Fix Me

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by messylochness

Summary

Jongin is just getting settled for bed when a stranger comes knocking on their door weak, disoriented, and in need of help. He allows the stranger inside before they collapse and that’s when they see it: the stitches holding the stranger together.

Notes

First of all, I want to thank the mods for they are nothing but super patient and very supportive to me every time I ask for an extension.

I also want to thank my betas; Soba, Denise, LY, VK and XA for being there to wipe my tears, help me sort things off and save my ass from embarrassing myself when I put random silly words together. English is not my main language and I feel very insecure to write something in it, especially when it's finished.

I read the original work of Frankenstein before starting this fic, and honestly I wish there's a further explanation of how the monster was created thoroughly, but I hope my pseudo theory is acceptable enough to fill the gap. Trigger warning: mentions of blood, lots of it and graphic description of wounds.

Lastly, I hope everyone enjoyed reading this story. Please note the trigger warning for your safety.
Prince Jongin would have appreciated the beauty of snow had it not delayed his journey to the northern part of Gangwon-do. He sighed heavily. The window of his carriage was foggy, he barely saw anything beyond the bumpy road. How much longer did he need to wait for his servants to clear the snowy path in front of them? He silently regretted the Queen's advice. He should have postponed his visit to his betrothed princess's palace after the king's astronomer had predicted the snowstorm, but it had been planned since summer and it would only make a bad impression if he could not keep his promise. Jongin slumped in his seat. He could only do that whenever his eunuchs weren't around or he would be scolded for his bad posture.

He straightened his spine when he saw the familiar green robes striding closer. Eunuch Cho bowed at him after he opened the door. As someone who lived near the sea, even the smallest cold winter breeze could chill Jongin to the bone. He blindly grabbed his winter coat, given by his future in-law, the king, as a welcome gift, and quickly draped it upon his shoulder. Eunuch Cho lent him a hand to tighten the thick coat on his body while he shivered himself to death.

"What happened?" Jongin dared to ask him.

"The road in front of us was blocked by snow. It seems like the snowstorm had started several days ago since the thickness is almost knee-deep." Jongin listened tentatively to the report since he needed to know what situation he was in.

"Then what should we do for now? We shouldn't wait here, should we?" Jongin gritted his teeth. It did nothing to hold himself together, but was effective enough to reduce the chattering of his jaws.

"Don't worry, Your Highness, the scouting team that the head guard sent earlier to seek rescue had just returned. We might not be able to find the nearby village or a civilian residence in the forest, but apparently there is an empty cottage that we could use as a shelter."

"Is it safe enough for us?" Jongin asked carefully, since he did not know what was more important for him, safety or was the place big enough to accommodate his people? But, he really needed to be extra cautious of his surroundings. Especially after his eldest brother, the crown prince Junmyeon, had been attacked by a group of assassins when he was visiting Hanyang to sign a trade treaty with the crown prince Seowon a year before. Fortunately, the crown prince Junmyeon had been guarded by the king's best troops, even though he himself was not bad at swordsmanship either. Jongin was not that brilliant at using his sword. He scored first in the archery training, but it would not give him a proficient advantage when he was situated in a close-range attack.

"I'm afraid that we will be left with no other choice," Eunuch Cho replied, carefully picking his words. "Staying in your carriage might be an option, but I am concerned that it might not be comfortable for you. Also, Eunuch Yang was worried that it might get colder the longer we stay outside."

"Fine." Jongin let out a breath that he had been holding for several moments. "Let's get there before dark."

Eunuch Cho bowed his head before retreating. Jongin closed his carriage door, collected his few belongings, and pulled himself out of the protection of his small, cramped carriage. As the youngest prince, he did not get the luxuries that his elder siblings Junmyeon and Jongdae had; both of them were the kingdom's crown prince and future general of the king's army. But, he was grateful enough that his parents still considered him as one of their princes. They allowed him to attend the royal
court, help to plan their harvest banquet and even hired the same teacher who taught his elder brother to give him the proper education fit for a prince. Other princes, who were not crowned from other kingdoms, might rot in their chamber without being able to see the world, or worse, be sent away in an exchange of treaty or peace.

It reminded him of why he was halfway to Gangwon-do to meet his fiance for the first time since the agreement had been made. The Gangwon King needed the extra army from Jeju Kingdom to protect their frontier line from the Ming Emperor's army who was sent to infiltrate the kingdom. Jongin was lucky they gave him the opportunity to marry their only crown princess, for Sunmyeon had wedded Joohyun, the Jeolla-do princess, and they were currently expecting their first child, while Jongdae had been betrothed to Minseok, his first love and also the king advisor's son.

He agreed to take the offering because the Gangwon King guaranteed that he could become the king when he decided to step down from his throne. This was probably the most profitable deal that the king had ever made, both for his own people and Jongin's good. He might not be able to inherit the Jeju-do kingdom, but he could become a king of his own in the future.

Jongin met with his eunuchs outside. Surrounded by the last four guards, they made their way through the narrow path into the thick pine woods. He guessed that the rest of his people might have been sent by the head guards to said cottage to prepare for his arrival.

They walked in silence for several minutes, the cold almost numbing Jongin's fingertips and he kept clenching his hands together to gain some warmth. He noticed that his people were not good at handling the cold either, and unlike Jongin, they did not have a thick coat to keep them warm. They reached a clearing in the forest where a hideous, two story cottage was surrounded by thick shrubs. It looked big enough to shelter him, eight royal guards, three maids and four eunuchs. He could see several candles lighting it up from the inside, making it exceptionally creepy when the light flickered in the windows. Jongin shuddered at the thought of spending the night at this strange place instead of the palace or his small carriage, but he really needed a nice place to stretch his sore limbs.

The eunuchs led him to the largest room on the first floor. Two of them helped him out of his thick traveling attire and into something more comfortable. If only there was a tub inside the cottage, they could have drawn him a warm bath with petals of roses like he preferred. They'd been traveling for more than two weeks by now, and he'd been in the same old clothes for two days straight, since their last stop before reaching the depth of pine tree forest. He might not sweat a lot in winter, but he was still bothered by the unpleasant odor coming from the layers of clothing that he wore.

Once he'd settled and cleaned, the maid knocked at his door and brought him a tray of warm tea. Jongin finished his first cup in several gulps before pouring himself a second serving. He sat near the fireplace across the bed where freshly chopped wood made a crackling sound as it burned to warm himself. The next knock at his door came from Taeyong, his head guard. He and his members might had finished securing the place by now.

"Your Highness," he started, bowing his head. "We may need to wait for the snow to subside in a couple of days before continuing our journey. We're pretty close already. Once the path is cleared, it will only take a day and a half to reach the capital of Gangwon-do."

"That sounds... great." Jongin nodded enthusiastically at the news. "Thank you for your hard work and for keeping me safe, Taeyong. Have you eaten?"

Taeyong opened and closed his mouth several times before drawing an answer, "I will later."

"I'm going to ask the maids to prepare the meal for you." Jongin pulled himself out of his chair, but Taeyong stopped him halfway.
"Don't worry about me, I'll eat with the other guards. I heard one of them caught some rabbits in the woods."

Jongin noticed the dark circles around the latter's eyes this close. He sighed, his most loyal person must have been stubbornly overworking himself again, "Are you sure about this? Make sure to eat well tonight. When was the last time you got some actual sleep?"

Taeyong didn't reply. Perhaps he himself had forgotten the last time he enjoyed his meal and had a proper rest. Jongin dismissed his guards with a flick of his hand, but Taeyong stood still in his place.

"But Jongin," he spoke again in a softer voice, afraid that the maids or eunuchs would hear the way he addressed the prince when they're alone. "You're not supposed to be left alone. I will share this chamber with you."

"Listen, Taeyong. It's not that I don't want to share this room with you. I will gladly do that on another occasion, but knowing you, you may not get the proper sleep when you're around me."

They'd been friends ever since Jongin was allowed to step outside of his wing and Taeyong happened to wander around the castle while visiting his father, who had been the previous minister of agriculture before his sudden death, one fine spring morning, three years ago. Although the latter was younger than Jongin by a year, they had been together longer than the amount of time Jongin spent with the king and queen. They practically grew up together, sometimes Taeyong would join Jongin's study session or sleep over when they were not watched.

"I insist, Your Highness." Taeyong bowed once again. "This is for your own safety. We both know that you have bad eyesight that got worse at night. Who knows what is going to happen—"

"Please, Taeyong," Jongin squinted his eyes. "Don't you ever tell me what to do when you look pale yourself. You need the rest more than I do. I'll be fine. I won't leave this chamber if that's what you want. After all, it's not like I don't know you either. You'll be lurking around this room no matter how hard I try to push you away to give me some personal space."

Taeyong could not help but smirk at that. "I have promised the king to protect you at all costs."

"That's why I can always get you if something ever happens to me, which I assure nothing will. Nobody's foolish enough to make a move in the middle of a snowstorm. Now, go! Don't make me use my power to order you." He playfully shoved the younger's shoulder, and a smile started to bloom on his handsome, usually stoic face.

"None of us are used to the extreme climate changes. I know you, you're the third closest person to me after my brothers. If I can't handle it well, then it's the same for you. I don't want you to get sick before we reach the palace. Who will protect me if you catch a cold?" he whined. He knew Taeyong could never stand his cute act.

"Alright, you win Jongin. I'll check on the horses before calling it a day," he relented, bowing his head. "Good night, Your Highness."

"Just leave it to Jaehyun. Or Youngho," Jongin told him before Taeyong passed the threshold. He knew that Taeyong wouldn't listen to him, but he still tried anyway.

Dinner was served not so long after, and Jongin ate some wild berries found in the forest as well as a bowl of steaming hot porridge with meat jerky. It tasted bland, but he'd been having the same old meal while travelling to the north; he'd grown used to the taste.

The mattress that he occupied was hard and a little bit too short for his liking. He could not sleep,
kept shifting to find the most comfortable position, but ended up lying on his back for only God knows how long. The book he was finished reading lay near his head. The sound of whirring wind rattled the branches towards his window, making everything become more eerie. Jongin shuddered. His candles had long burnt down and the fireplace had dimmed, his room was almost blanketed in darkness.

