hush them as he turns and looks around. “Something’s wrong.”

Jihoon draws back from the table and looks at his surroundings. True enough, several armed soldiers are running into the tent and frantically relaying messages to some nobles. Others gather around to discuss something, but their worried expressions tell Jihoon that something has happened. Something bad, most likely.

“I wonder what’s going on,” Daehwi rises from his chair, peering over the crowd.

At the same time, one of the armed soldiers approaches their table. Daehwi stumbles a little, and quickly finds himself in Jinyoung’s firm grip that is the only thing preventing him from falling. Jaehwan and Woojin immediately stand, anticipating the soldier’s message.

“What is it?” Jihoon asks the soldier, who bows towards them a few times.

“Consort Park,” the soldier pants, sounding quite out of breathe. Seeing the beads of sweat on his face, Jihoon can tell that he has run from a distance in his top speed. “An accident has happened at the hill.”

“The hill?” Jihoon blinks twice before he gasps, abruptly standing up and knocking down the chair he was sitting on. “Where the ambush happened?”

“Yes,” the soldier nods, dabbing at his forehead with his sleeve. “The surrounding trees caught fire, and it spread very quickly. The princes are trapped in the midst of a massive hillfire.”

Jihoon swallows drily and feels his head spin, his knees giving way beneath him. Thankfully, Fei and Jia are there to catch him with their arms around his waist.

“A fire coming out of nowhere?” Daehwi quickly grips on the table to help himself up, pushing Jinyoung gently away from him. “Explain.”

“No,” Jihoon shakily responds for the soldier, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. “I-”

“You traitor!” someone screams, and Jihoon doesn’t have time to process anything when a full cup of tea is flung towards his direction, the hot liquid spilling over the table and his robe, the glass shattering loudly on the floor.

“Calm down,” Daehwi’s voice suddenly turns cold, and Jihoon looks up to see the boy confronting an angered woman standing right in front of their table. As he tries to focus on the image before him, he realizes that the woman is none other than Consort Lee Hyejin. “You have no reason to belittle someone who has a higher status than you, Consort Lee.”

Lee Hyejin’s face turns red, her eyes seeming ready to pop out of their sockets when Daehwi spoke to her. “You shut your mouth, scum. Do not talk as if you have any place in our household.”

Daehwi’s grip on the table tightens, his knuckles slowly turning white. He pales slightly when he hears his half sister’s words, and Jinyoung places a hand over his shoulder, silently comforting him in the midst of this commotion.

“Do you know what I’m talking about when I call you a traitor?” Lee Hyejin narrows her eyes and
points at Jihoon with a snarl. “I heard of your big plan to counter the enemies that ambushed us from up the hill. It involved shooting fire arrows, didn’t it?”

Jihoon bites on his lower lip, curling his fist in so tightly that he can feel his nails digging into his palms.

_This isn’t supposed to happen_, he tells himself, though his heart thumps heavily against his chest, failing to give him any space to calm down and think rationally.

“Tell me, if not for the sole reason of wanting to kill the princes, why would you suggest such a plan in the first place? There is no way that you wouldn’t know of the risks of shooting fire arrows in a place with so many trees and bushes?” challenges Consort Lee, her eyes blazing as she crosses her arms and steps nearer towards Jihoon.

"What kind of ridiculous reasoning is that...", Jihoon can hear Woojin muttering under his breath.

Unable to watch this any further, Jinyoung gathers up his courage and holds up his hand in front of the red clothed woman.

“Excuse me for interrupting, but what evidence do you have to accuse my Master? The Crown Prince's consort isn't someone you can simply call a _traitor_, Consort Lee.”

Lee Hyejin cocks her head and looks at him incredulously. “You’re a servant, correct?”

“Consort Park’s servant, Mistress,” Jinyoung swallows his retorts and suppresses his desire to lash out at the woman.

“Then you should know not to interrupt me.”

Jihoon pulls Jinyoung towards him, shaking his head to tell him to keep silent. After helping the Princes and Hwang Minhyun lay out a strategy to defeat their enemies, Jihoon decided that he should let his people, including Jinyoung, Fei and Jia, know what had happened when he was outside the carriage. Perhaps Lee Hyejin knew of the plan from the other soldiers.

Jihoon looks at the flap of the tent, his heart sinking as he recalls Lai Guanlin’s last words to him before he left them and headed to safety.

"_Let’s meet at the White Forest._"

"He's going to come out alive,” Jihoon tells the people surrounding him, swallowing hard. "He promised."

Chapter End Notes

I love you guys so much and... I will try to update as frequently as I can.

p.s. really sleepy so there may be mistakes ill edit it tmr
“What?” Seongwoo jolts up from his seat, knocking down the chair behind him and causing the people sitting around his table to panic. “The princes are trapped in a hillfire?”

“Yes,” the messenger is almost breathless, his chest heaving up and down as he speaks. “We just got the information from a couple of soldiers who were lucky to escape, and they demand aid.”

“Aid?” Seongwoo’s hand touches the hilt of the sword that is hanging on the side of his waist, his expression frighteningly calm now. The few beads of sweat trickling down his forehead and the fist he bundles up on his side are the only things that give away the panic that is bubbling in his chest. “I must go-”

“No, sir!” One of his underlings grabs his arm to stop him. “We must stay. This may be a trap to lure you away from the Emperor and the Empress.”

Seongwoo freezes after he hears this and deeply inhales, trying to calm down the rapid thumping of his heart. He can hardly concentrate on his surroundings, especially when his brain is yelling three words at him over and over again: *Save Kang Daniel.*

“How bad is it?” Seongwoo asks, his voice barely steady as he clutches tightly on the hilt of his sword. “The hillfire?”

“It’s not huge, but spreads very quick,” the messenger replies as he bows.

“What caused it?”

“We don’t know the cause yet, General. But some soldiers believe that it was the fire arrows that were caught in the bushes which set the hill trees on fire..”

“Fire arrows?” Seongwoo utters in disbelief. “We’ve rarely used those.”

“It was the idea of Consort Park,” the messenger offers. He then lowers his voice. “Some say… that Consort Park may have other intentions.”

“Consort Park?” the soldiers at his table exchange quick glances, ducking their head to gossip. “The new addition to the royal family?”

“Silence,” Seongwoo throws them a look before turning back towards the messenger. “Which hill is it?”

“The one that we must pass before reaching The White Forest. It’s the closest one to the hunting grounds.”

“You’re implying that Consort Park’s plan was faulty? Do you know the weight of your words?” Seongwoo narrows his eyes at the messenger. “I’ll have you know this. If the arrows are shot towards the enemies who ambushed them, it’s not likely to have set anything on fire. There is hardly anything greatly flammable up the hill except some random patches of bushes and moss covered rocks, which are most likely moist due to the weather.”

“Not to mention…” He looks out of the window from the hut. “If I’m not wrong, it’s been raining for quite a while.”
“I apologize,” the messenger quickly kneels, realizing the mistake he’s made. “It was not my wish to put the blame on Consort Park. I was just relaying the soldiers’ assumptions.”

“Assumptions and gossips, none of those are facts. I don't think you know the consequences of slandering the Crown Prince's consort,” Seongwoo interrupts, placing a sharp and piercing glare on the messenger’s wilting figure. “Have you delivered this message to those on the hunting grounds?”

“Yes, general.”

“You've done your job. Now leave.” Seongwoo looks away from the messenger. “If I hear one more bad rumour revolving around Consort Park, I'll find you.”

As the messenger hurries out of their small room next to the temple where the Emperor and Empress are staying at, Seongwoo pounds his fist on the desk, gritting his teeth slowly.

“As if the situation isn’t messy enough,” he grunts, shaking his head.

“Perhaps someone deliberately set the hill on fire?” one of the soldiers questions.

“Didn’t you listen?” Another of his soldiers sighs. “The hill shouldn’t have caught fire at all.”

Seongwoo knocks his fist on the table to grab his soldiers’ attention. “We’ll leave the investigation of the cause for later. Right now, we have to send aid to the princes and help them leave the place as soon as possible.”

The door suddenly flings open and a soldier runs in. Kneeling in front of Seongwoo, he delivers in a low voice, “Young General, His Majesty has ordered that you must stay here with him and the Empress. He wants you to send a troop of soldiers to help extinguish the fire on the hill and save the princes and the foreign ambassadors from danger.”

Seongwoo purses his lips, trying to contain the impulse to just run out, grab his horse, and leave for the hill immediately.

But he has duties. Duties he must fulfill in his post.

“Please help me tell His Majesty not to worry,” Seongwoo drops onto his chair, defeated. “I will ensure the troop arrives at their quickest speed.”

“Here, have some tea.” Daehwi pours out the steaming liquid from the teapot into the small cup and places it in front of Jihoon. “Right now, I think it’s best that we stay here.”

“He’s right,” Jinyoung agrees, placing a hand on Jihoon’s shoulder and squeezing it. “Consort Lee has stirred up quite an uproar in the big tent. It’s safer here, where you can avoid the nobles.”

“Don’t worry, here in my tent no one will dare come in and bother us.” Kim Jaehwan firmly pats his own chest. “My father is one of the Four Generals after all.”

“Lee Hyejin is out of her mind,” Daehwi shakes his head and sighs. “I didn't expect her to accuse you in front of that many people, not when there isn’t any proof of you causing harm to the princes.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” Jihoon’s gaze drops to the still cup of liquid in front of him, watching intently as the steam rises from the tea. “I’ve thought about it carefully. As Jinyoung
said, there weren’t enough factors to start up a hillfire of this size. The weather is humid, and the
temperature is cool. We arrived when a storm started, which means the rain had drenched the soil.”

“The real question is, how did the fire spread? And to the extent that it could trap the princes?”
Woojin drums his fingers on the table and frowns, cocking his head to the side. “It wouldn’t be
possible without… someone initiating it.”

Jaehwan snaps his fingers and his eyes widen. “What if, just what if… the fire was not to trap the
princes, but to wipe out the ambushers?”

“You’re saying the princes did it?” Woojin scoffs and crosses his arms. “And to think you’re part
of the advisory committee…”

“No,” Jaehwan throws a glare towards Woojin before he continues. “Maybe someone who directed
the ambush did it so they could wipe off the ambushers’ existence before the princes could lock
them up and get information out of them.”

“That could be one of the possibilities, but that would be a very rash move,” Jihoon holds the edges
of his cup and brings it to his lips, inhaling the bittersweet scent of the tea to calm his rapid
heartbeat. “Judging from the meticulously planned ambush, the person or organization behind this
should be smart enough to know that causing harm to the princes is a terrible crime. A crime that
would bring upon a large scale investigation ordered by His Majesty the Emperor, and by then, it
would be hard to escape from the consequences.”

Silence echoes through the tent after Jihoon offers his explanation, and he looks up to see awe on
the faces of his newly made friends.

“Wow, you’re not just a pretty face, are you?”

Woojin is barely able to finish his sentence before Jaehwan elbows him on the side and almost
knocks him off his chair.

“Sorry, he has bad manners,” Jaehwan leans forward to reach for the teapot. Pouring more liquid
into Jihoon’s now empty cup, his smile spreads slowly on his face. “Enlighten us. What do you
think is a possible cause of this hillfire?”

Daehwi nods on the side and turns to look at Jihoon expectantly.

“Daehwi,” Jihoon’s expression softens. “Before I make any guesses, maybe you can tell me a little
bit about your stepsister?”

“Hyejin?” The boy jolts from his seat, shocked and mildly displeased at the mentioning of Lee
Hyejin. “What do you want to know about her?”

“Her feelings towards the Second Prince.” Jihoon grips onto his cup. “If she’s sincere towards him,
I’m almost certain that she is not the culprit.”

Daehwi opens his mouth then shuts it again, falling silent as he sinks into his seat.

After a while, he nods. “She’s sincere.”

“A few years ago,” Daehwi inhales, his beautiful eyes flickering up to meet Jihoon’s. “My mother
died. My father… General Lee’s wives started fighting for power in the household, since I, the
only son of the family, had lost all support from people around me since my mother’s death.
Hyejin’s mother, the wife most favoured by General Lee, finally settled the conflict and earned the
“Her ambition grew. Naturally, she wanted her daughter to secure a place in the royal family, and bring honour to her name. They wanted her to become the Crown Prince’s consort.” Daehwi’s fingers curl in and Jihoon could see his face redden in anger. “They also wanted to get rid of me, because Father had high expectations of me in succeeding his career, and they saw me as a threat.”

Jinyoung fidgeted in his position, but said nothing as he listened on, fingers gripping tightly on the side of his robe.

“Hyejin’s mother’s big plan was to make Hyejin the Crown Prince consort and wait for her to become the Empress of Tian He. But Hyejin refused.” Daehwi trembles in his seat. “As a person who has been suffering under Hyejin’s tyranny in the Lee household over and over again, I can tell you that she is just as power-hungry as her mother, if not more.”

“But when the time of the Selection came, she begged her mother to let her marry the Second Prince.”

At this point, Jihoon feels slightly uncomfortable. He downs the already cooled tea in his cup and sets the glass on his table.

“She even requested for General Lee- My father, to tell the Emperor that it was her wish to be the Second Prince’s consort.”

“Well, I suppose you might have become the Second Prince’s consort if not for Lee Hyejin,” Jaehwan raises a brow and looks curiously at Jihoon. “You’re lucky. The Empress seat is yours to take soon.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Daehwi stands up from his seat and steps toward Jihoon. “As I said, Hyejin is very power-hungry. She will do anything to get what she wants. She may have begged to be the Second Prince’s consort, but that does not mean she will let go of the chance to hoist herself further up the ladder.”

“Daehwi,” Woojin grabs the enraged boy’s wrist and pulls on it. “Sit down. Don’t get too worked up, your body-”

“I’m fine,” Daehwi puts a hand over Woojin’s. “But Jihoon, my instincts tell me that you and the Crown Prince are her next targets.”

“I understand how you feel,” Jihoon stands and faces Daehwi, a hand coming up to pat on his shoulder. Jihoon gives the younger boy a small smile to comfort the other. “Thank you for your concern. You’ve told me more than enough, and I can’t be more grateful for that.”

“I’ve always wanted to tell everyone how horrible of a person she is,” the pale boy’s brows crease, clearly frustrated. “I would tell you more, but the incident at hand is our priority.”

Eyeing the determined looks on the faces that were no longer unfamiliar to him, Jihoon saw a little spark of hope in his life as a consort. Though with experience he has found it hard to lay complete trust on people around him, the feeling of being supported was nonetheless something that warmed his heart.

“We’re near the hill where the fire is,” Jihoon murmurs. “I’ll head back.”

“You mustn’t!” Jinyoung grabs his arm to stop him from leaving. “It’s too dangerous. Who will rescue you out from the fire?”
“Jinyoung, I brought this upon myself,” Jihoon pushes Jinyoung’s hand off his arm and turns to him. “This is also a chance to clear my name.”

“We have bodyguards,” Jaehwan nods towards the well built men surrounding the tent. “If you really wish to go, I can send them to go with you.”

“I want to help too, but my bodyguards are under Hyejin’s control.” Daehwi dips his head apologetically. “I’m really sorry. Maybe I can head there with you?”

Before Jinyoung can protest, Woojin holds up his hand.

“I’ll go with you,” Woojin offers to Jihoon as he stands. He forcefully makes Daehwi sit on his chair and narrows his eyes at him. “You, stay put. You’re not going anywhere with your weak heart.”

“But Woojin-” Daehwi whines with a pout.

“No.”

Jinyoung steps back and his tensed shoulders relax once again, knowing that Daehwi isn't going anywhere dangerous in his fragile state.

“Are you sure you want to go there?” Jinyoung asks Jihoon, slightly anxious about Jihoon rushing into a raging hillfire. “I don’t know what to tell your father if anything happens…”

“Nothing bad will happen. I will come back just fine.”

Jihoon, with Woojin and the five accompanying Kim family bodyguards, head towards the stable to get their horses. Fei and Jia, who have been outside the tent guarding it to prevent others from entering, immediately rush to their master in shock.

“Where are you going?” Jia frantically catches up to Jihoon on his way to the stable.

“You’re not leaving to save the princes, are you?” Fei gasps, seeing Jihoon grab on the reins of his horse.

“I’m out to clear my name.” With the help of a bodyguard, Jihoon hoists himself up onto the back of the horse and looks down towards his worried servants. “I will not let anyone have even the slightest chance to say that I’m a traitor when I’ve sacrificed freedom for the fate of the kingdom.”

Who is he? Park Jihoon, the Crown Prince’s Consort, the person most likely to take the Empress’ position and wield great power of the country and the authorities. And more importantly, he is the key to defeating Tian He’s greatest enemy, Hak Li.

He is no longer a poor official’s son, no longer someone who can live his life as he wishes. He must toughen up, so that no one can harm him as easily as they could have back in the days he was his naive self.

To defend, he must attack. To survive, he must first take the initiative to fight back.

“Let's go,” Jihoon snaps on the reins of the horse and the group leaps forward into the woods.

It doesn't take quite long for them to reach the clearing and see the orange red blazing flames atop of the hill, grey smoke rising rapidly and dyeing the sky a darker shade.

Jihoon pulls on the reins to stop his horse from treading on. Then he looks at the sky.
It’s been raining all this time.

How, then, did a fire continue burning through the rain?

“Two of you head scour the area to check if there are anymore escapees.” Jihoon reaches into the sack he brought with him and pulled out two folded bags. “Another two of you must collect the mud you find around here until you fill the bags up. After your duty is completed, find us on top of the hill. And you,” he points at the guard closest to him. “Follow me. We will head up the hill.”

As expected from a high class general’s bodyguards, none of them questioned his orders and quickly got to work without any complaint.

“And what about me?” Woojin narrows his eyes at Jihoon, anxious to get to work as well.

“It’s not safe,” Jihoon tries to say, but the boy just gives him an annoyed glare.

“I’m not going to rot here. I’ll go up with you.” Woojin doesn’t give time for Jihoon to protest and kicks on his horse’s side to get them going. Jihoon casts a helpless glance at the boy’s parting figure and quickly follows too.

As they approach the raging flames, the closer he gets, the hotter the surroundings. Jihoon calls for the others to halt while he surveys the surroundings.

Surprisingly enough, there seems to be a boundary preventing the fire from spreading any further. As big as the fire gets, it never seems to cross the line that Jihoon can see in a distance.

“That’s a strange sight,” Woojin comments, nodding towards the direction Jihoon is looking at. “I don’t think a fire that burns with restrictions would be caused by natural factors.”

“Come on, let’s see where the boundary reaches.” Jihoon makes his horse tread slightly closer to the fire and they go around it in a steady pace to check for survivors.

A gust of wind blows and the scorching heat attacks them unexpectedly. The horses neigh and back up a few steps, clearly terrified at the raging fire. Jihoon, with his entire body drenched in sweat, pats the horse gently to calm it down.

“I think I see something!” Woojin exclaims suddenly, pointing in front of them. Among the flickering orange, Jihoon can barely see a pole with a burnt red coloured Kang flag, with more than half of the flag turned into ashes by the fire.

Jihoon takes in a deep breath and cups his mouth.

“Crown Prince!” He yells at the top of his lungs.

“Second Prince!”

“If you hear me, please respond!”

He chokes in the midst of his shouts from the rising smoke entering his nostrils, ducking down to take a few breaths of fresher air before he continues calling for the princes.

Woojin, seeing this, elbows the bodyguard and gestures for him to follow.

"Crown Prince! Second Prince! Answer us!"

Jihoon flinches from the high pitched screech and immediately breaks into a laugh as he quickly
realizes that it was Woojin making such bizarre noises.

“I have a knack for being loud,” Woojin tells him with a serious face.

“I can see that,” Jihoon chuckles, wiping the sweat from his brow.

An arrow suddenly shoots through the fire and lands next to Jihoon’s horse, startling the poor being and causing it to leap up into the air. Jihoon yelps and falls from the back of the horse, crashing painfully onto the hard ground.

The bodyguard trailing after them quickly hops down from his horse to help Jihoon up. Groaning, Jihoon grasps onto the arm he’d fallen on and looks at the arrow that had frightened the animal that had thrown him off.

Then he gasps.

“It’s the princes.” Jihoon pulls the arrow from the ground and inspects the arrow end. As expected, the word Kang is imprinted firmly there. “We must find them.”

“How?” Woojin eyes the fire incredulously. “And how are they alive there?”

“We’ll figure that out when we get in.”

The two guards who were told to collect the wet dirt around the area arrive just in time. Jihoon opens the bags of wet mud and dumps it on the area where the fire is least violent, trying to create an opening to enter the fire. Luckily, the fire dies down a little, and he drapes a wet robe he had brought with him over himself. The cold comes in contact with his heated body and he sighs, enjoying the chilly fabric against his skin.

“Here,” He hands another one to the bodyguard who is to enter the fire with him. “Come with me. Woojin, wait here. You two guards over there, head down the hill. If you see any of our troops, give them directions to where we are.”

“You’re going in there just like that?” Woojin grabs Jihoon’s arm and stops him, disbelief crossing his features. “That’s basically seeking for death. You don’t know where they are.”

“Once we cross the first wall of fire, I’m sure we’ll see something.” Jihoon swings the sack he brought with him onto his shoulder. “I have a lot of damp cloth with me. We will get through this.”

Beads of sweat trickle from the side of his face to his chin, dripping down slowly as he walks closer towards the narrow entrance into the bright heat. Jihoon pulls a handkerchief from his sleeve and covers it over his nose before he takes a few more steps forward.

“Idiot,” Woojin hisses, gritting his teeth and watching as the two men disappear into the flames.
Jaehwan holds up the flap of the tent and pokes his head out to have a quick look at the surroundings. He can sense the liveliness from the big tent a short walk from here, sounds of elegant strums of the guzheng and rhythmic plucks of the pipa accompanied by the loud obnoxious chattering of excited nobles drifting into his ears.

“Those people aren’t doing justice to the instrumental group,” Jaehwan scoffs in disgust, pulling his hand away from the flap so it drops down in front of him. Part of the sounds are muted but he can still hear them in the distance.

“Jaehwan has huge passion for music,” Daehwi explains to Jinyoung, who has been standing aside staring off into the low ceiling of the tent. Hearing Daehwi’s voice, Jinyoung snaps out of his trance and looks at him, muttering a small ‘oh’ in reply.

“I think I have to go back to the big tent,” Jaehwan says regretfully. He turns to face the two of them, seeming reluctant to go. “I should at least act like I want to interact with those nobles. Will you be coming along?”

“No,” Daehwi and Jinyoung reply in unison. They glance at each other, perplexed. Sensing the awkwardness in the room, Jaehwan shrugs and leaves the tent.

Fei and Jia had headed out to see if Jihoon needed backup, and the other soldiers were outside quietly guarding the tent. Now that even Jaehwan has left, only Jinyoung and Daehwi remain the room.

“I suppose you have some explaining to do,” Jinyoung finally musters up his courage to talk directly to Lee Daehwi, whom he has started to find foreign because of his given status and power. It was as if the fragile Daehwi, whom he had found wounded on the streets several years ago, was all but an illusion.

“Yes,” Daehwi answers without missing a beat. He had clearly expected the interrogation.

“You might as well tell me your change of attitude towards my master, Park Jihoon,” Jinyoung says flatly. “Around a few weeks ago you were insistent on me leaving him, and now you’re actively helping him, and even making friends with him.”

He puts his right hand on the table and leans forward, turning so he can look at Daehwi face to face. Surprised by the sudden intimacy, Daehwi almost flinches backwards, but Jinyoung’s intense gaze holds him in place.

“Just what do you know? And what are you trying to do?”

Daehwi can hear the gentle plea in Jinyoung’s voice, encouraging him to answer him, to spill everything that he has kept a secret up till now. Daehwi knows; the boy is trying to share his burden, trying to remove the pain from him and provide a solution to his problems. His heart skips a beat, pleased at the thought of an unwavering Jinyoung caring for him and him only, and even sacrificing all he has for him…

“It’s not time for you to know everything,” Daehwi smiles sweetly, resting his chin on the palm of
his hand. “But I mean no harm to Park Jihoon and you know it. I remain firm in my suggestion that you leave his side but if you don’t, I should at least be here to protect you when I can.”

“And you wish to achieve this by staying near to Jihoon?” Jinyoung withdraws his arm from the table and stands up straight again, moving to the side opposite to where Daehwi is sitting. “You shouldn’t use my friend like that.”

“I know,” Daehwi’s tone softens, his sparkling clear dark brown eyes flicking up to look at Jinyoung. “But I don’t want you dead.”

“And why would I be dead?” the family servant slams both his hands on the table, frustrated at the way the boy talks in riddles and simple words that he cannot seem to understand. The table shakes at the impact, and the teapot knocks over and spills towards the side, eventually rolling and hitting the floor with a loud sharp sound of shattered glass.

Two soldiers, alerted by the sudden noise, rushes in to check if there is anything they need help with. Daehwi waves them away immediately, not wanting to have the conversation between them be disturbed. The soldiers nod and return to their places outside the tent.

“Simply put,” Daehwi tries to look composed after the incident, though by now Jinyoung can hear it shaking a little. For a moment, Jinyoung feels guilty for startling the weak boy, but he has never concealed how strongly he felt towards anything, and certainly in this case it would be no exception. “Jihoon is like our ace in this battle, Jinyoung. We have enemies, and all enemies want to take out the ace as soon as they can-”

“What battle?”

Daehwi freezes, his body tensing up as he looks up towards Jinyoung. The servant’s brows are knitted tightly together, his hands bundled up into fists. There’s confusion written all over his face, and Daehwi immediately feels like he’s taken a step in the wrong direction.

“You don’t know anything?” Daehwi speaks slowly, refraining from Jinyoung any further. “About the Red Cloak Tribe? Border conflicts?”

“Border conflicts?” repeats Jinyoung, recalling briefly the first time Daehwi had used this term. It was at the New Year’s Eve Feast, he remembers. It was right when Jihoon got poisoned.

“You don’t know anything,” Daehwi says, this time with certainty but the concern is evident in his voice. “Oh, no. Jihoon hasn’t told you anything, has he?”

Jinyoung remains silent, slowly starting to understand. Jihoon has kept some things from him, that much he had suspected since they first arrived at the palace. Yet, he didn’t know the weight of his secrets, nor did he try to pry before.

To calm himself down, Jinyoung walks towards the other end of the tent to grab another teapot. He scoops up some tea leaves from one of the cans on the side and fills the teapot with water. Ignoring the scorching heat of the fuming teapot, he hoisted it towards Daehwi’s table.

“I made some new tea,” Jinyoung says quietly.

The aroma diffuses into the air and Daehwi catches a whiff. He lips slowly form into a smile, recognizing the familiar scent of his favourite tea. Or at least the tea that had become his favourite, after his saviour had fed him the same tea to help him recover from his injuries.

“Jasmine,” Daehwi whispers.
Jinyoung takes the handle and tilts the teapot into Daehwi’s now empty cup, and they both watch as the hot liquid swish inside the teacup.

“Really takes me back,” the noble murmurs, his voice almost inaudible through the pouring sounds. Jinyoung, however, had caught it clearly, and he purses his lips as he rests the teapot against the table.

“Jihoon doesn’t have the obligation to tell me everything.” Jinyoung lets out a small chuckle. “Nor do you.”

“But there is something I truly hope for,” he continues. “Something I had hoped for since the very beginning.”

“What did you wish for?” Jinyoung asks.

“It’s a secret,” Jihoon says with a fond smile.

“You always say that,” the younger grumbles, jutting out his lower lip. “You could’ve just humoured me with a simple answer.”

“What do you want to hear, then?” Jihoon says with a small laugh.

“I don’t know, maybe something like ‘oh, I wished for true love, what about you?’” Jinyoung blinks with mock innocence, a cheeky smile spreading on his lips as he nudges at Jihoon.

“What?” Jihoon says in mild surprise, raising a brow. “That’s your wish, not mine.”

“It’s not,” sputters Jinyoung.

Jinyoung takes Daehwi’s hand into his own, a move that startles the boy slightly. The warmth he had felt through the teapot stays in his palm, and his warmth engulfs the icy coldness that runs through Daehwi’s hand.

“I wish everyone I hold dear to me can put their trust in me. And in return, I am willing to do anything, even if it means giving up my life, to help my loved ones and protect them.”

Daehwi, shocked by the sudden speech, freezes in place. Jinyoung lips curve up knowingly on one side, as if he had expected such reaction from the other. He leaves him some time to digest his words while he reaches for a chair and pulls it close to the noble so they could sit side by side, like the old times.

It really takes them back to when they were younger. Daehwi would stay in the town doctor’s little hut and Jinyoung would visit him every day to bring him food and drinks. Most of the times he would just sit down next to him to talk about similar interests and simple politics, things the young ambitious scholars would discuss. Daehwi would provide him insights on issues and enlighten him like no other individual could, and Jinyoung could offer the other some brand new perspectives and introduce seemingly childish but innovative thinking. They would enjoy each other’s presence with a cup of hot Jasmine tea, and the days would pass without them knowing it.

“Okay. Okay.” Daehwi exhales, eyeing Jinyoung who is sitting expectantly beside him. He cracks a little smile, though it disappears almost as quickly as it surfaced. “I’ll tell you about my part of the story.”

“I’m listening.” Jinyoung brings his feet up to the chair and hugs his legs, resting his chin on his knees and tilting his head to show his attentiveness. Daehwi notices it and gives him a gentle push,
embarrassed because of the undivided attention.

“I really am,” whines Jinyoung.

“I know,” Daehwi hides his grin and takes a sip from his cup. “I trust you.”

Jinyoung nods, burying half of his face into his folded legs. Daehwi hasn’t seen him for awhile, but he knows that Jinyoung doesn’t display even half of his childishness to the outside world. Yet, now that they are together, Jinyoung must feel that he can show his He relaxes his shoulders. This is the Jinyoung he knows, the Jinyoung he is comfortable with.

“Perhaps you remember the first time we met.”

“Of course.” Jinyoung’s teeth clench as the stomach churning image of Daehwi covered in blood lying in the middle of the street floats into his mind. “You were heavily injured and had passed out in the main street.”

“Now that you know who my father is, it makes the explaining whole lot easier.” Daehwi wraps his fingers around the cup to allow the heat to seep through and warm his hands. “Let’s call him General Lee, since he’s hardly been a good father figure in my life, anyway.”

Daehwi hides his emotions very well, in contrast to the younger version of him that Jinyoung had found vulnerable on the streets. But Jinyoung at least knows how displeased the noble feels, and how long he has suppressed it within him.

“I didn’t exactly have an impressive mother,” Daehwi shakes his head and sighs. “She’s just a maid. A beautiful maid that had captured the eyes of a very drunk General Lee one particular night. Then, you know. I happened.”

Jinyoung pats Daehwi’s knee gently, who shoots him a grateful smile.

“My mother has always had a very weak body, so after she gave birth to me her condition became even worse. We struggled to survive in the home, where General Lee’s first wife holds the greatest power. We were shunned by General Lee, and were bullied by even the Lee household servants.”

“How dare they!” Jinyoung uncurls himself and tightens his grip on Daehwi’s knee. Daehwi puts his hand over Jinyoung’s, squeezing it to tell him that it was fine.

But it wasn’t fine. Daehwi might be the son of a maid, he might be an illegitimate child, but he still had General Lee’s blood running in him. He deserved all the respect not just because he was General Lee’s son, but because he was a living, breathing individual. To receive such humiliation at home, how horrid it must be!

“It was our everyday life. Everything was fine to me, because I still had my mother to endure this with me. At least I was loved by someone.” Daehwi’s eyes drop low, but Jinyoung can see a moist twinkle at the corners. “But she passed away. Left me alone. I was deprived of my only love and protection.”

“Daehwi,” Jinyoung sympathetically whispers.

“After she died, I was found hiding and weeping in Lee Hyejin’s room. Hyejin requested for me to be beaten up and thrown out onto the streets, saying that hopefully I’d be picked up by some rich pervert and I could be gone forever.” Daehwi awkwardly scratches his head. “So that’s when you found me.”
“No.” Jinyoung gasps, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. He couldn’t believe it. Daehwi, an angel, being tortured like that despite being a child. He grits his teeth, painfully digging his nails into his palms to resist storming out of the tent to punch Lee Hyejin, to drag out every single person that had made Daehwi sad and make them pay for what they did.

“I’m okay, Jinyoung.” Daehwi puts his hands on both sides of Jinyoung’s cheeks, turning him so their eyes could meet. “Look at me. I’m fine. Are you?”

“No,” breaths Jinyoung, his voice shaky.

Daehwi sighs and tilts his head on the side, giving Jinyoung his brightest gummy smile. “I really am. You see this?”

“I’m not fine,” whimpers Jinyoung, though Daehwi’s happiness lightens the weight on his heart slightly.

“You’re still a kid, aren’t you? And you act all mature,” Daehwi says, pulling on Jinyoung’s cheeks playfully. “Calm down, Bae Jinyoung.”

“Say that to yourself,” mutters Bae Jinyoung, though his words come out weird because of Daehwi aggressively rubbing his cheeks. Laughing, Daehwi finally lets go. Jinyoung can only helplessly watch as the boy clutches his stomach and doubles over. Though Jinyoung hasn’t really done anything to make the boy laugh, and so hysterically, seeing him like this makes him relieved. This is how a boy of Daehwi’s age should be. Joyful, carefree, full of laughter.

After a short while the boy starts to quiet down, though he continues crouching over and keeping his face away from Jinyoung’s sight.

“Stupid,” Jinyoung places his hand on the boy’s head and ruffles his hair gently. “It’s okay to cry.”

“Yeah.” Daehwi’s voice cracks, a sob cutting through. “Yeah.”

“What did you just do?” Minhyun grabs onto Guanlin’s sleeve and pulls him further into the hollow of the cave. “That was very dangerous.”

“You heard them, didn’t you?” Guanlin stares at the other, the reflection of the flickering flames from outside dancing in his eyes. “Someone’s here to rescue us. I just shot an arrow out to notify them of our location.”

“We don’t know who they are,” Minhyun leans his head against the cold, hard stone wall. “It may be the enemy.” He chokes, breaking into a coughing fit as he buries himself in his sleeve. His eyelids flutter while he struggles with his fading consciousness.

“Minhyun!” Guanlin anxiously pats his friend’s cheek a few times gently. His heart relaxes a little when he sees Minhyun take in several deep breaths of the rare oxygen around them to try and keep awake.

“You should get him to the furthest end of the cave, away from the fire. Even though the cave is quite shallow.”

The voice pulls Guanlin from his daze. He turns to the crouching figure on the other side of the wall and narrows his eyes.
Jeong Sewoon. Guanlin had almost forgotten that he was with them as well.

“It would have been more helpful if you didn’t start the fire at all,” hisses Guanlin, before he supports Minhyun with an arm around his waist and pulls him further away from the red heat.

“I didn’t.” Sewoon spreads his arms and looks at him with half a smile on his face, though he doesn’t look quite pleased with the situation either. “I would save myself the trouble if I were the culprit. But here I am, stuck with one prince and one high ranked representative, both from neighbouring countries of West Hak. Why should I risk my life and my kingdom with this stupid plot?”

“It’s... not the time to argue.” Minhyun swallows and dabs on his forehead with his sleeve. “We have to get out, or we’ll die. I can hardly breathe.”

Guanlin can tell that the West Hak representative isn’t lying. The man has no reason to lie, and has no reason to put himself in danger like this. Yet, the whole fire remains a mystery to him. How could it spread so quickly under the rain? Not only did the rain fail to put the fire out, it seemed to encourage it to burn quicker, bigger.

“If you’re wondering how the fire started, I have my suspicions,” Sewoon nodded towards the burning mess that is outside the cave. “I heard there’s a rare mixture of chemical that reacts with water to create fire. If they scattered the mixture around the place then it is bound to react with the rain water.”

“There’s something like that?” Minhyun’s brow twitches, taking in the fascinating piece of new information. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“Yes, it exists. Water reacts with the mixture to create a violent reaction, which then starts the fire. But the amount of water needed to cause the fire varies. And I’ve never known that it could cause a fire of this size.”

“They estimated the amount of rainfall?” Guanlin frowns, still in shock that water could start a fire.

“No, I reckon they didn’t think killing us off was an urgent matter. There’s no harm if they miss us,” Sewoon says, shrugging.

“There is, actually,” Minhyun murmurs, deep in thought. “They gave us a hint of where they are from at least. They’re not likely from East Scarlett or Tian He, since the Second Prince and I have no knowledge of this strange method.”

Their eyes turn towards Sewoon, who shakes his head and laughs. “You can doubt me all you want, but I’ve told you the truth. I wouldn’t do anything this stupid.”

“We’re not doubting you,” Guanlin shuffles closer towards Sewoon and looks him in the eye. “But I suspect you know who it is that tried to burn us to death.”

Sewoon runs a hand through the strands of his hair in slight frustration and sighs.

“I have a hunch.”

“Are they on your side?” Guanlin presses on, feeling faint as the energy fades from him slowly.

Sewoon halts in his actions, seemingly having to ponder thoroughly on the question. After a while, he finally replies with a firm, “No.”
“Then assist me in this investigation, if we get out of here.”

“If,” Sewoon repeats. “There’s no ‘if’. We better get out of here.”

“-prince.”

“My prince!”

“Guanlin!”

His eyes slowly flutter open and he squints to adjust to the sudden brightness in his surroundings. As things slowly come into focus, he finds himself staring into a pair of eyes that he has familiarized himself with for quite some time.

“You’re awake, thank Buddha.” The person takes his hand and interlocks her slender fingers with his. “I was worried sick.”

“Hyejin,” Guanlin greets halfheartedly, feeling too weak to withdraw his hand from hers. “What happened?”

“You were almost killed in a hillfire,” she explains, and Guanlin thinks he might’ve seen a flash of hatred in her eyes. “But you were brought back safely.”

Groggily, he sits up with the help of the woman beside him and he groans the moment his headache strikes.

“Your Highness,” another voice speaks up, and Guanlin recognizes amidst his pain that it belongs to one of the best palace doctors’. “Due to being deprived of fresh oxygen when you were in the fire, your head and blood flow has been trying to make up for the loss. Therefore you may experience some after effects of the fire. We suggest that you rest for the meantime.”

The fire. Guanlin briefly recalls the incident, and as he suspected, it wasn’t just a dream. It felt real, at least. The scorching heat, the feeling of helplessness while being trapped in a death cage, the struggle of watching a friend in pain but not having the faintest idea of how to relieve his pain…

“Minhyun!” Guanlin’s eyes widen as he pulls his hand from Hyejin’s and grabs the doctor’s sleeve frantically. “Is Minhyun alright? He’s fine, right? Where is he?”

The doctor pats his hand and bows with a smile. “Fear not, your Highness. Foreign ambassador Sir Hwang is in another room where he is to be nursed back to health. Though he seems to have a weaker body than yours, his persistence has helped him pull through.”

“Good.” Guanlin places a hand over his chest and breathes out, trying to steady to rapid thumping of his heartbeat.

“But your Highness, shouldn’t you be worried about the person who saved you—”

“Doctor Jung! Maybe you should check on Sir Hwang for the Second Prince? I can see he’s still worried,” Consort Lee cuts the doctor off immediately, her panic showing through all of a sudden. The doctor eyes her with a raised brow but bows his head and requests for permission to leave.

“Go.” Guanlin waves him away. A soldier escorts the doctor out of his medical tent.

“And by go, I meant you too,” Guanlin turns his gaze to the woman beside him, dressed in too frivolous clothing for a hunting event. She even looks like she just did her makeup and her hair.
Everything looks too tidy for a rowdy event like the hunt.

“Oh, but Doctor Jung has prepared you some medicine.” She smiles. The curve at the end of her eyes reminds Guanlin of someone. Someone he should remember, but is not able to right now. His thoughts are too disheveled after the incident of the hill ambush, and not to mention he had just woken up from a blazing trial.

Consort Lee snaps her fingers and a servant carries in a bowl of dark liquid on a tray, which Guanlin assumes is the chinese medicine Doctor Jung had packed up for him. Hyejin takes the bowl from the tray and picks up the spoon.

“What are you doing?” Guanlin questions sharply, his head immediately turning away resentfully when the woman puts the spoonful of medicine in front of his lips.

“Feeding you?” She says, as if it's the most natural thing on the world. Perhaps it is, because they are indeed a palace couple. He is the Prince, and she is his only Consort.

“I have hands, woman,” Guanlin sighs and tries to take the bowl away from her, but she dodges his grab.

“You let me feed you this and I'll let you have your time alone here,” she stubbornly threatens. Amused, Guanlin raises a brow at her.

“Are you giving your Prince orders?”

“Just drink.” Hyejin cools the liquid by blowing on it and puts it in front of his lips again. Reluctantly, Guanlin takes a sip. Then another. And another. He quickly finishes the bowl so he could have his time alone, finally.

Consort Lee places the bowl back onto the train and bows her head, departing with a blush on her face. Guanlin rubs his temples gently and lies back, staring at the ceiling as he tries to recall the incident from earlier. He had most likely passed out right where his memory had cut off.

So who saved them? The palace army?

But then he doubts that the palace army has forces that could arrive so promptly. Those that have followed them into the hunting camp were a small number of soldiers, not to mention he had taken most of them to counter the ambush at the hill. The remaining soldiers were with the Emperor and the Empress at the temple, led by Ong Seongwoo and his forces.

Then he remembers Doctor Jung's question that he wasn't able to finish.

“But your Highness, shouldn't you be worried about the person who saved you-”

“Eunuch Ki!” He shouts, shutting his eyes. All this thinking is making his head ache even more. His close servant Eunuch Ki immediately comes running, looking a little frazzled when he arrives at the ten and panting by the time he gets there.

“Yes, your Highness? Anything you need?” he asks, looking very concerned.

“Who saved me?”

“Your Highness, you really don't know?” Eunuch Ki peers at him curiously, tilting his head in surprise. “But you were clinging on real tightly on him when you both returned…”
Guanlin sits up from his bed immediately, a feeling of impending doom settling in his stomach. “I did what?”

“Um, cling onto him?” The Eunuch raises a brow, blinking and looking at him strangely. “Very very tightly?”

“Who was it?” hisses Guanlin, turning red from utter embarrassment. To think the people around him have seen him unconsciously doing that! He just hopes it wasn't another noble.

Eunuch Ki lets out a little laugh before he turns and hooks the tent securely shut in order to prevent eavesdropping from the outside.

“It was Consort Park, your Highness.”

Chapter End Notes

some of these talented sweethearts actually drew artwork for aom and I'm weeping in gratitude, they're so gorgeous!!

@onguanlinnie's beautiful sketch of panwink with magnolias and the hairpin:
https://twitter.com/onguanlinnie/status/1003499828821671937?s=19

@poppiyuu's wonderful take on the archery scene:
https://twitter.com/poppiyuu/status/1022676436241379328?s=19

Again, thank you for reading and showing this fic the love it doesnt deserve <3
“General, the Emperor tells us to pass on his word; that it's late and he wants you to go rest.”

“Please thank the Emperor on my behalf for his concern,” Seongwoo runs a hand through his sweat-dampened hair, his brows tightly knitted against his forehead. “But I think I'll stay here for the night.”

The soldier nods. “I'll go back to the camp to fetch some supplies for your stay, General. Would you like me to bring anything else?”

“Perhaps a medical kit, for when I find Dan—the Crown Prince.” Seongwoo rubs his temple gently, silently cursing himself for almost saying the royal's name out loud. It's near bedtime for most people, and he himself has had a long day, which is most likely the reason for his slip of the tongue. Yet, there is no reason for a general like himself to act this way just because of one whole day of running around and… failing to find the Crown Prince.

He puts a cool palm against his feverish face and closes his eyes. He has to pull himself together. The Prince, Kang Daniel, future ruler of the country and his very best friend, is nowhere to be found on this wreckage of a hill where he had last been seen. Whose duty is it to rescue the almighty Kang Daniel from danger, if not for his most trusted follower, Ong Seongwoo? Someone whom the Crown Prince had been his best friends with for years, someone whom he'd share something more with, and someone whom he'd entrusted the responsibility of leading his own secret army.

“...General?”

“Yes?” Seongwoo snaps out of his thoughts and turns towards the worried soldier.

“Would you like me to bring you dinner?”

Right, dinner. He's almost forgotten that he hasn't had his meal yet. In fact, he hasn't had anything since breakfast. After accompanying the Emperor and the Empress on their journey to the shrine and receiving news about the ambush, he hasn't been able to focus on anything since.

He shakes his head, almost laughing at how pathetic he seems right now. The Crown Prince has just been gone for a short time, and he's already so out of it. He's only a mere general, or an Imperial Guard at best. He's no one important to Kang Daniel, at least not to his position or status, but how important is Kang Daniel to him?

No one will ever know, perhaps not even himself.

“Do you think I have the appetite?” Seongwoo shakes his head and waves the soldier away. “Leave it. Go back and rest.”

“Sir, it's dangerous being out here alone-”

“I've had more experience than you in this field, newbie,” Seongwoo lightheartedly says, forcing a smile on his face. “Bring the men to the camp and wait for the Emperor's orders.”

The soldier gratefully dips his head, then curiously raises a brow. “Then when will you come along, sir?”
“Only when I find the Crown Prince.”

The soldier seems to want to retort, and Seongwoo can guess the question he is struggling whether or not to ask: What if the Crown Prince never comes back?

“The Prince is out here, somewhere, I'm certain,” is Seongwoo's answer, though his voice wavers and he can feel his throat turn dry.

“Sir!” Another one of the newly enlisted soldiers comes running. “It's getting dark so we must leave soon, or else it will be hard for us to walk along the tracks to the camp.”

“The general won't be coming with us,” the soldier beside him all along elbows the other. “Let's go.”

“But sir, how will you find the Crown Prince in the darkness?” The new soldier frowns, cocking his head. “And what if the Crown Prince is dea-”

“Nonsense!” Seongwoo's points the hilt of his sword towards the soldier that had spoken, his eyes blazing with something foreign to his underlings. Rage. Just rage? No, something never seen before in Ong Seongwoo's character.

Fear.

“You dare say another word to disrespect the Crown Prince and your head will be the next thing touching the ground,” hisses the general, his hand gripping down at the clothed blade of his sword as he thrusts it further forward, causing the two soldiers to scramble back in terror.

“For me, General!” The soldier cries and drops to his knees. The other follows suit in fearful silence. “I was just-”

“Leave.” Seongwoo points towards the direction of the camp with his sword, and the two soldiers get up immediately to run towards the other remaining men.

“Have you seen him this angry?” He can barely hear them whisper on their way.

“No, never. But the Crown Prince is a touchy subject.”

The rest of the conversation Ong Seongwoo cannot hear, refuses to hear, and he gives his soldiers one last glare before he turns and walk further up the hill, away from the men.

Seongwoo and his bunch had arrived just in time to see Consort Park helping the Second Prince and the foreign ambassadors out of the fire. With the Second Prince’s vague orders in his state of disorientation right after the rescue to check for the causes of the hillfire and to find the Crown Prince, Seongwoo had stayed and obliged but found nothing particularly helpful in his investigation. They had struggled to put out the fire with their limited resources and checked for any signs of life or evidence left by the enemies the entire afternoon. Seongwoo had been so focused on his mission that he had missed the time when night fell, and before he knows it, it is near midnight.

What’s left of the scene is a pile of dead grass and the scent of burnt mud. The fire he and his men had started in the midst of the burnt hill was dying down slowly with the whistling of the wind, weakly cackling in the vast darkness. Without him noticing, the air is getting colder as time passes, and the sweat has evaporated from his skin. What’s left is a chilling sensation, causing him to shiver.
Seongwoo huffs out softly and kneels to grab a branch from the fire. He flinches as the heat blazes upwards while he pulls it out, and wonders for a brief moment how Park Jihoon had worked up the courage to actually *walk into a fire*. That has never been seen or done before. The male consort never fails to amaze or impress him.

With the half lit stick, Seongwoo treads on the messy ground that is the remains of the hillfire. He’s walked up and down this hill for countless of times already, from daytime till nightfall, and he is almost certain he can find his way around without the help of a light, even.

Yet, he has failed to catch even the slightest glimpse of Kang Daniel, or what’s left of him.

He stops in his tracks.

Of course he refuses to believe Kang Daniel is dead. He’s his best friend, his master, his-

Seongwoo throws the stick to the ground, chest heaving up and down as he swallows to calm his rapid heartbeat. He watches as the small fire reach the damp mud and slowly dies down, turning into a few sparks and then nothing at all.

That’s when he notices something beside it.

It was just a small reflection of the light given off by the fire, but Seongwoo had caught it alright. Squinting his eyes in the dark and reaching downwards with slight regret of eliminating his only source of light, he fumbles around until he feels something hard and cold against his palm.

He grabs it and brushes the mud away from the surface, hearing a little metal clink from the item as he pulls it up. Then he slowly finds his way back to the fire he had started earlier to have a closer look at the item.

Seongwoo can feel his heart drop the moment he sees what is in his hand.

It is a chain bracelet, with a small valuable chunk of gold in the shape of a dragon dangling in the middle.

“Why don’t you smile for me?” Nine year old Kang Daniel mutters as he juts out his lower lip to express his displeasure.

“My duty is to protect you only,” Seongwoo, eleven at that time, answers with the most serious expression he can manage. “Smiling is not in my list of responsibilities.”

“But still!” Daniel stomps his feet, seemingly near to breaking into tears. “If you’re going to stick with me all day you should at least be able to make me happy!”

Younger Seongwoo sighs, taking out a small bracelet from his pocket. “Here you go.”

The gold from the bracelet sparkles under the sunlight when Seongwoo holds it up, and Daniel quickly wipes his unshed tears to glance at the item curiously.

“What’s that?” The young prince makes a grab for it but the boy in front of him steps back and holds it higher, his height at that time an obvious advantage for him.

“A gift fit for a king.”

“King?” The young prince blinks innocently, captivated by the light reflecting off the golden
dragon. “How could there be a gift fit for a king, if the king has the power to yield everything?”

Young Seongwoo falls silent immediately, staring into the prince’s eyes as he ponders on his words.

“How could there be a gift fit for a king, if the king has the power to yield everything?” The smaller boy calls his name, frowning because Seongwoo hasn’t said anything for a while.