At a moment like this, his mind suddenly reminisced the old tale he had read together with Jongdae, when he sneaked into his room late at night. He once found a book contained with mythical creatures at the back shelves of the palace's library when he was searching for a copy of Confucius. He could not wait to read it when his tutoring was over, but he got goosebumps after reading several lines. He had been taught that a real prince was supposed to be dauntless and stoic, for he should be able to protect his people from harm, but, for a seven year old boy, the dark tale of a walking corpse, spooky ghost, or flesh-eater creature was scary enough to read, prince or not. Jongdae usually cuddled him tight, he promised to protect the little brother from all the scary monsters when they read the book together.

Jongin was no longer the little kid he used to be, he just had his coming of age ceremony last winter when he turned nineteen. But he was all by himself at the moment, and he did not want to remember all the terrifying tales. Jongin rolled to lie on his stomach while silently reciting the acrostic poems that he had prepared for crown princess Sooyoung of Gangwon-do while trying to remove the imagery of flesh eater monster that slowly formed inside his head.

Being this close to the fireplace—only a couple of strides away—made his throat slightly parched. Jongin slid out of his comforter to fetch himself a water. He didn't bother to call the maid or his guards, since they were probably asleep in the smaller rooms upstairs. It was such a tiring long day for all of them. He had seen Eunuch Yoo's dampened robes after their attempt to shovel the frozen snow away, and his youngest guards, Minhyung's chapped lips from staying outside for too long. They all were fatigued, and he needed to stop being a spoiled prince for once.

Jongin opened his door to the view of Taeyong slumbering inside his thinly folded blanket. He didn't snore in his sleep, just a vague movements of his chest rose and fell in a constant speed as a sign for life. He even had his unsheathed dagger slipped under his makeshift pillow made by the royal guard's robes. It was a sign that he might not be in a deep sleep, since Jongin could still remember the soft breathing that Taeyong used to do when he invited him to sleep in his too-large chamber back then.

Jongin poured himself a glass of water taken from the river source at the top of a hill that they passed this morning. It was very refreshing with a little touch of sweetness at the tip of his tongue. Jongin was busy enjoying his water, so he didn't realize a shadow lurking near the window that was followed by a faint knocking at the back door. Jongin might not have heard it, had the sounds of whirling wind not subsided for a while. Jongin shuffled to the door, trying hard to muffle the sounds of his footsteps. He peered out the small window beside the door but he could not see things clearly. He almost cursed when he realized how right Taeyong's judgement about him was.

He pondered when he finally saw that small figure. He could not make up whether they were a man or woman, but one thing for sure, he should not open his door to some random person. What if they were going to attack him? What if they were just a bait to lure him? But what if they were the owner of this cottage, and they had been struggling hard to find their way back home after being trapped for several days in the middle of a snowstorm?

The painful grunts and whimpered heard when Jongin placed his ear at the door. Should he wake Taeyong up? But his fingers already slid the door's lock as fast as he can, then cracked it a little bit to take a look at the outside. He saw a slender figure leaning toward the back door with closed eyes and
shallow breathing. He could not make out their face, for it was covered in matted hair that escaped their top bun. He was sure that this was a man's body. He saw blood almost everywhere, most of it was already dried. It covered his temple, neck, chest, turned the white inner robe that he wore into scarlet and around his wrist sleeves. Jongin pulled the door wider, the man collapsed right into his chest, smearing the crimson gush into him almost immediately. He was thrown back for a bit, but then he felt a tight grip on his forearms. The man was still alive although he was badly injured.

"Help," the man whispered in his croaked voice. He tilted his head so that Jongin could hear him better. "Don't let him find me."

His body was feverish and hot despite being in the middle of the snow for God knows how long. Jongin circled his arms around the slightly shorter man, tried to shake him out of his delirious state, but he did not budge. He might have lost his consciousness right in Jongin's arms.

Jongin pulled the body inside, he was surprisingly heavy for someone who was a head shorter than him. Jongin relocked the door, then laid him on the kitchen floor. He tried to check the stranger's wounds, carefully peeling the layers of clothing that he wore until it pooled around his back. He was not dressed in the common style of Jeolla folks. The fabric of his outer robes felt so soft under Jongin's touch, it reminded him of the particular robe—the only clothing of his property that was made from the finest quality of silk—that he wore at Junmyeon's wedding ceremony. This person must be one of the rich merchants or a higher position nobleman as opposed to a mere prince like him. Jongin finally removed the last piece of his inner robe before inspecting the wounds.

There was a slit in his chest, right at his ribs above where the heart was located. It gushed fresh blood, no matter how hard Jongin tried to press the wound. His own sleeves now covered with the man’s blood, and cold sweat began to drop down his forehead. What if this man died in his arms because of blood loss and his inability to save someone's life? Jongin chanted a silent prayer to God for the strength and fast recovery of the stranger.

After several moments that felt like months, the bleeding subsided. Jongin could feel the faint pulse of his heart under his slippery palms. He ran his finger upon the deep gush. He might have never been taught medical subjects; why would a prince need that education when he was surrounded by the royal physician, but he knew just a little bit knowledge about types of wounds, and this one seemed like it needed to be stitched. There was only one person that Jongin knew was more than capable to undergo the procedure.

Jongin tore the lower part of his inner robes and wrapped it around the stranger’s torso before retreating to his room to find Taeyong. He didn't even need to shock his body, just a simple, cold touch of his hand that was covered with darkened shade of dried blood was more than enough to wake the head guard.

"Jongin, are you okay?" Taeyong grabbed his shoulders, checked his entire body from any signs of attack. "What ha—"

Jongin shushed the younger to not wake the other guards that stationed near them, and probably one of them was taking turns to stay awake. He signaling Taeyong to follow his lead towards the kitchen. Taeyong did not forget to bring his weapon with him and lit a candle on their way. They stood next to the man's body. His pale skin had turned into a shade of grey, now that Jongin took a good look at him with the help of Taeyong's light. There were several bruises on his neck, it seemed like somebody had choked this poor guy before attempting to kill him. Taeyong crouched near his head, he carefully removed his manggeon, the only accessories that Jongin forgot, while moving his candle closer.

Jongin gasped, there were stitches around his head right under the piece of clothing. It was as if
someone had cut his skull open and sewn it back messily. Jongin took several steps back while blindly grabbing for something—anything. He felt nauseated, heaving his dinner into the nearest empty basin that he could find. Cold sweats started to run down his temple, down into his cheeks and chin. Suddenly, the imagery of cutting human skull alive became his latest found nightmare. Unless it was not a dream.

When he thought he was strong enough to help attend the stranger, Taeyong had just finished examined some minor wounds at the stranger's arms and legs. He looked up to check on Jongin's condition.

"I'll go get my aid kit," he whispered softly. Jongin just nodded. His mouth felt bitter from his previous reaction, but he scooted closer anyway. Jongin could make the slightest movement of the stranger's chest as a mere sign of life. He tried to shake him out of his consciousness, but it was no use.

Taeyong returned to Jongin's side with his hide satchel. He carefully pulled a roll of bandage and began to wrap it around some bruises. He learned basic stitching technique when he was doing military training. Jongin did not know Taeyong could stitch a wound until he saw it himself. He was there when his friend received a deep laceration on his left abdomen by Wooyoung's blade when they were at the training field. Taeyong always refused to wear dulled sword when he trains. He said the fear of getting killed helped him concentrate better and it would be a perfect training method for someone who was going to apply for a royal guard.

Jongin still remembered the look on Wooyoung's face. The poor scrawny farmer boy had apologized for the hundredth of times before Taeyong shrugged it off by saying he did a good job and he was very careless for losing his footing. Taeyong refused to visit the physician's quarter when Youngho offered to take him there, he treated the wound himself at the guard's barrack.

Jongin never thought that he might need to learn basic survival skills, but the sight of Taeyong's bony fingers moving gracefully to suture closed an open wound was really fascinating. To be honest, he did it better than royal physical Lee himself.

"Can you stop watching and help me instead?" Taeyong asked him, when he finished weaving his last stitch.

"Uh, yes." Jongin tried hard to avert his eyes from Taeyong's delicate fingers to look into his eyes.

"Please mash two twigs of wormwood until the oil comes out then add a whole chrysanthemum flower and mix it together."

Jongin accepted Taeyong's satchel and he pulled out a small mortar and pestle from the inside. He rummaged through Taeyong's dried herbs collection to find the mentioned plant and start to grind it into a paste. He helped Taeyong to put the concoction on the stitches to disinfect and stop the bleeding. By the time they finished mending the stranger's wounds, the early morning sun had just begun rising.

"Is he going to be okay?" Jongin asked his head guard.

"He's going to be fine, for now," Taeyong sighed. "Still, Jongin, we have no idea who he is, and is he going to endanger your safety. What if he's a criminal?"

"Who wears the finest quality of silk?"

"He might be a rich criminal," Taeyong insisted. "I've heard rumors, Jongin, and most of them are
unpleasant to hear."

"Or, he might be a victim," Jongin opened his palm to uncover a royal insignia that was tucked securely under the stranger's belt when he undressed him to check the wounds.

"It's Hanyang's royal sign." Taeyong took the cold gold medal in his hand and flipped it. "I don't think there's any other royalty…"

"Oh, there you are! You're up early, Your High…" Jongin turned his head to the view of Eunuch Yang dropped to his knees while gasping for air. "For the sake of Goddess of Life, are you okay, Your Highness? Do you get hurt?"

Jongin realized that both him and Taeyong were covered in the stranger's dried blood. He lifted both of his hands to comfort him.

"We're okay, but I don't think he is." he nudged his chin to the direction of the strangers. Eunuch Yang came to Jongin's side, he inspected the youngest prince's from any sign of injuries.

"Who is he? Where does he come from? How could he know that a Jeju-do prince is here?" Eunuch Yang asked in his wavering voice. "Are we being followed?"

"Please calm down, Eunuch Yang." Taeyong gripped Eunuch Yang's shoulder to calm him down. "We found him at our door yesterday and he was already wounded. But we tentatively concluded that he came from Hanyang. Do you know anything about that city?"

"I have relatives in Hanyang, yes. What does that have to do with this? Was this culprit sent by the king of Hanyang?" He was trembling badly, Jongin threw his arm around the elder man to comfort him. Eunuch Yang had served the royal family since his father's younger days. He was there when Jongin was born, and he had been taking care of him since then. He raised Jongin like his own son, and it was about time for him to return the favor.

"Do you happen to know what thing is it?" Taeyong placed the royal insignia in Eunuch Yang's palm. He inspected it thoroughly, ran the tip of his fingers to each carve stroke while flipping it back and forth.

"I believe it belongs to the crown prince," Eunuch Yang spoke softly. "Only the king and the crown prince can wear the lion head as their insignia."