“Hold out your hand,” Seongwoo demands, and the young prince hesitates to oblige. Grabbing the smaller boy’s hand, Seongwoo drops the bracelet into his palm.

“Listen, my Prince. One’s ability to yield all the materialistic valuables on earth may come with status, but the ability to gain people’s love and loyalty is something that has to be earned.”

“Even the Emperor has to work hard for it?” Daniel asks with his eyes opened wide.

“Even the Emperor.”

“Does this bracelet give me the power? To gain people’s love and loyalty?” Little Daniel seems confused as he eyes the bracelet in his hands.

Seongwoo’s eyes soften. “No. But this is proof that you have my love and loyalty, my Prince.”

The young prince’s face lights up then, his smile becoming the brightest thing Seongwoo has seen his entire life.

The general buries his face into his lap, the memory of the exchange between him and the Crown Prince warming him but also haunting him at this very moment. Kang Daniel had kept the bracelet with him all this time, without Seongwoo knowing. The general had thought that the moment the Crown Prince had taken in a consort, he would discard any evidence of them being together at all. But perhaps the Crown Prince had left it by his side as a token of their friendship.

Friendship… just friendship?

It’s not the time to question these things, but the longer Seongwoo sits in the mud with his head aching due to lack of rest, the more he thinks that there’s no better time to ponder on trivial things like this other than tonight, where he gets to spend it alone, away from Kang Daniel. Missing Kang Daniel.

Not knowing if he’s alive or dead.

And what if he’s dead?

Seongwoo grips down onto the bracelet, feeling the metal dig into his palm. Warm liquid oozes from his flesh, and he opens his hand to find that he had held on too tightly. The gold had cut into his skin.

He knows the answers perfectly. There are two choices. One, he avenges him, and kills whoever is behind the Crown Prince’s supposed death.

Two, he dies with him.

“Yesterday, a very regretful incident happened to part of our group that had journeyed all the way here from the Royal Palace. Some of us have been ambushed on their way to the camp. While we are working hard to find the people behind the ambush, we should not let that hinder one of our
most important annual events, the Spring Hunt.”

The Emperor’s voice is heard loud and clear even in an open area. With his elbows propped on the side of his chair, his hawk like eyes scan over the nobles, foreign ambassadors as well as the members of his family and his extended family, all standing in their respective hunting groups as ordered.

Though it is early in the morning, the entire group of people gathered are wide awake and buzzing with excitement for the upcoming event. They stir a little at the Emperor's speech.

“As some of you may already know, due to the mess caused by the hillfire, the Crown Prince is still nowhere to be found.”

A few murmurs arise from the crowd, but with just one glare from the Emperor, the entire population hushes itself in seconds.

“But fear not, because our Crown Prince is very well trained and is absolutely capable of defending himself from any potential danger. I have already deployed some soldiers and sent General Ong to search the place for him.”

Jihoon shuffles from his position as he scans the crowd for familiar faces. In the near distance he can spot Lai Guanlin with his consort, Lee Daehwi’s half sister, standing together. His eyes lands on Consort Lee’s arm around the Second Prince’s, securely pulling him towards her.

Then there’s also Ha Sungwoon, who stands with the foreign ambassador Hwang Minhyun and Jeong Sewoon. They seemed to have formed a group as well.

The rest would be Lee Daehwi, Kim Jaehwan, Park Woojin, and him. Jinyoung has joined the group by default as his family servant.

“With that said, I welcome you all once again to one of our most anticipated events of the year, the annual Spring Hunt!” A smirk spreads across the Emperor’s face, his eyes narrowing on the crowd as he speaks. “As you all know, the team that gets the most points from the Hunt will receive a secret gift from me. And the most outstanding one in the team gets a bigger reward.”

“A gift?” Jihoon whispers.

“Yes. It’s always something very valuable every year, ranging from priceless jewelry to rare pets. As for the individual reward, depending on the Emperor’s mood, he may even grant one wish of yours, no matter what it is,” Daehwi leans towards Jihoon and explains.

“He means winning the Spring Hunt event is a big deal,” Woojin snickers as he sees the look of astonishment on Jihoon’s face. “You better not drag us down.”

Jihoon gives Woojin a sideways glance and says nothing.

“As you can see, we have very special guests with us today,” it’s the Empress’ turn to speak, her voice silky and powerful as she enunciates every word clearly. Her accoutrements today are simple and more bland in comparison to her normal outfit, and yet her aura is what makes her stand out as the mother of the kingdom. “We welcome our foreign ambassadors to join us in this meaningful event. And of course, should the foreign ambassadors win, we will reward you accordingly.”

“The most important thing, of course,” there’s a meaningful glimmer in her eye when she raises her voice to the crowd. “Is to have fun.”
“Let the Sprint Hunt begin!”

As soon as her voice dies down, the crowd breaks apart and the soldiers start setting up the booths for storing the dead animals’ bodies. Jihoon watches as the Emperor and the Empress turn and head towards their very own tent located right behind the big tent in the middle of the open area.

“Are you feeling well enough to do this?” Jinyoung jogs to Jihoon’s side and asks, scanning him up and down. He can see the rough burns that are partly covered up by Jihoon’s collar and the places that have puffed up because of extra bandages underneath the clothing. Though Jihoon had walked into the fire with wet cloth all over him, it was inevitable that there were parts of the clothing that could not withstand the heat. After all, the damp cloth he had brought were not fire resistant material. Jihoon had to suffer from physical burns while rescuing the people from the fire, and though the wounds were only on the surface on the skin, they were painful enough to bring Jihoon insomnia. Jinyoung was particularly aware of this, having to sleep in the bed next to him at the temporary hospital tent.

“It hurts,” Jihoon admits, wincing a little as they walk towards the tent to grab their archery tools. “But I want to win.”

“You do?” Woojin gasps, peeking from between Jihoon and Jinyoung and disrupting their conversation. “What is it?”

“You don’t know anything about privacy, do you?” Jinyoung mutters, annoyed.

“No, never heard of that before,” Woojin, picks up his pace so he can walk beside Jihoon. Nudging the male consort, he asks, “So, what is it that you want from the Emperor?”

“That is none of your business,” Jihoon sighs and shakes his head, fed up with having to deal with this ball of energy in their team.

“Of course it is! We’re friends,” Woojin emphasizes the last word, dragging it out and looking at Jihoon with his snaggletooth poking out as he smiles.

“Who says?” Jinyoung snorts and pushes Woojin away from Jihoon. “And since when?”

“You’re my idol now, Consort Park, no, Park Jihoon.” Woojin stops in the middle of his tracks. “Wait, can I call you Park Jihoon?”

Jihoon opens his mouth to reject him, but thinks for a moment and shuts it. “If I say no-”

“Okay, Jihoon it is! So, Jihoon, I was really impressed when you walked into the fire just like that. Whoa! I mean, you’re so cool. That was so manly, I can't believe someone with a pretty face like yours-”

“Woojin, would it hurt to keep your mouth shut?” Jaehwan pulls on the boy’s ear and ignores his yelps while he drags him away from Jihoon. “Come with me to get the bows and arrows. And shut up while you’re at it or I’ll tape your mouth shut.”

Shooting back half an embarrassed smile towards Jihoon, Jaehwan forces Woojin to walk with him towards the side of the tent to get the supplies. Jihoon watches as they banter on their way, arguing about almost everything and anything, not even caring to lower their voices when people start looking their way.

“They’re like that, I’m sorry,” Daehwi steps up next to him and apologizes, his voice soft and elegant in contrast to his friends’ tones. “I hope Woojin doesn’t bother you too much.”
“No, not at all,” Jihoon replies with a small laugh. It’s refreshing, seeing people with Woojin’s personality. Someone who speaks without thinking and without any malicious intentions. How can one stay like that in the midst of the fight for glory and prestige? Unless, that is, Woojin never wanted to be part of it. He didn’t have to, anyway, since he was only Daehwi’s friend and not part of the circle of nobles.

But something didn’t seem quite right.

“How can Woojin attend an event like this if this is meant to be an event for nobles only?” Jihoon asks, not tearing his eyes from Woojin’s shadow.

“My father allows it,” is all Daehwi says in reply. Jihoon can sense that there is something more to it, but doesn’t question it when the boy doesn’t elaborate.

“Consort Park,” he hears an unfamiliar voice call to him. Jihoon turns and sees a guard walking to him.

The guard leans in and whispers in his ear, “The Second Prince wishes to talk to you.”

Jihoon’s eyes search the crowd to look for the Second Prince and he finds that the boy sure is easy to spot, with his height, his handsome looks and the girls surrounding him like that. The guard leads Jihoon towards the Second Prince, who pauses in the middle of his conversation with some maidens to look at Jihoon.

“There you are. I’ve been looking for you,” the Prince says with a warm smile on his face, as if they had been the closest friends in the palace. It leaves Jihoon confused, because he’s rarely seen this expression on the Prince’s face before, and frankly speaking, the smile leaves him slightly intimidated. The kind smile looks especially suspicious when he’s witnessed and experienced the Prince’s cold personality firsthand. Though the Second Prince can clearly see the bewildered look on Jihoon’s face, he walks out of the crowd and places an arm around Jihoon’s shoulder, again like they’re brothers. Or something.

“What’s this,” Jihoon mutters under his breath but is hushed by a smiling Guanlin. A happily smiling Guanlin is a Guanlin that he does not want to mess with, he’s sure of it.

“Let’s get out of here first.” The irritation seeps from the Second Prince’s voice as soon as they are out of earshot, though the pretty smile stays plastered on his face. Jihoon half rolls his eyes and goes with the act as they leave the crowd for somewhere more quiet.

The moment they find a place to settle, Jihoon shrugs the arm off his shoulder and faces the Second Prince.

“Yes, your Highness?” Jihoon sounds impatient, but how can one blame him? The Sprint Hunt has started, and he wants to win this. He has no time to talk.

“Oh, so now you have an attitude,” the Second Prince finally sheds his smiley act, and Jihoon almost breathes a sigh of relief. Seeing Jihoon’s change of expression, Lai Guanlin raises a brow. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying.”

“Yes, I am,” Jihoon points to Guanlin’s lips, who takes an immediate step backwards when Jihoon approaches him. The action leaves Jihoon slightly mystified, and he shoves his finger forward till it
almost reaches Guanlin’s face. The prince’s neck has turned red and he takes yet another step backwards.

“Are you scared of me?” Jihoon asks, amused at Guanlin’s reaction.

“No?” The prince narrows his eyes at the consort, and he grabs his wrist to force his hand down so he is no longer pointing towards him. “And what’s your deal?”

“What’s my deal?”

“Why did you look so weirded out when I approached you earlier?”

Jihoon bites on his lips to suppress a laugh but fails, and he quickly clamps a hand over his mouth to stop himself when he catches the prince curiously looking at him.

“It’s nothing.”

The prince looks unconvinced, still.

“I mean, I’ve never seen you smiling so warmly before. Not to me, at least. Nor have you treated me,” Jihoon tiptoes to put an arm around Guanlin, “like this.”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” is Guanlin’s response when he looks at Jihoon.

Their eyes meet for a quick second. The eye contact had been brief, but there seemed to be something there, a small exchange between the two young men, perhaps some mutual understanding, or something more. Both of them seem to lack the ability to figure it out, though.

Jihoon blinks himself out of the trance first, withdrawing his arm and stepping sideways to put some distance between the two of them, suddenly conscious of their proximity. The Second Prince clears his throat too and turns to face Jihoon.

“You don't like seeing me smile?” The Second Prince suddenly throws out this strange question, causing Jihoon to jump.

“What? No? I-”

“So you like seeing me smile.” the Second Prince concludes, the corners of his mouth slowly turning up.

“You know what? Yes,” Jihoon suddenly thinks of something, his eyes lighting up. “And you? You like to cling to people in your sleep?”

The change of expression on Guanlin's face from smugness to panic was such a colourful transformation that Jihoon wanted to capture every bit of it and savour it whenever the Second Prince starts to tease him or anger him.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” the prince says in a low voice, though the redness creeping up his cheeks betray him.

“You don't? How about I tell you what happened?” Jihoon finds joy in finally being able to tease the Second Prince and make him pay back for all the anxiety he has brought him the moment he had stepped onto the royal grounds- no, the moment they had met on that very road to the shrine.

“You really don't have to,” the Prince looks fully uncomfortable now, narrowing his eyes at Jihoon as if he is daring him to continue speaking.
“So yesterday you had passed out by the time I found you, so I had to drape you with wet cloth and pull you out of the fire. The two foreign representatives were able to walk on their own.”

“Stop,” the Second Prince places a palm against his forehead, feeling too embarrassed to look at the consort who is too engrossed in telling the story to listen to him.

“When we came out you had your arms fully around my neck, putting your entire weight on me, and had me drag your heavy body through the woods to the camp.”

The Second Prince's skin is pale, so when a blush forms it's more prominent on him than on anyone else. Jihoon has to resist teasing him about it. He decides to save him face by not elaborating too deep into it. By taking away some details that are better left unsaid.

Details like Lai Guanlin resting his head on his shoulder, his breath fanning over his neck as he breathes soundly in his half conscious state, his long arms draped over Jihoon's smaller body as if pulling him into an embrace, Jihoon trying to ignore these distracting actions while he reaches his arm around him to support him the entire way back to camp. Details like Jihoon struggling to put him on the bed, and Lai Guanlin's firm grip around Jihoon pulling him straight into his chest as they collapsed onto the mattress. Details like Consort Lee walking into the room finding Jihoon putting an ice pack on Lai Guanlin's forehead and the woman chasing him out of the room because it was not his duty to take care of him, but hers.

“Jihoon?”

At the call of his name, Jihoon tears his unfocused gaze away from the ground and looks up at the boy before him.

“Um, thank you.”

The sincerity shines through the Second Prince's crystal clear eyes, and Jihoon again finds himself dazzled by the beautiful features of the man's face.

“I nearly hurt you with my plan,” Jihoon says instead of praising the man for his looks, though he is very tempted to do otherwise. “This is the least I could do-”

“No,” the Second Prince interjects. “You saved us both times. First, with the plan and second, with your bravery. I heard you entered the fire yourself, with nothing but damp cloth.”

“That's nothing.”

“That is something, Jihoon, whether or not you acknowledge it. It is easy for anyone to say that they'd lay down their lives for the royal family. But for one to do it, it takes courage and loyalty, and most importantly, a good heart. That is something I've seen in you from the start.”

“Something you could use, perhaps?” Jihoon suddenly speaks up, his dagger-like gaze startling the Second Prince. “For the greater good.”

Hearing this, the Second Prince's eyes become dim, no longer radiating that kind of sincerity and gratitude or whatever it was that Jihoon had barely caught a glimpse of.

“How are your injuries?” The Second Prince changes the topic smoothly, though the atmosphere between them has clearly changed. His hand comes up to touch the burn on Jihoon's neck but Jihoon flinches. Seeing this, the Prince stops midway and withdraws his hand.

“Nothing worth your concern,” Jihoon places a hand over his neck. “Your consort must be waiting
for you.”

The Second Prince ignores the mentioning of Consort Lee and ducks his head to stare at Jihoon in the eye.

“Is there anything you want from the Hunt?” he asks the unexpected question. Jihoon stares back at him, exhaling slowly as he debates whether or not to answer the truth.

“Yes.”

“Very well.” The Second Prince turns. “Good luck.”
The Legend of the Wild Toothed Jaguar

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jihoon is a man of pride, and he doesn’t like losing, nor does he like admitting that he’s probably going to lose in this hunt. That’s why he refuses to give up even when he sees more and more servants of the noble sons and daughters on their horses galloping back to the tents with hunting bags tied to them.

“We’re quite behind, aren’t we?” Daehwi murmurs as they trot forward in the woods. Jaehwan sighs and nods, quite reluctant to admit to that himself.

Jinyoung’s brows furrow, displeasure written all over his face. “If we didn’t have to spend time searching for Park Woojin, maybe we’d be in a better place.”

Park Woojin had run off on his own earlier before anyone could stop him. He is skilled at horse riding and is by far the best in the group in terms of being able to control the four legged being. Even if the others wanted to stop him, they couldn’t, not when they couldn’t keep up with Park Woojin without falling off their horses.

Daehwi said it was dangerous to hunt alone so they went around the woods in a steady pace trying to look out for Park Woojin, as well as hunt down some animals that passed by at the same time. But because they had to multitask, they didn’t put enough focus on shooting the animals. Several fast moving creatures had slipped past without giving them time to react.

Jihoon looks at the small size of the hunting sack tied to the back of Jinyoung’s horse. They had managed to capture some birds and a squirrel. At this rate, they are never going to even make it to the rankings that matter, let alone win.

“I apologize again for Woojin’s behaviour,” Daehwi says softly. “I guess it’s best that we now focus on hunting instead of finding Woojin. I’m sure he can take care of himself.”

Jihoon gives him a smile. “Don’t apologize. We still have time, maybe we can catch up.” This he says to comfort the others, but he stares again at the sack and then at those who have just brushed past them carrying their own hunted animals back. They bulks are much larger. If Jihoon’s group doesn’t catch something huge or rare, Jihoon can imagine them being at the bottom of the ranks.

He admits that their progress is slow also partly because he is quite weak in this sport. All the animals in the sack were shot down by Jaehwan and Jinyoung. Daehwi didn’t even raise his bow but he was the one leading the way through the woods. It annoys Jihoon to know that he is the only one who isn’t contributing to the team.

“Stop looking so troubled,” Jinyoung reaches over to smack his arm, and Jihoon looks at him with an unspoken threat in his eye. The other boy shrinks back with a smirk and pulls on the reins to draw some distance between them so that Jihoon cannot murder him for what he just did.

“We’re going to catch up with the others and grab the Emperor’s gift for sure! Don’t you worry.” Jinyoung shouts to assure him. Jihoon narrows his eyes at him as a silent reprimanding for the smack but his lips quirk up a little at the Jinyoung’s encouragement and positivity.

Jihoon wants the Emperor’s gift. And Jinyoung, having known him for so long, clearly saw through his intentions from the start.
As they move deeper into the woods, they slowly find that there are less and less people around. One or two rode past them at first but then after a while, they seemed to be all alone in this section of the woods. It’s a good sign because it means they don’t have to compete in hunting for animals in the same area.

Just as Jihoon is slowing down his pace, trying to find traces of animals, Daehwi suddenly pulls on his horse’s reins. The horse lets out a little grunt and turns to the right, trotting away from the group.

“Daehwi?” questions Jaehwan when he sees the boy changing his route.

“Come,” Daehwi gestures for them to come over and silences them with a finger over his lips. “I think I saw the shadow of a deer.”

They exchange glances and do as the boy requested, following after him in absolute silence. After a short ride, Daehwi’s words were proved to be right. There was indeed a deerlike creature in the distance bowing its head to munch on the plants on the ground.

Jihoon’s eyes light up at the sight of the slender and delicate silhouette. It’s the first time he’s seen a deer up close. Back in those days when he had some freedom he wasn’t one of those who would go out and hunt around for fun. He mostly stayed at home or roamed around within the small village, so the only times he’s actually had any form of contact with the subject of animals was through books.

Daehwi swings down to the ground gracefully, the crunching noises emitted by feet’s contact the leafy ground the only sounds he makes while he approaches the clearing. The other three boys stay on their positions, afraid to even budge as they watch the boy walk closer and closer to the animal that has its back facing them.

Daehwi carefully secures the arrow on his bow and raises it, pulling the bowstring effortlessly till it reaches near his lips.

Jihoon’s eyes widen. It’s the first time Daehwi has touched his bow throughout the trip. It lights a spark of curiosity and anticipation in him as he wonders how Daehwi will do in this sport.

Closing one eye, Daehwi releases the arrow, and Jihoon watches it fly across the air and strike the target right in the neck. It was a perfect shot, with a perfect aim.

Jinyoung draws in a sharp breath from next to Jihoon.

The creature struggles to run, but soon drops in agony as its limbs flail to support itself up again. Daehwi takes hurried steps towards the animal and puts a hand on it, as if to calm it down. Jihoon watches, intrigued, while he approaches Daehwi and the animal.

“Good gracious! Is that not a Chinese water deer?” Jaehwan exclaims when he sees the animal, fascinated. He kneels down next to Daehwi and strokes the animal’s head. Jihoon examines the creature and realizes that indeed, it has two prominent tusks, unlike any other regular deer. “How did you manage to capture such a rare creature? Not to mention these are usually found near the rivers!”

Jihoon’s eyes flick upwards to look at Daehwi, who beams down at his victim. “There’s a river nearby. I remembered the map and decided to come have a look. I didn’t know I would be so lucky.”

Jihoon raises a brow.
He remembers reading about this animal in the books. Not only is it quite rare, but it is also highly sensitive. Deer originally are greatly alert, but Chinese water deer can smell the scent of a human even from a large distance. So how on earth did they manage to approach the creature without it running away first?

Jihoon looks at Daehwi and Jaehwan, who are celebrating the capture of the rare animal. This is a great bonus for the team. The creature may not be huge and the points usually increase by size, but more points go to the rare finds. The Chinese water deer is pretty rare, not yet on the verge of extinction but he reckons they will be in a couple of years if they are not conserved. And they are extremely hard to catch. Either Daehwi is incredibly skilled and knows exactly how to hunt down an animal of this kind, or he is just very, very lucky. Perhaps a little bit of both. Jihoon knew this boy had a lot of potential, being the first son of the mighty Lee family, but he didn’t know of his capabilities till now.

Frankly speaking, Jihoon is impressed, but he is also shocked at how easy Daehwi made shooting down a rare deer seem.

“What’s wrong?” Jinyoung tugs at Jihoon’s sleeve when he notices that he’s zoning out instead of rejoicing in the amazing find. Jihoon lets out a small ‘oh’ and looks at Jinyoung, then gives him a pat on the arm to reassure him that it’s nothing. He doesn’t want to sound like someone who’s envious of someone else’s success so he keeps his thoughts to himself. He is probably thinking too much into it, anyway. Daehwi is General Lee’s son, naturally he’d be at least taught how to be a decent shooter.

“Carve your name on its belly and leave it there for the servants to bring it back to the camp,” Jaehwan tells Daehwi as he giddily hops onto his own horse. “We’re definitely not the last now. Come on! There are many more rare animals to hunt down!”

“That’s easier said than done,” Daehwi chuckles as he carves a ‘Hwi’ on the animal’s body. The four boys watch on silently as the animal painfully screeches in the process, each one louder than the one before with every stroke of the knife.

Jihoon swallows, and even Jinyoung blinks twice before he looks away. Jihoon finds that carving on the animal’s body to mark it as their possession is a cruel process and he doesn’t like it at all. Earlier, Jaehwan offered to give him the fat squirrel that he’s shot down and tells him to carve his name on it so that he could take some points but Jihoon refused. Because he doesn’t want to take anyone’s hard work and because he couldn’t bring himself to carve into the poor animal.

“Let’s go.” Daehwi takes out a napkin and wipes his bloodied hands on the white cloth. After he’s done, he slides the dirty napkin into his bag of arrows.

As they continue their journey into the woods, at times they find people chasing animals in full speed, which Jaehwan has explained that they should not do considering Jinyoung and Jihoon were new people in the hunt.

“It’s pretty dangerous going all out. If you lose control over your horse you could easily slip and break your neck.”

The thought that death is constantly so close to him sends a shiver down Jihoon’s spine. First, the poison that was inserted in his body without him knowing. Then, the risk of being killed for not obeying the rules in the palace. Ever since he’s come, he finds that he is constantly on the verge of Death. Sometimes he wonders if he will one day become one of the many that commit suicide on the royal grounds, having gone mad from trying so desperately to survive. Which sounds ironic the more he thinks about it, for one to seek death because they have been spending so much time
running away from it.

Now it starts to occur to Jihoon how living in the palace is starting to drive him a little crazy. How can he be triggered into thinking something so grim when they are engaging in a supposedly lighthearted, stress relieving sport like hunting?

“Do rabbits count?” Jihoon suddenly asks when he sees a tuft of light grey in the midst of the dark brown and green. He’s thankful that there’s something to distract his thoughts for now, at least.

“Of course. Squirrels, rabbits, all these small animals count.”

Jihoon raises the arrow that had already been placed on the bow and stretches, his opened eye focusing on the grey ball of fluff that is nibbling off on some leaves. It’s moving, and Jihoon’s hand shakes as he aims the arrow at the rabbit. He recalls Guanlin’s teachings as he steadies his breathing and puts one eye on the target.

When it moves again, Jihoon can clearly see its eyes, small and innocent, with not a clue that there is currently someone aiming to kill it. His heartbeat picks up when he focuses on the creature, the arrowhead pointing directly at it. It’s cute, with its shade of untainted grey. Somehow, the looks of the rabbit reminds him of himself.

He lowers his bow a little. He doesn't want to shoot it, he realizes.

Before he can hesitate more on whether or not to shoot, he feels the wind when an arrow flies past him and hits the small rabbit. Realizing what happened, he lets out a gentle cry when he sees the poor animal try to scramble for its life but fail, blood pooling on the ground from where the arrow had hit it.

“So soft hearted,” Jihoon hears a familiar voice behind him scoff. He turns and finds Woojin sitting straight on his horse and moving from his professional archery stance. He raises a brow and smirks at Jihoon, who drops from his horse to walk towards the rabbit.

Taking a closer glance at the animal, he finds out that the ends of the arrow has his initials and status carved on it. This is among the arrows that were specifically designed for him!

The arrows are different among all individuals for a reason. Carving on the animal's body is not essential as the arrow shot into the body of the animal is already marked with a name. Each individual has their own specially designed arrows to serve convenience for counting individual marks. Carving on the body only makes it harder for others to take away one's targets and claim it for themselves.

“That’s yours to take,” he hears Woojin say behind him.

Jihoon’s eyes widen in surprise as he turns towards Woojin. “You took my arrows with you?” He had wondered at first why his bag of arrows seemed much lighter than everyone else’s.

Woojin puts down his bow and crosses his arms with a grin on his face. “Yeah. I got you two elk, one bison, and three squirrels. There’s one more rabbit to add to the list now. I can assure you, we are leading the game right now.” Eyeing Jaehwan, he adds, “even though you haven’t really done much.”

So Woojin had stolen his arrows so he could take down targets and score marks for him. Jihoon is grateful but doesn't know how to begin in thanking him. Nor does he know why Woojin is doing this for him.
“That many?” Jaehwan ignores his criticism and stares at him in disbelief, his gaze going back and forth from Woojin to the rabbit in Jihoon’s arms. “Wait, how? Also, you found elk and bison? Where?”

Woojin shrugs. “There’s a piece of greenland that’s quite a distance from here, you know. Not many people know about it and even if they do, it’s quite likely that they don’t know it’s recently marked as part of the White Forest.”

“Then how did you-”

“Woojin is good at many things,” Daehwi cuts Jaehwan off and lets out a small chuckle. “Hunting being one of them. He’s good at geography too, I’m pretty sure he did some research before coming here. I believe the Second Prince has met his enemy this year.”

Jihoon places the injured rabbit in front of him on the horse, carefully making sure he doesn’t make the wound worse. Woojin glances his way and watches thoughtfully as Jihoon brushes the fur of the rabbit.

“Anyway, there’s no way we could be efficient if we stay in such a big group.” Woojin finally tears his eyes away from him and puts a hand on Jihoon’s shoulder, squeezing it hard. Jihoon shrinks back from his attack but he doesn’t look bothered. He’s starting to get used to Woojin’s rough personality, it seems. He's not a bad guy, so Jihoon doesn't mind. “You and I should be in a group because you seem like the one who needs the most help.”

“I’m not,” Jihoon shoots back, though with little conviction. It’s true that he hasn’t really done anything for the group. He feels a little sorry for his teammates but they don’t seem to mind one bit, nor do they seem to be aware of it. Even if they do, they don’t show it or scold Jihoon for it, to which Jihoon is grateful for.

“Then Jinyoung will come with me and Jaehwan,” Daehwi concludes with a smile. “Let’s split up and meet at the tent for dinner.”

Before Jihoon could retort and suggest that they should just stick together, Woojin holds up a hand and agrees. “Sounds good to me,” he says.

Jihoon resists the urge to roll his eyes when Woojin shoos them away. “Doesn’t sound good to me,” he mutters, though the others cannot hear him because they have already left.

“Why not? It seems you need some help,” Woojin lazily pats on the horse so that it would start moving. “Not just with the sport, but with your heart.”

“My heart?” Jihoon has an idea what he means but he pretends not to notice. Woojin doesn't take the hint to let the topic go and he continues, much to Jihoon's dismay.

“You have a soft heart. It’s not made for killing, is it.”

Jihoon’s grip on the reins tighten and he kicks the horse so it would follow after Woojin.

He’s been told that before, by his father. It partly had to do with how his parents value intellect more than physical strength which affected his upbringing. He has to admit that he’s also been quite a sheltered child, having had little exposure to violence up till now. But more of it has to do with his personality. He’s born this way. His father explained before that he refused to send him to military school because he wouldn’t be able to survive, not because of his lack of skills that can always be trained and polished, but because he doesn’t have a heart that can put the skills to use. If he were ever to be present on the battlefield, he overheard his father saying to his angry aunt, then
Jihoon would likely be the first one dead.

“If you wanted to win so badly you gotta work for it, you know,” Woojin adds, reaching for his bow again. He shoots another arrow before Jihoon even catches sight of his target and it’s only when the animal lets out a small shriek that Jihoon realizes it’s a squirrel climbing up the tree. The squirrel falls from the branch with a little struggle, whimpering in pain. Woojin quickly drops it into his sack and looks at Jihoon.

“See, look at how shaken you are every time I shoot something,” Woojin points out as he mounts on his horse again. Jihoon’s exhales through his nose and moves forward without responding. He’s thankful that Woojin is scoring points for him, but he’s not sure if he appreciates Woojin’s straightforwardness at this moment. It just reminds him how pathetic a hunter he is.

“You’re not mad, are you? I’m just speaking the truth,” Woojin leans from his horse to take a closer look at Jihoon’s expression, trying to see if he's really angered him or not. Jihoon keeps a straight face without saying anything as Woojin lets out a little laugh, shaking his head. Afterwards, it seems like he’s given up on teasing Jihoon as they continue their path through the White Forest. They ride on in silence that Jihoon much appreciates until his horse comes to a sudden halt.

Woojin’s horse hesitates to move forward at around the same place, as if there is some hidden barrier in front of them. Jihoon peers through the trees before them but cannot seem to catch sight of anything that is preventing the horses from moving. Woojin’s carefree expression has turned to one of absolute focus and seriousness. Jihoon cannot help but feel apprehensive.

“Do you know what’s going on?” Jihoon lowers his voice, just in case.

“Yeah. There’s something big nearby.”

Jihoon straightens up when he hears Woojin’s warning and his palms start to sweat. He recalls Fei and Jia’s conversation on the ferocious beasts of the White Forest and how they’re extremely hard to kill or tame. When met with danger, the Emperor has warned them to fire out a signal and the soldiers will come to their aid as soon as possible. Jihoon is about to reach for his fireworks but Woojin places a hand on his arm.

“Let’s try to beat this thing, yeah?” Woojin says, and Jihoon sees a frightening grin light up his face, revealing his signature snaggletooth. His hot blooded confidence alarms Jihoon but at the same time it impresses him.

Sure enough, not for long they start to hear the crunching of the grass from the right, as if the creature is slowly approaching them. Jihoon’s horse takes a few steps back and Jihoon has to pat it to comfort it, though he needs some comfort himself.

A shadow appears from behind the trees, and Jihoon swallows, gripping tight onto the reins with wet hands. Woojin takes out an arrow and puts it gently on the bow but makes no move to draw it. What he does next makes Jihoon’s heart beat twice as fast in anxiety, and he is about to stop him when he realizes that the man probably knows what he’s doing.

Woojin swings down from his horse and boldly takes a step forward to the shadow behind the densely packed trees.

“Be careful,” Jihoon whispers.

Woojin looks back. Jihoon finds it irritating to find no trace of fear on his face. A smirk spreads
across his lips. “What I’m doing is not much braver than someone’s act of rushing right into a fire.”

“Pay attention,” Jihoon warns, ignoring his statement. The situation at hand is more important than their nonsensical banters and it calls for absolute focus.

The other boy scoffs and turns towards the front once again, raising his bow and aiming it towards direction of the shadow which has now disappeared before they knew it. He releases it and it is somehow able to dodge all the branches that are in its way, going right for the tree where they had seen briefly seen the shadow appear before. The arrow stabs right into the very edge of the tree, alarming some sparrows that had perched onto the branches on top and scaring them away.

“Time to come out!” Woojin shouts, and Jihoon suddenly has the huge urge to smack him for alerting the animal of their presence.

As expected, or as feared, the shadow emerges once again from behind the trees. Jihoon resists the urge to pull the horse back and head to safety. The silhouette of the beast doesn’t seem intimidatingly huge, but it is smart enough to hide and not make any noise. As much as Jihoon apprehends facing this creature, he also feels the insuppressible wave of thrill within him in wanting to try defeating it.

Just as he is about to reach for his bow as well, the animal takes a few steps forward to where sunlight is not blocked by the overlapping branches and trees.

Jihoon freezes.

“That’s not very polite of you,” a familiar voice says, the resentment clear in her voice. “What will you do if you injure the prince?”

Jihoon sometimes really detests coincidences. Especially the coincidence of bumping into people he knows and doesn’t want to see at the moment.

Out of the dark the ‘creature’ finally comes into view, walking lazily on the wilted leaves that had fallen off their branches. The two lumps on top of it are in fact not part of its body, but two people whom he knows all too well, one of which had spoken up with obvious irritation at their offensive actions earlier.

“Your Highness,” Woojin doesn’t seem surprised when he dips his head low in their direction, greeting them with courtesy Jihoon has never witnessed in the man during the short period of time he’s known him. “And Consort Lee.”

Jihoon realizes what has happened and turns toward Park Woojin, giving him the most ferocious glare he can manage.

There’s no such thing as a big creature approaching them. He’s been played.

“It’s good to see you here,” The Second Prince gives Jihoon a knowing smile. “Looks like you’re enjoying yourself,” he adds, nodding towards Jihoon’s hand on his bow.

“I am,” Jihoon mutters, releasing his grip on the weapon. “I suppose you are too.”

“Perhaps, but it would be much more enjoyable for me if I had some entertaining people by my side,” the prince’s smile leaves a little dimple on his face that almost renders it impossible for Jihoon to be mad at him. “How’s your progress?”
“I doubt you’re doing well since you don’t seem to have any prior experience in hunting,” Consort Lee interrupts, clearly disturbed by the amount of attention the Second Prince is giving the other team.

“You’re right, we are quite behind, I suppose. Just caught some elk and a bison and a Chinese water deer, as well as some birds and squirrels and rabbits. I’m sure it’s nothing compared to his Highness’s catches.”

Woojin’s quirky reply draws out a chuckle from Jihoon’s lips, and the Second Prince eyes Woojin for a moment before he himself lets out a laugh.

“That is pretty impressive, sir. And who may you be?” he questions, a spark of interest lighting up his dark brown eyes.

“Park Woojin, your Highness, under the care of the Lee family.”

“He’s my brother’s protector,” Consort Lee leans forward and murmurs towards the prince’s ear. She looks straight into Jihoon’s eye, her blood red lips almost touching the prince’s skin. “I bet most of their animals were caught by him.”

“No,” Woojin shakes his head. “Your Highness, Consort Park did most of the work. You should see him in action. The way he focuses on his target is the most charming thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Lies,” Consort Lee narrows her eyes at the two of them, then stares at Jihoon up and down suspiciously. She seems to really be contemplating on whether Jihoon holds such talent for archery and hunting.

Woojin only shrugs.

Jihoon carefully waits for the Second Prince to react at the obviously false statement. Lai Guanlin had had a chance to witness his skills when they trained together earlier, and Jihoon was clearly an amateur. Not only was he an amateur, he was a plain, untalented amateur. It took him more than several practice shots for his arrow to hit the board, let alone the target.

To his surprise, the prince says nothing to reveal Jihoon’s poor ability in archery. Yet, his expression looks stiff as he shifts his gaze from Park Woojin to Jihoon, his face unreadable as usual when he’s deep in thought. Though Jihoon is unable to figure out what Lai Guanlin is thinking, he lets out a little sigh of relief when he realizes that his secret is safe. He wouldn’t know how to put up with Consort Lee’s further insults if she knew about the truth.

“Now that we’ve spent enough time getting to know each other, should we take down this beast together?” Woojin suggests out of the blue, and Jihoon looks at him, confused. At the corner of his eye Woojin is able to see Jihoon’s face and he smirks. “I mean, certainly your Highness and Consort Lee were hiding from something behind the trees just now.”

“Thank you for your offer, but Guanlin can handle it himself,” Consort Lee quickly dismisses Woojin’s suggestion and places a hand on Lai Guanlin’s shoulder. Jihoon’s eyes linger on the hand for awhile before he looks away, feeling slightly displeased with the thought of Lee Hyejin so casually calling Lai Guanlin by his name. “I think it’s best the two of you run along before you get chewed by the monster.”

“What monster?” Jihoon resists the urge to ask, and in the end he keeps his mouth shut. Judging from the situation he understands quickly that the horses were not scared for no reason earlier, and that the huge animal that Woojin was anticipating had only not revealed itself yet. It just happened
that before it arrived Woojin was able to spot the Second Prince and his consort, both of them hiding from the animal they were expecting.

“We weren’t hiding,” Lai Guanlin corrects him, his expression softening as he turns to Jihoon. “We were figuring out a way to take it down. You need not worry, the creature is sleeping for now, we caught sight of it hiding between the trees earlier.”

“Could you not kill it while it’s sleeping?” Jihoon questions.

“No, its senses are extraordinary and we wouldn’t be able to get within shooting range without it recognizing us,” Woojin explains patiently. “I haven’t seen it yet, but I’m guessing by its footprint that it’s a jaguar. But the size of it is strange.” Sure enough, when Jihoon looks at the direction he’s pointing at he sees a few footprints that have trampled through the wild grass and pressed them down onto the mud, leaving paw like shapes on the ground. What was strange about them was that the footprints were unbelievably huge. Jihoon knows the standard size of a jaguar and he’s never seen one paw print this big. It looks like the size of an elephant’s foot. A shiver runs down Jihoon’s spine.

“It’s not a normal jaguar, that’s why.” Guanlin pushes Consort Lee’s hand from his shoulder and slides down in one elegant move onto the ground, swiftly managing his balance. He kneels down next to the print. “This footprint belongs to a jaguar with huge feet, black fur and two rows of teeth.”

“The Wild Toothed Jaguar,” Woojin exclaims, clasping his hands together as his eyes light up in realization. He leaps off his horse with extreme enthusiasm. “The legendary creature exists? I’ve been wanting to see it since I was a child.”

“Wild Tooth?” Consort Lee pales, her hands now gripping on the reins tightly and pulling them towards her. Jihoon peers closer and finds that she is trembling slightly. “The White Forest’s Wild Tooth? The one with cross scars on its right eye?”

“Yes.” The Second Prince's expression remains indifferent, in contrast to Consort Lee's.

“It’s that one alright!” Woojin jumps in delight, beaming up at Jihoon, who fails to share the same excitement with the other boy. In fact, he is feeling rather the opposite. Just hearing the description of said animal made the thought of confronting it even the more terrifying.

“Did you know? It’s called the Wild Tooth not only because of the abnormal amount of teeth it has, but also because of the incredible power the teeth holds! It can chomp down on a tree trunk like this,” Woojin points to the tall tree next to him extending far into the sky, its trunk thick enough to take perhaps five or six grown adults to join hands in order to be able to hug it, “And break it in one bite.”

“You must be exaggerating,” Jihoon says quietly, hoping for his accusation to be true.

“No, I’m afraid he isn’t. People have been wanting to take its teeth as material for weaponry. Shields and such. It is incredibly strong and can withstand enormous power.” The Second Prince straightens up and pats away the mud from his sleeves after he had observed the footprint enough.

“Isn’t this great, Jihoon?” Woojin walks over and holds up his palm to Jihoon with a grin on his face. Jihoon cocks his head, unsure of what he wants to do. Then suddenly, Woojin grabs his wrist and holds his palm up so that he can slap his palm against his. Jihoon quickly retracts his hand, looking at the other boy strangely. Park Woojin seems unaffected by the reaction. “If we pull out
just one tooth from the Wild Tooth we will be taking the lead by far! And you’ll be able to win, as you wished.”

“Hold on,” Consort Lee lets out a laugh, though it sounds shaky and nervous. “You want to pull out its teeth? You must be insane. I’d applaud you and bow down to you if you were able to that.”

“Oh?” Jihoon raises a brow and speaks before he can stop himself. A thin smile crosses his lips and he ignores the intense gaze of the Second Prince’s and Woojin’s look of anticipation. “You would do what?”

Consort Lee’s expression contorts to one of ugly hatred and shock after processing what she has said herself. Her well defined brows knit into a frown and her red lips turn downwards, exhaling a long breath of air. “Don’t be an idiot, as if you could even approach it, let alone pull out its teeth! Do you know where the Wild Tooth got its scars from? It was from a famous swordsman that came upon it two years ago, who was said to be one of the strongest among the army. Yet, all the swordsman was able to do was give it a few scratches. The scars on the Wild Tooth’s right eye was a result of him struggling from having his skull crushed by it!”

一言既出，驷马难追,” Park Woojin cuts off the woman with an idiom Jihoon knows all too well. What’s said, cannot be unsaid. “Surely, as a well educated lady from a famous family like the Lee’s, you will not go back on your words.”

Consort Lee’s face reddens with anger, her chest heaving out as she throws a look towards the Second Prince. Yet, Lai Guanlin does not seem like he could care less. Gritting her teeth, Consort Lee hurls her bow onto the floor and points to Consort Park with her slender finger.

“Alright. I’ll applaud for you, hell, I’ll bow to you too!” She sneers. “But only if you, Park Jihoon, are able to pull out one of its teeth and show it to me today.”

Chapter End Notes

I'll leave the task of searching up the meaning of the chinese phrase to you and google!
LMAO coz im lazy
“Well?” Daehwi asks, stopping in the midst of the action of picking up the food from his plate. “Where are they?”

“Consort Park and Sir Park Woojin will be staying in the woods along with the Second Prince and the Second Prince’s Consort,” the servant gently says in a volume that can only be heard by Lee Daehwi under the noisy environment of the royal tents. “They have sent one of the soldiers on patrol to deliver the message that they will not be back until next morning and to rest assured.”

Daehwi can see Jinyoung throwing curious glances over occasionally and waves the servant away. But before the servant could take his leave, Daehwi grabs his sleeve and the servant ducks his head again to hear what Daehwi has to say.

“Do you know where they’re staying?”

“At the field at the north of the White Forest, Mister.”

Daehwi’s grip on the servant’s sleeve tightens and his mouth open but produces no sound. After some deeper thought Daehwi shuts his mouth again and finally dismisses the servant.

“So you’ve found them?” Jaehwan puts a hand over his mouth as he chews on his food, nodding towards the servant that had just left. Daehwi nods.

“They’re staying out in the woods for the night, apparently.”

“Whatever for? It’s so dangerous.” Jaehwan swallows and frowns, putting down his chopsticks. The servant beside him hands him a napkin and he takes it, gently dabbing it across his mouth. “Consort Park never struck me as a person who would enjoy spending the night in the wild.”

“Jihoon is going to spend the night in the wild?” Jinyoung sounds alarmed, his voice almost a pitch higher when he takes a closer step towards the table. As his status is not the same as his two new friends, he insisted not to sit with them during dinner, no matter how much they persuaded him to do so. Now he stands on the side watching them eat, pitching in a word or two during their conversations.

“I’m sorry to separate you and your master, Jinyoung.” Daehwi sounds apologetic as he smiles up towards the boy. “But yes, I think they’ve decided to stay in the woods. It is quite the experience after all, having to hunt for your own food and set up your own tents. It’s a rare taste of freedom.”

Jinyoung puts a hand on Daehwi’s shoulder and quickly withdraws it as he looks around him. Thankfully, none of the other nobles or guests are paying attention to their table, so Jinyoung could get away with his small gesture.

“Don’t apologize,” Jinyoung quietly says, the fingers that had brushed against Daehwi’s shoulder now curling up slowly on his side. His adam’s apple bobs as he clears his throat softly. “I’m glad Jihoon can take a little break from the palace life.”

Daehwi hums in agreement and Jaehwan eyes the two of them with a strange look on his face. His expression quickly relaxes, however, and he continues munching away on his meal.
“I did hear that the White Forest is quite dangerous during the night though, no?” Jaehwan casually speaks as he puts another piece of meat into his mouth. “They have all types of ferocious beasts lurking around in the woods, there’s no saying that they’ll stay put in the dark. Hopefully they chose the right place to stay.”

“Well, for that, I’m afraid,” Daehwi gives them a rather forced smile and Jinyoung has a pretty bad feeling the moment he sees Daehwi’s expression. “They may not have exactly chosen the best spot for camping.”

Daehwi is also quick to add, “But of course, since Woojin and the Second Prince are there, I’m sure they chose that place for a reason. And if anything comes their way, they should be able to tackle it.”

“Sure,” Jaehwan looks extremely unconvinced as he sips his tea. “Where is it?”

“The piece of flatland up north, the one closest to the Wild Tooth’s Cave.”

Jaehwan chokes on his tea and sputters, alerting the servant right beside him who jumps to clean the mess off him and the table. Daehwi looks highly amused but says nothing, though Jaehwan has already caught the expression on his face.

“Haha, very funny, Daehwi.” Jaehwan scowls and takes another napkin to wipe the spilled liquid from his robe. “Isn’t that a banned area for camping?”

Having held the event for years, the Emperor already has experience in ensuring the smooth running of the event. To make sure the wild campers stay safe, he has made several camping areas available, and those are the places where soldiers patrol every now and then so to prevent wild beasts from attacking. Near those camping areas are some royal tents to provide first aid, food, water, equipment and anything that is needed during the participants’ stay. Anyone who stays out of the areas where Emperors have made available for camping are only seeking for danger. There’s no telling when wild beasts would attack their tents while sleeping.

Banned areas are extremely dangerous areas where hunters should stay away from when seeking a place to rest. The place where Park Jihoon, Park Woojin, the Second Prince and his consort are staying is one of those areas, and it is banned for camping mainly because of its close proximity to the home of the Wild Toothed Jaguar.

“I wouldn’t say this as a joke,” Daehwi holds his elbows. “Besides, if the Second Prince wishes to camp there, there’s no stopping him. He can stay wherever he wishes.”

“The Wild Tooth?” Jinyoung can predict the danger of said animal but he’s not familiar with the nickname. After all, it’s the first year he’s attended the Hunt.

“It’s a big, bad beast,” Jaehwan explains briefly. “A jaguar, with two rows of teeth each on the upper and lower jaw. Enormous feet. And a few scars on its right eye. Silky black fur. Top notch clothing material, if you are ever able to capture one and skin it. Its teeth are worth millions, suitable for forging weaponry. Legend says that a sword made from it can pierce anything, and a shield made from it can block anything.”

“They’re planning to take it down,” Jaehwan snaps his finger and gasps, as if he had just realized something unbelievable. “Good lords, they’re planning to take it down tonight!”

“It’s dark though?” Jinyoung’s eyes widen, his brown irises reflecting a worried glow. “Jaguars only hunt in the dark, don’t they?”
“Not this one…” Jaehwan looks at his food with a grim look on his face. “This one hunts both in the dark and the light.”

The three of them fall silent immediately, thinking of what kind of suicide mission the group has gotten themselves into. Jinyoung is especially restless, and after pacing around the table for a bit, he takes off to find Fei and Jia.

On the extended field up north of the White Forest, a group is busy setting up tents, starting a fire, and tying up skinned animals on a wooden stick. This group is none other than Park Jihoon’s group.

Jihoon wipes the sweat off his brow and straightens himself to feel the chilly night air of mid spring. Park Woojin has already taken up the physically draining task of chopping wood for the fire and all he had to do was skin the animals and find a way to roast them properly on the fire. It still took quite some energy from him, however. He has this great urge to take of the protective armour from underneath his outer clothes so he could feel cooler. Looking around, it doesn’t seem appropriate to take it off in front of a crowd.

“I’ll be back,” he calls out to the several people that are around. Lee Hyejin looks up from the fire to see him leaving and simply ignores him, turning her attention back to the blazing heat again. Park Woojin raises a hand to show that he heard him and goes back to chopping firewood.

“Don’t head too far,” the Second Prince reminds him in his soft, deep voice. Jihoon flashes him a quick smile and slips away into the darkness of the trees.

As ordered, he didn’t go anywhere too far. The moment he saw that the shadows of the trees were able to cover up himself, he started undoing his waistband and he slips off the black silky robe off his shoulders. He grunts as he takes off the heavy armour, and a gust of wind hits him immediately. He sighs. It feels much better to have the tight and suffocating armour off him. Slowly, he puts on the black outer robe once again and ties back his waistband.

As he is about to go back to their camp, he hears a slight shuffle from his right. Jihoon’s breath hitches, turning his head towards the direction of the sound as he does his best to look at what had moved.

It’s too dark. Jihoon could best catch a glimpse of the shadow that moved but he could not make sure that what he saw was not the sway of some plants to the wind or a small creature leaping around in the bushes.

Jihoon knows that it’s not safe to dwell alone, so he picks up his armour and gently takes a step back to leave. After a few steps, there were no more suspicious movements in the dark, and Jihoon immediately takes off towards the direction of the camp.

It was a wrong move. Or perhaps it was right, but he should’ve done it earlier. He could clearly hear something chasing him! The ruffling of leaves from behind him and the whistle of the wind shakes up his heart like the vibrating of drums. Swallowing dryly, he picks up his speed, ignoring the little thorns and branches and prickly leaves that scratch at him in his way, leaving small but noticeable reddish cuts all over his body as he runs.

It doesn’t take him long to arrive at the camp. He almost breathes a sigh of relief when he sees the fire but then he realizes that only Park Woojin is there.

“Woojin!” Jihoon stumbles towards the boy, throat dry from the rapid breathing of dry and cold spring air. The boy throws another piece of wood into the fire and looks at the frazzled appearance
of the other, cocking his head, confused. Jihoon points a shaking hand to behind him and turns around himself to see what had been chasing him all this time.