"But he's not Crown Prince Seowon," Jongin had met the mentioned young prince once, when he visited their kingdom, although he had not had the chance to directly speak to him. He knew exactly how he looked, and the prince was far from this stranger, even after they cleaned up his blood and banded the wounds.

"No, not Prince Seowon," Eunuch Yang shook his head. "There was another crown prince from Hanyang, the king's first son with the deceased queen before he remarried to Prince Seowon's mother."

Both Jongin and Taeyong glanced at each other. "I have never heard of him before."

"The first crown prince was probably as old as Prince Jongdae." Eunuch Yang returned the insignia to Taeyong's hand. "And what I've heard from my relatives was he died at a very young age because of a rare disease. I totally understand if you never heard of him, mayhaps even your brothers never met him before, for he was a closed person and not allowed to leave the palace because of his… frail body."
"So you're assuming that this stranger might be a prince of Hanyang?" Jongin questioned him. "Have you seen him before?"

"No, of course no one outside of the palace had ever seen the prince. But, the possibility is high. This person is quite a good looking young man, fit for a prince, despite all the scars and bruises. Also, who else would bring the royal insignia, unless the prince himself?"

"Or, he might be a criminal who stole the royal insignia when they attacked Crown Prince Seowon and Crown Prince Junmyeon last autumn and imposed to be the dead crown prince." Taeyong concluded. "Or stole it from his grave."

"No, they don't make new insignia when they crown new prince." Eunuch Yang shook his head. "It was inherited from the very first generation of ruler, that makes their insignia special."

"Even if they make a new one like Jeju-do kingdom, why would he bother to break into a royal mausoleum to steal it?" Jongin argued his head guard.

"Well, I don't know, Jongin. He has a lot of reasons to do that. Maybe to fool an innocent prince like you?"

The stranger in Jongin's bed finally gained his consciousness at the second night since he came. Taeyong was spoon-feeding him with the traditional medicine that Eunuch Yang brew to boost his recovery, while Jongin waited patiently by his side.

He coughed painfully when the head guard accidentally shoved the lukewarm liquid a little bit too fast, it almost choked him. He let out a low groan, his closed eyelids fluttered open to allow Jongin to see right through the most beautiful pair of brown eyes. He blinked several times, his teary eyes roamed to take a good look at his surroundings. Taeyong placed his head back at the makeshift pillow while his other free hand sneakily grabbed the hilt of his dagger that was perfectly hidden inside his guard robes.

"Hello, can you see me?" He waved his head in front of his face. It might sound weird but he needed to make sure that he was not blind. The stranger nodded his head weakly.

"Are you okay?" Jongin asked him when their eyes met. He tried to look at him in the face without thinking about the raw, shabby stitches around his crown head that made him feel nauseated. Taeyong could not do anything to make it less terrifying, since he was not sure if he could sew human skull when they redo the stitches.

The stranger's lack of response made Jongin worry that perhaps the people who attacked them cut his tongue to prevent him from speaking. He forgot to check the inside of his mouth yesterday.

"Water," he spoke with his deep, gravelly voice. Taeyong was quick to bring a glass of water near the stranger's lips and allowed him to take a sip. He sighed, his left arm rose to grip his left chest, where the largest wound located.

"What are you feeling right now?" Jongin asked him carefully.

"Dizzy," he replied. It seemed like he could not talk more than a couple of syllables. Jongin understood why, he could not even speak himself when he just got choked to death. Jongin tried hard not to stare at the reddish bruises that littered the stranger's body who had turned into a darker shade of purple. When the stranger looked calmer, Jongin asked him another question.

"Who are you?"
He stared blankly at Jongin, as if trying to remember his name. He pondered for some moments before replying, "I… don't know."

"What was the last thing you remember?" Jongin did not want to sound like he was interrogating him, but he at least deserved to know who he had helped.

"Chased."

Jongin remembered his last words before he went unconscious, he just wanted to know who he was running from.

"Did your chaser rob you?" He shook his head. "Or did you happen to be a part of their group and you want to quit?" The strangers took several moments to understand the meaning, but hesitantly shook his head.

He took several more sips of the water then cleared his throat. His other free hand went to the neck, tried to rub the aches away. "I… conscious… sew my skull—" the hand upon his neck moved upwards to his head that was tightly bandaged around the suture. "I don’t… remember… before… they didn’t… I pretend… off guard… ran away."

Jongin tried to make the complete sentences out of the clues and it might sound quite like this: I was conscious when they sew my skull back. I don't remember what happened to me before, and fortunately they didn't even realize that I'm awake either. I pretend to be in my comatose state to wait until their guards was off then I ran away.

As Jongin looked closer, he seemed quite young. Perhaps he was only a couple of years older than him, the same age as his brother Jongdae. He must have been through a lot of unpleasant things for only God knew how long the torture happened. He seemed traumatized because he kept glancing at the windows, afraid that something might suddenly pop up from behind the bushes outside.

"Who are you running from?" Taeyong who had been silent for the entire night began to speak.

"White robe."

Both Jongin and Taeyong shared this look before the latter laid the stranger's head back to his pillow. Jongin stood from his chair and strode closer to him.

"Thank you for answering my questions, now take a nap." And the stranger closed his eyelids without being told twice. Taeyong waited for his best friend in front of the door, there were a lot of things to talk about, and they should.

"Do you think you can trust him?" Taeyong whispered. Both of them stood in front of the large window looking right through the forest. The snow storms had subsided several hours ago and his people had cleared the path. They could continue their journey to Gangwon-do tomorrow morning so that they would reach the capital around midday.

"We shall trust people until proven otherwise," Jongin recited. "That's what our martial art teacher told us on our last day at training camp. Have you forgotten your basic knowledge, Taeyong?"

Taeyong was silent. He stared right through his best friend's figure into the crackling fireplace.

"You're right, Jongin," he said. "But, I feel uneasy and it's been bothering me. Like something scary is going on and I don't want you to get involved with this mess."

"How messy can this be?"
"I don't know." Taeyong shrugged his shoulders. "He could be a part of some devil-worshipping rituals or something."

Jongin scoffed, "Now you're no longer assumed him as a thief."

"Listen, I know we've promised ourselves not to keep secrets from each other, but when we reached Chungcheongbuk-do last week, Seonho found a stone altar covered in boar's blood." Jongin's laughter died instantly when he heard the word blood. "There were also some burned talismans and black candle stains and it looked very eerie, like some dark rituals had just happened in there."

"And yet, you are supposed to report everything to me. You promised me, Taeyong." Jongin tried to mask his frightened face as convincingly as he could, but Taeyong knew the meaning behind that look pretty well already.

"That's exactly the reason why I'm keeping it from you. Until now, I guess." Jongin opened his mouth, but Taeyong cut him off. "And I know that you're going to say it's just my paranoia or else. But what if he was supposed to be a tribute for the devil or something?"

"And they wouldn't bother to dress him in the finest silk if he's going to die anyway," Jongin wriggled his eyebrows funnily.

"He said he was running away from people who were dressed in white," Taeyong insisted. "And I also heard that some shamans wore white attire while conducting some ceremonies, especially when it's related to human spirit."

Jongin placed his palm on Taeyong's shoulder to give him small pats, "I know that you're worried, I'm actually scared too, to be honest. It's the first time I've gone by myself to a faraway place where I have never been before. But I understand that we've been traveling for several weeks. You're probably tired, we all are, and sometimes our thoughts start deceiving us when we let our minds wander too far."

"But Jongin—" Jongin flicked his fingers at Taeyong's forehead to interrupt him, before continuing his speech.

"... But, let's think about it as a trial, especially for me, to see whether I'm really fit for a Jeju-do prince, or if I am ready for the wedding and maybe to become a king of Gangwon-do in the future. So, I will take the risk. Whatever happens to us, I'll take full responsibility for it. I'm your prince, Taeyong, I'll protect you the way you're protecting me."

"Yes you are, Your Highness." Taeyong bowed his head, he would stop arguing with his best friend for tonight.

The Gangwon-do people lined up at both sides of the main road that Jongin's carriage passed. They seemed curious to see what their crown princess's fiancé, as well their future king, looked like. Although Jongin's window curtains were shut closed, some people whispered that the could see his handsome silhouette vaguely.

The stranger—they decided to dress him with the eunuch's spare robe and called him Eunuch Do—sat obediently in front of Jongin because there was no other space to take him in another carriage. There was something in his demeanor that looked almost regal, it was only fair to disguise him as a eunuch instead of guard, since they had no idea whether he could use a weapon or not. Also, there was a higher possibility that those who hunted him would notice him right away when he was easily seen outside.
"Are you feeling better, Eunuch Do?" Jongin asked.

"Yes, Your Highness, thank you for asking." He slightly bowed his head while answering. He seemed uncomfortable with his new name and title, but he did not have any other choice other than to follow Jongin's plan.

"You don't have to call me by my title when we're alone," Jongin averted his eyes back to the road. He would never get used to his honorific title no matter how long he had been living or for however much longer he would live. But hearing it from someone that might come from a royalty family made him feel unpleasant.

Eunuch Do chuckled lightly, "Just like what Head Guard Taeyong did? But I haven't known you as long as him."

"But you're older than me." Jongin quickly corrected himself, "You seem older than me." Or the possibility that you might be the former Hanyang crown prince, but Jongin did not dare to say it out loud.

"Should I feel honored or insulted with that assumption?" He tilted his head playfully.

Jongin rolled his eyes. Eunuch Do seemed very healthy, he already joked around with him or his people while he barely spoke a full sentence when they first met. His recovery was quite rapid compared to how terrible he was less than three days ago. Whether it was from the medications given to him or he had something in him that makes him heal faster, Jongin did not dare to question that. Perhaps later when they have their own time to talk, for he would be busy courting Princess Sooyoung when they reached the Gangwon palace.

"How long have you known her?" Eunuch Do asked curiously.

"Who?"

"Who else?"

Jongin felt stupid for asking that question. "Ah, Princess Sooyoung." He chuckled. "I haven't even seen or met her before."

"Not even her portraits?"

"No." Jongin shook his head. "If they decided to humor me by replacing her with a decoy, I would not have realized."

Eunuch Do chuckled, "You would be able to tell it right away when they replaced the princess. Being a royalty took an entire time of education, a fake princess would embarrass themself before they were able to trick you into marrying them."

"Talking from your own experience?" Jongin teased him. Eunuch Do's face straightened into a blank expressions before he cast down his eyes. He stared at his shoes for a moment before he slowly spoke.