His breath catches and Woojin lets out a little yelp.

Whatever it was had not left the dark, but it was there alright. It blends into the black of the trees around it, absorbing the remaining light that was shed upon the forest by the low hanging moon. A blurry puff of black, and two lively gleams of gold. Those were the eyes. Golden eyes of a cat like creature.

“Hey, you,” Woojin lowers himself and reaches slowly for a block of wood on the side of the fire. “When I say go, you run to the back over there, the Second Prince and his little consort are taking their damn time fetching water from the rivers. Bring them here as soon as possible.”

“You won’t be able to fend it alone,” Jihoon looks at him in disbelief, eyes shifting from the unmoving creature in the dark and the stick of fire in Woojin’s hands.

“No, but I can hold it off for a-”

The creature finally shifts in the dark and jumps towards them, one leap immediately shortening the distance greatly between the two males and itself. It lands in front of the bonfire, and it lights up the body of the beast, finally giving Jihoon a good look of what was chasing after him.

The creature bears a body covered with unruly sleek black fur tangled in some leaves and stray branches, its four limbs long and slender like a normal jaguar’s. Its paws that are attached to the limbs, however, are threateningly large, almost two times the size of human feet. It’s much bigger than a regular catlike beast, its height almost reaching Jihoon’s.

Jihoon stops breathing as the fire cackles and he faces the jaguar directly. There are two large diagonal scars across its right eye, the pink skin underneath the black fur showing at the wounds. They are gaping long and deep, and not very clean cuts, probably made very rashly on the spur of the moment. The two golden bulbs and the slits for eyes stare back at him, lively and human like, catching Jihoon off guard.

“-what are you doing?! I said go!”

Before he knows it someone had given him a strong push and he tumbles backwards. It was Woojin. The young man raises the stick of fire he has in his hands and starts running to the other way into the woods, and the jaguar’s eyes follow the brightness of the heat as it slowly treads towards Woojin’s direction.

Jihoon watches with stuttering breaths as the Wild Tooth follows after Woojin without hurry, as if it knows that it will get him even if it doesn’t run after him. And for some reason, Jihoon knows that if he doesn’t do something now, Woojin will be dead very soon.

A scream pierces through the night and shakes up Jihoon.

Where’s it coming from? The shrill sound alerts the slow moving jaguar. It turns from Woojin’s burning light stick to the direction of which Jihoon is standing.

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Jihoon’s body stiffens, his head turning along with it to the place where the yell was heard. Standing where Woojin had tell him to run to was Lee Hyejin, her mouth agape in fear and shock, with all the colour drained from her pale face.

“Run!” he hisses towards the woman frozen in place, taking off into the wind himself. The female
consort seems to want to react but her feet wouldn’t budge. Taking one more look at the helpless woman, Jihoon grabs onto her sleeve and drags her, half stumbling and half running, into the woods without looking back.

“Where’s the Second Prince?” Lai Guanlin would not have let a girl wander alone out of the woods! It’s too dangerous.

“He… he’s facing off another creature… near the river.” The female consort tries to catch her breath as she picks up her pace to catch up with Jihoon. “This is bad! How did you find the Wild Tooth? Don’t tell me you went to its cave at this time of the day?”

“It found me!” is all Jihoon could explain as they jump and dart through the densely packed trees. After a while, Jihoon halts in his steps and Hyejin has to tug at the trunk of a tree to stop herself from the momentum as she senses the abrupt stop from the person before her.

“What?” The impatience is clear in her voice.

“Woojin is fighting it right now,” Jihoon says in between breaths, swallowing drily as he puts a hand on his chest as if it could calm his thumping heart. The woman falls silent and they listen together. There’s a few brief and soft sounds of items slicing through the air, and Jihoon knows from having stuck with Woojin the whole day that those are the sounds of Woojin shooting his arrows in magnificent speed. A few animalistic grunts were heard and a deep, long, predator like purr. A drop of cold sweat trickles down the side of Jihoon’s cheek.

Suddenly, a startling and almost hysterical roar rings throughout the forest, alarming all the birds that had been resting on the trees. They flock from the branches and let out squeals of warning and fear. The screeching sounds travel down the back of his spine and he straightens up, his heart rate picking up immediately. Woojin has successfully angered the Wild Tooth, it seems.

“What should we do?” Lee Hyejin, at this moment, is surprisingly much calmer than Jihoon thought she would be. That was already great help to him. Perhaps it was because she was a famous general’s daughter that she could act controlled in this situation.

“Go get the Crown Prince for help-”

“No, we can’t,” her voice is firm and the sentence comes out like an order, though it is not particularly forceful. Jihoon eyes her carefully and finds her giving him an unyielding stare. “Just a few more steps ahead in this path is a running river. There, Guanlin is fighting an adult tiger. If we’re lucky, we may stumble upon his victory as we walk on. But if not…”

“We would probably drag him in his progress,” Jihoon finishes for Lee Hyejin. The woman nods, crossing her arms. The situation is even worse than it seems! This is why they should’ve headed to a royal campsite at the first place. Yet, Lai Guanlin and Park Woojin both insisted that it was better to stay here. The reasons they gave were strong enough to persuade Jihoon. He wanted nothing to do with the other nobles after all. It seemed the other royal campsites would only mean more eyes on them and especially the Second Prince, so they all agreed to try this place.

Yet, Jihoon never knew staying meant that they were going to be this close to the Wild Tooth’s location.

“Is there no other way?” Regardless of whether they trek forth or back, they’d still be distracting the men from their fights. They’re not capable enough to help, nor quick enough to act as bait. Just as Jihoon crouches and tries to devise a plan, Lee Hyejin starts walking again, but not towards the river. She’s heading back to the campsite.
“Consort Lee?” Jihoon frowns as the woman takes several more steps away from him into the place where the howling and grunting is coming from.

“You stay there until the Second Prince comes by and tell him about the situation at hand,” she declared. He watches as she reaches up to gather her long, flowing hair into her hands and secure it into a long ponytail. “And take whatever action you need to stop him from approaching the campsite. I will handle the jaguar before he comes.”

Lee Hyejin’s shadow quickly vanishes as she glides through the woods, her elegant footsteps disappearing along with it. Jihoon had dropped into a daze and now he shakes himself out of it when her voice stops ringing in his ears.

Jihoon has absolutely no clue of what the female consort is doing. But the more he thinks about it, the more he becomes worried. Consort Lee is not doing anyone a favour heading back. If the Wild Tooth spots her, the moment it pounces on her, her head can hardly be spared.

Jihoon can’t waste anymore time. He takes one long look at the back where Lee Hyejin had pointed to be the river, then takes off towards the campsite once again.

Panting, he scurries through the trees again, this time picking up a rock or two that he finds has enough weight and yet is light enough to throw with control. They hadn’t run too far earlier, so after a few more hurried steps, he finds himself at the clearing again.

But the scene before him renders him mute, and he almost drops the stones to the floor.

Park Woojin’s shoulder is an ugly patch of red, his wound gaping open and a horrible looking mix of torn flesh. He grabs onto his wounded shoulder, chest heaving up and down from the ordeal of fighting the monster, as he crawls away from the battle scene.

Yes, the battle scene. Woojin is not the one engaging in the fight with the Wild Tooth. Lee Hyejin is.

The woman’s back faces Jihoon, her slender figure full of grace and power as she moves. Within her hand is a black sword, and she almost dances with the wind while she slashes towards the roaring jaguar that looms over her, not once showing any weakness in her movements. Her ponytail flies in the air, her pale skin of her arms that show because of her rolled up sleeves glistening under the moonlight. At one moment, the Wild Tooth leaps up and Jihoon stops breathing for fear that it would crush Lee Hyejin, but the woman is quick as well, dodging to the side with her agile body, and raising the sword once again to plunge it within the ball of black fur.

Jihoon can see the mastery, the rumoured beauty of the neat and clean Lee family sword style, embodied right in front of him. Every move, every attack, it is as if she is screaming to the small audience before her: I am none other than General Lee’s eldest daughter!

He lets out a shaky breath. This must be the power of the Lee family. To say he is impressed doesn’t do her enough justice. He is absolutely stunned and deeply in awe.

But there is no time to stand there and appreciate the fight. He can witness the maximum power the female puts in every single slash and swerve, and it is incredibly draining. He can see her falter for a few times and slowly, there’s a hint of weariness on her face. The Wild Tooth, on the other hand, looks like it’s playing with a toy, casually dodging her sword and lazily attacking her with its enormous paws occasionally.

It’s no good. The Wild Toothed Jaguar is very clearly having the upper hand and controlling the
fight.

“Park Jihoon.”

Jihoon nearly jumps when he hears someone from behind call out his name. The voice is familiar, and he sees it is none other than the Second Prince. He draws in a quick breath when he sees that the Second Prince is about to step into the clearing along with him, and he quickly tiptoes to put a hand over his eyes.

The Second Prince freezes in his movements, unable to proceed further. Of course he couldn’t, the Crown Prince Consort is shielding his vision!

It’s too late, however, and when the Second Prince Consort ducks from another attack, she faces the direction of Park Jihoon and the Second Prince. Her faces twists into one of conflicted emotion when she sees the Second Prince is present and Jihoon opens his mouth to warn her but the jaguar has already made its move. It knocks the female over and lightly tips the sword out of her hands. The weapon flies and plunges straight into the floor in front of Park Woojin, who looks petrified at how close to him the blade has landed.

“Please, do me a favour and don’t look,” Jihoon urges the Second Prince, holding the Prince’s hand and making it replace the hand that was on his eyes. Seeing that the Second Prince has indeed done as he was told, Jihoon runs in his top speed towards the Wild Tooth, which stretches its jaws and opens its mouth to reveal the terrifying double rows of teeth. Not just the four fangs, but every single tooth is sharp and threatening; dangling on the teeth are red, fleshy remains from either his last meal or Woojin’s shoulder.

Inhaling deeply, Jihoon gathers all his might and throws the two rocks towards the Wild Tooth. Then he starts climbing up the nearest tree, and this he does by using his knife to pierce into the wood, giving him a little handle up to climb onto the trunk. He’s quick to crawl trees because his body is small and flexible, and he’s been accustomed to doing so back when he was smaller in the village just so he could catch a glimpse of the streets during big events. In those times, the streets were narrow but crowded, so him being a smaller boy was never able to look at which noble or royal family member was passing by. But Jinyoung introduced this method to him and ever since then he’d climb up the tree in his backyard whenever parades or such were held in the streets.

Jihoon looks back down at the jaguar. The stones had hit it alright, but strangely enough, those heavy stones looked like they were light pellets deflecting off an iron shell. The jaguar didn’t look the least hurt, but he starts paying attention to the direction where the stones were hauled from.

Jihoon secures the arrows he had taken from earlier during the fight between Lee Hyejin and the Wild Tooth. The bow dangles from his back as he swings up another branch, and then higher. He’s never climbed trees of this height, as the trees back at the village did not have the nourishment of that of a royal forest. Every step he climbs he finds it harder to look down. After all, it’s a humongous tree in the wild.

As he climbs up he notices that the jaguar seems to have lost its patience. It starts to pick up its pace and his movements lack the slack from earlier. With one leap, the jaguar lands at the bottom of the tree, and its golden eyes flick up towards Jihoon. Frankly speaking, just one look from the jaguar and Jihoon already feels faint. Of course, what’s making him feel faint is not the predatory look of the jaguar or its salivating jaws, but also the distance between him and the ground.

This should be enough. Jihoon slowly lowers himself on a branch and sits on it when he finds that the branch is sturdy enough. His heart thumps crazily against his chest as he picks up his bow and draws an arrow from his sack. His hands are shaking and he can hear a low growl from the jaguar.
from below. Obviously because of his trembling hands, he finds it extremely hard to secure the arrow on his bow.

Thankfully, with a few more tries, he successfully does it. But he has no time to rejoice as the tree suddenly starts to shake! Jihoon almost drops the bow as he grabs onto the tree trunk to steady himself, but thank the lords, he had clumsily tangled the bow with a stray string of his sleeve. He immediately reins back the falling bow and looks down again. The jaguar had flexibly hopped onto one of the low hanging branches, two of its paws holding onto it as if it were a human.

Then swiftly, it swings again, quickly and quietly, onto the second branch, nearing the distance between him and Jihoon.

It’s hard to say that he underestimated the tiger, since he did indeed expect the worse outcome to be for it to climb the tree after Jihoon. But Jihoon didn’t expect the jaguar to be this persistent and agile with its big feet. If it continues like this, Jihoon is in great danger.

Taking in steady breaths to ease his racing heart, Jihoon draws the arrow on the bow, pulling it till it reaches his lips, just as Lai Guanlin had taught him. The jaguar has its huge paws on the trunk, its huge feet struggling to balance on the thickest branch as it stares up at Jihoon with unblinking eyes.

When Jihoon aims for the point right in the middle of the beast’s eyes, it lets out a little mew. A gentle mew. And another one. And thrice.

Jihoon freezes in his actions, a feeling of bitterness surging in his throat. He readjusts himself and tries to let go of the arrow when he finds himself aiming right.

The jaguar purrs again.

This last sound ultimately cracks Jihoon’s calm exterior. Jihoon finds that he can’t bring himself to shoot, not anymore. He looks into the yellow, golden orbs of the jaguar’s, his own pupils wavering as he finds himself drawn closer and closer into the glowing eyes.

“Jihoon, watch out!”

It’s the Second Prince’s voice. Before Jihoon has any chance to react, he finds out the branch he’s sitting on is slowly losing support, and with a ‘crack’, he finds himself tumbling from above through the layers of leaves, and right onto the unblinking jaguar.

Jihoon closes his eyes and braces for the moment he hits the ground and for his bones to crack. He braces for the other option as well, for the jaguar to open his mouth and catch him with his two rows of sharp teeth, and chew him up with his fangs. He shuts his eyes, and waits.

When the moment doesn’t come, he slowly opens his eyes to look. The scene before him makes him sharply draw a breath.

The jaguar is right in front of him.

A low pitched scream tries to wrestle itself out of his throat but he suppresses it down quickly, pressing back into the tree and looking around to see what had caught him. No, nothing had caught him. He looks up and realizes that a few arrows are shot through his clothes and pinning him right onto the middle of the tree trunk, and below him he has nothing else, no branches or whatsoever, to support his feet. He is dangling mid air with the help of arrows like nails pinning out areas on a battle map. The Second Prince, with that miraculous archery skills of his, must’ve saved him by
shooting those arrows to hold him up.

He can feel himself slipping, however, and knows that the clothes cannot hold him there for long. The collar of his shirt is suffocating as well, having to hold his entire weight like that. On his right is the jaguar, stuffing its head into his area, and taking a big whiff out of him. Jihoon can smell the blood from its jaws and he resists the urge to gag.

“Wild Tooth, look here!” Jihoon can hear Woojin shout, and he looks down to see him holding a fire stick once again, waving it around. The Second Prince and Lee Hyejin are there too, and the prince’s eyes are full of blazing emotion; Jihoon can witness in those black pits a flash of anger and desperation.

The jaguar turns towards the fire source and Jihoon is about to let out a sigh of relief when it growls. Jihoon tenses and realizes that the jaguar may have expressed its discontent towards the taunting light stick, but it doesn’t seem to have any intent on leaving.

Much to Jihoon’s horror, it turns back to him and takes another step towards him. The branch is narrow and thin, but it walks on it with perfect balance, as if it is just flat ground.

Powerful. There’s no way to describe this Wild Tooth but to say it’s very powerful, and it renders all people facing it helpless.

“Jihoon,” he hears someone from below roar up to him. “Remove the arrows holding you one by one! Slowly! I will catch you.”

The Second Prince’s voice provides him with steady waves of comfort, and Jihoon knows that if he promises that he will catch him, then he will. But the real question is whether the jaguar would make a move when he moves. All this time he’s been acting like he’s dead, not budging from the area where the arrows had pinned him.

But now he sees no choice. The jaguar may have been stalling all this time, but there is no missing the amount of bloodlust it holds within those two golden catlike eyes. If Jihoon doesn’t fall, then it will eat him, right then and there.

Jihoon, swallowing drily, removes the arrows one by one. First, the one on its right, holding his sleeve. He frees up his one arm but he slides down a notch immediately, and his heart jumps as he dangles unsteadily on the tree. Then he removes the arrow attaching his other sleeve, and this time, his entire body is hanging free. The last two hold up his collar, so he can barely breathe when he reaches up, and this was a mistake on his part. He should’ve removed them earlier. But before he faints, he grabs hold of the two arrows and pulls, and the jaguar moves at the same moment.

It pounces at Jihoon, who immediately loses any support of the tree and slides down painfully off the trunk. A tuft of black fills his vision and Jihoon, knowing he won’t survive this if the jaguar gets his jaws on him, takes the arrow he had just pulled from himself and sticks it in between the gaping jaws of the jaguar that is about to devour him.

A blood curdling shriek, one that sounds like it’s coming from a human adult, hits the night air and shocks everyone present.

Jihoon finds that he finally stops falling. He opens his eyes and finds that his vision blurry. Blinking a few times, he realizes it’s because there’s moisture in his eyes, probably tears from squeezing his eyes too tight, and also the fear that sprung up the very last moment where he thought he was about to die.
Something, no, someone had caught him. Jihoon wipes the wateryness from his eyes and glances up to see the warm, familiar face of concern. Between the person’s thick, defined brows is a little crease produced by worry, and he meets again the pitch black eyes he’s seen countless of times.

“Park Jihoon?” the man who had caught him calls out. Jihoon curls into that warmth, his head feeling instantly heavier. A strong sense of security envelopes him and he doesn’t reply, just choosing to close his eyes once again.

Chapter End Notes

Hyejin is one of my faves
Jihoon opens his eyes and finds himself lying on a soft mattress. His limbs feel stiff and he shifts on the bed into a more comfortable position. While he moves, something catches the corner of his eye and he freezes.

A figure sits on a chair next to him in a slumping position. His dark robes are in a messy condition, with bits and pieces of grass and thorns stuck on his sleeves and the fabric near his legs. Jihoon’s eyes trail up the robe and finds himself looking straight at the handsome face of a young man he’s known for a while. The man leans into his palm with his elbow supported by the arm of the chair. His long lashes drape downwards and his brows are deeply knitted, as if something is troubling him even during his sleep.

Jihoon props himself up on one arm and with the other he reaches out without thinking to touch the man’s forehead, gently trying to soothe out the crease between his eyebrows. The skin is hot, almost feverish against his cold fingers. The difference in temperature sends a shiver down his spine and he instantly comes to his senses, realizing what he’s doing. He quickly retracts his hand in a small fit of panic. While he wonders why he made that move in the first place, he fails to notice the slight movement of the person beside him.

A hand lays over his shoulder and carefully presses him back down onto the mattress, treating him so tenderly as if he is a fragile object. Jihoon blinks and doesn’t fight back, turning to his right to look at the person who had made him lie down on the bed again.

“Sleep,” is the only thing Lai Guanlin says as he leans back into his chair. He looks tired, his youthful looks weighed down by an unidentifiable burden.

“What time is it?” Jihoon murmurs, resisting the urge to ask what is bothering the other male. “Your Highness?”

The Second Prince doesn’t seem to be in a mood to correct him. If this were a normal day perhaps he’d insist for Jihoon to call him by his name. But this just isn’t the time.

“It’s too early,” he replies simply, and Jihoon can hear that his voice is a few octaves lower because he had just woken up. It’s quite attractive...

Jihoon eyes his chair and his uncomfortable position. He doesn’t know why the Prince is sitting here instead of laying on a comfortable bed that has probably been arranged for him in one of the royal tents.

Then he suddenly recalls the incident and he sits up, eyes widening. He must have fainted and the Second Prince must have escorted him back.

“How’s Woojin?” he asks. He’d seen his shoulder injury and it looked pretty serious.

Jihoon doesn’t know if it’s his imagination but he sees a flash of irritation in the Second Prince’s eyes. The male quickly reverts to his composed self and Jihoon thinks that it must be because of the lack of rest that he’s starting to see things.

“He’s resting in another tent. Don’t worry, the doctors say he’s fine.”
Jihoon wonders if he’s imagining the bitterness in Lai Guanlin’s voice as well. Maybe he’s just annoyed because Jihoon woke him up from his sleep. Jihoon feels slightly apologetic at this point.

“You should sleep properly. Uh, on a proper bed,” he speaks hesitantly. A strange thought just popped into his head and he starts thinking that the Second Prince may be sitting here because he’s watching over him. He shakes it off quickly. “It’s not… good for your back and your neck to be sleeping on a chair. I mean, that’s not a good posture to be sleeping in…”

The Second Prince eyes him back thoughtfully and Jihoon swallows. His thoughts were muddled and before he knew it, the words were already tumbling out of his mouth clumsily. To his dismay, the Prince cracks a smile, and Jihoon thinks he may as well laugh out loud at his awkwardness.

“You think I should lie on a bed?”

“Yes?”

“But there’s only one bed in this tent,” The Second Prince innocently cocks his head as if he is a student waiting for the teacher to answer his queries. “Are you proposing that we share?”

Jihoon freezes and a gush of heat rushes up to his face when he realizes what Lai Guanlin was so amused about. A wave of embarrassment washes over him and he glares up at Lai Guanlin, now feeling fully awake.

“It’s not like you have to sleep here,” Jihoon struggles to keep calm, though he keeps his fiery eyes on the other’s.

“No, but I do feel the need to look after you.”

If Jihoon’s face wasn’t red enough, it sure is now. He flushes deeply, lips opening and closing as he hesitates to answer. How is he supposed to respond to that, anyway?

“I don’t need you to…” he trails off halfway because he instantly regrets his choice of words, feeling that he’d just been extremely disrespectful and ungrateful to someone who willingly sat next to him to watch over him late into the night. And when he puts it that way in his head, his face heats up even more. He shoves his face into his hands, unwilling to look at Lai Guanlin’s face. He can already picture that playful smirk and the amusement dancing in his eyes. “Sorry. I meant, thank you.”

“I can’t hear you with your voice muffled like that,” the man beside him has already leaned in close, trying to look at Jihoon’s face through the gaps of his fingers just to spite him.

“I said, thank-” Jihoon throws his hands down in frustration and turns to face the prince but halts in the midst of his sentence, tensing up almost immediately as he realizes how close their faces are to each other. Lai Guanlin visibly stiffens as well, his eyes widening slightly.

They are at a proximity where Jihoon can feel the prince’s breath over the bridge of his nose, just slightly. His eyes trail from the clear forehead to the dark yet seemingly translucent lashes, to the glowing brown of his irises, down the refined and almost effeminate nose, and finally to his lips. They are slightly chapped—a result of the dry environment up the hill—his mouth opened and lips parting to reveal a little of the neat, pearl white teeth.

Reluctantly, he tears his eyes away from the boy’s lips, only to find that the other is staring at his own, long lashes draping over those flickering orbs. Jihoon swallows, his heart beat picking up and strumming against his chest like the strings of a guzheng when he plays a fast piece. As the Prince leans in closer, Jihoon finds himself inevitably inhaling the refreshing scent of the forest and the
manly scent of sweat mixed with… blood? He realizes that the Second Prince’s dark robe has stains of brownish red and he recognizes them as small blood patches, probably from when he carried Jihoon back…

The Prince had really done as he had promised, catching him as he fell and not letting him suffer from any further injuries. A familiar sense of security washes over him and Jihoon relaxes his shoulders, letting his guard down.

His line of thoughts is cut off the moment the Second Prince closes the distance between them, the tip of their noses touching and breaths colliding, lashes almost touching. Jihoon could feel the trembling puffs of air fanning over his own lips, and his mind goes completely blank. Cocking his head up a little, he lets his lips ghost over the other’s, unsure of whether he should go any further. His urge to simply press his lips against the other’s nearly overpowers his rationality, but then he gazes into the other’s eyes and stops.

There’s a swirl of intense emotion that he cannot describe, and it looks like the prince is battling some sort of inner conflict while he traces the lines of Jihoon’s lips.

Jihoon’s eyes dim and he takes that as a hint to pull back, inhaling deeply to calm his racing heart. The prince freezes in place the moment Jihoon shrinks away from him. Unable to face the prince properly, Jihoon tells him in a voice that cracks midway,

“We’re both tired, your Highness. Perhaps you should go back and rest.”

At the corner of his eye, he can see the Prince slowly straighten up, retreating to the position he’d been before any of that happened.

The Second Prince opens his mouth but before he can say anything, Jihoon speaks up, “I’ll be fine here on my own.”

The Prince gives no response and Jihoon can feel the eyes of the other burning into him. Just as he thought the prince was going to retort or give him a witty reply, he rises from the chair and heads to the exit of the tent.

“I’ll call a doctor over and tell them to check up on you.”

The prince pushes the flap of the tent and a gust of cold air hits him. Jihoon shivers, but he doesn’t know if it’s due to the wind or the iciness of the boy’s tone as he drops his goodbyes and leaves.

He is left there to ponder on what exactly had come over him and he sits there in a daze, the places where Guanlin’s breaths had touched feeling numb and tingly, his lips especially.

A doctor comes as the Second Prince had promised, and he settles down on the chair next to Jihoon, asking for him to extend his wrist so he could feel his pulse. Two fingers rest on his vein and the doctor frowns, pressing downwards repeatedly. The action reminds him of when the Second Prince had done this for him once. A rush of heat goes to his head again and he fights to force his blush down.

“Consort Park, your heart is beating abnormally fast. Perhaps you are still in shock of what had happened to you.” The doctor pulls down Jihoon’s sleeve and Jihoon retracts his hand, knowing that his heart activity was not affected by the fear or shock of his encounter with the Wild Tooth, but because of someone he finds far more dangerous. “I suggest that you rest up and have some of the calming medicine we handpicked for you. Your servants will bring it in once dawn breaks. For now, you should catch on with some sleep.”
And so he does. Jihoon once again falls into deep slumber, though his thoughts are particularly restless even when he drifts into unconsciousness.

He finds himself waking up in an all black environment. Not waking up, precisely, because he is in a dream. And this dream is unlike any other, because he is aware that this is a dream.

In the midst of searching through the darkness he is met with pair of piercing golden eyes that are all too familiar. They belong to the jaguar’s. Bright and blazing, like shards of the sun. Only in this dream is he able to stare at it without being terrified. Without the blinding fear affecting his thoughts, he peers at the being closely. It’s a beautiful creature, he realizes, despite the strange features it possesses. It opens its jaws and Jihoon here fails to sense any sort of fear, reaching out to stroke its head like he would to a cat.

The creature leans into his touch and Jihoon is startled at its obedience. The fur feels soft against his skin and the golden eyes flicker up to look at him, disturbingly human like.

The eyes draw him back to to when he had fallen and committed his act of bravery, sticking the arrow in between the creatures’ jaws.

A numb pain suddenly strikes in the midst of Jihoon’s upper and lower jaws, as if a sharp object had pieced right through it and yanked it open with force. He flinches at the pain, his hand flying to his mouth as he stares wide eyed at the tiger.

“That hurt, didn’t it?”

A deep, gruff voice resonates through the dark space and Jihoon flinches again. He turns to check if anyone is around him but fails to see so much as a figure. Then he stiffly returns his gaze to the jaguar and realizes that as strange as it seems, it may be the jaguar talking to him.

“Then it might please you to know that it hurt ten times more when you actually stuck that through my mouth, you bastard.”

Anger seethes from the voice and Jihoon takes a step back as soon as he senses the hostility, holding up a hand as if it could do anything to tame the wild jaguar.

“I’m sorry,” stutters Jihoon, his body turning cold. “You were about to kill me.”

“I was not. In fact, if you stayed properly in place after you saw me, things would’ve gone better for you and your friends. We could have had a proper chat- well, at least have interacted in a peaceful manner but you were a dumbass and had to run away and things turned out as it did because of your stupid decision to run.”

Jihoon narrows his eyes in confusion. “It was pure survival instinct.” He doesn’t know why he has to justify his actions to a jaguar.

The voice lets out what seems like a scoff. “Mortal instincts, huh.”

There’s a pause before the jaguar lowers himself down to the floor and curls up in a resting position. “Take a seat, young lad. My time to communicate with you is limited and I want to get this over with.”

It did occur to Jihoon that this is not just any kind of dream, as he is alert and aware of his state of mind. It’s some kind of telepathic mode of communication, he assumes; either that, or he’s had a long day and his mind is messed up from the trauma from the Wild Jaguar encounter.
Jihoon does as he is told; after all, he hasn’t figured out a way to wake himself up. Also, sleep is what his body needs for now. There’s no use disturbing himself from the rest he needs.

“Who might you be?” he asks the most straightforward question that had popped up almost immediately in his mind.

“That’s not important for now. Can you help me with one thing?”

“If it’s within my abilities.” Jihoon is not against doing favours, as long as it is not much of a hassle. Though the fact that he’s offering help through a dream and to the Wild Tooth nonetheless is kind of ridiculous.

“Let me out of the cage.”

“I cannot do that.” Jihoon doesn’t even hesitate in his answer.

“Why not?”

Jihoon can see the jaguar’s eyes narrow into slits and a shiver runs down his spine, but he continues while he breaks into a cold sweat. “Firstly, I... cannot do it for a very selfish reason: that I want to win the game and that there is a request I must make to the Emperor through winning this challenge. There are no better opportunities for me to ask for His Majesty to grant my wish and there are no other occasions will he accept my request either.”

The jaguar lets out a low purr, displeased and predacious, its yellow eyes like the sharp end of a knife glowing in the dark. Jihoon drops his eyes low and he continues.

“The second reason is that even if I request it, the Emperor will most likely not allow it. I reckon he intends to make full use of every part of you… and rid the White Forest of one of its biggest threats.”

“Nonsense,” the jaguar had lifted his head without Jihoon realizing and Jihoon’s breathing stops the moment he realizes how close the gaping jaws of the monstrous being is to his face, four rows of white teeth peering upon him in a threatening manner. “The second reason is absolute nonsense. It’s the first one that matters.”

Truly, Jihoon does not wish to let go of his only chance to pressurize the Emperor into granting a this wish of his. If he requested to let go of his prey and his key card to winning the challenge, the Emperor most likely would allow it. His Majesty would perhaps even admire his love for animals if that’s a reason he uses to beg for the jaguar’s release.

Jihoon swallows and lowers his eyes even more, gripping down on his robe. It’s the first time he’s ever been selfish, he realizes, but it seems that the world doesn’t allow his selfishness even once.

The beast finally backs down and curls back into his original position, looking more drained than angry. “I never kill any of those that come across me in the White Forest, if that helps with your mortal conscience.”

“I’ve attacked humans three times, not including the recent ones where we met. And all of those were for self defense.” The jaguar tilts its head so that his scars are right in Jihoon’s line of sight. “This I got from the most serious fight I’ve been in ever since I changed into this form, and the whole time I was trying to let him leave without leaving a scratch on him. But then I realized there are some people who just wouldn’t let you have a moment of peace until you give them something concrete to scare them.”
“So I tore off his sword bearing arms to strip him of his ability to fight. He ran home of course, and

The jaguar doesn’t seem to have done anything to Jihoon but he has lost the will to speak. The
immense pressure the jaguar exerts simply with his eyes has forced the breath out of Jihoon’s
lungs.

“I never actually hurt anyone unless I have to.”

“How about Woojin?” Jihoon finally gathers his breath to retort. “You bit his shoulder.”

“If you’re talking about your friend, what I did was merely out of self defense.” The jaguar growls,
as if he is reluctant to admit it. “I never meant to hurt any of you; you would’ve noticed if you paid
attention. I only came to you lot because I sniffed something familiar. That boy is a fierce warrior,
I’ve never met anyone who were able to keep up with my attacks.” A corner of its mouth twitches.
“He fights like he’s killed before, even though he looks so young.”

It’s true that out of the entire group, only Woojin got hurt. And he got injured very badly, it
 seemed.

“So are you going to let me out?”

The jaguar sounds impatient, its head shifting an inch closer towards Jihoon.

Jihoon bites on his lower lip, chewing gently on a dry piece of skin.

“This is not the time to be selfish, kid. There are more important reasons to let me out than you
think, but I don’t have the time.”

“Okay.”

Before he knows it, he’s agreed to it. Yet again, he’s left with no good reason to choose to be
selfish.

“Okay, okay. I’ll do it, I’ll do it alright.” Jihoon feels frustrated. With himself, his bad luck, and
his lack of strength to persevere when it comes to something he wants. He’d always feel guilty
wanting something for himself so he would hardly ever, in any occasion, choose his own selfish
desire over something else.

Hearing his response, the expression softens on the jaguar’s face, the tension slipping from the
muscles beneath the ghastly scars.

“Thank you. It is much appreciated.”

Jihoon sighs and gets up. “Take me back.”

“I owe you one. I promise you I’ll return this favour in the future, if you would just remember my
name.”

“What is it?” Although he couldn’t care less. He knows this all could possibly be just a fragment of
his imagination.

“Kang Dongho.”

The name rings a bell, but before Jihoon could think more about it, he finds himself falling into a
deep slumber.
The next day, he wakes up to the sound of a gong. Groggily, he sits up and climbs out of the bed, still in his under robes. Just in time, two females stroll into the tent and immediately squeal in delight when they find their master awake.

“We haven’t seen you for so long, Master!” exclaims Jia as she prances towards him with teary eyes. “When we heard you had encountered the Wild Tooth we thought you were going to be dead for sure!”

“Nonsense, Jia! Don’t be disrespectful.” Fei comes in with a barely concealed smile, reprimanding her workmate with a light tone. “I can’t believe you said something so ominous after seeing master the first time in two days.”

“Oh, my apologies,” says Jia, an embarrassed grin hanging off her lips. “Anyway, Jinyoung was worried sick when he knew that you were trying to ambush the Wild Tooth near its cave. I’ll call on him for you.” She slips out of the tent immediately.

Jihoon’s peaceful expression melts off in the matter of seconds. “Wait, I didn’t know we were camping near the Wild Tooth’s home.”

It would explain why he ran into the Wild Tooth that night if they were staying so close to the beast’s cave. The animal must have been lured in by their smells, especially the moment Jihoon took off his armour.

“I thought your group went there knowing it was near the Wild Tooth.” Fei holds up Jihoon’s arms and slips on the sleeves of the outer robes for him. “Congratulations, by the way! On capturing that beast.”

Jihoon shoots her a small smile but it disappears when she focuses to fix the waistband on him. He can’t help but find it suspicious that they had chosen somewhere so dangerous to camp overnight. He had little knowledge of the different parts of the White Forest because it’s his first time coming here. The Second Prince and Lee Hyejin had probably participated in the event for a few years already, but whether they knew of the Wild Tooth’s habitat was not clear. The same goes for Woojin. Although it’s his first time attending such an event, Daehwi had made it clear that Woojin was familiar with the geographical setting, not to mention he seemed to be a huge fan of wild beasts like the Wild Toothed Jaguar.

Technically, any of them could have led the group there with knowledge of the risk. Any of them could have stopped them from venturing further, but no one did so. Ultimately, the greatest suspicion lies on Woojin and the Second Prince, as they had taken the lead in finding a suitable campsite for the group.

Fei guides him in front of the mirror and sits him down on a stool so she can start doing his hair. She catches a glimpse of his stiffening expression and presses her cool fingers against his temple, exerting just the right amount of pressure to ease up the tension in his head.

“You must be nervous for the award ceremony, Master. Fear not, I heard the Emperor will speed up the ceremony so that we can head back as soon as possible.”

Fei had clearly mistaken the ceremony to be the cause of Jihoon’s stress but he has no intention to correct her. Also, it’s good news that they are leaving soon. He would like to get back to the palace as soon as possible after the thrilling encounter with the jaguar, anyway.

Speaking of the jaguar, the memory of the dream comes back to him and in a split second, he wonders if whoever had known about the jaguar’s cave also knew that the jaguar poses little
danger unless you attack.

His brows knit deeper as he tries to pull himself out of his mixed thoughts. He is just growing so badly, helplessly, **paranoid** as time goes. Ever since he got poisoned, everything and everyone seems dubious to him. He’d be lying if he said it wasn’t tiring to think that way.

Maybe he’s just unlucky. It’s not like anyone would have the time and motive to so meticulously lay a trap for him or something.

“I know that look on your face, Jihoon. You’re probably overthinking again.”

As if on cue, a familiar voice breaks into his thoughts and Jihoon’s eyes slant toward the side to have a good look at the boy that had just entered the tent.

“Jinyoung,” he greets quietly. His voice lacks the enthusiasm but his face visibly brightens at the sight of his childhood friend.

“I don’t know what you had in mind, attacking the Wild Tooth at that time of the day and willingly taking up such a big risk…” Jinyoung starts his full on lecture as he steps closer towards Jihoon, his freshly shaven face heightening his youthful beauty and making him appear even younger than he is. Jihoon has to suppress the urge to laugh as he can’t seem to take Jinyoung seriously, with that frown settling over his boyishly adorable features.

“Hey!” Jinyoung flicks his fingers at Jihoon’s forehead, which causes the other to flinch and wince. “You just zoned out on me and you didn’t even hear a word I said, didn’t you?” He crosses his arms with a huff, and even Fei couldn’t help but let out a gentle laugh.

“To sum it up, Jinyoung’s worried and you should stop throwing yourself into dangerous situations,” Jia helpfully offers as she attaches a small gemstone earring to Jihoon’s earlobe. She had entered in the middle of Jinyoung’s lengthy scoldings. “We’re worried too, so it’s best if you listen.”

“I will,” Jihoon chuckles, relaxing his shoulders.

“You better mean that,” Jinyoung raises a brow and pulls him from his chair the moment Fei and Jia have finished with their dressing up work. “Let’s go. It’s starting.”

A simple awards ceremony it may seem, but it is an event that has many nobles holding their breaths in competitive spirit. They hold the pride of the family name on their shoulders as they anticipate to be announced as at least the top ten achievers of the Spring Hunt.

The participant count is massive this year, with nearly a hundred and forty nobles taking part in the Spring Hunt.

Yet with this amount of people, news still passes around quickly. The fact that Park Jihoon, the Crown Prince’s consort, had single handedly taken down the Wild Tooth has already been spread among the crowd.

Jihoon had thought that he’s gotten used to the stares but the looks he’s been getting only seem to get more and more intense, nearly making it hard for him to breathe. Many just glare down at him condescendingly the moment they see him but there is a significant proportion whose eyes are filled with admiration and respect when they see him walking past them in the aisle.

Jihoon takes his seat in front of the masses, with the Second Prince and his consort settling right next to him. He takes care not to stare at the Prince at all but his heart still thumps rapidly against
his chest at the memory of their interaction the night before.

He shifts a little and his arm touches the Second Prince’s, causing him to flinch immediately. He can catch the Second Prince staring at him at the corner of his eye, but he musters all the self restraint he has to not turn to him.

When everyone stands, Jihoon follows suit.

The Emperor enters, looking like he had aged ten years since the last time he saw him. It must be the stress from having to put up with the current political and social issues, along with his son’s sudden disappearance.

The Empress, on the other hand, looks beautiful and magnificent as always, a glowing smile lighting up her face as she lays a hand over the Emperor’s arm to guide him up to the seat that faces the audience. Jihoon only catches a slight glimpse of her weariness when she sits down and holds a hand to rub against her temple.

“I hope all of you have had your share of fun in the past few days,” the Emperor’s voice booms after the people take their seats again. “The Spring Hunt has always served as a good opportunity for the young ones to develop their potential in various skills. It’s been particularly competitive this year, much thanks to the capable heads of families that have trained your children well for this event.”

“We’ve reached a new record for the amount of animals caught this year, and even the scores have reached a new high. Give yourself some applause for the amount of effort poured into this contest. Even I was surprised, and the Four Grand Generals too, very pleasantly so.”

In the midst of the applause, Jihoon notices that a soldier has passed on a message to the Head Eunuch, who reacts with a frown to the news. With hurried footsteps, the Head Eunuch heads to the Emperor’s side and whispers a few words to him.

“Let’s get to the rankings quickly,” the Emperor wastes no time and snaps his fingers. Two soldiers carry out a stand with a huge scroll attached to it. Jihoon can hear people shuffling in excitement behind him.

The soldier unfolds the scroll and the bottom of it rolls down till it touches the floor. Jihoon swallows as his eyes scan the paper before him for his name.

And then he sees it.

The soldier reads out the scores for the top five groups first. Unsurprisingly, the Second Prince’s group had reached the top five despite it being a two person group. He had scored eighty points on his own, coming in third for the group contest. The second group is composed of people Jihoon has never heard of, but their scores were absolutely amazing for a three person group. It pulled a big gap between them and Lai Guanlin’s group, with them scoring a total of a hundred and twenty four.

But the most eye catching achievements belonged to the first’s, and standing in that place is none other than Jihoon’s group. They had scored an incredible two hundred and two, breaking last year’s record of a hundred and seventy points.

Jihoon turns to search the crowd for Daehwi and the others, and he finds them easily; Woojin is pounding his fist into the air as Jaehwan grabs onto his arm with a scowl, with Daehwi on the other side trying to calm Woojin down but holding a victorious grin of his own.

Jinyoung is standing on the side along with the other servants, but he looks content in his place and
his eyes curve pleasantly with the announcement of their victory.

Jihoon licks his lips, wanting to feel happy but he simply is unable to.

Why? Because he has several things to worry about.

Like whether he should take his dream seriously and request for the Emperor to release the Wild Tooth, even if it means taking points for his capture off the total mark. He doubts this would be a good choice for his friends because-

“This is a score never seen before,” the Emperor praises, his eyes landing on Park Jihoon. Jihoon tries not to flinch as he bows his head to avoid the Emperor’s gaze. “Let’s take this chance to give Consort Park the recognition he deserves, as he had been the courageous one to take on the once impossible challenge of defeating the Wild Tooth, a legendary beast that has haunted the White Forest for ages! Taking into account the bravery and the scale of the achievement, we have awarded a hundred points to this young fella to encourage him in his future pursuits.”

-it would mean taking off a large number of points for his group. A hundred points off and their group’s rankings would fall below the group that had come second. He’d been ready to sacrifice his own victory but whether the group was ready for it was another story. And there was no time for him to discuss with the others before he made such a decision.

It was a decision he had to make on the spot and though it may not have been the hardest decision he’d ever made, it felt like quite a struggle to stand up midway.

“Your Majesty,” Jihoon holds his hands together and dips his head low. “I would like you to listen to my perhaps unreasonable request.”

Whispers run through the crowd immediately as they try to predict Jihoon’s intentions, half of them sneering because they thought he was arrogant to make a wish before individual rankings have been announced. True enough, it was likely that Jihoon had won the event, considering the hundred marks bonus, but it was poor behaviour to request anything without having that belief confirmed.

The Emperor raises a brow. “We have not yet advanced to that stage yet, Consort Park.”

“I am not making this request as a winner of the Spring Hunt, but as a participant,” he says, voice thick and solemn. “I would like to request for the Wild Tooth to be released back into the wild.”

The crowd’s whispers come to a stop and awe fills the air. He can feel their stares prickle at the back of his neck, and he lets out a calm exhale to steady himself.

“I am ready to have my marks — that I had obtained by capturing the jaguar — removed, but I sincerely hope your Majesty would agree to my request.”

“Why, my dear?” the silky voice of the Empress drifts into his ears. It would seem that the Emperor has passed on the task of dealing with this situation to the Empress. “Your group rankings will fall beneath the second, and your individual rankings will drop severely.”

“I’ve heard that the Wild Tooth has never attacked anyone before unless it is for self defense. He mostly hangs around his habitat and rarely walks away from his area… it just happened that we stumbled across a field near its home.”

Jihoon takes a deep breath. He really hates every part of this story, though it’s he who made it up so there’s only himself to blame. It makes him look like a maiden who is purely driven by
feelings… which he claims he’s not, mind you.

“The Wild Tooth approached me without warning but unlike other beasts, it didn’t radiate bloodlust,”

—it did, and very much so—

“I was shocked and we immediately put up defense even though it didn’t attack. Only when I fought with it up close did I realize that… in its eyes, I saw emotion- raw humanlike emotion,”

—I felt pure intimidation coursing through my veins—

“intense and gripping, and I realized… that it didn’t want me killed, and I don’t want it killed, either.”

He made it sound more dramatic than he had intended it to be, but it’ll do. He hopes it’ll do. Well, it will have to do.

“Oh,” the Empress’ eyes soften and she places a hand over her heart, her red and golden nails glimmering as they reflect the sunlight. “Aren’t you precious, child?”

The Emperor looked more amused than moved by the story, which Jihoon can’t help but empathize; after all, what kind of trash of a reason is that to throw away a hundred points? They’re hunters in this event, not animal activists. It mattered little though, because the person he is trying to move is the Empress. Women tend to be more emotional beings, after all.

“What do you think then, Empress Song?”

The decision making power lies on the Empress, now that the Emperor shows specifically his wish to have her opinions heard. Jihoon subconsciously holds onto the fabric of his robe, hoping that it means he has secured the freedom of the Wild Tooth.

“That’s a very touching story, and I can tell by what you said that you are a very kind, loving young man.” Empress Song’s red lips stretch on her face but the way she smiles makes Jihoon tighten his grip on the sides of his robe. “But I’m afraid that undermines the rules of this important annual event. And it would be a shame, it has such fine fur…”

Jihoon swallows, eyeing the Empress as she places her hand on top of the Emperor’s. “Of course, ultimately the choice is yours to make, your Majesty.”

“You’re too naive,” he hears someone say in a low voice next to him, so that only those in close proximity could hear him. It’s the Second Prince. Jihoon hears him sigh gently. “The Empress has laid her eyes on your prey. What she wants, she gets.”

If that’s the case, then there’s little Jihoon could do about it. He’s never intended to become enemies with the Empress, and now that he’s had a glimpse of her true personality, he wants to do anything but go against her. Known as the reputed, good natured Mother of the country, Empress Song has always been held in a high position in the citizens’ hearts. She loves animals, they say, and wouldn’t so much lay a finger on a bug. Beautiful and tender hearted, compassionate and patient, knowledgeable and gentle; that’s the image everyone has of Empress Song.

But here she is, expressing so clearly with nothing but greed in her eyes, that she wants the fur of the Wild Toothed Jaguar.

“It’d certainly be inconvenient for us to release the Wild Tooth, and there is no way to ensure it
will not conduct such mischief once again. I heard that one of our participants here got injured by it, right? Stand up and tell me who you are,” the Emperor follows swiftly, clearly understanding the wishes of his dearest Empress.

“It’s me, your Majesty.” Park Woojin stands up from the crowd and bows. “It’s true that I got bitten by the Wild Tooth, but this is but a small wound. It will heal in no time.”

“Well, take care of yourself,” the Emperor gestures for him to sit down. “We’ll bring the Wild Tooth back, and your points will remain the same, Consort Park.”

“Understood, your Majesty.” Taking his seat once again, Jihoon feels slightly guilty for not being able to talk his way through to have the jaguar released as he has promised.

Should he even be taking the dream seriously? A big part of him tells him that he should.

“What are you thinking, Jihoon?”

Jihoon’s head snaps up and he turns without thinking, meeting the steady gaze of the Second Prince’s. His heart almost stops when their eyes meet.

“Nothing.”

“Why did you make such a request?”

“It’s none of your business.” The words tumble out of his mouth before he has time to process it and he clamps his mouth shut, instantly regretting what he’d said. He is behaving a little too weirdly around the prince and he just cannot help it.

There’s a slight pause after Jihoon’s instantaneous response.

“I see,” the Prince replies after a while.

Jihoon sinks back in his chair, unable to hear the ongoing ranking announcements with the sudden heavy weight settling on his shoulders. He wonders if he should apologize, but he wouldn’t know how to carry on the situation without the feeling of unease. Something has changed between the two of them, but he cannot pinpoint what.

“Coming second!” The soldier draws him out of his trance with his solid vocal chords, “is the Second Prince, Lai Guanlin.”

Jihoon’s eyes trail to his right and he opens his mouth to congratulate him, but he doesn’t have the chance to as the soldier quickly follows it up with another ranking announcement.

“And first, is our true hero of the Spring Hunt. Our new record breaker — Crown Prince’s Consort, Park Jihoon.”

Dead silence follows immediately, most likely stemming from the awkwardness created by the strange request of Jihoon’s in the earlier group ranking announcement session. Jihoon can feel the stares of envy and disdain, doubt and intimidation, as well as admiration and respect; all the nobles of Tian He are dedicating their full attention to him, and he has no doubt become a new target for everyone, whether it be a target to butter up or put down. The feeling is rather unsettling, and Jihoon wants nothing more than to just leave and hide somewhere.

Yet a slow clap starts to ring in the air. Jihoon turns and realizes that it was Woojin who did it, and his face relaxes when he sees Daehwi, Jaehwan, and those around them following suit. The Second
Prince applauds as well, and by that time everyone joins in and the sound is nearly deafening.

“Well done, very well done, Consort Park,” the Emperor’s voice rumbles and the clapping dies down. “It’s rather regretful that we cannot release the Wild Toothed Jaguar as you wished, but we hope you will not take it to heart. Young man, you ought to walk home carrying pride within you. After all, you and your team have won the competition this year, and we are very impressed with the results.”

“As per tradition, your group will be awarded a special prize, coming first in the Hunt.”

Two soldiers step forward with heavy looking wooden chests in their arms.

“The awards this year,” the Emperor spreads his palm and the soldiers take proper care to open the chests without tilting the box, “are custom made talismans, worth five hundred gold each.”

Five hundred! The figure causes Jihoon to falter even though he’s stayed in the palace for a few months now. One of those talismans could buy him two properties, at least!

“But of course that’s not all, those are just some small but thoughtful bonuses awarded by the Empress herself, paid using her own money.”

“It’s my pleasure to see such young talents rise in events like these,” the Empress beams down on the crowd, though her smile now can only appear as condescending to Jihoon. “The talismans are sculpted by the best carvers in all of Tian He, and blessed by the Great Monk, Grandmaster Jia Yi. It is said to ensure the paths you walk are smooth and helps you rid of obstacles in the way.”

“That is very considerate of you, my dear Empress,” the Emperor looks at her fondly.