"I don't know why, but I feel like I have been in your position before." Jongin froze, perhaps he had started gaining his lost memories. Eunuch Do shook his head, his heart shaped smile returned. Has anyone ever told him that Eunuch Do had the prettiest smile ever?

"But maybe my head was just messing up with me again. Maybe I was a real eunuch before the accident and it was probably my previous master's memory."
Jongin offered his hand to comfort Eunuch Do but he pulled back before they were touched. They just met in less than a week, he should not touch some random person, especially when they were not sure whether he was contagious with infectious disease or not.

"We're here, Your Highness." Eunuch Yang knocked at Jongin's carriage. He took several deep breaths before allowing Eunuch Do to open the door from the inside.

The banquet was held very lively to welcome Jongin's arrival, it also worked as a late celebration for the crown princess's betrothal to him. They were going to get married next spring and the preparation had been visible in some places of the palace. Jongin was told that forsythia was Princess Sooyoung's favorite flower. The flower might not be blooming yet, but they already painted the wedding hall with bright yellow color.

Jongin would stay at Gangwon-do for a couple of months until the wedding day, then his parents would come for their ceremony. They were supposed to get to know each other well before they were officially wedded. King Hongjoong, Princess Sooyoung's father, also planned to teach Jongin himself to understand Gangwon court law, as he and Princess Sooyoung would ascend the throne after having their firstborn.

Jongin was admiring the sight of colorful fireworks that littered the dark skies when he caught Eunuch Do's shadow lurking behind the row of tables full of dishes. His entire face lit up when he saw a plate full of meat pancakes. He stuffed several pieces into his mouth until his cheeks were full before leaving as stealthily as he could. Jongin noticed that he was slowly gaining his lost memory. They still hid his royalty insignia from him as their only clue of Eunuch Do's real identity, but looking at his rapid recovery, it was about time when he might remember who he was.

The meat pancake was a special dish that was only served amongst the royal family or when they held a banquet. If he was just an ordinary person who happened to have lost his memory (just like everyone around Jongin assumed Eunuch Do's identity), he should have not recognized the meat pancake right away. Or he would have just tried every food at the table curiously. But the determined glint upon his eyes when he finally found meat pancakes looked like he was expecting it to be there. No matter how much Jongin denied that Eunuch Do—or whoever his real name is—might be Hanyang's former crown prince, the more he showed his real identity.

"Aren't you tired, Prince Jongin?" Princess Sooyoung's presence cut Jongin's train of thought. He put on his charming smile, wishing that it would look sincere enough before shaking his head.

"I would be lying if I said I'm not tired," Jongin chuckled lightly. "But I wouldn't want to miss this banquet for the sake of resting, also I don't want to be rude to King Hongjoong for he has prepared everything to welcome me."

Princess Sooyoung's face lit up when she smiled, the apples of her cheeks tinted in a shade of crimson beautifully. Jongin was expecting her to be older or at least someone at the same age as him. But she was a couple of years younger than him, who had not even held her coming of age ceremony. They would have their own separate chamber after the wedding, until the princess was ready to carry a child.

"But you can leave earlier if you want," she said with her cheerful voice. For a young crown princess, Sooyoung wore her heart on her sleeve. It was not bad, but Jongin was just too used with his broody eldest brother or any other crown prince and princess from all other kingdoms he ever met.

"Are you allowing me to leave earlier, Your Highness?" Jongin playfully used her honorific title for tease, but it was the word that triggered her. The bright glint of fireworks that reflected upon her eyes
suddenly disappeared as she replied with her authoritative voice that Jongin never heard before as long as they have interacted, and it startled him.

"Yes, Prince Jongin, now you are dismissed." Gone the imagery of cute young princess, replaced by a young queen of Gangwon-do who would rule her people in the future. Jongin unconsciously gulped, his eyes dilated. But it went away as soon as it came. She giggled while stood on the tip of her toes to whisper near Jongin's ear. "Please, don't be afraid of me. I just want to take care of my fiancé. And perhaps make you my most trusted ally in the future."

"No, I'm not afr—" Jongin shook his head. "I'm just..."

"It's okay, I understand," She smiled sweetly. "You haven't seen that side of me before. You'll get used to it soon, anyway. Do you think I deserve be the future queen of Gangwon-do, Prince Jongin?"

Jongin bowed his head. "Yes you are, Crown Princess Sooyoung. I believe of your capability to rule your people." He smiled at her. "Now, will you please excuse me."

Eunuch Do was summoned later the night to Jongin's chamber when everyone else had fallen asleep. He dismissed Taeyong from his extra task to nurture Eunuch Do's wounds and decided to do it himself to give his best friend the rest that he needed. Eunuch Do's appearance had gotten a lot better. Jongin did not know whether it was natural for a human to heal their wounds that fast.

Jongin could not help but reminisce one of his memorable experience when he was nine years old. There was a group of people who held attraction performances near the city's town hall. People in weird-looking colorful costumes who threw several balls at the same time but managed to catch them all, some man who could spit fire from their mouth like a dragon, and a man who perfectly balanced himself on a wheel.

There was a magical performance too, where they put a person inside a coffin-like box that was shorter than their body so that their head and feet dangled outside of the box. Then they cut the box in three pieces with a long sword, but the person inside it did not die nor feel hurt. They could even move their fingers and speak like usual. When the performer placed the boxes back according to the right order then open the lid, the person inside came out without any scratches on their skin. The adults who were taller and could see things clearer than him, swore they saw blood when the box was cut, but the person inside it did not seem like they were in pain at all. They might have the ability to recover inhumanely faster than any ordinary people, and then everything was chaotic. Jongin was lucky one of the royal guards bring him away as soon as he can, so that he would not witness the performance got cancelled forcefully. He could not sleep that night when he slipped inside Jongdae's bed and snuggled his older brother.

Eunuch Do refused his help at first, admitting that he was strong enough to do it by himself. But Jongin was a very persistent man. His curiosity beat his fear, for he loved riddles and Eunuch Do was the enigma that he wanted to solve by himself. He stripped out of his robes obediently while waiting for Jongin to prepare a bowl of lukewarm water and towel to wipe his wounds. Jongin helped unwrap the stained old bandages upon Eunuch Do's chest then warily inspected the stitches. It had healed from outside, surprisingly without leaving a distinct scar upon Eunuch Do's porcelain skin, but when Jongin pressed it with his thumb to check the wound, it gushed yellowish purulence that smelled very nasty. Jongin tried to keep his face straight when he rubbed it clean with his towel. Eunuch Do stopping him by gripping his wrist.

"I told you I can do this myself." He might be able to sense Jongin's hesitate when he peeled his hands off the towel. Their faces were pretty close, Jongin could feel each breath that Eunuch Do
took on the top of his head.

"Does it hurt?" Jongin whispered curiously.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "I can't feel anything. I'm numb."

"You can't?" Jongin did realize without the particular towel between them, his palm directly touched Eunuch Do's chest. He froze when he realized something was wrong. Dangerously wrong.

He gave it a gentle press to make sure he was not imagining things, but it was indeed missing its distinct throbs. He moved his palm upwards to his collarbone and a small juncture under his neck. Still no signs of pulsation.

Jongin thought perhaps because Eunuch Do was sick that it beat weakly, but the longer he tried to press it, the more he realized it was not there. His fingers travelled behind to grip his nape.

He moved his face closer to inspect Eunuch Do's face. He hovered his thumb at the bluish dry lips, suddenly wondering how did it feel to suck his plump upper lip and bite the lower one. Eunuch Do did not move, nor showing discomfort at their closeness.

Jongin could not help but question how could no one else who was also taking care of Eunuch Do's recovery did not realize it sooner. He trembled when the sudden coldness hit his sense. Everything about Eunuch Do was cold. It felt like touching a corpse that he was once experience first-handedly.

He widened his eyes, Taeyong never missed things as important as this, and he was probably keeping things from him again. Anger started to boil inside of him, he would have words with him soon and make sure that it would be the last.

Jongin slid backwards inch by inch as slowly as he could, hoping his small act would go unnoticed by Eunuch Do.

"What's wrong, Your Highness?" Eunuch Do raised his eyebrows.

"N-nothing. You sure can handle this yourself, right? You can go now, Eunuch Do." Jongin grabbed a stack of fresh bandages that he had personally asked his designated maids to deliver to his room and placed it on Eunuch Do's cold hands. "I- I think I'm going to sleep now. I suddenly feel tired."

Eunuch Do eyed him for several moments before bowing his head and he started gathering his discarded clothes. He held his breath until the Eunuch finished redressing and left his chamber. He scrambled backwards, panicking, until his back hit the wall and he realized how hard he trembled.

Back when Jongin was a little kid, his older brother always ensure him that every frightening things that they read was just rumors or follores and it did not possibly exist. Or had been extinct. He never thought that fifteen years later he might encounter one of them.

Taeyong was right. He should not take Eunuch Do with him to Gangwon-do. He should have left him in the cottage and never returned, because if he really was that monster, Jongin might have not only endangered his life, but also the entire Gangwon-do kingdom.

Jongin could not sleep properly that night.

King Hongjoong took Jongin out for a walk around the kingdom a week after his arrival to officially introduce him to the people of Gangwon-do. They were going to go to the town hall and market that
took half a day to reach there. They prepared a mare for Jongin since it was the easiest horse to ride, and although he could ride a horse he was not used to it, while Eunuch Cho and Taeyong took the rest of stallions to ride along with him. Jongin looked around at his people who accompanied him to the stable but he realized that their little troop was missing someone.

"Where is Eunuch Cho?" He asked his servants. Eunuch Yang who was busy securing Jongin’s saddle bowed his head.

"We apologize Your Highness, Eunuch Cho suddenly got stomach ache this morning. But Eunuch Do here would replace him, if you would not mind."

His eyes met Taeyong’s piercing glare. Both of them agreed to hide him from the outsider’s eyes until they were sure who he was and whether he would bring harm to them. But he could not refuse him, not in front of the king himself and his entire army of personal guards, no matter how hard he had tried to avoid him for the last few days. Jongin’s eyes lingered for a moment at him before nodding his head half-heartedly. Eunuch Do beamed a little at his approval, it seemed like he volunteered himself to be the eunuch in charge for Jongin today.

Eunuch Do was surprisingly very familiar with horse riding for someone who could not even remember his own name. That morning was foggy and it made Jongin shiver, no matter how thick his coat was. They rode in silence while Jongin mostly listened to King Hongjoong’s explanation about his land.

"We rarely get the amount of sunlight that Jeju has in here, even during the summer. The snow covered our land almost every day of the year." The king said. "I remember that your land was pretty warm compared to Gangwon, during my last visit. I hope you will get used to it soon."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Jongin nodded in acknowledgement. "I'm still adapting to Gangwon's weather."

"I feel bad that your journey was postponed for two days because of the storm, Prince Jongin. I already told my people to clear the entire road a few weeks before, but we didn't predict the storm would come earlier."

Jongin bowed his head, "We are very thankful for your concern, Your Majesty. Had it not been for your people who cleared the path before, we would have had to wait longer for the snow to melt before continuing our journey to Gangwon."

"I heard one of your people was hurt," the king looked concerned. "Are they already getting better?"

Jongin stole a glance at Eunuch Do who rode a few feet behind him, before smiling at the king, "Yes he is. Thank you for your concern, they're perfectly healed now."

"I'm glad to hear that," the king sighed. "I thought something bad had happened on your journey— Ah, there, there, let's stop for a moment. This tree was the tree of life, it is symbolizes the Gangwon kingdom and also become the royal family's sign." He steered his horse towards the mentioned tree. It was huge and stood high, like it had been sitting there for several hundred years. "Come here, take a closer look. You can feel the wind breezes softly, as if the tree is breathing."

They reached the town hall around midday. The folks who had been lining up at both sides of the road welcomed the royalty entourage cheerfully, it was as if the wedding celebration came earlier here. Hands reached out to help them dismount the ride and tie the horses to the post.
The people offered the prince some exotic fruits and traditional dishes, but Taeyong tried it first before passing it to Jongin. Despite being out in the cold, the people did not seem to be bothered by the dropping temperatures. They could not stop praising his handsome look and how he seemed like a nice person to be wedded to their precious princess, although it was only their first meeting. The number of people increased almost twice when they reached the center of the town hall, since the road was connected to the largest market in Gangwon on the left, and the woods on the right side. Jongin soon caught himself in utter distraction to realize that he was in danger.

Suddenly, a pack of people clad in black swarmed upon the royalty troops to assault them in the blink of an eye. The folks around them scattered chaotically, people screamed, kids cried for being separated from their parents in between loud clashing sounds of swords.

Jongin ducked when he felt a whisk of wind stroke near the left side of his face. He turned to see an arrow just missed his head by several inches. These intruders, where did they come from and why were they attacking him? What did he or his kingdom do wrong, since apparently it was not the first time the Jeju royalty got attacked outside of their palace. Or were they the Emperor Ming’s assassins solely sent to murder King Hongjoong?

Eunuch Do shoved Jongin behind his back when one of the assassins found their way to get to him. He tore a branch from the nearest tree and used it as a makeshift weapon. He defended with precise move and hit the assassin right at their weak spots; calves, wrist and neck. They dropped on their knees while groaning in pain. Eunuch Do took their sword then shoved it at their neck.

Jongin felt so useless without his weapon. He left his arrows and bow tied at his horse saddle, for he did not expect to be attacked in the middle of a diplomatic visit. His knuckles turned white from tightening too hard upon the hilt of his dagger that he always brought under the layers of his robe, unsure when to use it. From where he stood, he could see Taeyong and Jungwoo fight back to back against five people, their swords drawn. The rest of the king’s army was also occupied. They were outnumbered.

Someone gripped Jongin's shoulder tightly, he was so ready to attack them, but then he realized that it was King Hongjoong. He looked fine without any bruises, although the elbow of his outer robes was covered in dirt. He grabbed Jongin's wrist and took him through the maze of the market stalls. Some of the king’s personal guards escorted both the king and him to a safer place while defending them against their attacker.

"W-who are they?" Jongin panted hard from running. They were perfectly covered behind the blacksmith’s stall. Jongin crouched near the ground since he was taller.

"We were just as surprised as you, Prince Jongin. Are you okay?" The king asked him. Jongin nodded his head. His heart beat uncontrollably. It thrummed loudly behind the eardrums, he needs to take several calming breaths to be able to hear better.

"Are you usually got attacked like this when you're outside of the palace, Your Majesty?" Jongin whispered. He really wanted to ask why the king did not bring enough army with him when he was under the enemy's watch, but the scrunching eyebrows on the king’s face showed that it might be the first time he was attacked out of the blue.

"No, never," the king shook his head. "It was the first time since I became the king for the last twenty years." He added humorously, "Well, unless the Ming emperor's army attack, if you count them."

King Hongjoong's eunuchs who had been waiting there, began to tend to their king. His left palm was severely scratched and apparently he had lost his sword during the battle. Just like Jongin, it
"I never knew that the Jeju kingdom also trained their eunuchs in martial arts. He is very impressive, no wonder he insisted to go with you." The king said when his eyes landed on Eunuch Do who was fighting against three enemies at once. He dodged swiftly between every attack that aimed towards his vital part while still managed to return the blow, made them back down a little.

"No, we don't." Jongin replied. He could not averted his eyes from Eunuch Do's gracious move as if he was doing sword dancing instead of fighting. "It's just... him."

Judging how surprised Jongin's look was, the king mumbled, "I bet you are just as surprised as I am."

"Indeed, Your Majesty."

And just as soon as they came, the attack was abruptly stopped, then they retreated. Some of the king's guard ran for them, while the rest were trying to mend their people while composing themselves. Eunuch Do found Jongin safely hidden with the king. He dropped the sword before running towards his master to tend him.

"Are you okay, Your Highness?" Eunuch Do asked Jongin while grabbing at his chin to move his face to the left and right side. The gesture was almost romantically heart-fluttering if only the coldness that radiated from his body did not make Jongin shivered. It was like a constant reminder of who he really was, and why Jongin had been excluding him from following his activity around the Gangwon palace after their last encounter.

"I'm okay, Eunuch Do." Jongin grabbed his wrist, moved the freezing fingers away from his face, then let go his hold. "Did they hurt you?"

He nodded his head. "I'm fine, thank you for your concern, Your Highness."

"How about your stic—" Jongin slammed his mouth shut before finishing his sentence. He should not expose Eunuch Do's condition, especially when the king's people were near. "Good to hear that. Let's find Taeyong and Jungwoo, shall we?"

Jongin found his head guard crouched at the edge of the woods, inspecting their enemies trace. Jungwoo was leaning at a tree, his breath was uneven. It seemed like his shoulder was dislocated by the weird angle of it. Eunuch Do pulled a clean roll bandage insides his sack and began to see to him. Jongin stood behind his head guard, he pulled an arrow that got stuck at the nearest trunk to inspect it closely.

"Do you remember the game that we used to play when we were child?" Jongin asked his best friend. Taeyong straightened his spine before facing the prince.

"The mafia game where you always get killed first?" Jongin stifled a laugh when he heard that. Taeyong sense of humor was quite impressive, despite his broody look.

"The detective game." Jongin ran the tip of his fingers towards the feathery tip of the arrow. "We were pretty good at solving mysteries around the palace."

"Yeah, especially the missing dog case. Your soft-hearted self ended up adopting all the puppies before the queen found out about them and gave them away to the servants." Taeyong smirked, it was both a pleasing and sad memory for both of them. "So what did you find this time?"

"Black hawk fletching attached to a well polished birch wood shaft and iron point. Do you
remember your geography study where I would enthusiastically listen to our tutor and you usually slacked behind your stack of books?"

"Even if I studied as hard as you back then, you're still the best archer in our training batch, Jongin. You know it better than me. But there is obviously only one place who can make the black hawk arrow."

"How about you?"

Taeyong poked the footprint in front of him with his forefinger then brought it to his nose. "Dark green sticky mould that doesn't even smell like pine at all. They might be taking the shortcut through the west, even though the route was sloppier than the one we took, but it definitely would save them more time, almost half the time that we spent on the main road. And it seemed like the snowstorm that reached there wasn't as bad as what we had. Or they might moved after the snowstorm ends."

Both men turned towards Eunuch Do who was busy rubbing a yellowish concoction upon Jungwoo's torn knee after finished bandaging his shoulder. They were silent for a moment before Jongin slowly spoke.

"I still don't understand why the Hanyang assassins bother to wear masks when they were carelessly exposing their identity like this."

"Perhaps," Taeyong clasp his palm upon Jongin's shoulder, gave him a reassuring squeeze. "It wasn't meant to be stealthy at all. Perhaps they're giving us a warning. They might have found where their creation went missing and definitely want it back."

Jongin shrugged Taeyong's hand off his shoulder, then walk away from his head guard. "Don't touch me, I'm still mad with you."

"What? You're still holding a grudge about that?" Taeyong shook his head.

"Yes, because apparently you still haven't had the time to settle it with me."

Taeyong sighed heavily. He did notice that Eunuch Do no longer possessed his heart, since he could not feel the particular organ under the skin when he sutured his wounds close, but he did not tell Jongin or anyone about that since he did not want to scare them.

He knew who he was, or at least he had his own suspicion since that day. He once heard that the northern folks had a ritual to revive someone who was just recently death or near death by opening the skull and let the thunder hit the body. Then they would remove the heart, sew the skull back, and remove their intestines to complete the process.

There was a heavy storm when they were on their journey to Gangwon-do. The people who created this monster might have done the procedure during that time and they already took out his heart when they sliced his chest. But the procedure was incomplete since the subject ran away before they finished the procedure.

Judging by how his skin did not turn ashen, and he could still eat properly, it seemed like Eunuch Do was prepared for something bigger than just a living nightmare. If he really was the former crown prince of Hanyang, there must be someone important behind all of this, those who would take advantage of the prince.

Taeyong shrugged his shoulders while following his angry prince. After all, it was just his theory. They still did not know the main reason behind it, now that Eunuch Do was not making huge progress on restoring his lost memories.
"For the sake of Snow God, Prince Jongin!" Princess Sooyoung ran towards the stable when Jongin was just dismounting the mare. She did not seem to care that the lower part of her skirt was spattered in dirt and drenched in freshly melted snow. "I heard something bad happened during your visit. Did you get hurt? Can you talk?"

"I'm okay, I'm okay, Princess Sooyoung, don't worry about me." Jongin plastered a smile when he saw her worrying face. Well, at least she had gotten more natural in this. "You should ask after the king's wellbeing too, I wasn't the only one who got attacked."

King Hongjoong's laughter was blooming behind Jongin's back. "I wouldn't say that if I were you."