“It’s all I can do, your Majesty.”

“Well, as I promised, my reward is a big one, and a special one indeed.”

One of the soldiers nod towards the Emperor and walks forward with the chest, holding it up high for everyone to see. The item in the chest is a seal made of bronze, with a delicately carved lion resting on top of a low platform.

“This is the Seal of Honour, which I award to every one of you in the victorious group to promote you in your positions, no matter where you are right now. It is an unconditional promotion, and therefore I will only be able to move you up at most three ranks to abide with administrative rules.”

“The promotion will not only allow you to move vertically, but also horizontally across departments, meaning not only do you get a chance to move up your ranks, you will be able to move to an entirely different section of work.”

Jihoon’s mouth drops slightly, in awe of the weight of the award. To gift a seal means to grant immense power; it is a sign of the Emperor’s trust and acknowledgement. It’s the real deal. The nobles’ reactions to the reward are not small; he can hear them shuffling in their seats trying to contain their jealousy. It’s a magnificent prize, after all.

“Now, Consort Park.”

The deep set eyes casts him a gaze weighed down by half a century of unspoken burden, shaking Jihoon to the core.

“You have taken first place in the individual rankings. What is your wish that you want me to
fill? As long as it is within my abilities, I will see it granted.”

Jihoon’s heart pounds, feeling like a dozen gongs crashing within him every time he takes a step forward. Then he kneels, putting his palms down like he had in the shrine before all this has happened.

“Please allow me to accompany foreign ambassador Jeong Sewoon on his journey back to West Hak and stay there for a period of time.”

“What!?” Someone hisses behind him in a low voice, and though it was hardly noticeable among the chattering and the whispering between the nobles, Jihoon had heard it.

Yet Jihoon pays no attention to it. He kowtows, touching his head to the ground.

“Please grant my selfish wish, your Majesty!”

Chapter End Notes

7.5k words and i am ready to bury myself... writing this was ten times easier than writing 1.5k for my essays and 2k for my moot submission...
furthermore I apologize for my very late update it's been what, a month? And I said I was gonna update weekly :( broke the promise after one week LOL that's me yall I hate me too. But i been sick and busy and half dead... still not recovered but im reviving slowly!
as always, happy reading, and so much love to you guys, really!
“Your Majesty! I object.”

Jihoon jolts at the sudden interruption into the silence and he, along with the nobles around him, turn towards the voice.

The Emperor’s face had already darkened the moment Jihoon mentioned his request, and when Jeong Sewoon speaks up, Jihoon can almost feel the anger radiating from the great body of the ruler in his seat. Tightening the grip on the arm of his chair, the Emperor stays silent, willing the West Hak representative to continue.

“I believe this is a matter that needs to be thoroughly discussed before we decide, as this request involves the area under the jurisdiction of our great ruler, Son Hak.”

“Your Majesty!” Jihoon drops to the ground again. “I want nothing more than to go experience the places outside of Tian He-”

“I assume by that you mean you’re fine with visiting any other country? Since Hwang Minhyun is here, you could discuss with him the possibilities of you visiting East Scarlett instead, for that is a better option in this period of time…” Sewoon’s voice runs less calmly as it does on regular days, and Jihoon can barely hear the panic in his voice over the monstrous thumping of his own heart.

The message that went unsaid beneath the frantic objections of Jeong Sewoon was clear to everyone present: the relationship between Tian He and West Hak at the moment is comparable to a rope barely holding together with its frayed strings. The tension between kingdoms was unimaginable at the moment and Consort Park’s visit would mean more than a leisure trip in the eyes of a rivaling kingdom.

“I’m only interested in going to West Hak at this moment,” Jihoon says silently.

“You should think of the consequences!” Jeong Sewoon’s voice rises, shocking everyone.

“Silence!”

The Emperor’s roar reminds Jihoon of how ridiculous his request is and thousands of images flash through his mind on how this could possibly turn out. The word death appears briefly and his knees almost give out under him.

“Arguing in front of the Emperor? Such insolence!” He could hear one of the older men on the front row say. It must be one of the grand generals.

The Emperor casts a scorching gaze over Jihoon and the West Hak representative. “We will have a thorough discussion of it when we get back to the palace. But as of now, Sir Jeong…”

“I’m afraid I will have to agree to his request.”

A small gasp escapes Jihoon’s mouth and he deflates. The obvious displeasure in the Emperor’s voice, however, tells him that the only reason he’s agreed to it is because of the occasion. He applauds his own bravery for spilling such an ignorant request at a time like this, though he’s
planned it out since the very beginning.

“With that, we will be concluding the Hunt,” the Empress quickly follows up to lighten the atmosphere. “Thank you all so much for giving it your best these few days! To celebrate, we’ll be holding a feast. The food, of course, will be the animals you have hunted down for us. Our chefs will cook up some of our best Tian He delicacies tonight, so we hope the lot of you will enjoy it.”

The Emperor had agreed to his request.

Jihoon, however, finds himself unable to relax. Before the crowd disbands to return home, the Emperor had cast him a gaze that knocked out the breath within him. It’s stern and reprimanding, and it reminds Jihoon of the looks his father would give him whenever he did something wrong and he wanted Jihoon to reflect on it.

Before he can even brush off the feeling of guilt, Jeong Sewoon comes up to him when the crowd starts to disperse. Almost immediately, the Second Prince appears by his side, holding an arm out as if in a position to defend him. Jihoon looks at the tall figure in front of him and his heart does a little jump, though he quickly collects himself when Consort Lee appears as well.

“I have some private matters to discuss with Consort Park,” As Jeong Sewoon speaks, his eyes never leave Jihoon, and a shiver travels down his spine.

“Private matters?” The Second Prince doesn’t look back towards Jihoon either; for some reason, Jihoon knows that he’s vexed, and not on a normal level. He’s never once glanced towards Jihoon’s side ever since their little chat during the ranking announcements, and it frustrated Jihoon for reasons he cannot pinpoint.

“Yes, private matters. Now will you please, your Highness,” Jeong Sewoon gestures towards the side, where Hwang Minhyun and some generals are standing, “Step aside, for this is not a matter that is worthy of your attention.”

As if to deliver the final blow, the corners of his mouth turn up slightly and he leans forward. “And last I remembered, Consort Park’s matters were only of interest to his husband, the Crown Prince, and not you, your Highness.”

Consort Lee’s features twist into a nasty scowl as she turns to Jihoon, who reciprocates with a blank expression of his own.

The Second Prince then steps away, his back facing Jihoon and his position now right next to Consort Lee’s, intimately so. He finally turns his head towards him and the probing gaze of his plucks a little string on Jihoon’s heart. Whatever he was searching for, he seems to have failed, and mild disappointment shows in his face, albeit for a second only.

“Very well.” The Second Prince lets out a sigh. “If he bothers you, Consort Park, yell for the guards.” Then he puts a hand on Consort Lee’s back and escorts her towards Hwang Minhyun, whose circle parts for him to join in the conversation.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking,” Jeong Sewoon says immediately after the Second Prince leaves, not letting Jihoon’s attention fray for one second. “But it’s not a good idea.”

“I don’t understand what you mean,” Jihoon snaps, unable to keep the irritation from his voice.

“Going to West Hak during this period of time, where the tension is at its peak? I ensure you there are less painful ways of dying. This is ridiculous and what you’re requesting for is childish. I hope your reasons are not as immature.”
Jihoon opens his mouth and shuts it, channeling all the self control within him to suppress the insults he was about to spit back at him. “If his Majesty grants my wish, none of that will matter.”

“You and your selfishness shock me, really,” The composure has long slipped from Sewoon’s features. “You are still just a young brat, I see.”

“And what is it to you?” Jihoon retaliates in rapid fire. “What I do is none of your concern, especially if you want so desperately for me to die, anyway.”

“Watch your words,” Jeong Sewoon hisses. “Rethink your decisions. Staying alive, which means staying in Tian He, is the best thing you can do for yourself and your kingdom.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you this, Sir Jeong.” Curiosity washes away the annoyance that had been flowing within him. “Whose side are you on?”

“Yours.” Sewoon draws out a folded fan from his sleeve. He snaps it open, and Jihoon can see a beautiful calligraphy of the character “Jeong”, which is Sewoon’s surname.

“Mine?” The answer catches Jihoon off guard; the answer is something he never expected. Yet, the man doesn’t look like he’s lying. In fact, every bit of Jihoon seems to believe this man’s words. He doesn’t say Tian He. He doesn’t say West Hak. He says, very simply, ’yours’.

“Could you be…”

“That’s all I can say for now,” Sewoon fans himself gently, the strands of hair giving way to show the clear forehead of his. “And please, Consort Park.”

There’s a slight weariness to his voice. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Is he stupid?”

The man paces across the room, two hands linked behind him with his face contorted into a troubled expression. His brows knit together on his forehead and he crosses his arms.

“Please stop that, you’re making me dizzy, your Highness,” Sewoon sighs, palm pressed against his forehead as if it will do anything to cure his throbbing headache. “What’s your next move?”

“We’re stopping him!”

“I would appreciate something more concrete.”

“Let’s blackmail the Emperor so he won’t allow Jihoon to go.”

“Very funny, your Highness. Next.”

“Why?” The man looks at Sewoon with a brow raised, and Sewoon feels the urge to leave the moment he realizes that he’s serious about that suggestion. “Sounds great to me.”

“Poisoning your nephew sounded great to you too,” Sewoon reminds him. “And honestly for someone who loves their nephew that seems borderline psychopathic.”

“It worked though, didn’t it?” The man wags his finger in front of Sewoon. “Jihoon instantly became alert of surroundings and he even realized on his own the intentions of the Kang family.”
“You made the poor boy paranoid.”

“Hey, don’t make it sound like you had nothing to do with it. I saw you scaring him out of his wits every time you talk to him.”

“That’s called being a good actor, your Highness.”

The man makes a face at him and Sewoon exhaled, running his hand through his hair. “But it’s not like I don’t understand why he wants to do that.”

“Going to West Hak, you mean?”

“He’s already discovered his identity after the various hints I’ve thrown him; maybe he wishes to find allies within West Hak that support him so to assist Tian He with the upcoming battle.”

“There’s more to that, I think,” the man points at him. “I believe it mostly has to do with the boy’s inner conflicts of his own. Before this, he’s probably already thought of whether or not he should trust the royal family of Tian He enough to surrender himself as a pawn, knowing that he’s Tian He’s trump card against West Hak. And his request to go to West Hak is a clear indication of his stance.”

“You mean he doesn’t want to stay under Tian He’s umbrella of protection and wishes to gather allies and power of his own through this trip?” Sewoon notes the look of pride on the other man’s face and rolls his eyes. He knows that look. It’s the that’s-my-nephew-right-there look. “Stop making that face, you look weird.”

The man clears his throat and steps out from the shadows and into the narrow ray of light shining into the dark room. He takes out the small pouch containing the granules Sewoon had collected from the fire. “Anyway, there’s a more urgent problem we have to take care of. Have you heard of ghost fire?”

“Yes. It comes from the ancient myth originated from the Red Cloaks. A goddess falls in love with a man from the Red Cloak Tribe who is skilled at practicing witchcraft, and he happens to be particularly invested in the art of summoning the supernatural. One day he summons a demon and the demon devours him, rendering his body to nothing but ashes. The goddess’ tears fall from heaven and the ashes react to it to create a massive fire that consumes the whole town. Ghost fire grains is the mixture of chemical that reacts to rain like the ashes to the angel’s tears, creating the ultimate ghost fire — a fire that is able to start because of water.”

“You’re really smart. I forgot the first half of the story but thank you for reminding me.” The man looks impressed. “Indeed, there’s that myth. Regardless of whether it’s true or not, ghost fires can only start under stable weather, where you can ensure that there is not too much rain so it would put out the fire, or too little rain so it would not be enough to trigger the chemical reaction.”

“And coincidentally, Hak Li has a new valuable pawn by his side,” The man opens the pouch and looks at the sparkling granules. “A man who can predict the weather.”

“So it’s Hak Li’s doing?” Sewoon tightens his grip on his fan. “He has people stationed here?”

“Of course he does, what do you think he is, an idiot? He wouldn’t just leave you here alone.” The man flicks his finger against Sewoon’s forehead gently. “If he puts full trust in people he wouldn’t be as successful as he is now. You better be careful as well; as much as he favours you now, he is eerily vigilant.”

Sewoon falls silent, and the man laughs, taking a seat beside him.
“Don’t be worried. The moment he discovers about you I’ll hide you away immediately.” He pats his shoulder. “After all, you’re like a brother to me.”

Sewoon’s eyes drop to the ground. “Your highness, I’m not worthy of that…”

“I told you to stop calling me that long ago.” The man pulls out his own fan and spreads it under the light, firm black strokes clear against the pale faded yellow. “We’re not the rulers anymore.”

Sewoon traces his fingers on the character on the fan. ‘Yoon’, it reads. This man’s surname always manages to bring him comfort.

“Your name will rise again soon, I promise.”

“The sons of General Lee and General Kim are here to see you, Master,” Jia curtsies. “Shall I tell them to wait until you are finished preparing?”

“No, let them in, it’s fine. They’re my friends.”

“As you command.” Jia leaves the room and Fei tugs on Jihoon’s hair, causing him to wince. She apologizes immediately.

“You’ll have to put up with this for a while, I’m afraid,” she whispers in an apologetic tone. “I heard that Consort Lee will be dressing more extravagantly tonight and I certainly cannot let her outshine my dear master.”

Jihoon is speechless, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry. Why did it have to be a competition, anyway?

“Greetings, Jihoon.” Three people step in and Jihoon flashes them a smile from the mirror. “How are you doing?”

“I’m good! I’m just in the middle of preparing for the feast, as you can see. Sorry if I can’t tend to you myself. Make yourself comfortable. Jia, please serve them some tea.”

“You’re breathtaking as usual, Consort Park!” Jaehwan exclaims, a grin spreading across his face.

“He’s not even done dressing up yet, what are you talking about?” Woojin’s voice is immediately identifiable, his voice loud and clear.

“Well, when you have a face like his, there’s not much you have to do to look beautiful,” Jaehwan clicks his tongue. “What do you know about beauty?”

“I’m sorry that I have better things to do rather than appreciating beauty, like training my ass off and being the future hope of our kingdom’s military,” scoffs Woojin.

“Wow, amazing. Let’s see you defeat one of the grand generals first.”

“Why, you–”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Daehwi’s soft voice rings like velvet silk but it is powerful enough to cut through the men’s voices. “We’re here to thank and congratulate Jihoon, not to argue.”

“Oh, that’s right!” Jaehwan stands up and claps his hands. A maid quickly comes up beside Jihoon and holds out a beautifully carved bronze box. “I brought over a box of gold accessories that I thought would suit you best. Hopefully they’d be to your liking, Jihoon! Thank you so much for
helping us win the Hunt, you have no idea how happy my father was when he knew about the unconditional promotion.”

“Accessories? You sure they weren’t just hand-me-downs from your mother?” sneers Woojin.

“Shut up,” snaps Jaehwan. “Yes, they’re my mother’s, but these are our family treasures. Altogether they’re worth at least two of the talismans the Empress gave us.”

“I can’t possibly accept that!” Jihoon immediately rejects it, but in the mirror he can see Jaehwan’s face fall right after he says that. So he sighs. “Okay, nevermind, I’ll take it.” The man’s face brightens up. “Jia, please take it and store it somewhere safe.”

“I’m from a peasant background, so I don’t have anything to represent my gratitude in material,” Woojin says, arms crossed in front of him. “But I ensure you that if you face any danger, I will definitely do anything I can to rescue you.”

“That’s something you should swear to your master,” Jaehwan snorts. “But that is quite gallant of you, I suppose, if it’s not just plain words.”

“Woojin takes his words very seriously,” Daehwi chuckles. “As for me, I also don’t have much to offer, but I am very good at calligraphy. I’ll copy a poem called the ‘Three Rivers’ on a scroll, and give it to you as a present if you’d like.”

“The ‘Three Rivers’ from the Book of Saints?” Jihoon exclaims, almost earning a scolding from Fei when he shifts his head while she fixes his hair. “That’s a thousand word poem!”

“Oh, believe me, Daehwi can do it.” Woojin waves lazily as if it is nothing. “Just accept it. There’s nothing he can do better.”

Instantly he receives a dagger in the form of a glare and he flinches, wailing and running around in the house while Jaehwan reprimands him for his rowdy behaviour. Jihoon laughs, delighted at the uncommon liveliness that brightens up his palace.

Daehwi’s expression reflected on his mirror catches the corner of his eye. He seems to be deep in thought, even though the smile is still plastered on his face.

What a strange guy.

“Master!” Jinyoung comes running in and he immediately halts when he sees Daehwi. Then, tearing his eyes of the young boy, he walks in a hurried pace towards Jihoon. “When you’re done, the Emperor would like to see you.”

“The Emperor?” His hands suddenly feel cold and he rubs them against his thighs. “Right before the feast?”

“Yes.” Jinyoung senses the change in his Master's mood and kneels down before Jihoon to look at him in the face. “Once again, I ask you… are you alright?”

“Of course I am,” Jihoon answers without hesitation, beaming at him with all the positivity he can manage. His expression freezes, however, when Jinyoung’s face fails to ease as it usually does.

“I feel like,” Jinyoung’s voice drops low, so that only Jihoon can hear him. Over the screams and shouts of the other two men in the background, even Jihoon has to struggle to listen. “I feel like we’re drifting further and further apart from each other.”
“Jinyoung, that’s not true.” His hand reaches out to press on the boy’s shoulder but Jinyoung only purses his lips, his expression no longer radiating the warmth Jihoon had always been familiar with.

“I no longer understand what you’re thinking and you aren’t telling me everything I’m supposed to know.” There’s sadness and hurt in his eyes, and Jihoon feels like his voice is stuck in his throat. He has no way to comfort him, anyway, because truly, he doesn’t know how to tell him everything.

Jihoon unintentionally looks at the mirror and is about to turn away when he catches Daehwi’s face once again. He’s looking at Jinyoung, with eyes of — pity?

“Is it because you’re starting to lose trust in me?” Jinyoung’s adam apple bobs as he swallows, as if he’s trying to hold back on his emotions. Jihoon opens his mouth but before he can speak, Jinyoung stands up.

“Nevermind what I said,” Jinyoung pats his arm. “I’m joking. Let’s get you ready.”

Jihoon lets out a breath he didn’t know he had been holding. He doesn’t know if he’s imagining it but somehow, he feels murderous intent radiating from within the room.

He feels something sharp scratch him from the back of his neck and when he sees the glint of the needle tip reflecting the light of the room, he almost jumps out of his chair. Fei looks at him strangely, a frown knitted between her brows.

“Are you alright, Master?”

“I’m alright.” Out of breath, he repeats as if to persuade himself, “I’m alright.”

Fei does the finishing touch as she puts the beautiful hairpin that had scratched the back of his neck earlier into his hair.

Soon enough he finds himself walking on his own into the great Throne Hall to meet the Emperor. Kneeling in front of the Emperor, he greets him and blesses him according to tradition.

“Rise,” the Emperor booms, and Jihoon does as he is told.

“Brave young man, you said you wanted to go to West Hak?”

“Yes.”

Jihoon is fully ready for the rejection, but all he wants right now is to save his head from being chopped off because he has disrespected the Emperor in front of the nobles today; perhaps he’d been wrong to ask for such a request, after all, there were so many other things he could ask for… safer things, things that could still help him reach his goal, like riches —

“Your wish is granted.”

“I understand, your Majesty-” Then he stops midway through his sentence, the realization finally coming through to him. “Wait, your Majesty?” he repeats, shocked of what he had just heard and processed.

“You’ll be setting off with Jeong Sewoon as soon as he is ready. I’ll arrange for someone to escort you out of the kingdom.” The Emperor stares down at him; apart from him, there’s no one else of important status in the room right now, so the amount of attention the Emperor is giving him drains him of his energy. “You’ll have to prepare your heart properly. Jeong Sewoon’s approval could
come as early as within a few days, or as late as half a year. We have to get his approval, just for procedural reasons and basic respect, but I’ll see that it is done.”

“Your Majesty!” Jihoon is about to bow again in gratitude when the Emperor grunts. He looks up at the big man, cold hands gripping on the sides of his robes.

“I don’t know how much you know about yourself, but I assume you do have some degree of knowledge as I don’t see you as a person who would make random requests like these out of nowhere.” His deep set eyes narrow into slits, the wrinkles forming around them making him seem even more intimidating. “But I’ll have you know, now that your family is in Tian He, I’ll be watching over them.”

“And I’ll be watching over you, too. If your actions seem even the least bit suspicious over the course of time you’re staying in West Hak…” The dark orbs of his, in that moment, reflect what seems like centuries of knowledge and experience of death. “Then you-”

Jihoon’s heart races, his sweat glands starting to malfunction—

“-and your family-”

— *Thump, thump, thump* —

“-will be held responsible.”

His ears start to ring, and the air seems to become thin, he’s suffocating—

“Do you understand?”

Jihoon stands, pupils shivering, his body deprived of even its ability to tremble, as he freezes.

“I said, do you understand, Consort Park?”

Jihoon’s chest heaves up and down, unspoken feelings swelling up within him as he grits his teeth.

“I understand,” he finally manages. “Your Majesty.”

“Good.” Jihoon can hear the smile in his voice, that hideous smirk of victory. “Very good. I’ll see you at the feast tonight.”

The great door close behind him and the knees beneath him give way immediately. He collapses, and thankfully, someone is there to catch him.

“Master? Master!” Jia comes forward and dabs on his forehead. “You’re sweating like crazy!”

The person who caught him in his arms puts a palm against his forehead, then holds his hands.

“Your hands are cold,” he speaks, and Jihoon can make out the worry and the caution in his tone.

“I’m alright.” He takes a deep breath and pushes himself off the person. “I’m alright.”

“You don’t seem like yourself today, Master.” Fei rushes up with watery eyes, warm hands flying up to grab his. “Goodness me, are you cold? I’ll fetch you a shawl!”

“What did he say to you?” The person asks, voice stern. Jihoon looks up and almost immediately wants to reject his own longing for this man, whose concern flows so naturally he’s really about to take it for granted.
“Nothing.”

“Jihoon!” The Second Prince grabs his shoulders, shaking him roughly. “I said, what did he say to you!”

“He’s letting me go.”

His eyes flicker up to meet his, and a look of pained understanding crosses the prince’s face.

“He threatened you, didn’t he?”

“No, don’t be stupid.” Jihoon laughs immediately after he says it, because he’s the only one being stupid, not the prince. The prince is right, if anything. Standing up straight, he takes a few turns of breath to regain his composure.

“I’m just happy.”

The Second Prince looks at him for a while, the searching gaze of his returning. Then after a while, he stops and shakes his head.

“The feast is ready. Let’s get seated.”

“Why are you here, anyway?” The two of them, along with their servants, descend from the stairs that led to the Throne Hall.

“Everyone has already arrived at the feast, you were the only one missing apart from the Emperor, the Empress and the Empress Dowager. I heard from your friends that you were here so I came to fetch you.”

“Oh.” Jihoon’s heart warms up, and something broken within him seems to patch up on its own. “You came for me?”

There’s a moment of silence.

Then there’s a sigh, as if the Second Prince has given up. Turning to his side, he flashes him a dazzling smile that almost blinds Jihoon, a sight even more beautiful than the round moon hanging up high in the night sky.

“Yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

No excuses for leaving the story for so long I had no inspiration, words wouldn't come to me and I hated my academic subject's guts... um but yet again I love you guys so much for sticking w this long ass BORING STORY... uhhhh if i made the ko-fi thing would u guys actually donate me $$ to buy me coffee to support my work?????? aslkdfjsdf
When they are preparing for the take off to West Hak, the weather is stormy. Clouds gather, winds howl, rain falls and hits the shed of the carriage like arrows loaded with ten weights. And Jihoon’s own heart, is loaded with perhaps a hundred times more of that weight.

The long journey should be at least twenty days on horseback without rest. Jihoon of course want no horses killed, nor any of the drivers sick. So they will stretch it over a period of approximately thirty days, with an appropriate amount of time for resting, camping, and area surveillance. It’s that time of the year too, where the weather screams death should you have no patience on your way. Oh beautiful summer! The pitter-patter of the rain and the revolting grayness of the sky shatters all delusions of a sunny, warm coloured vacation-esque journey.

Jihoon sighs.

“My prince thinks it proper for you to meet up with your parents before you leave for West Hak, Consort Park,” one of the servants Jihoon recognizes as one of the Second Prince’s bows her head and holds up a letter of permission to him. Jihoon murmurs a quick thanks and carefully takes out the piece of paper enveloped and skims over it. There lies a proper permission from His Majesty to leave the palace to meet his parents one last chance before he sets off.

Then he folds back the paper into the envelope.

It’s been a good few months since he’s seen his parents. The information he’s gathered about his family has revealed more than he wished to know, and for that he does not know how to face his parents at the moment.

Yet he also knows that going to West Hak is an incredibly perilous trip and he is not naive enough to rule out the possibility that he may die. He only has himself to blame for the risk he is exposing himself to just because of his stubborn curiosity about his background. Like his Majesty the
Emperor said, there was nothing selfless about the trip. He will face dire consequences for going to an enemy kingdom knowing he’s the trump card of Tian He, and the Emperor will remember this: that he forced his wish upon the Emperor in front of the masses and made it near impossible for the request to be rejected due to mass pressure and expectations.