Princess Sooyoung grinned widely, "I used to beat him when we were sparring, so I know that my father will be just fine." She added in a not-so-secrecy whisper, "He might seem old, but he's quite strong. I don't need to worry about him."

"And I'm sure you still will," the king nodded his head proudly. Jongin somehow felt a tinge of envy when he saw how close the king and his only daughter were. He rarely got the chance to talk to the king as a father and son, and the closest figure that he could consider as a father was Eunuch Yang.

"Yes, and can we talk about it later, Father? Please allow me to take care of my future husband." Princess Sooyoung linked their forearms with furrowed forehead while studying Jongin closely. He could have mistaken her gestures as a caring, where she was clearly all pretending to look like she cared in front of her servants. "I'll take you to your room. Please prepare a warm bath for the prince."

They were still not making progress on getting to know each other closer, no matter how everyone around them gave both of the royalty enough space to be together. There was something in the way Princess Sooyoung behaved towards him that Jongin had yet to understand. She seemed like the one who cutely expressed herself, yet Jongin did not know if that's what she actually feels.

She once told him the reason why she accepted their betrothal was because she needed to be somewhere by herself, but the maids never allow her to wander alone. So she asked Jongin to lie to her servants that they just spent time together while she was away. He never asked where she went all the time and yet she never told him the exact reason behind her disappearance, so it was like keeping their own little obscure in a secretive way.

Jongin did not seem to be bothered at all with this plan. He realized that even though she was the prettiest princess that he ever met—he did not count Princess Joohyun because she was off the market, despite her flawless beauty and the fact that he rarely meet other royalty—he did not feel a tiny bit of spark when he was with her. He could not feel his heartbeat pace quicken, the urge to touch, or even to get closer to her whenever they were in the same room.

The only thing that bothered Jongin was the doubts that this arrangement would work. Or at least both him and Sooyoung would at least settle on an agreement for the sake of both kingdoms. And somehow she would stop running away from him like he was a contagious plague.

"You can stop pretending now," Jongin told Sooyoung when they were alone in his chamber, away from the sight of the maids and eunuchs. "They're already gone."

"I know, but let me hold you for a few moments more to make it less suspicious." She yawned tiredly. She always seemed fatigued since the last couple of days, Jongin noticed.

"Did you try to get away from the maids again today?" He asked her.

She just rolled her eyes at that question.
"No, you don't need to know what I did today, Prince Jongin, especially since you're not here, anyway. I'll always let you know whenever I need to get away."

"Good." Jongin nodded his head. "Because I need to prepare my lies to be as convincing as possible."

Jongin paced at the front gate of the Gangwon's palace anxiously. His brother Kim Jongdae and his fiancé Kim Minseok should have reached the capital earlier this morning, according to his latest letter that announced his departure, but it was nearly mid day and he still could not see the sign of their coming. His brother immediately scheduled his visit to Gangwon-do after he heard about Jongin's assailant. He would come earlier than their parents, the king and queen, to make sure that the Gangwon-do palace was safe enough to hold the wedding ceremony.

The spring might have already came to Gangwon-do, but Jongin could still see some snow-covered spots around the palace. He had been staying here for more than a month, but he had not yet gotten used to their normally chilly weather. He missed the warmth of Jeju, soft breezes of sea wind and swimming at the sea. When his brother sent the letter to announce his visit to Gangwon-do, Jongin could not feel more excited to see a familiar face, and he had diligently counted down the days until his arrival.

Jongin kept rubbing his palms together to keep him warm in between nail-biting. The king never took him out of the safety of the palace's wall again since that accident, and he felt more like a prisoner than a guest. And the closer their wedding day came, Princess Sooyoung disappeared more often, leaving him feeling lonelier than he was when he still lived in Jeju.

"Your Highness, for how much longer would you wait outside? It's still pretty cold and I'm not sure if you could handle it," Eunuch Yang hurriedly came to engulfed Jongin in another layer of thick coat and one of the servants that accompanied him brought a cup of hot tea.

"My brother hasn't come yet, and I want to wait for him," Jongin replied coldly. He did not mean to sound so distant, but he was really not in the mood to open himself up towards his most loyal eunuch.

"I know, and we believe that Prince Jongdae himself can not wait to get here soon, and he will." Eunuch Yang bowed his head lower when he confronted his stubborn youngest prince. "But please, come inside, for at least to warm yourself. It's pretty cold out here, and we're afraid that you will catch a cold. Please take care of your health, Your Highness, your wedding will be held in a few—"

"I totally understand that, and do not remind me of anything when you are not asked!" Jongin let out a shaky breath. He should not have snapped at him, when all his eunuch wanted was just to keep him warm and safe. A wave of regret started to flood inside his mind, and he hated himself for losing his usually calm demeanor in front of his people. Those who he would rule in the future. And suddenly the internal battle inside of him that doubting himself that he was not good enough for a king washed over him. Drown him in an endless pit of inferiority and low esteem.

Perhaps it was the stress that piled inside of him since the last few months. He was so ready to be wedded to a stranger before he departed to Gangwon-do. He was not against it nor feeling the spark of excitement when his father sealed the agreements. He already understood his place as the youngest prince that he had no right to choose, just like how the king crowned his first born as his next successor and the middle prince as the general of his army. But somehow during the journey, Jongin felt his determination slowly crumbled. He was not ready for this, and it terrified him.

"Please leave me alone," Jongin sighed. "I will not move from here until my brother comes." Jongin
refused to look at Eunuch Yang, not even receiving a cup of piping hot tea that was offered to him. Perhaps, he could torture himself and be stubborn instead of living the unwanted life that had been decided for him. What if something happened to his brother on his way here? What if he was attacked by the Hanyang assassins?

"I'm sure the prince would be fine," Eunuch Yang assured him, as if he could read his worrying face. "Perhaps he was resting somewhere, enjoying the beauty of snow that we have never seen before in Jeju, taking his leisure time with his fiance Kim Minseok, since it is their first journey together as a couple, enjoying the sight."

Jongin scoffed, "You might have forgotten why he came here in the first place."

Eunuch Yang placed his cold palm upon Jongin's forearm, although his eyes were still lowered. "Minister Song is there for them too. Albeit beyond his prime age, but he was the former head guard of the king himself and had been single-handedly defeated—"

"My brother is never late! And he always keeps his promise, no matter what happens." Jongin did not realize that he raised his voice even higher than his previous lash. His entire body shuddered, both from the cold and his anger. He gritted his jaw to prevent himself from unleashing any profanity that would hurt the elder.

"Prince Jongin."

He knew this familiar voice, despite the fact that he rarely heard it since he had been avoiding the person lately. Jongin just realized that the servants had already long gone when a smaller figure walked in a steady pace near them.

"Eunuch Yang, please allow me to talk to the Prince personally." He bowed his head respectfully. Eunuch Yang had no other choice but bowed his head once more towards the raging prince before he excused himself. Eunuch Do still kept his head and eyesight low when he turned to face Jongin.

"Don't you ever dare to come near me, you monster!" Jongin could no longer hide his disgust when Eunuch Do shuffled forward. The smaller man lifted his head until their eyes met, then smiled.

"So you already know who I am." He mumbled.

"Who are you?" Jongin shouted. "Answer me now, who the fuck are you?"

"I still… don't know what kind of creature I am, Your Highness."

Jongin tightened his fists at his sides. The damage had been done, and screw that. He was unstoppable. He would no longer care about what the others would think of him.

"Since when did you realize that you're..." He almost choked on his own saliva, yet still could not bring himself to say the worst.

"That I'm different?" Eunuch Do smirked eerily, the left corner of his lips pulled to the side and his eyes darkened. "I might have lost my memory, Your Highness, but I'm no fool. At least I could still remember how to read and write."

"Go away!" Jongin took a couple of steps back. The cold has numbed his senses, and all he ever wanted was just to get rid of this beast.

"Don't be scared of me, Your Highness." Eunuch Do moved closer. "I'm not going to hurt you, since you are the one who saved me. I trusted you with my life, and I just want to repay you."
He reached out his hand to hold the prince since he looked almost about to faint by the way his body shaking hard. Jongin did not resist him this time, he might have run out of energy to fight back. Eunuch Do circled both his arms around Jongin's waist to hold him even tighter. Jongin could feel his body slowly leaned towards the smaller, finding out how strangely comfortable his touch. Jongin could not help but let out low sobs.

Eunuch Do's body was even colder since the day he summoned him to his chamber to took care of his wounds. He was suddenly reminded of an old proverb that said to fight fire with fire, but he was fighting cold with cold instead. Jongin could not even remember when the feverish hot body that he found in the middle of the pine forest had turned algid.

He placed his forehead at the crook of Eunuch Do's neck to hide his tears of frustration. A prince should not show his weakness, and tears were considered as one. He even allowed him to rub circles at his back. He was tired, and he did not know whether he could handle these arrangements anymore.

"Explain to me," Jongin murmured.

"I know what a Eunuch is." Jongin heard Eunuch Do's soothing voice near his right ears, almost whispering. "What procedure one should undergo before they become a Eunuch. That's why I am so sure that I am not one. But I still don't know who I am. Why am I so different than other people around me. Why I couldn’t smell, couldn’t taste the food, don't feel thirsty or tired, nor have the faint pulse under my skin."

Jongin shivered, he could feel the hair at his nape and arms raised. He pulled back for a moment to allow their eyes met. “But the most important is… I could sense fear, and I know that you’re terrified of me.”

“How did you know that?” Jongin could not help but feel curious about his special ability.

“I could feel how your pulse accelerated, your eyes slightly shaking, and your body radiates more warmth as a defense, although I don’t mind the last one.” Eunuch Do smiled sincerely. It was a rare sight when his pretty lips turned into a beautiful heart shape, it made Jongin halt his breathing. No matter how scared he was, he still mesmerized by his look. Be calm, stupid heart, Jongin cursed inside his head.

“When I fought those assassins, my body felt so light. Although I don’t recall learning swordsmanship before, my muscle memory still remembered it well. My moves were swift and very accurate. I could read their movement, even those who attacking me from the back. And to top every inhumane feeling that I have, their fear surprisingly triggered me to surge forward. To defeat them. To kill. Taste their blood. And… I don’t know. It feels like it wasn't my first time to fight with them. Perhaps they weren't there for you or the king of Gangwon-do, but me.”

Jongin widened his teary eyes. Eunuch Do knew about the Hanyang assassins, although he was not quite sure why he was hunted. But he did not have enough proof either to help Eunuch Do to find his identity faster. Eunuch Do slowly released his grip at Jongin's waist, still smiling wide.

"Now, will you please come inside and warm yourself? I will be here to welcome your brother. You will be the first one to hear of his arrival from me. It's cold here, please don't get sick, Your Highness."

He bowed deeply when Eunuch Yang came back to escort Jongin inside of his pavilion. He did not resist anymore when the servants prepared his hot bath and warm soup. He did not realize he was starving, he had not eaten anything since last night. He told everyone to leave him alone, including
Taeyong because he wanted to have all the time for himself to dwell on his unfortunate life.

"Prince Jongin! Prince Jongin!" Jongin opened his eyes when the door to his chamber was knocked vigorously. He blinked his eyes several times, when had he fallen asleep? He could see some lights seeping from his curtains. He sat straight then hurriedly went to open his door. His other servants must have told Eunuch Do to not open his door without Jongin's consent.

Eunuch Do panted. His shoulders covered in a thin layer of snow but it did not seem to bother the smaller. "Forgive me to disturb your sleep at early morning, but your brother, the General Kim Jongdae has arrived."

Jongin could not tone down his excitement. He hugged Eunuch Do briefly while grinning wide.

"Where is he?"

"He is still at the stable. His fiancé Kim Minseok is also here. I ran away to fetch you right after I saw him."

Jongin did not wait any longer or put a thicker outwear around his body. He just could not wait to see his brother. He wanted to know why he was late. He wanted to tell him every strange thing that happened to him. He wanted to know whether he was okay.

"Hyung!" Jongin surged forward to tackle his elder brother backwards until both of them were laying flat on the ground. Missing him was an understatement when Jongin was literally dying to see his closest family member again.

"Why were you late?" He whined. A prince was not supposed to be seen whining in public, but he was with his brother anyway. "You were never late before."

"I'm really sorry, little brother," Jongdae patted Jongin's head. His manggeon was tilted and his hair look disheveled. "We took a detour, but I will tell you later. But the most important thing is, I see what you did there, Jongin." Jongdae sighed while rubbing at his back when both of them sat on the wet grass. Jongin shifted closer to snuggled his brother. "I have met Eunuch Do. Oh, you owe me a big explanation, little brother. It seems like you forgot to mention about him on your letter, when he could become our biggest clue here."

By the darkened tone on Jongdae's voice, Jongin could sense that his brother knew everything even without him explaining. Jongdae could always find his way to get into Jongin's mind since they were at a very young age. He was glad that one thing never changed between them.

"That's unfair," he could not prevent the pout. "You realized that he wasn't a human immediately when it took me more than a month to slowly put the clues together."

Jongdae's loud laughter resonated in Jongin's ear. A faint sound of footsteps came near and another body pulled Jongin in a tight hug, smashing him in the middle.

"Well, if this isn't the big baby bear," Jongin heard Minseok's chuckles.

"Hyung," Jongin whined. Compared to his other brother's spouse, he was closer to Minseok since they spent more time together when they were kids. Sometimes he became Jongin's sparring partner when Jongdae was busy with his private lessons.

"Welcome to the Gangwon-do, Your Highness." Taeyong stood in front of them, grinning widely. Jongdae headlocked him and pulled Jongin's head guard to their group hug.
"I almost didn't recognize you with this uniform." Jongdae slapped Taeyong's shoulder as hard as he could.

"You didn't attend my inauguration either, hyung." Taeyong nudged Jongdae playfully. "Our General is so busy nowadays, I am actually surprised that you would come to investigate this case by yourself."

Jongdae rolled his eyes. He almost smacked the back of Taeyong's head but did not because of Minseok.

"Let us get inside first, I need a warm bath and food. Lots of food. I'm famished. Then both of you can continue to try to kill each other later."

Jongin found himself later at Jongdae's chamber that was located right beside his own room, once he had settled in. Taeyong had left after lunch, he said he did not want to steal more of Jongdae's time. They both knew how greedy Jongin when it comes to his brother's attention.

They rummaging through Minseok's old documents that he had been preparing to bring here. He stole it from his father's archive, since Jongin had attached the arrow that he found along with his letter, they began to sort the correspondence letters between Jeju-do and Hanyang.

Minseok was already deep asleep in Jongdae's bed, the long journey must have exhausted him. Jongdae pulled an old letter from the top of the stack and carefully rolled it out. He almost dropped the scroll when he saw the picture that was attached to one of the letters. Jongin's jaw went slack when he recognized Eunuch Do's picture.

"Prince Yul," Jongin mumbled the name. It sounded way better than Eunuch Do. Jongin found himself smiling at the realization. It was a beautiful name fit for a prince. "His name is Prince Yul."

"So, he really is a crown prince." Jongdae rubbed his chin enthusiastically. "I never think that far. I mean, as far as I know, Crown Prince Seowon is the queen's an only child. Why do they need to sacrifice their other crown prince?"

"Is that even allowed to have two crown princes?" His eyes wandered to the gold lion insignia at the table. He always had it secured under his inner robes since Taeyong insisted that he was the most suitable person to keep it. The familiar weight on his chest that was now missing, and soon to be returned to the rightful owner. "And how could we n—" Jongin shook his head. "How could you not recognize him if you were already suspecting?"

"I once heard his name, but never saw the picture until now." Jongdae lifted the paper closer to his eyes. "Even Junmyeon might never met him before Prince Seowon was crowned. This is an invitation to his coronation day and… a wedding that dated four years ago."

"He was married?" Jongin suddenly remembered when they were on his carriage and he asked about Princess Sooyoung for the first time. "No wonder he gave me advice like that."

"What advice?"

"Well, it was a little bit weird…" Jongin scratched his nape. "We talked about what if they replaced
the real princess with a decoy, since I never met her before. But then he assured me that I wouldn't be deceived that easy."

"Here, look at the date, it was only several months before Junmyeon hyung's betrothal to Princess Joohyun. Prince Yul was supposed to marry the Vice Premier's daughter, but he suddenly cancelled the wedding a day before, because he got sick. Perhaps he was severely ill for a pretty long time after his coronation day, and the king had no other choice but to crown his other son. But that was not our place to solve. Meddling with other kingdom's internal issue would make you considered undue interference."

"He was sick?" Jongin suddenly remembered what Eunuch Yang said when they first found Eun—Prince Yul. "Ah, right. I heard he has a weak heart since a very young age."

Jongdae responded with a hum while his hands busy opening another letter, skimmed it, then throw it carelessly in a pile of scrolls under his seat. Minseok would be extremely upset when he woke up tomorrow morning, but he could deal with it with a couple of apology kisses.

Jongin did the exact same thing. Most of the letters contained trade agreement, crossing permit, tax deduction request—this one mostly came from the Jeju-do, since they need to travel through the sea to reach the town and the costs that they have to spent was quite expensive.

He suddenly stopped reading when he reach a shorter scroll, his fingers slightly shaking. Jongdae peeked behind his shoulder when he noticed how his brother went rigid.

"Why did they Vice Premier of Hanyang wanted to personally purchase mandrake roots from us in a large amount?" Jongin asked his brother. He remembers the plant from Taeyong's satchel when they were treating Eun—Prince Yul's wound back then at the cottage.

"A thin slice of dried mandrake root is more than enough to heal the chest pain. Unless…" Jongdae murmured, reminisced his traditional medical training. "A higher dose of mandrake root could be used as sedation, and it's very effective. You would not feel the pain for several days after. But if you're badly injured when you were under the effect of mandrake roots, your broken bone or wounds would not be able to heal perfectly. That's why we never use it for a sedative anymore."

"Could it cause memory loss too?" Jongin asked. Their eyes met, Jongdae's masked and Jongin's widened ones.

"I don't know, never heard of it before."

Taeyong had mentioned his theory earlier that day, that the yellowish gush that came out of Eun—Prince Yul's wounds smelled like a mixture of mandrake and pheasant's eye. It stunk like a rotten egg and made his eyes water. Jongin would have recognized the stench sooner had he learned traditional medicine too. This letter might be their biggest clue to solve this mystery.

"Well…" Jongin gulped hard. "It's… quite intense."

"The biggest question is, who is going to tell him?" Jongdae raised his eyebrows towards the younger brother. "We can't keep him forever, Jongin. The assassins already warned you enough. Not that I won't defend you when they attack again, but I don't think we could interfere in this mess any longer."

"Well, it's quite clear, right? You should tell him, of course." Jongin averted his eyes. "I… I don't think I can do that."

"You sure you don't want to be the one to talk to him?"
Jongin shrugged, "I'm sure he would prefer to hear it from you, since you're theoretically smarter than me in everything."

Jongdae could not help but smacked Jongin's back real hard. "Then what should we do with him later?"

"Well," Jongin lowered his eyes. His heart beat erratically, knowing that this might be the end of their intervention. Eun—Prince Yul would have to be the one who would end this himself. He should feel glad, but the sadness that is slowly creeping inside his heart could not get away unnoticed. Suddenly he was no longer interested in solving this case if that meant he must part ways with Eu—Prince Yul.

"W-would it be wiser if we all-allowed him to decide it himself?" Jongin bit his tongue hard. "It's his life, after all."

"That would work too. Now, go back to your room, I need to rest." Jongdae stood up and shoved his brother out of his room.

"Ah, there you are!" Jongin flinched when he heard that voice. He still wore the same old green robes, but Jongin could not help to think how that robes look so ugly on him. He remembered when they were first met, how he tore the expensive clothing that Eun—Prince Yul wore in an attempt to examine his wounds, now that he could not even afford to replace it. Jongin stood up to bow at the prince of Hanyang, but Yul caught his shoulder faster.

"No, no, please don't bow at me, Prince Jongin."

"What brings you here, Prince Yul?" he asked. It felt so great to be able to call him by his real name. They were sitting side by side on a bench under a cherry blossom tree that has yet to bloom. Yul was smiling widely, making Jongin's heart flutters erratically.

"Ssh, don't call me like that," he whispered. "I'm still your Eunuch Do, though."

Jongin about to protest but Prince Yul placed his forefinger upon his lips to silent him.

"I heard from the servants that you're supposed to spend your time with Princess Sooyoung today." He wandered his eyes around the garden. "But I couldn't see her yet."

Jongin sighed. He did not expect that he would be caught like this. Especially by Yul. He realized that the more they interacted with each other, the easier it was for him to refer to this man as a prince.

"Don't worry, she won't come." Jongin replied softly. If it was not because of their proximity, perhaps Yul would not be able to hear him.