Jeong Sewoon stops in front of one of the carriages as the servants open the curtain for him. He shoots a look and Jihoon reads from it all the disapproval that has long been suppressed. The man doesn’t speak a word when he enters the carriage.

Amidst the running back and forth of the servants, feet storming across puddles, Jihoon catches sight of a red amongst blacks. Fabric glistening and unaffected by the weather, with accessories that are clearly over-the-top for a fifteen day long horseback journey, the beautiful female consort glides down the steps of the palace with four female servants by her side, each with different tasks of pampering the woman: one holding two umbrellas, shielding her and her clothing without any care for her own drenched clothes exposed directly under the gray clouds; one holding the consort’s dress, not letting any of the undoubtedly expensive fabric touch the dirt of the floor; one fanning the woman, her own sweat trickling down her face mixing in with the droplets that rain upon her, and the last one receiving some sort of scolding, busy being a victim of the woman’s random tantrums.

Jihoon’s disgust must have shown so clearly on his face that the consort stops to look at him, pretty face contorted in a sneer, red lips parted ready to deliver some sort of criticism that he is glad he won’t be able to hear because of the rain. But the consort says nothing in the end and he decides that it’s because her presence is enough punishment for him. And that is true enough.

You would wonder what the Second Prince’s consort’s business was in a journey to the great West Hak. She indeed had no business with West Hak itself, her business was with the royal carriages that were coming along.

Well, the black one in particular.

Speaking of the sole black carriage that led the row of carriages, the servants that were finished in preparing it steps out and runs back to the palace to announce it ready for the rider.

Said rider appears in several minutes, pure black attire giving him a touch of his usual elegance. The dark piece of simple clothing brings out the beauty in the pale skin. Second Prince Lai Guanlin descends from the steps and gives every one of them a nod, his appreciative glance boosting the morale of the soldiers and brightening the day of the servants at his feet, his smile painting a blush on faces of many women at the scene, Lee Hyejin included.

When Guanlin takes to her side, one gaze from him renders the woman into a shy teen, composure and arrogance and fury for the servants forgotten. Jihoon himself is charmed, and his mind inevitably starts to wander, strange thoughts of what would happen if he were the Second Prince’s consort surfacing yet again after several weeks of, well, trying very hard not to think about it. Or him.

Enchanted, he doesn’t realize it when the prince stops next to him until he hears his name. Snapping out of his daze he looks up to find the handsome face of his thoughts appearing a tad too close for his liking.

“You will ride with me.”

Jihoon wishes he could decline.
But the prince’s looks were firm, and tells him that he of course came out with some mighty excuse to force him into sitting beside him in that black carriage. When the prince explains it, Jihoon was not disappointed with the amazingly straightforward and stupefyingly lame reason that the prince came up with.

“You’re safest when you ride with me.”

Good lords. Nothing about this trip is safe, and it’s troublesome that of all things he finds that his current biggest fear lies in the prince’s unpredictability.

The question ‘What about your own consort?’ dies on his tongue the moment he witnesses the deafening rage compressed in one single glare directed to him from Consort Lee’s direction.

He childishly decides if the woman wanted to punish him by coming he might as well do her a favour and get back at her by complying with the Second Prince’s orders.

The Prince would not keep silent about his obedience, amusement clear as day on his face as they tread side by side to the carriage.

“You’re surprisingly compliant.”

“You’re surprisingly lazy in coming up with excuses lately.” Jihoon shoots back.

“To be with you? Of course. Who knows when we’ll die?”

Jihoon struggles to keep a straight face but it’s hard not to crack a smile at the prince’s carefree response. That, however, does not stop him from reprimanding the prince.

“Your curses will bring us bad luck. We’re not dying.”

“I’m not saying we are.”

The consort sighs and shakes his head.

On that note their jesting stops, as Jihoon had matters to tend to as the carriages take off. Scrolls at hand and with a great deal of planning to do, Jihoon’s expression turns serious. The prince, like a good child, sits at the side without bothering him, eyes fixated on the side profile of Consort Park, tender gaze at rest.

“Your Highness, are we stopping by the Park household?” A servant pokes his head into the carriage and asks.

The Second Prince raises a brow at Jihoon, waiting for his reply. Jihoon shakes his head. He’d already commanded Jinyoung to deliver the letter that he’d written to his family the day before.

The parade of carriages, soldiers and other accompanying palacemen treading the path to West Hak must have been quite a sight. Within the crowd were four big carriages, one for the Second Prince, Consort Lee, Consort Park, and West Hak ambassador Jeong Sewoon respectively. Jinyoung is riding the carriage Jihoon was originally going to stay in, along with Fei and Jia. Perhaps midway, after they rest, Jihoon will find a chance to go back to his original assigned carriage so that he can talk to Jinyoung privately.

It’s been approximately four months since the Spring Hunt, and a lot has happened since then. Ong Seongwoo had disappeared when he was looking for the Crown Prince. It was worrying, and the whole palace knew of the Emperor’s tantrums and fits of anger the following few weeks after
hearing the news. Moreover, there were no updates about the older prince’s whereabouts. The palace dipped into a mournful month and large batches of soldiers were dispatched in search of the prince and his soldier.

Daehwi had gifted Jihoon the copy of the Book of Saints, his calligraphy as magnificent as rumoured, printed with care on a piece of premium silk Sungwoon had claimed one of the most expensive in Tian He.

Jihoon had also rescued the Wild Tooth from the hands of the Empress when in miraculous timing a summer disease had spread across the palace, with symptoms like bright red spots appearing on the bodies of females, including the Empress, who fretted with tears streaming down her beautiful face and shrieks of dramatic terror at the ghastly sight of her back dotted with spots in the mirror. Jihoon had managed to convince her that the Wild Tooth was a gifted beast and the only way to cure this disease was to release him back into the wild, so that his anger may dissipate and he may lift the curse from the females. So that’s what they did, and with his limited knowledge of medicine as well as his father’s connection to a peasant doctor in his village, he cured the females of the rash.

It was a stressful period of time, Jihoon’s lies could have killed him. Thankfully, the imperial doctors were paid not to cure, but to utter what the royals desire to hear. And what they did not desire to hear was that this summer disease was due to the palace consorts’ over consumption of sweet, cold wild fruits in this damned summer weather, that it was caused by their bodies protesting against their unhealthy self-indulgence. Naturally they’d prefer a reason that faulted foreign factors, instead of the highnesses themselves.

That was not all that happened over the course of four months, but they were the highlights. What was worth mentioning was the tension between Jihoon and the Second Prince had eased, and without knowing when, they had started letting their guards down in each other’s presence. The soft acknowledgement in their eyes were telling of the change, and none were oblivious to it. Not Lee Hyejin, at the very least.

At one point her anger spiked and she took to harassing Jihoon every day after she noticed how close he and the Second Prince had gotten. Itching powder in makeup, mild poison in berries, and the gifting of flowers heavy of pollen - luckily, Jihoon does not suffer from pollen allergy.

The worst revenge measure she had taken was the provocation of one of the Emperor’s most beloved consorts at the time, Lady Violet, when she with her mighty swordsman strength and agility pushed Jihoon to where the Lady was standing, then quickly resumed her position. It was the Lady’s birthday, and it so happened that the Lady was sickly at the time, and that one tumble could not be saved as her energy was crippled, causing her to fall nearly flat on her face. The bright red scratch at the side of her dolled up face made her scream and cry in the most pitiful fashion, eyes pleading and brimming with tears as she faced the Emperor.

Jihoon at that time was left in such awe that he could not speak to defend himself.

It was a dangerous situation; at first Jihoon knew not how to react. Those big doe eyes of the Lady’s could make a man as highly positioned as the Emperor kneel to please her, and she clearly put them to perfect use in the perfect occasion, with Jihoon pinned as crime offender. The Emperor already disliked him, and Jihoon feared the man would not let the perfect chance to punish him go to waste.

Then came Lai Guanlin to his rescue, helping the Lady up by her hand, enchanting her with a spell no other than his gift of a smile, and tells her that a beautiful lady like Lady Violet would not take these small mistakes to heart, as she was forgiving and loving and all that nonsense, you name it,
showered her with compliments that tumbled out of his mouth smoother than Tian He’s famous Qinglu waterfall, called her names that would impress a goddess, engulfed her with honey sweet words that left her in such a daze that she could not utter a word in retaliation.

Jihoon felt like if he had not interrupted at that moment to offer a ‘rare potion’ that could clear up any scars left by the scratch on her face, the woman’s eyes would give off her painfully obvious attraction and fascination to the Second Prince, which was wrong and disgusting, given that she was a consort of his father’s.

That aside, the issue was settled, Consort Lee was unsatisfied, but took a good scolding from her father, who had been at the scene and saw it happen. After that, she laid low in her vengeful pursuits, and it was a blessing.

Four months passed. Wild Tooth released, gifts received, information gathered, and permission granted by the one and only Hak Li, it was time for Jihoon to go.

Not long after they set off, thunder rumbled and the skies grew dimmer.

Little light could get through the curtains and reach the scroll Jihoon was reading, so he had no choice but to put down the scroll.

It was a mistake to do so. Somehow the prince thought it was a cue for him to start a conversation between them, one that Jihoon could not escape from no matter how much he wanted to, because they are stuck within the small confined space of the carriage, sleeves brushing up against each other.

The prince’s conversation starter was heavy. He spent no time going circles, and jumped right into what he wanted to know.

“What are your intentions of going to West Hak, really? You know of your royal background. You’re the biggest threat to Hak Li’s throne. What makes you think Hak Li won’t use any chance he gets to eliminate you when he meets you? Or worse, before he meets you?”

Jihoon directs a half hearted glare at the prince that, at present conditions, may not have been clearly visible because of the dim environment.

“If that isn’t the first time I’ve heard you admit that you and your entire family conspired to have me here because of my background, knowing that I’m your trump card in defeating your biggest enemy.”

“First of all, we did not conspire.” Seems like Jihoon’s speech had hit a spot and Guanlin was not pleased. “We merely recruited, in an unorthodox way-”

“If, in your view, poisoning my mother, stalking me to the temple and dragging me into this mess of a palace is not a conspiracy, then pardon me for finding the wrong word,” comes the sarcastic jab.

“Stalking you to the temple! I happened upon you by chance and thought it appropriate to drop in a word though I knew you would be enrolling to be one of the royal consorts anyway.”

“Whatever pleases you to hear, my prince.” Jihoon shakes his head. “I think I at least deserve an apology for poisoning my mother.”

“It was no poison! That was expired medicine.”
“You made my mother take in non-prescribed expired medicine!” he exclaims in horror. “Why, just because it’s expired medicine that you made my mother ingest, it makes you a good person?”

“It was not me,” the prince sounded pained as he retorted, though clearly his confidence is waning. “My father suggested it, and I thought it harmless.”

“Harmless?” scoffs Jihoon. “Harmless? Your concoction made my mother bedridden for years, complexion pale and sickly with no signs of good appetite, and this you achieved by threatening our home servants that had been loyal to us for years, browbeating them with their families’ safety into committing such grave sin.”

The carriage falls silent and the sinister rumble of the skies seemingly tears through the air in the compartment, cold wind’s wail filling in the gap of this very conversation.

“I knew not of the grave symptoms. Nor the threats.” The prince’s voice is quiet, his fingers bunching up into fists on his lap like a guilty child.

Something relaxes in Jihoon, and perhaps it’s the reassurance that this man, a man that he is undeniably fond of, is no mastermind behind the evil plot that cast her mother into sickness. But he is still vexed, no doubt, that the prince did not even attempt to stop the Emperor.

And yes, the Emperor must have done it. He would do anything for his country. Ruthlessness made him an efficient ruler.

“Don’t change the topic, Jihoon.” Soft voice rings in Jihoon’s ears and he knows the prince has ceased to defend himself in this matter. “Why are we going to West Hak?”

“It’s about time.” Jihoon replies. The prince only looks more confused, and Jihoon touches the Second Prince’s hand gently to comfort him. Then he draws back almost immediately, after he realizes what he’s done. The prince’s eyes sweep over their hands before he looks into Jihoon’s eyes again.

“I am royalty of purest West Hak blood. My mother and the Yoon family’s name and reputation spread well among the people before the Hak brothers got the power of the throne, so there is bound to be underground support from my mother’s time.”

“But how do you even know your mother’s supporters still exist? Hak Li is known to be strict in governing his people. He makes sure none of them show even the slightest tendency to betray,” The Prince is quick to challenge, and Jihoon can see the worry on his handsome features.

“Listen,” Jihoon stresses, gaze sharp. “That’s not all. Hak Li made enemies from the very start, declaring war on his brothers and murdering his father, killing thousands of families and nobles and soldiers that served the previous ruler. His brothers, we know for sure, are people who can be our allies, though not permanent ones. His mindless slaughter has brought continuous unrest to the nation, and over the months I’ve successfully reached rebels that have been itching for a chance to spring.”

Lai Guanlin shows no intent of praising Jihoon for the parts where he had done a good job in, for example the thorough and wise planning of it all, and instead decides to focus on that one risky point.

“You’ve been talking to rebels? Thinking West Hak knows not of it? Are you telling me you reached the other Hak brothers as well?” His tone lowers and he hisses. “You must be out of your mind! There could be spies for all you know! You would be giving out your identity and location
“Let’s be honest, Lai Guanlin.” The calling of the Second Prince’s seems to take direct effect as their eyes meet. “They knew my family sought refuge in Tian He years ago, when I was just born. They knew but could not pursue because Tian He was strong. Powerful. Word of your impenetrable defense and military feats frightened off all foreign enemies, but West Hak finally made their move when your defenses dropped, slowly eating up at your borders to avoid direct conflict.”

One look into the prince’s eyes and Jihoon knows his words had hit home. He wastes no time to continue.

“That’s when you knew something was wrong; it was blatant provocation. I believe his Majesty the Emperor thought it fair to poison my mother given that she was one of the biggest reasons for the menace Tian He is currently facing. But I thank the great Emperor for bestowing upon my father the name of a palace official, at least, to cover up our tracks up till now. It’s our time to repay you.”

“You have nothing to repay us.” The Second Prince says. He lays his hand on Jihoon’s, and it’s warm and calming and soothing and stays like it belongs.

“His Majesty thinks otherwise. With good reason.” Jihoon makes no move to pull away, as he sees the anxiousness starting to surface more clearly on the other man’s face. “I am also going for my own cause. I’m not so selfless after all.”

Guanlin stays silent and waits for him to go on. So he does,

“I need to find my own roots. This was my home. I want a place to belong.” He stops for a moment before he continues. “I do not belong in the palace. Nor in Tian He.”

The Second Prince looks ready to retort, but lightning interrupts and Jihoon takes the chance to go on.

“You have made me comfortable, and I enjoyed your company for half a year. The Crown Prince did the same. But I found it suffocating to live in the palace, especially me, a person whose flowing blood is that of your enemies’, and fearing from time to time the threats I might have to face, and trying so hard to find people I can trust, but-”

“Do you trust me?”

“I do.” There was no hesitation in the answer, and even the Second Prince is taken aback by the rapid response.

“I do. I had my doubts before, and I’m still not happy with what you did to my family, but the more I thought about it the less I could blame you and your father for what you did, and the more I spent time with you I knew it was my heart’s desire to…”

He trails off, as he was going off track. Yet he catches a glimpse of the Second Prince’s face, and his heartbeat picks up like it always did when they spent time together.

He was staring at him now, with intense focus.

“…to be with you.”

A knock startles them both. Slightly disgruntled because of the interruption, Guanlin holds up the
door curtains to reveal the poor servant standing under the pouring rain.

“Speak,” comes Guanlin’s voice, impatience and irritation seeping through.

“General Lee and the young master of the Lee family has come to visit. They wish to have a talk with Consort Lee before we proceed.”

“Approved.” Guanlin waves his hand and the servant lets the curtains drop. Once again, they are left alone in isolation.

But before they can even settle down and get back on topic, they hear people raising their voices outside.

“What is going on?” The Second Prince questions after he draws the door curtains to the side once again. A servant is quick to run to the carriage and hold up an umbrella so Guanlin could stick his head out and take a look. His brows are knitted by the time he turns back to Jihoon.

“What?” Jihoon asks.

“I think we should all get out. Stop by and have a rest.”

“We’ve barely left the city.”

“I know.” The prince looks uncomfortable with the situation. “Go out and see for yourself.”

So they did. As they climb out of the carriage, Jihoon cranes his neck to peer through the misty curtain of the rain. There stands Consort Lee and her brother, Lee Daehwi, arguing over something, with the female’s voice shrill and loud enough to wake a town.

“What is the matter here?” Impatience invades the calm exterior of the prince as he strides towards the two, long robe drenched in the puddles on the ground.

Jihoon itches to hold it for him but fears the look of it and the assumptions that come after, so he refrains from doing so.

Thankfully, two maids hurry to the spot to do it in Jihoon’s place.

“Your highness,” Daehwi does a humble bow. “My father insists that your consort, Lee Hyejin, head back to her quarters immediately.”

“I repeat, I am not leaving!” Hyejin’s eyes glows with indignance. “I shall do what I wish.”

“Don’t be like this, sister.” Daehwi’s soft voice is a large contrast to hers. “Father will not be pleased.”

She scoffs. “He’s never been pleased with me. And don’t we have you to thank for that! You son of a prostitute.”

The boy’s eyes dims and Jihoon can see a tremble run through his small body. “My mother is not a prostitute,” he hisses.

“Prostitute or not, it doesn’t change the fact that she seduced Father,” she sneers. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“I mean no harm,” the boy’s eyes lower. “I simply came here to take your place.”
“Take my place?” The words seem to ignite a fire within Hyejin, and her lips twist into an ugly scowl. “You’ve long done so!”

Jihoon cocks his head and frowns, wondering what her words could have meant.

“That’s enough!”

The crowd turns to the booming voice and someone else steps out of the carriage Daehwi came in. Two servants run to help the man descending the carriage and Jihoon’s eyes scan him down. He has jagged features and a neatly trimmed beard, and his right foot carries a limp. He’s seen him somewhere before.

That must be General Lee.

His eyes sweep over the right foot again. Jihoon did not notice before that the general's leg had problems.

“General Lee,” Lai Guanlin nods towards the old soldier, and he bows back, hastily. Then he turns to face his children.

“I am so ashamed to call you two my children.” The general raises a shaking hand to point a finger at the siblings. “Arguing in front of this many people- you’ve really brought shame to our family name!”

His face glows red with fury, and before anyone can stop him, he limps forward to grab his sword, still unsheathed, from one of the servants and strikes the back of Daehwi’s knees.

Almost all who witness the scene flinches; the boy drops to the ground from the lack of balance and lands on his knees with a harsh thud on the wet mud. One brave soldier runs up to his side, though he is hesitant to help. When the soldier removes his helmet, Jihoon recognizes his face immediately. It is Park Woojin.

He is panting, and Jihoon can see from his eyes the anger that he tries to hide by training his eyes on the floor instead of the one who forced Daehwi to the ground.

“Can’t even relay a message from me properly without an argument with your sister? I didn’t bring you up to be so petty!”

No one dares speak a word when the general turns his glare from his son to his daughter, who stares back at him with defiance, as if she has no fear for his wrath. Seeing her reaction, his free hand clutches at his chest, and for one moment Jihoon had a feeling that he would burst with rage.

“And you!” He grabs Hyejin’s left arm and ignores her pained yelp. “For so many years your mother taught you to act like a lady and your brain doesn’t seem to have retained a single drop of what she taught. I’ve never seen or heard of a woman quite as shrewish as you! It's no wonder the Second Prince doesn't spare you a glance.”

Jihoon's jaw drops, and Hyejin gasps. The general takes no notice in the sudden silence among the crowd, nor pays any attention to the sudden change in the prince's expression.

It’s just as those rumours say: General Lee is a man who wouldn't even bother caring for others' dignity when he speaks. He's just that powerful, probably, and has never suffered the consequences of his frank, undisguised speech.

The pain on her wrist snaps Hyejin out of her initial shock and she tries to twist her arm out of his
grasp, but her strength is incomparable to her father’s. She lets out a small cry when he presses
down harder on her wrist.

“As if you didn’t have a part to play in turning me into this,” she breaths, eyes brimming with tears
that she is unwilling to let fall. “Being a lady was all that I wanted.”

The general raises his unsheathed sword again and brings the heavy object down on his daughter’s
palm, drawing a scream from her lungs. Jihoon closes his eyes and swallows, feeling a tingle on his
hands after he witnessed that. He wonders how much that could’ve hurt; it seems that the general
has no regards for gender in his punishments. In that split second he recalls General Lee’s famous
saying: ‘all are equal under the sword’.

“Remember that pain,” he growls, looking ready to leave. “And you’ll know not to defy me in the
future.”

"Why can't I stay, Father?" she cries, as if it is her last plea.

"You left without seeking permission from me, and you dare ask me why? I had to go all the way
here to pick you up the moment I knew you’d left!" The general raises his voice and throws his
sword down for his poor servant to catch. "I said, over and over again, that you are not to be
exposed to any risk. And this journey is nothing if not perilous! Am I right, your Highness?" His
deep set eyes scan the lot before it lands on Guanlin’s. “Have I not made myself absolutely clear in
front of the royal courts, to not allow my daughter on this journey?”

"He's right." The prince's voice is frighteningly low.
General Lee lets out one cold laugh and Jihoon can see Guanlin’s nails digging into his palm.

"You're the only useful child I have." General Lee takes one look at a kneeling Daehwi and turns
his focus back to his daughter, as if Daehwi isn't worth his attention. "And you shall not get hurt. If
you want to know what happens on the journey, Daehwi will go in your place and write you
updates."

Daehwi stays on his knees in silence, bowing his head low. His half drenched hair covers any trace
of emotion on his face. Woojin stands closely by his side, holding an umbrella for him.

The general then heads back to his carriage, his heavy robes swaying in the rustling wind as he
flips his large sleeves behind him. “We’re heading back, your Highness. Forgive us for causing
such a commotion.”

“No matter. Safe journey, General,” Guanlin replies, though the crease on his forehead does not go
unnoticed under Jihoon’s sight.

This general does not even bother facing the Second Prince to greet him before he leaves, which is
a sign of terrible disrespect. Yet seeing Guanlin’s reaction, Jihoon can tell he is already quite used
to this, though he cannot help but be displeased at such behaviour.

Before Lee Hyejin walks to her father’s carriage, her eyes dart towards Guanlin’s.

“Even if I beg you, you wouldn’t let me stay, would you?” she murmurs.

Guanlin lowers his eyes and shakes his head.

From his gaze she can see his unspoken apology, and though that small bit of emotion is far from
what she wants, she takes it and leaves. At least, she thinks, he still cares. Even if he only cares so
little.
Her carriage trods a lonely way and until it disappears into the far distance, none of them say a word.

Jeong Sewoon saves them from the awkward silence when he pokes his head out and knocks on the carriage to gain everyone’s attention. By that time the Second Prince is already pulling Jihoon back to their black carriage, while Jinyoung and Woojin is helping Daehwi up from the mud.

“Thank you for the great show, but let us delay this no further. Hak Li is not known for being patient. In fact, he’s quite the opposite. No one wants a punishment from Hak Li as a welcome gift, am I correct?”

Everyone snaps their mouth shut and scrambles back to their places within mere seconds.

Their journey carries on and for three days straight they rode and rested in peace. No assassination attempts nor random assaults from Mother Nature, apart from the occasional showers and thunder or lightning that accompany them on their way. The atmosphere has, however, soured greatly ever since the incident with General Lee, and no one, nor the weather, was of any help in brightening it up again.

Jihoon is napping in his own carriage when it suddenly comes to a halt. His eyes flutter open and Jinyoung puts a hand on his shoulder, leaning forward to tell him that Jeong Sewoon had called for the carriages to stop.

“What?” Jihoon jolts up from his seat. “Where are we?”

“We’re near the borders of Tian He,” Fei says, and she could not hide the tremble in her voice. “One of the soldiers handed us a map. Here.”

Jihoon takes the map from her hands and unrolls it. Jia uses a slender finger to point at the palace, where they’d started off from.

“We’ve travelled a long way from the East of Tian He, where the palace and the city centre is located.” Her finger follows path through the symbol of the city gates. “After exiting the city we had to tread through steep slopes and unpaved paths. We’re finished with that, which means we’ve crossed two mountains. If my assumptions are correct, we’re currently located around here.”

Jihoon’s mouth tightens into a thin line.

Under Jia’s finger are three words scribbled in neat black brush strokes: 無法鎮 (Wu Fa Zhen/Wu Fa Village).

According to Jihoon’s understanding, Wu Fa Zhen could mean two things: 1. Unable to suppress 2. Lawless village. Whoever gave this place its name had their own sense of dry humour.

Or perhaps they just never really bothered with the name, because Jihoon had read in books about this infamous place, and it is as the name says: it is governed by no laws.

Chapter End Notes

//prays sincerely that no chinese people read this because of how historically inaccurate this entire fic is (and how bad it is compared to chinese ffs…)
End Notes

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