"Why—" Yul's gaze softened when he saw Jongin's dejected look. "I see. That's why you always look unhappy whenever you're spending time together with the princess." He emphasized at the spending time word. "Did she ever mentioned about a secret lover or anything?"

"Never, not that I know either. Maybe she is just doesn't like me," Jongin exhaled loudly. 'I mean, not every marriage arrangement would end up well, right?"

"How could someone not feel attracted to you?" Prince Yul scoffed as if it was just a joke. "You're a kind-hearted person, Prince Jongin. I might not remember my interaction with other people before the… accident. But even a heartless stranger like me could sense your sincerity."
"You're saying this because I am still your master." Jongin rolled his eyes. "At least, you're still pretending to be my servant."

Prince Yul nudged Jongin's waist lightly. "I will be accompanying you today. It must be very lonely to be by yourself all the time." He giggled, "Not that I remember that feeling of loneliness itself, but you're always looking alone. Also..." He bit his bottom lip nervously.

"Also?" Jongin tensed. He needed to remind himself to breathe evenly while waiting for the older man to continue speaking. Prince Yul was a couple of years younger than his brother Jongdae, and a year older than him. Jongin was beyond happy to finally know his age when Jongdae and him sort through the letters.

"I want to say a proper goodbye to you since I might be leaving soon." Prince Yul lowered his eyes. "Back to Hanyang? When? Did you remember the way to go there? Won't you at least stay until my wedding day?" Jongin could not stop the train of questions that come out of his mouth unconsciously. The silence that engulfed them once again felt like a torture.

"Your brother General Jongdae offered one of his guards to help show me the way," Yul offered to hold Jongin's hand that he took gratefully. "Thank you so much for helping me that night. I heard your conversation with Head Guard Taeyong about leaving me behind, back then at the cottage, but you were insisted to take me with you. I feel safe and protected when I'm with you, I hope you can find your own happiness too, Prince Jongin."

"When will you go?" Jongin tightened his grip on Yul's fingers, not that he could feel the pain either, but Jongin needed it to strengthen himself.

"As soon as possible."

"So you won't tell me?" Jongin insisted. Yul shook his head.

"I'm afraid if I see you sending me away, I would lose my intention to go." He slowly peeled Jongin's fingers that digging deeply into his skin. "Good luck to you, Prince Jongin. I hope to see you again in the future."

Jongin looked at his reflection through the looking glass at his wall. The sleeve was slightly longer than his wrists, but that was probably because he kept losing weight as his wedding day coming near. Eunuch Yang was busy tucking his hair into a top bun and secured it with a gold sangtugwan.

He would get married today. There was no way back after this day. Jongin sighed. How life would be easier if he was not a royalty, or at least he married someone that he loved. His heart still aches for Yul who suddenly disappeared in the middle of the night. He scoffed when he recalled the night he suddenly knocked on his door. It was only less than two months ago, time did move so fast, and so did his heart. He was pitied the stranger who wounded badly at his front door, then he tried to get away from him when he knew who he was, but he missed him terribly now.

"Are you nervous, Your Highness?" Eunuch Yang asked Jongin. He hummed as a response. The elder opened his mouth, trying to form a comforting word for his dearest young master, but then the door to Jongin's chamber shoved open forcefully.

"I apologise for breaking into your room without permission," a guard kneel with a lowered head. "But Crown Princess Sooyoung ran away from her chamber."

Jongin turned his head rapidly to face the guard. "Are you sure? Have you checked everywhere?
Have you told the king?"

"Yes, Your Highness. The king himself sent me to fetch you."

Jongin did not wait any longer, he stormed out of his room to the hall where they would held the wedding ceremony. His parents and Jongdae were already there, the king and queen of Gangwon-do looked extremely upset and humiliated with their daughter's disappearance. He nearly shouted at his guard who returned empty-handedly.

"Prince Jongin," Princess Sooyoung's head maid came closer to him. "Could you help us finding Princess Sooyoung?"

"Are you sure that she is not kidnapped or something?" Jongin asked the head maid.

"She ran away when we were busy preparing her bath and wedding attires. When we were back, she was already disappeared." The head maid trembled a lot. "There are no signs of violence or stolen property. Everything stays intact and as tidy as before."

"Have you checked at the palace's library? I often meet her there." Or he was waiting for her when she went away to somewhere he did not know until she returns. "The north garden under the cherry blossoms tree?"

"She's nowhere to be seen, Your Highness." She bowed her head deeper than she was. "The king sent his guards to search outside of the palace."

Jongin's nose caught a whiff of forsythia that have been arranged in some places to decorate the wedding hall the way the princess like. He widened his eyes in acknowledgement as he suddenly remembered a little trivia about the princess.

"The flower… forsythia, where did you get it from?" Jongin asked the head maid. She slightly tilted her head to look at the prince directly. "She might be there to comfort herself."

"You're probably right, Your Highness. Let me show you the way."

Jongin followed the head maid outside of the hall. Taeyong who waited for him, followed him right behind. The three of them moved through the mazes of building; behind the court hall, the guards barrack, through the training hall that spread wide, possibly almost twice the size of the Jeju-do training hall, then right into the outer edge of the woods.

"Forsythia grow fast in early spring," the head maid explaining. "Especially under the full sun, so we planted it in a warm place and far from the shade of taller trees or buildings."

Jongin saw the yellowish shrubs far in front of them before they even reach the place. The sight of tall yellow shrubs looked contrast to the dark shade of wet soil and the greens far behind. He found the lost princess curled at the bottom of the shrub, only on her inner robes. He could not help but run towards her while removing his own wedding robes.

"Princess Sooyoung." Jongin draped his blue robe around her shoulder. She was shaking hard, and could not stop wailing. "It's okay, you're safe now."

He glanced behind him to see the head maid and his guard slowly backed down to give them privacy. He held both of Sooyoung's shoulder and lifted her up so that she stood up in front of him.

"Prince Jongin, I apologise for treating you badly while you're here. I'm an awful person. I'm not supposed to do that, since you've been very kind and friendly to me." She said in between sobs. He
never saw her breaking down before, and she looked so fragile. He slowly lifted his hand off of her, afraid that a simple touch would crumbled her. "But I can't marry you. I don't want to spend my entire life with someone that I don't love. I'm sorry."

Jongin lowered his head, "I understand." He took a step backwards to give her more space. "I will cancel the marriage. I don't want to make you uncomfortable for the rest of your life either, if you ended up with me."

Sooyoung looked up at him with her red rimmed eyes and cheeks glistened in tears under the morning sun. She was still looking pretty even in this mess, but nothing could shaken Jongin's entire existence the way Yul did to him. No quickened heartbeat, no trembling fingers, no the sudden warmth that reddened his ears. Nothing.

At this moment, he realized that the attraction that he had towards the elder prince was not just a friendly gesture. He fell in love with him, but it was too late, he guessed. He had gone.

"Thank you," she mumbled softly.

"I hope you could find your own happiness, Crown Princess Sooyoung." He gave her a last bow before turning his back.

"It was dancing!" She shouted at his back. Jongin turned his head towards her. "I want to dance, but no one at the palace allowed me to do that since it didn't seem to fit a crown princess's image. I… don't cheat on you with someone else, if that's what had been bothering you."

He was pretty sure he did not need to hear that, but having the princess finally open up herself to him made him feel better. Jongin sent her his best smile genuinely this time.

"I'm glad that you find your passion. You decide what you want, Princess Sooyoung. Keep on doing it, you have my full support."

Jongin felt so light, like a big burden had just lifted from his shoulders. He walked towards the head maid and his guard, then signed Taeyong to followed him. Surprisingly, he did not question him. They walked back to the palace in silence.

Jongdae waited for Jongin near the stable with his fiancé beside him. They had packed their things, they were probably ready to return to Jeju-do right after the ceremony. Jongin slammed himself into his brother's open arms, hug him tight.

"It's over, hyung." He mumbled over his brother's shoulder. "Take me back home."

"Sure, little brother. Let's ride with us. Our carriage is way much bigger than yours anyway."

"Your Highness! Your Highness!" Jongin was walking leisurely at the beach when Eunuch Cho came running to fetch him. He was panting hard while leaning both hands on his knees. Jongin chuckled while rubbing the elder's shoulder.

"There, there, take a deep breath Eunuch Cho," he instructed his eunuch. "What kind of hustle that brings you rushing here?"

"Come, come! It's very important, Your Highness," his voice croaked. His throat must be painfully dry but Jongin did not have anything with him to help relieve his thirst.

"Let's get into the palace first, then." He suggested the eunuch.
The walk back was a little bit rushed since Eunuch Cho keep trying to drag Jongin to quickened their pace. He could not help but feel curious too, of how important this thing was. He saw several carriages and new horses when they passed the stable. The might be a guest coming to their kingdom, then. He wondered why the king never told him about their upcoming event with the guest before. But then, they never trying to involve him in the court since his return from Gangwon-do several months ago, afraid that he might still traumatized and needed more time to recover.

He was fine, though. Just missing a certain person sometimes, but he knew that the possibility of meeting him again was small, despite their promise. So, he would rather spend his leisure time walking around the beach, reading books and sometimes swim around the shore.

The eunuch led him to the throne room, where the king and queen would usually welcomed their guest. His eyes landed at the amount of guard that surrounding the guest. He must be a very important person, perhaps other king from other kingdom.

Jongin's eyes widened when he was reminded of King Hongjoong's visit last year. He offered his daughter in exchange of a troop of army. He slowly shuffled to the front row. His jaw slacked when he saw a familiar back facing him, although this time he was clad in the best quality of silk robes. It felt too surreal. Shivers began to run through his entire body when that figure slowly turning back towards him.

"Long time no see, Prince Jongin." There came the heart-shaped smile that he missed a lot, and he often saw on his dream when he was feeling lucky. Although he rarely have the luck several weeks after returning to Jeju-do.

Jongin's knees buckled when he dropped on the floor. It felt like a dream come true. The smaller figure closed their distance in a couple of strides then kneel in front of him, hugging him tight. The chill that suddenly surrounded him felt somehow comforting compared to the heat of summer. He leaned his head upon his shoulder, tears began to gather on his lids and he cries. His sobbing sounded ugly, but he could not care. He wrapped his arms around his waist, holding him dearly.

"I missed you, Prince Yul." He whispered. The older caressed his back tenderly. "I really wanted to see you again."

"It's King now, Jongin. King Yul." He corrected him. "But you can call me your future husband as well, since I came here to ask for your hand in marriage."

"Yes."

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